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Family Perspectives on Disappearance: Perceived Contributing Factors and Coping Strategies for Ambiguous Loss

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine how families interpret disappearances, to assess their psychological and emotional impact, and to explore perceived support and coping strategies.

Background: Disappearances are a widespread yet understudied phenomenon with severe psychological consequences for affected families. The uncertainty surrounding the fate of the missing person constitutes an ambiguous loss, often leading to prolonged grief, trauma, and unmet emotional needs.

Method: Thirty-six relatives of missing persons completed an ad hoc online survey that combined closed- and open-ended questions. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative responses underwent content analysis to identify recurring themes.

Results: Most families attributed the disappearance to involuntary circumstances, often involving interpersonal conflicts, health-related vulnerabilities, or possible criminal involvement. Participants reported intense emotional distress, including fear, guilt, and sadness, with many receiving psychological diagnoses post-disappearance. Social isolation, interpersonal conflict, and loss of meaning in life were also prevalent. Families primarily relied on informal support networks and expressed dissatisfaction with institutional support. Most participants highlighted a lack of access to specialized psychological care and proposed improvements to police, legal, and psychosocial services.

Conclusion: The disappearance of a loved one leads to profound and enduring emotional distress. Families experience ambiguous loss without adequate institutional support, resulting in persistent suffering and frustration.

Implications: Greater institutional sensitivity and investment are needed to support families of missing persons. Recommendations include accessible mental health care, improved investigative protocols, and public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and isolation.

1 | Introduction

In the United States, more than 600,000 people were reported missing between 2007 and 2020, averaging approximately 75,000 cases per year (National Missing and Unidentified Persons System 2022). In Europe, nearly 10,000 individuals disappear

every year (European Parliament 2016). While as many as 94% of these cases culminate with the safe return of the missing individual (Gobierno de España 2021; Missing People 2024), some cases go unsolved. Despite the scale of this phenomenon, there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a disappearance (Shalev-Greene et al. 2022). This lack of clarity

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leaves the classification of missing persons to the discretion of law enforcement agencies (European Commission 2013), leading to variations across jurisdictions. To ensure consistency and strengthen protection measures, the European Commission proposed a legally binding definition (Council of Europe 2009). Now used by courts, border agencies, and child welfare organizations, a missing person is defined as “a natural person whose existence has become uncertain, because he or she has disappeared without trace and there are no signs that he or she is alive.”

Disappearances are categorized under various taxonomies. From the law enforcement perspective, they are intentional, involuntary, and forced (Cereceda and Tourís 2019; Ranilla 2013). However, the complexity behind disappearances has driven scholars to expand and refine classifications. Bonny et al. (2016) refined this classification into dysfunctional (i.e., associated with mental health issues or addiction causes), escape (i.e., to avoid a vital stressor), and unintentional (i.e., due to loss of contact with one's environment). Similarly, García-Barceló et al. (2024) proposed four categories: intentional landscape, intentional-dysfunctional, unintentional-accidental/derivative, and unintentional-criminal. Halford (2024) distinguished intentional escape, intentional dysfunctional, unintentional accident, and unintentional criminal, with unintentional accidental the most common cause of disappearance.

While missing persons encompass all demographic groups with varied cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds (Shalev-Greene et al. 2022), research highlights demographic and psychopathological influences, noting that a proportion of missing persons belong to vulnerable populations impacted by factors such as age, mental health, or political contexts (Holmes et al. 2013). Ferguson (2022) expands these factors into demographic (e.g., gender, ethnicity), psychopathological (e.g., mental health conditions, cognitive functioning), and environmental factors (e.g., social, cultural, political), and further identifies individual risk factors, including disabilities, trauma history, self-harm, substance use, economic difficulties, and family dynamics. Among youth, disappearances are often associated with behavioral issues and experiences of family violence, frequently linked to family dysfunction (Bonny et al. 2016; Cervantes-Loredo 2016). Thus, disappearances are complex, multidimensional phenomena shaped by intersecting societal, psychological, and environmental factors, complicating both its study and intervention (Morewitz and Colls 2016).

For affected family members, the loss of a loved one elicits grief, typically involving shock, anger, and guilt (Love 2007). While grief is a natural process, certain types of loss can complicate the experience. One such example is *ambiguous loss*, defined as “a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution” (Boss 2016, 270). Boss (1999) identified two types of ambiguous loss: (a) physically present but psychologically absent (e.g., Alzheimer disease); and (b) physically absent, but psychologically present, which is typical of cases where it remains unclear if the loved one is deceased, thereby inhibiting traditional grief processes.

This lack of closure results in prolonged ambiguity (frozen grief), placing lives on indefinite hold (Abrams 2001). It can

lead to profound psychological and emotional consequences, such as hypervigilance, neglect of personal needs, and emotional responses such as fear, sadness, helplessness, and indignation (Colussi 2015), as well as adverse mental health outcomes (Oliveira and Vieira 2017). The persistent need for answers, hope of finding the missing person alive, and demands for justice further intensify feelings of pain, suffering, and frustration, which in turn contribute to high levels of emotional exhaustion, fear, guilt, and helplessness (Almanza-Avedaño et al. 2020; Colussi 2015; Linares and Álvarez 2022). Due to the sustained state of uncertainty, individuals experiencing ambiguous loss may face an increased risk of developing mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder, and prolonged grief disorder (Comtesse et al. 2022). Moreover, the unresolved nature of ambiguous loss can elicit negative emotions, including resentment in response to perceived impunity (Colussi 2015), exacerbate family conflicts, and obstruct the re-establishment of meaning in life (Heeke et al. 2020; Manriquez et al. 2020). From a systemic perspective, it is considered a relational event that affects the structure and functioning of the family system.

Families affected by ambiguous loss may experience structural disruptions and altered social networks (Adams 2019; Camacho-Quirós 2024). According to Minuchin (1974), when a loss is not clearly defined, family boundaries become blurred, leading to hierarchical imbalance, role confusion, and communication breakdown. In addition, the trauma may extend across generations (Cerutti 2015; Retama Domínguez and Rojas Rajs 2019). Research has identified several protective factors and coping strategies that mitigate the adverse effects of disappearances. Resilience serves as a key coping mechanism (Serna et al. 2016; Ungar 2013), allowing individuals to maintain a positive outlook, trust support systems, and openly express emotions (Mancini et al. 2015). Studies also suggest that self-compassion helps individuals manage emotional distress and reduces rumination, lowering the risk of depression and PTSD (Lenferink et al. 2019). Coping preferences appear to vary with age, with younger individuals (aged 18–40) often using problem-solving strategies, whereas those over 40 tend to rely on religiosity, family support, and meaning-making (Boss 2009). Social support and involvement in community organizations further promote adaptation to trauma. Higher levels of social support and community involvement are associated with better coping and adaptation, whereas low social support is linked to an increased risk of PTSD and depression (Scarpa et al. 2006). Tailored resources and coping strategies are essential across all stages of a disappearance (Pérez-Santana 2013).

1.1 | The Present Study

Ambiguous loss produces profound psychological challenges for families of missing persons, and understanding coping strategies can facilitate improved support by institutions and society. However, the psychological and social effects of disappearances remain understudied, representing a critical gap that this study seeks to address.

This study aimed to: (1) investigate adult relatives' perceptions of factors surrounding disappearances, (2) examine the

TABLE 1 | Sociodemographic information of the sample.

Variables	%
Gender	
Female	75
Male	25
Country of residence	
Spain	83.3
Italy	13.9
Mexico	2.8
Nationality	
Spanish	77.8
Italian	13.9
Ecuadorian	2.8
Colombian	2.8
Mexican	2.8
Marital status	
Married	63.9
In a relationship	13.9
Divorced	11.1
Single	5.6
Widowed	5.6
Education	
Secondary education	25
University studies	25
Primary education	19.4
Sixth form college	16.7
No studies	2.8
Other	11.1
Relationship with the missing person	
Mothers	27.8
Siblings	25.00
Fathers	8.33
Sons or daughters	8.33
Grandparents	5.6
Other relationship	25
Employment	
Employed	66.7
Retired	19.4
Unemployed	8.3
Studying	5.6

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Variables	%
Religious beliefs	
Christian	72.2
Atheists or agnostics	27.8

psychological and social impacts on their lives, (3) evaluate their satisfaction with available resources and support, and (4) identify needs and suggestions for improving support services.

2 | Method

This study used a cross-sectional design with a survey methodology approach.

2.1 | Procedure

To accommodate the specific nature of the sample (families of missing persons), participants were recruited through snow-ball sampling. In collaboration with the European Foundation for Missing Persons (QSD Global), a survey link was distributed via associations supporting these families. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, assured of anonymity, and provided informed consent prior to completing the survey. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, several measures were implemented to minimize potential distress. Participants were informed that the survey addressed potentially distressing experiences and that participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to skip questions or discontinue at any time without penalty. The survey was conducted anonymously, and no identifying information was collected, precluding individualized follow-up or direct support. However, participants were provided with the research team's contact details should they wish to seek further support following participation. No direct support resources were provided during or after the survey.

The study protocol was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Córdoba (CEIH-20-32). Data collection took place between November 2021 and July 2022.

2.2 | Participants

The sample consisted of 36 relatives of missing persons who had disappeared under various circumstances. Participants were between 18 and 74 years of age ($M = 49.8$; $SD = 12.6$). The gender distribution was uneven, with 75% ($n = 27$) female, and 25% ($n = 9$) male. Most participants resided in Spain ($n = 30$, 83.3%) and Italy ($n = 5$, 13.9%). In terms of nationality, the majority were Spanish ($n = 28$, 77.8%), followed by Italian ($n = 5$, 13.9%), Ecuadorian ($n = 1$, 2.8%), Colombian ($n = 1$, 2.8%), and Mexican ($n = 1$, 2.8%).

In terms of relationship with the missing person, participants were predominantly mothers (27.78%, $n = 10$) or siblings (25%,

$n=9$). The majority were either married (63.9%, $n=23$) or in a relationship (13.9%, $n=5$). Regarding education, 25% ($n=9$) had a university degree, 25% ($n=9$) completed secondary education, and 2.8% ($n=1$) reported no formal education. Most participants were employed (66.7%, $n=24$) or retired (19.4%, $n=7$). In terms of religious beliefs, 72.2% ($n=26$) identified as Christian, while 27.8% ($n=10$) were atheist or agnostic. Complete sociodemographic details are provided in Table 1.

2.3 | Variables and Measures

Due to the absence of validated instruments specifically designed to examine the impact of disappearances on relatives, an ad hoc questionnaire was developed drawing on prior research on missing persons, ambiguous loss, and family coping processes. The concept of ambiguous loss informed the design of the instrument, particularly the inclusion of items addressing uncertainty, lack of closure, ongoing emotional distress, and the enduring psychological presence of the missing person. The questionnaire comprised six conceptual domains: (1) sociodemographic information, (2) perceived contributing factors to the disappearance, (3) vulnerability factors, (4) psychosocial impact on family members, (5) perceived support and services received, and (6) recommendations for improving institutional responses. These domains reflect key dimensions identified in prior literature, including contextual characteristics, family members' interpretations of the disappearance, perceived vulnerabilities, psychosocial consequences, and experiences with formal and informal support systems. Example items included: "Do you think there was a specific situation that led to the disappearance of your relative? Please specify" (perceived contributing factors), "What negative effects did the disappearance of your family member have on your life?" (psychosocial impact), and "What changes do you think the system or society should make to better support families and associations of missing persons?" (perceived support). The questionnaire was developed by the research team and refined through internal discussion among the authors. No skip logic was implemented, and open-ended questions were optional to allow participants to elaborate without increasing respondent burden.

The instrument assessed sociodemographic characteristics (sex, age, relationship to the missing person, education, occupation, marital status), perceived contributing and vulnerability factors (mental health issues, relationship conflicts, economic stressors, possible criminal involvement), and the impact of the disappearance across emotional, social, occupational, and financial domains. It also examined perceived support, including adequacy of services received and types of support accessed (e.g., psychological, medical, spiritual), and invited participants to suggest improvements to institutional and social responses. To capture participants' lived experience, the survey combined closed and open-ended questions, allowing participants to share their perspectives in depth.

Quantitative items were presented in a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*), with a neutral midpoint (3 = *Neither agree nor disagree*) to allow neutral responses and increase reliability (Chyung et al. 2020). The survey was distributed across Spain, Latin America, and Italy. Considering the

study's exploratory nature and the topic's sensitivity, the scope was intentionally limited to minimize distress. Items assessing emotional impact were informed by constructs commonly examined in instruments such as the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, Watson et al. 1988) and DSM-5-TR PTSD symptom criteria (APA 2022).

2.4 | Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine participants' responses to open-ended questions. Coding followed a primarily inductive approach, allowing categories to emerge from the data, while the framework of ambiguous loss informed the organization of broader thematic patterns and guided interpretation. The analysis followed the four-step process described by Kyngäs et al. (2020): (1) data familiarization, (2) identification of initial themes, (3) reflection to explore relationships among themes, and (4) thematic categorization.

The research team familiarized themselves with the dataset through repeated readings. A preliminary codebook was developed based on recurrent concepts and refined through iterative discussion. Two independent researchers with training and experience in qualitative methods conducted the coding independently using a shared codebook that included category definitions and examples. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and reference to the codebook, with categories refined as needed to ensure consistency. The final thematic structure was reviewed by the remaining authors. To improve credibility, coding decisions and category revisions were documented throughout the analytic process. Once themes were established, frequencies were independently coded and cross-checked for consistency. No member checking was conducted due to the anonymous nature of the data. Descriptive statistics were calculated using Jamovi version 2.4 (the Jamovi project, 2024).

3 | Results

3.1 | Descriptive Data About the Missing Persons

Based on family reports ($N=36$), missing persons were aged between 9 and 85 years ($M=45.6$, $SD=23$). Most were male (72.2%, $n=26$). Regarding education, 44.4% ($n=16$) had completed primary education, 13.9% ($n=5$) had no formal education, 16.7% ($n=6$) completed secondary education, and 13.9% ($n=5$) held a university degree. Employment was evenly distributed: 33.3% ($n=12$) were employed, 33.3% ($n=12$) retired, 16.67% ($n=6$) unemployed, and 16.67% ($n=6$) were students. In terms of marital status, 44.4% ($n=16$) were single, 22.2% ($n=8$) were married, 16.7% ($n=6$) widowed, 8.3% ($n=3$) divorced, and 8.3% ($n=3$) in a relationship.

3.2 | Perceived Reasons for Disappearance and Associated Factors

Most disappearances were considered involuntary ($n=25$), with 18 (50%) participants attributing the disappearance to possible criminal involvement, six (16.7%) to accidents, and one (2.8%)

TABLE 2 | Family-reported attributions for disappearance.

Factor	Presence	
	<i>n</i>	%
Mental health issues		
Depression, anxiety or PTSD	7	19.4
Substance use	7	19.4
Personality or severe mental health disorder	3	8.3
Dementia or Alzheimer's disease	1	2.8
Learning disabilities	2	5.6
Gambling-related issues	1	2.8
Interpersonal conflicts		
Family argument	6	16.7
Relational problems	7	19.4
Other problems		
Financial problems	7	19.4
Severe illness diagnosis	4	11.1
School dropout	4	11.1
Loss of a loved one (grief)	3	8.3
Criminal activities	1	2.8

Note: Participants could report multiple responses; therefore, total percentages exceed 100.

to cult involvement. Additionally, eight participants (22.2%) reported no apparent explanation for the disappearance, one case (2.8%) was classified as voluntary, and two (5.6%) were uncertain about how to interpret it.

3.2.1 | Perceived Contributing Factors

Among perceived contributing factors, individual vulnerability and interpersonal conflicts were cited most frequently (Table 2).

Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance-related problems, as well as financial difficulties, were reported by 19.7% of respondents. Qualitative responses highlighted other aspects of the missing person's identity, such as gender ($n = 1$), age ($n = 3$), and personality traits ($n = 5$), with trustworthiness often described as a vulnerability factor. For example, one participant stated, "He was very trusting, and that person knew it"; while another remarked, "They saw her alone; she trusted everybody, and in that situation, they abused her." Traits like impressionability or naivety were also cited, with one participant noting, "He was a very good person and highly impressionable, and it's possible that he has been led astray by someone else ... I don't think he would have left on his own." Another respondent described the missing person as "very innocent, just a 14-year-old girl who trusted her best friend."

Interpersonal conflicts were also common; seven participants (19.7%) mentioned relational issues, such as separation, while

six (16.7%) reported family arguments preceding the disappearance. Additional factors were provided by 86.11% of respondents ($n = 31$), with 32.2% ($n = 10$) citing negative influences from friends. One participant noted, "The people he was surrounded by at that time were not the right ones."

Social factors, including violence, were identified by six participants (19.3%), and three participants mentioned domestic violence, with comments such as, "I believe they had a fight that got out of hand, and my brother ended up dead," and "Sexism. It is an intimate partner violence crime." Additionally, perceived threats were reported by one participant ("He felt threatened by someone"), while two participants mentioned potential kidnapping, though without further details.

Health issues were also considered relevant by eight respondents (25.8%), with two cases involving substance use (e.g., "[They] had undiagnosed depression and alcoholism"; "Alcoholism is key in my brother's case"), while others cited disorientation (e.g., "He got lost in the mountains, he called to let us know, but we never found them"; "I believe he got lost around the area he was walking") and physical impairments ("His deafness. Walking at dusk along the mountain road where he was at the time, could have led to a car accident, and then ... it might have turned into a crime"). Another participant described "He didn't want to treat his diabetes," suggesting that unaddressed health concerns might have influenced the disappearance. Additionally, three participants attributed the disappearance to uncontrollable factors, such as "bad luck" or "being in the wrong place at the wrong time," indicating an external locus of control, and one participant suggested financial problems as a contributing factor. Three responses were not classified due to vague or unclear descriptions.

Concerning contextual factors, participants frequently cited intersecting factors, such as relationships and financial issues (e.g., "He had a conflict with his partner; he suspected she was cheating on him. Additionally, he owed her money that she urgently needed to recover"), or conflicts exacerbated by substance use (e.g., "My brother's disappearance happened while he was surrounded by people on New Year's Eve. There was a fight with his roommate, along with drug use involved, and then he vanished without any apparent reason").

Most participants ($n = 26$, 72.2%) were unaware of any past trauma affecting the missing person. Among those who identified potential trauma sources, significant losses ($n = 3$), health issues ($n = 2$), and various family or social issues (each identified by 10% of respondents) were most common. Seven responses did not classify a trauma, as participants referred to the disappearance's cause rather than a prior traumatic experience.

3.3 | Psychological Impact of Disappearances for Family Members

The disappearance of a relative had severe psychological effects on family members. Among participants, 21 (58.3%) reported significant worldview shifts, and 15 (41.7%) felt a loss of control over their lives. Fear, anguish, panic, sadness, frustration,

confusion, despair, anger, and emptiness were common emotions, as were reported mental health issues. Socially, 13 participants felt isolated (36.1%), and 12 felt burdensome to others (33.3%). Qualitative responses emphasized the ongoing impact of ambiguous loss, with one participant describing it as “a constant, unrelenting struggle ...a grief you can never fully overcome that shapes your entire life.”

Participants also reported a “constant fear to the unexpected,” feelings of guilt (e.g., “I’m not who I used to be; It’s my fault for not seeing what was happening to my son”; “There was a lot of anger and guilt for not reacting sooner”), and resentment (“[I feel] a constant sense of anguish mixed with anger toward the people around my brother, fueled by the frustration and helplessness of not being able to do more to find him or uncover the truth”). These emotions intertwined with sadness and hopelessness. Respondents described a “constant feeling of frustration and confusion,” feelings of being “empty and broken inside,” and anhedonia, articulated as “not feeling like going out, not wanting to do anything.” The depth of sadness associated with loss was captured by one participant who stated, “Life feels frozen, and sadness and anxiety have taken over me.”

The search for their missing relative became all-consuming for some, with several reporting they were devoting their lives to finding them. As one participant indicated, “Fourteen months have passed since my brother disappeared, and there will be no rest until he’s found.” This relentless focus appeared to exacerbate their grief, as expressed by one participant:

Life no longer holds the same meaning. You keep fighting because you have another child, and you don’t want them to suffer or see you in pain. But the absence—and not knowing where or how my dear son might be—is consuming me from the inside. As time goes by, it only gets worse; it’s an unbearable existence, truly inhuman.

The disappearance also affected personal relationships, with seven participants feeling judged (19.4%), 15 experiencing family conflicts (41.7%), and 10 reporting partner disputes (27.8%), with comments on changes in spousal dynamics (“My husband is not the same as he used to be”) and conflicts with parents.

In terms of mental health, 41.7% of participants ($n = 15$) reported receiving a psychological diagnosis following the disappearance, most commonly depression (31.1%, $n = 9$) and anxiety (27.6%, $n = 8$). Other reported conditions included panic attacks, phobias, eating disorders, and sleep disturbances. Formal PTSD diagnoses were rarely reported and were based on participants’ self-reported prior diagnosis. In addition, several participants reported trauma-related symptoms based on self-report items. For example, 47.2% ($n = 17$) of participants reported avoiding places, activities, or people associated with distressing memories, while 41.7% ($n = 15$) reported avoiding thoughts, feelings, or conversations related to the disappearance. Self-blame or blaming others was reported by 47.2% ($n = 17$), with 44.4% ($n = 16$) experiencing persistent negative mood and 47.2% ($n = 17$) struggling to feel

positive emotions or affection. Additionally, seven participants reported suicidal ideation, and four engaged in risky behaviors, such as substance abuse or reckless driving. One participant shared that their daughter died by suicide following her brother’s disappearance, underscoring the profound impact on family members.

Most participants (70%, $n = 25$) stated that their emotional problems resulted from the disappearance. The impact also extended to occupational and academic performance, with 47.2% of participants ($n = 17$) reporting declines.

3.4 | Coping Strategies and Support Received

Participants primarily relied on friends (94.4%, $n = 34$) and family (80.5%, $n = 29$) for support. However, as time passed, they reported a decline in support from these sources and increased reliance on external support, including mental health professionals and missing persons organizations, such as QSD Global ($n = 18$), SOS Desaparecidos ($n = 6$), and Associazione Penelope ($n = 4$). Other organizations, such as Inter SOS, Afades Barcelona, Desendor Ecuador, and ONG *Guardias Civiles Solidarios*, were also mentioned. Connecting with others who shared similar experiences was helpful for 86.1% ($n = 31$) of participants, though 80.5% ($n = 29$) said they found the support inadequate, and 69.2% ($n = 25$) reported a lack of information on coping with the disappearance.

Of those who sought assistance (66.7%, $n = 24$), accessed psychological support (41%, $n = 16$), medical support (23.1%, $n = 9$), and spiritual support (10.2%, $n = 4$). However, 88.9% ($n = 32$) reported lack of access to specialized psychological resources, and among the few who accessed such resources (8.3%, $n = 4$), 75% were dissatisfied. A total of 21 participants identified needed resources, including police support ($n = 14$), psychological services ($n = 8$), financial assistance ($n = 4$), and legal support ($n = 4$). Additionally, 69.4% ($n = 25$) reported that they were still seeking support, and 63.9% ($n = 23$) perceived government measures addressing disappearances as ineffective.

3.5 | Recommendations for Improvement

Based on their experiences, 58.3% ($n = 21$) of participants offered recommendations to improve support services (Table 3), emphasizing the need for support throughout the entire process and across all aspects of family life, as remarked by one participant:

[They need to] offer help, even if the family says they don’t need it, that was my case. I was offered help at the beginning, but I was only focused on the search operation, and once the search was called off, I no longer received that offer of help, but now I believe I really needed it at that time.

Key suggestions included: (1) Mental health and psychosocial support; (2) police and investigative resources; (3) social

TABLE 3 | Proposals to improve support for families.

Improvement proposals	n	%
Police services	8	19.5
Mental health services	8	19.5
General support	5	12.2
Specialized personnel in disappearances	4	9.7
Institutional and administrative improvements	3	7.3
Improvement of laws	3	7.3
Financial assistance	3	7.3
Information/communication	2	4.9
Increase and improvement of resources	2	4.9
Media attention	1	2.4
Greater social awareness of disappearances	1	2.4
Improve waiting times	1	2.4

awareness and media engagement; and (4) institutional accessibility and transparency.

3.5.1 | Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Participants stressed the importance of specialized mental health services tailored to the needs of families affected by disappearances, calling for immediate, accessible, and sustained psychological care. One participant expressed, “I should have immediate, free access to a psychologist through social security from the moment my brother went missing.” The need for ongoing support was also underscored, with one participant noting, “[The] *first few days, the support was great but as time goes by, they forget about family members, we feel helpless.*”

3.5.2 | Police and Investigative Resources

Participants emphasized the need for efficient police services, including quicker response times, reduced bureaucratic delays, and keeping cases open indefinitely (e.g., “They should continue the investigation, even if 20 years have passed, you can’t close a case that isn’t solved.”) Additionally, 16.9% highlighted the need for specialized investigative protocols immediately after the disappearance, especially within the first 48 h, and 9.8% called for better trained professionals (e.g., “A body of specialized investigators, with sufficient technical means. Judges and prosecutors specialized or at least trained to direct this type of cases,” and “I think there should be a team of psychologists specialized in these cases.”).

3.5.3 | Social Awareness and Media Engagement

Participants advocated for greater empathy and respect from professionals and society. Nine participants (25%) suggested improvements in media coverage, particularly reducing sensationalism and respecting privacy. Increased social awareness was

also recommended, with 12.7% ($n=9$) urging the public to understand the reality of disappearances. In this vein, one participant stated, “They should involve families more when sharing the posters. Many people don’t realize the pain of having a loved one go missing ... or that it could happen to anyone. It could be a son, brother, father, or mother.”

3.5.4 | Institutional Accessibility and Transparency

Participants called for increased transparency and accessibility in institutions handling disappearances. Around 9.9% ($n=7$) advocated for equitable media coverage, recommending “Dissemination without filters of gender, nationality or age of the missing person.” Additionally, 7.0% emphasized the need for accessible and clear communication from institutions; 5.6% advocated for legislative changes to improve family support; 5.63% requested improving all resources, better access to mental health services (4.23%, $n=3$), and 2.82% ($n=2$) the need for additional financial support.

4 | Discussion

This study examined the impact of a loved one’s disappearance on relatives, focusing on families’ attributions and perceptions related to the loss, as well as the support they received to cope with the absence. To the authors’ knowledge, this perspective remains underexplored and offers valuable insights to inform effective support for affected families.

A key finding was the range of attributions families offered to make sense of disappearances. Although the specific circumstances of each case remain unknown, the explanations should be understood as family members’ interpretations rather than verified causes. Such attributions may function as coping mechanisms, helping families construct narratives to navigate the ambiguity of their loss. This pattern is consistent with the concept of ambiguous loss, whereby the absence of clear information prevents resolution and hinders adaptation to the loss. Families’ narratives reflected core features of this perspective, including persistent uncertainty, lack of closure, boundary ambiguity, and efforts to sustain meaning and relational continuity despite the loved one’s physical absence.

Families’ coping efforts often revolved around sustaining an emotional bond with the missing person, a process consistent with attachment and meaning-making frameworks. Through shared narratives, they maintained relational continuity despite physical absence, reflecting boundary ambiguity and collective resilience as described by Boss (2016).

In this context, most participants interpreted the disappearance as involuntary, often attributing it to possible criminal involvement (e.g., intimate partner violence), or health-related vulnerabilities (e.g., disorientation, untreated conditions). Only one participant considered the disappearance to be voluntary. This aligns with prior research (Henderson et al. 2000), which suggests that involuntary causes are often frequently reported once missing individuals are located.

Interestingly, the findings suggest potential age-related differences in families' attributions. Cases involving older missing persons were often linked to health-related factors, such as hearing loss or disorientation, whereas disappearances of younger individuals were more frequently associated with external or criminal causes, including kidnapping. This pattern is consistent with previous research indicating that young adults are more likely to go missing under circumstances beyond their control (Bonny et al. 2016). Conversely, a Spanish study (García-Barceló et al. 2024) found that individuals in involuntary disappearance cases tend to be older than those who disappear voluntarily.

Regarding perceived contributing factors, interpersonal conflicts and psychological vulnerabilities were most frequently identified. Conflicts often involved relationship disputes, in line with previous research linking disagreements over authority or independence to disappearances (García-Barceló et al. 2020; Henderson et al. 2000). Nearly 20% of respondents mentioned mental health or addiction problems. Notably, more than half did not perceive their relatives to be at risk before the disappearance, suggesting a gap between perceived and actual vulnerability.

Family members also highlighted personality traits, such as high levels of trust or impressionability, as well as social influences including peer relationships or adverse circumstances. Although previous studies have suggested a link between trauma and disappearances (Gossmann et al. 2024), this was not supported by the present findings, as most participants were unaware of prior traumatic experiences. Among those who did report such experiences, separations and losses were most common, suggesting that ongoing personal challenges may reduce resilience and increase vulnerability.

Participants described the disappearance as having severe and enduring psychological consequences, including shifts in worldviews, intense emotional distress (e.g., fear, sadness, anger, guilt), and disruptions to daily life. These findings are consistent with prior research on the emotional impact of ambiguous loss on families of missing persons (Almanza-Avendaño et al. 2020; Linares and Álvarez 2022).

In terms of support, 66.7% of participants reported seeking help, primarily psychological, but expressed low satisfaction due to limited access to specialized services. Interventions that are not tailored to the specific challenges of ambiguous loss may be insufficient or even counterproductive (Boss 2002). Previous research has highlighted this issue, suggesting that professionals may struggle to address ambiguous loss and may inadvertently pressure families toward closure (Boss et al. 2003).

More than half of participants identified the need for additional services, including improved police response, legal and financial assistance, and sustained psychological care. These gaps in both mental health provision and law enforcement response may further exacerbate families' distress. Addressing disappearances as a collective rather than purely individual issue may help foster more comprehensive and supportive responses (Henderson et al. 2000).

Based on their experiences, families proposed several recommendations for improving support, including better training for police and mental health professionals, stronger legal and financial support assistance, and sustained psychological care. Participants reported that support declined over time, leaving them feeling abandoned and increasingly reliant on informal networks (Linares and Álvarez 2022; Temple 1997). They also emphasized the importance of prompt investigative protocols, particularly within the first 48 h, consistent with previous research highlighting frustration over procedural delays and limited specialized responses (Almanza-Avendaño et al. 2020).

Finally, families called for greater public empathy and awareness to counter media sensationalism and improve social understanding of ambiguous loss, which may help alleviate the emotional strain experienced by affected relatives (Gair and Moloney 2013).

4.1 | Limitations

Despite the relevance of these findings, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was relatively small ($N = 36$) and primarily composed of participants recruited through associations supporting families of missing persons, which may have shaped the perspectives reported. Individuals connected to such organizations are often more engaged in advocacy, more aware of systemic shortcomings, and more likely to express dissatisfaction with institutional responses. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting a situated perspective within a specific subgroup and not as representing the full range of experiences among all relatives of missing persons. Second, the use of an ad hoc, non-validated questionnaire and the study's exploratory design may limit measurement precision and generalizability. The decision to prioritize participants' emotional well-being also led to the exclusion of some potential respondents. Additionally, the online survey format may have introduced biases, including self-selection and variability in the interpretation of questions. Third, the heterogeneous nature of disappearances suggests that the findings may be context-specific and not fully generalizable across different populations or settings. Cultural influences on how disappearance and loss are experienced were also not explicitly examined. Finally, this study examined adults' experiences of disappearances within the family and did not include children's perspectives. Future research should explore how children and adolescents experience ambiguous loss in their families, using developmental and trauma-informed frameworks to better understand intergenerational trauma and transmission of coping and meaning-making strategies. In addition, although cultural norms may shape how disappearance and loss are perceived and managed, this dimension was not explicitly analyzed in the present study. Future cross-cultural or culturally sensitive research is needed to examine how cultural expectations, values, and narratives influence families' interpretations of disappearance, coping processes, and access to support.

4.2 | Implications

The findings underscore the relevance of considering ambiguous loss within family science frameworks, particularly in contexts

involving disappearance and unresolved trauma. Importantly, the implications discussed below should be interpreted as priorities articulated by participating families and not as empirically validated policy prescriptions. Given the exploratory design and the qualitative nature of participants' suggestions, these implications reflect family-generated perspectives on how institutions could better respond to disappearances. Families facing such loss experience enduring psychological strain, disrupted relationships, and limited institutional support, all of which challenge existing models of grief and coping. By examining how families make sense of disappearance and the coping strategies they adopt, this study advances understanding of resilience under conditions of profound ambiguity.

The following recommendations emerge directly from the needs and suggestions expressed by participants in this study. Translating these insights into practice requires addressing several systemic barriers. Institutional fragmentation remains a major obstacle, as responsibilities for investigation, psychosocial care, and legal follow-up are often distributed across uncoordinated agencies, resulting in inconsistent and delayed responses as reported by the families in this study. Families' responses suggest the potential value of establishing interministerial protocols and permanent liaison structures between law enforcement, judicial bodies, and mental health services could promote continuity of care and information flow. Access to trauma-informed, family-centered interventions is also constrained by limited resources and insufficient specialized training. Participants' experiences also point to the potential value of integrating training on ambiguous loss into professional curricula for psychologists, social workers, and police officers, particularly in settings where these professionals are involved in the management of disappearance cases. From the perspective of participating families, greater consistency in definitions and procedures across jurisdictions may help reduce inequalities in how cases are classified and managed, although the applicability of this priority will depend on the legal organization of each context. Sustainable funding and responsible media communication strategies are equally essential to reduce stigma and ensure long-term support for affected families. Media guidelines emphasizing empathy, respect, and accuracy can improve public understanding and reduce secondary harm.

Because the study sample consisted primarily of families residing in Spain and Italy and was recruited through associations supporting relatives of missing persons, the transferability of these recommendations may depend on specific institutional contexts. In countries with centralized missing persons frameworks, strong interagency coordination, or established family liaison systems, some of the gaps described by participants may already be partially addressed. Conversely, the recommendations may be particularly relevant in contexts where institutional fragmentation, limited access to specialized psychological services, or unclear investigative procedures persist. Additional comparative research is needed to determine which of these family-generated priorities are broadly applicable across jurisdictions and which require adaptation to specific legal and cultural settings. Accordingly, these priorities are likely to be most transferable to institutional settings characterized by fragmented services, limited access to specialized psychological care, or unclear investigative procedures, whereas their relevance in more integrated systems should be examined through comparative research.

Several existing frameworks demonstrate that structural integration is attainable. The *National Missing Persons Framework in Scotland* (Scottish Government 2025) provides a model for clarifying institutional roles, creating family liaison roles, and improving data coordination across agencies (e.g., local authorities, third-sector organizations, NHS). Similarly, the *UK's Missing People Framework* offers multi-agency protocols and professional training designed to maintain consistent communication with families (National Police Chief's Council 2021). Internationally, the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (2019) and the *Families of Missing Migrants Project* (2019) exemplify the feasibility of trauma-informed, cross-sector collaboration that combines data sharing, psychosocial accompaniment, and advocacy. In Spain, measures and protocols, such as those coordinated through the Office of Missing Persons [*Oficina de Personas Desaparecidas*] and the National Center of Missing Persons [*Centro Nacional de Desaparecidos*] represent important steps toward institutional coordination. However, families continue to report feeling unsupported or left alone as time passes. This perception suggests that existing mechanisms may not yet be sufficiently effective in providing sustained emotional and procedural accompaniment, underscoring the need to reinforce assistance. These programs show that effective responses depend less on isolated interventions than on stable governance structures, adequate resources, and an institutional culture that recognizes the enduring psychological toll of disappearance. Strengthening these structural supports requires policy refinement and institutional accountability mechanisms to ensure that measures genuinely meet families' needs. A comprehensive, coordinated approach that combines long-term mental health care accessible through public systems, specialized training for professionals, consistent and compassionate communication with families, and legislative harmonization, would alleviate the emotional and practical burden carried by families and foster more humane and effective institutional responses.

5 | Conclusions

Disappearances are a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, affecting people across diverse backgrounds and leaving families grappling with uncertainty that disrupts closure and complicates grieving. Families often struggle to make sense of disappearances but lack effective strategies and support systems to ease their suffering. Legal reforms are crucial for better protecting victims and providing resources for families, including improved access to mental health services to reduce economic and psychological burdens. Financial limitations often restrict access to psychological care, leaving emotional needs unmet. Addressing missing person cases requires a comprehensive approach, encompassing stronger support systems, more efficient investigations, and greater social awareness to assist affected families.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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