

Going missing on a night out: men found dead in water

Background

Approximately 200,000 people went missing in the United Kingdom in 2009/10 (NPIA, 2011). Less than one per cent of all people reported missing will be found dead (Newiss, 2011). Some will have died through natural causes; others through suicide, accident or homicide. In some cases the cause of death will not be known.

Data is not routinely collected to identify how many people go missing on a night out, or what happens to them. However, disappearances reported in the media suggest that many people will be found dead in water.

Accidental drowning

More than 400 people died in 2009 as a result of accidents or other incidents in inland water (including rivers, lakes, canals and ponds) or at the coast (including harbours, marinas and docks) (National Water Safety Forum, 2011).

Approximately one third of accidental drownings involve males between the ages of 13 and 35 years (ibid.).

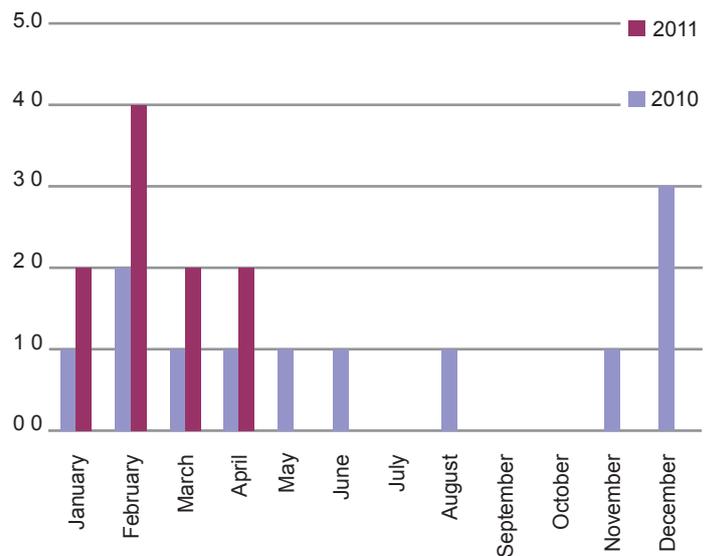
July and August are the peak months for accidental water related fatalities (ibid.).

Newiss (2011) identified 17 people who went missing in the UK following a night out during 2006 and 2007 who were later found to have died. In all cases where information was available, the person was found dead in water. All were male.

In 2010 Missing People learned of 12 men going missing on a night out who were found dead in water. In just the first four months of 2011, 10 men are known to have died and been found in water after going missing on a night out¹ (see Figure 1).

All people were last seen in, leaving, or having just left a nightclub, pub or bar. Most were known to have been drinking. The extent to which alcohol consumption plays a role in these fatalities is unclear.

Figure 1: Number of missing men found dead in water, 2010 and 2011 (to date)



Risk of being found dead

These findings do not provide any estimate of the risk of a person going missing on a night out being found dead. To calculate risk, a better understanding is needed of how many men go missing on a night out and are later found alive. For example, if for every man who goes missing on a night out and is found dead, there are 1,000 others who are later found alive, then the risk is relatively low. If, however, four out of five people who go missing on a night out are later found dead, then the risk is comparatively high. At present, data on the number of people who go missing on a night out (regardless of outcome) is not routinely available. For further discussion on risk assessment see Newiss (2011).

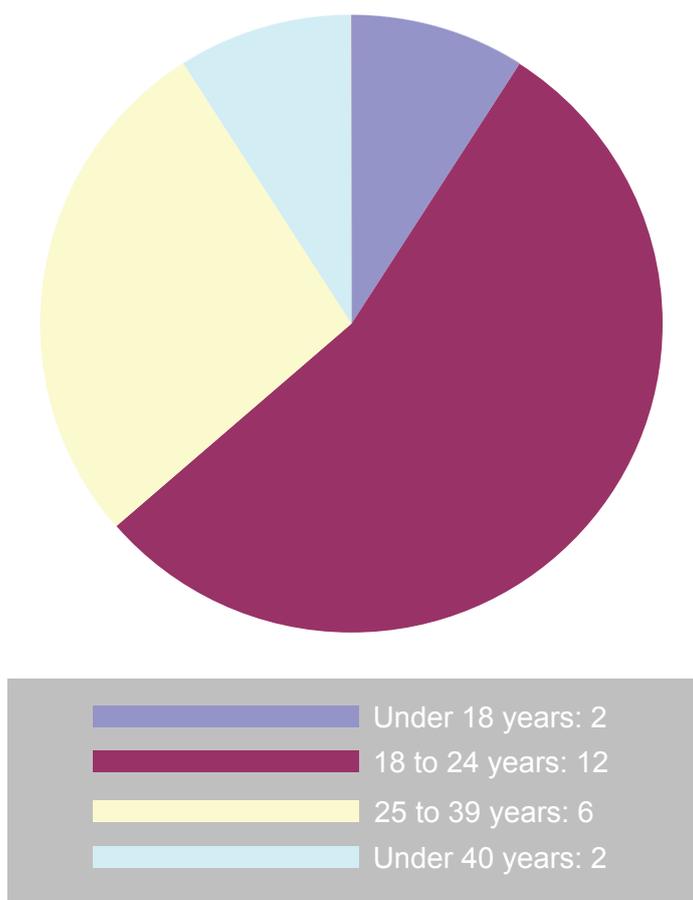
¹ The cases were identified through Missing People's media tracking system. Some cases may not have been identified and therefore the figures given may be an undercount. Individuals who went missing abroad on a night out have been excluded. This analysis only focuses on males. Whilst the charity is aware of several disappearances of women on a night out, it appears that the profile of what happens to them is different from men.

Characteristics

The 22 men who went missing on a night out and were found dead in water in 2010 and the first four months of 2011 were aged between 16 and 48 years. Just over half were aged between 18 and 24 years, and all but four were aged between 18 and 39 years (see Figure 2).

Nine were students and nine were in employment. In four cases this information was not available.

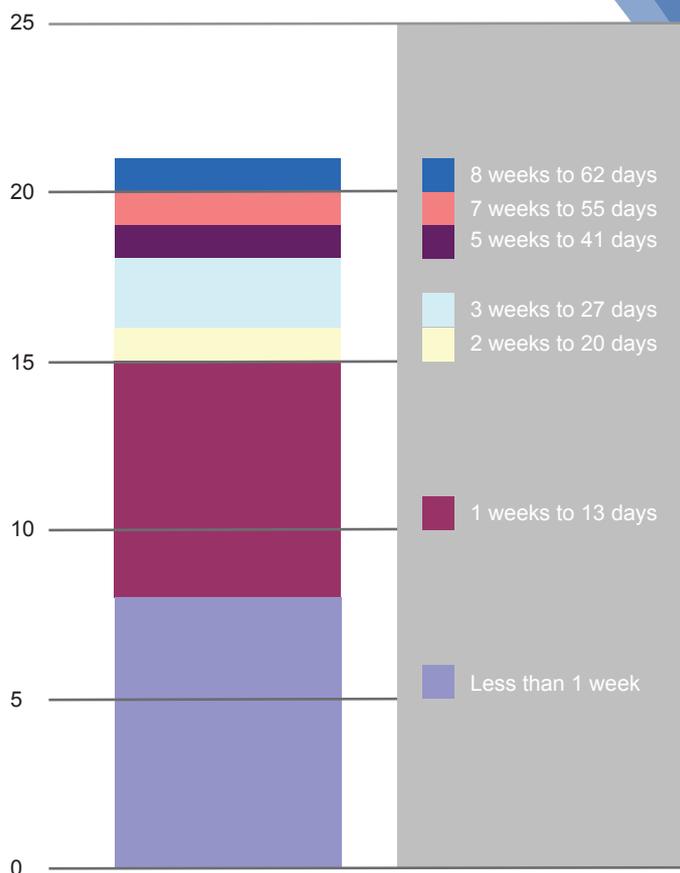
Figure 2: Age of the missing people



Duration missing

In these cases families face the uncertainty of not knowing what has happened to their relative before their fate is discovered. In nearly two-thirds of the cases identified in 2010 and 2011, the person was missing for longer than one week. Three people were missing for longer than five weeks (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of missing men found dead in water by duration



In nine of the 22 cases identified in 2010 and the first four months of 2011, the body of the missing person was discovered by a member of the public. In six cases the body was found by the police, and in one other case the body was found by people working in the waters. No information was available on who discovered the body in the other six cases.

Outcome

In 6 of the 17 cases reported in Newiss (2011) it was established that the person had died as a result of an accident. In the remaining cases the exact circumstances of death remained unexplained. These cases illustrate the difficulty of establishing the exact circumstances of a death when a body is found in water.

In the Newiss (2011) sample, three-quarters of the missing people were found in a river, the rest in the sea or in a dock. In the 2010 and 2011 cases, nearly two-thirds of the missing people were found in a river, two were found in the sea, two were found in a canal, and the others were found in other areas of water.

Summary and recommendations

Each year people die in the waterways and coast of the UK. Some are reported missing before their bodies are discovered, causing a period of distress and uncertainty before grieving can begin.

Men who go missing on a night out and are later found dead, are invariably found in inland water or the sea. The cause of death is often difficult to determine. Some fatalities are accidents but suicide may also account for some deaths. Whilst many people had been drinking, the exact role played by alcohol in these incidents is unclear.

Further work should be undertaken in four areas:

1. Missing People should work with other agencies to raise awareness of the danger posed by water to young men on a night out.
2. Local authorities should work with voluntary and private-sector organisations to maximise the safety of people in, or leaving, popular drinking areas.
3. Police recording systems should be examined to determine how many people go missing on a night out, and the proportions found dead and alive, in order to understand the risk posed to people reported missing in these circumstances. This should then be used to inform search strategies.
4. The police and other search agencies should examine whether new technologies, including water scanners, can aid the early discovery of bodies in water, to relieve the suffering of families waiting for news of a missing person.

References

National Policing Improvement Agency (2011) Missing persons: Data and analysis 2009/2010. NPIA: London.

Newiss, G. (2011) Learning from fatal disappearances. A report by Missing People. Missing People: London.

National Water Safety Forum (2011) UK water related fatalities 2009 WAID database report.

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