

Themes in Accidental Fire Deaths 2013-2017



An investigation into accidental fatal fires in the South West of England

From the Chief Fire Officers

It has been four years since the last review of the regions accidental fire deaths and sadly in that time we have encountered a slight increase in the tragic loss of life despite our best efforts to achieve zero accidental fire deaths.

Whilst the seven risk factors previously identified have remained the same, our learning as to contributory factors has evolved and goes beyond that of the hard facts contained within this booklet.

Positively, in support of the 2008-2013 report, fire and rescue services have continued to reach out to partner agencies responsible for caring for those most vulnerable in society. We know that working in isolation will not build on or deliver the safer communities agenda we all strive for. Therefore again we need to emphasise the importance of sharing information if we are to succeed in not only reducing fire deaths, but fires overall.

We believe our partners hold the key to help us in making the South West safer from fire and urge you and them to again work with us to target those most at risk from fire.

Chief Fire Officers

Avon, Cornwall, Devon & Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Fire & Rescue Services



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Coroners foreward

I would like to commend the Fire and Rescue Services of the South West for this continuing innovative work.

The identification of the seven factors in home fire deaths will prove invaluable in identifying high risk individuals, who would benefit from inter agency intervention.

I know the Fire Service is always keen to make home visits to advise vulnerable people. This key information should enable local agencies to bring particularly vulnerable individuals to the attention of their local fire service. This is important collaborative work which I fully support.

Ian Arrow

HM Coroner

Overview

This booklet builds on previous research undertaken by South West Fire and Rescue Services and provides a summary of accidental fatal fires occurring within the region between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2017.

Prediction of when the next fire will occur or who it will affect is still beyond our control. However, reviewing past incidents is just one of the many steps in informing our future prevention strategies to reduce the number of accidental fires and ensure protection of those most vulnerable of fire.

To be the most effective, we have found that the sharing of accidental fatal fire data continues to provide us with a better opportunity to understand the causes of those fires and those likely to be fatally affected by fire.

The societal cost of a fire death in the home is estimated at over £1.65million; this highlights the massive potential benefit to society if these deaths could be prevented.



Importantly the data shows us that a combination of risk factors is what makes a victim more vulnerable. We use this information as the basis to target community safety activities. It helps us to identify where the risk is highest and how we may protect those individuals.

What is clear is that many of those deaths could have been prevented through closer working with partner agencies to identify those at most risk.

In 32% of cases victims were known to other agencies.

Fire death risk factors

-  Mental health
-  Poor housekeeping
-  Alcohol
-  Smoking
-  Drugs (prescription and illegal)
-  Limited mobility
-  Living alone



Gender and age of victims

Those in the 80+ age group are the most likely to die in a fire, however during this period of analysis it was noted that there had been a significant increase in those aged 60+ dying in fires.

- Men are more likely to die in a fire than women.
- The risk of dying in fire substantially increases from aged 40 onwards.
- Between the ages of 40-70 three times as many men are victims than women.
- The two highest contributory risk factors in the 40-49 age group are alcohol and living alone.
- In the 60-69 age group the two highest contributory risk factors are mobility and living alone.

Of the over 65's where the victim lived alone, the gender split was even. This suggests that gender isn't necessarily an influence.

What this suggests is that separately, men are more at risk of dying in an accidental dwelling fire however living alone is a significant factor for both men and women.



Number of Accidental Dwelling Fire Fatalities by Age Group and Gender



Cause of fire

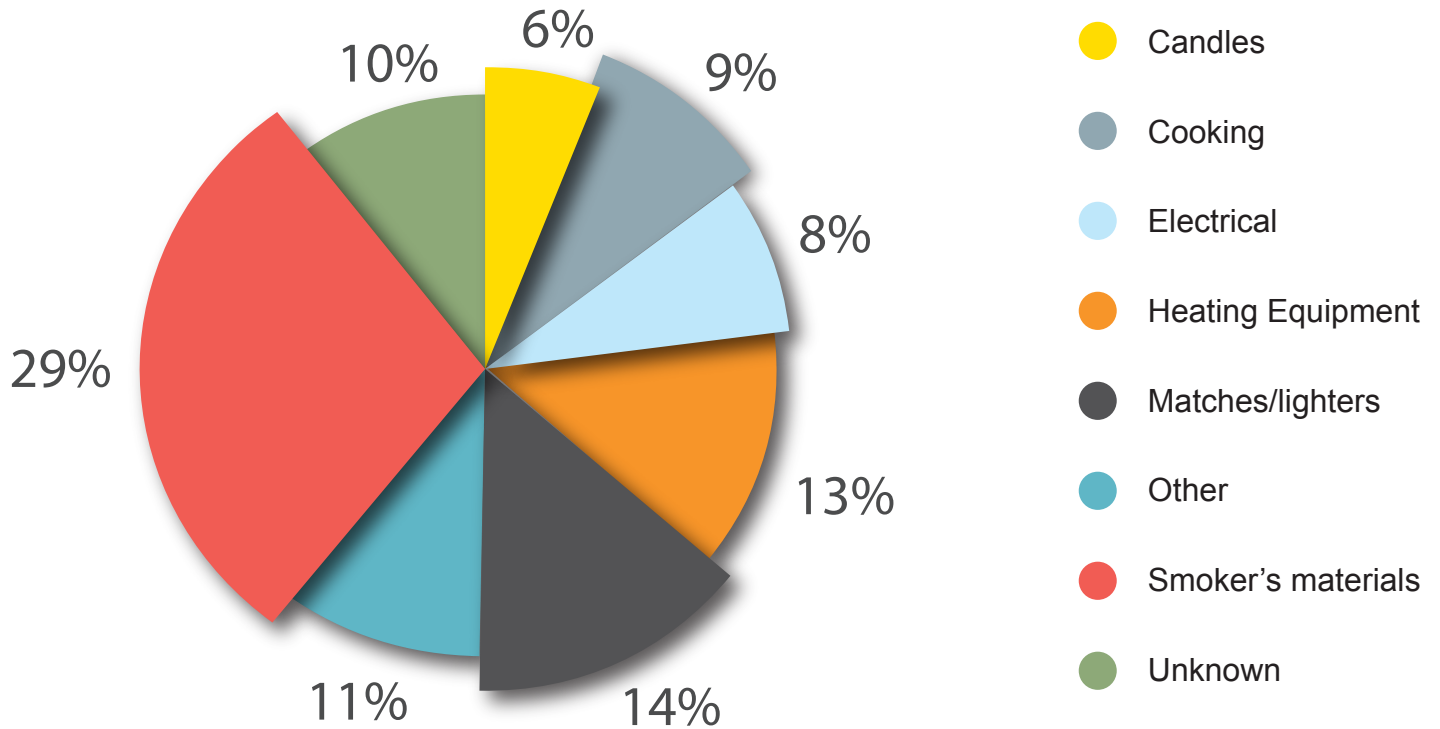
As part of the study, ignition sources responsible for causing the fires were also explored.

Whilst ignition source 'types' associated with causing fatal fires have remained relatively similar, we have experienced a shift in the numbers of ignition sources responsible for causing these fires. During 2013-17, accidentally discarded smoker's materials associated with fatal fires increased to 26 deaths as compared to the previous period of analysis, which recorded 14 deaths.

Naked flame sources such as matches and lighters (associated with smoking) were also identified as playing an increased role in ignition of fatal fires within this review period from 9 to 13 deaths.



Number of Accidental Dwelling Fire Fatalities by Source of Ignition



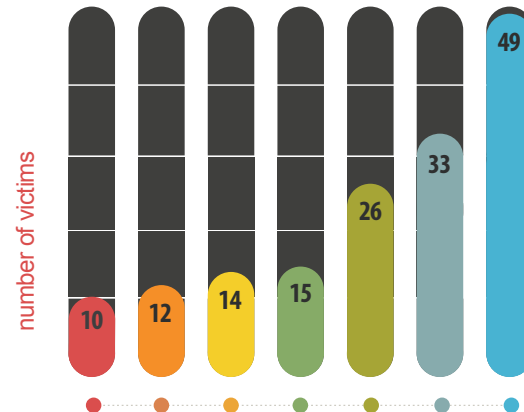
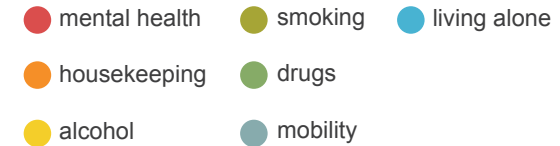
Risk factors

Common risk factors were examined during the study. These lifestyles or behaviours were often identified as being influential in the cause of the fire. Whilst the risk factors have remained the same as our previous research, we are now starting to appreciate other factors not previously reported i.e. the role of medicinal creams and medical ancillary equipment in supporting fire development.

Risk factors include:

- smoking
- living alone
- poor housekeeping
- limited mobility
- mental health
- medication including illegal drugs
- alcohol.

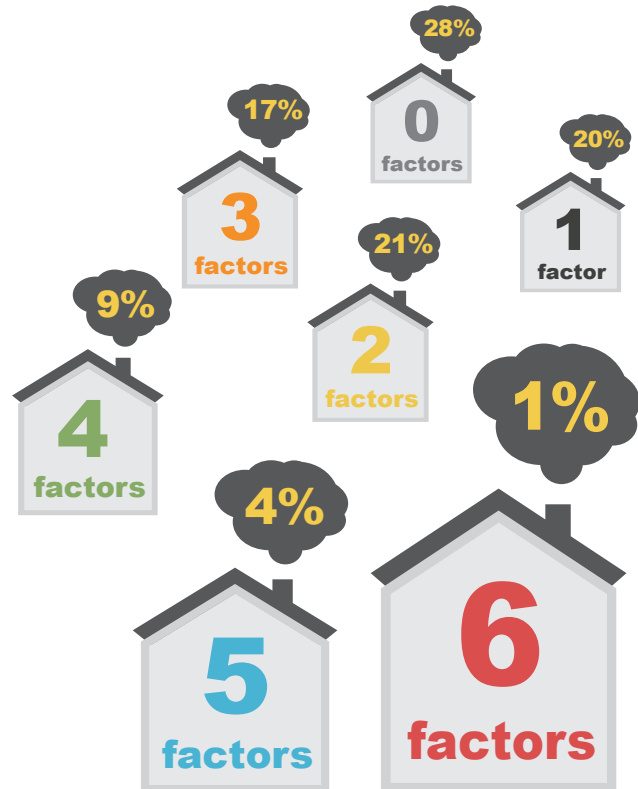
54% of victims live alone making it the most prevalent factor. The least common factor recorded was mental health, though this may be due to under recording as it is a difficult factor to establish during a fire investigation.



What is also noticeable is the number of cases where more than one factor is present.

- In 65 of the 90 (72%) cases one or more of the risk factors were present.
- Just over half have two or more risk factors.
- 28% have zero risk factors

This has clear implications from the perspective of targeting prevention work at those who are likely to be most vulnerable.

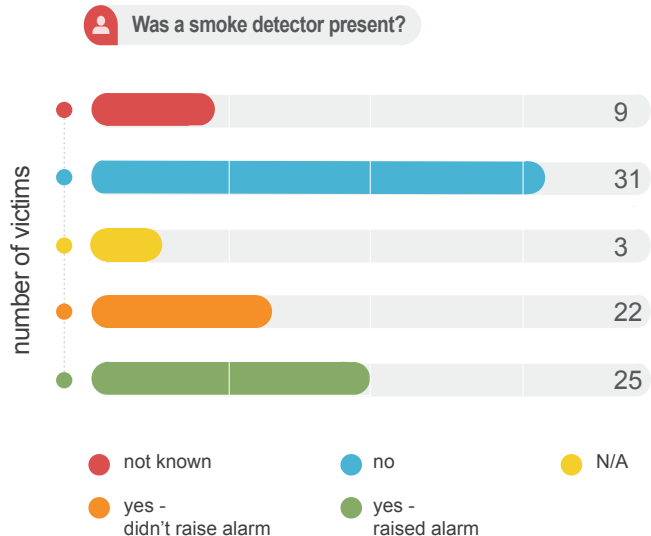


Smoke detector ownership and activation

Fire and rescue services actively encourage and fit smoke detectors in the home. Their effective operation has been instrumental in ensuring early warning and saving countless lives, hence working smoke detection continues to be a prime focus for fire and rescue services.

It is evident from this research that in 68% of fatal fires between 2013 and 2017 either a smoke detector was not present or failed to raise an alarm.

Despite the alarm being raised by smoke detection, there were 12 deaths in which the victim lived alone (48%). This is however a sizeable decrease when compared to 2008 - 2013 study which stood at 73%.



Were they known to other agencies?

From this study and the previous study of 2008 -13, we recognise that those most vulnerable and at risk from fire are most likely known to other agencies. This is even more likely where those individuals experience one or more identified risk factors.

When undertaking our investigations it is difficult to establish whether a victim is known to other agencies. Of the 90 accidental dwelling fire deaths the southwest region experienced between 2013-17, it was confirmed that 29 were known to other agencies, with 10 not known to other agencies. Of the remaining 51 accidental fire deaths, we were unable to establish whether those individuals were known to other agencies.



Did you know?

Emergency response and firefighting represent a fraction of the work carried out by your fire and rescue service.

Working to reduce incidents and keep you and your clients safe we can also provide:

- targeted home safety visits to assess the risks of fire to the household, whilst supporting and influencing behavioural change
- provision of appropriate equipment to reduce fire risk which may include:
 - smoke detectors
 - fire retardant bedding/throws
 - arson letterboxes
- a range of fire safety leaflets
- fire safety talks with community groups.

Register your 'white goods' appliance now

To make sure that manufacturers can contact you if a safety repair is needed go to:

www.registermyappliance.org.uk

You can register appliances brought in the last 12 years and update your details if your appliances move.



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