

Fire deaths in the South West

between 2008-13

a collaborative review



From the Chief Fire Officers

All too frequently fire services in the South West attend fires which were preventable.

Worst of all are those incidents which result in the tragic loss of life whereby the victim had already been identified as vulnerable. It is to those agencies that we now look to support our objective of zero accidental fire deaths.

Within this document you will see the hard facts taken from South West fire services which show that accidental fires in the home affect those most vulnerable and all too often are already known to other agencies.

As Chief Fire Officers, we are calling for all agencies to work even more closely together to identify and then help those most at risk from dying in a fire. We need action now to reduce fire deaths further. We need your help.

Chief Fire Officers

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

Mr Ian Arrow's Forward

I would like to commend the fire and rescue services of the South West for this 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.

Ian Arrow

H.M. Coroner

Overview

This booklet provides an analytical summary of accidental fatal fires occurring within homes, in the South West of England, between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2013.

The report has been compiled using research data, from a total of 88 deaths, collected by fire investigators across each of the South West's fire and rescue services.

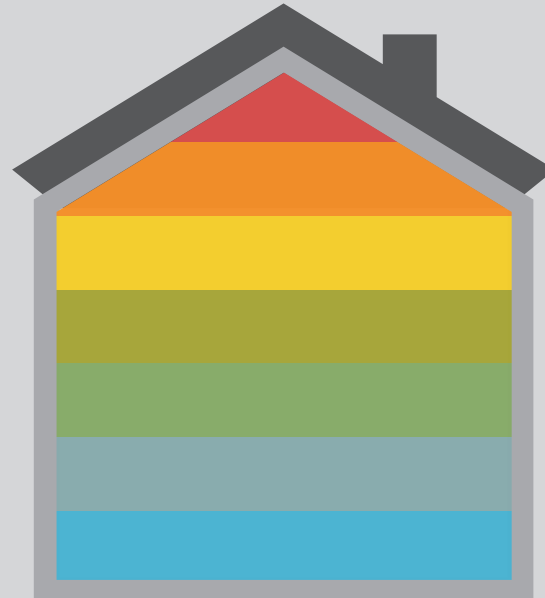
Due to the relatively low number of fire deaths across the region, working in partnership to collect this information has been vital in producing meaningful analysis.

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 could be prevented.

The research has successfully identified common factors present in incidents resulting in death. However, it is apparent from the data that no single characteristic of these fatal incidents would allow us to identify a 'silver bullet' solution.

Nevertheless, whilst no single solution exists, the research confirms what is generally believed throughout fire and rescue services; that in such unfortunate incidents there are a combination of factors that result in a tragic death.

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.



Fire death risk factors

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

Gender and age of victims

Results from the study show that slightly more men were victims of accidental fire than women, with 47 male fatalities compared to 41 female fatalities.

However, the gender difference is far more significant when age is also taken into account:

- over 60% of female victims were aged over 65, compared to just 36% of male victims
- the average age of a male victim was 56 years compared to 68 years for a female victim.

With these figures to compare, separate gendered risk groups can be more clearly identified.

One possible explanation for this variation between the genders could be that more elderly women live alone, compared to men, due to a longer life expectancy.

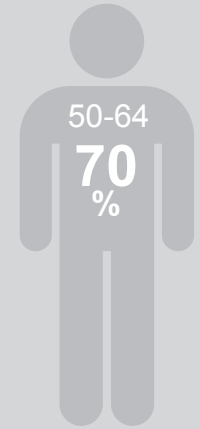
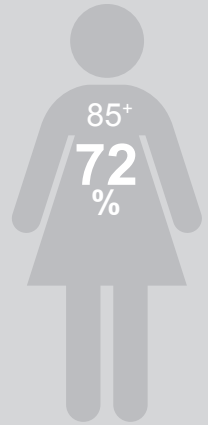
Just 7.14% of men in South West England are aged over 75 compared to 10.26% of women.





Age and gender of victims

Age group of victim



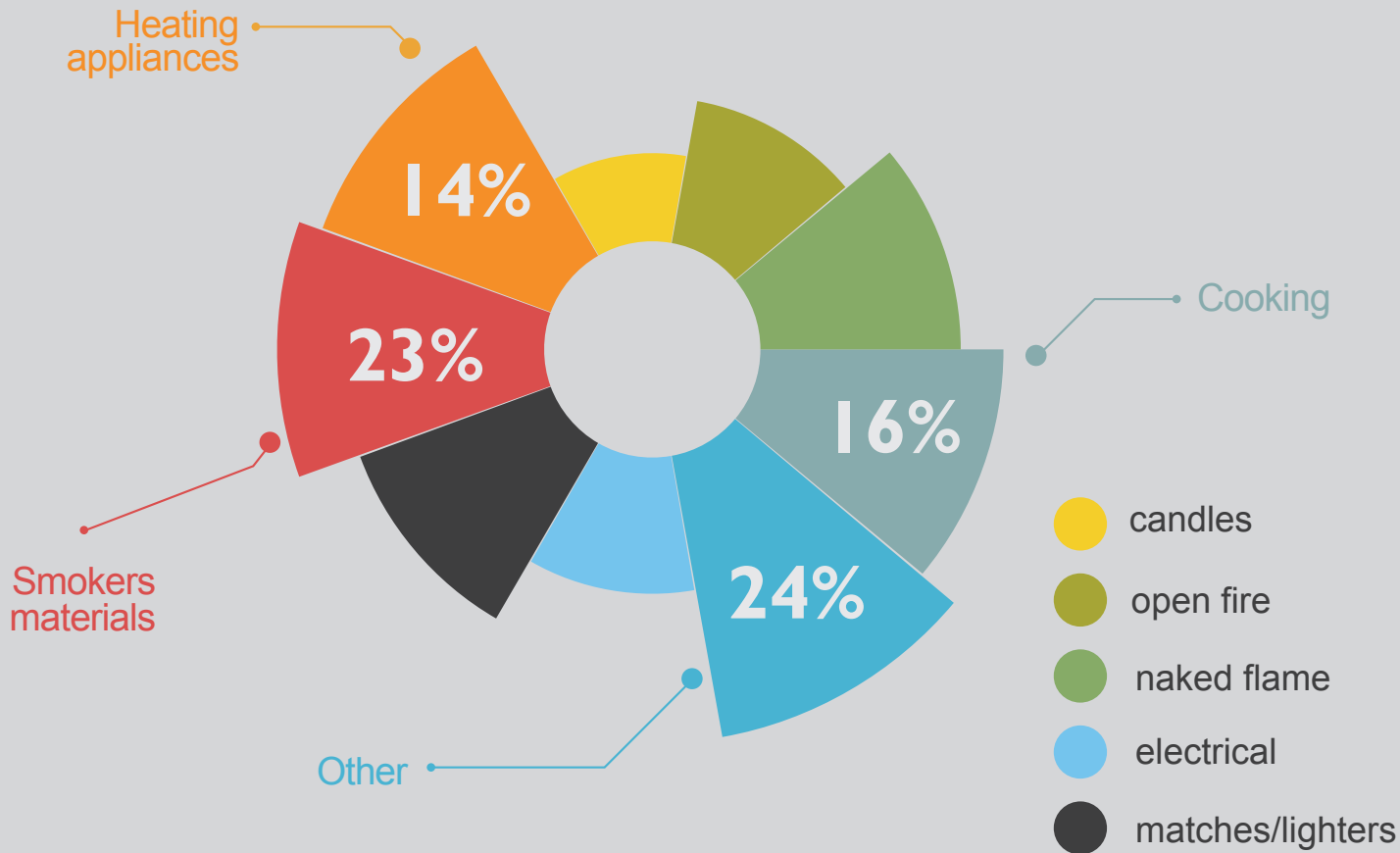
Cause of fire

There were a wide range of ignition sources identified in the study and no single cause accounted for more than 25% of the total.

Interestingly, cooking related fires accounted for just 14 of the 88 accidental deaths, yet over 50% of accidental house fires in the South West are started by cooking related activity.

Whilst fire safety campaigns have focussed on preventing fires as a result of discarded cigarettes, smoker's materials were still the most common source of ignition, which sadly resulted in 20 fatalities throughout the region.





Risk factors

During the study of each fire death the presence of seven lifestyle or behavioural factors were identified as key influencers.

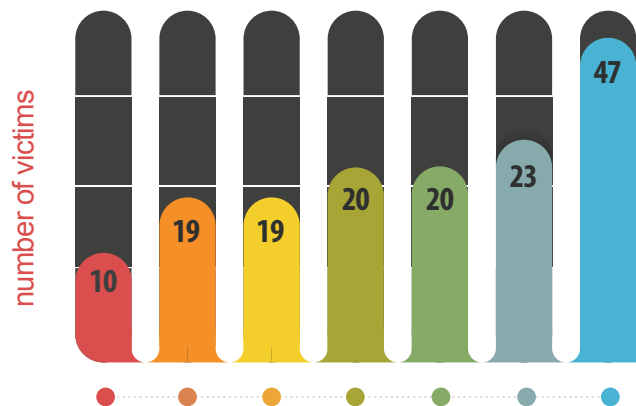
These factors were:

- victim lived alone
- alcohol
- poor housekeeping
- limited mobility
- mental health
- drugs (both prescription and illegal)
- smoking.

The most common factor was that the victim lived alone, which was identified in 47 of the 88 cases (53%).

The strong link between living alone and risk of fire death is reinforced when comparing the fatal fire study with Census statistics for the region.

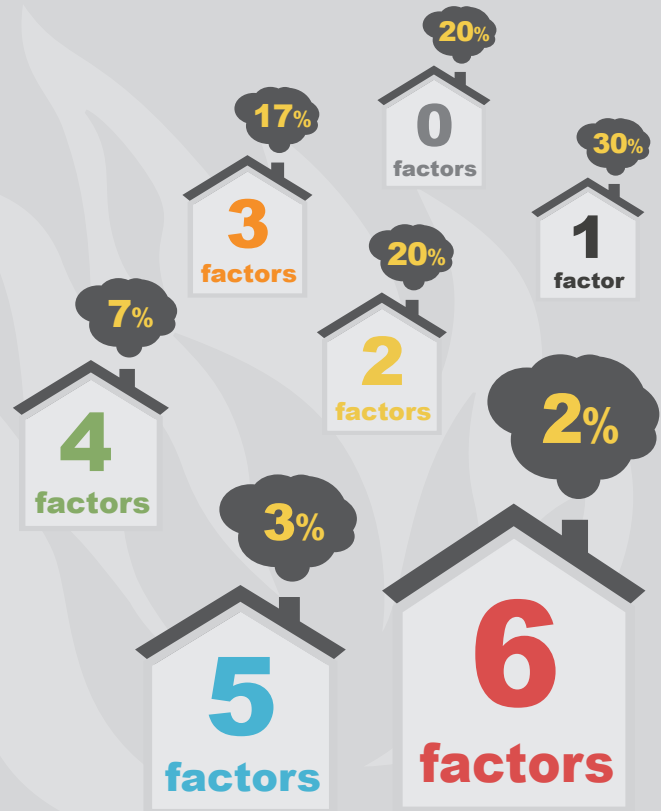
The government survey data shows 30% of households are occupied by a lone adult in South West England, yet this 'group' accounts for over half of accidental fire deaths. A large number of these victims were aged over 65.



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

- In 18 of the 88 (20%) cases none of the risk factors were present.
- In 26 (30%) cases one factor was present.
- In 44 (50%) cases more than one factor was present.

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



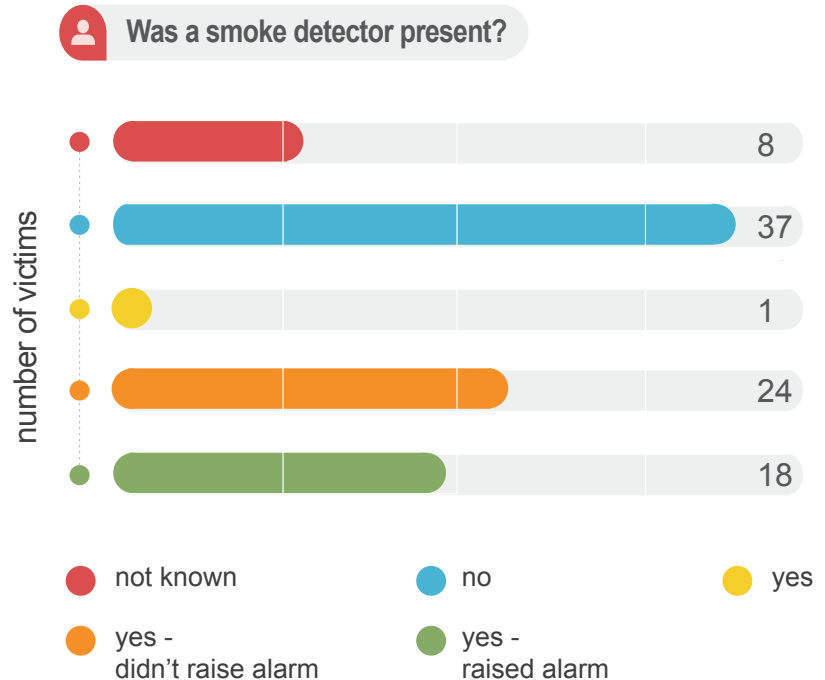
Percentage of fatal fire incidents identifying 0-6 risk factors.

Was a smoke detector present?

In 61 of the 88 fatal cases (69%) a smoke detector was either not present or failed to raise the alarm².

Given that smoke detector ownership was estimated at over 86% at the start of the study period, it is clear that working smoke alarms really do save lives. A fact promoted by fire and rescue services for over 20 years.

Tragically, 18 victims died where a smoke detector was present and raised the alarm; at least 50% of these victims lived alone and were known to be in contact with another agency.



²For a further eight victims this was not known or recorded.

Known to other agencies

Of the 88 cases examined in the study, at least 29 were known to other agencies who had the opportunity to influence the victim's lifestyle and behaviour.

Had the fire and rescue services been made aware of these victims before the fire, the outcome in many of these cases could have been different.



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
 - portable sprinkler units
- a range of fire safety leaflets
- fire safety talks with community groups.

For further information and to work more closely with your fire and rescue service contact:

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e.

Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service

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