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Narratives of Drowning: Exploring Family and Community Resilience

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Background

Within Ireland the last significant attempt to examine drowning covered the period 2000 to 2006. This research (Connolly, 2006) focused on rescue incidents carried out by An Garda Síochána rather than drowning *per se*, overall rescue or failure to rescue.

It is notable that most of the research on drowning focuses on the process of drowning and the process of effective rescue. Less attention is paid to the impact an incident of drowning has on other significant stakeholders, particularly families and local communities, and their support needs at a local level. This is a particular issue for local police (Gardaí) and local volunteer rescuers (such as Community Rescue Boats volunteers) who are often the first responders to a drowning incident (Connolly, 2006) and who live in local communities and do have to support and engage with the local community and family subsequent to the incident. As a result they are situated to have a unique insight into the medium and long terms issues that might arise for families and communities, how they are dealt with by agencies and how approaches could be improved.

This paper therefore explores a gap in the literature relating to the support needs of families and local communities following an incident of drowning. We have focused on ‘death by water’ as this happens in rivers, rather than at sea or by the coast.

The aim is to explore the impact of incidents of death by water in rivers on families and communities and the nature of the support issues that may arise when engaging with such families and communities as perceived by members of the Gardaí and members of the Community Rescue Boats Ireland organisation.

Method

One to one in-depth interviews were conducted with members of river search and rescue and retired members of An Garda Síochána. Thematic analysis was used to explore the narrative interviews.

Results

Demographic Information

The sample (n =12) included six Gardaí (2 divers/ 3 Garda sergeants / 1 Senior Garda) and six River Search and Rescue members. Ages ranged from 30 – 70 years. Participant experience involved in Search and Rescue ranged from 10 – 37 years. All interviewed were male. The range of deaths from drowning for the sample was between 9 – 200 deaths.

Discussion

Emergent Themes

'Sense of Belonging'

- Diverse communities were served by those in the sample: community identity was a source of support in cases of drowning when the person affected 'belonged' to the community.
- Community retrospective valuing of the services, particularly as this related to fund raising was also identified.

Supporting and 'Telling Them as It Is'

- Families wanted to be involved as a search progressed. Formal official agencies were a form of limited support.
- Informal supports from local community were more noticeable in rural setting than in larger towns/ cities, particularly when the person who drowned was known to the community.
- There was an evident need for ongoing support, particularly as this related to the traumatic processes associated with inquests into death by drowning.
- The need for closure was also identified and the concepts of 'bringing someone home' to allow a 'sigh of relief' for both the family and community was regularly expressed by the sample. The potential positive impact of social media in terms of progressing searches was also highlighted.

Challenges

Interrelated Triad: Individual – Local – National

- Availability of training for those supporting families/ community is essential - 'more than the family affected'
- Co-ordination of existing services needs to be improved with greater emphasis on interagency collaboration as this relates to supporting both the family and community.
- Disparity across the country in terms of services provided
- On-going support for families, particularly for inquest.
- National Standards are needed

Connolly, J. (2006).

<http://lifesavingfoundation.ie/files/3413/2379/6563/suicidebydrowninirewwsc.pdf>



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John Connolly is the honorary Company Secretary of the Irish registered charity The Lifesaving Foundation. He is a retired primary school Principal Teacher. Between 1977 and 2004 he was elected to the Branch Executive of RLSS IRELAND as Branch Water Safety Officer, Branch Technical Officer, Chief Examiner, Branch Secretary and Branch President. He was Director of Ireland's Lifeguard School for 15 years during which he established a voluntary weekend beach lifeguard service at Dunmore East, Co. Waterford (1979) and Bonmahon Lifeguard Club (1984). He worked as a professional pool lifeguard and as a voluntary surf lifeguard for 30 years during which he rescued over 100 persons from drowning. He is the recipient of many awards and honours which include the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Award (2003), the Australian Surgeon General's Medal (2007), and the Dutch Medal of Honour 2017 (250th anniversary Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen).