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First Responders' Narratives of Drowning: Perceptions of Family and Community Impacts and Policy Implications

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study of the impacts of drowning death on local communities and families in the Republic of Ireland as perceived by first responders. The impact of a death may be particularly stressful. The identified population of interest were members of the Garda and first responders from Community Rescue Boats Ireland. The principal data collection method was one-to-one narrative interviews followed by a focus group. Questioning involved asking interviewees to talk about specific events rather than providing general opinions. Community identity was a source of impact, an urban or rural setting was a significant factor, social media was clearly an issue, and once the immediate incident was dealt with families did not receive much formal support. Families require the support of counseling professionals. Participants identified the need for support for search and rescue personnel and improved inter-agency collaboration. There is a need for national guidelines.

Keywords: drownings, drowning prevention, families, community, police, rescue personnel, social media

Introduction

This paper reports on an exploratory study of the impacts of drowning on local communities and families in the Republic of Ireland as perceived by first responders, such as police or community rescue boats volunteers, to an incident of fatal drowning, a death by suffocating in water and principally in rivers. It is notable that most of the research on drowning has focused on the process of drowning (i.e., physiology, antecedents, immersion/ submersion, immediate consequences and treatments) and the process of effective rescue (e.g., Barwood, Corbett, Massey, McMorris, Tipton, & Wagstaff, 2018; Szpilman et al., 2017; Bierens et al., 2016; Connolly, 2006; 2007; 2012; 2014). Less attention has been 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. For example, Irish Water Safety, the statutory national water organization, lists a comprehensive set of drowning prevention strategies, but none made reference to how drowning deaths impacted members of local communities and what they needed in the aftermath of a fatal water incident.

The impact of death by drowning on a community, particularly if the victim was local, might be particularly stressful. Local police (i.e., in Ireland, the Garda) and local volunteer rescuers (e.g., Community Rescue Boats volunteers) who are often the first responders to drowning incidents (Connolly, 2006) who live in local communities have to support and engage with the local community and family subsequent to such incidents. As a result, as local first responders, they have unique insights into the medium and long terms issues that might arise for families and communities; how agencies have dealt with issues, and what and how approaches could be improved.

Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined the phenomenon of 'drowning' as 'the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid' (WHO, 2018). Drowning is associated with significant morbidity and mortality. The WHO (2014) reported a worldwide average of 372,000 deaths per annum, drawn from data based on resuscitations, hospitalizations, and officially-recorded deaths. It is likely this is a significant underestimate of the true nature of the phenomenon since this figure failed to take into account non-fatal episodes that nevertheless resulted in significant morbidities and also excluded drowning from boating and transport at sea; suicides, murders, and natural disasters (Szpilman et al., 2017).

A further problem with estimating the true nature of the drowning phenomena is that despite the efforts of the WHO to provide a definition (2018) there has been no universally-accepted designation of the phenomenon. This means that accurate data collection for the purposes of international comparative analysis has been greatly impaired. Furthermore, this lack of a universally-accepted designation often has led to poor communication of data among agencies that deal with drowning such as prevention and water safety agencies, rescue services (both statutory and non-statutory), and life-support services. This further has exacerbated the lack of comprehensive data collection (WHO, 2018).

Ireland and the Drowning Phenomena

Water dominates the geography of the Republic of Ireland. As an island it has 3,171 kilometers of coastline, 12,000 loughs and 5 rivers that measure over 1,070Km. The Government of Ireland has identified the phenomena of drowning as a public health issue within the state, noting that drowning costs the Republic €266 million each year.

On average, 133 people have lost their lives to drowning in these bodies of water every year (Government of Ireland, 2018). The annual number of Irish drowning deaths over the 10 year period 2007 – 2017 have ranged from 109 to 168 (<http://www.iws.ie/media/drowning-statistics.178.html>). Seventy-nine percent of deaths by drowning have involved men, with an average age of 42 and 79% of all drownings were defined as 'local' meaning that they had a residential address close to the drowning site. In terms of location of which 67% were in rivers, usually near an urban location (http://www.iws.ie/fileupload/Statistics/Irish%20Water%20Safety%20Report%20on%20Drowning%20in%20the%20Republic%20of%20Ireland_For%20Web.pdf accessed 11.11.2018).

Current Organisational Arrangements in Ireland for Water Search, Rescue, and Recovery

The Irish Coast Guard, according to the Department of Transport, deals with 'marine' matters (<http://www.dttas.ie/maritime/english/irish-coast-guard-ircg>). In this context marine refers to seas, loughs, and oceans rather than internal bodies of water such as rivers and lakes. When an incident occurs at sea, the senior Irish Naval Service Officer automatically assumes the role of 'On-scene Commander'. The Coast Guard and RNLi refer to him or her in relation to search, rescue, and recovery matters. For incidents on inland waters the senior Coast Guard officer acts as the 'On-scene Commander' unless it is a suspicious death in which case the Garda (Irish police) assume this control role.

The statutory national organization charged with oversight of safety policy in relation to water is Irish Water Safety (IWS). Its directive role and responsibilities in a range of areas such as training, however, are unclear. Thus, IWS does not oversee or certify all lifeboat crews that work within Irish waters. This means that organizations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLi) and independent local groups such as Waterford Marine Search and Rescue (WMSR) have members certified for rescue boat training by the Royal Yachting Association.

Community rescue boats are an Irish Coast Guard Declared Facility (<http://www.iws.ie/rescue-services/community-rescue-boats-ireland-crbi.302.html>). When an incident occurs, they are called upon by the Coast Guard to respond to the incident and work under its control. In Waterford City in the south of Ireland, for example, Waterford City River Rescue (WCRR) is such a Declared Facility. Not all groups are Declared Facilities, however. In the same area Waterford Marine Search and Rescue (WMSR) is not a Declared Facility. Thus, in response to a '999' emergency telephone call the Coast Guard will call out Waterford City River Rescue, but won't call on WMSR. Instead, WMSR attempts to prevent incidents through carrying out foot patrols at weekends with boats either on the water or ready at their base and they call themselves out. We can thus see from the above example that internal water incident organisation response and relations can be complex.

Drowning Impacts on Families and Communities

Bearing in mind that the nature of drowning incidents is a local phenomenon it is surprising that the social impact of the local dimension is not addressed in Irish national strategy nor in terms of research. For example, Irish Water Safety, the statutory national water organization, lists a comprehensive set of drowning prevention strategies but none make reference to how drowning deaths impact local communities and what they need both short and long-term in the aftermath of a fatal water incident.

Connolly (2004; 2006; 2007) examined rescue incidents carried out by An Garda Síochána (the Irish national police force) as this related to rescue or failure to rescue at a local level. He reported that at least 20 drowning rescues per year are made by members of An Garda Síochána and reported that 25% of annual suicides in Ireland involved drowning. This research did not address post-drowning impacts on those affected such as families and local communities.

Research Focus

This study therefore explored a gap in the literature relating to the support of families and local communities following an incident of drowning. For the purposes of the research drowning incidents were classified as follows – ‘death by water,’ ‘death in water,’ and ‘death on water.’ For the purposes of this study, it was decided to focus on ‘death by water’ as this happens in rivers, rather than at sea or by the coast. The research team felt that the complexities in the classification of death at sea and by the coast alluded to earlier would make the exploration too cumbersome and unfocused. Many of the victims at such locations were not local to the area, for example, holiday makers, and therefore tracing impacts beyond localities would be difficult.

The research project therefore focused on ‘death by water’ in rivers; its impact on families and local communities; and the responses to these impacts from agencies as seen by former Gardaí involved in drowning incidents and volunteer river rescuers (Community Rescue Boat Ireland personnel). It was decided to explore these issues through the perspectives of these groups for the following reasons:

- These individuals lived in local communities and were therefore sensitive to local issues but, because of their professional roles, were likely to possess a level of objectivity in relation to evaluating what happened, the impacts on families and communities, and what support needs were met or not met.
- Interviewing the relatives of people who have drowned may induce too much distress/ be too intrusive to justify the data generated when alternative sources of informant are available.
- There would be considerable complexity in identifying relatives of drowning victims in relation to generating a sample to be interviewed.

The following study objectives were set:

- Describe the nature of the involvement of local Gardaí and Community Rescue Boats when dealing with a ‘typical’ death by water in river’ incident;
- Analyze the possible impacts of such incidents on families and communities from the perspectives of the Gardaí and Community Rescue Boats personnel;

- Describe and analyze the approaches and nature of the support offered to families and communities after a ‘death by water’ incident;
- Make recommendations which can be used to better inform policy making in relation to dealing with incidences of ‘death by water’ to support and improve community resilience and inter-agency collaboration.

The Waterford Institute of Technology Research Ethics Committee granted approval of the study design in June 2018. Data collection took place between July and October 2018.

Data Collection

The identified population of interest were members of the Garda (Irish police) and first responders from Community Rescue Boats in Ireland. The interview sample consisted of retired members of An Garda Síochána (n=8) and members of local Community Rescue Boats (n= 10). All interviewees were over 18 years of age. The sampling method was a convenience one. The Secretary of the Lifesaving Foundation contacted prospective participants and asked them if they would be willing to take part in the study. Prospective participants were furnished with an information leaflet about the project and an informed consent form that they were asked to sign prior to interview.

The principal data collection method was qualitative through one-to-one narrative interviews followed by a focus group. For one-to-one interviews an adaptation of the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) outlined by Wengraf (2013) was used. Interviewees comprised six retired Gardaí and six members of the Community Rescue Boats Ireland. Questioning involved asking interviewees to talk about specific events, rather than providing general opinions. They were asked to recall those events and what were their perceptions of the impacts on stakeholder individuals and communities who were involved in them. The interviews were ‘depth’ ones and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. They were digitally recorded and recordings were entered into NVivo 8 (a Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis package). Each interview recording was allocated a number for the purposes of pseudo-anonymized identification. Numbering, whilst not identifying individuals, did differentiate between retired Gardaí and members of the Community Rescue Boats Ireland organization to assist in analysis of potential differing perspectives arising out of roles.

Analysis consisted of three members of the research team independently analyzing the interview data and then triangulating this analysis. This collated analysis was then reviewed against the literature for the purposes of credibility and transferability, analytical trustworthiness, and credibility. The final output will be a series of propositions relating to impacts and improvement in supports.

These propositions were then presented before a focus group (8 participants). This focus group consisted of both retired Gardaí and members of the Community Rescue Boats who were not interviewed in the one-to-one interviews. The group were asked to discuss the aforementioned propositions, arising from the analysis of the one-to-one interviews. The discussion was facilitated by three members of the research team. The group discussion was digitally recorded for ease of subsequent analysis and the recording entered into NVivo. Participants in the focus group were allocated a number rather than identified by their name. The analysis of the discussions in the focus group informed the basis of final recommendations.

Results

The following consensual themes emerged from the data: *community identity; urban / rural settings; time trajectories for support; training needs; co-ordination of existing services.*

Community Identity

Community identity was a source of impact in cases of drowning where the victim was identified as belonging to that community. Perceived ‘outsiders’ to the community raised only a passing interest and therefore the incident did not have the same impact. The degree of perceived ‘belongingness’ to the community therefore affected whether or not the community was drawn together and engaged with the search and rescue operation and hence the local support provided to those directly affected by an incident, for example the family.

It was acknowledged that ‘*Social media has opened up such incidents to everybody;*’ hence community is now a much broader and more fluid concept in terms of community boundary and belonging, which has resulted in greater involvement of the community in searches. This was seen as both helpful, particularly in terms of post-incident fund raising as this affected the voluntary services but could also be detrimental in terms of rumors being spread that could impede a search through misdirection.

Urban/Rural Setting

The issue of the setting of the search and rescue effort was a significant factor, both in terms of community reaction and community impact. Mixed views expressed between individual interviews versus the focus group. Thus, in the individual interviews it seemed smaller local communities were much more engaged when an incident of drowning occurred both in terms of response and likelihood of knowing the person who was drowned. Consequently, the local community tended to be much more involved in search and recovery operations than in larger communities/ conurbations. It seemed in the larger cities, searches did not generate the same level of interest.

Focus group participants were presented with the proposition ‘Informal supports from local community are more noticeable in rural settings than in larger towns/ cities.’ Their view was that all communities responded but in a more nuanced way ‘(support) is not as noticeable but it is there.’ Social media was seen as playing a role in impacting the response of communities in both a positive and negative way.

Time Trajectories and Support

Issues of timeliness as this related to the provision of support, closure, and in dealing with the aftermath of a drowning incident was a theme to emerge from the data, particularly as this related to families of victims. Timeliness in this context related ‘during the search,’ ‘during the recovery,’ and ‘post incident’.

During the Search Phase. The participants in both the individual and focus group interviews believed, ‘*the people see you as an asset – that you are going to find this body.*’ A number of participants stated that in their experience there was a need for families to be able to talk directly to those professionals involved in the search whilst it was progressing and especially those involved in recovery. The importance of regular communication with the family was identified as essential as a protective and support measure for them such that ‘*you must keep families involved or they may hear it elsewhere.*’

During the Recovery Phase. The need for closure for both the family and community was considered important. The communicative visual of recovery and returning the body home, - ‘*you know... there’s a great sense of relief shown by families when bringing someone home... by this time they have accepted that their loved one has drowned and all they want is the body so that they can move on.*’ The concepts of ‘bringing someone home’ to allow a ‘*sigh of relief*’ for both the family and community was regularly expressed by the participants.

Post Incident Phase. The need to support families between the conclusion of an incident (hopefully involving the recovery of a body) and the inquest was an important issue for a number of participants. Participants saw this as a role for the Garda. It was acknowledged that the Garda may not always be able to provide the degree of support which families required due to resource constraints. An indication of the importance of families being able to directly communicate with those involved in the recovery and feeling supported during the inquest was illustrated by the experience of one retired Garda who said, ‘*I went back to the inquest in xxx –and I walked in in uniform and the family were saying is that him? Is that him? The mother came over to me before the inquest and stayed next to me. And after she said to me I can’t sleep at night I can see her clawing at the ice, screaming and all this carry on.*’ The particular Garda went on to describe telling the mother that her daughter had fallen unconscious quickly and looked calm when her body was recovered. He reported that this

gave the mother great comfort. This particular anecdotal evidence was illustrative of the post trauma effect on family members even after time had elapsed after the incident and a definite need for family members to receive support in coming to terms with their loss.

Yet it appeared that once the immediate incident was dealt with families did not appear to receive much formal support. The voluntary service participants spoke of how they '*stand down and move on*' following an incident and that it is '*no longer their concern.*' Participants did regard statutory agencies – particularly the Garda and the Health Service Executive (HSE) – as agents of support but felt that bureaucratic lines of accountability often hindered their integrated effectiveness.

Incidents of drowning presented particular grief-related challenges for families that required the support of trained professionals. It should be noted that some non-Irish based informal networks were available to support families dealing with the particular traumas of drowning (e.g., No Body to Bury) including the Drowning Support Network (<https://drowningsupportnetwork.wordpress.com/>). Whilst there are a number of HSE guidelines related to untimely death (e.g., You Are Not Alone - <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/mentalhealth/you-are-not-alone.html>), the need for a specific national policy guideline for statutory services to provide post-drowning incident support was identified by a number of participants as critical for families and the local community. It was felt that this support should be provided by trained professionals sensitized to the particular traumas associated with drowning (e.g., the state of a recovered body dependent on length of time in the water, non-recovery of body, public nature of drowning). Some participants felt the nature of that support should be proactive and ongoing.

The participants also identified the need for support for the search and rescue service providers. This was highlighted particularly within the discussions of the focus group. While there was an informal support system in place within the volunteer agencies, it seemed no professional support was provided, particularly for the voluntary services. It was felt that there should be facilitated timely critical incident debriefing for rescuers/responders.

During the course of the focus group, a discussion highlighted the psychological needs of first respond rescuers and that there was little in the way of interagency debriefing. This failure related to a need for a formal mechanism for agencies to exchange information and thinking on how well they had worked together; how effectively an incident was dealt with, or what could be learned at local level to improve responses. Participants felt that such exchanges could be useful in terms of improving both integration and communication among agencies.

Training needs

Training was regarded by a number of participants as, *'essential but not there.'* Participants reported that training, where provided, focused on operational issues (such as boat management) rather than support/psychological issues. Some participants reported that training was more readily accessible for members of the statutory rather than voluntary agencies. Training regarding support was viewed as needed for the effective support of families/ communities since death by drowning had some unique features compared to other forms of accident or deliberate self-harm (see previous sections).

Participants reported that where training was put in place, it tended to be provided reactively rather than proactively. Funding for training was an ongoing issue, particularly for those in the voluntary agencies who were largely dependent on charitable donations for their operation and therefore often were chronically short of resources. Some participants reported that training was often expensive and that some volunteers once trained did not always stay involved in search and rescue organizations. This had the effect of increased training needs and costs as new volunteers recruited to replace those that had left in turn needed to be trained.

Coordination of Existing Services

A number of participants felt that there needed to be improved interagency collaboration as this related to engagement with families and community such that *'there needs to be more joined up thinking and working by all the services... both voluntary and statutory services. This is not happening really at the moment and we seem to be working from different standards.'* This comment really reflected that the overall emphasis on 'local' working may mean that standards and responses may not be as uniform as they might be across the country.

Discussion

In Ireland, both voluntary (volunteer search and rescue services) and statutory services (Garda /Fire Brigade) are involved in the co-ordination of search and rescue incidents. Overall, participants in this study reported that there was good interagency co-operation, but that it could be improved if there were a set of national guidelines to which local agencies could refer, particularly in relation to post-incident debriefing and learning. Therefore, based on this study, it would appear that national guidelines on these issues should be developed and implemented at local level.

During a search/rescue effort, the results of this study indicated that ongoing communication with the family/community was very important. This was particularly so as changes occurred over the course of the search. The results indicated that one person needed to take responsibility for communicating with families. Participants agreed that this person should be

from the statutory services, and favored a member of An Garda Síochána (the Irish police force).

The study results also indicated that more coherent and systematic follow up support was needed to meet a family's needs, particularly in preparing for an inquest. It appeared that there was no national agreement on this support provision and it was very much a local level issue for the Garda, was resource dependent and hence could vary between localities. The study results therefore suggested that a national guideline on provision of such support must be developed and implemented. This guideline would be resource intensive, with trained personnel such as counsellors or psychologists, made available by the Health Service Executive (HSE). Bearing in mind that on occasion considerable time can elapse between the conclusion of an incident and the holding of an inquest such provision may need to be subject to specialist assessment in terms of the impact of trauma on the family taken into account the specific nature of the search and rescue issues that arose during the recovery process.

The Social media was clearly an issue from these results and had to be considered in the overall operational management of search, rescue, and recovery. The positive benefit of social media was that it could galvanize the collective assistance of the community to assist in the search efforts. However, social media also created challenges in the effective management of the search, as it created an alternative channel of conflicting communication that could spread rumor or misdirect the search efforts. In this context, an Australian study (Keech et al 2018) on floodwater drowning, for example, reported that onlookers and untrained searchers could be sources of distraction and frustration in relation to official search and recovery efforts. In this regard, therefore, results from the current study suggested that the future coordinating agency should engage proactively with social media from the moment a search call was put out and establish a credible source of information for the community to counter misinformation or premature speculation as to the results of a search, rescue, or recovery operation.

The results of this study indicated that there was no provision of professional support for volunteer rescuers in relation to management of their psychological self-care. Bearing in mind that river rescue and recovery often involved volunteers and not just members of the statutory agencies (who had access to formal psychological supports) this was a gap that needed to be addressed by the statutory coordinating agencies in view of the essential role that volunteer personnel play in provision of a water search and rescue services. These results therefore suggested that the provision of support to these voluntary groups ought to be considered within national guidelines with the required resources put in place.

Conclusion

It was evident from the results that there was a need for national guidelines to be developed to ensure consistency in service provision across different regions and localities. It also appeared to be the case that there was a lack of resourcing in the provision of support for affected families and communities and services, particularly the voluntary services. This paper recommends establishing national guidelines regarding support for families and communities suffering drowning incidents.

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