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FIRE DEATHS IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 1968

by

S. E. CHANDLER

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FIRE RESEARCH STATION

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SUMMARY

A preliminary survey of fatal fires in the first six months of 1968 reveals a disturbing upward trend in fire deaths.

Based on reports received, there have been 452 deaths in 350 fires - the annual death roll due to fire has nearly doubled in the last eight years. Incidents involving more than one death during the first six months of 1968 have numbered 50, compared with only 35 during the whole of 1960.

The most serious incidents have involved a hotel, a small terraced house, a Boeing 707 and a collapse of a block of high flats. Nearly eighty per cent of fire deaths have occurred in dwellings, mainly old terraced houses and houses that have been converted into flats.

Key words; Fatalities, Statistics.

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the second in a series of quarterly reports giving preliminary information on deaths in fires attended by fire brigades.

There seems to have been no halt in the trend indicated in the first¹ of these reports. Reports of fire received by the 31st July recorded 452 deaths in 350 fires, so that the final total death roll for the first half of this year could be nearly 500. Until 1960, the annual death roll was of the order of 500, so life loss in fires has approximately doubled in the last eight years. Multiple death incidents, too, are continuing to increase. There were thirty-five² such incidents in 1960: there have been 50 during the first six months of 1968.

One of the most serious fires in the second quarter of the year involved a hotel at Church Stretton, Shropshire. This was attributed to an electrical fault and led to five deaths. Another recent hotel fire was at Ilkley, Yorkshire. These fires highlight some of the problems of hotels particularly the spread of toxic products from fire. An investigation of hotel fires is being made³. A rapidly spreading fire in a small, old, terraced house at Huddersfield led to the deaths of four young girls. The incident at Heathrow Airport involving a Boeing 707 was given wide press publicity; here prompt action kept the death roll down to five. The incident at Ronan Point, London, where an explosion caused a partial collapse of a block of high flats, accounted for four lives. Another explosion incident in Sheffield killed two people.

Tables 1-4 inclusive give further details of fatal fires, including multiple death incidents, and numbers of deaths. Table 1 shows that nearly 80 per cent of deaths occur in dwellings and that of the 39 multiple death fires in dwellings, at least 70 per cent occurred in terraced property or in buildings converted for use as flats. Table 2 shows the time of call, it appears that the worst periods of the day for fatal fires are between 9 a.m. and midday, and between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. Multiple death fires were also numerous during these hours. As Table 3 shows, half of the incidents attributed to children playing with fire were multiple death incidents. Table 4 gives details of age and sex of fatal casualties.

Although the monthly frequencies of fatal fires have decreased slightly in the last three months, it is still quite likely that the previous forecast of 900 deaths in fires attended by fire brigades will be correct.

REFERENCES

1. CHANDLER, S. E. Fire deaths in the first quarter of 1968. Joint Fire Research Organization Fire Research Note No. 715.
2. CHANDLER, S. E. A Survey of Multiple Fatality Incidents, 1960 - 1966. Joint Fire Research Organization Fire Research Note No. 703:
3. CHANDLER, S. E. Fire in Hotels, 1966. Joint Fire Research Organization Fire Research Note (To be published).

FIRE DEATHS IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 1968 (PROVISIONAL FIGURES)

Table 1
Hazard in which fires started

Hazard in which fire started	No. of fatal fires	No. of multiple death fires	No. of deaths
IN BUILDINGS			
Industry	9	2	12
Distributive trades	2	-	2
Financial, professional and miscellaneous services	7	1	8
Medical services	4	1	27
Clubs, hotels, restaurants and public houses	6	2	11
Houses - detached or semi-detached	42	2	44
- terraced	60	14	84
- not stated	81	8	90
Flats - in block	33	3	38
- converted	53	9	70
- other or not stated	23	3	28
Non-institutional dwellings as part of other occupancies	5	-	5
Private sheds, garages, etc.	2	-	2
Total	327	45	421
NOT IN BUILDINGS			
Vehicles	9	3	12
Other means of transport	3	1	7
Caravans	6	-	6
Other outdoor hazards	5	1	6
	23	5	31
T O T A L	350	50	452

Table 2
Time of call to fires

Time of call to fires	No. of fatal fires	No. of multiple death fires	No. of deaths
Midnight - 2.59 a.m.	43	8	79
3.00 - 5.59 a.m.	42	7	54
6.00 - 8.59 a.m.	30	2	32
9.00 - 11.59 a.m.	59	10	70
Midday - 2.59 p.m.	48	4	52
3.00 - 5.59 p.m.	50	11	73
6.00 - 8.59 p.m.	36	4	40
9.00 - 11.59 p.m.	38	4	48
No attendance (late call)	4	-	4
T O T A L	350	50	452

Table 3
Source of ignition of fires

Source of ignition of fire	No. of fatal fires	No. of multiple death fires	No. of deaths
Children with fire	14	7	24
Crash or collision	9	4	16
Malicious ignition	9	-	9
Matches, tapers, naked lights, etc.	11	2	13
Smoking materials	74	5	105
Electric - space heating	24	1	25
- wire and cable	5	1	9
- blanket	5	-	5
- other	6	-	6
Gas - cooking	5	-	5
- space heating	13	1	14
- other	1	-	1
Solid fuel - fire in grate	44	6	56
- other	3	-	3
Oil - space heating	27	5	35
- other	3	-	3
Other known causes	8	1	9
Unknown	89	17	114
T O T A L	350	50	452

Table 4
Age and sex of fatal casualties

Age (years)	Male	Female
Under 1	9	8
1 - 5	42	31
6 - 15	11	8
16 - 40	38	27
41 - 65	39	68
66 - 80	33	72
Over 80	24	36
Not stated	1	5
T O T A L	197	255

