

## 'Bin men' are not more at risk of COVID-19 compared to other occupations

Recent articles in the mainstream press have indicated that 'bin men' are more at risk from COVID-related deaths compared to all occupations in the UK. This conclusion was apparently based on ONS data which is the official data released by the UK Government<sup>1</sup>.

On first examination of this data this does appear to be an alarming statistic. Waste operations are grouped under 'elementary occupations' which show 699 fatalities related to COVID between March to December 2020, a death rate of 66.3 (age standardised per 100,000 population)<sup>2</sup>, which is indeed higher as an average than all other industry groupings.

However, there are many occupations grouped under the 'elementary' banner, including construction, process plant and security operations. In fact, if only waste-related occupations are analysed the story is very different.

First, a look at the total all deaths data shows for waste-related jobs:

SOC Occupation	Description	Men			Women		
		Deaths involving COVID-19	All causes of death	Average all cause mortality (2015 to 2019)	Deaths involving COVID-19	All causes of death	Average all cause mortality (2015 to 2019)
1255	Waste disposal and environmental services managers	6	52	46	0	4	2
9232	Street cleaners	6	39	37	0	2	1
9235	Refuse and salvage occupations	13	184	137	0	3	1
8124	Energy plant operatives	3	19	12	0	0	0

In the industry the numbers who have unfortunately died of COVID appear relatively low (considering the waste industry employs around 80,000 at least). If we look further the ONS calculate what is known as a 'death rate' which is standardised per 100,000 workers – and this is so low that for waste disposal and environmental service managers, street cleaners and energy plant operatives it is too low to calculate. For refuse and salvage occupations it is calculated at 45.8 (with the caveat that it is statistically unreliable due to the low numbers recorded). This figure is much lower than many occupations, for instance publicans (219.9), police officers (194.1), bank and post office clerks (105.5), roofers (100.5), hairdressers and barbers (112.5) and security guards (100.7) to name but a few. Indeed, out of the 368 occupations listed it is 44<sup>th</sup> and this is based on a large confidence interval – in other words even this placement is uncertain.

Hence based on this information it is not warranted to state bin men are amongst the riskiest of occupations and it appears this is inferred as those workers are in a category where some of the occupations are indeed riskier. However, once the data are examined this is not the case.

To date there have been no reports nationwide of large outbreaks of COVID within waste collection crews and hopefully this will continue to be the case. The information in WISH INFO 13 on managing COVID19 risks in waste and recycling has undoubtedly contributed to preventing outbreaks. INFO 13 continues to be updated and refined regularly based on experience reported back from industry and information received from government and scientific sources.

<sup>1</sup>: ONS Data

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregisteredbetween9marchand28december2020>

<sup>2</sup>: In men. In women the total COVID deaths are 227 and the rate is 21.1 which is lower than 'caring, leisure and other service occupations' but higher than all other industry.