

“No one here gets out alive!”

Bellis and colleagues explore mortality in musicians

There have been a number of very high profile cases of musicians who commit suicide. The number of column inches and the amount of TV hours devoted to these generally have the effect of making it seem like a lot of musicians take their own lives. But is this actually the case?

A fantastic study was carried out by Bellis and colleagues in 2008. These authors used a list of the top 1000 albums of all time to identify musicians. They excluded compilations and soundtrack albums and only included individuals who were either North American or European (this was so that they could use standardised mortality rates from the general populations in these regions as a comparison). The authors then used a range of sources including biographies, press articles and artist/fan websites to identify not only which musicians had died but what the cause of death was.

The final sample consisted of 1064 artists, of whom 100 had died somewhere between 3 and 25 years after becoming famous. The sample included musicians from a range of musical styles including rock, punk, rap, R&B, electronica and new age although 90% of all deaths were in the rock genre. Similarly, 91% of all deaths were male although this merely reflects the gender imbalance in professional popular musicians because the rates of mortality in men and women were rather similar (or at least, not significantly different: 9.6% and 7.3% respectively).

Overall, musicians had a mortality rate that was 1.7 times higher than that of the general population. In the first 5 years after becoming famous it was even higher, with musicians having a mortality rate that was 3 times higher than the general population.

But what were the causes of this increased mortality amongst musicians?

It turns out that only 3 of those 100 deaths were from suicide. The largest single category was from cancer (20 deaths) although 31 of deaths were related to alcohol or drug use in some way, such as an accident caused by drugs or alcohol (4 deaths), a chronic disorder related to drug and alcohol use (8 deaths) and overdoses (19 deaths). A further 16 deaths were caused by accidents that did not involve drugs or alcohol, 14 deaths were related to cardiovascular problems, 6 deaths were caused by violence and 10 others were simply classified as “other” where too few of any one cause of death occurred to create a separate category.

There are a number of observations that one can make but, as a health psychologist, I was struck that most of the causes of death are those that are

related to lifestyle factors. This is also true of the general population. In the early part of the 20th century (and earlier) the main causes of death were those that related to infections and hygiene whereas by the second half of the 20th century the biggest killers were things like cancer and heart disease, illnesses that were caused by lifestyle factors such as smoking, drinking, eating too much fat and taking too little exercise. So it's no real surprise that causes of deaths in musicians reflects the same trend, albeit at a higher rate than the general population. Bellis and colleagues speculate that much of this may be due to the stress of the job but that lifestyle factors are also probably important. But given that 90% of the deaths occurred in musicians in the rock genre, at least we know for certain that it really is "sex and drugs and rock'n'roll", not sex and drug and electronica or sex and drugs and R&B.

Reference:

Bellis, M.A., Hennell, T., Lushey, C., Hughes, K., Tocque, K. & Ashton, J.R. (2007). Elvis to Eminem: Quantifying the price of fame through early mortality of European and North American rock and pop stars. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 61, 896-901 (<http://jech.bmj.com/preprint/bellis.pdf>)