



# HOME OFFICE STATISTICAL BULLETIN

# R S B

ANNEX K

Issue 11/98

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## STATISTICS OF DEATHS REPORTED TO CORONERS: ENGLAND AND WALES 1997

### Main points

190,000 deaths were reported to coroners in 1997, 3,000 fewer than in 1996, reflecting a fall of nearly one per cent in registered deaths between 1996 and 1997 (*paragraph 2*).

The proportion of all registered deaths reported to coroners remained steady at 34 per cent in 1997 (*paragraph 2*).

Postmortem examinations as a proportion of deaths reported remained at 65 per cent in 1997 although there is a long-term downward trend (*paragraph 3*).

Inquests were held on just over 22,700 deaths, nearly 12 per cent of all deaths reported to coroners in 1997 (*paragraph 4*).

As in previous years, the most common verdicts returned at inquests were deaths by accident or misadventure (47 per cent) and suicide (16 per cent) (*paragraph 6*).

Verdicts of death from drug misuse, and industrial diseases both rose in 1997, as did those for accidental death, and open verdicts (*paragraphs 6 and 7*).

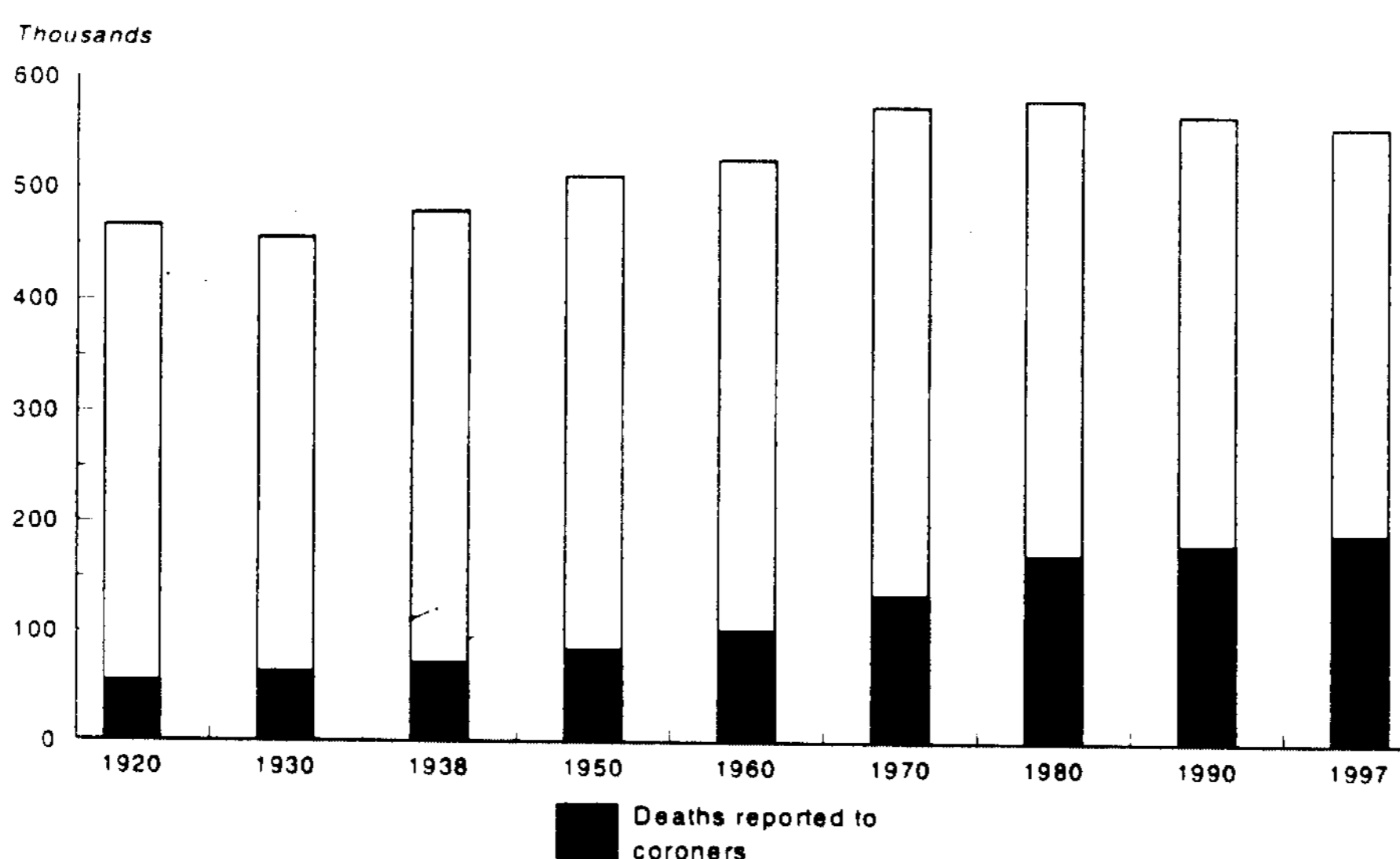


Figure 1: Registered deaths, and deaths reported to coroners, England and Wales, 1920-1997

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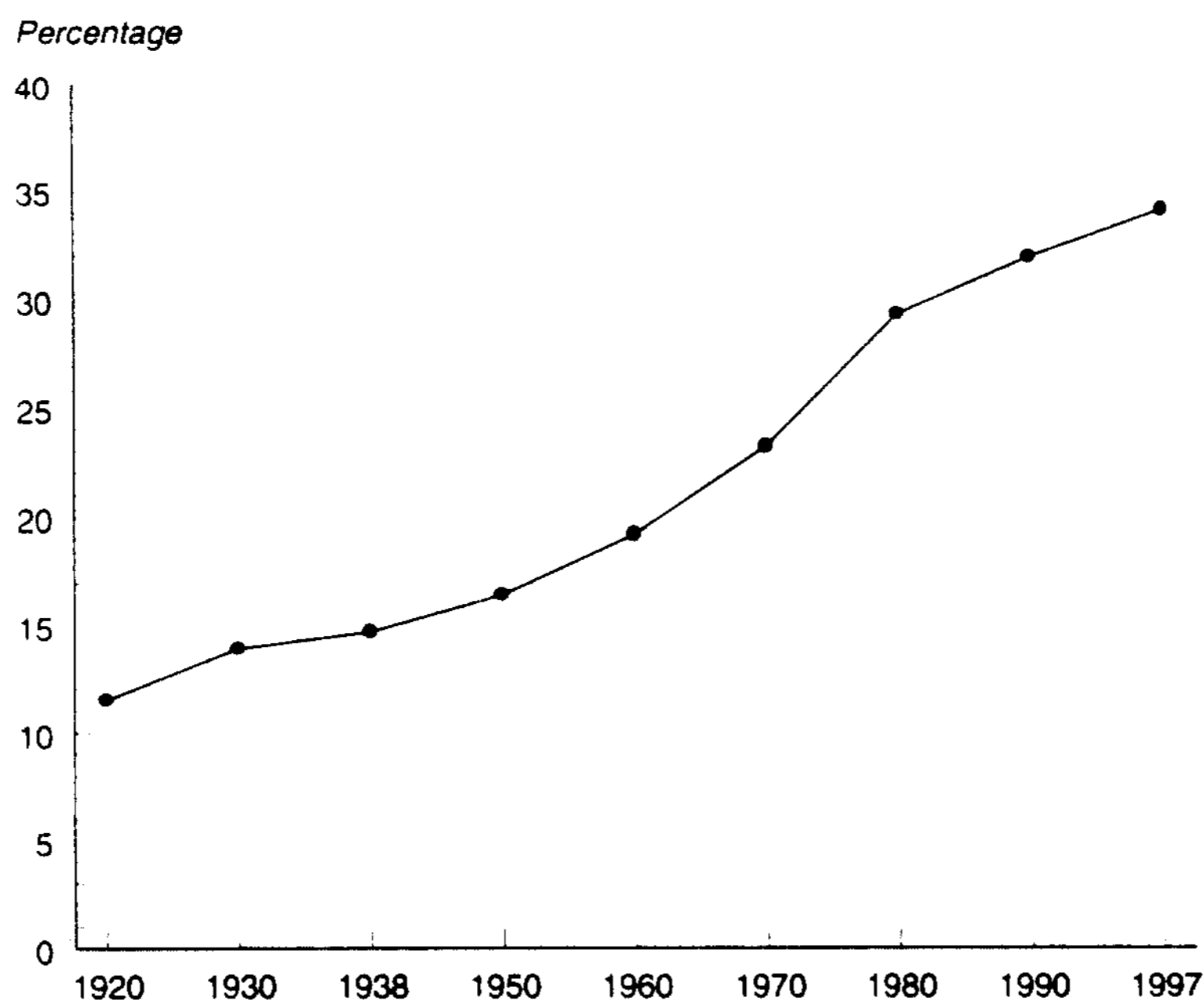
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## Introduction

1. This bulletin presents statistics of deaths reported to coroners in England and Wales in 1997 in accordance with section 28 of the Coroners Act 1988. Information is provided on deaths reported to coroners, post-mortem examinations and inquests held, and verdicts returned at inquests.

### Deaths reported (Tables 1, 3 and 4, figure 2)

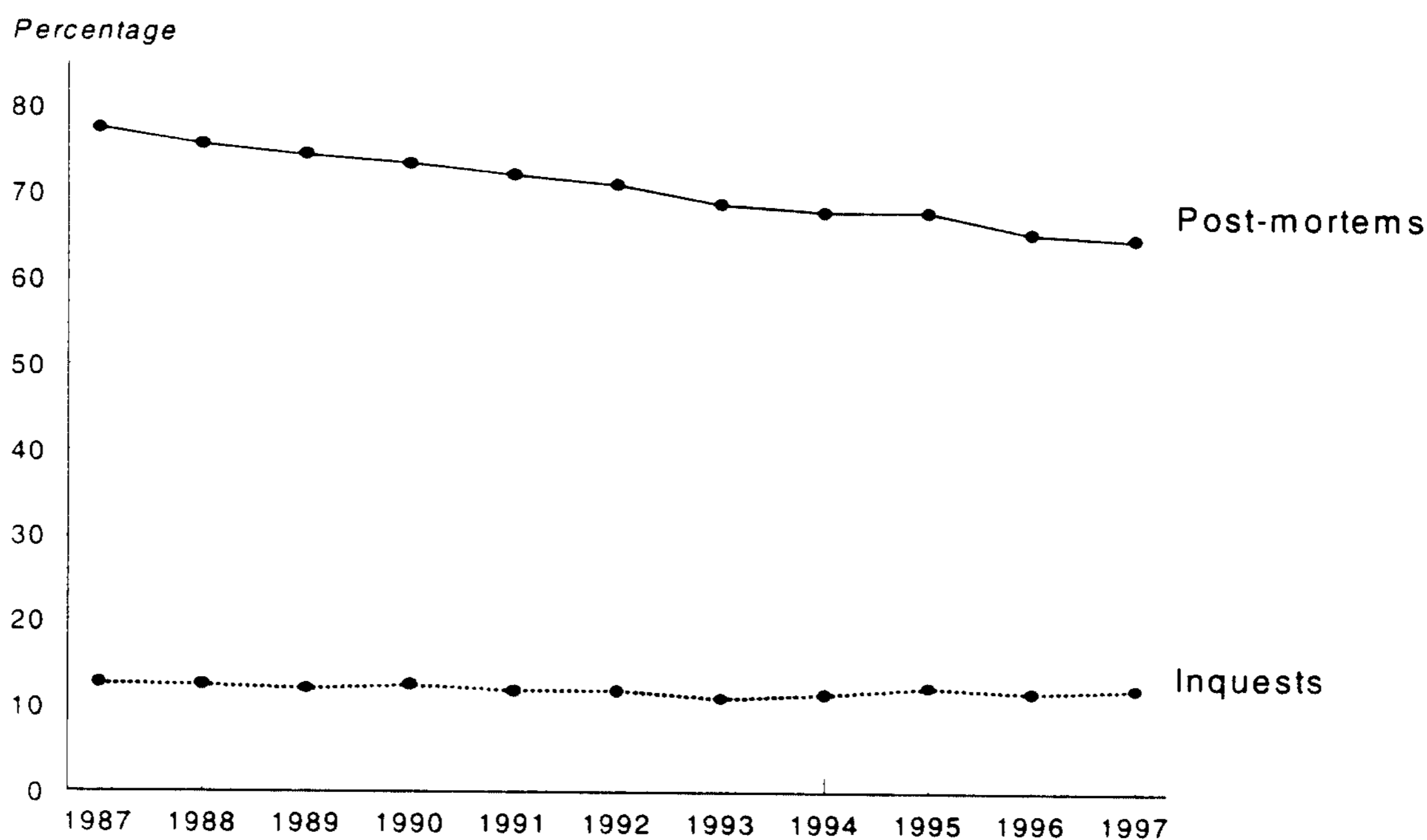
2. Although the long-term trend in the number of deaths reported to coroners continues upwards (see figure 2 and table 3 below), a fall of nearly one per cent in registered deaths in England and Wales in 1997 was reflected in a fall in the number of deaths reported to coroners which fell by over 3,000 to 190,300. Registered deaths fell 5,000 to 558,000 but the proportion reported to coroners remained steady at 34 per cent. The long-term upward trend in the number of deaths reported to coroners is probably due in part to the growing use of deputising services by general practitioners. In these cases the doctor attending at or after death cannot legally give a medical certificate showing the cause of death.



*Figure 2: Deaths reported to coroners as a percentage of registered deaths, England and Wales, 1920-97*

### Post-mortem examinations (Tables 1 and 4, figure 3)

3. Of the total deaths reported in 1997, post-mortem examinations were ordered by coroners in 123,000 cases, 3,000 fewer than in 1996 and the lowest since 1971. In total, post-mortems were carried out on 65 per cent of deaths reported to coroners in 1997, representing a slight fall of half of one per cent from 1996. This proportion has been declining slowly since the 1970s when it was about 88 per cent. Post-mortem examinations were carried out in nearly all deaths where inquests were held and for 60 per cent of deaths reported where no inquest was held. In 1997 there were 67,000 deaths where there was neither an inquest nor a post-mortem. This is the same as in 1996 and follows on from a steady increase in recent years, and compared with 39,600 ten years earlier.



*Figure 3: Post mortems and inquests as a percentage of deaths reported to coroners, England and Wales, 1987-97*

### Inquests (Tables 1, 3 and 4, figure 3)

4. Inquests were held on 22,700 deaths reported to coroners in 1997, 400 more than in 1996 and similar to the ten-year high of 1995. Inquests were held for nearly 12 per cent of deaths reported to coroners in 1997, slightly higher than in 1996. The proportion has declined very slowly over the last twenty years or so and, although there have been occasional reverses, the 1997 figure is still lower than a decade ago.

## Verdicts (Tables 2, 5 and 6, figures 4 to 6)

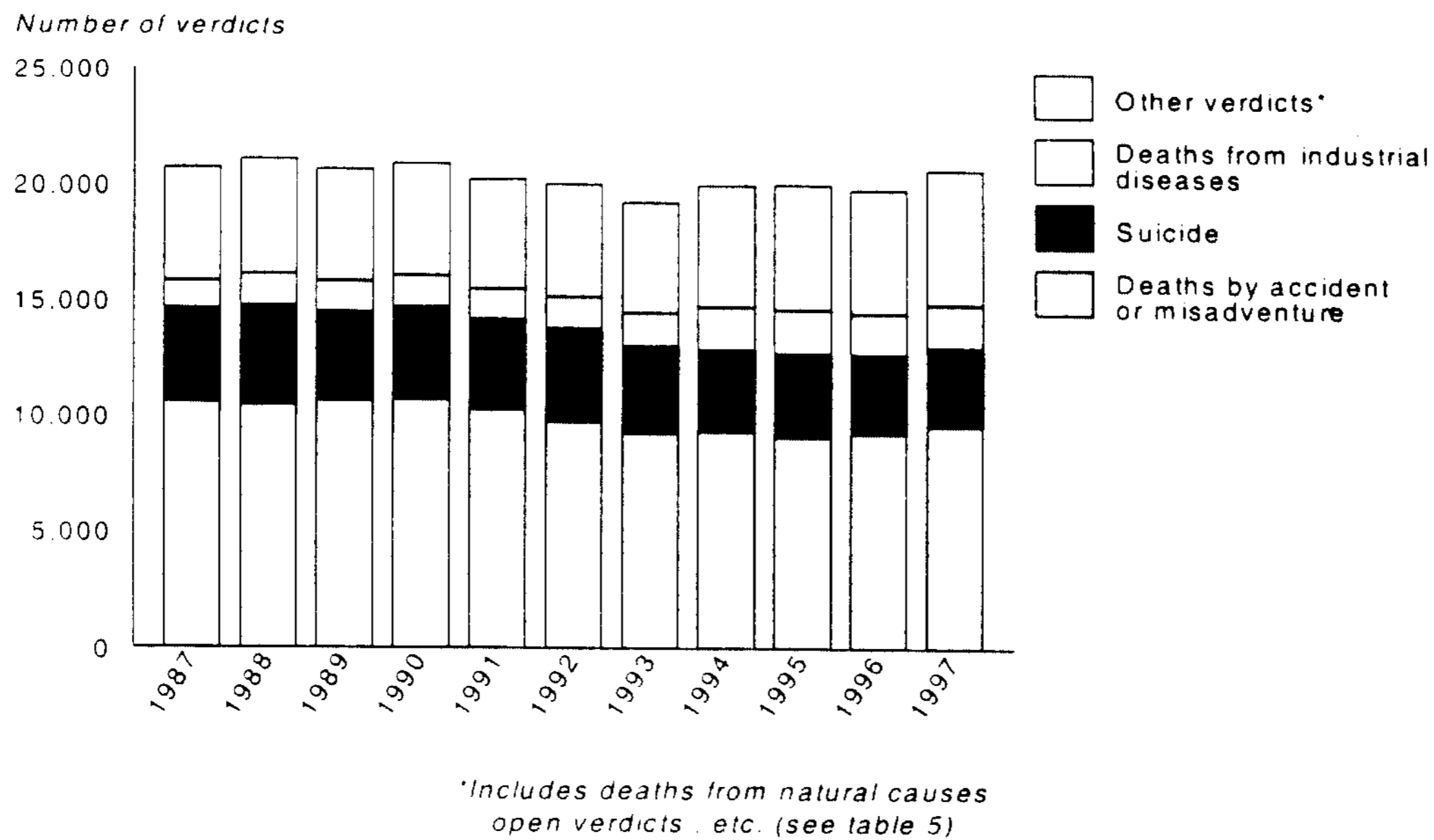


Figure 4: Verdicts returned at inquests, England and Wales, 1987-97

5. Verdicts were returned at nearly 21,000 inquests in 1997, 800 more than in 1996 which reflects the slight upturn in inquests held. There was a fall in the number of verdicts of suicide (down 44 from 1996), and also for verdicts of unlawful killing and want of attention at birth (see table 5 below) but these were greatly outweighed by rises in other categories, the highest being accident or misadventure (up 360), natural causes (up 258) and open verdicts (up 168).

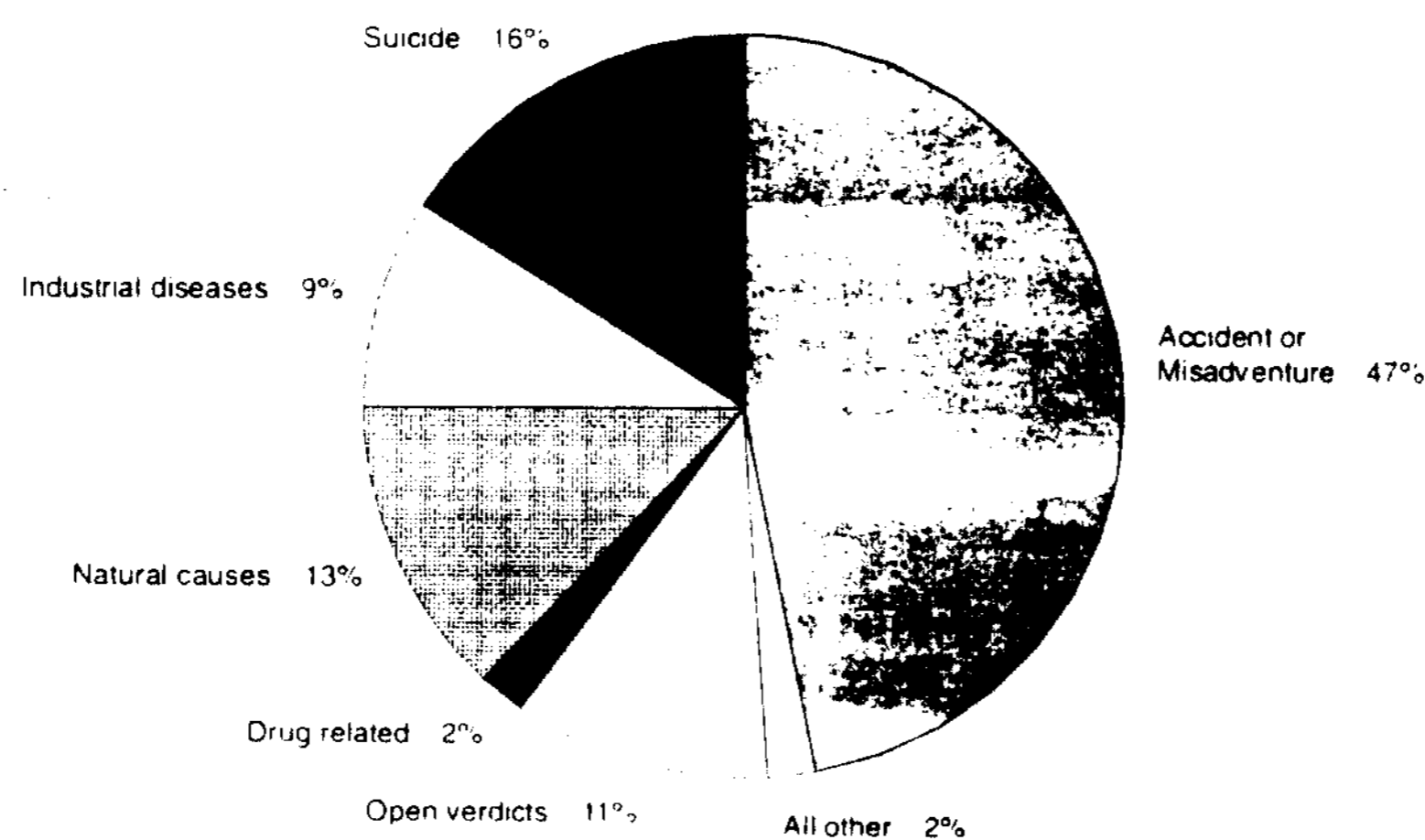


Figure 5: Verdicts returned at inquests, England and Wales, 1997

6. As in previous years the most common verdicts in 1997 were death by accident or misadventure (9,600, 47 per cent) and suicide (3,400, 16 per cent). The proportion of verdicts of death from industrial diseases has risen in the last ten years from 6 per cent in 1986 to 9 per cent in 1997 (1,800 verdicts). Verdicts of death from drugs (dependence on, or non-dependent abuse of drugs) also increased, to 400 compared with 350 in 1996 and 300 in 1995: the underlying trend appears to be a slow increase.

7. By sex the picture by cause of death is slightly different, with males (as in previous years) making up around 70 per cent of all verdicts but 95 per cent of verdicts of death from industrial disease, 77 per cent of verdicts of suicide and 84 per cent of verdicts of death from drugs. For females, the second most common verdict after death by accident or misadventure (55 per cent of all female verdicts) was death from natural causes (16 per cent).

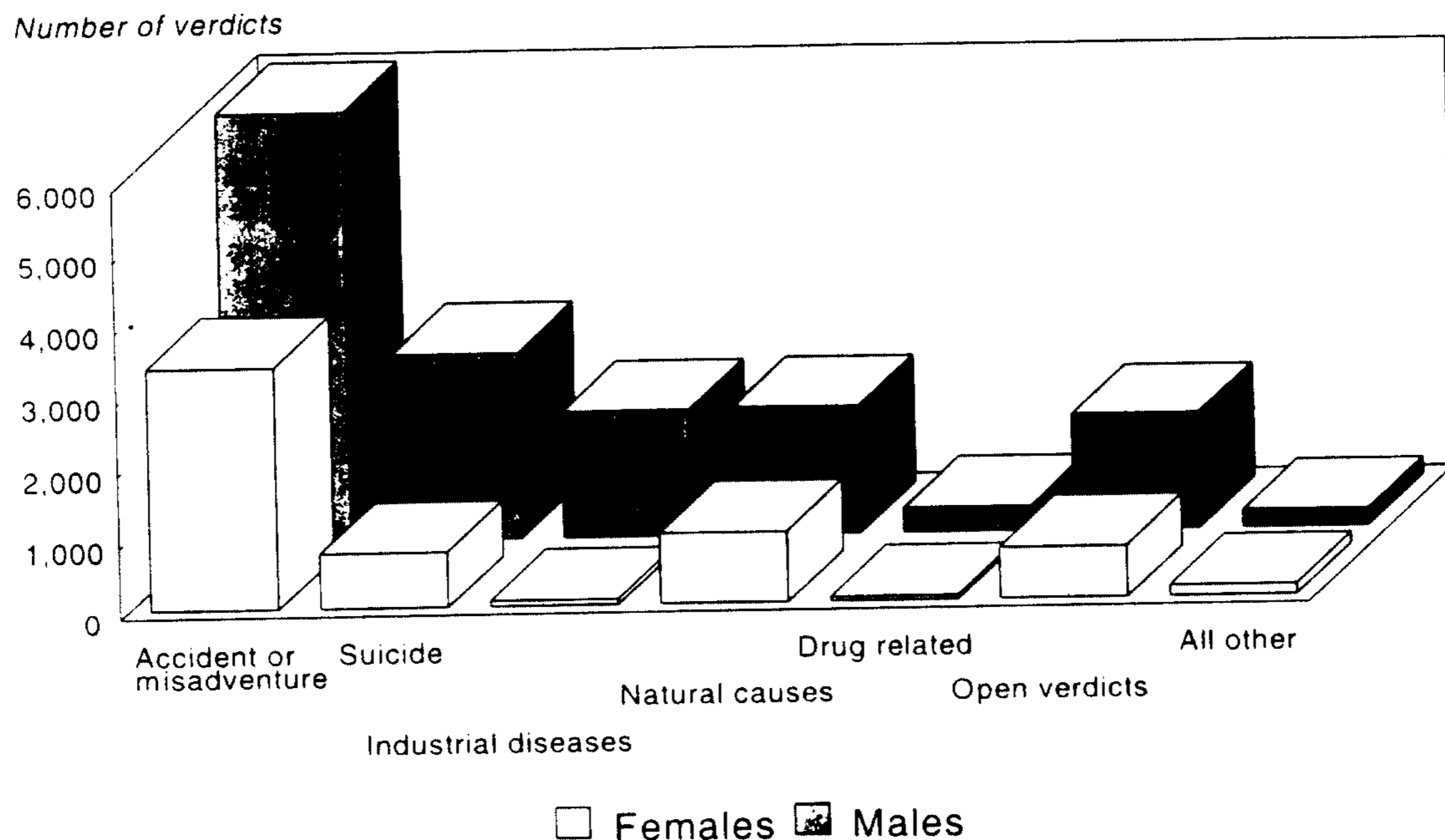


Figure 6: Number of verdicts returned at inquests, England and Wales, 1997

8. As in previous years, the overwhelming majority (20,800 or 96 per cent) of inquests in 1997 were held without juries. The number of inquests held with juries in 1997 fell to under 800. Around 850 inquests were adjourned by the coroner and not resumed, a total similar to others in recent years.

9. On 24 September 1997, the Treasure Act 1996 came into force and replaced the common law of Treasure Trove in England and Wales. The 1996 Act introduced new requirements for reporting and dealing with finds, not all of which will need to be the subject of an inquest. Details of the returns received in relation to treasure trove inquests, and to finds occurring after the commencement of the 1996 Act, are given in Table 6.

**Table 1: Deaths reported to Coroners, 1997**

| England and Wales                 |         | Number of deaths |         |  |
|-----------------------------------|---------|------------------|---------|--|
|                                   | Males   | Females          | Total   |  |
| Inquest held:                     |         |                  |         |  |
| with post-mortem                  | 15,762  | 6,574            | 22,336  |  |
| without post-mortem               | 210     | 157              | 367     |  |
| Total                             | 15,972  | 6,731            | 22,703  |  |
| No inquest held:                  |         |                  |         |  |
| with post-mortem                  | 56,160  | 44,519           | 100,679 |  |
| without post-mortem               | 32,399  | 34,568           | 66,967  |  |
| Total                             | 88,559  | 79,087           | 167,646 |  |
| Total deaths reported to Coroners | 104,531 | 85,818           | 190,349 |  |

**Table 2: Verdicts returned at inquests, 1997**

| England and Wales  |        | Number of verdicts |        |   |
|--|--------|--------------------|--------|---|
| Verdict  | Males  | Females            | Total  | Number per<br>10,000<br>registered deaths |
| Homicide, of which:  |        |                    |        |   |
| killed unlawfully  | 99     | 66                 | 165    | 3.0                                       |
| killed lawfully  | 1      | 1                  | 2      | 0.0                                       |
| Suicide  | 2,580  | 775                | 3,355  | 60.1                                      |
| Attempted or self-induced abortion                           | -      | -                  | -      | -   |
| Cause of death aggravated by lack<br>of care or self neglect |        |                    |        |   |
|  | 34     | 25                 | 59     | 1.1                                       |
| Dependence on drugs  | 144    | 33                 | 177    | 3.2                                       |
| Non-dependent abuse of drugs                                 | 189    | 31                 | 220    | 3.9                                       |
| Want of attention at birth                                   | 2      | 2                  | 4      | 0.1                                       |
| Death from industrial diseases                               | 1,750  | 86                 | 1,836  | 32.9                                      |
| Death by accident or misadventure                            | 6,270  | 3,376              | 9,646  | 172.9                                     |
| Stillborn  | 4      | 2                  | 6      | 0.1                                       |
| Deaths from natural causes                                   | 1,769  | 987                | 2,756  | 49.4                                      |
| Open verdicts  | 1,599  | 720                | 2,319  | 41.6                                      |
| All other verdicts   | 99     | 55                 | 154    | 2.8                                       |
| Total  | 14,540 | 6,159              | 20,699 | 370.9                                     |

Table 3: Registered deaths, deaths reported to Coroners, and inquests held, 1920-1997

| England and Wales   |                                  | Thousands and percentages   |   |                       |                                       |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Year                | Registered deaths<br>(thousands) | Deaths reported to Coroners |   | Inquests held         |                                       |
|                     |                                  | Number<br>(thousands)       | As a percentage<br>of registered deaths | Number<br>(thousands) | As a percentage<br>of reported deaths |
| 1920                | 466.1                            | 53.7                        | 11.5                                    | 31.5                  | 58.7                                  |
| 1930                | 455.4                            | 63.2                        | 13.9                                    | 31.7                  | 50.2                                  |
| 1938 <sup>(1)</sup> | 479.0                            | 70.6                        | 14.7                                    | 31.5                  | 44.6                                  |
| 1950                | 510.3                            | 83.6                        | 16.4                                    | 25.8                  | 30.9                                  |
| 1960                | 526.3                            | 101.1                       | 19.2                                    | 26.3                  | 26.0                                  |
| 1970                | 575.2                            | 133.4                       | 23.2                                    | 24.9                  | 18.6                                  |
| 1979                | 593.0                            | 171.3                       | 28.9                                    | 23.8                  | 13.9                                  |
| 1980                | 581.4                            | 170.2                       | 29.3                                    | 23.1                  | 13.6                                  |
| 1981                | 577.9                            | 173.6                       | 30.0                                    | 22.9                  | 13.2                                  |
| 1982                | 581.9                            | 174.3                       | 30.0                                    | 23.0                  | 13.2                                  |
| 1983                | 579.6                            | 177.2                       | 30.6                                    | 22.9                  | 12.9                                  |
| 1984                | 566.9                            | 174.7                       | 30.8                                    | 22.4                  | 12.8                                  |
| 1985                | 590.7                            | 182.1                       | 30.8                                    | 22.5                  | 12.3                                  |
| 1986                | 581.2                            | 181.3                       | 31.2                                    | 22.2                  | 12.3                                  |
| 1987                | 567.0                            | 175.8                       | 31.0                                    | 22.0                  | 12.5                                  |
| 1988                | 571.4                            | 178.1                       | 31.2                                    | 21.9                  | 12.3                                  |
| 1989                | 576.9                            | 182.8                       | 31.7                                    | 21.7                  | 11.9                                  |
| 1990                | 564.8                            | 180.1                       | 31.9                                    | 22.1                  | 12.3                                  |
| 1991                | 570.0                            | 181.6                       | 31.9                                    | 21.3                  | 11.7                                  |
| 1992                | 558.3                            | 179.3                       | 32.1                                    | 20.9                  | 11.7                                  |
| 1993                | 578.2                            | 188.3                       | 32.6                                    | 20.4                  | 10.8                                  |
| 1994                | 551.5                            | 185.0                       | 33.5                                    | 20.8                  | 11.3                                  |
| 1995                | 565.9                            | 186.6                       | 33.0                                    | 22.7                  | 12.1                                  |
| 1996                | 563.0                            | 193.6                       | 34.4                                    | 22.3                  | 11.5                                  |
| 1997                | 558.0 <sup>(2)</sup>             | 190.3                       | 34.1                                    | 22.7                  | 11.9                                  |

(1) Data were not available for 1940.

(2) Provisional.

Table 4: Deaths reported to Coroners and post-mortem examinations and inquests held, 1987-1997

| England and Wales                          | Thousands and percentages |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |  |
|--|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--|
|  | 1987                      | 1988         | 1989         | 1990         | 1991         | 1992         | 1993         | 1994         | 1995         | 1996         | 1997         |  |
| <u>Deaths reported to Coroners</u>         |                           |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |  |
| <u>Inquest held</u>                        |                           |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |  |
| With post-mortem                           | 21.7                      | 21.5         | 21.3         | 21.7         | 20.9         | 20.5         | 20.0         | 20.5         | 22.2         | 21.9         | 22.3         |  |
| Without post-mortem                        | 0.3                       | 0.4          | 0.5          | 0.4          | 0.4          | 0.4          | 0.4          | 0.4          | 0.4          | 0.5          | 0.4          |  |
| <u>No inquest held</u>                     |                           |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |  |
| With post-mortem                           | 114.2                     | 113.0        | 114.5        | 110.3        | 109.6        | 106.4        | 109.2        | 104.7        | 104.2        | 104.3        | 100.7        |  |
| Without post-mortem                        | 39.6                      | 43.2         | 46.6         | 47.6         | 50.7         | 51.9         | 58.7         | 59.5         | 59.8         | 67.0         | 67.0         |  |
| <b>Total deaths reported</b>               | <b>175.8</b>              | <b>178.1</b> | <b>182.8</b> | <b>180.1</b> | <b>181.6</b> | <b>179.3</b> | <b>188.3</b> | <b>185.0</b> | <b>186.6</b> | <b>193.6</b> | <b>190.3</b> |  |
| <u>Post-mortem examinations held</u>       |                           |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |  |
| <b>Total post-mortem examinations held</b> | <b>136.0</b>              | <b>134.5</b> | <b>135.8</b> | <b>132.1</b> | <b>130.5</b> | <b>126.9</b> | <b>129.1</b> | <b>125.2</b> | <b>126.4</b> | <b>126.2</b> | <b>123</b>   |  |
| <b>Percentage of deaths reported</b>       | <b>77.4</b>               | <b>75.5</b>  | <b>74.3</b>  | <b>73.3</b>  | <b>71.9</b>  | <b>70.8</b>  | <b>68.6</b>  | <b>67.7</b>  | <b>67.7</b>  | <b>65.2</b>  | <b>64.6</b>  |  |
| <u>Inquests held</u>                       |                           |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |  |
| <b>Total inquests held</b>                 | <b>22.0</b>               | <b>21.9</b>  | <b>21.7</b>  | <b>22.1</b>  | <b>21.3</b>  | <b>21.0</b>  | <b>20.4</b>  | <b>20.8</b>  | <b>22.7</b>  | <b>22.3</b>  | <b>22.7</b>  |  |
| <b>Percentage of deaths reported</b>       | <b>12.5</b>               | <b>12.3</b>  | <b>11.9</b>  | <b>12.3</b>  | <b>11.7</b>  | <b>11.7</b>  | <b>10.8</b>  | <b>11.3</b>  | <b>12.1</b>  | <b>11.5</b>  | <b>11.9</b>  |  |

Table 5: Verdicts returned at inquests, 1987-1997

| England and Wales   | number of verdicts |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |                    |        |        |  |
|---|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------------------|--------|--------|--|
|   | 1987               | 1988   | 1989   | 1990   | 1991   | 1992   | 1993   | 1994   | 1995               | 1996   | 1997   |  |
| Homicide, of which:                                       |                    |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |                    |        |        |  |
| killed unlawfully   | 334 <sup>(1)</sup> | 147    | 133    | 165    | 162    | 177    | 143    | 162    | 217 <sup>(3)</sup> | 169    | 165    |  |
| killed lawfully   | 1                  | 3      | 2      | 1      | 13     | 11     | 1      | 4      | 6                  | 1      | 2      |  |
| Suicide   | 3,987              | 4,242  | 3,757  | 3,977  | 3,838  | 3,991  | 3,740  | 3,537  | 3,579              | 3,399  | 3,355  |  |
| Attempted or self-induced abortion                        | -                  | -      | -      | -      | -      | -      | -      | -      | -                  | -      | -      |  |
| Cause of death aggravated by lack of care or self neglect | 51                 | 51     | 47     | 37     | 55     | 47     | 53     | 58     | 35                 | 59     | 59     |  |
| Dependence on drugs <sup>(2)</sup>                        | 66                 | 68     | 81     | 70     | 81     | 121    | 108    | 124    | 139                | 156    | 177    |  |
| Non-dependent abuse of drugs <sup>(2)</sup>               | 70                 | 63     | 60     | 83     | 78     | 112    | 84     | 131    | 162                | 199    | 220    |  |
| Want of attention at birth                                | 13                 | 11     | 12     | 8      | 12     | 4      | 6      | 6      | 9                  | 5      | 4      |  |
| Death from industrial diseases                            | 1,191              | 1,345  | 1,314  | 1,342  | 1,347  | 1,372  | 1,460  | 1,839  | 1,878              | 1,784  | 1,836  |  |
| Death by accident or misadventure                         | 10,600             | 10,479 | 10,692 | 10,711 | 10,303 | 9,774  | 9,273  | 9,347  | 9,142              | 9,286  | 9,646  |  |
| Stillborn   | 13                 | 7      | 6      | 10     | 5      | 4      | 5      | 1      | 8                  | 6      | 6      |  |
| Deaths from natural causes                                | 2,487              | 2,192  | 2,020  | 2,032  | 1,952  | 2,085  | 2,138  | 2,388  | 2,483              | 2,498  | 2,756  |  |
| Open verdicts   | 2,149              | 2,379  | 2,424  | 2,394  | 2,260  | 2,178  | 2,112  | 2,221  | 2,257              | 2,151  | 2,319  |  |
| All other verdicts  | 40                 | 69     | 81     | 86     | 123    | 154    | 105    | 162    | 136                | 142    | 154    |  |
| Total   | 20,002             | 21,056 | 20,629 | 20,916 | 20,229 | 20,030 | 19,228 | 19,980 | 20,051             | 19,855 | 20,699 |  |

(1) Includes 188 verdicts arising from the Zeebrugge ferry disaster.

(2) Changes made by the Coroners Rules 1984, removed figures involving 'Chronic Alcoholism and Addiction to drugs'.

New statistics showing 'Death from dependence on drugs' and 'Death from non-dependent abuse of drugs' were introduced.

(3) Includes 48 inquests arising from the Marchioness pleasure boat disaster.

Table 6: Inquests held, by type of inquest, 1987-1997

| England and Wales                                     | number of inquests |        |        |        |        |        |        |                       |                   |        |                   |  |
|---|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------|-------------------|--|
|   | 1987               | 1988   | 1989   | 1990   | 1991   | 1992   | 1993   | 1994                  | 1995              | 1996   | 1997              |  |
| Type of inquest                                       |                    |        |        |        |        |        |        |                       |                   |        |                   |  |
| Verdicts returned                                     | 21,002             | 21,056 | 20,629 | 20,916 | 20,229 | 20,030 | 19,228 | 19,980                | 20,051            | 19,855 | 20,699            |  |
| Ajourned - not resumed                                | 816                | 895    | 1,028  | 1,070  | 1,009  | 872    | 899    | 837                   | 899               | 892    | 849               |  |
| Total   | 21,818             | 21,951 | 21,657 | 21,986 | 21,238 | 20,902 | 20,127 | 20,817 <sup>(1)</sup> | 20,950            | 20,747 | 21,548            |  |
| Of which:   |                    |        |        |        |        |        |        |                       |                   |        |                   |  |
| with juries   | 1,360              | 1,331  | 1,111  | 1,283  | 1,018  | 922    | 1,051  | 878                   | 868               | 903    | 774               |  |
| without juries  | 20,458             | 20,620 | 20,546 | 20,703 | 20,220 | 19,980 | 19,076 | 19,935                | 20,083            | 19,844 | 20,770            |  |
| Inquests held on treasure trove<br>Treasure Act 1996: | 46                 | 44     | 54     | 63     | 60     | 38     | 40     | 59                    | 66                | 45     | 35 <sup>(3)</sup> |  |
| Number of finds reported                              | ..                 | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..                    | ..                | ..     | 54 <sup>(4)</sup> |  |
| Number of inquests held                               | ..                 | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..                    | ..                | ..     | 25 <sup>(4)</sup> |  |
| Verdicts of treasure returned                         | ..                 | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..     | ..                    | ..                | ..     | 6 <sup>(4)</sup>  |  |
| Inquests held by order of the<br>High Court           | 2                  | 2      | 3      | 2      | 6      | 1      | -      | -                     | 50 <sup>(2)</sup> | 7      | 3                 |  |
| Inquisitions quashed or amended<br>by the High Court  | 4                  | 3      | 1      | 2      | 2      | 2      | 3      | 6                     | 2                 | 1      | 2                 |  |
| Exhumations ordered by the Coroner                    | 8                  | 12     | 4      | 3      | 5      | 2      | 5      | 4                     | 4                 | 3      | 1                 |  |

(1) Includes 4 inquests in 1994 for which information about juries is not known.

(2) Includes 48 inquests arising from the Marchioness pleasure boat disaster.

(3) Relates to finds made before 24 September 1997 (commencement of Treasure Act 1996)

(4) Relates only to finds made on or after 24 September 1997.

## NOTES

1. In England and Wales, all violent and unnatural deaths, and deaths the causes of which are either unknown or are in serious doubt, and all deaths of persons in custody, are reported to coroners. The coroner's investigation is most often concluded without an inquest being held, usually after a post-mortem has enabled the coroner to determine the medical cause of death and to establish that the death was not one on which he is required by law to hold an inquest. In addition to those cases in which he is required by law to hold an inquest the coroner will proceed to an inquest if, after the initial investigation, it appears that the death was not due to natural causes. The holding of an inquest requires the coroner not only to ascertain the medical cause of death, but to determine how, when and where the deceased came by his or her death and to ascertain the particulars necessary to enable the death to be registered.
2. Verdicts are returned in nearly all coroners' inquests. The exceptions are those inquests adjourned by the coroner which he later decides not to resume, and are mainly inquests into deaths by unlawful killing and deaths by dangerous driving or careless driving when under the influence of alcohol or drugs in which court proceedings have been instituted. This avoids the need for two tribunals to consider the same evidence.
3. Other post-mortem examinations are held which are not ordered by the coroner. Details of these are collected by the Office for National Statistics and information about them can be obtained by writing to: ONS, Medical Statistics Division, 1 Drummond Gate, London SW1P 2QQ.
4. With the commencement of the Treasure Act 1996 on 24 September 1997 inquests into finds which previously might have resulted in a verdict of Treasure Trove are supplemented by those now conducted to determine whether finds made on or after that date are Treasure.
5. The following symbols are used in the tables:
  - \* = not applicable
  - .. = not available
  - = nil or less than a specified amount
6. The number of deaths reported to coroners and the outcome of the enquiries into those deaths are recorded in annual returns submitted to the Home Office, which has published statistical bulletins on these returns since 1980. Previous issues are as follows:

| <b>Home Office Statistical Bulletin:</b>                          | <b>Issue No.</b> |
|---|------------------|
| Coroners' Statistics: England and Wales 1980                      | 10/81            |
| Coroners' Statistics: England and Wales 1981                      | 23/82            |
| Coroners' Statistics: England and Wales 1982                      | 10/83            |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1983 | 7/84             |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1984 | 10/85            |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1985 | 8/86             |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1986 | 8/87             |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1987 | 10/88            |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1988 | 14/89            |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1989 | 14/90            |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1990 | 5/91             |
| Statistics of deaths reported to Coroners: England and Wales 1991 | 7/92             |
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