

# ‘Missing in (Cruise-) Action’: Exploring Missing Passenger Incidents on Board Cruise Ships



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## 1 Introduction

“Cruising is an increasingly popular style of vacation enjoyed by millions of people; the cruise industry is currently experiencing worldwide 3.4% annual passenger growth with an estimated 20 million passengers in 2013, with its greatest growth in Australia, New Zealand, and Asia” (Klein 2013). “Never before have I been a part of or seen an industry that is so good at listening and reacting to what its customers want, and this is why we are going to see our industry continue to grow,” Cindy D’Aoust CEO of CLIA said in 2016. Moreover, “the cruise industry profited from its image as a safe travel option and generated high revenue and passenger growth last year, according to FVW’s annual dossier on the German tour operator market (2017). For the next few years, 85 new cruise ships are commissioned by shipping companies all over the world (Cruise Industry News 2016). With these new generations of ‘superliners’, it will be possible to accommodate even more passengers, which could cause a number of problems (e.g. MSC Meraviglia which can accommodate 5714 passengers and 2244 crew members). With this exponential growth of the industry, crime rates on cruise ships are already high and are expected to increase, according to the US Department of Transportation. 421 offences were reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) within a single year! This included smaller offences like bodily harm or theft, but half of these offences were classified as constituting serious crimes, like 154 cases of sexual assault (Klein 2012), but also attempted murder, as well as murder on board a cruise vessel. Moreover, this statistic only takes into account ships, which are sailing into US ports, US sea territory or cases involving a US citizen. This is why our paper focuses

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on people who were exposed to crime on board, especially overboard cases, as there is a surprisingly high number of missing person cases in this industry. 30% of such overboard cases are mysterious in nature (Klein 2016). However, these mysterious disappearances are just within the known cases. The actual number of overall missing person cases might be much higher. There are no internationally-enforced laws regarding safety and security standards dealing with this matter (W. Gregor, personal communication, June 12, 2017). Still, the Cruise Line International Association (abbr. CLIA) propagates that “there are all these regulations the cruise industry is suffering from, although there aren’t any” (R. Klein; W. Gregor, personal communication, 2017).

## 2 Methodology

Before proceeding with outlining the methodology adopted for this piece of research, It needs to be stated that this paper only focuses on persons who went overboard on cruise ships excluding incidents on ferry boats or other occurrences like theft or sexual assault.

### 2.1 Data Collection

The data/incidents coded and imported in the statistical program PSPP, were mined from various online sources (i.e. <http://www.cruisejunkie.com>, <http://www.cruiselawnews.com>, <http://www.internationalcruisevictims.com>). As the literature on this particular topic is practically non-existent, we opted for a mixed-methods approach. At a first phase, quantitative research on passengers going overboard on cruise vessels was conducted to examine the magnitude and trends of such incidents, followed by qualitative content analysis of expert interviews on the findings.

### 2.2 PSPP Data Sets

The first data set included 268 incidents, occurring between February 1995 and May 2017, and consisting of:

- 12 accidental falls
- 167 overboards
- 58 missing passengers
- 23 suicides by going overboard
- 5 murders or attempted murders
- 6 cases with no further information published

In addition, other attributes were taken into account, such as: whether it was a crew member or a passenger going overboard, which company and on which ship the incident happened. All available vessel-related data was also added (i.e. gross tonnage, knots, all berth, low berth and number of crew on board) to aid the explorative analysis. Within the second data set, victims' attributes such as: age, gender, location of disappearance, as well as more precise incident codes were collected. Updating the data for completeness, we added five more incidents, occurring in 2015, as well as the incidents reported between May 2017 and mid-July 2017. The latest numbers concluding 274 incidents:

- 12 accidental falls
- 120 overboards
- 49 missing passengers
- 18 suicides by going overboard
- 4 murders or attempted murders
- 5 incidents where there is no information at all (unknown)
- 5 suicides after a casino loss
- 15 intoxication overboards
- 32 cases which were mysterious
- 14 in which the people arguing with their beloved before going overboard.

The third set of data included:

- overall passenger number within a year in the cruise industry
- number of passengers or crew members who went missing each year
- yearly market capacity in total
- number of ships operating each year between 1995 and 2017 if data were available.

Due to an interview with James Walker (personal communication, June 5, 2017), who stated that he sees a correlation between mysterious overboard cases and gender (i.e. victims are mainly young women), we decided to conduct a separate set of data on mysterious disappearance cases between the years 1995 and mid of July 2017. This set of data included 32 cases. The given data was analysed by importing all data-sets in PSPP, and extracting descriptive statistics and conducting bivariate correlation testing and/or one-way ANOVA to discover potential relationships between the different variables.

### ***2.3 Cruise Expert Interviews***

To aid the interpretation of our results, we also conducted semi-structured interviews involving different cruise industry experts that have consistently highlighted and analysed this type of incident. We interviewed:

- Ross A. Klein, Professor at the Memorial University of Newfoundland and expert in crimes on board of cruise ships,
- Jim Walker, a maritime lawyer from Miami, who represents cruise victims in court.
- Wolfgang Gregor, former captain of a cruise ship, manager and author of the book “Der Kreuzfahrtskomplex – Traumschiff oder Alptraum”

Furthermore, and in order to obtain a more balanced view on the matter, we attempted to get in touch with various cruise lines, as well as CLIA; all of which declined the request for an interview or a statement to this topic. The coding process of the semi-structured interviews resulted to 21 axial codes, reflecting four major categories: Life on Board, Jurisdiction, Economics, and Media. All the corresponding open codes, and their allocation are illustrated in the Table 1.

**Table 1** Coding summary

Axial codes/categories	# of sources	# of codes	Major categories
Overboard	3	41	Life on board (114)
Alcohol misuse	2	15	
Crime	2	14	
Investigation	3	15	
Safety on board	2	15	
Humanity	1	9	
Behaviour on board	2	7	
Safety and security act	3	20	Jurisdiction (69)
Security on board	3	7	
National law	2	15	
International guidelines	2	9	
Flag countries	1	6	
Law enforcement	3	13	Economics (75)
Profitability	3	16	
Pressure on personell	2	23	
Cronyism	1	7	
Working conditions	2	16	
Growth in cruise market	2	13	Media (29)
Media involvement	3	6	
Disguise	3	16	
Manipulation	2	8	

Number of categories comprising each major category in parenthesis

**Table 2** One-way ANOVA missing persons in total, years of cruising

Years of cruising	Sum of squares	df	Average of quarters	F	sig.
Between groups	921.33	13	70.87	7.04	.003
Within groups	90.67	9	10.07		
Whole	1012.00	22			

Source: Author’s research

### 3 Hypotheses

Fourteen different hypotheses, reflecting the significance of vessel- and victim-related factors were generated and tested. None of the tested factors revealed a statistically significant relationship to missing persons. This leaves us with one remaining explanation for the increasing number of missing cruise passengers:

*During the last years more passengers went missing due to more cruising at the sea.*

Using *One-way ANOVA* analysis with the variables: year and total number of missing persons Table 2 shows a significance level of  $p = 0.003$ . This association has a high significance level (less than 3%). The *F-test* indicates that the average of the variables is significantly different, as ‘F’ is with 7.04 higher than 1. As it is shown in the first diagram, there is a constant growth of passenger numbers over the last years.

Barack Obama introduced the Cruise Vessel Safety and Security act in 2010, which became active in January 2014. This act forces cruise lines to report crimes on board of cruise ships involving US Citizens or sailing in US waters. Other crimes concerning non-US-Citizens are actually not reported. This has led us to assume that the actual number of reported incidents is underestimated, as overboard incidents of people from different nations carry a high risk of remaining unreported. Moreover, the media does not presumably publish every single incident, mostly because they may never find out about it. The former CLIA President stated in a confidential meeting between CLIA and the ICV in 2007 “that they will not report any person overboard unless the media already knows about it.” (Klein, personal communication 6 June, 2017). Focusing only on overboard cases, there are at least three cases of mysterious disappearances, which cruise lines dismiss as a suicide, without any evidence behind this claims.

It is argued that cruise lines often presume suicide as a reason for disappearance, reaching into their bag of tricks and pulling out a good excuse (Cattarius 2011). In the well-known case of Merrian Carvers, Royal Caribbean stated: “The death of Merrian Carver is a horrible tragedy, but, regrettably, there is very little a cruise line, a resort or a hotel can do to prevent someone from committing suicide” (Anglen 2005).

In the case of George Smith IV, a similar statement was given by Michael Crye, representing the International Council of Cruise Lines (the predecessor to today’s Cruise Line International Association, CLIA) “. . .) it’s difficult if someone chooses

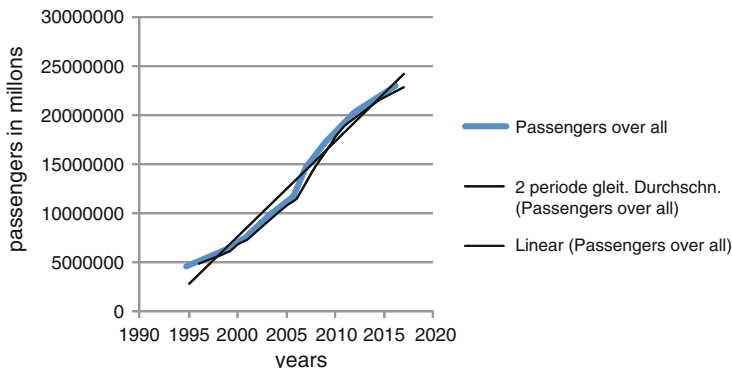
to do harm to themselves (. . .)”, making this statement “without a shred of evidence justifying such a conclusion” (Walker 2009).

In the case of Amber Malkuch, Holland America Line said, that apparently the woman took her own life (Ducey 2009). Alaska State Troopers spokeswoman Megan Peters informed the press, that the investigations are nowhere near determining the cause of death “and if we haven’t been able to make a determination, how can the cruise line who isn’t trained?” (Ducey 2009). “Unfortunately, there are no independent police authorities onboard cruise ships to gather the true facts and conduct an objective and timely investigation. Cruise lines investigations are often conducted with the cruise line’s reputation and legal interests in mind” (J. Walker, personal communication, June 6, 2017).

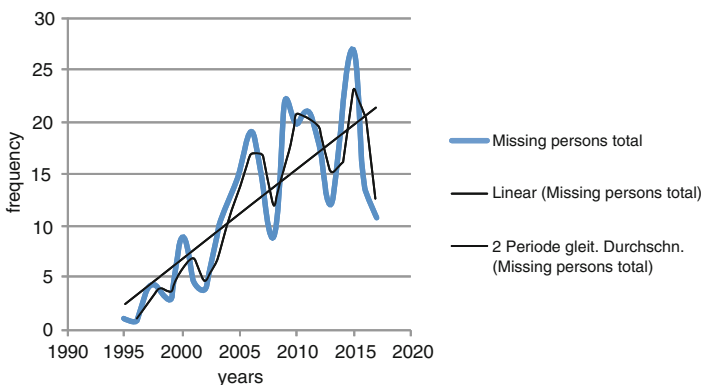
For Wolfgang Gregor it is highly questionable that people would attend a cruise vacation only to commit suicide; also due to the fact that death due to drowning is one of the agonizing deaths. Investigations on individual cases uncovered that deaths and missing person cases, especially of young people, are mostly unexplained (2016). “Unfortunately, it also appears that a cruise is a perfect location for a murder, particularly when there are few automatic man-overboard cameras installed on ships, which would document and possibly, deter criminal activity” (J. Walker, personal communication, June 5, 2017). “It’s the ideal place to commit a crime, and that is the last message the cruise industry wants to get out.” stated Kendall Carver (Yoshino 2007). The disposal of a corpse on a cruise ship is much easier than somewhere else, even more, if one has a cabin with a balcony. Referring to the question if the inhibition-levels regarding capital offences are decreasing, Frank Neubacher, dean of the institute of criminology, university of Cologne, states in the book ‘Kreuzfahrtkomplex’, that it will help a planning perpetrator, if they become aware of the fact how to get rid of the corpse (Gregor 2016).

A normal city with this level of population would have a police station representing the state’s interests. A cruise ship with sometimes more than 6000 passengers and crew members on board has no police station (Cattarius 2011). According to Kendall Carver, entering cruise ships, is most of the time the equivalent of entering a foreign legal framework, as the passengers are exposed to the law enforcement of third world countries. In most cases they do not have any evidence, witnesses, a corpse or traces (Cattarius 2011).

However, these are dreadful examples on how cruise companies may have acted terribly wrong in different situations. Research has shown, that the number of known missing person cases has not increased drastically over the last years, but has steadily increased, in line with total number of persons traveling by cruise ships, as shown in Fig. 1. Nevertheless, it is a safe assumption that there is an even higher number of unknown overboard cases, which is not distinctively different than what is assumed by the cruise experts. Figure 2 shows the exact number of overboard cases from 1995 up to July 2017. As one can see, the swaying numbers are constantly rising, which could be attributed to the rising passenger numbers and the overall cruise capacity growth.



**Fig. 1** Over all passenger numbers. Data source: Cruise Market Watch (<http://www.cruisemarketwatch.com/growth>)



**Fig. 2** Missing persons in total

## 4 Conclusion

During the interviews with the cruise experts, our impression was that there are many more unknown cases of missing persons on board of cruise ships and the reported ones are only a fraction of the total magnitude of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, one also needs to take into account, that all these experts are professional-critics and their activism against cruise industry is associated with financial and/or reputational rewards (A. Papathanassis, personal communication, September 28, 2017). This sheds a critical light to their impartiality and credibility of their statement. However, there are indeed enough known cases, in which the cruise lines acted irresponsibly during or after an overboard case. Unfortunately, no cruise company was willing to give a statement on this sensitive topic. This can also be interpreted as intentional lack-of-transparency from the part of the cruise sector, supporting its critics (A. Papathanassis, personal communication, September 28, 2017).

Our analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship within the 14 different hypotheses, failing to prove that the numbers of persons overboard has disproportionately increased over the last few years, and that other factors like for example ships or the shipping company itself, may indeed play a role. Although the number of missing persons did actually increase, it increased proportionally to the overall number of passengers and the cruise capacity in general. This supports the assumption of a given, expected ratio between cruising capacity and the number missing persons. Of course falling overboard is nothing which occurs on a daily basis, or at least not that we know of. But in case of an overboard situation it is fair to say that one's destiny is sealed. Not only because of the small possibility of detecting a person going overboard (lack of warning technology adoption), but also due to the very long response time of the cruise lines and the procedural formalities they need to follow before attempting a rescue mission.

Cruising will most probably continue to grow within the next few years and the passenger numbers will rise as well. Cruise corporations, especially the larger ones, have the moral obligation to care for their passengers' safety and well-being by implementing improved safety and security measures on board. A pioneer for installing a modern man-overboard-system will be MSC on their new ship MSC Meraviglia. This system will include integrated video surveillance system to optimize security monitoring on board, which will allow for a timely intervention in the unlikely event a person or object falls overboard (Seatrade Cruise News 2017). Regrettably these Systems are not mandatory and not every cruise line is willing to install such a system considering the costs of such systems.

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