

# NOT AN ~~ACCIDENT~~

## The Power of Mortality Data: Beyond Cause of Death

The data collected by coroner and medical examiner (ME) offices serve vital roles that extend far beyond pinpointing individual causes of death. This information feeds into public health, criminal justice, research, and policy systems at various levels. Let's explore who uses this critical data and why.

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### Government Agencies

#### Local and State Agencies

- **Public Health Departments:** Utilize ME/coroner data to track causes of death, particularly focusing on drug overdoses, suicides, homicides, and accidents. This data informs prevention programs and health alerts.
- **Law Enforcement:** Police and prosecutors rely on ME findings for homicide, suspicious, or accidental deaths to build criminal cases or close investigations.
- **Child Fatality Review Teams / Elder Death Review Boards:** Access autopsy data to identify preventable deaths and improve protective systems.
- **State Vital Records Offices:** Receive death certificate data for official death statistics.

#### Federal Agencies

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):**
    - **National Vital Statistics System (NVSS):** Collects nationwide cause-of-death data from death certificates.
    - **National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDARS):** Integrates data from MEs, law enforcement, and death certificates to study suicides, homicides, and unintentional firearm deaths.
    - **National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS):** Publishes mortality data used for health policy and epidemiology.
  - **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA):** Uses toxicology and cause-of-death data in traffic fatality studies.
  - **Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA):** Monitors drug-related deaths to track substance trends and set enforcement priorities.
  - **Food and Drug Administration (FDA):** Uses postmortem toxicology data for pharmacovigilance and drug safety research.
  - **Department of Justice (DOJ):** Collects ME/coroner data on mortality in custody, homicides, and violent deaths through the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and FBI.
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## Public Health and Research Organizations

- **Universities and Medical Schools:** Employ de-identified ME data for epidemiological and forensic research, studying substance trends, suicide clusters, and environmental toxins.
  - **Public Health Surveillance Systems:** Rely heavily on ME data, such as the State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS).
  - **Injury Prevention Programs:** Use data to guide public health campaigns like seatbelt use, firearm safety, and drug overdose prevention.
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## Legal, Insurance, and Regulatory Entities

- **Insurance Companies:** Request autopsy and death certificate reports to verify claims and determine benefits.
  - **Courts and Legal Professionals:** Utilize ME reports as evidence in criminal trials, civil wrongful death suits, or malpractice cases.
  - **Occupational Safety Agencies (e.g., OSHA):** Review ME data on workplace fatalities to enhance safety regulations.
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## Private and Nonprofit Data Users

- **Epidemiological and Forensic Databases:** Organizations like the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) collect and analyze vital data.
  - **Nonprofits and Advocacy Organizations:** Use aggregated data to focus public health initiatives, such as suicide prevention and opioid crisis advocacy.
  - **News and Data Journalists:** Analyze publicly released data, often obtained through FOIA requests, to report on mortality trends and hold institutions accountable.
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## Examples of Specific Data Flows

- **Death Certificates:** ME/Coroner → State Vital Records → CDC NVSS: Contributes to national mortality statistics.
  - **Toxicology Reports:** ME/Coroner → State Health Departments, CDC SUDORS: Used for overdose surveillance.
  - **Violent Death Reports:** ME/Coroner + Law Enforcement → CDC NVDRS: Aids in violence prevention research.
  - **Custodial Deaths:** ME/Coroner → DOJ/BJS: Monitors deaths in custody.
  - **Fetal/Infant Death Reviews:** ME/Coroner → State Child Death Review: Informs prevention and safety policy.
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## Data Access and Privacy

Most of this data, especially identifiable records, is protected by privacy laws (e.g., HIPAA, state statutes). However, aggregated or de-identified datasets are often shared with approved researchers or made public for health surveillance purposes.

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# The Importance of National Mortality Statistics

National mortality statistics, primarily compiled by the CDC's NVSS, are crucial for understanding public health and guiding government policy. They help us comprehend who is dying, from what causes, and where, shaping everything from disease prevention strategies to funding priorities.

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## Public Health Surveillance & Disease Tracking

- **Identify Leading Causes of Death:** Helps track conditions such as heart disease, cancer, and drug overdoses.
  - **Detect Emerging Health Threats:** Monitors trends like the opioid epidemic and COVID-19 mortality.
  - **Track Mortality Disparities:** Analyzes variations in life expectancy across demographics.
  - **Spot Hazards:** Identifies trends indicating new health dangers, such as contaminated products or unsafe workplaces.
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## Policy and Funding Decisions

- **Guide Health Policies:** Directs federal and state health policy priorities, such as opioid prevention programs.
  - **Allocate Funding:** Informs the distribution of federal and state funding for health services and disease prevention.
  - **Set Public Health Goals:** Supports initiatives like Healthy People 2030 targets aimed at reducing premature deaths.
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## Research and Epidemiology

- **Study Risk Factors:** Provides data for examining mortality trends and demographic changes.
  - **Support Clinical Outcome Studies:** Evaluates treatment success and the impact of environmental factors on mortality.
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## Legal and Forensic Uses

- **Validate Death Information:** Essential for Social Security, veterans' benefits, insurance claims, and legal proceedings.
  - **Establish Mortality Benchmarks:** Important for workplace safety and product liability cases.
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## International and Historical Comparisons

- **Global Comparisons:** Facilitates the analysis of U.S. mortality trends alongside other countries through the World Health Organization (WHO).
  - **Historical Data:** Provides insights into long-term public health progress and population changes.
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In summary, national mortality statistics transform individual death records into powerful tools that provide insights into the health of entire populations, shaping the systems designed to protect and improve public health. By understanding who is dying and from what causes, we can better strategize to enhance safety and well-being for all.