



“Natural Causes?” 59 Autopsies Prove Otherwise Evaluating 59 Deaths in Los Angeles County Jails, 2009-2019

Report by Carceral Ecologies Lab and The BioCritical Studies Lab
Principal Investigators: Nicholas Shapiro DPhil, Terence Keel Ph.D

June 1 2022

The rising number of jail deaths in the United States[1] has left impacted community members, state actors, media, and scholars questioning if these rates are a reflection of the overall declining health of the nation or are due to factors specific to the carceral environment. This fact sheet contributes to this national dialogue through the analysis of autopsies for 59 deaths that occurred in Los Angeles County Jails over a 10 year period. Our findings support the efforts of community members and lawmakers attempting to reform the cash bail system in Los Angeles County as three quarters of the deaths in our study were individuals held in pre-trial detention. Moreover, our study supports the urgent need to reduce the jail population to expedite the closing of Men’s Central Jail and the potential lifesaving benefits of jail diversion programs for the people of Los Angeles County.

We focus on autopsies because they are fundamental to establishing the causes and manner of death in carceral facilities that have limited public accountability.

[1] Carson, E. Ann. “Mortality in Local Jails, 2000-2018 – Statistical Tables.” Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021.



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Fact Sheet, Page 2 First of its kind UCLA quantitative and qualitative report, *Evaluating the Autopsies of 59 Deaths in Los Angeles County Jails, 2009-2019*, shows that the causes of death of young and otherwise healthy Black and Latinx men in Los Angeles County jails were deliberately misclassified as natural or undetermined.

Data show that the majority of deaths of young Black men in jail are at the hands of their keepers through physical violence, mistreatment of the mentally ill, or appeared to be the result of medical negligence. The 59 autopsies definitively show that the majority suffered physical violence.

It’s a pattern that’s all too often repeated, yet most autopsy reports have not been released to the public because of “security holds.” The factors responsible for the deaths in this study appear to be unique to L.A. County jails. The report was authored by the Carceral Ecologies Lab and The BioCritical Studies Lab and UCLA Principal Investigators Nicholas Shapiro D.Phil., Terence Keel Ph.D. in consultation with Community Researcher and Justice Leader Helen M. Jones at Dignity and Power Now.

Black and Latinx men who are in custody are being killed by a system that covers up their brutal deaths and then closes a blind eye to official reports being filed that are erroneous and deem these deaths natural or from undetermined causes.

More than 75% of the people in the study died before standing trial.

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