

Embargoed until June 1, 2022

Facts Summary

“Natural Causes?” 58

Autopsies Prove Otherwise

Evaluating the Autopsies of 58 Deaths in
Los Angeles County Jails

2009 – 2018*

Report by



Carceral Ecologies Lab



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*Correction: this report has been amended to reflect the total number of autopsies requested and received by Dignity & Power Now from the Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner. Our amended report excludes data from the year 2019.

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Executive Summary:

The rising number of jail deaths in the United States¹ 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 58 deaths that occurred in Los Angeles County Jails over a 9-year period. Our study shows that young Black and Latinx men are not dying merely from "natural causes" but from the actions of jail deputies and carceral staff. 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 life saving 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.



Only 58 out of 260 cases between 2009-2018 were accessible at the time of the study due to security holds.

- From 2009-2018, there were 260 total reported deaths in Los Angeles County jails. The Los Angeles Sheriff Department likely used security holds to block access to the remaining autopsies, coroner investigator narrative, and toxicology reports. Security-holds prevent families, scholars, and activists from seeking public accountability and closure. Shortcomings of the Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner recordkeeping may have also limited access to these public documents.

Out of 58 cases, 26 (43%) died from “natural” causes.

- Of these 25 “natural” cases, 64% were Black, 24% were Latinx, and 8% were White. 22 of the 25 “natural” cases were men; of these 22 men, 13 were Black, 6 were Latinx men, and 2 were White. All 3 Black women in the study died from “natural” cases. People who died from “natural” causes are not significantly older than other manners of death. 84% of these “natural” cases involved alleged or substantiated mental illness and 56% included evidence of physical violence on the body. White and Latinx women were not represented in our sample of natural deaths.

73% of all Black deaths in the sample were classified as “natural”.

- 32% of Latinx deaths, 14% of White deaths, and 33% of Asian (1 of 3) deaths were classified as “natural”. Black deaths were nearly twice as likely to be designated as “natural” compared to Latinx, White, and Asian deaths combined.

Latinx people who die in county jails are more likely to be “undetermined”.

- There were 8 total undetermined cases in our sample (Latinx men n=5; Black men n=3). In fact, every Latinx death in our study classified as undetermined died before trial. In all undetermined cases, the victims were young with an average age of 24.5 years old at time of death compared to an overall average of 42.8 years old for all cases.

More than 78% of the cases in our study were deaths that occurred before standing trial.

- We discovered that 72% of the natural death cases in our sample were pre-trial. Again, Black people were in the majority and represented 72% of “natural” pre-trial cases.

Law enforcement were present during the autopsy in 51 of the 58 cases we analyzed.

- The Chief Physician at the LASD, who has supervisory responsibilities over medical care in LA jails, attended 14 of the autopsies (24%) across all manners of death. Having Sheriff Department staff present at autopsy may bias these reports. ²

Deaths in Los Angeles County Jail have steadily increased since 2016.

- This increase in deaths coincides with an increased number of cases placed on security hold also beginning in 2016.

There were 260 deaths in Los Angeles County Jails between 2009 and 2018 that were reported to the Department of Justice.

- Consistent with our analysis of the smaller 58 case sample, the large majority of deaths during this period were classified as “Illness” which is equivalent to “Natural” (n=144, 55%), followed by “Suicide” (n=46, 18%), “Drugs/Alcohol” (n=19, 7%), “Undetermined” (n=18, 7%), “Accident” (n=12, 5%), “Unknown” (n=10, 4%), “Homicide” (n=11, 4%).

Latinx and Blacks constituted the majority of all deaths during this period.

- Latinx deaths (n=96, 37%) led all groups followed by Blacks (n=88, 34%), Whites (n=57, 22%), Other (n=8, 3%), Asian (n=7, 2%), Pacific Islander (n=2, 1%) and Unknown/withheld (n=2, 1%).

The number of cases placed on security hold dramatically increased beginning in 2016.

- The majority of death determinations in 2016, 2017, and 2018 were withheld “pending investigation”. No cases were placed on security hold between the years of 2008 and 2014.

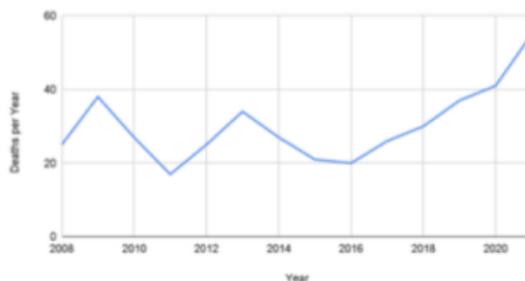
182 deaths occurred before standing trial.

- Most pre-trial cases were designated as “Illness/Natural” (n=100, 55%), followed by “Suicide” (n=35, 20%). Latinx made up the majority of pretrial deaths (n=66, 36%), followed by Blacks (n=61, 34%), then Whites (n=41, 23%).

73 deaths occurred post-conviction.

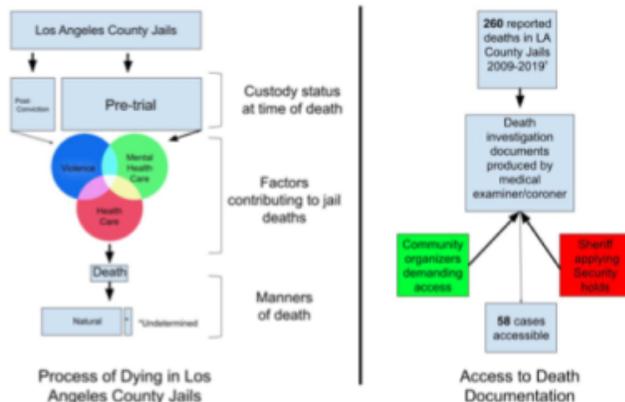
- A clear majority were classified as “Natural” (n=44, 60%) followed distantly by “Suicide” (n=9, 12%). Despite lower overall numbers, Black post-conviction deaths (n=19, 43%) constituted a larger proportion of “Natural” than Latinx (n=14, 32%) deaths. 18% of post conviction ‘natural’ deaths were Whites (n=15, 19%), and 5% were Asians (n=2).

Deaths per Year in LA County Jails



2008-2013 Data from LASD Documents prepared for the US Department of Justice,³ 2014-2021 Data from the Los Angeles County Office of Inspector General.⁴

Visual Overview



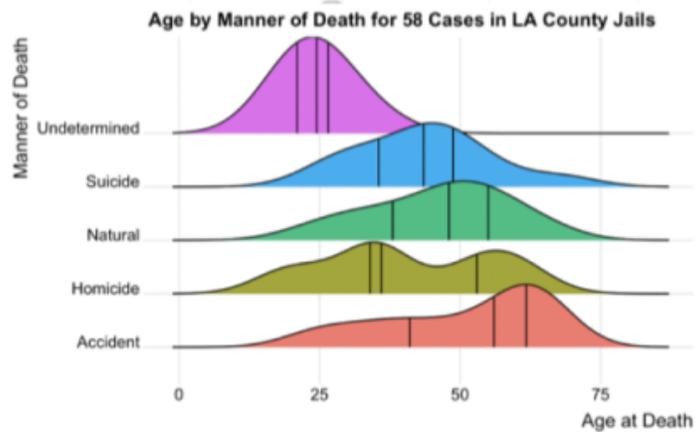
The above figure represents an overview of our preliminary findings. On the left we depict the multiple factors that result in death inside Los Angeles County Jail. Most individuals in our study were of “pre-trial” status, meaning they were charged with a crime but had not yet stood trial or accepted a plea bargain. While incarcerated, the individuals in our study were subjected to one or all of the following factors that led to their deaths: physical violence, issues with mental health care treatment, or issues with health care. These factors contributed to the loss of life later classified by the medical examiner-coroner. The most common manner of death in our study was classified by the medical examiner-coroner as “natural.” “Undetermined” deaths were overrepresented in our sample compared to the average number of undetermined deaths for all autopsies in Los Angeles County. On the right we depict access to information involving the deaths of inmates in Los Angeles County jails. During our period of study, Los Angeles County jails were mandated to report deaths that occurred in their facilities to state and national authorities. However, public awareness of these deaths are shaped locally by the conflict between communities demanding access to files protected by California’s open record laws and the Los Angeles Sheriff Department denying this access. This number is based on data submitted to Department of Justice. See footnote two for reference.

Death Classifications of 59 Cases in Los Angeles County Jails by Race, 2009-2018



Note the disproportionate scale of Black deaths deemed "natural."

Age by Manner of Death

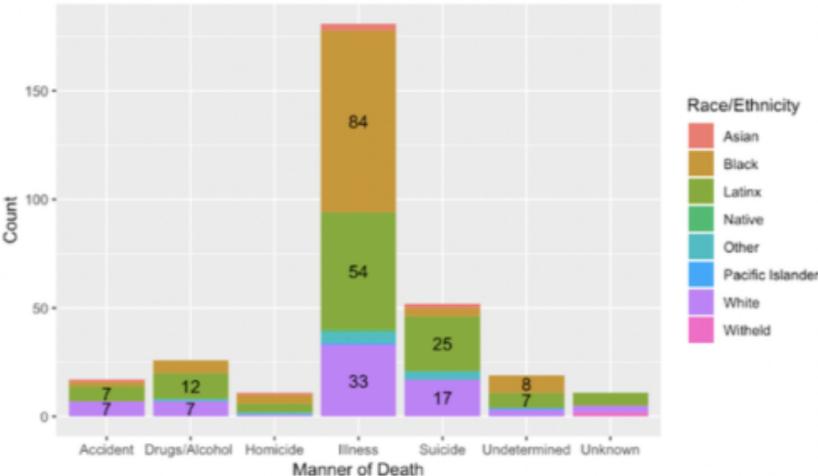


The graph above depicts age at death by each of the manners of death. Each manner is broken up into quartiles (meaning that ~25% of all cases fall between each of the vertical lines in the graph). Undetermined deaths show a statistically significant skew towards youth ($p = 0.00003$). Natural deaths are not statistically significantly older than other manners of death ($p = .1534$). The average American life expectancy was 78.9 years of age in 2019.⁵

Jail Deaths by Facility

Jail	Number of deaths	Average age at death
Twin Towers	44	43.6
Century Regional Detention Facility	6	48
Men's Central Jail	5	30.6
Pitchess Detention Center	2	38
North County Correctional Facility	1	47
Total Average Age		42.8

Manner of LA County Jail Deaths, 2009-2018



Security holds of LA County Jail Deaths 2009-2018

Year	Security Held Death Determinations	Total Deaths	Percentage Held
2009	0	38	0.0%
2010	0	27	0.0%
2011	0	17	0.0%
2012	0	25	0.0%
2013	0	34	0.0%
2014	0	28	0.0%
2015	1	21	4.8%
2016	13	19	68.4%
2017	20	25	80.0%
2018	19	26	73.1%

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the many impacted families that brought this issue to our attention, trusted us with their truths, and consulted us as we performed this analysis. We are also grateful for the organizing efforts of Dignity and Power Now and the tireless work of undergraduate students in Carceral Ecologies and the BioCritical Studies Lab who were involved in this study.

References

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

² Dror, Itiel, Judy Melinek, Jonathan L. Arden, Jeff Kukucka, Sarah Hawkins, Joye Carter, and Daniel S. Atherton. "Cognitive Bias in Forensic Pathology Decisions." *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 66, no. 5 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.14697>.

³ Smith, Grant. "Dying Inside: The Data behind @Reuters Investigation of US Jail Deaths." Reuters, October 16, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-jails-graphic/>. Data obtained from PRA requests of LASD.

⁴ Office of Inspector General. "Reform and Oversight Efforts: Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department." County of Los Angeles, December 2021. <https://assets-us-01.kc-usercontent.com/0234f496-d2b7-00b6-17a4-b43e949b70a2/736916ea-786c-4bfd-b073-b7de182ebf6c/Reform%20and%20Oversight%20Efforts%20-Los%20Angeles%20County%20Sheriffs%20Department%20-%20October%20to%20December%202021.pdf>.

⁵ Masters, Ryan K., Laudan Y. Aron, and Steven H. Woolf. "Changes In Life Expectancy Between 2019 and 2021: United States and 19 Peer Countries." Preprint. *Public and Global Health*, April 7, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.04.05.22273393>.





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