DEATH RECORD AND MEDICAL EXAMINER DATA

Data Description Death records use ICD-10 coding which includes codes for deaths caused while in custody or during actions by law enforcement. If the data is compiled by a medical examiner, it will typically be completed by a forensic pathologist. Death record data are often revised on an ongoing basis. Final counts are likely to take more than a year after the end of a calendar year. Revised numbers typically only involve a small fraction of the overall reported deaths in any given year. As the autopsies are finalized, the most recent year's numbers will be revised upward. Some death record data sources include narrative fields. These fields can be mined for law enforcement related deaths.

Limitations Depending on the jurisdiction and quality of information the medical examiner, physician or coroner receives, law enforcement related deaths may not be captured completely. There have been major discrepancies between the totals reported by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention using death records and public data aggregated by the Washington Post. With the Washington Post investigative team identifying almost twice the number of fatal shooting cases each year since 2015 compared to data based on death records. In addition, the quality and the level of detail provided on vital records/death certificates will vary by state and jurisdiction. Death certificates must conform to national standards, but the level of training of those completing the death certificates and the practices of each agency varies.

Variables Death records typically include information on date and time of death, demographics of the decedent including race and ethnicity, decedent residence location, cause and manner of death, contributing causes, comorbidities, and incident location including geolocation.

Case Definition for Identifying Civilian Injuries Caused by Law Enforcement
Death records use ICD coding. When using ICD-10 codes the sixth digit identifies whether the person is a suspect, bystander or law enforcement official. Omit all cases where the 6th digit is 1 (Y35.XX1). An internal record abstraction confirmed that most of the cases codes as "law enforcement official" involve injuries to security guards not sworn officers.

1. Any primary cause or contributing cause of death fields = Y35.0 – Y35.9 (ICD-9 then 970-979)
2. If there are narrative fields, search for the following keywords:
    a. law enforcement, police, sheriff, officer, guard, vice, bystander, suspect, prisoner, inmate, convict, detainee, criminal, jail, prison, security, tear gas, manhandling, custody, arrest, baton, handcuff, riot
3. Some data systems have a unique field that flags deaths caused during a legal intervention, but the above query criteria should be checked in case a death was inadvertently missed (not flagged).
4. Currently the Washington Post research team is compiling fatal shooting deaths at https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/. Based on our internal analysis, the majority of civilian deaths are caused by firearms, but it may miss deaths caused by manhandling and especially those that occur in custody. The Bureau of Justice Statistics collects arrest related and death in custody data via two data systems: Deaths in Custody Reporting Program and the Arrest related death (ARD) program.