



### **D52 Stepping Into Squalor: Scene Investigation of Decedents Who Lived in an Extremely Cluttered or Squalid Residence at the Time of Their Death**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the demographic and social history of decedents in Harris County who were living in an extremely cluttered or squalid residence at the time of their death.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing new insight into the investigation of extremely cluttered death scenes and addressing common misconceptions of decedents who were living in that type of environment. The data presented may benefit first responders, investigators, pathologists, social workers, and other professionals by helping them to see beyond the squalid conditions and instead focus on specific clues inside the residence, thus being able to perform a proper and more thorough investigation.

Using definitions developed by Randy Frost, PhD and Gail Steketee, PhD, in their research on hoarding, 81 sets of scene photographs were examined for this study. All deaths occurred and were investigated in Harris County from 2009 to the present. Scenes were determined to be extremely cluttered or squalid using the Frost/Steketee definitions. Information about the decedents was gathered from both the forensic investigators and pathologists reports. Cases selected were deaths of adults only (age 18 and older) and the death must have occurred inside of or on the property of an extremely cluttered residence. For this study, a residence was defined as a person's permanent living quarters and those quarters must contain a kitchen, bathroom, and living room or bedroom. Therefore, homeless individuals and those living in encampments were excluded. Children were also excluded because it is believed they would not have adequate control over their living environment.

Using the stated case criteria, decedent demographic data including age, race, and gender were compiled, as well as social history, including substance abuse, market value of the residence, whether family members were easily located, and the cause and manner of death (as determined by the pathologist). Scene photos were examined for patterns and trends and were also noticed in another investigation of extremely cluttered scenes.

Of the 81 deaths reviewed for this study, the majority of the decedents were White males and the average age of the decedents was 62 years. Those aged 62 years and older accounted for 50% of the 81 subjects. This age group was over-represented in this study compared to the population of Harris County whose residents age 62 years and over account for only 10.5% of the population. Most of the decedents were in an early-to-moderate stage of decomposition (65%) but, surprisingly, the majority of decedents had family members that either lived nearby or were in regular contact with the decedent (73%). Most of the decedents did not have pets (73%) and the majority of the decedents did not smoke cigarettes, use illicit drugs, abuse prescription medications, or use alcohol. However, of those who did use alcohol, most of the use was described as "heavy."

When investigating deaths in an extremely cluttered or squalid residence, it is beneficial for investigators, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and police officers to be able to locate needed information quickly and safely. Though the scene appears overwhelming at first, some trends were noted which may assist investigators. For example, current medications, cell phones, purses, and other frequently used items were often found on top of piles which were closest to the bed, the door used to enter the residence, the television, and/or sitting area. There was no need for the investigator to risk his or her safety by sorting through the piles and debris.

This presentation will address common misconceptions regarding people who hoard and offer insight into successful navigation of extremely cluttered death scenes. This information will be of benefit to those who first respond to 911 calls, those investigating the death, and, ultimately, to the family of the deceased.

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#### **Hoarding, Forensic Investigation, Residence**