



### **E100 A Retrospective Study of Homeless Deaths in the County of Santa Clara, California**

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The goal of this presentation is to present causes of death and other variables affecting the homeless community upon review of autopsy and investigative reports at the Santa Clara County Medical Examiner-Coroner's Office spanning the years 2011 through 2016.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by further defining the definition of homelessness used by the Santa Clara County Medical Examiner-Coroner's office and illuminating the trends in homeless deaths over the past six years. For the years 2011 through 2016, there were 476 homeless deaths in Santa Clara County, an increase of 164%. The number of deaths affecting the homeless population continues to rise, with the most deaths observed to date occurring in 2016.

The importance of a definition of homelessness is that it allows for county-wide consistency in classification. Those included in this study's definition of homeless consist of people living on the street in indoor and outdoor makeshift living areas, including homeless encampments, parks, motor vehicles, and recreational vehicles, as well as those individuals living in homeless shelters, motels, or any type of funded or transitional housing. Also included in this study's definition are individuals who did not have a valid living address upon a public records search.

Each year was analyzed separately for the following variables: decedent demographics; cause and manner of death; location of death; medical history; the presence and use of drugs; veteran status; and motor vehicle-related deaths. The yearly data was then compiled and compared to demonstrate trends across the six-year period. These data seek to present the homeless death rate in the United States and report any trends that may help in creating preventative measures to help the homeless at the county, state, and national levels.

All autopsy and investigative reports of homeless deaths in this time period were critically reviewed. The highlights of these data include: the increase in the number of homeless deaths from 2011 through 2016; the consistent use of alcohol and methamphetamine; the increase in heroin-related deaths corresponding with the national opioid epidemic; the location of death; and the rising number of elderly homeless deaths.

There were 50 homeless deaths in Santa Clara County in 2011, followed by 62 in 2012, 78 in 2013, 69 in 2014, 85 in 2015, and 132 in 2016. Between 2011 and 2016, the number of homeless deaths increased by 164%.

Alcohol and drug abuse continues to claim a significant number of homeless deaths each year, with alcohol and methamphetamine being the most commonly abused drugs; however, of interest is the increase in heroin use among the homeless decedents.

Each case was analyzed to determine location of death to illustrate where the greatest number of homeless deaths occurred in Santa Clara County. The most common locations of death comprising all six years were hospitals, emergency rooms, and nursing facilities. The second most common locations were outdoor makeshift living areas. These data demonstrate that the majority of the homeless decedents in Santa Clara County were not dying in shelters or emergency housing.

The average life expectancy for a homeless individual is far younger than the general population (64 years and 78 years, respectively).<sup>1</sup> As the baby boomer generation ages, so does the homeless population, further exacerbating their risk for illnesses. Santa Clara County saw a 320% increase in the number of homeless decedents aged 65 and over between 2011 and 2016.

The increased number of homeless deaths exemplifies some of the risk factors faced by this population. Housing alone will not completely solve the homeless problem; rather, more resources for medical and mental illness, drug addiction, and the elderly population need to be provided. By presenting these data, the goal is to encourage this type of change through policy reform at the county, state, and national levels.

#### **Reference(s):**

- <sup>1</sup> Culhane D.P. No Place to Call Home: Late Boomers Face Homelessness, End of Life Difficulties. *Aging Today*. 36 (2015): 1-2. Accessed July 24, 2017. [https://works.bepress.com/dennis\\_culhane/194/](https://works.bepress.com/dennis_culhane/194/).

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#### **Homeless Deaths, Transient Deaths, Santa Clara County, CA**