



E82 Examining Drug-Related Deaths While in Custody: A Look Into the Role That Race Plays in Drug-Related Custody Deaths in Texas

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the correlation between deaths related to narcotics during custody in the state of Texas and race. The goal of this presentation is to introduce the concept of drug-related death occurrences during custody and present the data behind the association of race and specific type of drug found to contribute toward the cause of death.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by increasing understanding of the nexus which exists between race and narcotics-related deaths of individuals in law enforcement custody. This presentation will also provide recommendations as to the necessity for thorough medical examinations of illicit drug-related deaths that occur in law enforcement custody.

Deaths of Americans in the custody of law enforcement is a widespread discussion being had in today's society. While much of the debate involves officer shootings during arrest or initial contact, drug-related deaths while in custody are a less-emphasized topic of discussion. The relationship between the race of the decedents and type of drug indicated as a cause of death by the medical examiner were tested. The results suggest that there exists a statistically significant difference between the race of the individual and type of drug associated with their death while in law enforcement custody.

As public scrutiny of law enforcement's treatment of minority citizens increases, empirical research in the fields of criminal justice and criminology increase as well. Primarily, these empirical studies seek to determine the association between citizen and police, which is most visible at the moment of initial confrontation or arrest. What is examined to a lesser extent are the occurrences between citizen and police after arrest. This report intends to examine occurrences of drug-related deaths of individuals in law enforcement custody. Specifically, it seeks to explore the relationship between race and type of narcotics that contribute to the cause of death to individuals in custody.

In understanding the current cannon of research associated with race and overdoses within custody, this report used official data gathered by the Texas Justice Initiative. The data is obtained through the mandatory reporting system between criminal justice agencies in the state of Texas and the Attorney General's Office when a death occurs in their custody. While this reporting has been in practice for decades, it was not until 2005 that it became streamlined and, in 2016, made open to the public. This study examines deaths linked to narcotic use while in law enforcement custody within the state of Texas for the period of 2015 through 2019.

Data analysis was conducted by examining the causes of death noted by medical examiners for each of the original deaths that occurred within this time frame ($n=2,975$); only 3.5% ($n=104$) listed a narcotic as a noted cause of death. The dataset breaks down Race by either Black, White, Hispanic, or Other. For the causes of death, this study only focused on narcotic names that were listed under the cause of death by the medical examiner. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a multiple response report, is used in order to capture multiple narcotics listed in some subject's causes of death. Binary variables are created to reflect Cocaine, Methamphetamine, Amphetamine, and Other. This report then employed an uncertainty coefficient measure to determine the relationship between the race of the decedent and the form of narcotic noted as a cause of death by the medical examiner. While the Race and Drug type were too far from a uniform distribution to use chi-square, uncertainty coefficient is deployed, and the likelihood ratio between race and narcotics gave significant results.

The analysis of data conducted in this study indicates that there exists a relationship between the race of the decedent in custody and the type of narcotics associated with that individual's death. More specifically, the data finds that there exists a statistically significant relationship between Race and Cocaine ($p=.022$) as well as Race and Methamphetamine ($p=.002$). The results were unable to determine a significant correlation between Race and Amphetamine use and Other drug use.

The purpose of this analysis is to further the understanding of illicit drug-related deaths occurring to individuals who are placed under the supervision of a law enforcement agency. This report seeks to educate the public on the widespread occurrences of illicit drug-related deaths in custody, the types of drugs associated with these deaths, and demographics of the decedents.

Overdose, Criminal Justice, Custody