



H75 A Retrospective Review of Deaths in Custody Submitted for Medicolegal Autopsy at a Medical University in South Carolina (2012 to 2020)

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have additional information regarding deaths in custody and the classification of cause and manner of death in these cases. The goals of this presentation are to contribute to the education of the public, media, law enforcement, and judiciary systems and to encourage discussion relating to how in-custody deaths are certified.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by supplementing the existing information available regarding deaths in custody and may be valuable in contributing to the public and political discourse/debate.

Recent high-profile events have brought the topic of in-custody deaths to the forefront of public discourse, raising questions related to patterns in the certification of death as well as the treatment of minorities in the criminal justice system.

A retrospective analysis of medicolegal cases referred to the Medical and Forensic Autopsy Division of the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) from September 1, 2012, to August 31, 2020, was conducted. Search terms included “custody,” “restraint,” “police,” “jail,” “prison,” “law enforcement,” and “detention;” of the total 7,414 cases performed during that time period, 652 were identified as containing one or more of the search terms. The 652 cases were manually reviewed by two forensic pathologists and a total of 68 cases were identified as falling under the category of in-custody death, where custody was defined as “law enforcement official’s act of holding an accused or convicted person in criminal proceedings, beginning with the arrest of that person.” An additional 55 cases were identified where decedents were not in custody but died during interaction with or fleeing from law enforcement. The in-custody deaths were further categorized by demographic data, including decedent age, race, sex, manner of death, cause of death, and other variables such as incident site and the presence of drugs and alcohol.

Initial data indicated a preponderance of male decedents with 87% (59) male and 13% (9) female fatalities. There was an equal distribution of deaths between races with a Black:White ratio of 8:8.5. The average age of the decedent in custody was 37 years for females (range 23–58 years) and 44 years for males (range 24–67 years). The most common manner of death was natural with 25 (37%) deaths, followed by suicides and accidents at 13 (19%) deaths each, then homicides and undetermined manners of death at 8 (12%) each. One manner of death remained pending at the time of this abstract. Of the suicidal and accidental fatalities, the most common cause of death was hanging and drug intoxication, respectively. The majority of in-custody homicide fatalities included a component of restraint asphyxia whereas in-custody fatalities where the manner of death remained undetermined involved a variety of mechanisms, including restraint, blunt trauma, and history of seizure.

The data accumulated in this retrospective analysis will supplement existing information regarding deaths involving law enforcement and incarceration and may be valuable in contributing to the education of the public, media, law enforcement, and judiciary systems.

In-Custody Death, Autopsy, Forensic Pathology