

The CDC mortality database

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's mortality database has been the registry of every American death since 1959.

The data are maintained so that causes of death can be used to gauge the nation's health, identifying trends in a given county or state or among a specific ethnic or age group.

Every person who dies in the United States is supposed to be included in the record, which grows by about 2.5 million deaths every year. Each record, gleaned directly from an individual's death certificate, includes the person's age but no name, and a snapshot of when, where, how and why he or she died.

Unfortunately, the information is only as good as what's recorded by the coroner, doctor or medical examiner filling out the certificate.

For each record, the health professional provides a written description of the cause of death and contributing factors, which are then translated into a standardized set of World Health Organization codes by the state before being passed on to the Centers for Disease Control.

For example, from 1999 to 2004 there were no "X33" codes in Nevada, the designation for a lightning-caused death. But in the same period there were 10 "J12" deaths, indicating the underlying cause was viral pneumonia. There are about 5,000 codes in all.

The CDC's National Center for Health Statistics separates the individual codes into 113 groups for easier analysis. This is the data the Sun analyzed.

Ken Kochanek, a CDC statistician who has worked with mortality data for nearly 20 years, says the information is not completely accurate. The same is true for other large data sets compiled from many sources.

But the mortality data are important because they highlight trends that can become a starting point for further investigation, he said.

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