

Death Certificate Data Biography

This data biography includes information about who created this data, and how, where, when, and why it was collected. We (the Assessment, Policy Development, and Evaluation Unit at Public Health – Seattle & King County) created it to help you understand where the data we analyze and share comes from and its strengths and limitations. If you have any further questions, we would be happy to provide more information or direct you to relevant resources! You can reach us at data.request@kingcounty.gov.

Who collects the data?

A death certificate is an official record of disease or injury responsible for the death (the cause of death) and the explanation of how the cause arose (the manner of death). When a family member, friend, or healthcare staff informs a Washington State funeral home of a death, a death certificate is generated in the Washington Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS). The funeral home completes the demographic section of the certificate, then contacts a medical certifier (such as a healthcare provider, a medical examiner, or a coroner) to complete the Cause of Death section of the record. In some situations, a physician or coroner may initiate the death certificate process.

Once the death is registered, the Washington Department of Health's Center for Health Statistics submits the data to the National Center for Health Statistics which adds International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems codes for cause of death to the record. This final record is held by Washington Department of Health's Center for Health Statistics.

Who owns the data?

The Washington State Department of Health's Center for Health Statistics owns the data. Public Health – Seattle & King County accesses it through a data sharing agreement with them.

How is the data collected?

The demographic section is typically completed by the funeral home with the help of an informant. The informant is someone the funeral home selects to identify the deceased and provide demographic and biographical information about them. Often this is an immediate family member. The Cause of Death section is completed by a medical certifier using their diagnostic expertise and any available information such as medical records or incidence reports. The medical certifier may be a physician, osteopath, physician's assistant, nurse practitioner, health officer, medical examiner, coroner, prosecuting attorney, or chiropractor.

Who is included and excluded from the data?

The data set includes records on all persons who die while residing within the state, as well as death certificate information of Washington state residents who die outside the state. Data for deaths that occurred out of state may not include complete information.

Race and ethnicity are sometimes reported based on observing the decedent, rather than questioning the next of kin. This causes an underestimate of deaths for Native American/Alaska Natives and Hispanics, so death rates based on death certificate data are lower than true death rates for these groups. Multiple race identity is also underreported and data quality for this group is so poor that we do not report causes of death for this group.

Where is the data collected?

The data are collected at the places of business of the funeral homes and medical certifiers.

Why is the data collected?

Data are collected as part of national and state vital statistics programs. They are used to calculate health measures such as leading causes of death and life expectancy. Vital statistics data have diverse uses for public health, social service, and economic planning and program development and are used to track progress toward health goals.

How often is this data collected?

Data are collected as deaths occur and are processed. Data quality checks and corrections are also continuous. Data are released annually, roughly by July of the calendar year following the death. This delay allows for late entries and final quality checks on the closing year's data.

What else is important to know about this data?

Due to limitations in data sharing agreements, information about WA residents who die and are processed out-of-state may be incomplete. This especially applies to race, ethnicity, and armed forces status.

In 2016, Washington State Department of Health changed the system they used to process data from death certificates. Due to this change, updating and correcting cause of death information was not completed in 8%-10% of death records from 2016.

Where can I learn more about this data?

The following links include additional information:

[Death Data - Vital Statistics :: Washington State Department of Health](#)

[Washington State Death Data 2020](#)

View our death data for King County [here](#)

About data privacy and security

The Assessment, Policy Development, and Evaluation Unit takes data security and the privacy of all individuals represented in our data very seriously. Data are stored in a secure environment. For data sets that are not publicly available, only authorized staff are able to access them. Each data set has privacy guidelines to prevent sharing any information that may be identifiable – for example, not sharing (sometimes called suppressing) numbers when they are very small.

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