

Death in Custody: A Historical Analysis

This research delineates the historical evolution of death in custody. A retrospective, exploratory analysis of 145,425 cases from Maryland's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, occurring from 1939 to 2004, was conducted. Two hundred and two custodial deaths were identified and subsequently examined relative to time, agency, decedent characteristics, and cause and manner of death. Results indicate that there have been substantive changes in custodial deaths over time. Cardiovascular disease was the most frequent cause of death from the 1930s to the 1970s, except for the 1940s, when syphilis and tuberculosis took precedence. Asphyxia, the predominant cause of death in the 1980s, reflected an increase in suicidal hangings. Emerging in the 1980s, drug intoxication deaths were prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s. Sudden unexplained deaths involving violent behavior, the use of multiple restraints, and drug intoxication were not identified until the 1980s, coinciding with periods of increased cocaine abuse nationally.