

Deaths In American Police Custody: A 12 MONTH SURVEILLANCE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Emergency physicians often care for suspects in police custody. Sudden and unexpected in-custody death (ICD) of a suspect is an alarming event that occurs at an unknown rate. There are many theories of causation, including drug intoxication, excited delirium and excessive use of force by police. There is currently not an adequate, universal method in place to track ICD events so it is difficult to know how often ICD occurs or what factors surround each event. Since ICD has recently been a popular media topic of human rights groups, this lack of a universal tracking method may lead to faulty conclusions regarding causation or association. This report uses a novel and prospective process to gather ICD data and analyzes the factors reported for significance.

METHODS

www.webclippings.com was prospectively queried for American ICD's over a 12 month period. This data search service scours 1.5 billion sources daily for requested terms. Data was forwarded for analysis and included subject gender, age, behavior, arrest force and weapons used, time of collapse proximal to arrest, and presence of illicit substance abuse. Custodial agencies were contacted for details as necessary. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests for significance were used.

RESULTS

- 162 ICD's reported
- 96.3% males
- Mean age 35.7 years (SD±9.8, range 15-75).
- 62.9% exhibited bizarre behavior and 62.3% had confirmed illicit drug use just prior to arrest.

POLICE FORCE USED:

None 22
Significant Hands-On 111
Intermediate Weapons 84
(Chemical 20, Impact 14, TASER 50, Handcuffs 162)
Deadly 19

WHO DIES IN CUSTODY

A review of available media sources reveals the following statistics about people who die in police custody without trauma.

Note: Some subjects fit multiple categories, so numbers are not intended to add up to 100%.



12.3%
were shot with chemical spray



8.6%
were hit with impact weapons



30.1%
were hit with TASER



68.5%
went hands-on with officers



62.3%
ingested illegal drugs



100%
were handcuffed



TIME TO COLLAPSE:

Instantly 21
Within 1st hour 85
Between 1-48 hours 56

SIGNIFICANT ASSOCIATIONS FOUND

- Impact Weapons were associated with death in the first 60 minutes (13/14, p=0.019)
- TASER device application was never associated with instantaneous death (0/50, p=0.001)

CONCLUSIONS

- ICD in America is largely an event involving males less than 45 years of age engaging in illicit substance abuse
- ICD appears to occur within the first 60 minutes when an intermediate impact weapon is used
- ICD appears to never occur instantaneously when a TASER device is used
- This poster represents a preliminary source of the known ICD data
- No current ICD database exists for analysis and we recommend that professionals from interested disciplines develop universal reporting guidelines to better track these events

LIMITATIONS

We recognize that the most significant limitation of this study is the very point that we are trying to call attention to. The fact that there is not a current, universal ICD database is concerning. Because we have relied on the media to report these, it is possible that we have not included every ICD that has occurred. And, although we have attempted to verify accuracy of each report, it is possible that inaccurate reporting of force factors and collapse times occurred. We believe that an opportunity for a national registry of ICD's exists to further define and study this problem.