



Bureau of Justice Statistics Fact Sheet

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Unidentified Human Remains in the United States, 1980-2004

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Between 1980 and 2004, about 10,300 unidentified human remains were reported to the National Death Index (NDI), maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). The NDI is a central computerized database of all death records in the United States. While death records are submitted annually to NCHS by the vital statistics office in each State and the District of Columbia, the NDI is not a national system for reporting unidentified persons. States do not uniformly specify on the death certificate when a person's identity is not known.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Unidentified Person File is the only national database specifically designed to collect information on unidentified persons. However, reporting to the NCIC is voluntary and has been inconsistent across States and over time. California is the only State that mandates reporting to the Unidentified Person File.

10,300 unidentified persons in the NDI; 73% reported by 5 states

The NCHS provided estimates of unidentified persons in the NDI to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The counts varied each year, from a low of 271 in 1984 to a high of 688 in 1987 (figure 1). The reported number of unidentified persons declined from 1993 through 2004. This decrease may be due to advances in forensics and technology.

Almost three-quarters of unidentified persons were reported by 5 States: Arizona, California, Florida, New York, and Texas. Two States — California and New York — accounted for 50% of all reported unidentified persons in the NDI.

State-level data on unidentified persons reported to the NDI varied over time. While States such as Georgia, Michigan, New York, and Texas had an overall decrease since 1990, Arizona and Florida had substantial increases (table 1). The large increase in unidentified persons in Arizona and Florida may be attributed to a growing number of illegal immigrants

Number of unidentified human remains reported to the National Death Index, 1980-2004

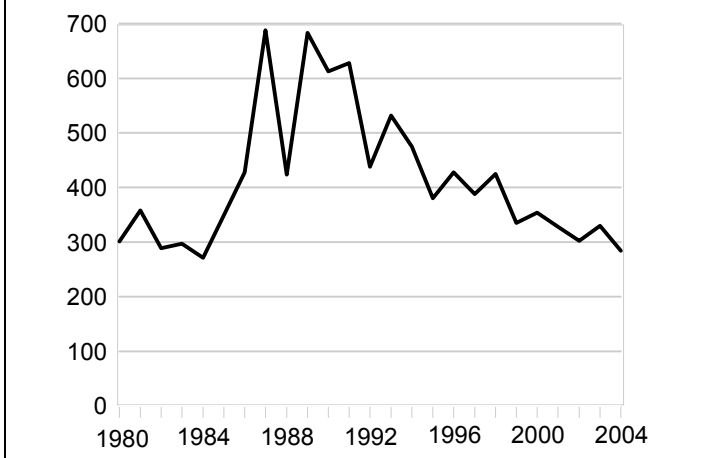


Figure 1

in these States. Friends or family members of illegal immigrants may not report the person missing or come forward to identify them for fear of authorities.

White males accounted for over half of unidentified human remains

As of February 2005, the NCIC file contained information on approximately 5,900 unidentified persons. The 5 States that accounted for 75% of the records in the NDI also accounted for 75% of all unidentified persons in the NCIC file. California accounted for 42% of all persons in the NCIC database.

The majority of unidentified persons were white (70%); blacks made up 15% of unidentified persons; and race could not be determined in 13% of the cases. Overall, 72% of unidentified persons were male, and 24% were female. Gender could not be determined in 4% of the cases. White males accounted for over half of all unidentified persons.

27% of unidentified persons in the NCIC were homicide victims

In about half of the cases (49%), the medical examiner or coroner could not determine the manner of death because the remains were badly decomposed or skeletonized. About 27% of the deaths were ruled homicides; 12%, accidental deaths; 7%, natural causes; and 5%, suicides.

Methodology

The NDI is a centralized index of death records reported to CDC from the State vital statistics offices. By state law, all deaths in each State must be reported and a death certificate prepared by either a funeral director, medical examiner, or coroner, regardless of whether the person is identified. Records are provided to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) electronically. Death records are added to the index annually, approximately 12 months after the end of the calendar year. According to CDC, the index contains a standard set of identifying information on each death to be used to identify and locate death records in State offices.

Estimates of unidentified persons in the NDI, provided to BJS by NCHS, were calculated by conducting a literal text field search on the first and last name categories of the NDI. First and last name combinations were used to identify unknown decedents when Doe, Black, White, John, or Jane appeared in either the first or last name data field. Other combinations containing these strings, such as Thomas White or John Smith, were counted as known decedents and were not included as unidentified persons.

The number of unidentified persons are annual estimates instead of true counts because of the criteria used to search the NDI. While the search of the death records was comprehensive, some death records may have been missed because terms other than those specified in the search were used to indicate that a person's identity was not known. In addition, some death records reported as unidentified may have been identified at a later date. For more information about the National Death Index, see the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics Website at <<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/ndi.htm>>.

The NCIC Unidentified Person File was provided to BJS by the FBI. Records are typically entered by a law enforcement agency on behalf of medical examiner and coroner offices and are retained indefinitely, unless removed by the entering agency. The NCIC contains records of unidentified deceased persons, persons of any age who are living and unable to determine their identity, and unidentified catastrophe victims. Only data on unidentified deceased and catastrophe victims were included in this analysis. For more information about the NCIC, see the FBI's Criminal Justice Information System (CJIS) Division Website at <<http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cjisd/missingpersons.htm>>.

Table 1. Number of unidentified human remains in 5-year periods from 1980 to 2004, by State

| | 25 year total | 1980-1984 | 1985-1989 | 1990-1994 | 1995-1999 | 2000-2004 |
|----------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| US Total | 10,328 | 1,516 | 2,572 | 2,686 | 1,956 | 1,598 |
| Alabama | 17 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Alaska | 21 | 9 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Arizona | 569 | 67 | 129 | 51 | 124 | 198 |
| Arkansas | 36 | 14 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 2 |
| California | 2,678 | 401 | 850 | 585 | 431 | 411 |
| Colorado | 47 | 10 | 8 | 14 | 9 | 6 |
| Connecticut | 5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| Delaware | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| District of Columbia | 121 | 15 | 40 | 43 | 10 | 13 |
| Florida | 950 | 230 | 192 | 157 | 181 | 190 |
| Georgia | 139 | 32 | 30 | 35 | 27 | 15 |
| Hawaii | 19 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| Idaho | 15 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| Illinois | 408 | 97 | 111 | 129 | 32 | 39 |
| Indiana | 66 | 12 | 14 | 19 | 14 | 7 |
| Iowa | 8 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Kansas | 16 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 5 |
| Kentucky | 15 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| Louisiana | 126 | 29 | 24 | 43 | 20 | 10 |
| Maine | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Maryland | 140 | 18 | 28 | 33 | 53 | 8 |
| Massachusetts | 61 | 8 | 17 | 27 | 6 | 3 |
| Michigan | 115 | 12 | 34 | 33 | 24 | 12 |
| Minnesota | 24 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 9 | 3 |
| Mississippi | 36 | 6 | 12 | 6 | 7 | 5 |
| Missouri | 93 | 33 | 32 | 16 | 8 | 4 |
| Montana | 9 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| Nebraska | 15 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| Nevada | 169 | 20 | 37 | 33 | 53 | 26 |
| New Hampshire | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| New Jersey | 167 | 48 | 33 | 20 | 35 | 31 |
| New Mexico | 144 | 16 | 37 | 33 | 23 | 35 |
| New York | 2,284 | 75 | 497 | 944 | 485 | 283 |
| North Carolina | 97 | 15 | 13 | 20 | 24 | 25 |
| North Dakota | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Ohio | 54 | 15 | 16 | 12 | 8 | 3 |
| Oklahoma | 64 | 23 | 18 | 12 | 7 | 4 |
| Oregon | 64 | 13 | 12 | 21 | 10 | 8 |
| Pennsylvania | 119 | 42 | 22 | 12 | 20 | 23 |
| Rhode Island | 5 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| South Carolina | 52 | 13 | 14 | 11 | 6 | 8 |
| South Dakota | 4 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Tennessee | 67 | 21 | 8 | 11 | 15 | 12 |
| Texas | 1,080 | 121 | 229 | 300 | 249 | 181 |
| Utah | 25 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 0 |
| Vermont | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Virginia | 47 | 24 | 12 | 5 | 5 | 1 |
| Washington | 89 | 24 | 33 | 14 | 15 | 3 |
| West Virginia | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Wisconsin | 23 | 7 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 1 |
| Wyoming | 12 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 |

Source: Data are from the CDC's National Death Index. These data were calculated by conducting a literal text field search on the first and last name categories of the NDI. The number of unidentified persons are annual estimates instead of true counts because of the criteria used to search the NDI.