

# OUTLOOK •

## DEATH IN CUSTODY, CALIFORNIA

Pursuant to Government Code Section 12525, the California Department of Justice has death in custody information since 1980. However, due to limited resources, an annual publication on this topic has not been possible. This report provides a brief overview of the facts regarding deaths in custody in California from 1994 through 2003, with a more detailed analysis for 2003. Areas discussed include: numbers of deaths in custody; a comparison of deaths in custody to those in the general public; differences between racial/ethnic groups; locations where the death occurred; causes of death; and a comparison between people arrested and those who died in custody.

### The number of deaths in custody increased each year from 1994 to 2003.

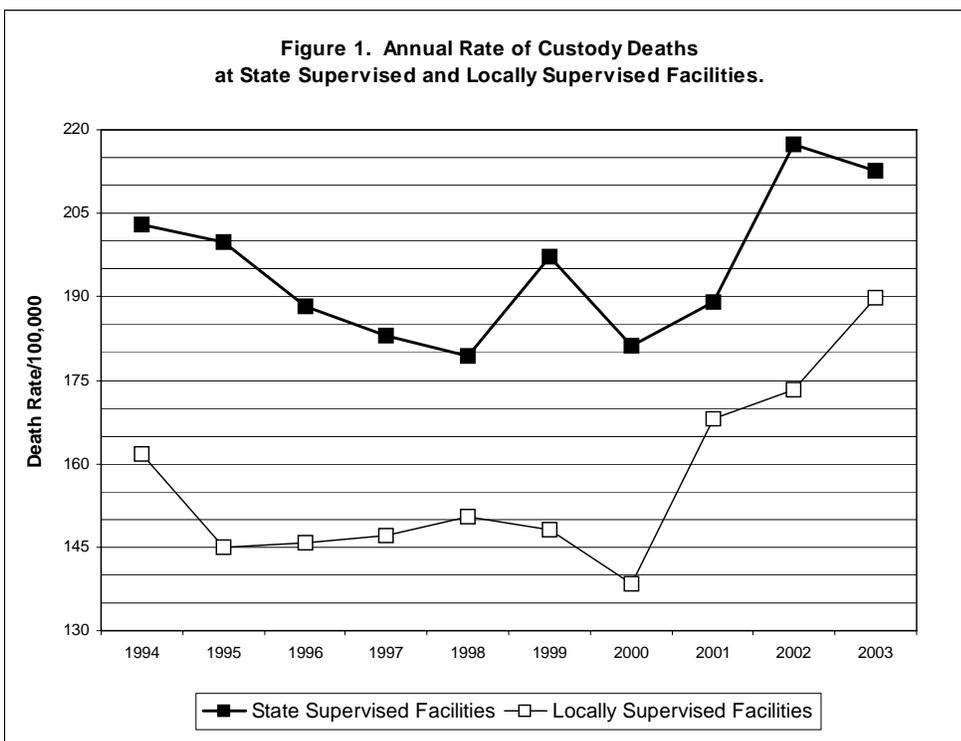
Between 1994 and 2003, 4,506 people died while in the custody of law enforcement. Specifically, the number of people who died in custody increased from 384 deaths in 1994 to 580 deaths in 2003. The largest yearly increase was 14.8 percent in 2001, followed by a 12.6 percent increase in 2000. The number of deaths each year, however, is only one measure of these events.

- ✓ From 1994 to 2003, custody deaths at state supervised facilities increased an average of 3.5 percent each year: 257 in 1994 to 344 in 2003.

### The rate of custody deaths decreased from 1994 to 2000 and then increased from 2000 to 2003.

The rate of custody deaths (deaths per 100,000 population) combines information on number of deaths and population and is therefore a better indicator of a trend in custody deaths.

At state supervised facilities, where 66.1 percent of all custody deaths occurred, this rate decreased from 203.0 in 1994 to 181.1 in 2000 and then increased to 212.6 in 2003 (Figure 1). At locally supervised facilities, where 26.0 percent of custody deaths occurred, there was a similar trend, with the rate of custody deaths decreasing from 161.8 in 1994 to 138.5 in 2000 and then



increasing to 189.9 in 2003 (Figure 1).

- ✓ From 1994 to 2003, inmate population at state supervised facilities increased an average of 2.8 percent per year: 126,605 in 1994 to 161,785 in 2003.
- ✓ The modal age of the population at state supervised facilities in 1994 was 25 to 34 years old and changed to 25 to 39 years old in 2003. However, from 1994 to 2003, the age range at which most custody deaths

occurred at state supervised facilities changed from the 30 to 34-year-old group in 1994 to the 45 to 49-year-old group in 2003.

**The rate of death was higher for 55 to 74-year-olds in custody compared to the general public.**

In the general public, any number of conditions affect the rate of death and the age at death. Being in custody, however, provides another set of conditions, which may either degrade or restore a person's health and well being and therefore further modify a person's life expectancy.

For people between 25 and 54 years old in 2001 (most current data available), the rate of death was similar at state supervised facilities and for the general public. However, for younger persons 15 to 24 years old, the rate of death was higher for the general public, and, for the 55 to 74 year-old age group, the death rate was higher at state supervised facilities.

As expected for the general public, the largest number of deaths occur at ages 75 to 84 years old. However, at state supervised facilities, the largest number of custody deaths occur at ages 45 to 54 years old.

**From 2000 to 2003, the rate of custody deaths for whites increased, while the rate for Hispanics and blacks remained the same.**

The rate of custody deaths for whites at state supervised facilities decreased from 284.3 in 1994 to 243.2 in 2000, then increased to 326.0 in 2003. However, during this time period, 1994-2003, the rate of custody deaths for blacks and Hispanics remained about the same, averaging, 197.9 for blacks and 125.1 for Hispanics.

**Fifty-five percent of custody deaths occurred in prison.**

In 2003, most custody deaths occurred in prison (55.0 percent), followed by county jails and adult camps/ranches (22.2 percent), a squad car, on a street or in a residence (15.7 percent), city jails (2.4 percent), state

and local hospitals (4.3 percent), and state and local juvenile facilities (0.3 percent) (Figure 2).

**Sixty-two percent of custody deaths were from natural causes.**

In 2003, causes of custody deaths were 61.9 percent natural causes, 13.1 percent suicide, 9.5 percent accidental, 7.8 percent justified homicide, and 2.9 percent other homicides (Figure 3).

**Most of the custody deaths at city jails, juvenile facilities, squad car, street or residence were not due to natural causes.**

From 1994 to 2003, the number of custody deaths due to natural causes was greater than other causes for both genders and each racial/ethnic group. During this period, custody deaths from natural causes were greater than other causes of death at prisons, county jails, adult camps/ranches, and state/local hospitals.

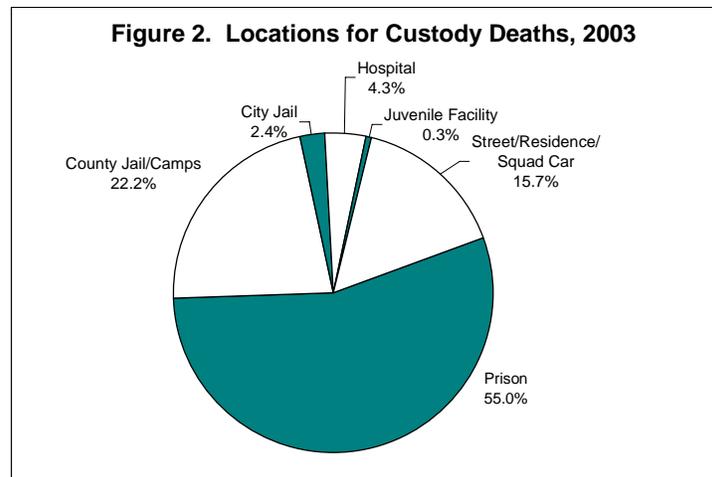
Conversely, custody deaths at city jails, state/local juvenile facilities, and in squad car/street/residence were greater for other than natural causes.

✓ From 1994 to 2003, the percentage of custody deaths due to natural causes was 73.0 percent for females and 70.2 percent for males.

✓ From 1994 to 2003, the percentage of custody deaths due to natural causes was 80.8 percent for blacks, 62.2 percent for Hispanics, 68.5 percent for whites, and 62.7 percent for other races.

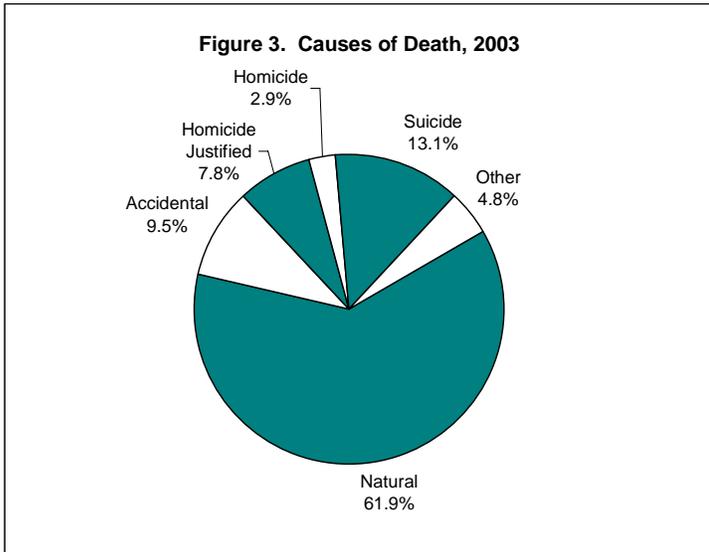
✓ From 1994 to 2003, most deaths in custody by natural causes were at prisons (83.5 percent), county jails and adult camps/ranches (58.6 percent), and state/local hospitals (81.1 percent). However, most custody deaths due to other than

natural causes occurred at city jails (81.7 percent), state/local juvenile facilities (75.0 percent), and in squad car/street/residence (85.8 percent).

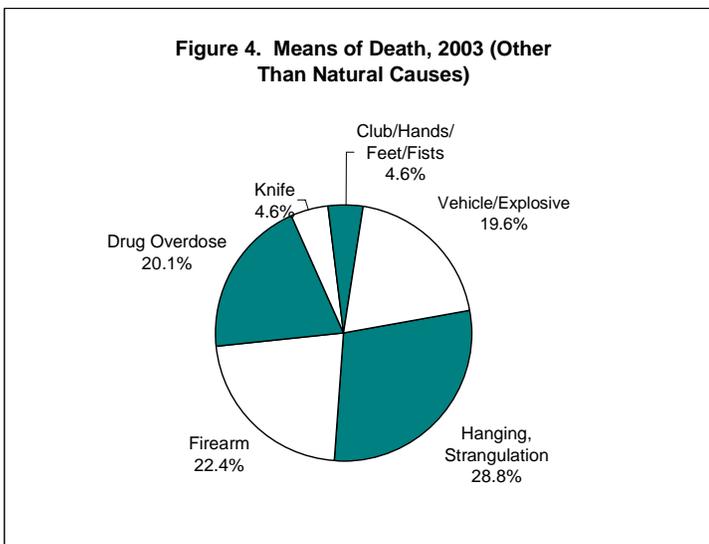


**Hanging and strangulation was most often the means of death for Hispanics and for whites who died from other than natural causes.**

In 2003, the most common means of death (excluding natural causes) was injury from hanging/strangulation-



tion followed by a firearm, drug overdose, and a vehicle or explosive, with equal numbers for a knife/cutting instrument, and club/blunt instrument or hands/feet/fists (Figure 4). From 1994 to 2003, most Hispanics, other



aces, and whites who died from other than natural causes died from hanging/strangulation. Most blacks died from injuries from a vehicle or explosive followed by equal numbers of deaths by hanging/strangulation, and drug overdose.

✓ In 2003, for other than natural causes, the means of death was usually hanging/strangulation (28.8

percent), firearm (22.4 percent), drug overdose (20.1 percent), vehicle or explosive (19.6 percent), knife/cutting instrument (4.6 percent), and club/blunt instrument or hands/feet/fists (4.6 percent) (Figure 4).

✓ From 1994 to 2003, for other than natural causes, most Hispanics (39.3 percent), other races (44.7 percent), and whites (45.6 percent) died from hanging/strangulation. Most blacks died from vehicle or explosive injuries (27.6 percent), followed by hanging/strangulation (25.2 percent) and drug overdose (24.8 percent).

**Males are dying in custody at a higher rate than females.**

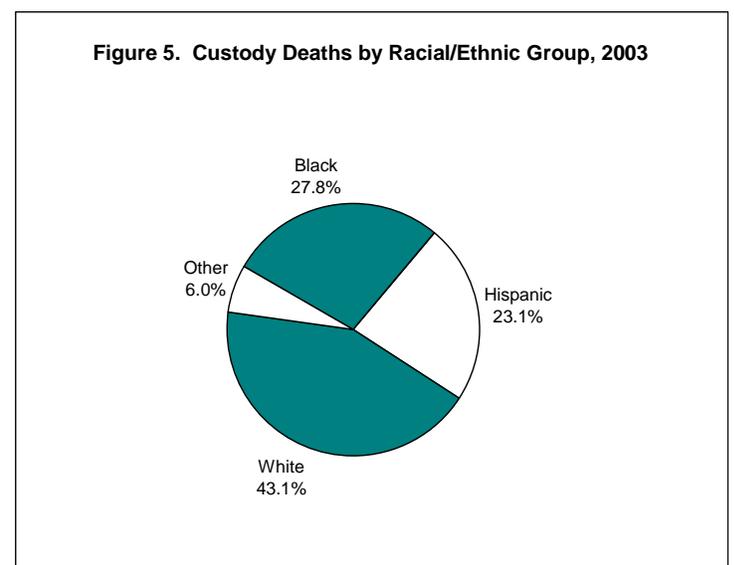
In 2003, males comprised the majority of both arrestees (79.0 percent) and custody deaths (93.8 percent). The larger proportion of male custody deaths suggests that males in custody are dying at a higher rate than females.

**Most arrestees were in the 15 to 24-year-old age group, yet most deaths in custody occurred in the 45 to 54-year-old age group.**

In 2003, most arrests consisted of Hispanics, followed by whites and blacks, yet most custody deaths consisted of whites, followed by blacks and Hispanics.

In 2003, most black, Hispanic, and white arrestees were between 15 and 24 years old. In addition, for blacks and whites, there was a second noticeable group arrested between 35 and 44 years old.

In 2003, most black, Hispanic, and white deaths in custody occurred for persons between 45 and 54 years



old. In addition, for Hispanics there was a second noticeable group of death in custody for persons between 25 and 34 years old.

- ✓ In 2003, most deaths in custody consisted of whites (43.1 percent), followed by blacks (27.8 percent), Hispanics (23.1 percent), and other races (6.0 percent) (Figure 5).
- ✓ In 2003, most arrestees consisted of Hispanics (40.0 percent), followed by whites (35.9 percent), blacks (16.6 percent), and other races (7.6 percent).

#### **Additional research needs to be done.**

This Outlook was intended as a brief overview of death in custody in California. Additional detailed research could be done if resources were available.

Example research topics include:

- ✓ A study which uses rate of custody death to investigate significant differences in location of fatal injury, cause of death, and means of death in terms of gender, age, and race/ethnic group.
- ✓ A study to investigate significant differences between people arrested, people in custody and deaths in custody in terms of gender, age and race/ethnic group.

#### **Definitions**

*Custody* is defined as any point in time when a person's freedom of movement has been denied by law enforcement, such as during transport prior to booking, or during arrest, prosecution, sentencing, and correctional confinement.

This *Outlook* was authored by Robert R. Springborn, Ph.D. For any questions or feedback you may have regarding this report's contents, Dr. Springborn can be reached at (916) 227-3557. If you need assistance in obtaining additional statistical information or a customized statistical report, please contact the CJSC's Special Requests Unit at (916) 227-3509.

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