

Death and Dying in the Nineteenth Century South

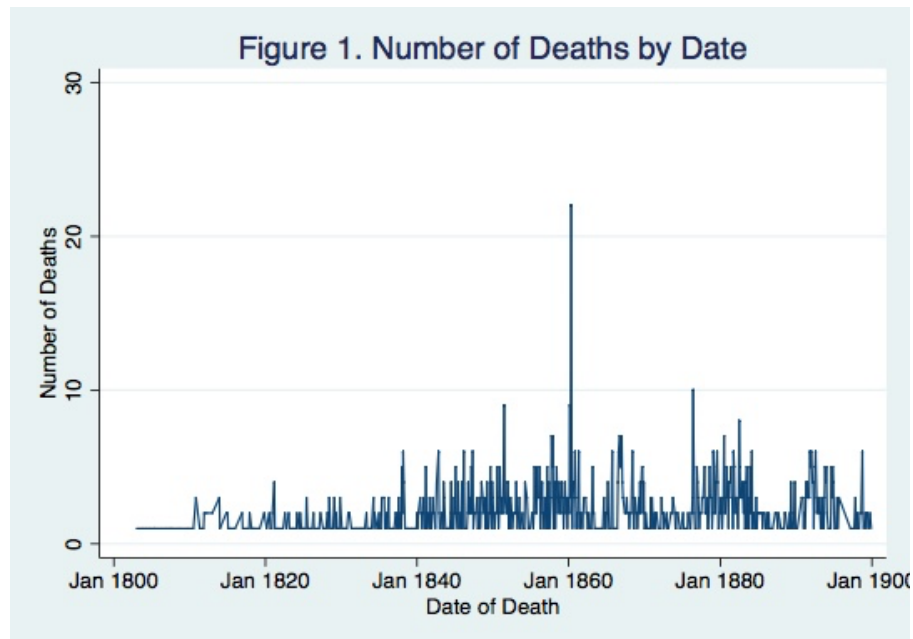
In the past several years, a growing body of research emerged focused on connecting historical legacies of enslavement and racial violence to contemporary outcomes (e.g., Acharya et al. 2018; Cook, et al. 2018; Petersen and Ward 2015; Durso and Jacobs 2013; Jacobs et al. 2012; DeFina & Hannon 2011; Cunningham & Phillips 2007). Historical considerations of race-related violence tend to focus on limited cases of extreme violence (e.g., public lynching) and would be improved by developing a broader and refined understanding of historical violence, including patterns of mortality. Further, analyzing data on death and dying in the nineteenth century, for instance, provides an opportunity to assess mortality differences by categories such as gender, race, location, and enslavement status, and how these vary by place. Although historians have documented and contextualized the violence of the Antebellum and PostBellum Periods (DuBois 1935; Litwack 1999; Mustakeem 2016), and social scientists have traced these histories to contemporary outcomes (see Ward 2016), few demographers have contributed to this work (e.g., Cook, et al. 2018; Bailey and Tolnay 2015).

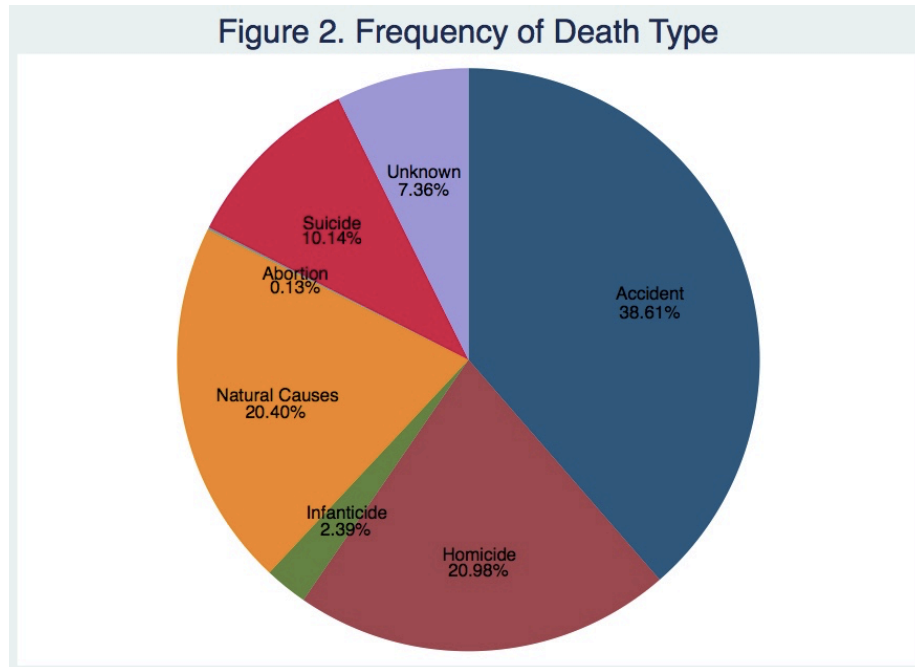
Using comprehensive historical data from the *CSI: Dixie* project, we provide a demographic snapshot of mortality in the nineteenth century south by race, gender, location, and enslavement status. We examine questions such as how did people die, how did slave deaths differ from those of free persons, and were there spatial or other concentrations of interpersonal and lethal violence? This paper is the first use of the publically-available *CSI: Dixie* project data, an extensive collection effort undertaken by the Center for Virtual History at the University of Georgia. The data were collected using an underutilized source: coroner's inquests. These primary documents detail the who, what, when, where, and how of death and dying and were hand coded to produce a rich data set that includes dates, counts, methods, location and types of deaths as well as coroner's identifying information and narrative accounts. Table 1 shows the extensiveness of the data, capturing 1,583 deaths from January 3, 1803 to December 11, 1899 across 6 South Carolina counties (Anderson, Edgefield, Greenville, Kershaw, Spartanburg, and Union). While these are official death record data, our research will also critically assess their reliability and validity. For example, we will examine variation in reported causes of death by coroner, as coroner bias may influence variation in accounts of enslaved deaths by plantation, or periods and features of reporting.

We analyze the data to provide a picture of death and dying in a southern state in the nineteenth century. This paper provides not only unique opportunities to make sense of when and how people die, but also to gain insight on more complex topics like murders of enslaved people, which may aid in advancing research on legacies of enslavement and other historical racial violence. Figure 1 shows the number of documented deaths across this time period (1803-1899), showing higher death periods, such as a mass drowning that occurred in February 1860. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of type of death during this period. Preliminary analysis indicates that

“accidents” account for a large portion of the data (39%), driven by types of deaths such as accidental drownings, deaths influenced by alcohol consumption, and assorted transportation-based accidents such as being thrown from a horse. There were also a large proportion of deaths by homicide (21%), skewed heavily towards death by firearm (52%) of males (88%) (CSI: Dixie).

Inquest data provide detail regarding circumstances of death with a significant portion of deaths committed at the hands of enslavers, but also many murders involving enslaved perpetrators and victims, a poorly understood phenomenon. We will examine how these and other patterns vary by demographic features to show the inequality in death in the nineteenth century south. Because we can also link Coroner data to each death, we also have the opportunity to understand variation in documentation of deaths across geographic areas. Following recent work on racialized enforcement networks in the South (Owens, Cunningham, and Ward 2015), we will examine how both inter-county variation in tolerance for vigilantism and the social locations of individual coroners can produce differing incentives around the reporting of deaths (e.g. as “accidents” rather than homicides). We can also link additional census data to place of death to further explore features of the social environment potentially driving disparities in deaths and cause of death. We will demonstrate the empirical truth in the statement that, “As mortals, we all die, but we do not die equally” (CSI: Dixie). Our longer-term objective is to use these analyses in modeling more refined considerations of legacies of area enslavement for subsequent patterns of racialized violence (e.g., lynching), and contemporary violence and inequality, including health disparities.





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