

# Understanding the Numbers: Provisional Death Counts and COVID-19

*Provisional death counts deliver the most comprehensive picture of lives lost to COVID-19. These estimates are based on incoming death certificates, which are the most reliable source of death data and contain information not available anywhere else, including information about the place of death, other causes that contributed to the death, and race and ethnicity.*

## How it works

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) uses data from death certificates, which are sent to NCHS daily, to produce provisional COVID-19 death counts. These include deaths occurring within the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

NCHS also provides summaries that examine deaths in specific categories and in greater geographic detail, such as deaths by county or by race and Hispanic origin.

**COVID-19 deaths are identified using a new ICD-10 code.** When COVID-19 is reported as a cause of death – or when it is listed as a “probable” or “presumed” cause – anywhere on the death certificate, the death is coded as **U07.1**. This can include cases with or without laboratory confirmation.

## Why these numbers are different than counts from other sources

Provisional death counts may not match counts from other sources, such as media reports or numbers from county health departments. Our counts often track 1-2 weeks behind other data because:

- **Death certificates take time to be completed.** There are many steps to filling out and submitting a death certificate. Waiting for test results can create additional delays.
- **States report at different rates.** Currently, 63% of all U.S. deaths are reported to NCHS within 10 days of the date of death, but there is significant variation between states.
- **It takes extra time to code COVID-19 deaths.** While 80% of death records are processed and coded electronically at NCHS within minutes, most deaths from COVID-19 cannot be coded electronically and must be coded by a person, which takes an average of 7 days.
- **Other reporting systems use different definitions or methods for counting deaths.**

## Things to know about the data

**Provisional counts are not final and are subject to change.** Counts from previous weeks are continually revised as more records are received and processed.

**Provisional data are not yet complete.** Counts will not include all deaths that occurred during a given time period, especially for more recent periods. However, the completeness of the data can be estimated by examining the average number of deaths reported in previous years.

**Death counts should not be compared across states.** Some states report deaths to NCHS on a daily basis, while other states report deaths weekly or monthly. State vital record reporting may also be affected or delayed by COVID-19 response activities.

To view the provisional death counts or for more detailed technical information, visit our [Provisional Death Counts for Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\)](#) page.



Centers for Disease Control  
and Prevention  
National Center for Health Statistics