



County Coroners and Death Investigations

June 2023

Background

Idaho's death investigation system includes city police, physicians, the court system, and county-level officials such as coroners, sheriffs, and prosecutors. When a death occurs without a physician present, county coroners have the primary authority and responsibility to investigate the death and determine its cause. This evaluation will focus on the role of county coroners.

Statute directs coroners and their deputies to investigate deaths that occur as a result of violence, have unknown or suspicious circumstances, or involve a child without a known medical disease.¹ Investigations may include performing autopsies, collecting evidence, and interviewing witnesses. Reports generated from death investigations can be used in criminal cases, civil lawsuits, and insurance claims.

Coroners are county-level elected officials who are at least 21 years of age, have resided for at least one year in the county in which they serve, and hold office for a period of four years. Since 2010, Idaho Code has required newly elected coroners attend "coroner's school" and complete 24 hours of continuing education every other year they are in office.²

In recent years, high-profile legal cases have highlighted potential problems with Idaho's coroner and death investigation systems. The requesters of this evaluation raised concerns that the lack of standardization in coroner training and certification requirements may lead to a fragmented and inconsistent approach to death investigations throughout the state.

Requesters also noted that constraints on county coroners, such as limited funding or access to forensic pathology labs, may hinder the ability of coroners to adequately conduct death investigations.

Scope

This evaluation will focus on the following objectives:

- discuss the role of county coroners in the death investigation system in Idaho, as well as the state's role in facilitation, regulation, and oversight of coroners and death investigations;
- identify limitations, shortcomings, or deficiencies in the current death investigation system;
- assess county and state spending on coroners and death investigation systems, exploring alternative models from other states for improved service or cost efficiency; and
- identify what Idaho can do to ensure that death investigations are conducted in a uniform and sufficient manner.

Projected completion date: 2024 legislative session

1. Idaho Code § 19-4301

2. Idaho Code §§ 34-622(5), 31-2810