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THE MILLENNIUM DEATH SPIKE

BYLINE: Dawn Fallik Of The Post-Dispatch

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* The period between Dec. 30, 1999, through Jan. 5, 2000, saw a sharp rise in the number of deaths in Missouri. Did the rollover of the century and millennium play a part? Experts have theories, but no definite explanations, for these grave statistics.

For millions of people, the procession from 1999 to 2000 was a time of excitement, a cause for celebration and a reason to look forward. But that one week spanning the old to the new was deadly for Missourians.

In what one professor called a "millennium death spike," the state had its four most deadly days from Dec. 30, 1999, through Jan. 5, 2000. No one knows why.

According to newly released vital statistics data, the average 1999 death rate was 157 people per day. But during those seven deadly days, it jumped by 42 percent to an average of 222 deaths per day, Missouri Department of Health records show.

January typically has the most deaths, but that first month of 2000 had the highest number of fatalities -- 6,144 -- of any month during the past two decades. And that last day of the death spike, Jan. 5, had 236 recorded deaths, the most on any single day in Missouri.

Illinois does not make public its individual death certificates, but officials there said that the state did not have an unusually high number of deaths during the Christmas 1999 season compared to previous years. Illinois had not completed processing the state's 2000 numbers; however, officials said the highest death day in 1999 was Dec. 27.

Some states, such as Minnesota, showed a fatality increase around New Year's Eve, but not to Missouri's extent. But others, such as Colorado and Rhode Island, showed no increase at all over previous years.

Many theories, no answers

Psychologists, sociologists and cardiologists offered many theories about Missouri's millennium fatalities (although some maintain the century and millennium ended Dec. 31, 2000). But no one knows for sure why so many deaths occurred during that holiday period.

It wasn't the cold -- the entire week's highs were above freezing, and five of the seven days hit 45 degrees and above.

It wasn't suicides -- there were 16, just five more than in previous years.

It wasn't teen-agers in traffic accidents, although that happened, too. The average age of the deceased that week was 77, and the most common cause of death was heart attack or heart disease.

"Maybe there was just too much partying. Or maybe there were people saying 'I'm going to make it through that damn millennium, and then I'll die,'" said Dr. Robert Kloner, director of research at The Heart Institute, Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles.

He also said that the fear of a new century might have had an impact, although he doesn't know anyone who literally was "scared to death."

Early deaths defy predictions

The upward Missouri mortality rate right before Jan. 1, 2000 particularly frustrates researchers nationwide, who had predicted the elderly and the ill would hold on to see the new year.

But the opposite occurred.

Instead of a sharp drop right before the turn of the century, New Year's Eve 1999 had the second-highest fatality count in Missouri in 20 years with 235 deaths. This was not a pattern mirrored by the previous or following year: Dec. 31, 1998, had 177 deaths, and Dec. 31, 2000, had 158 deaths.

Some had more reason to live than others. Erma Rattling of St. Louis was 81 when she died on New Year's Eve 1999. She and her husband, Andrew Rattling, 88, had been married 37 years when she died.

A housewife who loved her gardens and her long baths, she had been ill for some time. After her death, her husband learned to garden so he could keep up the flower beds she loved so.

"She loved the flowers, and I learned from her; you learn things together," he said. The two met at the Memorial Baptist Church while she worked at a beauty salon.

"Now I keep the whole thing up myself," Rattling said, referring to her gardens. "There are stands all over the house. I haven't thrown away a single pot."

The holidays are now a hard time for Rattling. The couple had no children, but there are several "adopted" children who drop by and help Rattling around the house.

"New Year's Eve is kind of hard. But you go ahead and live with it because you don't have any choice," he said. "When you're with someone 37 years there's no replacement."

Which was the milestone?

Christmas or New Year's?

One professor believes that, particularly in St. Louis, the fact that people died around the turn of the new century is not the point. It's that they lived through Christmas.

"About 20 years ago, there was a study and it found that people, especially older people, very often had target dates of their death," said Dennis Klass, professor of religious studies at Webster University. "While the theory would indicate that people would aim to die the week after New Year's,

in a town like St. Louis, the importance maybe isn't New Year's, it's Christmas."

That certainly rings true for Cathy Czarnecki of Dorsey, Ill. Her mother, Freda Card, of Alton, died on Jan. 5, 2000 -- her husband's birthday. He, too, is deceased. The property the couple's beloved house sat on was purchased by the state for a highway, so Czarnecki and her siblings bought the house and then moved it -- very slowly -- to her sister's bean field. It sits there now, awaiting a foundation.

Czarnecki said that Christmas was the last really good day the family had with her mother.

"It was really kind of surprising, she was feeling a lot better that day. We were all together at my brother and sister's," she said. "She was in really good spirits, and we all sat and visited and ate. We had a really good Christmas."

She hopes that the new foundation will be in place by December so that the family can once again celebrate Christmas in her parents' house.

The connection between holidays and deaths isn't particularly new. David Phillips, a sociologist for the University of California at San Diego, did a study that showed people can set target death dates for themselves -- holidays, birthdays and special events, like a loved one's birthday.

One of his studies focused on Jewish men in California. He found that death rates declined in the week before Passover but rose to a six-month high the week after.

Back in 1999, he predicted that deaths would rise just after the new century, expecting that people would will themselves through the first day of 2000.

So he was surprised to hear that Missouri deaths started several days before the turn of the century.

Phillips said that older people or those who are ill will set target dates for their deaths, and that could be a factor in the higher death rate.

"A holiday or a symbolic event can serve as a deadline or a lifeline. They'll say 'I'll never make it to my 'X' birthday or I'll never make it to the new millennium,'" he said. "Other people use it as a lifeline. They'll say 'I'm determined to make it.' That's why there's an increase (in deaths) right after the event."

Holiday stress could be factor

Officials said holidays tend to bring on more of everything that could be death factors: stress, eating, drinking and travel.

"There is always holiday stress every year. You could argue that this particular year was more stressful, and that's why there was this millennium death spike, but I don't know how to show if that's accurate," said Paul Handel, psychology professor at St. Louis University.

Kloner, from Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, found in a 1999 study that California deaths from heart attacks started to rise after Thanksgiving, through Christmas and peaked around the New Year.

While researchers suggested that weather might be a factor, they said that food and alcohol intake

could be a controllable factor. Studies have shown that heavy meals can trigger heart attacks.

"People party more, they take in more salt, they eat more," Kloner said.

They also stay out later, going to parties and chatting with friends.

Craig Westhoff, of Old Monroe, was only 19 when he fell asleep at the wheel of his car in the early morning hours of Dec. 31, 1999. His father, Neal Westhoff, said his son had been out with friends at a party the night before, and was simply too tired to drive and too bull-headed not to.

Craig had moved out of his parents' house to an apartment just a few miles down the road only a few months earlier, after securing his first full-time job with a plumbing company. That Christmas, Craig reveled in giving his parents, his two brothers and his sister special presents, including a VCR.

The police officer knocked on the door at 5 a.m., Westhoff was just getting ready to go out to the fields.

"He asked, 'Was Craig Westhoff my son?'" he said. "It hits you pretty hard."

The family leaned on their faith to help them through their son's death and through the holidays.

"He was only a few miles from his new place," said his dad. "We were closer. If he had only come home, he'd have made it."

The fear factor

While there is no cause of death specifically attributed to being scared, Kloner said that fear does have an effect. He found that heart attacks in Los Angeles dramatically increased during and after an earthquake several years ago.

Jack Kamerman, a professor at Kean University in New Jersey, said that stress levels particularly increased for older folks as the calendar changed from 1999 to 2000. "There was a lot of general agitation around the new millennium, just the hype of the whole thing. Everyone was paranoid about the Y2K problem that never happened," he said. "The younger people, when they heard the lights might go off, they probably thought 'This is a great adventure.' But if you're in your 80s or 90s and threatened with that, it's a life-threatening problem."

He also pointed out that staff levels in nursing homes and other senior-care facilities might have dropped due to the holiday.

"If you look at people, age 90, 100, see what circumstances they were living under, where they living in institutions. I bet care went to hell in institutions that night (New Year's Eve 1999) and the week before," he said.

Death facts

The top 10 death dates in Missouri, ranked by number:

Date	Deaths
Jan. 5, 2000	236

Dec. 31, 1999 235

Dec. 30, 1999 230

Jan. 3, 2000 229

Jan. 10, 1994 222

Jan. 4, 1997 222

Jan. 1, 2000 221

Jan. 6, 2000 221

Jan. 11, 2000 220

Jan. 1, 1997 219

Average age of death:

1998: 76

1999: 78

2000: 77

The Missouri death spike

Date	Number Dead
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12/30/99	230
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12/31/99	235
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01/01/00	221
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01/02/00	211
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01/03/00	229
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01/04/00	195
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01/05/00	236
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Source: Missouri Department of Health

Deaths per day of the week:

2000	1999
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Saturday: 8,165 Friday: 8,438

Sunday: 8,145 Saturday: 8,418
Monday: 8,144 Thursday: 8,217
Tuesday: 8,037 Monday: 8,211
Thursday: 8,005 Wednesday: 8,193

Friday: 7,991 Tuesday: 8,138
Wednesday: 7,908 Sunday: 8,006

Total: 56,395 Total: 57,621

Source: Missouri Department of Health, U.S. Census Bureau

PERSON: ANDREW RATTLING (68%);

COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (99%);

STATE: MISSOURI, USA (99%); ILLINOIS, USA (93%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%);

CITY: SAINT LOUIS, MO, USA (58%);

SUBJECT: DEATH; STATISTIC; CAR; MORTALITY; DATE; TIME DEATHS & DEATH RATES (92%); MILLENNIUM (90%); HOLIDAYS & OBSERVANCES (89%); SUICIDE (78%); CHRISTMAS (78%); PUBLIC HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (75%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (73%); MEDICAL RECORDS (68%); TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS (67%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (64%); DISEASES & DISORDERS (63%); PSYCHOLOGY (62%); CARDIOLOGY (62%); SOCIOLOGY (62%); ANDREW RATTLING (68%); DEATHS & DEATH RATES (92%); MILLENNIUM (90%); HOLIDAYS & OBSERVANCES (89%); SUICIDE (78%); CHRISTMAS (78%); PUBLIC HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (75%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (73%); MEDICAL RECORDS (68%); TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS (67%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (64%); DISEASES & DISORDERS (63%); PSYCHOLOGY (62%); CARDIOLOGY (62%); SOCIOLOGY (62%);

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO, GRAPHIC; (4) 2001 Color Graphic FILED: Deaths (COLOR) tms; COLOR PHOTOS BY ROBERT COHEN / Post-Dispatch; (1) Phillip Ramos, 4, plays hide-and-peek in a soybean field in Illinois where his great-grandmother's home was moved to make way for highway expansion. The family of Freda Card of Alton, who died Jan. 5, 2000, at 82, didn't want to see the house demolished so they moved it to the property of Freda Maher, one of Card's daughters.; (2) TOP: The grave marker of Dexter and Lowell McCracken of Godfrey. Dexter died Dec. 30, 1999, and her husband died Jan. 2, 2000.; (3) Andrew Rattling, 88, looks after his wife's flower garden at his home on Dressell Avenue in St. Louis. Rattling tends to the flowers daily in memory of his wife,

Erma, who died on New Year's Eve 1999.; (4) Color Graphic / Chart by Post-Dispatch - Deaths in Missouri; December 1999 through December 2000; Researchers are puzzled by the large increase in fatalities from Dec. 30, 1999, through Jan. 5, 2000. That week had four of Missouri's most fatal days in the past 20 years.

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