

# Bodies stack up as California counts cost of funerals

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Jul 24 04:41 AM US/Eastern

Bodies left unclaimed, cadavers stacked high in morgues and burial rates tumbling as loved ones cut funeral costs: the crippling recession is even haunting the dead across the [United States](#).

In [Los Angeles](#), the local coroner's office has witnessed an unprecedented spike in the number of corpses unclaimed by families who cannot afford the costs of a burial or cremation.

"The reason we are hearing from the families is the economic downturn," Los Angeles County Coroner's chief investigator [Craig Harvey](#) told AFP. "They tell us they don't have the means to afford funerals."

In the past 12 months, the coroner's office, which is responsible for handling bodies from homicides and suspicious deaths, carried out 36 percent more cremations than the previous year, jumping to 712 from 525. At the Los Angeles County morgue meanwhile, the cremation figure rose by 25 percent.

Cremations are usually carried out around one month [after death](#) if no-one from the deceased's family comes forward to claim the body. The ashes are then stored for two to three years before being dispersed in a communal grave.

Simply claiming a body from the county costs 200 dollars and can run up to 452 if the deceased has been cremated.

A private cremation can cost up to 1,000 dollars while the average price of a funeral weighs in at around 7,300 dollars, according to the [National Funeral Directors Association](#) (NFDA).

While the recession is by no means the first that [California](#) has had to weather over the years, Harvey said he has never known previous downturns to impact the workings of the coroner's office and morgues as severely.

"It seems that this crisis has hit a greater number of people," he told AFP.

While the overwhelming majority of deceased people in the United States -- 2.4 million in 2007 -- continue to be laid to rest in traditional funerals, many families are shaving costs from ceremonies.

"We did a survey among our members, earlier this year, and most definitely reported that families were making different choices regarding funerals, because of the economic downturn, choosing less expensive caskets and urns," said [Jessica Koth](#), a spokeswoman for the [NFDA](#).

Families are also saving costs by cutting back on expenses like [flowers](#) and opting to hold shorter, less elaborate funeral services, Koth added.

At the same time, the long-term trend of families opting for less-expensive cremations instead of burials has continued to rise.

The NFDA said cremations accounted for 35 percent of funerals in 2007, compared to 23.6 percent a decade earlier. Koth noted however that cremations have risen steadily since the 1960s and was cautious about whether the most recent increases could be attributed to the economy.

"Cremations have increased every year since the '60s, but it's pretty difficult to say whether the increase we are seeing now is due to economy or natural expansion since the last 40 years," Koth said.

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