

Unburied bodies tell the tale of Detroit — a city in despair

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Tim Reid in Detroit

The abandoned corpses, in white body bags with number tags tied to each toe, lie one above the other on steel racks inside a giant freezer in Detroit's central mortuary, like discarded shoes in the back of a wardrobe.

Some have lain here for years, but in recent months the number of unclaimed bodies has reached a record high. For in this city that once symbolised the American Dream many cannot even afford to bury their dead.

"I have not seen this many unclaimed bodies in 13 years on the job," said Albert Samuels, chief investigator at the mortuary. "It started happening when the economy went south last year. I have never seen this many people struggling to give people their last resting place."

Unburied bodies piling up in the city mortuary — it reached 70 earlier this year — is the latest and perhaps most appalling indignity to be heaped on the people of Detroit. The motor city that once boasted the highest median income and home ownership rate in the US is today in the midst of a long and agonising death spiral.

After years of gross mismanagement by the city's leaders and the big three car manufacturers of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, who continued to make vehicles that Americans no longer wanted to buy, Detroit today has an unemployment rate of 28 per cent, higher even than the worst years of the Great Depression.

The murder rate is soaring. The school system is in receivership. The city treasury is \$300 million (£182m) short of the funds needed to provide the most basic services such as rubbish collection. In its postwar heyday, when Detroit helped the US to dominate the world's car market, it had 1.85 million people. Today, just over 900,000 remain. It was once America's fourth-largest city. Today, it ranks eleventh, and will continue to fall.

Thousands of houses are abandoned, roofs ripped off, windows smashed. Block after block of shopping districts lie boarded up. Former manufacturing plants, such as the giant Fisher body plant that made Buicks and Cadillacs, but which was abandoned in 1991, are rotting.

Even Detroit's NFL football team, the Lions, are one of the worst in the country. Last season they lost all 16 games. This year they have lost eight, and won just a single game.

Michigan's Central Station, designed by the same people who gave New York its Grand Central Station, was abandoned 20 years ago. One photographer who produced a series of images for *Time* magazine said that he often felt, as he moved around parts of Detroit, as though he was in a post-apocalyptic disaster.

Then in June, the \$21,000 annual county budget to bury Detroit's unclaimed bodies ran out. Until then, if a family confirmed that they could not afford to lay a loved one to rest, Wayne County — in which Detroit sits — would, for \$700, bury the body in a rough pine casket at a nearby cemetery, under a marker.

Darrell Vickers had to identify his aunt at the mortuary in September but he could not afford to bury her as he was unemployed. When his grandmother recently died, Mr Vickers's father paid for her cremation, but with a credit card at 21 per cent interest. He said at the time it was "devastating" to not be able to bury his aunt.

What has alarmed medical examiners at the mortuary is that most of the dead died of natural causes. It is evidence, they believe, of people who could not afford medical insurance and medicines and whose families can now not afford to bury them.

Yet in recent weeks there have been signs of hope for Mr Samuels that he can reduce the backlog of bodies. Local philanthropists have donated \$8,000 to help to bury the dead. In the past month, Mr Samuels has been able to bury 11 people. The number of unburied is now down to 55.

