

The count is still *coming in*

One mechanism of official statistics — why recent mortality, birth, and health figures are provisional, and why comparing incomplete data to complete data invents a discrepancy.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to the official statistics the government publishes — jobs, prices, crime, output, deaths — the numbers themselves and the way they are read, examined the same way regardless of which party the figure happens to help or hurt. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with agency methodology, official records, and nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS — OFFICIAL DATA REPORTING

- | | |
|--|--|
| 01 Seasonal Adjustment Mistaken for Manipulation | 02 Preliminary Estimate vs. Revised Figure |
| 03 Nominal vs. Real (Inflation-Adjusted) | 04 Headline Rate vs. Broader Measures |
| 05 Disinflation vs. Deflation | 06 Reported Crime vs. Victimization Survey |
| 07 Base-Period Switching | 08 Per Capita vs. Absolute Counts |
| 09 Point Estimate vs. Sampling Error | 10 Methodology Change Framed as Fudging |
| 11 Provisional vs. Final Data | 12 Index Construction |

Provisional vs. Final Data

Nondum Completum

Governing precedent / case CDC provisional vital statistics Status Recurring for all recent-period data

OBSERVED SPECIMEN	CDC PROVISIONAL MORTALITY AND NATALITY RELEASES
Death and birth records take months to be reported, coded, and finalized, so the most recent figures are marked provisional and rise as records arrive. A recent month or year will show fewer deaths simply because its data are not yet complete. Setting a still-filling provisional period beside a finalized earlier one produces a “drop” that is an artifact of reporting lag, not a real decline — and, read the other way, a later upward revision looks like the count being “quietly raised.”	

THE HOOK	THE MECHANISM
A recent, incomplete count is compared to a finalized one, so the lag looks like a real difference.	Vital statistics are released as provisional and revised toward final as death and birth certificates are received and coded; completeness varies by how recent the period is.

Field mark: when recent counts look low, check whether the data are labeled ‘provisional’ — a recent period is still filling in, so a comparison to finalized data manufactures a drop.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

AGENCY DATA · CDC

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, NCHS, “Provisional Mortality Statistics” (WONDER) with completeness notes.

<https://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd.html>

CDC's provisional mortality data, explicitly labeled and revised toward final as records arrive.

AGENCY REFERENCE · CDC

National Center for Health Statistics, “Technical Notes on provisional vs. final vital statistics.”

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/>

NCHS documentation of the provisional-to-final revision process and reporting lag.

Reading a Recent Count: A Gut Check

four questions before a low recent figure convinces you something changed

1 Check the label

Recent vital data are marked ‘provisional’ and will rise.

2 Mind the lag

Reporting and coding take months; recent periods are undercounts.

3 Do not compare across completeness

Provisional vs. final is not a like-for-like comparison.

4 Expect upward revision

A later increase is records arriving, not a quiet edit.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 11 of the Official Data Reporting section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins Elections and Federal Laws within Civics, with local government and institutional communications planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.