

Suggested citation: National Center for Health Statistics. Office of Analysis and Epidemiology, The Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III) Linked Mortality File, Mortality follow-up through 2006: Matching Methodology May 2009. Hyattsville, Maryland. (Available at the following address: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/datalinkage/matching_methodology_nhanes3_final.pdf)

The Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III) Linked Mortality File: Mortality follow-up through 2006

Matching Methodology

Introduction

The NHANES III Linked Mortality File contains mortality follow-up data for [NHANES III survey](#) participants (1988-1994) through December 31, 2006. This is the second mortality follow-up of the NHANES III survey participants. The previous NHANES III Linked Mortality File provided mortality data through December 21, 2000. Mortality status is ascertained primarily through probabilistic record matching with the [National Death Index \(NDI\)](#). NCHS employed a matching methodology for the NHANES III Linked Mortality File that is similar, but not identical, to the standard methodology offered by the NDI. However other sources of mortality information may be utilized to determine vital status¹. The updated mortality file provides the opportunity to conduct a vast array of outcome studies designed to investigate the association of a wide variety of health and risk factors with mortality.

Changes from first release

This updated version of the NHANES III Linked Mortality File is different from the previous version in several ways: (1) eligible participants have death information added for six additional years of mortality follow-up; (2) eligibility to link to the NDI has been expanded to include children; and (3) several minor modifications have been made to the matching algorithm which may lead to differences in eligibility status, vital status, or death information from the previous version. The updated NHANES III Linked Mortality File supersedes the previous linkage of the NHANES III to the NDI.

The National Death Index Matching Algorithm

The NDI is a NCHS centralized database of all U.S. deaths beginning in 1979 that is used to match a NCHS survey record to a NDI record of death according to NDI matching criteria. The NDI contains the following identifying information for each death, which are used for matching purposes:

- Social Security Number
- First name
- Middle initial
- Last name
- Month of birth
- Day of birth
- Year of birth
- Sex
- Father's surname
- State of birth
- Race
- State of residence

¹ Please refer to the information on mortality source in the [Analytic Guidelines](#).

State of birth
Marital status

NCHS prepares records² of the survey participant based upon these identifiers that are submitted to the NDI and used in the matching process. NHANES III collected all of the data items used by the NDI for matching ([Table 1](#)). Before the NDI processes any submission record, each record is screened to determine if it contains at least one of the following combinations of identifying data elements:

1. Social Security number, sex, full date of birth present
2. Last name, first initial, month of birth, year of birth present
3. Last name, first initial, Social Security number present

Any survey participant submission record that did not meet these minimum data requirements was ineligible for record linkage. [Table 2](#) lists the number of survey participants and eligibility status. The NDI system selects death record matches based on a set of established match criteria. The seven criteria listed below were the criteria in use at the time of the NHANES III-NDI match.

1. Social Security Number
2. First and last name, exact month of birth, year of birth within 1 year
3. Last name, first initial and middle initial, exact month of birth, year of birth within 1 year
4. First and last name, exact month of birth, exact day of birth
5. Last name, first initial and middle initial, exact month of birth, exact day of birth
6. First name, father's surname, exact month of birth, exact year of birth
7. For females only, first name, exact month and year of birth, and last name from the user's record matching birth surname on the NDI record (for females who change their name after marriage, but don't supply a birth surname)

Agreement on names may be based upon exact spelling matches or, since spelling variants of names are common, based upon the way a name sounds rather than how it is spelled³. Any NDI record that matches a NHANES III submission record on any one of these seven criteria is selected as a potential match. As one or more NDI records may be matched to a given NHANES III submission record, the NDI record selection process can return several potential matches for each NHANES III person, many of which will be non-matches or duplicate records. Users interested in a detailed description of the standard NDI matching methodology should refer to the NDI.

² The NDI allows multiple submission records for each survey participant and NDI records can be matched to any or all of the submission records created for a survey participant. [Appendix A](#) describes scenarios under which NCHS generates alternate submission records.

³ The sound alike system is a variation of the New York State Identification Intelligence System or NYSIIS, which converts a name to a phonetic coding. For example, records with last names Smith and Smyth receive equivalent NYSIIS codes and both would be selected as a potential match for a NHANES III submission with Smith (or Smyth) as a last name.

Scoring and classifying potential match records

As previously described, there are seven ways that a NHANES III survey participant submission record may match to a NDI record. For each potential match, the NDI provides a code indicating whether there is agreement, disagreement, or no basis for comparison for each identifier. NCHS assigns a score to each potential match reflecting the degree of agreement between the identifying information on the NHANES III submission record and the NDI death record. The score is based upon probabilistic weights assigned to each of the identifying data items used in the NHANES III-NDI record match⁴. For example, a common first name, such as “John”, that has a higher probability of occurrence in the population has a lower weight than an uncommon name such as “Jonas”. Weights are either positive or negative. If there is agreement between the NHANES III record and the NDI record for a particular identifying data item, the weight is positive. If there is no agreement, the weight is negative. With the exception of middle initial, data items that are missing on the NHANES III submission record, the NDI record, or both receive a weight of zero. The score for each potential match is the sum of the weights for each individual data item.

$$\text{Score} = \{ \sum W_{SSN1} + \dots + W_{SSN9} \} + W_{\text{firstname} \times \text{sex} \times \text{birthyear}} + W_{\text{middleinitial} \times \text{sex}} + W_{\text{lastname}} + W_{\text{race}} + W_{\text{sex}} + W_{\text{maritalstatus} \times \text{sex} \times \text{age}} + W_{\text{birthdate}} + W_{\text{birthmonth}} + W_{\text{birthyear}} + W_{\text{stateofbirth}} + W_{\text{stateofresidence}}$$

After scoring the potential matches, each is categorized into one of five mutually exclusive classes. Whereas weighting and scoring take into account the probability that the NHANES III record and the NDI record share a particular value for the identifying items, the classes take into account which identifying items agree. They reflect the fact that some of the 12 NDI identifying items are more important for determining true matches than others (e.g. SSN versus state of birth) and that non-changing identifying information is more important than information that can change over time (e.g. birth surname versus marital status).

As SSN is a key identifier in the matching process, each NHANES III-NDI record match is initially classified according to whether SSN is present and agrees (Class 1 or 2), is present but disagrees (Class 5) or is missing (Class 3 or 4). The final five classes used by NCHS for the NHANES III Linked Mortality file are as follows.

Class 1: Agrees on at least 8 (of 9) digits of SSN, first name (including NYSIIS match), middle initial (including blank), last name (including NYSIIS match), birth year (+/- 3 years), birth month, sex, and state of birth.

⁴ NCHS developed a new system of assigning weights to each identifying data element that is similar, but not identical, to the standard methodology offered by the NDI. NCHS developed the weights, known as binit weights, based upon the frequency of occurrence of the 12 data items in the NDI files for years 1979 to 2000, which represents about 49 million persons. The weights correspond to $[\text{Log}_2(1/p_i)]$: the base 2 logarithm of the inverse of the probability of occurrence of the value of the identifying data item on the submission record.

⁵ For a record to be assigned the maximum weight for SSN, there needs to be agreement on at least 8 digits. If seven digits agree, then 7/9 of the total weight is assigned. If fewer than seven digits agree then the total SSN weight becomes negative.

Class 2: Agrees on at least 7 (of 9) digits of SSN and at least 5 more of the following items: first name (including NYSIIS match), middle initial (including blank), last name (including NYSIIS match), birth year (+/- 3 years), birth month, sex, and state of birth.

Class 3: There are two types of Class 3 matches:

Type A: SSN is unknown, but last name matches (including NYSIIS match) and at least 7 of the following items agree: first name (including NYSIIS match), middle initial (including blank), last name (including NYSIIS match), birth year (+/- 3 years), birth day, sex, race, marital status and state of birth.

Type B: Records in this category were initially put in Class 5 but switched to Class 3⁶. SSN is known but 3 or more digits do not agree, but at least 8 of the following items agree: first name, middle initial (including blank), last name, birth year, birth day, sex, race, marital status, and state of birth.

Class 4: SSN is unknown on either the NHANES III submission record or the NDI record and fewer than 8 of the items listed in Class 3 match.

Class 5: SSN is present but fewer than 7 (of 9) digits on SSN agree.

Selecting matches and assigning vital status

Since each eligible NHANES III participant may have multiple submission records and each submission record may return one or more potential matches to a NDI record, NCHS employed a strategy to provide the single best NDI match record for inclusion on the linked mortality file.

First, NHANES III-NDI potential match records that had a date of death prior to the date of interview, a score of zero or less, or final categorization of Class 5 were considered false matches and eliminated from the pool of potential matches. Next, among the remaining pool of potential matches, duplicates (i.e. match records that referred to the same death certificate) were eliminated. Many participants, however, still had more than one NDI record as a potential match. The remaining potential matches were ranked first on class (from 1 to 4) and then within class by highest score. The NDI match with the highest score within the best class was selected as the single best record match. In the event of a tie among NDI record matches for a particular NHANES III record, the record underwent manual review with the tiebreaker reflecting the importance of matching items.

Next, NCHS determined whether each best record match was true or false. A true match reflects *both* the correct vital status of the survey participant and a match to the correct death certificate data. All Class 1 match records were considered true matches. For match records with Classes 2, 3, and 4, NCHS determined whether the match was true or false using cut-off scores developed from the [NHANES I Epidemiologic Follow-up Survey \(NHEFS\) calibration sample](#). Within each class, matches with a score *greater than or equal* to the cut-off score were considered true matches, while records with a score less than the cut-off were considered false

⁶ This class switch occurs if after review, there is the possibility that SSN was either recorded incorrectly or that the spouse's SSN was recorded instead of the subject's SSN. All total scores were adjusted to reflect the final class code for the potential matches. For example, any record that was switched from Class 5 to Class 3 had its score adjusted to reflect that SSN is missing, with the value of 0 assigned to SSN.

matches. *The cut-off scores for Classes 2, 3, and 4 were 47, 45, and 40, respectively.* In general, the process was to select the cut-off scores within Classes 2, 3, and 4 that simultaneously maximized the proportion of people correctly classified and minimized the number of people incorrectly classified, with particular attention given to minimizing the number of false positives. In addition, for a small percentage of NHANES III participants, NCHS conducted a manual review of the NHANES III submission record and the corresponding NDI potential matches to determine vital status.

Table 1. Percent of missing data for eligible respondents by sex: NHANES III

Personal Identifying Information	Male	Female
Social Security Number ¹	16.80	16.27
First Name ¹	0.01	0.00
Middle Name ^{1,2}	25.09	24.32
Last Name ¹	0.01	0.00
Date of Birth ¹	0.00	0.02
Race	0.26	0.26
Sex	0.00	0.00
State of Birth	0.52	0.53
State of Residence	0.01	0.00

¹Social Security Number, Name, Date of Birth are used to select potential match records.

All variables listed are utilized by the probabilistic scoring algorithm.

²Blank middle name/initial is considered a valid code.

Table 2. Eligibility status and NDI match status: NHANES III

Sample Total	Eligibility Status for Mortality		
	Follow-up		Assumed Deceased
Eligible	Ineligible, insufficient data		
33,994	33,950	44	5,478

Appendix A

Creating Alternate Submission Records

The primary purpose of using alternate submission records is to increase the chances of returning a correct death record for those NHANES III participants who are, in fact, deceased. The NDI allows multiple alternate submission records for each survey person.

Alternate submission records may be created for several reasons. For example, if a SSN is present but additional information indicates that the SSN is not valid, an alternate submission record will be created that does not include SSN. Name inaccuracies are the most common type of mismatch error encountered when matching to the NDI system, e.g. reporting a nickname like “Beth” for a formal name like “Elizabeth” or the presence of multi-part first or last names. In these cases, alternate submission records are created that take into account nicknames being listed as the first name, using a nickname to proper name conversion process or that use all of the components of multi-part names both separately and together.

The rules for alternate submission record creation are multiplicative in nature. For example, a participant may have both an imputed month of birth (12 separate records) and two-part first name (3 separate records) resulting in 36 NDI submission records.

Appendix B

Altering the criteria to assign vital status

This updated version of the NHANES III Linked Mortality file includes the NCHS recommended vital status ascertainment (MORTSTAT) for each eligible NHANES III participant. NCHS also has a set of [special request variables](#), NDI probabilistic match score (SCORE) and match criteria classification (CLASS), that users can request to alter the criteria for determining vital status and conduct their own sensitivity analyses. Below are two examples of studies using the NHIS Linked Mortality files that evaluate different criteria to ascertain vital status.

Using the 1986-1990 NHIS linked to the NDI with mortality follow-up through 1991, Liao et al. (1998) evaluated death rates using three different criteria to identify deaths. Criterion 1 was the most conservative, requiring an exact match on SSN. Only NHIS participants with a NDI record with a Class 1 or 2 match were considered true matches and assumed deceased; Criterion 2 was the NCHS recommended ascertainment of vital status using NCHS's cut-off scores⁷; and Criterion 3 was the least stringent with all of Class 1, 2, and 3 matches plus Class 4 matches with scores higher than the recommended cut-off considered true matches. Mortality estimates were lowest based upon criterion 1 and highest with criterion 3. Furthermore, the use of different criteria to determine vital status had differential effects upon death rates for sex and race/ethnic groups.

Using a prior data release of the NHIS Linked Mortality files for the NHIS years 1988-1994, NCHS conducted its own evaluation of alternative criteria to assign vital status and its impact on death rates. The analysis evaluated four criteria that differed in the established cut-off scores for determining which Class 2, 3, or 4 matches were true matches. For all four criteria, Class 1 match records were considered true matches. Criterion 1 reflected the NCHS recommended cut-off scores; criterion 2 made all Class 2 matches true matches and all Class 4 matches non-matches; criterion 3 increased by four points the cut-off scores for Classes 2, 3, and 4 from the NCHS recommended scores; and criterion 4 lowered by four points the cut-off scores for Classes 2, 3, and 4 from the NCHS recommended scores. [Table 3](#) displays the results.

Across the four criteria, the number of Class 1 matches (assumed deceased) was 36,345. Altering the cut-off scores for the other classes, Criterion 3 produced the most conservative results with 58,934 deaths overall and criterion 4 the least conservative with 64,142 deaths. The NCHS recommended cut-off scores produced 61,021 deaths overall. Not surprisingly, altering the matching criteria differentially affected the mortality rates by race/ethnicity, sex, and age, with Hispanics being the most affected (data not shown).

Inferences from studies that use the NHIS Linked mortality files could be affected by the matching criteria chosen and the ascertainment of vital status. Researchers interested in examining the robustness of their findings can perform sensitivity analyses by altering the

⁷ Analysts should note that the NCHS recommended classifications and cut-off scores used in this analysis do not reflect the current classifications and cut-off scores used to determine true match status between NCHS survey records and NDI records.

criteria for matching. This may be particularly important for studies examining mortality patterns for specific race/ethnic groups.

Table 3: Number of deaths assigned to NHIS participants based upon four criteria for determining NHIS-NDI record linkages to be matches or non-matches

	Match Record Class	Match Record Score	No. Assumed Dead
Criterion 1: NCHS recommendation	2	≥ 47	10,273
	3	≥ 45	11,855
	4	≥ 40	2,548
Criterion 2	2	All	10,734
	3	≥ 45	11,855
	4	None	-----
Criterion 3 (4 points above NCHS recommended cut-off scores)	2	≥ 51	10,038
	3	≥ 49	10,817
	4	≥ 44	1,291
Criterion 4 (4 points below NCHS recommended cut-off scores)	2	≥ 43	10,415
	3	≥ 41	12,595
	4	≥ 36	4,787