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Length of Life: A Study in Demography

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LENGTH OF LIFE: A STUDY IN DEMOGRAPHY

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Your local cemetery may be an excellent field trip site. For example, I use wooded Timber Creek Cemetery for the following study.

Each student collects data from nine different headstones and also plots the location of the same grave markers on a map. The student records the name and sex of the deceased, epitaph and/or heritage, cause of death if recorded, the condition of the headstone, the kind of rock it is, and anything unique about it.

All of the students' data are compiled back in the classroom. The students each record the ages at death and years of death of their subjects on a chart in their notebook and on the chalkboard. This gives us a common place to begin for discussion. Each student gives a personal written discussion and may extract from the data collected any special point he wishes to study, e.g., age at death: 19th century vs. 20th century. Interestingly enough, even if you have only 30 students and they record only 270 graves, the data show a cluster of deaths at 0-11 months old from the middle 1800's up to the early 1900's and a cluster at 71 years or older from the early 1900's to the present. Very few infant deaths occur after the early 1900's. At Timber Creek Cemetery the ratio of infant deaths in the 1800's to those in the 1900's is about 6:1.*

Another good area for comparisons is the 19th-century ratio of male to female deaths at various ages. Some students may also choose to comment on any noticeable differences in weathering of the various materials used for grave markers.

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* *Editor's note:* Improvement in antisepsis and nutrition and the control of major contagious diseases reduced infant deaths; in addition, the movement of young people from farms to larger urban areas may have meant that fewer children were born or lived in Marshalltown in the 20th century than in the 19th (and hence, fewer died). Also, the custom of providing headstones for children waned in the 20th century, and in urban areas, particularly, infant graves are often massed, without individual markers, in one localized section of the cemetery. Therefore, data from other cemeteries may be quite different from the experience cited. Yet the search for clues to "what happened here" would be of interest to most students and might entice them to seek further information on the many factors affecting human longevity.