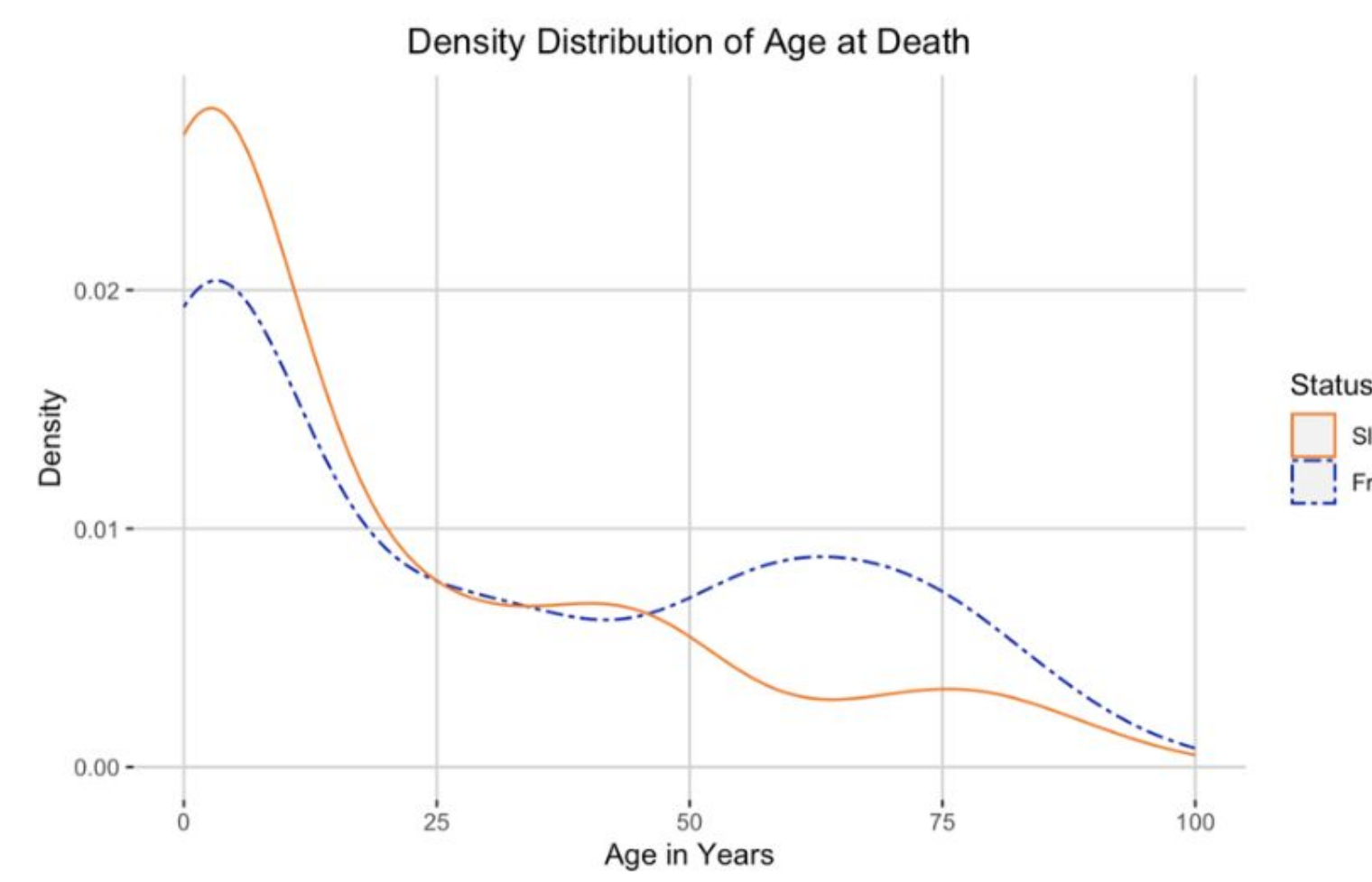


# Death in Fairfax County, Virginia, in the mid-19th Century: Morbidity and Mortality among Enslaved and Free Populations

Bailey Griffin and Lorenzo Duran Charris



Graph 1:



Graph 2:

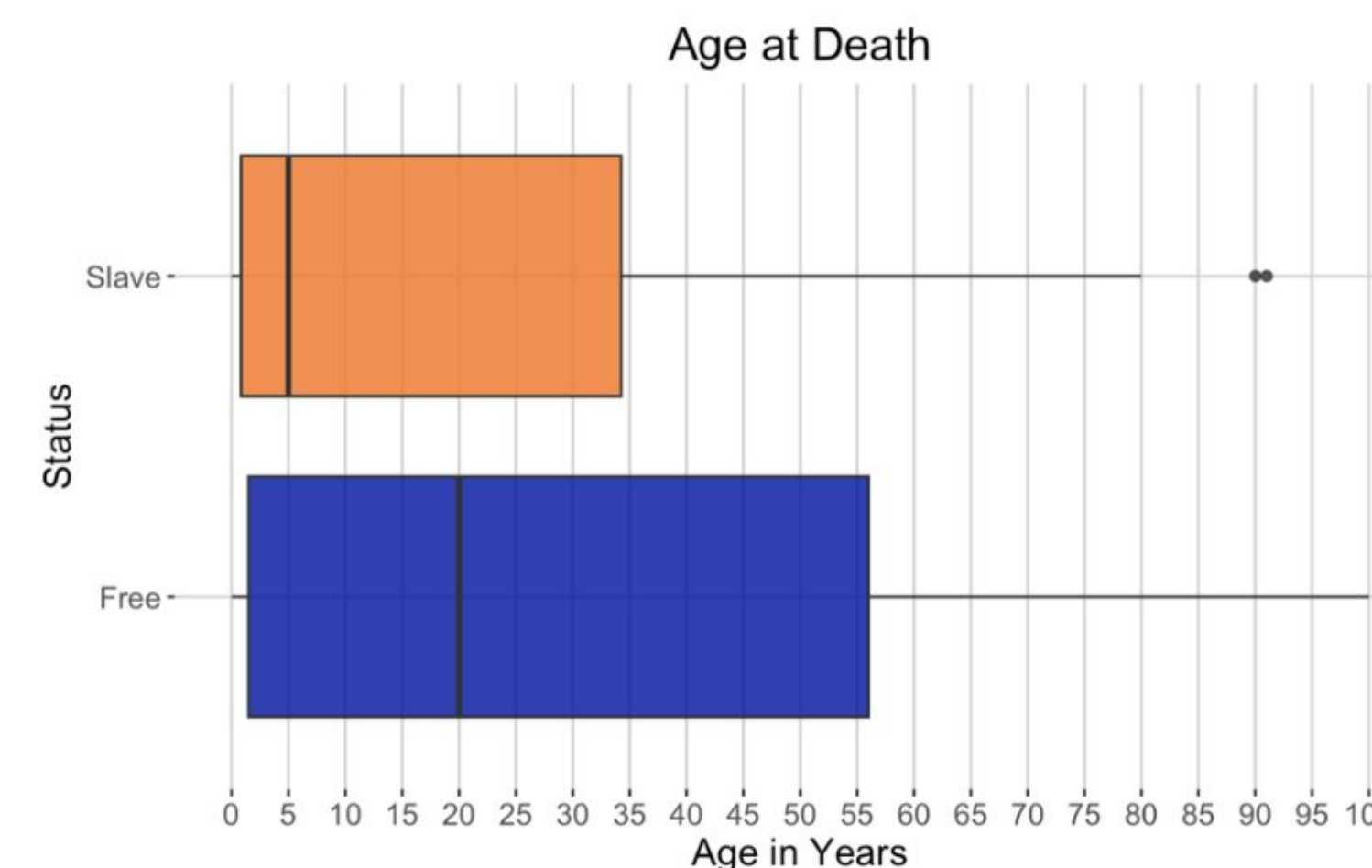


Table 1:

Table 1 10 most common causes of death among Enslaved between 1 and 10		
	% of Slave deaths between 1 and 10	Count
Not Registered	31.58	12
Croup	18.42	7
Whooping Cough	7.89	3
Burn	5.26	2
Diarrhea & Dysentery	5.26	2
Smothered	5.26	2
Tuberculosis	5.26	2
Worms	5.26	2
Catarrhal Fever	2.63	1
Dropsy	2.63	1

Table 2:

Table 2 10 most common causes of death among the Free between 1 and 10		
	% of Free deaths between 1 and 10	Count
Diarrhea & Dysentery	23.33	14
Not Registered	11.67	7
Croup	11.67	7
Fever	11.67	7
Scarlet Fever	8.33	5
Typhoid	6.67	4
Brain Disease	3.33	2
Inflammation	3.33	2
Tuberculosis	3.33	2
Accident	1.67	1

## INTRODUCTION

This presentation will discuss Death Registries recorded in Fairfax County, Virginia during the period of 1853 to 1869. We intend to describe and record the death causes of enslaved people to honor a small portion of the history and experiences of Black people in the United States and give the people who have been forgotten by history the acknowledgment they are owed. We will analyze the data by comparing the causes of death between enslaved people and free people, pulling from previous research to understand some of the differences we observe and critically question the data and its origin to better understand, demographically and socially the dynamics that perpetuated the exploitative system of slavery.

## DISCUSSION

The lives of mothers and their children are intertwined from conception until the child takes their last breath. When investigating the death records of enslaved and free people in Fairfax County between 1853 through 1869 and focusing our study on the age and cause of death, the stories of enslaved children, both in life and death, became a critical component of our data set that needed further analysis. The data confirms several facts, (1) enslaved children died before the age of one at higher rates than children born free, (2) enslaved children who died before the age of one often died from what enslavers termed suffocation or “smothering,” and (3) the deaths of enslaved people were significantly less reported than those of free people. This data validates the harsh realities of life for the enslaved, particularly the lives of enslaved mothers and their young children.

## METHODS

We obtained data from the Fairfax County court Death Registry with the help of their senior archivist, Heather Bolinger. The records exist because, in the mid-nineteenth century, the state of Virginia mandated that all county courts would record births, deaths, and marriages in separate registries. The records spanned from 1853 to 1869, with a few years missing due to the civil war. We transcribed the scanned documents into a spreadsheet while working closely with Heather whose expertise was instrumental to the project.

The focus of this study is on the age and causes of death among the two categorizations used for race and status, as recorded by the census taker. With that in mind, we combined the ages of individuals into a measurement in years as a continuous variable, converting years, months, and days into years given (See Graphs 1 & 2):

$$\text{Age} = \text{Years} + \text{Months} \times 1/12 + \text{Days} \times 1/365$$

## RESULTS

As described in Steckel, R. (1986), in Fairfax County, Virginia, we found that “Smothering” is the main recorded cause of death among the enslaved under the age of 1. The table also shows a significant difference when it comes to blank records. Although more than half of the data is missing in both cases, the assumed cause of enslaved deaths was reported 9.86% less often. We hypothesize that the large quantity of data missing, for both categories, was due to several factors.

## RESULTS CONTINUED

In our data, “smothering” was the second leading cause of enslaved children’s death (15.5%). This data implies that enslavers, who reported the cause of death, believed Black women were careless/cruel when caring for their infant children. However, the data for free infants’ causes of death was never reported to be due to smothering and was most often attributed to unavoidable childhood diseases. An analysis of this depiction of Black mothers as unable to care for their children, curated by white enslavers, is an intentional act of White Supremacy that shaped the current white patriarchal society. This mythology fashioned a fantasy of white motherhood as natural/instinctual, laudable, and feminine—whereas Black mothers were seen as “lazy” and unable to “properly” care for their children. These ideas were deeply contradictory; after all, Black mothers regularly cared for the white children of enslavers as well as being expected to care for their own children. (See Table 1 & 2)

## CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to overstate just how staggering the differences in causes and age at death are between enslaved people and free people. With a median age at death four times greater, free individuals demonstrably enjoyed longer lives. Enslaved children suffered predominantly from respiratory illnesses, like croup. Infections spread due to poor living conditions and overcrowded sheds. The physical exploitation of their mothers during the gestational period and malnourishment also had devastating effects on the survival rate of infants and young children. Fevers appeared frequently among free children, but their longer life spans meant that, on aggregate, tuberculosis and old age were the most common causes of death.

A qualitative analysis of the data supports the accuracy of scholar Moya Bailey’s term **misogynoir**, defined as a hatred exclusively directed at Black women. The transparent bias in the data is an example of misogynoir. The White Supremacist views on motherhood and mothering perpetuate the inaccuracies of Black motherhood and continue to villainize Black women. As we continue to analyze and uncover this data, we must also consider the patterns in causes of death that shape our results and recognize the struggle, fear, and circumstances of the enslaved people represented by the data. We must never lose sight of the fact that these are real people; the data captures only a small part of the lived experience but highlights the vicious cruelty of the system of enslavement and the ramifications of this system and how this reflects in today’s society.

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