



ALLISON HUNT, M.D.
Chief Medical Examiner

Whatcom County Medical Examiner 2022 Annual Report



WHATCOM COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER

Allison Hunt, M.D. Chief Medical Examiner

2022 Annual Report

Message to the County Council

The Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office investigates sudden, violent, unexpected, and suspicious deaths that occur in Whatcom County. The Medical Examiner's Office certifies death after investigation and postmortem examination and issues the death certificate as required by law. Complete findings of the death investigation are distributed to families, law enforcement and treating physician as appropriate.

The main duties of the Medical Examiner's Office is to determine the cause and manner of death and certify the deaths that are reported to the medical examiner. The cause of death is the disease process or the injury that resulted in death. There are thousands of diseases and injuries that may result in death. The manner of death is the classification in which a determination is made regarding whether the death resulted from natural causes, homicide, suicide, or an accident. On occasion, the manner of death is classified as indeterminate or undetermined.

The Medical Examiner's Office provides information to law enforcement, medical personnel, and other agencies our office works with regarding the role and function of the Medical Examiner's Office as required by Washington State RCWs.

Information collected during the investigation helps to clarify the circumstances, such as sequence of events prior to death. Evidence collected during an investigation and/or postmortem examination may help to lead to the arrest or successful conviction of a suspect in a homicide case. Because deaths occur around the clock, medical examiner investigators are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year. In addition, the Medical Examiner's Office collects and analyzes data on various cases to help with prevention of deaths due to disease, injury, drug intoxication/poisoning trends and preventable infant death.

With the skill and experience of the investigators and board-certified forensic pathologist, we believe the quality of death investigations in Whatcom County are among the best in the State. The death investigation reports filed by the investigators are very thorough and supply comprehensive information to the medical examiner.

Our Medical Examiner and investigators also extend their duties to the living by answering questions and addressing concerns regarding deaths within the county. Medical Examiner Investigators frequently make personal contact with family members of a deceased and assist them by providing appropriate answers regarding the circumstances surrounding the death. The investigators provide a pamphlet for families. The information provides answers to common questions and facts about autopsies and provides resource information.



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In 2022 the Medical Examiner's Office began to use an electronic data base, MDI Log, which also works as a tracking system for Medical Examiner cases. MDI Log is a comprehensive investigative report/database system that enables the Medical Examiner to review death scene investigation information from a secure Internet site anytime. MDI Log enables Medical Examiner investigators to submit death scene investigation reports via the Internet in an efficient manner. MDI Log has evolved to become a valuable tool for our office, and it is now available to medical examiner offices across the nation.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Whatcom County Council for their support of the medical examiner program and the services we provide to the citizens of Whatcom County.

Mission and Vision for the Medical Examiner's Office

The Medical Examiner's Office is an independent agency which serves the citizens of Whatcom County by investigating deaths and gathering facts concerning circumstances surrounding the deaths of those who have dies unexpectedly and suddenly while in apparent good health. Our geographic boundaries are all of Whatcom County. Our mission is to serve the citizens and community of Whatcom County with the highest level of compassion, professionalism, and care to those who died in Whatcom County.

To achieve our mission, the Medical Examiner's Office will:

Treat every deceased individual and their property with dignity and respect.

Conduct professional death investigations and provide scientific examination for every decedent.

Complete reports with regard for the concerns of the community, criminal justice system, family members and public health and safety.

Promote and maintain adequate staffing to provide mandated services.

Exercise a safe and healthy and safe work environment for medical examiner staff.

Ensure all staff members are provided with proper equipment, training, and support.

Provide training and information to agencies we work with.

Complete an annual report for deaths that occur within Whatcom County.

Participate in preparation for mass casualty incidents.

Consistently strive for accuracy, proficiency, and professionalism in the Medical Examiner's Office.



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The Medical Examiner’s Office has an important role to provide cause and manner of death. The Medical Examiner’s Office works closely with community partners with a proactive approach to reducing preventable deaths such as drug related deaths, suicides and child and infant deaths.

Reported cases and Medical Examiner Involvement

For the year 2022, there were 742 deaths reported to the Medical Examiner’s Office. This excludes hospice deaths with no concern for falls, fractures, or trauma. This was an increase of 294 cases from the year 2021, with 448 cases reported. The Whatcom County Medical Examiner’s Office conducted 458 death investigations and responded to 265 scenes. Additionally, accidental deaths that did not require a scene response, that involved falls, fractures and trauma, did require a complete medical record review and death certificate certification by the Medical Examiner totaled 122 cases. 71 cases required a review for information due to drug involvement or Adult Protective Services concern. In review, of the deaths over the past two years (2021, 2022), there was an increase in the number of investigations conducted by the Medical Examiner’s Office. In addition, there was a significant increase in the number of Medical Examiner jurisdictional cases, scene responses, and postmortem examinations performed.

Medical Examiner Staff

Allison Hunt, M.D. Chief Medical Examiner	Dylan Hartwig Death Investigator
Fred Hollis Autopsy Technician	Radovan Woods Autopsy Assistant
Caitlyn Borthwick Death Investigator	Payton Richards Death Investigator
Julia Welch, D-ABMDI Medicolegal Death Investigator	Deborah Hollis, D-ABMDI Medicolegal Death Investigator



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Types of Deaths Reportable to the Medical Examiner

Jurisdiction is assumed on deaths that occur within the geographical boundaries of Whatcom County. The Washington State RCW 68-50-010 mandates that specific types of death be referred to the Medical Examiner for investigation (see list below). These deaths include sudden and unexpected deaths, accidental deaths, and violent deaths. The medical examiner has the authority under these Acts to order an autopsy at any time it is deemed necessary to determine or confirm the cause and manner of death.

Deaths Reportable to the Medical Examiner:

- Violent death (e.g., strangulation, gunshot, stabbing, poisoning, etc.)
- Accidental deaths (e.g., falls, drowning, motor vehicle collisions, burns, overdose, etc.)
- Death of a prisoner (e.g., deaths in any county or city jail while imprisoned or in custody).
- Suspicious Circumstances (e.g., Unidentified Bodies or events surrounding death)
- Sudden and Unexpected deaths (e.g., all deaths during a surgical procedure, in recovery, anesthesia-related, unexpected natural death, occupational-related deaths)*
- Without medical attendance within 48 hours of death:
- In cases of chronic illness, the attending physician may sign the death certificate if s/he can be reasonably certain of the cause of death.
- Death of a mother due to an abortion.
- Unexpected infant deaths

The medical examiner would generally order an autopsy for any of the reportable deaths listed above.



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Whatcom County Medical Examiner Cases

Population	212,284
Cases Reported to Medical Examiner	742
A. Number of deaths certified after postmortem examination	257
1. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with Complete Autopsy	168
2. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with External Examination	84
3. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with Limited Examination	10
B. Number of deaths certified without postmortem examination	343
C. Number of deaths not certified by Medical Examiner's Office after investigation	399

Definitions

Full Autopsy: A complete external and internal examination of a decedent

Limited Examination: An examination which is focused on a specific organ or region of the body, i.e., heart. The limited examination also includes an external examination.

External Examination: An examination of the exterior of a decedent.



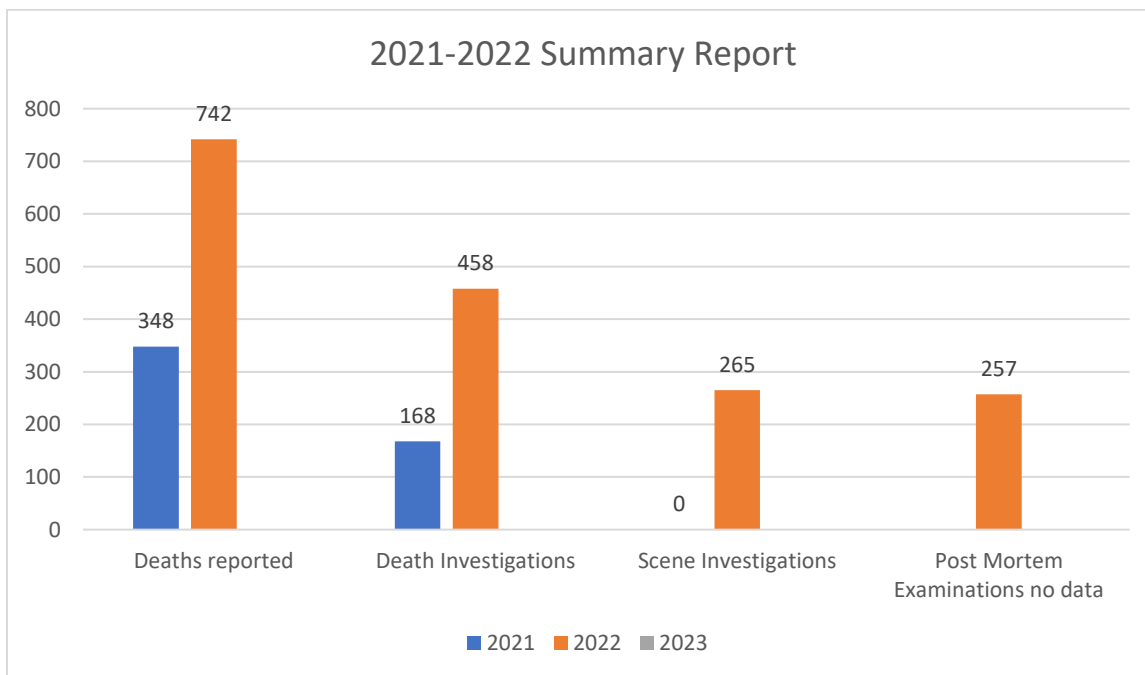
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The Washington State RCWs define death investigations categorized into two separate categories: non-jurisdictional and jurisdictional. Non-Jurisdictional deaths are apparent natural deaths that are reported to the Medical Examiner’s Office when the death is sudden, unattended, but the deceased was under the current care of a physician who had treated the decedent and was aware of the decedent’s health and is able to certify the death certificate.

Jurisdictional deaths can be natural or unnatural, are all deaths that the Medical Examiner certifies the cause and manner of death. Unnatural deaths (homicide, suicide, accident, undetermined or pending deaths) must be signed by the Medical Examiner.

In 2021 there were 458 cases reported to the Medical Examiner, 168 cases that received a forensic investigation, no data for scene investigation, no data available on the number of cases that received an autopsy, limited autopsy or an external examination.

In 2022, 742 deaths were reported to the Medical Examiner’s Office. The medical examiner’s office conducted 458 investigations. Investigators responded to 265 scene investigations and 257 postmortem examinations were performed.

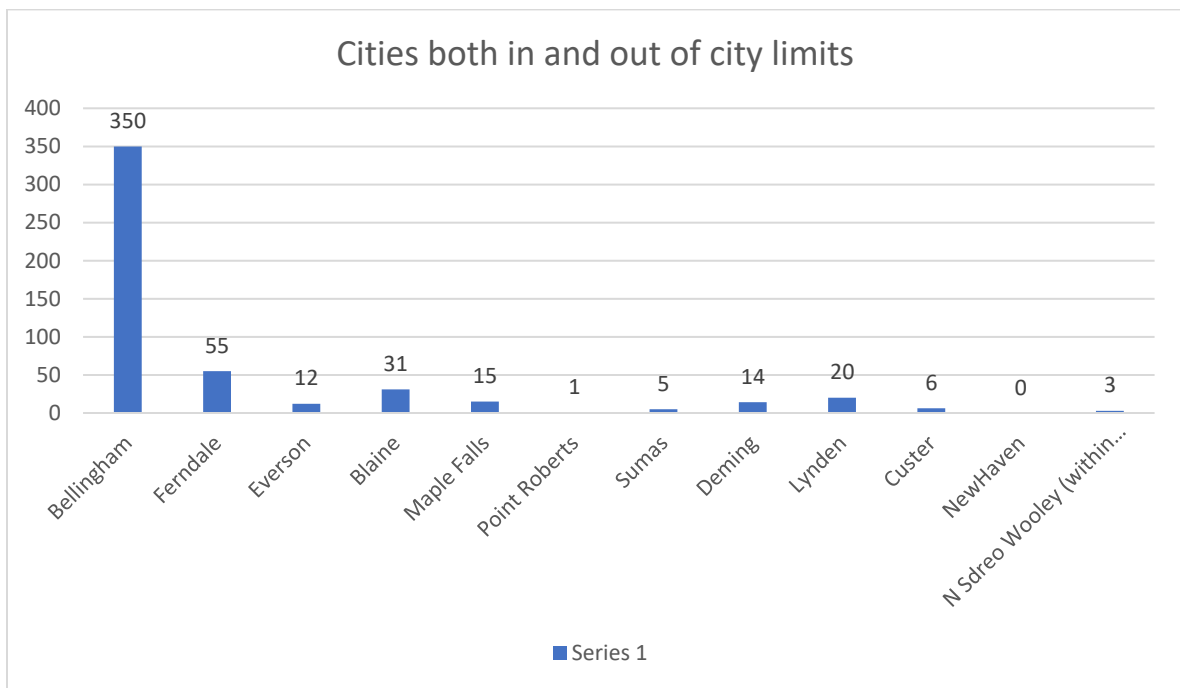




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Jurisdictional Deaths Investigated by the Medical Examiner’s Office by city location are represented in the graph below.

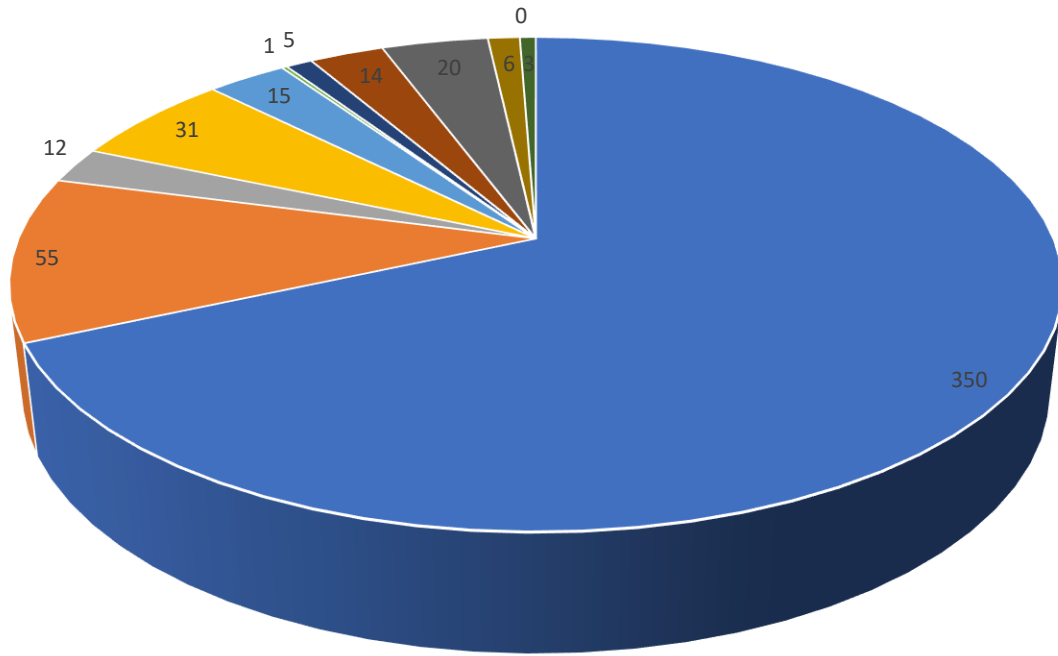
Deaths Investigated by City Location:





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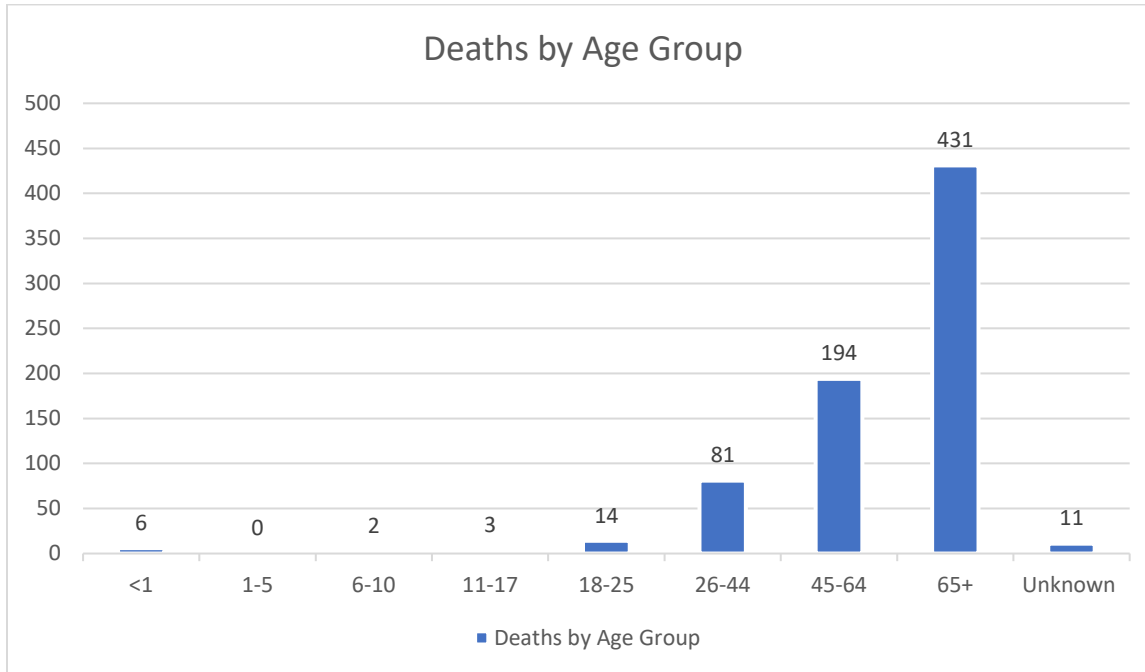
Jurisdictional Deaths Investigated By the Medical Examiner by city location



- Bellingham
- Ferndale
- Everson
- Blaine
- Maple Falls
- Point Roberts
- Sumas
- Deming
- Lynden
- Custer
- New Haven
- N.Sedro Woolley



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MANNER OF DEATH: HOMICIDE

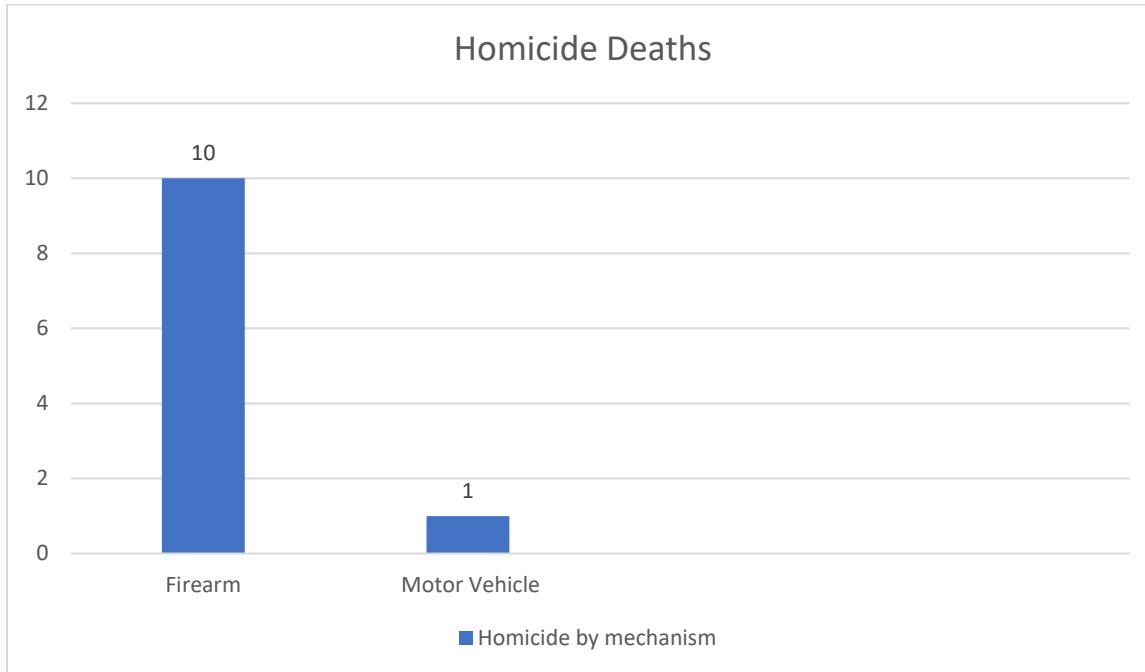
Classification of Homicide is determined by the Medical Examiner when a death is a result of injury caused by another. This does not imply criminal intent by the action of the other person.

In some cases, a law enforcement agency will investigate the case as a homicide. There are cases in which the Medical Examiner's Office will certify the death as an accident even though the case is being investigated as homicide by law enforcement. For example, traffic fatalities where a pedestrian dies and the driver of the vehicle demonstrated negligent behavior (intoxication, leaving the scene of an accident), will be classified as an accident by the Medical Examiner even though these causes may meet the legal definition of vehicular homicide. In this case the criminal justice system will make the decision. This is the same for motor vehicle fatalities and deaths due to acute drug intoxication.

In 2022, the Medical Examiner's Office Investigated 10 homicides. 9 were firearm related and 1 was motor vehicle related.



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MANNER OF DEATH: SUICIDE

Suicides are deaths that are self-inflicted or intentional by the individual with evidence of intent to take one’s own life. Evidence of intent can be demonstrated by explicit expressions, such as verbalizing, a suicide note, or an act demonstrating implicit intent.

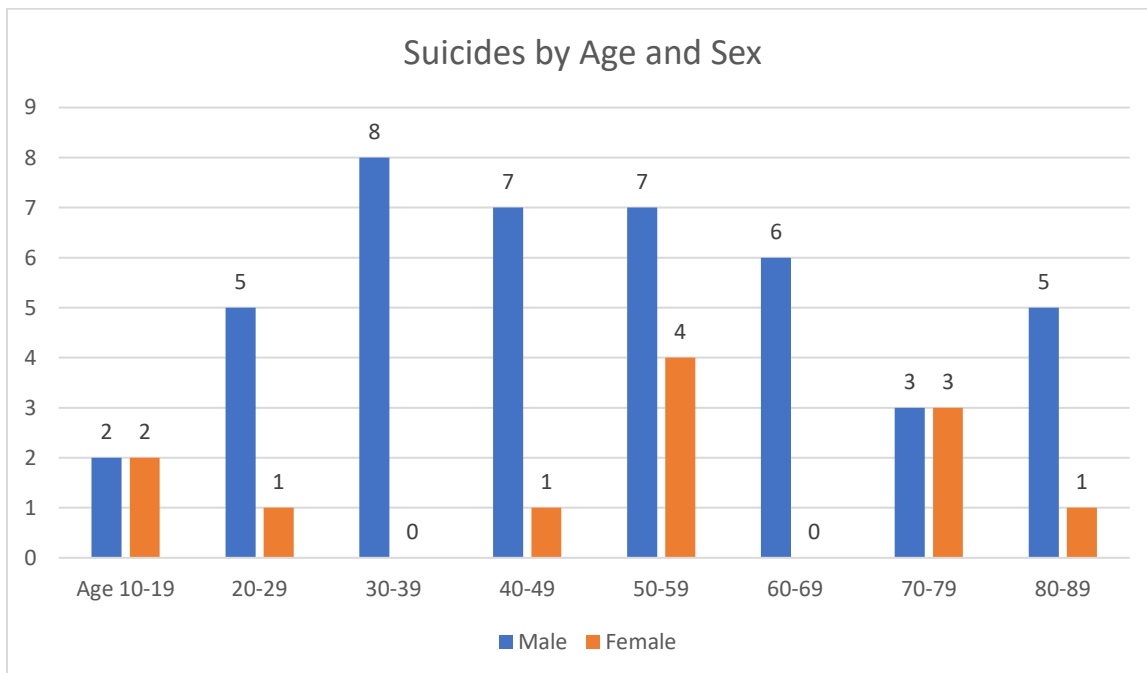
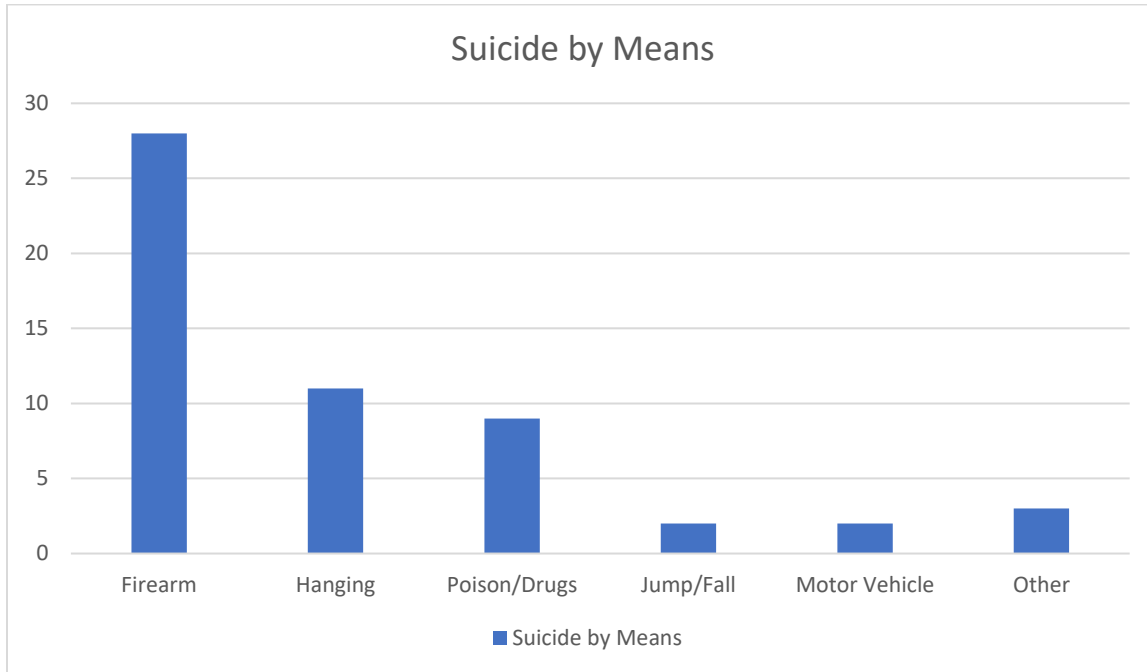
In 2022 the Whatcom County Medical Examiner’s Office investigated 55 suicide deaths in Whatcom County.

There were 9 drug related suicides, 1 asphyxia related suicide, 1 pedestrian vs. motor vehicle suicide, 1 train vs. pedestrian related suicide, 1 jump from height, 1 hanging and 30 firearm related.

The mechanisms are demonstrated in the graph below.



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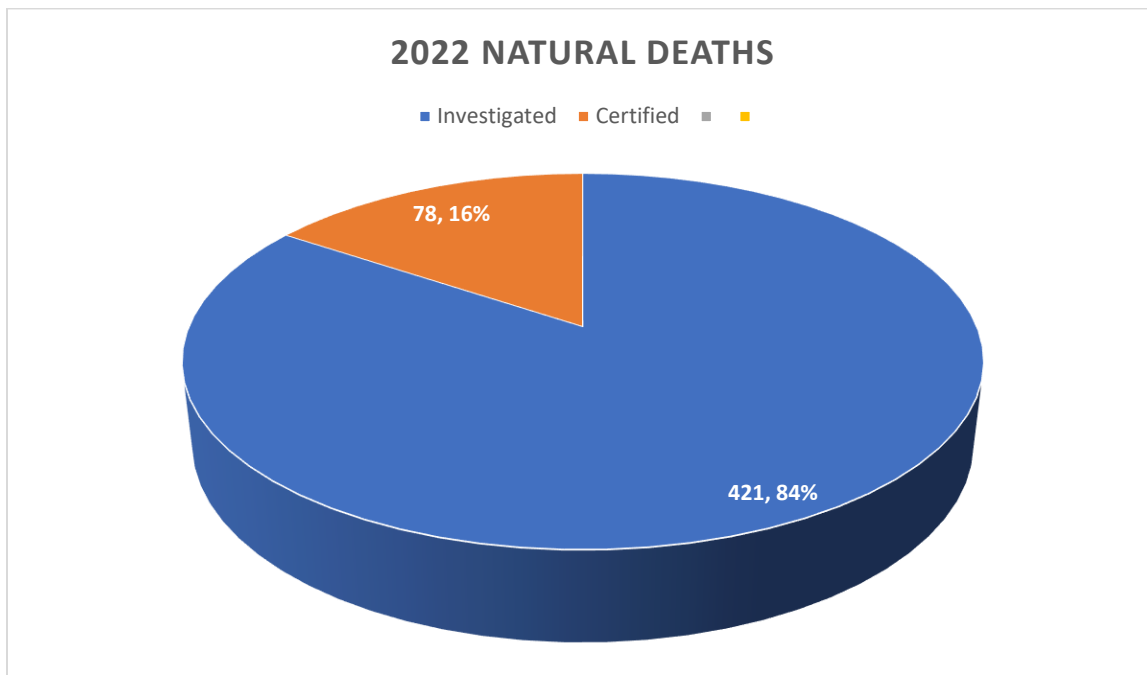


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MANNER OF DEATH: NATURAL

The Medical Examiner certifies natural deaths under various circumstances. These include sudden and unexpected deaths in apparent healthy individuals, when there is not physician able or agreeable to certify the death, when there is no next of kin or when there are suspicious circumstances surrounding the death.

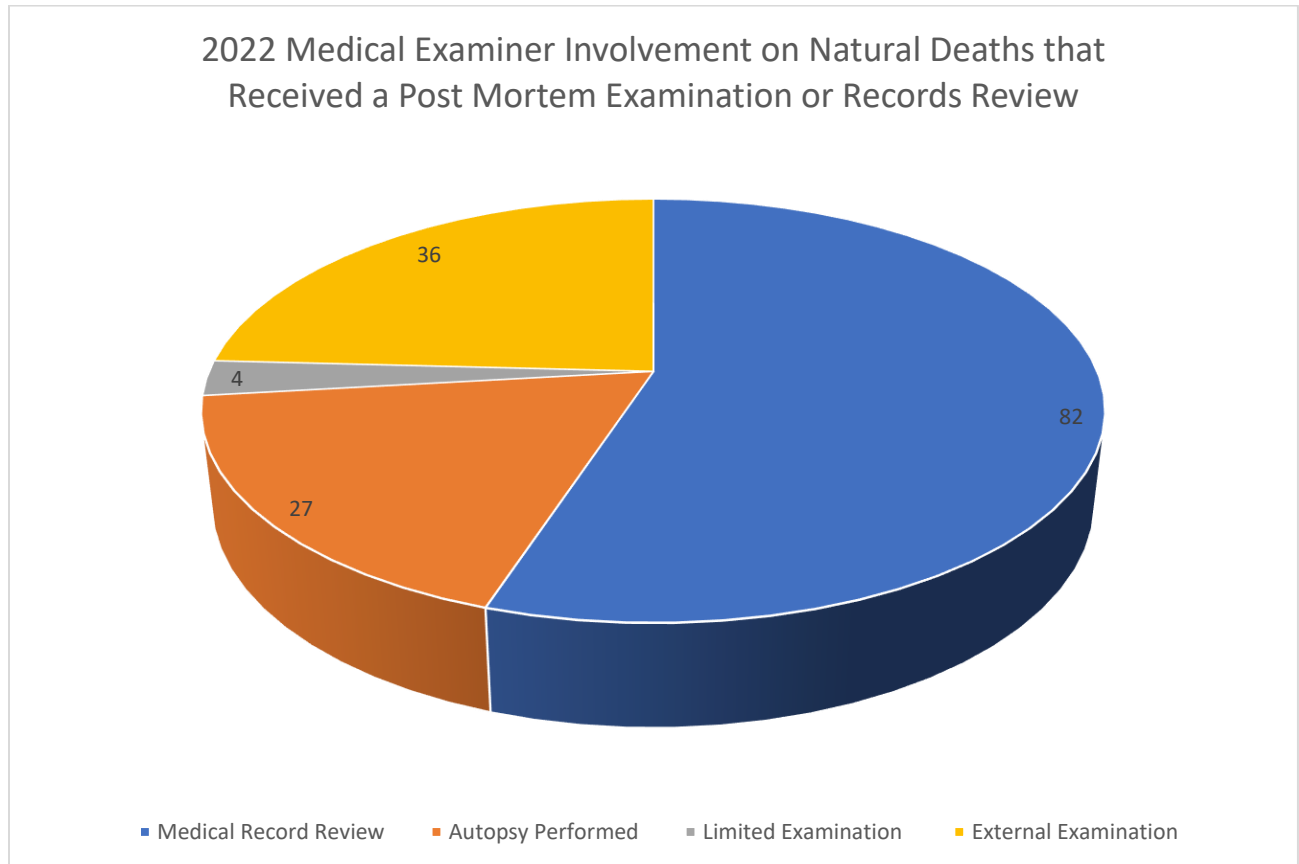
In 2022 there were 742 deaths reported to the Medical Examiner's Office. 421 were investigated and determined to be natural and the Medical Examiner certified 78 of those deaths.





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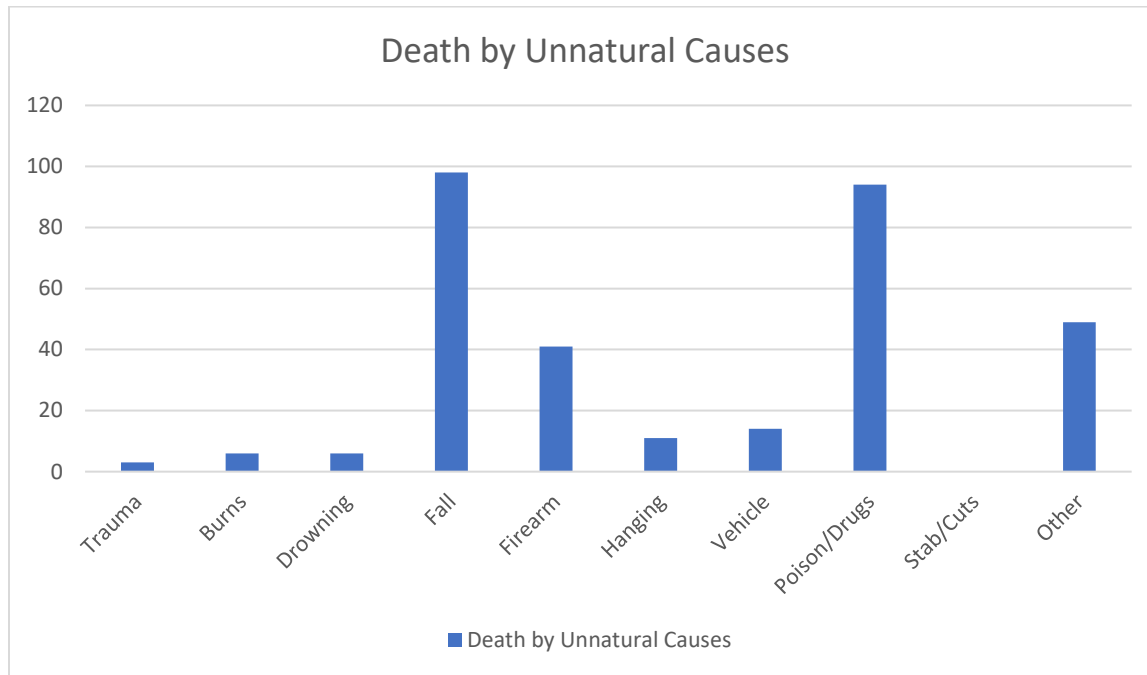
Medical Examiner Involvement on Natural Deaths Investigated





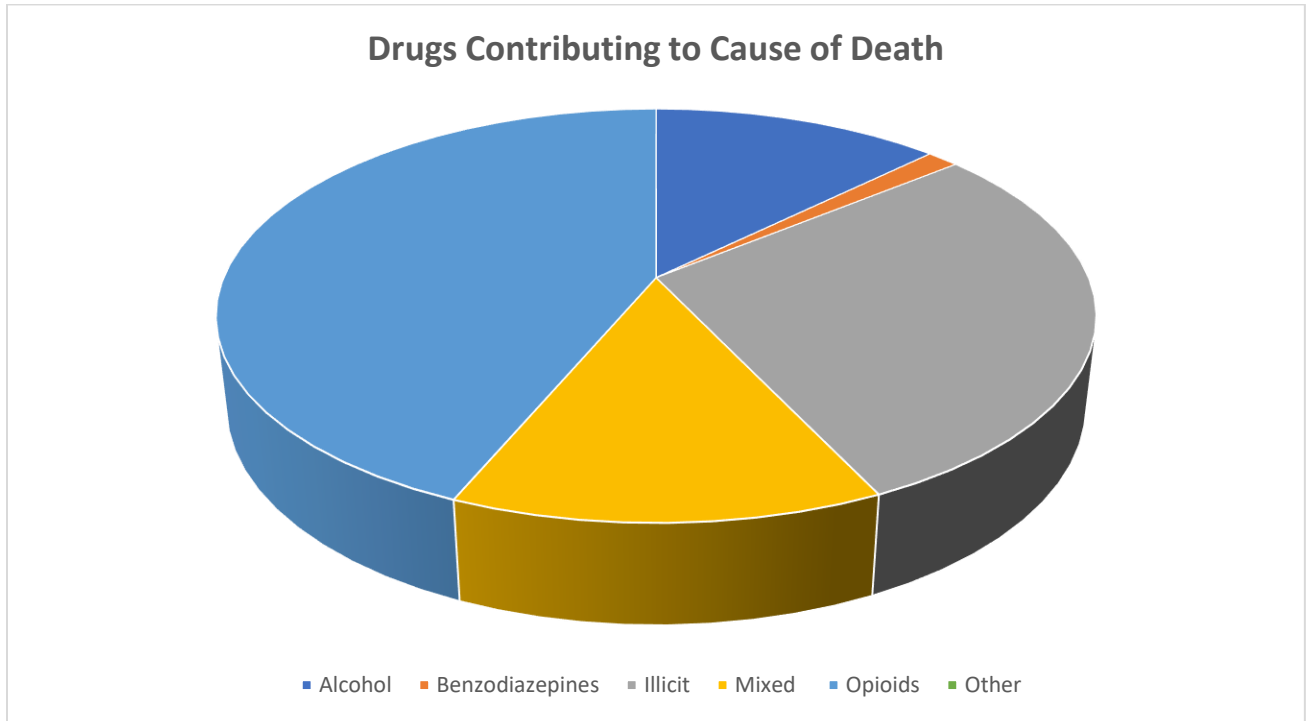
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Deaths By Unnatural Causes





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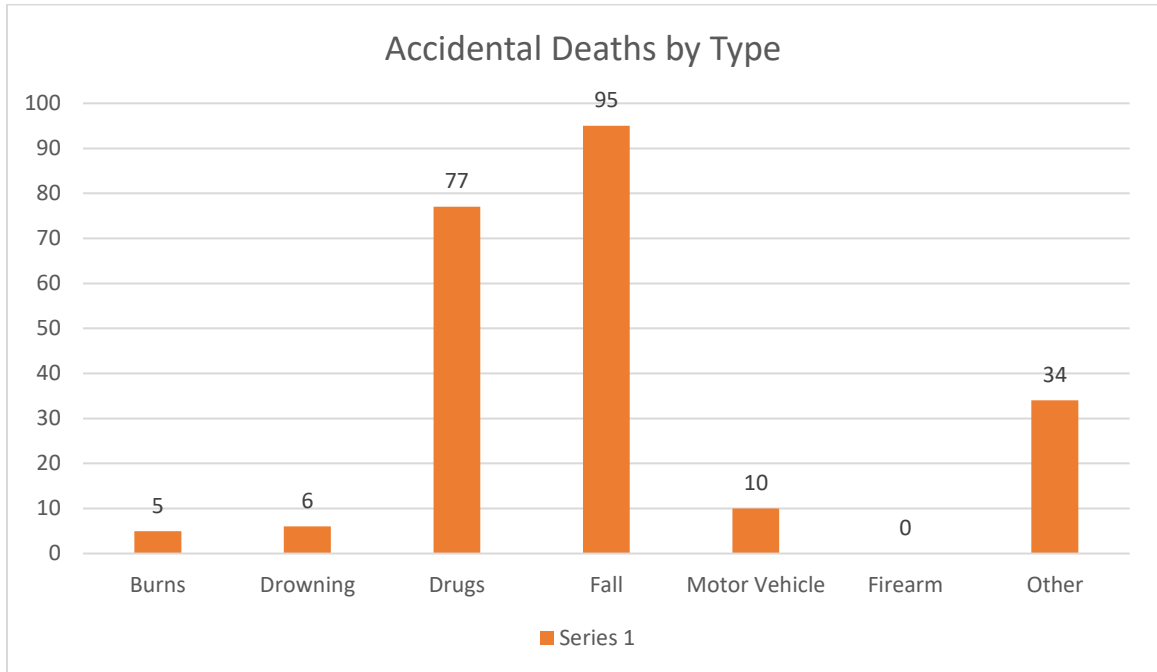
MANNER OF DEATH: ACCIDENT

The Medical Examiner certified 272 deaths due to accident in 2022. Of these 227 deaths, 5 were burns, 6 drowning, 77 were drug related, 95 fall related, 10 motor vehicle crash, 0 firearm and 34 other. Falls resulting in trauma including those deaths in which geriatric patient had fallen.

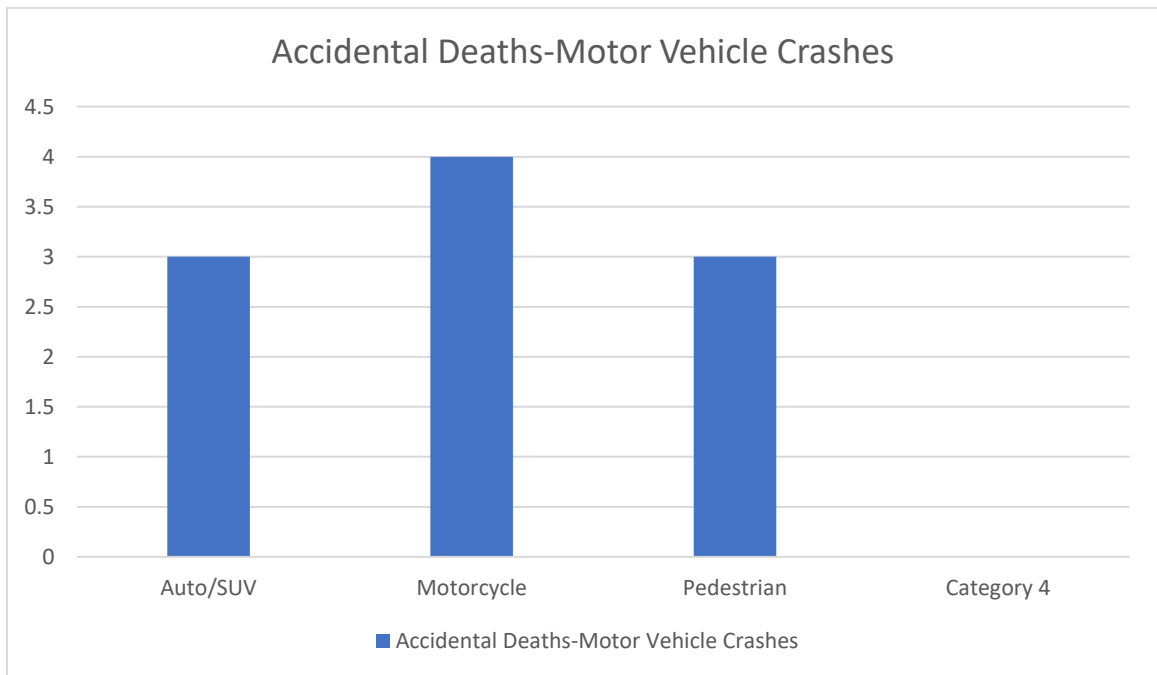
Since all accidental deaths are believed to be preventable, each such death is investigated for public health and safety purposes.



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Accidental Deaths- Motor Vehicle Crashes





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MANNER OF DEATH: Undetermined

A death can be ruled undetermined when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more compelling than one or more other competing manners of death when all available information is considered. A medical examiner may classify the cause of death as undetermined if he doesn't understand intent at the conclusion of an autopsy; if he cannot say for sure what caused the death.

The Medical Examiner's Office investigated 11 undetermined/Indeterminate cases in 2022.

A total of 16 indeterminate cases have been investigated since 2022. In 2022, a total of 11 cases were investigated. 6 were unidentified human bones, 2 were presumptive deaths where the person went missing and there is no evidence that they are still living, 3 cases where the cause is established, but the manner was not.

Whatcom County Medical Examiner is very involved in preventative deaths including the death of a fetus in the womb and infants. We conduct thorough death investigations on these deaths to provide data and information that will help in the effort to provide preventative programs.

INFANT DEATHS IN WHATCOM COUNTY

The Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office investigated 1 infant death and 5 fetal deaths in 2022. One case is pending. 3 deaths were stillborn deaths with no concerns for trauma, drugs, or alcohol. 2 deaths however revealed methamphetamine and fentanyl/methamphetamine combination.

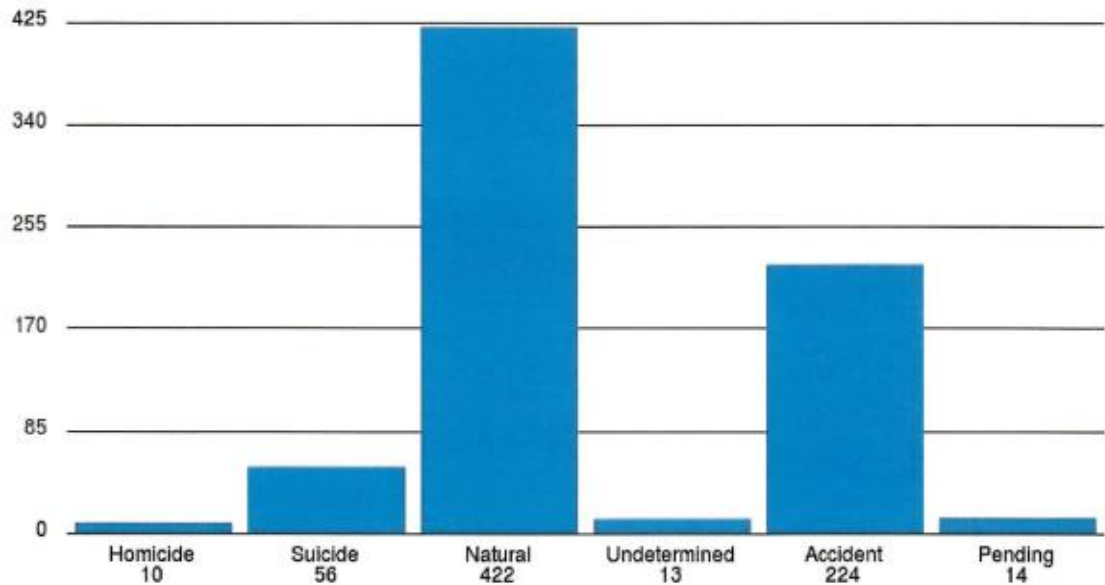
Tissue and Cornea Donation

In 2022, the Medical Examiner's Office entered a partnership with SightLife and LifeNet Health. We participated in facilitating donations within Whatcom County. Our MDILOG reporting system IS linked to the Organ Procurement Organizations (OPS's). This allowed for the automatic notification to the OPOs of all potential organ, tissue (skin, long bones, heart for valves), and cornea donation. We are proud to support their services.



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Manner of Death by Postmortem Examination

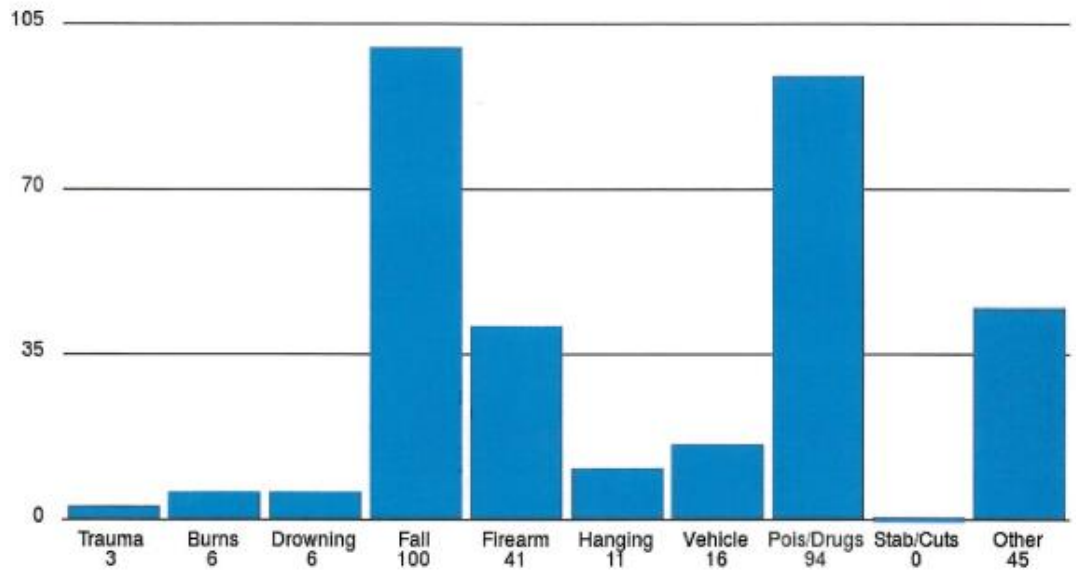


In 2022 there were 10 homicides, 56 suicides, 423 natural deaths, 13 undetermined, 223 accidental and 14 pending.



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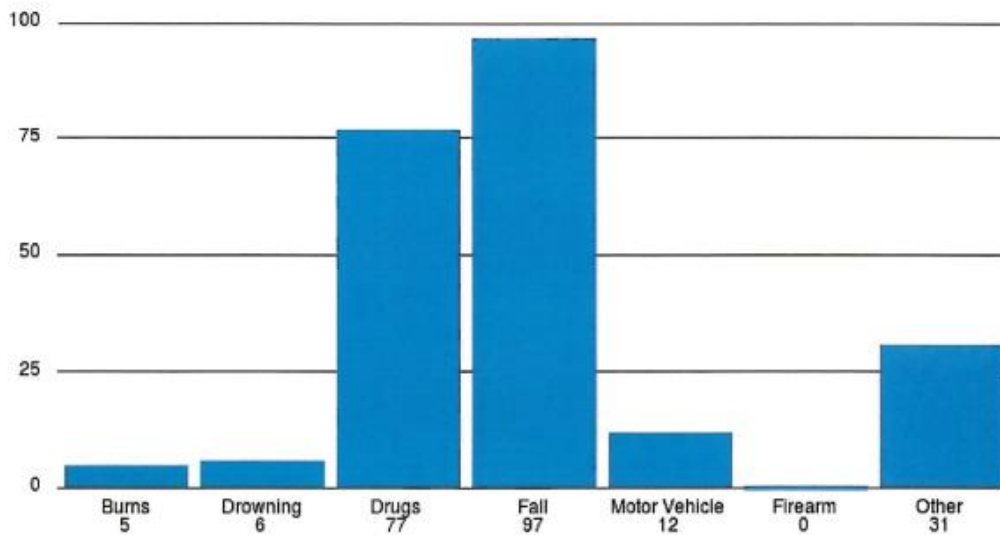
Deaths by Unnatural Causes





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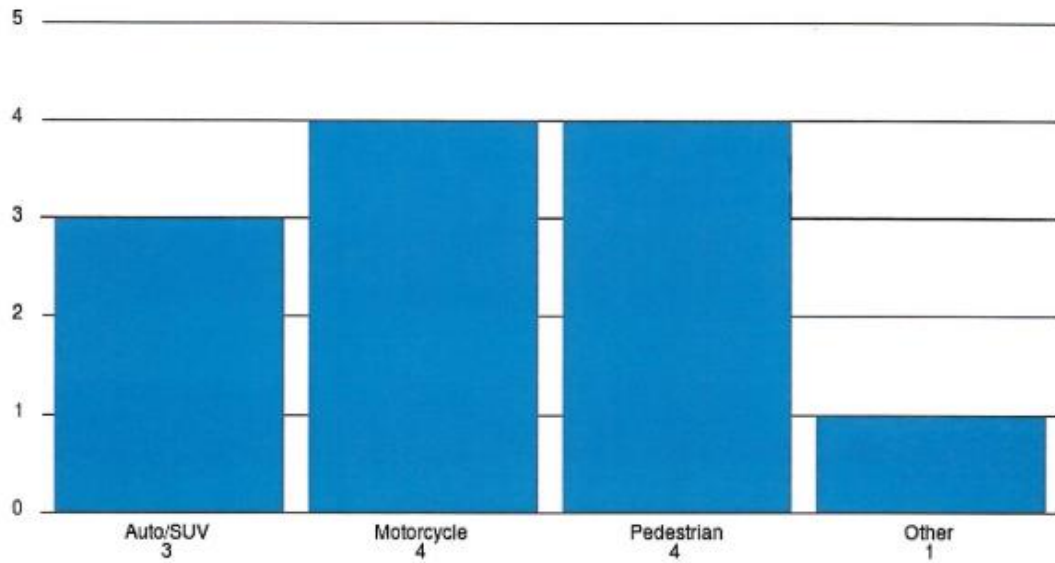
Accidental Deaths by Type





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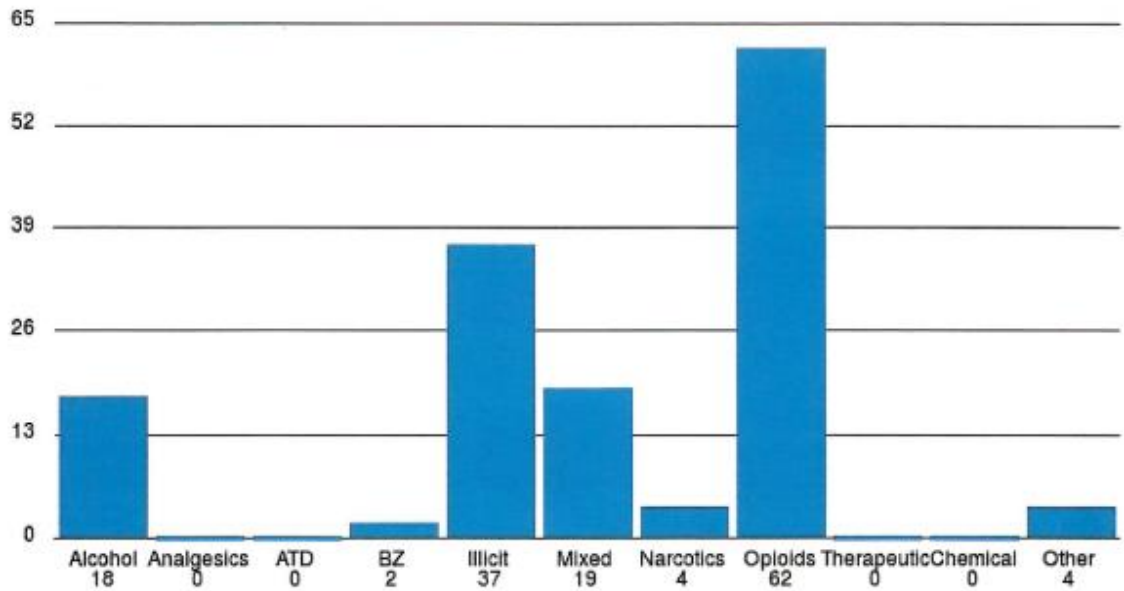
Accidental Deaths - Motor Vehicle Crashes





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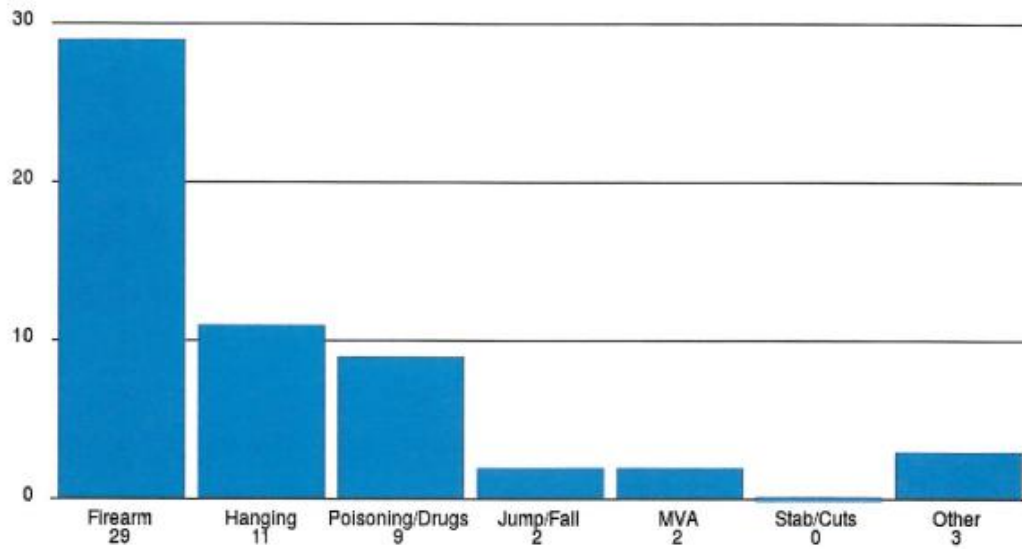
Drugs Contributing to Cause of Death





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Suicide by Means

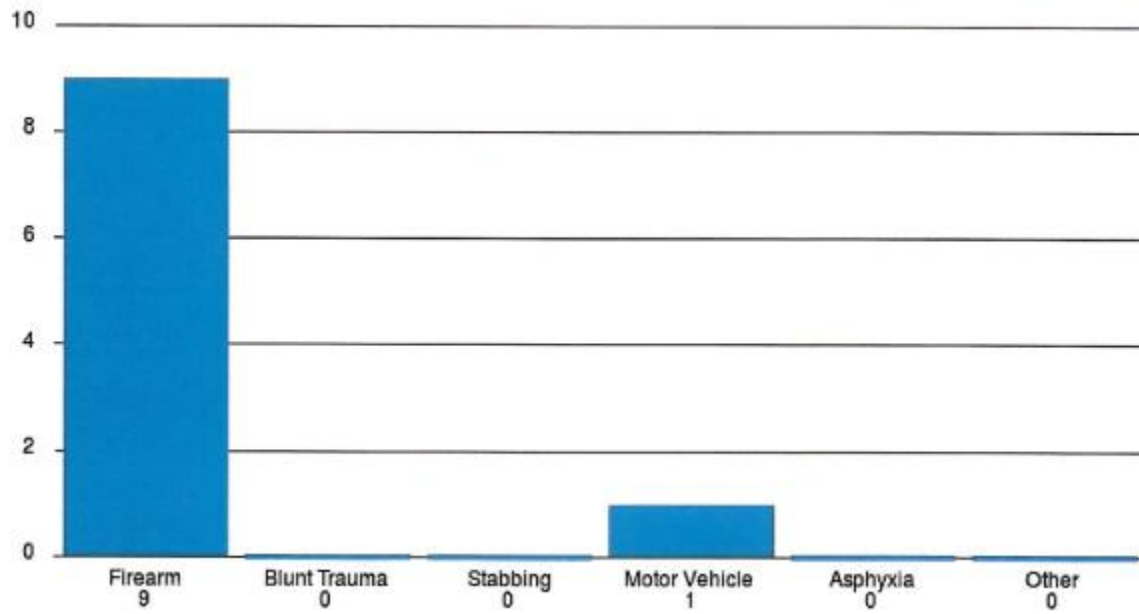


In 2022 Whatcom County there were 56 suicides. 29 with a firearm, 11 hangings, 9 poisonings, 2 jump, 2 motor vehicle collisions, and 3 others.



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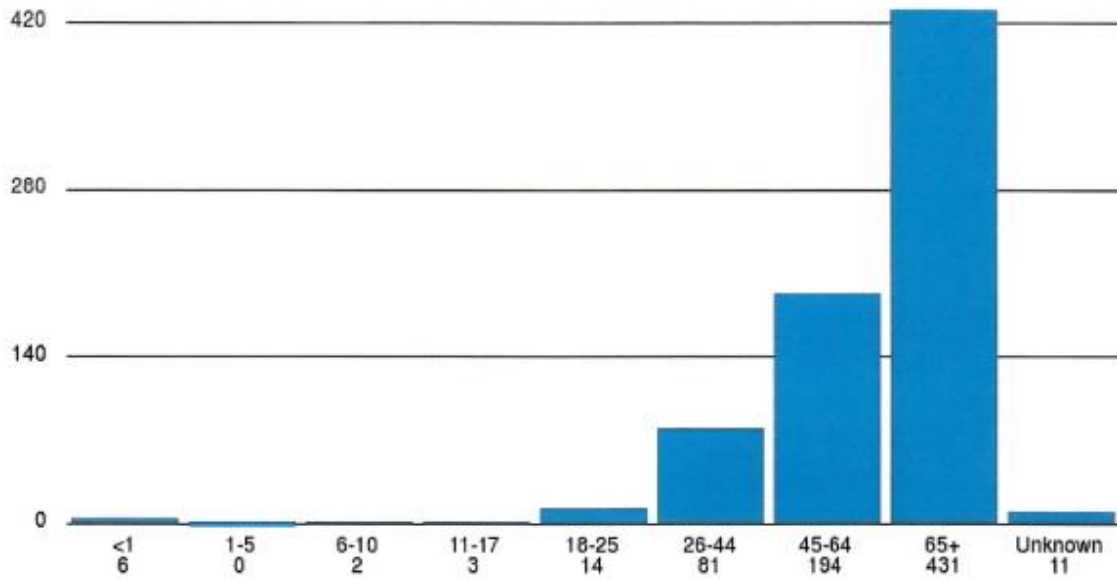
Homicide Deaths





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Deaths by Age Group





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It has been a pleasure serving the community, agencies, and residents of Whatcom County. Our goal is to bring answers to the families, community, and agencies we work in association with. With a thorough and fact-based death investigation we will be successful in providing data and information to the public and public health partners for public health and safety.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allison Hunt MD", written over a horizontal line.

Allison Hunt, M.D.
Chief Medical Examiner

A handwritten date "5.16.2023" written in black ink over a horizontal line.

Date