

*Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office*



**Allison Hunt, M.D.**  
**Chief Medical Examiner**

**2023 Annual Report**

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## **Message to the Whatcom County Council and Citizens of Whatcom County**

The Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office investigates sudden, violent, unexpected, and suspicious deaths that occur in Whatcom County. The Office of the Medical Examiner 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 and law enforcement agencies as appropriate.

The main duties of the Office of the Medical Examiner are to determine the cause and manner of death and certify deaths that are reported to the medical examiner. The cause of death is the disease process or injury that resulted in death. There are thousands of diseases and injuries that may result in death. The manner of death is a 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 undetermined.

Information collected during the investigation helps clarify the circumstances, such as the sequence of events prior to death. Evidence collected during an investigation and/or postmortem examination may help lead to the arrest or successful conviction of a suspect in a homicide case. Because deaths occur around the clock, medical examiner staff members are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

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

Our medical examiners 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 of the death. Medical examiner investigators are supplied with a pamphlet for distribution to families. The information provides answers to common questions and facts about autopsies and also provides resource information pertaining to grief counseling.

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

MEDICAL EXAMINER STAFF

Allison Hunt, M.D. Chief Medical Examiner	Deborah Hollis, D-ABMDI Operations Manager
Jennifer Nara, D.O. Forensic Pathologist	Julia Welch, D-ABMDI Lead Investigator
Desiree Marshall, M.D. Forensic Pathologist	Payton Richards, D-ABMDI Investigator
Megan Quinn, M.D. Forensic Pathologist	Maggie Beton Investigator
Fred Hollis Lead Forensic Autopsy Technician	Katie Wilson Family Liaison - Death Investigator
Julia Epps-North Autopsy Technician	Vivienne Butler Family Liaison
Arthur Morris Data Analyst	
Morgan Semtner Administrative Assistant	
Cody Fowler Transportation	

## **Types of Deaths Reportable to the Medical Examiner**

The RCWs of Washington State mandates that specific types of death be referred to the medical examiner for investigation (see below). These deaths include sudden and unexpected deaths, accidental deaths, and violent deaths. The medical examiner has the authority under these RCWs 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

## **Whatcom County Medical Examiner Cases**

Population: 212,284

Cases reported to the Medical Examiner: 726

A. Number of Medical Examiner Cases after postmortem examination: 280

1. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with Complete Autopsy: 171

2. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with External Examination: 102

3. Number of Medical Examiner cases with Limited Examination: 9

B. Number of deaths certified without postmortem examination: 396

C. Number of deaths not certified by Medical Examiner's Office after investigation: 330

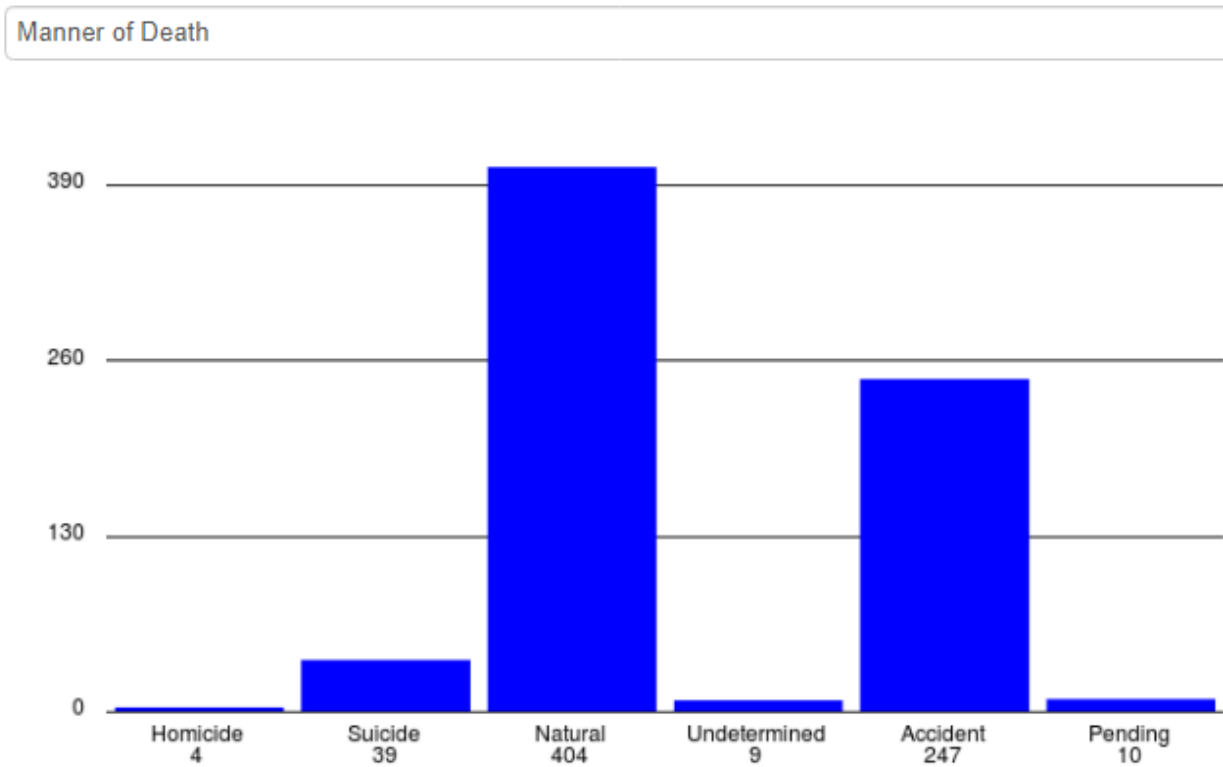
### **Definitions**

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

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

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

## Manner of Death by Postmortem Examination

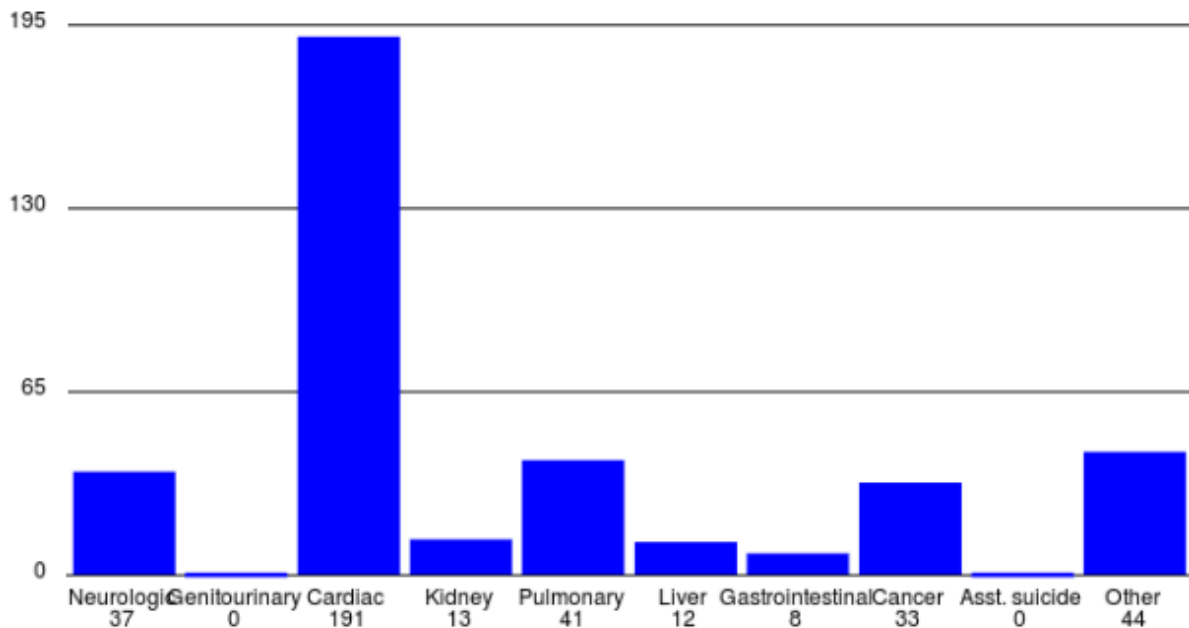


In 2023, the Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office conducted 726 forensic death investigations. The manner of death was categorized into 6 different categories. Specifically, there were 4 homicides, 39 suicides, 403 natural deaths, 9 undetermined deaths, 236 accidental deaths, and 22 pending cases. The pending status means the medical examiner has requested further study or the toxicology examination is not complete.

The statistics and graphs provide more in-depth information on the various causes of death of those who died.

## Deaths by Natural Causes

Natural Causes of Death



Natural is defined as death caused solely by disease or natural process.

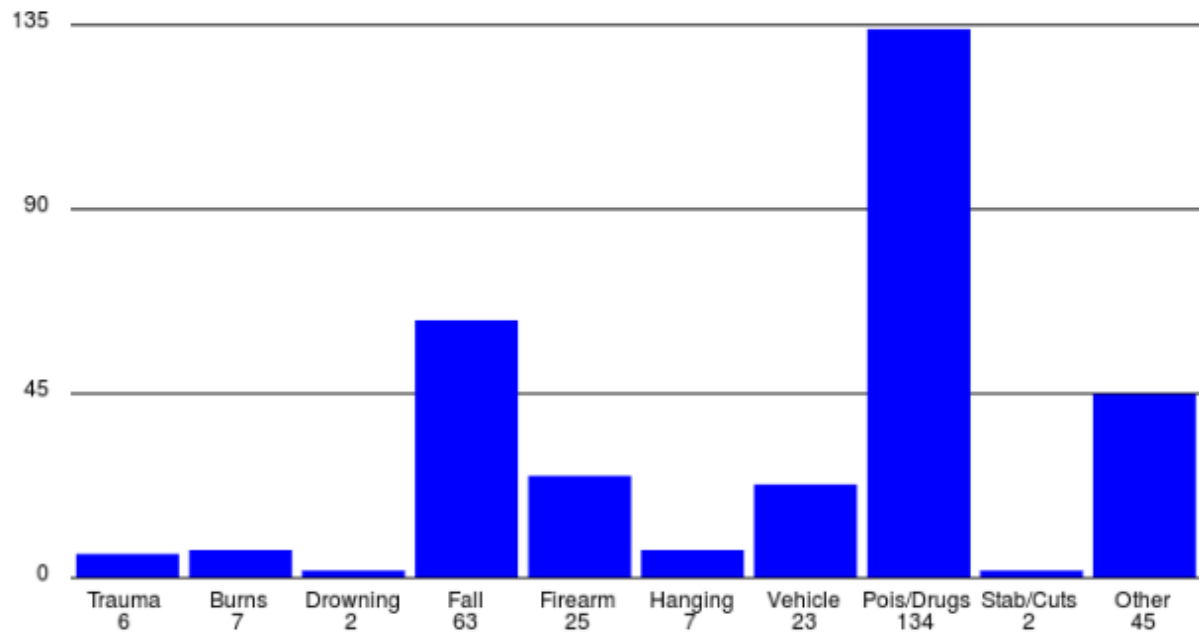
In 2023, the Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office conducted forensic death investigations to

determine the cause of natural deaths. The breakdown of natural deaths in Whatcom County is as follows:

- 37 neurologic related deaths
- 0 genitourinary-related deaths
- 188 cardiac-related deaths
- 13 kidney-related deaths
- 41 pulmonary-related deaths
- 41 liver-related deaths
- 33 cancer-related deaths
- 43 other natural deaths
- The 43 deaths that are classified as "other" and had specific causes listed on the death certificates, with other significant conditions.

## Deaths by Unnatural Causes

### Unnatural Causes of Death



An unnatural death results from an external cause, typically including homicides, suicides, accidents, medical errors, alcohol intoxications and drug overdoses.

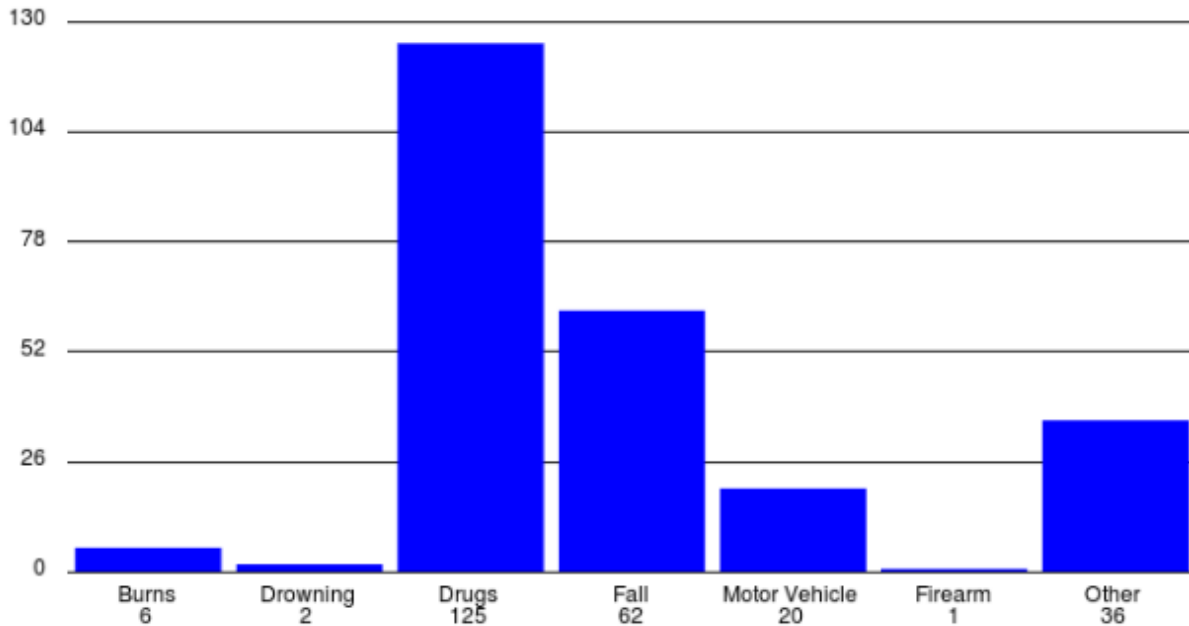
In 2023 the Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office investigated certified a total of 314 deaths due to unnatural causes.

Out of the 314 deaths there were there were:

- 6 related to trauma
- 7 due to burns
- 2 drownings
- 63 caused by fall
- 25 by firearm
- 7 hangings
- 23 due to motor vehicle crashes
- 133 due to poison/drug
- 2 caused by cutting or stabbing
- The 46 deaths that are classified as "other" and had specific causes listed on the death certificates, with other significant conditions.

## Accidental Deaths by Type

Accidental Deaths



Accidental death pertains to a demise resulting from an unusual, unintended, unexpected, and unforeseeable event.

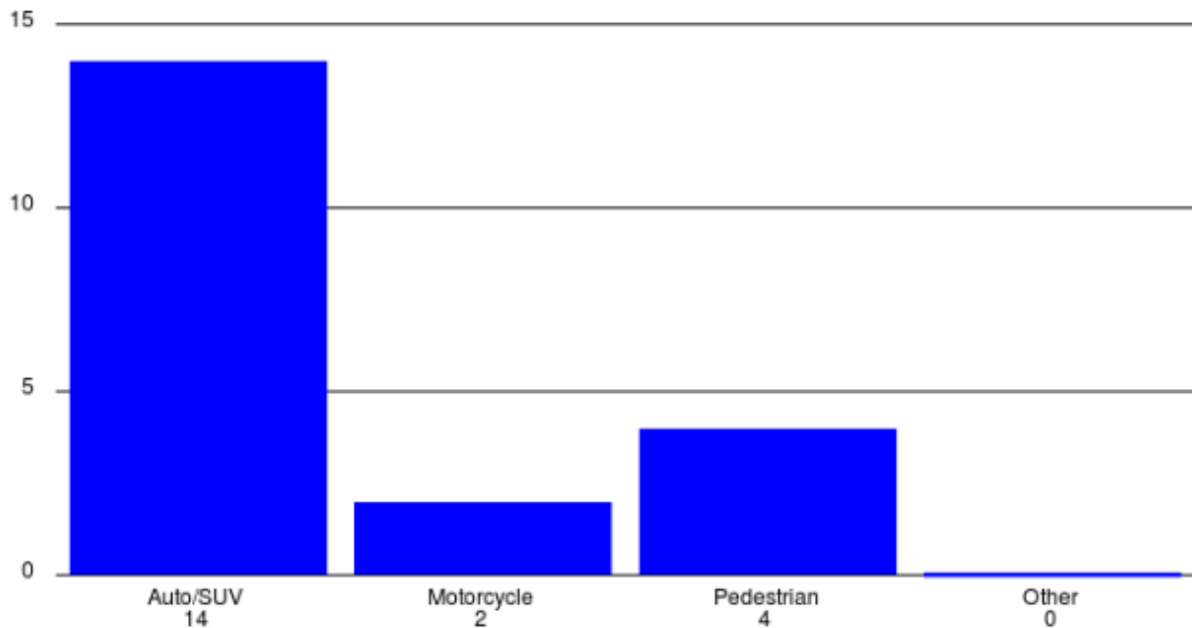
In 2023 Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office conducted investigations and determined that 251 deaths were accidental.

Of these 251 deaths, there were:

- 1 firearm related
- 2 drownings
- 6 due to burns
- 20 motor vehicle related
- 36 other
- 62 fall-related
- 124 drug-related
- The 36 deaths were classified as "other" and had specific causes listed on the death certificates, with other significant conditions.

## Accidental Deaths - Motor Vehicle Crashes

Accidental Motor Vehicle Deaths



An accidental motor vehicle crash death is generally defined as the unintentional death of a driver, passenger, or pedestrian involving a motor vehicle on public roadways.

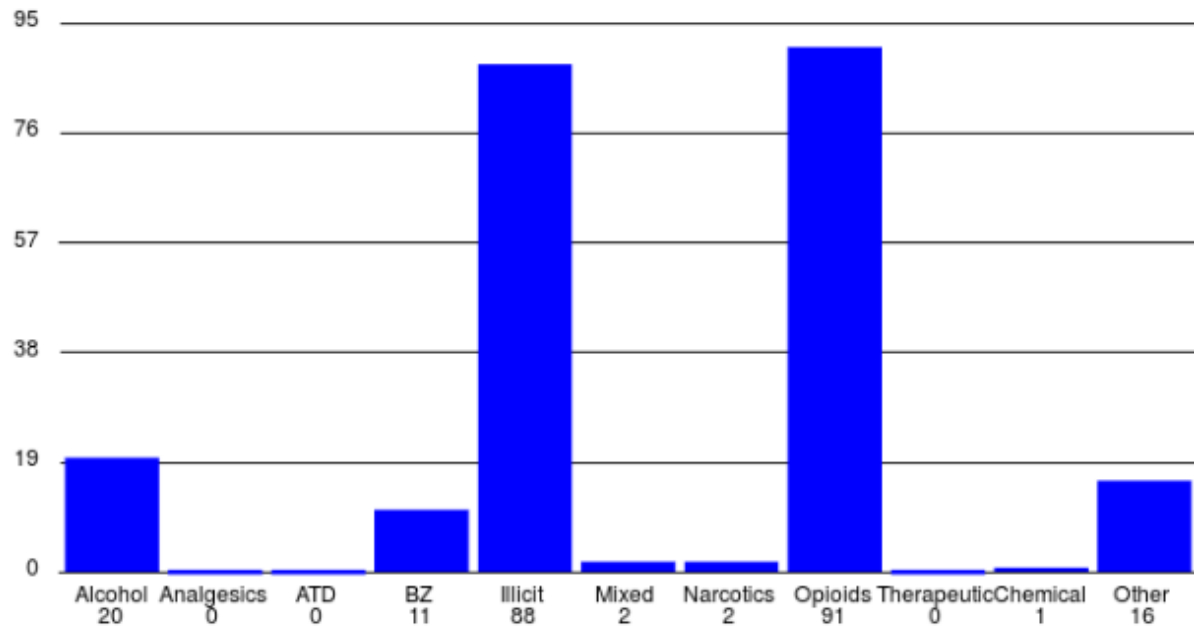
In 2023 the Whatcom County Medical Examiner certified a total of 20 deaths that were related to accidental motor vehicle crashes.

Of the 20 deaths, there were:

- 14 were automobile/SUV-related deaths
- 2 involving a motorcycle
- 4 related to motor vehicle vs. pedestrian
- 0 other

## Drugs Contributing to Cause of Death

Deaths Involving Drugs

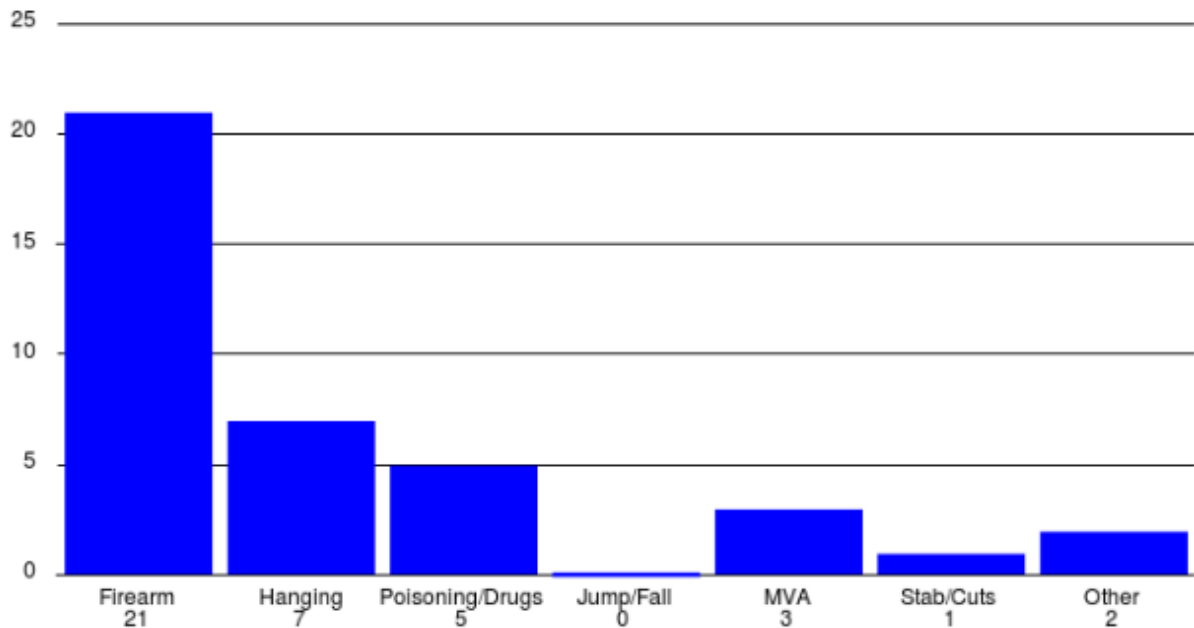


Drugs contributing to a cause of death include all deaths for which drugs are the underlying cause, including deaths attributable to acute poisoning by drugs (drug overdoses) and deaths from medical conditions resulting from chronic drug use. The Medical Examiner's Office identified 269 deaths in which drugs contributed to or influenced the deaths in 2023. These include:

- 0 therapeutic
- 1 chemical
- 2 mixed
- 2 narcotic
- 11 Benzodiazepines
- 16 other
- 20 alcohol
- 87 Illicit
- 91 opioids
- 
- Deaths that are classified as "other" and had specific causes listed on the death certificates, with other significant conditions.

## Suicide by Means

Suicide Deaths



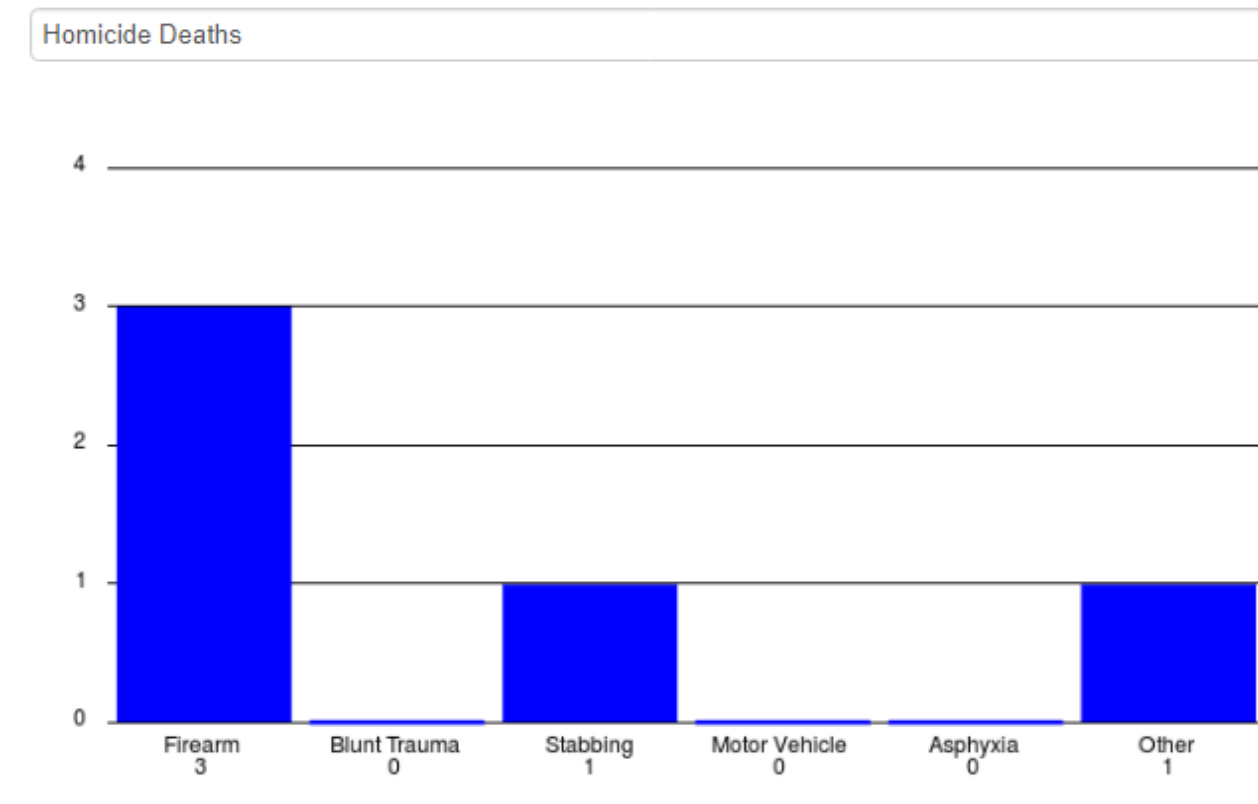
Suicide is the intentional taking of one's own life. Suicide is the intentional taking of one's own life, i.e., by his or her own hands."

In 2023 the medical examiner certified 39 deaths due to suicide. The Medical Examiner's Office identified suicide by means.

These include:

- 0 - jump/fall
- 1- stab/cuts
- 2- other
- 3 - motor vehicle
- 5 - poisoning/drugs
- 7 - hanging
- 21- firearm
- Deaths that are classified as "other" and had specific causes listed on the death certificates, with other significant conditions.

## Homicide Deaths



Homicide is a death caused by another person.

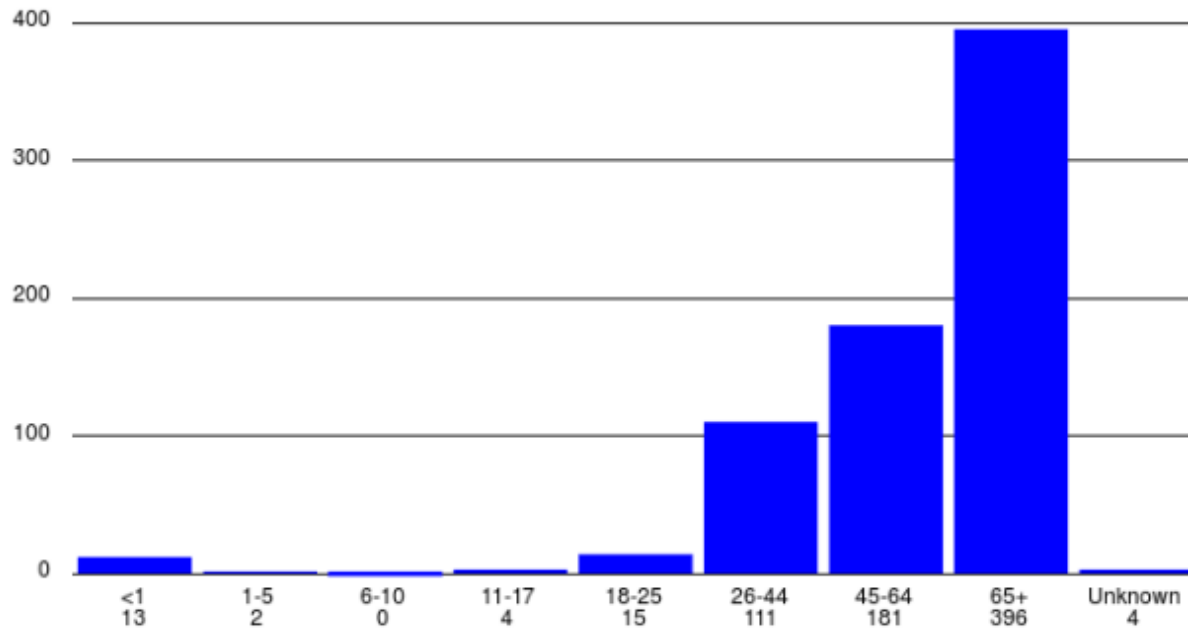
In 2023 Five deaths were certified as homicide. The Medical Examiner's Office identified the homicide deaths by the following:

These include:

- 3 Firearm
- 0 Blunt Trauma
- 1 Stabbing
- 0 Motor Vehicle
- 0 Asphyxia
- 1 other
- Deaths that are classified as "other" and had specific causes listed on the death certificates, with other significant conditions.

## Deaths by Age Group

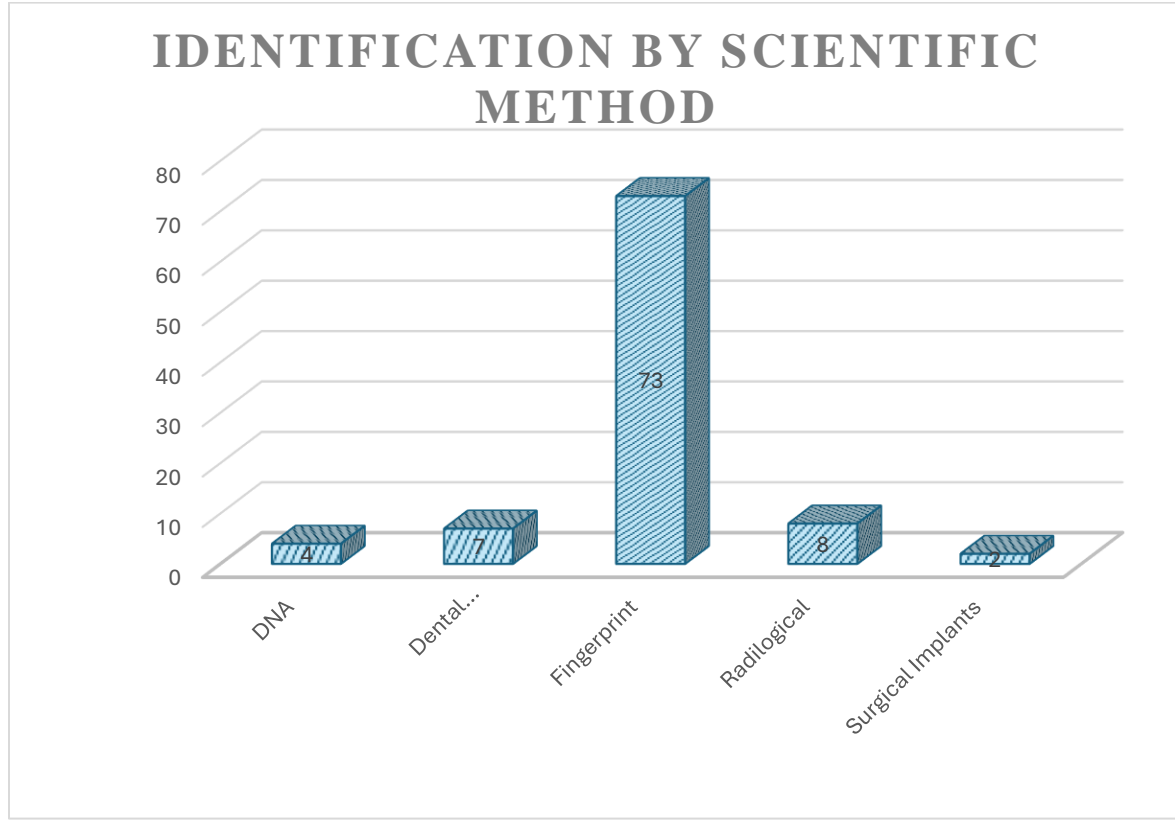
Demographic Statistics (Age)



Deaths by age group is the total number of deaths to residents of a specified age. In Whatcom County, there were:

- 13 deaths of infants under the age of 1 year
- 2 deaths between the ages of 1-5 years,
- 0 deaths between the ages of 6-10 years
- 4 deaths between the ages of 11-17 years
- 15 deaths between the ages of 18-25 years
- 111 deaths between the ages of 26-44 years
- 181 deaths between the ages of 45-64 years
- 396 deaths 65 years and older
- 4 unknown skeletal remains

## Identification Using Scientific Methods



The forensic identification of human remains is a legal determination (sealed by the jurisdictional authority's signature on a death certificate) based on the scientific matching of information on unidentified human remains.

Establishing an identification using scientific methods is crucial for the Medical Examiner's Office as it ensures accurate and reliable identification of individuals in various medicolegal cases. This process plays a vital role in criminal investigations, disaster victim identification, missing persons cases, and mass casualty incidents. By employing forensic techniques such as DNA analysis, fingerprinting, dental records comparison, and facial reconstruction, the medical examiner's office can provide conclusive evidence that aids in law enforcement efforts, closure for families, and the administration of justice. In some cases, decedents that come to our facility are not physically identifiable either they have been deceased for an extended amount of time, have trauma that prevents identification, or are skeletal.

In 2023, the Whatcom County Medical Examiner's Office was required to identify individuals with scientific methods. The numbers are listed below.

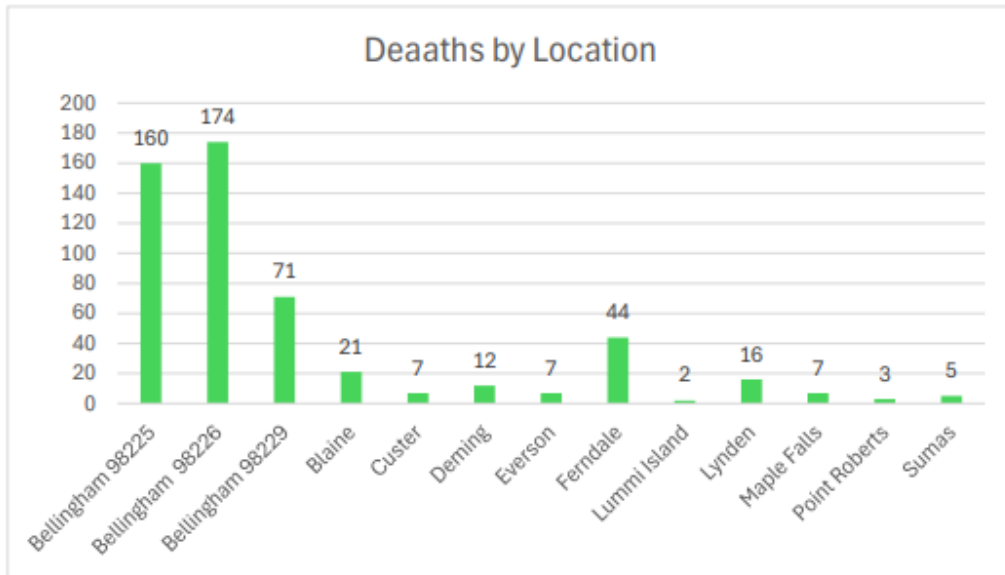
- 4 DNA:
- 7 Dental Comparison/Records
- 73 Fingerprint:
- 8 Radiological (X-Rays): 8 Cases
- 2 Surgical Implants

## Deaths by Location in Whatcom County 2023

Deaths by location represent deaths in which the medical examiner's office investigated deaths reported to the medical examiner's office.

Deaths by Location in Whatcom County

City	Number of deaths	Population	Zip code
Bellingham 98225	160	49,078	98225
Bellingham 98226	174	47,011	98226
Bellingham 98229	71	33,664	98229
Blaine	21	18,754	98230
Custer	7	3,118	98240
Deming	12	3,134	98244
Everson	7	9,067	98247
Ferndale	44	26,784	98248
Lummi Island	2	934	98262
Lynden	16	23,170	98264
Maple Falls	7	4,097	98266
Point Roberts	3	1,191	98281
Sumas	5	2,899	98295



## **Toxicology Performed**

The medical examiner's office submitted 283 jurisdictional cases for toxicology testing. Jurisdictional cases are those where an autopsy, limited examination, external examination, or toxicology only was performed. Of the 283 cases submitted for toxicology testing, 269 of the cases were identified in which drugs contributed to or influenced the death.

## **Other Important Information to Report**

### **In Custody Deaths-**

- The Medical Examiner investigated 1 in custody jail death.

**Indigent Deaths-** there were 20 indigent (unclaimed/ no next of kin) cremations/burials paid by Whatcom County in 2023 in the amount of \$16,855.02.

**Organ, Tissue & Cornea Donations-** In 2022, the medical examiner's office partnered with Lifenet Health. LifeNet Health has advanced medicine through the life-changing power of organ and tissue donation. In the year 2023, there were a total of 247 referrals for tissue donation, 57 were screened and were deemed potential donors and 16 were able to donate. "Each cell and every tissue is a promise of hope for families whose grief is softened by the knowledge that their loved one's gifts can help others; for patients waiting for more effective therapies; for pioneering scientists working toward revolutionary advances in care."

### **Exhumations-**

The Medical Examiner's Office did not order exhumations during the 2023 year.

### **Accreditation-**

The Medical Examiner's Office is working with the county toward achieving IACME accreditation. To achieve accreditation, a morgue and office space remodel was necessary.

- Currently the morgue is undergoing a complete remodel.
  - - The Medical Examiner's Office applied for a grant to purchase an X-ray machine and was awarded the grant. The X-ray machine will be ordered in 2024.
    - In 2022, the medical examiner's office experienced a shortage of cool storage space for decedents. At that time, we had a cooler with space for 4 decedents and were experiencing a higher case load that the cooler could not accommodate. In October 2022 an order for a three-compartment cooler was submitted. In the interim, we partnered with a Funeral Home for overflow storage. In April 2023, the three-compartment cooler was received.
    - The building the medical examiner initially began utilizing for the Medical Examiner's Office in 2022 is currently undergoing a complete remodel. The work on the building located at 1500 State Street began in August 2023. The medical

examiner and staff were temporarily relocated to two separate locations to resume operations.

- The remodel of the morgue will accommodate locked and limited access storage for personal property and evidence. Access-controlled entrances will be added. An isolation morgue separate from the main morgue will be added. Ventilation and exhaust will be replaced. The floors will be sealed as appropriate. Office space for pathology staff will be added. These are just a few changes highlighted, however, there are other changes not mentioned. The medical examiner staff anticipates returning to the initial building in 2024.
- Moving forward, the medical examiner's office will be applying for a grant to replace outdated equipment which will modernize the morgue.