

Kittitas County Coroner

2018 Annual Report



Member of the Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners

Member of International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Message to the Board of Commissioners and Citizens of Kittitas County	3
Kittitas County Coroner's Office Staff	4
Types of Deaths Reportable to the Coroner	5
Kittitas County Coroner Cases	6
2018 Total Manner of Death	7
Deaths by Natural Causes	9
Factors Contributing in Unnatural Causes	11
Accidental Deaths - Types of Motor Vehicle Involved	12
Drugs Contributing to Cause of Death	13
Suicide Death Factors	14
Homicide Deaths	15
Deaths by Age Group	15

Message to the Board of Commissioners and Citizens of Kittitas County

The Kittitas County Coroner's Office investigates sudden, violent, unexpected, and suspicious deaths that occur within the boundaries of Kittitas County.

The mission of the Kittitas County Coroner's Office is to serve and protect the interests of the community. This is achieved by determining the cause, manner, and mechanism of sudden or unexplained deaths, and by identifying deceased persons and notifying their next of kin, regardless of where they may live in the world, while ensuring the deceased and their property are treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

We accomplish our mission with medicolegal- trained investigators, forensically trained pathologists, and other scientific methods of inquiry. We serve as an independent finder of fact in our search for the truth. The Coroner's investigation and conclusions strive to provide a balance to the scales of justice and seek resolution to medical mysteries. Complete findings of the death investigation are distributed to families and law enforcement agencies as appropriate.

The main duties of the Coroner's Office are to determine the cause and manner of death, and certify deaths that are reported to the Coroner's Office. 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 indeterminate.

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, Coroner staff members are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

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

Our Coroner and investigators also extend their duties to the living by answering questions and addressing concerns regarding deaths within the county. The Kittitas County Coroner frequently makes personal contact with family members of a deceased and assists them by providing appropriate answers regarding the circumstances of the death.

In 2008 our office contributed significant input toward the implementation of a web based death investigation report system. After providing assistance to Occupational Research and Assessment, Inc. of Big Rapids, Michigan, the Medicolegal Death Investigation Log or, MDI Log was launched in June of 2008. MDI Log is a comprehensive investigative report/database system that enables the Coroner to review death scene investigation information from a secure Internet site any time of the day. MDI Log enables the Coroner and Deputy Coroners 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 Coroner and Medical Examiners offices across the country.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Kittitas County Board of Commissioners for their support of the Coroner program and the services we provide to the citizens of the Kittitas County.

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Types of Deaths Reportable to the Coroner

Revised Code of Washington (RCW 68.50.10) [1] remands jurisdiction of all deceased persons who come to their death suddenly when in apparent good health without medical attendance within the thirty-six hours preceding death; or where the circumstances of death indicate death was caused by unnatural or unlawful means; or where death occurs under suspicious circumstances; or where a coroner's autopsy or postmortem or coroner's inquest is to be held; or where death results from unknown or obscure causes, or where death occurs within one year following an accident; or where the death is caused by any violence whatsoever, or where death results from a known or suspected abortion; whether self- induced or otherwise; where death apparently results from drowning, hanging, burns, electrocution, gunshot wounds, stabs or cuts, lightning, starvation, radiation, exposure, alcoholism, narcotics or other addictions, tetanus, strangulations, suffocation or smothering; or where death is due to premature birth or still birth; or where death is due to a violent contagious disease or suspected contagious disease which may be a public health hazard; or where death results from alleged rape, carnal knowledge or sodomy, where death occurs in a jail or prison; where a body is found dead or is not claimed by relatives or friends, is hereby vested in the county coroner, which bodies may be removed and placed in the morgue under such rules as are adopted by the coroner with the approval of the county commissioners, having jurisdiction, providing therein how the bodies shall be brought to and cared for at the morgue and held for the proper identification where necessary.

Deaths Reportable to the Coroner in which a postmortem examination would generally be ordered include, but are not limited to:

- **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)
- **Unexpected infant deaths**
- **Deaths resulting from a violent or neglectful crime**

[1] <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=68.50.010>

Kittitas County Coroner Cases

Kittitas County Population per US Census July 1, 2018	47,364
Cases Reported to Kittitas County Coroner's Office	220
A. Number of deaths certified after postmortem examination	51
1. Number of Cases with Complete Autopsy	50
2. Number of Cases with External Examination	0
3. Number of Cases with Limited Examination	1
B. Number of deaths certified without postmortem examination	66
C. Number of deaths not certified by Coroner's Office after investigation	103

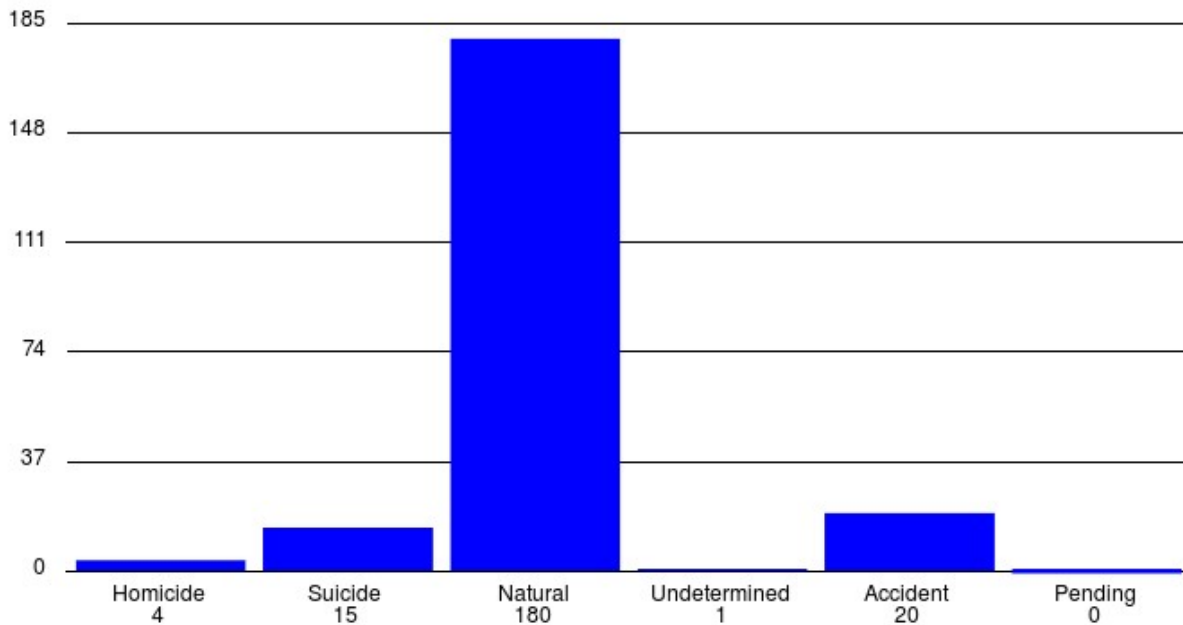
Definitions

Complete Autopsy: A complete external and internal examination of a decedent. A full autopsy includes a toxicology test. As mentioned previously a full autopsy will generally be completed for any death which occurred as a result of violent, accidental, suspicious or neglectful circumstances and for in custody/prisoner and unexplained infant deaths.

Limited Examination: An examination which is focused on a specific organ or region of the body, for example, the heart. The limited examination also includes an external examination. A limited examination may also indicate that only a toxicology test was completed.

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

2018 Total Manner of Death



Manner of Death is the way to categorize death as required by the Washington State Department of Health. The classifications are natural, accident, suicide, homicide, undetermined, and pending. Only medical examiner's and coroners may use all of the manners of death. Other certifiers must use natural or refer the death to the Coroner. The manner of death is determined by the Coroner.

- **Natural Deaths (180)**

Natural is defined as death caused solely by disease or natural process. If natural death is hastened by injury (such as a fall or drowning in a bathtub), the manner of death is not considered natural.

Sudden Unexplained Infant Death (SUID), formerly known as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), is a subset of natural death. It is the sudden death of an infant under one year of age which remains unexplained after a thorough and complete investigation. The investigation includes a complete autopsy, examination of the death scene, and clinical history. If significant risk factors were present, such as an unsafe sleep environment, including co-sleeping or inappropriate bedding, then the cause of death would fall out of the definition of SUID and the manner would be classified as "undetermined."

- **Accidental Deaths (20)**

Accident is defined for death certification purposes as an unnatural death resulting from an inadvertent chance happening. Traffic related fatalities (involving vehicles used for transportation on any public roadway) are classified as accidents. On the job injury related deaths are referred to as industrial deaths and are classified as accidents. Deaths related to illicit drug or excessive medication use, in the absence of specifically supporting the conclusion of the manner of death being homicide or suicide, are classified as accident.

Traffic Deaths are a subset of accidental deaths, but deaths resulting from traffic accidents are reported

separately from other accidental deaths for statistical purposes. A traffic death is defined as an unintentional death of a driver, passenger, or pedestrian involving a motor vehicle on public roadways. Accidents involving motor vehicles on private property (such as driveways) are not included in this category and are classified non-traffic vehicular deaths. Classification of traffic related deaths as an "accident" does not preclude the prosecution as a vehicular homicide by legal authorities.

Complication of Therapy Deaths are accidental deaths that occur during or due to complications that occur during medical, surgical, therapeutic, or diagnostic procedures.

- **Suicide (15)**

Suicide is defined for death certification purposes as a death from self-inflicted injury with evidence of intent to die. Evidence of intent includes an explicit expression, such as a suicide note or verbal threat, previous attempts, or an act constituting implicit intent. An example would be a self-inflicted contact/close range gunshot wound (particularly of the head, chest, or abdomen) that is recognized as having very high potential for lethality, and is considered to be implicit evidence of intent to die.

- **Homicide (4)**

Homicide is defined as the action of one person directly causing the death of another. A death that occurs during and is related to the commission of a felony is also considered homicide. A violent death may stem from some kind of deliberate or purposeful action, but intent to cause death need not be present or proven for the classification as homicide.

Homicide and murder are not the same. All murders are homicides, not all homicides are murder. "Murder" is not an acceptable manner of death classification for death certification purposes. "Murder" is a term used under specific conditions in criminal law matters as a general concept. An example might be that of unintentional firearms-related hunting death. While it may be classified as a homicide, it is up to legal authorities to determine when to prosecute such a case as "murder," "manslaughter," etc.

- **Undetermined (1)**

Undetermined is listed as the manner of death classification in only a small number of cases each year.

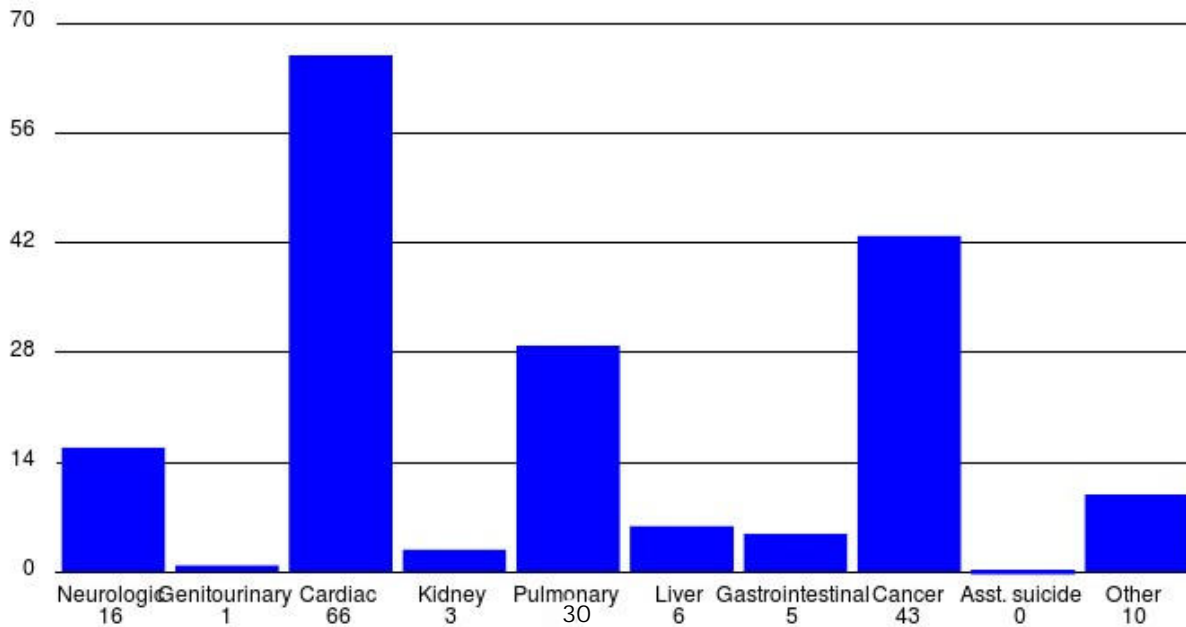
Undetermined is an appropriate designation for cases that have very little available information about the circumstances surrounding the death (e.g., partial skeletal remains) or where known information equally supports, conflicts with, more than one manner of death. An undetermined manner of death is assigned to cases of unnatural death when a clear preponderance of evidence supporting a specific manner (homicide, accident, or suicide) is not available.

Some unexpected infant deaths that are not classified as "natural" (SIDS), such as when an unsafe sleeping environment is present, may be classified as "undetermined" in manner.

- **Pending (0)**

Pending may be listed temporarily on the death certificate for cause and/or manner when additional investigation, information and/or test results are required for certification. These classifications are generally amended as soon as additional information becomes available.

Deaths by Natural Causes



Natural Deaths

Natural is defined as death caused solely by disease or natural process. If natural death is hastened by injury (such as a fall or drowning in a bathtub), the manner of death is not considered natural.

Sudden Unexplained Infant Death (SUID), formerly known as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), is a subset of natural death. It is the sudden death of an infant under one year of age which remains unexplained after a thorough and complete investigation. The investigation includes a complete autopsy, examination of the death scene, and clinical history. If significant risk factors were present, such as an unsafe sleep environment, including co-sleeping or inappropriate bedding, then the cause of death would fall out of the definition of SUID and the manner would be classified as "undetermined."

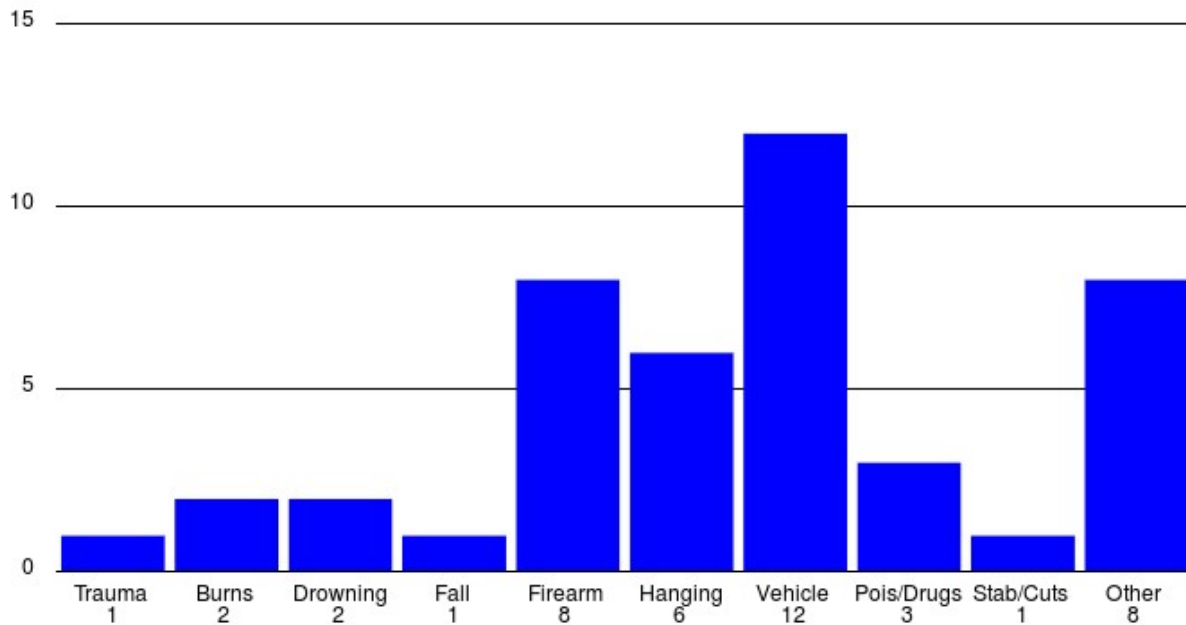
The following explanations are taken from the seventeenth edition of the Merck Manual to help explain how natural causes of death are categorized in this report:

- **(16) Neurological** death may occur from injury, disease or disorder of the nervous system. Some examples are cerebrovascular accidents such as stroke or aneurysm, convulsive disorders such as epilepsy, genetic alterations such as muscular dystrophy or Huntington's disease, neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, traumatic brain or spinal injury, euplastic conditions such as brain tumors or from infectious processes such as meningitis.
- **(1) Genitourinary** deaths are those occurring from disorders. Genitourinary organs are the bladder, kidney (renal), vagina, ovaries, penis or testicle. Genitourinary disorders are illnesses or conditions which occur when the urinary and genital organs are not functioning properly. Genitourinary disorders

may also occur in the uterus, ureter, bladder, urethra and the two sphincter muscles.

- **(66) Cardiac** death pertains to the heart. Some cardiac deaths include heart failure, cardiac or respiratory arrest, hypertension, heart disease such as aortic aneurysm and aortic dissection, endocarditis and cardiac tumors.
- **(3) Kidney** deaths include infection, transport disorders such as Bartter's or Liddle's syndrome, trauma, or tumors of the kidney(s).
- **(30) Pulmonary** death pertains to the lungs. Respiratory failure such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder (COPD), emphysema.
- **(6) Liver** death is caused by diseases which create an inability for the liver to perform its normal metabolic functions. Liver disease may be caused by an ongoing health condition like diabetes, hepatitis, cirrhosis or fatty liver.
- **(5) Gastrointestinal** death may occur from an inflammation of the stomach and intestine which originates from different types of bacteria.
- **(43) Cancer** can develop in any tissue of any organ at any age. Cancer is an uncontrolled or unregulated division and growth of cells in a part of the body. These cells then spread into surrounding tissue crowding out normal cells.
- **(10) Other** deaths are investigated and after a postmortem examination no obvious cause may be found. Using other as a cause of death is pretty uncommon but may be used when an autopsy does not reveal an apparent cause of death, there is no history of illness or heart disease, no toxins, drugs or injuries.

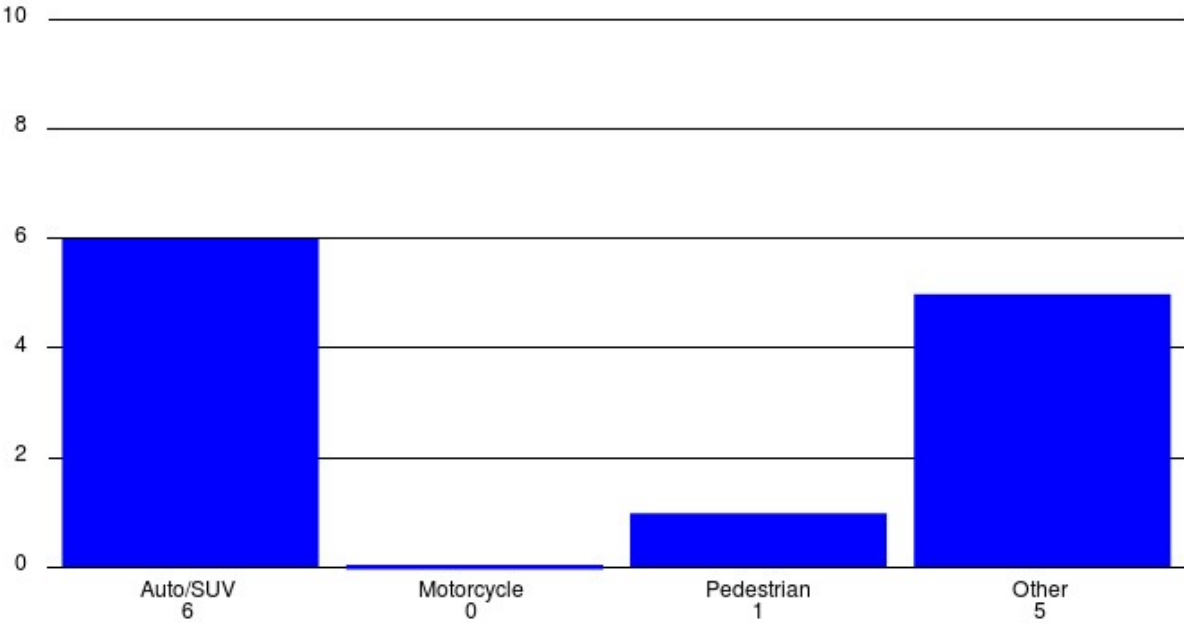
Factors Contributing in Unnatural Causes



Unnatural death is defined as a death resulting from an external cause, such as intentional injury (homicide or suicide) or unintentional injury (in an accident). For manner of death there are three categories: Accident, Homicide and Suicide which are explained below.

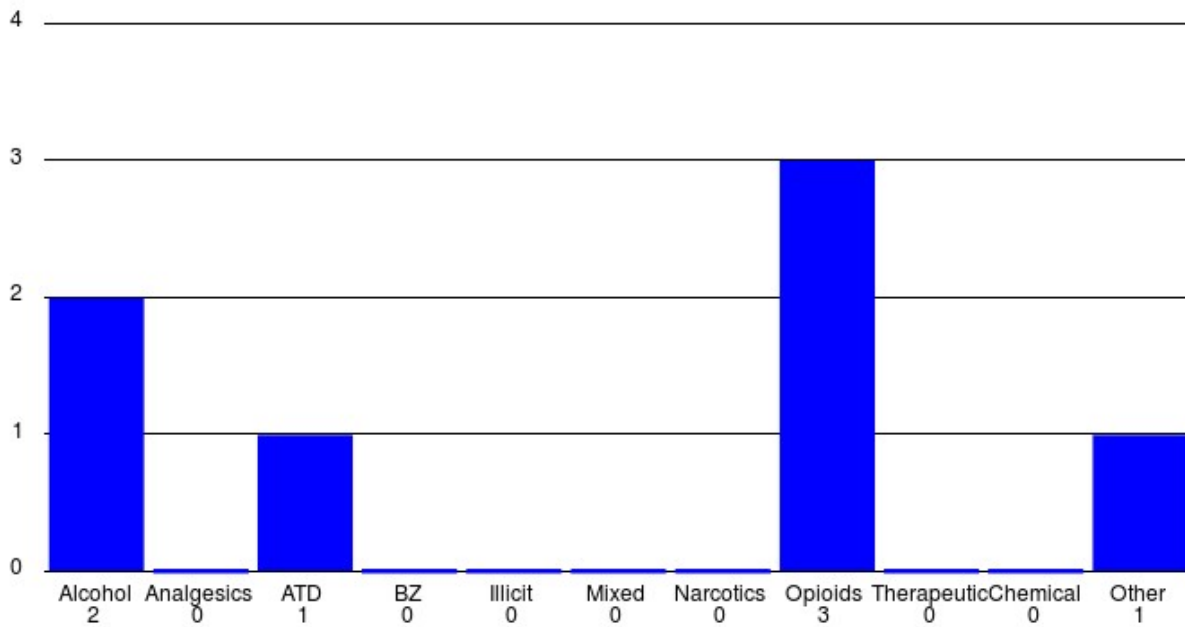
Some of the external mechanisms affecting unnatural death include injury, inhalation, ingestion or submersion. An unnatural death may include multiple factors such as a motor vehicle accident may also include alcohol.

Accidental Deaths - Types of Motor Vehicle Involved



This table illustrates the total types of vehicles involved in motor vehicle fatalities.

Drugs Contributing to Cause of Death

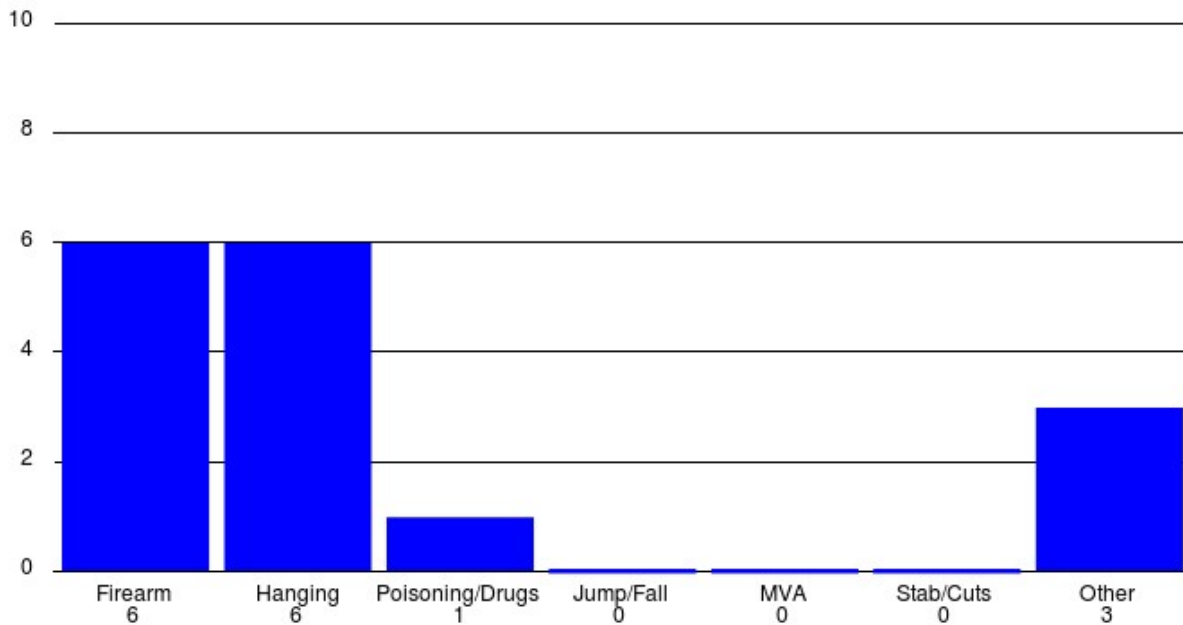


The manner of death may include multiple types of drugs such as alcohol and therapeutic drugs or medications.

A national study conducted by the University of Maryland reviewed 12 sentinel communities, the closest to Kittitas County was King county (Seattle area). There are drug patterns and trend studies available for 2018, 2017, 2016 and 2015 at <https://ndews.umd.edu/publications/king-county-seattle-area-sentinel-community-site-scs>.

This information may be useful to help predict future drug patterns for our area.

Suicide Death Factors

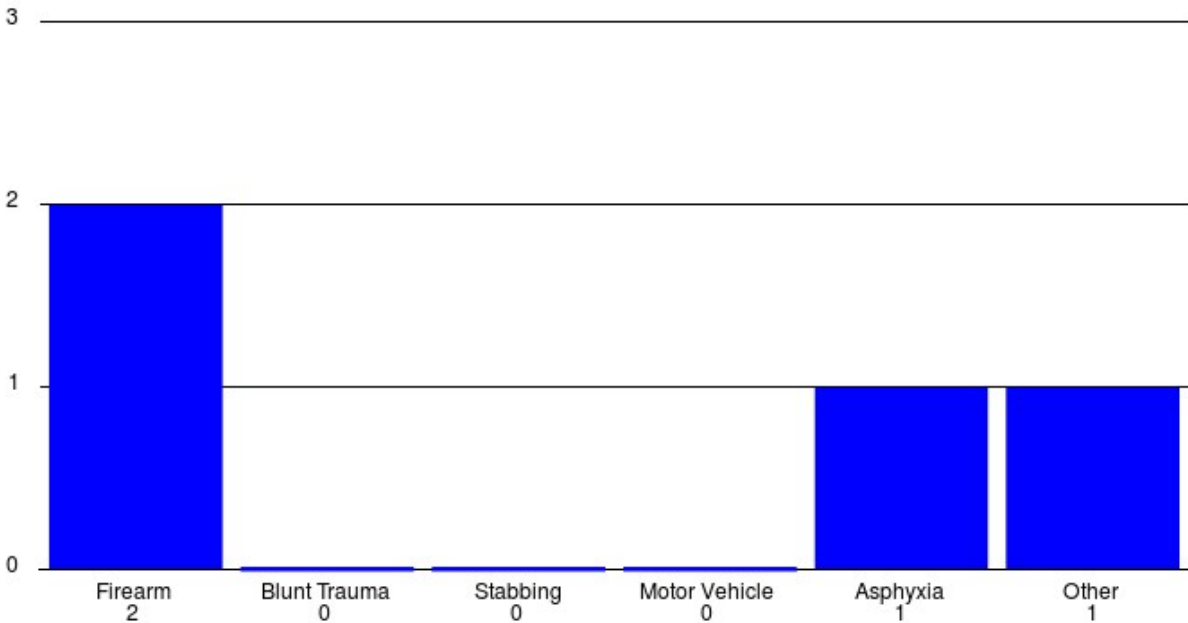


This chart does not include the total number of suicides. Instead, it illustrates factors which may have contributed to the suicides investigated. For example, the death was due to a firearm, however, drugs may also have been involved.

According to the Pacific Northwest Suicide Prevention Resource Center Washington State has a suicide rate 15.78/100,000. Some suicide statistics for Washington include:

- Suicide is the #2 cause of death for 10-24-year-olds.
- Firearms were the leading method of suicide for both males and females.
- In 2014, 1,111 Washington residents died by suicide.
- American Indians and Alaska Natives die by suicide at a higher rate than every other ethnic and racial group.
- From 2012-2015, 77% of suicide deaths were males.

Homicide Deaths



Deaths by Age Group

