

Kittitas County

Coroner

2020 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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Year in Review - Letter From Coroner Nick Henderson

With COVID-19 in the community I am happy to say death investigations have increased by only one from last year. In 2019 there were 246 death investigations completed, in 2020 there were 247. This speaks volumes to your commitment to stemming the spread of the coronavirus. Like you I was worried how the pandemic might affect Kittitas County and if it would become overwhelming. My thanks to you for keeping the community safe and for your continued efforts to do so.

The wall calendar shown on the next page illustrates daily activity in 2020. Deaths investigated were noted on the calendar by highlighting the day orange and then writing in the number of deaths investigated. For example, on January 1st there was one investigation and on February 3rd there were three.

In November, DNA from two unidentified cold case homicide victims was submitted for testing to a national laboratory. We are eagerly awaiting the test results and hope to provide information that will not only help identify these victims but also help further the homicide investigations. I will send out a press release when the DNA testing is completed sometime in the next 4-6 months.

The Coroner's Office is proud to have received a Department of Justice funding opportunity entitled "Strengthening the Medical Examiner-Coroner System Program". The approved award amount is \$99,799.00 and will be used beginning January 2021 to seek national certification for all investigators and international accreditation of the office and facility.

The Coroner's Office team is small, but our roots grow deep. Our dedication to the community and responsibility to get things right is out of respect to our friends, families, and neighbors. In a rural community that has often found itself under national scrutiny the Kittitas County Coroner's Office is dedicated to building stronger business practices and providing professional, informed, complete, and timely death investigations.

One of our five investigators successfully completed national certification in October 2020. Two more are preparing to take the certification test early 2021. I am committed to accreditation which will ensure investigators from your Coroner's office are trained and evaluated on current best practices, are able to provide augmented death investigations, and improve legal certainty, regardless of the circumstances surrounding a death.

Sincerely,

Nick Henderson

Nick Henderson, Coroner

2020

JANUARY 2020							FEBRUARY 2020							MARCH 2020							
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	
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JULY 2020							AUGUST 2020							SEPTEMBER 2020							
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OCTOBER 2020							NOVEMBER 2020							DECEMBER 2020							
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	
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		/	/				2							/	/						

Kittitas County Coroner Personnel And Consultants

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Forensic Pathologist / Consultant

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Forensic Anthropologist / Consultant

Norman Thiersch, MD

Forensic Pathologist / Consultant

Office Location

507 N Nanum St, Suite 113A
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What Your Coroner's Office Does

Determine Jurisdiction:

Investigates deaths that occur within the boundaries of Kittitas County per Washington State Law.

Revised Code of Washington Chapter 68.50.10 RCW (Human Remains) 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.[1]

[1] [RCW 68.50.010: Coroner's jurisdiction over remains. \(wa.gov\)](#)

Deaths Reportable to the Coroner:

- 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 Coroner may order an autopsy for any of the reportable deaths listed above.

Mission Statement:

The mission of your Coroner's Office is to serve and protect the interests of the community by determining the cause, manner, and mechanism of sudden or unexplained deaths. And to identify deceased persons and notify 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.

Our Duty:

The main duties of your Coroner's Office are to determine the cause and manner of death and certify deaths that are reported. Information gathered during our investigations and reported on death certificates is used locally, statewide, and federally for statistical analysis and public safety and health planning.

Cause of Death:

The disease or injury that resulted in death. There are thousands of diseases and injuries that may result in death.

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

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 criminal case. Because deaths occur around the clock, Coroner staff

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

With the skilled experience of the Coroner, Deputy Coroner investigators, Consultant Forensic Pathologists, and Consultant Forensic Anthropologist we believe the quality of death investigations in Kittitas County are among the best in Washington State. The death scene investigation reports filed by the investigators are very thorough and supply comprehensive information.

The 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.

Our Database:

In 2018 the Coroner's Office contributed significant feedback toward the implementation of a web-based death investigation report system. After aiding in research and assessment the Medicolegal Death Investigation Log or, MDI Log was launched in June of 2018.

MDI Log is a comprehensive investigative reporting system based upon the Center for Disease Control guidelines for death scene investigations. MDI Log enables the Coroner to report, review, and share death scene investigation information from a secure internet site any time of the day or night. This database has evolved to become a valuable tool for our office, and it is now available to Coroner and Medical Examiners offices across the country.

2020 Investigations

Kittitas County Population [1]	47,935
Cases Reported to Coroner's Office	246
A. Accepted for further investigation	94
1. <i>Total accepted with scene investigation (94)</i>	
2. <i>Total accepted transported to the morgue (93)</i>	
B. Declined for further investigation by the office	152
Death Certified by Coroner	71
C. Certified after investigation and a forensic postmortem examination	40
1. <i>Total with Complete Autopsy (37)</i>	
2. <i>Total with Partial Autopsy (0)</i>	
3. <i>Total with External Examination (0)</i>	
4. <i>Total with Toxicology Only (3)</i>	
5. <i>Total number of hospital autopsies under coroner jurisdiction (0)</i>	
D. Certified after an investigation, without forensic examination	31
Unclaimed	1
Unidentified	2

E. Cases from 2020 (0)

F. Cases prior to 2020 remaining unidentified (2)

Exhumations in 2020

0

Total Cases Reported to Coroner's Office (246)

The total number of cases reported to your Coroner's Office. All reports of a death or remains are investigated to varying extents by a death investigator (Coroner or Deputy Coroner). Some of these cases may require an investigation of the scene or location where the death occurred. Some cases may only need an investigator to speak with the decedent's health care provider.

Total Number of Forensic Postmortem Examinations (40)

The total number of forensic examinations completed to augment the coroner's office death investigation. Investigators from your Coroner's Office complete reports in MDILog.com for all 246 investigations. An autopsy will be ordered when the manner of death is determined to be Homicide, Suicide, or Accidental and may be ordered for another manner of death when the coroner deems it necessary.

Complete Autopsy (37)

A complete autopsy includes both an external and internal examination of the body and is done by a Forensic Pathologist. Toxicology examinations are completed as part of a complete autopsy.

Partial Autopsy (3)

A limited examination which is focused on a specific organ or region of the body, i.e., heart is done by a Forensic Pathologist. Toxicology examinations are completed as part of a partial autopsy.

External Examination (0)

An external or physical examination of the decedent is done by a Forensic Pathologist. Toxicology may be completed as part of an external examination.

Toxicology Only (3)

A toxicology sample analyzed by a Forensic Toxicologist or, a Forensic Anthropologist's examination of remains to determine if they are human or non-human.

Deaths Certified by Coroner (69)

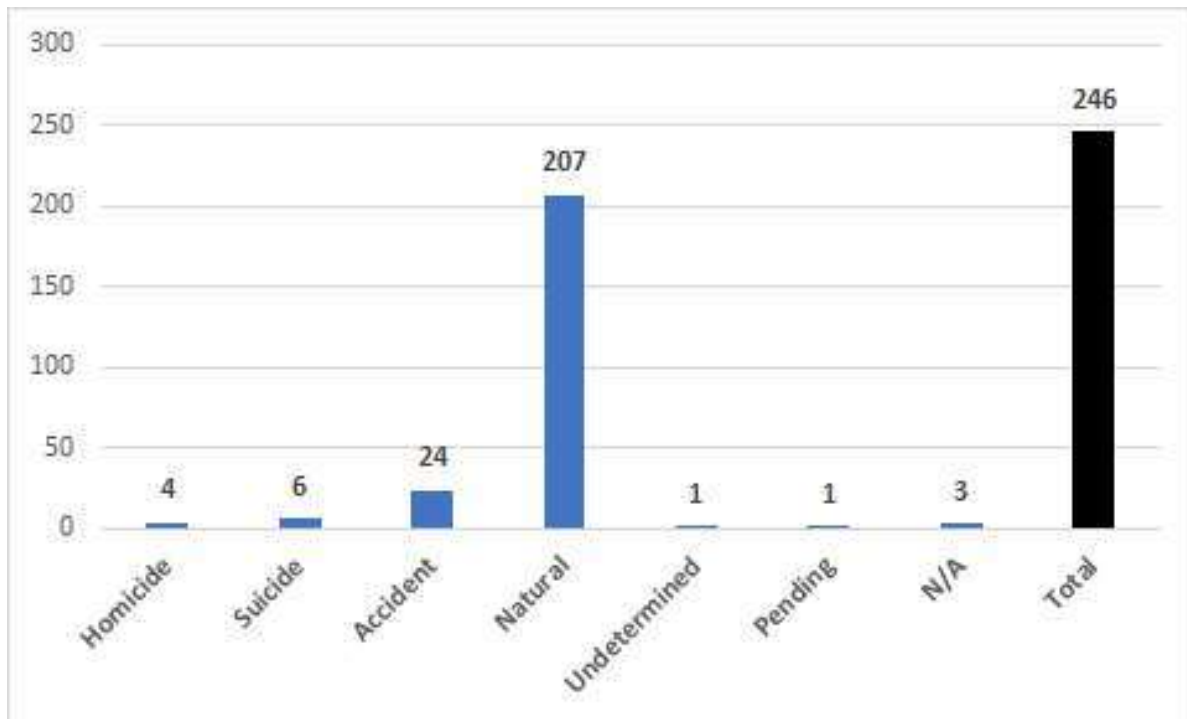
The number of deaths reported to and certified by the coroner. These are the cases that were investigated, and then the death certificate was completed and signed by the coroner.

Death Certificates Signed by Medical Practitioner (177)

The number of deaths reported to your Coroner's Office that were certified by the decedent's medical practitioner. Cases that were investigated and then the death certificate was completed and signed by the decedent's physician.

[1] <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/kittitascountywashington,WA/BZA010218>

Manner Of Death Totals



Total Cases Reported (246)

Manner of Death criteria is determined by the Center for Disease Control and the Washington State Health Department and tracked by the database (MDI Log) for each investigation.

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 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.

Suicide (6)

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 implicit evidence of intent to die.

Accident (24)

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.

Natural Deaths (207)

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. A SUID 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."

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.

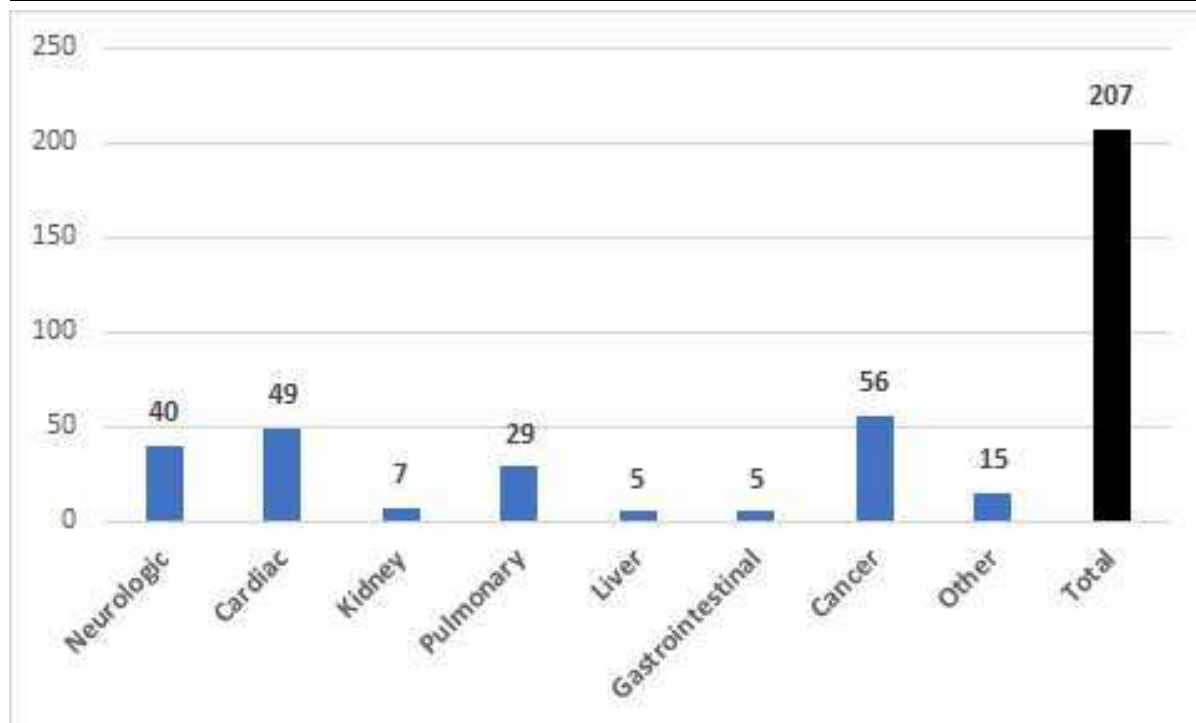
Pending (1)

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.

Not Applicable - N/A (3)

In 2020 three cases have been considered Not Applicable because they did not require a 'manner of death'. Non-Human remains reported to the Coroner's Office and/or natural neonatal death at a medical facility are two examples of NA investigations where our office may be contacted and complete an investigation but the death is certified.

Natural Cause Of Death Total, Distributed By Cause



Total Deaths Reported and Certified Natural (207)

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:

Neurological (40)

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.

Cardiac (49)

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.

Kidney (7)

Kidney related deaths include infection, transport disorders such as Bartter's or Liddle's syndrome, trauma, or tumors of the kidney(s).

Pulmonary (20)

Pulmonary death pertains to the lungs. Respiratory failure such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder (COPD) or emphysema.

Liver (5)

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.

Gastrointestinal (5)

Gastrointestinal related death may occur from an inflammation of the stomach and intestine which originates from different types of bacteria.

Cancer (56)

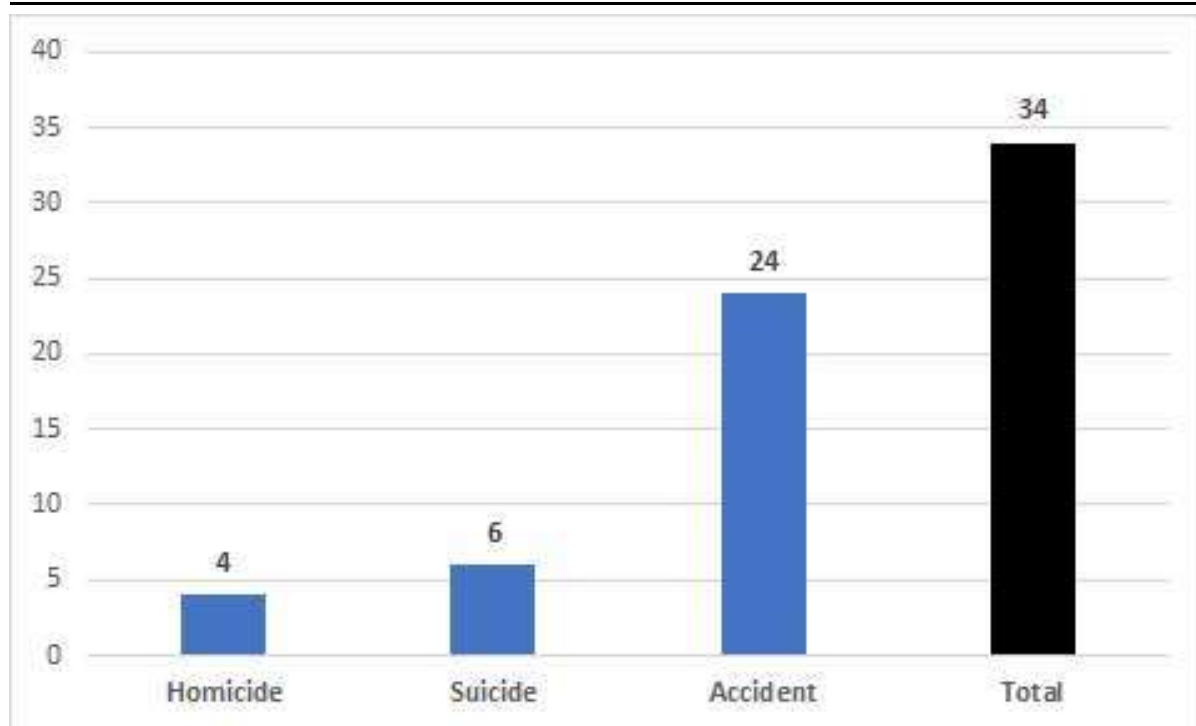
Cancer can develop in any tissue of any organ at any age. Cancer is an uncontrolled or unregulated division and growth of cells in a part of the body. These cells then spread

into surrounding tissue crowding out normal cells.

Other (15)

Some deaths are investigated and after a postmortem examination no obvious cause may be found. Using "Other" as a cause of death is not common but may be used neither an investigation nor an autopsy fails to reveal an apparent cause of death. No history of illness, toxins, drugs or injuries can be found.

Unnatural Cause Of Death Total, Distributed By Manner



Total Certified Unnatural Deaths (34)

Unnatural death is defined as death resulting from an external cause such as intentional or unintentional injury. For unnatural death there is no specific Cause of Death listed on a death certificate. Homicide, Suicide, or Accident is a way to categorize the manner of death in investigations and is required by the Washington State Health Department.

Homicide (4)

The act of one person killing another. Homicide is used for manner of death when an injury is inflicted upon one person by another person be it intentionally or through recklessness.

Suicide (6)

The action of killing oneself intentionally. Suicide is used for manner of death when one causes injury to themselves with the intent to kill themselves.

Accident (24)

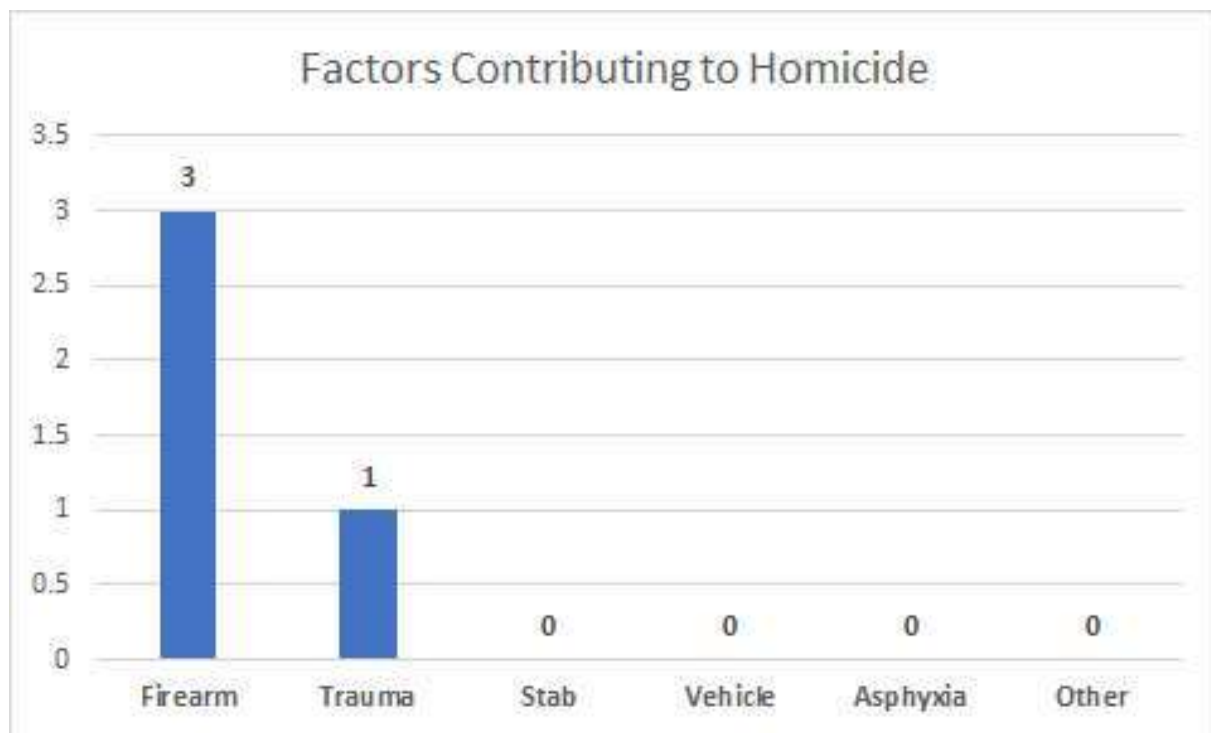
Accident is used for manner of death when an unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, nothing found during an investigation indicates there was any intent to cause harm or death.

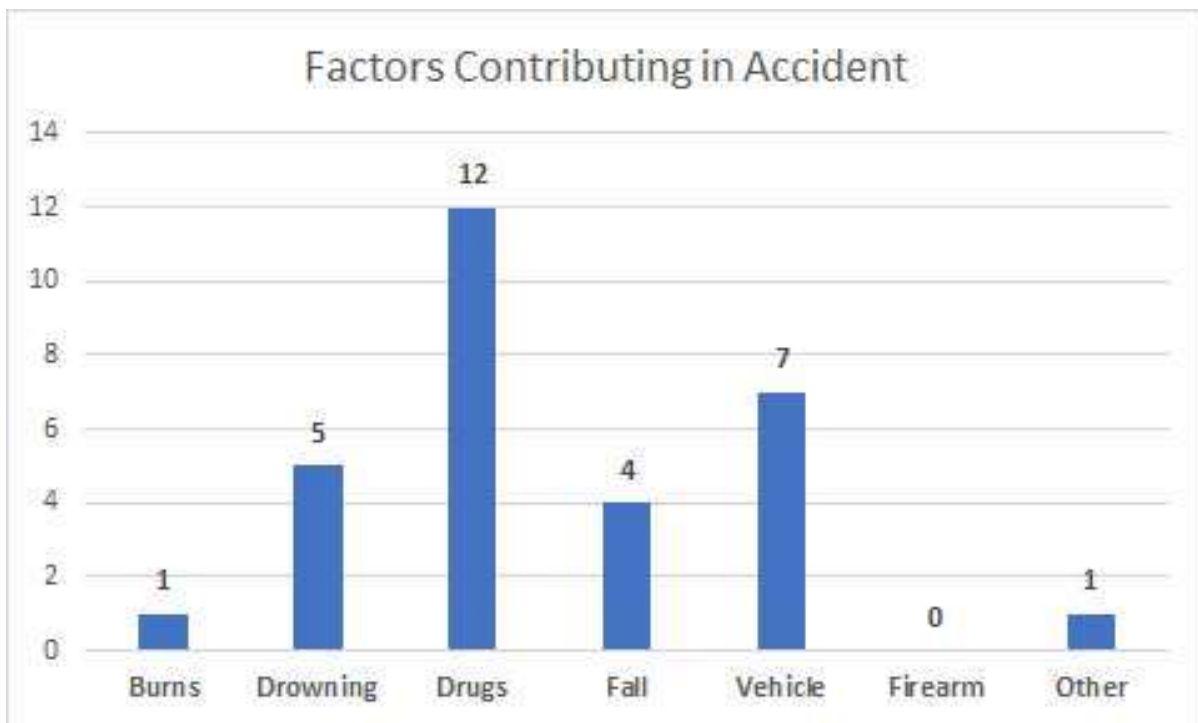
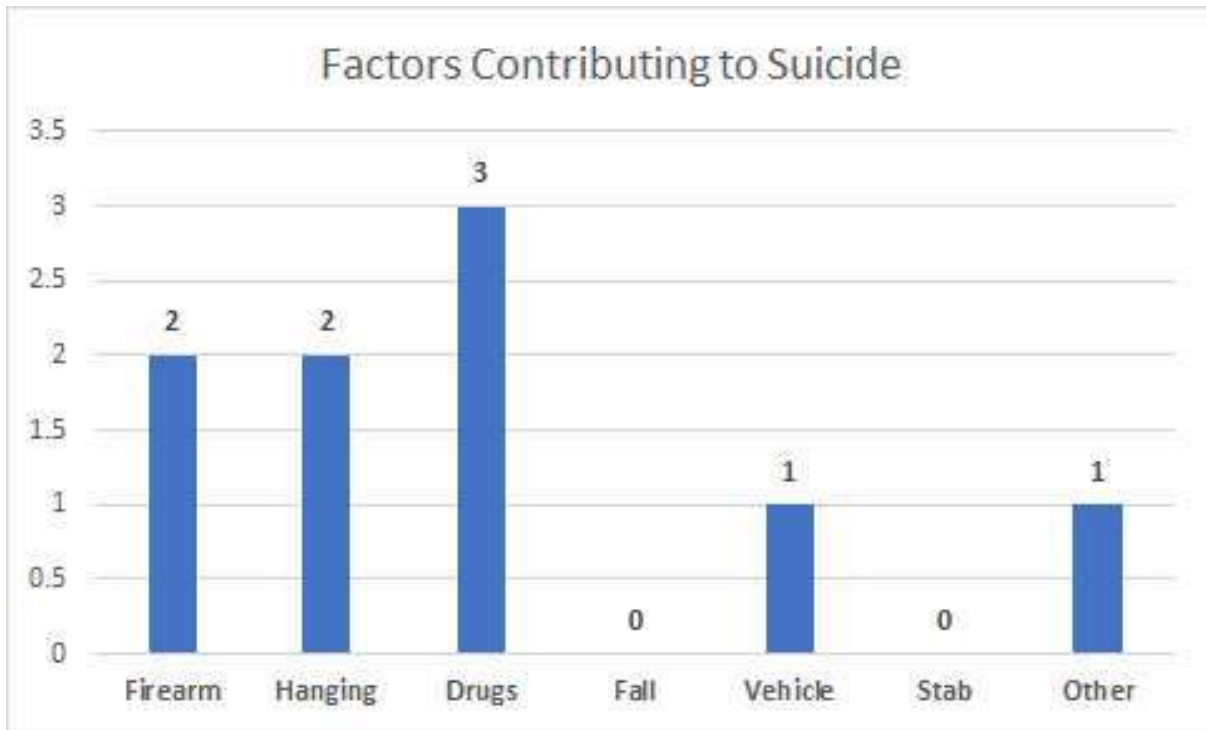
Factors Contributing To Unnatural Death

Factors Contributing to Unnatural Death

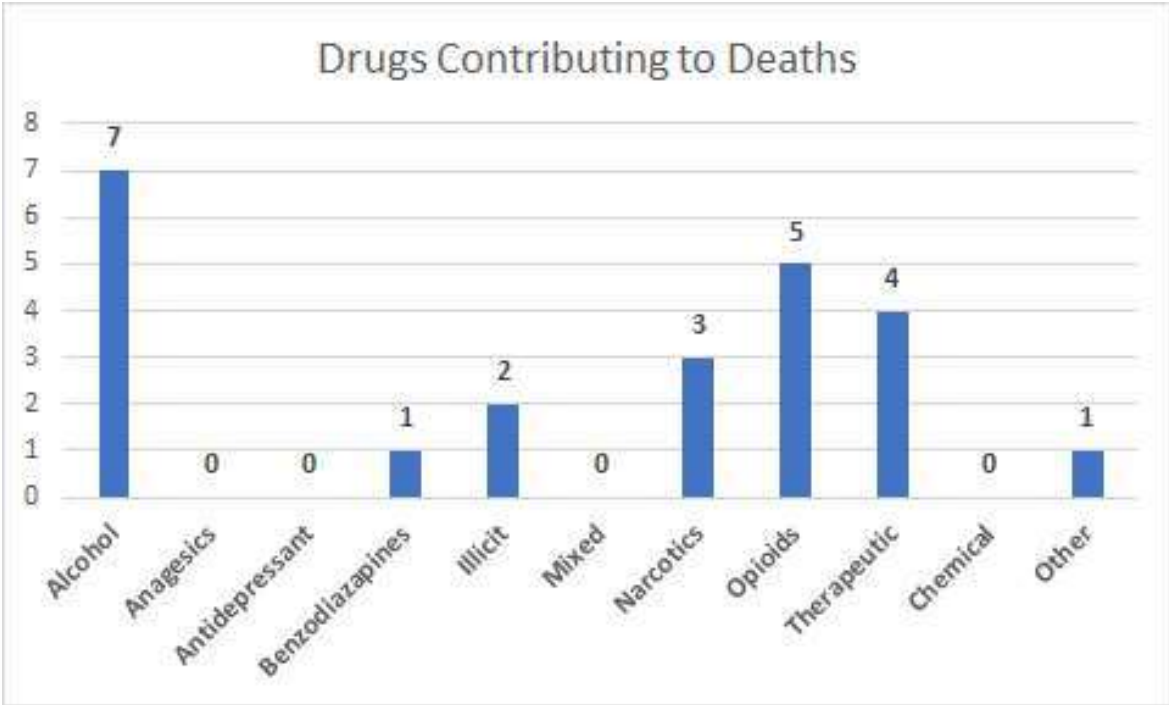
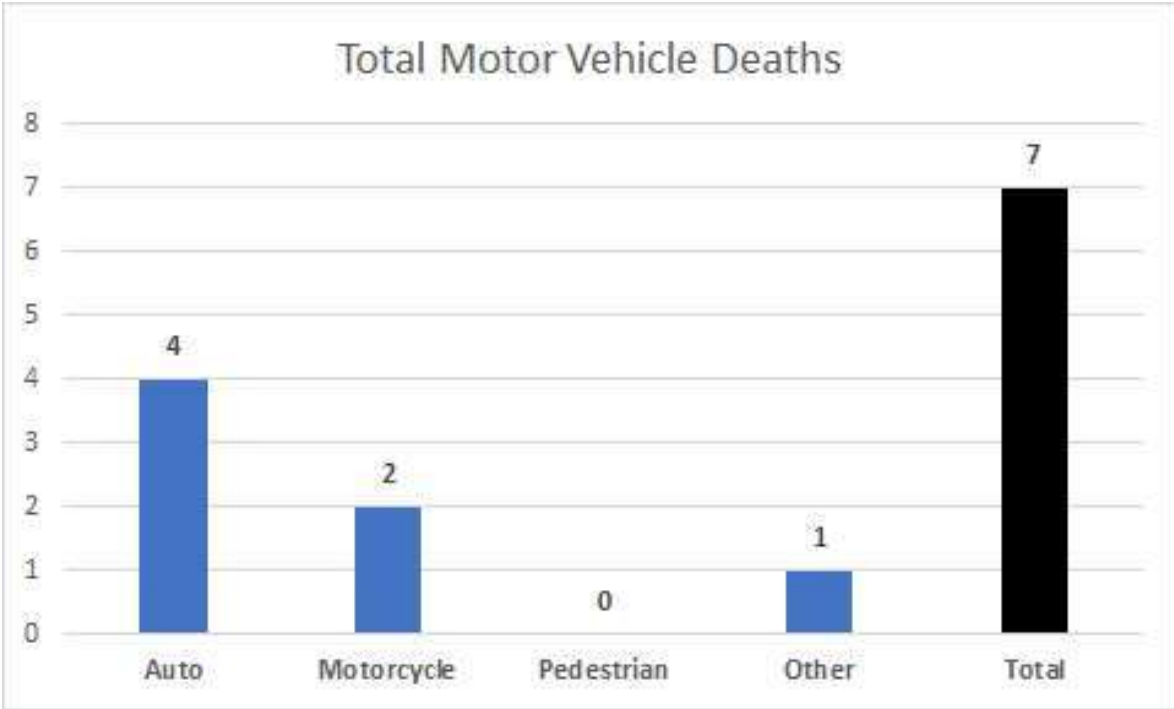
You may notice the totals in the following graphs may not appear to match the earlier Manner of Death Totals (Homicide 4, Suicide 6, Accident 24) graph. This is because an unnatural death may have more than one contributing factor. The list of contributing factors tracked by our database (MDI Log) is determined by the Center for Disease Control and the Washington State Health Department.

Our database tracks as many contributing factors for each investigation as is found. Shown in the three graphs below, you may notice some similarities in the information.

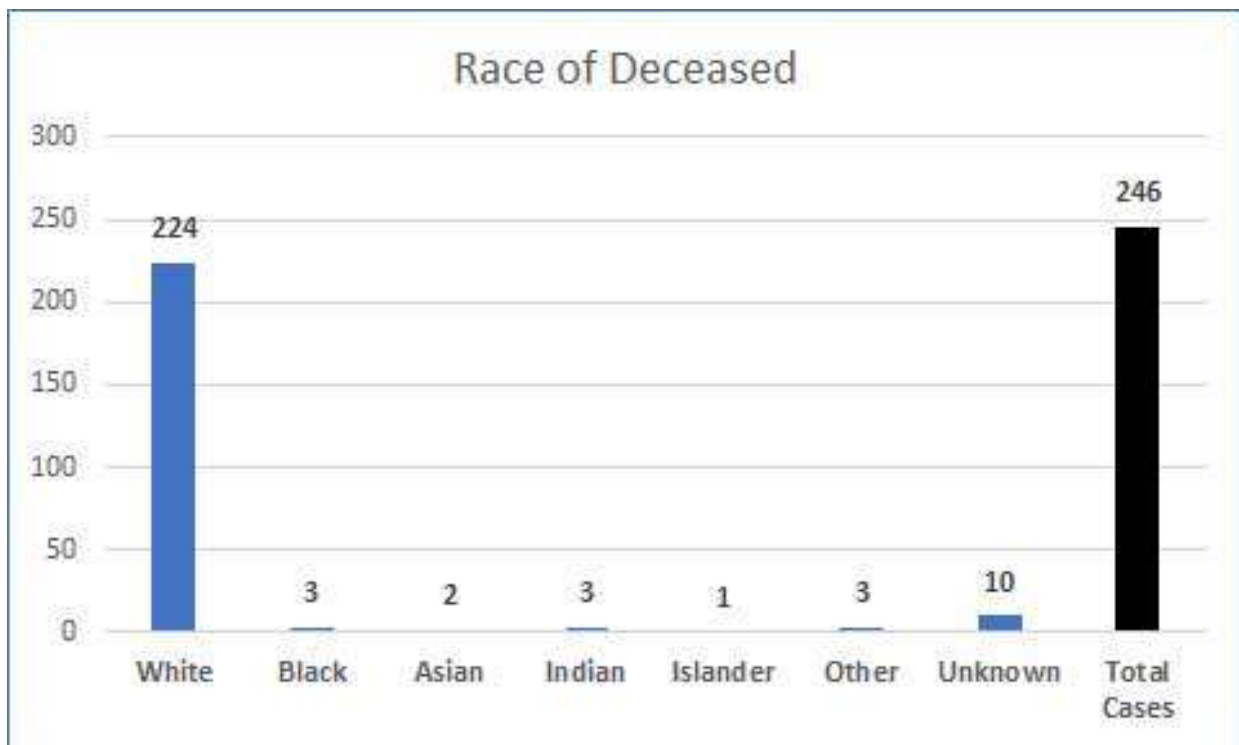
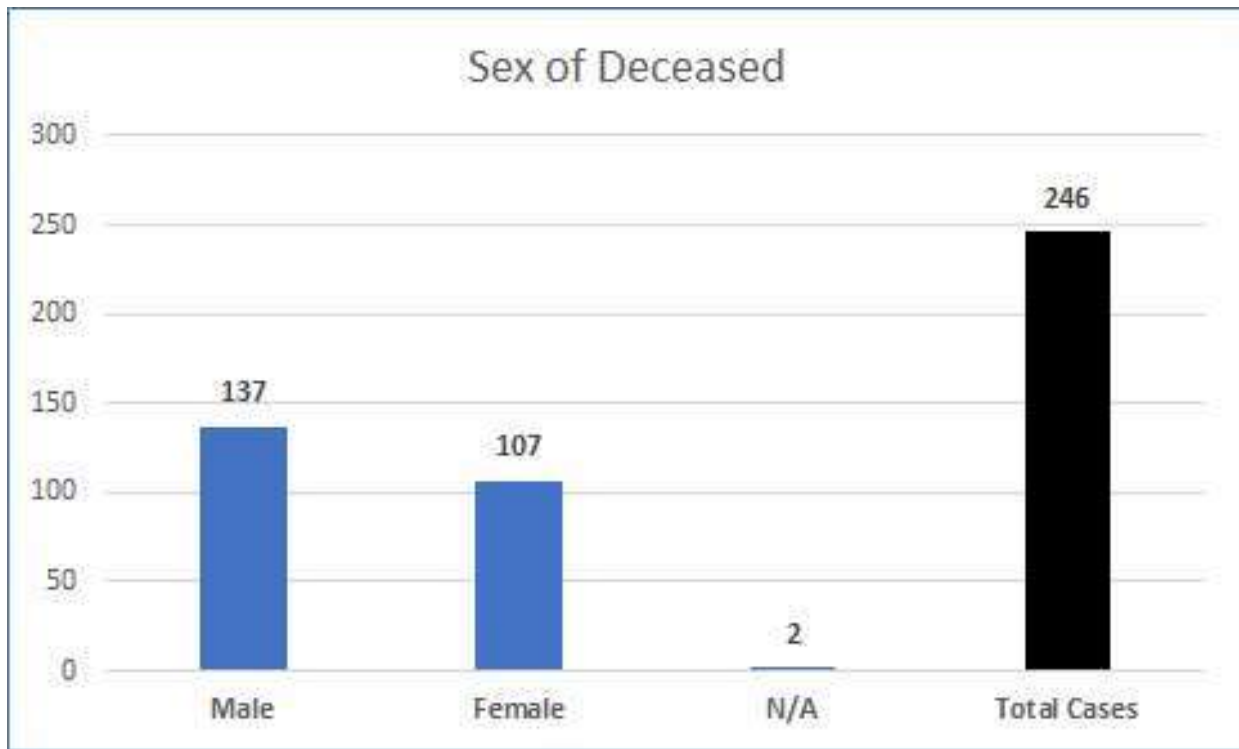


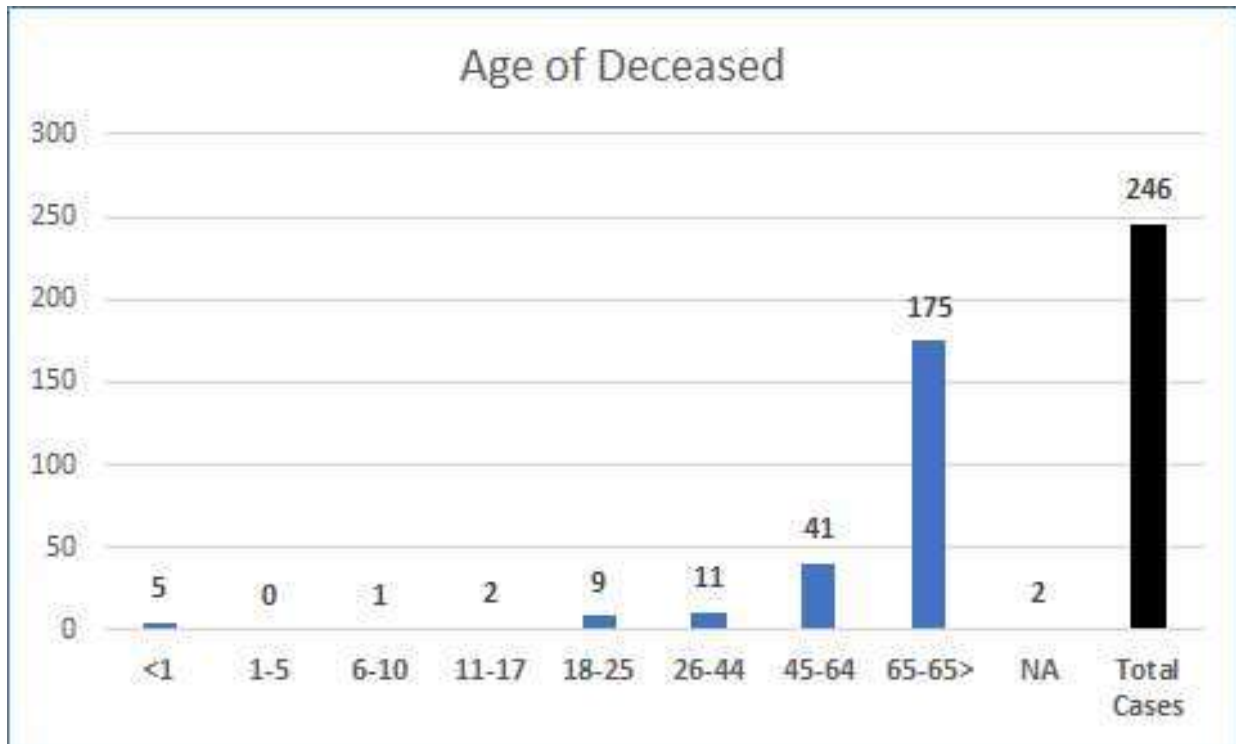


Other Data With Statistical Health And Safety Importance



Demographics





Disposition

The manner in which human remains are handled included:

Burial	36
Cremation	197
Storage	0
Unclaimed	1
Donation	0
Entombment	1
Removal	6
Other	5