



TRAVIS COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER ANNUAL REPORT 2020



www.traviscountytx.gov/medical-examiner

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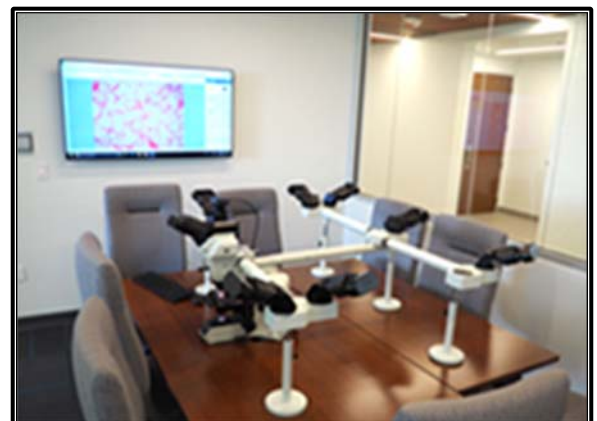
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ABOUT OUR OFFICE

Introduction

The Travis County Medical Examiner's Office (TCME) provides medicolegal death investigation for Travis County, Texas, and 43 surrounding counties. Travis County is part of the Austin-Round Rock metropolitan area and covers 989 square miles of land and 33 square miles of water. The county seat is Austin, which is also the capital of Texas. In 2020, the population of Travis County was approximately 1,301,340. In January of 2018, TCME moved into a new state-of-the-art facility located at 7723 Springdale Road. The two-story building has an open design that enhances natural lighting and has a computed tomography scanner, enabling advanced imaging technology. Effective July 1, 2016, with institutional sponsorship from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, TCME obtained accreditation for a one-year forensic pathology fellowship training program from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). TCME is one of 45 medical examiner's offices in the country accredited to provide the final year of subspecialty training needed to become a forensic pathologist. Each year, TCME trains two fellows; the first class of fellows began their training in July of 2018.



Accreditation

Our office first became accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) in 2009 and was reaccredited in 2014 and again in 2020. NAME also requires that a yearly self-assessment be submitted to the accrediting authority of the organization.



For more information on NAME, click the following links:

<https://www.thename.org/>

<https://www.thename.org/inspection-accreditation>

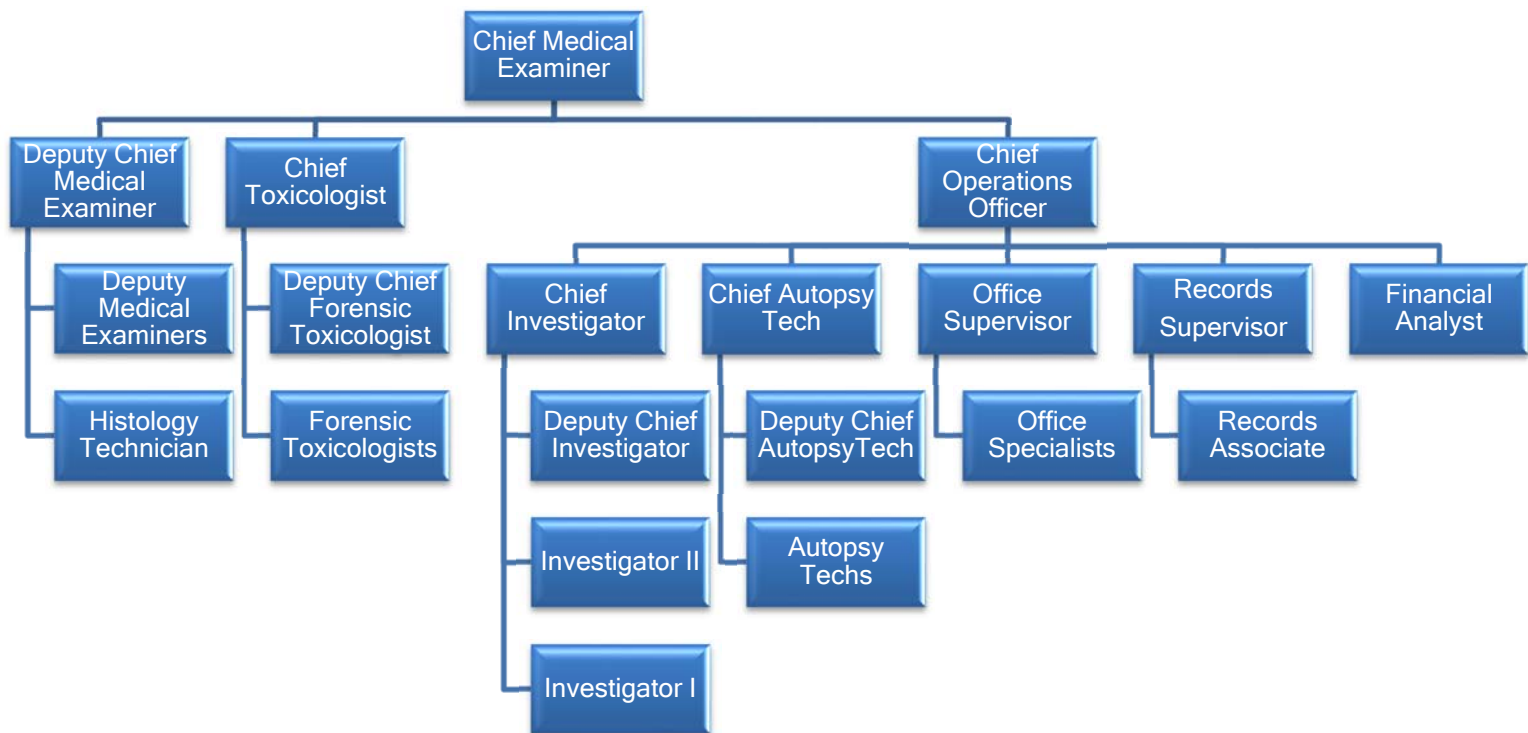
The Travis County Medical Examiner's Toxicology Laboratory first achieved accreditation by the American Board of Forensic Toxicology (ABFT) in 2005 and has maintained accreditation since.



For more information on ABFT accreditation, click on the following link:

<https://www.abft.org/>

OFFICE STAFFING



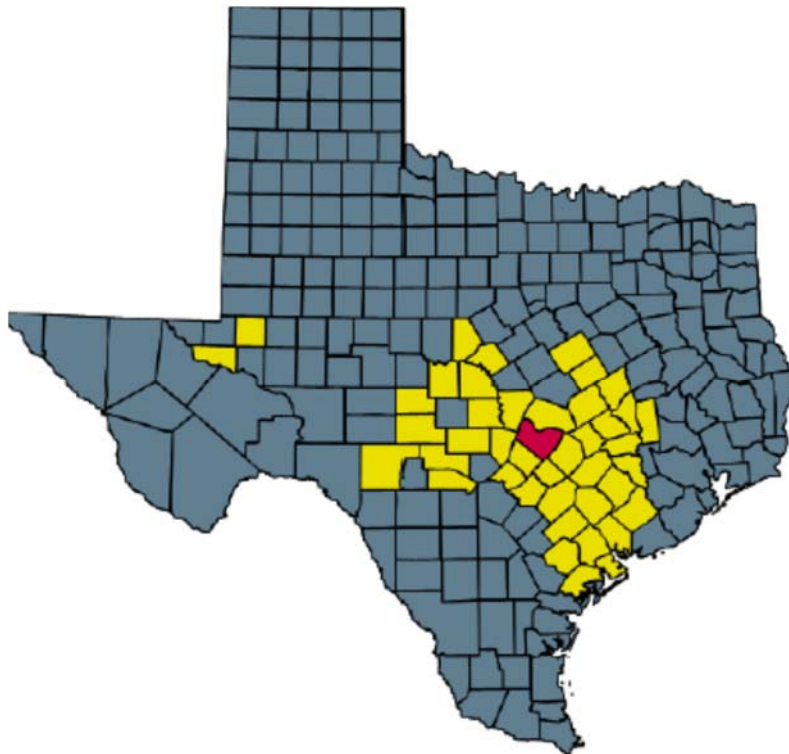
In 2020, TCME was staffed by 45 employees and was composed of the following departments: Pathology, Investigations, Morgue, Toxicology, and Administration.

- There were 8 forensic pathologist positions at TCME, including the Chief Medical Examiner, the Deputy Chief Medical Examiner, and six Deputy Medical Examiners.
- There were thirteen positions in the Investigations Department, including the Chief Investigator and the Deputy Chief Investigator. There were four Investigator II personnel and seven Investigator I personnel.
- In the Morgue Department, there were seven employees, including the Chief Autopsy Technician, a Deputy Chief Autopsy Technician, and five Autopsy Technicians.
- In the Toxicology Department, both the Chief Toxicologist and the Deputy Chief Toxicologist hold Ph.D. degrees. There were five Forensic Toxicologists.
- The Chief Operations Officer oversees Investigations, Morgue, and Administration. The Administration Department includes Office Support, Finance, Human Resources and Record Management. There were eight employees in the Administration Department.

ABOUT OUR WORK

Case Jurisdiction

The Travis County Medical Examiner's Office is responsible for the investigation and certification of cause and manner of death of all sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths that occur in Travis County. The cause of death is a disease, injury, drug toxicity, or combination of factors that causes a physiologic derangement severe enough to result in death. The manner of death refers to the circumstances surrounding how the death came about and is divided into five categories: natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined. TCME also investigates similar deaths occurring in 43 Texas counties at the written request of the local authorities.



Red -Travis County

Yellow -Counties serviced by TCME through Interlocal Agreements

Reportable Deaths

Pursuant to the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, Chapter 49.25, TCME has jurisdiction over the following deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County:

- When a person dies while in prison or in jail;
- When any person is killed; or from any cause dies an unnatural death, except under sentence of the law; or dies in the absence of one or more good witnesses;

- When the body or a body part of a person is found, the cause or circumstances of death are unknown, and:
 - The person is identified; or
 - The person is unidentified;
- When the circumstances of the death of any person are such as to lead to suspicion that he/she came to his/her death by unlawful means;
- When any person commits suicide, or the circumstances of his death are such as to lead to suspicion that he/she committed suicide.
- When a person dies within twenty-four hours after admission to a hospital;
- When a person dies without having been attended by a duly licensed and practicing physician, and the local health officer or registrar required to report the cause of death under Section 193.005, Health and Safety Code, does not know the person's likely cause of death;
- When the person is a child who is younger than six years of age and the death is reported under Chapter 264, Family Code, and;
- When a person dies who has been attended immediately preceding his death by a duly licensed and practicing physician, and the physician is not able to certify with reasonable certainty the cause of death as required by Section 193.004, Health and Safety Code.

Process

Local deaths (those that occur within the boundaries of Travis County) that fall under TCME's jurisdiction and require a postmortem examination are transported to TCME by a contract body transport company. In certain cases, a TCME investigator may attend the death scene in person and perform a preliminary examination of the body. An investigator usually attends all homicides, suicides, accidental deaths, and select natural deaths. An investigator is on staff and available 24 hours/day, 365 days/year. TCME investigators do not physically perform scene investigations on cases that are reported to them from outside of the physical boundaries of Travis County. In these cases, the pertinent investigative information is collected over the telephone. On cases from outside of Travis County, an autopsy must be ordered by the referring Justice of the Peace and the body is transported to and from TCME by a funeral home or mortuary company at the request of the referring Justice of the Peace.

Not all bodies brought to TCME for examination are autopsied. The Medical Examiner may choose to either perform a complete autopsy or to perform an external examination only. Partial autopsies are not performed at TCME. In all autopsies and external examinations that do not consist of skeletal remains, blood and vitreous fluid specimens are collected. Toxicological analysis is performed on the vast majority of cases that are autopsied and on only select external examination cases.

Case Designation

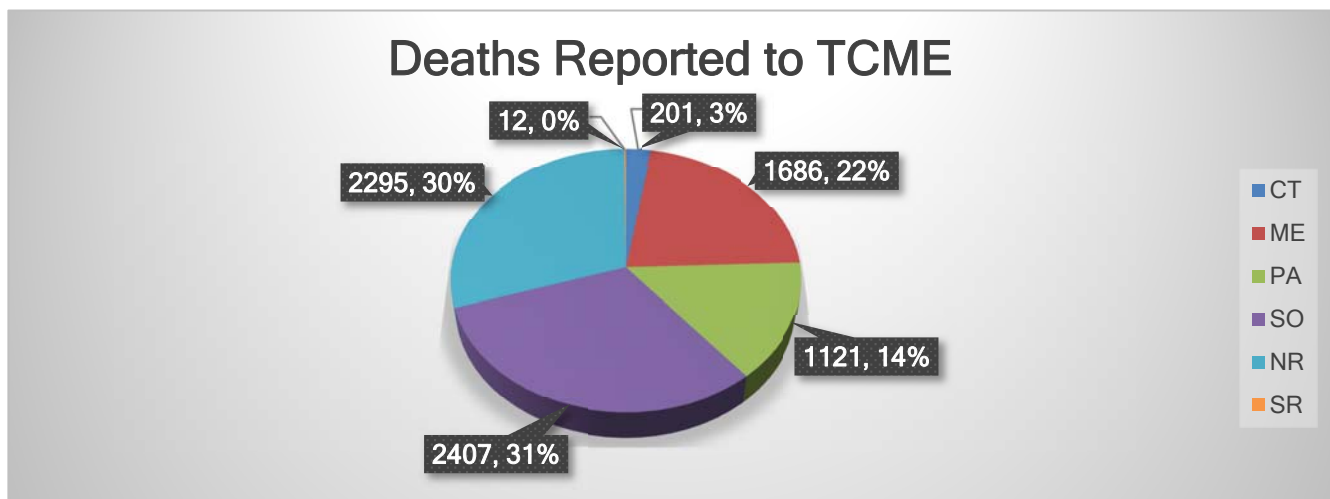
Investigative reports are generated on all cases that fall under the jurisdiction of TCME. All deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County that are brought to TCME for examination (whether they are autopsied or not) are given the designation of 'ME' before the

case number. All cases referred to TCME from outside Travis County are given the designation of 'PA' before the case number. If TCME delegates death certification to a treating physician on a case, it is given the designation of 'SO' before the case number. If a case is reported to our office that does not fall within our jurisdiction, it is given the designation of 'NR.' Occasionally, a death occurring within the boundaries of Travis County is not reported to TCME when it should have been. The body may have already been buried or cremated. If the death can be adequately certified by review of the decedent's medical records and other investigation without physically viewing and examining the body, the case is given the designation of 'CT' before the case number. All cases are collectively numbered sequentially beginning January 1 of each year. If the case consists of nonhuman remains (animal remains), it is given the designation of 'SR' before the case number.

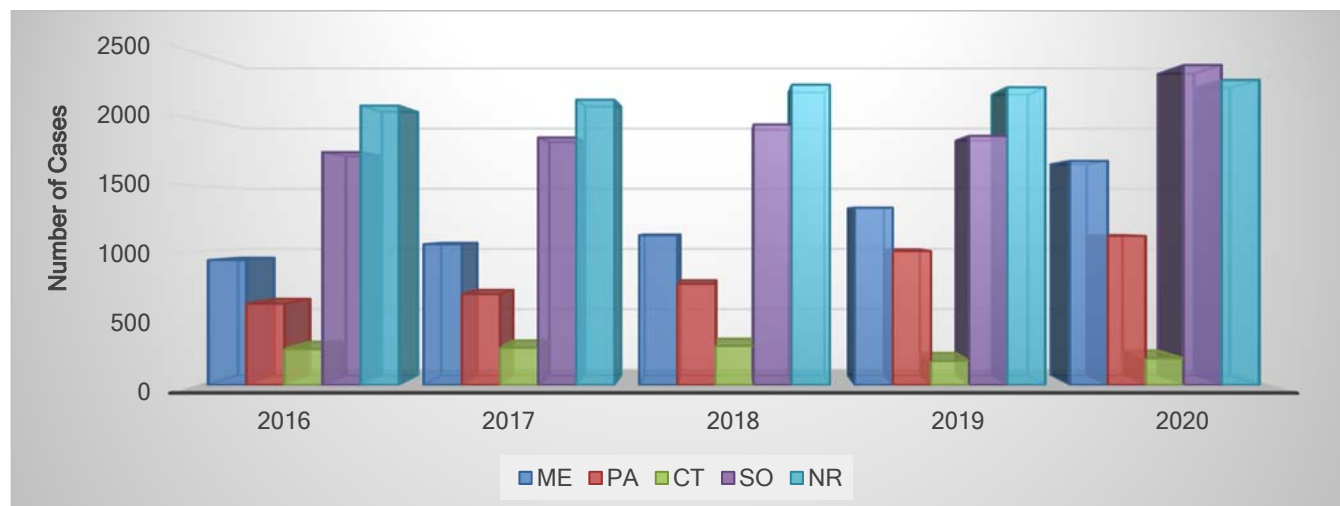
ABOUT OUR CASES

Deaths Reported in 2020

In 2020, 7722 cases were reported to TCME. Every referral requires a preliminary screening by TCME investigative staff to determine if it falls under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner. Of those cases, 1686 were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction and the bodies were physically examined at TCME (ME cases). 201 cases were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, but for various reasons, the bodies were not physically examined at TCME (CT cases). 2407 cases were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction and were reported to TCME, but certification of the death was delegated to the decedent's treating physician (SO cases). TCME received reports of death on 2295 cases in Travis County that did not fall within its jurisdiction (NR cases). TCME received a total of 1121 cases from outside of Travis County for examination (PA cases), and a total referral of 11 cases that proved to be nonhuman skeletal remains (SR cases). TCME does not perform hospital (family consented) autopsies. There were no exhumations.

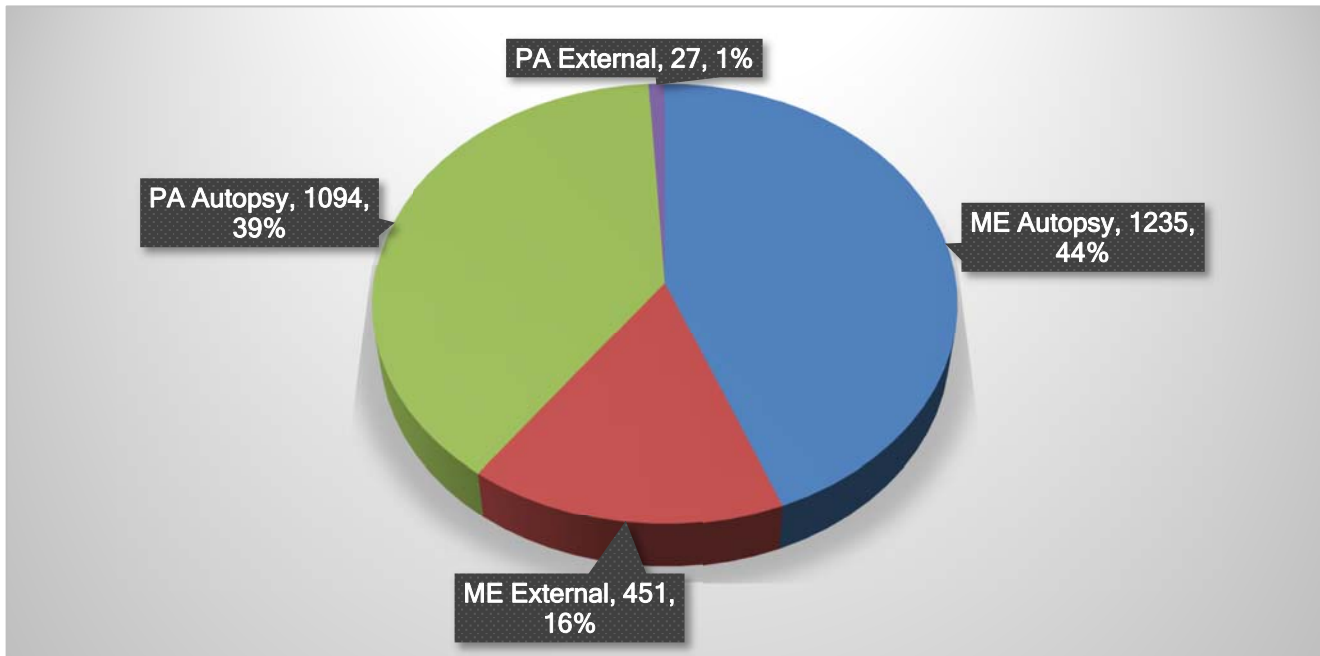


Deaths Reported in 2016-2020

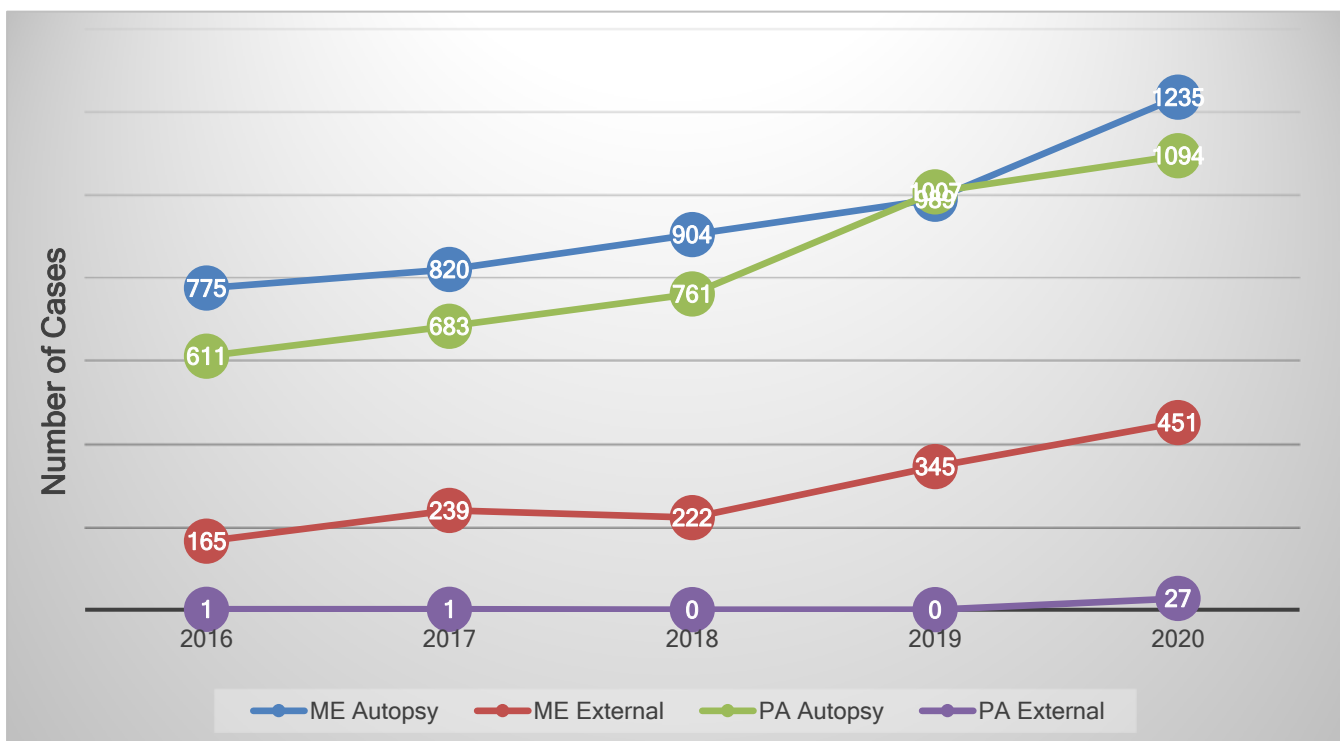


Exam Types in 2020

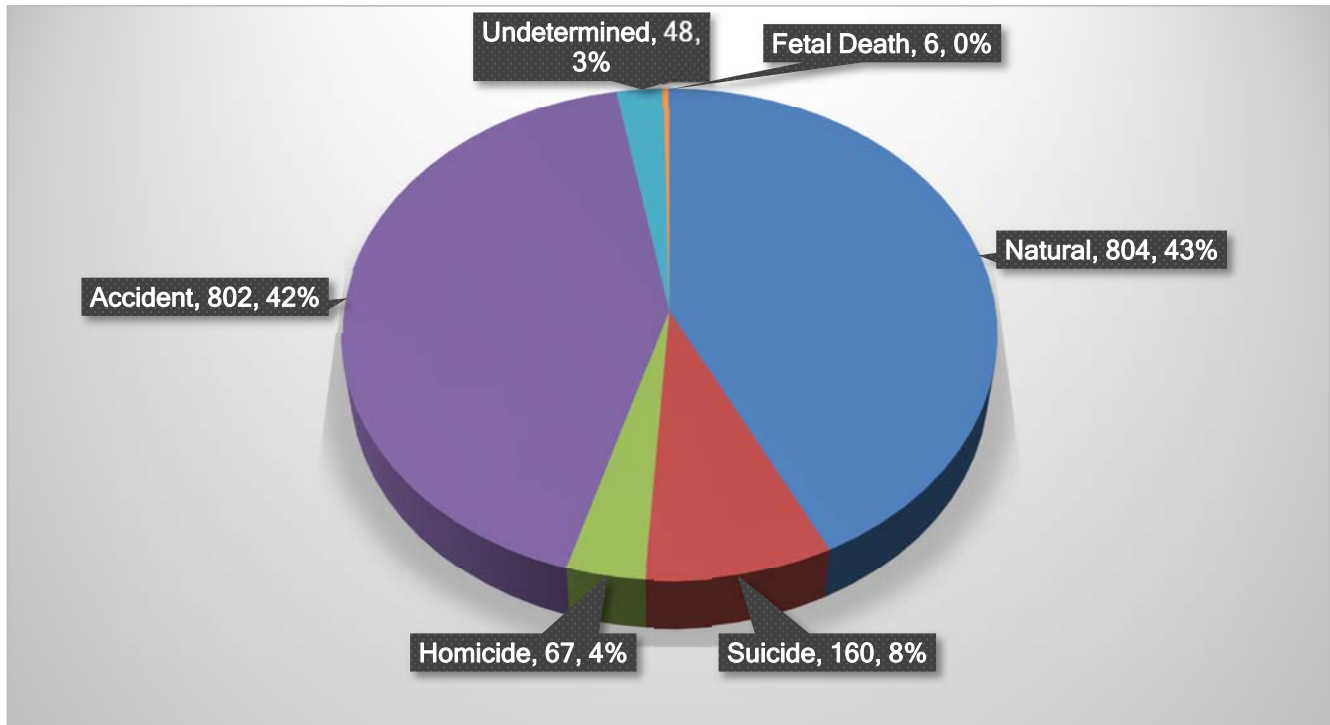
The autopsy numbers represent complete autopsies. Partial autopsies are not performed at our office. Bodies that come to our office based on jurisdiction that are not autopsied (but are visually examined) are called external examinations.



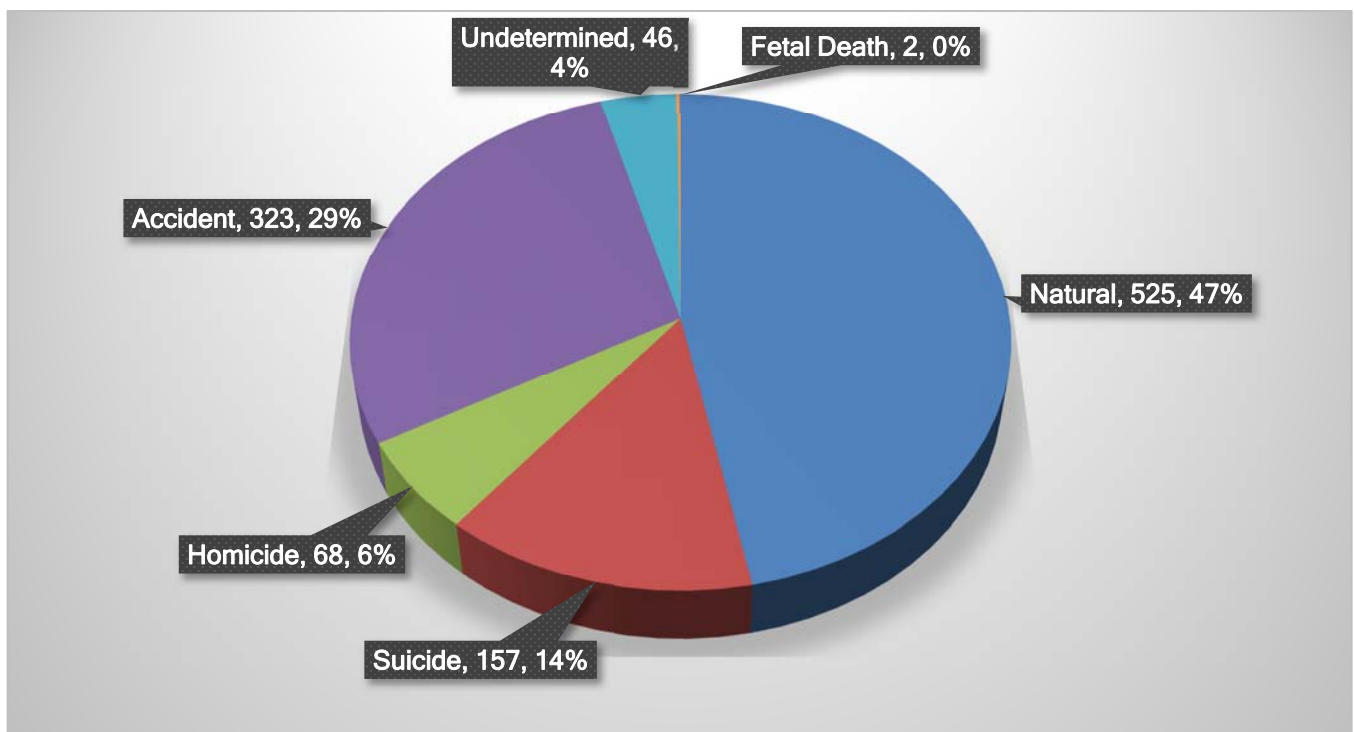
Autopsy and External Examination Trends: 2016-2020



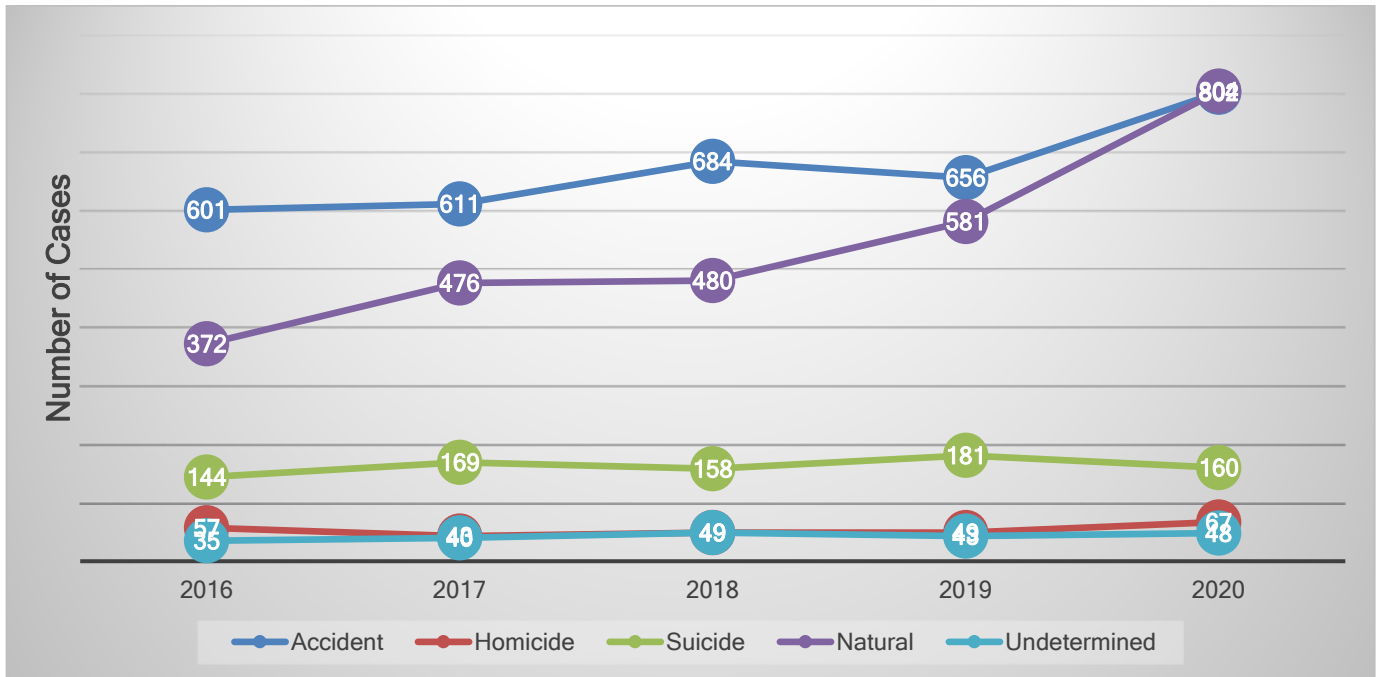
Manner of Death in Travis County Cases – 2020



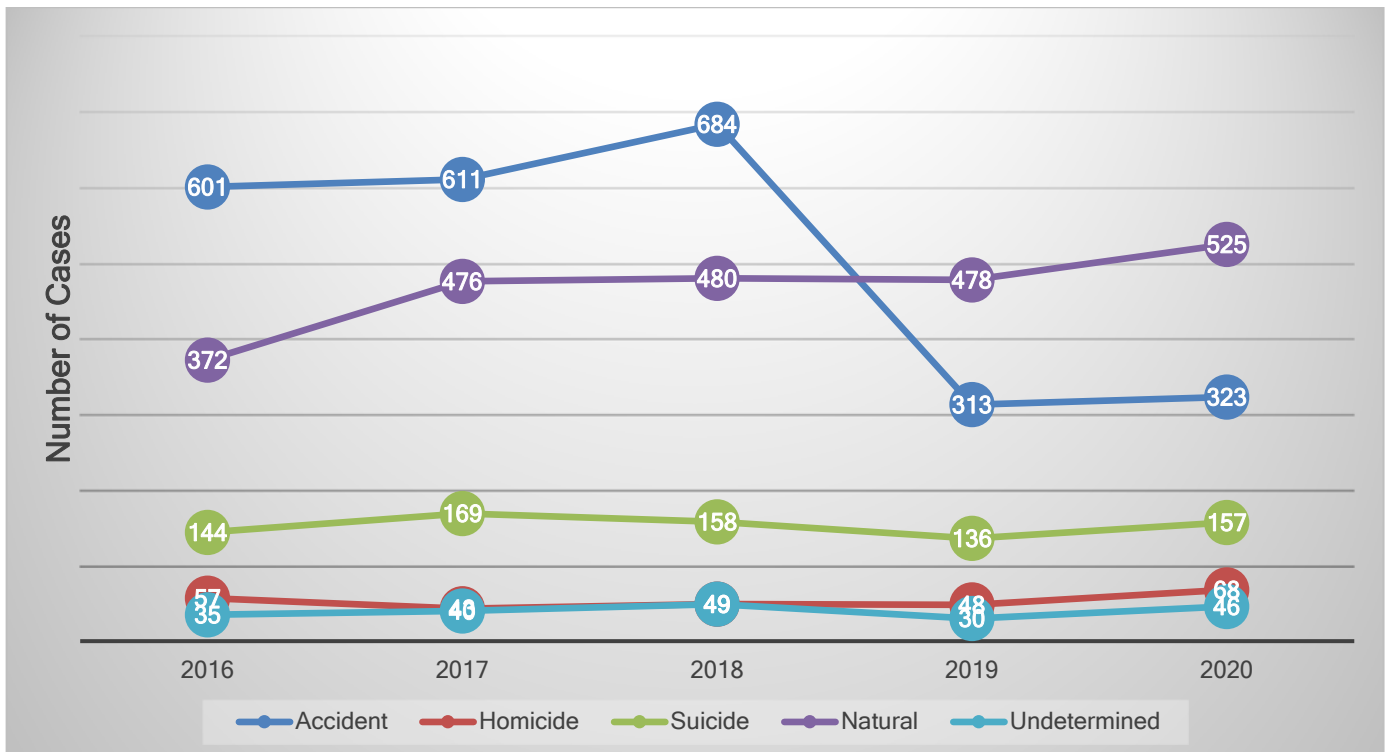
Manner of Death in Out-of-County Cases – 2020



Trends in Manner of Death in Travis County Cases: 2016-2020

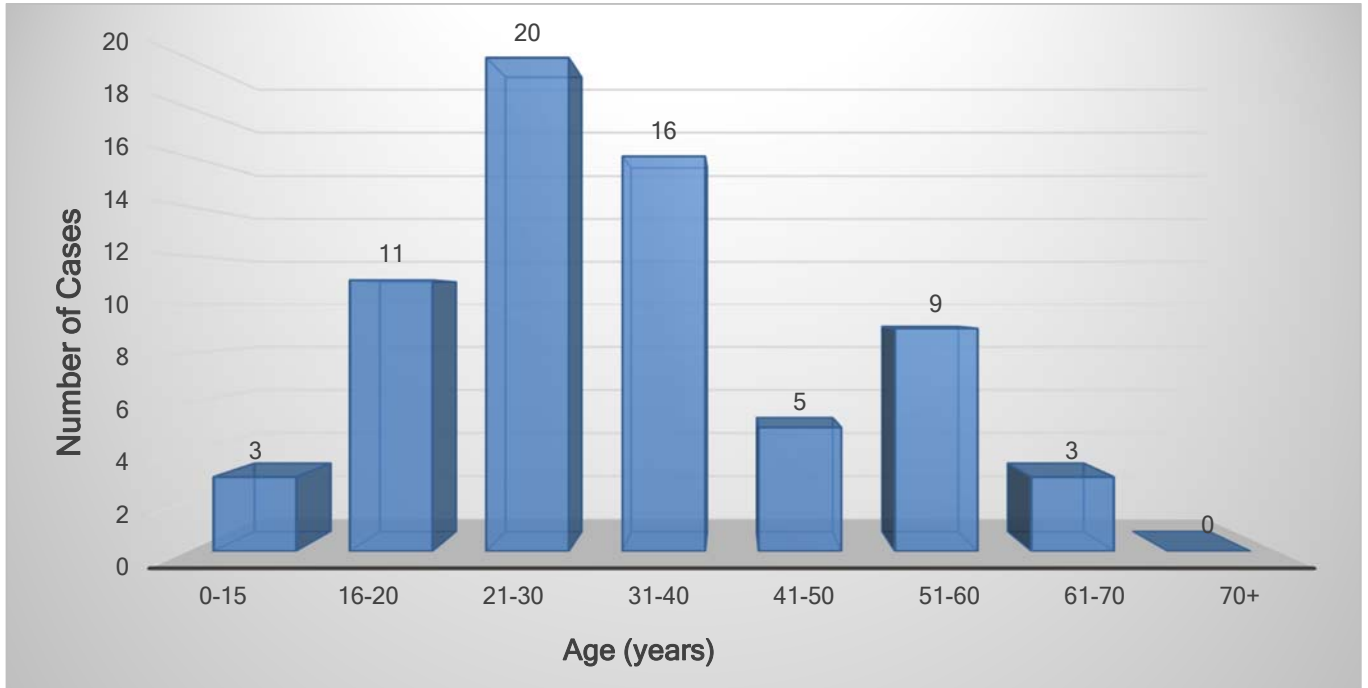


Trends in Manner of Death in Out-of-County Cases: 2016-2020

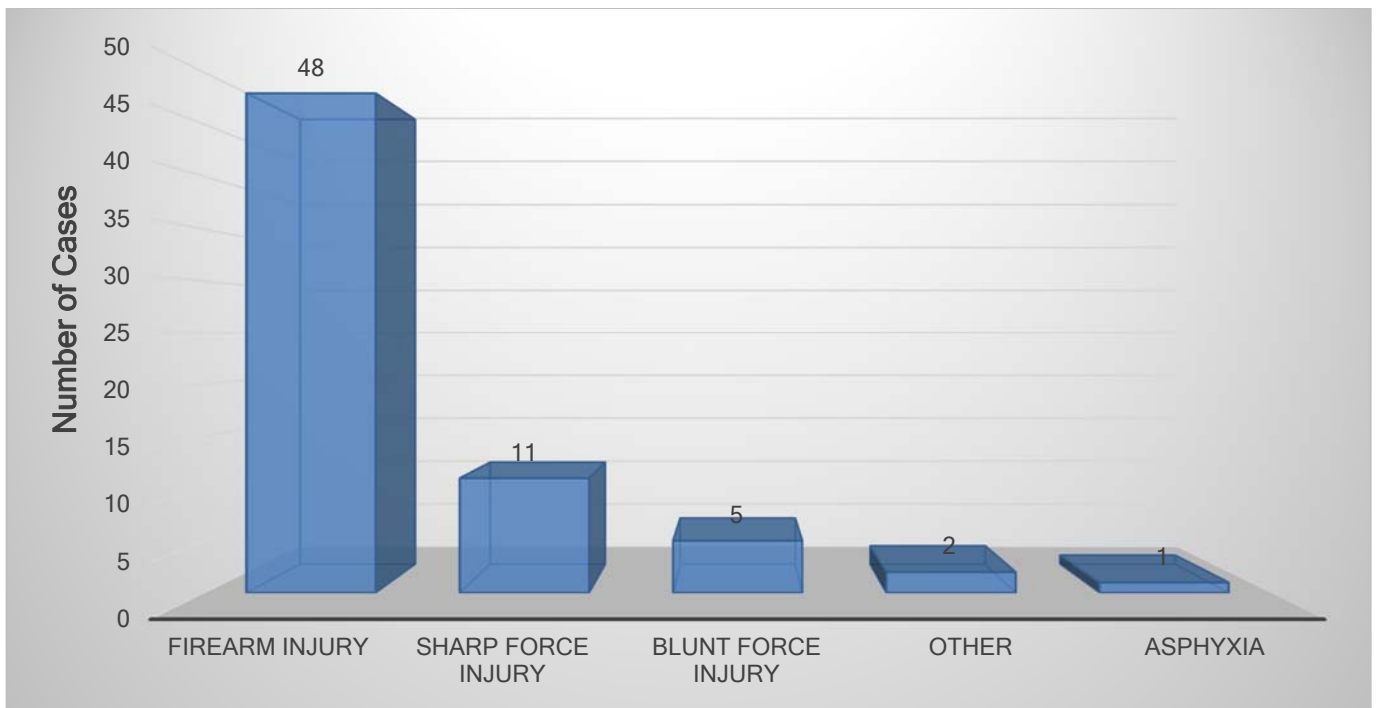


Homicides in Travis County – 2020

By Age

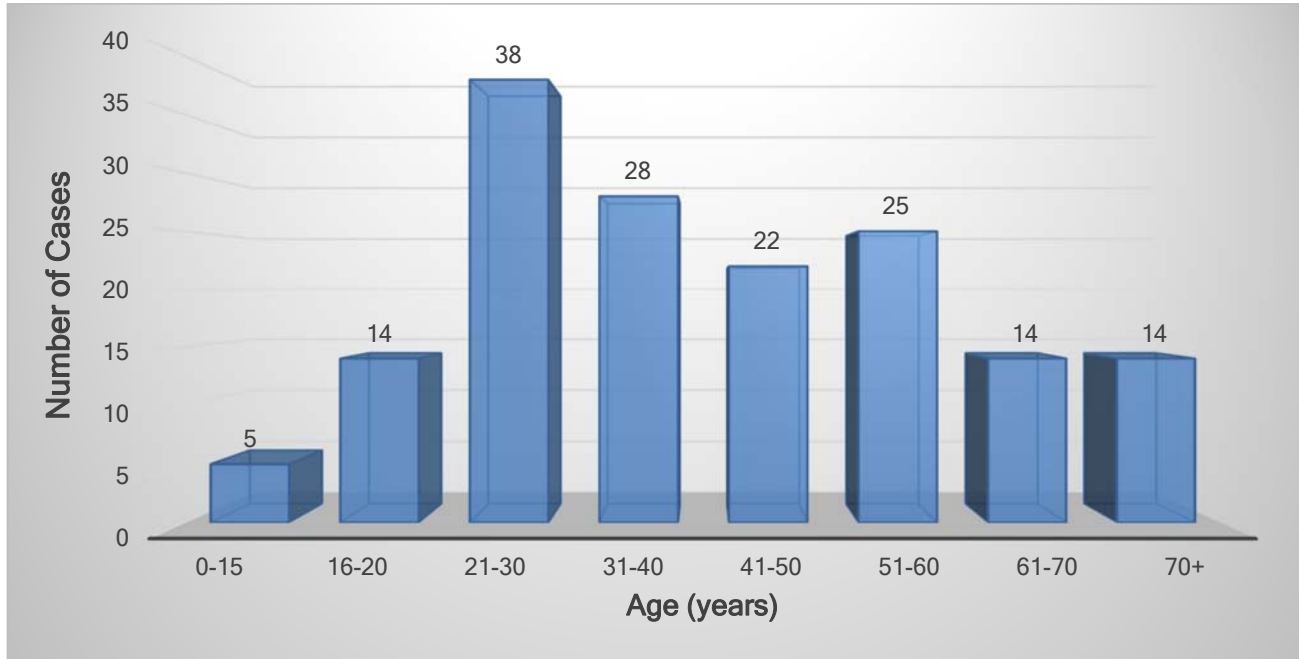


Homicides by Injury Type

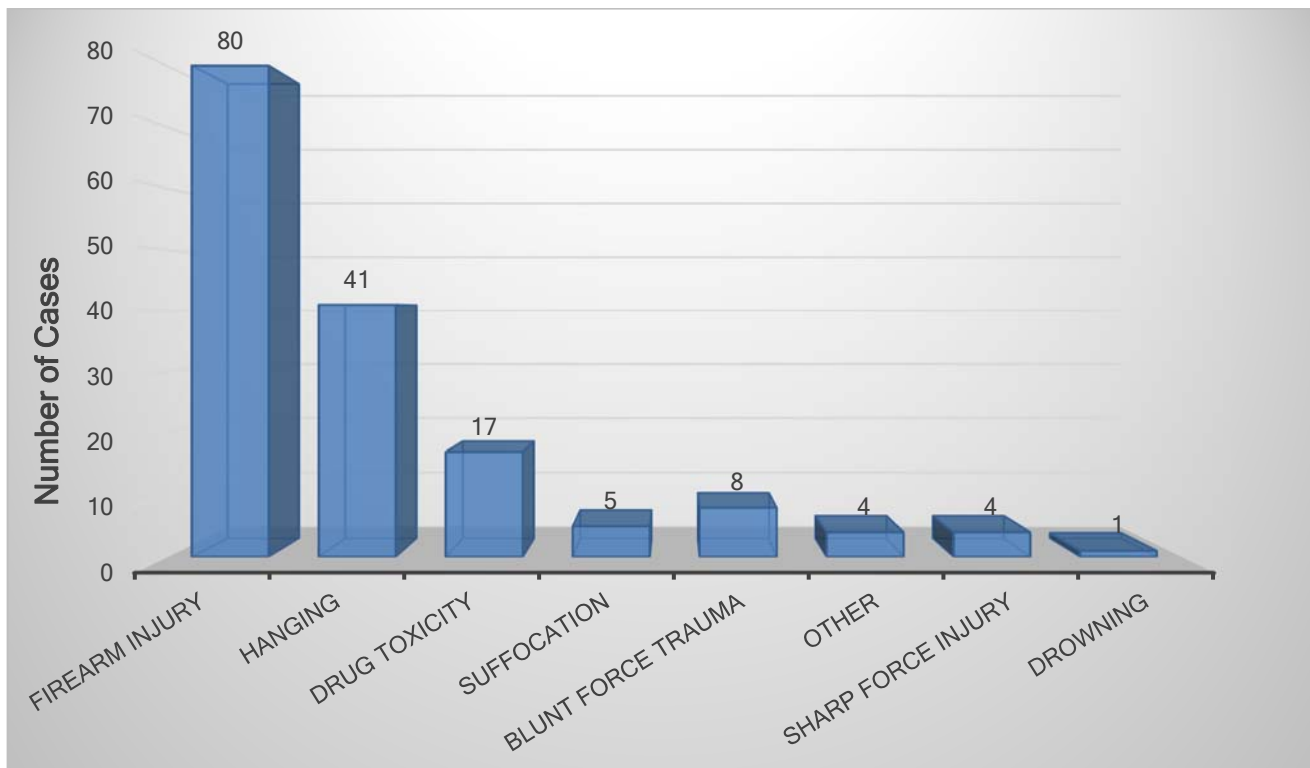


Suicides in Travis County – 2020

By Age

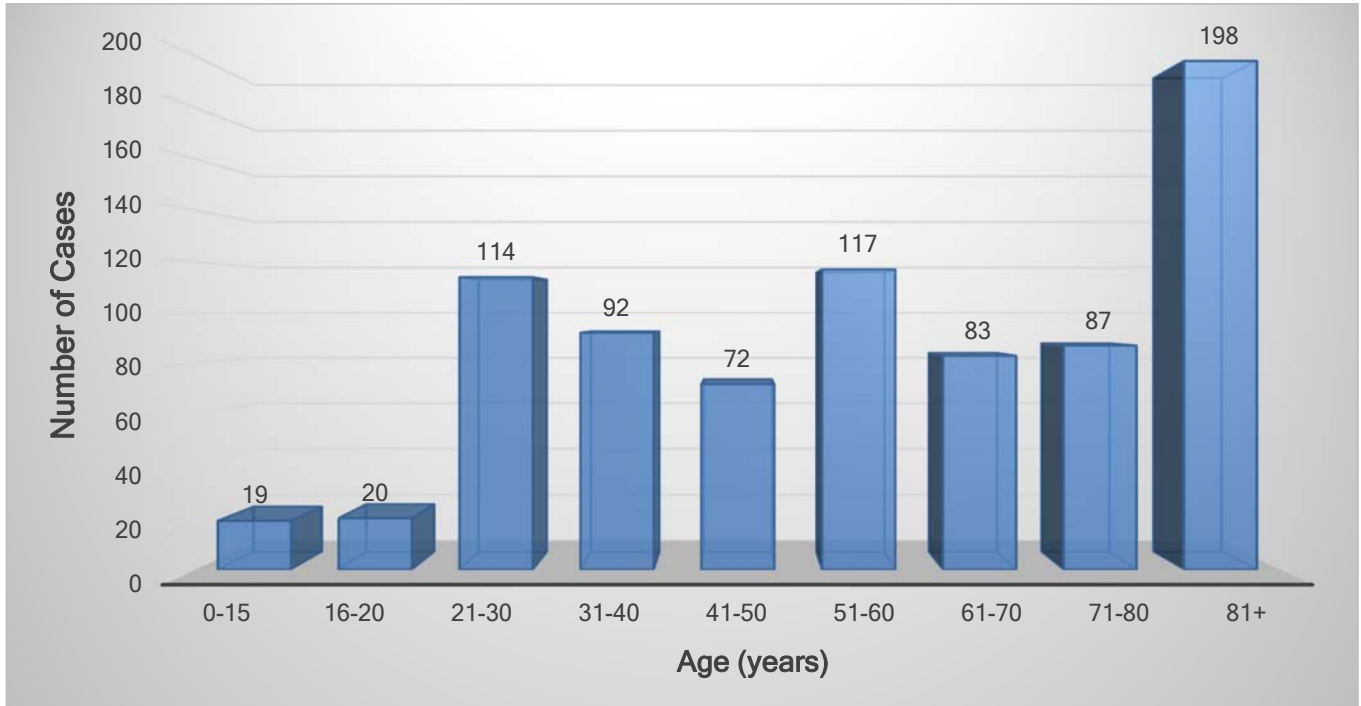


By Injury Type

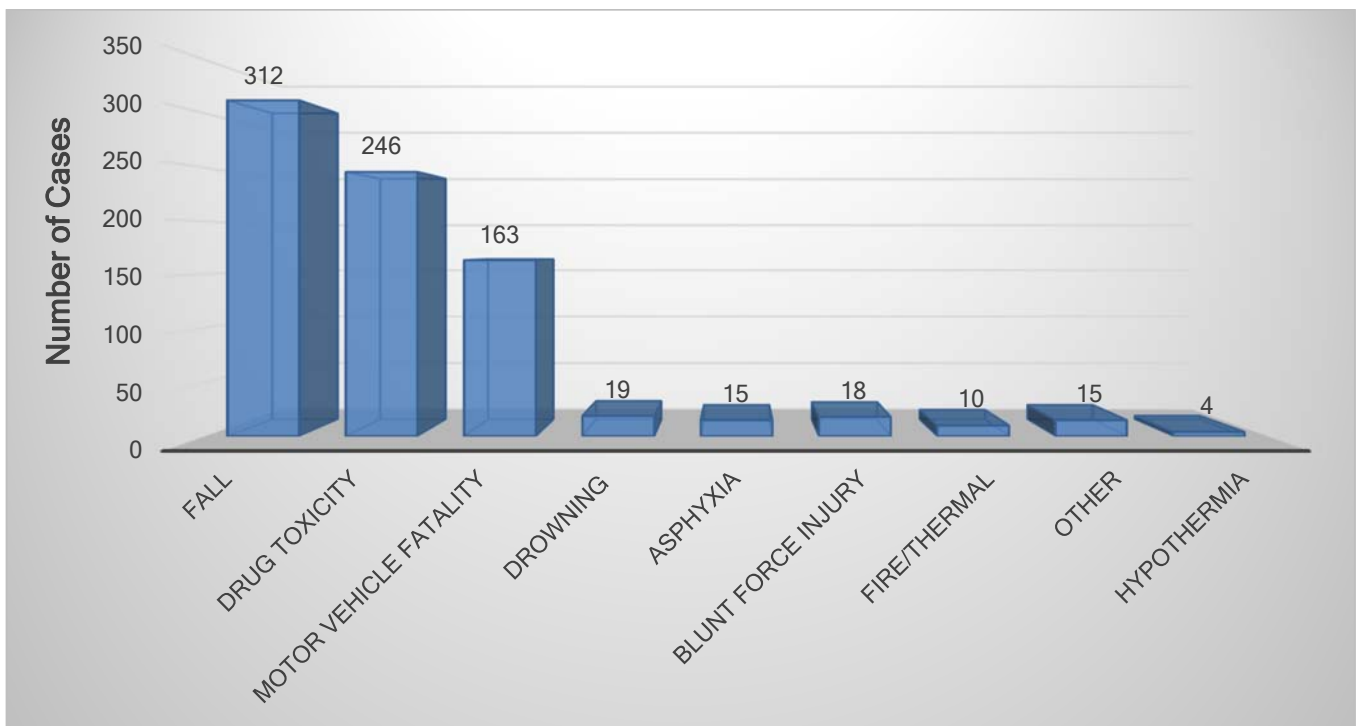


Accidental Deaths in Travis County – 2020

By Age

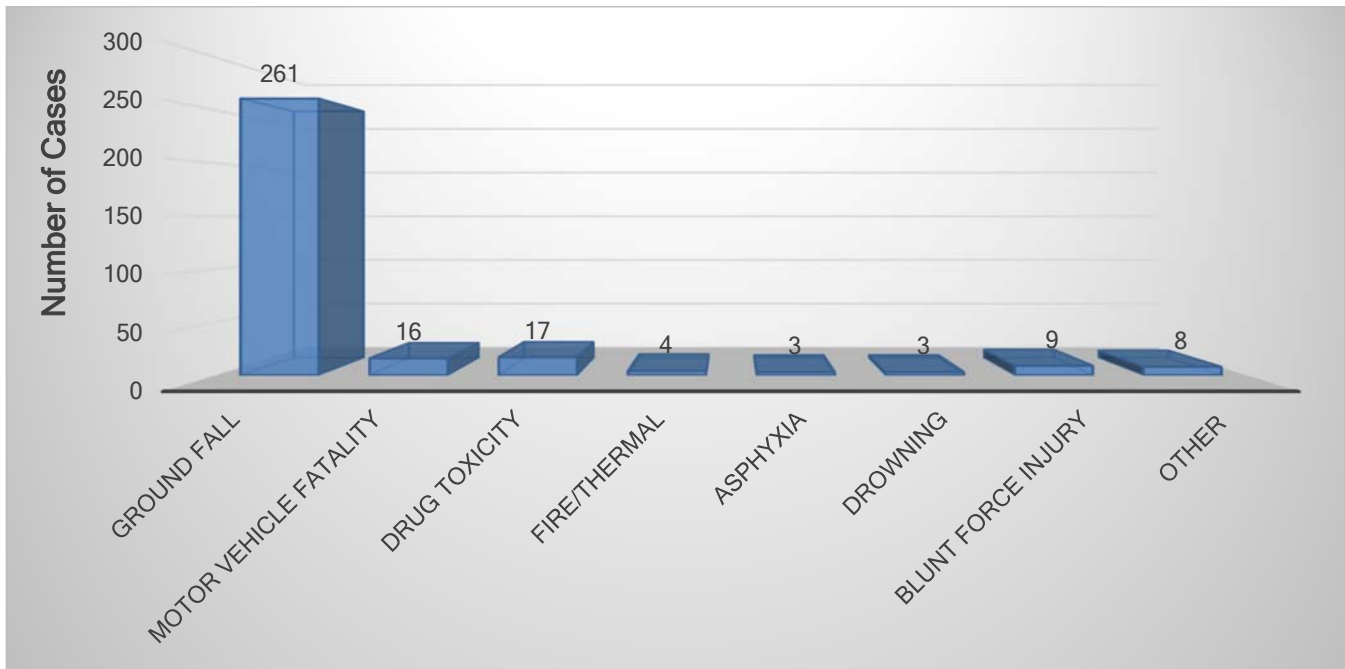


By Injury Type

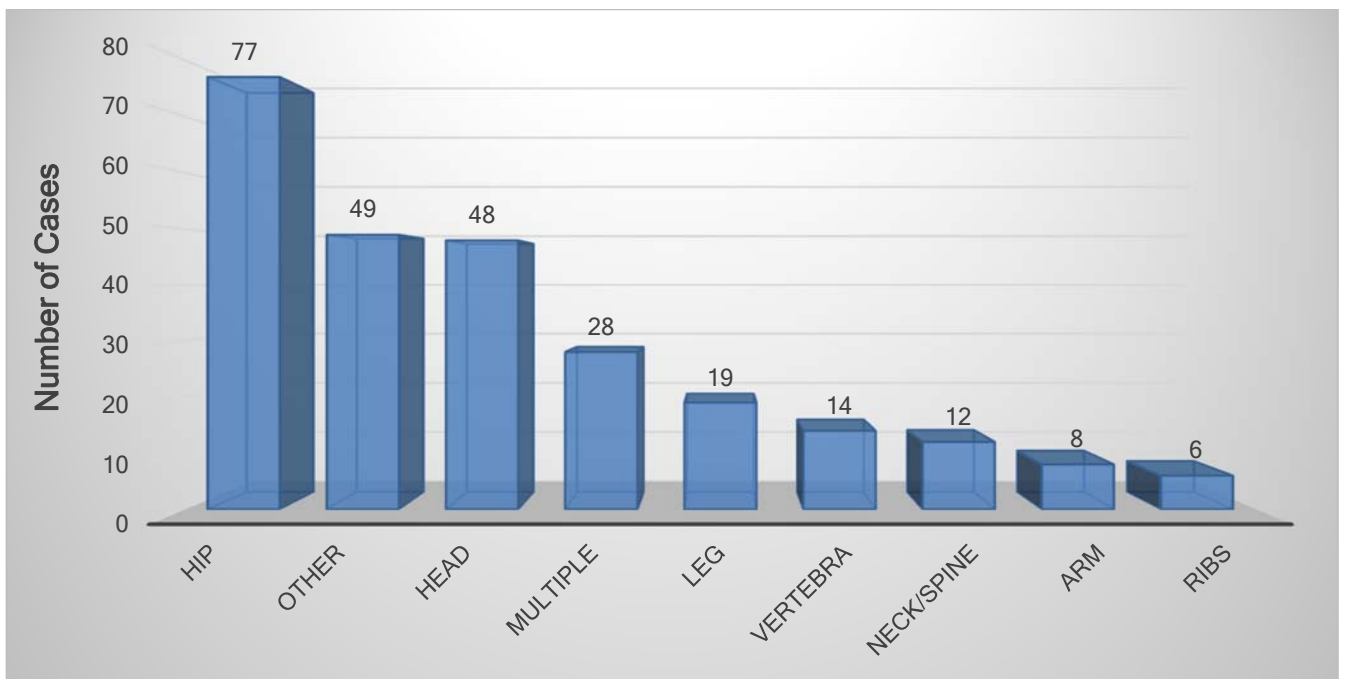


Accidental Deaths in Travis County, >65 Years of Age – 2020

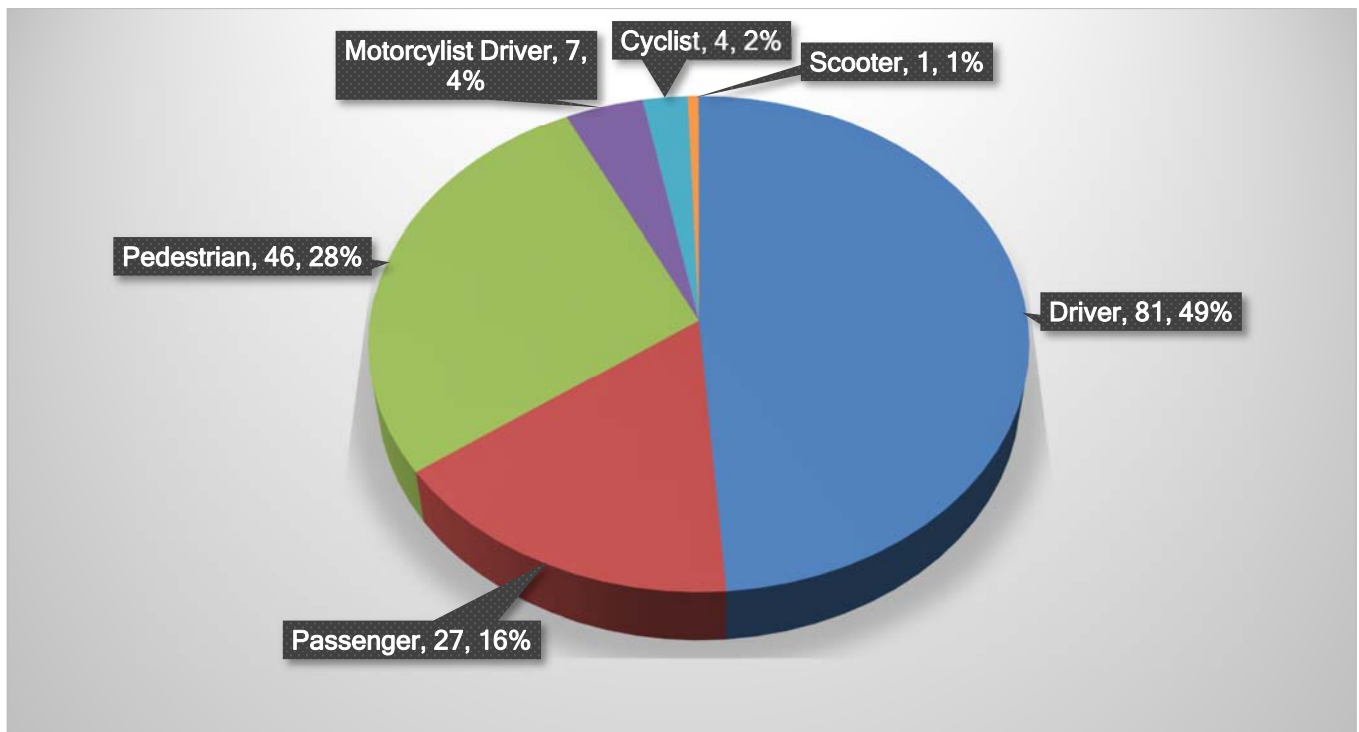
Mechanism of Injury



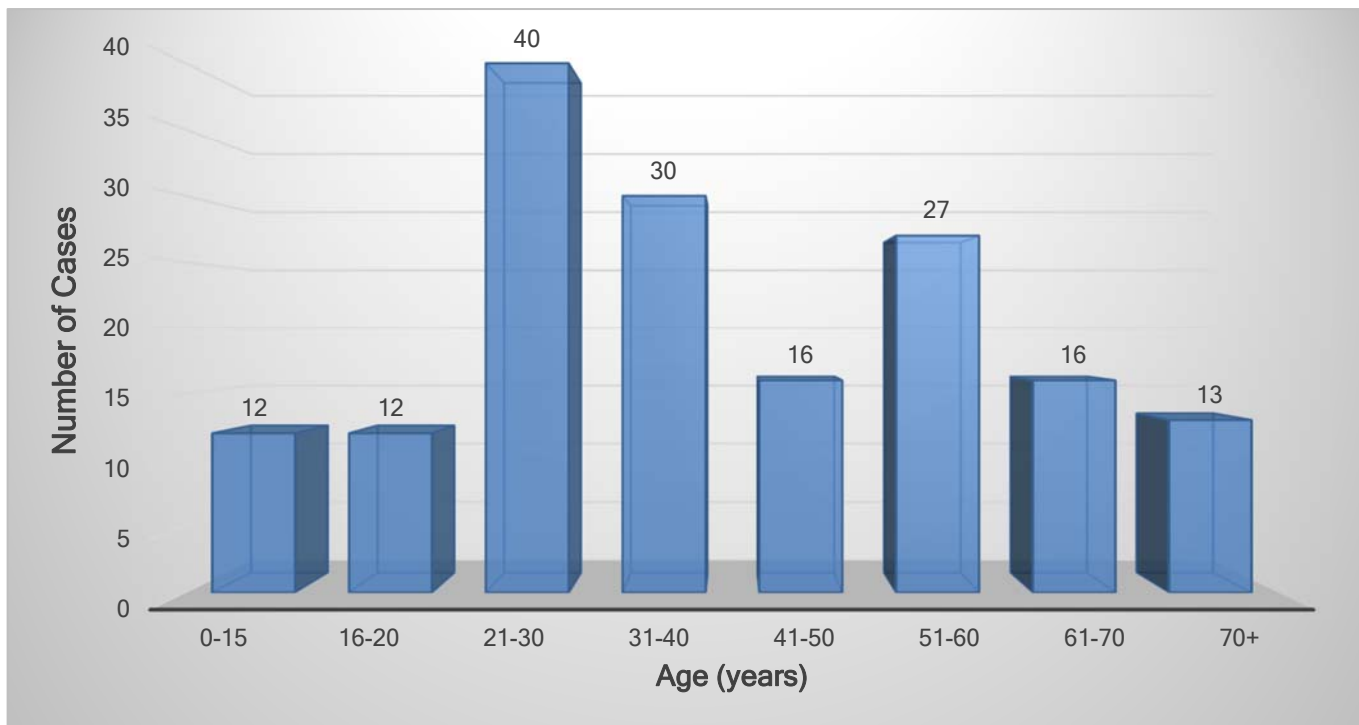
Anatomic Location of Injury/Fracture in Fall Related Deaths, >65 Years of age – 2020



Motor Vehicle Fatalities in Travis County – 2020

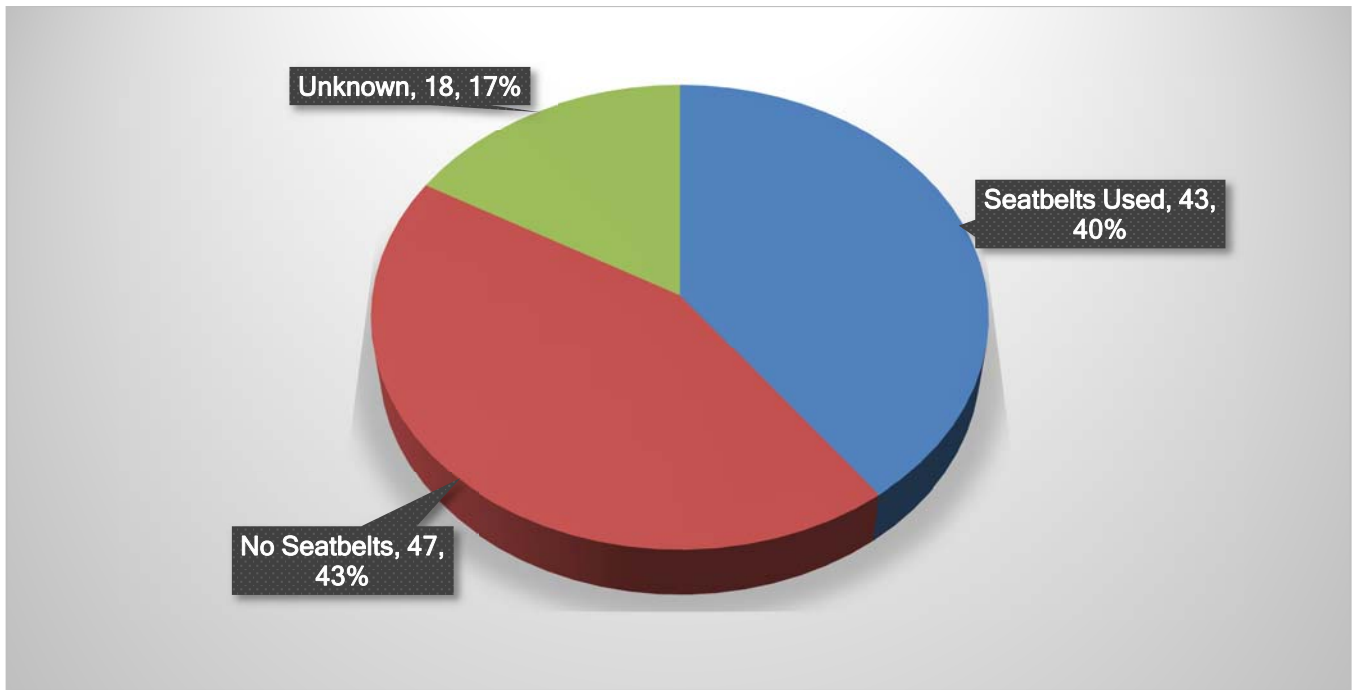


By Age

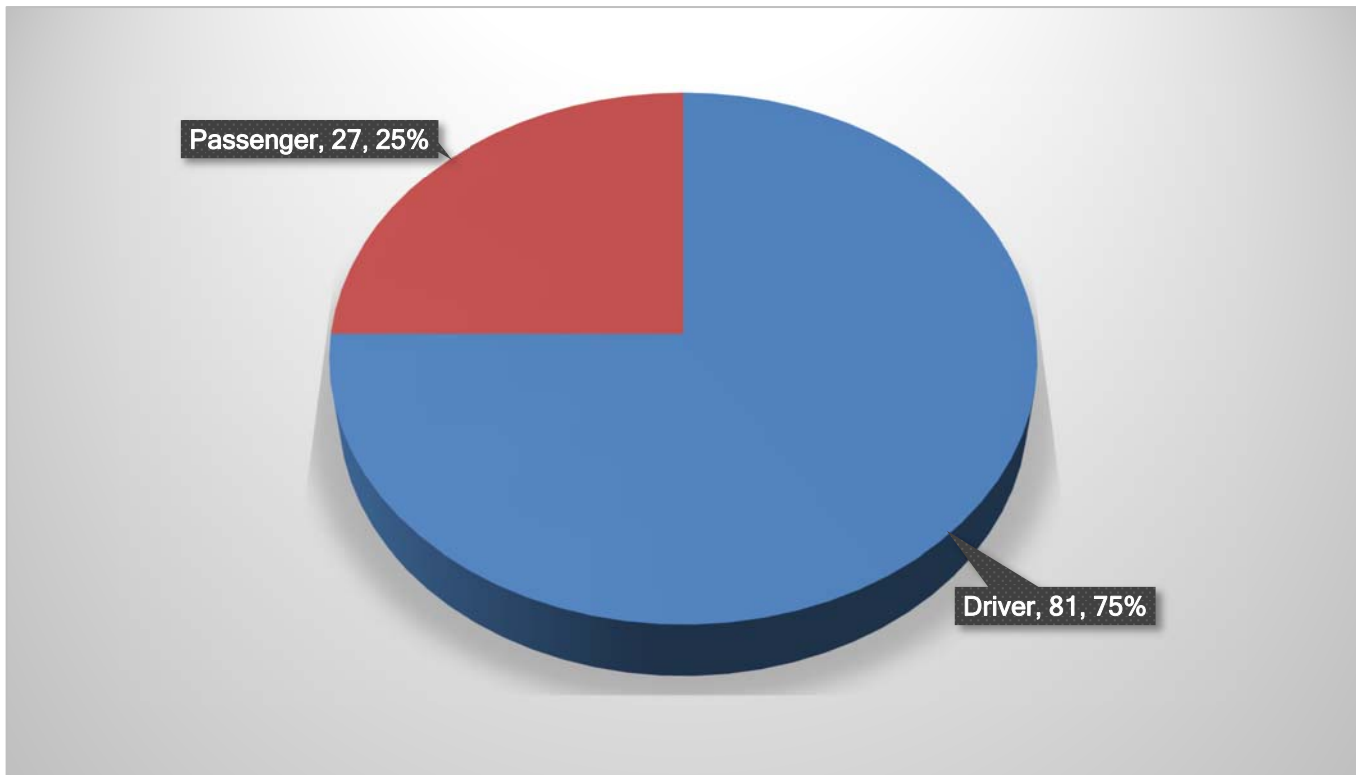


Automobile Fatalities in Travis County – 2020

Seatbelts in Use

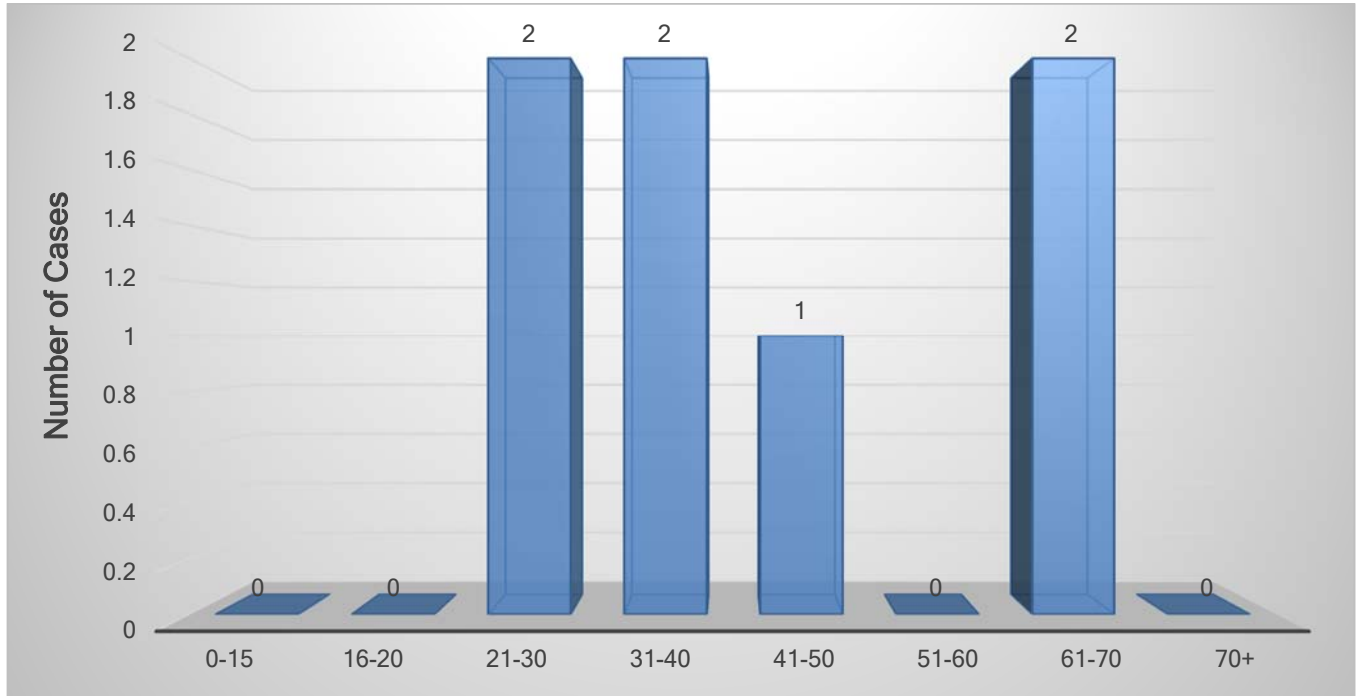


Decedent's Location in Vehicle

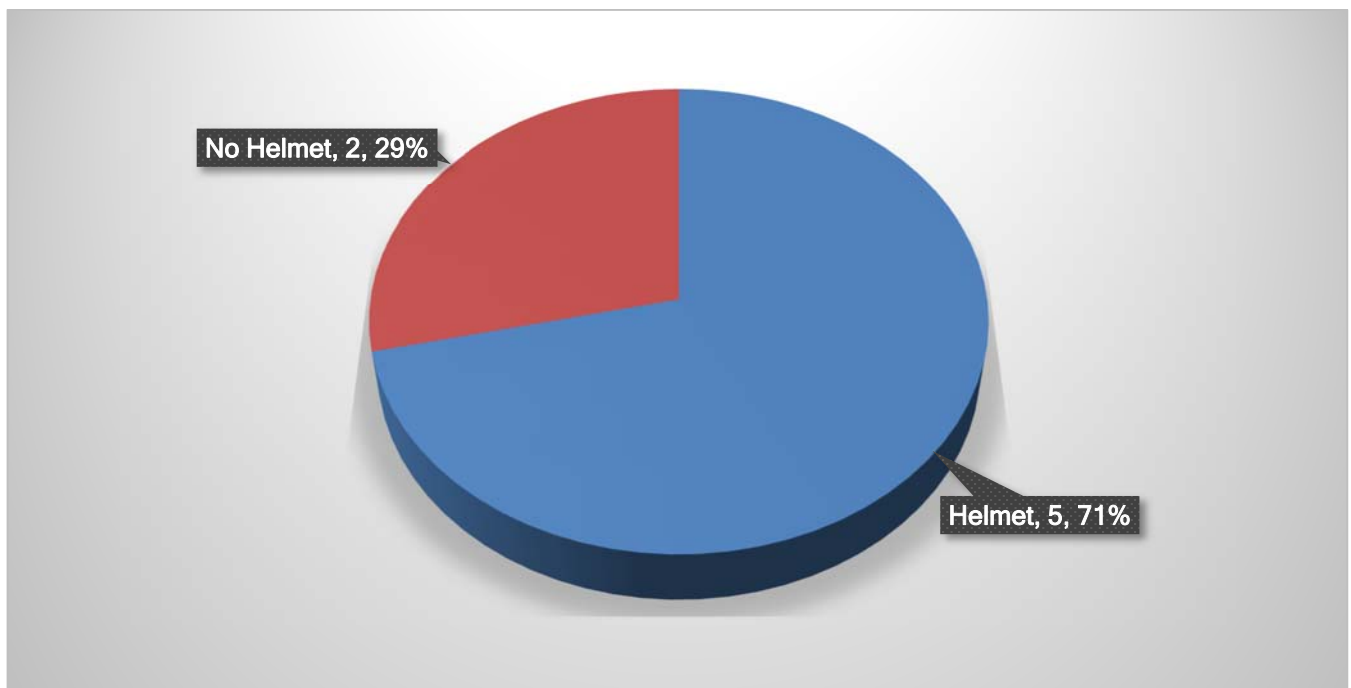


Motorcycle Fatalities in Travis County – 2020

By Age

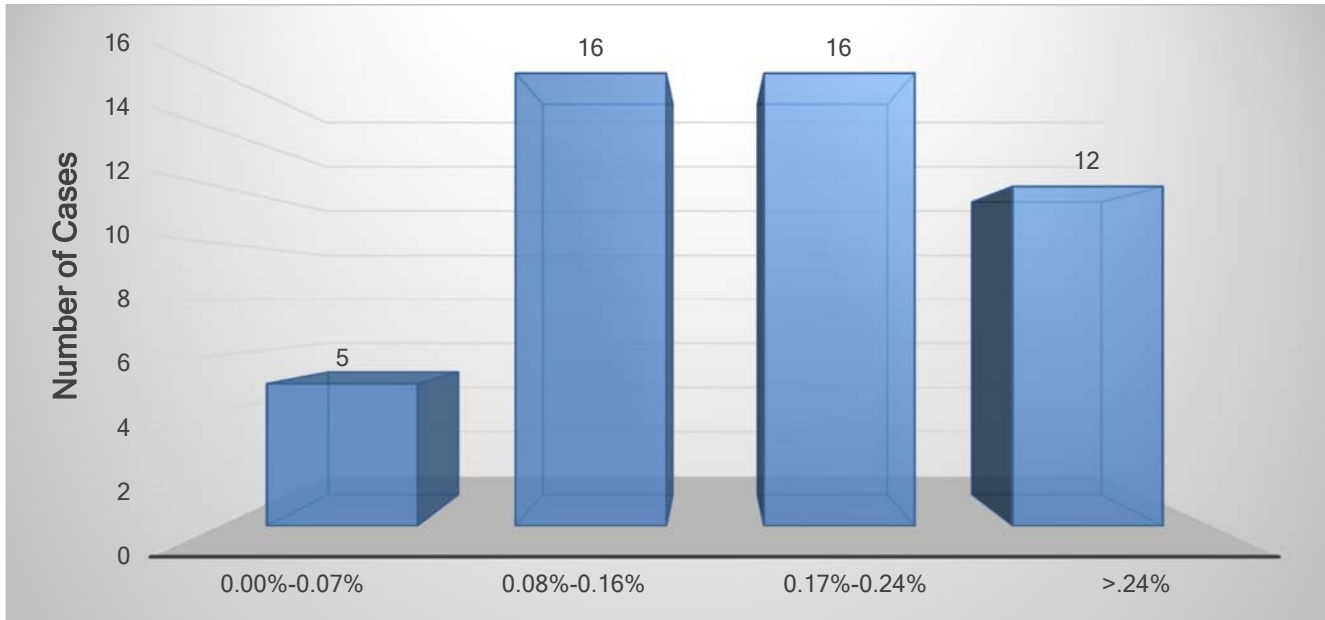


Helmet Status

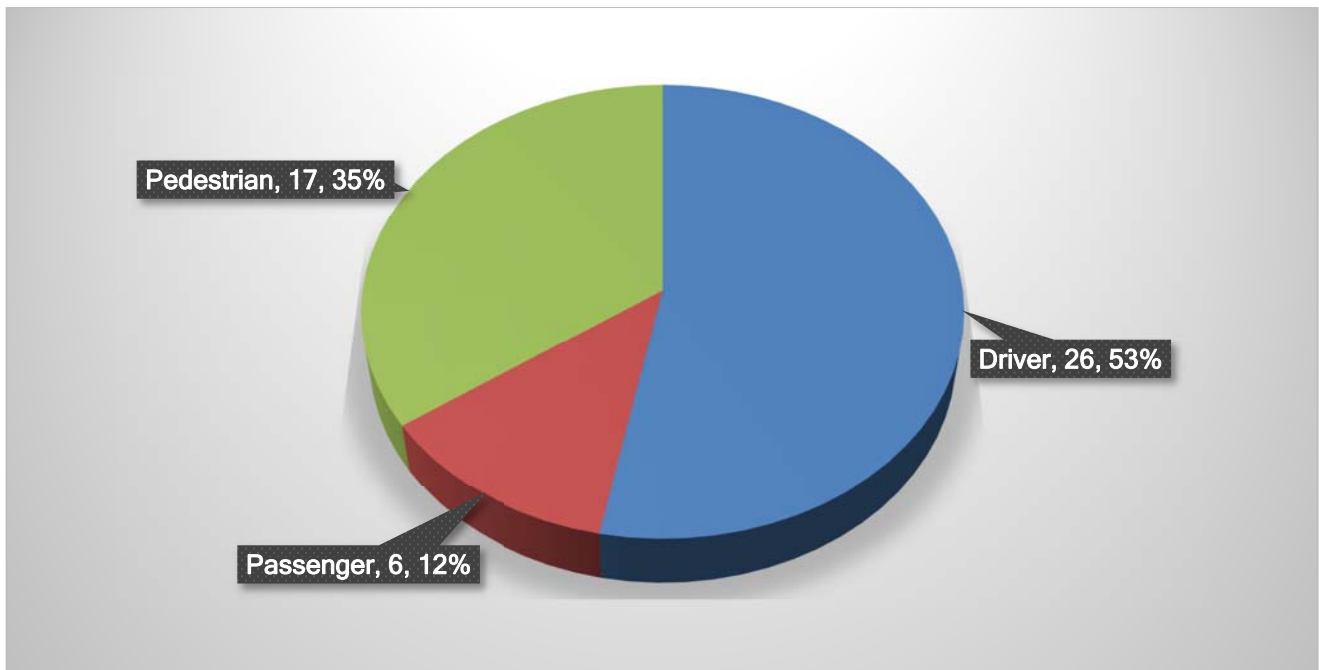


Alcohol was detected in 49 out of 163 (30%) traffic fatalities that occurred within the boundaries of Travis County in 2020. This includes drivers, passengers and pedestrians.

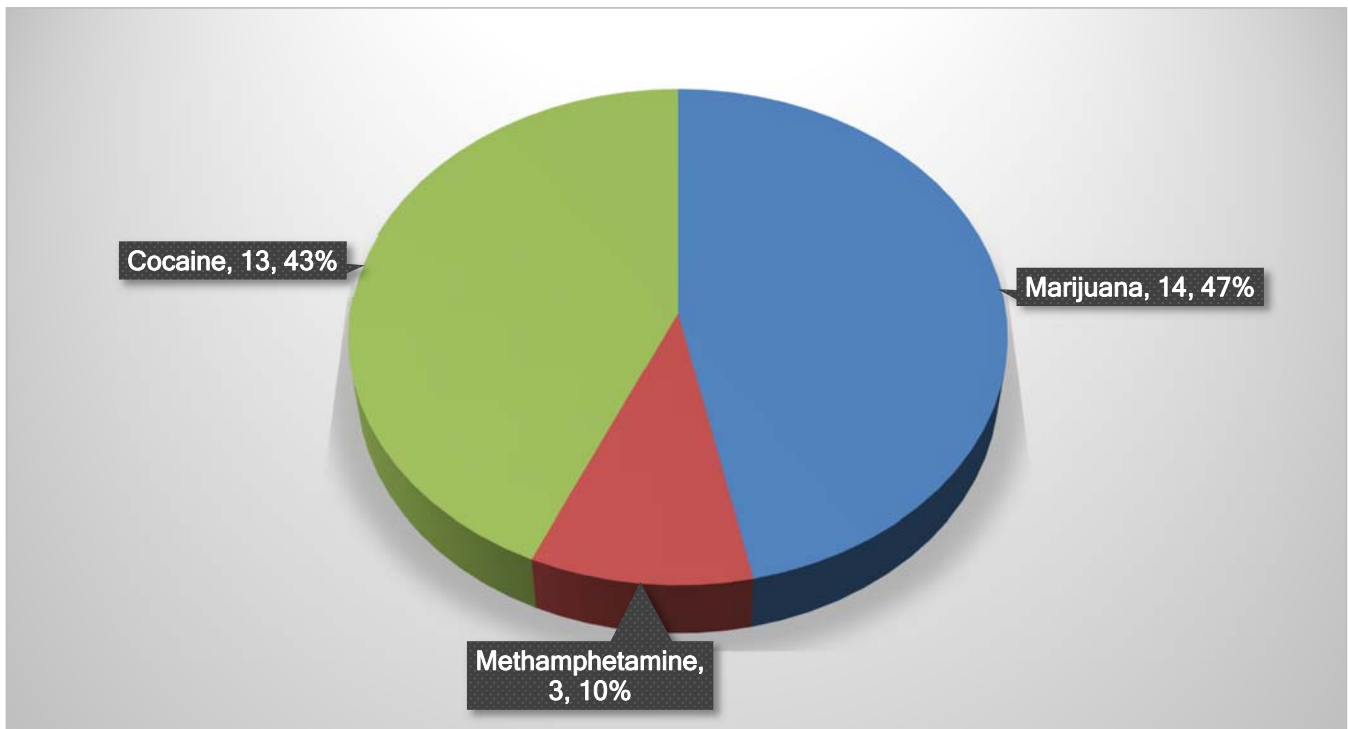
Blood Alcohol Concentrations in Decedents when Alcohol is Detected in Traffic Fatalities in Travis County – 2020



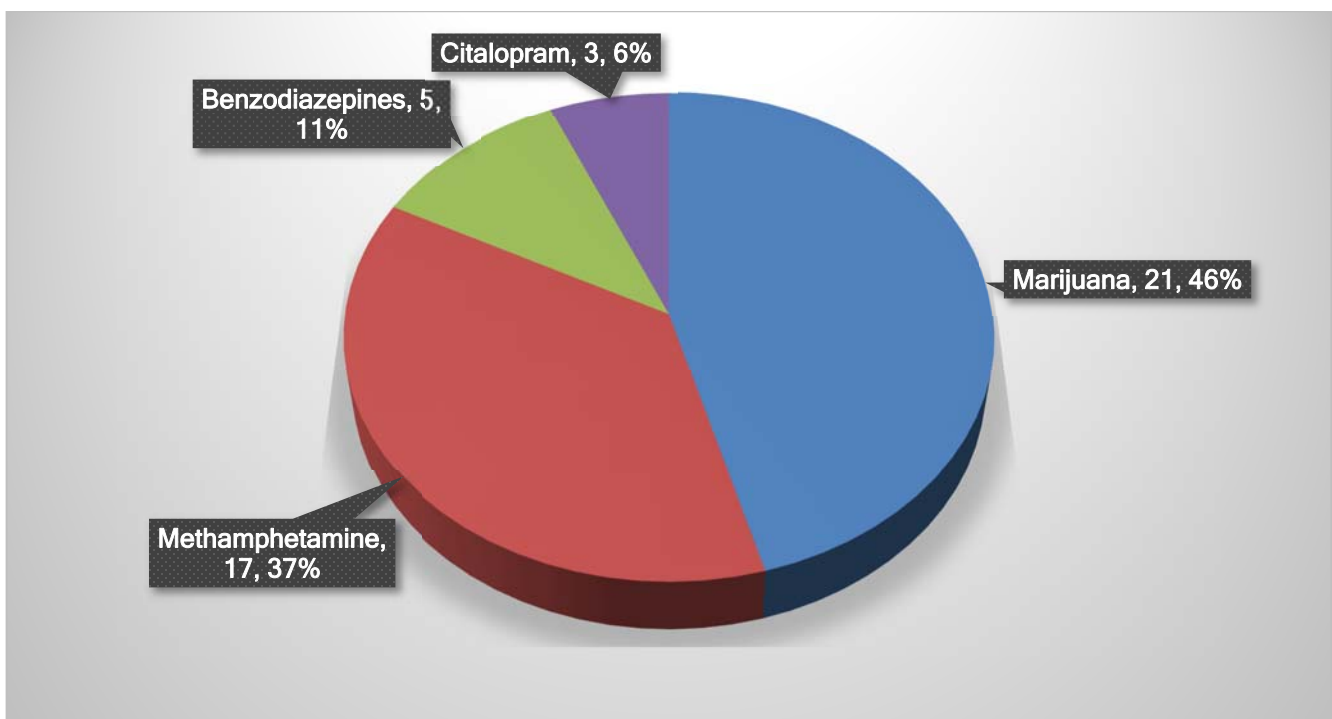
Role of Decedent in Travis County Traffic Fatalities in Which Alcohol was Detected in Decedent



Most Common Drugs Detected in Combination with Alcohol in Travis County Traffic Fatalities – 2020



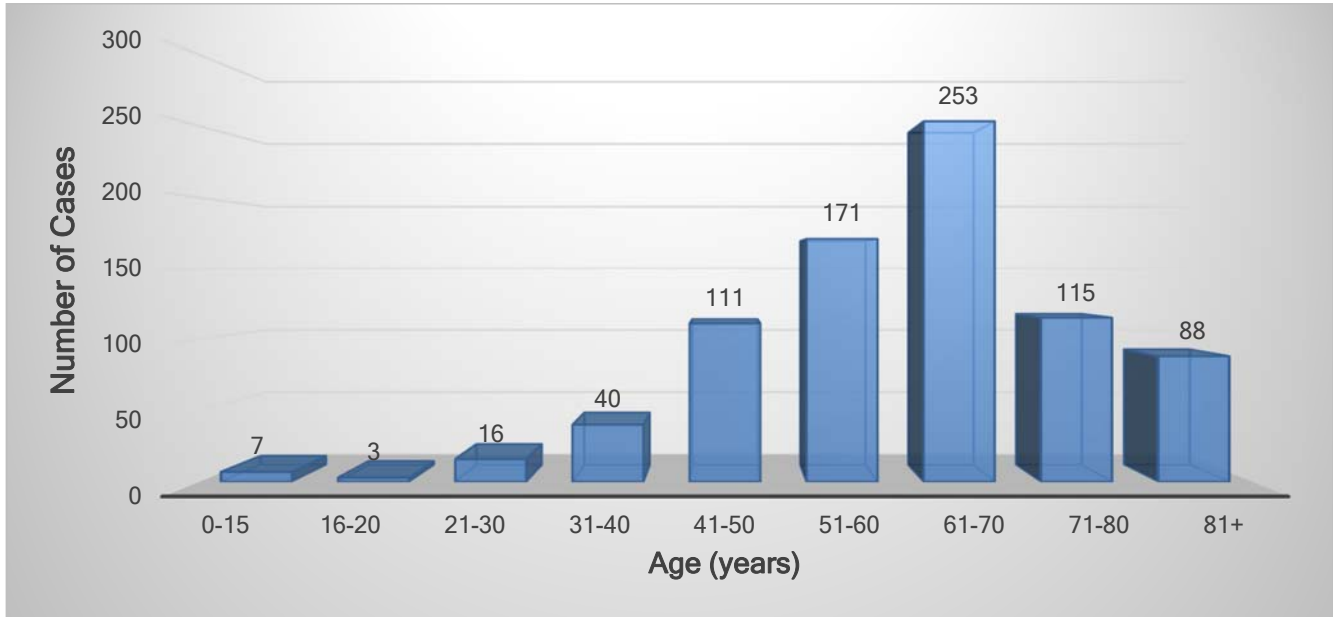
Most Common Drugs Detected in Travis County Traffic Fatalities – 2020



Natural Disease Deaths in Travis County – 2020

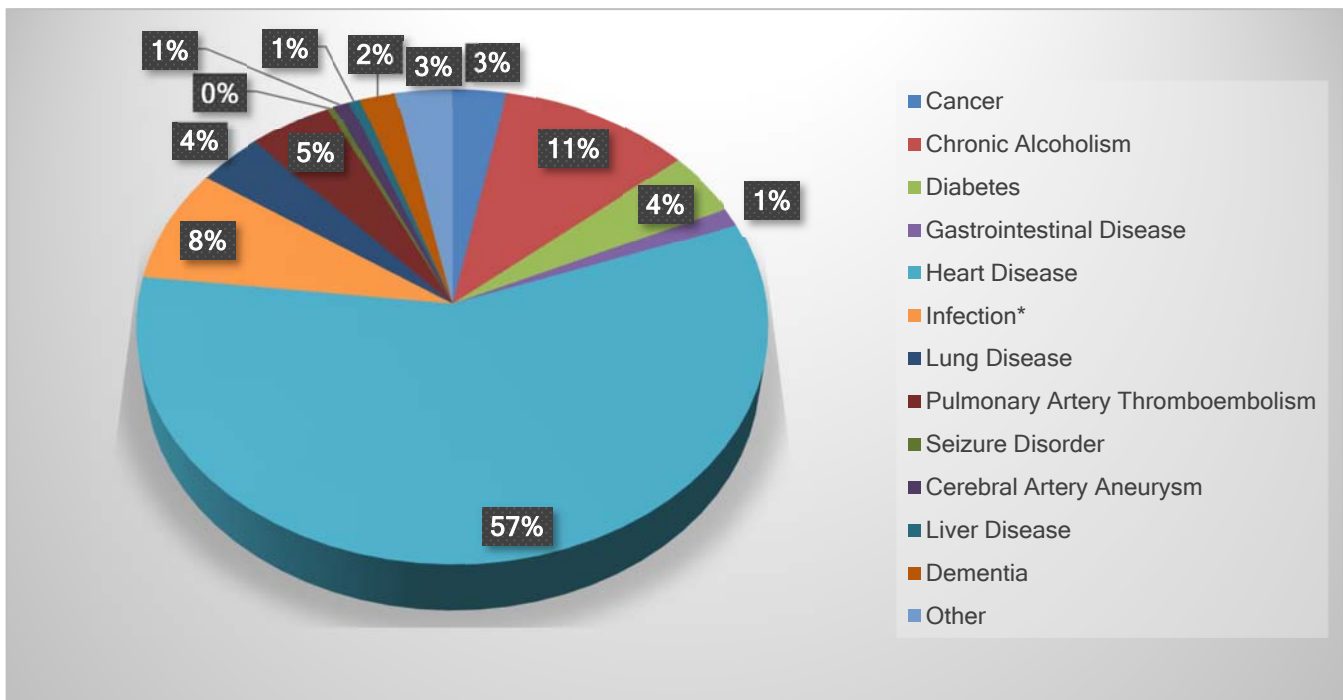
In 2020, 47% of Travis County Medical Examiner cases died of natural disease.

By Age



Natural Disease Death by Disease Process in Travis County – 2020

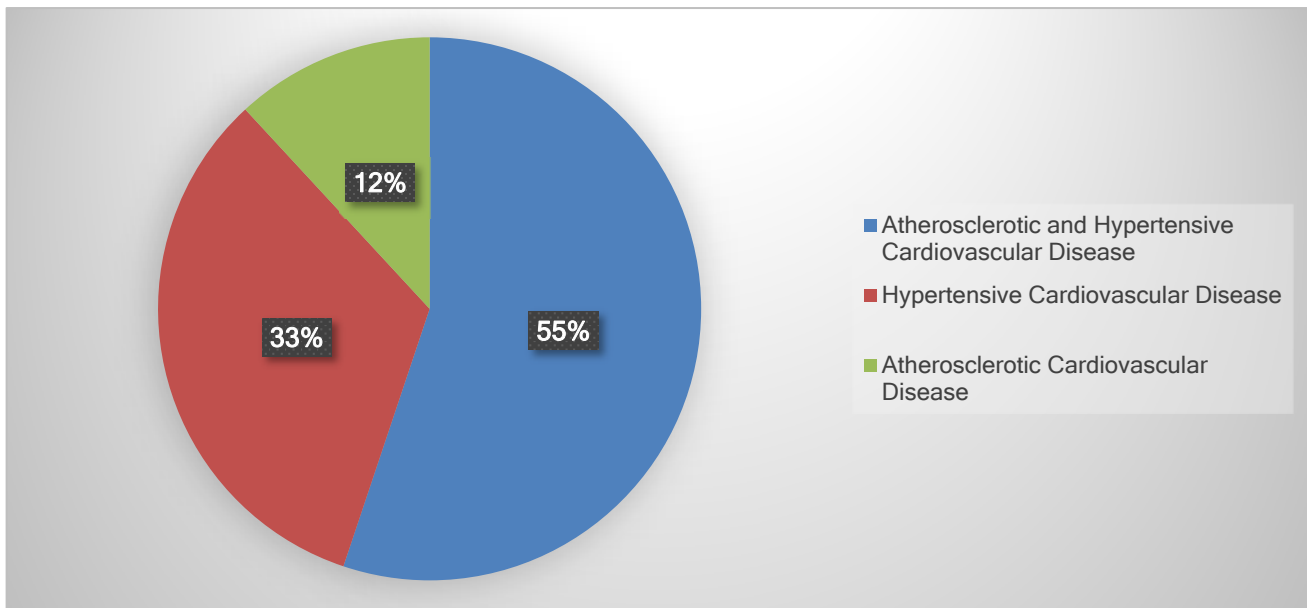
The greatest percentage of the deaths from natural disease was due to heart disease.



*Infection includes 48 cases in which death was from Covid-19

Heart disease is generally subdivided into atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, hypertensive cardiovascular disease, and atherosclerotic and hypertensive cardiovascular disease. Atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease is a term used to describe hardening and narrowing of the arteries by atherosclerotic plaque. Hypertensive cardiovascular disease refers to enlargement of the heart that occurs because of hypertension (high blood pressure). Atherosclerotic and hypertensive cardiovascular disease refers to a situation in which both disease processes are present.

Heart Disease by Type in Travis County – 2020



Resources for Cardiovascular Health

- High blood pressure (hypertension) - www.mayoclinic.com/health/high-blood-pressure/DS00100
- American Heart Association - <https://www.heart.org/>
- Cardiovascular Disease - <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-cvds>

Ways to Improve Cardiovascular Health

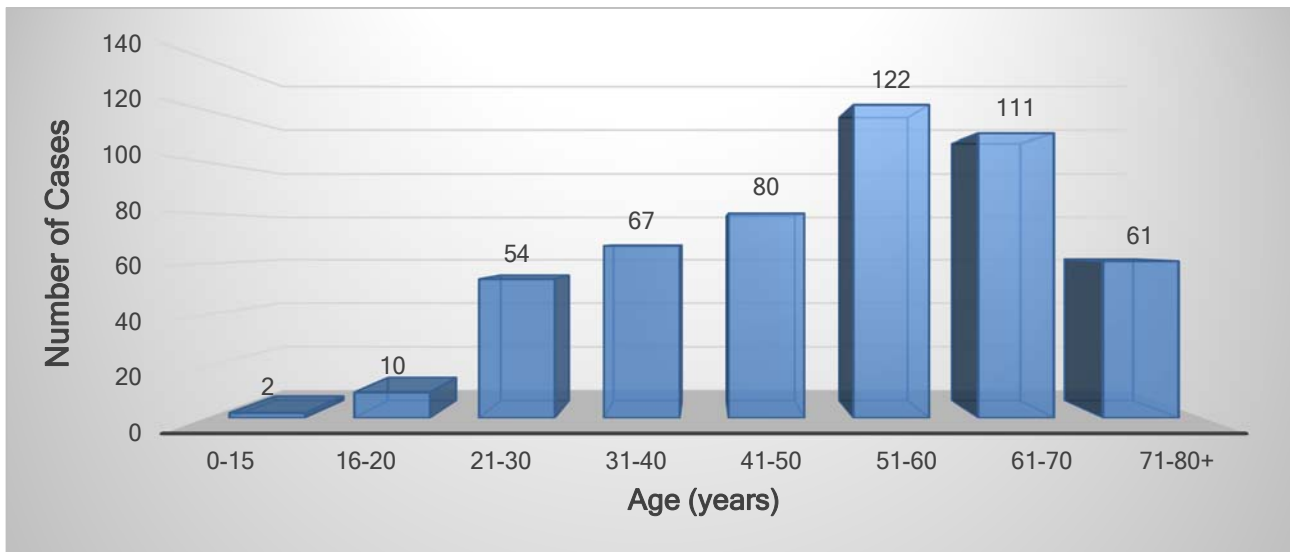
- Don't smoke or use tobacco
- Get moving: Aim for at least 30 to 60 minutes of activity daily
- Eat a heart-healthy diet
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Get good quality sleep
- Manage stress
- Get regular health screenings



Obesity

507 of 1686 (30%) of deaths of Travis County residents 18 years and older in 2020 that were examined at TCME were obese. Obesity is defined as body mass index >30 kg/m².

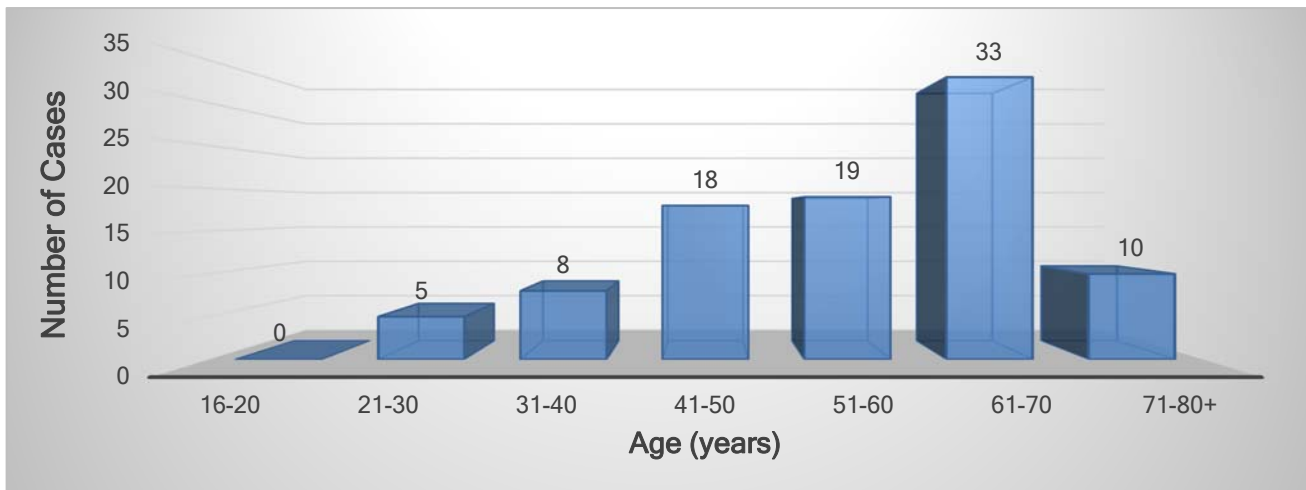
Age of Decedents Determined to be Obese in Travis County – 2020



Deaths Related to Obesity

93 of 783 (12%) of natural deaths of Travis County residents 18 years and older in 2020 that were examined at TCME were obesity related.

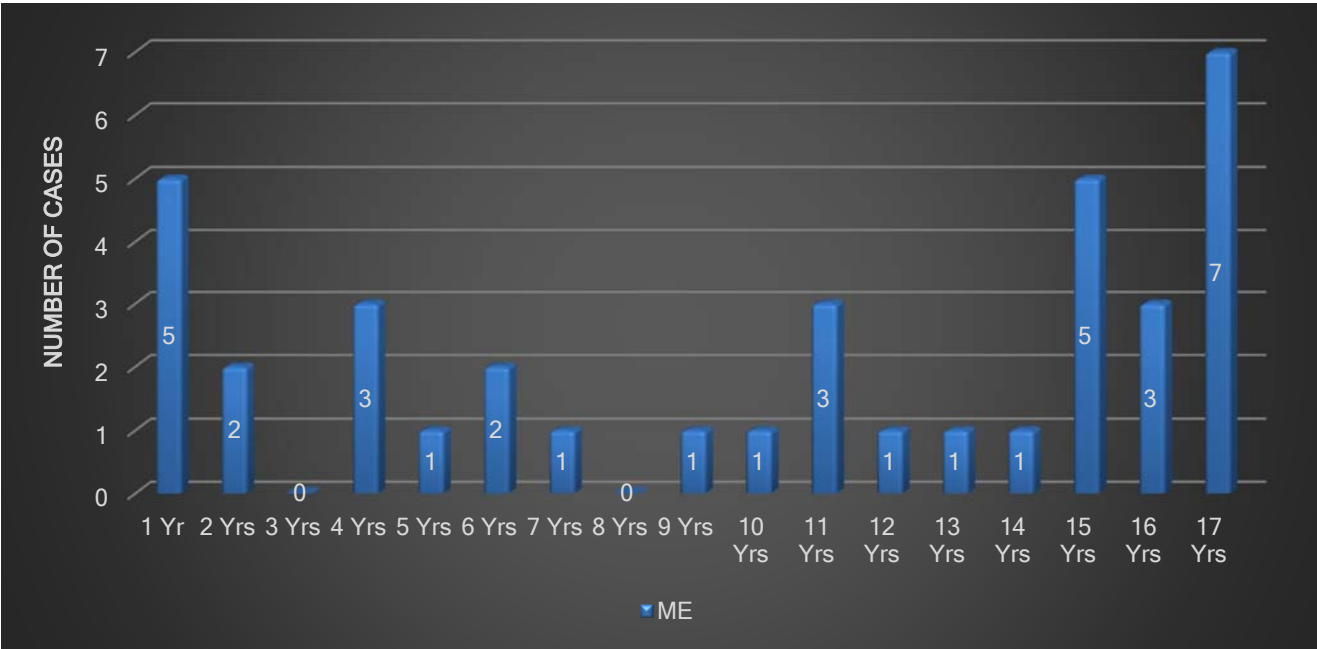
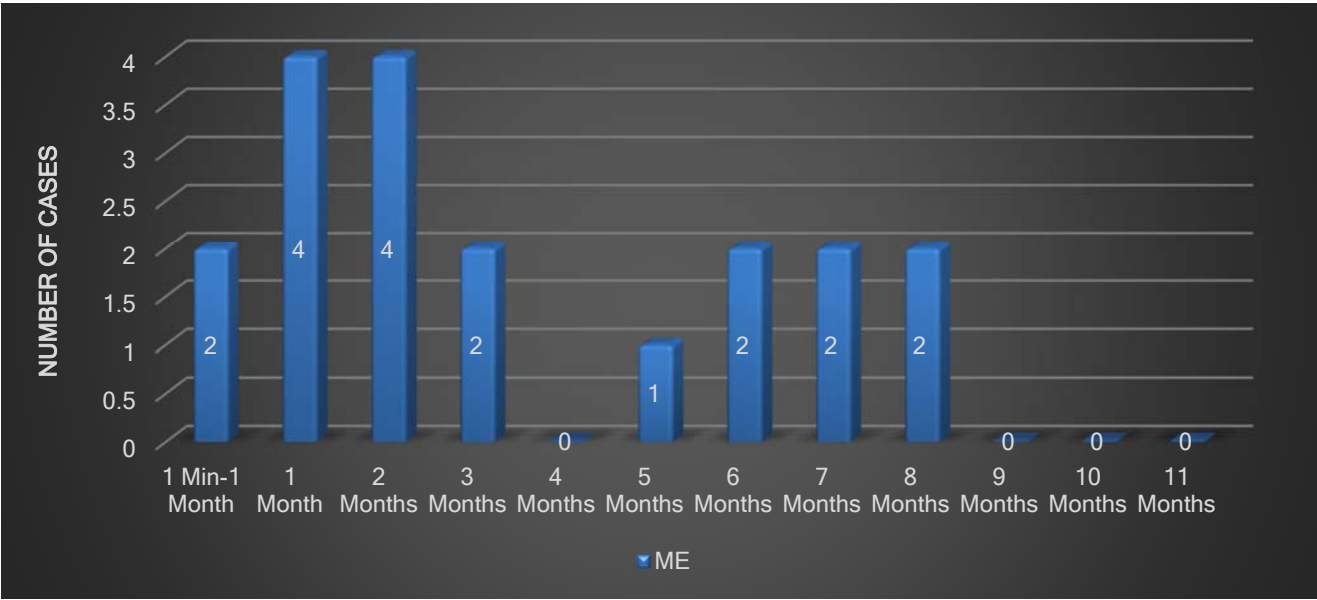
Age of Decedents Whose Deaths were Obesity-Related in Travis County – 2020



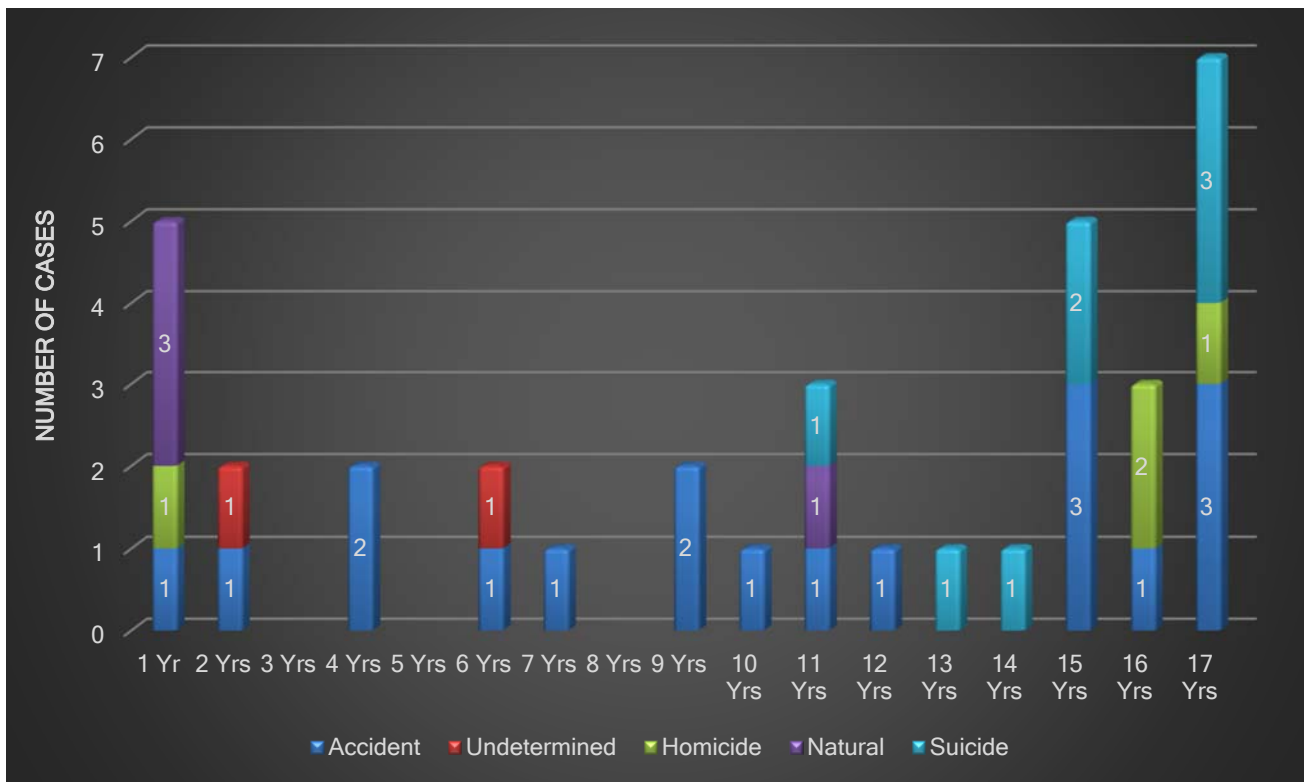
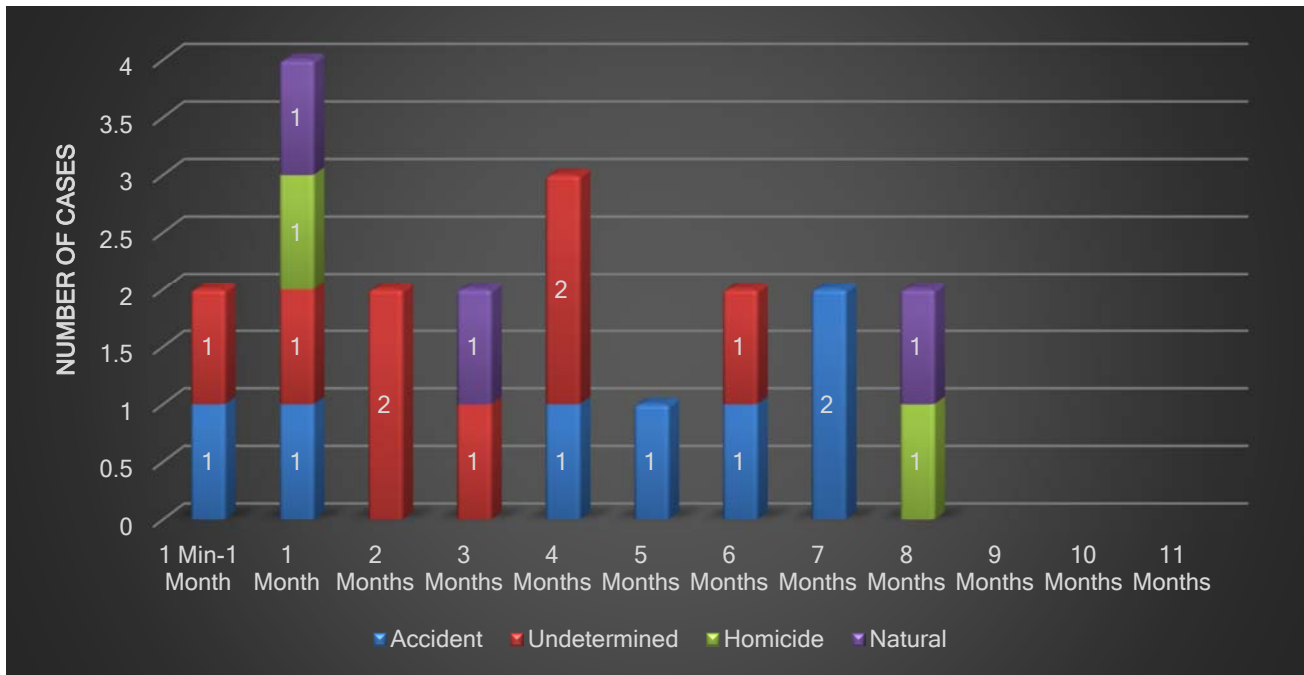
Child Fatalities in Travis County – 2020

In 2020, 56 child fatalities (1 minute through 17 years of age) in Travis County were reported to TCME.

Ages at Death of Child Fatalities

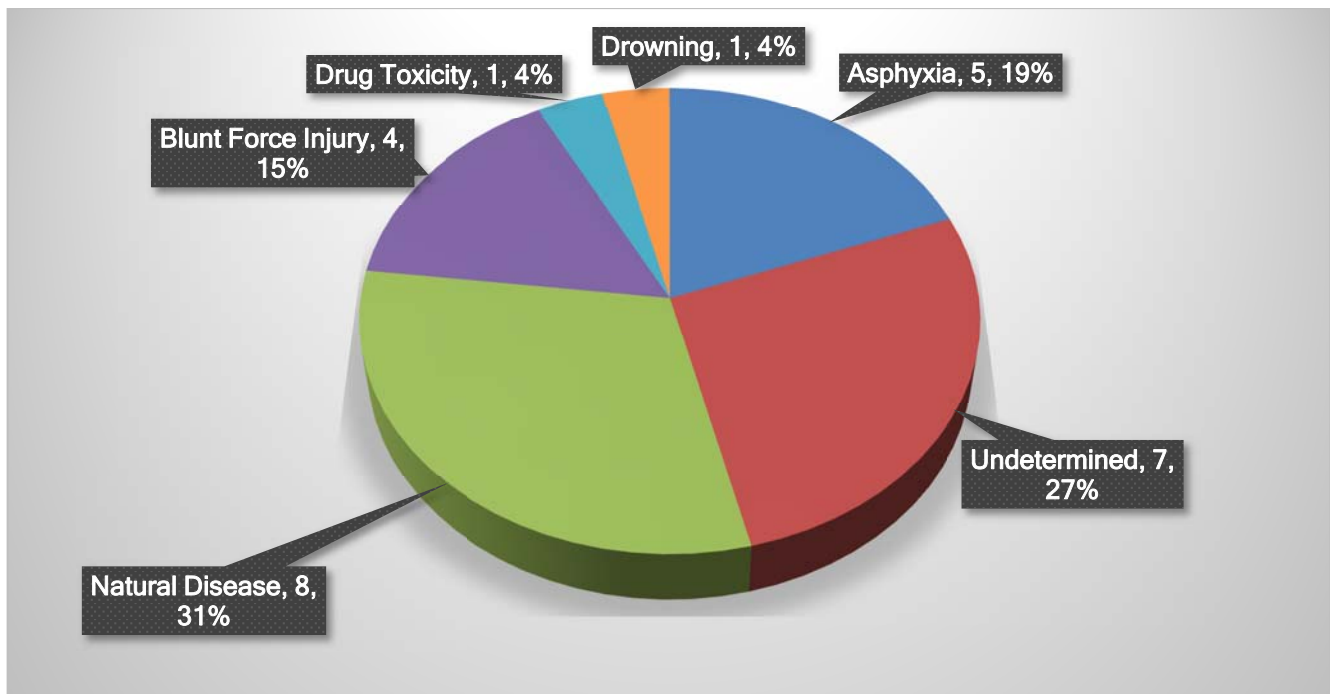


Manner of Death in Death of Child Fatalities in Travis County – 2020



Infant Deaths (1 Day to 1 Year of Age) – Travis County – 2020

Cause of Death



The majority of asphyxial causes of death in these infants were related to unsafe sleeping conditions such as bed sharing in adult beds with other individuals and/or the use of unsafe/adult-type bedding materials.

IS YOUR BABY SLEEPING SAFELY?

Follow these simple guidelines to ensure Safer Sleep:

- No Pillow
- No Blanket
- No Bumper Pads
- No Stuffed Toys

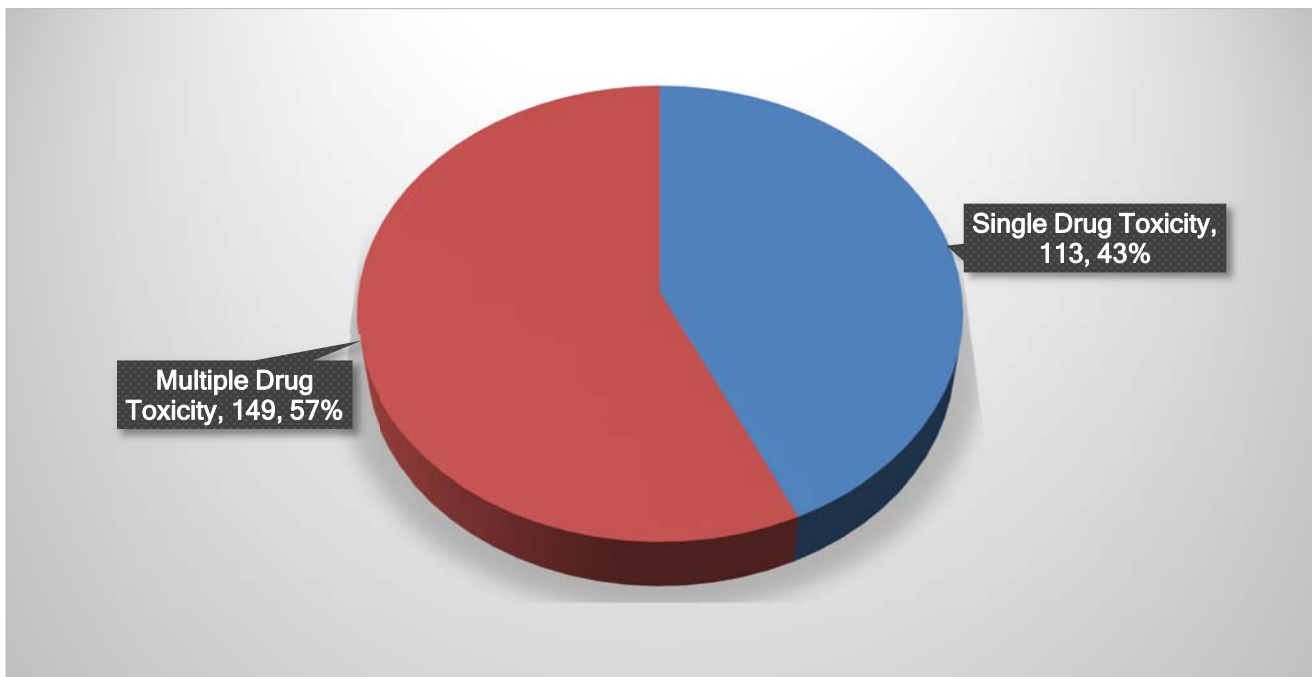
Infants can easily suffocate and die in soft bedding material. Because of this, infants should not be placed to sleep on adult beds, couches, futons, waterbeds, etc.

Infants should sleep alone because they may be rolled over upon (overlaid) by a bedsharing adult or sibling. If on a couch, an infant may slip into the space between the person lying on the couch and the backrest of the couch and become wedged, preventing them from breathing adequately. They may get their face wedged between two cushions or into a soft cushion. Cribs should not contain pillows, thick blankets or comforters, plush materials, stuffed toys, or anything else that a baby could suffocate on. Bumper pads should not be used because an infant can wedge their face between the bumper pad and the mattress.

Most of the infant accidental deaths that occur in Travis County are due to infants suffocating in unsafe sleep environments. These deaths are preventable. Infants should always be placed to sleep alone, on their back, in a safety-approved crib, with a tight-fitting sheet on a firm mattress, without any extra pillows, stuffed animals, or other potentially hazardous items. Infants should sleep in the same room as adults, but in their own safe crib.

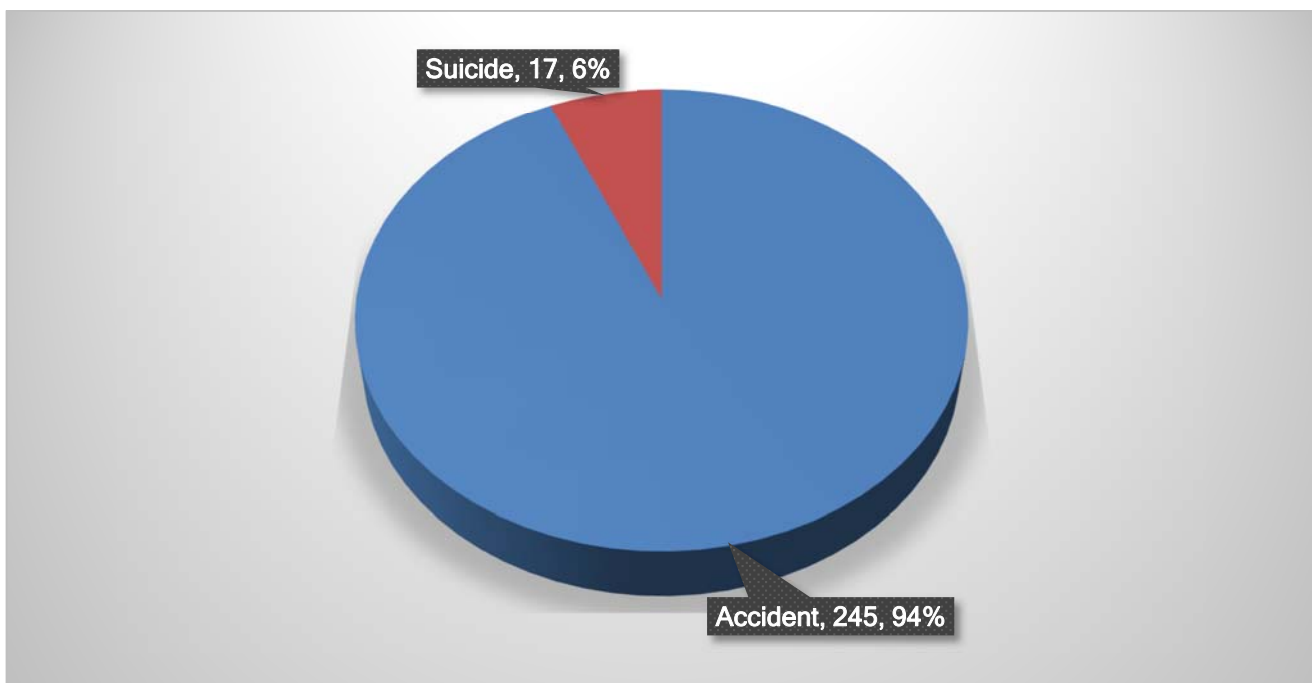
Types of Drug-Related Deaths in Travis County – 2020

Multiple Drug Versus Single Drug Toxicity

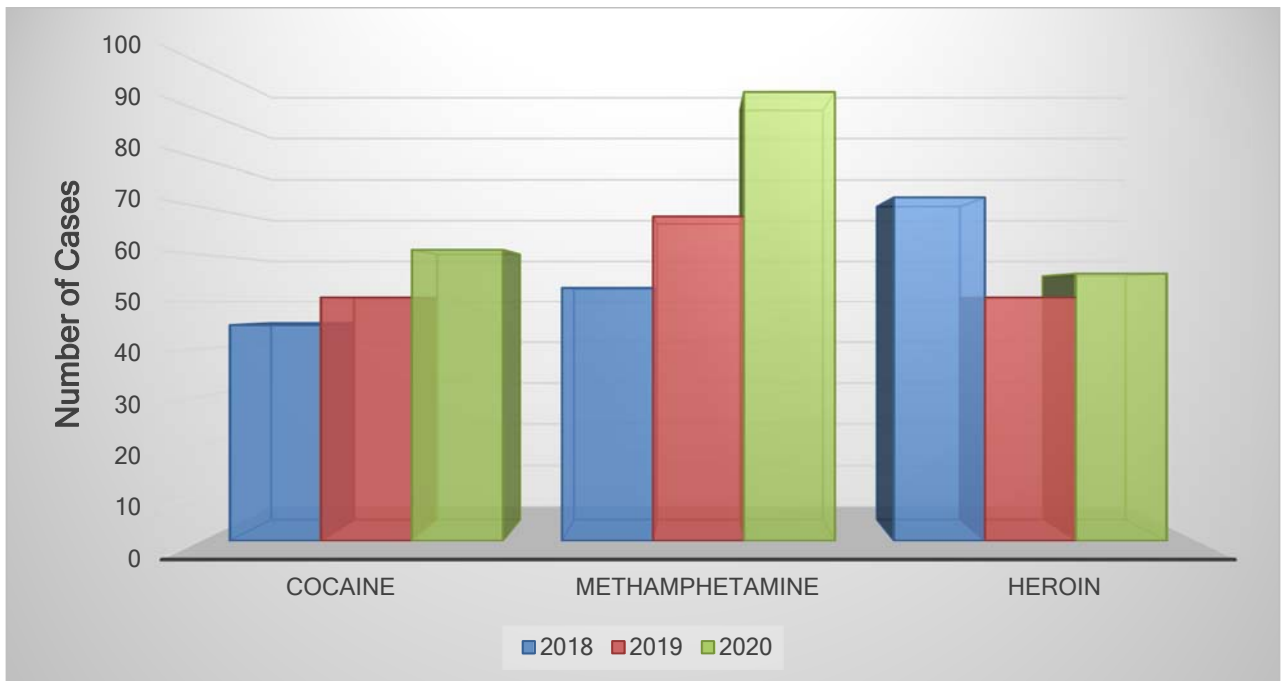


Drug Toxicity Deaths in Travis County – 2020

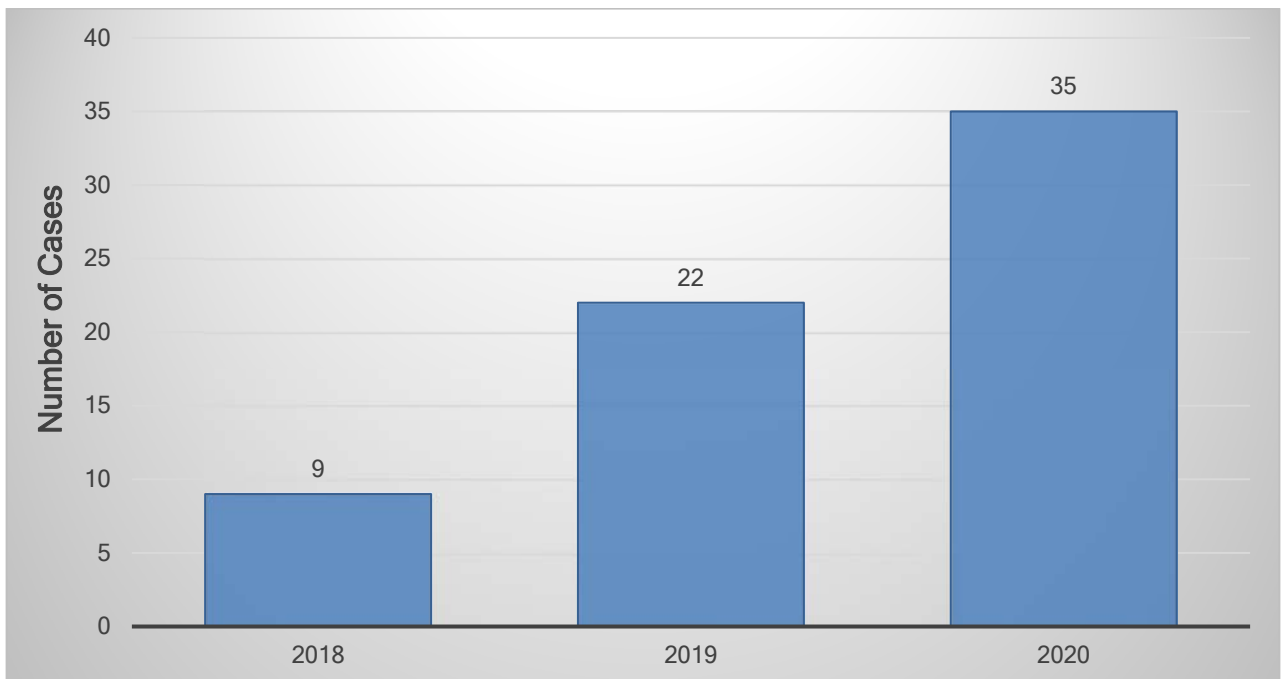
Manner of Death



Accidental Drug Deaths by Drug Detected (Illicit) – 2018-2020

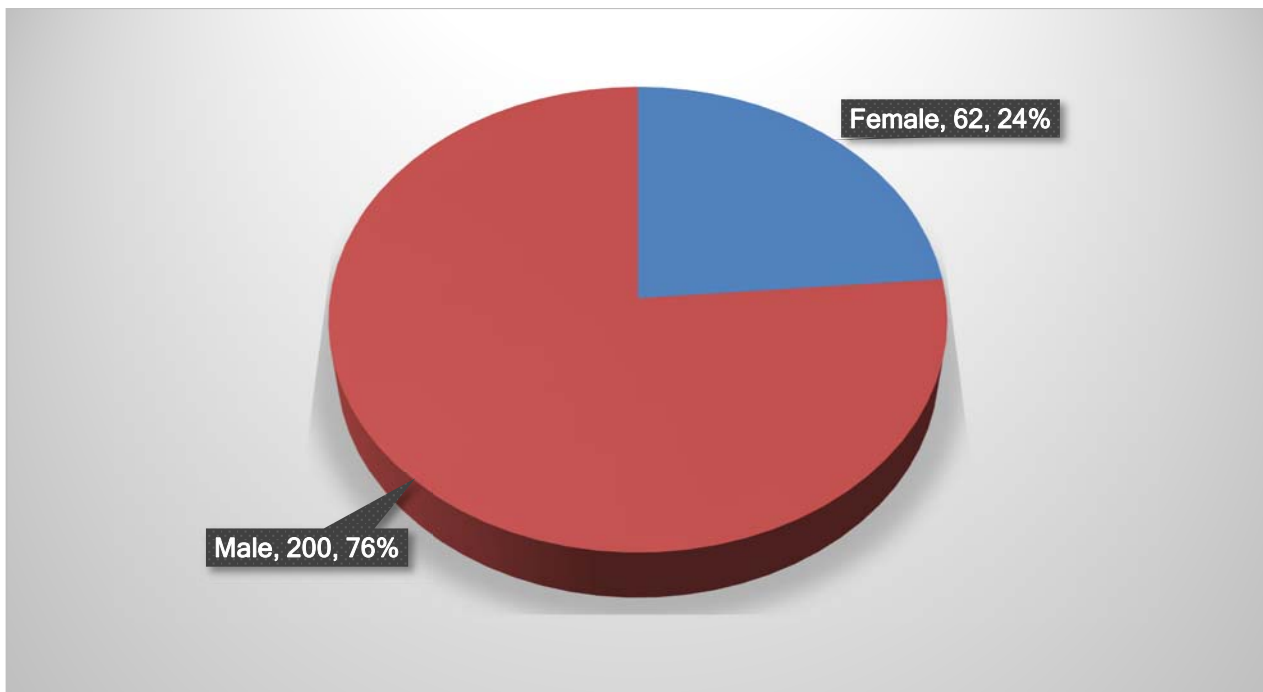


Accidental Drug Deaths - Fentanyl Detected – 2018-2020

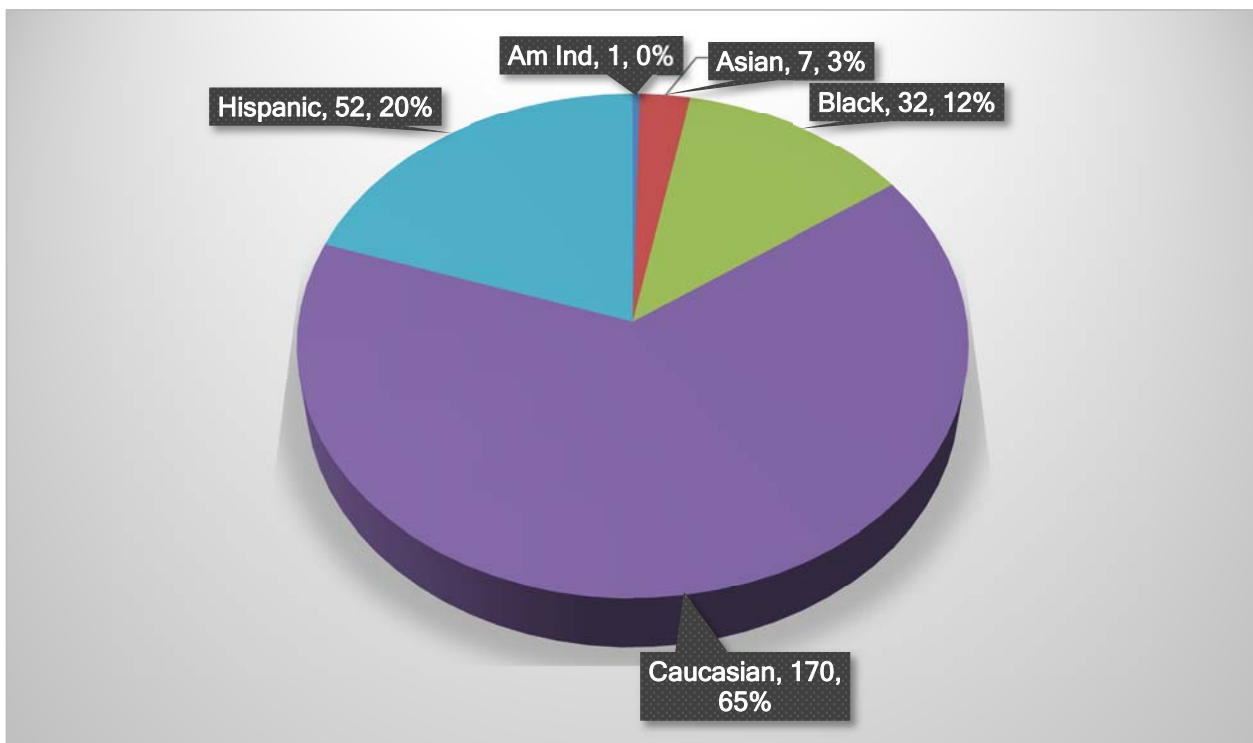


There were 12 deaths related to synthetic cannabinoids in 2020.

Drug Deaths by Decedent Gender in Travis County – 2020

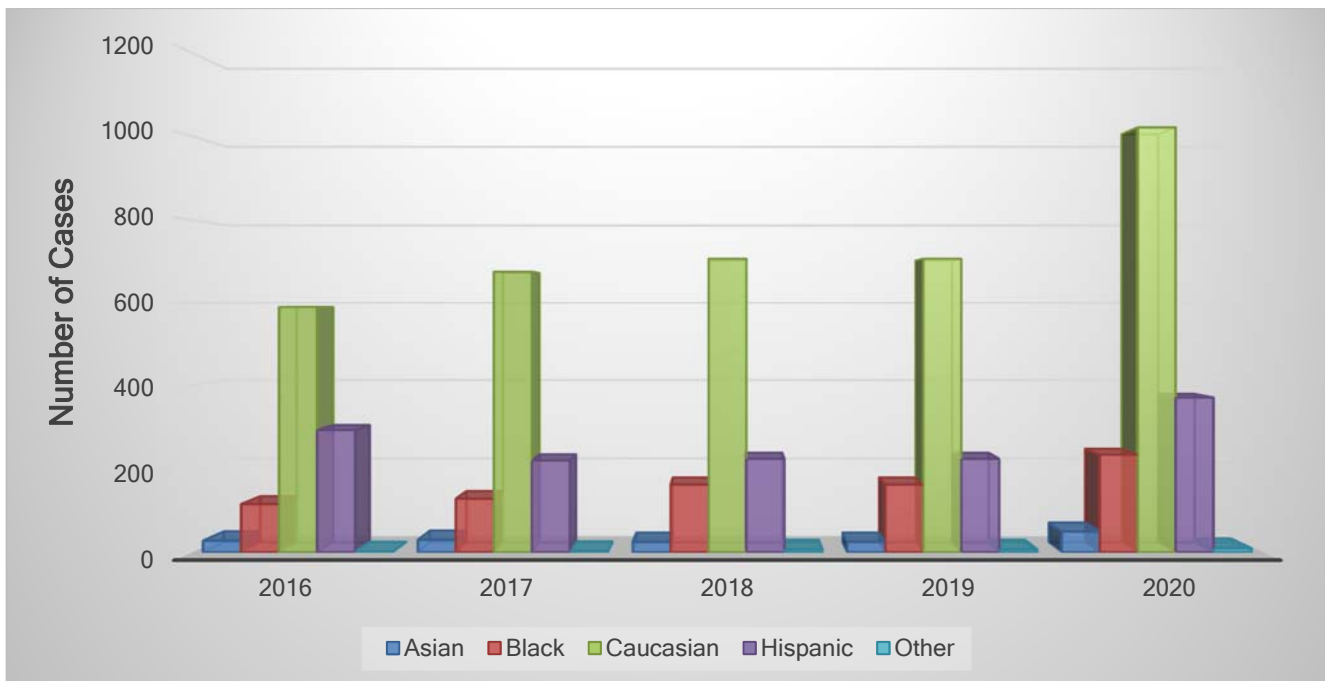


Drug Deaths by Decedent Race in Travis County – 2020

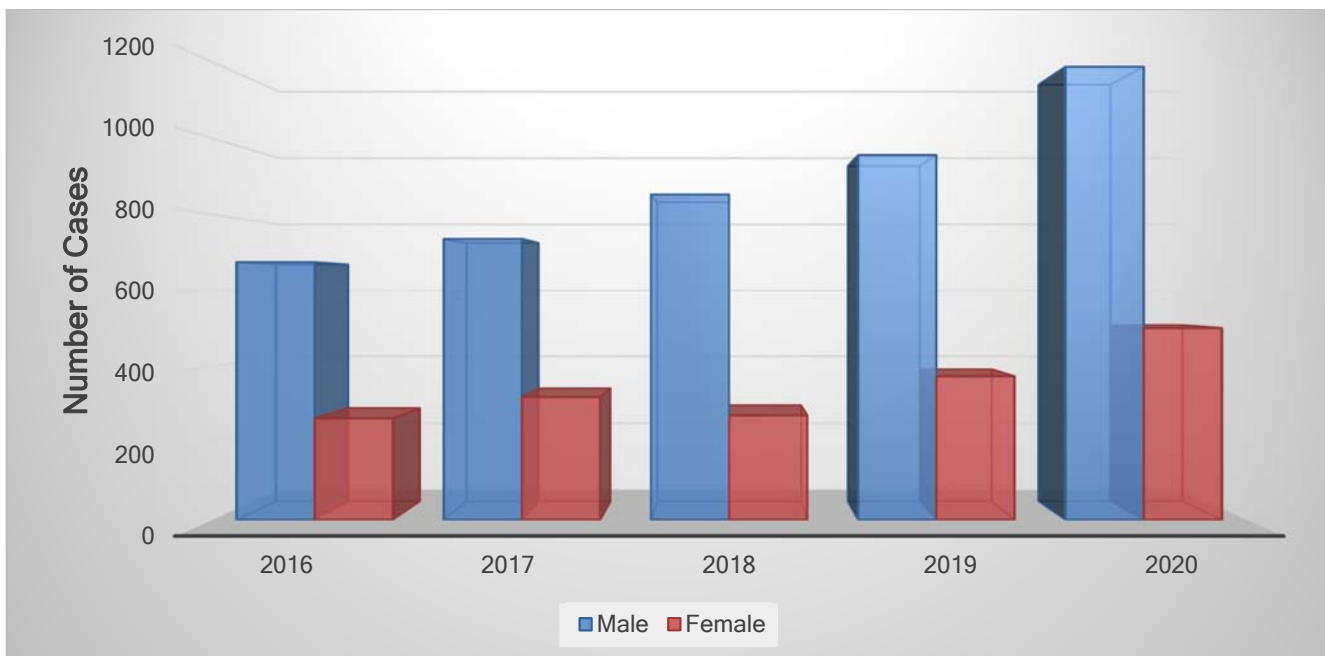


Demographic Information in Travis County

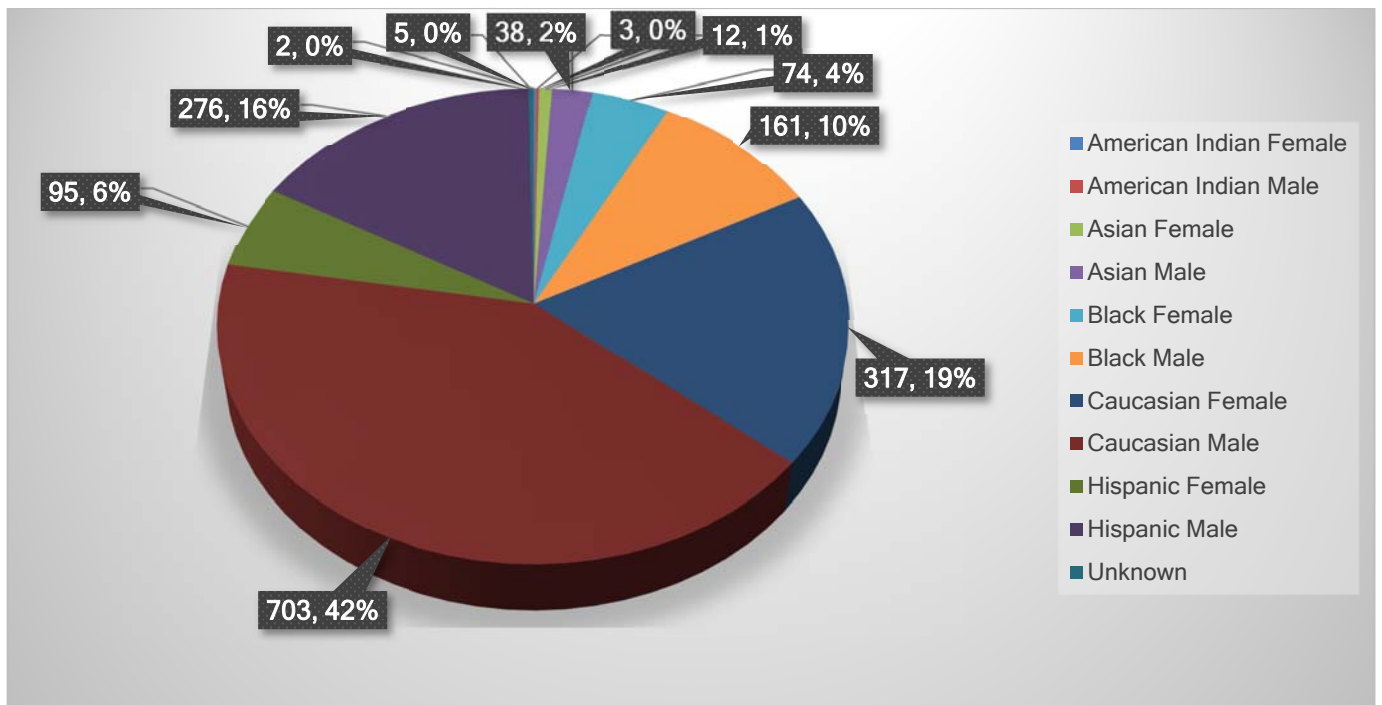
Decedent Race Trends: 2016-2020



Decedent Gender Trends: 2016-2020



Breakdown by Decedent Race and Gender in Travis County – 2020



Scene Investigations – 2020

Scene investigation is an important component of a proper medicolegal death investigation. TCME forensic investigators attended 1158 death scenes in Travis County in 2020. TCME investigators do not typically attend death scenes that are located outside of Travis County boundaries. Types of scenes investigated include all suspected homicides, suicides, accidental deaths and select cases suspected to have died of natural disease.

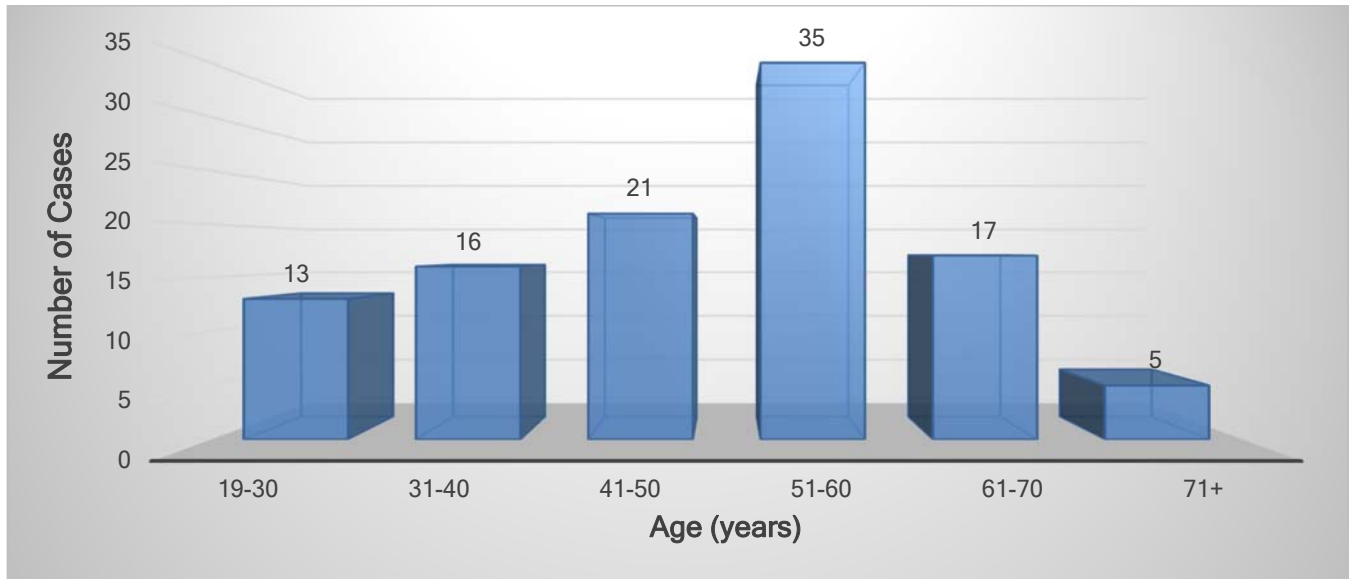
Trends in Numbers of Scene Investigations: 2016-2020



Transient Deaths in Travis County – 2020

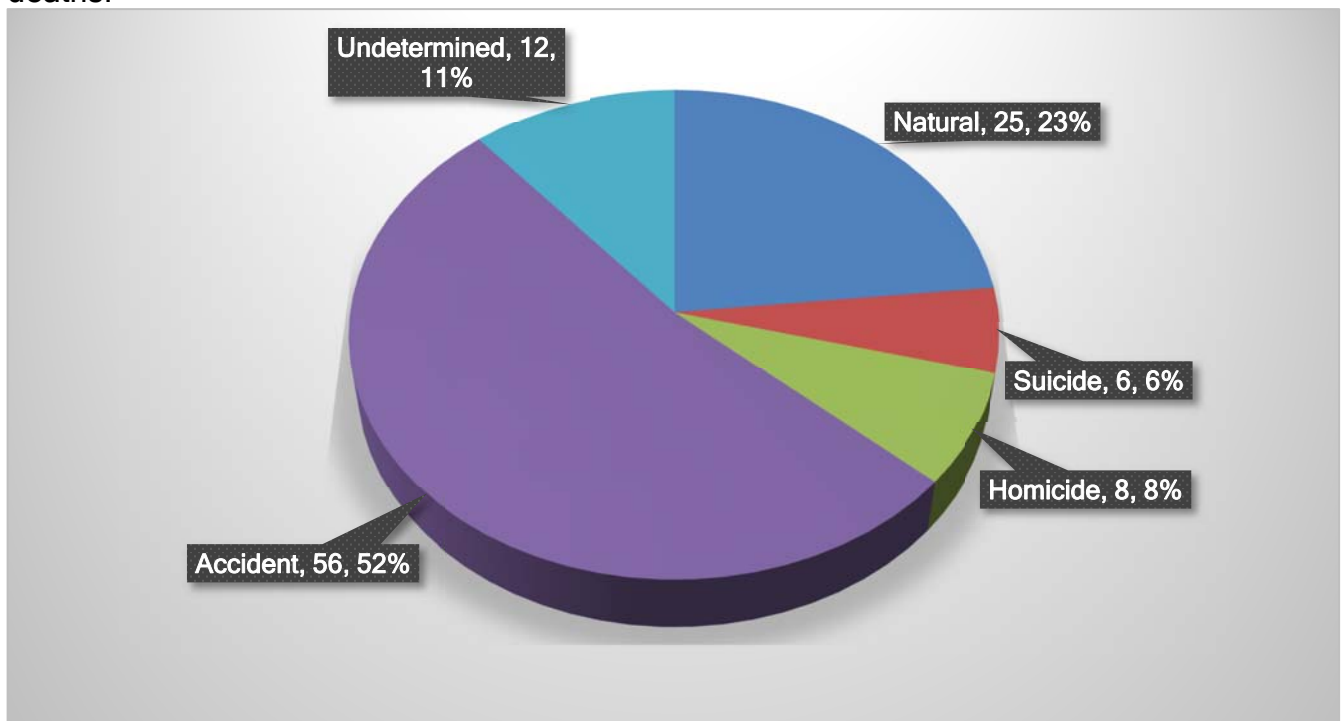
Our office receives requests for information regarding the homeless population in Travis County. Insight into the manner of deaths for the homeless might help address the situations that are faced and facilitate measures to protect this population.

Transient Death by Age in Travis County 2020



Transient Deaths by Manner in Travis County – 2020

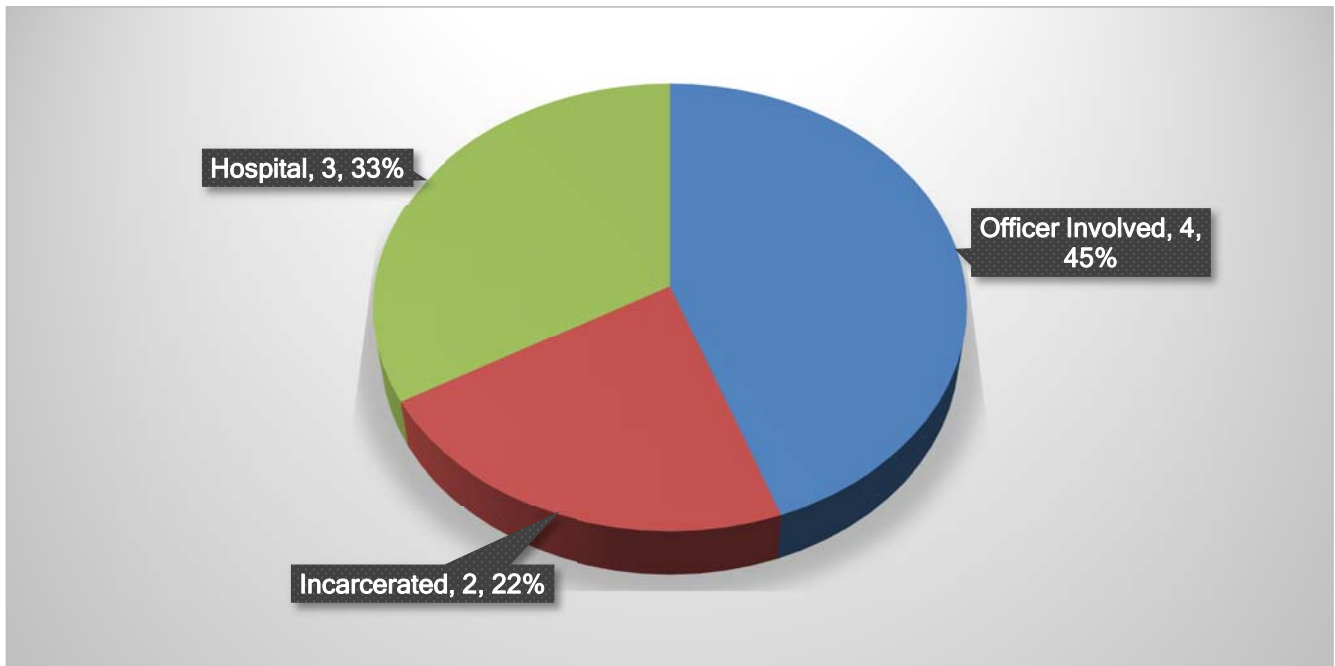
Unlike the general population, the majority of deaths are accidental rather than natural deaths.



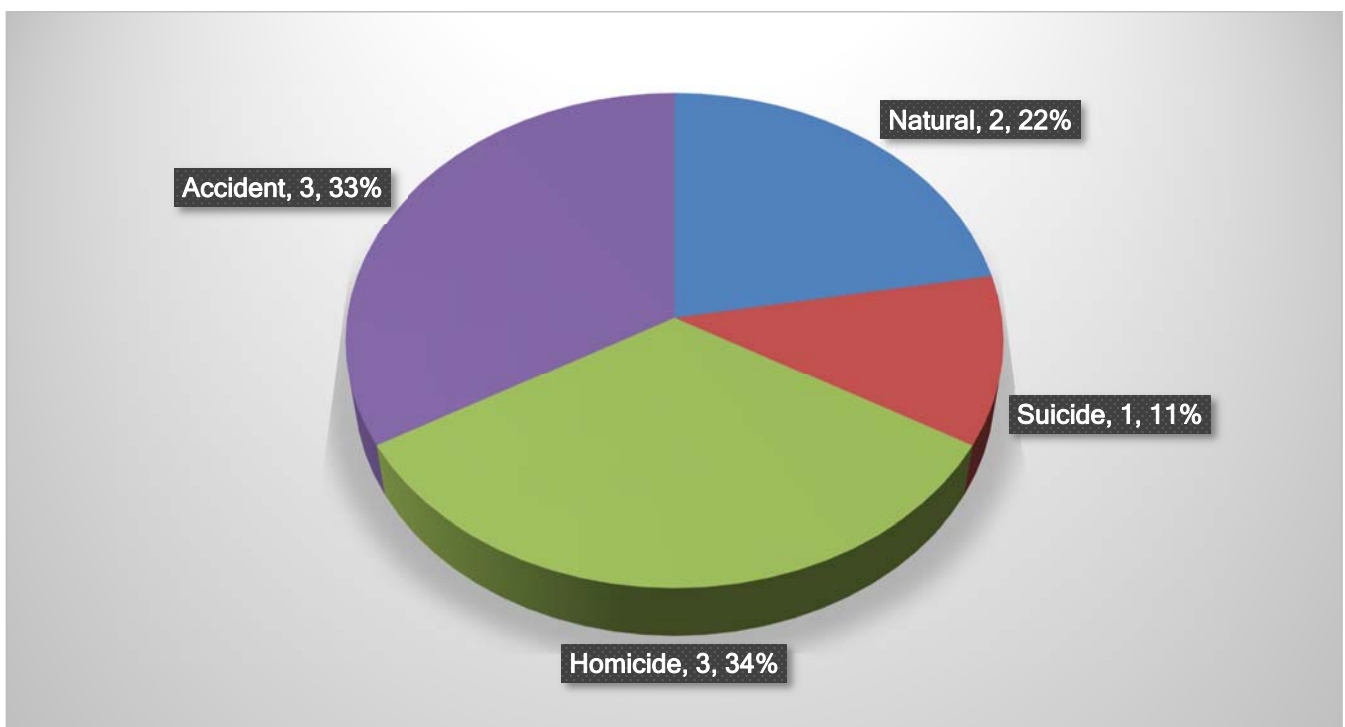
In-Custody Deaths in Travis County – 2020

A death in custody is a death of a person during initial confrontation with authorities, during the process of arrest, transport to a facility, or during incarceration. It also includes deaths in hospitals for a person who is in the custody of the law enforcement. Deaths in custody fall within the medical examiner's jurisdiction.

Types of In-Custody Deaths



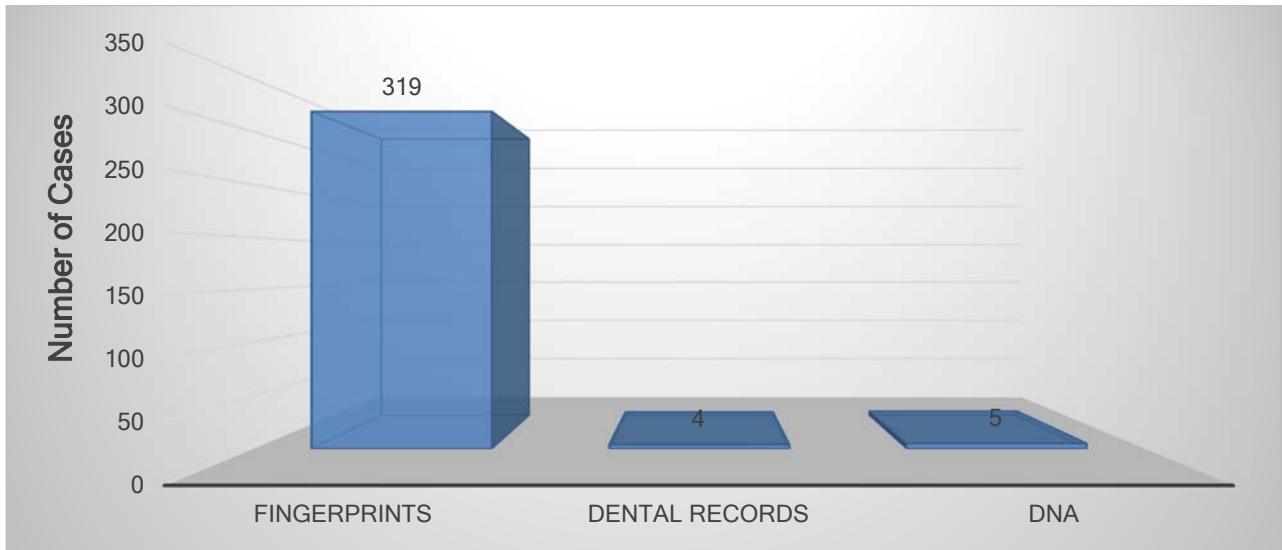
In-Custody Deaths Manner



Unidentified Bodies in Travis County 2020

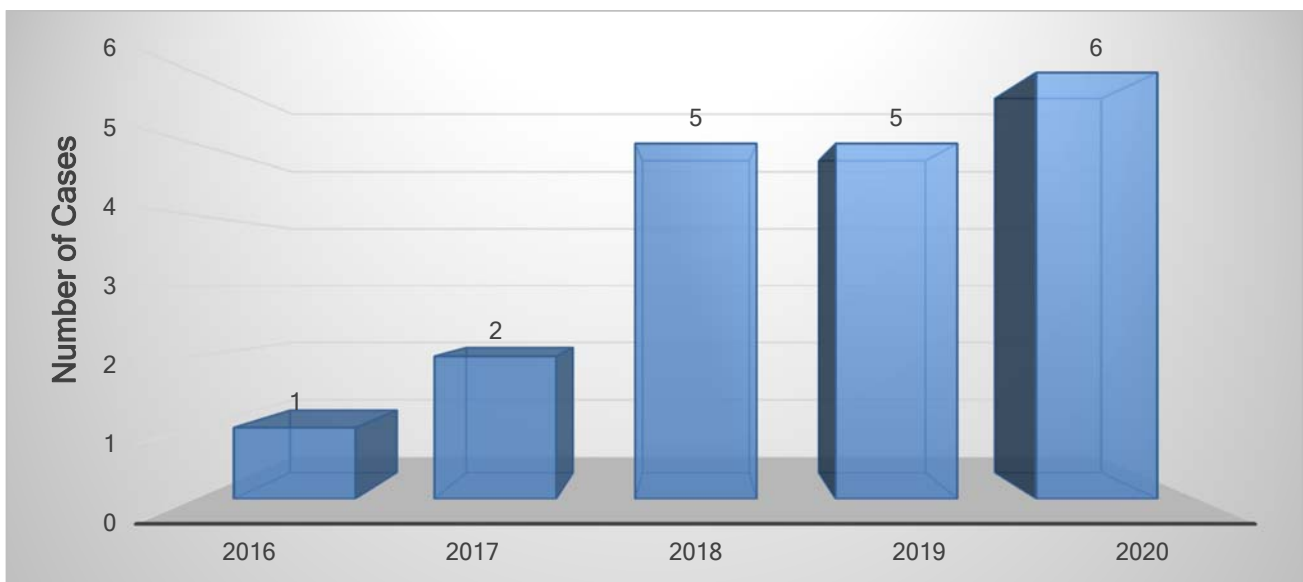
Occasionally, people who die have no identification on their person, and their identity is either unknown or uncertain. TCME and law enforcement agencies work together using various techniques to scientifically identify these decedents. In 2020, 328 decedents examined at TCME were scientifically identified.

Methods of Scientific Identification of Unidentified Decedents 2020



Unidentified Bodies in Travis County: 2016-2020

Despite best attempts at identifying unidentified individuals, a body may remain unidentified. These cases most often are skeletal remains, where only bones are available for identification, ranging from a single bone fragment to an entire skeleton.



Body Transport

Travis County contracts with a company to provide transport services to our office on deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County. In 2020, 1686 bodies in Travis County were transported using our contracted provider. Out-of-county cases are transported by funeral homes retained by the referring Justice of the Peace or family.

Community Involvement

TCME regularly interacts with the local community in a variety of ways. Such activities over the past few years included a variety of educational endeavors, including lectures on a college level to St. Edwards and University of Texas students. We have lectured on infant safety for teen mothers and on unsafe sleep environments. In addition, we give presentations to area hospitals, hospice agencies, and nursing homes on proper reporting of medical examiner cases. We also provide lectures on proper death certification to physician and administration groups. We provide training to law enforcement agencies on death investigations. Some of our most important community interactions happen when physicians and hospitals receive postmortem reports and gain insight on a disease or injury process. Over the past few years, TCME hosted interns from the St. Edwards University Forensic Science program, the University of Texas, and the Texas State University Anthropology program. We also provide training in forensic pathology for various regional medical students and pathology residents. Due to the pandemic, most of these activities were suspended. TCME actively participated in the Fatality Management Task Force, assisting community partners in preparing for deaths related to the pandemic.