



CLARK COUNTY
**MEDICAL EXAMINER'S
OFFICE**

2023

Annual Report

Preliminary Dataset: July 2024 Release
Anticipated Final Report Release: December 2024

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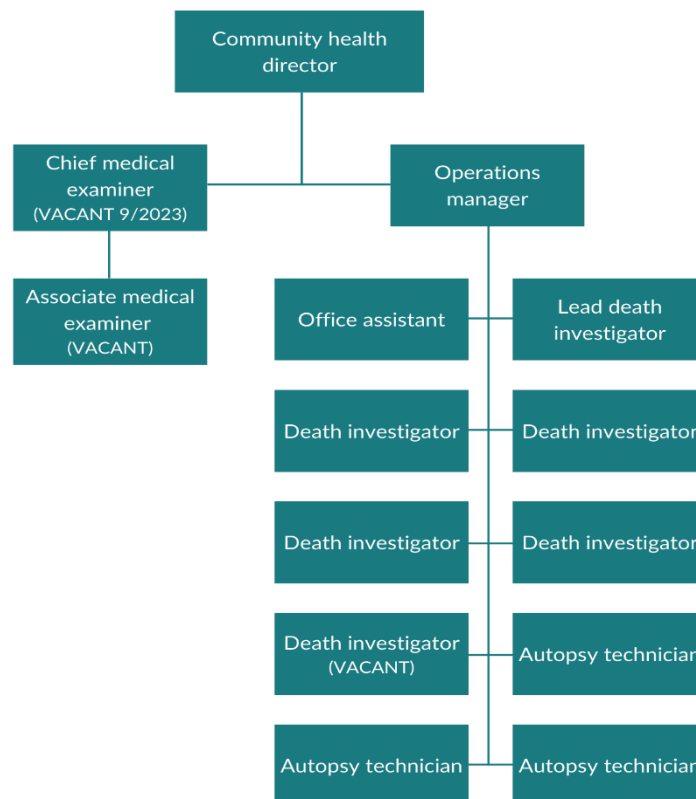
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INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Clark County Medical Examiner’s Office (CCMEO) is to serve the public by providing accurate, thorough, and efficient medicolegal death investigations to ensure justice and provide solace, comfort, and protection to the living.

The CCMEO provides 24-hour medicolegal death investigation services to Clark County residents and visitors. Established in 1999, the department operates under the leadership of Alan Melnick, MD, MPH, CPH, Director and Health Officer of Clark County Public Health. CCMEO’s organizational structure includes one chief medical examiner, one associate medical examiner, six death investigators, three autopsy technicians, an office assistant, and an operations manager. Additional department support includes a forensic odontologist, anthropologist, and contract forensic pathologist services as needed.

CCMEO Organizational Chart



In addition to conducting death investigations, the department is responsible for locating the legal next-of-kin of decedents the office has taken jurisdiction of and overseeing the disposition of unclaimed indigent decedents in Clark County. The department also provides contracted forensic autopsy services to Klickitat and Skamania counties.

CCMEO staff understand the difficulties surrounding the unexpected death of a loved one and perform investigations in a professional and sensitive manner. Surviving family, friends, and the public should have the assurance that medical examiner personnel are committed to a thorough and objective investigation.

We are grateful to have the professional assistance of both the [Trauma Intervention Program NW \(TIPNW\)](#) and [County-Wide Chaplaincy](#), who provide on-scene support to family and friends of decedents. The County-Wide Chaplaincy also provides death notifications to next-of-kin in certain circumstances.

Our findings provide important information to support investigations of violent deaths where civil or criminal judicial proceedings take place. Prompt medicolegal death investigations are conducted to provide the criminal justice system with medical information and evidence required for legal proceedings. Deaths resulting from criminal acts constitute a small portion of deaths investigated by the medical examiner; these deaths are evaluated and documented in detail to aid in the pursuit of justice. In some circumstances, the results of investigations may be shared with the Department of Labor and Industry, the Consumer Products and Safety Commission, the Department of Social and Health Services, as well as state and local public health officials.

The 2023 operating budget of 2.08-million-dollars included Clark County general funds and fee revenues collected from certified copies of death certificates by the State of Washington. The state uses those fees to reimburse CCMEO 40 percent for contracted services of a pathologist, 100 percent of autopsies performed on infants and children under the age of 3, and 30 percent of the Chief Medical Examiner's salary. In 2023 CCMEO received a provisional accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) due to the vacancy of the Chief Medical Examiner position. The office had previously maintained continuous accreditation since 2005. Effective July 1, 2025, annual NAME accreditation will be required for CCMEO to receive full reimbursement funds for forensic pathology services per RCW 68.50.104. If not accredited, the state treasurer's office will withhold 25 percent of autopsy reimbursement funds until accreditation is received. These annual reimbursements are included as part of prospective budgeting for future fiscal years.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY AND JURISDICTION

Death investigations in Clark County transitioned from a coroner system to a medical examiner system on January 1, 1999. This change was approved by Clark County voters in the fall of 1996. The authority to make this transition was established in 1996 when the Washington legislature passed a bill that became statute (RCW 36.24.190), authorizing counties with a population of 250,000 or greater the ability to adopt a medical examiner system to replace the elected coroner system. The appointed medical examiner has the same authority and responsibilities as an elected coroner. To be appointed medical examiner, the statute requires that the candidate be either certified as a forensic pathologist (physician) by the American Board of Pathology or be a pathologist eligible to take the examination for certification within one year of appointment and pass the exam within three years.

The primary role of the medical examiner is to investigate the deaths of individuals over which the medical examiner has jurisdiction, with the purpose of determining the cause and manner of death.

Deaths under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner are defined by state statute (RCW 68.50) and include, but are not limited to, the following circumstances:

1. Persons who die suddenly when in apparent good health and without medical attendance within 36 hours preceding death. This category is reserved for the following situations: (1) Sudden death of an individual with no known natural cause for the death. (2) Death during an acute or unexplained rapidly fatal illness, for which a reasonable natural cause has not been established. (3) Death of an individual who was not under the care of a physician.
2. Circumstances which indicate death was caused in part or entirely by unnatural or unlawful means. This category includes but is not limited to: (1) Drowning, suffocation, smothering, burns, electrocution, lightning, radiation, chemical or thermal injury, starvation, environmental exposure, or neglect. (2) Narcotics or other drugs including alcohol or toxic agents, or toxic exposure. (3) Death of the mother caused by known or suspected abortion. (4) Death from apparent natural causes during the course of a criminal act, e.g., a victim collapses during a robbery. (5) Death that occurs within one year following an accident, even if the accident is not thought to have contributed to the cause of death. (6) Death following all injury producing accidents, if recovery was considered incomplete or if the accident is thought to have contributed to the cause of death (regardless of the interval between the accident and death).
3. Suspicious circumstances. This category includes, but is not limited to, deaths under the following circumstances: (1) Deaths resulting from apparent homicide or suicide. (2) Hanging, gunshot wounds, stabs, cuts, strangulation, etc. (3) Alleged rape, carnal knowledge, or sodomy. (4) Death during the course of, or precipitated by, a criminal act.
4. Incarcerated or detained. This category includes: (1) Deaths occurring in a jail or

prison. (2) Deaths occurring during the process of arrest or while in custody of law enforcement or other non-medical public institutions.

5. Unknown or obscure causes. This category includes bodies found dead.
6. Deaths caused by any violence whatsoever, when the injury was the primary cause or a contributory factor in the death. This category includes, but is not limited to: (1) Injury of any type, including falls. (2) Any death due to or contributed to by any type of physical trauma.
7. Contagious disease. This category includes only those deaths wherein the diagnosis is undetermined and the suspected cause of death is a contagious disease which may be a public health hazard.
8. Premature and stillborn infants. This category includes deaths of stillborn or premature infants where there was no maternal prenatal care and the birth was outside of a medical facility, or where the birth was precipitated by maternal injury, or abortion under unlawful circumstances.
9. Unclaimed bodies. This category is limited to deaths where no next of kin or other legally responsible representatives can be identified for disposition of the body.

The Medical Examiner's Office is an independent agency and operates separately from law enforcement agencies and prosecuting attorney offices. CCMEO investigations are, however, performed in conjunction with one or more local law enforcement agencies depending on the circumstances of the fatality.

The autopsy is an examination of the body by the pathologist to identify injuries and diseases and collect specimens for toxicology, histology, and other testing. An autopsy is required in many cases and is performed in conjunction with the investigation to determine the cause and manner of death.

When the medical examiner assumes jurisdiction over a death, they are responsible for certifying the death electronically through the Washington State Department of Health Vital Records. This requires the medical examiner to formulate an opinion regarding the cause and manner (i.e., homicide, suicide, accident, natural or undetermined) of death. Manner of death is not applicable in fetal deaths (stillborn) and is recorded as not classified.

NATIONAL FORENSIC PATHOLOGIST SHORTAGE

The United States (U.S.) is currently experiencing an [ongoing](#) national shortage of forensic pathologists. The number of people pursuing careers in forensic pathology is insufficient to keep pace with growing community populations and rising death rates.

According to the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), the United States has about 750 full-time, board-certified forensic pathologists. Experts say that number needs to be at least 1,500 - if not more - to deal with the rising caseloads across every state. For example, in November 2022, NAME had 55 forensic pathologist job openings posted on its website. Unfortunately, only about 40 people become board-certified forensic pathologists each year.¹

“The recent rise in drug overdoses and other traumatic deaths (e.g., suicides and deaths resulting from motor vehicle crashes) has led to an increase in the number of deaths that need to be investigated and autopsied. Given the shortage of forensic pathologists and the limited resources available, this increase jeopardizes accreditation and certification efforts and threatens the health of the individuals working in the medicolegal death investigation community. National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) recommends that forensic pathologists perform no more than 250 autopsies each year, with the maximum burden never to exceed 325. Surpassing this level will “seriously impact the work or adversely affect the health and safety of the public or agency staff,” resulting in the loss of full accreditation. As more people die from drug overdoses, more deaths need to be investigated and autopsied and state and local jurisdictions need more qualified professionals to fill this void.”

ASTHO Brief Exploring critical issues in the state and territorial public health. Forensic Pathologist Shortages: Context and Considerations for State Public Health Agencies. March 2019

Clark County Medical Examiner Office staff continue to work closely with local leadership and state partners to promote ongoing problem-solving dialogues about this national crisis and its impact on the loved ones of decedents under CCMEO jurisdiction.

¹ Michelle Taylor, Editor-in-Chief, “Stopping the Shortage ‘Cycle’: Ways to Fortify the Forensic Pathology Workforce”, *Forensic Magazine*, February 22, 2023

GEOGRAPHY AND POPULATION

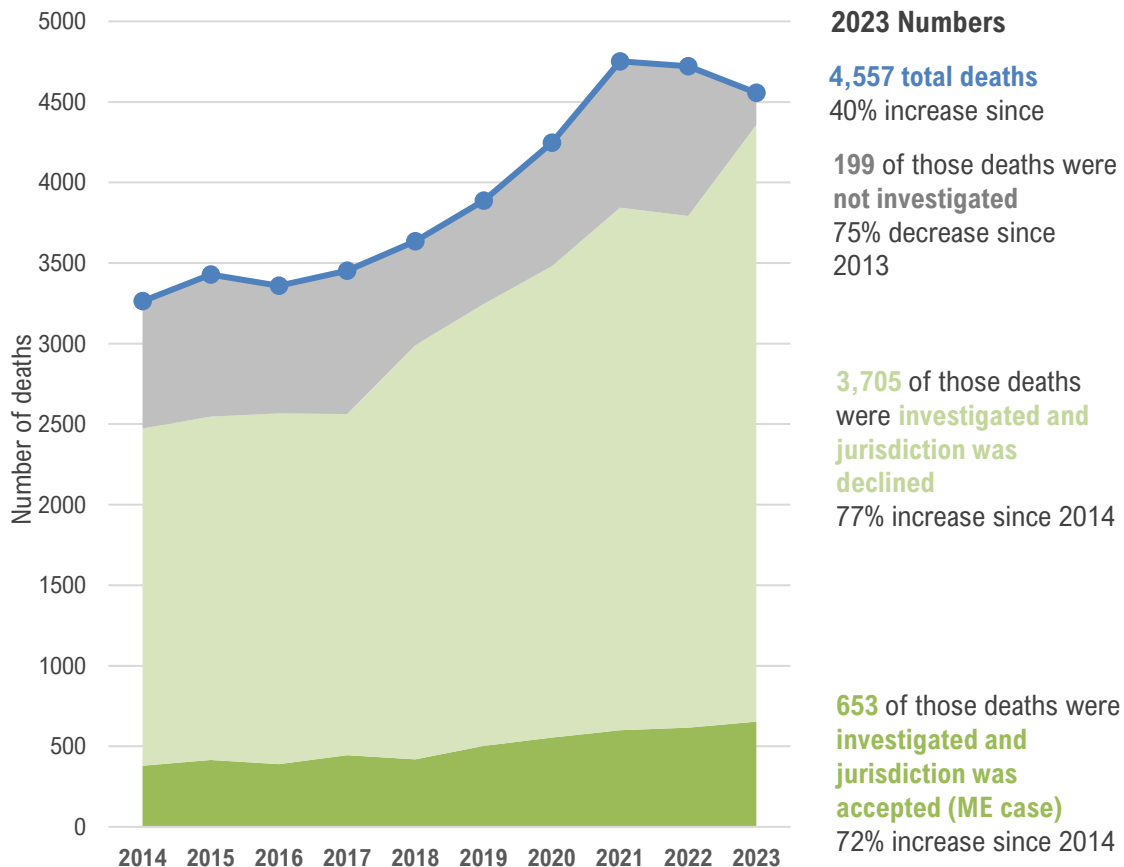
In 2023, the estimated population of Clark County was 527,400, ranking fifth among Washington’s 39 counties. Clark County covers 656 square miles in the state’s southwest region. It is compact, measuring approximately 25 miles across in any direction. The population density is estimated at 804 persons per square mile with an estimated 86.9 percent of the population living in urban areas.²

Clark County is one of seven counties in the Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, Oregon-Washington, Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). The other six counties are Clackamas, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill in Oregon, and Skamania County in Washington. In 2023, the metropolitan area population was 2,513,660. Clark County represents 21 percent of the total metropolitan population, a slight increase from 2022.

The number of deaths reported to the Medical Examiner’s Office continues to outpace population growth. Since 2014, deaths in Clark County have increased by 40 percent, while the population of Clark County has only increased by 19.1 percent. CCMEO jurisdictional cases are exceeding both rates of growth and have increased by 72 percent.

Over 10 years, the population in Clark County has increased by 19% (2014-2023)

The increase in the **number of deaths** and **number of investigations** over the same time period has disproportionately outpaced population growth.



² Clark County Geographic Information Services

TOTAL CASES

As of July 2024, there have been 4,557 total deaths reported in Clark County for the 2023 calendar year. Total (*all manners of death*) death numbers are preliminary, as annual state death statistics are typically finalized by the end of the next calendar year following reporting year in question. Investigators evaluated the circumstances of 4,358 reported deaths and performed 428 scene investigations prior to taking jurisdiction for further investigation. The Medical Examiner's Office assumed jurisdiction in 653 deaths, or 14 percent³ of the total deaths that occurred in Clark County in 2023. 686 total deaths were accepted by CCMEO when including those from Klickitat and Skamania counties.

Of the deaths reported during 2023, 519 sets of remains were transported to the Clark County Medical Examiner facility in Vancouver, WA. Postmortem examinations were performed in 492 of those cases. Those examinations included 327 autopsies and 14 partial autopsies performed on human remains, including 26 autopsies and 1 partial autopsy performed per contract for Klickitat and Skamania counties. An autopsy was performed to establish cause of death in 50 percent of cases accepted.

External-only examinations were conducted in 151 cases including 6 performed per contract for Klickitat and Skamania counties. In Clark County, 194 deaths were certified without examination. 1 presumptive death certificate was filed. Remains from 5 cases were determined to be nonhuman. Washington State Patrol Toxicology Laboratory and NMS Labs performed toxicological analysis for the Medical Examiner's Office in 522 cases.

Organ and tissue donations can be requested by family members, by designation on a decedent's driver's license, or initiated by investigators. Donations are authorized by the medical examiner when the procurement procedure would not compromise the medicolegal death investigation. Organ donation proceeded in 21 deaths; corneal procurement in 11 deaths; and tissue procurement in 7 deaths. Some donors contributed to multiple types of donations.

It is extremely rare for bodies to be exhumed for further investigation. In 2023 no were bodies exhumed.

Clark County is legally mandated to arrange for the disposition of unclaimed indigent decedents and CCMEO assumes responsibility of this mandate. Of the 4,557⁴ deaths occurring in Clark County during 2023, 26 decedents were determined to be indigent and cremated at county expense. Cremains from 79 decedents are unclaimed dating back to 1996.

³ Calculation based on preliminary dataset. Final percent calculation available December 2024.

⁴ Calculation based on preliminary dataset. Final percent calculation available December 2024.

MANNER OF DEATH

The manner of death is a classification of how the cause of death came about, whether by force of natural events, accidental means, self-inflicted wounds, or other external forces. Manner of death is determined largely by means of the investigation.

Natural: Death caused solely by disease. If natural death is hastened by injury or any other non-natural event (ex: fall), the manner of death will not be considered natural. If the terminal disease process is caused by a non-natural event (ex: pneumonia due to long-term bed confinement as a result of a motor vehicle accident), the manner of death will not be considered natural.

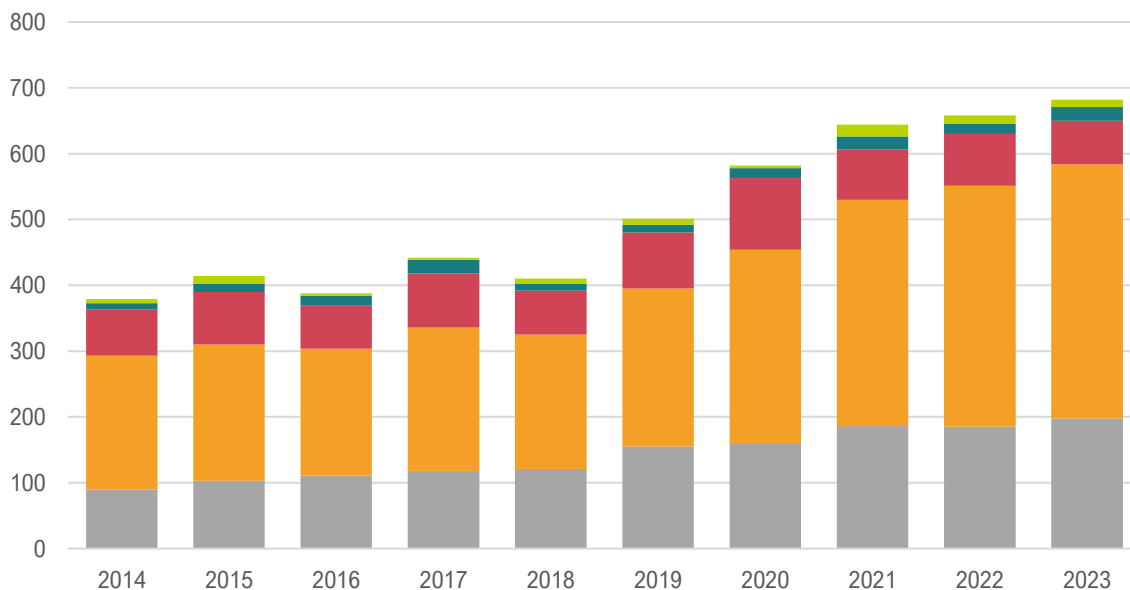
Suicide: Death as a result of deliberate action to harm oneself or end one's life.

Accident: Death other than natural when the death is the result of a hostile environment. This category includes most motor vehicle accidents, falls, drowning, recreational drug overdoses, drug intoxication, etc.

Homicide: Death resulting from the deliberate action of another person.

Undetermined: Manner assigned when there is insufficient evidence, or conflicting/equivocal information, to assign a specific manner

Over the past 10 years, MEO has investigated an increasing number of deaths by all manners, including natural deaths, suicides, homicides, and deaths of undetermined intent, but especially accidents.

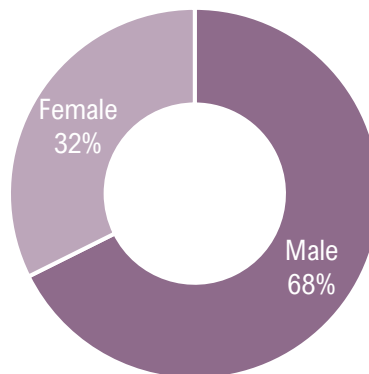


DEMOGRAPHICS

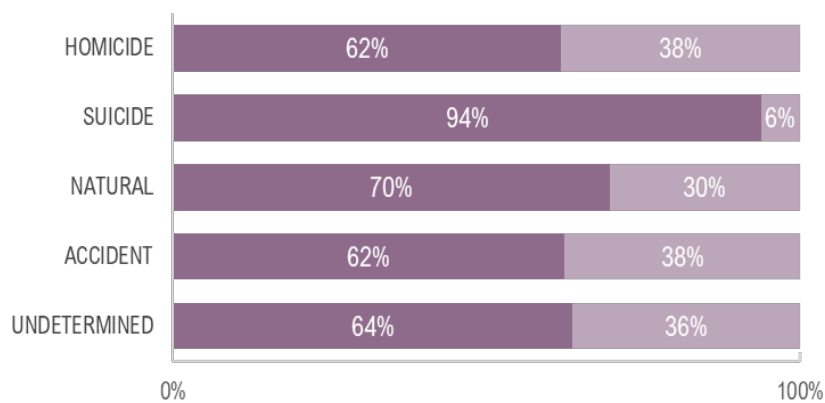
The Clark County Medical Examiner's Office recognizes the complexity of gender and how it is represented through various platforms in our society, culture, and evolving data systems. For our statistical data collection and reporting requirements to various agencies, we rely upon how a person legally represents themselves, recognizing with sensitivity, the limitations of legal naming conventions available to community members seeking to accurately reflect their identity.

The population of Clark County has a nearly even split between identified male and female individuals. Males represent a larger percentage of the 653 deaths fully investigated or certified by the Medical Examiner's Office.

About two thirds of all deaths assumed by the Clark County MEO in 2023 were **male**.



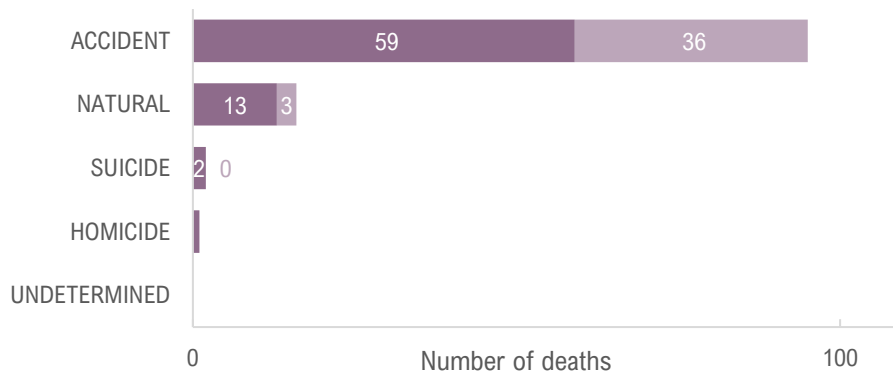
Males suffered a disproportionate percentage of deaths assumed by the MEO in 2023 compared to **females** among all manners of death.



The following graphs represent the manner of death by age. Deaths of individuals ages 50-59 accounted for the largest age group (18.7 percent) of the 686 deaths fully investigated or certified by the Medical Examiner’s Office. Individuals ages 60-69 accounted for 18.5 percent. In 2023 the Medical Examiner’s Office autopsied four infant deaths (age live birth to one year). The manners of death for the infants were determined as 2 accidental, cause: probable asphyxia; 1 homicide, cause: methodone toxicity; and 1 natural, cause: unexplained sudden death (intrinsic factors identified).

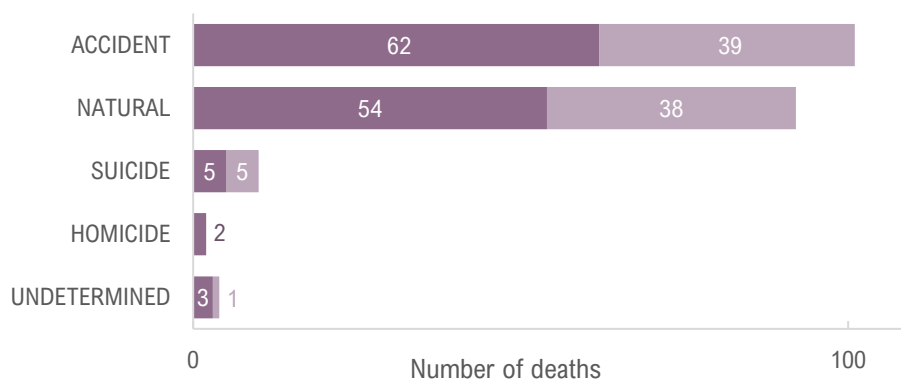
DEATHS AMONG 80+ YEAR-OLDS

In 2023, accidents were the most common manner of death among adults aged **80-89 years-old** and **90+ years-old**.



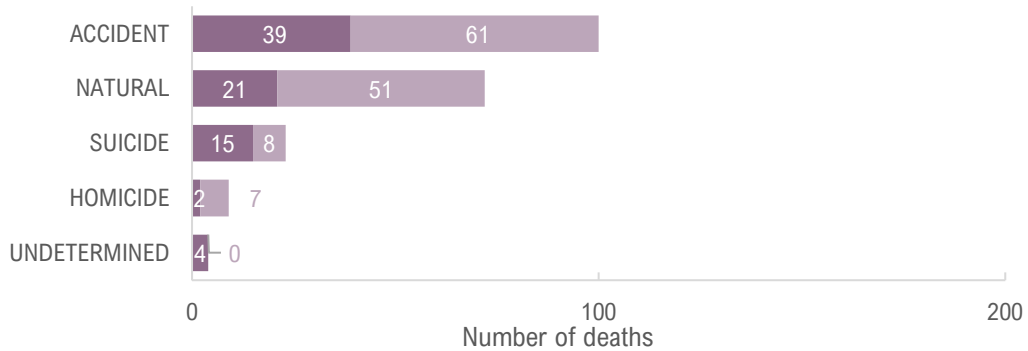
DEATHS AMONG 60-79 YEAR-OLDS

In 2023, accidents were the most common manner of death among adults aged **60-69 years-old** and **70-79 years-old**. Natural deaths were the second most common manner of death among both age groups.



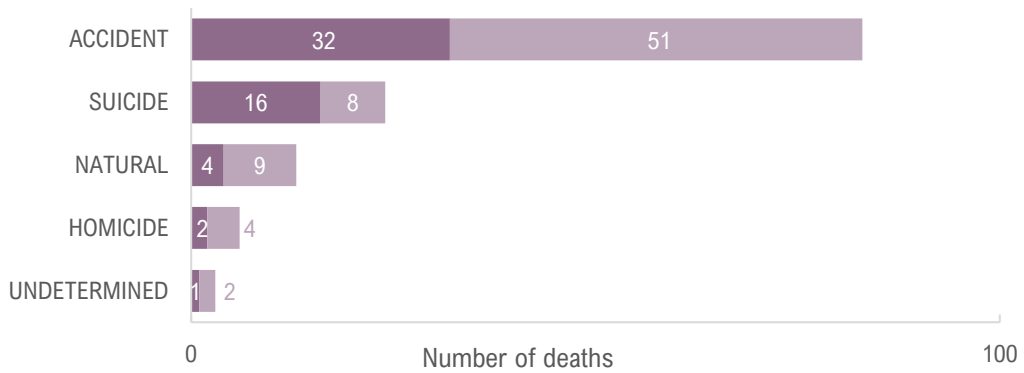
DEATHS AMONG 40-59 YEAR-OLDS

In 2023, accidents were the most common manner of death among adults aged **50-59 years-old** and **40-49 years-old**. Natural deaths were the second most common manner of death among both age groups.



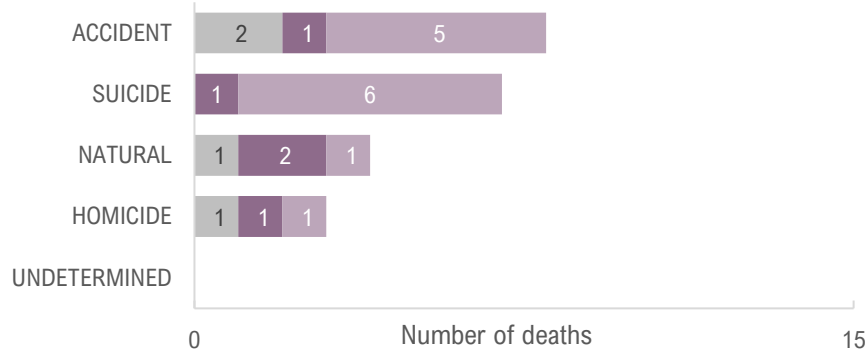
DEATHS AMONG 20-39 YEAR-OLDS

In 2023, accidents were the most common manner of death among adults aged **20-29 years-old** and **30-39 years-old**. Suicide was the next leading manner of death among **20-29 year-olds**.



CHILD DEATHS

In 2023, accidents were the most common manner of death among children aged **1-14 years-old** and **15-19 years-old**. There were four deaths among infants **under one-year-old**.



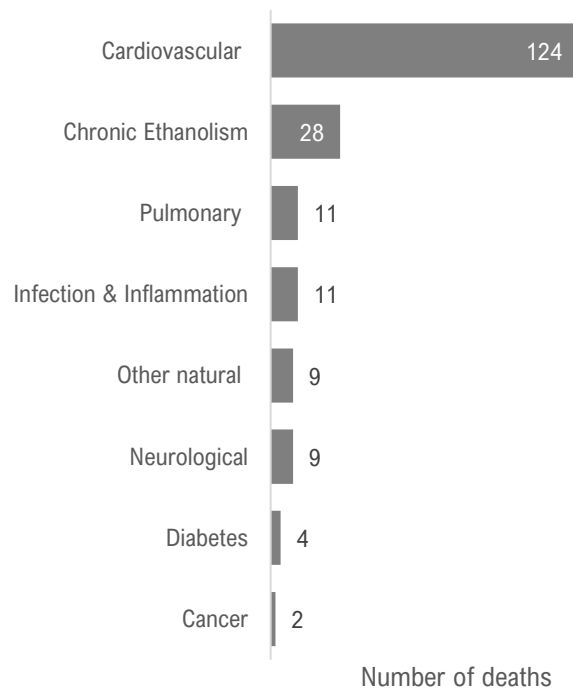
NATURAL DEATHS

Deaths from natural causes are typically certified by the decedent's primary care provider, however, not all decedents have a primary care provider or a provider in the area. In some cases, the Medical Examiner's Office investigates a case due to suspicious circumstances and ultimately determines the death is from natural causes.

The chart below provides a list of the causes of natural deaths investigated by the Medical Examiner's Office in 2023. Deaths were determined to be of a natural cause in 198 cases. The two major causes of natural death were the result of some form of cardiovascular disease (124 deaths) and chronic ethanolism (28 deaths).

NATURAL DEATHS

Cardiovascular conditions caused 63% of deaths deemed natural in manner by the Clark County MEO in 2023.



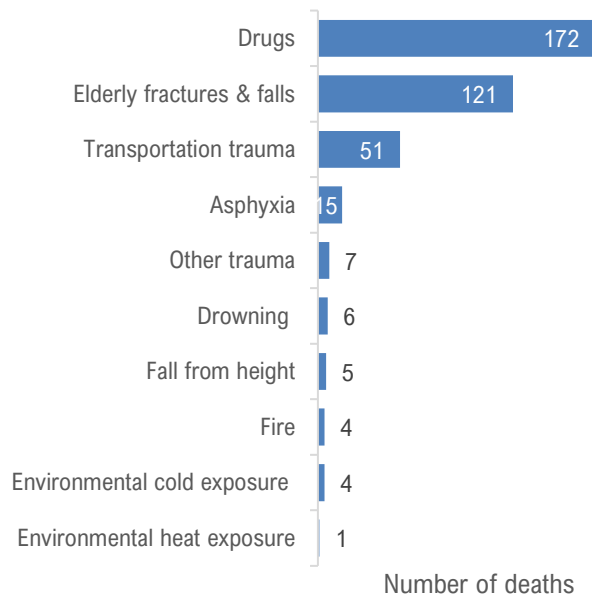
ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

The medical examiner determined 386 deaths were accidents, which is a 5.5 percent increase from 2022. Deaths occurring as a direct result of a fall, often accompanied by fractures in populations ages 65 and older, occurred in 121 cases. Deaths classified as accidents due to drug use occurred in 172 cases. Among other accidents, 51 deaths resulted from transportation-related collision trauma including: 19 motor vehicle drivers, 5 motor vehicle passengers, 12 motorcyclists, 8 pedestrians, and 7 deaths from other transportation-related incidents.

The primary substances involved in drug-related accidental deaths were methamphetamine (114 deaths), opioids (109 deaths), multiple-drug (91 deaths), and fentanyl (99 deaths). Opioids include morphine, heroin, methadone, oxycodone, hydrocodone, buprenorphine, fentanyl, and analogs. Of the drug-related accidental deaths, nearly 58 percent included the use of fentanyl (a 13% increase over 2022). The number of methamphetamine deaths increased nearly 58 percent from 2022.

ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

Deaths by drugs made up 45% of accidental deaths. Elderly falls caused 31% of deaths deemed accidental in manner by the Clark County MEO in 2023.

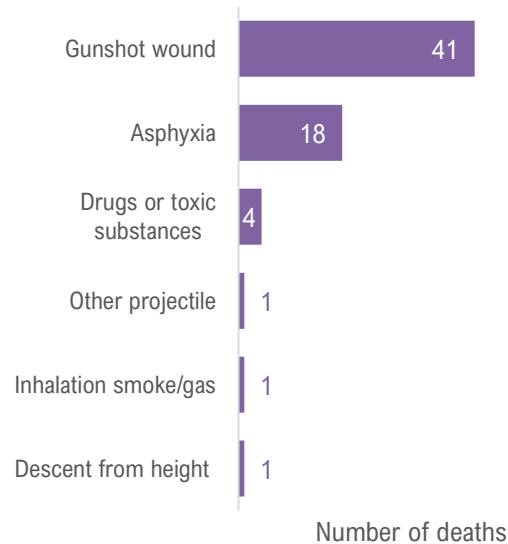


SUICIDE DEATHS

The Medical Examiner's Office investigated 66 deaths determined as suicide. Of those, 41 deaths resulted from gunshot wounds, 18 from asphyxia (hanging) and 4 deaths resulted from drugs or toxic substances.

SUICIDE DEATHS

Gunshot wounds caused 62% of deaths deemed intentional in manner by the Clark County MEO in 2023. Deaths by asphyxia (hanging) make up 27% of intentional deaths.

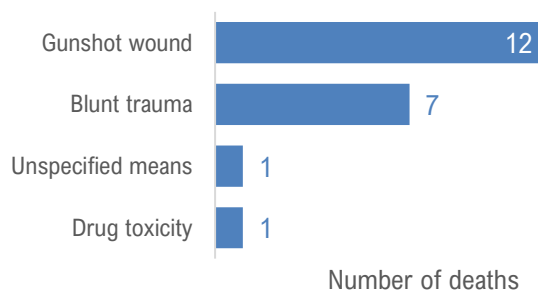


HOMICIDE DEATHS

In 2023, the medical examiner investigated and classified 21 deaths as homicide. Of those deaths, 12 resulted from gunshot wounds, 7 from blunt trauma, 1 from unspecified means and 1 from drug toxicity.

HOMICIDE DEATHS

Gunshot wounds caused the majority of deaths determined to be homicides by the Clark County MEO in 2023.

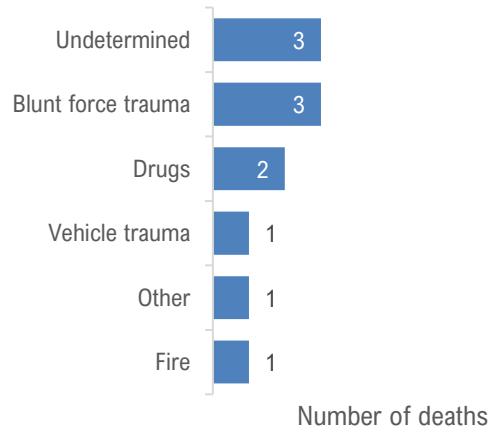


MANNER UNDETERMINED

Under 2 percent (11 deaths) of the cases in 2023 were classified as manner undetermined. In three cases a cause of death was not able to be determined.

UNDETERMINED MANNER OF DEATH

Drug overdose caused the 18% of deaths with undetermined manner by the Clark County MEO in 2023.



UNIDENTIFIED REMAINS

Identities were established for all decedents under CCMEO's jurisdiction in 2023. Five decedents found in prior years remain in CCMEO's custody (4 from Clark County and 1 from Skamania County). These five cases have no new leads currently. Two sets of the Clark County remains were found prior to 1998. The office will evaluate forensic opportunities to identify these remains as resources and technology allow.

Forensic genealogy using consumer DNA (e.g., Ancestry, 23 and Me, Bode Technologies) is a relatively new tool aiding in cold case investigations. In some circumstances, CCMEO staff can work to locate potential family members of decedents and procure reference DNA samples to identify remains.

UNIDENTIFIED REMAINS						
CLARK COUNTY						
Reported	Gender	Estimated Age	Race	Manner	Cause	Year Identified
1980	Female	Est 16-23	Mixed	Homicide	Not Disclosed	2021
1982	Male	Est 20-35	Asian	Undetermined	Drowning	N/A
1998	Male	Unknown	White	Suicide	Gunshot Wound of the Head	N/A
2002	Male	Est 30-40	White	Suicide	Asphyxia due to Hanging	2022
2004	Female	Est 30-45	White	Undetermined	Undetermined	2021
2013*	Male	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	N/A
2014*	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	N/A
SKAMANIA COUNTY						
Reported	Gender	Estimated Age	Race	Manner	Cause	
1997	Male	Est 30-35	Unknown	Undetermined	Undetermined	N/A

*Pre 1998 cases

DATA TABLE

2023	Totals
Deaths reported	4,358
Cases accepted	686
Out of County Cases	33
Bodies (includes nonhuman samples) brought to the facility	519
External examinations (inspections)	151
Certified only (not examined)	194
Autopsies performed by Clark County	327
Autopsies performed by outside jurisdictions	0
Autopsies performed for outside jurisdictions	26
Partial autopsies	14
Partial autopsies for outside jurisdictions	1
Microscopic studies	49
Neuropathologic studies	10
Cardiac pathologic studies	1
Hospital autopsies retained under ME jurisdiction	0
Toxicology performed	522
Unidentified after examination	0
Exhumations	0
Unclaimed bodies	26
DONATIONS	
Donation - Cornea	11
Donation - Tissue	7
Donation - Organ	21
CLARK COUNTY	
Deaths in Clark County	4,557
Scenes investigated	428
Bodies transported by office or at County expense	458
Manner of death - Natural	190
Manner of death - Accident	366
Manner of death - Suicide	63
Manner of death - Undetermined	9
Manner of death - Homicide	21
Manner - Undetermined not classified (fetal death or archeological)	0
OTHER JURISDICTIONS	
Manner of death - Natural	8
Manner of death - Accident	20
Manner of death - Suicide	3
Manner of death - Undetermined	2
Manner of death - Homicide	0

MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE	
Manner of death - Natural	198
Manner of death - Accident	386
Manner of death - Suicide	66
Manner of death - Undetermined	11
Manner of death - Homicide	21
Manner - Undetermined not classified (fetal death or archeological)	0

2022 Population					
County	Male		Female		Total
Clark	262,118	49.7%	265,282	50.3%	527,400
Skamania	6,144	51.2%	5,856	48.8%	12,000
Klickitat	11,997	51.6%	11,253	48.4%	23,250