

Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center



2023

Annual Report

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MISSION

The mission of the Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center is to serve not only the decedents, but also the families of those who have passed. The Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center conducts independent and thorough investigations. Our Office often works in conjunction with physicians and other medical professionals, law enforcement agencies, emergency service responders, social service agencies, and other entities to assure that the facts and circumstances surrounding a death are accurate and true. The staff of the Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center recognizes the responsibility to treat all deceased persons with dignity and the respect every human deserves. We consider it an honor to speak for those who no longer have a voice.

The Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center is responsible for investigating all deaths that fall under Coroner jurisdiction within the geographical boundaries of the County of Dauphin. Deaths that occur under violent and suspicious circumstances are those that are seen in the headlines; however, most deaths occur away from the public eye and are of a non-violent nature. The staff of this Office recognizes a responsibility to all citizens regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death. Investigations performed by our staff often assist surviving loved ones with valuable medical information, specifically as related to inherited or preventable diseases and conditions. This type of information provides families with comfort and peace of mind, serving as a tool for early detection and treatment of potentially life threatening illnesses. In addition, information obtained by our staff is often requested to assist in legal proceedings and insurance settlements.

It should be noted that the Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center Annual Report only discusses deaths that fall under Coroner jurisdiction. Not every death that occurs in Dauphin County becomes a Coroner case. We assume jurisdiction of deaths occurring in Dauphin County that are reportable under Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Title 16.

PURPOSE OF THE CORONER'S OFFICE & FORENSIC CENTER

The Dauphin County Coroner's Office is an independent investigative agency of Dauphin County.

Under the direction of Coroner Graham Hetrick, our office provides Medicolegal Death Investigations, performs Forensic Autopsies, and provides Administrative Support.

The six basic functions of the Coroner's Office are:

- Determine Cause and Manner of Death;
- Identify the deceased with the highest degree of certainty possible;
- Locate legal next of kin, and make proper and timely notification to them;
- Account for and secure personal property of the decedent;
- Account for and secure evidence;
- Provide assistance to families involved in our investigations, as applicable.

The Coroner's Office is charged with determining the Cause and Manner of Death. We receive this Statutory Mandate from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Title 16 § 1237:

1. The Coroner having a view of the body shall investigate the facts and circumstances concerning deaths which appear to have happened within the county, regardless where the cause thereof may have occurred, for the purposes of determining whether or not an autopsy should be conducted or an inquest thereof should be had in the following cases:
 - a. Sudden deaths not caused by readily recognizable disease, or wherein the cause of death cannot be properly certified by a physician on the basis of prior medical attendance.
 - b. Deaths occurring under suspicious circumstances, including those where alcohol, drugs or other toxic substances may have had direct bearing on the outcome.
 - c. Deaths occurring as a result of violence or trauma, whether apparently homicidal, suicidal, or accidental.
 - d. Any death in which trauma, chemical injury, drug overdose or reaction to drugs or medication or medical treatment was a primary or secondary, direct or indirect, contributory, aggravating or precipitating cause of death.

- e. Operative and/or peri-operative deaths in which the death is not readily explainable on the basis of prior disease.
 - f. Any death wherein the body is unidentified or unclaimed.
 - g. Deaths known or suspected as due to contagious disease and constituting a public health hazard.
 - h. Deaths occurring in prison or penal institution or while in the custody of police.
 - i. Deaths of persons whose bodies are to be cremated, buried at sea or otherwise disposed of so as to be thereafter unavailable for examination.
 - j. Sudden infant death syndrome.
 - k. Stillbirths.
2. The purpose of the investigation shall be to determine the cause of any such death and to determine whether or not there is sufficient reason for the coroner to believe that any such death may have resulted from criminal acts or criminal neglect of persons other than the deceased.
 3. As part of this investigation, the coroner shall determine the identity of the deceased and notify the next of kin of the deceased.

DAUPHIN COUNTY CORONER AND STAFF MEMBERS**Coroner Graham Hetrick**

Graham Hetrick has been Coroner since January 1990. Graham is a graduate of Susquehanna Township High School and has a Bachelor of Arts Degree from York College of PA (dual majored in European history and biology), a Mortuary Science Degree from Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, and a Master of Science Degree in research psychology from Capella University. Graham is a member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the American College of Forensic Examiners, the International Association of Bloodstain Pattern Analysis, the National Coroner/ME Advisory Board for the Musculoskeletal Transplantation Board, the PA Coroner's Association, and the Institute for Behavioral Profiling. He is nationally certified as a medicolegal death investigator by the American College of Forensic Examiners Institute. Graham is certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. He has advanced training in blood pattern analysis, crime scene management, forensic sculpting, and shallow grave recovery. Over the years he has been part of hundreds of homicide investigations.

Graham grew up above a funeral home, with his father being the founder and owner of the Hetrick Funeral home in Harrisburg. During the 1960's Graham served in the United States Army. He was assigned to the Military Police, and then was attached to the 52nd Criminal Investigation Division. He was Provost Marshall for the Southern half of Germany where he investigated a wide variety of cases. Upon returning from the service, he completed his education and was a funeral director for many years before becoming Coroner.

FULL TIME STAFF

- Chief Deputy Lisa Potteiger-Visconti, B.S., AAFS, D-ABMDI
- Assistant Chief Deputy Thomas Reinhard, D-ABMDI
- Deputy Gregory Bowser, D-ABMDI
- Deputy Alisha Simpson, M.S., D-ABMDI
- Deputy Donald Machamer
- Deputy Mackenzie Paul
- Deputy Lexine Mengel, B.S
- Deputy Eric Hoffmaster
- Deputy Ashley Evans
- Administrative Assistant Jill Payne

CURRENT PART TIME STAFF

- Deputy Jeffrey Tracey
- Deputy Emma Shepler
- Deputy Kellianne Shaub

AMERICAN BOARD OF MEDICOLEGAL DEATH INVESTIGATORS CERTIFICATION (ABMDI)

The American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators is a voluntary, national, independent, and professional certification board that has been established to promote the highest standards of practice for medicolegal death investigators. ABMDI certifies individuals who have the proven knowledge and skills necessary to perform medicolegal death investigations as set forth by the National Institutes of Justice. The benefit of having staff certified by the ABMDI is that they have proven to be able to perform 29 tasks, which have been identified as crucial in conducting a medicolegal death investigation. The certification also demonstrates that deputies have acquired specialized knowledge and proficiency in the standards of practice necessary to properly conduct an investigation. Currently Coroner Hetrick and 4 deputies hold the ABMDI certification. Four deputies will be obtaining their diplomat certifications, and 1 deputy will be obtaining their fellowship certification in 2024.

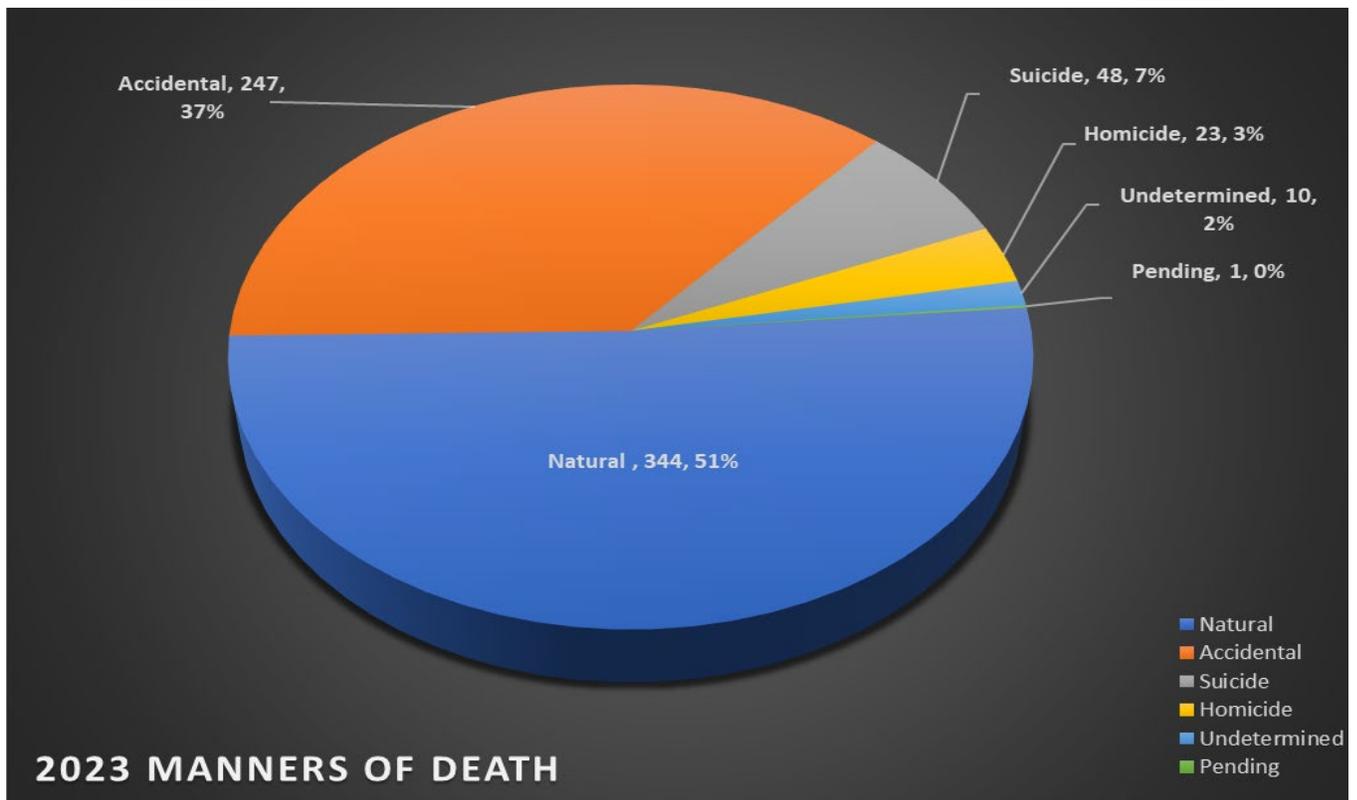
CAUSE AND MANNER OF DEATH

The mission of the Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center is to investigate and determine the Cause of Death and the Manner of Death of individuals who have been pronounced deceased within the boundaries of the County, as a result of sudden, unattended, violent or suspicious circumstances.

CAUSE OF DEATH: The official determination of the disease or injury and the sequence of events responsible for the occurrence which leads to an individual's demise.

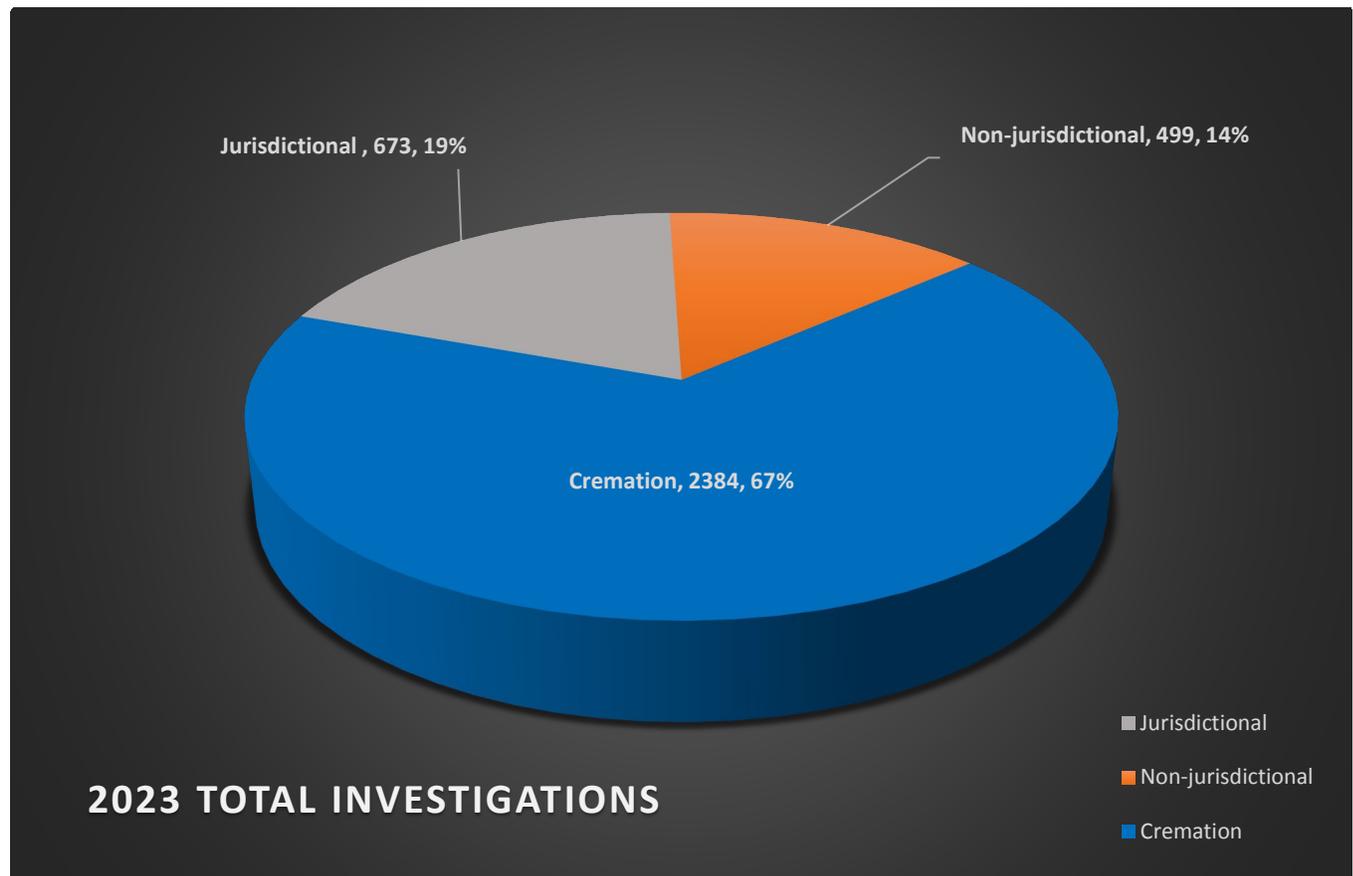
MANNER OF DEATH: The classification of the way in which the cause of death came about. There are 6 manners of death:

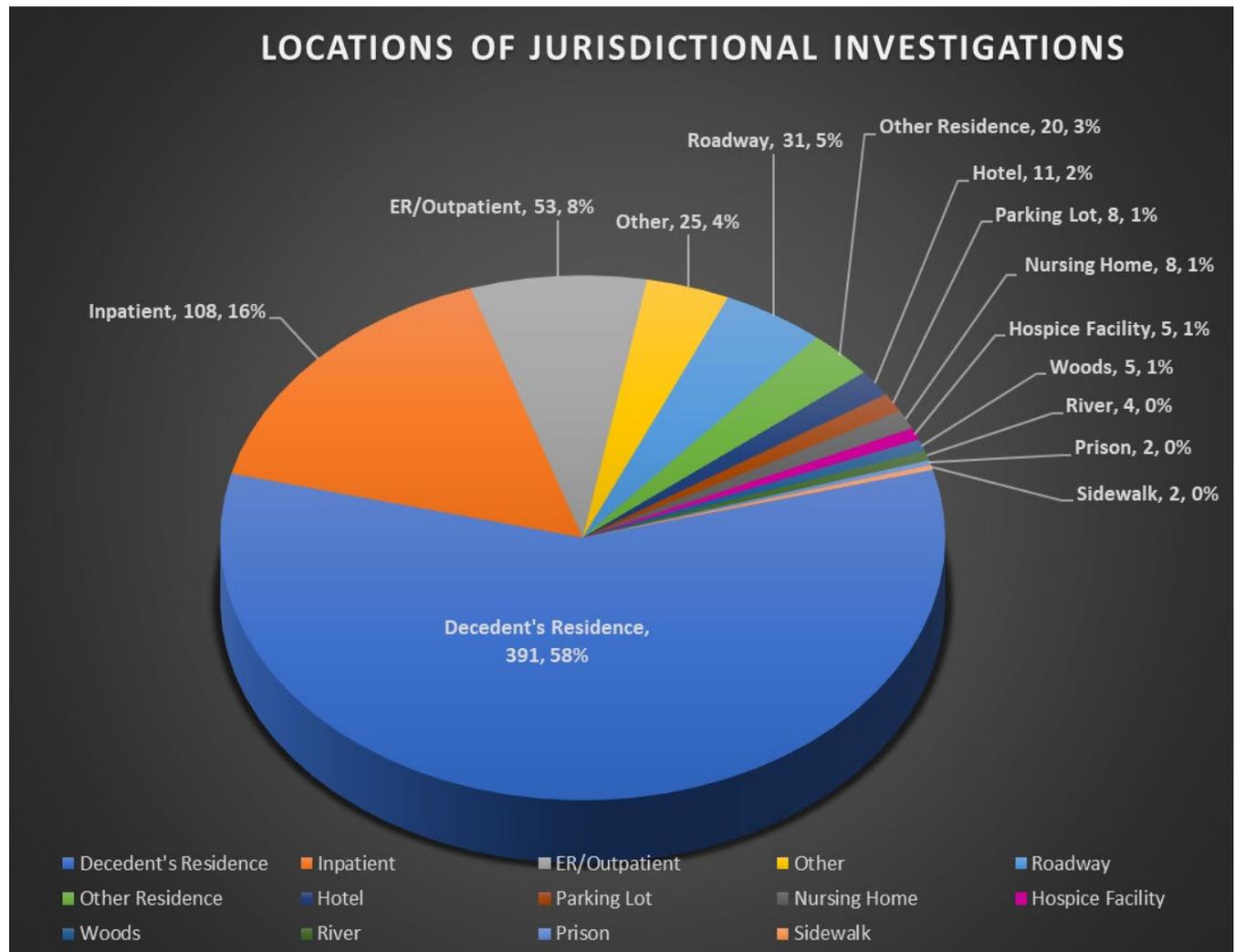
- **NATURAL:** Death caused solely or nearly totally by disease and/or the aging process.
- **ACCIDENTAL:** Death caused by an injury or poisoning where there is no evidence that the injury or poisoning occurred with intent to harm or cause death.
- **SUICIDE:** Death caused by injury or poisoning as a result of an intentional, self-inflicted act committed to do self-harm or cause the death of one's self.
- **HOMICIDE:** Death caused by a volitional act committed by another person to cause fear, harm, or death.
- **UNDETERMINED:** Manner assigned when there is insufficient evidence or conflicting/equivocal information (especially about intent), to assign a specific manner.
- **PENDING:** Manner assigned when the investigation is ongoing.

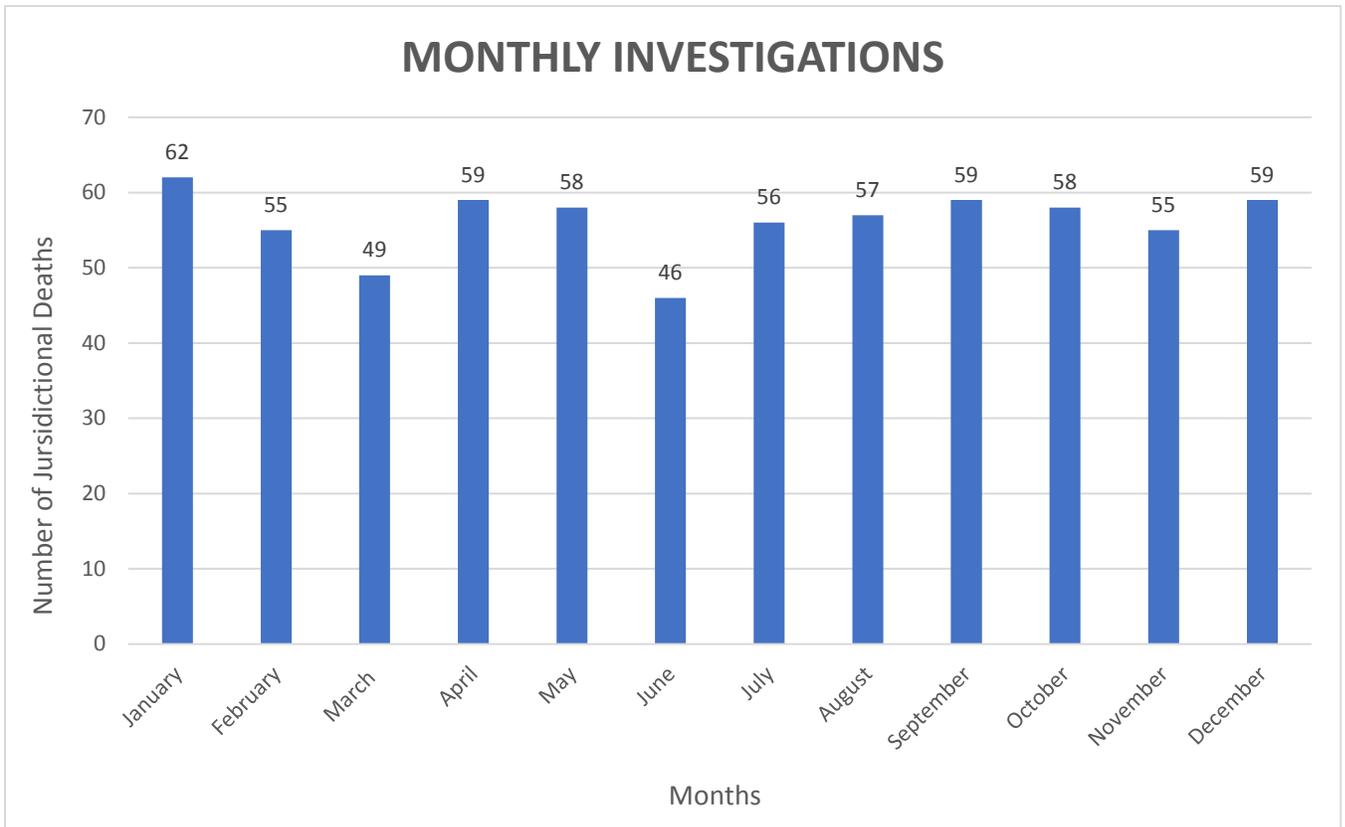
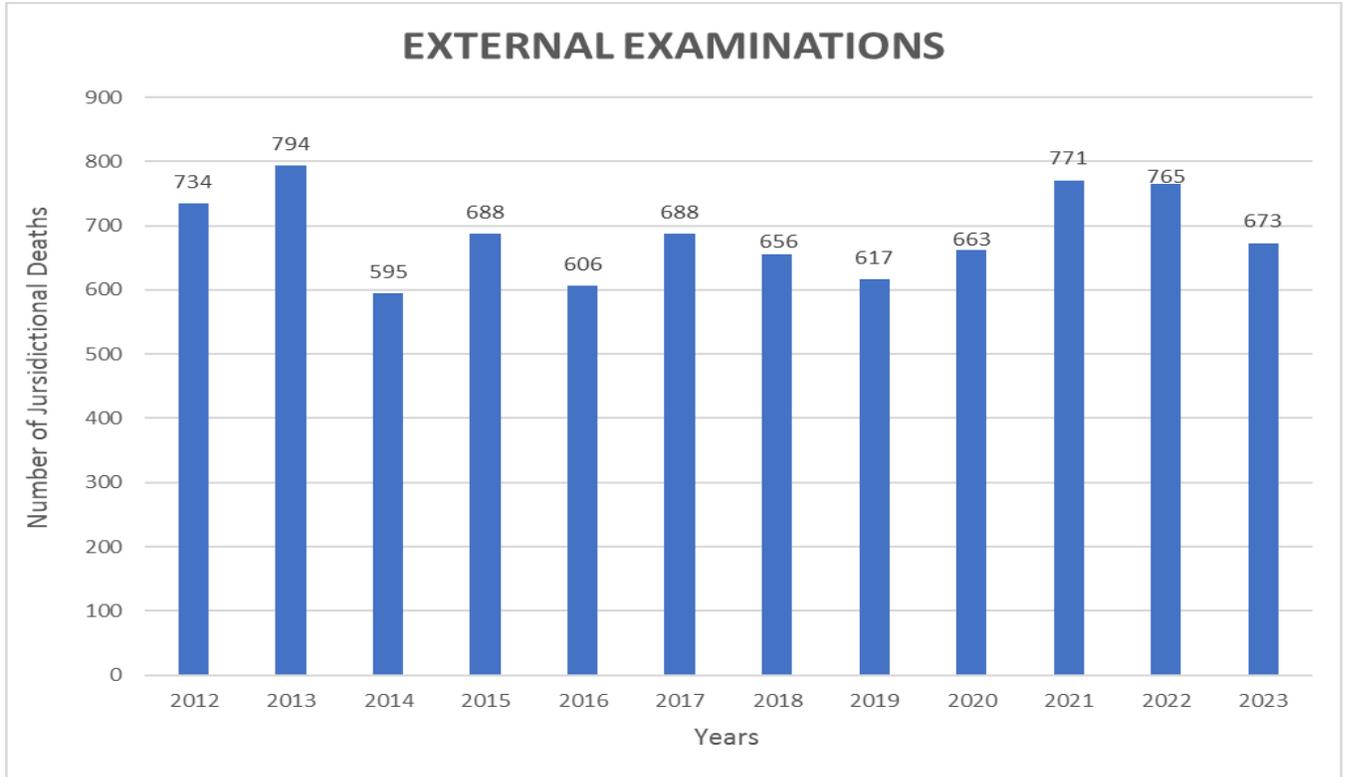


2023 INVESTIGATIONS

In 2023, there were a total of 3,556 investigations reported to our office. Of these investigations: 499 deaths did not require scene investigations or external examinations. There were 2,384 authorizations for cremation. 673 of the death investigations required the Office of the Coroner to provide scene investigations, as well as external examinations. (Forensic Autopsies were not performed where scene investigation, circumstances, medical history, and external examination provided enough detail for death certification.)



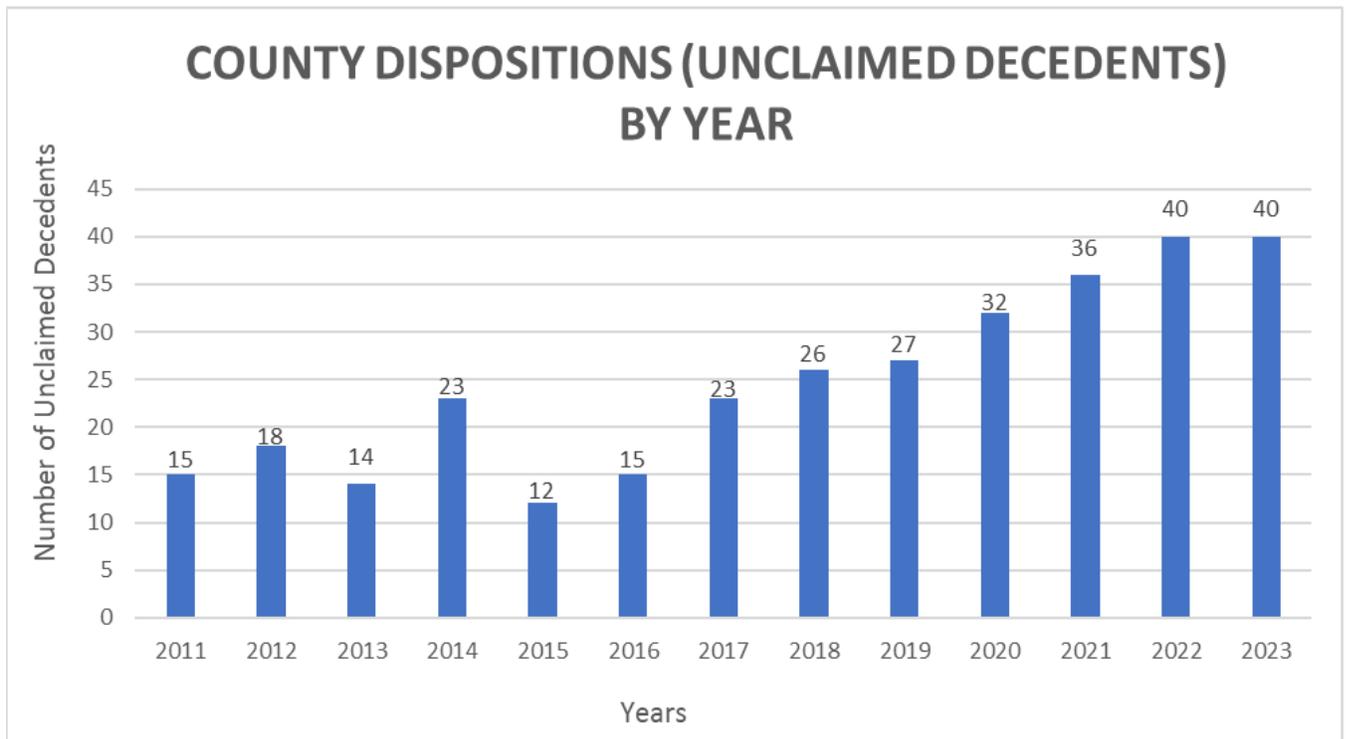




COUNTY DISPOSITIONS (UNCLAIMED DECEDENTS)

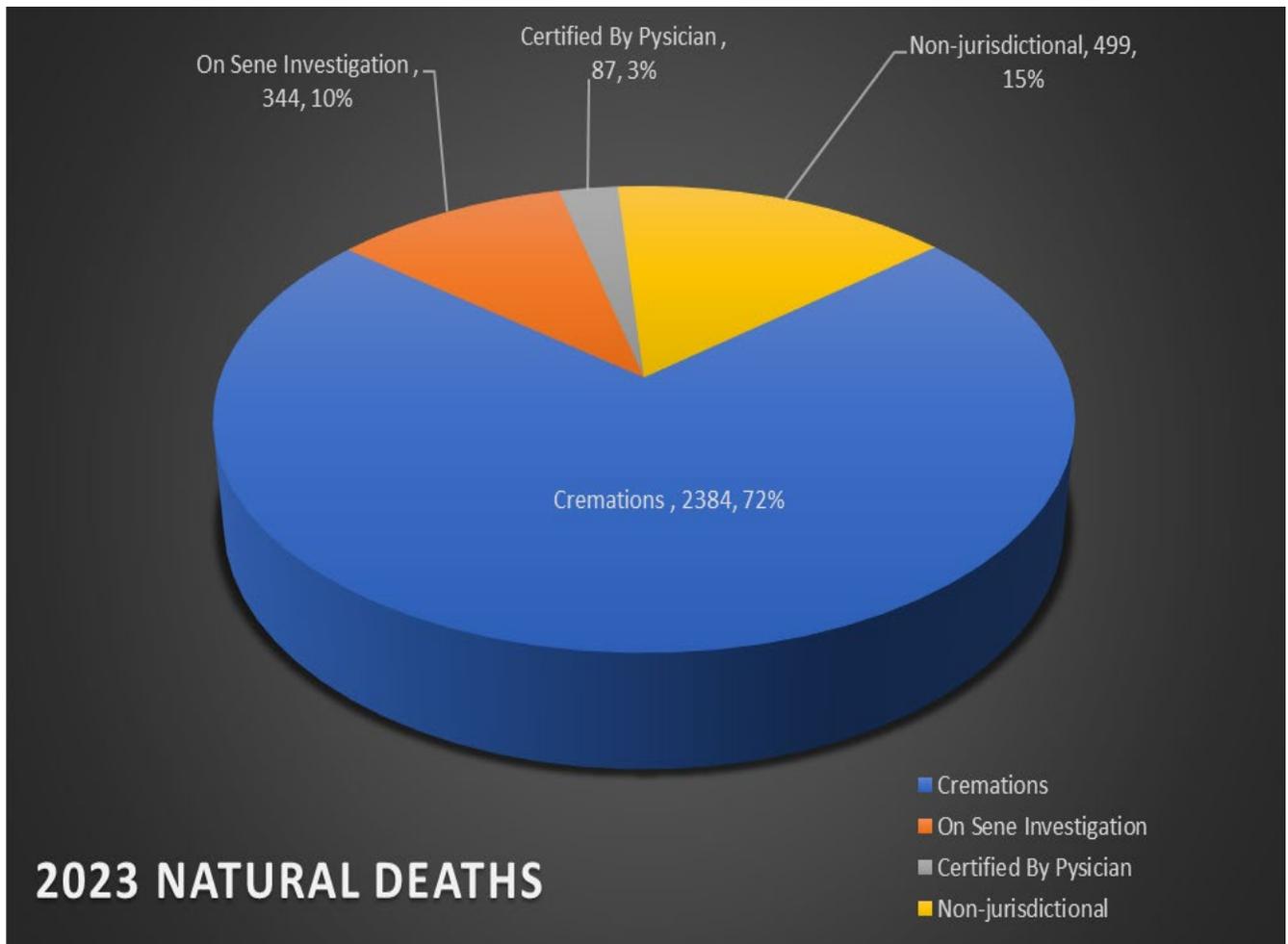
An unclaimed decedent is defined as an individual who has died in Dauphin County and funeral arrangements are not made within 10 days of the date of discovery of death. An unclaimed decedent does not have to be a Coroner’s jurisdictional case to be unclaimed – an individual could have died at a nursing home, hospital, or hospice facility. A decedent can become unclaimed if no legal next of kin can be located or if legal next of kin chooses not to claim the decedent’s person or is not financially able to claim the decedent.

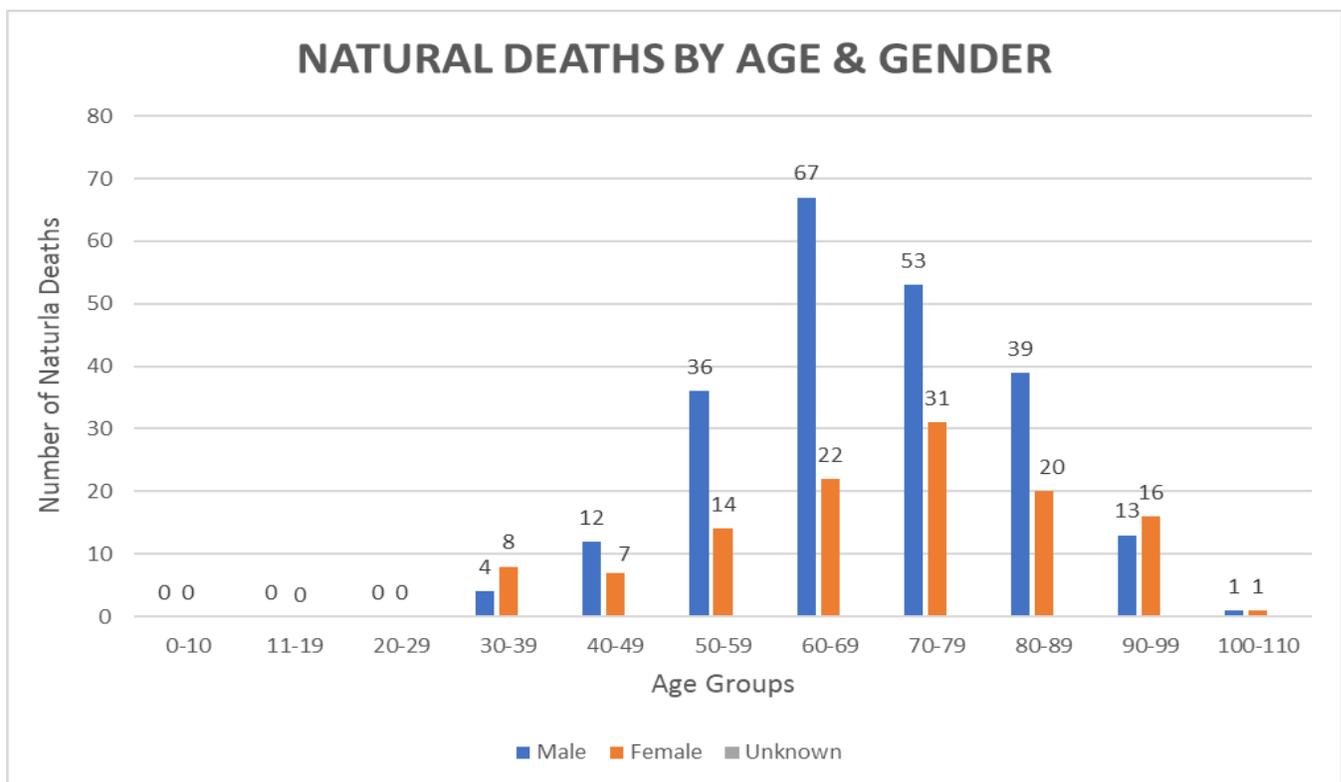
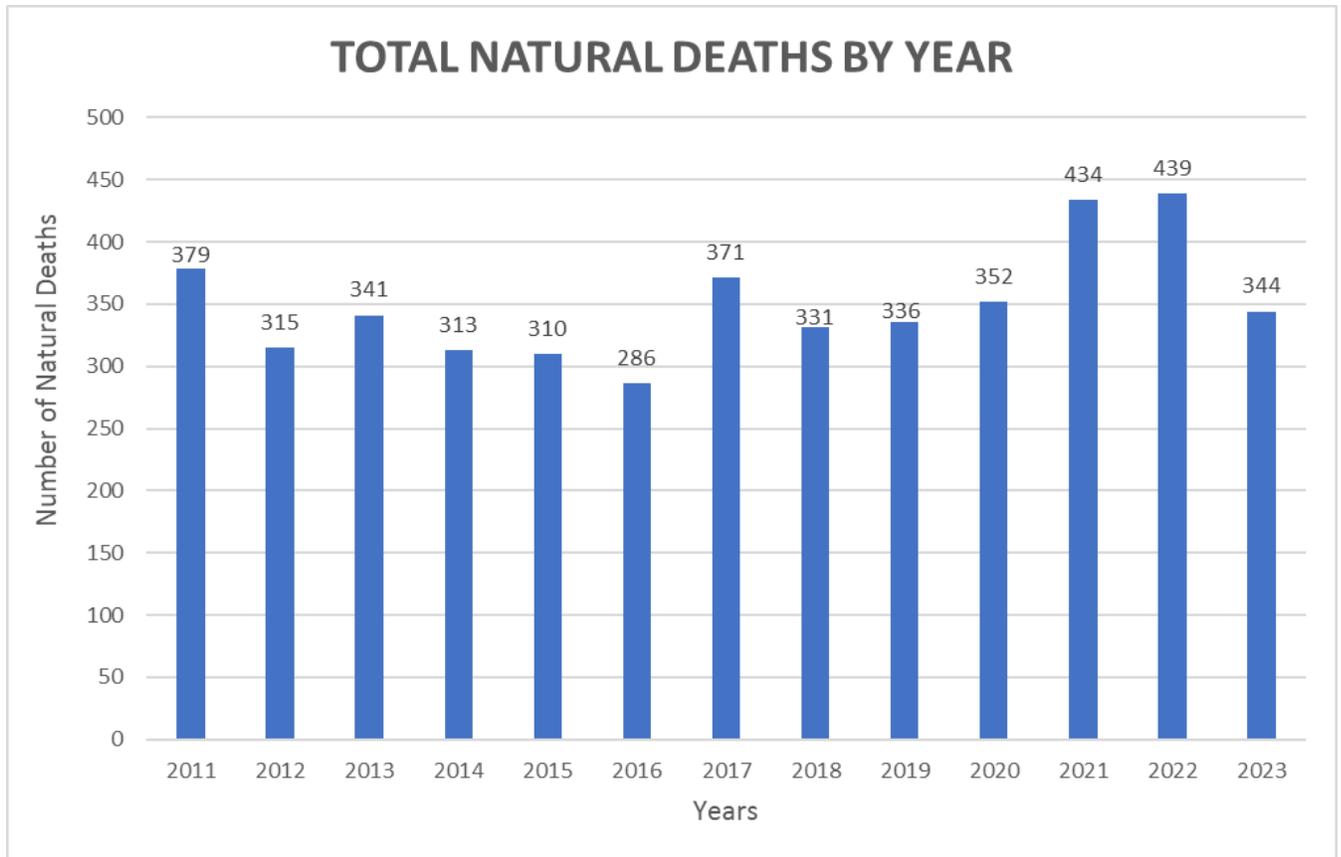
The Coroner’s Office actively searches for legal next of kin following a decedent’s death. We have gained access to Accurant System to increase the ability to locate legal next of kin. If a legal next of kin cannot financially claim the decedent, they are referred to Compassionate Burial Program and/or PA Department of Human Services and/or US Department of Veterans Affairs for eligible burial benefits. If the decedent is not eligible for burial benefits, the Coroner’s Office becomes responsible for disposition of the decedent’s person and will have the decedent cremated and buried at Potter’s Field. If the decedent is a Veteran, the Coroner’s Office will contact U.S. Veterans Affairs to ascertain for eligibility for burial at Indiantown Gap National Cemetery.

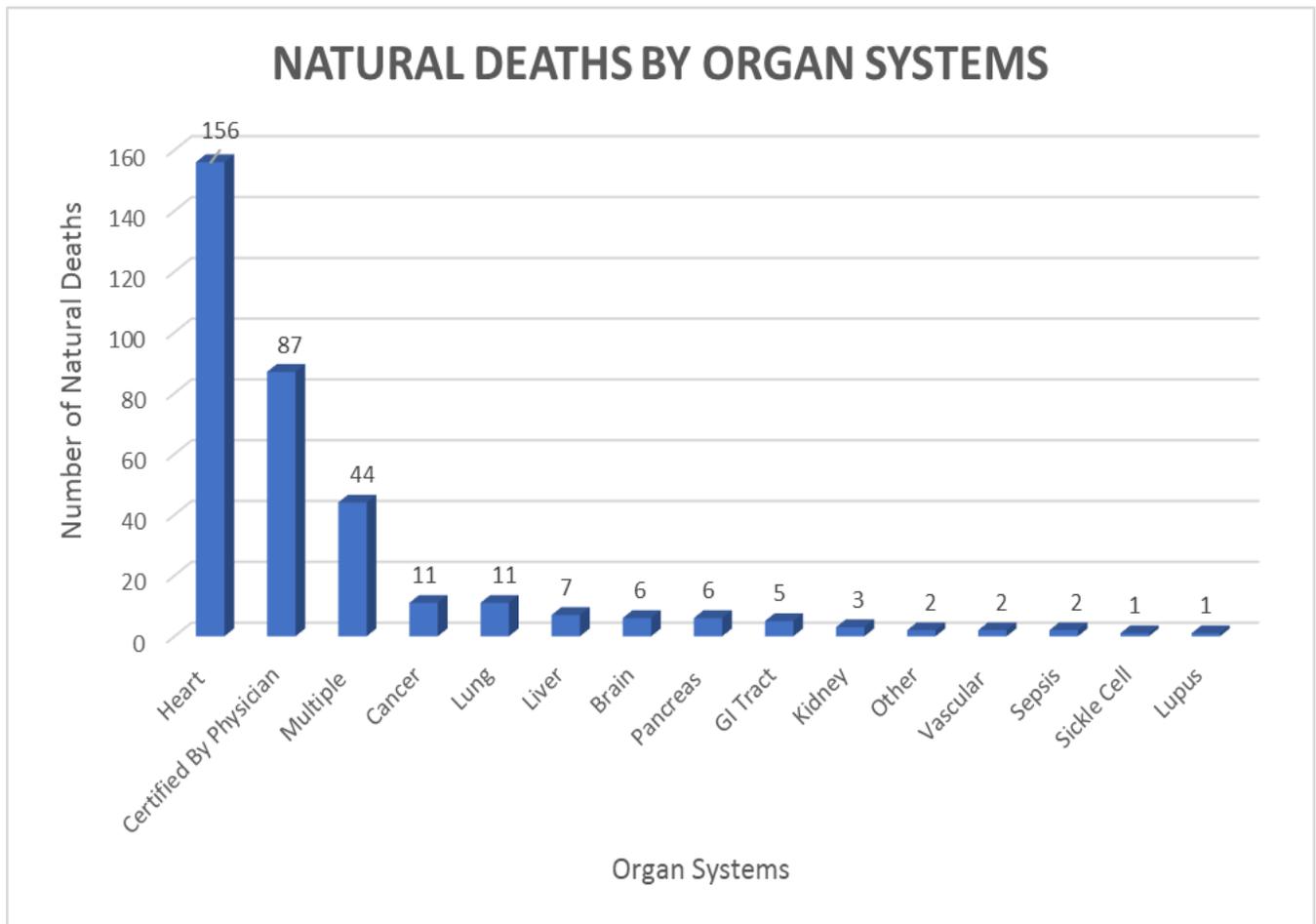


2023 NATURAL DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

The vast majority of the deaths investigated by the Coroner’s Office are determined to be natural deaths. In 2023, there were 3,314 deaths that were reported to our office and ruled natural. 499 of these deaths did not require our office to take Jurisdiction of the death. 344 of these deaths were unattended and required our office to take Jurisdiction in the death, which consisted of an investigation and external examination of the decedents. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, physicians are only able to certify natural deaths. In appropriate cases, our office affords the opportunity to the decedent’s attending physician to certify the death following our investigation, if he/she chooses. In 87 cases the attending physicians signed the death certificate after our Office’s investigation. There were 2,384 attended deaths that were reported as cremation authorizations and were certified by the decedents’ attending physicians.

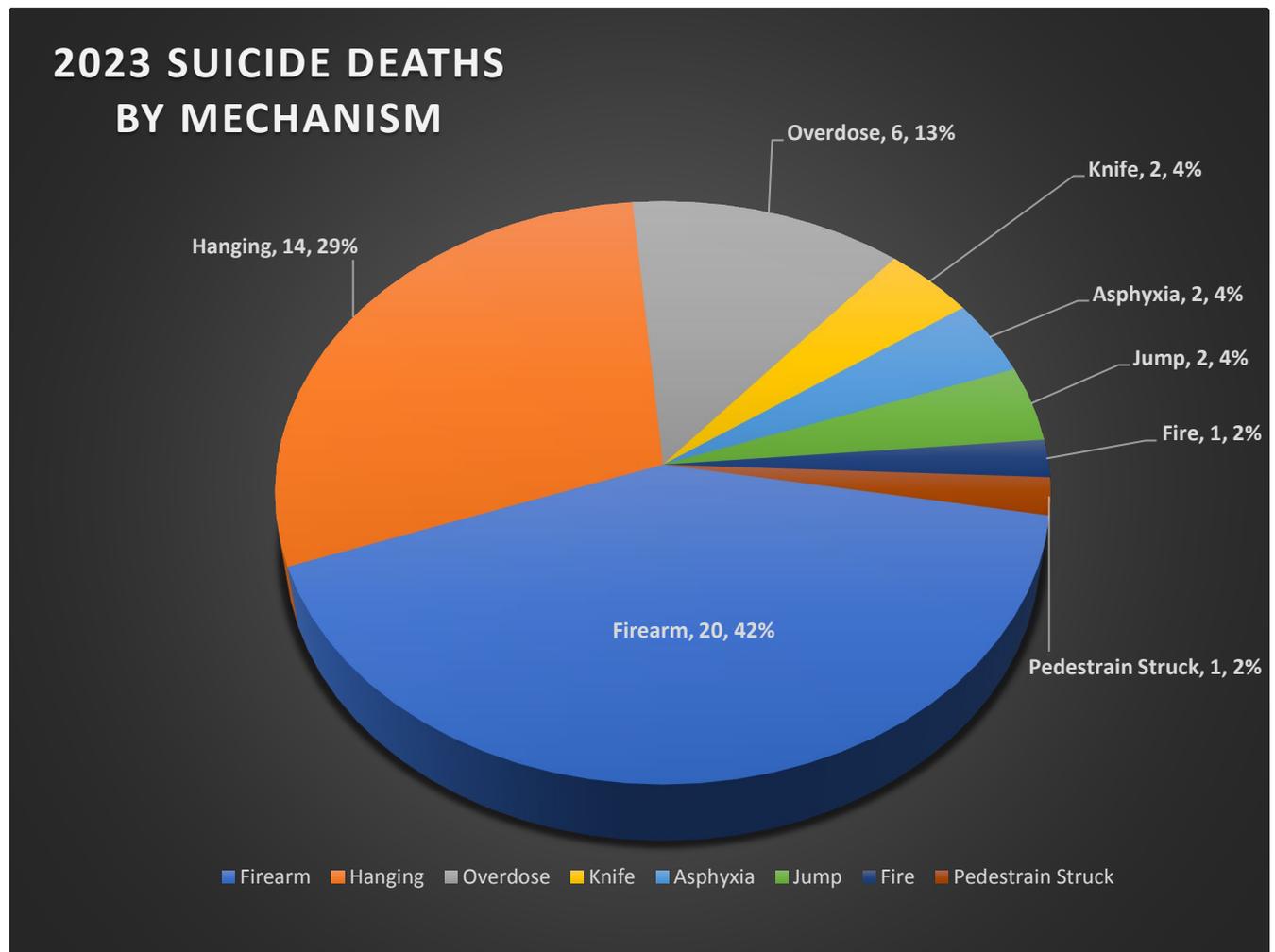


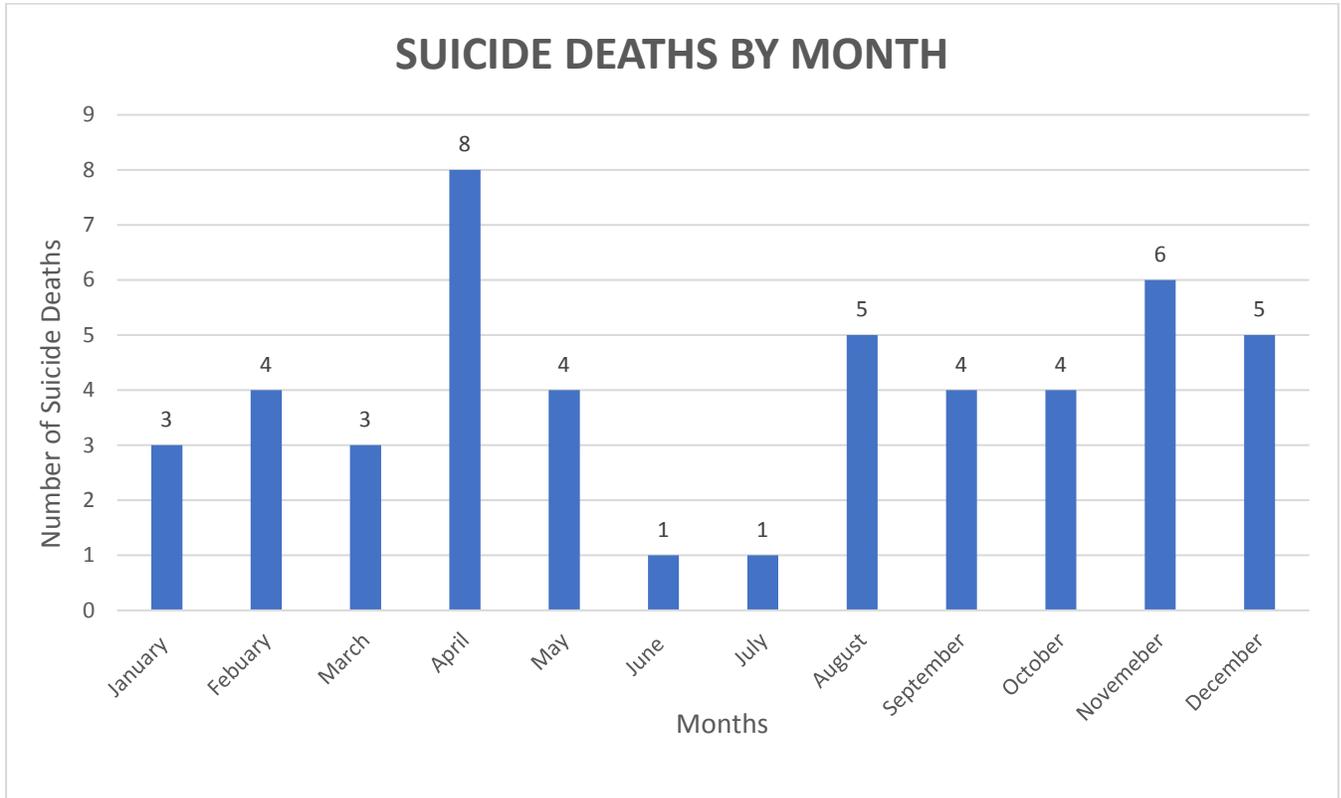
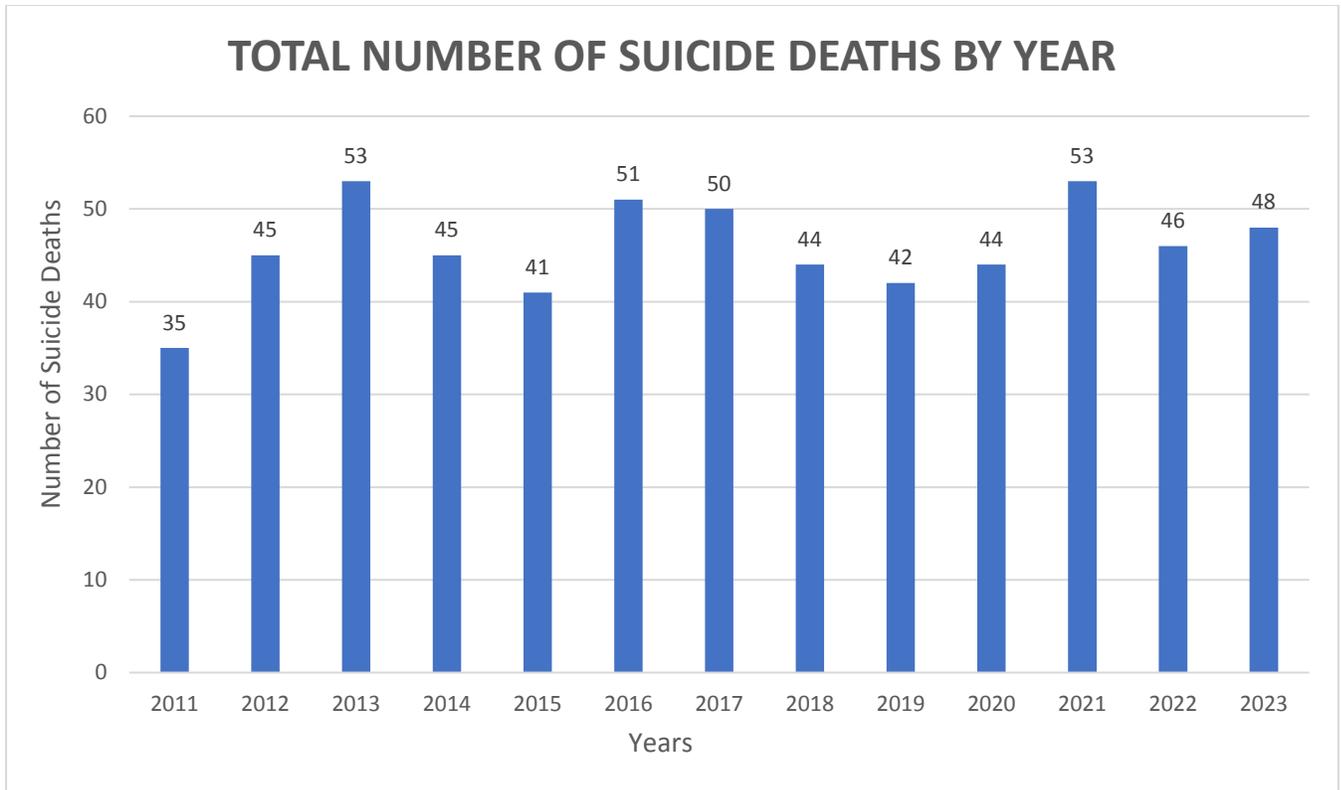


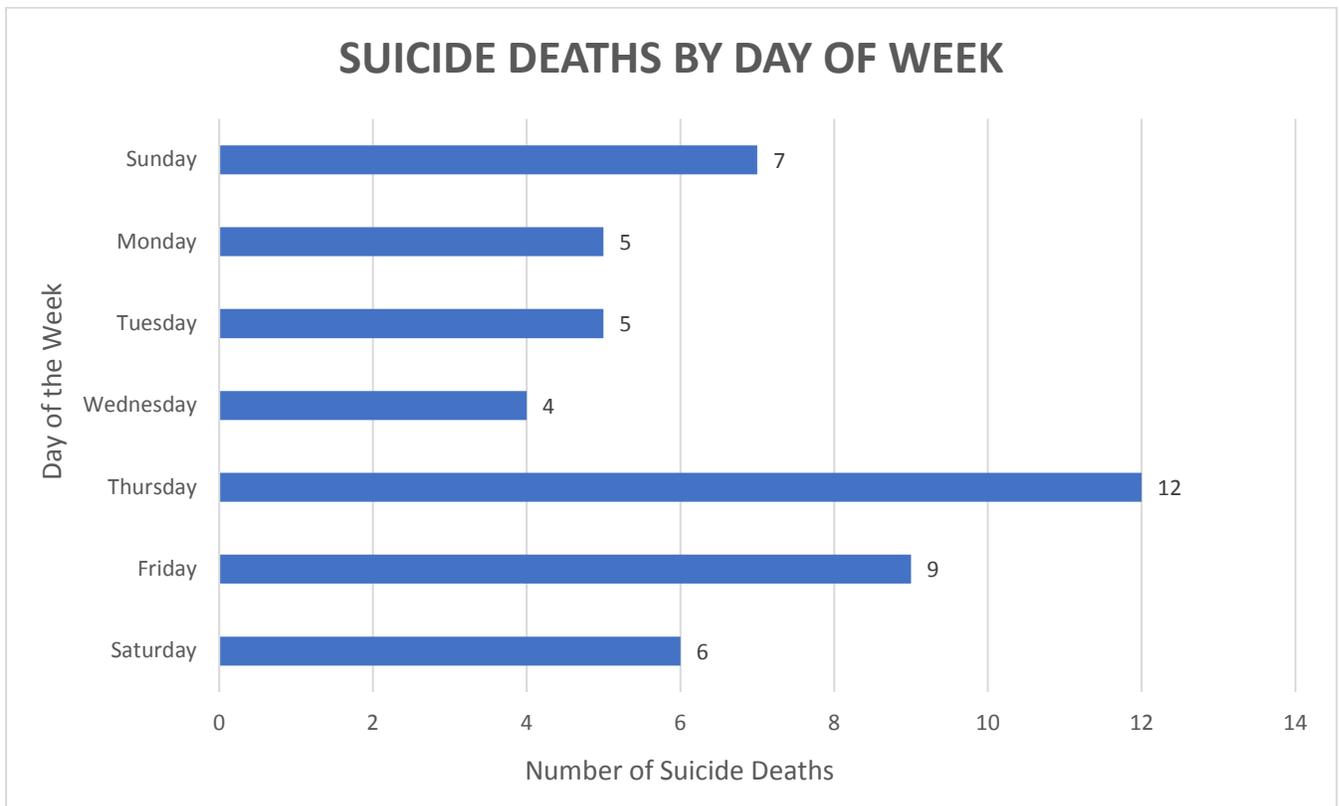
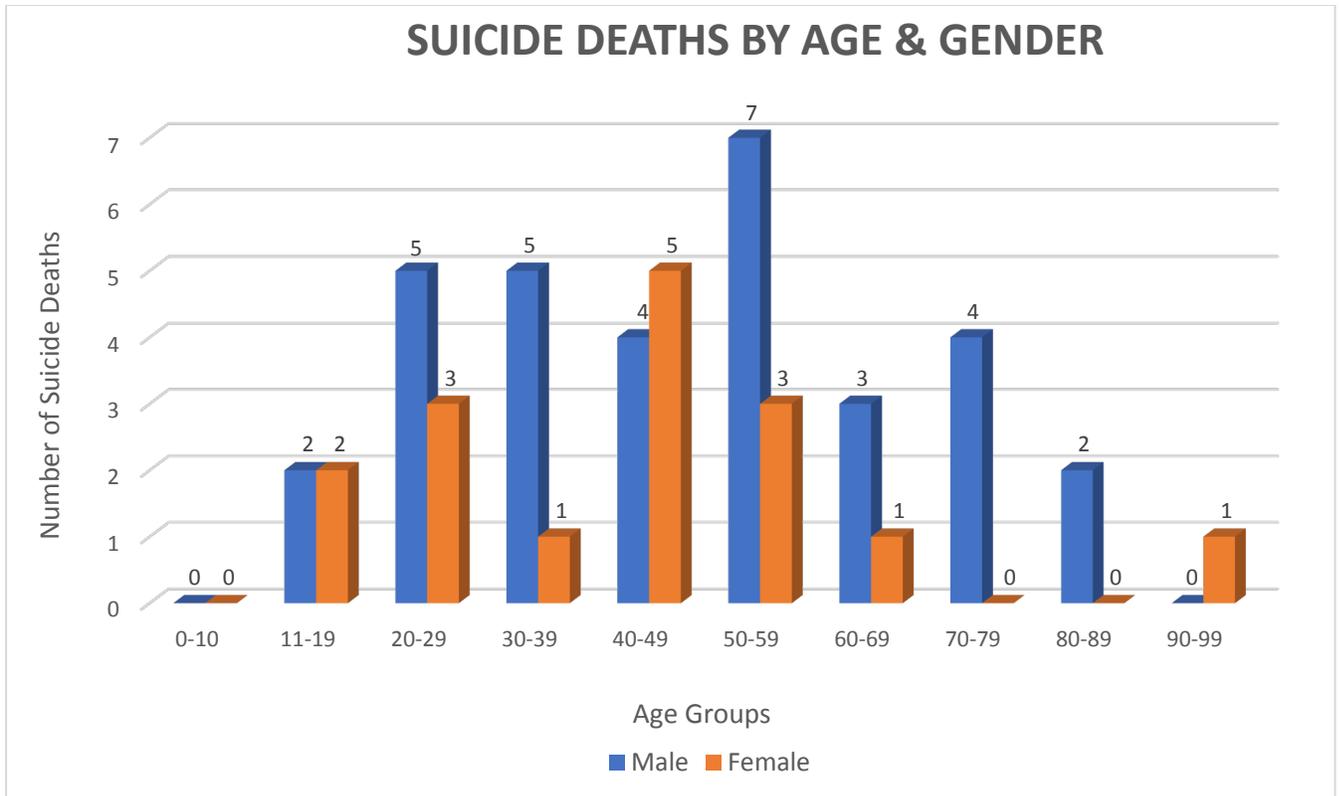


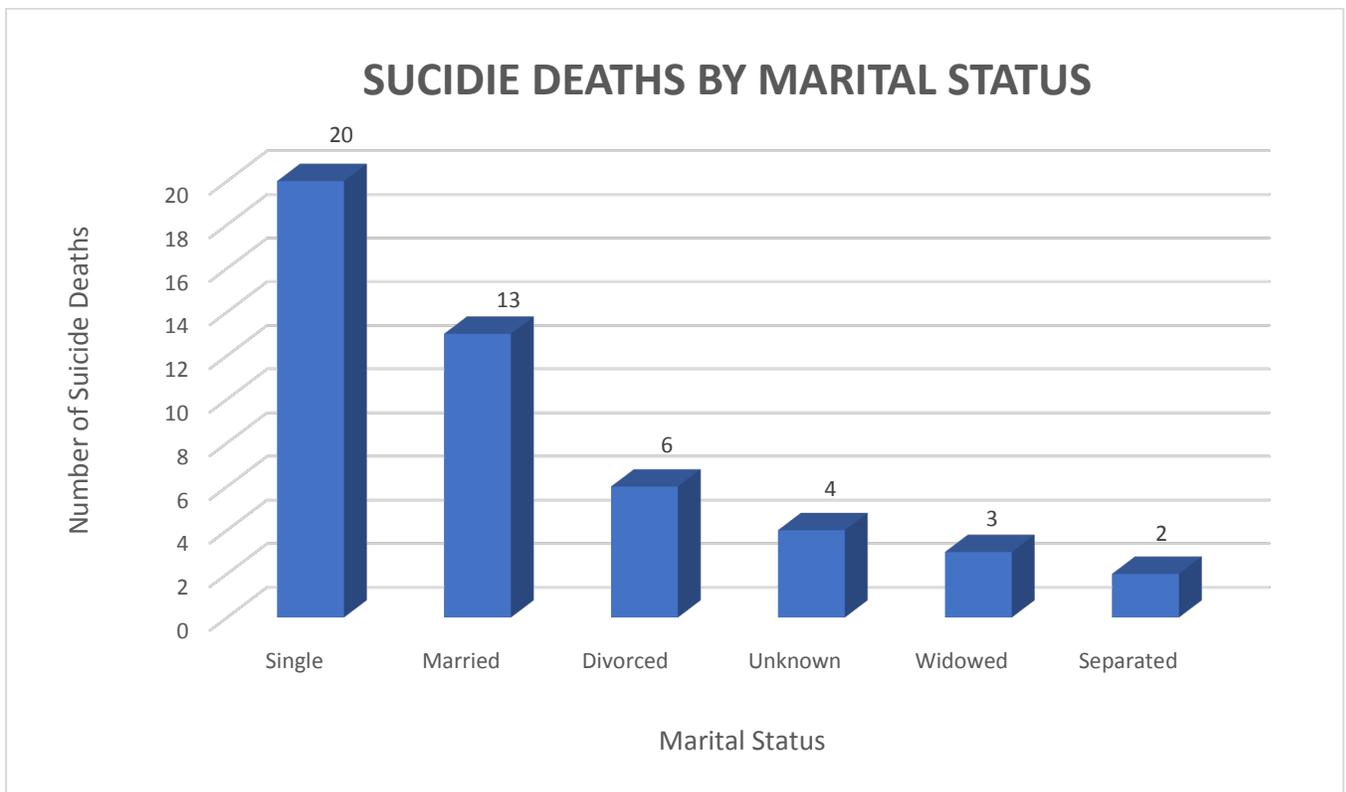
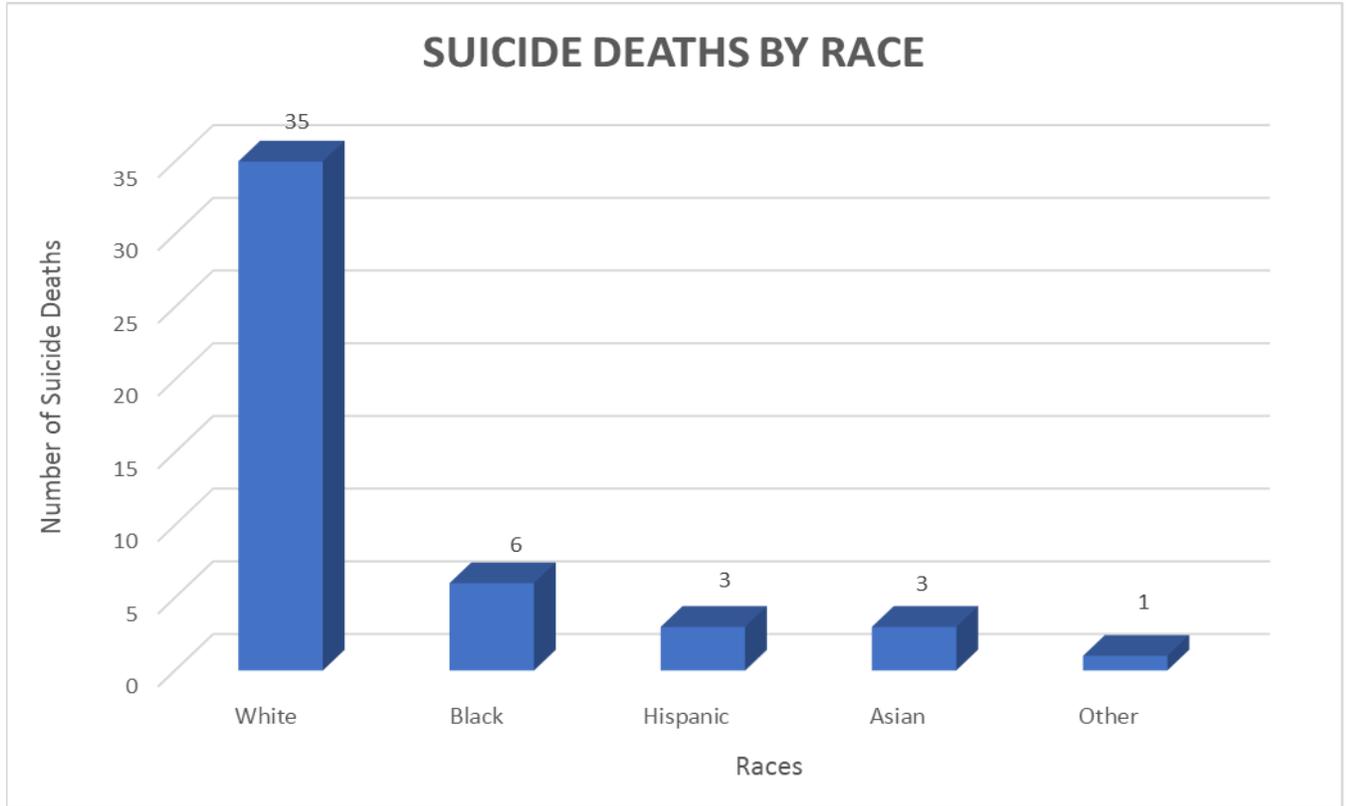
2023 SUICIDE INVESTIGATIONS

Suicide is a death caused by injury or poisoning as a result of an intentional, self-inflicted act committed to do self-harm or cause the death of one's self. Suicide deaths can range from gun related incidents to drug ingestions. During the 2023 year, there were 48 deaths by suicide. 20 were deaths by firearms, 14 were hangings, 6 were drug overdoses, 2 were by knife, 2 were asphyxia, 2 were a jump, 1 was by fire, and 1 was a pedestrian struck.



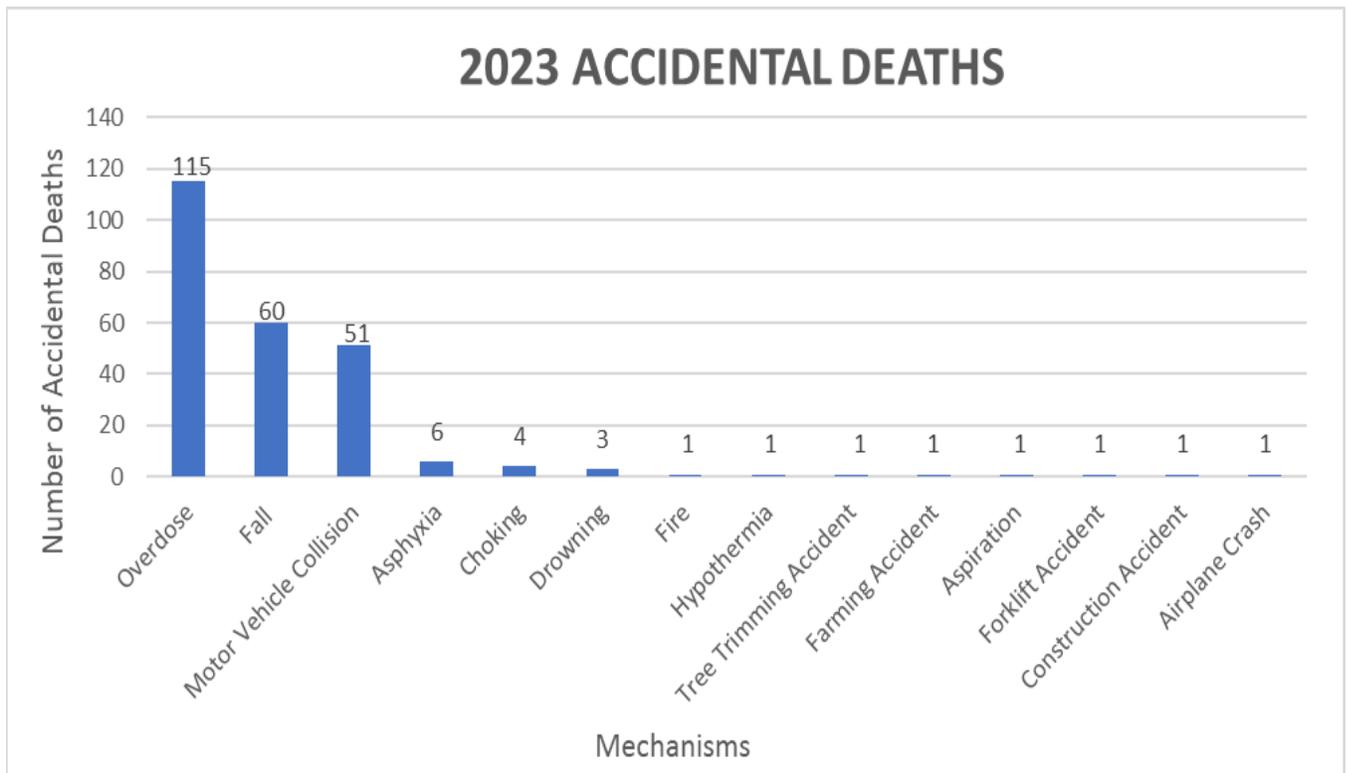


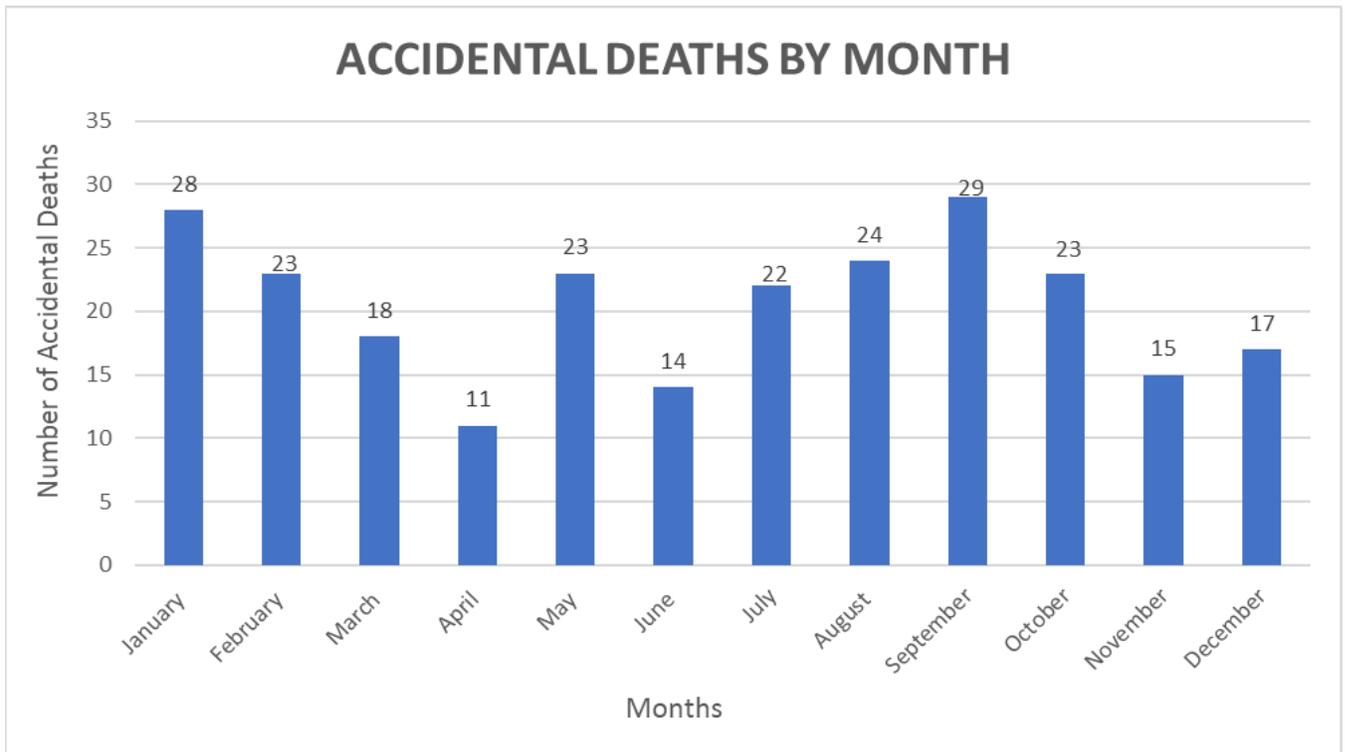
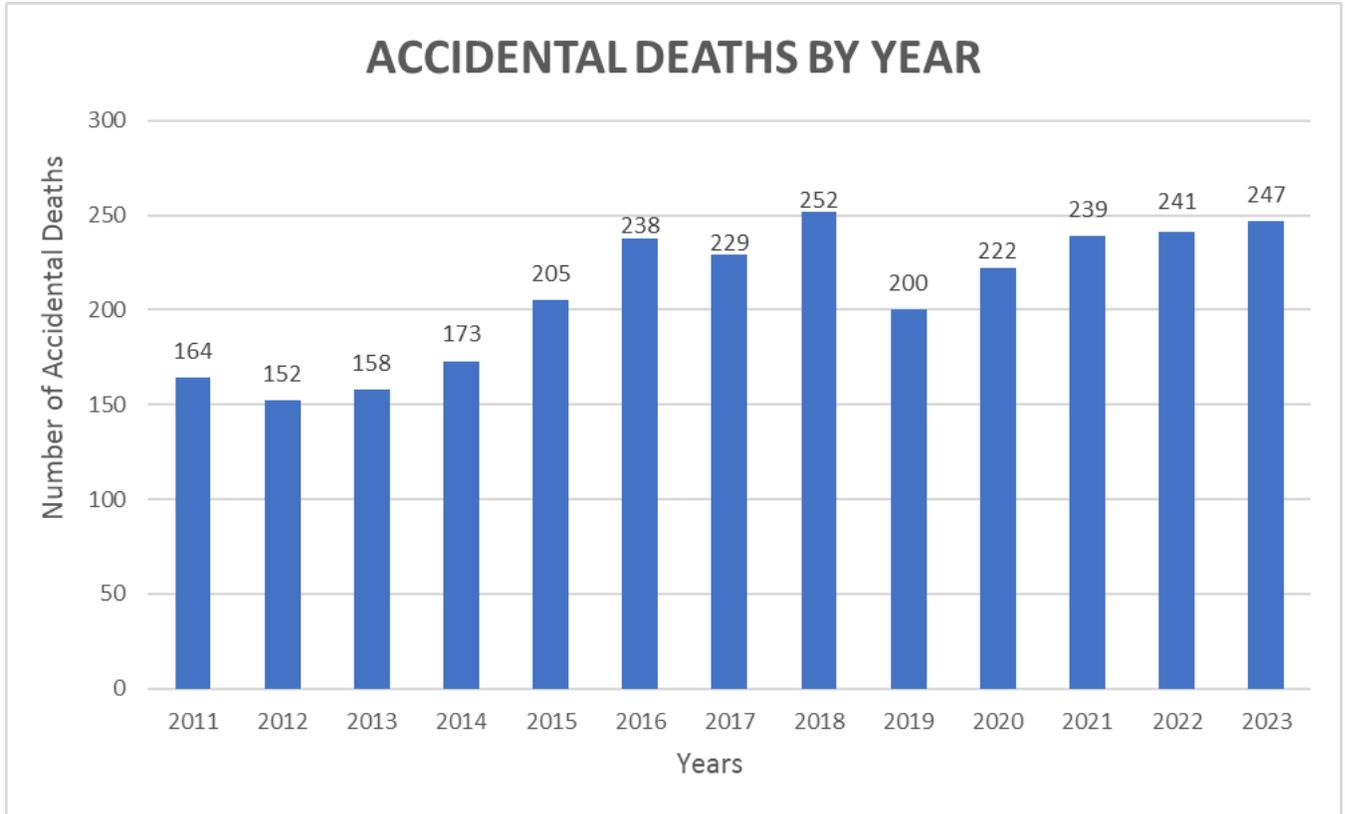


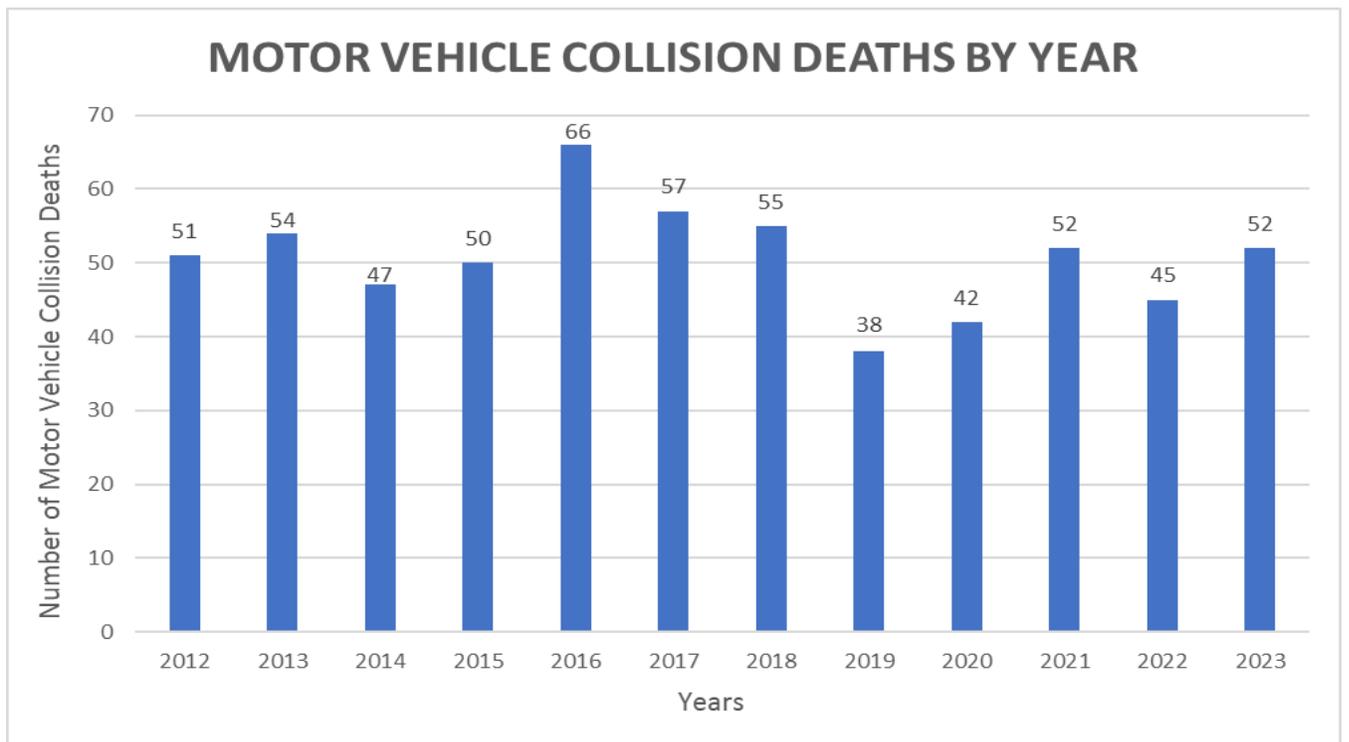
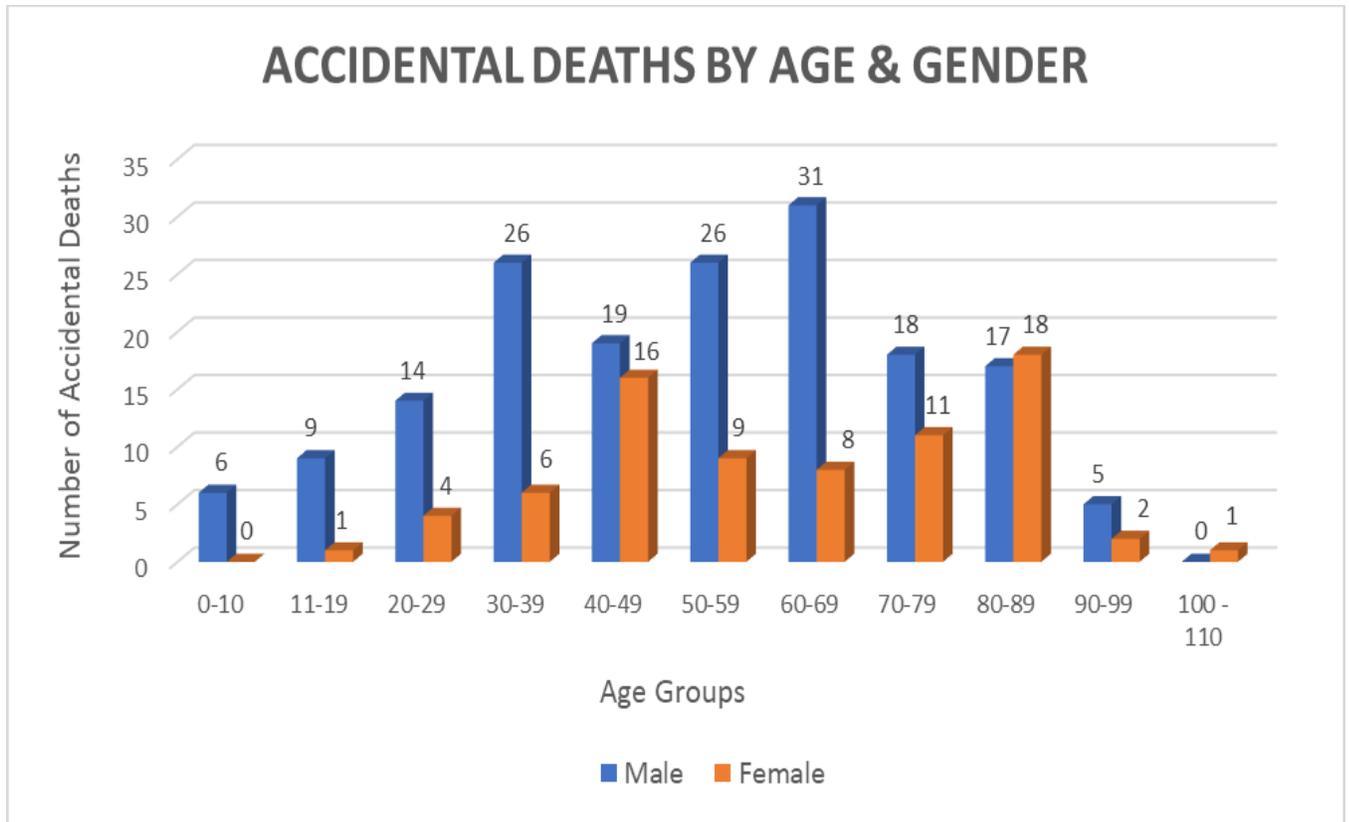


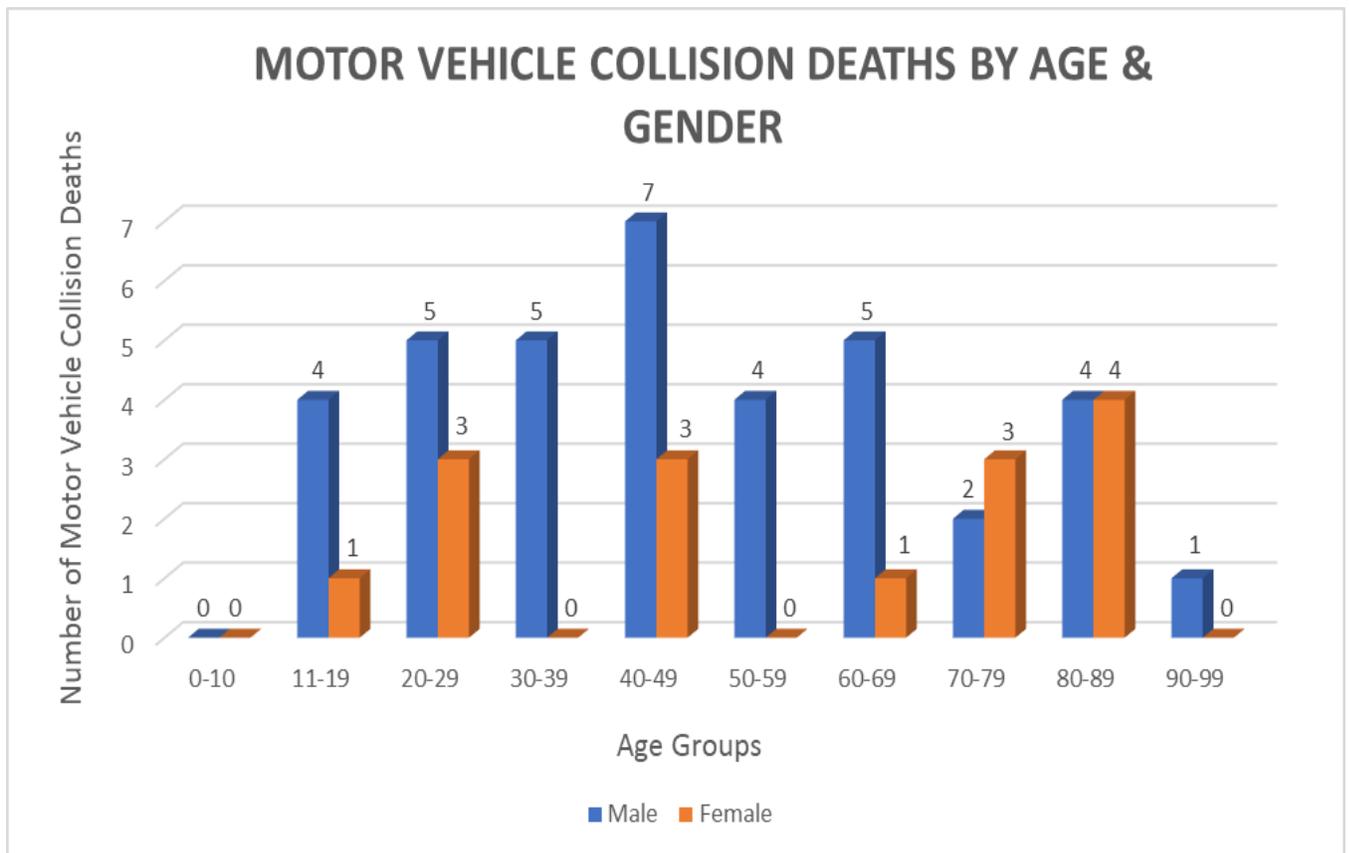
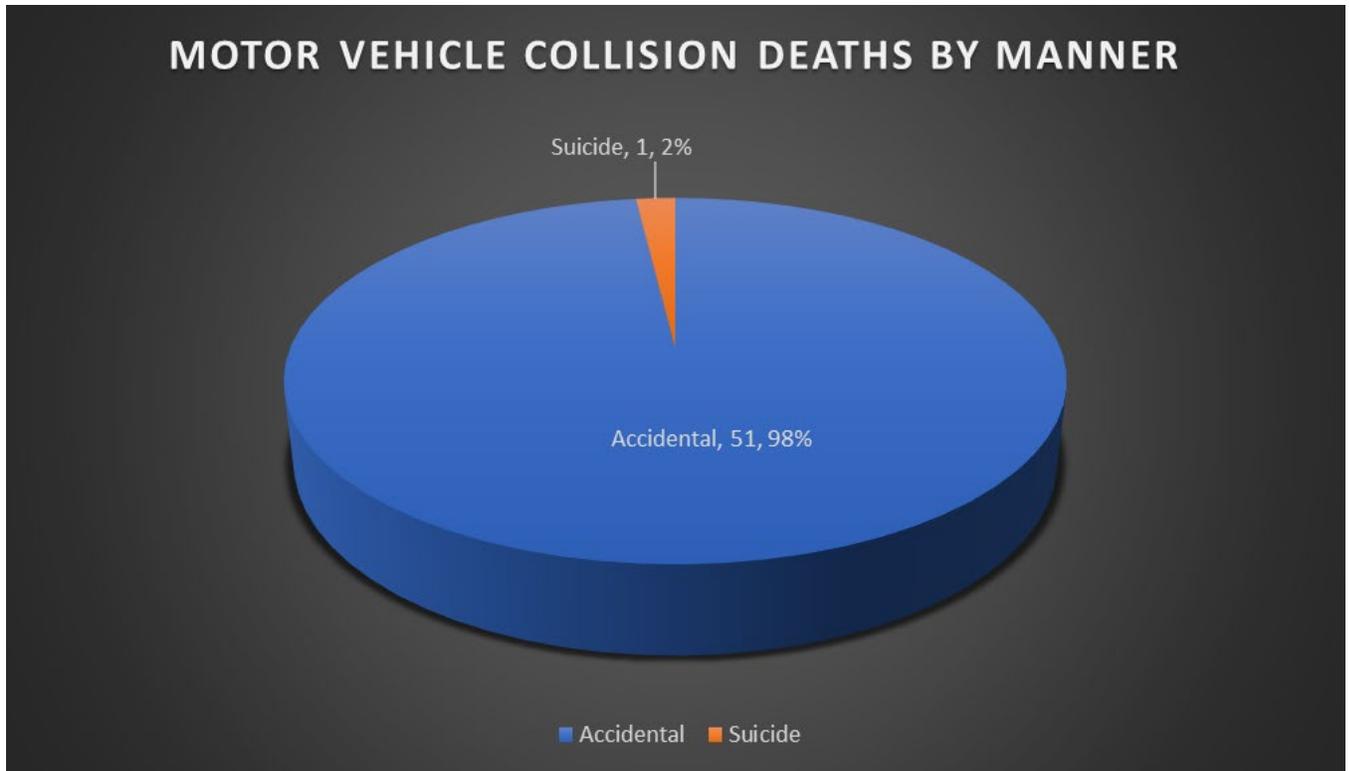
2023 ACCIDENTAL DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

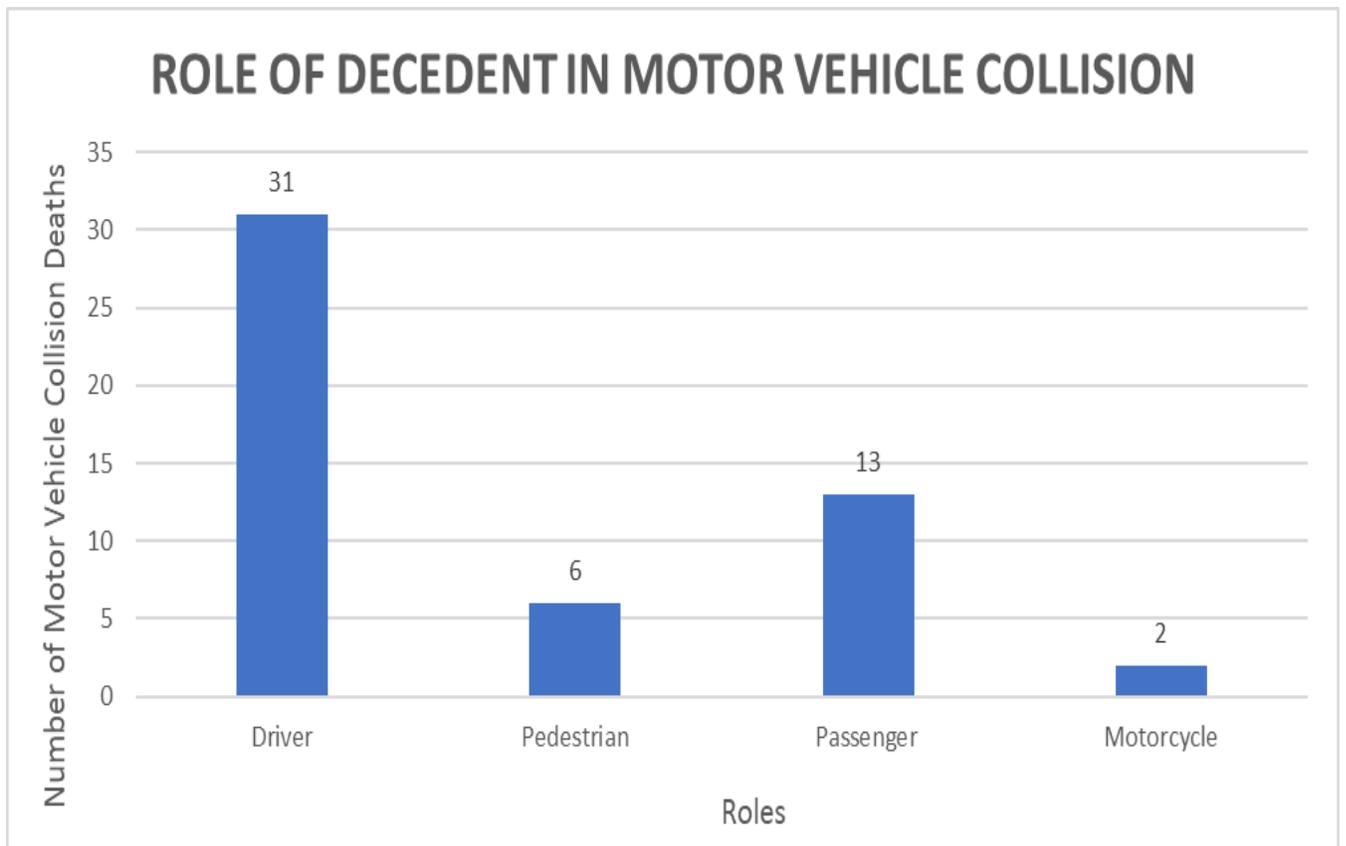
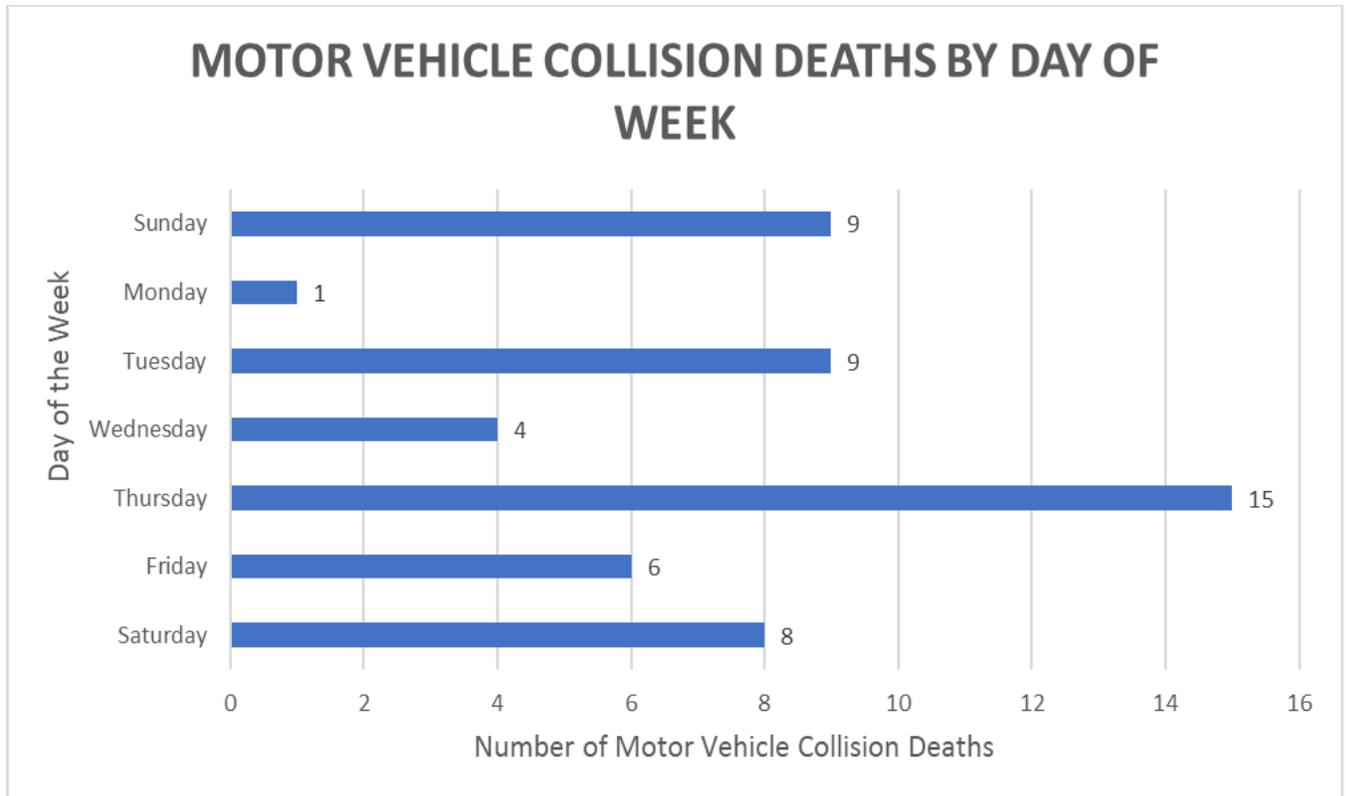
An accidental death is a Death caused by an injury or poisoning where there is no evidence that the injury or poisoning occurred with intent to harm or cause death. These deaths can range from falls to drug overdoses. During the 2023 year there were 247 deaths ruled accidental.



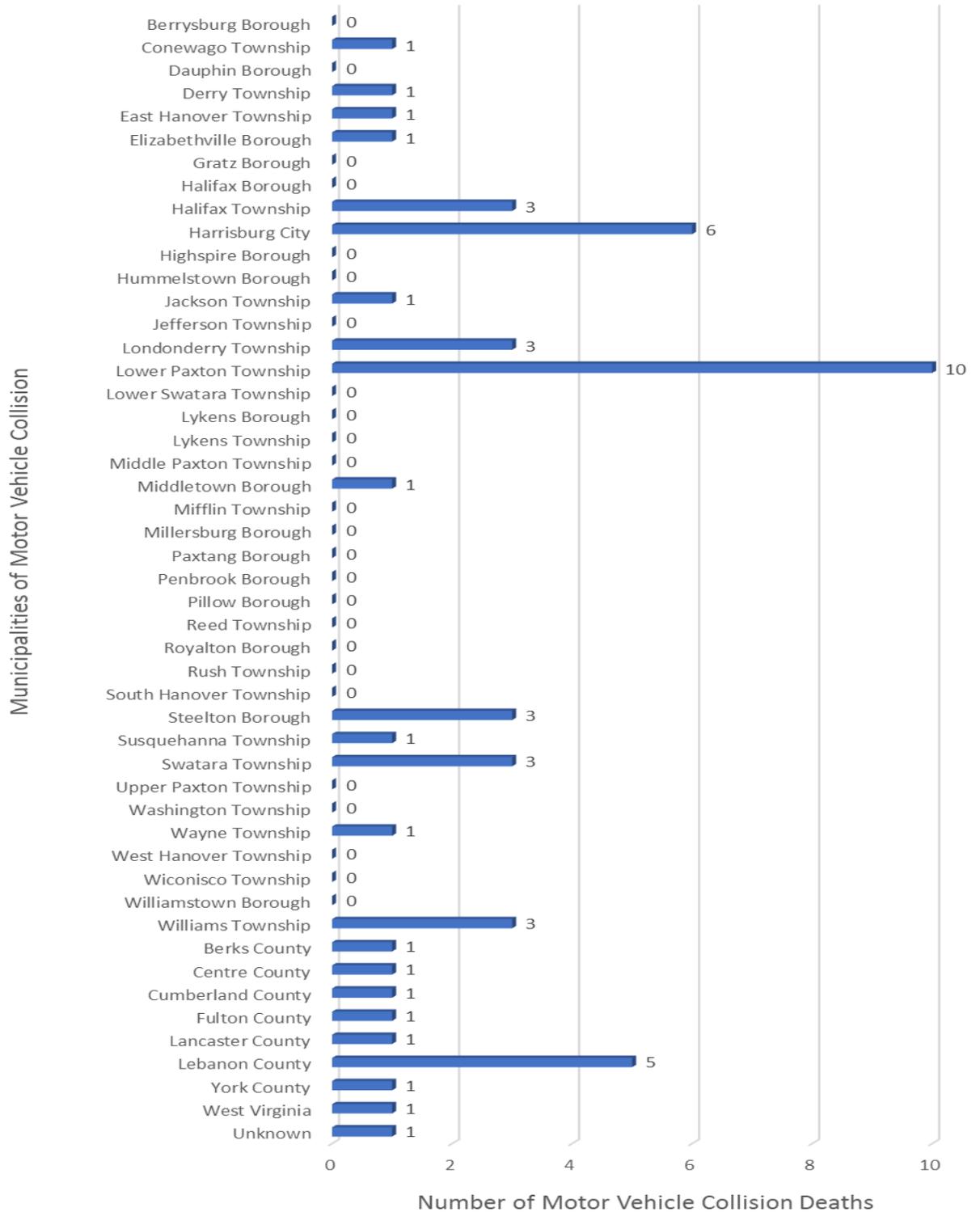






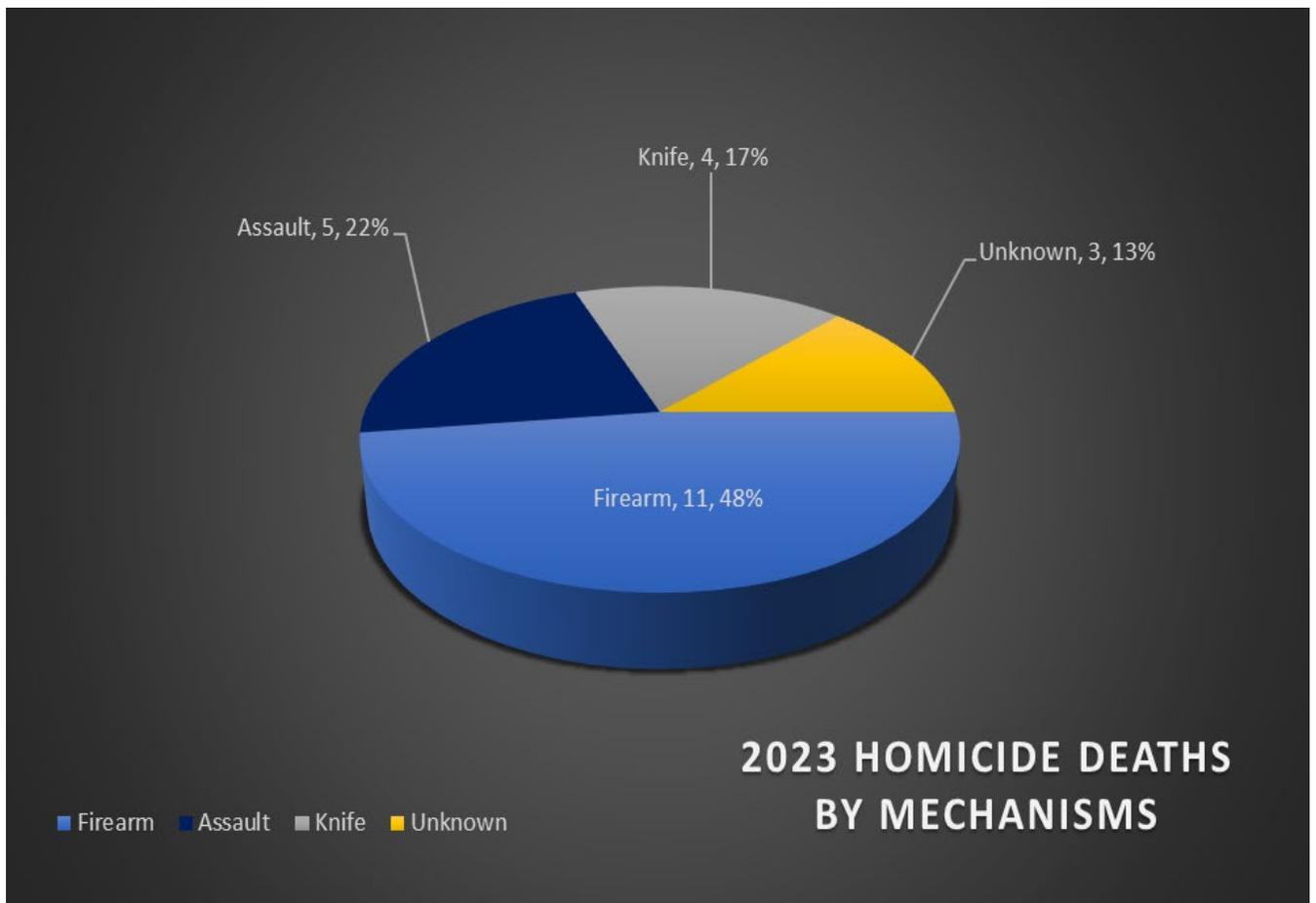


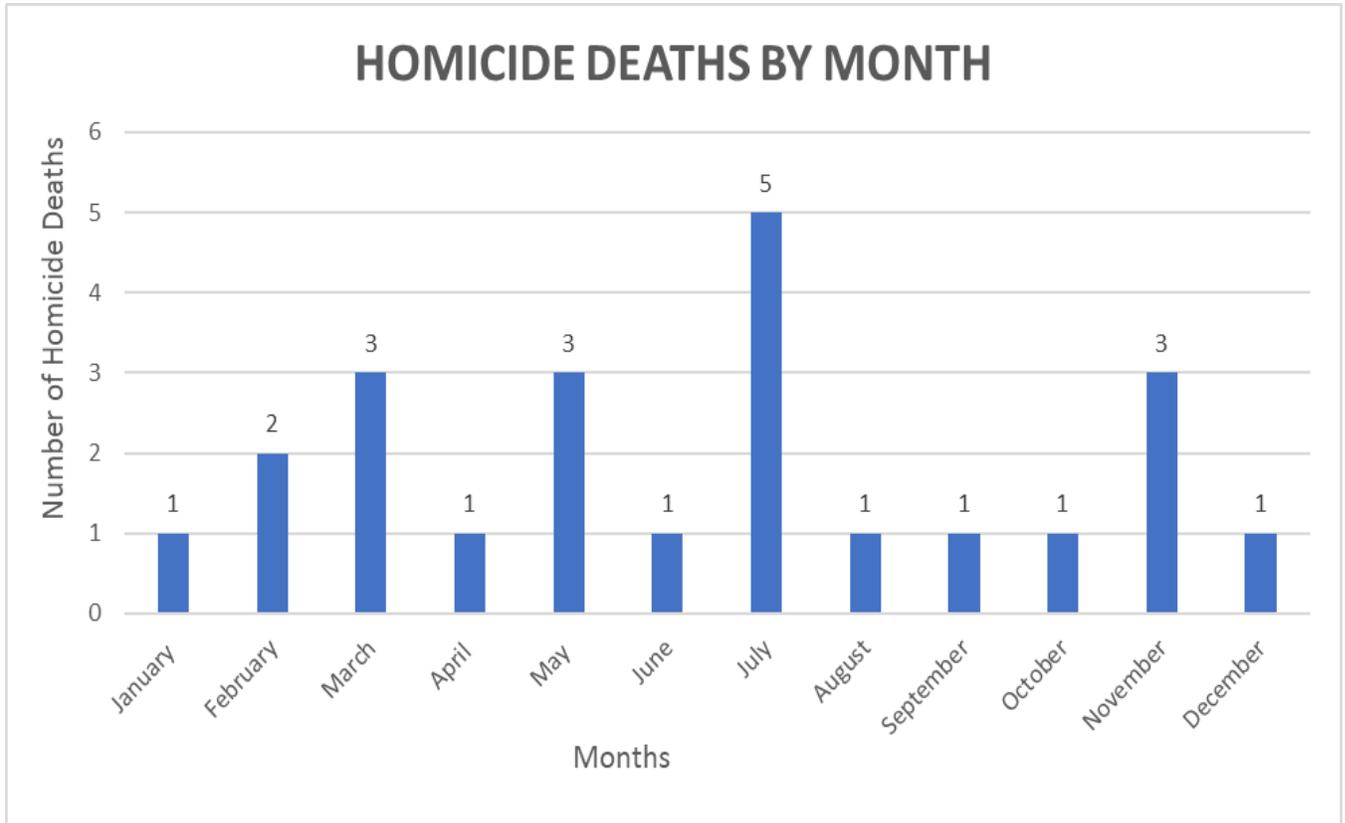
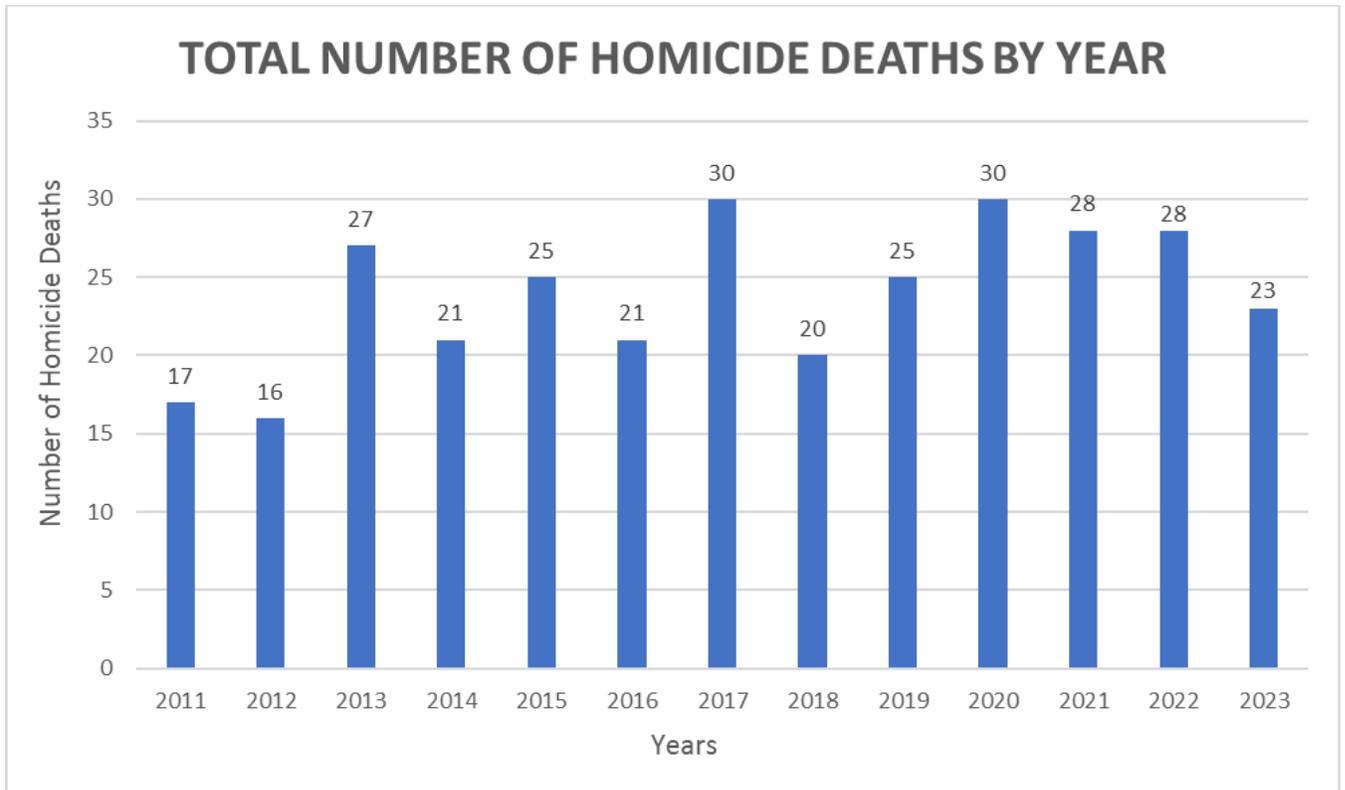
MOTOR VEHICLE COLLISION DEATHS BY MUNICIPALITY OF INCIDENT LOCATION

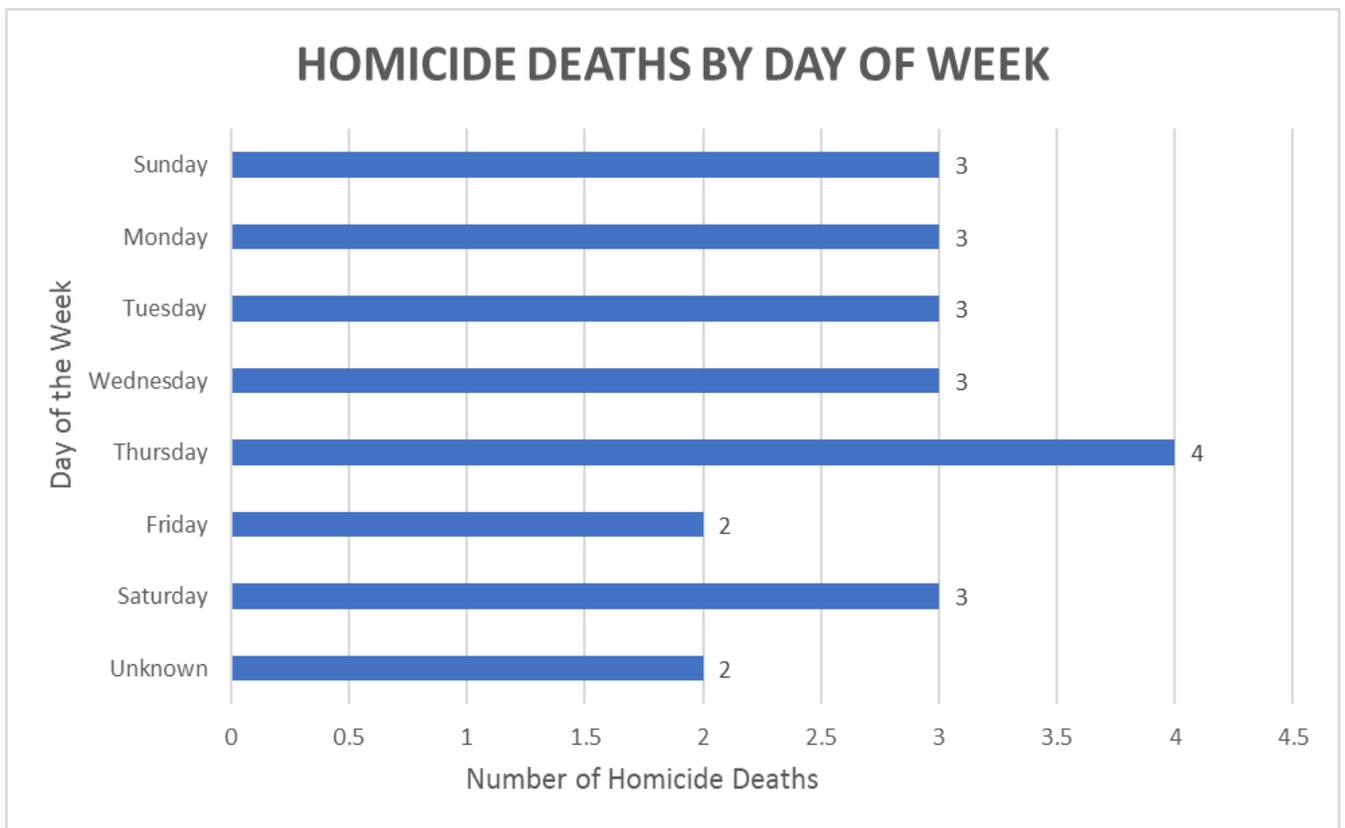
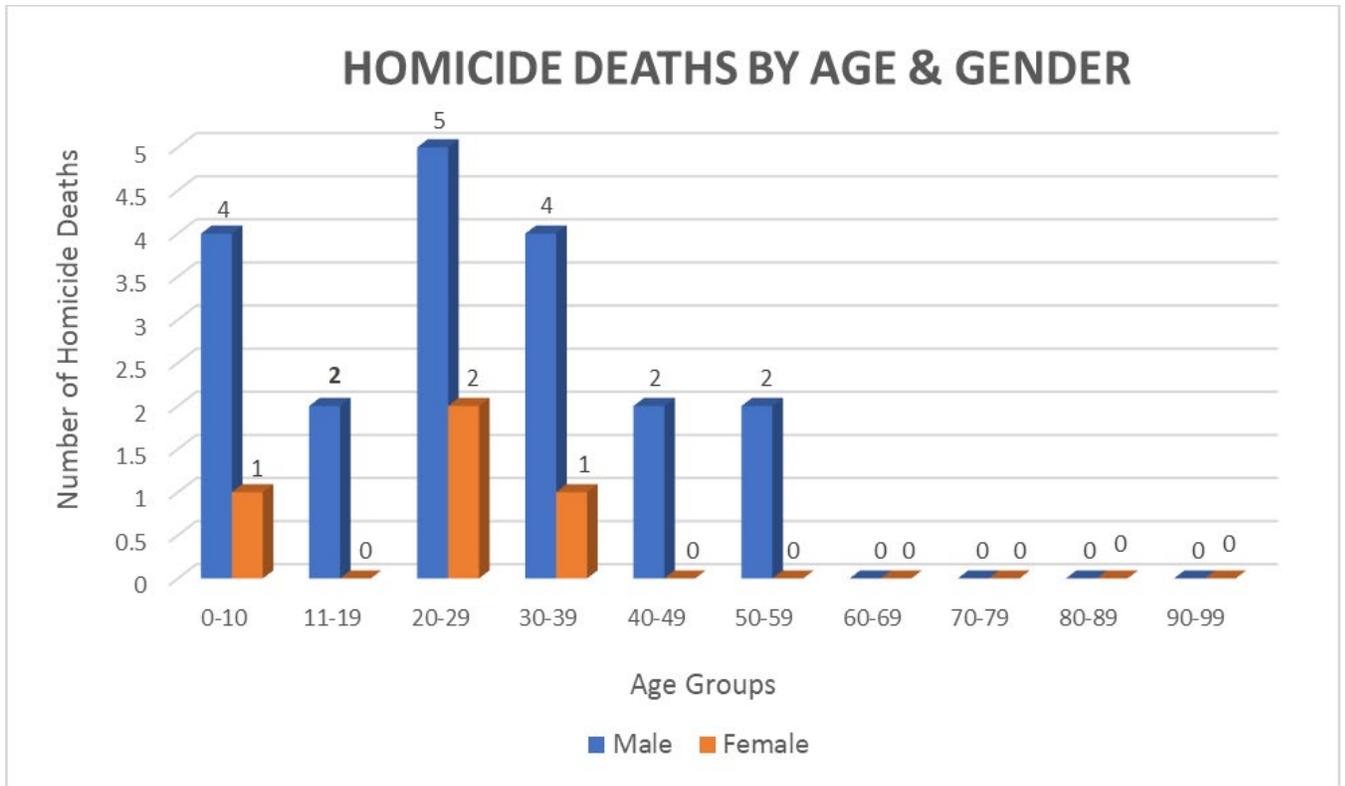


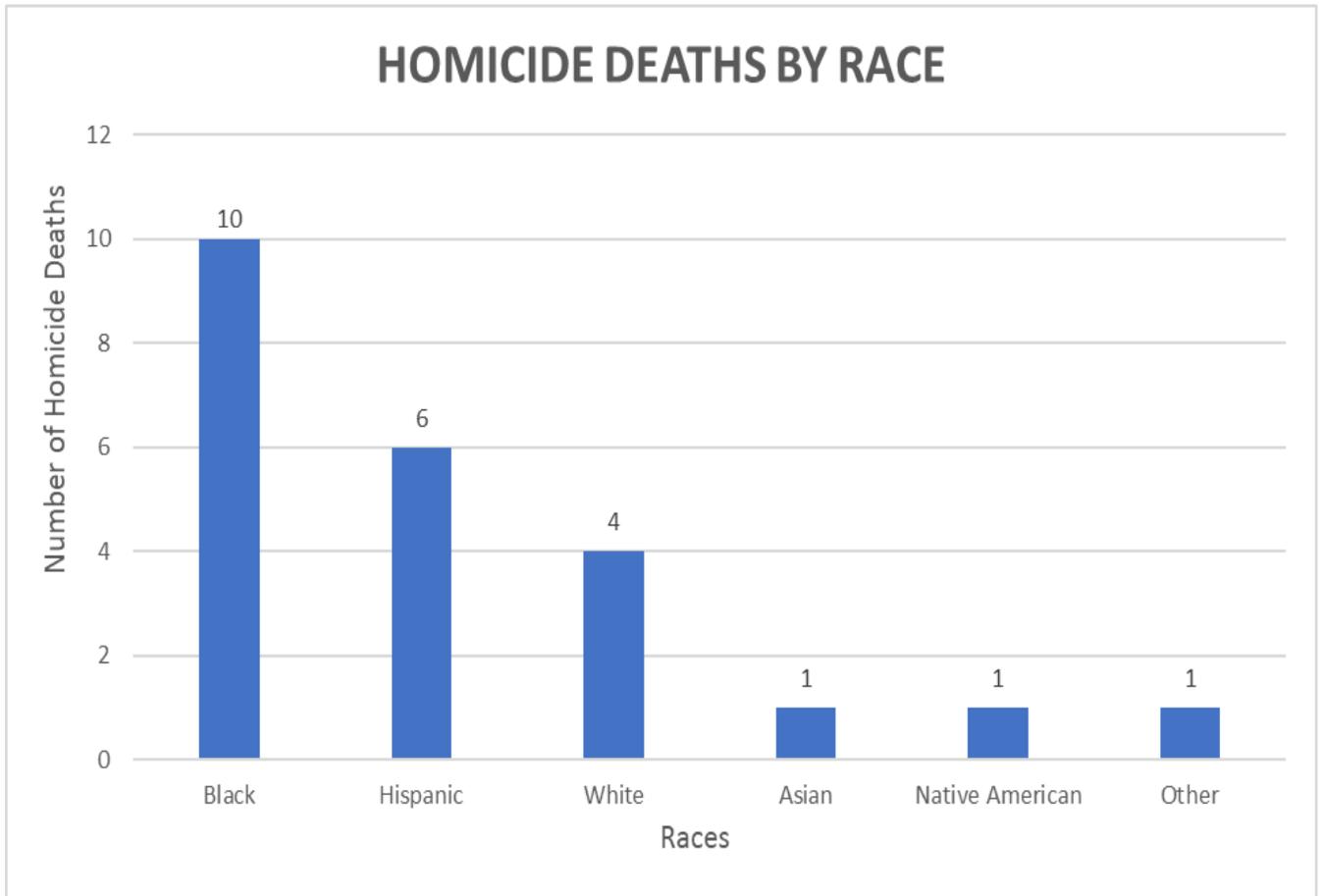
2023 HOMICIDE INVESTIGATIONS

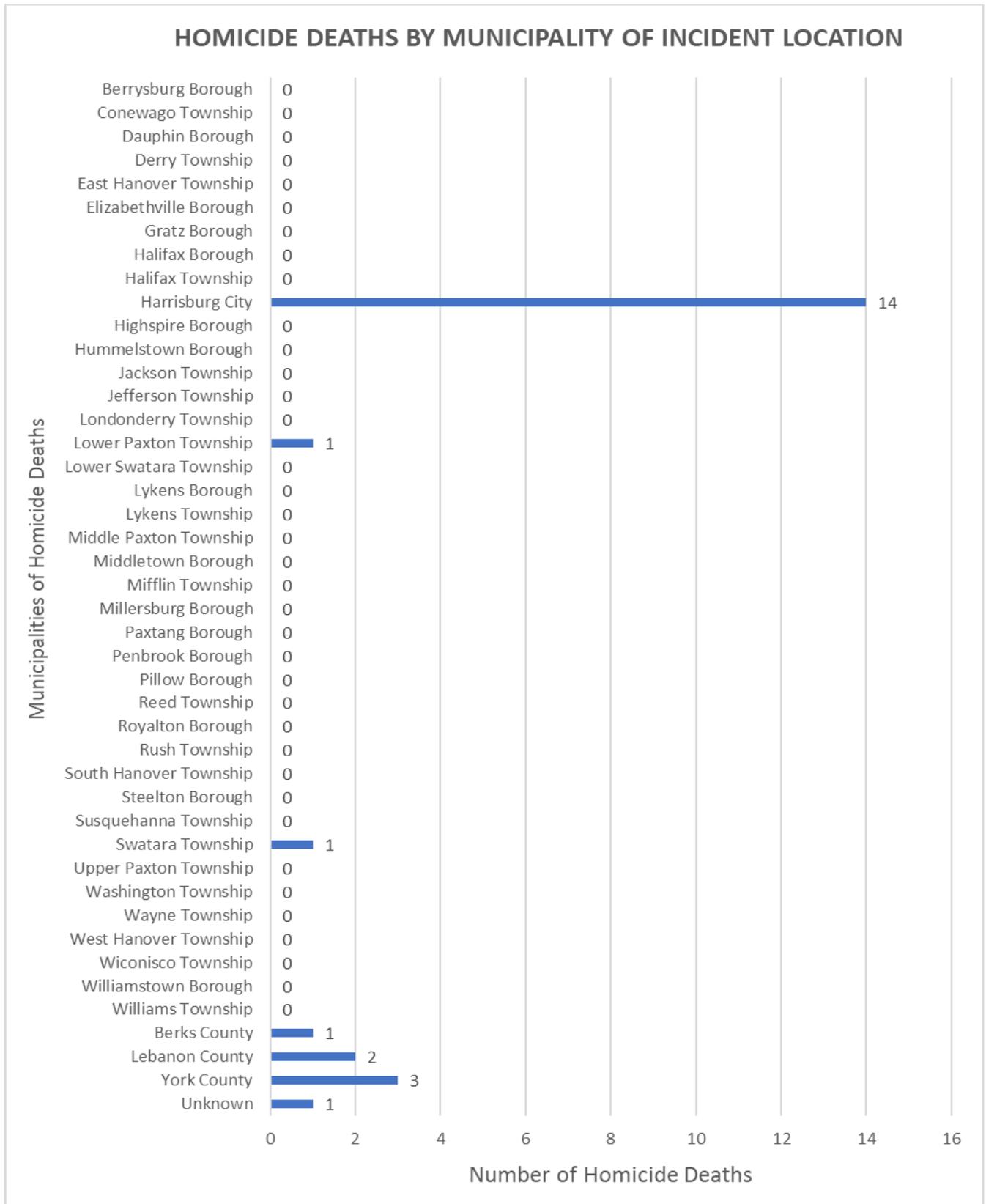
Homicide is a death caused by a volitional act committed by another person to cause fear, harm, or death. These cases are quite possibly the most sensationalized investigations and gain the most media attention. During the 2023 year, there were 23 homicides.





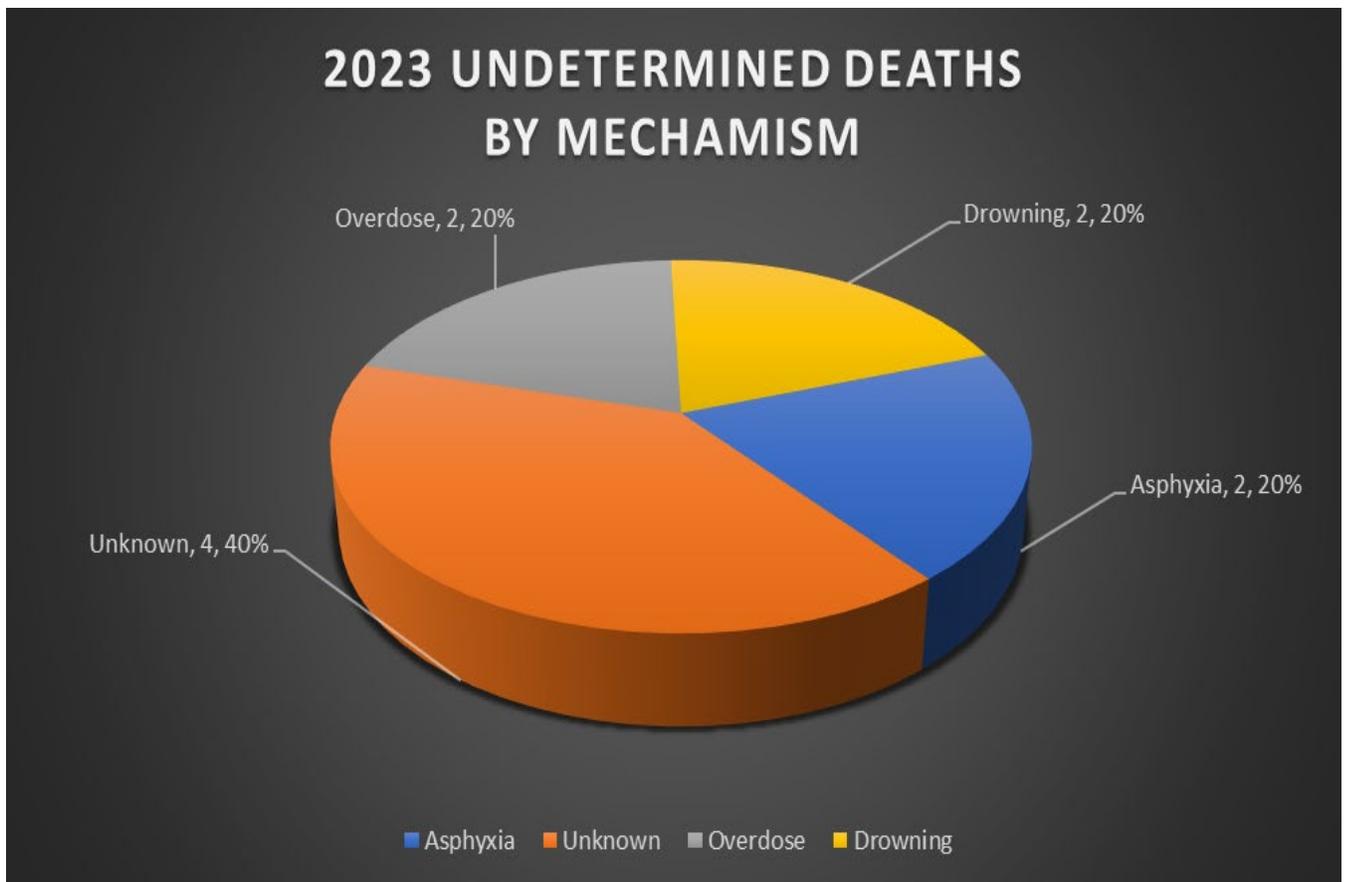


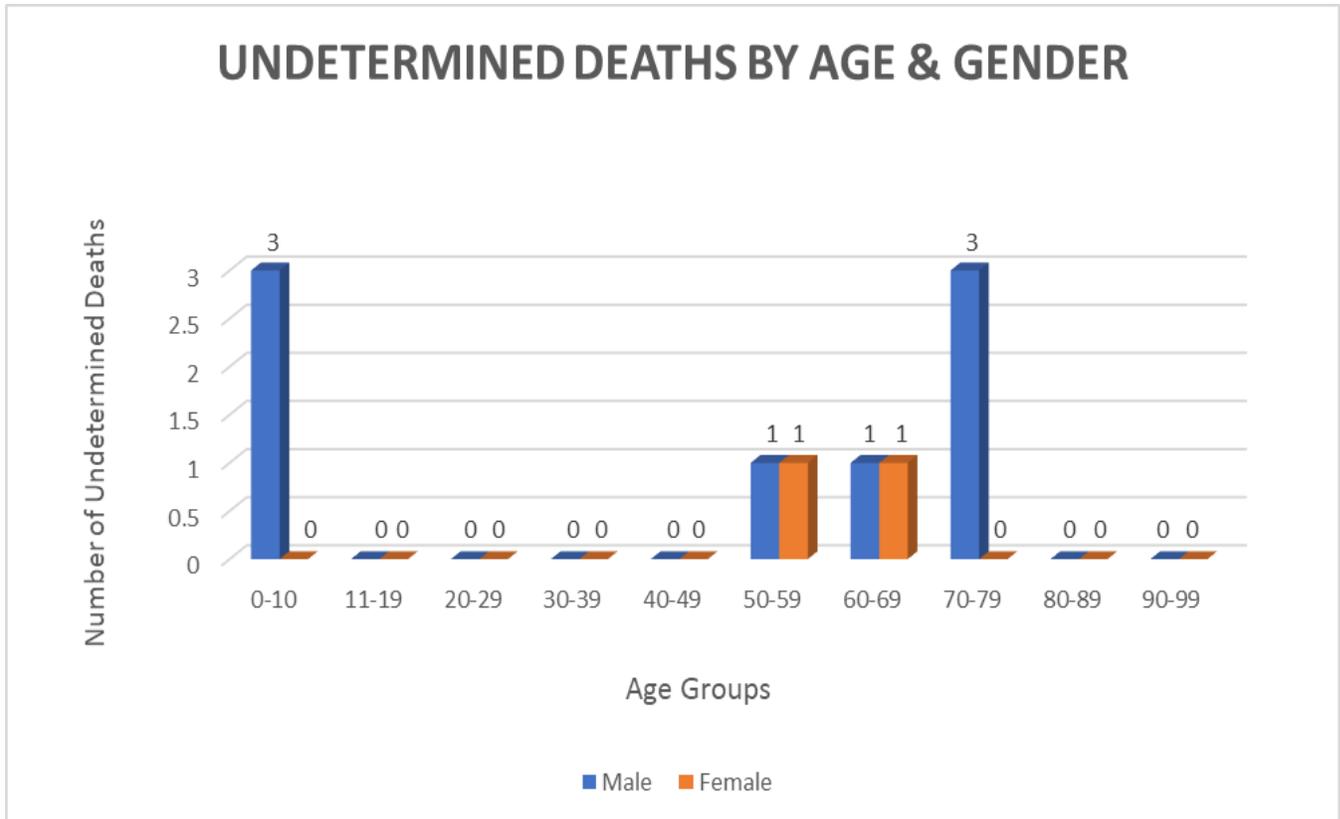
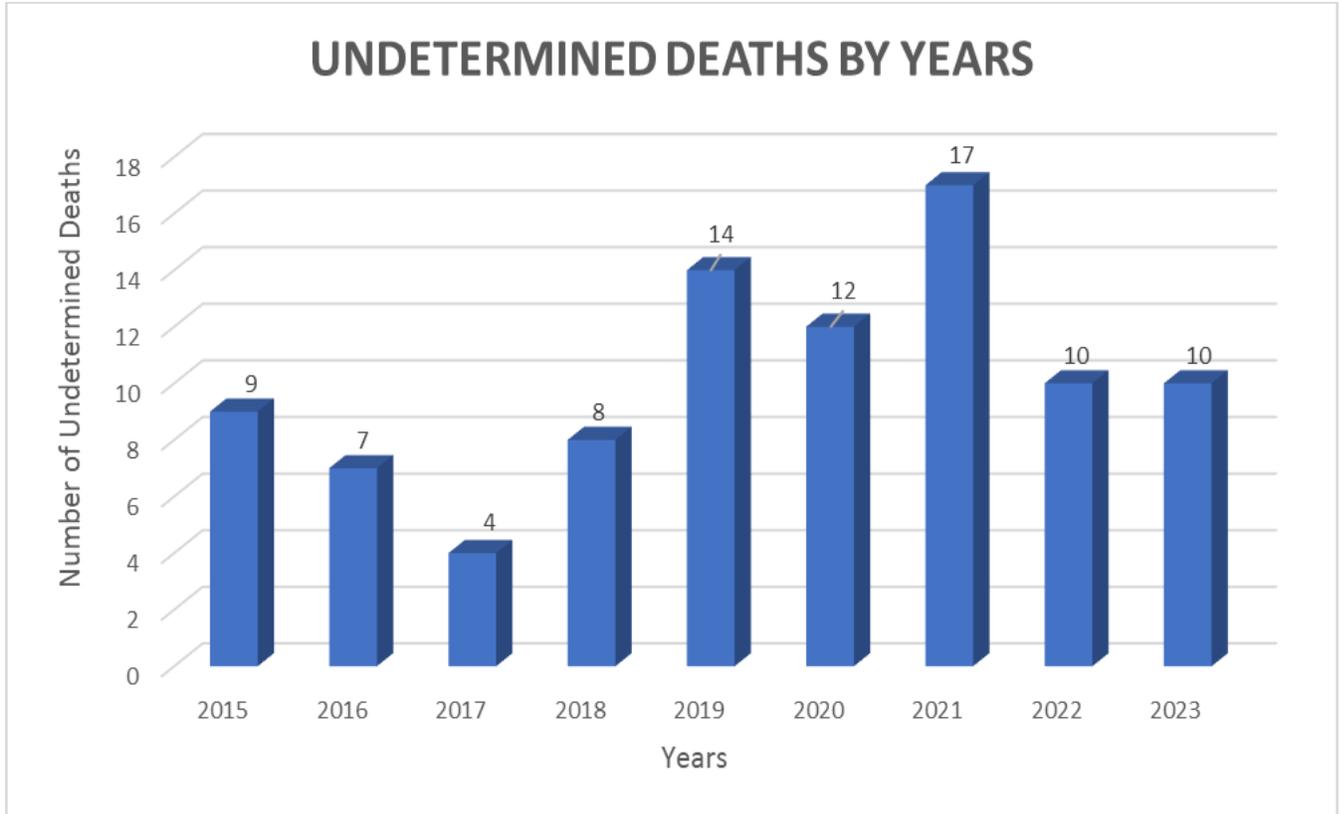




2023 UNDETERMINED INVESTIGATIONS

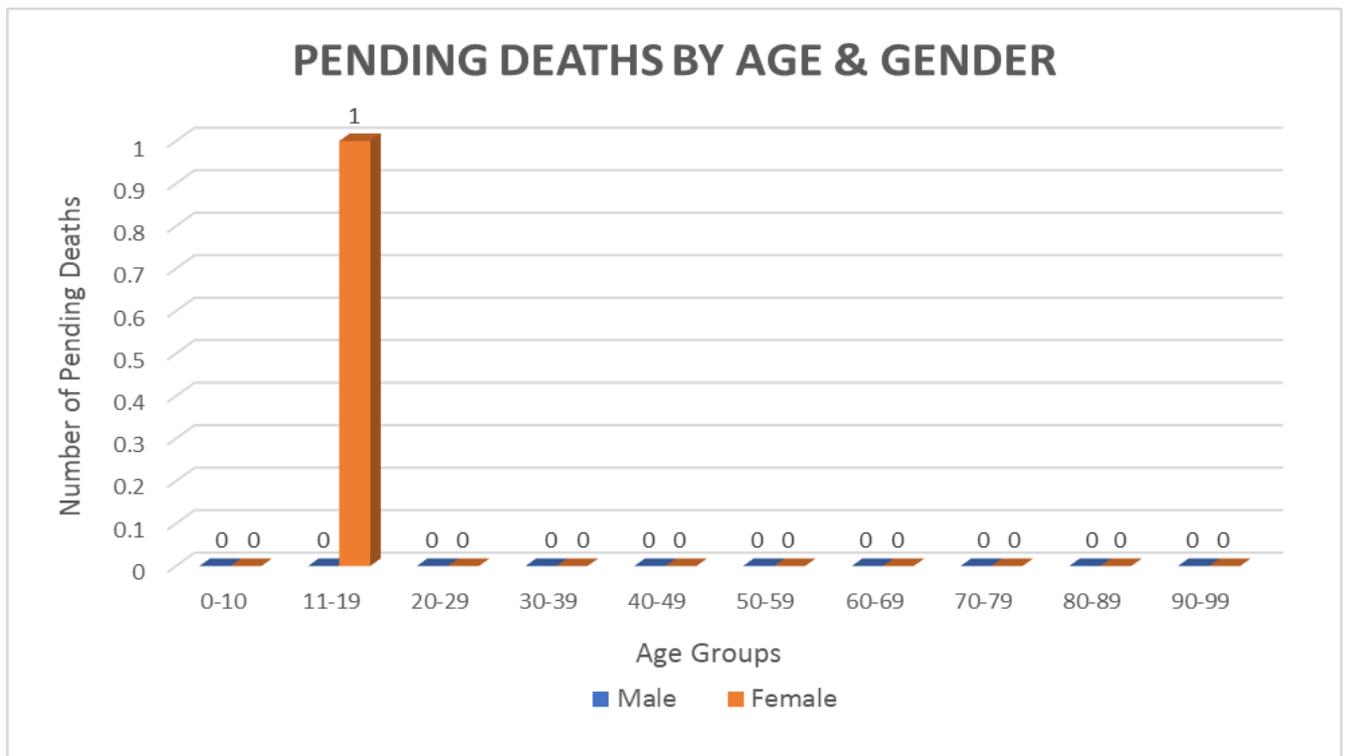
All possible efforts are made to determine both a Manner and Cause of death for all deaths investigated by the Coroner's Office. In a very small percentage of the total cases, the Manner of Death was unable to be classified even with a complete autopsy, scene investigation, and toxicology testing.



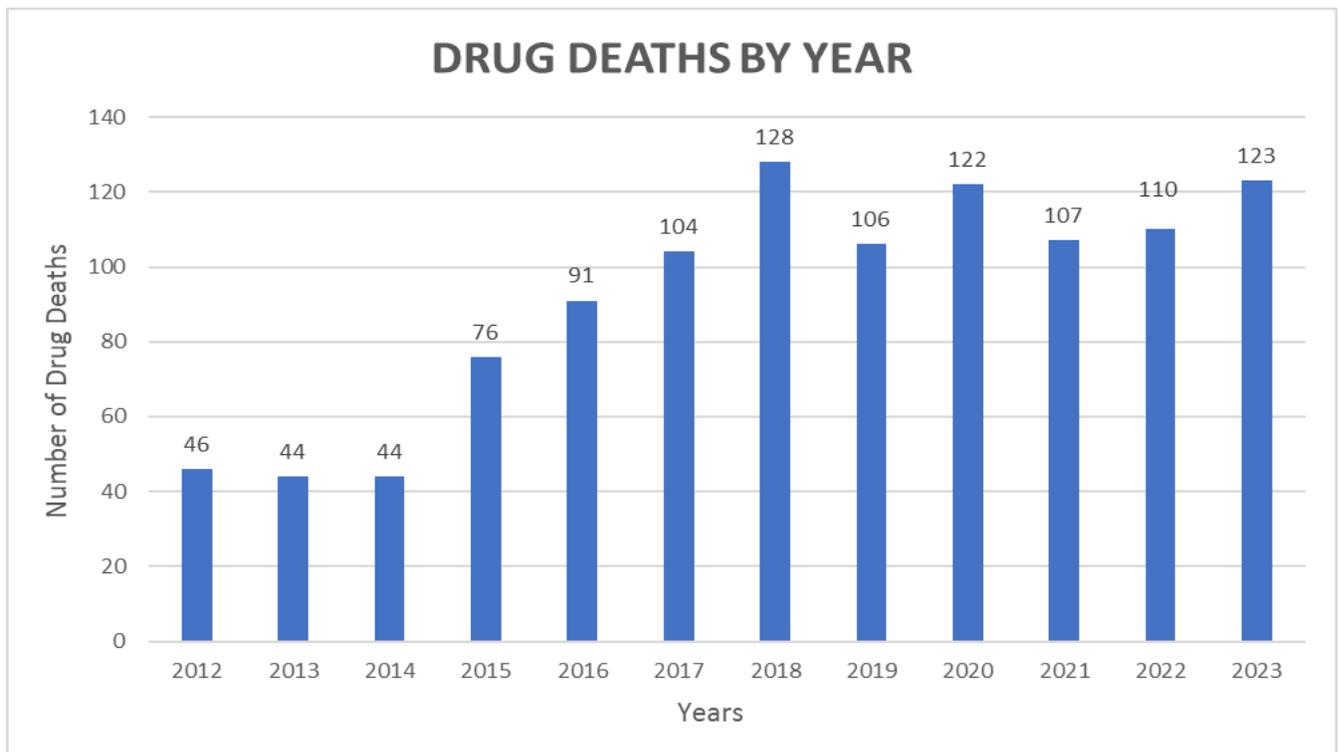
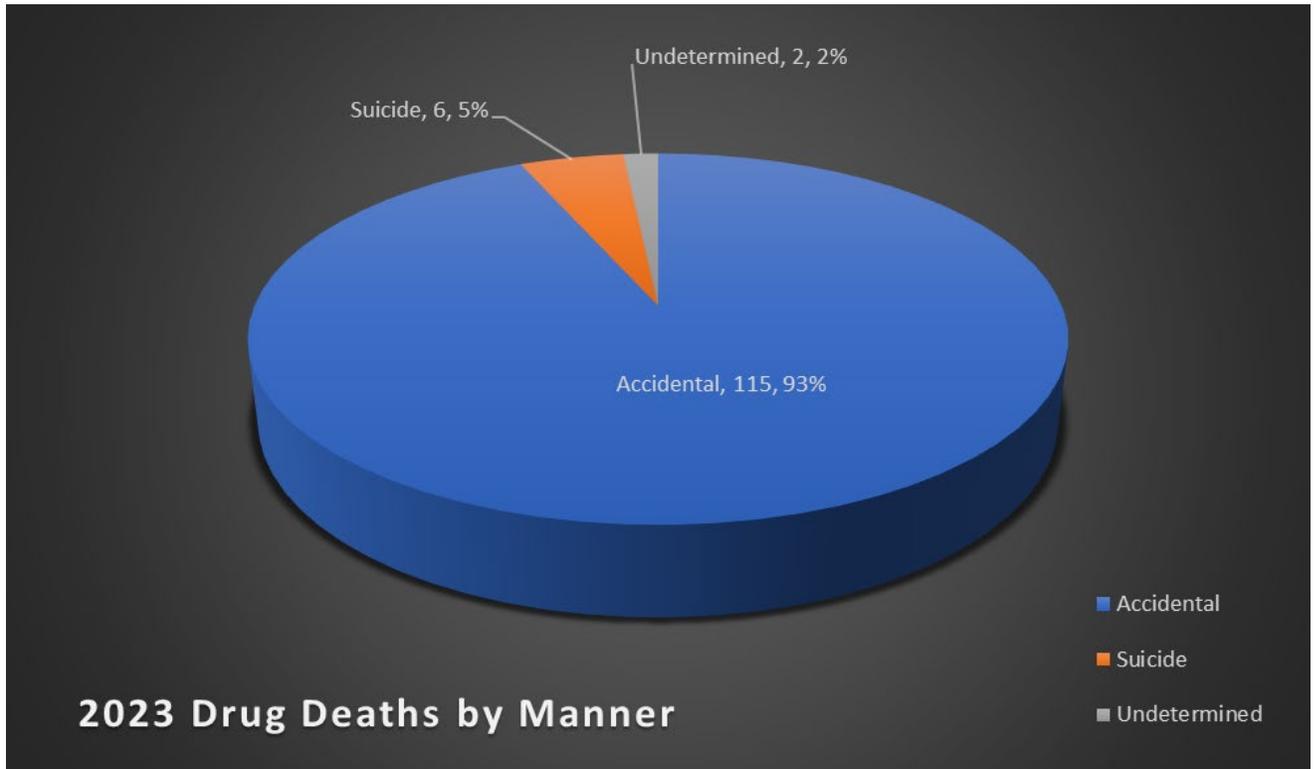


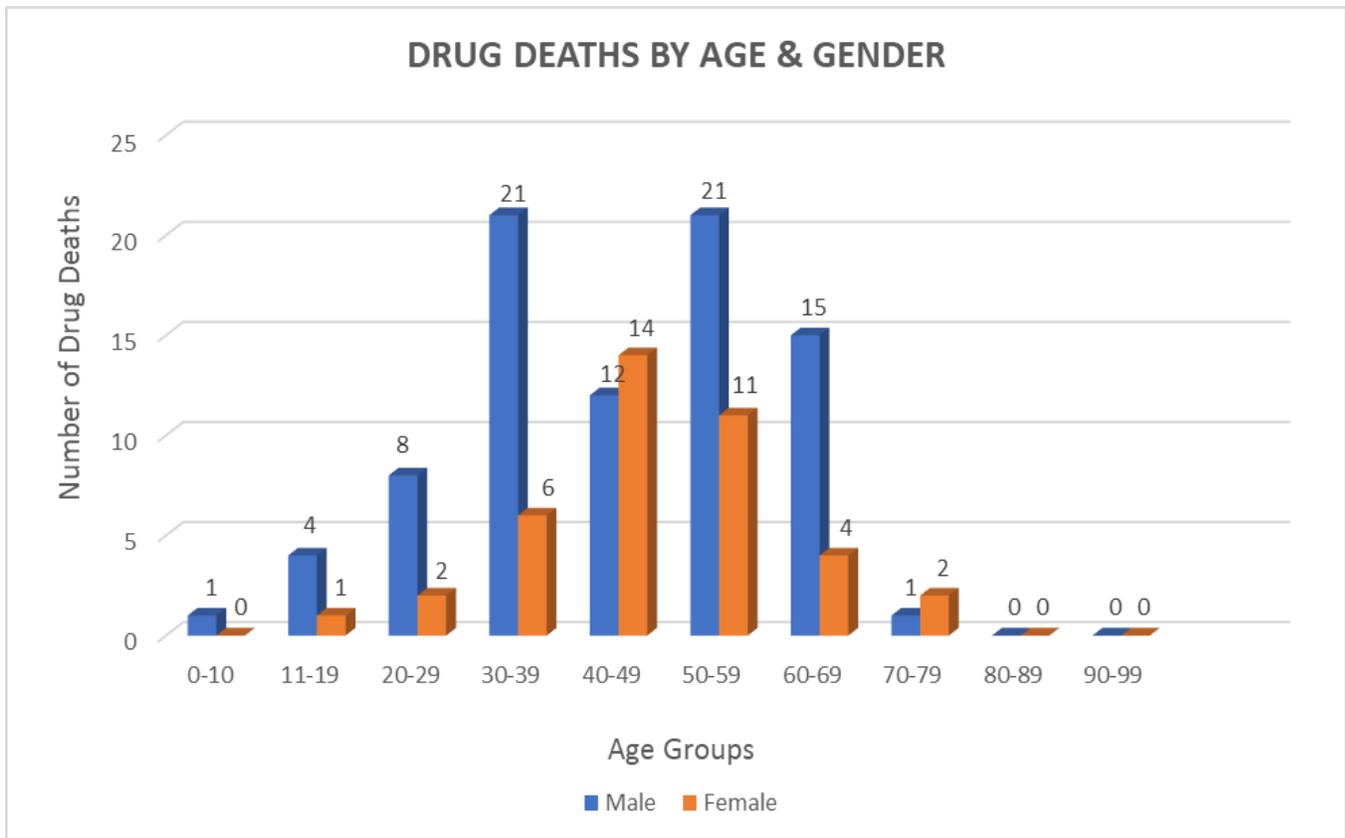
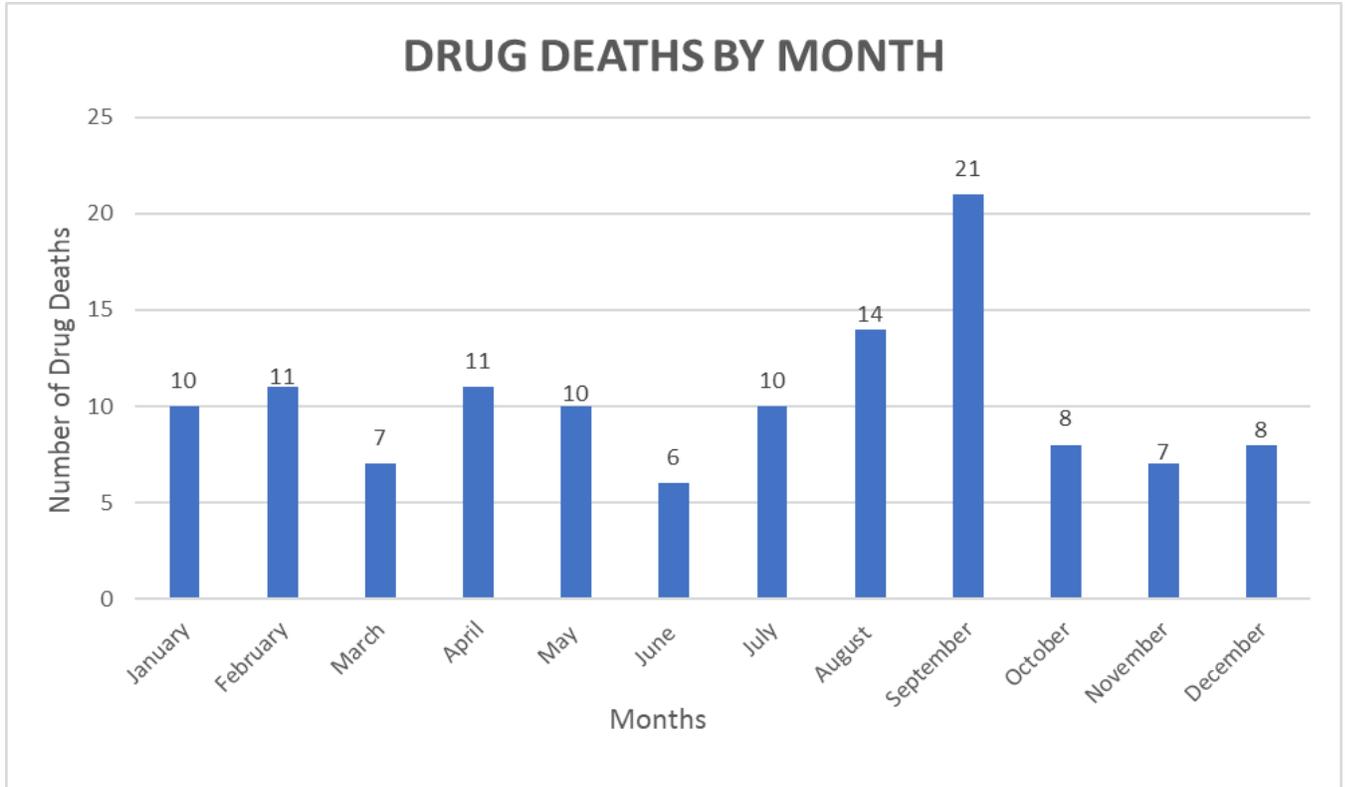
2023 PENDING INVESTIGATIONS

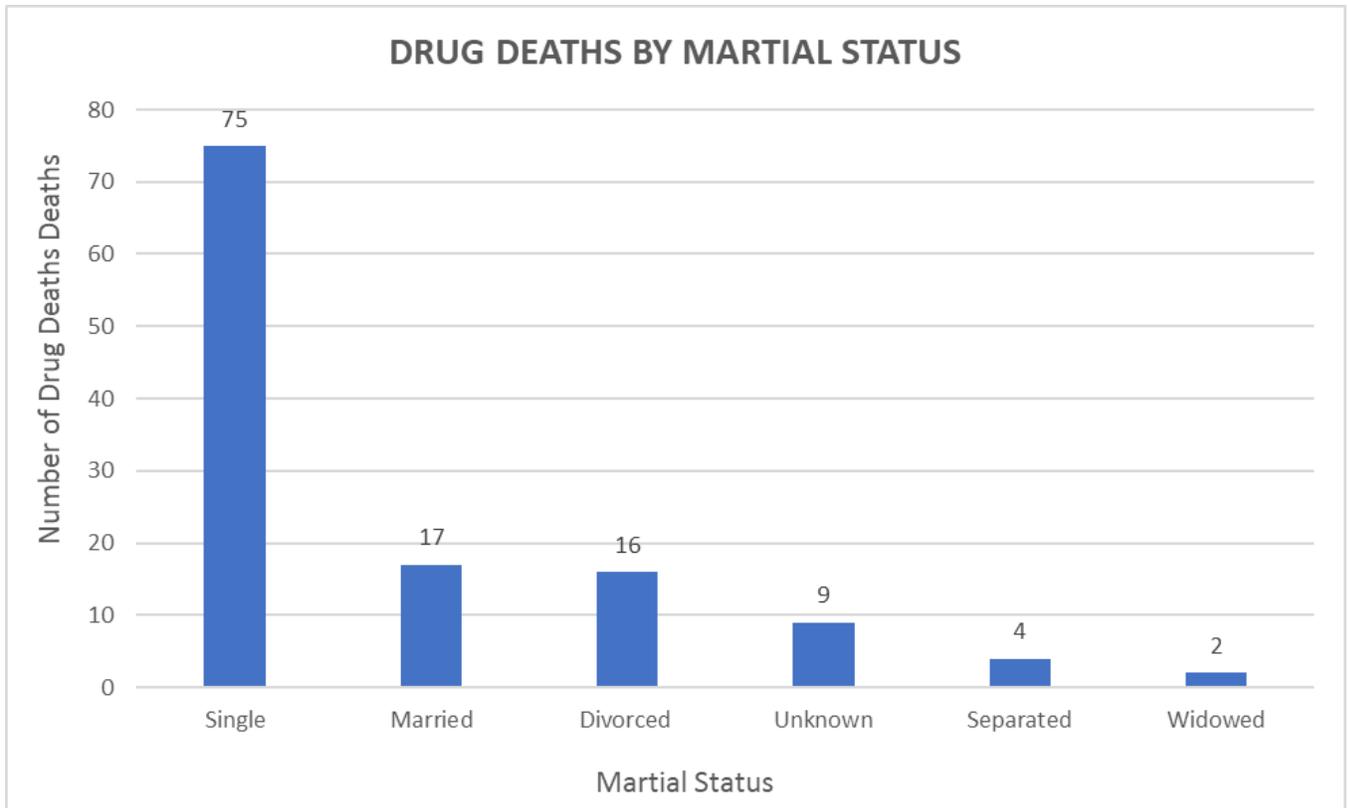
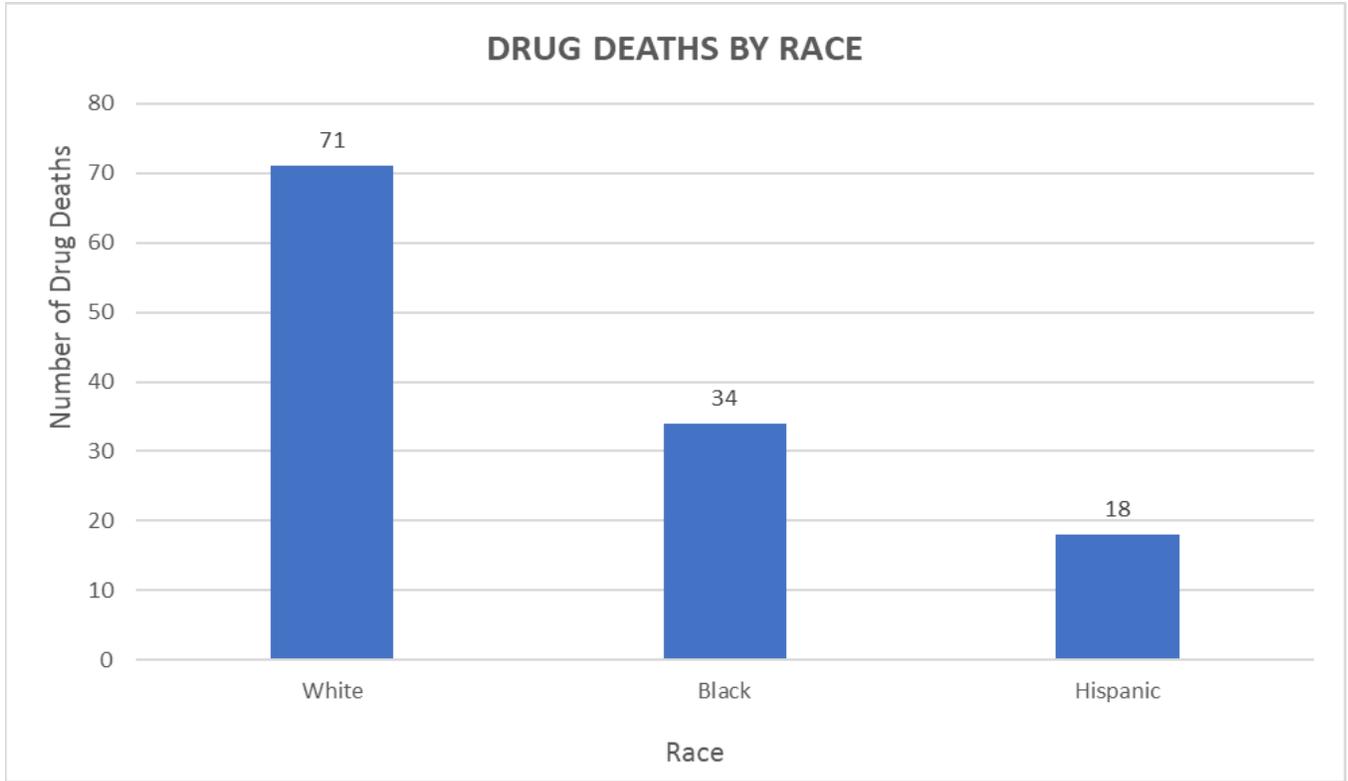
A death is listed as pending when the investigation is still ongoing. The ongoing investigation can include toxicology, histology, interviews, and other testing. Once the investigation is concluded a cause and manner of death will be determined.

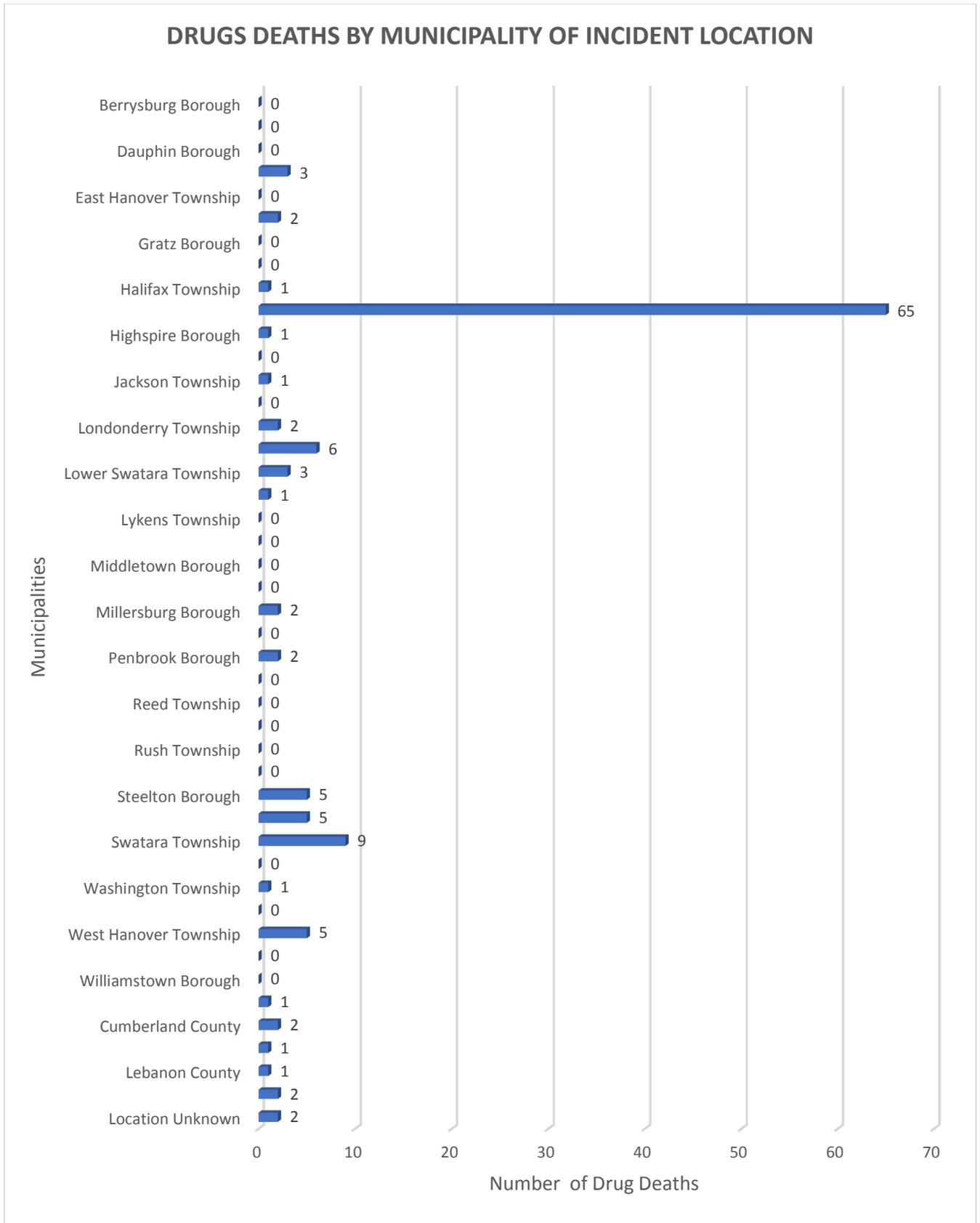


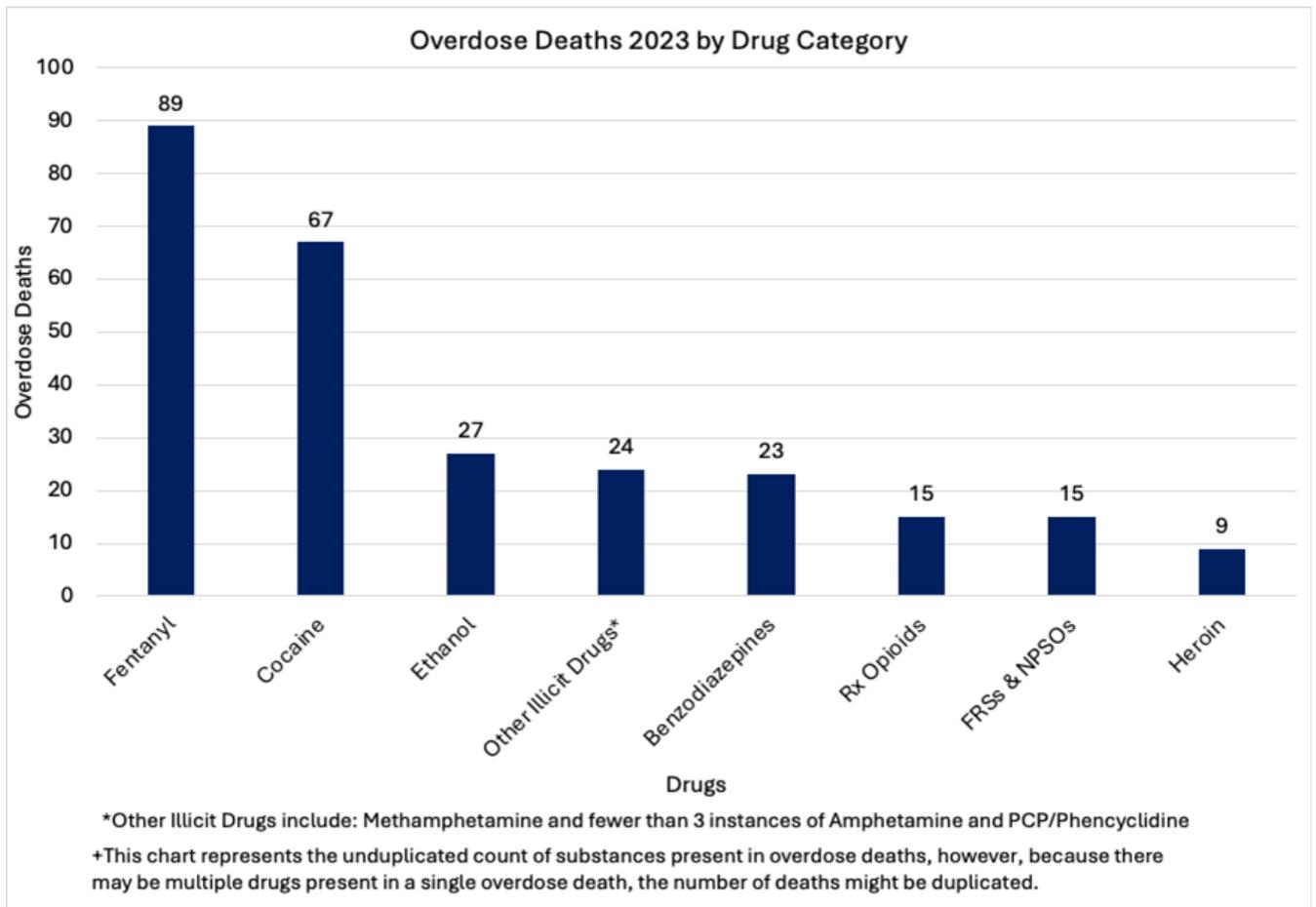
2023 DRUG DEATH – DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS





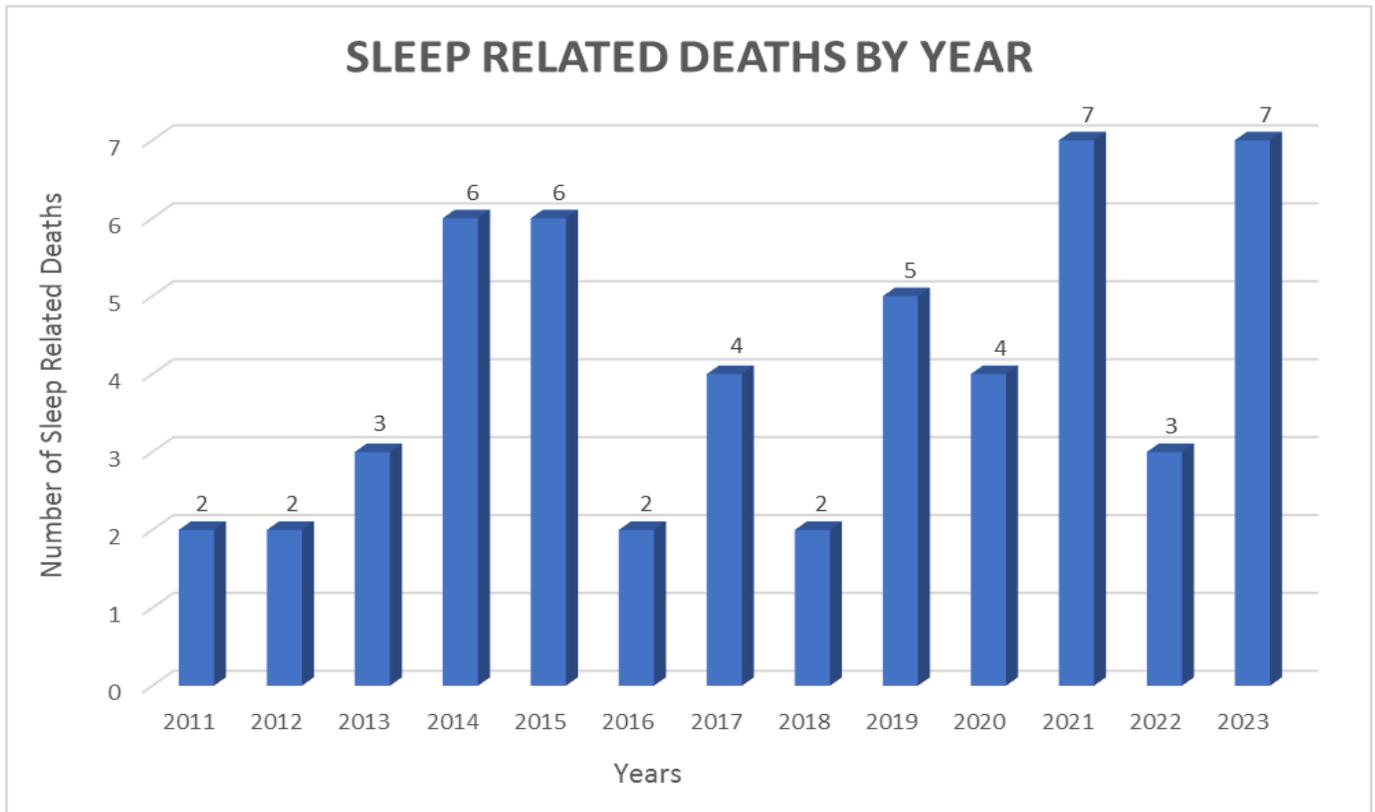






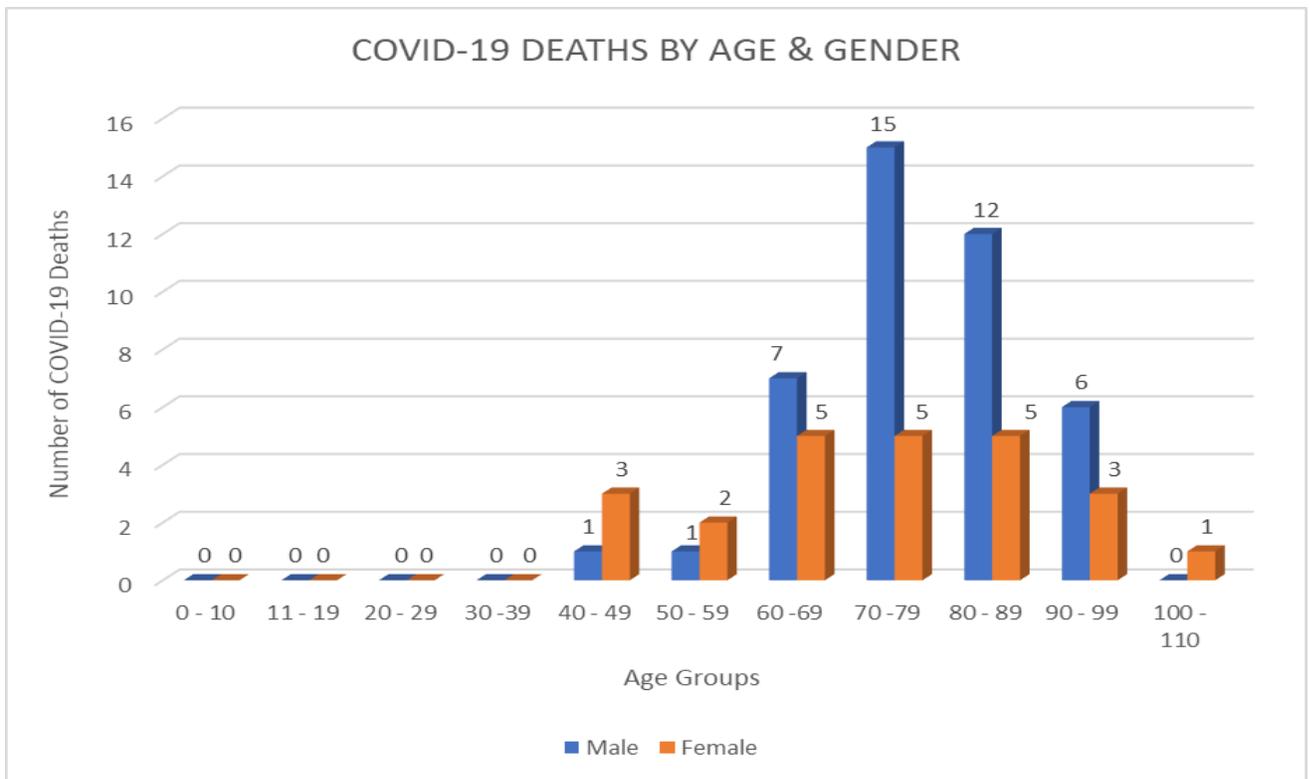
SLEEP RELATED DEATHS

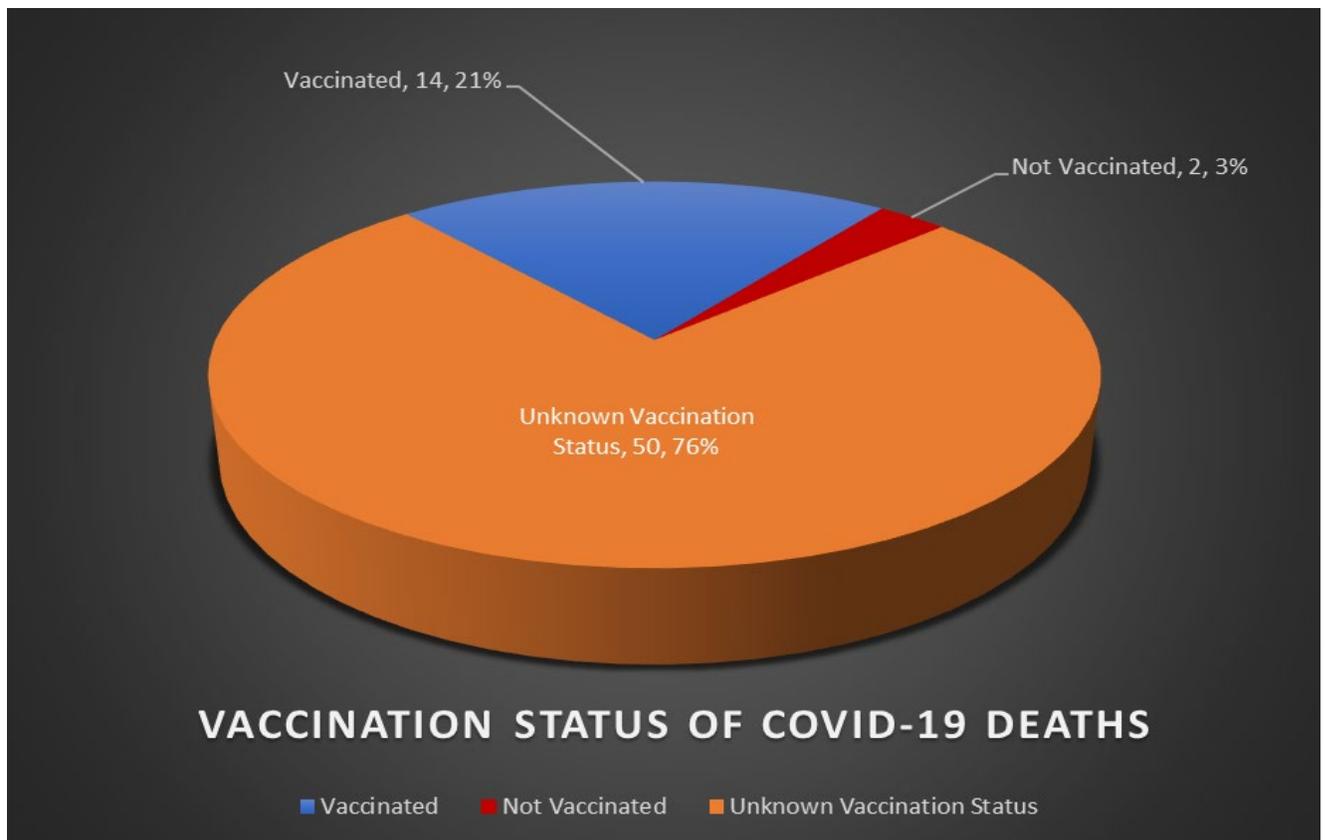
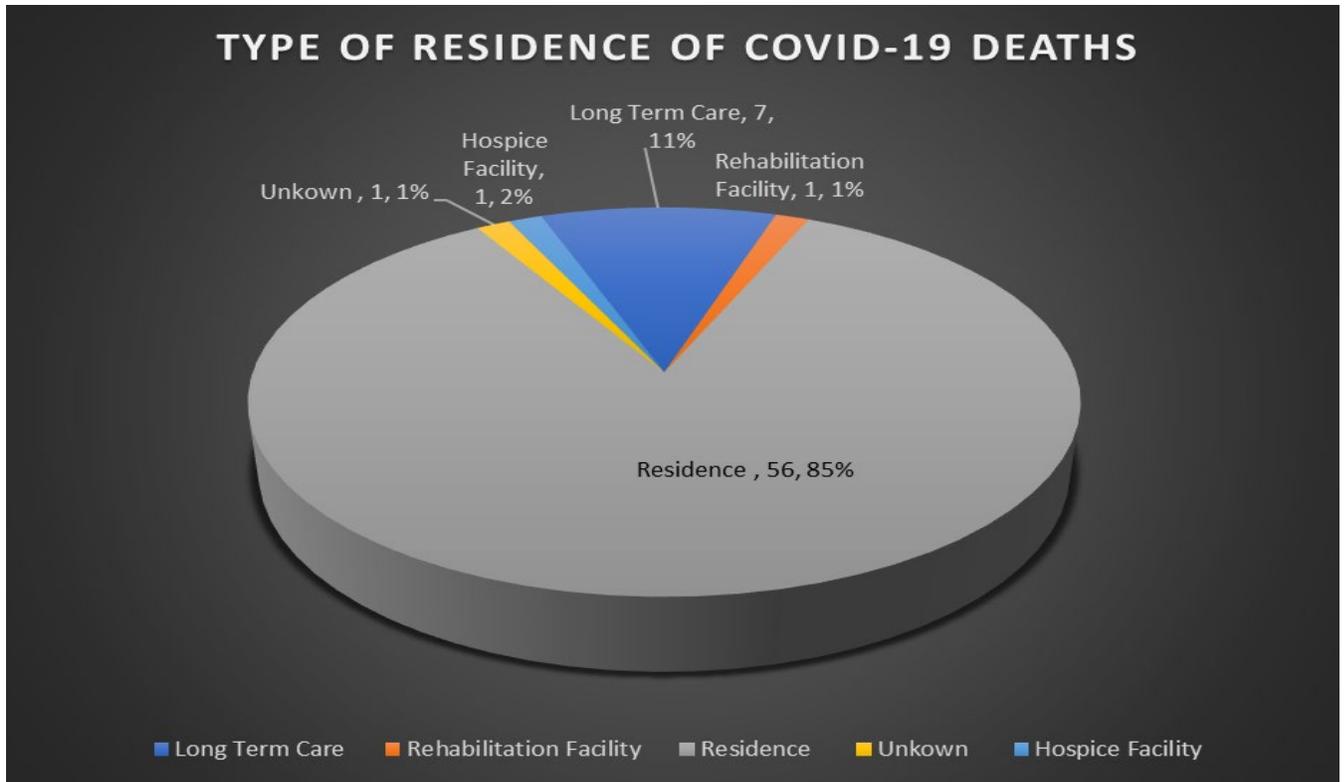
Sleep related deaths are deaths that occur in infants that are due to co-sleeping or an unsafe sleep surface/environment. A safe sleep surface/environment for an infant is: alone and in a crib, with the crib free of items, and with the infant placed on its back. Any other sleeping environment is considered unsafe and could result in the death of the infant. Due to the occurrence of sleep related deaths in Dauphin County, a subcommittee of the Child Death Review Team was formed to focus on prevention of this type of death. The Coroner's Office in conjunction with multiple other agencies launched the ABC of Safe Sleep campaign. This campaign includes educational stands at multiple community events, the making of a PSA that will be displayed in multiple agencies' offices, and further ways to begin to educate the public on what a safe sleep environment is for an infant. The focus of this committee is to prevent deaths of infants that are associated with an unsafe sleep environment.

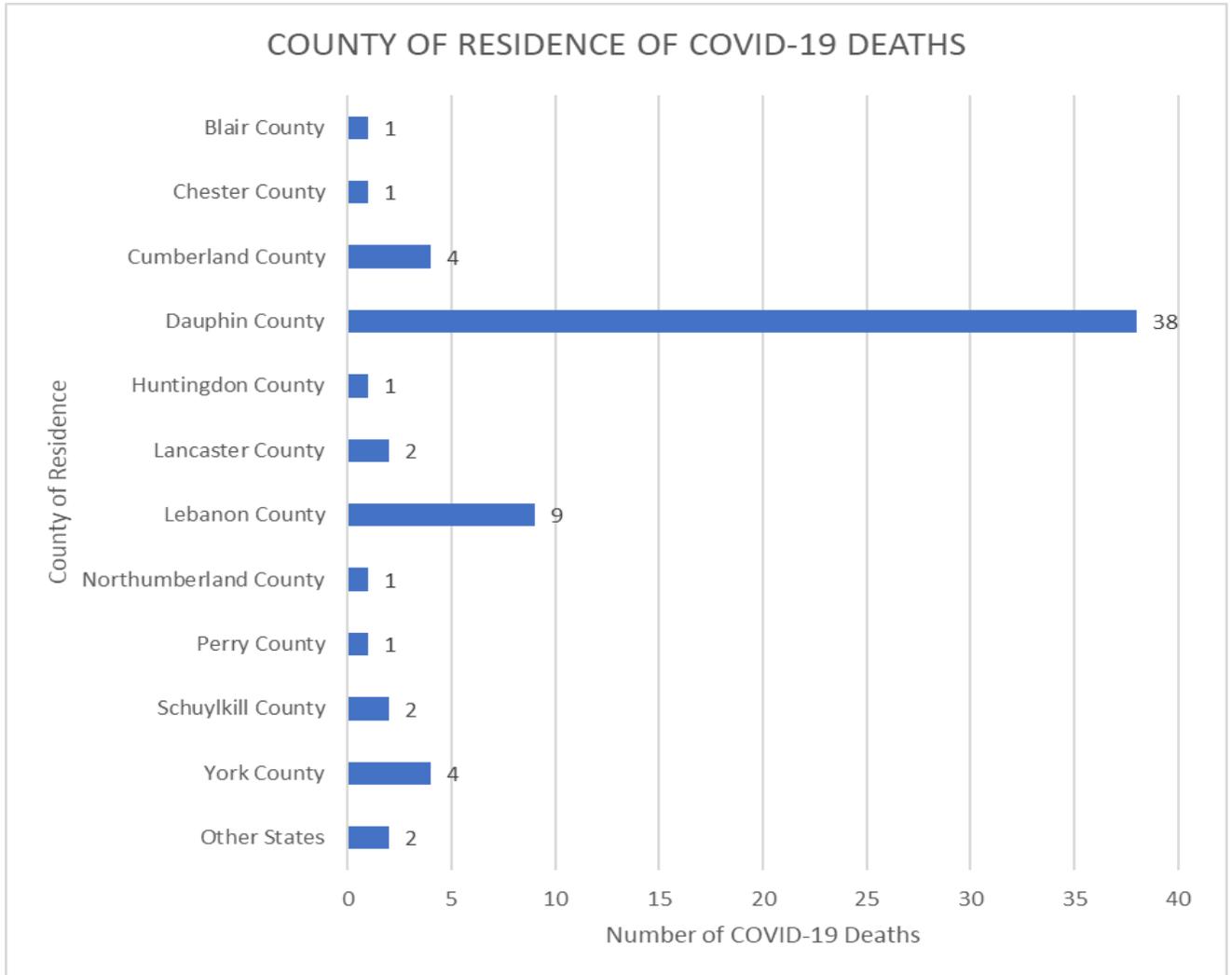


COVID-19 PANDEMIC DEATHS

Since the inception of the COVID-19 Pandemic in March of 2020 many things including our investigations and data collection have changed. When the pandemic started our office contacted all of the nursing homes, assisted living, human service housing, hospitals, and jail in Dauphin County to inform them if someone was pronounced deceased and the cause of death was due to COVID-19 our office needed to be informed. We have been collecting data on all deaths related to COVID-19 and reporting the deaths to the department of health. The numerical data on the number of deaths, average age, and if the decedent had past medical history has been shared with the PA. State Coroner's Association Board and County Entities. Through tracking of data patterns and facilities with high rates of COVID-19 exposure, Dauphin County first responders were able to be informed to better protect emergency responders. In 2023 there were 66 deaths that occurred in Dauphin County that were related to COVID-19. 7 deaths were nursing home residents.

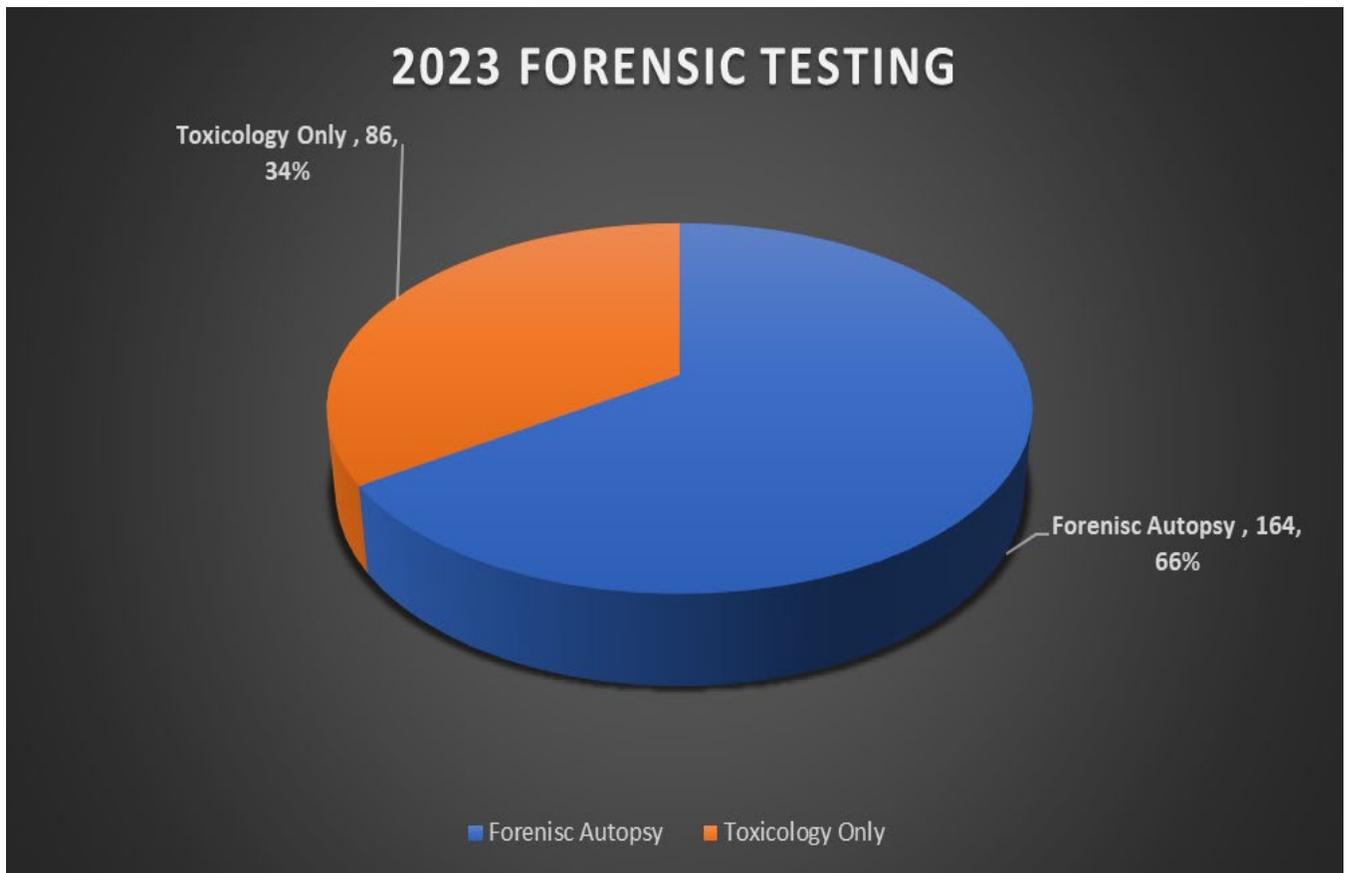






FORENSIC TESTING

There were 164 Forensic autopsies performed in 2023 year, some of which involved toxicology and other testing. 86 investigations only required toxicological testing, and no autopsy was performed.



INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The Internship Program is designed to ultimately benefit both the intern and the Coroner's Office. Students are afforded the opportunity to gain academic credit, while simultaneously receiving the practical work experience in the Medicolegal Death Investigation setting. Employers can not only benefit from the skills and assistance of the interns, but they can also enjoy the advantage of being able to evaluate possible future employees firsthand.

Internships are appropriate for advanced undergraduate or graduate students attending facilities that have a structured, in-house internship program, thus allowing the internship to be conducted under the joint supervision of an on-site supervisor and a school faculty member. Both parties agree on the internship objectives and assignments, while jointly evaluating the intern's performance during and after their experience.

The student eligibility and expectations for internship was revamped in 2018. An application, requirements, and internship policy agreement were developed and implemented. The individual must be a student who is enrolled at an undergraduate or graduate facility with an official internship program, and where the student will receive academic credit for time spent under supervision of their advisor at the Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensic Center.

Undergraduate students must be of at least junior status and shall have a GPA of 3.0 or greater. Graduate students are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. The intern must submit weekly journals of their internship to their site supervisor.

It is important to understand that an accepted intern will, in time, be working directly with a designated supervising Deputy on investigations. The same expectations for the intern will be demanded as with all members of the Dauphin County Coroner's Office & Forensics Center, which are to present themselves in a respectable, professional, and courteous manner.

In 2023 the Dauphin County Coroner's Office had 4 interns associated with 3 different universities that included: Pennsylvania State University, Waynesburg University, and West Virginia University.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES FOR 2024

- Maintain the standards of independent and scientific investigation into the causes and manners of death.
- Redesign the Dauphin County Forensic Center to comply to national standards. After completion of the design and analysis of cost we will seek various methods of funding through grant applications.
- Continue interactions with the medical community, first responders, police, and the public as to the process of medical/legal death investigation.
- Maintain educational programs for the above agencies in medical/legal investigation.
- Maintain data for research in understanding the direction of public health.