

# **Kittitas County**

## **Coroner**

### **2015 Annual Report**



**Member of the Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners**

**Member of International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners**

Revised: October 22, 2019

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# **Message to the Board of Commissioners and Citizens of Kittitas County**

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The Kittitas County Coroner's Office investigates sudden, violent, unexpected, and suspicious deaths that occur in Kittitas County. The Office of the Coroner certifies death after investigation and postmortem examination and issues the death certificate as required by law. Complete findings of the death investigation are distributed to families and law enforcement agencies as appropriate.

The main duties of the Office of the Coroner are to determine the cause and manner of death, and certify deaths that are reported to the coroner. The cause of death is the disease process or injury that resulted in death. There are thousands of diseases and injuries that may result in death. The manner of death is a classification in which a determination is made regarding whether the death resulted from natural causes, homicide, suicide, or an accident. On occasion, the manner of death is classified as indeterminate.

Information collected during the investigation helps clarify the circumstances, such as the sequence of events prior to death. Evidence collected during an investigation and/or postmortem examination may help lead to the arrest or successful conviction of a suspect in a homicide case. Because deaths occur around the clock, Coroner staff members are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

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

Our investigators also extend their duties to the living by answering questions and addressing concerns regarding deaths within the county. Coroner investigators frequently make personal contact with family members of a deceased and assist them by providing appropriate answers regarding the circumstances of the death. Coroner investigators are supplied with a pamphlet for distribution to families. The information provides answers to common questions and facts about how to proceed when their loved one passes.

In 2018 the Medicolegal Death Investigation Log or, MDI Log was launched and has been used for digitizing 2015 Kittitas County Coroner's reports. MDI Log is a comprehensive investigative report/database system that enables the Coroner to review death scene investigation information from a secure internet site any time of the day. MDI Log enables coroner investigators to submit death scene investigation reports via the internet in an efficient manner. MDI Log has evolved to become a valuable tool for our office and it is now available to Coroner offices across the country.

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

# **Kittitas County Coroner's Office**

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Kittitas County Coroner's Office

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## **2015 Staff and Pathologists**

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Forensic Pathologist

**Norman Thiersch, MD**

Forensic Pathologist

**Stanley Adams, MD**

Forensic Pathologist

## **Types of Deaths Reportable to the Coroner**

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

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

- **Violent death** (e.g., strangulation, gunshot, stabbing, poisoning, etc.)
- **Accidental deaths** (e.g., falls, drowning, motor vehicle collisions, burns, overdose, etc.)
- **Death of a prisoner** (e.g., deaths in any county or city jail while imprisoned or in custody).
- **Suspicious Circumstances** (e.g., Unidentified Bodies or events surrounding death)
- **Unexpected infant deaths**
- **Deaths resulting from a violent or neglectful crime**

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

# Kittitas County Coroner's Office Cases

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Population [2] (Estimated for 2015)	42,670
<b>Cases Reported to Medical Examiner</b>	212
A. Number of deaths certified after postmortem examination	36
1. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with Complete Autopsy	36
2. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with Limited Examination	0
3. Number of Medical Examiner Cases with Toxicology Only Test	1
B. Number of deaths certified without postmortem examination	60
C. Number of deaths not certified by Medical Examiner's Office after investigation (i.e. Hospice deaths)	115

## Definitions

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

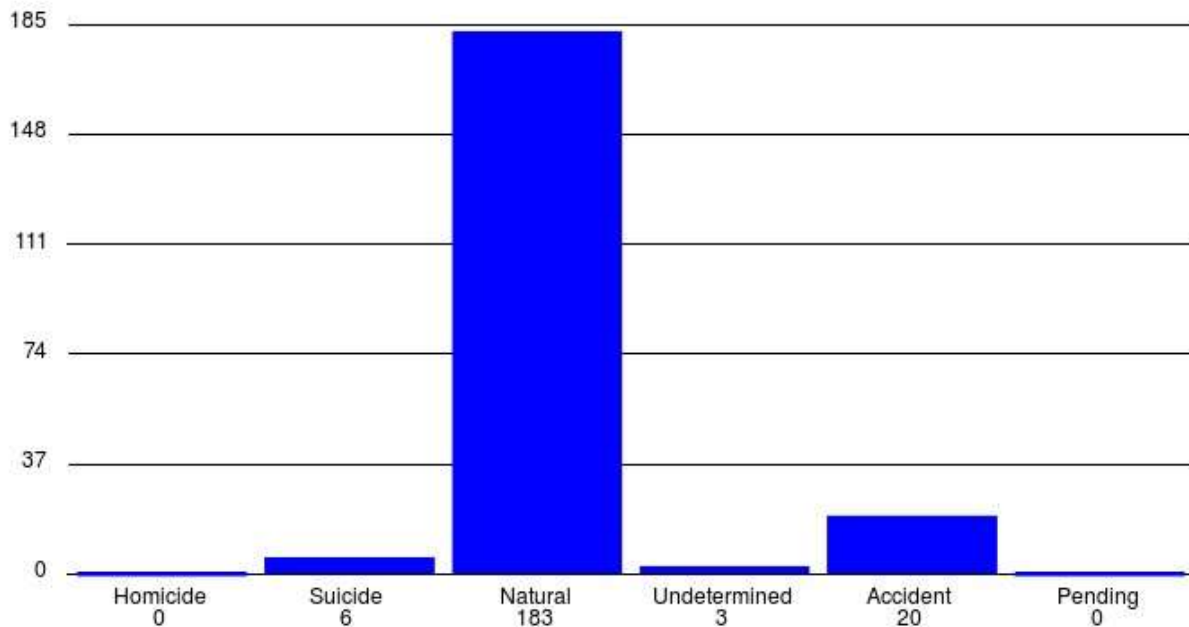
**Limited Examination:** An examination which is focused on a specific organ or region of the body, for example, the heart. The limited examination also includes an external examination. In 2015 a limited examination was completed for skeletonized human remains which had been found.

**Toxicology Only Test:** May be done without a full autopsy to help with the Coroner's investigation. Forensic or Post Mortem Toxicology test results are used to determine if and what kind of drugs were in a person's system. They also measure the amount of drugs and look to see if the concentration is of a lethal dosage.

[2] <https://www.co.kittitas.wa.us/about/population.aspx>

# Manner of Death by Postmortem Examination

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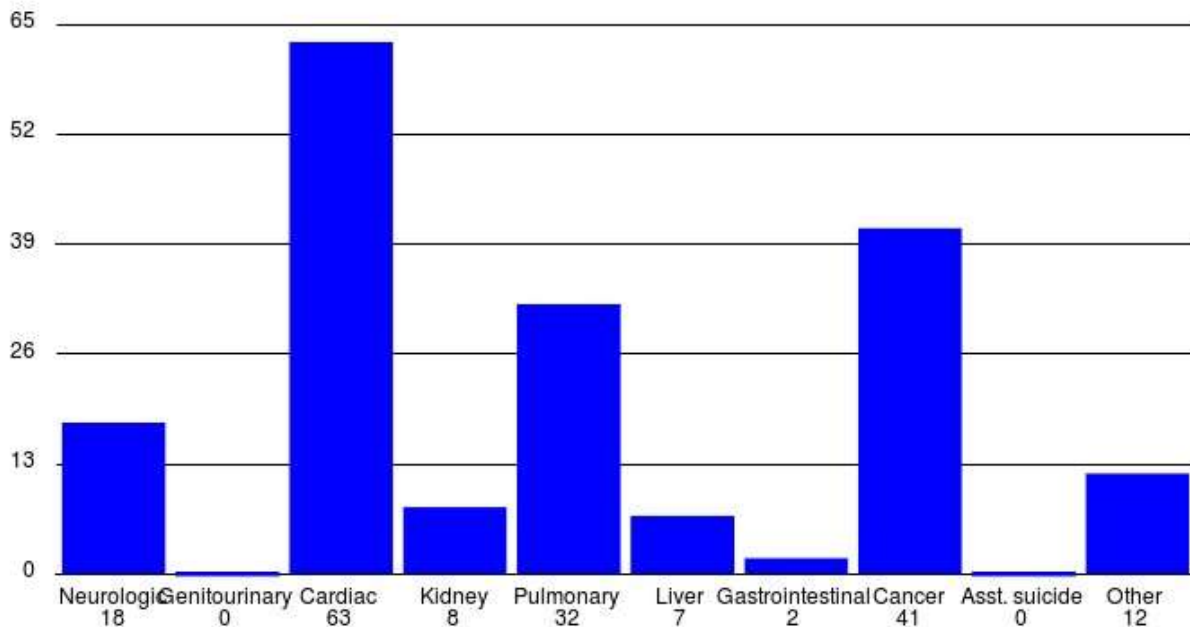


**Manner of Death** is the way to categorize death as required by the Washington State Department of Health. The classifications are natural, accident, suicide, homicide, undetermined, and pending. Only coroners and coroners may use all of the manners of death. Other certifiers must use natural or refer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

- **Natural Death:** Those deaths caused solely by disease or natural process.
- **Unnatural Deaths:** Those deaths resulting from an external cause.
  - **Accidental:** For death certification purposes an unnatural death resulting from an inadvertent chance happening.
  - **Homicide:** Defined as the action of one person directly causing the death of another.
  - **Suicide:** A death from self-inflicted injury with evidence of the intent to die.
- **Pending Deaths:** Deaths listed temporarily on a death certificate for cause and/or manner when additional investigation, information and testing are required. These classifications are generally amended as soon as additional information becomes available.
- **Undetermined Deaths:** Deaths which a manner of death cannot be found after investigation, examination and testing. This classification is used in a small number of cases each year.

# Deaths by Natural Causes

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## Natural Deaths (183 total)

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:

- **(18) 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.
- **(0) Genitourinary** deaths are those occurring from disorders. Genitourinary organs are the bladder, kidney (renal), vagina, ovaries, penis or testicle. Genitourinary disorders are illnesses or conditions which occur when the urinary and genital organs are not functioning properly. Genitourinary disorders

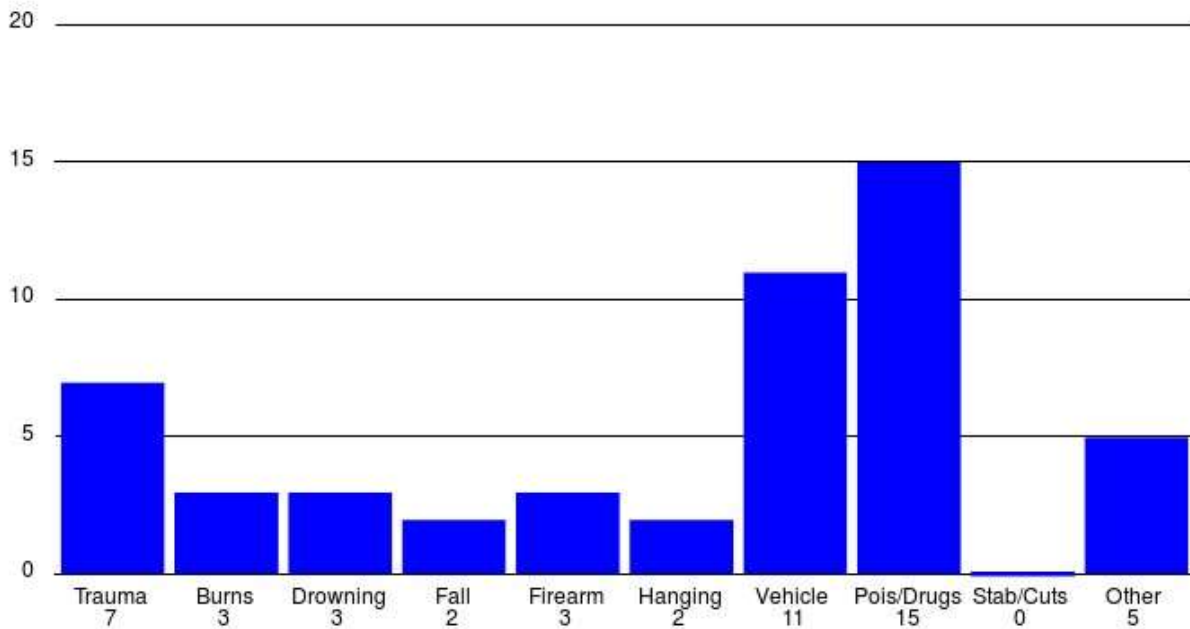


may also occur in the uterus, ureter, bladder, urethra and the two sphincter muscles.

- **(63) 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.
- **(8) Kidney** deaths include infection, transport disorders such as Bartter's or Liddle's syndrome, trauma, or tumors of the kidney(s).
- **(32) Pulmonary** death pertains to the lungs. Respiratory failure such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder (COPD), emphysema,
- **(7) 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.
- **(2) Gastrointestinal** death may occur from an inflammation of the stomach and intestine which originates from different types of bacteria.
- **(41) 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.
- **(12) Other** deaths are investigated and after a postmortem examination no obvious cause may be found. Using other as a cause of death is pretty uncommon but may be used when an autopsy does not reveal an apparent cause of death, there is no history of illness or heart disease, no toxins, drugs or injuries.

# Deaths by Unnatural Causes

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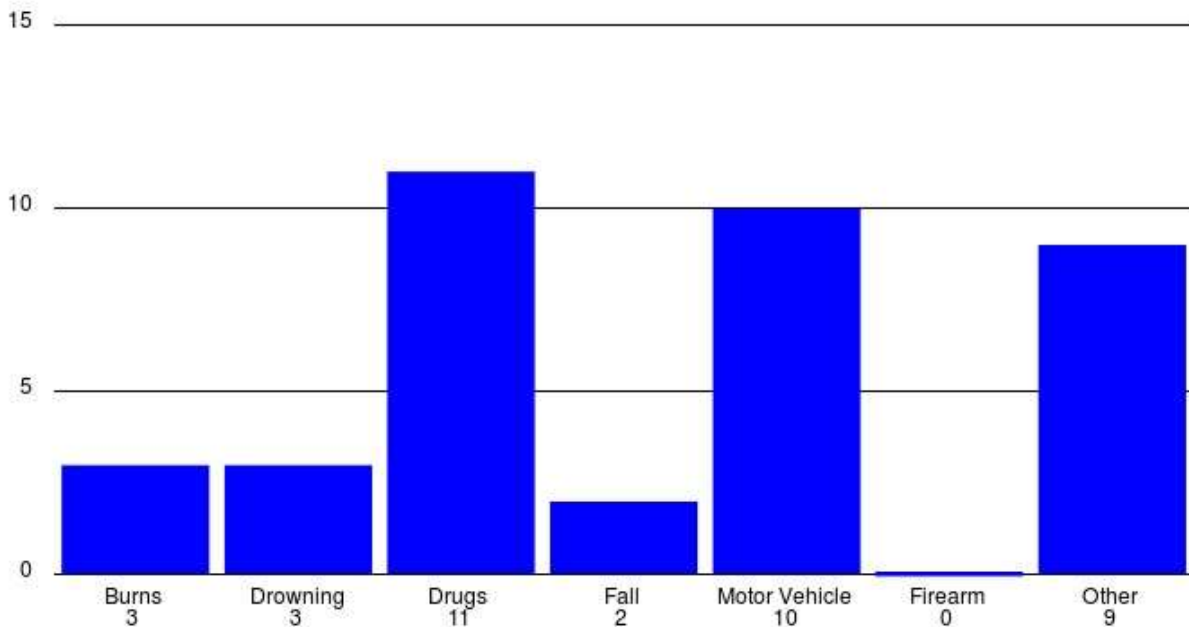
## Unnatural Deaths (29 total)

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

Some of the external mechanisms affecting unnatural death include injury, inhalation, ingestion or submersion. It is important to understand unnatural death may include multiple mechanisms such as a motor vehicle accident may also include alcohol.

# Accidental Deaths by Type

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## Accidental Deaths (20 total)

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.

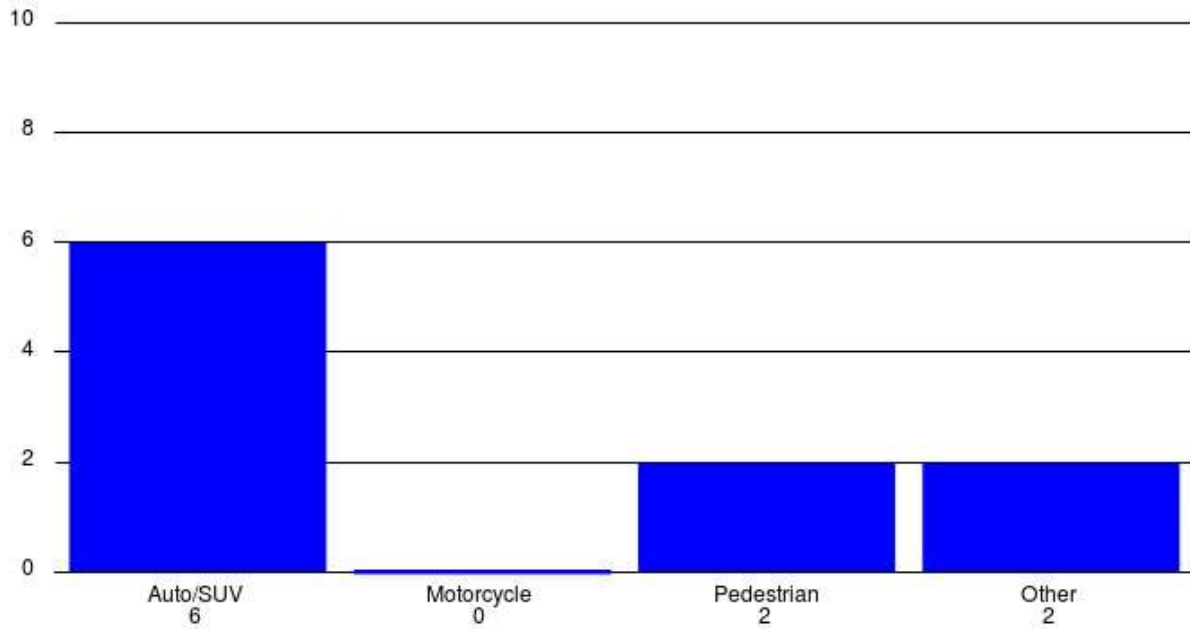
The graph above may reflect more than one contributing type or factor in an accidental death. For example, at least one motor vehicle caught fire after crashing.

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

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

# Accidental Deaths - Motor Vehicle Crashes

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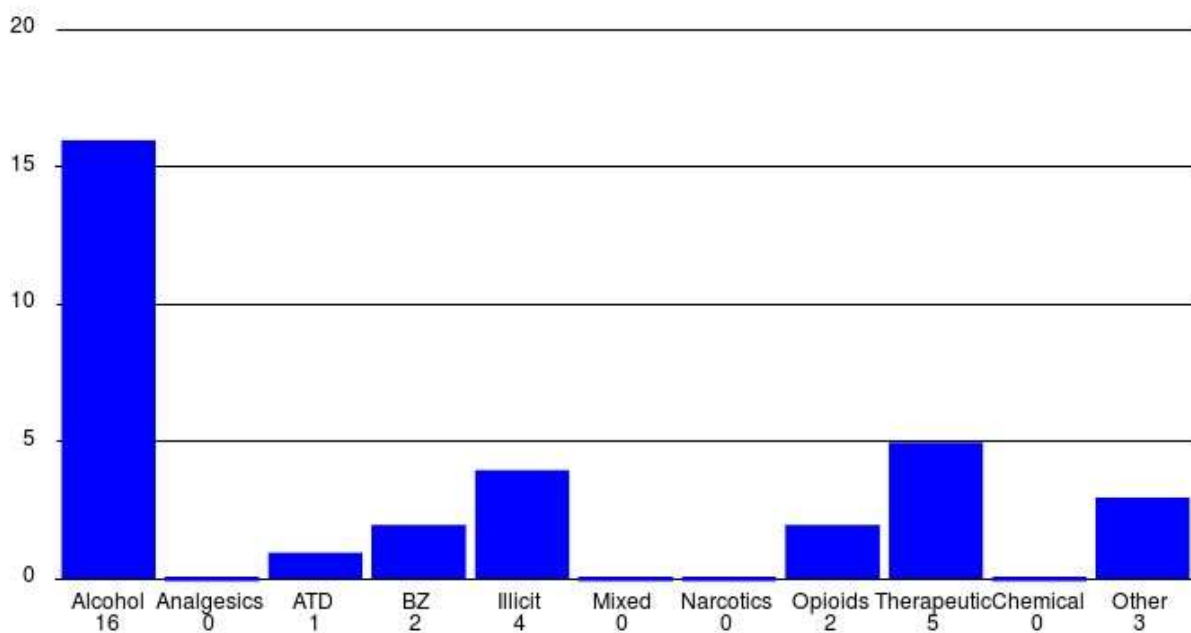


## Accidental Motor Vehicle Deaths (10 total reported in 2015)

DOD	Sex	COD/Circumstances
03/29/2015	Female	Driver
12/31/2015	Male	Snowmobile - Driver
05/17/2015	Male	Driver
12/02/2015	Male	Pedestrian
05/13/2015	Male	Pedestrian
12/19/2015	Male	Driver
07/09/2015	Male	Driver - ATV
08/16/2015	Male	Driver

DOD	Sex	COD/Circumstances
07/30/2015	Female	Driver
05/18/2015	Male	Driver

## Drugs Contributing to Cause of Death



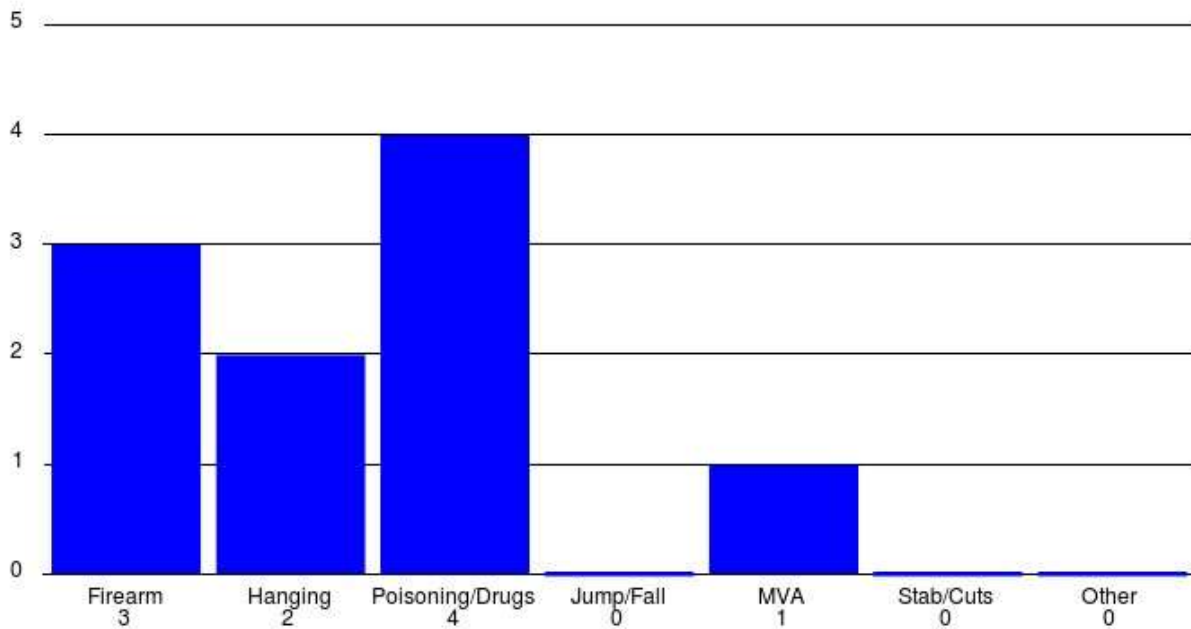
The manner of death may include multiple mechanisms such as alcohol and therapeutic drugs or medications. Drugs or alcohol may also be involved in other manners of death, such as a natural death from liver cirrhosis or an accident death from a motor vehicle fatality.

### Overdose Deaths (2 total)

Age	Sex	Race	Cause of Death	Manner of Death
53	Female	White	Acute cocaine intoxication	Accident
51	Male	White	Acute heroin intoxication	Accident

# Suicide by Means

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## Suicide Deaths (6 total)

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

The graph above may reflect drug or alcohol use which was reported through toxicology testing, which in addition to other circumstances may have attributed to suicide death. In 2015 there was no suicides strictly by overdose, there were 2 accidental overdose deaths and 4 suicides in which the decedent had consumed alcohol or drugs.

	18-25	26-44	45-64
<b>Firearm</b>	0	2	1
<b>Hanging</b>	0	1	1
<b>MVA</b>	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	1	3	2

# Deaths by Age Group

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