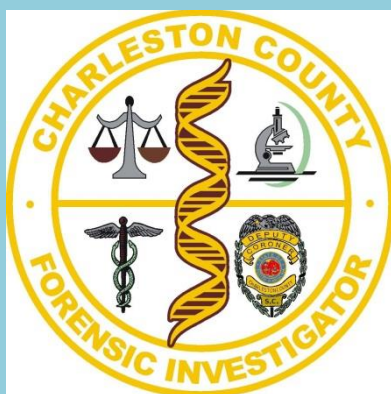


# **Charleston County Coroner's Office**

## **2014 Annual Report**

**Coroner Rae H. Wooten**



**Charleston County  
South Carolina**

## Charleston County Coroner's Office – 2014 Annual Report

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**Rae H. Wooten, Coroner**

**Chief Deputy Coroner**

Bobbi Jo O'Neal

**Deputy Coroners**

Dottie Lindsay

Kelly Kraus

Brittney Martin

Kimberly Rhoton

Sheila Williams



**OFFICE OF THE CORONER**

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To the Citizens of Charleston County,

I am pleased to share the 2014 Annual Report for the Charleston County Coroner's Office. The goal of providing this information is to increase public awareness of the role of the Coroner's Office and to focus attention on the causes and manners of death in our county. It is my hope that the sharing of this information will assist in efforts to reduce the number of preventable deaths, to the extent possible.

The information contained in this annual report is gathered from sources reviewed by the Charleston County Coroner's Office to include autopsy reports, police reports, death certificates, cremation permits and motor vehicle reports, among others.

I hope that you will find this up-to-date and detailed information to be in a format that is accurate, valuable and easy to read.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please feel free to contact the Charleston County Coroner's Office.

As always, thank you for your support,

Rae H. Wooten, RN, BSN, F-ABMDI  
Coroner of Charleston County, SC

Dedicated to the citizens of Charleston County and beyond who grieve the loss of loved ones whose deaths are statistically reflected in this report.

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## MISSION STATEMENT

***To conduct medicolegal death investigations in an independent, compassionate and professional manner serving as a representative of the decedents and survivors to facilitate a thorough understanding of the circumstances surrounding a death.***

## DESCRIPTION, PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE CHARLESTON COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

The Coroner, Rae H. Wooten, RN, BSN, F-ABMDI, is an elected official who oversees a separate and independent law enforcement agency which serves the residents of Charleston County by conducting parallel investigations of any sudden and unexpected death, or those deaths that occur under violent or suspicious circumstances. While the Coroner is elected, the Coroner's Office operates as an entity of Charleston County Government and is funded by tax revenue provided by the citizens of Charleston County. An annual budget is proposed and submitted to the Charleston County Council for approval. The approved budget for the specified fiscal year is administered through the finance department of Charleston County Government.



Coroner Rae H. Wooten

Rae H. Wooten was born, raised and educated in Columbia, South Carolina before moving to the Charleston area in 1973. She graduated from the University of South Carolina with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and subsequently worked as a registered nurse in various settings before joining the Charleston County Coroner's Office in April 1995. She became Chief Deputy Coroner in July 1996 and continued in that position until September 1, 2006 when she was appointed Coroner by the Governor. She was elected as Coroner in November, 2008 and was re-elected in November, 2012. She was awarded "Coroner of the Year" for 2012 by the South Carolina Coroner's Association.

The South Carolina Code of Laws (17-5-530(B)) mandates "The coroner or medical examiner shall make an immediate inquiry into the cause and manner of death and shall reduce the findings to writing on forms provided for this purpose.", upon notification of deaths that are unexpected, unexplained, suspicious, violent or in which the cause and/or manner of death is unknown. The Coroner is also responsible for identifying decedents and making notification to next-of-kin.

The Coroner's Office seeks to find answers to the questions which are important to the decedent's family, involved law enforcement agencies, insurance companies, the judicial system, Consumer Product Safety Commission, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), to name a few. The pursuit of civil or criminal proceedings is in part determined by the ability of the Coroner's Office to determine the cause and manner of death. This unique makeup of job responsibilities means the Coroner's Office performs both a public service and a law enforcement role that requires the Coroner to scrutinize every death within her jurisdiction to determine the events that led to that death. The Coroner may hold a formal inquest to determine the manner of death. There were no inquests held in 2014.

The Coroner's Office also functions as an advocate for families to insure timely notification of the death and the circumstances surrounding the death known at that time. As more information is derived from autopsy and/or further investigation, the Coroner's Office staff updates family members and assists them in contacting other agencies that can help them through the grieving process. This Office works whenever possible with organizations such as Lifepoint to facilitate family or decedent's wishes regarding organ and tissue donations.

Some of the investigative services and processes performed by the Charleston County Coroner's Office include: Medicolegal death investigations, child and infant death investigation and reconstruction, ordering of autopsies (authorized by SC Code 17-5-520), ordering of forensic odontology examination, forensic anthropologic examination, scene and decedent photography, inked fingerprint collection, ordering of fingerprint comparison, forensic entomology sample collection, overseeing of forensic sexual assault trace evidence collection, overseeing collection of toxicology samples and/or DNA samples, and bloodstain pattern analysis. Scene investigations include but are not limited to: homicides, suicides, industrial and residential accidents, motor vehicle accidents, deaths due to abuse/neglect/negligence, terrorist acts, death due to malpractice, mass fatalities, arson, drowning, drug related and fire deaths. The investigations and rulings of the Coroner's Office concerning criminal acts or those that effect the public health and safety, are the foundation for follow up actions by other investigative agencies.

The Fiscal Year 2014 budget for the Charleston County Coroner's Office was \$1,211,926. This partially covers the period of January 1, 2014 – June 30, 2014.

The Fiscal Year 2015 budget for the Coroner's Office was \$1,320,354. This partially covers the period of July 1, 2014 – December 31, 2014.

## What's New in 2014

In 2014, Coroner Wooten officially memorialized current procedures and practices of the Office in expanded official written policies that are required to meet the high standards of accreditation from the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IAC&ME).

The IAC&ME's accreditation allows coroner and medical examiner offices to ensure they are conducting death investigations in compliance with international standards. The site visit inspection planned for January, 2015 will encompass a review of 288 standards that encompass the administrative, forensic practices, investigative techniques and facilities utilized by the Office.

Several new Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs) replaced the Coroner's fleet sedans which can tow the mass fatality trailer and carry extra equipment. The mass fatality trailer is a resource available to the Coroner's Office through a mutual aid agreement with the regional state Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) office. The trailer was used for a mass casualty drill that was held in July and involved resources from numerous municipalities throughout Charleston County.

The deputies were issued uniforms for use on their 'On-Call' rotations in order to promote a more professional appearance at emergency scenes and during the initial phases of a death investigation.

The Coroner's Office received two grants that were active during 2014. The first grant was awarded from the South Carolina Department of Public Safety Office of Justice Programs, Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants Program (INF13001), Awarded October 2013 - \$27,326.00 – for paralegal services. The award began in October, 2013 and ended September 30, 2014. This grant was for non-matching funds that did not cost Charleston County government any additional funding. Because this grant was in its third and final year, the Coroner added the Paralegal position as a county employee with the approval of Charleston County Council due to the high number of subpoenas received for records and other legal matters that involve the Coroner's Office.

The second grant also awarded by the SCDPS Paul Coverdell FSI Grants Program (INF1401) awarded in October for the grant period October, 2014 through September, 2015, which allowed for the addition of a new part-time employee to handle the high volume of cremation permit requests (2,013). The award was \$26,381 and was non-matching funds for Charleston County government.

The Forensic Evidence Technician position converted from being grant funded to Charleston County funding with the approval of the county council at the end of the award period.

## SIZE AND POLULATION OF CHARLESTON COUNTY

The geographic area served by the Charleston County Coroner's Office includes all of Charleston County, which is 916 square miles, and is located on the southeastern coast of South Carolina. Charleston County has approximately 100 miles of Atlantic Ocean coastline and is the third largest county in South Carolina in terms of population. The county has a unique blend of urban areas, beaches, rivers and two federally protected forest and wilderness areas along with rural countryside. It includes the cities and towns of Charleston, North Charleston, Mt. Pleasant, Isle of Palms, Sullivan's Island, James Island, and Folly Beach to name a few.

The population of Charleston County was estimated to be 379,793 in 2014. In the spring and summer months, the population in the county increases significantly due to the tourist influx to historic sites and beaches. During routine business hours, the population also increases by about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> due to the location of many jobs and hospitals within the county.

## 2014 ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



## **Citizens of Charleston County**

### **Coroner**

*Rae H. Wooten, RN, BSN, F-ABMDI*

### **Chief Deputy**

*Bobbi Jo O'Neal, RN, BSN, F-ABMDI*

#### **Deputy Coroner II**

*Dottie Lindsay, F-ABMDI*

#### **Deputy Coroner**

*Kelly T. Kraus, BS, F-ABMDI*

*Brittney W. Martin, BS, F-ABMDI*

*Kimberly L. Rhoton, ANP-BC, RN, F-ABMDI*

#### **Administrative Services Coordinator**

*Teresa Vickers, BS*

#### **Case Manager**

*Penny Craven, LPN*

#### **Paralegal**

*Joe Crawford, M. Ed., MSCJ*

#### **Evidence Technician**

*Nancy A. Ritter-Peacock*

#### **Cremation Permit Specialist (grant funded)**

*Tina Todaro*

#### **Consultants:**

##### **Forensic Anthropologist**

*Suzanne Abel, PhD*

##### **Forensic Odontologist**

*Dr. Wolf D. Bueschgen, DMD*

## INVESTIGATION and DISPOSITION OF CASES

The following description is a general overview of the processes during a jurisdiction assumed, full investigation and the follow-up processes.

Upon arrival at a death scene, the Coroner or a deputy coroner will speak with first responders, law enforcement officers and any witnesses to become familiar with the circumstances surrounding the incident and any safety considerations prior to entering the immediate scene. The Coroner or the deputy will take notes and utilize photographs and/or video to further document the scene. They also collect and preserve all evidence and any personal property on or around the body/remains. In some crime scene situations, the Coroner or deputy will coordinate with law enforcement officers regarding the collection of evidence. Any evidence and/or personal property collected by the Coroner or deputy is secured and documented until it can be processed or appropriately turned over to legal next-of-kin.

The Coroner or deputy makes every effort to identify the decedent utilizing at least two of the following methods: government issued photo ID of the decedent that matches decedent's physical characteristics/features; fingerprint analysis; DNA analysis; coordination of odontology examination (dental X-rays); coordination of forensic anthropology analysis (skeleton/bones); comparison of significant scars, marks and tattoos; birth defects and presence of prosthetics.

If the Coroner or deputy deems it necessary to conduct a post mortem examination (autopsy), they notify the contracted autopsy vendor, which is generally the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. This office also notifies the interested law enforcement agency of the autopsy schedule. The collection and preservation of all evidence rendered from an autopsy is of utmost importance to the investigation.

The Coroner or deputy makes every effort to identify, locate and notify the legal next of kin of the death in a timely manner and in person if possible. The Office also facilitates the release of the remains to the funeral home selected by the next of kin or facilitates county resources for cremation and burial for unclaimed decedents.

The Coroner's Office is responsible for obtaining and reviewing medical records related to both the present event and all past medical records if they might have some relationship to the death. This office documents all the information gathered through the investigation in a written report and collects all documents related to the investigation in a case file. Upon request, the Coroner's Office provides copies of their investigative case file to the Solicitor's Office, the Public Defender's Office and invested law enforcement agencies and litigants.

The Coroner's Office contracts the services of Drs. Suzanne Abel (forensic anthropologist) and Wolf Bueschgen (forensic odontologist) for analysis and

processing of evidence in the form of skeletal or badly decomposed remains. The anthropologist and odontologist work together to provide the Charleston County Coroner's Office with biological profiles that assist the Coroner's Office with identifying individuals as well as possible indicators of cause and manner of death. They also provide timely, precise, and detailed reports that assist in furthering the investigation.

In approximately 18% percent of the deaths that were investigated which is 327 out of 1,793, a full forensic autopsy was performed to aid in the determination of the cause and manner of death, to document disease, to identify injury patterns, and to recover items of evidentiary/investigative value. The cases not autopsied were those in which the scene investigation, circumstances of death, medical documentation, interviews, social history, and/ or external examination of the body provided sufficient information for certifying the cause of death.

Specimens for toxicology testing, which may be helpful in determining the cause and manner of death, are collected at autopsy or upon admission to a hospital and are submitted to a nationally accredited laboratory or the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) crime lab for testing. In 2014, the coroner's office ordered 350 toxicology tests. Screening tests include alcohol, illicit drugs, commonly abused prescription and nonprescription drugs, and other substances as needed.

## CAUSE and MANNER OF DEATH

The **Cause of Death** is the official determination of the specific disease or injury and the sequence of events that leads to an individual's death.

The **Manner of Death** is determined largely by means of the investigation and relates to circumstances at the time of, or surrounding the death. In South Carolina, as is common in the United States, there are five manners of death as listed below.

**NATURAL:** Death caused by disease.

**SUICIDE:** Death because of a purposeful action to end one's own life.

**ACCIDENT:** Death, other than natural, where there is no evidence of intent.

**HOMICIDE:** Death resulting from injuries inflicted by another person.

**UNDETERMINED:** Manner assigned when after a thorough investigation there is insufficient evidence, or conflicting/ equivocal information (especially about intent), to assign a specific manner.

## STATISTICS

The Charleston County Coroner's Office investigated 1,793 deaths during 2014. Regarding those deaths, 1,183 were classified as "Natural" deaths; 178 were classified as "Accident" (127 accident events and 51 traffic collisions); 57 were classified as "Suicide"; 47 were classified as "Homicide"; and 17 were classified with an "Undetermined" manner. In addition, there were 311 "Limited Investigations".

In addition to these deaths, the Coroner's Office received 2,052 requests for services that included:

- 7 cases of recovered non-human bones;
- 2,013 requests for a cremation permit which requires deputy review;
- 23 requests to make a death notification to next-of-kin by other jurisdictions
- 9 cases were preliminarily investigated via telephone inquiries which subsequently were turned over to other jurisdictions due to their having jurisdiction in the case.

The grand total of all requests for services was 3,845.

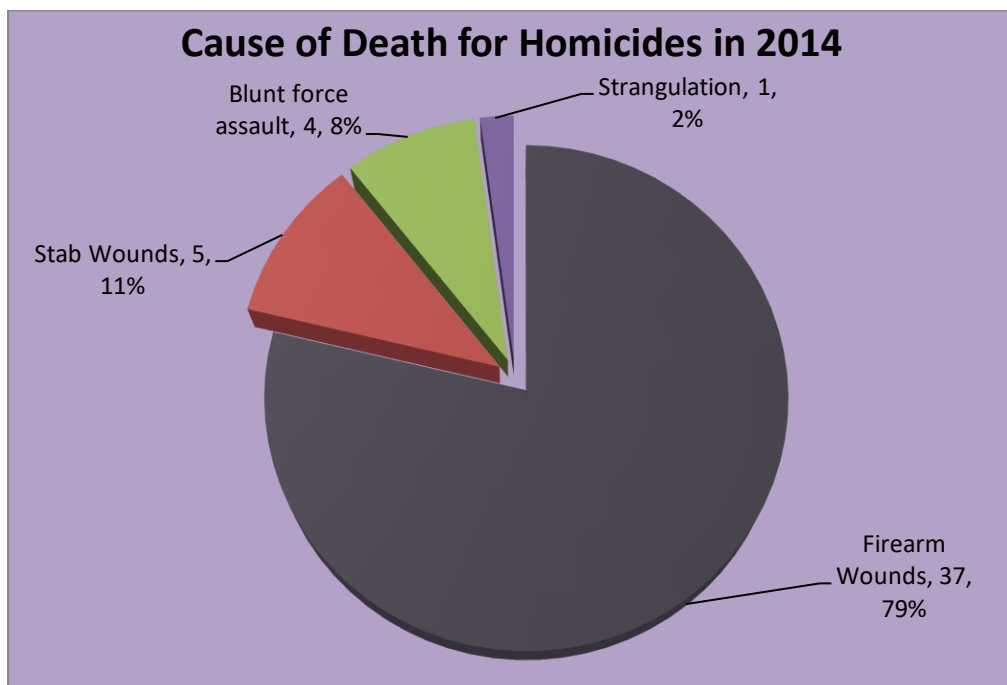
## 2014 HOMICIDE STATISTICS

The manner of death classified as a "Homicide" when it results from injuries inflicted by another person or inflicted on another by one's grossly reckless behavior. The Coroner's Office is not responsible for determining if a homicide was justified or not and classifies those deaths as "Homicides" in these statistics.

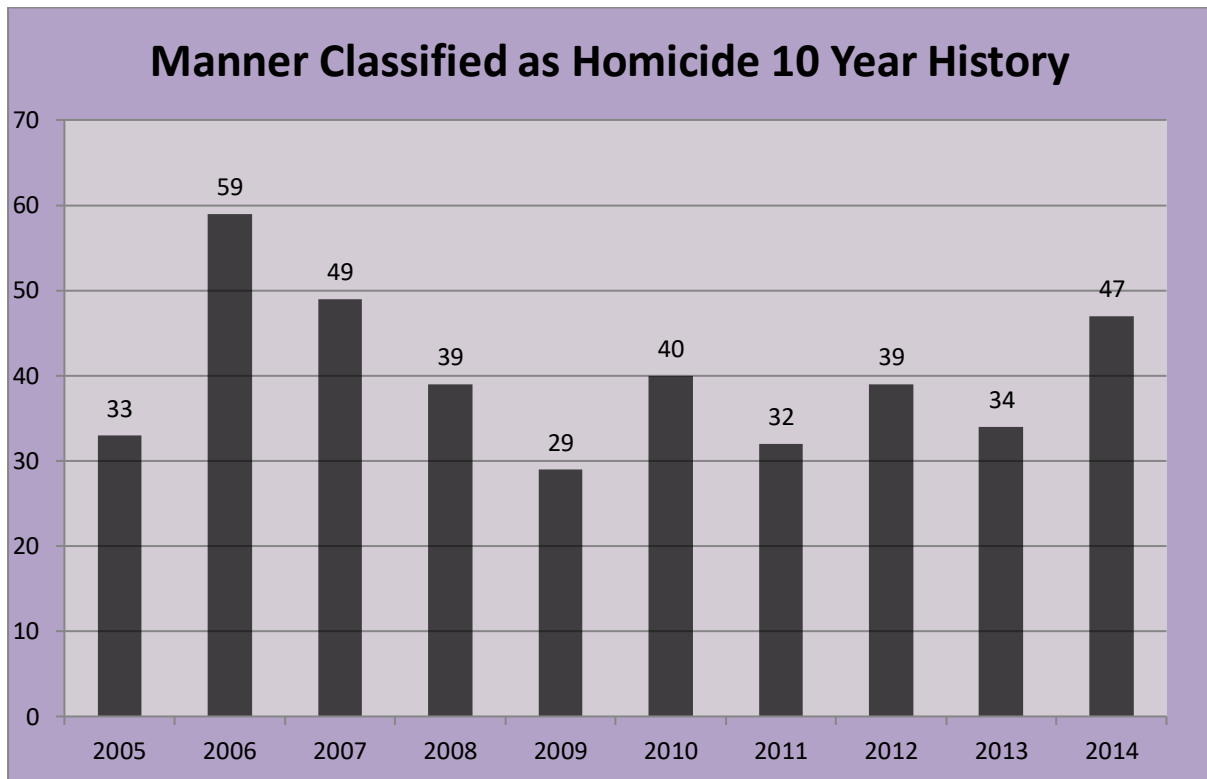
In addition, a death is classified as a "Homicide" regardless of the length of time between an incident causing injuries that results in death which can be attributed to those injuries. South Carolina Code of Laws section 16-3-5 states "A person who causes bodily injury which results in the death of the victim is not criminally responsible for the victim's death and must not be prosecuted for a homicide offense if at least three years intervene between the injury and the death of the victim." This three year window does not apply to the classification of manner of death as long as the death can be attributed to the injuries inflicted by another person or inflicted on another by one's grossly reckless behavior.

Vehicular incidents, such as those which occur in circumstances of reckless driving or driving under the influence, are NOT included in this category but are counted in the traffic collision statistics.

In 2014, there were 47 deaths classified with a manner of "Homicide" in Charleston County. Thirty-seven were caused by firearm. Of the ten remaining deaths, five were caused by stabbing; one was due to strangulation and four were due to assault which included blunt force trauma.

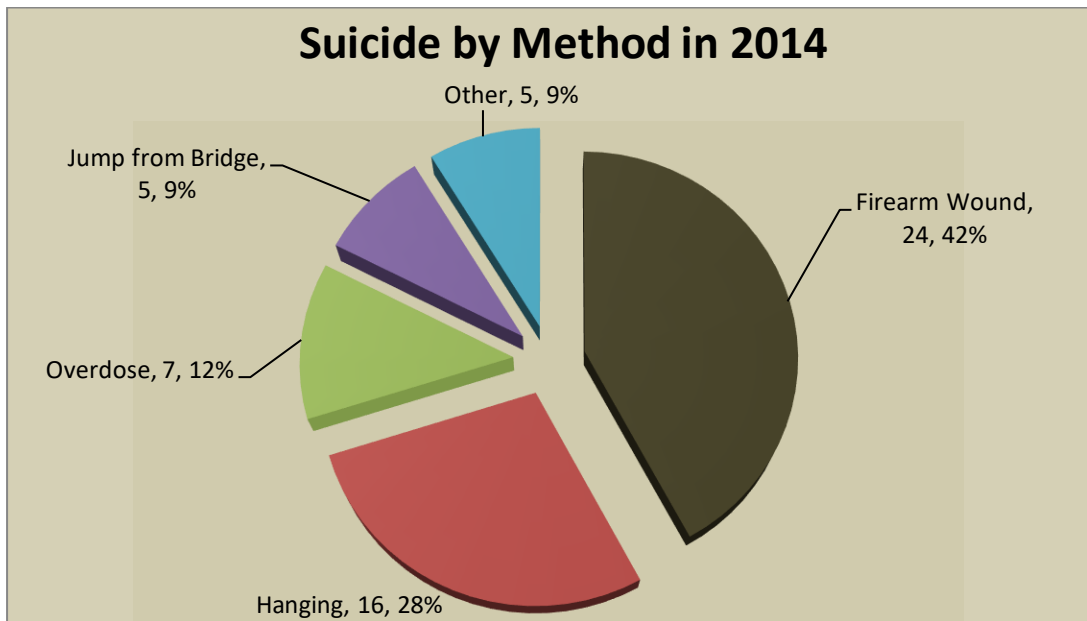


A review of the number of deaths classified as “Homicide” in Charleston County over the past 10 years shows the average number per year is 40.

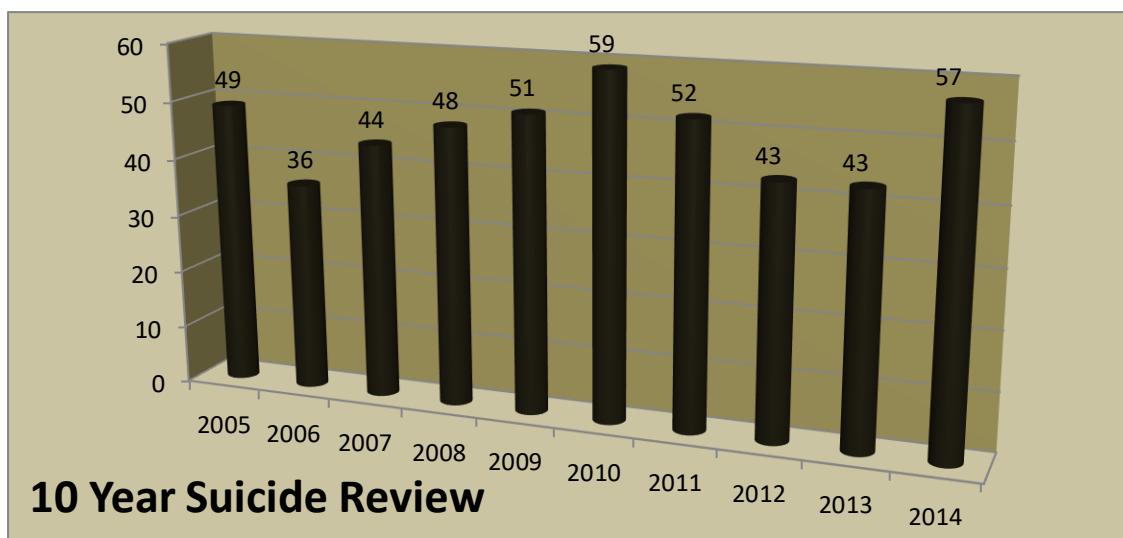


## 2014 Suicide Information

Suicide is death caused by intentional, self-inflicted injuries. In Charleston County during 2014, there were 57 deaths by suicide. The most prevalent method of suicide in 2014 was via firearm with 24. There were sixteen hangings, seven overdoses, five jumped from a bridge and five other causes.



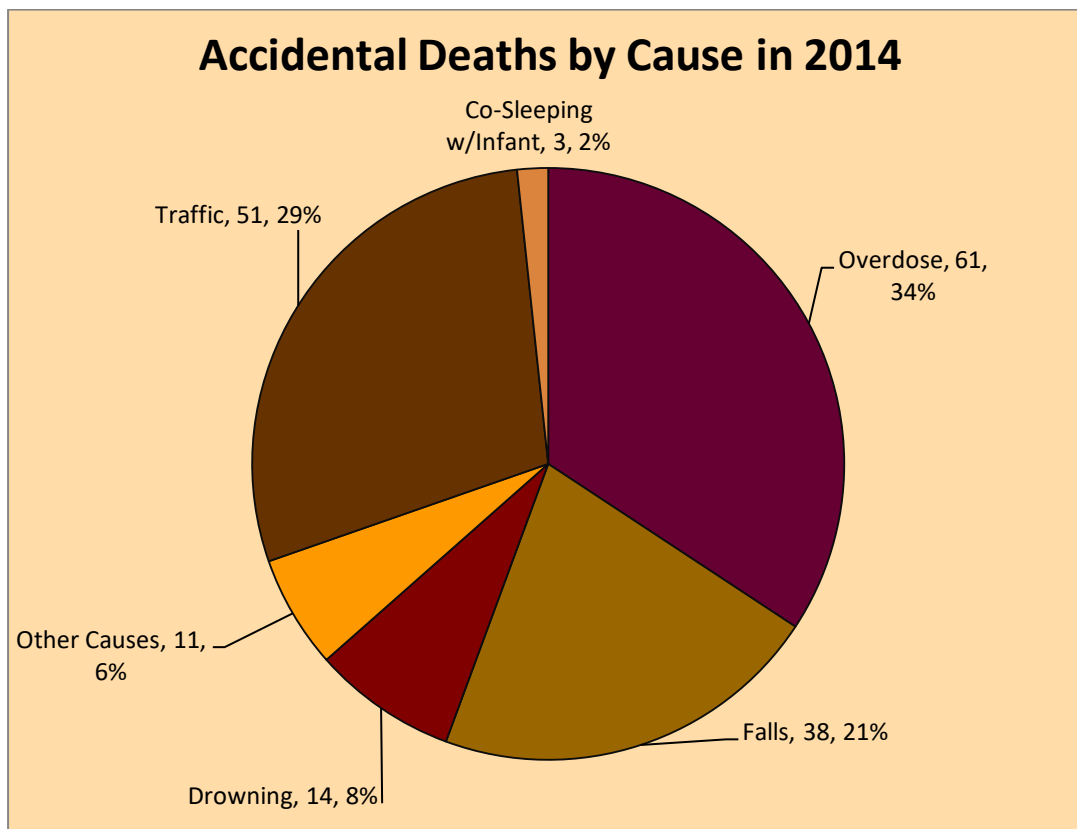
A ten year review of the number of suicides in Charleston County shows an average of 48 per year.





## ACCIDENT FATALITIES FOR 2014

Accidental deaths are those deaths that are other than Natural where there is no evidence of intent; i.e. an unintentional event or chain of events. This category includes most motor vehicle accidents, falls, drowning, accidental drug overdoses, fire related deaths, etc. During 2014, one hundred seventy-eight deaths were certified as "Accident". There were 61 accidental overdoses, 51 traffic related deaths, 38 deaths resulting from falls (34 from standing or walking and 4 falls from a height) and 14 accidental drowning deaths, 3 deaths of infants upon co-sleeping/layover/unsafe sleeping environment and 11 other causes.



The eleven cases of accidental death listed as 'Other' in the chart above are: 3 from exposure; 2 from an airplane crash; 2 from hemorrhagic shock; 1 house fire death; 1 asphyxia related death, 1 death from a firearm wound and 1 death from choking on food.

## Natural Deaths

In 2014, there were 1,183 deaths classified as "Natural" by the Charleston County Coroner's Office. The following is a breakdown by "Cause".

Heart related: 32 %  
Cancer: 30%  
Dementia/Alzheimer's: 12%  
Alcoholic related diseases: 3%  
Stroke: 2%  
Renal failure: 2%  
Other causes total: 19%

## Undetermined Manner of Death

In 2014, the Charleston County Coroner's Office deemed 17 deaths were of an "Undetermined" manner.

While a great deal of effort has gone into compiling accurate statistics for this report, they are subject to change as "Causes" and "Manners" of death, dates, etc., may change should new or additional information become available.