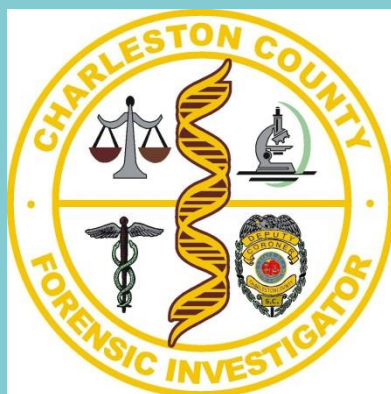


Charleston County Coroner's Office

2020 Annual Report



**Charleston County
South Carolina**

Bobbi Jo O'Neal, Coroner

Chief Deputy Coroner

Brittney Martin



OFFICE OF THE CORONER

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To the Citizens of Charleston County,

I am pleased to share the 2020 Annual Report for the Charleston County Coroner's Office. The goal of providing this information to the public 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 in an effort to reduce the number of preventable deaths to the extent possible.

The information contained in this annual report derives 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 complete information to be in a format that is easy to read and is of value to you.

As we move into the 2021, I would like to extend a heartfelt "Thank You" to retired Coroner Rae Wooten. Ms. Wooten completed her tenure on January 4, 2021 after serving the citizens of Charleston County for 25 years. Her extensive knowledge and leadership will be missed.

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

As always, thank you for your support,

Bobbi Jo O'Neal, RN
Coroner of Charleston County, SC

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the decedents, and the citizens of Charleston County and beyond, who grieve the loss of loved ones. It has been an honor and privilege to serve you during this time of greatest need.

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MISSION STATEMENT

We will conduct medicolegal death investigations in an independent, compassionate and professional manner to determine the full truth of the circumstances surrounding a death while serving as a representative of the decedents and an advocate to the survivors.

2020 PROFILE OF THE CHARLESTON COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

The Charleston County Coroner's Office building is located in the city of North Charleston in Charleston County, which is located on the southeastern coast of South Carolina. Charleston County measures about 916 square miles and is the third largest county in South Carolina by population; Charleston County's population was approximately 411,406 in 2019. Official US Census population figures are not available for 2020.

The Coroner's Office investigates the circumstances surrounding a person's death independently of any law enforcement agency that may also be investigating the death. The role of the Coroner's Office is to determine the "Cause" and "Manner" of a person's death.

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 provides information to the decedent's family, involved law enforcement, the judicial system, insurance companies, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and many others.

The Coroner's Office advocates for families by notifying and advising them of the circumstances surrounding the death known at that time. The Office provides updates to the families after autopsy and/or when further investigation reveals new information. Additionally, we refer families to resource agencies when necessary to assist them through the grieving process. This Office works with organizations such as We are Sharing Hope to facilitate the family or decedent's wishes regarding organ and tissue donation whenever possible.

Medicolegal death investigations provided by the Charleston County Coroner's Office may involve many things, to include but not limited to, scene response, scene and decedent photography, ordering of forensic autopsies (authorized by SC Code 17-5-520), anthropologic and odontology examinations, fingerprint collection and ordering of fingerprint comparison, etc. Collection, submission and interpretation of toxicology samples and/or DNA samples are also part of the investigation.

Scene investigations include, but are not limited to, child and infant death investigation and re-enactments, 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 Coroner may hold a formal inquest to determine the "Manner of Death". There were no inquests held in 2020.

The Coroner is an elected official and the Coroner's Office is funded by tax revenue provided by the citizens of Charleston County. The Coroner submits an annual budget to the Charleston County Council for approval. The Finance Department of Charleston County Government administers the approved funds.

The Fiscal Year 2020 adjusted budget for the Charleston County Coroner's Office was \$2,442,037. This partially covers the period of January 1, 2020 – June 30, 2020.

The Fiscal Year 2021 approved budget for the Coroner's Office was \$2,531,775. This partially covers the period of July 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020.

In 2020, the Charleston County Coroner's Office was awarded funds from the Paul Coverdell Forensic Sciences Improvement Grant Program. Award # 2019-CD-BX-0067 for the project "Improving the Quality of Autopsy and Forensic Services" which provided funds for an autopsy technician, training and equipment. Award amount \$84,576.00 Grant period was from January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020.

Evidence Technician Nancy Ritter-Peacock was selected the "2020 Employee of the Year" for Charleston County.

THE CORONER



Coroner Rae H. Wooten

The Coroner, Rae H. Wooten, RN, BSN, F-ABMDI, is an elected official who oversees a separate and independent law enforcement agency serving 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.

Coroner 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 Governor Mark Sanford appointed her Coroner of Charleston County. She won the election for Coroner of Charleston County in November 2008 and was re-elected in 2012 and 2016. In 2020, Coroner Wooten retired after 25 year of service to the citizens of Charleston County.

The South Carolina Coroner's Association recognized her as "Coroner of the Year" for 2012.

Bobbi Jo O'Neal was elected Coroner in November 2020 and assumed office in January 2021. Coroner O'Neal currently serves in full capacity as the Charleston County Coroner.

2020 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 Supervisors

Kimberly Rhoton, RN, ANP-BC, F-ABMDI

Brittney W. Martin, BS, F-ABMDI

Deputy Coroners

Dottie Lindsay, F-ABMDI; Anita Hasert, BS, F-ABMDI; Christina Harrison, RN, BSN, D-ABMDI; Elizabeth Dobbins, D-ABMDI, BFA; Shane Bowers, D-ABMDI, MDiv; Kelley Nevill, Allison Garbarini

Administrative Services Coordinator - Nicole Brown

Case Manager- Deputy Coroner Sara K. Tuuk, BS, MS, D-ABMDI

Paralegal- Joe Crawford, M. Ed., MSCJ

Evidence Technician- Nancy Ritter-Peacock

Receptionist- Jeanelle Harris/Lauren Lodato/Kennedy Camburn

Morgue and Autopsy Suite Coordinator - Ty'Reik Faulks, BS

Morgue and Autopsy Suite Technician- Kelly Gallagher

Contracted Consultants:

Forensic Anthropologist
Suzanne Abel, PhD

Forensic Odontologist
Dr. Wolf D. Bueschgen, DMD

Forensic Pathologists
Dr. Janice Pat Ross
Dr. Eric Eason

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 Coroner, will take notes and utilize photographs and/or video to further document the scene. They also collect and preserve evidence and personal property on, or around the body/remains. In some crime scene situations, the Coroner or Deputy Coroner will coordinate with law enforcement officers regarding the collection of evidence.

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

If the Coroner or Deputy Coroner deem it necessary to conduct a post mortem examination (autopsy), the contracted transport vendor transports the decedent to our in-house morgue/autopsy suite (363 cases) or to the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Medical University (182 cases). One case went to Richland County for autopsy. 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 Coroner 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 the 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 past medical records, as they might have relevance to the death. This office summarizes the information gathered through the investigation in a written report and collects 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.

The Coroner's Office contracted 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 documenting findings that may assist with determining cause and manner of death. They also provide timely, precise and detailed reports that assist in furthering the investigation.

In approximately 21% percent of the deaths that were investigated, which is 546 out of 2,565 deaths reported, 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 during the investigation or autopsy, or upon admission to a hospital, are submitted to a nationally accredited laboratory or the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) crime lab for testing. In 2020, the Coroner's Office ordered 572 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.

2020 STATISTICS

There were 2,565 deaths reported to the Charleston County Coroner's Office in 2020. Regarding those deaths, 2,082 were classified as "Natural" deaths, 342 were classified as "Accident"; 65 were classified as "Suicide"; 62 were classified as "Homicide"; and 13 were classified with an "Undetermined" manner. One case remains "pending" investigation, at the time of publishing.

In addition to investigating these deaths, the Coroner's Office had involvement to various degrees with 3,130 requests for services which included: 13 cases of recovered bones (3-human and 10 non-human); 1,486 additional requests for a cremation permit which required deputy review; 46 requests to make a death notification to next-of-kin by other jurisdictions; 130 cases were preliminarily investigated via telephone inquiries which subsequently were turned over to other jurisdictions due to their having jurisdiction in the case. There was 1 agency or citizen assist which did not involve a death investigation, but unique assets of the Coroner's Office were utilized to resolve unusual circumstances. Additionally, there were 1,454 requests for cremation permits for disposition, where jurisdiction was accepted.

The Coroner's Office was not involved in any exhumations in 2020.

The grand total of all requests for services plus death investigations was 5,761.

Other statistics include:

Grand total of cremation permits: 3,006

 Cremation permits issued with Coroner Cases: 1,454

 Stand-alone Cremation Permits: 1,486

Full autopsy: 546 cases

 At the Coroner's Office: 363

 Contracted to MUSC: 182

 Contracted to Richland Memorial Hospital: 1

Number of external exams ordered: 3

 At the Coroner's Office: 2

 Contracted to MUSC: 1

Number of partial/limited autopsies ordered: 0

Number of hospital autopsies under coroner jurisdiction: 0

Deceased transports to morgue: 562

Deceased transported for storage only: 95 (Coroner's Office: 80, MUSC Morgue: 15)

Toxicology tests ordered: 469

Unidentified decedents: 1

Exhumations: 0

Unclaimed: 8

Donor referrals, organ donation and tissue donation statistics from We are Sharing Hope SC:

 Release for organ donation: 38

 Release for tissue: 142

 Organ donors: 20

 Tissue donors: 17

2020 "HOMICIDE" STATISTICS

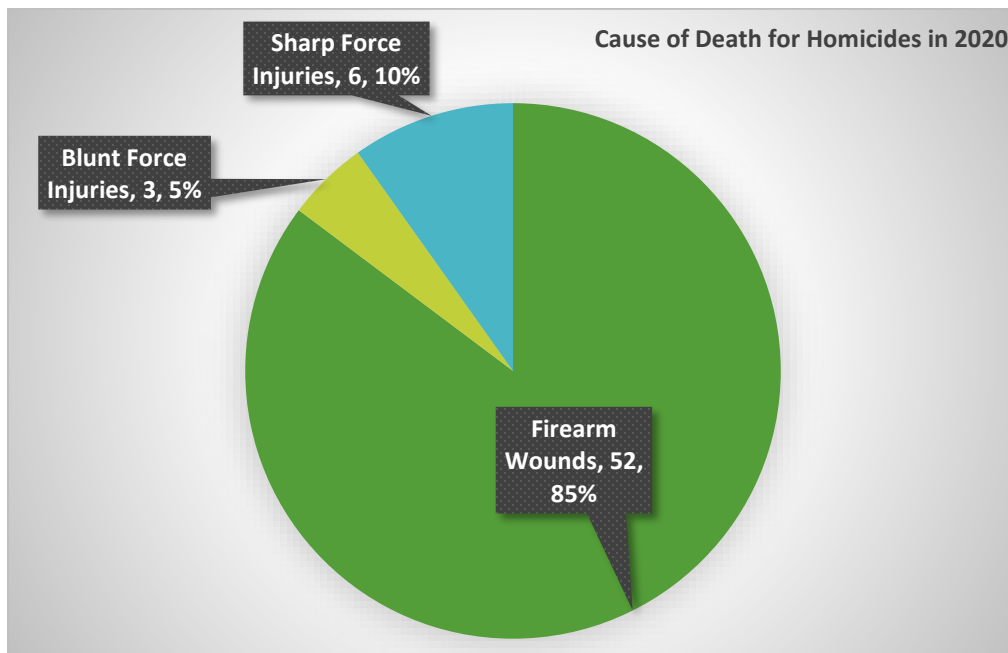
The manner of death classified as a "Homicide" when it results from injuries inflicted by another person or inflicted on another by one's grossly reckless behavior. The Coroner's Office is not responsible for determining if a homicide was justified, or not, and classifies those deaths as "Homicides"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

In addition, a death is classified as a "Homicide", regardless of the length of time between an incident causing injuries, and the death, which can be attributed to those injuries.

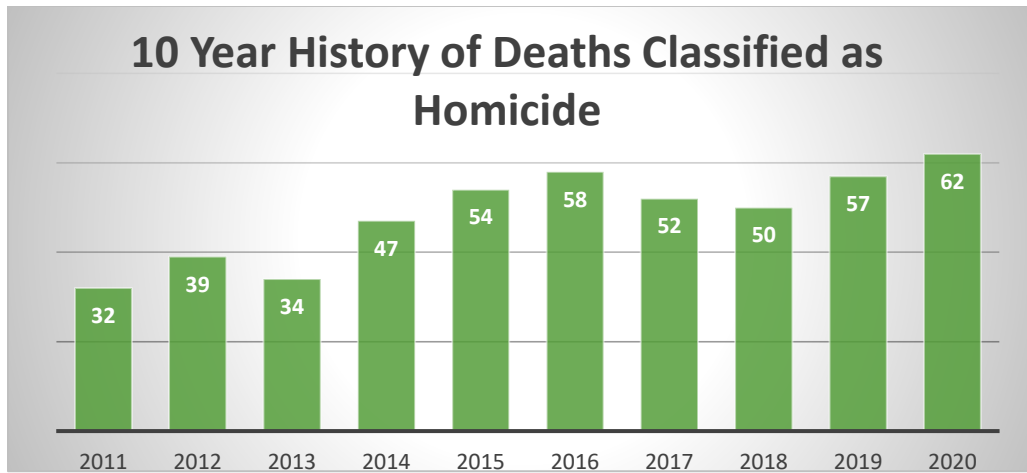
South Carolina Code of Laws section 16-3-5 states "A person who causes bodily injury which results in the death of the victim is not criminally responsible for the victim's death and must not be prosecuted for a homicide offense if at least three years intervene between the injury and the death of the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

Vehicular collisions, occurring in circumstances of reckless driving or driving under the influence, are NOT included in this category but are counted in the traffic collision statistics under the manner - Accident.

In 2020, there were 62 deaths classified as "Homicide" in Charleston County. Fifty-two (52) due to firearm injuries. Of the ten remaining deaths, six were due to sharp force injuries, three were due to blunt force trauma, and one death was due to neglect.

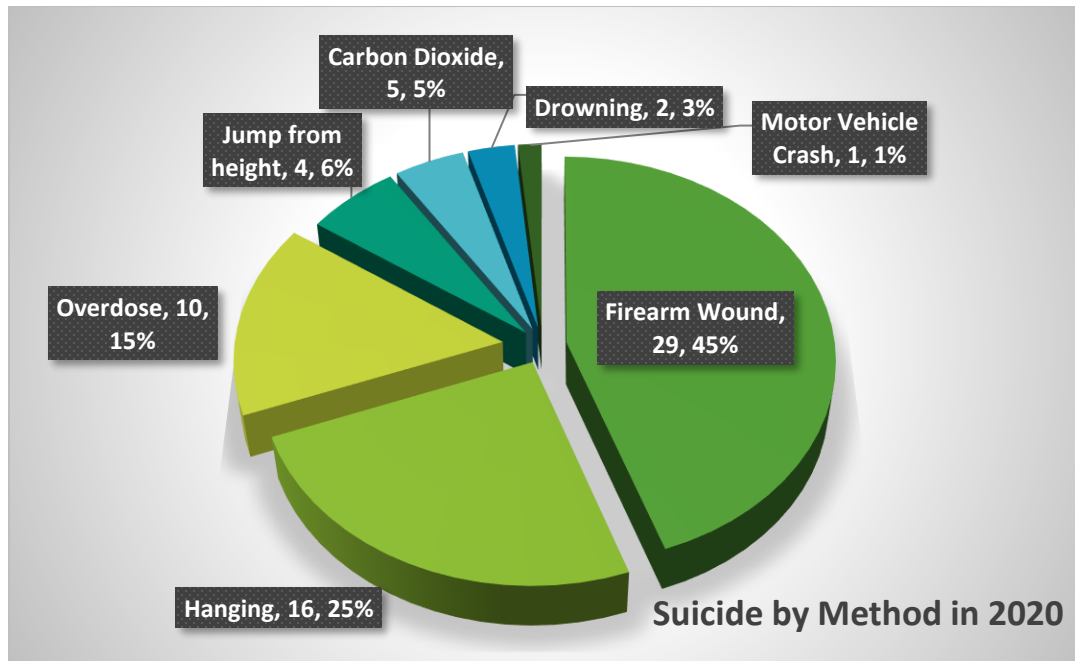


A review of the number of deaths classified as “Homicide” in Charleston County over the past 10 years shows the average number per year as 48.

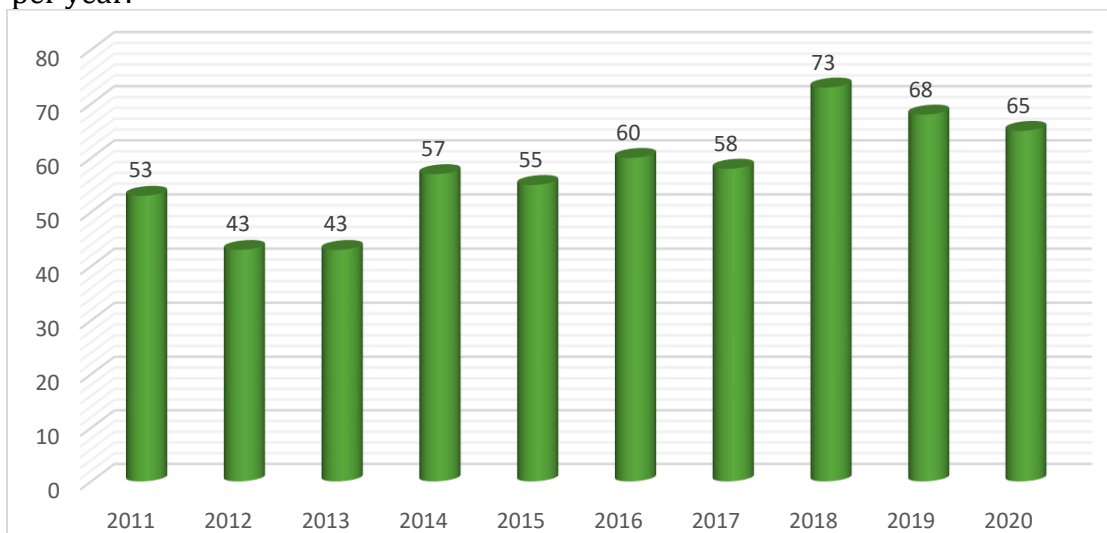


2020 "SUICIDE" STATISTICS

Suicide is death caused by intentional, self-inflicted injuries. In Charleston County during 2020, there were 65 deaths by suicide. The most prevalent method of suicide in 2020 was via firearm wound totaling 29. There were sixteen (16) hangings; ten (10) overdoses; four deaths from jumping from a height; one motor vehicle crash, two drownings and three via inhalation of carbon dioxide.



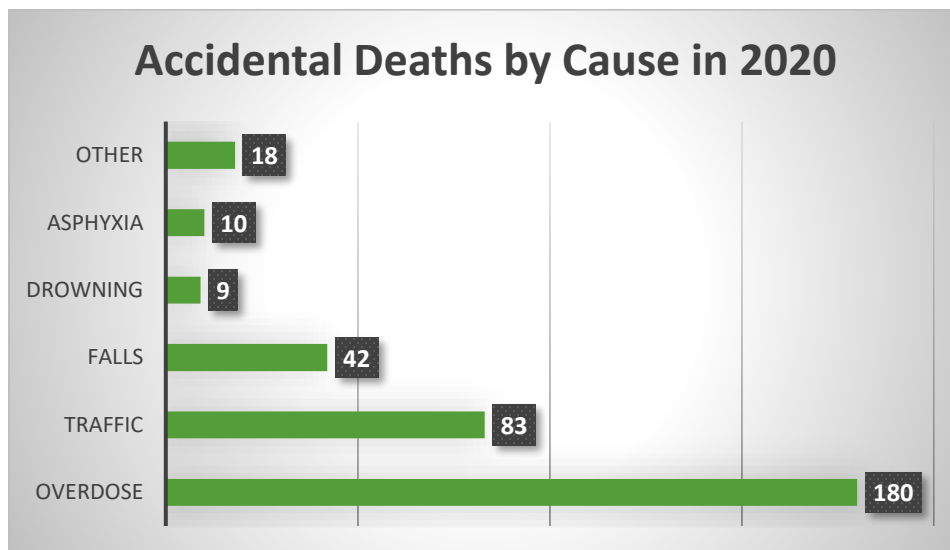
A ten-year review of the number of suicides in Charleston County shows an average of 57 per year.



2020 “ACCIDENT” STATISTICS

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 collisions, falls, drowning, accidental drug overdoses, fire related deaths, etc.

During 2020 there were 342 deaths certified as “Accident”. The causes include: 180 drug related deaths; 83 traffic collisions; 42 falls; 9 drownings; 4 foreign body asphyxia (food/emesis); 1 infant overlay, 5 positional asphyxia, 4 fire burns, 2 carbon monoxide inhalation not fire related, 4 hyperthermia, 3 via plane crash, 2 hypothermia, and one case of accidental firearm wound, blunt force and infection, respectively.



2020 “Natural Death” Statistics

In 2020, there were 2,082 deaths reported to our office that were determined to be “Natural” deaths. The deputies receiving these notifications either investigate in person and assume jurisdiction for determining cause and manner of death, or determine that no further action is warranted. If no detailed, in-person investigation was required, the Deputy Coroner contacted the physician of record and after discussing the circumstances of the death, the physician agreed to certify the decedent's cause and manner of death on the Death Certificate.

Natural deaths reported to the office who were hospice care totaled 1,073.

There were 13 cases of natural fetal demise reported to the office. Generally, the Deputies conduct a preliminary investigation to determine if further action is required.

2020 “Undetermined Death” Statistics

In 2020, the Charleston County Coroner's Office deemed thirteen 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 “Cause” and “Manner” of death, dates, etc., may change, should new or additional information become available