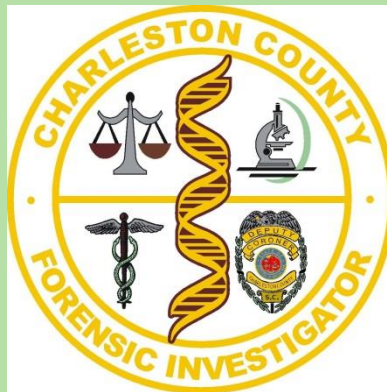


Charleston County Coroner's Office

2022 Annual Report

Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal



**Charleston County
South Carolina**

Bobbi Jo O'Neal
Coroner

Brittney W. Martin
Chief Deputy Coroner



OFFICE OF THE CORONER

4000 Salt Pointe Parkway
North Charleston, SC 29405
Phone: (843) 746-4030
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To the Citizens of Charleston County,

I am pleased to share the 2022 Charleston County Coroner's Office Annual Report. It's my goal that by providing this information we increase public awareness to the role of the Coroner's Office, and to focus attention on the types of deaths in our county in order to reduce the number of preventable deaths to the greatest extent possible.

The information contained in this annual report is derived from our medicolegal death investigations which produce a Coroner's Report and case files which may include autopsy reports, death certificates, cremation permits, law enforcement reports and motor vehicle collision reports among others.

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, BSN, F-ABMDI
Coroner of Charleston County, SC

DEDICATION

Dedicated to those lost in 2022.

To 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 your 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.

CORONER BOBBI JO O'NEAL



Bobbi Jo O'Neal, a Registered Nurse and a Board-Certified Fellow with the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators, has served in the Coroner's Office since 1998, including serving as Chief Deputy Coroner from 2011-2020. She was elected Charleston County Coroner in 2020.

With her leadership, the Charleston County Coroner's Office is one of only 32 coroner offices in the country that is accredited by the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners. Additionally, as a grant writer for the Coroner's Office, O'Neal has successfully brought in over \$2 million in funds to Charleston County.

O'Neal is the President of the South Carolina Coroner's Association and the President of the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners. She serves on the Executive Committee for the Lowcountry Healthcare Coalition, and numerous other Boards and Commissions.

An experienced emergency room nurse, O'Neal received her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. She is and has been actively involved in the specialty of forensic nursing, first in the area of sexual assault and then as a death investigator.

She is a member of the National Association of Medical Examiners, a Fellow with the American Academy of Forensic Science, a member of the South Carolina Coroner's Association, and a member of numerous national committees which seek to develop protocols and training material for medicolegal death investigators.

A former Director-at-Large for the International Association of Forensic Nurses, O'Neal is the author of the book "Investigating Infant Deaths" and has had the unfortunate distinction of working the mass fatalities of the Sofa Super Store fire and the Emanuel AME mass shooting.

Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal was awarded the 2022 Coroner of the Year by the South Carolina Coroner's Association.

PROFILE OF THE CHARLESTON COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

The Office investigates the circumstances surrounding a person's death independently of any law enforcement agency with the primary role of determining the "Cause" and "Manner" upon notification of deaths that are unexpected, unexplained, suspicious, violent or in which the cause and/or manner of death is unknown. Additionally, the coroner is also responsible for identifying decedents and making notification to next-of-kin.

The Coroner's Office advocates for families by notifying and advising them of the circumstances surrounding the death known at the 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 and Miracles in Sight to facilitate the family or decedent's wishes regarding organ and tissue donation whenever possible. The Office also collaborates with involved law enforcement agencies, the concerned parties of civil suits and criminal cases within the judicial system, insurance companies, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and many others.

Medicolegal death investigation 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 and testing 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 investigations 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 2022.

Charleston County is located on the southeastern coast of South Carolina and measures about 916 square miles and is the third largest county in South Carolina by population. Charleston County's population was approximately 419,279 in 2022 according to the US Census Bureau.

The Charleston County Coroner's Office homepage can be found here:
<https://www.charlestoncounty.org/departments/coroner> and on Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/charlestoncoroner>.

BUDGETING AND FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Coroner of Charleston County is an elected official and the Coroner's Office is funded by tax revenue provided by the citizens of Charleston County. Annually, Coroner O'Neal submits a budget proposal to Charleston County Council for approval. Once the budget is approved by the full Council, the Finance Department of Charleston County Government administers the approved funds.

The Fiscal Year 2022 approved budget for the Charleston County Coroner's Office was \$2,996,138. The Fiscal Year 2023 approved budget for the Coroner's Office is \$3,238,909. The last six months of FY2022 and the first six months of FY2023 combine to financially account for the calendar year 2022.

In 2022, the Charleston County Coroner's Office was awarded \$60,913 from the South Carolina Department of Public Safety Office of Justice Programs Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants Program (5NF000620) for the grant titled: "Opioid-related deaths: A Mass Fatality Disaster" written and managed by Coroner O'Neal. The grant started in October, 2022.

On July 1, 2022, the Charleston County Coroner's Office was awarded \$53,820 from the South Carolina Department of Public Safety Office of Justice Programs Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants Program (5NF000421) for the grant titled: "Improving and expanding forensic autopsy services in Charleston County, SC" written and managed by Coroner O'Neal.

The CDC Foundation awarded the Charleston County Coroner's Office the 2022 Medicolegal Death Investigation FHIR Implementation Collaborative grant (\$101,605.00). This grant funded collaborative work between medicolegal death investigation offices and data-sharing partners to pilot the use of FHIR (Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources). This grant made possible efficient data transmission between the Coroner's Office and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division.

The Charleston County Coroner's Office was awarded the 2022 Bureau of Justice Affairs Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant (\$279,854.00). This award (1) prepared the Office for accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners, (2) improved the timeliness of toxicology results, and (3) improved the quality of opioid investigations for Charleston County and the five neighboring counties.

In addition, Coroner O'Neal submitted three project proposals to the Low Country Healthcare Coalition and the Healthcare Preparedness Program (HPP), which were fully grant-funded totaling \$86,656.

The projects were:

1. Improvement of forensic services within the region by providing the equipment and training for IDEMIA MorphoIDent fingerprint units. The Coroner's Office assisted with the purchase of the required items and accessories as well as one year of maintenance fees and coordinated training for regional Coroners. Award amount \$25,291.00.
2. Improvement of mobile morgue service for fatality management by purchase of a 14' morgue trailer that would be listed as an asset in the Regional Mass Fatality Plan in coordination with the coroners in the region, and the Low Country Healthcare Coalition key partners and emergency management. Award amount \$50,940.90.
3. Improvement of radiographic capabilities and training in the region by providing Radiation Safety Officer training to four (4) individuals and the purchase of a new laptop computer to operate the software for the Nomad Dental X-Ray unit. Award amount \$10,425.20.

UNCLAIMED VETERAN BURIAL

The unclaimed cremated remains of eight US Veterans who were in the care of the Charleston County Coroner's Office were laid to rest with full military honors December 6, 2022, in Beaufort National Cemetery. These Veterans died in Charleston County and were interred after a complete death investigation, which included a thorough search for next-of-kin, clearance from the Probate Court and approval from the US Veterans Administration. Coroner O'Neal and several deputies attended the beautiful ceremony with about 400 citizens from Beaufort and Charleston Counties.

POTTER'S FIELD

Charleston County is home to a Potter's Field which is a 2.65-acre track located on Johns Island. In February of 2022 Charleston County Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal was contacted regarding the property. Coroner O'Neal sought counsel to develop a plan to document the cemetery's history and document the physical attributes of the grounds.

Coroner O'Neal attended the Historic Cemetery Symposium at Clemson University in October 2022 to learn what steps should be taken to ensure that this Potters Field was properly cared for. Coroner O'Neal consulted with her in-house forensic anthropologist, Dr. Suzanne Abel, as well as Dr. Eric Poplin of Brockington & Associates to develop a 2023 plan to survey and document the attributes and history of the grounds.

geoFOR

In 2022, the Charleston County Coroner's Office became a collaborator in the development of the "geoFOR", a web-based application designed to improve forensic investigations. The application was developed by Clemson University researchers to address the gaps of knowledge in the field of postmortem interval estimation – or, time since death – by providing an ongoing, mass collaborative reference sample that spans a breadth of environments. Determining time elapsed since death is a critical piece of information to provide law enforcement when human remains are discovered. An accurate estimation of this time span facilitates the identification of an unknown individual and can help reconstruct the death event.

Non-Charleston County Resident Cases

The Charleston County Coroner's Office investigated 183 deaths in 2022 in which the decedent resided out-of-county. These non-Charleston County resident deaths largely originate from medical complexes that draw high-level trauma patients from surrounding counties. They also come from transient populations such as tourists, out-of-state college students, and migrant workers. While non-Charleston County residents made up just 8% of Charleston County Coroner cases, these investigations consumed a disproportionate 16% of the total amount spent on autopsies and toxicology costs.

2022 ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Citizens of Charleston County

Coroner

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

Chief Deputy

Brittney W. Martin, BS, F-ABMDI

Investigations

*Sr. Deputy/Supervisor
Dottie Lindsay, F-ABMDI*

Deputy Coroners

*Anita Hasert, BS, F-ABMDI
Sara K. Tuuk, BS, MS, D-ABMDI
Elizabeth Dobbins, BFA, D-ABMDI
Ty'Reik Faulks, BS
Shane Bowers, MDiv., D-ABMDI
Stacey Toto, BS, D-ABMDI
Alison Garbarini, MPH, D-ABMDI
David Reynolds
Angela Biela, RN
Ella Butler, MSc, Special Opioid Investigator (grant funded)
Joshua Ambrite, RN*

Forensic Services

*Sr. Deputy/Supervisor
Dep. Kelly Gallagher, BA*

*Autopsy Technician II
Dep. Kelley Nevill, D-ABMDI*

*Autopsy Technician I
Miracle Randall, LFD
Ashleigh Jordan, BS*

*Forensic Evidence Tech II
Dep. Nancy Ritter-Peacock*

Administrative Services

*Coordinator - Nicole Brown, BHUServ, BA
Paralegal - Joe Crawford, M. Ed., MSCJ
Administrative Assistant – Katie Copp, BS*

Contracted Consultants

*Forensic Anthropologist
Suzanne Abel, PhD*

*Forensic Odontologist
Dr. Wolf D. Bueschgen, DMD*

*Forensic Pathologists
Dr. Janice Pat Ross
Dr. J.C.U. Downs
Dr. Paul Uribe
Dr. Stephen Cina*

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 evidence and 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.

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 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 deems it necessary to conduct a postmortem examination (autopsy), the contracted transport vendor transports the decedent to our in-house morgue/autopsy suite or to the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Medical University. 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 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 stores related documents in a records management system. Upon request, the Coroner's Office provides copies of their investigative case records to the Solicitor's Office, the Public Defender's Office and invested law enforcement agencies.

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 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 22% percent of the deaths that were given a full investigation, which is 606 out of 2,674 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 submitted to a nationally accredited laboratory or the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) crime lab for testing. Toxicology tests provide quantitative measures of blood levels for: 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 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.

2022 STATISTICS

There were 2,674 deaths reported to the Charleston County Coroner's Office in 2022. Regarding those deaths, 2,129 (80%) were classified as "Natural" deaths, 389 (14.5%) were classified as "Accident"; 67 (2.5%) were classified as "Suicide"; 56 (2.0%) were classified as "Homicide"; and 33 (1%) were classified with an "Undetermined" manner. The grand total of all requests for services plus death investigations was 4,444.

In addition to investigating these deaths which was 49% of all deaths in our county (5,468 total) and authorizing cremations for 1,443 of the investigated cases, the Coroner's Office had involvement to various degrees with requests for services which included:

- 1,545 additional requests for a cremation permit which was outside of a fully assumed case investigation which requires deputy review.
- 45 requests to make a death notification to next-of-kin by other jurisdictions,
- 58 cases were preliminarily investigated via telephone inquiries which subsequently were turned over to other jurisdictions due to their having jurisdiction in the case.
- 4 agency assists where work was completed to assist other jurisdictions in a death investigation.
- 1,443 requests for cremation permits for disposition where jurisdiction was accepted.
- 76 requests for a fetal cremation letter.
- 17 cases of recovered bones (4 human and 13 non-human).
- Grand total of cremation permits: 3,064
Cremation permits issued with Coroner Cases: 1,443
Stand-alone Cremation Permits: 1,545
Fetal Cremation Letter: 76
- Full autopsy: 606 cases; At the Coroner's Office: 439; At MUSC: 167
- Number of external exams ordered: 3; At the Coroner's Office: 3
- Decedents in custody at the AI Cannon Detention Center: 3 Natural, 1 Homicide, 1 Accident, 1 Suicide.
- Number of cases with contracted forensic anthropology: 17
- Number of cases with contracted forensic odontology: 8
- Deceased transports to morgue: 676; transported for storage only: 67
- Toxicology tests ordered: 643
- Unidentified decedents: 1
- Exhumations: 0; Unclaimed: 7
- Release for organ donation: 36; actual organ donation cases: 12
- Release for tissue donation: 145; actual tissue donation cases: 19
- Coroner cases declined for donation: 1 organ and 8 for tissue
- Children under 18 years old: 67
- Scene Investigations: 701

2022 “HOMICIDE” STATISTICS

The manner of death is 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.

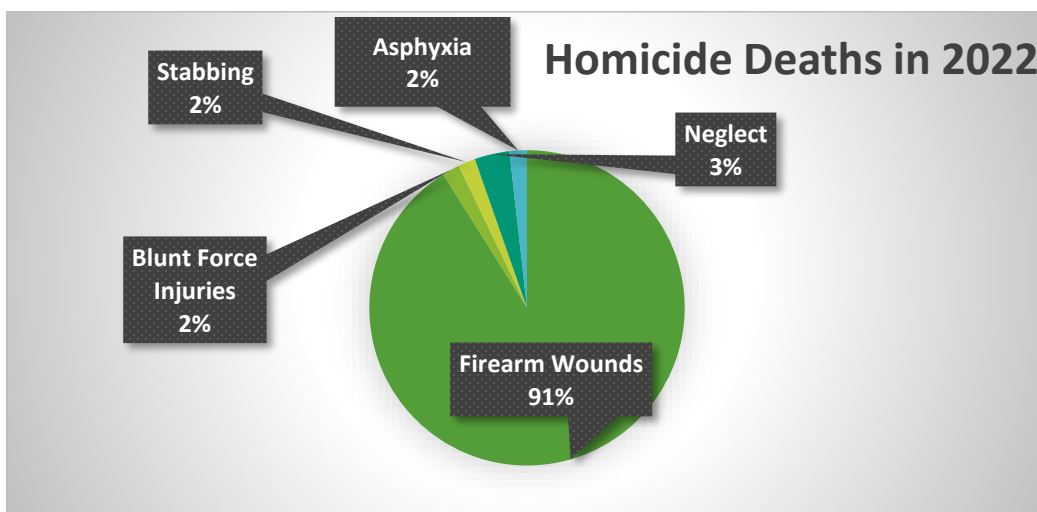
In addition, a death is classified as a “Homicide” regardless of the length of time between an incident causing injuries that results in death which can be attributed to those injuries.

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 is attributed to the injuries inflicted by another person or inflicted on another by one’s grossly reckless behavior.

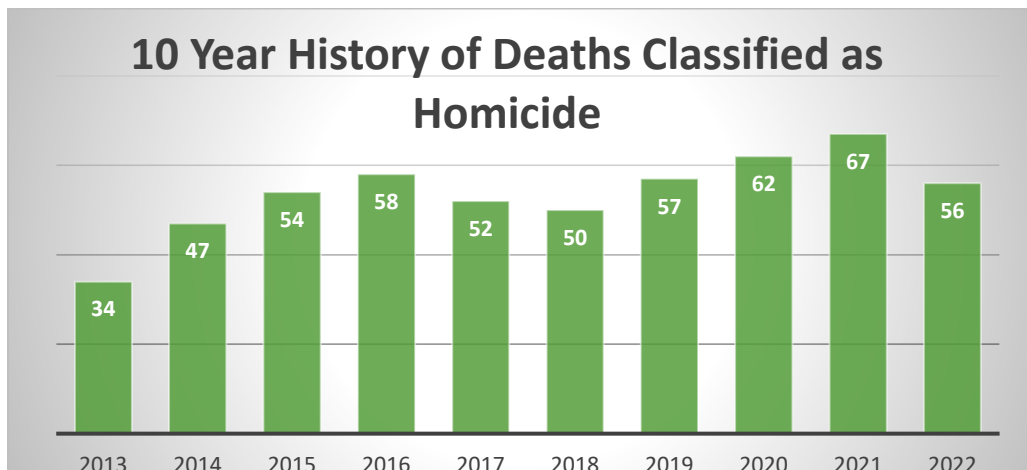
Vehicular collisions, occurring in circumstances of reckless driving or driving under the influence, are NOT included in this category but are counted in the traffic collision statistics under the manner - Accident.

In 2022, there were 56 deaths classified as “Homicide” in Charleston County. The causes include:

- 51 firearm injuries
- 1 sharp force injuries
- 1 blunt force injuries
- 2 neglect
- 1 asphyxia



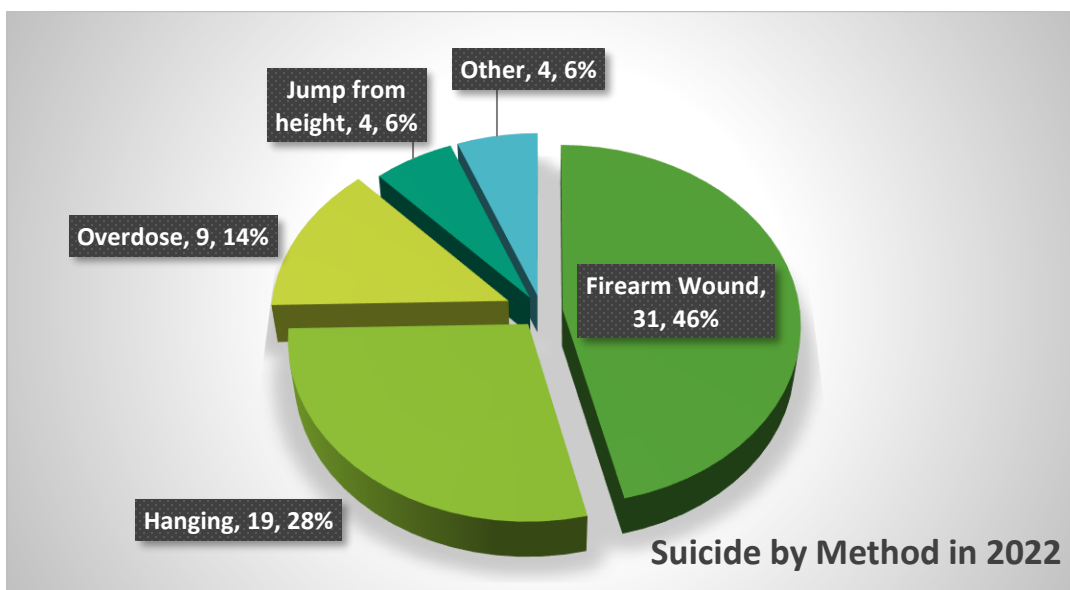
A review of the number of deaths classified as “Homicide” in Charleston County over the past 10 years shows the average number per year is 53.



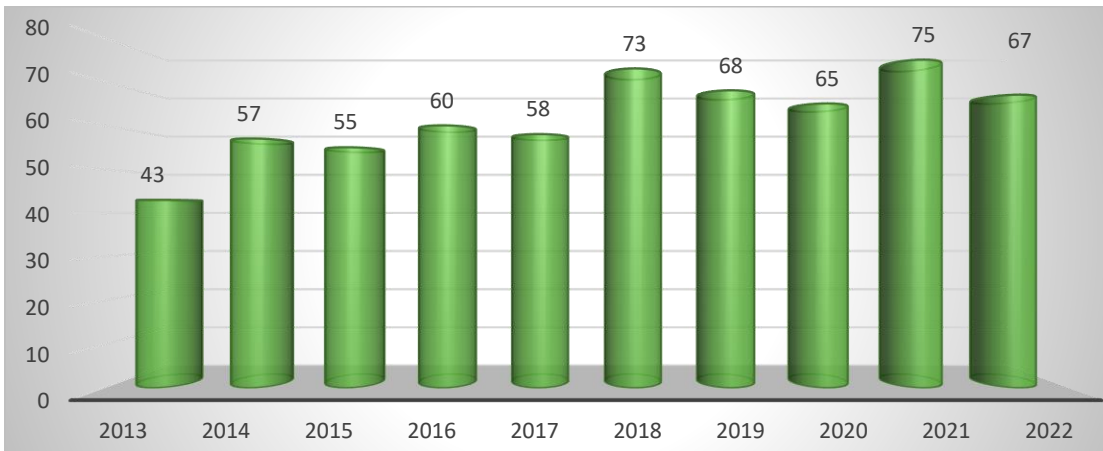
2022 “SUICIDE” STATISTICS

Suicide is death caused by intentional, self-inflicted injuries. In Charleston County during 2022, there were 67 deaths by suicide. The methods were:

- 31 firearm
- 19 asphyxia
- 9 overdoses
- 4 deaths by jumping from a height (1 from the Ravenel Bridge, 1 from the Don Holt Bridge, 2 from a building)
- 4 other means.



A ten-year review of the number of suicides in Charleston County shows an average of 62 per year.

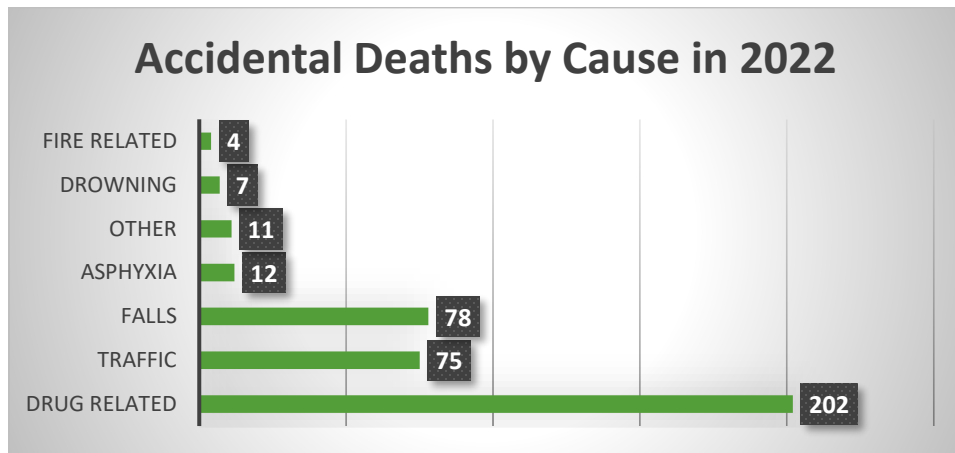


2022 “ACCIDENT” STATISTICS

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.

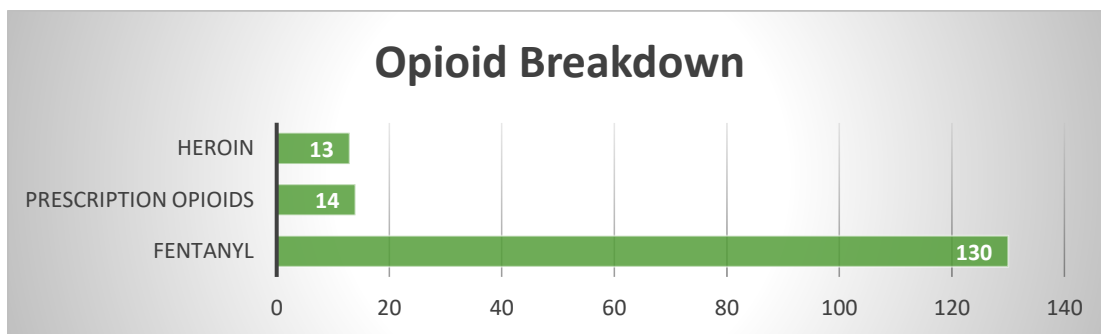
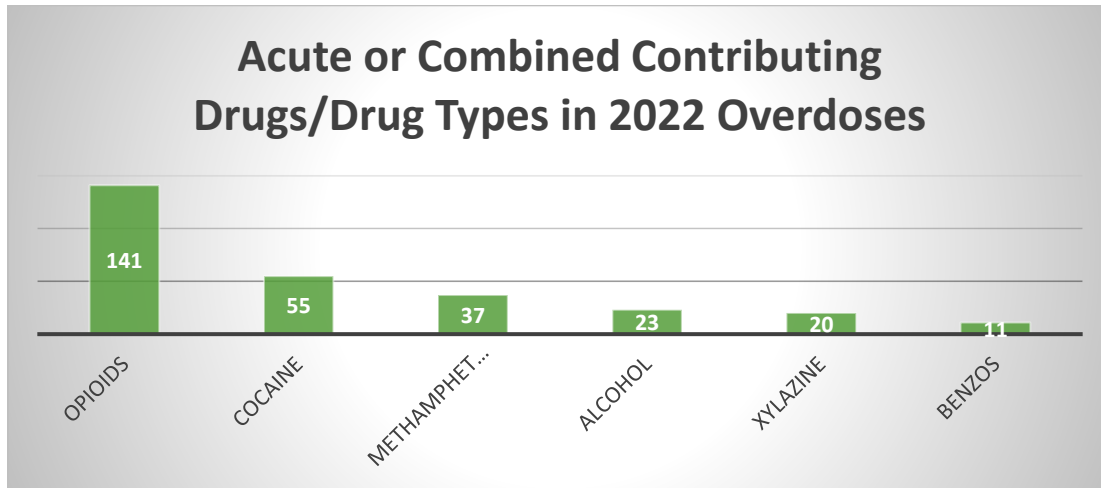
Three hundred eighty-nine (389) deaths were certified as “Accident”. The causes include:

- 202 drug related deaths;
- 75 traffic collisions;
- 78 falls;
- 7 drowning (River x 3, Pool x 2, Pond x 2);
- 10 foreign body asphyxia (food/emesis);
- 2 overlay/ asphyxia;
- 1 electric shock;
- 3 boat accidents;
- 1 gunshot injury;
- 1 train accident;
- 4 fire-carbon monoxide
- 1 carbon monoxide exhaust;
- 1 hypothermia; and
- 3 treatment complication related deaths.



Ninety-seven percent (97%) of the drug related deaths were overdoses with either a finding of acute intoxication (29%) or mixed drug toxicity (68%). Mixed drug toxicity means that more than one drug was found to have contributed to the death. Five (5) deaths were attributed to chronic drug abuse circumstances.

Toxicology testing revealed that the following drugs or drug types were present and significant enough to either cause the death acutely or in combination with another significant drug or drug type.

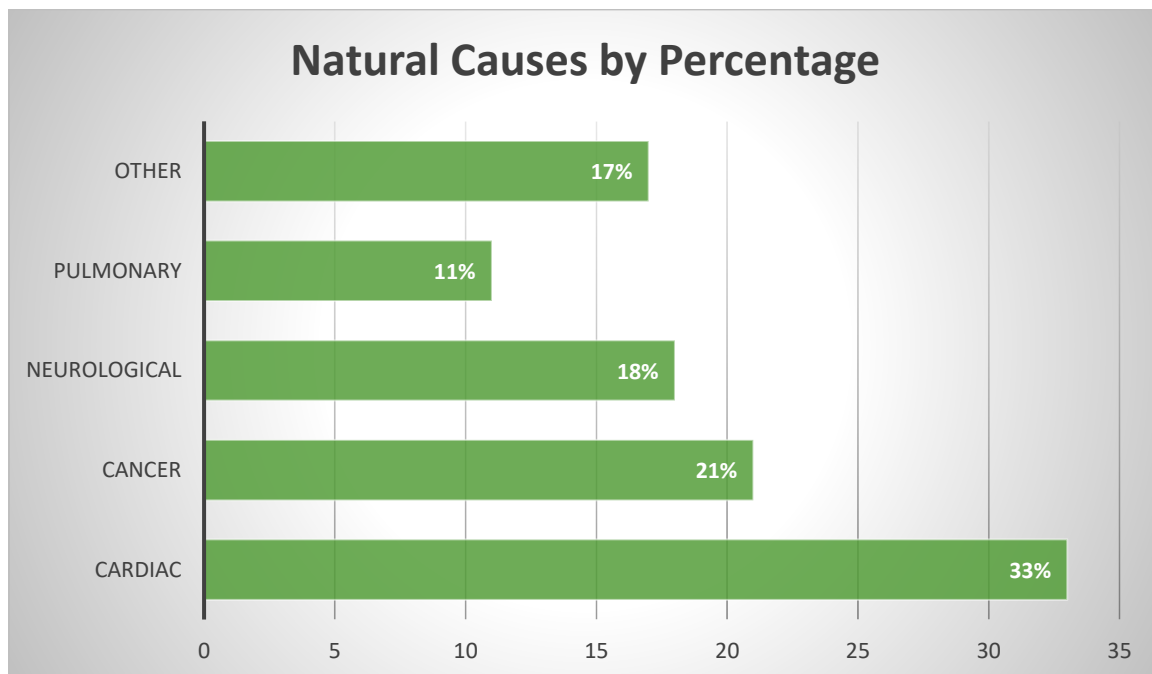


2022 “Natural Death” Statistics

In 2022, there were 2,129 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 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 by law to the office who were hospice care decedents totaled 1,130. There were 15 cases of natural fetal demise reported to the office. Generally, the deputies conduct a preliminary investigation to determine if further action is required.

In 2022, fifty-two (52) of the 2,129 Natural deaths investigated by the Office were due to COVID-19.



2022 “Undetermined Death” Statistics

In 2022, the Charleston County Coroner's Office deemed thirty-three deaths were of an “Undetermined” manner. After a full investigation, there is not a preponderance of information to classify the manner. Deaths in this category are the most thoroughly investigated. Often determination between suicide vs an accidental overdose cannot be made resulting in an “Undetermined” classification.

2022 Children's Statistics

Although children's deaths are counted in the overall statistics previously outlined in this report, it's important to highlight the information surrounding children's deaths. In 2022, there were 67 children's deaths investigated by the Charleston County Coroner's Office.

HOMICIDE:

Total: 9

Age range: 11 months to 17 years old

Average age: 14

Median age: 16

Causes: 7 victims had gunshot wounds, 1 victim of blunt trauma; 1 victim of neglect

Gender: 7 Males; 2 Females

Race: 7 African American; 2 Caucasian

SUICIDE

Total: 1

To keep the identity of the decedent private, no further information will be made public.

ACCIDENT

Total: 12

Accidents Other Than Vehicle Collisions

Total: 4

Causes: 1 fell from height, 2 asphyxia while co-sleeping; 1 choked on food

Age range: 7 days to 4 years old

Average age: 1 year

Median age: 5.5 months

Gender: 2 males; 2 females

Race: 2 African American; 2 Caucasian

Motor Vehicle Collisions

Total: 8

Age Range: Fetus -17 years

Position: 5 vehicle occupants, 2 pedestrians, 1 rider on running board

Gender: 6 males; 2 females

Race: 4 Caucasian; 3 African American; 1 biracial

NATURAL

Total: 36

Age range: A few minutes old to 17 years

Fetal demise: 11

UNDETERMINED

Total: 9

Age range: fetus to 11 years old

Average age: 2.5 years

Median age: 4 months

Causes: 4 undetermined causes while unsafe sleeping related; 1 asphyxia;
2 undetermined causes; 2 other causes

Gender: 6 females; 3 males

Race: 4 African American; 4 Caucasian; 1 Bi-racial

Included in the above children's statistics are the following cases regarding infants aged 1 and under, their causes of death and autopsy statistics.

Homicide: 1, Cause: blunt trauma, autopsied.

Accident: 3, Causes: Asphyxia for all 3, all autopsied.

Natural: 15, various causes, 1 autopsied.

Undetermined: 5, undetermined causes for all, autopsies for all.