

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER NUECES COUNTY

Rajesh Kannan, MD

Chief Medical Examiner



2023 Challenge Coin created for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner by SymbolArts

Table of Contents

About Our Office	3
Introduction	4
Accreditation	5
Staffing	6-7
About Our Work	7
Case Jurisdiction	8
Reportable Deaths	9
Case Designation	10
About Our Cases	11-12
Exam Types	13
Demographics	14
Manner of Death	15
Homicides	16
Suicides	17
Accidents	18
Natural Deaths	19
Child Fatalities	20
Drug Toxicity Deaths	21
In-Custody Deaths	22
Unidentified Remains	23
Outreach	24

About Our Office

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner was established to perform the inquest duties of death investigations for the citizens of Nueces County. This office receives reports of deaths in Nueces County according to the statutory requirements for inquests in the Texas Code of Criminal Procedures. We are striving to consistently provide quality medical death investigations so that stakeholders can have confidence that we have answered the questions on the manner and cause of death.



Dr. Kannan's Vision Statement for the Office

The three Cs of this office will be **Character**, **Competence**, and **Commitment**. In regard to **character**, we understand that the poor hiring decisions of the past and the lack of accountability at the office have opened Nueces County to unnecessary liability and expensive litigation. Moving forward, we will work to attract and retain staff that share our core values. Standardizing interview questions, establishing interview panels,

and careful examination of prior experience and training to evaluate their **competence** to perform this important work. We will continue to revise and align departmental standard operating procedures with state law, national standards, and best practices of other successful medical examiner offices across the country. Dr. Kannan's 14 years of experience with Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office will be helpful. Following Nueces County personnel and civil service guidelines, we will utilize the employee performance evaluation and employee discipline to establish solid expectations for this office and align our staff to the three core values.

Finally, I make a **commitment** to the Court that I will work with the Commissioners Court to provide quality medical death investigations. I plan on serving the people of Nueces County on a long-term basis since I am now residing in the Corpus Christi area. I believe the Court has made a generational investment in this office, and I want to help you realize a positive return on your investment. We will seek that level of **commitment** from our staff as well so that we can build a strong organizational culture that will outlast any one leader.

November 2023

Introduction

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) provides medicolegal death investigations for Nueces County and surrounding counties covered by interlocal agreements. Nueces County is located in the Coastal Bend region of Texas along the Gulf of Mexico and covers an area of 1,166 square miles. The county seat of Nueces County is Corpus Christi which had a population of more than 317,000 in the 2020 Census and is where the office is located. Nueces County had a total population of 353,178 in the 2020 Census which places the county as the 16th largest of Texas' 254 counties. The medicolegal investigations conducted by this office include postmortem examination and inquest services in order to certify the cause and manner of death in cases of homicide, suicide, accidents, and otherwise unexplained or unexpected deaths. The only exceptions to the jurisdiction of the County would be federal installations that arrange for their own death investigations such the U.S. military installations like the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station or the Army Depot.



Image: CLK Architect's rendering of the front of the ME's Office – Expansion and Remodel Project approved for Spring 2024 start date. (Left side of the building is the expansion portion of the office which includes new autopsy suite, intake area, coolers, and office area for technician team)

Accreditation

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is not currently accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) during the period of this annual report. The accreditation lapsed in 2020. Factors which precluded this office from regaining accreditation in 2023 included equipment issues, insufficient number of staff including board certified forensic pathologists, and forensic specialist availability (odontologist, anthropologist, neuropathology, radiology, etc.). With the appointment of Dr. Rajesh P. Kannan as the Chief Medical Examiner, regaining NAME accreditation is one of the foremost priorities of the office. Additionally, the office is currently implementing a case management software application and working on updating the facility. Nueces County awarded Victory Building a contract to build a new facility and remodel the existing facility with a Spring 2024 start date.

In anticipation of seeking re-accreditation, this office continues to work from the NAME checklist, and revise its policies and procedures to be in compliance with those standards and best practices in forensic pathology. Information about NAME and inspection and accreditation can be found on the NAME website at:

<https://www.thename.org>

<https://www.thename.org/inspection-accreditation>

Staffing

During 2023, the number of full-time positions within the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner were reduced. All positions funded by the ARPA monies previously authorized by the Commissioner’s Court were eliminated due to the long-term financial impact of grant funded positions on the County. Those positions included two full time Medical Examiner Investigators and one full-time Autopsy Technician. Additionally, the number of full-time Medical Examiners was reduced to two, both of which were entirely funded by the General Fund rather than relying on a portion of ARPA funds for salaries and fringe benefits. Finally, a reduction in force was required to achieve the necessary salary savings and the permanent part-time investigators were eliminated. The County dedicated an amount of temporary salary funds to hire temporary part-time Deputy Medical Examiners and ME Investigators as needed for coverage.

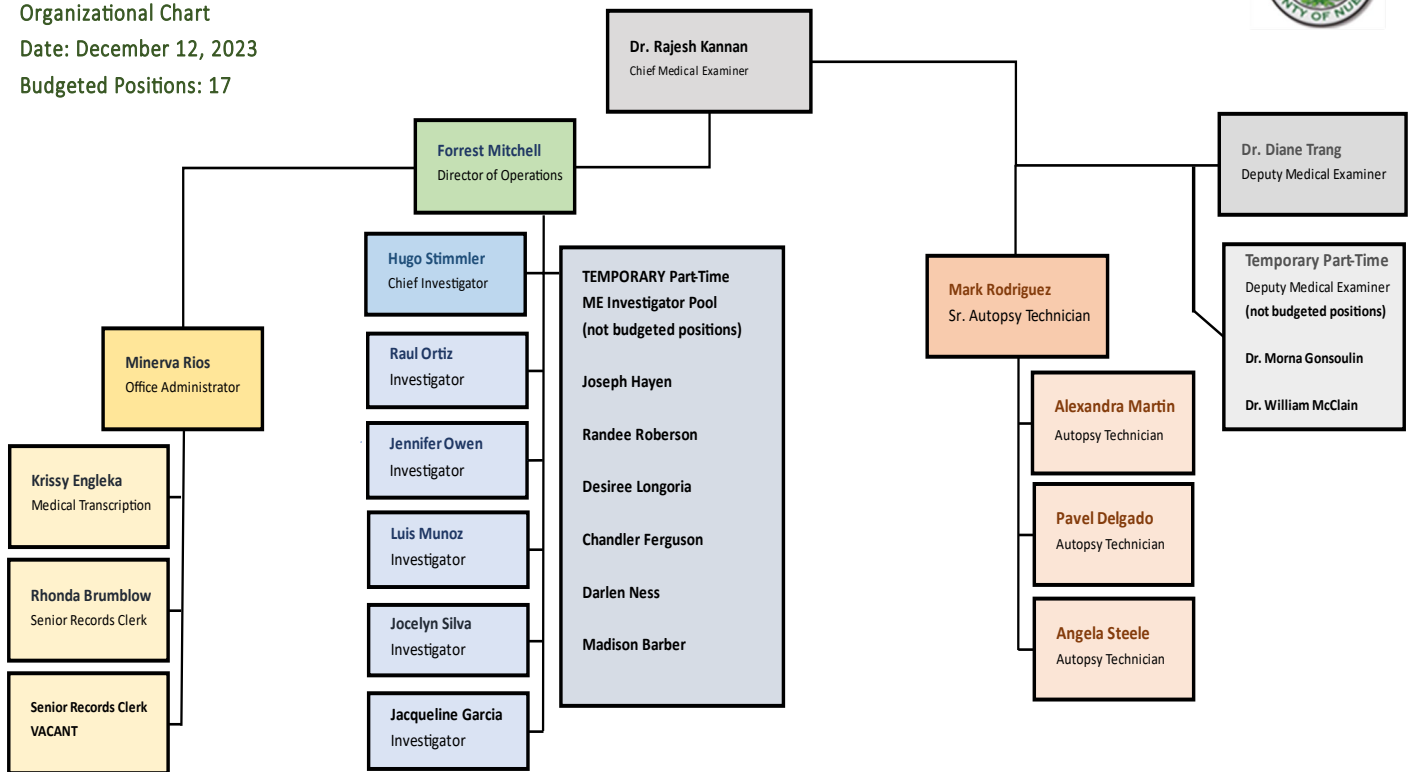


DEPT. 3890- Office of Chief Medical Examiner

Organizational Chart

Date: December 12, 2023

Budgeted Positions: 17



About Our Work

During 2023, this office continued to see significant organizational and personnel changes. Some of these changes included the voluntary separation from employment of the Chief Medical Examiner, the appointment of Deputy Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Rajesh Kannan as Chief, a reduction in the use and reliance on Temporary Deputy Medical Examiners, and the elimination of positions funded by the American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA). In July of 2023, Dr. Diane-Ngan H. Trang joined the team as a Deputy Medical Examiner. Dr. Trang trained in Bexar County and joined the Nueces County team after serving with a multijurisdictional office in the Fort Worth area. With the resignation of former Chief Medical Examiner in the August of 2023, Dr. Rajesh Kannan was appointed as interim Chief Medical Examiner until he was appointed as Chief Medical Examiner by the Nueces County Commissioner's Court in November.

Due to significant budgetary constraints in the 2023-2024 Nueces County Budget created by taxation valuation litigation which remains on-going, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner was asked to make significant budgetary reductions in a very short period of time. Working with our elected leaders and budgetary planning personnel, the office was able to reduce more than 11.8% of its General Fund appropriations or \$340,479. This was done primarily through the elimination of positions, reduction in the reliance of contractors, streamlining of processes, and the reduction in waste in all teams. These General Fund savings did not include the additional reduction and elimination of positions partially funded by ARPA, which in 2022-2023 budget were \$403,377 and projected to be \$302,533 dollars in 2023-2024. Combined, these two reductions totaled \$643,0142, or a 22.3% reduction in both types of funds as compared to the 2022-2023 budget.

Despite all of these challenges in 2023, all the Medical Examiners on staff or physicians conducting postmortem examinations through a county approved contract were board certified in forensic pathology and held an active Texas medical license. Additionally, the majority of the investigators were certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABDMI) and held either a bachelor's degree or a master's degree in the sciences or applied sciences.

Case Jurisdiction

The Texas statutes that govern medicolegal death investigations for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner are found in Article 49.25 of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, Inquest Upon Dead Bodies. Though the population of Nueces County is not large enough to statutorily be required to create a medical examiner's office¹, the Commissioner's Court has long authorized the resources necessary for this office to perform the duties of state mandated inquests. Other, smaller, jurisdictions in Texas would rely on the Justices of the Peace to perform inquest duties, which in turn would contract with private forensic pathologists or some of the larger Medical Examiners' Offices in the state. That practice however could significantly increase the costs of inquests as the county would be contracting for autopsy services and paying transportation costs to and from those private autopsy facilities (sometimes hundreds of miles away).

The cause of death in the death certifications is generally an injury, natural disease, exposure to toxic material or substances, or any combination of these which is sufficient to cause death. The manner of death in the certifications refers to the circumstances surrounding how the death occurred and is divided into five categories:

NATURAL ACCIDENT SUICIDE HOMICIDE UNDETERMINED

¹ Art. 49.25 Sec. 1. Of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedures mandates the creation of an office of medical examiner in any county with a population of over 2.5 million. According to U.S. Census figures, there were only two counties in Texas with a population in excess of 2.5 million, Dallas and Harris. However, there were medical examiner's offices in smaller Texas counties such as Bexar, Travis, Tarrant, Galveston, Ft. Bend, and Nueces County.

Reportable Deaths

The Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, Article 49.25 also requires certain persons including police officers, superintendents or managers of an institution, physicians, or private citizens who become aware of a death to report the death to the medical examiner. This statute also requires the office investigating the death to report any unidentified remains to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) no later than 10 working days after the identifying features of the body are determined or no more than 60 days from when the investigation began.

- The person dies in prison under circumstances other than those described by Section 501.055(b), Government Code, or in jail;
- The person dies an unnatural death from a cause other than a legal execution;
- The body or a body part of a person is found, the cause or circumstances of death are unknown, and:
 - The person is identified; or the person is unidentified;
 - The circumstances of the death indicate that the death may have been caused by unlawful means;
 - The person commits suicide, or the circumstances of the death indicate that the death may have been caused by suicide;
 - The person dies without having been attended by a physician;
 - The person dies while attended by a physician who is unable to certify the cause of death and who requests the medical examiner to conduct an inquest; or
- The person is a child younger than six years of age and reported under Chapter 264, Family Code.
- If a person dies in a hospital or other institution and an attending physician is unable to certify the cause of death.

Case Designation

Each death investigation conducted by this office that results in a body being transported to the OCME will result in an investigative report being completed. ME investigators that conduct any follow-up investigation of Nueces County or other counties' cases document their work and findings in supplemental reports which become part of the permanent case file. With reportable deaths having so many identifying numbers for the agencies involved (i.e., Fire Department Call number, Emergency Medical Services run sheets, Police Department Incident Report Number, or District Attorney Cause Number), it is important for the OCME to assign each reported death its own unique, sequential identifying ME case number. This is important for reference when communicating with those agencies about each case and in court proceedings.

The first aspect of the designation will be ME for Medical Examiner. That is followed by a two-digit number for the calendar year in which the death occurred. The final number is a four-digit number in numerical order as they were called into the office on the death notification phone line. These are logged by the investigators as the calls occur and do not change between sections (Autopsy, Administration, or Investigations).

About Our Cases

Deaths Reported

In 2023, a total of 3,187 deaths were reported to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's Office for Nueces County. Each of the death notifications required an immediate evaluation of the facts and circumstances surrounding the death by investigators to determine if the Medical Examiner's Office would take jurisdiction over the reported case, pursuant to the state law. Of those deaths, 803 bodies were transported to this office by our contract transport service or organ and tissue procurement agencies. Of the 803 decedents transported to the office, 545 decedents had a postmortem examination conducted by this office as determined by the Medical Examiner on duty. The other 256 decedents were determined to be temporary storage until a funeral home was assigned, "no-cases" where the OCME either determined it did not have jurisdiction, or where our office worked with the primary care or treating physician that was providing care for the decedent prior to their death agreed to sign the death certificate. This office does not perform any private autopsies on site, such as hospital autopsies with family consent, on the county premises. County policies prohibit the use of government property for personal pecuniary gain.

Scene Investigations

The primary responsibility of the investigator is to assist the Medical Examiners by providing a detailed investigation report regarding the circumstances of the death which were reported to the office. Part of the investigators' duties include working with law enforcement and medical examiners in the investigation of the death scenes that occur outside of medical facilities. Investigators responded to the following type of death scenes:

- All deaths due to other than natural causes (known or suspected accident, suicide, or homicide) where the decedent is still at the scene
- All deaths of children up to and including the age of six (6) years, even when the decedent may have been removed from the scene and pronounced dead at a local health care facility
- All deaths where the decedent has collapsed or been injured at their workplace, even if the decedent may have been removed from the scene and pronounced with death at a health care facility
- Investigators will coordinate with other agencies, including regulatory agencies, in workplace accidental deaths
- All deaths involving decomposed decedents and skeletonized remains
- Any other deaths at the discretion of the Medical Examiner

Scene Investigations (cont.)

Investigators may collect evidence at the scene that may be relevant to the investigation. Some examples of this could include:

- A braided nylon rope that was used as a ligature in a suspected suicide by hanging
- The deceased's parachute that did not deploy in a skydiving accident
- A safety harness with flotation device from a worker that may have died in an industrial accident

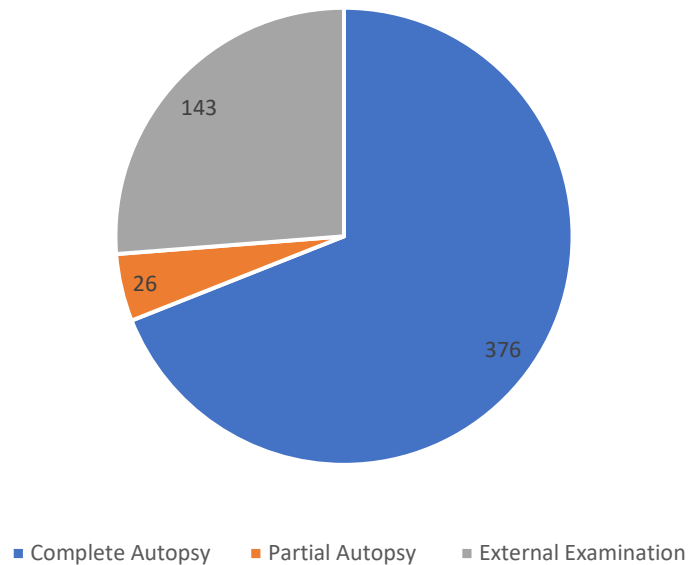
As a part of the scene investigation, investigators may also gather the decedent's medications and prescription bottles. This is done for two significant reasons: First, to see if the medications may have contributed to the death and second, it is a public safety effort to reduce the amount of dangerous controlled substances in our community. Once the medications are counted and documented, and after the case is complete, the medications are transferred to the custody of the Nueces County Sheriff's Office for proper destruction.

After completing the scene investigations, investigators follow-up by requesting any necessary records or reports, contacting primary care physicians, notifying next of kin, and arranging for transport. Investigators document their findings in supplemental reports which are made available to the Medical Examiner who investigates that case. In 2023, OCME investigators conducted a total of 215 scene investigations.

Exam Types

During 2023, this office conducted primarily complete autopsies in the 545 examinations performed by this office. The next highest category of cases external examinations, followed by 26 partial autopsies. The type of exam was determined by each Medical Examiner, and the work was reviewed by their colleagues through an adopted peer review process. The types of examinations were consistent with the current best practices in forensic medicine and based upon the criteria established by the National Association of Medical Examiners for the case type.

2023 Postmortem Exam Types

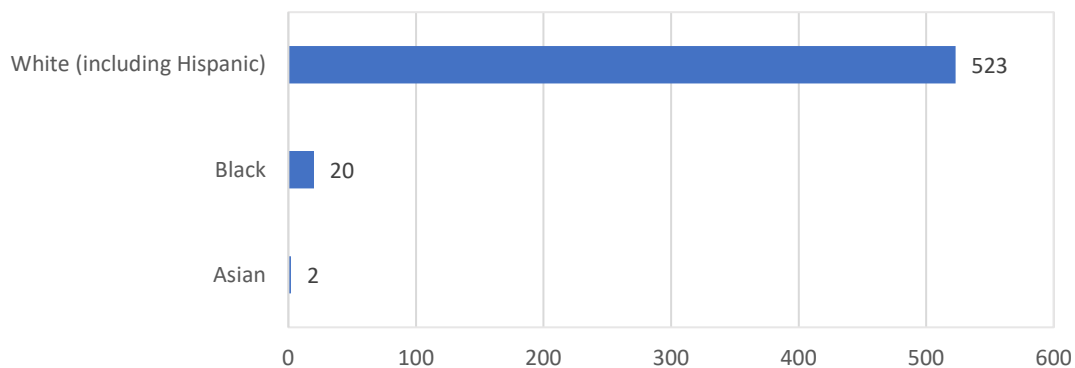


Demographics

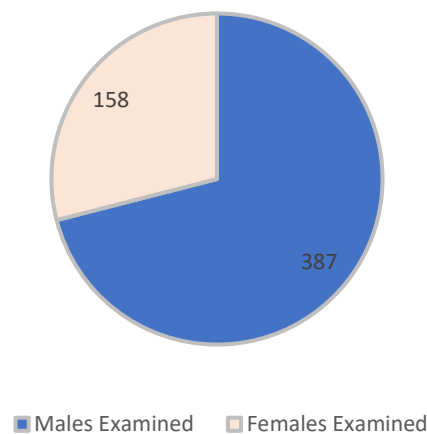
During 2023, this office was awarded funds to obtain case management software through the statutory competitive bid process which will be utilized to conduct more advanced research and analytics regarding case demographics. Beginning in October 2023, this office began working with the vendor that was awarded the contract, QuincyTech, to begin the process of moving away from paper charting. Furthermore, QuincyTech is an American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant case management software application which will bring Nueces County in compliance with a long-standing settlement with the federal government.

Since the creation of this office, all operational processes and documents have remained paper driven, with only a small amount of data that was able to be captured electronically in a database for the preparation of this report. Demographic information was limited and gleaned from our internal database.

2023 Race of Decedents Examined

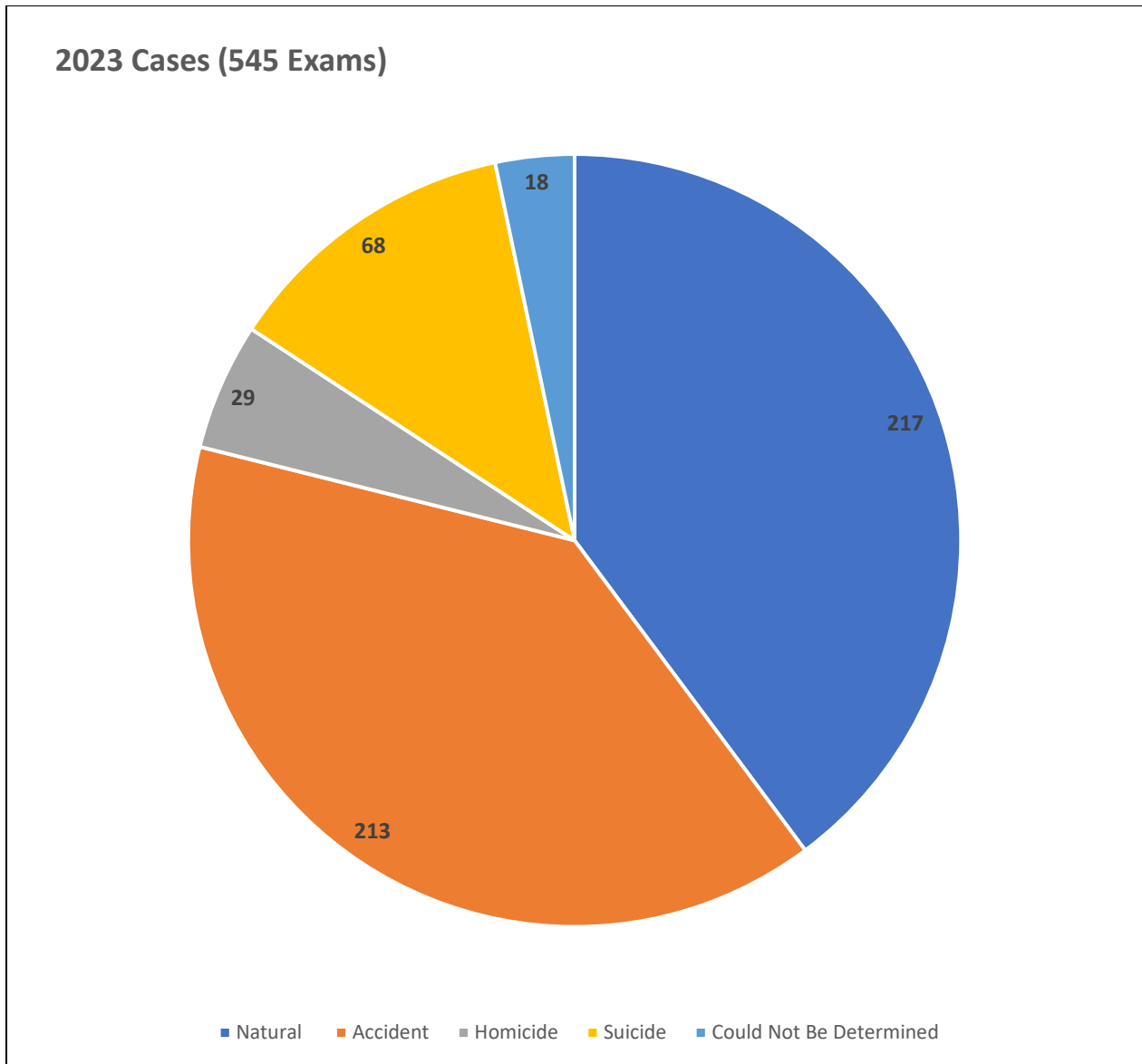


2023 Cases Examined - Sex of Decedent



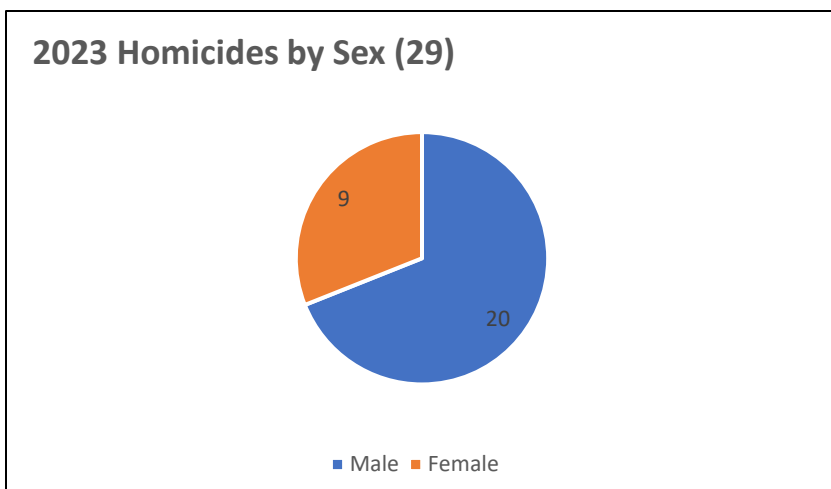
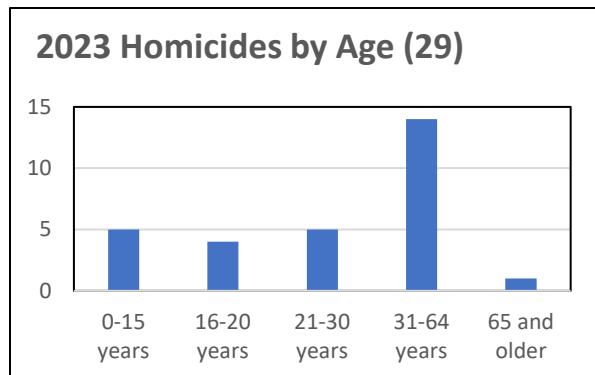
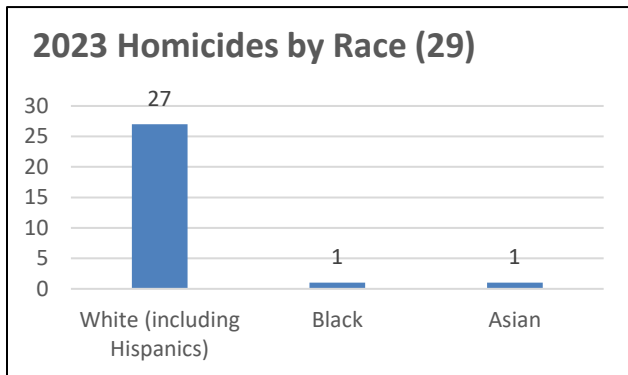
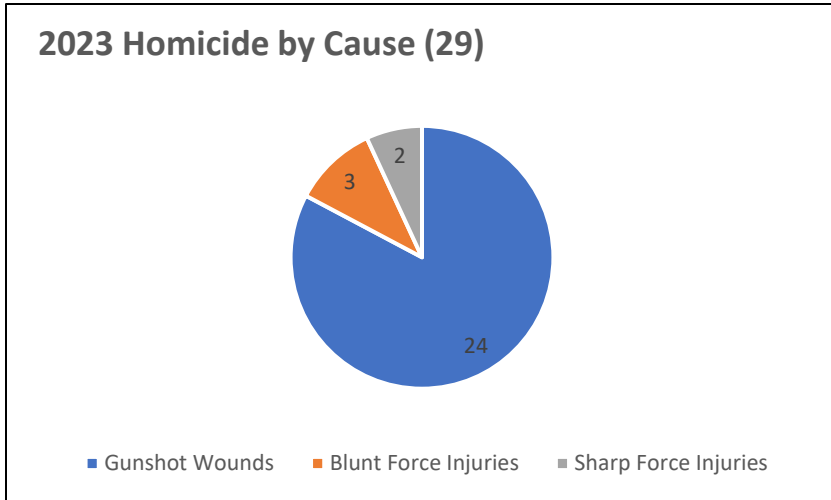
Manner Of Death

Manner of Death in 2023 cases for the OCME



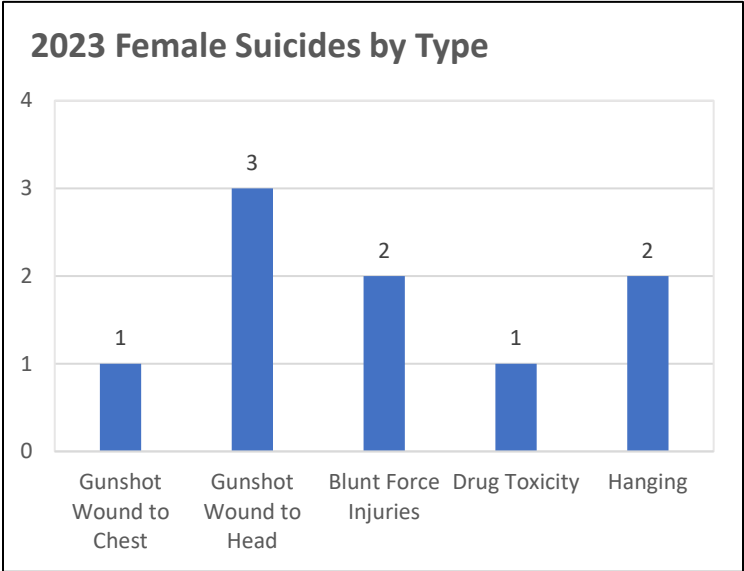
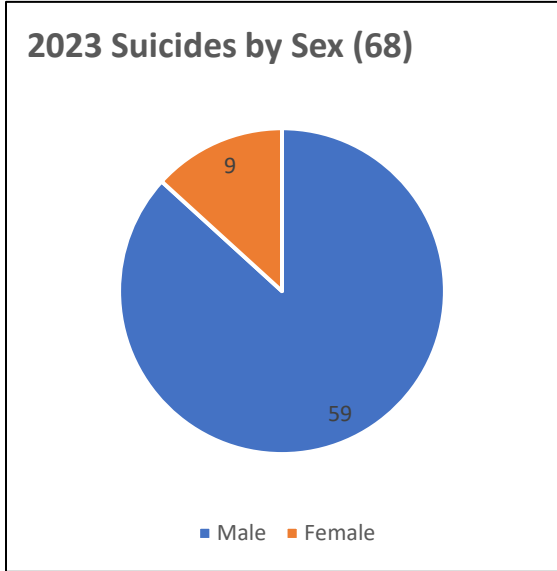
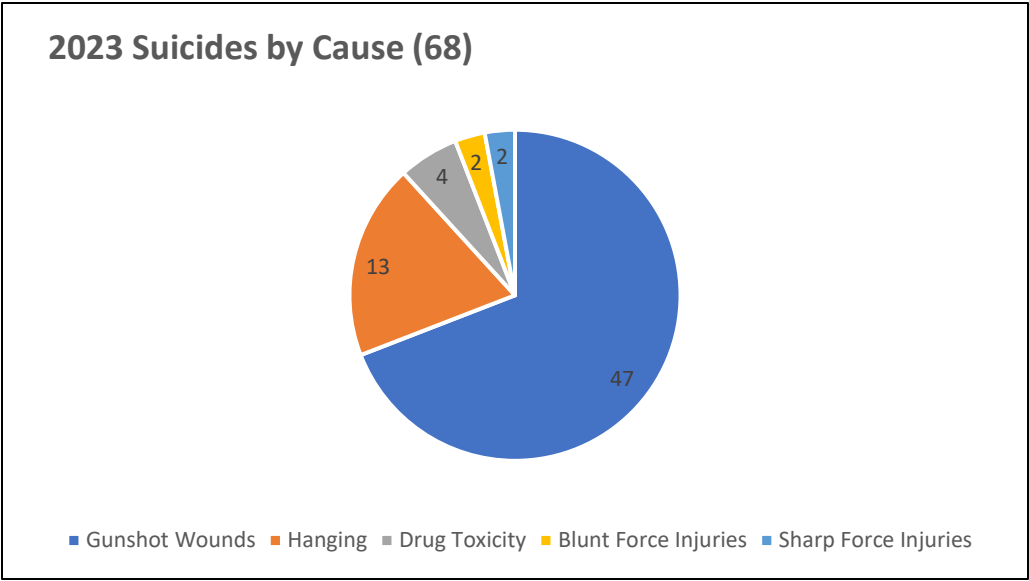
Homicides

Of the 547 postmortem examinations conducted by the OCME in 2023, 29 of those cases or 5.3% of those examinations were designated by the Medical Examiners as homicides.



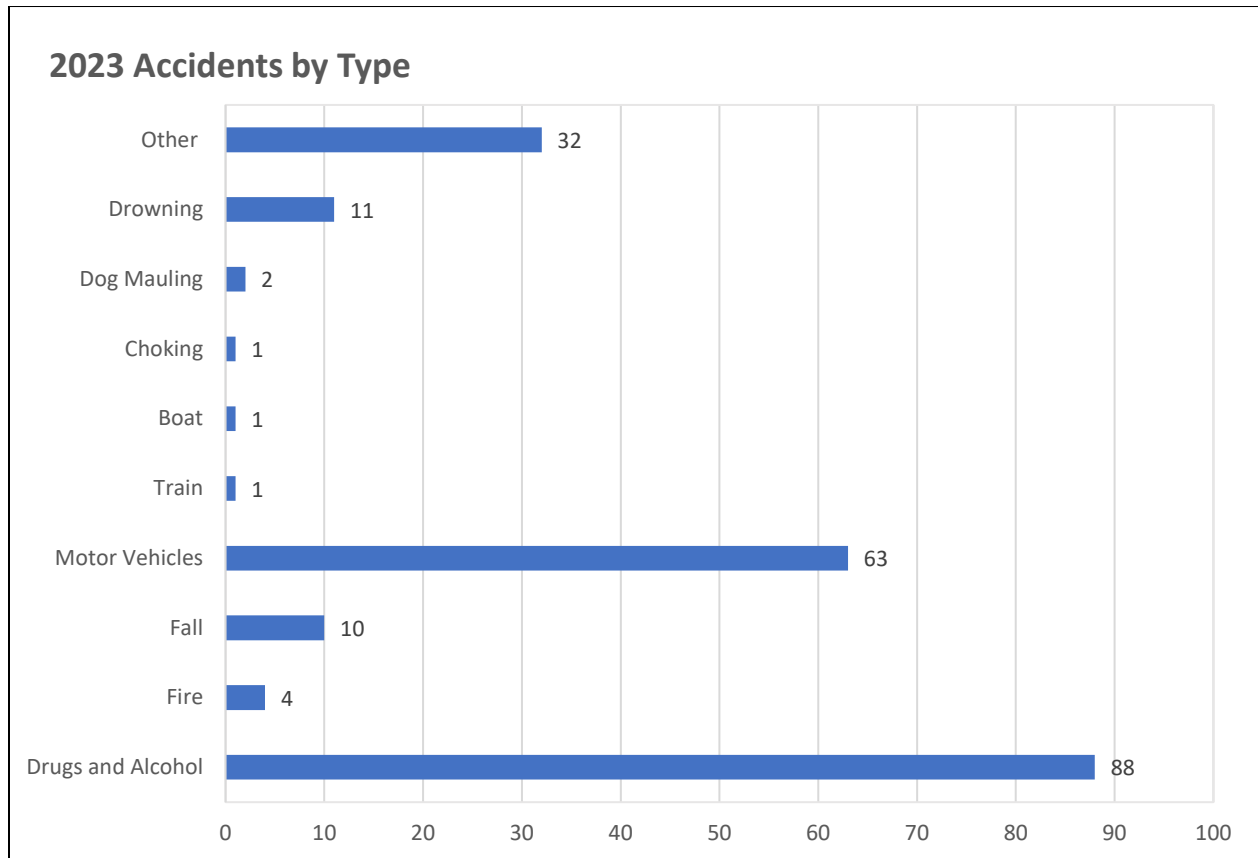
Suicides

Of the 545 postmortem examinations conducted by this office in 2023, a total of 68 of those cases were determined to be suicides. This equates to approximately 12.5% of our cases which is a slight increase over 2022, when suicides represented 10% of our cases. The majority of the suicides that occurred in Nueces County involved gunshot wounds.



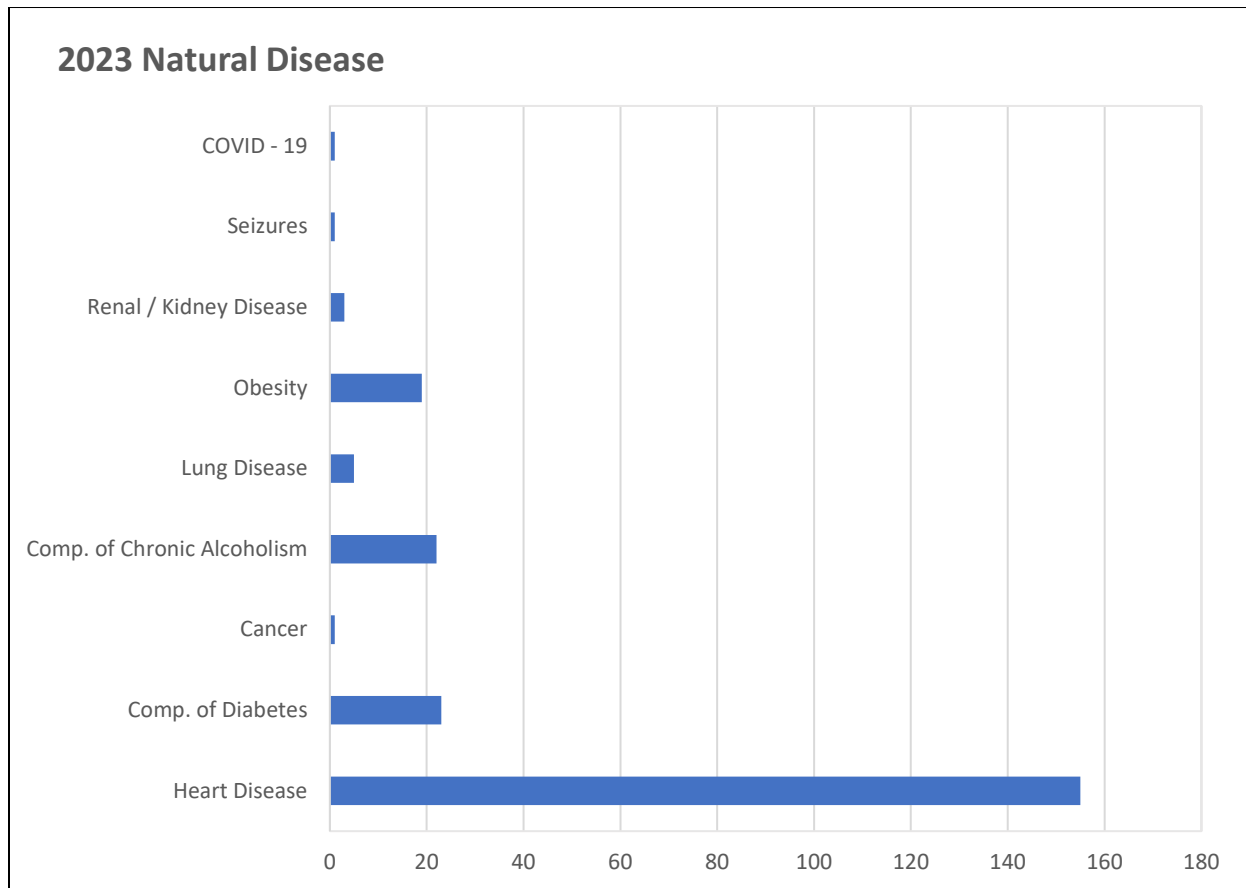
Accidents

There were 213 deaths reported to this office that were classified as accidents for the manner of death, which represents a decline over last year. More than a third of those accidents were drug-related fatalities (prescription drugs, illicit drugs, and alcohol, by themselves or in combination). The next largest category of accidental deaths involved drugs or alcohol, followed by accidents involving motor vehicles. These are then followed by falls, drowning, fires, and other categories.



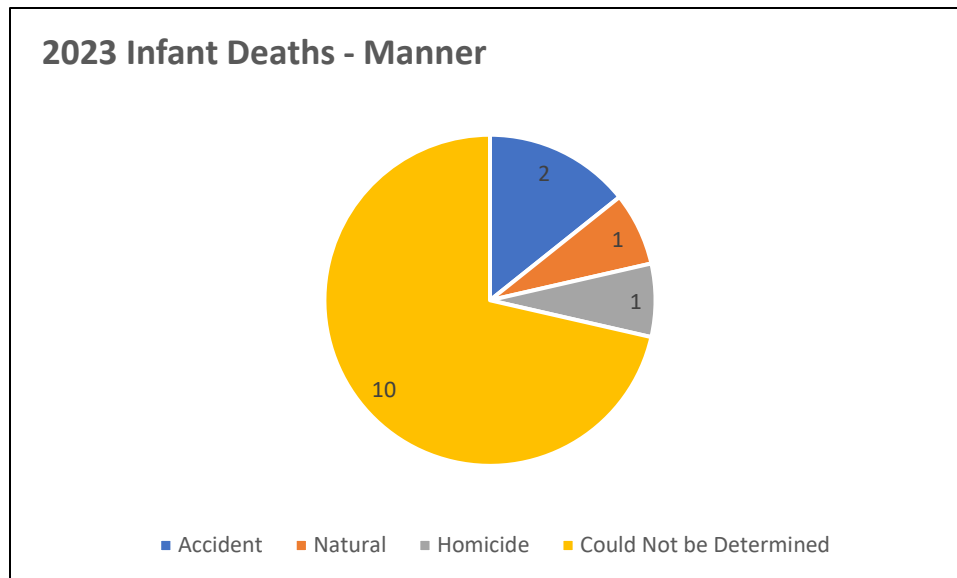
Natural Deaths

In 2023, 217 of the Nueces County decedents examined by the office were determined to have died of natural disease. These natural deaths account for 39.8% of the examinations which is an increase over last year (30.2% of examinations). Like other jurisdictions in Texas and the United States, our postmortem examinations revealed that the most common cause of natural deaths is heart disease. Many of the cases involve multiple diseases. Other significant categories of natural deaths include complications of chronic alcoholism, complications of diabetes, and cancer.

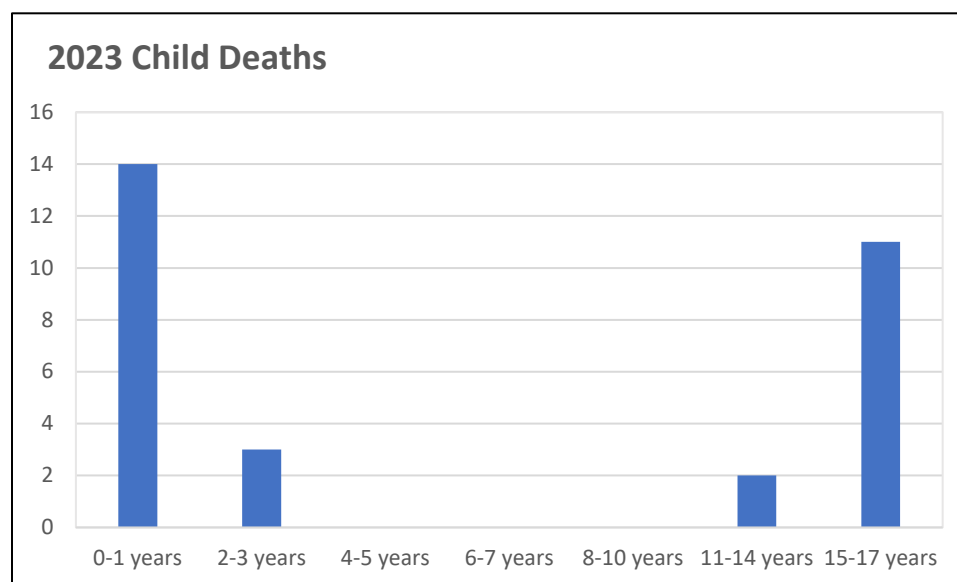


Child Fatalities

Pursuant to Chapter 674 of the *Texas Health and Safety Code*, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's Office participates in the quarterly Child and Infant Death Review Board in a partnership with local health care providers and child protection services. This office provides a copy of its autopsy reports for participating members. Of the child fatalities (30) in 2023, 14 of those met that legal definition of being an infant for the purposes of review.

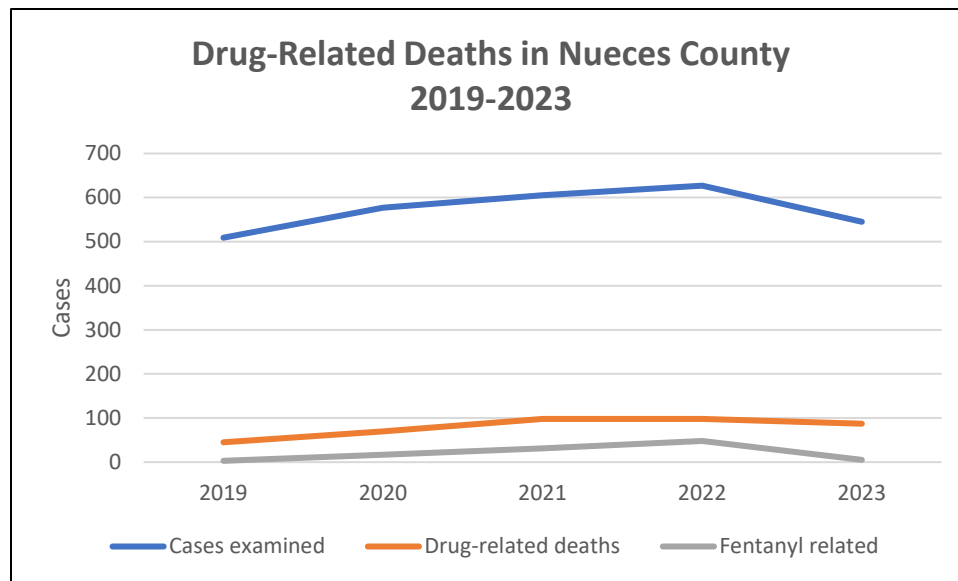


For the purposes of this report, a child is referred to as someone under the age of 18. In 2023, there were a total of 30 cases involving defendants 0-17 years of age.



Drug-Related Deaths

Accidental deaths due to drug toxicity remain a significant portion of the deaths examined by this office in 2023. In fact, drug-related deaths accounted for a total of 87 of our 545 examinations, or approximately 16% of our casework. Over the past five years, fentanyl has emerged as one of the most prevalent drugs found in these drug-regulated fatalities, however the cases involving fentanyl declined significantly in 2023 as demonstrated in the chart below.



Combined drug use toxicological results have emerged in many of our drug-related death cases. In 2023, 44 cases involving methamphetamine or methamphetamine in combination with other drugs were detected, which represents 50% of the drug-related deaths in 2023. Cocaine toxicity, or in combination with other drugs such as fentanyl or methamphetamine were detected in a total of 31 cases. The office has been working closely with law enforcement agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Corpus Christi Police Department, and Nueces County Sheriff's Office to provide them with information about our death investigations in an effort to further reduce these tragic and unnecessary deaths. In 2023, the DEA provided the ME's Office with first aid, CPR, and Narcan training in case our staff were accidentally exposed to fentanyl and other dangerous drugs. ME Investigators have now been provided with a sufficient number of dosages in case such an exposure occurred.

In Custody Deaths

Under Article 49.18 of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, a death in custody is defined as a person who died while confined in a penal institution. For the purposes of this statute, correctional facilities include prisons operated by or under contract with the State of Texas, jails, and juvenile justice facilities. This statute also requires the reporting of deaths for persons under arrest by a peace officer, or under the physical control or restraint of a peace officer. Under Texas law, the sheriff, law enforcement executive, or other person in charge of the penal institution shall as soon as practicable inform the Justice of the Peace or the Medical Examiner of the death if that office assumes the role of conducting inquests in that jurisdiction. An investigation of that death must be conducted by those agencies and a report must be filed with the Texas Attorney General's Office within 30 days of the death of the person in custody. This office performs postmortem examinations in support of those investigations and our autopsy reports are provided to those agencies as a part of their statutory reporting of the investigative findings to the state's attorney.

In 2023, there were a total of nine (9) cases classified as Custodial Deaths that died under the custody of a criminal justice agency such as law enforcement, a detention facility, or a correctional facility. Of those deaths, seven were ruled as Natural Deaths due to diseases such as heart disease, sepsis, cirrhosis of the liver, and renal disease. Two (2) were ruled as Accidental Deaths, one of which was a Choking case while the other was classified as a Fall.

Unidentified Decedents

The OCME utilizes several methods to identify decedents and their remains. These can include identification at the scene by family, friends, or someone who knew the decedent. It could also be by hospital identification, or an identification document present on the decedent. Other ways to identify unknown decedents include the comparison of dental radiographs, medical x-rays, or fingerprints. Some decedents can be identified by serial numbered medical devices or implants as well. Finally, specimens can be collected from the decedent for DNA identification. Investigators with this office work closely with our medical examiners to identify all decedents in a timely manner.

If our efforts to identify a decedent are unsuccessful, this office will report the unknown remains to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs). Partnering with a forensic anthropologist from the Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi or the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification, this office will enter as much identifying information about the remains as possible to assist in future efforts. This includes taking a sample for DNA analysis. During 2023, this office entered two cases into NamUs.

Outreach

Rebuilding and repairing the relationships between the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and the local law enforcement, prosecutorial, health care, and educational institutions, agencies, and the community has been an important part of our work in 2023. Dr. Kannan and Director Mitchell both support and believe in a partnership with our local college and university in teaching the next generation of forensic scientists, investigators, and technicians. Consequently, this office strengthened our partnership with the Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi to allow student observers along on its death investigations, but also to observe certain types of autopsies.

In April of 2023, Dr. Kannan provided a continuing educational opportunity for local law enforcement regarding Gunshot wounds stemming from his years of experience with the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office under Dr. Vincent DiMaio. The course was well attended by detectives with the Corpus Christi Police Department, the Sheriff's Office, the Texas Rangers, and surrounding agencies.



Additionally, our Chief Investigator presented at the Corpus Christi Police Academy on Death Investigations and the role of the Medical Examiner's Office in Inquests in Texas.

Finally, in cooperation with the Texas Workforce Commission, the office hosted two sets of high school teachers from all over the Coastal Bend area that were interested in teaching forensic science to their students. The day-long presentations included briefings and instruction on all aspects of the operation of the office, statutory authority, and ended in a tour of the facility with representatives of each section of the department.

Photo: Dr. Kannan presenting to local law enforcement on Gunshot Wounds