



OFFICE OF THE
MEDICAL EXAMINER
ANNUAL REPORT
2022



www.nuecesco.com/county-services/medical-examiner

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ABOUT OUR OFFICE

Introduction

The Nueces County Medical Examiner’s Office (NCMEO) 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. The NCMEO also provides autopsy services to other counties in the region via interlocal agreements.

Counties served in 2022 through Interlocal Agreements

ARANSAS

BEE

BROOKS

JIM WELLS

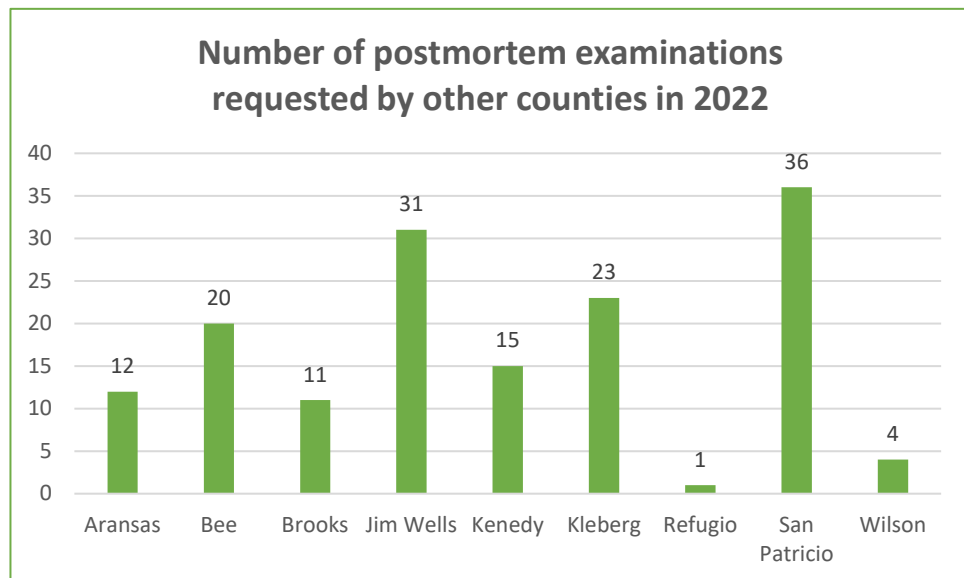
KENEDY

KLEBERG

REFUGIO

SAN PATRICIO

WILSON



Accreditation

The Nueces County Medical Examiner’s Office was not accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) during the period of this annual report. The accreditation lapsed in 2020. Factors which precluded the NCMEO from regaining accreditation included equipment issues, insufficient number of staff including board certified forensic pathologists, forensic specialist availability (odontologist, anthropologist, etc.), and the utilization of doctors that were not board certified in forensic pathology. With the appointment of Dr. Timothy Fagen as the Chief Medical Examiner in July of 2022, the office began to pursue regaining NAME accreditation of the office.

One of those projects included strengthening the partnership with Texas A & M University at Corpus Christi and the Anthropology Department. The Office reinstated the previously suspended student observer program and expanded the agreement. It simultaneously enlisted the services of a forensic anthropologist, Dr. Sharon Derrick. Through an agreement, Dr. Derrick is now providing services for the NCMEO. Dr. Derrick assists the office with the evaluation of bones and skeletal remains as we work to enter unidentified remains into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUS). Simultaneously, we are working with a forensic odontologist to assist in the scientific identification of unknown persons that are too badly decomposed for fingerprint or visual identification, or whose body has been destroyed by fire or other destructive means.

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 2022, there were significant organizational and personnel changes that occurred within the office. Some of these changes include the separation of employment of the Chief Medical Examiner, the Deputy Chief Medical Examiner, a Senior Autopsy Technician, and the Office Administrator. With the departure of the Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Adel Shaker, in the Spring of 2022, an interim Chief Medical Examiner was hired by the Nueces County Commissioner’s Court. The Interim Chief, Dr. Ray Fernandez, who was also the retired Chief Medical Examiner of Nueces County returned to the office to assist during the transition period. Then on July 18th, 2022, Dr. Timothy Fagen started as the Chief Medical Examiner for Nueces County. In late September 2022, Dr. Rajesh Kannan joined the team as the Deputy Chief Medical Examiner.

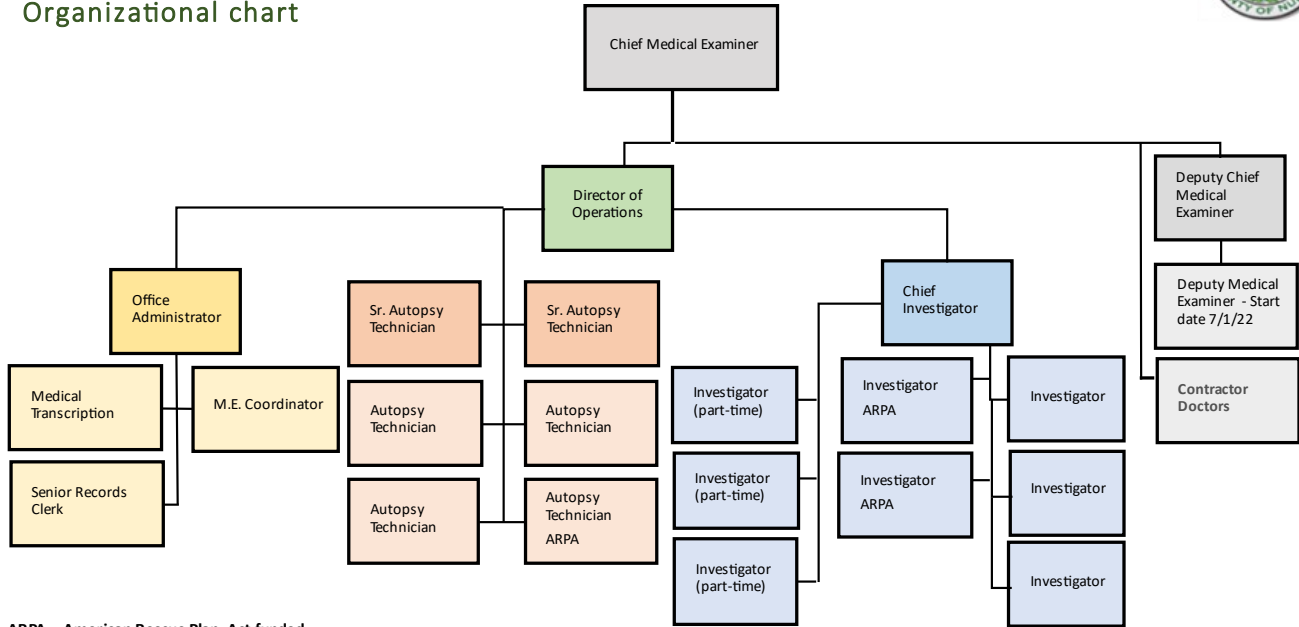
With the assistance and support of the Nueces County Commissioners Court, the NCMEO was able to hire additional staff to assist with the case volume. A third full-time Deputy Medical Examiner was approved for the summer of 2023 through American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding made available to the County. Additionally, the NCMEO was able to hire two additional full-time investigators through ARPA funding which allowed for 24 hours on-site operations for the first time in the office’s history. This was a significant step forward in the operations and professionalization of the office.

By the end of 2022, 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.



Medical Examiner's Office

Organizational chart



ABOUT OUR WORK

Case Jurisdiction

The Texas statutes that govern medicolegal death investigations for the NCME are found in Article 49.25 of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, Inquest Upon Dead Bodies. 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

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.

Process

When a death occurs in Nueces County, the reporting party contacts the NCMEO, which is staffed by Medical Examiner investigators 24 hours per day. The investigator takes down the relevant information from the reporting person, nurse, doctor, or facility administrator in order to make a determination as to whether or not the NCMEO will take jurisdiction over the death. Another important determination that must be made is whether or not the ME Investigator will respond to the death scene to perform a scene investigation and to document findings that will become part of the medicolegal death investigation.

If the death occurs outside of the jurisdictional boundaries of Nueces County, the local Justice of the Peace will gather the relevant facts and document them on an autopsy order form for this office. This will also include information about other agencies that may have reports or information about the case. ME investigators will then contact those agencies to gather further information for the forensic pathologist to evaluate during the investigation. In most cases, the Justice of the Peace will also request any additional testing, such as scientific identification, needed for the case.

Case Designation

Each death investigation conducted by this office that results in a body being transported to the NCMEO 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 NCMEO 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). Finally, if the postmortem examination is being conducted at the request of the Justice of the Peace from a county covered by an interlocal agreement, the letters SC will be included for "surrounding county."

ME 22-0001

ME 22-1000 SC

ABOUT OUR CASES

Deaths Reported

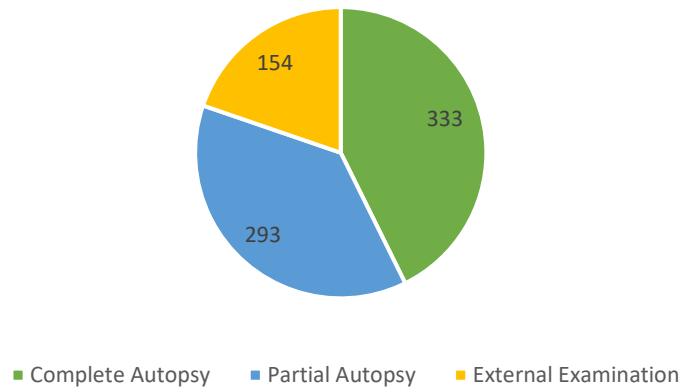
In 2022, a total of 3,272 deaths were reported to the Nueces County Medical Examiner’s Office. Each of the death notifications required an immediate evaluation of the facts and circumstances surrounding the death to determine if the Medical Examiner’s Office would take jurisdiction over the reported case, pursuant to the state law. Of those deaths, 973 bodies were transported to this office by our contract transport service or funeral homes from Nueces and surrounding counties. Of the 973 decedents transported to the office, 780 decedents had a postmortem examination conducted by this office. The other 193 decedents were determined to be “no-cases” where the NCMEO either determined it did not have jurisdiction, or where a physician that was providing care for the decedent prior to their death agreed to sign the death certificate. After the appointment of Dr. Fagen as Chief Medical Examiner, the office discontinued the practice of performing private autopsies, such as hospital autopsies with family consent, on the county premises.

There were a total of 153 out-of-county postmortem examinations conducted by this office in 2022. The invoices for those examinations totaled \$664,703. In October of 2022, the Nueces County Commissioners Court authorized an increase in the Medical Examiner fees for the first time since 2015. These fees had not kept up with the actual costs of performing these services for other counties and Nueces County taxpayers were paying for the difference. Due to the interlocal agreement requirements, the newly increased fees were not fully implemented until late November due to the 30-day notice requirement to partner counties for which we provide autopsy services. In the future, the NCMEO will closely monitor the costs of supplies, testing, and hourly rates of staff so we can cover the true operational costs of the department.

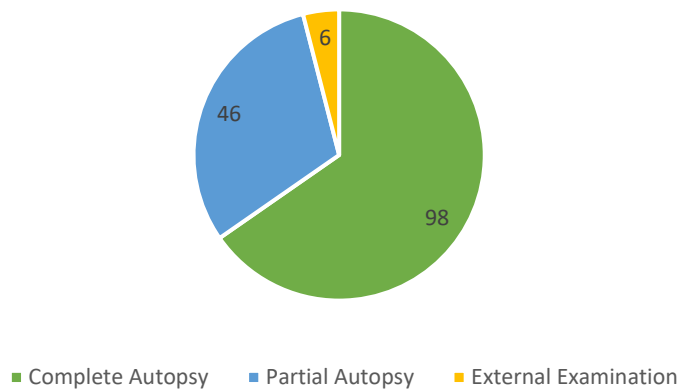
Exam Types

During most of 2022, this office performed external exams, partial autopsies, and full autopsies based on the facts and circumstances associated with each individual case. Previously, Justices of the Peace from neighboring counties sent postmortem exam orders for an external exam, partial autopsy, or full autopsy with great variability. However, after the appointment of Dr. Fagen in the summer of 2022, the Justices of the Peace from those neighboring counties were informed that this office would no longer perform partial autopsies or external examination on out-of-county cases, only full autopsies.

**2022 NCME postmortem examination type
(including surrounding counties)**



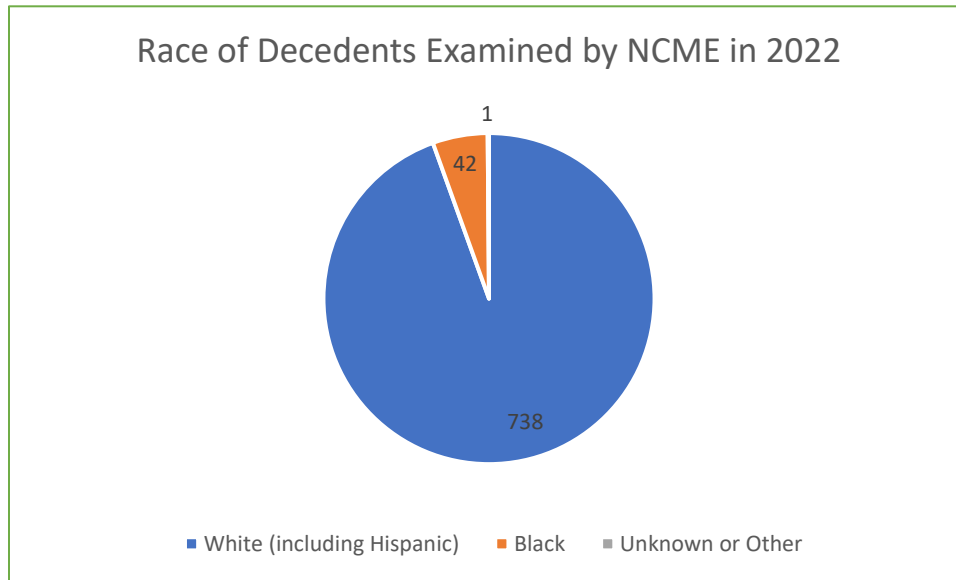
**2022 NCME Out-of-County postmortem
examination types**



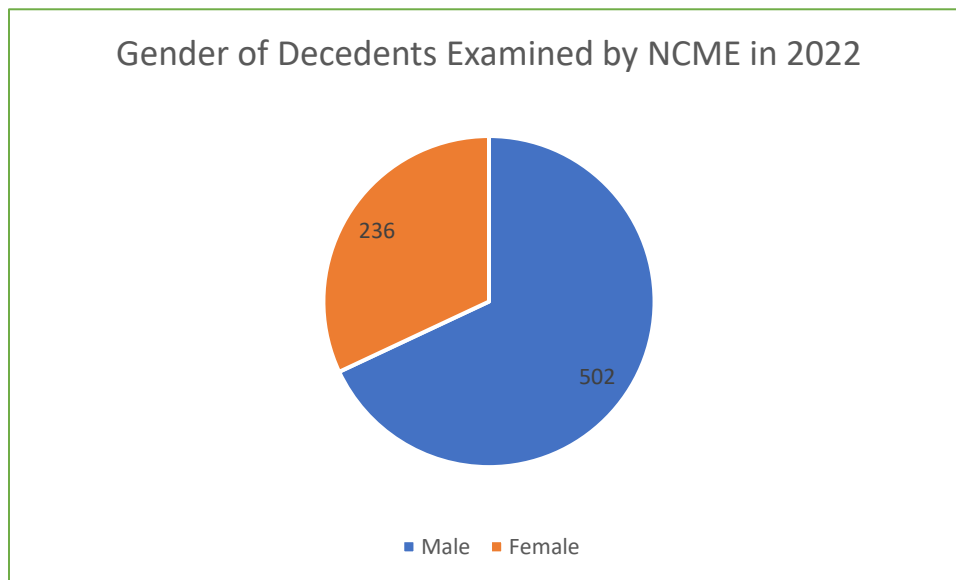
Demographics

At the time of this report, this office does not have any formal case management software and so the amount of demographical information captured by this office on its cases is limited. 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. In the fall of 2022, this office received funding from the Nueces County Commissioner’s Court in the 2022-2023 budget to acquire a formal computer case management system to modernize this office and its processes in addition to ensuring data integrity and preservation of government records.

Decedent Race Trends



Decedent Gender Trends



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

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

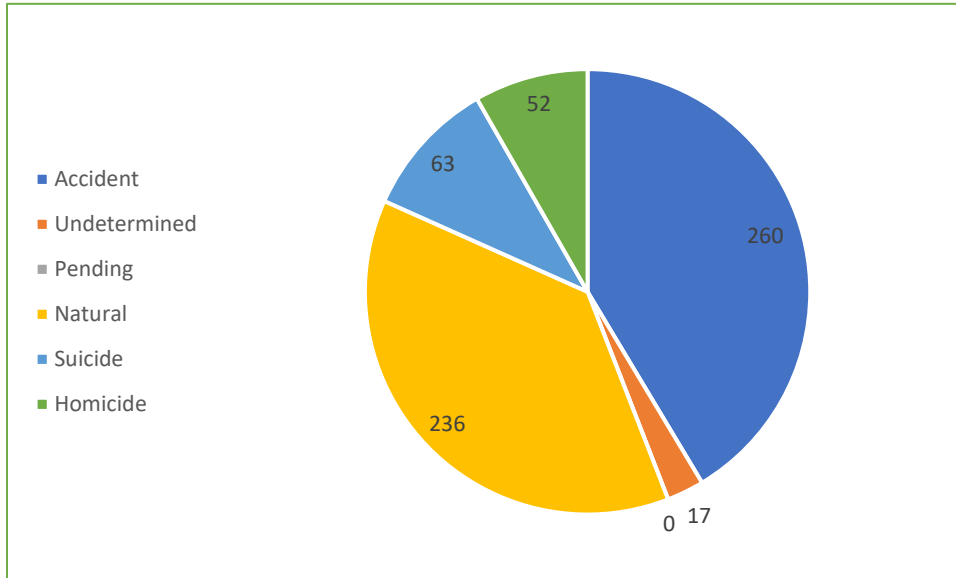
- A braided nylon rope that was used as a ligature in a suspected suicide by hanging
- The deceased's parachute that did not deploy in a skydiving accident
- A safety harness with flotation device from a worker that may have died in an industrial accident

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.

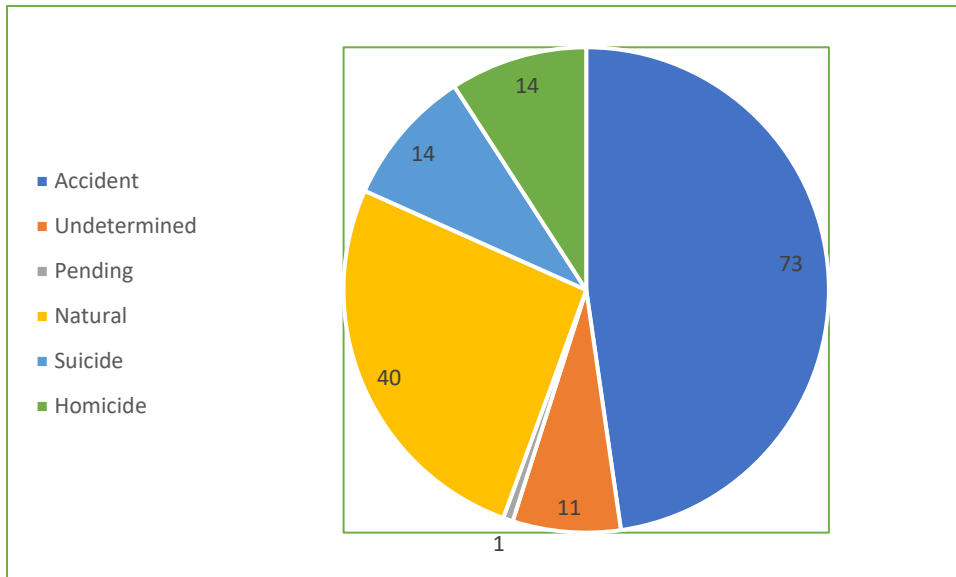
After completing the scene investigations, investigators follow-up by requesting any necessary records or reports, contacting primary care physicians, notifying next of kin, and arranging for transport. Investigators document their findings in supplemental reports which are made available to the Medical Examiner who investigates that case. In 2022, NCME investigators conducted a total of 250 scene investigations.

Manner of Death

Manner of Death in Nueces County Cases – 2022

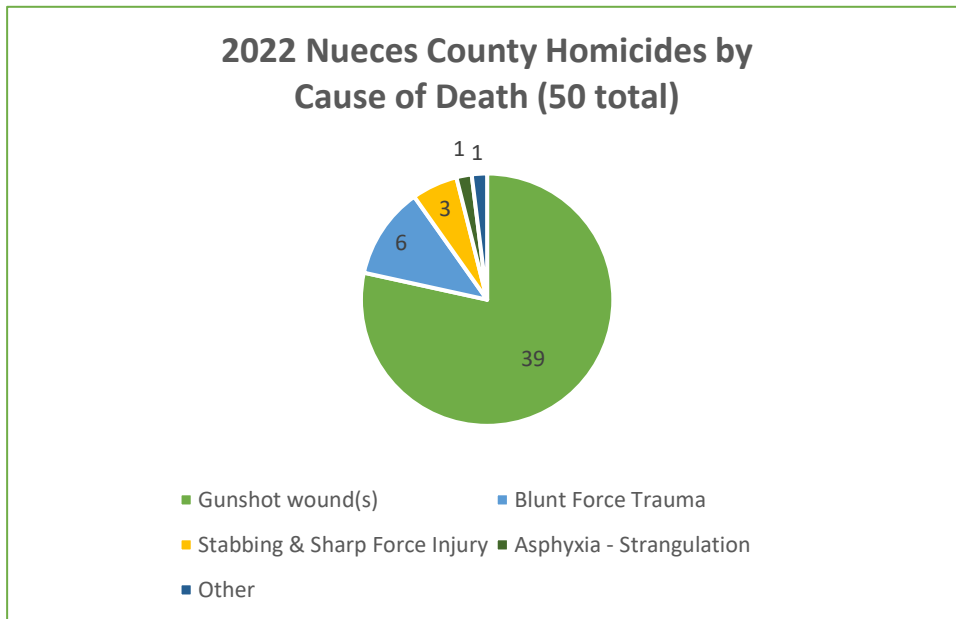
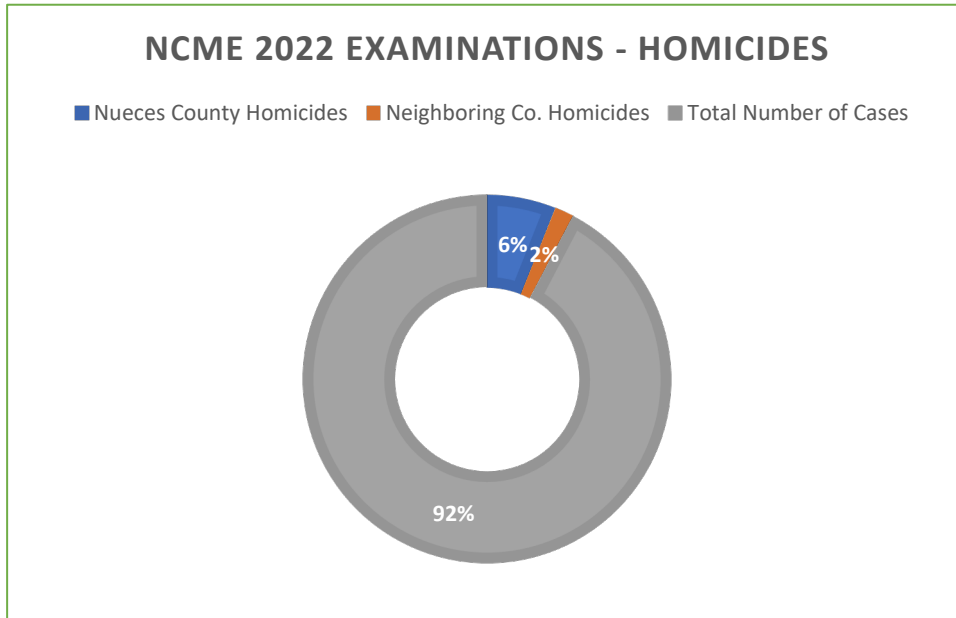


Manner of Death of Death in Out-of-County Cases – 2022

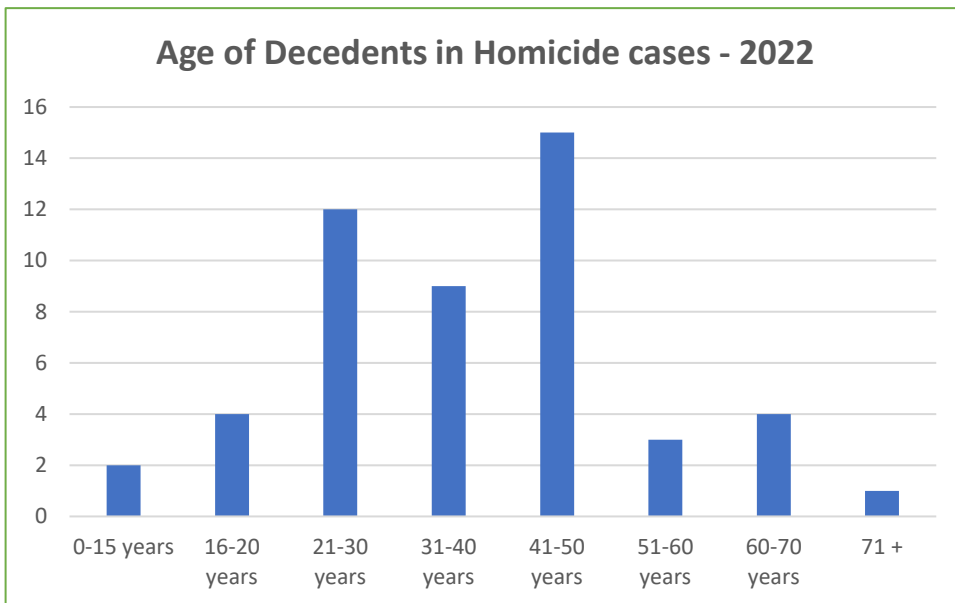
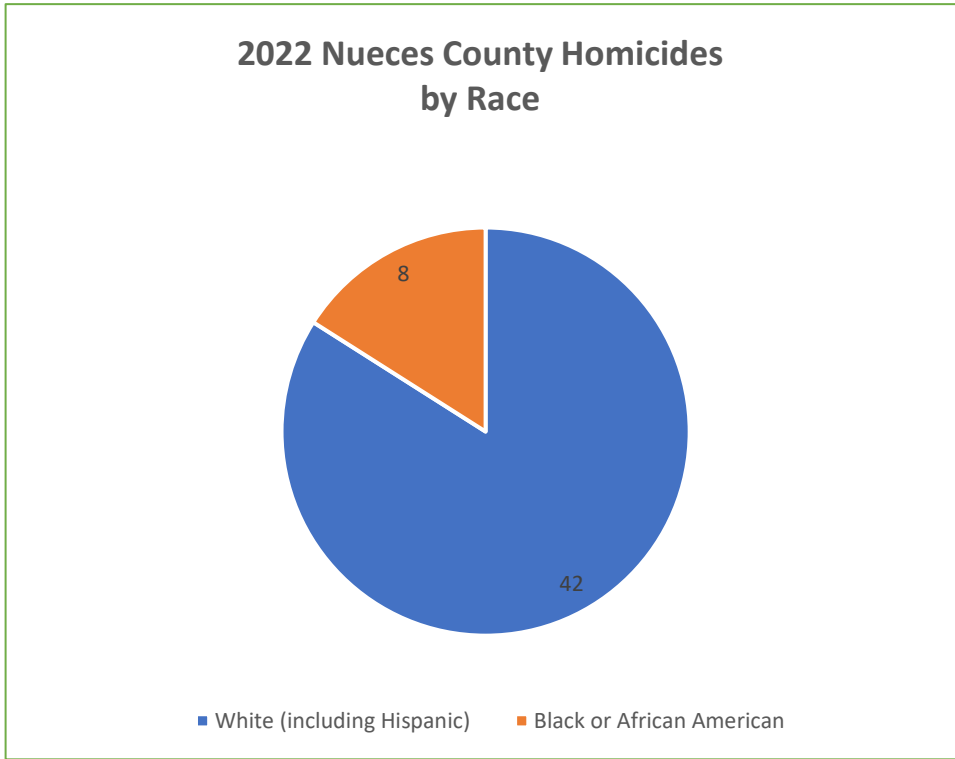


Homicides

Of the 780 postmortem examinations conducted by the NCMEO in 2022, 64 or 8% of those cases were designated as homicides. A total of 50 of those homicide cases, or 6%, originated in Nueces County. The other 14 homicide cases, or 2% of the total cases examined by this office, originated in one of the other nine counties utilizing this office for postmortem examinations.

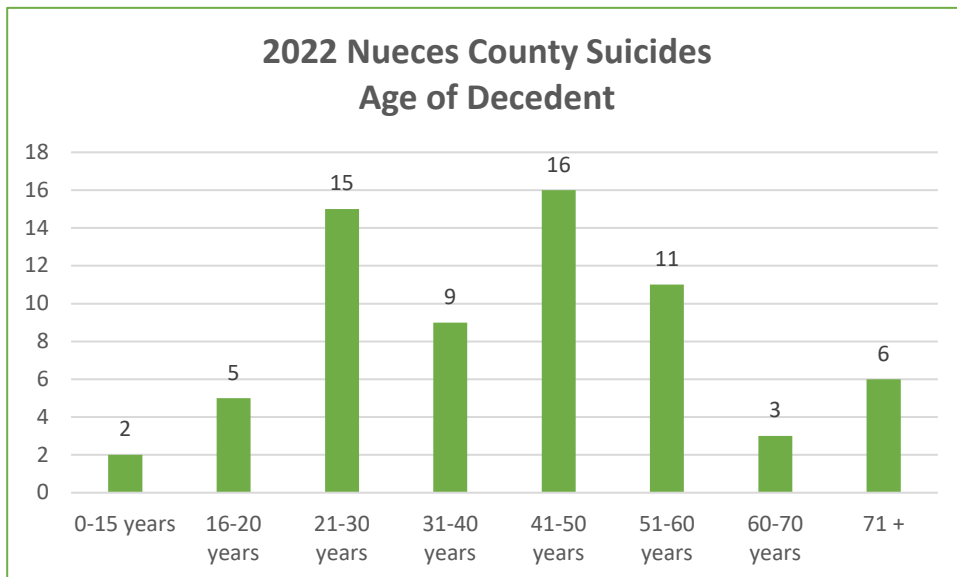
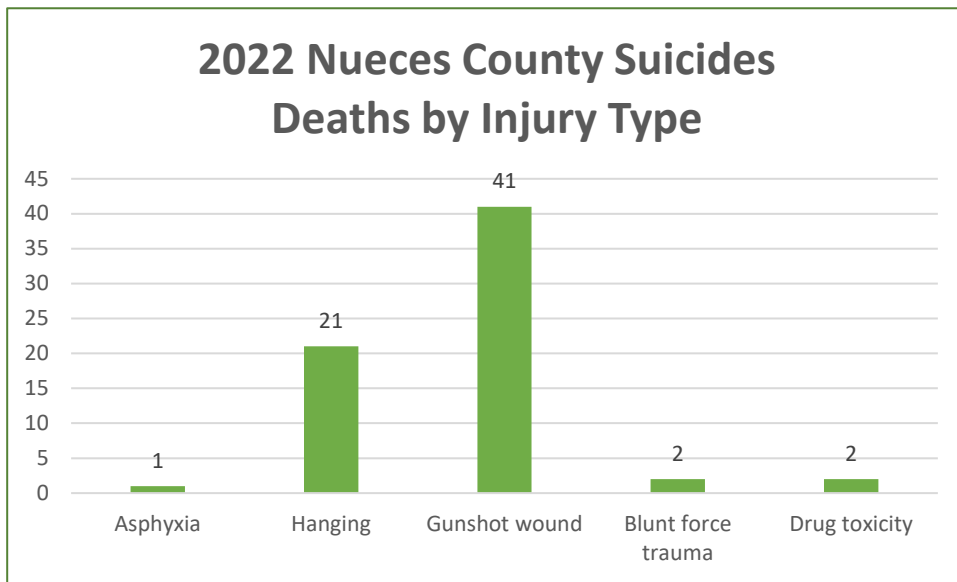


Homicides



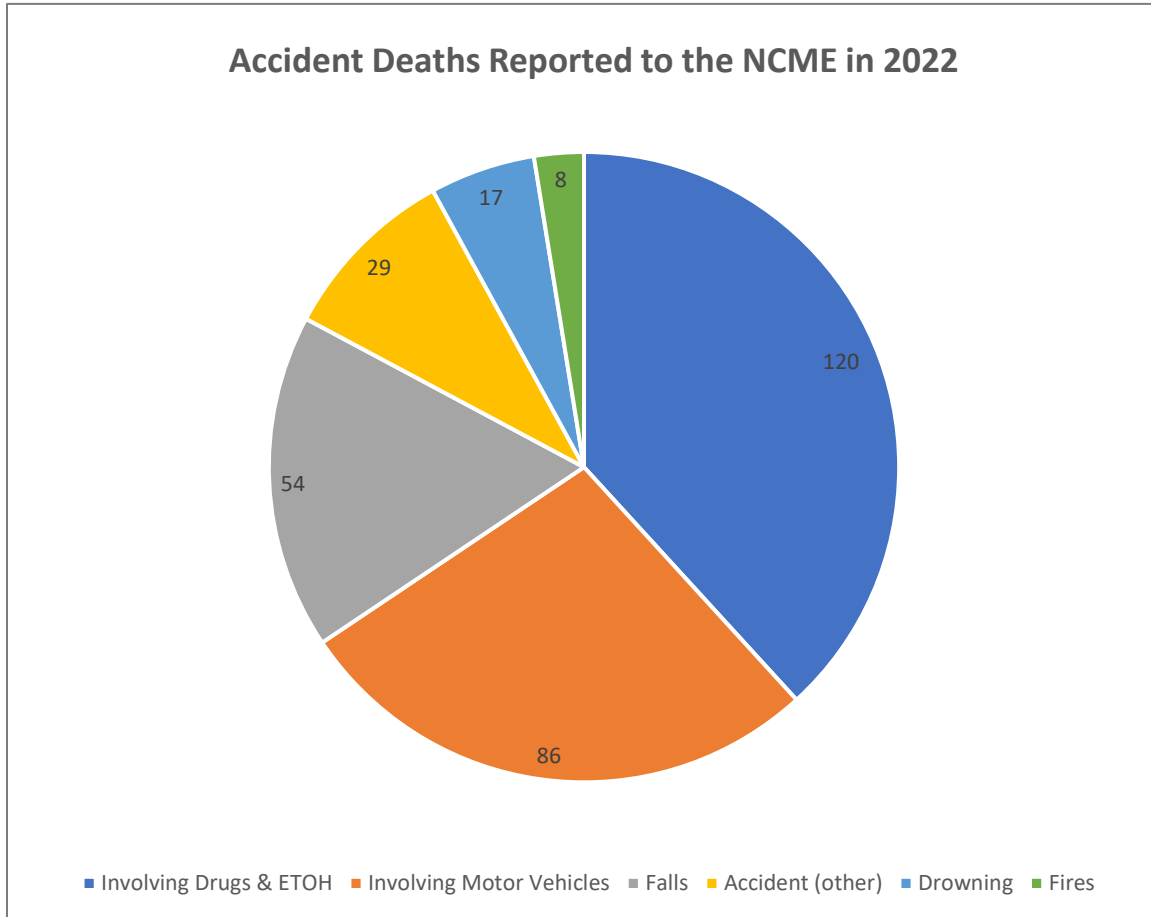
Suicides

Of the 780 postmortem examinations conducted by this office in 2022, a total of 77 of those cases were determined to be suicides. This equates to approximately 10% of cases. Of those 77, a total of 63 occurred in Nueces County. The majority of the suicides that occurred in Nueces County involved gunshot wounds. During 2022, investigators determined that six (6) of the decedents who committed suicide were also veterans of the United States Armed Forces.



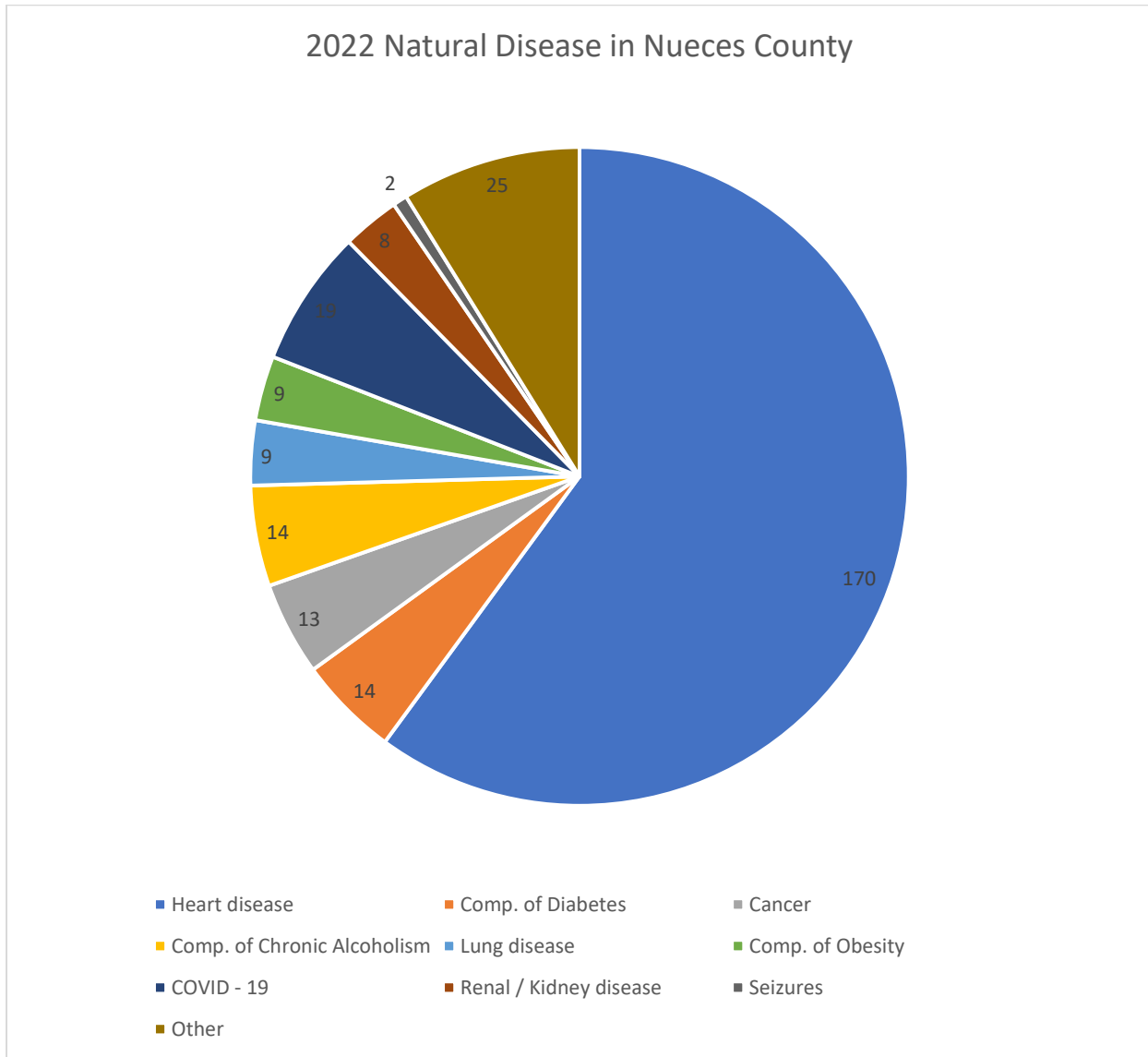
Accidents

There were 333 deaths reported to this office that were classified as accidents for the manner of death. 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 was motor vehicle fatalities. These are then followed by falls, drowning, fires, and other categories.



Natural Deaths

In 2022, 236 of the Nueces County decedents examined by the office were determined to have died of natural disease. These natural deaths account for 30.2% of the 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. Some of the other significant categories of natural deaths include complications of chronic alcoholism, complications of diabetes, and cancer. Finally, our postmortem examinations also revealed that COVID-19 continued to be a contributor to the natural deaths in Nueces County.

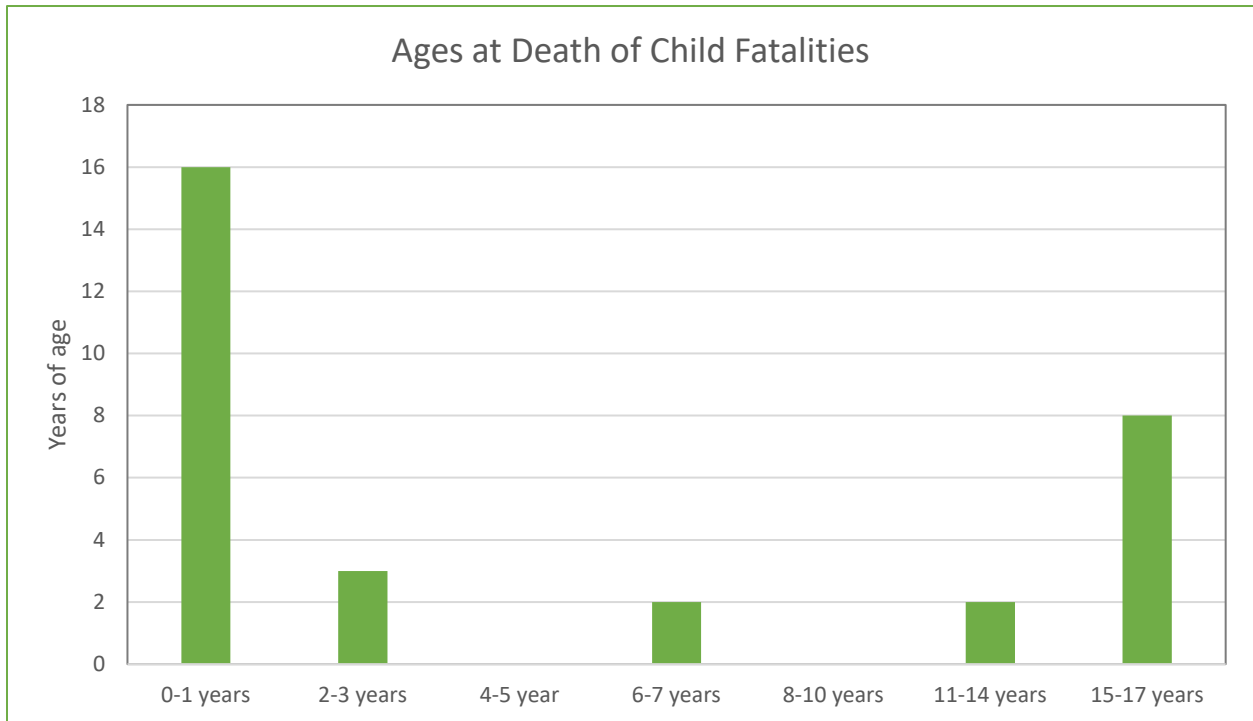


Child Deaths

For the purposes of this report, a child is defined as a decedent that was born but did not reach the age of 18 years of age when the death was reported to the NCMEO. This office received notice of a total of 48 child deaths in 2022, of which 31 cases were transported to the office for postmortem examination. Additionally, 12 out-of-county child death cases were transported to this office for examination. This office also participates in the local Nueces County Child Fatality Review Team pursuant to the requirements of the Texas Family Code. In 2022, the Chief Medical Examiner reviewed cases with the team via virtual meetings.

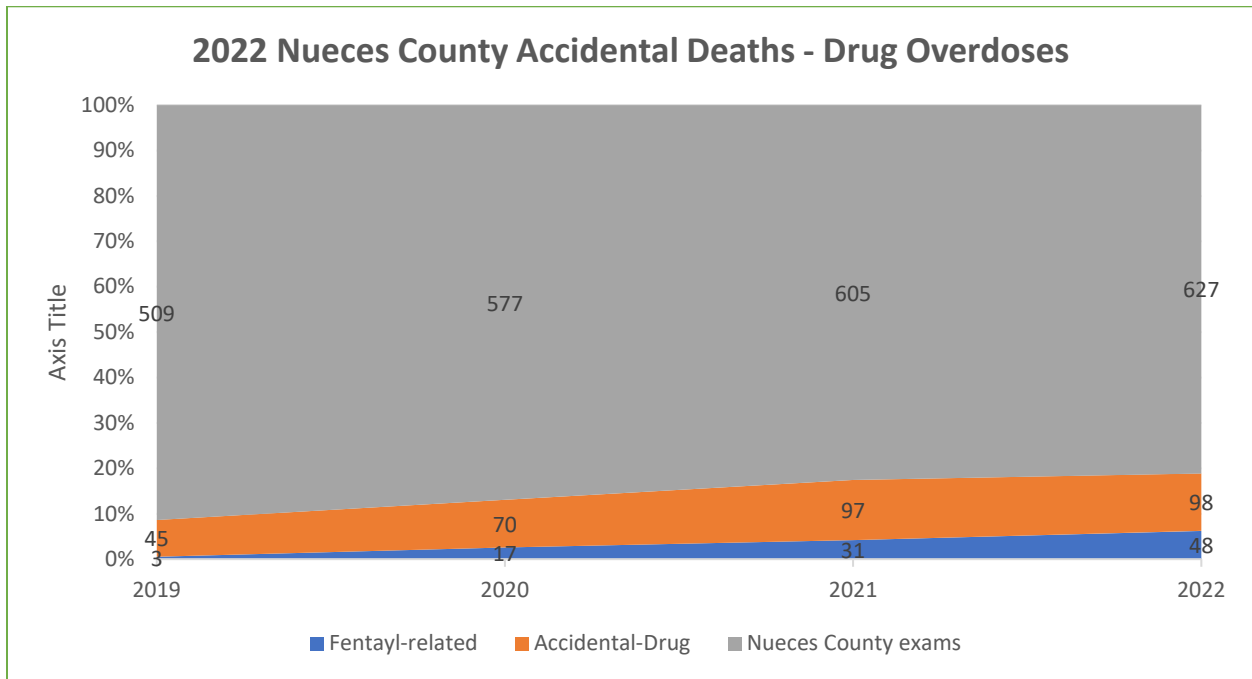
Of the postmortem examinations of Nueces County child deaths, the manner of death in those cases were determined to be:

- 3 homicides
- 4 suicides
- 4 natural deaths
- 9 accidents
- 11 where the cause could not be determined



Drug-Related Deaths

Accidental deaths due to drug toxicity were a significant portion of the deaths examined by this office in 2022. Additionally, over the past four years, fentanyl has emerged as one of the most prevalent drugs found in these drug-regulated fatalities as indicated by the chart below. During 2022, these overdose trends and the corresponding data analysis led by one of the NCMEO investigators, Luis Munoz, M.P.A. was shared with stakeholders in a special report. The office has been working with law enforcement agencies such as the Nueces County Sheriff’s Office, the Corpus Christi Police Department, and the Drug Enforcement Administration.



Homeless Deaths

Another category of cases examined by this office includes those who may be identified as homeless individuals. This is not typically a category of information that is normally collected by ME investigators. However, the office can quantify this population where this information was specifically provided to this office by first responders or where there was no last known address. In 2022, ME investigators identified a total of eight (8) persons that were categorized as homeless.

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.

Law Enforcement Agency or Correctional Facility	NCME Case number	Manner of Death
Corpus Christi Police Department	22-3018	Homicide
Corpus Christi Police Department	22-2938	Homicide
Nueces County	22-2913	Natural
Nueces County	22-2454	Natural
Nueces County	22-2300	Natural
Nueces County	22-1335	Natural
Nueces County	22-1261	Natural

Custodial Death Cases in Out-of-County - 2022		
Law Enforcement Agency or Correctional Facility	NCME Case number	Manner of Death
Wilson County	22-2767	Natural
San Patricio County	22-2532	Accident-Drug
DeWitt County	22-2430	Accident-Drug
Refugio County	22-1332	Accident-Fall
Brooks County	22-1508SC	Homicide
Kleberg County	22-864	Suicide-Drugs

Unidentified Decedents

The NCMEO 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 2022, this office entered one (1) set of unknown remains into NamUs, and 4 (four) on behalf of neighboring counties requesting our services. Two (2) of the persons entered were subsequently identified by follow-up investigation efforts after obtaining DNA samples from possible family members.

www.namus.nij.ojp.gov

<https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/services#namus-forensic-services>



Body Transport

Nueces County contracts with a private company that provides transport services to the NCMEO on the deaths that occur within Nueces County. The Office does not have any county-owned transport vehicles. This contract is subject to the competitive bid requirements of county purchasing statutes and is approved by the Nueces County Attorney Office and the Commissioners Court. Out-of-County cases are transported by funeral homes in the referring jurisdiction according to the direction of the local Justice of the Peace ordering the autopsy. Prior to the hiring of additional investigator staff in October of 2022, the contract body transport service would also meet out-of-county funeral homes transporting bodies to the office for an additional fee. This cost was not included in the fee schedule of the interlocal agreements and was being absorbed by the Nueces County taxpayers. Since the new investigator staff were hired, this office now has staff on-site 24 hours a day for the first time in its history.

Medical Examiner Performance Audit

Turnaround time for Final Autopsy Report

In 2022, the Nueces County Commissioners Court established a written policy for the Medical Examiner’s Office which adopted the NAME standard of completing the final written autopsy report within 90 days of the examination.

“The final autopsy report shall be completed and sent to the law enforcement officer investigating the fatality within 90 days of the autopsy, along with a copy of the complete Medical Examiner file, including any photographs.”

2022 NCME Exam Cases (780) – Time from Autopsy to Final Written Autopsy Report	
Time to final report	Number of cases (%)
Within 60 days	114 (14.6%)
Within 90 days	181 (23.2%)
More than 90 days	485 (62.2%)

Due to the events that occurred in 2022, including the attrition of the forensic pathologists with the Nueces County Medical Examiner’s Office, this office was not able to meet the County’s standard for completing the written autopsy report within 90 days. This was largely due to the separation of the former Chief Medical Examiner and the former Deputy Chief Medical Examiner. This necessitated the appointment of an interim Chief Medical Examiner and the use of contract and temporary physicians.

Medical Examiner Cash Audit

On August 22, 2022, the Nueces County Auditor’s Office conducted a surprise cash audit of the Medical Examiner’s Office. This audit was conducted under the authority of the Texas Local Government Code § 115.001, § 115.002, and §115.901. This audit was conducted according to accepted government auditing standards,

Conclusion:

“At the time of the cash audit, there were no findings or exceptions.”

Medical Examiner Evidence, Specimen, and Property Audits

Following the hiring of the new Director of Operations, Mr. Forrest A. Mitchell (CIG ret.) on August 8th, 2022, the office has undergone multiple audits of NCMEO evidence, specimens, and property. Mr. Mitchell has directed investigators, autopsy technicians, and other staff to correct deficiencies in the management of those areas including returning evidence to law enforcement agencies; identifying and locating next of kin regarding unclaimed property; and verifying that all unknown specimens had been properly submitted for testing. Serious deficiencies were noted, some dating back many years, and great effort was made to correct those deficiencies identified. To strengthen the NCMEO practices, new policies and procedures were implemented with the approval of Dr. Timothy Fagen.