

TRAVIS COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER

Annual Report

2007



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Introduction

The Travis County Medical Examiner's Office (TCMEO) provides medicolegal death investigation for Travis County, Texas, and a number of surrounding counties. Travis County is part of the Austin-Round Rock metropolitan area and covers 989 square miles of land and 33 square miles of water. The county seat is Austin, which is also the capital of Texas. In 2006, the population of Travis County was estimated at 921,000.

The TCMEO was established in 1977. It is located at 1213 Sabine Street, Austin and is a three story free-standing building. The first floor houses investigations, the morgue, and the body coolers. The second floor houses the toxicology department and histology laboratory. The third floor houses the administrative section, including doctor's offices. There are five medical examiner positions at the TCMEO including the chief medical examiner, the deputy chief medical examiner, and three deputy medical examiners.

Staff

The TCMEO is staffed by 34 Travis County employees and is composed of the following personnel sections: Administration, Medical Examiners, Investigation, Autopsy Technicians, and Toxicology. The number of personnel in each section is as follows:

Administrative section:

- chief administrative officer,
- office manager
- office specialists (4)
- records analyst

Medical examiners:

- chief medical examiner
- deputy chief medical examiner
- deputy medical examiners (3)

Investigations:

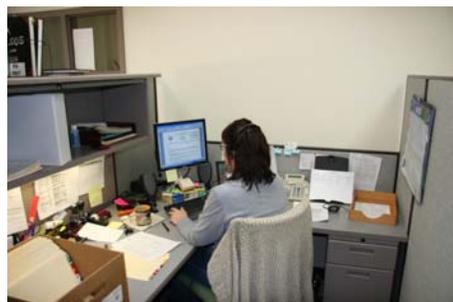
- chief investigator
- forensic nurse investigator
- investigators (8)

Autopsy technicians:

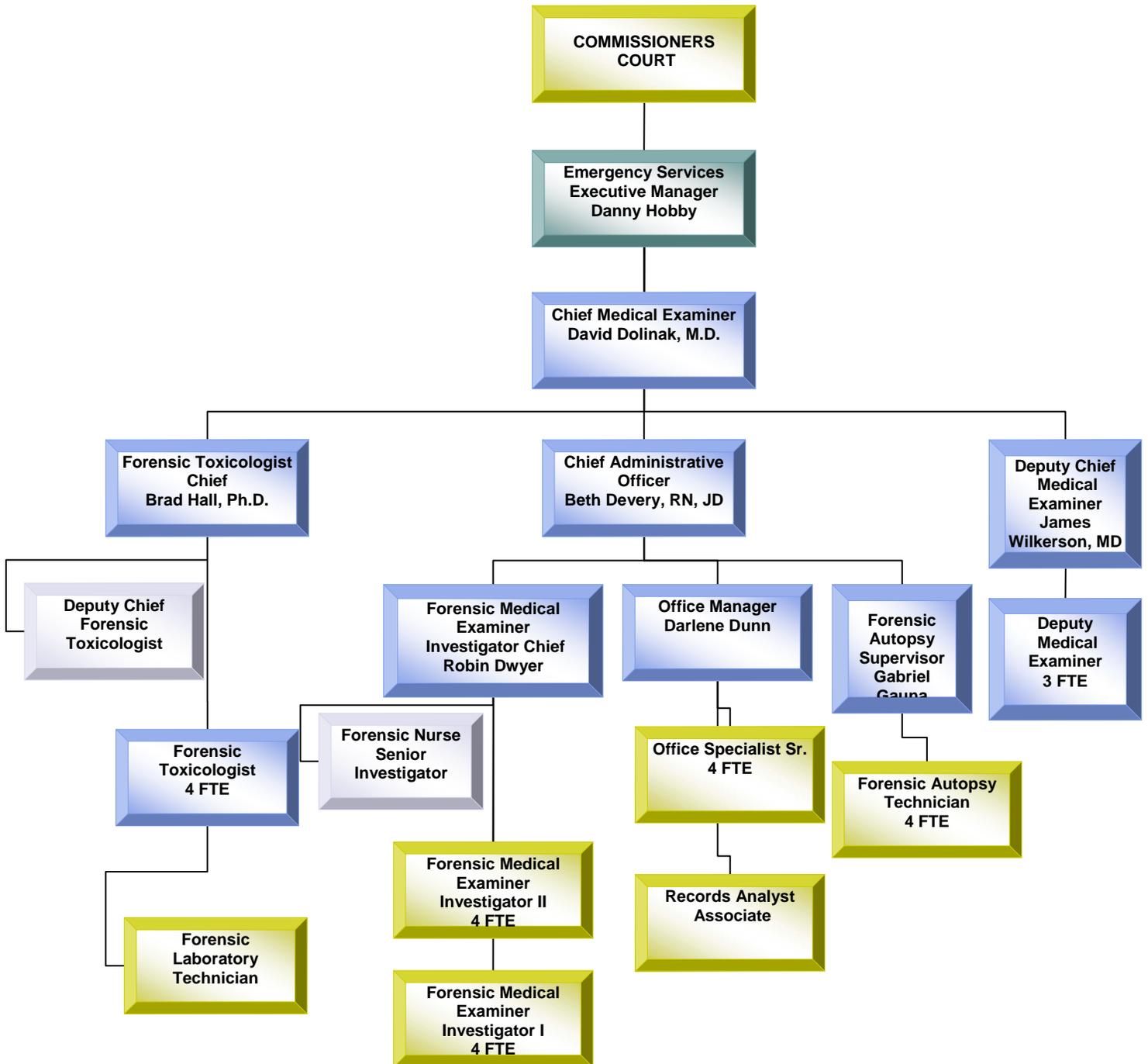
- chief autopsy technician
- autopsy technicians (5)

Toxicology:

- chief toxicologist
- deputy chief toxicologist
- toxicologists (3)
- laboratory technician



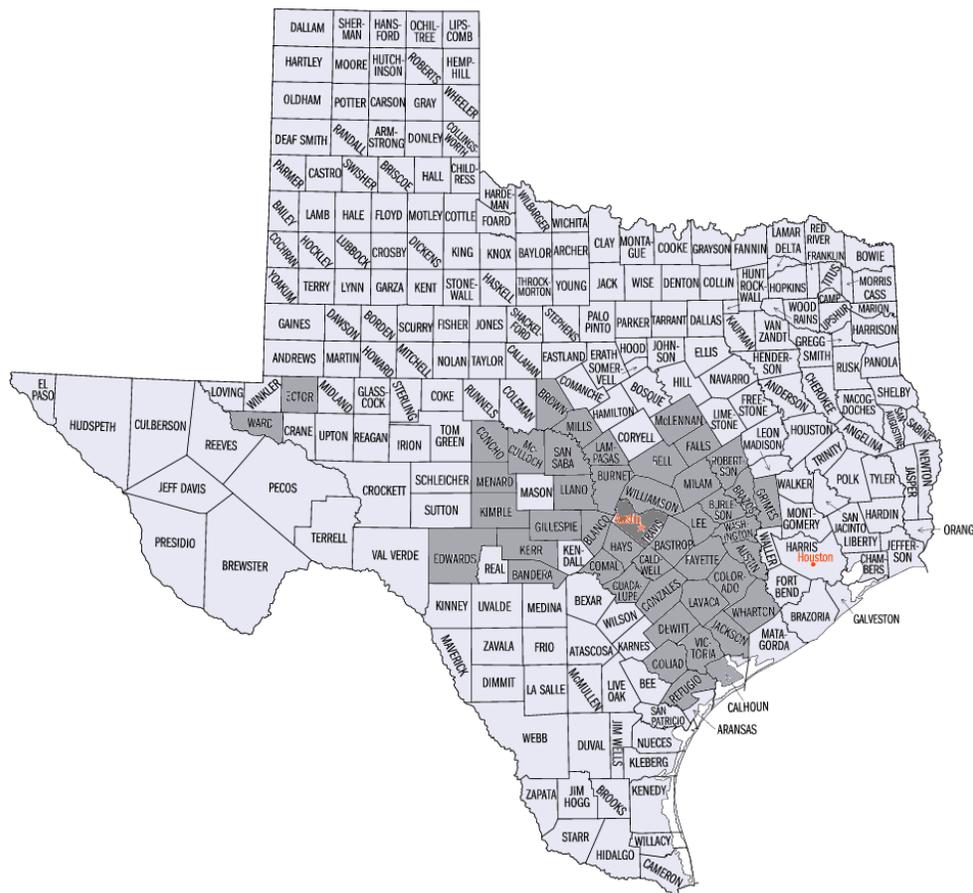
Organizational Chart



Case Jurisdiction

The Travis County Medical Examiner’s Office is responsible for the investigation and certification of cause and manner of death of all sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths that occur in Travis County. The *cause of death* is a disease, injury, drug toxicity, or combination of factors that causes a physiologic derangement severe enough to result in death. The *manner of death* refers to the circumstances surrounding how the death came about and is divided into five categories: natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined. The TCMEO also investigates similar-type deaths occurring in 45 central Texas counties at the written request of the local authorities.

Graphic of TCMEO service region



Black - Travis County
 Dark Gray - Counties serviced by TCMEO
 Light Gray - Counties not serviced by TCMEO

Reportable deaths

Pursuant to Texas Code of Criminal Procedures, Chapter 49.25, the TCMEO has jurisdiction over the following deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County:

- When a person dies while in prison or in jail;
- When any person is killed; or from any cause dies an unnatural death, except under sentence of the law; or dies in the absence of one or more good witnesses;
- When 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;
- When the circumstances of the death of any person are such as to lead to suspicion that he/she came to his/her death by unlawful means;
- When any person commits suicide, or the circumstances of his death are such as to lead to suspicion that he/she committed suicide;

The following cases shall be reported to TCMEO. TCMEO may either accept or decline jurisdiction based upon the circumstances of the individual case.

- When a person dies within twenty-four hours after admission to a hospital.
- When a person dies without having been attended by a duly licensed and practicing physician, and the local health officer or registrar required to report the cause of death under Section 193.005, Health and Safety Code, does not know the person's likely cause of death.
- When the person is a child who is younger than six years of age and the death is reported under Chapter 264, Family Code; and
- When a person dies who has been attended immediately preceding his death by a duly licensed and practicing physician, and the physician is not able to certify with reasonable certainty the cause of death as required by Section 193.004, Health and Safety Code.

Local deaths (those that occur within the boundaries of Travis County) that fall under TCMEO's jurisdiction are transported to the TCMEO for examination by a contract body transport company. In certain cases, a TCMEO investigator may attend the death scene in person and perform a preliminary examination of the body. An investigator usually attends all homicides, suicides, and accidental deaths, and select natural deaths. An investigator is available 24 hours/day, 365 days/year. TCMEO investigators do not physically perform scene investigations on cases that are reported to them from outside the boundaries of Travis County. In these cases, the investigative information is collected over the telephone. On cases from outside of Travis County, an autopsy must be ordered by the referring justice of the peace and the body is transported by a funeral home company at the request of the referring justice of the peace.

Not all bodies brought to the TCMEO for examination are autopsied. The medical examiner may choose to either perform a complete autopsy or to perform an external examination only (referred to as "view-out"). Partial autopsies are not performed at the TCMEO. Regardless of whether or

not an autopsy is performed, blood and vitreous fluid specimens are obtained for possible toxicological analysis. Toxicological examinations are performed on the vast majority of cases that are autopsied and on select cases that are viewed-out.

Investigative reports are generated on all cases that fall under the jurisdiction of the TCMEO. All deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County that are brought to the TCMEO for examination (whether they are autopsied or not) are given the designation of “ME” before the case number. All cases referred to the TCMEO from outside Travis County are given the designation of “PA” before the case number. If the TCMEO declines jurisdiction on a case, it is given the designation of “SO” before the case number. Occasionally, a death occurring within the boundaries of Travis County is not reported to the TCMEO when it should have been. The body may have already been buried or cremated. If the death can be adequately certified by review of the individual’s medical records and other investigation without physically viewing and examining the body, the case is given the designation of “CT” before the case number. All cases are collectively numbered sequentially beginning January 1 of each year.

Statistics (2007) covering January 1, 2007 thru December 31, 2007

Deaths reported

 In county

 Out of county.

Cases accepted

 In county

 Out of county

Manner of death

 In county

 -natural

 -accident

 -suicide

 -homicide

 -undetermined

 Out of county

 -natural

 -accident

 -suicide

 -homicide

 -undetermined

Scene visits by investigator

Scene visits by medical examiner

Number of bodies transported by in-county body transport service

Number of bodies transported to TCMEO from outside counties

View-outs (external examination only)

Complete autopsies

Partial autopsies

Hospital autopsies retained under TCMEO jurisdiction

Cases with toxicology performed

Unidentified bodies

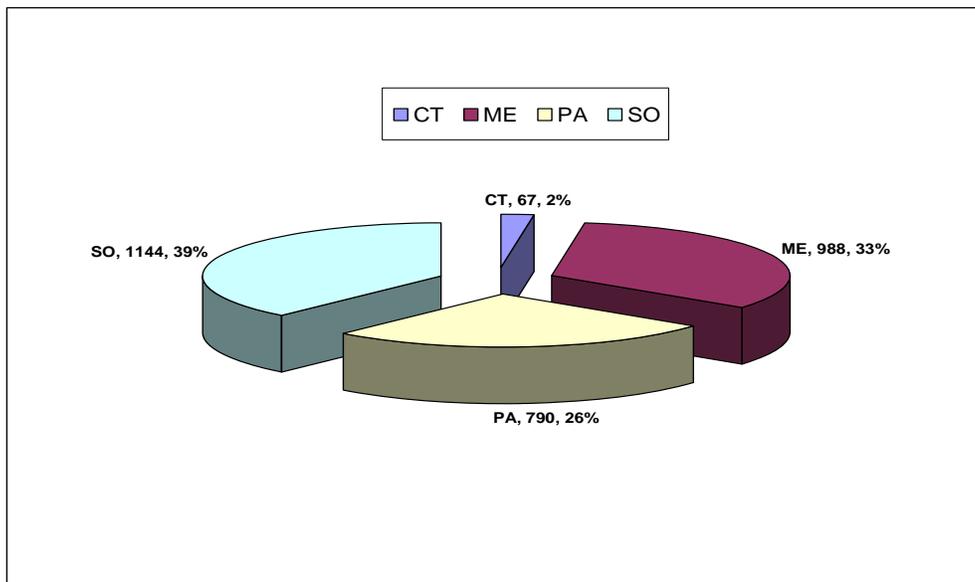
Organ and tissue donation

Unclaimed bodies

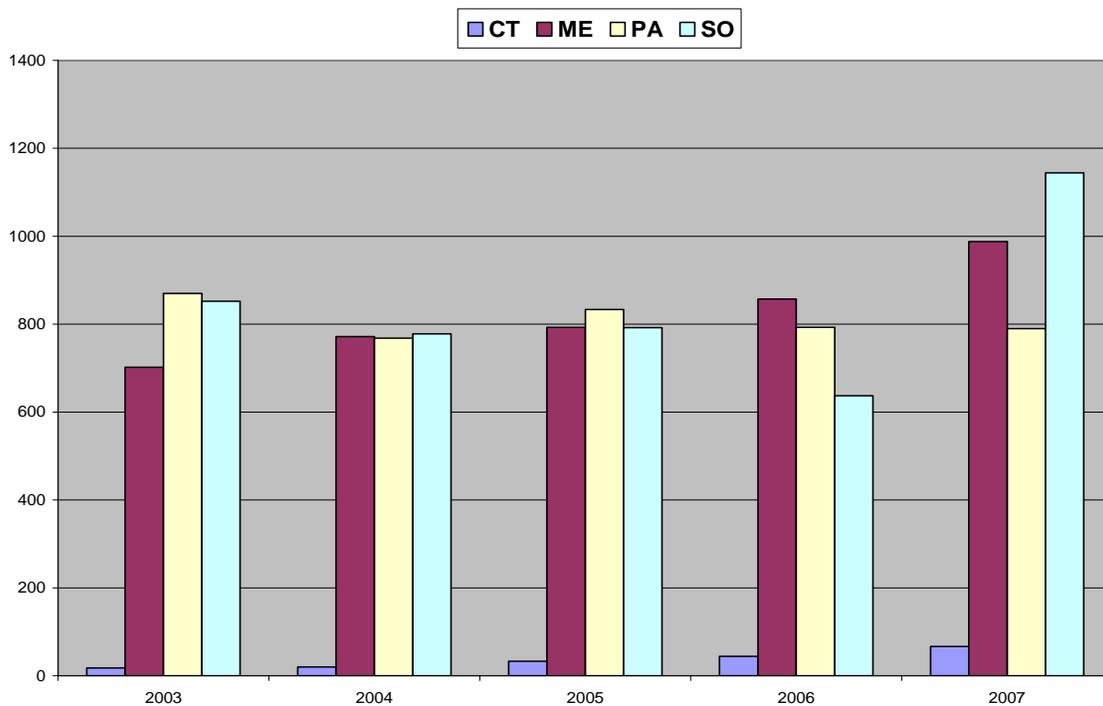
Exhumations

DEATHS REPORTED

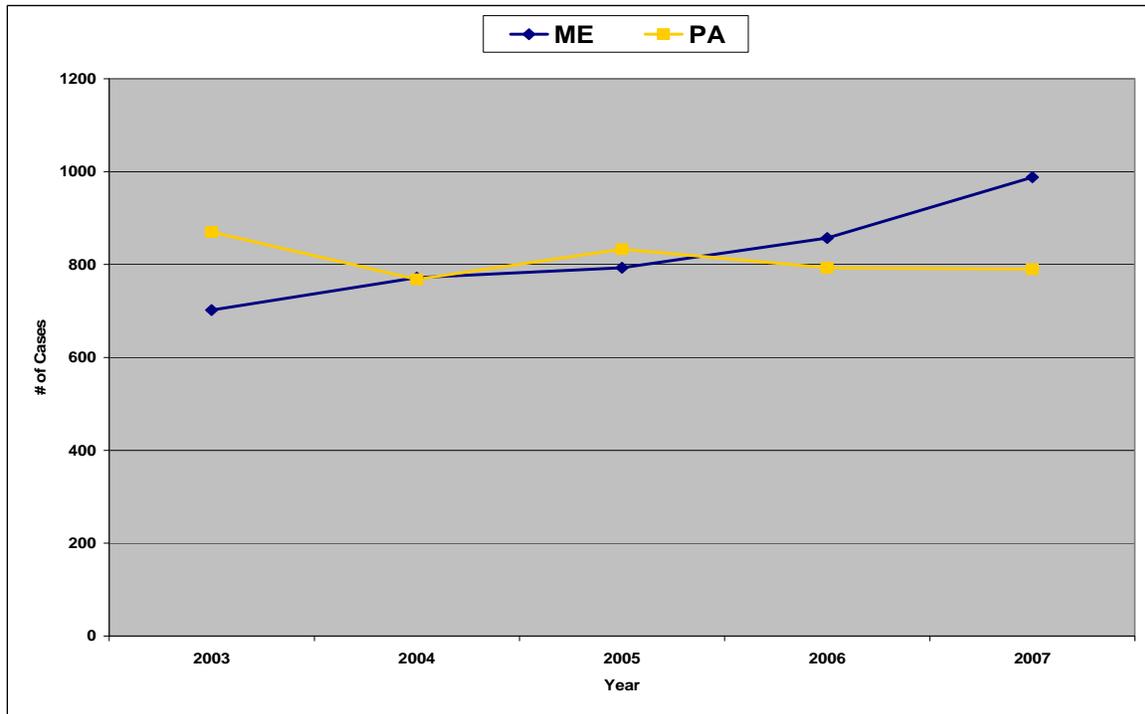
In 2007, our office received a referral of 2989 cases. Of those cases, 67 were for certification. In Travis County, 988 cases were medical examiner cases, and 1144 were referred to our office, but ultimately the death certificate was signed by a physician. We received a total of 790 cases from outside Travis County.



Over the last five years, the number of cases reported to our office has steadily risen.



Based on historic trends, we continue to expect to see our number grow.



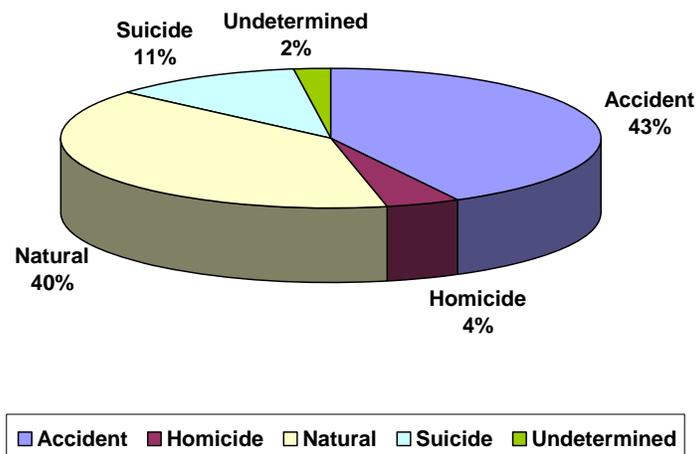
MANNER OF DEATH

TOTAL CASES EXAMINED

TRAVIS – 988

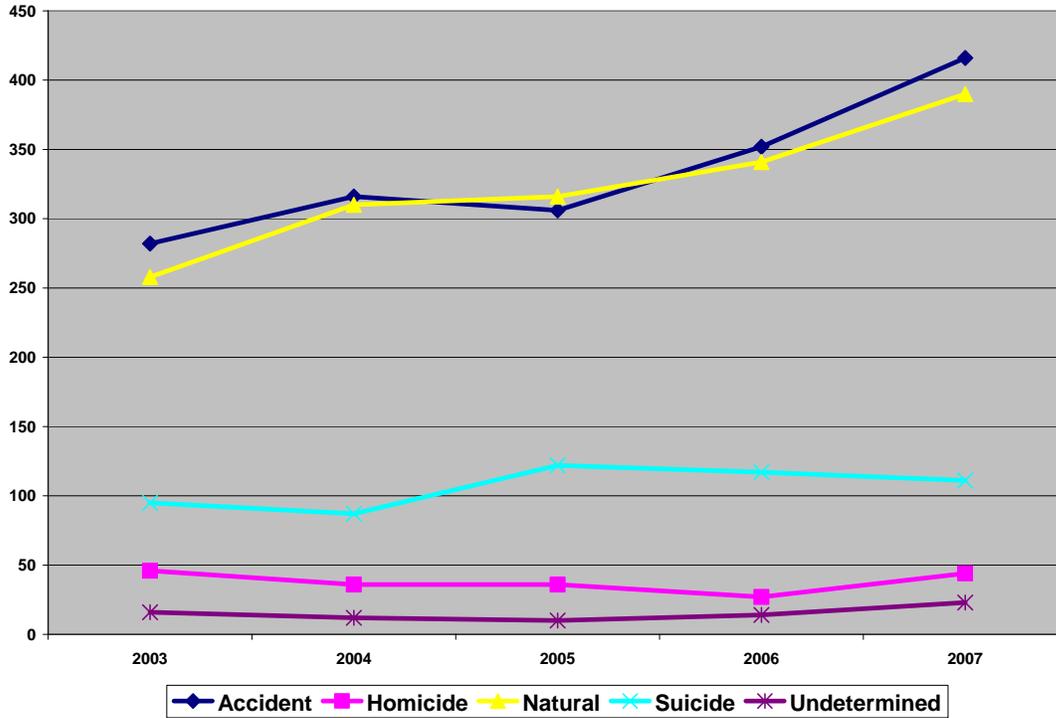
OUT OF COUNTY – 790

TRAVIS COUNTY MANNER OF DEATH 2007

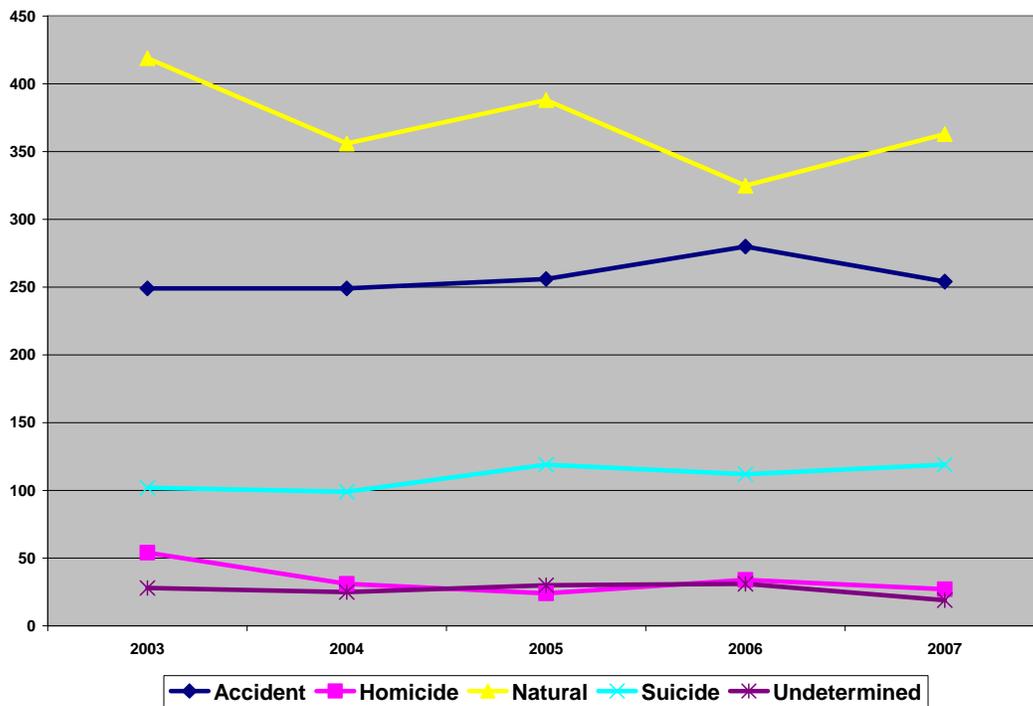


TRENDS IN MANNER OF DEATH 2003-2007

TRAVIS COUNTY CASES

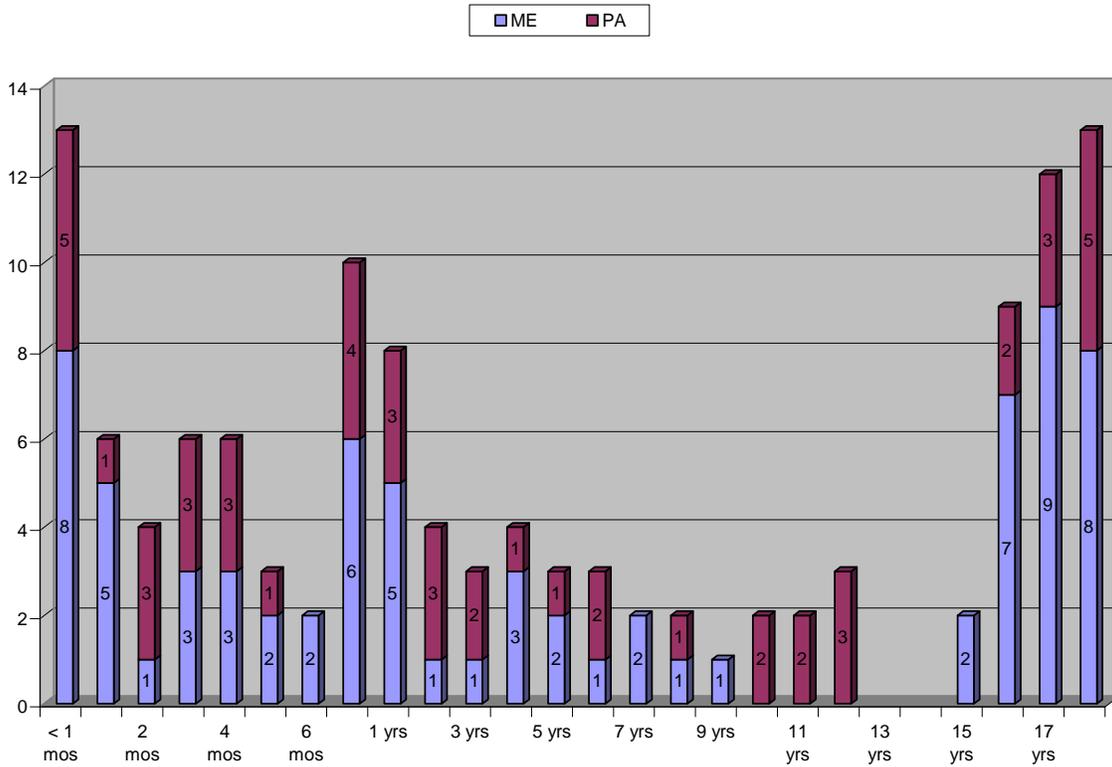


OUT OF COUNTY CASES

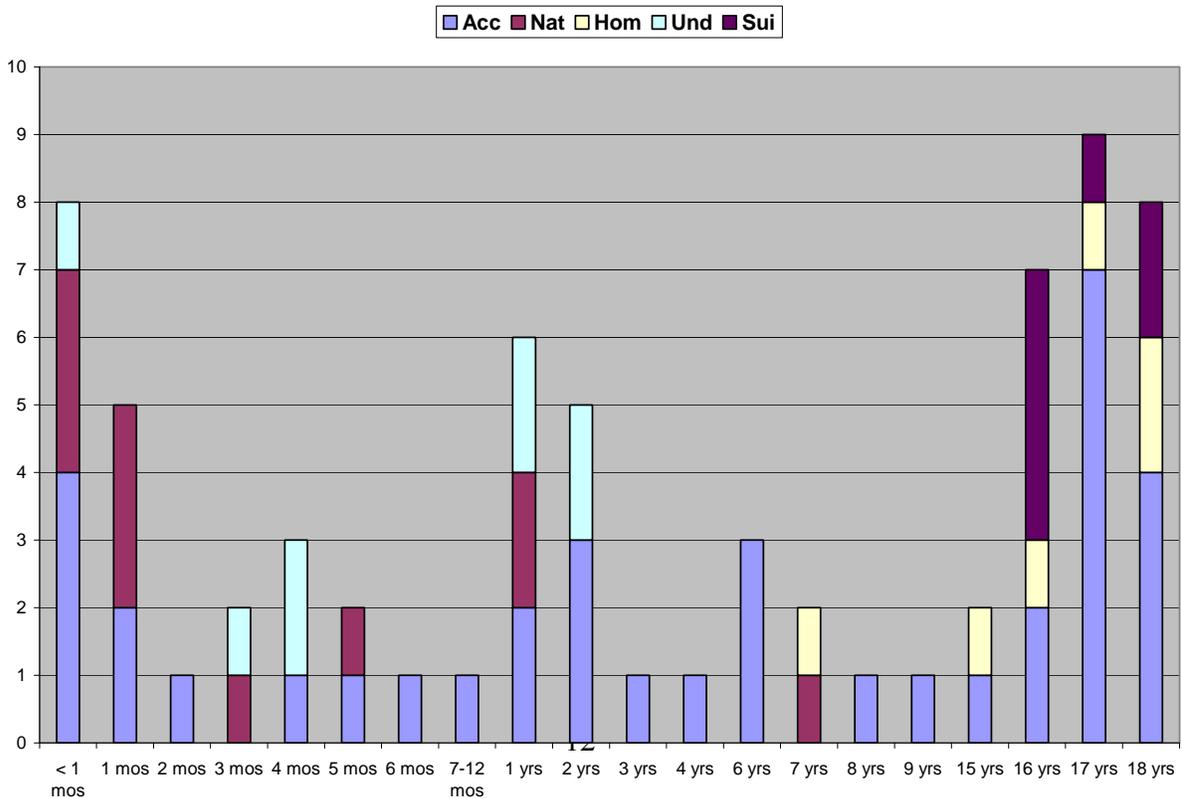


CHILD FATALITIES

In 2007, there were 71 child fatalities reported to our office in Travis County. There were 50 deaths reported to our office from other counties.

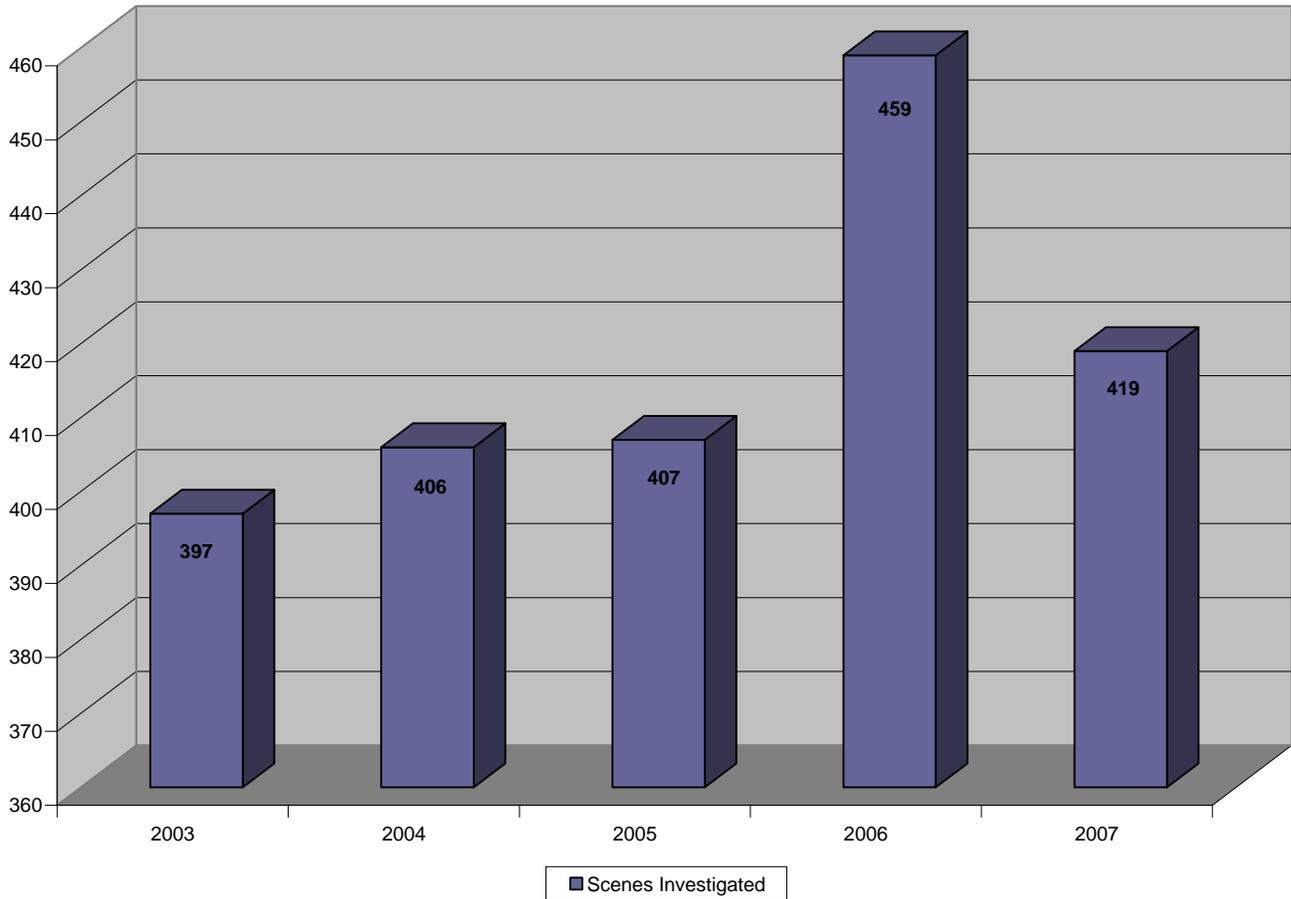


Manner of Death in Child Fatalities in Travis County



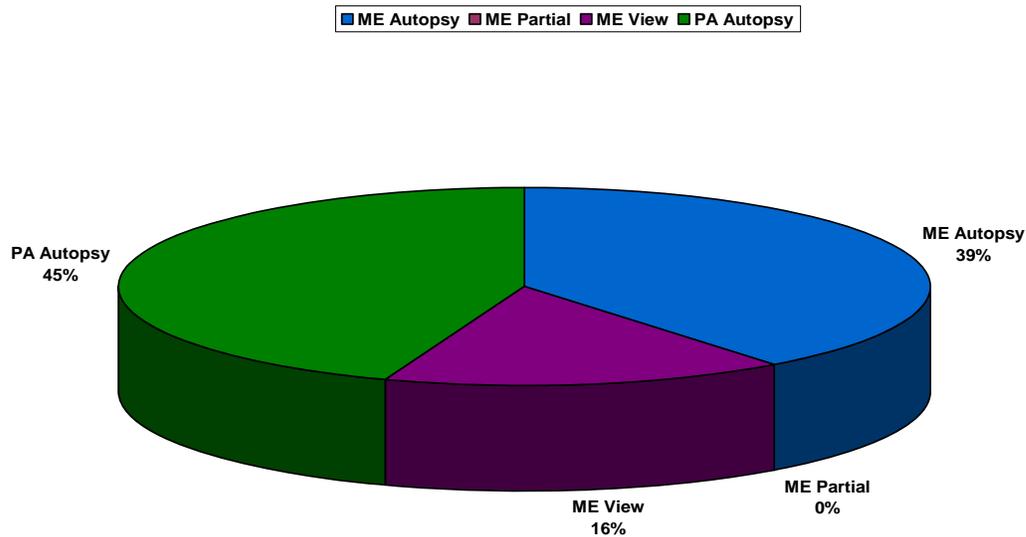
Forensic Investigators attended 419 scenes in 2007, in which 10 visits were also attended by a Forensic Pathologist.

TRENDS IN SCENE INVESTIGATIONS

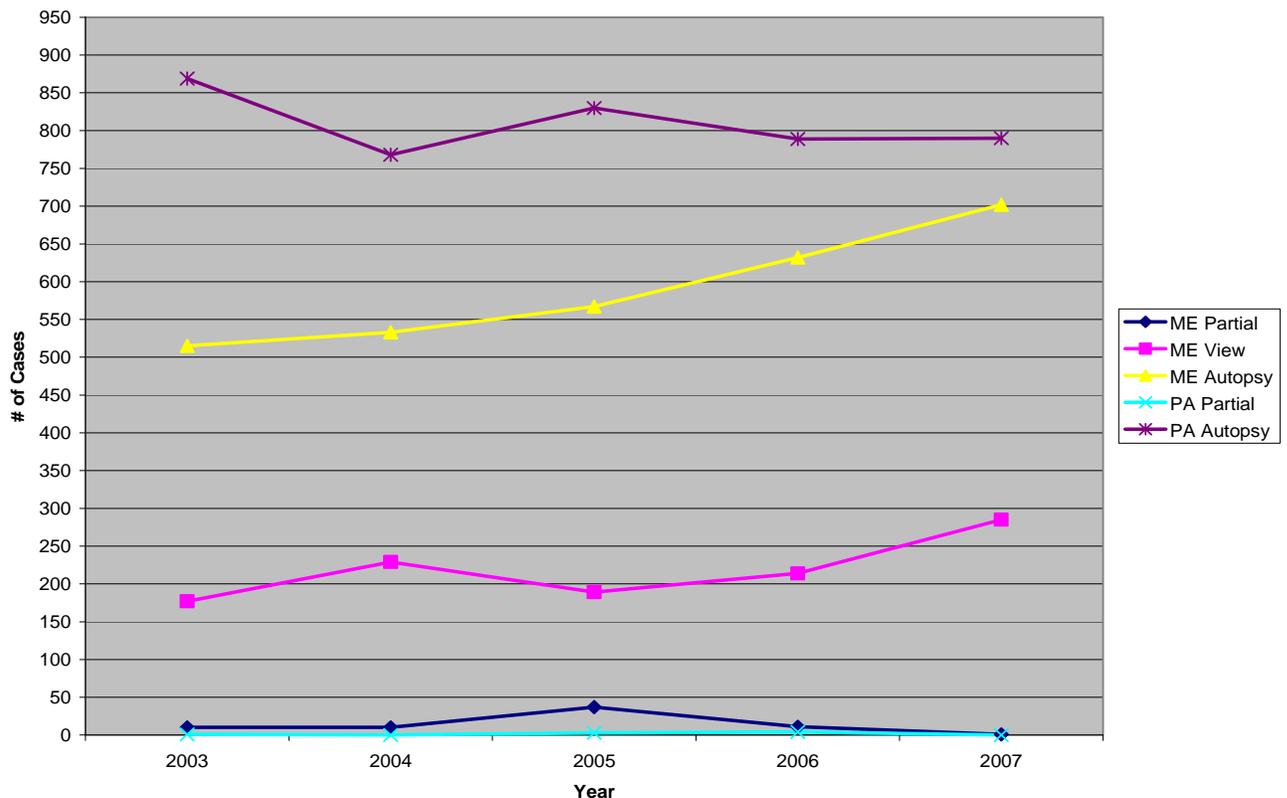


EXAM TYPES

In 2007, our policies were amended to eliminate the practice of performing partial autopsies. There was one case in January of 2007 in which a partial examination was performed.



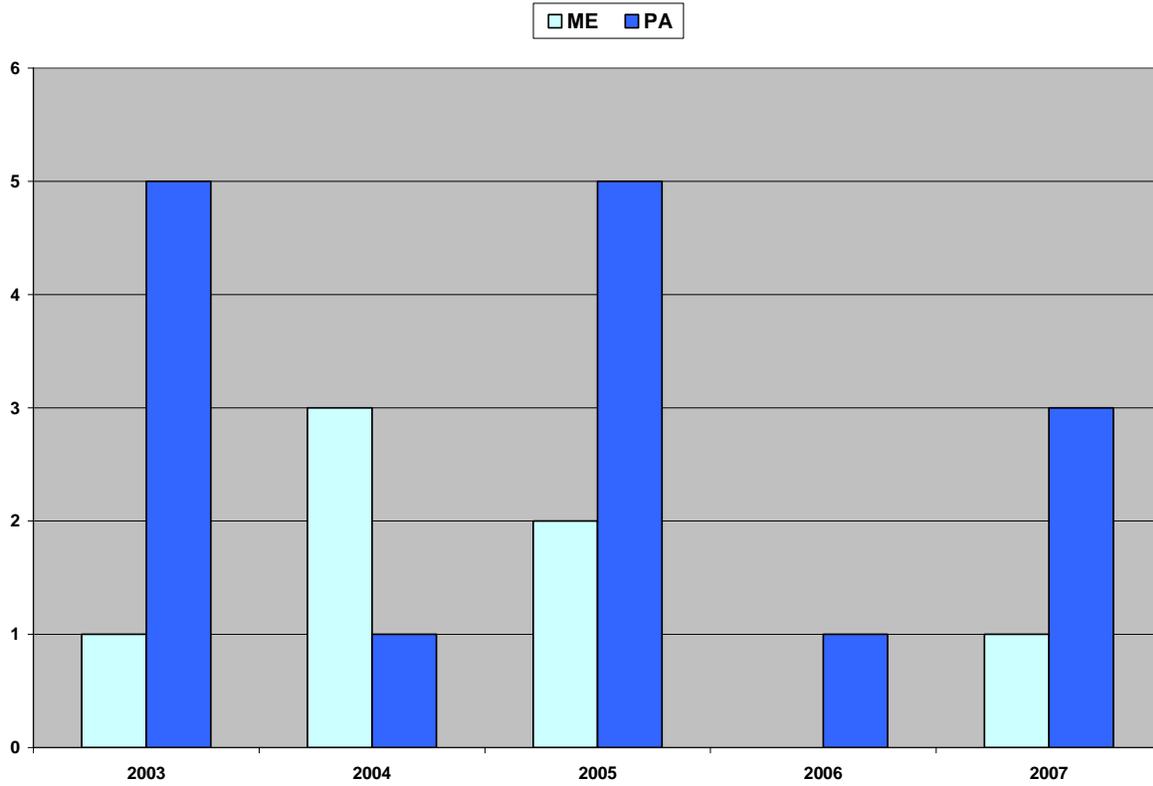
EXAMINATION TRENDS 2003-2007



TOXICOLOGY TESTING IN 2007

| | Toxicology Performed | # of Cases | Percentage of Cases |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| | | | |
| Travis County | Yes | 759 | 43% |
| | No | 229 | 13% |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| Out of County | Yes | 769 | 43% |
| | No | 21 | 1% |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| TOTAL CASES | | 1778 | 100% |

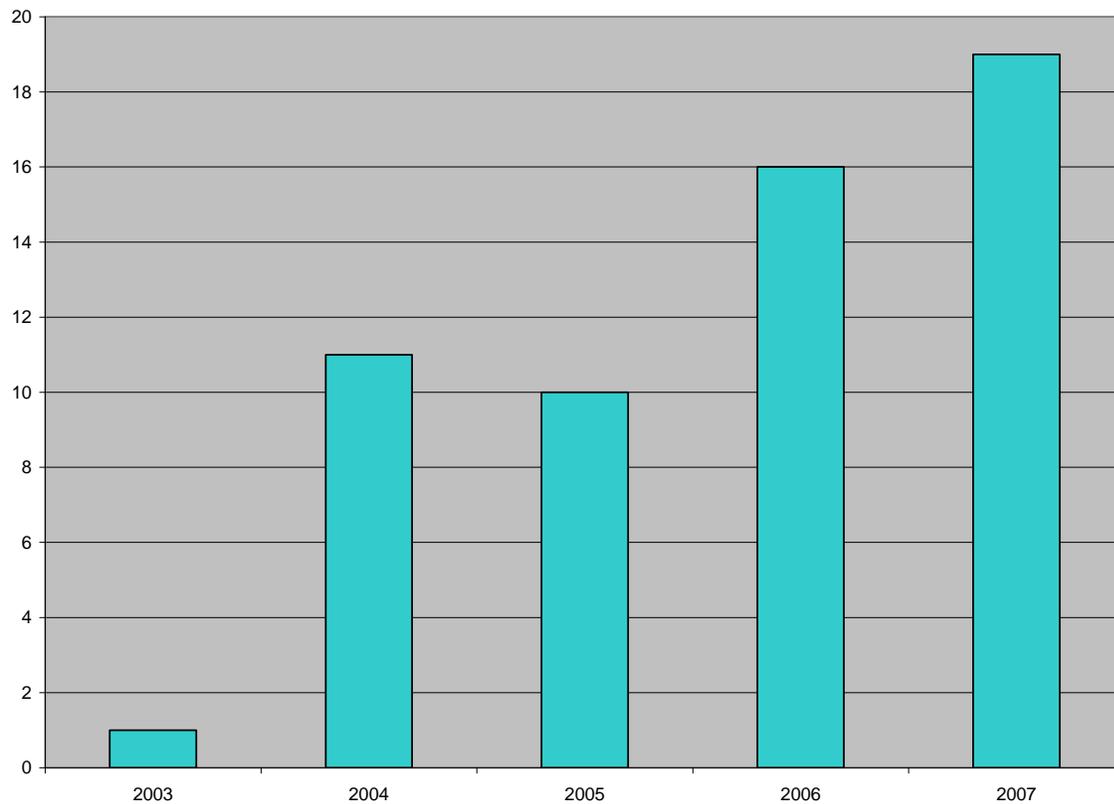
UNIDENTIFIED* AND UNCLAIMED DEATHS IN 2007



*unidentified numbers include skeletal remains

UNCLAIMED BODIES

(all cases referred to Travis County Burial Assistance Program)



EYE AND TISSUE BANK REFERRALS

In Travis County, our office refers cases to the Travis County Blood and Tissue Center and Lions Eye Bank of Central Texas. All cases are referred to both agencies.

| | Total Cases | Cases Referred | Non-reportable |
|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Travis County | 988 | 670 | 318 |
| Out of County | 790 | 762 | 28 |

TRANSPORT

Travis County contracts with a company to provide transport services to our office within Travis County. In 2007, 977 bodies in Travis County were transported using our contracted provider. 11 cases were transported by private funeral homes. All out of county cases were transported by companies retained by the Justice of the Peace or family.