

TRAVIS COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER

Annual Report

2008



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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 2008, the population of Travis County was estimated at 974,365.

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:

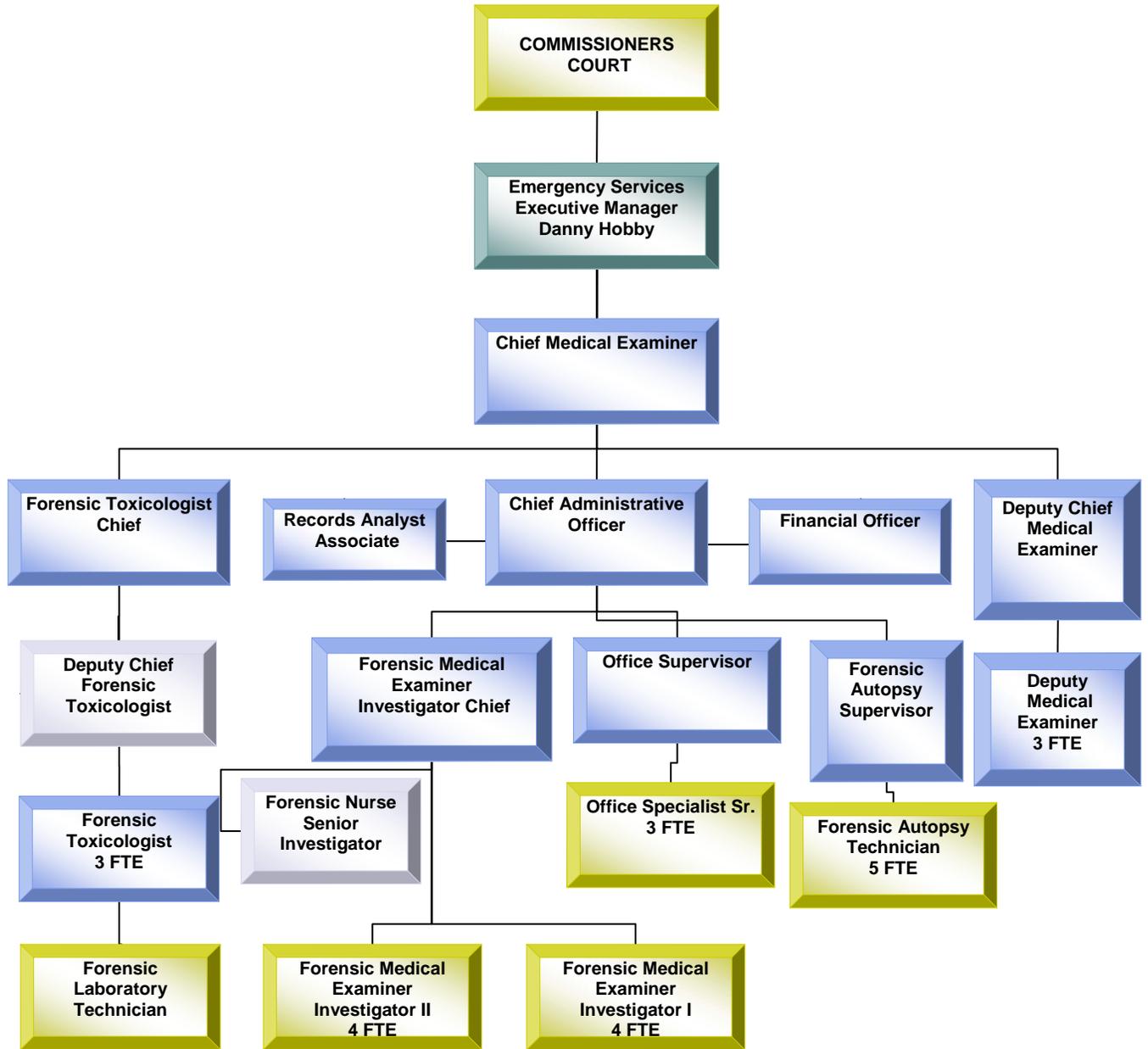
- chief autopsy technician
- autopsy technicians (5)

Toxicology:

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



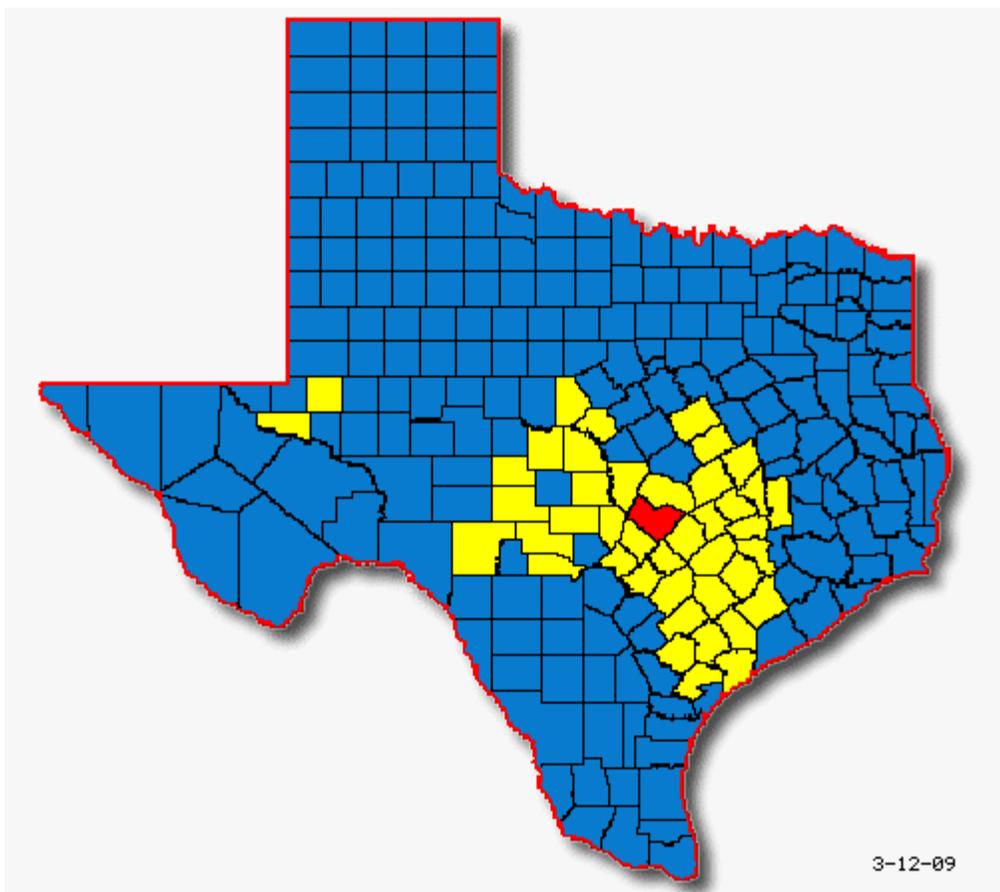
Organizational Chart



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 42 central Texas counties at the written request of the local authorities.

Graphic of TCMEO service region



Red - Travis County

Yellow - Counties serviced by TCMEO through Interlocal Agreements

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.

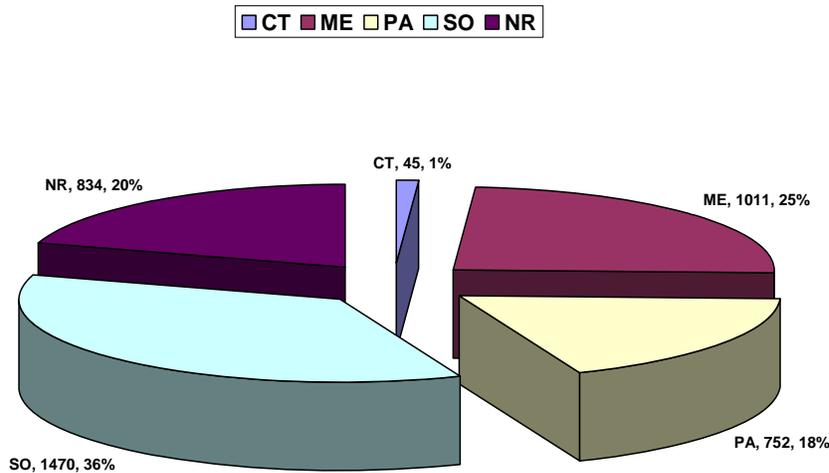
Not all bodies brought to the TCMEO for examination are autopsied. The Medical Examiner may choose to either perform a complete autopsy or to perform an external examination only (referred to as "view-out"). Partial autopsies are not performed at the TCMEO. Regardless of whether or not an autopsy is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

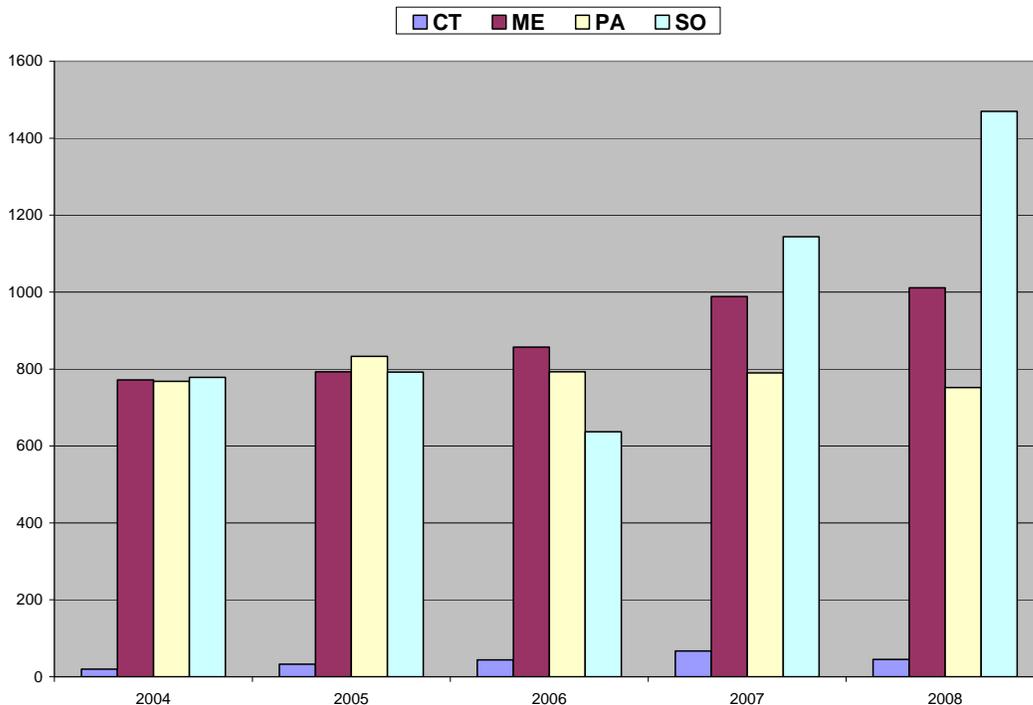
Investigative reports are generated on all cases that fall under the jurisdiction of the TCMEO. All deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County that are brought to the TCMEO for examination (whether they are autopsied or not) are given the designation of “ME” before the case number. All 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. If a case is reported to our office that does not fall within our jurisdiction, it is given the designation of “NR.” 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 decedent’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.

DEATHS REPORTED

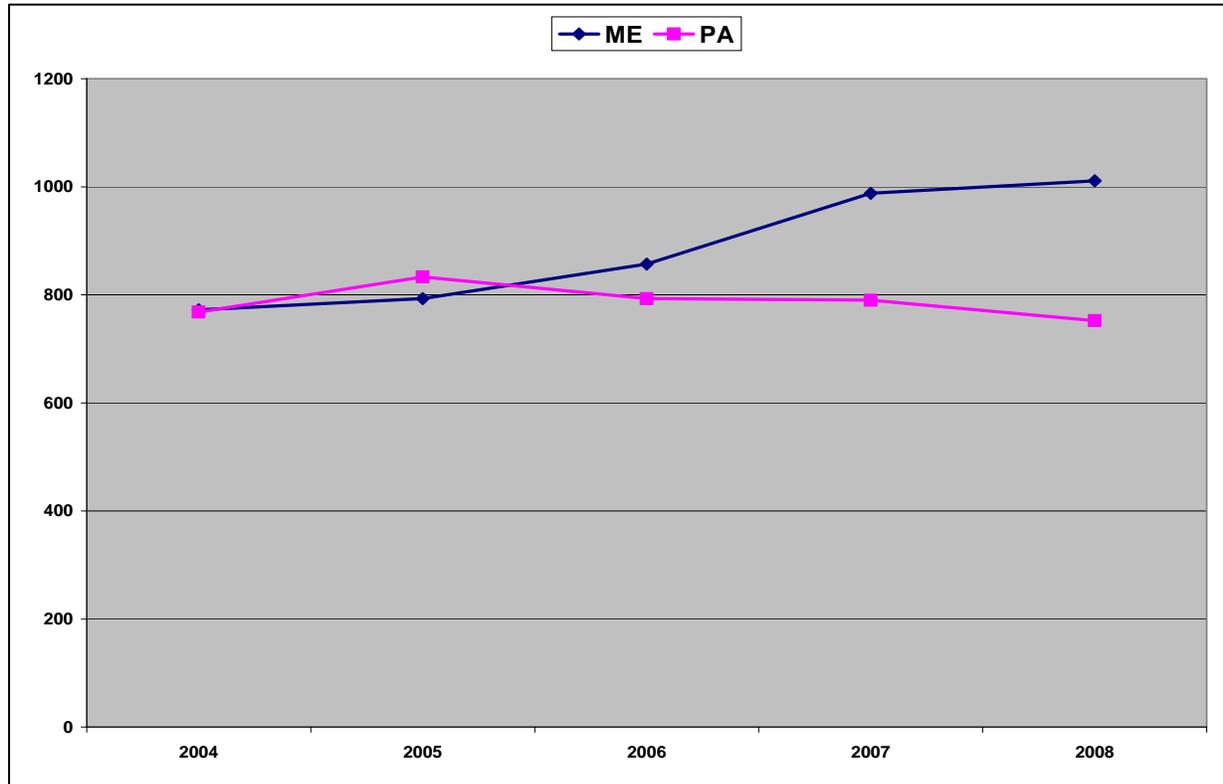
In 2008, the TCMEO received a referral of 4112 cases. Of those cases, 1011 were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, jurisdiction was accepted, and the body was examined at the TCMEO (ME cases). Forty five (45) cases were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, jurisdiction was accepted, but the body was not examined at the TCMEO (CT cases). 1470 were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, but jurisdiction was declined by TCMEO (SO cases). The TCMEO received reports of death on 834 cases in Travis County that did not fall within its jurisdiction (NR cases). The TCMEO received a total of 752 cases from outside Travis County (PA cases).



Over the last five years, the number of reportable cases has steadily risen.

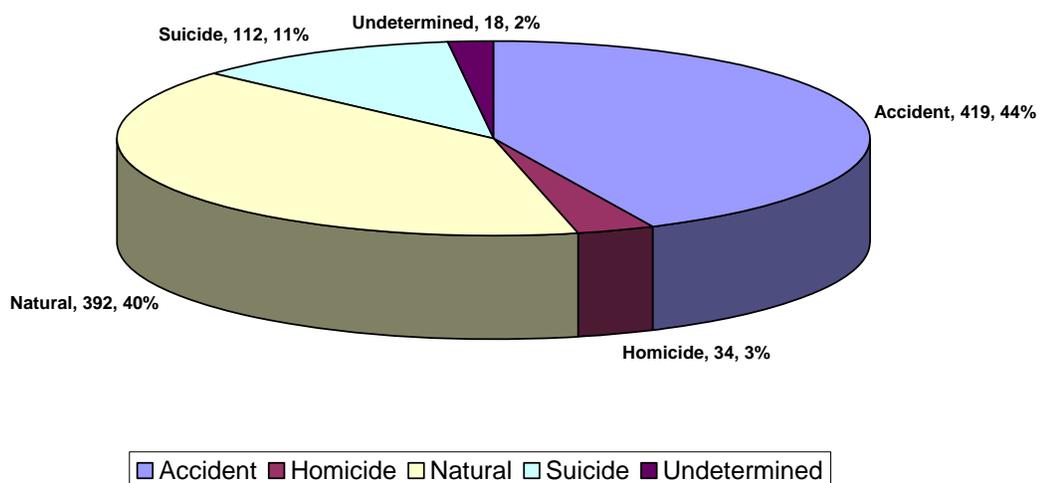


In October 2007, our office raised its fees for out of county autopsies. As a result, we saw a small decline in out of county caseload. The number of Travis County cases continued to increase. Historically, we see a small decrease in caseload when fee adjustments are made.

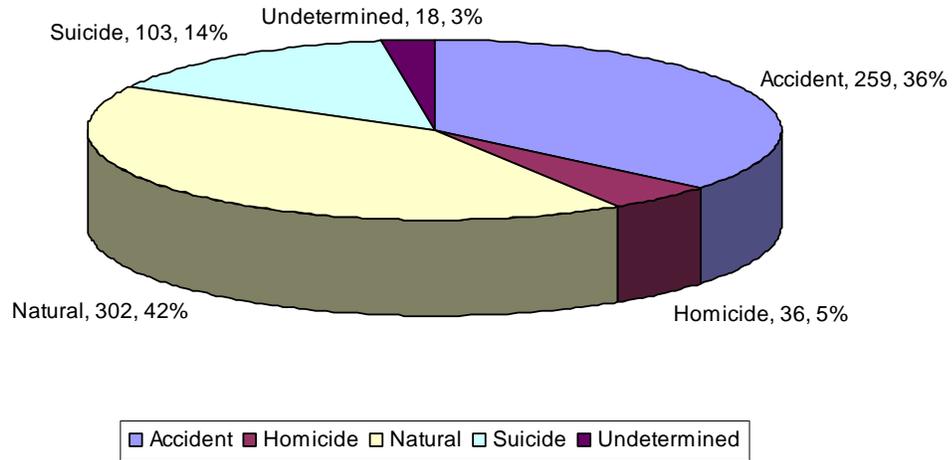


MANNER OF DEATH

TRAVIS COUNTY MANNER OF DEATH 2008

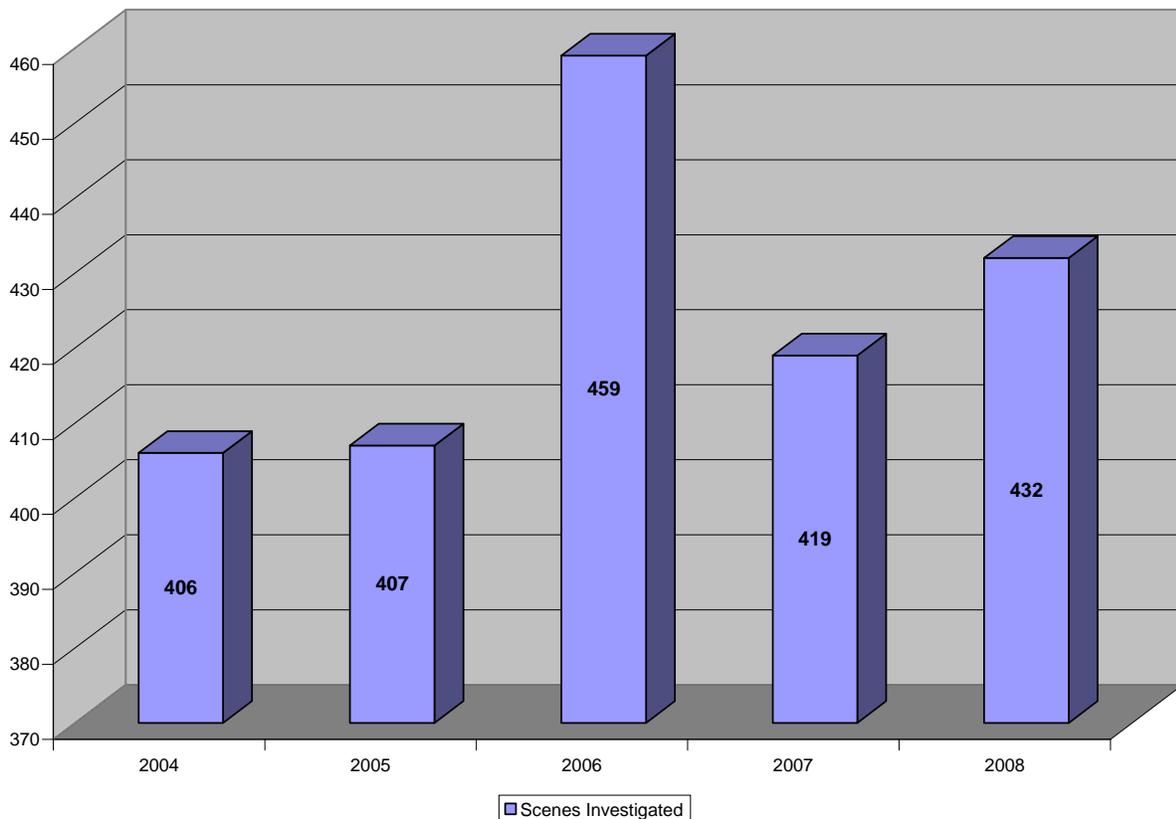


OUT OF COUNTY MANNER OF DEATH 2008



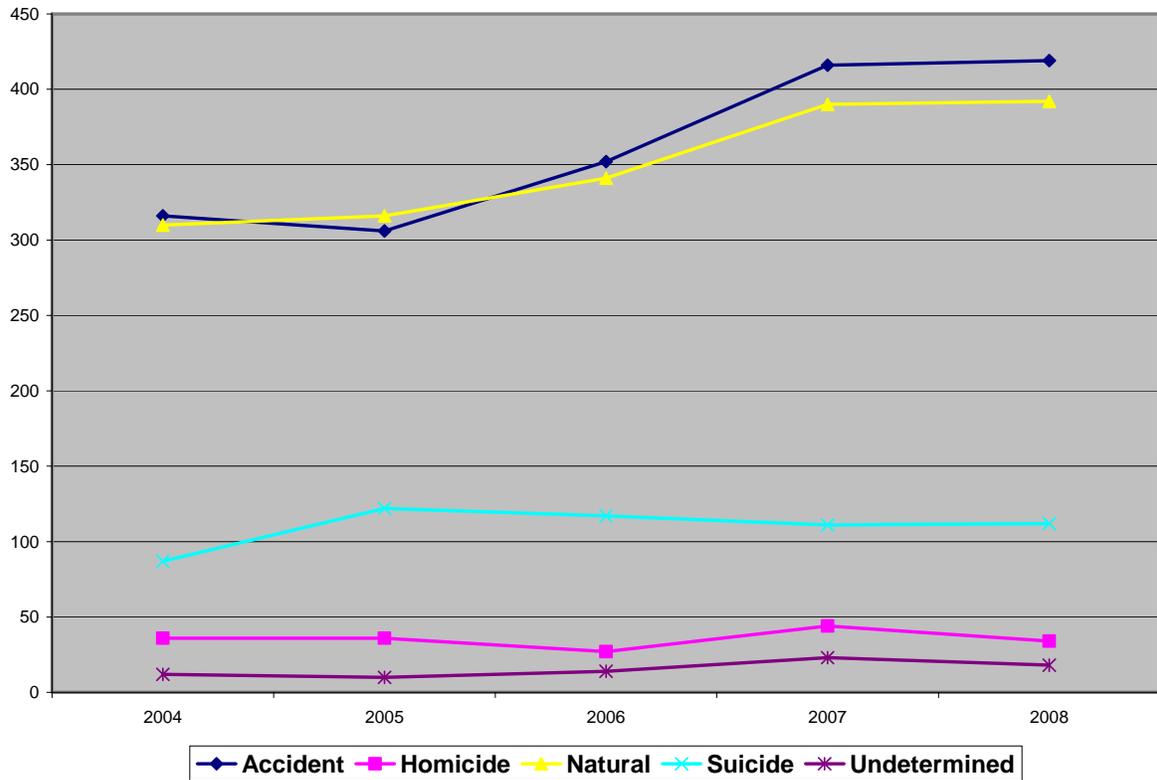
TRENDS IN SCENE INVESTIGATIONS

Forensic Investigators attended 432 scenes in 2008. Ten of the scenes were also attended by a Forensic Pathologist.

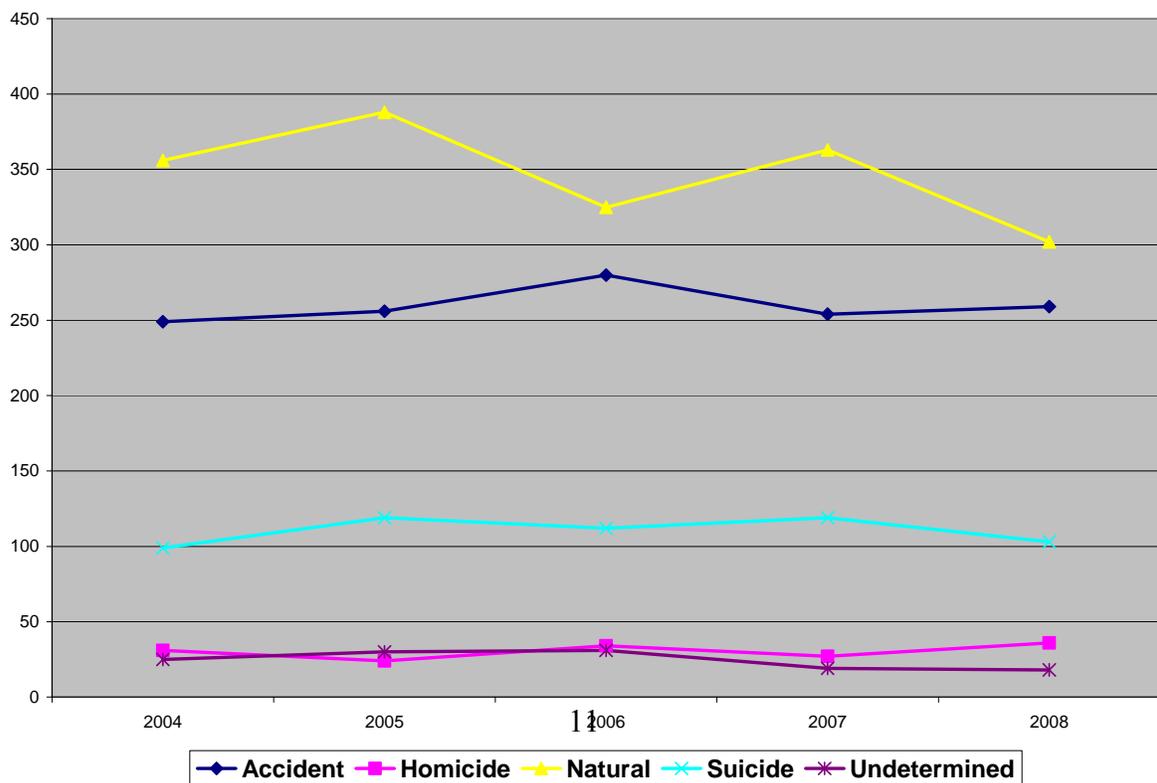


TRENDS IN MANNER OF DEATH 2004-2008

TRAVIS COUNTY CASES

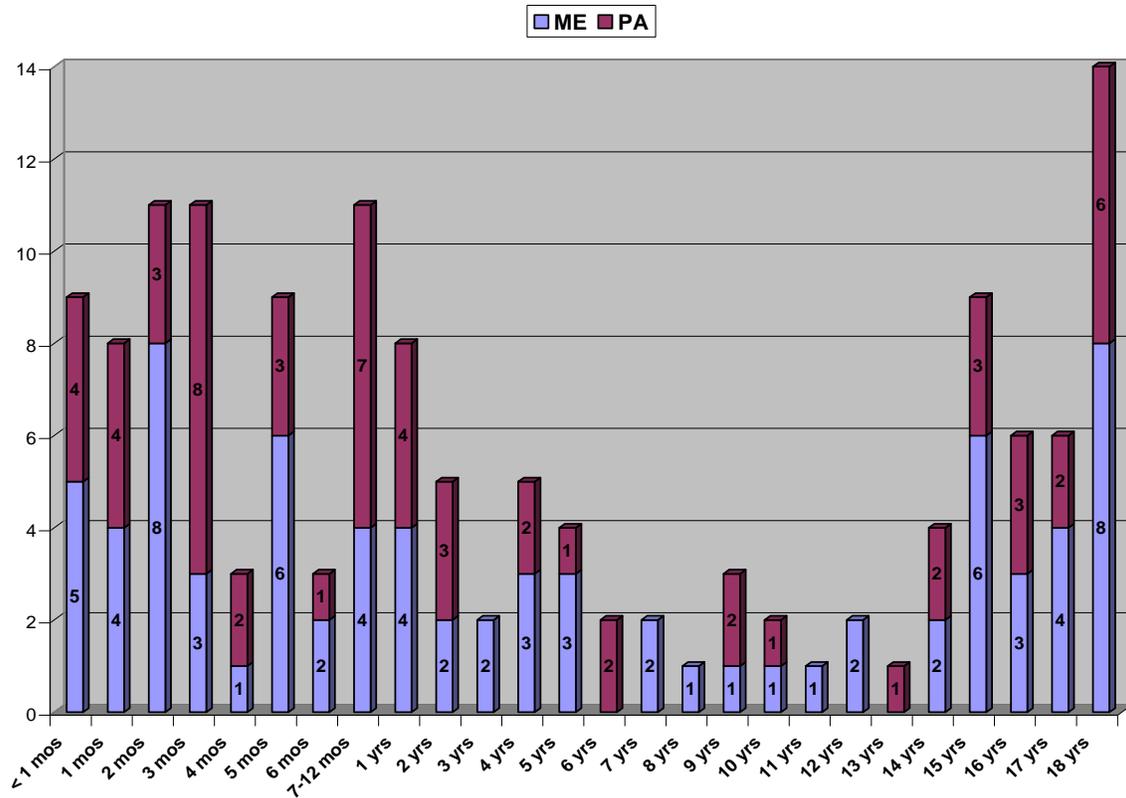


OUT OF COUNTY CASES

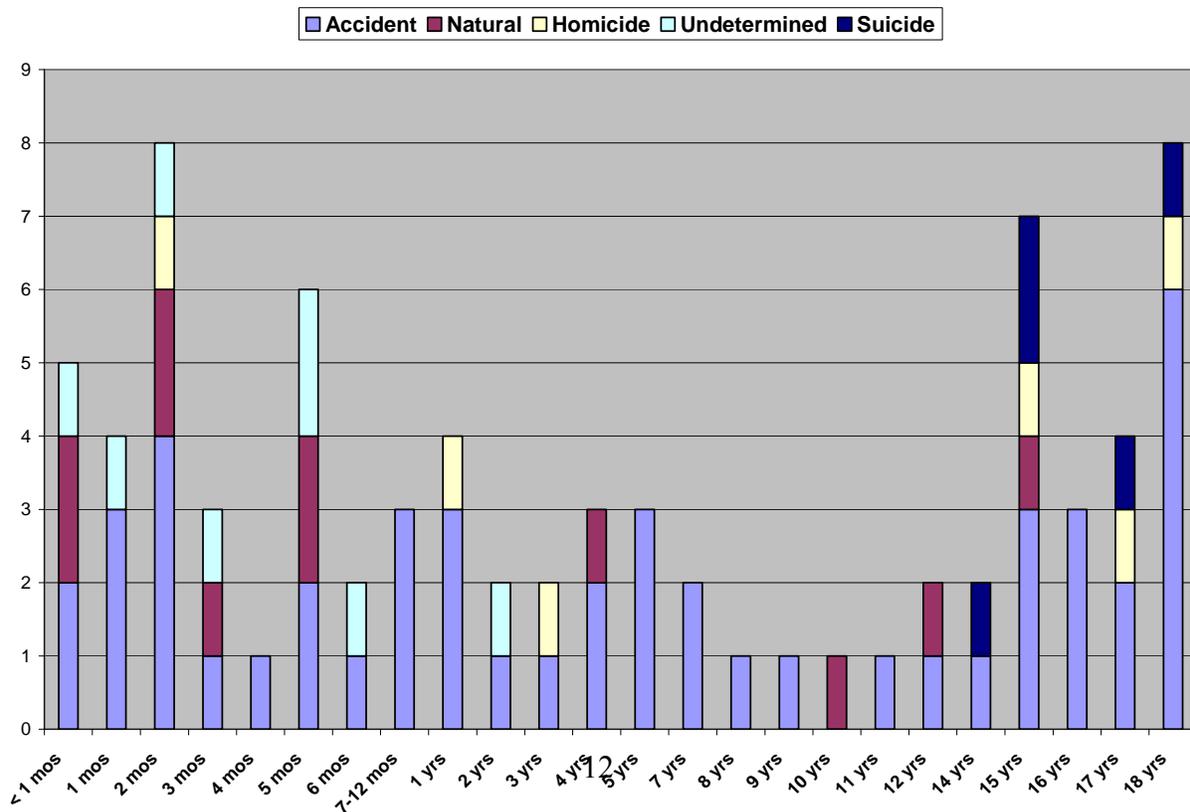


CHILD FATALITIES

In 2008, there were 51 child fatalities reported to our office in Travis County. There were an additional 51 child fatalities in other counties that were reported to our office.

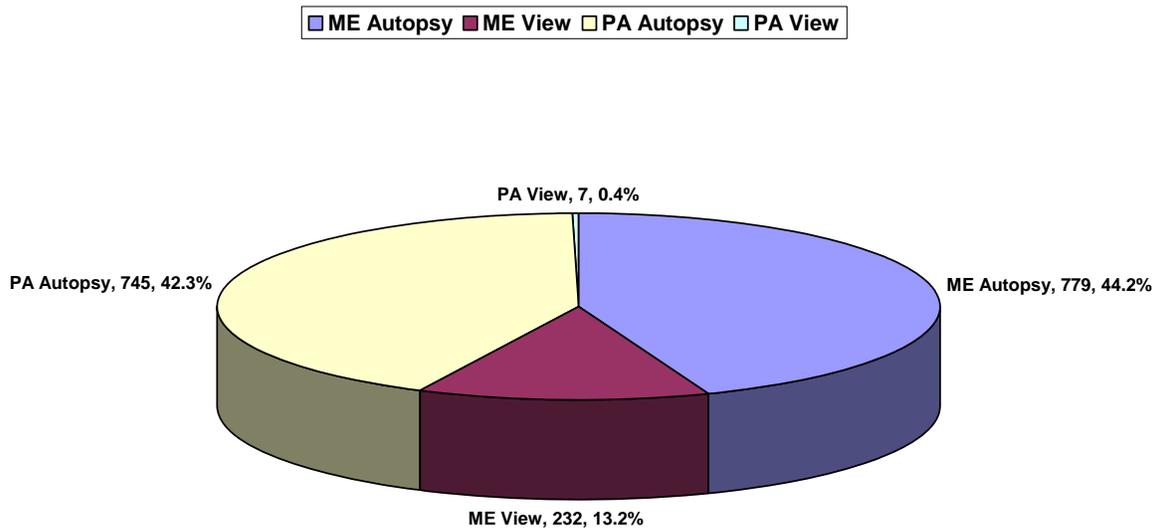


Manner of Death in Child Fatalities in Travis County

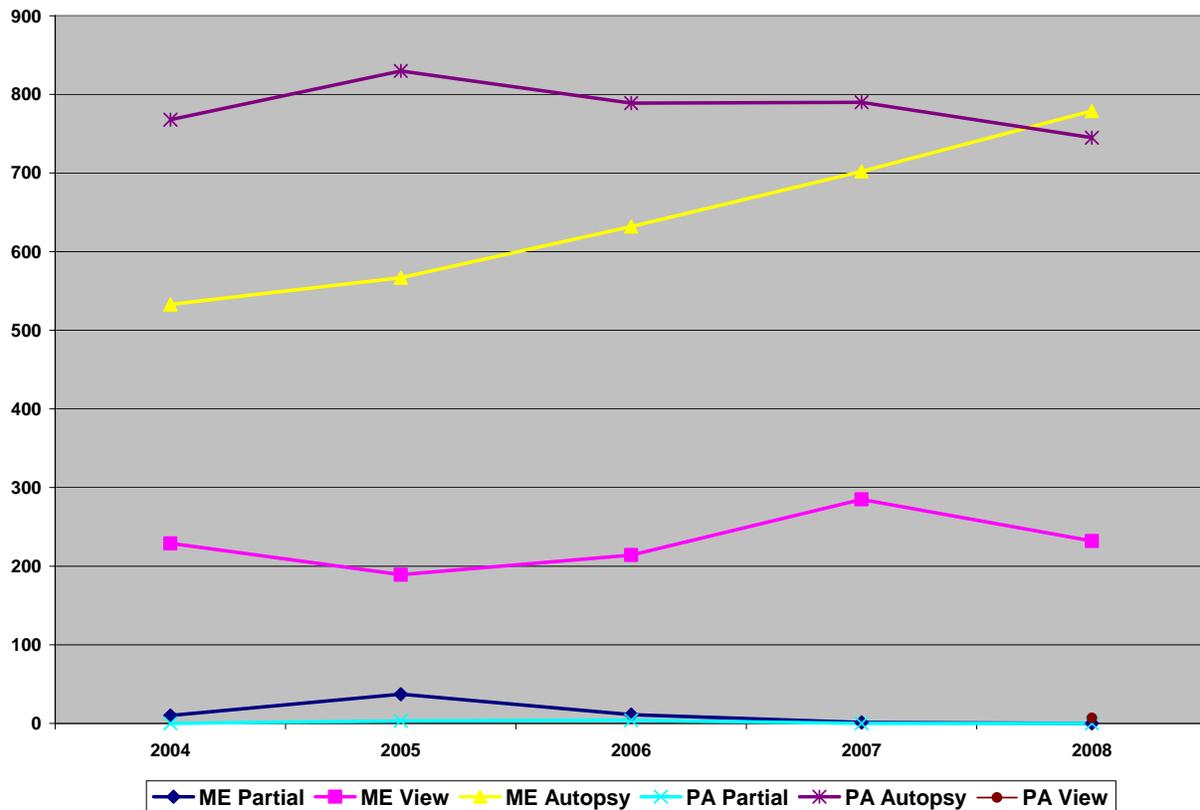


EXAM TYPES

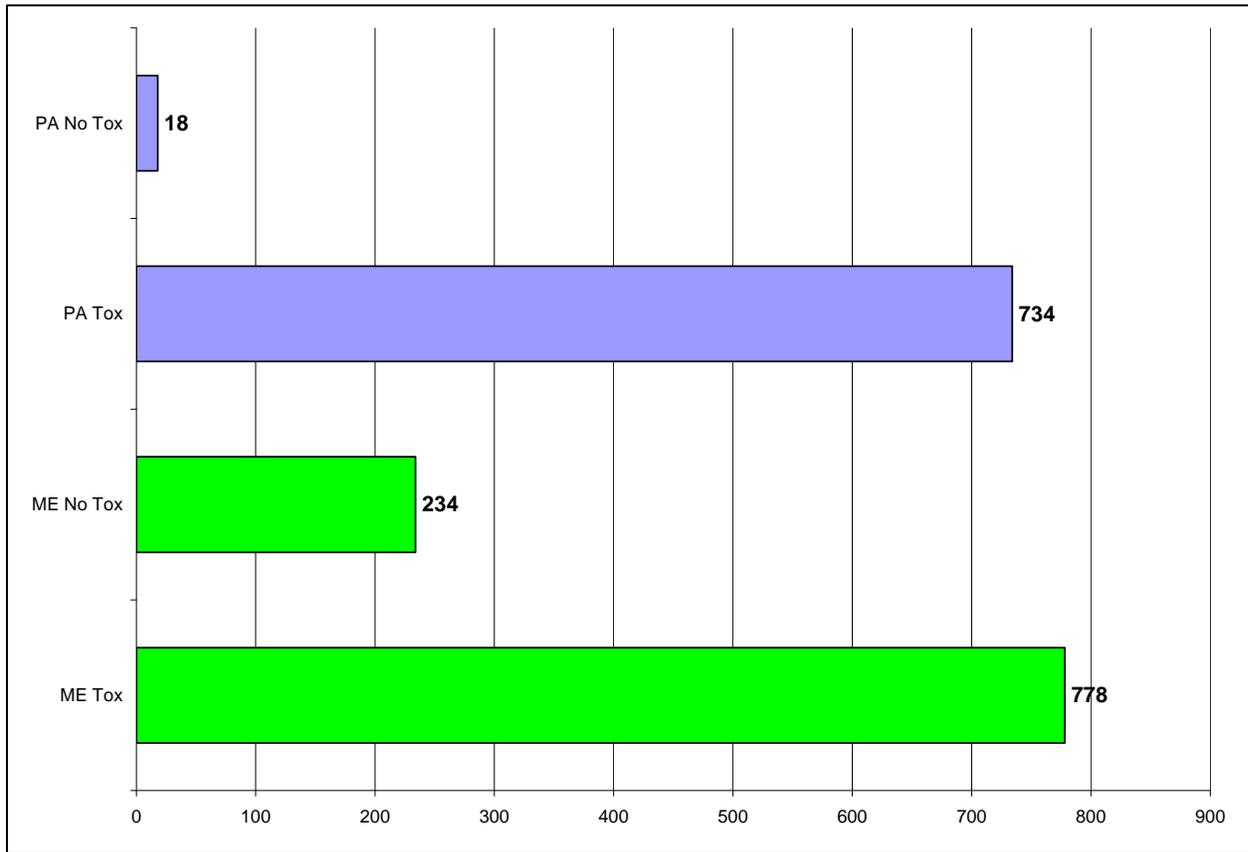
In 2008, we began doing external examination (“view-outs”) on select out of county cases. Partial autopsies are not performed in our office.



EXAMINATION TRENDS 2004-2008

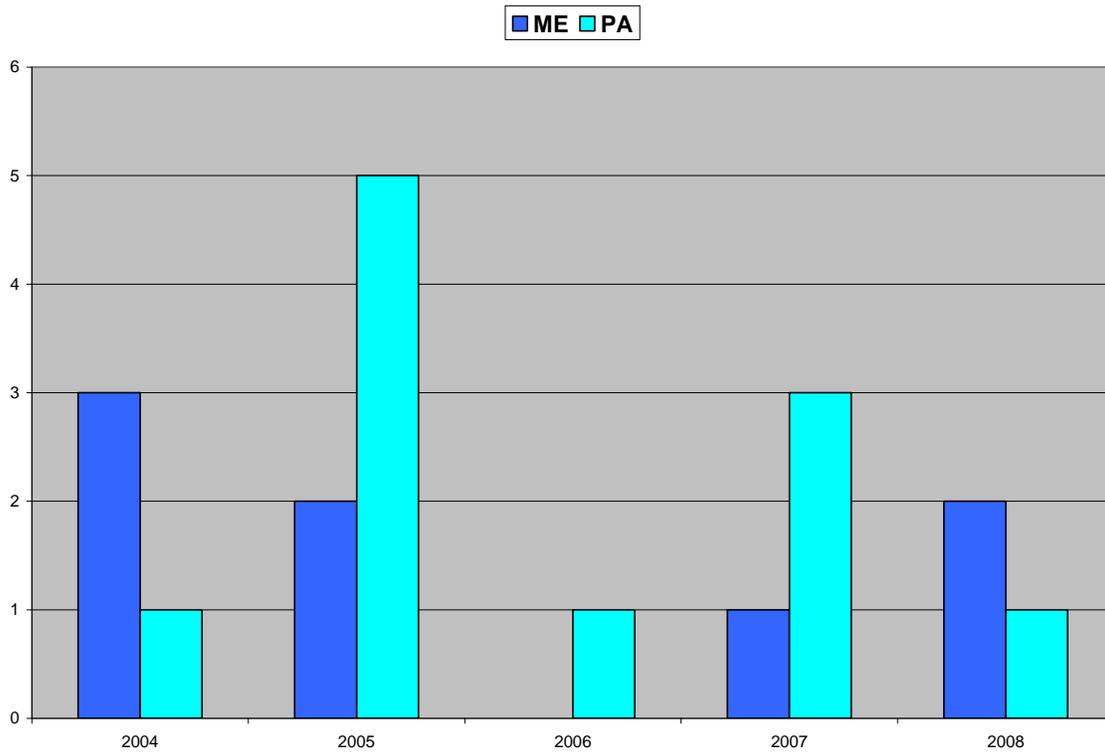


TOXICOLOGY TESTING IN 2008



Toxicology and/or clinical testing was performed on 77% of Travis County cases. Toxicology and/or clinical testing were performed on 98% of out of county cases.

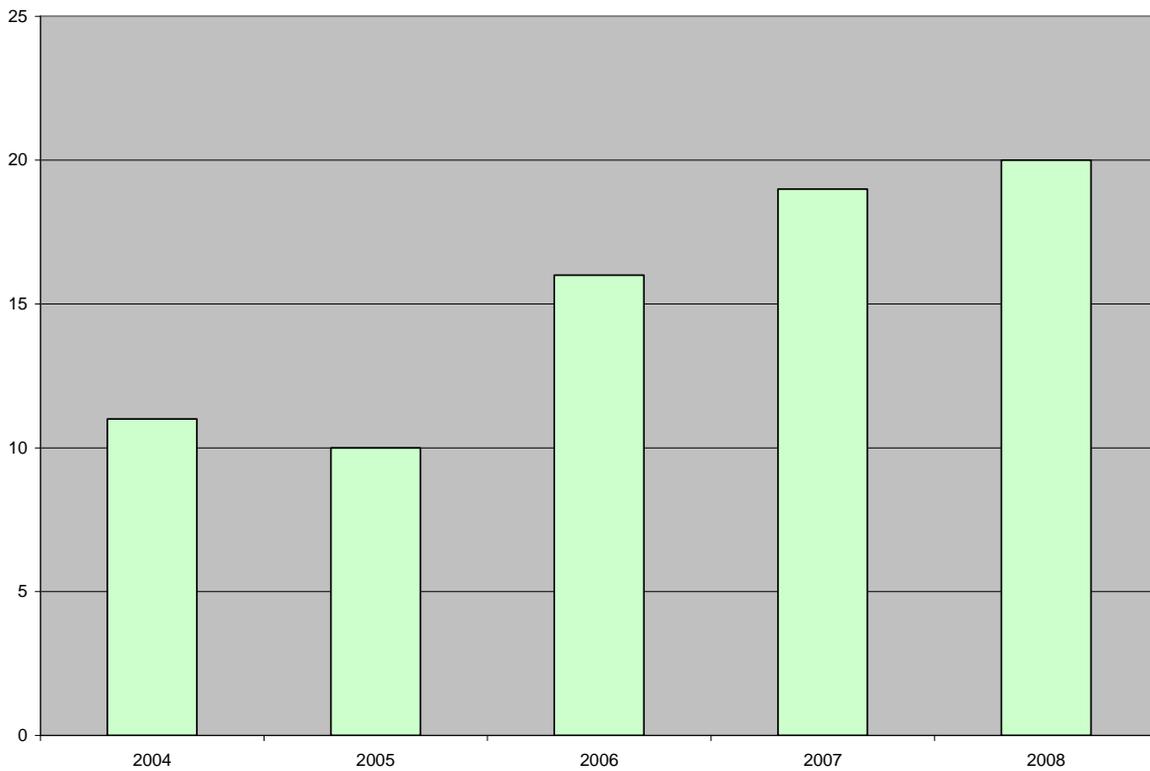
UNIDENTIFIED* BODIES



*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.

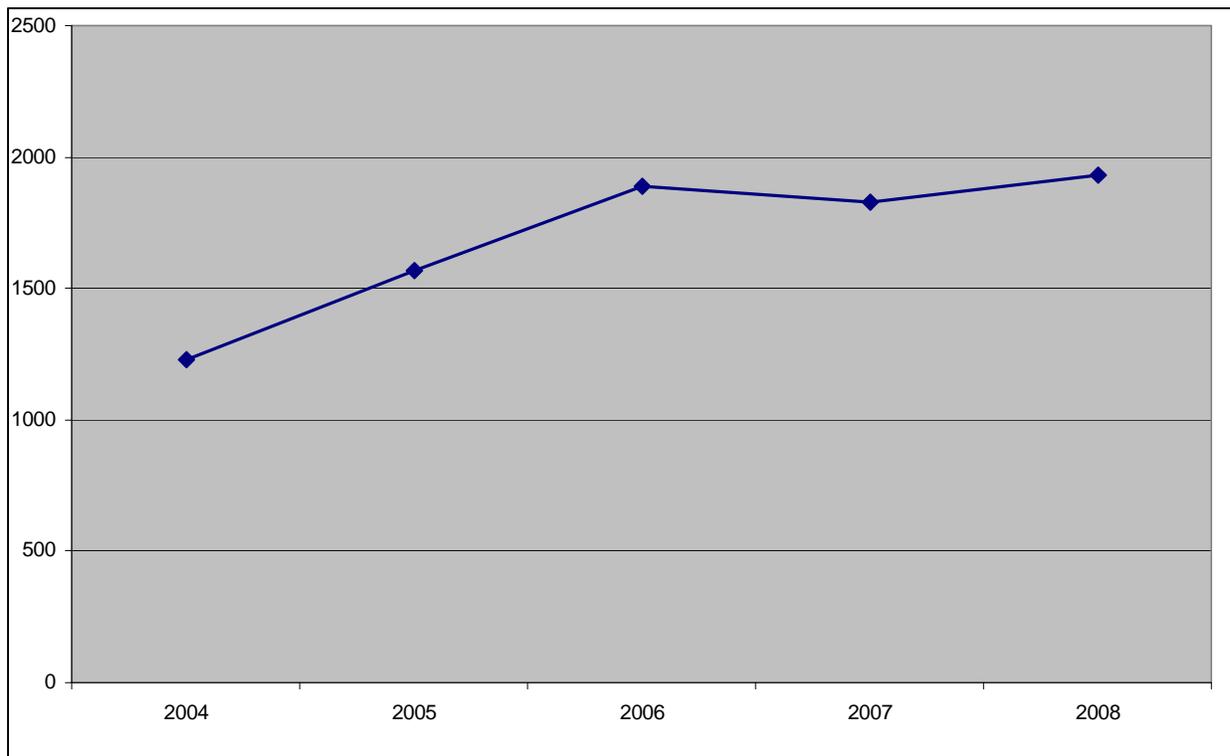
	Total Cases	Cases Referred	Non-Referral
Travis County	1011	745	266
Out of County	752	586	166

TRANSPORT

Travis County contracts with a company to provide transport services to our office within Travis County. In 2008, 903 bodies in Travis County were transported using our contracted provider, and 99 were transported by TCME personnel. There were nine cases transported by private funeral homes. All out of county cases were transported by companies retained by the referring Justice of the Peace or family.

CREMATION AUTHORIZATIONS

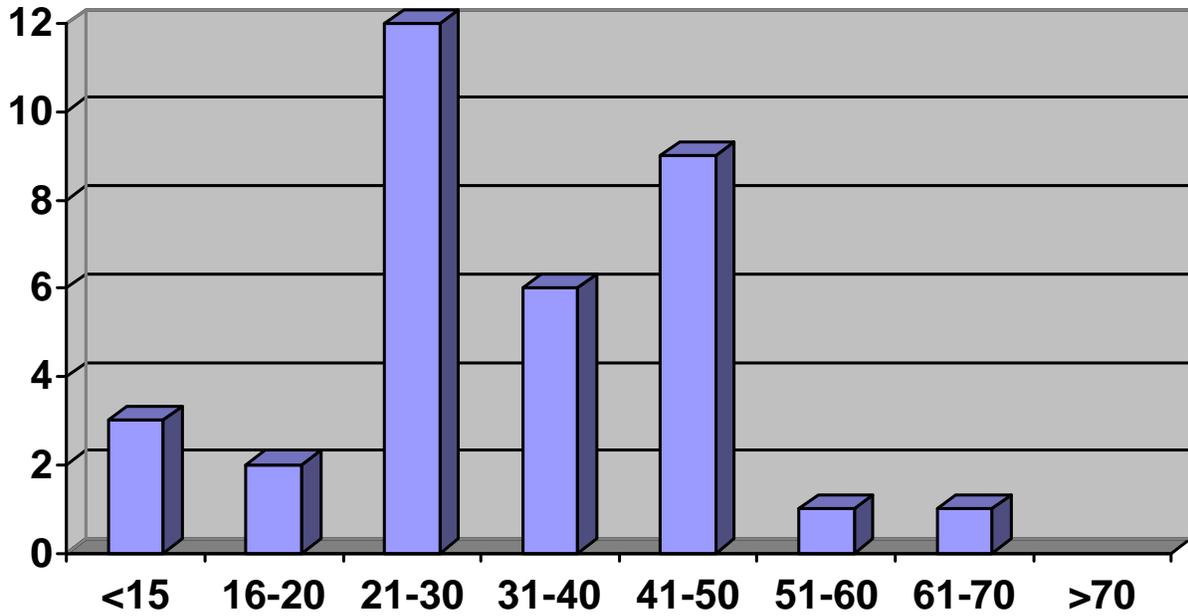
In Texas, Medical Examiners or Justices of the Peace are required by law to sign cremation authorizations before a body is cremated. At the TCMEO, the cremation authorization form and death certificate of each decedent is reviewed by a forensic pathologist before authorizing cremation. The following demonstrates the number of cremation authorizations signed by one of our pathologists.



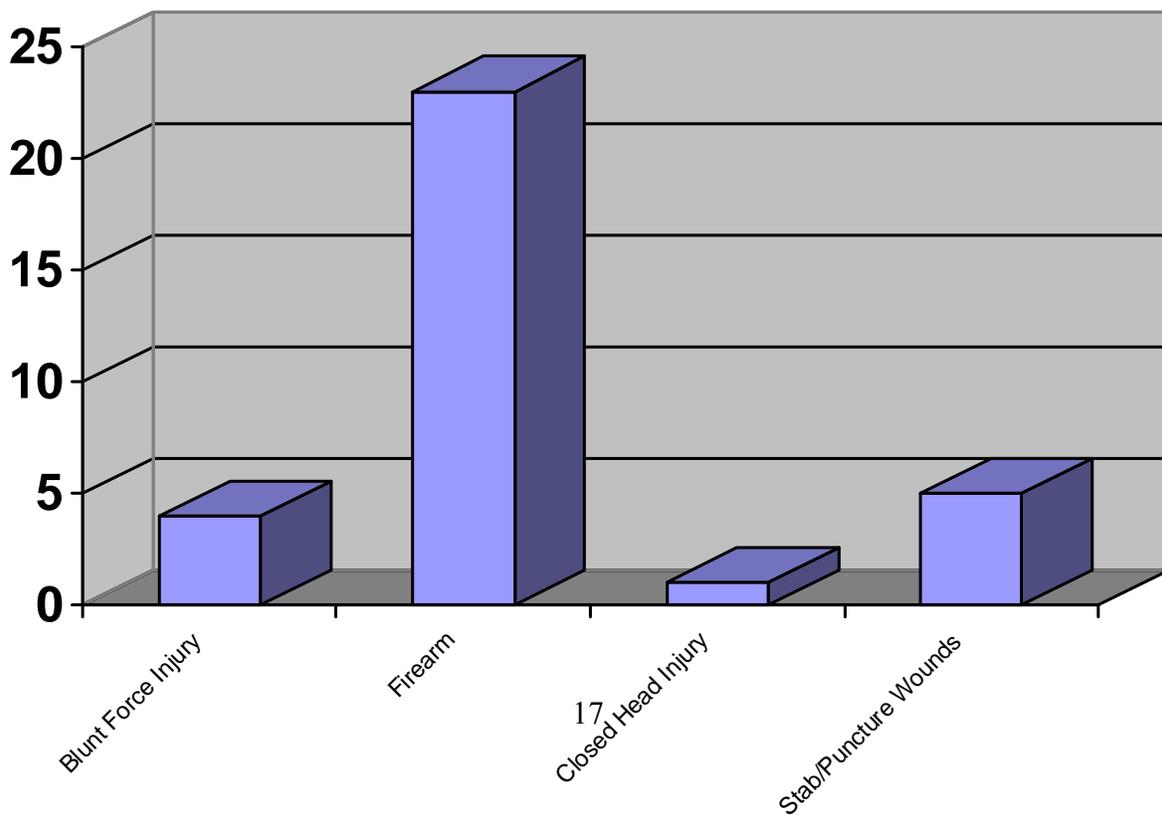
**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
DEATHS IN TRAVIS COUNTY**

HOMICIDES

By Age

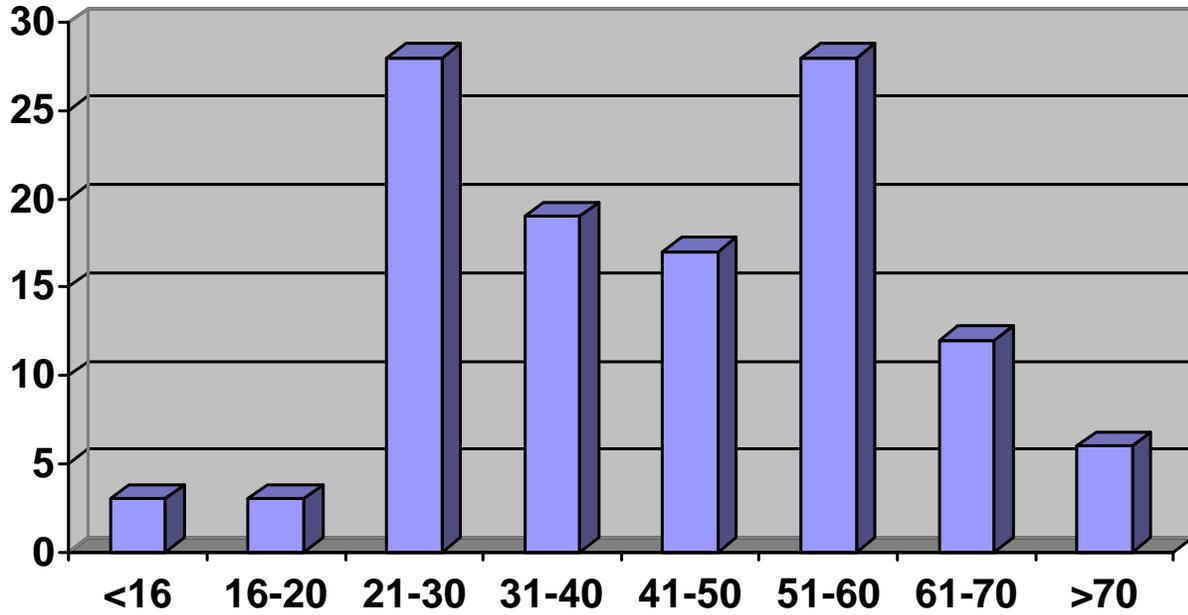


By Injury Type

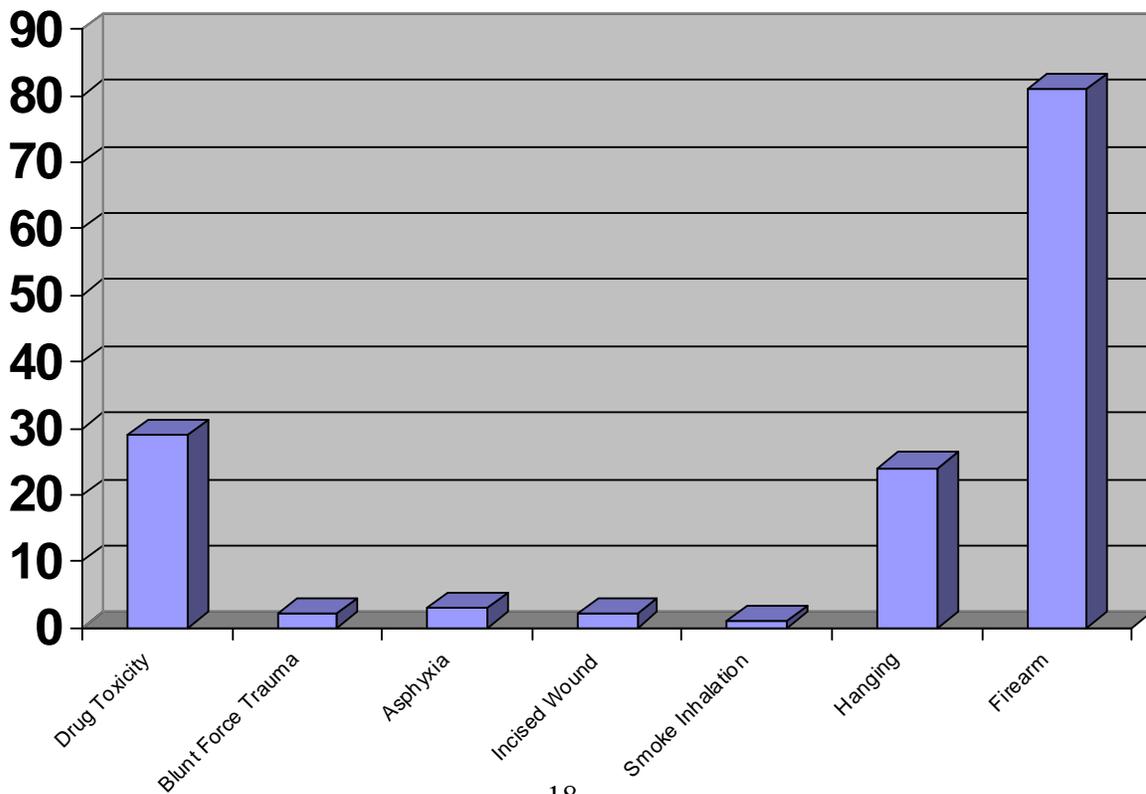


SUICIDES

By Age

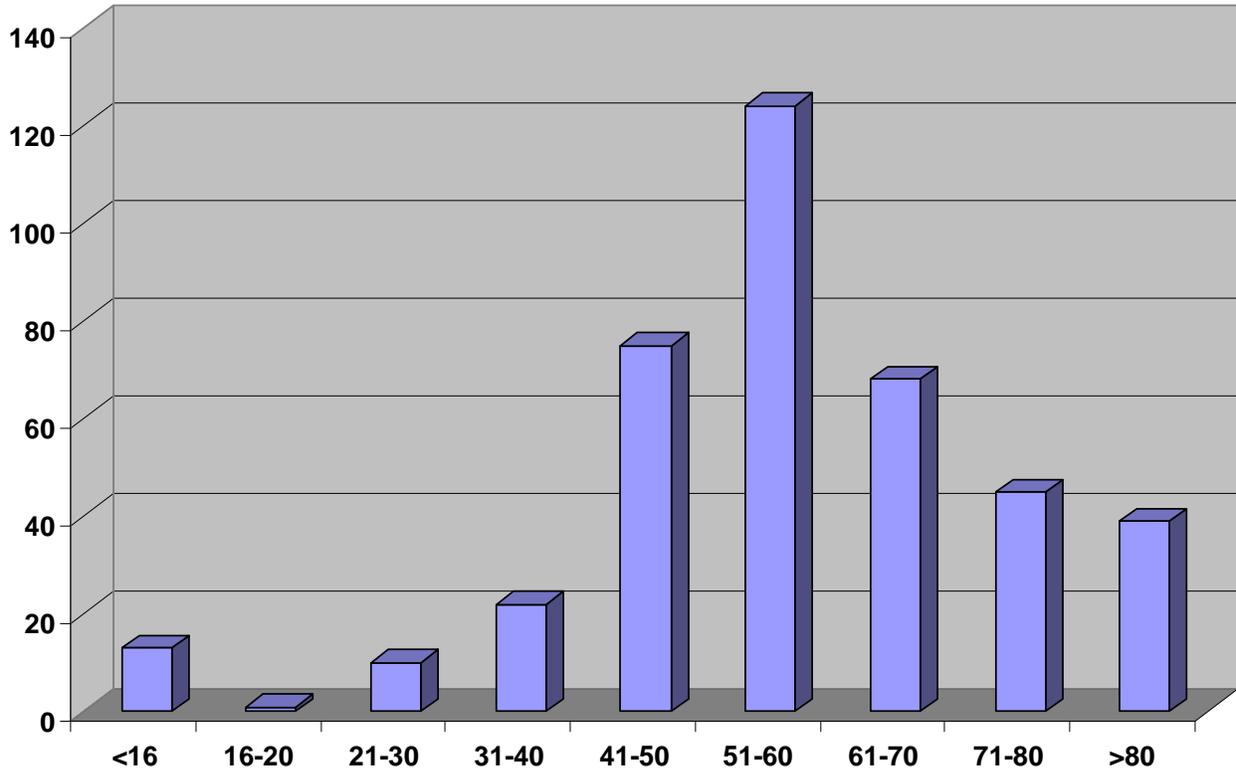


By Injury Type

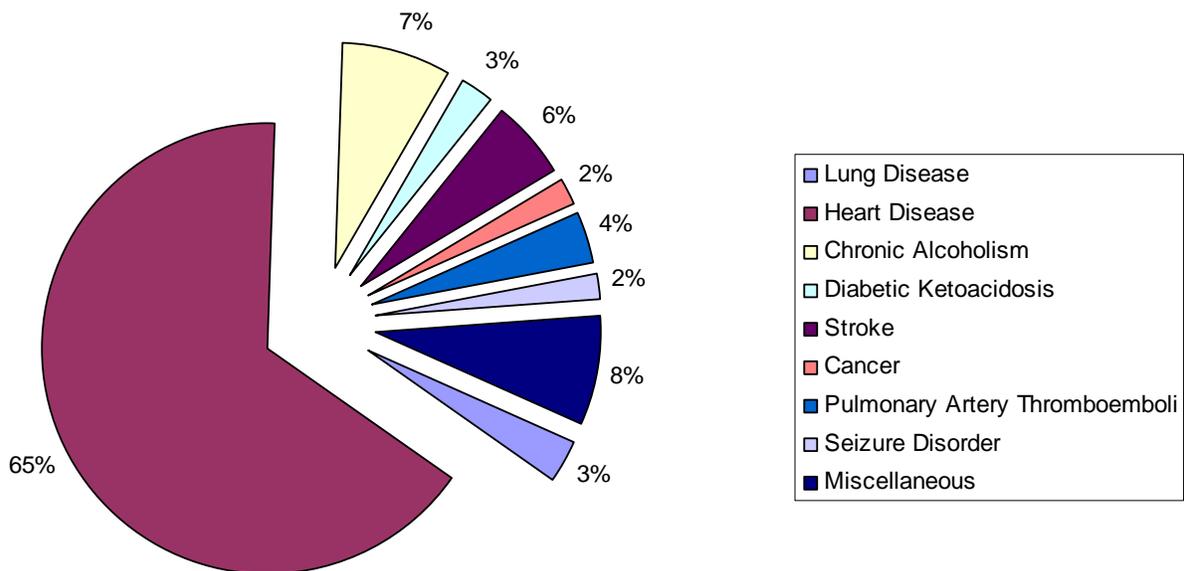


NATURAL DEATHS

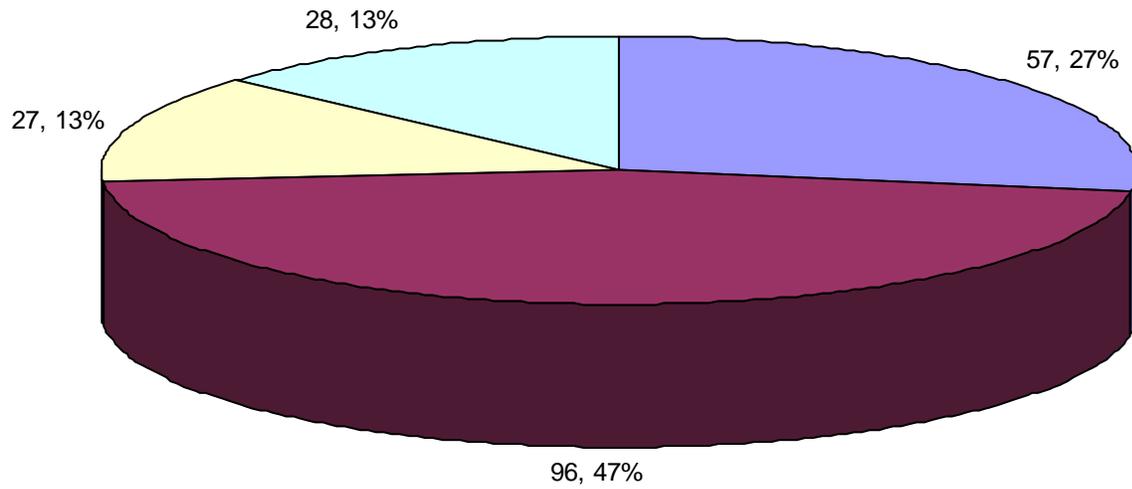
By Age



By Disease Process

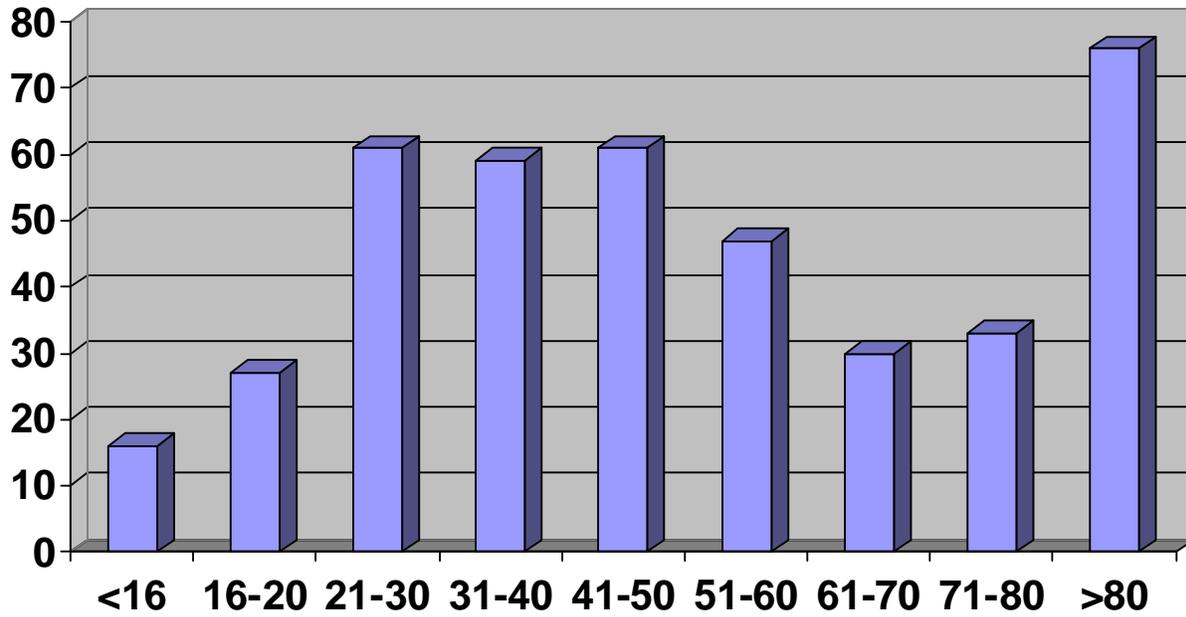


Heart Disease by Type

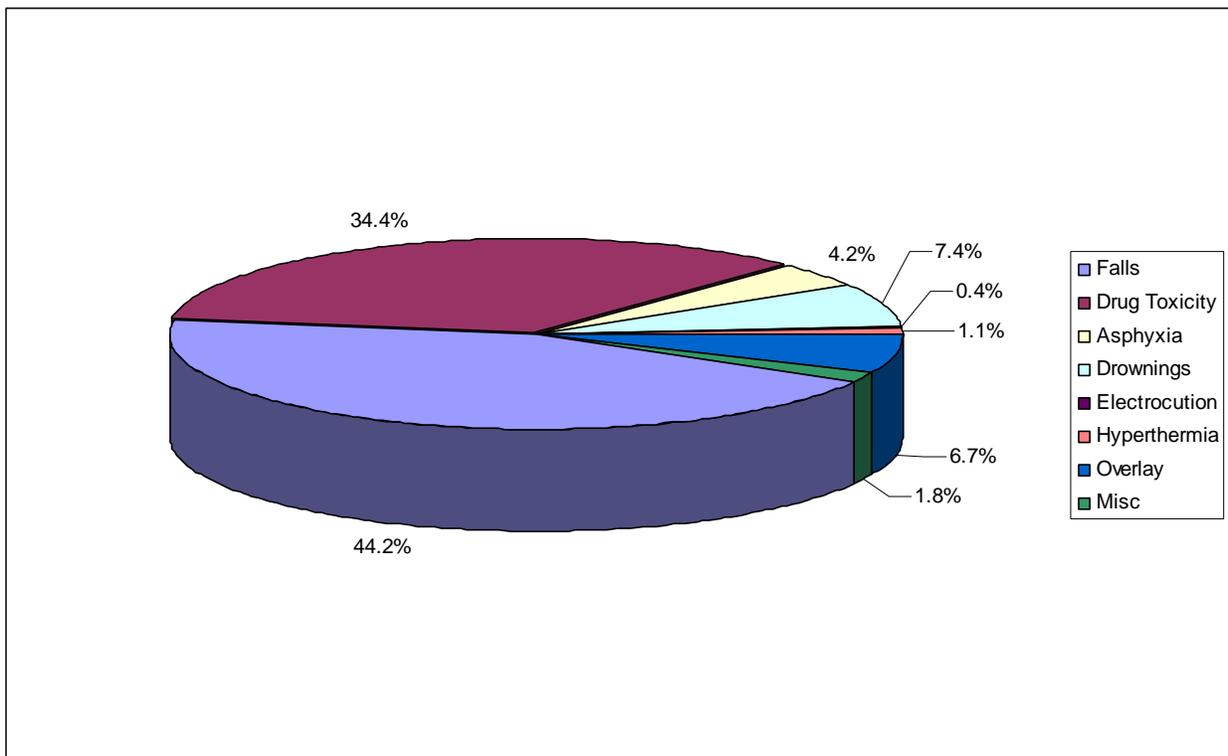


ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

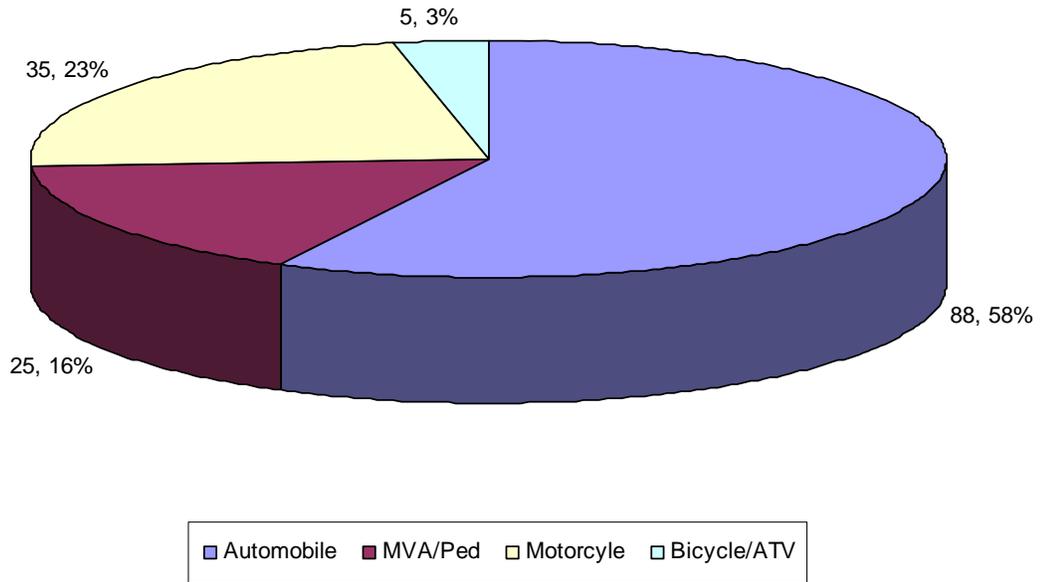
By Age



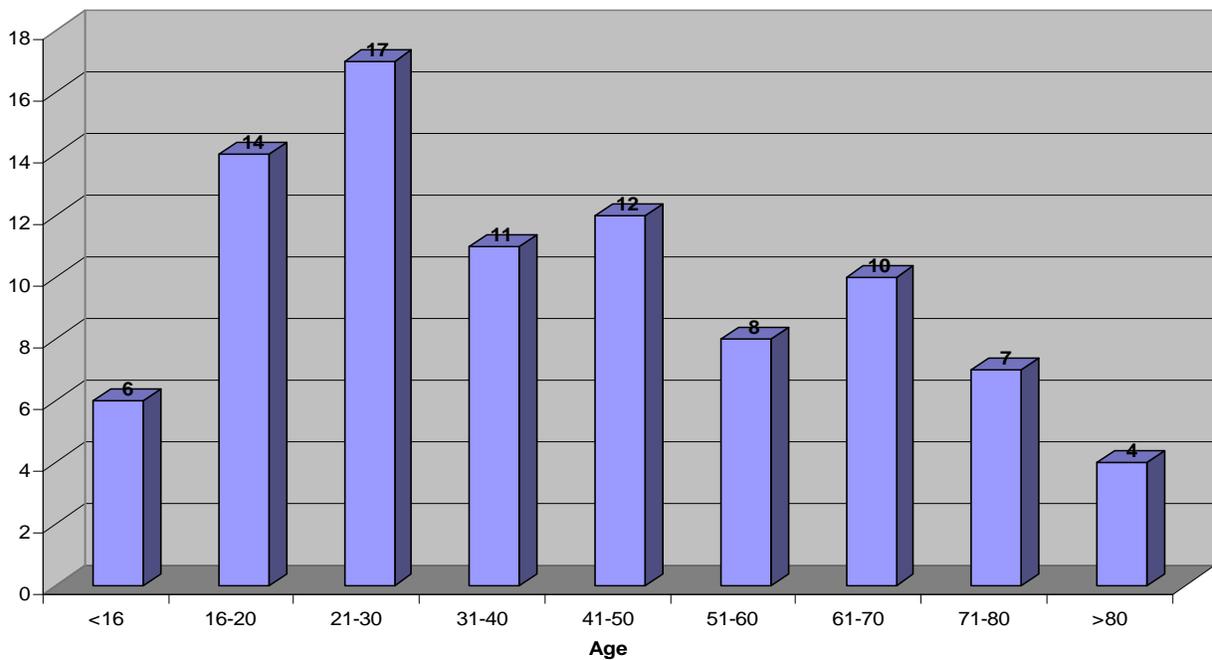
By Injury Type



**TRAVIS COUNTY
MOTOR VEHICLE FATALITIES**

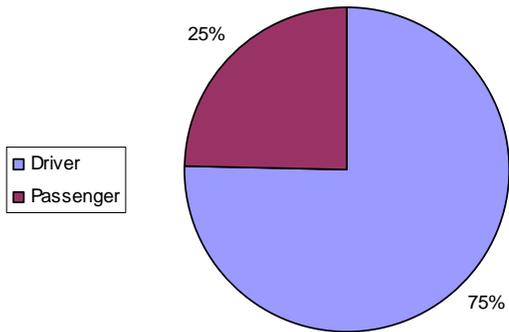


Automobile Fatalities By Age

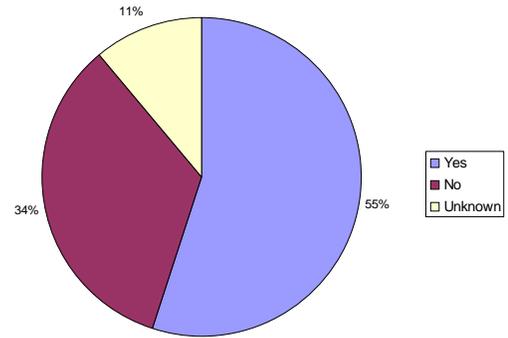


Automobile Fatalities

Placement in Vehicle

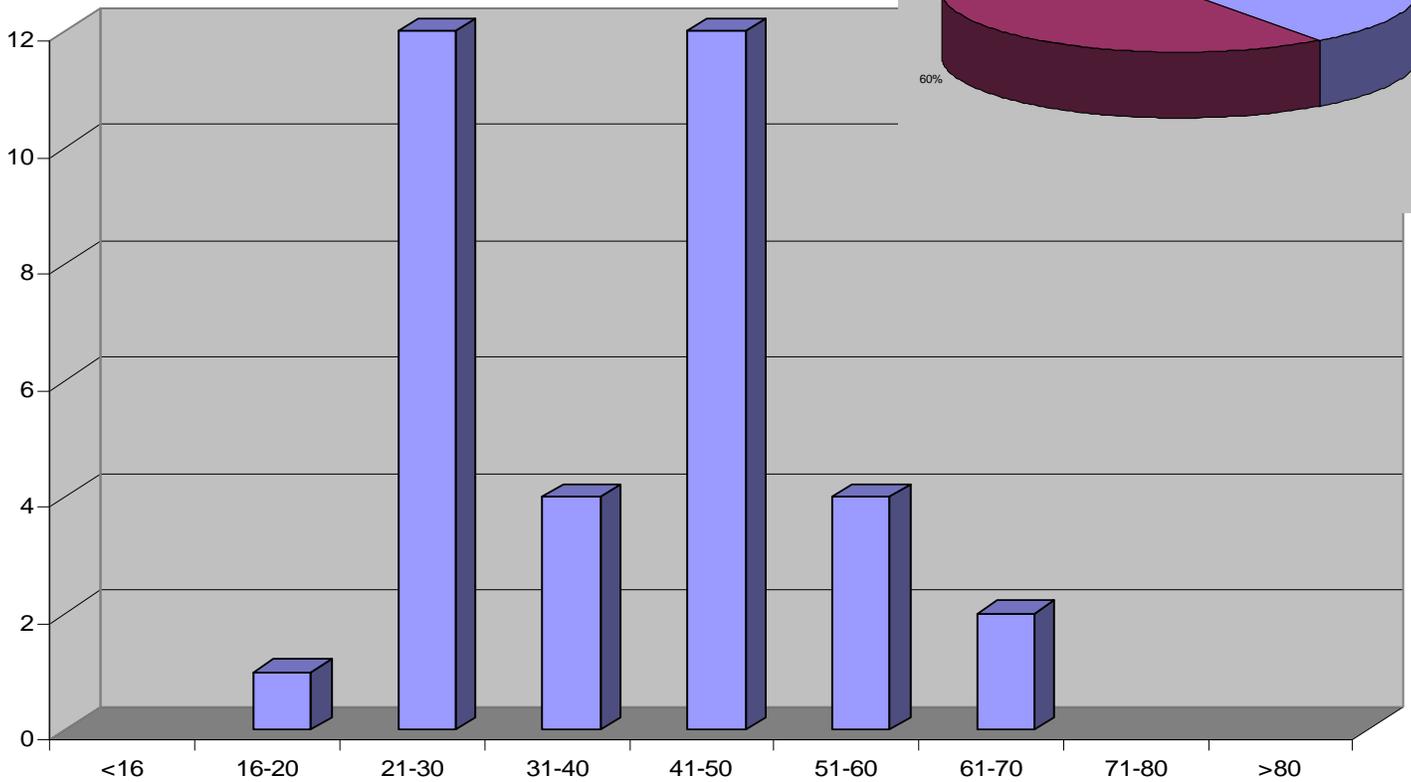


Seatbelts



Motorcycle Fatalities

By Age

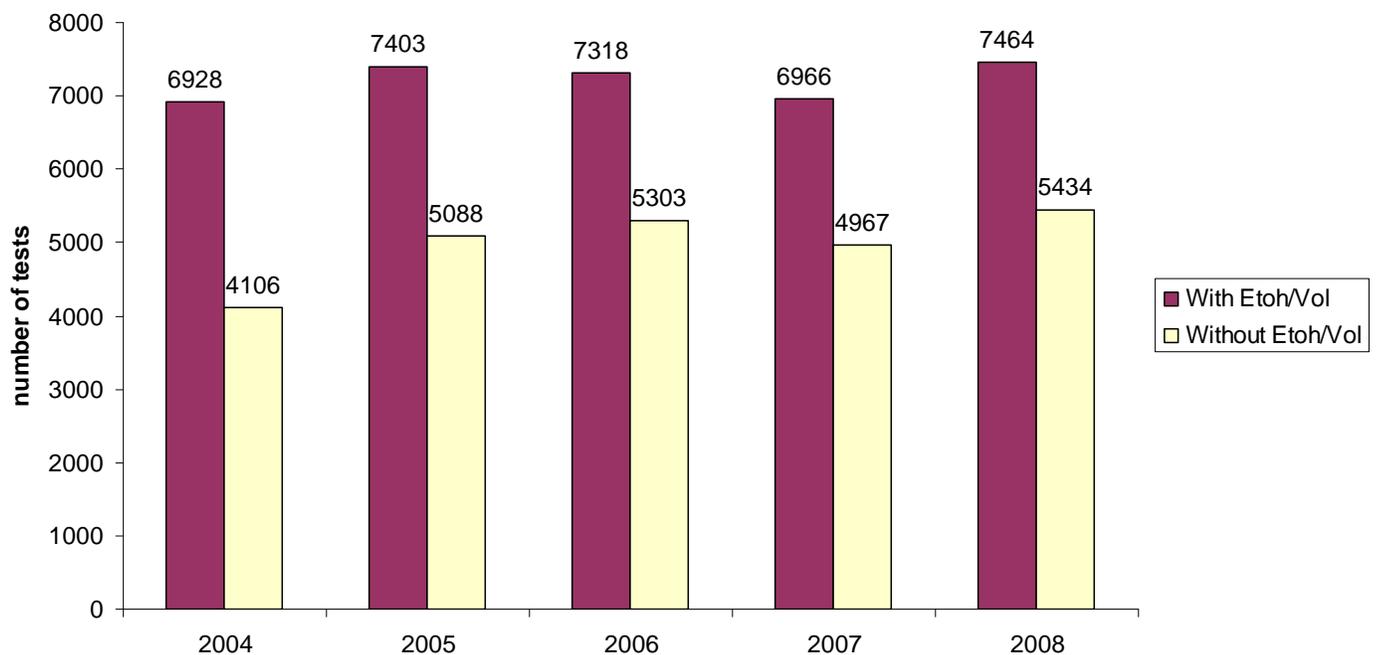


TOXICOLOGY DATA

Types of Screens

The toxicology laboratory is accredited by the American Board of Forensic Toxicology. The laboratory is housed within the Medical Examiner's office and provides testing and support for a vast array of drugs and poisons to assist the Medical Examiners in the determination of cause and manner of death. The laboratory utilizes advanced techniques and equipment including enzyme linked immuno-sorbent assay (ELISA), gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), and liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS) to aid in the detection and measurement of these drugs and poisons in physiological specimens collected at autopsy. The toxicology laboratory is staffed by professional scientists with experience in forensic toxicology, analytical chemistry, and pharmacology. The following chart illustrates the raw number of complex screens and quantification tests performed since 2004. The numbers do not include the immunoassay screen data as the numbers would be skewed upward do to the addition of additional drug screening panels in the recent years.

Tox Assay Count minus immunoassay and vitreous panel



LIQUID CHROMATOGRAPH/MASS SPECTROMETRY (LC/MS) TESTING

In 2002 the Travis County Medical Examiner’s office was fortunate to be one of the first Medical Examiner toxicology laboratories in Texas and the USA to acquire LC/MS technology. LC/MS has afforded our office the opportunity to advance our scope of drug screening and quantification and improve upon quality control in those analyses. In fact, LC/MS is utilized by major drug companies in the development and testing of new drugs that will be introduced to the general public. Therefore it is important for the Medical Examiner’s office to test for these drugs as well. The chart below illustrates the upward trend in LC/MS testing in our laboratory since 2003. It is the goal of our laboratory to keep up with technological advances in order to provide the best toxicological information to the Medical Examiners, the judicial system, law enforcement, and the general public.

LC/MS Tests

