

# TRAVIS COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER



Annual Report

2018

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Travis County Medical Examiner's Office (TCME) provides medicolegal death investigation for Travis County, Texas and 43 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 2018, the population of Travis County was approximately 1,248,743.

TCME was established in 1977. In January of 2018, TCME moved into a new state-of-the-art facility located at 7723 Springdale Road. The two-story building has an open design that enhances natural lighting and has a computed tomography scanner, enabling advanced imaging technology. Effective July 1, 2016, with institutional sponsorship from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, TCME obtained accreditation for a one-year forensic pathology fellowship training program from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). TCME is now one of 43 medical examiner's offices in the country accredited to provide the final year of subspecialty training needed to become a forensic pathologist. Each year, TCME will train two fellows; the first class of fellows began their training in July of 2018.

## **NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MEDICAL EXAMINERS (NAME)**

The office was initially accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners in 2009 and re-accredited in 2014 for another five years, at which time we will again seek re-accreditation.

NAME also requires that a yearly self-assessment be submitted to the accrediting authority of the organization.

**AMERICAN BOARD OF FORENSIC TOXICOLOGY (ABFT)  
ACCREDITATION**

The Travis County Medical Examiner's Toxicology Laboratory first achieved accreditation by the ABFT on August 1, 2005, and has maintained accreditation without interruption since.

**STAFF**

In 2018, TCME was staffed by 43 Travis County employees and was composed of the following departments sections: Forensic Pathologists, Investigation, Morgue, Forensic Toxicology, and Administration. There were seven forensic pathologist positions at TCME, including the Chief Medical Examiner, the Deputy Chief Medical Examiner, and five Deputy Medical Examiners.

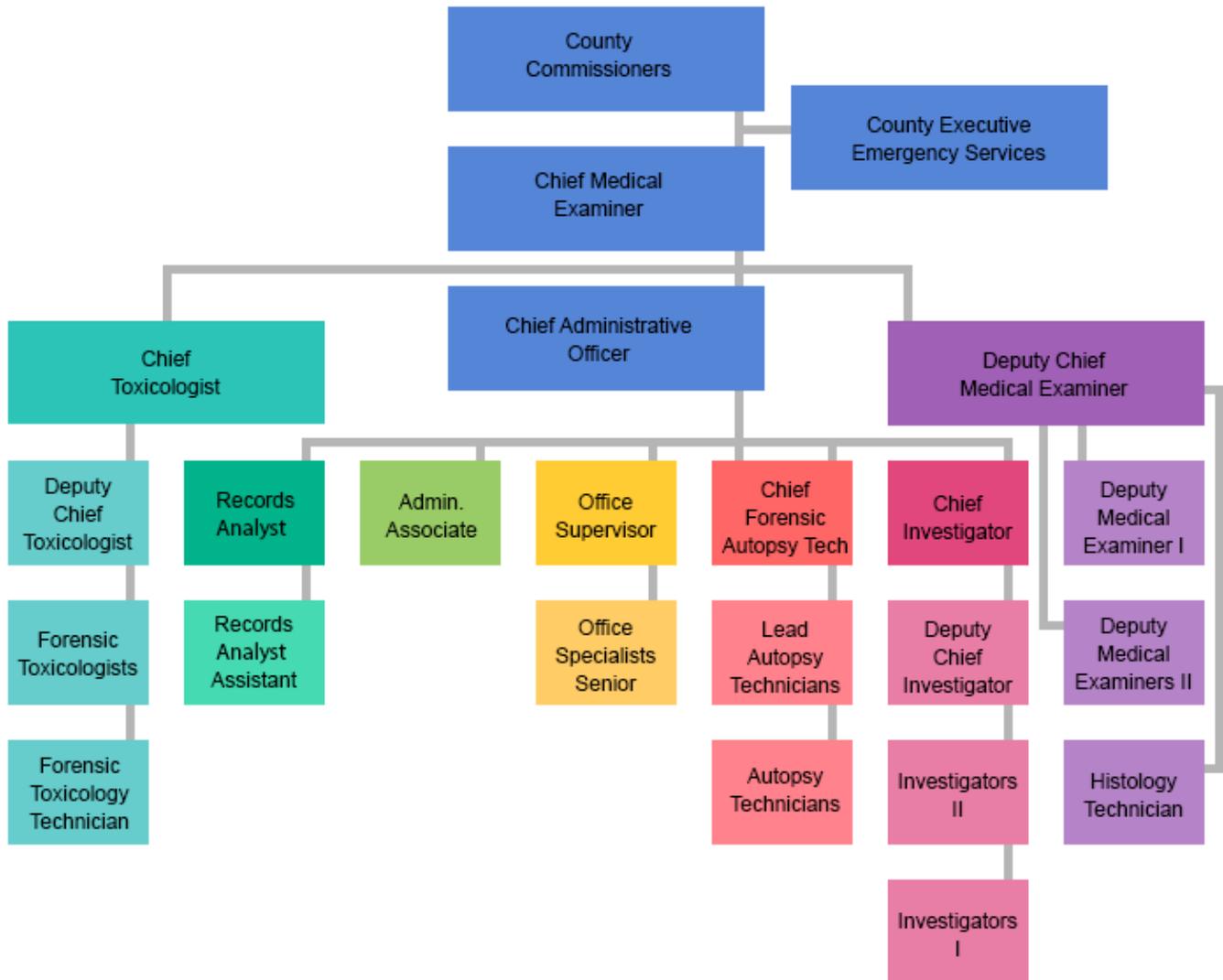
There were thirteen positions in the Investigation Department, including the Chief Investigator and the Deputy Chief Investigator. There were four Investigator II personnel and six Investigator I personnel.

In the Morgue Department, there were six employees, including the Chief Autopsy Technician, two Lead Autopsy Technicians, and three Autopsy Technicians.

In the Forensic Toxicology Department, both the Chief Toxicologist and the Deputy Chief Toxicologist hold Ph.D. degrees. There were four Forensic Toxicologists and one Forensic Toxicologist Technician.

The Chief Administration Officer oversees Investigations, Morgue, and Administration. The Administration Department includes Office Support, Finance, Human Resources and Record Management. There were eight employees in the Administrative Department.

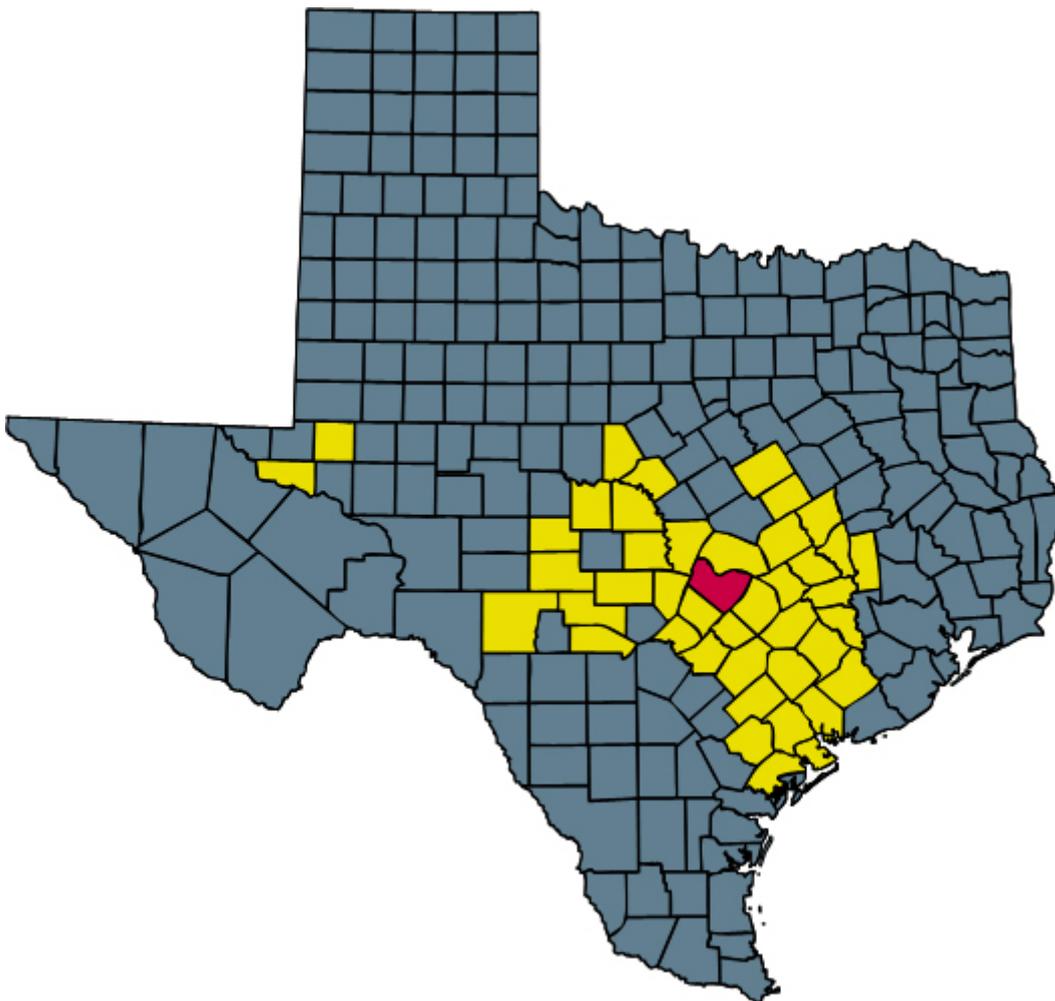
### ORGANIZATION CHART



**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. TCME also investigates similar-type deaths occurring in 43 Texas counties at the written request of the local authorities.

**Graphic of TCME service region**



Red -Travis County  
Yellow -Counties serviced by TCME through Interlocal Agreements

## REPORTABLE DEATHS

Pursuant to the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, Chapter 49.25, the TCME 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:
  - o The person is identified; or
  - o 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 TCME. TCME 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 TCME's jurisdiction are transported to the TCME for examination by a contract body transport company. In certain cases, a TCME 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 on staff and available 24 hours/day, 365 days/year. TCME investigators do not physically perform scene investigations on cases that are reported to them from outside of the physical boundaries of Travis County. In these cases, the pertinent 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 to and from TCME by a funeral home company at the request of the referring Justice of the Peace.

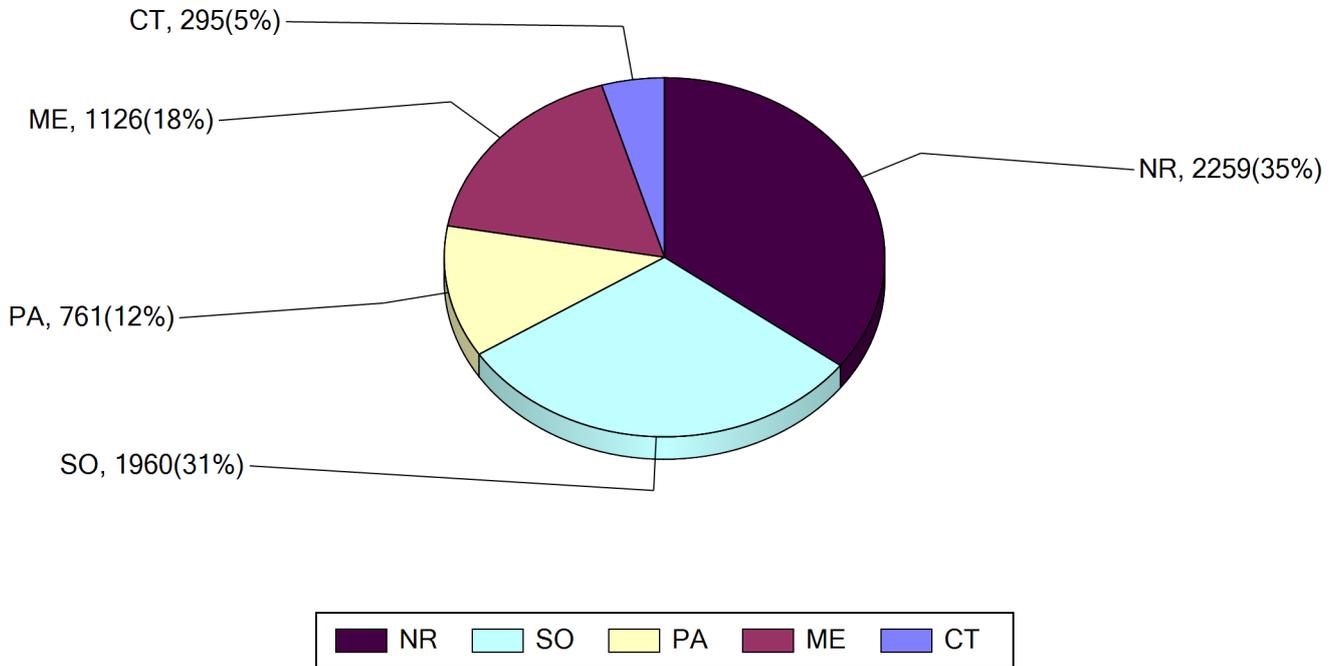
Not all bodies brought to the TCME for examination are autopsied. The Medical Examiner may choose to either perform a complete autopsy or to perform an external examination only. Partial autopsies are not performed at the TCME. In all autopsies and external examinations that do not consist of skeletal remains, blood and vitreous fluid specimens are collected for toxicological analysis. Toxicological analysis is performed on the vast majority of all cases that are autopsied and on only select cases that undergo external examination.

Investigative reports are generated on all cases that fall under the jurisdiction of the TCME. All deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County that are brought to the TCME for examination (whether they are autopsied or not) are given the designation of 'ME' before the case number. All cases referred to the TCME from outside Travis County are given the designation of 'PA' before the case number. If the TCME 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 TCME 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. If the case consists of nonhuman remains (animal remains), it is given the designation of 'SR' before the case number.

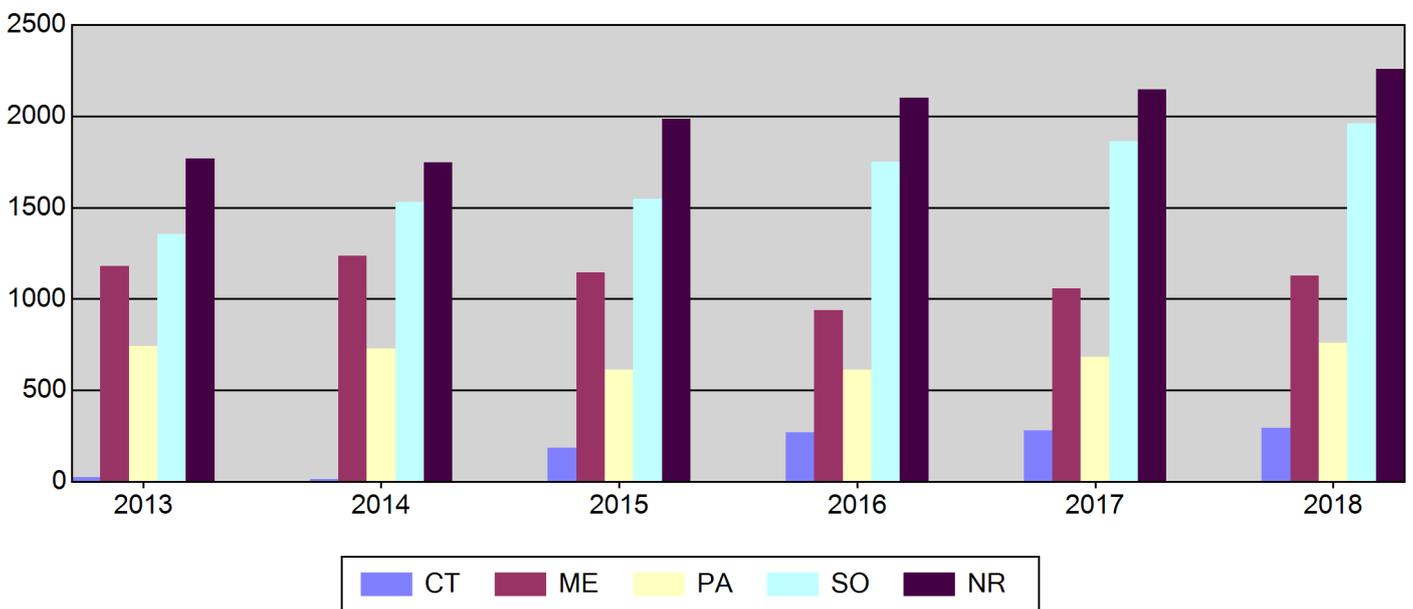
## **DEATHS REPORTED**

In 2018, the TCME received a referral of 6401 cases. Every referral requires a preliminary screening by TCME investigative staff to determine if it falls under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner. Of those cases, 1126 were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, jurisdiction was accepted, and the bodies were physically examined at the TCME (ME cases). 295 cases were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, jurisdiction was accepted, but for various reasons, the bodies were not physically examined at the TCME (CT cases). 1960 cases were Travis County deaths that were under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, and were reported to the TCME, but certification of the death was delegated to the decedent's physician (SO cases). TCME received reports of death on 2259 cases in Travis County that did not fall within its jurisdiction and the cases were declined for examination (NR cases). The TCME received a total of 761 cases from outside of Travis County for examination (PA cases), and a total referral of 11 cases that proved to be animal remains (SR cases). There were no exhumations.

**DEATHS REPORTED TO TCME 2018**

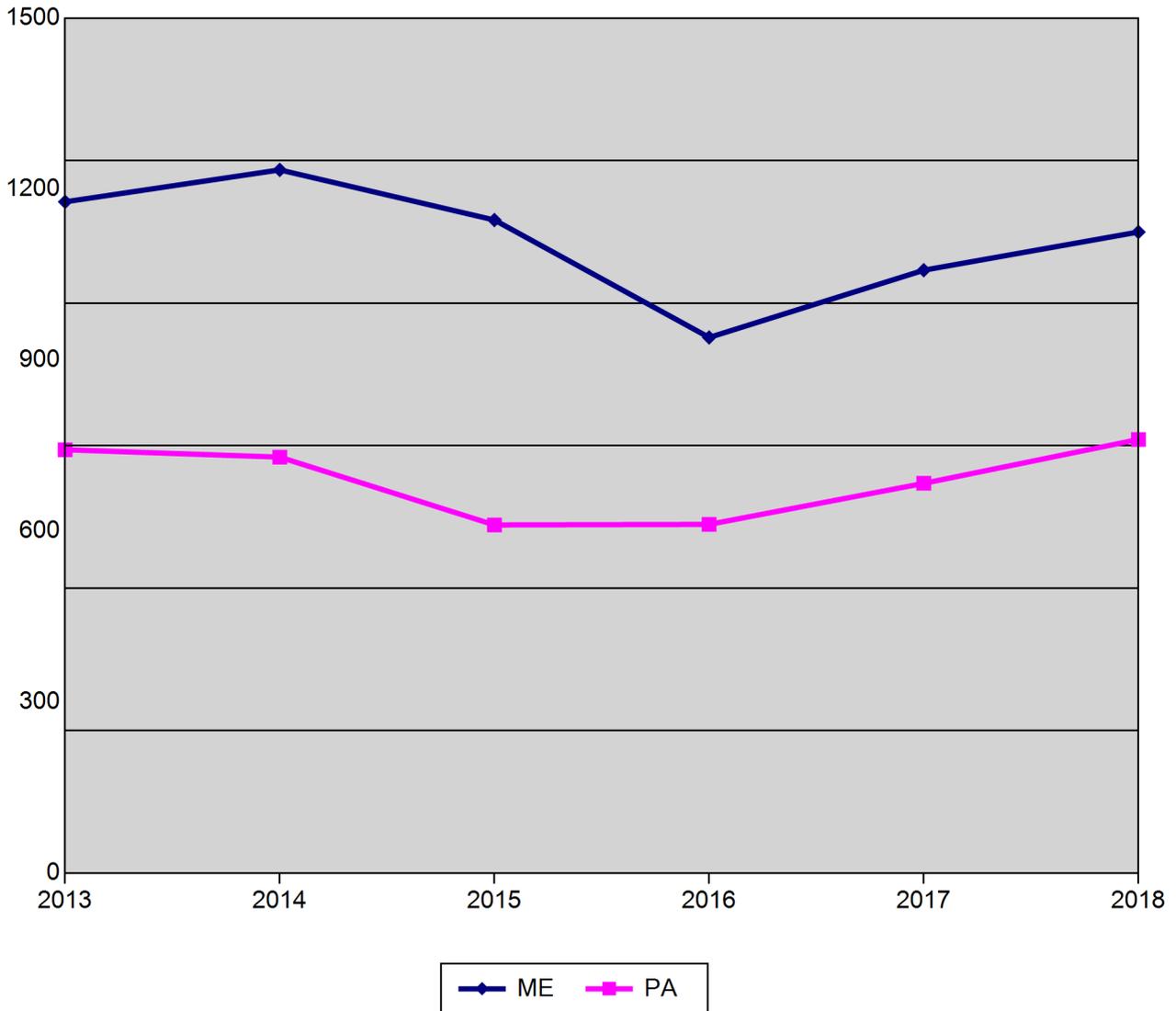


**DEATHS REPORTED TO TCME 2013-2018**



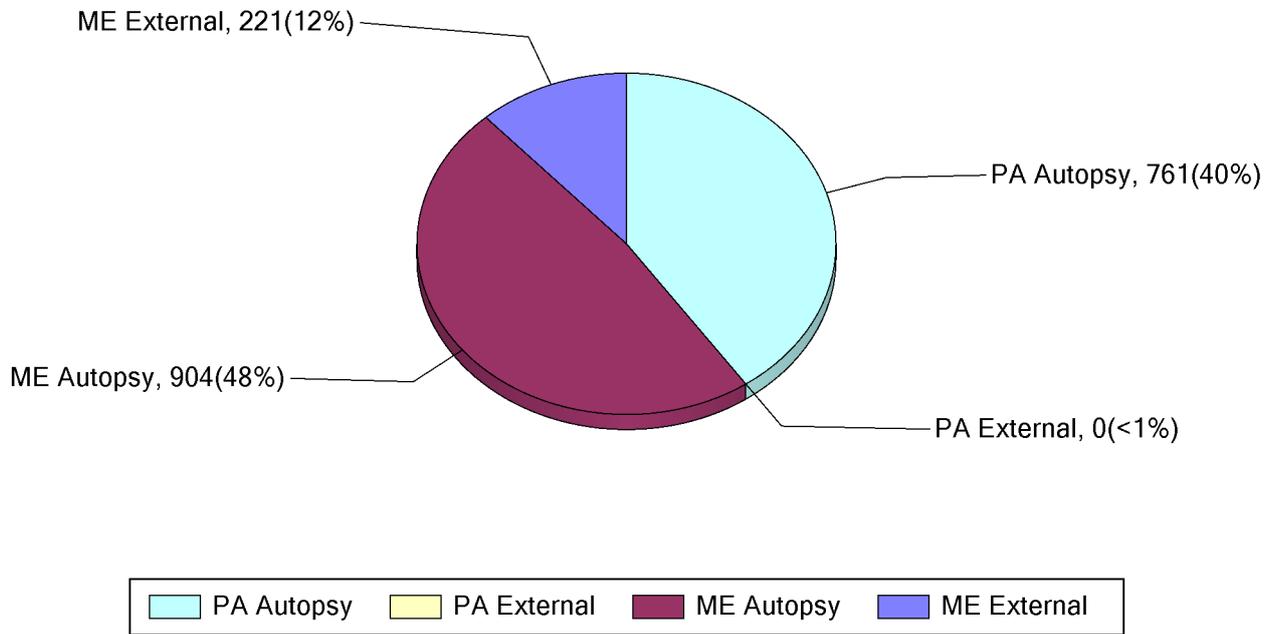
The yearly number of Travis County (ME) cases fluctuates along with the population of Travis County. The yearly number of out-of-county (PA) cases fluctuates along with many different factors, including the population of the surrounding counties, and changes in the fee charged for the performance of autopsies for the surrounding counties.

**YEARLY CASELOAD TREND OF TRAVIS COUNTY (ME) AND OUT-OF-COUNTY (PA) CASES 2013-2018**

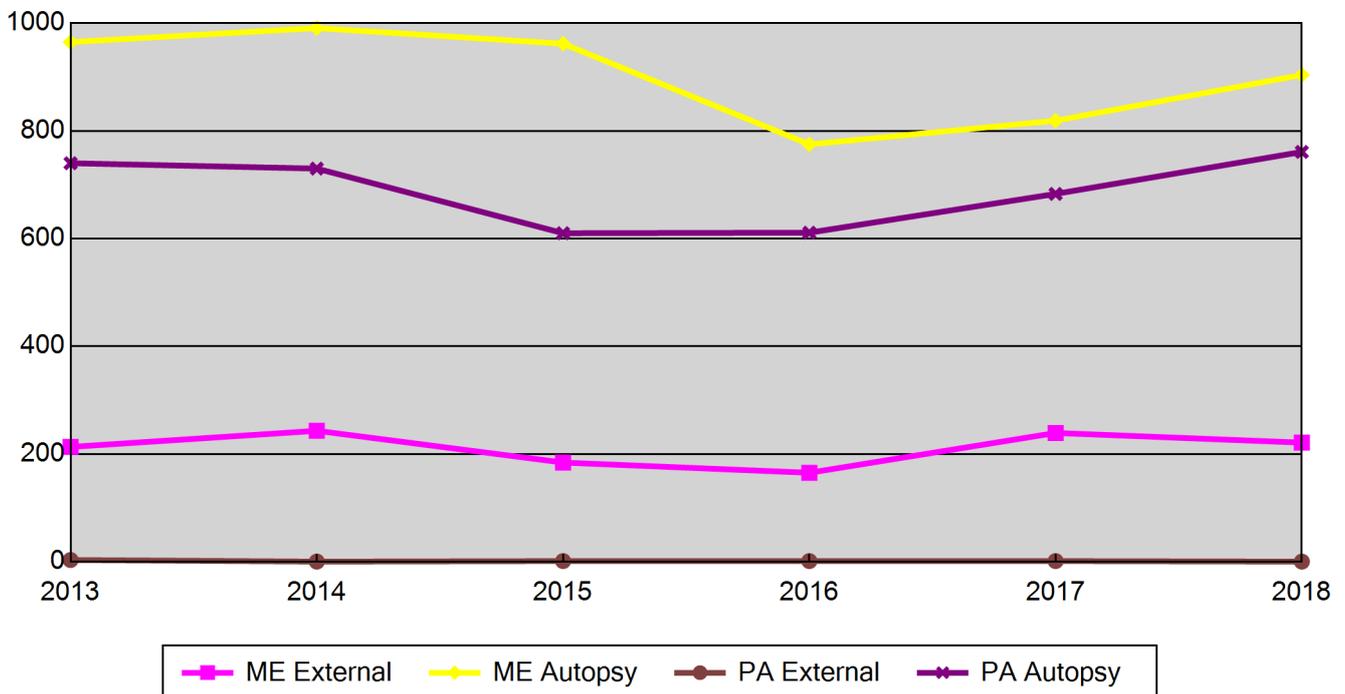


**EXAM TYPES 2018**

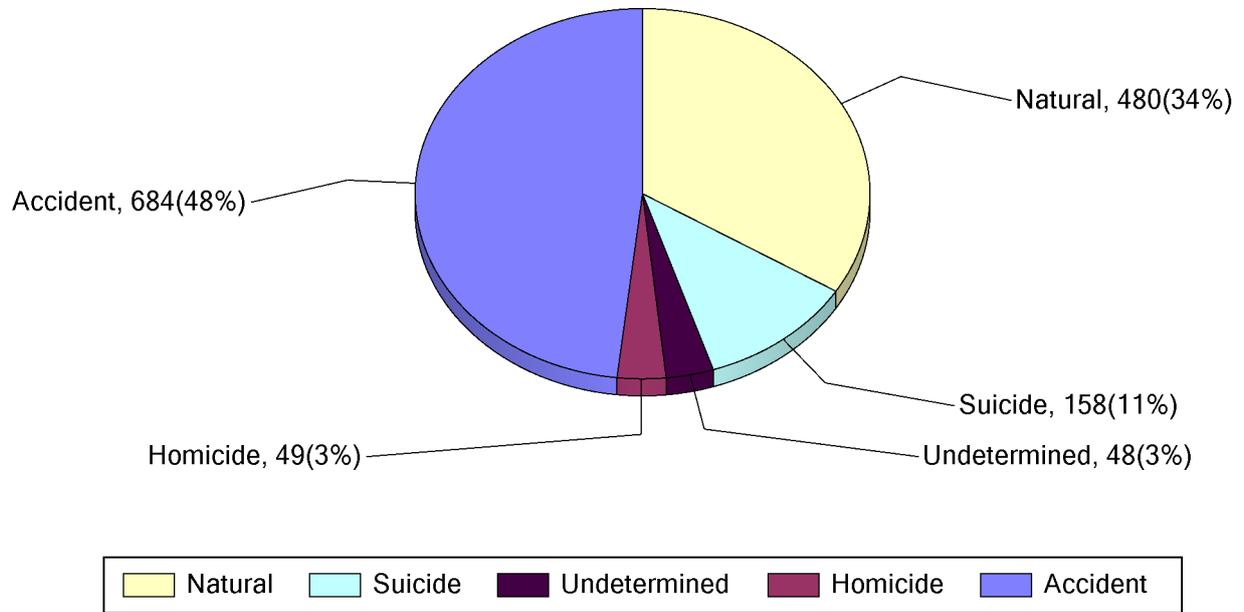
The autopsy numbers represent complete autopsies. Partial autopsies are not performed at our office. Bodies that come to our office based on jurisdiction that are not autopsied (but are visually examined) are called external examinations. Percentages are rounded in the chart below to the nearest whole percentage.



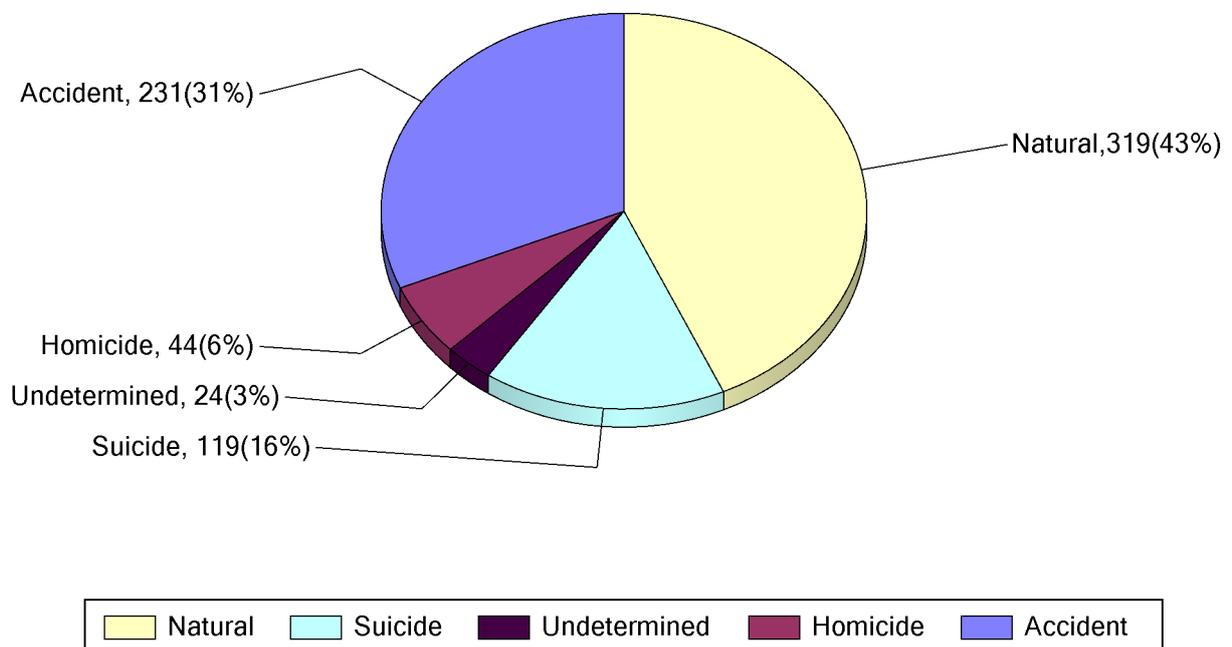
**AUTOPSY AND EXTERNAL EXAMINATION TRENDS 2013-2018**



**MANNER OF DEATH  
TRAVIS COUNTY CASES 2018**

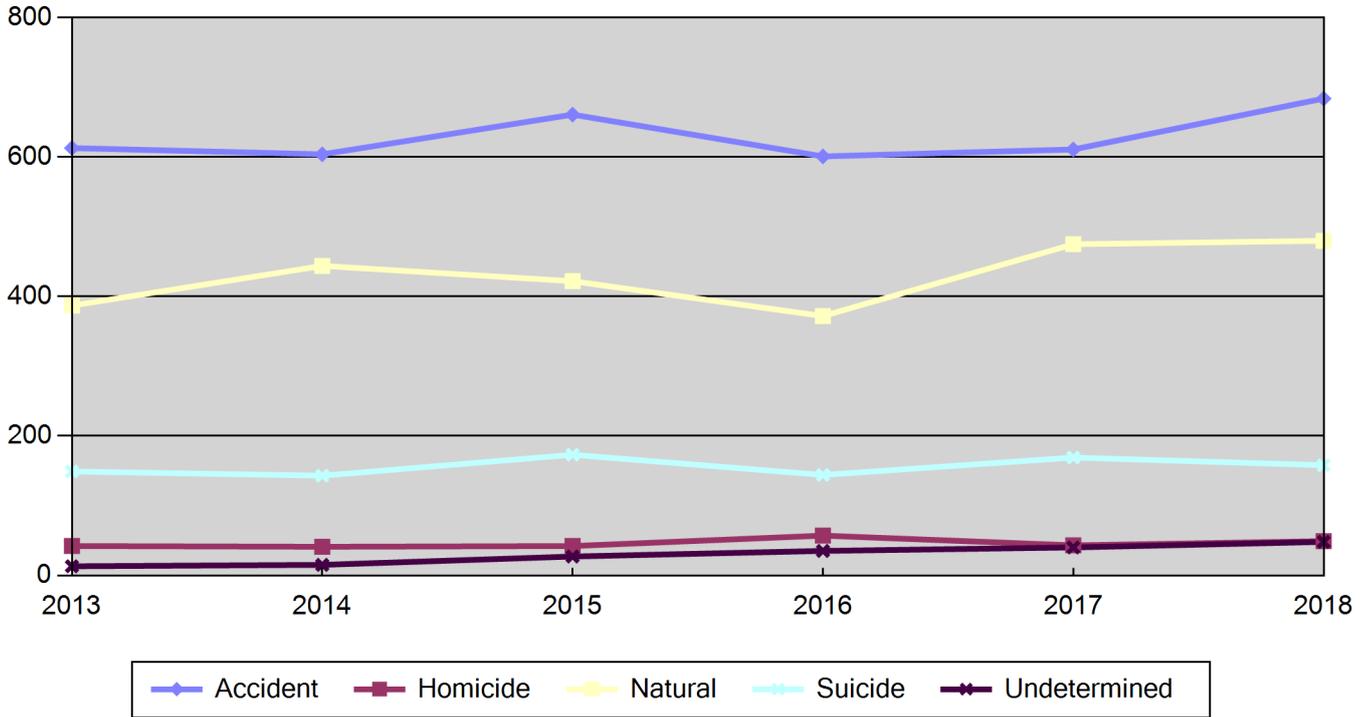


**OUT-OF-COUNTY CASES 2018**

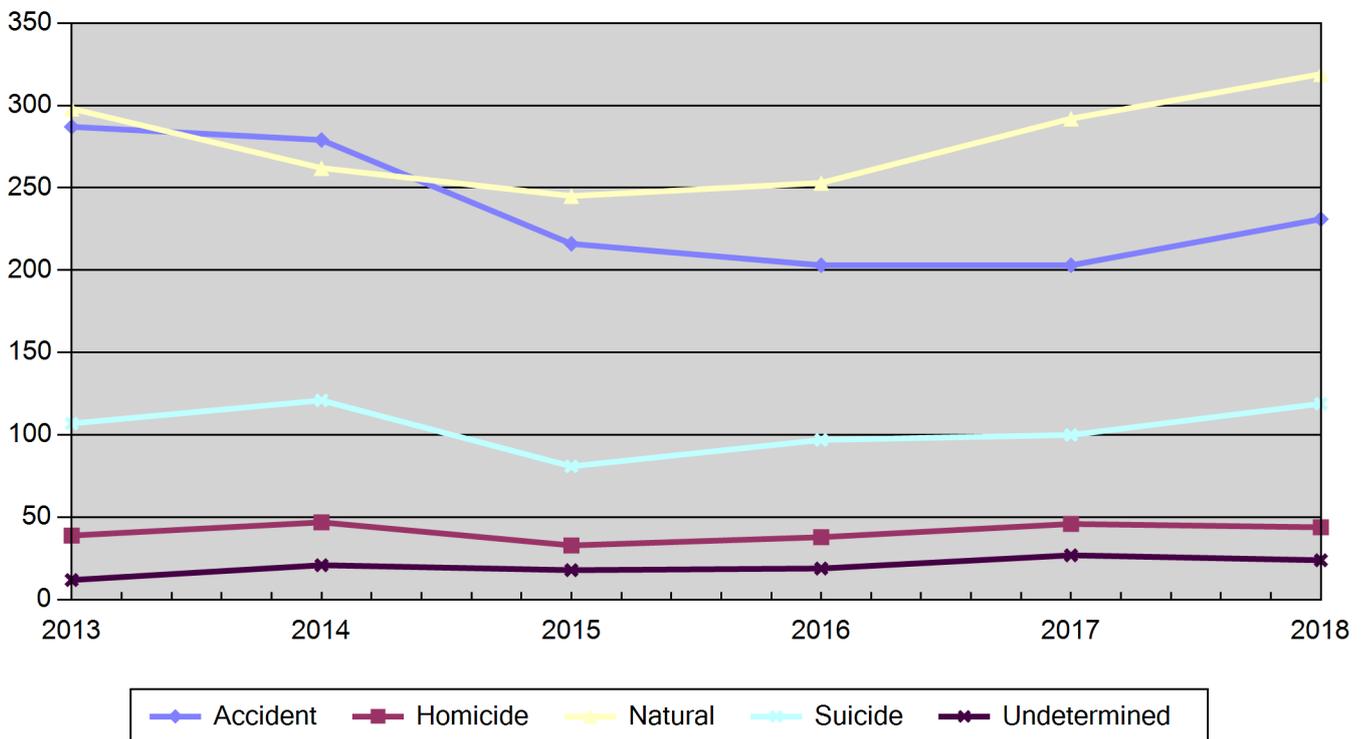


**TRENDS IN MANNER OF DEATH 2013-2018**

**TRAVIS COUNTY CASES**

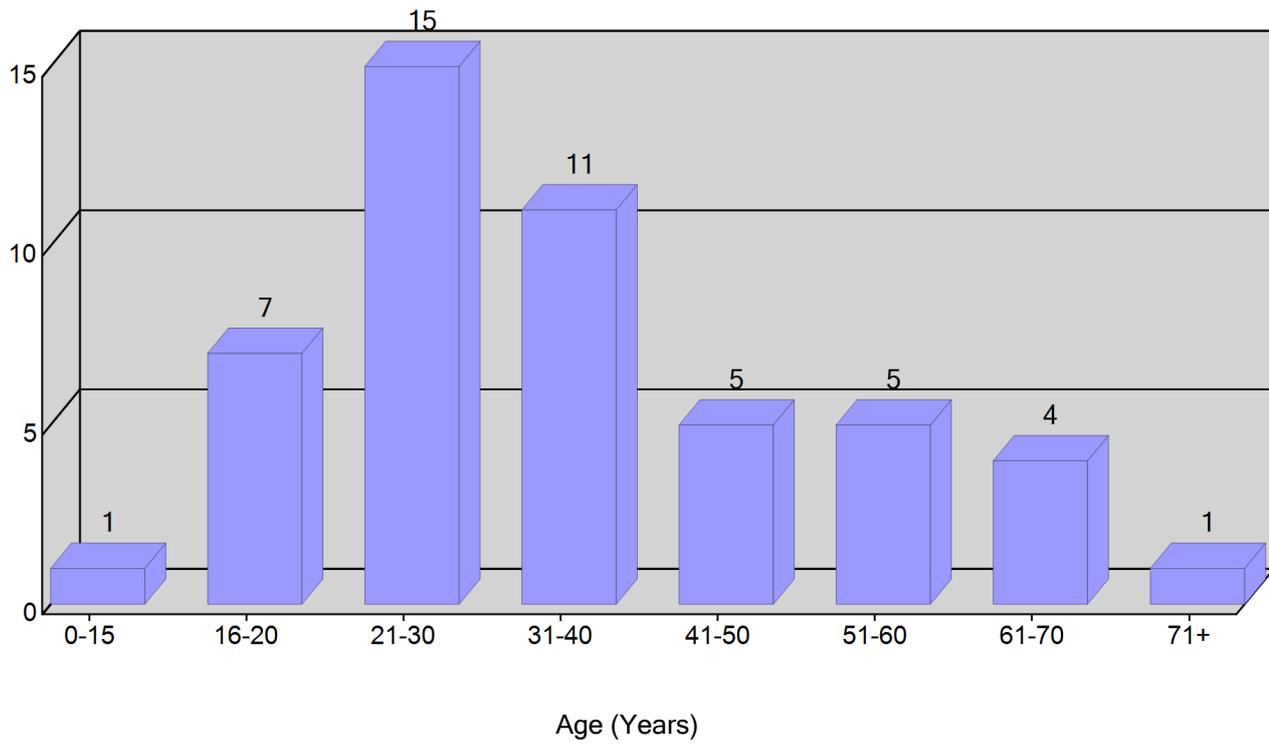


**OUT-OF-COUNTY CASES**

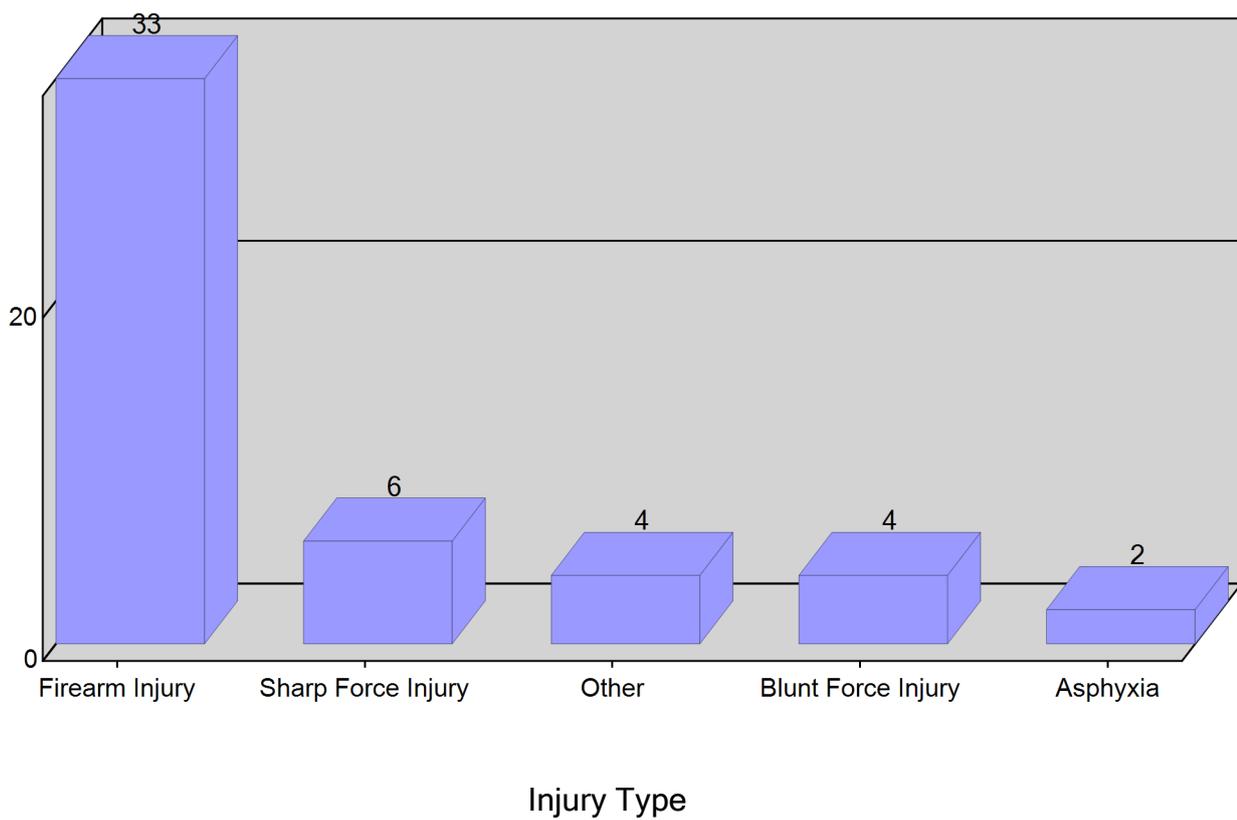


**HOMICIDES IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018**

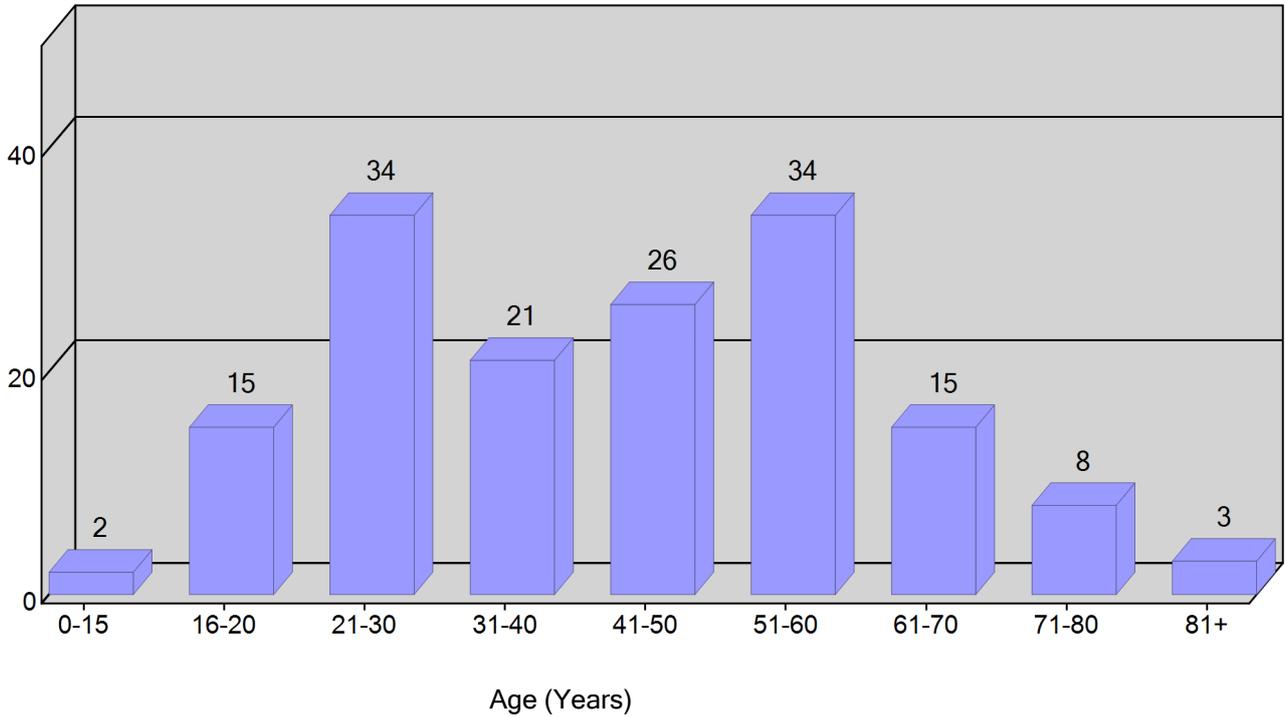
**BY AGE OF DECEDENT IN YEARS**



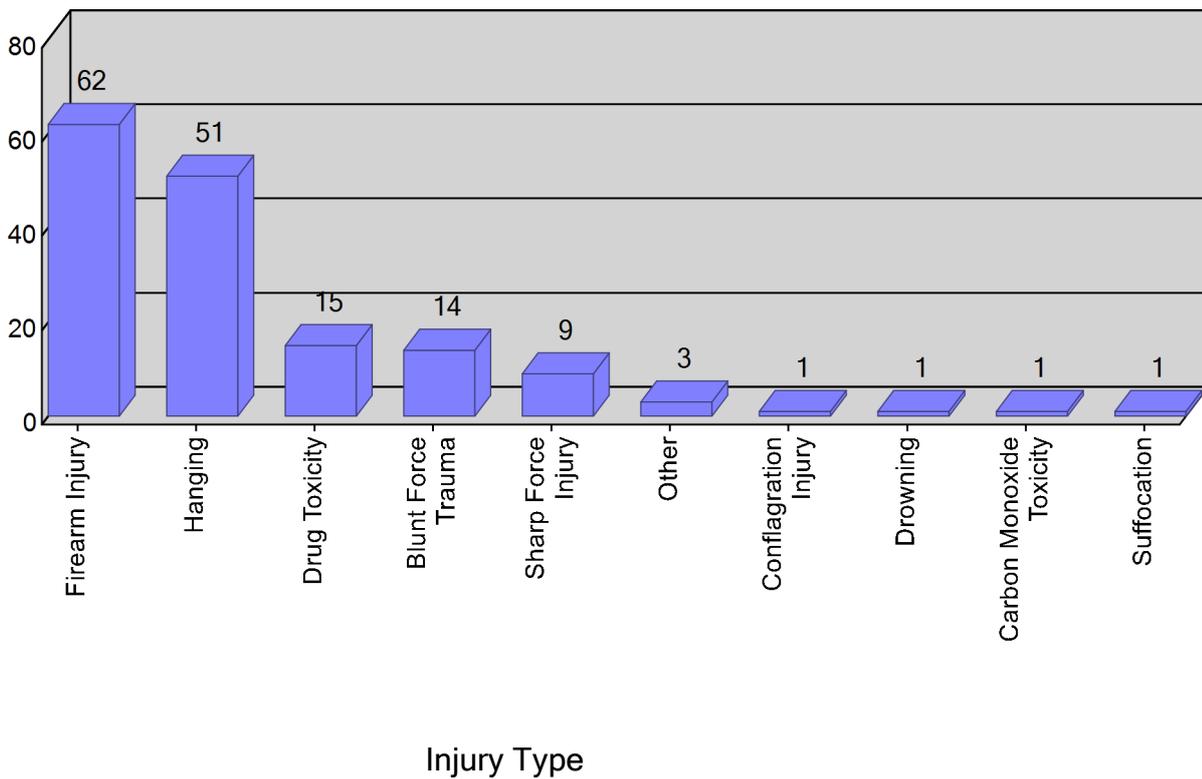
**HOMICIDES BY INJURY TYPE**



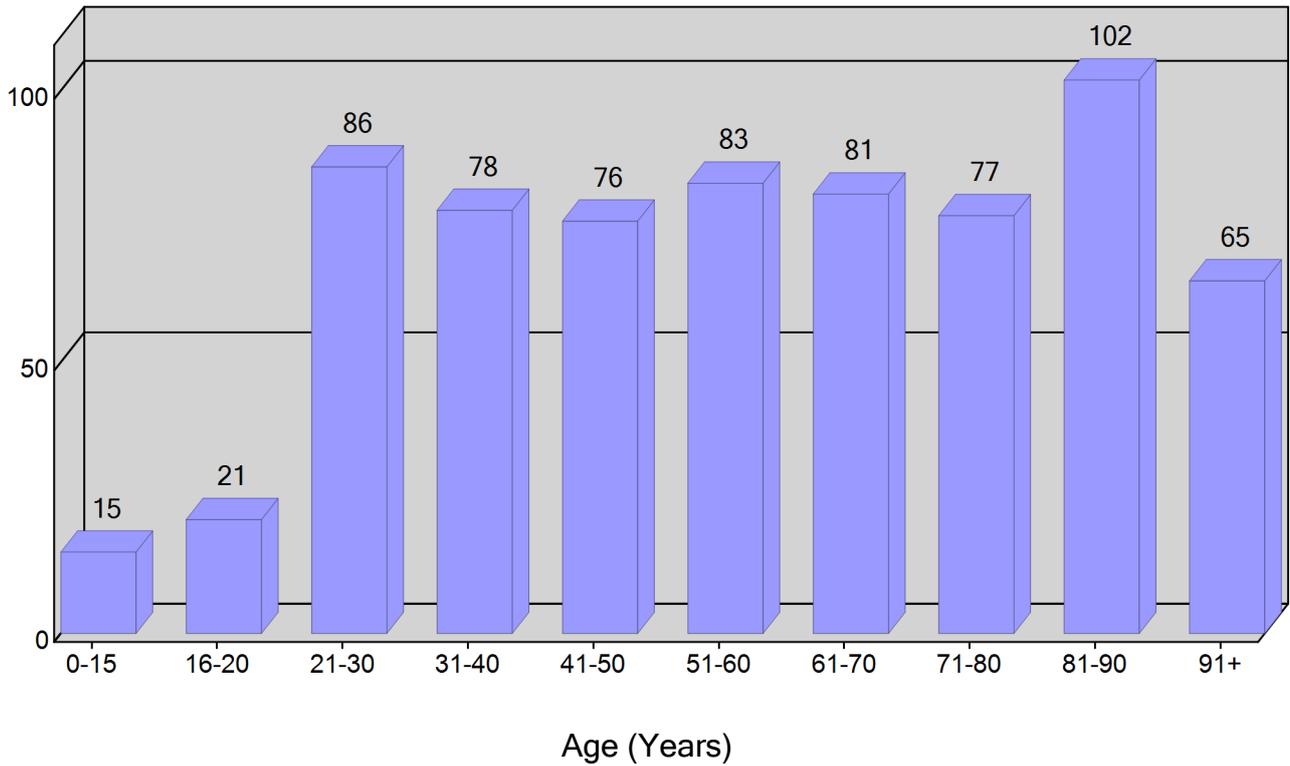
**SUICIDES IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018  
BY AGE OF DECEDENT (IN YEARS)**



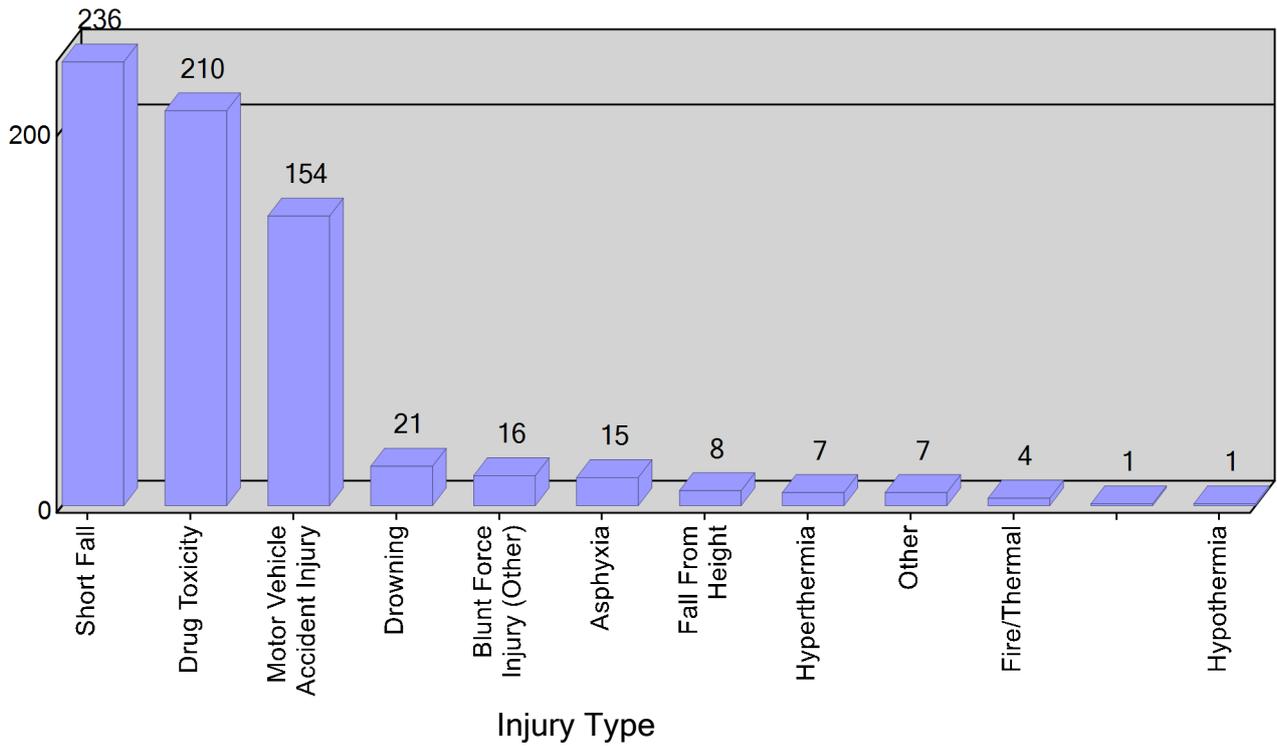
**SUICIDES BY INJURY TYPE**



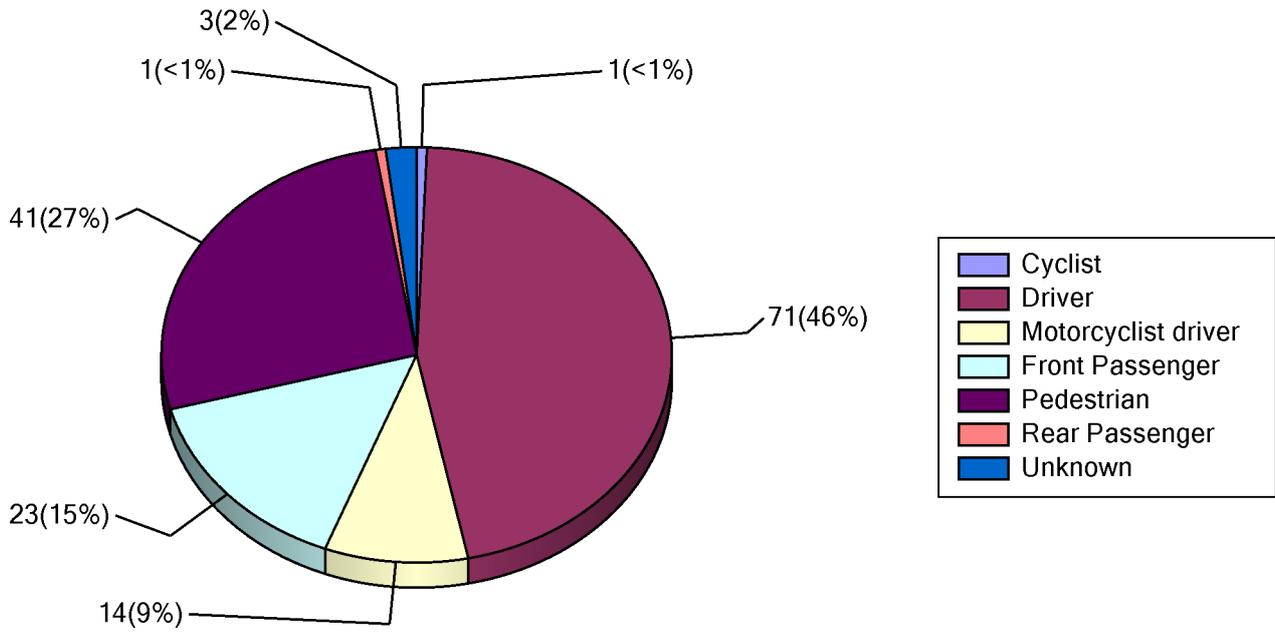
**ACCIDENTAL DEATHS IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018  
BY AGE OF DECEDENT (IN YEARS)**



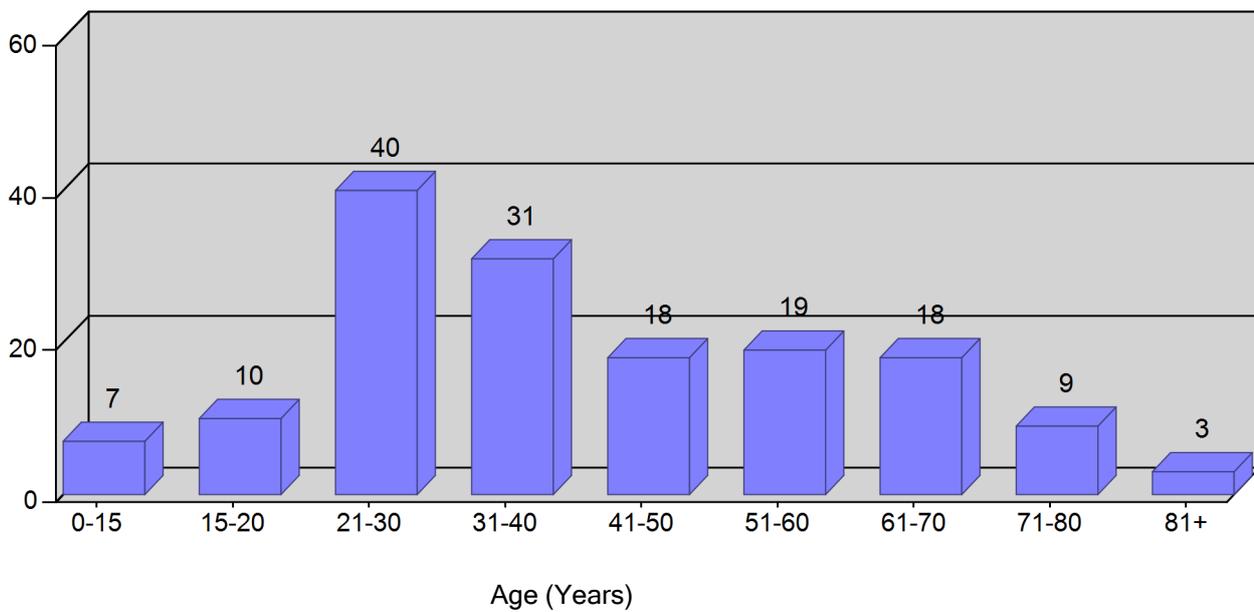
**ACCIDENTS BY INJURY TYPE**



**MOTOR VEHICLE FATALITIES, TRAVIS COUNTY 2018  
BY TYPE OF INCIDENT**

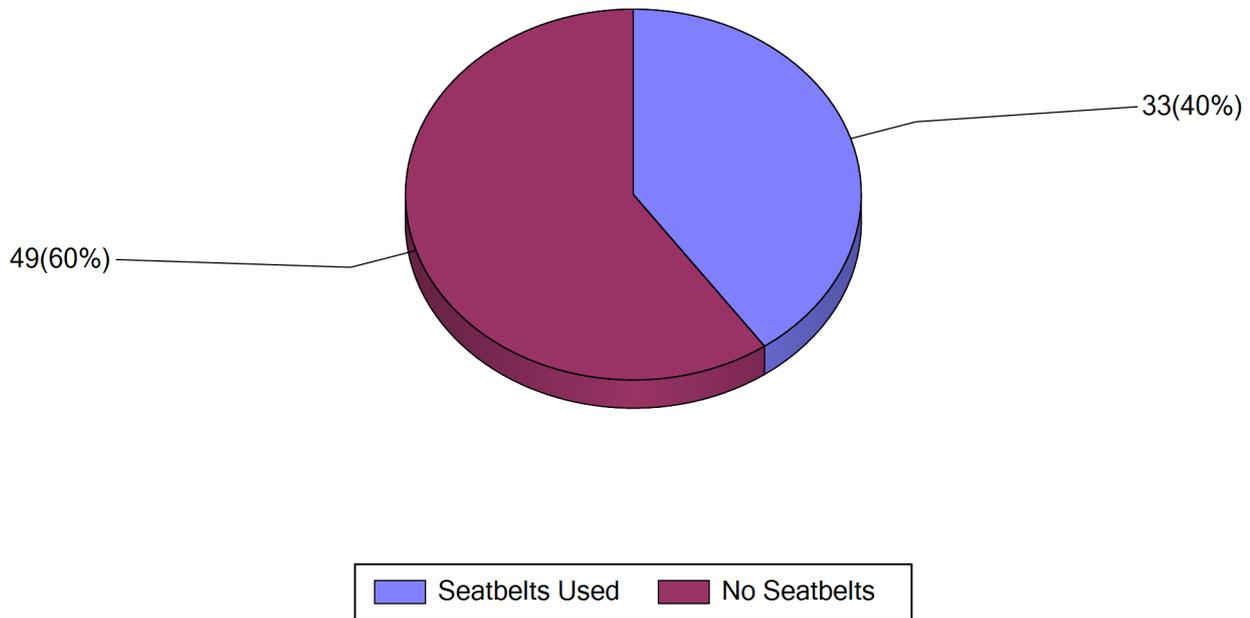


**BY AGE OF VICTIM (IN YEARS)**

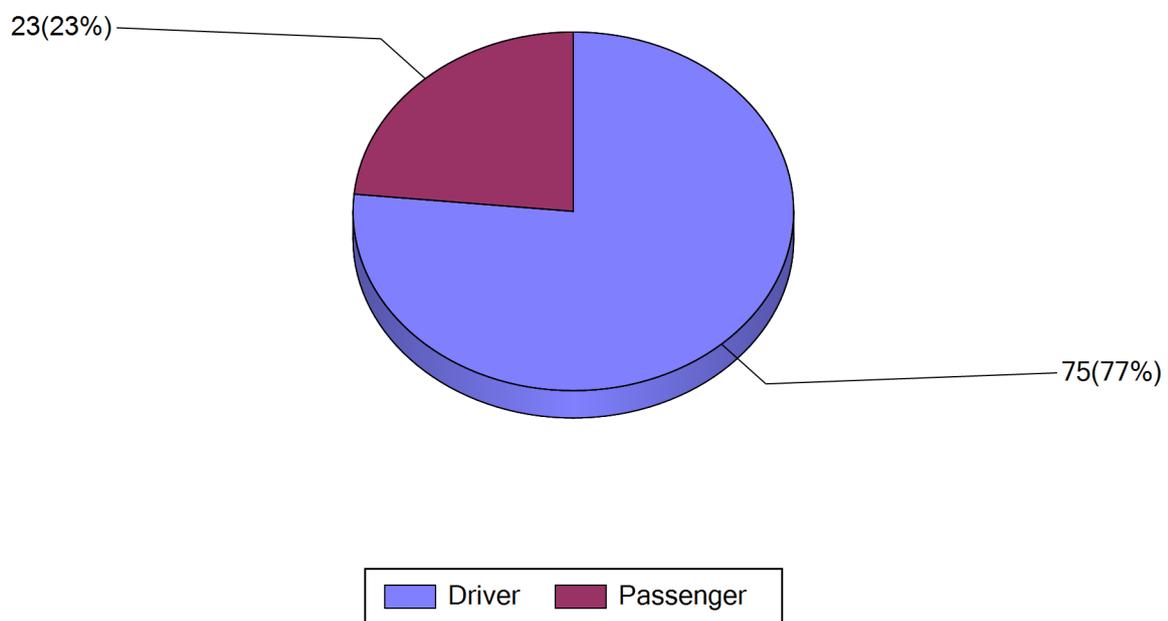


**AUTOMOBILE FATALITIES IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018**

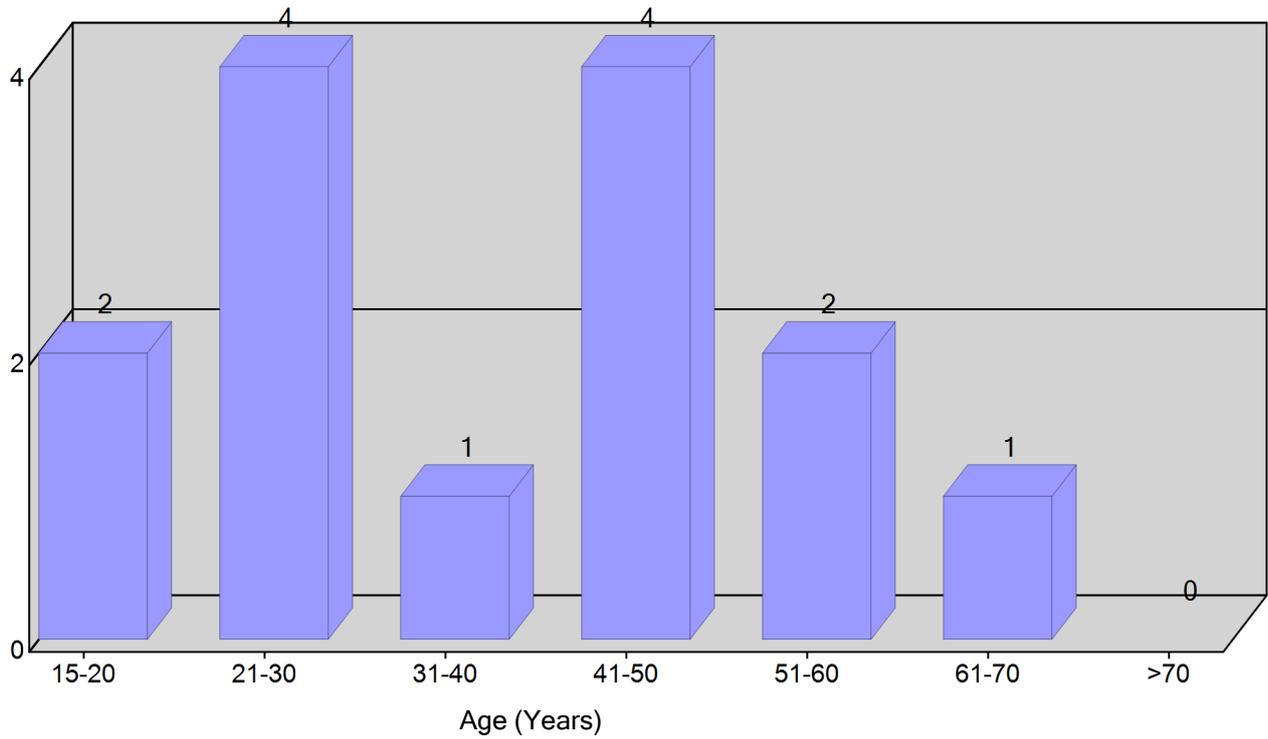
**SEATBELTS IN USE AT TIME OF FATALITY (WHEN KNOWN)**



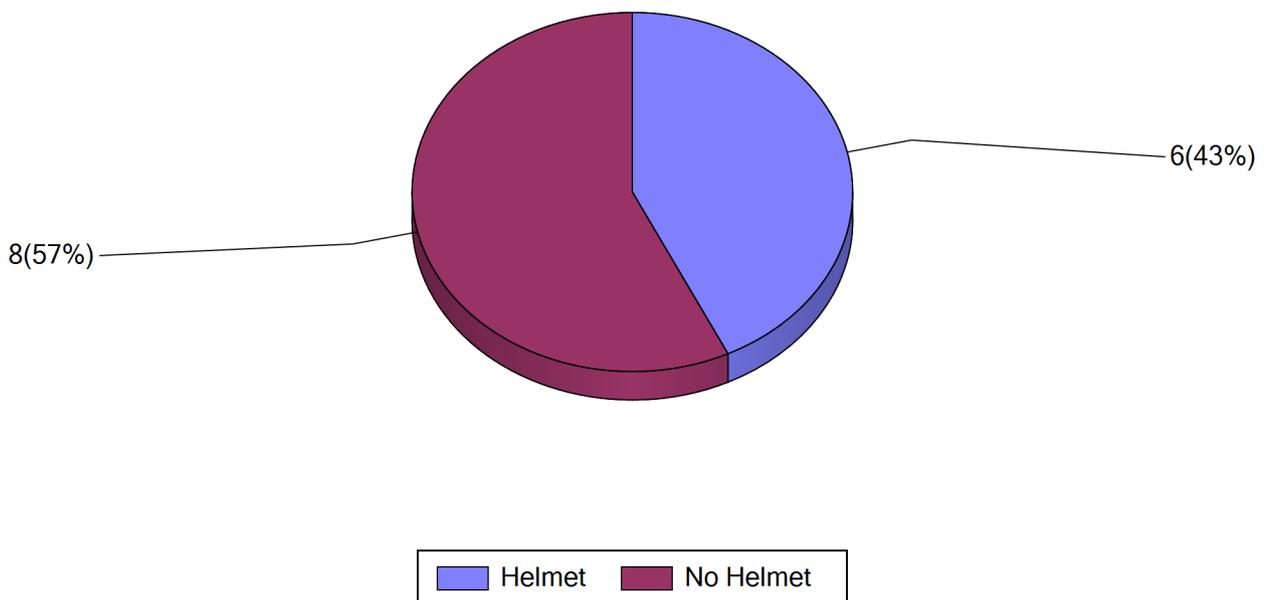
**DECEDENT'S LOCATION WITHIN VEHICLE (WHEN KNOWN)**



**MOTORCYCLE FATALITIES IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018  
BY AGE OF DECEDENT (IN YEARS)**

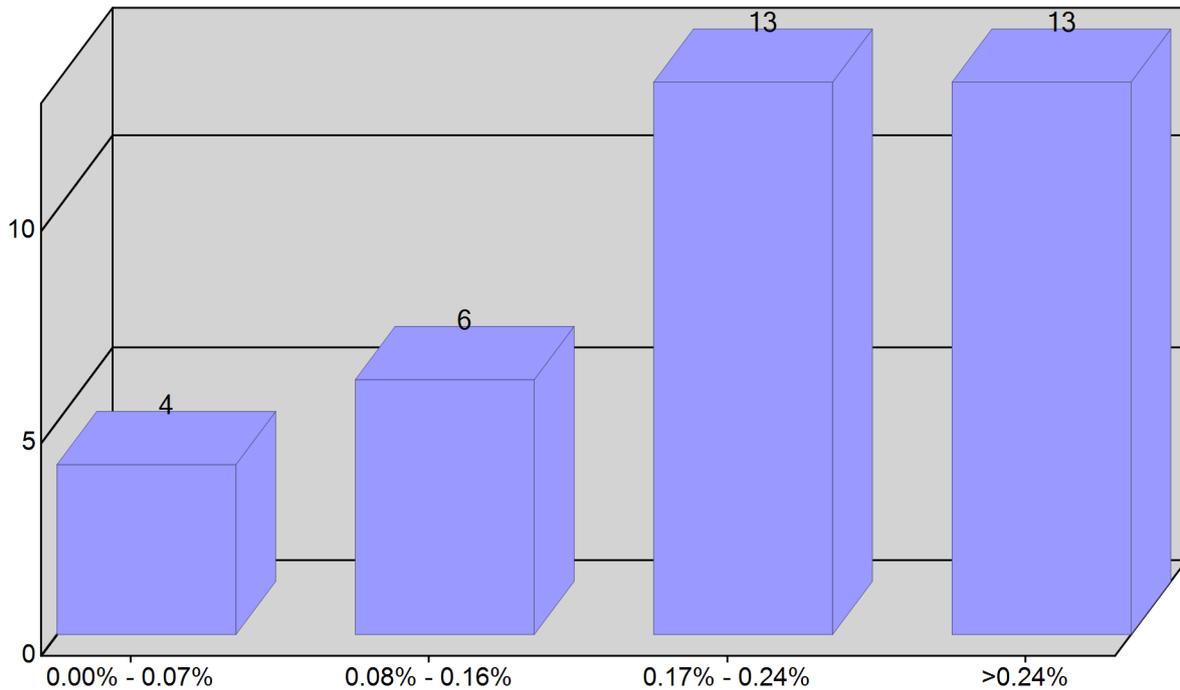


**HELMET STATUS (WHEN KNOWN)**

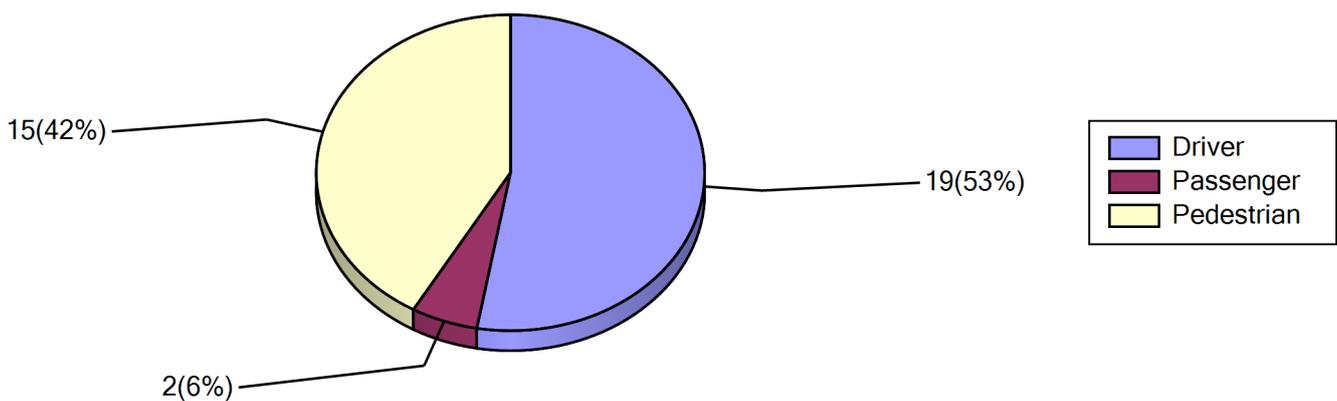


Alcohol was detected in 36 out of 130 (28%) traffic fatalities that occurred within the boundaries of Travis County in 2018.

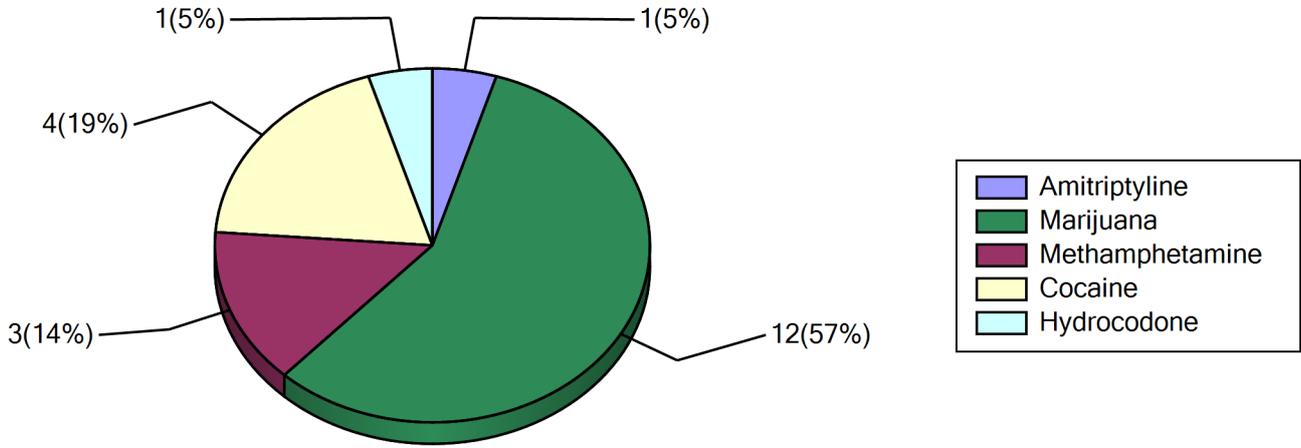
**BLOOD ALCOHOL CONCENTRATION IN VICTIM WHEN ALCOHOL IS DETECTED IN TRAFFIC FATALITIES, TRAVIS COUNTY 2018**



**ROLE OF DECEDENT IN TRAVIS COUNTY TRAFFIC FATALITIES IN WHICH ALCOHOL WAS DETECTED IN THE DECEDENT**

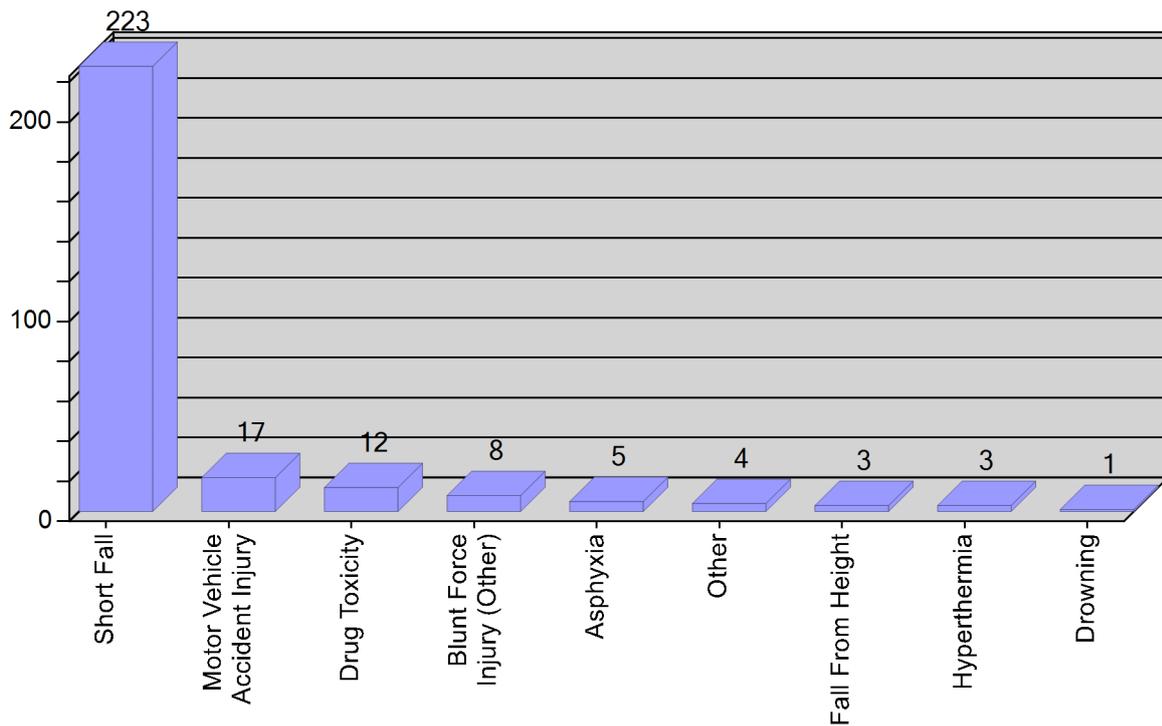


**MOST COMMON DRUGS DETECTED IN COMBINATION WITH ALCOHOL IN TRAVIS COUNTY TRAFFIC FATALITIES IN 2018**

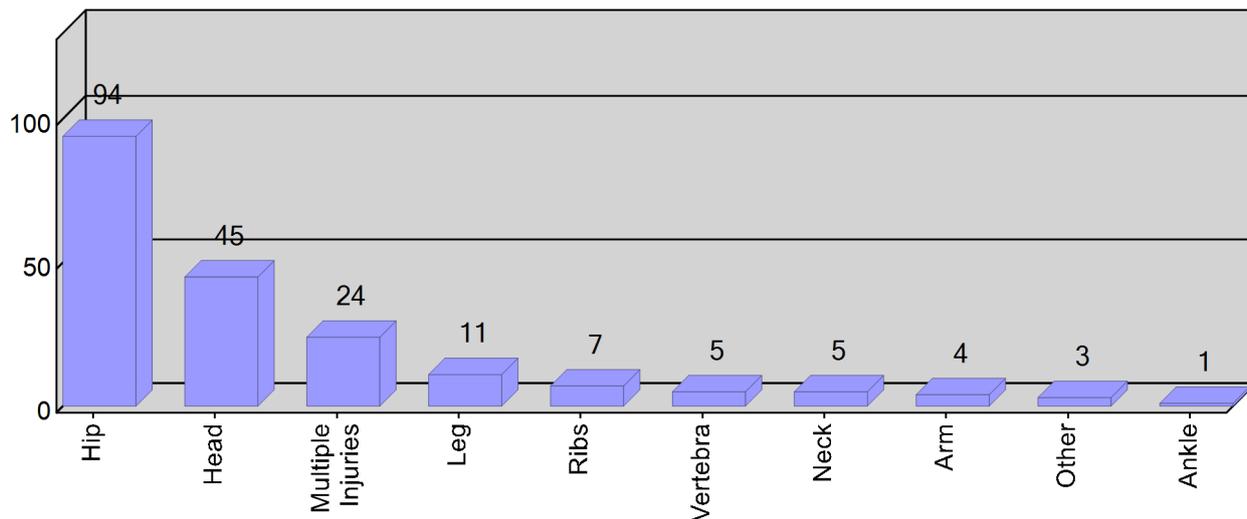


**ACCIDENTAL DEATHS IN TRAVIS COUNTY ELDERLY INDIVIDUALS (>65 YEARS OF AGE) 2018**

**MECHANISM OF INJURY**



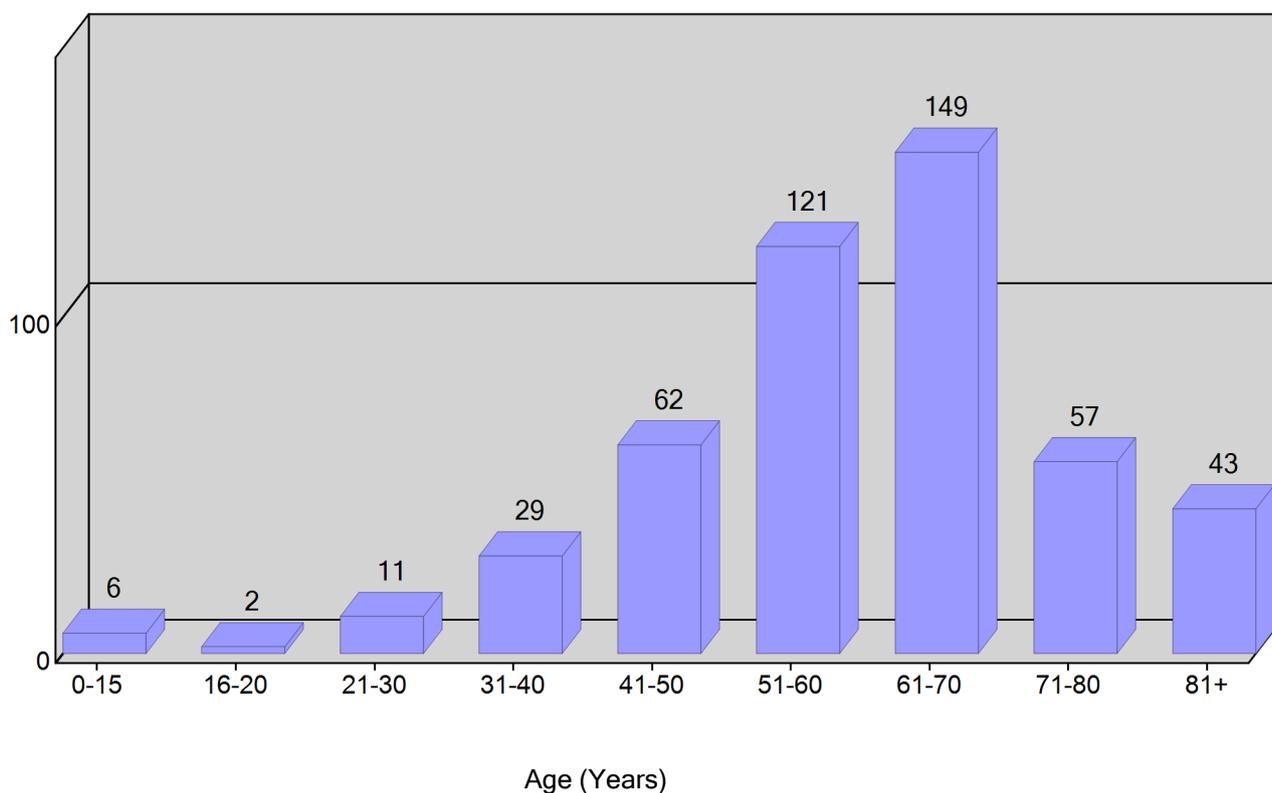
**ANATOMICAL LOCATION OF INJURY/FRACTURE IN FALL-RELATED DEATHS IN ELDERLY INDIVIDUALS 2018**



**NATURAL DISEASE DEATHS**

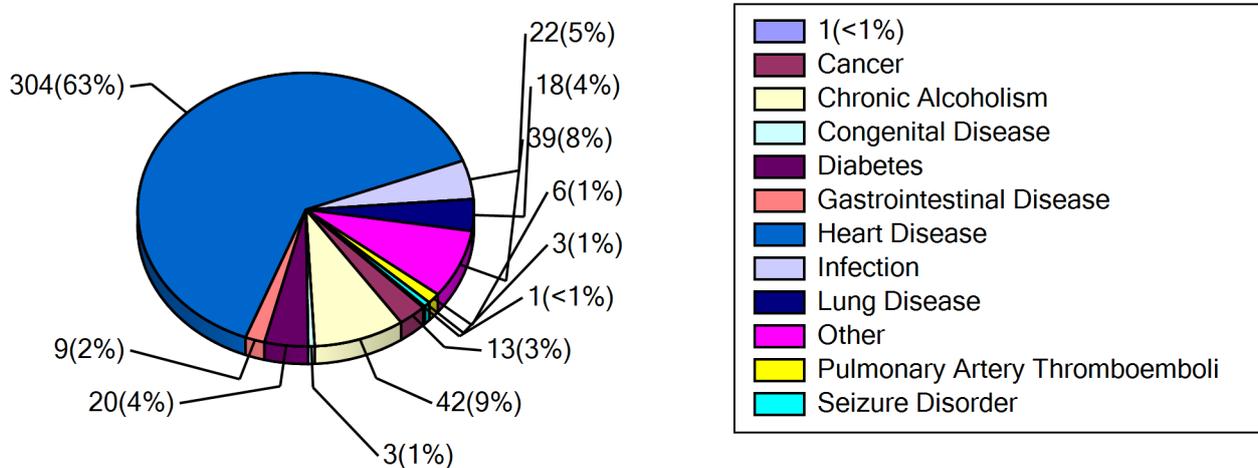
In 2018, 39% of Travis County medical examiner cases and 43% of out-of-county cases died of natural disease.

**NATURAL DISEASE DEATHS IN TRAVIS COUNTY EXAMINED BY TCME IN 2018 BY AGE OF DECEDENT (IN YEARS)**



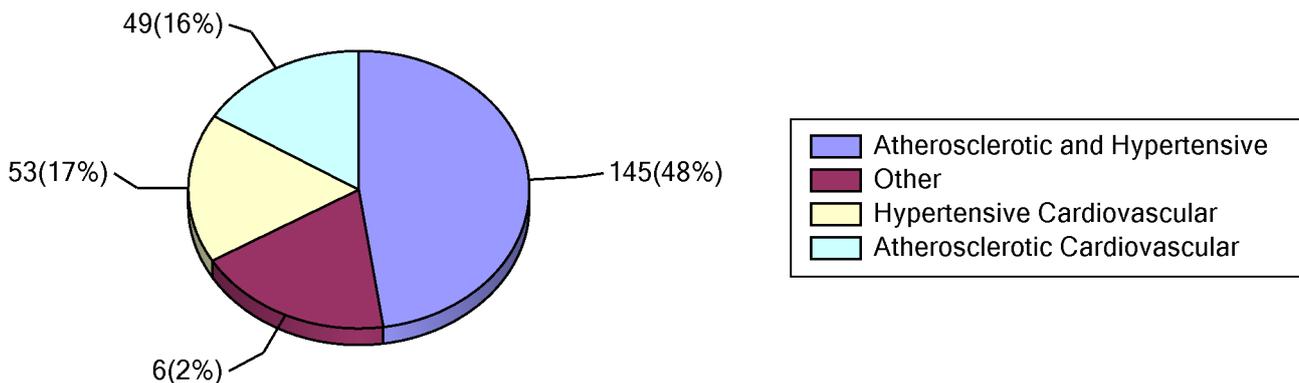
**NATURAL DEATH IN TRAVIS COUNTY BY DISEASE PROCESS**

The greatest percentage of the deaths from natural disease are due to heart disease.



Heart disease is generally subdivided into atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, hypertensive cardiovascular disease, and atherosclerotic and hypertensive cardiovascular disease. Atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease is a term used to describe hardening and narrowing of the arteries by atherosclerotic plaque, which often becomes calcified with age. Hypertensive cardiovascular disease refers to enlargement of the heart that occurs because of hypertension (high blood pressure). Atherosclerotic and hypertensive cardiovascular disease refers to a situation in which both disease processes are present.

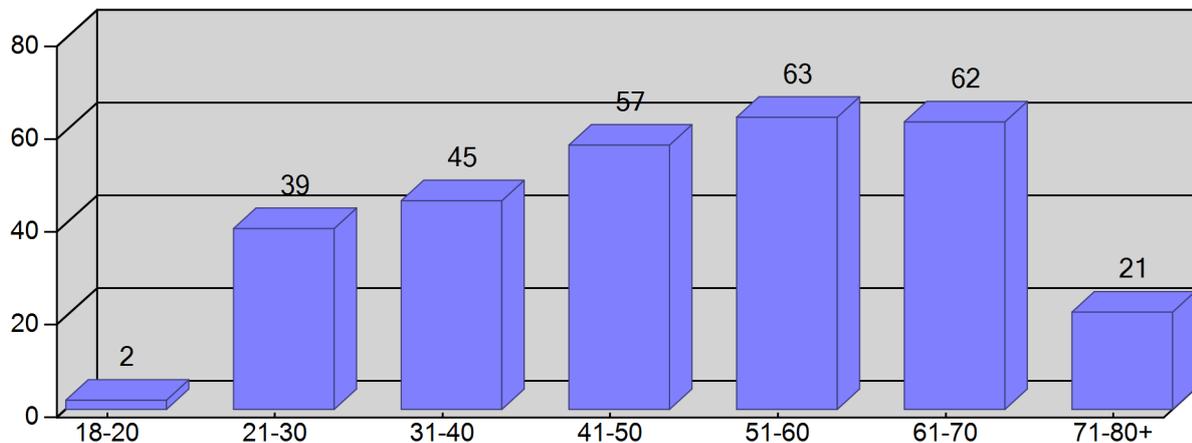
**HEART DISEASE BY TYPE 2018**



**OBESITY 2018**

291 out of 1096 (27%) of deaths of Travis County residents 18 years or older in 2018 that were examined at TCME were obese. Obesity is defined as body mass index >30.

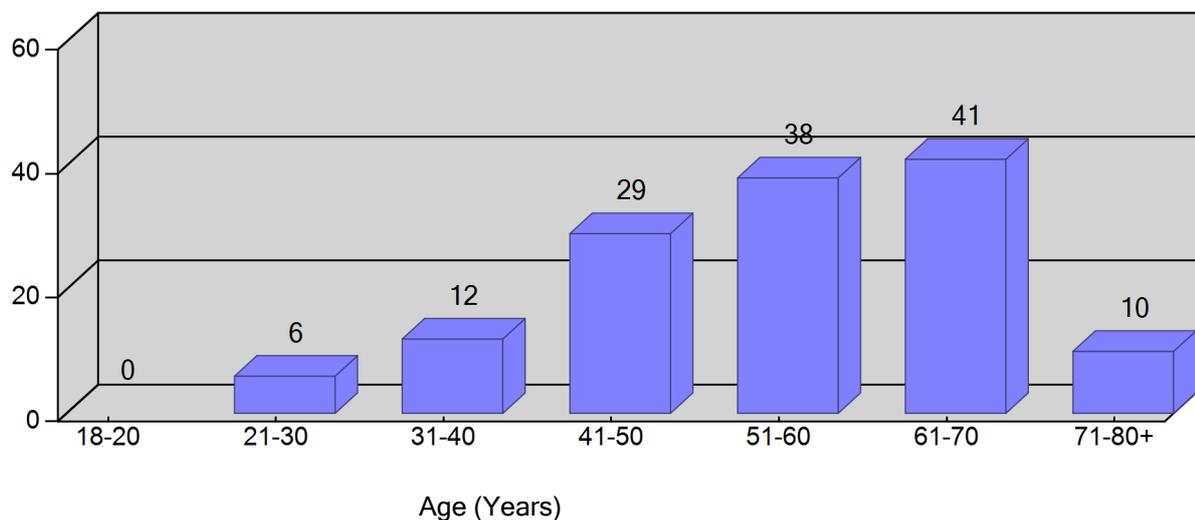
**AGES OF DECEDENTS DETERMINED TO BE OBESE**



**DEATHS RELATED TO OBESITY**

136 out of 476 (29%) of natural deaths of Travis County residents 18 years or older in 2018 that were examined at TCME were obesity-related.

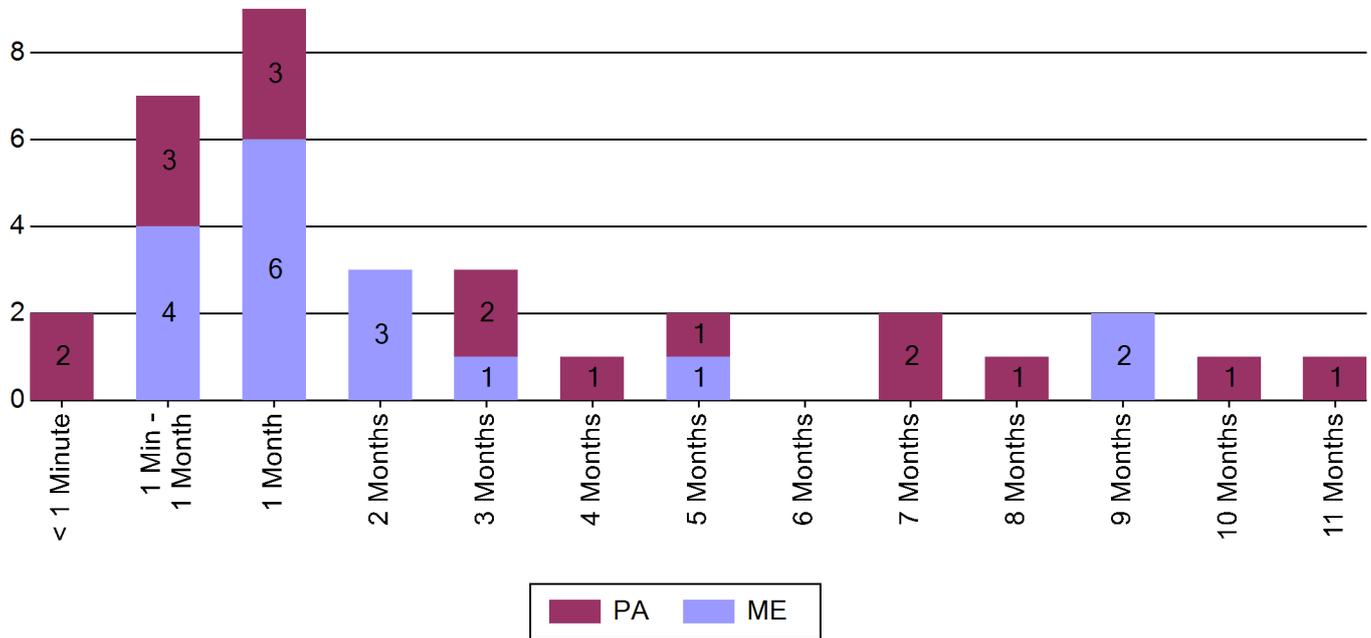
**AGES OF DECEDENTS WHOSE DEATH WAS DETERMINED TO BE OBESITY RELATED**



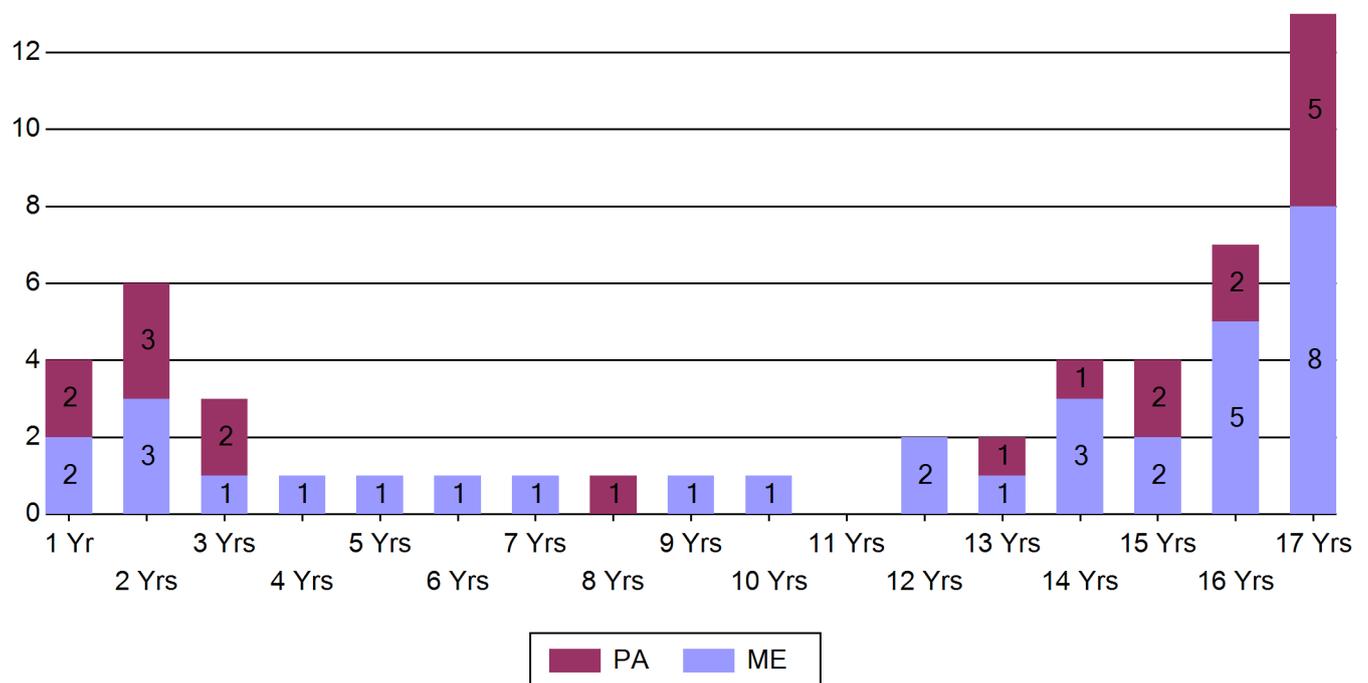
**CHILD FATALITIES 2018**

In 2018, 57 child fatalities (1 minute through 17 years of age) in Travis County were reported to TCME. An additional 43 child fatalities in other counties were reported to our office.

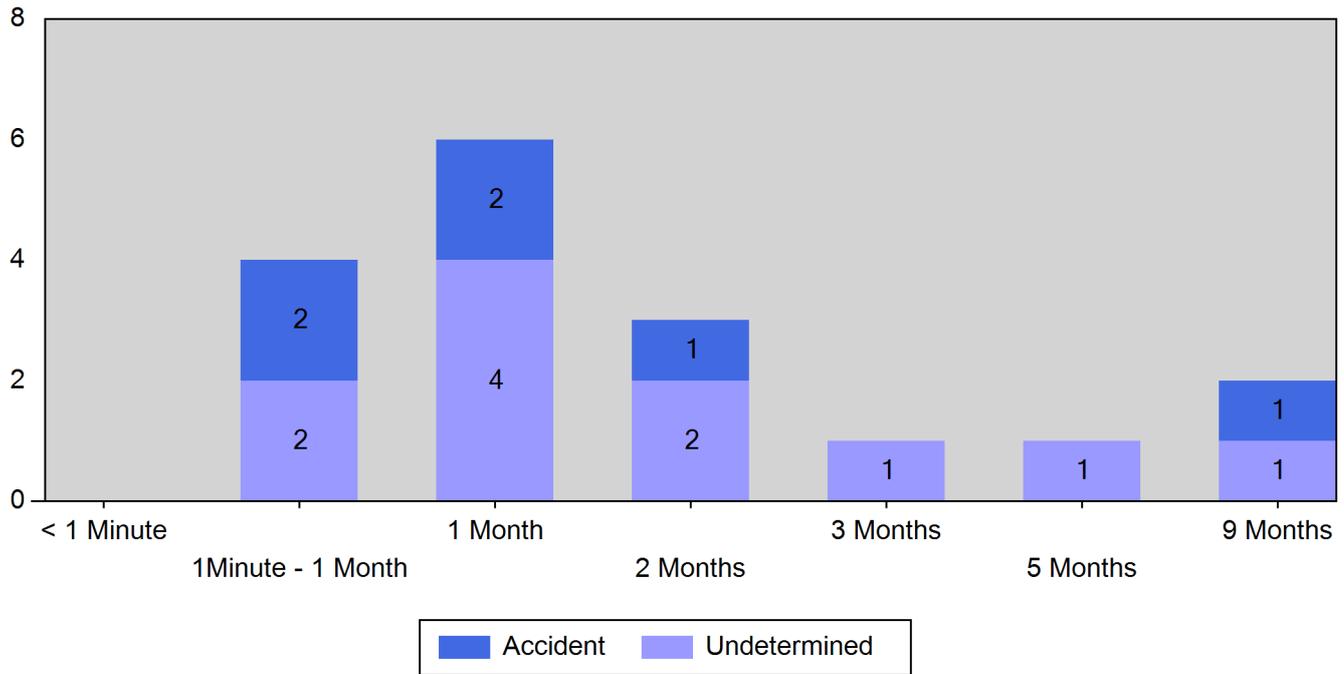
**AGES AT DEATH OF CHILD FATALITIES**



**AGES AT DEATH OF CHILD FATALITIES (CONTINUED)**

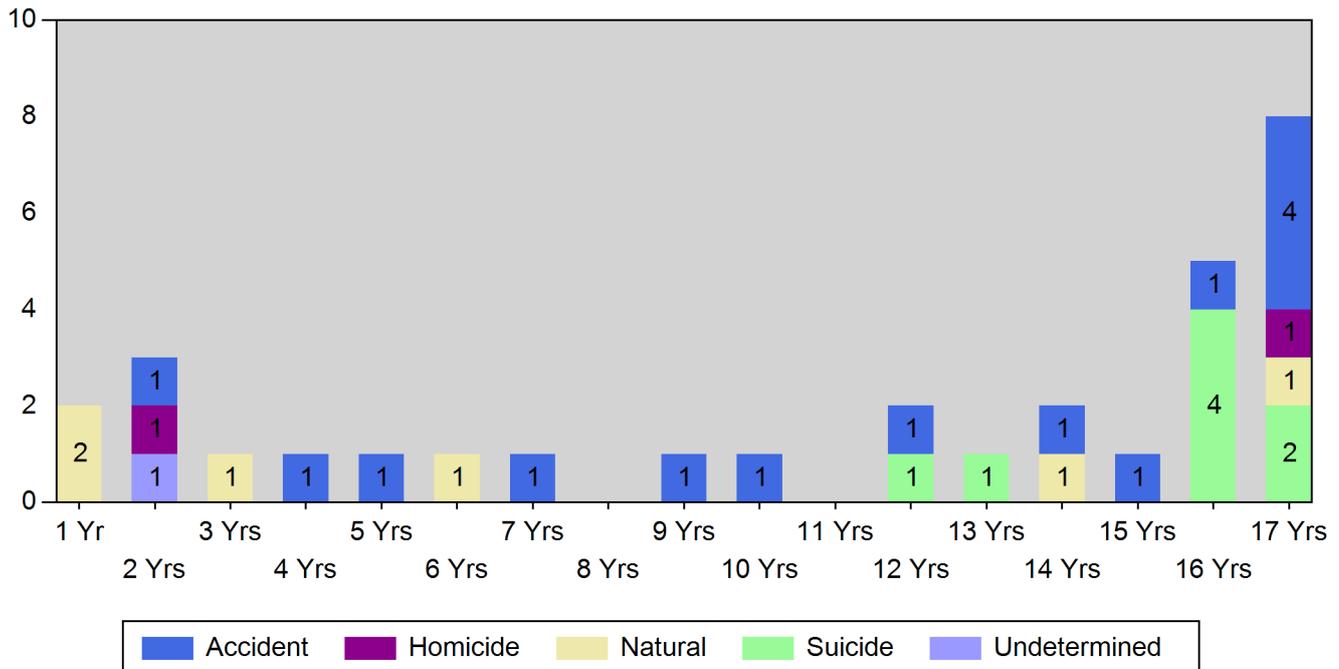


**MANNER OF DEATH IN CHILD FATALITIES IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018**



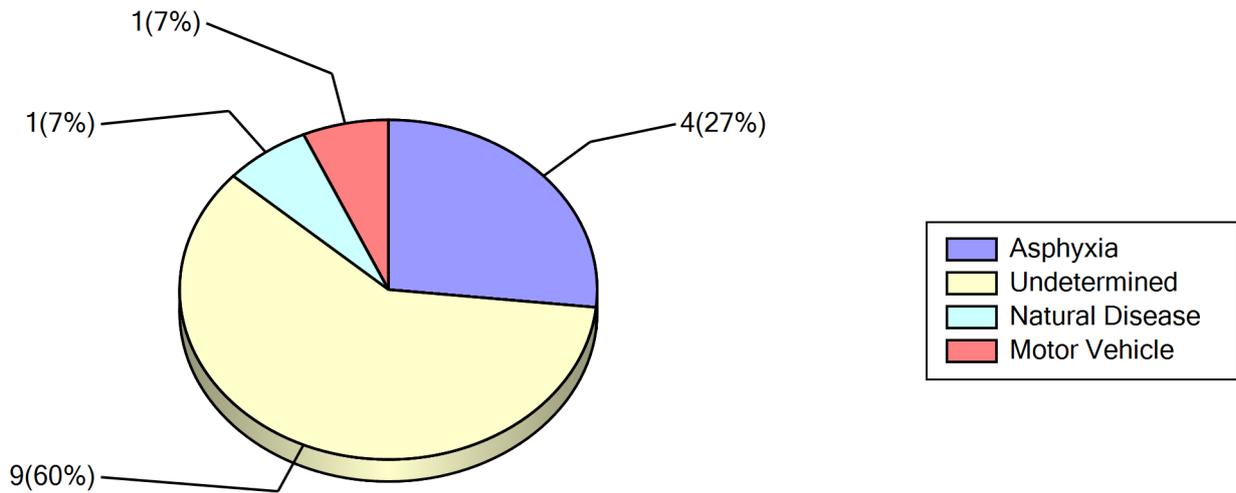
**MANNER OF DEATH IN CHILD FATALITIES IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018**

(Continued)



**INFANT DEATHS (1 DAY TO 1 YEAR OF AGE) IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018**

**MECHANISM OF DEATH, NUMBER OF CASES**

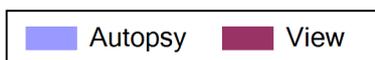
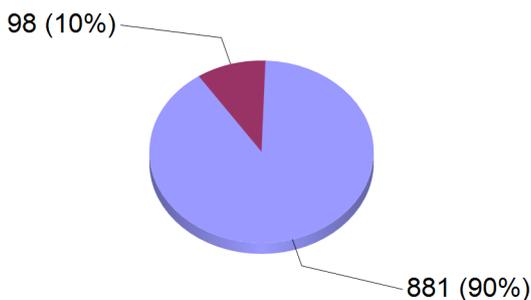


The majority of asphyxial deaths in these infants were related to unsafe sleeping conditions such as bed sharing in adult beds with other individuals and/or the use of unsafe/adult-type bedding materials.

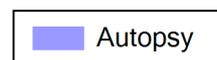
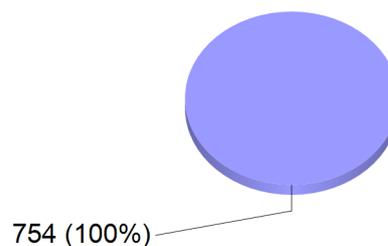
**TOXICOLOGY TESTING IN 2018**

Toxicology testing is routinely performed on cases that are autopsied. Toxicology testing is not routinely performed on cases that are not autopsied and have no suspicion of drug abuse or misuse of medications. In 2018, toxicology and/or clinical testing was performed on 97% of Travis County medical examiner autopsies and on 99% of out-of-county autopsies. Toxicology and/or clinical testing was performed on 6% of Travis County medical examiner cases that underwent external examination only.

**TOXICOLOGY TESTING IN TRAVIS COUNTY CASES**

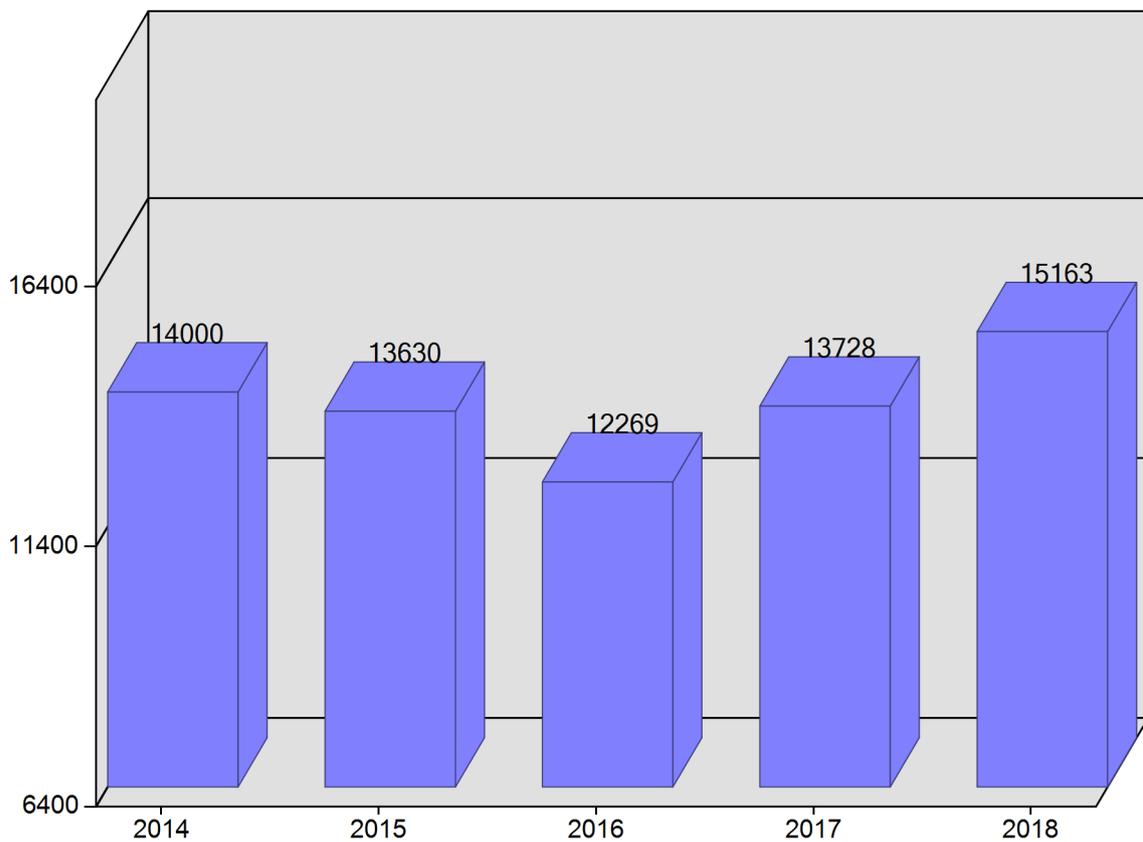


**TOXICOLOGY TESTING IN OUT-OF-COUNTY CASES**



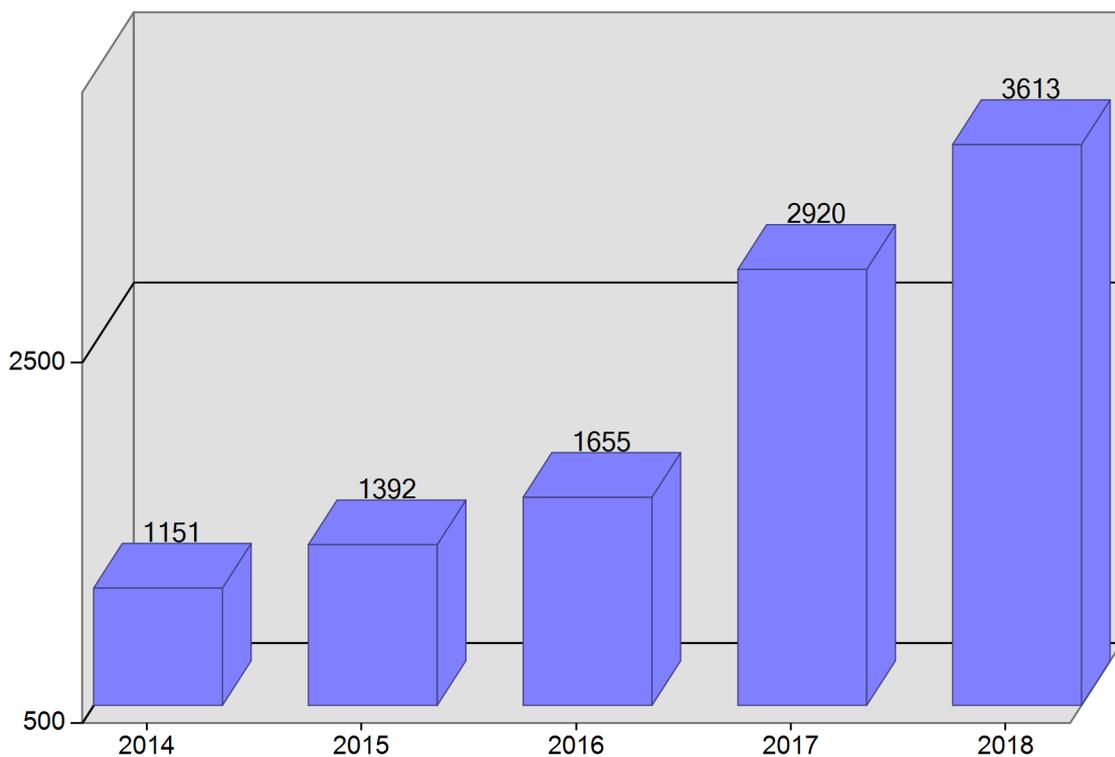
**NUMBER OF TOXICOLOGY TESTS PERFORMED 2014-2018**

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 on Travis County cases for the past five years.



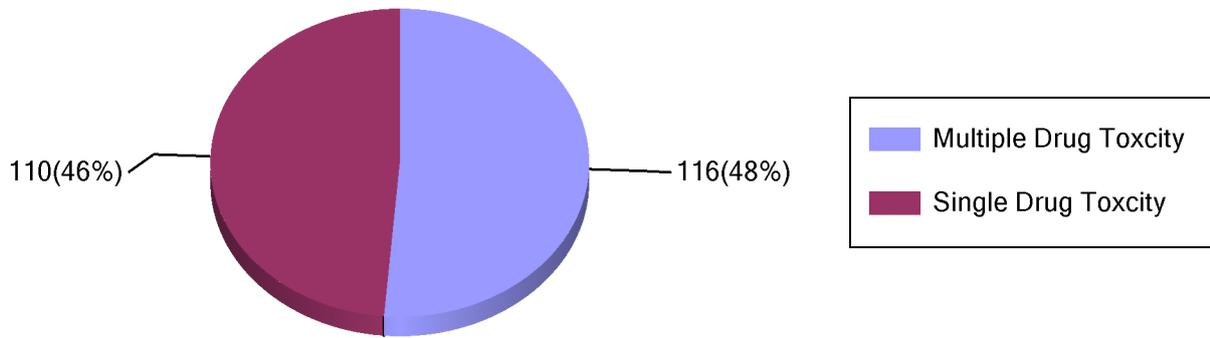
**LIQUID CHROMATOGRAPHY/MASS SPECTROMETRY (LC/MS) TESTING 2014-2018**

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. Currently, we have four such instruments. 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 on all cases for the past five years. 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.



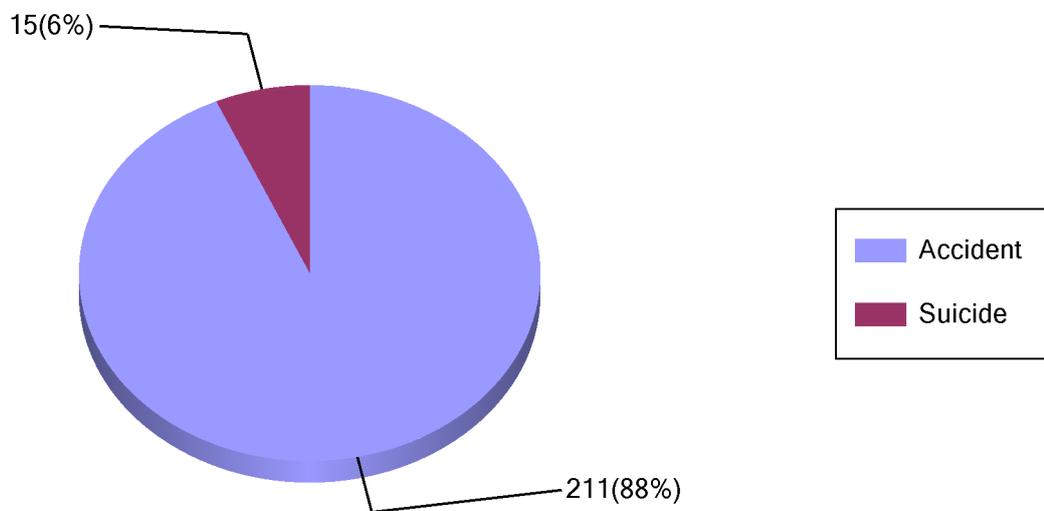
**TYPES OF DRUG-RELATED DEATHS IN TRAVIS COUNTY IN 2018**

**MULTIPLE DRUG TOXICITY VERSUS SINGLE DRUG TOXICITY**



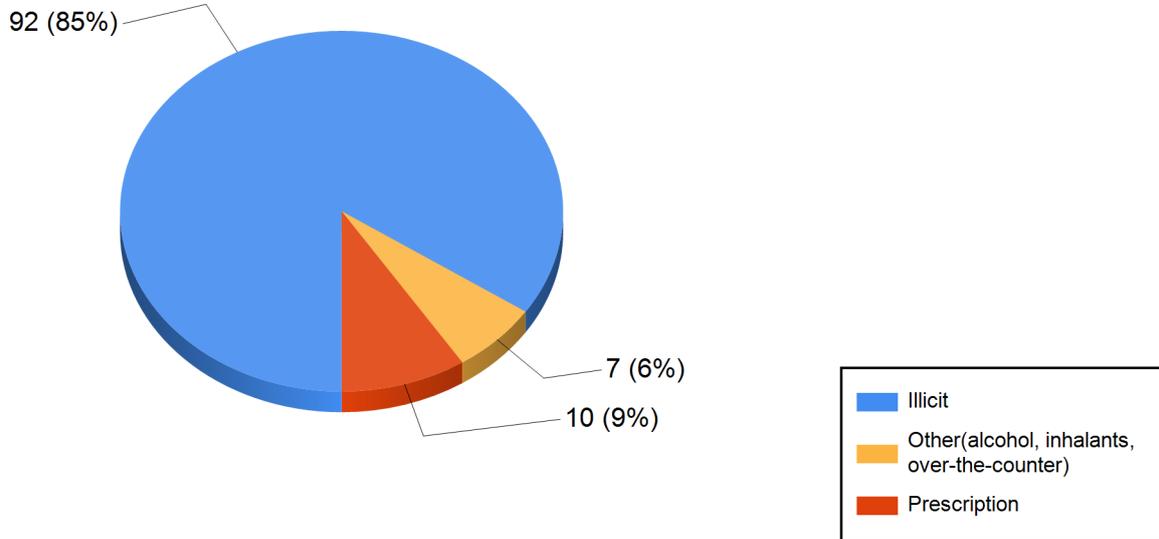
**DEATHS BY INTOXICATION IN TRAVIS COUNTY 2018**

**MANNER OF DEATH**



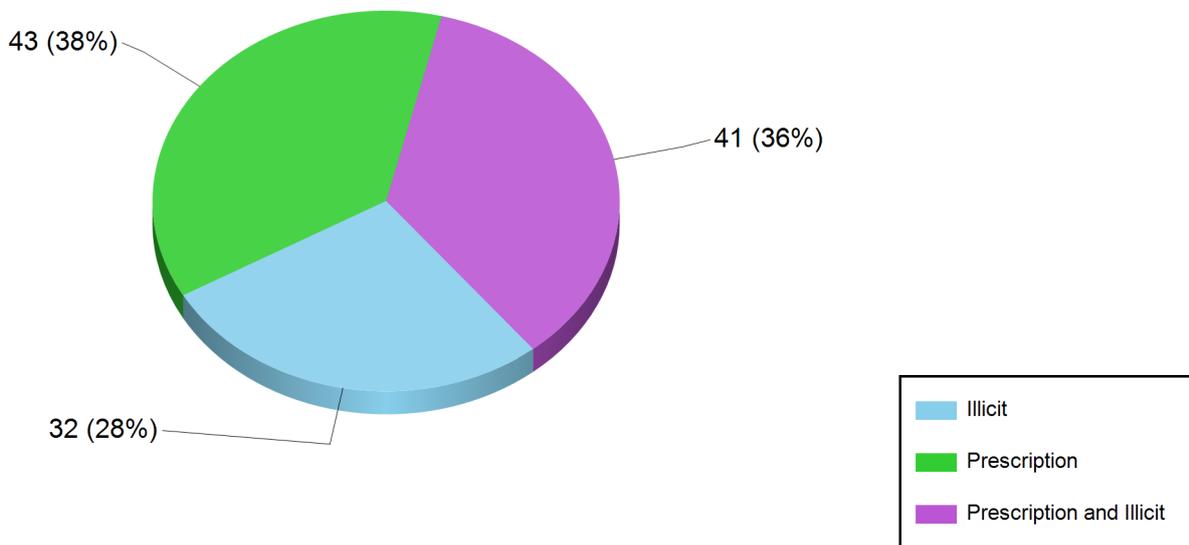
### DEATHS DUE TO SINGLE DRUGS IN 2018

The majority (85%) of deaths due to a single drug were deaths caused by an illicit drug. Deaths due to single prescription drugs made up only 9% of single drug deaths.

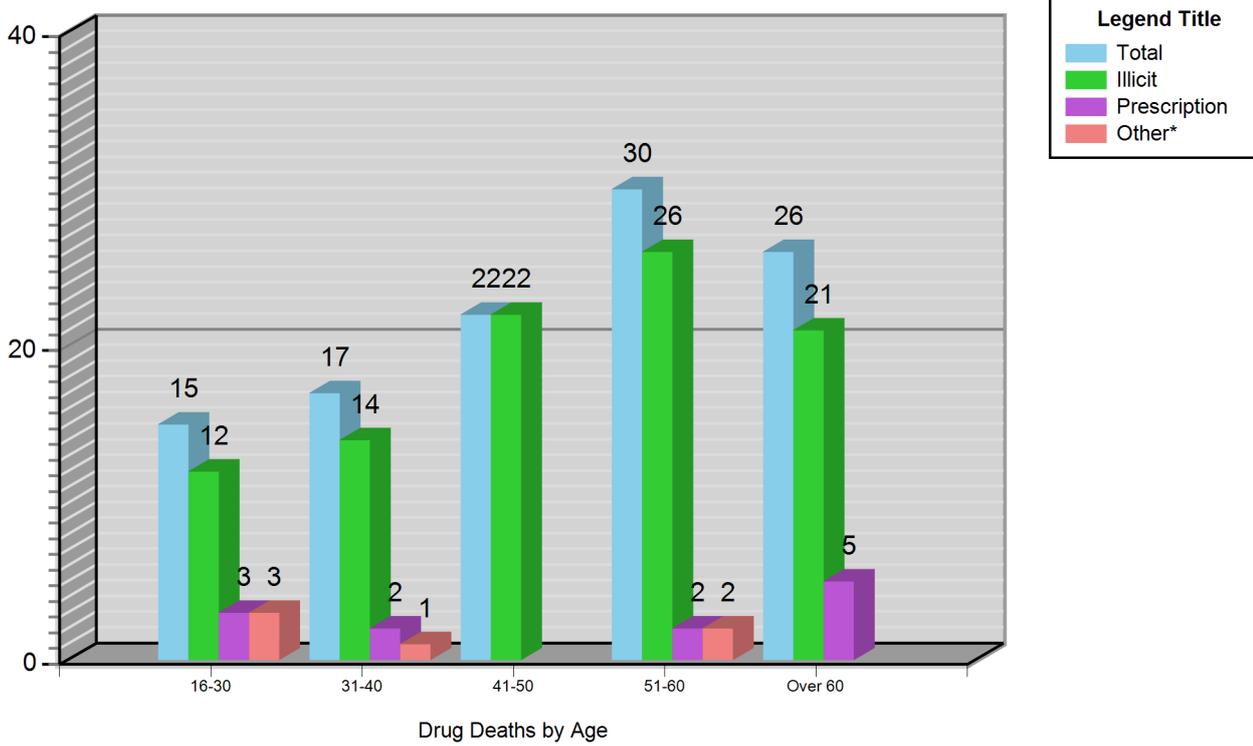


### DEATHS DUE TO MULTIPLE DRUGS IN 2018

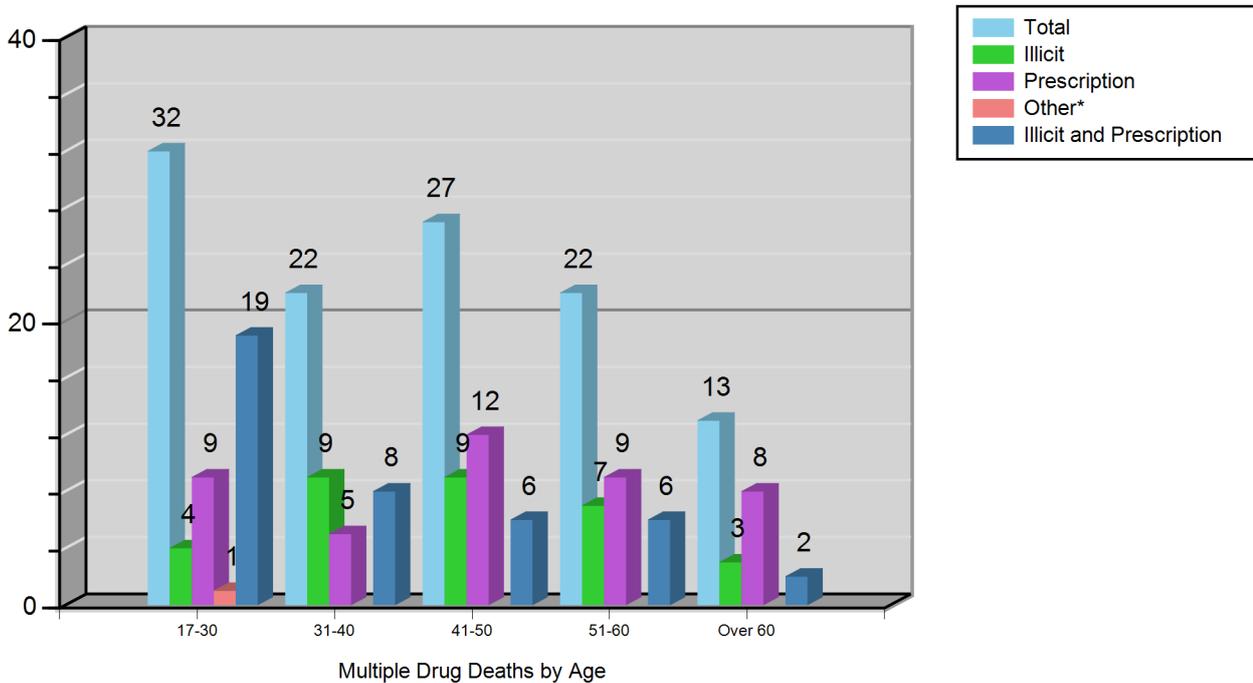
The majority (38%) of deaths due to a multiple drugs were deaths caused by prescription drugs, followed by combinations of illicit and prescription drugs (36%), and then mixtures of illicit drugs (28%).



**SINGLE DRUG DEATHS BY AGE**

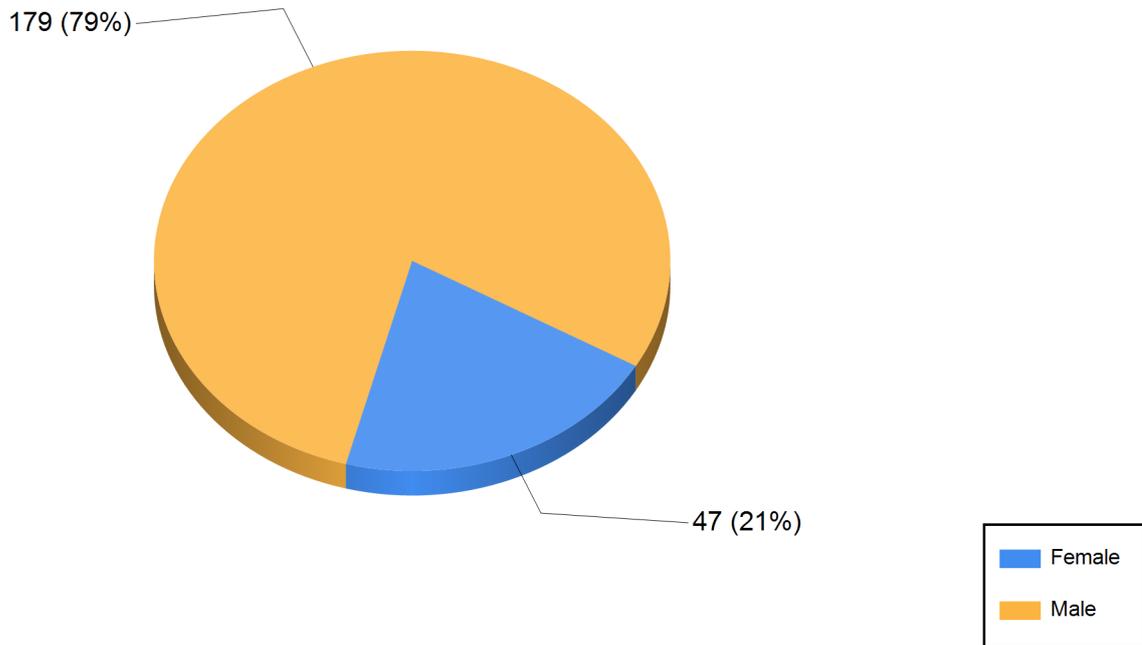


**MULTIPLE DRUG DEATHS BY AGE**

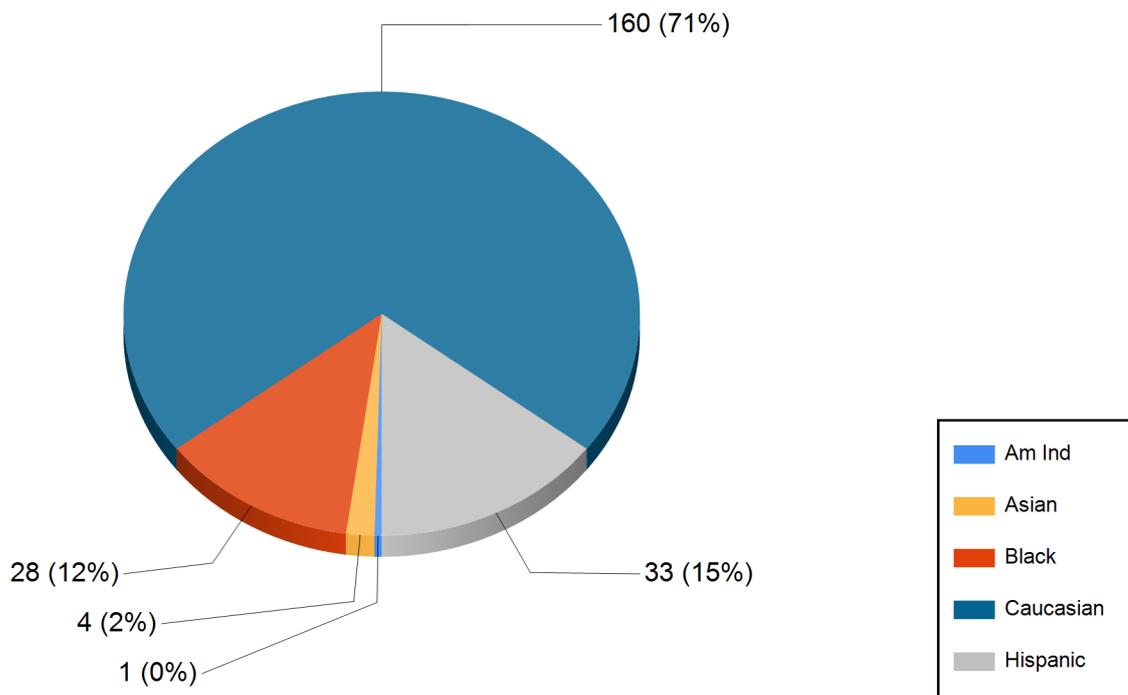


\*The "Other" category includes over-the-counter drugs, alcohol, and poisonous substances

### DRUG DEATHS BY GENDER

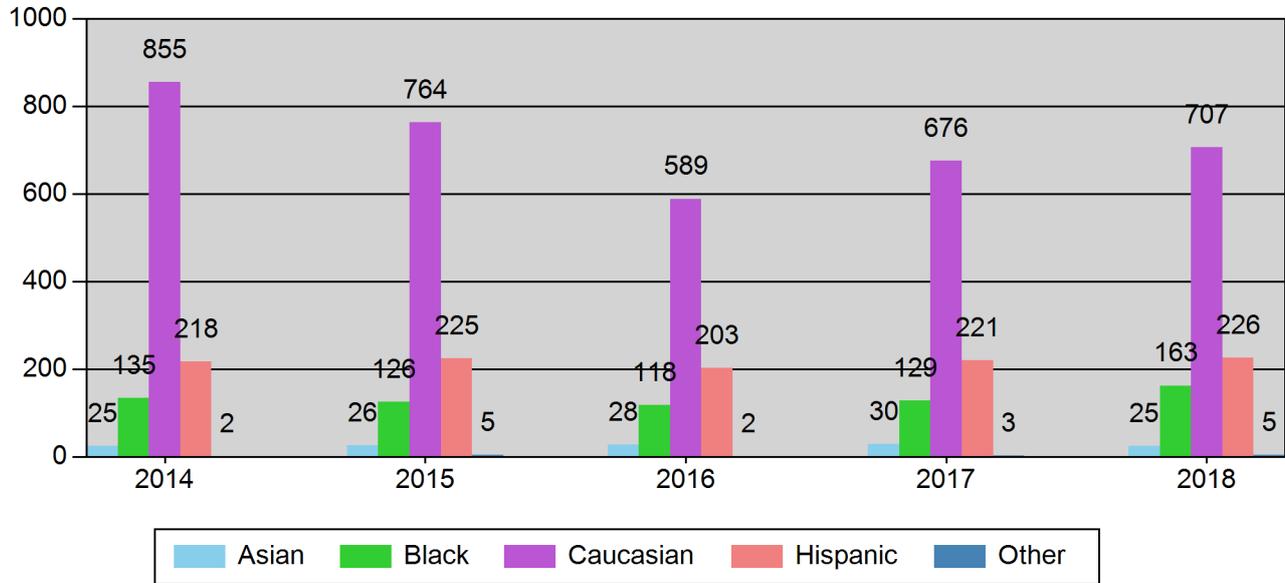


### DRUG DEATHS BY RACE

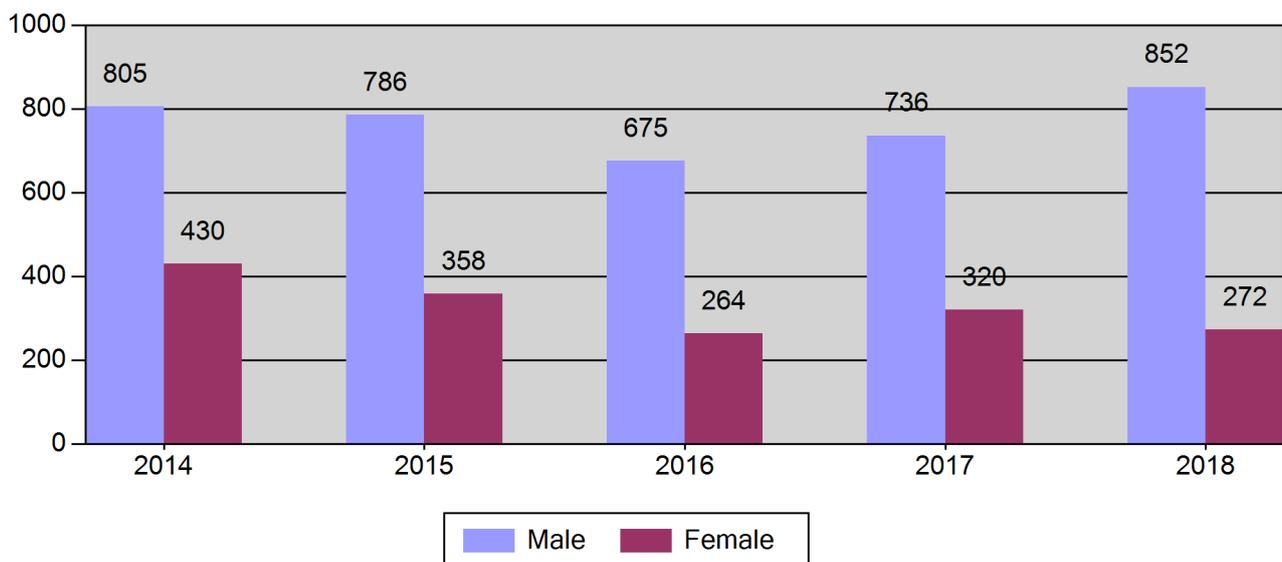


**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

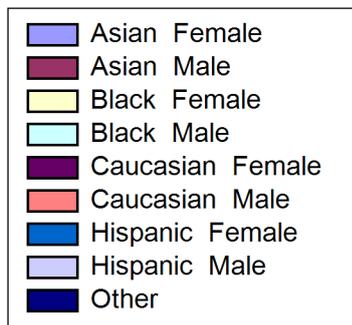
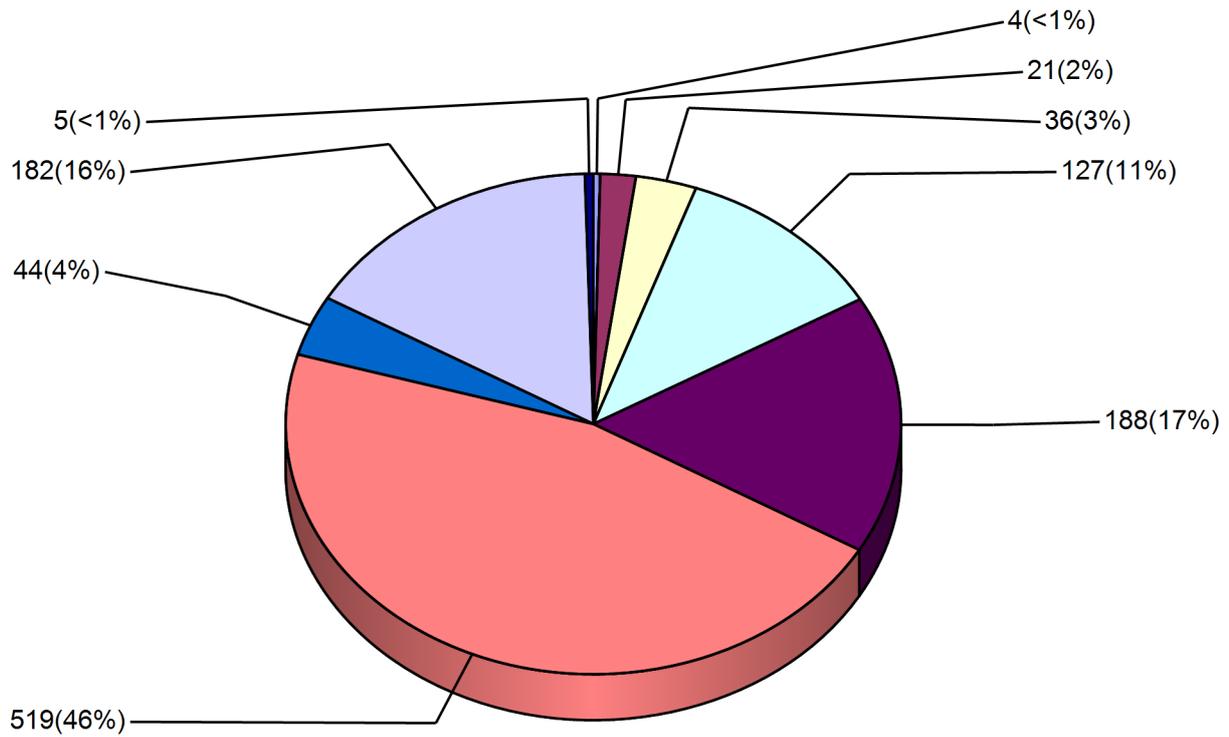
**DECEDENT'S RACE 2018 TRAVIS COUNTY CASES AS COMPARED TO CASES OCCURRING IN THE PREVIOUS FOUR YEARS**



**DECEDENT'S GENDER 2018 TRAVIS COUNTY CASES AS COMPARED TO CASES OCCURRING IN THE PREVIOUS FOUR YEARS**



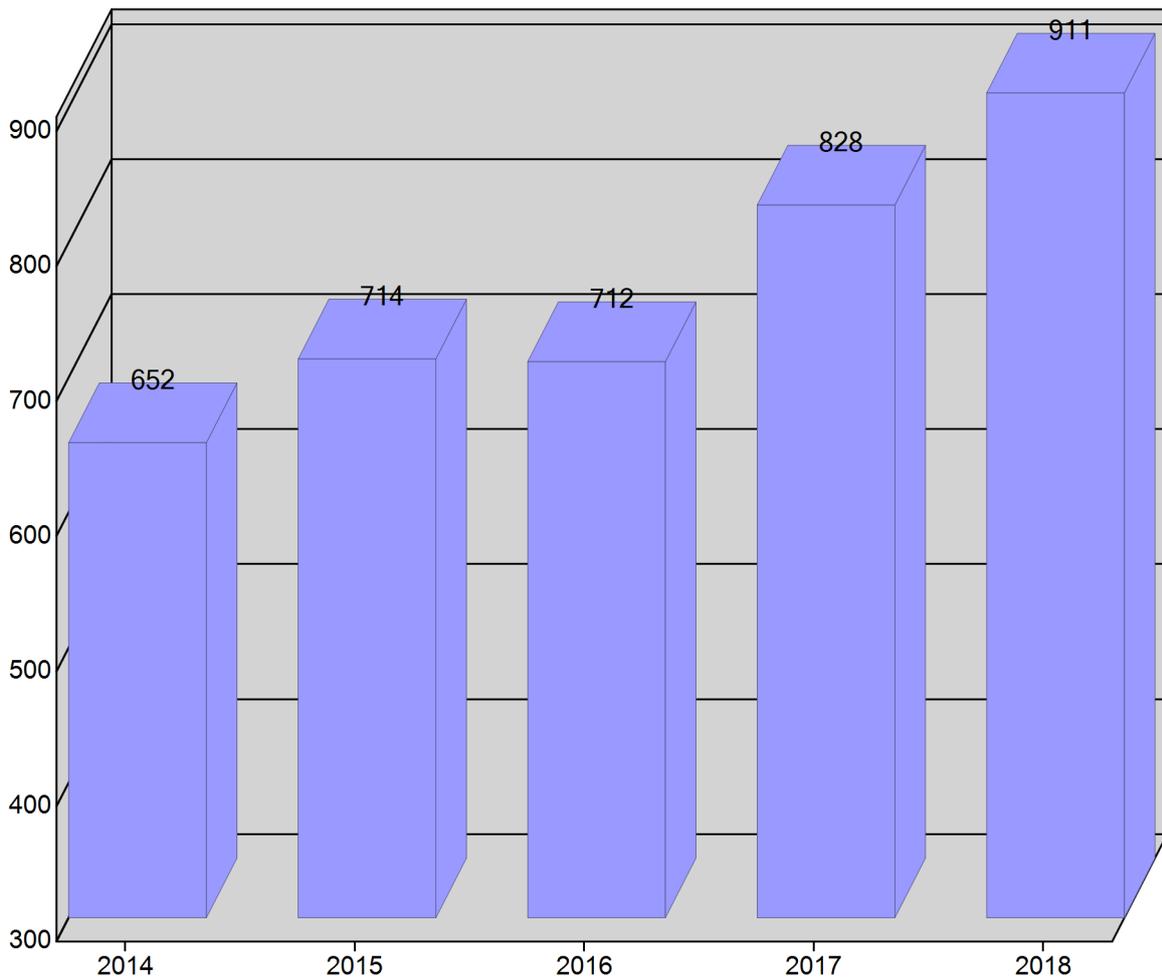
**BREAKDOWN BY RACE AND GENDER OF TRAVIS COUNTY DEATHS AS INVESTIGATED BY TCME IN 2018**



**SCENE INVESTIGATION 2018**

Scene investigation is an important component of proper medicolegal death investigation. TCME forensic investigators attended 911 death scenes in Travis County in 2018. TCME investigators do not attend death scenes that are located outside of Travis County boundaries. Types of scenes investigated include all suspected homicides, suicides, and accidental deaths, and select cases suspected to have died of natural disease.

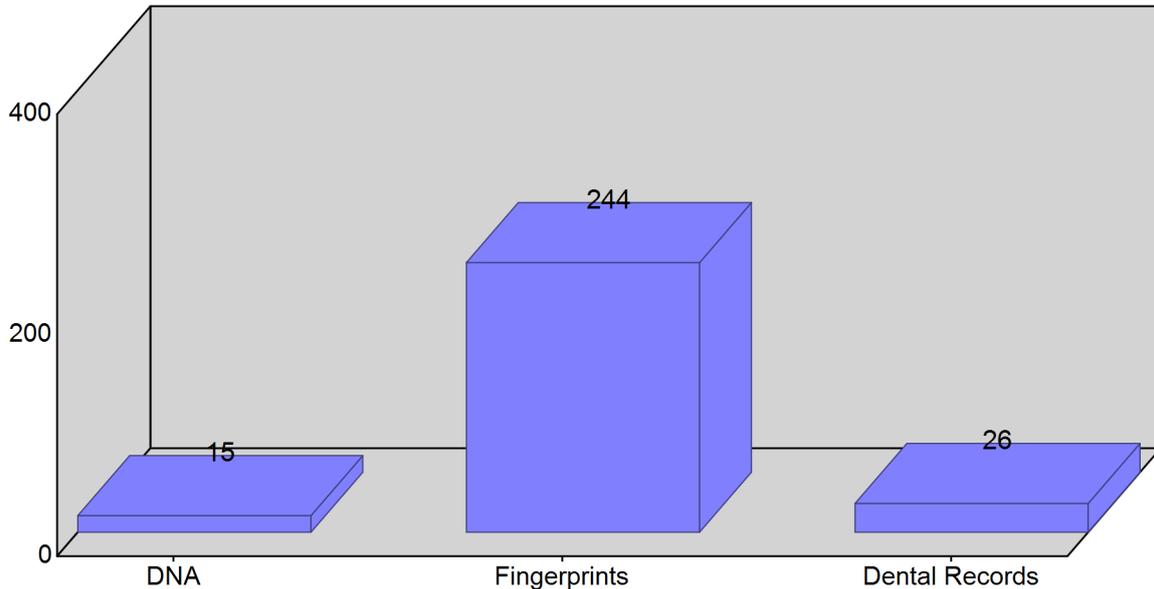
**TRENDS IN SCENE INVESTIGATION 2014-2018  
NUMBERS OF SCENE INVESTIGATIONS**



**UNIDENTIFIED BODIES 2018**

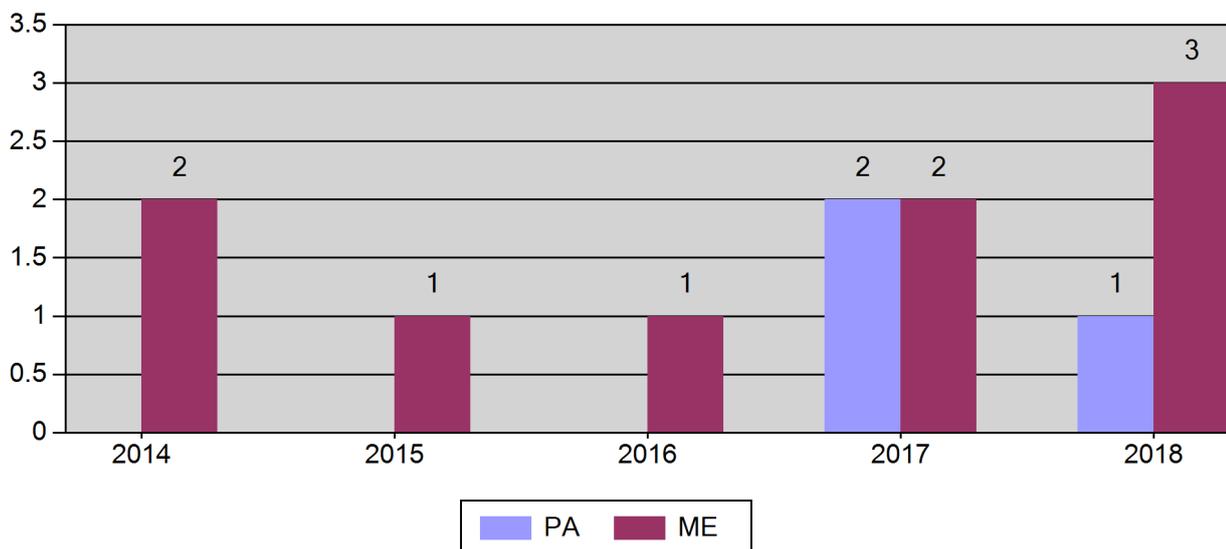
Occasionally, people who die have no identification on them, and it is either unknown or uncertain as to who they are. TCME, along with law enforcement agencies, work together using various techniques to scientifically identify these decedents. In 2018, 285 decedents examined at TCME were scientifically identified.

**METHODS OF SCIENTIFIC IDENTIFICATION OF UNIDENTIFIED DECEDENTS 2018 (ME and PA cases combined)**



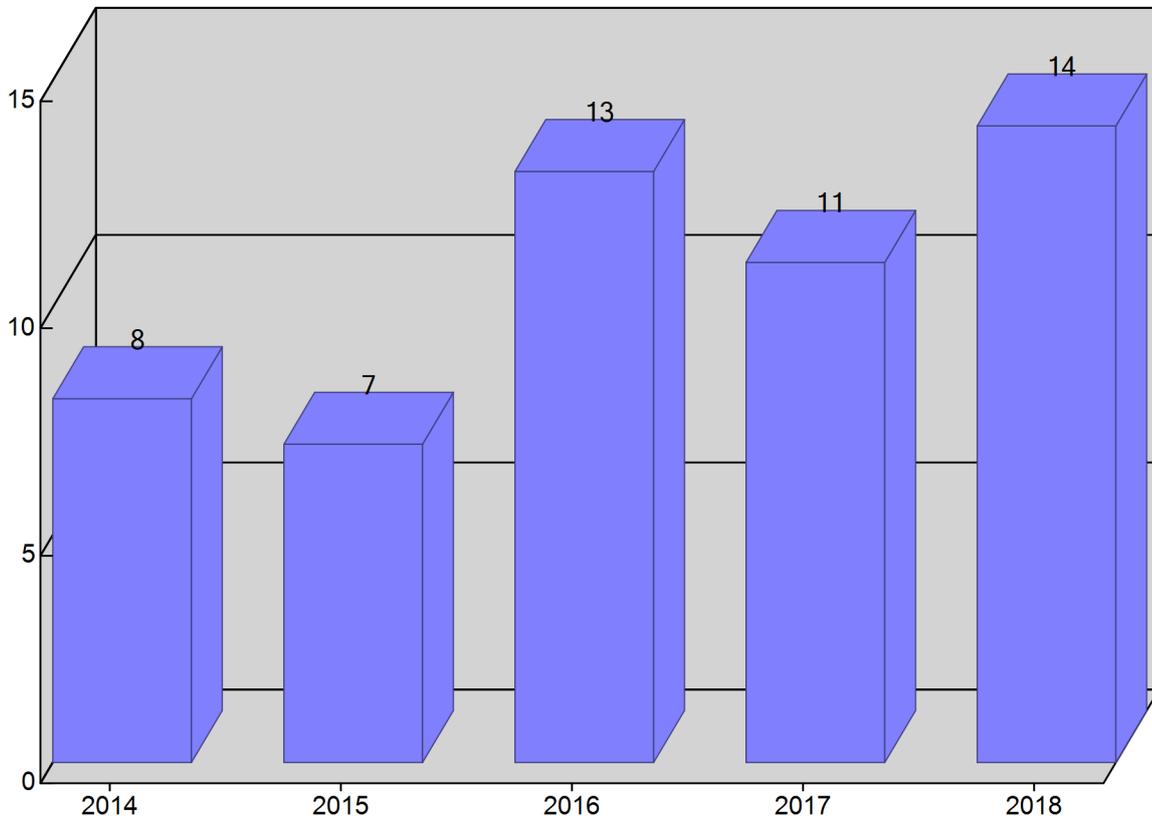
**UNIDENTIFIED BODIES AT TCME 2014-2018**

Despite best attempts at identifying unidentified individuals, occasionally, a body will remain unidentified. These cases most often are skeletal remains, where only bones are available for identification, ranging from a single bone fragment to an entire skeleton.



**NUMBERS OF UNCLAIMED BODIES AT THE TCME 2014-2018**

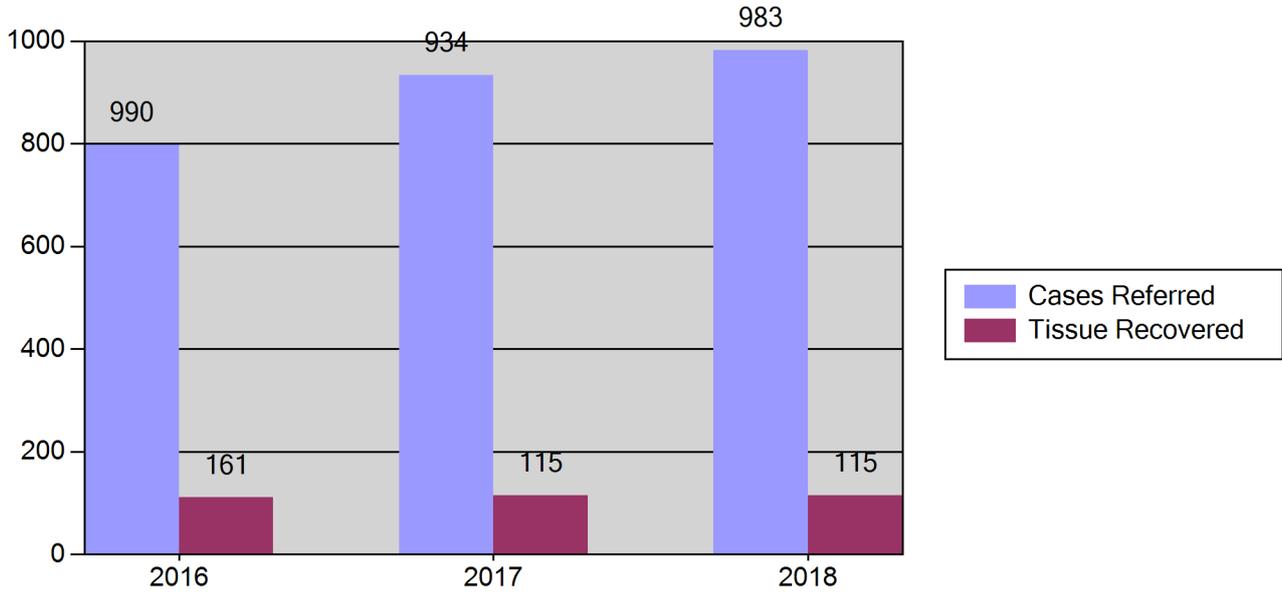
(All cases were referred to the Travis County Burial Assistance Program.)



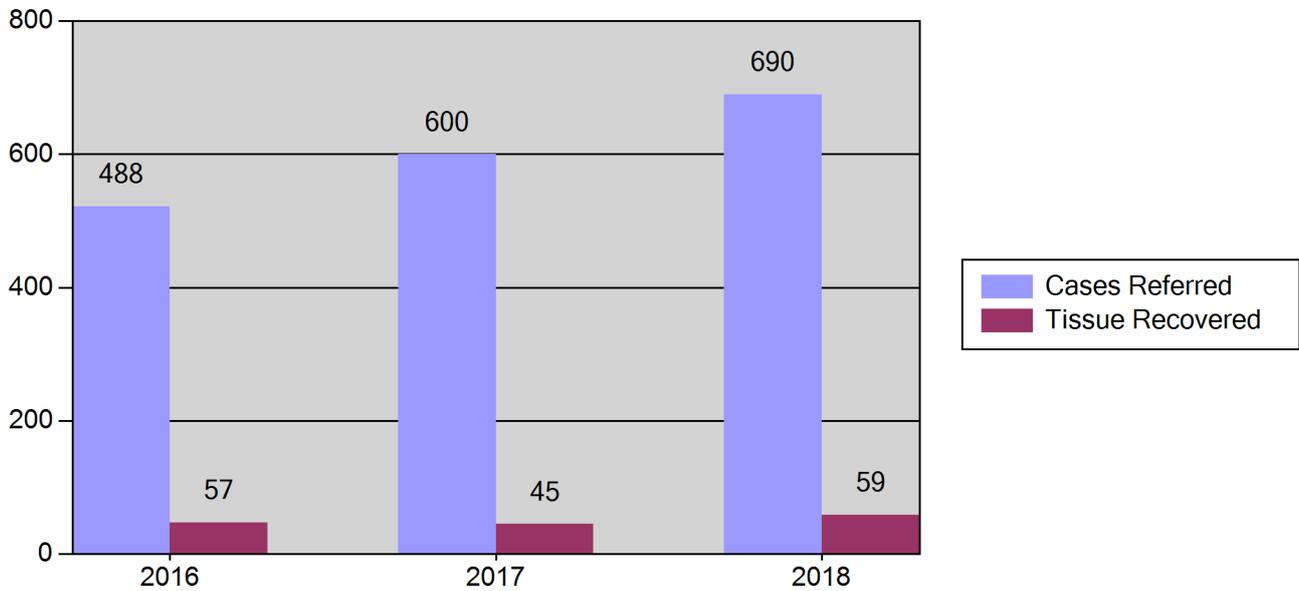
**EYE AND TISSUE BANK REFERRALS 2016-2018**

TCME refers all eligible cases to the Travis County Blood and Tissue Center and the Lone Star Lions Eye Bank of Central Texas for possible tissue recovery. Tissue may be recovered from select cases only upon consent from the decedent's family. The following charts indicate the number of cases referred to the recovery agencies by TCME, and the number of cases in which tissue was recovered.

Travis County



Out of County

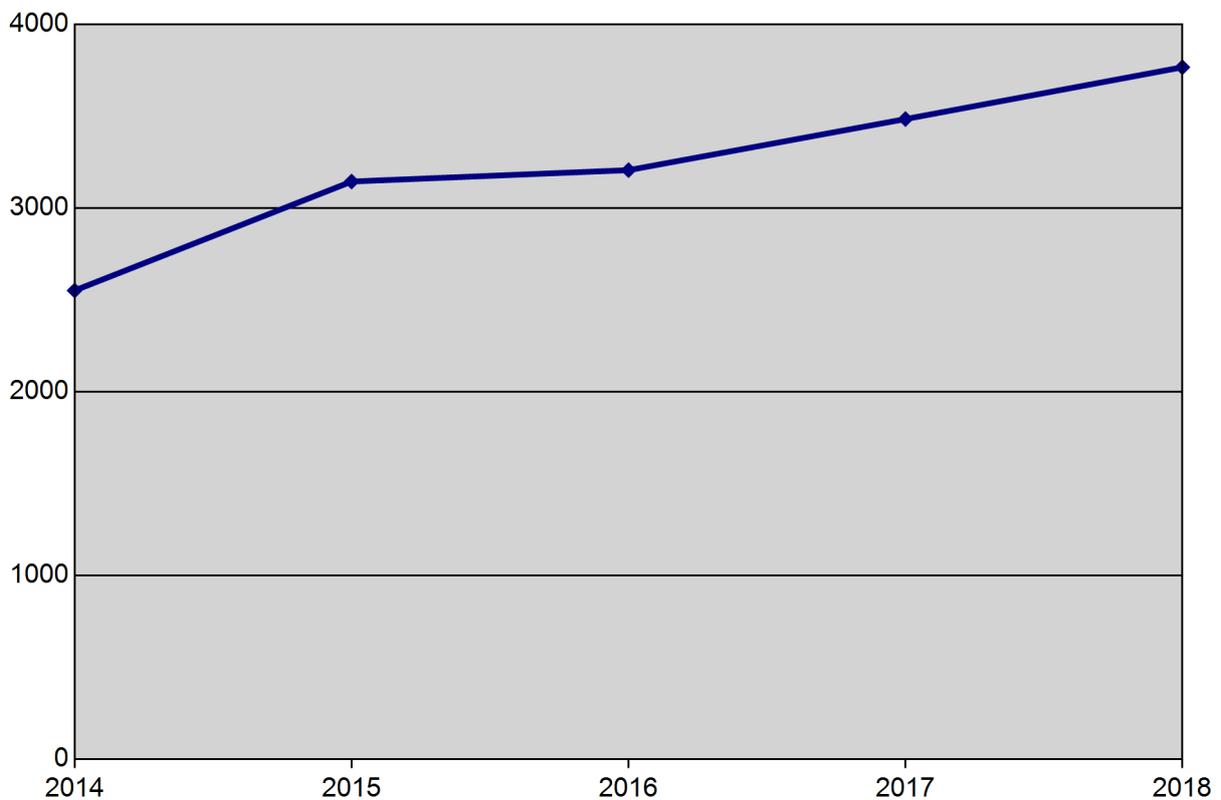


**ORGAN DONATION IN 2018**

If organ donation is to occur in a case, it takes place in a hospital setting before the body is received by TCME for its examination. In 2018, organ donors who died within the boundaries of Travis County gifted a large number of organs that were successfully transplanted into needy individuals across the United States. There were 32 organ donors from Travis County in 2018, the majority of whom died a traumatic death and subsequently underwent autopsy.

**CREMATION AUTHORIZATIONS 2014-2018**

In Texas, Medical Examiners or Justices of the Peace are required by law to sign cremation authorizations before a body is cremated. At the TCME, the cremation authorization form and death certificate of each decedent is reviewed by a forensic pathologist before authorizing cremation requested by the decedent's family. In 2018, TCME doctors authorized 3766 cremations. The following demonstrates the number of cremation authorizations signed by our pathologists over the recent years.



**BODY TRANSPORT IN 2018**

Travis County contracts with a company to provide transport services to our office on deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County. In 2018, 1088 bodies in Travis County were transported using our contracted provider, and 38 bodies were transported by TCME personnel. Out-of-county cases are transported by funeral homes retained by the referring Justice of the Peace or family.

**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN 2018**

TCME regularly interacts with, and impacts the local community in a variety of ways. Such activities over the past few years included a variety of educational endeavors, including lectures on a college level to St. Edwards and University of Texas students. On a high school level, TCME staff lectured on death investigation at several schools and participated in Shattered Dreams and Skillpoint Alliance programs. Staff members of TCME serve on the Travis County Child Fatality Death Review Team and attend AIM HIGH meetings, Safe Kids Austin, and Safe Sleep Task Force meetings. We have lectured on infant safety for teen mothers and on unsafe sleep environments. In addition, we gave presentations to area hospitals, hospice agencies, and nursing homes on proper reporting of medical examiner cases. We also provided lectures on proper death certification to physician and administration groups. One of our most important community interactions happens when physicians and hospitals receive post-mortem reports and gain insight on a disease or injury process. Over the past few years, TCME hosted interns from the St. Edwards University Forensic Science program, the University of Texas, and the Texas State University Anthropology program. We also provide training in forensic pathology for various regional medical students and pathology residents.