



# TRAVIS COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER ANNUAL REPORT 2019



[www.traviscountytexas.gov/medical-examiner](http://www.traviscountytexas.gov/medical-examiner)

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# ABOUT OUR OFFICE

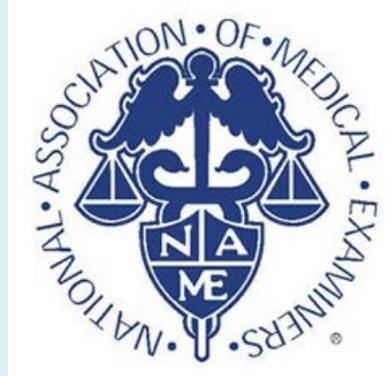
## Introduction

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 2019, the population of Travis County was approximately 1,273,954. 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 one of 45 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 trains two fellows; the first class of fellows began their training in July of 2018.



## Accreditation

Our office first became accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) in 2009 and was reaccredited in 2014 and again in 2019. NAME also requires that a yearly self-assessment be submitted to the accrediting authority of the organization.



For more information at NAME, click on the following links:

<https://www.thename.org/>

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

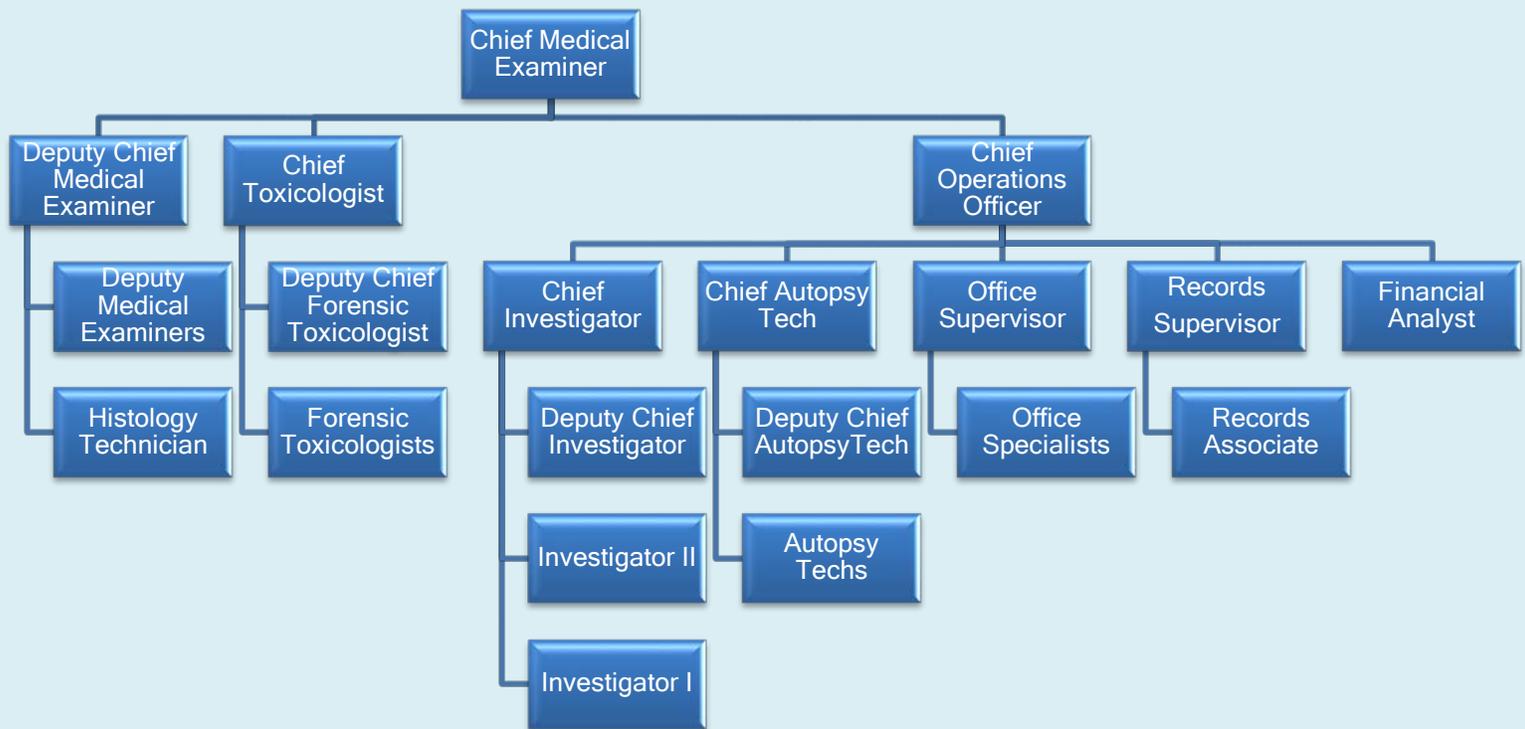
The Travis County Medical Examiner's Toxicology Laboratory first achieved accreditation by American Board of Forensic Toxicology (ABFT) in 2005 and has maintained accreditation since.



For more information on ABFT accreditation, click on the following link:

<https://www.abft.org/>

# OFFICE STAFFING



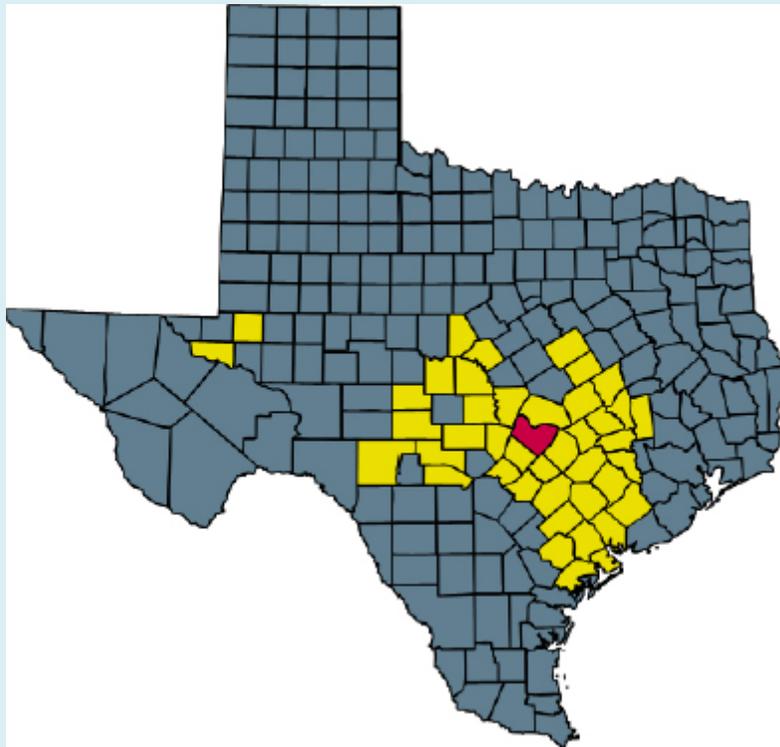
In 2019, TCME was staffed by 43 employees and was composed of the following departments: Pathology, Investigations, Morgue, Toxicology, and Administration.

- 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 Investigations 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, a Deputy Chief Autopsy Technician, and three Autopsy Technicians.
- In the Toxicology Department, both the Chief Toxicologist and the Deputy Chief Toxicologist hold Ph.D. degrees. There were five Forensic Toxicologists.
- The Chief Operations Officer oversees Investigations, Morgue, and Administration. The Administration Department includes Office Support, Finance, Human Resources and Record Management. There were eight employees in the Administration Department.

# ABOUT OUR WORK

## 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 deaths occurring in 43 Texas counties at the written request of the local authorities.



Red -Travis County

Yellow -Counties serviced by TCME through Interlocal Agreements

## Reportable Deaths

Pursuant to the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, Chapter 49.25, 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:

- 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.
- 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.

## Process

Local deaths (those that occur within the boundaries of Travis County) that fall under TCME's jurisdiction and require a postmortem examination are transported to TCME 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 or mortuary company at the request of the referring Justice of the Peace.

Not all bodies brought to 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 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 external examination cases.

## Case Designation

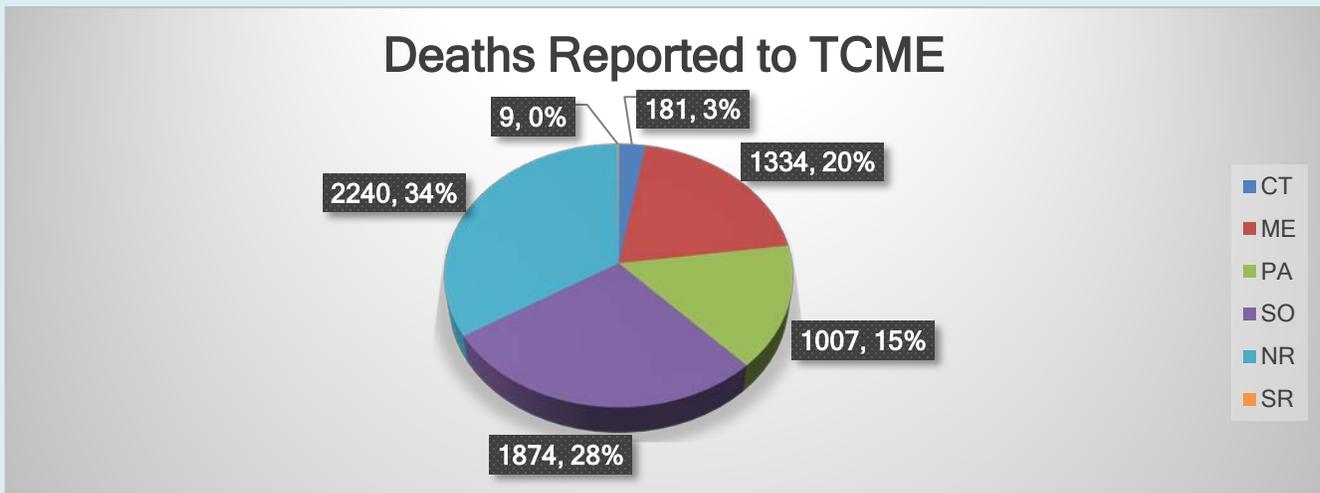
Investigative reports are generated on all cases that fall under the jurisdiction of TCME. All deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County that are brought to TCME for examination (whether they are autopsied or not) are given the designation of 'ME' before the case number. All cases referred to TCME from outside Travis County are given the designation of 'PA' before the case number. If TCME delegates death certification to a treating physician 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 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.

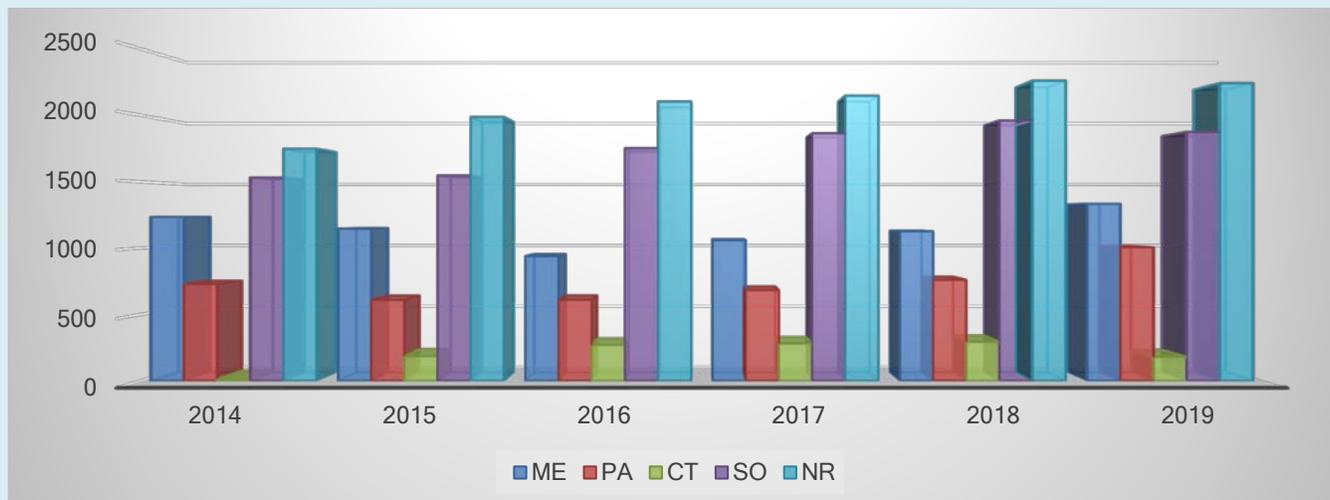
# ABOUT OUR CASES

## Deaths Reported in 2019

In 2019, 6654 cases were reported to TCME. 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, 1334 were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction and the bodies were physically examined at TCME (ME cases). 181 cases were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction, but for various reasons, the bodies were not physically examined at TCME (CT cases). 1874 cases were Travis County deaths that fell under the Medical Examiner jurisdiction and were reported to TCME, but certification of the death was delegated to the decedent's treating physician (SO cases). TCME received reports of death on 2240 cases in Travis County that did not fall within its jurisdiction (NR cases). TCME received a total of 1007 cases from outside of Travis County for examination (PA cases), and a total referral of 9 cases that proved to be nonhuman skeletal remains (SR cases). TCME does not perform hospital (family consented) autopsies. There were no exhumations.

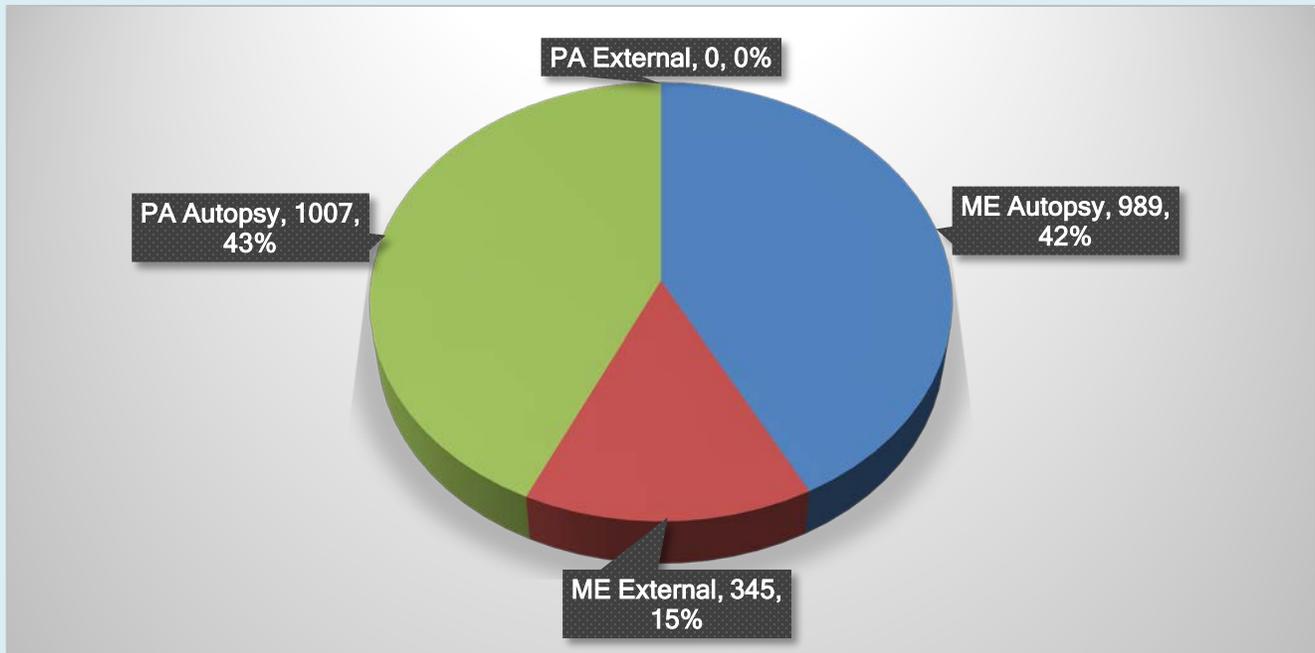


## Deaths Reported in 2014-2019

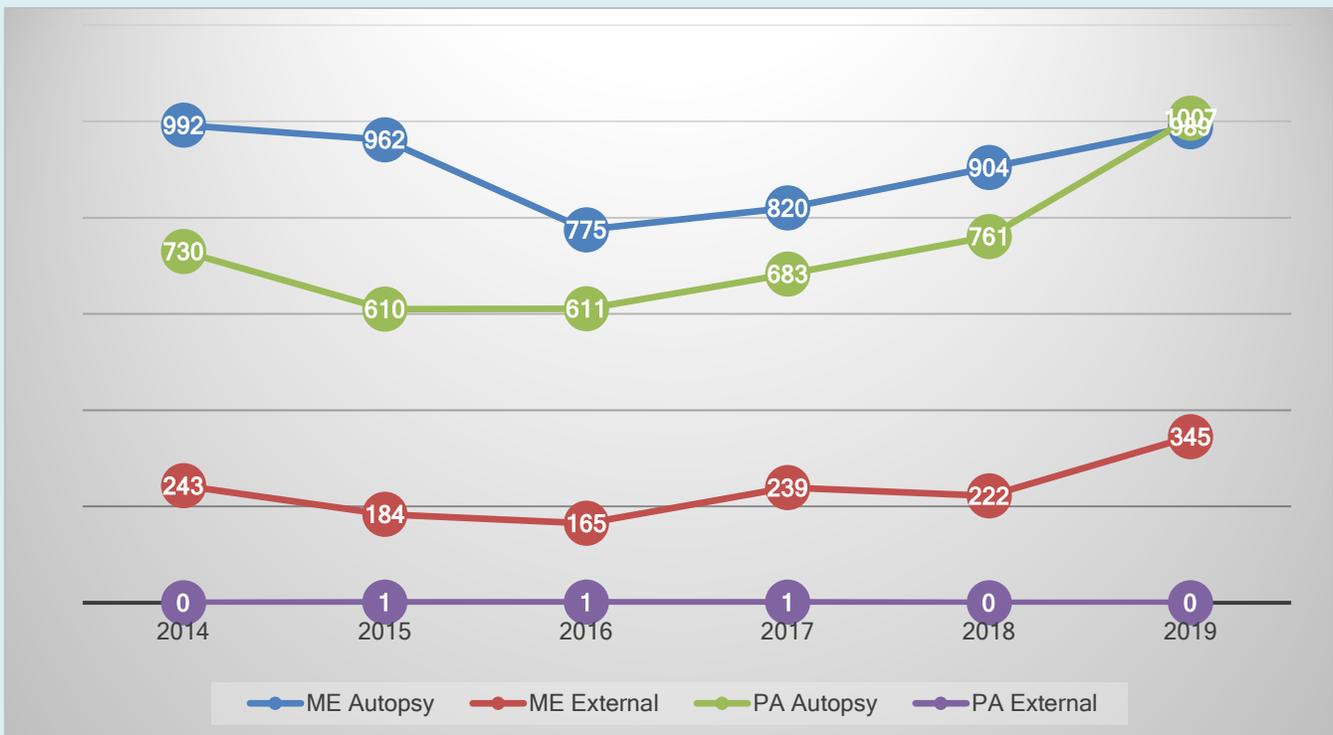


## Exam Types in 2019

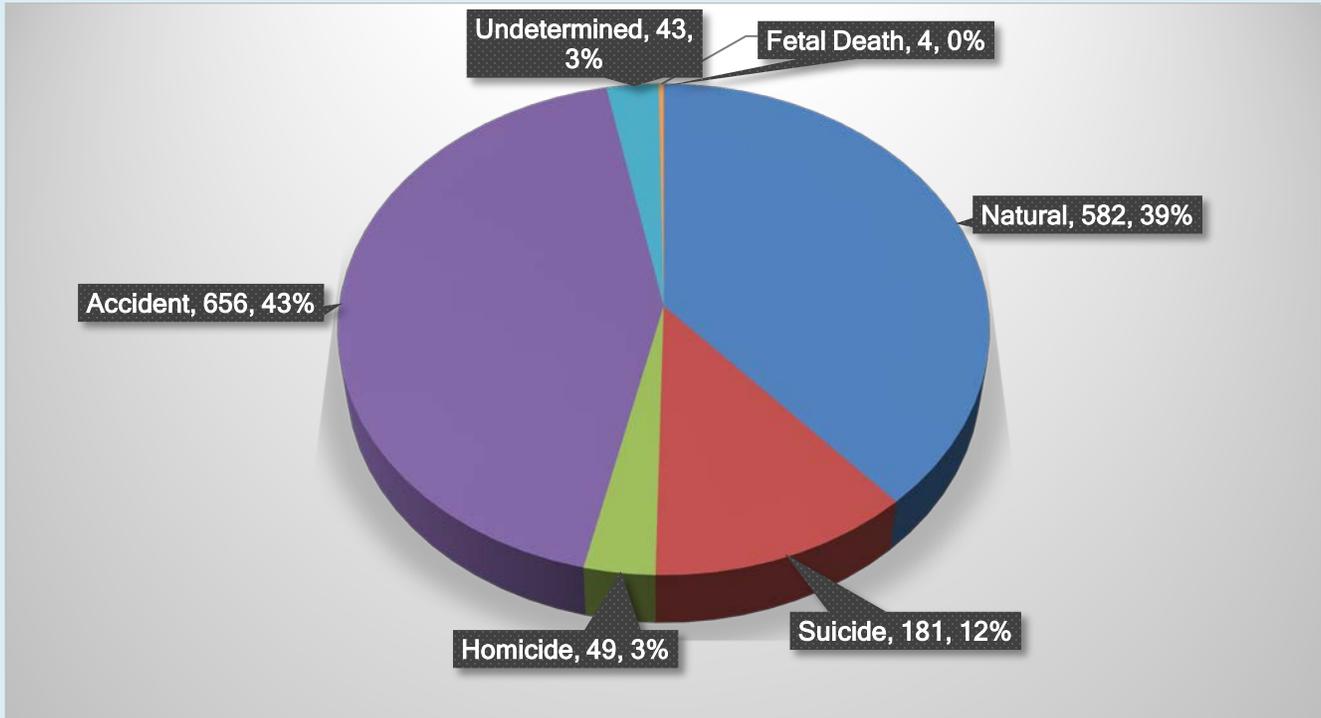
The autopsy numbers represent complete autopsies. Partial autopsies are not performed at our office. Bodies that come to our office based on jurisdiction that are not autopsied (but are visually examined) are called external examinations.



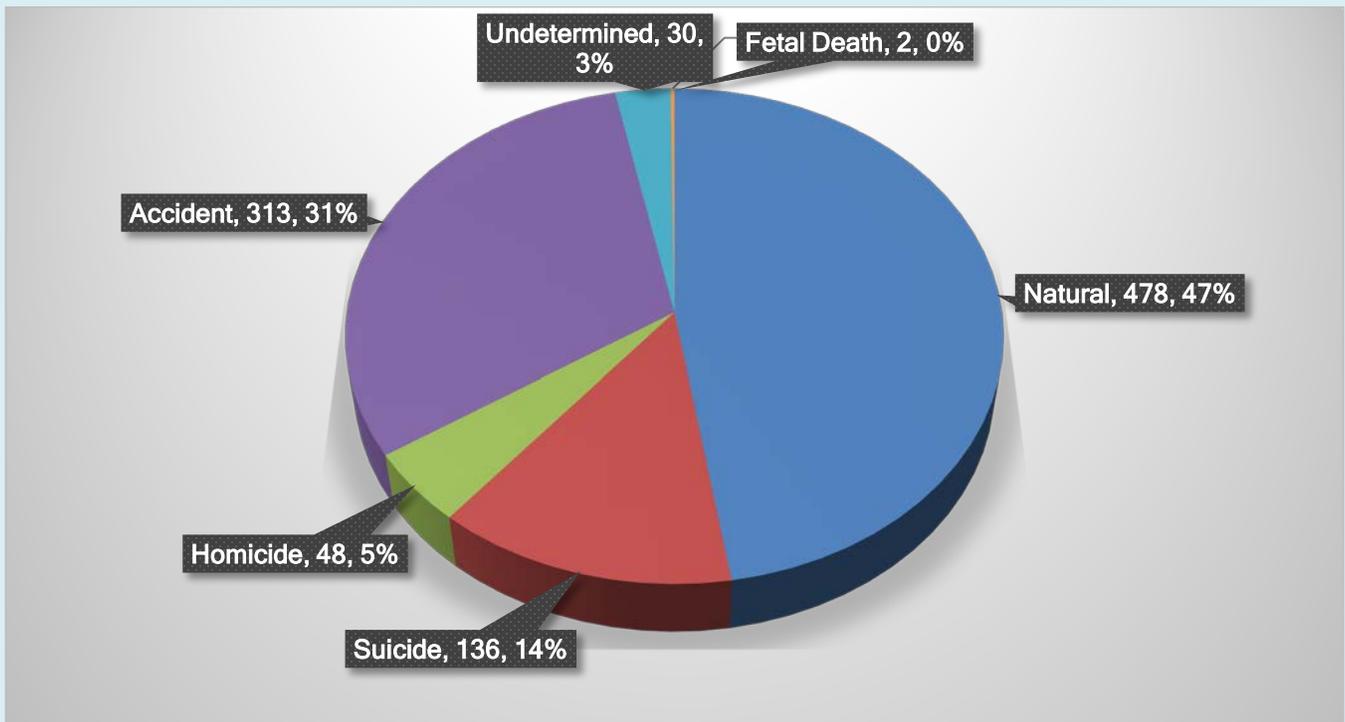
## Autopsy and External Examination Trends 2014-2019



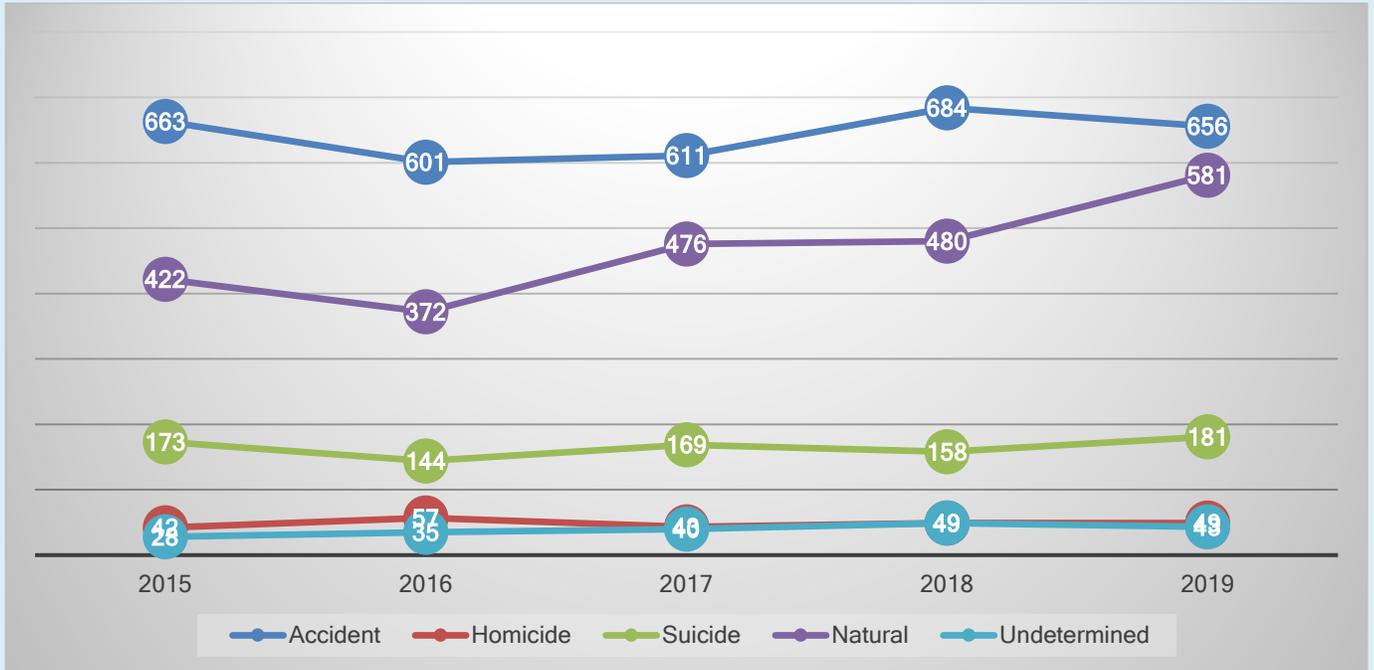
## Manner of Death in Travis County Cases – 2019



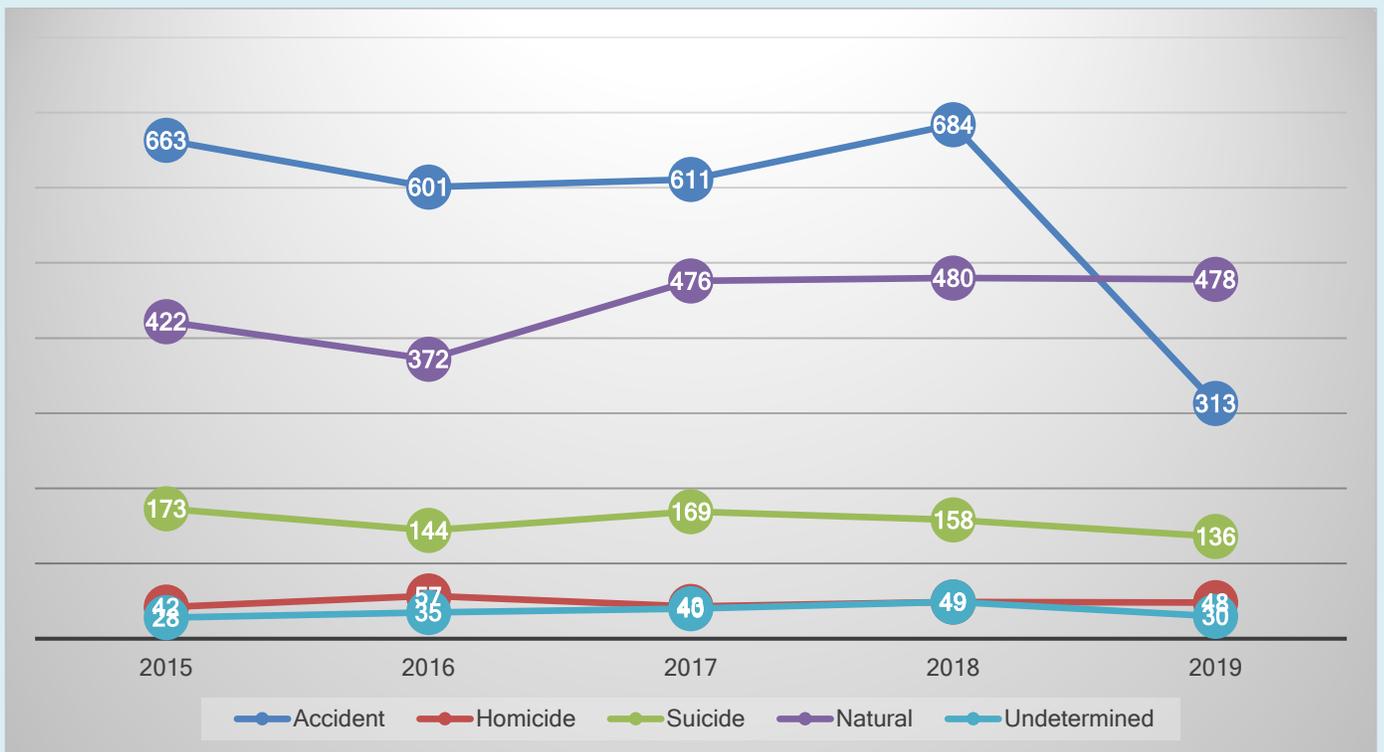
## Manner of Death in Out-of-County Cases – 2019



### Trends in Manner of Death in Travis County Cases – 2015-2019

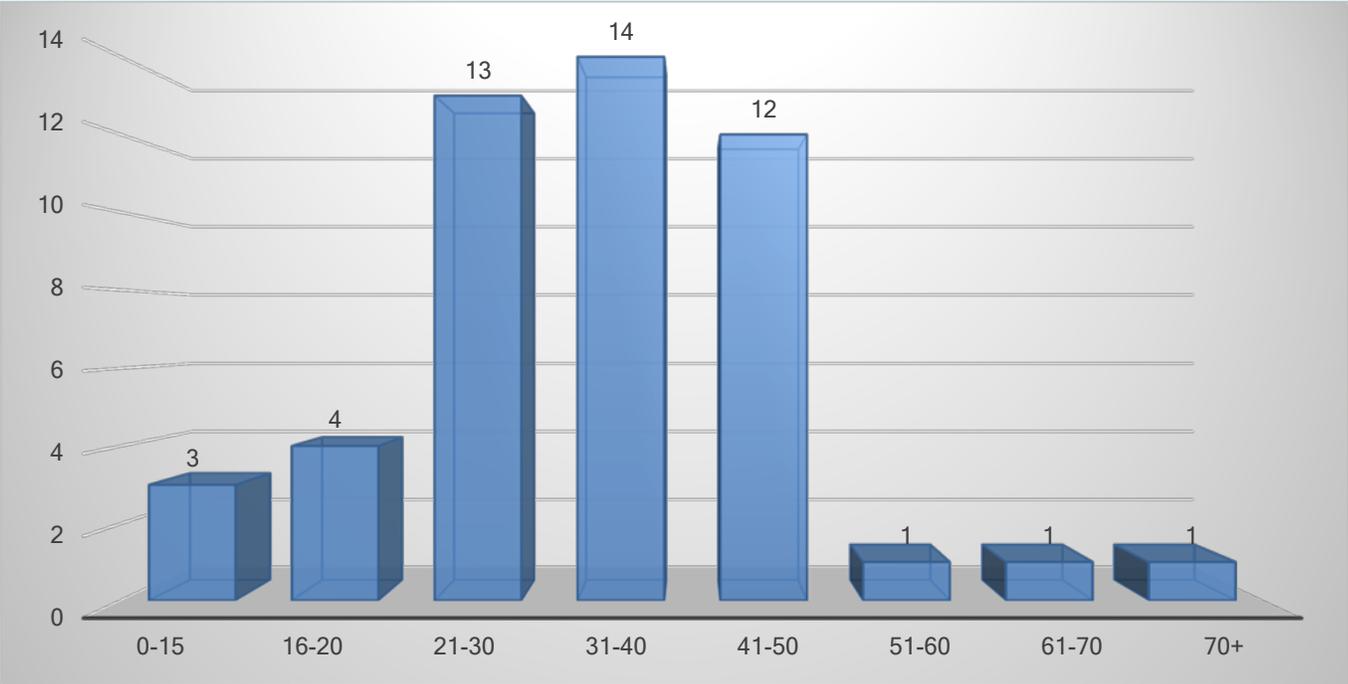


### Trends in Manner of Death in Out-of-County Cases – 2015-2019

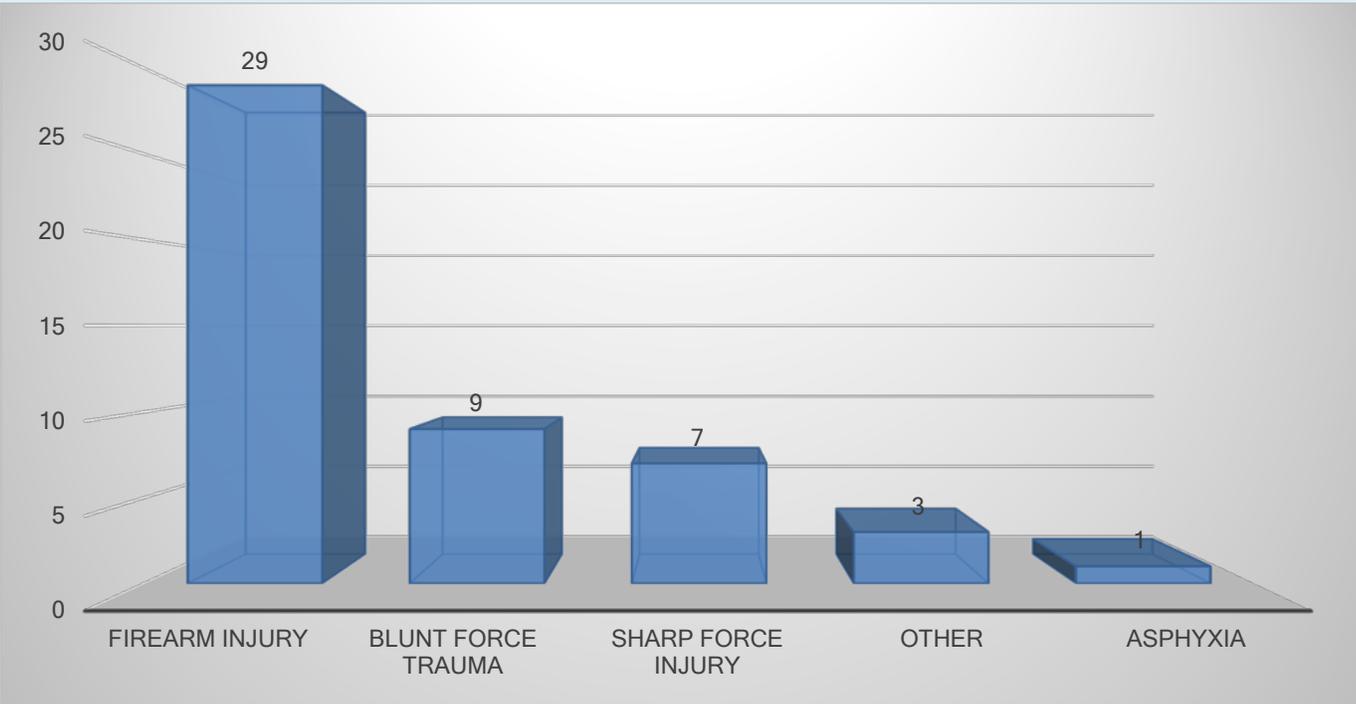


# Homicides in Travis County – 2019

## By Age

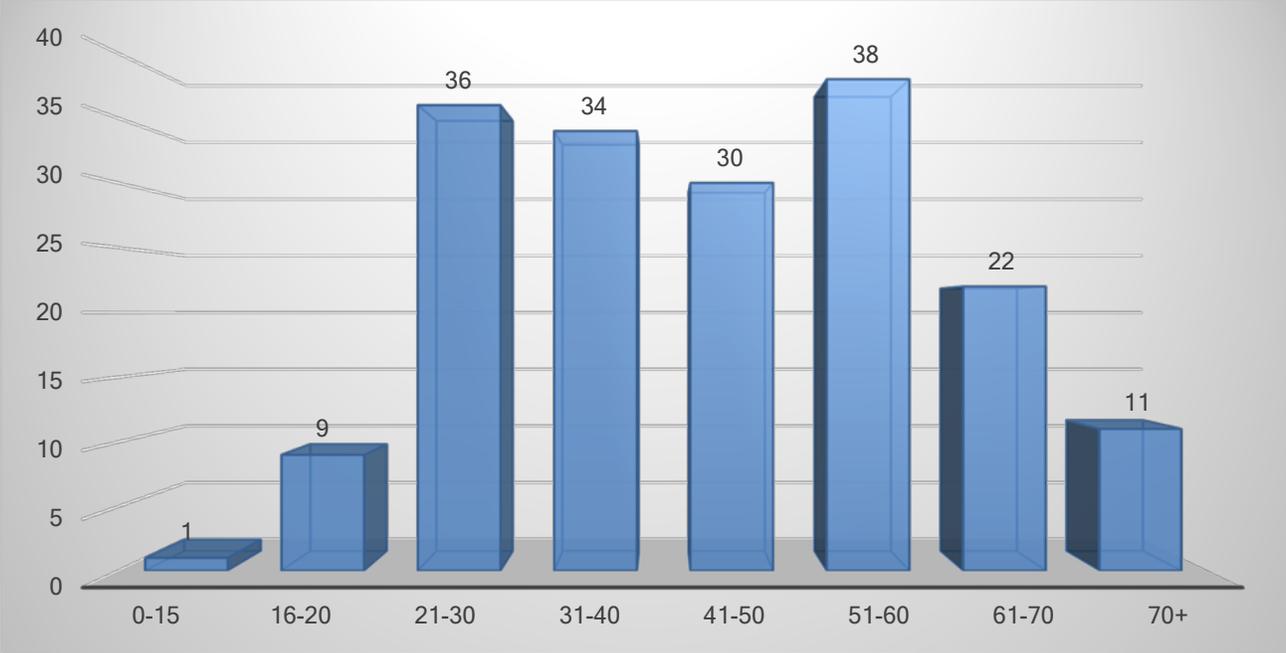


## Homicides by Injury Type

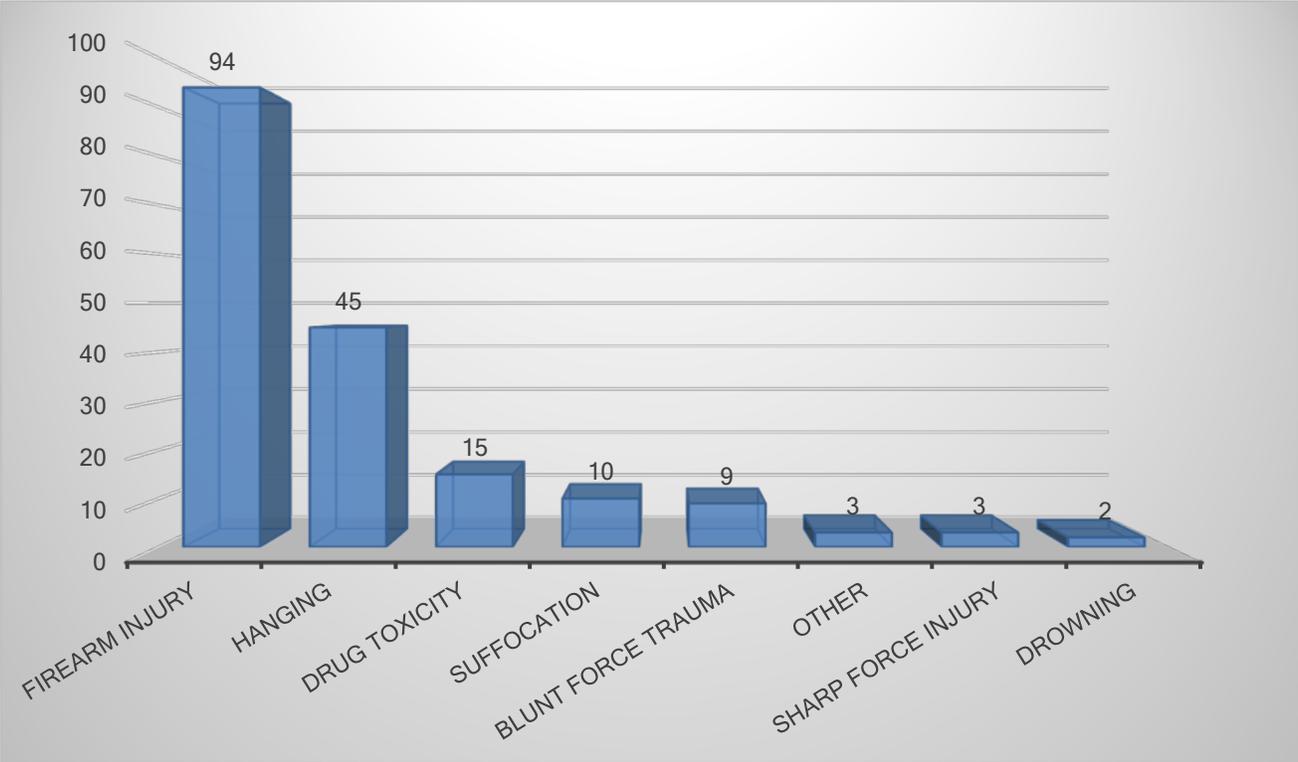


# Suicides in Travis County – 2019

## By Age

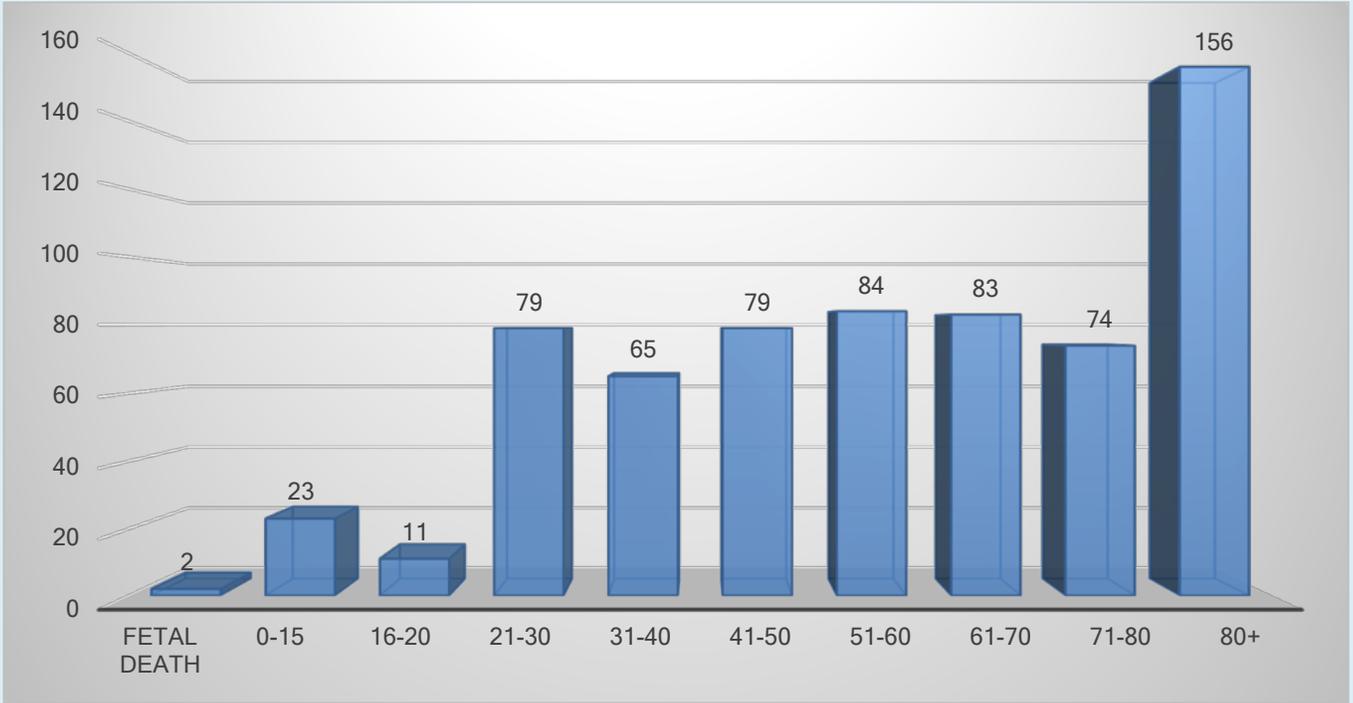


## By Injury Type

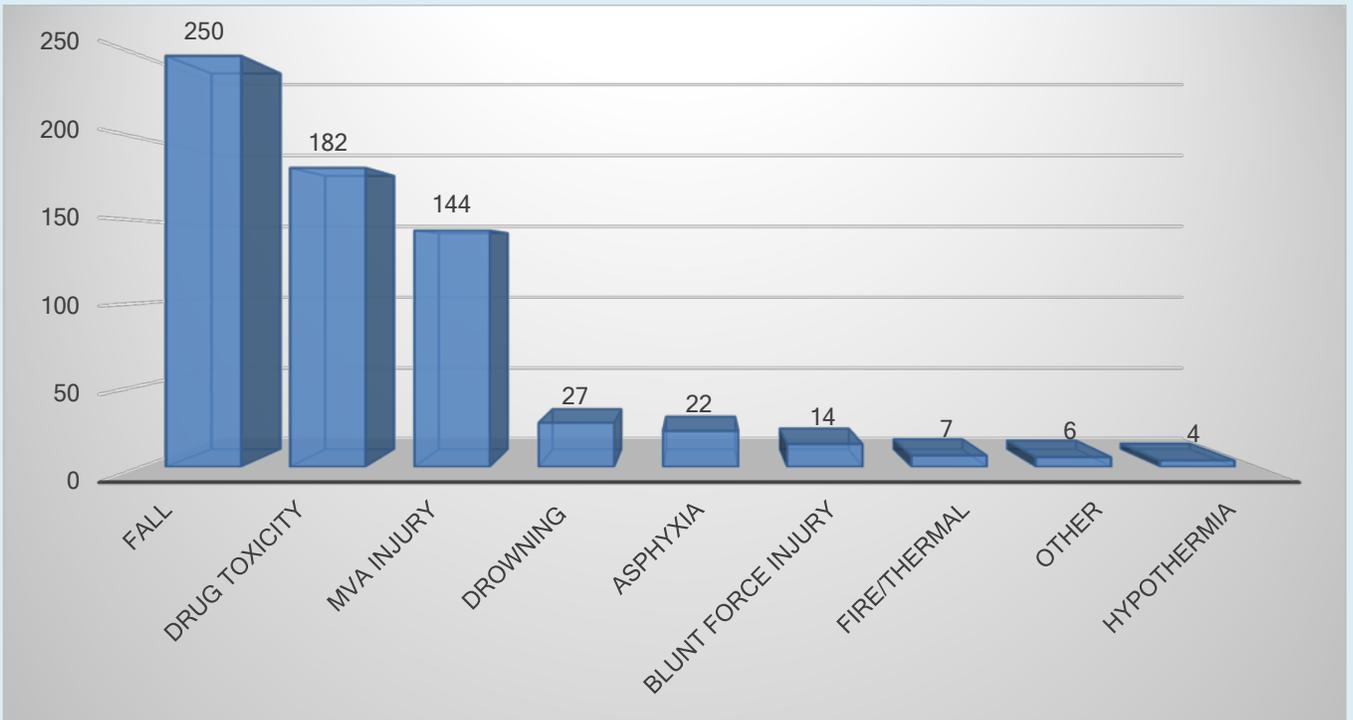


## Accidental Deaths in Travis County – 2019

### By Age

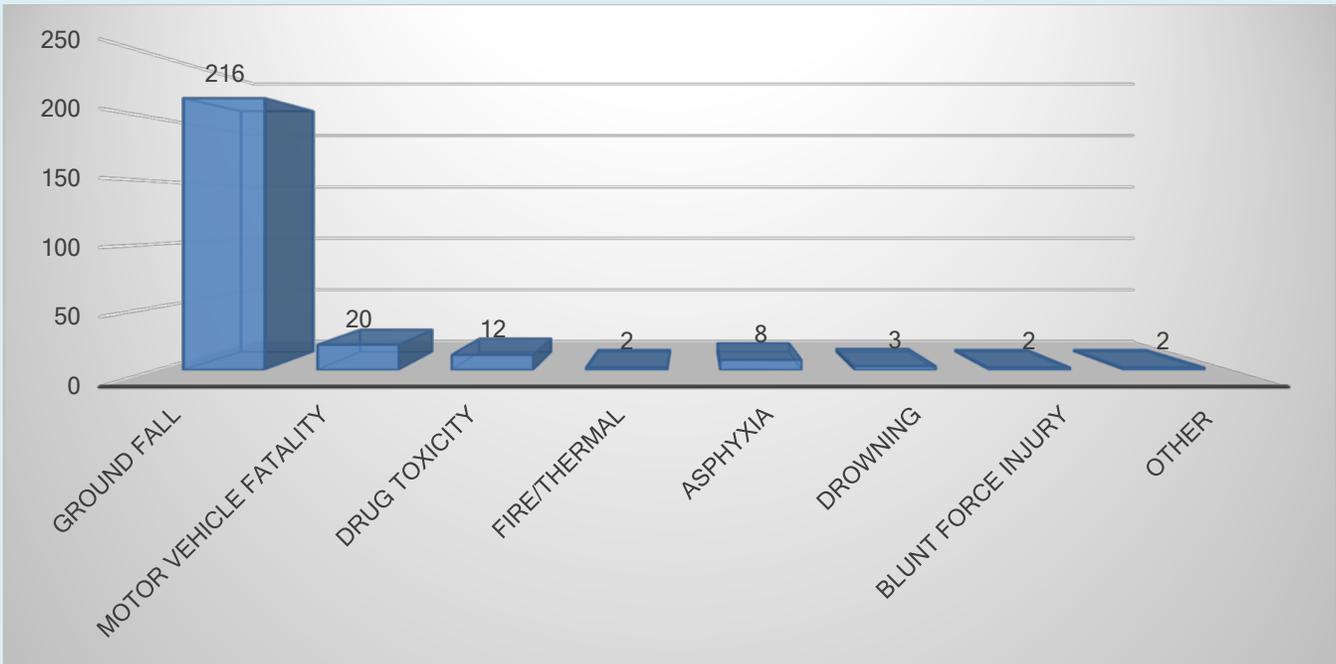


### By Injury Type

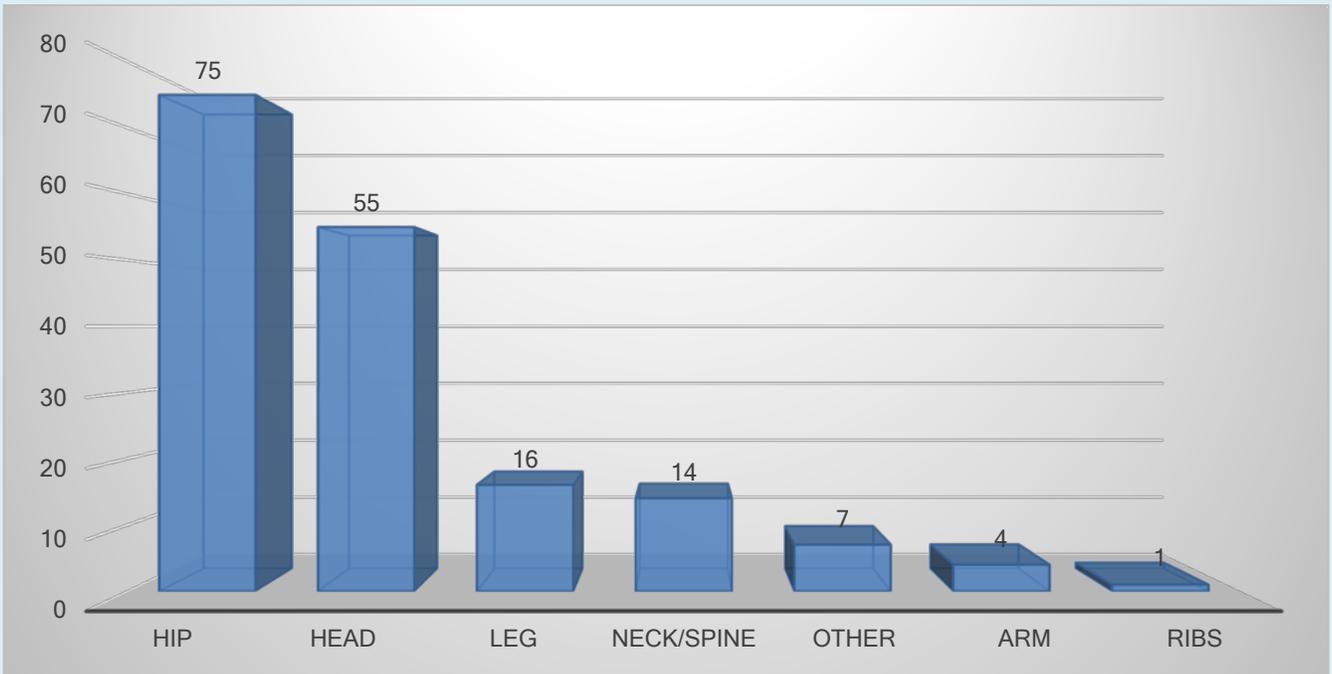


## Accidental Deaths in Travis County, >65 Years of Age – 2019

### Mechanism of Injury

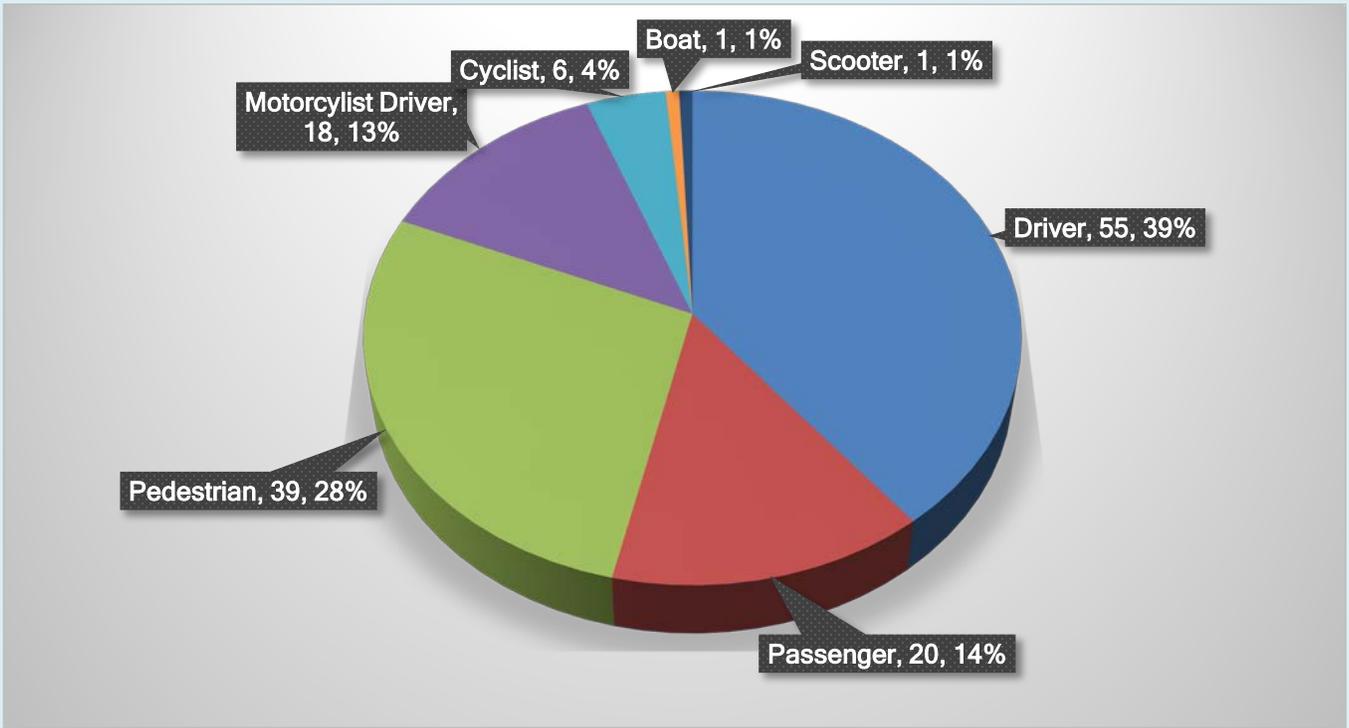


### Anatomic Location of Injury/Fracture in Fall Related Deaths, >65 Years of age – 2019

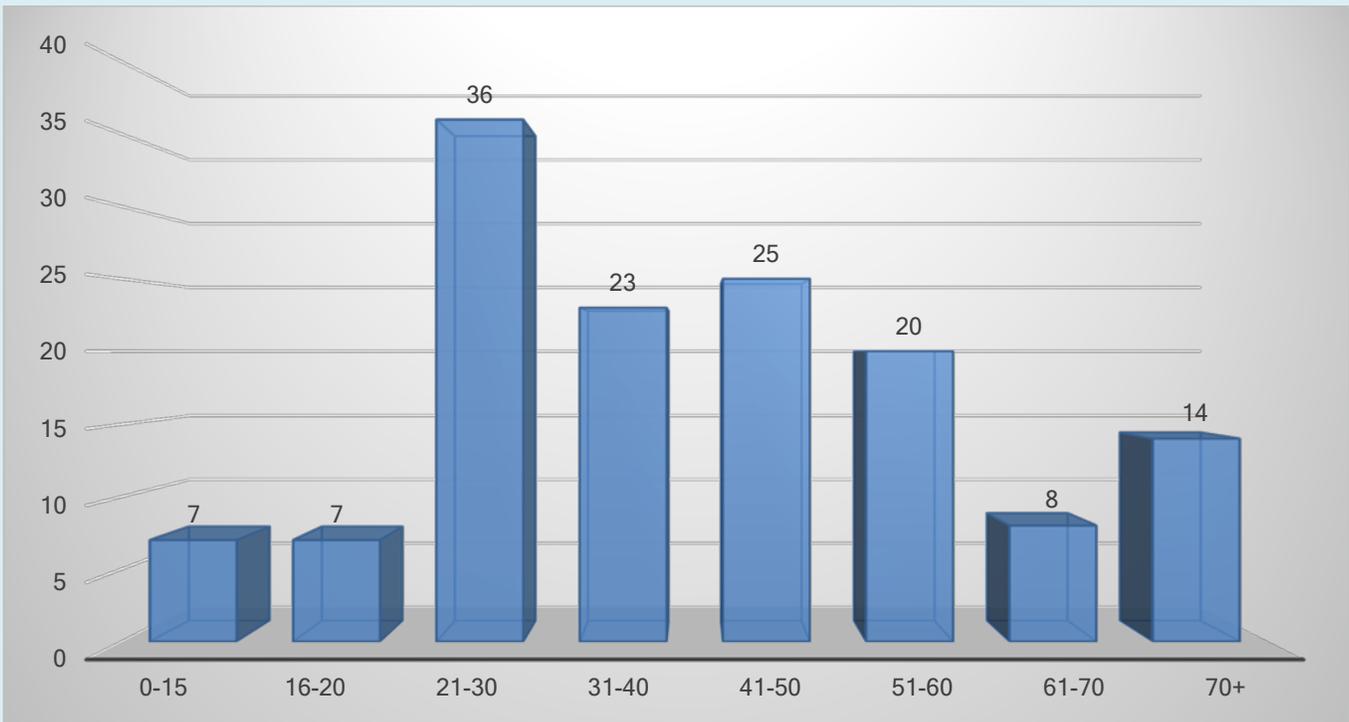


# Motor Vehicle Fatalities in Travis County – 2019

## By Type of Accident

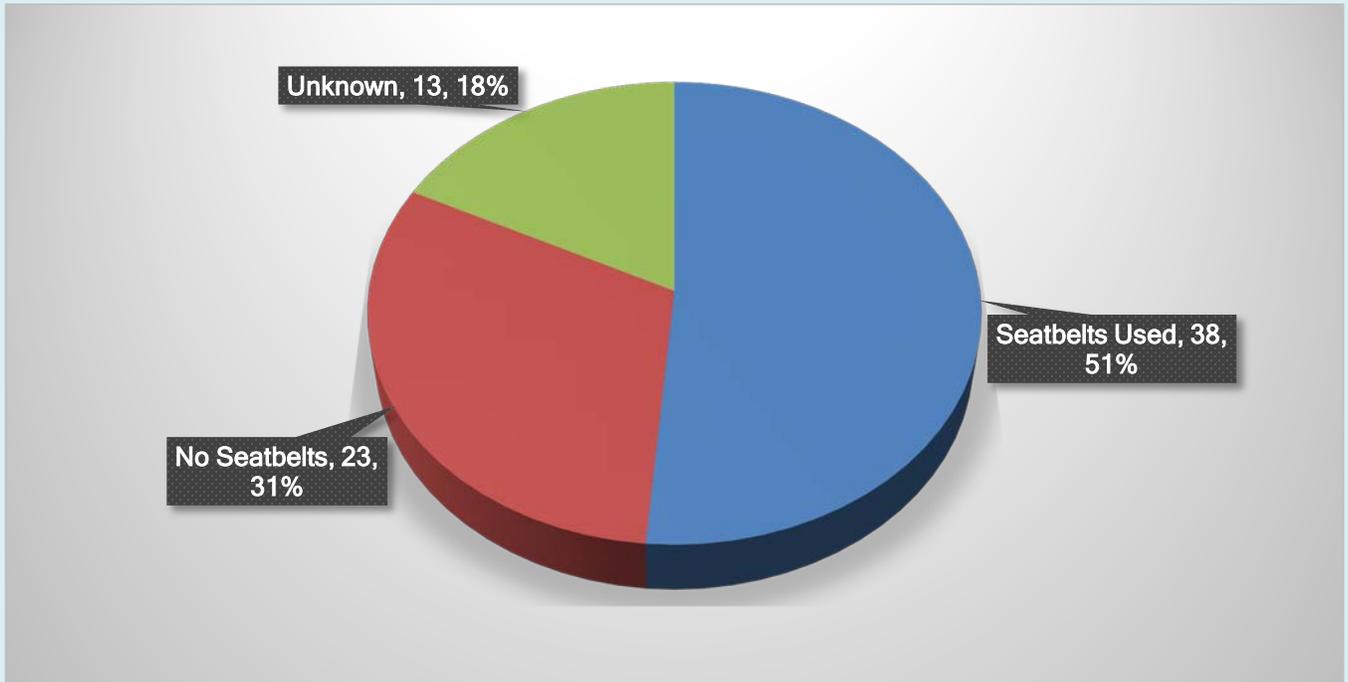


## By Age

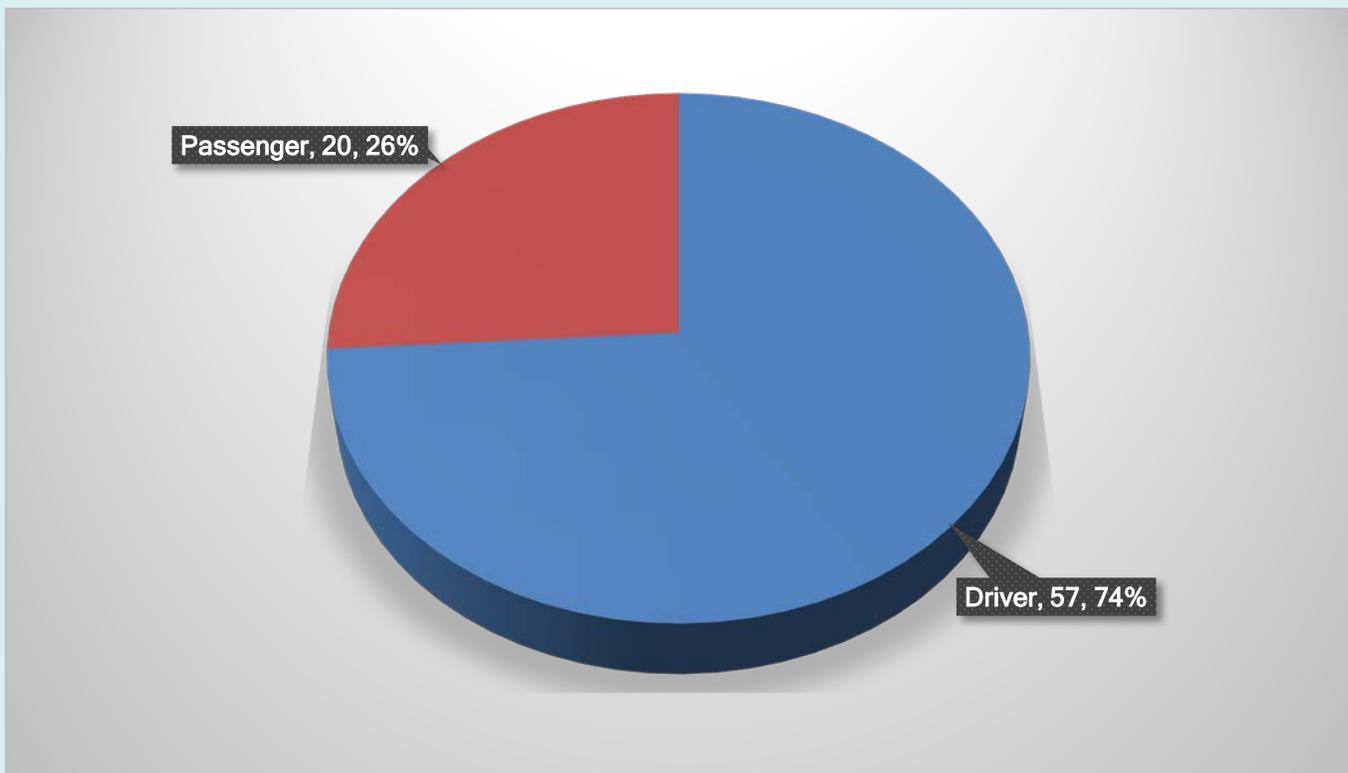


## Automobile Fatalities in Travis County – 2019

### Seatbelts in Use

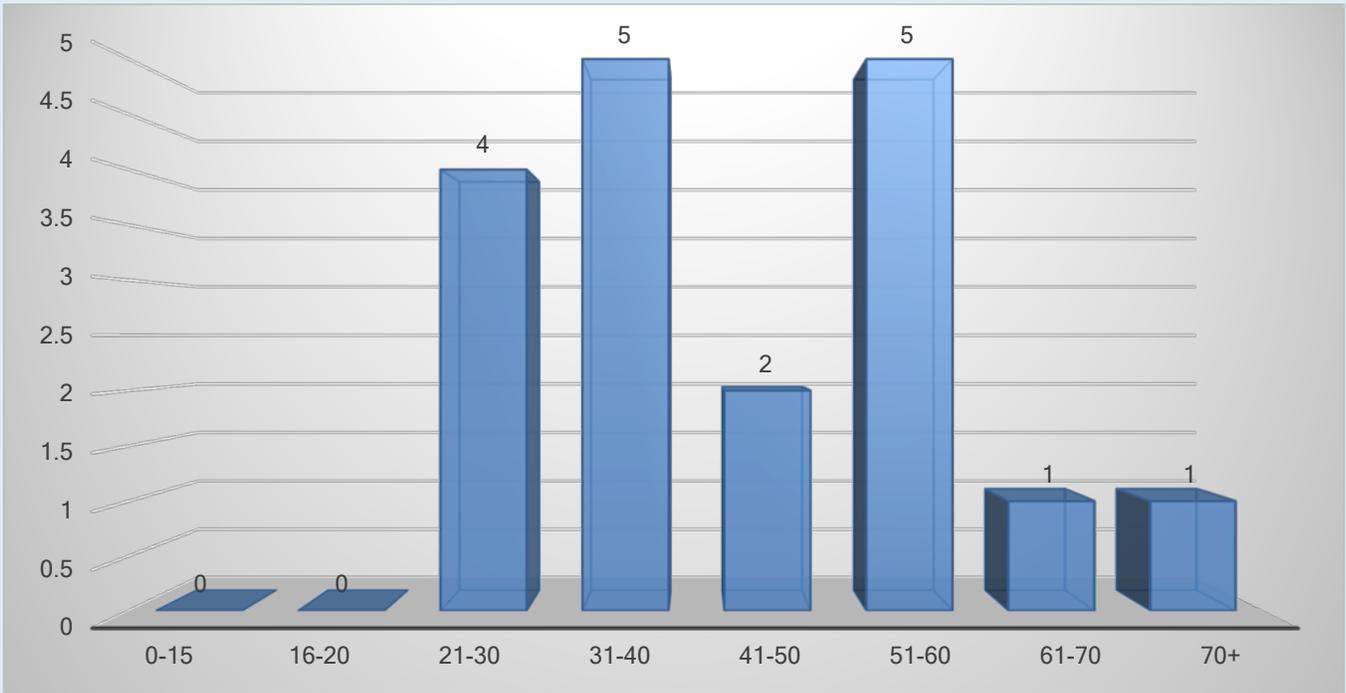


### Decedent's Location in Vehicle

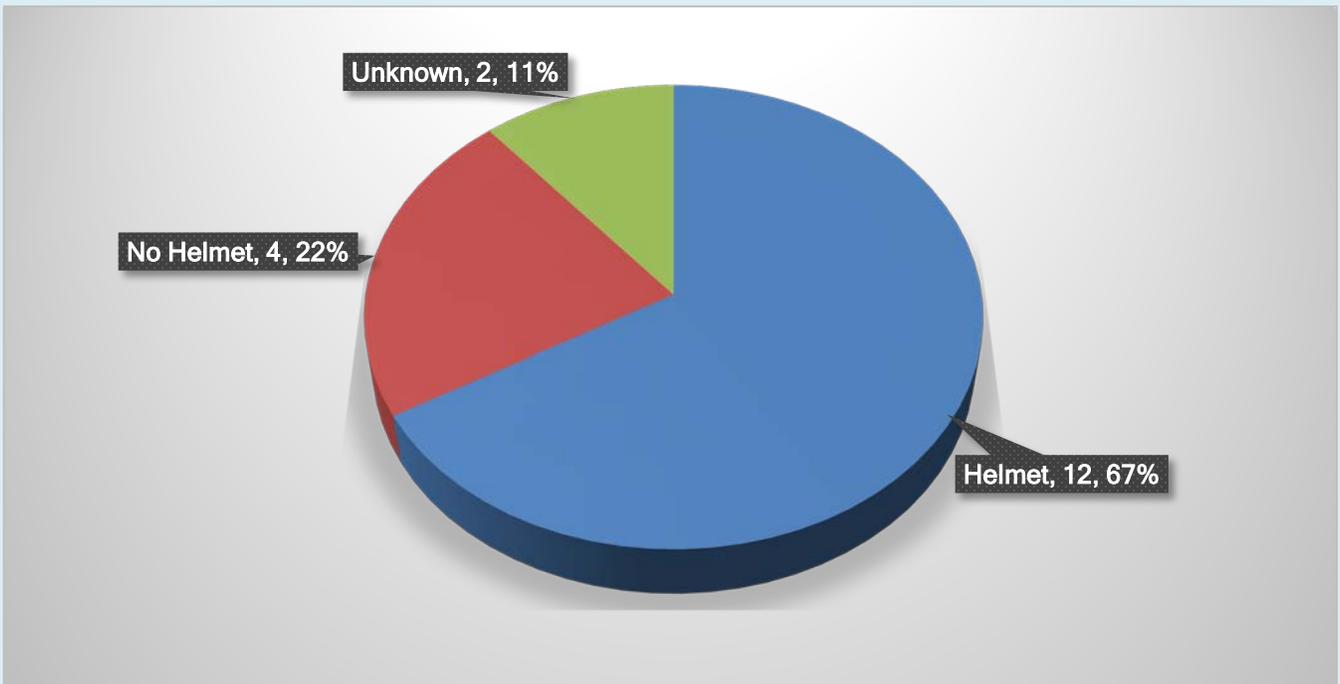


# Motorcycle Fatalities in Travis County – 2019

## By Age

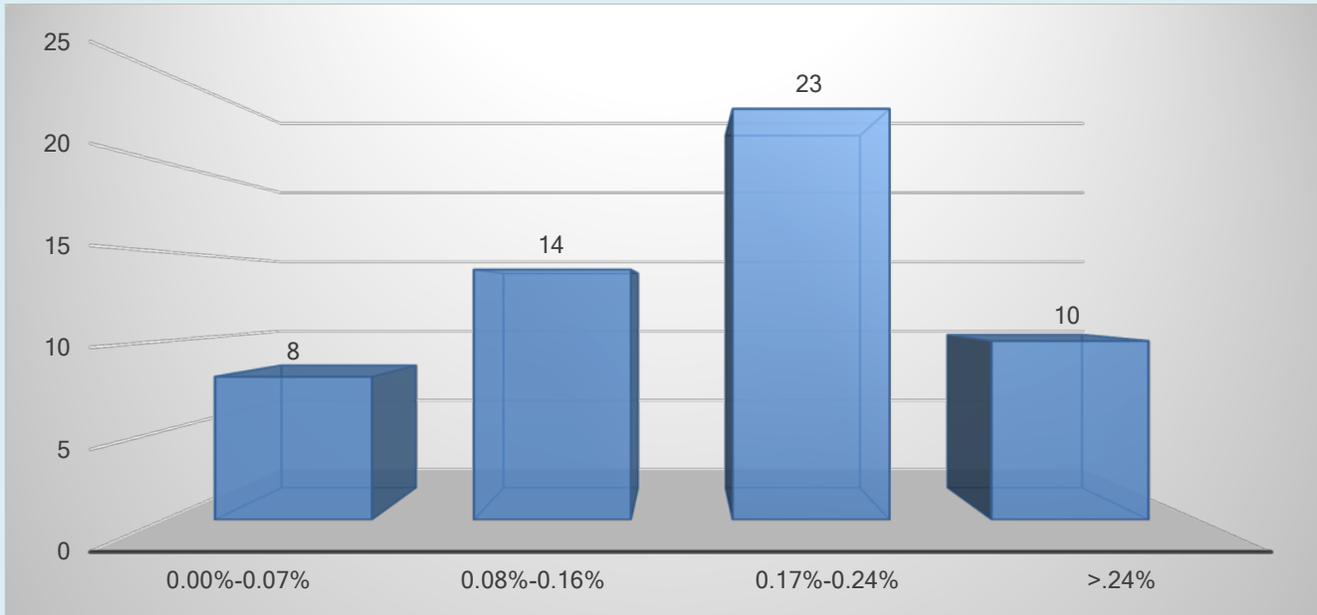


## Helmet Status

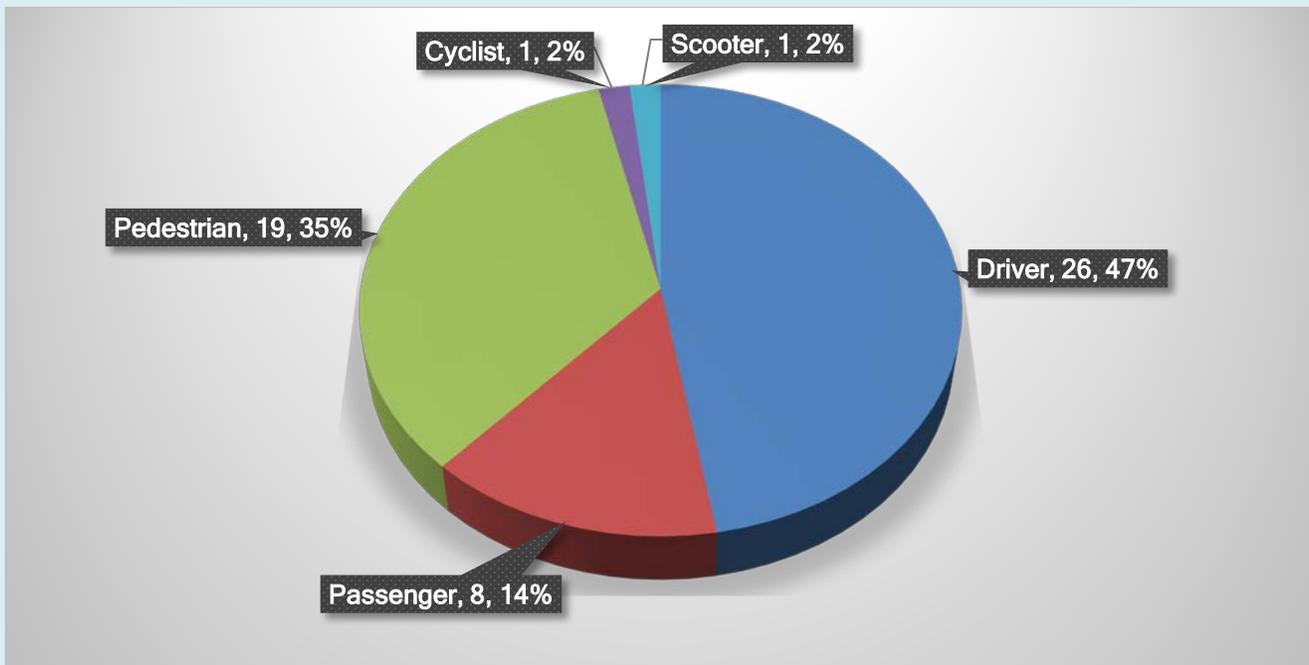


Alcohol was detected in 55 out of 140 (39%) traffic fatalities that occurred within the boundaries of Travis County in 2019. This includes drivers, passengers and pedestrians.

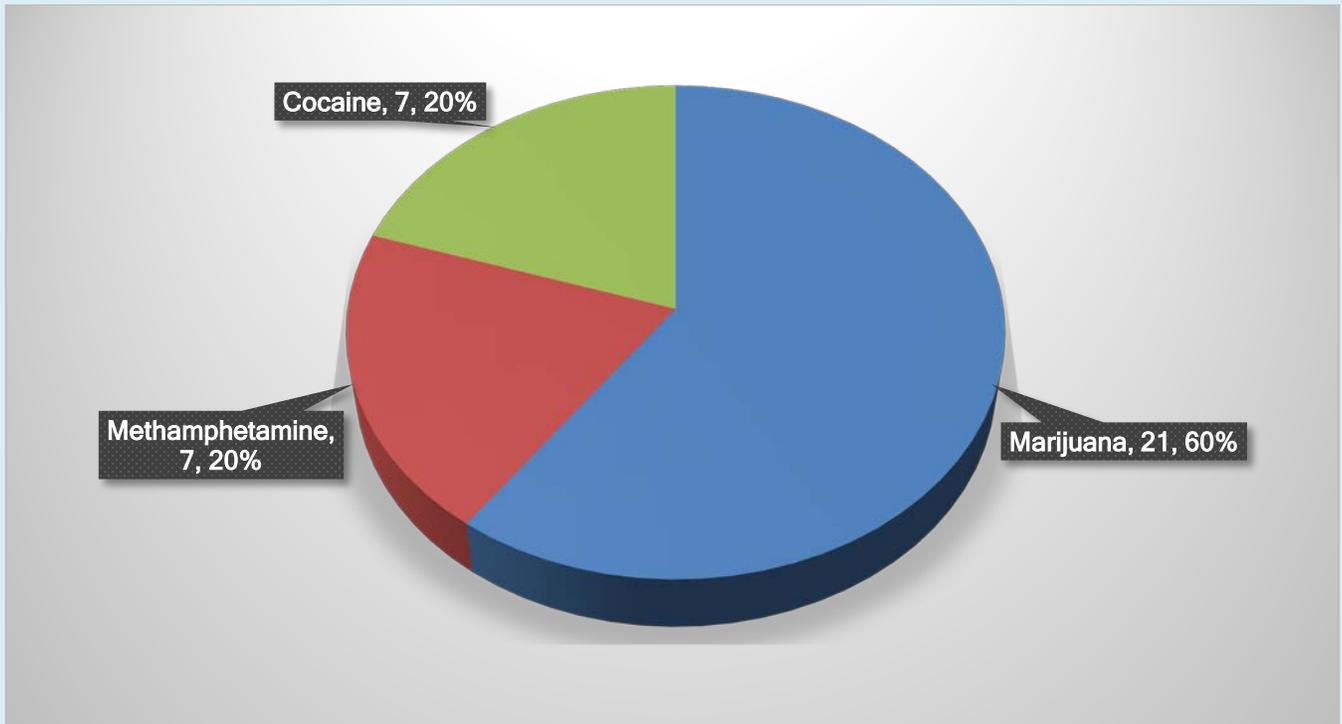
### Blood Alcohol Concentrations in Decedents when Alcohol is Detected in Traffic Fatalities in Travis County – 2019



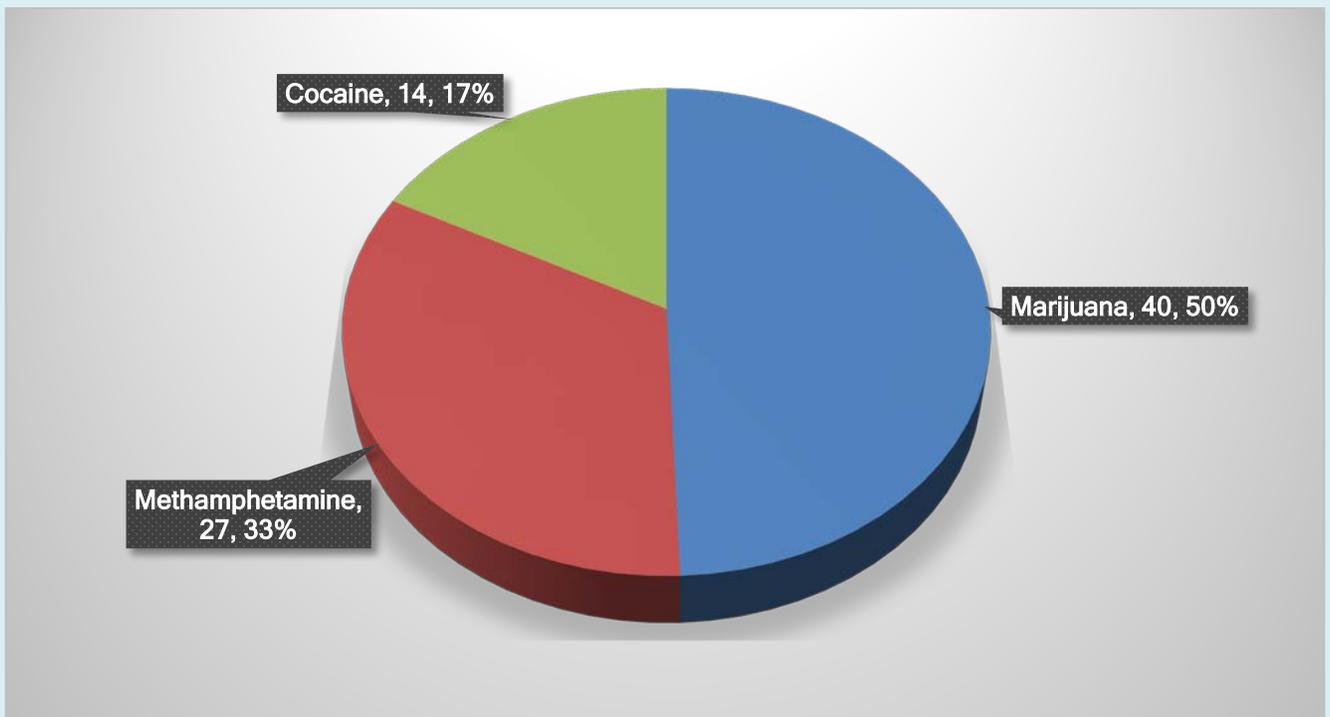
### Role of Decedent in Travis County Traffic Fatalities in Which Alcohol was Detected in Decedent



## Most Common Drugs Detected in Combination with Alcohol in Travis County Traffic Fatalities – 2019



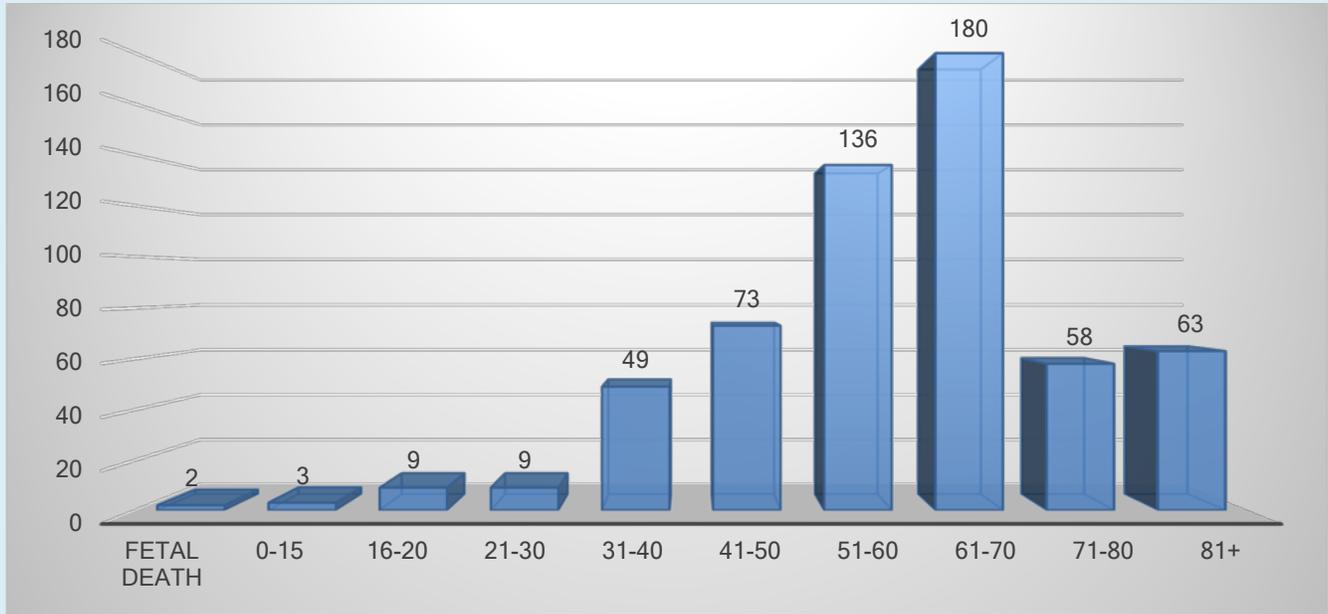
## Most Common Drugs Detected in Travis County Traffic Fatalities – 2019



## Natural Disease Deaths in Travis County – 2019

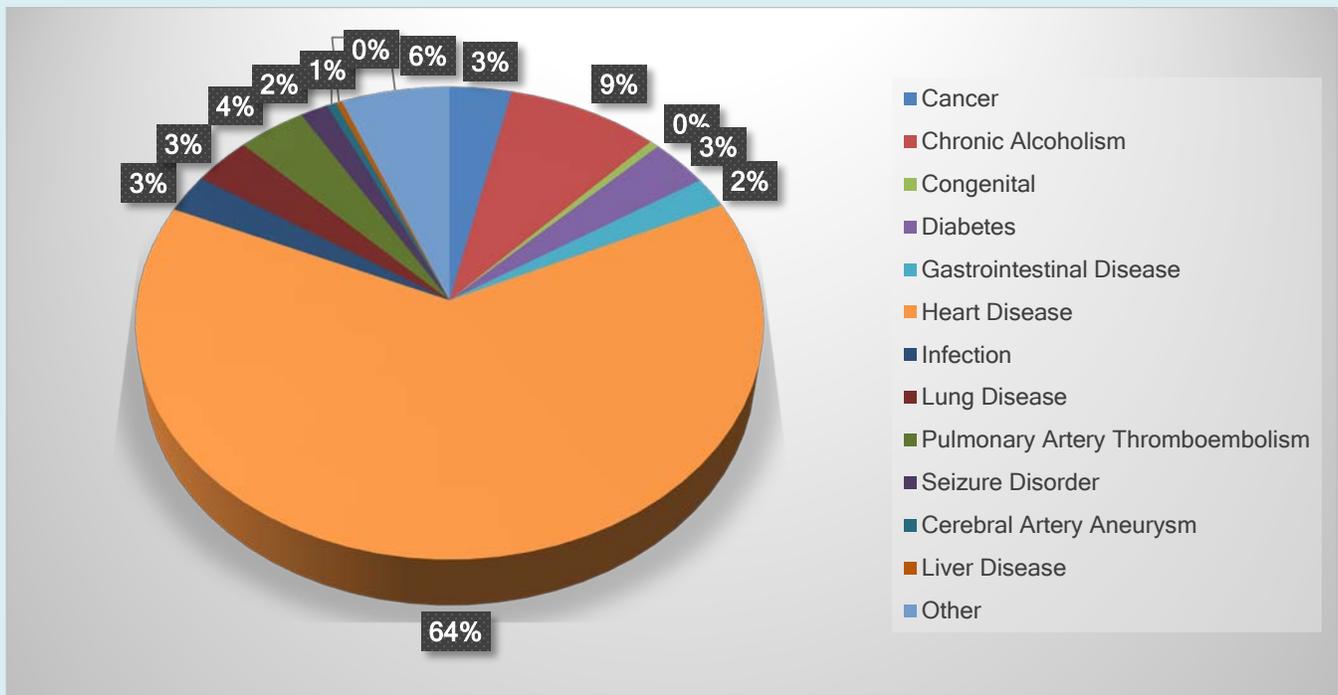
In 2019, 39% of Travis County Medical Examiner cases died of natural disease.

### By Age



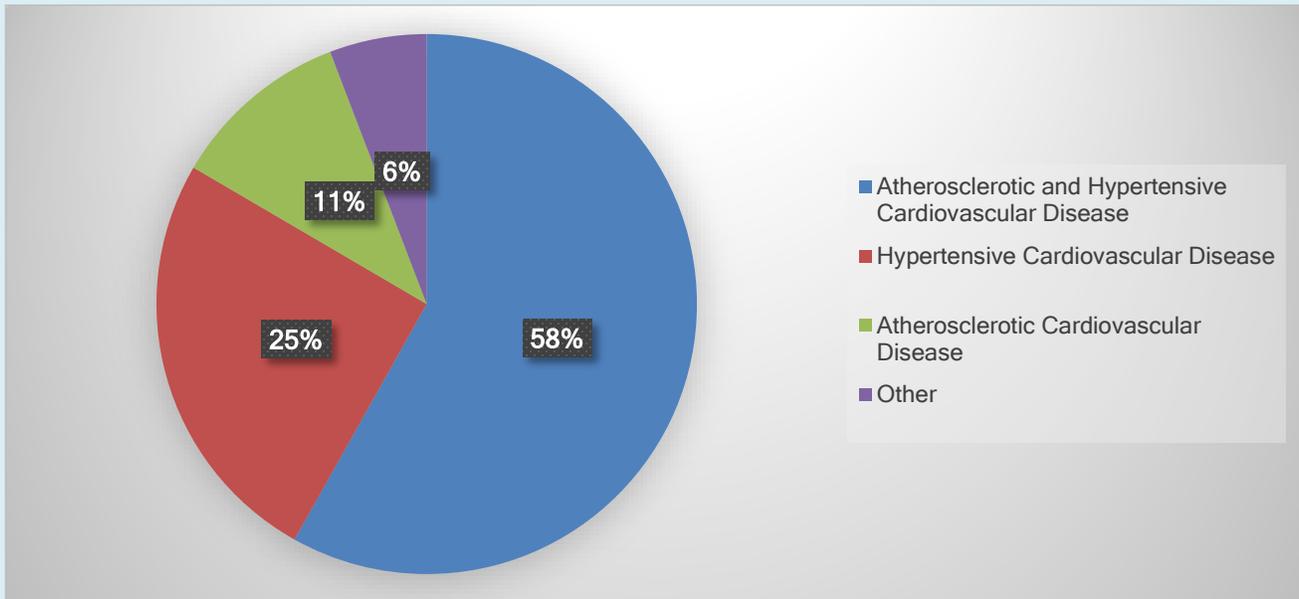
## Natural Disease Death by Disease Process in Travis County – 2019

The greatest percentage of the deaths from natural disease was 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. 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 in Travis County – 2019



## Resources for Cardiovascular Health

- High blood pressure (hypertension) - [www.mayoclinic.com/health/high-blood-pressure/DS00100](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/high-blood-pressure/DS00100)
- American Heart Association - <https://www.heart.org/>
- Cardiovascular Disease - [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-\(cvds\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-(cvds))

## Ways to Improve Cardiovascular Health

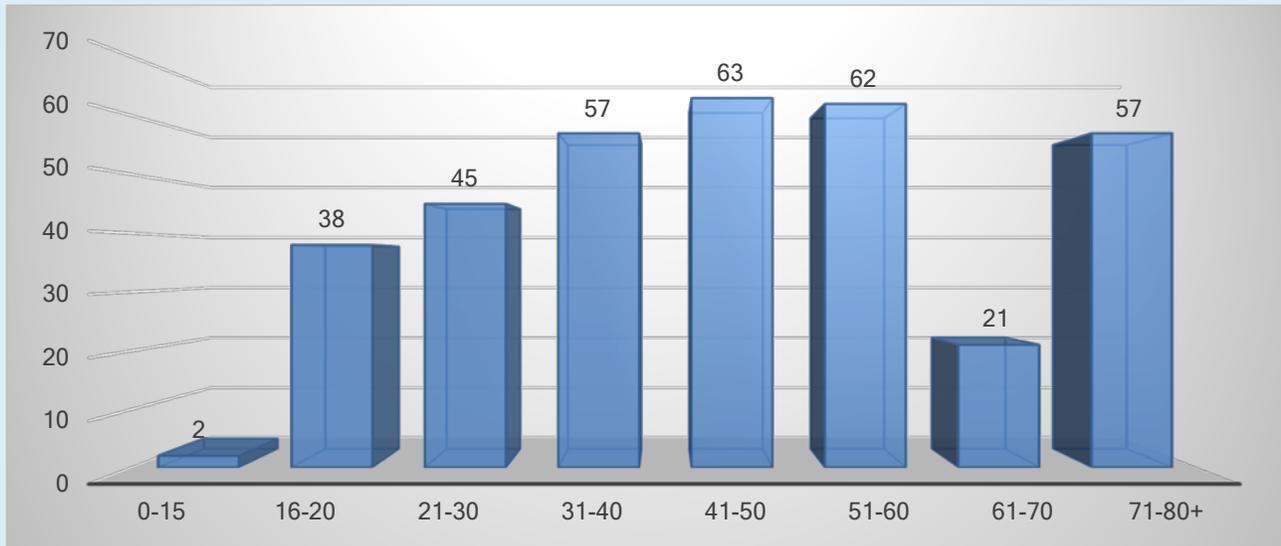
- Don't smoke or use tobacco
- Get moving: Aim for at least 30 to 60 minutes of activity daily
- Eat a heart-healthy diet
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Get good quality sleep
- Manage stress
- Get regular health screenings



## Obesity

403 of 1284 (31%) deaths of Travis County residents 18 years and older in 2019 that were examined at TCME were obese. Obesity is defined as body mass index  $>30$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>.

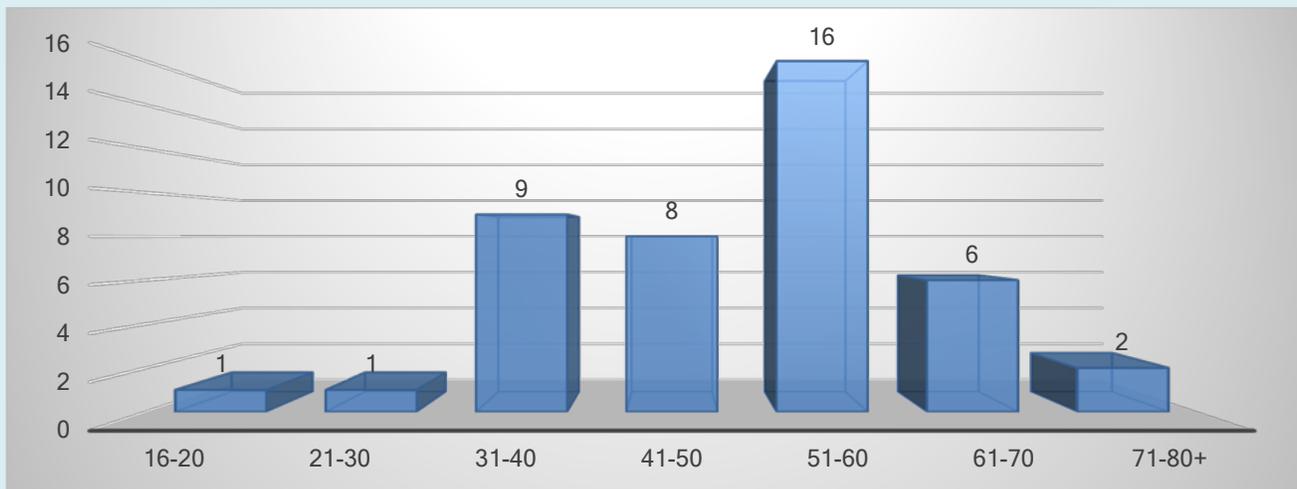
### Age of Decedents Determined to be Obese in Travis County – 2019



## Deaths Related to Obesity

40 of 210 (19%) natural deaths of Travis County residents 18 years and older in 2019 that were examined at TCME were obesity related.

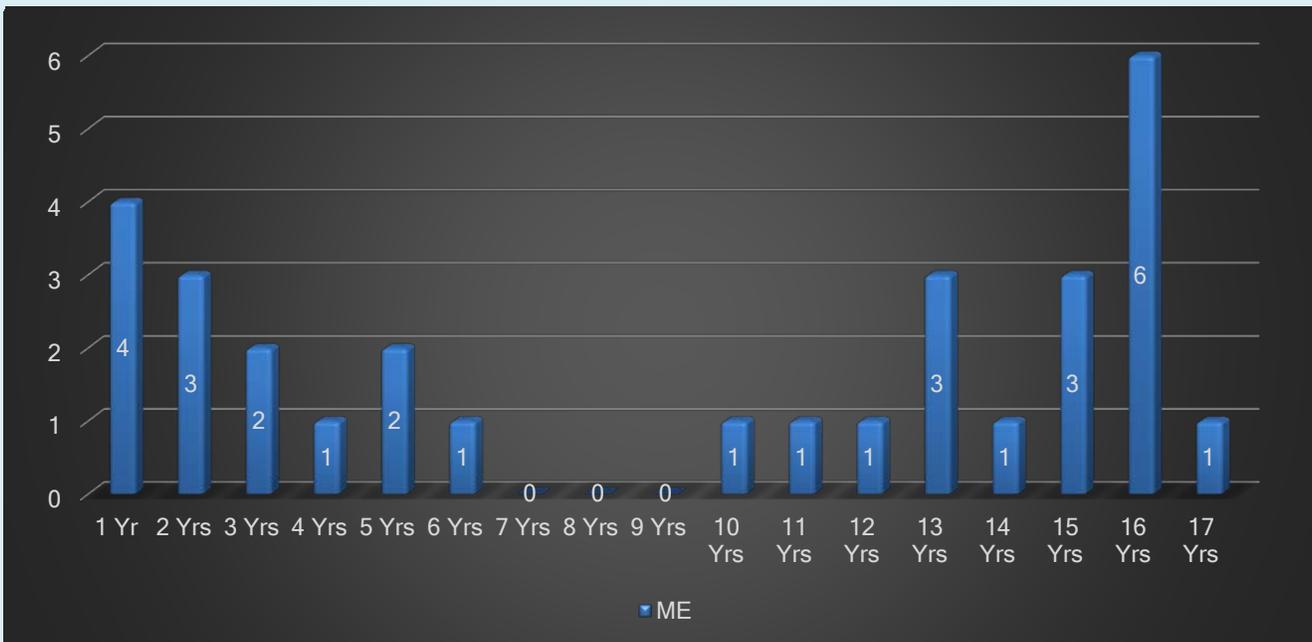
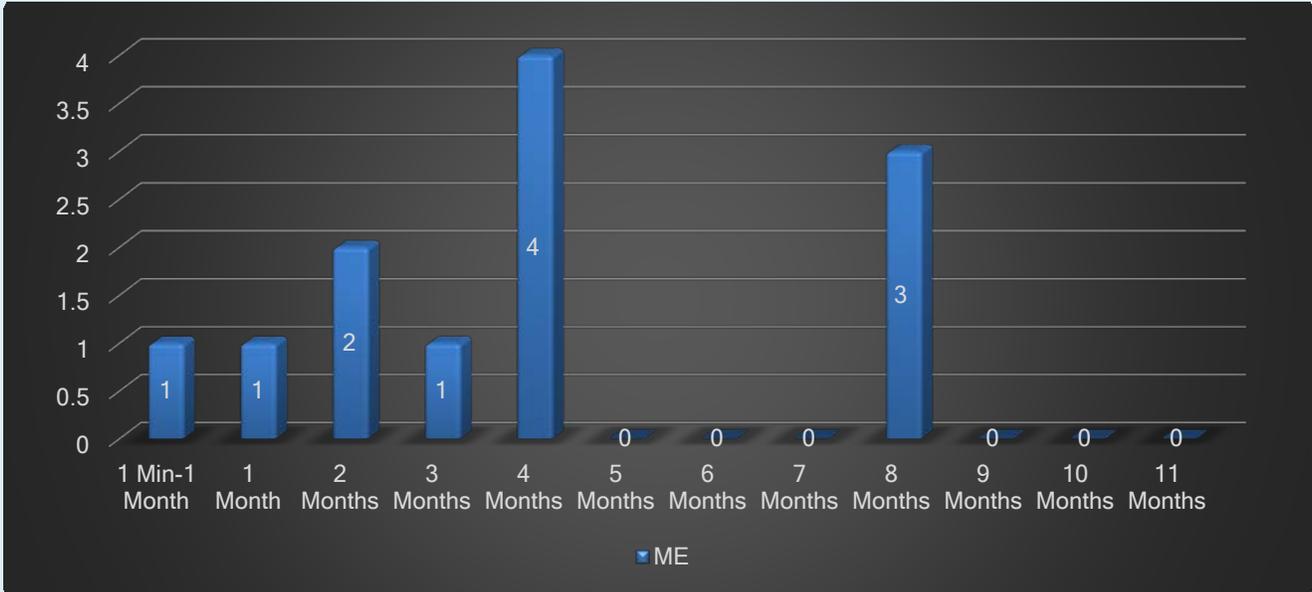
### Age of Decedents Whose Deaths were Obesity-Related in Travis County – 2019



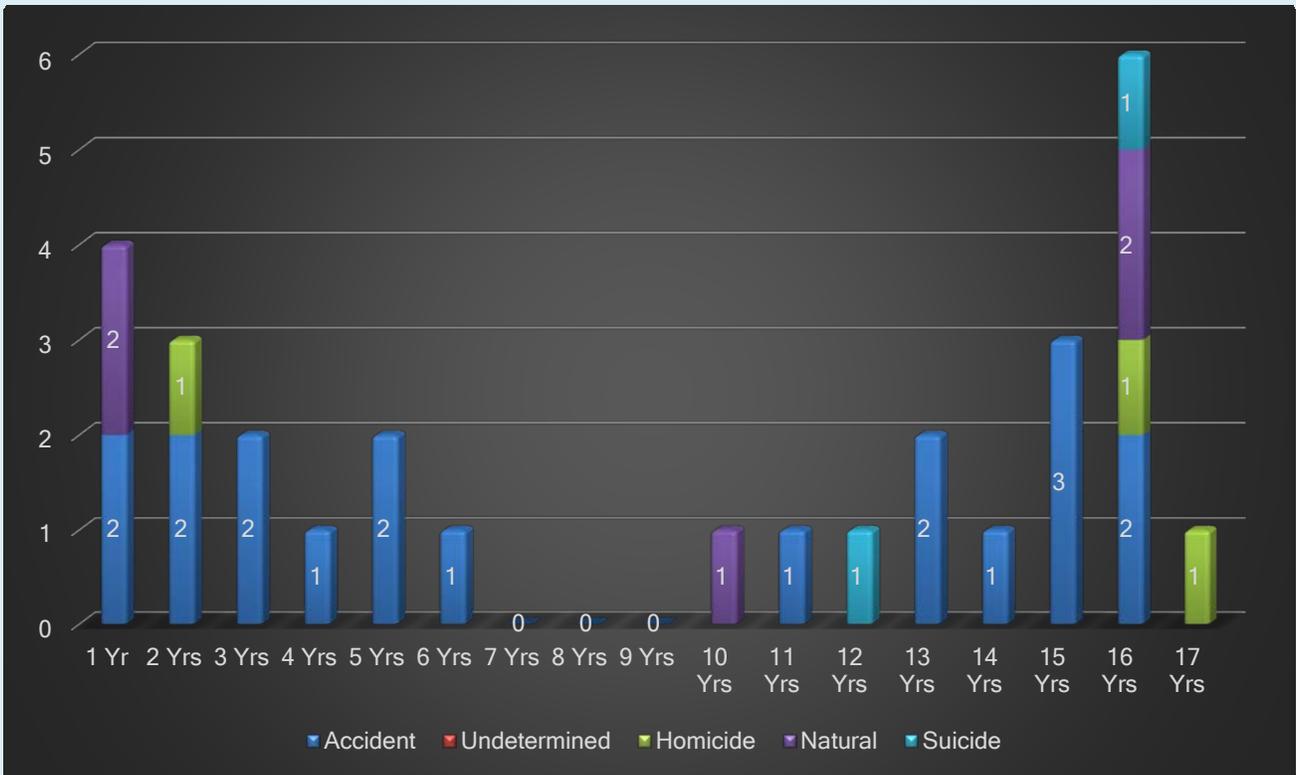
## Child Fatalities in Travis County – 2019

In 2019, 42 child fatalities (1 minute through 17 years of age) in Travis County were reported to TCME.

### Ages at Death in Child Fatalities

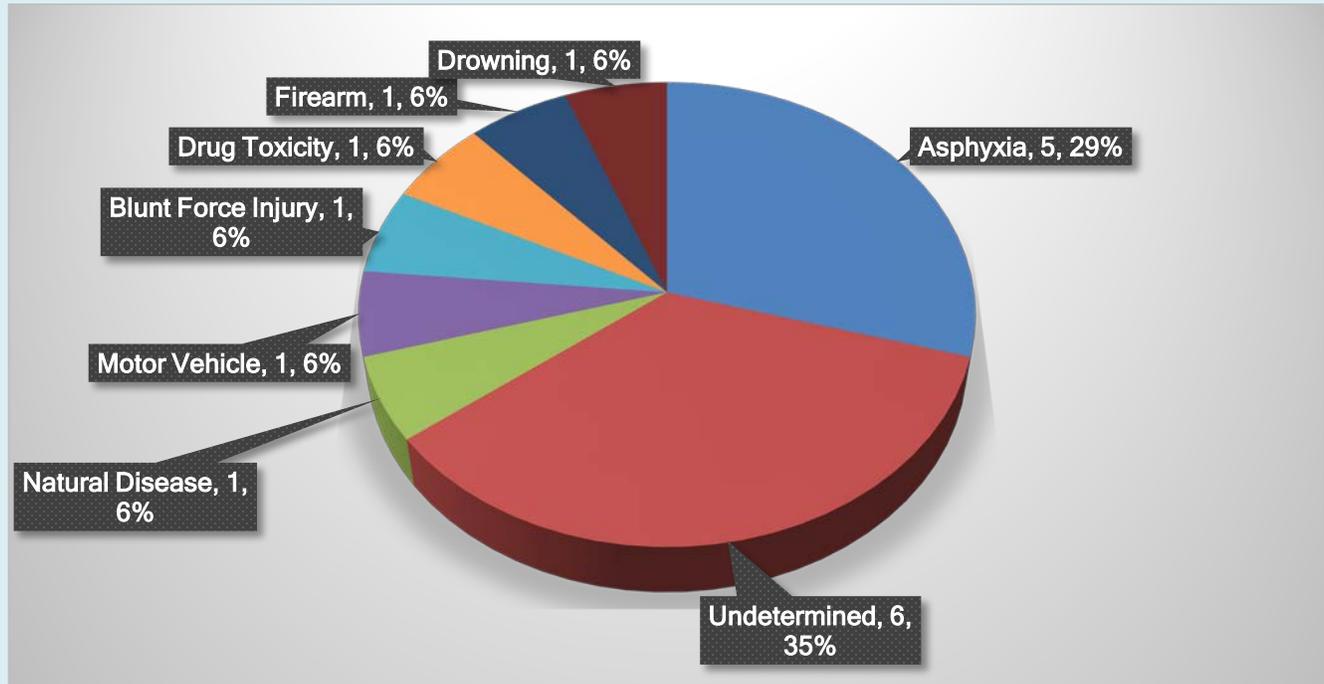


### Manner of Death in Child Fatalities in Travis County – 2019



## Infant Deaths (1 Day to 1 Year of Age) – Travis County – 2019

### Cause of Death



The majority of asphyxial causes of death 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.

## IS YOUR BABY SLEEPING SAFELY?

**Follow these simple guidelines to ensure Safer Sleep:**

- No Pillow
- No Blanket
- No Bumper Pads
- No Stuffed Toys

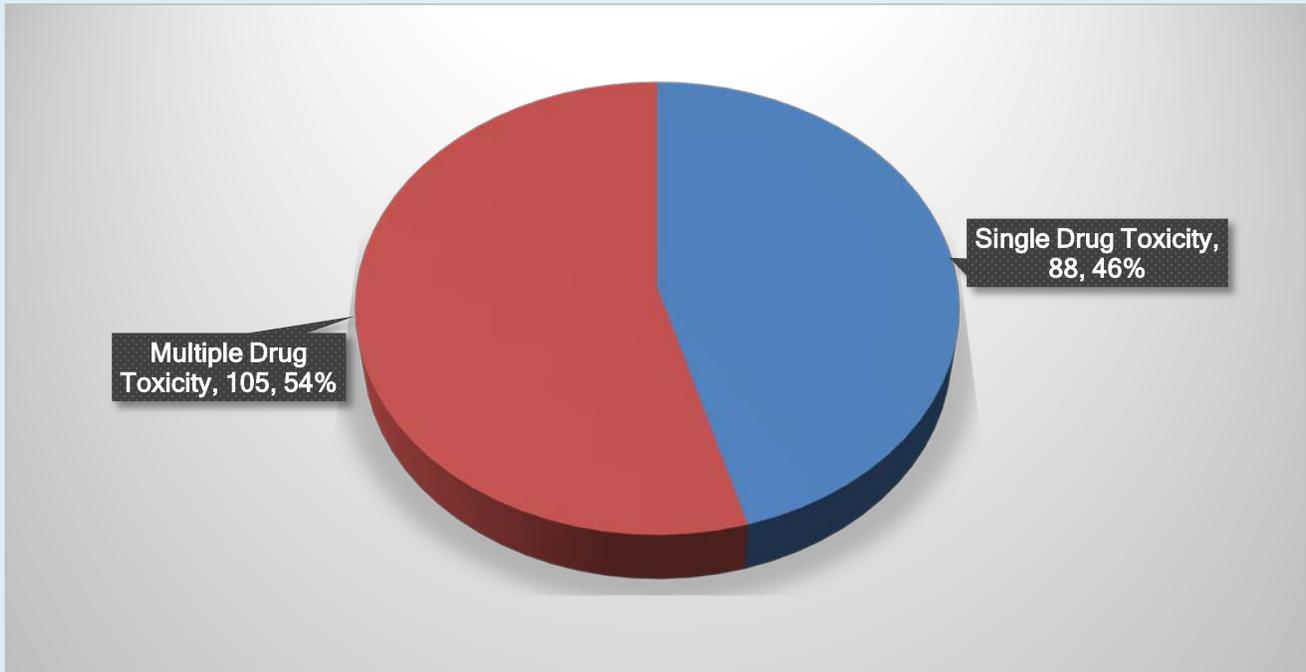
Infants can easily suffocate and die in soft bedding material. Because of this, infants should not be placed to sleep on adult beds, couches, futons, waterbeds, etc.

Infants should sleep alone, because they may be rolled over upon (overlaid) by a bedsharing adult or sibling. If on a couch, an infant may slip into the space between the person lying on the couch and the backrest of the couch, and become wedged, preventing them from breathing adequately. They may get their face wedged between two cushions or into a soft cushion. Cribs should not contain pillows, thick blankets or comforters, plush materials, stuffed toys, or anything else that a baby could suffocate on. Bumper pads should not be used, because an infant can wedge their face between the bumper pad and the mattress.

Most of the infant accidental deaths that occur in Travis County are due to infants suffocating in unsafe sleep environments. These deaths are preventable. Infants should always be placed to sleep alone, on their back, in a safety-approved crib, with a tight-fitting sheet on a firm mattress, without any extra pillows, stuffed animals, or other potentially hazardous items. Infants should sleep in the same room as adults, but in their own safe crib.

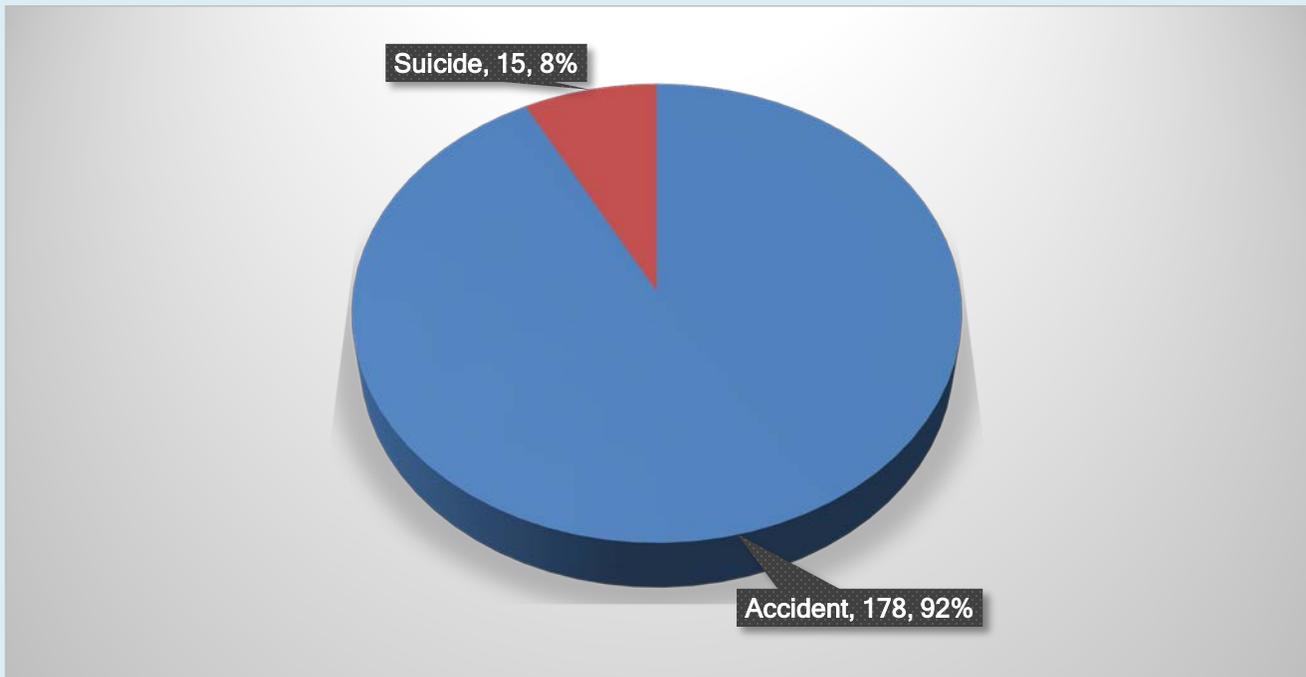
## Types of Drug-Related Deaths in Travis County – 2019

### Multiple Drug Versus Single Drug Toxicity



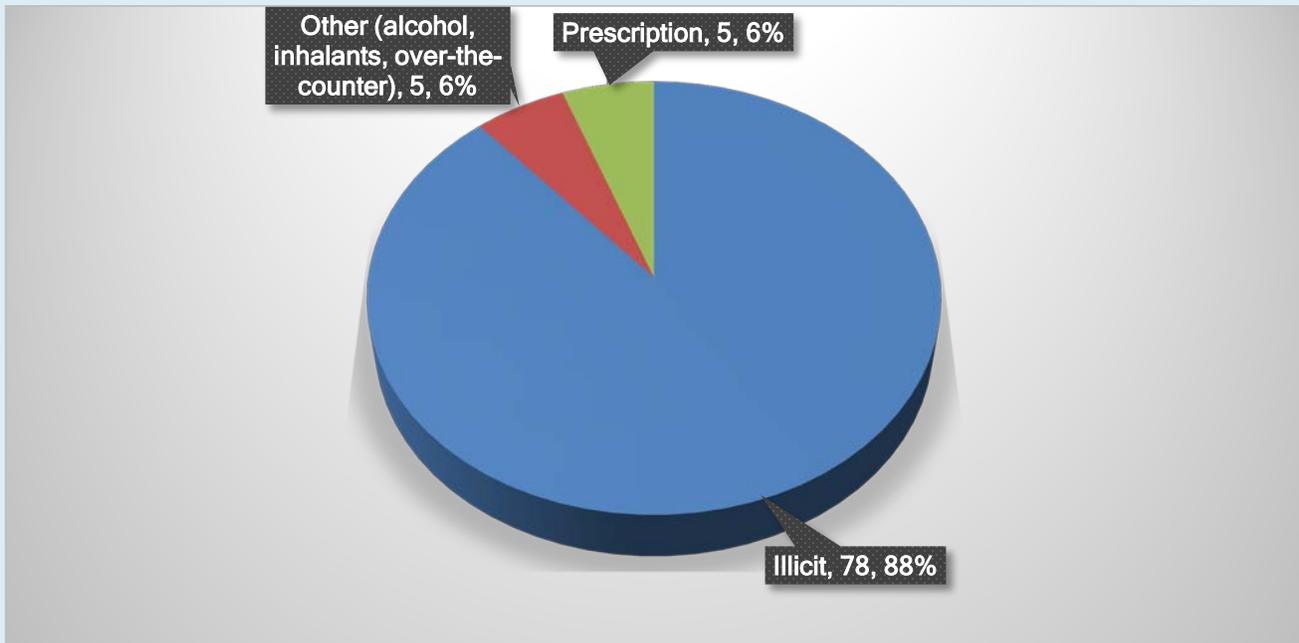
## Drug Toxicity Deaths in Travis County – 2019

### Manner of Death



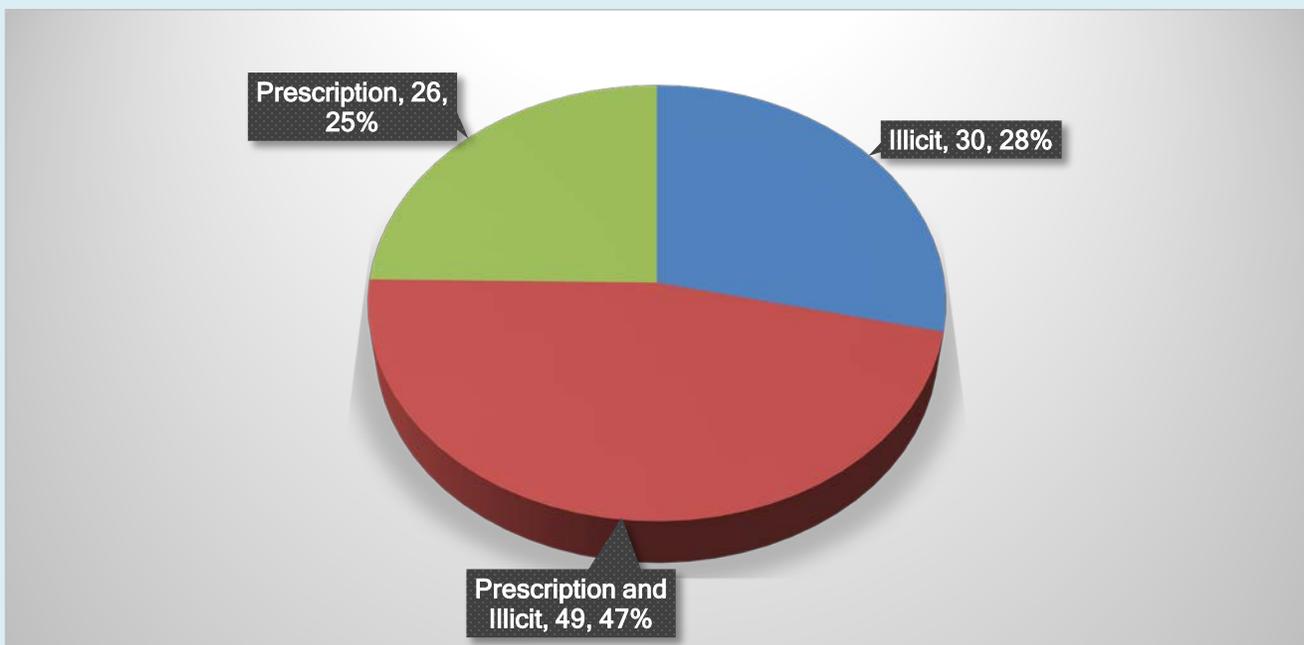
## Deaths Due to Single Drugs in Travis County – 2019

The majority (80%) of deaths due to a single drug were deaths caused by an illicit drug. Deaths due to single prescription drugs made up only 6% of single drug deaths.

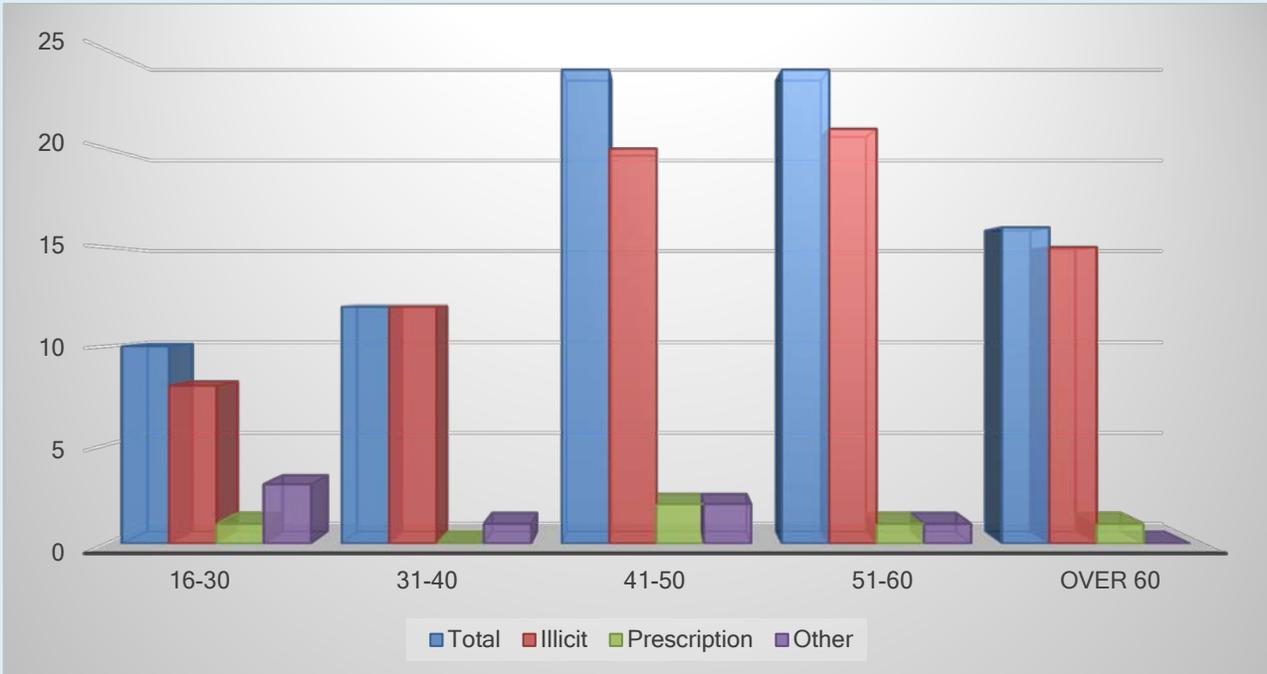


## Deaths Due to Multiple Drugs in Travis County – 2019

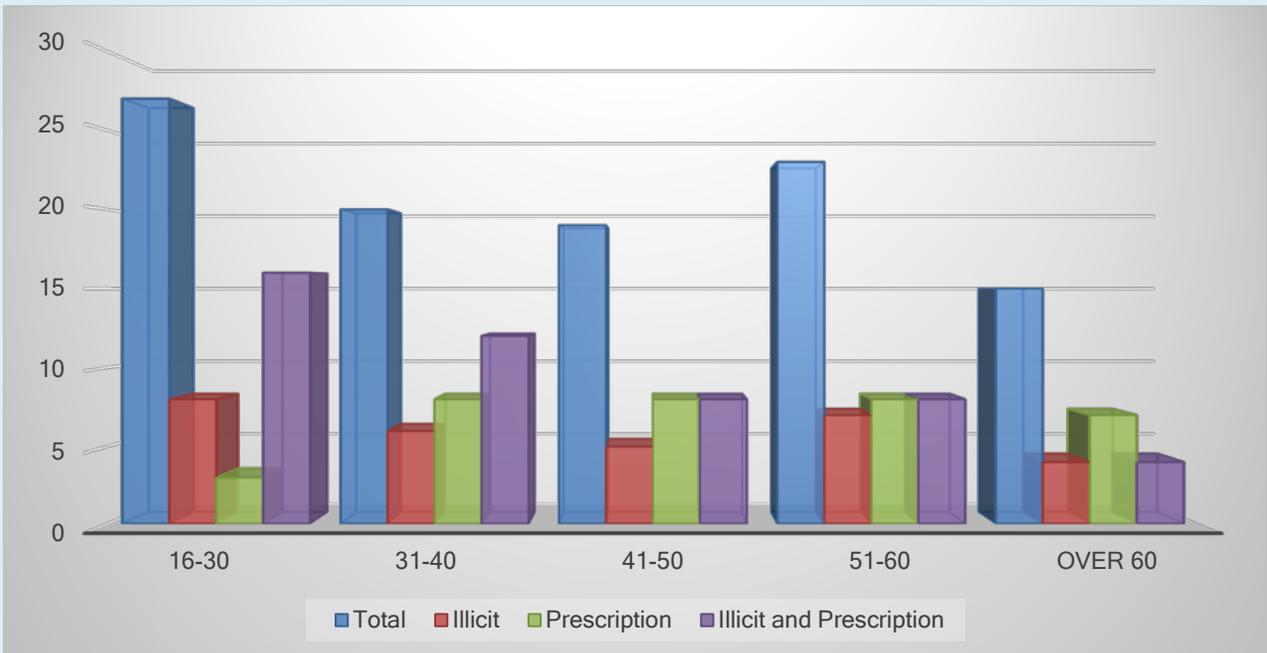
The majority (47%) of deaths due to multiple drug were deaths caused by combinations of illicit and prescription drugs, followed by illicit drugs (28%), and then prescription drugs (25%).



### Single Drug Deaths by Age in Travis County – 2019

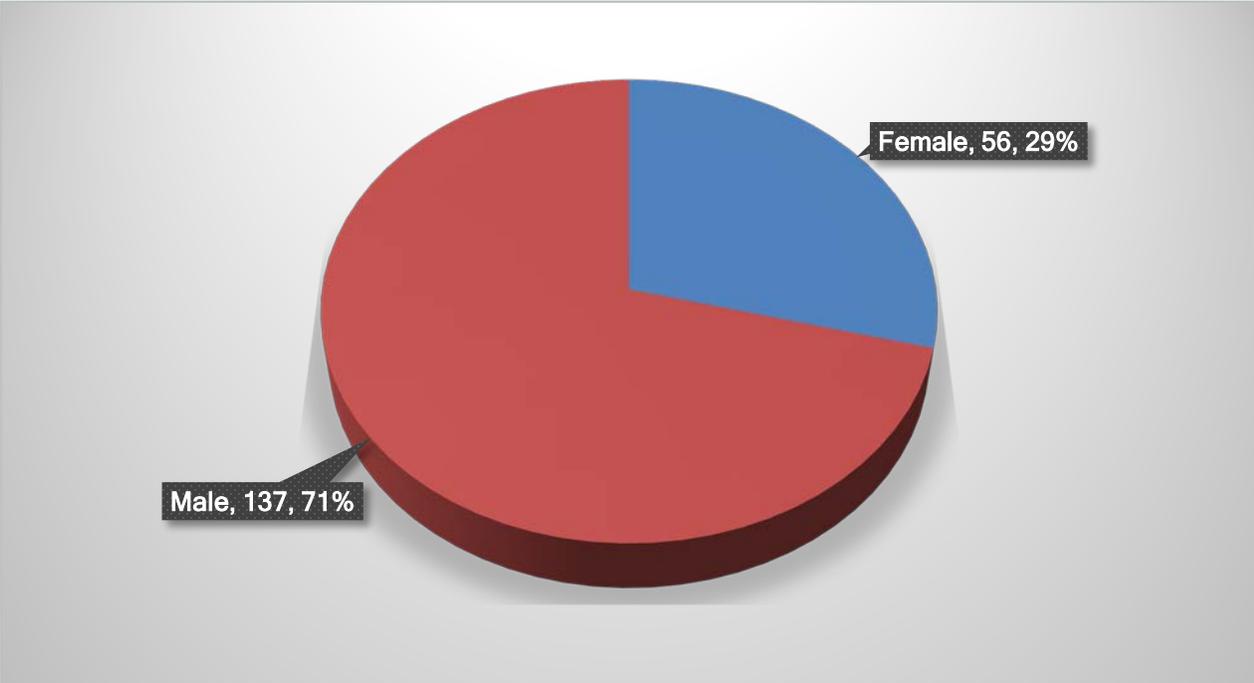


### Multiple Drug Deaths by Age in Travis County – 2019

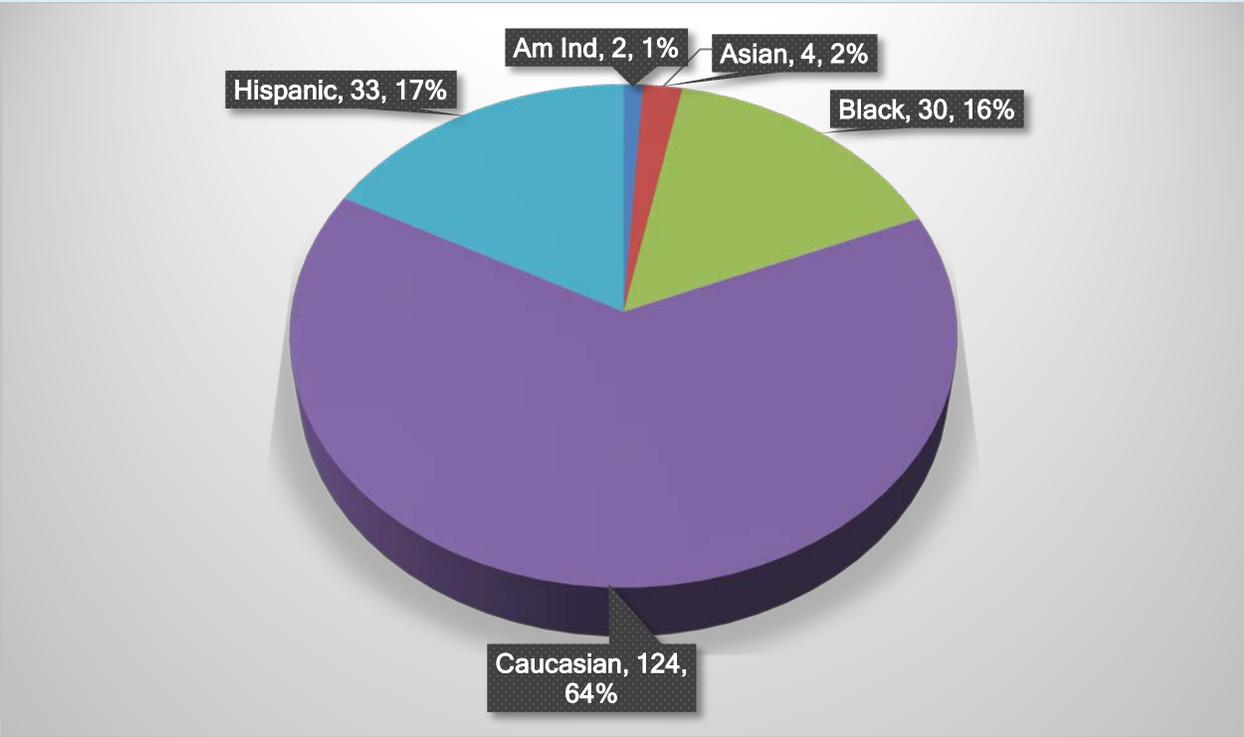


\*The “Other” category includes over-the-counter drugs, alcohol and poisonous substances

### Drug Deaths by Gender in Travis County – 2019

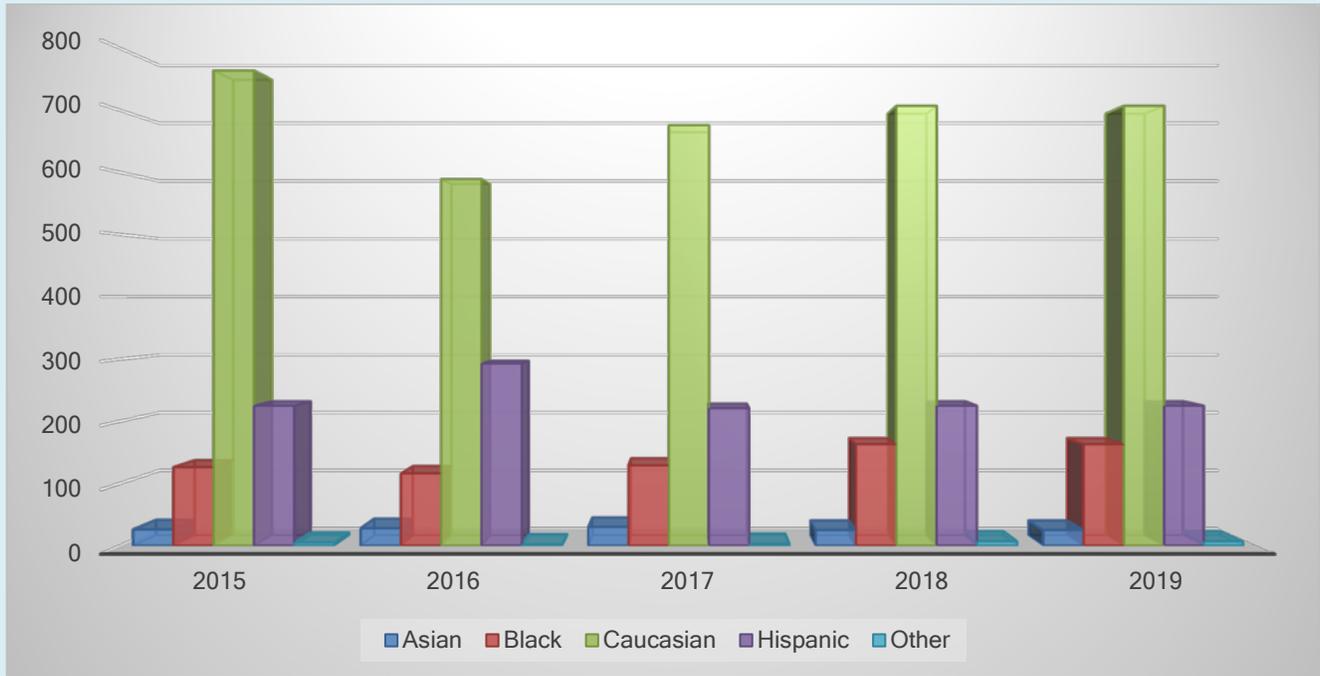


### Drug Deaths by Race in Travis County – 2019

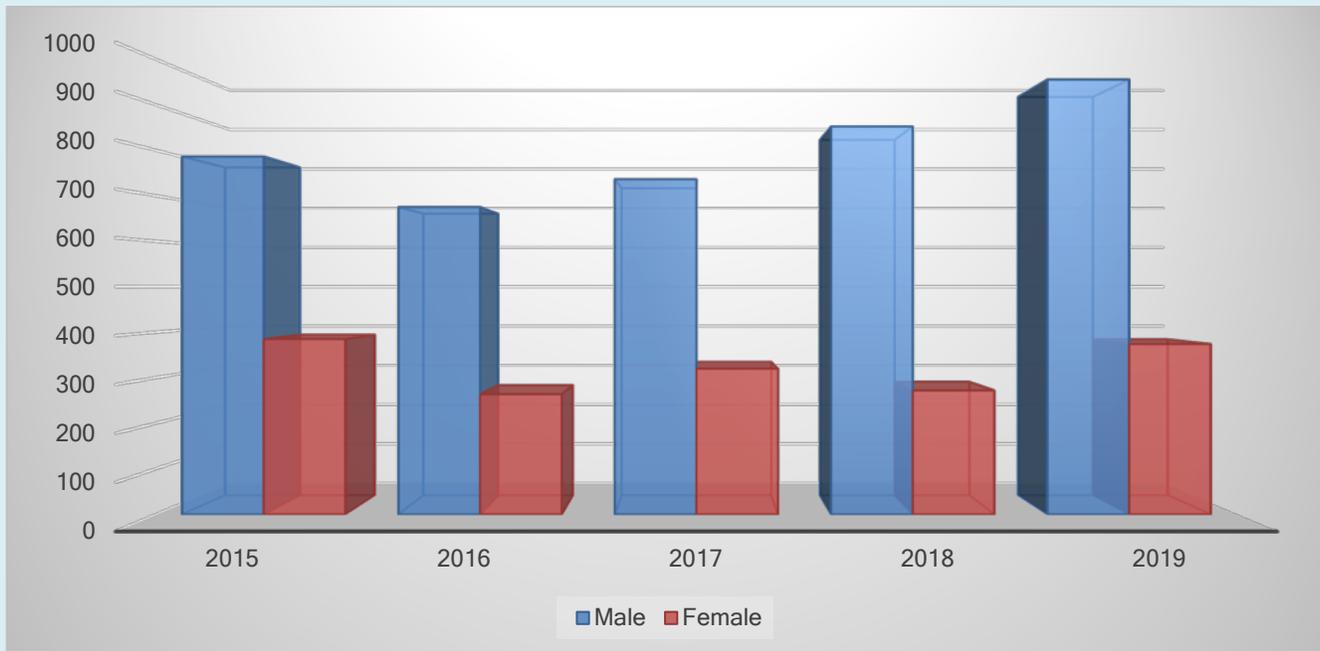


## Demographic Information in Travis County – 2019

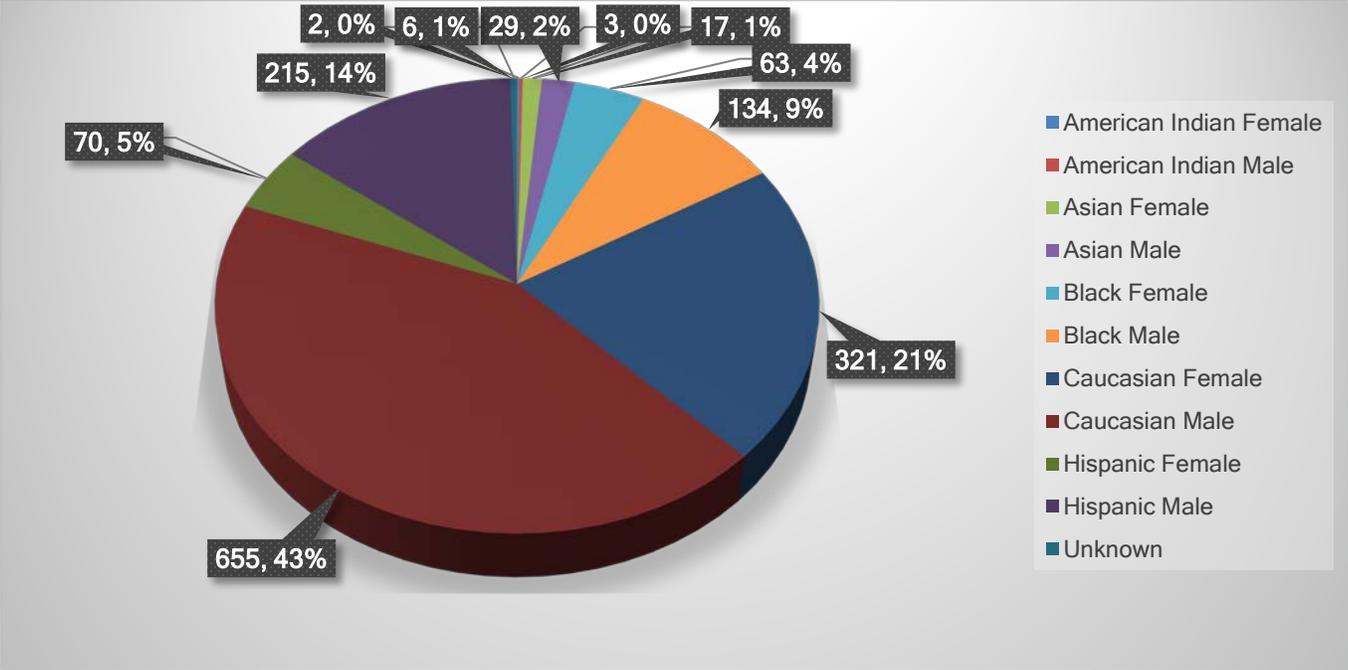
### Decedent Race Trends: 2015-2019



### Decedent Gender Trends: 2015-2019



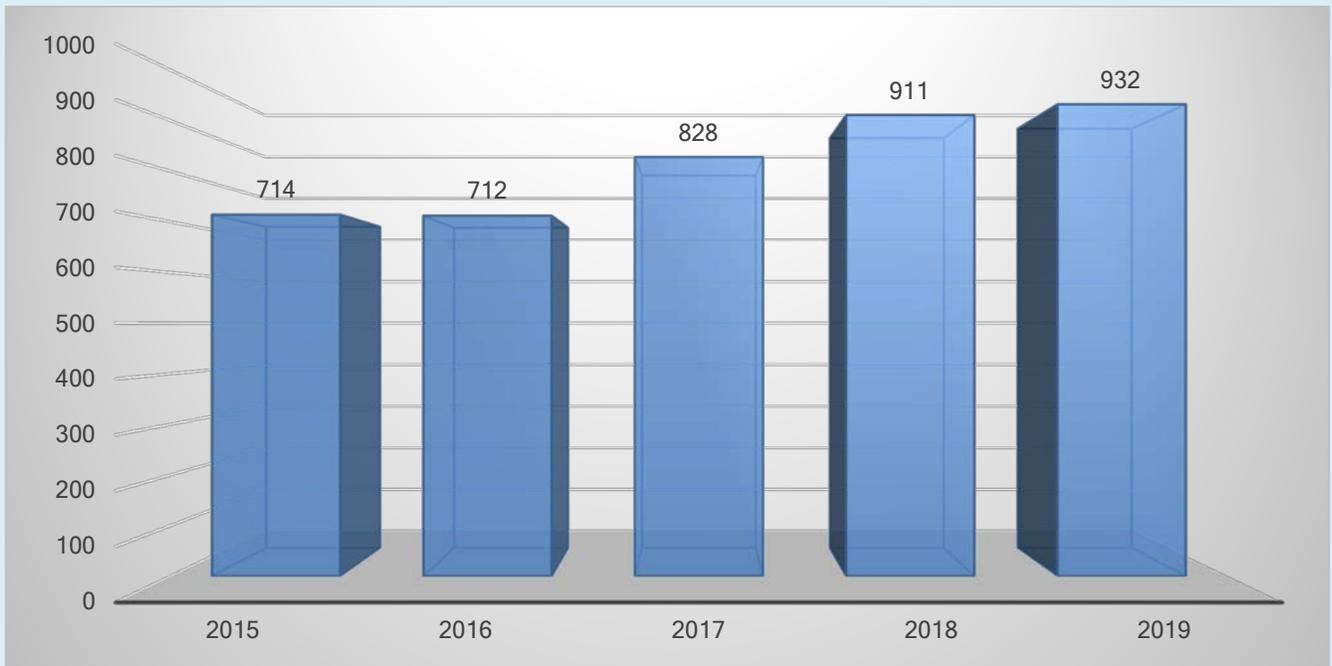
### Breakdown by Race and Gender in Travis County – 2019



## Scene Investigations – 2019

Scene investigation is an important component of a proper medicolegal death investigation. TCME forensic investigators attended 932 death scenes in Travis County in 2019. TCME investigators do not typically attend death scenes that are located outside of Travis County boundaries. Types of scenes investigated include all suspected homicides, suicides, accidental deaths and select cases suspected to have died of natural disease.

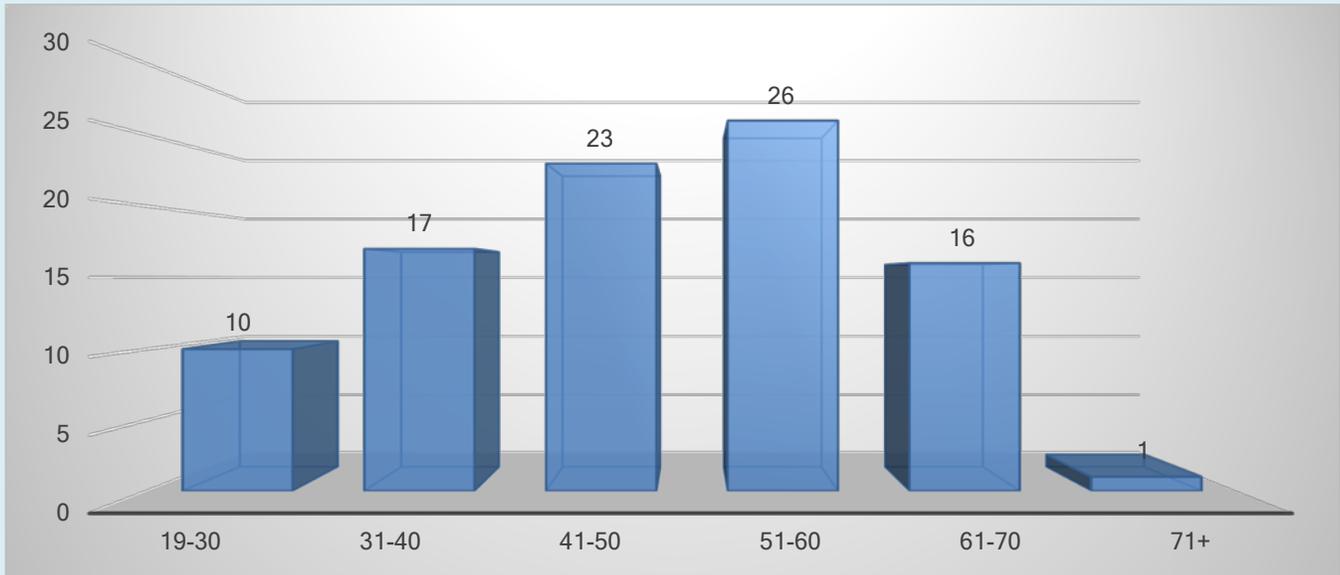
## Trends in Numbers of Scene Investigations 2015-2019



## Transient Deaths in Travis County – 2019

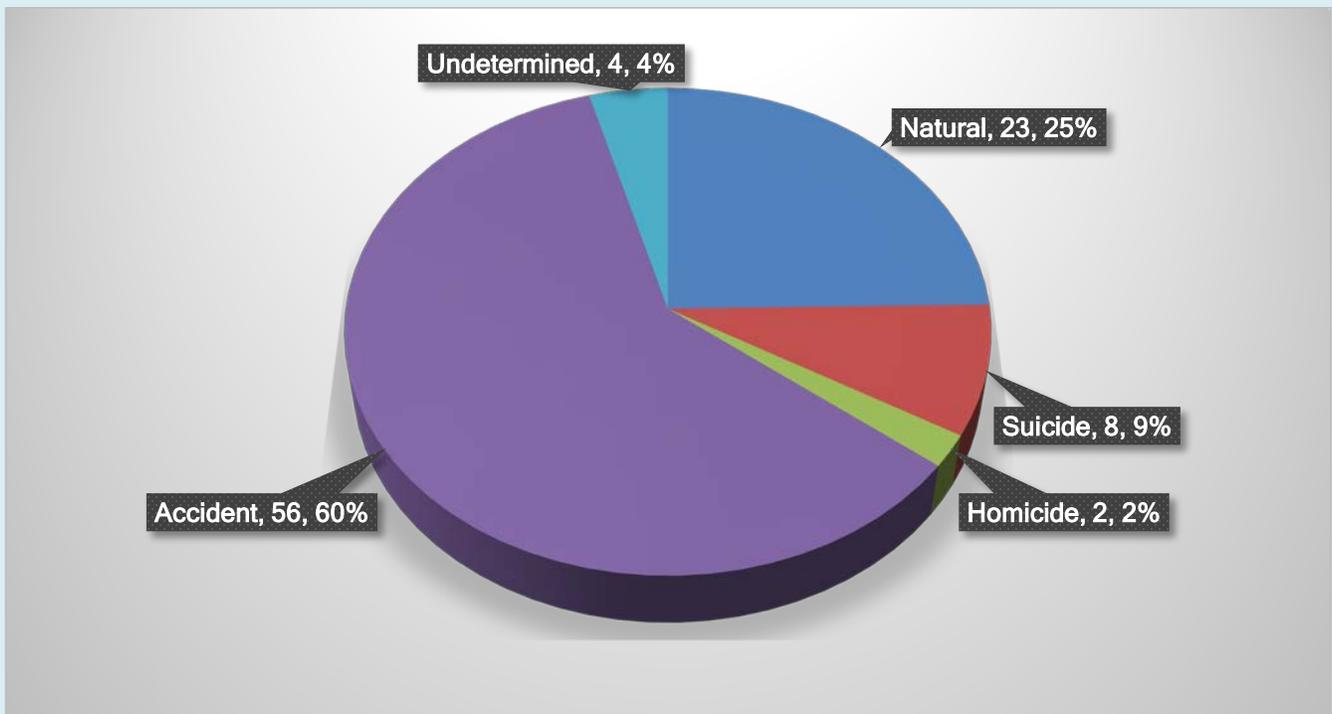
Our office receives requests for information regarding the homeless population in Travis County. Insight into the manner of deaths for the homeless might help address the situations that are faced and facilitate measures to protect this population.

### Transient Death by Age in Travis County 2019



### Transient Deaths by Manner in Travis County – 2019

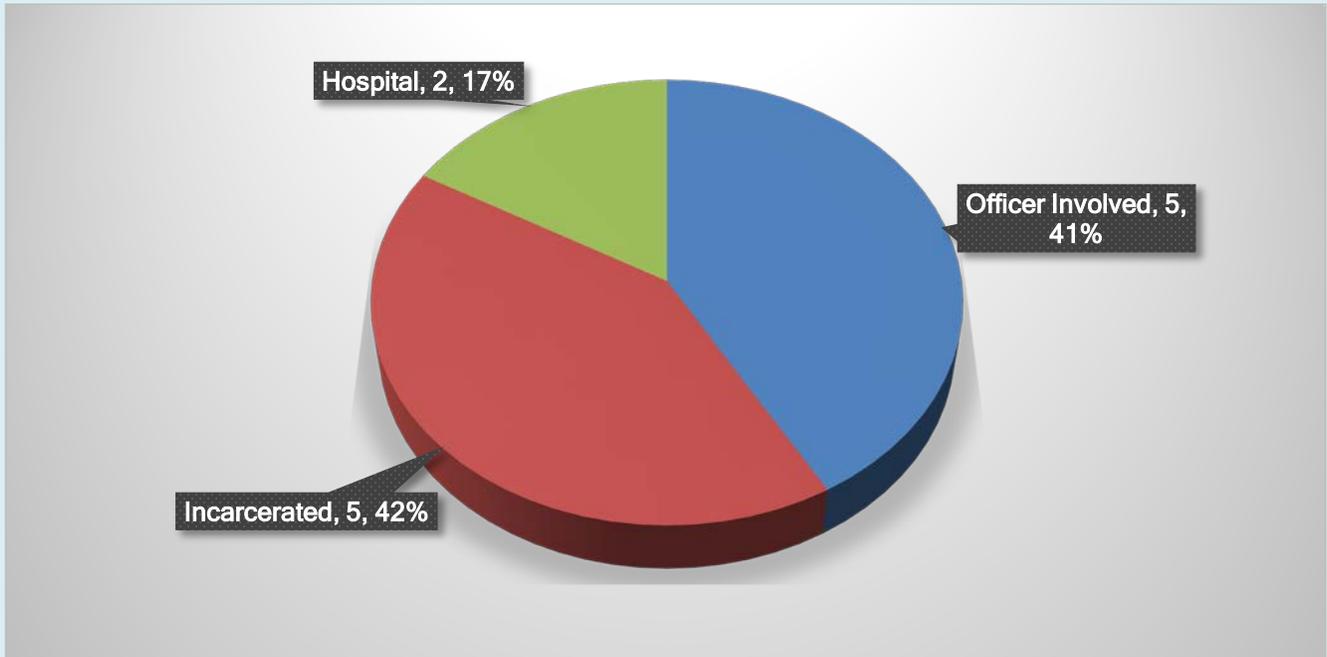
Unlike the general population, the majority of deaths are accidental instead of natural deaths.



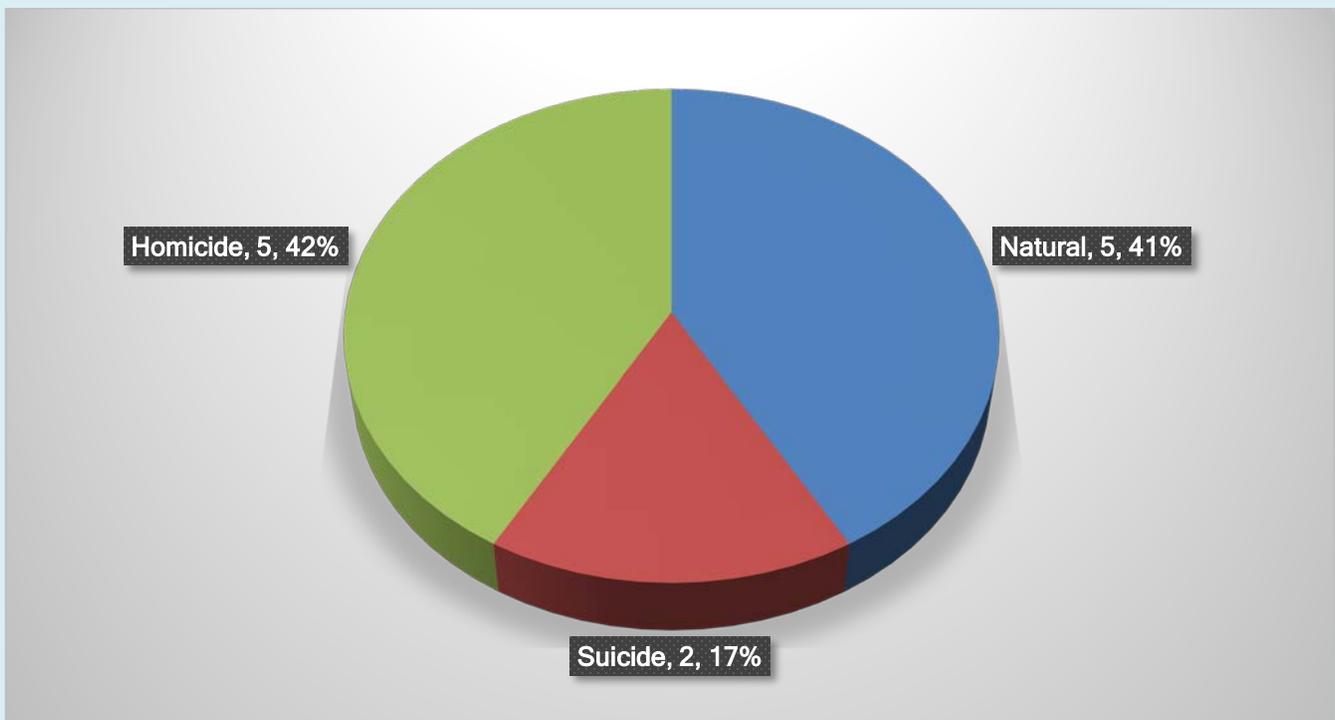
## In-Custody Deaths in Travis County – 2019

A death in custody is a death of a person during initial confrontation with authorities, during the process of arrest, transport to a facility, or during incarceration. It also includes deaths in hospitals of patients who are in the custody of the law enforcement. Deaths in custody fall within the medical examiner's jurisdiction.

### Types of In-Custody Deaths



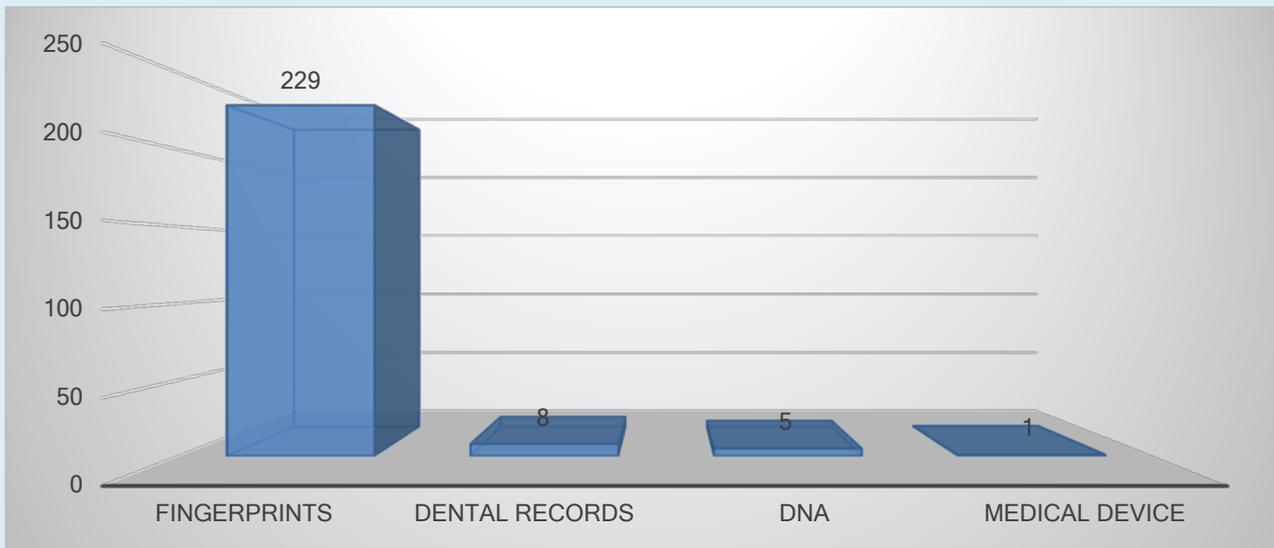
### In-Custody Deaths – Manner



## Unidentified Bodies in Travis County – 2019

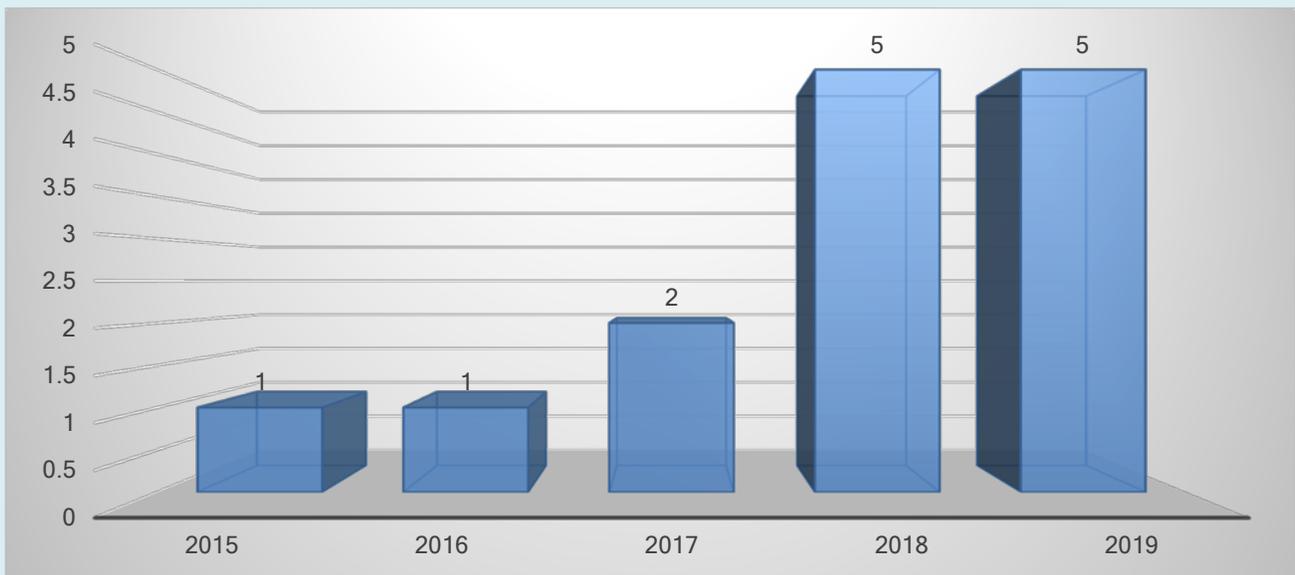
Occasionally, people who die have no identification on their person, and their identity is either unknown or uncertain. TCME, along with law enforcement agencies, uses various techniques to scientifically identify these decedents. In 2019, 287 decedents examined at TCME were scientifically identified.

### Methods of Scientific Identification of Unidentified Decedents 2019



## Unidentified Bodies in Travis County 2019

Despite best attempts at identifying unidentified individuals, a body may 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.



## Body Transport

Travis County contracts with a company to provide transport services to our office on deaths that occur within the boundaries of Travis County. In 2019, 1304 bodies in Travis County were transported using our contracted provider, 27 bodies were transported by TCME personnel, and three using other services. Out-of-county cases are transported by funeral homes retained by the referring Justice of the Peace or family.

## Community Involvement

TCME regularly interacts with 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. Staff members of TCME serve on the Travis County Child Fatality Death Review Team, attend AIM HIGH meetings, and Safe Sleep Task Force meetings. We have lectured on infant safety for teen mothers and on unsafe sleep environments. In addition, we give presentations to area hospitals, hospice agencies, and nursing homes on proper reporting of medical examiner cases. We also provide lectures on proper death certification to physician and administration groups. We provide training to law enforcement agencies on death investigations. Some of our most important community interactions happen when physicians and hospitals receive postmortem 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.