

Berkeley County Coroner's Office

2023
Annual Report

Coroner Darnell Hartwell



Darnell Hartwell
Coroner

Kelly Kraus
Chief Deputy Coroner



Office Of The Coroner

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To the Citizens of Berkeley County,

I am pleased to share the 2023 Annual Report for the Berkeley County Coroner's Office. The goal of providing this information to the public is to increase public awareness of the role of the Coroner's Office and to focus attention on the causes and manners of death in our county in an effort to reduce the number of preventable deaths to the extent possible.

The information contained in this annual report derives from sources reviewed by the Berkeley County Coroner's Office to include autopsy reports, police reports, death certificates, cremation permits and motor vehicle reports, among others.

I hope that you will find this up-to-date and complete information to be in a format that is easy to read and is of value to you.

If you have any questions or need any additional information, please feel free to contact the Berkeley County Coroner's Office.

As always, thank you for your support,

Darnell D. Hartwell
Coroner of Berkeley County, SC

DEDICATION

In Dedication to the decedents and citizens of Berkeley County and beyond who are grieving the loss of their loved ones. Serving you during your most trying time has been a sincere honor and privilege. We are here for you, always ready to offer any assistance.

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Mission Statement

The Coroner's Office will investigate all deaths within its jurisdiction according to State Law. The Office conducts independent investigations of deaths in Berkeley County, serving as a representative of the decedents and survivors. The investigation's purpose is to determine the cause and manner of death and ensure that the circumstances are thoroughly understood. The Coroner's Office is responsible for investigating all suspicious, violent, sudden, and unexpected deaths that occur within Berkeley County. As well as deaths that occur in other counties resulting from an accident or injury that occurred in Berkeley County. Additionally, the Office also investigates all deaths that occur in a hospital within the first 24 hours of admission or after an invasive medical procedure.

2023 Profile of the Berkeley County Coroner's Office

The Coroner's Office investigates the circumstances surrounding a person's death independently of any law enforcement agency that may also be investigating the death. The role of the coroner's office is to determine the "Cause" and "Manner" of a person's death.

The South Carolina Code of Laws (17-5-530(B)) mandates "The coroner or medical examiner shall make an immediate inquiry into the cause and manner of death and shall reduce the findings to writing on forms provided for this purpose.", upon notification of deaths that are unexpected, unexplained, suspicious, violent or in which the cause and/or manner of death is unknown.

The Coroner is also responsible for identifying decedents and making notification to next-of-kin. The Coroner's Office provides information to the decedent's family, involved law enforcement, the judicial system, insurance companies, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and many others.

The Coroner's Office advocates for families by notifying and advising them of the circumstances surrounding the death known at that time. The Office provides updates to the families after autopsy and/or further investigation reveals new information. Additionally, we refer families to resource agencies when necessary to assist them through the grieving process. This Office works with organizations such as Sharing Hope to facilitate the family or decedent's wishes regarding organ and tissue donation whenever possible.

Medicolegal death investigation provided by the Berkeley County Coroner's Office may involve many things, to include but not limited to, scene response, scene and decedent photography, ordering of forensic autopsies (authorized by SC Code 17-5-520), forensic anthropology and odontology examinations, fingerprint collection and ordering of fingerprint comparison, etc. Collection of toxicology samples and/or DNA samples are also part of the investigation.

Scene investigations include, but are not limited to, child and infant death investigation and re-enactments, homicides, suicides, industrial and residential accidents, motor vehicle accidents, deaths due to abuse/neglect/negligence, terrorist acts, death due to malpractice, mass fatalities, arson, drowning, drug related and fire

deaths. The Coroner may hold a formal inquest to determine the “Manner of Death”. There were no inquests held this year.

Berkeley County is located on the southeastern coast of South Carolina and measures about 1,233.88 Square Miles and is the eighth largest county in South Carolina by population. Berkeley County's population was approximately 253,363 in 2023.

The Coroner of Berkeley County is an elected official and the Coroner's Office is funded by tax revenue provided by the citizens of Berkeley County. Coroner Hartwell submits an annual budget to Berkeley County Council for approval. The Finance Department of Berkeley County Government administers the approved funds.

The Fiscal Year 2023 approved budget for the Berkeley County Coroner's Office was \$929,093. The Fiscal Year 2024 approved budget for the Coroner's Office was \$1,200,092. The last six months of FY2023 and first six months of FY2024 combine to financially account for the calendar year 2023.

In 2023, the Berkeley County Coroner's Office was awarded SCORF Funds \$100,000.00. The South Carolina Opioid Recovery Fund Board (“SCORF Board”) was created by the South Carolina Opioid Recovery Act, SC Code §11-58-10 et seq., to administer and disburse the South Carolina Opioid Recovery Fund by the terms of *In re South Carolina Opioid Litigation* settlement agreements. The SCORF Board will distribute money from the South Carolina Opioid Recovery Fund to help address and remediate the impact of the opioid epidemic in South Carolina.

The Coroner



Coroner Darnell D. Hartwell was born in Charleston, SC, in 1984 and was raised in the northern part of Berkeley County (Bonneau, Alvin). He is a 2003 graduate of Timberland High School.

Coroner Hartwell has served the citizens of Berkeley County his entire career. From 2003 to 2005, he served at the Bonneau Volunteer Fire Department; from 2003 to 2018, he also served with the Berkeley County Rescue Squad.

Coroner Hartwell began his career in the Coroner's Office in 2005 and served through 2010 as a volunteer deputy coroner under the leadership of the late Coroner Glenn Rhoads. In 2011, Coroner Hartwell was sworn in as a paid deputy coroner under the leadership of retired Coroner William "Bill" Salisbury, and from 2018 to the present, as Chief Deputy Coroner under the leadership of Coroner George M. Oliver.

With nearly 20 years of service in the Coroner's Office, Coroner Hartwell has over 3000 training hours in death investigation, criminal investigations, emergency services, and leadership training. He has been involved in over 5000 death investigations that include but are not limited to natural death, violent deaths, suicides, accidental deaths, and homicides. Coroner Hartwell has assisted in leading the Coroner's Office through the COVID-19 pandemic and the everlasting opioid epidemic fatalities. He has led his team through example and teaching to strive towards excellence, treating all families with dignity, compassion, and professionalism.

Coroner Hartwell is an active member of the South Carolina Coroner's Association, the International Association of Coroner's and Medical Examiners, The Lowcountry Health Care Coalition, The National Training Center Bureau of Justice Training (U.S. Department of Justice), The Kennedy Center Prevention Programs, Wounded Warriors (Suicide Prevention for Military Personnel) and the Fraternal Order of Police. Coroner Hartwell is a Registered Medicolegal Death Investigator and a class 3 certified law enforcement officer for the State Of South Carolina.

Coroner Hartwell is an active member of Pointe North Community Church. He is married to Melissa Hartwell; he has two sons and a daughter.

2023 Organizational Chart

Coroner

~Darnell D. Hartwell~

Chief Deputy

~Kelly Kraus~

Investigations

Deputy Coroners

~Christine Kinney

~Rochelle Tuttle

~Whitney Crawford

~April Overby

~Jordan Moran (Part Time)

Administrative Services

~Allison Bilton- Admin Assistant

~Catherine Grill- Admin Assistant (PT)

~Chevon Allen- Admin Assistant

Office Achievements

Coroner Darnell Hartwell and Chief Deputy Coroner Kelly Kraus also attended the SCCA Coroner's Conference in 2023

Chief Deputy Kelly Kraus and Deputy Rochelle Tuttle received American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators – Diplomat status in 2023 and Law Enforcement 3 basic certification.

Administrative Assistants Chevon Allen and Catherine Grill became certified technicians through National Child Passenger Safety Certification, a program of Safe Kids Worldwide.

Chief Deputy Coroner Kelly Kraus and Deputy Coroners Rochelle Tuttle and Whitney Crawford completed SC Coroner's Association Academy in January 2023.

Deputy Coroner Rochelle Tuttle and Administrative Assistant Allison Bilton attended the 2023 National Forum on Overdose Fatality Review in Washington, DC, to learn how to start an Overdose Fatality Review in Berkeley County.

Administrative Assistant Allison Bilton attended the RX and Illicit Drug Summit in Atlanta.

Berkeley County Coroner's Office established the County's first Overdose Fatality Review Board.

The purpose of the Overdose Fatality Review Board is to assemble a diverse coalition of agencies, including local law enforcement, hospital staff, DJJ, EMS, Berkeley County Mental Health, The Ernest E. Kennedy Center, Berkeley County School District, DPPS, The 9th Circuit Solicitor's office, DSS, and others, to conduct thorough reviews of overdose victims.

This collaborative effort aims to identify areas where victims might have benefited from treatment or preventive services. Our call to action is pinpointing inadequacies or gaps in our service systems by analyzing patterns and trends. Through this process, we seek to generate effective strategies and recommendations to prevent future overdose fatalities in Berkeley County.

The Berkeley County Coroner's office has been represented and participated in 81 community events throughout the county in 2024.

INVESTIGATION and DISPOSITION OF CASES

The following description is a general overview of the processes during a “jurisdiction assumed”, full investigation and the follow-up processes.

Upon arrival at a death scene, the Coroner, or a deputy coroner, will speak with first responders, law enforcement officers and any witnesses to become familiar with the circumstances surrounding the incident and any safety considerations prior to entering the immediate scene. The Coroner, or the deputy, will take notes and utilize photographs and/or video to further document the scene. They also collect and preserve evidence and personal property on or around the body/remains. In some crime scene situations, the Coroner or deputy will coordinate with law enforcement officers regarding the collection of evidence.

The Coroner or deputy makes every effort to identify the decedent utilizing at least two of the following methods: government issued photo ID of the decedent that matches the decedent's physical characteristics/features; fingerprint analysis; comparison of significant scars, marks and tattoos; birth defects and presence of prosthetics; coordination of odontology examination (dental X-rays); coordination of forensic anthropology analysis (skeleton/bones); DNA analysis and other methods.

If the Coroner or deputy deem it necessary to conduct a post mortem examination (autopsy), the contracted transport vendor transports the decedent to our in-house morgue/autopsy suite or to the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Medical University. This office also notifies the interested law enforcement agency of the autopsy schedule. The collection and preservation of all evidence rendered from an autopsy is of utmost importance to the investigation.

The Coroner or deputy makes every effort to identify, locate and notify the legal next of kin of the death in a timely manner and in person, if possible. The Office also facilitates the release of the remains to the funeral home selected by the next of kin or facilitates the cremation and burial for unclaimed decedents.

The Coroner's Office is responsible for obtaining and reviewing medical records related to both the present event, and past medical records, as they might have relevance to the death. This office summarizes the information gathered through the investigation in a written report and stores related documents in a records management system. Upon request, the Coroner's Office provides copies of their investigative case records to the Solicitor's Office, the Public Defender's Office and invested law enforcement agencies.

The Coroner's Office contracts the services of Drs. Suzanne Abel (forensic anthropologist) and Wolf Bueschgen (forensic odontologist) for analysis and processing of evidence in the form of skeletal or badly decomposed remains. The anthropologist and odontologist work together to provide the Berkeley County Coroner's Office with biological profiles that assist the Coroner's Office with identifying individuals, as well as documenting findings that may assist with determining cause and manner of death. They also provide timely, precise and detailed reports that assist in furthering the investigation.

In approximately 16% percent of the deaths that were given a full investigation, which is 297 out of 1,832 deaths reported, a full forensic autopsy was performed to aid in the determination of the cause and manner of death, to document disease, to identify injury patterns, and to recover items of evidentiary/investigative value. The cases not autopsied were those in which the scene investigation, circumstances of death, medical documentation, interviews, social history, and/ or external examination of the body provided sufficient information for certifying the cause of death.

Specimens for toxicology testing, which may be helpful in determining the cause and manner of death, are collected and submitted to a nationally accredited laboratory or the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) crime lab for testing. Toxicology tests provide quantitative measures of blood levels for: alcohol, illicit drugs, commonly abused prescription and nonprescription drugs, and other substances as needed.

“CAUSE” and “MANNER” OF DEATH

The **Cause of Death** is the official determination of the specific disease or injury and the sequence of events that leads to an individual's death.

The **Manner of Death** is determined largely by means of the investigation and relates to circumstances at the time of, or surrounding the death. In South Carolina, as is common in the United States, there are five manners of death as listed below.

NATURAL: Death caused by disease.

SUICIDE: Death because of a purposeful action to end one's own life.

ACCIDENT: Death, other than natural, where there is no evidence of intent.

HOMICIDE: Death resulting from injuries inflicted by another person.

UNDETERMINED: Manner assigned when after a thorough investigation there is insufficient evidence, or conflicting/ equivocal information (especially about intent), to assign a specific manner.

2023 Statistics

There were 1,832 deaths reported to the Berkeley County Coroner's Office in 2023. Regarding those deaths, 1,132 were classified as "Natural" deaths, 187 were classified as "Accident"; 38 were classified as "Suicide"; 18 were classified as "Homicide"; and 8 were classified with an "Undetermined" manner.

In addition to investigating these deaths and authorizing cremations for 1,090 of those cases, the Coroner's Office had involvement to various degrees with 68 requests for services which included: 2 cases of recovered bones Both human; 61 requests to make a death notification to next-of-kin by other jurisdictions; 5 cases were preliminarily investigated via telephone inquiries which subsequently were turned over to other jurisdictions due to their having jurisdiction in the case.

While a great deal of effort has gone into compiling accurate statistics for this report, they are subject to change as "Causes" and "Manners" of death, dates, etc., may change should new or additional information become available.

The grand total of all requests for services plus death investigations was 2,990. This does not include requests from other agencies, family, or outside reports. It also excludes additional meetings with families to release personal effects.

Other/details of statistics include:

Grand total of cremation permits: 1,090

- Cremation permits issued with Coroner Cases: 712
- Stand-alone Cremation Permits 389

Full Autopsy cases Contracted to MUSC: 173

- Number of External Autopsy Exams: 13
- Number of Limited Autopsy Exams: 0

Deceased transports to MUSC Morgue and County Morgue: 432

Toxicology tests ordered: 283

Unidentified decedents: 1

Exhumations: 0

Unclaimed: 1

Donor referrals– Organ Donation Statistics from Sharing Hope SC:

- Release for organ donation: 13
- Actual organ donation cases: 11
- Organs Recovered: 49
- Lives Saved: 36
- Coroner cases declined for donation: 0

2023 “Homicide” Statistics

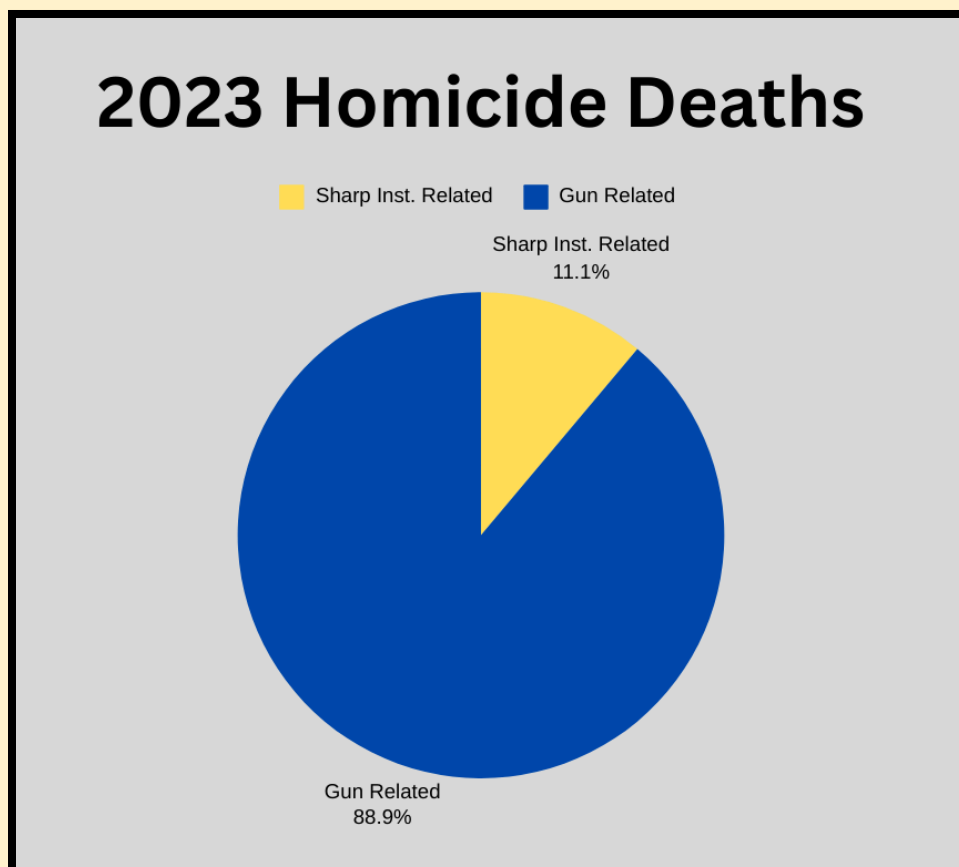
The manner of death is classified as a “Homicide” when it results from injuries inflicted by another person or inflicted on another by one’s grossly reckless behavior. The Coroner’s Office is not responsible for determining if a homicide was justified or not and classifies those deaths as “Homicides” in these statistics.

In addition, a death is classified as a “Homicide” regardless of the length of time between an incident causing injuries that results in death which can be attributed to those injuries.

South Carolina Code of Laws section 16-3-5 states “A person who causes bodily injury which results in the death of the victim is not criminally responsible for the victim's death and must not be prosecuted for a homicide offense if at least three years intervene between the injury and the death of the victim.” This three-year window does not apply to the classification of manner of death as long as the death is attributed to the injuries inflicted by another person or inflicted on another by one’s grossly reckless behavior.

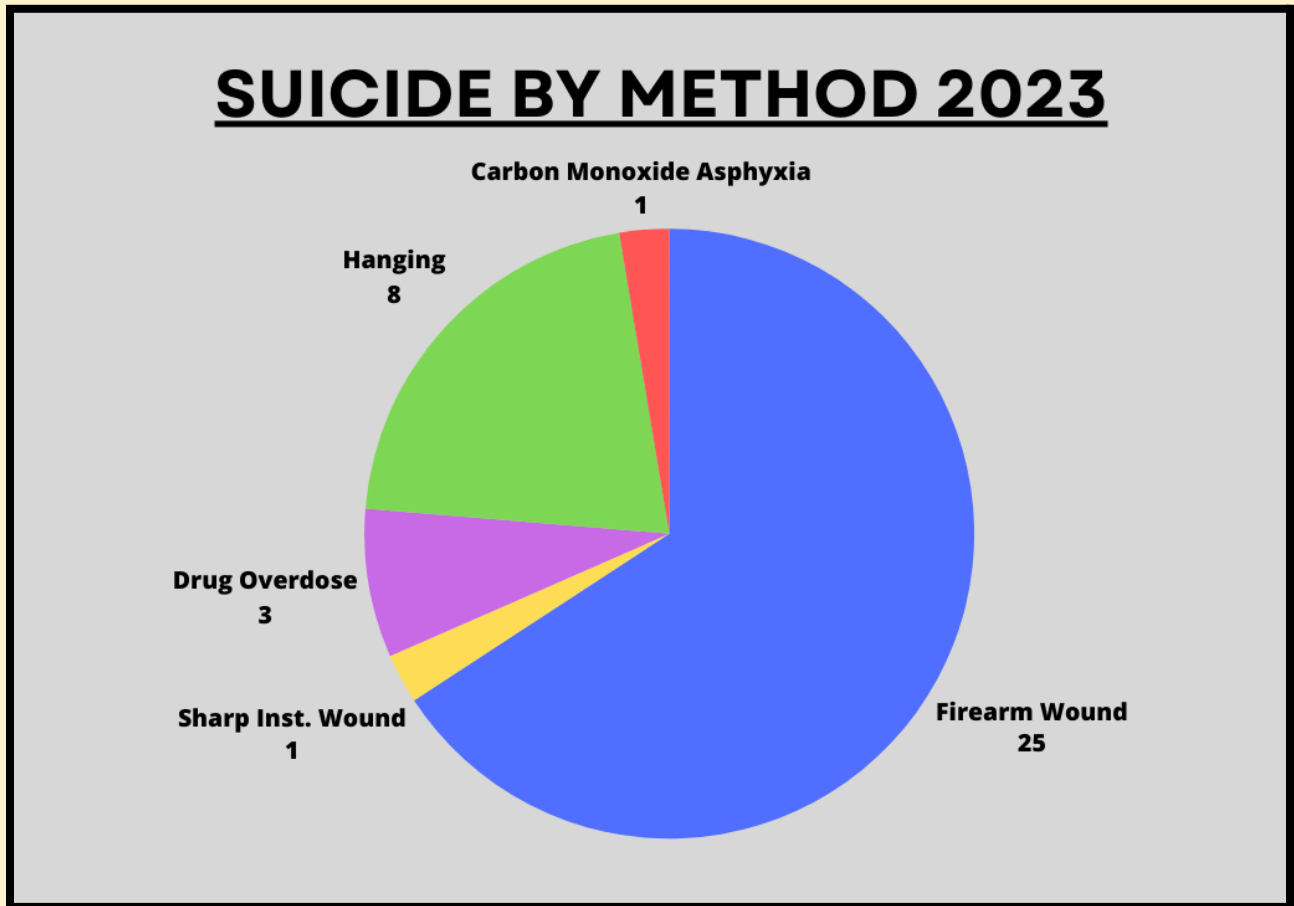
Vehicular collisions, occurring in circumstances of reckless driving or driving under the influence, are NOT included in this category but are counted in the traffic collision statistics under the manner – Accident.

In 2023, there were 18 deaths classified as “Homicide” in Berkeley County. 16 due to firearm injuries. Of the two remaining deaths, both were due to sharp force injuries.



2023 “Suicide” Statistics

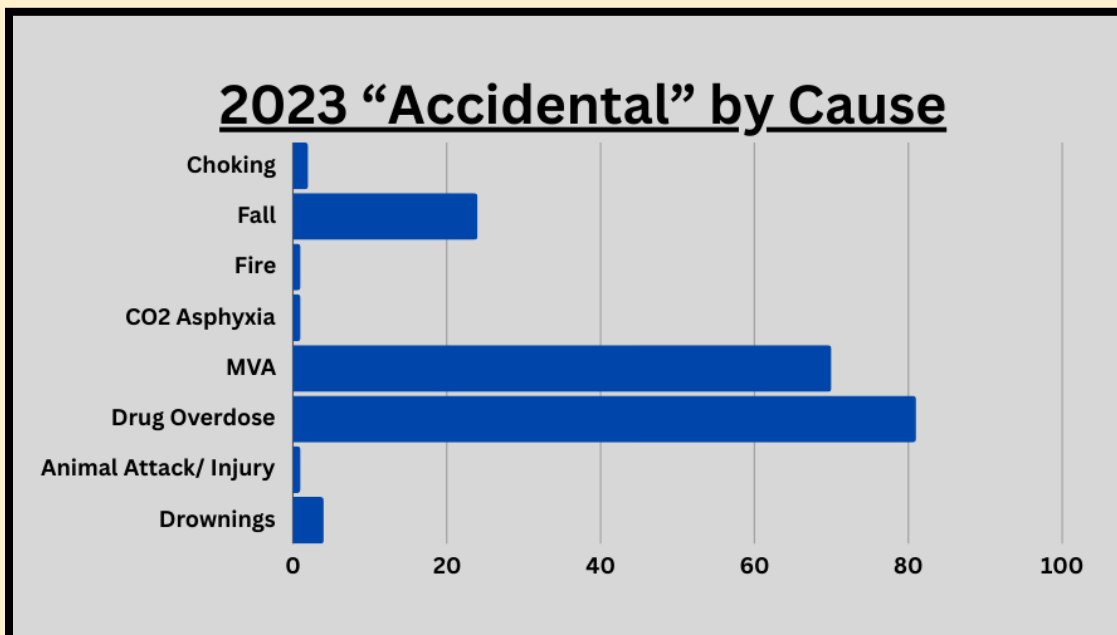
Suicide is death caused by intentional, self-inflicted injuries. In Berkeley County during 2023, there were 38 deaths by suicide. The most prevalent method of suicide in 2023 was via firearm wound totaling 25. There were 8 hangings; 3 overdoses; One Sharp-instrument death, and One Carbon monoxide asphyxia death.



2023 “Accidental” Statistics

Accidental deaths are those deaths that are other than natural where there is no evidence of intent; i.e. an unintentional event or chain of events. This category includes most motor vehicle collisions, falls, drowning, accidental drug overdoses, fire related deaths, etc.

187 deaths certified as “Accidental”. The causes include: 81 drug related deaths; 70 traffic collisions; 24 falls; 4 drowning; 2 foreign body asphyxia (food/emesis); 1 fire-related death, 1 Carbon Monoxide death not related to fire; 1 death due to an Animal Attack (Two PitBulls); and 1 death due to Hyperthermia

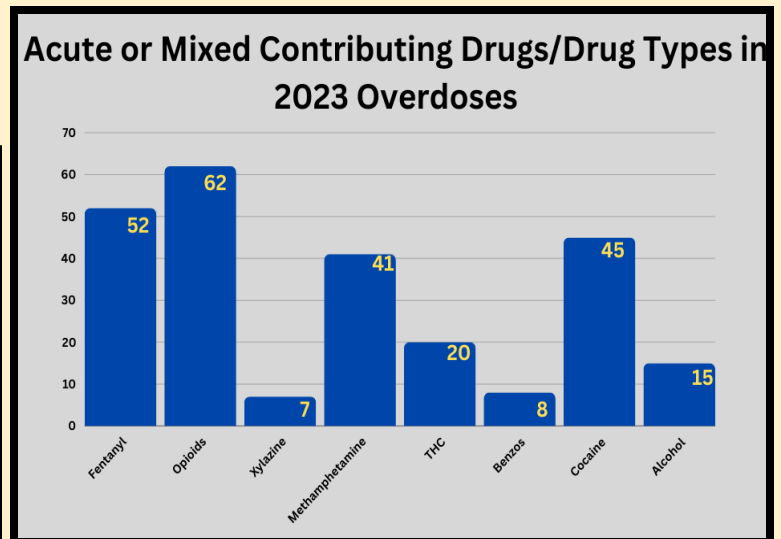
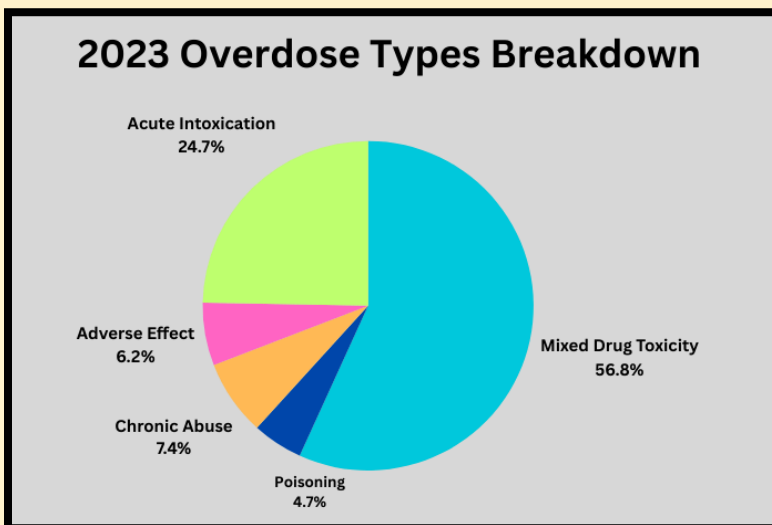


2023 Accidental Drug Overdose Death Statistics

In 2023 there were 81 Unintentional Drug Overdose-related deaths, 56.8% of those deaths were due to Mixed drug Toxicity; 24.7% due to Acute Intoxication; 7.4% Due to the effects of Chronic Abuse; 6.2% as a result from an Adverse effect; and 4.7% due to a poisoning.

- Mixed Drug Toxicity means that more than one drug was found to have contributed to the death.
- Acute Intoxication means that there was one drug found that contributed to the death.
- Chronic Abuse means that the death was a result from a disease caused by chronic drug use.
- Adverse Effect means that there was an adverse effect to the drugs that resulted in death.
- Poisoning means that the death resulted from a drug poisoning resulting from unintentional or intentional overdoses of a drug, being given the wrong drug, taking the wrong drug in error, or taking a drug inadvertently. Poisoning deaths also include poisoning resulting from other toxic substances, gasses, or vapors.

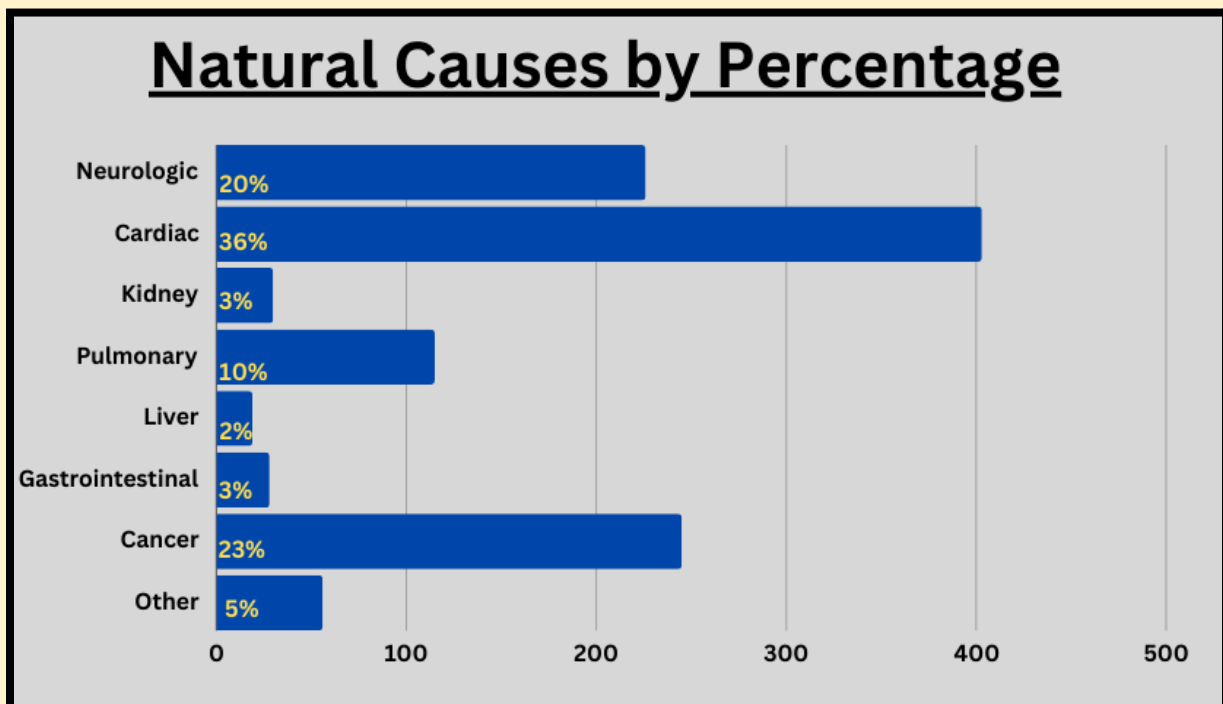
Toxicology testing revealed that the following drugs or drug types were present and significant enough to either cause the death acutely or in combination with another significant drug or drug type.



2023 “Natural” Death Statistics

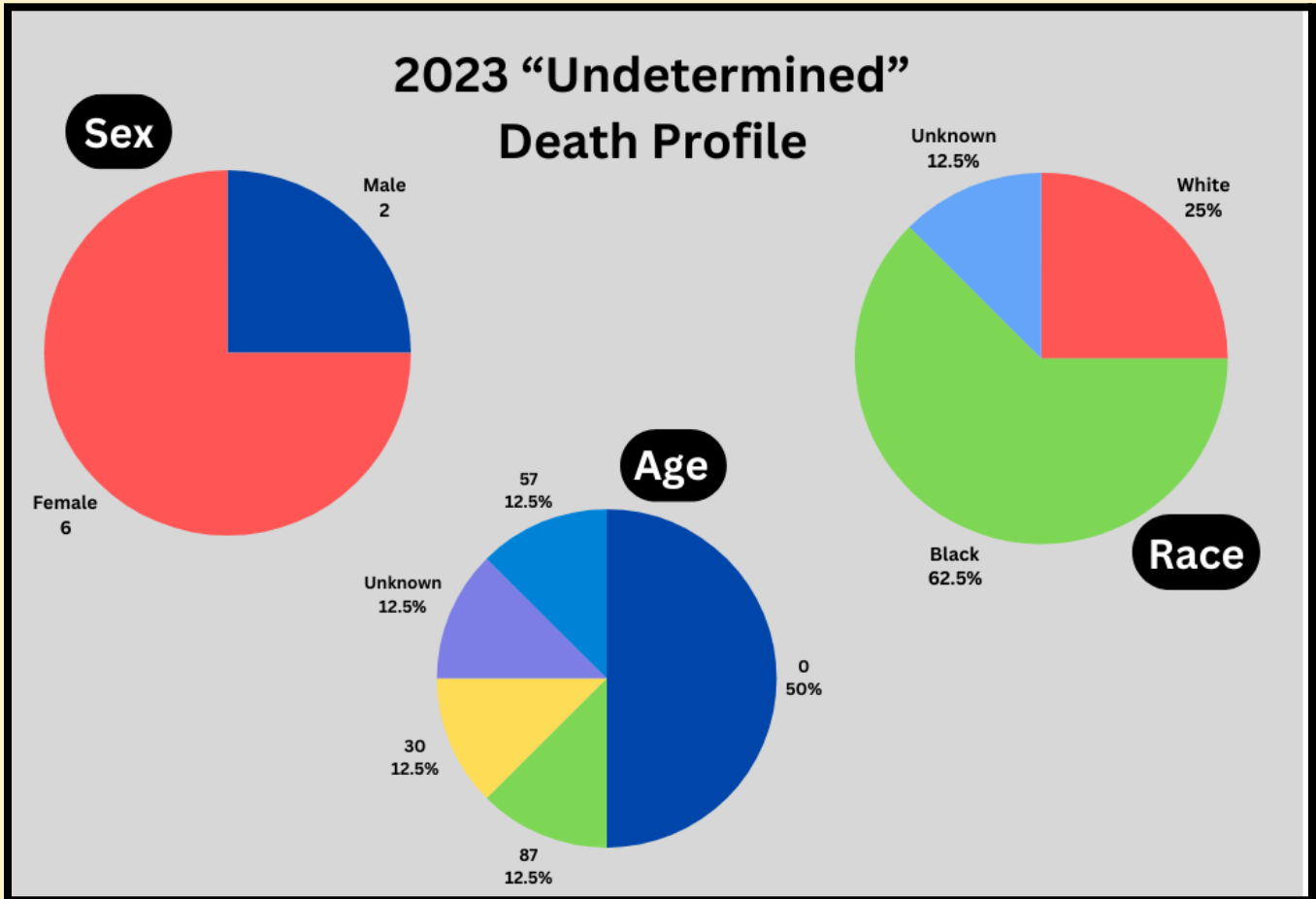
In 2021, there were 1,132 deaths reported to our office that were determined to be “Natural” deaths. The deputies receiving these notifications either investigate in person and assume jurisdiction for determining cause and manner of death or determine that no further action is warranted. If no detailed, in-person investigation was required, the deputy contacted the physician of record and after discussing the circumstances of the death, the physician agreed to certify the decedent's cause and manner of death on the Death Certificate.

Natural deaths reported by law to the office who were Hospice Care decedents totaled 684. There were 5 cases of natural fetal demise reported to the office. Generally, the deputies conduct a preliminary investigation to determine if further action is required.



2023 “Undetermined” Death Statistics

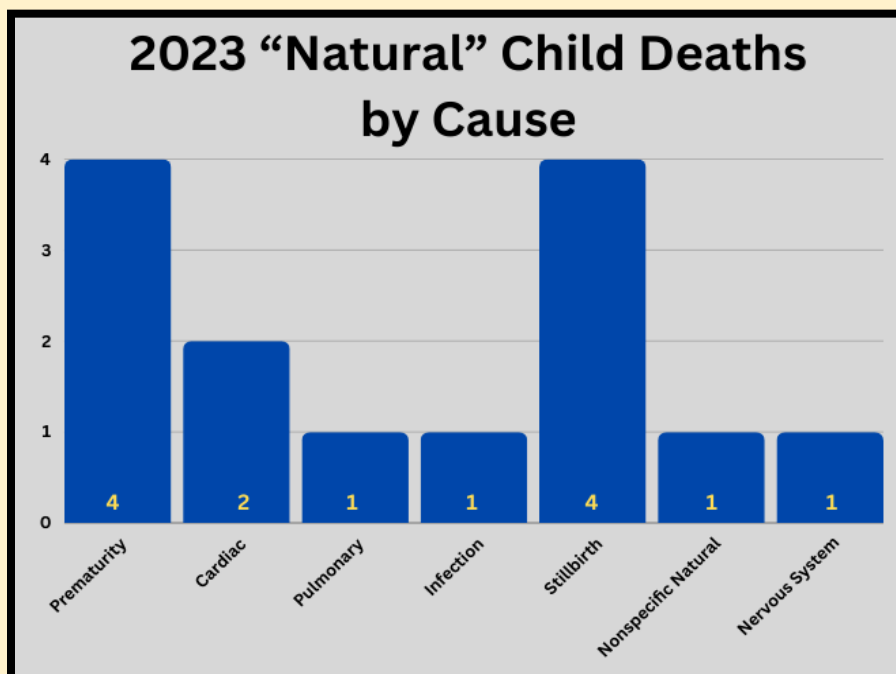
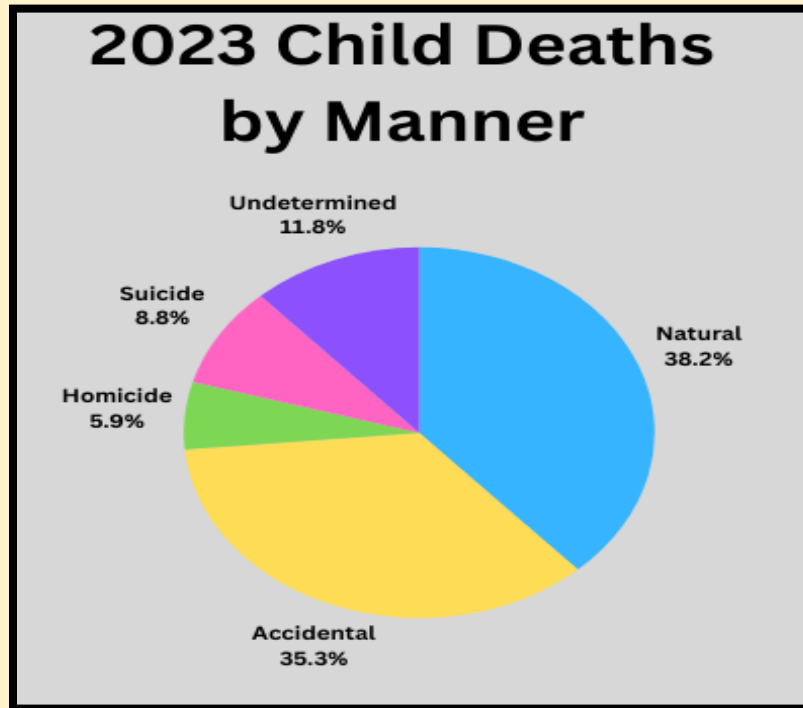
In 2023, the Berkeley County Coroner's Office deemed 8 deaths were of an “Undetermined” manner.



2023 Child Death Statistics

In this report Child deaths are defined as the unfortunate demise of an individual who was less than or equal to the age of seventeen.

In 2023 Berkeley County had 40 Child Deaths; 14 were classified as “Natural”; 12 classified as “Accidental”; 2 Classified as “Homicide”; 3 were classified as “Suicide”; and 4 were classified as “Undetermined”.



2023 Child Death Statistics Continued

