

**OFFICE OF THE
MEDICAL
EXAMINER**

Palm Beach County Medical
Examiner's Office
2024 Annual Report



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Introduction

The Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office is located at 3126 Gun Club Road in West Palm Beach. This facility includes medical examination areas, evidence and specimen storage areas, a tissue procurement area, X-ray facilities, and administrative areas and offices. Medicolegal death investigations are carried out 24 hours a day, every day of the year, including Federal Holidays. During weekdays, the PBCMEO is open to the public during normal business hours.

According to the Florida Legislature Office of Economic and Demographic Research¹, Palm Beach County is Florida's fourth most populous county, with 6.8% of Florida's population. In addition to its year round and seasonal residents, Palm Beach County has several million visitors per year. If any person, resident or visitor, dies within Palm Beach County, and the circumstances of the death fulfill the criteria defined by Florida Statute 406.11², they will be referred to the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office for investigation.

The Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office (PBCMEO), District 15 of the Florida Medical Examiner system, is responsible for determining the cause and manner of death of people who die in Palm Beach County and fulfill the criteria of Florida Statute 406.11². The Medical Examiner shall "make or have performed such examinations, investigations, and autopsies as he or she shall deem necessary or shall be requested by the state attorney" based on the following criteria of Florida Statute 406.11:

(a) When any person dies in the state:

1. Of criminal violence.
2. By accident.
3. By suicide.
4. Suddenly, when in apparent good health.
5. Unattended by a practicing physician or other recognized practitioner.
6. In any prison or penal institution.
7. In police custody.
8. In any suspicious or unusual circumstance.
9. By criminal abortion.
10. By poison.
11. By disease constituting a threat to public health.
12. By disease, injury, or toxic agent resulting from employment.

(b) When a dead body is brought into the state without proper medical certification.

(c) When a body is to be cremated, dissected, or buried at sea.

In 2024, 3,723 deaths were reported to the PBCMEO. This included 1,560 cases investigated and determined to not fulfill the criteria of F.S. 406.11. These are called non-Medical Examiner (non-ME) cases. The PBCMEO reviewed the death certificates of 9,366 decedents who were to be cremated, dissected, or buried at sea to determine if any fulfilled the criteria of F.S. 406.11 and thus become a Medical Examiner

¹ <https://edr.state.fl.us/content/area-profiles/county/palmbeach.pdf>

² http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=0400-0499/0406/Sections/0406.11.html

(ME) case. Of those 9,366 cremation reviews, 75 (0.8%) became ME cases because they fulfilled the criteria of F.S. 406.11. The 2024 annual report concentrates on the 2,163 Medical Examiner (ME) cases for the year 2024.

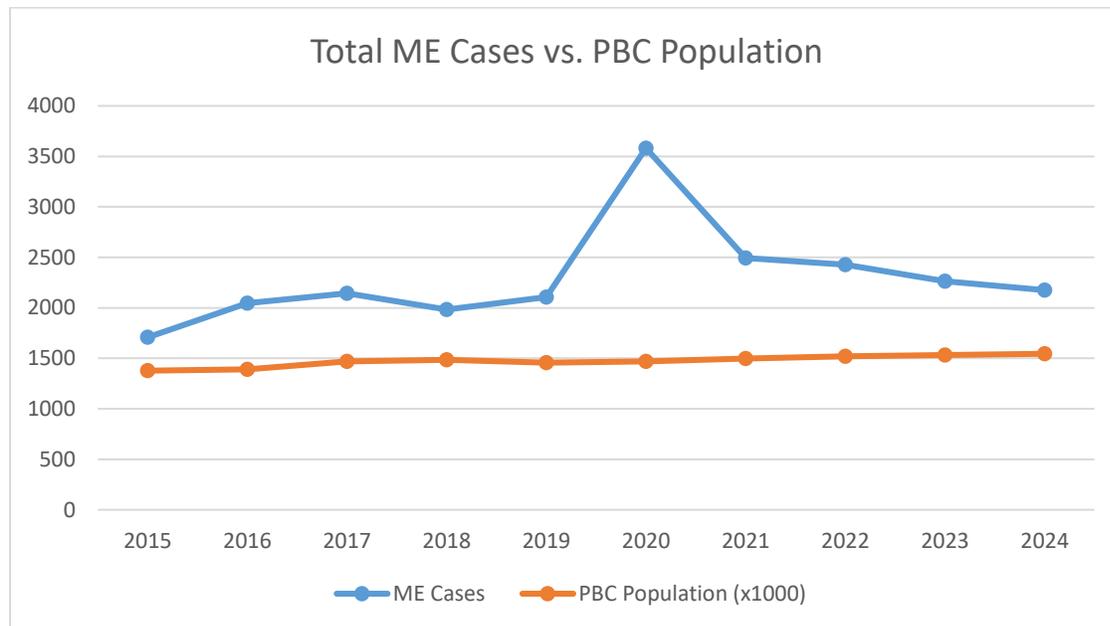
County Demographics

According to the Florida Legislature Office of Economic and Demographic Research, the population of Palm Beach County in 2024 was estimated to be 1,545,905 (The US Census Bureau³ estimate for 2024 was 1,582,055). Based on data from the Florida Legislature Office of Economic and Demographic Research, this is an approximately 5.6% increase over the 2020 census. The U.S. Census Bureau statistics for 2024 indicates that 51.2% of the population was female, 4.9% of the population was under 5 years of age, and 25.4% was over 65 years old. Non-Hispanic white was the most common race (51.8%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (24.5%), Black/African American (20.2%), and Asian (3.2%). Foreign-born persons made up 26.9% of the population. Of those individuals under age 65 years, 16.3% had no health insurance. The median household income (in 2023 dollars) was \$81,115 with 10.8% of the population living in poverty. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in 2024 1,855 people were homeless in Palm Beach County on a given night⁴.

Workload

Graph 1: Total ME Cases vs. PBC Population

Graph 1 shows the total number of ME cases from 2015 to 2024 compared to the population of Palm Beach County over the same time period.



The increase in the total number of ME cases from 2015 to 2017 is due largely to fatal opioid overdoses. The decrease in total ME cases in 2018 is due to a reduction in opioid fatalities. The dramatic increase between 2019 and 2020 is due to an increase in drug fatalities and the COVID-19 pandemic. Not accounting for COVID-19 cases, there is an upward trend in cases between 2019 and 2024, which is

³ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/palmbeachcountyflorida,FL/PST045224>

⁴ <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-dashboards?State=Florida>

consistent with an increase in deaths from multiple modalities, and loosely corresponds to the population increase in Palm Beach County during this period of time.

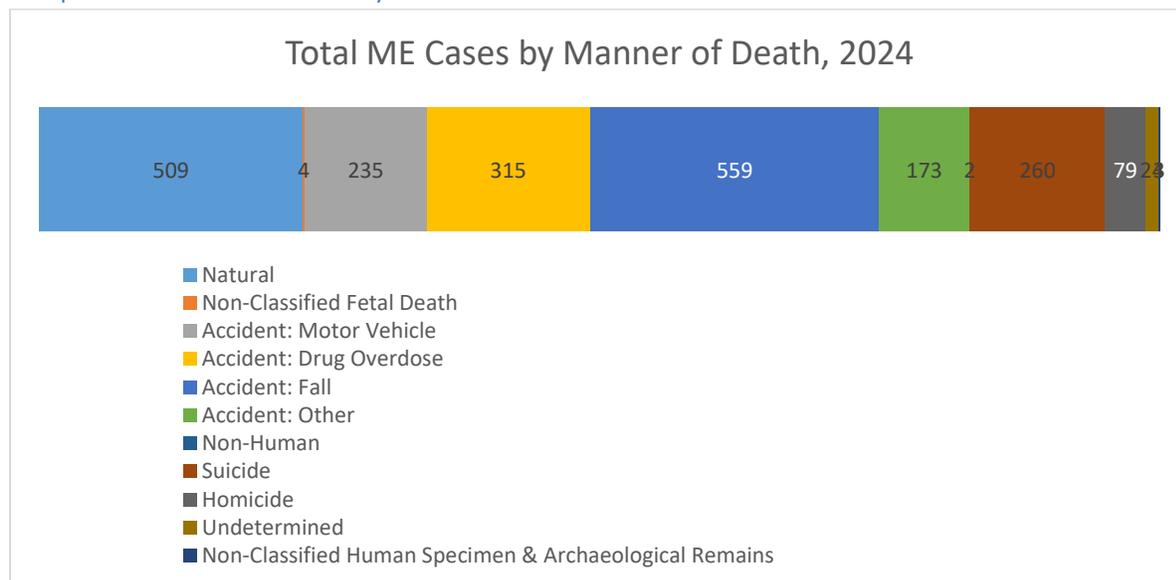
Manner of Death

For death certification, each death must be assigned an appropriate manner of death (Figure 1). The assignment of a manner of death is for public health purposes, although other entities (state attorney, insurance companies, etc.) may use this determination for their own purposes. The manners of death are natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined. A natural death is one that is entirely caused by a disease without contribution by any injury. Accidental deaths are those where an injury or poisoning causes death, and there is little or no evidence that the injury or poisoning occurred with the intent to harm or cause death. Suicides result from an injury or poisoning as a result of an intentional, self-inflicted act committed to do self-harm or cause the death of one’s self. Homicides are deaths that result from a volitional act committed by another person with the intention to cause fear, harm, or death.⁵ If the manner of death cannot be determined because there is more than one reasonable choice or there is a high degree of uncertainty, then it is undetermined.

Figure 1: Florida Death Certificate with Manner and Cause of Death Sections

BY: MEDICAL CERTIFIER	39. PROBABLE MANNER OF DEATH	The following are under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner:	40. REPORTED TO MEDICAL EXAMINER DUE TO CAUSE OF DEATH?
	<input type="checkbox"/> Natural <input type="checkbox"/> Accident <input type="checkbox"/> Suicide <input type="checkbox"/> Homicide <input type="checkbox"/> Pending Investigation <input type="checkbox"/> Undetermined	Enter the <u>chain of events</u> - diseases, injuries, or complications - that directly caused the death. Enter only one cause on a line. DO NOT enter terminal event such as cardiac arrest, respiratory arrest, or ventricular fibrillation without showing the etiology.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	41. CAUSE OF DEATH - PART I. (See instructions on back)		Approximate Interval: Onset to Death
	IMMEDIATE CAUSE (Final disease or condition resulting in death)	a. _____	
	Sequentially list conditions, if any, leading to the cause listed on line a. Enter the UNDERLYING CAUSE (disease or injury that initiated the events resulting in death) LAST	b. _____	
		c. _____	
		d. _____	

Graph 2: Total ME Cases by the Manner of Death



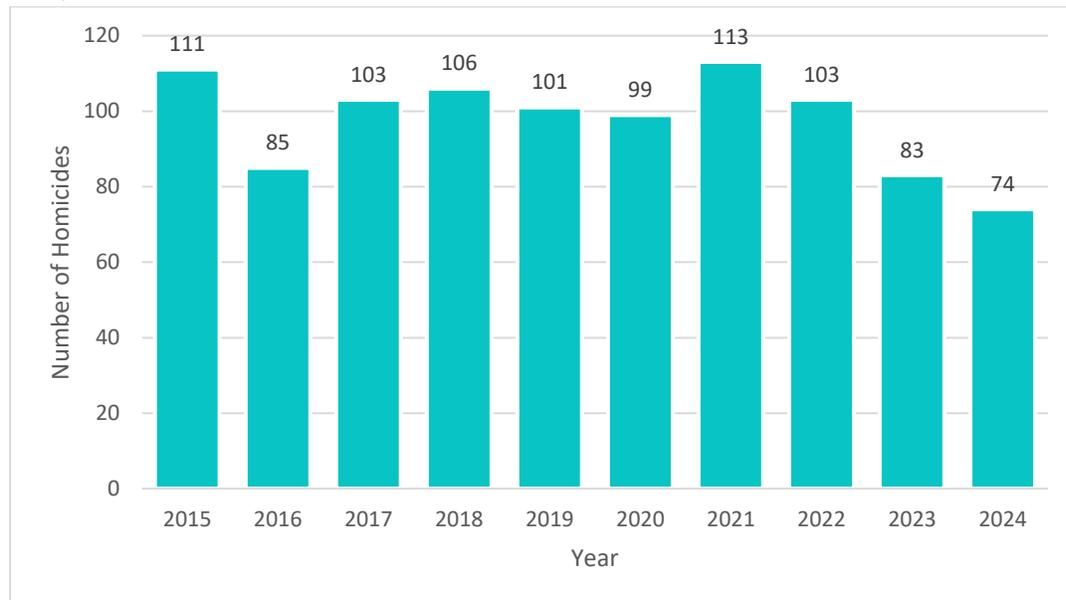
Graph 2 shows the proportions of death categorized by the manner of death in 2024. We further break down the accidental deaths into those involving motor vehicles, drug overdoses, falls, and other types of accidents such as drownings. Finally, we also include non-classified fetal deaths, non-human remains, and archaeological specimens that were examined in 2024.

In 2024, the majority (58.6%) of ME cases were accidents, and the plurality of the accidents were fall-related (43.8%). This is in line with year 2023, when the plurality of accidents were fall-related (39.4%). The majority of fatal falls resulted in head injury or femur (hip) fractures, and occurred in elderly individuals. Fatal drug overdoses constituted 24.7% of all accidents, and motor vehicle fatalities another 17.9% of all accidents.

Homicides

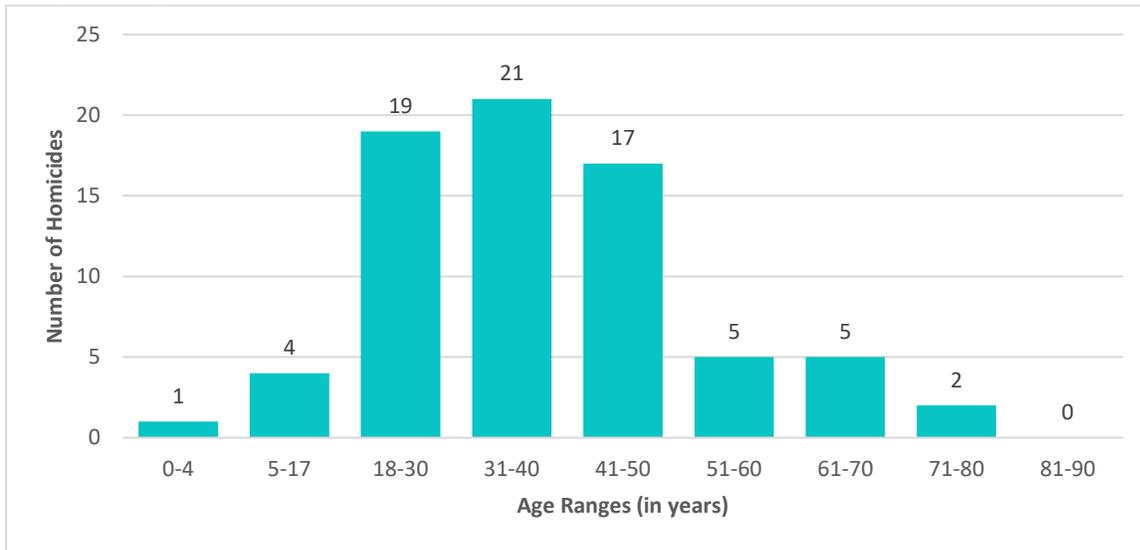
For death certification, homicide is defined as death at the hands of another person. Homicide determination is not a legal decision. The state attorney and investigative law enforcement agency will determine if and what criminal charges would be brought forth, not the Medical Examiner.

Graph 3: Annual Homicide Totals for 2015-2024



The average annual number of homicides for the last ten years is 98. In 2024, there were 24 fewer homicides than the annual average. The male:female ratio for homicide victims in 2024 was 5.2: 1. Most 2024 homicide victims were Black/African American (46), followed by White (18) and Hispanic/Latino (9). The average age of homicide victims was 38 years, and the age distribution of homicide victims is seen in Graph 4.

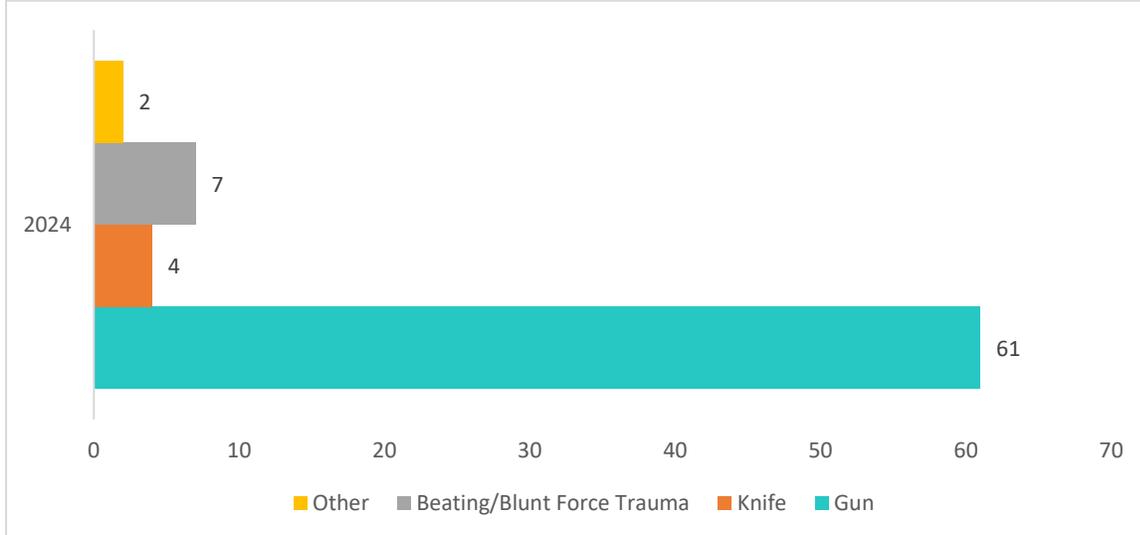
Graph 4: Age Distribution of Homicide Victims in 2024



The most common means or instrument of death in the 2024 homicides was the gun, as seen in Graph 5.

Guns far exceeded stabbings, beatings/blunt force trauma, and other methodologies as the means to kill another person in 2024. Other methodologies employed included compression of neck and fentanyl intoxication.

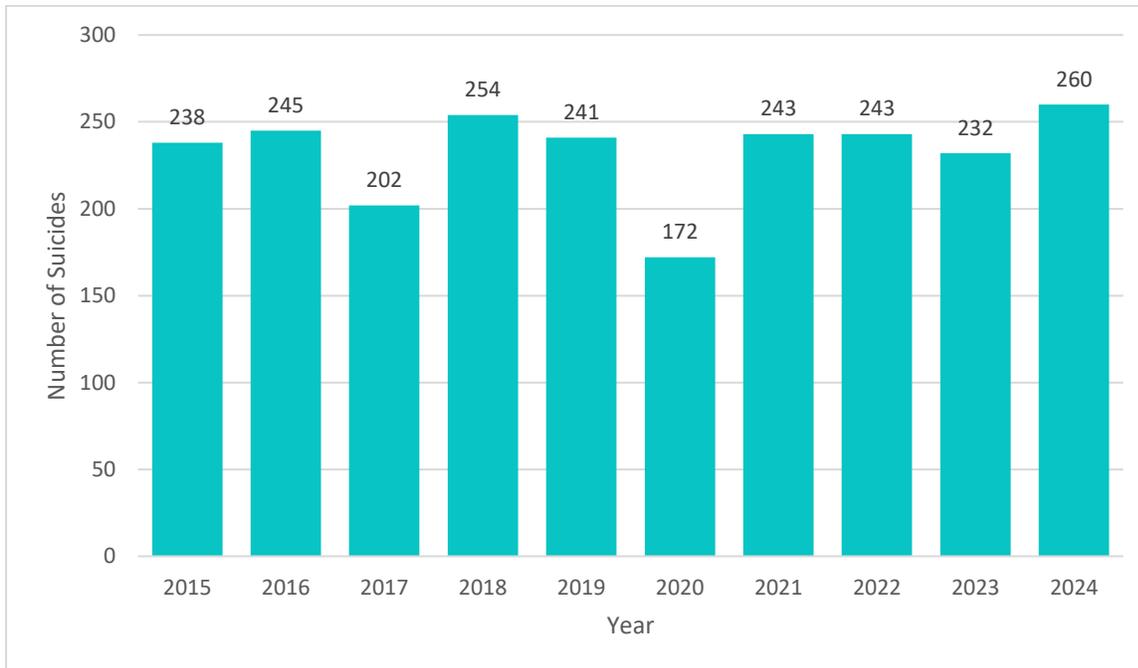
Graph 5: Types of Homicides in 2024



Suicides

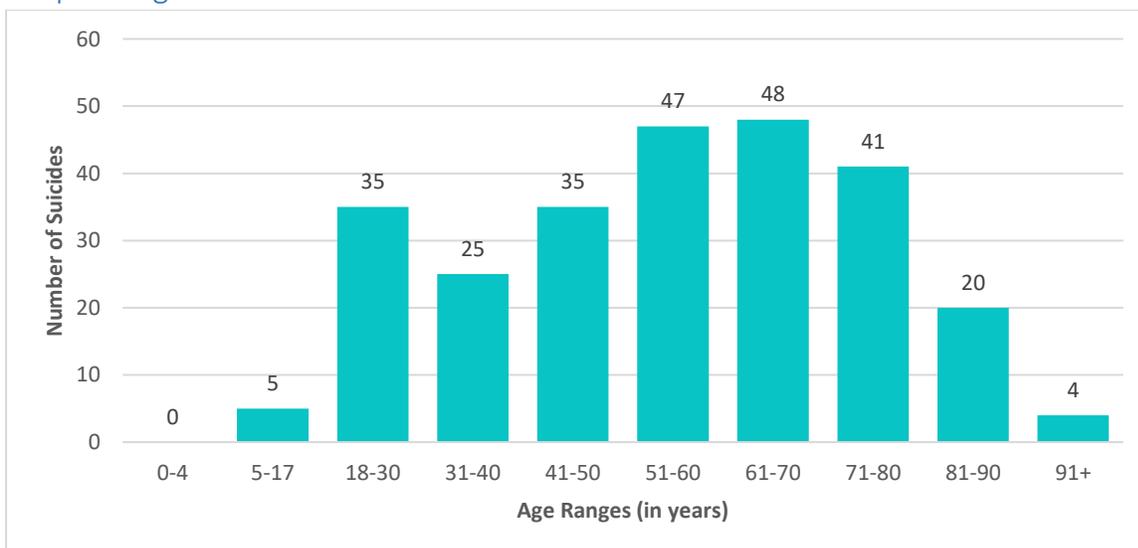
For death certification, suicide is defined as death at one's own hands.

Graph 6: Annual Suicide Totals for 2015-2024



The average annual number of suicides for the last ten years is 233. In 2024, there were 27 more suicides than the annual average. The male:female ratio for suicide victims in 2024 was 3.8:1. Most 2024 suicide victims were White (199), followed by Black/African American (29), Hispanic/Latino (28), Other Race or Ethnicity (3), and Asian (1). The average age of a suicide victim was 54.7 years. The age distribution of suicide victims is seen in Graph 7.

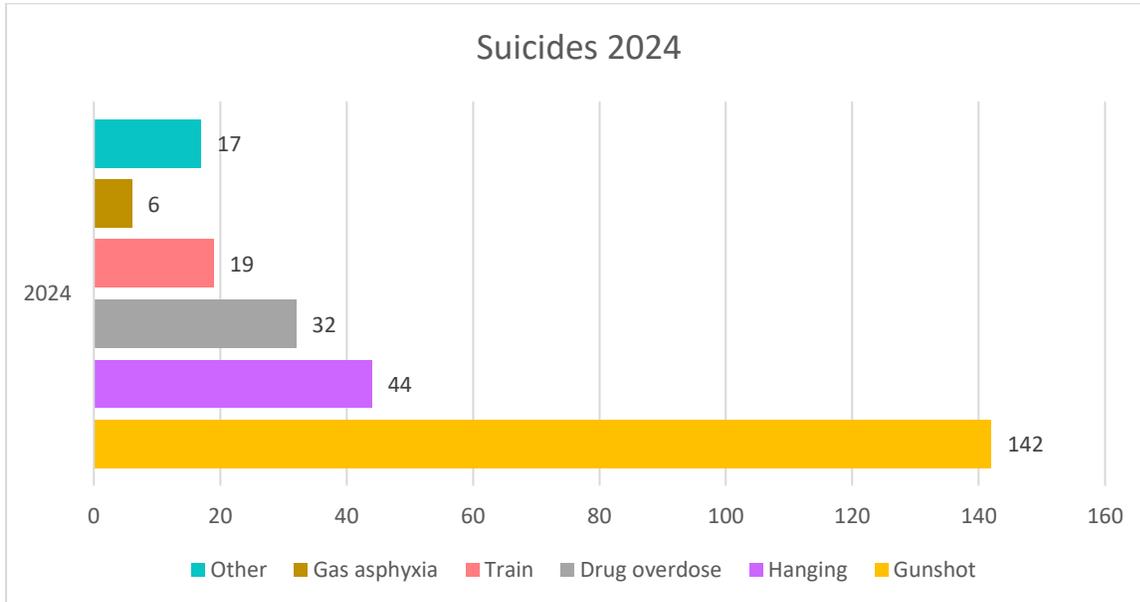
Graph 7: Age Distribution of Suicide Victims in 2024



The most common means or instrument of death in the 2024 suicides was the gun, as seen in Graph 8.

In 2024, guns exceeded drugs and hanging as the preferred means to kill oneself. Gas asphyxia included three deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning, one from nitrogen gas, and two from a combination of carbon monoxide, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide. The other types of suicide included sharp-force injuries (6), jumping from height (5), strangulations (2), pedestrian struck by vehicle (1), drowning (1), self-immolation (1), and asphyxia by plastic bag (1).

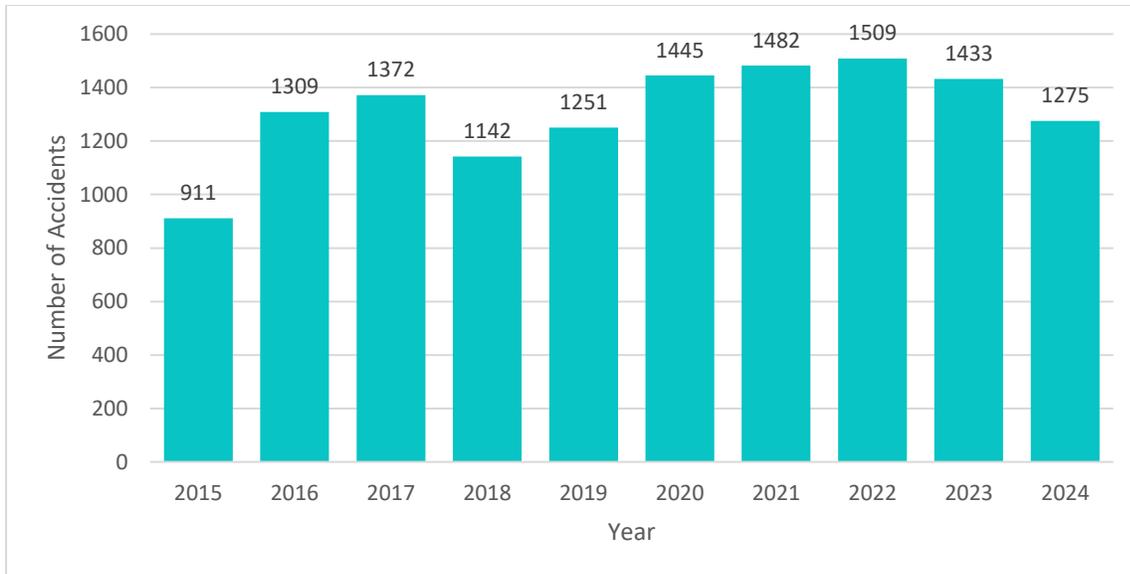
Graph 8: Types of Suicides in 2024



Accidents

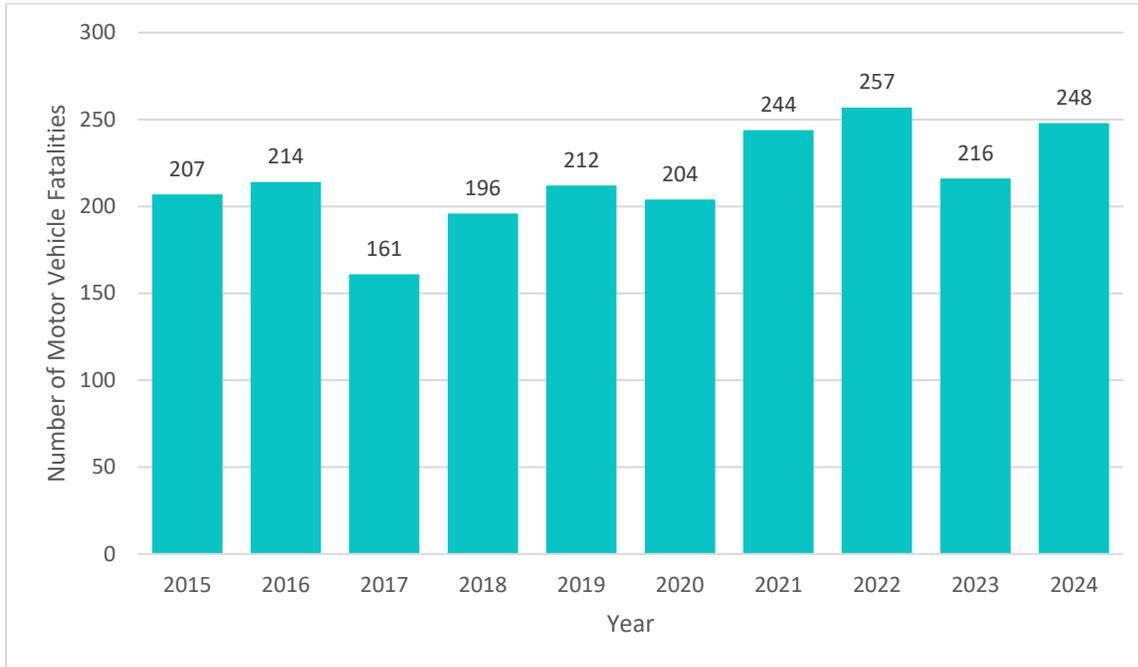
Accidents are deaths that result from an unintentional injury. In this report, we further break down the accidents into four large subgroups: deaths from motor vehicle collisions, drug overdoses, falls, and other accidental deaths. These subgroups are examined in greater detail later. In Graph 9, the marked increase in accidental deaths through 2022 is due to the rise in drug, predominantly opioid fatalities. The decrease in accidental deaths since 2022 coincides with an overall decrease in deaths in Palm Beach County during that time.

Graph 9: Annual Accident Totals for 2015-2024



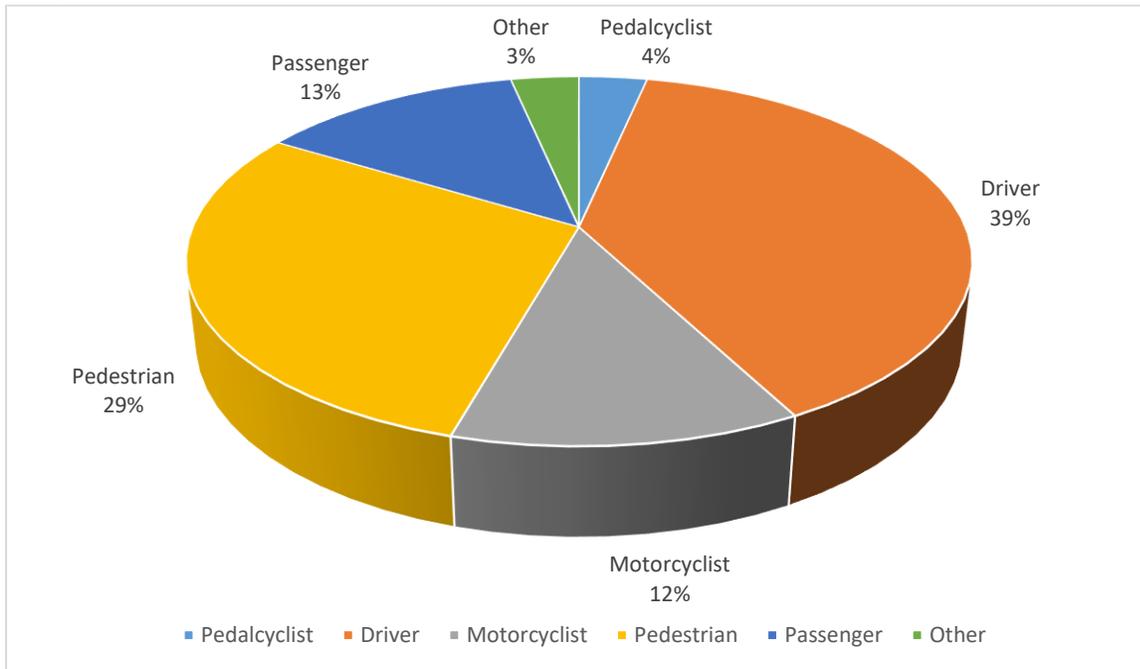
Accidents: Motor Vehicle Fatalities

Graph 10: Annual Accidental Motor Vehicle Fatality Totals for 2015-2024

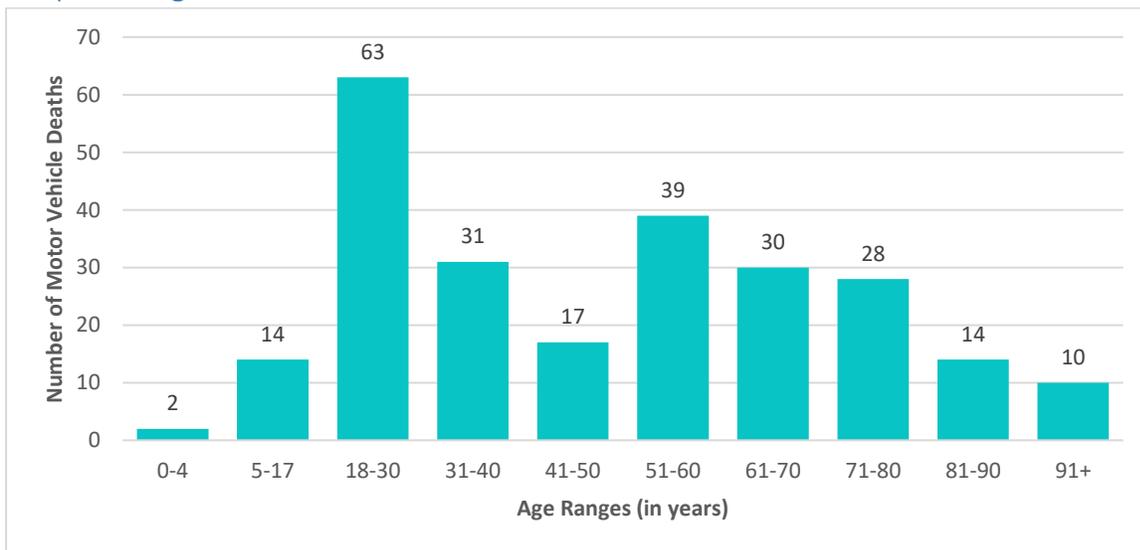


There were 248 accidental motor vehicle fatalities in Palm Beach County in 2024. Graph 10 shows the annual number of motor vehicle deaths from 2015 to 2024. In 2024, 24.2% of those killed in accidental motor vehicle collisions were driving a car. Other vehicles driven by decedents included trucks (2.6%), SUVs (6.9%), motorcycles (3.5%), ATVs (0.4%), boats (0.4%), dirt bikes (0.4%), and scooters (0.87%). An additional 3 individuals (1.3%) were driving unknown vehicle types when they were killed. The remaining victims' percentages are seen in Graph 11. In 2024, men were 2.7 times more likely to accidentally die in a motor vehicle collision than women. White individuals were 2.4 times more likely to accidentally die in a motor vehicle crash than those of Black/African American descent, and 1.9 times more likely to accidentally die in a motor vehicle crash than those of Hispanic/Latino descent. The average age of the victims was 49 years old. The age distribution of decedents by decades is seen in Graph 12.

Graph 11: Victims of 2024 Motor Vehicle Fatalities



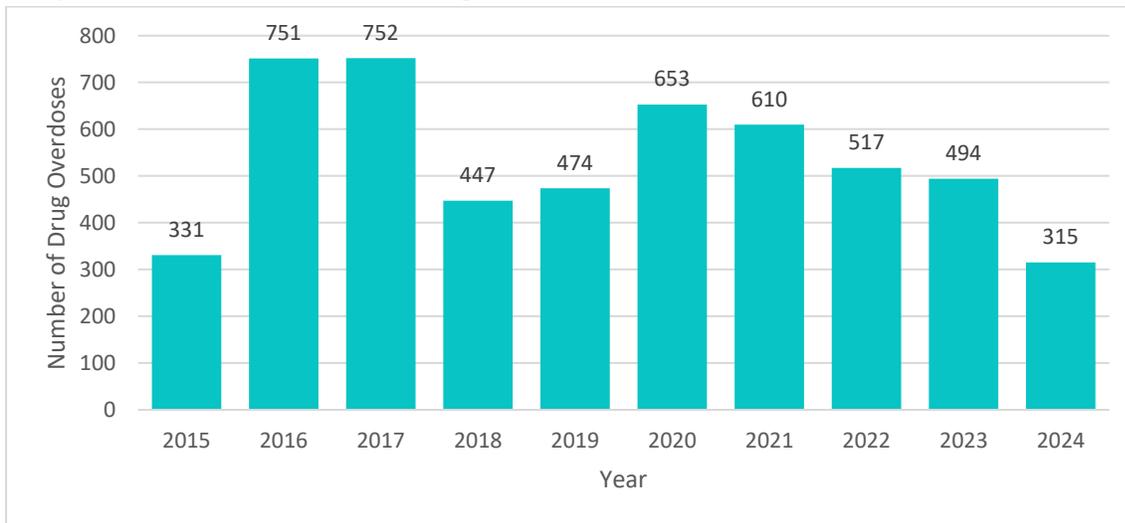
Graph 12: Age Distribution of Motor Vehicle Fatalities in 2024



Accidents: Drug Overdoses

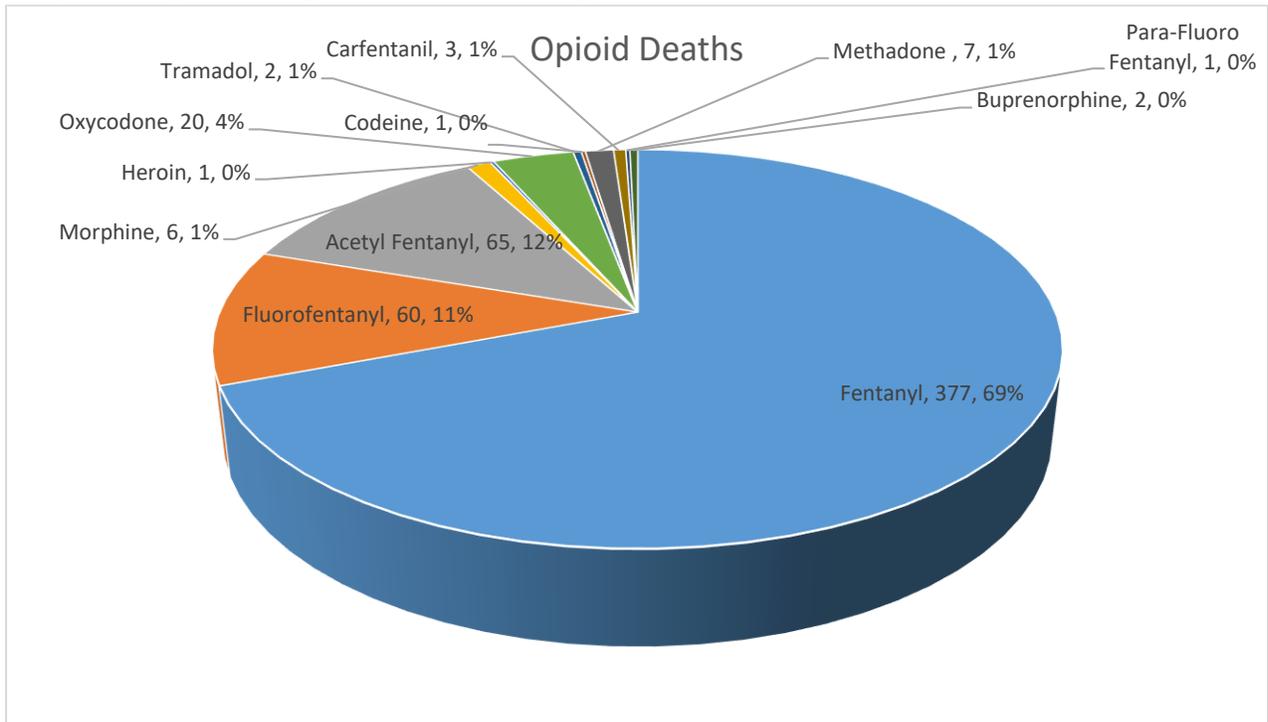
If a drug or drugs accidentally caused or contributed to the death of a person, then this was counted as an accidental drug death. Alcohol is considered a drug, along with illicit drugs (e.g., heroin, cocaine), prescription medications, and non-prescription medications. Opioids are a subset of both illicit drugs (e.g., heroin) and prescription medications (e.g., oxycodone). Suicidal drug overdoses, and drug overdoses in which the manner of death was undetermined, are not included in these Graphs.

Graph 13: Annual Accidental Drug Overdose Totals for 2015-2024



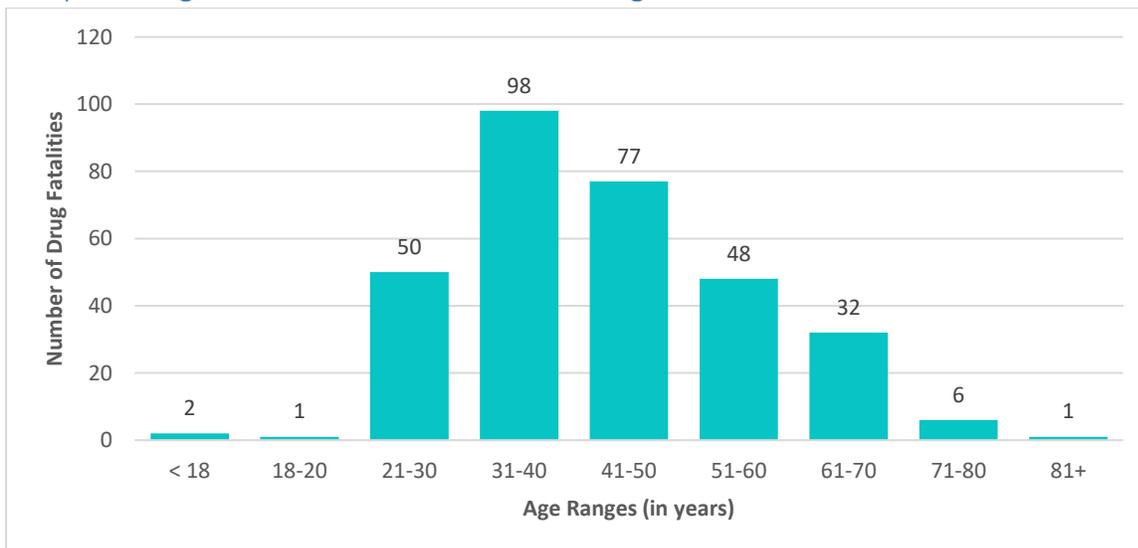
In 2024, there were 315 accidental drug fatalities, 242 of which involved one or more opioid drugs. The relative percentage of opioid drugs causing or contributing to the 242 drug fatalities in 2024 is seen in Graph 14.

Graph 14: Opioid Drugs in Accidental Drug Deaths, 2024



Fentanyl and its analogs (including acetyl fentanyl and fluorofentanyl) far exceeded the other opiates (such as heroin and oxycodone) in 2024. Most opioid deaths had multiple opiates contributing to the death; 19 opioid deaths were caused by illicit fentanyl alone. In 2024, the average age of accidental drug fatality victims was 43 years old. The age distribution of those dying from an accidental drug overdose is seen in Graph 15. The victims were predominantly men (2.3:1). White individuals were 5.1 times more likely to die of an accidental drug overdose than those of Black/African American ancestry, and 5.2 times more likely to die of an accidental overdose than those of Hispanic/Latino ancestry.

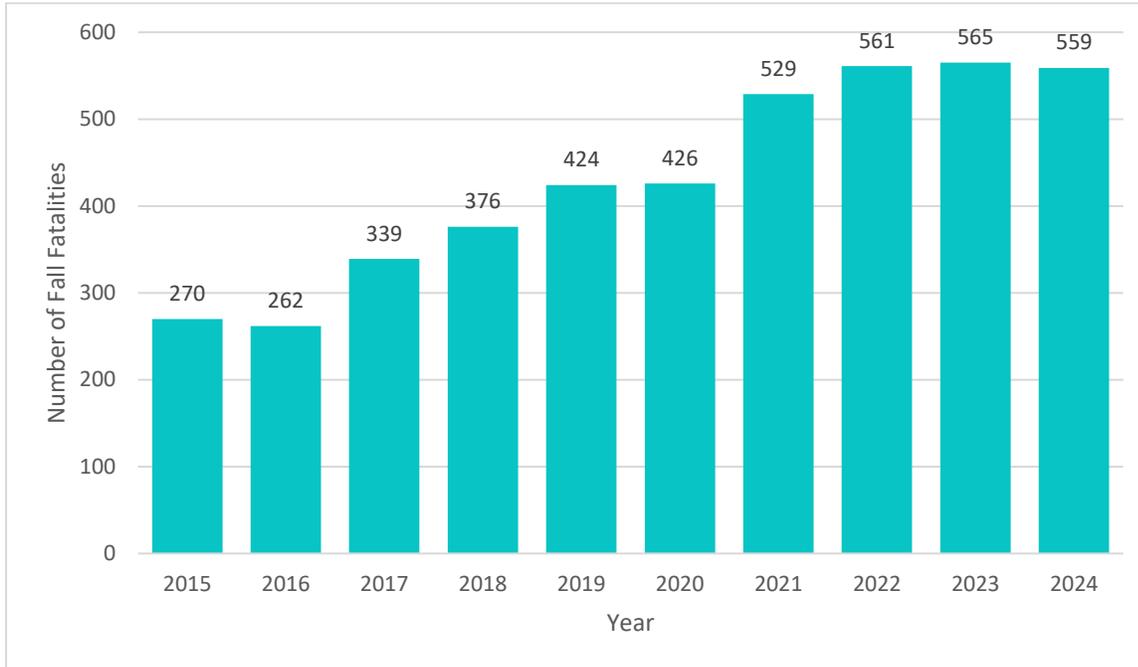
Graph 15: Age Distribution of Accidental Drug Overdose Fatalities in 2024



Accidents: Falls

Fatal falls have risen in recent years, as seen in Graph 16. The vast majority of these deaths occur in unstable elders who fall from a standing position. Women often have osteoporosis and are more likely to fracture their hip. Men with heart disease who were treated with anticoagulants were more likely to strike their head leading to fatal brain hemorrhage.

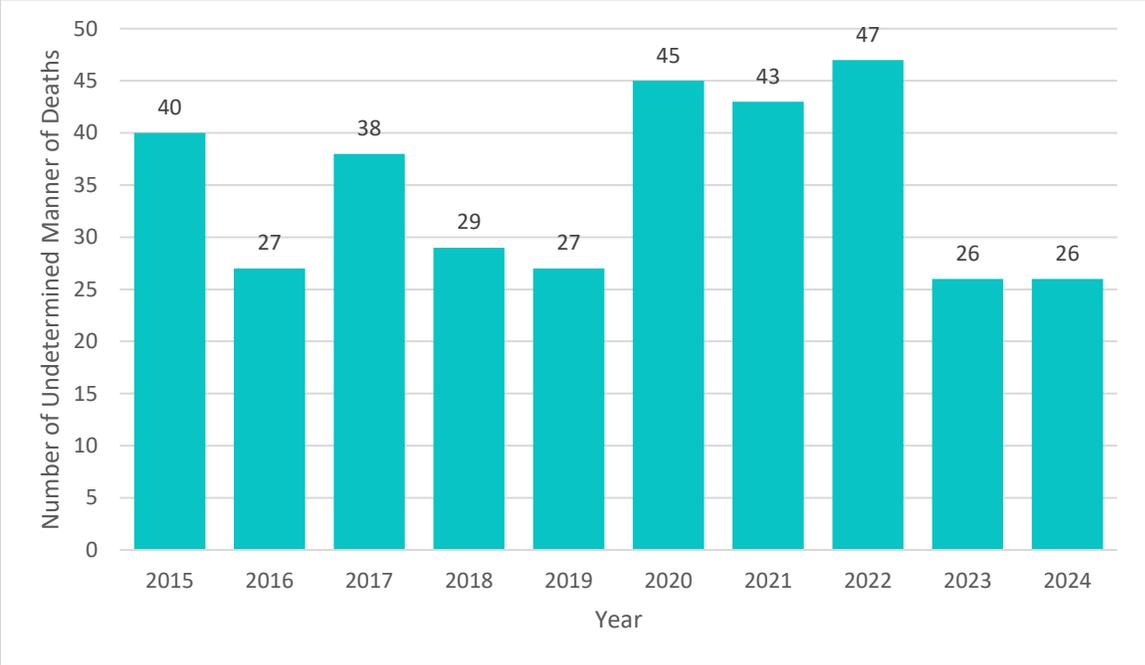
Graph 16: Annual Fatalities Caused by Falls Totals for 2015-2024



Deaths with an Undetermined Manner of Death

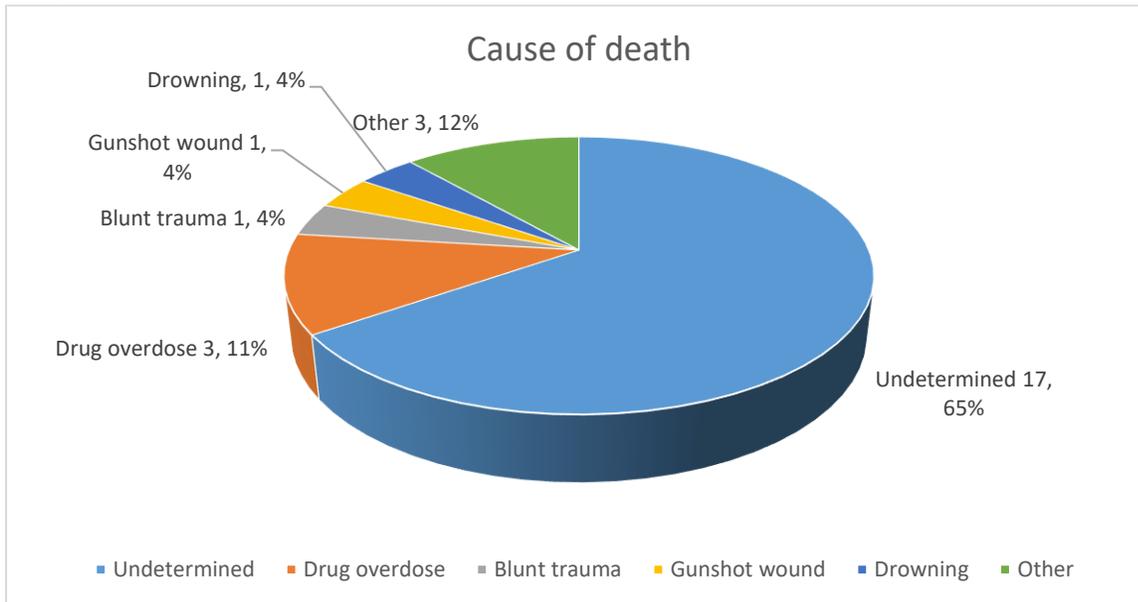
The manner of death is how the death came about, and is for death certification and public health purposes. The manners of death are natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined. If the manner of death cannot be determined because there is more than one reasonable choice, then it is undetermined. The annual number of deaths with an undetermined manner from 2015 to 2024 is seen in Graph 17.

Graph 17: Annual Undetermined Death Totals for 2015-2024



In 2024, there were 26 deaths in which the manner of death could not be determined. Cases where the manner of death was listed as undetermined may always be amended if additional information or circumstances become known. The causes of death in these cases are seen in Graph 18.

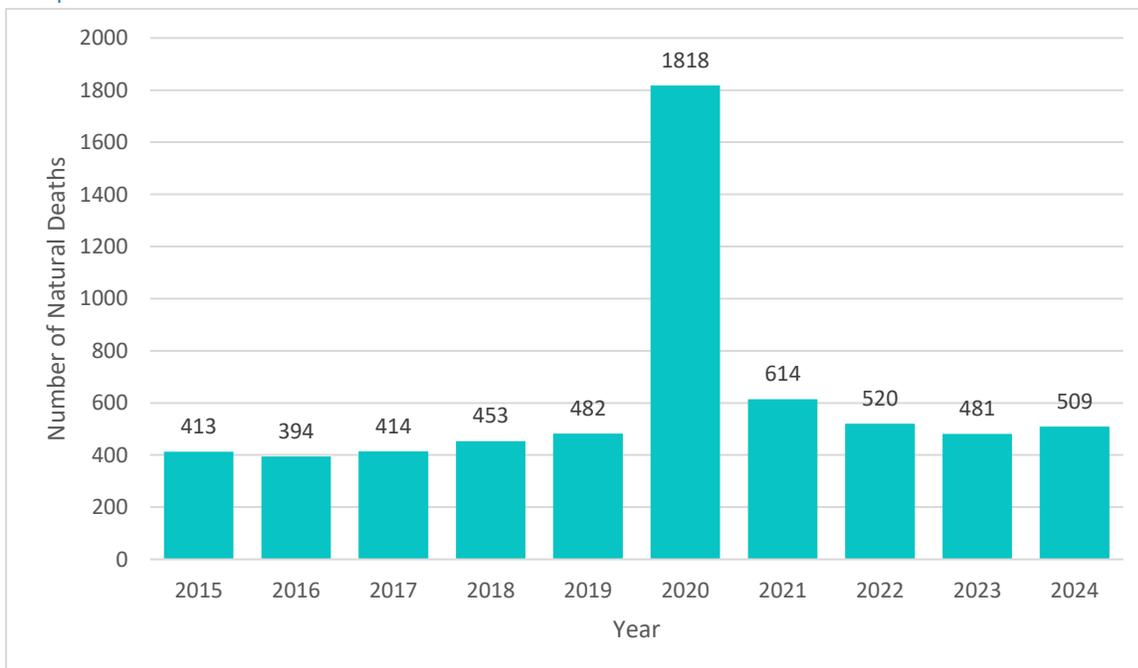
Graph 18: Causes of Death in 2024 Undetermined Manner of Death Cases



Natural Deaths

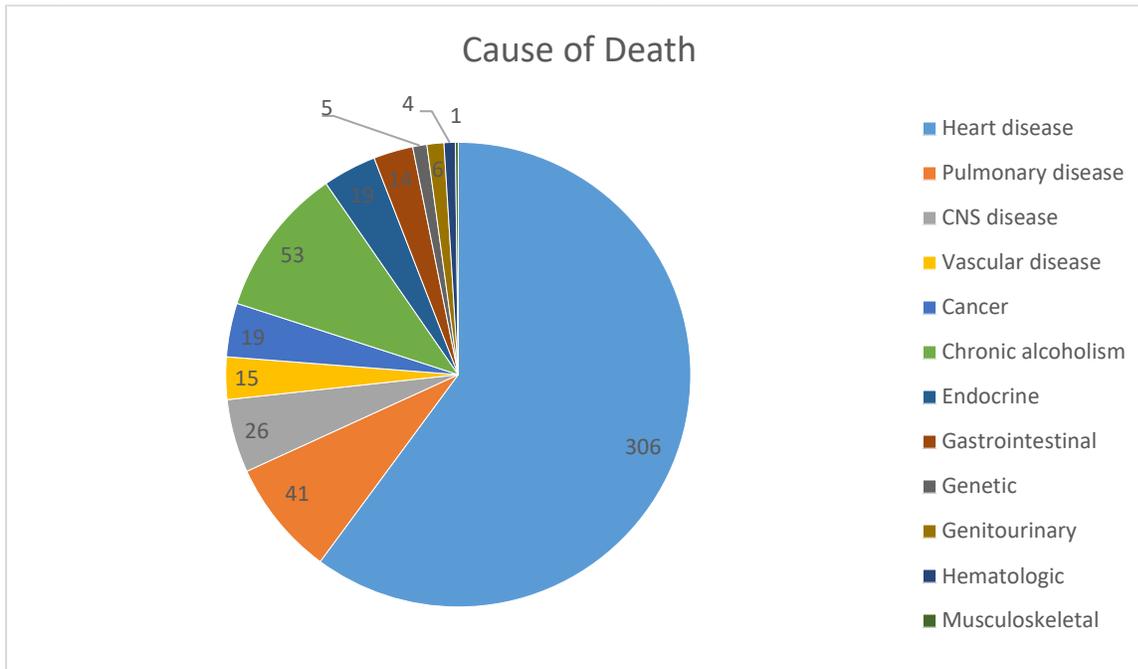
A natural death is one that is entirely caused by a disease without contribution by any injury. The annual number of natural deaths from 2015 to 2024 is seen in Graph 19.

Graph 19: Annual Natural Death Totals for 2015-2024



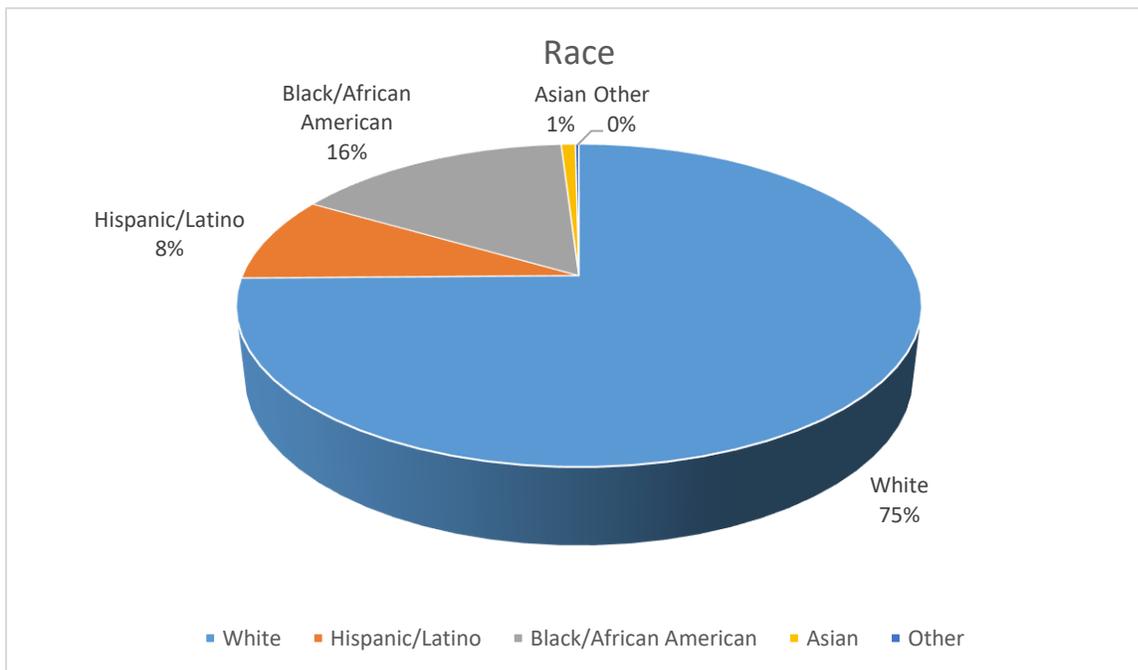
In 2024, the majority of natural deaths investigated by the Medical Examiner were due to heart disease, which is most likely to kill suddenly without any previous signs or symptoms. Graph 20 shows the diseases that caused natural deaths and examined by the Medical Examiner in 2024.

Graph 20. Causes of Natural Death Examined by the Medical Examiner in 2024



Of those who died of heart disease in 2024, 94% died of hypertension and/or atherosclerotic coronary artery disease. In 2024, the average age of those who died of natural disease, and fell under Medical Examiner jurisdiction, was 64 years with a range of 1.5 years to 101 years. Men outnumbered women 2.1:1. Graph 21 shows the relative proportions of people who died of natural disease by their race.

Graph 21: Race of Decedents Who Died of Natural Disease and Examined by the Medical Examiner in 2024



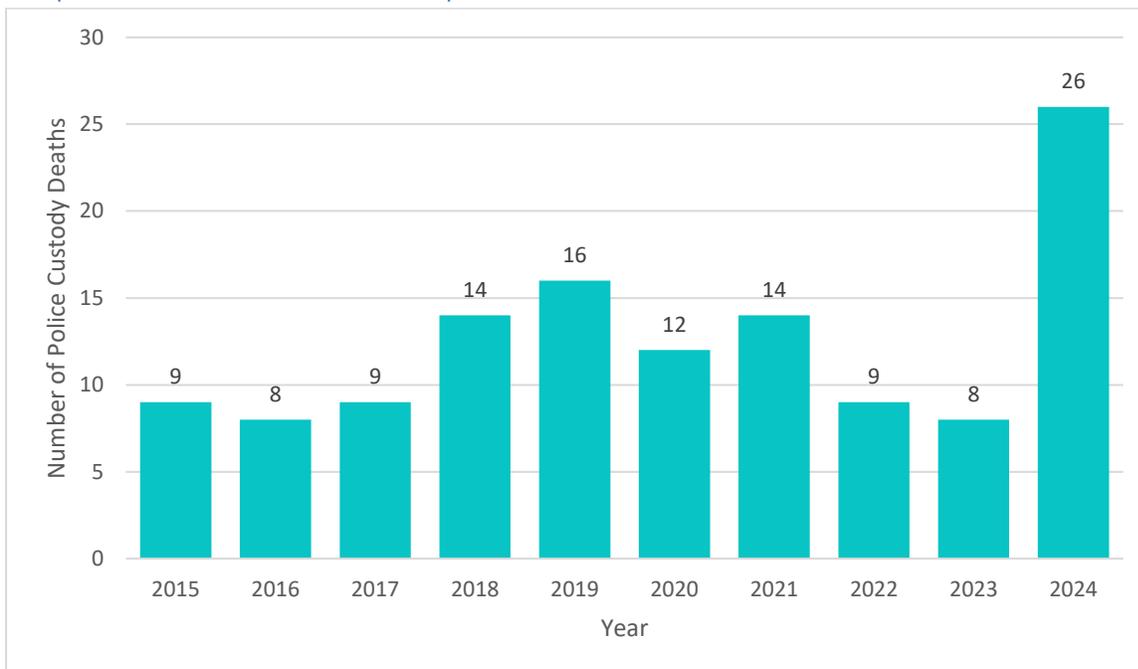
Deaths in Police Custody*

Deaths in police custody are of two broad categories: law enforcement-involved, and penal institution, as defined by the Florida Medical Examiner Commission. Law enforcement-involved deaths include, but are not limited to, individuals who die while in police pursuit, during or after arrest, while under house arrest, and those who are killed by law enforcement officials while in the line of duty. In 2024, twenty-four men and two women died in police custody. Their ages ranged from 19 to 85 years old.

The breakdown of those who died while in police custody is as follows. Eight people died of natural causes while incarcerated, seven people shot themselves in police custody (during stand-offs, under police pursuit, while on parole with an ankle monitor, or pre-arrest), three people were shot by police officers, two people died in a motor vehicle collision while under police pursuit, one person overdosed while incarcerated, one person died in a motor vehicle collision while on parole (with an ankle monitor), one person drowned while fleeing from police pursuit, one person fell while incarcerated, one person hanged himself while incarcerated, and one person was assaulted while incarcerated.

*The increase in deaths in police custody for 2024 stems from re-categorization within the Medical Examiner Database tracking system, and includes individuals who would not have been previously accounted for in earlier years.

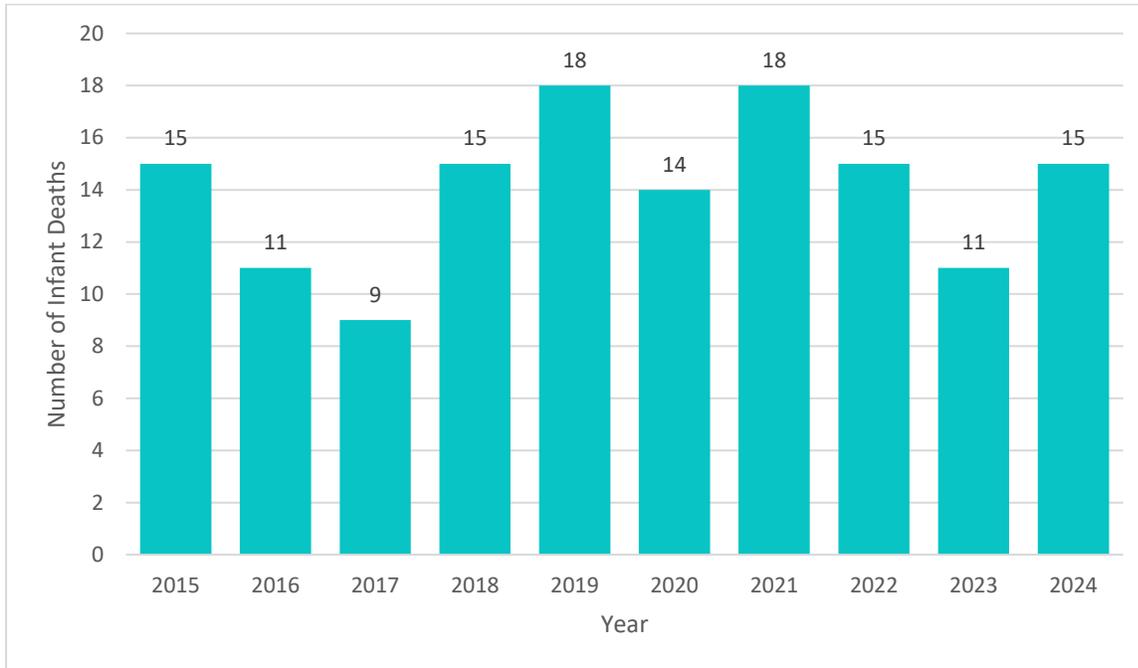
Graph 22: Annual Police Custody Deaths Totals for 2015-2024



Infant Deaths

An infant is a child under the age of one year. Graph 23 shows the number of infant deaths from 2015 to 2024.

Graph 23: Annual Infant Deaths Totals for 2015-2024

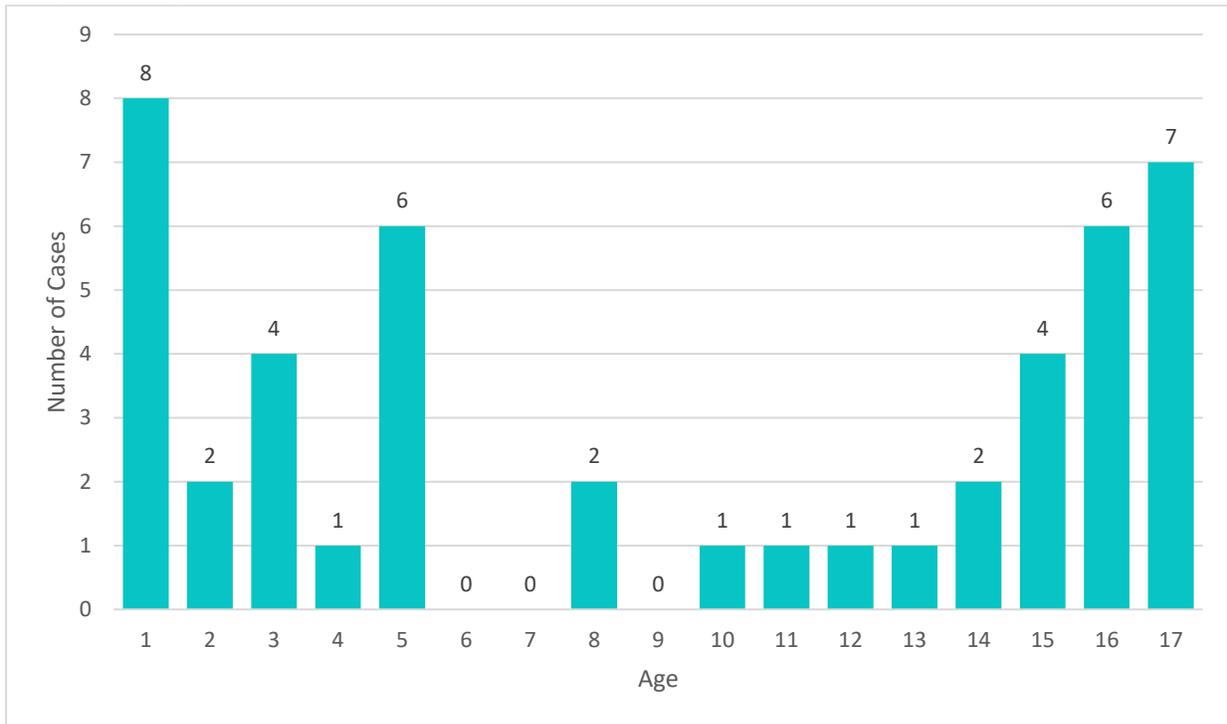


In 2024, fifteen infant deaths were investigated by the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner’s Office. Six infants were male, and nine were female. Eight infants were Black/African American, two infants were Hispanic/Latino, and five infants were White. The age range was newborn to 6 months, and the average age was 2.7 months. Ten deaths were asphyxia-related. Two deaths were due to pneumonia, one death was related to viral infections, one death was classified as Sudden Unexplained Infant Death, and one was classified as undetermined. Ten deaths were related to an unsafe sleeping environment. Four non-classified fetal deaths were also investigated by the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner’s Office in 2024. Three deaths were listed as Fetal Demise, and one was listed as Undetermined.

Child Deaths

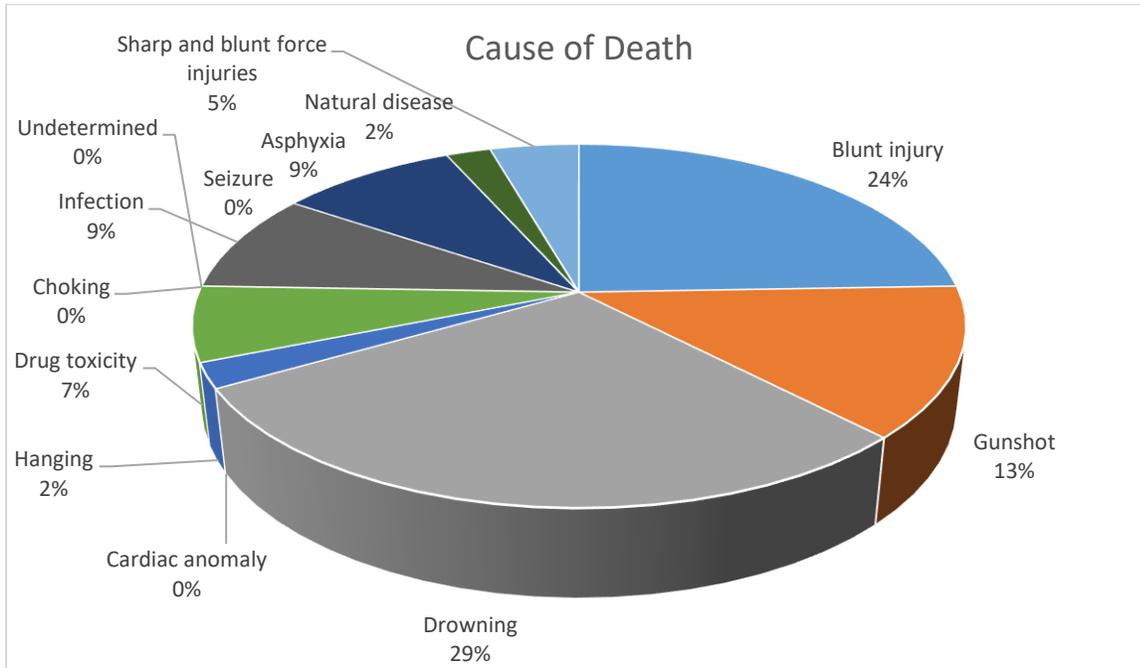
For our purposes, a child is greater than 1 year old, but less than 18 years of age. By this definition, 46 child deaths were investigated by the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner’s Office in 2024. The average age was 9 years and the age distribution of child deaths in 2024 is seen in Graph 24. The ratio of males to females was 2.5:1. Twenty-three of the children were Black/African American, eleven were Hispanic/Latino, eleven were White, and one was Asian.

Graph 24: Age Distribution in Children Who Died in 2024

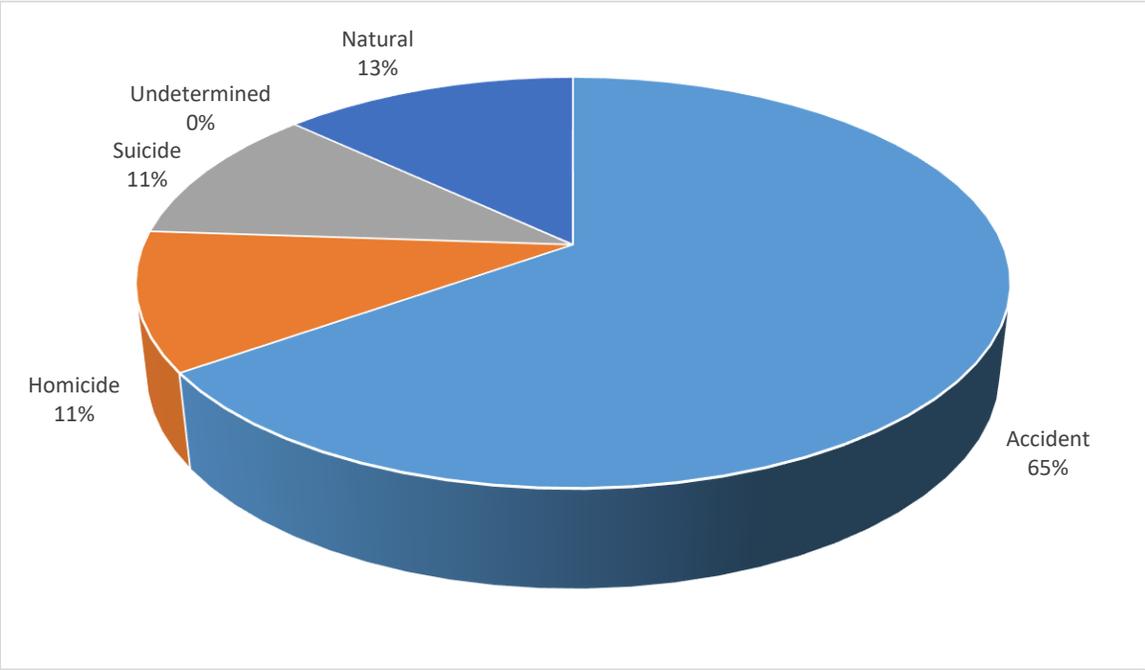


The distribution of cases by cause and manner of death are seen in Graphs 25 and 26.

Graph 25: Cause of Death in Child Deaths in 2024



Graph 26: Manner of Death in Child Deaths in 2024



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

District 15: Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office website

<http://discover.pbcgov.org/medicalexaminer/Pages/default.aspx>

Email: D15ME@pbc.gov

Florida Statute 406

http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=0400-0499/0406/0406PARTIContentsIndex.html

FAC 11-G

<https://www.flrules.org/gateway/RuleNo.asp?!D=11G-2.006>

Practice Guidelines for Florida ME

<https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/MEC/Publications-and-Forms/Documents/2010-Guidelines-Adopted.aspx>

Florida Association of Medical Examiners

<http://www.fameonline.org/>