

BERKS COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



Cover Page: The Reading Pagoda at sunset.

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The Berks County Coroner’s Office (BCCO) serves Berks County as an independent row office in the County of Berks to protect public health and provide valuable information to the criminal justice system by investigating all sudden, unexpected, and non-natural deaths. While many natural deaths can be certified by the decedent’s physician, approximately one-quarter of deaths require further investigation to determine the cause and manner of death and ensure public health and safety. The Coroner’s Office serves the 439,117 residents of Berks County, covering an area of approximately 866 square miles.

We assist families in providing answers to those affected by sudden and traumatic loss, helping to protect public health by contributing to education and research, increasing public understanding of the forensic sciences, and encouraging and training the next generation of investigators and leaders in the field. BCCO regularly compiles and reports data to help improve or save lives by addressing risk factors, common issues and trends.

TOTAL CASES
INVESTIGATED

973

(3% decrease from 2023)

TOTAL AUTOPSIES
PERFORMED

88

(10% decrease from 2023)

In 2024, the BCCO’s staff consisted of two board-certified forensic pathologists, Dr. Neil A. Hoffman, M.D. and Dr. Supriya Kuruvilla, M.D., as well as three autopsy assistants, twelve death investigators, one forensic toxicologist, and one administrative staff member. Four staff members are certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators.

The Berks County Coroner's Office has jurisdiction for certain categories of deaths which occur in the County of Berks, regardless of whether the decedent was a County resident or non-resident. County residents who die in other counties don't fall under the Berks County Coroner's Office jurisdiction, even if the precipitating event for the death occurred in Berks County. Only the Coroner can certify a death that occurred by a manner other than Natural.

The role of the Coroner is to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding such deaths for the purpose of determining the cause and manner of death, and whether there is sufficient reason for the Coroner to believe that the death may have resulted from a criminal act or criminal neglect of a person other than the deceased. If the investigation does not provide the necessary information, the Coroner shall order an autopsy on the body and/or may conduct an inquest.

As part of their investigation, the Coroner shall determine the identity of the deceased and notify the next of kin (NOK) of the deceased. Pennsylvania Statute 16 P.S. §1218-B describes the roles and responsibilities of the Coroner in investigating deaths. A complete forensic investigation provides the cause and manner of how an individual died. The investigation can assist in settling insurance and estate claims as well as the implementation of civil and criminal actions. Identifying cause and manner of death is a critical component of ensuring public health and safety. The surviving family and general public can have peace of mind that a thorough death investigation was completed.

It is the responsibility of the BCCO to identify the decedent and notify next-of-kin. In many cases, identification and next-of-kin notification can be quickly achieved. However, in cases of burns, extensive injury, or decomposition, this can prove more challenging. BCCO ensures all leads have been exhausted in pursuit of identification and notification. At the time of this report, 11 Berks

County cases dating back to 1986 are pending identification, with no cases from 2024 pending identification. In 2024, 21 unclaimed remains were collected at the Coroner's Office.

Responsibilities of the Coroner:

- Pronounce death
- Determine cause and manner of death
- Identify human remains
- Notify next-of-kin
- Investigate death in conjunction with but independent of law enforcement agencies
- Collect evidence on or in the body



Death investigators Terri Straka, left, and Joel Bonilla, right, with Berks County Coroner John Fielding display the fingerprints that recently led to the identification of Nicolas P. Grubb, 27, of Fort Washington, as the remains found in a cave along the Appalachian Trail near the Pinnacle on Jan. 16, 1977. (Photo courtesy of BILL UHRICH – READING EAGLE)

According to Pennsylvania Statute (16 P.S. § 1218-B "Coroner's Investigation"), the categories of deaths that fall under the Coroner's jurisdiction are:

1. A sudden death not caused by a readily recognizable disease or, if the cause of death cannot be properly certified, by a physician on the basis of prior recent medical attendance.
2. A death occurring under suspicious circumstances, including if alcohol, a drug or another toxic substance may have had a direct bearing on the outcome.
3. A death occurring as a result of violence or trauma, whether apparently homicidal, suicidal or accidental; including, but not limited to, a death due to mechanical, thermal, chemical, electrical or radiation injury, drowning, cave-in or subsidence.
4. A death in which trauma, chemical injury, drug overdose or reaction to a drug or medication or medical treatment was a primary or secondary, direct or indirect, contributory, aggravating or precipitating cause of death.
5. A perioperative death in which the death is not readily explainable on the basis of prior disease.
6. A death in which the body is unidentified or unclaimed.
7. A death known or suspected to be due to contagious disease and constituting a public hazard.
8. A death occurring in prison or a penal institution or while in the custody of the police.
9. A death of an individual whose body is to be cremated, buried at sea or otherwise disposed of so as to be unavailable for examination thereafter.
10. A sudden and unexplained infant death.
11. A stillbirth. (Fetal death over 16 weeks' gestation per Pennsylvania law)

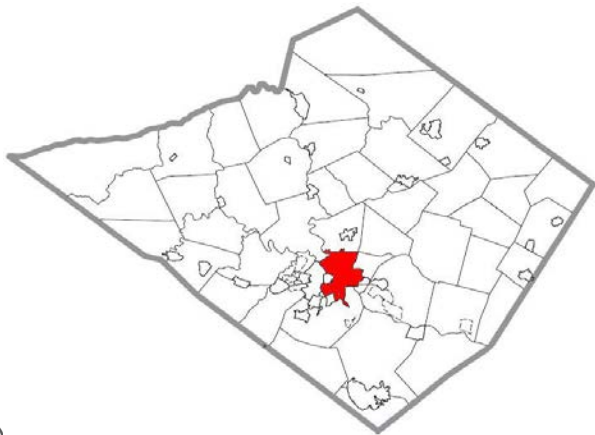
Overall Breakdown of Deaths Recorded by the Berks County Coroner’s Office

3618

Total Cases

1013

Coroner Cases



Top Municipalities (Coroner Cases, 2024)

WEST READING	307	13	TILDEN
READING	186	13	HAMBURG
MUHLENBERG	37	12	LAURELDALE
SPRING	34	11	ROBESON
EXETER	31	10	BERN
WYOMISSING	24	9	BOYERTOWN
CUMRU	23	9	LOWER HEIDELBERG
AMITY	16	9	BRECKNOCK
MAIDENCREEK	15	9	FLEETWOOD
S. HEIDELBERG	13	8	ALBANY

There are five manners of death that can be classified on a Pennsylvania Death Certificate.

Natural - Deaths due solely to disease or aging

Accident - Deaths due to unintentional injury

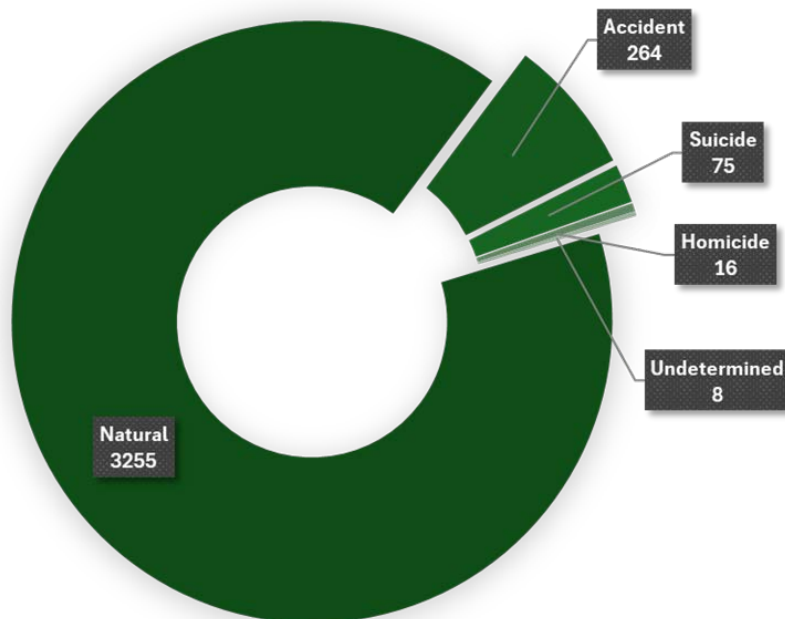
Suicide - Deaths due to an intentional self-inflicted injury

Homicide - Deaths due to the intentional injurious action of another individual

Undetermined - Deaths in this category may or may not have a determined cause of death, or may have several different possible manners

Unclassified - Death of a fetus in utero (in the uterus) does not receive a manner determination

2024 Berks County Deaths



These are natural deaths due to aging or disease that occurred suddenly or while not under the care of a physician. Most notably there has been a steady decline in COVID-19 related deaths, from 293 in 2022 to 45 in 2024.

3255 Total

Natural Death Causes (Coroner Cases- 588 total)

Heart disease	279
Respiratory disease (include smoking-related)	66
Cancer/Neoplasm	45
Geriatric Decline/Dementia/Alzheimer's	36
Diabetes mellitus	28
Cerebrovascular diseases/Stroke	25
Liver disease (include alcohol-related)	22
Sepsis/Infection	22
Epilepsy/Seizure	13
Pulmonary embolism	12
COVID-19	11
Kidney Disease	10
Other	10
Gastrointestinal	9

Significant Co-morbidities - The diseases that are most commonly listed as significant contributing factors in death alongside those causes listed above include obesity, diabetes, pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, smoking, and chronic alcoholism.

The Berks County Coroner's Office saw a decrease in Accidental deaths (283 in 2023) largely due to a 19% decrease in motor vehicle crashes. Overall drug deaths decreased by 2%.

264

Total

Drugs	35%	92
Falls	35%	92
Motor Vehicle Crashes	16%	43
Pedestrian Injury	2%	6
Fires/Burns	2%	6
Asphyxias	2%	6
Choking	2%	5
Drowning	1%	3
Weather Exposure	1%	3
Unsafe Pediatric Sleep	1%	3
Others	1%	3
Carbon Monoxide	<1%	2

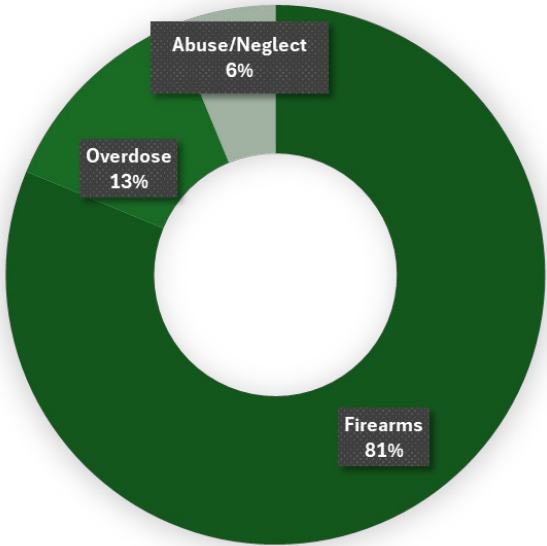
Blunt Force Injury Accidents

Simple Falls in Adults	78	Motorcycle	11
Passenger Vehicles	32	Unknown	2
Falls on Stairs	14	All-Terrain Vehicle	1
Compression	5	Bicycle	1
Pedestrian	6	Train	1

2024 saw a 19% decrease in total homicides (19 in 2023) with decreases in nearly every injury category.

16 Total

Firearms	13	81%
Overdose	2	13%
Abuse/Neglect	1	6%



Apparent Circumstances of the Homicides

Altercation	4
Domestic/Family Violence	4
Targeted Attack	4
Officer Involved*	1
Other	2
Justifiable	1

81% of decedents personally knew the suspect in their death.

There was an 8.5% decrease in total suicides compared to 2023.

75 Total

Firearms	49
Drugs	6
Ligature	5
Asphyxia	2
Blunt Force	2
Other	1
Sharp Force	0

Drugs Used in Suicide

Single Non-Opioid	3
Mixed Non-Opioids	2
Illicit Drugs	1

2024 Suicide Facts

51

Average age at death (Range of 13 - 90 years)

65%

of suicides were firearm-related

88%

of those tested had positive results for drugs (37%), alcohol (32%), or THC (7%) at the time of death

36%


of decedents were married or separated

16%

have known active or prior military duty

75%

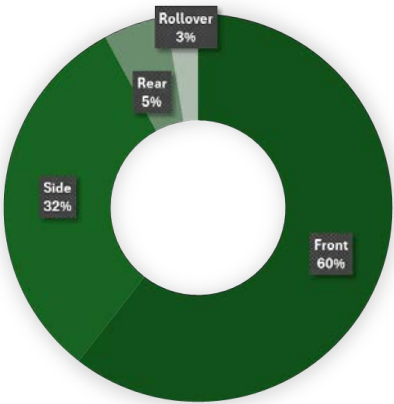
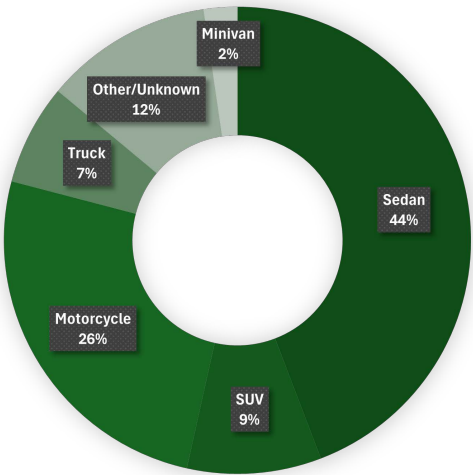
of suicide victims were male



The most common risk factors present are relationship issues, financial struggles, substance abuse, chronic health problems, grief and legal issues.

Type of Vehicle Involved

Sedan	19	44%
SUV	4	9%
Motorcycle	11	26%
Truck	3	7%
Other/Unknown	8	12%
Minivan	1	2%

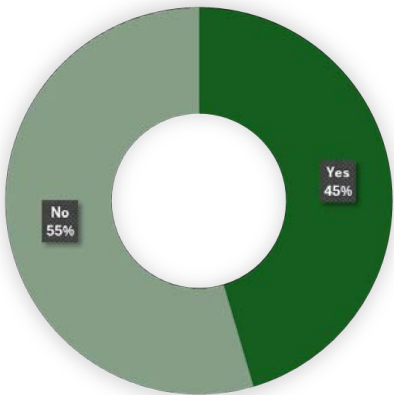


Type of Collision, if Known 38 TOTAL

Front	23	60%
Side	12	32%
Rear	2	5%
Rollover	1	3%

Use of Restraint/Seatbelt, if Known

Yes	5	45%
No	6	55%



Suspected Primary Cause of Crash

Vehicle vs. Pedestrian/Bicycle	Pedestrian at fault	Driver at fault	Unknown
	43%	43%	14%

There was a 23% reduction in drug-related accidental deaths from 2023. Total Fentanyl-related deaths decreased 24% which represents further declines of the rising rate of the preceding five years. Methamphetamine-related deaths decreased 17% over 2023 totals, occurring 59% of the time in combination with Fentanyl.

92

Total

Most Common Drug Combinations (Polypharmacy)

Fentanyl
Fentanyl + Xylazine (+/- other meds)
Methamphetamine
Fentanyl + Cocaine
Heroin + Fentanyl (+/- other meds)
Opioid Prescription Medications
Fentanyl + Xylazine
Fentanyl (+/- other drugs)
Cocaine (+/- other drugs)
Cocaine
Fentanyl + Methamphetamine
Non-Opioid Prescription Medications
Fentanyl + Methamphetamine (+/- other drugs)

Most Common Drugs in Death (All manners of Death)

Fentanyl -----	65	Alcohol (Ethanol) -----	24
Methamphetamine -----	29	Xylazine -----	21
Cocaine -----	29	Heroin -----	9
Prescription Medications -----	29		

66%

of accidental drug deaths were male

49yrs

Average age at death for all accidental deaths

65

Total number of fentanyl-related deaths

The Berks County Coroner’s Office investigated the deaths of 16 children (below the age of 18 years old). These cases are individually reviewed by the Berks County Child Fatality Review Team to identify strategies to prevent these types of deaths in the future, which has resulted in community-wide efforts to decrease teen suicide and sudden infant death in Berks County. Youth suicides decreased from 4 deaths in 2023.

16

Total

Age	
<1 Month	9
1 Month - 1 Year	3
1- 4 Years	2
5- 12 Years	3
13- 17 Years	8

Breakdown	
Natural	7
Infant unsafe sleep/asphyxia	3
Homicides	2
Suicides	2
Motor vehicle accident	1
Pedestrian/Bicycle	1

Teen Suicides (Ages 13-17 Years)

Sex	Male: 1	Female: 1
Ligature		1
Firearms		1
Drugs		0
Identified Risk Factors		
Family discord, bullying, grief, and school performance		

Unsafe Sleep Infant Deaths: 3 Total

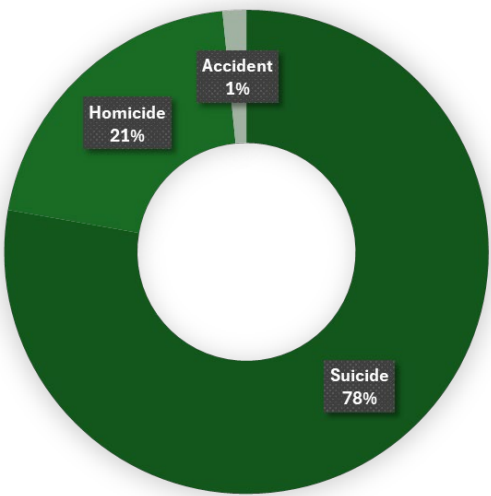
Deaths due to an unsafe sleep surface	0
Deaths due to co-sleeping with adults	3

In 2024, 63 individuals died of firearm-related injuries. There was a decrease in firearm-associated homicides to 13 (compared to 16 in 2023) while firearms-related suicides stayed steady. There was one firearm-related accidental death in 2024.

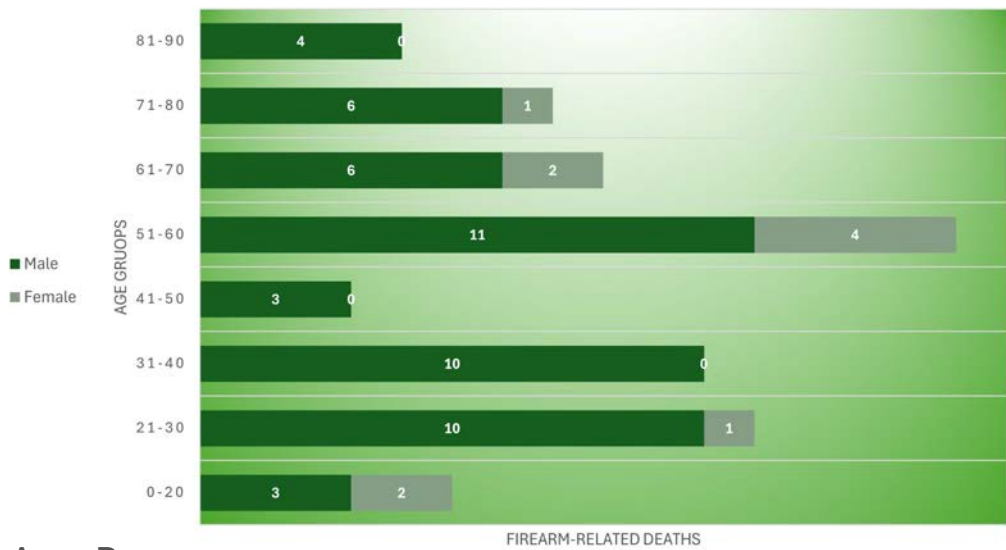
63 Total

Breakdown of Manners

Suicide	49	78%
Homicide	13	21%
Accident	1	1%



Firearm-Related Deaths by Age Groups



Age Ranges

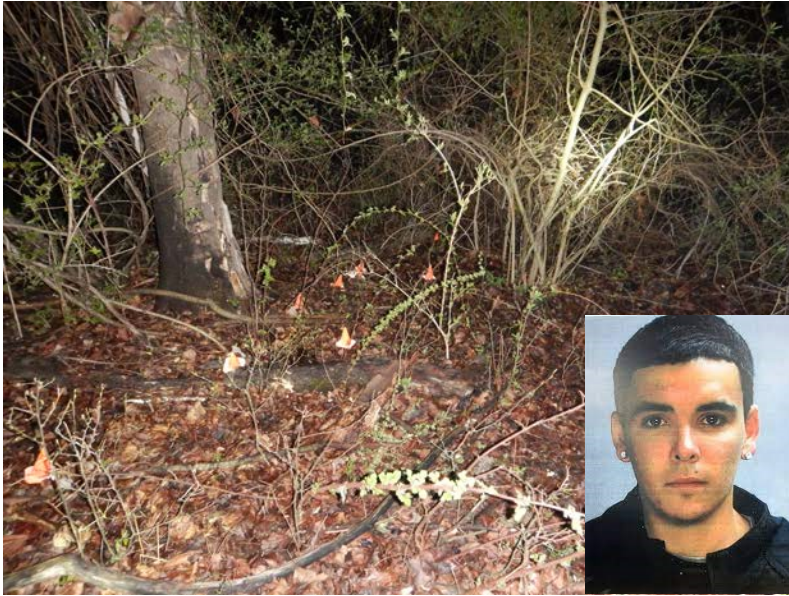
FIREARM
HOMICIDE
19 - 86
years old

FIREARM
SUICIDE
17 – 90
years old

80% vs. 20%

Males Females

Utilized Firearm to Complete Suicide



Anthony E. Warunek Rodriguez - The skeletal remains of Anthony were discovered one rainy night in April 2024, over four years after partial remains were found in March 2020, bringing a conclusion to the recovery of his remains, and a small measure of closure to his family.

Nicolas P. Grubb - The identification of this 1977 cold case in August 2024 made worldwide news, and highlights the close interaction BCCO relies on with its law enforcement partners.



Robert Vargas - As a fire victim in December 2024, Robert's positive identification was very difficult due to lack of dental records. Using available medical history, our forensic pathologist was able to conclusively make a positive identification in March 2025.

Photos courtesy of BCCO, WGAL and Reading Eagle. Photo of Robert Vargas used with permission.

Category	2023	2024
Total Deaths Reported	3626	3618
Coroner Case Load		
All Cases	3631	3627
Coroner Cases (Jurisdiction Retained)	1030	1013
Referred Cases (Jurisdiction Waived)	2602	2614
Investigations	1003	973
Cremation Permits Issued	2480	2484
Fetal Deaths	48	52
Non-Human Bones Found	5	9
Unidentified Persons	1	0
Unclaimed Bodies (Coroner Cremations)	20	21
Body Transports	294	301
COVID-19 Deaths Reported	70	45
Post-Mortem Examination / Testing		
Forensic Autopsies	98	88
Forensic Dental Examinations	3	2
Cases where Toxicology was Performed	344	388
Autopsies for Out-of-County Jurisdictions	2	7
Hospital/Private Autopsies	7	14
Manner of Death		
Natural	3232	3255
Accident	283	264
Suicide	82	75
Homicide	19	16
Undetermined	10	8
Pending	0	0
Location of Deaths		
Residence	1370	1324
Hospital (Inpatient)	921	1037
Hospital (ER / Outpatient)	153	207
Nursing / Hospice Facility	1057	943
Other	125	109
Organ and Tissue Donations		
<i>Gift of Life Donor Program Tissues Recovered</i>	89	89
<i>Gift of Life Donor Program Successful Organ Transplants</i>	35	70