



**OFFICE OF THE CORONER  
BERKS COUNTY**



# **ANNUAL REPORT**

# **2023**

County of Berks  
Office of the Coroner

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*Cover photo: Deputy Coroner Joel Bonilla participates in the exhumation of an unidentified person who died in 1977. Advances in DNA allow death investigators to try new methods of identification. This decedent's DNA was submitted for Forensic Investigative Genetic Genealogy (FIGG) in late 2022.*

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# Overview

The Berks County Office of the Coroner, also known colloquially as the Berks County Coroner's Office (BCCO), is an independent office in the County of Berks (COB) that serves to protect public health and provide valuable information to the criminal justice system through advanced forensic science, detailed independent investigation, and thorough documentation. BCCO investigates unnatural deaths such as homicides, suicides, motor vehicle crashes, drug overdoses, as well as sudden, unexpected, natural deaths. Pennsylvania law requires and empowers BCCO to determine the cause and manner of these deaths, as defined by Pennsylvania Statute 16 P.S. § 1218-B. The Coroner's Office serves the 432,821 residents of Berks County, covering an area of approximately 866 square miles.

BCCO is committed to the accurate determination of the cause and manner of death, proper scientific identification, and respectful disposition of every case under the jurisdiction of the Office. This is accomplished through the professional and compassionate application of the disciplines of science, medicine, and law. The Coroner's Office supports municipal, county and state agencies, including Reading Police Dept., Berks County District Attorney's Office, and the Pennsylvania Department of Health in improving the overall health and safety of Berks County residents.

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 that may be identified in the data, or by comparing the data to previous years. BCCO consistently shares data with County and State agencies to better understand current death trends, public health issues, under-served communities, and violence. Our statistics influence local, regional, and national policies and procedures that prevent, reduce, and address public health issues and crime.

In 2023, a total of 3,627 deaths were reported to BCCO. COVID-19 continued to disrupt death trends within both the United States and the County of Berks. A 36.7% rise in suicides was tempered by a nearly identical percentage decrease in homicides. Accidental drug overdoses subsided somewhat from the high of 137 deaths in 2022 to 124 death in 2023.



*Office of the Coroner Team Photo*





# The Role of the Coroner

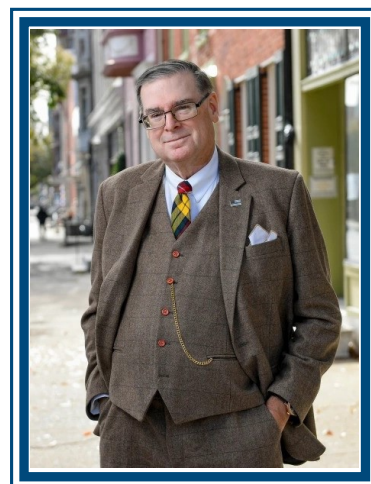
## *Jurisdiction and State Statutes*

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.

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)

As part of their investigation, the Coroner shall determine the identity of the deceased and notify the next of kin (NOK) of the deceased.



**John A. Fielding, III**  
Coroner

# Highlights- The Year in Review

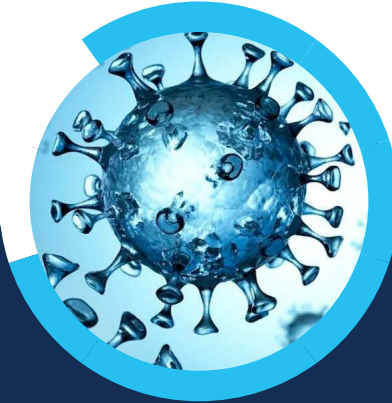


## R.M. Palmer Co. Chocolate Factory Explosion and Recovery

On March 24, 2023 at 4:57pm, a natural gas explosion at the R.M. Palmer Co. building in West Reading killed seven of its workers: Xiorky D. Nunez, 30, of Reading, Susan H. Halvonik, 63, of Upper Providence Township, Michael D. Breedy, 62, of Marion Township, Diana M. Cedeno, 44, of Reading, Judith Lopez-Moran, 55, of Reading, Amy S. Sandoe, 49, of Ephrata, and Domingo Cruz, 60, of Reading.

BCCO responded within an hour of the blast and continued forensic investigation even after the incident was declared over. BCCO notified the families as identifications were made, so that their loved ones could process their grief and loss in a meaningful way.

Additionally, it should be noted that BCCO continued its daily ongoing operations, handling a further 20 deaths during the same period.



## COVID-19 Pandemic shifts to long-term management

The Emergency Committee on COVID-19 met for the 15th time on 4 May 2023, and issued a statement on 5 May advising the World Health Organization Director-General that it is time to transition to long-term management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Director-General accepted the Committee's advice that COVID-19 is now an established and ongoing health issue and no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC).

Closer to home, the number of COVID-19 deaths saw a dramatic drop in 2023. COVID-19 deaths in Berks County reached 70 in 2023, compared to 293 deaths in 2022 and 676 deaths in 2021.

At the 'end' of the COVID-19 pandemic on May 5, 2023, the total deaths in Berks County due to COVID-19 reached 1,609 persons. We mourn the toll that COVID-19 has taken on families and our communities throughout Berks County.



## In Memoriam

The COVID-19 Pandemic represents more than just statistics; each person lost is a unimaginable loss to family and friends. At the Coroner's Office, we lost one of our own, and fondly remember fellow Deputy Investigator Robert Bickam.

Those moments we share with our coworkers often feel like just another day until there are no more days. Bob's death was not just felt by one person in this office rather; it was felt by all of us. Those shared stories, shared dreams, shared loves are treasured stories each one of us will forever hold dear.

Bob was like the brother you always wanted and never had; the best friend you needed when you were down and the person who would always be willing to lend a helping hand. He will always be remembered for his kindness to others, his absolutely great sense of humor and willingness to mentor others. His laughter will continue in our hearts.

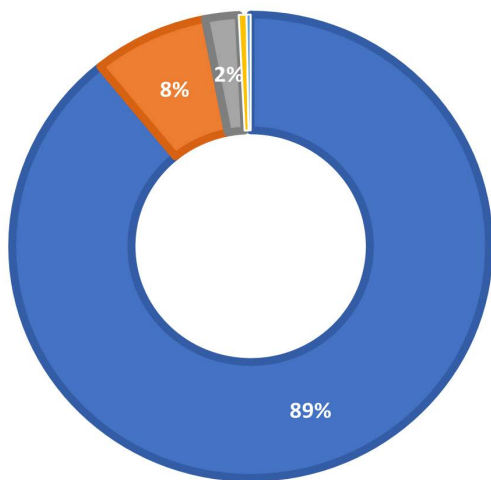
Bob will always be loved, always be missed and forever be remembered. A great soul serves everyone all the time - a great soul never dies. It brings us together again and again.

Bob's photos throughout our Office are a visual reminder of loss, both of our own and that so many Berks County residents deal with every day, every year.



# Manner of Death

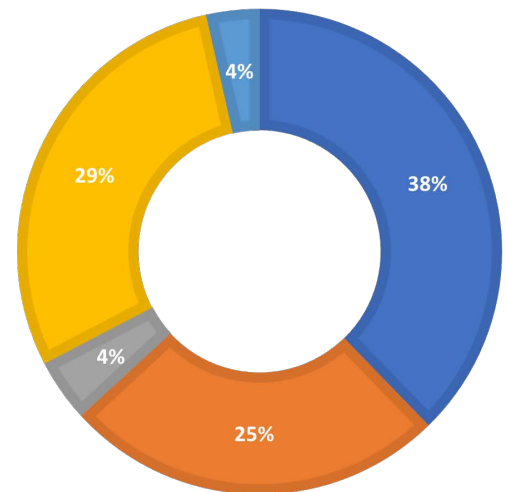
## Manner of Death



■ Natural ■ Accident ■ Suicide ■ Homicide ■ Undetermined

Eighty-nine (89) percent of deaths reported to BCCO were natural deaths. January and December had the highest monthly natural death totals. Accidental deaths accounted for 8% of deaths, while suicides made up 2% of deaths. COVID-19 accounted for 70 deaths in 2023.

## Location of Death



■ Residence ■ Hospital (Inpatient)  
 ■ Hospital (ER / Outpatient) ■ Nursing / Hospice Facility  
 ■ Other

Among the 3,627 cases recorded by BCCO in 2023, **38% of deaths occurred at the decedent's residence**. Another 29% occurred at a nursing or hospice facility, while 25% occurred while inpatient at a hospital. Non-residents of Berks County account for approximately 7% of deaths.





# Natural Deaths

Death is the end of life; the irreversible cessation of all biological functions that sustain a living organism. The remains of a former organism normally begin to decompose shortly after death. Death eventually and inevitably occurs in all organisms. Fortunately among humans, aging is the primary reason for death. In the United States, approximately 1% of the population die each year. The vast majority of those deaths are natural deaths.

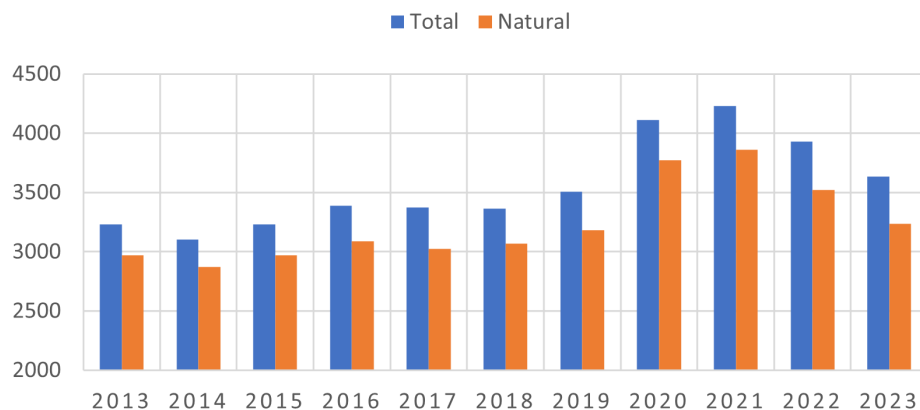
In Berks County, natural death is the primary manner of death. In 2023, 3,232 natural deaths were recorded by BCCO. It is important to remember that not every death in Berks County is reported to BCCO; Pennsylvania law does not mandate universal death reporting to Coroner's Offices.

It is BCCO policy to record every death reported to the Office. Such deaths are reported by hospitals, funeral directors, nursing and personal care homes, hospice nurses, emergency services and individuals. Our office is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days every year to record deaths that occur, or to respond directly to death scenes in order to conduct a death investigation.

**Month with  
the most  
Natural  
deaths**

January

**TOTAL VS. NATURAL DEATHS,  
BCCO CASES, 2013-2023**



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# Accidental Deaths

In 2023, BCCO investigated **283 deaths** ruled **accidental** in nature. These deaths made up 7.2% of the total cases investigated by BCCO, **unchanged from 2022**. The majority of these deaths are drug-related, followed by falls and motor vehicle crashes.

Accidental Deaths	2023
Fall	75
Motor Vehicle Crash	48
Pedestrian Struck	9
Overdose	117
Asphyxia	6
Drowning	6
Fire	3
Carbon Monoxide	1
Blast Injuries	6
Co-Sleeping	4
Choking	6
Train	1
Industrial	1

**Month with  
the most  
Accidental  
deaths**

August

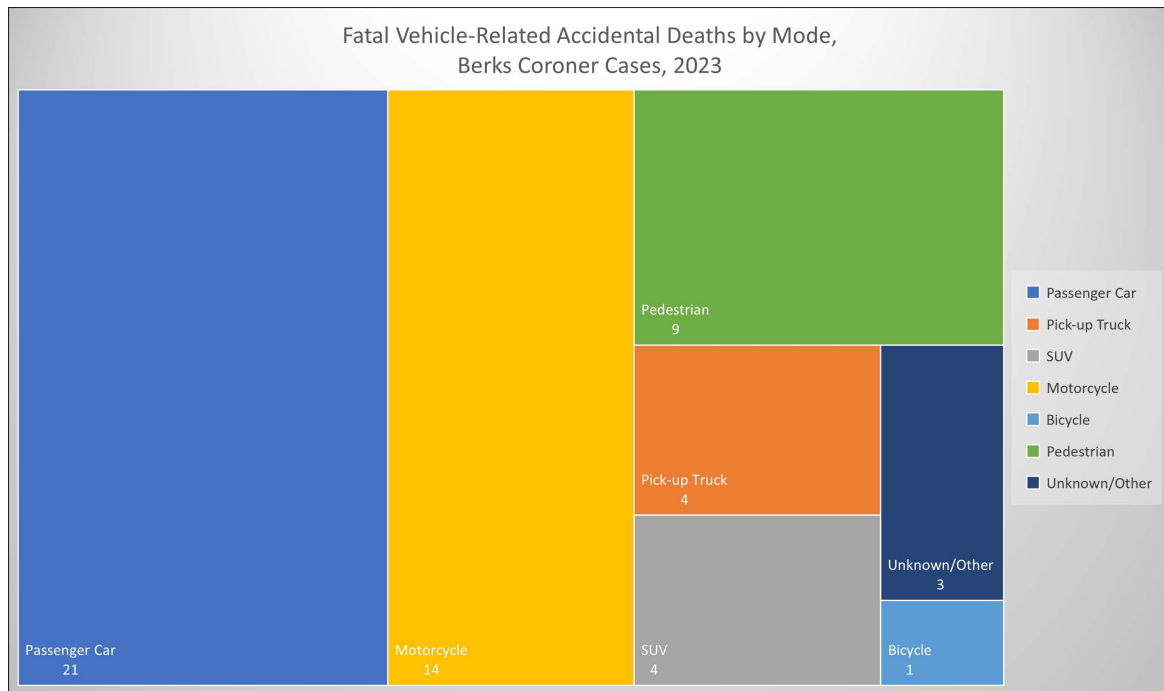
Among the various types of accidental deaths, falls are a common mishap for the elderly and those under the influence of alcohol. Indeed, alcohol is a major factor in various types of accidental deaths, to include drownings, fire, and asphyxia as well. Co-sleeping is the practice of infants or young children sleeping close to one or both parents, which increases the risk of suffocation and strangulation.

Ten (10) accidental deaths were work-related, including the seven deaths from the R.M. Palmer Company building explosion.

# Traffic-Related Deaths

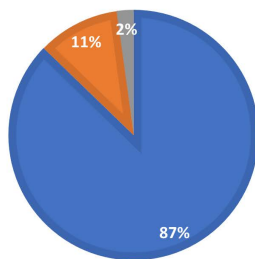
In 2023, there were **56 traffic-related deaths** investigated by BCCO, down slightly from the record high of 60 deaths in 2019.

Among these deaths, **motorcycles account for one-quarter (25%) of fatal deaths**, even though such vehicles represent just 3.53% of registered vehicles in Berks County in 2023.

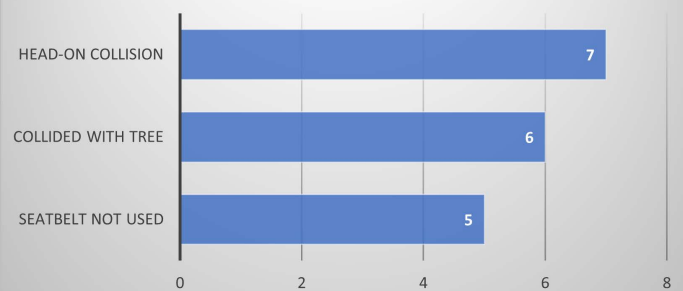


FATAL VEHICLE CRASHES BY SEAT POSITION,  
BERKS CORONER CASES, 2023

■ Driver ■ Passenger ■ Unknown/Other



Additional Factors in Fatal Crashes,  
Berks Coroner cases, 2023



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# Drug-Related Death Trends

The total number of drug-related deaths in Berks County in 2023 was 156 deaths, which includes all manners of death. Accidental overdose deaths totaled 117 deaths, a decrease of 14.6% compared to a record high of 137 overdose deaths in 2022. This recent decrease is promising, however, given the 153% increase in drug overdose deaths between 2013 and 2023.

## Highlights

Change since  
2022



### 86 Fentanyl-Related Deaths



### 45 Cocaine-Related Deaths



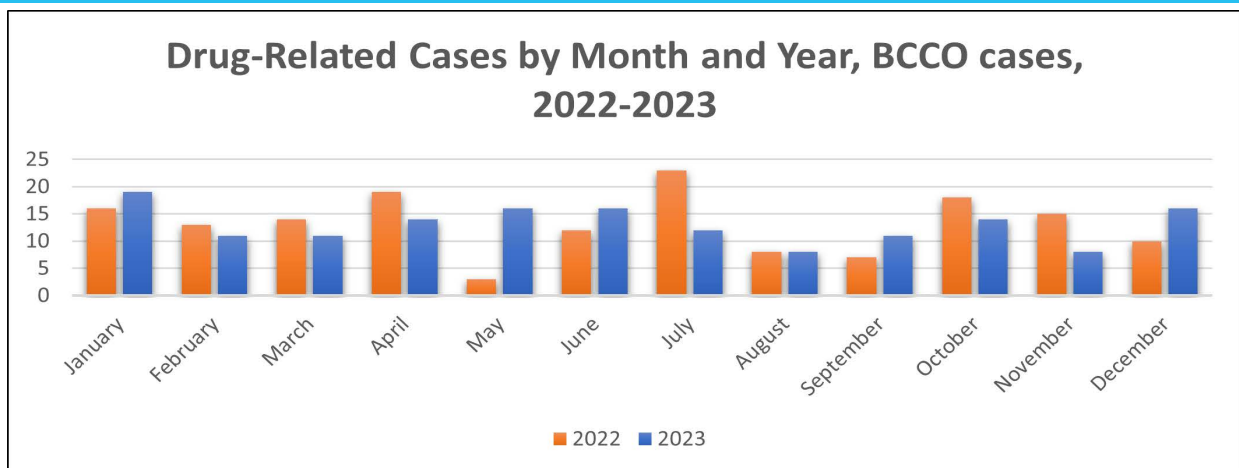
### 32 Xylazine-Related Deaths



### 35 Methamphetamine-Related Deaths

\* Multiple drugs can contribute to the cause of death and groups are not mutually exclusive

## Trends by Month and Year





# Polysubstance Use

The majority of drug overdose deaths in Berks County were caused by **multiple substances** found in the deceased's system as identified by our forensic pathologists and toxicologist.

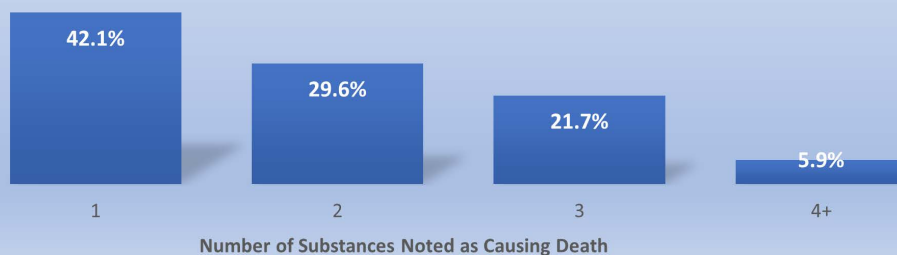
**In 2023, 57.9%**  
of deaths were  
caused by **more  
than one substance**

**27.6%** of deaths  
were caused by  
**three or more  
substances**

**42.1%** of deaths  
were caused by a  
**single substance**

Number of Drugs Identified in the Cause of  
Death for Drug-Related Deaths, Berks County  
cases, 2023

Percentage of Total Drug-related Deaths

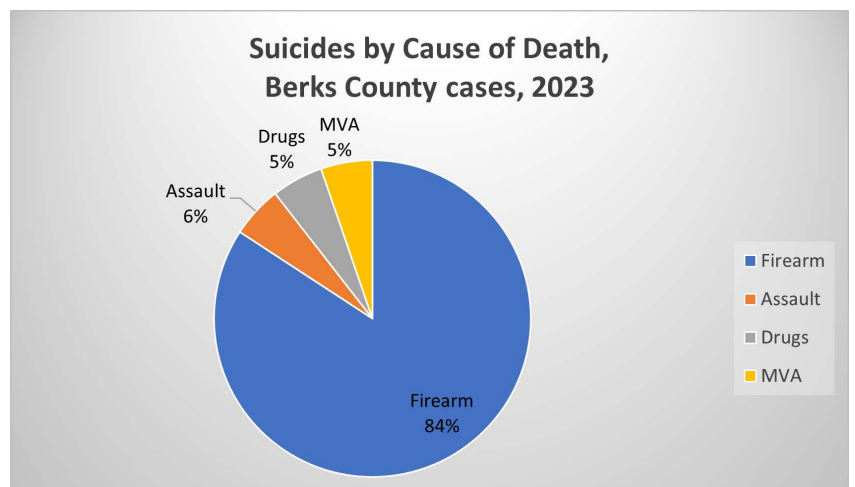


# Deaths By Suicide

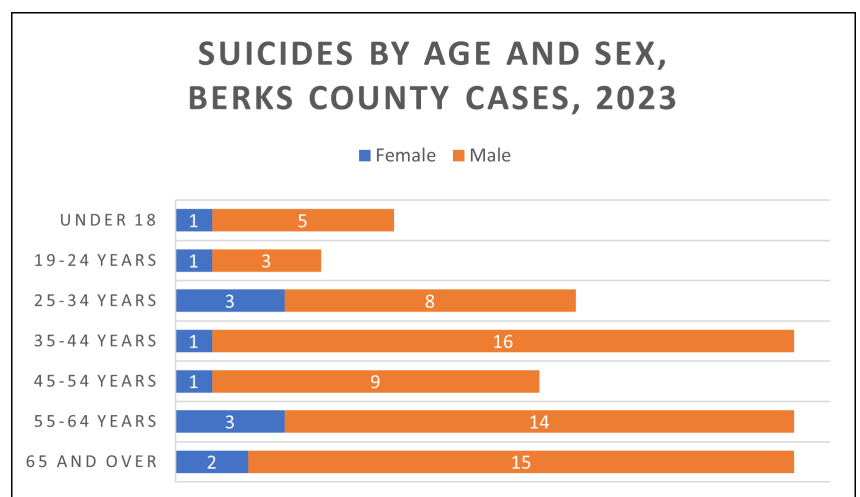
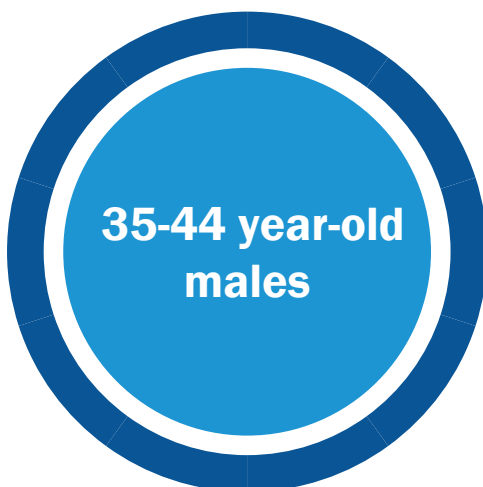
The number of suicides investigated by BCCO rose significantly in 2023 to 82 deaths, surpassed only by a record high of 84 deaths in 2013. Middle-aged and elderly males are the predominate sub-groups, with firearms being the principal instrument of suicide. Semi-automatic 9mm handguns were the most commonly recovered firearm, representing about a third of weapons recovered.

The median age for all suicides is 50 years old. Females represent 15% of all suicides; military veterans represent just over 12%.

## Most Common Cause



## Largest Subgroup

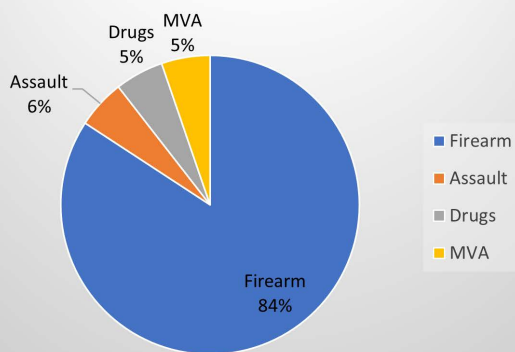


# Deaths by Homicide

The number of homicide deaths investigated by BCCO decreased from a record high of 30 homicides in 2022 to **19 homicides in 2023**. The decrease is partially attributed to the adoption of national manner-of-death classification standards. The homicide rate in Berks County in 2023 was **4.39 homicides per 100,000** people, well below the national average of 7.5 homicides per 100,000 people in 2022.

*A death is considered to be a homicide when a person is killed unlawfully or lawfully by another person(s); manners of death differ from legal definitions established in criminal law.*

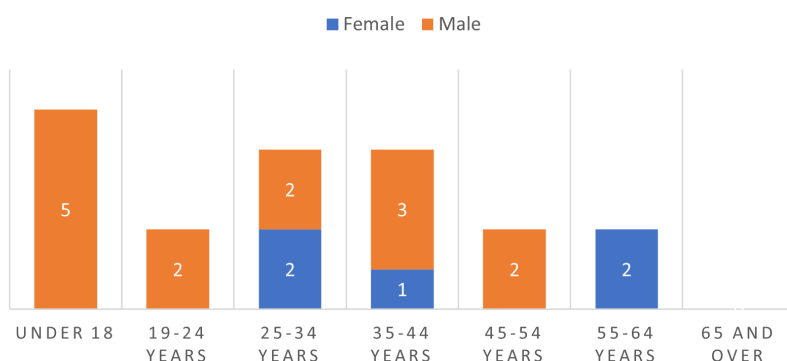
**Homicides by Cause of Death,  
Berks County cases, 2023**



## Most Common Cause

**2023 and  
2022  
Firearms**

**HOMICIDES BY AGE AND SEX,  
BERKS COUNTY CASES, 2023**



## Largest Subgroup

**Under 18  
year-old males**





# Other Death-Related Information

Medicolegal Death Investigators (MDI) use a variety of tools to determine the manner and cause of death. One of the most well-known is the post-mortem, also known as autopsy. The percentage of autopsies performed nationwide has steadily decreased from 19.1% of all deaths in 1972 to 7.4% in 2020. **Ninety-eight (98) forensic autopsies were conducted by BCCO in 2023**, often at the request of law enforcement. This figure does not include hospital and private autopsies conducted. BCCO autopsy guidelines generally align with standards established by The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME). Our contracted forensic pathologists have more than 75 years' of combined medical experience and are board-certified forensic pathologists.

**The National Association of Medical Examiners' Forensic Autopsy Performance Standards indicate that a forensic autopsy will be performed when:**

The death is known or suspected to have been caused by apparent criminal violence.

The death is unexpected and unexplained in an infant or child.

The death is associated with police action.

The death is apparently non-natural and in custody of a local, state, or federal institution.

The death is due to acute workplace injury.

The death is caused by apparent electrocution.

The death is by apparent intoxication by alcohol, drugs, or poison, unless a significant interval has passed (while hospitalized), and the medical findings and absence of trauma are well-documented.

The death is caused by unwitnessed or suspected drowning.

The body is unidentified and the autopsy may aid in identification.

The body is skeletonized.

The body is charred.

The forensic pathologist deems a forensic autopsy is necessary to determine cause and/or manner of death, or document injuries/disease, or collect evidence.

The deceased is involved in a motor vehicle incident and an autopsy is necessary to document injuries and/or determine the cause of death.

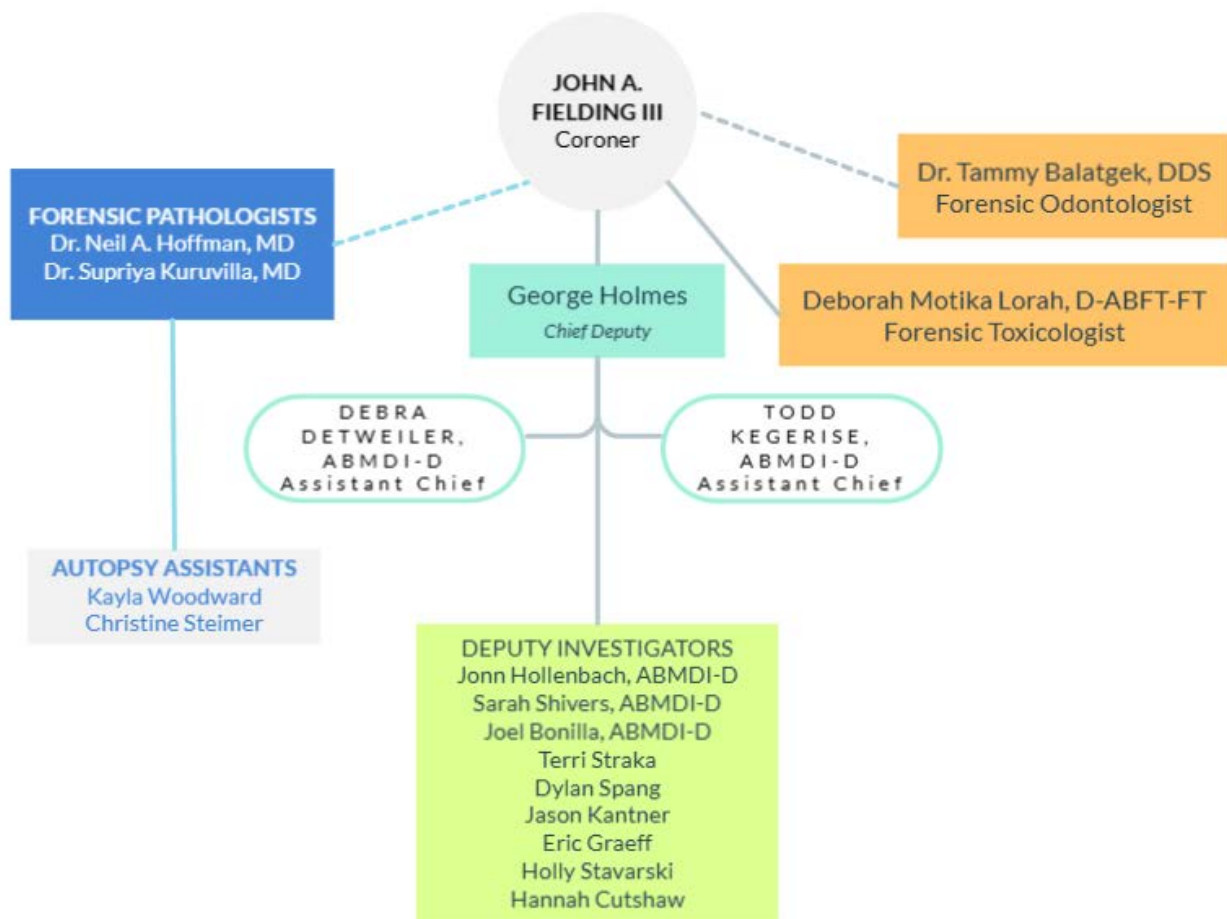
Toxicology is another vital tool in determining cause of death. With the increase in novel drugs of abuse, and substances ingested by individuals, investigative sampling has become increasingly more important. Toxicology specimens were sent for lab analysis in 344 cases in 2023. BCCO has a board-certified Forensic Toxicologist on staff to interpret toxicology reports and assist in certifying causes of death.

Medicolegal Death Investigators (MDI) conduct the primary death investigation, similar but separate from a criminal investigation carried out by our law enforcement partners. The Coroner is responsible for removal of bodies to be further examined, as well as unidentified or unclaimed bodies. Our MDIs transported 294 decedents to our contracted morgue facility in 2023.





# Organization Chart



# Annual Statistical Report

Category	2022	2023
<b>Total Deaths Reported</b>	<b>3921</b>	<b>3626</b>
<b>Coroner Case Load</b>		
All Cases	3925	3621
Coroner Cases (Jurisdiction Retained)	1397	1030
Referred Cases (Jurisdiction Waived)	2528	2602
Investigations	1118	1003
Cremation Permits Issued	2576	2480
Fetal Deaths	44	48
Non-Human Bones Found	4	5
Unidentified Persons	0	1
Unclaimed Bodies (Coroner Cremations)	16	20
Body Transports	238	294
COVID-19 Deaths Reported	293	70
<b>Post-Mortem Examination / Testing</b>		
Forensic Autopsies	106	98
Forensic Dental Examinations	1	3
Cases where Toxicology was Performed	292	344
Autopsies for Out-of-County Jurisdictions	3	2
Hospital/Private Autopsies	12	7
<b>Manner of Death</b>		
Natural	3519	3232
Accident	301	283
Suicide	60	82
Homicide	30	19
Undetermined	11	10
Pending	0	0
<b>Location of Deaths</b>		
Residence	1448	1370
Hospital (Inpatient)	1064	921
Hospital (ER / Outpatient)	183	153
Nursing / Hospice Facility	1106	1057
Other	124	125
<b>Organ and Tissue Donations</b>		
Gift of Life Donor Program Tissues Recovered	85	89
Gift of Life Donor Program Successful Organ Transplants	61	35







County of Berks

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