

Johnson County Medical Examiner Department

Annual Report 2023



www.johnsoncountyiowa.gov

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Introduction

The purpose of this annual report is to share information and annual statistics of the Johnson County Medical Examiner Department (JCME).

JCME achieved full accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) on February 25, 2019, and was re-accredited in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. This significant accomplishment demonstrates that JCME adheres to the highest standards of medicolegal death investigation as set forth by NAME.

The primary statutory function of JCME is to determine a scientifically based cause and manner of death for every death within the medical examiner jurisdiction. Cause of death is defined as the disease or injury process that initiated the sequence of events that resulted in death (e.g., “atherosclerotic heart disease” or “gunshot wound of the head”). Manner of death is a public health statistic that classifies the circumstances under which death occurred (natural, accident, suicide, homicide, or undetermined). The manner of death stated on a death certificate is not a legal determination. The cause of death and the manner of death are the core medical components of the death certificate.

Medical examiner jurisdiction is described by Iowa Code § 331.802 as deaths which affect the “public interest.” Common examples are deaths that occur unexpectedly or from an unexplained cause; trauma deaths in the context of an accident, suicide, or homicide; deaths unattended by a physician; and deaths of children under the age of two.

In 2023, there were 924 deaths reported to JCME. Of these, 442 were accepted as medical examiner jurisdiction deaths. Each of these deaths were investigated and certified by JCME. After review of each of the remaining 482 reported deaths, jurisdiction was declined because each death was determined to not be in the “public interest” as defined above. Each of these deaths were certified by the decedent’s physician. The total number of deaths investigated (jurisdiction accepted) or reviewed (jurisdiction declined) by JCME comprised 43% of the 2134 deaths that occurred in Johnson County in 2023.

Of the 442 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, 183 decedents were Johnson County residents and 197 were residents of other counties in Iowa. Additionally, there were 16 decedents who were in the custody of the Iowa Department of Corrections and 1 decedent who was in the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections at the time of death. Forty-four decedents were out-of-state residents, and 1 decedent had a residence out of the country. As a result, 41% of deaths accepted and investigated by JCME consisted of Johnson County residents.

Of the 442 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, the incident location for 199 decedents was Johnson County. One-hundred and eighty-five incidents occurred in other Iowa counties, 16 incidents occurred while in the custody of the Iowa Department of Corrections, and 1 incident occurred in the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections. Additionally, for 38 decedents, the incident location was out-of-state, and 3 decedents had an incident location that was unknown.

Of the 442 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, all decedents were identified. Three decedents were unclaimed by family or friends and final disposition was arranged by JCME.

In 2023, 125 autopsies were conducted by JCME. All JCME autopsies were performed at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC) and were complete autopsies (external examination and internal examination of the head, neck, chest, and abdomen).

Of the 442 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, the manner of death was classified as accident for 228, natural for 176, suicide for 23, undetermined for 10 and homicide for 5. JCME did not accept jurisdiction of any fetal deaths in 2023.

In 2023, there were 42 drug related deaths investigated by JCME. Of this total, 25 involved illicit drugs only, 5 involved over-the-counter drugs only, 3 involved prescription drugs only, and 9 involved a mixture of drugs. Of the 9 mixed drug-related deaths, 8 involved a mixture of illicit drugs (methamphetamine, fentanyl, MDMA, xylazine) and 1 involved a mixture of over-the-counter drugs. Of the 33 illicit drug-related deaths, 24 involved methamphetamine, 10 involved fentanyl, 6 involved cocaine, 1 involved MDMA, 1 involved MDMB-4en-PINACA, and 1 involved xylazine. Of the 42 drug-related deaths, 38 were classified as accident, 3 as suicides, and 1 as undetermined. Of the 42 drug-related deaths, 10 involved prescription or illicit opioids. All 10 of these opioid deaths were classified as accident and involved fentanyl.

There were 290 deaths accepted by JCME of adults aged 60 and older. Of these, there were 109 in which the death was the result of a fall. Of these fall-related deaths, 77 occurred from a standing height and 51 of the falls occurred inside the decedent's home. The most common anatomical location of injury from a fall was the head and/or neck, which occurred in 59 of the falls.

In 2023, there were 15 deaths accepted by JCME of individuals 17 years of age and younger. Of these 15 deaths, 7 were classified as accident followed by 3 as natural, 3 as undetermined, 1 as suicide, and 1 as homicide. For 5 of these deaths, the incident location was Johnson County with the remaining 10 occurring in other Iowa Counties. Of these 15 deaths accepted by JCME, there were 8 deaths of infants one year of age or less of which 5 were classified as accident, 1 homicide, 1 natural and 1 undetermined. An autopsy was performed on all 8 infant deaths. In 2023, there were 5 sleep-related infant death, all of which were classified as accident. For 2 of these deaths, the incident location was Johnson County with the remaining 3 occurring in other Iowa Counties.

A data point on every death certificate is an indication of whether tobacco use contributed to death. This determination is made by the forensic pathologist responsible for certifying the death. Of the 442 deaths certified by JCME in 2023, it was determined that 98 were tobacco-related and 26 were probably tobacco-related.


Iowa law requires that a medical examiner issue a cremation permit prior to cremation. This practice is to ensure that deaths are properly certified and that deaths within the jurisdiction of the medical examiner are not unreported ("missed cases"). JCME issued 1458 cremation

permits to funeral service providers in 2023. There were 484 cremation permits issued to funeral service providers in Johnson County, 846 to funeral service providers located in other Iowa counties, and 128 to funeral service providers located out-of-state. Cremation permits were issued to a total of 155 funeral service providers. Of the 1458 cremation permits issued, 5 permits prompted the recognition of missed cases, or less than 1% of all cremation permits issued.

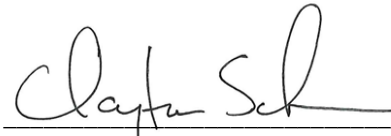
The Johnson County Child Death Review Team is facilitated by JCME. The purpose of the Team is to gain a greater understanding of issues associated with death of children under the age of 18. The information gained from the review of these cases is used to identify trends and risk factors, as well as to educate and mobilize community forces to prevent similar deaths in the future.

JCME has an essential role in the coordination of organ and tissue donation. In 2023, 15 accepted JCME cases became organ donors. From these 15 individuals, the Iowa Donor Network coordinated the recovery of 22 kidneys, 9 livers, 7 hearts, 2 lungs, 2 pancreases, and 1 small intestine for transplant. Thirty accepted JCME cases became tissue donors with the recovery of bone, skin, heart valves, saphenous veins, femoral veins, adipose tissue, and/or joints. One tissue donor can enhance the lives of more than 300 people. JCME fully supports organ and tissue donation and, by policy, JCME refers all out-of-hospital deaths that fall under our jurisdiction to the Iowa Donor Network.

JCME requires its investigative employees to be certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) within two years of starting employment. ABMDI is a voluntary, national, not-for-profit, independent professional certification organization that was established to promote the highest standards of practice for medicolegal death investigators. In 2023, JCME had four Board Certified Death Investigators (Advanced): Clayton Schuneman, Kate Bengtson, Amanda Gellhaus, and Kristen Long and three Registry Certified Death Investigators (Basic): Kora LaVoy, Anna Posthumus, and Zeel Naik. Additionally, the three forensic pathologist medical examiners, Dennis Firchau, MD, Stephanie Stauffer, MD, and Marcus Nashelsky, MD, are certified in Anatomic, Clinical, and Forensic Pathology by the American Board of Pathology.

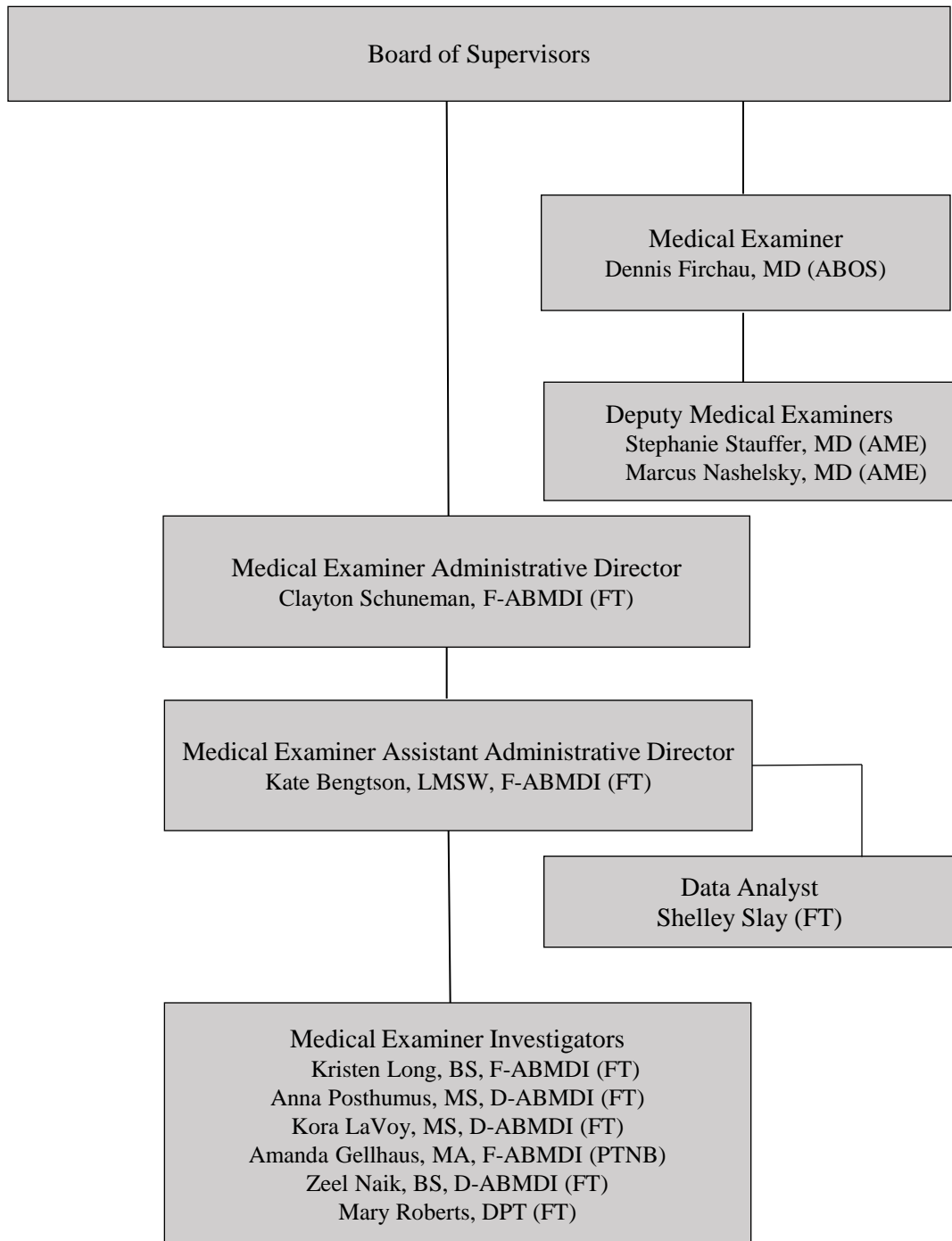


Dennis Firchau, MD
Medical Examiner



Clayton Schuneman, F-ABMDI
Administrative Director

Figure 1.1. Organizational Chart (2023)



Employment/Appointment Status Key:

- ABOS: Appointed by Board of Supervisors
- AME: Appointed by Medical Examiner
- FT: Full-time
- PTNB: Part-time without benefits

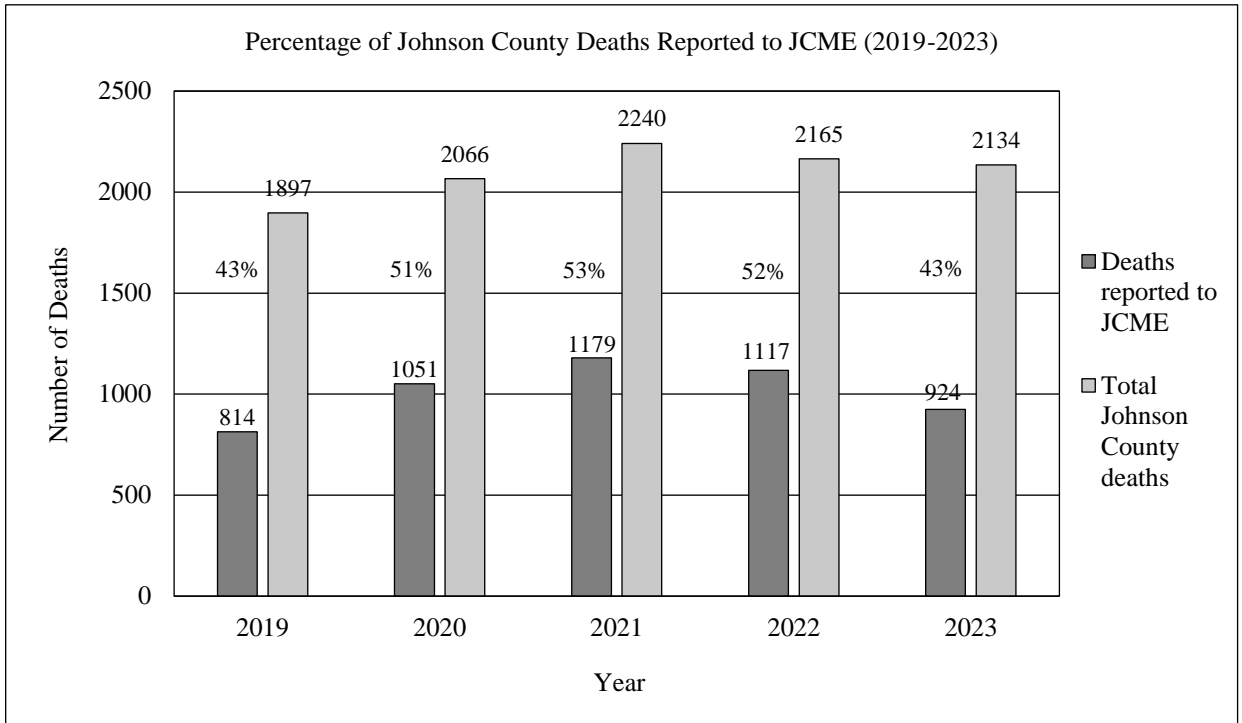


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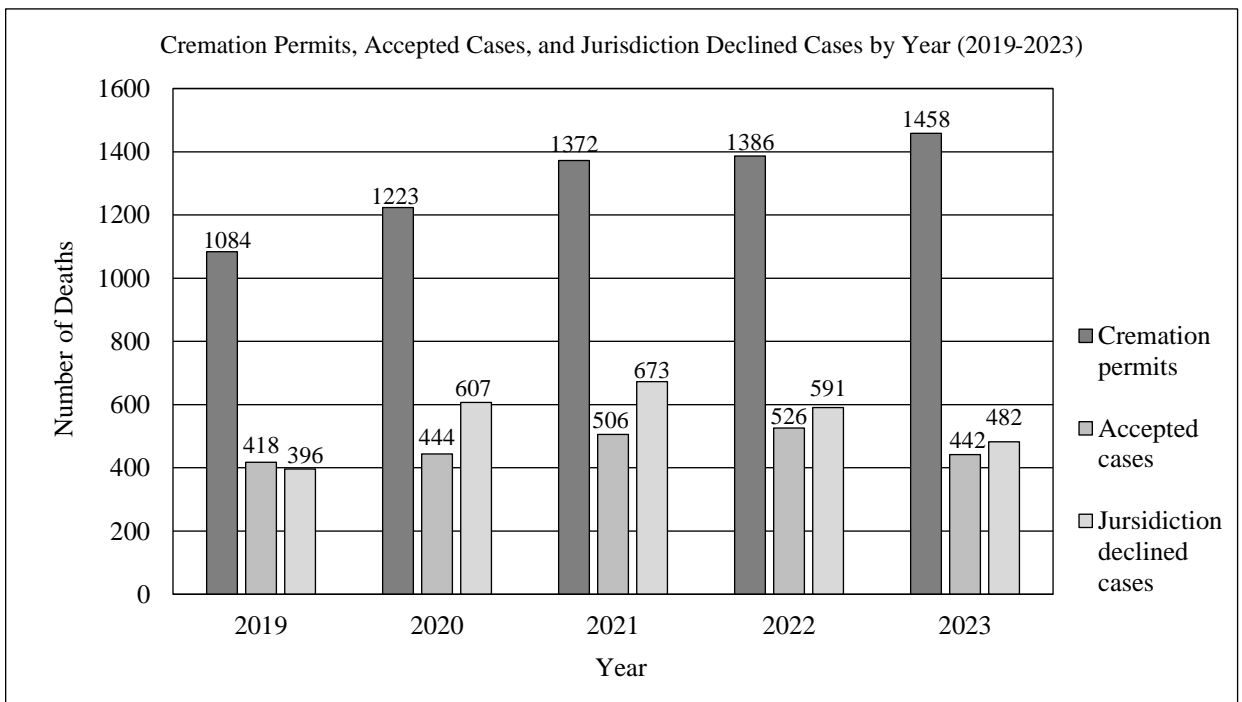


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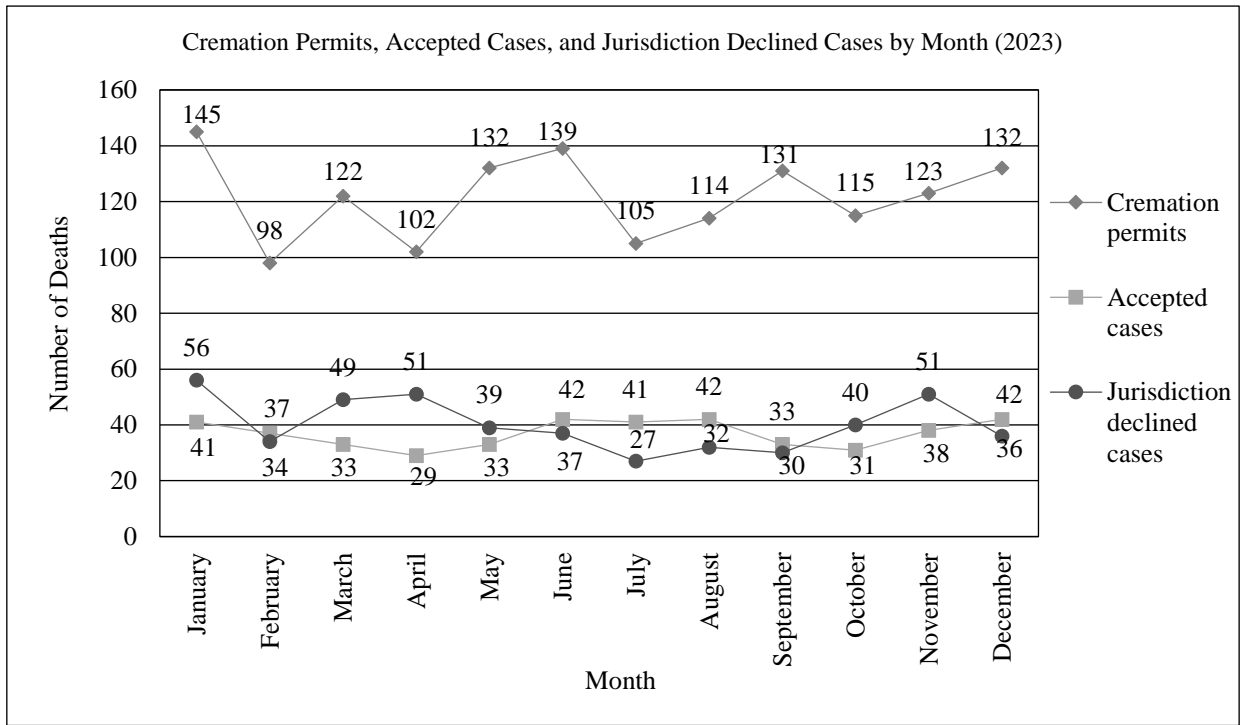


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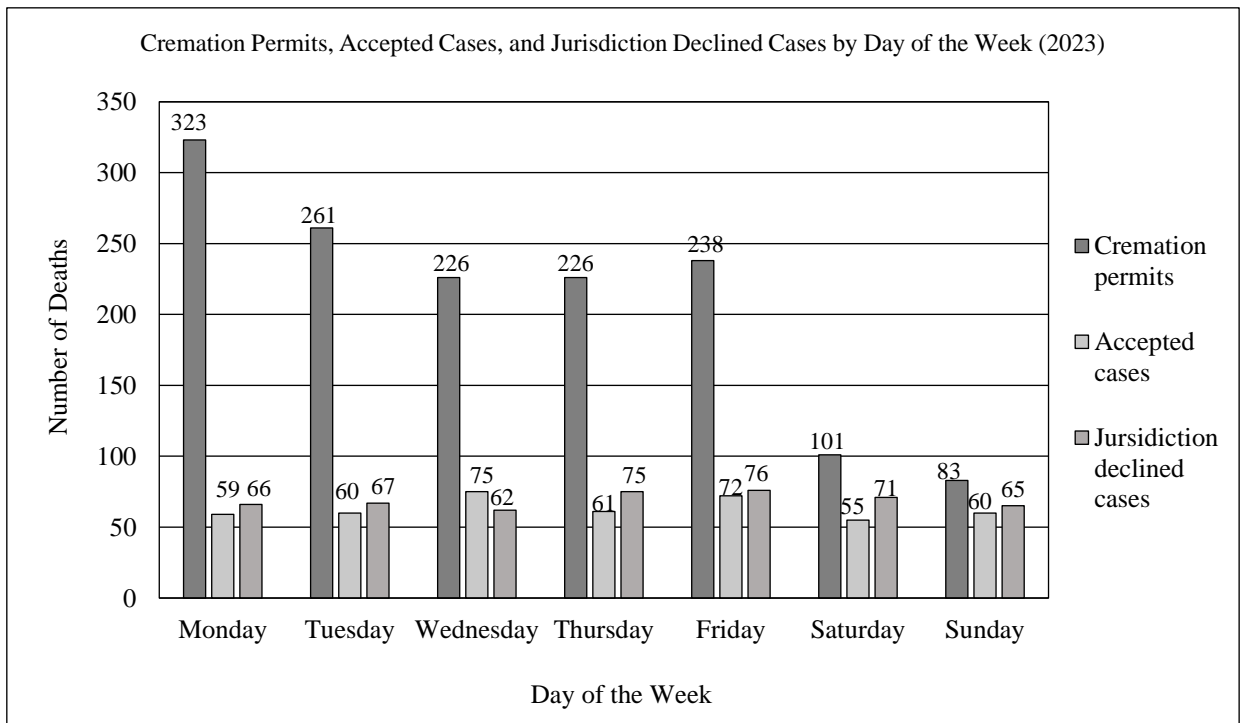


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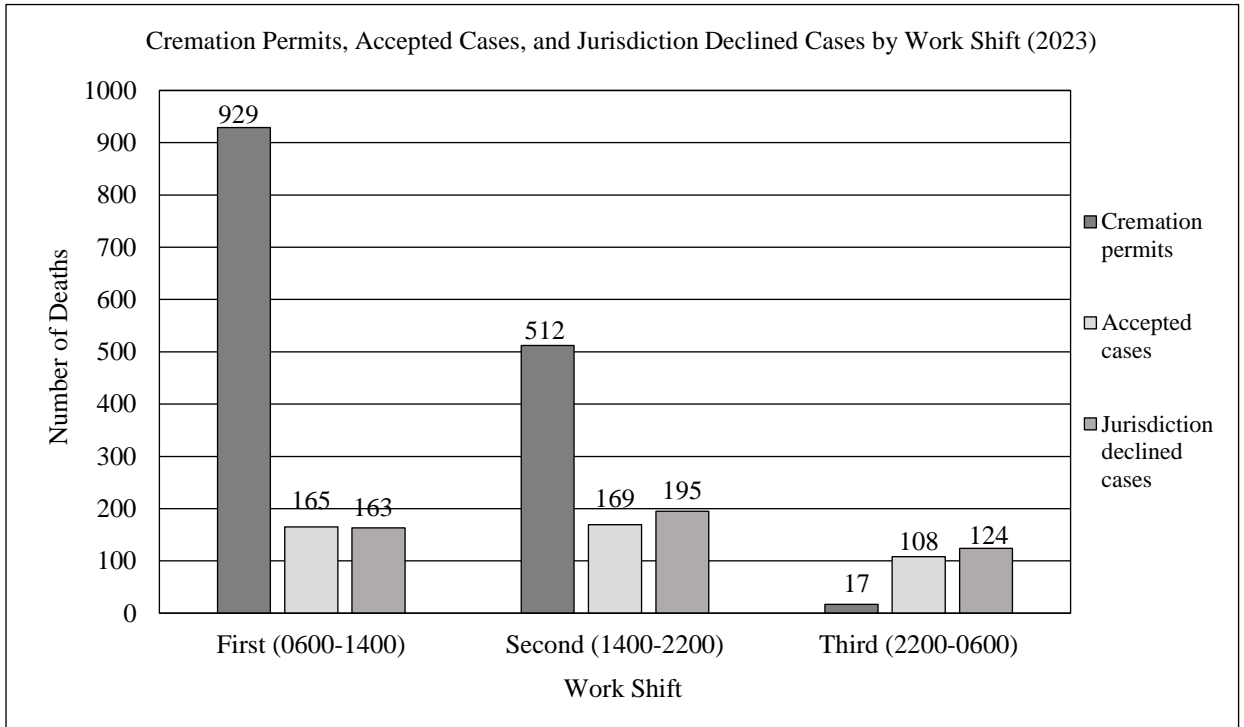


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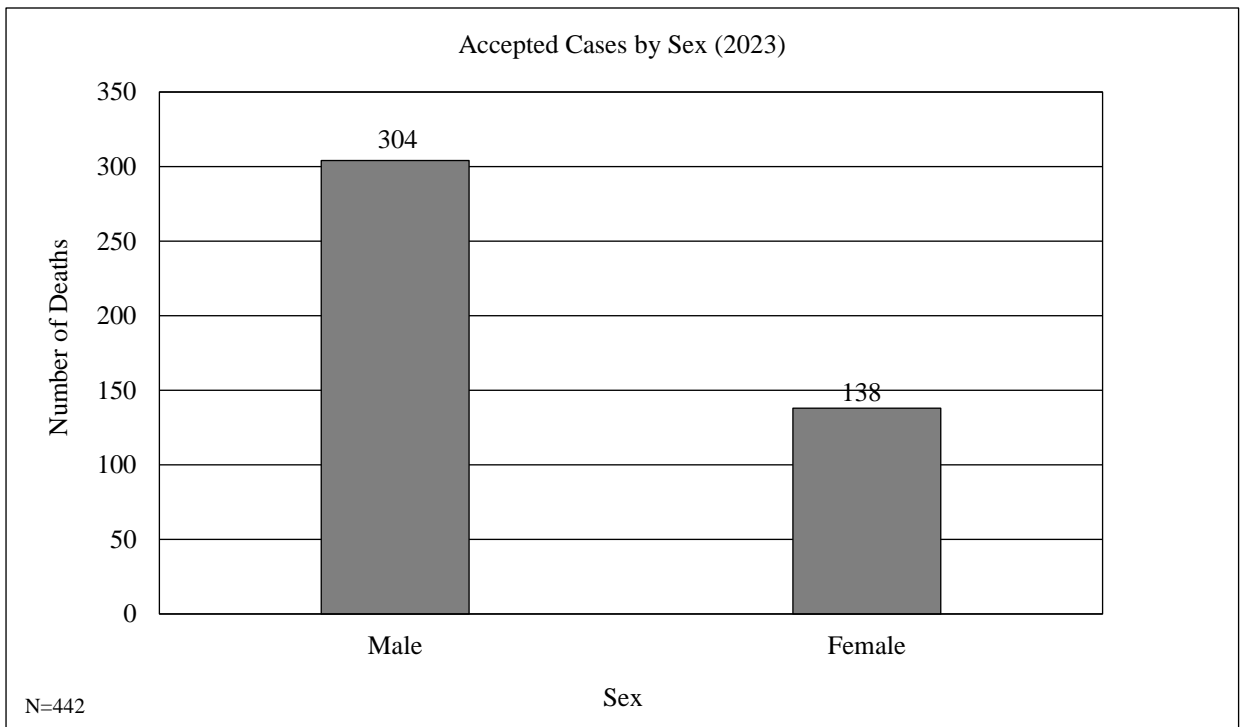


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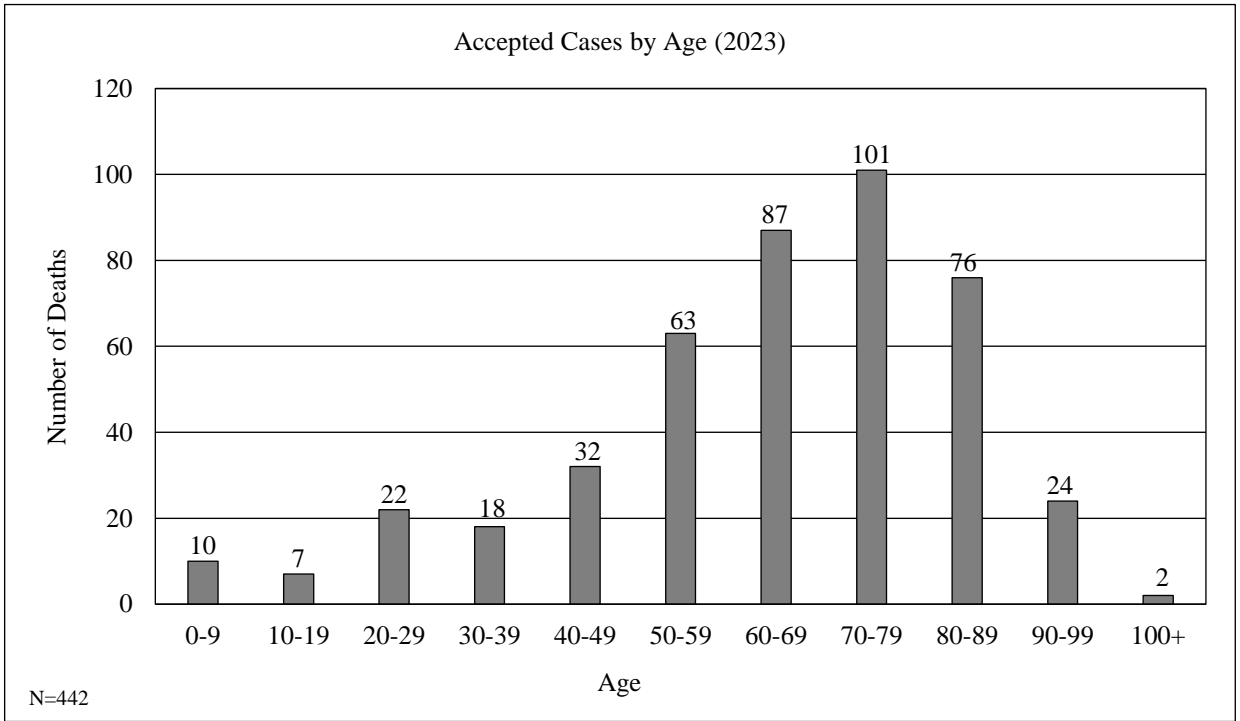


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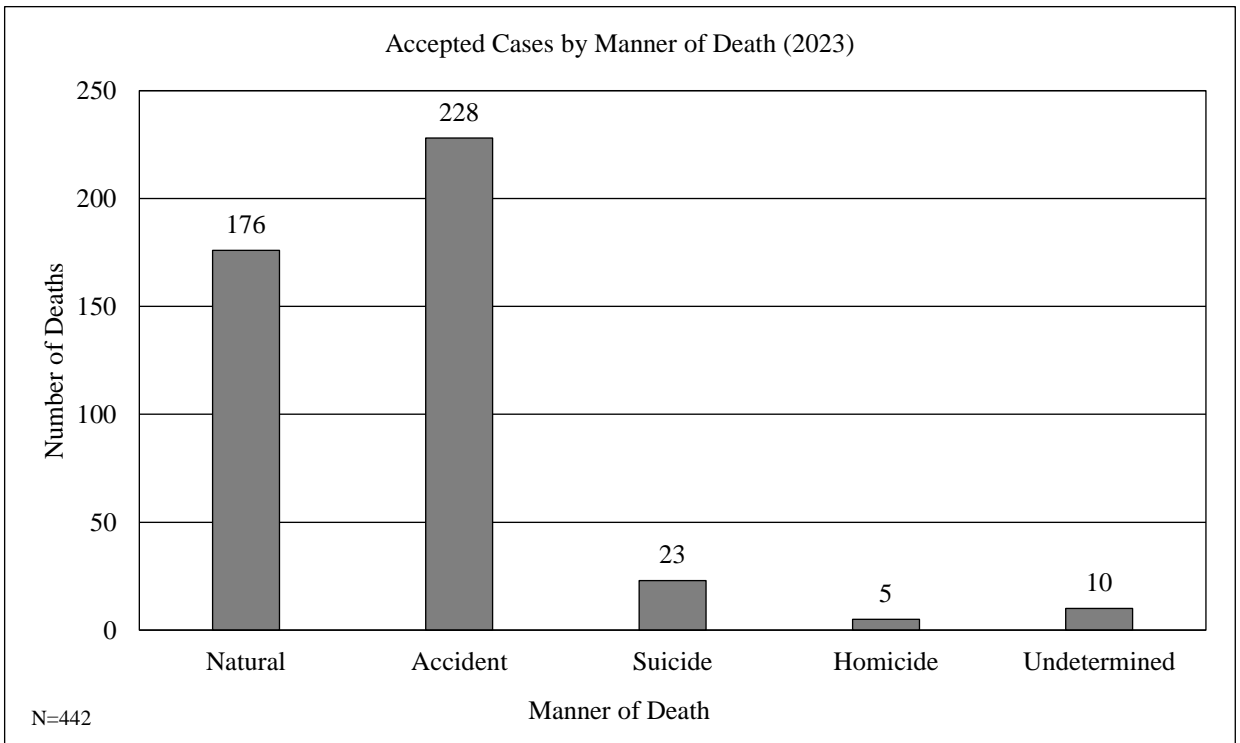


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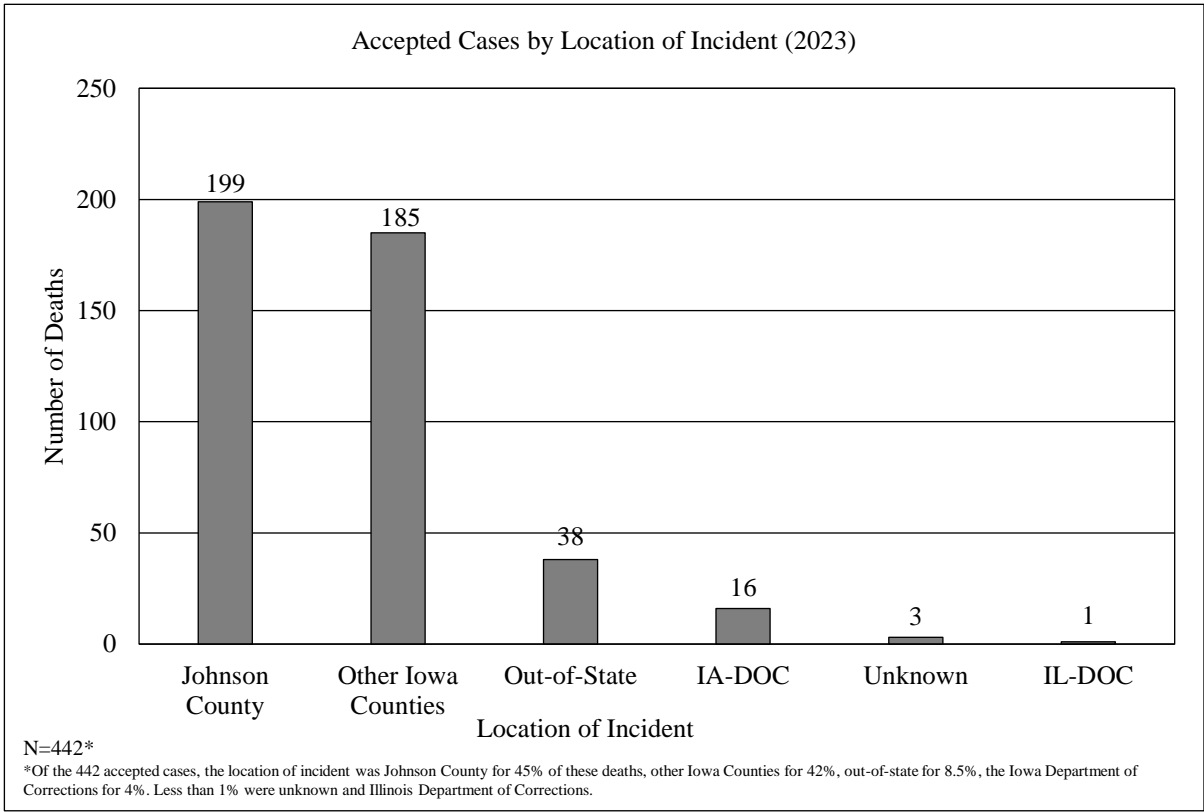


Figure 1.10.

Table 1.1. Other Iowa Counties Location of Incident (2023)

County	Number of Decedents
Linn	20
Scott	20
Black Hawk	12
Clinton	10
Louisa	10
Washington	10
Cedar	9
Dubuque	9
Polk	8
Iowa	7
Benton	6
Lee	6
Wapello	5
Mahaska	4
Muscatine	4
Van Buren	4
Delaware	3
Des Moines	3
Fayette	3
Jones	3
Bremer	2
Clayton	2
Henry	2
Jackson	2
Jefferson	2
Keokuk	2
Audubon	1
Boone	1
Buchanan	1
Butler	1
Cherokee	1
Clarke	1
Floyd	1
Franklin	1
Grundy	1
Hardin	1
Jasper	1
Marion	1
Marshall	1
Poweshick	1
Story	1
Tama	1
Wayne	1

N=185

Table 1.2. Out-of-State Location of Incident (2023)

County and State	Number of Decedents
Rock Island, IL	20
Hancock, IL	3
Whiteside, IL	3
Henderson, IL	2
Henry, IL	2
Mercer, IL	2
Cook, IL	1
Fulton, GA	1
Greene, MO	1
Isabella, MI	1
Maricopa, AZ	1
Montgomery, OH	1

N=38

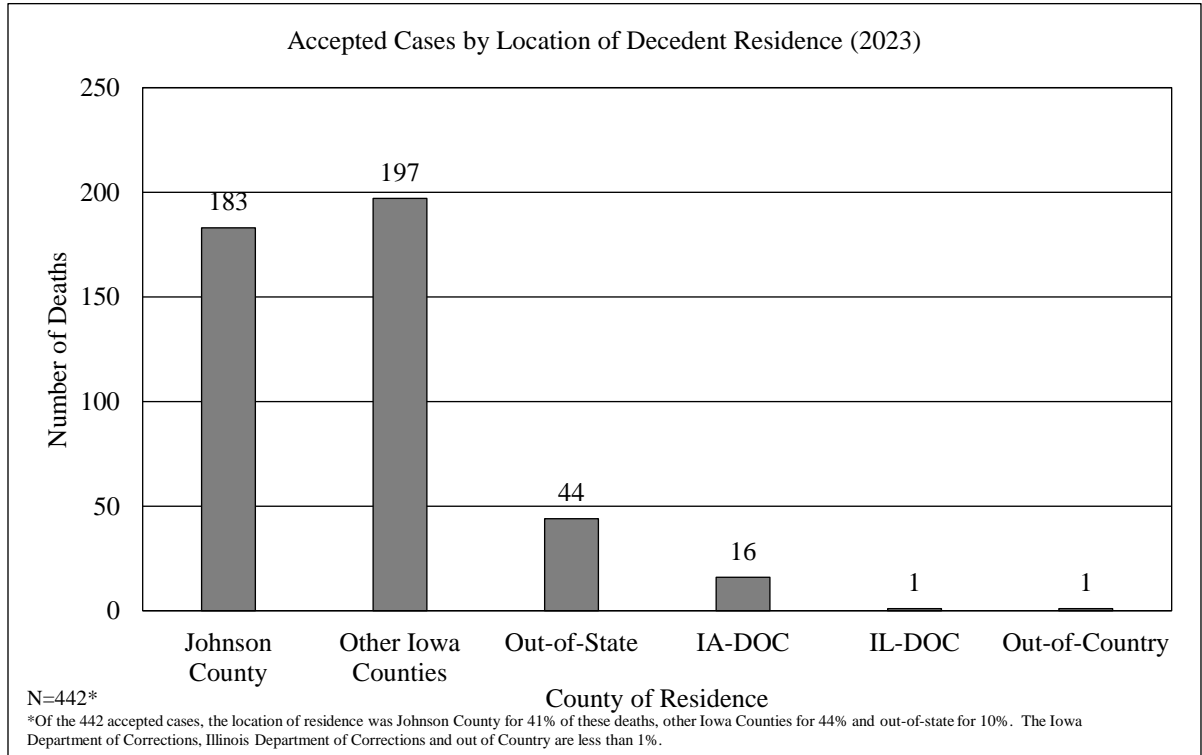


Figure 1.11.

Table 1.3. Other Iowa Counties Location of Decedent Residence (2023)

County	Number of Decedents
Linn	26
Scott	21
Black Hawk	10
Cedar	10
Clinton	10
Washington	10
Dubuque	9
Muscatine	9
Louisa	8
Polk	8
Wapello	8
Benton	7
Lee	7
Iowa	5
Mahaska	4
Des Moines	3
Jefferson	3
Jones	3
Van Buren	3
Butler	2
Clayton	2
Fayette	2
Henry	2
Jackson	2
Keokuk	2
Marion	2
Poweshiek	2
Audubon	1
Boone	1
Bremer	1
Buchanan	1
Buena Vista	1
Cherokee	1
Clarke	1
Delaware	1
Floyd	1
Franklin	1
Grundy	1
Hardin	1
Jasper	1
Marshall	1
Story	1
Tama	1
Wayne	1

N=197

Table 1.4. Out-of-State Location of Decedent Residence (2023)

County and State	Number of Decedents
Rock Island, IL	20
Hancock, IL	2
Henderson, IL	2
Henry, IL	2
Mercer, IL	2
Whiteside, IL	2
Buchanan, MO	1
Clark, MO	1
Collier, FL	1
Cook, IL	1
Dodge, MN	1
Elkhart, IN	1
Fulton, GA	1
Harris, TX	1
Isabella, MI	1
Lee, FL	1
Lincoln, MO	1
Montgomery, OH	1
St. Louis, MO	1
Tarrant, TX	1

N=44

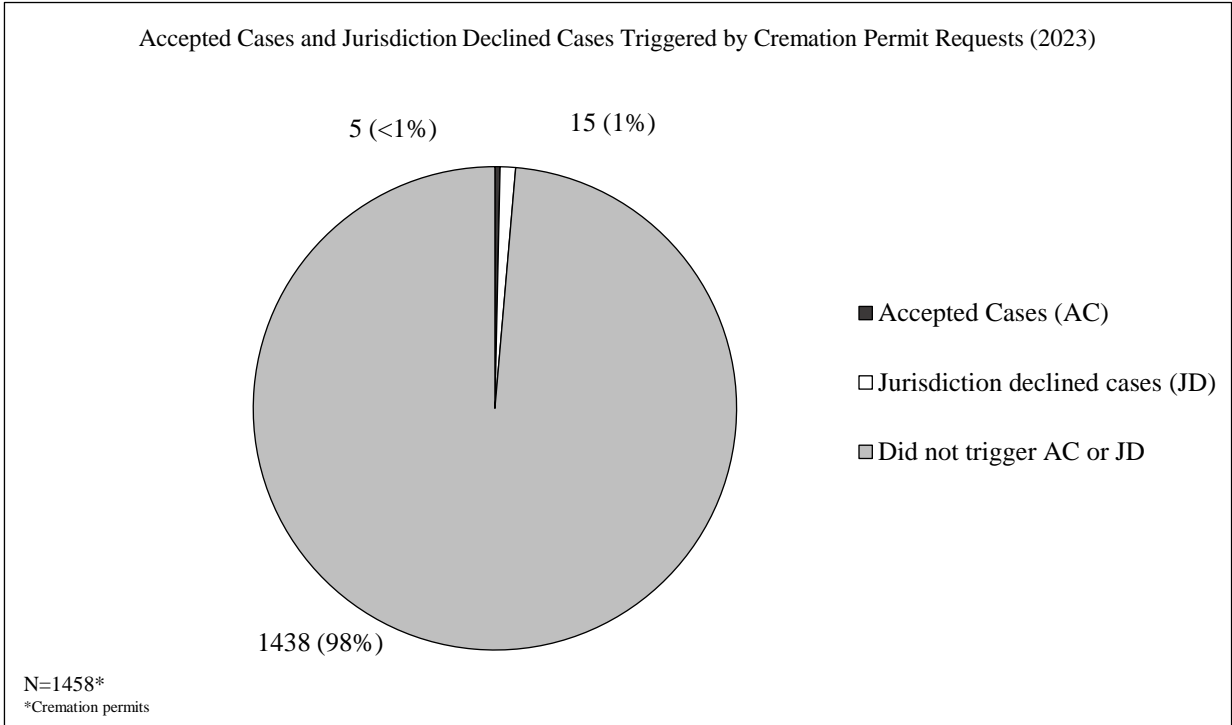


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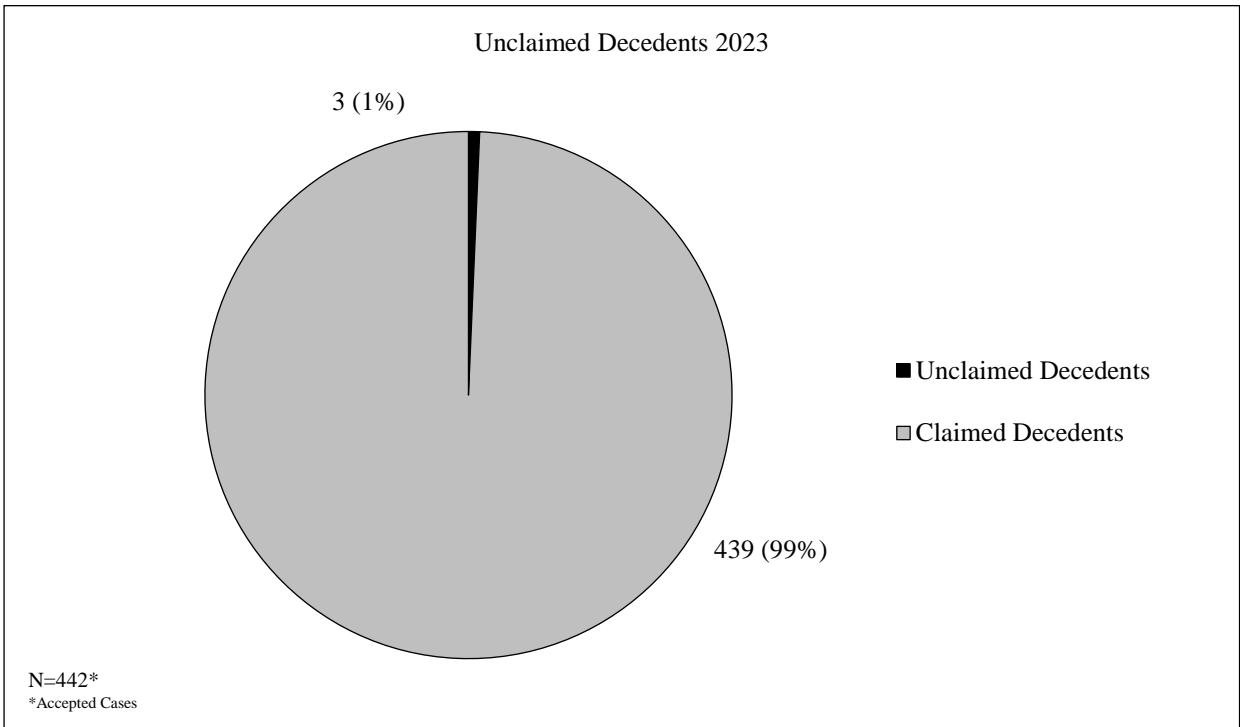


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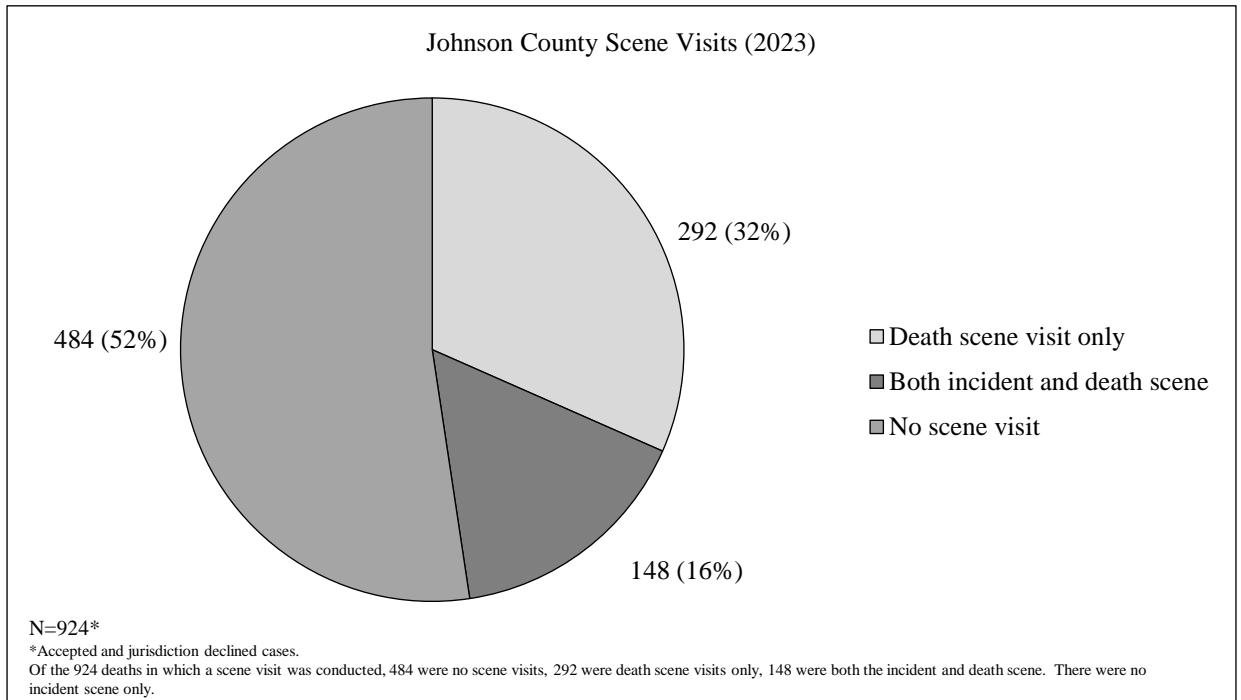


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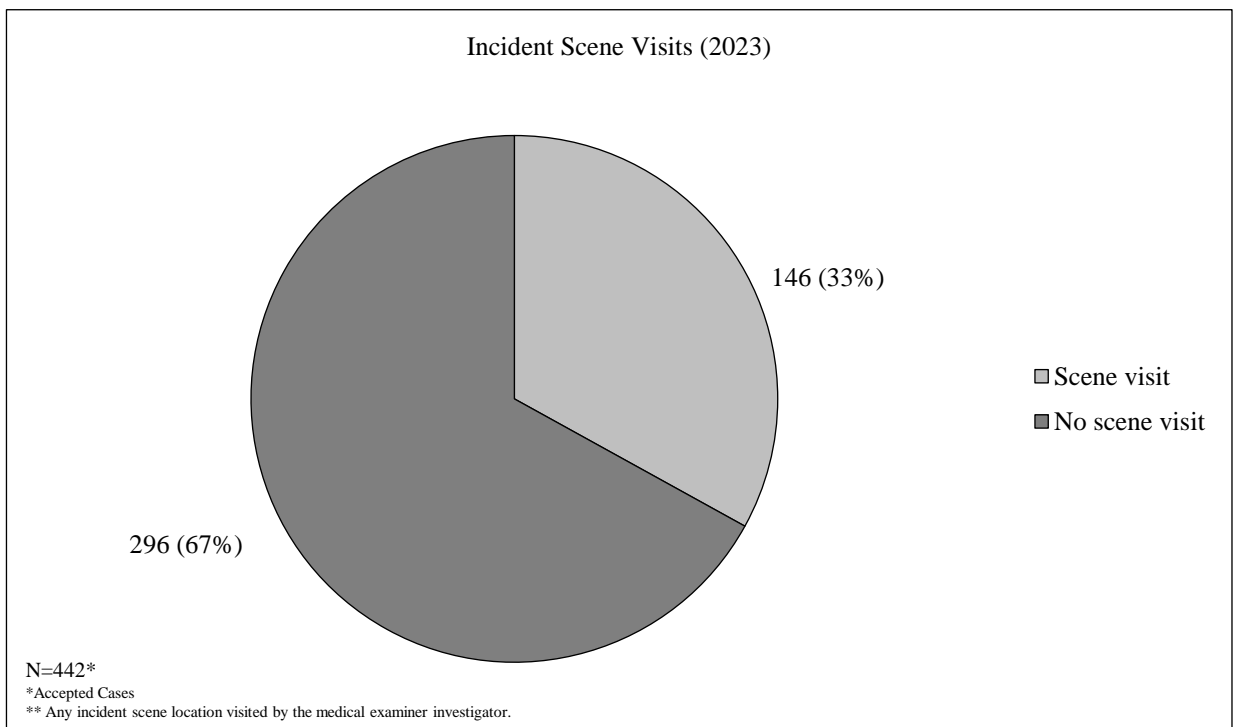


Figure 1.15.

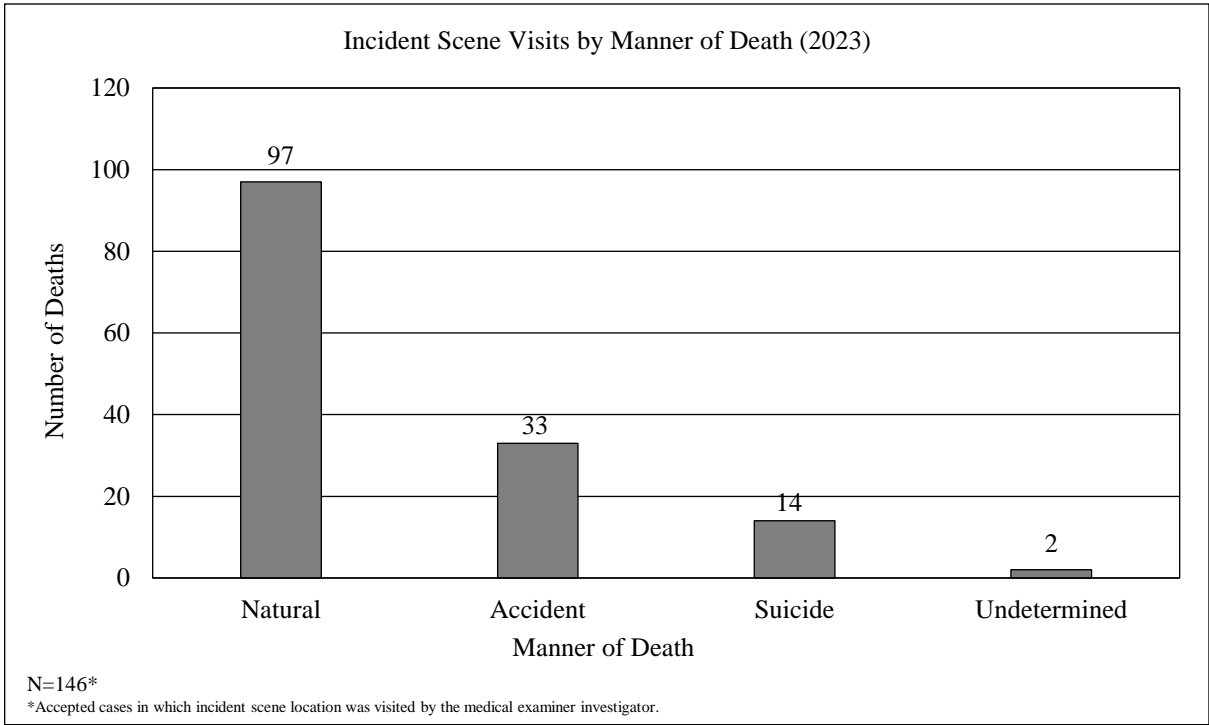


Figure 1.16.

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Autopsies

In 2023, 125 autopsies were conducted by JCME. All JCME autopsies were performed at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC) and were complete autopsies (external examination and internal examination of the head, neck, chest, and abdomen).

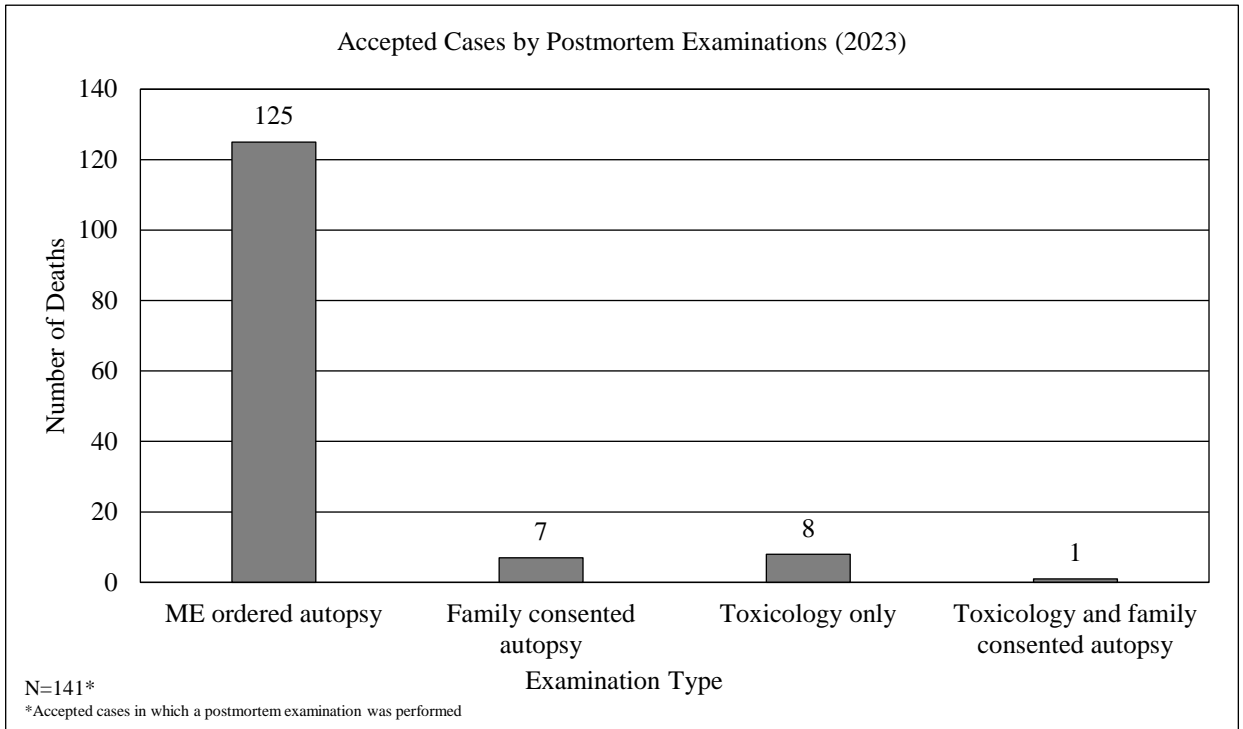


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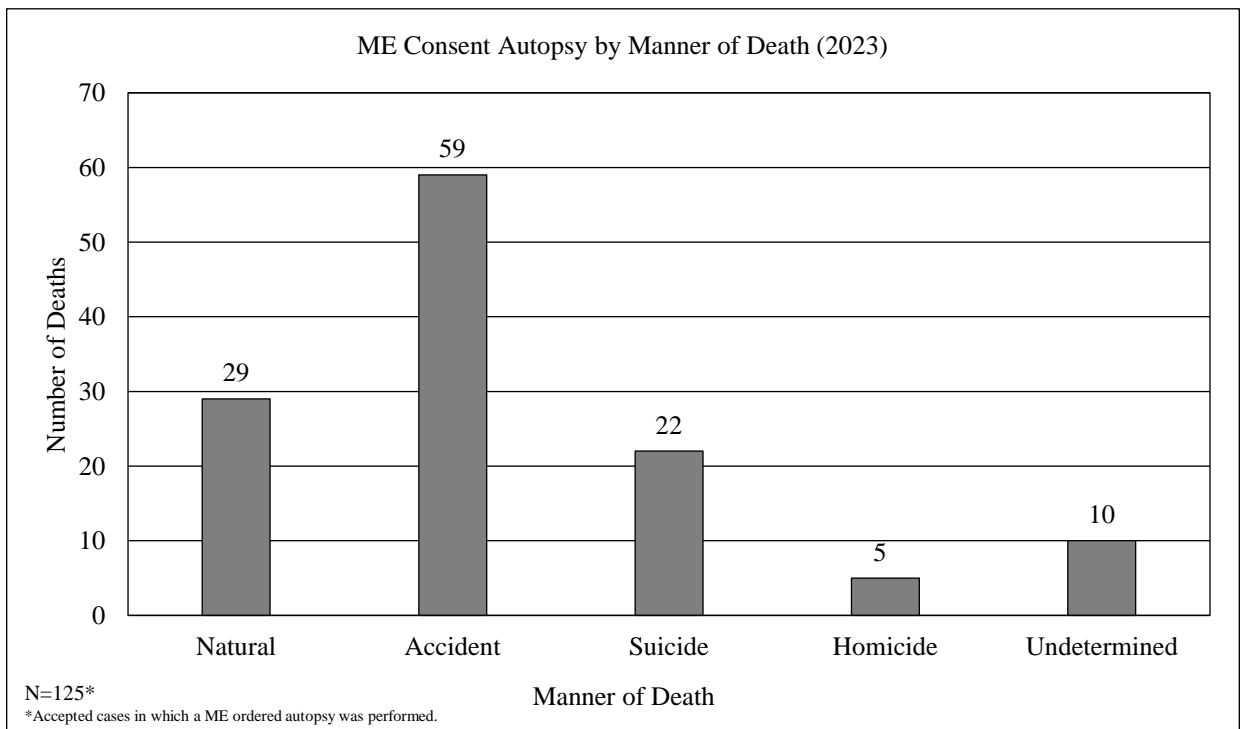


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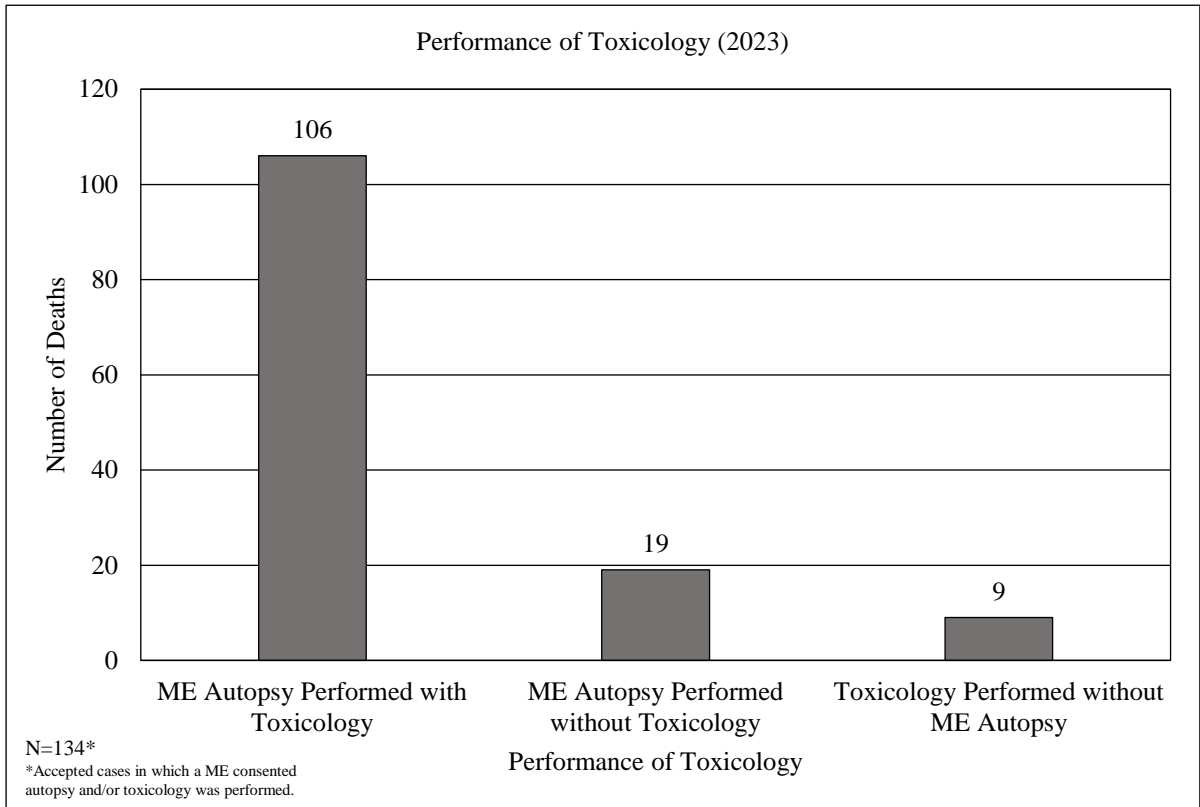


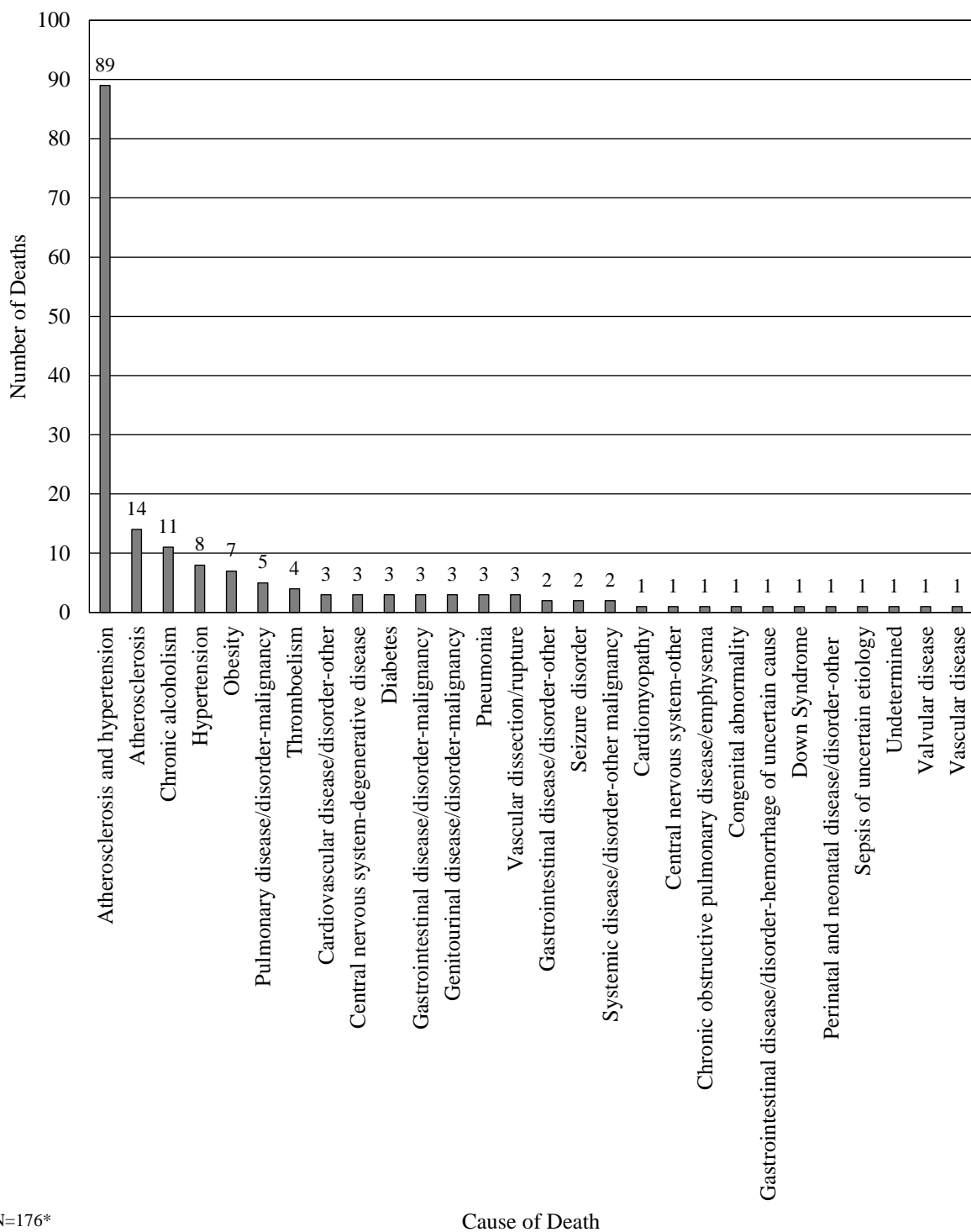
Figure 2.3.

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Causes of Death for Each Manner of Death

The cause of death for each manner of death is a cross index of categories used for statistical information retrieval.

Cause of Death by Manner of Death: Natural (2023)



N=176*

* Accepted cases in which the manner of death was determined to be natural.

Figure 3.1.

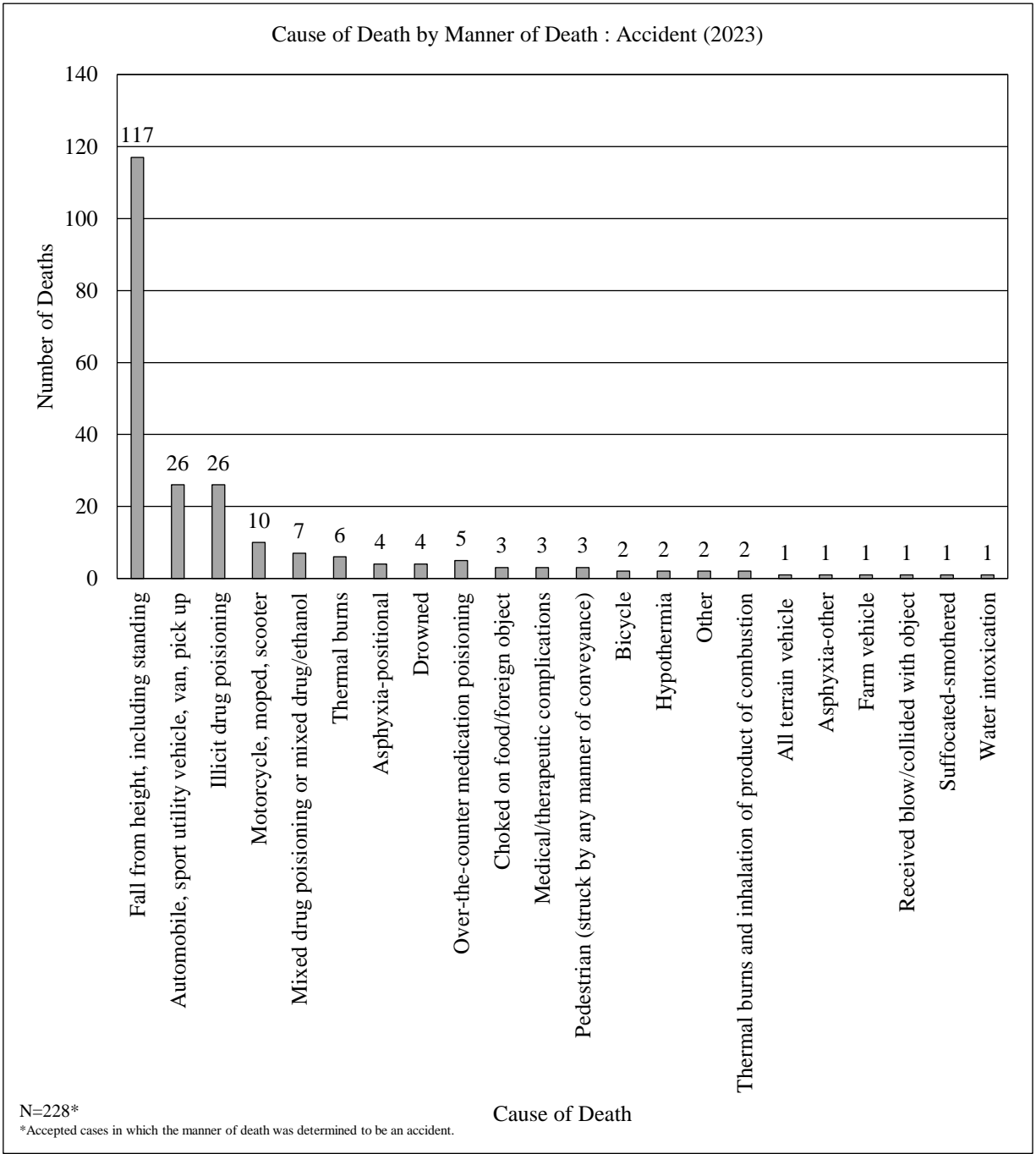


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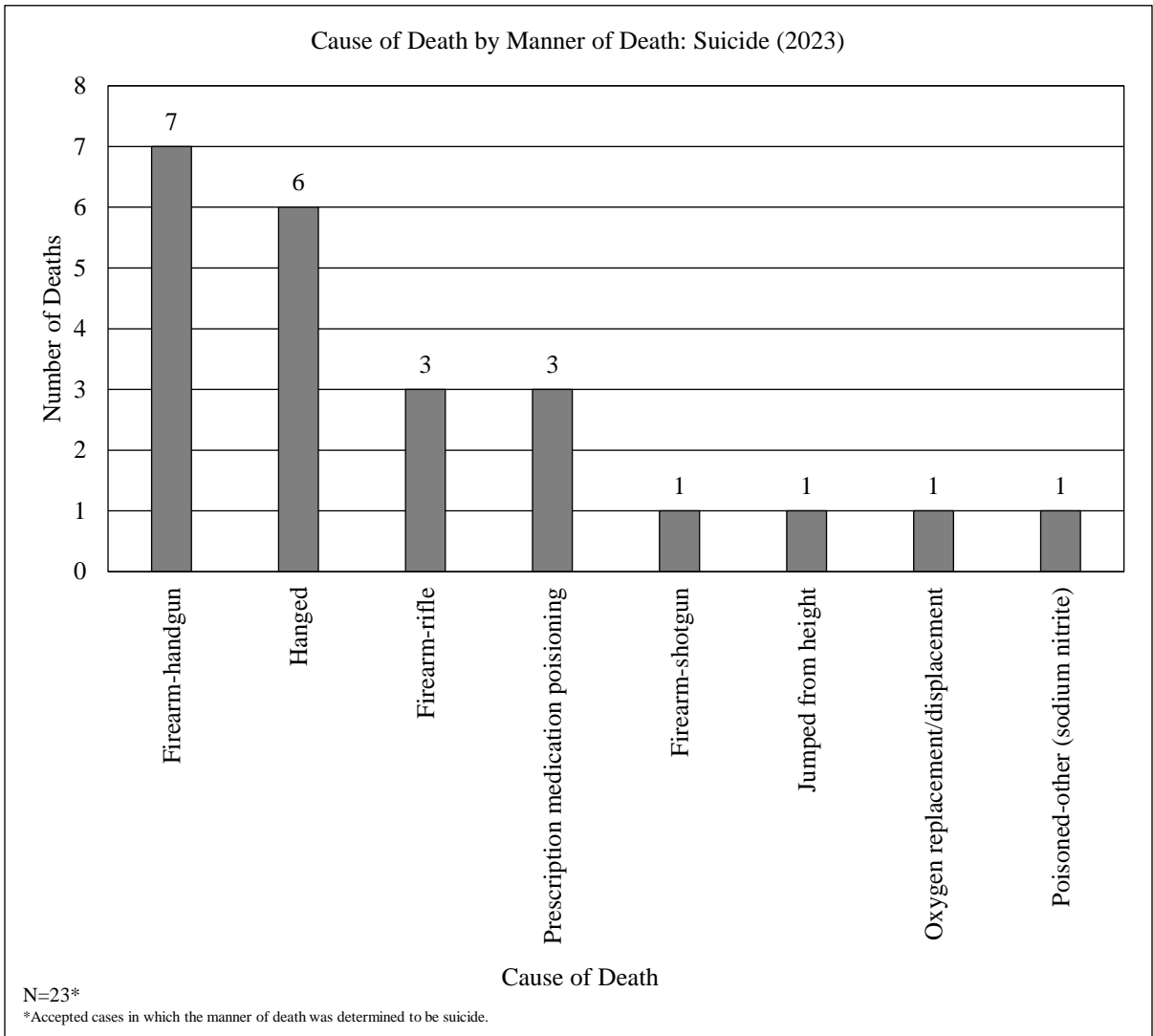


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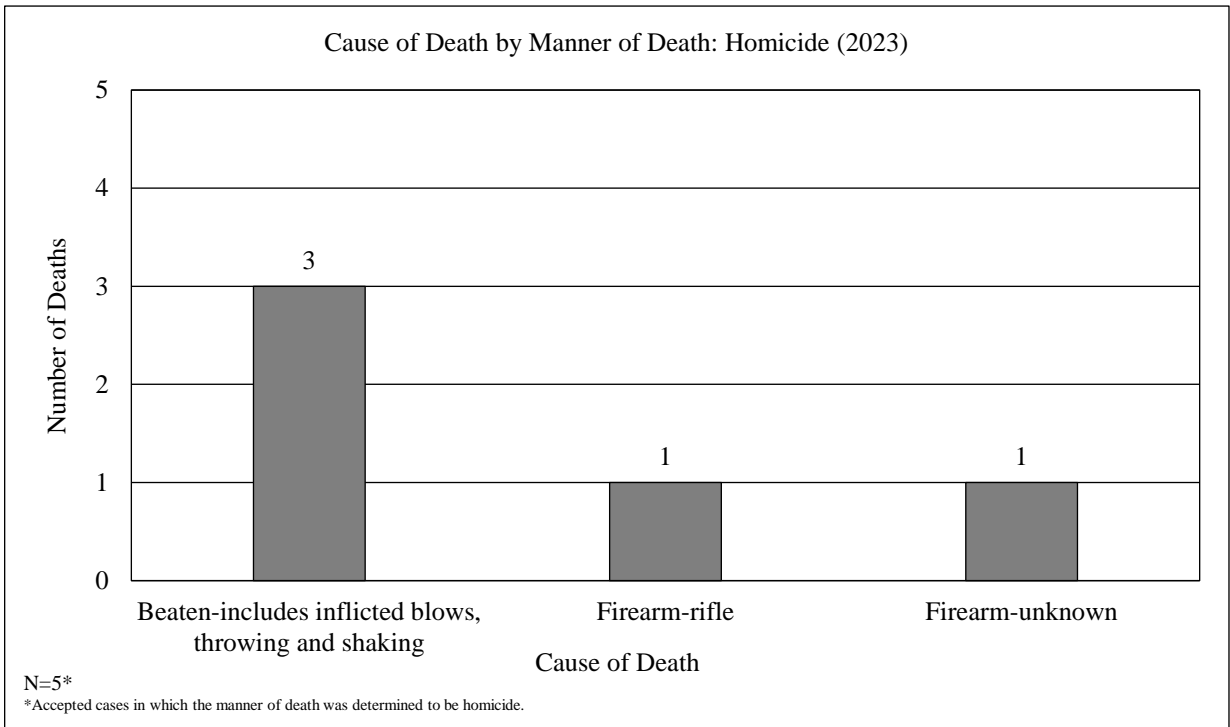


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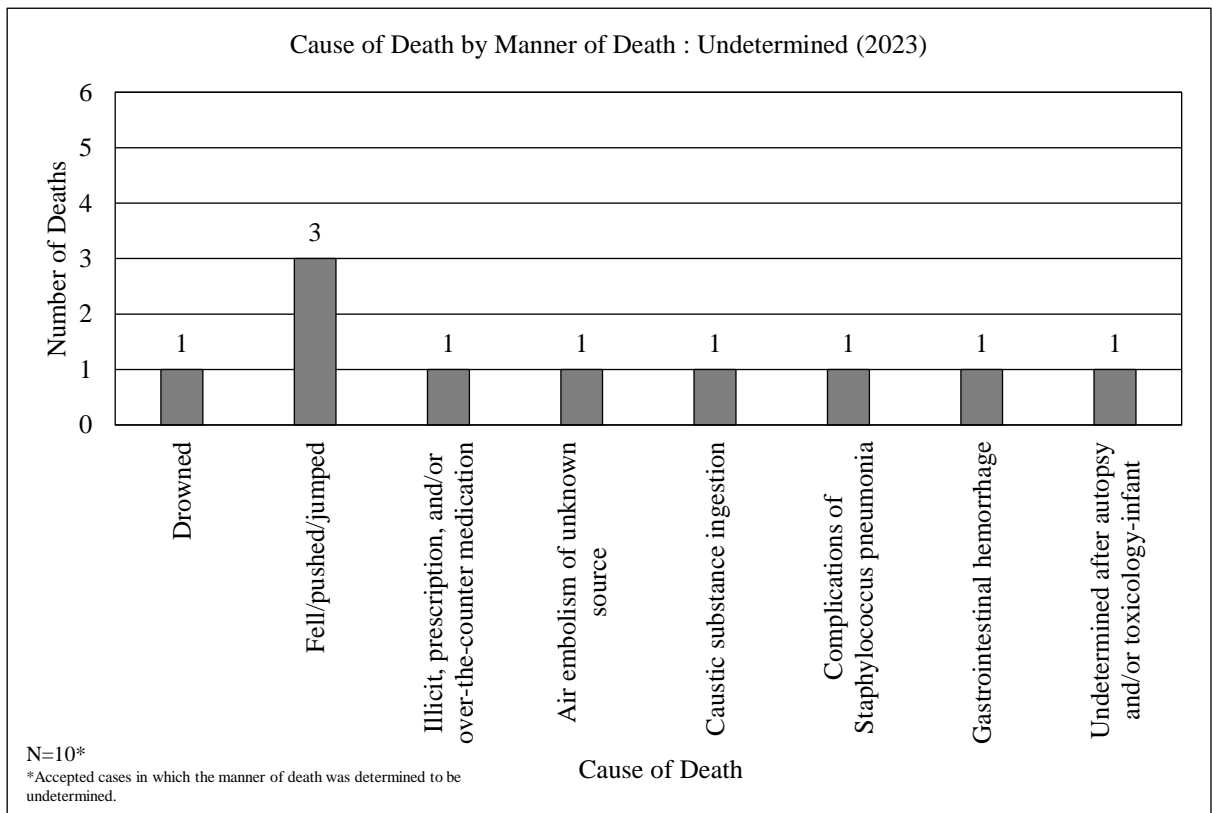


Figure 3.5.

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Accidents

Of the 442 deaths accepted by JCME, 228 were classified as accident. The sex distribution was 156 males to 72 females. One hundred and seventeen deaths were the result of a fall, 33 were the result of illicit drug poisoning, and 41 were due to a motor vehicle crash. The most common age ranges were 70-79 years (53 decedents) and 80-89 years (48 decedents).

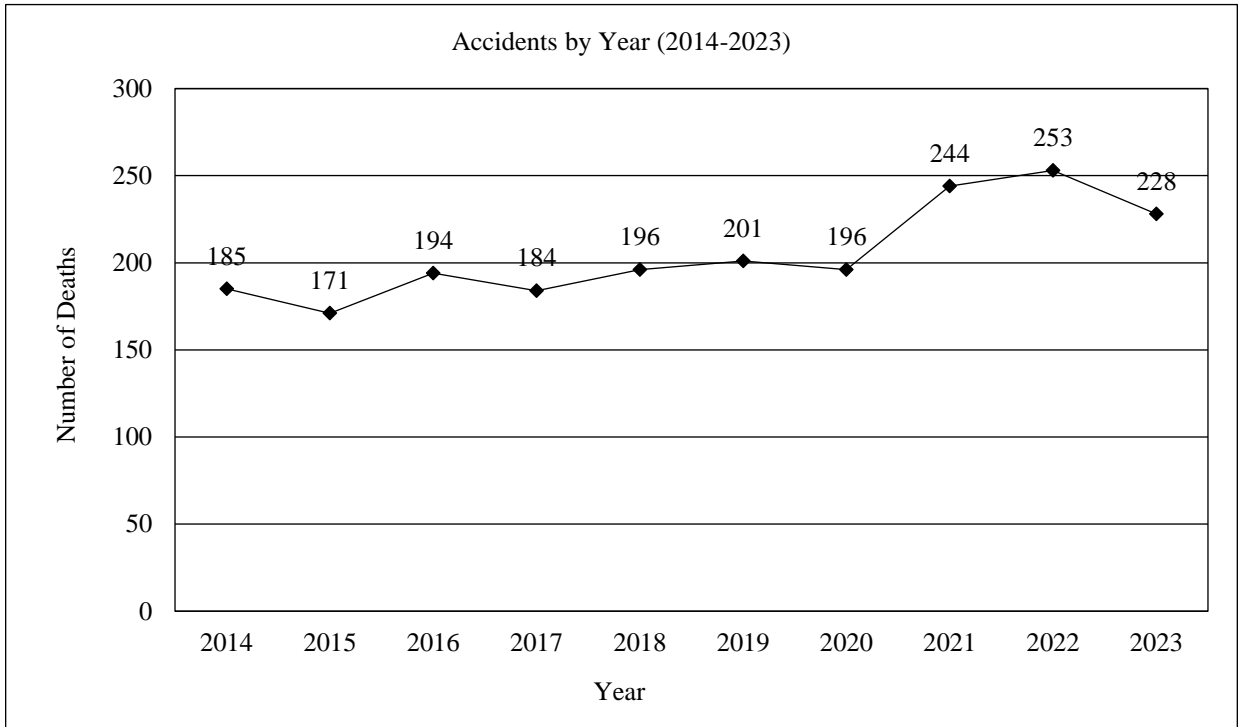


Figure 4.1.

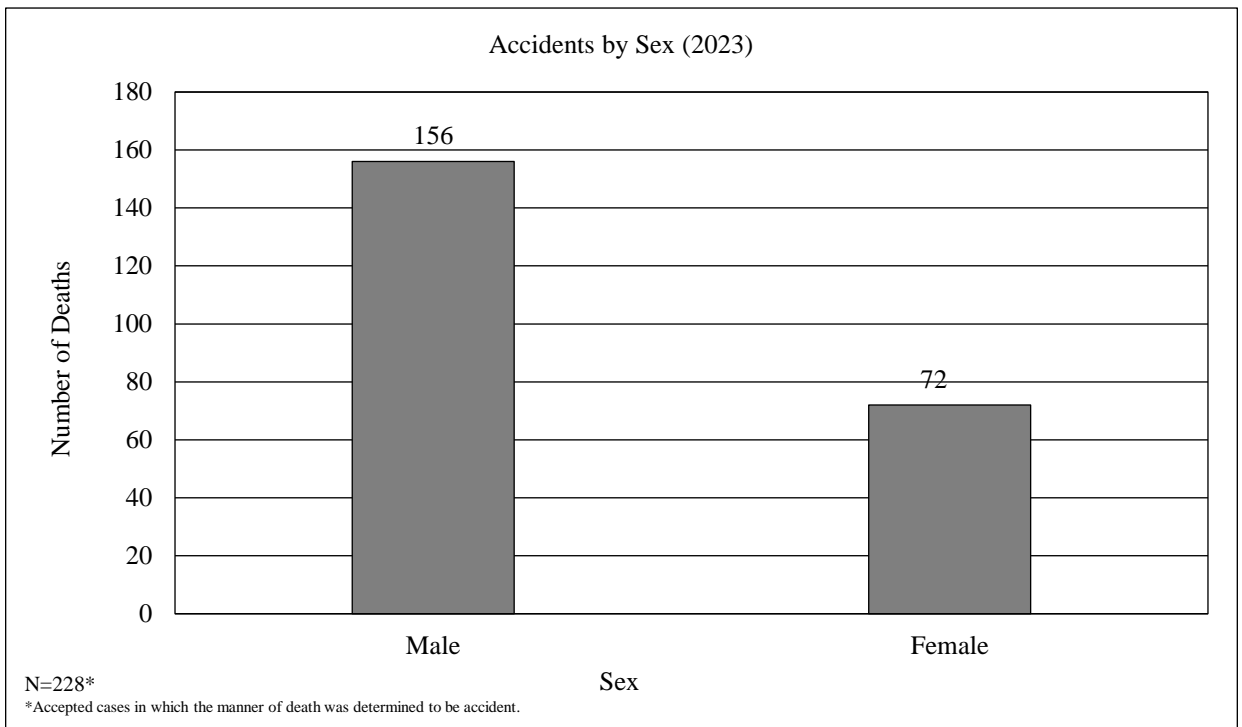


Figure 4.2.

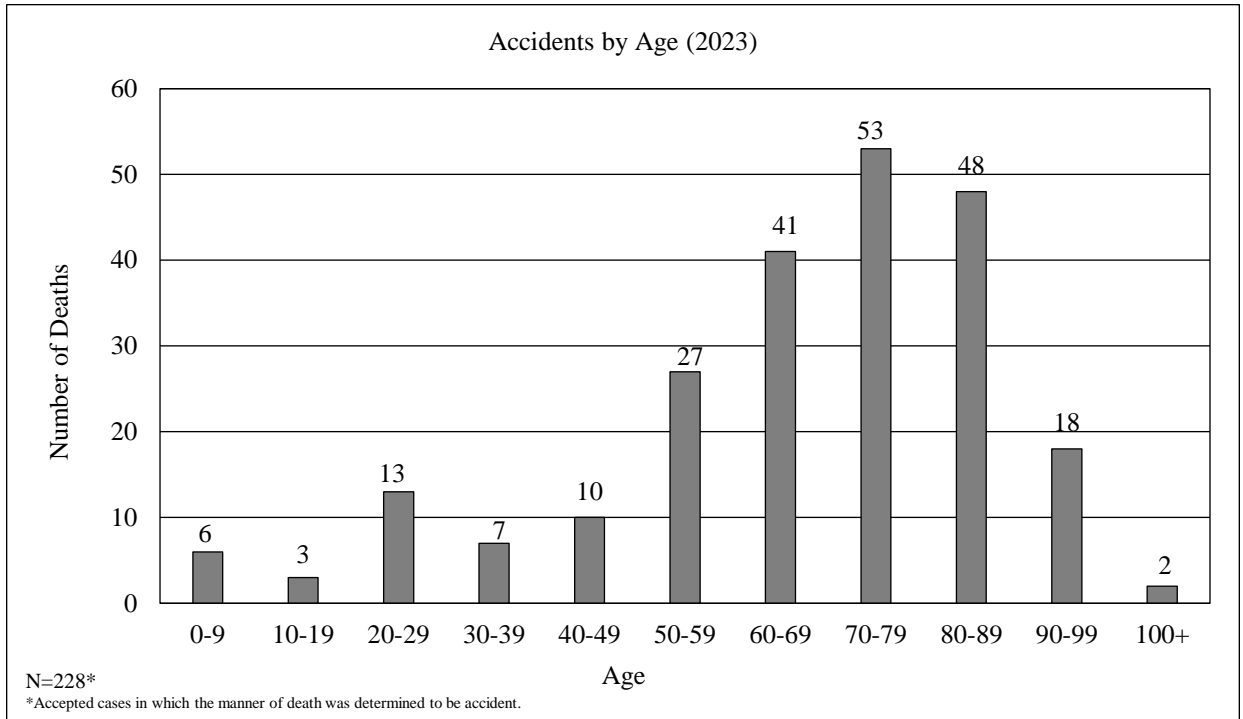


Figure 4.3.

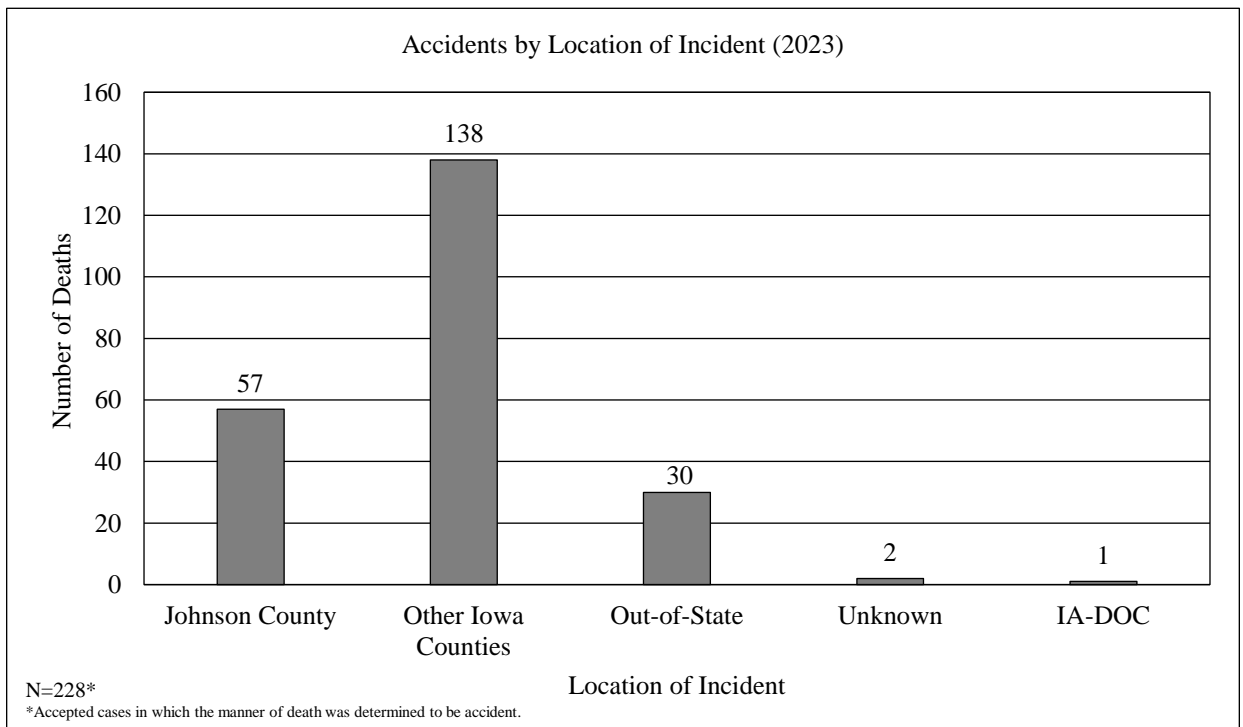


Figure 4.4.

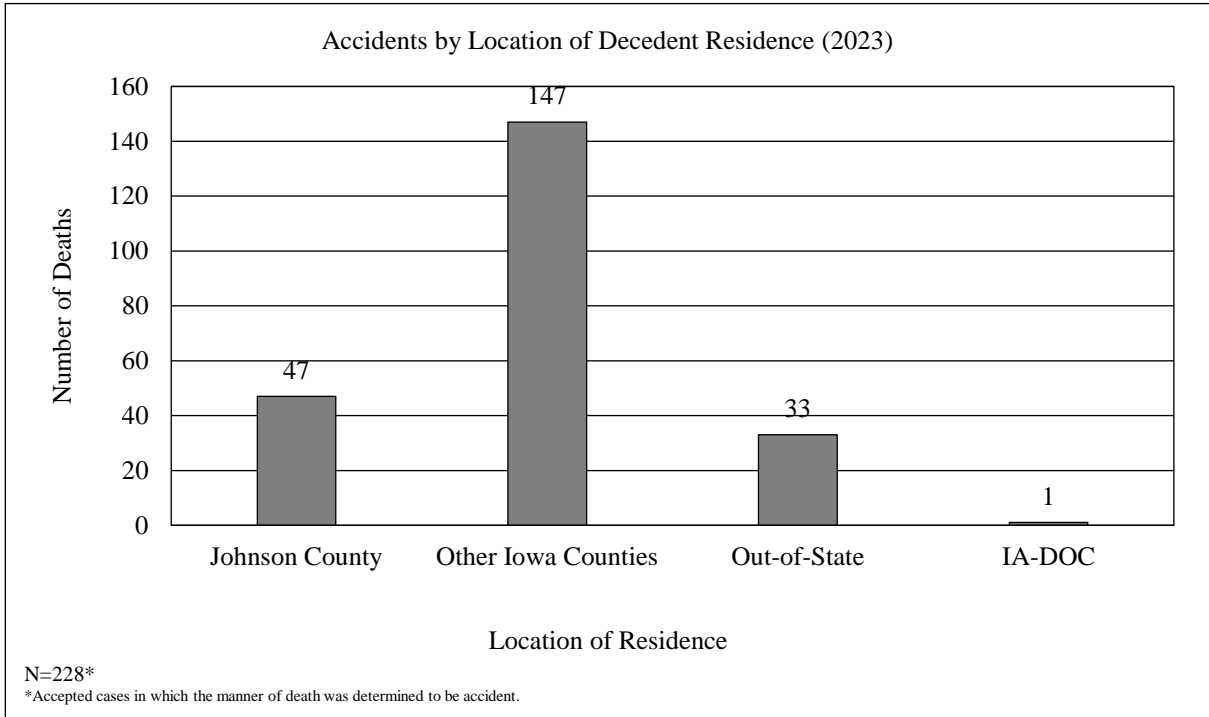


Figure 4.5.

Suicides

Of the 442 deaths investigated by JCME, 23 were classified as suicide. Eleven of these deaths were the result of a firearm and 6 were due to hanging. The sex distribution was 15 males to 8 females. The most common age ranges were 20-29 and 60-69 years with 5 decedents making up each age range.

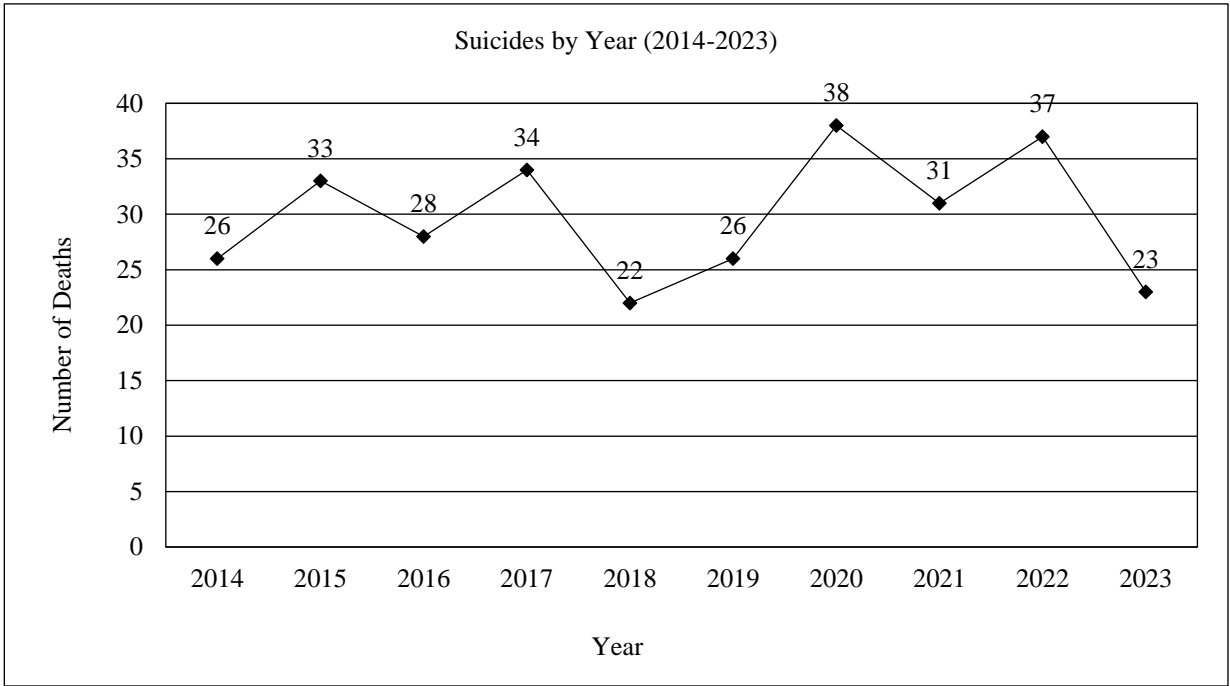


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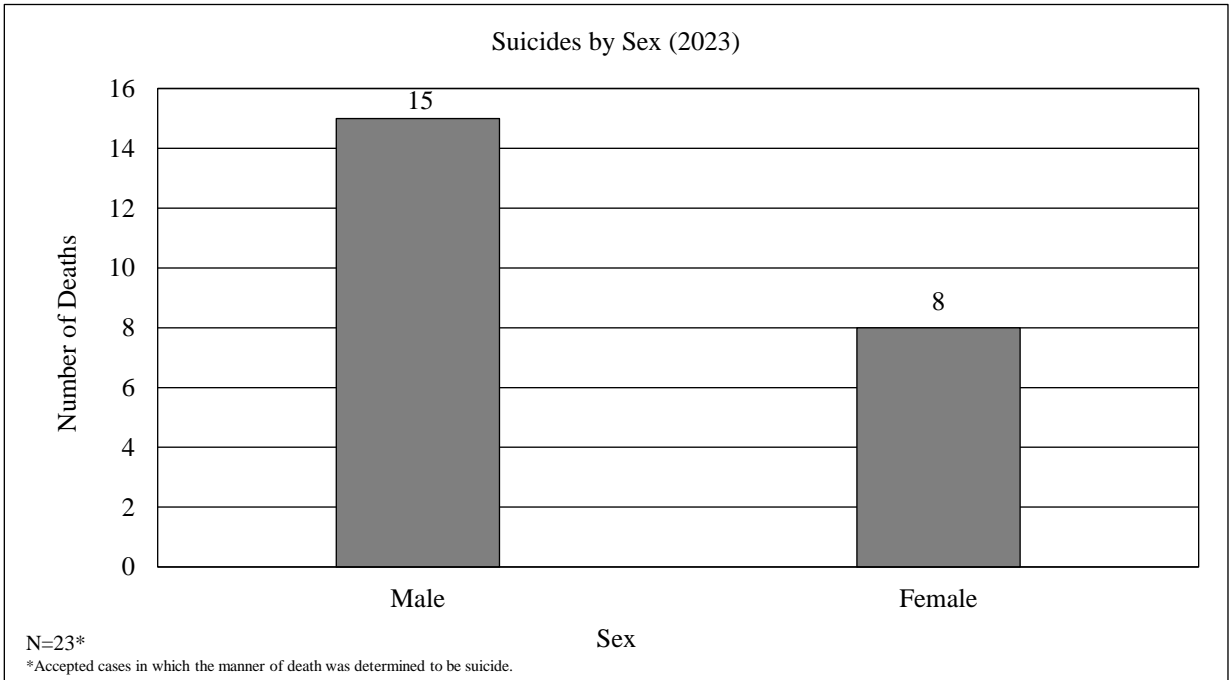


Figure 5.2.

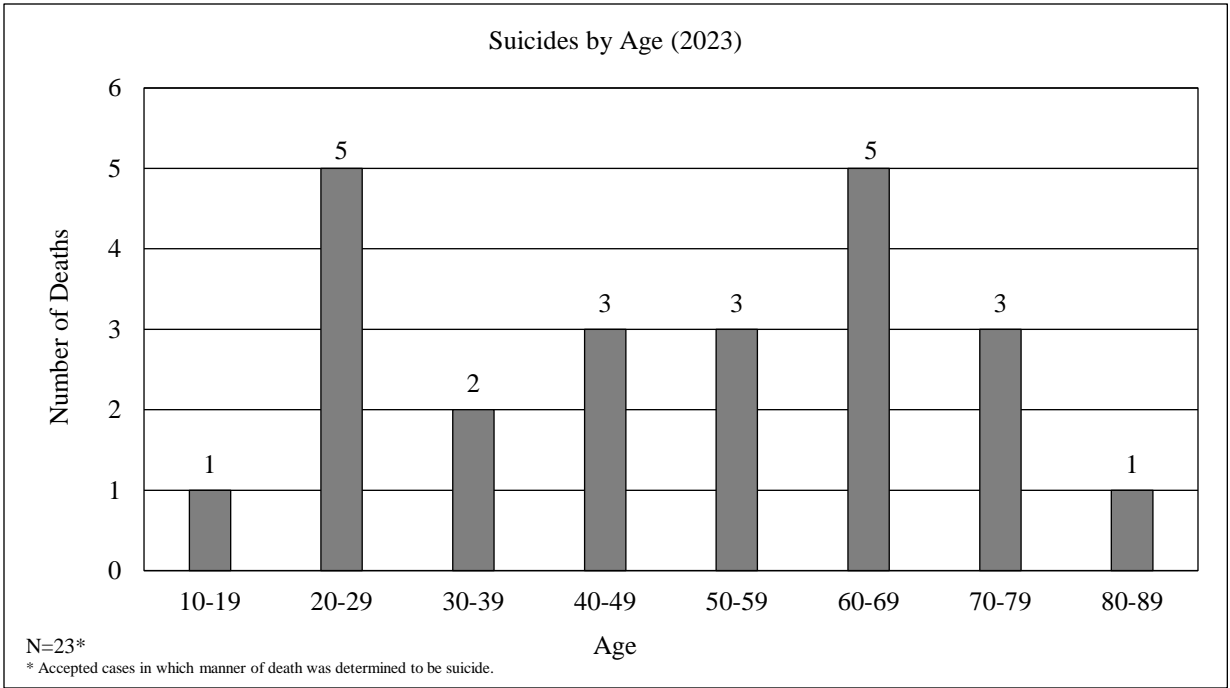


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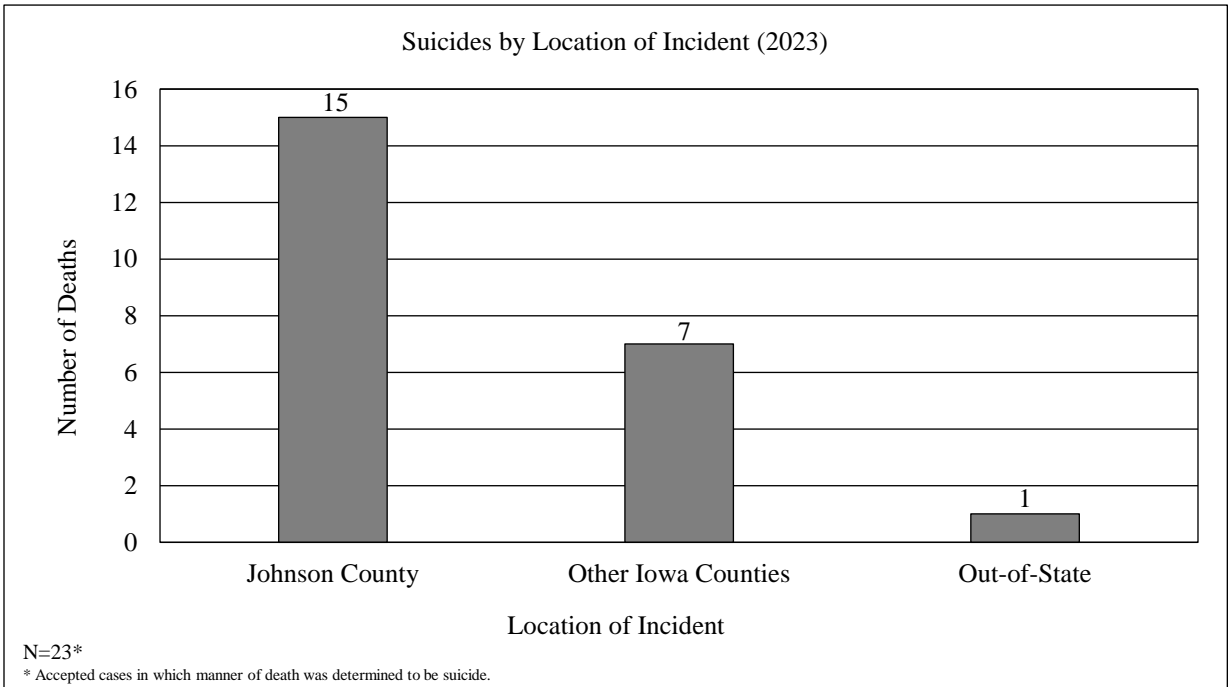


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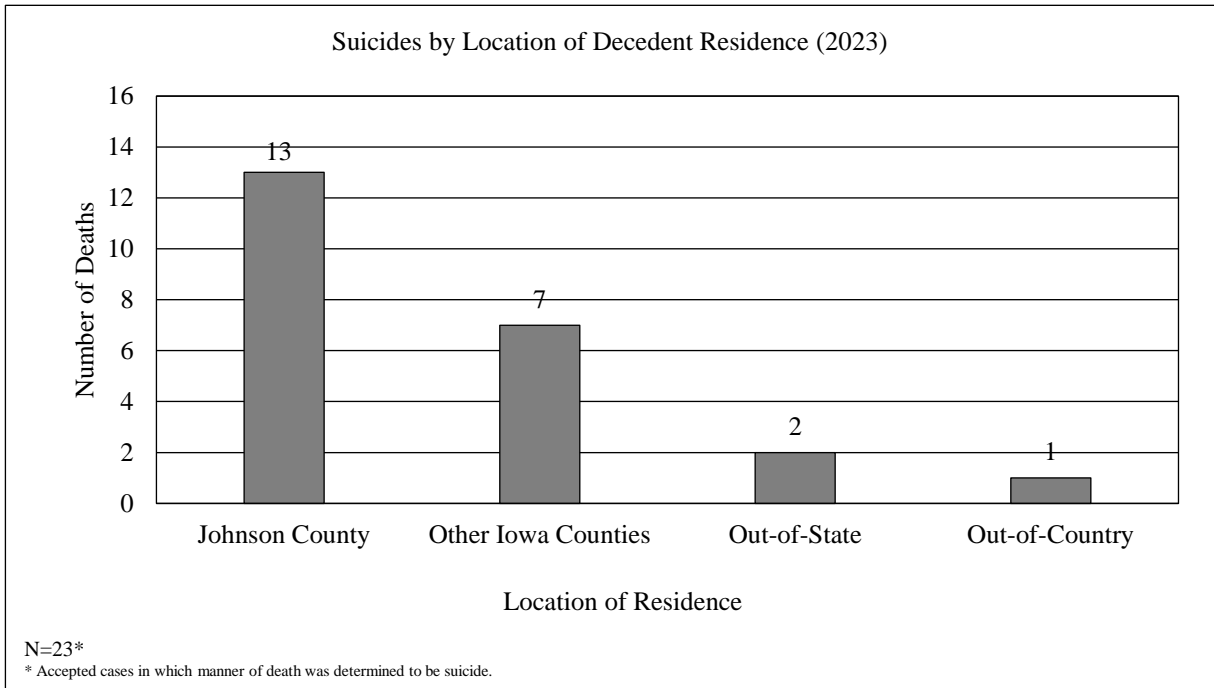


Figure 5.5.

Homicides

Of the 442 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, 5 were classified as homicide. The sex distribution was 4 males to 1 female. The most common age range was 40-49 (2 decedents). The incident location for 1 of the 5 deaths certified as homicide occurred out-of-state, 4 occurred in other Iowa counties, and none occurred in Johnson County.

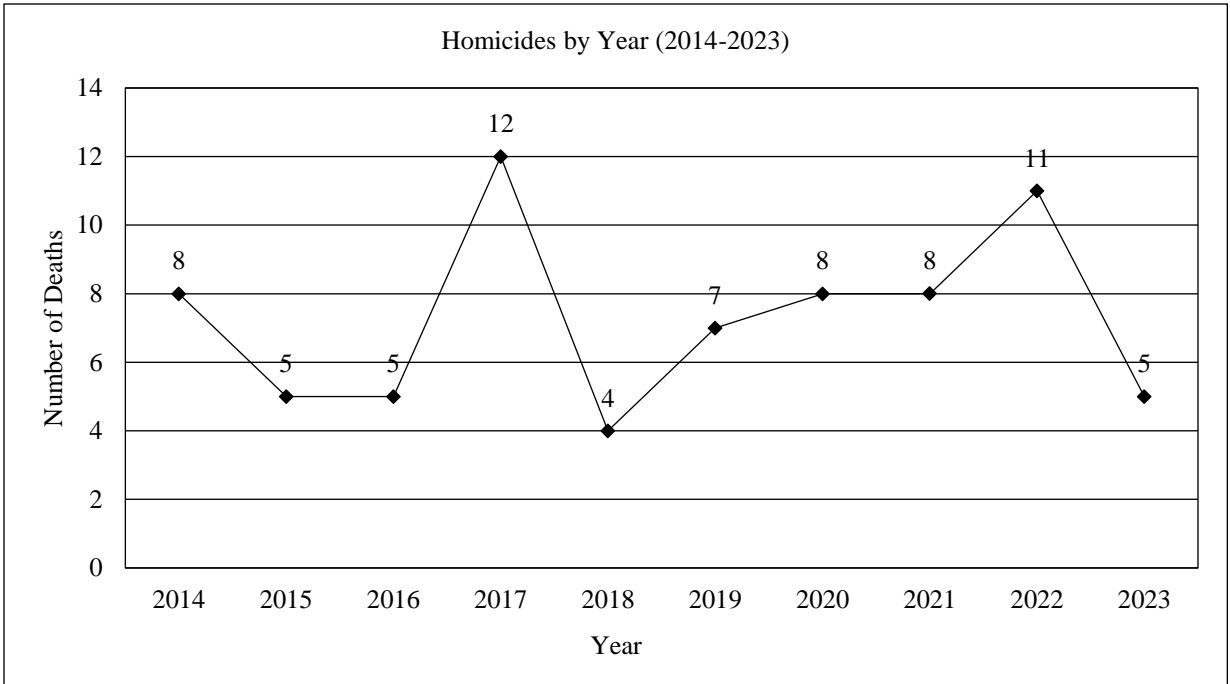


Figure 6.1.

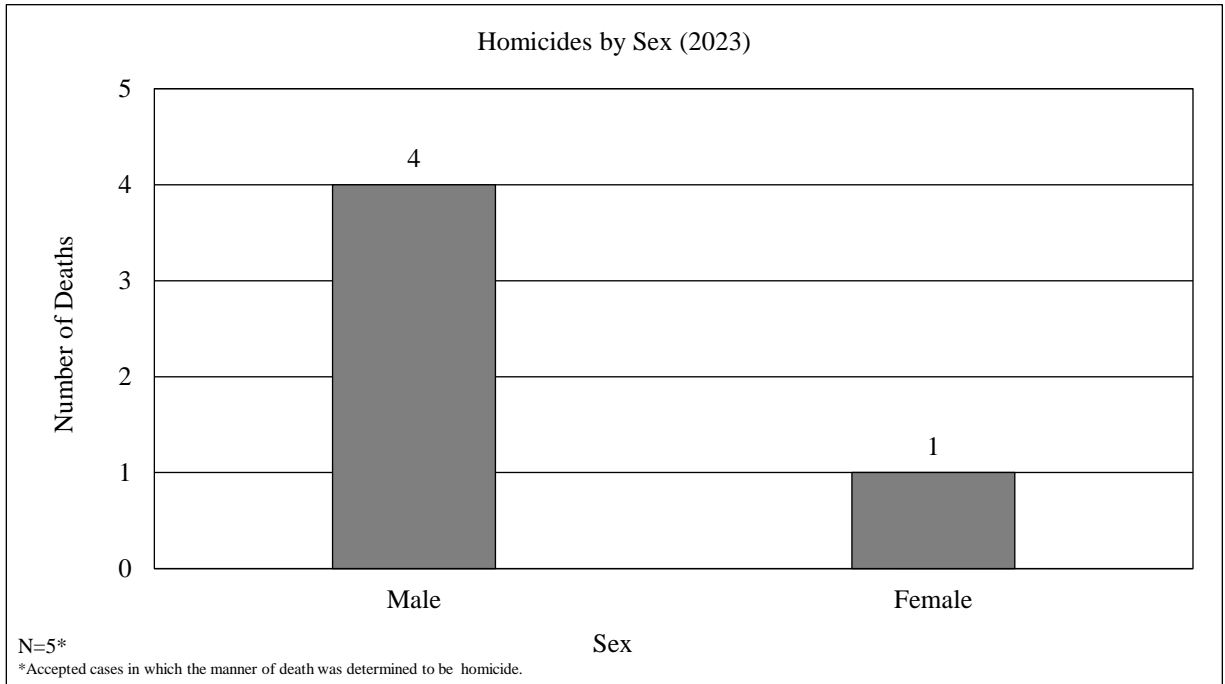


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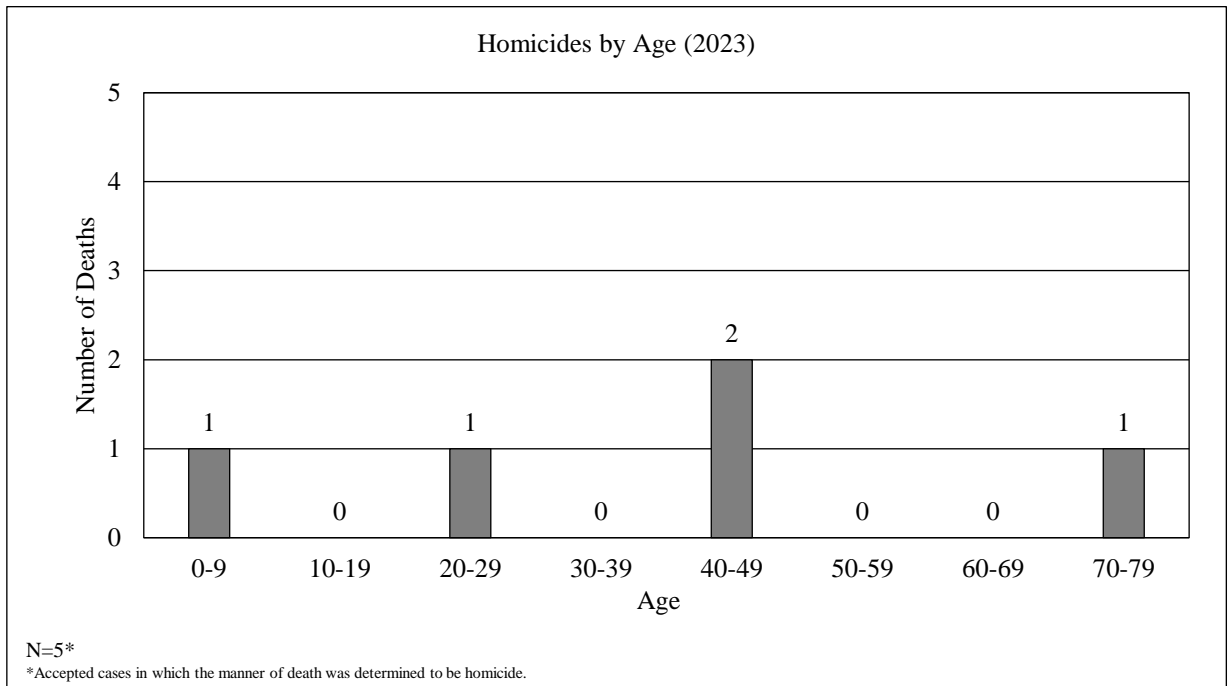


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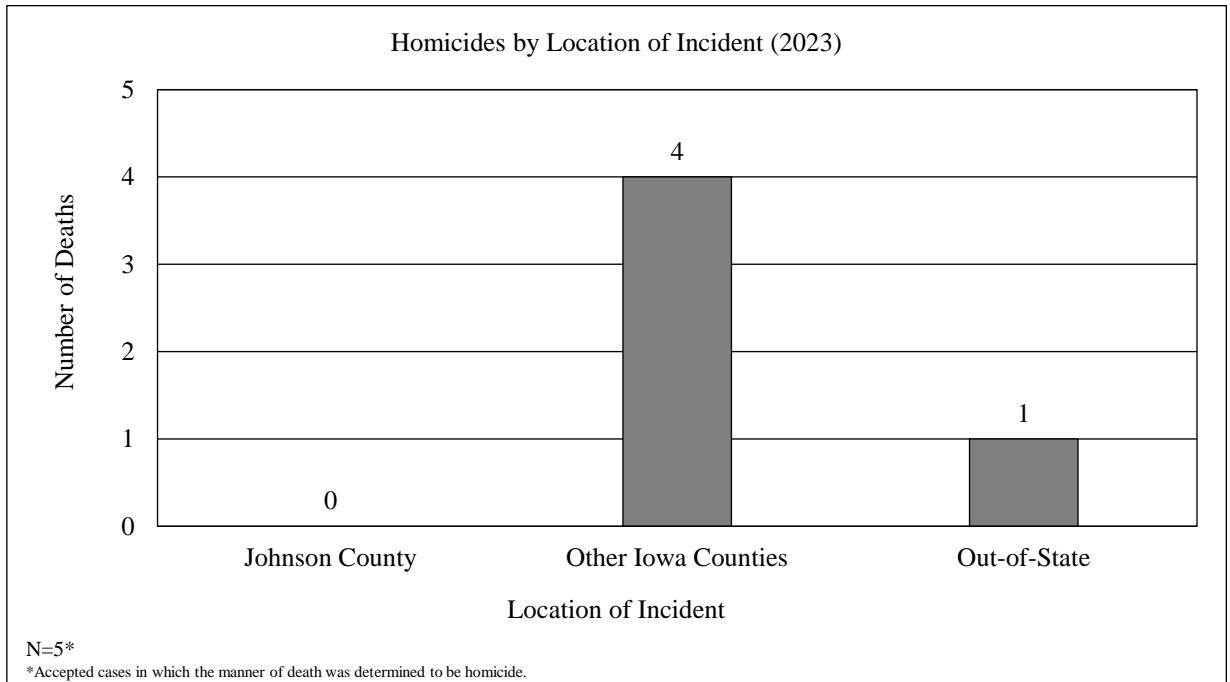
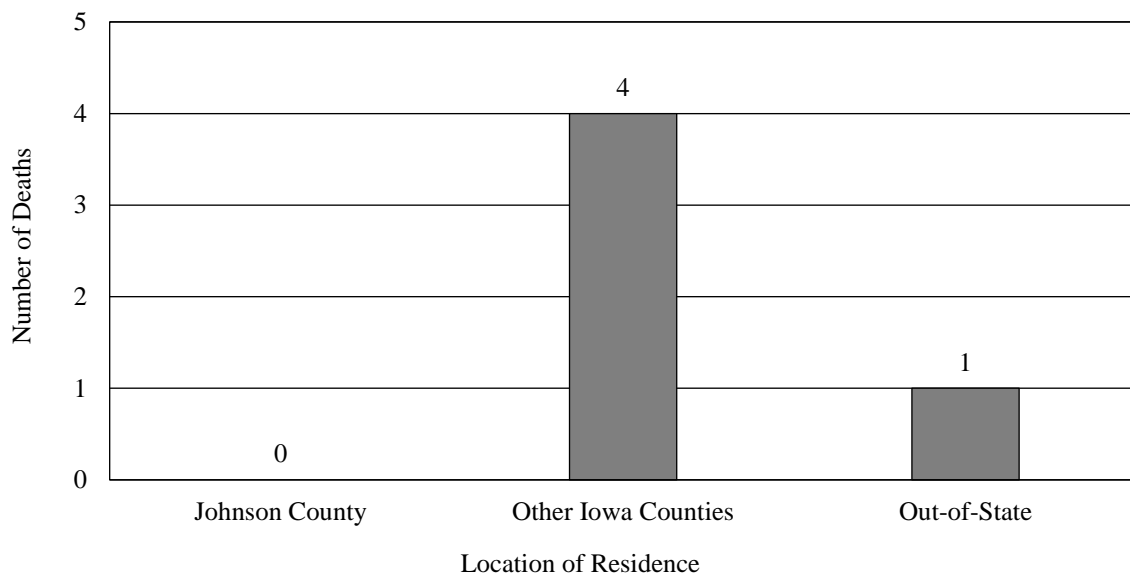


Figure 6.4.

Homicides by Location of Decedent Residence (2023)



N=5*

*Accepted cases in which the manner of death was determined to be homicide.

Figure 6.5.

Drug-Related Deaths

In 2023, there were 42 drug related deaths investigated by JCME. Of this total, 25 involved illicit drugs only, 5 involved over-the-counter drugs only, 3 involved prescription drugs only, and 9 involved a mixture of drugs. Of the 9 mixed drug-related deaths, 8 involved a mixture of illicit drugs (methamphetamine, fentanyl, MDMA, xylazine) and 1 involved a mixture of over-the-counter drugs. Of the 33 illicit drug-related deaths, 24 involved methamphetamine, 10 involved fentanyl, 6 involved cocaine, 1 involved MDMA, 1 involved MDMB-4en-PINACA, and 1 involved xylazine. Of the 42 drug-related deaths, 38 were classified as accident, 3 as suicides, and 1 as undetermined.

Of the 42 drug-related deaths, 10 involved prescription or illicit opioids. All 10 of these opioid deaths were classified as accident and involved fentanyl.

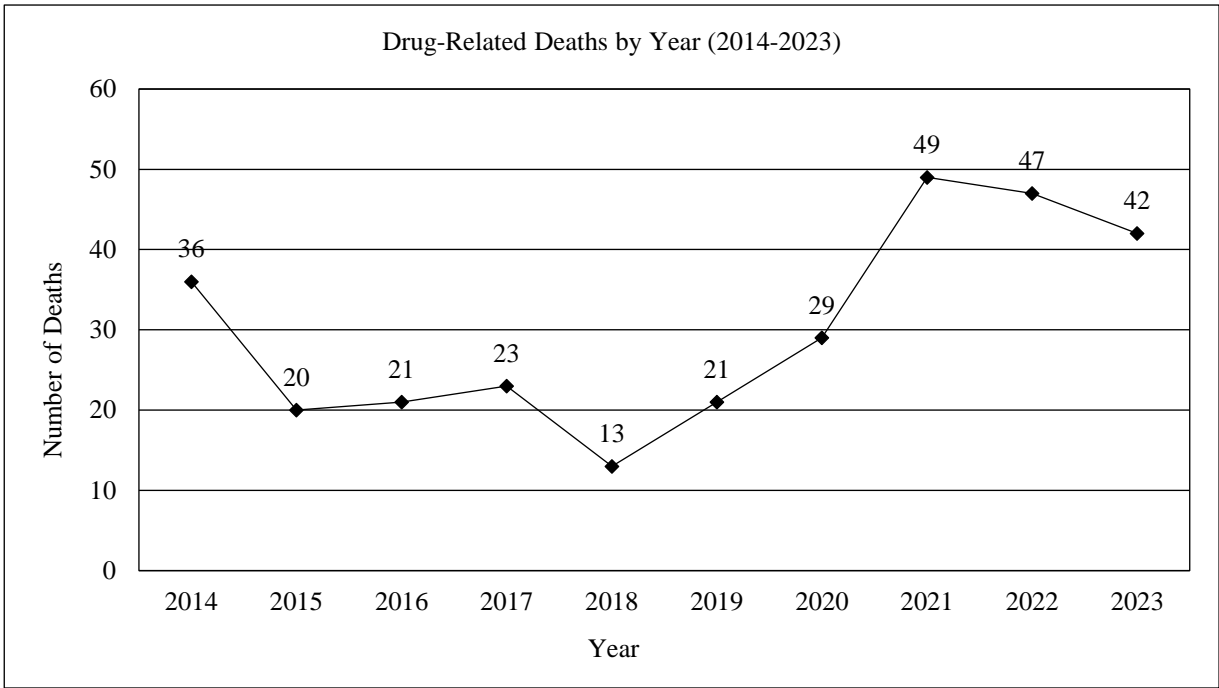


Figure 7.1.

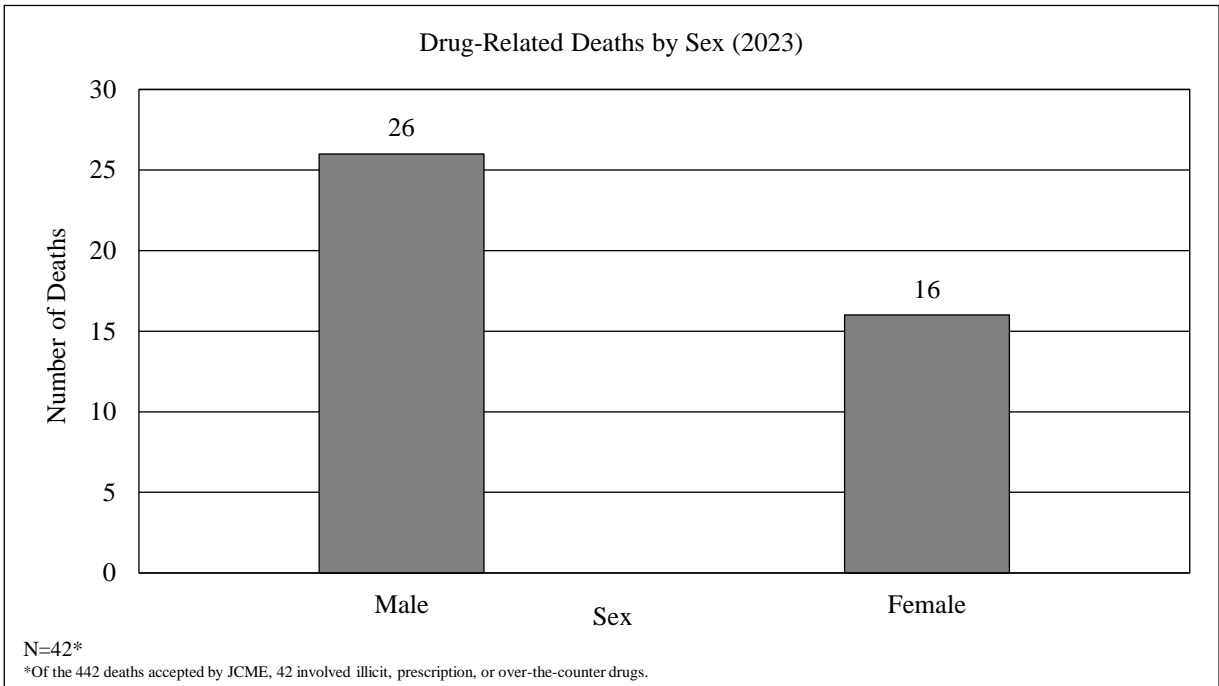


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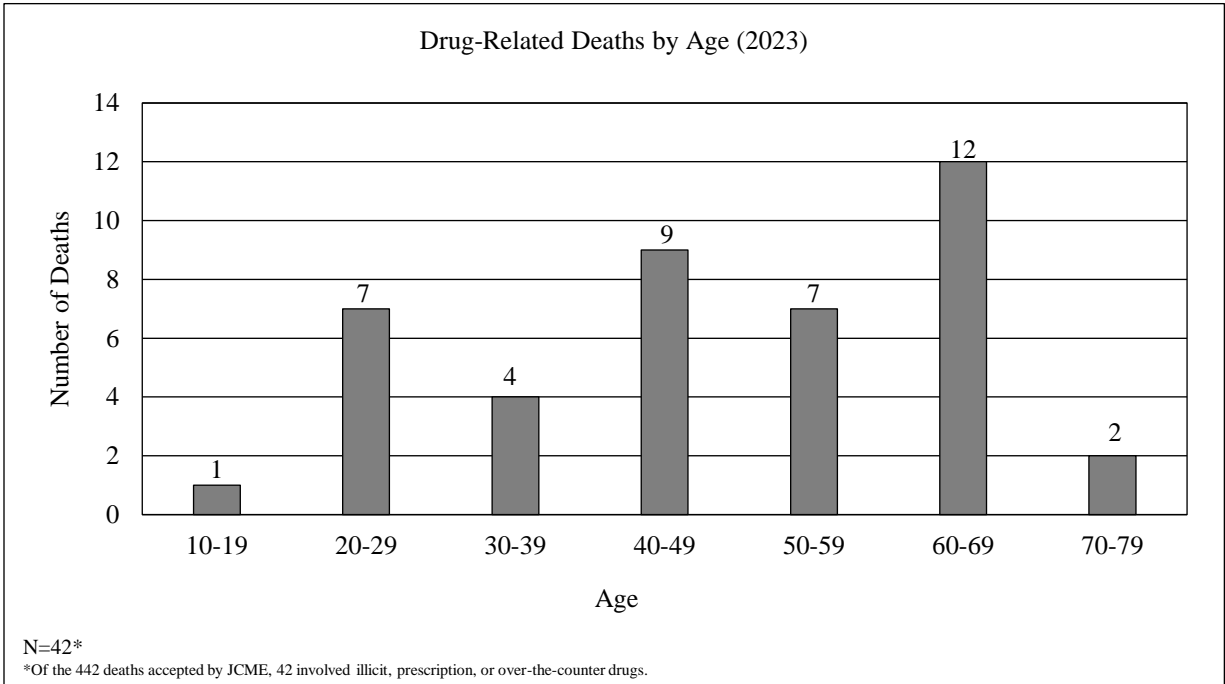


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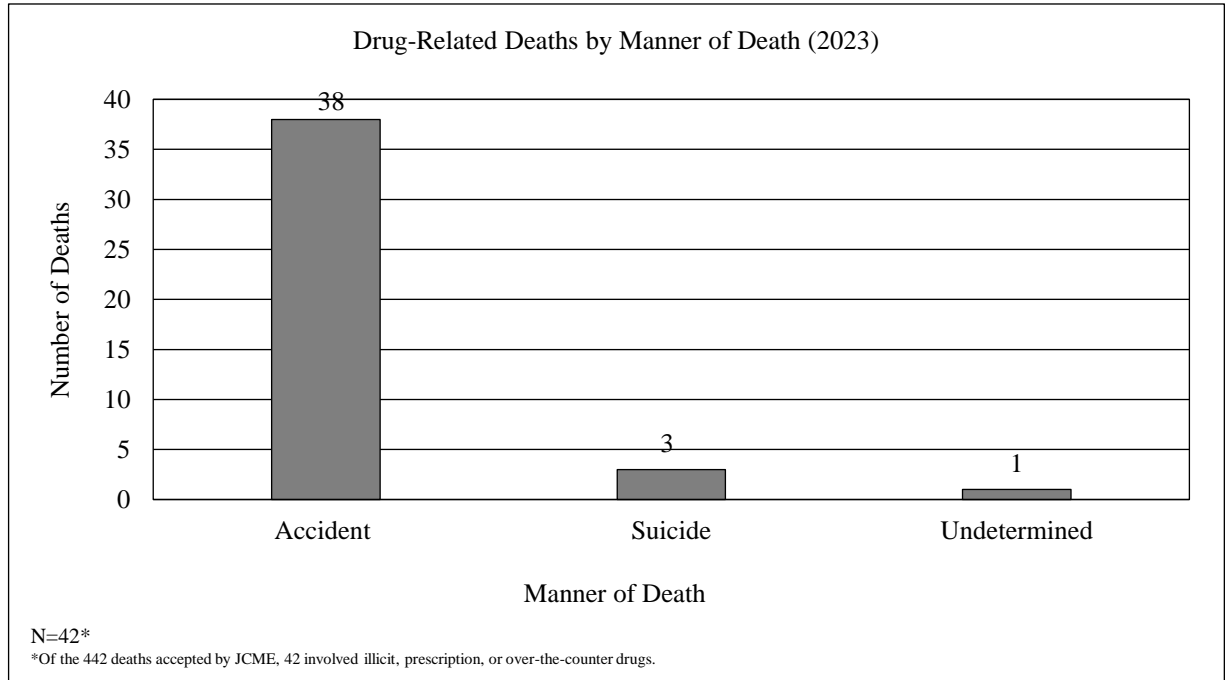


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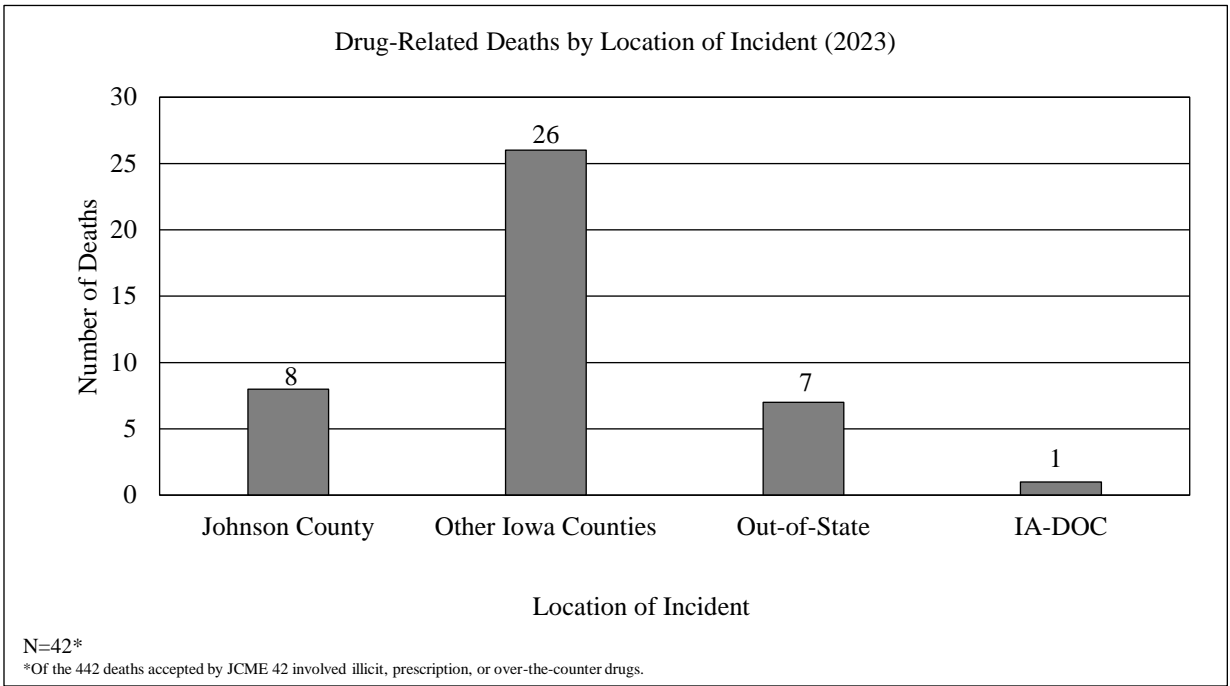


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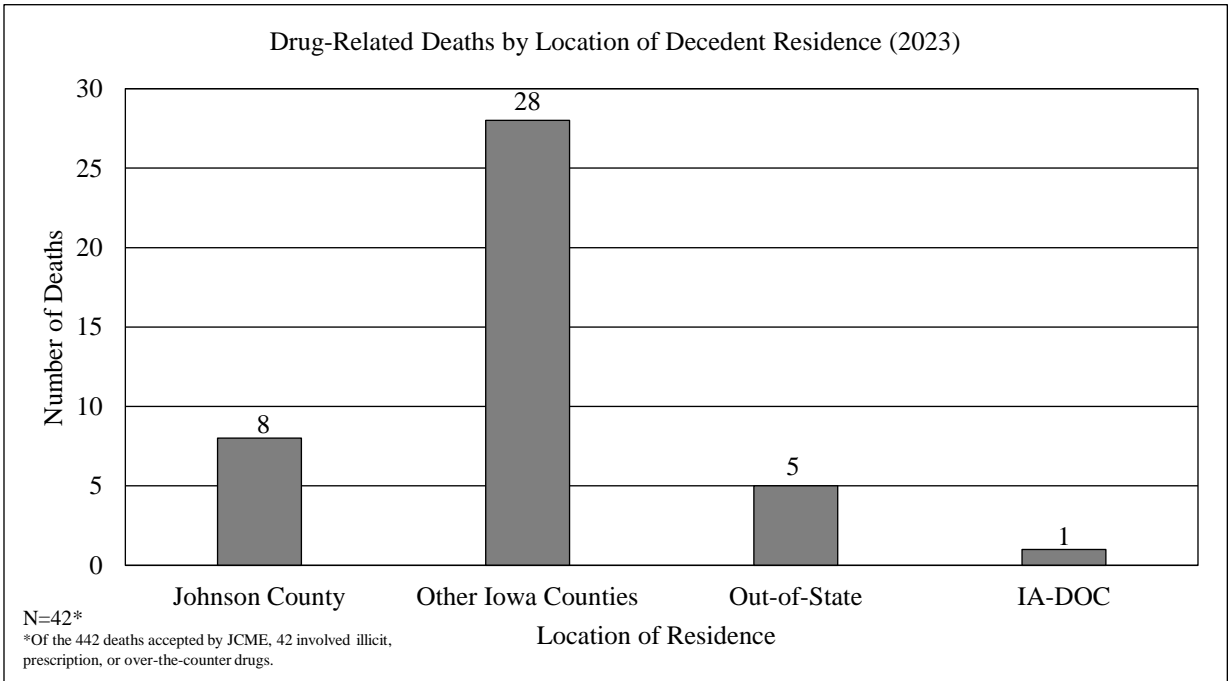


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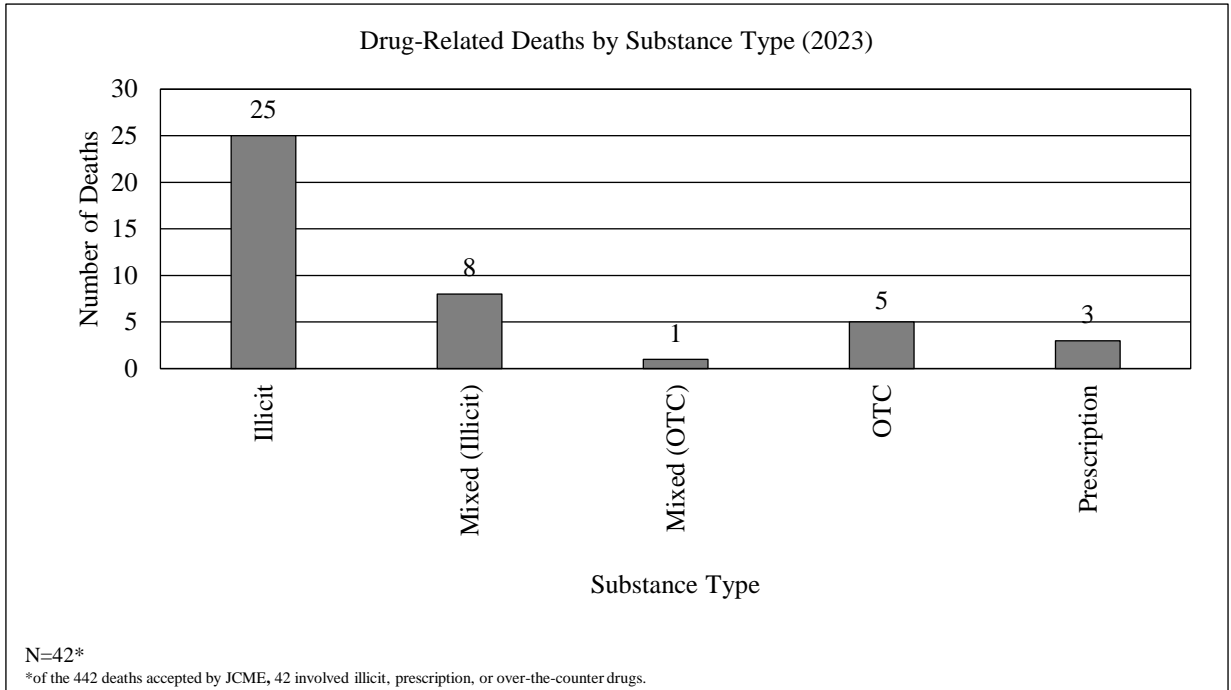


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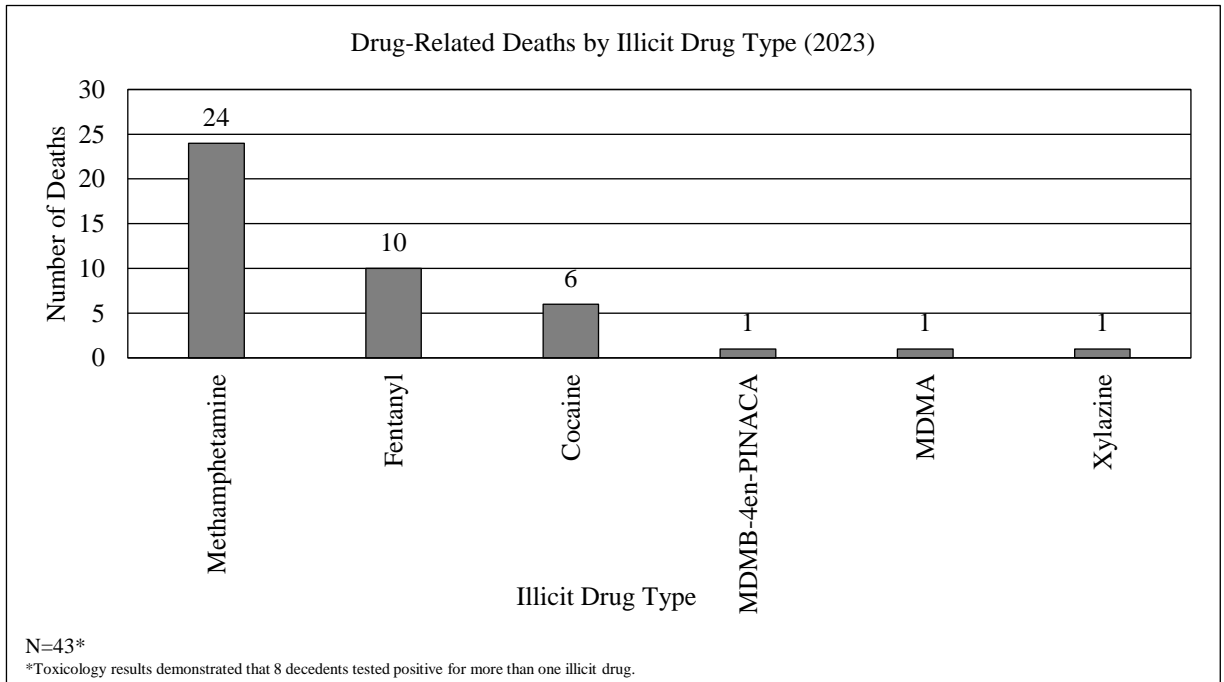


Figure 7.8.

Table 7.1. Drug-Related Deaths by Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs (2023)

Type of Drugs	Number of Decedents
Acetaminophen	6
Diltiazem	1
Iron	1
Ibuprofen	1
Bupropion	1

N=10*

*Toxicology results demonstrated that 1 decedent tested positive for multiple drugs.

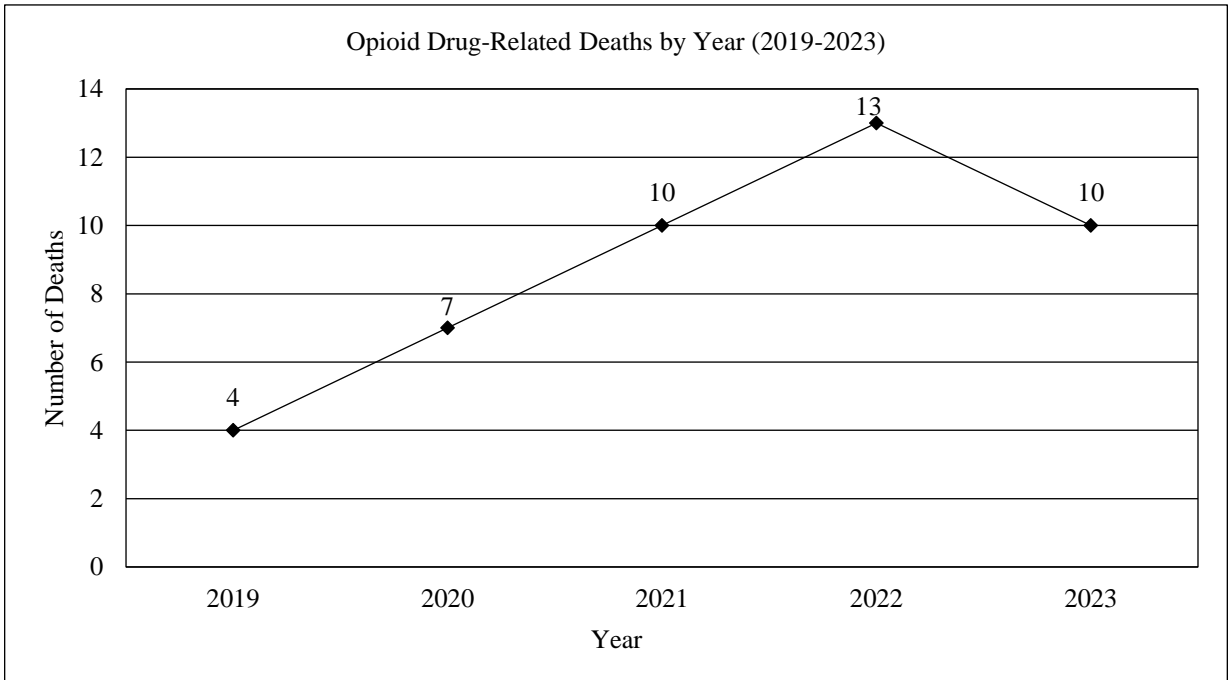


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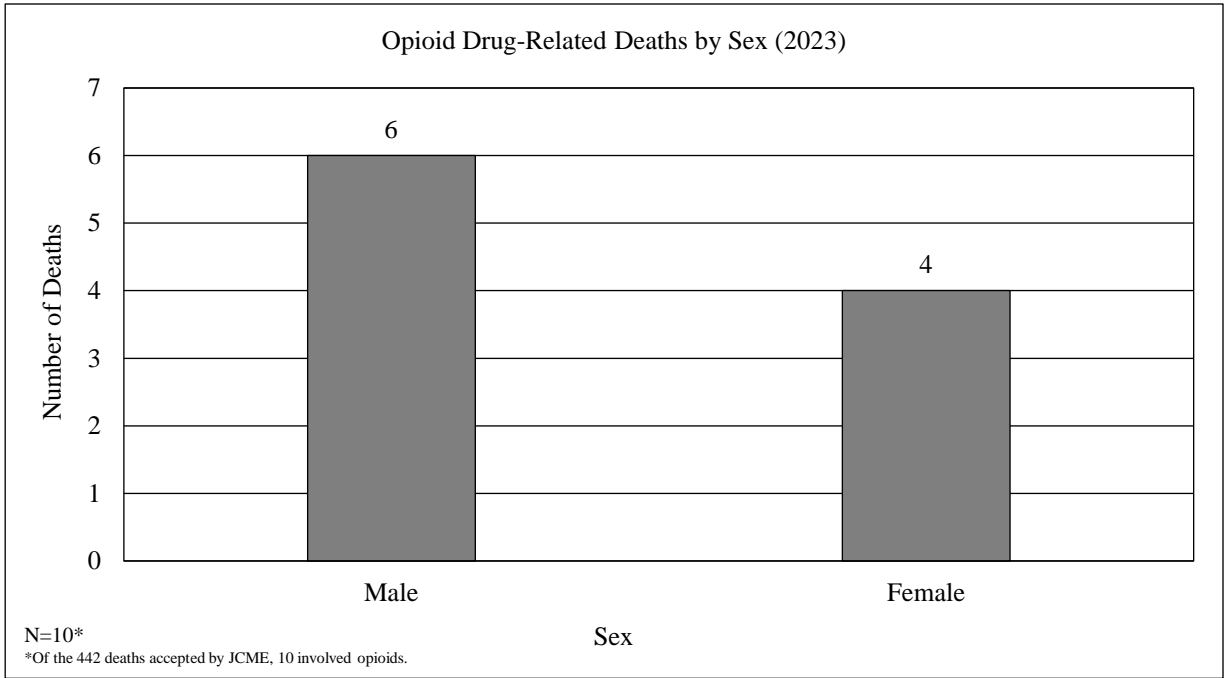


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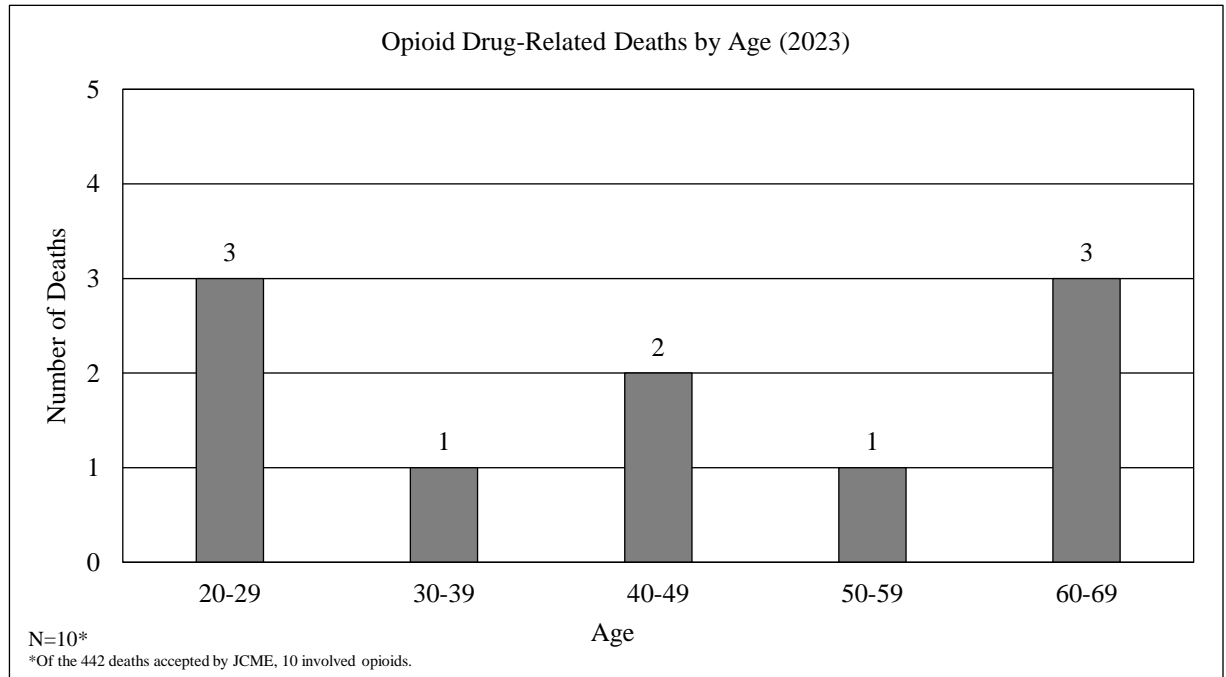


Figure 7.11.

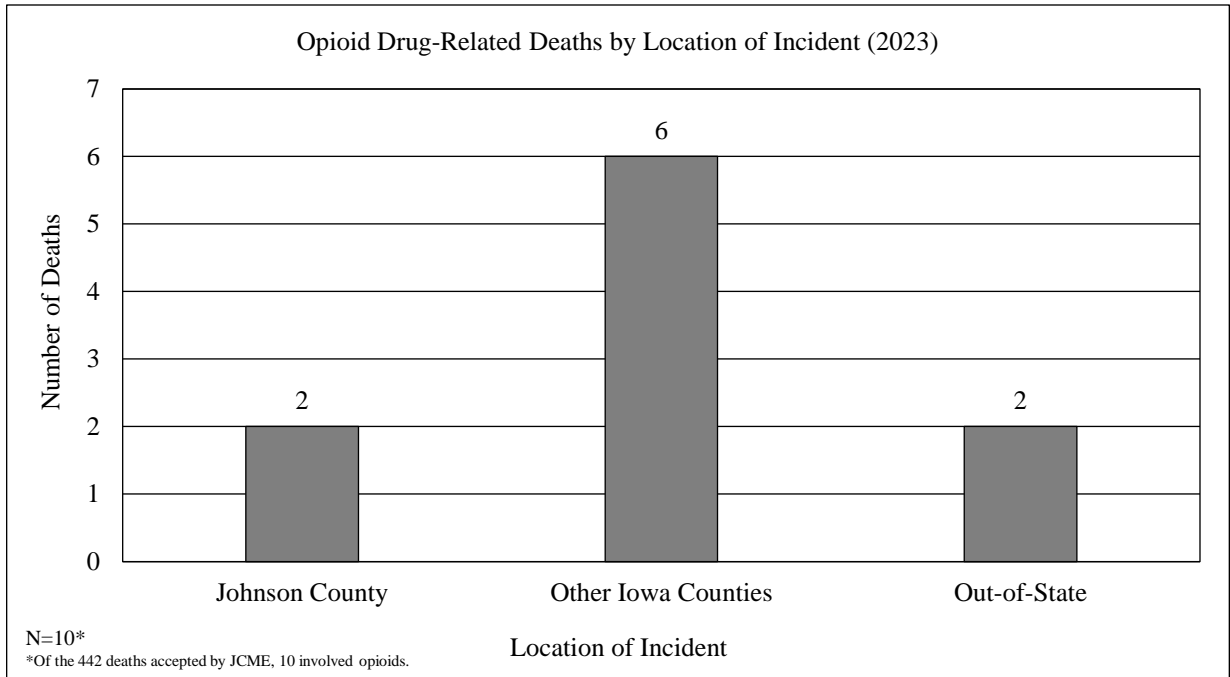


Figure 7.12.

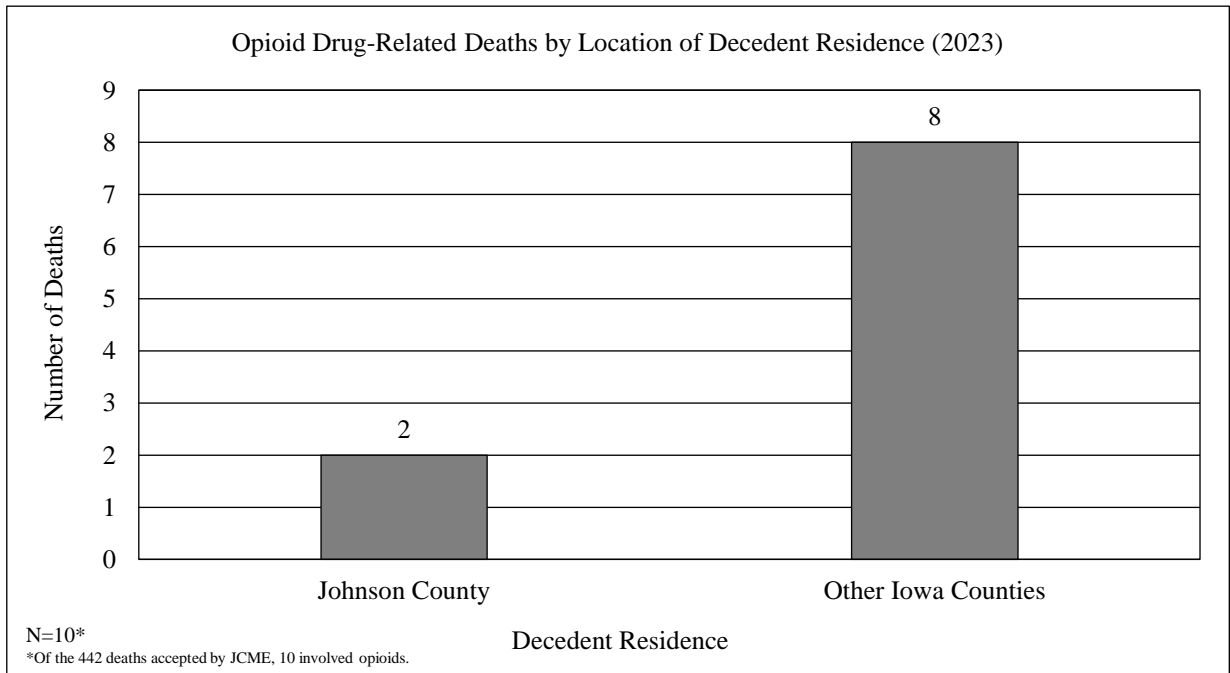


Figure 7.13.

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Older Adult Deaths

In 2023, JCME accepted jurisdiction of 290 deaths that involved adults aged 60 years and older. Of these, 115 were residents of Johnson County, 133 were residents of other Iowa counties, 29 were out-of-state residents, 12 were in the custody of the Iowa Department of Corrects, and 1 was in the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections. One hundred and sixty-two of these deaths were certified as accident, 116 as natural, 9 as suicide, 2 as undetermined, and 1 as homicide.

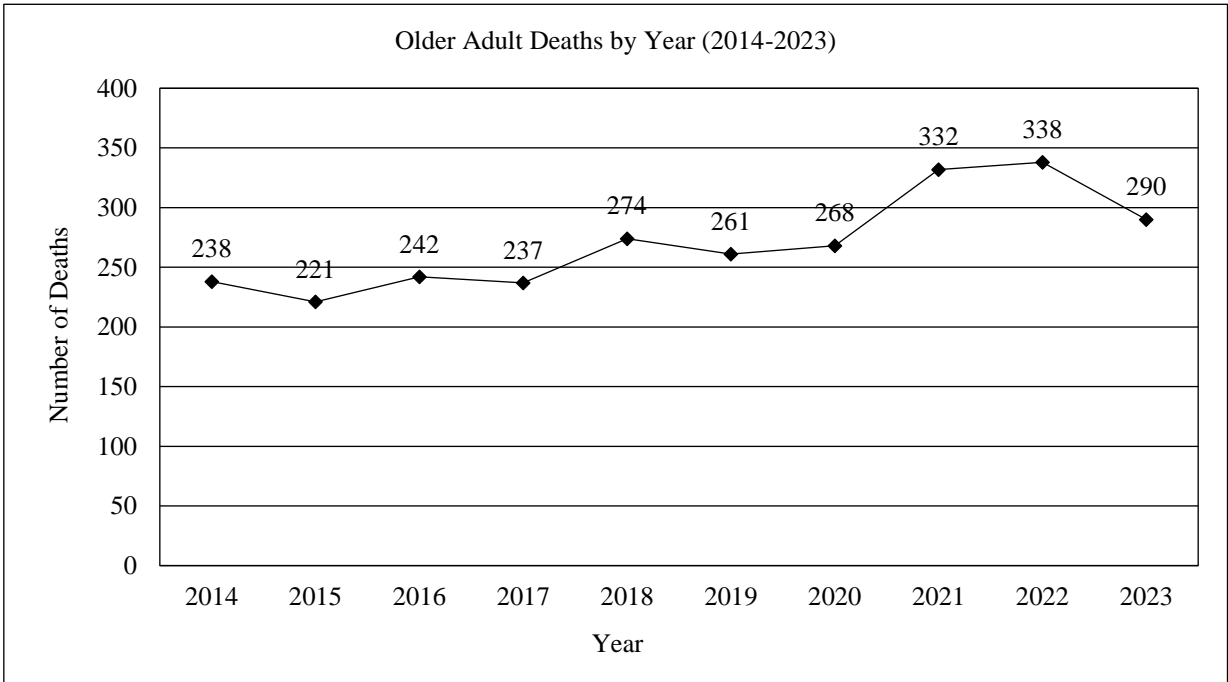


Figure 8.1.

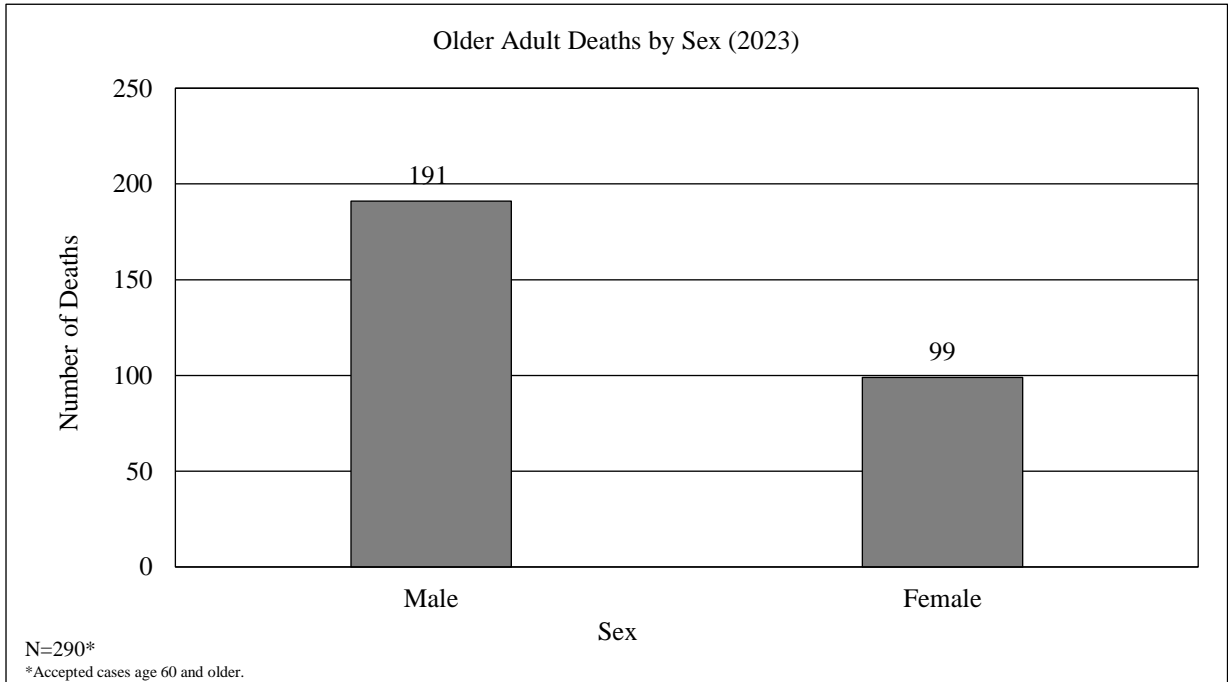


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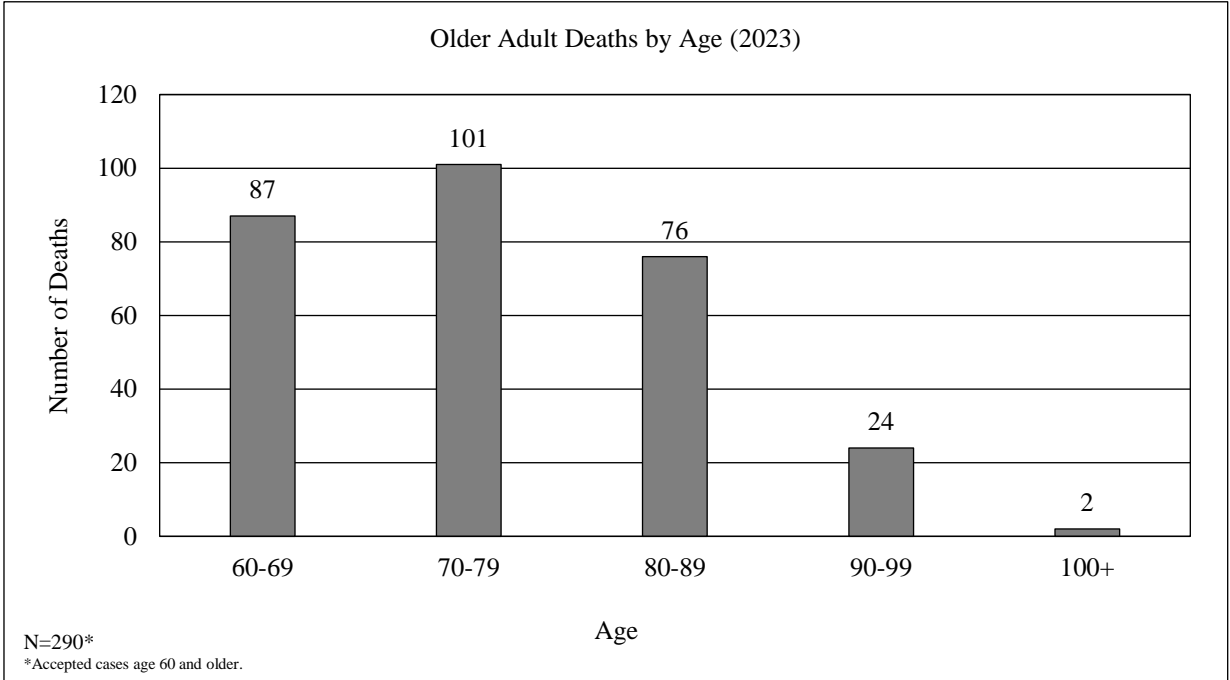


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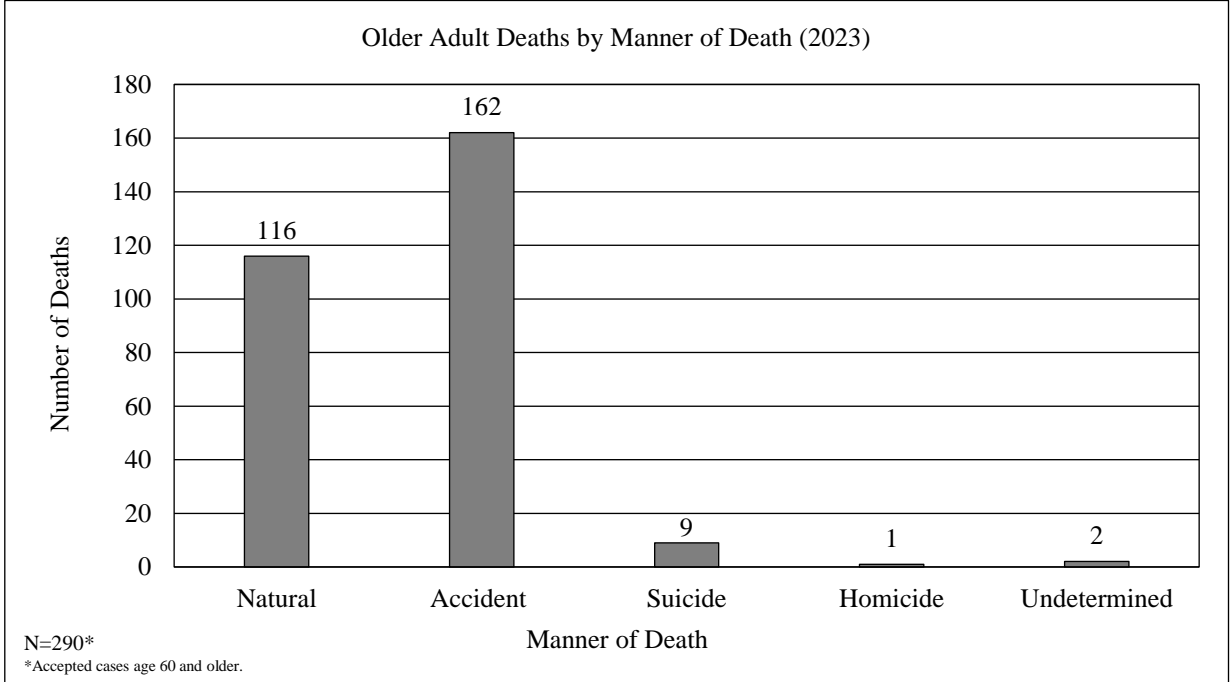


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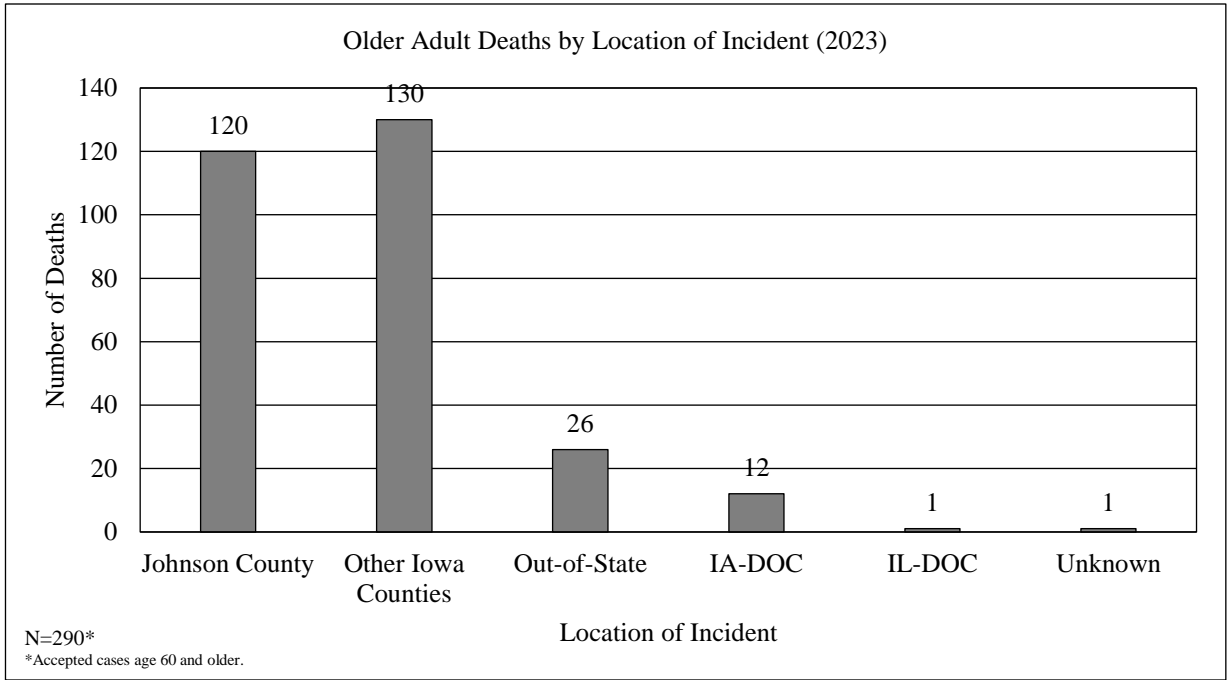


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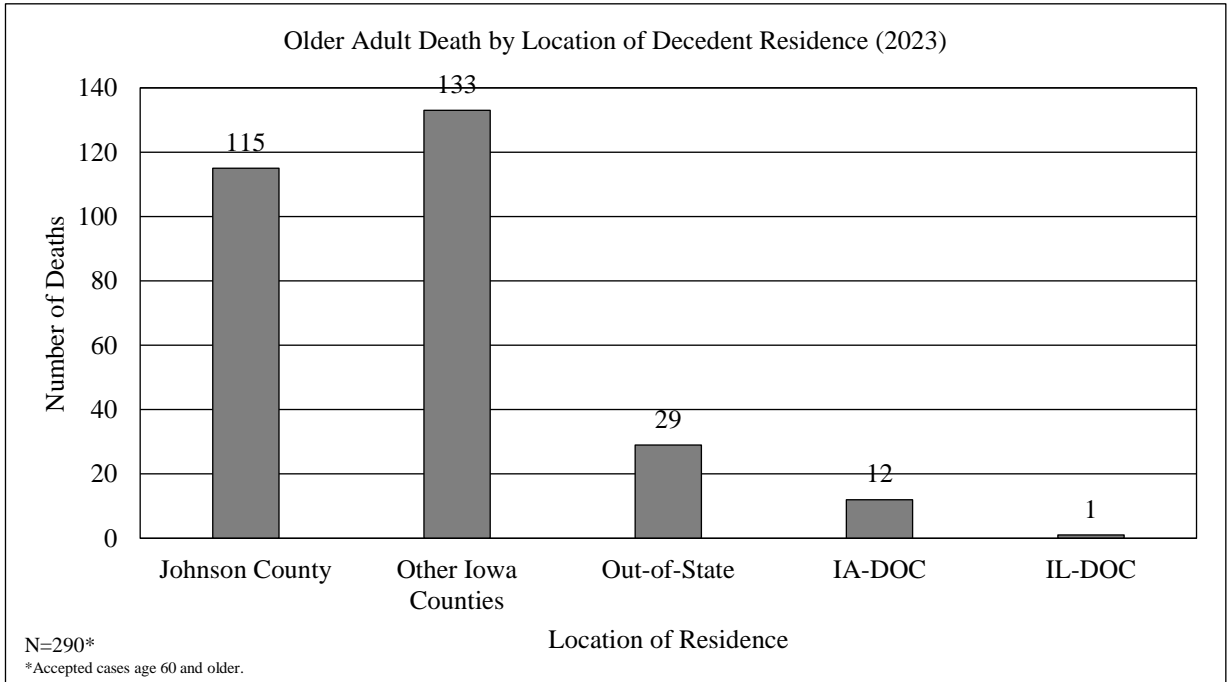


Figure 8.6.

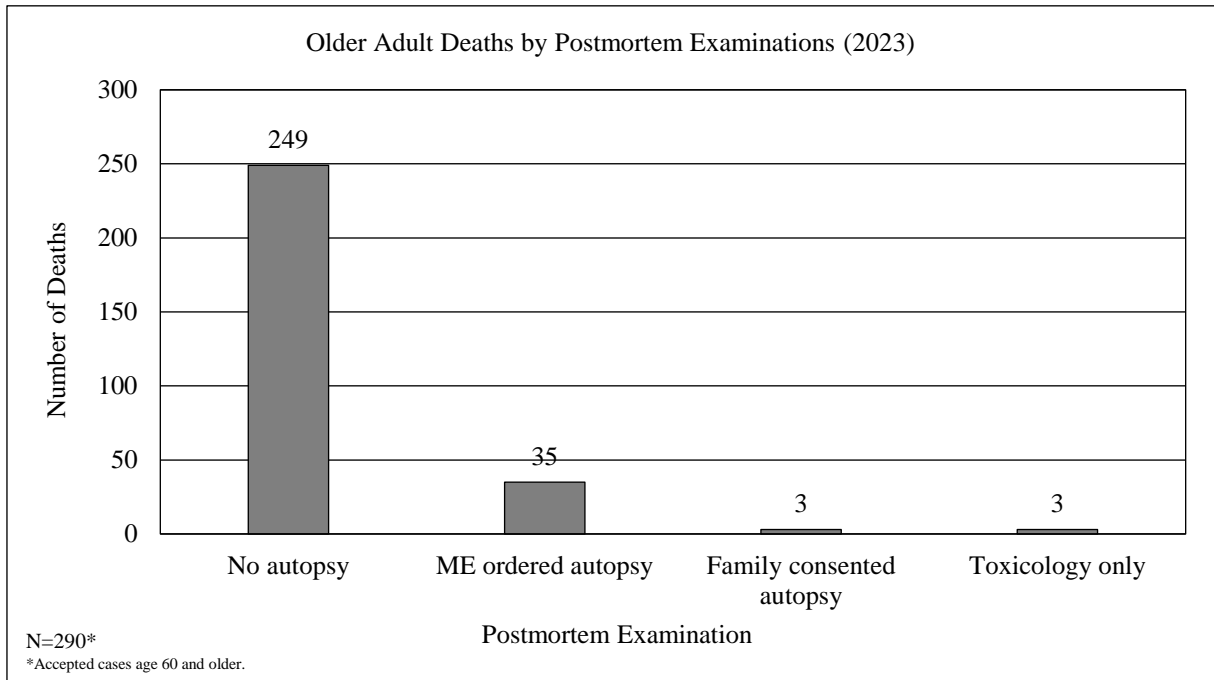


Figure 8.7.

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Older Adult Fall-Related Deaths

There were 290 deaths accepted by JCME of adults aged 60 and older. Of these, there were 109 in which the death was the result of a fall. Of these fall-related deaths, 77 occurred from a standing height and 51 of the falls occurred inside the decedent's home. The most common anatomical location of injury from a fall was the head and/or neck, which occurred in 59 of the falls.

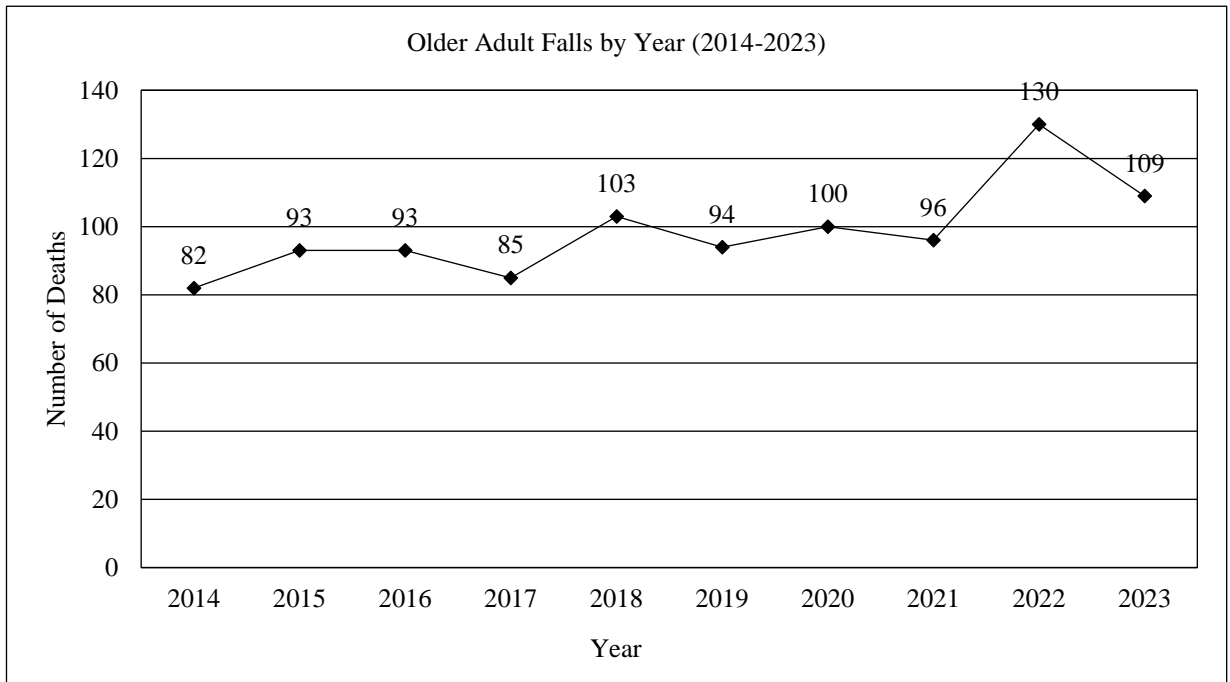


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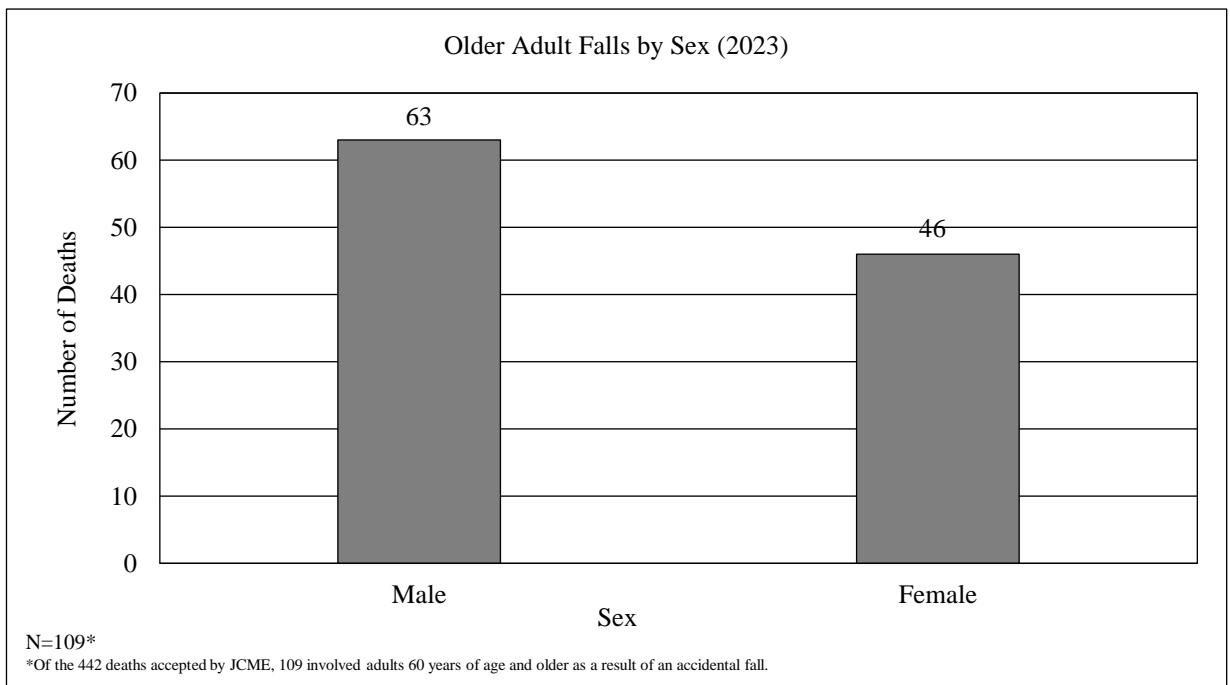


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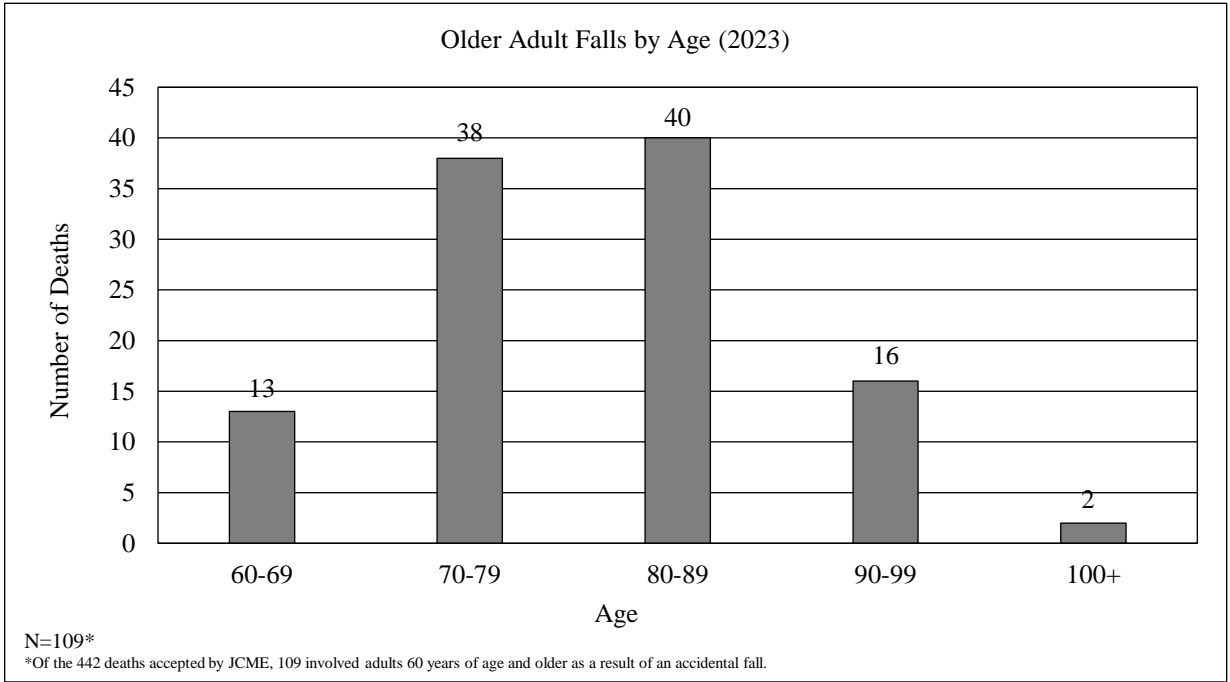


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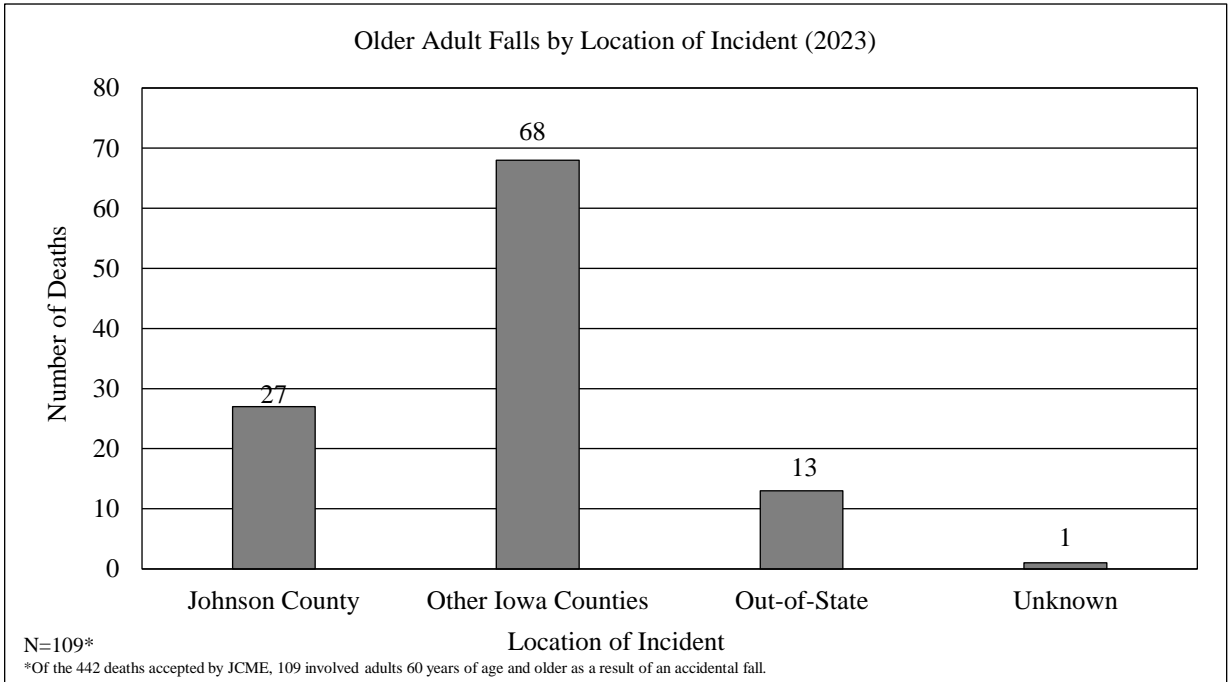


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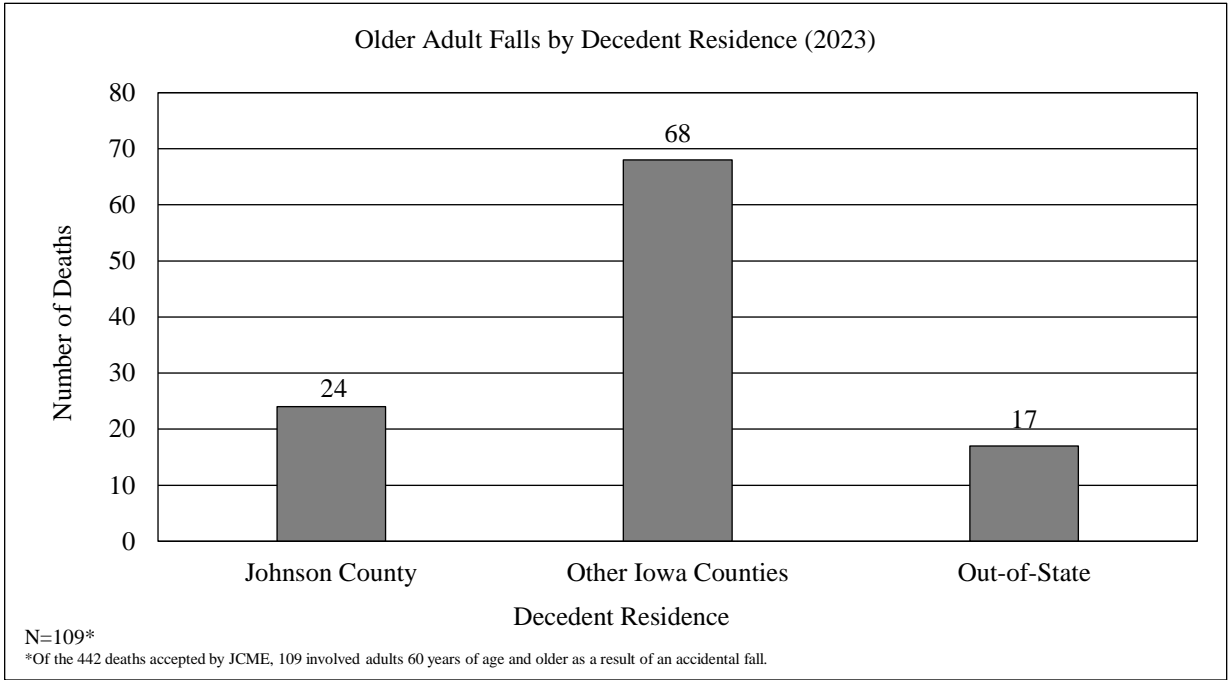


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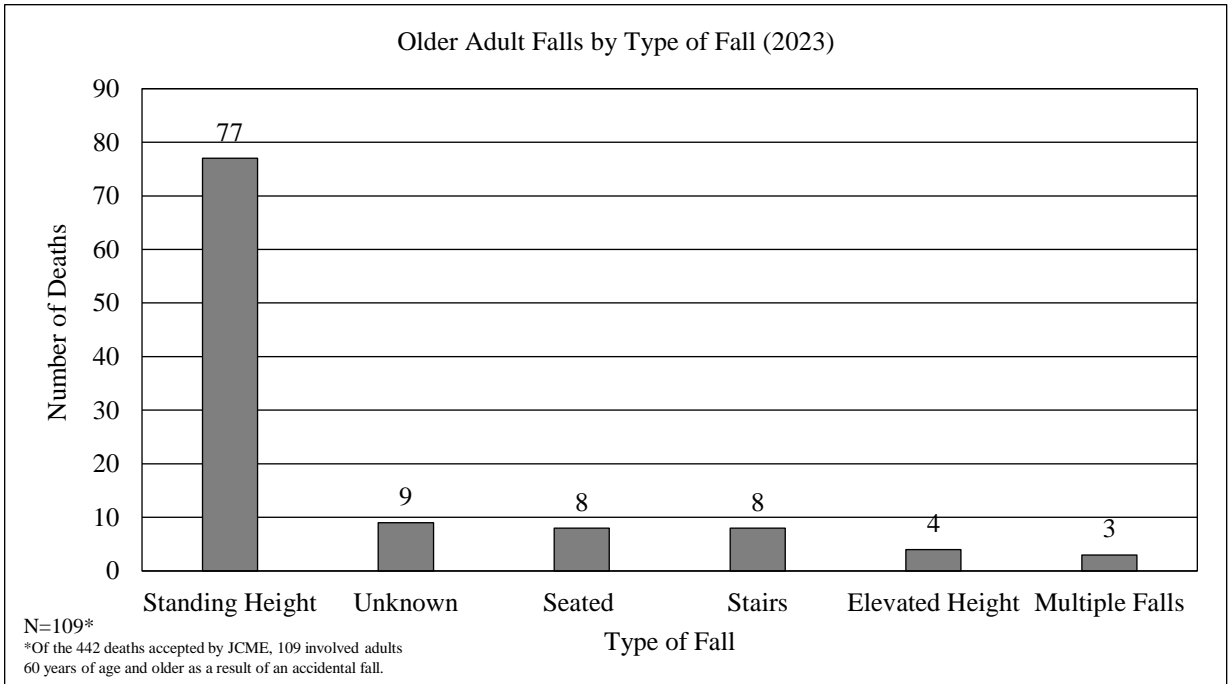


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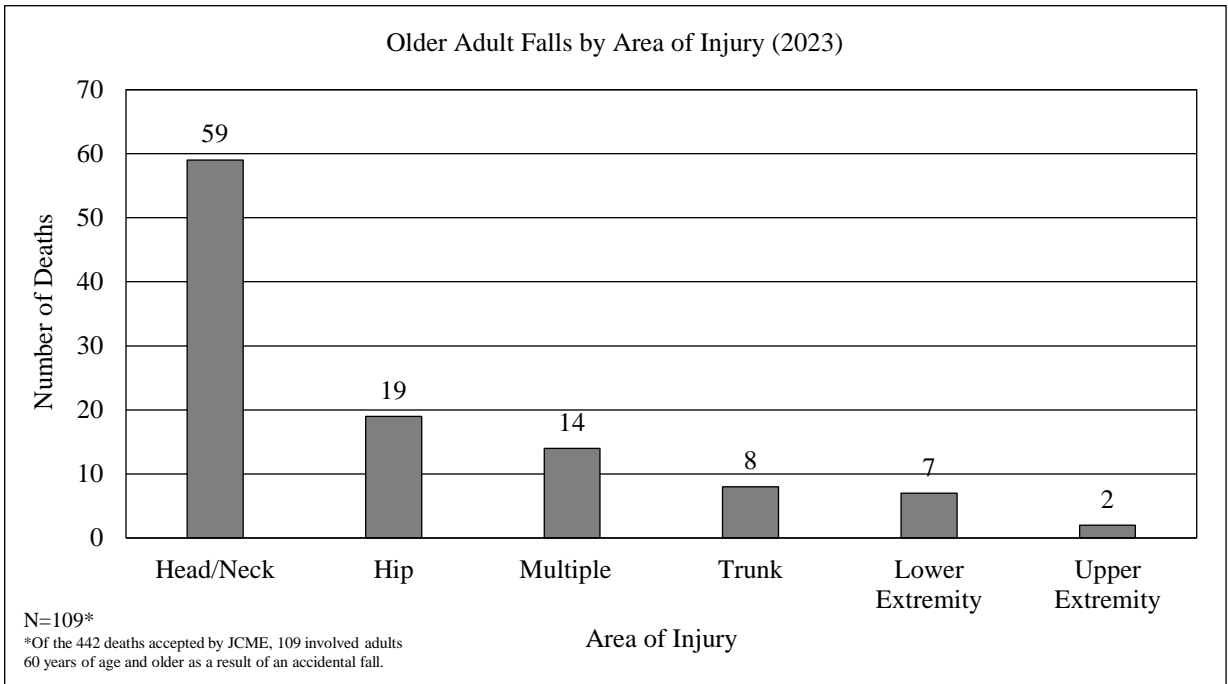


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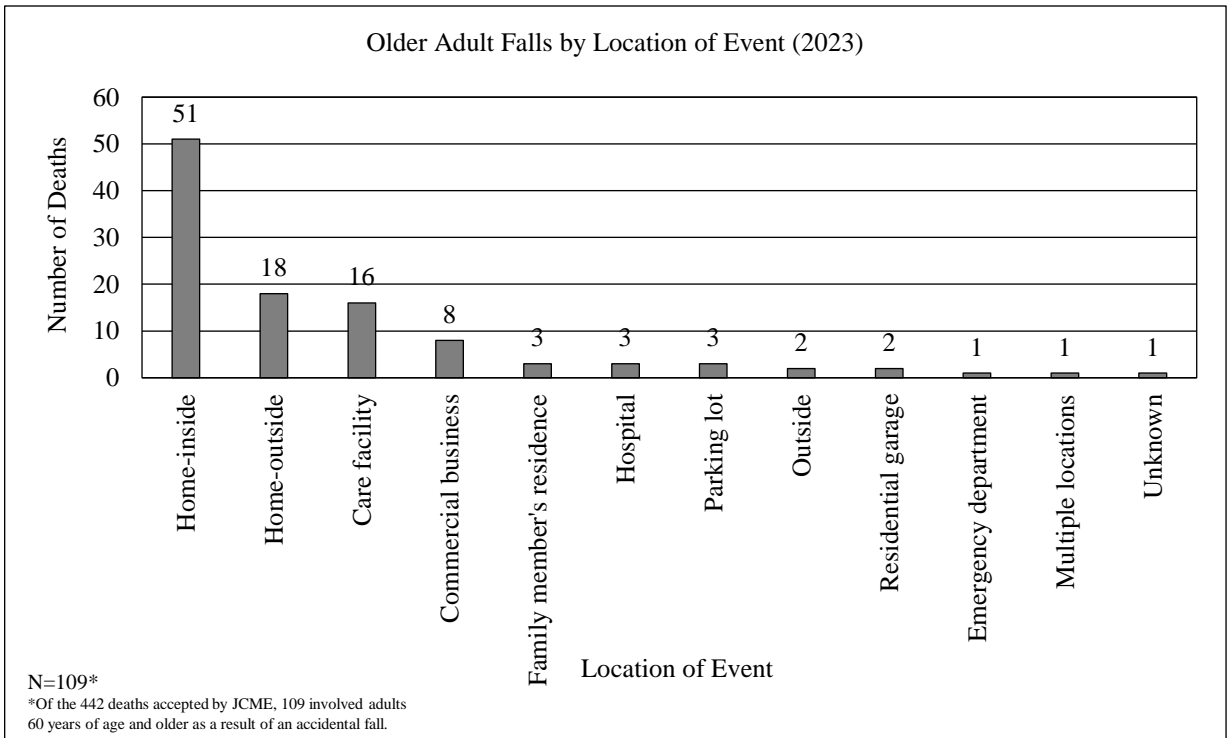


Figure 9.8.

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Child Deaths

In 2023, there were 15 deaths accepted by JCME of individuals 17 years of age and younger. Of these 15 deaths, 7 were classified as accident followed by 3 as natural, 3 as undetermined, 1 as suicide, and 1 as homicide. For 5 of these deaths, the incident location was Johnson County with the remaining 10 occurring in other Iowa Counties. Of these 15 deaths accepted by JCME, there were 8 deaths of infants one year of age or less of which 5 were classified as accident, 1 homicide, 1 natural and 1 undetermined. An autopsy was performed on all 8 infant deaths.

In 2023, there were 5 sleep-related infant death, all of which were classified as accident. For 2 of these deaths the incident location was Johnson County with the remaining 3 occurring in other Iowa Counties.

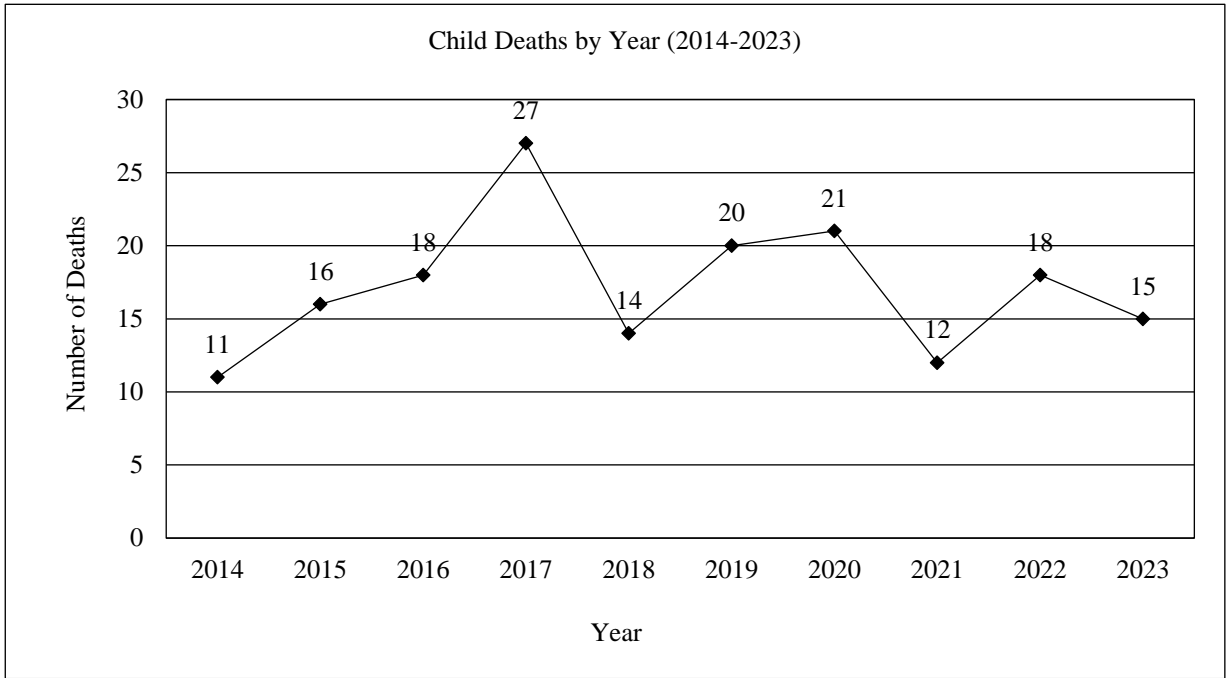


Figure 10.1.

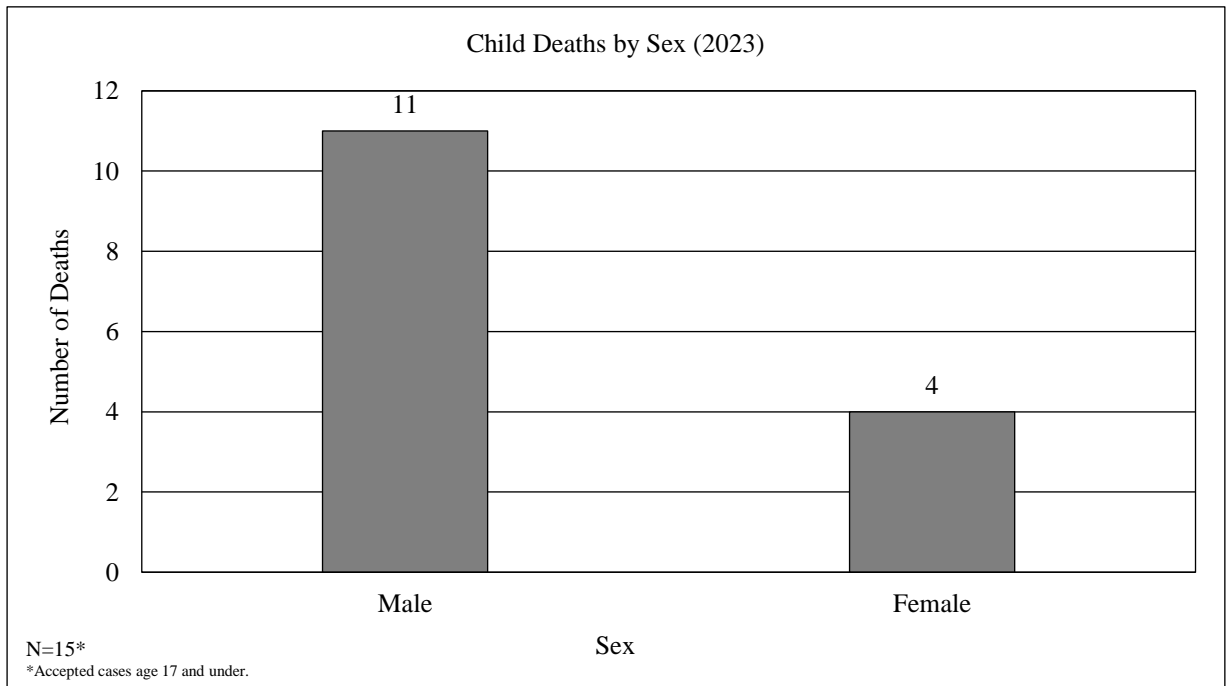


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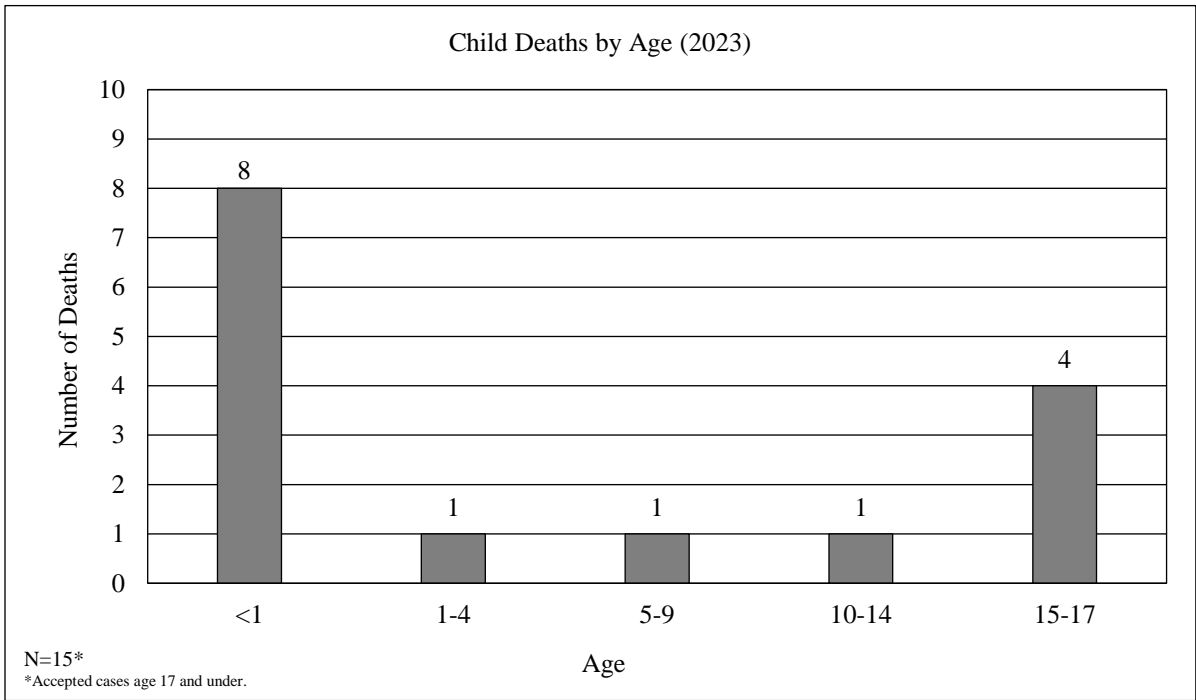


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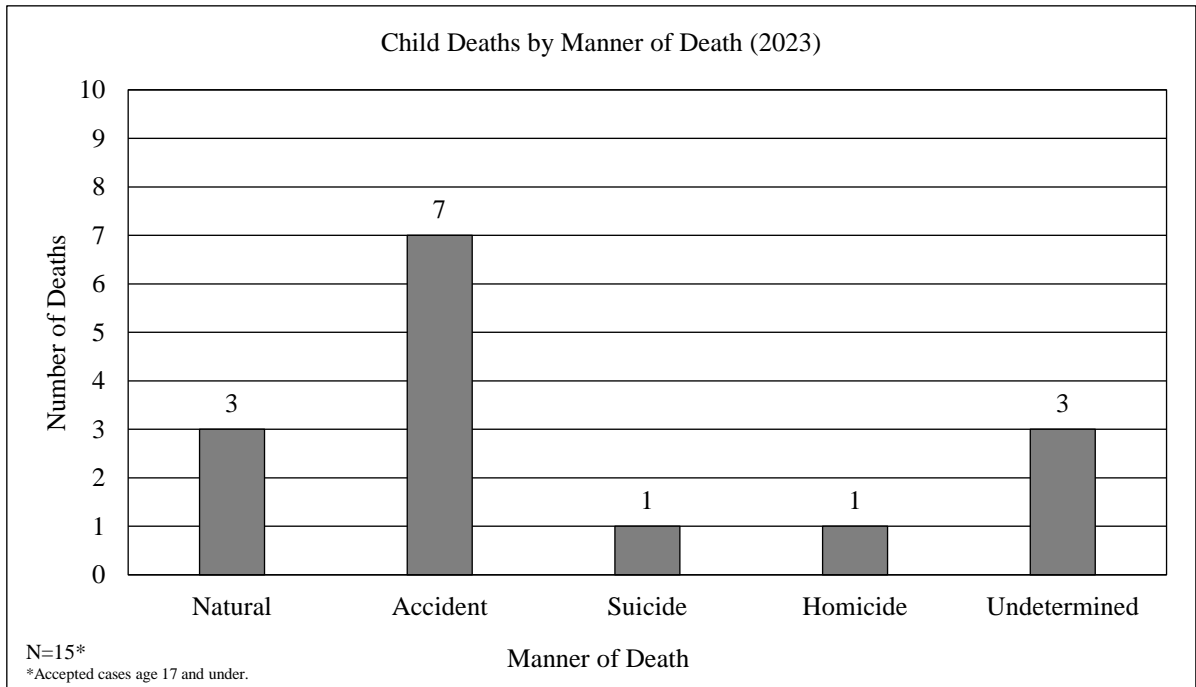


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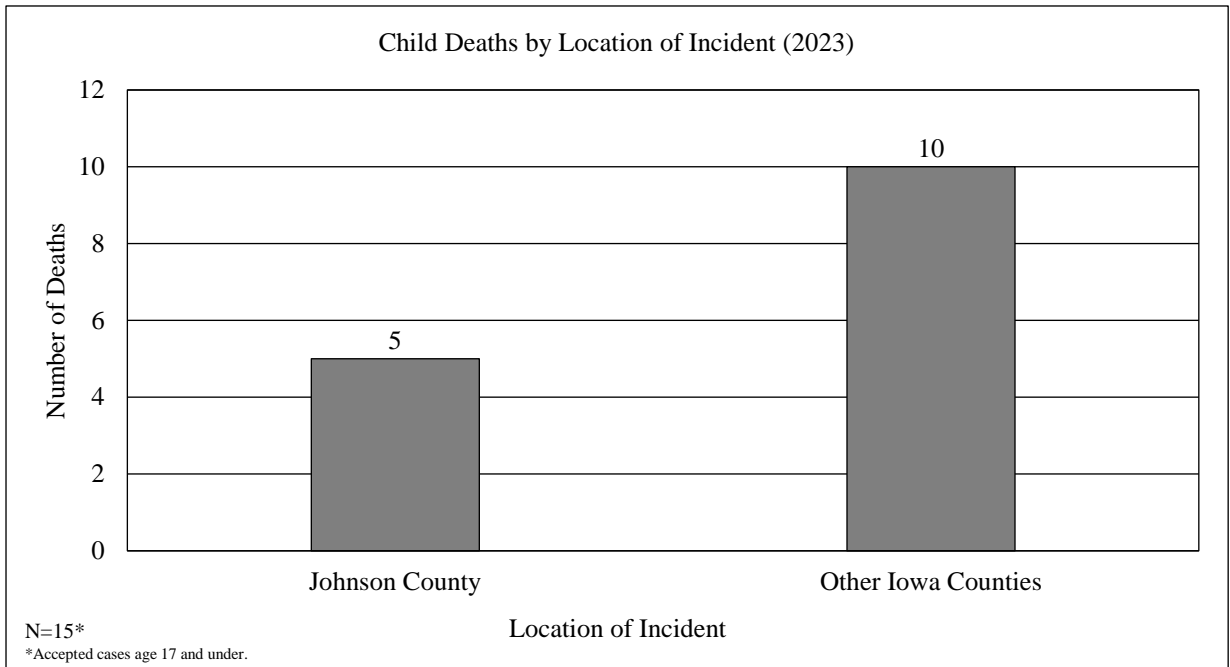


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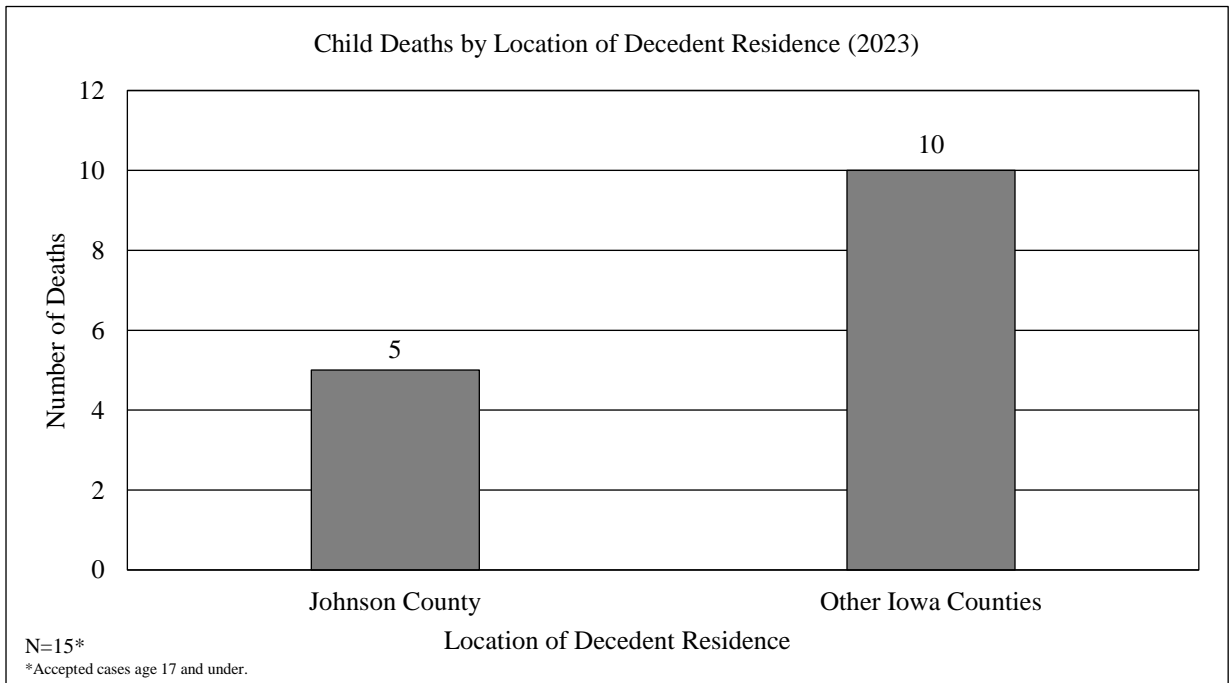


Figure 10.6.

Table 10.1. Infant Sleep-Related Deaths (2023)

Age	Sex	Cause of Death	Manner of Death	Location of Incident
15 days	M	Accident	Positional Asphyxia	Lee
34 days	F	Accident	Asphyxia due to likely smothering/exclusion of sufficient oxygen in the setting of an unsafe sleep environment	Johnson
4 months	M	Accident	Positional Asphyxia	Johnson
5 months	F	Accident	Anoxic brain injury due to resuscitated cardiopulmonary arrest due to combined effects of positional asphyxia and smothering	Delaware
8 months	M	Accident	Positional Asphyxia	Black Hawk

N=5*

*Infant deaths in which an unsafe sleep environment/sleep surface may have had a contributory role.

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Budget

Johnson County's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30. In fiscal year 2023, JCME was 20% under our budgeted expenditures and 5% over our budgeted revenues. In fiscal year 2024, JCME was 8% under our budgeted expenditures and 4% over our budgeted revenues.

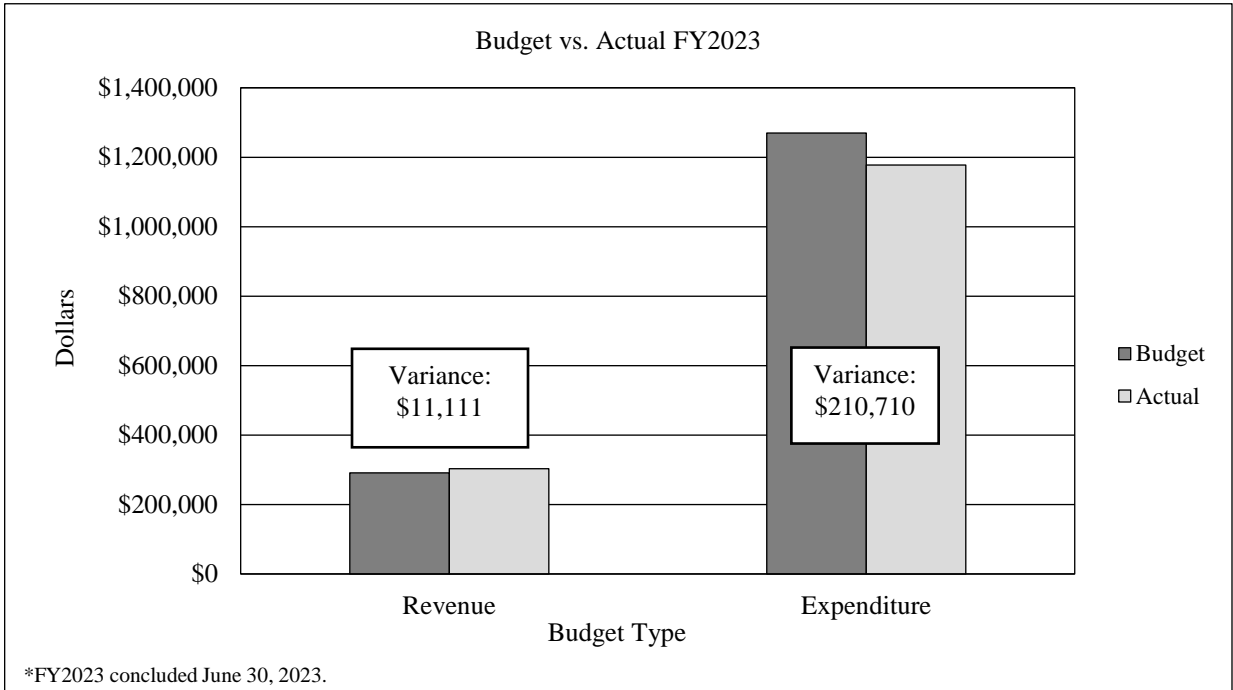


Figure 11.1.

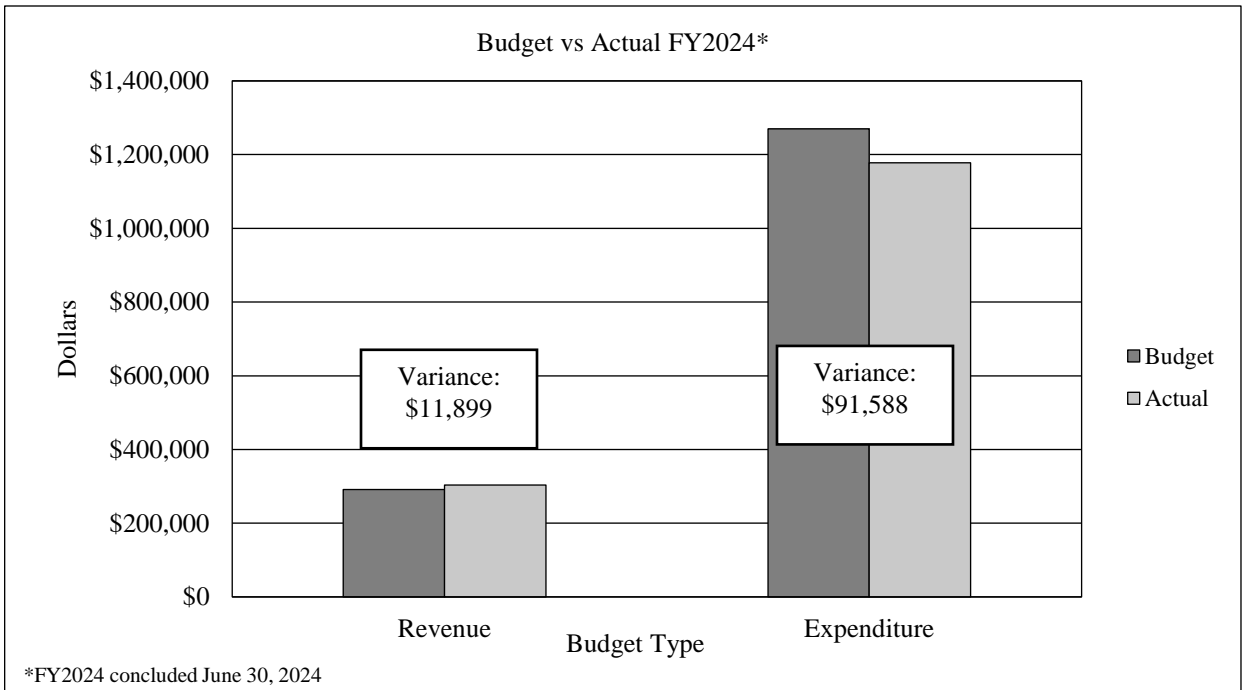


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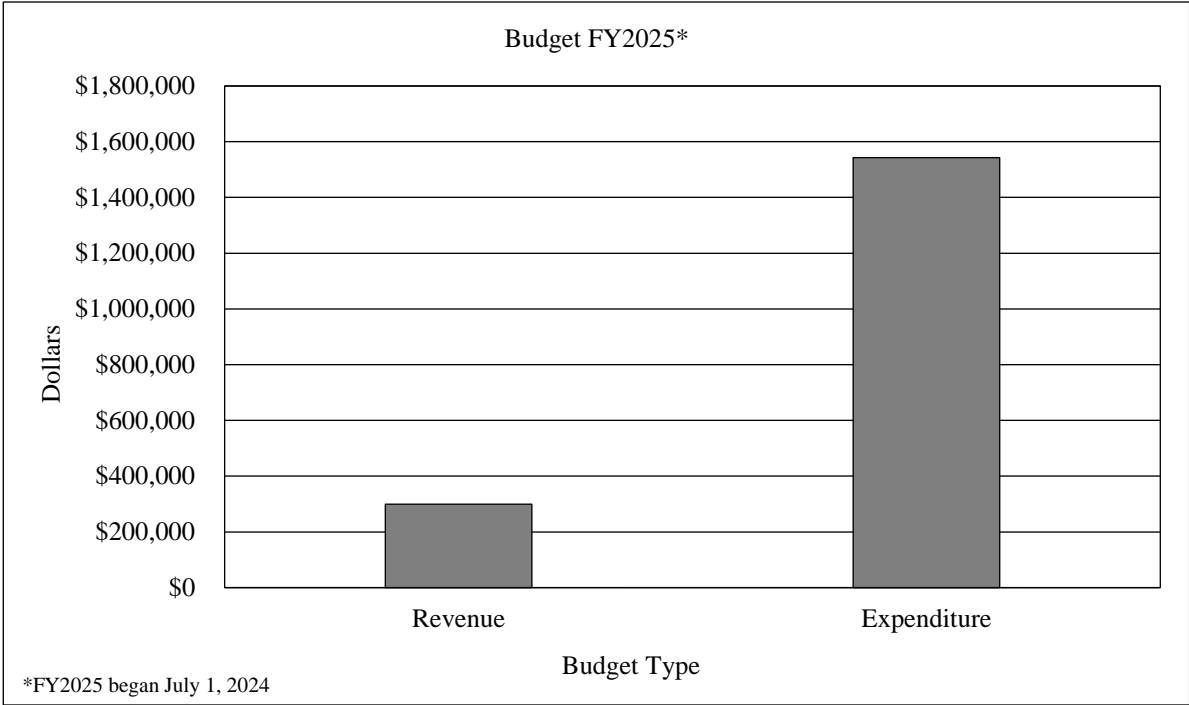


Figure 11.3.

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Organ and Tissue Donation

JCME has an essential role in the coordination of organ and tissue donation. In 2023, 15 accepted JCME cases became organ donors. From these 15 individuals, the Iowa Donor Network coordinated the recovery of 22 kidneys, 9 livers, 7 hearts, 2 lungs, 2 pancreases and 1 small intestine for transplant. Thirty accepted JCME cases became tissue donors with the recovery of bone, skin, heart valves, saphenous veins, femoral veins, adipose tissue, and/or joints. One tissue donor can enhance the lives of more than 300 people. JCME fully supports organ and tissue donation and, by policy, JCME refers all out-of-hospital deaths that fall under our jurisdiction to the Iowa Donor Network.

Table 12.1. Organs Transplanted from JCME Accepted Cases (2023)

Organs Transplanted	
Hearts	7
Lungs (single lungs)	2
Livers	9
Kidneys (single kidneys)	22
Pancreases	2
Small Intestines	1
Total organ donors*	15 donors (43) organs transplanted**

*Information supplied by Iowa Donor Network.

**Total number of decedents who donated organs.

Table 12.2. Tissues Transplanted from JCME Accepted Cases (2023)

Tissues Transplanted	
Bones	28
Skin	20
Heart valves	12
Saphenous veins	6
Femoral veins	3
Juvenile cartilage	0
Joint restoration	6
Corneas (single corneas)	48
Total recovered tissue donors*	30 donors**

*Information supplied by Iowa Donor Network.

**Accepted cases who died out-of-hospital and donated tissue.