

# Natrona County Coroner



Year End Report 2007

200 North Center Street Suite #10 - Casper, Wyoming -  
82601-1990 - 307-235-9458

## **Opening Statement from the Coroner**

Dear Citizens:

My office is proud to present the 2007 Annual Report for the Natrona County Coroner's Office. Over the last year the office has witnessed many new and unusual circumstances involving the field of medicolegal death investigation and the field of forensic science. Many of these unusual circumstances involve causes of death that our office has never had to deal with in the past. Both medicolegal death investigation and skills in forensic science require extensive classroom training as well as on-the-job experience for the office staff. They must be well trained, so that they can adequately continue to serve the citizens of Natrona County.

During the year 2007 there were 683 deaths in Natrona County. This office looked at 540 cases, and worked full investigations on 169 of those cases. Full investigations are quite extensive and require a great deal of time. Each investigation involves travel to location, time on scene, physical exam and specimen collection, funeral home transit and briefing, notification of next of kin, medical record search, medical record abstract, toxicology, report writing, chain of custody logs and records, pathologist briefing and review, other agency coordination, and follow-up calls to family or others. Every aspect of a case can be complicated by aggravating circumstances which in turn lengthens the amount of time required for each case.

Oftentimes the function of the Coroner's Office and its role within Wyoming communities is often misunderstood. I invite each one of you to talk with me so that you may fully understand the functions and needs of this office. The Coroner's Office has the duty to find the cause of death, essentially speaking for the dead and giving closure to the families involved, while assisting governmental entities arrive at the truth. In this annual report I have also included a description of what our office does and how its role fits into our community.

It is vitally important that the Coroner's Office retain an administrative office due to privacy and confidentiality concerns. We frequently interview family and next-of-kin regarding sensitive issues related to past medical history, conversations with next-of-kin in situations related to terminal illness, and other private matters. We also deal with law enforcement personnel, OSHA investigators, insurance investigators, lawyers, organ donor representatives, and medical personnel. In order to effectively and professionally serve the citizens of Natrona County this office must maintain its current facilities and continue to provide an effect.

Sincerely,

James W. Thorpen M.D.  
Coroner/Forensic Pathologist  
Natrona County Coroner's Office

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## **Definition of a Coroner's Case:**

Wyoming Statutes, Title 7, Chapter 4: County Coroners

7-4-104 Legal definitions:

- (i) “Coroner case means a case involving a death which was not anticipated and which may involve any of the following conditions:
  - (A) Violent or criminal action;
  - (B) Apparent suicide;
  - (C) Accident;
  - (D) Apparent drug or chemical overdose or toxicity;
  - (E) The deceased was unattended by a physician or other licensed healthcare provider;
  - (F) Apparent child abuse causes;
  - (G) The deceased was a prisoner, trustee, inmate or patient of any county or state correction facility or state hospital, whether or not the death is anticipated;
  - (H) If the cause is unknown, or cannot be certified by a physician;
  - (I) A public health hazard is presented; or
  - (J) The identity of the victim is unknown or the body is unclaimed.

(iv) “Anticipated death” means the death of an individual who has been diagnosed by a physician acting within the scope of his/her license as being afflicted with an illness or disease reasonably likely to result in death, and there is no cause to believe the death occurred for any reasons other than those associated with the illness or disease;

(v) “Unattended” means the deceased had not been under the care of a physician or other health care provider acting within the scope of his license within (60) days immediately prior to the death.

## **Goals of the Office:**

The goals of the Natrona County Coroner's Office is to serve the interests of the community by making a determination on the cause, circumstances, and manner of deaths that occur within our jurisdiction. We have the duty to identify the deceased and notify their next-of-kin, while insuring that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. In essence, it is this office's obligation to speak for the dead to ensure that the truth is known.

**CORE VALUES:**

- To seek the truth;
- To combine forensic science and medicolegal death investigation to determine the cause and manner of death;
- To serve the community with professionalism and integrity

**Functions of the Office:**

- To respond to the death scene, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- To investigate the death scene;
- To take all necessary steps needed to positively identify the decedent;
- To collect, preserve, and process pertinent evidence at the scene;
- To photograph, document, and/or sketch the scene;
- To remove the body from the scene in a dignified manner;
- To interview witnesses, family members, physicians, employers, friends, neighbors, etc.;
- To compile document information in unbiased, accurate, and complete reports;
- To assist at autopsy, which will most often determine cause of death;
- To notify next-of-kin;
- To process and compare fingerprints from the decedent;
- To provide information and assistance to families;
- To interact with other law enforcement, governmental, and health agencies, i.e. police/sheriff, fire, emergency medical services, attorneys, OSHA, FBI, U.S. Marshall's, DEA, Consumer Product Safety Commission, school districts, hospitals, funeral homes, organ donation teams, etc.;
- To release information to the public through press releases and/or media interviews;
- To provide testimony at depositions and in court;
- To provide training and education in the field of death investigation or other law enforcement, health, and community service agencies.

## Reportable Cases:

The following types of death are reportable to the Coroner's Office immediately after expiration:

- *All* deaths in which the attending physician or licensed care provider has not been in attendance of the decedent within 60 days immediately prior to the death.
- *All* deaths resulting from an accident, suicide, homicide, violent or undetermined cause and manner. For example, falls, poisoning, industrial accidents, automobile accidents, automobile-pedestrian accidents, battered children, etc., should be reported.
- We are notified of *all* deaths that occur in the emergency room. Not all are investigated, but a brief conversation with the emergency room physician will determine if the coroner is needed.
- Deaths resulting from thermal, chemical or radiation injury.
- *All* cases in which the cause is unknown and the attending physician is unable or unwilling to certify the cause of death.
- *All* deaths due to unexplained causes or under suspicious circumstances.
- The deceased was a prisoner, trustee, inmate, or patient of any county or state correction facility or state hospital, whether or not the death is anticipated.
- Apparent drug or chemical overdose or toxicity.
- Deaths resulting from a disease which may be hazardous, contagious, or which may constitute a threat to the health of the public (Infectious Disease Cases).
- Sudden deaths of persons appearing to be in good health.
- *All* cases in which trauma is, or may be associated with the death. Cases where the patient entered the medical facility due to trauma. Cases should be promptly reported even though death may be attributed only indirectly to the trauma.
- *All* deaths while in custody of law enforcement officials or while incarcerated in a public institution.

## **Staff:**

**Coroner:** James W. Thorpen, M.D. Clinical Pathologist, Forensic Pathologist,  
Elected Coroner of Natrona County Since 1982. Affiliate of the office since  
1960.

**Chief Deputy Coroner:** Gary R. Hazen. D-AMBDI  
Chief Deputy Since 1994, Affiliate of the office since 1987

**Coroner Investigators:** Jim Holscher  
James K. Sandison  
Anna C. Ray  
Richard E. Mackler  
Russel S. Dalgarn  
Cynthia Moline

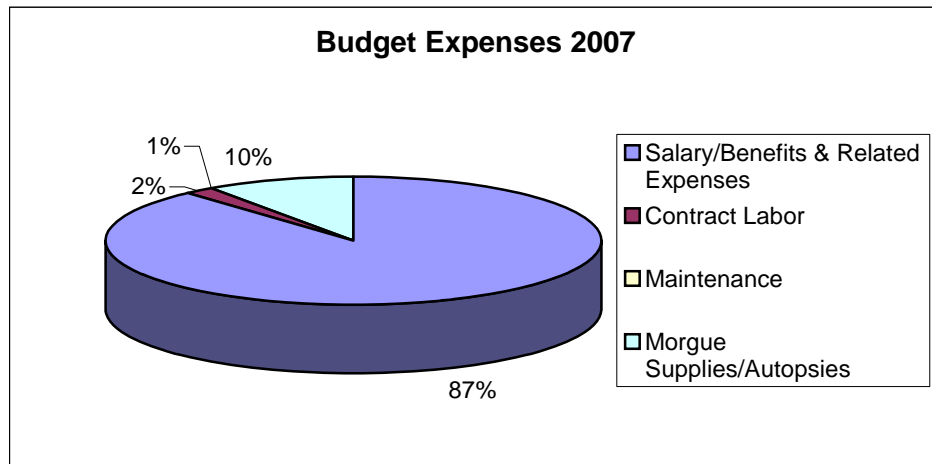
**Medical Transcriptionist:** Lucinda M. Patterson

**Deputy Coroners:** Michael R. Bruno, M.D.  
Robert C. Byrd, DDS. Forensic Odontology  
Jay G. Sekavec, DDS. Forensic Odontology  
Michele A. Hazen, MT (ASCP) SH  
Larry N. Cottrell, Funeral Director

**Facilities:** Coroner's Office, 200 N. Center Street Suite #10- Casper, Wyo.  
Natrona County Morgue, 6620 Wildcat Road, Evansville, Wyo.

## Budget :

The budget for the Natrona County Coroner's Office in 2007 reflects the percentage amount of monies received to adequately sustain the office at optimal working and operating levels.



## Manner of Deaths:

The various manners of death are defined below:

Homicide→ The killing of one person by another.

Accident→ An undesirable or unfortunate happening that occurs unintentionally and usually results in harm, injury, damage, or loss; casualty; mishap.

Suicide→ A person who intentionally takes his or her own life.

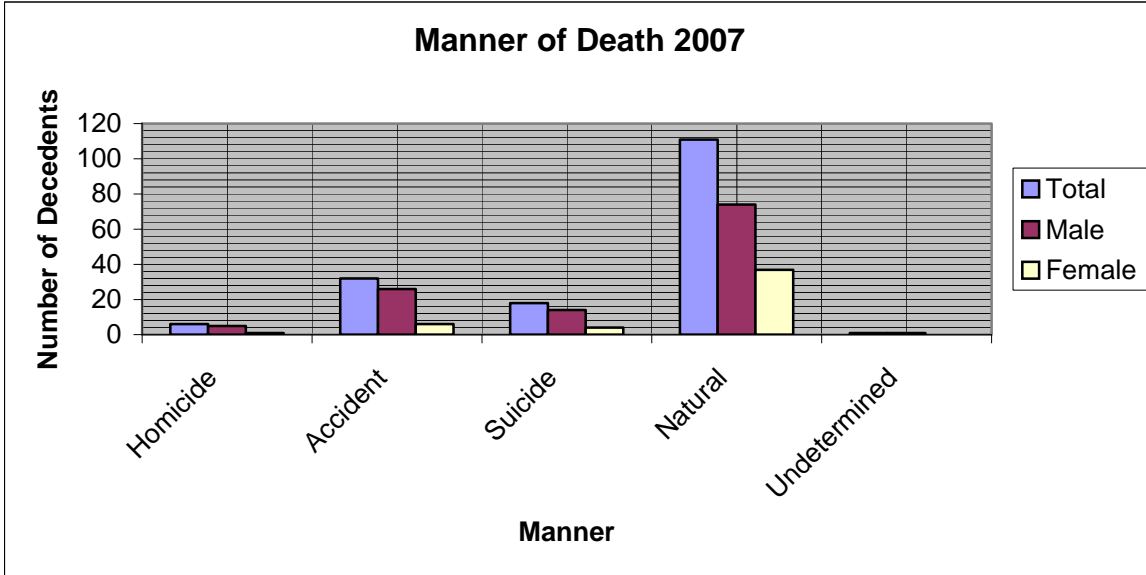
Natural→ Death that occurs from natural causes, such as disease or old age, rather than from violence or an accident.

Undetermined→ If the death investigation does not fit into any of the aforementioned categories.

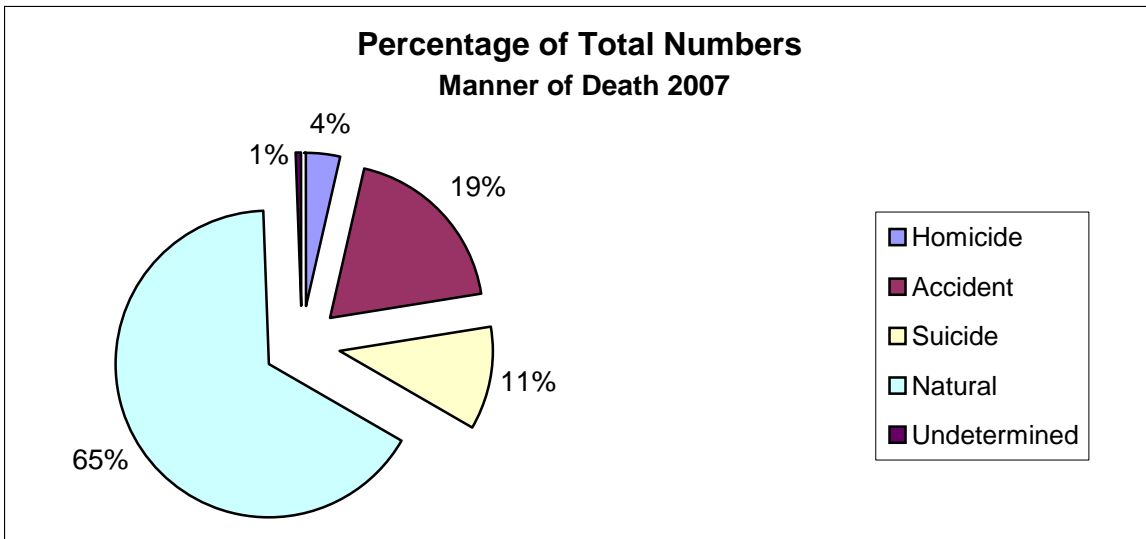
\*\* It is important to note: the **Manner of Death** is the fashion in which the cause of death came into being. The **Cause of Death** is the disease or injury responsible for initiating the chain of events, brief or prolonged which produced the fatal end result (death).

*In 2007, the total number of cases worked by our office was 169. Of those cases, 111 of them were by natural means, 32 were accidents, 18 were suicides, 1 was a still birth, 1 was undetermined, and 6 were homicides.*

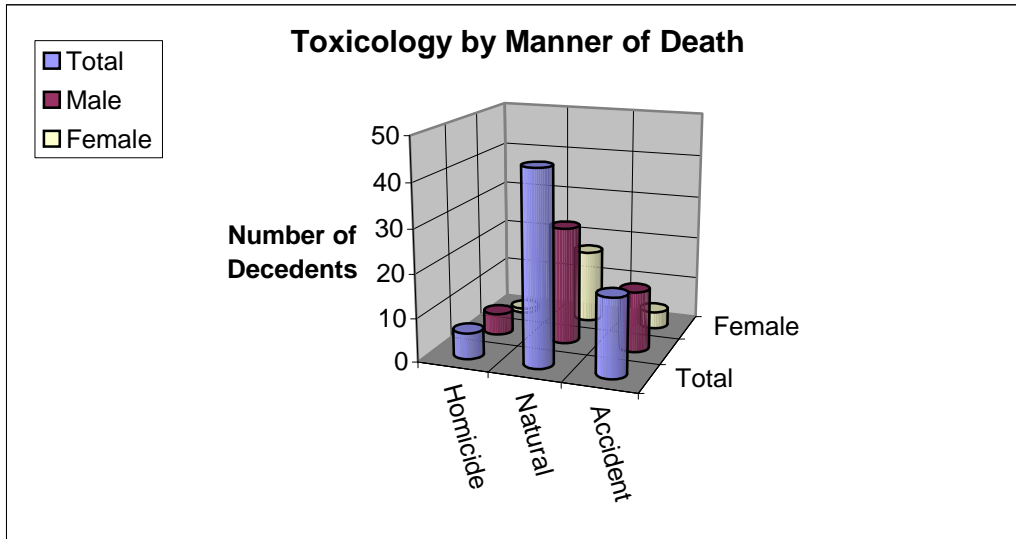
- The following chart indicates the breakdown of five manners of death by gender and the cumulative total:



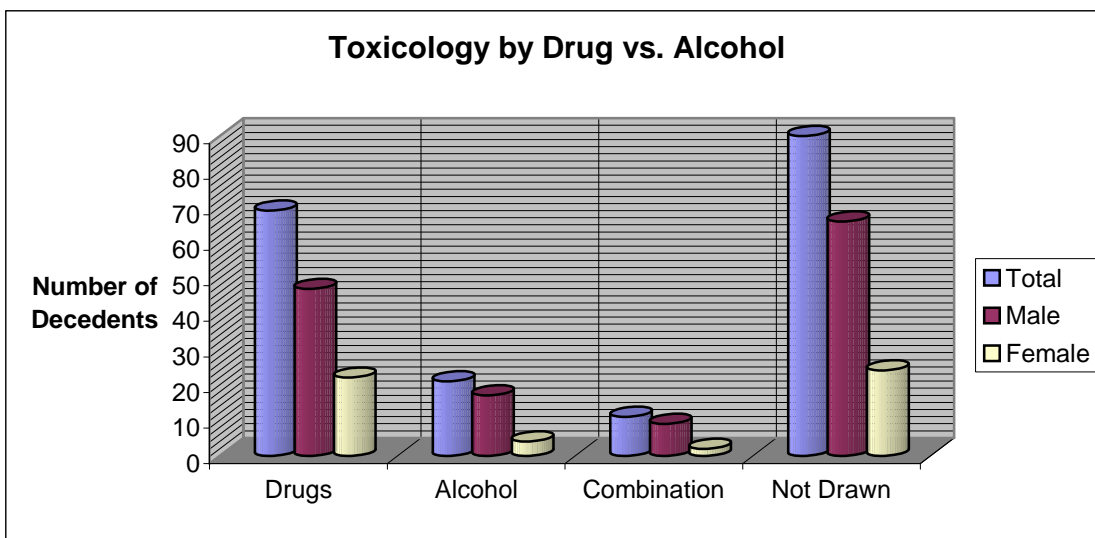
- The following chart indicates the total numbers of manner of death by percentage; gender is excluded:



- The following chart indicates the presence of drugs, alcohol, or both in the decedent upon drawing the toxicology. This chart reports manner of death by gender and the cumulative total:

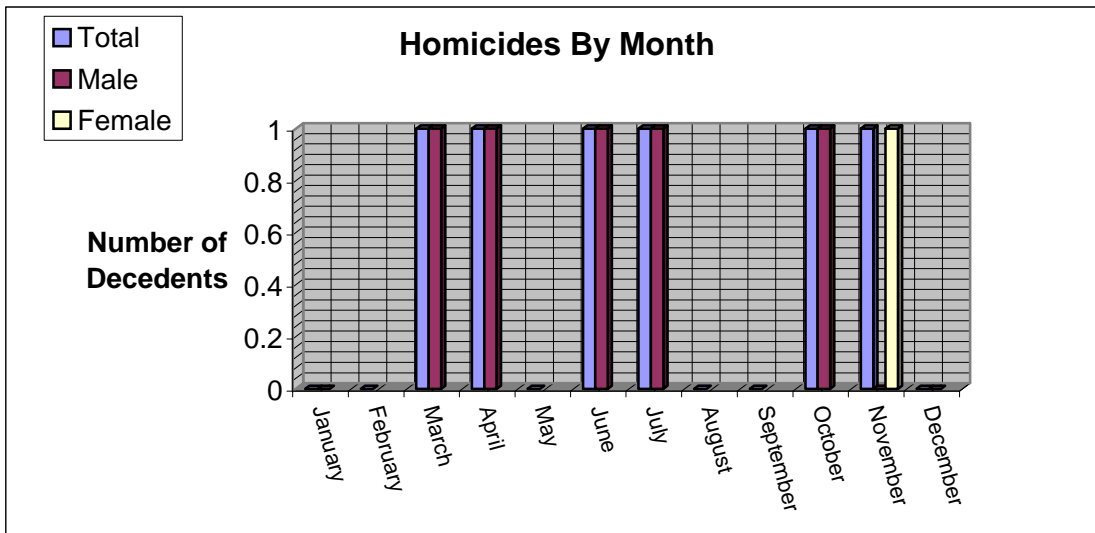


- The following chart indicates drug vs. alcohol from the toxicology reports. This chart shows manner of death by gender and the cumulative total:



## Homicide Deaths:

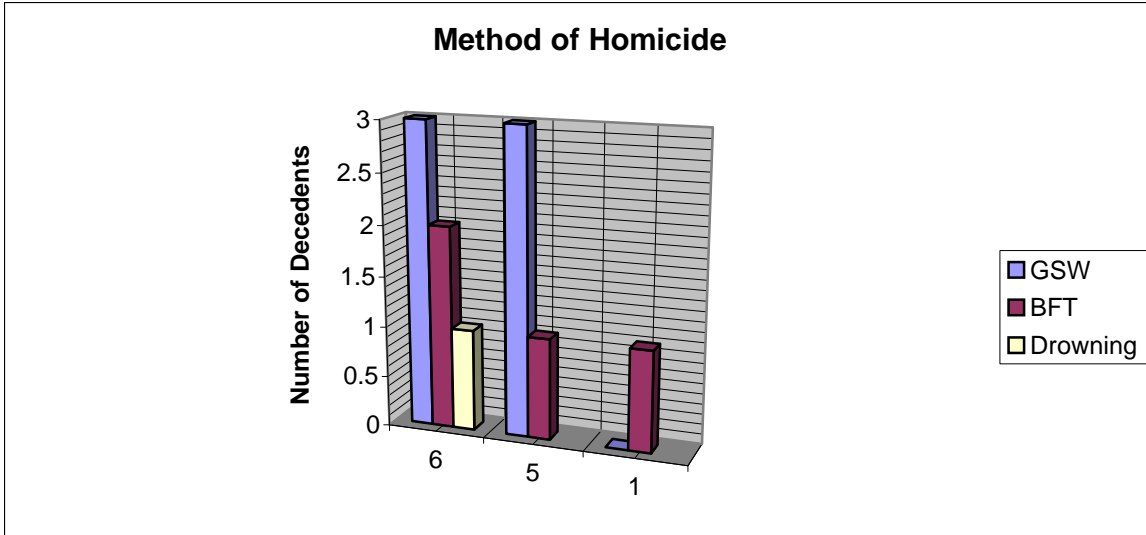
- The following chart indicates homicide deaths by month. In 2007, Natrona County had one female and five male victims of homicide:



- The following chart indicates homicide by age and gender. The chart is further broken down to show the lowest age, highest age, the range between the two, and the mean average of the decedents:



- The following chart indicates the method by which the decedent encountered the homicide. During 2007, there were six homicides and only three methods were carried out:



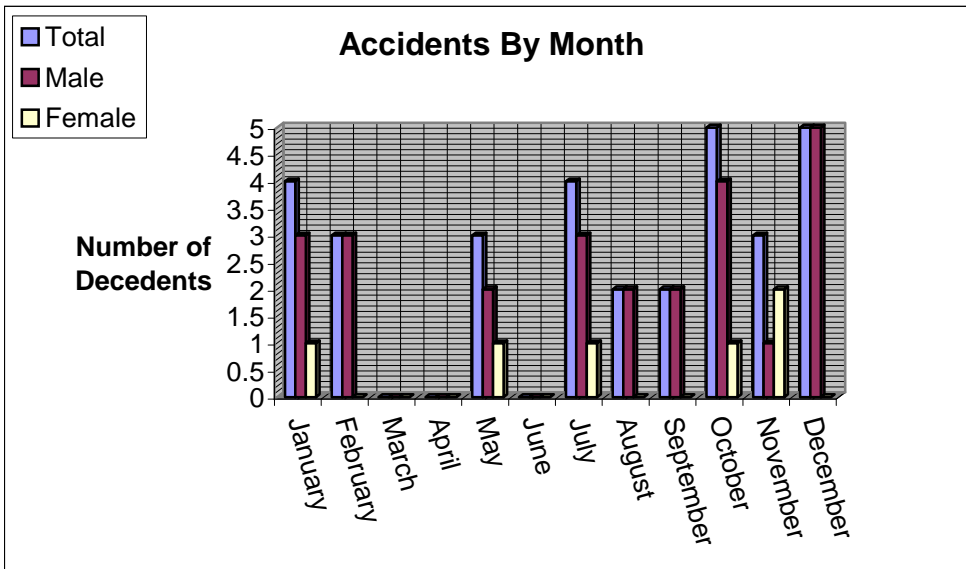
Legend:

GSW= Gunshot wound

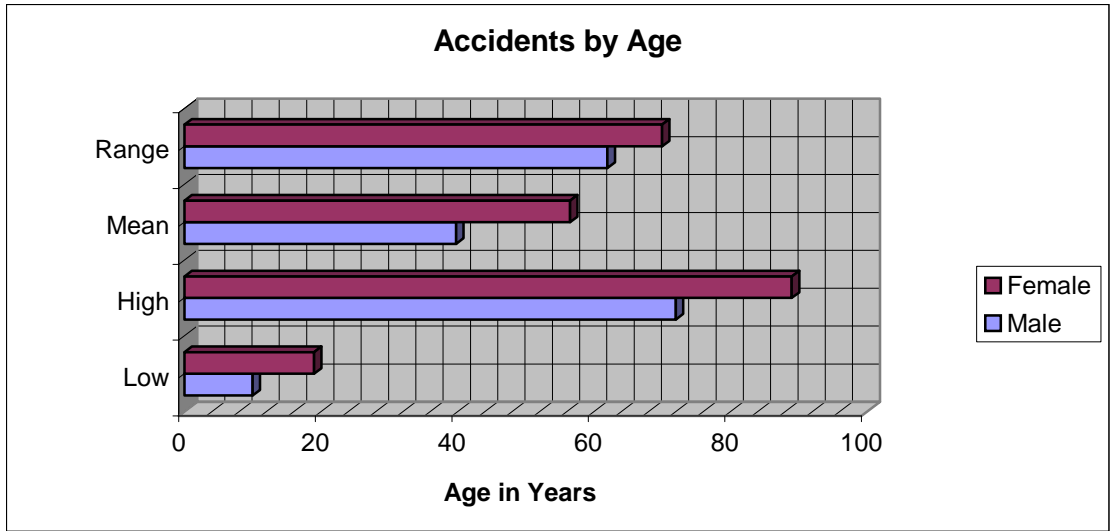
BFT= Blunt force trauma

**Accidental Deaths:**

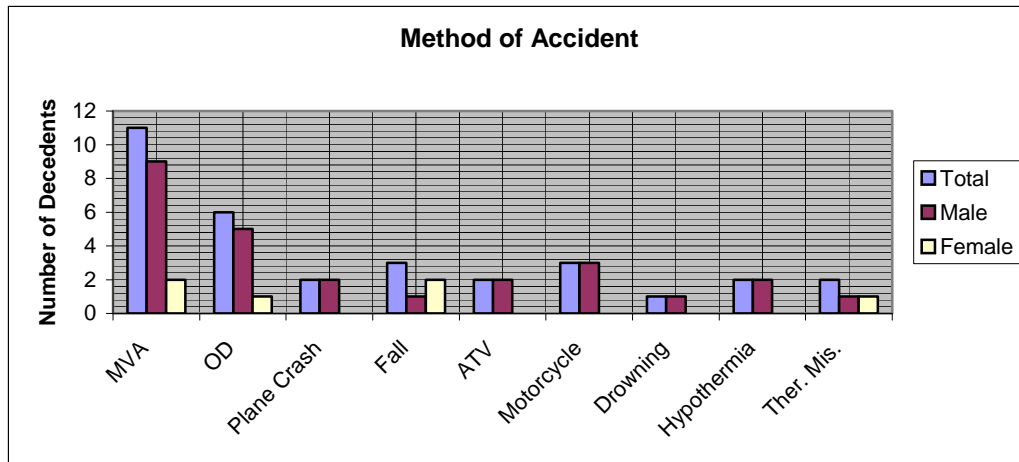
- The following chart indicates the total number of accidental deaths per month by gender and the cumulative total:



- The following chart indicates accidental deaths by age and gender. The chart is further broken down to show the lowest age, highest age, the range between the two, and the mean average age of the decedents:



- The following chart indicates the method which caused the accidental death:

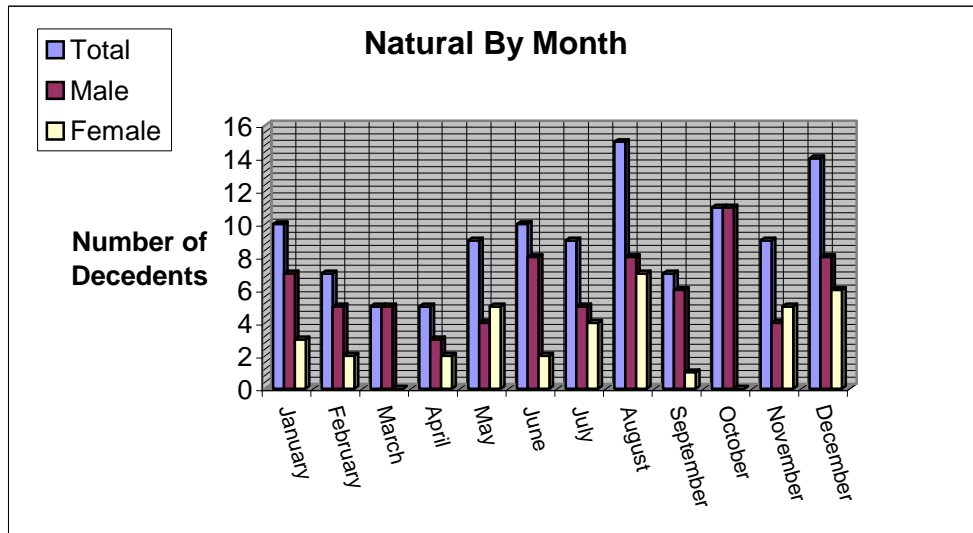


Legend:

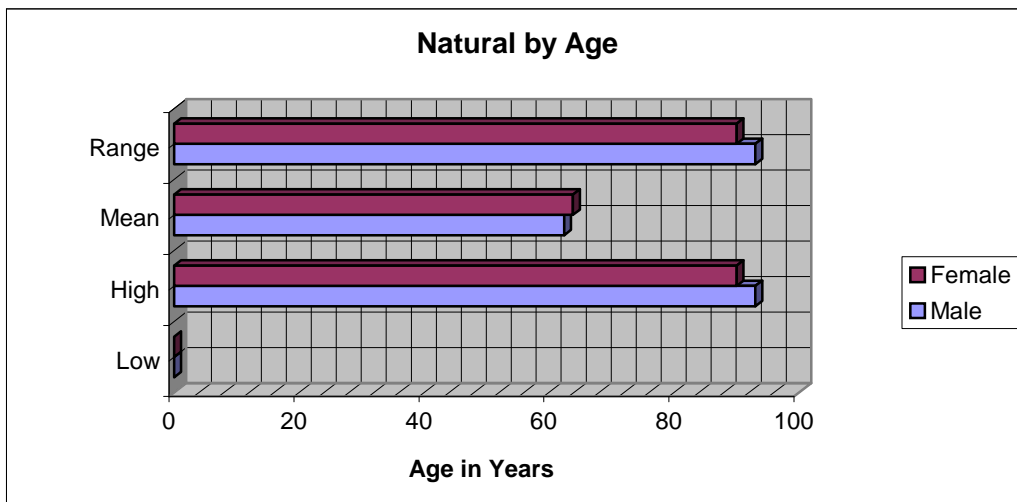
MVA = Motor Vehicle Accident  
 OD = Overdose  
 Ther. Mis.= Therapeutic Misadventure

**Natural Deaths:**

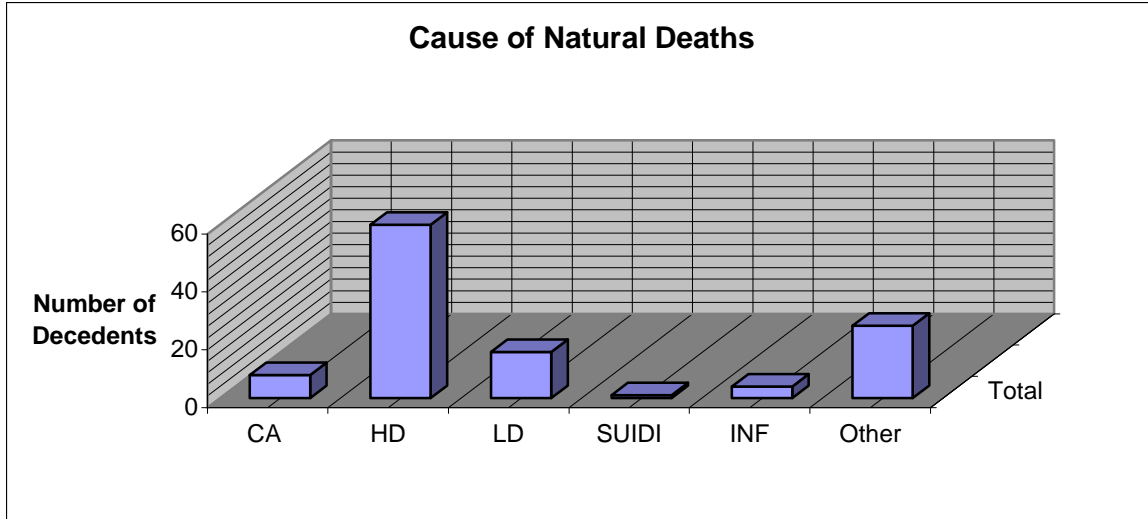
- The following chart indicates natural deaths by month, gender, and the cumulative total:



- The following chart indicates natural deaths by age and gender. The chart is further broken down to show the lowest age, highest age, the range between the two, and the mean average age of the decedents:



- The following chart indicates the method which caused the natural deaths:



Legend:

**CA (Cancer)** - Deaths by any type of cancer.

**HD (Heart Disease)** - Deaths by atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, coronary artery heart disease, myocardial infarction, hypertensive heart disease, cardiomyopathy, valvular heart disease and others.

**LD (Lung Disease)** - Deaths by lung disease including but not limited to; COPD, asthma, etc.

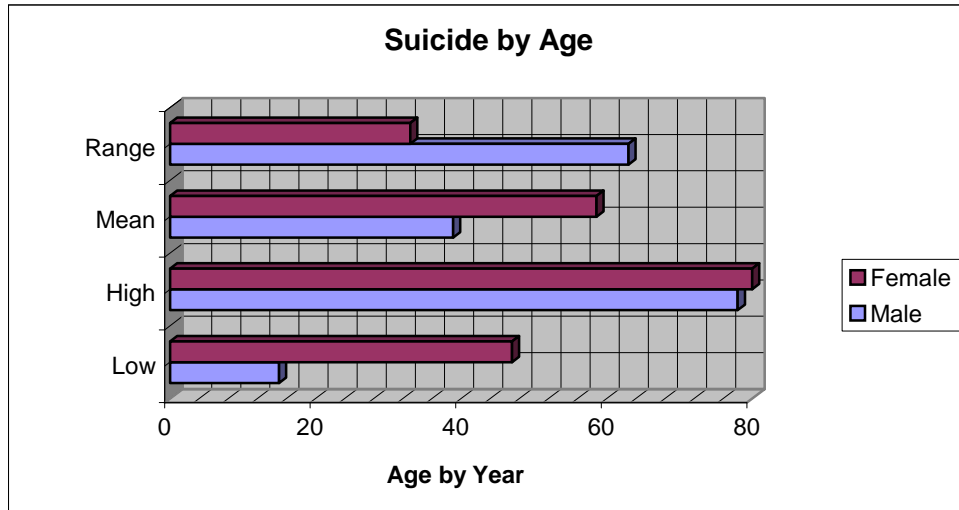
**SUIDI (Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Investigation)**

**INF (Infection)** - Pneumonia and other infectious diseases.

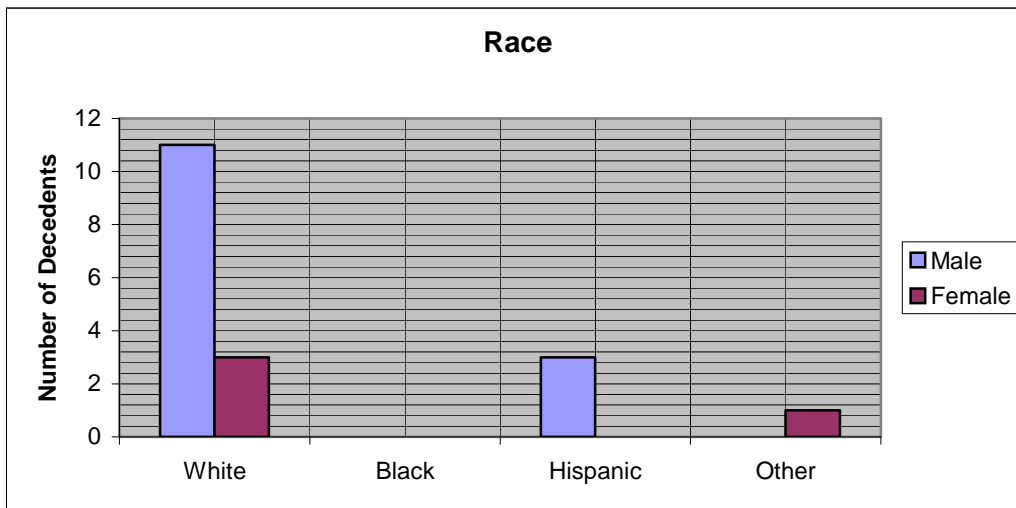
**Other** - Includes but is not limited to; liver failure, alcoholism, diabetes, and others.

## Suicide Deaths:

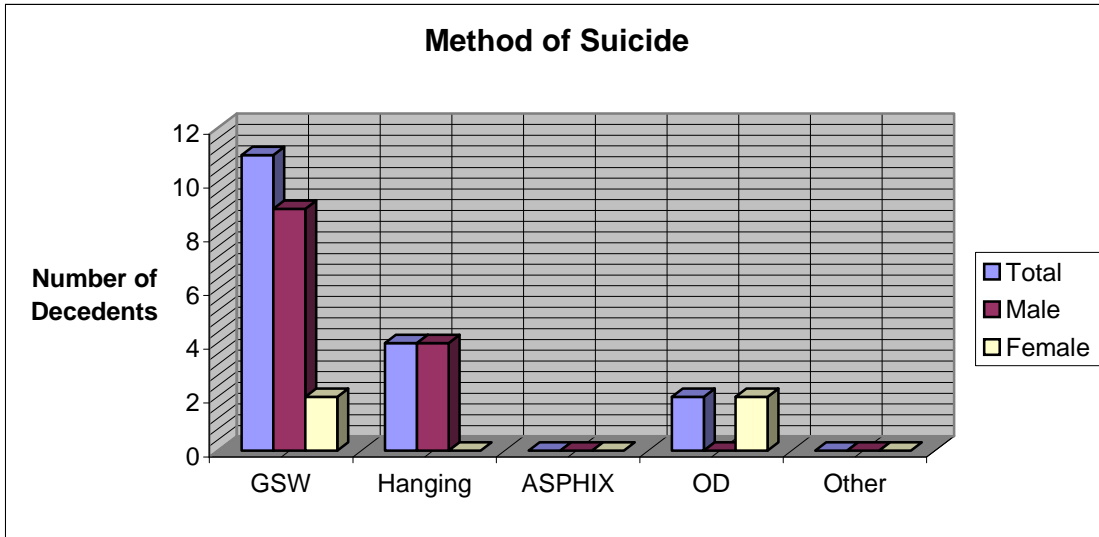
- The following chart indicates suicide deaths by age and gender. The chart is further broken down to show the lowest age, highest age, the range between the two, and the mean average age of the decedents:



- The following chart indicates the race of the decedents:



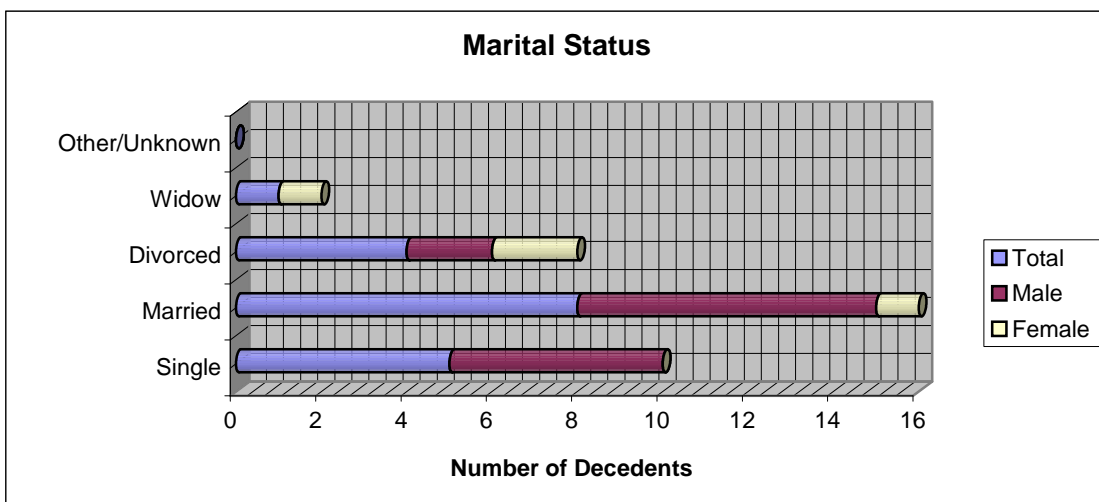
- The following chart indicates what method caused the suicidal death:



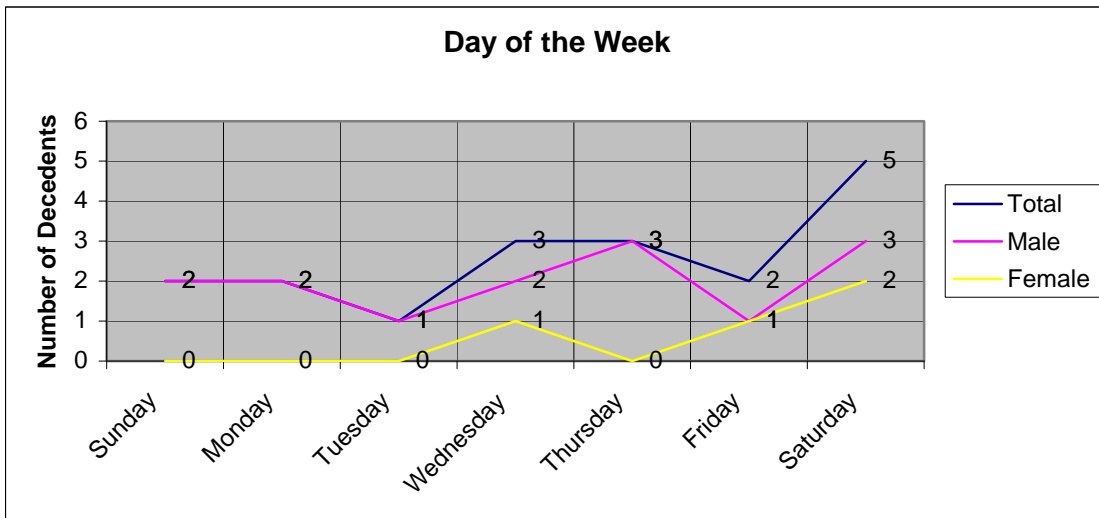
Legend:

GSW = Gunshot wound  
 ASPHIX = Asphyxiation  
 OD = Overdose  
 Other = Fall

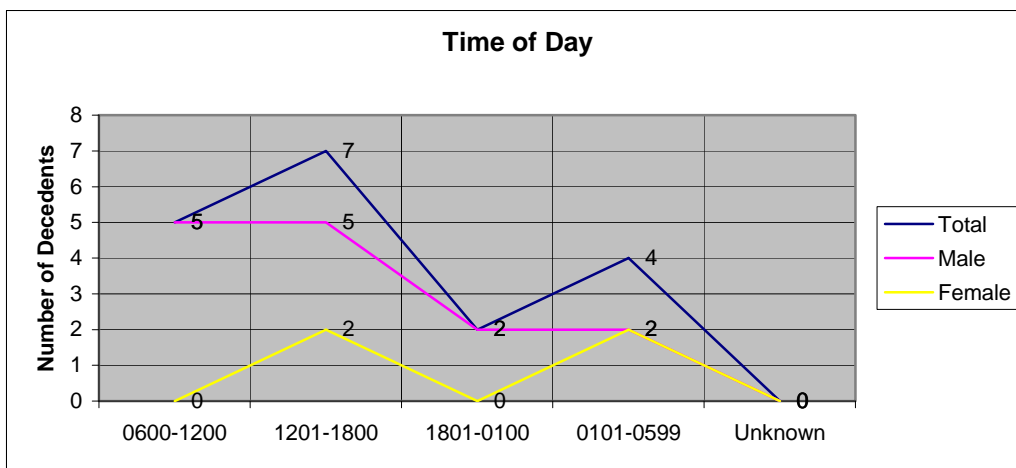
- The following chart illustrates the marital status of the suicide decedent by gender and the cumulative total:



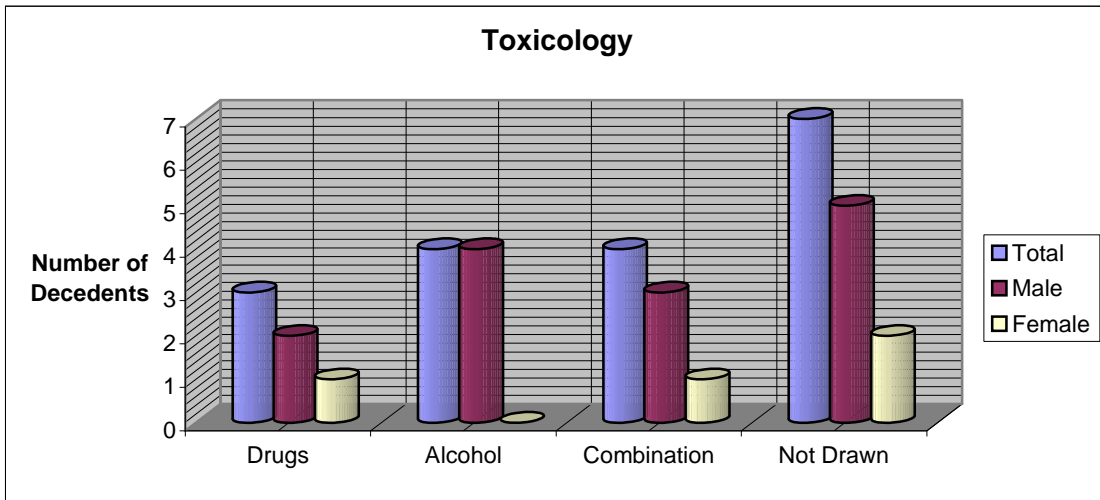
- The following chart indicates the day of the week the suicide occurred by gender and the cumulative total:



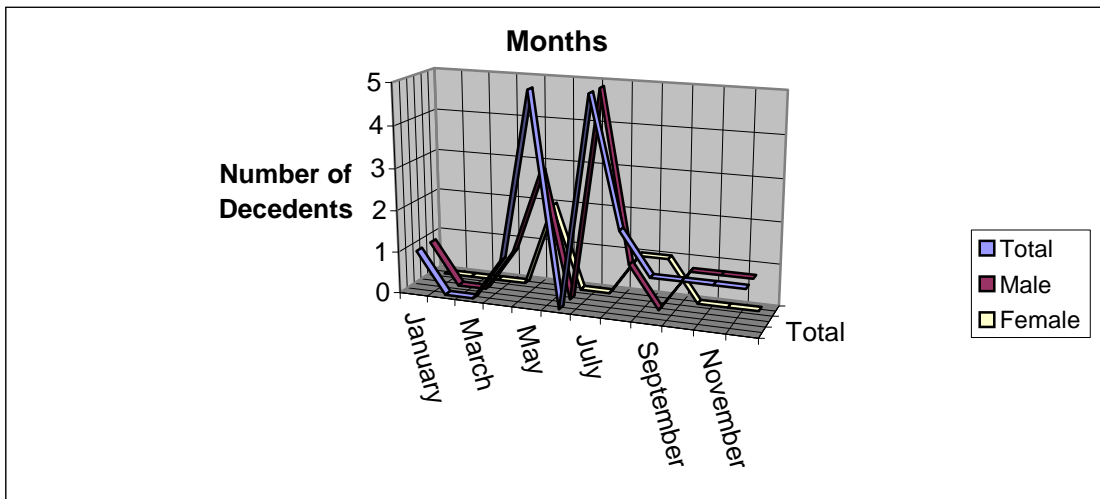
- The following chart indicates the time of day the suicide occurred by gender and the cumulative total:



- The following chart indicates the number of decedents with drugs, alcohol, or both in their system preceding death:

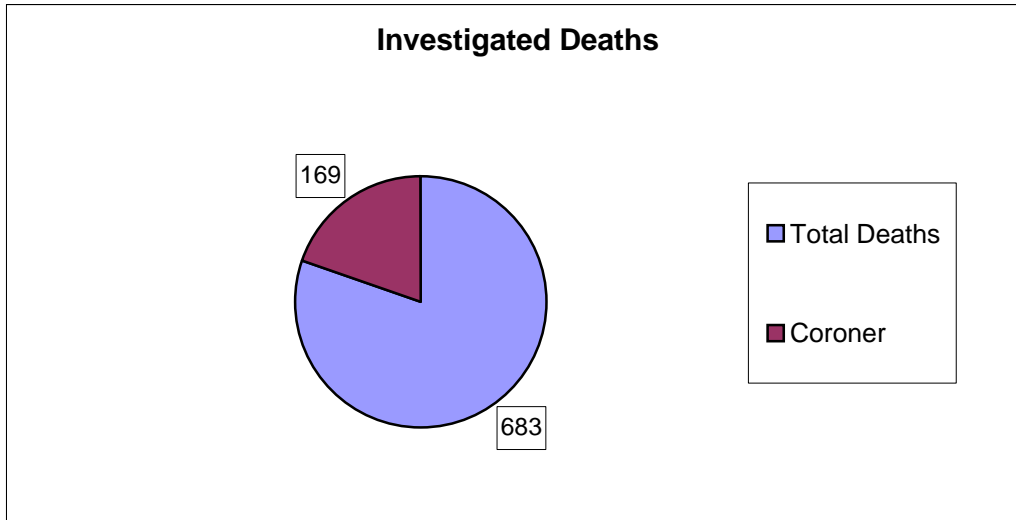


- The following chart indicates the number of suicides per month by gender and the cumulative total:



## Investigations:

Natrona County deaths totaled **683** in 2007. Of those deaths, the Natrona County Coroner investigated **169** of them. The following chart indicates those findings:

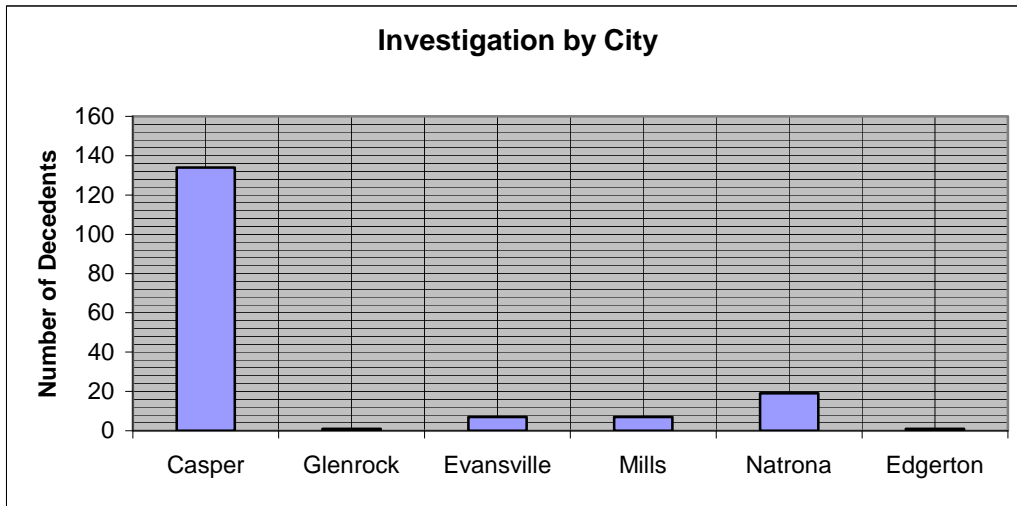


Of the 683 deaths, the Natrona County Coroner was an active participant in 90% of these deaths performing cursory exams.

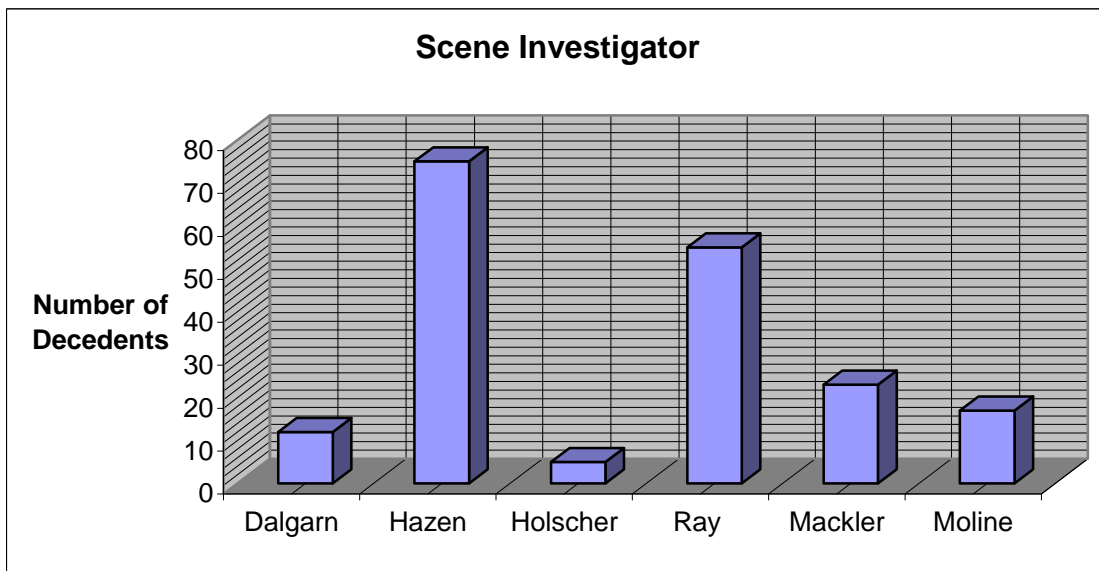
The Natrona County Coroner's Office also aided other counties. Seven deaths outside of Natrona County were investigated by the Natrona County Coroner's Office. The following table indicates the counties served:

<b>Carbon</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Hot Springs</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Fremont</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Campbell</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Niobrara</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Natrona</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>169</b>

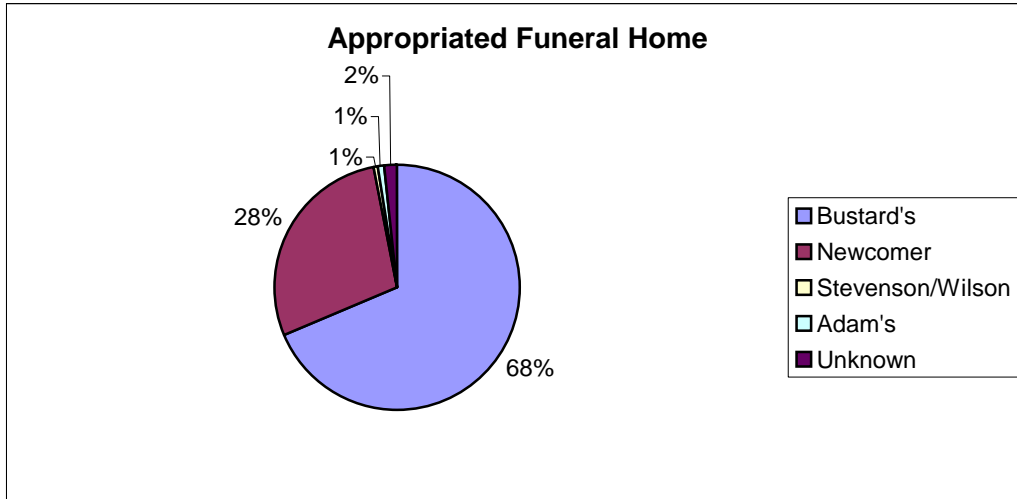
- The following chart indicates the cities in Natrona County that had deaths investigated:



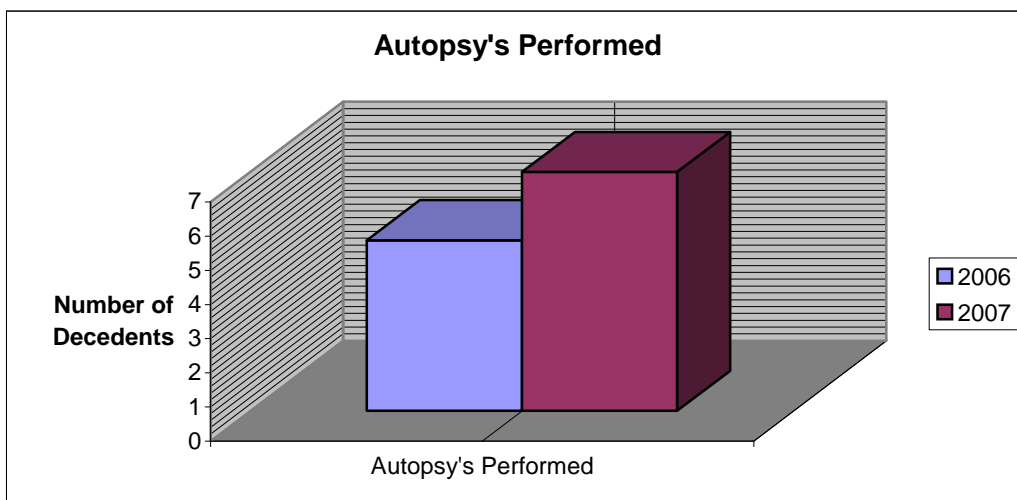
- The following chart indicates the total number of cases each Coroner Investigator was assigned:



- The following chart indicates the percentage of funeral homes that were utilized by the Natrona County Coroner's Office:



- The following chart indicates the autopsies performed by the Natrona County Coroner in the 2007 compared to 2006:



## Conclusion:

It is important to note that the numbers in this report by no means suggest a bias on this office. It should also be further noted that when reading the report, drawing conclusions on this year's data alone can skew perceptions of the realities. The purpose of the annual report is to answer frequently asked questions of this office on a daily basis from numerous agencies and individuals.

This report only shows data from 2007, if you desire reports from another year to use as contrast they are available at the Natrona County Coroner's Office. Either a written request can be made by mailing to:

	Natrona County Coroners Office
	200 N. Center; Suite #10
	Casper, Wyoming 82601-1990
A telephone call can also be made by:	307-235-9458
A fax transmission can also be sent to:	307-235-9608
Email to:	coroner@natronacounty-wy.gov

The coroner's office serves the residents of Natrona County by incorporating the fields of medicine and forensic science to investigate any sudden and unexplained death, or those deaths that occur under violent or suspicious circumstances. According to Wyoming State Statute 7-4-201 states: when the coroner is notified that the dead body of any person has been found within the limits of the county or that the death resulted from injury sustained within the county and he suspects that the death is a coroner's case, he shall conduct an investigation which may include:

- An examination of the body and an investigation into the medical history of the case;
- The appointment of a qualified physician to assist in determining the cause of death;
- An autopsy if the physician appointed to assist the coroner under this subsection determines an autopsy is necessary.

The investigative and medical staff seeks to find answers to questions that are important to the decedent's family, involved law enforcement agencies, insurance companies, the judicial system, Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Wyoming Department of Health, and OSHA. The pursuit of civil or criminal proceedings is in part determined by the ability of the Natrona County Coroner's Office to determine the cause and manner of death. This unique makeup of job responsibilities means the Natrona County Coroner's Office performs both a public service and a law enforcement role. This requires the coroner to scrutinize every death within his jurisdiction to determine the events that led to that death.

The Natrona County Coroner's Office also functions as an advocate for families, by working with them to insure they are notified of the death, relaying medical information from autopsies, and placing families in touch with other agencies that will assist in the grieving process. The office also works, when possible, with organizations such as the Lions Eye Bank and Donor Alliance Network to facilitate family wishes regarding organ donations.

Data collection and compilation of this report was produced by: H. C. Rogers 2008.