

# Johnson County Medical Examiner Department

Annual Report 2020



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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 for a second time on March 8, 2021. 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 2020, there were 1051 deaths reported to JCME. Of these, 444 were accepted as medical examiner jurisdiction deaths. Each of these deaths was investigated and certified by JCME. After review of each of the remaining 607 reported deaths, jurisdiction was declined because each death was determined to not be in the “public interest” as defined above. Each of these deaths was certified by the decedent’s physician. The total number of deaths investigated (jurisdiction accepted) or reviewed (jurisdiction declined) by JCME comprised 51% of the 2066 deaths that occurred in Johnson County in 2020.

Of the 444 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, 208 decedents were Johnson County residents and 173 were residents of other counties in Iowa. Additionally, there were 24 decedents who were in the custody of the Iowa Department of Corrections at the time of death and 39 decedents were out-of-state residents. As a result, 47% of deaths accepted and investigated by JCME consisted of Johnson County residents.

Of the 444 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, the incident location for 217 decedents was Johnson County. One-hundred and sixty two incidents occurred in other Iowa counties and 24 incidents occurred while in the custody of the Iowa Department of Corrections. Additionally, for 30 decedents, the incident location was out-of-state. Eleven decedents had an incident location that was unknown.

Of the 444 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, all decedents were identified. Nine decedents were unclaimed by family or friends and final disposition was arranged by JCME. There were no exhumations.

In 2020, 123 autopsies were conducted by JCME. All JCME autopsies were performed at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC). There were 122 complete autopsies (external examination and internal examination of the head, neck, chest, and abdomen) and one partial autopsy.

Of the 444 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, the manner of death was classified as accident for 196, natural for 191, suicide for 38, undetermined for 11, and homicide for 8.

In 2020, there were 29 drug-related deaths investigated by JCME. Of this total, 15 involved illicit drugs only, 4 involved over-the-counter medications only, 1 involved prescription drugs only, and 9 involved a mixture of drug types. Of the 9 mixed drug-related deaths, 3 involved multiple illicit drugs (methamphetamine, fentanyl, heroin, and acetylfentanyl), 3 involved a mixture of illicit drugs (pentobarbital, methamphetamine, fentanyl, and acetylfentanyl) and prescription drugs, 2 were a mixture of prescription medications, and 1 was a mixture of prescription and over-the-counter medications. Of the remaining 15 illicit drug-related deaths, 13 involved methamphetamine, 1 involved fentanyl, and 1 involved cocaine. Of the 29 drug-related deaths, 23 were classified as accident, 5 as suicide, and 1 as undetermined.

Of the 1051 deaths reported to JCME in 2020, 217 decedents were determined to have died from COVID-19. Of these 217 decedents, the sex distribution was 146 males to 71 females with the most common age range of 70-79 years (59 decedents) followed by 60-69 years (51 decedents). Forty seven decedents were Johnson County residents and 134 were residents of other counties in Iowa. Additionally, there were 12 decedents who were in the custody of the Iowa Department of Corrections at the time of death and 24 decedents who were out-of-state residents.

There were 268 deaths accepted by JCME of adults aged 60 years and older. Of these, there were 100 in which the death was the result of a fall. The majority of these fall-related deaths, 65, occurred from a standing height and 51 of the falls occurred inside of the decedent's home. The most common anatomical location of injury from a fall was the head and/or neck, which occurred in 55 of the falls.

In 2020, there were 21 deaths accepted by JCME of individuals 17 years of age and younger. Of these 21 deaths, 9 were classified as accident followed by 4 as suicide, 4 as undetermined, 3 as natural, and 1 as homicide. For 9 of these deaths the incident location was Johnson County; 9 incident locations occurred in another Iowa County; 3 incident locations occurred out-of-state. Of these 21 deaths accepted by JCME, there were 4 deaths of infants one year of age or less of which 2 were classified as accident and 2 as undetermined. An autopsy was performed on all 4 infant deaths. In 2020, there were 3 sleep-related infant deaths, 2 of which were classified as accident and 1 as undetermined. For 2 of these deaths the incident location was Johnson County and 1 incident locations occurred in another Iowa county.

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 444 deaths certified by JCME in 2020, it was determined that 105 were tobacco-related and 27 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 1223 cremation permits to funeral service providers in 2020. There were 482 cremation permits issued to funeral service providers in Johnson County, 656 to funeral service providers located in other Iowa counties, and 85 to funeral service providers located out-of-state. Cremation permits were issued to a total of 148 funeral service providers. Of the 1223 cremation permits issued, 5 permits prompted the recognition of missed cases, or less than 1% of all cremation permits issued.

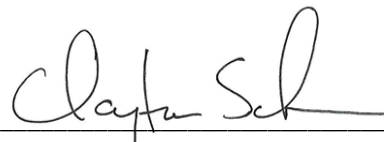
The Johnson County Older Adult Death Review Team and the Johnson County Child Death Review Team are facilitated by JCME. The purpose of the Teams is to gain greater understanding of issues associated with the deaths of adults aged 60 and older and children under the age of 18. Information gained from 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 2020, 17 accepted JCME cases became organ donors. From these 17 individuals, the Iowa Donor Network coordinated the recovery of 26 kidneys, 11 livers, 9 hearts, 8 lungs, and 5 pancreases for transplant. Twenty-seven 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 2020 JCME had two Board Certified Death Investigators (Advanced): Clayton Schuneman and Kate Bengtson, and four Registry Certified Death Investigators (Basic): Heather Sanderson, Amanda Fink, James McDonald, and Kristen Long. 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. As of January 1, 2020 Dennis Firchau, MD, was appointed as Medical Examiner by the Johnson County Board of Supervisors. Marcus Nashelsky, MD, was appointed as Deputy Medical Examiner.

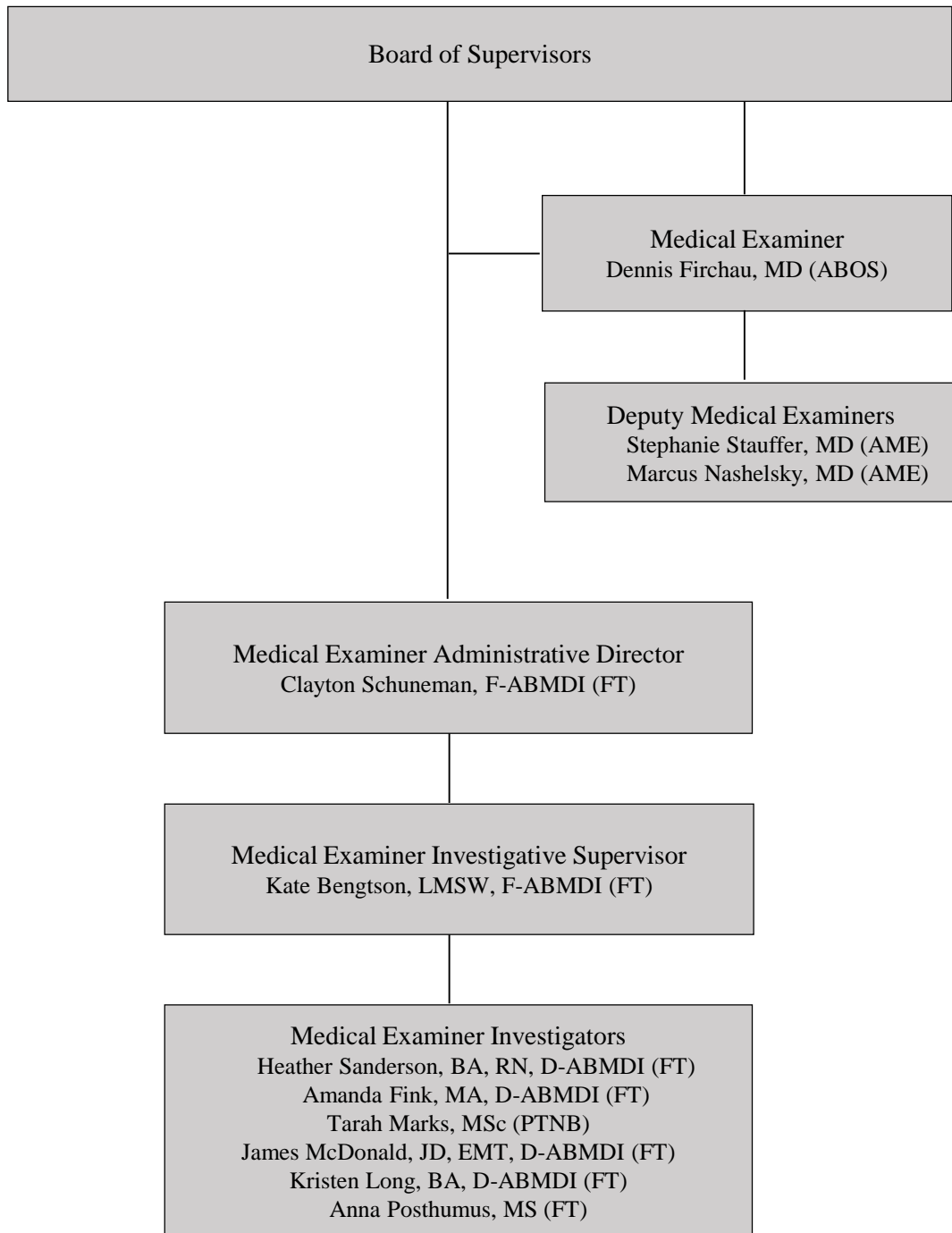


Dennis Firchau, MD  
Medical Examiner



Clayton Schuneman, F-ABMDI  
Administrative Director

Figure 1.1. Organizational Chart (2020)



Employment/Appointment Status Key:

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



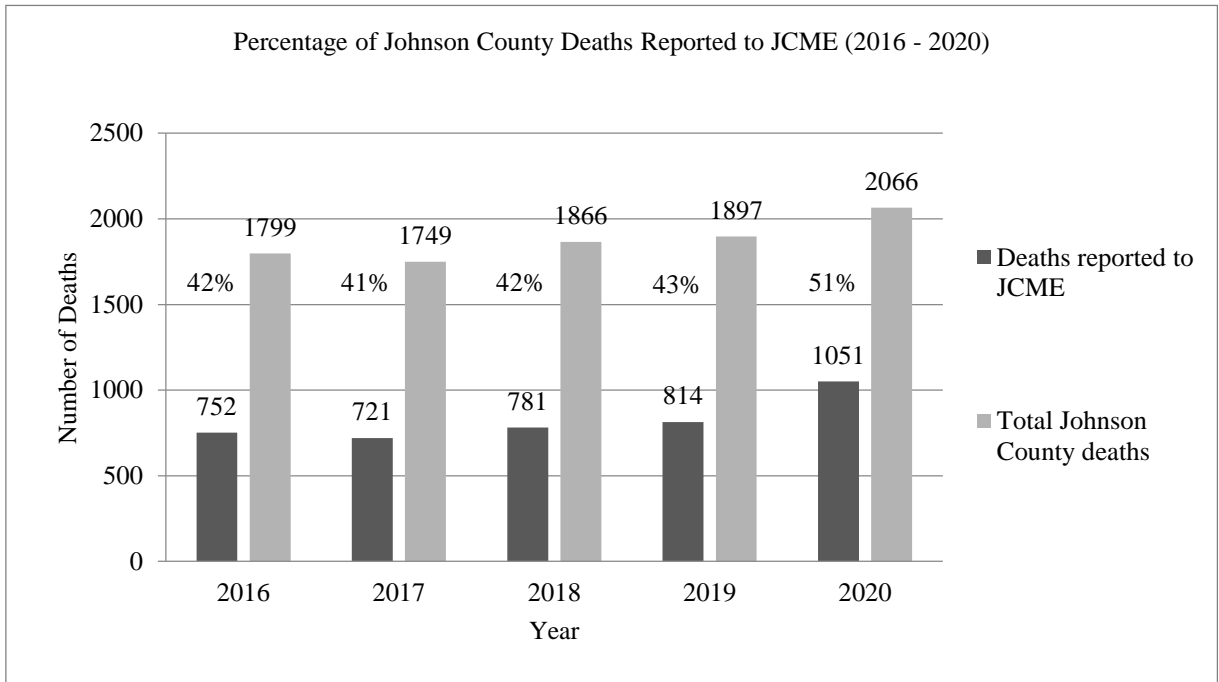


Figure 1.2.

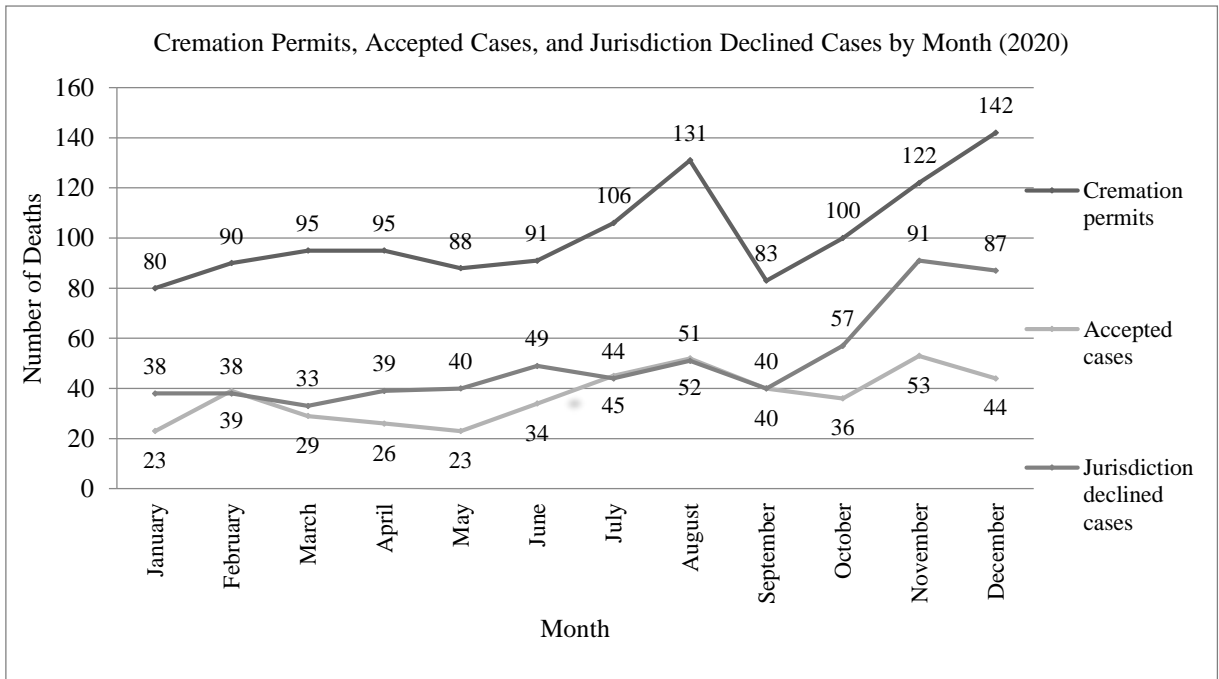


Figure 1.3.

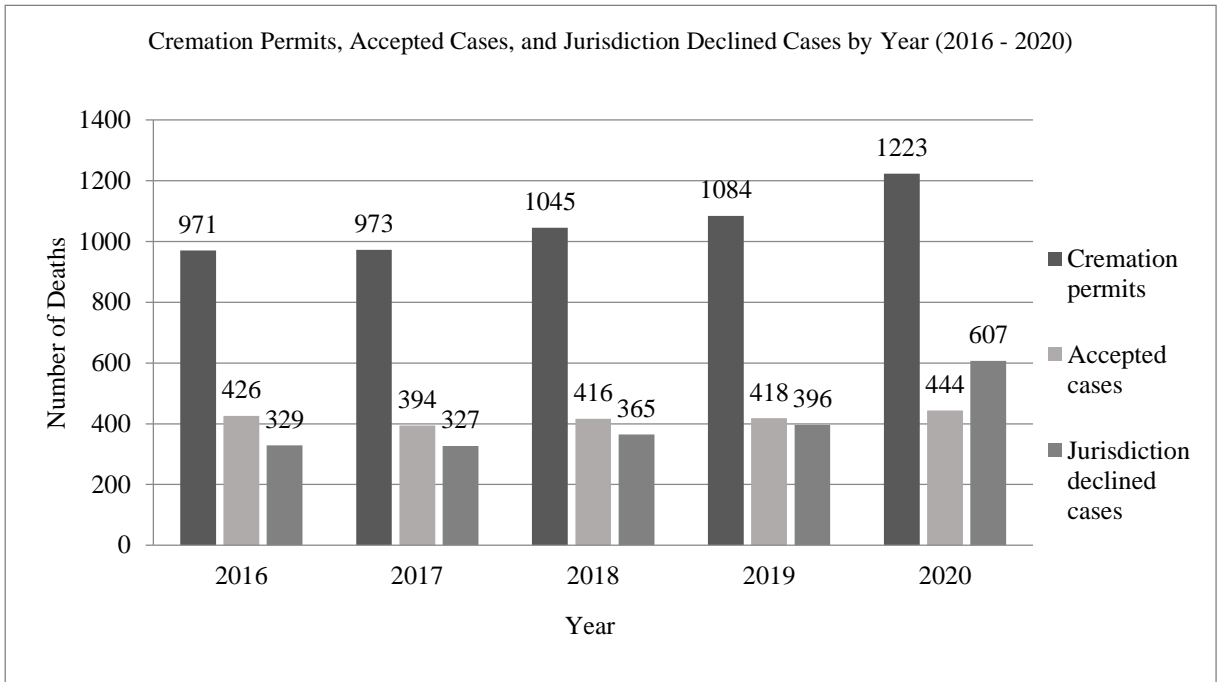


Figure 1.4.

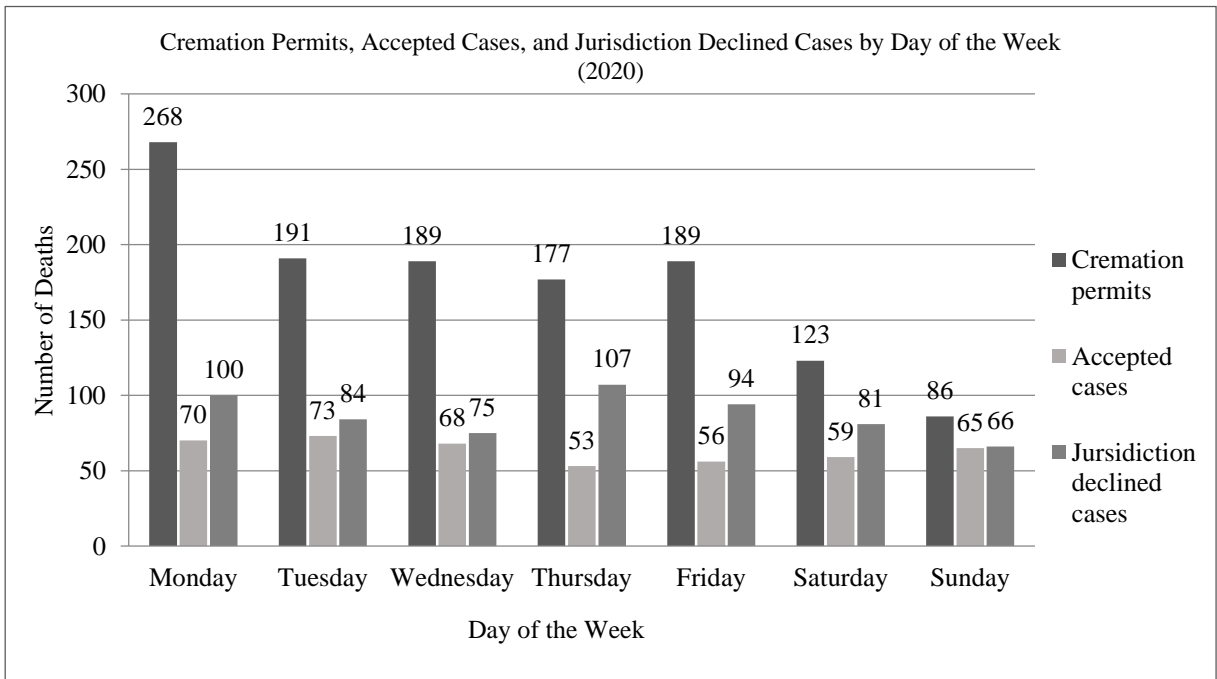


Figure 1.5.

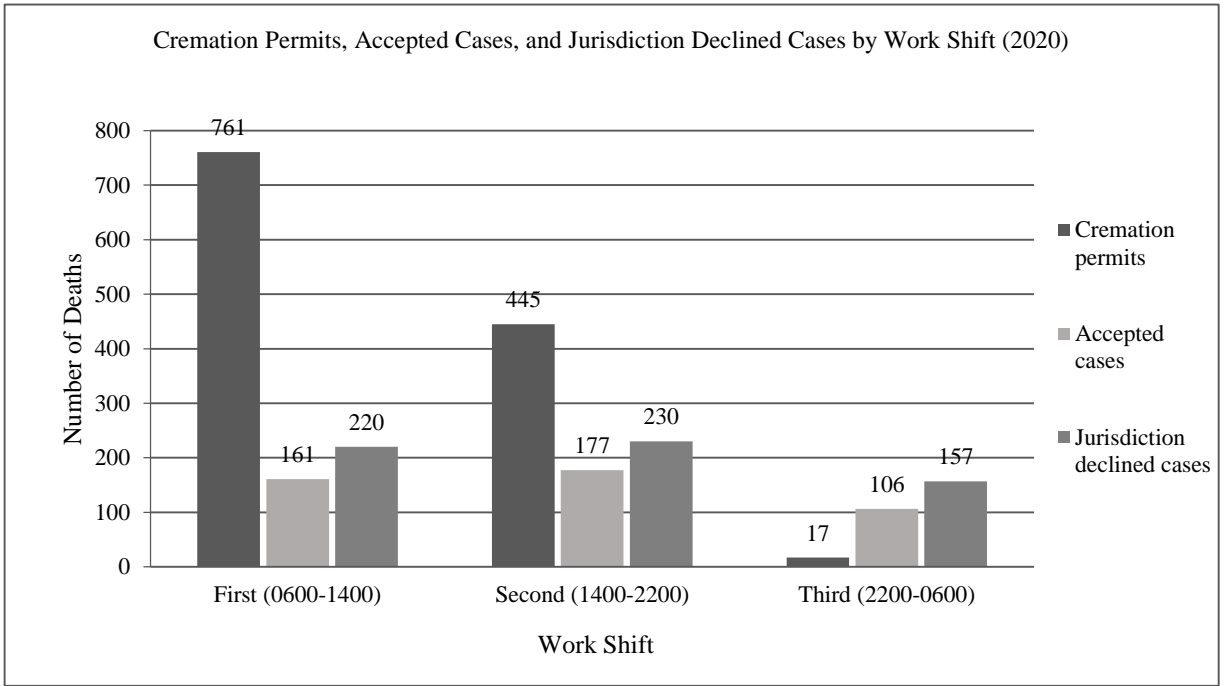


Figure 1.6.

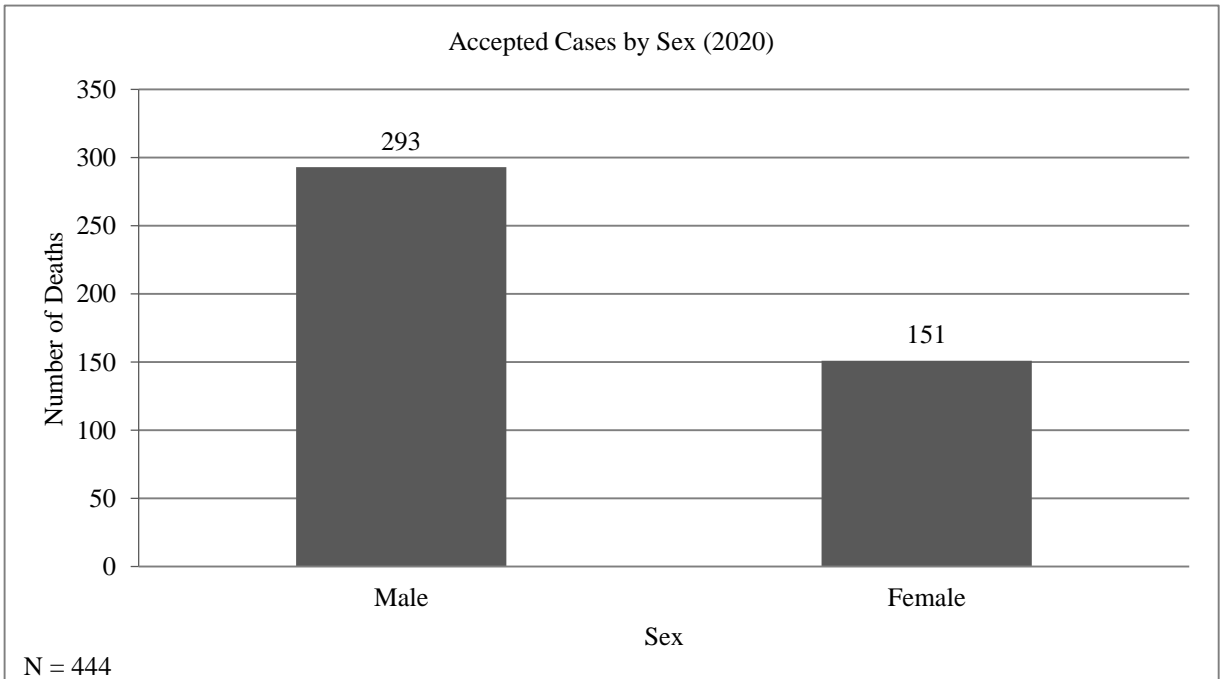


Figure 1.7.

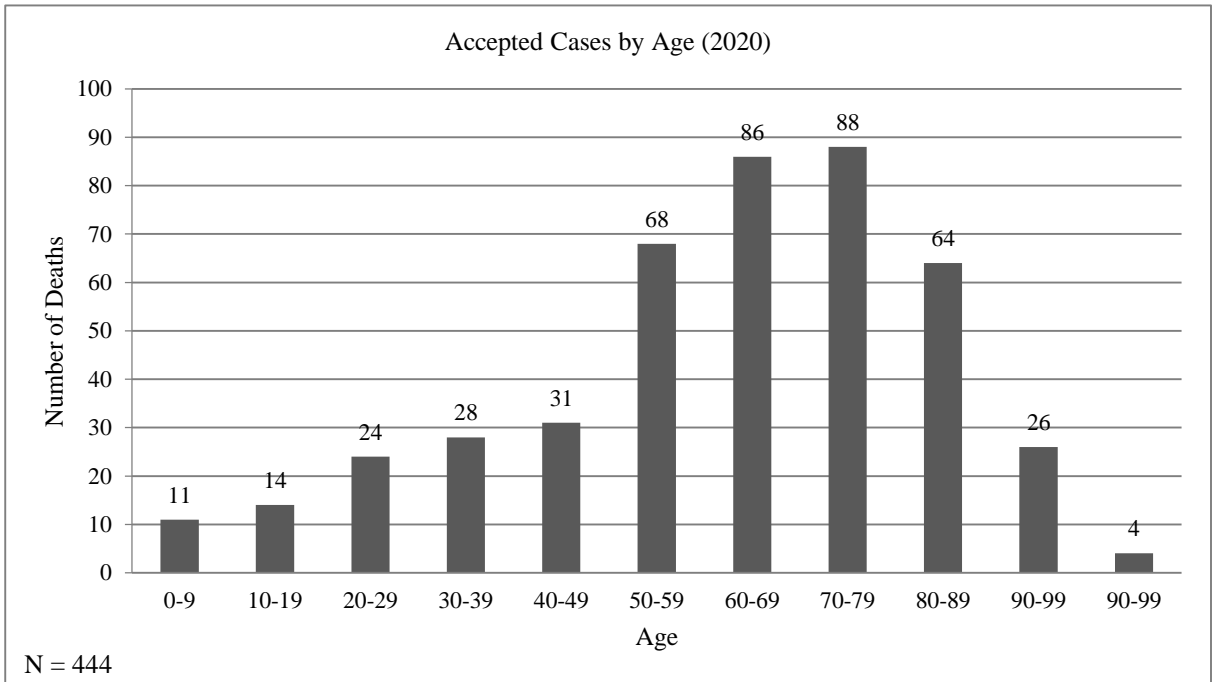


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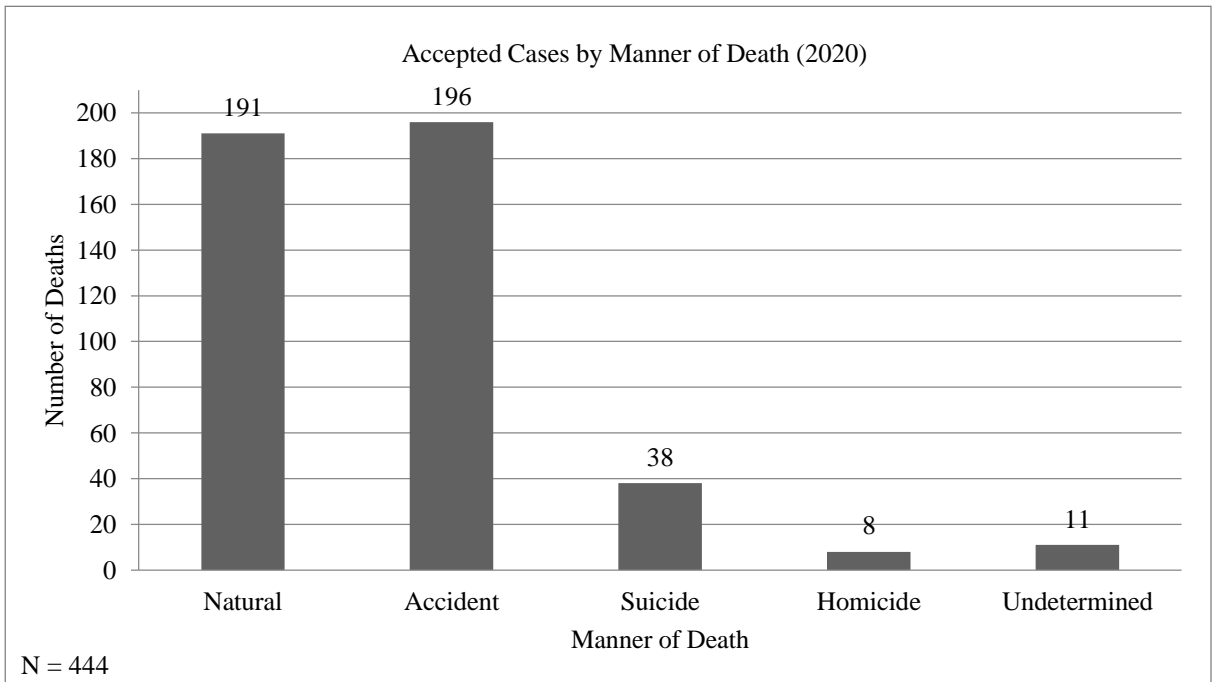


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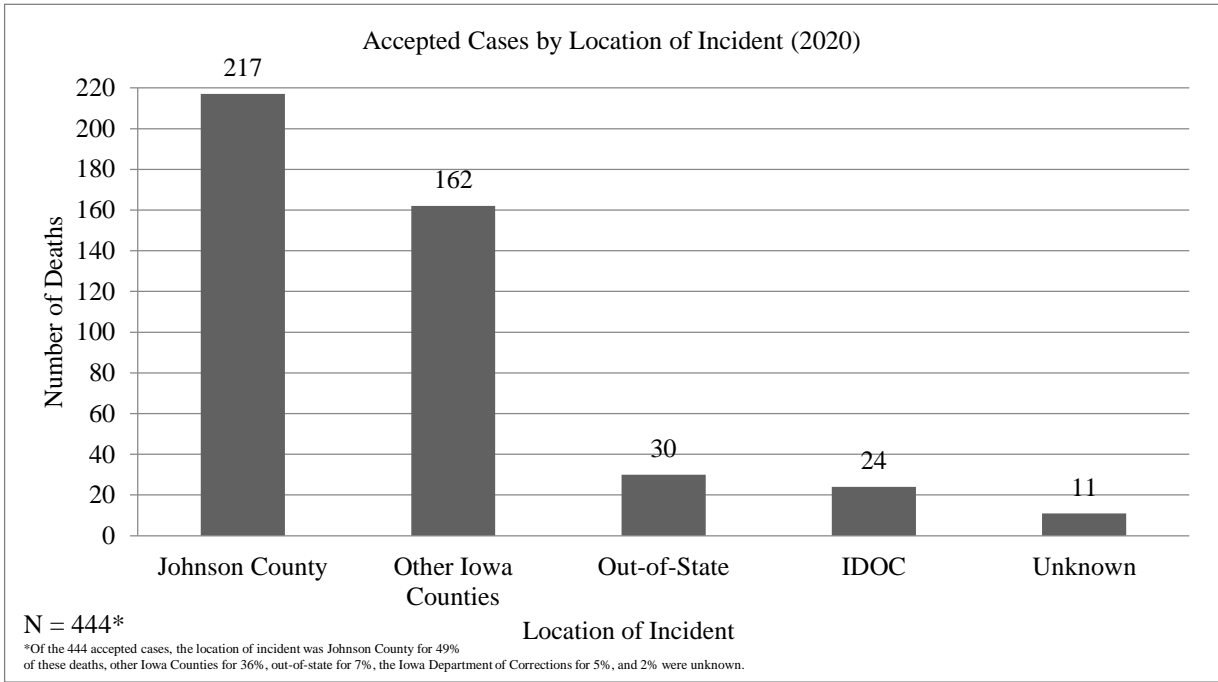


Figure 1.10.

Table 1.1. Other Iowa Counties Location of Incident (2020)

County	Number of Decedents
Linn	17
Scott	15
Muscatine	11
Black Hawk	9
Cedar	9
Dubuque	9
Clinton	8
Wapello	8
Des Moines	7
Henry	7
Lee	7
Delaware	4
Iowa	4
Jones	4
Benton	3
Jackson	3
Polk	3
Poweshiek	3
Bremer	2
Buchanan	2
Clayton	2
Fayette	2
Jefferson	2
Keokuk	2
Washington	2
Boone	1
Butler	1
Clarke	1
Decatur	1
Franklin	1
Hancock	1
Hardin	1
Jasper	1
Louisa	1
Madison	1
Mahaska	1
Marion	1
Marshall	1
Tama	1
Warren	1
Webster	1
Worth	1

Table 1.2. Out-of-State Location of Incident (2020)

County and State	Number of Decedents
Rock Island, IL	16
Hancock, IL	2
Henry, IL	2
Jo Daviess, IL	2
Carroll, IL	1
Clark, MO	1
Del Norte, CA	1
Department of Corrections, IL	1
Henderson, IL	1
Mercer, IL	1
Scotland, MO	1
Whiteside, IL	1

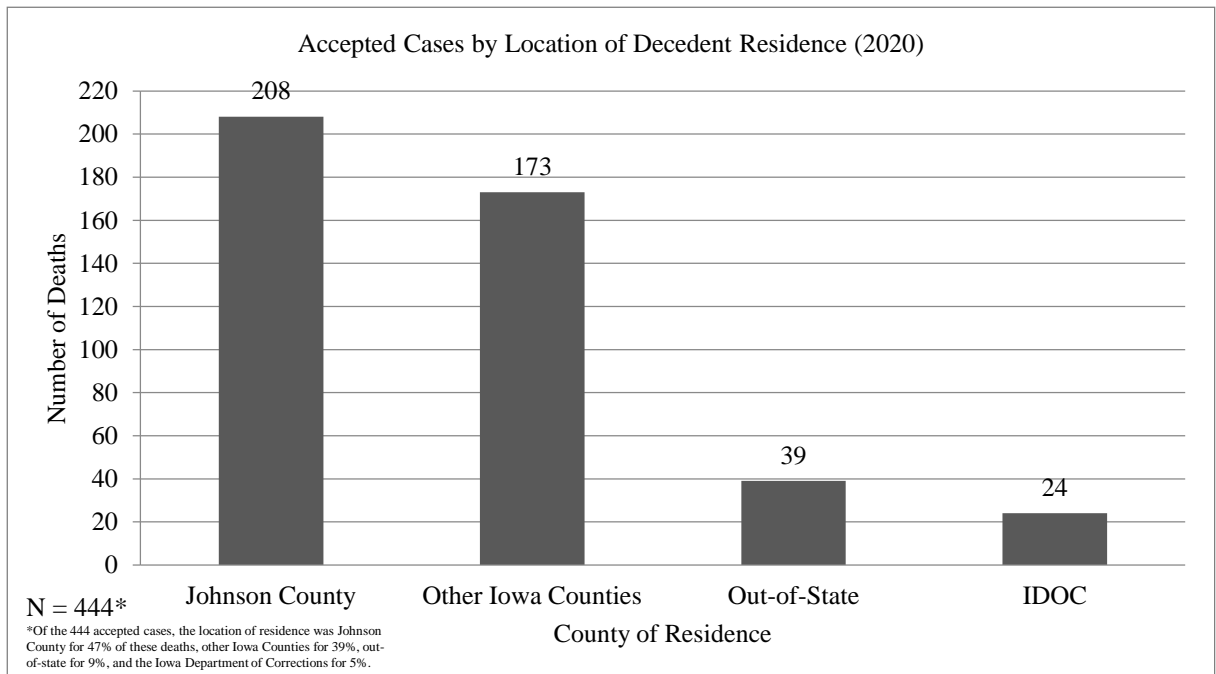


Figure 1.11.

Table 1.3. Other Iowa Counties Location of Decedent Residence (2020)

County	Number of Decedents
Linn	21
Scott	16
Muscatine	13
Black Hawk	10
Clinton	9
Cedar	8
Des Moines	8
Dubuque	8
Wapello	8
Henry	7
Iowa	5
Jones	5
Lee	5
Delaware	4
Fayette	4
Jefferson	4
Washington	4
Benton	3
Bremer	3
Jackson	3
Polk	3
Poweshiek	3
Keokuk	2
Adair	1
Boone	1
Butler	1
Clarke	1
Clayton	1
Dallas	1
Decatur	1
Franklin	1
Hancock	1
Hardin	1
Mahaska	1
Marion	1
Marshall	1
Tama	1
Warren	1
Webster	1
Worth	1



Table 1.4. Out-of-State Location of Decedent Residence (2020)

County and State	Number of Decedents
Rock Island, IL	15
Henry, IL	3
Whiteside, IL	3
Carroll, IL	2
Clarke, MO	2
Hancock, IL	2
Jo Daviess, IL	2
Dane, WI	1
Del Norte, CA	1
Department of Corrections, IL	1
Hancock, OH	1
Henderson, IL	1
Madison, NE	1
McDonough, IL	1
Mercer, IL	1
Scotland, MO	1
St. Charles, MO	1

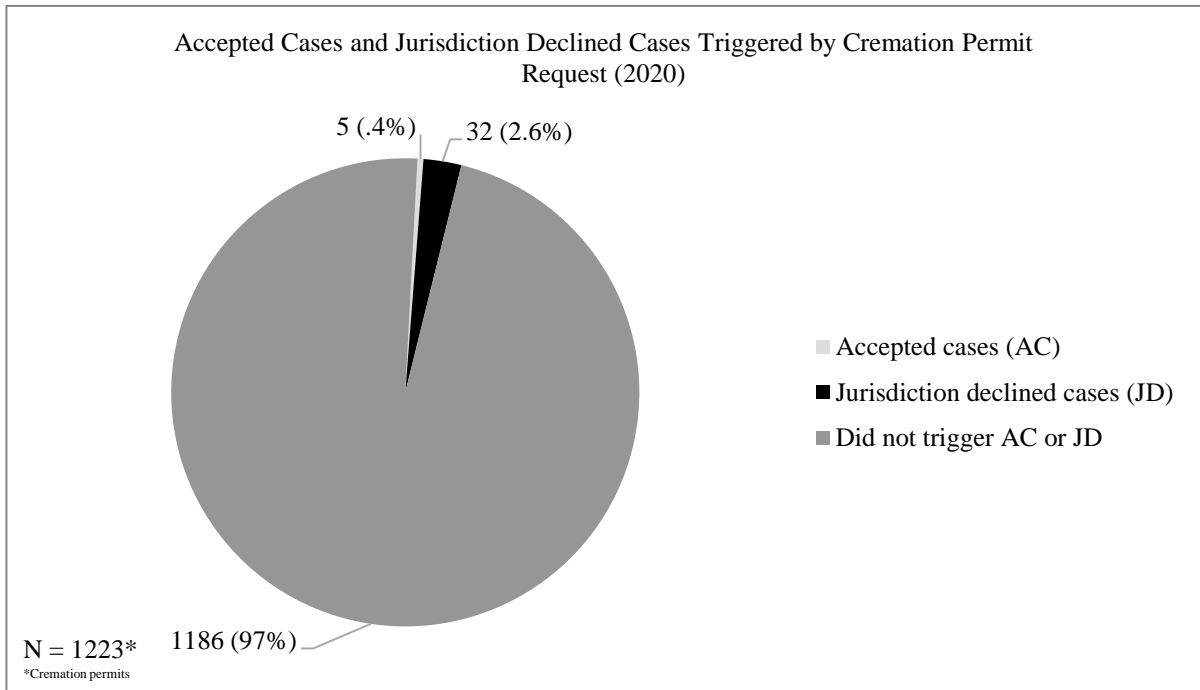


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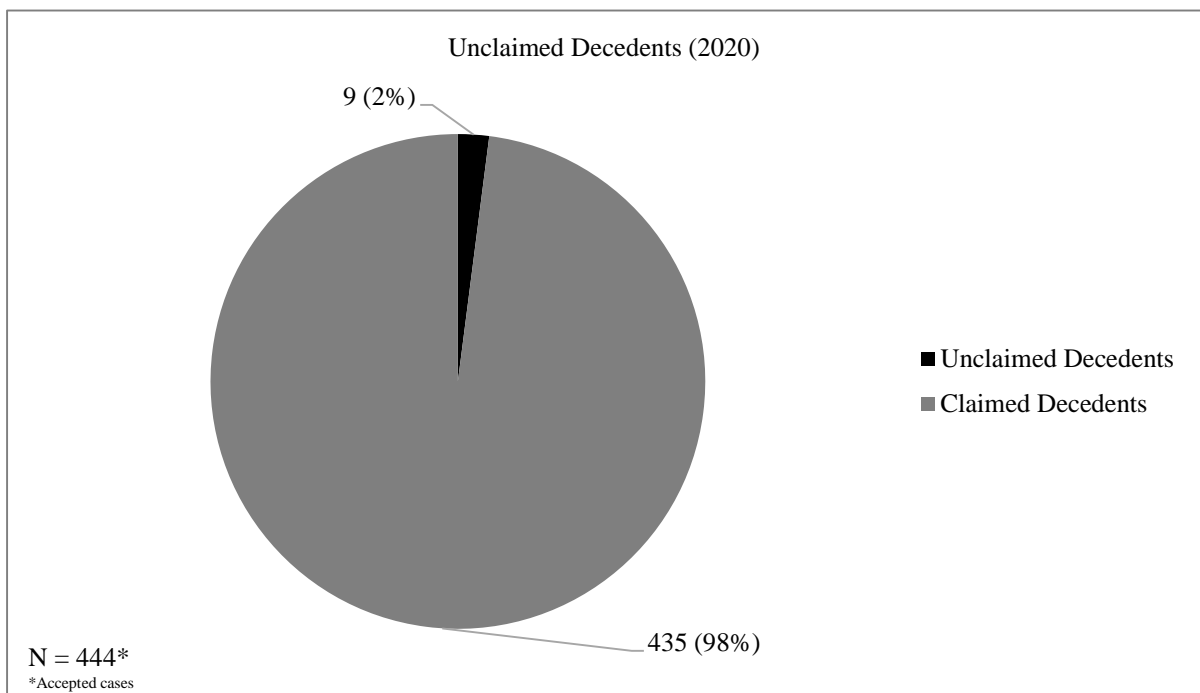


Figure 1.13.

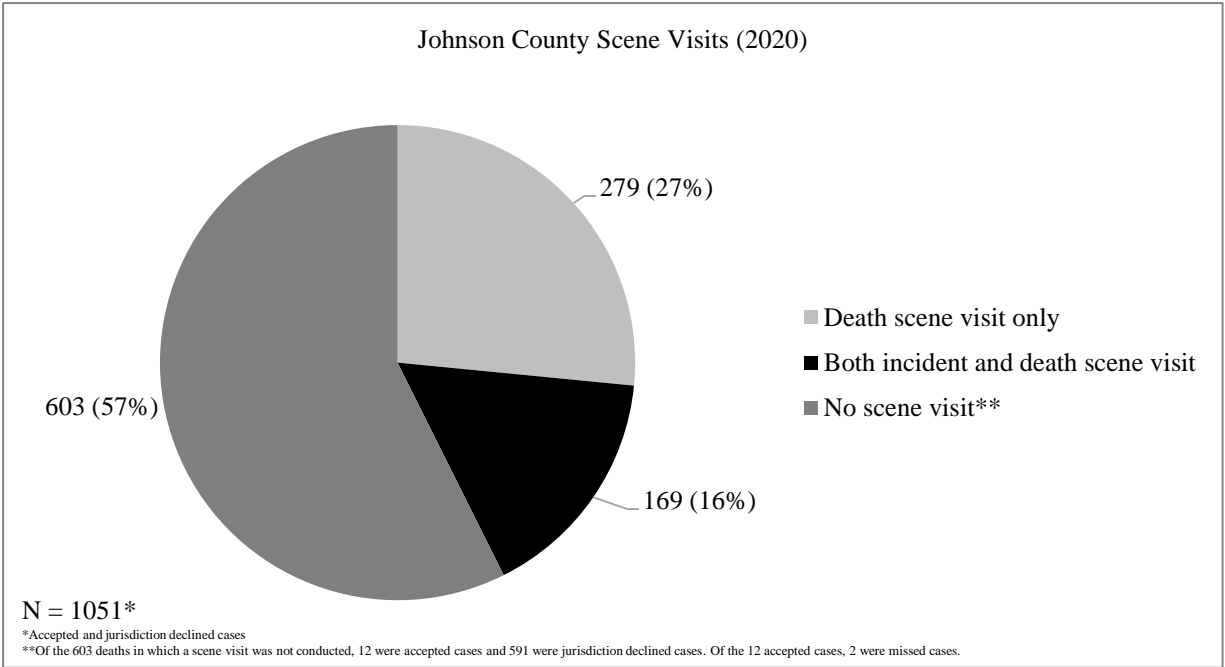


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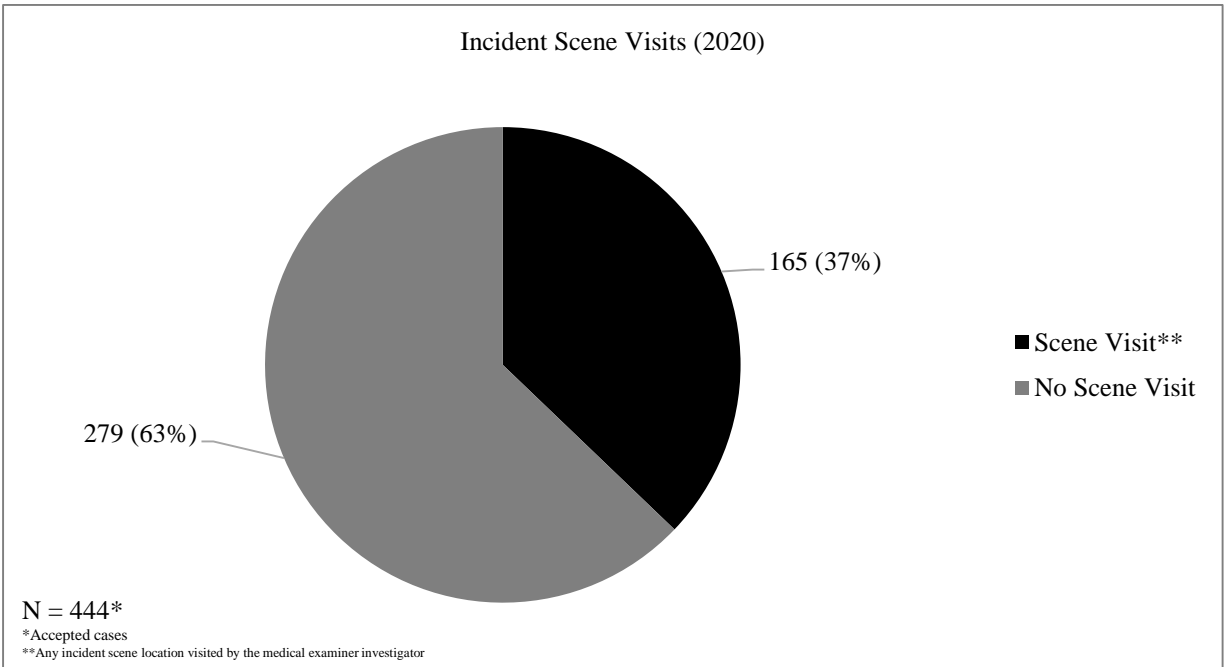


Figure 1.15.

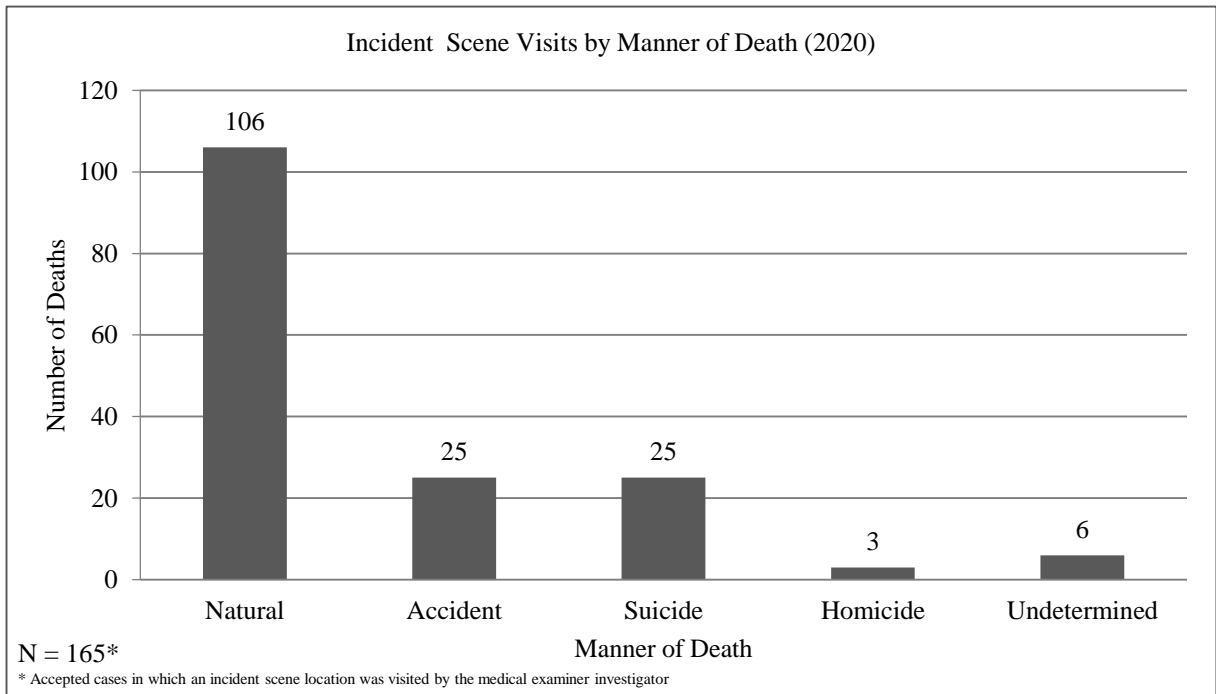


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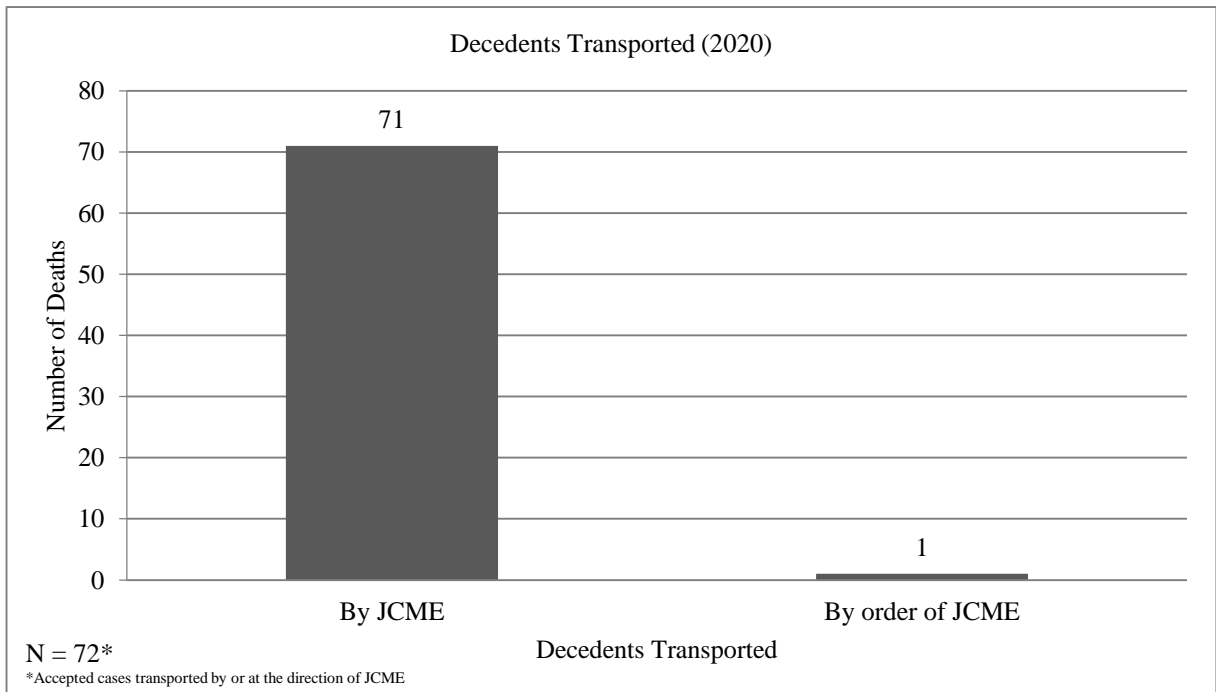


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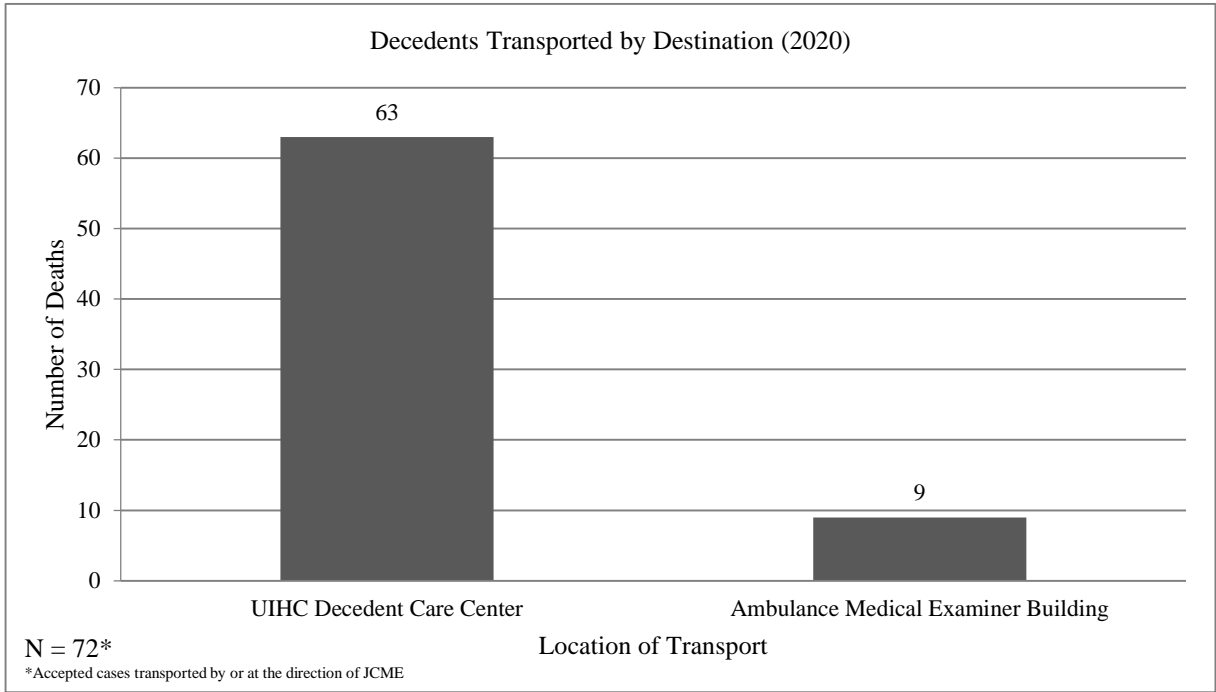


Figure 1.18.

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## Autopsies

In 2020, 123 autopsies were conducted by JCME. All JCME autopsies were performed at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics (UIHC). There were 122 complete autopsies (external examination and internal examination of the head, neck, chest, and abdomen) and one partial autopsy.

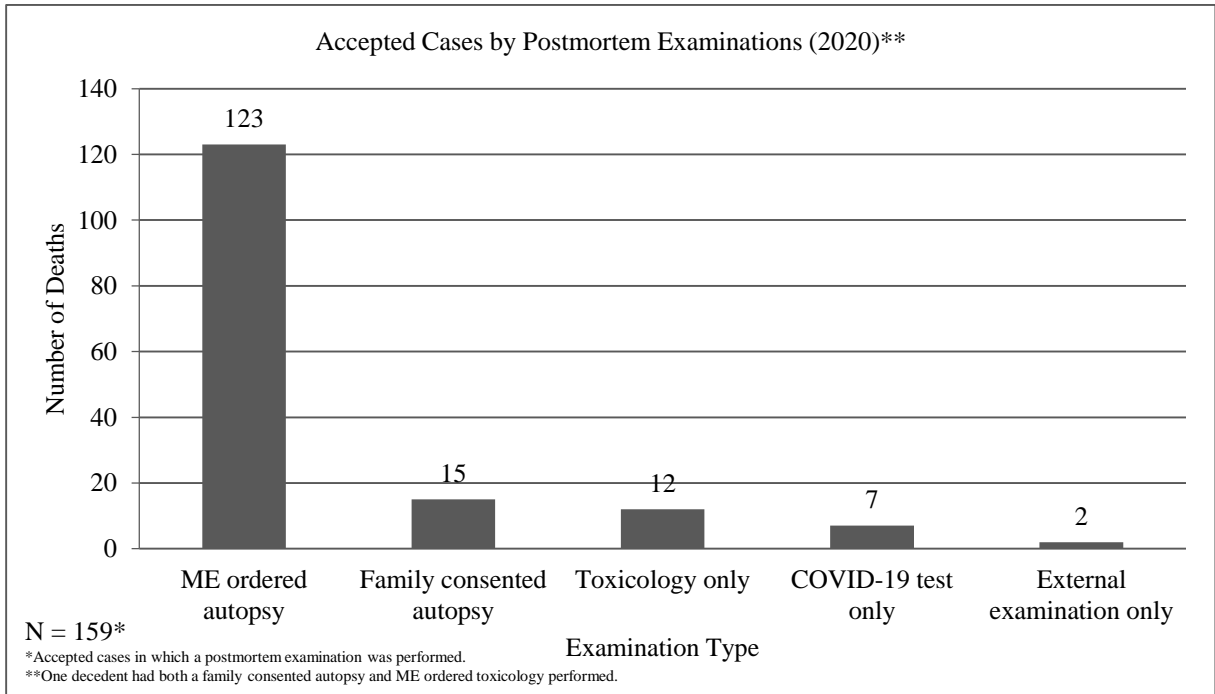


Figure 2.1.

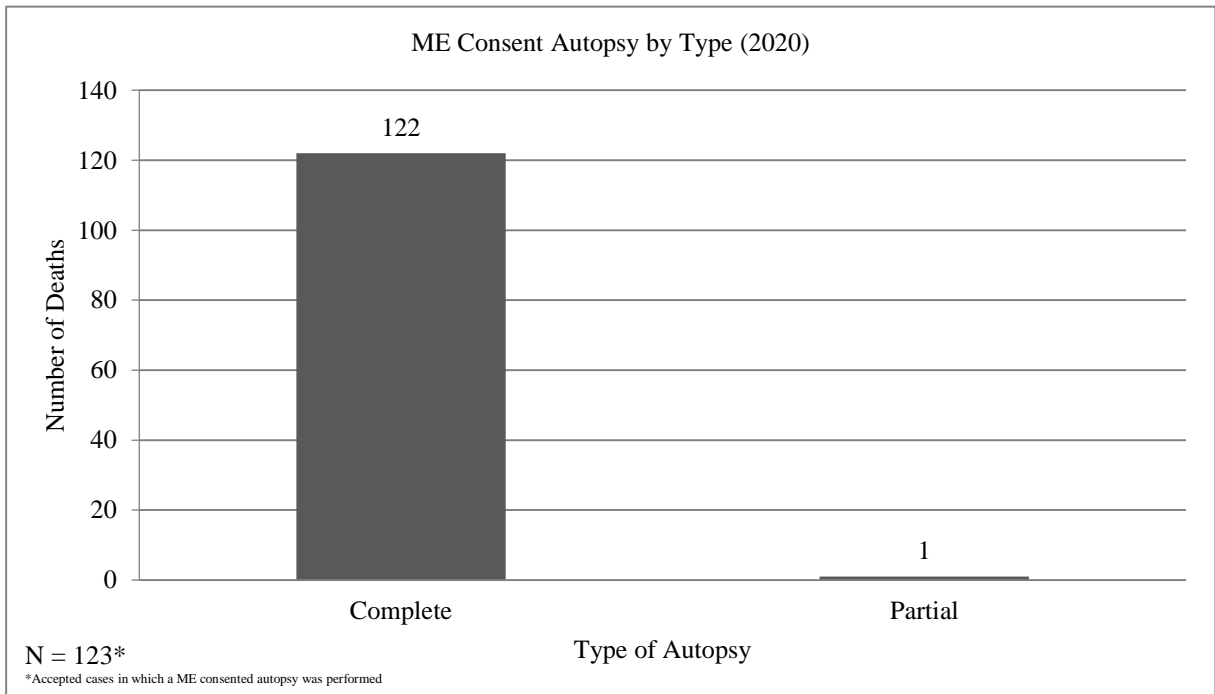


Figure 2.2.



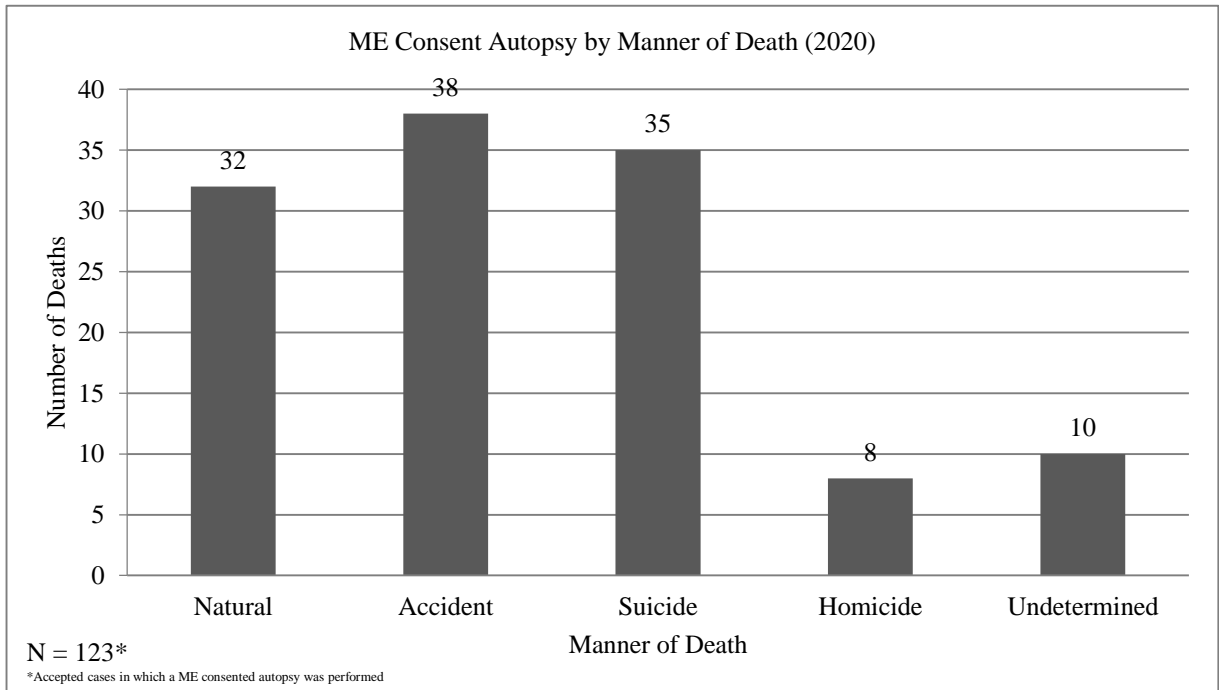


Figure 2.3.

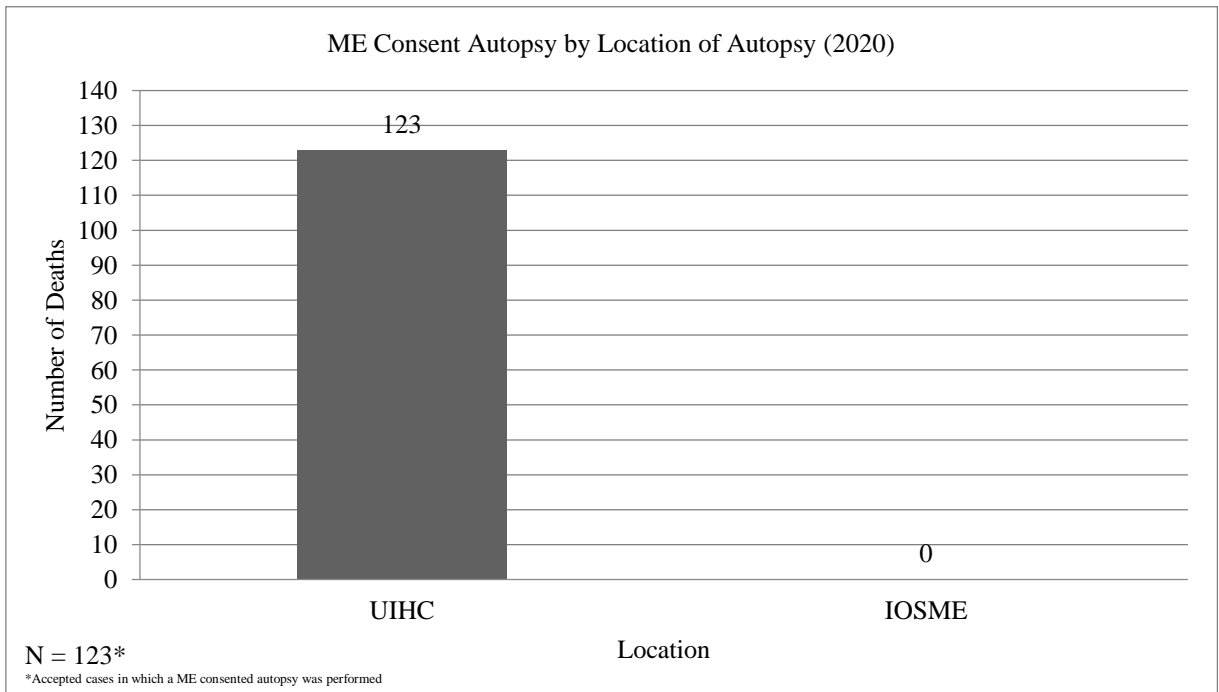


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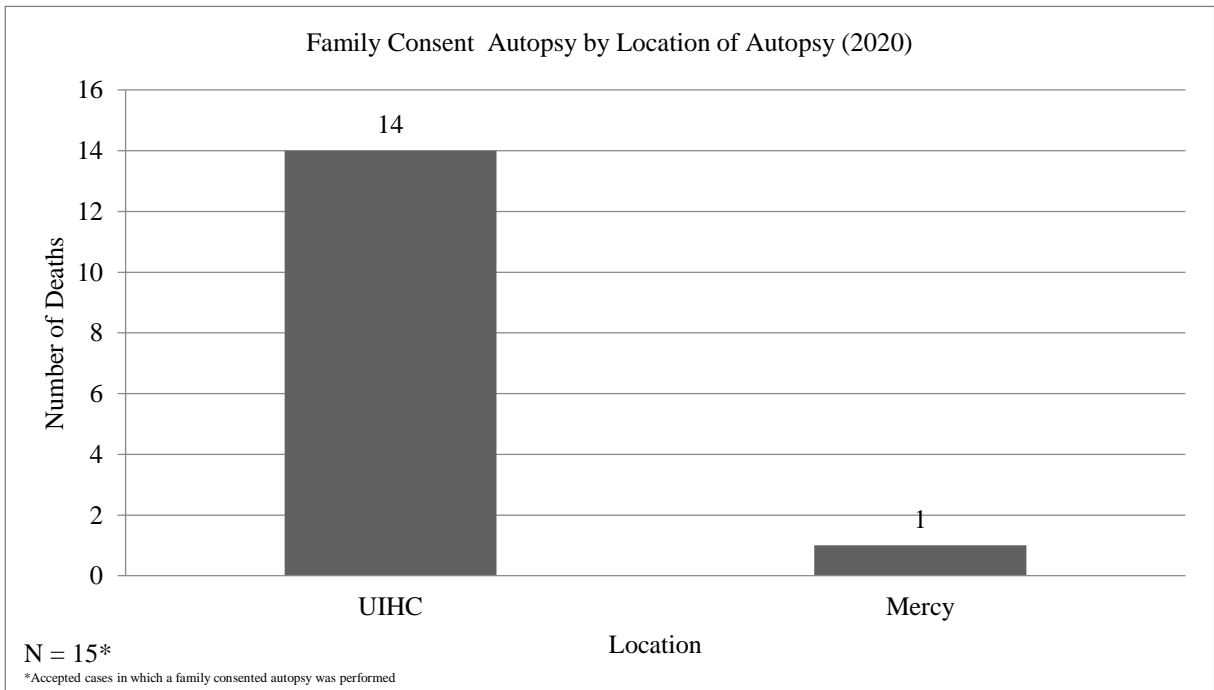


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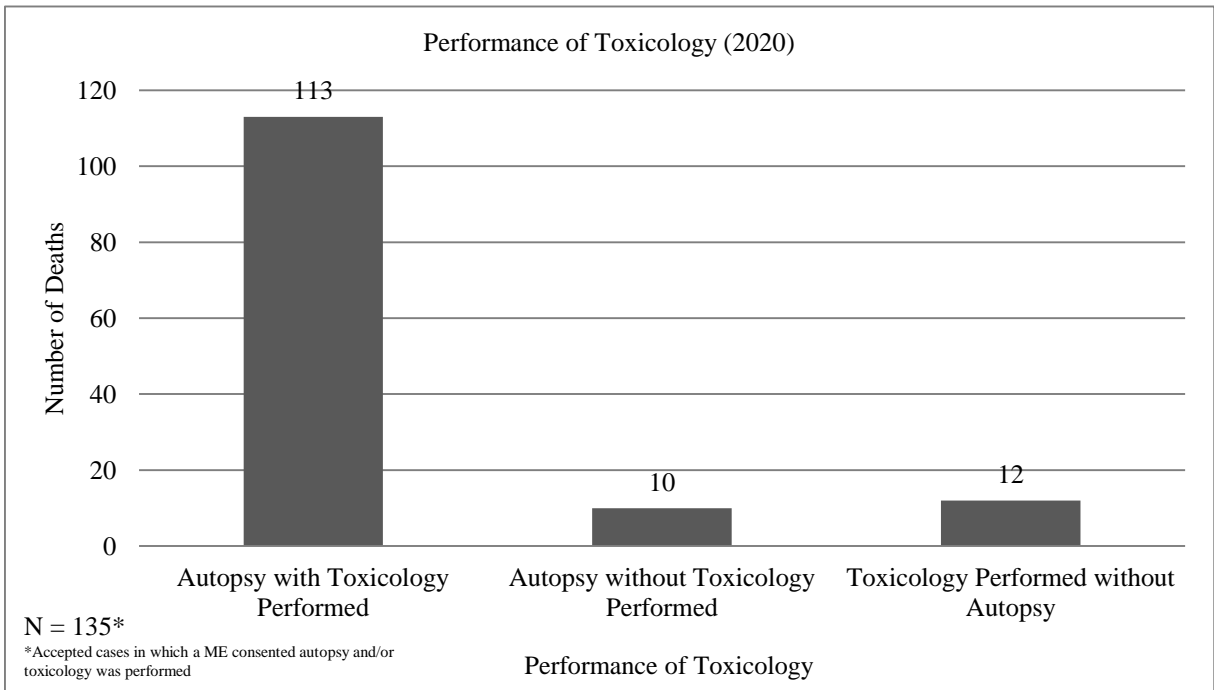


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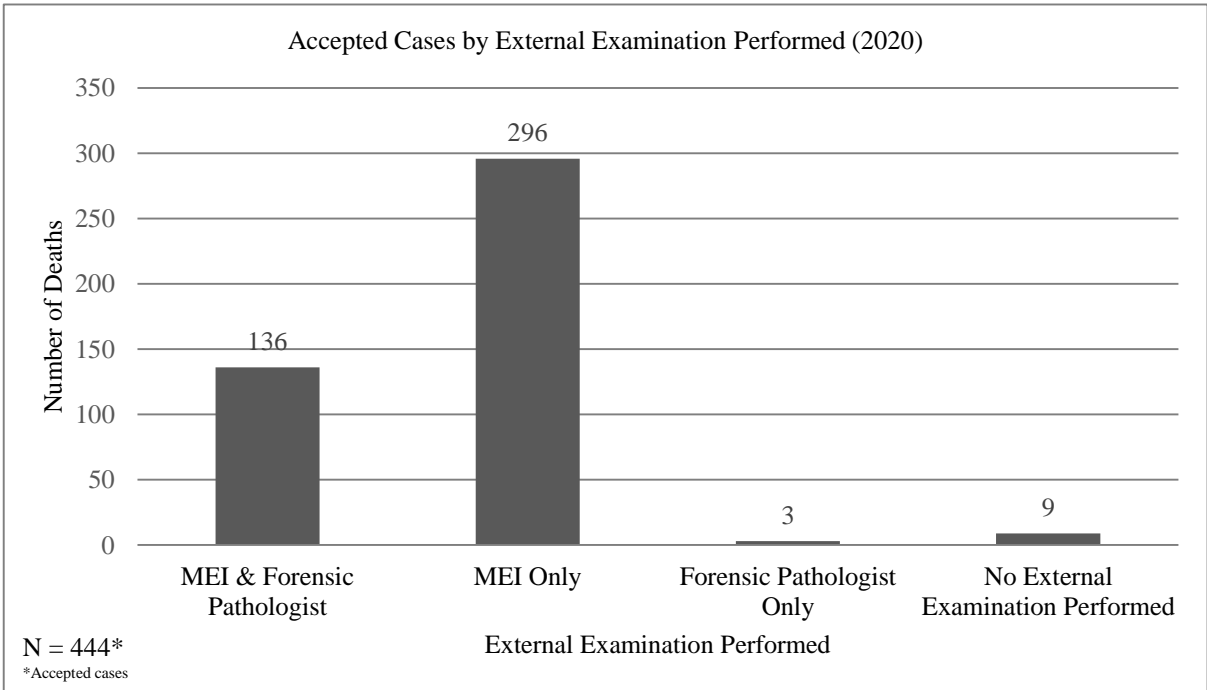


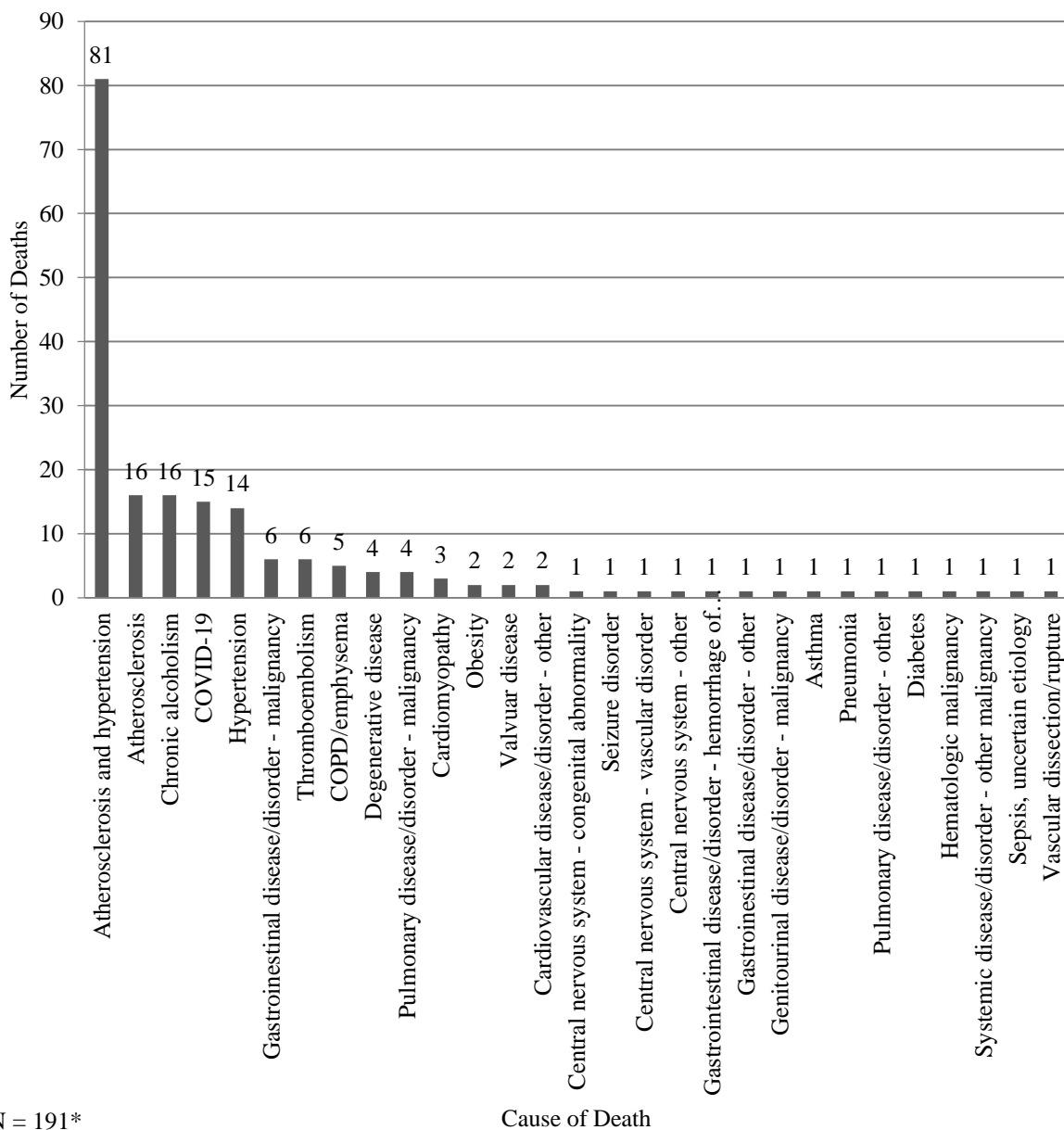
Figure 2.7.

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## Cause 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.

### Causes of Death: Natural (2020)



N = 191\*

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

Figure 3.1.

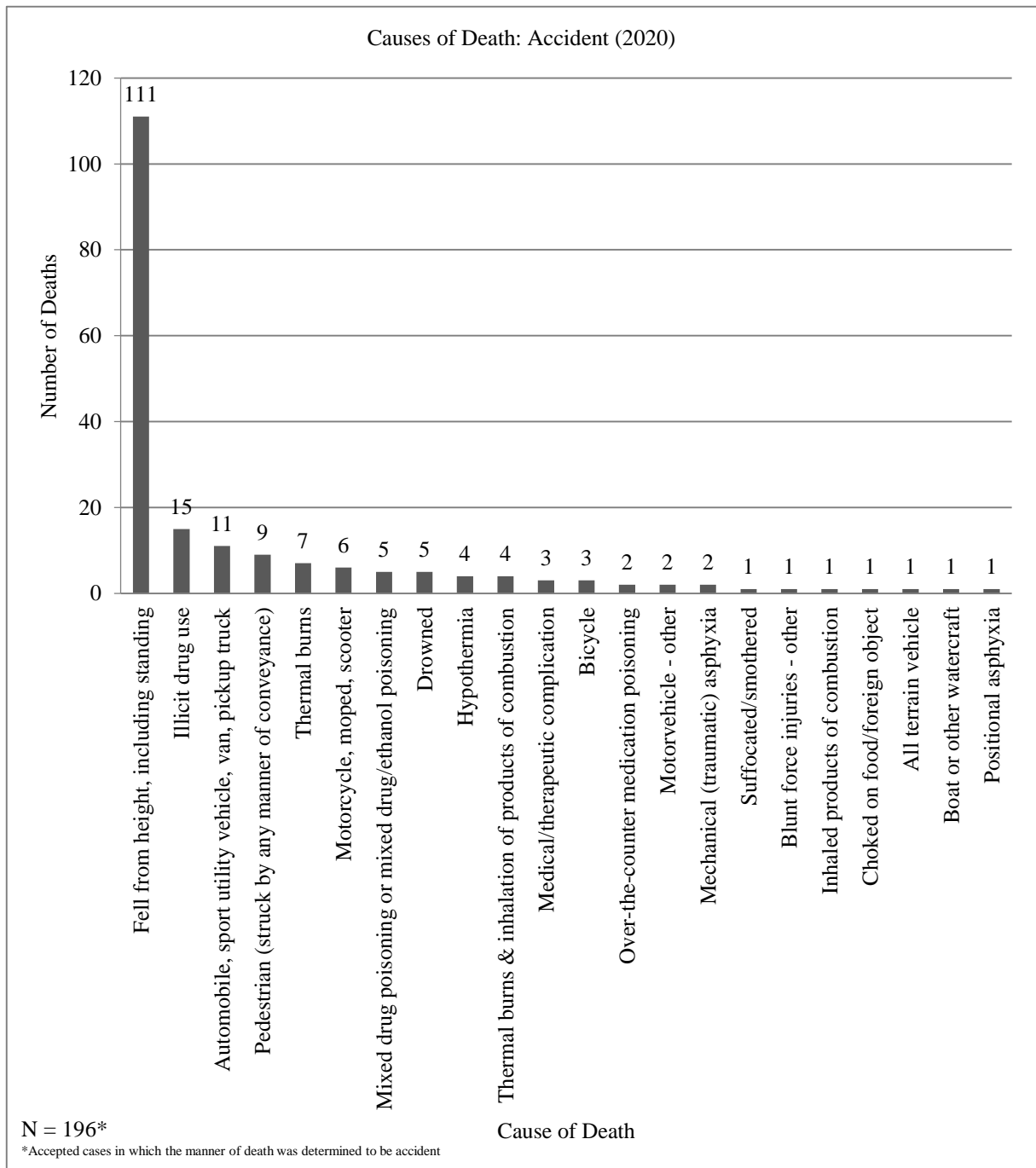


Figure 3.2.

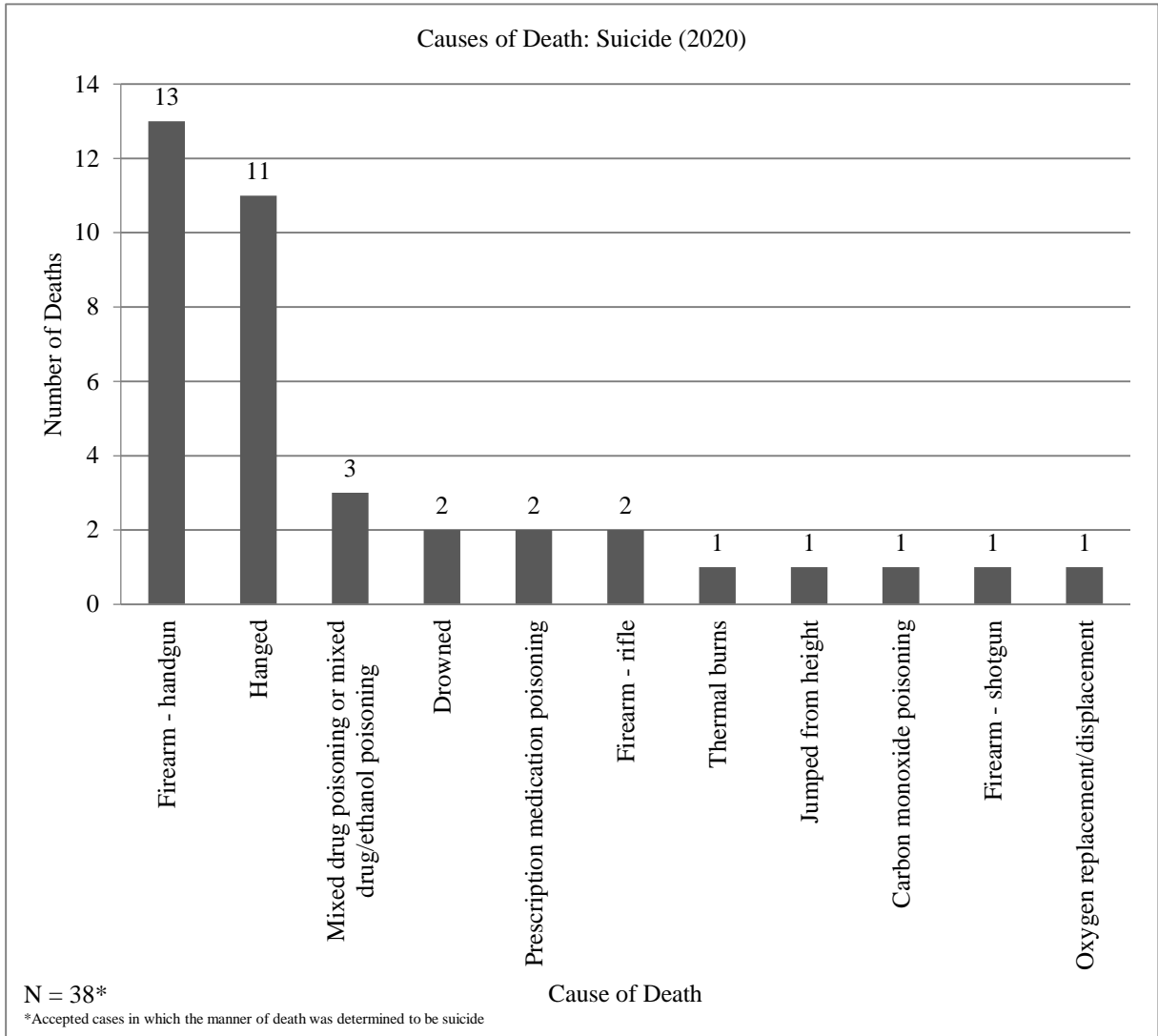


Figure 3.3.



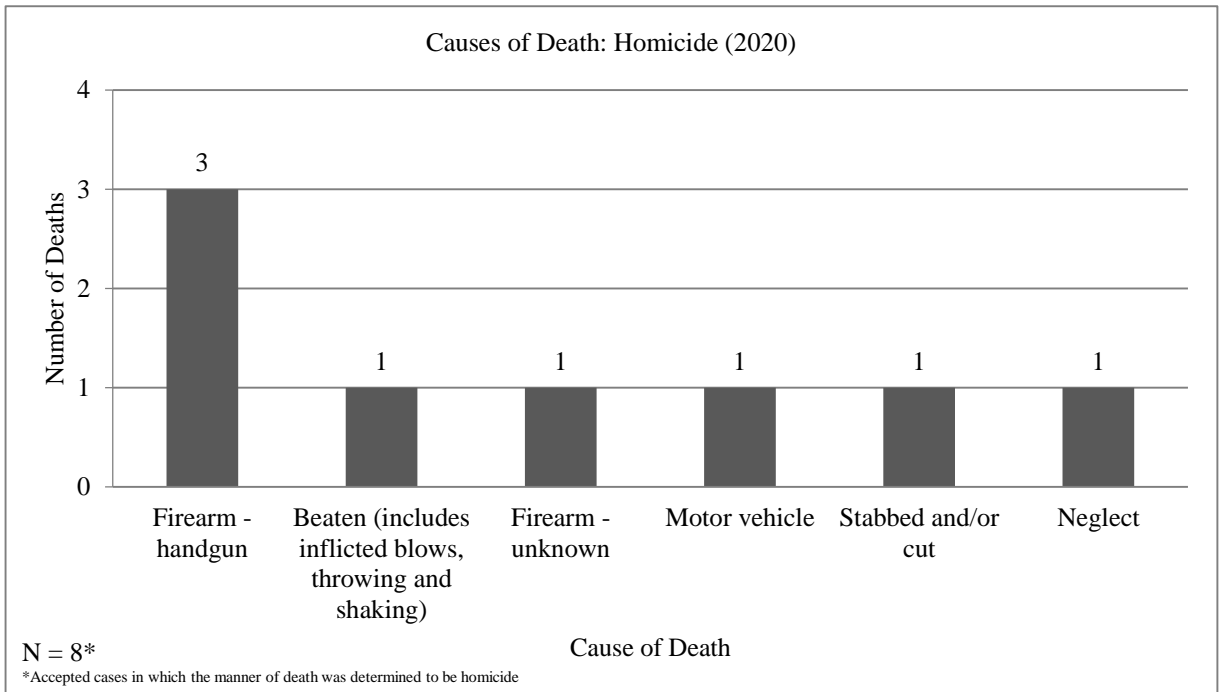


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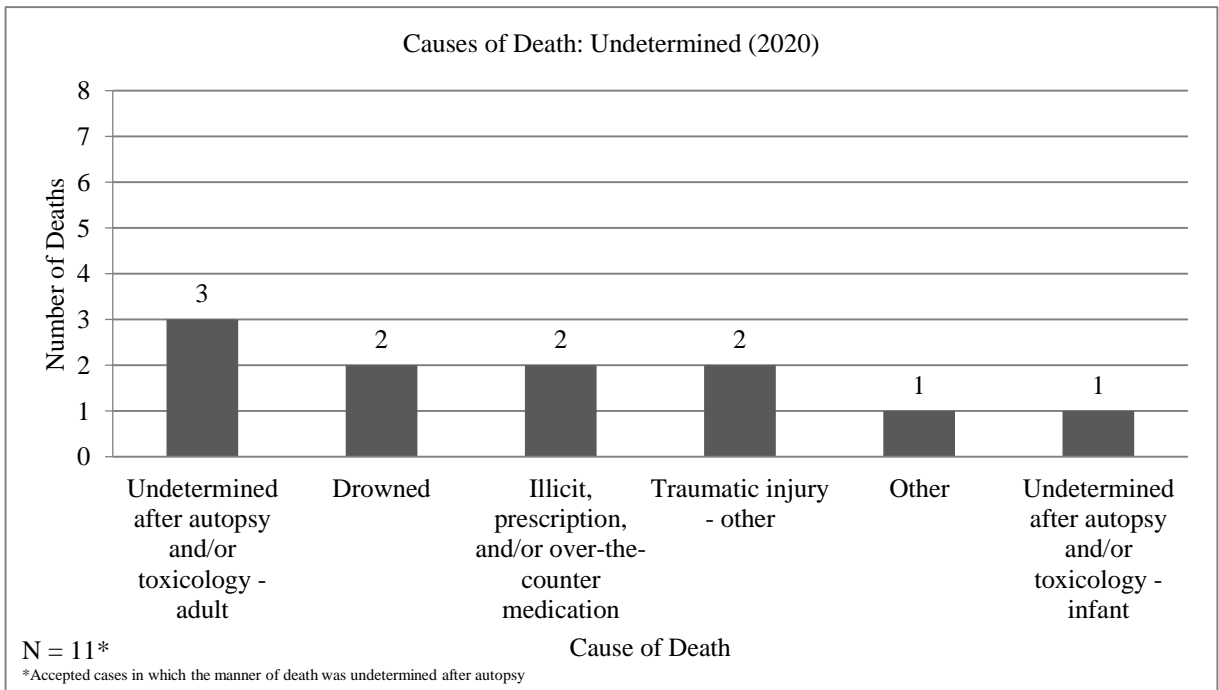


Figure 3.5.

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## Accidents

Of the 444 deaths accepted by JCME, 196 were classified as accident. The sex distribution was 129 males to 67 females. One hundred and eleven of these deaths were the result of a fall, 15 were the result of illicit drug poisoning, and 28 were due to a motor vehicle crash. The most common age ranges were 70-79 years (38 decedents) and 80-89 years (38 decedents).

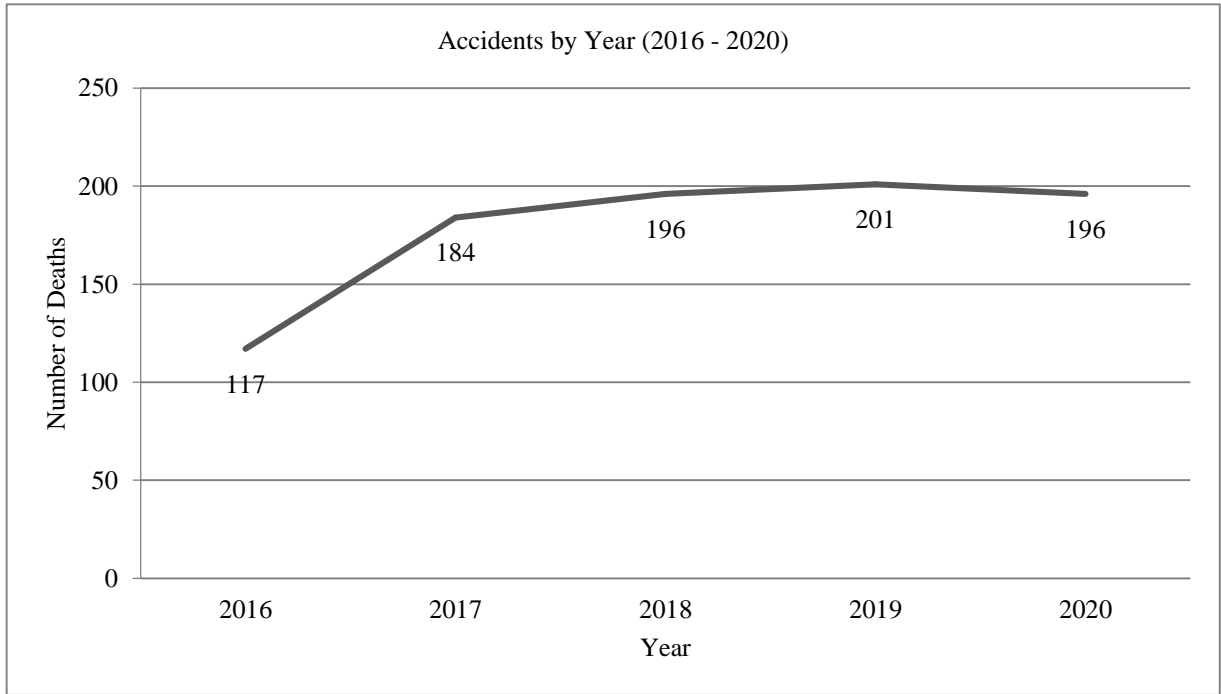


Figure 4.1.

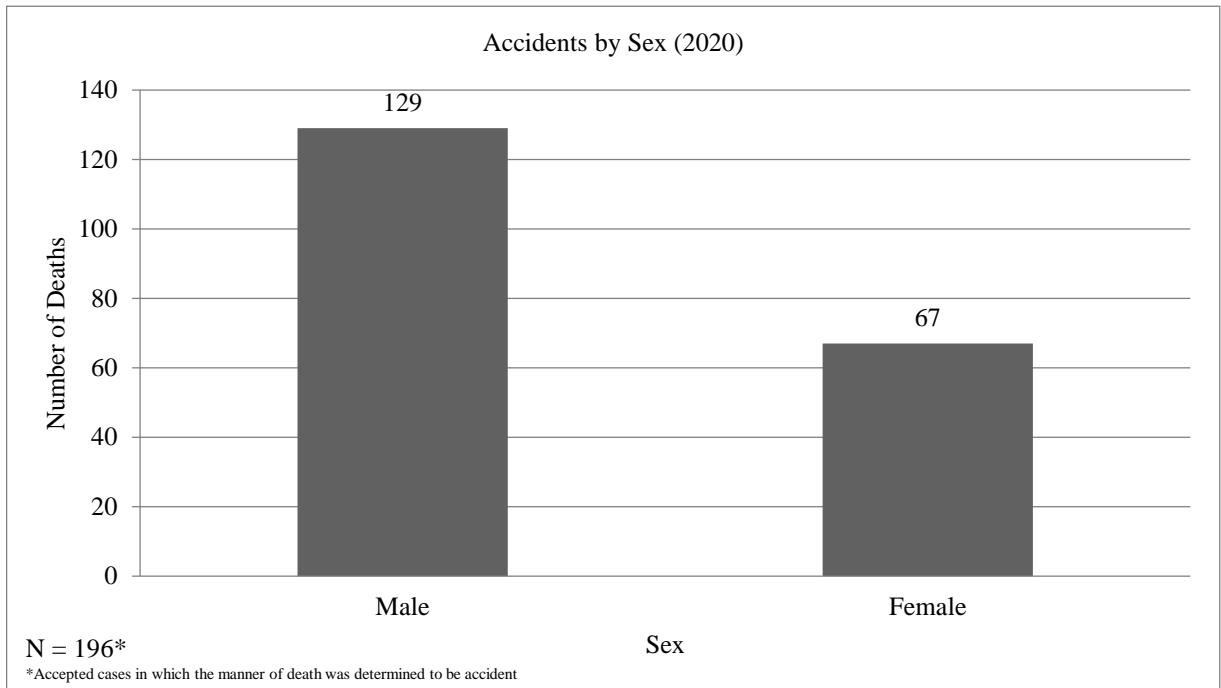


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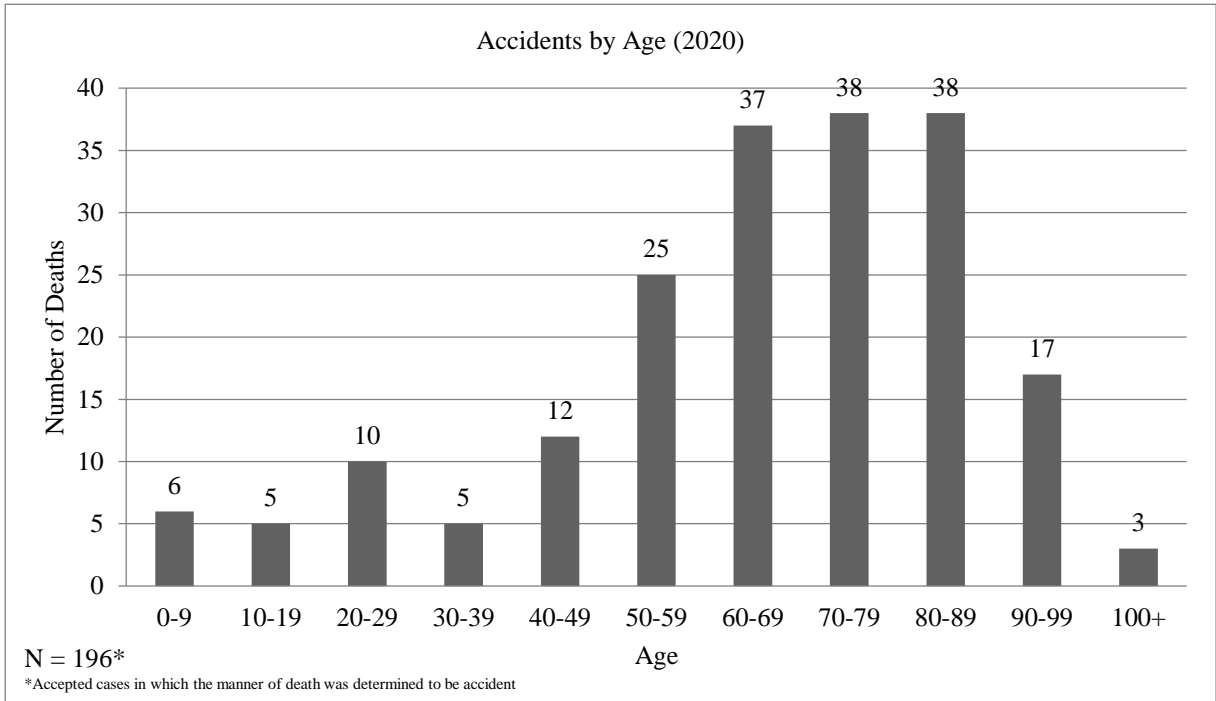


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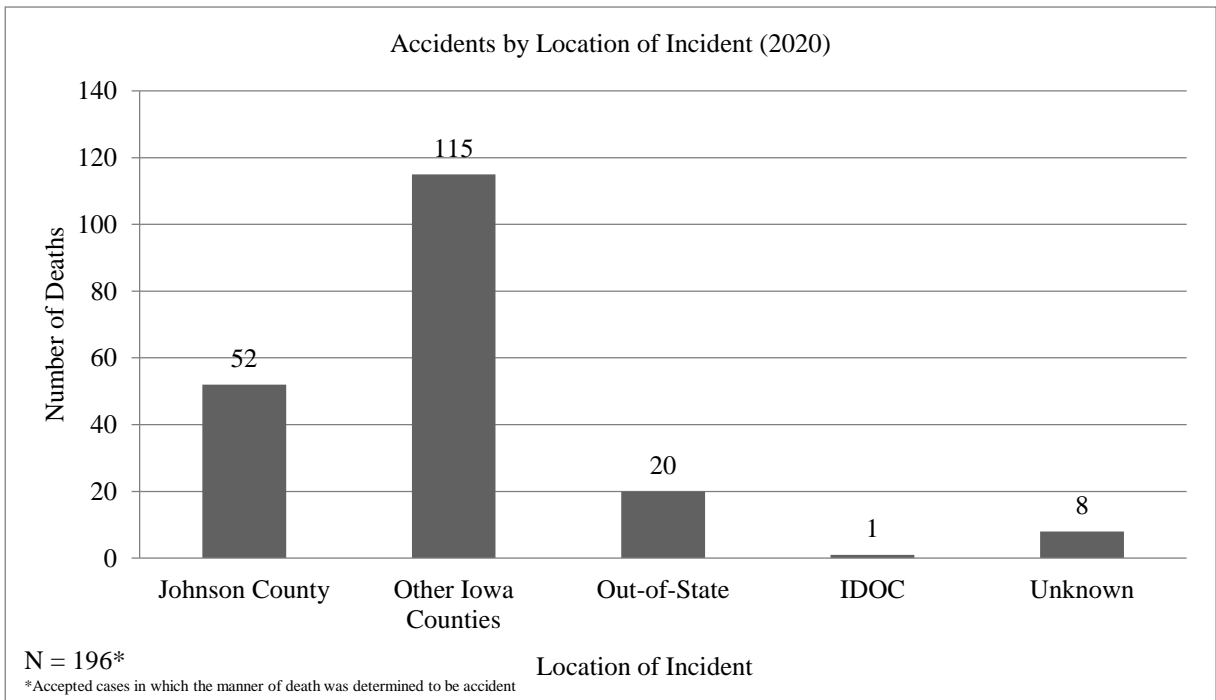


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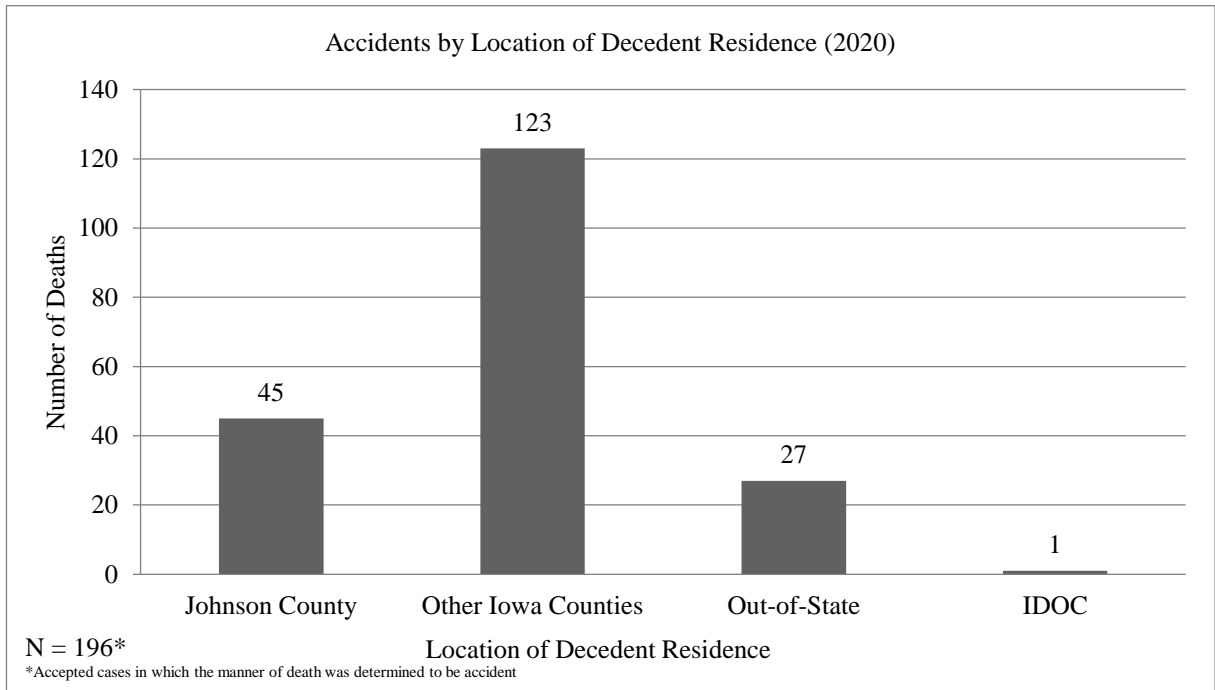


Figure 4.5.

## Suicides

Of the 444 deaths investigated by JCME, 38 were classified as suicide. Sixteen of these deaths were the result of a firearm and 11 were due to hanging. The sex distribution was 30 males and 8 females. The most common age range was 30-39 years (11 decedents) followed by 20-29 years (8 decedents).

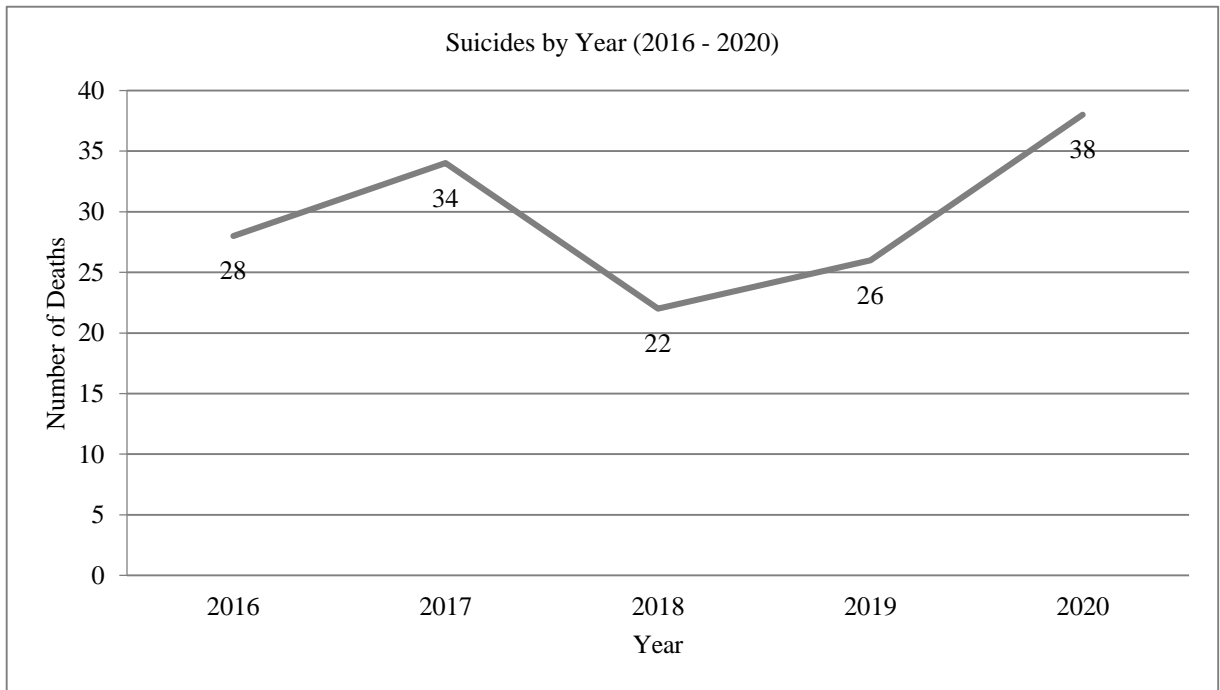


Figure 5.1.

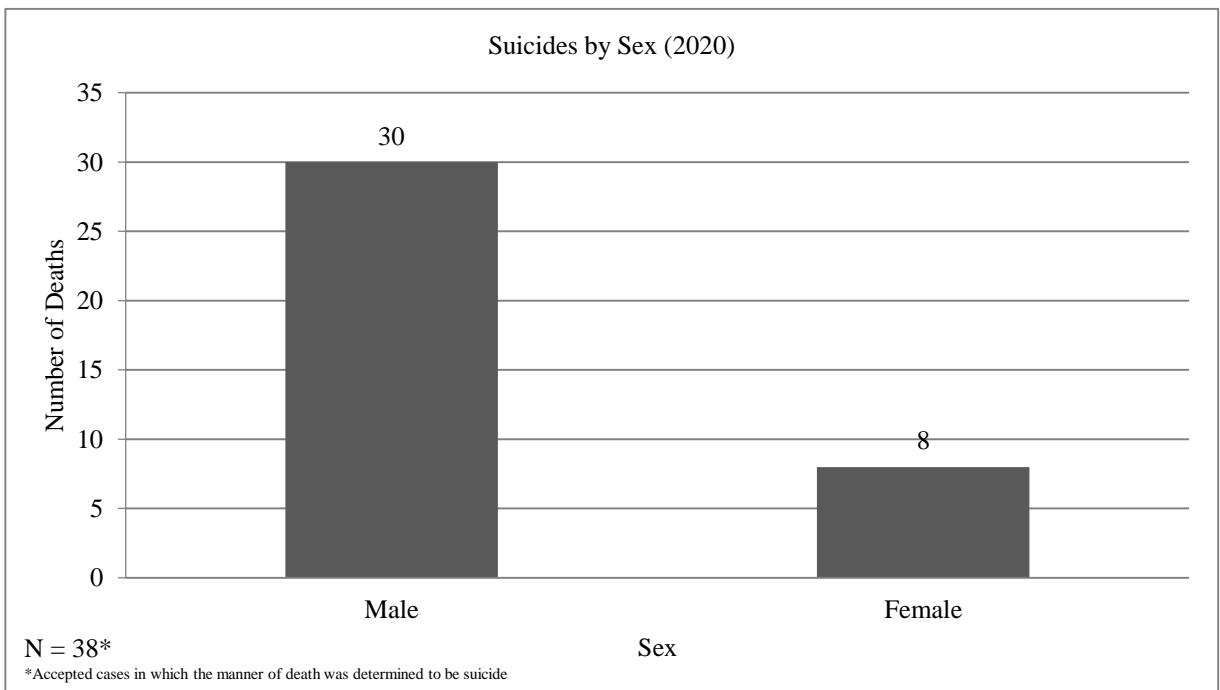


Figure 5.2.



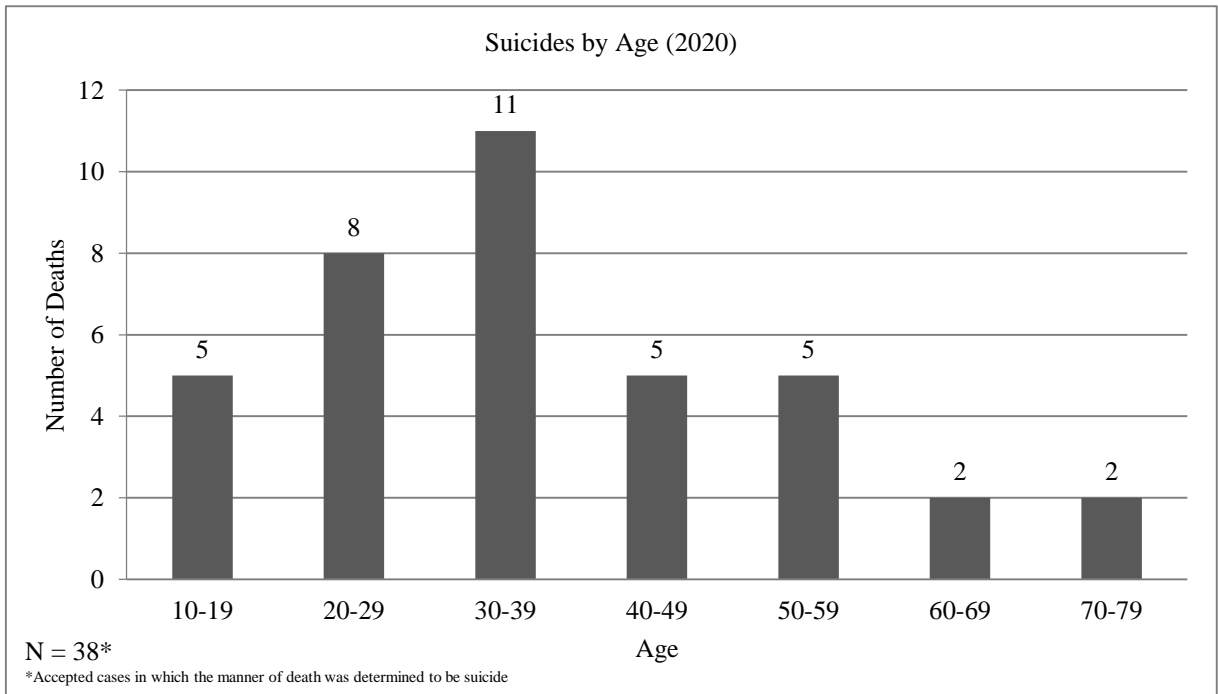


Figure 5.3.

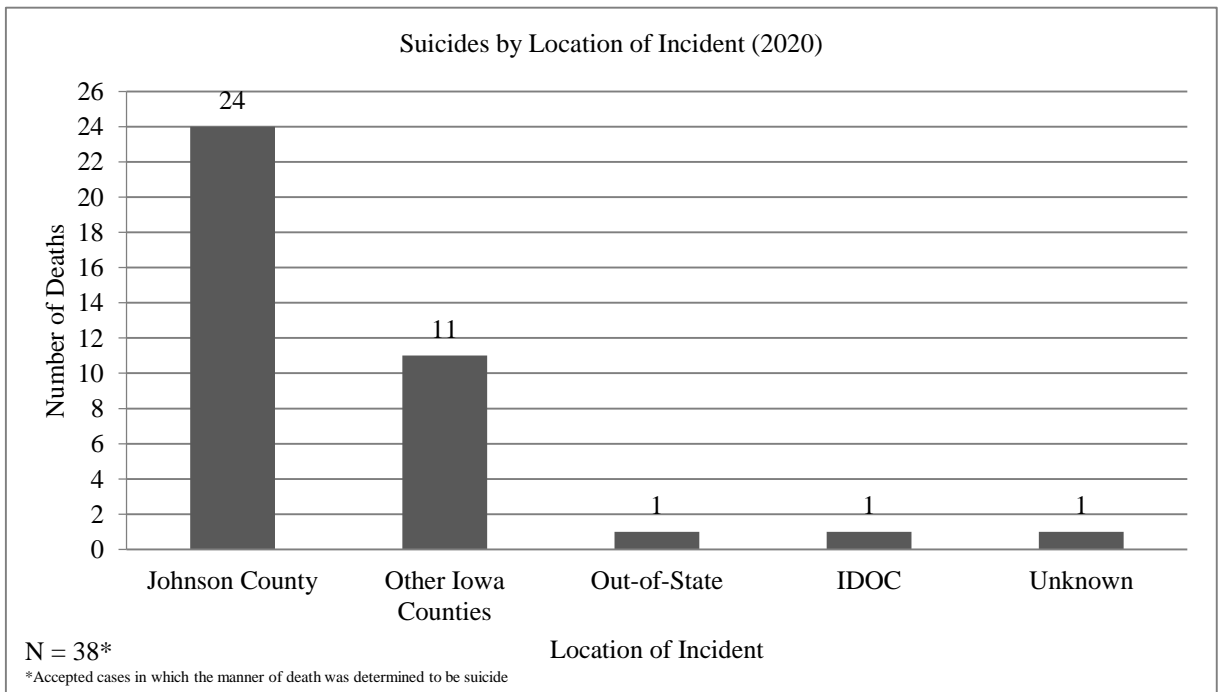


Figure 5.4.

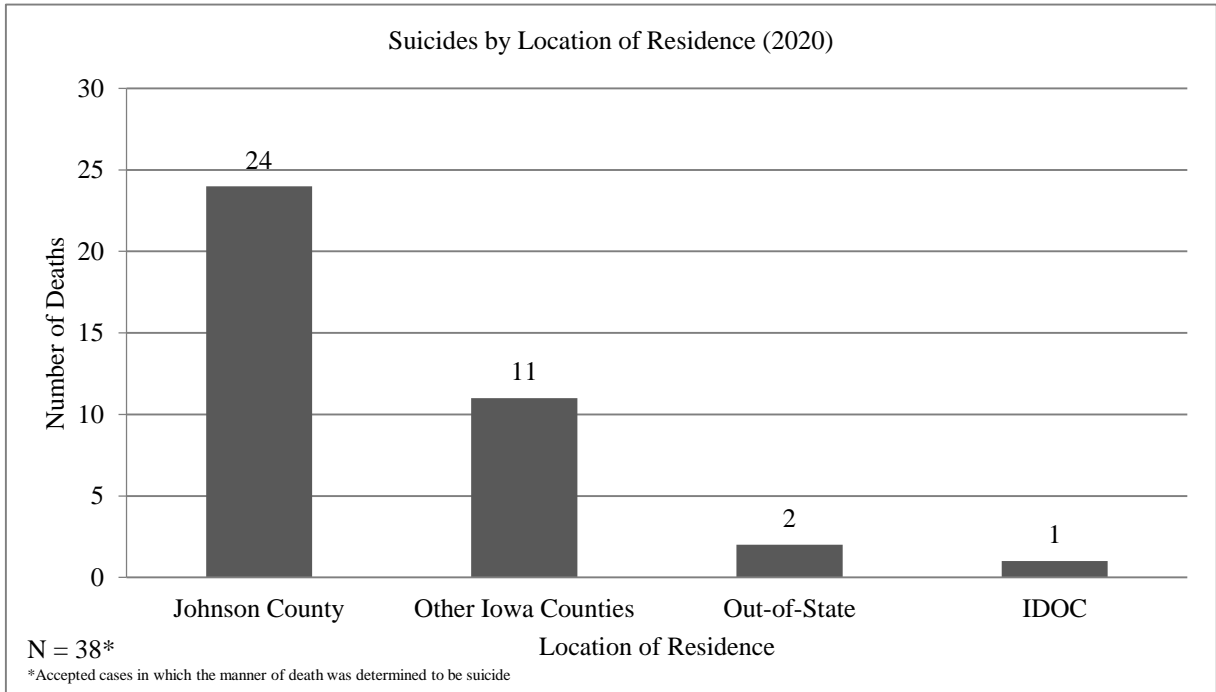


Figure 5.5.

## Homicides

Of the 444 deaths accepted and investigated by JCME, 8 were classified as homicide. The sex distribution was 6 female and 2 male. The most common age range was 20 to 29 years (3 decedents). The incident location for 3 of the 8 deaths certified as homicide occurred in Johnson County followed by 3 that occurred in another Iowa county and 2 that occurred out-of-state.

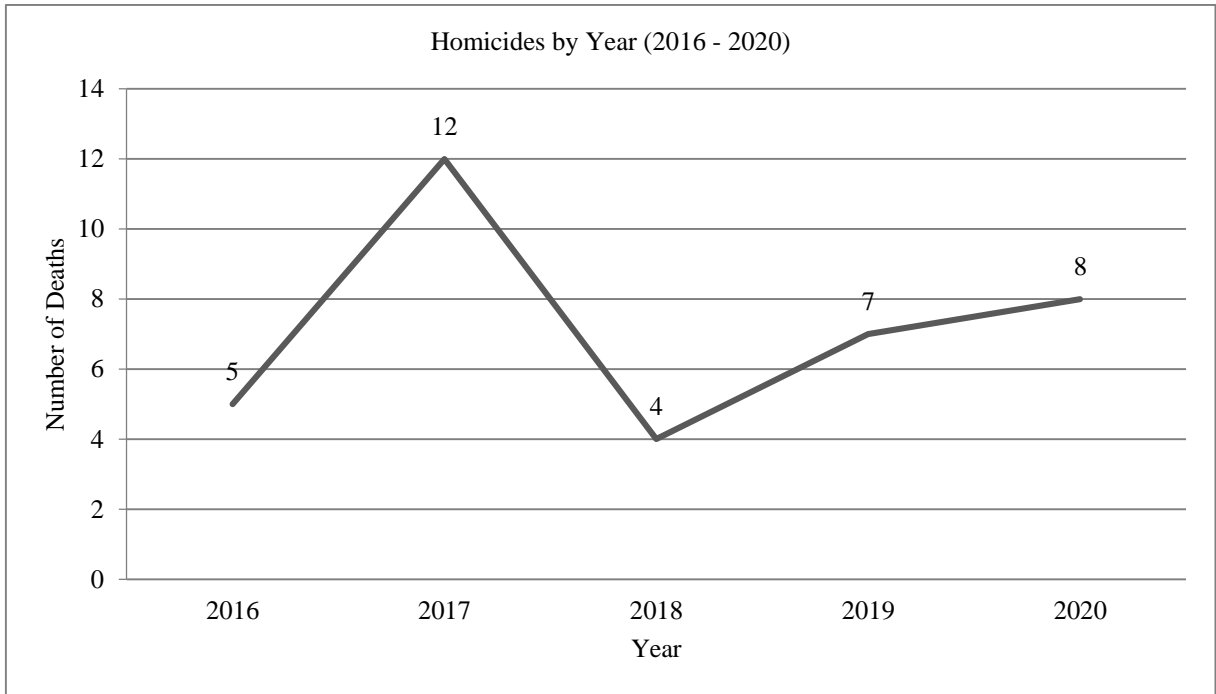


Figure 6.1.

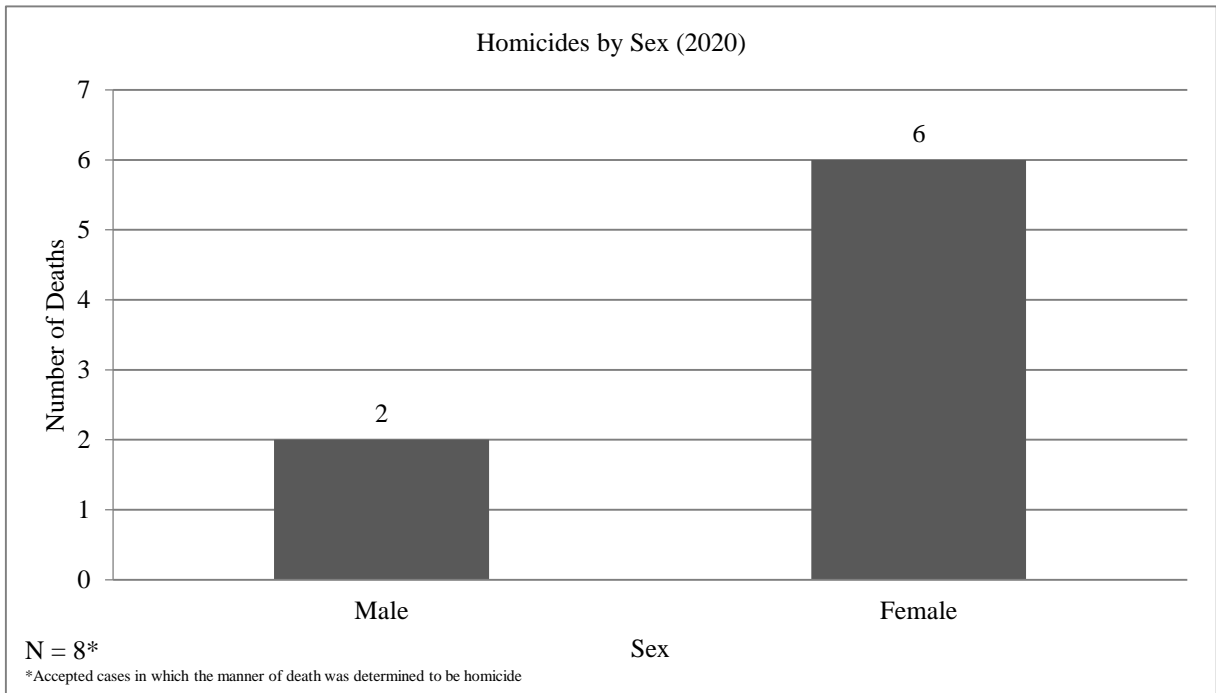


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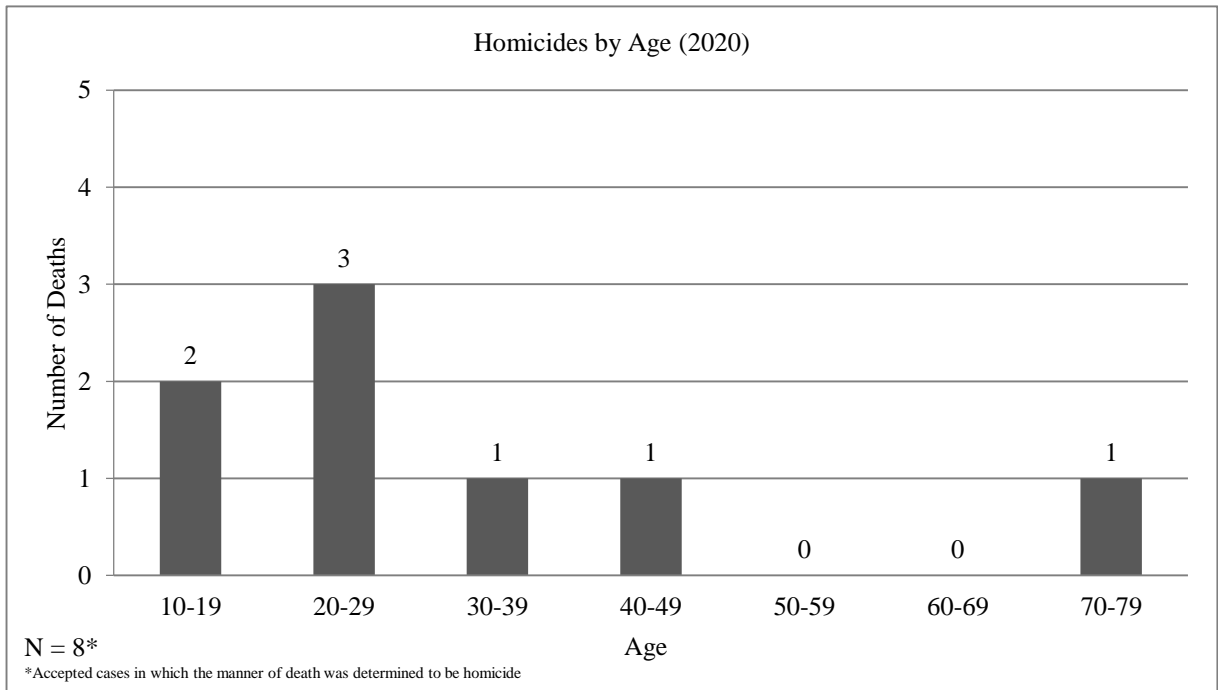


Figure 6.3.

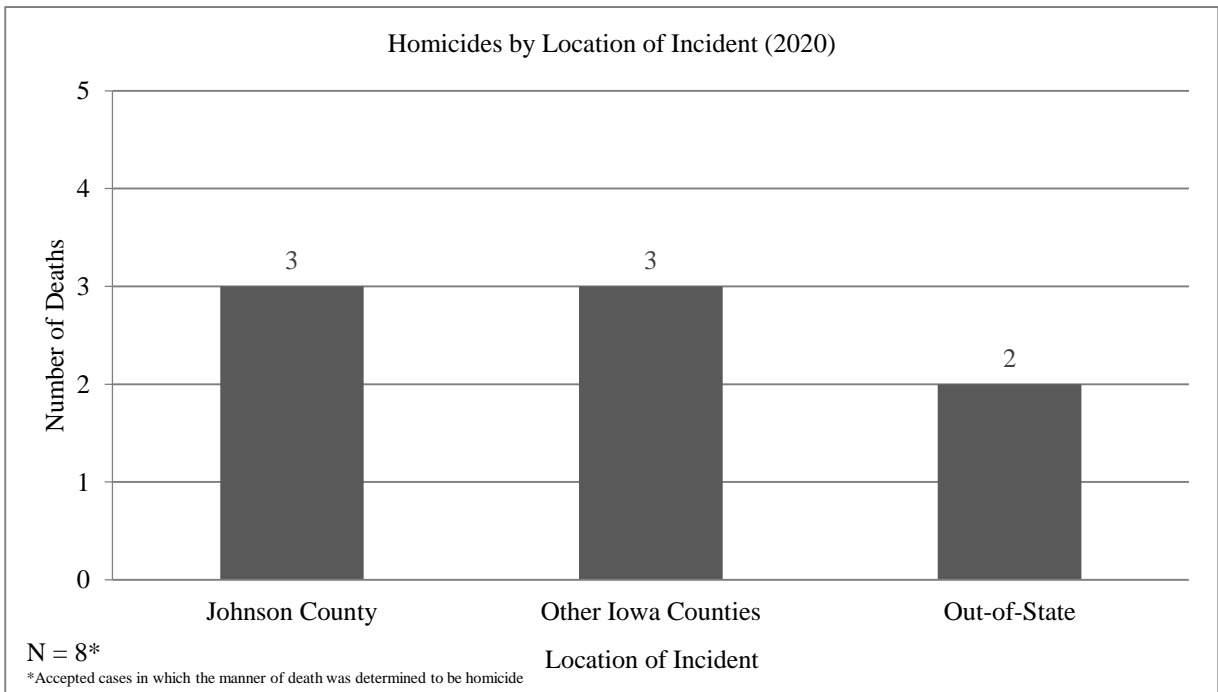


Figure 6.4.

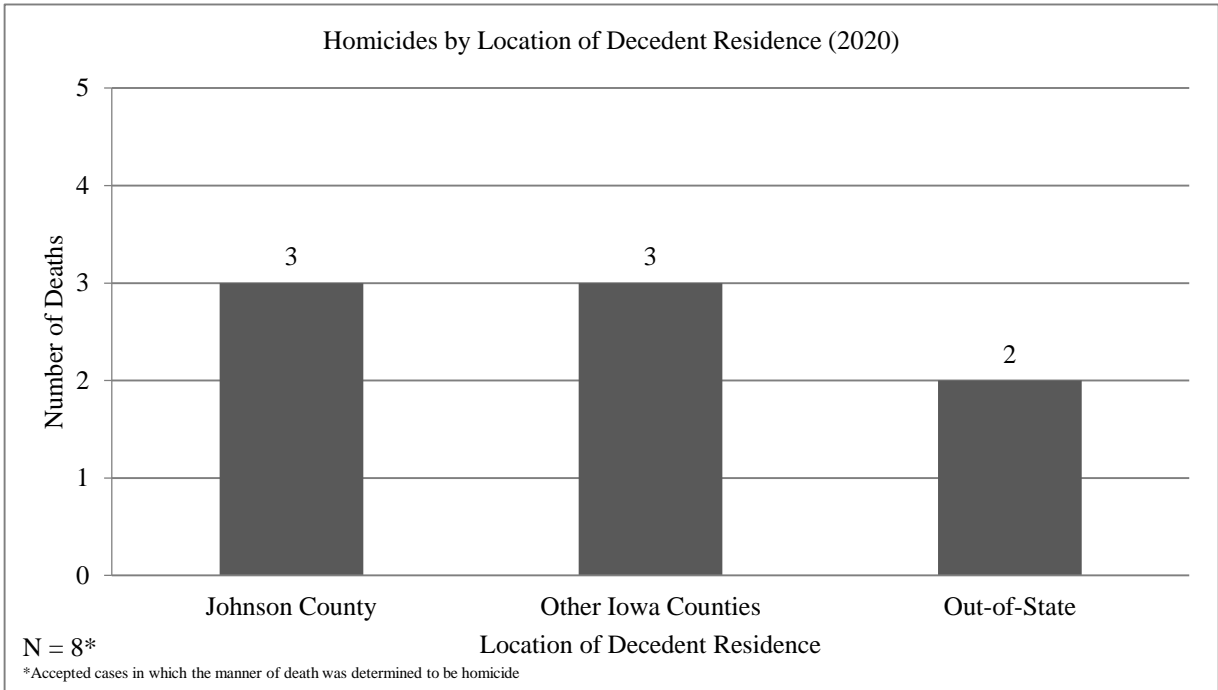


Figure 6.5.

## Drug-Related Deaths

In 2020, there were 29 drug-related deaths investigated by JCME. Of this total, 15 involved illicit drugs only, 4 involved over-the-counter medications only, 1 involved prescription drugs only, and 9 involved a mixture of drug types. Of the 9 mixed drug-related deaths, 3 involved multiple illicit drugs (methamphetamine, fentanyl, heroin, and acetylfentanyl), 3 involved a mixture of illicit drugs (pentobarbital, methamphetamine, fentanyl, and acetylfentanyl) and prescription drugs, 2 were a mixture of prescription medications, and 1 was a mixture of prescription and over-the-counter medications. Of the remaining 15 illicit drug-related deaths, 13 involved methamphetamine, 1 involved fentanyl, and 1 involved cocaine.

Of the 29 drug-related deaths, 23 were classified as accident, 5 as suicide, and 1 as undetermined. The overall sex distribution was 25 males to 4 females, with the most common age range 50-59 years (9 decedents).

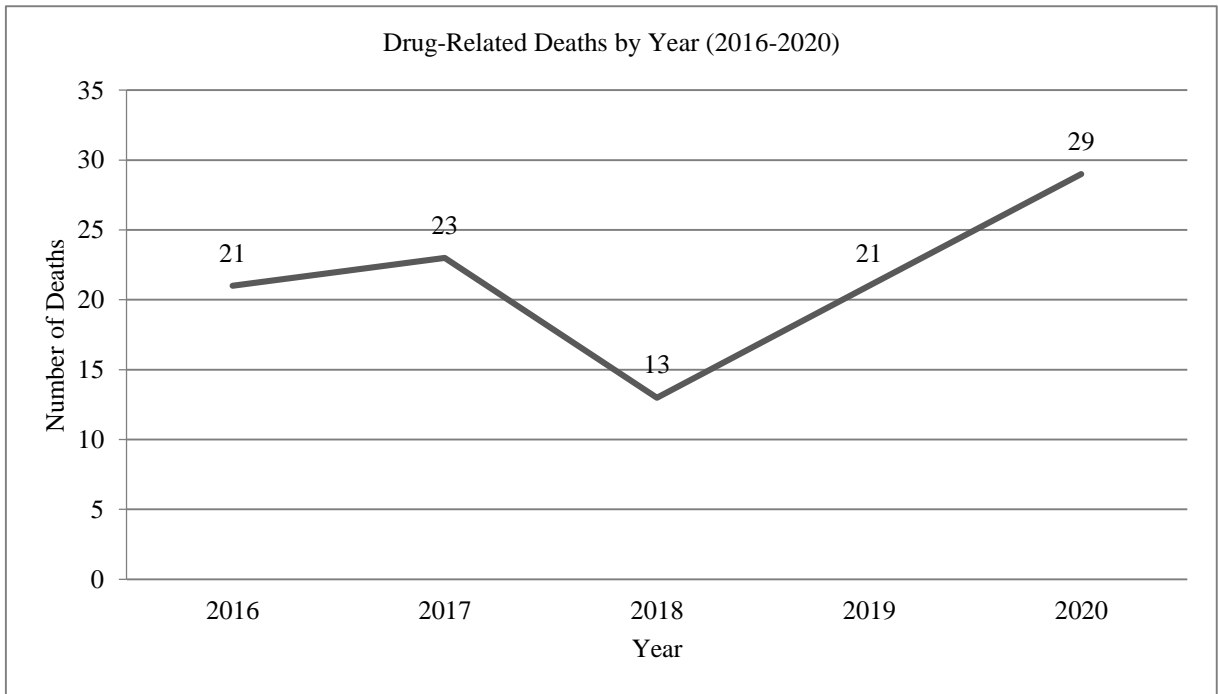


Figure 7.1.

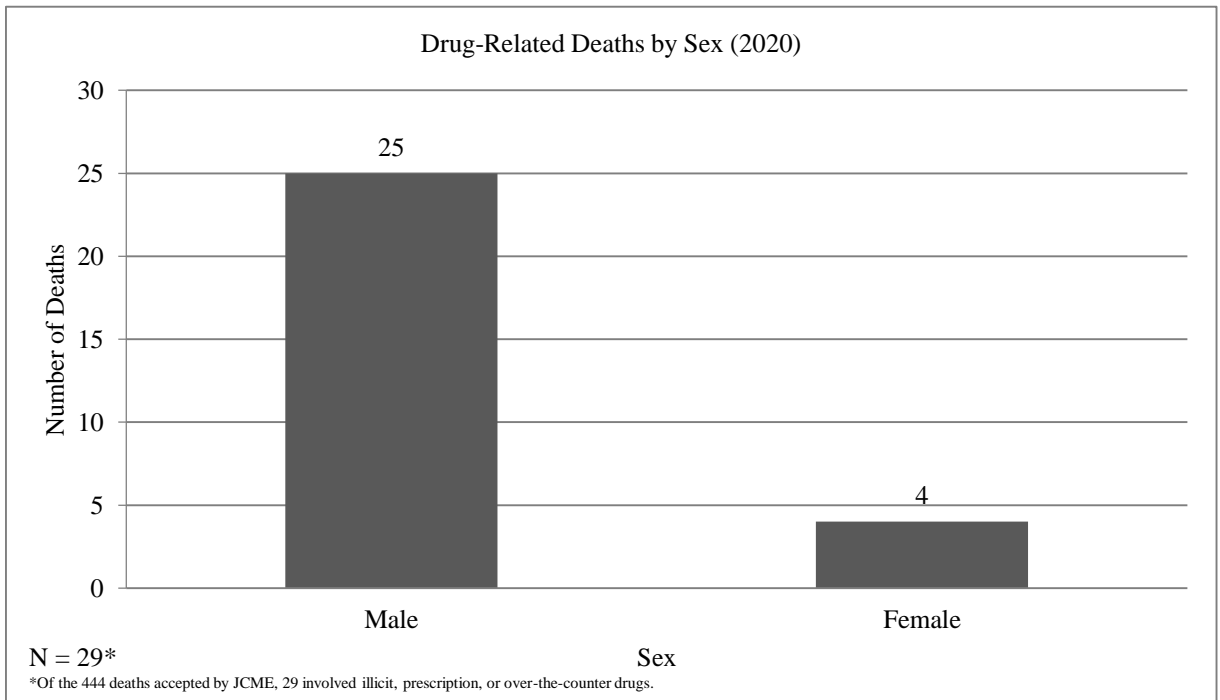


Figure 7.2.



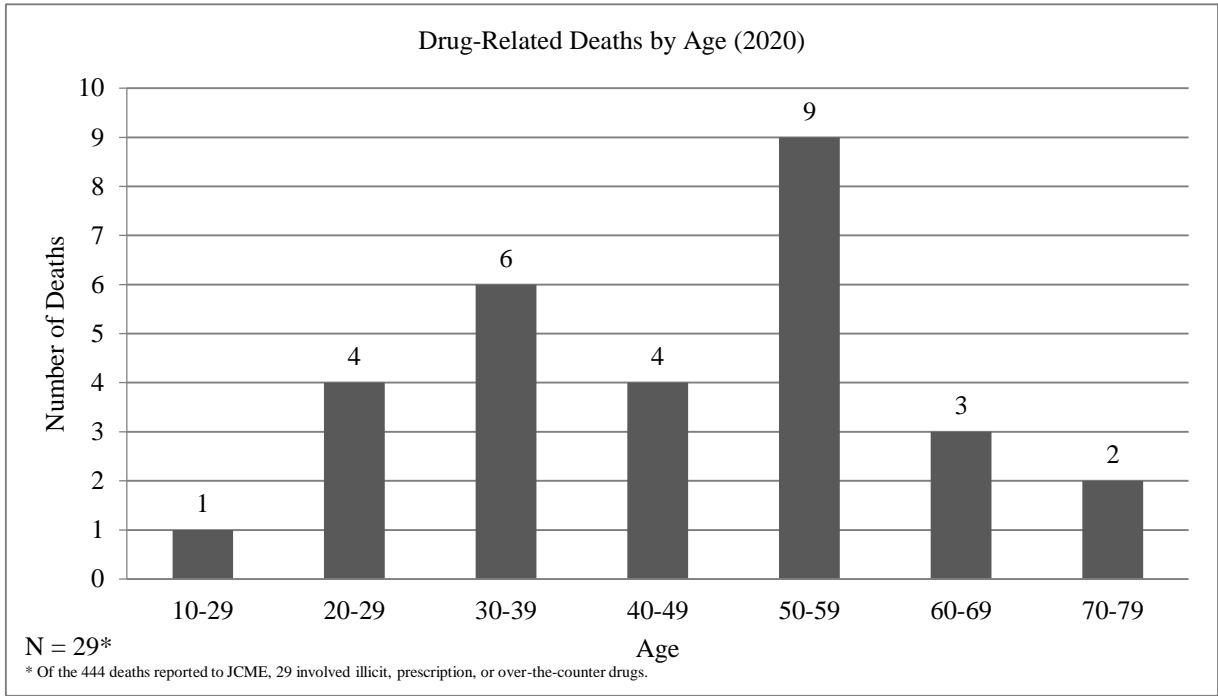


Figure 7.3.

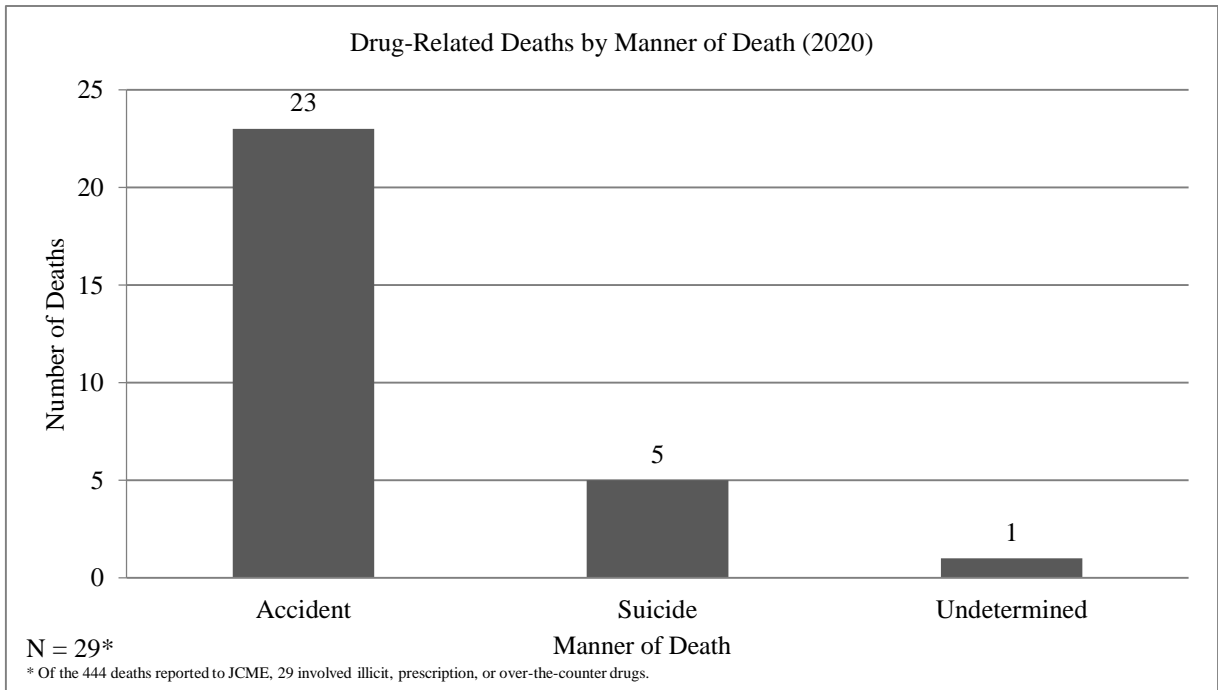


Figure 7.4.

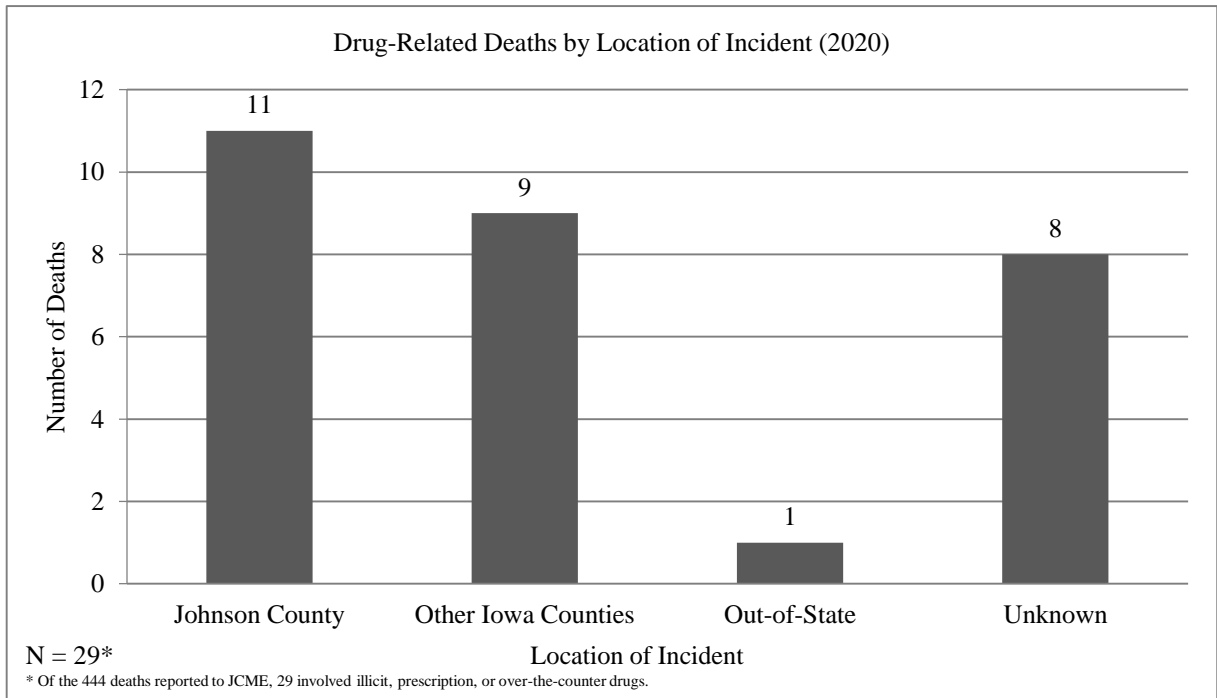


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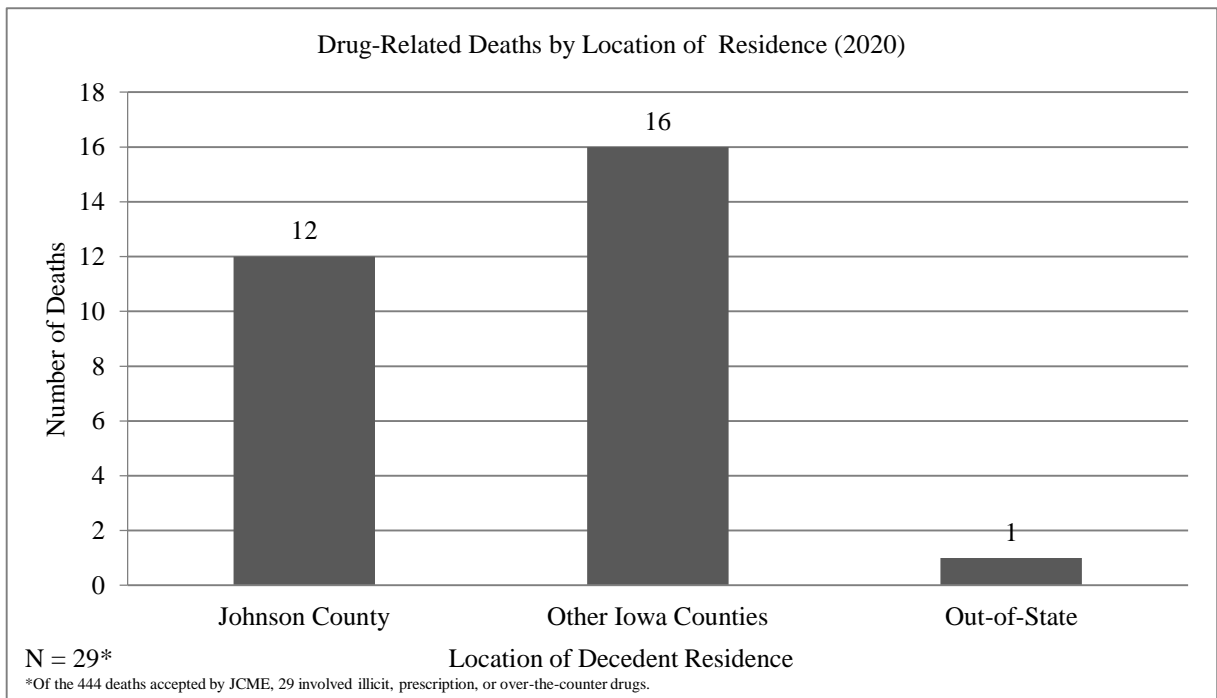


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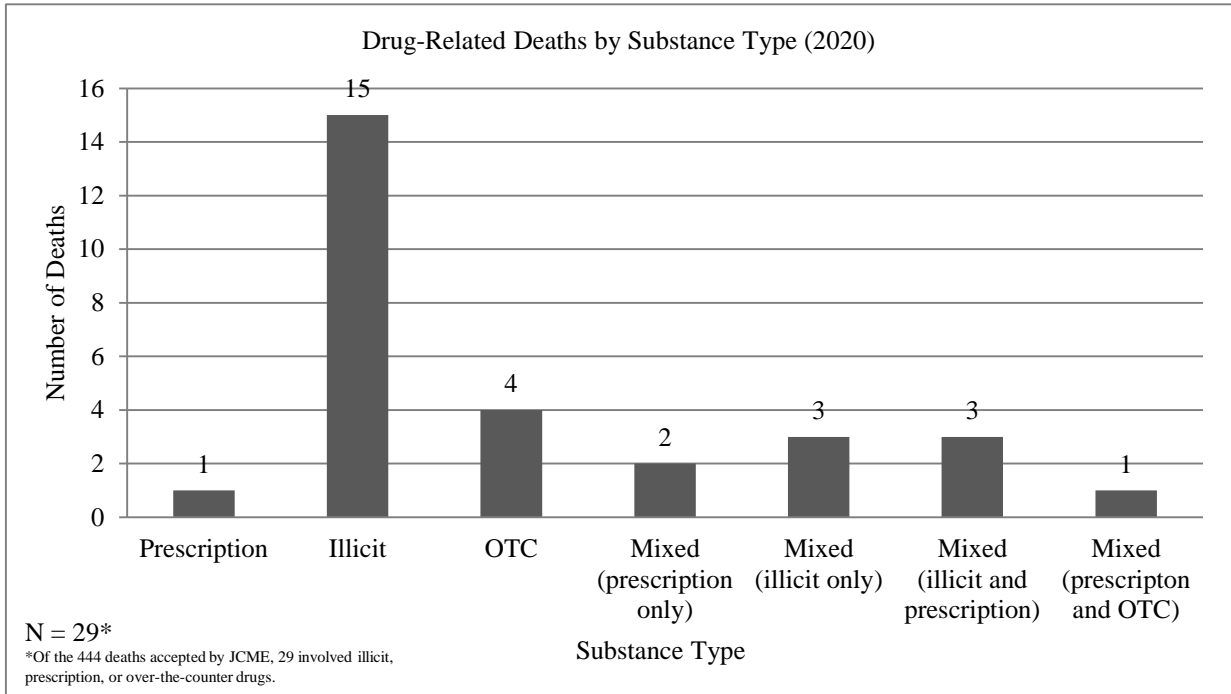


Figure 7.7.

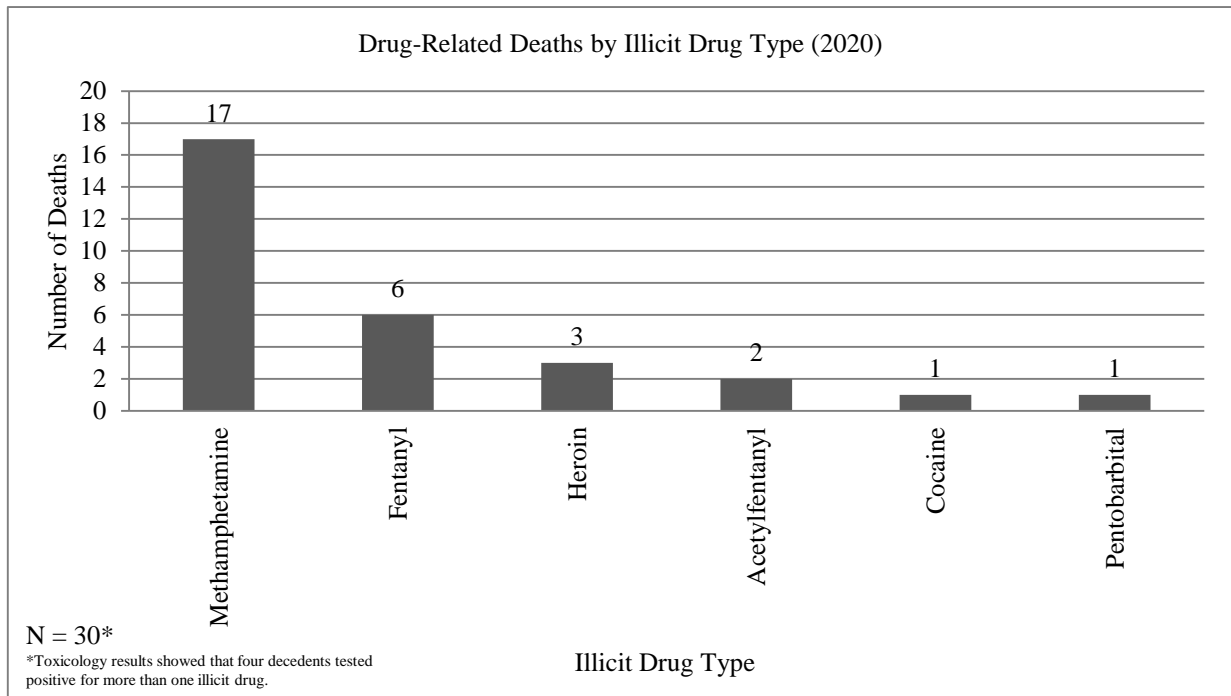


Figure 7.8.

Table 7.1. Drug-Related Deaths by Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs (2020)

Type of Drugs	Number of Decedents*
Acetaminophen	3
Alprazolam	1
Clonazepam	1
Diazepam	1
Fluoxetine	1
Gabapentin	1
Hydrocodone	1
Mitragynine	1
Nortriptyline	1
Olanzapine	1
Promethazine	1
Quetiapine	1
Ropinirole	1
Salicylate	1

\*Toxicology results showed that several decedents were positive for multiple prescription and over-the-counter drugs at the time of their death.

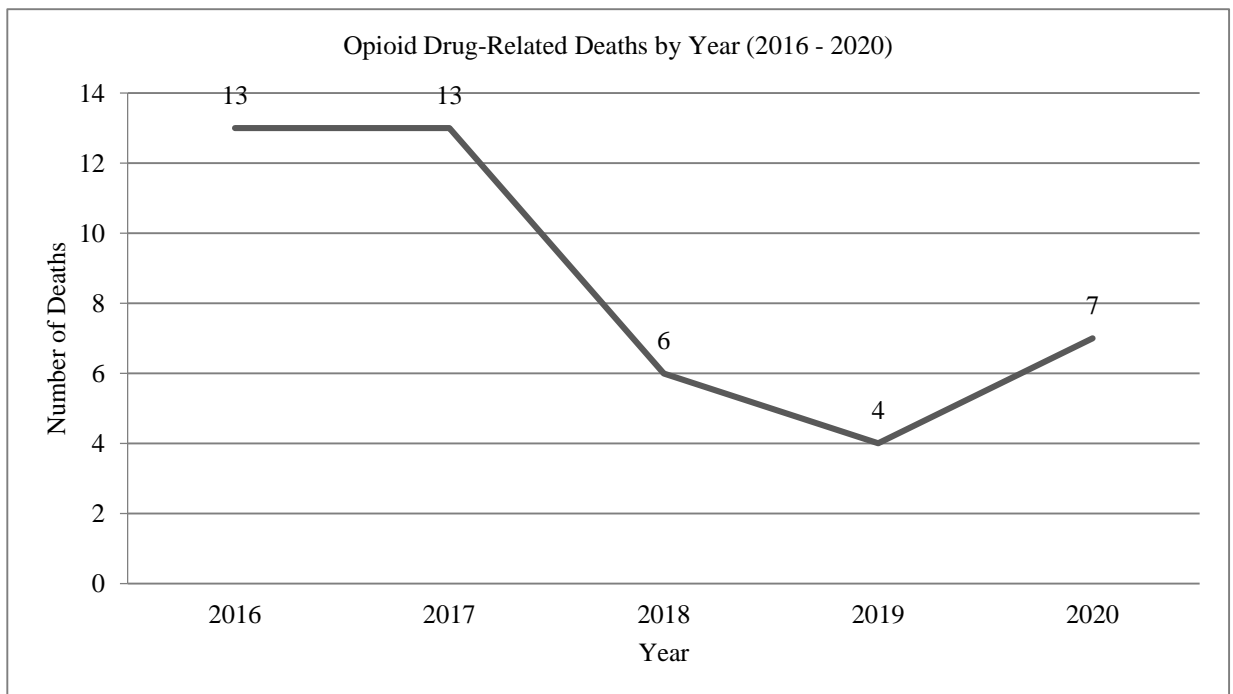


Figure 7.9.

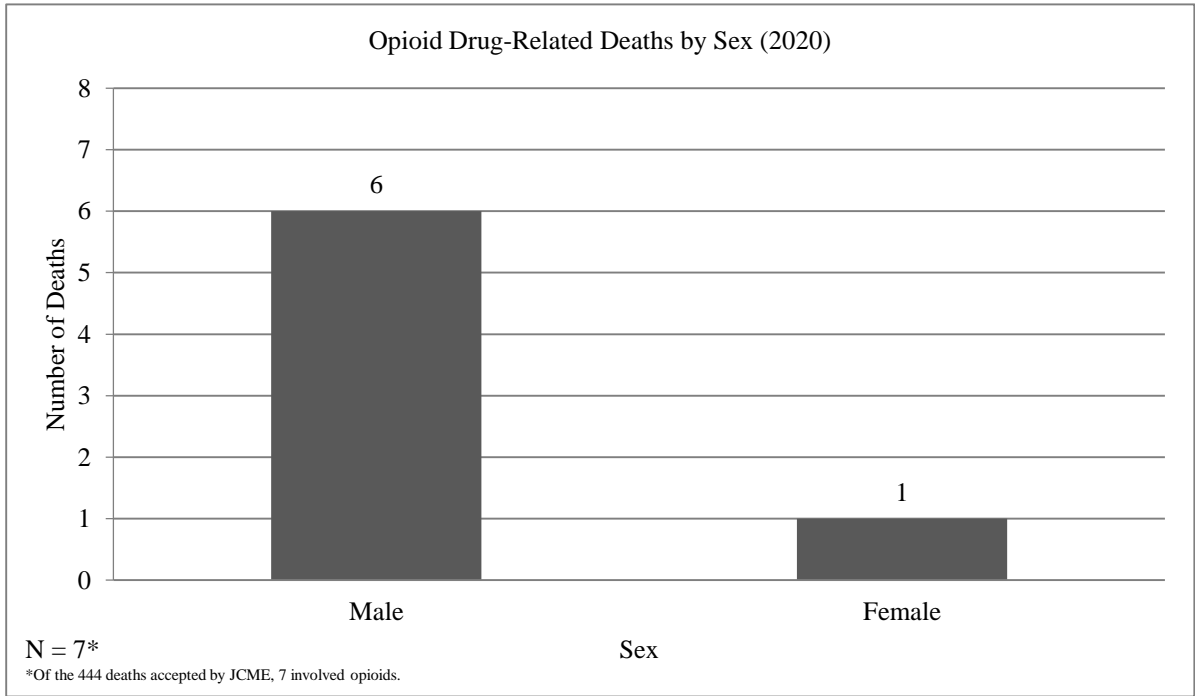


Figure 7.10.

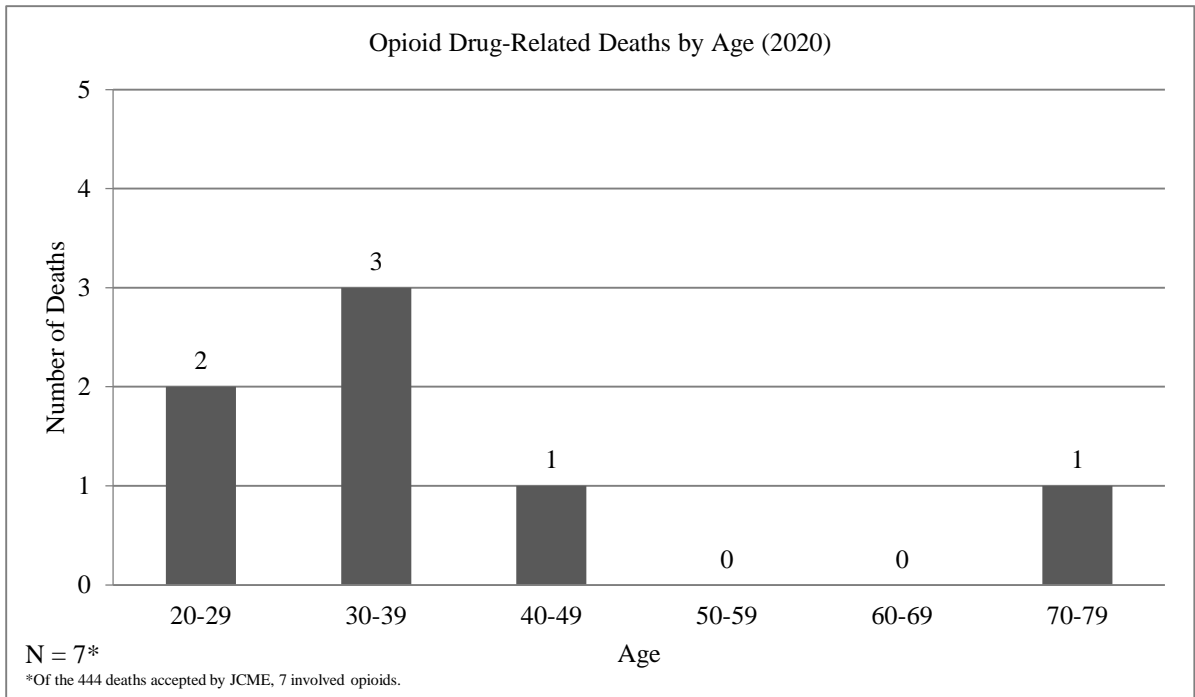


Figure 7.11.

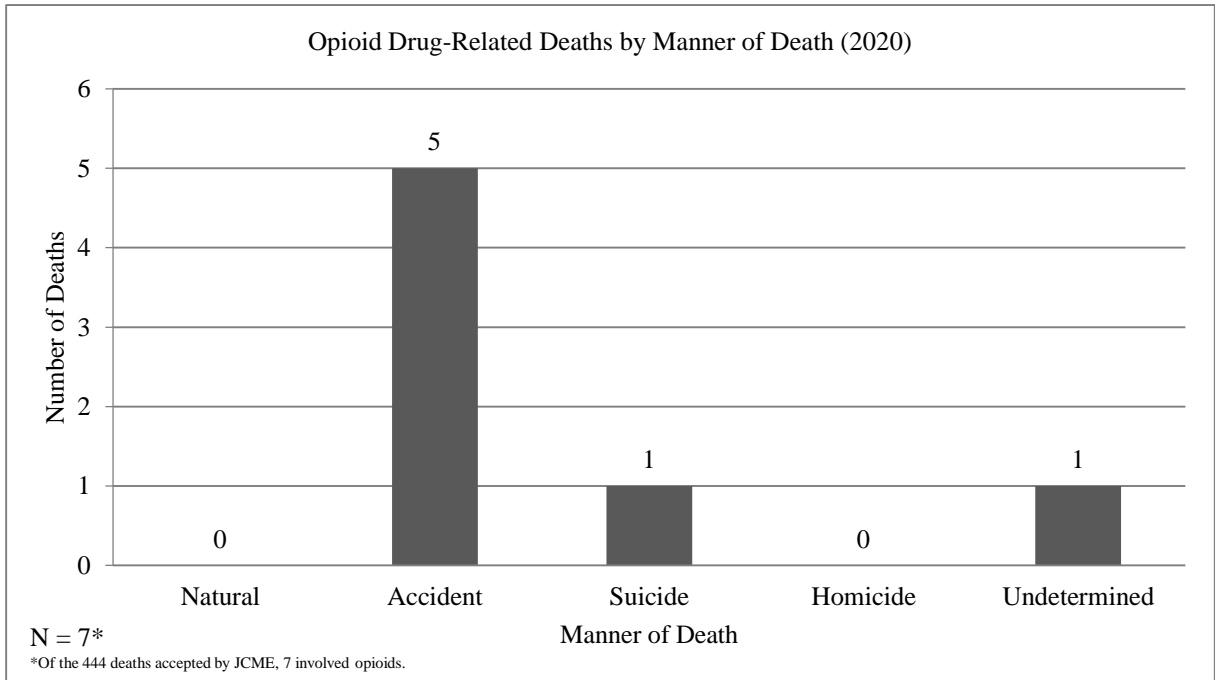


Figure 7.12.

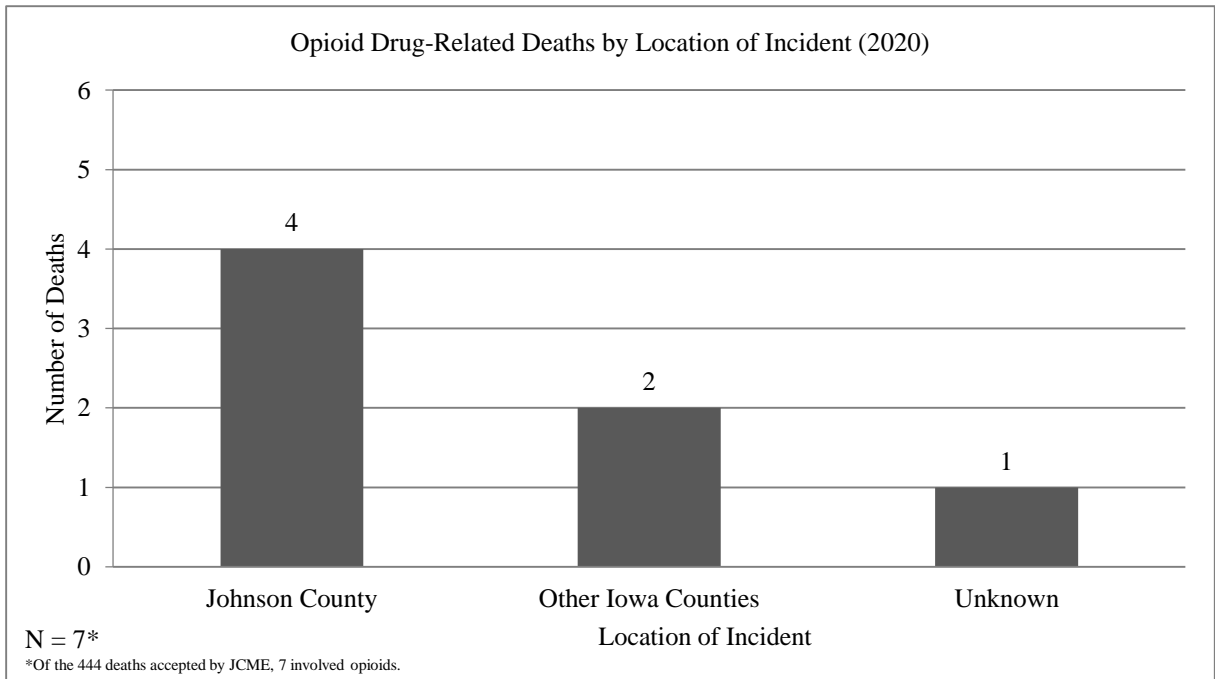


Figure 7.13.

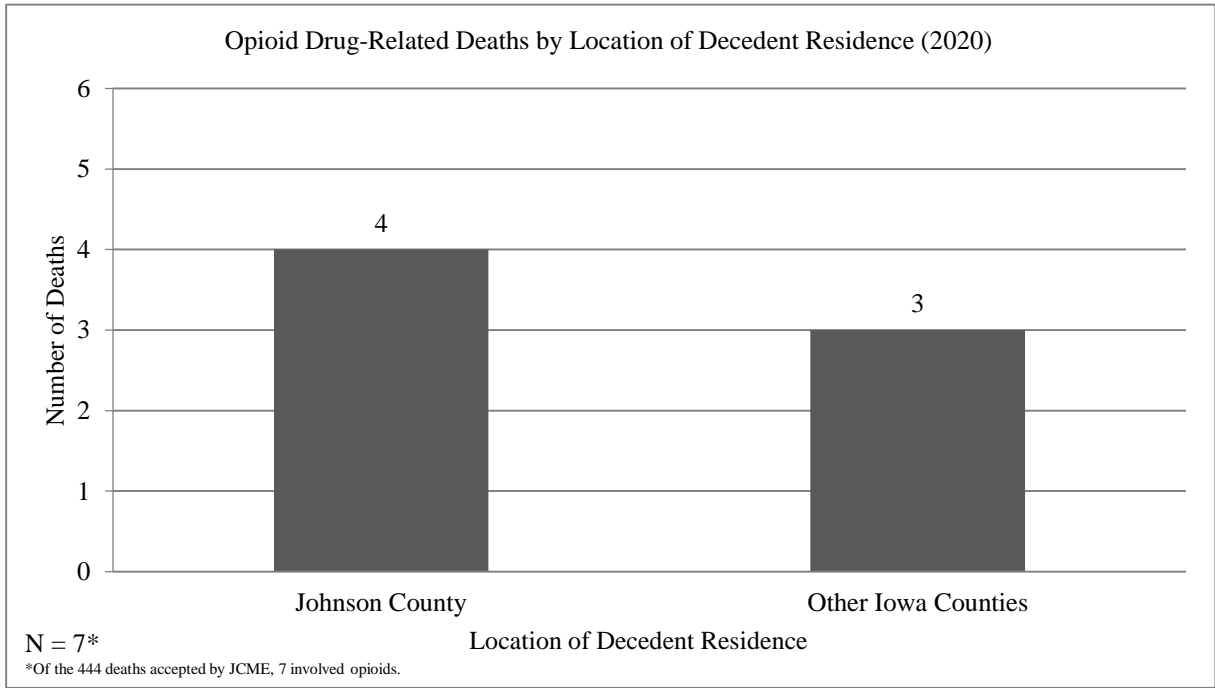


Figure 7.14.

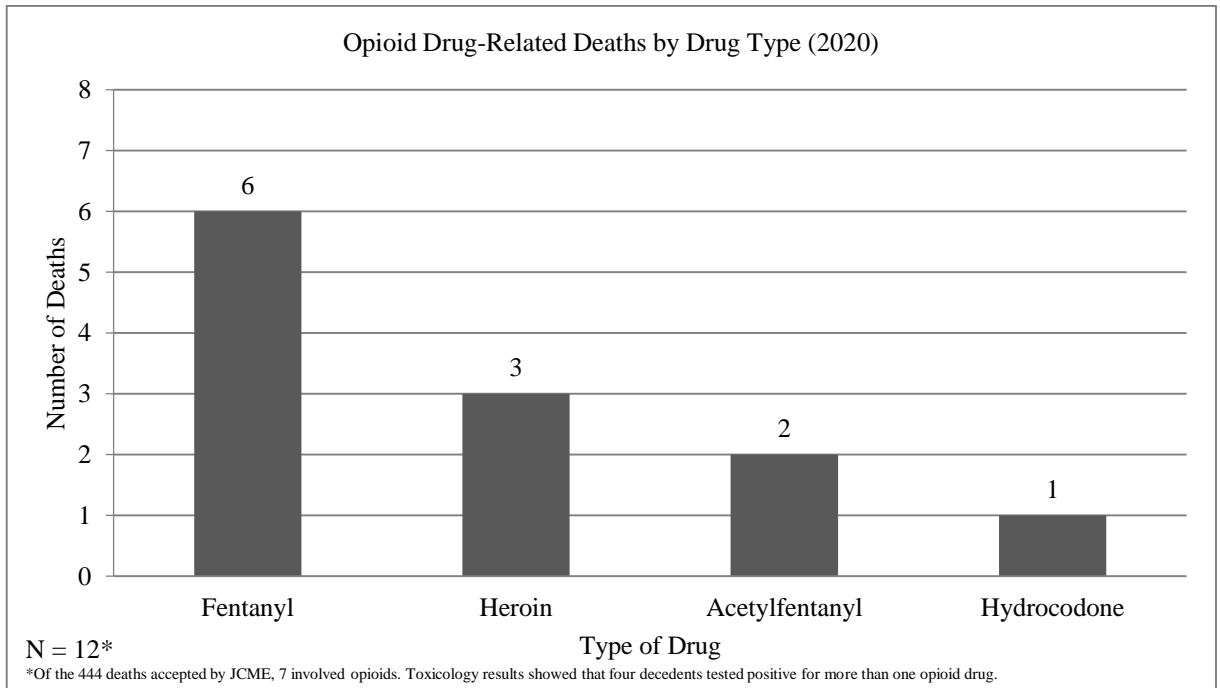


Figure 7.15.

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## COVID-19 Deaths

Of the 1051 deaths reported to JCME in 2020, 217 decedents were determined to have died from COVID-19. Of these 217 decedents, the sex distribution was 146 males to 71 females with the most common age range of 70-79 years (59 decedents) followed by 60-69 years (51 decedents). Forty seven decedents were Johnson County residents and 134 were residents of other counties in Iowa. Additionally, there were 12 decedents who were in the custody of the Iowa Department of Corrections at the time of death and 24 decedents who were out-of-state residents. Twenty-four decedents were identified to have COVID-19 at the time of death, but COVID-19 was determined to have caused or contributed to death. These 24 decedents were classified to have died with COVID-19, not from it.

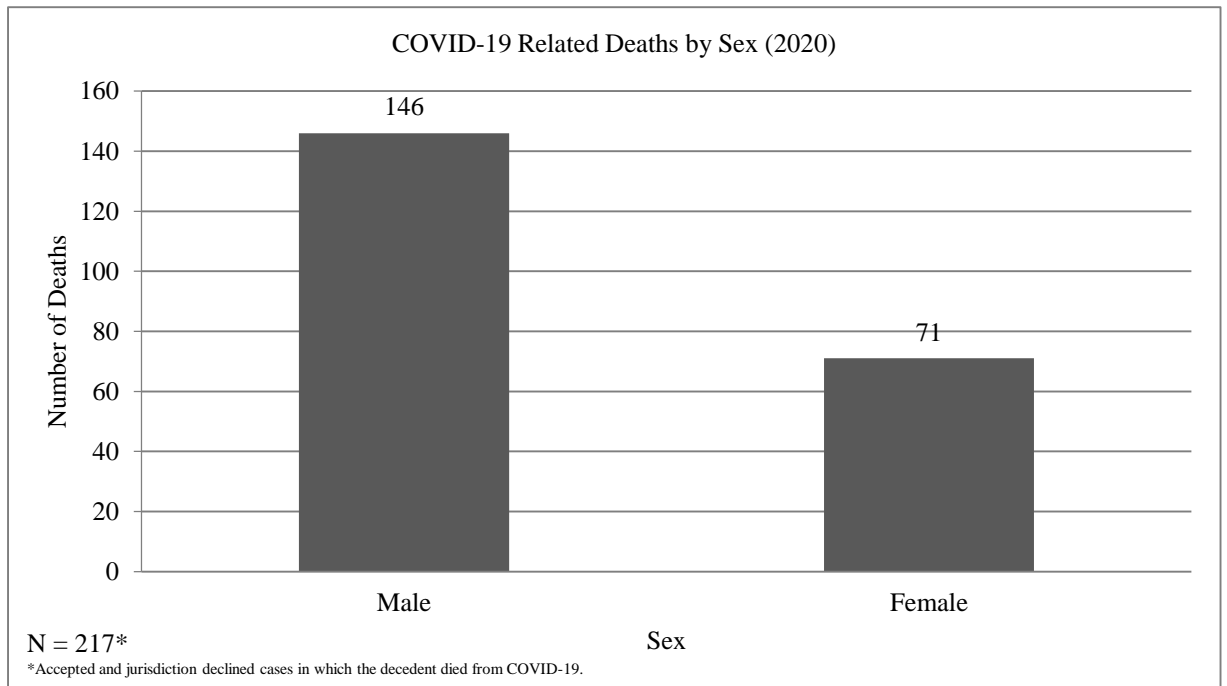


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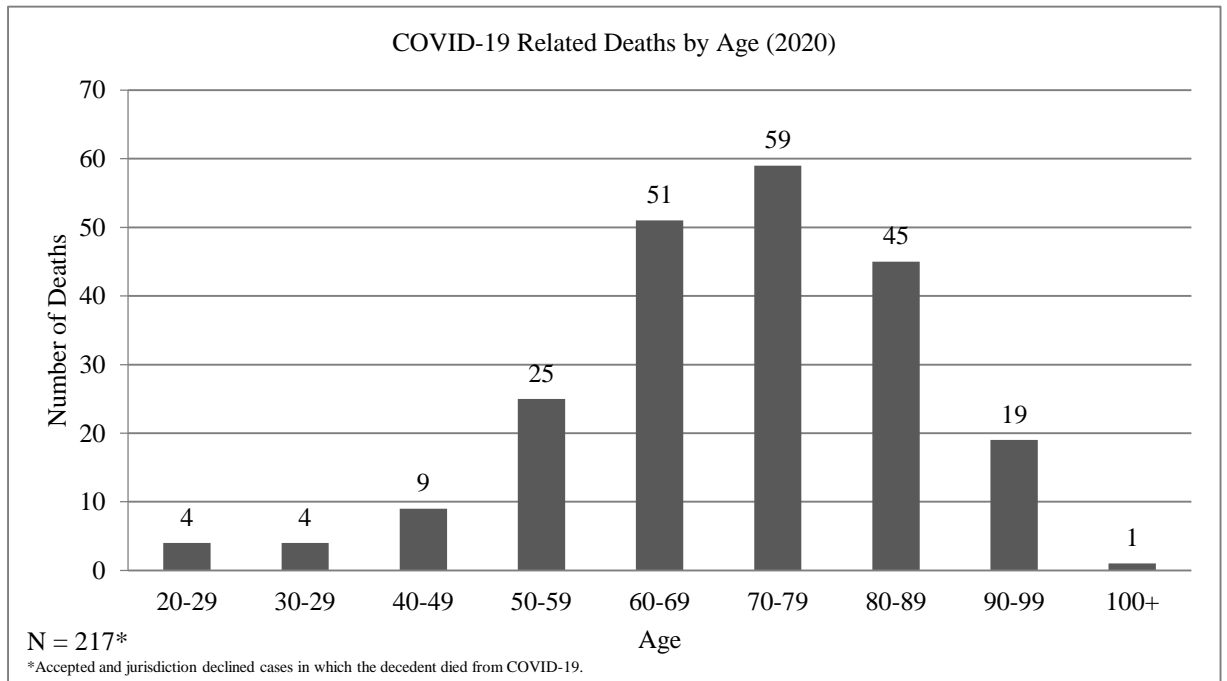


Figure 8.2.

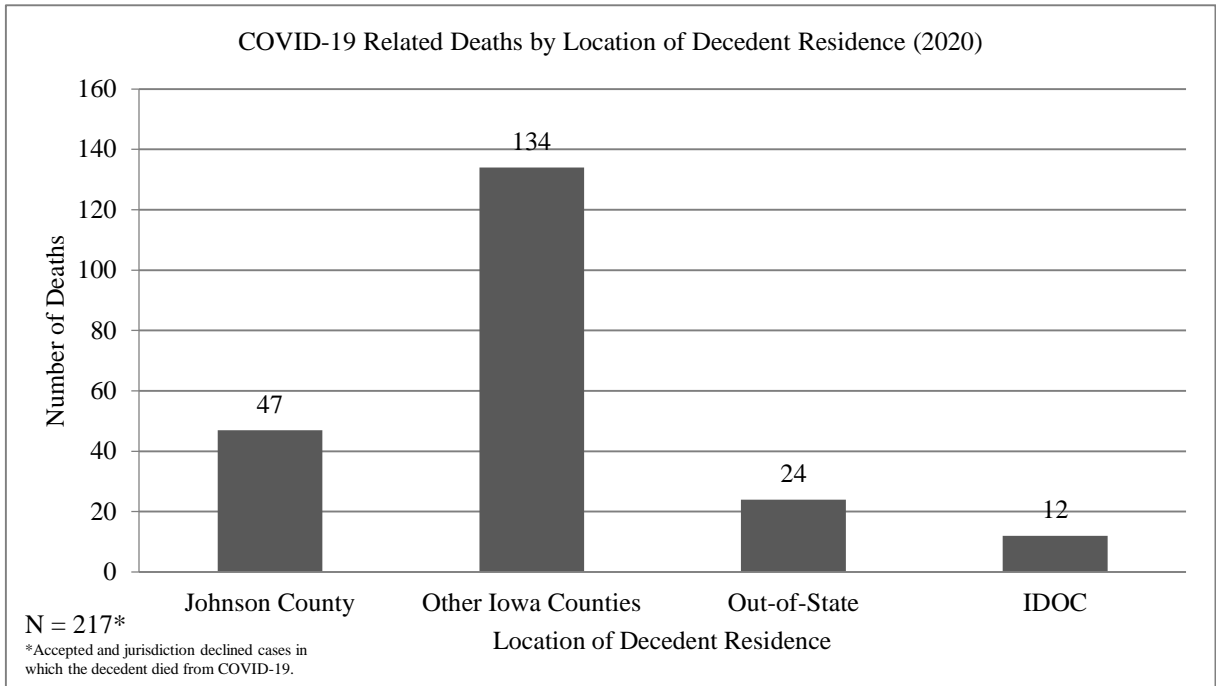


Figure 8.3.

Table 8.1. COVID-19 Related Deaths by Other Iowa Counties Location of Decedent Residence (2020)

County	Number of Decedents
Muscatine	26
Scott	9
Linn	7
Louisa	7
Washington	7
Black Hawk	6
Clinton	6
Dubuque	6
Keokuk	6
Wapello	6
Henry	5
Jefferson	5
Lee	5
Cedar	4
Des Moines	3
Iowa	3
Van Buren	3
Clayton	2
Jackson	2
Jones	2
Mahaska	2
Marshall	2
Benton	1
Butler	1
Calhoun	1
Davis	1
Delaware	1
Fayette	1
Franklin	1
Humbolt	1
Polk	1
Tama	1

Table 8.2. COVID-19 Related Deaths by Out-of-State Location of Decedent Residence (2020)

County and State	Number of Decedents
Rock Island, IL	12
Whiteside, IL	3
Mercer, IL	2
Adams, IL	1
Aledo, IL	1
Clark, MO	1
Dallas, TX	1
Henry, IL	1
San Diego, CA	1
Scotland, MO	1

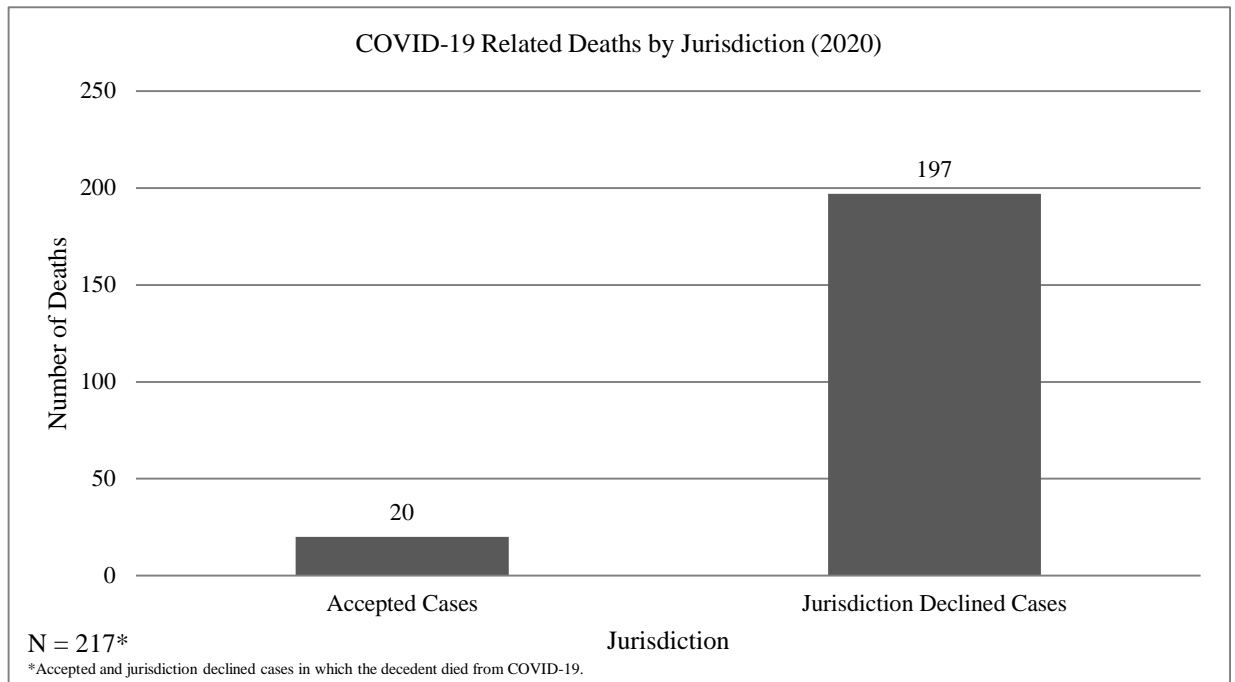
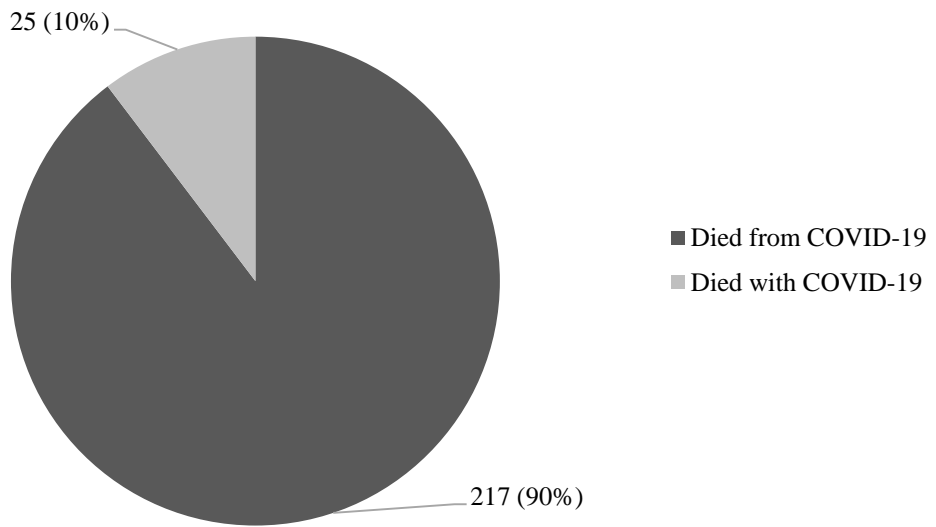


Figure 8.4.

COVID-19 Deaths Reported to JCME (2020)



N = 242\*

\*Accepted and jurisdiction declined cases in which the decedent died and tested positive for COVID-19.

Figure 8.5.

## Older Adult Deaths

In 2020, JCME accepted jurisdiction of 268 deaths that involved adults aged 60 years and older. Of these, 122 were residents of Johnson County, 102 were residents of other counties in Iowa, 28 were out-of-state residents, and 16 were Iowa Department of Corrections offenders. One hundred and thirty-three of these deaths were certified as accident, 130 as natural, 4 as suicide, and 1 as homicide.

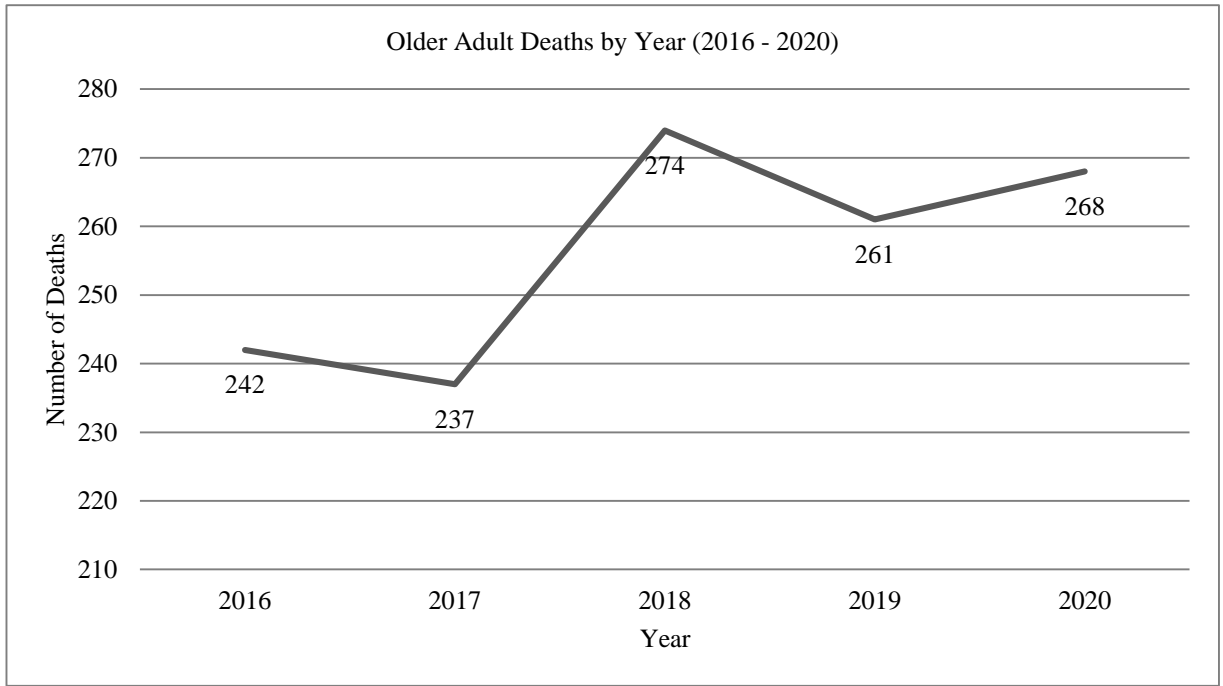


Figure 9.1.

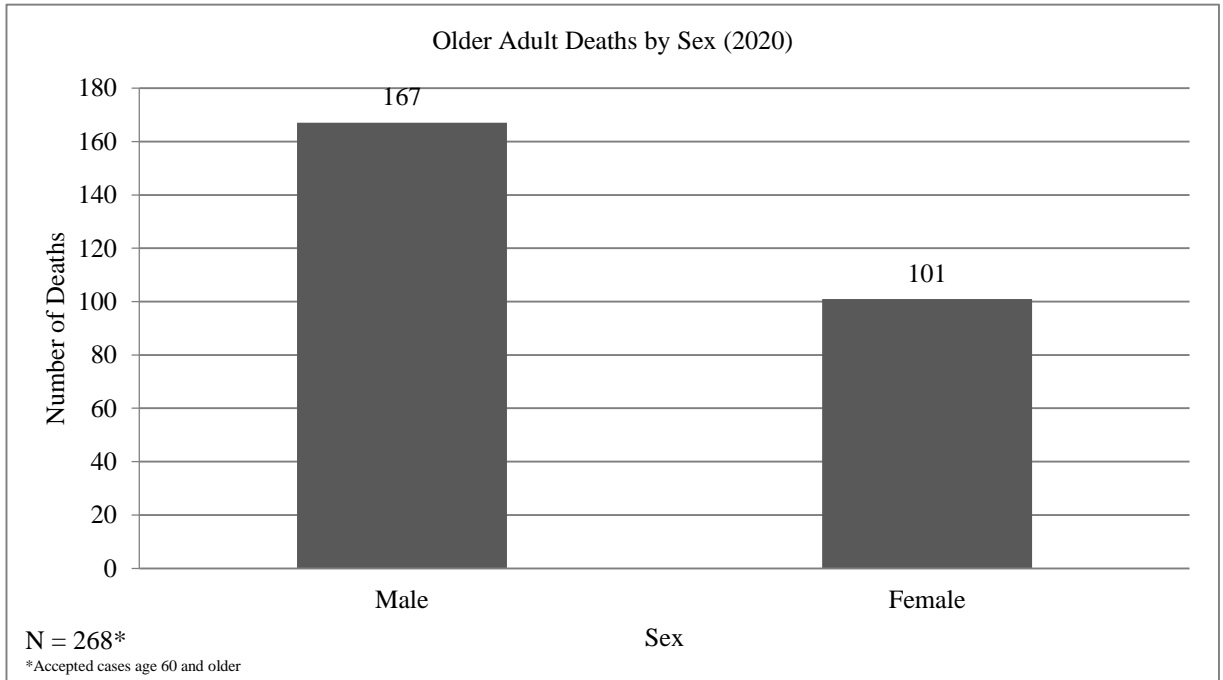


Figure 9.2.



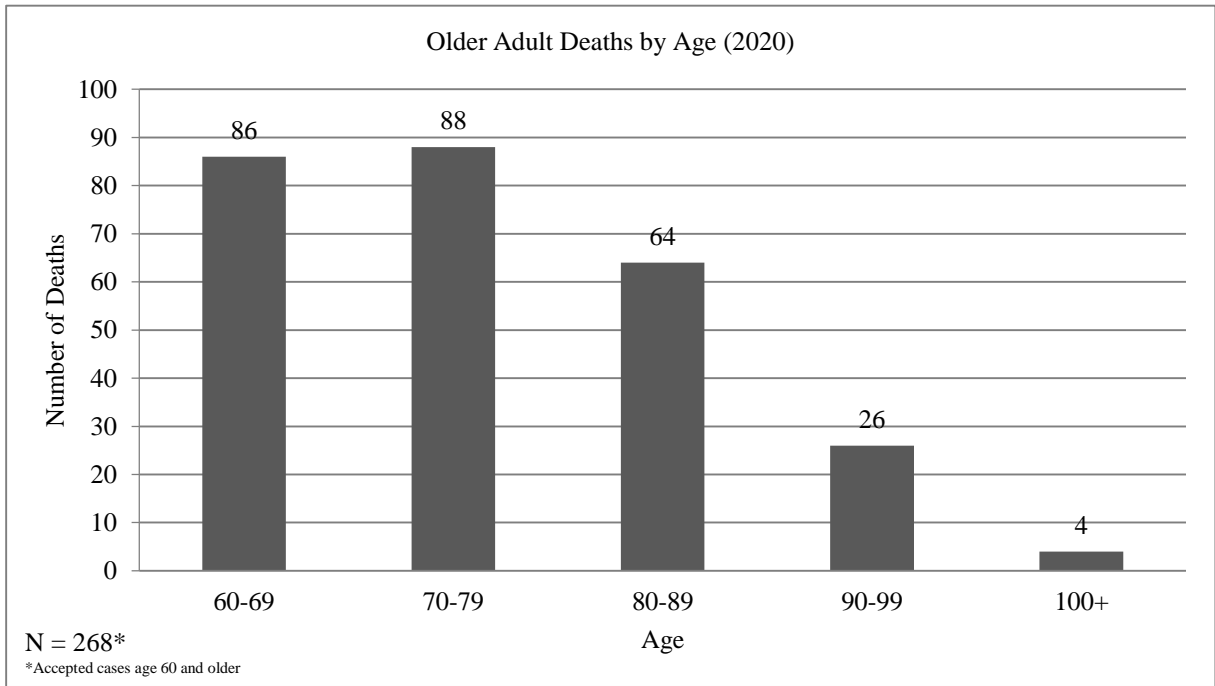


Figure 9.3.

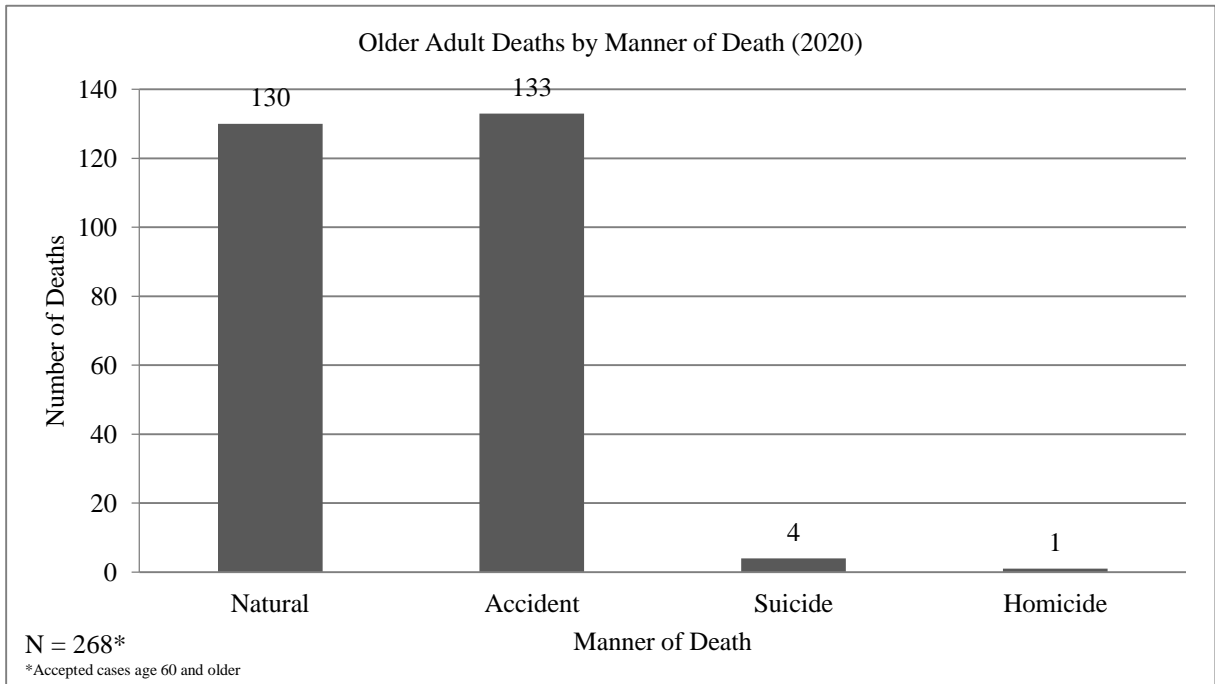


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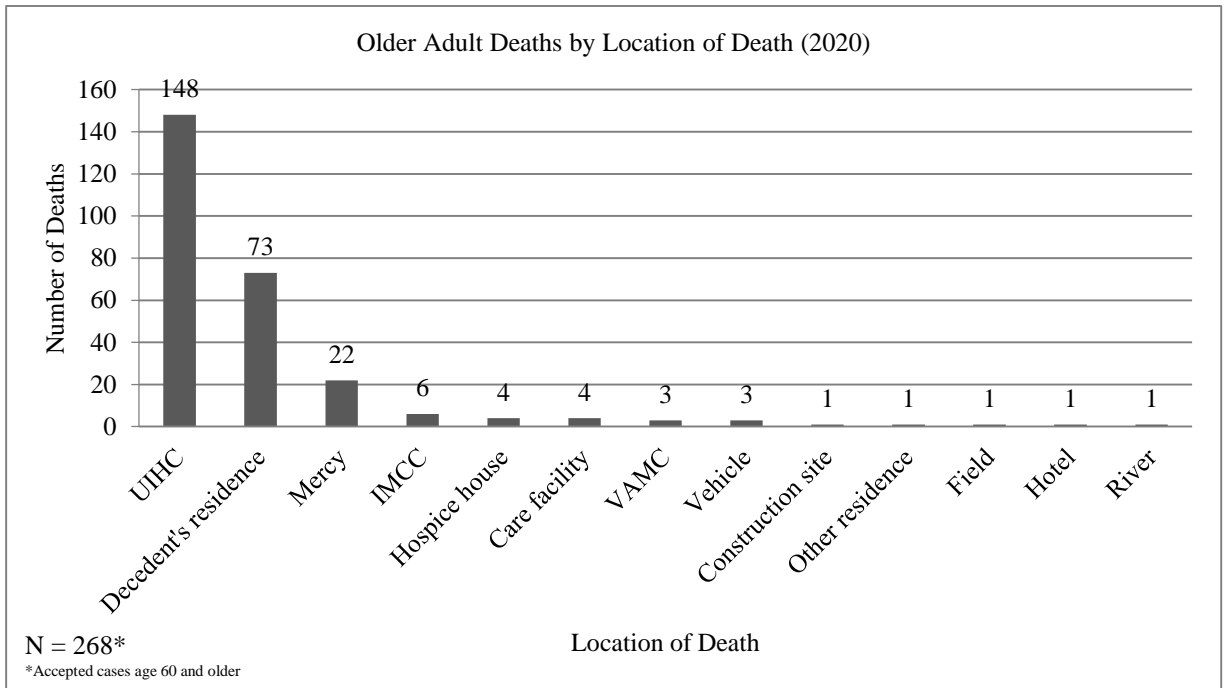


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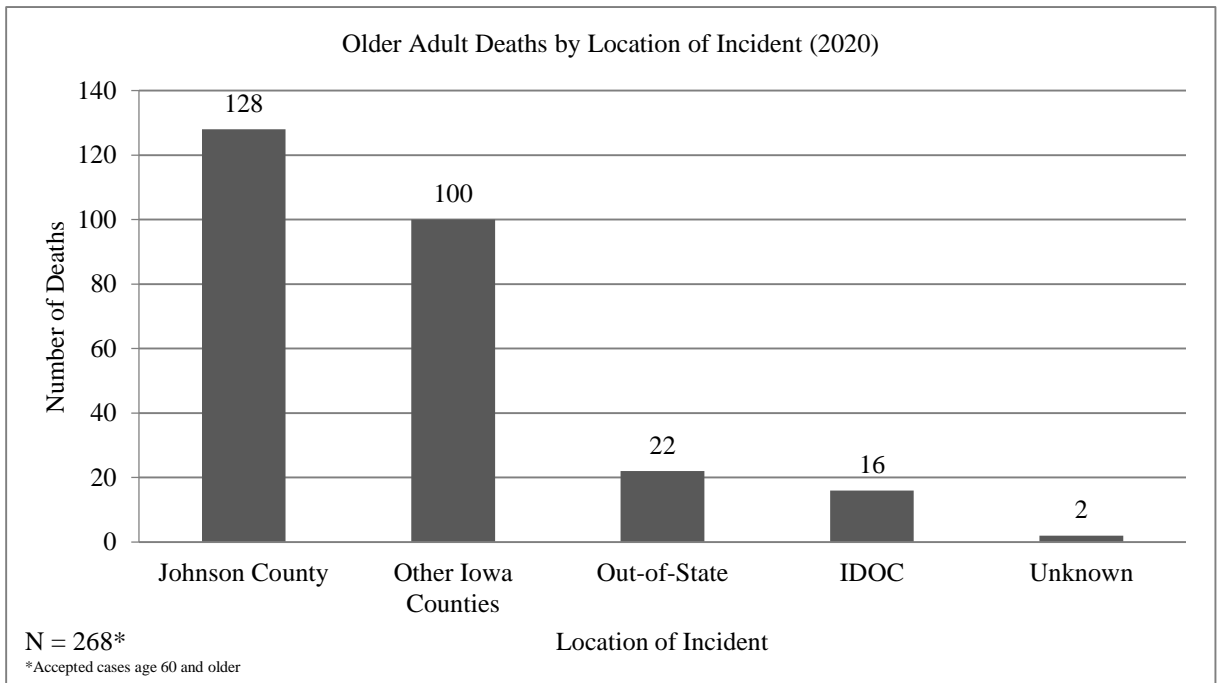


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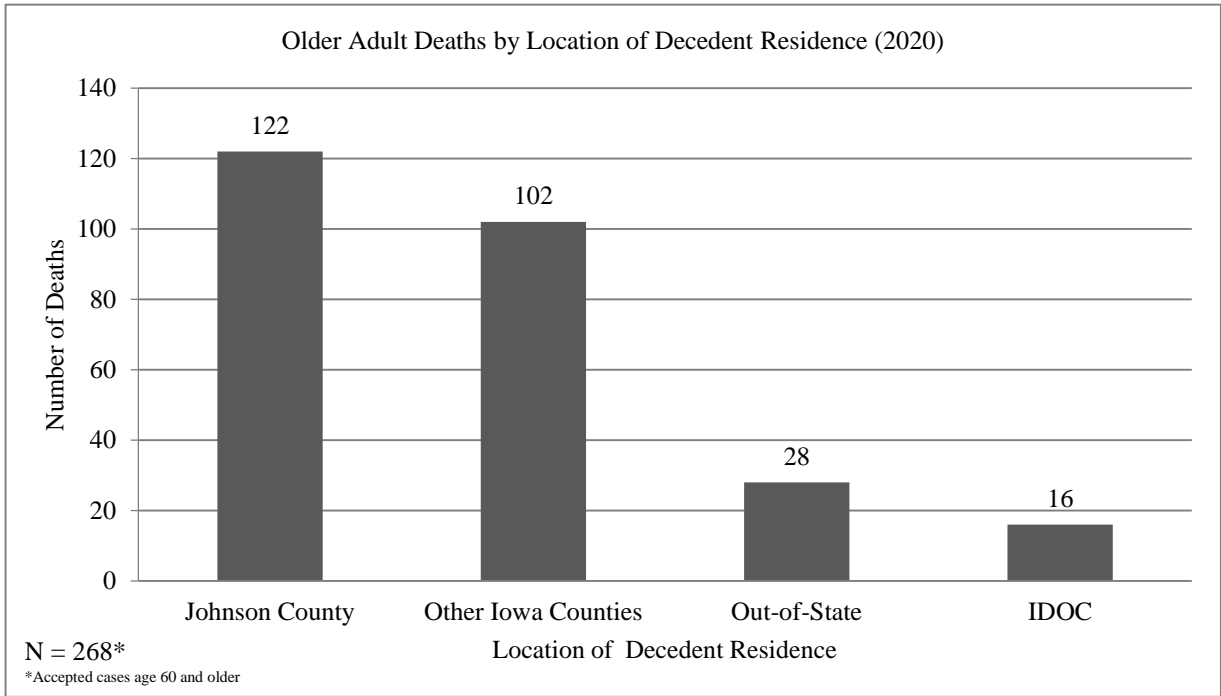


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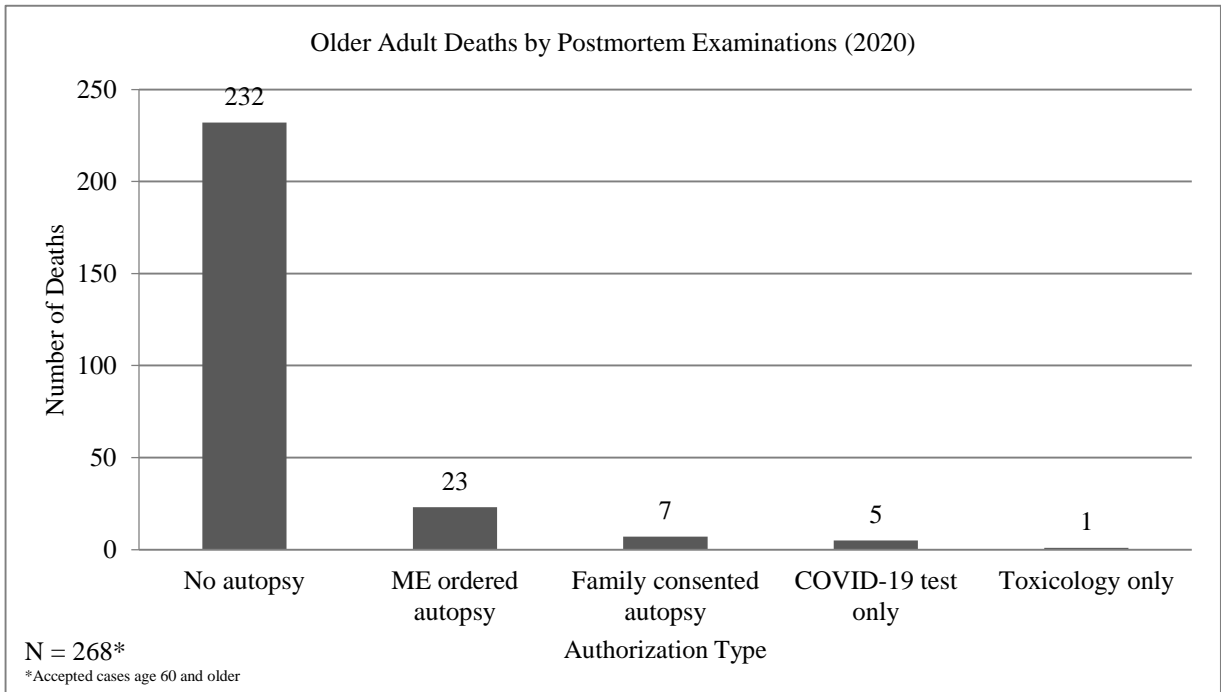


Figure 9.8.

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## Older Adult Fall-Related Deaths

There were 268 deaths accepted by JCME of adults aged 60 and older. Of these, there were 100 in which the death was the result of a fall. The majority of these fall-related deaths, 65, occurred from a standing height and 51 of the falls occurred inside of the decedent's home. The most common anatomical location of injury from a fall was the head and/or neck, which occurred in 55 of the falls.

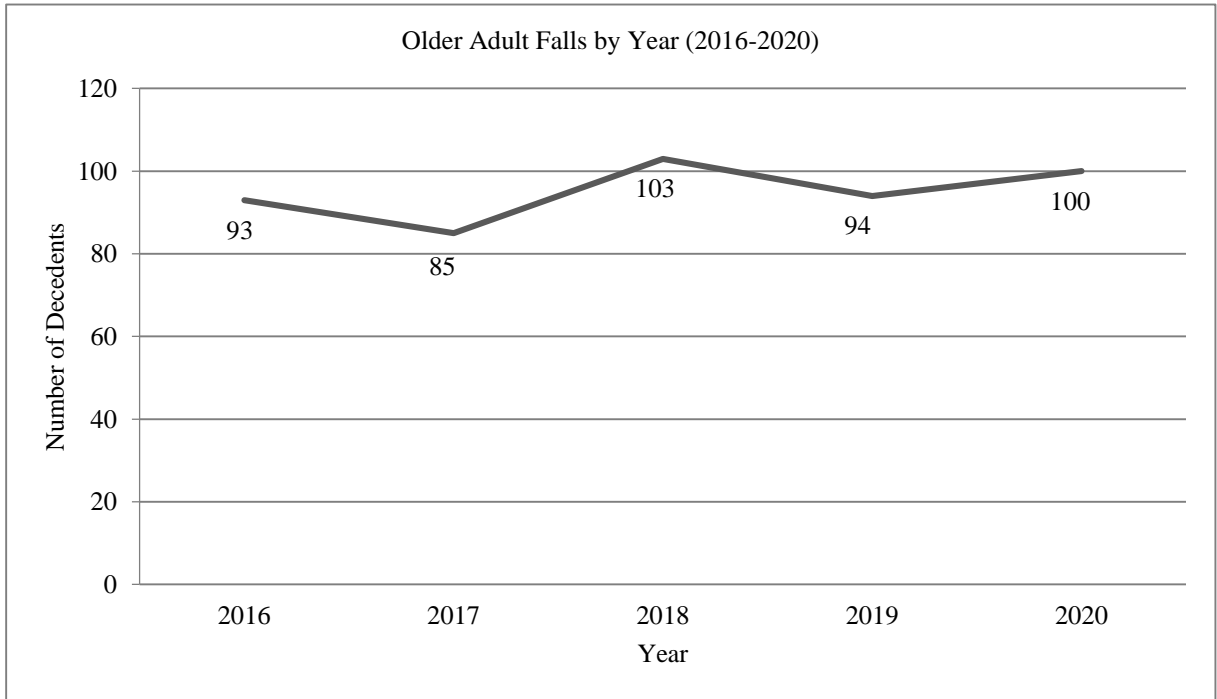


Figure 10.1.

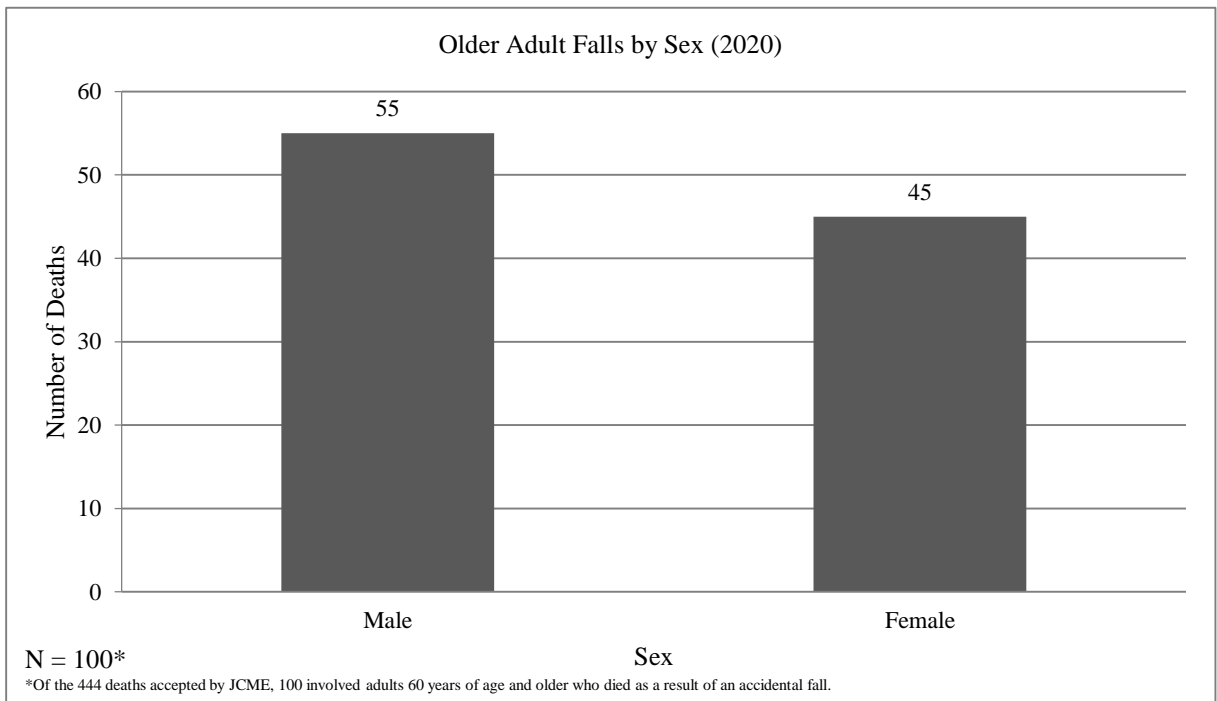


Figure 10.2.

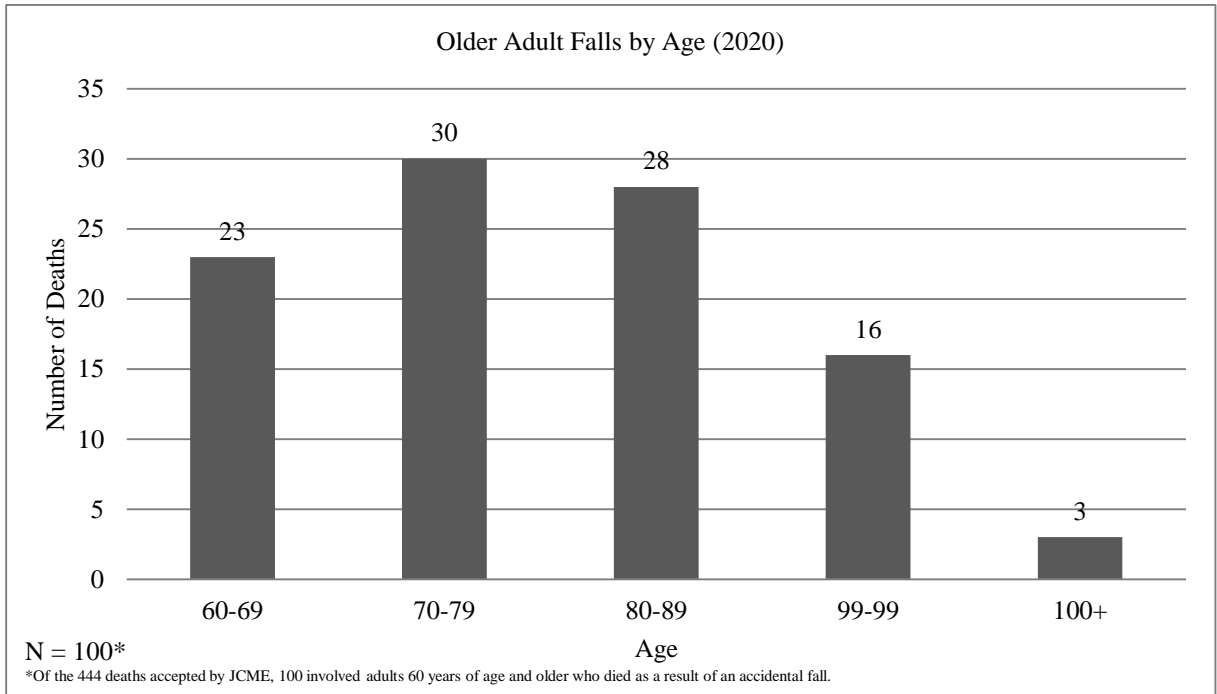


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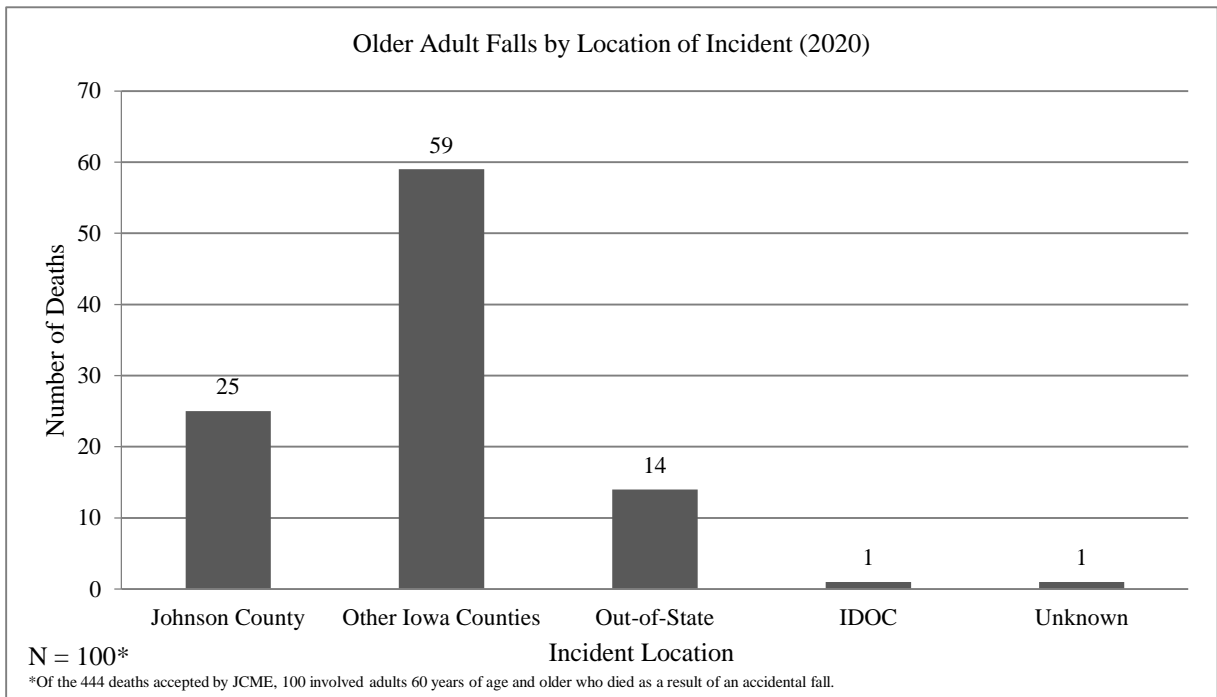


Figure 10.4.

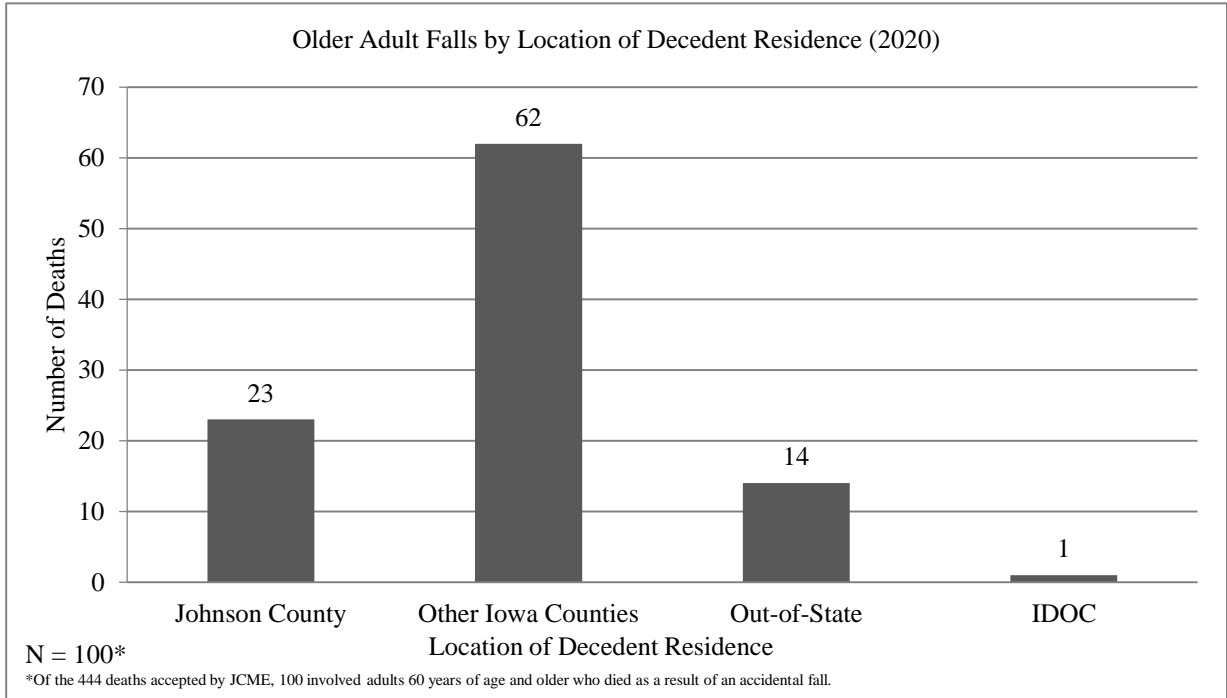


Figure 10.5.

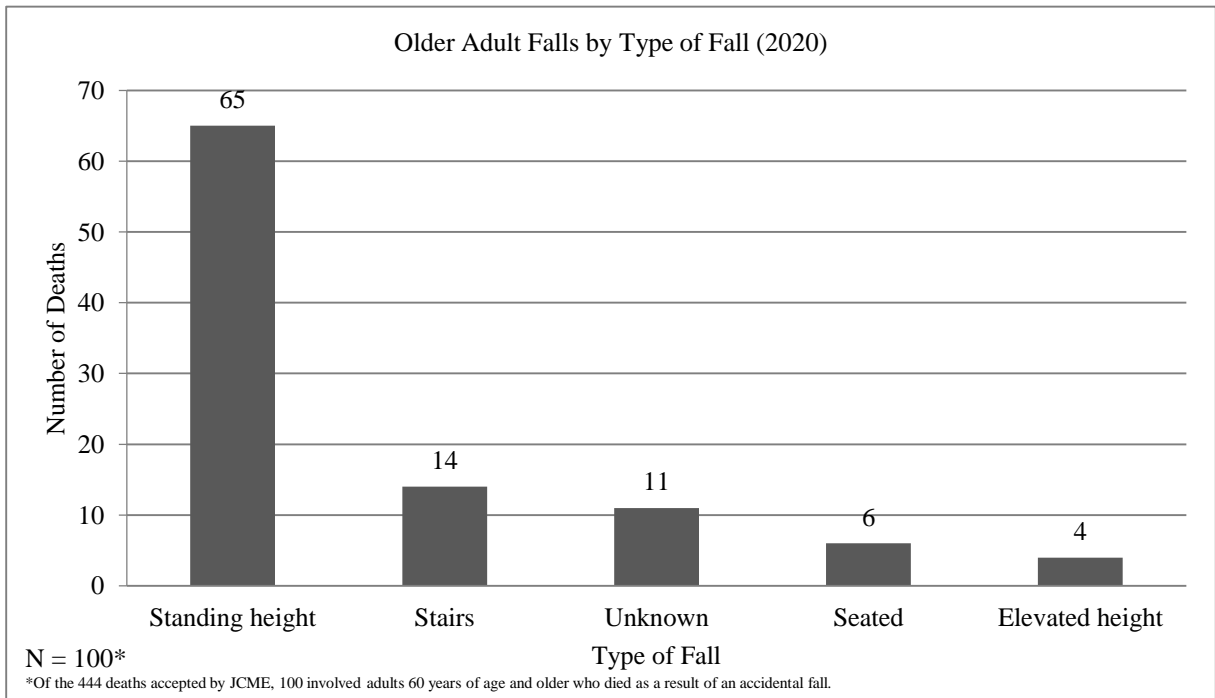


Figure 10.6.



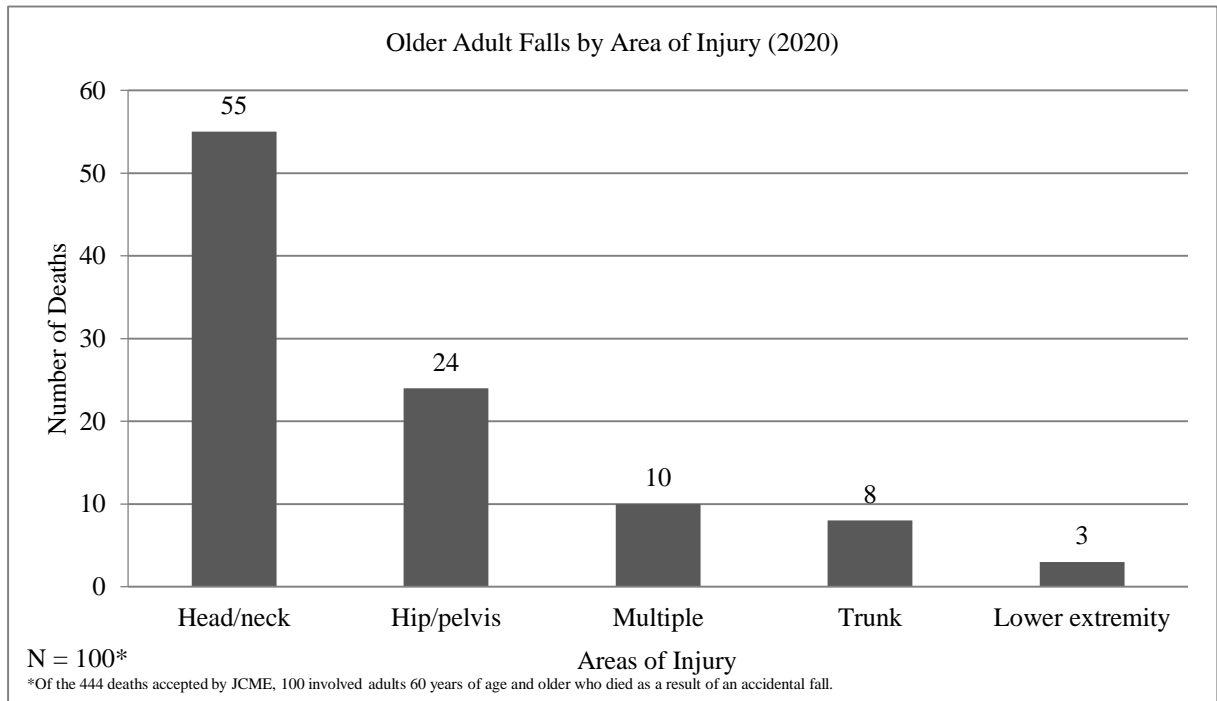


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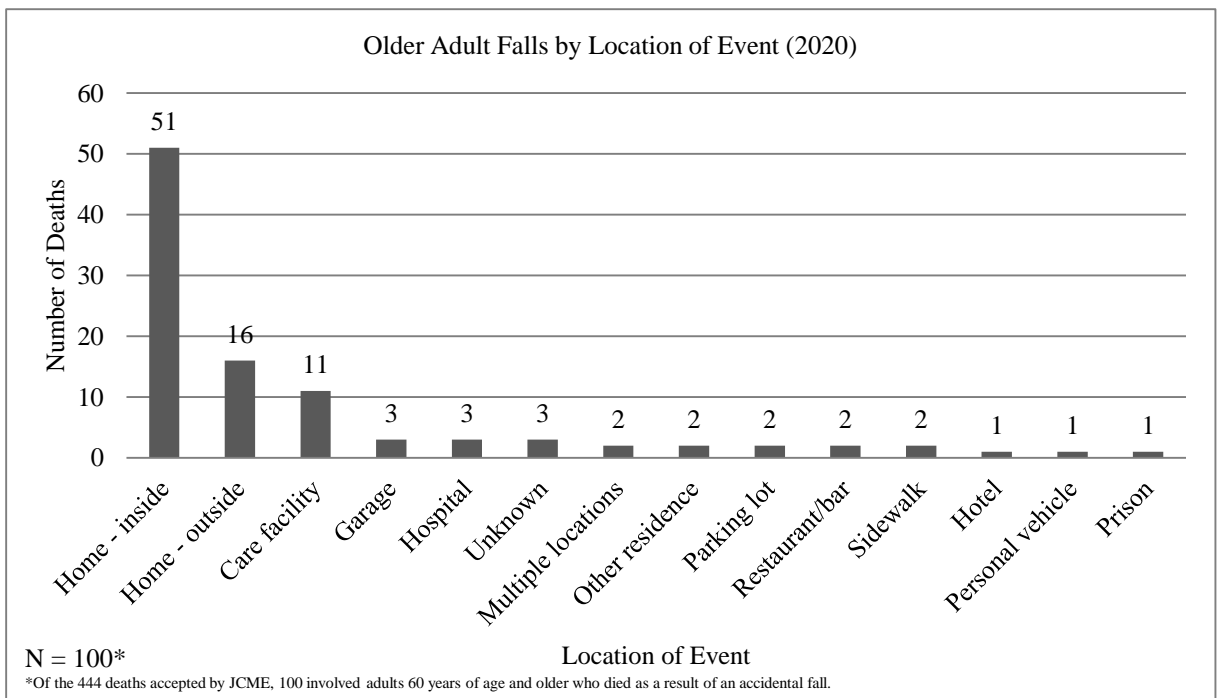


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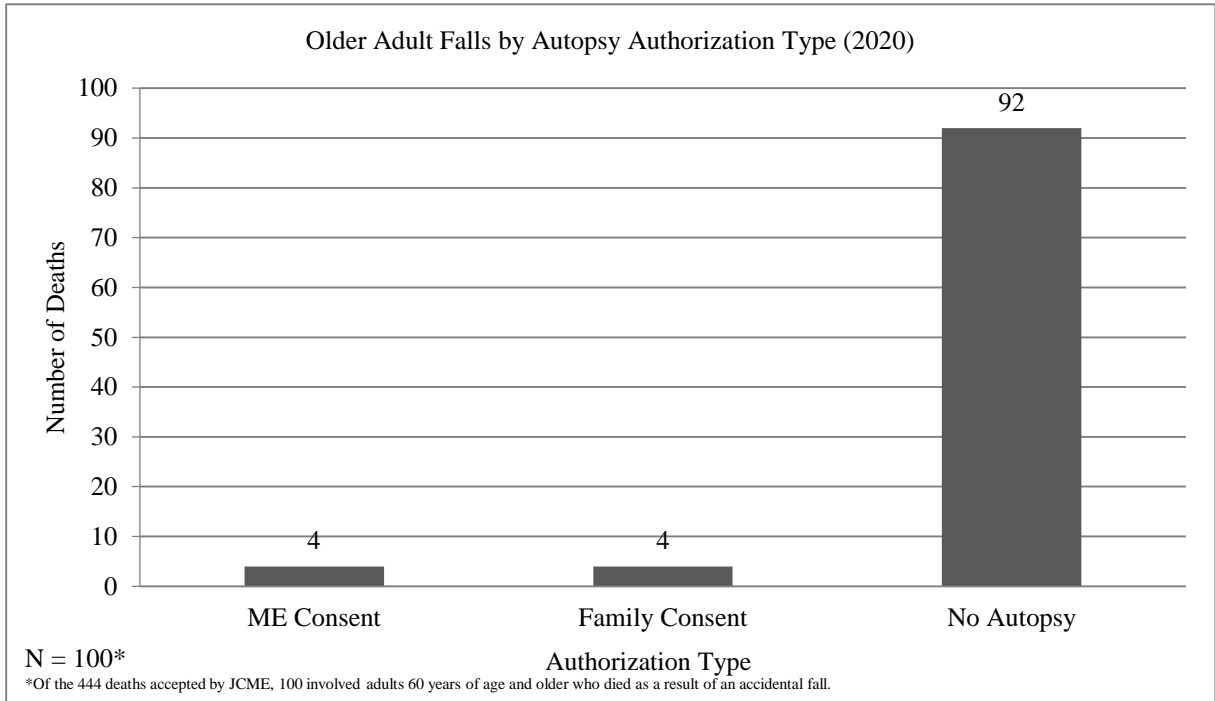


Figure 10.9.

## Child Deaths

In 2020, there were 21 deaths accepted by JCME of individuals 17 years of age and younger. Of these 21 deaths, 9 were classified as accident followed by 4 as suicide, 4 as undetermined, 3 as natural, and 1 as homicide. For 9 of these deaths the incident location was Johnson County, 9 incident locations occurred in another Iowa County, and 3 incident locations occurred out-of-state. Of these 21 deaths accepted by JCME, there were 4 deaths of infants one year of age or less of which 2 were classified as accident and 2 as undetermined. An autopsy was performed on all 4 infant deaths.

In 2020, there were 3 sleep-related infant deaths, 2 of which were classified as accident and 1 as undetermined. For 2 of these deaths the incident location was Johnson County and 1 incident locations occurred in another Iowa county.

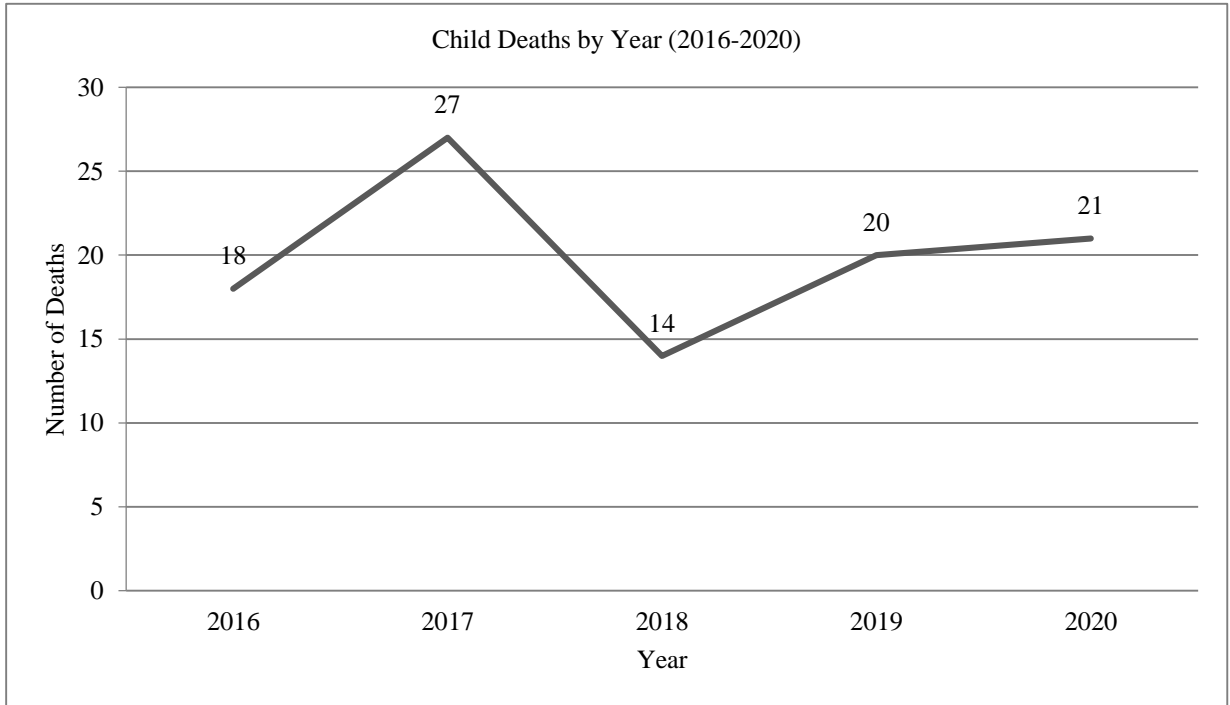


Figure 11.1.

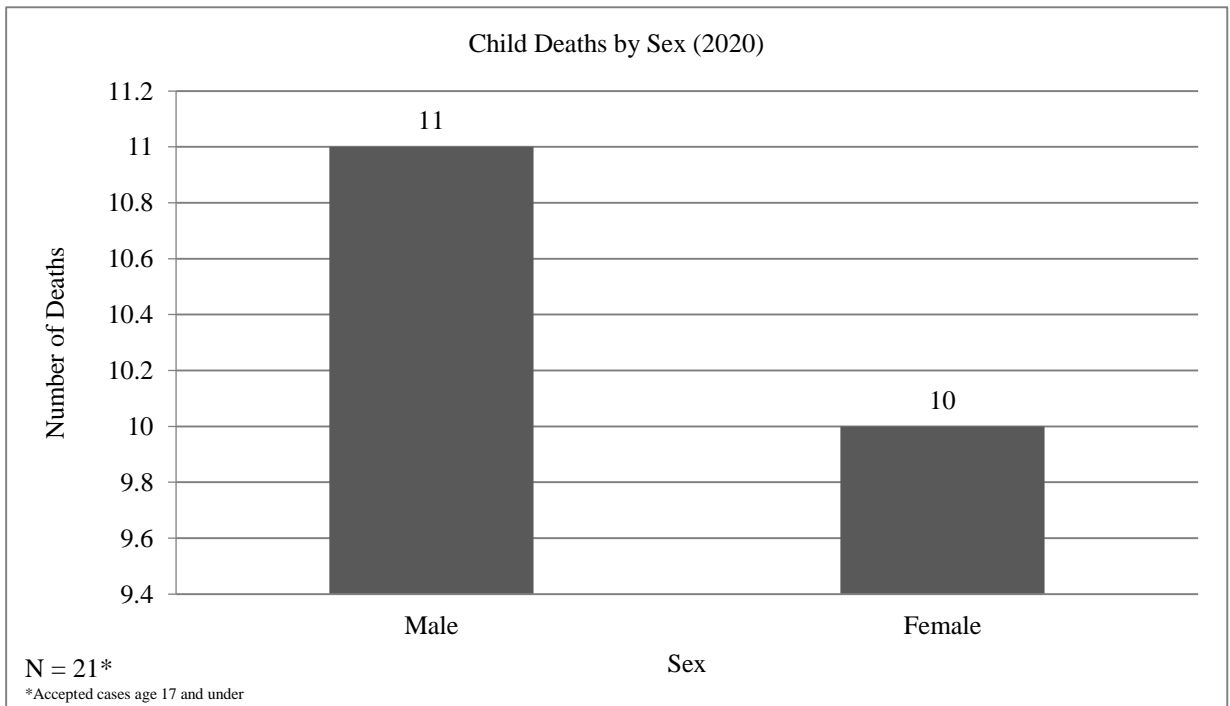


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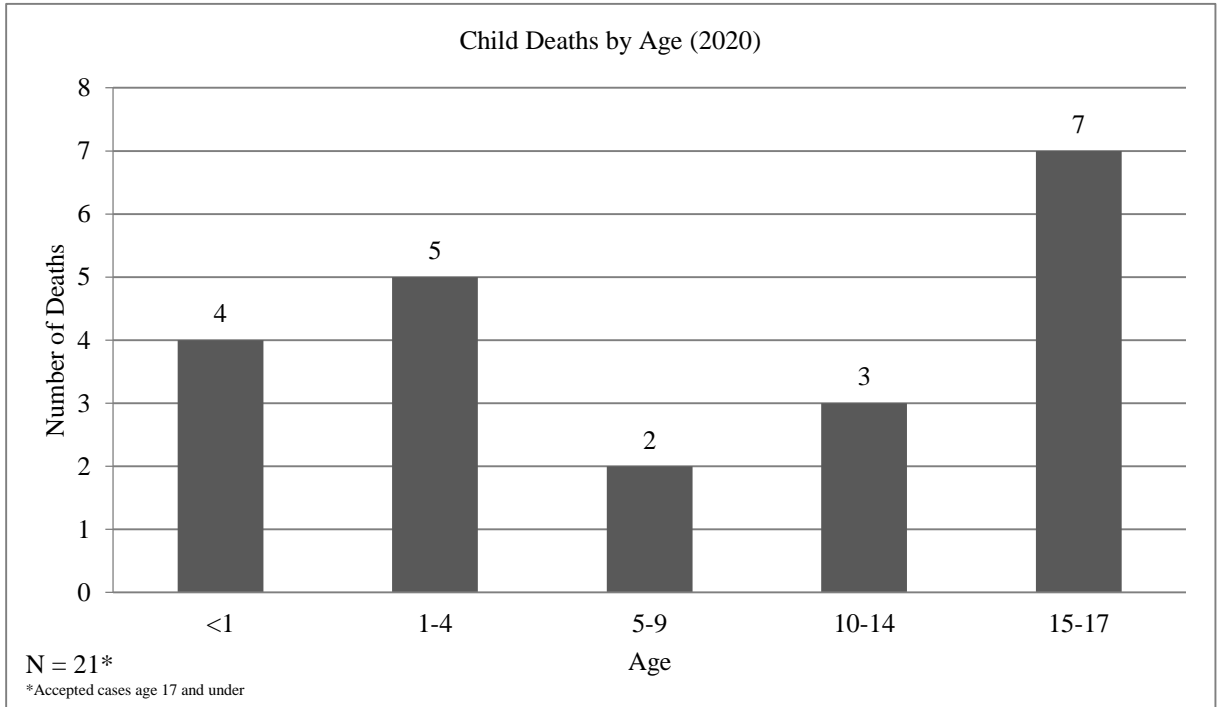


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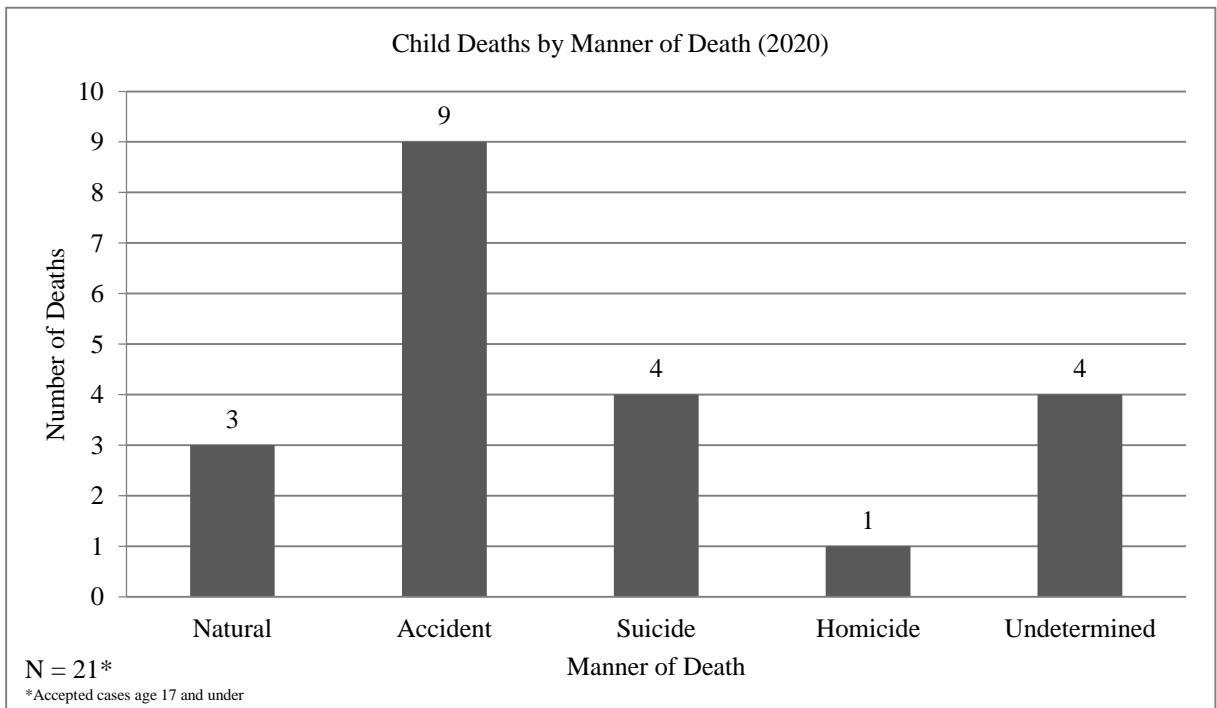


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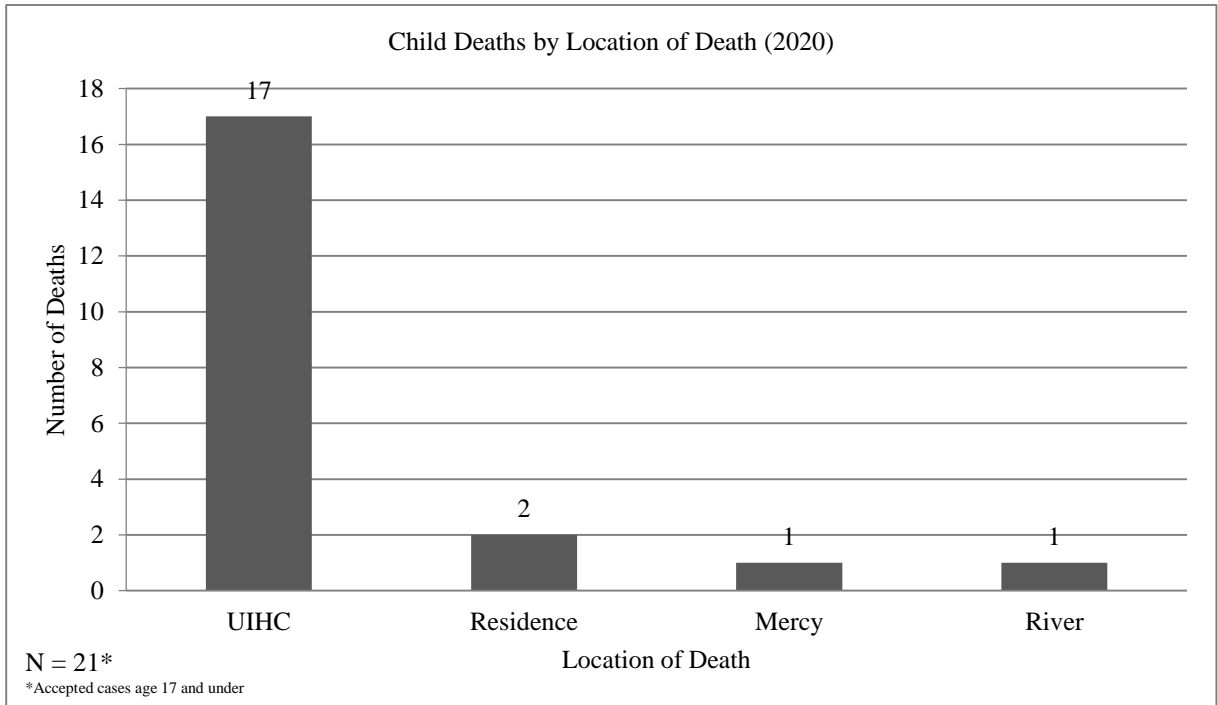


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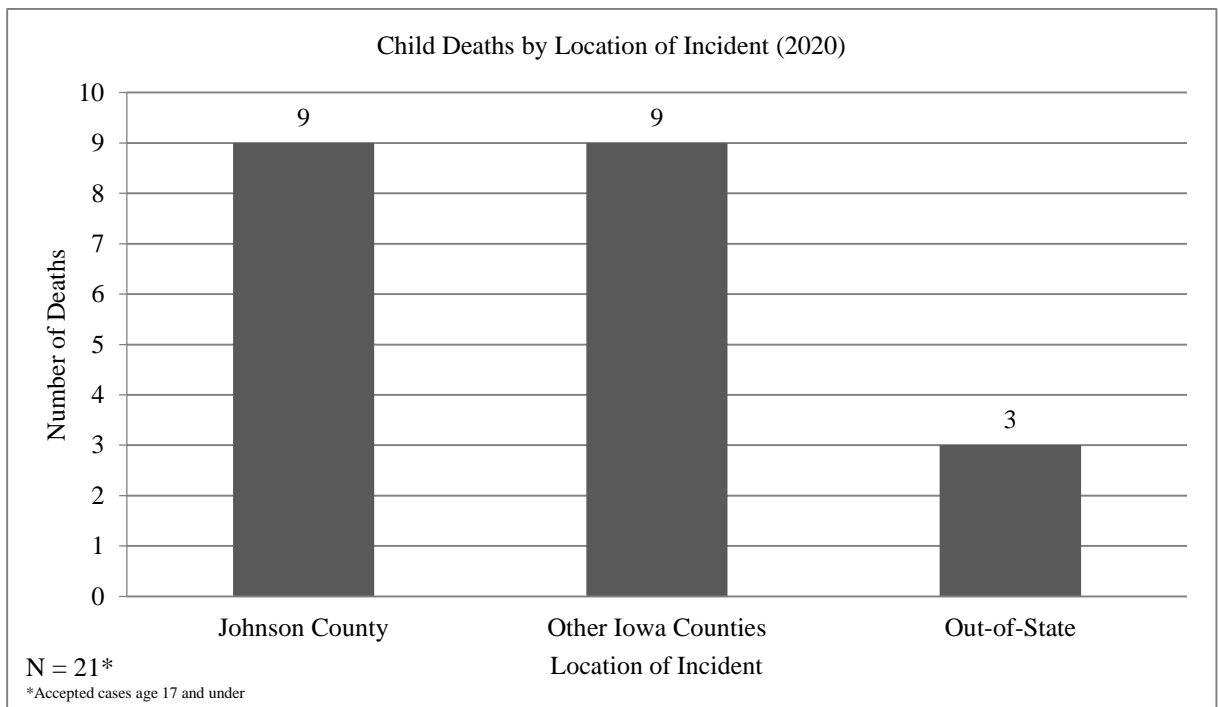


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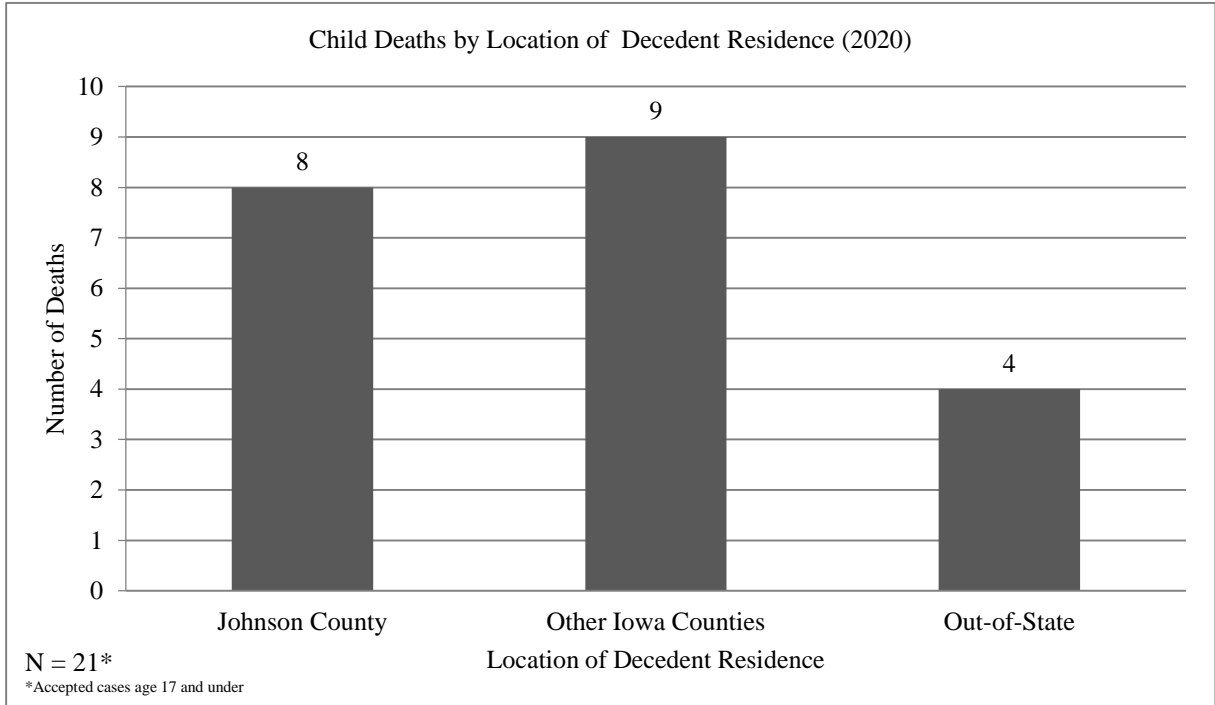


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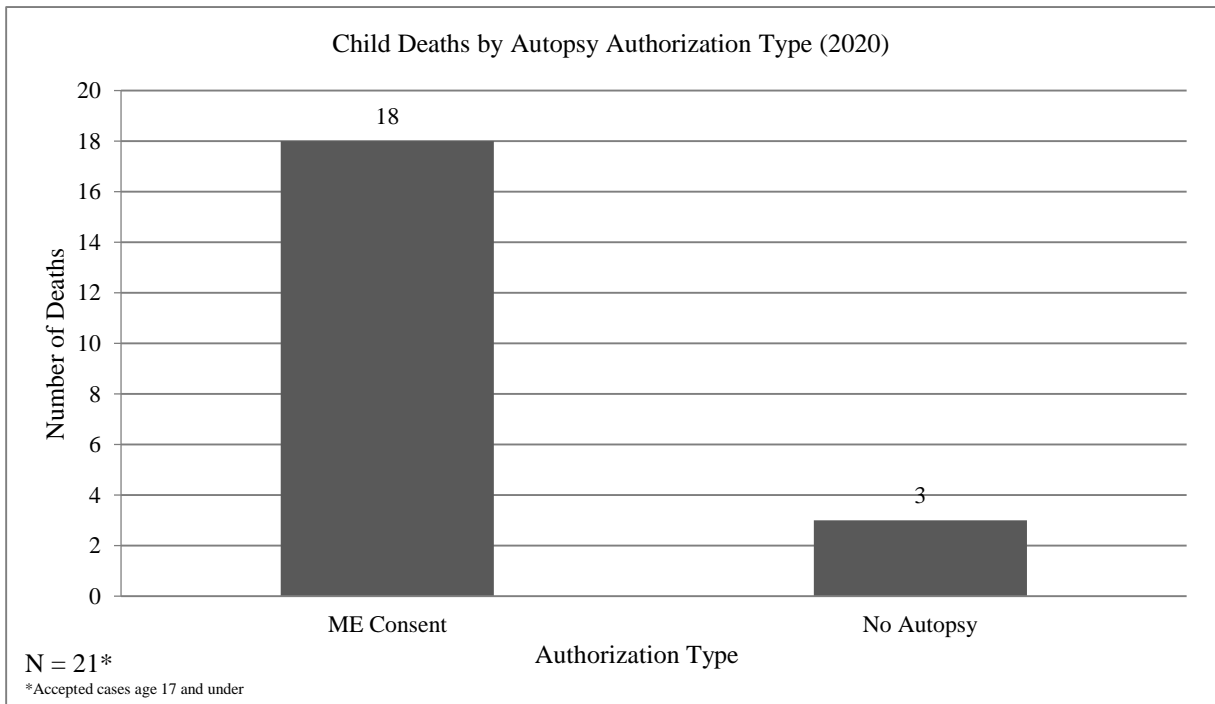


Figure 11.8.

Table 11.1. Infant Sleep-Related Deaths (2020)\*

Age	Sex	Cause of Death	Manner of Death	Location of Incident
2 months, 20 days	F	Undetermined cause of death in the setting of an unsafe sleep environment	Undetermined	Johnson County
5 months	M	Complications of resuscitated asphyxia	Accident	Other Iowa County
2 months, 14 days	M	Asphyxia due to external airway occlusion	Accident	Johnson County

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



## Budget

Johnson County's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30. In fiscal year 2020, JCME was 28% under our budgeted expenditures and 5% below our budgeted revenues.

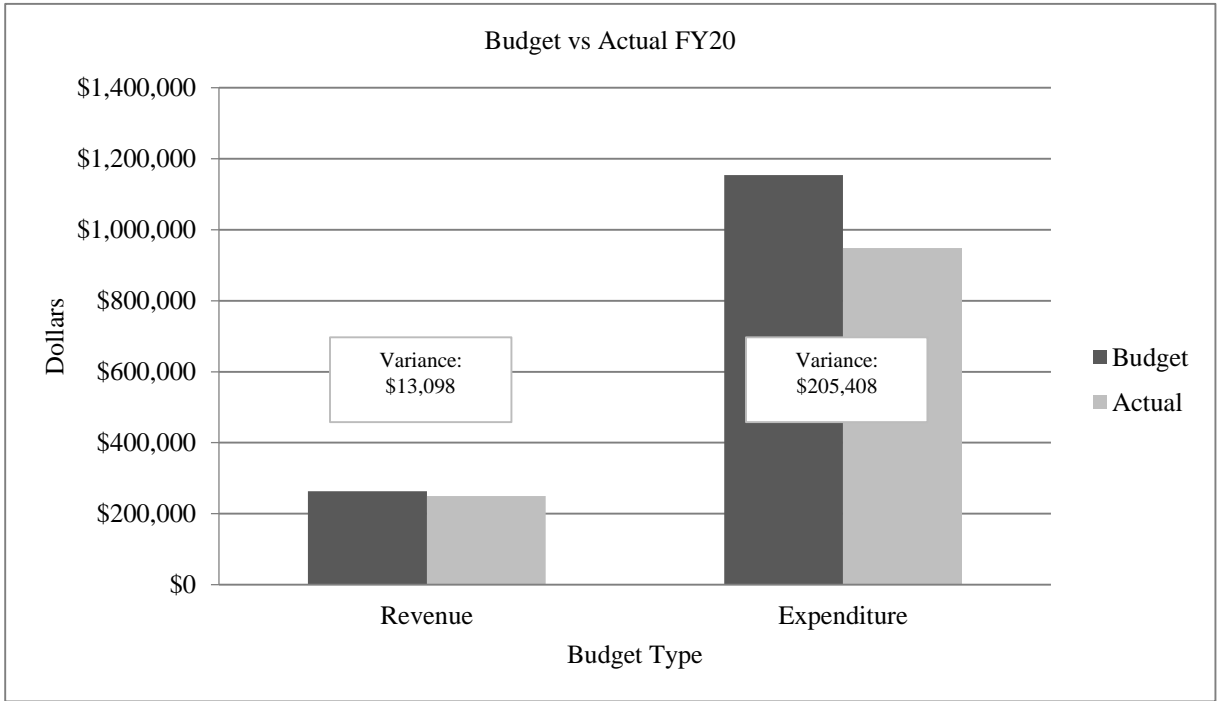


Figure 12.1.

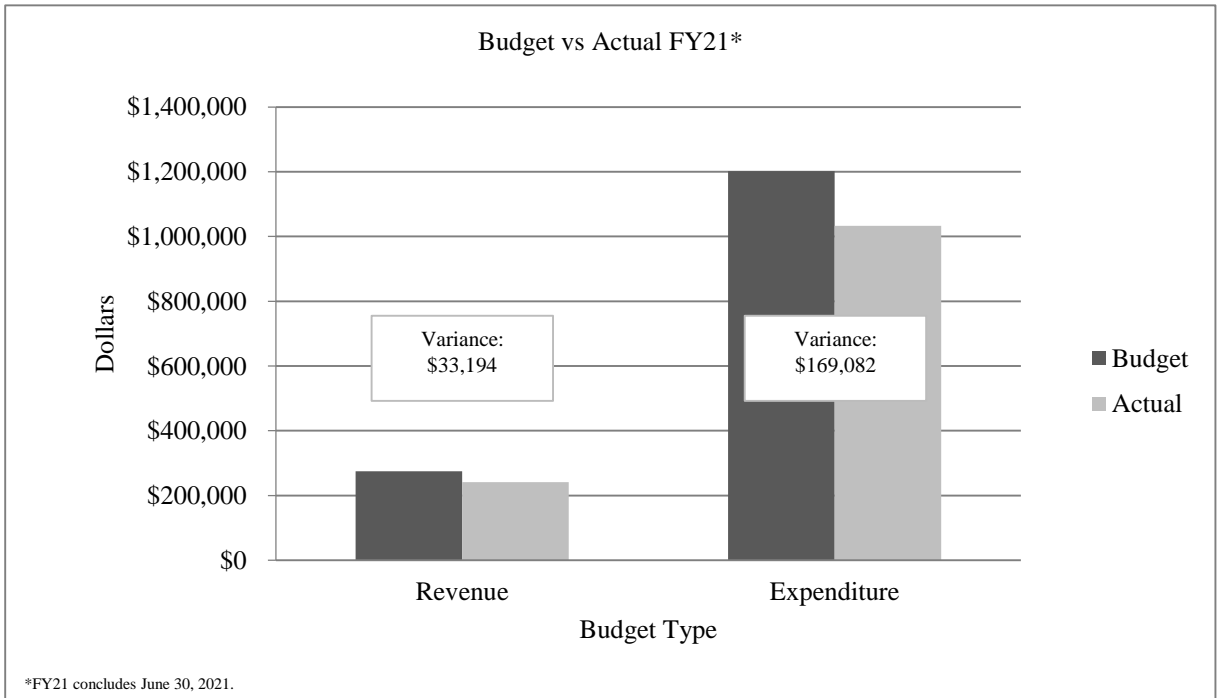


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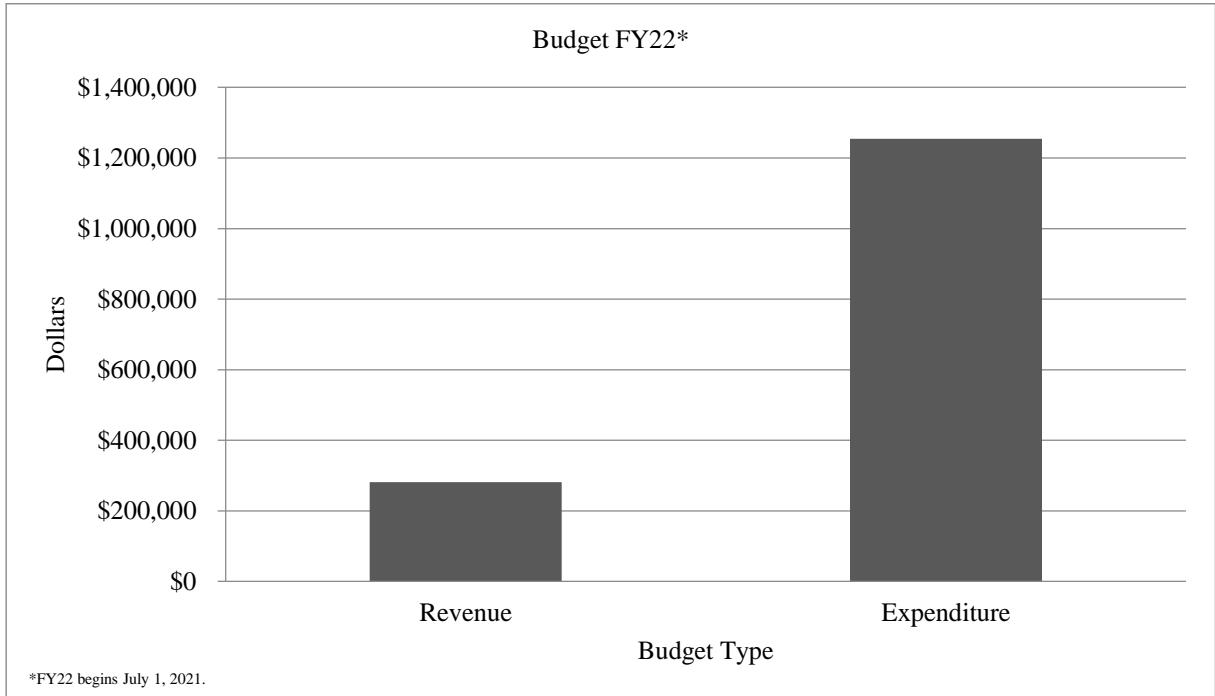


Figure 12.3.

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## Organ and Tissue Donation

JCME has an essential role in the coordination of organ and tissue donation. In 2020, 17 accepted JCME cases became organ donors. From these 17 individuals, the Iowa Donor Network coordinated the recovery of 26 kidneys, 11 livers, 9 hearts, 8 lungs, and 5 pancreases for transplant. Twenty-seven 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 13.1. Organs Transplanted from JCME Accepted Cases (2020)

Organs Transplanted*	
Hearts	9
Lungs (single lungs)	8
Livers	11
Kidneys (single kidneys)	26
Pancreases	5
Small Intestines	0
Total organ donors**	17

\*Information supplied by Iowa Donor Network  
 \*\*Total number of decedents who donated organs

Table 13.2. Tissues Transplanted from JCME Accepted Cases (2020)

Tissues Transplanted*	
Bone Donors	22
Skin Donors	17
Heart Valve Donors	8
Saphenous Vein Donors	14
Femoral Vein Donors	10
Juvenile Cartilage Donors	2
Joint Restoration Donors	6
Total recovered tissue donors**	27

\*Information supplied by Iowa Donor Network  
 \*\*Accepted cases who died out-of-hospital and donated tissue