

DISTRICT 23 MEDICAL EXAMINER OFFICE
2024 Annual Report

Mortui Vivos Docent

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Introduction

The District 23 Medical Examiner's Office (D23MEO) is located at 4501 Avenue A in St. Augustine, Florida. We are responsible for determining the cause and manner of death in people who die in the counties of St. Johns, Flagler, and Putman that fulfill the criteria of Florida Statue 406.11. This statute empowers the Medical Examiner to perform investigations and examinations deemed necessary based on the following criteria:

When any person dies in the state:

1. Of criminal violence
2. By accident
3. By suicide
4. Suddenly, when in apparent good health
5. Unattended by a practicing physician or other recognized practitioner
6. In any prison or penal institution
7. In police custody
8. In any suspicious or unusual circumstances
9. By criminal abortion
10. By poison
11. By disease constituting a threat to public health
12. By disease, injury or toxic agent resulting from employment

(a) When a dead body is brought into the state without proper medical certification

(b) When a body is to be cremated, dissected, or buried at sea

The office consists of an administrative building and a separate building that houses the autopsy suite. The office has twelve employees including a chief medical examiner, an associate medical examiner, an operations manager, two administrative staff, four medicolegal death investigators, and three forensic technicians. We comply with national standards, Florida administrative code, and Florida Association of Medical Examiner guidelines and are proud to say that we maintain accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners. The Medical Examiners are board certified by the American Board of Pathology and three investigators are certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators.

While our facility is open from Monday to Friday during normal business hours, medicolegal death investigations are carried out 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Our mission is to comply with our mandate in a compassionate, respectful, and timely manner, and to provide accurate information to all stakeholders.

County Demographics

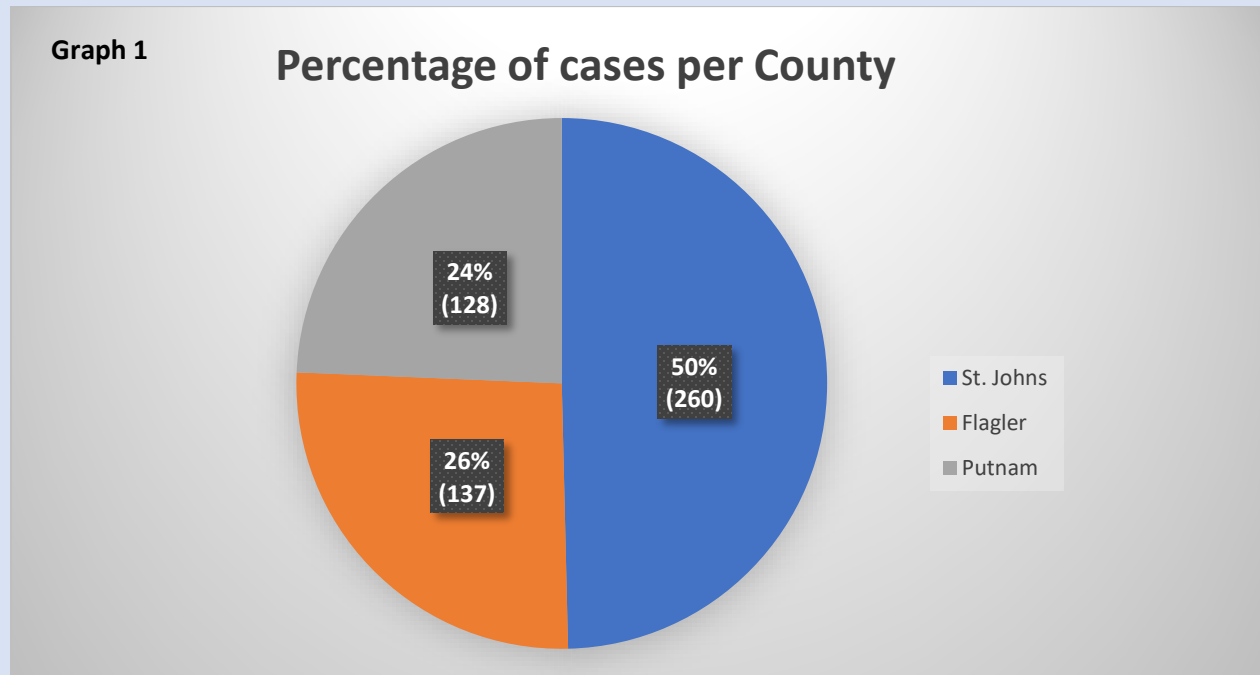
According to the United States Census Bureau the combined population in 2024 of the three counties the D23MEO serves was estimated at 548,973, with St. Johns County accounting for the largest population of the three counties.

The separate population estimates are as follows:

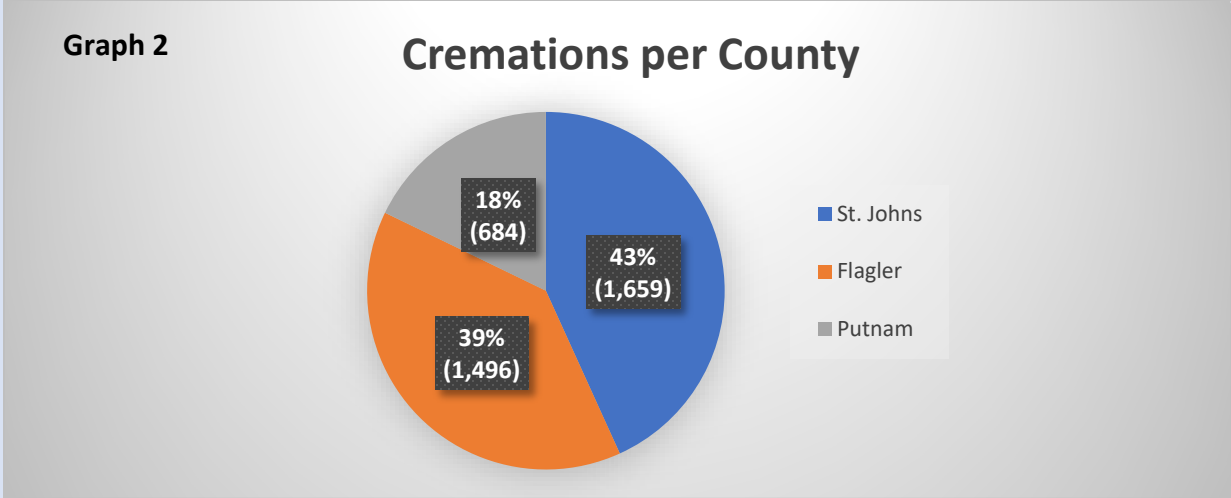
| | |
|------------------|---------|
| St. Johns County | 334,928 |
| Flagler County | 136,744 |
| Putnam County | 77,301 |

Workload

In 2024 a total of 928 cases were reported to the D23MEO. Out of these 402 were immediately declined as they did not meet criteria for jurisdiction. Six hundred and eighty-six were investigated. Out of those, 1 case was deemed to be non-human remains, and 160 cases were further determined to not fulfill the criteria established by F.S. 406.11; the latter cases are known as declined jurisdiction. Ultimately, medical examiner Jurisdiction was assumed in 525 cases. The number and percentage of cases by county is depicted in **Graph 1**.

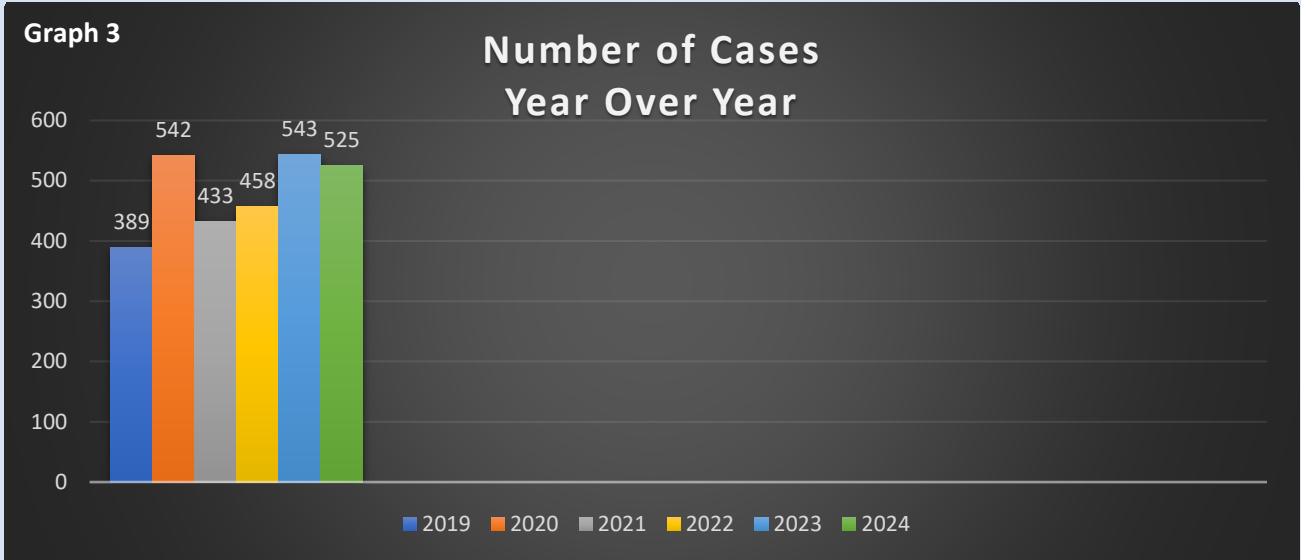


In addition, the D23MEO reviewed the death certificates of 3,839 decedents that were to be cremated, dissected, or buried at sea to determine if any of those fulfilled the criteria of F.S. 406.11. Of the reviewed cases 37 were identified as meeting criteria for medical examiner jurisdiction and their death certificates were re-certified with the appropriate cause and manner of death. The number of cremations by county is depicted in **Graph 2**.



Year over Year

Between years 2019 and 2023 there was a rapid increase in population, reflected in the total number of cases in which D23MEO assumed jurisdiction. The accelerated rate of cases in 2020 was partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, most of the increase was secondary to drug overdoses. Year 2024 reveals a marginal decrease in total number of cases (-17 cases). A possible explanation for this decrease in numbers could be that there was a 30% decrease in total drug overdoses from all counties, as compared to year 2023 which is in line with statewide trends of drug overdoses. **Graph 3** depicts the number of ME cases for the last six years.

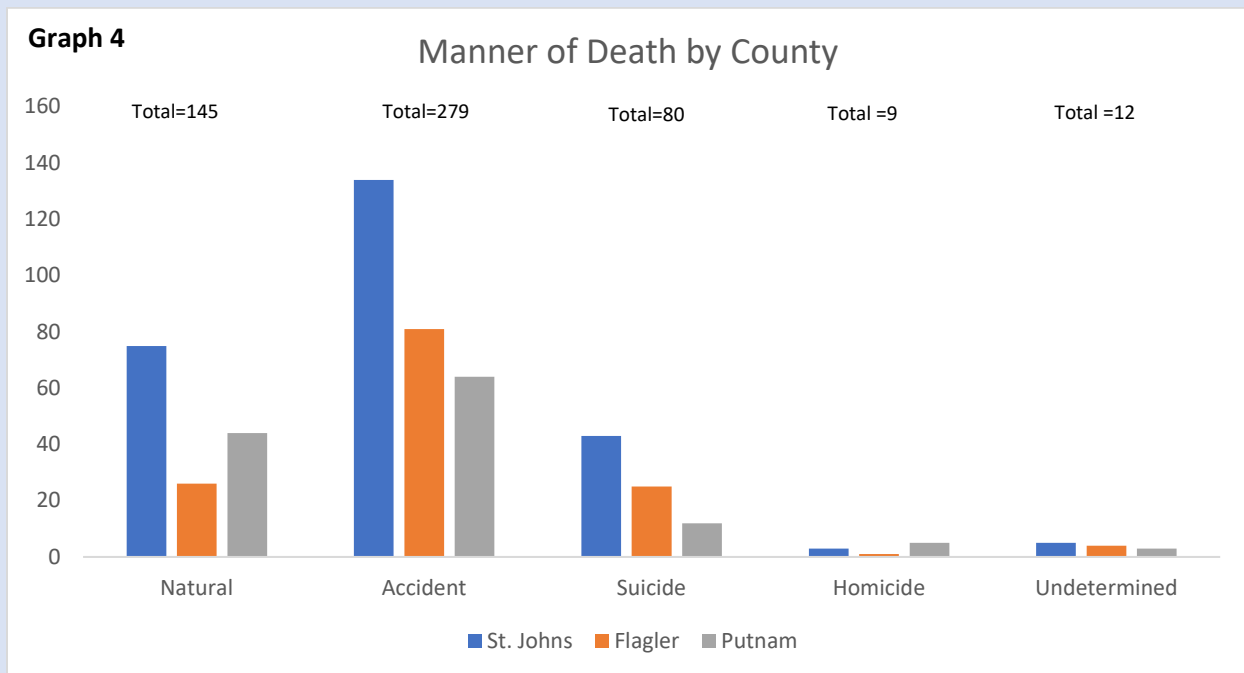


It is important to note, that not all cases in which the D23MEO assume jurisdiction are transported to the Medical Examiner’s Office. Additionally, not all cases transported to the office are to be autopsied. Decedents not brought to the office include mostly those who suffered falls, complications of a fall, and were under medical care at the time of their death; in those cases, the cause of death is adjudicated based on investigative findings and review of medical records. In 2024, out of 525 cases of which we assumed

jurisdiction, 416 were physically brought into the office; out of those 276 (66%) were autopsied while the remainder underwent external examinations.

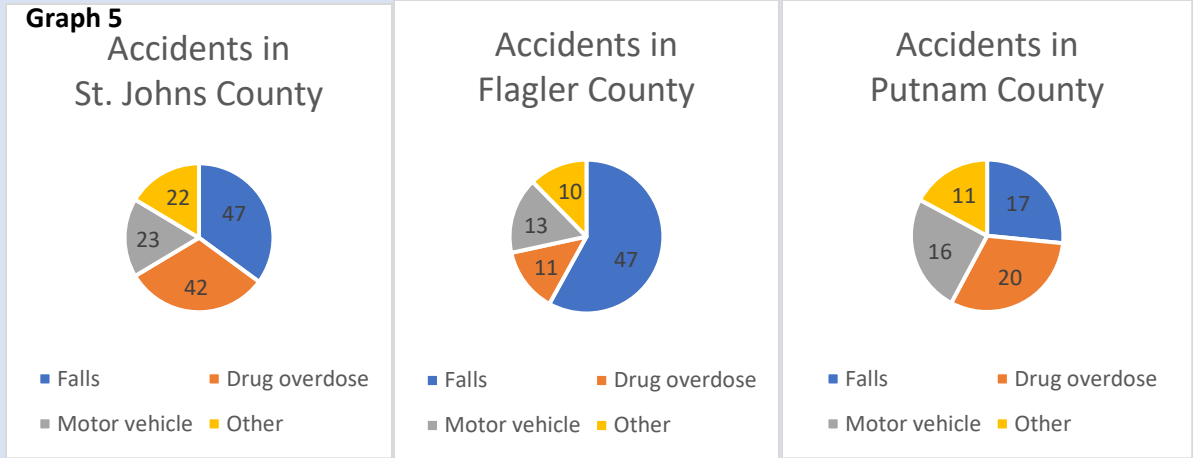
Cause and Manner of Death

Each certificate of death must include a cause and a manner of death. The cause of death is the initiating disease or condition that starts a physiologic pathway culminating in death. The manner of death is how the death came about. The assignment of a manner of death is for public health purposes, although agencies like the State Attorney’s Office and insurance companies may use this determination for their own purposes. The manners of death are natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined. If a person dies from a natural disease or diseases, then the manner is natural. If death is secondary to injury or drug toxicity without evidence that there was intent to harm or cause death, then the manner is accident. Suicides result from injury or drug toxicity that results from an act intended to cause self-harm or death. Homicides are deaths that result from a volitional act committed by another person with the intention to cause fear, harm, or death. In cases in which the manner of death cannot be determined because there is more than one reasonable choice or if there is a high degree of uncertainty, then the manner of death is best listed as undetermined. **Graph 4** shows the proportion of manner of death in 2024 by counties.



Accidents

In 2024, accident was the most common manner of death certified at the D23MEO. Accidents include motor vehicle related deaths, drug toxicity, falls, drownings, and other modalities. Traditionally drug overdoses have been the most common type of accidental manner of deaths at the D23MEO; however, in 2024 with the decrease in drug deaths, falls and/or their complications became the most common cause for accidental deaths. The falls are typically associated with the elderly population. **Graph 5** shows the distribution of accidental manner of death per county.

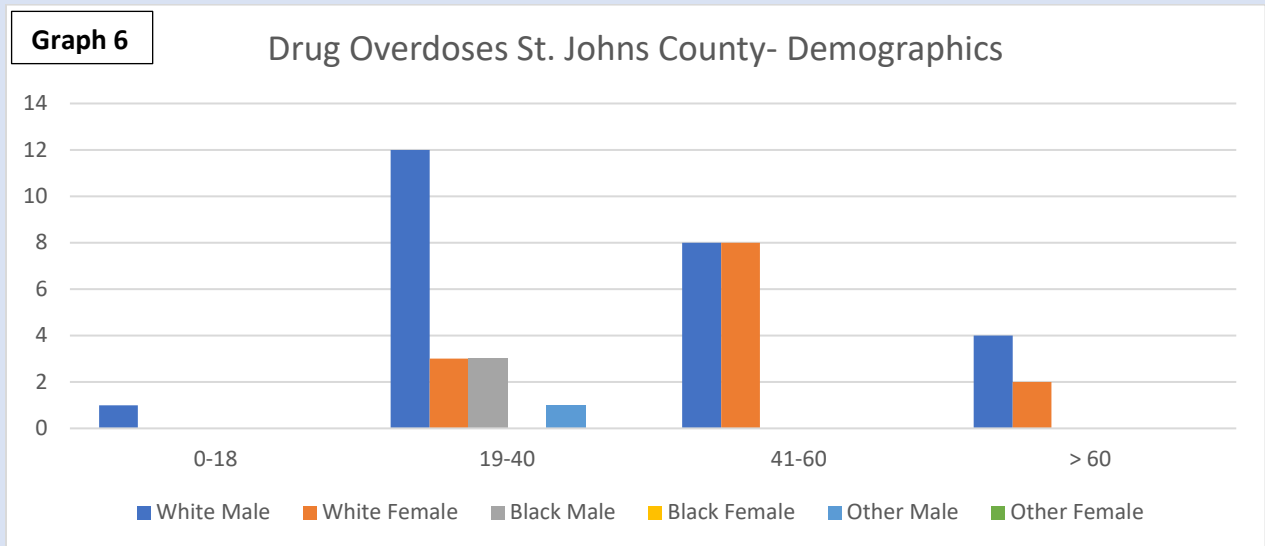


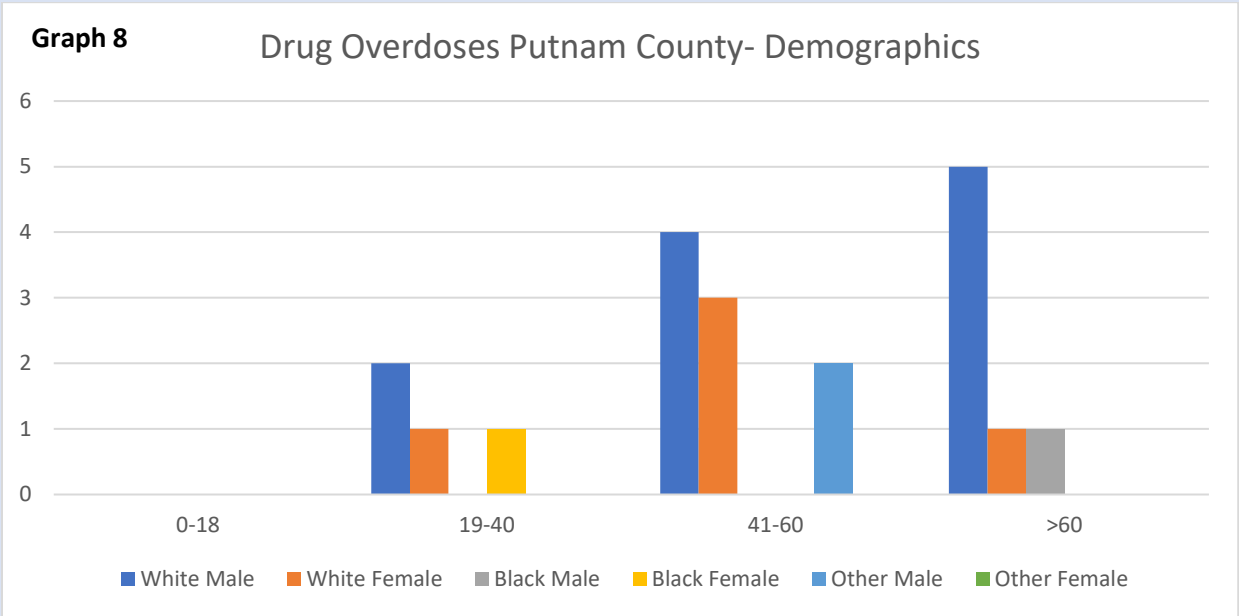
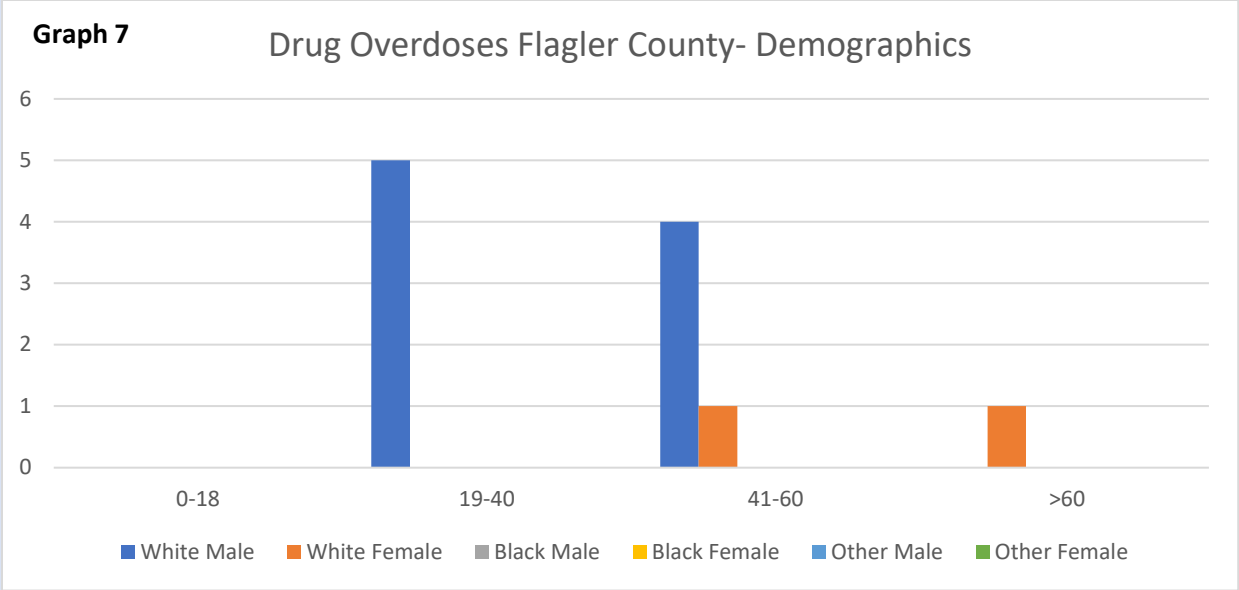
Drug Overdoses

In 2024 the D23MEO certified a total of 73 drug overdoses. By far, the most common drug causing accidental deaths is non-prescribed (illicitly obtained) fentanyl, mostly in combination with stimulants. The most used stimulant in all counties is methamphetamine. Acetyl fentanyl is the most common fentanyl analog used. **Table 1** depicts the most common combinations of drugs seen within the three counties.

| Table 1 | Fentanyl | Fentanyl + Fentanyl analog | Fentanyl + stimulant | Fentanyl + Fentanyl analog + stimulant | Fentanyl analog + stimulant | Fentanyl + others | Stimulants | Methadone | Other drugs |
|-----------|----------|----------------------------|----------------------|--|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------|-------------|
| County | | | | | | | | | |
| St. Johns | 6 | 3 | 12 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| Flagler | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| Putnam | 3 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 1 |

Graphs 6, 7, and 8 show the demographic distribution of drugs by age, gender, and ethnicity within each county.



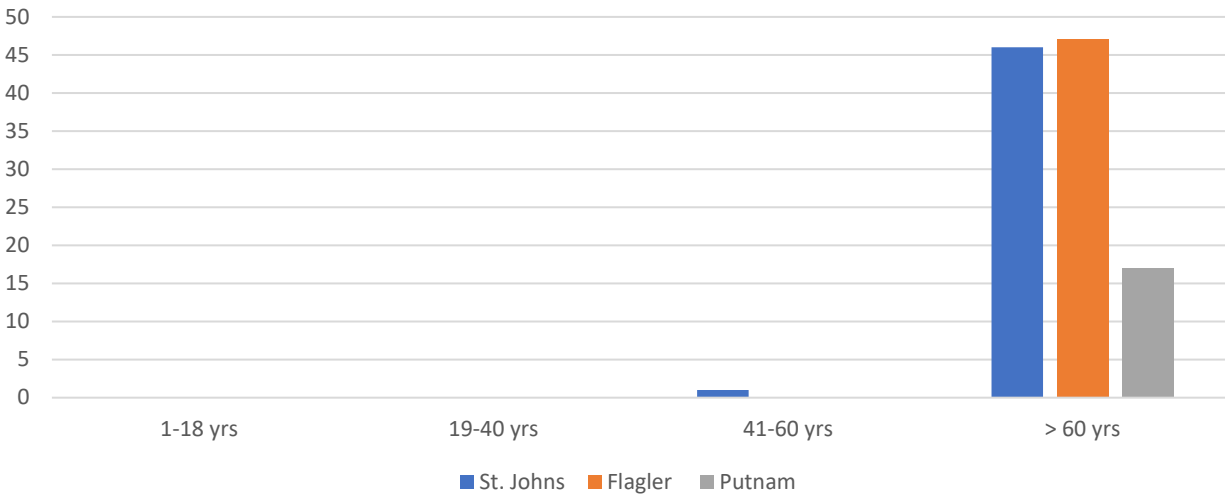


Falls

The medical examiner office certified 111 deaths secondary to falls in 2024. The cause of death on these cases are typically designated as blunt trauma and include intracranial hemorrhages and hip fractures in the elderly population resulting from ground level falls, falls from bed, or falls from wheelchairs. The majority of deaths resulting from falls (76%) occurred in the population over the age of 80 years. **Graph 9** depicts the age ranges for falls.

Graph 9

Age distribution of Falls by County

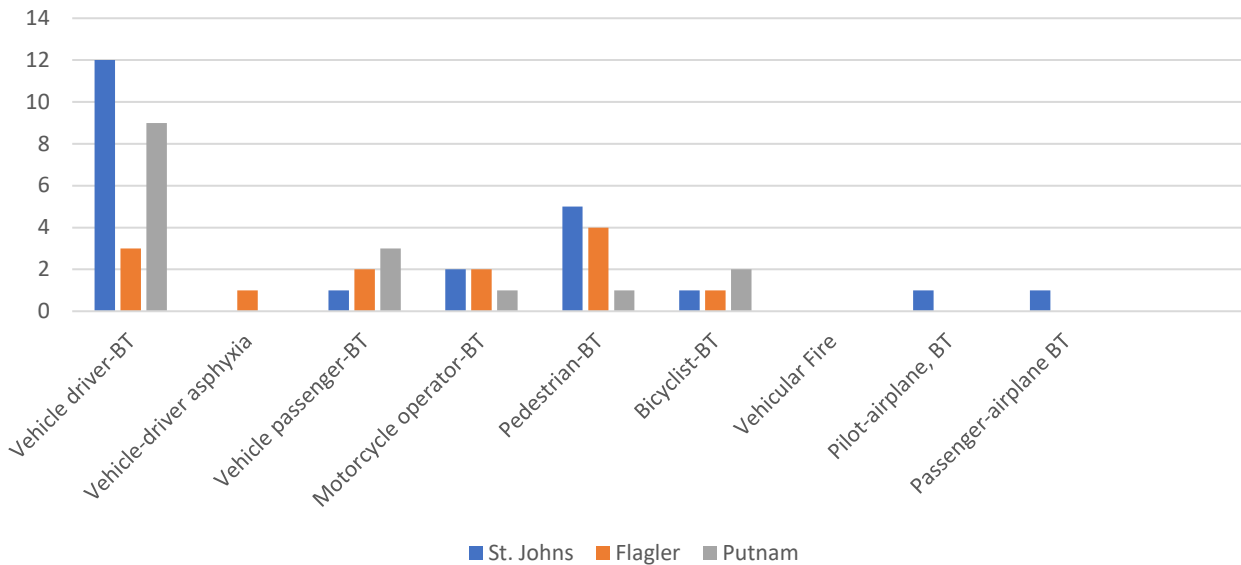


Motor Vehicle Related Deaths

Motor vehicle fatalities include deaths in cars, motorcycles, bicylists struck by vehicles, pedestrians struck or runover by vehicles, and plane crashes. The modalities include deaths from blunt trauma (BT), traumatic asphyxia, drowning, and vehicular fire. In 2024 fifty-two deaths were recorded in all three counties. The distribution of motor vehicle related death by county is depicted in **Graph 10**.

Graph 10

Motor Vehicle Related Deaths



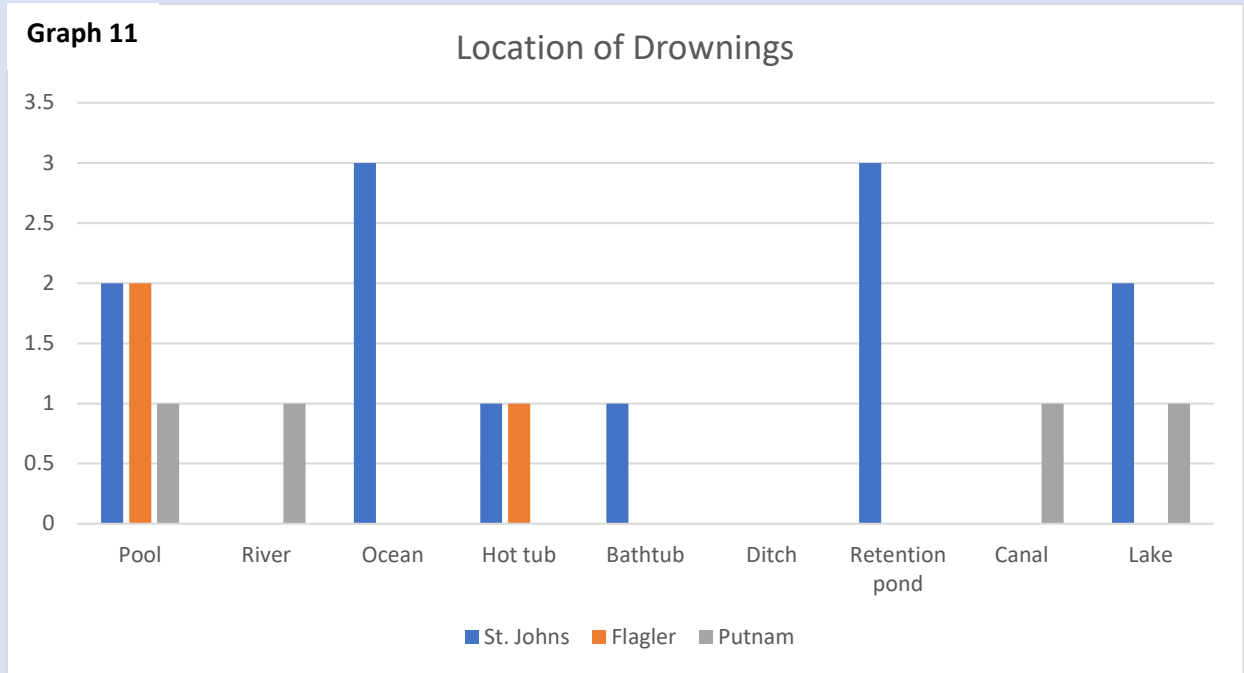
Thirty decedents out of the 52 traffic related deaths were in charge of operating their vehicles (cars and motorcycles). Eighteen out of the thirty (60%) decedents were positive for drugs which include fentanyl, alcohol, stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamines, and marijuana. Out of the eighteen, approximately 50% (9) had more than one drug in their system.

Other Accidental Deaths

In 2024 other accidental deaths accounted for 15% of the total accidents. Included amongst those deaths are fire-related deaths, drownings, choking, and other types of asphyxia deaths.

Drownings

There were 19 drownings in 2024, accounting for 7% of total accidental deaths. Overall, drownings occurred most often in pools. **Graph 11** depicts the locations of the drownings by county. Five off the nineteen drownings occurred in children (<18 years).

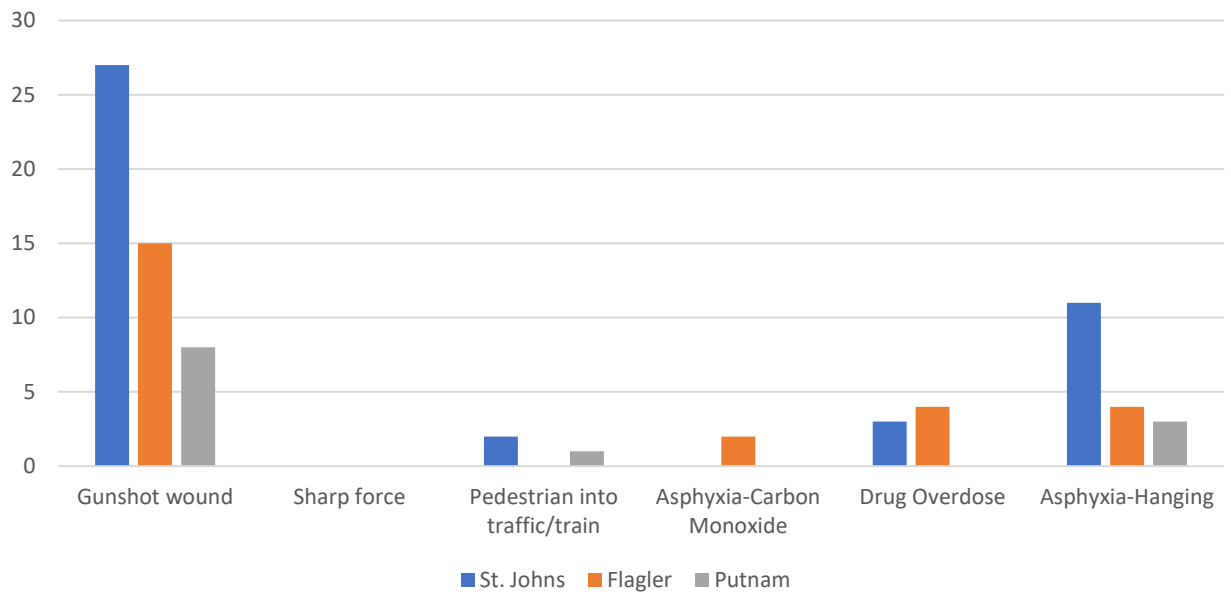


Suicides

In 2024 the D23MEO certified 80 deaths with a suicidal manner. Firearm deaths exceeded hanging and overdoses as the preferred mean to kill oneself. **Graphs 12 through 15** show the distribution of suicides on each county by modality, and age. The suicide male to female ratio in St Johns, Flagler, and Putnam Counties were 2.6:1, 3.2:1, and 5:1 respectively. The age of female suicides ranged from 16 to 90 years, and the male suicides ranged from 17 to 92 years.

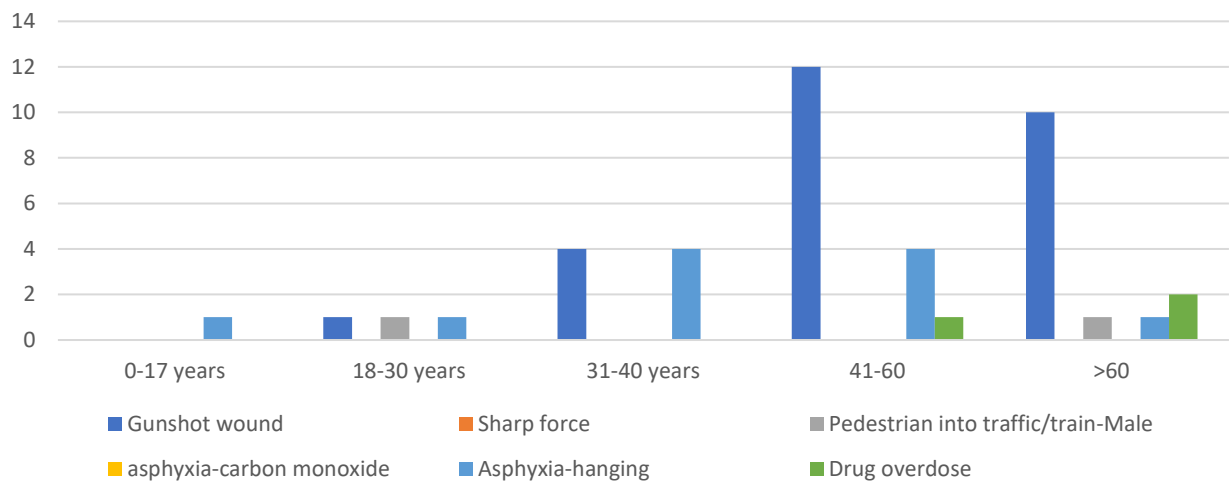
Graph 12

Suicide Modalities



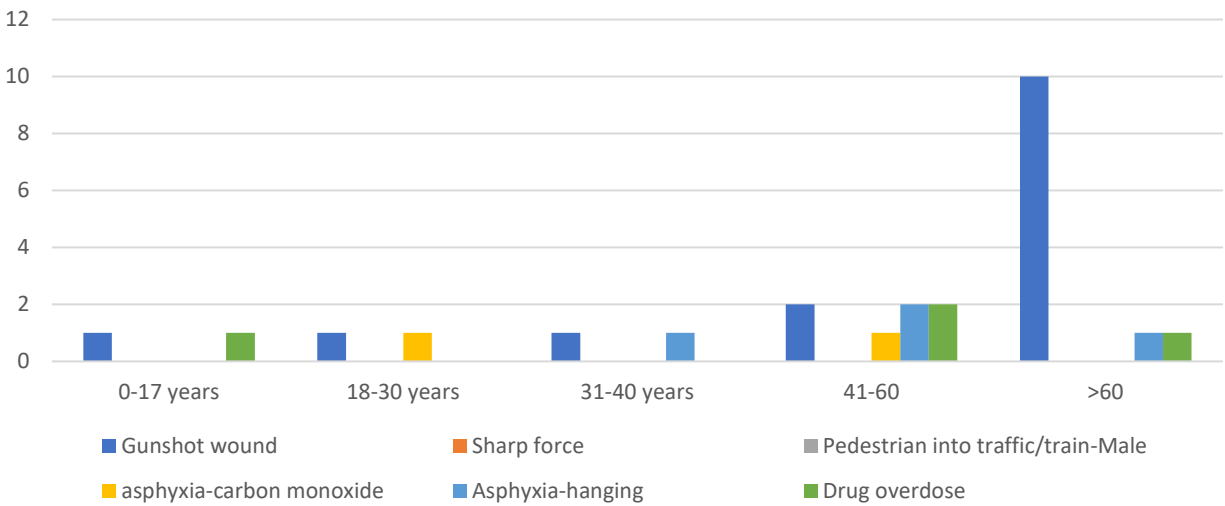
Graph 13

St. Johns Suicide Age Distribution



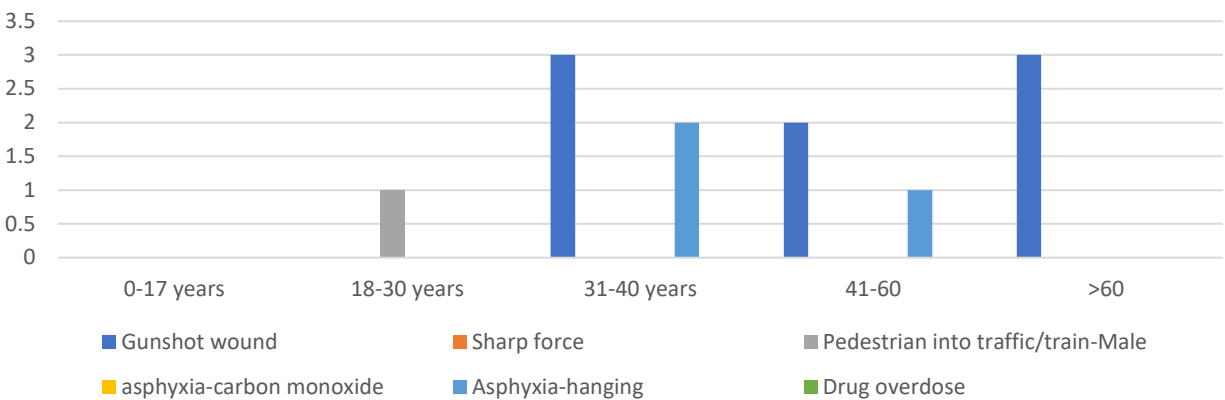
Graph 14

Flagler
Suicide
Age Distribution



Graph 15

Putnam
Suicide
Age Distribution

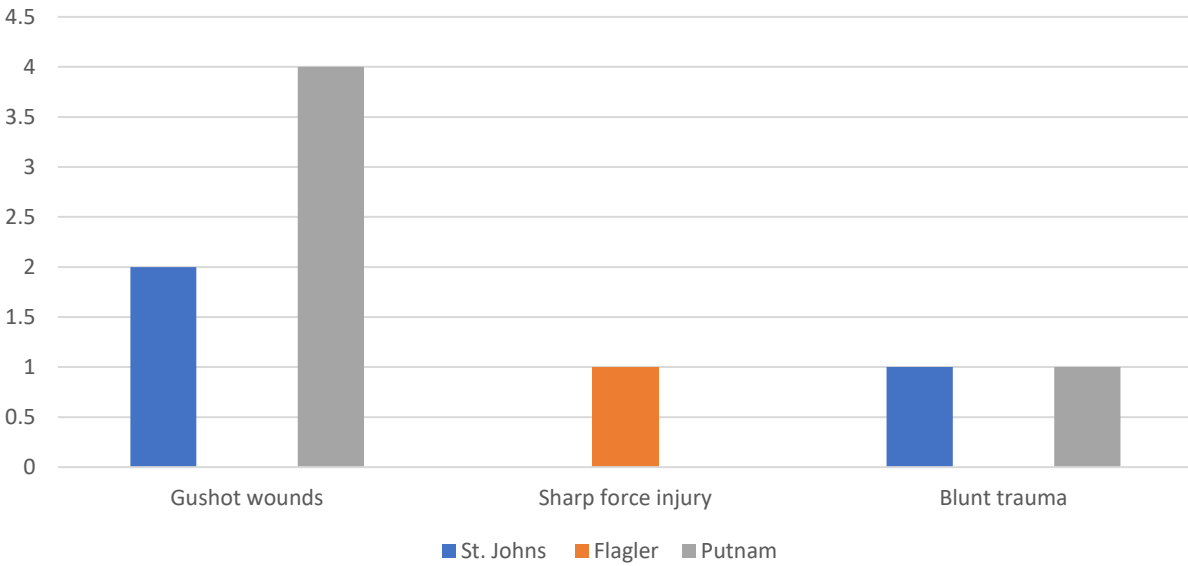


Homicides

Year 2024 yielded 9 homicides, a total **40% decrease** in homicides for all counties as compared to year 2023. Like suicides, firearms far exceeded other modalities. **Graph 16** depicts the number of homicides by county and **Graph 17** depicts the homicide demographics by age, ethnicity, and gender. Firearms are the most common modality accounting for 67% of all homicides.

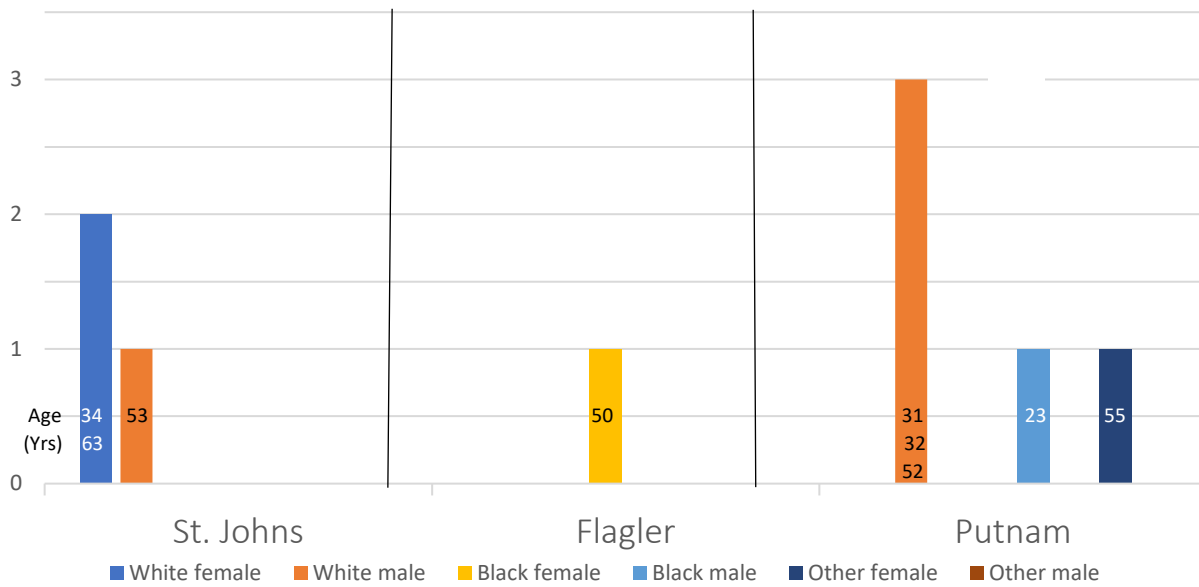
Graph 16

Homicides by County



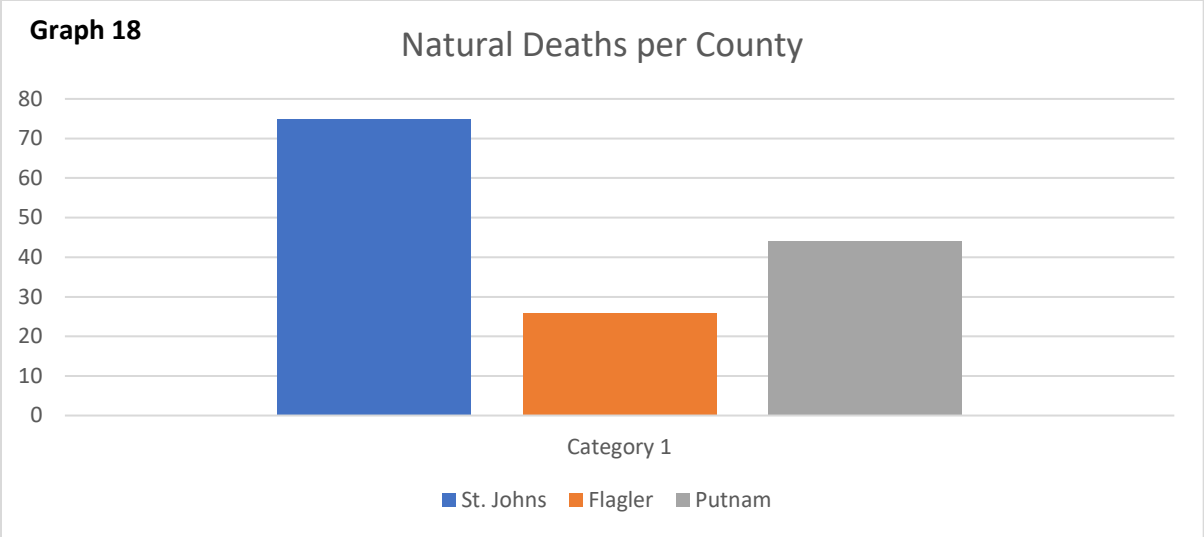
Graph 17

Homicide Demographics



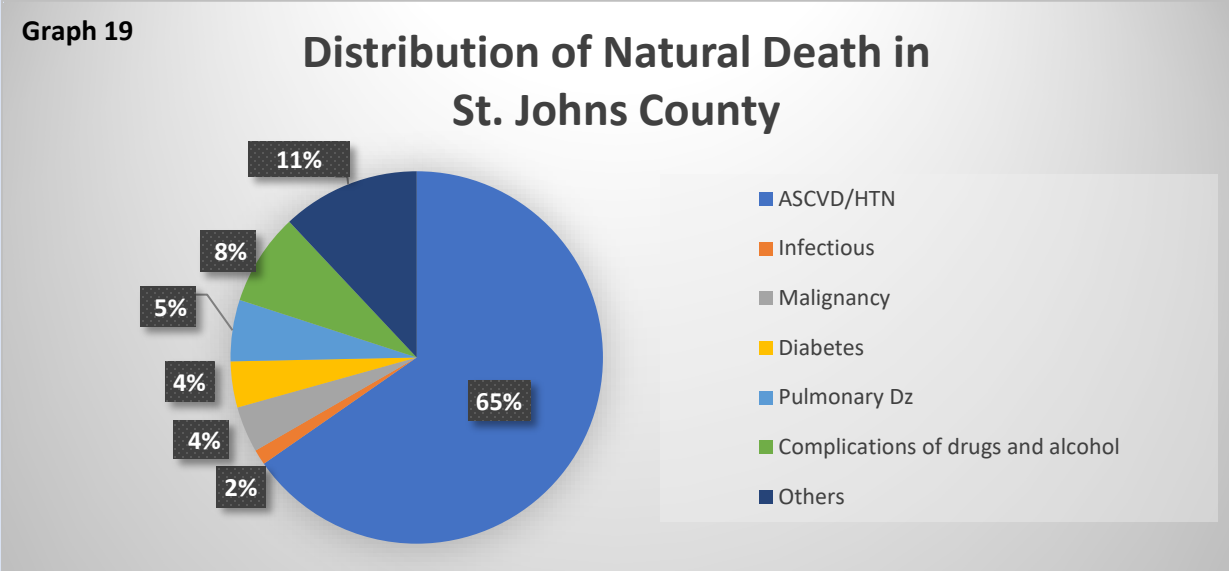
Natural Deaths

Per Florida Statute if a person dies while they are not under the care of a medical professional during the 12 months preceding the death, then the medical examiner must take jurisdiction for the purpose of certifying the death. The D23MEO certified a total of 145 natural deaths in 2024. The number of natural deaths per County is depicted on **Graph 18**.



By far the most common natural diagnosis in all counties was related to cardiovascular conditions which includes atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, hypertension, valvular disease, congestive heart failure, cerebral aneurysm, and cerebrovascular accidents. Other natural deaths stem from infectious conditions, malignancy, diabetes mellitus, and pulmonary diseases. Complications of drugs and alcohol refers mostly to decedents with findings consistent with end stage liver disease from alcoholism or with chronic complications of drug abuse.

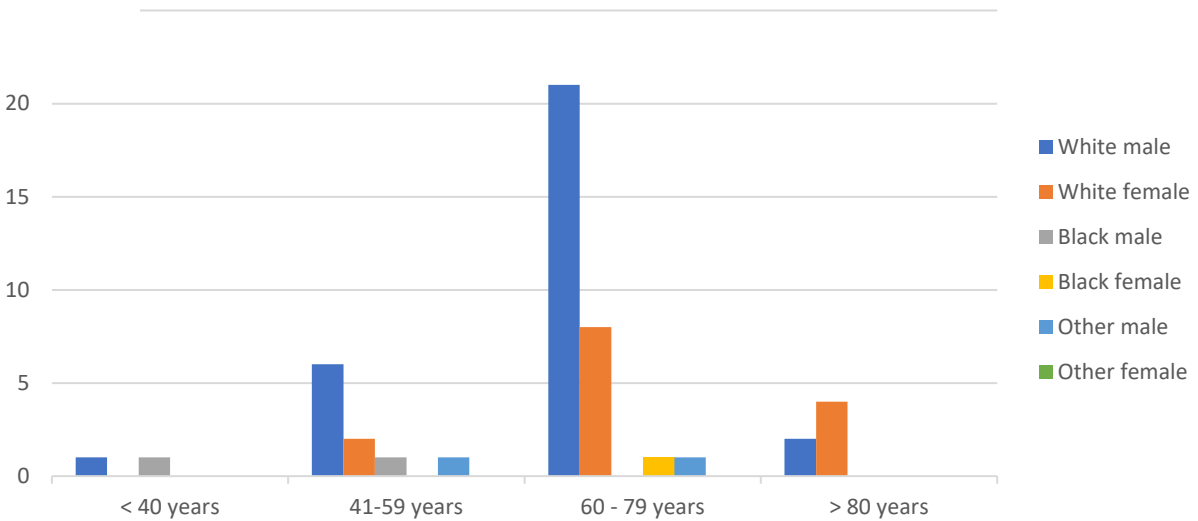
In St. Johns County natural deaths accounted for approximately 29% of the total case load of this county (75 out of 260 cases). The types and percentages of natural deaths are depicted in **Graph 19**.



Most cases that died from cardiovascular conditions were between the ages of 60 and 79 years. The overall male to female ratio of 2.26:1 as depicted in **Graph 20**.

Graph 20

St. Johns County Cardiovascular Disease Demographics

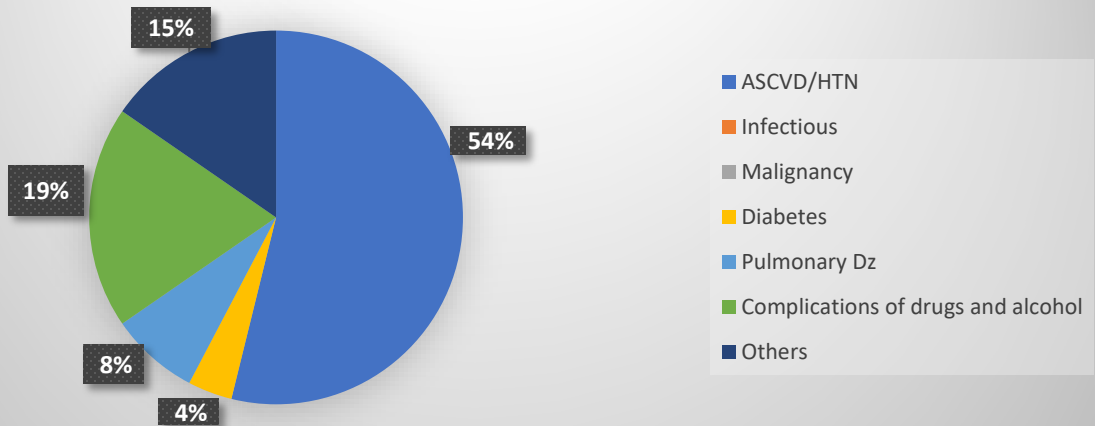


The second most common deaths in St. Johns County fell under the category of others; these include but are not limited to advanced age, dementia, gastrointestinal conditions, and epilepsy to name a few.

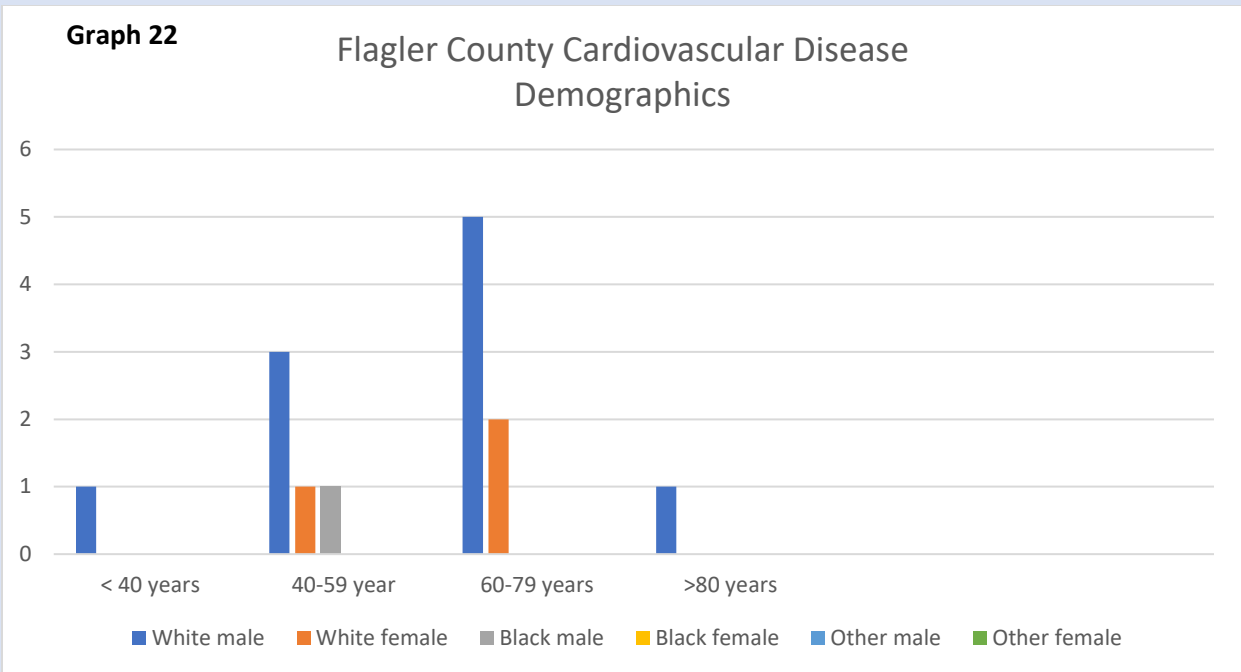
In Flagler County natural deaths accounted for approximately 19% of the total case load of this county (26 out of 137 cases). The types and percentages of natural deaths within the county are depicted in **Graph 21**.

Graph 21

Distribution of Natural Deaths in Flagler County

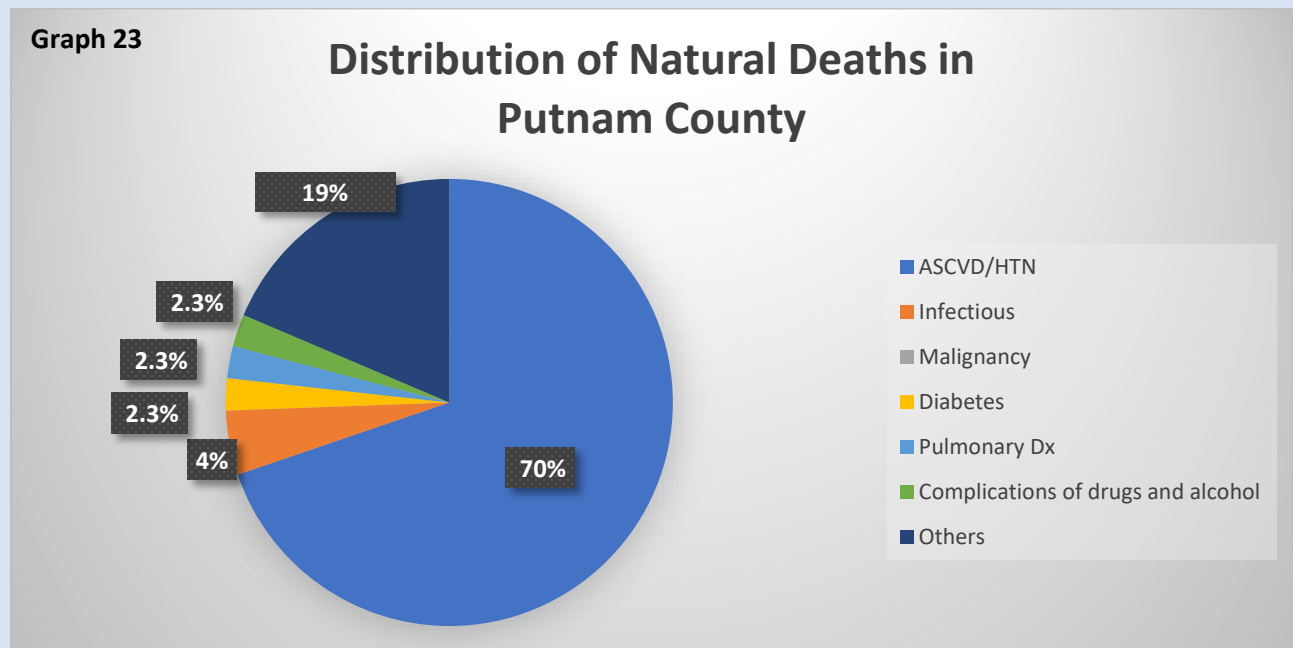


In Flagler County most of the cases that died from cardiovascular conditions were between the ages of 60 and 79 years with a male to female ratio of 3.6:1 as depicted in **Graph 22**.

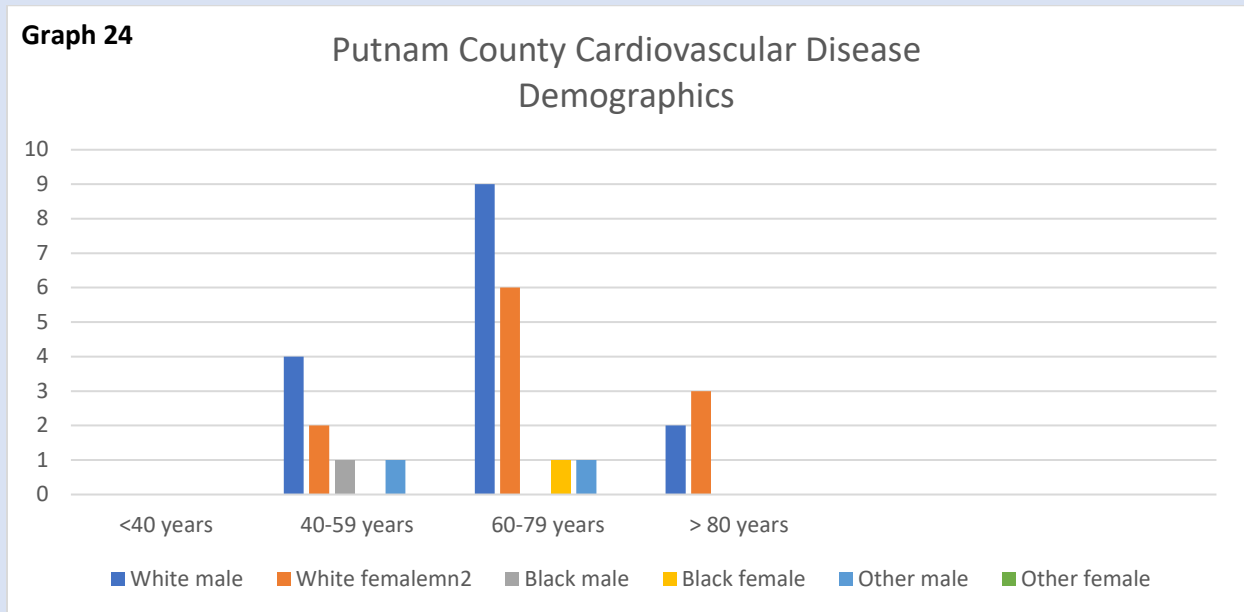


The second most common deaths in Flagler County fell under the category of others which includes natural conditions previously detailed.

In Putnam County natural deaths accounted for approximately 34% of the total case load of this county (44 out of 128 cases). The types and percentages of natural deaths are depicted in **Graph 23**.



Consistent with St. Johns and Flagler Counties, in Putnam County most of the cases that died from cardiovascular conditions were between the ages of 60 and 79 years with a male to female ratio of 1.5:1 as depicted in **Graph 24**.



The second most common category of natural disease seen in Putnam County fell under the category of others, with conditions previously specified.

Undetermined Cause and/or Manner of Death

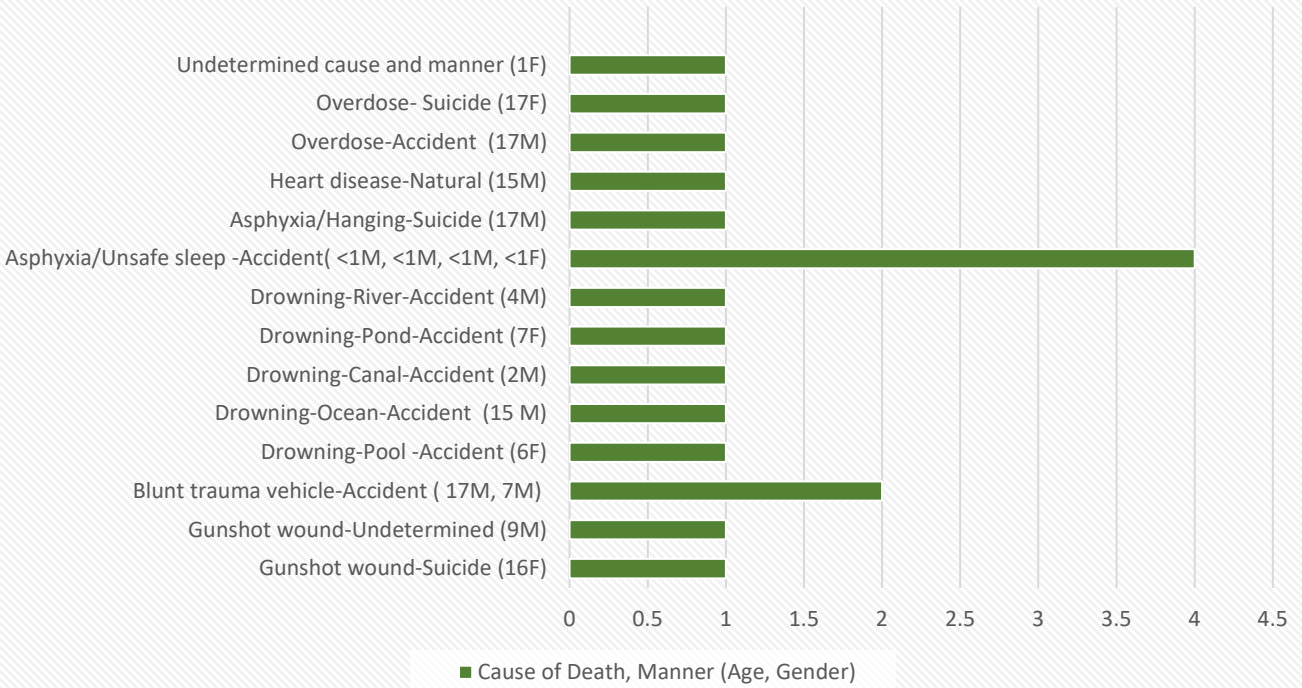
Undetermined (could not be determined) can refer to the cause and/or the manner of death. Undetermined is used after thorough investigation, examination, and consideration of all available information does not yield clear information to support a specific cause of death, or when the information pointing to one manner of death is no more compelling than one or more other competing manners of death. In 2024, 12 out of 525 cases (2%) were deemed to be undetermined. It is important to know that the cause and/or manner of death may always be reclassified if additional information or circumstances are provided that warrant a change in the opinion of cause and/or manner of death.

Children and Infants

For our purposes, a child death is greater than 1-year, but less than 18 years of age. An infant is less than 1 year of age. By these definitions, 18 child/infant deaths were investigated in 2024. There were 7 St. Johns, 5 Flagler, and 6 Putnam deaths investigated. Amongst the 18 deaths there was 0 homicide, 3 suicides (one overdose, one hanging, one gunshot wound), 2 accidental motor vehicle related deaths, 5 accidental drownings, 4 accidental deaths related to unsafe sleep environment and/or asphyxia, 1 natural death due to heart disease, 1 accidental overdose, and 2 undetermined manner deaths. **Graph 25** depicts all children deaths with their respective ages.

Graph 25

Children Deaths



Death in Custody

Death in custody are of two broad categories; law enforcement involved and penal institution, as defined by the Florida Medical Examiner Commission. The D23MEO certified 6 deaths under these criteria. One death was at a St. Johns County jail; the decedent’s cause of death was deemed to be from complications of chronic ethanolism, manner of death was certified as natural. The other five were law enforcement involved in St. Johns and Putnam Counties; the causes of death resulted from blunt trauma (traffic) and gunshot wounds (homicides). One case was determined to be a suicide.

Organ and Tissue Donation

The Medical Examiner Office cooperates with all tissue and organ procurement agencies in the area. Cases that fall under Medical Examiner Jurisdiction who are pronounced deceased at a hospital may become organ donors. If the death is certified outside of a medical facility and the bodies are directly transported to the Medical Examiner’s Office, then the decedents may become tissue donors. Authorization for tissue or organ donation is required and provided to the Medical Examiner’s Office by the tissue or organ procurement agency. In 2024 fifteen cases stemming from Medical Examiner Jurisdiction became donors. Four of them were organ donors and 11 were tissue donors.

Non-Resident Deaths

In 2024 the D23MEO assumed jurisdiction of 81 decedents that died without having a permanent address in our counties to account for 15% of total case load. This data does not include transient/homeless people living in our counties. This number includes out of state visitors, decedents with out of county addresses, and people in transit throughout our roadways.

Report prepared by: Dr. Wendolyn Sneed, Chief Medical Examiner
Sara K. Painter, Forensics Operation Coordinator