
Clallam County Coroner's Office 2024 Annual Report

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Rebecca Shankles, MS, D-ABDMI

Manager of Investigations

Published June 2025

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Clallam County Coroner's Office is to serve the community by conducting medicolegal death investigations in an independent, compassionate, and professional manner to determine the circumstances surrounding a death while serving as an advocate for the decedents and a resource to the families.

VISION STATEMENT

To be a leader in providing compassionate, professional, and efficient assistance to the community of Clallam County and to work collaboratively with our partners to reduce preventable deaths.

DEDICATION

We acknowledge that each case featured in this report represents the death of a person whose absence is grieved by family, friends, and our community. We dedicate this report to those individuals, their loved ones, and the citizens of Clallam County we strive to serve with compassion every day.

About the Coroner's Office

The Clallam County Coroner's Office investigates the circumstances surrounding a person's death independently of any law enforcement agency with the primary role of determining the cause and manner upon notification of deaths that are unexpected, unexplained, suspicious, violent, or in which the cause and/or manner of death is unknown. In addition to this role, the coroner is responsible for identifying decedents and notifying next of kin. The coroner's office strives to provide every individual in need of our services with factual direction, professionalism, commitment, and care.

Core Values

Integrity:

Honesty in everything we do; knowing it is critical to do the best we can for all decedents and their families to arrive at the most accurate conclusion of each death we investigate.

Compassion:

To be able to recognize and respond with sincerity to the needs, concerns, and fears of those experiencing a loss.

Service:

To be available anytime we are needed, and to respond to provide our services quickly and with an emphasis on thoroughness. To assist other agencies, both public and private, in gathering and sharing information with them relative to their participation in the cases we investigate.

Prevention:

The Clallam County Coroner's Office has an important public health role in bringing causes and manners of deaths to the attention of the public and many involved agencies. The Coroner's Office works with community partners to adopt a proactive approach to reducing preventable deaths such as drug-related deaths as well as suicides.

Clallam County



Clallam County covers an area over 2,670 square miles which consists of coastal, agricultural, and mountain areas, including a portion of the Olympic National Park. Towns include Forks, Port Angeles, and Sequim. There are four Native American tribal governments in the county: Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe, Makah Tribe, Lower

Elwha Klallam Tribe, and Quileute Tribe.

Per the US Census Bureau for 2024, Clallam County is home to approximately 77,958 people with a growth rate of 1%. Currently, Clallam County is ranked as the 18th largest county in Washington State. Clallam County’s population is made up of 81.6% Caucasian, 7% Hispanic or Latino, 5.7% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2.1% Asian, 1.1% African American, and 4.6% identifying with two or more races.

Clallam County has two hospitals:

- *Olympic Medical Center* located in Port Angeles, WA, is a 126-bed level III Trauma Center. This hospital offers a full range of services including surgical services, oncology care, labor and delivery, and laboratory services. The hospital also offers heart and vascular care.
- *Forks Community Hospital* located in Forks, WA, is a 25-bed regional community hospital that offers emergency care, surgical services, infusion therapy, and pain management.

Cause and Manner of Death

The *Cause of Death* is the official determination of the disease or injury, and the sequence of events responsible, for the occurrence which led to the individual's death.

The *Manner of Death* is the description used to classify the conditions that caused a death and the circumstances by which they occurred. Manner of death is determined largely by means of the investigation. This is a medicolegal classification mainly for statistical purposes and has no direct bearing on criminal prosecution, insurance settlements, or judicial purposes. Controlled substance homicides and vehicular homicides for example are considered accidents under the Coroner/ME system as there was no intent by the dealer or the driver to harm another person.

In Washington state there are (5) manners of death, listed below.

Natural: Death caused by disease process.

Suicide: Death as a result of purposeful action to end one's own life.

Accident: Death other than natural where there is no evidence of intent.

Homicide: Death resulting from injuries intentionally inflicted by another person.

Undetermined: Manner assigned when there is insufficient evidence, or conflicting/equivocal information (especially about intent), to assign a specific manner.

Jurisdiction and State Statutes

Washington State law requires that the Clallam County Coroner be notified when any person in Clallam County has been found deceased and was not under direct medical care at the time of death. Clallam County Coroner's Office is only authorized to investigate deaths that occur within the geographical boundaries of Clallam County regardless of whether the decedent was a resident of the county or not at the time of death. If a Clallam County resident dies in another county, the county of death is responsible for investigating the death.

The Clallam County Coroner's Office assumes jurisdiction on all sudden, violent, traumatic, or unexpected deaths that occur within Clallam County. This includes deaths from apparent "natural diseases," but only when the individual had no recent physician of record or documented history of an existing medical condition that could credibly have caused the sudden death. Under these circumstances, it becomes the coroner's responsibility to determine how and why a person died. Those who die of natural causes in a hospital, care facility, or under hospice care are not required by law to be reported to this office.

Only the Coroner can certify a death that is not considered to be natural (accident, suicide, homicide, or undetermined).

The role of the coroner in such deaths is to investigate the facts and circumstances concerning the death for the purpose of determining the cause and manner of death and whether there is sufficient reason for the coroner to believe that the death may have resulted from a criminal act or criminal neglect of a person other than the deceased. If the investigation does not provide the necessary information to make this determination, then the coroner may order an autopsy.

As part of the death investigation, the coroner shall determine the identity of the deceased and notify the next of kin of the death. Per standards and office policy, a scientific identification will be whenever a visual identification is not able to be performed or is not confirmatory. Current acceptable methods of scientific identification include fingerprint comparison, dental comparison, imaging comparison, or DNA comparison.

In accordance with the [Revised Code of Washington \(RCW 68.50\)](#), the following deaths fall under the Coroner’s jurisdiction:

Deaths Requiring Coroner’s Jurisdiction
Sudden death of an apparent healthy person with no known or significant medical history
Suspected natural deaths in which there is no current physician to certify the death
Deaths in which there are concerns for abuse or neglect by another (Adult Protective Services or Child Protective Services involvement)
Violent or suspicious circumstances
Traffic-related deaths
Suicides
All infant and child deaths
All premature births and stillbirths over 20 weeks gestation
All accidental deaths (falls, industrial, recreational, etc.)
Deaths attributed to drug overdose or are drug-related
Deaths that occur while in legal/court/jail/prison custody
Deaths due to <i>unforeseen</i> complications of therapy, surgery, or diagnostic procedures
Deaths due to an injury or fracture that either was directly or indirectly contributed to the death, this includes those injuries that occurred months or years prior
Deaths due to an undiagnosed or possible contagious disease that may be a public health hazard
Indigent or unclaimed bodies

Table1. Categories of deaths required to be reported to Coroner’s Office

Identification and Locating Next of Kin

In all cases, the identification and establishing and locating next-of-kin (NOK) is necessary. In certain cases, the identification process can be extensive requiring outside assistance from a forensic odontologist, forensic anthropologist, or out of state lab to analyze DNA. Finding the NOK can be complicated as some individuals may have died leaving no NOK. The Clallam County Coroner's Office ensures that all leads regarding NOK are exhausted before establishing the case as indigent.

Unclaimed and Indigent Cases

Occasionally there are individuals who pass away in Clallam County where the NOK cannot be located or the NOK declines responsibility for the decedent. In these situations, the Coroner's Office takes jurisdiction of the decedent and arranges for cremation. If after 45 days, NOK has not claimed the remains, any other family member or friend can claim the cremains. Claiming the cremains after the County has taken responsibility for disposition requires contacting the funeral home contracted for those services, Harper Ridgeview. There is no time limit for NOK to request the cremated remains. If the decedent is unclaimed by NOK and cremation is covered by the county, family can later reimburse the cost of cremation and claim the remains. Unclaimed and indigent cremated remains are stored in a community crypt at Mount Angeles Memorial Park in Port Angeles, WA.

Autopsy Services

All autopsies are performed by a contracted board-certified forensic pathologist at the direction of the coroner. These pathologists work under the standards set forth by the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME). If an autopsy is required to determine the cause and manner of death, then various body fluids (blood and vitreous), tissues for microscopic and toxicological analysis will be taken in addition to the anatomical examination. Photographs are taken during autopsy and are essential to the case and the pathologist.

Sharing of Information

All coroner records including autopsy reports and related data from individual investigations are considered confidential and not subject to public record per RCW 68.50 and RCW 42.56. Outside of the agency/agencies involved in the case (law enforcement agencies, prosecuting attorneys, attending physicians, and other agencies such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Federal Aviation Administration, National Transportation Safety Board, Board of Consumer Product Safety, Adult or Child Protective

Services and Labor and Industries), only the legal next of kin (NOK) and family members are authorized to request the coroner's reports including the autopsy and toxicology report. If an outside party has interest in obtaining reports or seeking additional information on the case, the legal NOK must provide authorization.

The coroner provides information to local law enforcement and medical personnel as well as various community groups on a regular basis regarding the role and function of the coroner's office. In addition, the coroner's office collects and analyzes data on various cases to assist the community with prevention.



Death Investigations- An Overview

Death Investigations are categorized into 2 different categories: non-jurisdictional and jurisdictional.

- **Non-jurisdictional** cases are attended natural deaths in a hospital, care facility, or hospice setting that are reported to the coroner’s office and determined that no further investigation is needed by the office. This also includes Death with Dignity cases. The decedent’s healthcare provider must be willing to certify the death as natural causes, otherwise the case becomes jurisdictional.
- **Jurisdictional cases**, which can be natural or non-natural deaths, are deaths that meet statutory requirements for reporting to the coroner’s office. A decision is made that further investigation by the office is needed to determine the cause and manner of death. The Clallam County Coroner’s Office responds to all unattended deaths unless the person was in the final process of being admitted to hospice, had significant medical history, or had sought medical care with a provider or hospital within the last 48 hours preceding death.

2024 Reported Deaths	323
Jurisdictional Cases	184
Non-Jurisdictional Cases	139
Natural Deaths	99
Accidental Deaths	56
Suicide Deaths	24
Homicide Deaths	3
Undetermined Deaths	5
Full Autopsies	62
External Examinations	13
Toxicology Only	30
Scene Responses	75
Unidentified	0
Exhumations	0

Table 2. 2024 Statistical Summary

It should be noted that the Clallam County Coroner’s Office Annual Report does not include all deaths that occurred within Clallam County, but only the cases reported to the Clallam County Coroner’s Office. For a total description of deaths occurring in Clallam County, please consult with the Washington State Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Records.

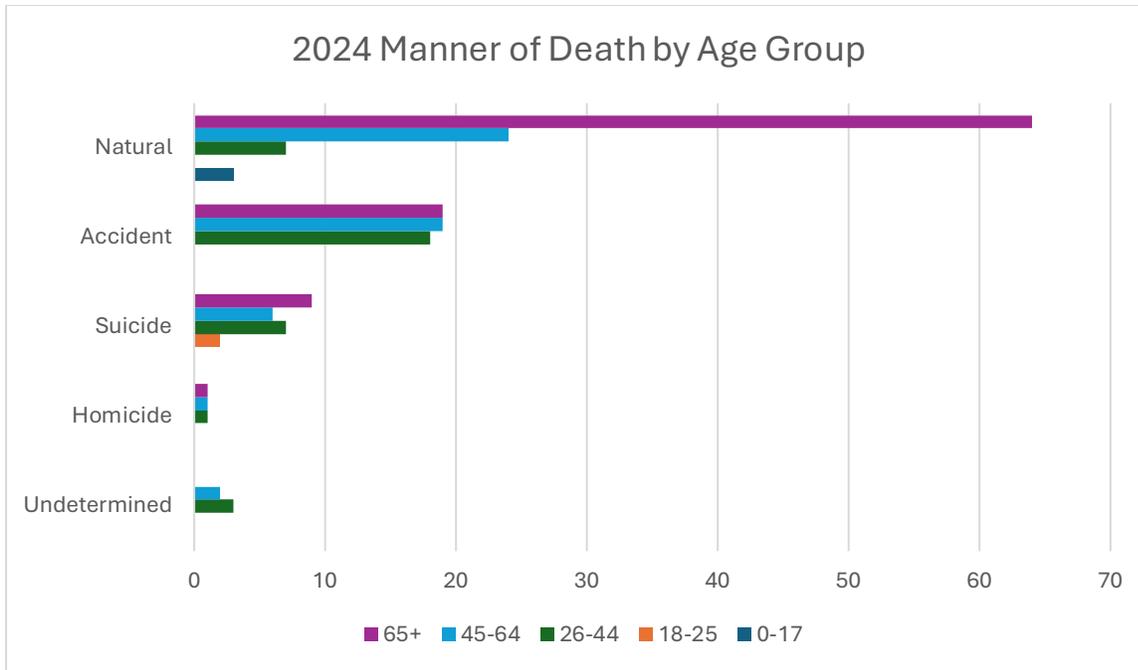


Figure 1. 2024 Manner of Death by Age Group

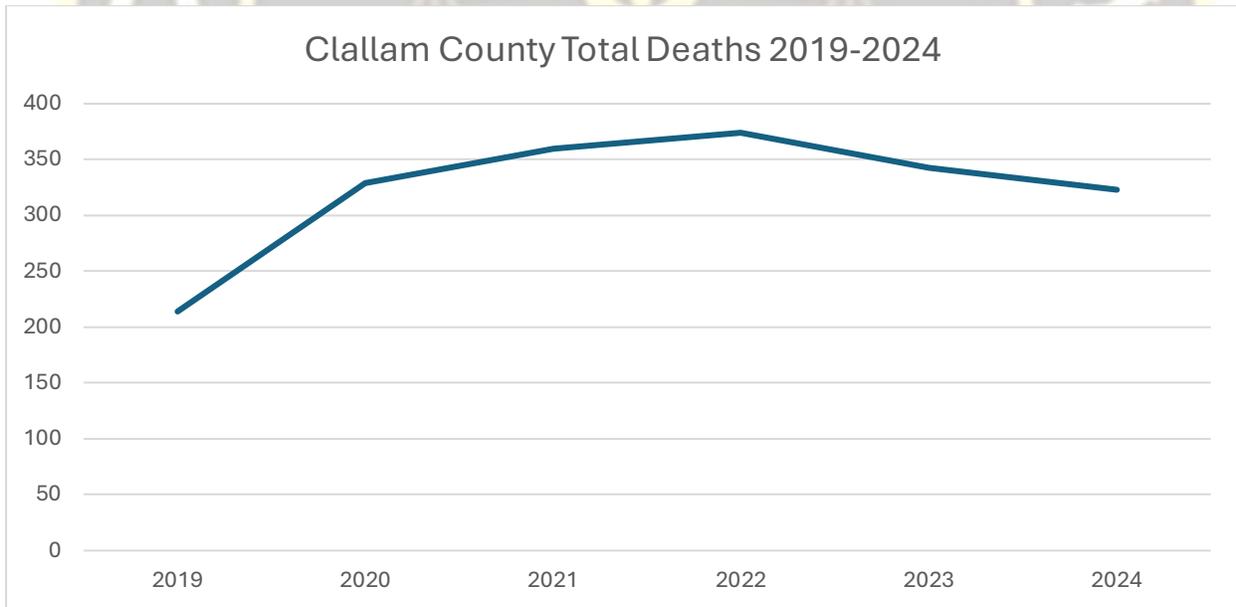


Figure 2. Clallam County Total Deaths per Year (2019-2024)

For the year 2024, there was a total of 323 deaths in Clallam County that were reported. The Clallam County Coroner’s Office conducted 75 scene investigations and assumed jurisdiction on 184 cases. Please note that the cause and manner of death, as well as the

decisions for non-jurisdictional and jurisdictional cases, are often a matter of judgement and strict comparisons across years are not valid.

In review of the deaths over the last 6 years (2019-2024), the number of cases reported to the Coroner's Office have remained between 200 and 400. In October 2024, the office changed its policy criteria for scene responses requiring this office to respond to all unattended deaths, defined above as non-jurisdictional. Prior to this change, this office responded to select cases with a greatly reduced number of scene responses. The number of scene responses following the change in October has greatly increased.

In 2024, there was a total of 75 post-mortem examinations conducted at the request of the Coroner's Office. Post-mortem examinations include both autopsies and external body examinations. Of these 75 examinations, 62 required an autopsy to confirm cause and manner of death and 13 cases required an external examination of the body for documentation purposes. Toxicology testing was performed on all of these cases unless no samples could be obtained due to the circumstances of the case or the preservation of the decedent. The majority of coroner cases were finalized in under 90 days.

Manner of Death: Natural

The Coroner may certify natural deaths under many circumstances. These include a sudden and unexpected death in an apparently healthy individual, when there is no physician able or willing to certify the death or when there are suspicious circumstances surrounding the death. In 2024, there were 98 natural deaths investigated by the coroner's office accounting for approximately 30% of the total deaths reported to the coroner's office. Of these 98 deaths, the primary cause of death was cardiac-related (29/98, 30%) followed by unspecified or undetermined causes (25/98, 26%). Figure 3 outlines the natural types of death for all reported natural deaths in 2024. Other natural causes included: (10) neoplasm, (6) chronic alcoholism, and (4) dementia.

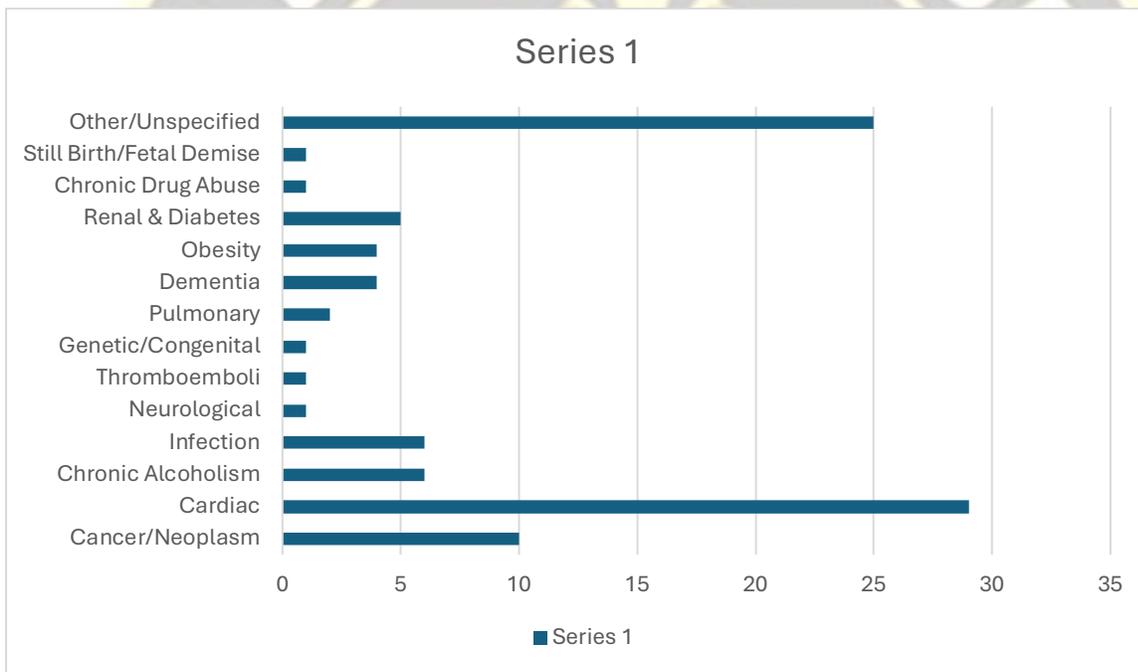


Figure 3. 2024 Clallam County Certified Natural Causes of Death by Coroner's Office

Manner of Death: Accident

The Clallam County Coroner's Office provides reports on all violent deaths to the Washington State Violent Death Reporting System (WA-VDRS). This includes all deaths where the manner of death was determined to be a homicide, accident, or suicide. Accidents are the second most common manner of death after natural deaths for Clallam County. Accidental deaths include all motor vehicle accidents, falls, industrial accidents, drownings, choking/asphyxiation cases, structural fires, and drug overdoses. Since all accidental deaths are theoretically preventable, each such death is investigated for public health purposes.

The Coroner certified 53 deaths as accidental in 2024 accounting for 17% of the total deaths reported to the coroner's office and 30% of jurisdiction assumed cases. Over 60% of the accidental deaths were males (34/53, 64%). The age group 65 and above (19/53, 34%) and the age group 45-64 (19/53, 34%) were tied for the highest number of accidental deaths. With regards to the types of accidental deaths, drug-related deaths were the leading cause at 57% of the accidental deaths (30/53). Fall-related deaths were the second leading cause of accidental deaths (9/53, 17%). Most of these type of cases were elderly patients who had sustained an injury after a ground level fall resulting in a decline in health. Other types of accidental deaths included: (6) asphyxia/confined space, (1) carbon monoxide, (1) hypothermia, and (4) blunt force injury.

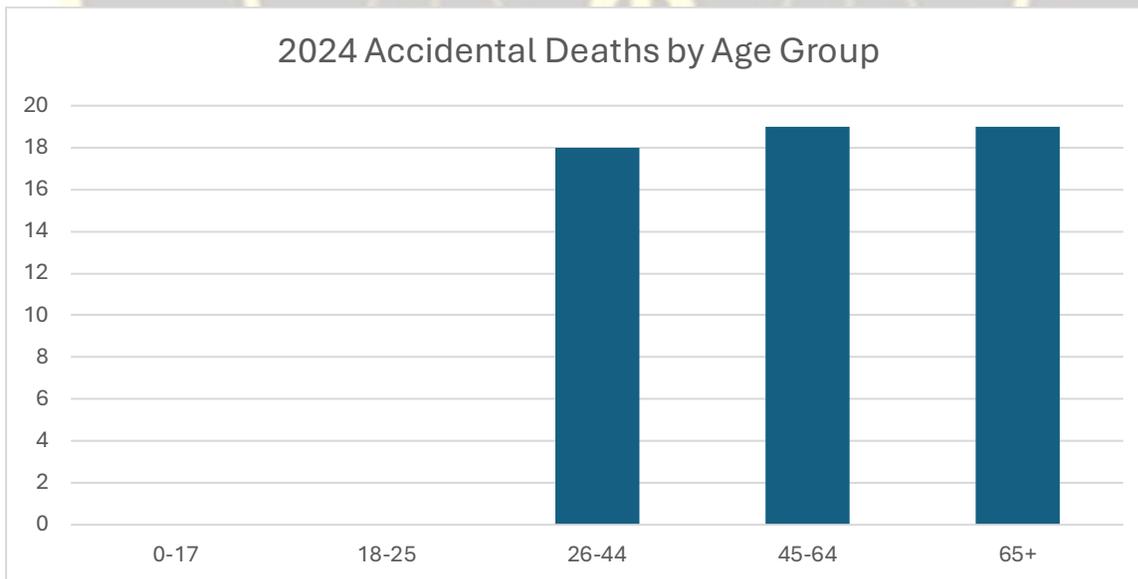


Figure 4. 2024 Clallam County Accidental Deaths by Age Group

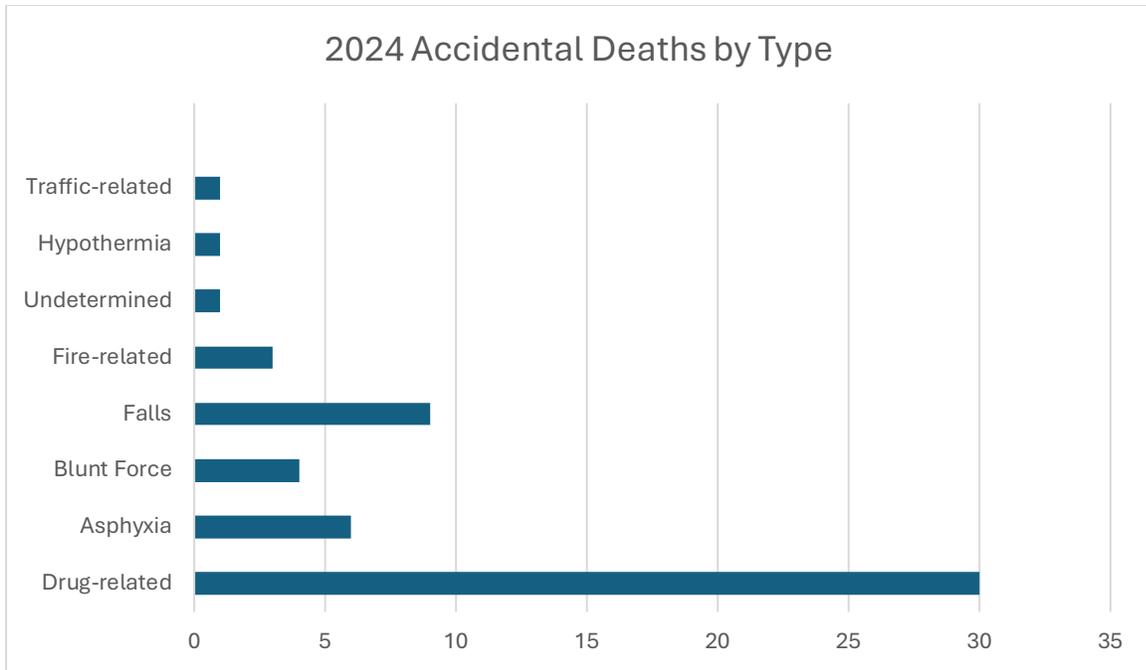


Figure 5. 2024 Clallam County Accidental Deaths

Drug Overdose Deaths

Drug overdose deaths are extensively investigated as there are no findings at autopsy to confirm an overdose. It is important to note that a drug overdose is a diagnosis of exclusion requiring an autopsy to be performed on those who have little to no medical history in order to rule out other causes of death. Expanded forensic toxicology testing was performed on all suspected drug overdose deaths, allowing confirmation of the cause of death and the identification of both illicit and prescription drug abuse trends in Clallam County. The Clallam County Coroner’s Office takes an active role in sharing its data and insights regarding overdose deaths with the county and outside partners. In 2024, 31 deaths were certified by the coroner’s office as an accidental drug overdose. This was greatly decreased from 2023 in which there were 46 overdose deaths. Clallam County Total Drug Overdose Deaths 2018-2024 (yellow line is a trend line noting the increase in overdose cases).

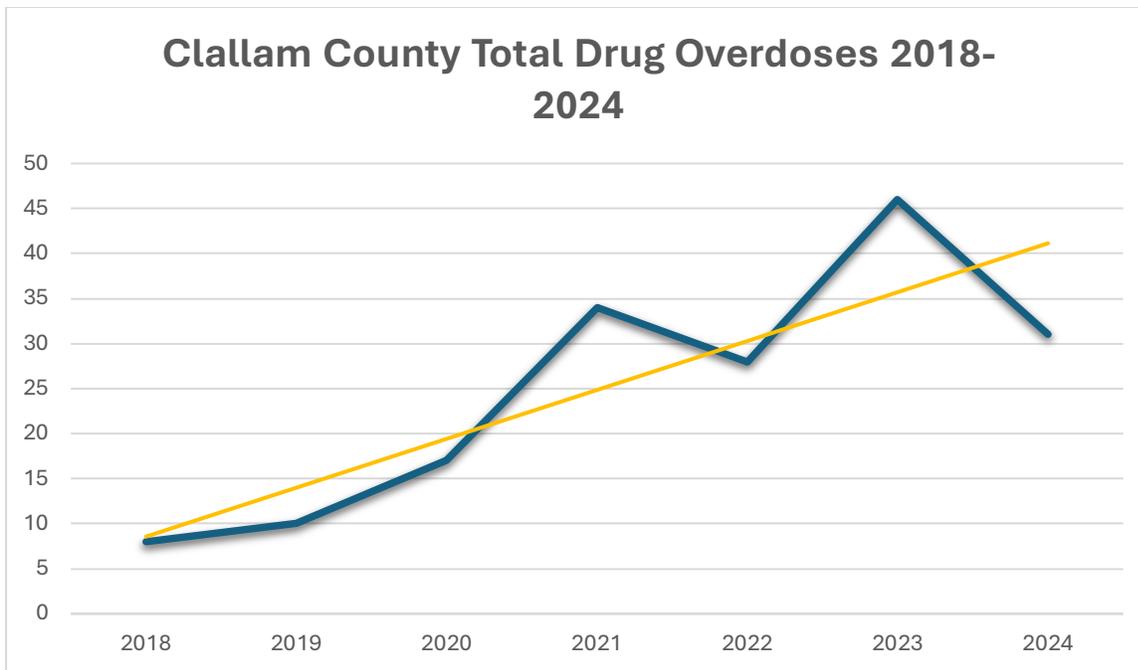


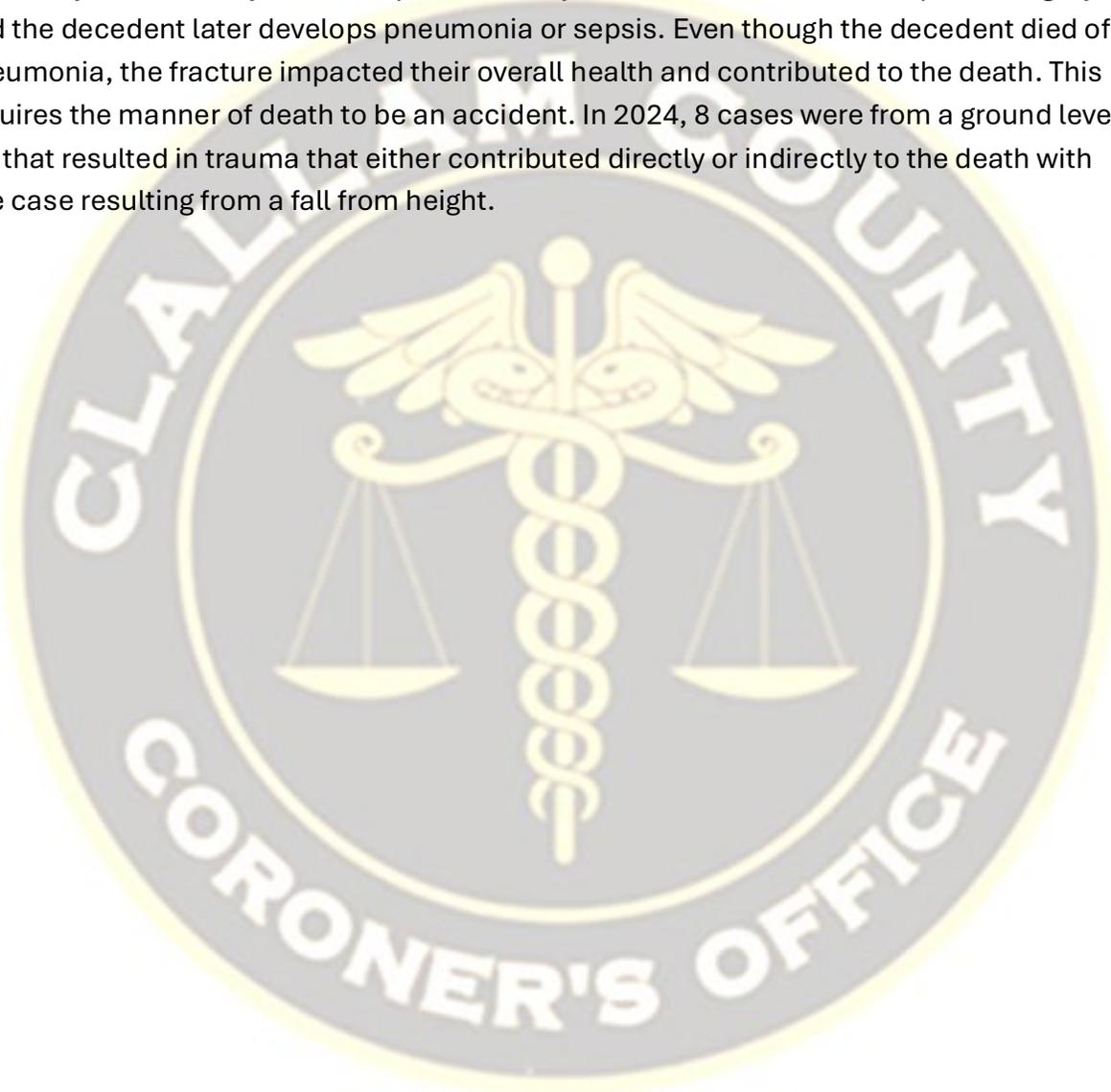
Figure 6. Clallam County Total Drug Overdose Deaths 2018-2024 (yellow line is a trend line noting the increase in overdose cases)

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid pain reliever that is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. There are two types of fentanyl: pharmaceutical fentanyl and illicitly manufactured fentanyl. Fentanyl-related deaths in Clallam County are linked to the illicitly manufactured fentanyl and are being seen in either pill form or powder. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl is more commonly being mixed with other drugs to make it more powerful, addictive, and dangerous. In 2024, drugs commonly mixed with fentanyl included: methamphetamine and methadone. The number of fentanyl-involved drug overdose deaths has increased significantly since 2018. In 2023, the total number of fentanyl-involved deaths greatly increased from the previous year. For 2024, the total number of fentanyl-involved drug overdose deaths decreased slightly from 61% (23/46 in 2023) to 58% (18/31).

Demographic analysis showed males (19/31, 61%) and Caucasians (23/31, 74%) to be mostly represented in drug overdose death statistics for Clallam County with Native American/Alaskan Native (8/31, 26%) being the only other ethnic group represented. The age range for overdose deaths was 29-82 years of age with age group 30-64 (29/31, 94%) having the highest number of deaths.

Falls

In 2024, there were 9 deaths certified as fall-related accounting for 17% (9/53) of the accidental deaths in Clallam County. All of these deaths were in those aged 76 years and older. Falls were sometimes a direct cause of the death, such as when the fall results in head trauma leading to a subdural hemorrhage. Falls were also an indirect cause of death, especially in the elderly. For example, a fall may result in a fracture that required surgery, and the decedent later develops pneumonia or sepsis. Even though the decedent died of pneumonia, the fracture impacted their overall health and contributed to the death. This requires the manner of death to be an accident. In 2024, 8 cases were from a ground level fall that resulted in trauma that either contributed directly or indirectly to the death with one case resulting from a fall from height.



Manner of Death: Suicide

Suicides are those deaths caused by self-inflicted injuries with the evidence of intent to end one's life. Evidence of intent can include explicit expression such as a suicide note or verbal threat, or an act constituting implicit intent, such as deliberately putting in a roadway or placing a gun to one's head.

In 2024, there were 24 suicides, accounting for 7% (24/323) of the total deaths reported to the coroner's office and 13% (24/184) of deaths certified by the Coroner's Office. The primary method of suicide for 2024 was via ligature hanging (10/24, 42%), followed by firearms (9/24, 38%) and drug-related (2/24, 8%). Additionally, there were 2 asphyxiation cases and one case of intentional exsanguination.

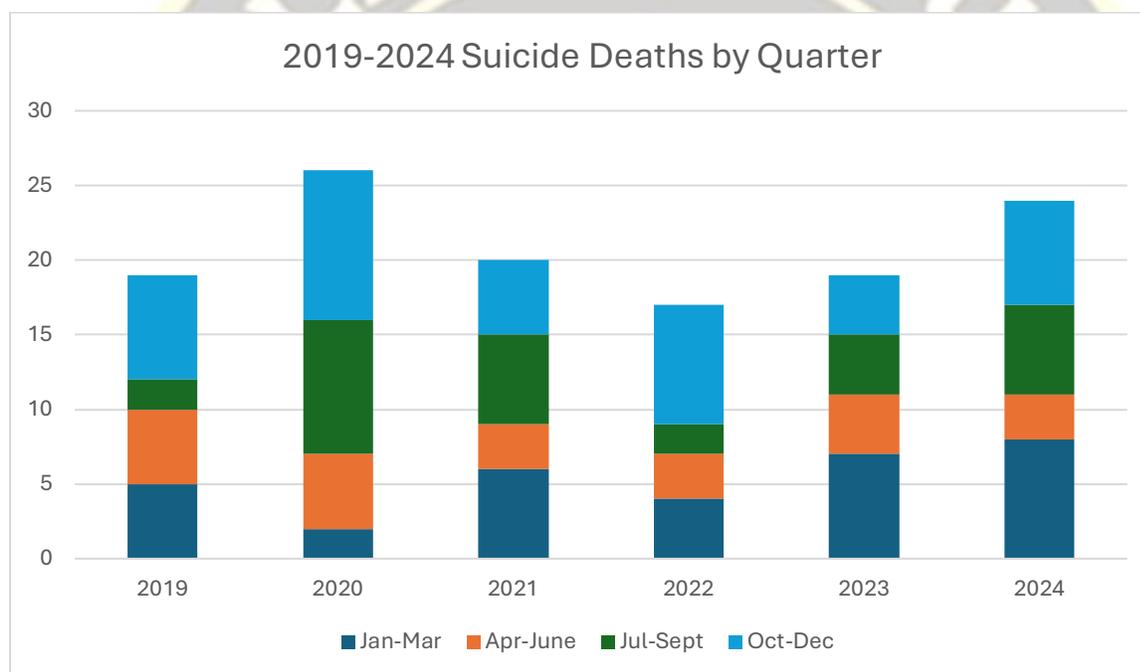


Figure 7. 2019-2024 Clallam County Suicide by Quarter

Individuals who committed suicide were between the ages of 21 and 83 years. The primary age group was 65+ (9/24, 38%) followed by age group 26-45 (2/24, 33%) and then 46-64 (5/24, 21%). 79% of suicides in 2024 involved males (19/24). 92% of suicides occurred in the White/Caucasian demographic (22/24), with the remaining two cases occurring in the Asian demographic.

Manner of Death: Homicide

Classification of Homicide is determined by the Coroner when the death results from injuries intentionally inflicted by another person. This does not imply the existence of *criminal* intent behind the action of the other person. There are cases in which the investigating law enforcement agency will investigate the case as a homicide. It is important to note, that there are certain cases in which this office will certify the death as an accident even though the case is being investigated as a homicide by law enforcement. Traffic fatalities in which a pedestrian is killed, and the driver may show negligent behavior, probable intoxication, or fleeing of the scene will be classified as accident even though these causes may meet a legal definition of vehicular homicide. This decision is based on the assumption that there was no intent to kill the individual. Whether or not this type of case meets the legal definition of vehicular homicide, it is better left to the criminal justice system to decide. This goes the same for motor vehicle accidents and deaths resulting from acute drug intoxication. As long as there was no intent to kill the individual, then the manner of death will be classified by the Clallam County Coroner's Office as Accident. However, in cases where bodily harm was inflicted by another, such as shoving someone during an argument, and the individual dies from those injuries, then the death will be listed as a homicide as injury was intentionally inflicted by another even without the intent to kill.

In 2024, the Coroner's Office classified 3 deaths as homicide, which accounts for 0.2% of the total coroner jurisdiction cases. The methods of homicide included (2) firearm and (1) blunt force. The age range for homicides in 2024 was 38-81 years of age. Homicides involved (2) females and (1) male.

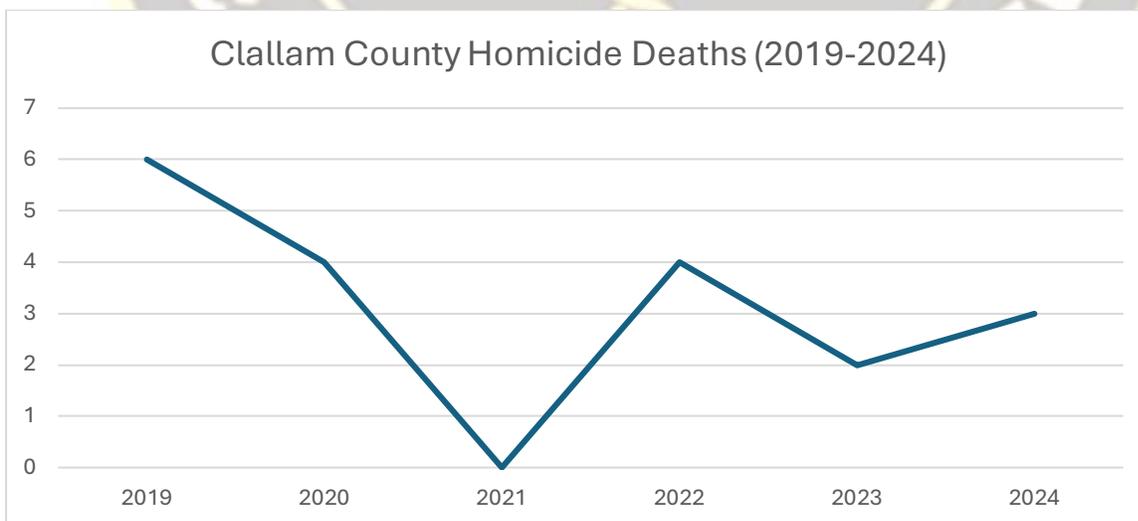


Figure 8. 2019-2024 Clallam County Homicide Cases

Manner of Death: Undetermined

The Coroner's Office certifies the manner of death as undetermined when available information regarding the circumstances of the case is insufficient to classify the death into one of the other four manners of death: natural, accident, suicide, homicide. In some cases, serious doubt exists as to whether the injury occurred with intent or as a result of an accident. The information obtained from the case may be lacking due to absence of background information or witnesses, or because of the lengthy delay between the time of death and the discovery of the body. If an extensive investigation and autopsy cannot clarify the circumstances, the death is classified as undetermined. If new credible information regarding the case is provided at a later time, then the manner of death can be changed. In 2024, the Clallam County Coroner's Office certified 5 deaths as undetermined, which accounted for only 0.3% (5/184) of coroner-involved cases.

