



# ANNUAL REPORT 2021

## KITTITAS COUNTY CORONER

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Website:

<https://www.co.kittitas.wa.us/coroner/>

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

From the Coroner _____	3
Kittitas County Coroner Personnel and Consultants _____	4
Mission and Vision _____	5
History _____	6
Year in Review _____	7
Community Engagement _____	9
Internship _____	9
Indigent _____	9
Cribs for Kids _____	9
Statistics and Data _____	10
Case Summary Totals _____	10
Forensic Examination Totals _____	10
Manner of Death by Month _____	11
Reported Cases Total (310) _____	11
Natural Death _____	13
Demographics _____	14

# FROM THE CORONER

To the Board of County Commissioners and Citizens of Kittitas County,

The Kittitas County Coroner's Office investigates deaths that fall under the following categories: sudden, violent, and suspicious deaths. We accomplish this with the help of trained death investigators and forensically trained pathologists and a host of other professionals. This is done for all of Kittitas County 24 hours a day 365 days a year.



In this report you will find bar charts that break down the types of cases our office handles. You will also see the variety of cases. Our main job is to determine cause and manner of death, this is done by autopsy, and toxicology tests. We have purchased a portable x-ray machine with grant funding and that has saved us on autopsy fees. The savings come from not having to take the pathologist to the local funeral home for an autopsy. Our machine will take the x-ray then we copy it to the investigators computer and email it to the pathologist who reads it with the investigator on the phone to determine the cause of death as a fractured neck for example. We have also used it to identify objects that are not clear to the naked eye but show up on x-ray, because we have the machine present at autopsy.

Our death investigators are trained though out the year at WACME (Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners) conferences and IACME (International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners) conference held annually in Las Vegas, Nevada. We also attend training on computers held by the Legal and Liability Risk Management Institute. I believe our investigators are some of the best trained in the state. One of my employees is certified as Diplomatic standing with The American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators and the other 4 are working for their requirements to test for those.

You will notice on the graphs that "undetermined" is a bit larger than past years. The reason for this was that it was discovered by Central Washington University Anthropology Department and the Museum Studied Department the some remains had become co-mingled that were criminal and some teaching remains. With the help of the Washington State Forensic Anthropologist, CWU and the Kittitas Coroner's Office a more detailed inventory was set up and will help keep items in the correct categories in the future.

I would like to thank the county commissioners for their support of this office and look forward to continued cooperation between us.

Sincerely,

*N. C. Henderson*

N.C. Henderson, Coroner

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# MISSION AND VISION

The mission of the Kittitas County Coroner's Office is to serve and protect the interests of the community.

We accomplish the mission with medicolegal trained investigators, forensically trained pathologists, and other scientific methods of inquiry. Serving as an independent finder of fact in our search for the truth. The coroner's investigation and conclusions strive to provide a balance to the scales of justice, seek resolution to medical uncertainty, and provide answers to family and friends of the deceased.

The Kittitas County Coroner is an elected official serving the community by overseeing the medicolegal system. The medicolegal system employs personnel with a unique confluence of investigative and medical skill sets. The coroner is responsible for determining the cause and manner of death, for identifying deceased persons, and notifying the next of kin, regardless of where they may live in the world.

At all times decedents and their personal effects are treated with dignity and respect, without discrimination. Family and friends are treated honestly, compassionately, courteously, and with sensitivity to cultural differences.

Investigative efforts are coordinated with law enforcement, medical professionals, hospitals, and other agencies in a professional and courteous manner. Investigators collect, compile, and disseminate information regarding deaths in a manner consistent with the laws of the State of Washington.

The Kittitas County Coroner's office staff and investigators are personally and professionally committed to conducting business in the most consistent, accurate, and timely manner using standardized medicolegal death investigation best practices and seek certification with the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators and accreditation with the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME).

# HISTORY

Established in 1883, Kittitas County has Native American inhabitants dating back over 300 years in official records. The county is centrally located in Washington State with Interstate 90 running through it East to West and the Cascade Mountain Range North to South. Terrain ranges from snow covered alpine wilderness to arid desert scrub along the Columbia River.

Hosting a resident population of 44,688<sup>1</sup> Kittitas County also see a year-round transitory population known to surge upwards of 65,000 on weekends and holidays as people travel through or stop for activities. Interests in outdoor recreation, like downhill skiing or water sports, and various community events such as the Ellensburg Rodeo draw people in. Kittitas County Coroner's Office is responsible for death investigations in a county where population fluctuates daily and where deaths may occur in any type of terrain, or during severe weather (such as avalanches, mudslides, flooding, wildland fire or forest fire).

Rural Kittitas County includes two qualified opportunity zones, or low-income areas, as designated by the U.S. Department of treasury Community Development Financial Information Fund. The areas are located within Ellensburg<sup>2</sup>, the largest incorporated city in the county. Ellensburg is home to Central Washington University is the largest employer in the county.

Overall Kittitas County is an agricultural community. Two thirds of the county is hilly or mountainous which historically leant itself to the logging and lumber processing industry and to coal mining. Farming and ranching are prevalent. Production of timothy hay for overseas export is a big business.

Today the Kittitas County Coroner's Office has two full-time employees, the elected Coroner, and an Office Administrator. There are also four part-time Deputy Coroners who investigate deaths. For each investigation an investigator is notified of a death by the local 9-1-1 center (KITTCOM) who acts solely as a callout agent. All communication from the time notification is made becomes the responsibility of the investigator and is accomplished using cell phones.

MDILog is a powerful tool developed by the U.S. Department of Justice to track death cases from the time a death is reported until the death is certified. Data can be communicated between medicolegal death investigators, organ procurement organizations, forensic specialists, and consultants. In 2017 the Kittitas County Coroner's Office began using MDILog to capture and communicate death investigations.

Locums, or certified forensic pathologists, travel from Western Washington to Eastern Washington counties to perform autopsies. Cases with advanced decomposition or anthropological components are sent to the King County Medical Examiner's Office for forensic examination. Access to King County services depends on their caseload and our ability to navigate the mountain pass. In 2021 King County Medical Examiner's Office and others around the state began restricting the number of cases they would accept from outside jurisdictions due to their own caseload and forensic pathologist shortage.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/kittitascountywashington>

<sup>2</sup> See Attachments Documentation of High-Poverty Areas or Persistent Poverty Counties

Morgue and autopsy facilities are provided in Ellensburg by two local funeral homes contracted with the office. Until June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, imaging is completed at the local hospital, Kittitas Valley Healthcare. With an Office of Justice Programs funding award entitled “Strengthening the Medical Examiner-Coroner System” the office purchased, trained with, and began to use a portable x-ray machine on June 17<sup>th</sup>.

Toxicology samples are mailed out and screening is completed by either NMS Labs or the Washington State Patrol Toxicology lab.

Death certificates are completed using the Washington State Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS).

## **Year in Review**

To be of greater service to the community we dedicated 2021 to increasing departmental assets and strengthening our investigation skills. Accomplishments include:

- Began an Intern Program in partnership with Central Washington University
- Purchase 2021 Toyota Tundra with canopy (pictured on cover).
- Purchase Ferno 24H miniMaxx cot.
- Purchase MinXRay portable imaging.
- Train in depth on fundamental medicolegal death investigations and advanced investigation topics with:
  - Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (WACME).
  - International Association of Coroners & Medical Examiners (IACME).
- Won 2021 Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement - Competitive Grant.
- Won a 2021 Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement - Formula Grant.



The calendar illustrates the investigations, totaled, by day, for the year.





# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We are proud of the work we are doing to strengthen our health and social systems. We strive to improve our community through a process of engagement and education.

## Internship

In 2021 to develop future medicolegal death investigators and forensic scientists we partnered with several Central Washington University departments. The coroner's office can provide real-life experience in medicolegal death investigations and start building professional relationships for participants. Opportunity to learn MDILog, report writing, scene investigation, evidence collection, and attend autopsy are provided.

Feedback from participants is positive. We wish to thank the students who joined our intern program and worked alongside us in 2021:

Macy Byrne

Annika Hald

Jeremy Wetherald

## Indigent

When a person passes, and they have not made any preparation for a funeral the coroner offers assistance through an indigent program. Indigency can mean no provision has been made or no funeral wishes have been put in place. If the decedent is unclaimed or if the person responsible for the internment of a decedent's remains fails, refuses, or neglects to handle final disposition, the coroner proceeds with internment. In 2021 eight decedents were cared for by the coroner.

## Cribs for Kids

The Cribs for Kids mission "*to prevent infant sleep-related deaths...*" aligns with our own. The Kittitas County Coroner's Office is proud to partner with Cribs for Kids and offer safe sleep solutions and education to those families seeking help.

# STATISTICS AND DATA

Mortality data is used locally, statewide, and nationally to help track characteristics of those who have died, monitor, and make decisions about public health challenges, determine life expectancy, and compare death trends.

Information about leading causes of death, adolescent health, diseases, and conditions, infectious or immune diseases, health of population by race, and life stages of populations, maternal mortality, and drug overdoses are gathered and used by the Center for Disease Control<sup>3</sup> and other public health agencies.

Data is used by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to improve product and equipment quality and safety. Data indicating possibly defective products drive their public health mission. Other departments such as the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration use mortality data as well.

The following pages provide 2021 death statistics for Kittitas County.

## Case Summary Totals

### **Accepted Jurisdiction (172)**

Cases where jurisdiction is accepted require examination, certification, next-of-kin search, or storage. Basically, the office has taken significant action, which may include transporting or examining a body, or there was an extensive investigation.

### **Declined Jurisdiction (138)**

Of the total cases reported, jurisdiction is declined in some cases. These are typically natural cases where jurisdiction is given to private physicians after case review.

### **Cases with Scene(s) (196)**

Total visits to the location where injury and/or death occurred is considered a scene investigation.

### **Coroner Signed (133)**

Total deaths investigated and certified by coroner.

## Forensic Examination Totals

Forensic examinations completed to augment the coroner's office death investigation. Investigators from the Coroner's Office complete reports in MDILog.com for all investigations. An autopsy is ordered when the manner of death is determined to be Homicide, Suicide, or Accidental and may be ordered for any other manner of death when the coroner deems it necessary.

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<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality Statistics

**Complete Autopsy (41)**

A complete autopsy includes both an external and internal examination of the body and is done by a Forensic Pathologist. Toxicology examinations are completed as part of a complete autopsy.

**Limited Autopsy (18)**

A limited examination which is focused on a specific organ or region of the body, i.e., heart is done by a Forensic Pathologist. Anthropological examination of skeletal remains is considered a limited autopsy. Toxicology may be completed as part of an limited autopsy.

**External Examination (0)**

An external or physical examination of the decedent is done by a Forensic Pathologist. Toxicology may be completed as part of an external examination.

**Toxicology Only (3)**

A toxicology sample analyzed by a Forensic Toxicologist or, a Forensic Anthropologist's examination of remains to determine if they are human or non-human.

**Manner of Death by Month**

	Homicide	Suicide	Accident	Natural	Undetermined	Pending	Not Applicable (Non-Human)	Total
January	0	0	2	13	0	0	1	16
February	0	0	1	18	0	0	0	19
March	0	0	0	14	0	0	2	16
April	0	1	2	15	0	0	1	19
May	0	2	1	17	1	0	2	23
June	0	0	1	13	34	0	1	49
July	0	0	2	23	0	0	4	29
August	0	0	4	21	1	0	1	27
September	0	2	5	22	0	0	1	30
October	1	1	3	20	2	0	0	27
November	0	1	4	19	0	0	1	25
December	0	1	1	27	0	0	1	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>310</b>

**Reported Cases Total (310)**

Manner of Death criteria is determined by the Center for Disease Control and the Washington State Health Department and tracked by the coroner database for each investigation.

## Homicide

Defined as the action of one person directly causing the death of another. A death that occurs during and is related to the commission of a felony is also considered homicide. A violent death may stem from deliberate or purposeful action, but intent to cause death need not be present or proven for the classification as homicide.

Homicide and murder are not the same. All murders are homicides, not all homicides are murders. "Murder" is not an acceptable manner of death classification for death certification purposes. "Murder" is a term used under specific conditions in criminal law matters as a general concept. An example might be that of unintentional firearms-related hunting death. While it may be classified as a homicide, it is up to legal authorities to determine when to prosecute such a case as "murder," "manslaughter," etc.

<b>Homicide Death Involving</b>
1 Firearm - Unspecified

## Suicide

Defined for death certification purposes as a death from self-inflicted injury with evidence of intent to die. Evidence of intent includes an explicit expression, such as a suicide note or verbal threat, previous attempts, or an act constituting implicit intent. An example would be a self-inflicted contact/close range gunshot wound (particularly of the head, chest, or abdomen) that is recognized as having very high potential for lethality and is implicit evidence of intent to die.

<b>Suicide Deaths Involving</b>
2 - Firearm - Unspecified
2 - Firearm - Handgun
1 - Firearm - Rifle
2 - Train
1 - Asphyxia - Gas

## Accident

Defined for death certification purposes as an unnatural death resulting from an inadvertent chance happening. Traffic related fatalities (involving vehicles used for transportation on any public roadway) are classified as accidents. On the job injury related deaths are referred to as industrial deaths and are classified as accidents. Deaths related to illicit drug or excessive medication use, in the absence of specifically supporting the conclusion of the manner of death being homicide or suicide, are classified as accident.

<b>Accidental Deaths Involving</b>
1 - Asphyxia Drowning

1 - Asphyxia Mechanical Positioning
2 - Asphyxia Suffocation-Smothering
12 - Drug Death – Acute Intoxication
1 - Drug Death – Mixed Drug Toxicity
1 - Fall
3 - Fall - From Height
1 - Firearm – Handgun
2 - MVCrash – Driver
1 - MVCrash – Rider
1 - Train

## Natural Death

Natural is defined as death caused solely by disease or natural process. If natural death is hastened by injury (such as a fall or drowning in a bathtub), the manner of death is not considered natural.

Sudden Unexplained Infant Death (SUID), formerly known as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), is a subset of natural death. It is the sudden death of an infant under one year of age which remains unexplained after a thorough and complete investigation. A SUID investigation includes a complete autopsy, examination of the death scene, and clinical history. If significant risk factors were present, such as an unsafe sleep environment, including co-sleeping or inappropriate bedding, then the cause of death would fall out of the definition of SUID and the manner would be classified as "undetermined."

<b>Natural Deaths Involving</b>
24 – Neurologic
81 – Cardiac
10 – Kidney
23 – Pulmonary
6 – Liver
5 – Gastrointestinal
64 – Cancer
1 – Other – Hypothermia
7 - Other – Nonspecific Natural
1 – Other – Pregnancy Complication

## **Undetermined**

Undetermined is listed as the manner of death classification in only a small number of cases each year. Undetermined is an appropriate designation for cases that have very little available information about the circumstances surrounding the death (e.g., partial skeletal remains) or where known information equally supports, conflicts with, more than one manner of death. An undetermined manner of death is assigned to cases of unnatural death when a clear preponderance of evidence supporting a specific manner (homicide, accident, or suicide) is not available.

Some unexpected infant deaths that are not classified as "natural" (SIDS), such as when an unsafe sleeping environment is present, may be classified as "undetermined" in manner. In 2021, for three **(3)** investigations the manner of death was undetermined after a complete investigation and full autopsy.

Thirty-four **(34)** of the remaining undetermined totals comes from a review of Central Washington University's (CWU) Anthropology and Museum Studies human skeletal remains. A co-mingling of remains was found at the college, some were used for teaching purposes and others were stored for law enforcement. Prior to DNA testing and the development of forensic analysis of remains, CWU was a valued partner who helped police determine such things as sex, age, race, and stature when unidentified remains were found. Dating back to the 1970s, unidentified remains were brought to the college to identify or learn more about them. Over the years some of those remains were not reclaimed by police, and they went into storage at the college.

Along with the Washington State Forensic Anthropologist and the Kittitas County Coroner's Office, CWU recognized the importance of analyzing the remains and establishing a thorough inventory of those kept for continued future educational and research purposes. Due to the age and condition of the thirty-four **(34)** sets of remains examined it was not possible to determine a cause of death.

## **Pending (0)**

Listed temporarily on the death certificate for cause and/or manner when additional investigation, information and/or test results are required for certification. These classifications are generally amended as soon as additional information becomes available.

## **Not Applicable**

In 2021 there were fifteen **(15)** cases where someone found bones but could not tell if they were human or animal. Citizens called to report their findings, their call was documented and after consultation with an Anthropologist the coroner determined the bones to be non-human.

## **Demographics**

In some cases, such as those from CWU, it is not possible to determine one or all demographic (sex, race, age) for a case.



<b>Sex</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Total Identified	109	153
Percentage of Total	42%	58%

<b>Race</b>	<b>Native American/Alaskan</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
Total Identified	5	1	2	253
Percentage of Total	2%	0%	2%	95%

<b>Age in Years</b>	<b>&lt; 1</b>	<b>1-5</b>	<b>11-17</b>	<b>18-25</b>	<b>26-44</b>	<b>45-64</b>	<b>65+</b>
Total Identified	2	1	3	5	20	57	172
Percentage of Total	1%	1%	2%	2%	8%	22%	66%