HARRIS COUNTY

INSTITUTE OF FORENSIC SCIENCES

CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF SCIENCE. SERVICE. INTEGRITY.

2017 Annual Report

The **MISSION** of the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences is to provide medical examiner and crime laboratory services of the highest quality in an unbiased manner with uncompromised integrity.

Accreditations

- Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education
- American Board of Forensic Toxicology
- ANSI-ASQ National Accreditation Board
  ISO/IEC 17025 Program (Crime Laboratory)
- ANSI National Accreditation Board
  ISO/IEC 17020 Program (Forensic Anthropology)
- National Association of Medical Examiners
- Texas Forensic Science Commission
- Texas Medical Association for
  Continuing Medical Education

Medical Examiner Service

Has the statutory duty to determine cause and manner of death

Statistical Summary

- **Harris County (HC) remains the third most populous county in the nation, exceeded only by Los Angeles and Cook counties**
  - **4.6+ million** estimated HC population in 2017*
  - **30,047** HC death certificates filed in 2017**
  - **36%** (10,862) of HC deaths reported to HCIFS in 2017
  - **4,731** medicolegal (ML) cases received by HCIFS for examination
  - **5,794** inquest only cases reported
  - **330** trauma inquest cases reported
  - **2,742** scenes attended by Forensic Investigators

- **5,104 deaths were certified in 2017, including:**
  - **4,731** Harris County ML cases (all brought to HCIFS for examination)
  - **330** trauma inquests
  - **43** out-of-county cases

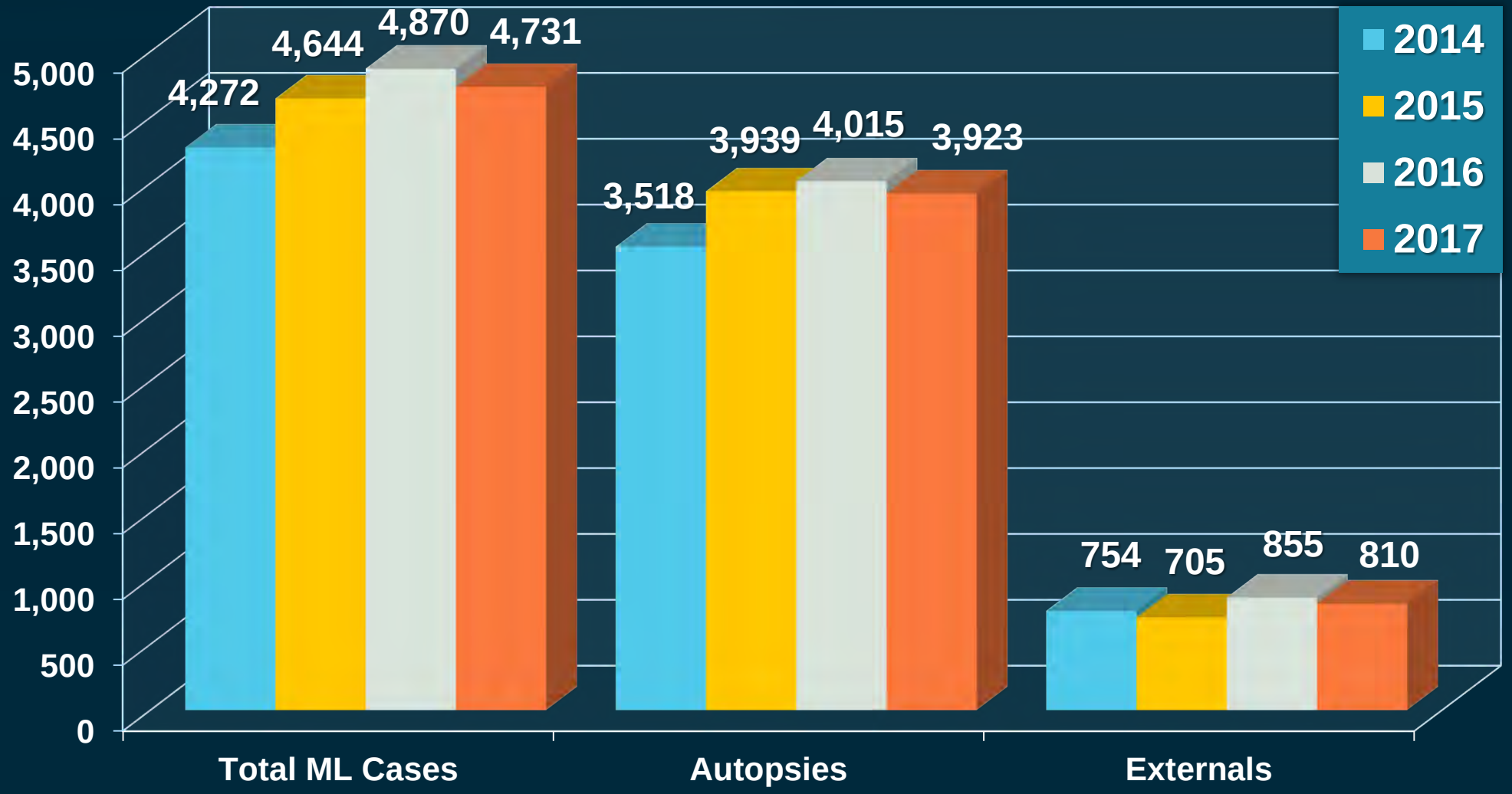
** Population estimate for 2017 obtained from the US Census Bureau*
*** Provisional Death Certificate data from the Texas Department of State Health Services*

Statistical Summary

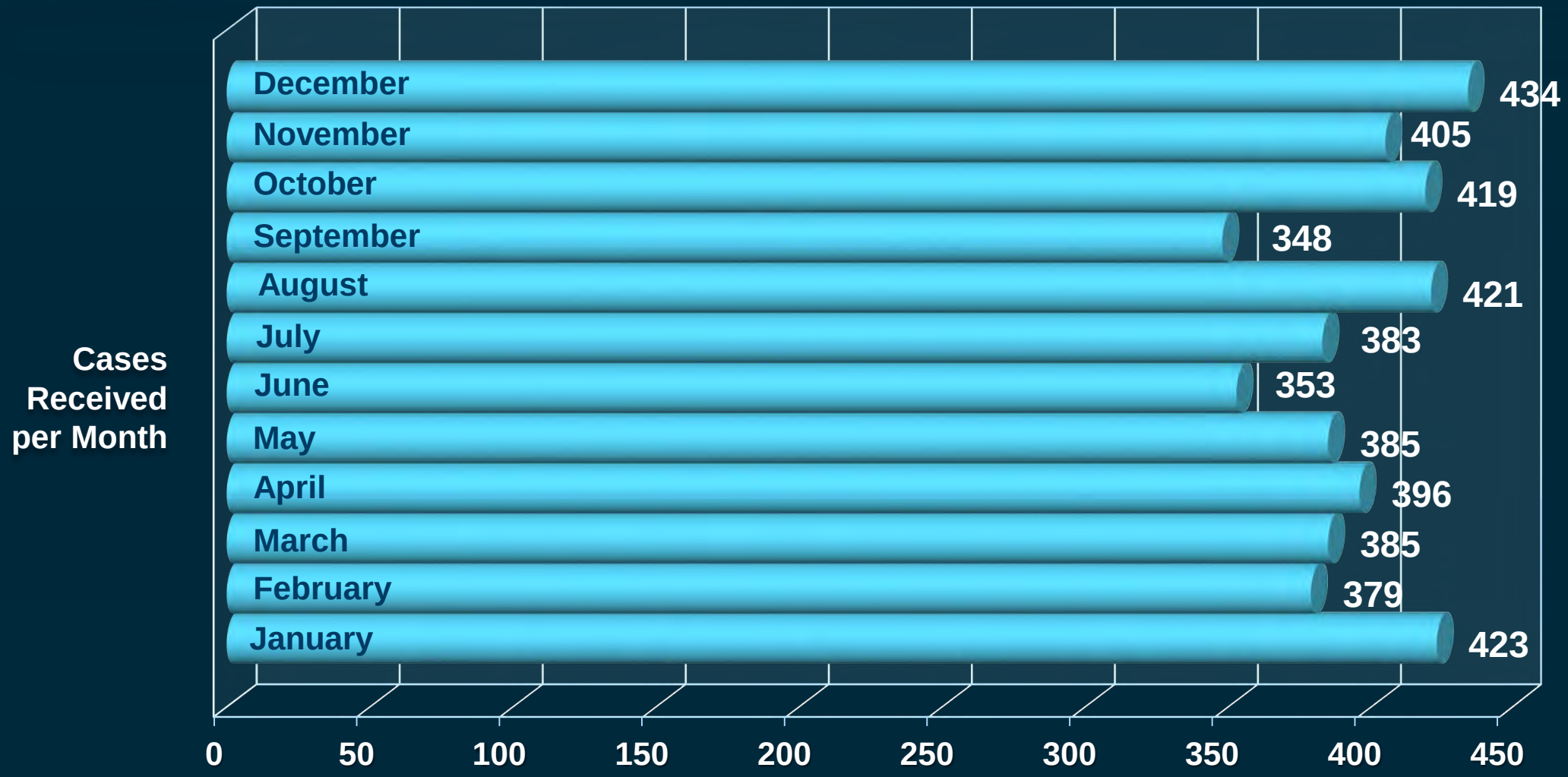
- **83% of ML cases (3,922) received a full autopsy***
  - **17%** of ML cases (**809**) received an external examination only
- **299 decedents unidentified on arrival**
  - **0** decedents remained unidentified at the end of 2017**
- **273 referrals to Harris County Bereavement Services**
- **167 formal neuropathological consults and 215 unofficial consults*****
  - **11** child abuse consults
- **No hospital autopsies retained**

** Partial autopsies are not performed by the HCIFS*
*** Exclude skeletal cases*
**** Unofficial consults include gross, photo and microscopic consults*

Total Caseload (2014 - 2017)



Monthly ML Caseload 2017



Average Daily Medicolegal Caseload

2017: **13.0 cases** | 2016: **13.4 cases** | 2015: **12.7 cases**

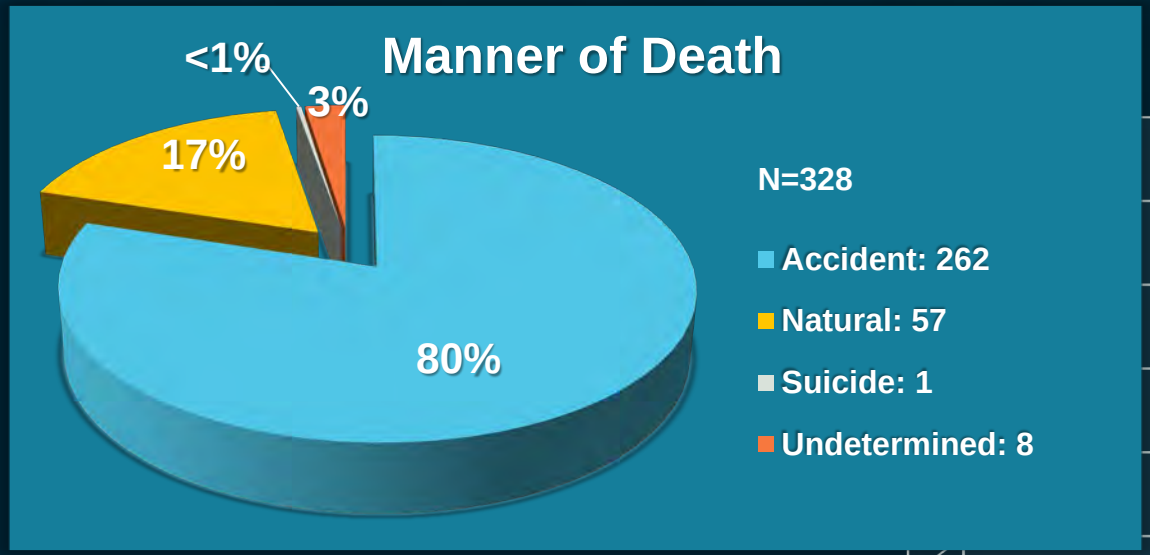
Months with Highest Average Daily Caseload:

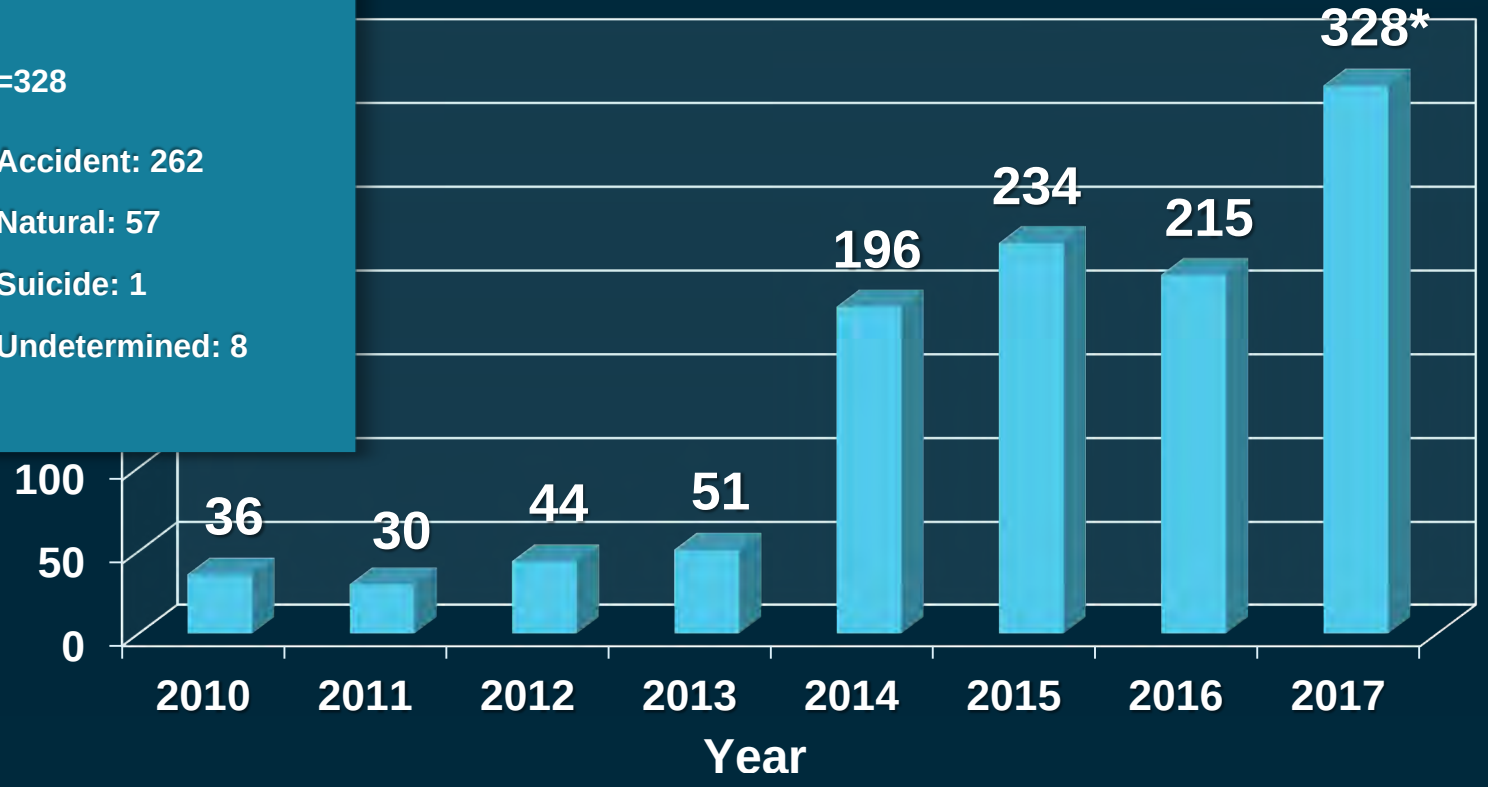
2017 December: **14.0 cases**
2016 July: **15.2 cases**
2015 July: **13.7 cases**

Months with Lowest Average Daily Caseload:

2017 September: **11.6 cases**
2016 October: **11.8 cases**
2015 September: **11.3 cases**

Trauma Inquest Case Stats

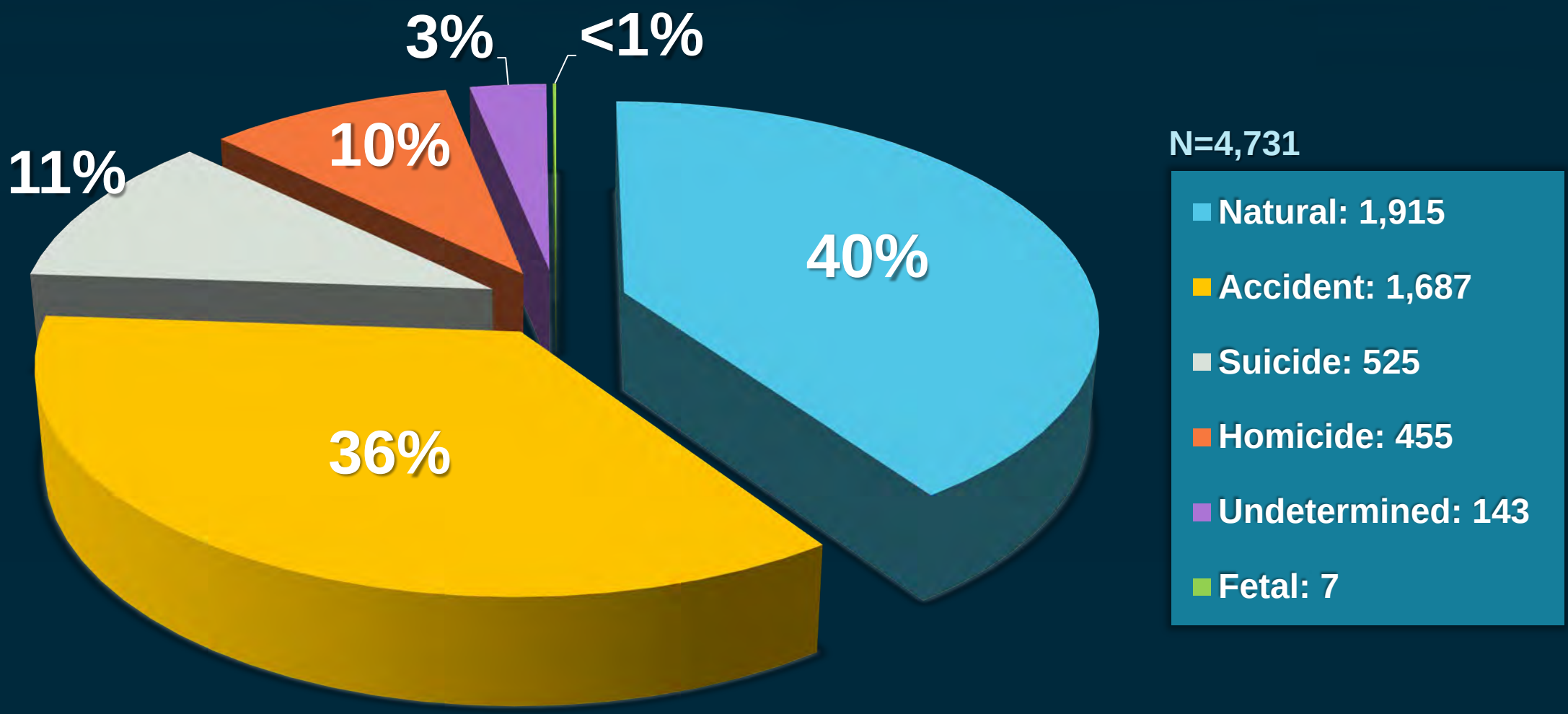




*About 53% increase compared with 2016; a record high for trauma inquest cases

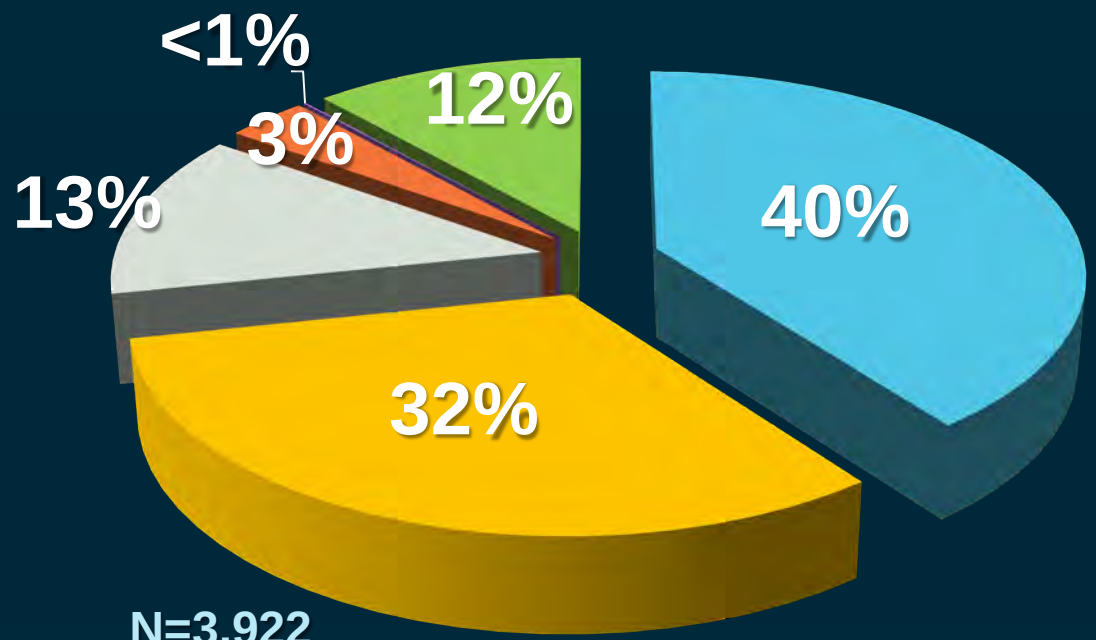
**Trauma inquest is a death investigation in which the medical examiner accepts jurisdiction and completes the death certificate, but the body of the deceased is not examined by medical examiner personnel. Prior to 2014, many of the deaths that we currently handle as trauma inquests were brought in for external examination. The practice of performing a trauma inquest in these cases is a more judicious use of HCIFS personnel, and streamlines family disposition of the body, without compromising the accuracy of death certification.

Manner of Death – Autopsy and External Examinations



Manner of Death Filtered by Autopsy and External Examinations

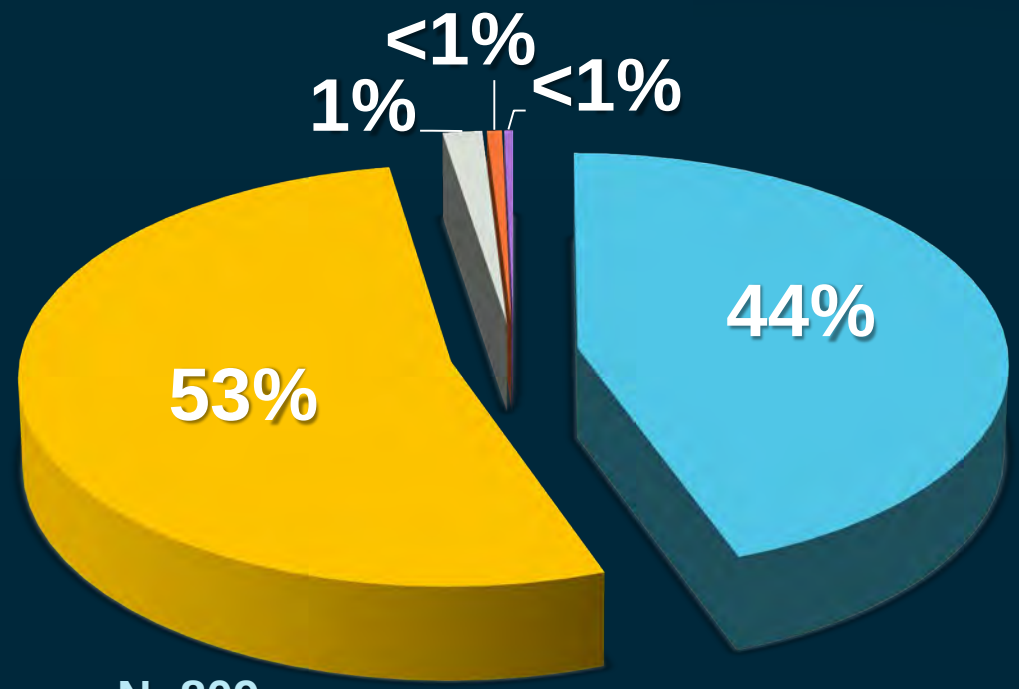
Autopsy Examinations



N=3,922

- Natural: 1,555
- Accident: 1,258
- Suicide: 512
- Undetermined: 138
- Fetal: 4
- Homicide: 455

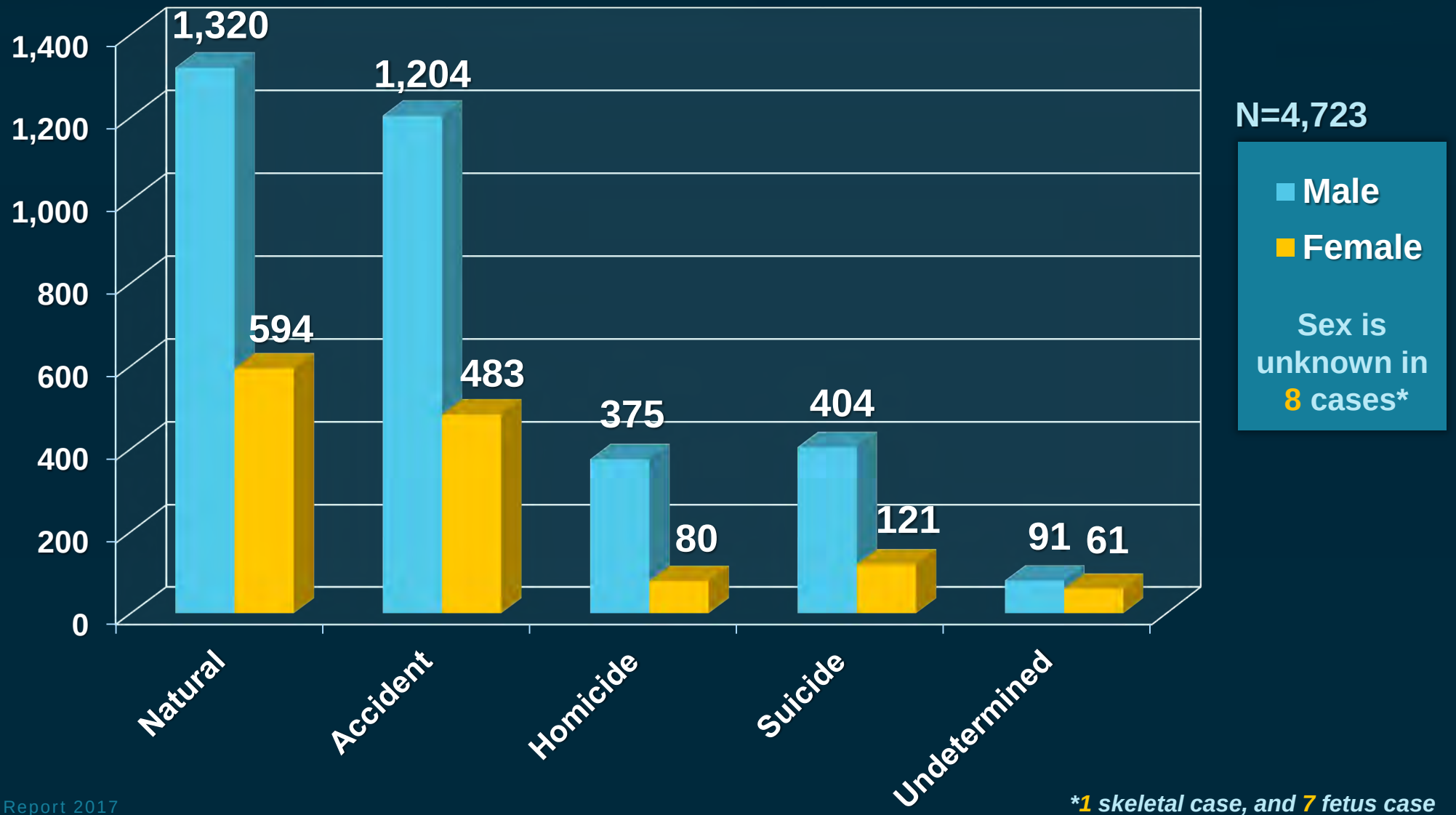
External Examinations



N=809

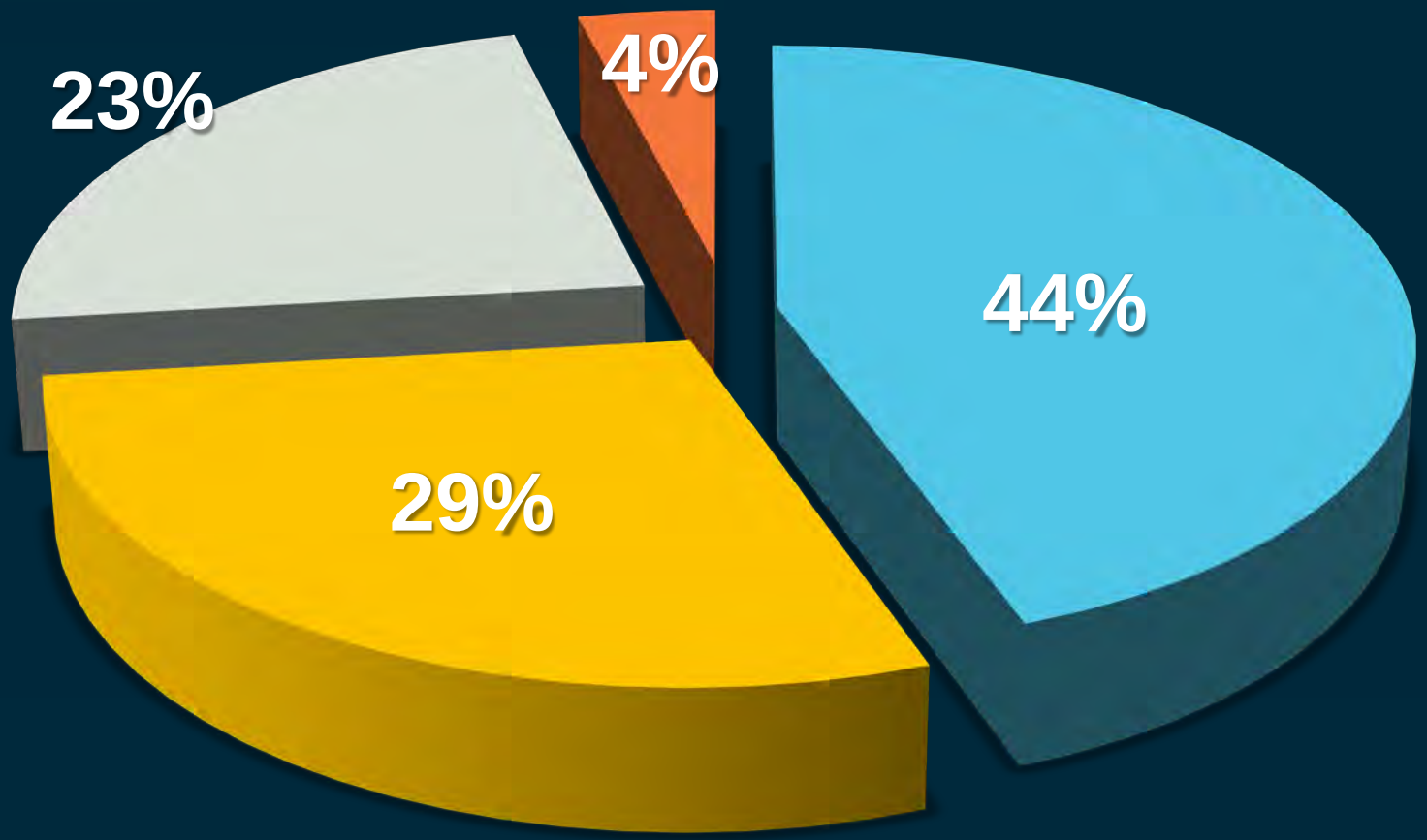
- Natural: 359
- Accident: 429
- Suicide: 13
- Undetermined: 5
- Fetal: 3

Manner of Death Stratified by Sex



*1 skeletal case, and 7 fetus case

Race/Ethnicity Components of ML cases



N=4,731

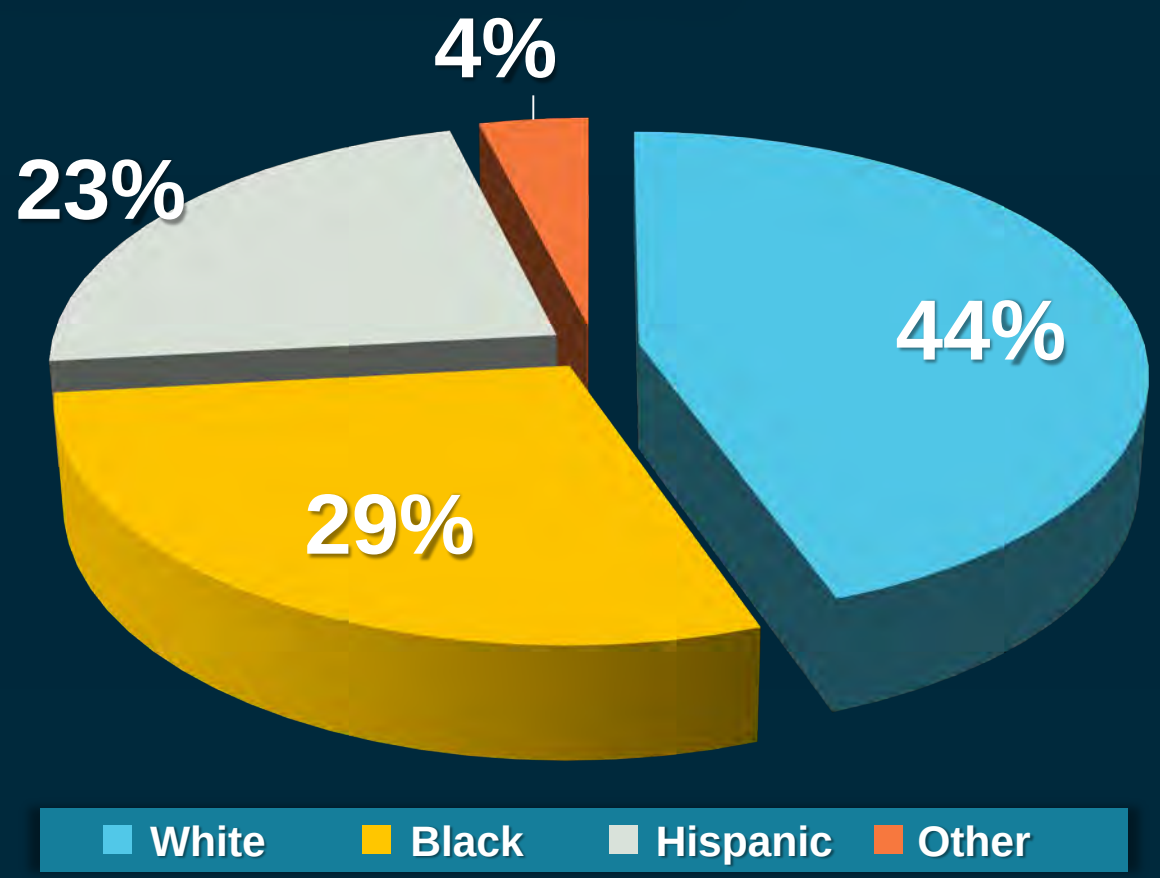
- White: 2,108
- Black: 1,353
- Hispanic: 1,081
- Other: 189*

Race/Ethnicity is unknown in 5 cases

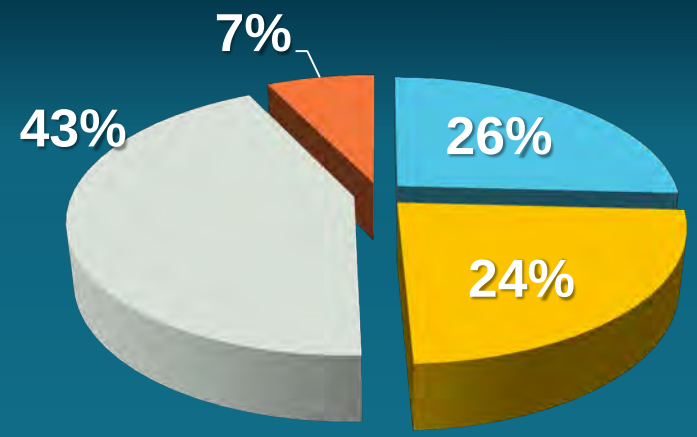
** Other is composed of Native American (1) and Asian (188)*

Race/Ethnicity Case Demographic Data HCIFS Compared to Population

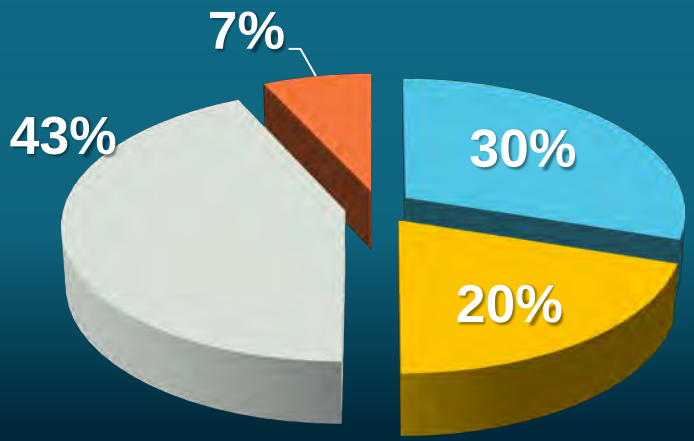
HCIFS Decedent Population*



Houston City Population**

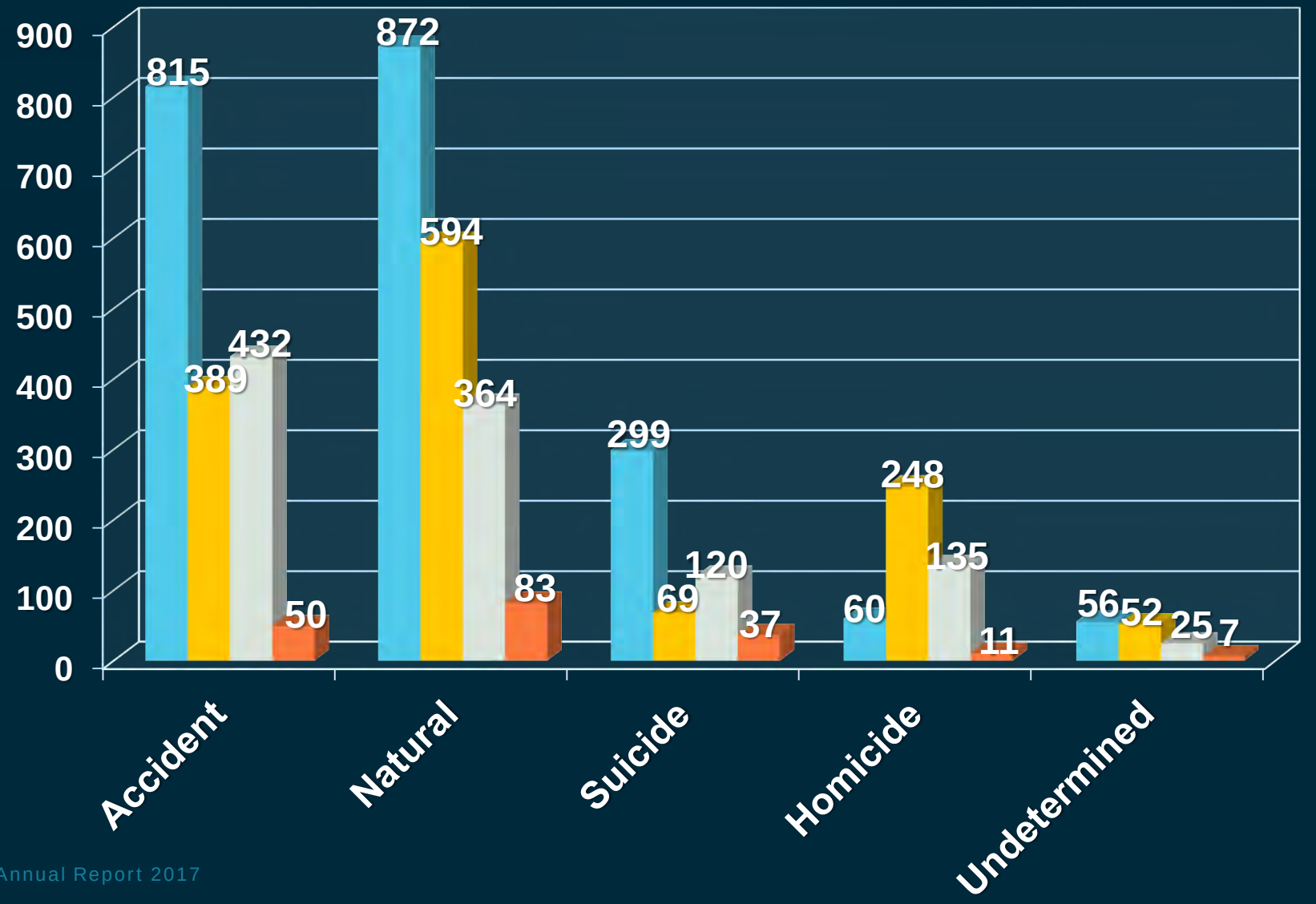


Harris County Population***



** HCIFS decedent population, N=4,731, excludes unknown race/ethnicity*
*** City of Houston population, N=2,312,717, estimated by Statistical Atlas*
**** Harris County population, N=4,652,980, estimated by Texas DSHS Center for Health Statistics*

ML Cases by Manner and Race/Ethnicity



N=4,731

- White: 2,102
- Black: 1,352
- Hispanic: 1,076
- Other: 188

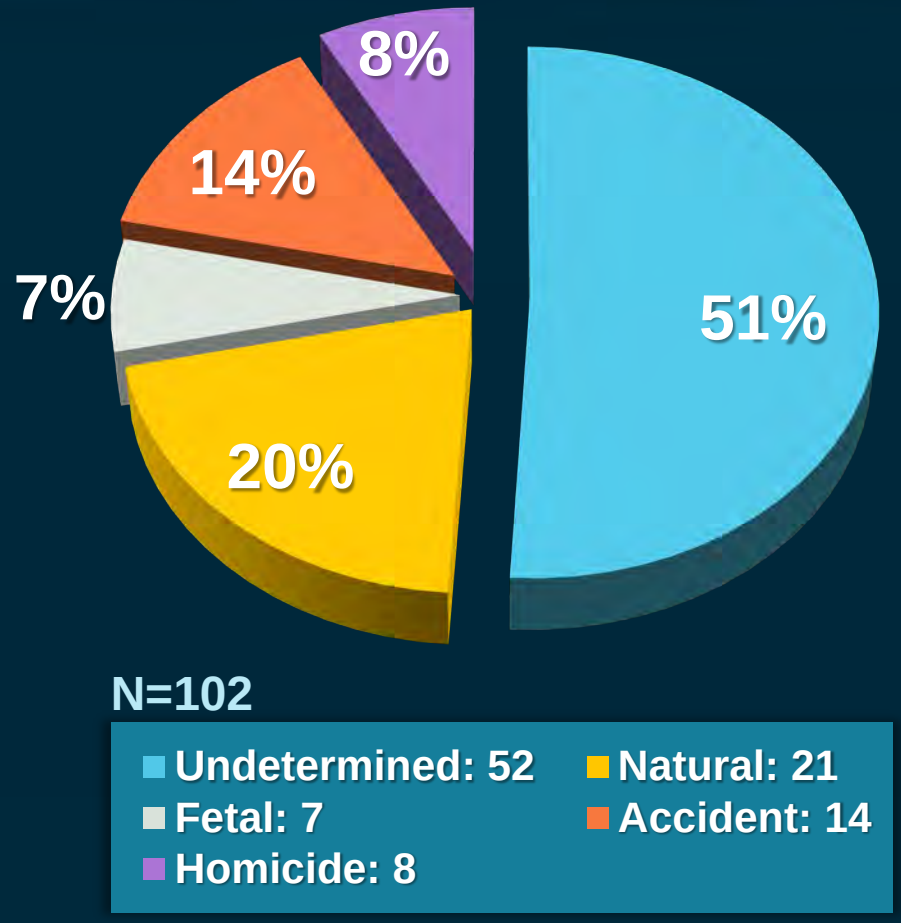
Excludes 5 individuals of unknown race/ethnicity

Infant/Fetal Deaths

The birth count for Harris county is estimated to be 73,605 for 2017

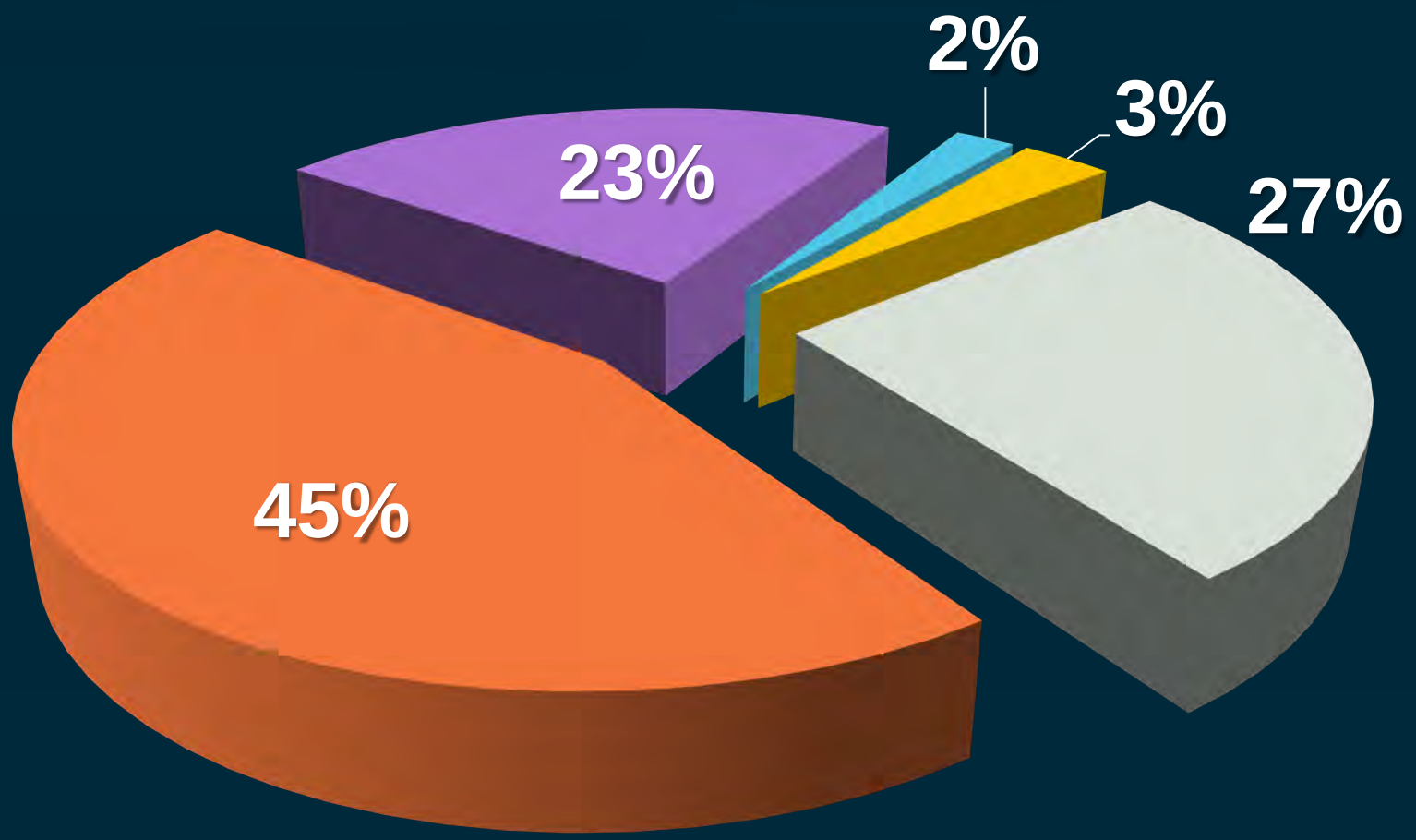
(Data provided by Texas Department of State Health Services)

- **104 infant/fetal death cases**
  (aged less than 1 year)
- **52 cases of Undetermined Manner**
  - **26 were classified as Undetermined (co-sleeping)***
- **The cause of death in 5 of the 21 infant deaths with a natural manner was SIDS**



** "Undetermined (co-sleeping)" are cases with no anatomic findings to indicate a cause of death, toxicological cause of death, or suspicion of foul play by investigation, but were co-sleeping with another individual at the time of their demise. These cases would otherwise be classified as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) but for the possibility of overlay. Therefore, the cause of death in this subset of cases was classified as "undetermined (co-sleeping)."*

ML Cases Age Categories – Represented By Proportion

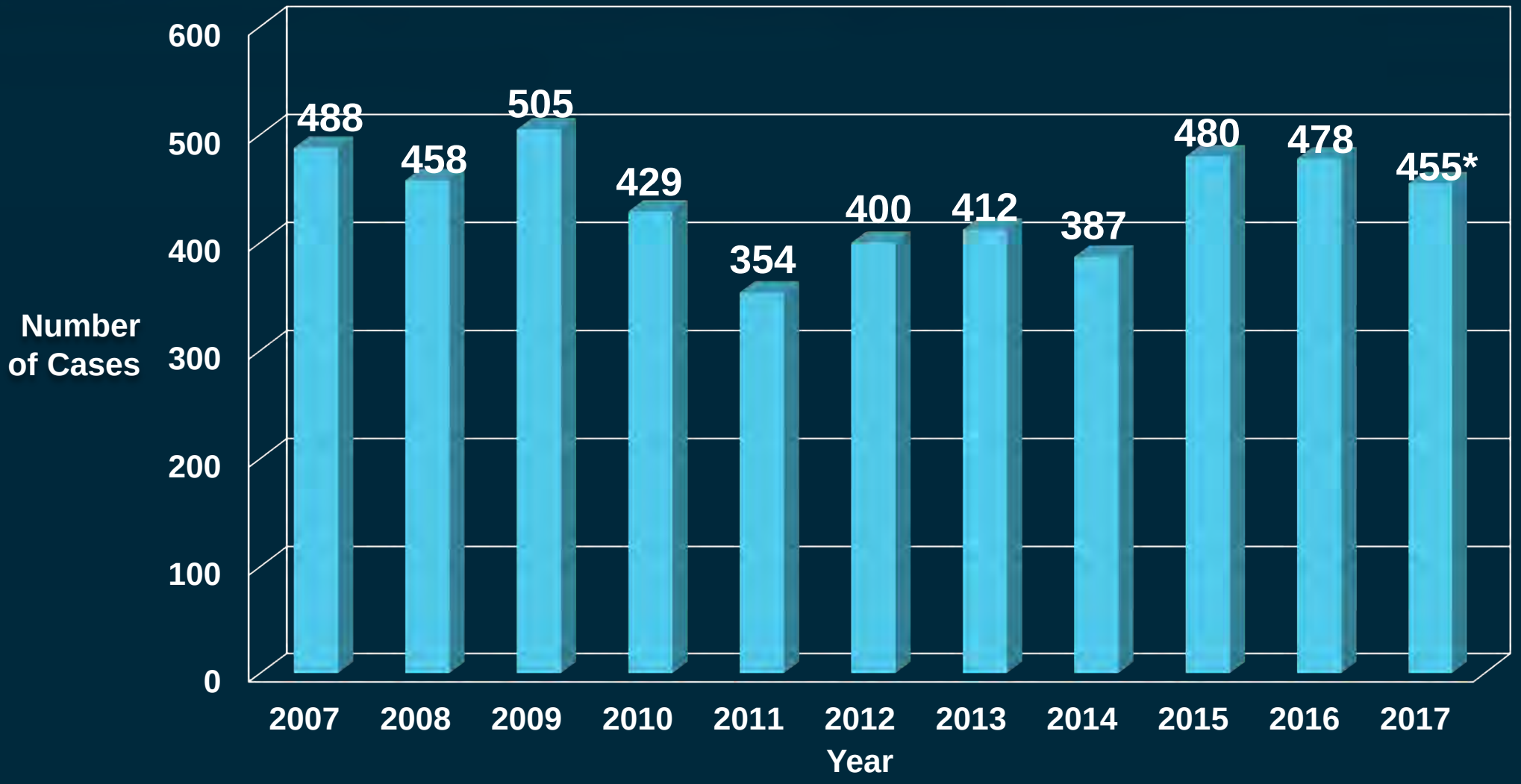


N=4,731

- <1 Year: 104
- 1-17 Years: 158
- 18-39 Years: 1,261
- 40-64 Years: 2,117
- 65+ Years: 1,092

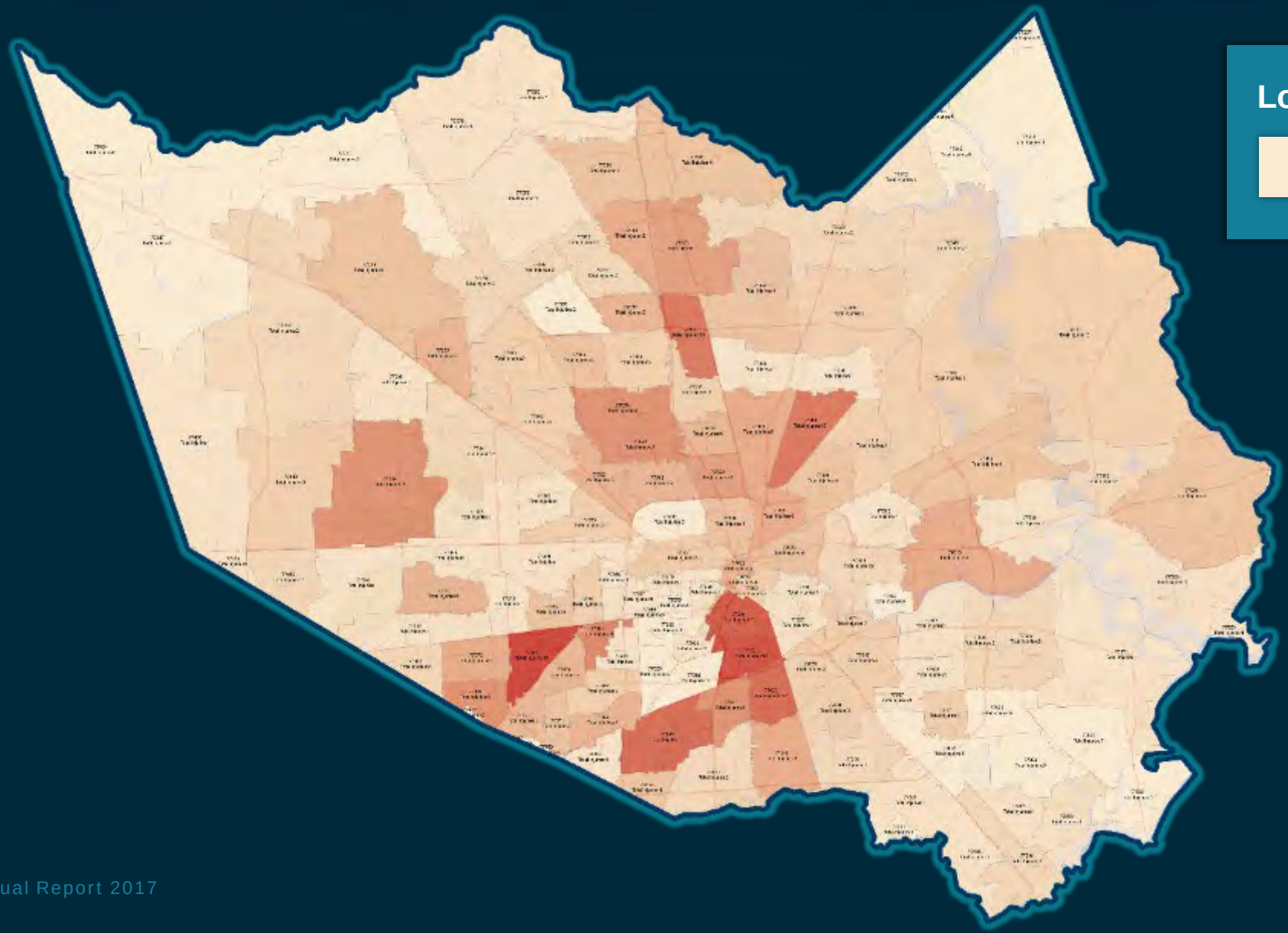
4 individuals were of undetermined age

Homicide Case Volume

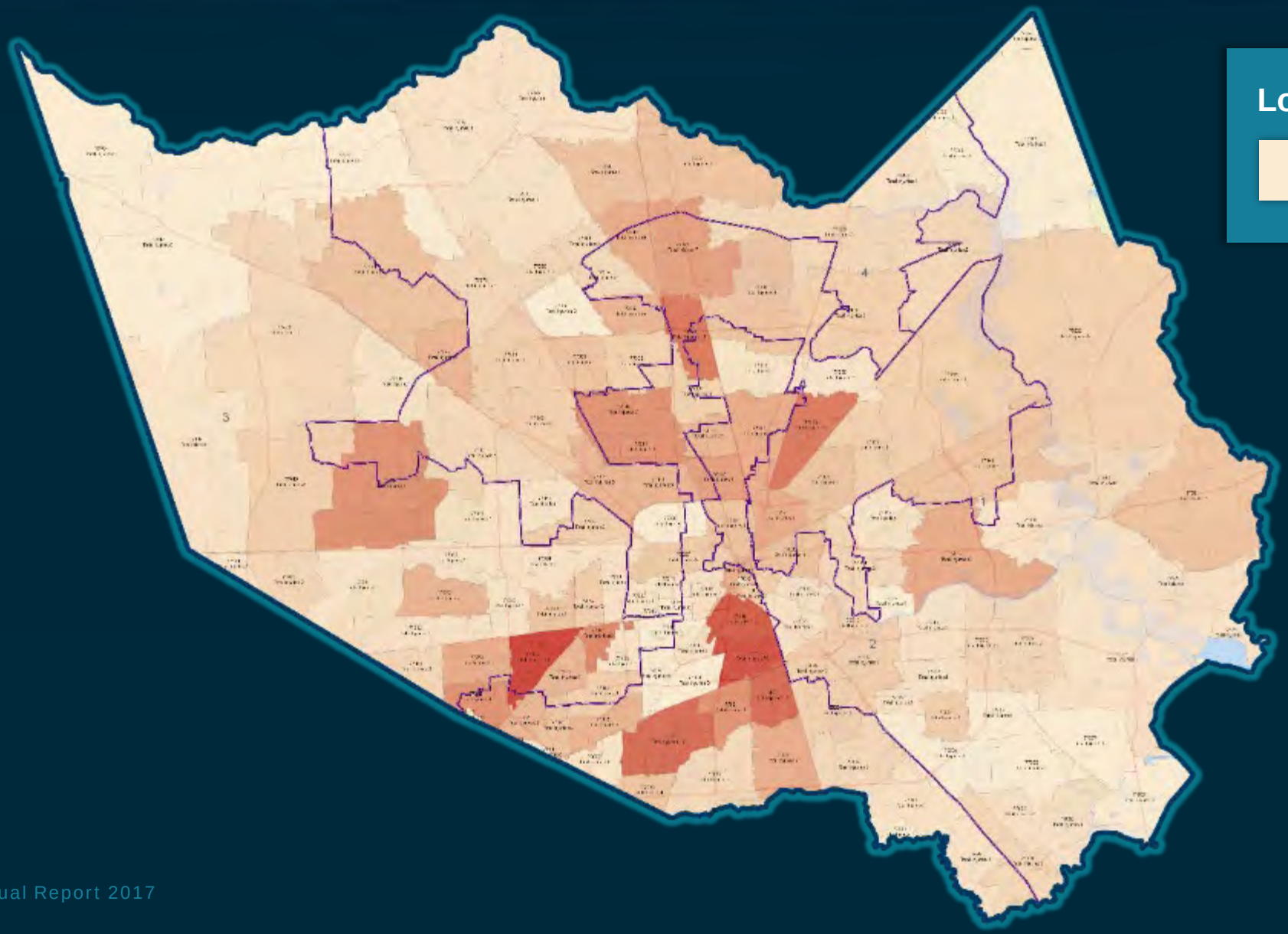


** About 4% decrease compared with 2016; a 29% increase compared with 2011*

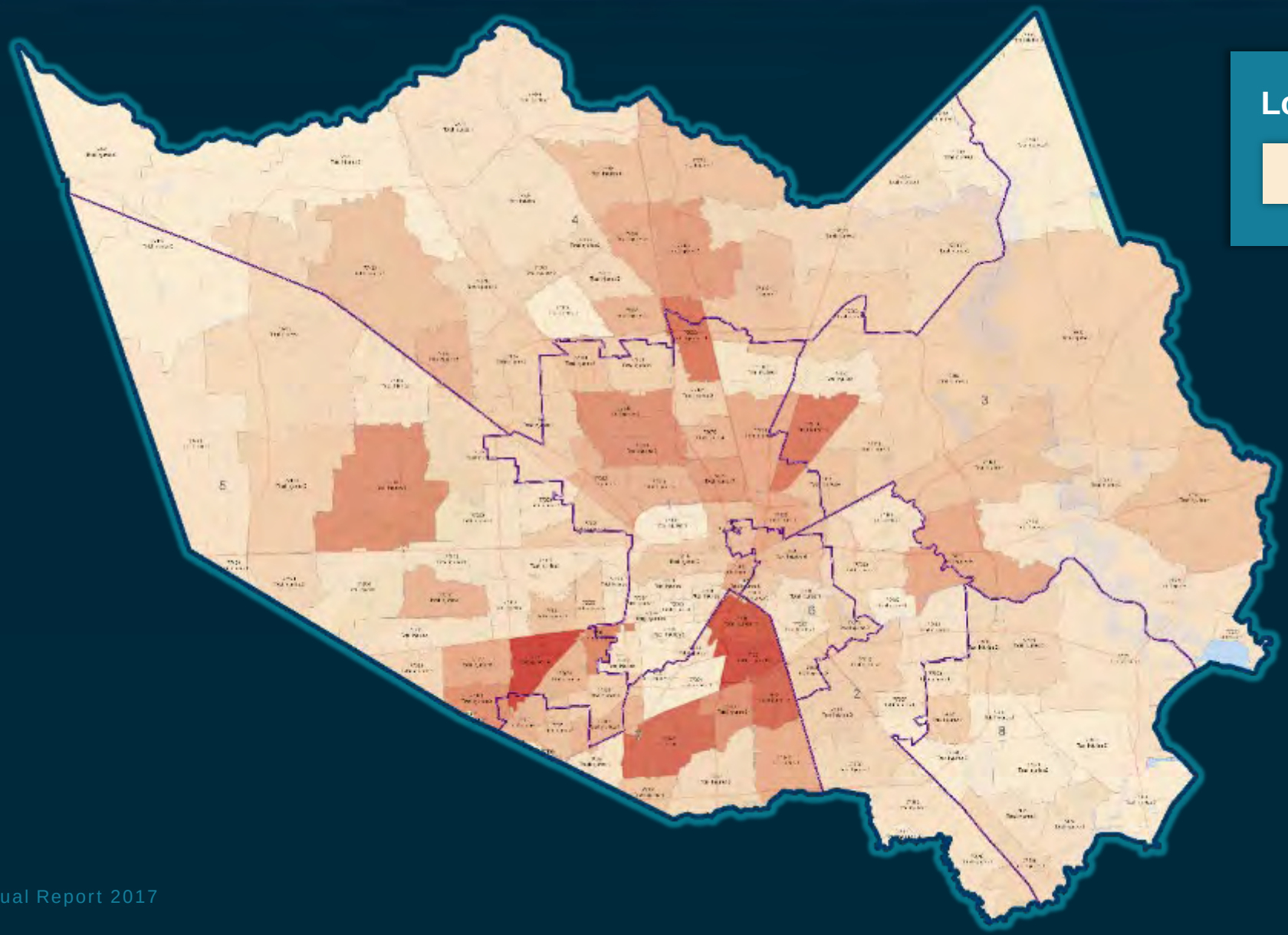
Homicides Stratified by Injury Zip



Homicides Stratified by Injury Zip/Commissioner Precinct Boundary



Homicides Stratified by Injury Zip/Constable Precinct Boundary

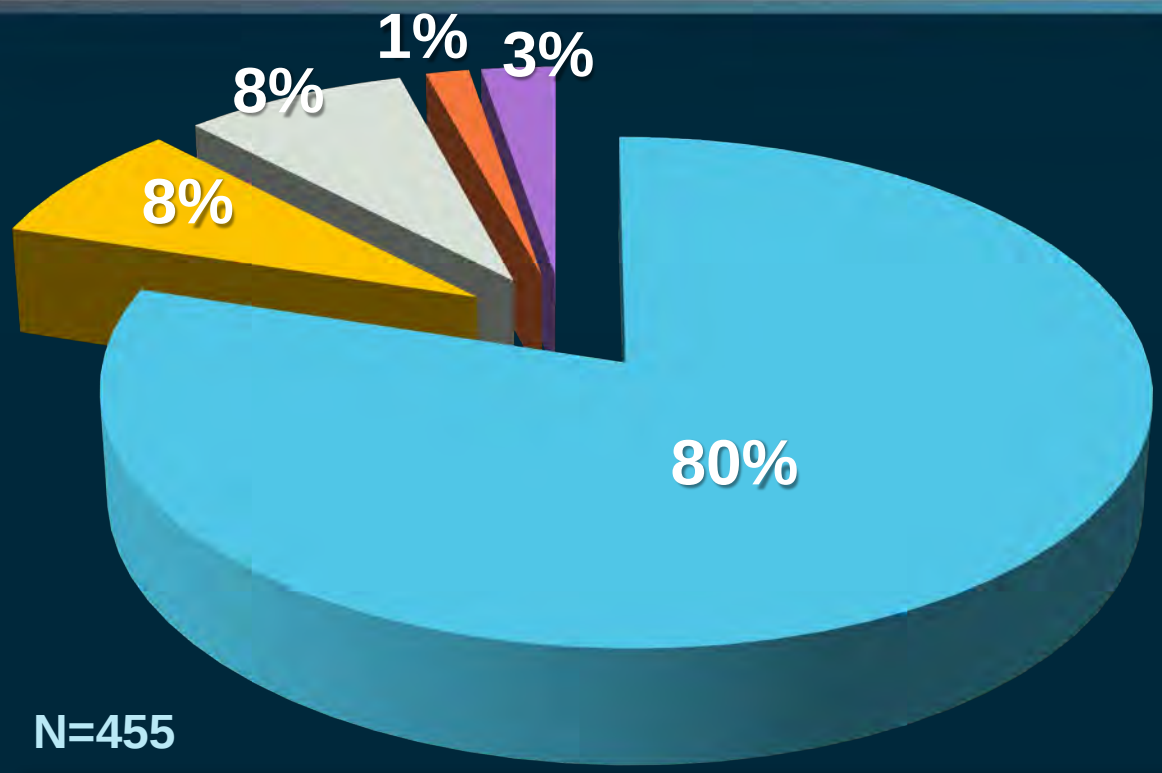


Cause of Death in Homicide Cases

- **60 cases were linked to at least one other ML case**
  (e.g. double murder, murder suicide, etc.)
  - **Similar to number of total homicide cases in 2016 (61)**

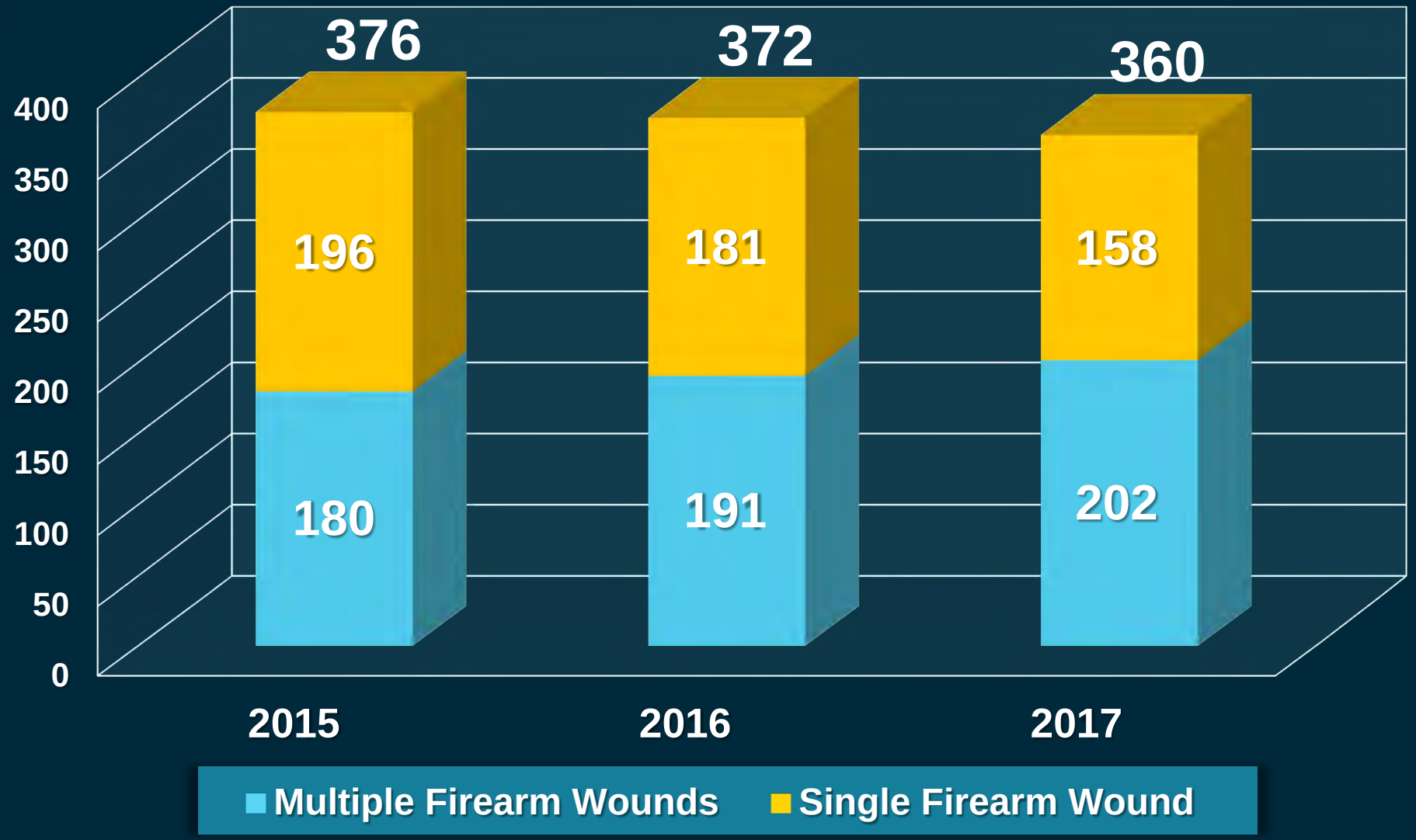
- **At least 32 homicide cases are associated with domestic violence**

- **11 homicide deaths occurred "while at work"**



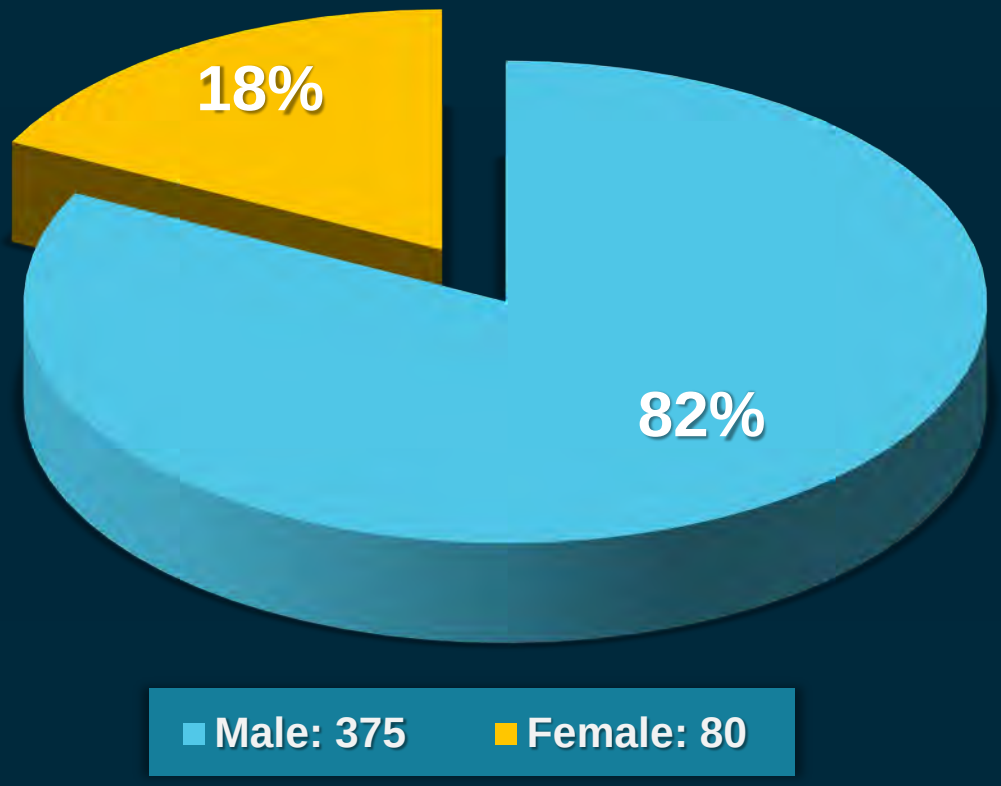
** Other causes include the use of drugs, thermal injuries and drowning*

Homicide Deaths by Firearms



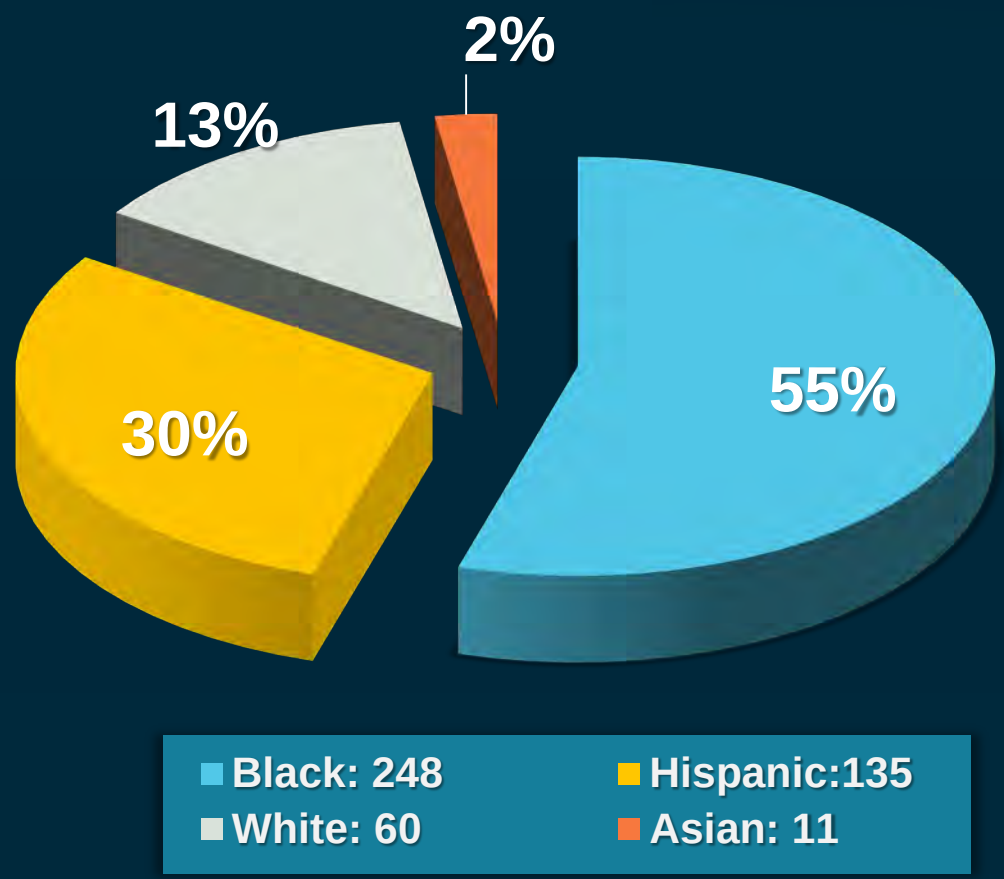
Homicide Deaths – Stratified by Demographic Category

Sex



Race/Ethnicity

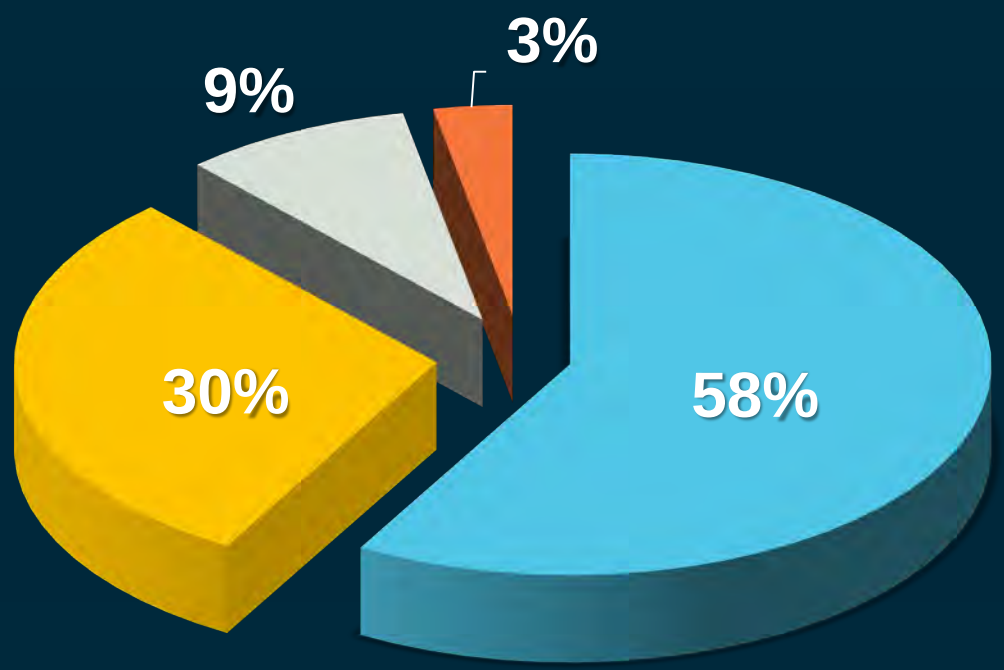
N=455



** There is one homicide case with unknown race/ethnicity*

Homicide Deaths by Race/Ethnicity – Harris County & City of Houston

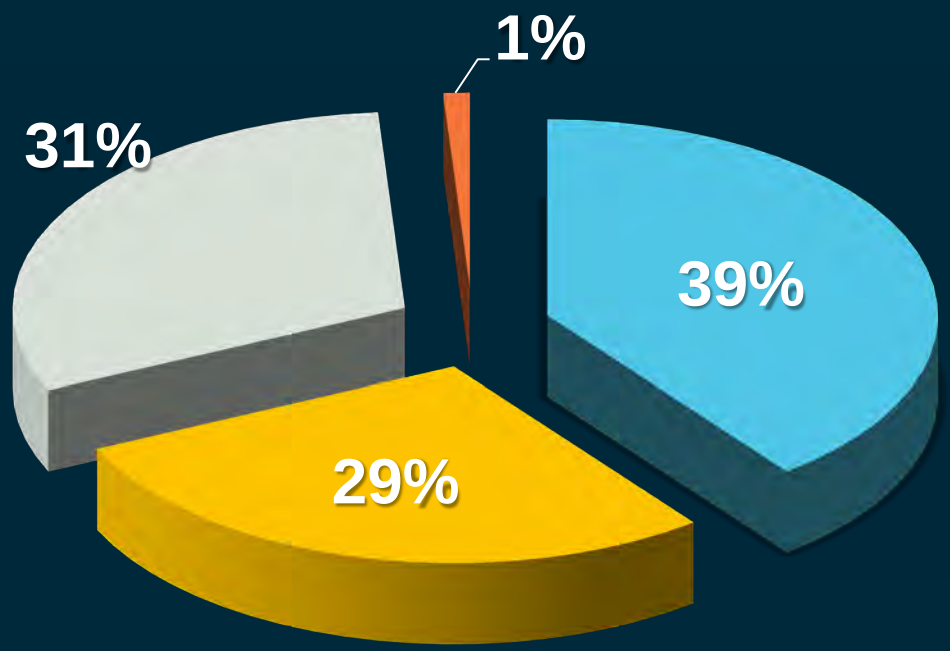
City of Houston



N=364*

Harris County

Excluding the City of Houston

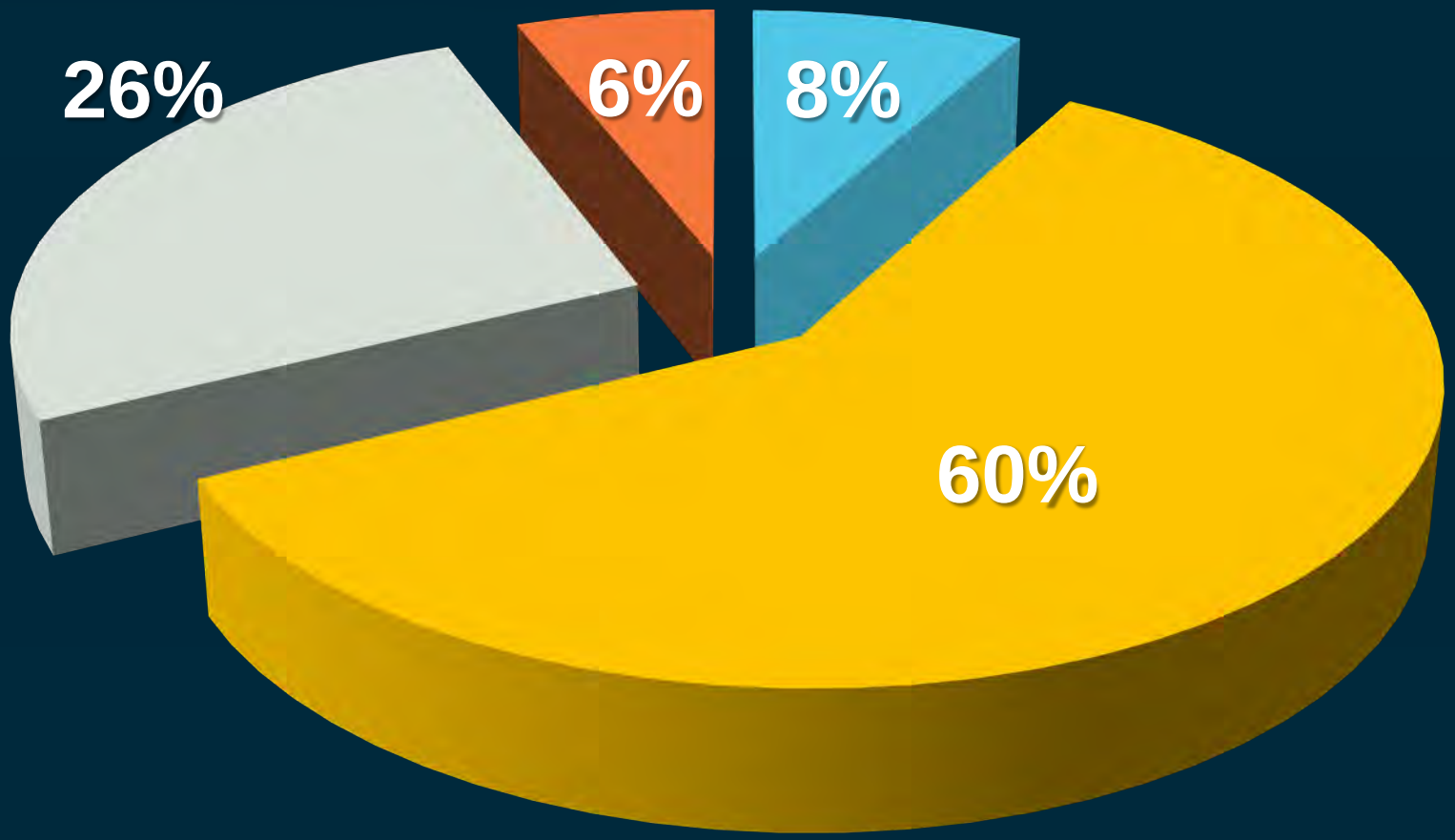


N=91

Black Hispanic White Asian

** 364 homicide cases were attributed to injury locations within the City of Houston based on the address of the place of injury and law enforcement jurisdiction*

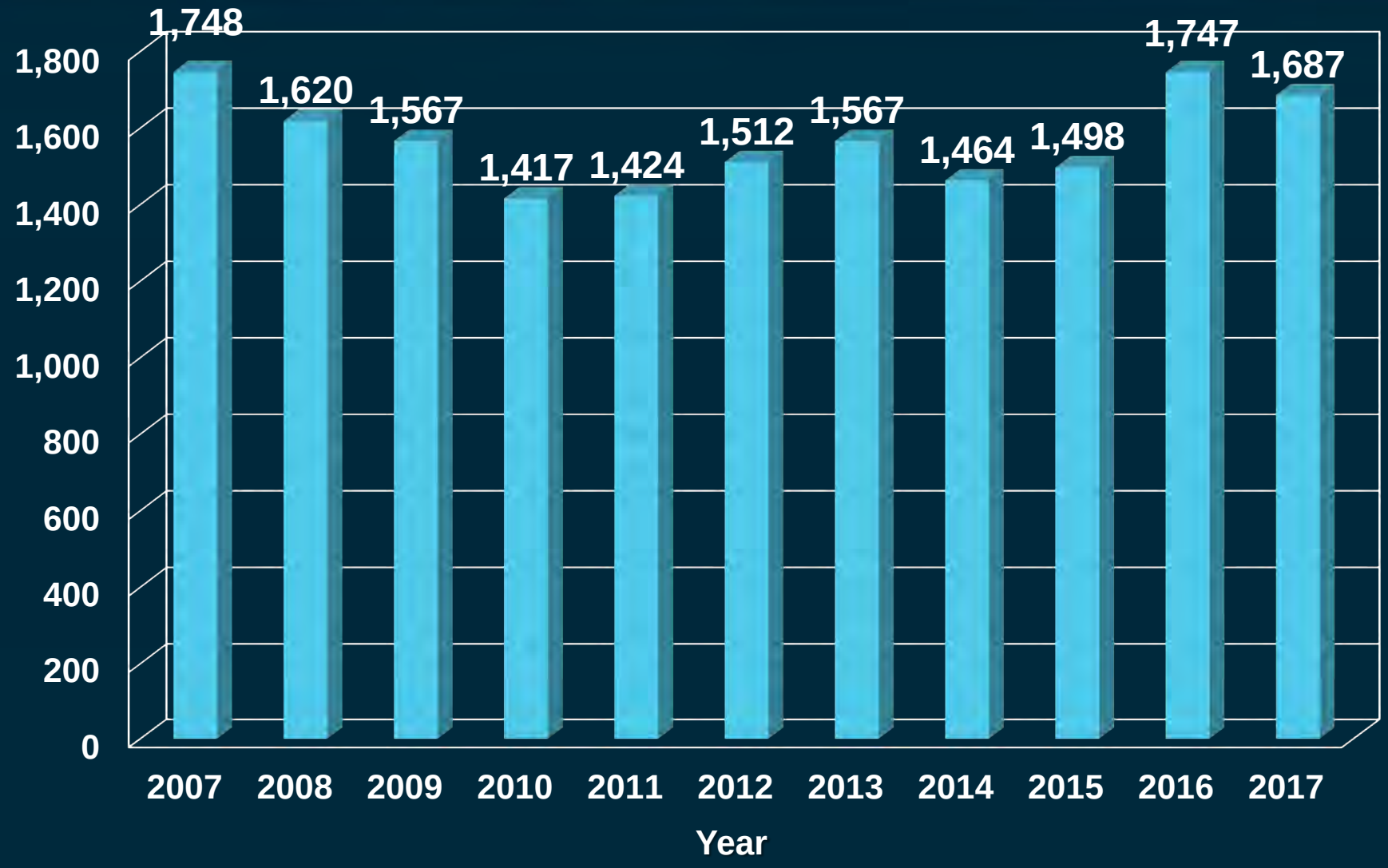
Homicide Deaths by Age Category



N=455

- < 18 years: 37
- 18-39 years: 271
- 40-64 years: 120
- 65+ years: 27

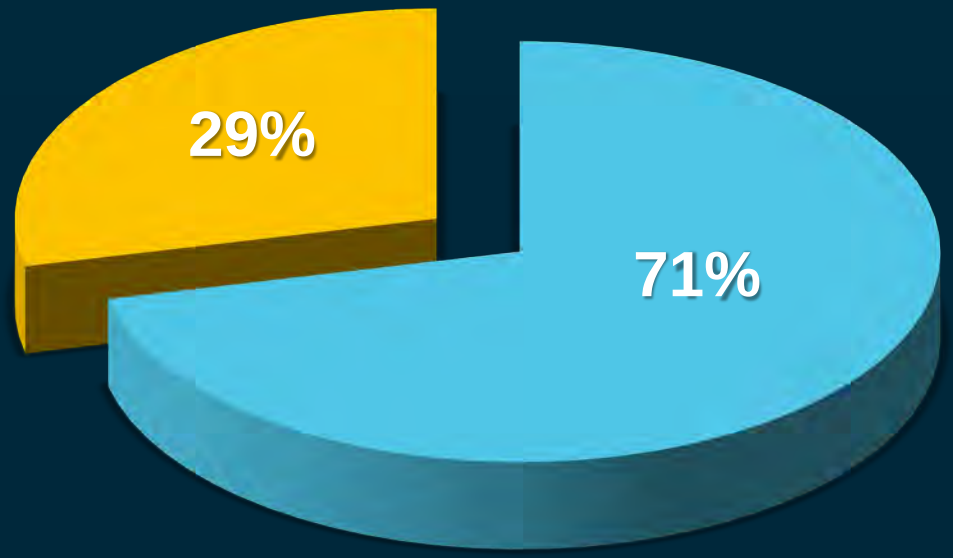
ML Accidental Death Case Volume



** About 3% decrease compared to 2016; a 19% increase in Accidental Death case volume compared to 2010*

ML Accidental Deaths – Stratified by Demographic Category

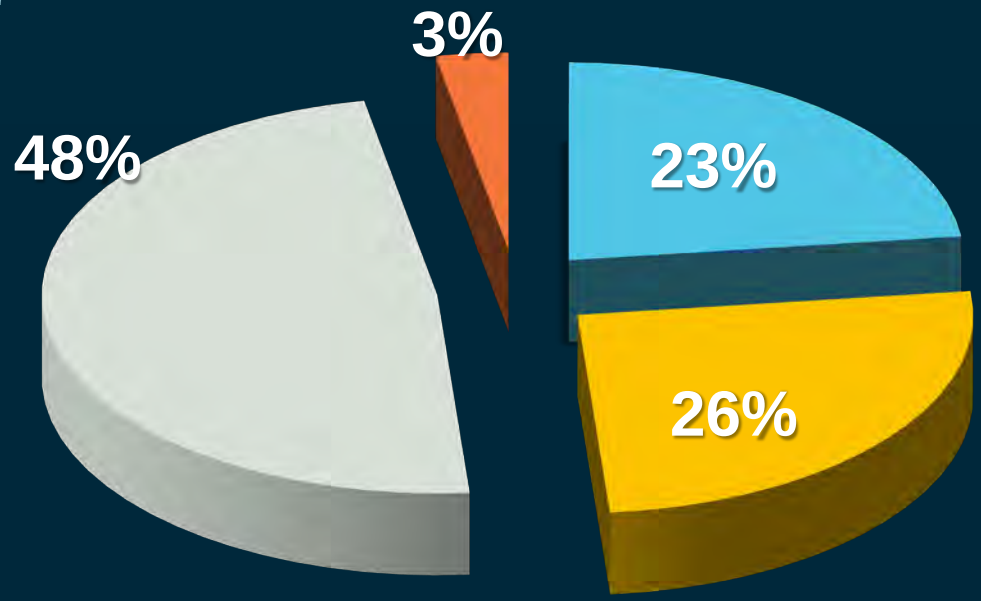
Sex



Male: 1,204 Female: 483

N=1,687

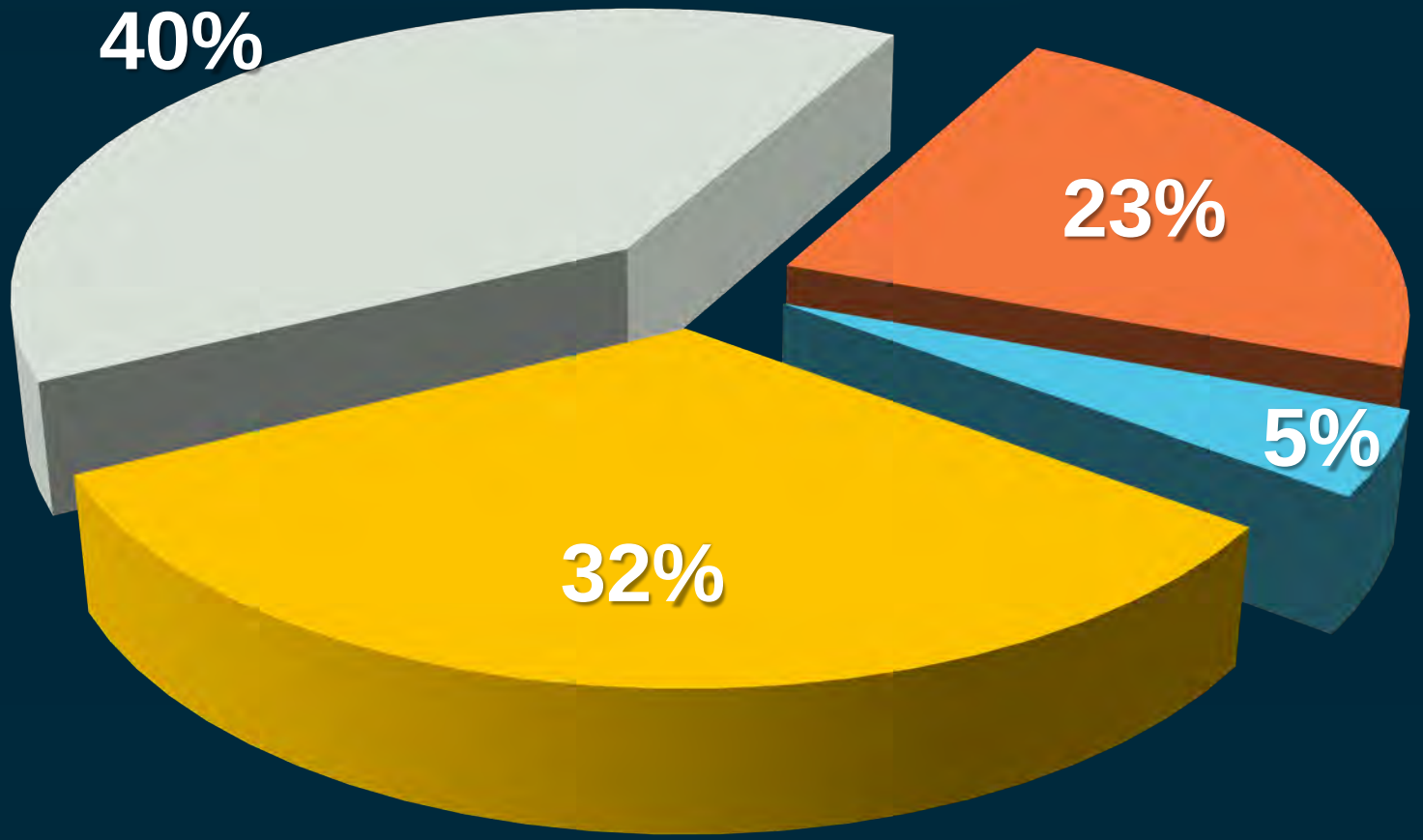
Race/Ethnicity



Black: 389 Hispanic:432
White: 815 Asian: 50

** There is one accidental case with unknown race/ethnicity*

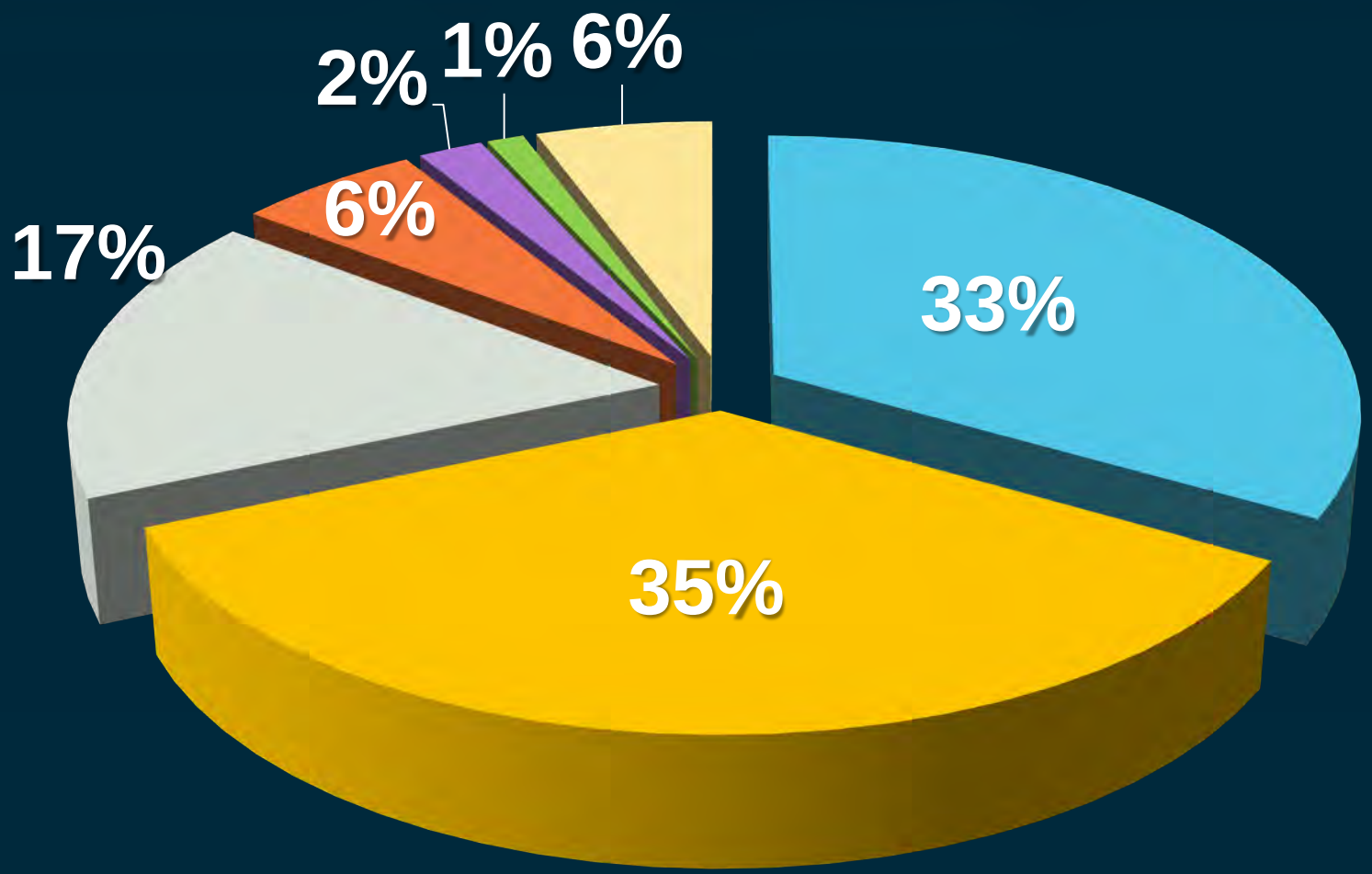
ML Accidental Deaths by Age Category



N=1,687

- < 18 years: 77
- 18-39 years: 548
- 40-64 years: 682
- 65+ years: 380

Most Common Causes of ML Accidental Death



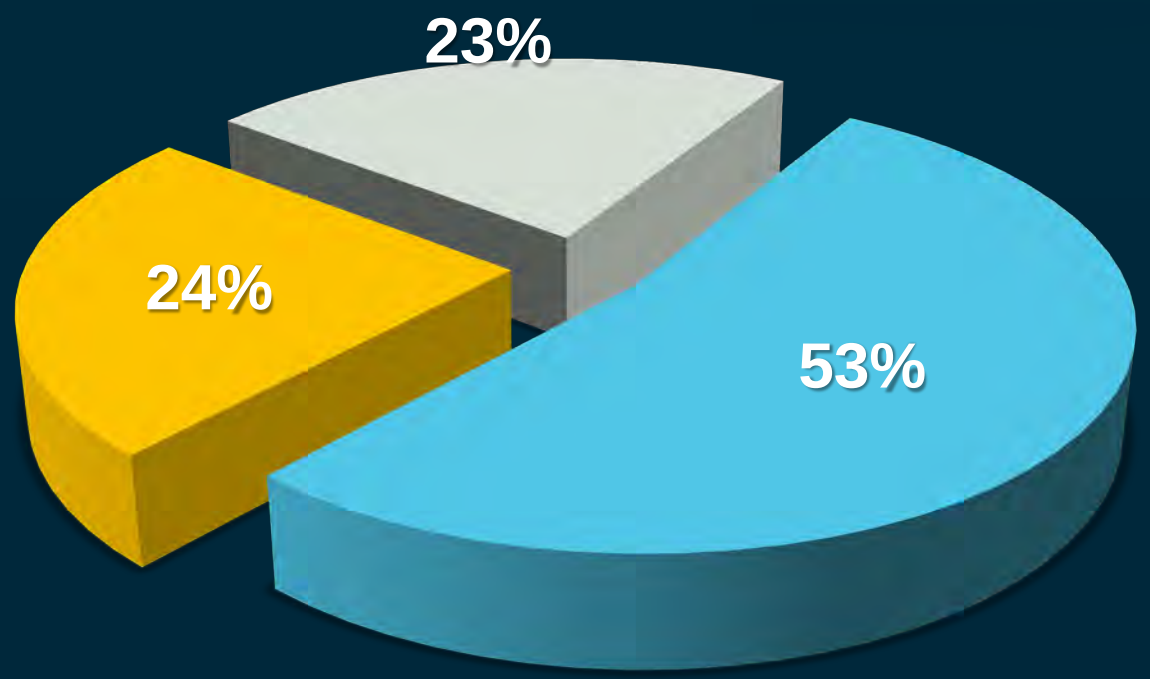
N=1,687

- Motor Vehicle: 562
- Drug Toxicity: 594
- Non-MVC Blunt Trauma: 284
- Drowning: 98
- Asphyxia: 35
- Fire/Thermal: 20
- Other: 94*

** Other includes firearm injuries, sharp force injuries, hyperthermia, hypothermia and therapeutic complications*

Motor Vehicle Crash (MVC) Death Cases

- **MVC fatalities include 32 children aged 2 months to 17 years**
- **3 children were pedestrians, aged 5 years to 15 years of age**
- **18% of driver fatalities (53) were under 25 years of age**
- **19 stranded motorists were hit while stopped**

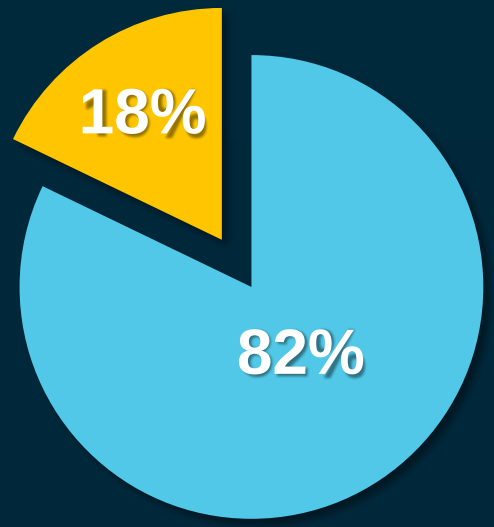


N=562

- Driver: 297
- Passenger or Unknown Position: 136
- Pedestrian: 129

MVC Sex and Age Distributions

Driver Sex Distribution

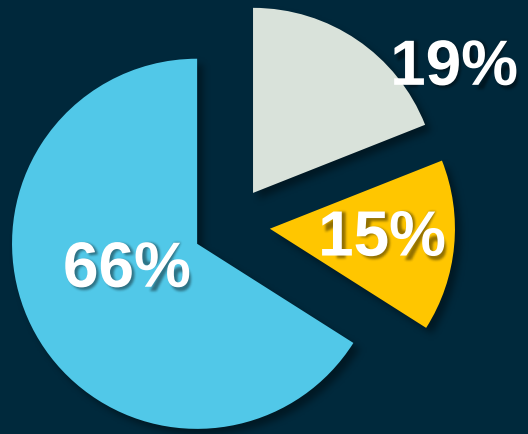


N=297

- Male: 244
- Female: 53

The youngest driver fatality was 16; the oldest 94

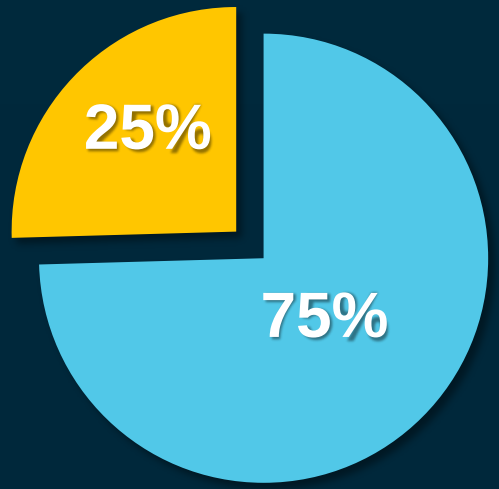
Proportion of drivers who were teens or senior citizens



N=297

- 16 to 25 years: 57
- 65+ years: 43
- Other Ages: 197

Sex Distribution all MVC



N=562

- Male: 419
- Female: 143

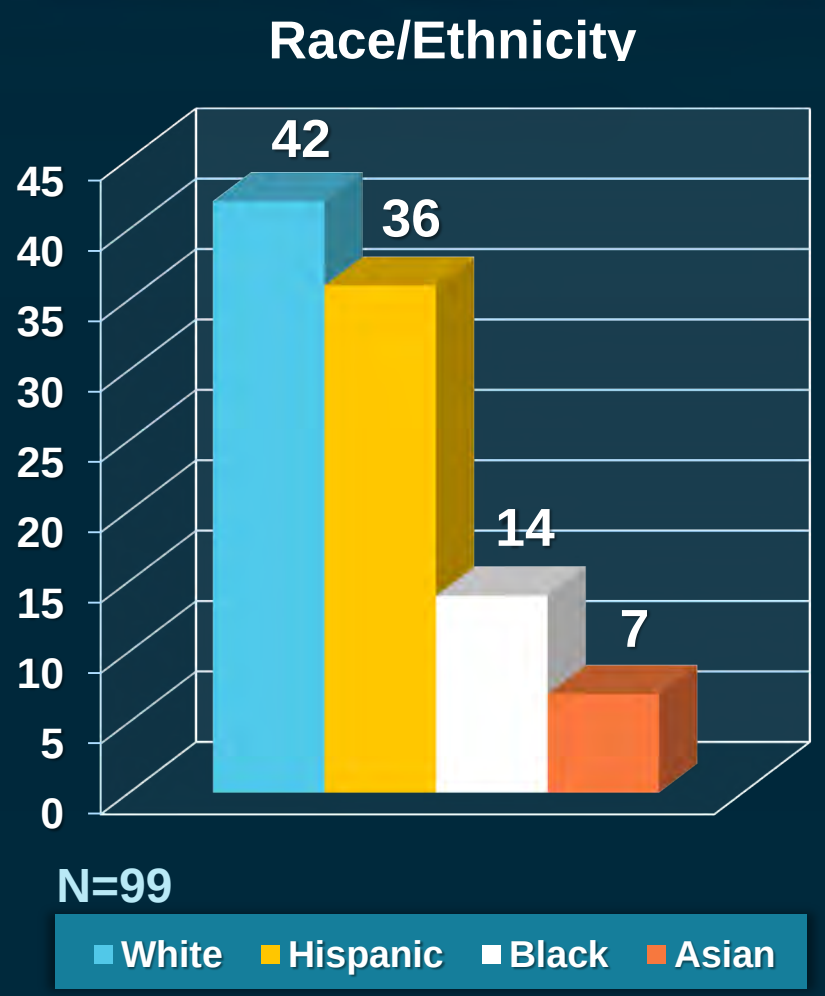
Accidental Drowning

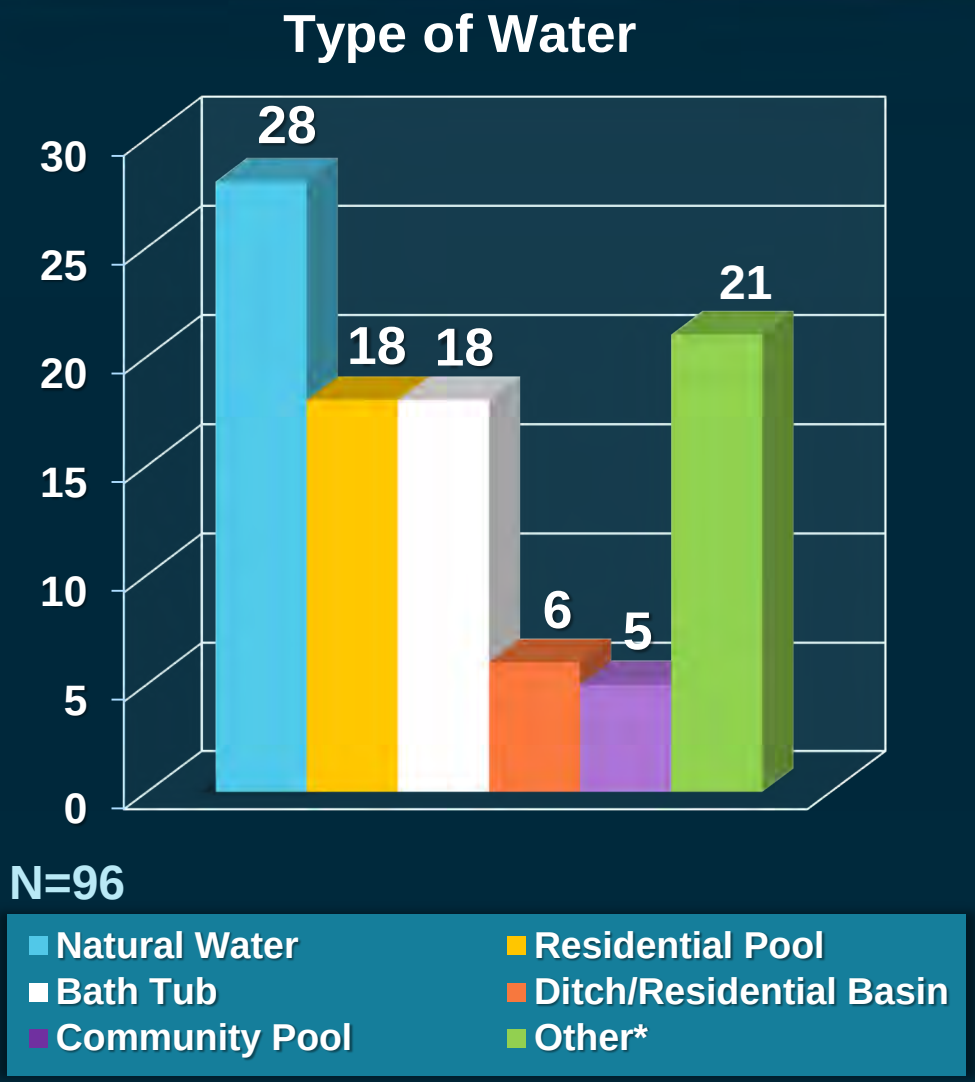
- **99 total cases of Accidental Drowning in 2017**
  (Includes cases of submerged vehicles)
  - **Includes 34 drowning cases related to Harvey**

- **Age range is 2 years to 91 years**
  - **Includes 14 young children aged 2 to 7 years**

  - **68 of the drowning cases are males compared to 31 females**

Accidental Drowning – Case Demographics





** Other category includes locations such as near a roadway, parking lot and other open area*

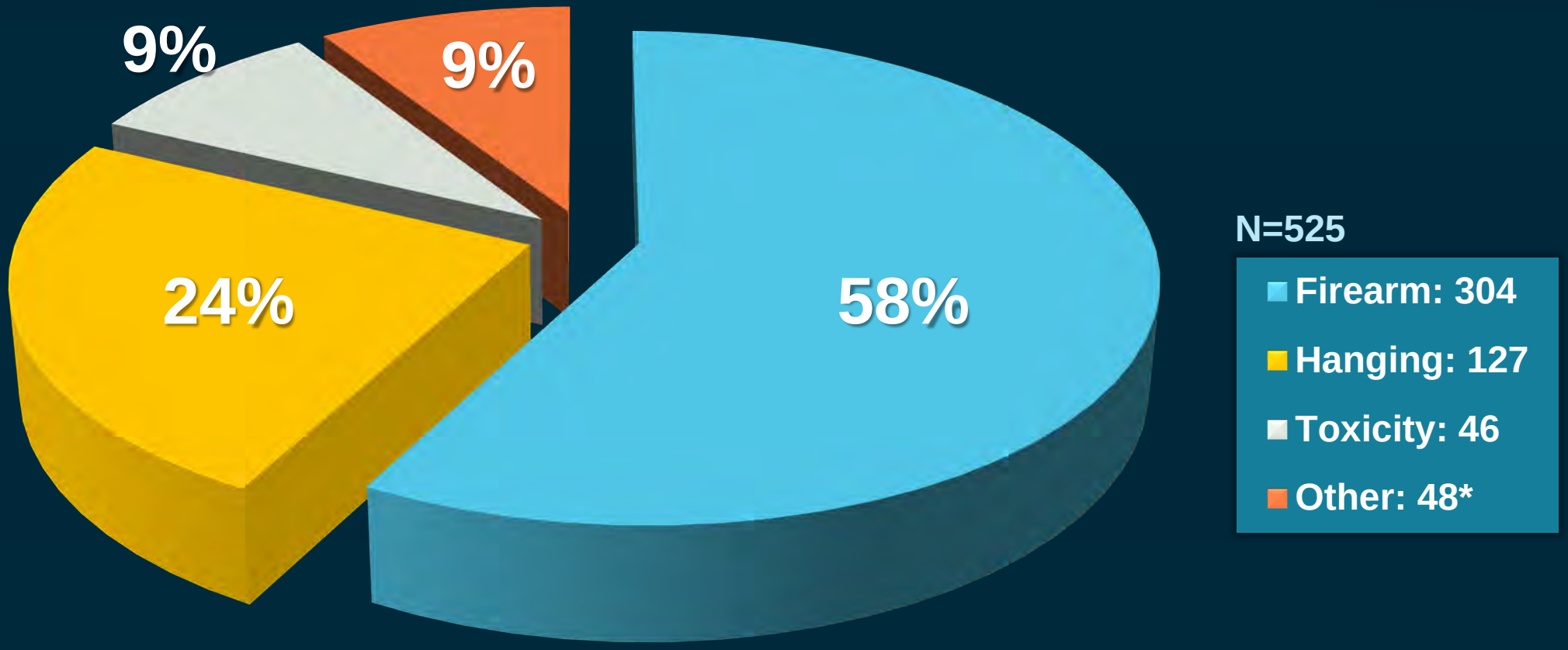
ML Suicide Case Volume

** 2017 is the current record high volume for suicide cases. Compared to 2016, 3% increase, and compared to 2010, 45% increase in Suicide cases.*

ML Suicide Case Demographics

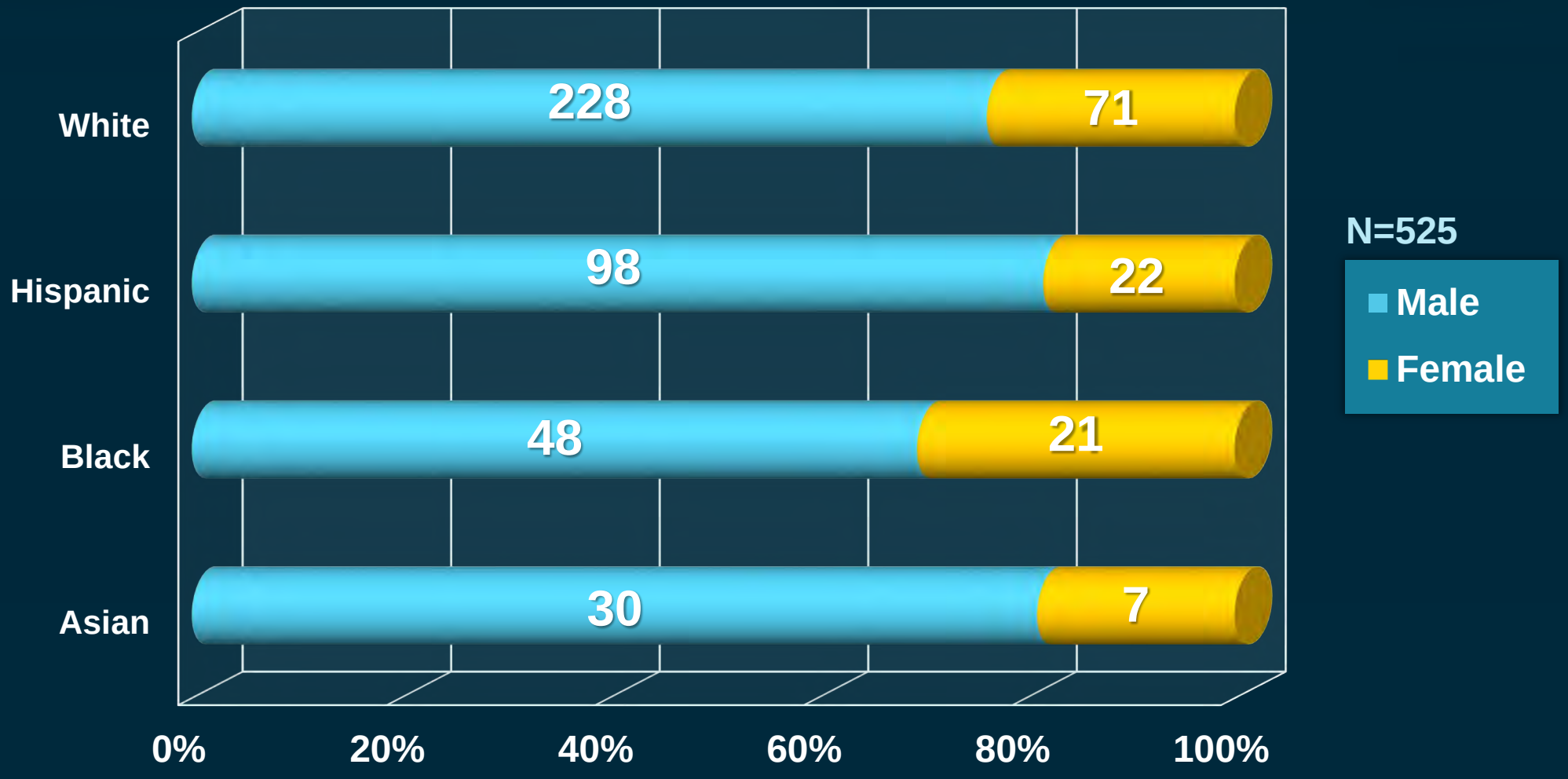
- **Male to female ratio is 3.34 to 1**
- **Age range is 11 to 92 years**
- **The majority (57%) of suicide cases occur among White individuals**
- **Number of companion Suicide/Homicide cases:**
  - **2014: 5**
  - **2015: 15**
  - **2016: 11**
  - **2017: 17**

Causes of Death in ML Suicides

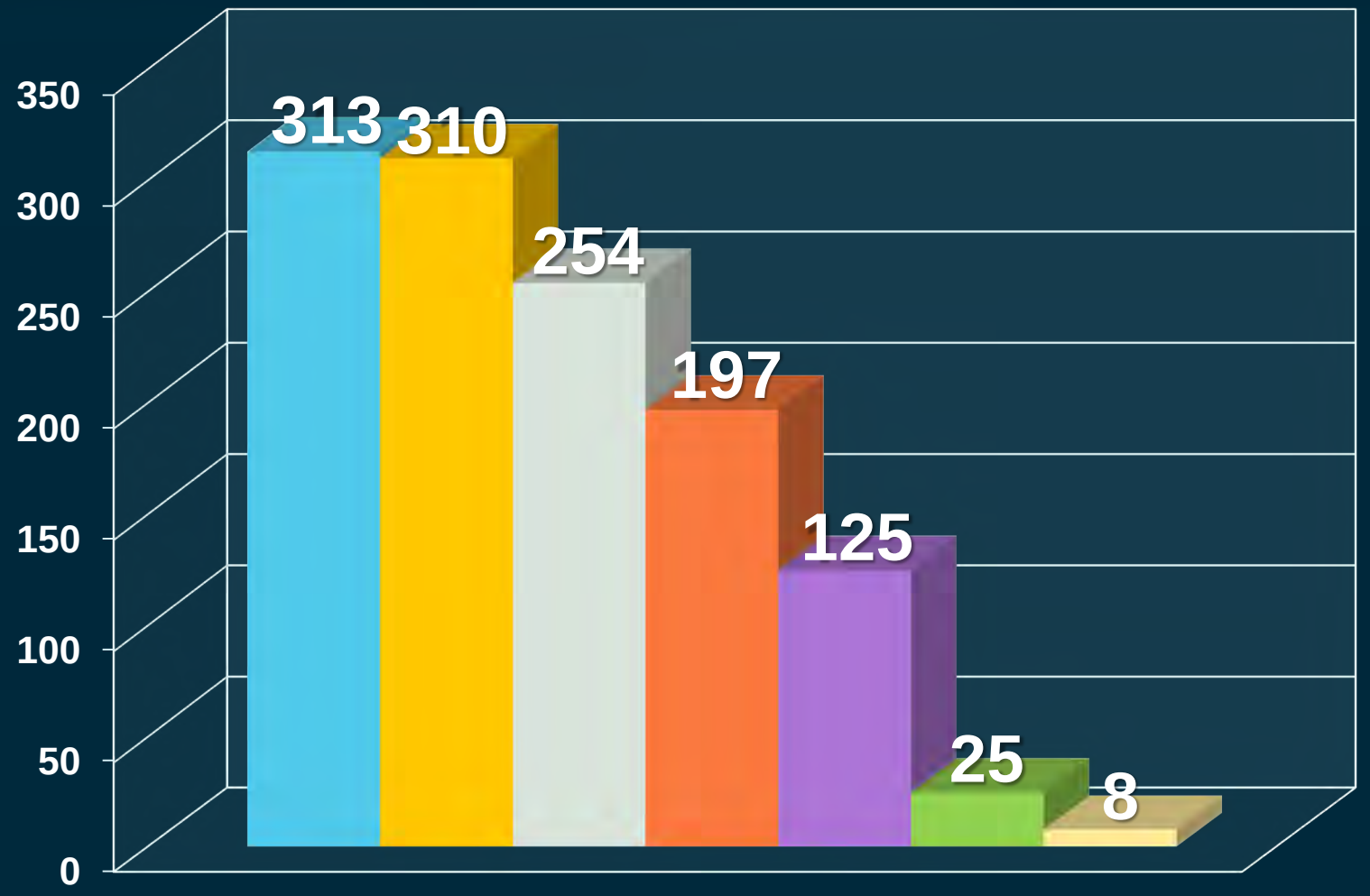


** Other category contains: Blunt Force Trauma (28), Asphyxiation-not due to hanging (8), Sharp Force (5), Thermal (4) and Drowning (3)*

ML Suicide Cases – Stratified by Sex & Race/Ethnicity



Most Frequent Substances Listed in Cause of Death for ML Cases

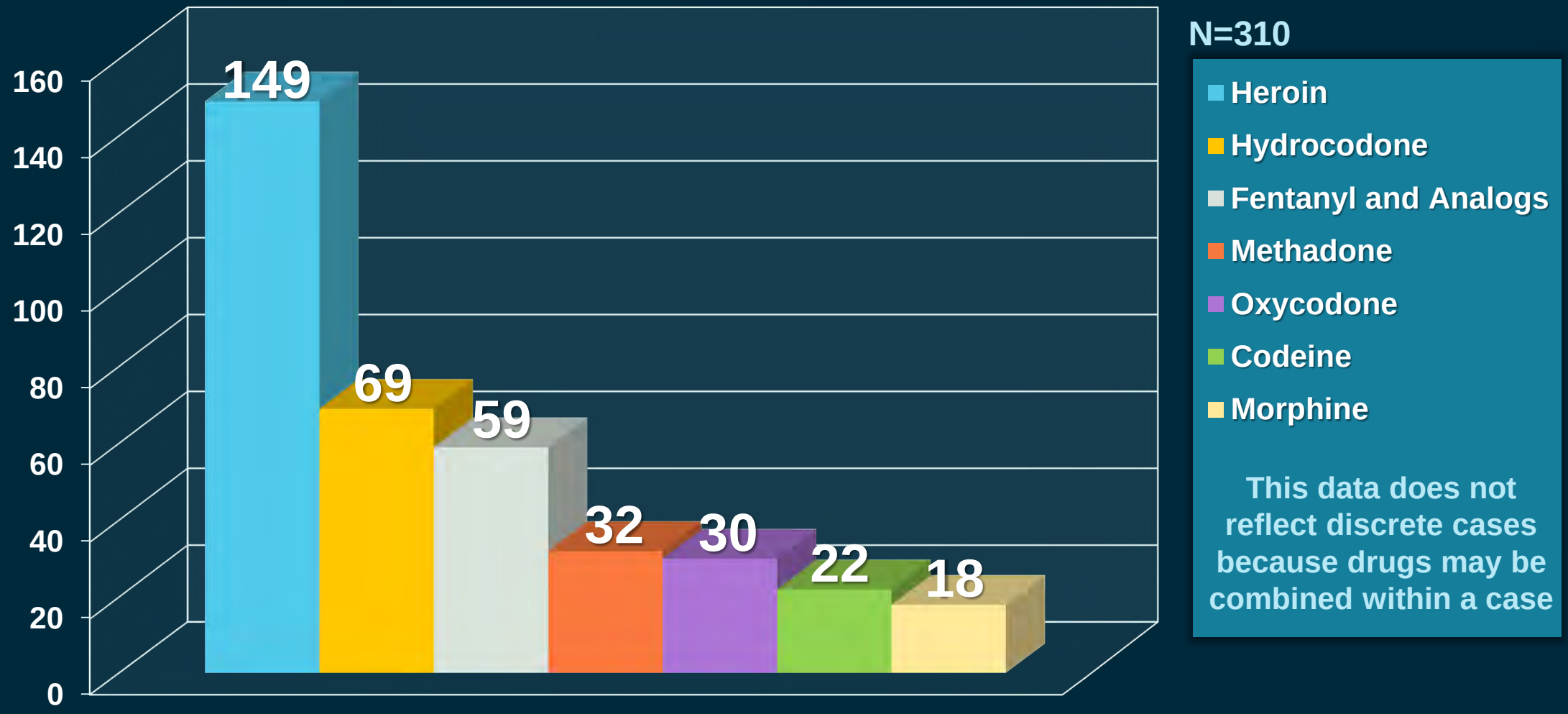


N=648

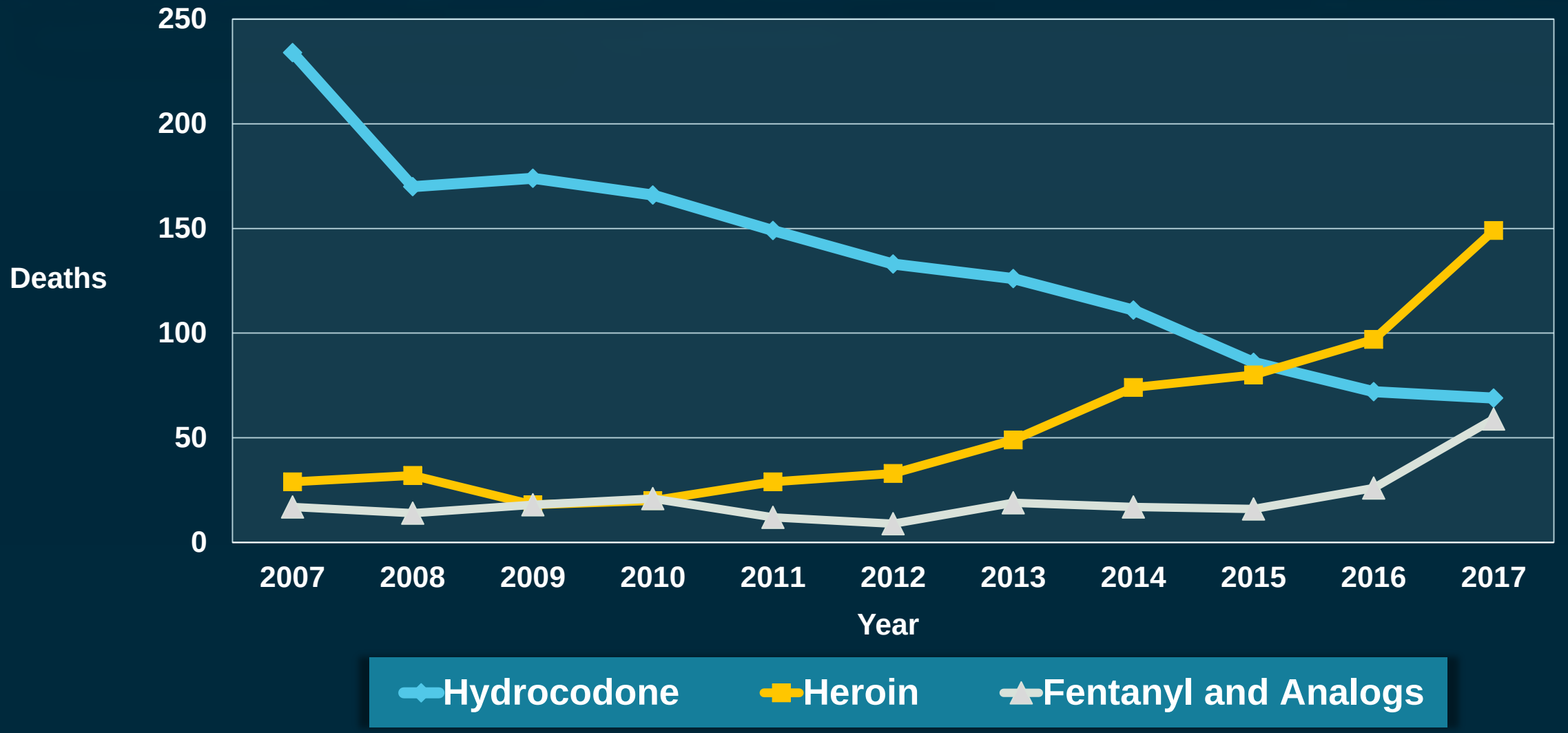
- Ethanol
- Opiates/Opioids
- Cocaine
- Benzodiazepines
- Amphetamine/Meth
- Carisoprodol
- Acetaminophen

This data does not reflect discrete cases because drugs may be combined within a case

Opiates/Opioids Listed in Cause of Death for ML Cases



Hydrocodone, Heroin and Fentanyl in Cause of Death for ML Cases



Harvey

- **Harvey made landfall on the Texas coast at Corpus Christi as a Category 4 Hurricane**
- **1 Trillion gallons of water fell on Harris County**
- **5,352 calls for help were received by police and fire departments by August 28, 2017**
- **32,422 homes in Texas were reported as damaged as of August 31, 2017**

Source: Houston Chronicle and CNN

Harvey Response | August 25 – September 1, 2017

47
Death scene responses requiring high-water vehicles

36
Storm-related deaths

123
Post-mortem examinations

329
Reports of death received

24-hour operations maintained

122
Releases to funeral homes

26
External agencies responding

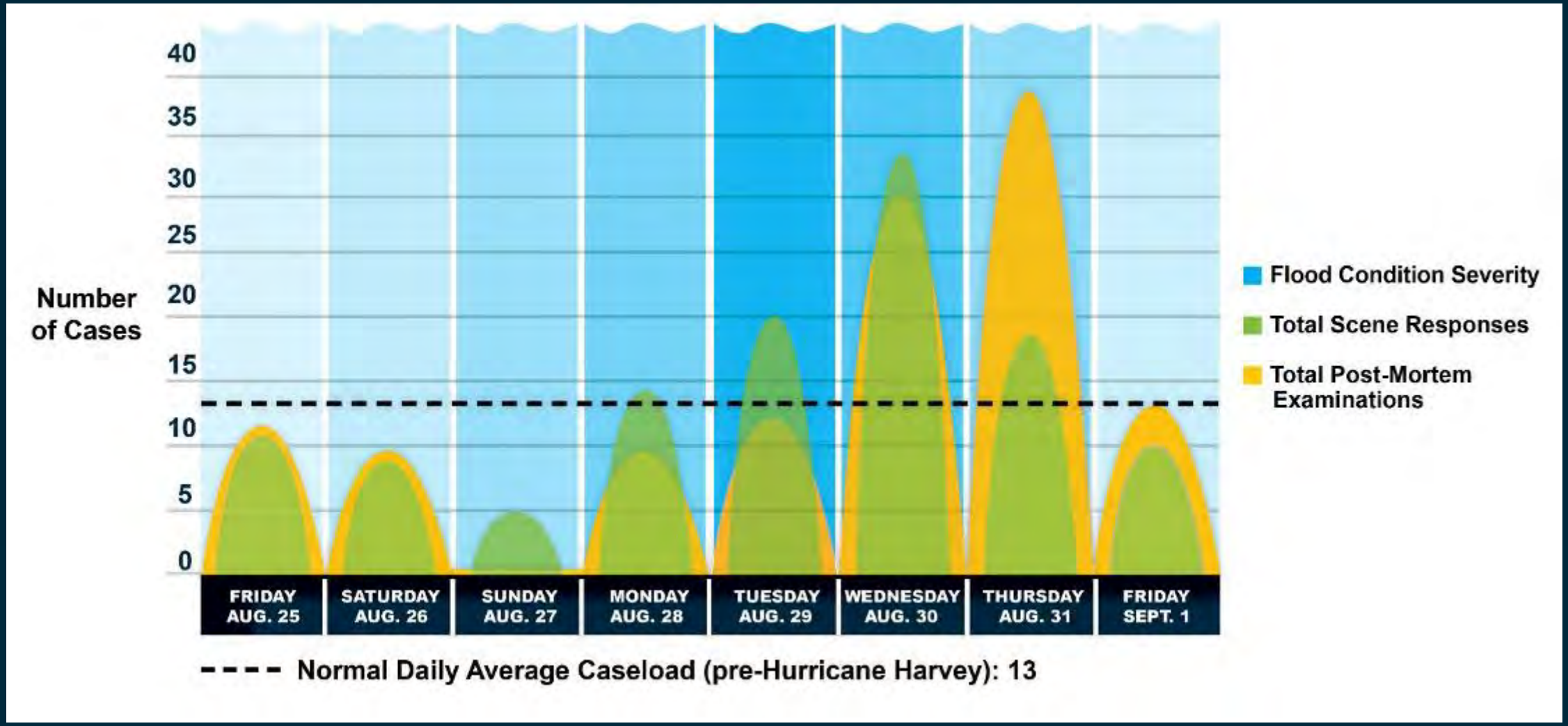
112
Positive identifications

44
Family meetings and resource referrals

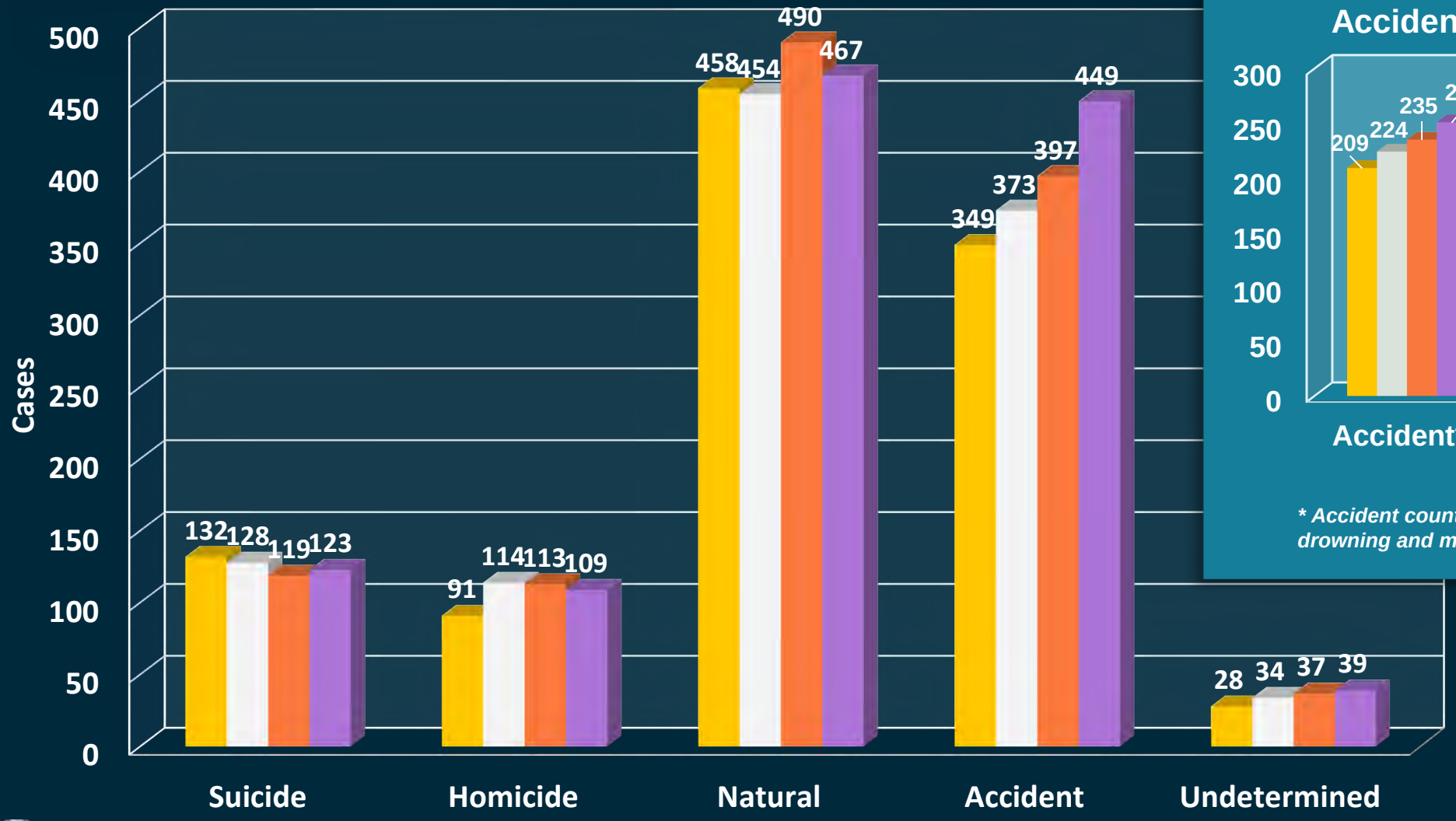
14
Staff on-site for the duration

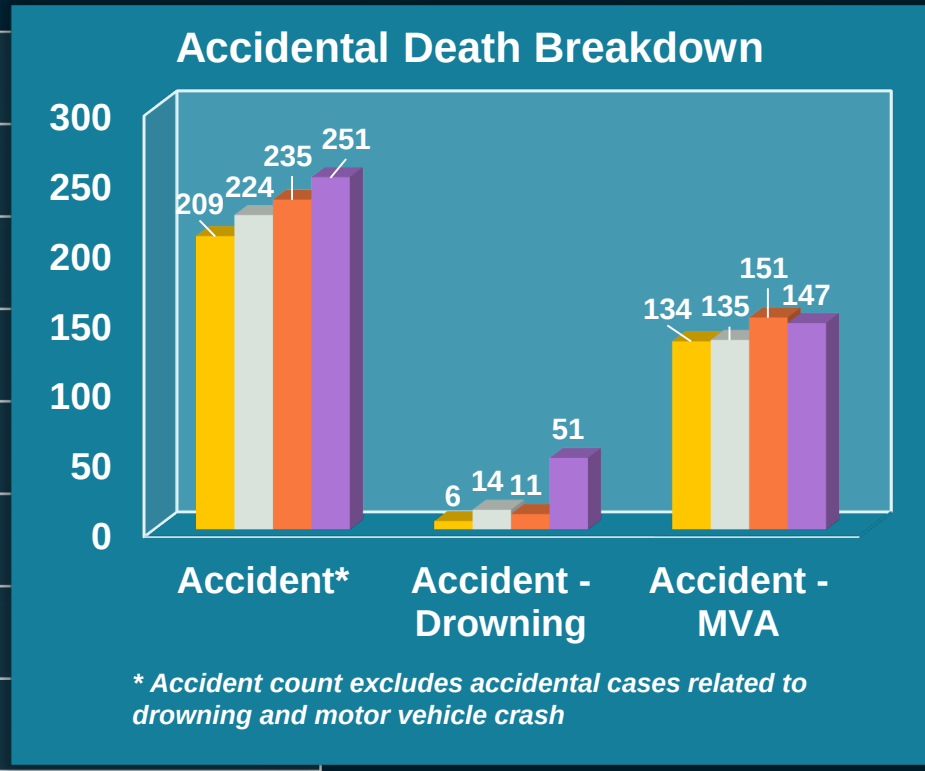
535
Media responses

Harvey Response | August 25 – September 1, 2017



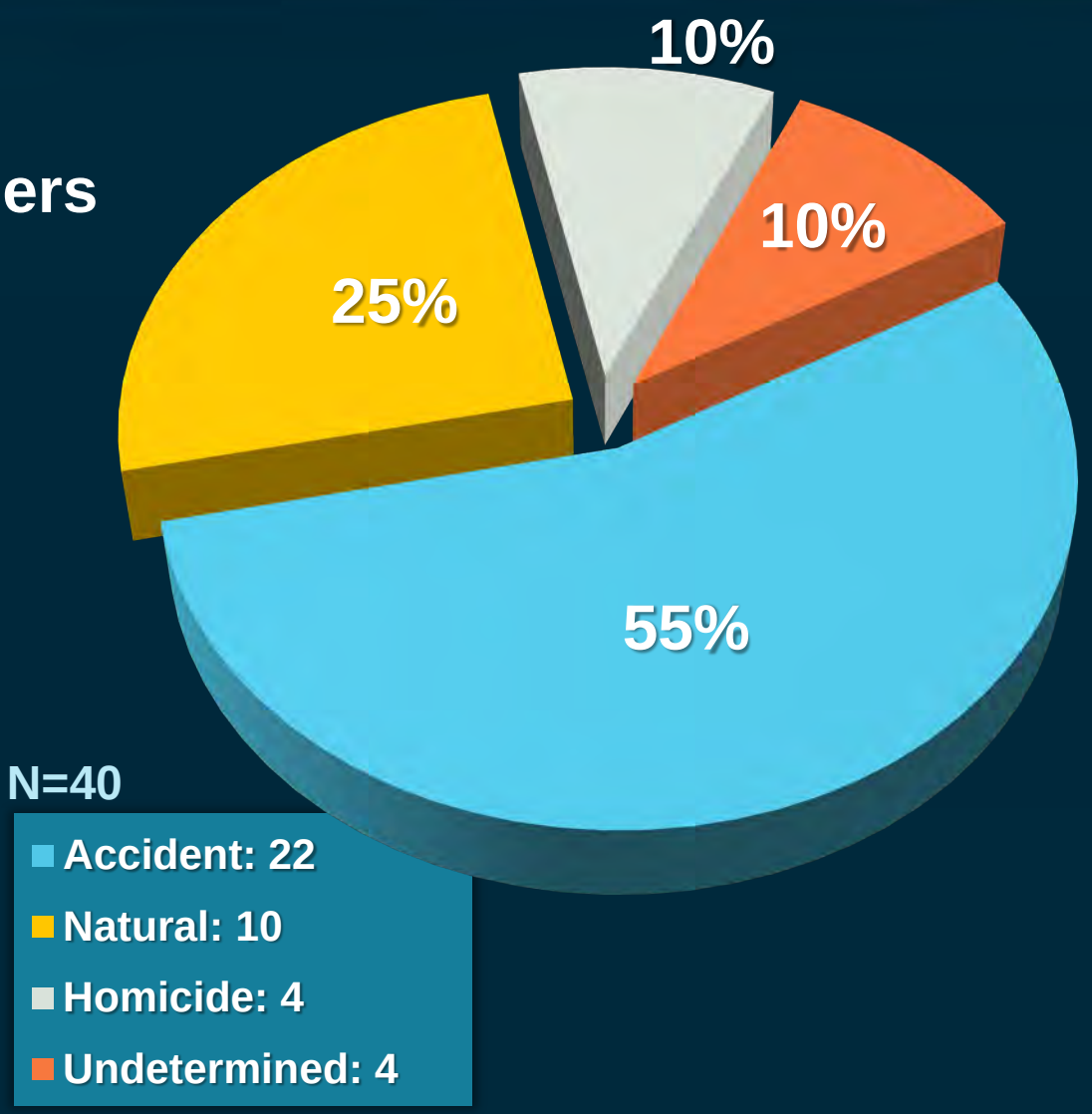
ML Case Volume Following Harvey: August – October



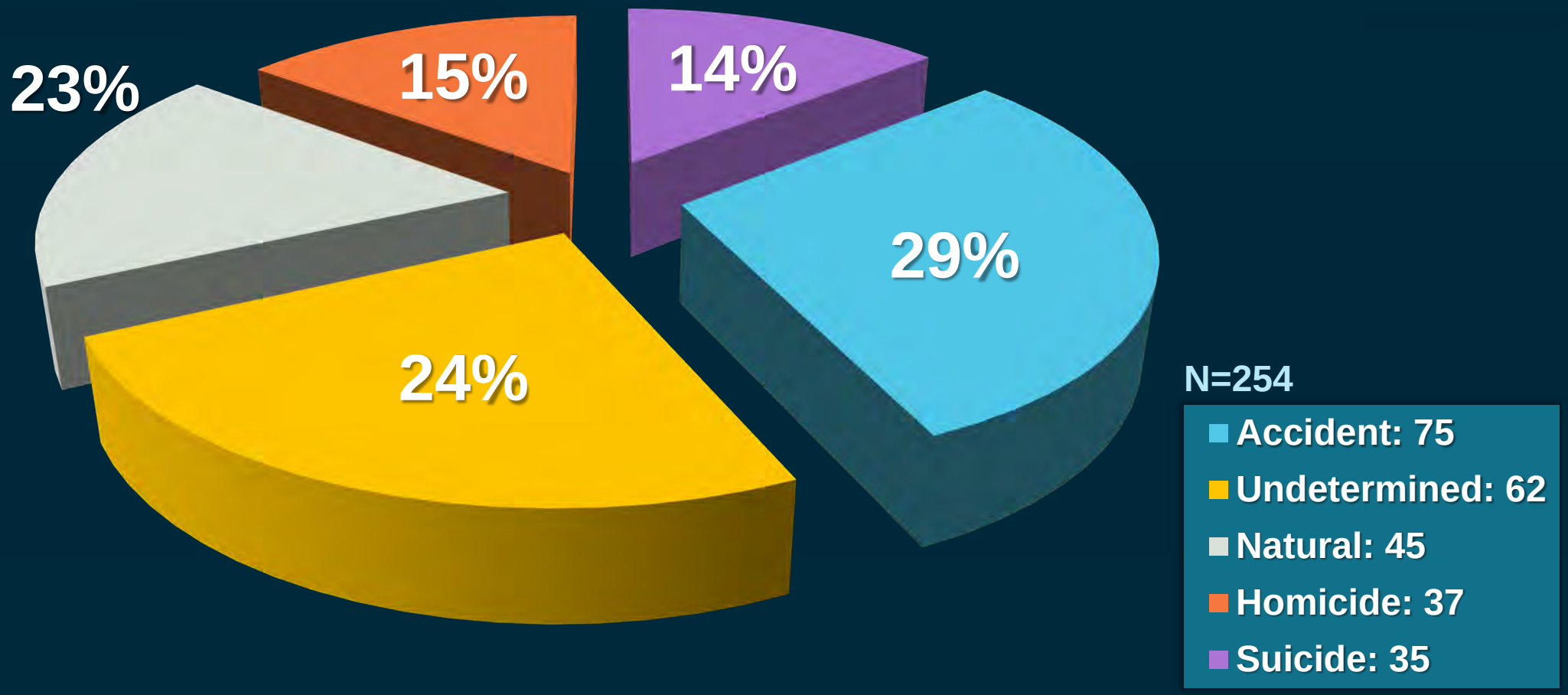


Toddler Deaths (Aged 1-4 Years)

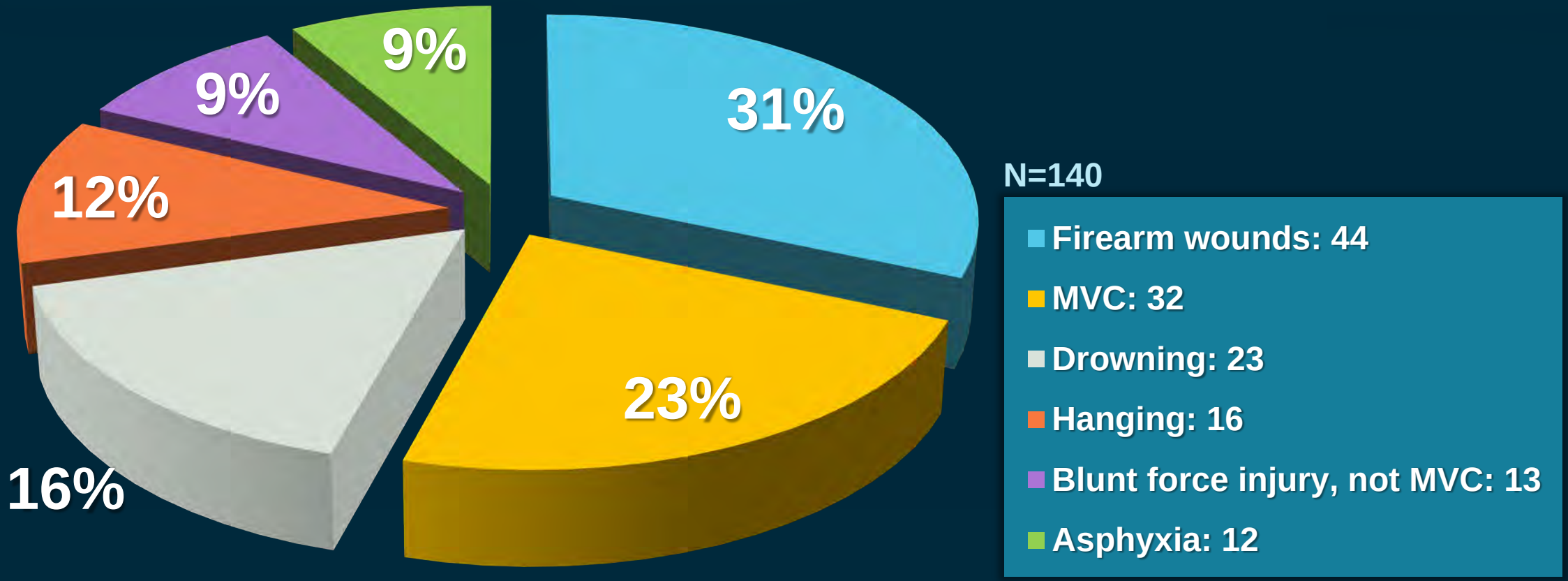
- **Injury Deaths Include:**
  - **6 toddlers died in MVC as passengers**
  - **10 toddlers drowned in accidents**
  - **4 Homicide cases**
    - **1 males**
    - **3 females**



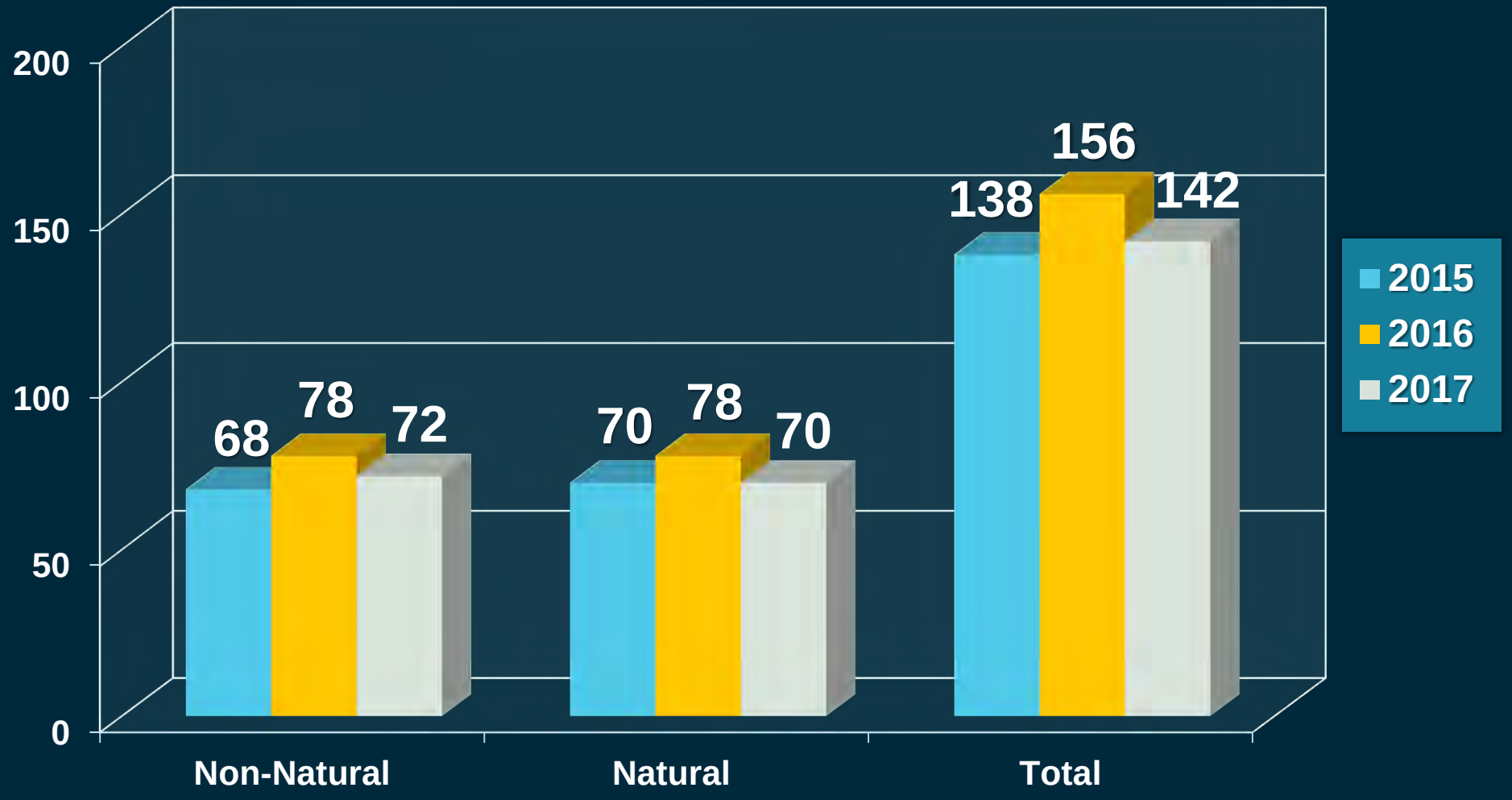
Manner of Death in Children (Aged 0-17 Years)



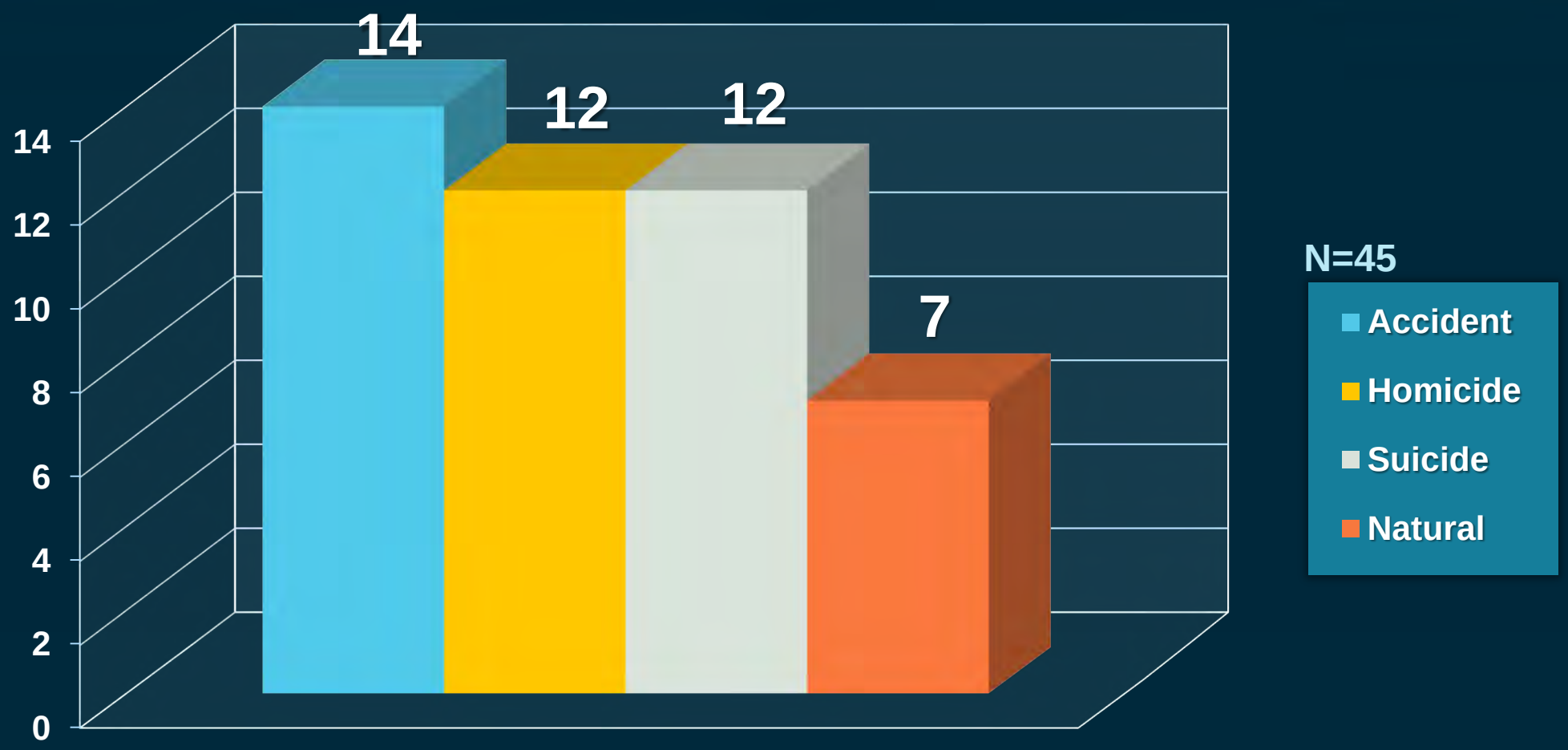
Cause of Death in Children (Aged 0-17 Years)



“While at Work” Deaths

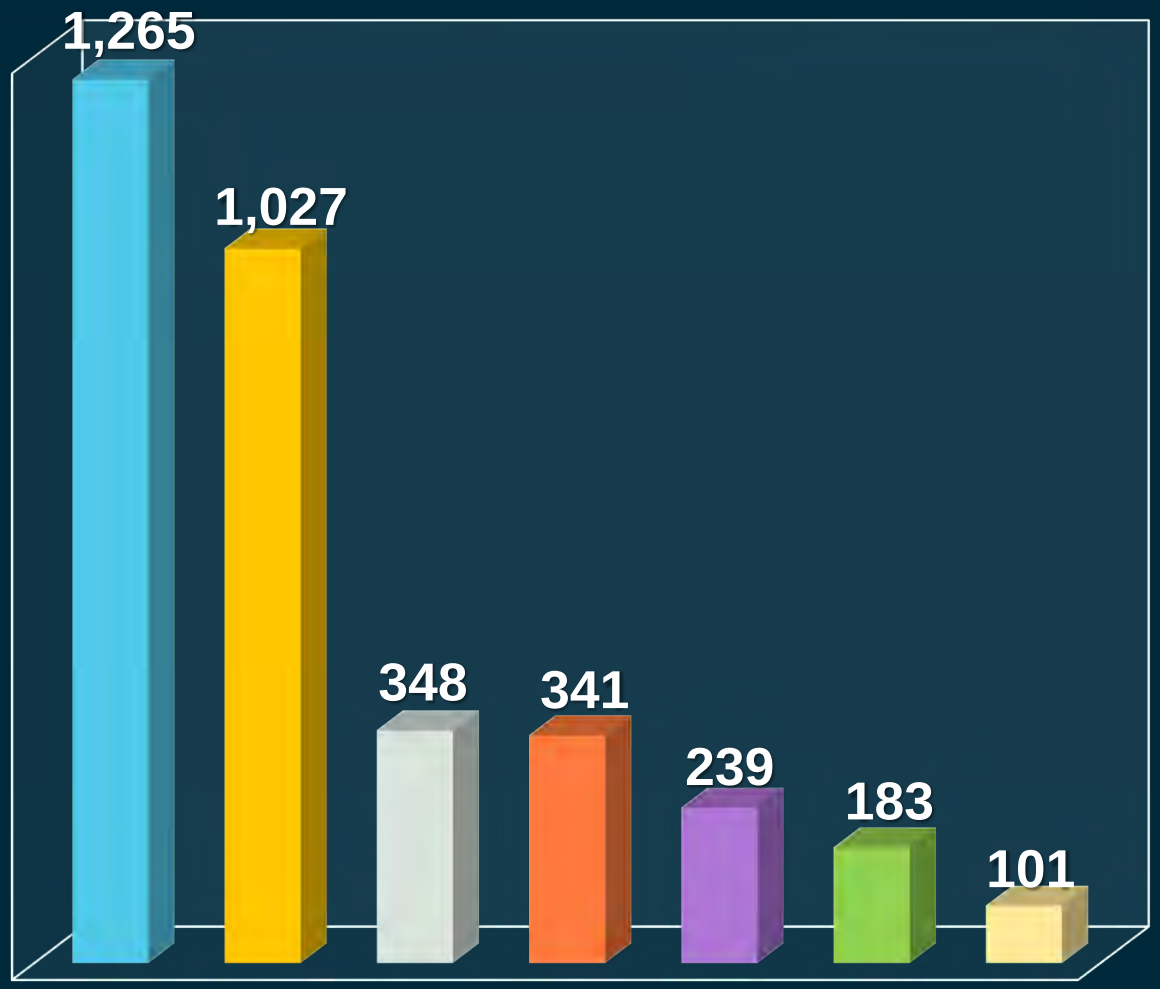


Death During Police Intervention*



** These include deaths in which the circumstances of the death place the decedent in either direct or indirect contact with law enforcement such as incarceration, apprehension and pursuit. This category of death is not limited to police shootings, arrest-related deaths, apprehension deaths or in-custody deaths.*

Most Frequent Causes of Natural Death



1,914 Natural Deaths in 2017

- Hypertensive Cardiovascular
- Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular
- Diabetes Mellitus
- Obesity
- Chronic Ethanolism
- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease
- Other forms of cardiac death

This data does not reflect discrete cases because diseases may be combined within a case

Diabetes and Obesity

- For 375 decedents, diabetes mellitus was listed in the primary cause (68) or the contributing cause (307) of death
  - 68% were either overweight or obese *(Body Mass Index, BMI = 25+)*
- BMI was calculated for 4,261 decedents aged 13 years or older, at least 60” tall and weighing at least 100 pounds:
  - 1,317 (31%) were obese with a BMI of 30 or greater
  - 1,262 (30%) were overweight with a BMI between 25 and 29
  - The greatest BMI was 96 (690 lbs./71” tall)
  - 18 decedents weighing more than 400 lbs.
  - 1,682 (39%) decedents were of normal weight or underweight

Organ & Tissue Donation Summary

- **HCIFS maintains agreements with:**
  - **LifeGift**
  - **Lions Eye Bank of Texas at Baylor College of Medicine**

- **440 ML cases were released in 2017 for organ and/or tissue donation**

Forensic Anthropology

- **Staffed by five doctoral-level forensic anthropologists, four of whom are certified as Diplomates by the American Board of Forensic Anthropology**

- **2017 case work:**
  - **238 total cases received with written reports provided**
  - **56 autopsy consultations without written reports**
  - **14 skeletal cases examined**
  - **25 death scenes with skeletal recovery**
  - **33 cases of remains determined to be non-human**

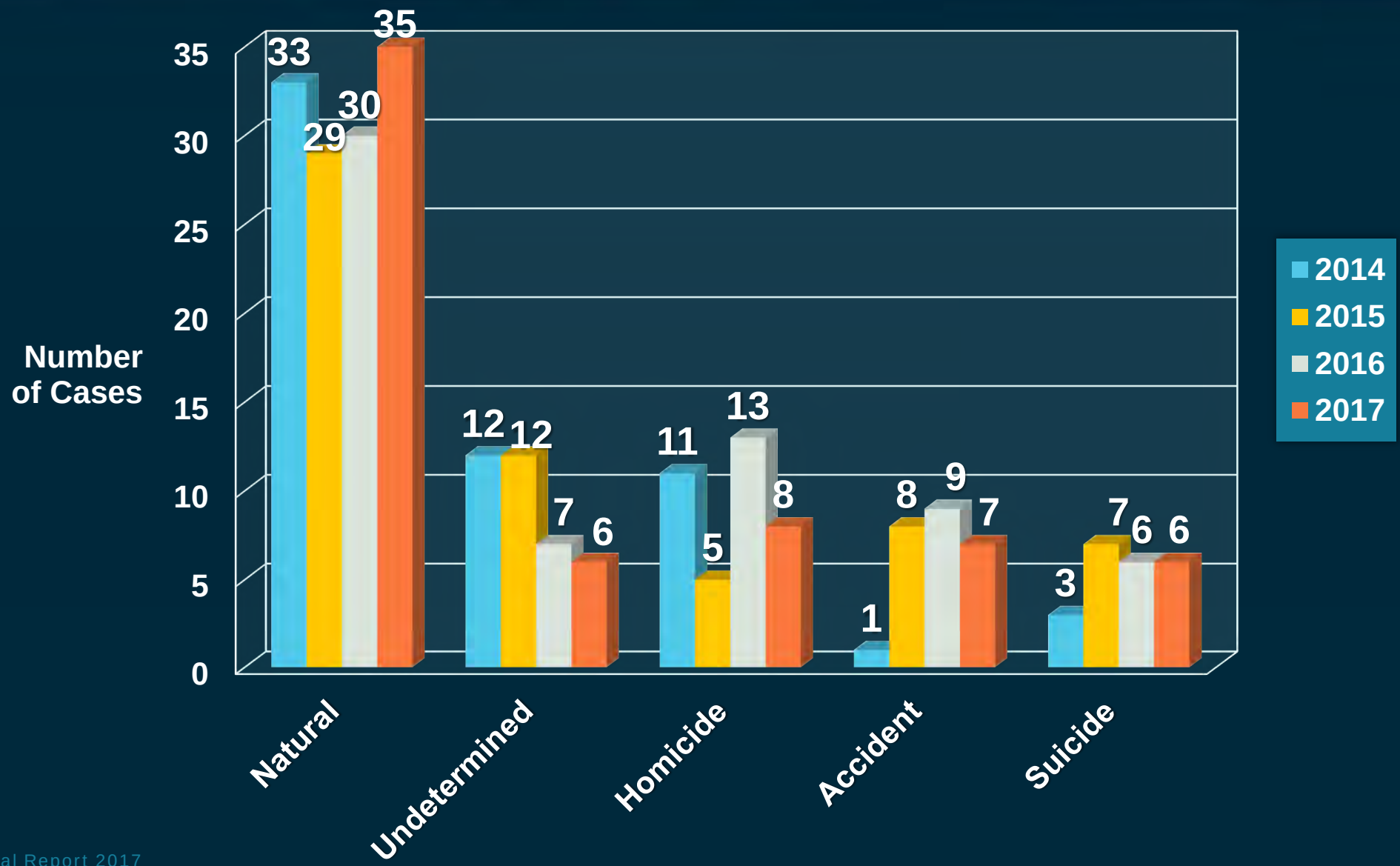
Forensic Entomology

- **Staffed by a board-certified, doctoral-level Forensic Entomologist**
  - **Reports are peer-reviewed by external doctoral-level entomologists from three major academic institutions**

- **2017 Casework:**
  - **62 Cases**
  - **40 Scene Collection**
  - **18 Autopsy Collections**
  - **4 Scene and Autopsy Collections**

Image: *Houston Chronicle*

Forensic Entomology by Manner of Death



Quality Management Division

A separate division of HCIFS

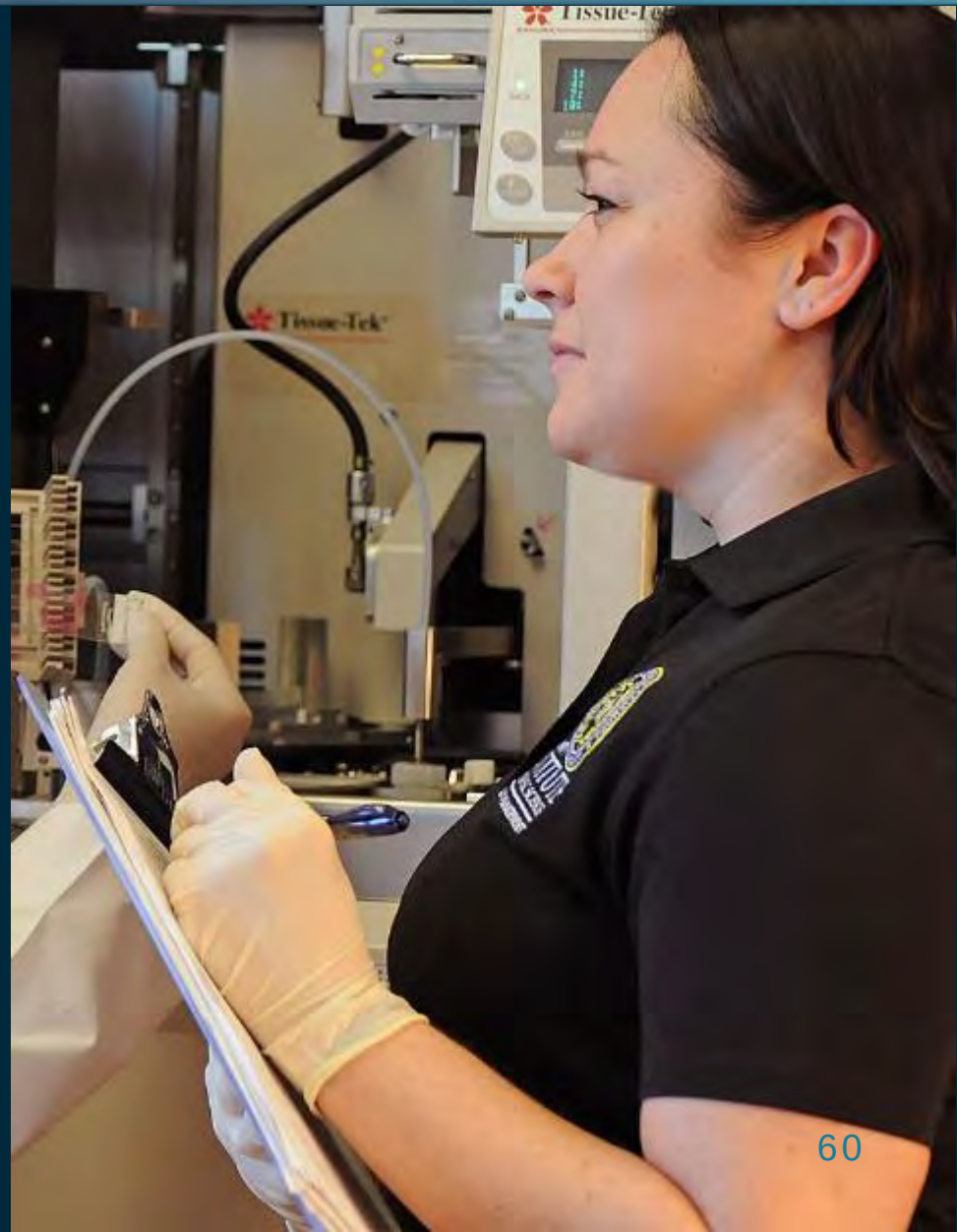
Ensures that services provided by the Institute are reliable and of high quality

Responsibilities

- Maintains a **documented quality management system** that meets all accreditation and county requirements
- Facilitates **quality improvements** within each division of HCIFS
- Monitors the **continued use of best practices** and ensures the reliability of records released for discovery

2017 Accomplishments

- **395** standard operating procedures reviewed
- **235** proficiency tests administered
- **494** court orders processed
- **9** internal audits conducted
- **83** internal training sessions provided



Crime Laboratory Service

Image: *Shau Lin Hon/Slyworks Photography*

Provides analytical testing services to the HCIFS Medical Examiner Service, the justice system and law enforcement agencies in Harris and surrounding counties

Statistical Summary

- **Cases received: 22,805**
  (Approximately a 13% decrease from 2016)
- **Cases completed: 22,900**
  (Approximately a 8% decrease from 2016)
- **Total Number of submitting agencies: 75**
- **68% of laboratory personnel have a professional certification**
  - American Board of Criminalistics: 51 analysts
  - American Board of Forensic Toxicology: 11 analysts
  - Association of Firearm and Tool Mark Examiners: 4 examiners

Image: *Shau Lin Hon/Slyworks Photography*

Crime Laboratory Service:
Drug Chemistry

Analyzes suspected drug evidence seized by law enforcement agencies

Drug Chemistry Laboratory

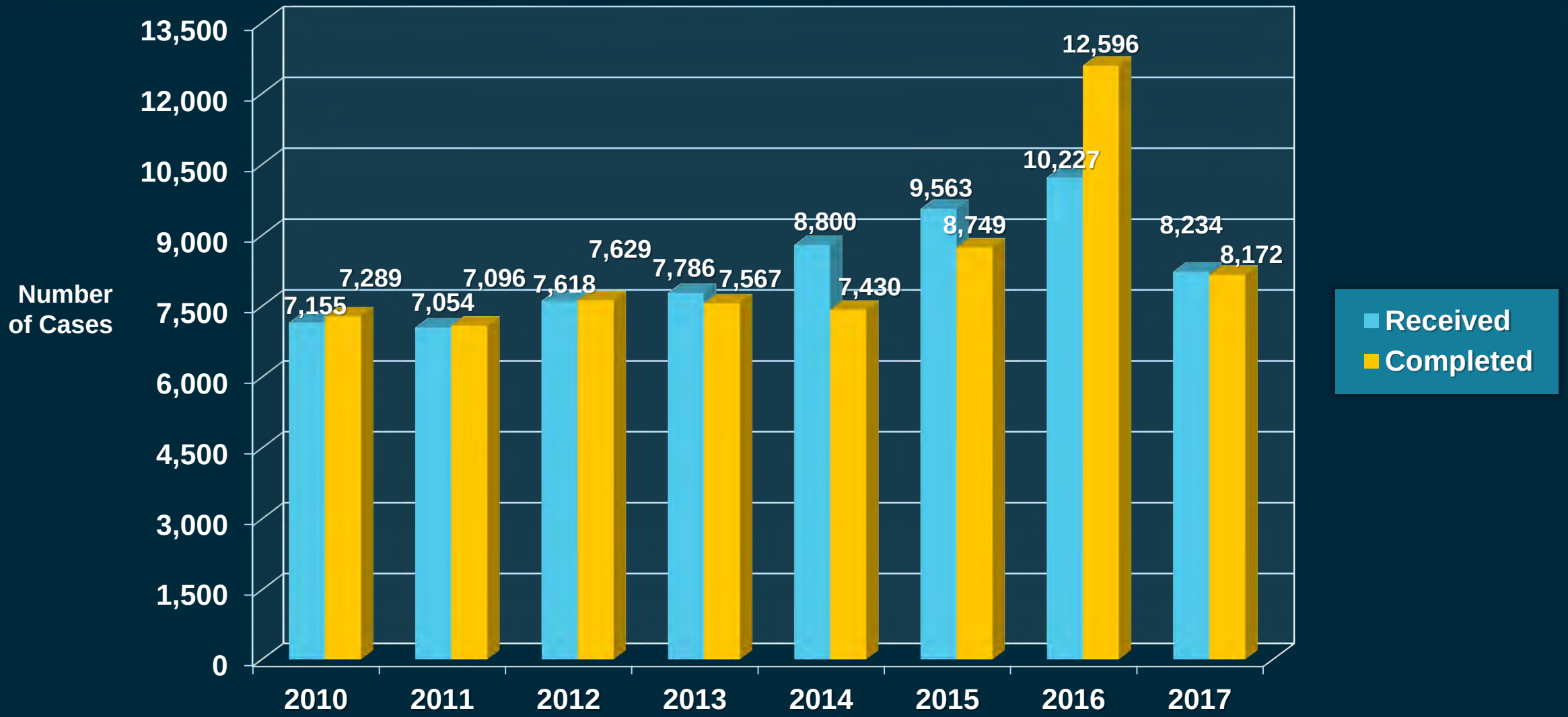
In accordance with Texas state statutes, identifies confiscated, illegal and dangerous drugs, including:

- **Plant material**
- **Powders, tablets, liquids**
- **Drug paraphernalia**

The laboratory also develops and *implements* methods to identify new "designer" drugs including:

- **Stimulants known as "Bath Salts"**
- **Synthetic cannabinoids such as "Spice" or "K2"**
- **NBOMe hallucinogens**

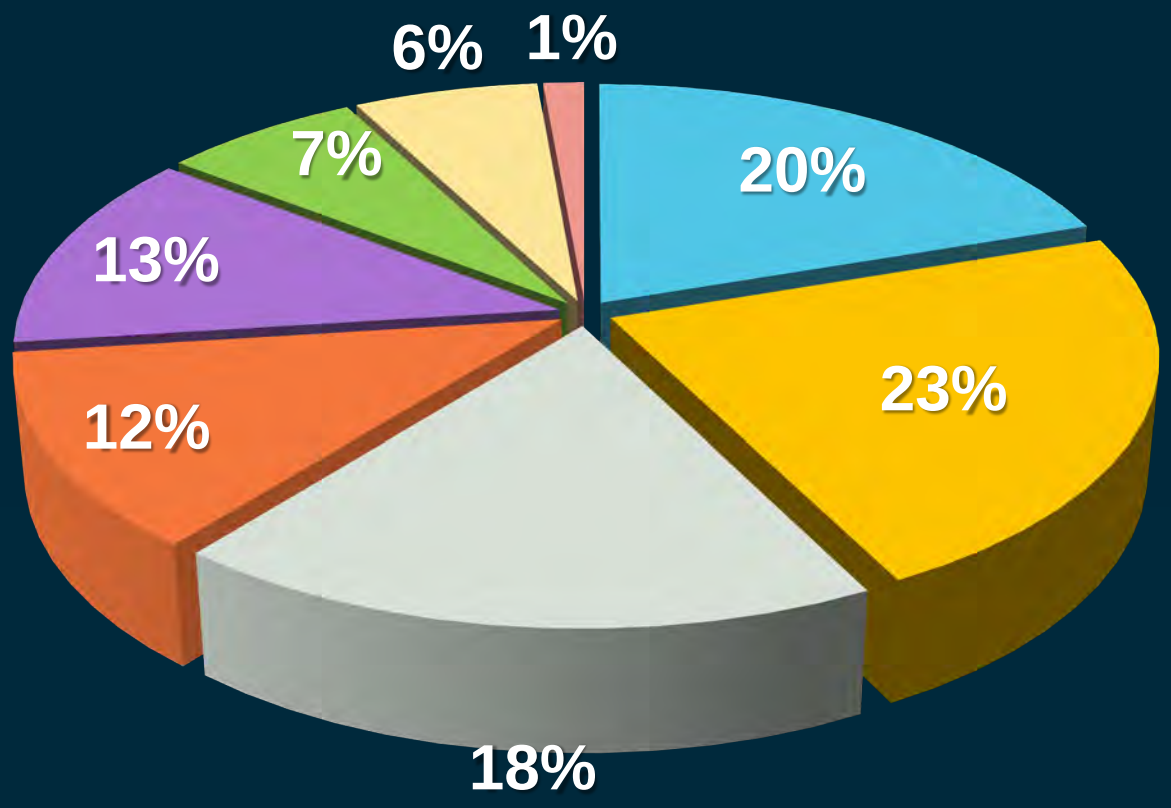
Cases Received & Completed



** Compared to 2016, 20% decrease in cases received due to reduction in marijuana cases*

Test Results

- **8,095** unique IFS cases handled
- **21,435** items received and processed
- **15,126** positive results reported

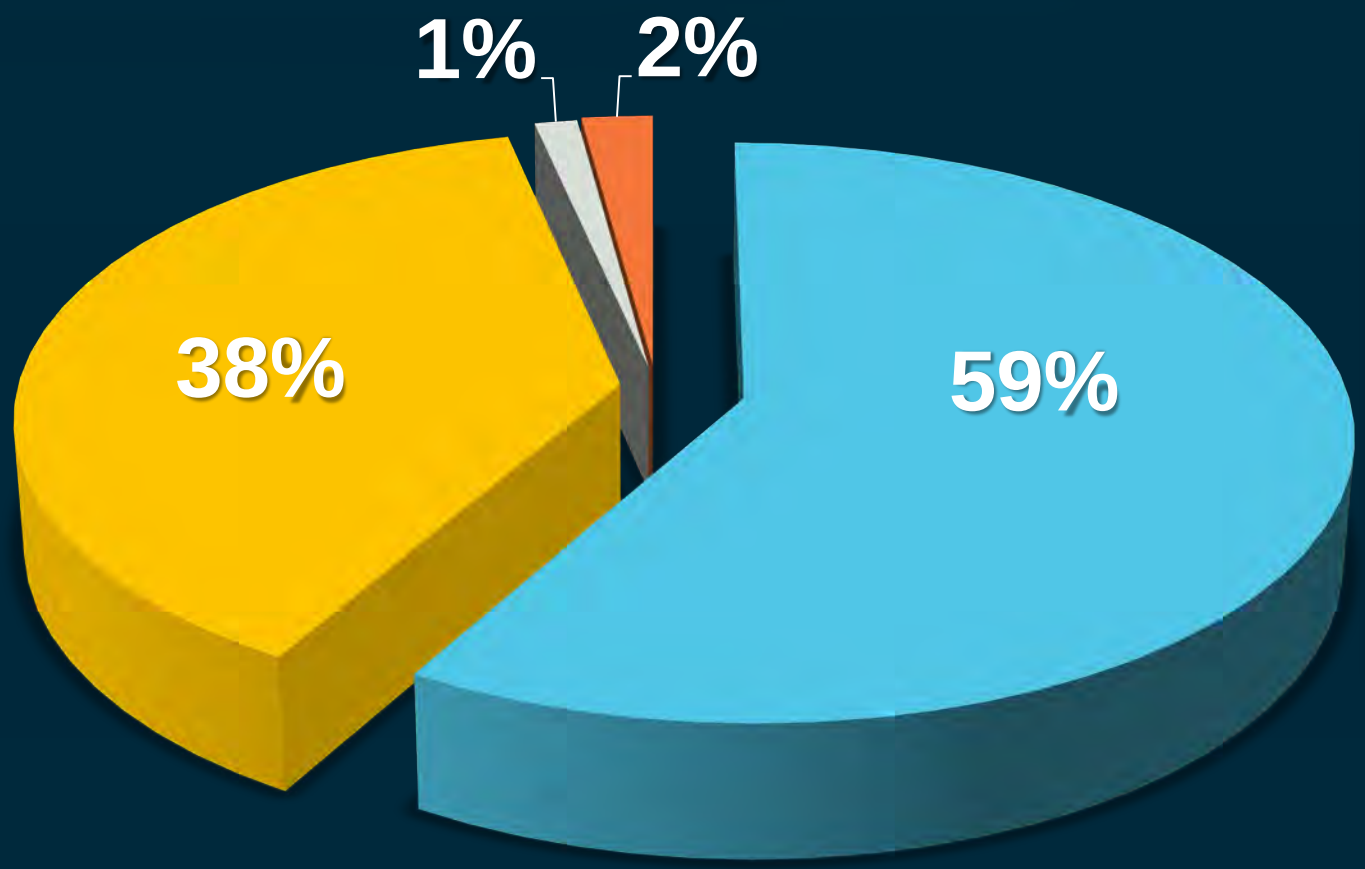


N=15,126

- Marihuana/THC: 2,999
- Methamphetamine: 3,428
- Non-Controlled Substances: 2,768
- General Pharmaceuticals: 1,846
- Cocaine: 1,883
- Pharmaceutical Opioids: 1,030
- Designer Drugs: 959
- Other: 213

** "Other" relates to a variety of controlled substances not specifically listed as an individual result in the pie chart*

Breakdown of Designer Drugs Test Results

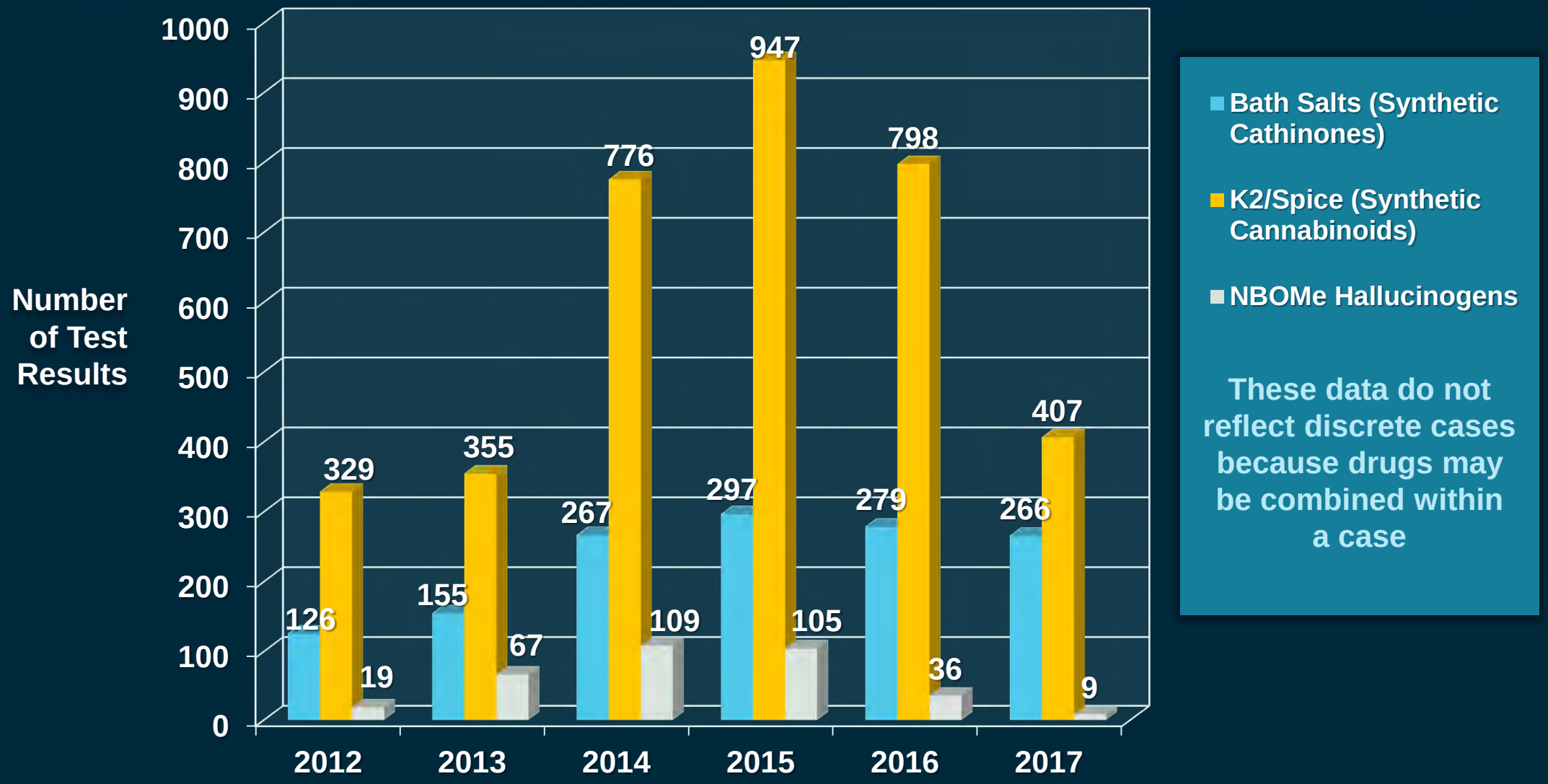


N=697

- Synthetic Marihuana: 407
- Bath Salts: 266
- NBOMe: 9
- Other: 15

This data does not reflect discrete cases because drugs may be combined within a case

Designer Drug Trends



Crime Laboratory Service:
Forensic Genetics

Image: *Shau Lin Hon/Slyworks Photography*

Analyzes biological fluids and tissues such as blood, semen, muscle and bone

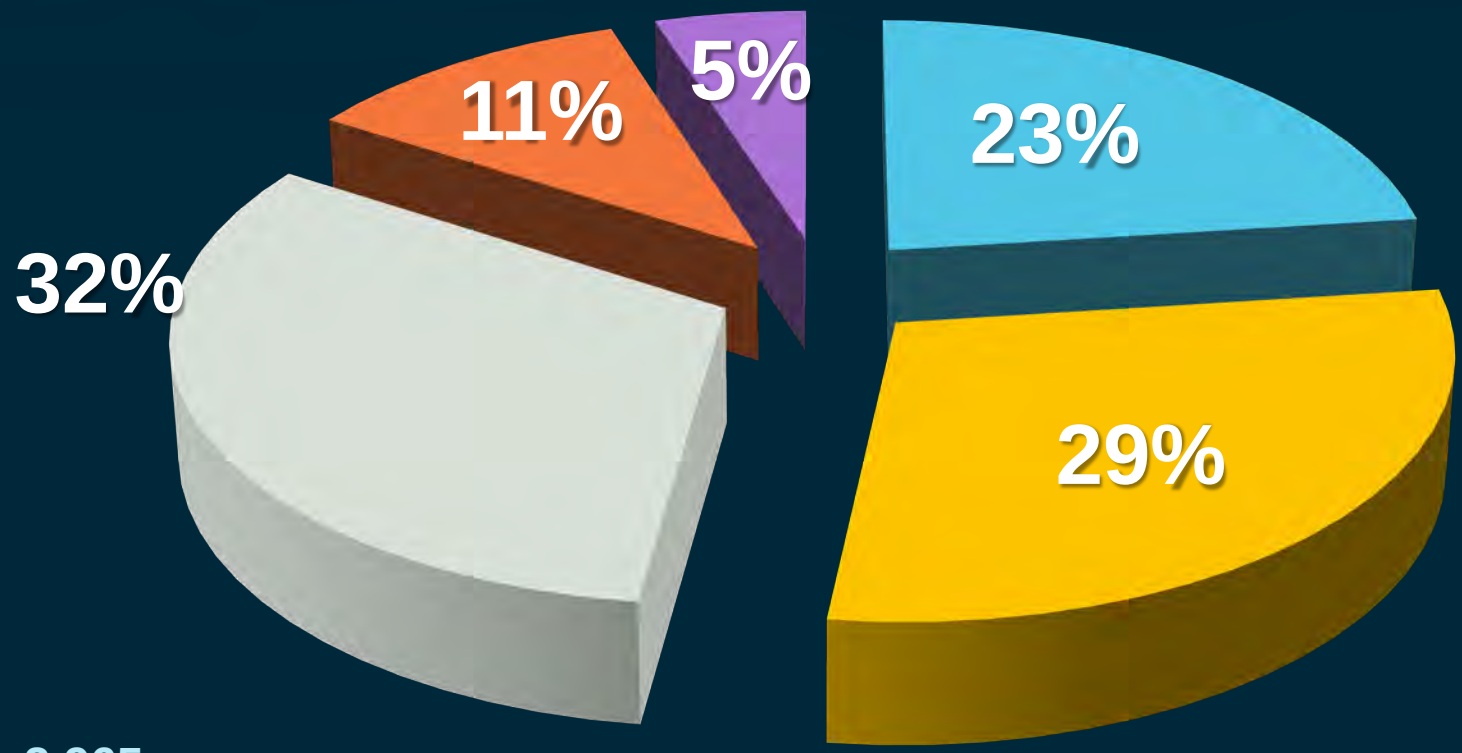
Forensic Genetics Laboratory

Conducts DNA testing primarily for:

- **Law enforcement agencies**
- **HCIFS medical examiners and forensic anthropologists to assist in positively identifying decedents**
- **Cases submitted for DNA testing include crimes against persons such as sexual assault, homicide and robbery, as well as property crimes such as burglary and theft**
- **Crimes against persons are given first priority for testing**

Image: *Shau Lin Hon/Slyworks Photography*

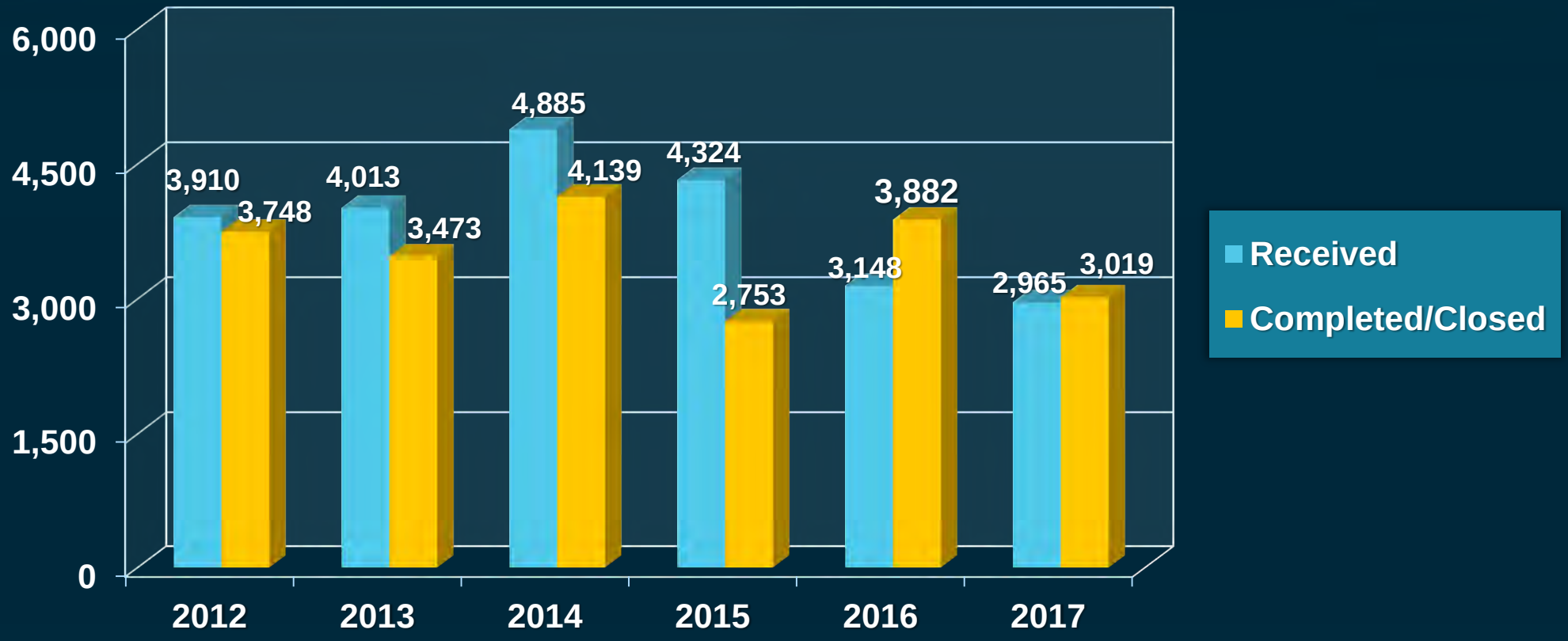
Case Submissions Stratified by Type



N=2,965

- Property: 680
- Assault/Robbery: 849
- Sexual Assault: 966
- Homicide/Death Investigation: 320
- Other: 150

Cases Received & Completed/Closed

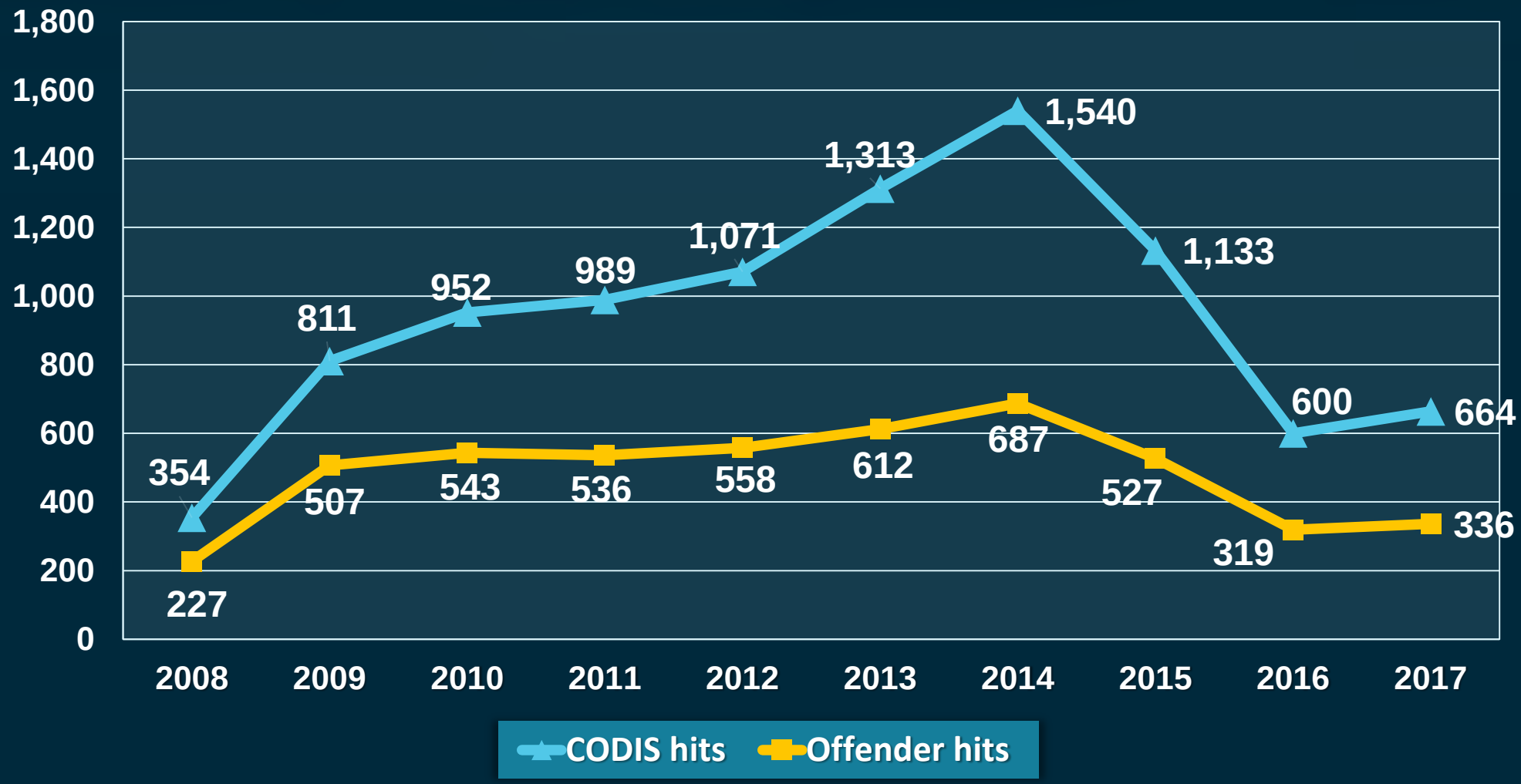


The laboratory paused the collection and analysis of touch DNA property crimes in July 2015 to focus on crimes against persons, which typically requires more testing and more complex interpretations.

Increasing DNA testing of crimes against persons decreases the number of cases the lab can complete.

**** Compared to 2016, 5% decrease in cases received (see above)***

CODIS Hits


1,800
1,600
1,400
1,200
1,000
800
600
400
200
0
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
354
811
952
989
1,071
1,313
1,540
1,133
600
664
227
507
543
536
558
612
687
527
319
336
CODIS hits
Offender hits

Trace Evidence DNA Collection Team

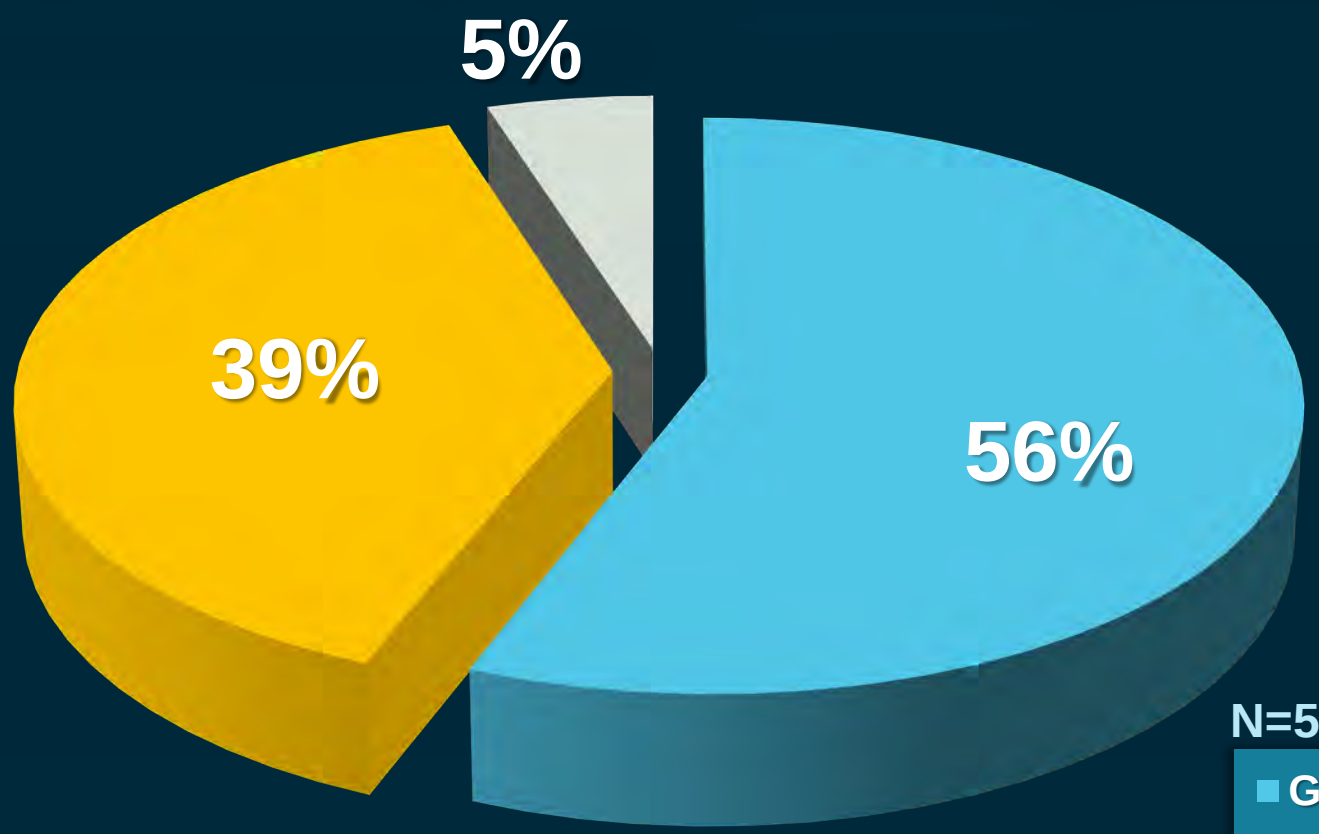
Specialized DNA analysts who attend select death scenes to collect DNA and trace evidence from bodies that have been:

- **Dumped**
- **Bound**
- **Thought to have been in close contact with the perpetrator**

The team has had a number of successes obtaining DNA different from that of the victim

This information assists investigators in solving crimes

Trace DNA Collection: Homicide Cases by Cause of Death



74 collections in 2017

80% (**59**) of the Trace DNA Collection Cases are **Homicides**

N=59

- GSW: 33
- Blunt or Sharp: 23
- Strangulation or Asphyxia: 3

Crime Laboratory Service:
Forensic Toxicology

Provides analytical services in medicolegal death investigations, driving while impaired (human performance alcohol and drug testing), and drug-facilitated sexual assault investigations

Forensic Toxicology Laboratory

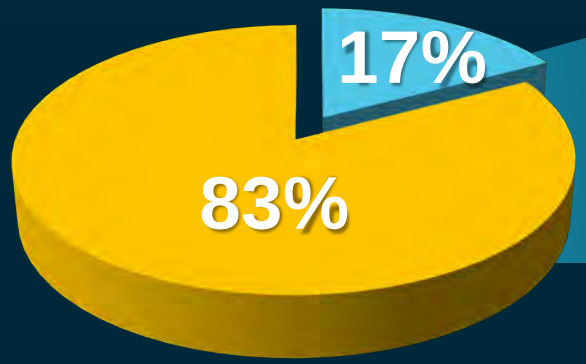
Analyzes biological evidence submitted by the HCIFS Medical Examiner Service and law enforcement agencies in Harris County for:

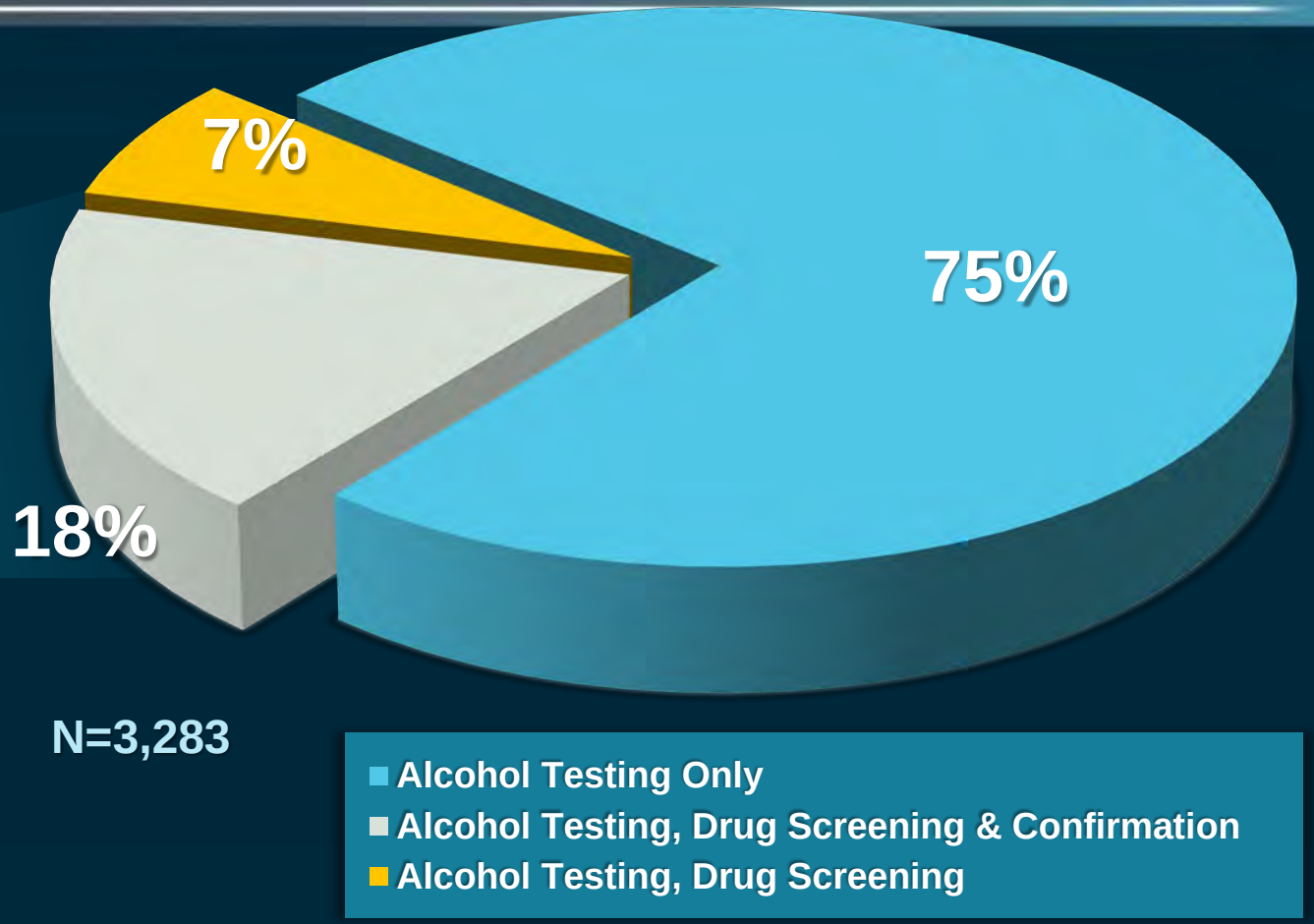
- **Death investigations**
- **Driving while impaired (DWI) and driving under the influence (DUI) cases**
- **Drug-facilitated sexual assaults**
- **Other criminal investigations**

The only forensic toxicology laboratory in Texas dually accredited by the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors/Laboratory Accreditation Board and the American Board of Forensic Toxicology

DWI Case Analysis Distribution

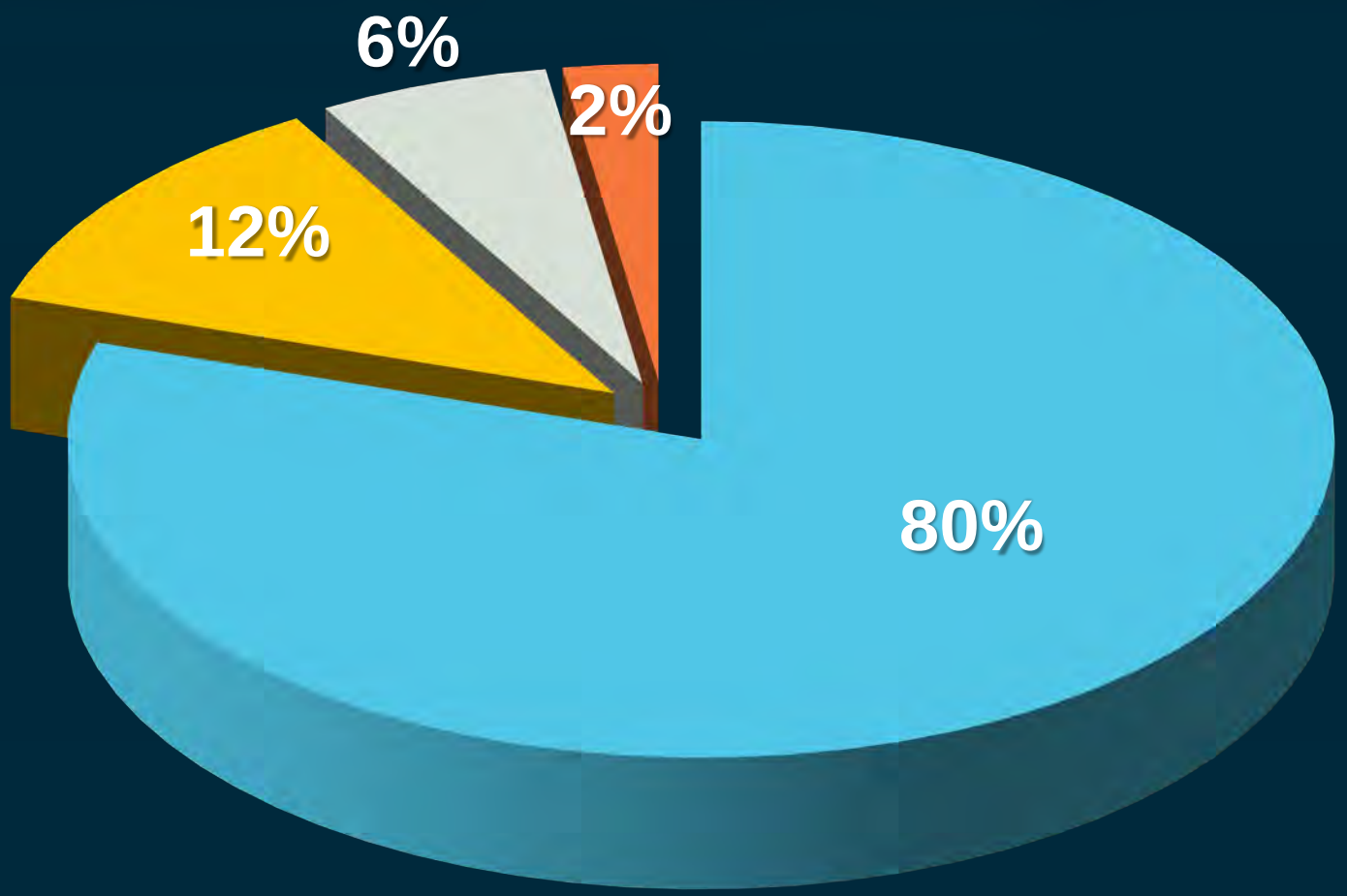
Of the 25% of DWI Cases that Receive Drug Screening:





- **Alcohol Testing Only: Alcohol testing was performed; results were ≥ 0.10 g/100 mL**
- **Alcohol Testing, Drug Screening & Confirmation: Alcohol testing results were < 0.10 g/100 mL; drug screening and confirmation testing was performed**
- **Alcohol Testing, Drug Screening: Alcohol testing results were <0.10 g/100 mL; drug screening was performed with negative results**

DWI Case Result Distribution

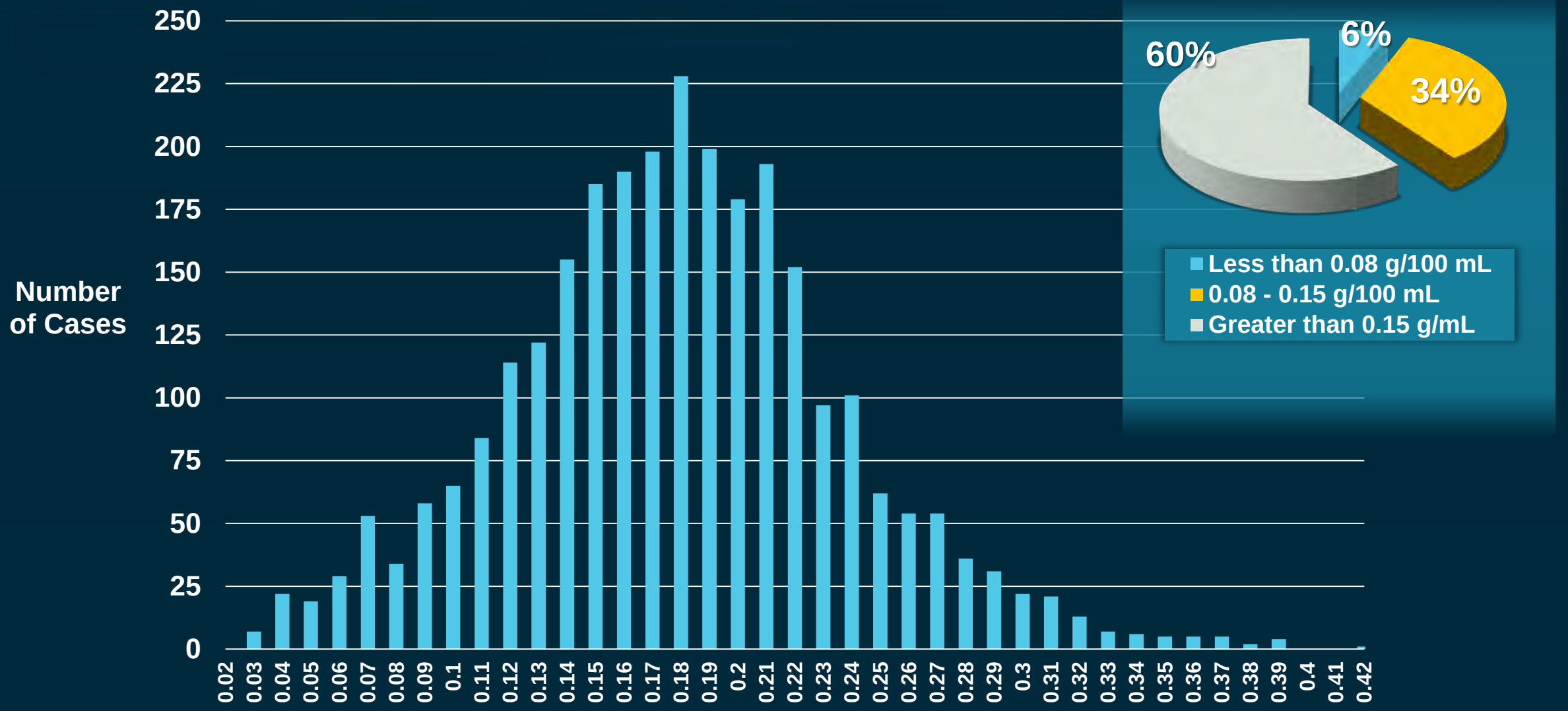


N=3,279

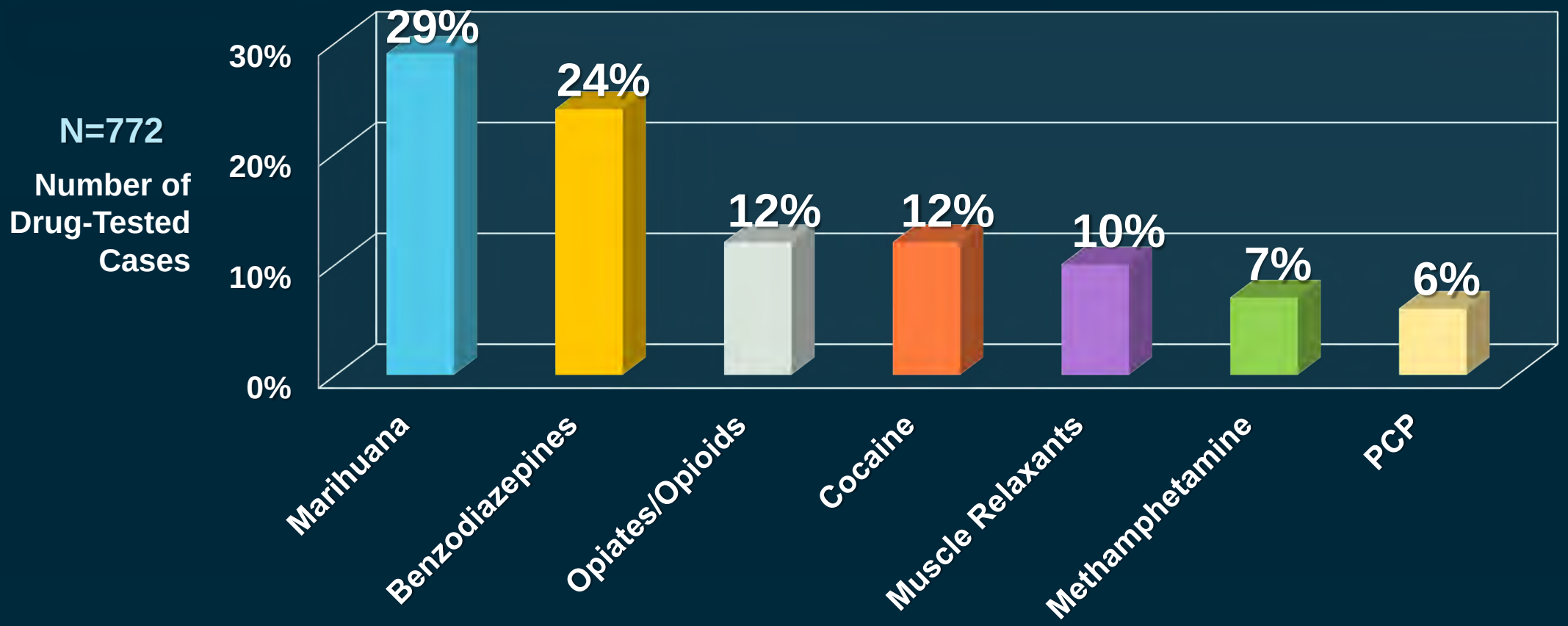
- Alcohol Positive Only: 2,620
- Drug Positive Only: 385
- Alcohol and Drug Positive: 194
- Negative: 80

- **Alcohol Positive Only: Cases with alcohol test result ≥ 0.10 g/100 mL which may or may not contain other drugs**

DWI Blood Alcohol Concentrations



Drug Prevalence in Drug-Tested DWI Cases



True prevalence may be underrepresented as one case could have multiple drugs from a single drug class, e.g. opiates or benzodiazepines

Other identified drug classes include: anti-seizure medicines, over-the-counter cough and cold medicines, and anti-depressants

Crime Laboratory Service:
Physical Evidence

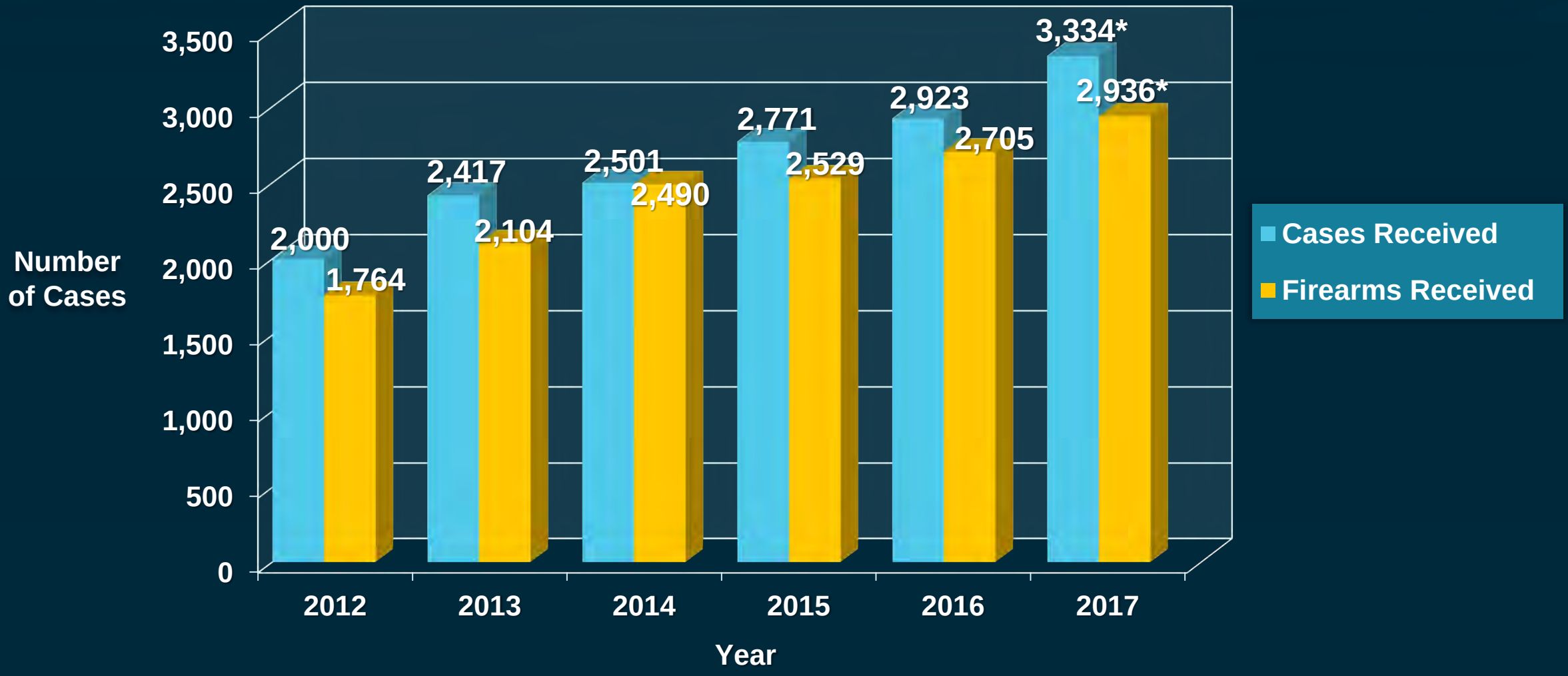
Evaluates fired cartridge casings and bullets recovered from crime scenes, and firearms involved in violent, gun-related incidents

Analysis in the three forensic sub-disciplines of Gunshot Residue Analysis, Fire Debris Analysis and Automotive Paint Analysis

Firearms Identification Laboratory

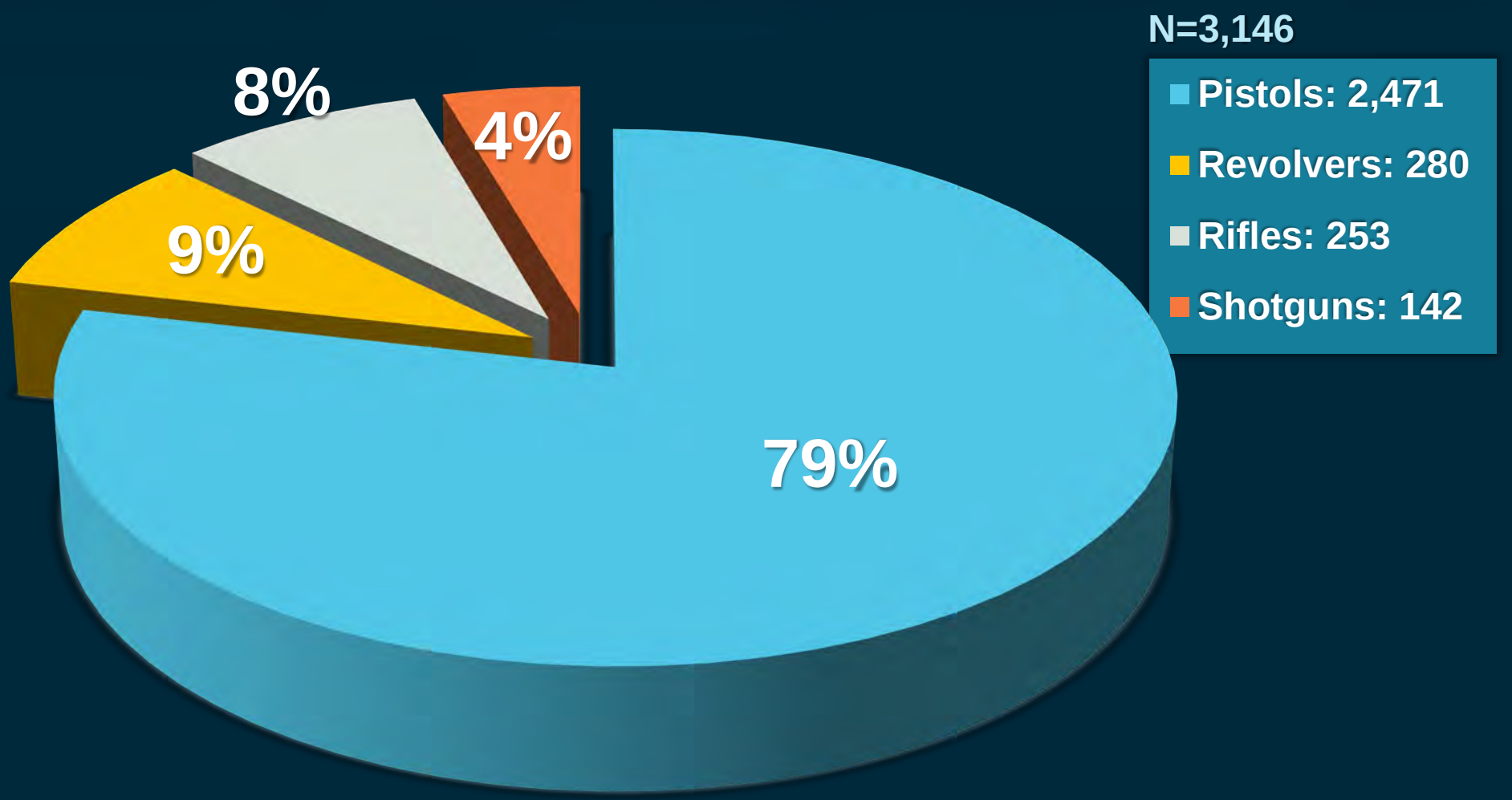
- Conducts examinations of evidence related to investigations of gun-related offenses
- Cases received are comprised of weapons, bullets and cartridge casings
- Serves as a regional facility for the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network database

Firearms Identification Casework



** Compared to 2016, 14% increase in cases received and 9% increase in firearms received*

Firearms Cases Completed by Type

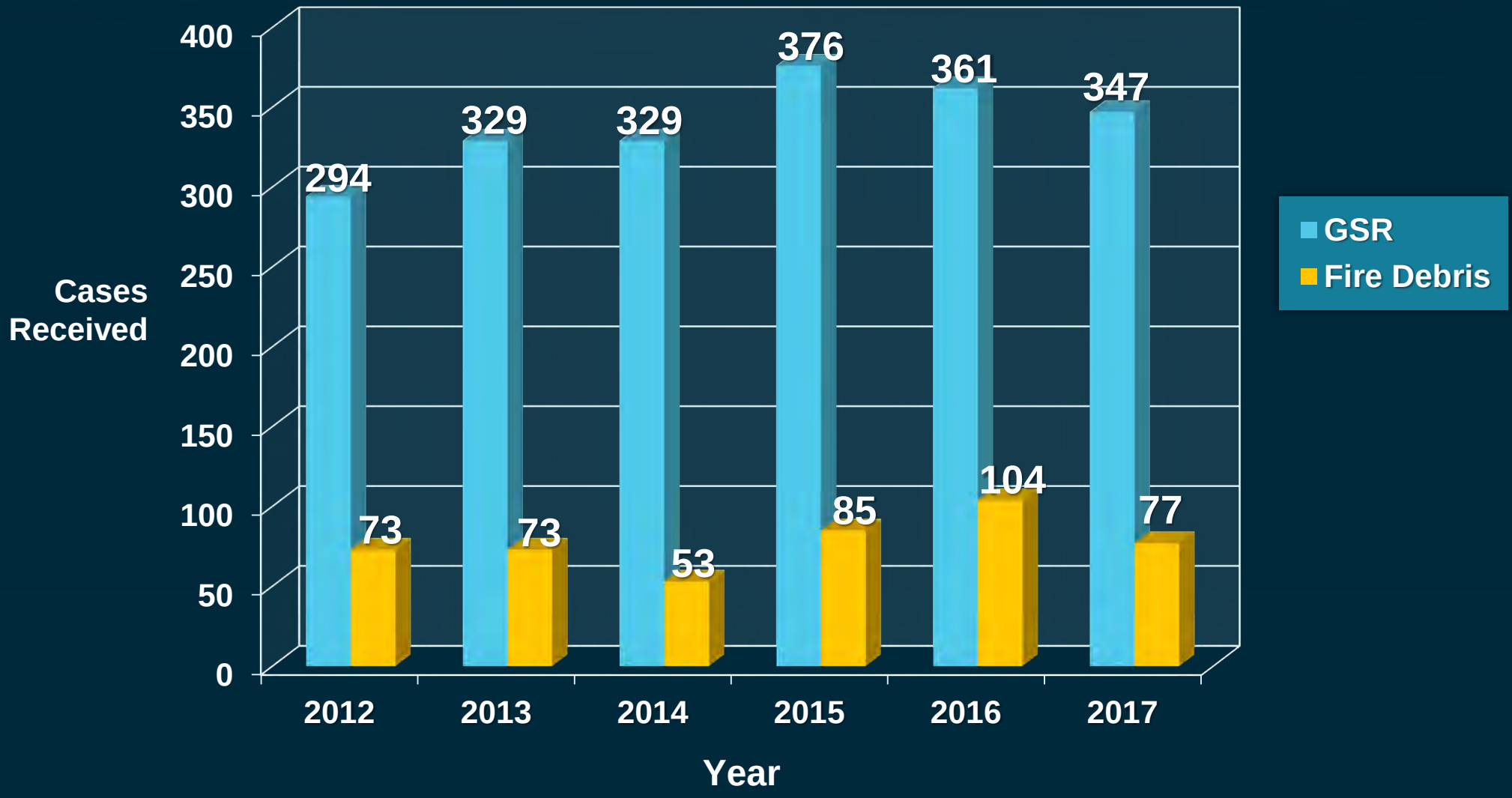


Trace Evidence

Provides analytical support to the HCIFS Medical Examiner Service and law enforcement in two areas:

- **Fire Debris Analysis**
  - **Examines evidence from fires to assist investigators in determining the presence of ignitable liquid residues**
- **Gunshot Residue (GSR) Analysis**
  - **Assists in determining whether a person or object has an association with the discharge of a firearm**

Trace Evidence Casework



** Compared to 2016, 4% decrease cases received for GSR and 26% decrease in fire debris cases received*

Published Scientific Work

7 published works in peer-reviewed journals

Publications by HCIFS Doctors & Scientists

	Authors	Title	Publication
1	**Bakota EL, Kelly AT,** Walterscheid JP, **Phatak DR**	A Case Report of Fatal Desmethyl Carbodenafil Toxicity	*Journal of Analytical Toxicology. 2017;41(3):250-255.*
2	Drake SA, **Wolf DA**, Meininger JC, Cron SG, Reynold T, Wade CE, Holcomb JB	Methodology to reliably measure preventable trauma death rate	*Trauma Surgery & Acute Care Open. 2017; 2:1-6.*
3	**Derrick SM,** Hipp J, Goel P	Chapter 23: The CADI Method of Computer-Assisted Radiographic Identification	*In: Bartelink E and Latham K (eds). New Perspectives in Forensic Human Skeletal Identification. Elsevier.*
4	Love JC, **Derrick SM**	Chapter 12: A Life History of Skeletal Trauma: Cases from a Medical Examiner's Office.	*In: Tegtmeyer C and Martin D(eds.). Broken Bones, Broken Bodies: Bioarchaeological and Forensic Approaches of Accumulative Trauma and Violence. Lexington Books.*
5	**Crowder CM,** Andronowski JM, Dominguez DM**.**	Bone Histology as an Integrated Tool in the Process of Human Identification.	*In: Latham K, Bartelink E, and Finnegan M (eds.). New Perspectives in Forensic Human Skeletal Identification.*
6	**Fleischman JM,** Kendell AE, Eggers CC, Fulginiti LC.	Unidentified Border Crosser Deaths in Arizona: Expanding Intra-state Collaborative Efforts in Identification.	*Journal of Forensic Sciences. 2017;62(4):840-849.*
7	**Wiersema, J., Pierce, M., Woody, A., & Sanford, M.**	Evidence Management: Best Practices in Medicolegal Death Investigation.	*In: Mozayani A and Fisher CP (eds).Forensic Evidence Management: From the Crime Scene to the Courtroom. CRC Press*
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Internship and Fellowship Programs

Internship Program

- **HCIFS prepares students for future careers in Forensic Science in many different scientific disciplines as well as in technical, professional and administrative capacities**

- **16 summer interns and 6 fall interns from the following disciplines:**

- Histology
- Forensic Anthropology
- Forensic Investigations & Emergency Management
- Victim's Assistance
- Systems Support
- Drug Chemistry
- Firearms Identification
- Forensic Genetics
- Forensic Imaging
- Forensic Toxicology
- Trace Evidence

Medical Examiner Fellowship Programs

Forensic Pathology Fellowship:

A 1-year fellowship that is a required training program for all new pathologists seeking Forensic Pathology Board certification

Fellows focus on the data acquisition and documentation processes from medical and non-medical sources with particular emphasis placed on the correlation of scene observations (forensic investigation) with autopsy and forensic toxicological findings

Medical Examiner Fellowship Programs

Forensic Anthropology:

An 18-month grant-funded fellowship/research project investigating the sources of cognitive bias influencing forensic anthropological casework and the validation of anthropological equipment and software used at HCIFS

Crime Laboratory Fellowship Programs

Forensic Toxicology:

A 2-year fellowship providing training for doctorate-level scientists seeking specialization in Forensic Toxicology

The program involves a combination of learning:

- **Forensic toxicology analytical operations**
- **Method validations**
- **Publications/presentations**
- **Interpretation skills**
- **Court testimony training**

Crime Laboratory Fellowship Programs

Forensic Genetics:

A 2-year program designed to train life science doctorates in casework and validation methods

Fellows focus on furthering specialized testing in Forensic Genetics, including animal and insect DNA testing

HARRIS COUNTY
INSTITUTE
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Thank you!

To learn more about the Institute, visit: ifs.harriscountytx.gov