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About Our Office

Introduction

The Spokane County Medical Examiner's Office (SCMEO) is tasked with investigating deaths of individuals in Spokane County, Washington who die violently or suddenly and unexpectedly, to determine the cause and manner of death. Due to a nationwide shortage of forensic pathologists, SCMEO also provides autopsy services to a growing number of counties in Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho. Spokane County is 1,781 square miles in size. In 2021, the population of Spokane County was approximately 541,993 with a growth of 1.73% from the year prior. In 2020, SCMEO moved into a new state-of-the-art facility located at 102 South Spokane Street, Spokane, WA 99202. The facility offers robust technology and is dedicated to the community and the region we serve.
Accreditation

Our office has been accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) since 2004. Our office has been continually accredited since, with annual self-inspections, and on-site inspections every 4 years. The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) is the national professional organization of forensic pathologists, physician medical examiners, medical death investigators, death investigation system administrators, and consultants who perform the official duties of medicolegal investigation of deaths of public interest in the United States. Accreditation is a rigorous process and requires a lengthy inspection by an independent Medical Examiner trained and appointed by the organization. Less than ½ of 1% of all Medical Examiner and Coroner Offices in the country have achieved this accreditation.

For more information on NAME, click the following links: https://www.thename.org/
https://www.thename.org/inspection-accreditation

Our Investigators are board certified diplomates of the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI). The American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) is a voluntary national, not-for-profit, independent professional certification board that has been established to promote the highest standards of practice for medicolegal death investigators.

For more information on ABMDI, click the following link: https://abmdi.org/
In 2021, SCMEO was staffed by 16 employees and was composed of the following departments: Pathology, Investigations, Morgue, and Administration.

- There are 3 forensic pathologist positions at SCMEO, including the Chief Medical Examiner, and two Deputy Medical Examiners.
- There are six positions in the Investigations Department.
- In the Morgue Department, there are three employees, including the Morgue Supervisor and two Autopsy Assistants.
- The Operations Manager oversees Investigations, Morgue, and Administration department. The Administration Department includes two Administrative Support Specialists III.
About Our Work

Case Jurisdiction
The Spokane County Medical Examiner's Office is responsible for the investigation and certification of cause and manner of death of all sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths that occur in Spokane County. Our office investigates deaths that may have implications for public health and/or public safety. This task begins with careful investigation at the scene of death, supplemented when appropriate, by autopsy examination, toxicology, and other testing. SCMEO helps the community by determining the cause and manner of death, recognizing and collecting evidence needed for adjudication, defining public health and product safety risks, and providing compassionate services to families including direction of efforts to notify next of kin. The manner of death refers to the circumstances surrounding how the death came about and may fall into one of five categories: natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined.
Deaths That Must Be Reported to the Medical Examiner

- Persons who die suddenly when in apparent good health and without medical attendance within 36 hours preceding death.
- Circumstances that indicate death was caused in part or entirely by unnatural or unlawful means.
- Suspicious circumstances.
- Unknown or obscure causes.
- Deaths caused by any injury whatsoever, whether the primary cause or contributing cause.
- Rapidly fatal contagious disease, with public health risk.
- Unclaimed bodies.
- Premature and stillborn infants where suspicious circumstances exist.
- All deaths in children.

Process

An initial investigation is done on every death reported to the SCMEO, to determine whether or not the death falls under SCMEO jurisdiction. Deaths which occur within the boundaries of Spokane County, do fall under SCMEO’s jurisdiction, and require a postmortem examination are transported to SCMEO by a contract body transport company. In certain cases, a SCMEO investigator may attend the death scene in person and perform a preliminary examination of the body. An investigator usually attends all homicides, suicides, accidental deaths, and select natural deaths. An investigator is on staff and available 24 hours/day, 365 days/year. SCMEO investigators do not physically perform scene investigations on cases that are reported to them from outside of the physical boundaries of Spokane County. For cases from outside Spokane County, an autopsy must be ordered by the Coroner of that jurisdiction.

Not all cases falling under Medical Examiner jurisdiction are autopsied. Some deaths can be certified via a review of medical records; the bodies of those decedents can be released to the funeral home without being brought to the SCMEO. If a body is transported to SCMEO, the Medical Examiner may choose to either perform a complete autopsy, partial autopsy, or an external examination. In all autopsies and external examinations that do not consist of skeletal remains, blood and vitreous fluid specimens are collected for toxicology and laboratory analysis.
Body Transport

Spokane County contracts with a company to provide transport services to our office on deaths that occur within the boundaries of Spokane County. Out-of-county cases are transported by the requesting agency, usually the coroner of the referral jurisdiction.

Forensic Unit

The Forensic Unit is part of the Sheriff’s department and provides crime scene documentation, fingerprint comparison and scene photo documentation at the direction of the Law Enforcement Agency with jurisdiction. The Medical Examiner’s office often partners with this group in the collection and preservation of evidence. The unit also assists the Medical Examiner’s Office in providing fingerprint (friction ridge) comparison expertise.

Scene Investigations

Scene investigation is an important component of a proper medicolegal death investigation. SCMEO forensic investigators attended 592 death scenes within the boundaries of Spokane County in 2021. Types of scenes investigated include all suspected homicides and suicides, suspicious deaths, accidental deaths, and select cases suspected to have died of natural disease, but where drug use or previous injury may have played a role in the death.
Important Trends

• **Heatwave across the Inland Northwest**

SCMEO confirmed 20 total hyperthermia related fatalities in 2021. 16 out of the 20 hyperthermia deaths within Spokane County occurred in housed individuals, inside the deceased’s residence, which had inadequate ways of regulating temperature. Of the three hyperthermia deaths in unhoused persons, two were residing in temporary housing while the third was found deceased in their vehicle.


• **COVID-19**

In 2020, SCMEO had a total of 203 COVID-19 cases reported to the office. In 2021, 458 COVID-19 cases (a 44.3% increase) were reported. The impacts of the COVID-19 on fatality statistics continue to be seen well into 2022 and may last until the pandemic is declared over and the virus is considered endemic.


• **Fatal drug overdoses**

SCMEO has seen a significant increase of fatal drug overdoses, most involving fentanyl. From 2020 to 2021, there has been an astonishing 285.7% increase in overdose fatalities within the boundaries of Spokane County. See page 25 for more information.


• **Deaths in unhoused persons**

SCMEO receives requests for information regarding unhoused inhabitants in Spokane County on a regular basis. Insight into the manners of death for the transient population may help address the situations that are faced and facilitate measures to protect this population. Most transient deaths handled by the SCMEO are ruled accidental. In 2021, 91.3% of all certified accidental deaths were from fatal drug overdoses. See page 28 for more information.
About our Cases

Deaths Reported

In 2021, there were 6695 deaths in Spokane County. Based on the latest United States Census Bureau data the estimated population of Spokane County is 541,993. The 6695 deaths thus represent approximately 1.2% of the population. Of these deaths, 2873 or 42.9% of the deaths were reported to the Medical Examiner. Based upon analysis of the scene and circumstances of death, and the decedent’s medical history, the Medical Examiner assumed jurisdiction in 952 (33.1%) of these reported deaths, or in 14.2% of all deaths in the county.

Spokane County Deaths Reported in 2019-2021

Reported Deaths - SCMEO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Jurisdiction Accepted</th>
<th>Jurisdiction Released</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>1314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>1457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>952</td>
<td>1922</td>
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</table>
Exam Types
The autopsy numbers represent complete, partial, and external examination. A “complete” autopsy includes a detailed examination of the external surfaces of the body as well as an internal examination, which involves surgical incisions of the head and abdomen, inspection of the body cavities, and removal and dissection of the internal organs. In select cases, only a portion of the internal examination is performed (called a “partial” examination). In certain other cases, only the detailed examination of the external surfaces of the body is performed, without any surgical incisions (called an “external” examination).
The total number of deaths certified by SCMEO went up by 226 cases based on data from 2020 to 2021. Thus, SCMEO had a 26.9% overall increase in jurisdiction assumed cases over the previous year. Referral county cases have also increased year over year.
Homicides

By Age

By Injury Type
Suicides

By Age

By Injury Type
Accidental Deaths

By Age

By Injury Type
Accidental Deaths in Spokane County, >70 Years of Age – 2021 Mechanism of Injury

169 or 86% of the falls certified in 2021 were from individuals at the age of 70 and older.

Hyperthermia Death Indoor vs. Outdoor

16 out of the 20 hyperthermia deaths within Spokane County in 2021 occurred within the decedent’s residence, which had inadequate ways of regulating temperature. The 3 outside deaths occurred within or in close proximity to the decedent’s property of residence.
Motor Vehicle Fatalities

By Age

![Motor Vehicle Fatalities Chart](chart.png)

- Automobile Driver, 30, 36%
- Motocycle Driver, 18, 21%
- Pedestrian, 17, 20%
- Automobile Passenger, 13, 15%
- Bicyclist, 6, 7%
- Other, 1, 1%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
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<td>30-39</td>
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<td>60-69</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Automobile Fatalities in Spokane County – 2021

Seatbelts in Use

Unrestrained, 10, 42%
Restrained, 9, 37%
Unknown, 5, 21%

Decedent's Location in Vehicle

Driver, 15, 68%
Passanger, 7, 32%
Motorcycle Fatalities by Age in Spokane County – 2021

Pedestrian Fatalities by Age in Spokane County – 2021
Illicit Drugs and/or Alcohol were detected in 45 out of 85 (52.9%) traffic fatalities that occurred within the boundaries of Spokane County in 2021. This includes drivers, passengers, bicyclist, and pedestrians.

Illicit Drug and/or Alcohol Detected
in Traffic Fatalities in Spokane County
– 2021

Role of Decedent in Spokane County Traffic Fatalities in Which Illicit Drugs and/or Alcohol Were Detected in Decedent
Natural Disease Deaths
In 2021, 26% of Spokane County Medical Examiner cases died of natural disease.

Natural Disease Death by Age

The greatest percentage of the deaths from natural disease was due to heart disease.
Resources for Cardiovascular Health

- Cardiovascular Resources- [Cardiovascular Health Resources Resources & FAQs (vmfh.org)](https://www.heart.org/)
- American Heart Association - [https://www.heart.org/](https://www.heart.org/)
- Cardiovascular Disease - [Cardiovascular health: Heart-healthy, science-backed resources (medicalnewstoday.com)](https://www.heart.org/)

Ways to Improve Cardiovascular Health

- Eating healthy
- Exercising often: Aim for at least 30 to 60 minutes of activity daily
- Not smoking
- Watching your cholesterol
- Get good quality sleep
- Manage stress
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Get regular health screening

COVID-19 death reported to the Spokane County Medical Examiner’s Office

![Bar chart showing COVID-19 cases in 2020 and 2021](chart.png)

**2020**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF CASES</th>
<th>203</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**2021**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF CASES</th>
<th>458</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Child Fatalities
In 2021, 15 child fatalities (less than three years of age) in Spokane County were reported to SCMEO.

Ages at Death of Child Fatalities in Spokane County – 2021

Manner of Death in Child Fatalities in Spokane County – 2021
Most causes of death in these infants were related to unsafe sleeping environments such as co-sleeping in adult beds and/or the use of unsafe/adult-type bedding materials.

**IS YOUR BABY SLEEPING SAFELY?**

4 **Tips to help baby sleep safely:**

- Place baby on his or her back for all sleep times- naps and at night.
- Use a firm sleep surface, such as a mattress in a safety-approved crib.
- Keep soft bedding such as blankets, pillows, bumper pads, and soft toys out of the baby’s sleep area.
- Have baby share your room, NOT your bed.

**Resource:**

Safe Sleep for Babies: [https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/safesleep/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/safesleep/index.html)
Drug Toxicity Deaths

Types of Drug-Related Deaths in Spokane County – 2021
(Multiple Drug Versus Single Drug Toxicity)

- Single Drug Toxicity, 51, 25%
- Multiple Drug Toxicity, 154, 75%

Drug Toxicity Deaths in Spokane County- 2021 Manner of Death

- Suicide, 13, 6%
- Accident, 190, 94%
Accidental Drug Deaths by Drug Detected (Illicit) in Spokane County – 2019-2021

Fatalities Involving Fentanyl in Spokane County– 2019-2021
Drug Deaths by Decedent Gender in Spokane County – 2021

Female, 69
Male, 134

Drug Deaths by Decedent Age in Spokane County – 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-9</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
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<td>60-69</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deaths in Unhoused Persons

Deaths in Unhoused Persons by Jurisdiction Accepted vs. Jurisdiction Released in Spokane County - 2021

- Jurisdiction Accepted, 44, 83%
- Jurisdiction Released, 9, 17%

Jurisdiction Accepted deaths in Unhoused Persons by Manner in Spokane County – 2021

- Accident: 23 cases
- Natural: 15 cases
- Suicide: 2 cases
- Homicide: 2 cases
- Vehicular: 2 cases
Accidental Deaths in Unhoused Persons by Method in Spokane County – 2021

Illicit Drugs vs. Prescription Drug Deaths in Unhoused Persons in Spokane County – 2021
In-Custody Deaths

An “in-custody” death is the death of a person occurring at any stage of interaction with law enforcement, including the initial confrontation with authorities, the process of arrest, during transport to a facility, or during incarceration. Incarcerated persons may die in an institution or may be hospitalized for a health condition while remaining in-custody. All deaths in custody must be reported to the medical examiner.

Types of In-Custody Deaths

- Hospital, 7, 58%
- Jail or Prison, 3, 25%
- Arrest and Transport, 2, 17%
- Natural, 8, 67%
- Suicide, 1, 8%
- Homicide, 3, 25%
Demographics

Decedent Race and Manner in Spokane County – 2021

Decedent Gender and Manner
Spokane County – 2021
Spokane County Facts According to US Census:

**Gender:**
Male- 49%
Female- 51%

**Race:**
Asian- 2.7%
Black or African American- 2.4 %
Caucasian- 83.7%
Hispanic- 6.6%
Native American- 1.6%
Pacific Islander- .9%
Unidentified Bodies

SCMEO uses a variety of techniques to scientifically identify decedents who are unknown, or for whom identification is uncertain. In 2021, scientific identification methods were employed for 58 decedents examined at SCMEO.

Methods of Scientific Identification of Unidentified Decedents 2021

- Fingerprint: 40, 69%
- XRAY: 14, 24%
- Dental X-RAY: 4, 7%
Community Involvement

SCMEO regularly networks with the local community in a variety of ways. Activities over the past few years have included a variety of educational presentations, such as lectures to area hospitals, hospice agencies, and nursing homes on proper reporting of medical examiner cases. This upcoming year, SCMEO will be providing outreach lectures to local schools within the boundaries of Spokane County.

In 2021, SCMEO established a college internship program and set up affiliation agreements with several local colleges and universities, including Gonzaga University, Eastern Washington University, and Whitworth University. The goal of the internship is to provide opportunities for students to learn about the work performed by the Medical Examiner’s Office and, under the direction of SCMEO staff, develop skills required to perform the duties of a Medical Investigator and/or Autopsy Assistant. We also host medical students from the University of Washington and Washington State University Schools of Medicine for 1-day clinical experiences as well as longer clinical rotations.

Some of our greatest impacts on community health happen when physicians and hospitals receive our postmortem reports and gain valuable insight on an injury or disease. Pathologists from SCMEO take part in hospital Morbidity and Mortality conferences. The SCMEO also participates in multiple local and statewide public health surveillance programs and provides data on fatal drug overdoses, child deaths, motor vehicle deaths, and consumer product safety deaths to a variety of agencies.

SCMEO administers the indigent burial program for Spokane County, overseeing efforts to contact family members of the deceased and ensuring that public funds are used responsibly to make final arrangements for unclaimed persons. As part of this process, we also partner with the Washington State Veterans Cemetery, working to identify qualifying unclaimed veterans who can be interred with military honors.

In addition to the above, SCMEO actively participates in mass disaster planning and assists community partners in preparing for a mass fatality event.