

Good Morning,

Senator Ballweg, Representative James and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for your invitation to speak about your study about Uniform Death Reporting. I am one of many hard-working public safety servant investigators who every day spend their time and effort investigating the most horrendous of crimes—Homicide. And just as devastating, the investigation of Suicides/Self-Harm. As a 30-year law enforcement veteran and a Senior Special Agent with the Wisconsin Department of Justice – Division of Criminal Investigation me and my colleagues respond to and investigate tragic events during all times of day and night, weekends and holidays while away from our families to ascertain the truth for those who can no longer offer it, bring answers to agonized family members, to foster fair and equal justice and to assist with holding perpetrators accountable for their heinous acts against other human beings. To the surviving family members of sudden, unexpected and tragic deaths of their loved one(s) due to violence or the unlawful acts of another, our thoughts, respect and hearts are with them.

Because death investigators only get one chance at every case or scene, we have to do it right the first time, every time. We have to methodically locate every piece of evidence, at that time. We do not get a second chance. We do not get to do anything over. Time is of the essence. Every victim family member expects the best investigation we have ever performed in our careers related to their loved one's investigation/case.

As a result, death investigators need to be the most skilled, talented, discerning, methodical and tenacious professionals they can be. To aid talented death investigators, they need exceptional training to assist their skill sets. In Wisconsin, that type of training has been hosted by the Wisconsin Department of Justice – Division of Criminal Investigation (herein referred to as my agency, the DOJ-DCI) . For many years, DOJ-DCI has hosted an 80-Hour Death Investigation Course for death investigators from across the entire state. The course offers instruction in: An Introduction to Death Investigation, Analytical Support in Homicides, Managing & Processing Death Scenes, Death Scene Evidence Processing Techniques, Time of Death & Changes After Death, Contributions of the Autopsy In Death Investigations, Atypical Gunshot Wounds, National Missing & Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), Identification of Human Remains, Locating Buried & Concealed Bodies, Formal Investigative Techniques, Analyzing the Crime Scene & Suspect Development, Digital Technology & Social Media in Death Investigation, Deaths Resulting from Sharp/Blunt Force, Conducting Interviews & Documenting Admissions, Wisconsin Crime Laboratory Support (Firearm Evidence, Blood Stain Pattern Analysis, DNA Evidence and other specialties), FBI Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP), Sexual Assault Investigations (including Sexual Assault Kit Initiative [SAKI]), Investigative Genetic Genealogy, Misconceptions in Forensic Autopsy, Cold Case Investigation & Exhumations, Drug-Related Death Investigations, Legal Considerations, Forensic Odontology in Homicide Investigations, Deaths Resulting from Fire & Explosion, Child Fatality & Abuse Investigations, Equivocal (Suicide) Death Investigations, Other Investigative Tools, Stalking as Evidence in Homicide Cases, Scenario-Based Death Scene Deductions, Child Abduction & Homicide, Incident Command, Asphyxial Deaths, Poisoning Deaths, Murder-For-Hire Investigations, Officer-Involved Critical Incident Investigations, Prosecuting Homicides, Developing the Suspect

Through the Use of Electronic Devices and Defense Strategies. The death investigation course is a tested course and every professional has to successfully pass the written examinations after each week of the course.

During the DCI death investigation course, attendees are supplied with an array of course materials, books, resources, checklists and other specific information. Attendees leave the death investigation course with a higher level of knowledge, advanced training and an array of networking resources.

Just last month, the DOJ-DCI completed its' 75<sup>th</sup> Session of the death investigation course. In years past, the course was held twice each year but because of costs and logistics, DOJ-DCI only holds one (1) course per calendar year, typically each September which is Suicide Awareness Month. The course is competitive and there is a waiting list to attend the course. Our most recent course graduated 64 investigators from all across the State from a wide variety of jurisdictional agencies. The target class size is typically between 50-55 students or attendees. The course costs \$200.00/per professional which covers program fees. Hotel and meal fees are in addition to the course.

Another tremendous resource for death investigators is the Wisconsin Association of Homicide Investigators (WAHI) which offers a 4-Day Death Investigation Symposium each April in differing locations in Wisconsin. I am one of the vice-presidents of the organization. WAHI is open to all certified law enforcement death investigators. Annual training and updates are offered at WAHI each year which focuses on bringing national-level expert training related to death investigation to statewide death investigators. The association has a cold case review team and has availability to experts from across the nation.

DCI continues to exist to assist any agency or jurisdiction in the state with criminal cases that are of statewide nature or importance. DCI works closely with local, county, tribal, state and federal officials to investigate and prosecute crimes involving homicide and other specialized crimes. DCI also performs special investigations requested by the Governor or the Legislature. In addition, DCI provides extensive training to local, state and federal law enforcement professionals on current issues in law enforcement.

Comprehensive uniform death reporting standards are essential. For example, I work with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) to collect up-to-date statistics each year for one of the courses that I personally offer at the DCI Death Investigation Course (Equivocal/Suicide death Investigation). I attempt to obtain death certificate data to offer statistical and current trend data to students in my training. I avoid obtaining statistical data from the Wisconsin Violent Death Reporting System (WVDRS) because the data is approximately 1.5 to 2 years behind the death certificate data. It is frustrating not to be able to offer the most recent or up-to-date data to investigators during trainings because: suicide reporting varies greatly by county, WVDRS is NOT mandatory and the lack of data (or delayed) collection of death reporting hampers suicide prevention efforts.

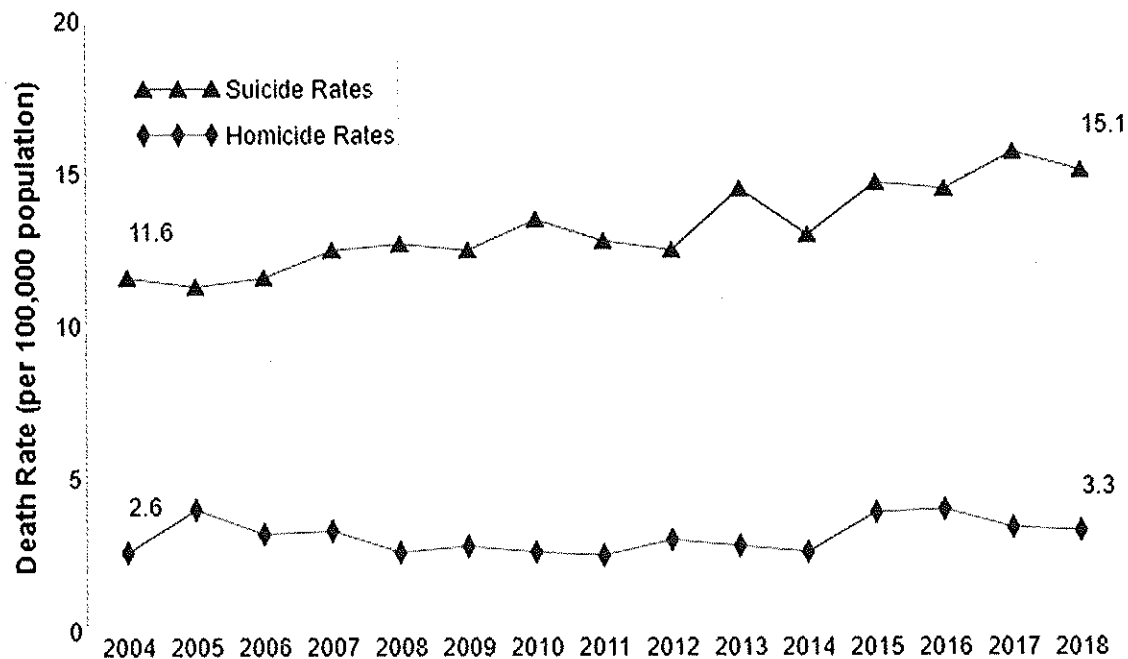
I submit the following . . .

# WISH: Violent Death Module

[Begin Query](#)

[Data Source](#) [Data for Figure](#) [Definitions](#) [Related Links](#)

**Wisconsin Suicide and Homicide Rates,  
2004-2018**



The Wisconsin Violent Death Reporting System (WVDRS) is a statewide, active surveillance system that collects detailed information on all suicide deaths, all homicide deaths, deaths of undetermined intent, deaths resulting from legal intervention, and deaths related to unintentional firearm injuries that occur in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin system is part of the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) ([see details](#)). Wisconsin began contributing data to the NVDRS in 2004.

Last Revised: June 27, 2022

# National Statistics, 2019

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Courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control

(<http://www.cdc.gov>)



# Latest 16 Leading Causes of Death:

- 1 Heart Disease
- 2 Malignant Neoplasms (Cancer)
- 3 Unintentional Injury (Accidents)
- 4 Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases
- 5 Cerebrovascular Disease (Strokes)
- 6 Alzheimer's Disease
- 7 Diabetes Mellitus (Diabetes)
- 8 Nephritis, Nephrotic Syndrome & Nephrosis (Kidney Disease)
- 9
- 10 Intentional Self-Harm (Suicide)
- 11 Chronic Liver Disease & Cirrhosis
- 12 Septicemia (Blood Poisoning)
- 13 Essential Hypertension & Hypertensive Renal Disease (Hypertension)
- 14 Parkinson's Disease
- 15 Pneumonitis (Inflammation of Lung Tissue)
- 16 Homicide

# In a Given Year: National Statistics...

- Suicide is the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the U.S.
- 19,141 U.S. Homicides

**2019 Total  
Deaths:  
2,854,838**

**Total Suicides:  
47,511**  
(Leading cause of death for  
persons 10-34 yoa)

## National Problem Description:

- 12 Million Adults Reported Serious Thoughts of Suicide
- 3.5 Million Adults Planned a Suicide
- 1.4 Million Attempted Suicide
- Medical & Lost Work Costs = \$70 Billion

# In a Given Year: National Statistics...

Of 220,551 Injury Deaths, the following were the methods of “Suicides:”

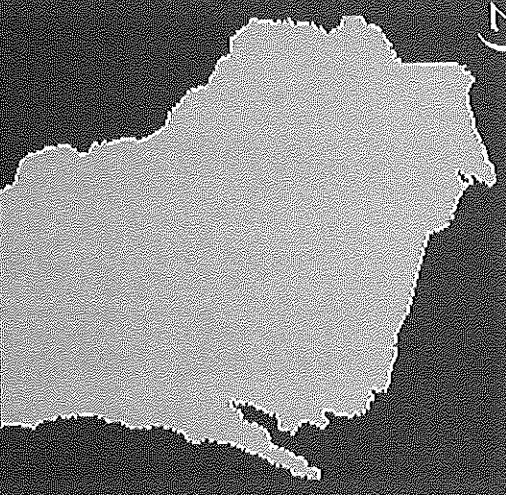
23,941	• Firearm
13,563	• Suffocation
6,125	• Poisoning
1,183	• Fall
921	• Cut/Pierce
833	• Other
506	• Drowning
187	• Fire/Burn
171	• Transportation



# Wisconsin Statistics, 2021

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Courtesy of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services,  
Division of Public Health,  
Office of Health Informatics (08/29/2022)\*  
(<http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov>)



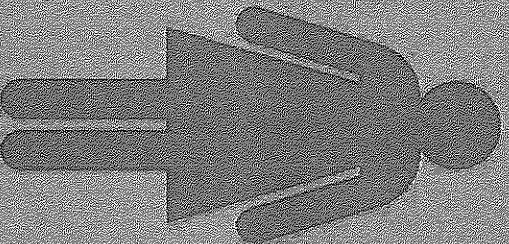
\*Data from 2021 is PROVISIONAL and SUBJECT TO CHANGE

# Wisconsin Statistics (2021)

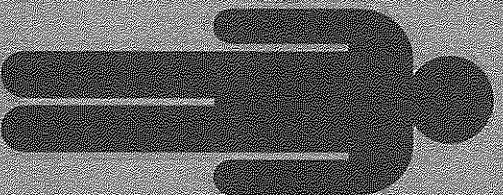
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899\* Suicides Total:

198 Women



701 Men



\*38 Increase from 861 suicides in 2020

Suicide was the second leading cause of death for ages 15-34. 1 in 5 children at risk for suicide. The highest rates were seen among 45-54 year olds for women (12.9/100,000) and 25-34 year olds for men (35.6/100,000).

# Wisconsin Statistics, 2021

Methods of the 899 Suicides:

483	• Firearm
225	• Suffocation
102	• Drug Poisoning
21	• Nondrug Poisoning
15	• Cutting/Piercing
?	• Falling, Drowning
?	• Other

Good morning Senator Ballweg, Representative James and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss what training law enforcement recruits receive in the academy on death investigations and making death notifications.

I am Stephanie Pederson and I work at the Training and Standards Bureau at the Wisconsin DOJ. I oversee the curriculum for the 22 police academies we have in Wisconsin. Every recruit learns the same basic curriculum in Wisconsin to ensure consistency across the state. The focus of the academy is on the types of skills an officer will use the first 5 years on the job. That is the curriculum that I oversee.

In the 720-hour curriculum we do cover 8 hours of evidence collection and crime scene processing, including some basic information on responding to deaths. The main focus of the training as far as deaths go is to recognize that a death has happened, determine if it appears to be a crime, secure the scene and prevent any contamination of evidence, and to call an investigator or supervisor to investigate the incident further.

After a few years on the job, officers tend to start focusing on specialty areas such as crash reconstruction, sensitive crimes, and death investigations. Usually, those officers go to more training, such as the death investigation course that Special Agent Yerges talked about. These types of trainings give the officer more advance training on investigating these crimes.

Additionally, we do teach recruits how to make a death notification in their Professional Communications Skills course. Patrol officers may be the ones contacting family members, we train to do it in person, to tell a family that their loved one has died. We worked with Chaplains across the state to develop this procedure knowing that this notification and the way the notification is done, is very important to the family and often times sets the tone for any follow-up contact with the families.

I would also like to add, that I have talked to many legislators over the years regarding requiring training for officers. In Wisconsin, officers must complete 24-hours of in-service training every year and the individual agencies decide what training their officers go through outside of two topics that are required through statute (pursuit training and the annual handgun qualification course). We encourage best practices when it comes to the training rather than requiring training out of those 24 hours. The reason for this is that if officers were required to go through several required topical trainings there would not be any time, or funding, left for those officers to attend training they really need for the type of policing they do.

As I said earlier, officers tend to go down a certain track as they move through their career, and they will need training in those specialty areas. Crash reconstructionists need to become better trained in processing crash scenes, sensitive crimes investigators need to learn more about trauma informed interviewing and working with advocates and victims of domestic violence and sexual assaults, and death investigators need to learn better methods to process crime scenes and investigate deaths. We begin in the recruit academy by providing basic training in many topics and train the recruits on the things they need to know to do the job out on patrol for the first 5 years of their career. Agencies decide on what training officers in different positions need to keep them proficient in those roles.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today and with that overview, do any of you have any questions regarding what training recruits receive in the academy?

## Death Notifications Steps

1. Gather the facts and confirm them – verify the victim died and that a positive identification is made. Know the general facts to be able to answer questions.
2. Make the notification within one hour or as soon as practical after someone died.
3. Go in person.
4. Go in pairs – law enforcement and the medical examiner or a chaplain, or service counselor. A male/female team helps. One can provide support while the other is answering questions. If the notified person is home alone, do not leave them alone. Wait for other family or friends to arrive for support.
5. Contact the family. Verify you have the correct address and family, identify your self and show credentials if not in uniform.
6. Deliver the notification in plain language.
7. Be compassionate and provide support. Do not just notify the family and then leave. Be patient, take the time to answer questions, ask the family if they have anyone you would like them to call.
8. Provide closure and follow-up. Offer condolences, ask if they have any more questions, provide them with your contact information.
9. Exercise self-assessment and care.