

Buncombe County
Community Child Protection Team & Child Fatality Prevention Team



Protecting our Children

**2023 ANNUAL REPORT TO BUNCOMBE COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS AND HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES BOARD
Submitted 5/17/2024**

I. Introduction to the North Carolina Child Fatality Prevention System

North Carolina’s Child Fatality Prevention System is addressed in Article 14 of the North Carolina Juvenile Code, N.C.G.S. 7B-1400 through 7B-1414. The public policy that anchors this system is articulated in the statute as follows:

The General Assembly finds that it is the public policy of this State to prevent the abuse, neglect, and death of juveniles. The General Assembly further finds that the prevention of the abuse, neglect, and death of juveniles is a community responsibility; that professionals from disparate disciplines have responsibilities for children or juveniles and have expertise that can promote their safety and well-being; and that multidisciplinary reviews of the abuse, neglect, and death of juveniles can lead to a greater understanding of the causes and methods of preventing these deaths.

According to Article 14, the purpose of the system is to assess the records of all deaths of children in NC from birth to age 18, as well as selected cases in which children are being served by child protective services (CPS), to:

- Develop a community-wide approach to child abuse and neglect;
- Understand causes of childhood deaths;
- Identify gaps or deficiencies in service delivery in public agency systems designed to prevent abuse, neglect, and death; and
- Make and implement recommendations for laws, rules, and policies that will support the safe and healthy development of children and prevent future child abuse, neglect, and death.

Every county in NC has two teams that are part of the state Child Fatality Prevention System.

1. The **Community Child Protection Team (CCPT)** reviews selected active cases of children who are being served by child protective services (CPS), and all cases in which a child died as a result of suspected or confirmed abuse or neglect and a report of abuse or neglect had been made about the child or their family to the Department of

Social Services (DSS) within the prior 12 months, or the child or their family was a recipient of CPS within the prior 12 months.

2. The **Child Fatality Prevention Team (CFPT)** reviews the records of all cases of additional child fatalities (i.e., the deaths of children who died from a cause other than suspected abuse or neglect). It is important to note that fatalities are reviewed during the calendar year following the year of death.

In most counties, including Buncombe, these two local review teams are merged into one team. Based on case reviews, the local CCPT/CFPT makes recommendations and advocates for system improvements and needed resources where gaps and deficiencies may exist.

CCPT and CFPT membership is designated by statute, consisting of various representatives of public and private community agencies that provide services to children and their families, including the local Department of Social Services (DSS), Health Department, law enforcement, Guardian Ad Litem, and school systems. The local board of county commissioners also may appoint as many as five additional members to represent agencies or the community at-large. Appendix 1 shows the mandated members and their appointing authority, as well as the specific individuals filling those roles for the Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT at the time of this report. Due to a vacancy, we are requesting that the Board of Commissioners appoint Jordyn Dezago, Associate Child and Family Coordinator, as the new team representative from Helpmate.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the activities and accomplishments of the Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT during the prior calendar year, including the number of child fatality reviews conducted and data on the causes of those child fatalities, the number of DSS case reviews conducted, and recommendations for system improvements and needed resources to prevent child abuse, neglect, and death.

II. Role of the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners and Health & Human Services Board

- Receive the annual report from the Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT, which contains recommendations for prevention of child abuse, neglect, and death.
- Advocate for system improvements and needed resources, if requested.
- Appoint members to the Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT as identified by team members and designated by state statute.

III. Child Maltreatment Case Reviews

In 2023, the Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT reviewed two open DSS cases. One case highlighted a system deficiency related to access to treatment for children with eating disorders, specifically children with Medicaid. Navigating the limited treatment options can be difficult for children and families and may require them to leave their

community and even NC. The other case illustrated the impact of substance use disorders in parents and extended family members as well as generational trauma.

IV. Child Fatality Reviews

The Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT reviewed 24 deaths of children who resided in Buncombe County at the time of their deaths in 2022. There were five additional child fatalities in 2022 that have not been reviewed by the team yet per guidance from the State’s Child Fatality Prevention Team Program Coordinator. Four of these five fatalities are in a ‘Pending’ status in the NC Medical Examiner System, meaning that documents provided by the Medical Examiner System (i.e., autopsy and toxicology reports) are not yet available. Once those documents are released to the team, these four fatalities will be reviewed. One fatality is awaiting an Intensive Review which is a two-day review led by staff from NC DSS. Please see Appendix 2 for aggregate data on the causes of child deaths in Buncombe County in 2022, as well as select demographic information about the deceased children. This aggregate data includes information on the five fatalities which the team has not yet reviewed.

During review of the 2022 child fatalities, the team identified the following system problems, made recommendations to address those problems, and took the following actions.

Cause of Death	System Problem Identified	Recommendation	Actions
<p>Accident – Gunshot Injury from Unsecured Firearm</p> <p>and</p> <p>Suicide – Use of Unsecured Firearm</p>	<p>A lack of proper & safe gun storage leads to preventable injuries and death in NC children.</p>	<p>a) The NC SAFE Campaign needs to continue to promote safe gun storage across NC in ways that reach more gun owners as well as parents/caregivers.</p> <p>b) Buncombe County Government and community partners should promote the NC SAFE campaign to encourage and aid gun owners to secure their firearms in an effective manner (e.g., through distribution of gun locks).</p>	<p>Team representatives partnered with other local governmental & non-governmental agencies to promote safe firearm storage as part of the NC SAFE Campaign. A local kickoff event for the campaign was held on 06/08/2023 and additional events are scheduled for June 2024.</p>

<p>Accidental Poisoning -- Fentanyl</p>	<p>The lack of substance use disorder (SUD) treatment resources of adequate quantity and quality for NC youth (i.e., outpatient and inpatient facilities, Licensed Clinical Addiction Specialists, and other licensed professionals) leads to poor health outcomes, including preventable injury and death.</p>	<p>State legislators in NC should improve the availability of SUD treatment resources for youth by strongly considering support of the following strategies: 1) increased Medicaid reimbursement rates for youth behavioral health services, 2) housing and/or loan forgiveness for NC behavioral health professionals serving youth with SUD, and 3) state-funded grants for students pursuing an education in licensed clinical mental/behavioral health care.</p>	<p>The team's Mental Health Professional shared this recommendation with the Buncombe Behavioral Health/Justice Collaborative in late 2023.</p>
<p>Illness – Due to Child Abuse/Neglect</p>	<p>1) Many members of the public in NC are unaware of their legal obligation to report suspected child abuse, neglect, dependency, and sex trafficking and who to call to make a report. Employees in the hospitality industry are a key demographic who may witness such acts and could benefit from training on this topic. 2) CPS intake staff in NC currently lack the ability to utilize information in the statewide registry of DSS involvement. This</p>	<p>1a) NC DSS should develop and share a training program for managers and staff in the hospitality industry (food/lodging) about mandatory reporting laws. 1b) NC DSS should consider creating a statewide phone number for reporting of suspected child abuse, neglect, dependency, and sex trafficking. 2) NC DSS should consider seeking a revision to NC statute that would enable CPS staff to use the central registry of DSS</p>	<p>The Buncombe County HHS Director shared these recommendations with leadership at NC DSS in August 2023.</p>

	limits their ability to identify children who may be at higher risk of child abuse, neglect, and dependency.	involvement at the time of intake.	
Sudden Unexplained Infant Death – unsafe sleep environment	Despite education on safe sleep recommendations and access to safe sleep environments, caregivers continue to engage in behaviors that place infants in unsafe sleep environments, leading to preventable infant deaths.	<p>a) Safe Sleep NC should continue to review the safe sleep literature/ research, looking for promising or best practices that can lead to caregiver behavior change related to implementation of safe sleep recommendations. Safe Sleep NC should disseminate this information widely to key stakeholders (e.g., healthcare providers, parent groups, childcare providers, WIC, lactation support providers, community health workers, etc.) & explore opportunities to implement promising interventions in NC.</p> <p>b) Buncombe County CFPT will share the link to updated Safe Sleep NC videos with local agencies and providers that serve infants and families.</p> <p>c) Mission Hospital's Mother-Baby Unit & Lactation Consultants should ensure that all parents (including fathers) receive safe sleep education that discourages co-sleeping.</p>	<p>a) Team chair shared this recommendation with Safe Sleep NC staff in January 2024.</p> <p>b) Team Chair shared the link to Safe Sleep NC videos with CFPT members & Mission Children's Outreach leadership in early 2023.</p> <p>c) Team Chair spoke with Mission Hospital Mother-Baby Unit leadership in May 2023 about safe sleep education provided to parents/caregivers at the hospital during the post-partum period.</p>

Suicide	The lack of a coordinated, county-wide effort focused on youth mental health and suicide is leading to stalling of implementation of ideas generated at the May 2023 Youth Suicide Community Conversations, frustrating stakeholders, and hindering improvements in youth mental health and suicide prevention in Buncombe County.	Buncombe County government should fund a part-time, 20 hour per week position that is dedicated to leading and coordinating youth mental health & suicide prevention efforts in Buncombe County	The Buncombe County CFPT/CCPT Chair, BCHHS Director, & BCHHS Public Health Director met with the County Behavioral Health Manager to convey the team's concerns about the youth mental health & suicide crisis, the urgent need to address it, the current lack of sufficient leadership/coordination of the efforts, and the team's perspective that it is a county-wide need that should be led by County government. The County Behavioral Health Manager and BCHHS Director conveyed this recommendation to their Assistant County Manager.
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Additionally, due to concerns that local healthcare providers did not provide sufficient details to Medical Examiners or DSS Intake staff in some instances which may have resulted in criteria not being met for autopsies or DSS investigations, recommendations were made to local healthcare leaders for staff training and education about reporting requirements for child fatalities, and suspected child abuse, neglect (including improper medical care), or dependency.

V. Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT Activities and Accomplishments

- The team met nine times in 2023 and an additional three times in 2024 to complete 2022 fatality reviews.
- The Team Chair, Review Coordinator, and two DSS staff members attended the NC Child Fatality Prevention Summit in Chapel Hill on March 30, 2023.
- The team sponsored a Youth Suicide Prevention Community Conversation event on May 17, 2023, which pulled together representatives from a variety of community agencies that serve youth. State and local data on youth mental health & suicide were shared with attendees who then generated ideas for community education & training opportunities and prevention, intervention, & postvention efforts.
- Team representatives partnered with other local governmental & non-governmental agencies to promote safe firearm storage as part of the NC SAFE Campaign. A local kickoff event for the campaign was held on 06/08/2023.

- The team used their FY23 state funding to purchase Pack ‘n Plays and fitted sheets for distribution to Sistas Caring 4 Sistas (SC4S), a local community-based doula program founded by women of color for women of color, and Buncombe County’s Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program.
- The State CFPT Program Coordinator attended the team’s December 2023 meeting.
- The Team Chair and Review Coordinator completed the required reports on each child fatality reviewed by the team and submitted these reports to the state CFPT Coordinator.
- The Team Chair completed the annual NCDHHS CCPT Survey and CFPT Activity Summary.

VI. Conclusion

Several individuals transitioned off our team since submission of the last annual report. Thank you to Trina Hill, Mark Van Tuyl, Dr. Elizabeth Buys, Geoff Sidoli, and Chanel Young for their years of service to our team and Buncombe County children and families.

Thank you also to the members of the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners & Health and Human Services Board for this opportunity to share the work of the Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT. We appreciate your support of our efforts and your attention to our recommendations for the prevention of child abuse, neglect, and death. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions about this report.



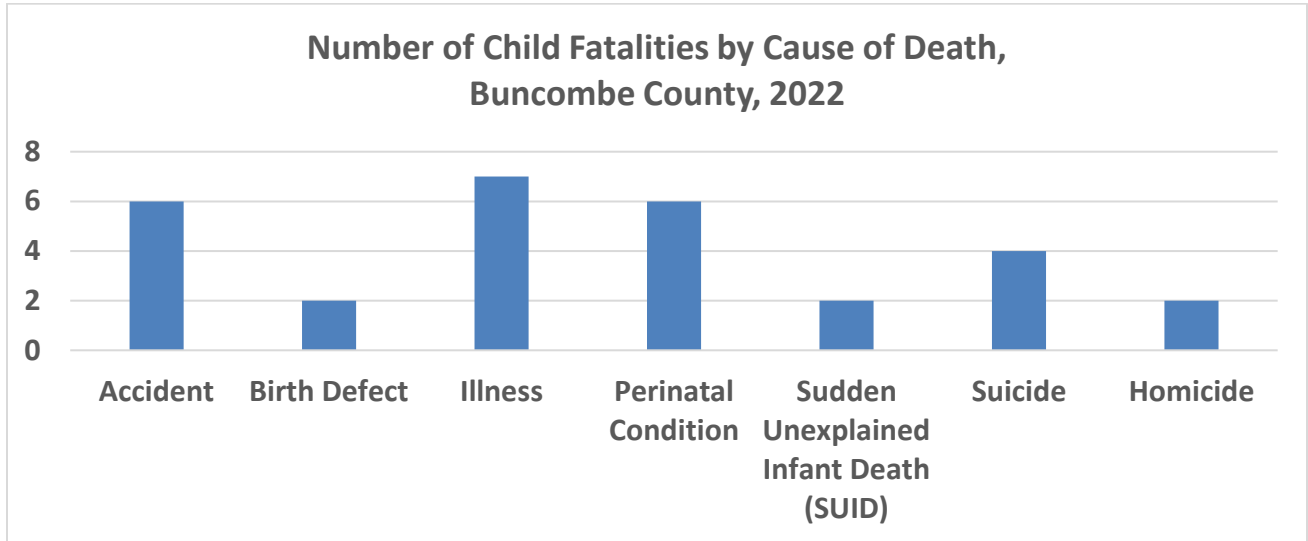
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Appendix 1: Buncombe County CCPT/CFPT Membership (as of 05/17/2024)

MANDATED MEMBER	APPOINTING AUTHORITY	AGENCY	REPRESENTATIVE	MEMBER SINCE
DSS Director		Buncombe County HHS (BCHHS)	Stoney Blevins	2018
DSS staff member		BCHHS	Rebecca Smith	2019
			Sherrie Thomas	2024
Local Law Enforcement Officer	Board of County Commissioners	Buncombe County Sheriff's Dept.	Sgt. Caleb Hunter	2022
Attorney from District Attorney's Office	District Attorney	Buncombe District Attorney's Office	David Denninger	2023
Executive Director of local community action agency (or their designee)		Community Action Opportunities	Trudy Logan	2016
Superintendent of each local school system (or their designee)		Asheville City Schools	April Dockery	2021
		Buncombe County Schools	Shanon Martin	2023
County Board of Social Services member	Chair of BCHHS Board	Buncombe County HHS Board	Jacquelyn Hallum	2021
Mental Health Professional	Vaya Health LME/MCO Director	Vaya Health	Angela Garner	2023
Guardian ad Litem Coordinator (or their designee)		Guardian ad Litem – District 28	Coby Wellshear	2019
Director of local Department of Public Health		Buncombe County HHS	Dr. Ellis Matheson	2023
Local Health Care Provider	BCHHS Board	Buncombe County HHS	Dr. Jennifer Mullendore	2011
		MAHEC OB/GYN Specialists	Dr. Carol Coulson	2023
		Mission Children's Specialists	Dr. Deana Lashley	2023
Emergency Medical Services provider or firefighter	Board of County Commissioners	Buncombe County EMS	Max Boswell	2019

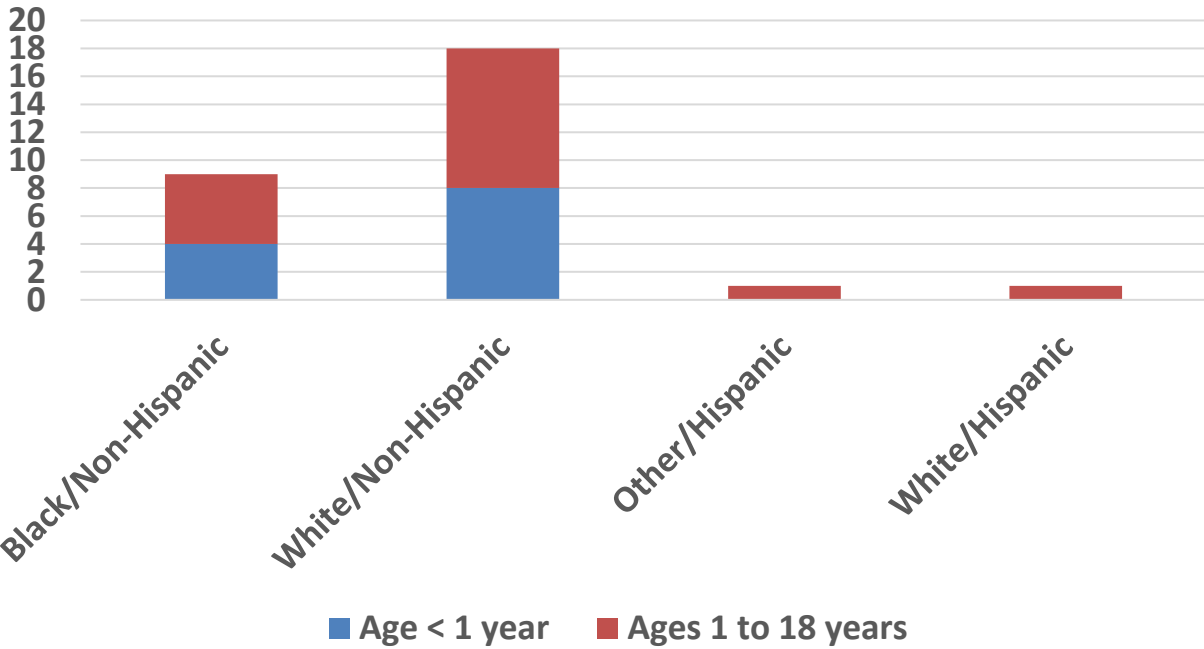
District Court Judge	Chief District Court Judge	Buncombe County District Court	Judge Ward Scott	2015
County Medical Examiner	Chief Medical Examiner	Buncombe County Medical Examiner	Paula Case	2022
Representative of a Local Childcare Facility or Head Start program	Buncombe County DSS Director	Community Action Opportunities Head Start	Sharon Farmer	2015
Parent of a Child Who Died Before 18 th Birthday	Board of County Commissioners	n/a	VACANT	
Additional member #1	Board of County Commissioners	Children's Developmental Services Agency	Molly Payne	2005
Additional member #2		Mountain Child Advocacy Center	Colleen Burnet	2023
Additional member #3		Community Care of NC (CCNC)	Sherry Noto	2018
Additional member #4		MAHEC OB/GYN Specialists, Project CARA	Tammy Cody	2018
Additional member #5		Helpmate	VACANT – request for appointment of Jordyn Dezago	
Review Coordinator	Buncombe County DSS Director and Health Director	BCHHS	Deana Shetley	2020

Appendix 2: 2022 Buncombe County Child Fatality Data (based on fatalities assigned to the Buncombe County Child Fatality Prevention Team)

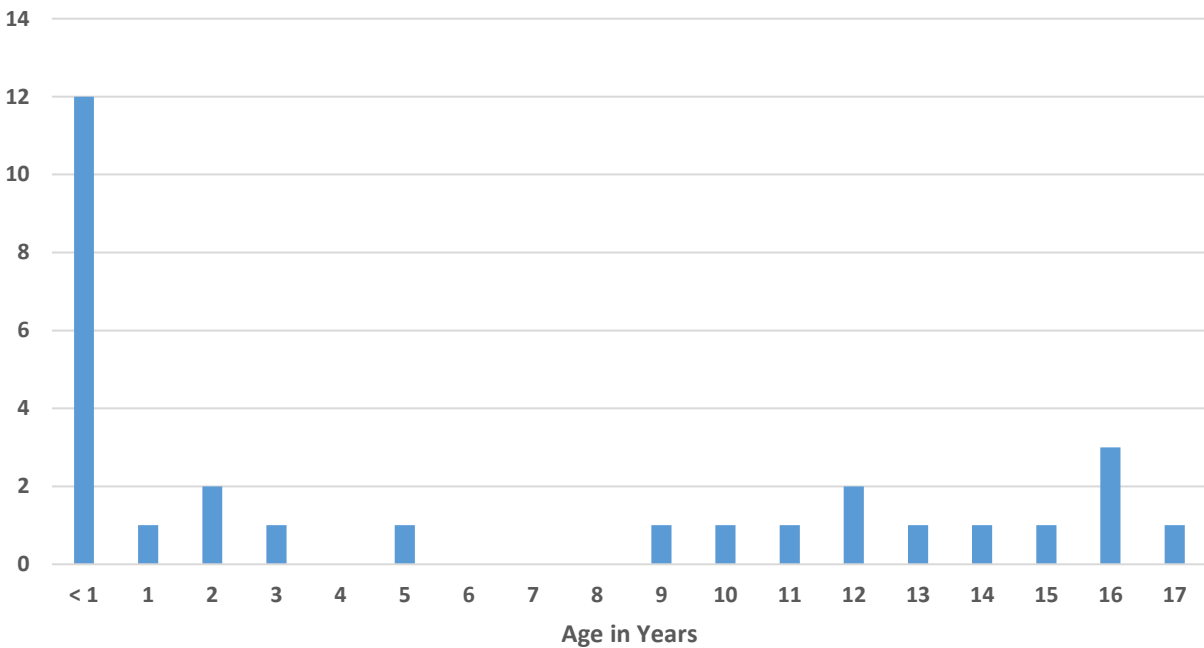


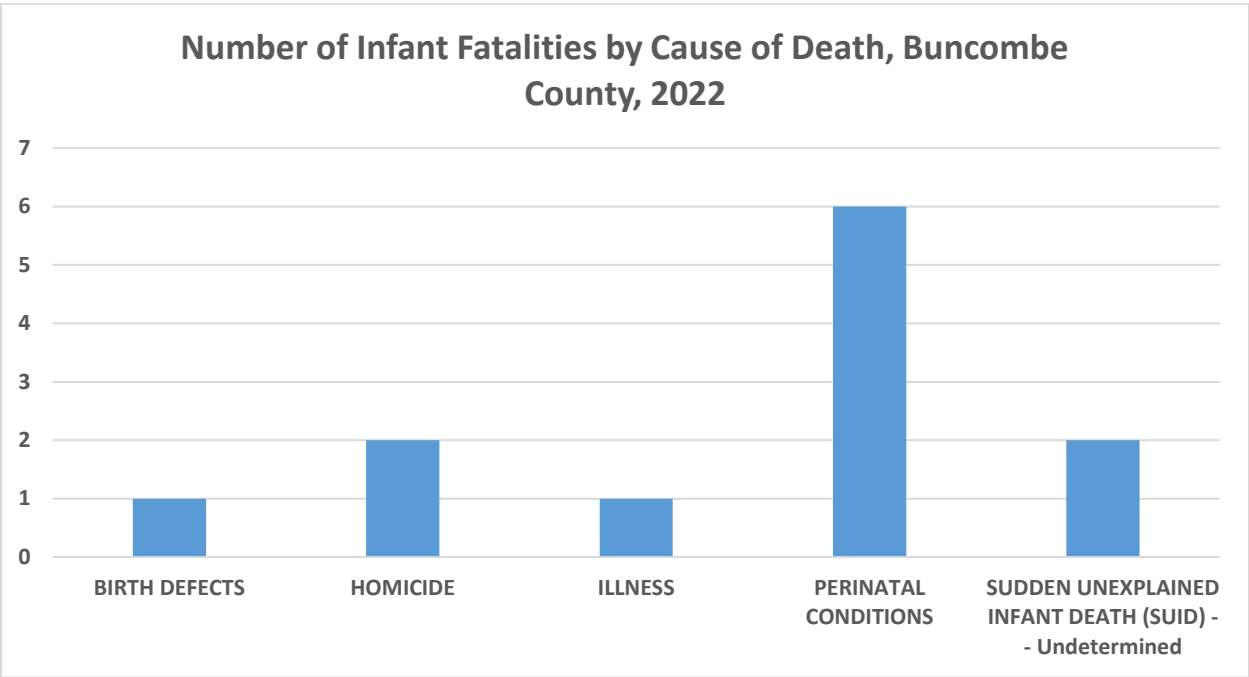
- There were 29 fatalities total, including 12 infants.
- The fatalities due to accidents included two drownings, two accidental poisonings (fentanyl), a gunshot wound due to an unsecured firearm, and trauma following a motor vehicle collision.
- The fatalities due to perinatal conditions involved five premature births, a placental abruption, an infection, and neonatal heart failure.
- Both Sudden Unexplained Infant Deaths were categorized as undetermined cause but involved unsafe sleep environments and co-sleeping.
- All fatalities by race/ethnicity:
 - 9 Black/Non-Hispanic
 - 18 White/Non-Hispanic
 - 1 Other/Hispanic
 - 1 White/Hispanic
- All fatalities by gender:
 - 17 females
 - 12 males

Number of Child Fatalities by Race/Ethnicity, Buncombe County, 2022



Number of Child Fatalities by Age, Buncombe County, 2022





- Infant fatalities by race/ethnicity:
 - 4 Black/Non-Hispanic
 - 8 White/Non-Hispanic

- Infant fatalities by gender:
 - 10 females
 - 2 males