State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System

Data Brief: Veteran Overdose Deaths In Illinois, 2019–2023

Published 11-2025

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Introduction

This report summarizes veteran overdose deaths in Illinois from 2019 through 2023. A total of 843 deaths were reviewed (88% of identified cases). Data describe demographic patterns, incident context, physical and behavioral health factors, and toxicology findings.

OVERVIEW

Annual overdose deaths among veterans increased through 2022 when these deaths peaked. From 2022 to 2023, veteran overdose deaths declined by 15% (32), compared to a decline of 8.09% for Illinois as a whole. (CDC WONDER, accessed 10-29-25).



Key Facts (Veterans, Illinois 2019–2023)

843 overdose deaths (veterans, 2019–2023)
94.4% male | 54.1% NH Black | 36.3% ages 55–64 49.2% HS graduates | 37.0% single | Cook County: 60.4%

Overdose Scene:
Naloxone used: 27.2% | Bystander present: 41.5% Route unknown: 70.9% | Snorting most common: 13.5% | Occurred in Home 78.6%

Health History:
Heart disease: 24.1% | Obesity: 8.1% | COPD: 7.5% Other pain condition: 6.6%

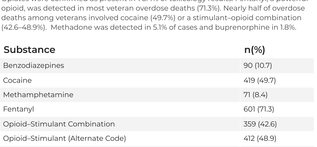
Behavioral / Mental Health:
Substance Abuse (other): 79.4% | Mental illness: 16.1% | Mental health problem: 15.3%
In treatment (MH/SUD): 10.7%

Toxicology:
Opioids: 78.4% | Fentanyl: 71.3%
Cocaine: 49.7% | Opioid-stimulant combo: 42.6–48.9%
Methamphetamine: 8.4% | Methadone: 5.1% | Benzodiazepines: 10.7%

Demographics

Most veteran overdose deaths occurred among men (94.4%). The age group with the largest percent of these deaths was 55–64 (36.3%), followed by those 65 and older (22.3%). More than half of overdose deaths among veterans involved non-Hispanic Black veterans (54.1%), followed by non-Hispanic White (39.1%) and Hispanic (4.0%). Over one-third of decedents were single (37.0%), and another third divorced (33.7%). Nearly half (49.2%) had completed high school, and 44.4% had education beyond high school. Most deaths occurred in Cook County (60.4%).

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Incident Context: Overdose Circumstances, Route of Use, and Naloxone Administration

INCIDENT CONTEXT

Naloxone, a lifesaving overdose reversal medication, was administered in 27.2% of overdose cases. A bystander was present in 41.5% of deaths. Snorting (13.5%) and injection (8.2%). Most cases were classified as having an unknown route of use, although most were classified as unknown (70.9%).

MEDICAL HISTORY

In examining medical history, nearly one-fourth of veterans had documented heart disease (24.1%), 8.1% were obese, 7.5% had COPD, and 6.6% had another chronic pain condition. Other respiratory or musculoskeletal conditions were less common, suggesting overlapping but distinct health challenges among this group.

BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

When looking at behavioral and mental health factors, most veterans (79.4%) had evidence of abusing substances other than alcohol, and 78.6% of overdose occurred in the home. Mental health problems were present in 15.3% of cases, and 16.1% had a documented history of mental illness. Ten percent were receiving mental health or substance-use treatment at the time of death, indicating overlapping behavioral health concerns that may have contributed to risk.

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Indicator (Health Factor)	n (%)
Naloxone Administered	229 (27.2)
Bystander Present	345 (41.5)
Route of Administration	
Route – Ingestion	62 (7.4)
Route – Injection	69 (8.2)
Route – Snorting	114 (13.5)
Route – Unknown	598 (70.9)
Medical History	
Asthma	37 (4.4)
COPD	63 (7.5)
Heart Disease	203 (24.1)

Toxicology: Substances Involved and Toxicology Results

Opiates were confirmed as present in 78.4% of toxicology results. Fentanyl, a powerful opioid, was detected in most veteran overdose deaths (71.3%). Nearly half of overdose deaths among veterans involved cocaine (49.7%) or a stimulant-opioid combination (42.6–48.9%). Methadone was detected in 5.1% of cases and buprenorphine in 1.8%.

Substance	n(%)
Benzodiazepines	90 (10.7)
Cocaine	419 (49.7)
Methamphetamine	71 (8.4)
Fentanyl	601 (71.3)
Opioid-Stimulant Combination	359 (42.6)
Opioid-Stimulant (Alternate Code)	412 (48.9)
Opiate Positive	661 (78.4)
Methadone	43 (5.1)
Buprenorphine	15 (1.8)

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Conclusion

IVDRS recorded 843 deaths from 2019 to 2023 in Illinois. Most occurred among older, male veterans, particularly among those ages 55–64. Most deaths involved an opioid, and fentanyl was involved in nearly three quarters of these. Most veteran overdose deaths occurred in Cook County where the bulk of Illinois' population lives. Findings highlight the role of polysubstance use, chronic health conditions, and co-occurring behavioral health factors in veteran overdose mortality.

Resources for Veterans (Illinois)

Crisis Support
Veterans Crisis Line – Call or text 988 (Press 1) or text 838255 for 24/7 confidential help. veteranscrisisline.net

Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA): https://veterans.illinois.gov/about-us/governors-challenge.html

Statewide Assistance
Illinois Helpline for Opioids and Other Substances – Call 1-833-2FINDHELP for treatment and recovery options. helpline[1].org

Veteran Services & Treatment
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – Substance use and mental health programs for veterans statewide.
va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/substance-use-problems

Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs – Local service officers and benefits navigation. veterans.illinois.gov

Harm Reduction
Chicago Recovery Alliance – Naloxone and harm-reduction education.
chicagorecoveryalliance.org

Illinois Statewide Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS)
SUDORS is also open to sharing analysis results with researchers, policymakers, violence prevention programs, and others for more focused collaborative projects.

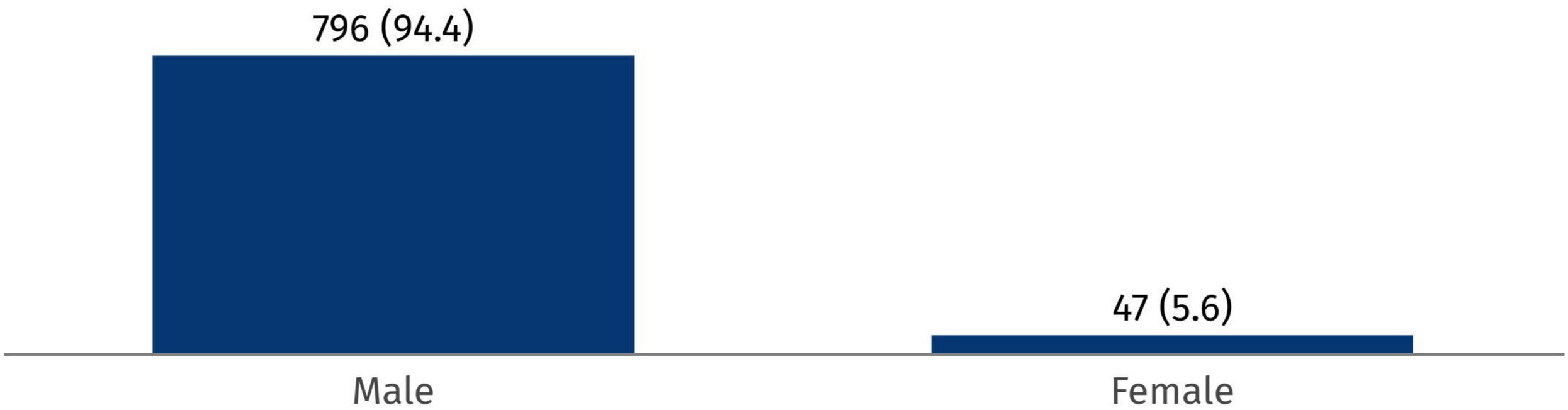
This report is funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, additional support provided by the Illinois Department of Public Health and an anonymous donor. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services.

Questions or Comments? Please contact: Maryann Mason, PhD, Principal Investigator for the State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (IVDRS) | sudors@northwestern.edu

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View: Chart 1, option: Sex

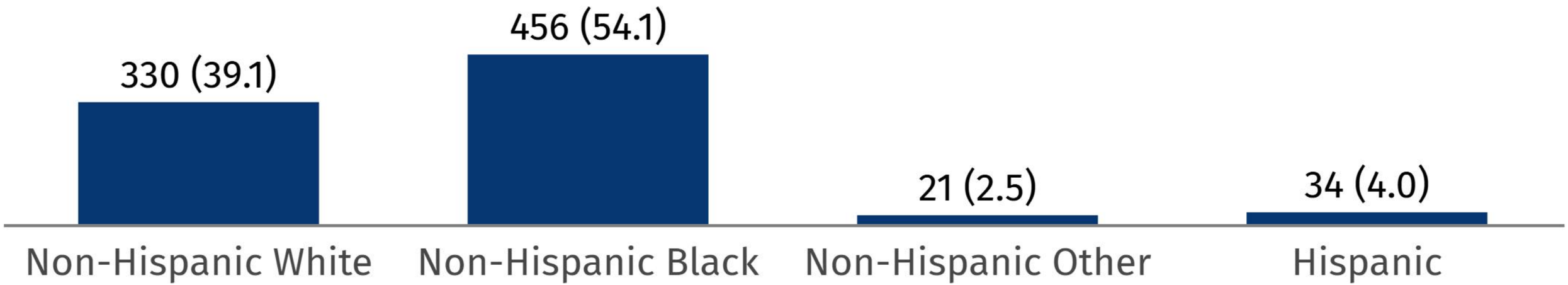
Sex



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View: Chart 1, option: Race/Ethnicity

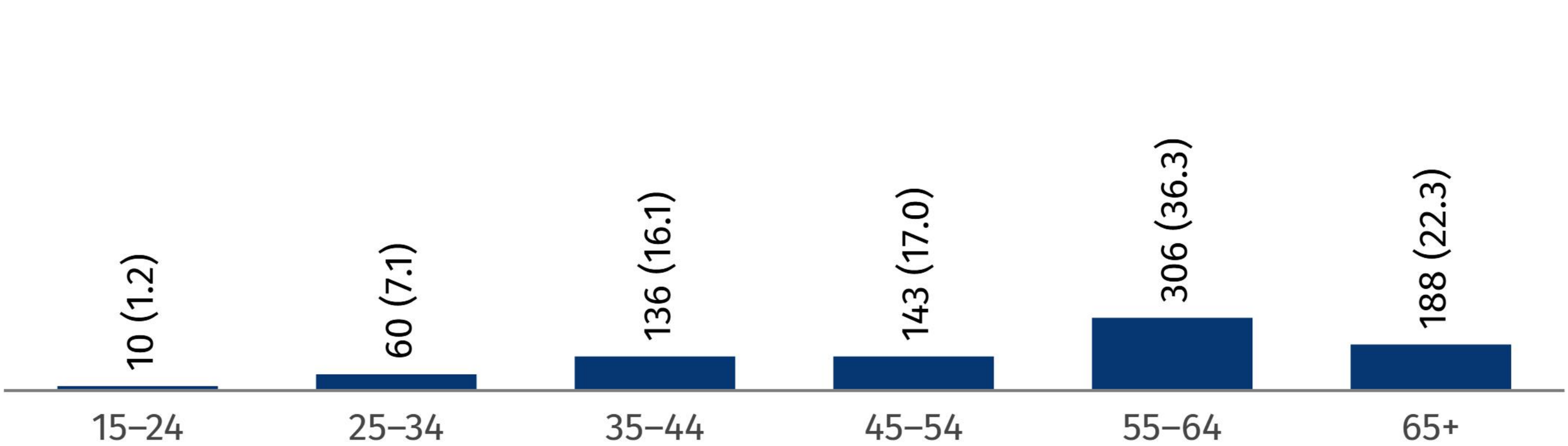
Race/Ethnicity



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View: Chart 1, option: Age Group

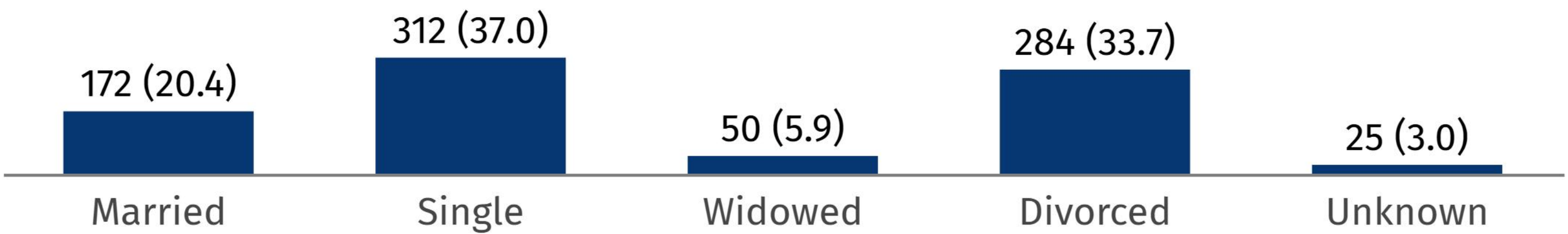
Age Group



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View: Chart 1, option: Marital Status

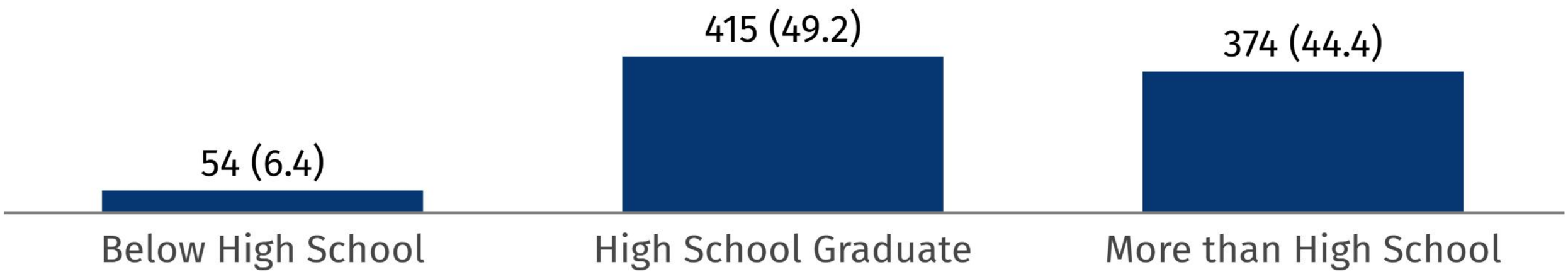
Marital Status



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View: Chart 1, option: Education Level

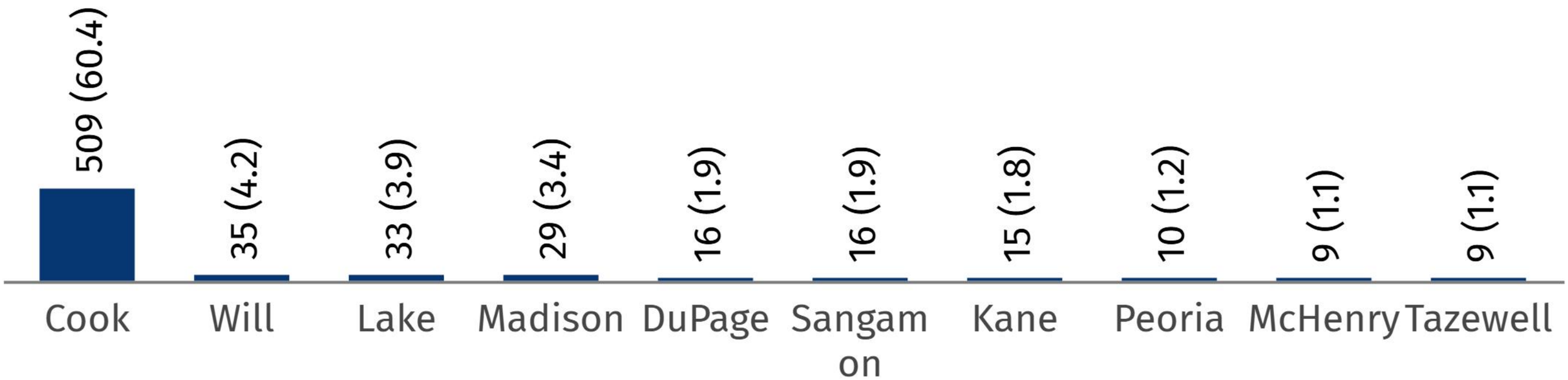
Education Level



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View: Chart 1, option: Top Counties

Top Counties



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