



LEHIGH COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE AND FORENSICS CENTER

4350 Broadway

Allentown, PA 18104

610.782.3426 610.820.8271 FAX

Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI
Coroner

July 21, 2020

Fellow County Officials,

Attached you will find the 2019 Annual Report for the Lehigh County Coroner's Office and Forensics Center. It was my intent to provide this report to you all in the beginning of the second quarter, however the COVID-19 pandemic put some projects on hold. Through the end of June, our total investigations increased by over 23% from that same time period in 2019. This increase in investigations came as staff was divided into two teams and time was split between working in office and remotely. My staff, as always, stepped up and performed immeasurably well during this time; handling investigations with professionalism and compassion while following the appropriate guidelines and maintaining a healthy and safe workplace.

Please review our Annual Report at your leisure and if you have any questions or would like further information, do not hesitate to reach out. Thank you for your continued support of our office.

Sincerely,

Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI
Coroner



Accredited by the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners



Lehigh County Coroner's Office and Forensics Center

2019 Annual Report



**Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI
Lehigh County Coroner**



LEHIGH COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE & FORENSICS CENTER

4350 Broadway * Allentown, PA 18104
Phone: (610) 782-3426 Fax: (610) 820-8271

To the Citizens of Lehigh County,

It is with great pride and honor that I present the 2019 Annual Report for the Lehigh County Coroner's Office and Forensics Center. The year began with the retirement of Scott Grim, a mentor and friend, who served the County of Lehigh for 26 years; 22 of them as the Coroner. Through our transition and throughout the year, our investigations increased by nearly 2% from the year prior. The fall marked our 5th anniversary of moving into our forensics center and since that time our total investigations has increased nearly 20%. This report provides statistics and other relevant data to inform and educate the reader.

In March, I was appointed by the Board of Commissioners to fill the remainder of retired Coroner Grim's term and was subsequently elected in to my first term in November. The year brought the completion of two capital projects; the purchase and delivery of a completely digital x-ray system for our morgue and the purchase and delivery of new vehicle for use by our staff of dedicated investigators.

In 2019, three of our newest investigators completed the Pennsylvania Basic Coroner Education training in Harrisburg. Our team of investigators are now all state certified. Additionally, one staff member completed certification through the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI), bringing our total to 60% of the investigative staff certified by the ABMDI.

It is an absolute privilege to lead this team of dedicated professionals. Our staff is comprised of investigators, morgue staff, x-ray techs and administrative support from a diverse background that all are committed to our mission of service to those that die in Lehigh County.

This report is a cumulation of data from each and every investigation that we complete. It is a reflection of lives well lived and sadly, lives cut too short. Every number reflects a family mourning a loss, looking for answers and seeking hope. It is to those families, those lives well lived and those cut short, that this report is dedicated.

Respectfully,

Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI
Coroner

Mission Statement

The Lehigh County Coroner's Office and Forensics Center delivers services to the Citizens of and those who die within the County of Lehigh, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Lehigh County Coroner's Office is an independent investigative agency staffed by highly trained personnel whose function is to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding a death over which the Coroner has jurisdiction and to determine the Cause and Manner of Death.

Investigative services performed include: forensic death investigations, forensic post mortem examinations, forensic photography, forensic fingerprinting, forensic entomology, forensic anthropology, forensic temperature analysis, forensic child and infant death analysis, forensics bloodstain pattern analysis, forensic odontology and forensic ophthalmology.

Death scene investigations include: natural deaths, accidents, suicides, homicides as well as deaths due to neglect, abuse, terrorism, fire/arson, industrial accidents and mass disasters.

The investigations and rulings of The Lehigh County Coroner's Office and Forensics Center concerning criminal acts or criminal neglect or those that affect public health and safety are the foundation for follow-up actions other investigative agencies.

Introduction

The Coroner's Office serves families by investigating sudden and unexpected deaths to determine the Cause and Manner of Death. Moreover, deaths that occur under violent or suspicious circumstances are what seem to make the top headlines. The Coroner's Office is tasked by Statutes of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to investigate all reportable deaths that occur within the geographical boundaries of the County of Lehigh.

The Lehigh County Coroner's Office staff recognizes that tragedy surrounds a premature death and performs their investigations, in part, to assist the grieving family. A complete and thorough investigation can simply serve to answer the question of what happened, or it may be able to provide insight for siblings and children to be evaluated and assist in dealing with any inherited problems they could potentially face.

Often questions and tasks performed by our investigators seem very irrelevant in the immediate hours following the death of a loved one; however, these can become significantly more important in the following months. The surviving families, friends, and general citizenry can be assured that a thorough investigation is completed by the Lehigh County Coroner's Office. It should be noted that the Lehigh County Coroner's Office annual report does not include *all* deaths occurring in Lehigh County, rather the cases investigated by the Lehigh County Coroner's Office. For a total description of deaths occurring in Lehigh County please consult:

Vital Records, Pennsylvania Department of Health
105 Nesbitt Road
New Castle, PA 16105
(724)-656-3100

OVERVIEW

This annual report is presented in three sections:

- 1) Overview of the Coroner's Office
 - (a) Description
 - (b) Purpose / Statutes
 - (c) Staff

- 2) Total Case Information

- 3) Cause and Manner of Death Statistics
 - (a) Natural
 - (b) Accident
 - (c) Suicide
 - (d) Homicide

Sections 2 & 3 are aimed at presenting data routinely collected by the Coroner's Office. The graphs, charts, and numbers are designed to provide a picture of the investigations the Lehigh County Coroner's Office performs.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CORONER'S OFFICE

The Coroner's Office is an independent, investigative division of the Lehigh County Government. The citizens of Lehigh County fund us through the Office of the Lehigh County Executive and Board of Commissioners.

Under the direction of Coroner Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI, our office provides Medicolegal Death Investigations, Authorization of Autopsies; as needed, and Administrative Support as well as many other family assistance services.

The six basic functions of the Lehigh County Coroner's Office are:

- Determine the Cause and Manner of Death for individuals in a timely fashion.
- Identify the deceased with the highest degree of certainty possible and provide written documentation of same.
- Proper and timely notification of the legal next of kin.
- Prepare, maintain, and safeguard thorough and timely reports regarding our investigations.
- Account for, maintain, and safeguard personal property of the decedent and evidence.
- Provide assistance to families involved in our investigations as applicable.

The Coroner is an elected position, voted by the citizens of Lehigh County; the elected Coroner, Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI, has been with the Coroner's Office since 2006. He is a member of the Pennsylvania State Coroner's Association and the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners. He serves on the Lehigh and Northampton County Child Death Review Team, the Lehigh County Suicide Prevention Task Force, the Lehigh County Elder Abuse Task Force and the Allentown Heroin / Opioid Task Force. Prior to being named Coroner and subsequent election, Coroner Minnich was the First Deputy Coroner under Coroner Scott Grim and prior to working for the Coroner's Office, was a Paramedic.

PURPOSE OF THE CORONER'S OFFICE

The Coroner's Office is an independent investigatory office. We are charged with determining the Cause of Death, as well as the Manner of Death. We receive this directive based upon the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Title 16 § 1218-B. Whereas, the Coroner having a view of the body shall investigate the facts and circumstances concerning deaths which appear to have happened within the county, regardless where the cause thereof may have occurred, for the purposes of determining whether or not an autopsy should be conducted or an inquest thereof should be had in the following cases:

- 1) Sudden deaths not caused by readily recognizable disease, or wherein the cause of death cannot be properly certified by a physician on the basis of prior medical attendance.
- 2) Deaths occurring under suspicious circumstances, including those where alcohol, drugs or other toxic substances may have had a direct bearing on the outcome.
- 3) Deaths occurring as a result of violence or trauma, whether apparently homicidal, suicidal, or accidental.
- 4) Any death in which trauma, chemical injury, drug overdose or reaction to drugs or medication or medical treatment was a primary or secondary, direct or indirect, contributory, aggravating or precipitating cause of death.
- 5) Operative and/or peri-operative deaths in which the death is not readily explainable on the basis of prior disease.

- 6) Any death wherein the body is unidentified or unclaimed.
- 7) Deaths known or suspected as due to contagious disease and constituting a public health hazard.
- 8) Deaths occurring in prison or a penal institution or while in the custody of police.
- 9) Deaths of persons whose bodies are to be cremated, buried at sea or otherwise disposed of so as to be thereafter unavailable for examination.
- 10) A sudden and unexplained infant death.
- 11) Stillbirths

The purpose of the an investigation shall be to determine:

- 1) The cause and manner of death.
- 2) Whether or not there is sufficient reason for the Coroner to believe that the death may have resulted from a criminal act or criminal neglect of a person other than the deceased.

As part of an investigation, the Coroner shall determine the identity of the deceased and notify the next of kin of the deceased.

CORONER ACTIVITY

The staff of the Coroner's Office is involved in a wide variety of activities commensurate with the mission of the office. This includes responding to and investigating deaths at various locations throughout the geographic boundaries of the County, attending postmortem examinations, reviewing the detailed findings in order for the certification of the Cause and Manner of Death, and providing assistance to the families that we serve.

Staff members are well versed in dealing with families and assisting them in their time of need. Some details that the Deputy Coroner / Medicolegal Death Investigator assist families with are; office procedures, release of remains following an investigation, and release of property of the deceased that may have come into the possession of the Office of the Coroner. Additional duties include, reviewing investigative findings with the legal next of kin, and coordinating release of the deceased and/or any materials to the funeral home of the families choosing.

The Coroner's Office staff provides testimony both in court and in depositions. This can be for civil and/or criminal matters. Investigators routinely interact with police officers/investigators, attorneys, laboratory personnel, etc. Staff provides a wide range of services through the entire process of dealing with death and/or crimes related to a death.

Reporting is provided by the Office of the Coroner to Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, and many other government and regulatory agencies. As part of efforts to keep the public safe and informed of the dangers of many items in public use this practice is continued, in hopes that it will make a difference correcting issues with certain products. We cooperate routinely and are actively involved in the Local and State Child Death Reporting Systems, where various members of the present health care systems as well as local health bureau review all children's deaths under the age of 21 to assist in various programs and needs ranging from suicide prevention to pandemic preparedness. Additionally, the staff is routinely active in other entities of death investigation, whether it is for education, guidelines, or resources to assist with current trends in investigation procedures.

The Lehigh County Coroner's Office was the first Coroner's Office in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the second worldwide to have received accreditation from the International

Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME). We have complied with recertification and continue to uphold the highest standards to maintain this accreditation. We will be audited for reaccreditation in 2021.

At the end of 2019, 60% (12/20) of our investigators have attained national certification, with 87% of our full time investigators certified. All of our investigators attend annual training to attain and maintain the continuing education requirements, as well as attaining certification by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania – Office of the Attorney General/Coroner’s Education Board.

As you can tell by our advances, our office is prepared, trained, extremely motivated, and highly educated to meet the needs of this demanding field and serve the deceased and their loved ones in their time of need.

CORONER’S OFFICE STAFF

Administration

Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI

Coroner

Raymond W. Anthony III, D-ABMDI

Chief Deputy Coroner

Daniel A. Buglio, D-ABMDI

First Deputy Coroner

Richard B. Pender, D-ABMDI

Morgue Manager

Marianne Granitz

Secretary

Deputy Coroners

Gabrielle Alcaro, D-ABMDI

Michael Bartholomew, D-ABMDI

Nicolette DeFrank

Jack Fliter, D-ABMDI

Craig Hanzl, D-ABMDI

Dywane Harris

Alexandria Hollkamp

Andrew Kehm, D-ABMDI

Richard Kroon, D-ABMDI

Jason Nicholas, D-ABMDI

Cassandra Schiffner, D-ABMDI

Jackie Seidman, D-ABMDI

Jason Smith

Rachel Tallarico

Edward Zucal, D-ABMDI

Morgue Staff

Maryanne Lutz

Morgue Technician

Jill Gower

X-Ray Technician

Holli Johnson

X-Ray Technician

Heather Newman

X-Ray Technician

Eva Marie Poliquin

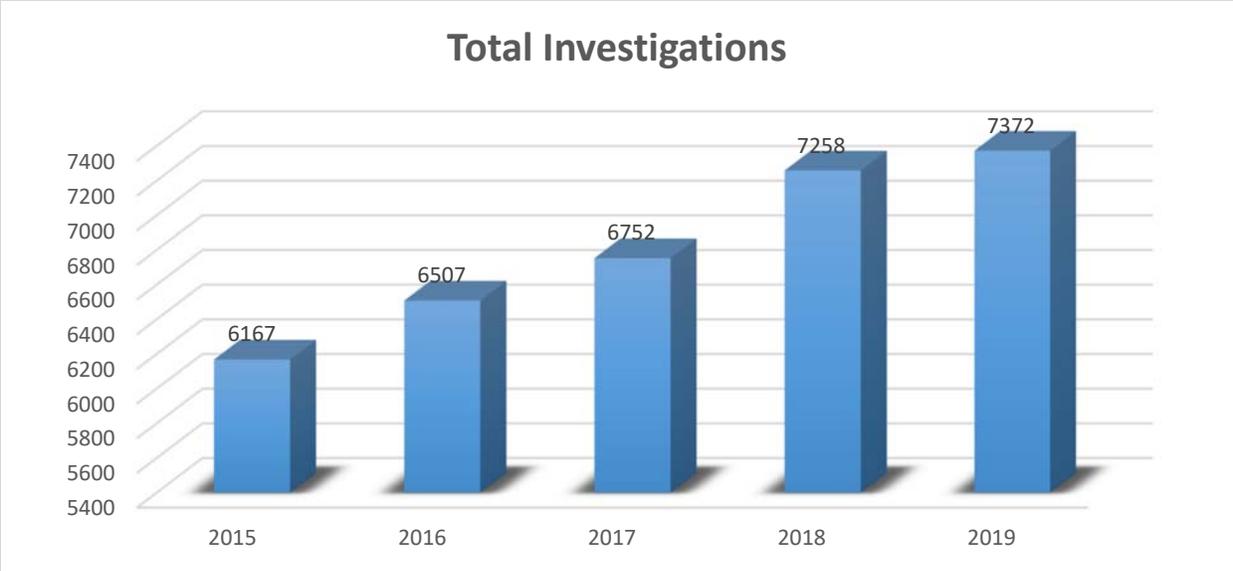
X-Ray Technician

The staff of the Coroner’s Office comes from a diverse background with considerable training and experiences that benefit our investigations. Backgrounds include emergency medical services, law enforcement, fire / emergency services, fire investigation, military and funeral services. In addition, several staff members have received degrees in forensics and/or related fields.

2019 INVESTIGATION DATA

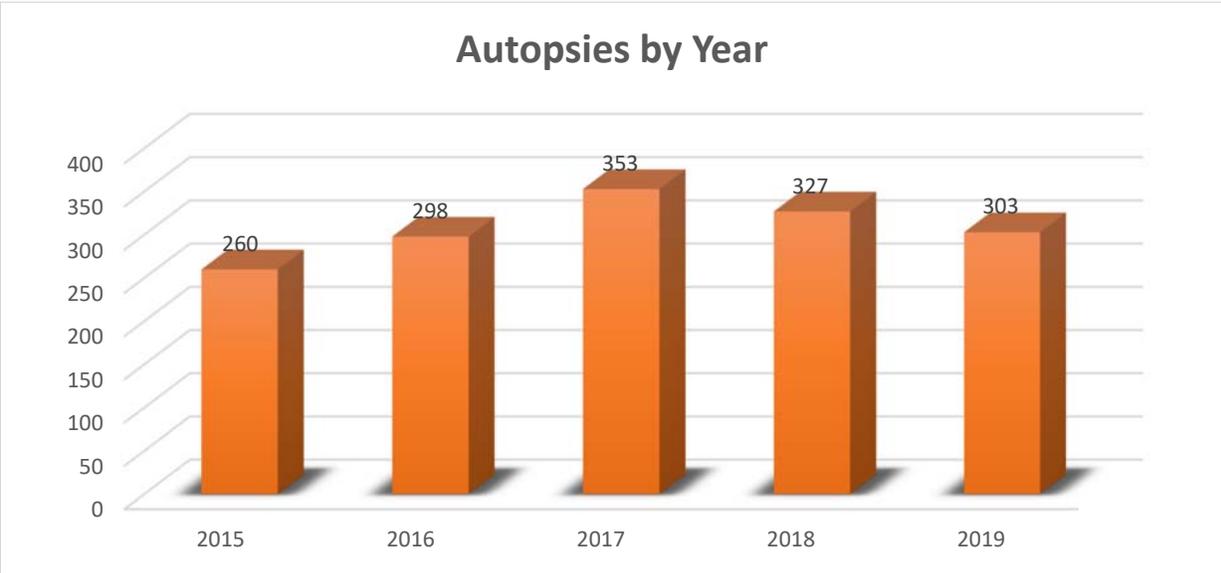
The information provided in this report was compiled on deaths that were reported to the Lehigh County Coroner’s Office and occurred during the calendar year 2019. The report will review routinely collected data in a way to answer questions regarding mortality and public health.

The County of Lehigh encompasses some 345 square miles, with U.S. Census figures showing the current estimated population of Lehigh County at just over 369 thousand people. Please keep in mind that with the two major health systems based in Lehigh County (St. Luke’s Hospital and Lehigh Valley Hospital) our office technically, does not only serve Lehigh County citizens. We are also responsible to investigate the deaths of individuals at either of these two facilities that may have been brought here because of their specialty services; such as critical care, trauma care, burn care, and pediatric care.

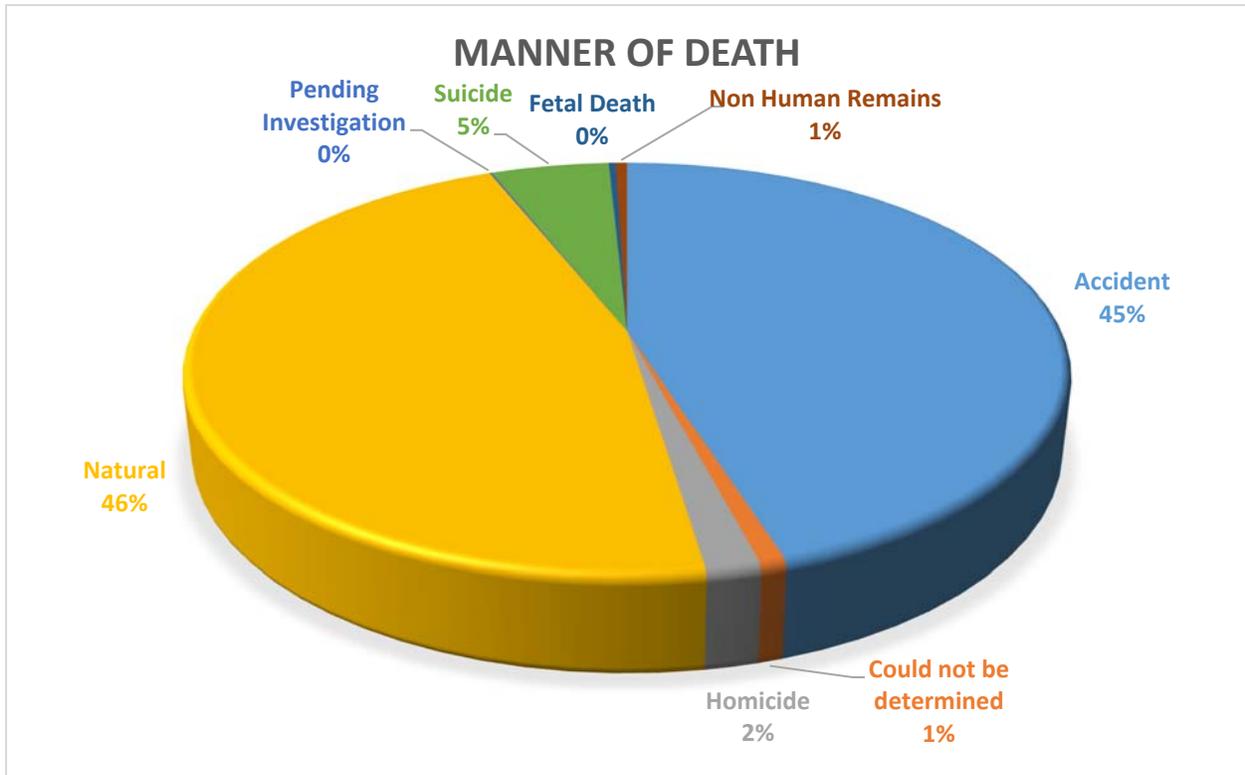


In 2019, our office conducted 7,372 investigations. This is an approximate 1.5% increase from 2018. 1,004 of the death investigations required the Office of the Coroner to provide scene investigations as well as external examinations. Autopsies, in non-criminal cases, were not performed where scene investigation, circumstances, medical history, and external examination provided enough detail for death certification. In the 1,004 deaths, that the office provided detailed investigations of, we autopsied approximately 30% of those cases, or 303 autopsies.

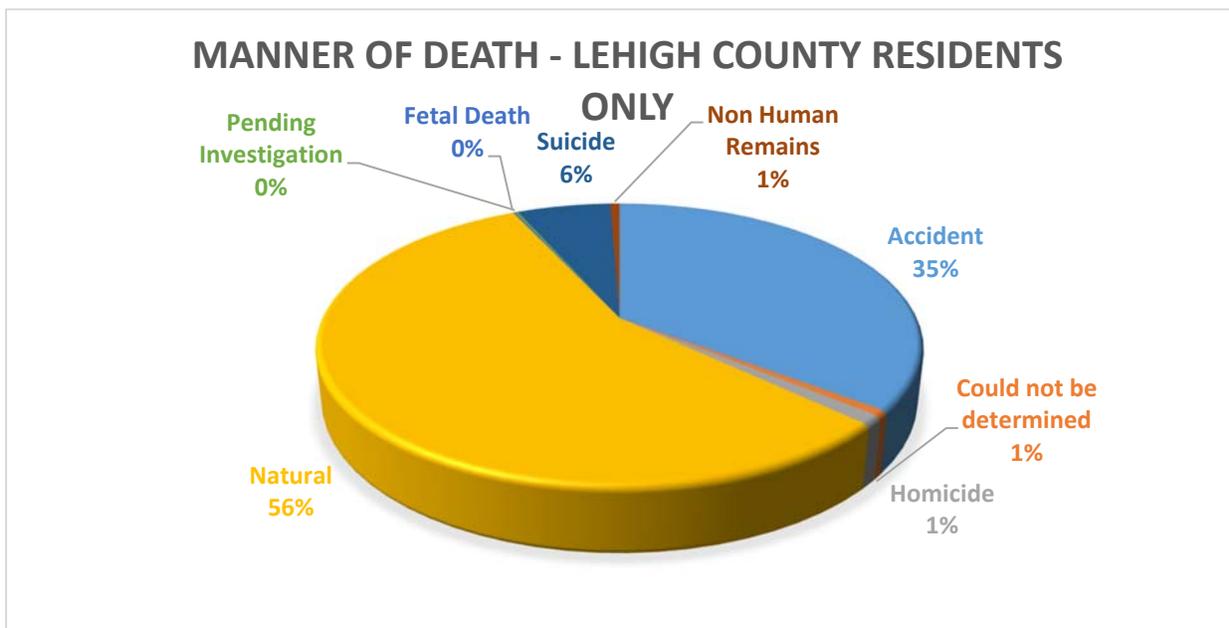
The remaining 6,368 investigations consisted of natural deaths that occurred under medical care but met the criteria of a reportable death (3,337) and authorizations for decedents to be cremated (2,967).



As we moved forward through the following pages of data, this information will be reflective of the 1,004 deaths that we conducted scene investigations / took jurisdiction. The following charts breakdown these deaths by the Manner of Death; a ruling of the Coroner's Office.

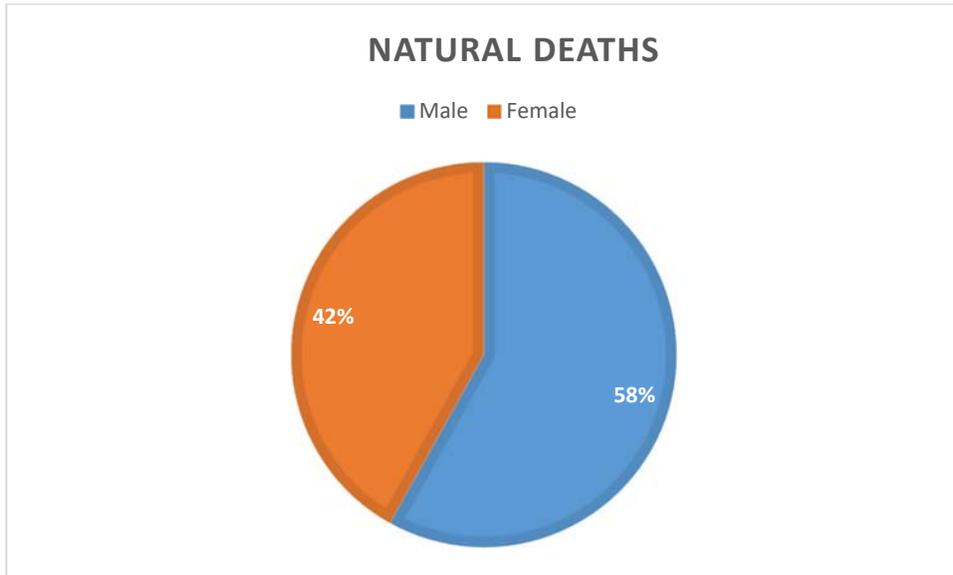


The above chart is inclusive for all deaths, while the chart below provides specific information for Lehigh County residents. You will note a disparity between natural and accidental deaths between the charts. This can be attributed to the number of out of county residents brought to Lehigh County hospitals for advanced care following a traumatic injury or overdose.

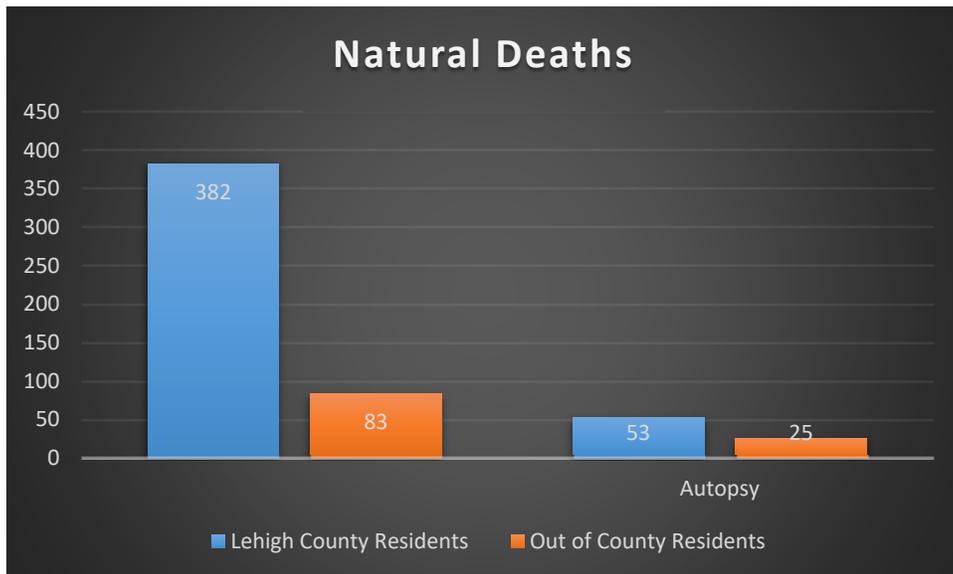


NATURAL DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

A Natural death is a death that is due solely or nearly totally to disease and/or the aging process. In 2019, 46% of our total jurisdictional investigations were ruled to be a Natural death. 56% of these natural deaths were unattended deaths that occurred in the decedent's home (246).

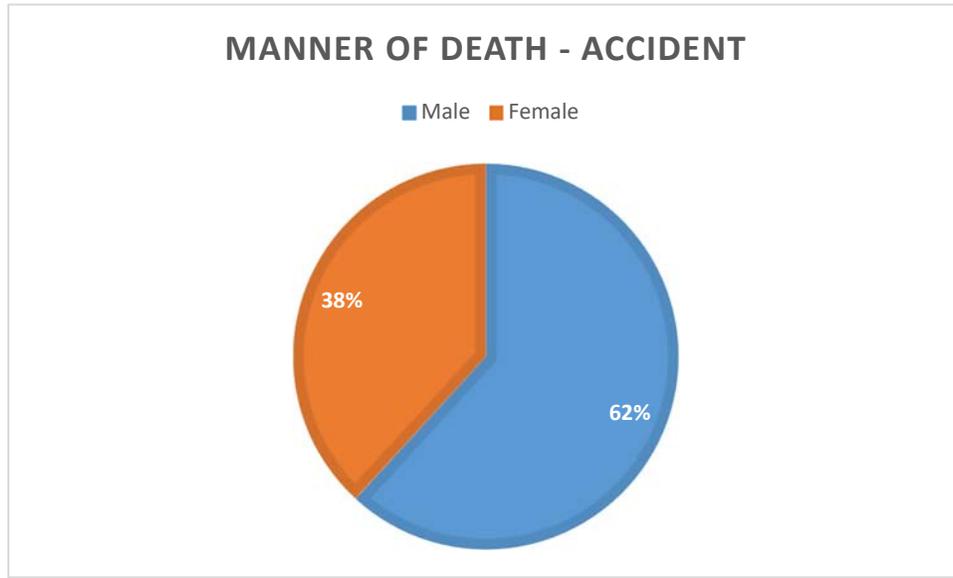


Of the 465 natural deaths, an autopsy was conducted in 17% of these cases.

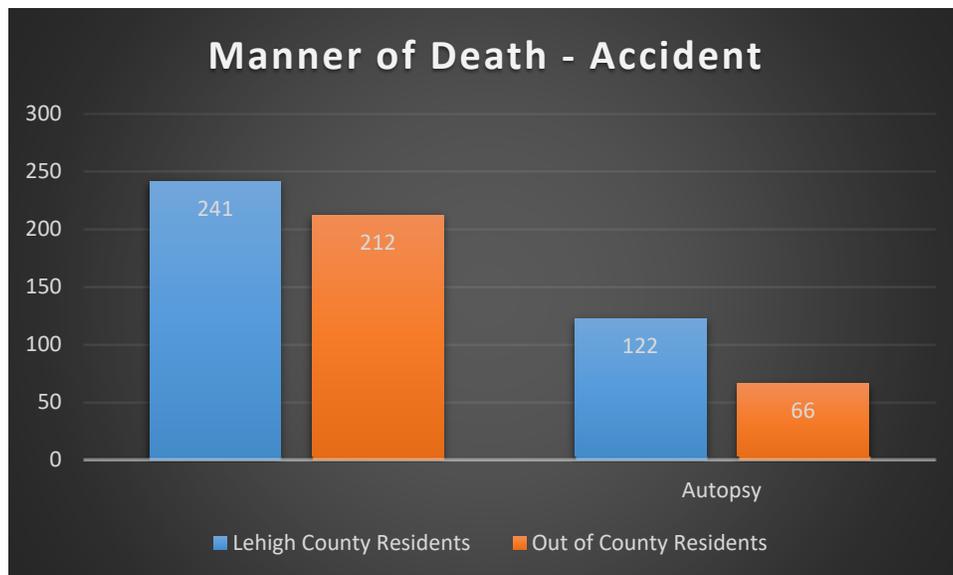


ACCIDENTAL DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

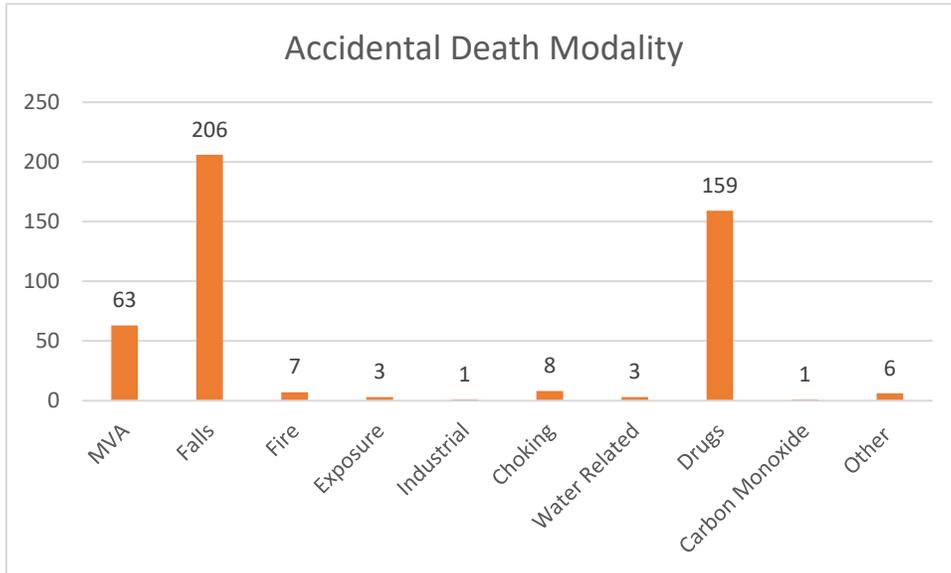
A death determined to be a Manner of Death of Accident is a death in which there is little or no evidence that the injury or poisoning occurred with intent to harm or cause death. In essence, the fatal outcome was unintentional. Deaths with a Manner of Death determined to be Accident are the second highest category of deaths at 45% (453).



Of the 453 accidental deaths, an autopsy was conducted in almost 42% of these cases.

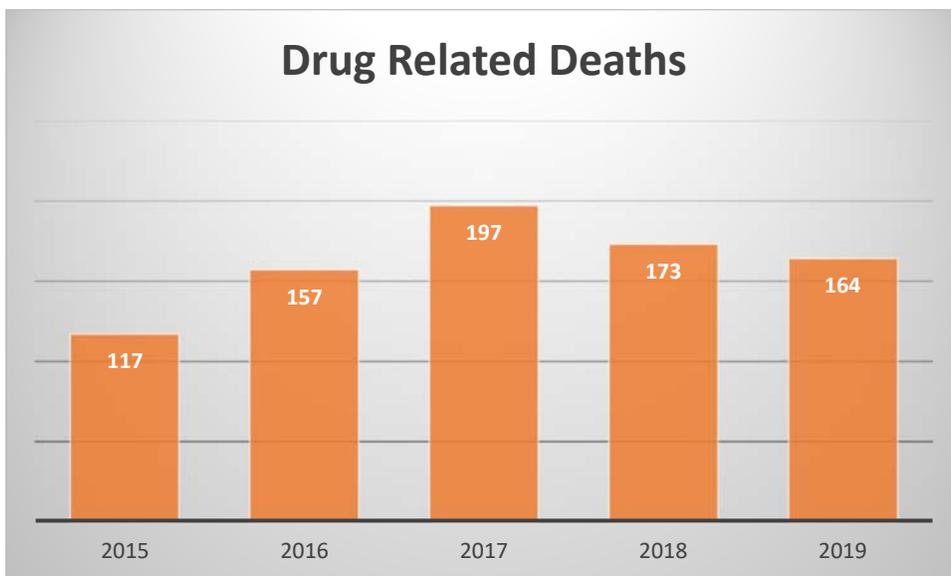


Of these accidental deaths, the following chart reflects the modality by which the death occurred. Deaths relating to injuries sustained in a fall rank the highest and affect our elderly population greatly; in part to their other co-morbidities and medical history. The number of accidental drug related deaths declined again in 2019; a positive sign that efforts of Lehigh County in the opioid crisis are making a difference.



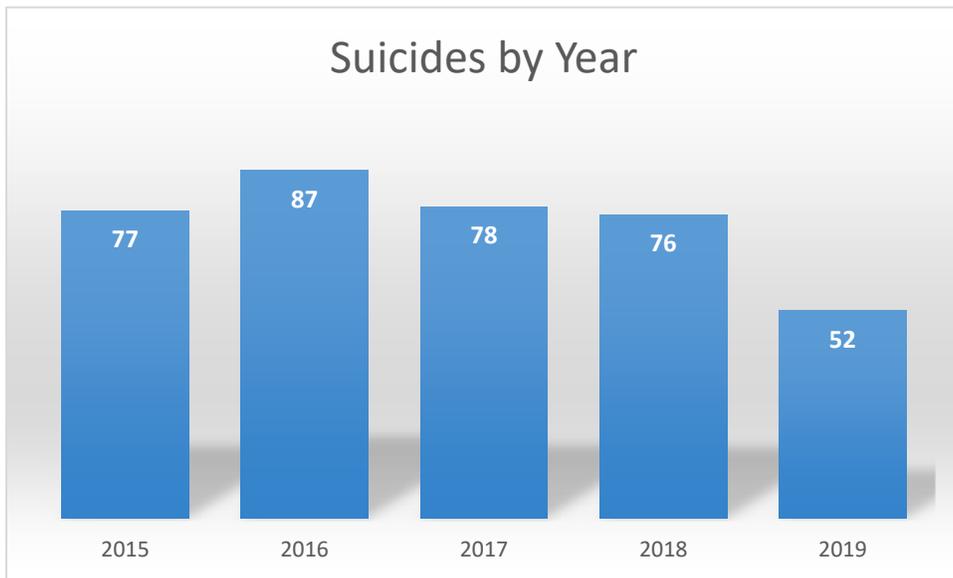
DRUG RELATED DEATHS

The following chart reflects the total number of drug related deaths for 2019, with a comparison to the previous 4 years. These are reflective of all drug related deaths, regardless of the Manner of Death. Partnerships between Lehigh County Drug and Alcohol, Lehigh County Coroner’s Office, Lehigh County District Attorney’s Office, the City of Allentown and law enforcement agencies appear to be making a positive impact on the opioid crisis in Lehigh County, as the total number of drug related deaths declined for the 2nd straight year.

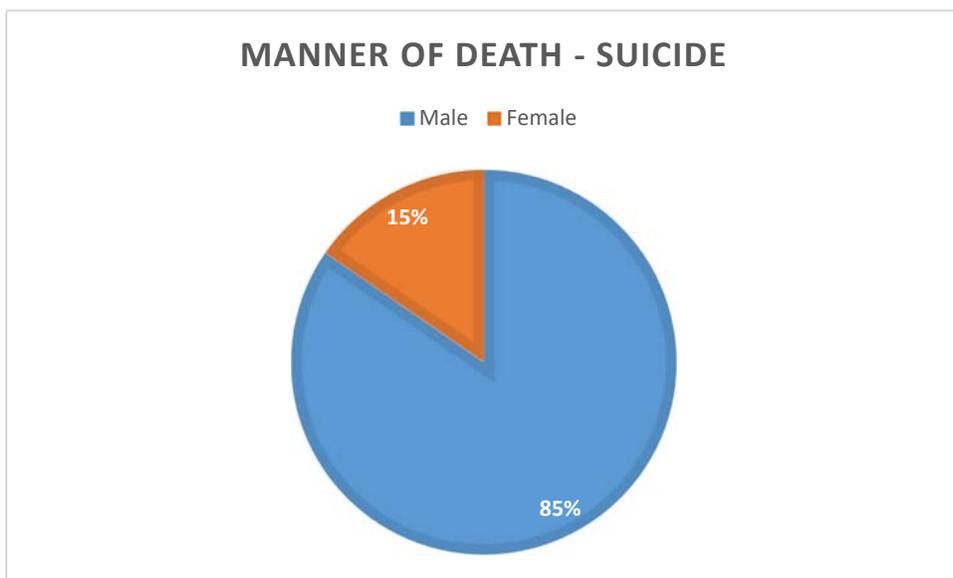


SUICIDE DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

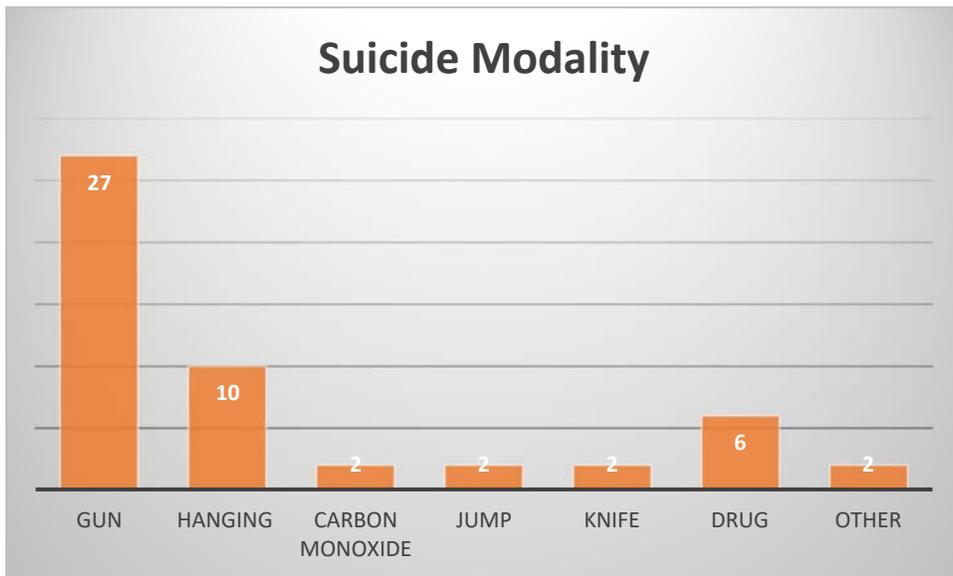
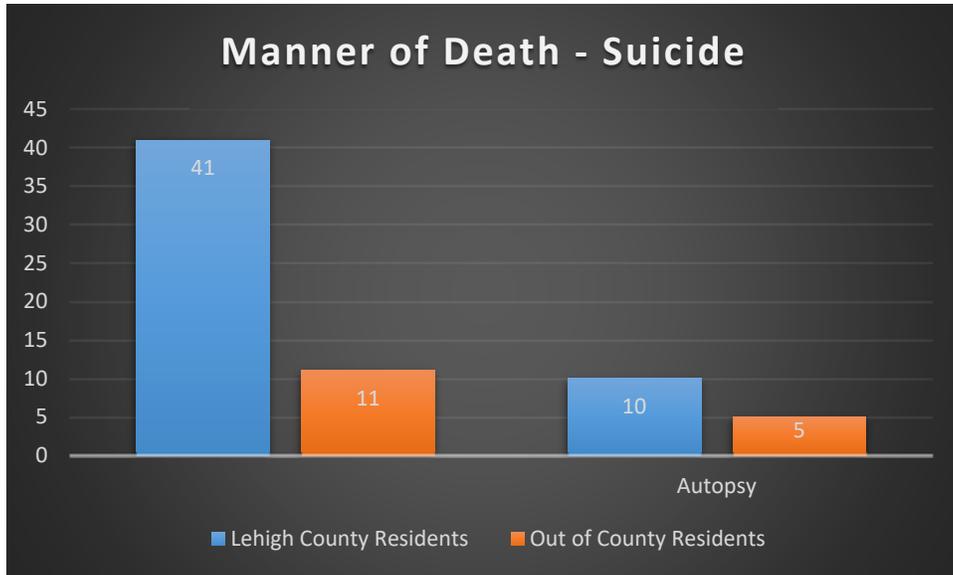
A death ruled to be a Suicide results from an injury or poisoning as a result of an intentional, self-inflicted act committed to do self-harm or cause the death of one's self. The year 2019, brought us the lowest number of suicide deaths in year since 2010. The Lehigh County Suicide Prevention Task Force is actively engaging communities on suicide awareness and prevention. As with other preventable deaths, it is not enough to be responsive, we must be proactive and engage the at-risk communities and population.



Suicide deaths by males overwhelmed suicide deaths by female by more than a 5:1 margin.

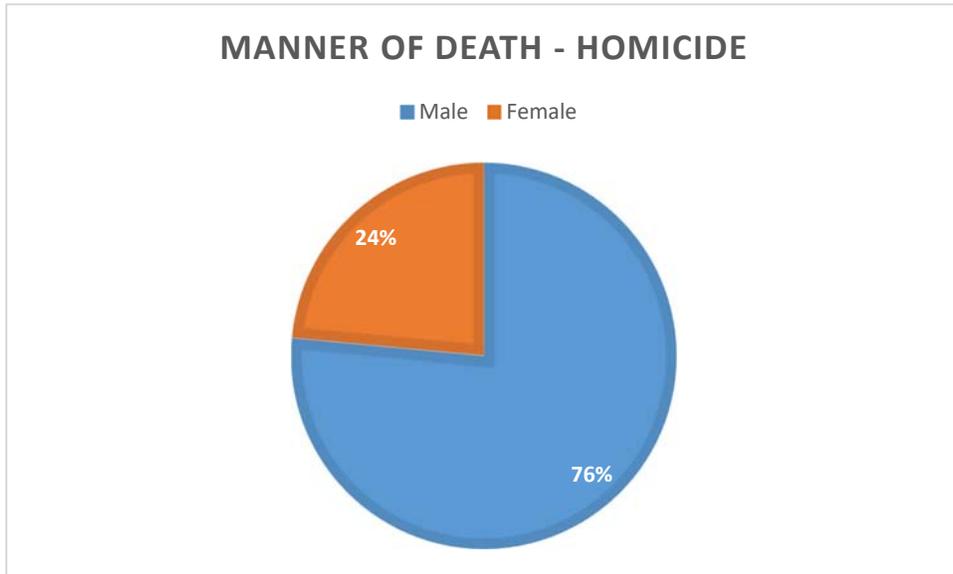


The following charts reflect autopsy and suicide death modality data. An autopsy was conducted in approximately 29% of all suicide deaths in 2019.

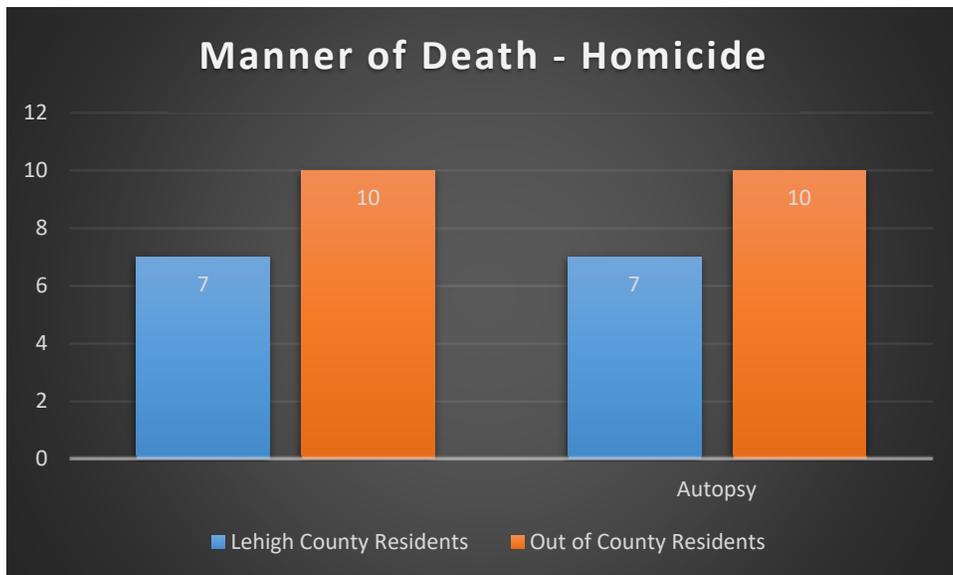


HOMICIDE DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

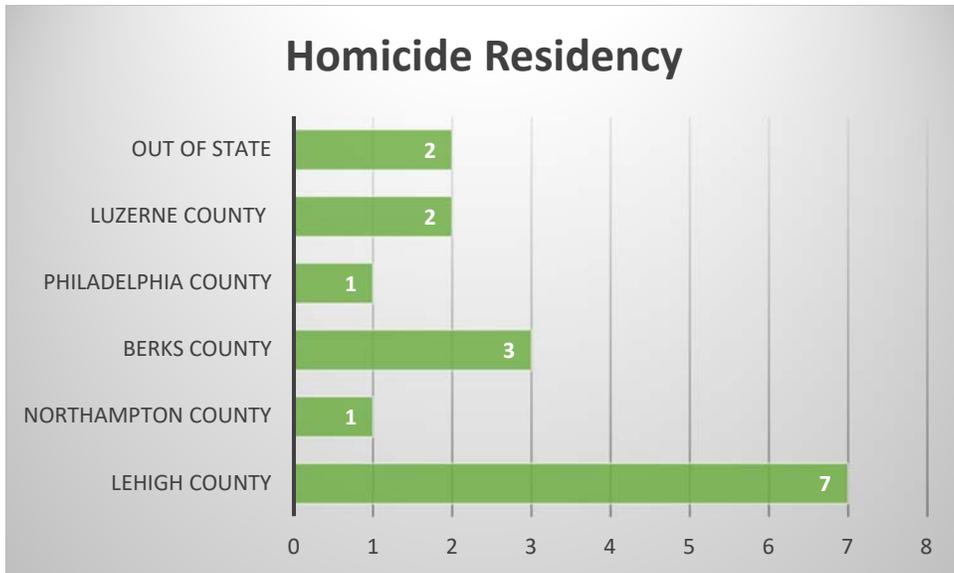
A death ruled to be Homicide is considered death at the hands of another; an act committed by another person to cause fear, harm or death. Intent to cause death is a common element but is not required for classification as homicide. Homicide death investigations are cooperative investigation with law enforcement; with assistance provided by the District Attorney's Office.



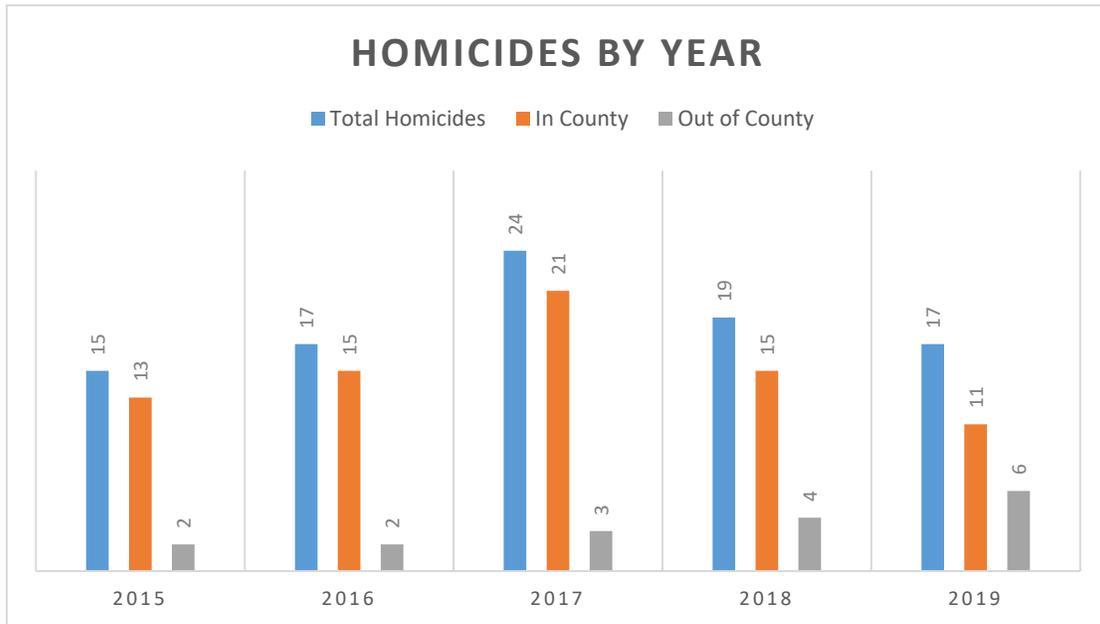
While the Cause of Death is often readily known in a Homicide, an autopsy is performed on each case in order to document injuries and collect additional evidence.



The following reflects the County of residency for each Homicide death investigated by our office in 2019. Homicides occurring outside Lehigh County, often require our Investigators to interact with other law enforcement agencies and can require travel to other counties for court proceedings.



The following is a comparison of homicides by year; in county and out of county.



SUMMARY

In closing, I'd like to thank you for your support of our office throughout 2019. I am fortunate to lead such a dedicated staff that is both rich in experience and potential. If there is any part of this report that you have questions about or would like more information about, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time.

This report is provided to:

- County of Lehigh – Administration
- County of Lehigh – Board of Commissioners
- County of Lehigh – Judiciary
- County of Lehigh – Row Officers
- Various boards and committees

This report is also available on the website of the Office of the Coroner;
www.lehighcounty.org/Departments/Coroner

This report has been provided in electronic format. If you require a printed format, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Respectfully,

Eric D. Minnich, D-ABMDI
Coroner