

LCQ15: Unnatural death and dead body found cases

Following is a question by the Hon Jeremy Tam and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (November 20):

Question:

It has been reported that a number of suspected suicide cases and dead body found cases may be associated with the disturbances arising from opposition to the proposed legislative amendments. Regarding the unnatural death cases (including suicide and murder cases) and dead body found cases handled by the Police since June this year, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the numbers of such cases, and how they compare with those of the same period last year;
- (2) of the following details of each case (set out in a table):
 - (i) the date and time when the case was reported,
 - (ii) the age and gender of the deceased,
 - (iii) the place where the incident happened/the dead body/bodies was/were found,
 - (iv) the date and time when the police officers first arrived at the scene, and the date and time when they left the scene,
 - (v) the number of police officers who were first to arrive at the scene, and the department/police district to which they belong,
 - (vi) whether the deceased was/were certified dead at the scene or upon arrival at the hospital,
 - (vii) whether the case was classified as suicide (if so, the means by which the suicide was committed and reasons for the act, as well as whether any suicide notes were found),
 - (viii) whether there were superficial injuries on the dead body/bodies of the deceased (if so, of the details),
 - (ix) whether the clothes on the dead body/bodies of the deceased were untempered,
 - (x) whether the Police have gained contact with the family members of the deceased,
 - (xi) whether any inquest into the case has been/will be held by a Coroner's Court (if an inquest has already been held, of the finding), and
 - (xii) whether the dead body/bodies of the deceased has/have been buried or cremated (if so, of the date);
- (3) of the respective numbers of cases in which the Police have been unable to (i) ascertain the identity of the deceased and (ii) gain contact with the family members of the deceased;
- (4) of the respective numbers of cases in which:

(a) the deceased was/were suspected of falling from height;
(b) the body/bodies of the deceased was/were found in the sea; and
(c) the body/bodies of the deceased was/were found at other places,
together with a breakdown by whether or not the Police (i) concluded the case
to be suspicious, (ii) carried out any investigation, and (iii) found any
suicide notes;

(5) of the number of suspicious death cases investigation into which by the
Police has been completed; among such cases, the number of those in which the
causes of death of the deceased were suspected to be associated with the
movement of opposition to the proposed legislative amendments;

(6) of the number of cases into which inquests have been held by a Coroner's
Court; among such cases, the respective numbers of those into which inquests
were held (a) pursuant to the decision of the Coroner, (b) upon the
application made by family members of the deceased to the Court of First
Instance and (c) upon the application made by the Secretary for Justice to
the Court of First Instance; the respective numbers of cases into which the
inquest found that the death being (i) a suicide, (ii) an accidental death,
(iii) death by misadventure, (iv) a lawful killing, (v) an unlawfully
killing, and (v) an open verdict;

(7) of the criteria adopted by the Police for determining whether the causes
of death of the deceased were suspicious, and the respective procedure
adopted for handling the bodies of the deceased in the suspicious cases and
the non-suspicious cases; and

(8) whether any common attributes were found among such cases (e.g. the scene
and the date and time of the incident)?

Reply:

President,

Upon receipt of any death report, the Police will investigate the case
from different aspects and will not rule out any possible causes of death
including suicide and murder. The Police will work on various fronts to
collect evidence, including death notes found at scene, the deceased's
conditions before death as learnt from his/her family and friends, medical
records, call records, closed-circuit television footage, etc.

Regarding unnatural death cases, identifiable dead bodies will be
conveyed to public mortuaries. The Police will arrange with the deceased's
families to attend the public mortuary for corpse identification. In
general, a Forensic Pathologist will perform an autopsy, including a
toxicological examination and sampling, on a body in respect of unnatural
death where appropriate. Having completed the autopsy and recorded the
information required, the deceased's family will collect the body and decide
the burial means.

In case of discovery of an unidentifiable dead body, the Police will
conduct a detailed search at the scene where the dead body is found to seek

information which may be related to the death. The Police will also take fingerprints, palm prints and DNA samples from the dead body, and make a record of information on the clothing worn on the dead body in an effort to confirm the identity of the deceased. Besides, the Police will try to contact the next of kin of the deceased by every feasible means.

Meanwhile, a Government Forensic Pathologist will perform an autopsy to ascertain the cause of death. Generally, the dead body will be kept in the public mortuary for one month after the autopsy. If the Police are able to contact the deceased's family before the expiry of the one-month retention period or any such period extended for the investigation into the death, and the dead body is no longer required for the purpose of any investigation, the mortuary will arrange for the family to claim the dead body. If the dead body remains unclaimed after the expiry of the retention period, the mortuary will inform the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), which will then arrange for the burial or cremation of the dead body in accordance with established procedures.

In accordance with section 14(1) of the Coroners Ordinance (Cap 504), where a person dies suddenly, by accident or violence or under suspicious circumstances, a coroner shall hold an inquest into the death. According to section 27 of the Ordinance, the purpose of the inquest shall be to inquire into the cause of and the circumstances connected with the death. For that purpose, the proceedings and evidence at the inquest shall be directed to ascertaining the following matters in so far as they may be ascertained, which include the identity of the dead person; how, when and where the person came by his death; and the conclusion of the coroner/jury concerned as to the death.

Where the coroners consider that further investigation of the death is required, the Police will investigate further and submit a more detailed death investigation report. Upon perusal of the relevant report, and upon considering all the circumstances of the case, the coroner will consider whether to hold an inquest into the death.

The Police maintain their professionalism in investigating each of the death cases and follow it up in a meticulous manner. In fact, as indicated in the Coroners' Report 2018, the coroners recognised the performance of the police investigators and that their standard of conducting investigation into every incident of death was very high, as was their reports.

Our consolidated reply to Hon Jeremy Tam's question is as follows:

(1) to (8) In handling every death case, the Police report to the coroner's court in strict compliance with the law and guidelines. Based on the Police's initial case classification at scene, the number of suicide reports (including person found hanging or felt from height), and dead body found and death before or on arrival to hospitals reports (including cases of uncertain cause of death at scene) received by the Police between June and September 2019, as compared with the same period in the past four years, are listed below:

Between June to September	Suicide (including cases of person found hanging or felt from height) (Note 1)	Dead body found, death before or on arrival to hospitals (including cases of uncertain cause of death at scene) (Note 2)
2019	256	2 537
2018	222	2 226
2017	250	2 407
2016	235	2 161
2015	216	2 159

Note 1: Based on Police's initial classification.

Note 2: Cases may be reclassified upon conclusion of the investigation, including reclassifying them as suicide reports.

As at September 30, 2019, there were 1 162 cases under further investigation and pending submission of more detailed death reports by the Police according to the coroners' instructions.

From June to September 2019, the public mortuaries conveyed 42 unclaimed dead bodies to FEHD for handling, and four of which were subsequently claimed by the deceased's families.

The coroner's court held inquests into 161 cases in 2018 and passed verdicts of death by natural causes in 138 of them. Please refer to Annex for other relevant statistics published in the Coroners' Report. The coroner's court is still collecting relevant statistics for 2019 and will publish them in the first half of 2020.

The Police do not have the other breakdown statistics required in the question.