



## Legislation Text

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### 2021 Annual Coroner's Report

**Presenter:**

Dr. Leon Kelly, El Paso County Coroner

**Summary:**

Dr. Leon Kelly will provide an overview of his 2021 annual report to City Councilmembers.

**Background:**

El Paso County Coroner Dr. Leon Kelly has released the office's 2021 annual report, which is marked by a record-setting number of death investigations and autopsies.

The El Paso County Coroner's Office is responsible for investigating all sudden, unexplained, or traumatic deaths, or deaths that occur in the custody of law enforcement, in the workplace, or that constitute a public health threat.

"This annual report provides the foundational data, concerning our county's worst tragedies, necessary to begin the collaborative work of building a safer and healthier community. The more we know about what went wrong in these cases, the better equipped we are to prevent these same tragedies in the future," said Dr. Kelly.

The report shows that the El Paso County Coroners Office performed more death investigations and autopsies than it has ever seen before. In 2021, the Office performed 7,000 death investigations; a 16% increase over 2020, and 1,444 autopsies; an 11% increase over 2020.

The increase in autopsies were driven by 227 drug-related deaths; a 22% increase from 2020. Drug-related fatalities included more than double the amount of accidental fentanyl deaths, from 47 in 2020 to 99 in 2021, continuing a doubling trend that started in 2017. The average age for fentanyl deaths was 35, 12 years younger than all other drug-related deaths and included five deaths among youth. More than half of fentanyl deaths (55%) had other drugs of abuse in the blood at the time of death, suggesting multi-drug use or clandestine presence of fentanyl in another drug. More than one-third (38%) of all drug deaths had marijuana or metabolites in the body compared to 23% of all deaths investigated.

61 of the autopsies performed were homicides, an 11% increase from 2020. This was due to an increase in firearm-related deaths with 52 recorded in 2021. Six of the deaths occurred in a single mass shooting event. Homicides most frequently occurred in relation to domestic or family violence. Among cases, 58% knew the suspect at the time of death.

Suicides continued a slight decrease for the third straight year with 176 recorded in 2021, which

included a large decrease in youth suicides from 15 in 2020 to four in 2021. 30% of suicides had a known active or prior military duty, a 10% increase from 2020. The average age at death was 44, and 81% of completed suicides were male. Among those investigated, 32% had notes or social media posts indicating suicidal intentions and 62% had a reported history of prior suicidal thoughts.

Deaths among individuals experiencing homelessness decreased by one in 2021 to 78. Accidents made up 62% of deaths among those experiencing homelessness, and more than half (56%) were the result of drug intoxication. Hypothermia made up 15% of accidental deaths and motor vehicle crashes made up 13%. Deaths due to natural disease increased from 309 in 2020 to 398 in 2021, a 28% increase. Cardiovascular deaths increased from 155 in 2020 to 170 in 2021. Chronic alcohol deaths increased from 43 in 2020 to 64 in 2021. COVID-19 deaths investigated by the Coroner's Office increased from 13 in 2020 to 54 in 2021. However, most COVID-19-related deaths occur in health care settings and are not considered sudden or unexpected that would result in a death investigation by the Coroner's Office.

While the numbers delineated in the report represent a somber milestone, the Coroner's Office said that 35 donors provided 120 life-saving organs to those on the register.

**Previous Council Action:**

N/A

**Financial Implications:**

N/A

**City Council Appointed Board/Commission/Committee Recommendation:**

N/A

**Stakeholder Process:**

N/A

**Alternatives:**

N/A

**Proposed Motion:**

N/A

N/A