



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Police de facto part of mental health system: death review panel

VICTORIA – A death review panel examining the deaths of people who died during or within 24 hours following contact with police in B.C. says police are a de facto part of the mental health system and that the role of policing should be incorporated into the provincial mental health strategy, highlighting that more assessment and training opportunities exist.

In the report “Opportunities for Different Outcomes – Police: A crucial component of B.C.’s mental health system”, three promising areas to reduce deaths and improve public safety were identified:

- Improve co-ordination between health services and police who encounter persons experiencing a mental health crisis;
- Increase access to mental health assessment, and improve referrals to services for persons experiencing other life stressors; and
- Utilize findings from police encounters with the public to inform ongoing police professional development.

This review of 127 deaths between 2013 and 2017 found that:

- Mental health issues, chronic alcohol use or substance use were present in the lives of many decedents. These factors were the primary reason police were called by the public, friends and family members of the persons who died;
- More than half of the decedents exhibited mental health symptoms at the time of police contact;
- Many of these deaths were of persons living in rural or small communities; and
- Indigenous persons in B.C. account for 6% of the population; in this review 20% of deaths were among Indigenous peoples.

The death review panel, chaired by Michael Egilson, included 19 panel experts who are professionals with expertise in policing, policing oversight, public health, health services, mental health and addictions, and Indigenous health. The recommendations from the panel are aimed at preventing death in similar circumstances and improving public safety overall.

“Police in B.C. are responding to about 74,000 incidents annually involving mental health, and 18,000 of those fall under the Mental Health Act,” Egilson said. “These are situations where police officers de-escalate crisis situations and assess, triage and transport persons for emergency care to health services or to cells.

“We need to drive home the point that the police have become part of the mental health system and that their role needs to be acknowledged, supported and incorporated into the larger provincial mental health and addictions strategy.”

Learn More:

Opportunities for Different Outcomes – Police: A crucial component of B.C.'s mental health system: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/policeencountersdrp.pdf>.

Death review panels: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/death/coroners-service/death-review-panel>

A backgrounder follows.

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BACKGROUND

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Facts about death review panel report

- Every year, approximately 25 persons die during or within 24 hours of a police encounter. Police officers have more than 400,000 encounters with civilians each year for criminal-code or traffic-related offences. The vast majority of police interactions are resolved without incident.
- Of the 127 deaths, 84% were male and 61% experienced challenges related to illicit drug use.
- More than two-thirds of these deaths involved a mental health issue and in more than half of the deaths, decedents exhibited mental health symptoms during contact with police.
- Police in B.C. respond to more than 74,000 calls related to mental health issues annually.
- Persons with mental health and substance use concerns are increasingly interfacing with police agencies. The high numbers of these encounters have, by default, made policing part of the mental health system in B.C. Persons in crisis are often unpredictable and police officers need more support when engaging with persons experiencing mental health issues.
- One of the BC Coroners Service's most important responsibilities is the advancement of recommendations aimed at preventing deaths in similar circumstances. One of the ways the BC Coroners Service makes recommendations is through death review panels, which bring together experts across disciplines to review a group of deaths in aggregate to identify opportunities for intervention to prevent death and improve public safety. The purpose of this death review panel was to review deaths that occurred during or within 24 hours of an encounter with the police; and
- The review includes 127 deaths by suicide, accidental injuries, illicit drug overdoses and natural causes, as well as deaths attributed to police use of force. The following classifications of deaths were made:
 - 56 were suicides, accounting for 44% of the deaths reviewed;
 - 40 were accidental, including 24 classified as unintentional poisonings (alcohol or illicit drug related deaths);
 - Seven were natural; and
 - 21 were deaths attributable to police use of force and three were deaths from injuries by others.

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