

HENNEPIN COUNTY  
MINNESOTA

# Medical Examiner Annual Report for 2020



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# Hennepin County Medical Examiner

## Mission

To investigate and determine cause and manner of death in all cases within the jurisdiction of the office in compliance with Minnesota statutes, and to advance the knowledge of death investigative professionals and partnering agencies through training and education to improve health, safety and quality of life.

## Vision

The Medical Examiner envisions a standard of excellence whereby death investigative professionals conduct thorough, accurate death investigations by harnessing innovative technologies and solutions in a regional office that serves a diverse population with timely, accurate and compassionate investigations run by professional staff equipped with state-of-the-art technology and resources.

# Welcome

On behalf of the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office, I want to thank you for reading our 2020 Annual Report. This report reflects a statistical breakdown of the total caseload of our three-county service area — Hennepin, Dakota and Scott counties — and includes referral autopsies from additional partners throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office is accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners and administers an Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education approved fellowship program in forensic pathology.

In 2020, we began construction on the new Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Facility. We worked with Knutson Construction and our facilities staff to build a space that will serve the residents of our jurisdiction for the next 50 years. We created ergonomic workspaces filled with light to retain our valuable staff and attract the talent we need. We installed bird-safe glazing on the windows to protect the natural wildlife that surrounds our new facility. In readying our former facility for our move, we digitized old records and recycled obsolete equipment.

We accomplished a great deal in 2020, never wavering in our 24/7/365 mission while managing a response to the global COVID pandemic. We have a special focus on how our work changed during the pandemic in this report.

I invite you to learn more about our office as highlighted in the pages that follow.



Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Baker M.D.' with a stylized flourish.

Andrew Baker, M.D.

Chief Medical Examiner of  
Hennepin, Dakota and Scott counties



# Jurisdiction Map

The Hennepin County Medical Examiner's Office has jurisdiction to investigate all sudden or unexpected deaths in Hennepin, Dakota and Scott counties.

## Population by county (2020)

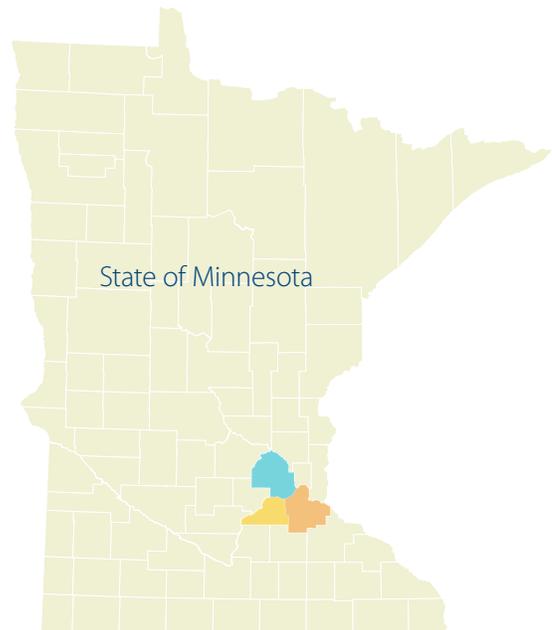
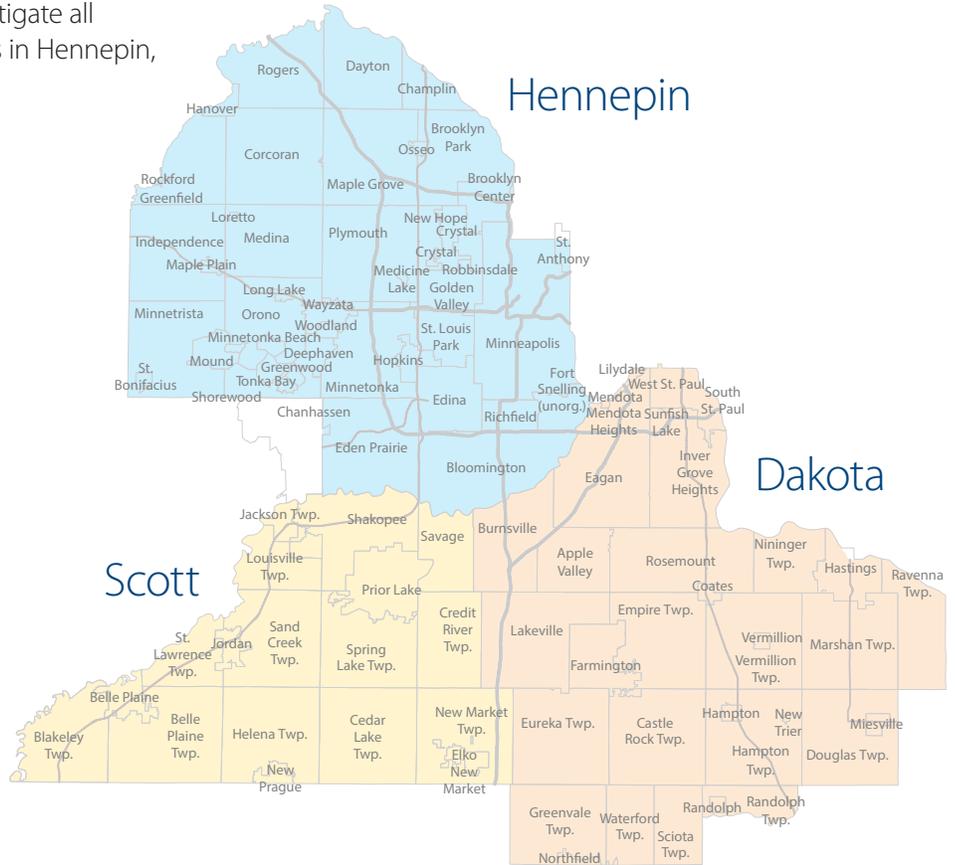
- Hennepin 1,281,565
- Dakota 439,882
- Scott 150,928

## Area by county in square miles

- Hennepin 607
- Dakota 587
- Scott 368

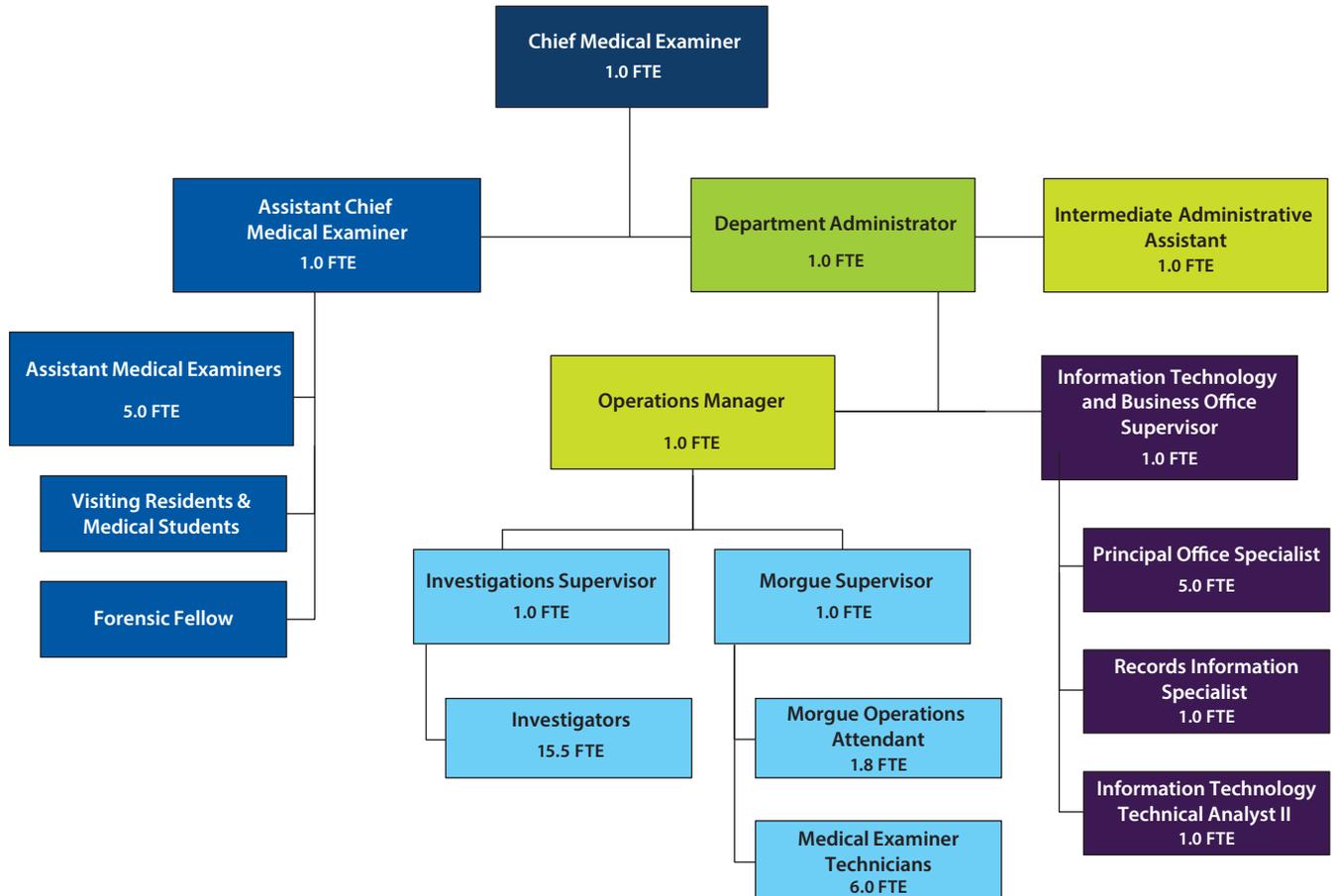
## Number of cities by county

- Hennepin**  
45 cities and 1 unorganized territory (Fort Snelling)
- Dakota**  
21 cities and multiple townships and unincorporated communities
- Scott**  
7 cities and multiple townships and unincorporated communities



Andrew M. Baker, M.D., Chief Medical Examiner of Hennepin, Dakota and Scott counties.

# Organizational Chart



2020

## 43.3 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) positions

Note: Students and limited duration are not included in the total FTE count.

## Medical Examiner's Office Adopted Budget — 2020

The Medical Examiner is responsible for investigation of all known or suspected homicides, suicides, accidental deaths, drug-related deaths, medically unattended deaths, and deaths which might constitute a threat to public health and safety that occur under the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's jurisdiction including Hennepin, Dakota and Scott counties. The office provides autopsy services for other jurisdictions on a referral basis and is responsible for cremation services. The Medical Examiner harnesses innovative technologies and solutions in a regional office that services a diverse population with timely, accurate, and compassionate investigations run by professional staff equipped with state-of-the-art technology and resources.

Budget Summary	2018 Actual	2019 Budget	2020 Budget
Budgeted Property Tax Requirement*	\$4,281,474	\$4,979,129	\$5,242,738
Other Taxes	0	0	0
Federal	0	0	0
State	0	0	0
Local	1,548,216	1,564,298	1,736,226
Investment Earnings	0	0	0
Fees for Services	121,975	121,975	121,975
Fines and Forfeitures	0	0	0
Licenses and Permits	385,123	410,000	410,000
Other Revenue	189,630	235,000	225,000
Other Financing	0	0	0
<b>Total Revenues</b>	<b>\$6,526,418</b>	<b>\$7,310,402</b>	<b>\$7,735,939</b>
Personal Services	\$5,196,550	\$5,811,819	\$5,903,170
Commodities	78,279	94,700	90,700
Services	1,310,281	1,338,783	1,689,469
Public Aid Assistance	0	0	0
Capital Outlay	0	0	0
Other Charges	23,899	65,100	52,600
Grants	0	0	0
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$6,609,009</b>	<b>\$7,310,402</b>	<b>\$7,735,939</b>
<b>Budgeted Positions (Full-Time Equivalents)</b>	<b>38.0</b>	<b>41.1</b>	<b>42.3</b>

\*Reflects the adjusted property tax requirement budget, not actual property tax collections.

# Life at the Medical Examiner's Office during the COVID-19 pandemic

The onset of the global COVID pandemic brought profound changes to the work of the Medical Examiner (ME) in 2020. Although most COVID deaths did not fall under ME jurisdiction — since the deaths were natural and often occurred in hospitals and nursing homes — the ME rapidly expanded its body storage capacity due to the ME's dual function as the morgue for Hennepin HealthCare (HHC). With expertise in mass fatality management, ME staff provided critical input to regional and state decision-makers as models for the number of expected fatalities continued to evolve in the spring and summer of 2020.

Beginning on March 16, 2020, all ME staff capable of working remotely were sent home. All in-house staff — physicians, investigators, autopsy technicians — were required to socially distance and mask within the ME building. Medical examiner investigators, who never stopped going into the field to work with families and assess death scenes, were provided personal protective equipment (PPE) items including hospital scrubs, eye protection, disposable gowns, and N-95 masks — the latter in short supply in the early days of the pandemic. To conserve as many N-95 masks as possible, all body processing and autopsy functions in the ME building were done by technicians and physicians wearing powered air purifying respirators (PAPRs). The days of simple surgical masks were over.

From the first days of the pandemic, the ME partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) to screen for COVID-related deaths. Each day, ME physicians and investigators pored over all newly reported deaths, referring any potential COVID deaths to MDH. In many cases, MDH was able to deploy a staff member to the hospital morgue or the funeral home to collect a postmortem COVID swab and confirm the diagnosis.



**Physician in full PPE and PAPR, collecting a COVID swab**

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MDH also provided all COVID testing for ME swabs collected during autopsies of suspected COVID cases. Though thankfully never implemented, the ME developed numerous plans and protocols in the event that the morgue was overwhelmed with fatalities, and/or staff attrition reached critical levels due to illness.

# Construction of the new Medical Examiner's Facility begins 2020

On March 4, 2020 — less than two weeks before the unforeseen pandemic lockdown coming later that month — the Medical Examiner (ME) held a construction kick-off meeting with its partnering county departments, general contractor Knutson Construction, architectural firm Leo A Daly, and other partners and subcontractors. After nearly seven years of pre-planning, touring other facilities, securing funding, planning, and design, it was time to break ground and bring our vision to reality. Designed by Leo A Daly, with laboratory/autopsy wing design by specialists at MWL Architects, the ME was poised to embark on building one of the most aesthetic, ergonomic, environmentally friendly, and technologically sophisticated ME facilities in the world.

Nestled onto the southwest corner of a parcel of greenspace in Minnetonka — site of former County Home School cottages — the new ME office was designed to simultaneously blend in with, and flood the facility with views of, the surrounding wetlands, hills, trees, and wildlife. Funded by Hennepin, Dakota and Scott counties, with bonding monies from the state of Minnesota, the building was designed to meet all Minnesota's sustainable building guidelines and energy standards. Substantial completion was targeted for November of 2021, with ME move-in occurring late 2021 and operations commencing January of 2022.



April 27, 2020



December 31, 2020

# Functions of the Medical Examiner

## Receiving death reports

When a reportable death occurs, the Medical Examiner's Office gathers pertinent data, including the person's name, address, age, sex, race, marital status, next of kin, a summary of medical history, physical findings, and name of last attending physician.

## Preserving evidence

At the location of the death, the Medical Examiner Investigator takes custody and arranges transport of the body, personal property, and associated evidence.

## Deciding jurisdiction

The Medical Examiner decides who has jurisdiction to investigate the death, and reserves the right to accept or decline jurisdiction. If the person died from natural causes and has seen an attending physician within 120 days, the office usually declines jurisdiction. If the office accepts jurisdiction, or if the death is due in part to an injury, the Medical Examiner must sign the death certificate.

## Facilitating tissue, eye, and organ donation

The Medical Examiner must receive notification and provide authorization before any agency arranges to recover tissues, eyes, or organs.

## Performing autopsies

The Medical Examiner determines whether state interest compels an autopsy to answer medical and legal questions in the public interest, to protect public health, or to address a question of law. Families have the right under state law to object to an autopsy under some circumstances.

## Determining cause and manner of death

The Medical Examiner assists families, law enforcement agencies, and the legal system by determining a scientifically unbiased and logical cause and manner of death. In many cases, family members benefit from the information derived from a death investigation and autopsy.

## Managing public and private information

Basic demographic information and the cause and manner of death are matters of public record under Minnesota law (Minnesota Statute §13.83). The Medical Examiner treats the rest of the information as confidential and gives it the same discretion as a medical record.

In homicide cases, the Medical Examiner provides information and autopsy reports only to the law enforcement agencies investigating the death and to the prosecutor in the county where the homicide occurred.

# Types of Reportable Cases

Deaths that meet certain criteria in Hennepin, Dakota or Scott County must be reported, including all sudden or unexpected deaths and all deaths that may be due entirely, or in part, to any factor other than natural disease. These include:

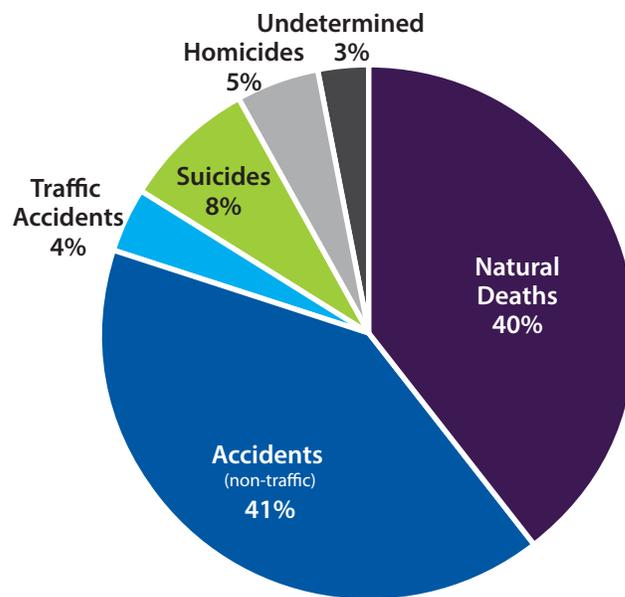
1. Unnatural deaths, including violent deaths arising from homicide, suicide, or accident;
2. Deaths due to a fire or associated with burns or chemical, electrical, or radiation injury;
3. Unexplained or unexpected perinatal and postpartum maternal deaths;
4. Deaths under suspicious, unusual, or unexpected circumstances;
5. Deaths of people whose bodies are to be cremated or otherwise disposed of in such a manner that the bodies will later be unavailable for examination;
6. Deaths of inmates of public institutions and people in custody of law enforcement officers, who have not been hospitalized primarily for organic disease;
7. Deaths that occur during, in association with, or as the result of diagnostic, therapeutic, or anesthetic procedures [these include operating room deaths];
8. Deaths due to culpable neglect;
9. Stillbirths of 20 weeks or longer gestation, not attended by a physician;
10. Sudden deaths of people not affected by recognizable disease;
11. Unexpected deaths notwithstanding a history of underlying disease;
12. Deaths in which a fracture of a major bone such as a femur, humerus, or tibia has occurred within the past six months;
13. Deaths not attended by a physician, occurring outside of a licensed health care facility or licensed residential hospice program;
14. Deaths of people not seen by their physician within the past 120 days;
15. Deaths occurring in an emergency department;
16. Stillbirths or deaths of newborn infants in which there has been maternal use of or exposure to unprescribed controlled substances, including street drugs, or in which there is history or evidence of maternal trauma;
17. Unexpected deaths of children;
18. Solid organ donors;
19. Unidentified bodies;
20. Skeletonized remains;
21. Deaths occurring within 24 hours of arrival at a health care facility, if death is unexpected;
22. Deaths associated with the decedent's employment;
23. Deaths of nonregistered hospice patients or patients in unlicensed hospice programs; and
24. Deaths attributable to acts of terrorism.

## 2020 Aggregate Data: Total, Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties:

	Total	Hennepin	Dakota	Scott	Referral
<b>Total Cases</b>	<b>9,513</b>	<b>7,152</b>	<b>1,812</b>	<b>496</b>	<b>53</b>
Total Case Percentage	100%	75.2%	19.0%	5.2%	0.6%
Jurisdiction Accepted	2,571	2,088	359	124	0
Jurisdiction Declined	6,472	4,657	1,447	368	0
<b>Jurisdiction Accepted</b>	<b>2,571</b>	<b>2,088</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>124</b>	
Natural Deaths	1,018	797	168	53	
Accidents (non-traffic)	1,062	893	122	47	
Traffic Accidents	90	77	9	4	
Suicides	208	153	40	15	
Homicides	118	110	8	0	
Undetermined	75	58	12	5	
<b>Total Medical Examiner Autopsies</b>	<b>1,437</b>	<b>1,118</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>72</b>	
HCME Autopsies (not including HCMC autopsies)	1,343	1,068	204	71	
Autopsies at Other Institutions (JA cases)	7	5	1	1	
Partial Autopsies (not including HCMC autopsies)	16	14	2	0	
External Examinations	41	36	4	1	
HCME-HCMC Inpatient Autopsies	65	65	0	0	
HCME-HCMC ER Autopsies	82	82	0	0	
<b>Total Donations</b>	<b>716</b>	<b>497</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>61</b>	
Eyes	511	350	113	43	
Tissue/Bone (ME & hospital referred)	155	98	34	18	
Organs	16	16	0	0	
Scene Visits by Investigators	1,482	1,137	251	94	
Cremations Approved	11,507	9,135	1,827	545	
Subpoenas Answered	102	98	2	1	
Bodies Transported	2,633	2,086	359	123	
Hospice Deaths	5,113	3,592	1,225	296	

## Jurisdiction Accepted Cases by Manner of Death: Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties 2020

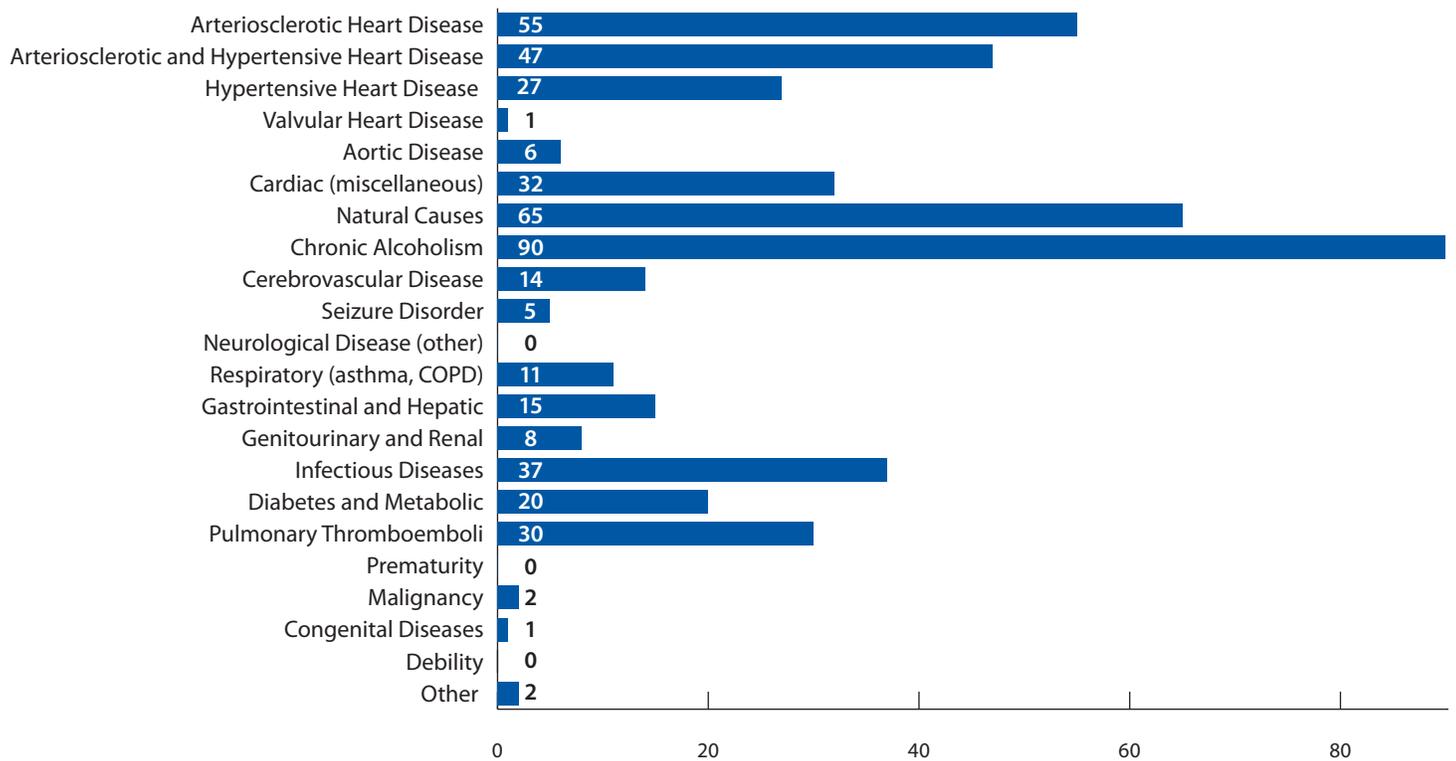
	Hennepin		Dakota		Scott		Total
	total	by %	total	by %	total	by %	
Jurisdiction Accepted	2,088	81%	359	14%	124	5%	2,571
Natural Deaths	797	78%	168	17%	53	5%	1,018
Accidents (non-traffic)	893	84%	122	11%	47	4%	1,062
Traffic Accidents	77	86%	9	10%	4	4%	90
Suicides	153	74%	40	19%	15	7%	208
Homicides	110	93%	8	7%	0	0%	118
Undetermined	58	77%	12	16%	5	7%	75



## Natural Deaths: Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties 2020

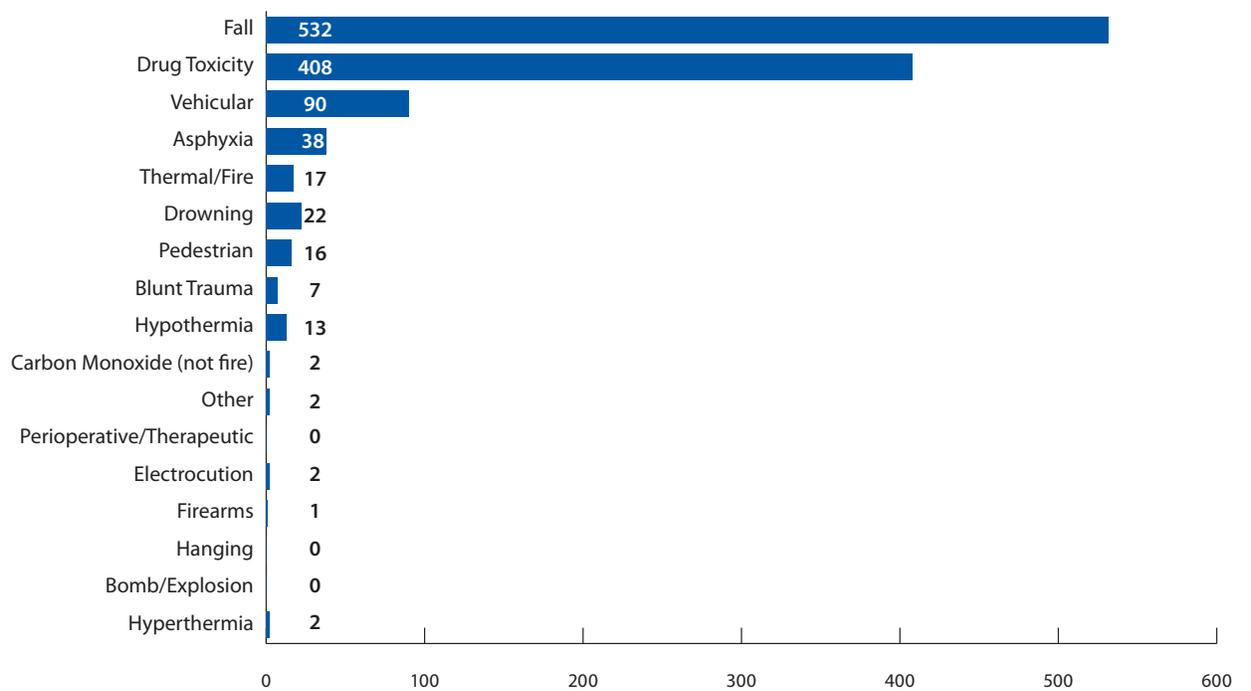
	Exam (full or partial)			No Exam			Total (Exam + No Exam)			Total
	Hennepin	Dakota	Scott	Hennepin	Dakota	Scott	Hennepin	Dakota	Scott	
Arteriosclerotic Heart Disease	41	11	3	5	0	1	46	11	4	61
Arteriosclerotic and Hypertensive Heart Disease	37	8	2	2	0	0	39	8	2	49
Hypertensive Heart Disease	19	5	3	0	1	0	19	6	3	28
Valvular Heart Disease	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Aortic Disease	6	0	0	1	0	0	7	0	0	7
Cardiac (miscellaneous)	18	10	4	4	1	0	22	11	4	37
Natural Causes	49	15	1	370	70	25	419	85	26	530
Chronic Alcoholism	69	18	3	9	1	0	78	19	3	100
Cerebrovascular Disease	12	2	0	9	1	1	21	3	1	25
Seizure Disorder	4	1	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	5
Neurological Disease (other)	0	0	0	5	2	0	5	2	0	7
Respiratory (asthma, COPD)	9	2	0	2	0	0	11	2	0	13
Gastrointestinal and Hepatic	10	3	2	2	0	1	12	3	3	18
Genitourinary and Renal	6	2	0	1	0	0	7	2	0	9
Infectious Diseases	31	3	3	17	1	1	48	4	4	56
Diabetes and Metabolic	18	1	1	1	2	1	19	3	2	24
Pulmonary Thromboemboli	22	7	1	1	0	0	23	7	1	31
Prematurity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Malignancy	2	0	0	10	1	0	12	1	0	13
Congenital Diseases	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	2
Debility	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>797</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>1,018</b>

## Natural Deaths — Full or Partial Exam: Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties 2020



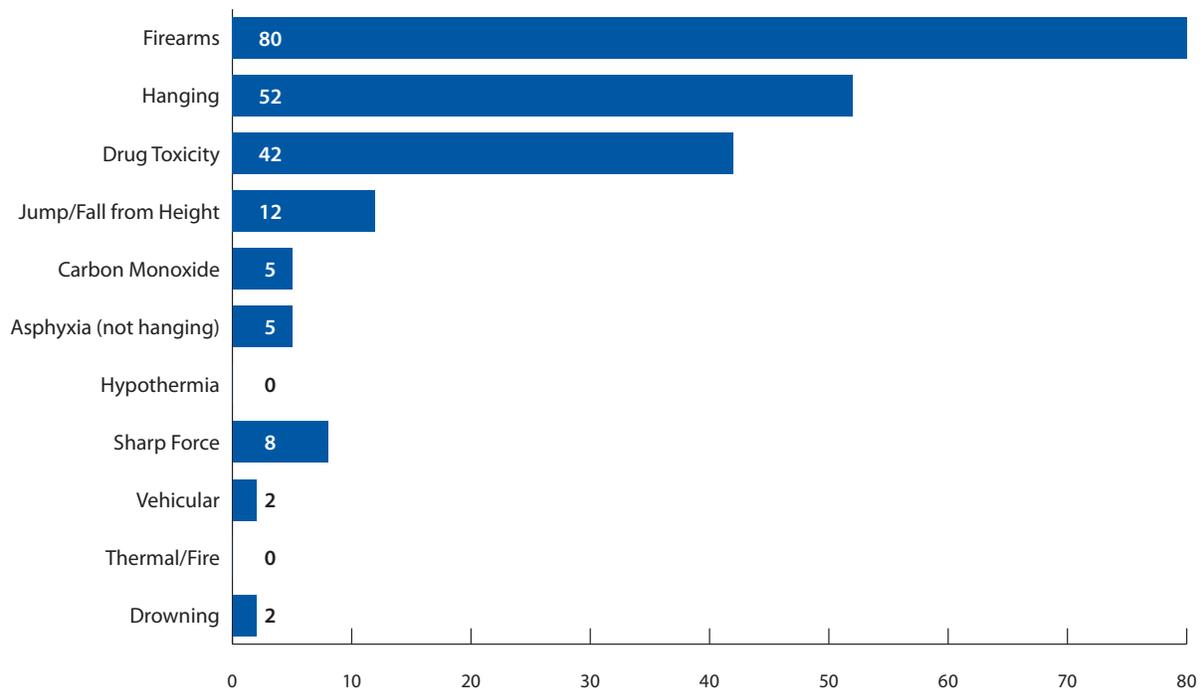
## Accident Deaths: Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties 2020

	Hennepin	Dakota	Scott	TOTAL
Fall	438	70	24	532
Drug Toxicity	351	40	17	408
Vehicular	77	9	4	90
Asphyxia	31	5	2	38
Thermal/Fire	15	1	1	17
Drowning	18	2	2	22
Pedestrian	16	0	0	16
Blunt Trauma	7	0	0	7
Hypothermia	10	3	0	13
Carbon Monoxide (not fire)	2	0	0	2
Other	1	0	1	2
Perioperative/Therapeutic	0	0	0	0
Electrocution	2	0	0	2
Firearms	1	0	0	1
Hanging	0	0	0	0
Bomb/Explosion	0	0	0	0
Hyperthermia	1	1	0	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>970</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>1,152</b>



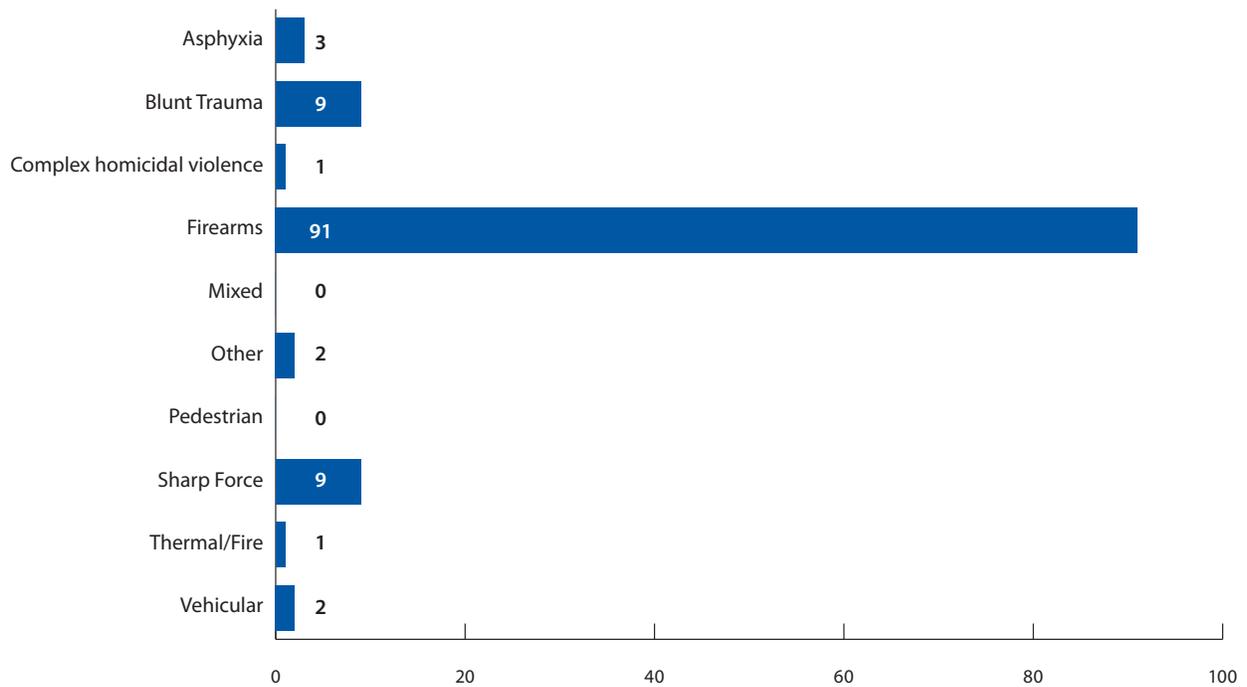
# Suicide Deaths: Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties 2020

	Hennepin	Dakota	Scott	TOTAL
Firearms	53	19	8	80
Hanging	37	9	6	52
Drug Toxicity	35	7	0	42
Jump/Fall from Height	11	0	1	12
Carbon Monoxide	3	2	0	5
Asphyxia (not hanging)	3	2	0	5
Hypothermia	0	0	0	0
Sharp Force	7	1	0	8
Vehicular	2	0	0	2
Thermal/Fire	0	0	0	0
Drowning	2	0	0	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>208</b>



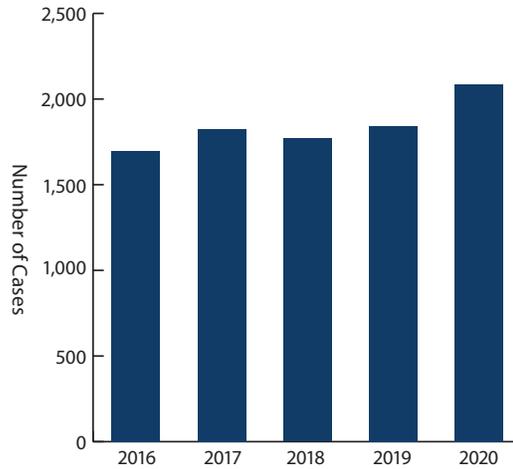
## Homicide Deaths: Hennepin, Dakota, and Scott Counties 2020

	Hennepin	Dakota	Scott	TOTAL
Asphyxia	3	0	0	3
Blunt Trauma	9	0	0	9
Complex homicidal violence	1	0	0	1
Firearms	84	7	0	91
Mixed	0	0	0	0
Other	2	0	0	2
Pedestrian	0	0	0	0
Sharp Force	8	1	0	9
Thermal/Fire	1	0	0	1
Vehicular	2	0	0	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>118</b>



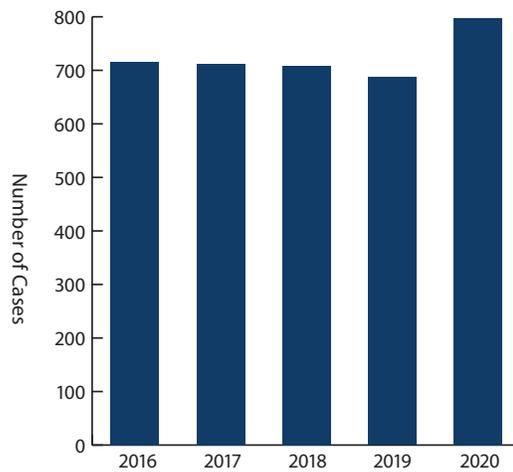
## Cases Accepted: Hennepin County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	1,698
2017	1,823
2018	1,769
2019	1,841
2020	2,088



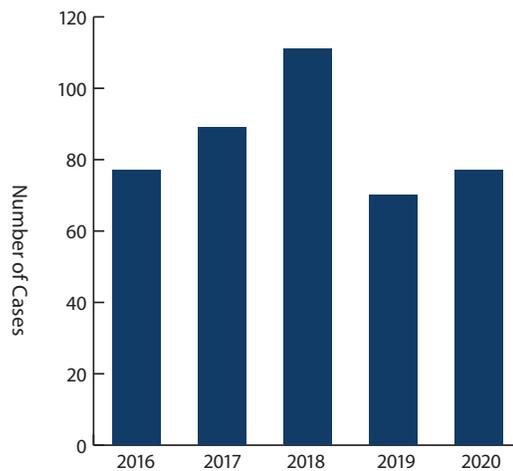
## Natural Deaths: Hennepin County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	716
2017	712
2018	708
2019	687
2020	797



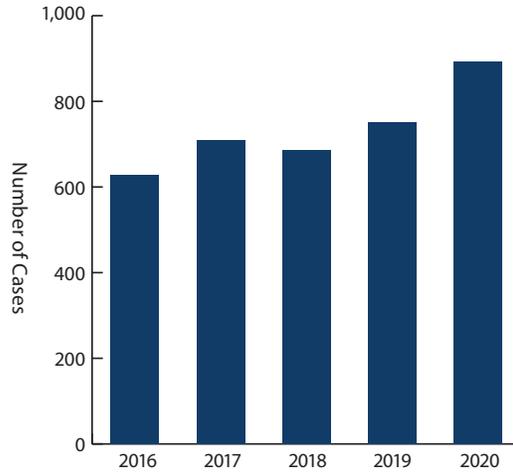
## Traffic Accidents: Hennepin County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	77
2017	89
2018	111
2019	70
2020	77



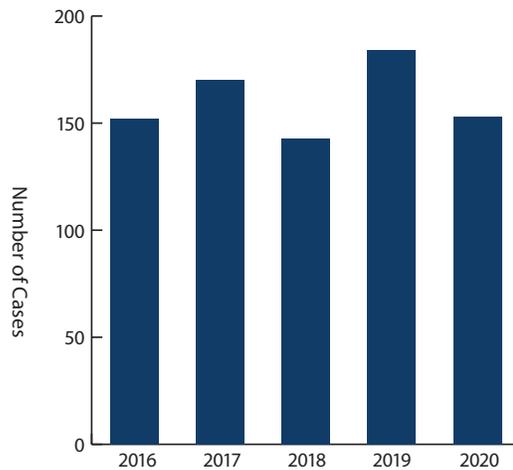
## Accidents (Non-Traffic): Hennepin County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	629
2017	710
2018	687
2019	752
2020	893



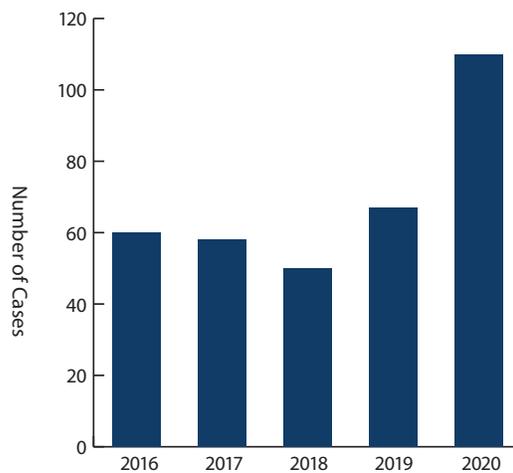
## Suicide Deaths: Hennepin County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	152
2017	170
2018	143
2019	184
2020	153



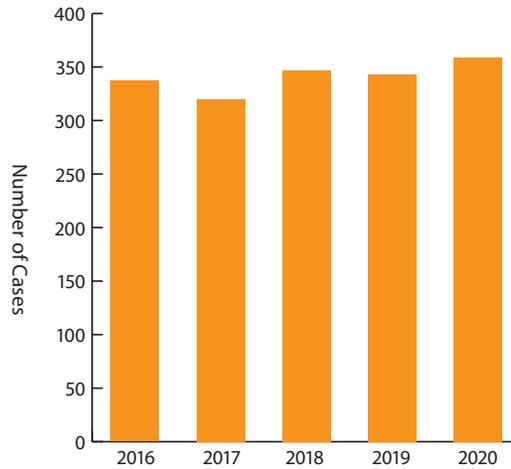
## Homicide Deaths: Hennepin County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	60
2017	58
2018	50
2019	67
2020	110



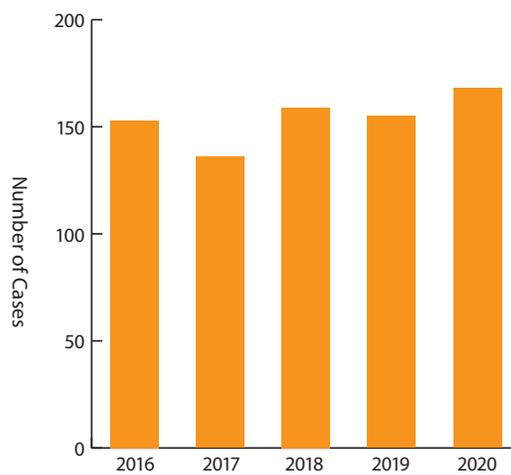
## Cases Accepted: Dakota County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	337
2017	320
2018	347
2019	343
2020	359



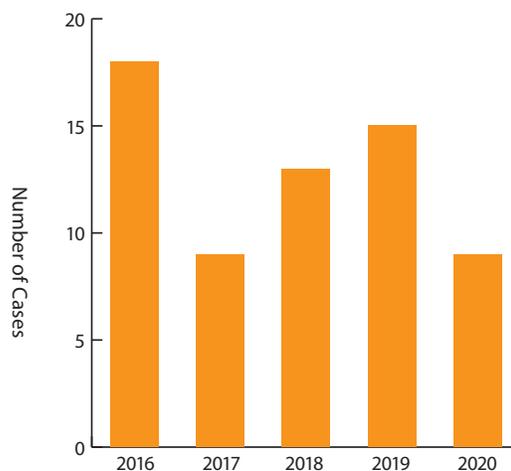
## Natural Deaths: Dakota County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	153
2017	136
2018	159
2019	155
2020	168



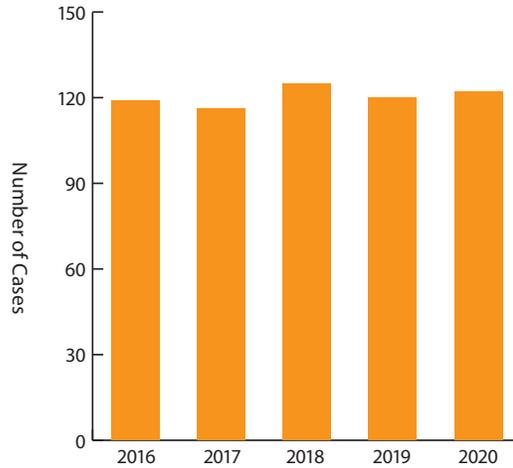
## Traffic Accidents: Dakota County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	18
2017	9
2018	13
2019	15
2020	9



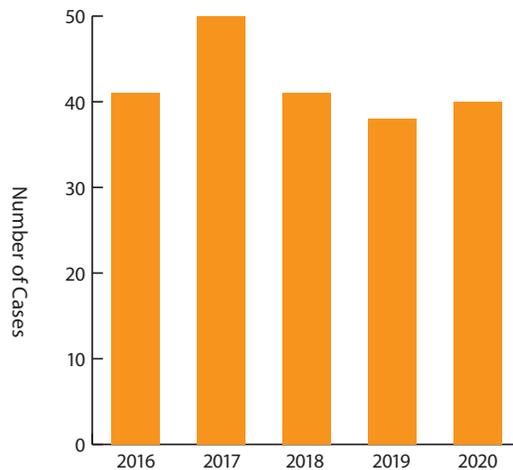
## Accidents (Non-Traffic): Dakota County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	119
2017	116
2018	125
2019	120
2020	122



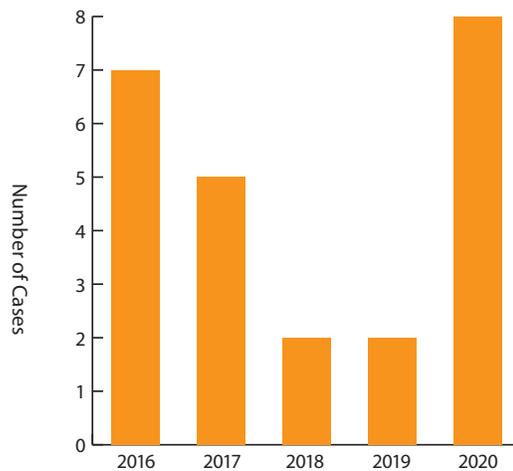
## Suicide Deaths: Dakota County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	41
2017	50
2018	41
2019	38
2020	40



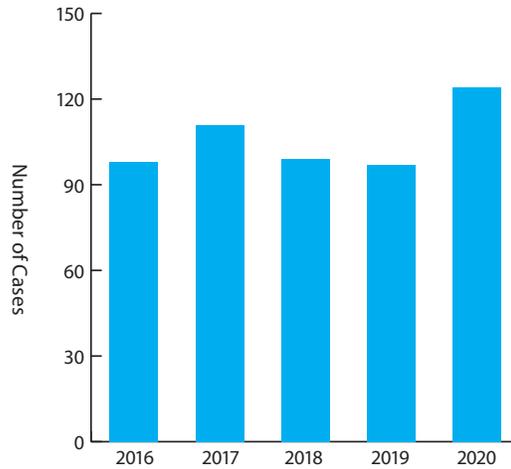
## Homicide Deaths: Dakota County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	7
2017	5
2018	2
2019	2
2020	8



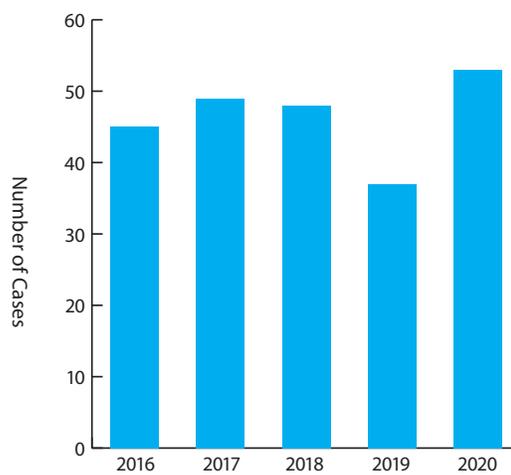
## Cases Accepted: Scott County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	98
2017	111
2018	99
2019	97
2020	124



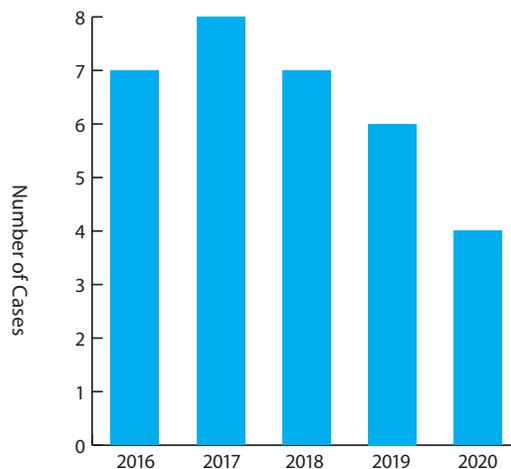
## Natural Deaths: Scott County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	45
2017	49
2018	48
2019	37
2020	53



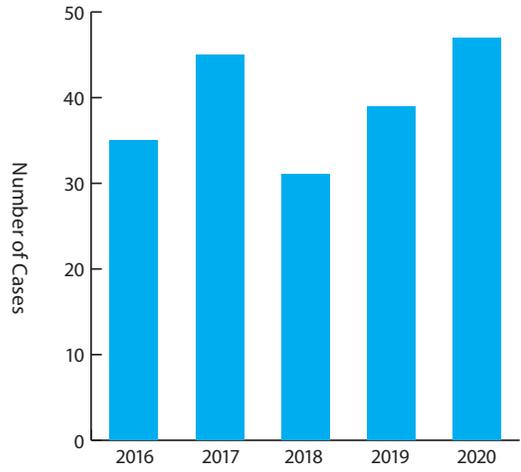
## Traffic Accidents: Scott County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	7
2017	8
2018	7
2019	6
2020	4



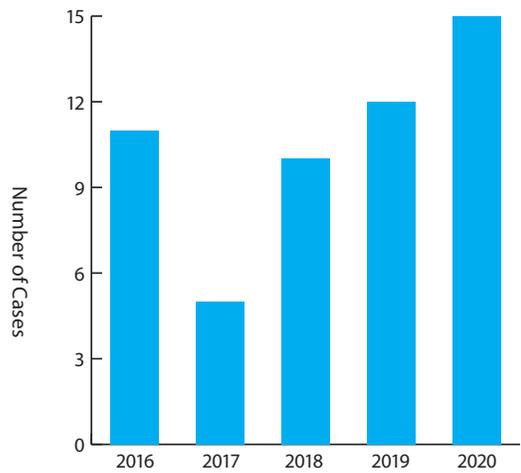
## Accidents (Non-Traffic): Scott County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	35
2017	45
2018	31
2019	39
2020	47



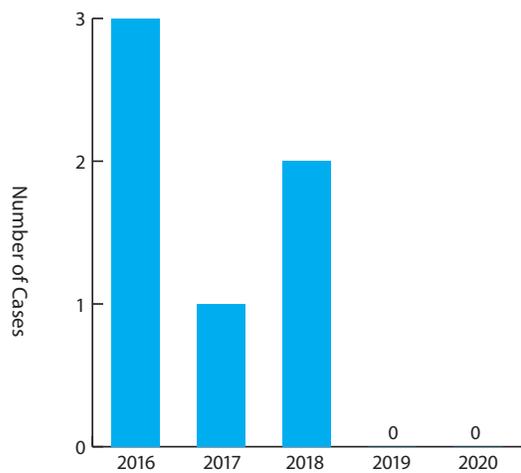
## Suicide Deaths: Scott County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	11
2017	5
2018	10
2019	12
2020	15



## Homicide Deaths: Scott County 2016–2020

Year	Number of Cases
2016	3
2017	1
2018	2
2019	0
2020	0





Hennepin County  
Medical Examiner

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