Christchurch earthquake death toll still not clear

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The destruction wrought by the February 22 earthquake is evident in Christchurch's streetscape and in the places people died.

The 6.3-magnitude quake and its aftershocks collapsed buildings and street frontages across the CBD and the suburbs, while east of the city rocks and cliff faces tumbled.

Almost three weeks on from the quake, names are still being released and the final death toll is not yet clear.

Of the 166 confirmed dead, 94 were found in the CTV building, 15 in the PGC building and the remainder from other locations around the city in buildings, in the streets, in vehicles including two buses, in the open and in their homes.

However, police say it is too early to say exactly where people lost their lives and the picture is confused.

Police spokesman Grant Ogilvie said that information was not available.

While police had processes surrounding the recovery of bodies, the immediate aftermath of the quake had been chaotic.

"In that spontaneous rescue effort in the first minutes after the earthquake a large number of bodies were taken to the hospital," he said.

Police procedure was to record where bodies were found and await the arrival of specialist disaster victim identification staff, Ogilvie said. However, there had been many reports of civilians intervening contrary to that process, including one who picked up four bodies and drove off with them in his vehicle. Cases like that highlighted the difficulty in producing a definitive list.

"Police are now working through the process of finding out where those (dead) people were."

That involved speaking to witnesses, but many were injured themselves making that difficult, Ogilvie said.