



# EL PASO COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

2021 ANNUAL REPORT

The Coroner's Office (EPCCO) serves El Paso County by investigating all sudden, unexpected, and non-natural deaths. While many natural deaths can be certified by the decedent's physician, approximately one quarter of deaths require further investigation to determine cause and manner of death and ensure public health and safety. In addition to performing **1032 autopsies on El Paso County Deaths**, the office performed 408 autopsies for a fee for 23 surrounding counties.

TOTAL CASES  
INVESTIGATED

7000

(16% increase over 2020)

TOTAL AUTOPSIES  
PERFORMED

1444

(11% increase over 2020)

In 2021, the EPCCO's staff consisted of six board-certified forensic pathologists including elected Coroner Leon Kelly, M.D., Deputy Chief Medical Examiner Emily Russell, M.D., and Associate Coroners Dan Lingamfelter, D.O., Allison Cooper, M.D., Jarod Murdoch, D.O., and Megan Kliesner, M.D., as well as three administrative staff, ten death investigators, four toxicologists, one histologist, and five morgue technicians.

## Why Perform an Autopsy?

Colorado Revised Statute (C.R.S.) 30-10-606 describes the roles and responsibilities of the coroner in investigating deaths. A complete forensic investigation provides the **cause** and **manner** of how an individual died. The investigation can assist in settling insurance and estate claims as well as the implementation of civil and criminal actions. Identifying cause and manner of death is a critical component of ensuring public health and safety. The surviving family and general public can have peace of mind that a thorough investigation was completed.

It is the responsibility of the EPCCO to identify the decedent and notify next-of-kin. In many cases, identification and next-of-kin notification can be quickly achieved. However, in cases of burns, extensive injury, or decomposition this can prove more challenging. Our office ensures all leads have been exhausted in pursuit of identification and notification. At the time of this report, 6 cases dating back to 2012 are pending identification and 3 cases from 2021 are pending identification. In 2021, 66 unclaimed remains were released to the Public Administrator.

### MEANS OF IDENTIFICATION



Visual or  
Circumstances – 633



Outside  
Coroners – 410



Fingerprints – 397



Dental – 0



DNA – 0



Medical – 1

## What is an Autopsy?

An "autopsy" can encompass several levels of examination:

# 228

228 cases in 2021 were "**external only**" examinations, in which the cause and manner are well established by the external examination\* and a thorough medical history.

# 53

53 of the 2021 examinations were **partial autopsies** and typically consisted of "head only" examinations to ensure that head trauma didn't cause or contribute to death.

# 1163

1163 examinations included a full internal exam in which each organ and body cavity is examined and is considered a **complete autopsy**.

# 97%

97% of cases had **toxicology testing** performed. Samples are nearly always collected, but testing may not be performed at the discretion of the physician

# 887

887 of 1032 (86%) of El Paso County autopsies required **death scene investigation**



El Paso County Coroner's Office does not perform **Hospital Autopsies**.



The El Paso County Coroner's Office did not perform any **exhumations** in 2021

\***External Examination** – Every autopsy includes a thorough examination of the outside of the decedent's body documenting changes of natural disease, identifying marks and scars, medical treatment, injuries, and an inventory of clothing and property.

## Average time to completion

The average number of days from autopsy to report completion during 2021 was **34.4 days**. **119 cases** (8.3%) took **greater than 60 days** to complete due to their complexity or ongoing investigation. This meets the national standard of >90% of reports completed before 60 days post autopsy.

## What Deaths are Investigated?

Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S) 30-10-606 mandate that the following deaths are reported to and investigated by the coroner:

- // Sudden, unexpected, or non-natural
- // No physician available to certify the death
- // Industrial accidents
- // Deaths in the custody of law enforcement or in the care of a public institution
- // Deaths due to public health threats
- // All unexplained deaths

Responsibilities of the Coroner:

- // Pronounce death
- // Determine cause and manner of death
- // Identify human remains
- // Notify next-of-kin
- // Investigate death in conjunction with but independent of law enforcement agencies
- // Collect evidence on or in the body
- // Secure a decedent's property for next-of-kin
- // Provide expert testimony in criminal or civil proceedings
- // Grant tissue/organs for donation

## 2021 Revenue for El Paso County Coroner's Office

Grant for Violent Death Reporting .....	\$2388
Out-of-County Autopsy Fees .....	\$614,775
Out-of-County Toxicology Fees .....	\$189,165
Histology Fees .....	\$3,495
<b>Total Revenue for 2021 .....</b>	<b>\$809,823<sup>†</sup></b>

## El Paso County Citizen Cost Breakdown

2021 Population\* 737,867

Total 2020 Budget \$3,038,681

\$3,038,681 (Budget)

- \$809,823 (Revenue)

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\$2,228,858 Overall Cost to Citizens

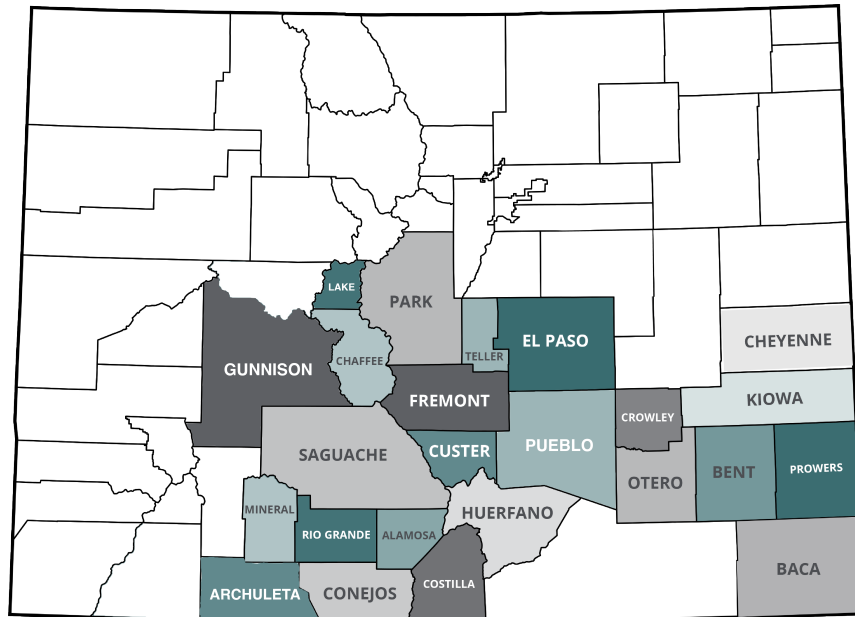
÷ 737,867 (Population)

**= \$3.02** Annual cost to each El Paso County Citizen

\*US Census Bureau (2021)

†This represents a 10% increase in revenue over 2020

# Overall Breakdown of Autopsies Performed by the El Paso County Coroner's Office



ALAMOSA	40	1	GUNNISON
ARCHULETA	1	20	HUERFANO
BACA	4	1	KIOWA
BENT	9	11	LAKE
CHAFFEE	28	7	MINERAL
CHYENNE	6	25	OTERO
CONEJOS	19	26	PARK
COSTILLA	13	15	PROWERS
CROWLEY	8	1	PUEBLO
CUSTER	15	18	RIO GRANDE
EL PASO	1032	22	SAGUACHE
FREMONT	78	44	TELLER

**1,444 – TOTAL CASES**

## Manner of Death

There are five manners of death that can be classified on a Colorado Death Certificate.

**Natural** - Deaths due solely to disease or aging

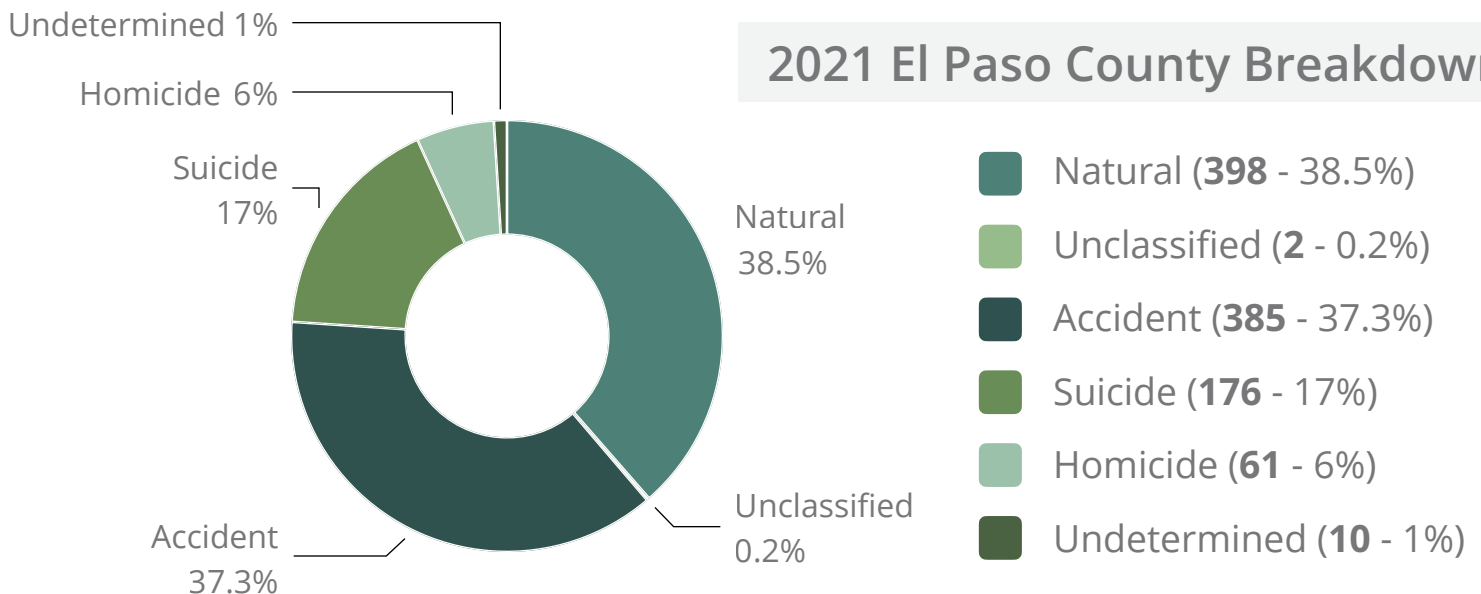
**Accident** - Deaths due to unintentional injury

**Suicide** - Deaths due to an intentional self-inflicted injury

**Homicide** - Deaths due to the intentional injurious action of another individual

**Undetermined** - Deaths in this category may or may not have a determined cause of death, or may have several different possible manners

**Unclassified** - Death of a fetus in utero (in the uterus) does not receive a manner determination






## Deaths Due to Natural Diseases

These deaths are due to the disease of aging and occur suddenly or while not under the care of a physician.

**398** Total



Cardiovascular	43%	<b>170</b>
Chronic Alcohol	16%	<b>64</b>
COVID-19*	14%	<b>54</b>
Pulmonary Embolism	5%	<b>19</b>
Non COVID-19 Infections	4%	<b>16</b>
Diabetes	3%	<b>13</b>
Pulmonary Disease	3%	<b>12</b>
Gastrointestinal	3%	<b>10</b>
Cancer/Neoplasm	2%	<b>8</b>
Morbid Obesity	2%	<b>8</b>
Other	2%	<b>8</b>
Epilepsy	1.5%	<b>8</b>
Cerebrovascular	<1%	<b>4</b>
Geriatric Decline/Dementia	<1%	<b>2</b>
Congenital Disorders	<1%	<b>2</b>

**Significant Contributing Causes** - The diseases that are most commonly listed as significant contributing factors in death alongside those causes listed above include obesity, diabetes, pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, smoking, COVID-19 (10 cases), and chronic alcoholism.

\*The majority of COVID-19 Deaths occur in the hospital or care facility setting and are not determined by the coroner. Only 6% of all El Paso County reported COVID-19 related deaths have come through the coroner's office. These deaths represent those that died at home or prior to diagnosis.

# Deaths Due to Accidents

We saw an increase in accidents (356 in 2020) largely due to a 22% increase in drug related deaths and an increase in motor vehicle related pedestrian fatalities. There were an additional 96 accidental deaths due to falls in predominantly the elderly (average age of 78.6 years) that are investigated without autopsy.

**385** Total



Drugs	59%	<b>227</b>
Motor Vehicle Accidents	15%	<b>58</b>
Falls	8%	<b>31</b>
Pedestrian Injury	5%	<b>20</b>
Hypothermia	3%	<b>12</b>
Drowning	3%	<b>11</b>
Unsafe Sleep - Pediatric	1%	<b>5</b>
Carbon Monoxide	1%	<b>4</b>
Asphyxias	<1%	<b>3</b>
Choking	<1%	<b>3</b>
Motor Vehicle vs. Bicycle	<1%	<b>3</b>
Others	0.5%	<b>2</b>
Bicycle Crashes	0.5%	<b>2</b>
Fires/Burns	0.5%	<b>2</b>
Firearms	<0.5%	<b>1</b>
ATV Accident	<0.5%	<b>1</b>

## Blunt Force Injury Accidents

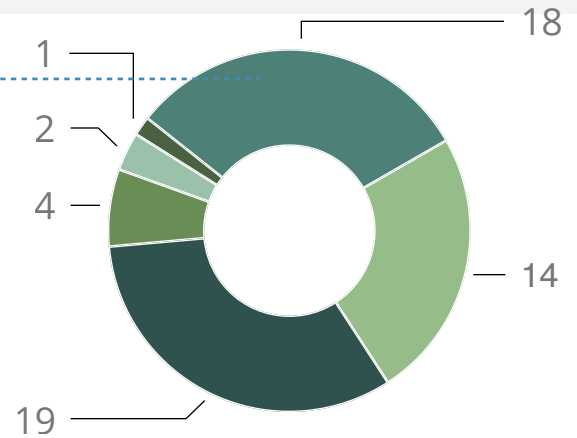
Simple Falls in Adults	26
Passenger vehicles	40
Pedestrian	20

Motorcycle	18
Falls from height	5
Falls down stairs	5
Bicycle	5

# Motor Vehicle Crashes

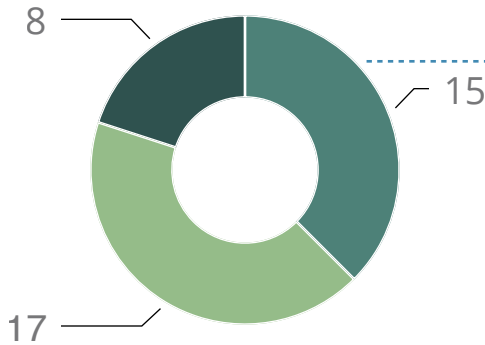
## Type of Vehicle Involved

Sedan	18 (31%)
SUV	14 (24%)
Motorcycle	19 (33%)
Truck	4 (7%)
Other/Unknown	2 (3%)
Minivan	1 (2%)



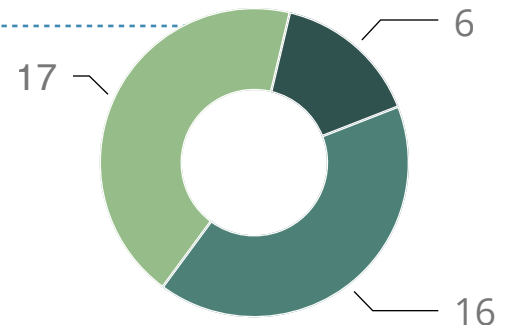
## Type of Collision

Front	15 (37.5%)
Side	17 (42.5%)
Rollover	8 (20%)

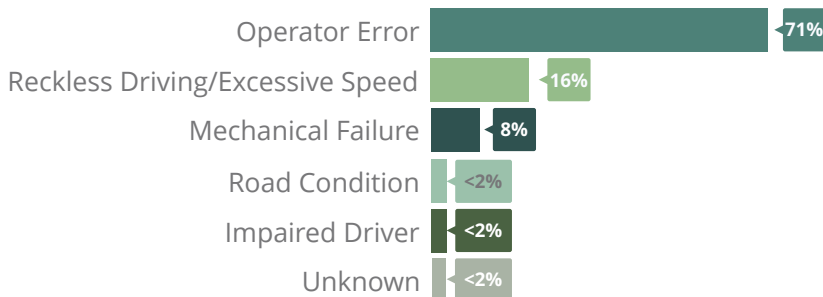


## Use of Restraint/seatbelt

Yes	16 (41%)
No	17 (44%)
Unknown	6 (15%)



## Suspected Primary Cause of Crash



Of the 30 fatal accidents where the decedent was the "at fault driver" and toxicology was performed 21 had drugs, alcohol, or THC in their system at autopsy

Drugs: 9	Alcohol + THC: 1
Alcohol: 7	Drugs + Alcohol: 5
THC: 3	Drugs, Alcohol + THC: 2
Drugs + THC: 5	

## Vehicle vs. Pedestrian/Bicycle

Pedestrian at fault	Driver at fault	Unknown
<b>87%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>4%</b>

# Drug Related Accidental Deaths

There was a 22% increase in drug-related accidental deaths over 2021, due in large part to a more than doubling of our fentanyl deaths (99 in 2021) which has been the trend since 2017. Methamphetamine related deaths (107) increased 18% over 2020 totals, occurring 25% of the time in combination with fentanyl.

**227** Total



Methamphetamine (+/- other meds)	56
Fentanyl	45
Heroin + Methamphetamine	18
Methamphetamine + Fentanyl (+/- other meds)	15
Fentanyl + Cocaine	15
Prescription Opioids (+/- Ethanol or other meds)	13
Cocaine	9
Heroin (+/- other meds)	8
Non-Opioid Prescription Drugs	8
Fentanyl, Methamphetamine + Cocaine	7
Fentanyl + Other Prescription Drugs	6
Cocaine + Methamphetamine	4
Mitragynine (+/- Ethanol or other meds)	4
Methamphetamine, Fentanyl + Heroin	3
Fentanyl + Mitragynine	3
Fentanyl + Heroin	2
Methamphetamine, Fentanyl, Heroin + Cocaine	2
Freon Gas	2
Methamphetamine + Prescription Opioids	1
Heroin, Cocain + Methamphetamine	1
Cocaine + Heroin (+/- other meds)	1
Heroin, Fentanyl + Cocaine	1
Ethanol/Alcohols	1
Cocaine + Prescription Opioids	1
Ketamine (+/- other meds)	1

## Opioids resulting in death

Heroin	36	Methadone	5
Oxycodone	19	Unknown Opioids	2
Hydrocodone	3	Morphine	1
Fentanyl	99	Tramadol	3

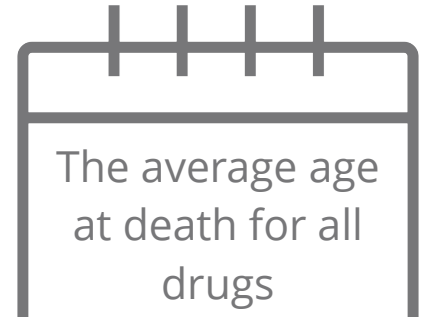
# 2021 Drug Related Death Facts

**5%** 

of medication used in the overdose was prescribed by the decedent's physician.

**71%**

of accidental drug deaths were male



The average age at death for all drugs

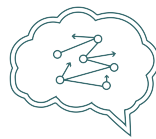
**42 YEARS**

**60%**

have a prior history of substance abuse or addiction

*6% decrease from 2020*

**23%**



have a known history of mental illness

Average age of fentanyl death

**35 YEARS**

*5 youth (ages 1-17)*

Average age of non-fentanyl drug death

**47 YEARS**

 **23%**

of all deaths have marijuana metabolites present at autopsy

*Represents a 1% increase from 2020*

**38%**

of drug-related deaths had THC metabolites present

**101**

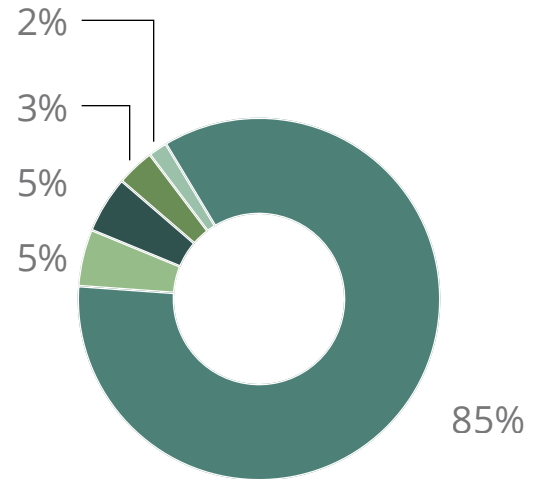
Total number of fentanyl-related deaths in 2021 (Accidents and Suicides)

## Deaths Due to Homicide

61 Total

2021 saw a continued increase in homicides (55 in 2020) due entirely to increase in firearms related deaths. Six of the deaths occurred in a single mass shooting event.

Firearms	52
Blunt Force/Altercation	3
Sharp Force Injuries	3
Strangulation	2
Blunt and Sharp Force	1



## Apparent Circumstances of the Homicides



Domestic/Family Violence	27
Altercation	13
Officer Involved*	7
During the Commission of Another Crime	6
Other	3
Unknown	3
Reckless Use of Firearm	1
Gang Related	1

\*All 7 officer-involved deaths resulted from a use of force that resulted in the death of another. Therefore, the manner is ruled a homicide. However, this determination is not an opinion on the legality of the force used as this judgement is within the purview of the District Attorney and the justice system.

**58%** of decedents personally knew the suspect in their death.

# Deaths Due to Suicide

There was a slight decrease in total suicides (178 in 2020).


**176** Total

Firearms	114
Ligature	30
Drugs	22
Asphyxia	4
Fall	2
Sharp Force	2
Other	2

## Drugs Used in Suicide

Mixed Opioids	7
Single Non-Opioids	8
Mixed Non-Opioids	2
Illicit Drug	4
Insulin	1

## 2021 Suicide Facts




**44**  
Average age at death  
(Range of 11 - 95 years)



**32%**  
have notes or social media posts indicating suicidal intentions



**62%**  
have a reported history of prior suicidal thoughts



**74%**  
of autopsies contain drugs (41%), alcohol (44%), or THC (22%) at the time of death



**30%**  
have known active or prior military duty  
(10% Increase from 2020)

**81%** of completed suicides were male



The most common risk factors present are relationship issues, financial struggles, substance abuse, chronic health problems, grief and legal issues.

# Child Fatalities

48 Total

El Paso County Coroner's Office investigated the deaths of 48 children (below the age of 18 years old). These cases are individually reviewed by the El Paso County Child Fatality Review Team to identify strategies to prevent these types of deaths in the future, which has resulted in community-wide efforts to decrease teen suicide and sudden infant death in El Paso County. There was an increase in deaths largely in ages less than 1 year-old. Youth suicide decreased from 15 in 2020 to 4 in 2021. There were 5 fentanyl related deaths in youth.

### Age

<1 Month	4
1 Month - 1 Year	14
1-4 Years	3
5-12 Years	10
13-17 Years	17

### Breakdown

Homicides	8
Natural	7
Undetermined	7
Infant unsafe sleep/asphyxia	6
Drugs, accident	6
Suicides	4
Motor vehicle accident	4
Maternal drug use	2
Pedestrian	2
Firearms	1
Drowning	1



### Teen Suicides (Ages 11-17 Years)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male: 3</b>	<b>Female: 1</b>
Hanging		2
Firearms		2

### Identified Risk Factors

Relationship issues, bullying, poor academic performance and learning challenges.

### Unsafe Sleep Infant Deaths: 11 Total

Deaths due to an unsafe sleep surface	8
Deaths due to bed sharing with adults	2
Bed sharing and unsafe sleep surface	1



# Homeless Deaths in El Paso County

As homelessness continues to be a concern for our community, it is important to examine what issues cause or contribute to death in this population. In 2021, 78 total individuals died unexpectedly while experiencing homelessness and were investigated by the coroner.

**78** Total

## Homelessness is defined as:

- Sleeping on the streets
- Sleeping in a tent, vehicle, or shelter
- "Couch surfing" or "squatting"
- Transitional living program
- Temporary residence in a motel

**49**  
Average age at death

## RACE

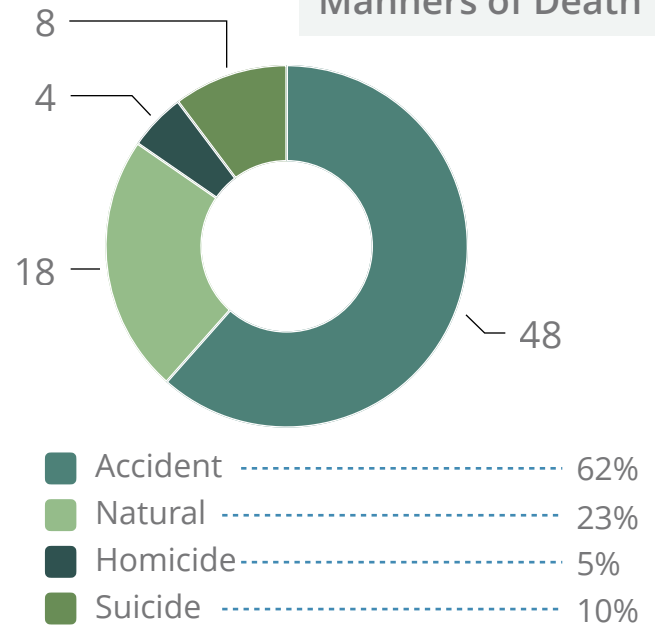
White - 72%  
Black - 14%  
Hispanic - 9%  
Other/Unknown - 5%

**83%**  
Homeless deaths were male

## Accidents

Drug intoxication	27 (56%)
Pedestrian struck by vehicle	3 (6%)
Carbon monoxide/fire	2 (4%)
Hypothermia	7 (15%)
Motor vehicle crash	6 (13%)
Fall	1 (2%)
Drowning	1 (2%)
Other	1 (2%)

## Manners of Death



## Natural Deaths

Cardiovascular	4
Alcoholism	4
Diabetes	3
COVID-19	2
Other	2
Pulmonary Embolism	2
Non-COVID-19 Infections	1

## Drug Intoxications

Methamphetamine	14
Mixed illicit + fentanyl	7
Mixed illicit	5
Mixed Prescription	1

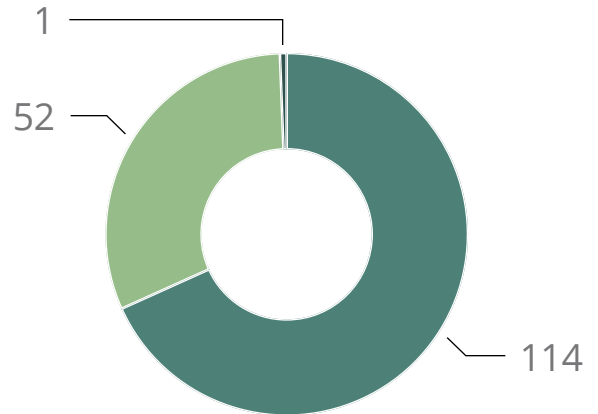
# Firearms Related Deaths

In 2021, 167 total individuals died of firearms related injuries. There were increases in both firearms associated homicides (34 in 2020) as well as in firearm related suicides (97 in 2020).

**167** Total

## Breakdown of Manners

- Suicide ..... 68%
- Homicide ..... 31%
- Accident ..... 1%



## Firearm Related Homicide Circumstances

Domestic Violence	24
Altercation	8
While committing another crime	7
Lawful use of deadly force by law enforcement	7
Unknown	4
Reckless use of a firearm	1
Gang related	1

## AGE RANGES

### FIREARM HOMICIDE

10 - 74  
years old

### FIREARM ACCIDENT

19 - 27  
years old

### FIREARM SUICIDE

11 - 95  
years old

**73%**  
of males used a firearm to complete suicide  
vs.  
**38%**  
of females  
(Both are increases over 2020)

# Organ Donation

In 2021:

**35**

El Paso County donors had organs recovered for transplantation

**12 of the 16**

**75%**

Were coroner jurisdiction cases and all were approved for donation



Organs were transplanted from El Paso County donors

**50**

El Paso County tissue donor cases fell under the coroner's jurisdiction



Cases resulted in tissue harvest

There were no refusals of organ requests by the El Paso County Coroner