



EL PASO COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

2020 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 **920 autopsies on El Paso County Deaths**, the office performed 373 autopsies for a fee for 21 surrounding counties.

TOTAL CASES
INVESTIGATED

6037

TOTAL AUTOPSIES
PERFORMED

1293

(9% Increase over 2019)

In 2020, the Coroner's Office staff consisted of five 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., Travis Danielsen, M.D., and Christopher Hauch, M.D., as well as two administrative staff, nine 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 Coroner's Office 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, 5 cases dating back to 2012 are pending identification. In 2020, 67 unclaimed remains were released to the Public Administrator.

MEANS OF IDENTIFICATION



Visual or
Circumstances – 632



Outside
Coroners – 373



Fingerprints – 284



Dental – 1



DNA – 0



Medical – 1

What is an Autopsy?

An "autopsy" can encompass several levels of examination:

237

237 cases in 2020 were "**external only**" examinations, in which the cause and manner are well established by the external examination* and a thorough medical history.

28

28 of the 2020 examinations were **partial autopsies** and typically consisted of "head only" examinations to ensure that head trauma didn't cause or contribute to death.

1028

1028 Examinations included a full internal exam in which each organ and body cavity is examined and is considered a **complete autopsy**.

93%

93% of cases had **toxicology testing** performed. Samples are nearly always collected, but testing may not be performed at the discretion of the physician

772

772 of 920 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 2020

***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 2020 was **29 days**. **61 cases** (4.7%) took **greater than 60 days** to complete due to their complexity or ongoing investigation. This meets the national standard of <10% of cases completed beyond 60 days.

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 contagious diseases
- // 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
- // Grant tissue/organs for donation

2020 Revenue for El Paso County Coroner's Office

Grant for Violent Death Reporting	\$3,838
Out-of-County Autopsy Fees	\$556,150
Out-of-County Toxicology Fees	\$171,390
Histology Fees	\$3,500
Facility Fees	\$1,600
Total Revenue for 2020	\$736,478 †

El Paso County Citizen Cost Breakdown

2019 Population* 720,403

Total 2020 Budget \$2,980,002

\$2,980,002 (Budget)

- \$736,478 (Revenue)

\$2,243,524 Overall Cost to Citizens

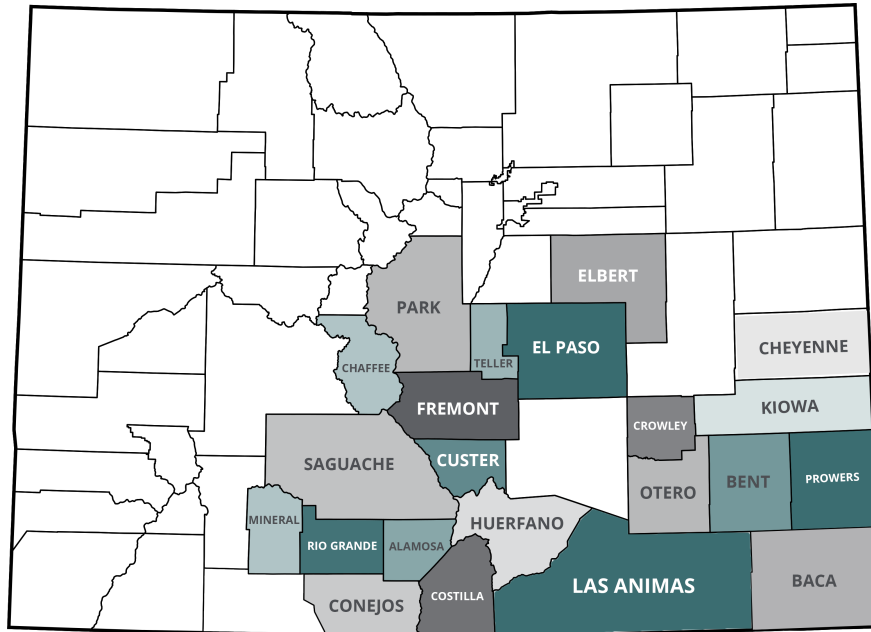
÷ 720,403 (Population)

= \$3.11 Annual cost to each El Paso County Citizen

*US Census Bureau (2019)

†This represents a 6% increase in revenue over 2019

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



ALAMOSA	26	70	FREMONT
BACA	5	16	HUERFANO
BENT	8	4	KIOWA
CHAFFEE	38	1	LAS ANIMAS
CHEYENNE	10	4	MINERAL
CONEJOS	11	18	OTERO
COSTILLA	17	23	PARK
CROWLEY	9	10	PROWERS
CUSTER	26	18	RIO GRANDE
EL PASO	920	19	SAGUACHE
ELBERT	3	37	TELLER

1,293 – TOTAL CASES

Manner of Death

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

Natural - Deaths due solely to disease or aging

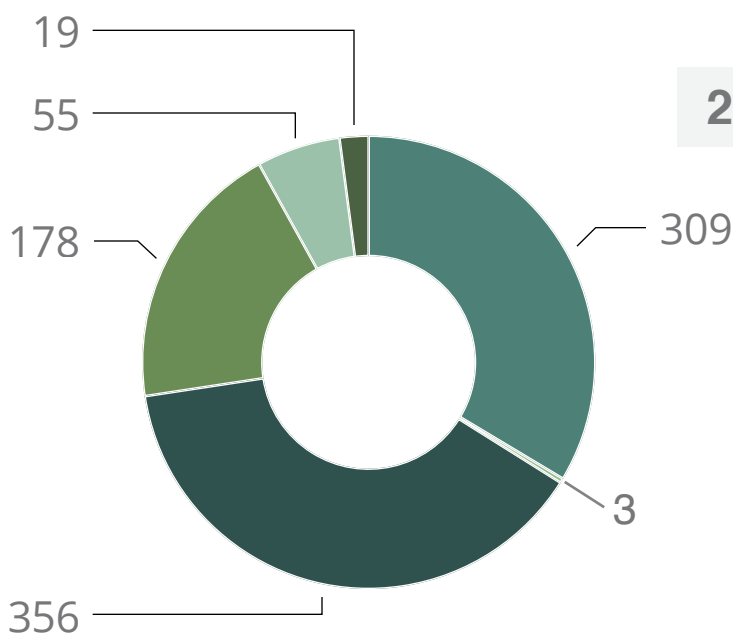
Accident - Deaths due to unintentional injury

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



2020 El Paso County Breakdown

- Natural (**309** - 33.6%)
- Unclassified (**3** - 0.3%)
- Accident (**356** - 38.7%)
- Suicide (**178** - 19.3%)
- Homicide (**55** - 6.1%)
- Undetermined (**19** - 2.0%)

Deaths Due to Natural Diseases

309 Total



Cardiovascular	50%	155
Chronic Alcohol	14%	43
Pulmonary Embolism	6%	17
Non COVID-19 Infections	5%	15
COVID-19*	4%	13
Diabetes	4%	12
Pulmonary Disease	3%	10
Cancer/Neoplasm	2%	7
Morbid Obesity	2%	7
Geriatric Decline/Dementia	2%	7
Gastrointestinal	2%	6
Cerebrovascular	2%	6
Epilepsy	1%	4
Other	1%	4
Liver Disease	1%	2
Complications of Pregnancy/Birth	1%	1

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, and chronic alcoholism.
















*The majority of COVID-19 Deaths occur in the hospital or a care facility setting and are not investigated by the coroner. These deaths represent those that died at home or prior to diagnosis.

Deaths Due to Accidents

We saw an increase in accidents (332 in 2019) largely due to increases in drug related deaths (130 in 2019) and motor vehicle related deaths involving pedestrians and motorcycles. These increases were partially off-set by a decrease in falls in the elderly that due to COVID-19 safety measures for long-term care were not brought to our office for examination.

356 Total



Drugs		52%	186
Motor Vehicle Accidents		22%	78
Falls		5%	32
Pedestrian Injury		4%	13
Others		2%	8
Unsafe Sleep - Pediatric		2%	7
Asphyxias		2%	6
Drowning		1%	4
Hypothermia		1%	4
Bicycle Crashes		1%	4
Carbon Monoxide		<1%	3
Fires/Burns		<1%	3
Choking		<1%	3
Motor Vehicle vs. Bicycle		<1%	3
Firearms		<1%	2

Blunt Force Injury Accidents

- Falls in Adults + Elderly 23*
- Passenger vehicles 49
- Pedestrian 13

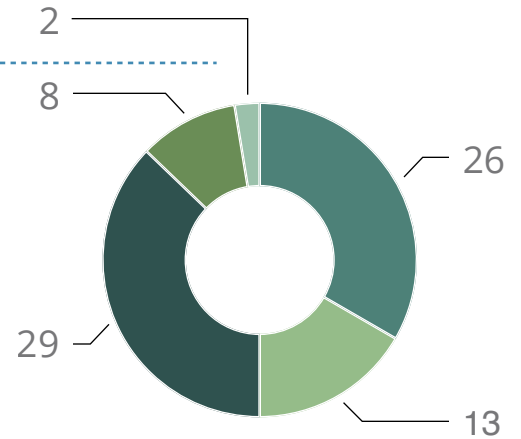
- Motorcycle 29
- Falls from height 4
- Falls down stairs 5
- Bicycle 7

*Reduced from 85 in 2019 due to release to treating physician for death certification

Motor Vehicle Crashes

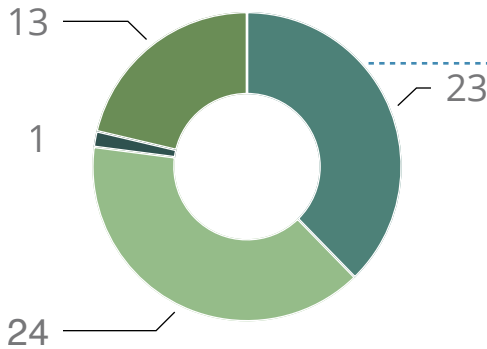
Type of Vehicle Involved

■ Sedan	26 - 33%
■ SUV	13 - 17%
■ Motorcycle	29 - 37%
■ Truck	8 - 10%
■ Other/Unknown	2 - 3%



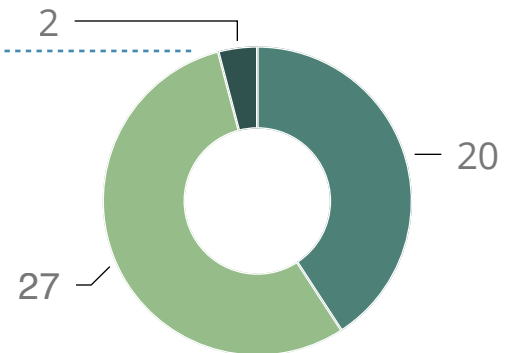
Type of Collision

■ Front	23 - 38%
■ Side	24 - 39%
■ Rear	1 - 2%
■ Rollover	13 - 21%

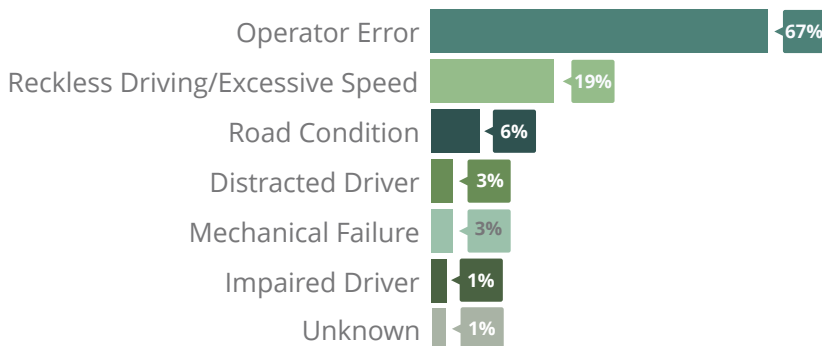


Use of Restraint/seatbelt

■ Yes	20 - 41%
■ No	27 - 55%
■ Unknown	2 - 4%



Suspected Primary Cause of Crash



Of the 44 fatal accidents where the decedent was the "at fault driver" and toxicology was performed 32 had drugs, alcohol, or THC in their system at autopsy

Drugs: 7	Alcohol + THC: 4
Alcohol: 6	Drugs + Alcohol: 2
THC: 5	Drugs, Alcohol + THC: 4
Drugs + THC: 4	

Vehicle vs. Pedestrian

Pedestrian at fault **62%** Driver at fault **38%**

Drug Related Accidental Deaths

The total number of drug-related deaths increased significantly from 2019 (130) due to increases in fentanyl deaths (21 in 2019 to 47 in 2020), methamphetamine (66 increased to 91), cocaine (20 increased to 30), and heroin (35 increased to 43). Forty percent of deaths were due to a combination of substances.

186 Total



Methamphetamine (+/- other meds)	51
Heroin (+/- other meds)	14
Heroin + Methamphetamine	23
Prescription Opioids (+/- Ethanol or other meds)	17
Methamphetamine + Prescription Opioids	2
Fentanyl + Other Prescription Drugs	5
Cocaine	12
Non-Opioid Prescription Drugs	4
Fentanyl	22
Heroin, Cocain + Methamphetamine	1
Methamphetamine + Fentanyl (+/- other meds)	5
Cocaine + Heroin (+/- other meds)	1
Heroin, Fentanyl + Cocaine	1
Ethanol	3
Methamphetamine + Prescription Opioids	1
Cocaine + Methamphetamine	2
Mathamphetamine, Fentanyl, Heroin + Cocaine	1
Mathamphetamine, Fentanyl + Heroin	2
Cocaine + Prescription Opioids	1
Ketamine (+/- other meds)	1
Fentanyl + Cocaine	9
Mitragynine (+/- Ethanol or other meds)	3
Freon Gas + Methamphetamine	1
Freon Gas	2
Fentanyl, Methamphetamine + Cocaine	2

Opioids resulting in death

108 Total

Heroin	36	Methadone	7
Oxycodone	10	Fentanyl + RX Opioids	6
Hydrocodone	1	Mixed RX Opioids	2
Fentanyl	37	Heroin + RX Opioids	3
Fentanyl + Heroin	4	Tramadol	2

2020 Drug Related Death Facts

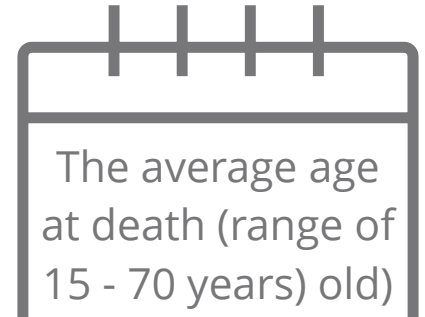
8%



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

67%

Of accidental drug deaths were male

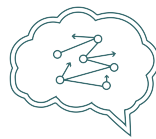


41 YEARS

66%

Have a prior history of substance abuse or addiction

20%



Have a known history of mental illness

61%

Death scene investigations revealed drugs, drug paraphernalia or medications of abuse



24%

Deaths of all causes that have marijuana metabolites present at autopsy

Represents a 3% increase from 2019

86%

Percentage of the accidental opioid deaths that were heroin or fentanyl

118

Total number of opioid related deaths (including accident and suicides)

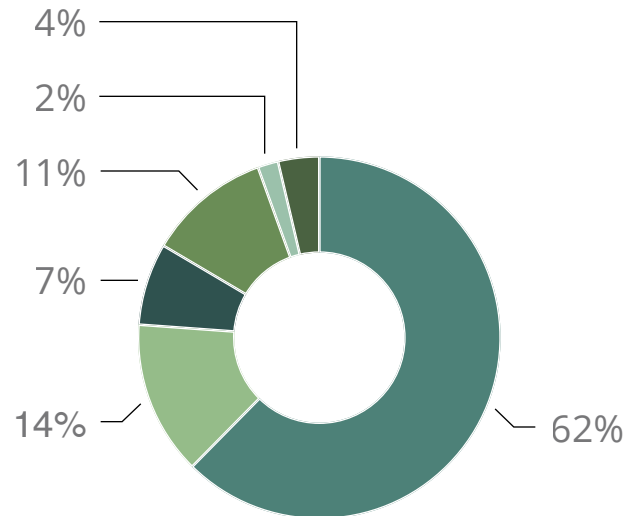
82 in 2019

Deaths Due to Homicide

2020 marked a sharp increase in homicides (35 in 2019) to numbers more similar to prior years (56 in 2018).

55 Total

Firearms	34
Blunt Force/Altercation	8
Sharp Force Injuries	4
Strangulation	6
Blunt and Sharp Force	1
Other	2



Apparent Circumstances of the Homicides



Altercation.....	16
Domestic/Family Violence	19
Officer Involved*	5
Reckless use of firearm	3
During the Commission of Another Crime	12

*All 5 officer-involved deaths resulted from a use of force (firearms, restraint, taser) 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.

53% of decedents personally knew the suspect in their death.

Deaths Due to Suicide

There was a slight decrease in total suicides (180 in 2019).

178 Total

Firearms	97
Ligature	36
Drugs	27
Carbon Monoxide	7
Asphyxia	3
Fall	3
Sharp Force Injury	1
Other	4

Drugs Used in Suicide

Single Opioids	2
Mixed Opioids	6
Single Non-Opioids	7
Mixed Non-Opioids	7
Illicit Drug	2
Insulin	2
Other	1

2020 Suicide Facts

 <p>42 Average age at death (Range of 11 - 100 years)</p>	 <p>19% Notes or social media posts indicating suicidal intentions</p>	 <p>61% Have a reported history of prior suicidal thoughts</p>	 <p>73% Autopsies contain drugs (45%), alcohol (35%), or THC (17%) at the time of death</p>	 <p>20% Have known active or prior military duty</p>
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79% of completed suicides were male



Investigation revealed 18 Cases where COVID-19 associated grief or stress was a driving factor in the suicide.

Child Fatalities

43 Total

El Paso County Coroner's Office investigated the deaths of 43 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 in ages 5-12 years (1 in 2019) due to homicides, motor vehicle crashes, and suicides in this age group. Youth suicide increased from 9 in 2019 to 15 in 2020.

Age	
<1 month	1
1 month - 1 year	11
1-4 Years	3
5-12 Years	8
13-17	20


Breakdown	
Natural	2
Homicides	5
Suicides	15
Infant unsafe sleep/asphyxia	8
Undetermined	6
Motor vehicle accident	4
Drugs, Accident	2
Complication of birth	1



Teen Suicides (Ages 11-17 Years)

Gender	Male: 12	Female: 3
Hanging		4
Firearms		8
Drugs		2
Other		1

When the Suicides Occurred

	Jan.	March	April	May	June	
	1	1	2	2	1	
	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	1	1	1	1	3	1

Infant Asphyxias: 8 Total

Deaths due to an unsafe sleep surface	4
Deaths due to bed sharing with adults	2
Bed sharing and unsafe sleep surface	2

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 2020, 79 total individuals died unexpectedly while struggling with homelessness and were investigated by the coroner.

79 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

(Increase of 4 years over 2019)

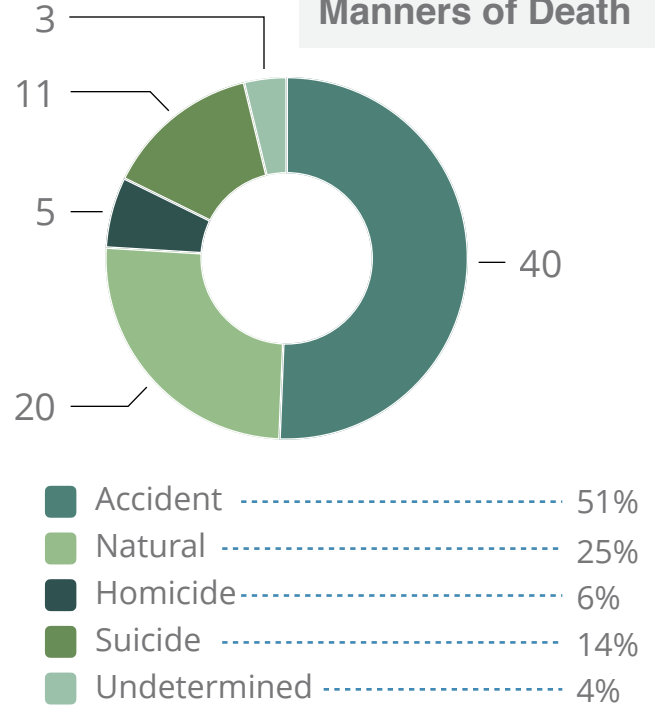
RACE

- White - 82%
- Black - 9%
- Hispanic - 8%
- Other - 1%

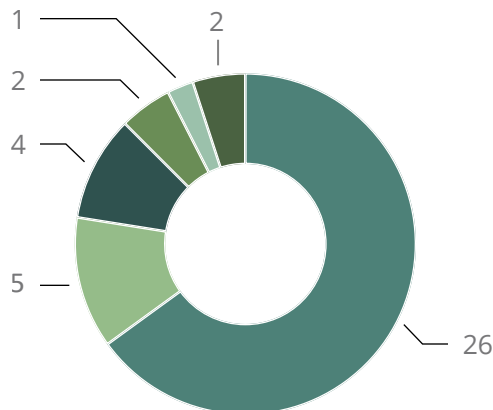
81%

Homeless deaths were male
(86% in 2019)

Manners of Death



Accidents



- Drug intoxication 26 - 65%
- Pedestrian stuck by vehicle..... 5 - 12%
- Carbon monoxide/Fire..... 4 - 10%
- Hypothermia 2 - 5%
- Motor Vehicle Crash 1 - 3%
- Fall 2 - 5%

Natural Deaths

- Heart Disease 7
- Alcoholism 5
- COVID-19 1
- Non-COVID-19 Infections 2
- Other 5

Drug Intoxications

- Methamphetamine 15
- Heroin 1
- Methamphetamine + Heroin 6
- Methamphetamine + Fentanyl 2
- Cocaine 1
- Mixed Drugs and/or Alcohol 1

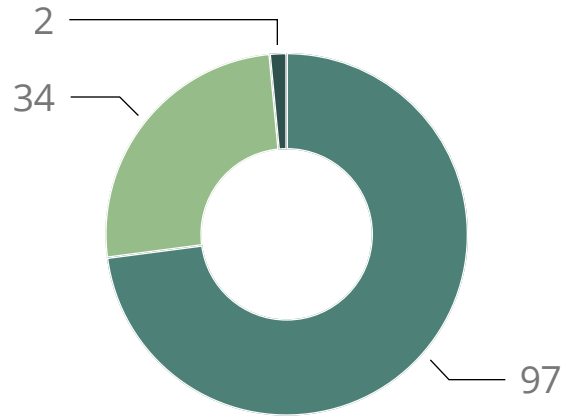
Firearms Related Deaths

In 2020, 133 total individuals died of firearms related injuries. There was an increase in firearm associated homicides (29 in 2019) which was offset by a decrease in firearm related suicides (102 in 2019).

133 Total

Breakdown of Manners

- Suicide 73%
- Homicide 26%
- Accident 1%



Firearm Related Homicide Circumstances

Altercation	9
While committing another crime	12
Domestic violence	7
Reckless use of a firearm	3
Lawful use of deadly force by law enforcement	3

AGE RANGES

FIREARM HOMICIDE

6 - 72
years old

FIREARM ACCIDENT

19 - 27
years old

FIREARM SUICIDE

11 - 100
years old

62%
Of males used a firearm to complete suicide
vs.
26%
Of females

Organ Donation

In 2020:

29

El Paso County donors had organs recovered for transplantation

10 of the 29

42%

Were coroner jurisdiction cases and all were approved for donation



Organs were transplanted from El Paso County donors

52

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