



EL PASO COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

2019 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 816 autopsies on El Paso County Deaths, the office performed 375 autopsies for a fee for 20 surrounding counties.

**TOTAL DEATHS
INVESTIGATED**

4816

**TOTAL AUTOPSIES
PERFORMED**

1191

In 2019, the Coroner's Office staff consisted of four 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., and Travis Danielsen, 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, 1 Otero County body from 2019 is still awaiting positive identification. In 2019, 40 unclaimed remains were released to the Public Administrator.

MEANS OF IDENTIFICATION



Visual or
Circumstances – 764



Dental – 2



Fingerprints – 48



Medical – 1



DNA – 1

What is an Autopsy?

An "autopsy" can encompass several levels of examination:

206

206 cases in 2019 were "**external only**" examinations, in which the cause and manner are well established by the external examination* and a thorough medical history.

13

13 of the 2019 examinations were **partial autopsies** and typically consisted of "head only" examinations to ensure that head trauma didn't cause or contribute to death.

972

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

91%

91% of cases had **toxicology testing** performed. Samples are nearly always collected, but testing may not be performed at the discretion of the physician

588

588 El Paso County deaths required **death scene investigation**



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

0

The El Paso County Coroner's Office did not perform any **exhumations** in 2019

***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 2019 was **21 days**. This is a decrease from 32 days in 2018. **14 cases** (1%) took **greater than 60 days** to complete due to their complexity or ongoing investigation. This surpasses the national standard of >90% of cases completed within 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

2019 Revenue for El Paso County Coroner's Office

Grant for Violent Death Reporting	\$1,850
Out-of-County Autopsy Fees	\$546,750
Out-of-County Toxicology Fees	\$143,900
Histology Fees	\$2,395
Miscellaneous Fees	\$155.39
Total Revenue for 2018	<u>\$695,050.39</u>[†]

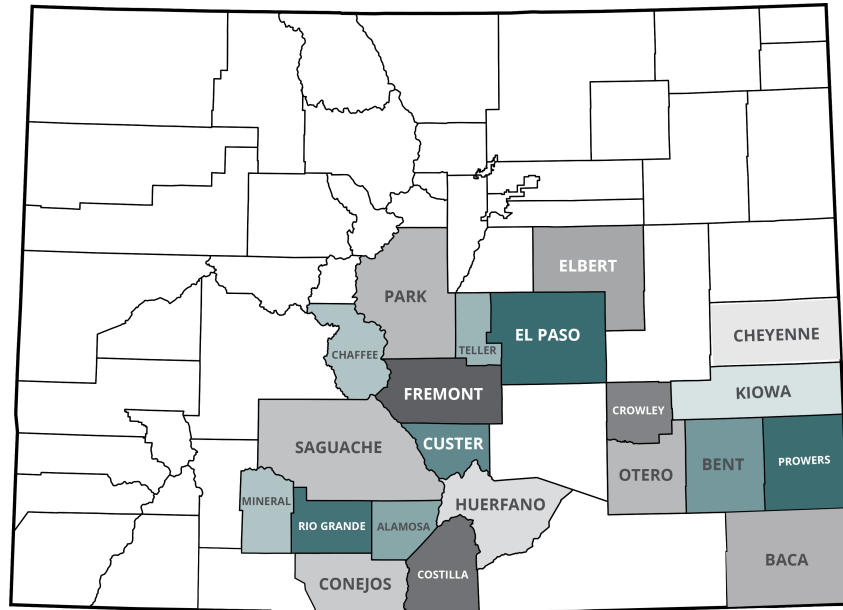
El Paso County Citizen Cost Breakdown

2019 Population*	720,403
Total 2019 Budget	\$2,852,324
\$2,852,324	(Budget)
- \$695,050.39	(Revenue)
<hr/>	
\$2,157,273.61	Overall Cost to Citizens
÷ 720,403	(Population)
= \$2.99	Annual cost to each El Paso County Citizen

*US Census Bureau (2019)

†This represents an 21% increase in revenue over 2018

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



ALAMOSA	29	59	FREMONT
BACA	2	14	HUERFANO
BENT	18	2	KIOWA
CHAFFEE	40	6	MINERAL
CHEYENNE	2	28	OTERO
CONEJOS	14	22	PARK
COSTILLA	16	11	PROWERS
CROWLEY	7	19	RIO GRANDE
CUSTER	12	17	SAGUACHE
EL PASO	816	37	TELLER
ELBERT	20		

1,191 – 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

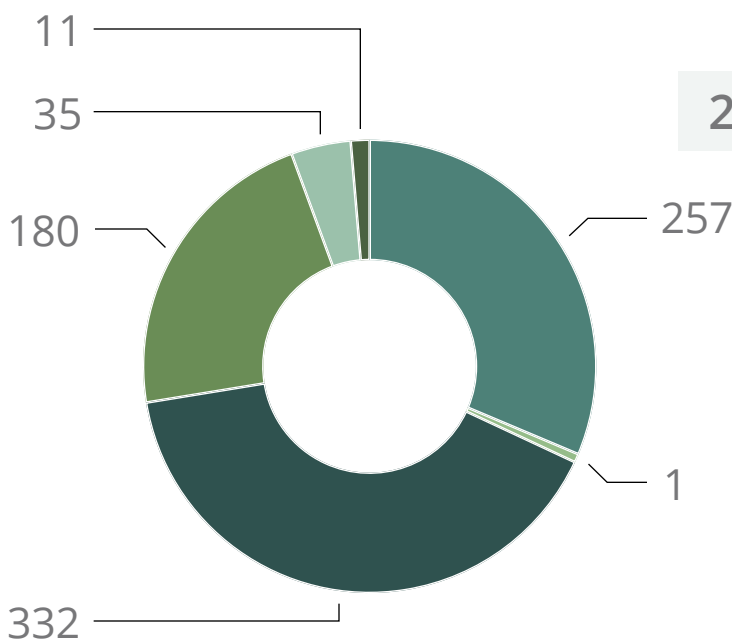
Accident - Deaths due to unintentional injury

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



2019 El Paso County Breakdown

- Natural (32%)
- Unclassified (0.1%)
- Accident (41%)
- Suicide (22%)
- Homicide (4%)
- Undetermined (1%)

Deaths Due to Natural Diseases

257 Total



Cardiovascular	57%	146
Chronic Alcohol	10%	26
Infections	7%	18
Pulmonary Embolism	4%	11
Geriatric Decline/Dementia	4%	9
Pulmonary Disease	3%	7
Diabetes	3%	7
Gastrointestinal	3%	7
Cerebrovascular	2%	5
Complications of Pregnancy/Birth	2%	4
Morbid Obesity	2%	4
Epilepsy	2%	4
Cancer/Neoplasm	1%	3
Liver Disease	1%	2
Other	2%	4





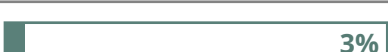








Significant Contributing Causes - The diseases that are most commonly listed as significant contributing factors in death alongside those causes listed above include obesity, diabetes, pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, smoking, and chronic alcoholism.

Deaths Due to Accidents

We continue to see decreases in accidents (369 in 2018) largely due to decreases in fall related deaths (100 in 2018) and pedestrian deaths (19 in 2018). We did see a marked increase in hypothermia deaths (2 in 2018).

332 Total



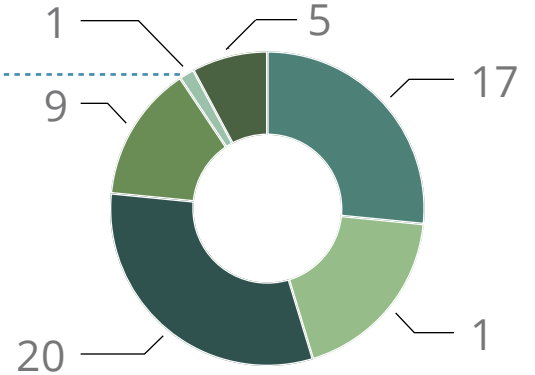
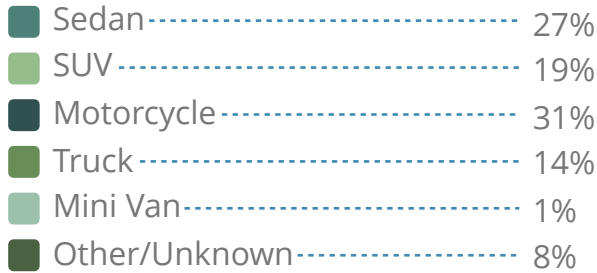
Drugs		39%	130
Falls		26%	85
Motor Vehicle Accidents		19%	64
Drowning		3%	10
Asphyxias		3%	10
Pedestrian Injury		2%	8
Hypothermia		2%	8
Carbon Monoxide		1%	4
Fires/Burns		<1%	3
ATV		<1%	3
Bicycle Injuries		<1%	3
Firearms		<1%	1
Others		<1%	3

Blunt Force Injury Accidents

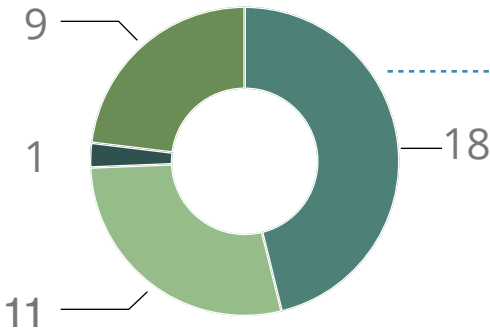
Falls in Adults + Elderly	.....	85	Falls from height	.....	6
Passenger vehicles	.....	64	Falls down stairs	.....	6
Pedestrian	.....	8	ATV	.....	3
Motorcycle	.....	20			
Bicycle	.....	3			

Motor Vehicle Crashes

Type of Vehicle Involved



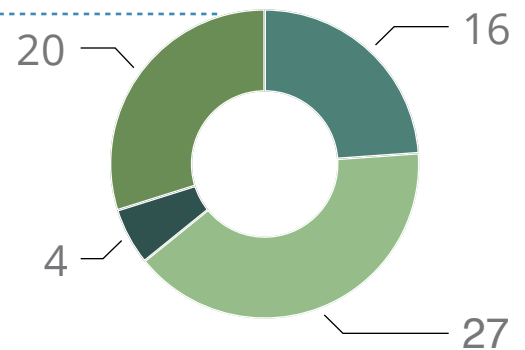
Type of Collision



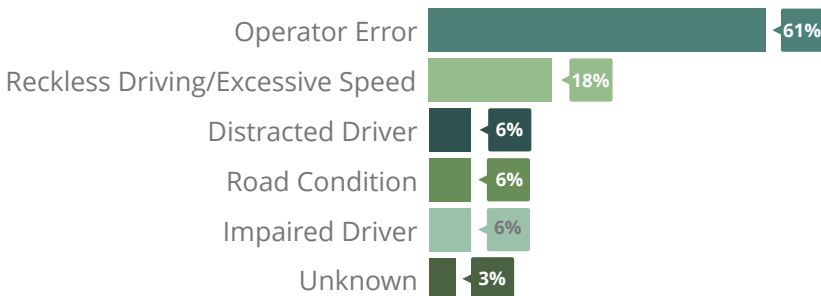
Use of Restraint/seatbelt



Every crash in which the decedent was ejected there was failure to use a seatbelt



Suspected Primary Cause of Crash



Of the 45 fatal accidents where the decedent was the "at fault driver" 24 had drugs, alcohol, or THC in their system at autopsy

Drugs: 4	Alcohol + THC: 2
Alcohol: 7	Drugs + Alcohol: 3
THC: 5	Drugs, Alcohol + THC: 3

Vehicle vs. Pedestrian



Drug Related Accidental Deaths

The total number of drug-related deaths remained relatively steady from 2018 (133) due to decreases in heroin deaths (47 in 2018) being offset by an increase in fentanyl related deaths (9 in 2018). Overall methamphetamine continues to be the drug most commonly present at death (66 cases). Forty-five percent of deaths were due to a combination of two or more drugs.

130 Total



Methamphetamine	38
Heroin	11
Heroin + Methamphetamine	17
Prescription Opioids (+/- Ethanol or other meds)	14
Fentanyl + Other Prescription Drugs	4
Cocaine	5
Non-Opioid Prescription Drugs	7
Fentanyl	8
Heroin, Cocaine + Methamphetamine	2
Methamphetamine + Fentanyl	2
Cocaine + Heroin	2
Ethanol	5
Cocaine + Methamphetamine	4
Methamphetamine + Fentanyl + Herion + Cocaine	2
Methamphetamine + Heroin + Fentanyl	1
Cocaine + Prescription Opioids	1
Fentanyl + Cocaine	4
Mitragynine	2
Freon Gas	1

Opioids resulting in death

71 Total

Heroin	35	Methadone	3
Oxycodone	7	Mixed RX Opioids	1
Hydrocodone	1	Buprenorphine	2
Fentanyl	21	Oxymorphone	1

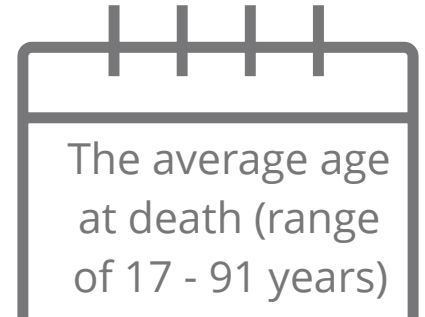
2018 Drug Related Death Facts

12% 

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

68%

Accidental drug deaths that were male (6% decrease from 2018)

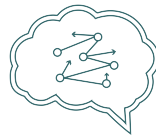


42 YEARS

65%

Have a prior history of substance abuse or addiction

13%



Have a known history of mental illness

44%

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

 20%

Deaths of all causes that have marijuana metabolites present at autopsy

Represents a 1% decrease from 2018

60%

Percentage of the accidental opioid deaths that were heroin

82

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

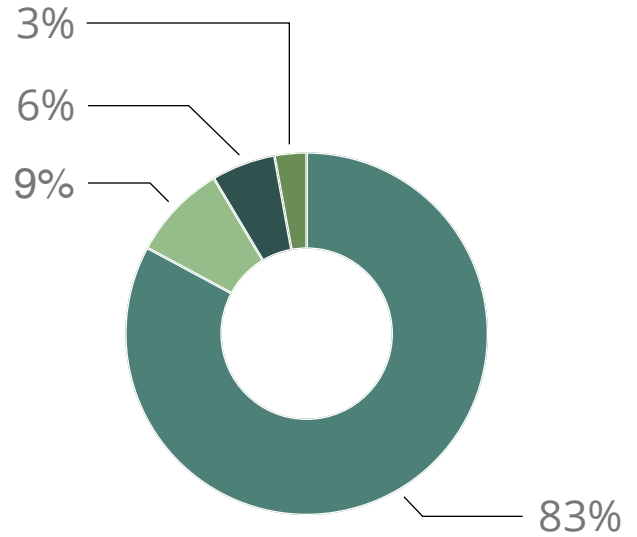
87 in 2018

Deaths Due to Homicide

2019 marked a sharp decrease in homicides (56 in 2018) of nearly all types.

35 Total

Firearms	29
Blunt Force Injuries	3
Sharp Force Injuries	2
Strangulation	1



83% of homicide victims were intoxicated with drugs (49% of victims), alcohol (40% of victims), THC (49% of victims) or some combination at death.

Apparent Circumstances of the Homicides



Altercation	14
Drug related	4
Domestic Violence	7
Officer Involved*	6
Gang Related	2
Reckless use of firearm	1
Military Combat Injuries	1

*All 6 officer-involved deaths resulted from a use of force (firearms) 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.

40% of decedents personally knew the suspect in their death.

Deaths Due to Suicide

There was an increase in suicides (152 in 2018) largely by firearms (80 in 2018) in our adult population.

180 Total

Firearms	102
Ligature	46
Drugs	19
Carbon Monoxide	2
Asphyxia	4
Fall	1
Sharp Force Injury	2
Train	1
Other	3

Drugs Used in Suicide

Opioids	11
Mixed alcohol and non-opioids	3
Other	5


2018 Suicide Facts




40
Average age at death
(Range of 13 - 89 years)



33%
Notes or social media posts indicating suicidal intentions



64%
Have a reported history of prior suicidal thoughts



68%
Autopsies contain drugs (41%), alcohol (31%), or THC (14%) at the time of death



19%
Have known active or prior military duty

79% of completed suicides were male



Most common risk factors: **recently ended relationship, personal health crisis, financial struggles, legal issues, and grief over the death of a loved one.**

Child Fatalities

El Paso County Coroner's Office investigated the deaths of 36 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 motor vehicle deaths (3 in 2018), including 2 ATVs.

36 Total

Age	
<1 month	2
1 month - 1 year	12
1-4 Years	2
5-12 Years	1
13-17	19


Breakdown	
Natural	3
Homicides	2
Suicides	9
Infant unsafe sleep/asphyxia	9
Undetermined	2
Drowning	1
Motor vehicle accident	6
Water Intoxication	1
Drugs, Accident	2
Complication of birth	1



Teen Suicides (Ages 13-15 Years)

Gender	Male: 6	Female: 3
Hanging		3
Firearms		6

When the Suicides Occurred

	January 2	April 3	August 1
	September 1	November 1	December 1

Infant Asphyxias: 9 Total

Deaths due to an unsafe sleep surface	6
Deaths due to bed sharing with adults	3

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 2019, 56 total individuals died unexpectedly while struggling with homelessness and were investigated by the coroner.

56 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

45

Average age at death

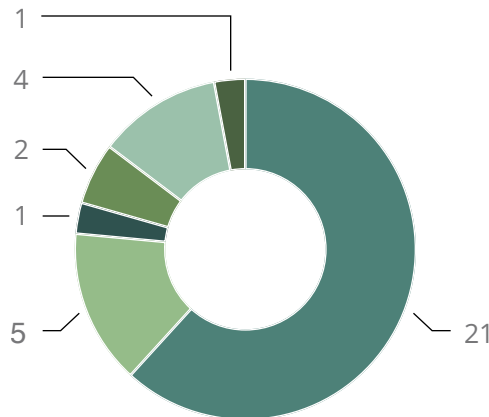
RACE

- White - 88%
- Black - 3%
- Hispanic - 9%

86%

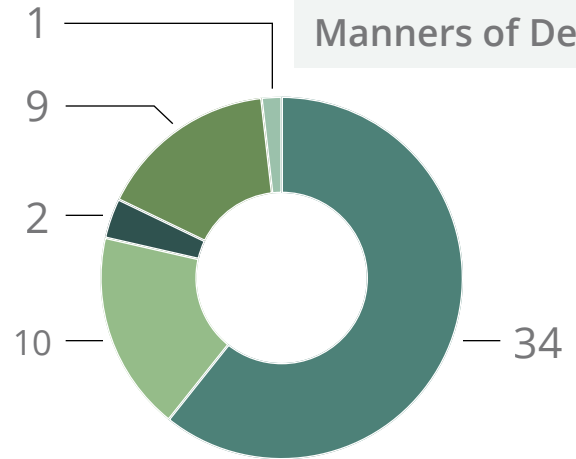
Homeless deaths were male

Accidents



- Drug intoxication 61%
- Pedestrian stuck by vehicle..... 18%
- Carbon monoxide/Fire..... 3%
- Hypothermia 3%
- Hypothermia + Drugs/Alcohol .. 12%
- Drowning 3%

Manners of Death



- Accident 61%
- Natural 18%
- Homicide..... 4%
- Suicide 16%
- Undetermined 1%

Natural Deaths

- Heart Disease 5
- Alcoholism 3
- Infections 1
- Global Decline 1

Drug Intoxications

- Methamphetamine 10
- Heroin 1
- Methamphetamine + Heroin 7
- Methamphetamine + Fentanyl 1
- Methamphetamine + Cocaine 1
- Methamp. + Cocaine + Heroin 1
- Mixed Drugs and/or Alcohol 3
- Other 1

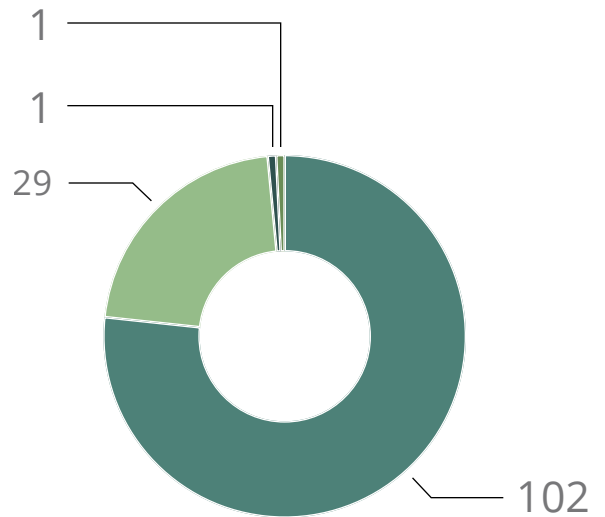
Firearms Related Deaths

In 2019, 132 total individuals died of firearms related injuries. There was a marked decrease in firearm associated homicides (41 in 2018) which was offset by a marked increase in firearm related suicides (80 in 2018).

132 Total

Breakdown of Manners

- Suicide 77%
- Homicide 22%
- Accident <1%
- Undetermined <1%



Firearm Related Homicide Circumstances

Altercation	11
Drug related	5
Domestic violence	4
Gang	2
Reckless use of a firearm	1
Lawful use of deadly force by law enforcement	6

AGE RANGES

FIREARM HOMICIDE

15 - 74
years old

FIREARM ACCIDENT

44
years old

FIREARM SUICIDE

15 - 89
years old

55%
Of males used a firearm to complete suicide
vs.
47%
Of females

Organ Donation

In 2019:

24

El Paso County donors had organs recovered for transplantation

17 of the 24

71%

Were coroner jurisdiction cases and all were approved for donation



Organs were transplanted from El Paso County donors

68

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



38

Cases resulted in tissue harvest

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