



EL PASO COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

2022 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 **1039 autopsies on El Paso County Deaths**, the office performed 425 autopsies for a fee for 22 surrounding counties.

TOTAL CASES
INVESTIGATED

6741

TOTAL AUTOPSIES
PERFORMED

1464

(4% increase over 2021)

In 2022, the EPCCO's staff consisted of five board-certified forensic pathologists including elected Coroner Leon Kelly, M.D., Deputy Chief Medical Examiner Emily Russell-Kinsley, M.D., and Associate Coroners 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 six 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, 5 cases dating back to 2019 are pending identification and 1 case from 2022 is pending identification. In 2022, 59 unclaimed remains were released to the Public Administrator.

MEANS OF IDENTIFICATION



Visual or
Circumstances – 598



Outside
Coroners – 425



Fingerprints – 430



Dental – 6



DNA – 1



Medical – 3

What is an Autopsy?

An “autopsy” can encompass several levels of examination:

209

209 cases in 2022 were “**external only**” examinations, in which the cause and manner are well established by the external examination* and a thorough medical history.

50

50 of the 2022 examinations were **partial autopsies** and typically consisted of “head only” examinations to ensure that head trauma didn’t cause or contribute to death.

1205

1205 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

864

864 of 1039 (83%) of El Paso County autopsies 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 2022

***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. 106 accidental deaths due largely to documented falls in the elderly were released after reviewing the circumstances with care providers.

Average time to completion

The average number of days from autopsy to report completion during 2022 was **40.5 days**. **137 cases** (9.4%) 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

2022 Revenue for El Paso County Coroner's Office

Grant for Violent Death Reporting	\$4828
Out-of-County Autopsy Fees	\$564,775
Out-of-County Toxicology Fees	\$26,090
Histology Fees	\$3,657
HB-21-1317 Tax Reimbursement	\$6,975
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Total Revenue for 2022	\$606,325

El Paso County Citizen Cost Breakdown

2022 Population* 740,567

Total 2022 Budget \$3,760,102

\$3,760,102 (Budget)

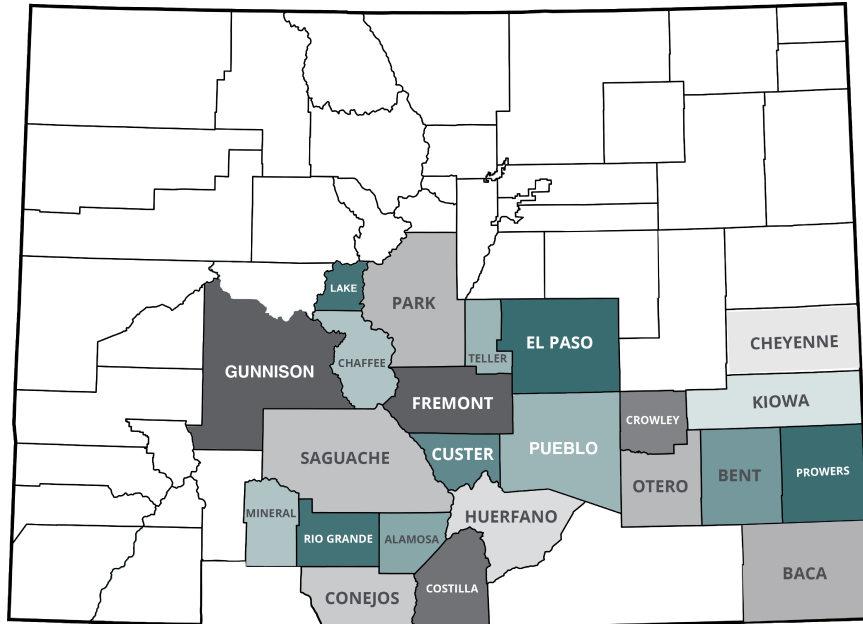
- \$606,325 (Revenue)

\$3,153,777 Overall Cost to Citizens

÷ 740,567 (Population)

= \$4.46 Annual cost to each El Paso County Citizen

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



ALAMOSA	30
BACA	7
BENT	12
CHAFFEE	36
CHEYENNE	8
CONEJOS	14
COSTILLA	18
CROWLEY	11
CUSTER	19
EL PASO	1039
FREMONT	87

1	GUNNISON
18	HUERFANO
3	KIOWA
16	LAKE
5	MINERAL
15	OTERO
27	PARK
17	PROWERS
1	PUEBLO
16	RIO GRANDE
16	SAGUACHE
48	TELLER

1,464 – 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

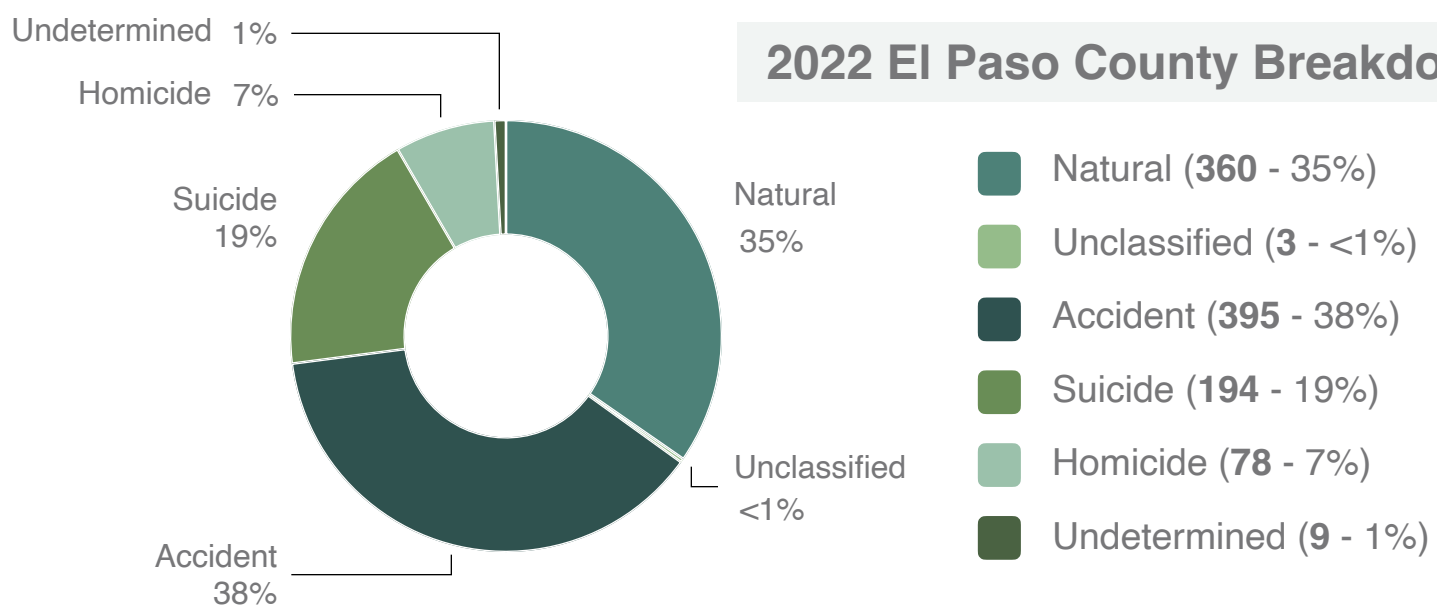
Accident - Deaths due to unintentional injury

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 aging or disease and occurred suddenly or while not under the care of a physician.

360 Total



Cardiovascular	168
Chronic Alcohol	71
COVID-19*	20
Non COVID-19 Infections	17
Pulmonary Embolism	11
Cancer/Neoplasm	11
Morbid Obesity	9
Geriatric Decline/Dementia	9
Pulmonary Disease	8
Gastrointestinal	8
Other	8
Diabetes	7
Epilepsy	7
Congenital Disorders	6

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.

*There was a 63% reduction in COVID-19 related deaths compared to 2021 with the majority occurring over the first few months of 2022.

Deaths Due to Accidents

We saw an increase in accidents (385 in 2021) largely due to a 33% increase in motor vehicle related fatalities, including a 56% increase in motorcycle deaths. Total drug deaths decreased by 5%. Alcohol intoxication played a role in many hypothermia and asphyxial deaths.

395 Total



Drugs	55%	216
Motor Vehicle Accidents	19%	77
Falls	7%	28
Pedestrian Injury	4%	16
Hypothermia	4%	14
Choking	2%	7
Drowning	2%	6
Bicycle Crashes	2%	6
Unsafe Sleep - Pediatric	1%	5
Asphyxias	1%	5
Others	1%	5
Carbon Monoxide	1%	4
Fires/Burns	<1%	2
ATV Accident	<1%	2
Maternal Drug Use	<1%	1
Hyperthermia	<1%	1

Blunt Force Injury Accidents

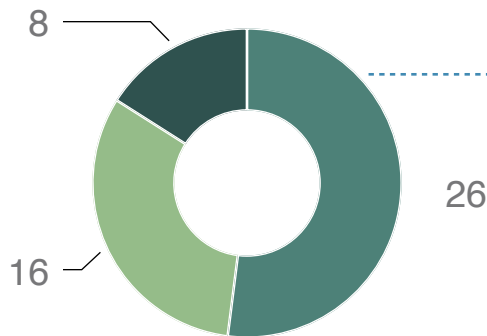
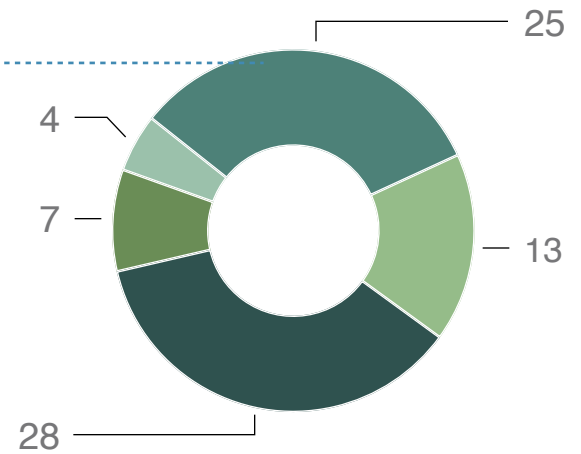
Simple Falls in Adults	18
Passenger vehicles	77
Pedestrian	16

Motorcycle	28
Unknown mechanism	5
Falls down stairs	5
Bicycle	6

Motor Vehicle Crashes

Type of Vehicle Involved

Sedan	25 (32%)
SUV	13 (17%)
Motorcycle	28 (36%)
Truck	7 (9%)
Other/Unknown	4 (5%)



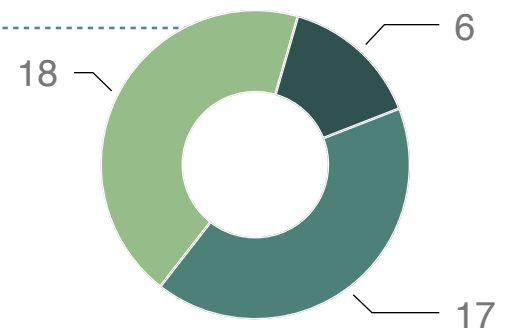
Type of Collision if Known

50 TOTAL

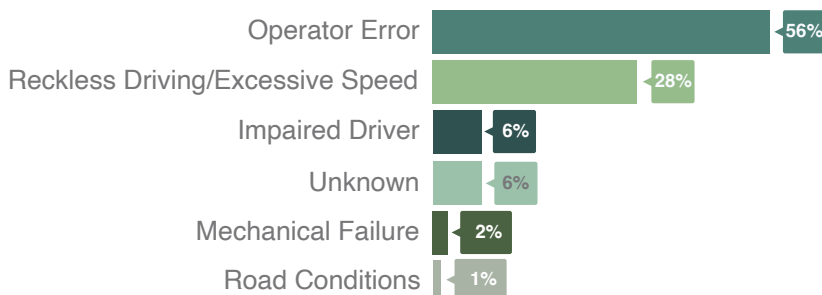
Front	26 (52%)
Side	16 (32%)
Rollover	8 (16%)

Use of Restraint/Seatbelt

Yes	17 (41%)
No	18 (44%)
Unknown	6 (15%)



Suspected Primary Cause of Crash



Of the 46 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: 10	Alcohol + THC: 2
Alcohol: 8	Drugs + Alcohol: 2
THC: 5	Drugs, Alcohol + THC: 2
Drugs + THC: 3	

Vehicle vs. Pedestrian/Bicycle

Pedestrian at fault
39%

Driver at fault
61%

Drug Related Accidental Deaths

There was a 5% reduction in drug-related accidental deaths over 2021. Total Fentanyl deaths increased 16% which represents a flattening of the doubling rate of the preceding five years. Methamphetamine related deaths increased 8% over 2021 totals, occurring 48% of the time in combination with fentanyl.

216

Total



Methamphetamine (+/- other meds)	48
Methamphetamine + Fentanyl (+/- other meds)	42
Fentanyl	36
Prescription Opioids (+/- Ethanol or other meds)	14
Fentanyl + Other Prescription Drugs	10
Methamphetamine, Fentanyl + Heroin	10
Fentanyl + Cocaine	7
Heroin + Methamphetamine	6
Cocaine	6
Fentanyl + Heroin	5
Heroin (+/- other meds)	4
Fentanyl, Methamphetamine + Cocaine	4
Cocaine + Methamphetamine	4
Over the Counter meds	4
Ethanol/Alcohols	4
Cocaine + Heroin (+/- other meds)	3
Freon Gas	2
Methamphetamine + Prescription Opioids	2
Non-Opioid Prescription Drugs	1
Mitragynine (+/- Ethanol or other meds)	1
Nitrous Oxide + Cocaine	1
Heroin, Fentanyl + Cocaine	1
Cocaine + Prescription meds	1

Most Common Drugs in Death

Methamphetamine	116	Prescription Opioid	25
Fentanyl	115	Mitragynine	5
Heroin	29	Ethanol	4
Cocaine	27	Ketamine	1

2022 Drug Related Death Facts

3% 

of drugs used in the overdose were prescribed by the decedent's physician

67%

of accidental drug deaths were male

The average age at death for all drugs

42 YEARS

92%

of drug related deaths occurred prior to transport to the hospital

9%

had no known drug use history prior to death

Average age of fentanyl death

36 YEARS

3 youth (ages 4-16)

Average age of non-fentanyl drug death

48 YEARS



23%

of all deaths have marijuana metabolites present at autopsy

25%

of drug-related deaths had THC metabolites present
(13% reduction compared to 2021)

117

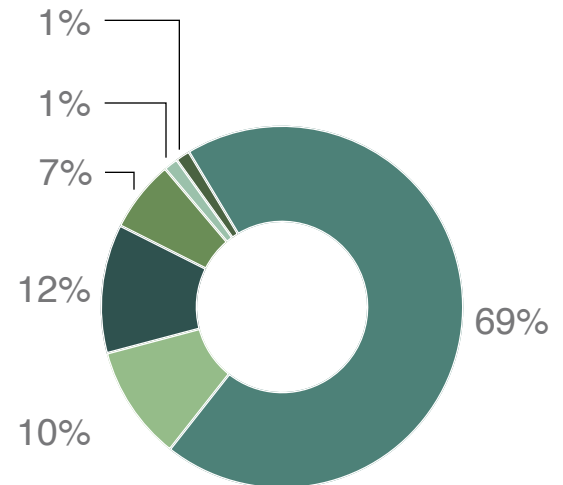
Total number of fentanyl-related deaths in 2022
(Accidents and Suicides)

Deaths Due to Homicide

2022 saw a significant increase in homicides (61 in 2021) due to increases in every category. Five of the deaths occurred in a single mass shooting event.

78 Total

Firearms	54
Blunt Force/Altercation	8
Sharp Force Injuries	9
Strangulation	5
Blunt and Sharp Force	1
Neglect	1



Apparent Circumstances of the Homicides



Altercation	27
Domestic/Family Violence	23
During the Commission of Another Crime	10
Officer Involved*	5
Mass Shooting/Hate Crime	5
Unknown	4
Reckless Use of Firearm	2
Line of Duty	1
Gang Related	1

*All 5 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.

37% of decedents personally knew the suspect in their death.

Deaths Due to Suicide

There was a 10% increase in total suicides (over 2021).

194 Total

Firearms	119
Ligature	37
Drugs	23
Fall	5
Other	5
Asphyxia	4
Sharp Force	1

Drugs Used in Suicide

Opioid Containing	6
Single Non-Opioids	9
Mixed Non-Opioids	5
Illicit Drug	3

2022 Suicide Facts



44

Average age at death (Range of 13 - 88 years)



34%

have notes or social media posts indicating suicidal intentions



55%

have a reported history of prior suicidal thoughts



73%

of autopsies contain drugs (42%), alcohol (36%), or THC (22%) at the time of death



25%

have known active or prior military duty
(5% Reduction from 2021)

74%

of completed suicides were male (7% decrease from 2021)



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

Child Fatalities

40 Total

El Paso County Coroner's Office investigated the deaths of 40 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 a decrease in deaths (from 48 in 2021), largely from the undetermined and drug categories. Youth suicides stayed steady at 4 deaths. There were 3 fentanyl related deaths in youth.

Age

<1 Month	1
1 Month - 1 Year	13
1-4 Years	5
5-12 Years	7
13-17 Years	14

Breakdown

Homicides	8
Infant unsafe sleep/asphyxia	8
Natural	6
Motor vehicle accident	6
Suicides	4
Drugs, accident	3
Choking	1
Maternal drug use	1
Pedestrian	1
Drowning	1

Teen Suicides (Ages 13-17 Years)

Gender	Male: 2	Female: 2
Blunt Force Injuries		2
Firearms		2

Identified Risk Factors

Relationship issues, poor academic performance and family discord.

Unsafe Sleep Infant Deaths: 8 Total

Deaths due to an unsafe sleep surface	3
Deaths due to bed sharing with adults	3
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 2022, there was a 55% increase in deaths over 2021 (78) in individuals who died unexpectedly while experiencing homelessness that were investigated by the coroner. This significant increase was due largely to elevations in homicides (11) and fentanyl (35) related deaths.

121 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

47

Average
age at
death

RACE

White – 78%
Black – 13%
Hispanic – 8%
Other/Unknown – 1%

77%

Of homeless
deaths were
male
(6% decrease from
2021)

Accidents

75 TOTAL

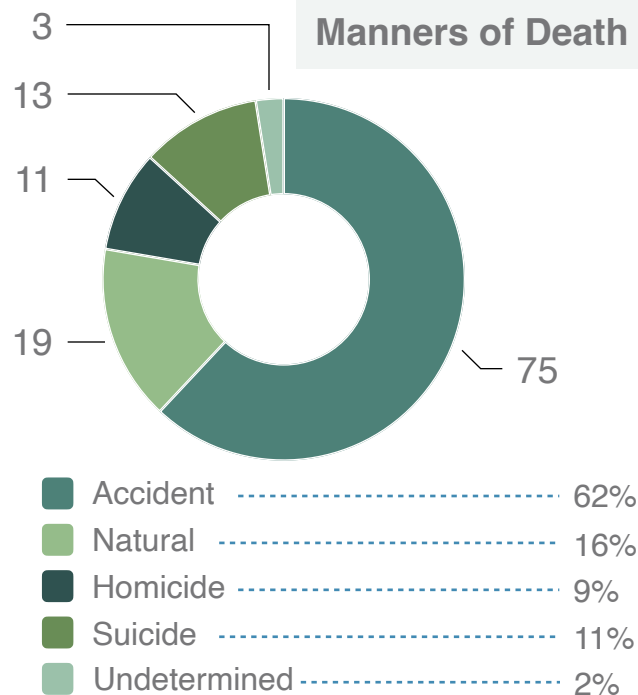
Drug intoxication	59 (79%)
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Hypothermia	9 (12%)
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Motor vehicle crash	6 (8%)
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Carbon monoxide/fire	1 (2%)
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Manners of Death



Homicides

11 TOTAL

Sharp Force	4
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Gunshot Wound	3
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Asphyxia	3
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Blunt Force	1
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Drug Intoxications

59 TOTAL

Methamphetamine	18
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Fentanyl +/- other drugs	35
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Other illicit	2
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Prescription	3
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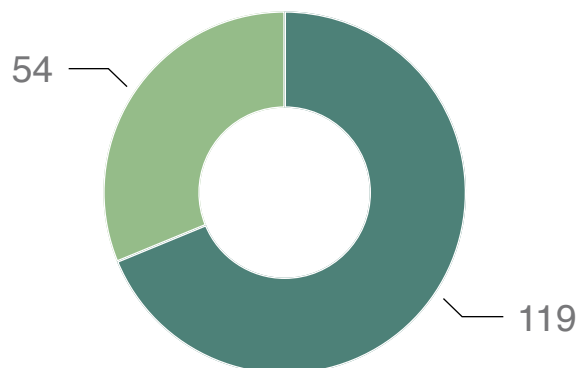
Ethanol	1
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Firearms Related Deaths

In 2022, 173 total individuals died of firearms related injuries. There were increases in both firearms associated homicides (52 in 2021) as well as in firearm related suicides (114 in 2021). There were no firearm related accidental deaths in 2022.

173 Total

Breakdown of Manners



Firearm Related Homicide Circumstances

Altercation	18
Domestic Violence	11
While committing another crime	8
Mass Shooting	5
Lawful use of deadly force by law enforcement	4
Unknown	4
Reckless use of a firearm	2
Gang Related	1
Line of Duty	1

AGE RANGES

FIREARM HOMICIDE

13 – 67
years old

FIREARM SUICIDE

13 – 91
years old

69%

of males used a firearm to
complete suicide
vs.

40%

of females

(Males decreased 4% while females
increased 2% over 2021)

Organ Donation

In 2022:

29

El Paso County donors had organs recovered for transplantation

100%

of 83 potential donor cases were approved for donation by the El Paso County Coroner's Office



Organs were transplanted from El Paso County donors



118

Cases resulted in tissue recovery

There were 22 refusals of tissue requests by the El Paso County Coroner due to time or tissue constraints