

# Suicide Death among Veterans in California, 2020

In accordance with Assembly Bill 242 (Chapter 222, Statutes of 2017), the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) has created this annual injury data brief on California veterans (those who have served in the United States Armed Forces) who died by suicide in 2020. It provides information on statewide counts by age, sex, race/ethnicity, county, and method of suicide. Data are compiled from limited information on death certificates in the California Comprehensive Death Files produced by CDPH’s Center for Health Statistics and Informatics.<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, there were 583 suicide deaths among California residents aged 18 years and older who had served in the United States Armed Forces (identified here as veterans) (Table 1).

- In 2020, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the total number of deaths statewide increased by 19%. The number of deaths by suicide in 2020, however, decreased by 7% statewide and decreased by 8% among California veterans.
- 2020 had the lowest number of suicide deaths to California resident veterans since the information became available in vital statistics data in 2005.
- Suicide deaths among veterans made up 15% of all suicides in 2020 (similar to 2019).
- Among both veterans and non-veterans, suicides made up 1% of total deaths in 2020.

Table 1: Suicide deaths and total deaths in California residents aged 18 years and older by decedent’s veteran status, 2020.

Veteran Status	Suicides	Total Deaths
Veteran	583	52,888
Non-Veteran	3,355	258,965
Unknown	65	4,660
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,003</b>	<b>316,513</b>

The vast majority of veteran suicide deaths were to males (97%). Forty percent of veteran suicides were in the 65–84-year-old age group and 20% occurred in the 45–64-year-old age group. Fourteen percent of veterans who died by suicide were in the oldest age group, 85 years and older. The majority of veteran suicides were among Whites (80%) and Hispanics (10%) (Figure 1).

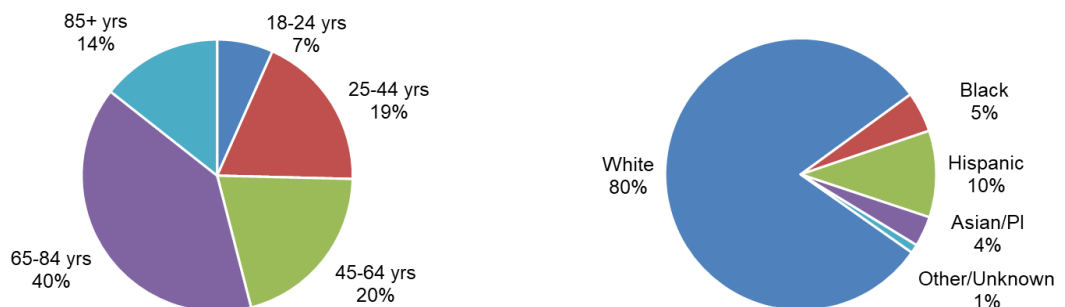


Figure 1: Age and Race/Ethnicity among veteran suicide deaths, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2020 (n=583).

Firearms were used in nearly two-thirds of suicides among California veterans (61%), followed by hanging/suffocation (19%) (Figure 2).

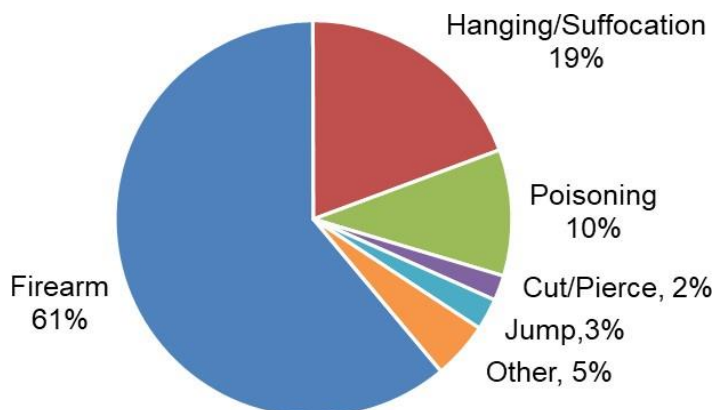


Figure 2: Method of suicide among veteran suicide deaths, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2020 (n=583).

Females made up only 3% of veteran suicide deaths; there may be some differences between male and female veterans who die by suicide. In 2020, more than half of male veteran suicides were among those aged 65 or older, whereas this age group consisted of no suicides among female veterans (Table 2). Among both sexes, most suicides among veterans were White (80% of males and 75% of females).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics among veteran suicide deaths by sex, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2020.

	Male (N)	(%)	Female (N)	(%)
<b>Age (years)</b>				
18-44	137	24%	11	69%
45-64	115	20%	5	31%
65-84	231	41%	0	
85+	84	15%	0	
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				
White	456	80%	12	75%
Black	26	5%	*	
Hispanic	59	10%	*	
American Indian/Alaska Native	*		*	
Asian/Pacific Islander	20	3%	*	
Other/Unknown	*		*	
<b>Total</b>	<b>567</b>		<b>16</b>	

\*Numbers are masked due to potential identification as required by the California Department of Health Care Services, Data De-Identification Guidelines (DDG), Version 2.0, November 22, 2016.

Firearms were used in the majority of suicides among male veterans (62%), followed by hanging/suffocation in 18% (Table 3). Hanging/suffocation, however, was used in one-half of female veteran suicides, followed by firearm and poisoning in 25% each.

*Table 3: Method of suicide among veteran suicide deaths by sex, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2020.*

Method of Suicide	Male (N)	(%)	Female (N)	(%)
Firearm	352	62%	4	25%
Hanging/Suffocation	105	18%	8	50%
Poisoning	56	10%	4	25%
Cut/Pierce	12	2%	0	
Jump	15	3%	0	
Other Methods	27	5%	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>567</b>		<b>16</b>	

Los Angeles and San Diego, the two most populous counties in California, had the largest number of suicide deaths among veterans in California, accounting for 28% in 2020 (Table 4).

#### Data Limitations

- In this report, veteran status is identified based on the answer to a single item on the death certificate that asks whether the decedent was “ever in the United States Armed Forces.” This does not distinguish between current and former service members, nor does it identify those seeing active duty. This definition of veteran may not align with other definitions that include only those who have been activated for federal military service and are not serving at the time of their death.
- Rates were not calculated because CDPH does not have estimates on the underlying population of Californians who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces.
- The veteran status information on death certificates may be inaccurate if those completing the form (e.g., Coroners, Funeral Homes) did not have sufficient information on the decedent’s history.

#### Technical Notes

<sup>1</sup>Copies of the California Certificate of Death and the CDPH, Vital Records, Death/Fetal Death Registration Handbook are available upon request from CDPH, Center for Health Statistics and Informatics (CHSI).

Suicides are identified on the death certificate as an underlying cause of death with ICD-10 codes X60-X84, U03.0 or U03.9. Method of suicide is categorized by the following ICD-10 code groupings: Cut/Pierce: X78; Firearm: X72-X74; Hanging/suffocation: X70; Jump: X80-X81; Poisoning: X60-X69; and Other: U03.0, U03.9, X71, X75-X77, X79, X82-X84.

As required by the California Department of Health Care Services, Data De-Identification Guidelines (DDG), Version 2.0, (November 22, 2016), small numbers may be masked in tables to prevent potential identification. In the case of county breakdowns, cells are masked when the number of deaths and the resident population are small.

Table 4: Veteran suicide deaths by county of residence, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2017-2020.

County	2017	2018	2019	2020	County	2017	2018	2019	2020
Alameda	16	17	11	18	Orange	30	42	45	34
Alpine	0	0	0	0	Placer	7	9	13	16
Amador	*	*	*	*	Plumas	0	*	*	*
Butte	9	17	9	6	Riverside	43	52	44	41
Calaveras	*	*	*	*	Sacramento	31	32	30	23
Colusa	0	0	0	0	San Benito	0	1	1	0
Contra Costa	16	19	6	16	San Bernardino	31	37	33	46
Del Norte	0	*	0	*	San Diego	110	98	95	85
El Dorado	7	7	4	5	San Francisco	9	9	13	6
Fresno	20	14	15	9	San Joaquin	14	9	11	17
Glenn	*	*	*	*	San Luis Obispo	17	12	9	7
Humboldt	3	6	4	4	San Mateo	8	7	8	8
Imperial	1	1	2	2	Santa Barbara	13	5	17	6
Inyo	*	*	*	0	Santa Clara	22	14	21	17
Kern	15	16	16	19	Santa Cruz	6	2	2	3
Kings	5	3	5	5	Shasta	14	10	7	7
Lake	4	2	3	1	Sierra	0	0	0	0
Lassen	*	*	0	0	Siskiyou	*	0	*	*
Los Angeles	93	108	87	81	Solano	10	22	11	7
Madera	2	5	1	3	Sonoma	7	13	15	4
Marin	6	4	7	5	Stanislaus	9	11	12	3
Mariposa	*	*	0	0	Sutter	0	2	2	2
Mendocino	6	2	4	8	Tehama	2	5	2	3
Merced	1	3	1	3	Trinity	0	0	*	*
Modoc	0	0	0	0	Tulare	5	5	5	2
Mono	0	0	0	0	Tuolumne	3	5	1	2
Monterey	4	6	9	8	Ventura	13	25	23	13
Napa	2	3	4	2	Yolo	1	4	2	4
Nevada	4	0	7	6	Yuba	5	4	2	3
					<b>Total</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>583</b>

\*Numbers are masked due to potential identification as required by the California Department of Health Care Services, Data De-Identification Guidelines (DDG), Version 2.0, November 22, 2016. In the case of county breakdowns, cells are masked when the number of deaths and the resident population are small.

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California Department of Public Health

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Data source: CDPH, California Comprehensive Master Death File (CCMDF), 2020.



**Supplemental Table**

The following table contains the numbers of suicide deaths to both veterans and non-veterans by demographic characteristics and method of suicide for the four reporting years, 2017 through 2020. For veteran suicide deaths in 2020, these numbers are reflected in Figures 1 and 2 and Tables 2 and 3.

*Table 5: Demographic characteristics and method of suicide among veteran and non-veteran suicide deaths, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2017-2020.*

	2017:		2018:		2019:		2020:	
	Veteran	Non-Vet	Veteran	Non-Vet	Veteran	Non-Vet	Veteran	Non-Vet
<b>Sex</b>								
Male	615	2,583	669	2,670	608	2,737	567	2,509
Female	21	878	21	941	23	884	16	846
<b>Age (years)</b>								
18-24	21	412	28	393	31	381	39	350
25-44	120	1,188	111	1,263	119	1,303	109	1,276
45-64	153	1,308	176	1,384	148	1,363	120	1,146
65-84	254	487	282	506	245	505	231	517
85+	88	66	93	65	88	69	84	66
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>								
White	504	2,137	560	2,160	509	2,208	468	1,964
Black	32	139	29	161	24	184	28	169
Hispanic	66	781	77	857	67	828	60	809
American Indian/Alaska Native	6	26	2	26	1	22	4	13
Asian/Pacific Islander	26	369	21	392	29	367	21	389
Other/Unknown	2	9	1	15	1	12	2	11
<b>Method of Suicide</b>								
Firearm	419	1,134	448	1,126	391	1,147	356	1,141
Hanging/Suffocation	109	1,236	139	1,412	129	1,344	113	1,252
Poisoning	61	572	57	578	60	562	60	451
Cut/Pierce	17	97	19	93	23	116	12	117
Jump	10	156	11	162	9	180	15	165
Other Methods	20	266	16	240	19	272	27	229
<b>Total</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>3,461</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>3,611</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>3,621</b>	<b>583</b>	<b>3,355</b>

\*Numbers are masked due to potential identification as required by the California Department of Health Care Services, Data De-Identification Guidelines (DDG), Version 2.0, November 22, 2016.

**For Veterans in Need:**

National Suicide Prevention Hotline: Dial 988 then press 1

**PRESS 1** to connect with the Veteran Crisis Line to access veteran-specific help.

Chat also available at [veteran Crisis Line](http://veteran Crisis Line) or text 838255.