

INJURY DATA BRIEF

Suicide Death among Veterans in California, 2021



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 reside in California and have served in the United States Armed Forces) who died by suicide in 2021. It provides information on numbers of suicide deaths statewide broken down 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.¹

In 2021, there were 559 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 2021, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the total number of deaths statewide increased by 4%. The number of deaths by suicide in 2021 increased by less than 1% statewide and decreased by 4% among California Veterans.
- 2021 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 14% of all suicides in 2021 (compared to the 15% in 2019 and 2020).
- Among both Veterans and non-Veterans, suicides made up 1% of total deaths in 2021.

Table 1: Suicide deaths and total deaths in California residents aged 18 years and older by decedent's Veteran status, 2021.

Veteran Status	Suicides	Total Deaths
Veteran	559	52,341
Non-Veteran	3,384	273,186
Unknown	67	4,676
Total	4,010	329,847

Most Veteran suicide deaths were to males (96%; see Data Limitations section on page 3). Thirty-seven percent of Veteran suicides were in the 65–84 year-old age group, and 19% 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. Most Veteran suicides were among Whites (76%) and Hispanics (11%) (Figure 1).

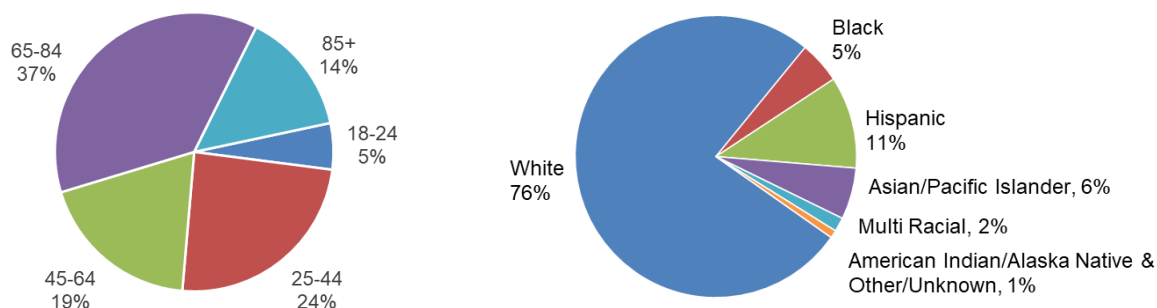


Figure 1: Age and Race/Ethnicity among Veteran suicide deaths, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2021 (n=559). American Indian/Alaska Native and Other/Unknown have been merged for data de-identification purposes.

Firearms were used in nearly two-thirds of suicides among California Veterans (65%), followed by hanging/suffocation (19%) (Figure 2).

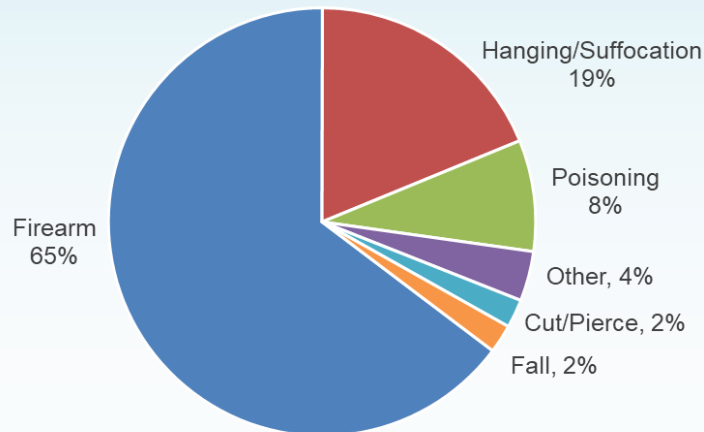


Figure 2: Method of suicide among Veteran suicide deaths, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2021 (n=559).

Females made up only 4% of Veteran suicide deaths; there may be some differences between male and female Veterans who die by suicide. In 2021, 15% of male Veteran suicides were among those aged 85 or older, whereas this age group had no suicide deaths among female Veterans (Table 2). Among both sexes, most suicides among Veterans were White (77% of males and 59% of females).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics among Veteran suicide deaths by sex, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2021.

	Male (N)	(%)	Female (N)	(%)
<u>Age (years)</u>				
18 – 44	155	29%	11	50%
45 – 64	99	18%	7	32%
65 – 84	203	38%	4	18%
85+	80	15%	0	
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>				
White	413	77%	13	59%
Black	25	5%	*	
Hispanic	53	10%	6	27%
American Indian/Alaska Native	*		*	
Asian/Pacific Islander	33	6%	0	
Multi Racial	*		*	
Other/Unknown	*		*	
Total	537		22	

*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 most suicides among male Veterans (66%), followed by hanging/suffocation in 18% (Table 3). Hanging/suffocation, however, was used in almost one-third of female Veteran suicides, followed by firearm (27%) and poisoning (23%).

Table 3: Method of suicide among Veteran suicide deaths by sex, California residents aged 18 years and older, 2021.

Method of Suicide	Male (N)	(%)	Female (N)	(%)
Firearm	356	66%	6	27%
Hanging/Suffocation	98	18%	7	32%
Poisoning	42	8%	5	23%
Cut/Pierce	11	2%	1	5%
Fall	10	2%	2	9%
Other Methods	20	4%	1	5%
Total	537		22	

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 25% in 2021 (Table 4).

Although overall suicide deaths decreased from 2020 to 2021, it is worth noting that suicide deaths increased from 109 to 136 (see Table 5) for Veterans between the ages of 25 and 44 years old. For the first time since 2018, Veterans between the ages of 25 and 44 years old have a greater number of suicide deaths compared to those between the ages of 45 to 64 years old. In addition, suicide deaths among Asian/Pacific Islander Veterans increased by 65% from 2020 to 2021 (from 20 to 33 deaths), making 2021 the third year of the past four that suicides among Asian/Pacific Islander Veterans has increased.

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.
- Sex is defined based on the sex that was assigned at birth or provided on the death certificate. Data available on death certificates does not yet include information on sexual orientation or gender identity.

TECHNICAL NOTES

¹ 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; Fall: X80; Poisoning: X60-X69; and Other: U03.0, U03.9, X71, X75-X77, X79, X81-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, 2018-2021.

County	2018	2019	2020	2021	County	2018	2019	2020	2021
Alameda	17	11	18	14	Orange	42	45	34	44
Alpine	0	0	0	0	Placer	9	13	16	13
Amador	*	*	*	*	Plumas	*	*	*	*
Butte	17	9	6	5	Riverside	52	44	41	42
Calaveras	*	*	*	*	Sacramento	32	30	23	36
Colusa	0	0	0	*	San Benito	*	*	0	*
Contra Costa	19	6	16	13	San Bernardino	37	33	46	37
Del Norte	*	0	*	*	San Diego	98	95	85	61
El Dorado	7	4	5	9	San Francisco	9	13	6	5
Fresno	14	15	9	12	San Joaquin	9	11	17	12
Glenn	*	*	*	*	San Luis Obispo	12	9	7	10
Humboldt	6	4	4	2	San Mateo	7	8	8	6
Imperial	1	2	2	0	Santa Barbara	5	17	6	5
Inyo	*	*	0	0	Santa Clara	14	21	17	18
Kern	16	16	19	12	Santa Cruz	2	2	3	4
Kings	3	5	5	0	Shasta	10	7	7	14
Lake	2	3	1	3	Sierra	0	0	0	0
Lassen	*	0	0	*	Siskiyou	0	*	*	*
Los Angeles	108	87	81	81	Solano	22	11	7	11
Madera	5	1	3	1	Sonoma	13	15	4	5
Marin	4	7	5	5	Stanislaus	11	12	3	10
Mariposa	*	0	0	*	Sutter	2	2	2	3
Mendocino	2	4	8	3	Tehama	*	2	3	*
Merced	3	1	3	2	Trinity	0	*	*	*
Modoc	0	0	0	0	Tulare	5	5	2	3
Mono	0	0	0	0	Tuolumne	*	*	*	*
Monterey	6	9	8	6	Ventura	25	23	13	11
Napa	3	4	2	2	Yolo	4	2	4	4
Nevada	0	7	6	4	Yuba	4	2	3	3
					Total	690	631	583	559

**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), 2021.



SUPPLEMENTAL TABLE

The following table contains the number of suicide deaths to both Veteran and Non-Veterans by demographic characteristics and method of suicide for the four reporting years, 2018 through 2021. For Veteran suicide deaths in 2021, 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, 2018-2021.

	2018		2019		2020		2021	
	Veteran	Non-Vet	Veteran	Non-Vet	Veteran	Non-Vet	Veteran	Non-Vet
Sex								
Male	669	2,672	608	2,740	567	2,509	537	2,592
Female	21	945	23	886	16	848	22	791
Age (years)								
18 – 24	28	393	31	381	39	350	30	383
25 – 44	111	1,267	119	1,305	109	1,276	136	1,321
45 – 64	176	1,385	148	1,365	120	1,147	106	1,084
65 – 84	282	507	245	506	231	518	207	531
85+	93	65	88	69	84	66	80	65
Race (Ethnicity)								
White	557	2,125	505	2,172	468	1,927	426	1,862
Black	24	147	21	173	26	156	27	165
Hispanic	77	858	67	830	60	809	59	897
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	22	0	19	*	11	*	23
Asian/Pacific Islander	19	373	27	353	20	368	33	354
Multiracial	12	78	10	67	5	75	9	71
Other/Unknown	1	14	1	12	*	11	*	12
Method of Suicide								
Firearm	448	1,126	391	1,147	356	1,141	362	1,161
Hanging/Suffocation	139	1,412	129	1,344	113	1,252	105	1,199
Poisoning	57	578	60	562	60	451	47	482
Cut/Pierce	19	93	23	116	12	117	12	129
Fall	11	162	9	180	15	165	12	188
Other Methods	16	246	19	277	27	231	21	225
Total	690	3,617	631	3,626	583	3,357	559	3,384

*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. Some demographic characteristics may not sum to the total due to unknown status of the decedent or membership in an unlisted category.



FOR VETERANS IN NEED:

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. **Call 988** and then **Press 1** to be connected with the Veterans Crisis Line to access 24/7, confidential crisis support for Veterans and their loved ones. Chat also available at veteranscrisisline.net or text 838255.