



WE WILL REMEMBER 2020

HOMELESS DEATH REVIEW | DENVER, CO

Each year, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) reports on the deaths of people experiencing homelessness living in Denver. It is our greatest responsibility to ensure that these deaths are memorialized in as much detail as we can to provide in order to underscore the magnitude to which homelessness contributes to the early, and often preventable, death of our unhoused neighbors.

For thirty-one years, we have honored people experiencing homelessness who have died on the streets, under bridges, in cars, hospital beds, emergency rooms, shelters, and sometimes in nursing homes or transitional housing. But 2020 was incomparable to other years in so many ways, with a social justice movement to end police brutality on Black and Brown people in our streets amid the COVID-19 global pandemic. We would be remiss to exclude either of these issues from this report, as they both so deeply impact people experiencing homelessness. Through “stay at home” orders, recommendations to quarantine and isolate, it has become abundantly clear that a home is imperative for our ability to stay healthy and safe, and to recuperate from a deadly virus. It is also evident in the available demographic data that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are disproportionately represented in homelessness, and have disproportionately been impacted by the tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the data available through a coordinated process involving Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) and 14 other organizations dedicated to serving those in our community experiencing homelessness, at least 222 people experiencing homelessness passed away in metropolitan Denver, Colorado, in 2020. Names were collected for the unofficial total from MDHI partners from January 1, 2020 through December 11, 2020. No demographic or medical information was available for these individuals.

Analysis from Denver Medical Examiner’s Office (OME) dated November 1, 2019, through October 30,



2020, is detailed in the data which follows for 150 of the people experiencing homelessness who passed away. Of those included in the Examiner’s report, nine were still pending a full medical report so no additional details were available at the time of this report for those cases. However, for the second year in a row, due to a change in the Denver Medical Examiner’s Office’s policies, the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless was unable to collect aggregate data on demographics including age, a pertinent piece of data to demonstrate the national trends of people experiencing homelessness.

Numbers from MDHI and the Denver Medical Examiner’s Office could not be cross-referenced meaning this report cannot be used for an accurate total count of people who died while experiencing homelessness in Denver in 2020. CCH was also unable to collect names from the OME of those who are now deceased to add to the We Will Remember: Homeless Persons’ Memorial Vigil program, again challenging our ability to give an accurate count in 2020. We believe this information is key to understanding how people lived and died in our community and in obtaining additional resources for targeted populations. Unfortunately, this year’s report and its accompanying Vigil program do not include full details, most specifically, names of all individuals who passed away while experiencing homelessness.

We will remember all the people who have passed while experiencing homelessness along with the estimated 1,753 others who have died since 2008 (when the Coalition officially began tracking this information), as well as countless others in years prior, and those whose deaths have gone unreported.

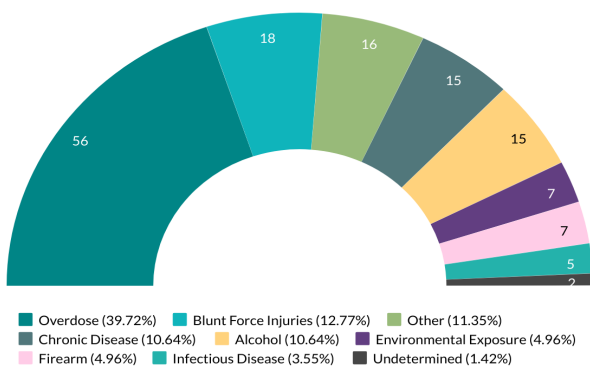
Homelessness in Colorado

The 2020 MDHI Point-In-Time Survey¹ counted 6,104 men, women, and children experiencing homelessness in the seven-county Metro Denver Area (4,171 of which are in the City and County of Denver alone), an increase of 349 people (6%) from 2019. Among those who participated in the Point-In-Time Survey, 1561 were unsheltered, 429 identified as families (a total of 1446 people in these households), and 627 identified as veterans. (Point-in-Time data can be limiting because it is collected in a single 24-hour period in January each calendar year and only includes people experiencing homelessness as defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It is the only count done nationally for comparison and analysis.) For comparison, the Department of Education reported in the 2018-2019 school year that 1,849² children were experiencing homelessness which does not include the guardians or non-school aged siblings of these students who similarly would be experiencing homelessness exemplifying the undercount of the Point-in-Time Survey.

Top Causes and Manner of Death

Among the 141 confirmed causes of death reported by OME, drug overdose was listed as the primary cause. In 2020, 56 people experiencing homelessness or 35% in Denver died from drug overdose. The second confirmed cause of death was “Other” which comprised of death categories with minimal counts that have been grouped

Graph 1. Cause of Death

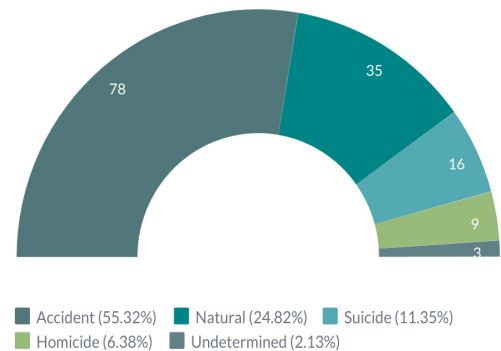


The Medical Examiner’s Office was able to confirm the primary cause of death for 141 of the 150 individuals who died while experiencing homelessness in 2020. Nine causes of death are still pending.

together as "Other" including hanging, drowning, asphyxia, and stabbing.

In 2020, 52% of deaths of people experiencing homelessness were accidents while only 23.33% of people experiencing homelessness died of natural causes. People who are housed are significantly more likely to die from natural causes at 52.2% than any other manner of death, and people experiencing homelessness are more likely to die from an unnatural cause (such as an accident, suicide or homicide).

Graph 3. Manner of Death



OME was able to determine the manner of death for 141 people who died while experiencing homelessness. Between November 1, 2019 and October 30, 2020, 52% of deaths were accidental, a 7% increase from the previous year.

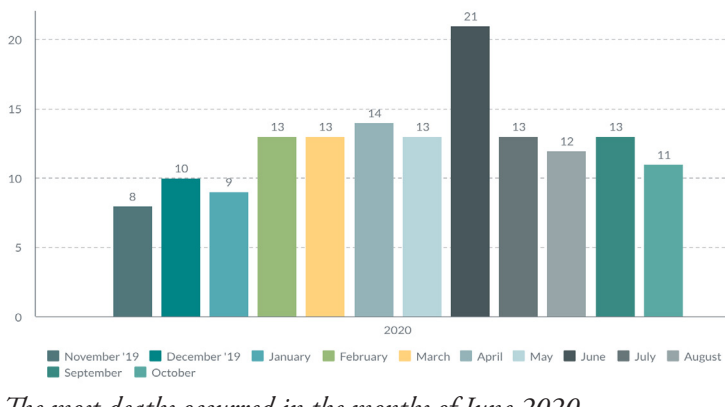
From the OME demographic data, 87.75% of those who passed away between November 1, 2019 and October 30, 2020, were male, 11.87% female, and 0.76% unknown.

COVID-19 and Homelessness

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, data showed that people experiencing homelessness were highly susceptible to contracting the deadly virus due to the congregate nature of shelter settings, limited access to handwashing and sanitation supplies, and an inability to isolate or quarantine. Additionally, national estimates reported that people experiencing homelessness would be two to three times more likely to require hospitalization, critical care, or die from COVID-19 because many are living with high risk pre-existing health conditions that could complicate virus recovery.³ Homelessness during a pandemic was labeled a “crisis within a crisis” by media outlets nationwide, and people experiencing homelessness were projected to be in the highest category of people to contract and die from the virus.

In Denver shelters, prevalence rates were higher for

Graph 2. Month of Death



The most deaths occurred in the months of June 2020, accounting for 21 deaths.

contracting COVID-19 than in outdoor encampments. In a surveillance test at seven shelters, the prevalence rate was 1 in 14.5 guests between May 27 and June 12, 2020. In unsheltered settings on July 7, 14, and 22, 2020, 1 in 30.28 people tested positive for the COVID-19 virus⁴ due to the ability increase physical distance between themselves and others. In August, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended allowing encampments to remain where they were without threat of police sweeps. Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread.⁵

Similarly, a new housing crisis was brewing with an additional 40-45% of the national population projected to become at severe risk of homelessness due to increased unemployment and inability to make housing payments like rent.⁶ In Colorado alone, that meant approximately 350,000 people could be at risk of eviction.⁷ The perfect storm of an exploding homelessness crisis, combined with job loss, economic collapse, and increased homelessness due to eviction was predicted to add to the death toll of people suffering from COVID-19.

However, in partnership with the City and County of Denver, homeless service providers were able to develop a multilayered plan to stop the impending crisis from devastating our unhoused community. In addition to implementing public health protocols like physical distancing and use of personal protective and sanitation equipment in shelters, two additional auxiliary shelters were temporarily established at the National Western Complex and Denver Coliseum. These sites offered symptom screening, 24-hour access, and on-site medical

staff. Partnerships with six hotels/motels to rent 800 rooms made it possible for people experiencing homelessness to isolate with symptoms or positive COVID-19 tests, or quarantine as person in a high-risk category. These new spaces and the numerous resources required to operate them including the National Guard, volunteers, and generous donations from the community were responsible for preventing extensive outbreaks and death among people experiencing homelessness from COVID-19 in Denver.

As of November 1, 2020 and since early March, at least 654 people experiencing homelessness in Denver tested positive for COVID-19 according to a Denver Department of Public Health study. Out of all cases in people experiencing homelessness, 21% have been hospitalized, compared with 9% of cases hospitalized in the general population. Of those individuals, there was a total of 13 COVID-19-related deaths of people experiencing homelessness, eight of whom the primary cause of death was to COVID-19.⁸ While each of these 13 deaths are a tragic loss of human life, we believe we would have lost many more of our unhoused neighbors without the protective measures having been put in place.

Race, Ethnicity, and Death in Homelessness

In life and in death, people of color are overrepresented in the homeless population in Denver. Most impacted are people who identify as Black and Native American. Black people make up 14.28% of people experiencing homelessness who have died, while only comprising 9.15% of the total Denver population. Native Americans are even more dramatically impacted with 2.09% of Native Americans have died while experiencing homelessness, while 0.33% of the total Denver population.

Systemic racism impacts BIPOC throughout the entirety of their lives, and serves as the ultimate injustice in their death. As was made clear through the over-representative suffering of BIPOC communities in the COVID-19 pandemic, the same is seen true in all manners of death. Nationwide, Native Americans who contract COVID-19 are experiencing about five times the hospitalization rates and 40% more deaths than whites.⁹ A full report on race, ethnicity, and homelessness with additional data on health and COVID-19 can be found at www.coloradocoalition.org/reports.

What We Can Do

It has become more evident than ever before that housing is healthcare. Four walls, a roof, and a door give

us a place to stay safely away from potential virus exposure, and to rest and recover when necessary. Adequate housing offers safety, clean water, warmth, and isolation which is crucial to reducing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Most importantly, a home reduces risk factors inevitably exacerbated by homelessness. Knowing this, we must continue to advocate for affordable and accessible housing in Denver.

In November 2020, the residents of Denver voted to pass Measure 2B, a 0.25% sales tax on non-essential items which will support the building of 1,800 units of housing over 10 years, expand and increase access to homelessness programs and services including substance use treatment and job training. This win for Denver will help, but we must continue to advocate for safe, affordable, and available housing, services, and shelter. It is also imperative that we advocate for continued eviction moratoria at the state and federal levels to prevent the flood of evictions and massive entry into homelessness by hundreds of thousands of Coloradans.

We are pleased to see three state legislative wins in 2020 in substance use disorder treatment including: funding for substance use disorder treatment resources in the criminal justice system and required people in custody to have access to opioid treatment and overdose reversal medications; harm reduction measures such as requiring insurance carriers to cover opioid antagonists, allowing pharmacists to sell needles/syringes, establishing immunity to anyone attempting to administer an opioid antagonist in good faith, etc., and expanded treatment coverage and coordination of care for people using

substances. While COVID-19 continues to rage on, we must remember that overdose deaths throughout the country continue to kill more people than any other cause, and will continue to do so without appropriate services and treatment for those who can afford to pay and those who cannot.

Lastly, until we change the systems that dramatically impact BIPOC communities, we will continue to see more BIPOC people experiencing homelessness and dying while homeless. The Coalition asks you to advocate alongside us to increase access to housing, healthcare, and services for BIPOC communities and fight systemic injustice in these areas to ensure safe access to necessary care and services. While the passing of SB20-217: Enhance Law Enforcement Integrity 2020 Legislative Session which requires the use of body cameras and release of these recordings to the public and disallows the use of projectiles or chemical agents without warning by July 1, 2023, is a step in the right direction, there is still much work to be done inside our city walls, at our dinner tables, and beyond.

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless hosts the We Will Remember: Homeless Persons' Memorial Vigil on the shortest day each year to honor and remember those who have died while experiencing homelessness. This marks the 31st year of honoring those lives lost. We encourage the community to come together to solve homelessness to prevent the heartbreaking end of life of our loved ones, colleagues, friends, and neighbors.

Resources

- 1 Metro Denver Homeless Initiative. Point-in-Time Regional Report 2020. tinyurl.com/yy9gkrmp
- 2 Colorado Department of Education. Homeless Education Data 2018-2019. 2018-2019. tinyurl.com/y4hpwwax
- 3 Culhane, et al. Estimated Emergency and Observational/Quarantine Capacity Need for the US Homeless Population Related to COVID-19 Exposure by County; Projected Hospitalizations, Intensive Care Units and Mortality. University of California Los Angeles. March 27, 2020. tinyurl.com/tqmf2g
- 4 Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. Surveillance Testing to Establish COVID-19 Prevalence Among People Experiencing Homelessness Who Utilize Denver Shelters. 2020. tinyurl.com/y579uuw7
- 5 Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Interim Guidance on Unsheltered Homelessness and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) for Homeless Service Providers and Local Officials. August 6, 2020. tinyurl.com/s4lzzdo
- 6 Community Solutions. Analysis on Unemployment Projects 40-45% Increase in Homelessness this Year. May 11, 2020. tinyurl.com/yafpaaus
- 7 Dorado, Marco, and Gilman, Sam. Reducing Eviction Risk in Colorado. COVID-19 Eviction Task Force. May 27, 2020. tinyurl.com/y5purhks
- 8 Denver Department of Public Health. Communicable Diseases Affecting People Experiencing Homelessness. November 1, 2020.
- 9 Sheldon, Bobbi. 'Food insecurity, fresh water, lack of access to health care: The impact of COVID-19's on Colorado's Native American communities. Channel 9 News. September 22, 2020. tinyurl.com/yye2ku5w



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