



WE WILL REMEMBER 2021

HOMELESS DEATH REVIEW | DENVER, CO

For the 32nd year the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (the Coalition) and the Denver community remember the lives of those who passed away while they were experiencing homelessness. The Coalition is committed to memorializing the lives of these individuals and reporting on their deaths in the greatest detail possible to bring attention to the troubling trends impacting people experiencing homelessness (PEH).

In 2020, we witnessed a convergence of crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic fallout, a reckoning with racial inequity, a massive increase in overdose deaths, and a worsening housing and homelessness crisis. [The number of people experiencing homelessness for the first time has doubled between 2020 and 2021.](#) The corresponding increase in deaths among PEH may reflect the devastating impact of these forces.

According to data collected by Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) and several other direct service organizations, at least 269 PEH passed away in the Denver Metro area in 2021. No demographic or medical information was available for these individuals.

The Denver Medical Examiner’s Office (OME) reported 168 total deaths among people experiencing homelessness between November 1, 2020 and October 31, 2021, up 12 percent from 2020 and 83 percent over the last five years. This includes 17 cases that are still pending investigation and 12 deaths due to COVID-19.

For the third year, OME policies have challenged our ability to collect demographic data including age and made it impossible to cross-reference OME data with reports from MDHI. As a result, neither this analysis nor the We Will Remember: Homeless Persons’ Memorial Vigil program account for all our neighbors who died while experiencing homelessness this year.

We will remember all the people who have passed while experiencing homelessness including those whose deaths have gone unreported.



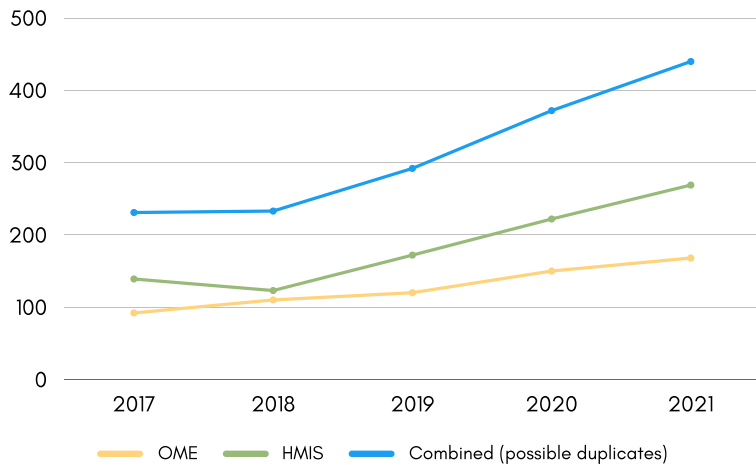
Colorado Coalition for the Homeless hosts the We Will Remember: Homeless Persons’ Memorial Vigil on the shortest day each year to honor and remember those who have died while experiencing homelessness. This marks the 32nd year of honoring those lives lost. We encourage the community to come together to solve homelessness to prevent the heartbreaking end of life of our loved ones, colleagues, friends, and neighbors.

[To view the program listing the known names of those who passed in 2021, and the video recording of the reading of the names, click here.](#)

DEATHS OVER TIME

Sadly, the number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness has grown substantially. In the last five years, the number of deaths reported by the OME has increased by 83 percent. During the same period, those reported by MDHI and other partners has jumped by 94 percent. We fear that the tally of – often preventable – losses will continue to rise each year unless the State of Colorado and local governments in the Metro area commit to passing truly transformational policies and investing in tools to end homelessness.

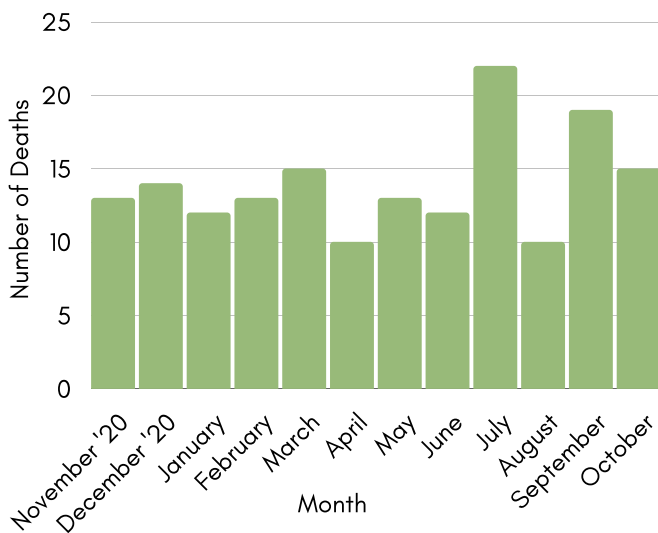
FIGURE 1. DEATH BY YEAR



MONTH OF DEATH

At least 10 deaths occurred each month, with the highest number in September at 22. Most deaths from environmental exposure took place during the coldest months between November and February.

FIGURE 2. MONTH OF DEATH



CAUSE AND MANNER OF DEATH

The most common cause of death was overdose, accounting for 46 percent of deaths, up at least 6 percent from 2020. [A recent report by the Colorado Health Institute indicates that overdoses statewide increased by 38 percent between 2019 and 2020 for both housed and unhoused individuals.](#) The analysis suggests that the pandemic has had an unparalleled impact on substance use due to social isolation, economic hardship, and lack of access to treatment and support. The increasing prevalence of fentanyl has also contributed to this devastating trend. The number of overdose deaths statewide in 2021 is expected to surpass those in 2020. Blunt force injury was the second most common cause of death at 9 percent, followed by infectious disease and environmental exposure each at 7 percent.

Whereas the cause of death describes the specific injury or disease that results in death, manner of death refers to the determination of how an injury or disease leads to death. Accidental death, which includes most overdoses and environmental exposure deaths, accounted for 56 percent of all cases. Natural deaths, defined as those resulting from disease or the aging process accounted for 21 percent. It is important to note that PEH are at increased risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and diabetes and [have an average life expectancy of 30 years less than the housed population.](#) In this context, “natural” does not suggest that these individuals’ deaths were unaffected by their experience of homelessness. With adequate access to healthcare, housing, and other basic needs, many of these deaths may have been avoided. Homicide and suicide make up a small minority of cases, at 5 percent each.

Note: Neither this analysis nor the We Will Remember: Homeless Persons’ Memorial Vigil program account for all our neighbors who died while experiencing homelessness this year.

Housing has a significant impact on mortality outcomes, acting as a protective factor against accidental death, substance-related death, and violent or traumatic death. The Coalition compared the causes and manner of death among the 168 people who died while experiencing homelessness in 2021 to the 50 people recovering from homelessness who died while in the Coalition’s housing program during the same period. The findings are unequivocal. Among housed individuals, only 14 percent died as the result of an accident, whereas over half of deaths among people experiencing homelessness were due to an accident.

Similarly, 10 percent of deaths among housed individuals were attributed to drugs or alcohol, compared to over half of unhoused individuals. It is important to reiterate that the opioid pandemic affects people regardless of income or housing status. This disparity in mortality is likely largely due to a lack of social support and emergency overdose interventions accessible to people who are unhoused. Further, 9 percent of deaths among people experiencing homelessness were caused by blunt force trauma, whereas none of the deaths among people recovering from homelessness resulted from blunt force trauma. These stark statistics reinforce what the Coalition has always known to be true – housing saves lives.

FIGURE 3. CAUSE OF DEATH

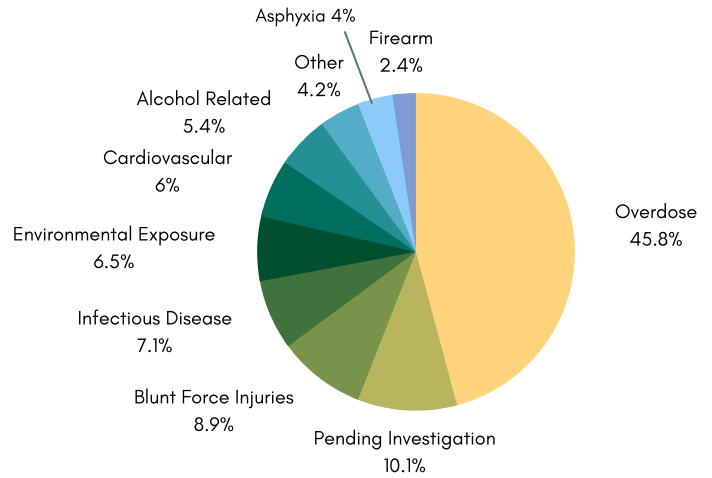
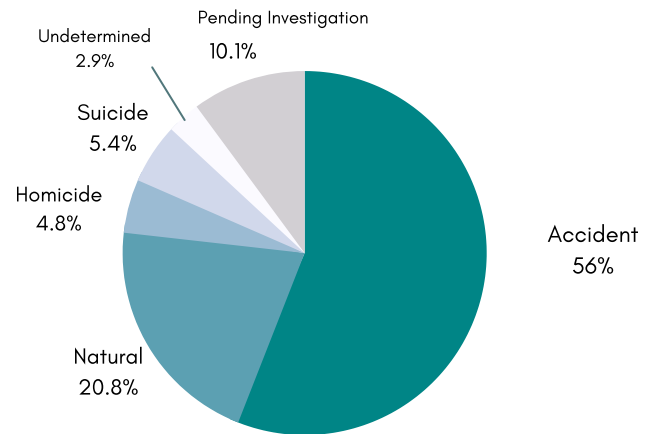


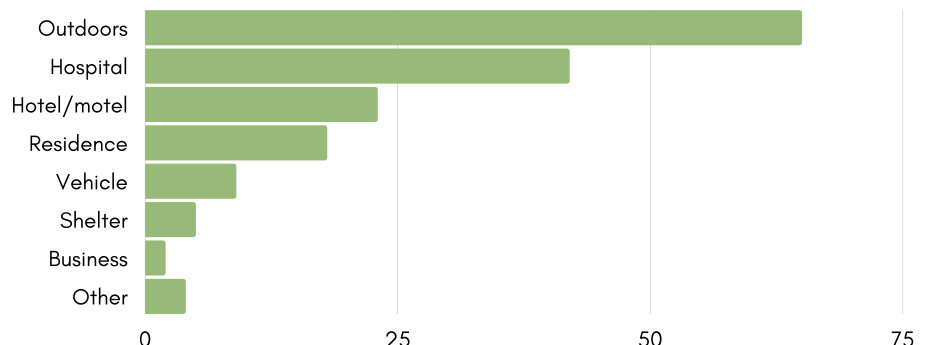
FIGURE 4. MANNER OF DEATH



LOCATION OF DEATH

Location of death gives us insight into the circumstances under which people may have been living when they passed. Most people died outdoors at 39 percent. A quarter died in a hospital or medical facility, and another quarter passed in either a hotel/motel or another person’s residence.

FIGURE 5. LOCATION OF DEATH



PROMISING PRACTICES

The Coalition continues to champion proven solutions to homelessness. One of the most impactful strategies for addressing housing instability is Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH). PSH combines affordable housing assistance with voluntary support services to address the needs of people experiencing chronic homelessness. [Denver's Social Impact Bond project provides a prime example](#). Nearly 400 of the most frequent visitors to emergency rooms, jails, and detox were housed using Housing First and PSH models over the last five years. The results were stunning and included substantial cost savings to local governments and taxpayers. In total, it cost half as much to provide housing and supportive services than to provide emergency services to people experiencing homelessness.

Evaluators found:

- 86% of residents remained housed after one year
- 34% reduction in police contacts
- 65% reduction in their use of detox
- 40% decrease in emergency department visits
- 155% increase in office-based health care visits

While the U.S. Treasury Department has offered the city an additional \$6 million to expand the program, additional resources are needed at the state and local level to meet the growing need.

The Coalition also advocates for expanding acquisition and conversion of underutilized properties for housing. In partnering with the City and County of Denver and with support from the State, the Coalition was able to house approximately 5,000 people at hotels and motels converted to activated respite and protective action sites during the pandemic. Greater investment in this area would truly be transformational. The Coalition is also the lead agency in the Denver Rehousing Collaborative (DRC), which provides housing and supportive services to individuals and families currently experiencing homelessness in Denver

and helps facilitate the transition of temporary hotel/motel residents to more permanent housing. The other partners in this collaborative include The Gathering Place, Delores Project, Urban Peak, Salvation Army and Volunteers of America. Funded through the Coronavirus Relief Fund and Denver's Affordable Housing Fund, the effort began in September of 2020 and has been extended through December of 2022. To date, the DRC has moved 318 people into housing.

[Denver's Department of Housing Stability \(HOST\) committed additional resources to housing those most in need when it launched an effort to house 200 people experiencing homelessness in 100 days](#). The push exceeded expectations, concluding in early December with a total of 340 households, including 576 individuals, housed.

MOVING FORWARD

In response to the seemingly intractable challenges facing our community, state policymakers have stepped up to address emergent and long-standing barriers to housing stability. During the 2021 legislative session, the Colorado General Assembly passed a bill authorizing the appropriation of \$400M of federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding and establishing a legislative interim committee, [the Affordable Housing Transformational Task Force \(AHTTF\)](#), to make policy recommendations for the use of these funds. The AHTTF made several recommendations for use of funds and policies to support those hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, including people experiencing homelessness and marginalized communities that have long been subject to discriminatory housing policies and significant barriers to housing stability. These recommendations are expected to inform legislation during the 2022 legislative session which begins on January 12.

RESOURCES

1. Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative, Point-In-Time Regional Report 2021, (August 25, 2021). <https://tinyurl.com/2p8ch5vt>
2. Colorado Health Institute, A Parallel Epidemic: More Overdose Deaths in 2020, Fentanyl Fatalities Spike, (Oct 25, 2021). <https://tinyurl.com/7cwaspv2>
3. National Coalition for the Homeless. Remembering Those Lost to Homelessness, (December 21, 2018). <https://tinyurl.com/34zw3ext>

4. The Colorado Sun, *Denver's program to house people who were homeless was so successful, the federal government is offering millions more to expand it*, (November 19, 2021). <https://tinyurl.com/mrywhcwx>
5. Denver Department of Housing Stability. Denver Moves 576 People from Homelessness to Housing over 100 Days, (December 21, 2021). <https://tinyurl.com/yeyk9ys7>
6. Colorado General Assembly, Affordable Housing Transformational Task Force, <https://tinyurl.com/2k64fkmr>