California Department of PublicHealth
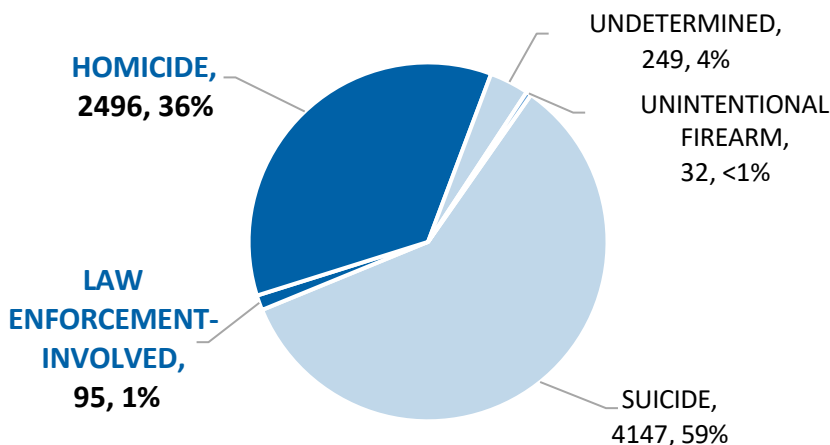
HOMICIDE IN CALIFORNIA, 2021

Vital statistics data are collected from death certificates for all violent deaths that occur in California. Enhanced surveillance through CalVDRS is completed for a subset of participating counties by linking vital statistics data to data abstracted from coroner and medical examiner reports, toxicology reports, and law enforcement reports. Circumstances that contributed to the death that were documented in these reports were included in the surveillance system. This additional data can address the **who**, **what**, **where**, **when,** and **how** of the deaths to help us try to understand **why** they occurred and prevent similar deaths from occurring in the future.

This document summarizes demographic data for homicide deaths of all California residents in 2021. Additionally, data regarding the circumstances surrounding the death are summarized for homicides that occurred in the subset of 31 participating CalVDRS counties using data from multiple sources. Law enforcement-involved fatal encounters, in which a person dies due to injuries inflicted by law enforcement (and other persons with legal authority to use deadly force in the line of duty) are included in this report. These have been labeled "Legal Intervention" in previous reports.

STATEWIDE HOMICIDE DATA (*N*=58 Counties)

- There were 7,019 violent deaths to Californians in 2021.
- Thirty-seven percent of these were due to homicide (2,591), including the 1% law enforcement-involved fatal encounters.
- The homicide rate was 6.6 deaths per 100,000 population.

Violent death among CA residents, 2021

HOMICIDE, 2496, 36%

LAW ENFORCEMENT-INVOLVED, 95, 1%

UNDETERMINED, 249, 4%

UNINTENTIONAL FIREARM, 32, <1%

SUICIDE, 4147, 59%

About CalVDRS

The California Violent Death Reporting System (CalVDRS) is housed in the Injury and Violence Prevention Branch in the California Department of Public Health. CalVDRS is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct statewide surveillance on violent deaths that occur in California. Violent deaths include homicide (including law enforcement-involved fatal encounters, where a person is killed or dies as the result of injuries inflicted by a law enforcement officer), suicide, unintentional firearm deaths, and deaths of undetermined intent that meet the CalVDRS definition. CalVDRS collects data from multiple sources (i.e., death certificates, medical examiner/coroner reports, and law enforcement reports) in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding these deaths. The goal of this system is to promote development of data-driven public health prevention strategies that aim to reduce the number of violent deaths that occur each year.
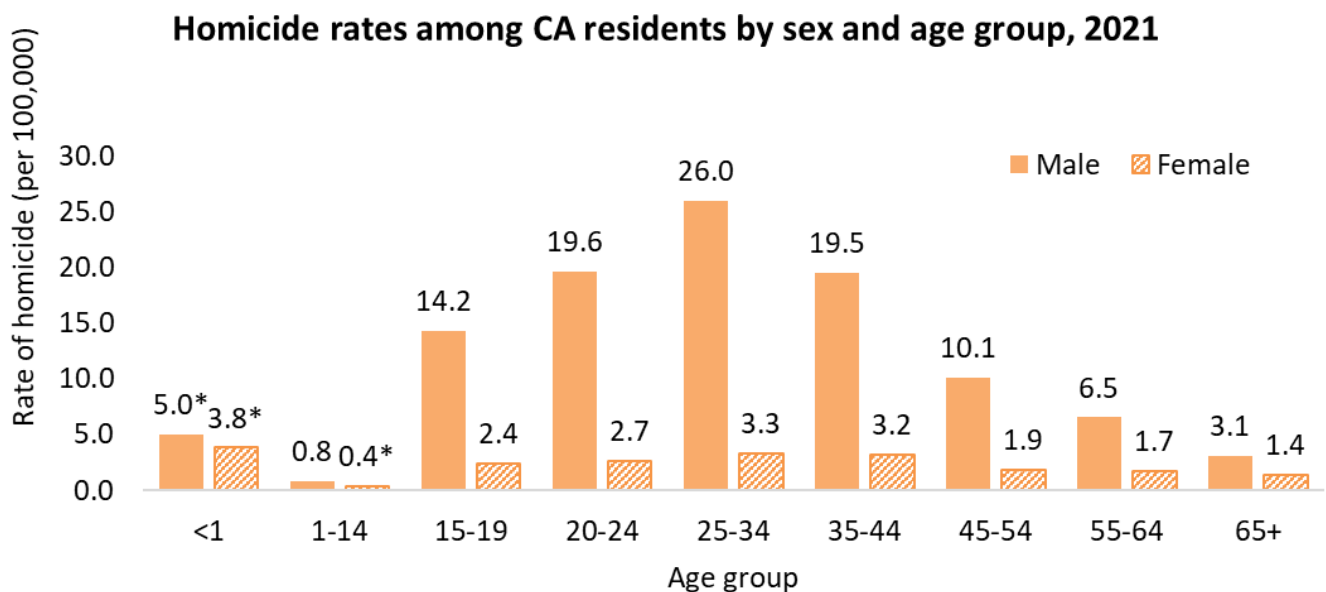
HOMICIDE DEMOGRAPHICS

Sex

- More than four out of every five homicide victims were male (85%).
- The rate of homicide among males (11.3 per 100,000) was nearly 6 times the rate among females (2.0 per 100,000).

Age

- Rates of homicide among males were higher than females at all ages.
- Rates were highest in young adult males, aged 25-44 years.
- The rate of homicide decreased with age after the peak in young adulthood.
- While deaths among those aged younger than one year make up less than 1% of all homicides, rates in this age group are routinely higher than at any other time in pre-adolescent childhood. Rates in this age group tend to be unstable due to small numbers and should be interpreted with caution.

Homicide rates among CA residents by sex and age group, 2021

*Rates are likely to be unstable due to small sample size and thus should be interpreted with caution.
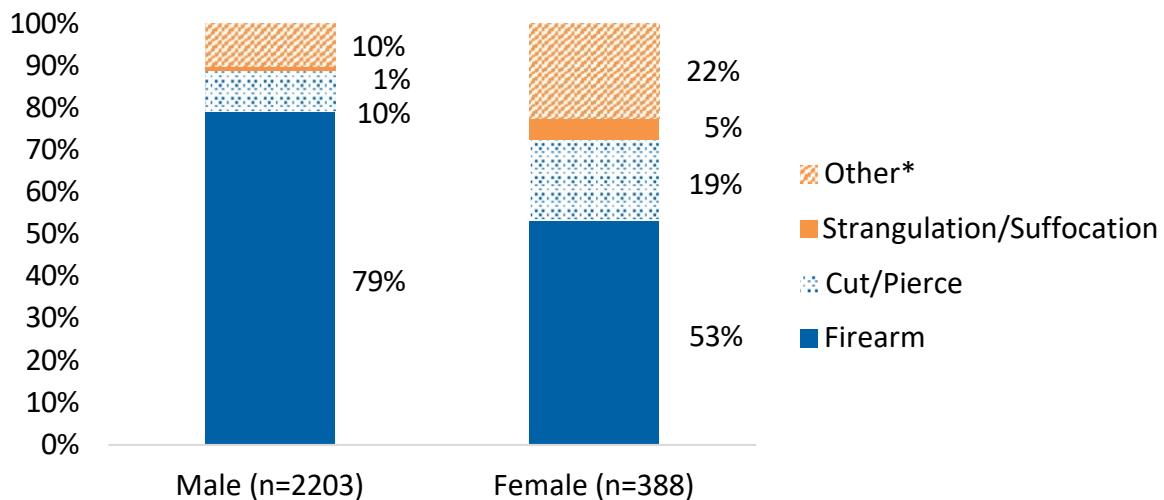
Race/Ethnicity

- Most homicide deaths were among Californians who are Hispanic of any race (49%), followed by those who are Black (26%) and those who are White (17%).
- Drastic inequities occur among homicide rates by race. The highest rate was seen among people who are Black (31.1 per 100,000), with a rate nearly five times the overall rate.
- Higher rates were also seen among people who are Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (11.6 per 100,000), American Indian/Alaska Native (10.6 per 100,000), or Hispanic (8.1 per 100,000). While the rates among Pacific Islander and Native American populations are based on small numbers and may be unstable, they are routinely higher than the annual overall rate.

The variables of sex, age, and race/ethnicity intersect such that homicide rates among those who are male, aged 25-34, and Black are more than 15 times higher than the overall rate. These are also the groups seeing the largest increase in rates since 2019.

Mechanism of Homicide

- Firearms were used in 75% of all homicide deaths, followed by sharp instruments in 11%.
- Among male victims of homicide, firearms were the weapon used in nearly four out of every five deaths (79%).
- Among female victims of homicide, firearms were used in more than half of deaths (53%). The next largest single category weapon used was sharp instruments in 19%.
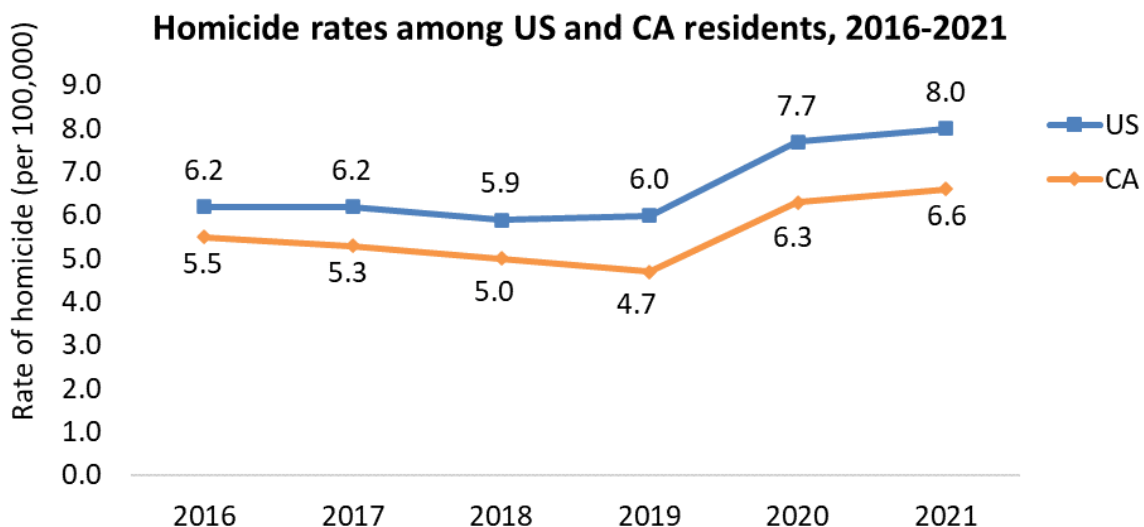
Mechanism of homicide among CA residents by sex, 2021

Male (n=2203):
- Other*: 10%
- Strangulation/Suffocation: 1%
- Cut/Pierce: 10%
- Firearm: 79%

Female (n=388):
- Other*: 22%
- Strangulation/Suffocation: 5%
- Cut/Pierce: 19%
- Firearm: 53%

*"Other" includes drowning, fall, fire/flame, land transport, poisoning, struck by/against, and other specified and unspecified mechanisms.
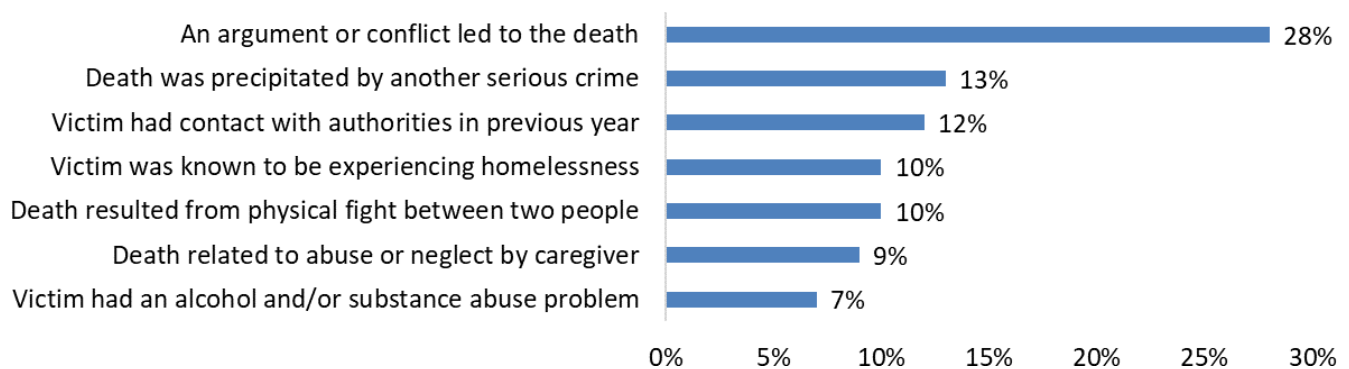
HOMICIDE TRENDS OVER TIME

- The homicide rate in 2021 represented a 40% increase over the 2019 rate.
- An increase in homicide rates in 2020 and 2021 was seen nationwide; rates in California have remained lower than in many other states and in the country as a whole.
- In California, the increase was seen in nearly all demographic groups, but has continued to be most severe among males, adults aged 20-44, those who were Black, and with the use of firearms.

Homicide rates among US and CA residents, 2016-2021

Rate of homicide (per 100,000)

Year	US	CA
2016	6.2	5.5
2017	6.2	5.3
2018	5.9	5.0
2019	6.0	4.7
2020	7.7	6.3
2021	8.0	6.6

HOMICIDE CIRCUMSTANCES IN CalVDRS COUNTIES (*N*=31 Counties)

- There were 1,443 homicides in CalVDRS counties with supplemental data from coroner/medical examiner or law enforcement reports. Eighty percent had at least one circumstance documented (n=1,152).
- Conflict frequently contributed to homicides in the form of an argument (28%) or a physical fight (10%).
- Precipitating criminal activity was identified in 13% of homicides.
- Homicide victims were identified among marginalized communities including those having recent contact with authorities (12%), those known to be experiencing homelessness (10%), and those with an alcohol and/or other substance abuse problem (7%).
- In the 9% of homicides where death was related to abuse or neglect by a caretaker, the age of the victims ranged from infancy to 91 years. Nearly one-quarter were aged younger than 18.
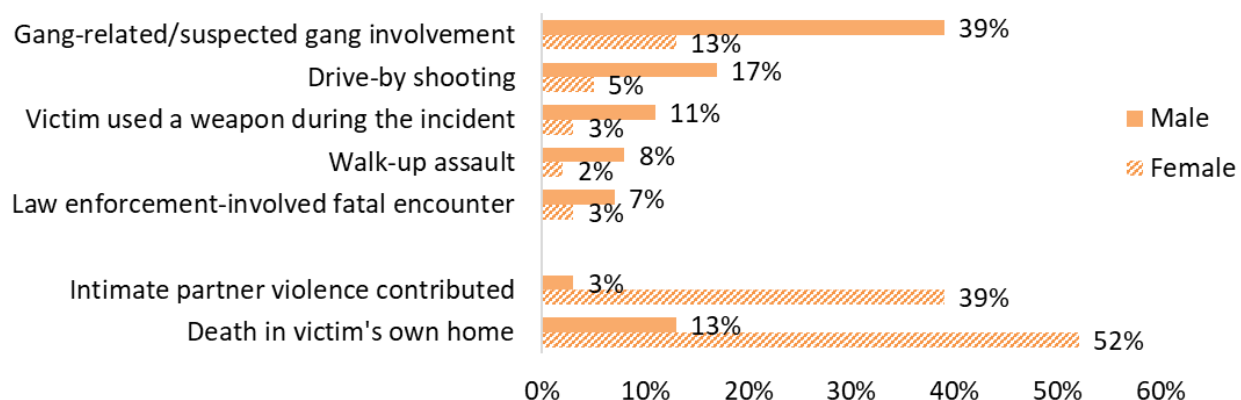
Percent of homicides with selected circumstance
CalVDRS counties, 2021

Circumstance	Percent
An argument or conflict led to the death	28%
Death was precipitated by another serious crime	13%
Victim had contact with authorities in previous year	12%
Victim was known to be experiencing homelessness	10%
Death resulted from physical fight between two people	10%
Death related to abuse or neglect by caregiver	9%
Victim had an alcohol and/or substance abuse problem	7%

Homicide circumstances by sex

- The most frequent injury locations for homicides among men was outdoors on a street or sidewalk (38%) and 23% in a house or apartment. Most homicides to females (58%) occurred in a house or apartment.
- The homicide was more likely to have suspected gang member involvement (39%), use of a weapon by the victim (11%), and/or be a law enforcement-involved fatality (7%) when the homicide victim was male.
- Intimate partner violence was much more likely to contribute to the homicide when the victim was female.

Percent of homicides with circumstance by sex of victim
CalVDRS counties, 2021

Circumstance	Male	Female
Gang-related/suspected gang involvement	39%	13%
Drive-by shooting	17%	5%
Victim used a weapon during the incident	11%	3%
Walk-up assault	8%	2%
Law enforcement-involved fatal encounter	7%	3%
Intimate partner violence contributed	3%	39%
Death in victim's own home	13%	52%

HOMICIDE CIRCUMSTANCES AMONG WOMEN

- Homicides among women were more likely to be personal:
    - 39% had an Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) circumstance.
    - 52% occurred in the victim's own home. When IPV contributed to the homicide, 76% occurred in the female victim's own home.
    - 62% of the homicide suspects were someone known to the woman (compared to only 16% among male homicide victims). When IPV contributed to the homicide, 72% of the homicide suspects were the woman's current spouse or intimate partner.
    - 9% were part of a homicide(s)/suicide incident where the homicide suspect then died by suicide. When IPV contributed to the homicide, 16% of female homicides ended in homicide(s)/suicide.

HOMICIDE CIRCUMSTANCES AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN

- Children 5 years of age and younger make up 1% of homicide deaths statewide, and 1% of homicides with known circumstances from CalVDRS counties. While this is a very small sample (n=18), it can be revealing:
    - In all cases, the death was directly related to abuse or neglect by a caregiver.
    - In all but one of these deaths, the suspect was the victim's parent or the parent's intimate partner.
    - More than half of these were part of an incident with more than one victim, either a multiple homicide or a homicide(s)/suicide incident where the homicide suspect then died by suicide.
    - The weapons most frequently used included suffocation, drowning, firearms, and shaking.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PREVENTION

Address structural racism and social determinants of health.

Disparities in homicide rates represent one of the most significant health inequities in California, and those who are young, male, and Black bear a disproportionate burden. Historically marginalized communities are impacted by structural inequalities rooted in racism. Social determinants of health have a significant impact on exposure to violence. Those who grow up and live in environments with limited social, educational, and economic opportunities – and where racism, discrimination, and community and domestic instability are daily stressors – are at increased risk of exposure to multiple forms of violence. Prevention efforts should emphasize comprehensive anti-racist strategies that can stop violence by addressing factors that contribute to underlying economic and social inequities including strengthening economic supports through income assistance, livable wages, income building programs to build wealth, paid family leave and paid time off, and affordable and safe housing.

A focus on firearms can prevent homicide.

The fatal weapon for most victims of homicide was a firearm (75%). Exposure to gun violence traumatizes survivors and communities, impacting physical and mental health, as well as social wellbeing. Reducing unsafe access to firearms and creating protective environments through strategies such as mentoring programs, addressing unhealthy gender norms around masculinity, promoting connectedness in communities, and supporting other positive changes to social norms can lower the risk of these deaths in the future.

Address risk and resilience within communities.

Effective prevention efforts focus on those at increased risk. It may be beneficial to address risk factors that are relevant to the different types of homicides (e.g., intimate partner violence, gang-related violence, child abuse and neglect) so that prevention efforts are focused on supporting communities to create policy change and help those who are most at risk of violent death.

RESOURCES FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION

[Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices](#)

[Youth Violence Prevention: Resource for Action](#)

[Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities](#)

[Adverse Childhood Experiences Prevention: Resource for Action](#)

[Firearm Violence Prevention](#)

Notes about CalVDRS data

- 31 counties participated in CalVDRS data collection in 2021: Amador, Butte, Colusa, Fresno, Glenn, Humboldt, Imperial, Kings, Lake, Lassen, Los Angeles, Mendocino, Merced, Modoc, Mono, Orange, Placer, Sacramento, San Benito, San Diego, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Tehama, Ventura, and Yolo Counties.
- Together, the CalVDRS counties represent 63% of the homicide deaths that occurred in 2021 in California and cover a mix of both urban and rural counties across the state.
- Data regarding the circumstances surrounding the death are reported as a percentage of deaths with at least one known circumstance; circumstances were known for 80% of abstracted homicide deaths in the 31 CalVDRS counties.
- Circumstances contributing to the homicide are not mutually exclusive, and more than one can be indicated for a single homicide death.

Data Sources

- California Violent Death Reporting System (CalVDRS), Injury and Violence Prevention Branch, Center for Healthy Communities, California Department of Public Health (CDPH), 2021.
  - ➤ Access the [CalVDRS Data Dashboard](#)
- US homicide rates: WISQARS: Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC). Accessed November 22, 2023, *https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/index.html*.
- Vital Statistics: California Comprehensive Master Death File (CCMDF), CDPH, 2021. Homicides are identified in the CCMDF as an underlying cause of death with ICD-10 codes X85-X99, Y00-Y09, Y87.1, or U01. Law enforcement-involved fatal encounters are identified as an underlying cause of death with ICD-10 codes Y35.0-Y35.4, Y35.6-Y35.7, or Y89.0. These are frequently called "Legal Intervention", which is a coding term and does not denote the legality of the circumstances surrounding the death.
- California Department of Finance, Report P-3: Complete State and County Population Projections Dataset, Vintage 2023 release (2023.7.19).

For more information on CalVDRS, please contact CalVDRS@cdph.ca.gov

Scan code to provide feedback!

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