

American Indian/ Alaska Native Victims of Lethal Firearm Violence in the United States



Violence Policy Center

OCTOBER 2024

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Copyright © October 2024 Violence Policy Center

The Violence Policy Center (VPC) is a national nonprofit educational organization that conducts research and public education on violence in America and provides information and analysis to policymakers, journalists, advocates, and the general public.

This study was authored by VPC Public Health Analyst Terra Wiens, MPH.

For a complete list of VPC publications with document links, please visit <http://www.vpc.org/publications/>.

To learn more about the Violence Policy Center, please visit www.vpc.org.

To make a tax-deductible contribution to help support the work of the Violence Policy Center, please visit www.vpc.org/contribute.

American Indian/Alaska Native Victims of Lethal Firearm Violence in the United States

Introduction

Gun violence impacts all communities in the United States, though each in different ways. Communities of color are especially impacted by fatal gun violence.^a While substantial research has described the disproportionate impact gun violence, specifically firearm homicide, has on Black communities, less research has been done to describe the impact on the American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) community in the U.S.

This study examines the impact of lethal firearm violence in the AI/AN community in the U.S. by analyzing mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)^b and Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) data submitted to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). While CDC mortality data capture more homicides in the U.S. compared to crime data, FBI SHR data provide additional details about homicide deaths not available in the CDC data used for this report. Therefore, this report includes CDC mortality data to describe victim demographics and the use of firearms for both homicide and suicide, while FBI SHR data describe the victim and offender relationship and circumstances for homicides.

a For more information about the impact of fatal gun violence on communities of color, see the VPC's recent reports: *Black Homicide Victimization in the United States* (<https://vpc.org/studies/blackhomicide24.pdf>) and *Hispanic Victims of Lethal Firearms Violence in the United States* (<https://vpc.org/studies/hispanic23.pdf>).

b The American Indian or Alaska Native race category in CDC mortality data includes the following populations: North, Central, and South American Indians, Eskimos, and Aluets.

A Note About Data Limitations:

Mortality data for the AI/AN population are limited for a few reasons.

First, in a groundbreaking study of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls (MMIWG^c) published in 2018, the Urban Indian Health Institute described the magnitude of cases of missing and murdered AI/AN females in urban settings across the U.S.¹ The study enumerated 128 missing and 280 murdered women and girls from 71 cities in 29 states. A follow-up report estimated the rate of missing AI/AN females in Washington state to be 78.6 per 100,000 — more than four times higher than that of white women in the state.² Experts believe there are many more unreported or misclassified deaths among AI/AN females than are currently reported. From a data perspective, the MMIWG crisis results in an undercount of the true magnitude of fatal violence against AI/AN women and girls.



Image. A red dress is a symbol of the many Native people who go missing or are murdered each year.

Second, significant race misclassification exists in mortality data for the AI/AN community. According to the CDC, misclassification of race on death certificates is approximately 40 percent for the AI/AN population with decedents frequently being classified as white, though misclassification varies by age and geography.⁴ An analysis of death certificate data showed that after correcting for racial misclassification, the death rate in the AI/AN population increased by almost 40 percent. Racial misclassification is also evident in law enforcement data.¹ The reasons for misclassification are complex and multifaceted and include arbitrary decisions made by death investigators or funeral directors based on decedent surname or appearance as opposed to conversations with next of kin. Additionally, “race” is a social construct and, as such, may change over time.⁵⁻⁸ This is especially true for individuals with a multiracial ancestry, which includes many in the AI/AN population. Obtaining accurate death counts in specific populations is fundamental to the ability to describe characteristics, trends, and disparities in mortality. Thus, this misclassification hinders one of the most basic functions of public health surveillance.

Apart from the challenges with adequately capturing information about the AI/AN population, this racial classification is inherently problematic. As one set of researchers noted, it is important to:

acknowledge that these terms have origins in colonizer logic, oversimplify heterogeneous groups, and are proxy reflections, at best, of the diverse and dynamic nature of individuals’ racial and cultural identities.⁷

^c Also known as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People (MMIWP) and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S).

They also noted that:

race and ethnicity are social constructs with complex cultural and political influences, and therefore do not have ‘correct’ classifications.

The Violence Policy Center (VPC) recognizes the importance of identity language and understands that condensing all Native people into a singular “AI/AN” category oversimplifies the experiences of individuals in a heterogeneous group. However, aggregating individuals in a broad category allows for the evaluation of the impacts of structural, environmental, and interpersonal racism on the collective group.⁹ Until a more appropriate method of classifying indigenous and Native individuals is implemented in publicly available mortality datasets, the VPC will use the classification “AI/AN” to be consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau, mortality data, and other data sources.

Given the challenges with accurately collecting death data about the AI/AN population in the U.S., the data presented in this report are flawed to the extent to which the underlying data are an undercount and otherwise inaccurate.

Overview of Gun Deaths among American Indians/Alaska Natives in the U.S.

The violence faced by the AI/AN community is the direct result of structural racism, historical trauma, and other effects of the colonization of Native tribes. Though outside the scope of this report, it is important to highlight the profound resilience of the AI/AN population despite the trauma and violence these communities experience.

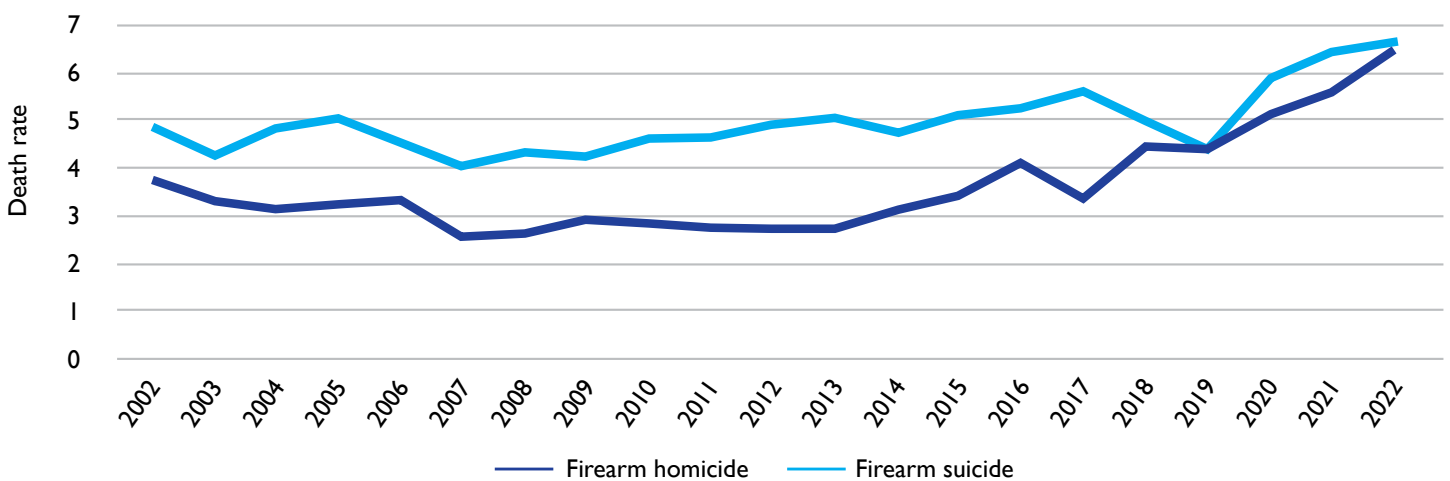
According to the most recent mortality data available from the CDC, there were 596 firearm deaths in the AI/AN population in the U.S. in 2022 — 265 of which were homicides and 275 of which were suicide deaths (Table 1).¹⁰ Rates of both firearm homicides and firearm suicides have been increasing in this population in recent years (Figure 1).^d While this increase may be in part due to potential improvements in reporting the race of AI/AN decedents, improved reporting likely does not account for all of the increase in firearm deaths in this population.

d CDC changed the way race was reported in death data in 2018 by switching from bridged-race categories (American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black or African American, White) to single race categories (American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Black or African American, White, More than one race). For more information, see the CDC WONDER Underlying Cause of Death by Single Race 2018-2022 webpage at <https://wonder.cdc.gov/wonder/help/ucd-expanded.html#>. This report combines the Asian and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander categories into an “Asian” category.

TABLE I. Firearm deaths in the AI/AN population, 2018 – 2022¹⁰

	Total firearm deaths	Firearm homicide	Firearm suicide
2018	400	171	192
2019	366	167	168
2020	491	209	246
2021	531	224	262
2022	596	265	275

FIGURE I. Rates^e of firearm homicides and firearm suicides in the AI/AN population, 2002 – 2022¹⁰



Homicide

In 2022, males accounted for the vast majority of both homicide victims (78.4 percent) and firearm homicide victims (81.5 percent) in the AI/AN population (Table 2). As previously noted however, the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) crisis indicates the number of homicide deaths, particularly among females, is almost certainly an undercount.

Compared to other racial groups, the AI/AN population has had the second highest rates of homicide and firearm homicide in the nation since 2018, surpassed only by the Black population (Figure 2). Though rates in the Black population decreased slightly between 2021 and 2022, rates increased in the AI/AN population. In 2022, American Indian or Alaska Natives in the U.S. were more than twice as likely to die by homicide or firearm homicide compared to the white population. VPC research about female homicide victimization shows that since 2015 the rate of female AI/AN victims killed by men is second highest in the nation and has increased more substantially compared to other races in recent years.¹¹

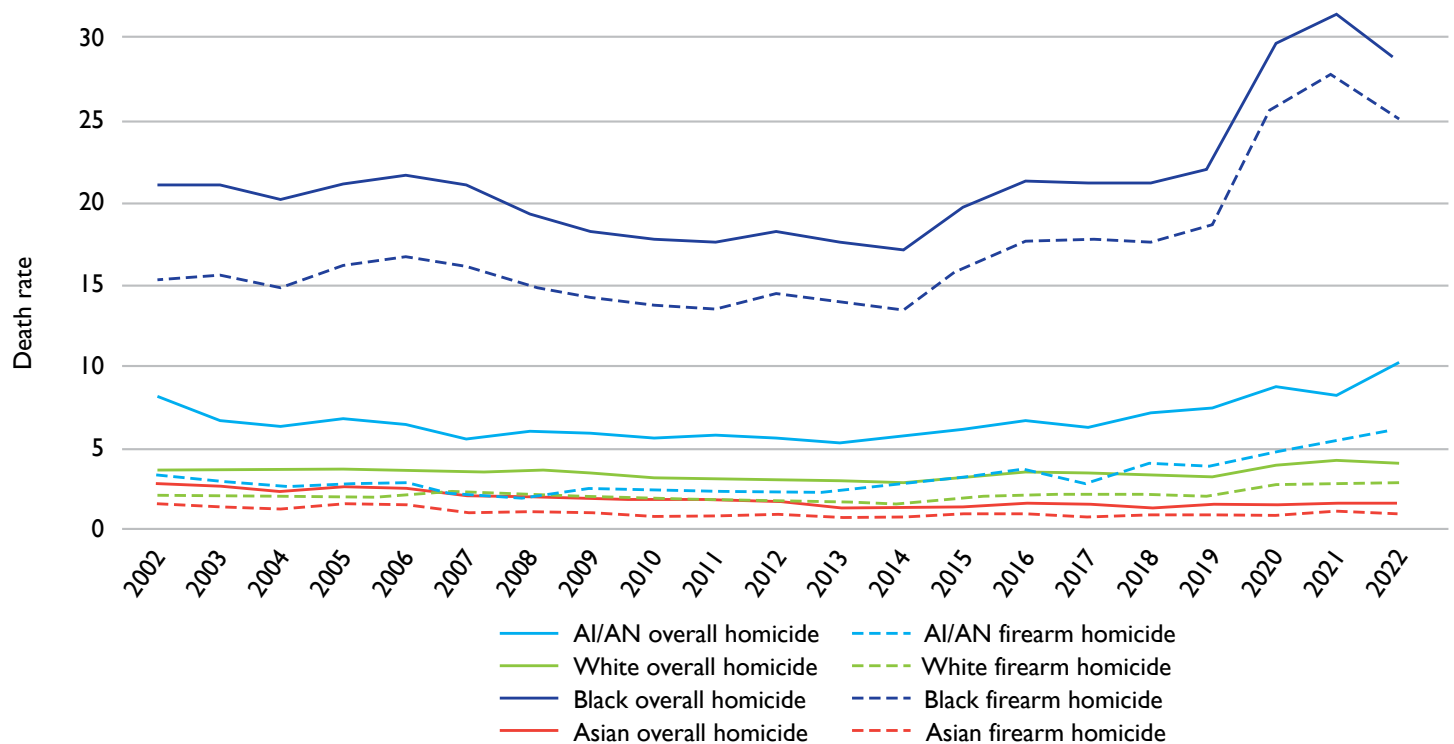
^e All death rates presented in this report are adjusted for age and per 100,000.

TABLE 2. Homicide and firearm homicide victims in the AI/AN population, 2022¹⁰

	Homicide deaths	Firearm homicide deaths
Total deaths	436 (100.0%)	265 (100.0%)
Sex		
Male	342 (78.4%)	216 (81.5%)
Female	94 (21.6%)	49 (18.5%)
Age (in years)		
<10	16 (3.7%)	--
10-24	87 (20.0%)	70 (26.4%)
25-44	238 (54.6%)	149 (56.2%)
45-64	86 (19.7%)	42 (15.8%)
65+	--	--

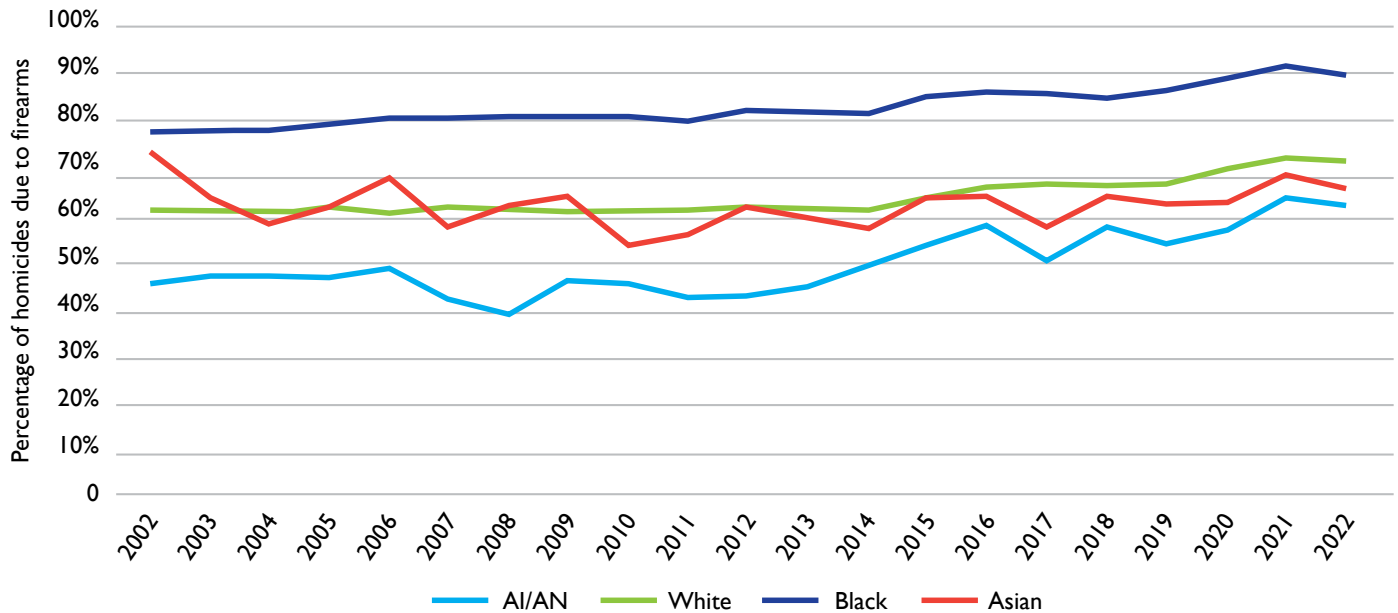
-- Indicates value has been suppressed because the number is too small to publish due to privacy concerns (nine or fewer deaths)

FIGURE 2. Homicide and firearm homicide rates by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰



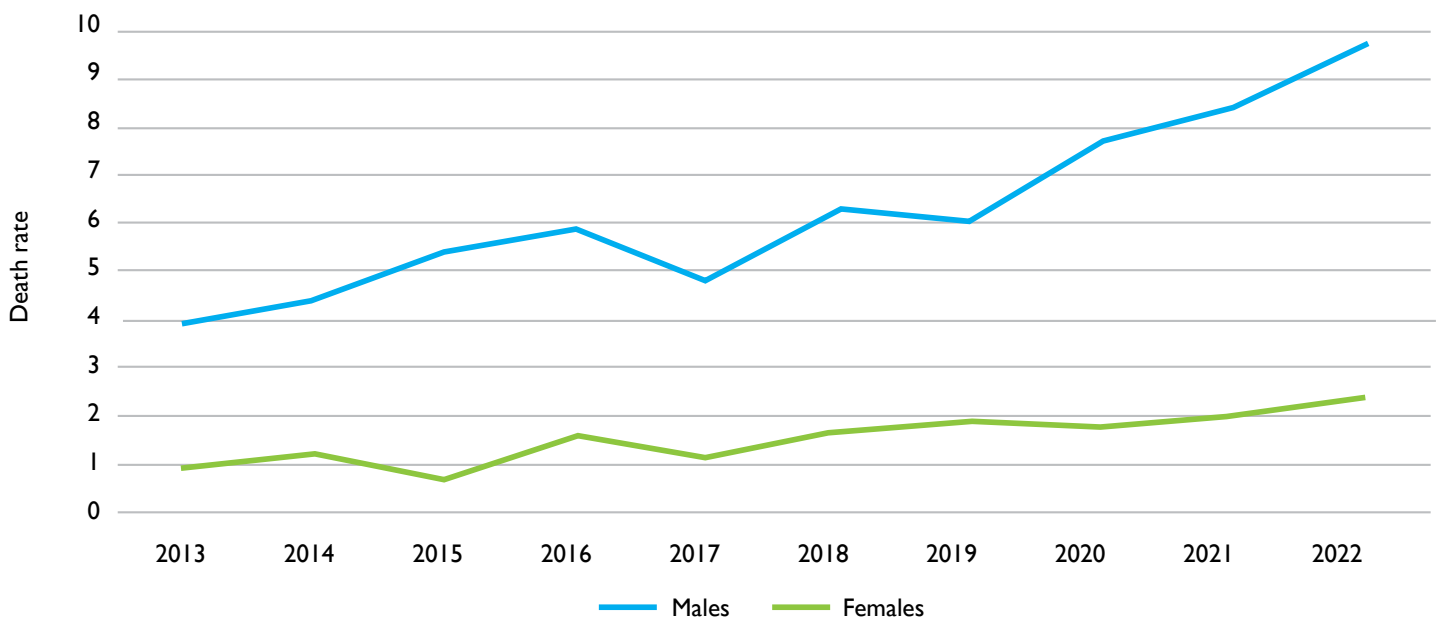
Compared to other races, the percentage of homicides perpetrated with firearms are lowest in the AI/AN population, though this percentage has increased from 49.2 percent in 2017 to 60.8 percent in 2022 (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. Percentage of homicides due to firearms by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰



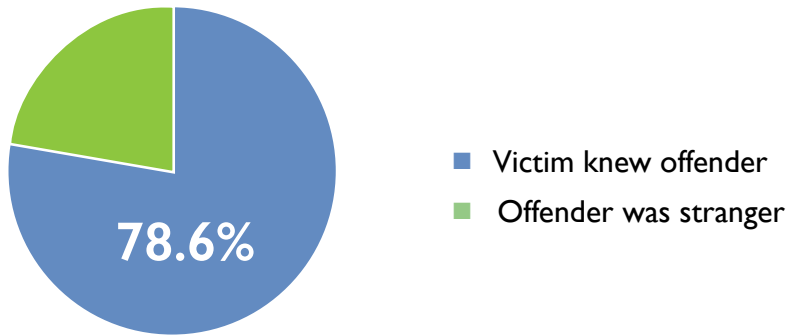
While rates of firearm homicides have increased for both male and female AI/AN victims, the rate has increased more drastically among males, from 3.9 per 100,000 in 2013 to 9.7 per 100,000 in 2022 (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Firearm homicide rates in the AI/AN population by sex, 2013 – 2022¹⁰



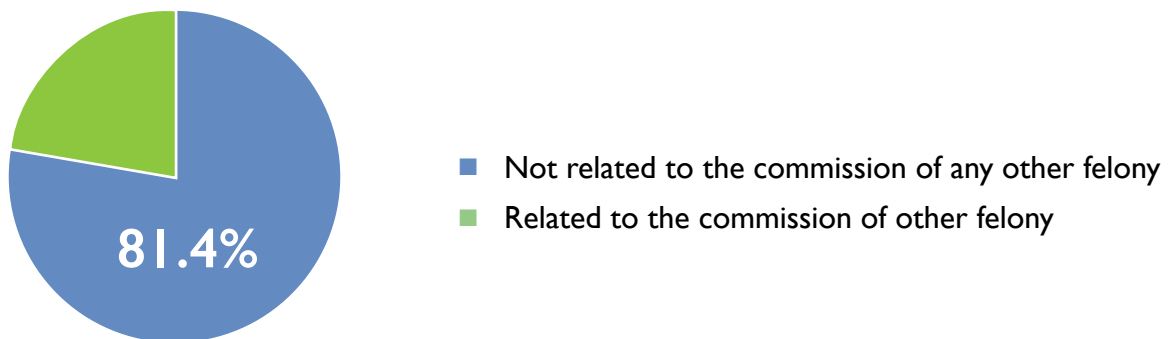
According to 2022 FBI SHR data, for homicides in which the victim to offender relationship could be identified, 78.6 percent of AI/AN victims were killed by someone they knew (136 out of 173, Figure 5).¹² Thirty-seven victims were killed by strangers (21.4 percent).

FIGURE 5. Percentage of AI/AN homicide victims who knew their offender¹²



For homicides in which the circumstances were known, 81.4 percent (149 out of 183) were not related to the commission of any other felony (Figure 6). Of these, 53.7 percent (80 homicides) involved arguments between the victim and offender.

FIGURE 6. Percentage of homicides with AI/AN victims that were not related to the commission of any other felony¹²



Suicide

In 2022, males accounted for the vast majority of both suicide victims (72.9 percent) and firearm suicide victims (86.9 percent) in the AI/AN population (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Suicide and firearm suicide deaths in the AI/AN population, 2022¹⁰

Total deaths	Suicide deaths 701 (100.0%)	Firearm suicide deaths 275 (100.0%)
Sex		
Male	511 (72.9%)	239 (86.9%)
Female	190 (27.1%)	36 (13.1%)
Age (in years)		
<10	--	0 (0.0%)
10-24	182 (26.0%)	78 (28.4%)
25-44	364 (51.9%)	121 (44.0%)
45-64	122 (17.4%)	52 (18.9%)
65+	32 (4.6%)	24 (8.7%)

-- Indicates value has been suppressed because the number is too small to publish due to privacy concerns (nine or fewer deaths)

Overall suicide deaths have been steadily increasing in the AI/AN population over the last two decades (Figure 7). Previously exceeded only by the white population, suicide rates in the AI/AN population have surpassed those of the white population to have the highest rates out of all races. Firearm suicide rates in the AI/AN population remain the second highest and have increased in recent years.

Compared to other races, the percentage of suicides perpetrated with firearms is the third lowest in the AI/AN population, though this percentage has increased from 28.9 percent in 2019 to 39.2 percent in 2022 (Figure 8).

FIGURE 7. Suicide and firearm suicide rates by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰

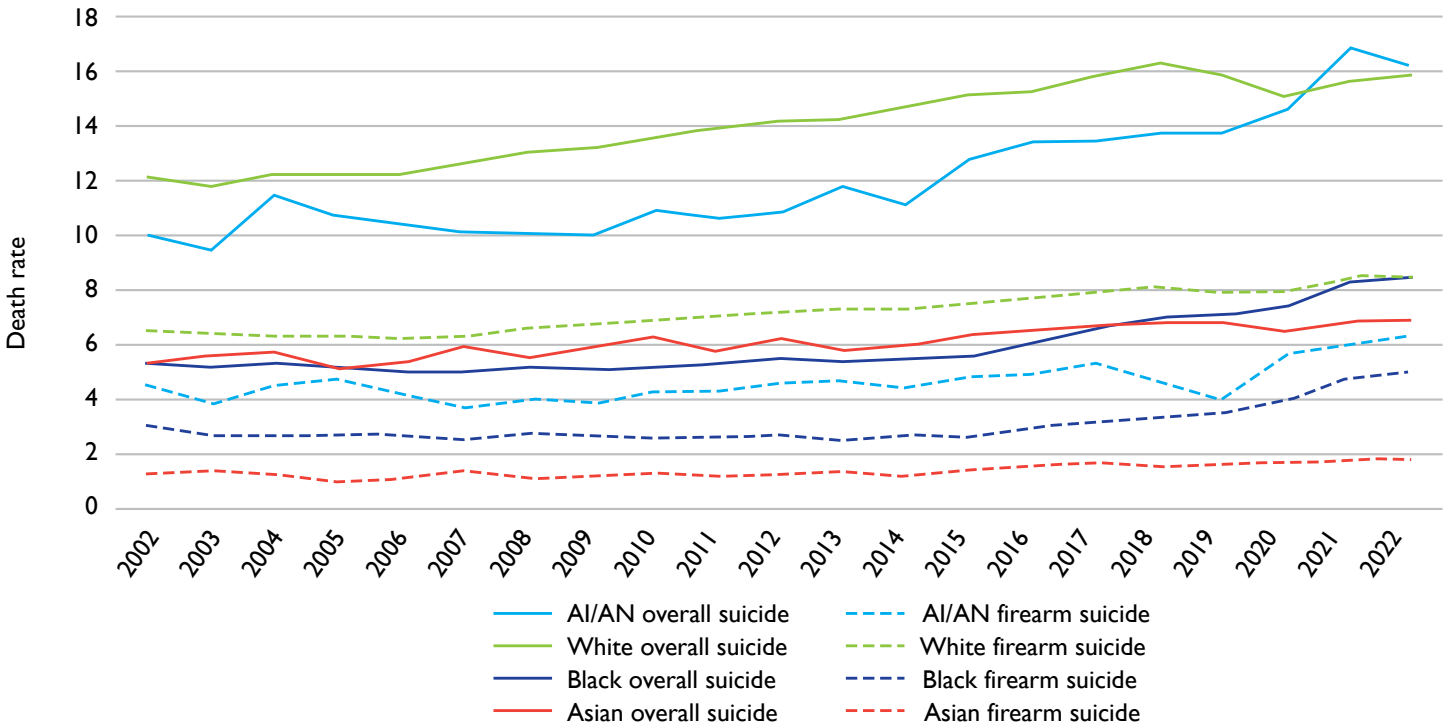
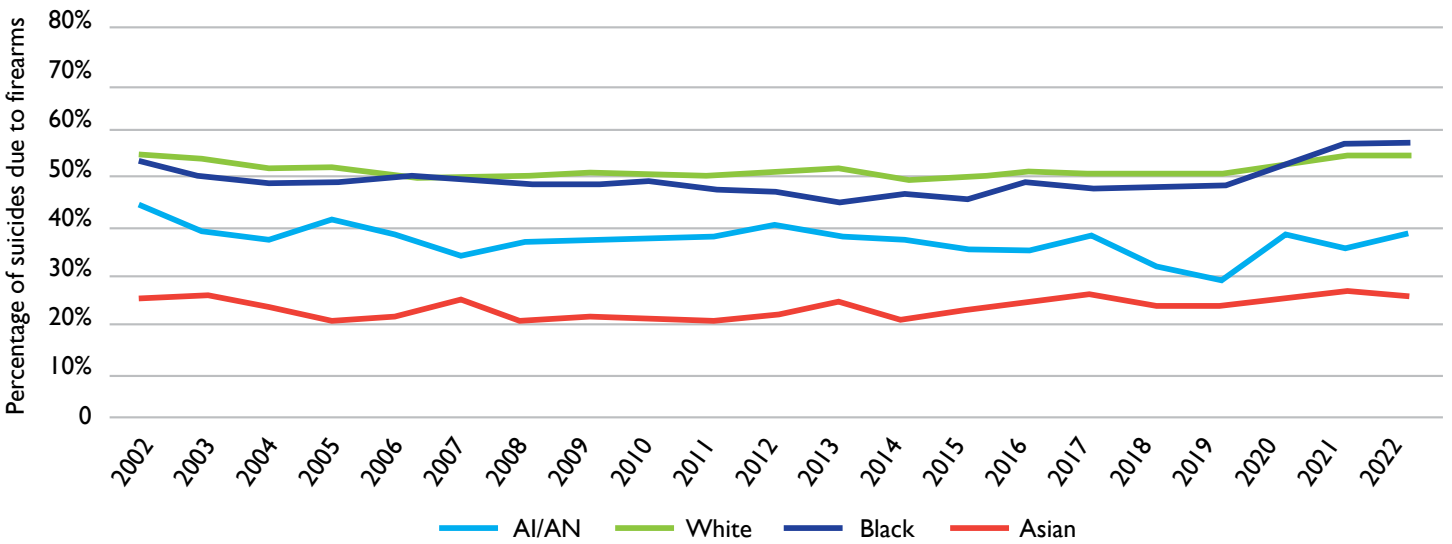
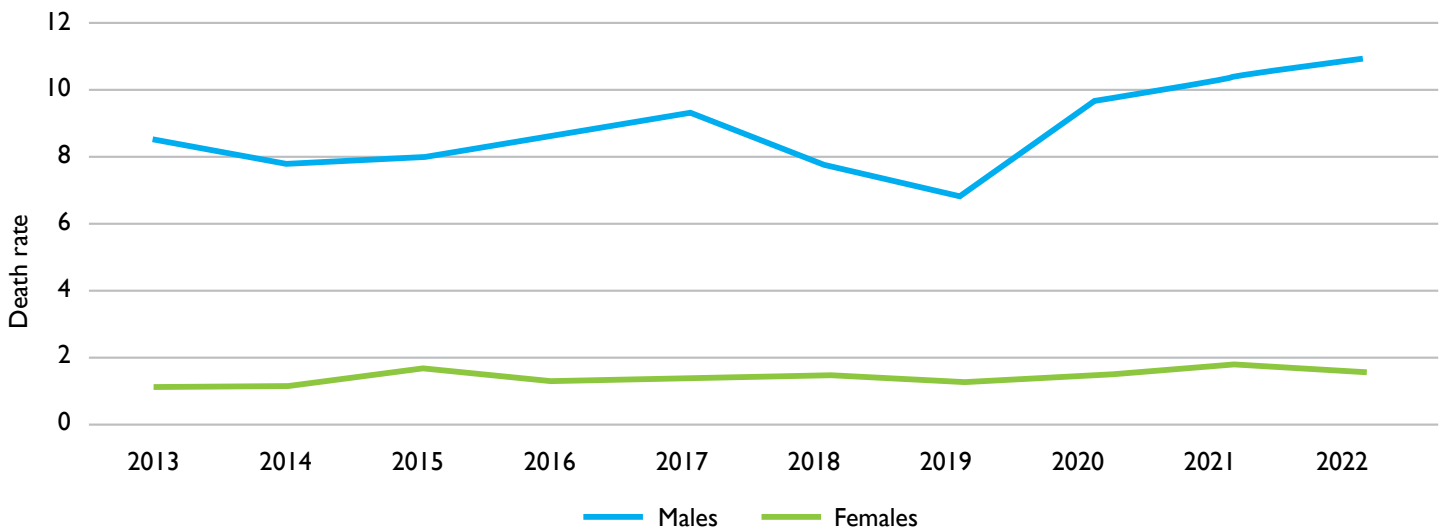


FIGURE 8. Percentage of suicides due to firearms by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰



While rates of firearm suicide have remained relatively stable among AI/AN females, rates have increased for male victims in recent years, from 6.8 per 100,000 in 2019 to 10.9 per 100,000 in 2022 (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9. Firearm suicide rates in the AI/AN population by sex, 2013 – 2022¹⁰



Conclusion

American Indians and Alaska Natives are disproportionately affected by firearm violence in the U.S. This population has the second highest rate of homicide and firearm homicide compared to other races. Furthermore, while rates decreased or stayed the same among all other races between 2021 and 2022, both homicide and firearm homicide rates increased in the AI/AN population. Similar to other races, both suicide and firearm suicide rates are increasing in the AI/AN population, but the overall suicide rate in this population surpassed that of the white population in 2021 and has had the highest rate since then.

The data show that AI/AN males make up the majority of violent death victims, though it is important to again note that homicide deaths are undercounted among AI/AN women and girls. Racial misclassification of AI/AN decedents has been well documented and inhibits the ability to accurately describe characteristics, trends, and disparities in violent deaths in the AI/AN population in the U.S. There is much work to be done to improve the characterization of AI/AN decedents in death data. More important however, is the urgent need to address the violence faced by the AI/AN community and the underlying factors that contribute to this epidemic of violence.

References

1. Urban Indian Health Institute. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf>
2. Urban Indian Health Institute. MMIWG: We Demand More. Available at: <https://www.uihi.org/projects/our-bodies-our-stories/>.
3. Satter DE, Mercer Kollar LM; Public Health Writing Group on Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons Various Public Health Experts; O’Gara ‘Djik Sook’ D. American Indian and Alaska Native Knowledge and Public Health for the Primary Prevention of Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons. *Dep Justice J Fed Law Pract.* 2021;69(2):149-188.
4. Arias E, Heron M, Hakes JK. The validity of race and Hispanic-origin reporting on death certificates in the United States: An update. National Center for Health Statistics. *Vital Health Stat.* 2016;2(172):1-21.
5. Braveman P, Parker Dominguez T. Abandon “Race.” Focus on Racism. *Front Public Health.* 2021;7(9):1-8. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2021.689462.
6. Anderson RN, Copeland G, Hayes JM. Linkages to improve mortality data for American Indians and Alaska Natives: a new model for death reporting? *Am J Public Health.* 2014;104(Suppl 3):S258-62. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2013.301647.
7. McClure ES, Gartner DR, Bell RA, Cruz TH, Nocera M, Marshall SW, Richardson DB. Challenges with misclassification of American Indian/Alaska Native race and Hispanic ethnicity on death records in North Carolina occupational fatalities surveillance. *Front Epidemiol.* 2022 Oct 21;2:878309. doi: 10.3389/fepid.2022.878309.
8. Haozous EA, Strickland CJ, Palacios JF, Solomon TG. Blood politics, ethnic identity, and racial misclassification among American Indians and Alaska Natives. *J Environ Public Health.* 2014;1-9. doi: 10.1155/2014/321604.
9. Gartner DR, Wilbur RE, McCoy ML. “American Indian” as a Racial Category in Public Health: Implications for Communities and Practice. *Am J Public Health.* 2021;111(11):1969-1975. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2021.306465.
10. CDC WISQARS Fatal and Nonfatal Injury Reports. Accessed June 2024. Available at: <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/reports/>.
11. Violence Policy Center. *When Men Murder Women: A Review of 25 Years of Female Homicide Victimization in the United States.* Available at: <https://www.vpc.org/studies/wmmw2023.pdf>
12. FBI Supplementary Homicide Report data. Downloaded from the Crime Data Explorer on January 26, 2024. Available at: <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/home>.

Appendix

FIGURE 1. Rates of firearm homicides and firearm suicides in the AI/AN population, 2002 – 2022¹⁰

	Firearm homicide	Firearm suicide
2002	3.4	4.5
2003	3.0	3.9
2004	2.8	4.5
2005	2.9	4.7
2006	3.0	4.2
2007	2.2	3.7
2008	2.3	4.0
2009	2.6	3.9
2010	2.5	4.3
2011	2.4	4.3
2012	2.4	4.6
2013	2.4	4.7
2014	2.8	4.4
2015	3.1	4.8
2016	3.8	4.9
2017	3.0	5.3
2018	4.1	4.6
2019	4.0	4.0
2020	4.8	5.6
2021	5.3	6.1
2022	6.2	6.3

FIGURE 2. Homicide and firearm homicide rates by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰

	AI/AN overall homicide	AI/AN firearm homicide	White overall homicide	White firearm homicide	Black overall homicide	Black firearm homicide	Asian overall homicide	Asian firearm homicide
2002	8.1	3.4	3.7	2.2	21.0	15.6	2.9	1.7
2003	6.8	3.0	3.7	2.2	21.0	15.7	2.8	1.6
2004	6.4	2.8	3.7	2.2	20.1	15.0	2.4	1.4
2005	6.9	2.9	3.7	2.2	21.1	16.0	2.8	1.7
2006	6.5	3.0	3.7	2.2	21.5	16.7	2.7	1.7
2007	5.6	2.2	3.7	2.3	20.9	16.1	2.2	1.2
2008	6.2	2.3	3.7	2.2	19.3	15.0	2.1	1.2
2009	5.9	2.6	3.5	2.1	18.1	14.1	2.0	1.2
2010	5.7	2.5	3.2	1.9	17.7	13.8	1.9	0.9
2011	5.9	2.4	3.2	1.9	17.5	13.6	2.0	1.0
2012	5.8	2.4	3.2	1.9	18.2	14.5	1.8	1.1
2013	5.3	2.4	3.1	1.8	17.6	13.9	1.5	0.9
2014	5.8	2.8	3.0	1.8	17.1	13.5	1.5	0.9
2015	6.2	3.1	3.3	2.1	19.5	16.1	1.6	1.0
2016	6.7	3.8	3.5	2.3	21.2	17.7	1.8	1.1
2017	6.4	3.0	3.6	2.3	21.2	17.8	1.7	0.9
2018	7.2	4.1	3.4	2.3	21.2	17.6	1.5	1.0
2019	7.4	4.0	3.3	2.2	22.1	18.6	1.7	1.0
2020	8.7	4.8	4.1	2.8	29.5	25.7	1.6	1.0
2021	8.4	5.3	4.3	3.0	31.5	27.9	1.7	1.2
2022	10.1	6.2	4.2	3.0	29.0	25.3	1.7	1.1

FIGURE 3. Percentage of homicides due to firearms by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰

	AI/AN	White	Black	Asian
2002	43.8%	59.7%	75.8%	71.4%
2003	46.0%	59.4%	76.2%	61.2%
2004	45.6%	59.2%	76.2%	57.0%
2005	45.5%	60.0%	77.3%	62.1%
2006	46.9%	59.6%	78.8%	65.6%
2007	41.4%	60.4%	78.5%	56.3%
2008	38.0%	59.7%	78.8%	60.6%
2009	44.1%	59.5%	78.9%	61.8%
2010	44.0%	59.1%	78.7%	52.0%
2011	41.3%	59.2%	78.5%	54.5%
2012	41.4%	59.9%	80.2%	60.1%
2013	44.4%	59.6%	79.9%	58.7%
2014	48.1%	59.3%	80.0%	55.5%
2015	51.7%	62.6%	83.0%	62.1%
2016	56.7%	64.1%	84.4%	63.1%
2017	49.2%	64.8%	84.4%	56.3%
2018	56.8%	64.4%	83.5%	63.3%
2019	53.0%	65.3%	84.6%	61.4%
2020	56.2%	68.5%	87.6%	62.2%
2021	62.9%	70.0%	88.8%	67.0%
2022	60.8%	69.6%	87.4%	64.6%

FIGURE 4. Firearm homicide rates in the AI/AN population by sex, 2013 – 2022¹⁰

	Males	Females
2013	3.9	0.9
2014	4.4	1.2
2015	5.4	0.7
2016	5.9	1.6
2017	4.8	1.2
2018	6.3	1.7
2019	6.0	1.9
2020	7.7	1.8
2021	8.4	2.0
2022	9.7	2.4

FIGURE 7. Suicide and firearm suicide rates by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰

	AI/AN overall suicide	AI/AN firearm suicide	White overall suicide	White firearm suicide	Black overall suicide	Black firearm suicide	Asian overall suicide	Asian firearm suicide
2002	9.9	4.5	12.0	6.5	5.3	3.0	5.3	1.3
2003	9.5	3.9	11.8	6.4	5.2	2.7	5.6	1.4
2004	11.4	4.5	12.1	6.3	5.3	2.7	5.7	1.3
2005	10.6	4.7	12.1	6.3	5.2	2.7	5.1	1.0
2006	10.4	4.2	12.2	6.2	5.0	2.7	5.4	1.1
2007	10.1	3.7	12.6	6.3	5.0	2.5	5.9	1.4
2008	10.1	4.0	13.0	6.6	5.2	2.7	5.5	1.1
2009	10.0	3.9	13.2	6.7	5.1	2.6	5.9	1.2
2010	10.9	4.3	13.6	6.9	5.2	2.6	6.2	1.3
2011	10.6	4.3	13.9	7.0	5.3	2.6	5.8	1.2
2012	10.8	4.6	14.1	7.2	5.5	2.7	6.2	1.3
2013	11.7	4.7	14.2	7.3	5.4	2.5	5.8	1.4
2014	11.0	4.4	14.7	7.3	5.5	2.7	6.0	1.2
2015	12.7	4.8	15.1	7.5	5.6	2.6	6.4	1.4
2016	13.4	4.9	15.2	7.7	6.0	3.0	6.6	1.6
2017	13.4	5.3	15.9	7.9	6.6	3.2	6.7	1.7
2018	13.7	4.6	16.2	8.1	7.0	3.4	6.8	1.6
2019	13.7	4.0	15.8	7.9	7.1	3.5	6.8	1.6
2020	14.5	5.6	15.0	7.9	7.4	4.0	6.5	1.7
2021	16.8	6.1	15.6	8.4	8.3	4.8	6.8	1.8
2022	16.1	6.3	15.8	8.5	8.6	5.0	6.9	1.8

FIGURE 8. Percentage of suicides due to firearms by race, 2002 – 2022¹⁰

	AI/AN	White	Black	Asian
2002	45.1%	55.5%	54.6%	25.7%
2003	39.4%	54.7%	51.4%	26.2%
2004	37.6%	52.7%	50.0%	23.8%
2005	41.6%	53.1%	50.7%	20.5%
2006	39.0%	51.6%	51.9%	21.5%
2007	34.4%	51.1%	50.4%	24.6%
2008	37.4%	51.6%	49.8%	20.7%
2009	37.5%	51.9%	49.6%	21.4%
2010	38.0%	51.6%	50.3%	21.3%
2011	38.6%	51.7%	48.9%	20.8%
2012	41.0%	52.1%	48.5%	22.0%
2013	38.8%	52.8%	46.2%	24.3%
2014	38.0%	51.1%	47.5%	20.6%
2015	35.9%	51.1%	46.6%	23.1%
2016	35.5%	52.2%	50.0%	24.7%
2017	38.6%	51.7%	48.6%	26.2%
2018	32.7%	52.0%	48.8%	23.6%
2019	28.9%	51.8%	49.5%	23.8%
2020	39.0%	54.2%	53.7%	25.2%
2021	35.7%	55.9%	58.1%	26.8%
2022	39.2%	55.9%	58.3%	25.8%

FIGURE 9. Firearm suicide rates in the AI/AN population by sex, 2013 – 2022¹⁰

	Males	Females
2013	8.5	1.1
2014	7.8	1.2
2015	8.0	1.7
2016	8.7	1.3
2017	9.3	1.4
2018	7.7	1.5
2019	6.8	1.3
2020	9.7	1.5
2021	10.4	1.8
2022	10.9	1.6



Violence Policy Center

805 15th Street, NW

Suite 601

Washington, DC 20005

202-822-8200

WWW.VPC.ORG