Decedent Demographics

Decedents are overwhelmingly male, peak in the 25–44 age range, and are majority White by count, with Hispanic and Black decedents together accounting for nearly half of all cases with known race.

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Current	**1.0**	**25 October 2026**
Evidence grade	Data snapshot	Reviewed by
Data supported	**S-20261002**	**Under review**

> **Figures in this report** are drawn from snapshot `S-20261002`. All statistics are computed from the suppressed public aggregate; no case-level data are included. Cells with fewer than 5 records are suppressed (shown as —).

Takeaway

Across 1,970 fatal edged-weapon encounters from 2015 to 2024, decedents are almost exclusively male (94.5%), are most concentrated in the 25-to-44 age band (60.3% of cases with known age), and have a mean age of 37.5 years. Among the 1,943 cases with known race, White decedents account for 48.5 percent of cases, Hispanic decedents 24.6 percent, and Black decedents 19.9 percent.

Background

A basic demographic description of decedents is foundational for any serious analysis of fatal police encounters. Age, gender, and race interact with call type, crisis presentation, and encounter dynamics in ways that later, more specific reports will need to account for. The present report provides that baseline, drawing on the full Edged-Weapon Response Lab dataset without stratification or adjustment.

This report describes decedent demographics as recorded; it does not adjust for population denominators, does not compare rates across racial groups, and does not draw conclusions about disparate impact. Those analyses require additional data — census-period population estimates, agency jurisdiction denominators, and appropriate uncertainty quantification — and are deferred to future work.

Research context

The demographic profile of people killed by police has been studied with increasing rigor as journalist-maintained databases have provided more complete counts than official administrative records, which historically undercounted police-involved fatalities by roughly half (Nix et al., 2017). The most consistent findings

across this literature are that decedents are overwhelmingly male, concentrated in the 25–44 age band, and that Black and Hispanic decedents appear at shares substantially above their general-population representation. Nix et al. (2017), analyzing Washington Post data on 990 civilians killed in 2015, found a sample that was 95 percent male with a demographic age concentration closely comparable to the EWRL edged-weapon dataset (Nix et al., 2017). Racial disparity in fatal police encounters is the most contested empirical question in this literature. Ross (2015) applied a Bayesian hierarchical model across counties and found evidence of racial bias in the shooting of unarmed Black civilians not explained by county-level crime rates (Ross, 2015). Cesario et al. (2019) reached the opposite conclusion using encounter-rate denominators drawn from violent-crime data, finding that disparities largely disappear when controlling for differential rates of police contact (Cesario et al., 2019). Tregle et al. (2019) and Klinger et al. (2016) argue that the divergence reflects the choice of denominator — general population, violent-crime arrests, or police contacts produce different disparity estimates — and that no single benchmark is theoretically correct without a precise statement of the causal question being asked (Tregle et al., 2019; Klinger et al., 2016). Knox et al. (2020) demonstrated that official administrative records systematically undercount racially biased stops, which means that any denominator drawn from those records carries the same reporting bias as the numerator it is meant to adjust (Knox et al., 2020).

The EWRL demographic report does not perform rate analysis. It provides count distributions — the numerators that a rate analysis would require — while making explicit the methodological conditions under which rate comparisons can be interpreted. Encounter-level denominators for edged-weapon calls do not exist in any national database; in their absence, count distributions are the appropriate descriptive output.

Data and methods

Dataset. The analysis draws on the full Edged-Weapon Response Lab dataset (N = 1,970), covering fatal police encounters involving an edged weapon documented in the Washington Post Fatal Force database (Washington Post, 2025) and Mapping Police Violence (Mapping Police Violence, 2026) for January 2015 through December 2024.

Race and ethnicity (D_Race). Race is recorded using the source databases' own categories, supplemented by narrative review. Categories used in this report are: White (W), Hispanic (H), Black (B), Asian (A), Native American or Alaska Native (N), Pacific Islander (P), and Mixed or multiracial (M). Race was not determinable for 27 cases (1.4%). Hispanic origin is treated as a racial category following the source databases' convention; this diverges from Census Bureau practice, which treats Hispanic origin as a separate ethnicity overlapping all racial categories. This convention is noted as a limitation below.

Age (D_Age). Recorded in years at the time of the encounter. Age was missing for 18 cases (0.9%).

Gender (D_Gender). Recorded as Male (M), Female (F), or non-binary or gender-diverse (X). Two cases are coded X; these are included in total counts but not displayed separately where cell suppression applies.

Suppression. All counts are drawn from the suppressed public aggregate. Cells with fewer than five records are not displayed. For more information see EWRL Methods — Suppression and privacy (/methods/suppression-and-privacy).

Findings

Gender

Male decedents account for 1,861 of 1,970 cases (94.5%). Female decedents account for 107 cases (5.4%). Two cases carry a non-binary or gender-diverse coding.

The call type profile differs between male and female decedents. For female decedents, domestic and family calls are the single largest category (35 of 107 cases, 32.7%), and the domestic flag is present in 43.0 percent of female cases (46 of 107) — a rate identical to that for male decedents (804 of 1,861, 43.2%). Female decedents are more heavily concentrated in domestic and welfare-check calls relative to enforcement-oriented call types such as warrants, robbery, and traffic enforcement, which are predominantly male.

Age

The mean age of decedents is 37.5 years (range 14–83; 18 cases with unknown age excluded). The distribution is unimodal and right-skewed, peaking in the 25–34 band.

Age distribution by band (N = 1,952 with known age):

- Under 18: 27 cases (1.4%)
- 18–24: 218 cases (11.2%)
- 25–34: 629 cases (32.2%)
- 35–44: 548 cases (28.1%)
- 45–54: 345 cases (17.7%)
- 55–64: 150 cases (7.7%)
- 65 and older: 35 cases (1.8%)

The 25–34 and 35–44 bands together account for 60.3 percent of cases with known age. Decedents under 18 are a small but non-trivial group (27 cases); decedents 65 and older are rarer still (35 cases).

Figure 1. Age distribution of decedents in fatal edged-weapon encounters, 2015–2024 (n = 1,952; 18 cases with unknown age excluded).

Race

Race was recorded for 1,943 of 1,970 cases (98.6%). Among cases with known race:

- White: 943 (48.5%)

- Hispanic: 477 (24.6%)
- Black: 387 (19.9%)
- Asian: 54 (2.8%)
- Native American or Alaska Native: 46 (2.4%)
- Mixed or multiracial: 18 (0.9%)
- Pacific Islander: 18 (0.9%)

Hispanic and Black decedents together account for 44.5 percent of cases with known race. White decedents are the plurality in every year of the study period. Hispanic and Black decedents have been stable as shares of annual caseload across the decade, while the absolute count increase observed in 2024 (261 cases, the highest annual total) is distributed across all groups.

Figure 2. Race distribution of decedents in fatal edged-weapon encounters, 2015–2024 (cases with known race).

Race, age, and illness

The age distributions within the three largest racial groups are broadly similar, with each group peaking in the 25–44 band. Black decedents skew modestly younger: the 18–24 band accounts for 13.7 percent of Black cases (53 of 387) compared with 14.1 percent of Hispanic cases (67 of 477) and 8.4 percent of White cases (79 of 943). The 65-and-older band is most prevalent among White decedents (17 of 943, 1.8%) and less common among Black (5 of 387, 1.3%) and Hispanic (10 of 477, 2.1%) decedents.

Mental illness coding varies modestly by race. The illness flag is present in 64.6 percent of White cases (609 of 943), 58.9 percent of Black cases (228 of 387), and 55.6 percent of Hispanic cases (265 of 477). This gradient may in part reflect reporting differences: mental health histories are more likely to be documented in sources covering White decedents, and the illness flag is conditioned on documentation in public records.

Figure 3. Gender distribution of decedents in fatal edged-weapon encounters, 2015–2024.

Interpretation

What the findings show. Fatal edged-weapon encounters are concentrated among men in early middle age. The demographic profile is broadly consistent with findings from general police fatal-force studies [Nix et al., 2017], with the edged-weapon subset showing a similar gender distribution and a comparable age peak. Race by count shows White plurality, with Hispanic and Black decedents together comprising nearly half of all cases.

What the findings do not show. Count distributions are not rates. Without population-at-risk denominators, the race and age distributions cannot be used to assess whether any group is over- or under-represented relative to their share of relevant contact events with police. This report does not support claims of disparity or the absence of disparity; it provides the numerators that a rate analysis would require.

What would change the conclusion. Adjusting for contact with police by call type, jurisdiction, and time period — rather than using general population denominators — would provide a more informative basis for assessing whether demographic distributions in fatal encounters differ from those expected given encounter exposure. That analysis is deferred to future work.

Limitations

Hispanic origin is treated as a racial category in the source databases, which conflates a heterogeneous ethnic group with racial identity. An unknown number of decedents coded as White, Black, or other categories may have identified as Hispanic; the Hispanic count is almost certainly an undercount. This convention is retained here for consistency with the source data but should be noted in any downstream comparative analysis.

Race coding in the source databases relies on reporting by law enforcement agencies and media sources. The 27 cases with unknown race are likely not random; they may disproportionately involve incidents with limited media coverage and lower documentation quality.

The illness flag gradient by race (White highest, Hispanic lowest) should be interpreted cautiously. It may reflect genuine differences in mental health history across groups, differences in documentation and source availability, or both.

How to cite

Machacynski, B. (2026). *Decedent Demographics* (EWRL-26-004). In *Fatal Edged-Weapon Encounters, 2015–2024* (Version 1.0). Edged-Weapon Response Lab. https://droptheknife.org/reports/decedent-demographics

Data snapshot. S-20261002, deposited at Zenodo https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22650264 (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22650264).

References

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Washington Post. (2025). *Fatal Force database* [Data set]. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from https://github.com/washingtonpost/data-police-shootings

Figures

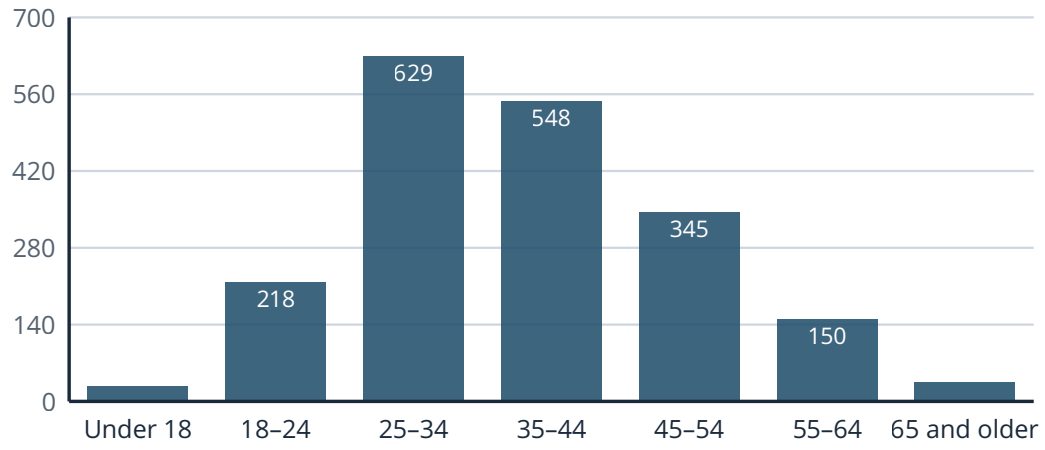

Figure 1. n = 1952. 18 records excluded because not coded. 18 cases with unknown age excluded.

Category	Decedents
Under 18	27
18–24	218
25–34	629
35–44	548
45–54	345
55–64	150
65 and older	35

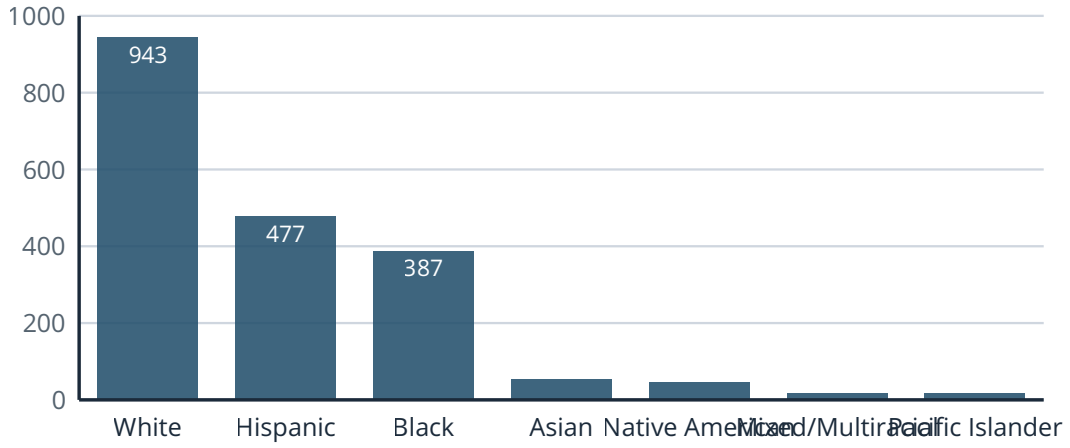

Figure 2. n = 1943. 27 records excluded because not coded. 27 cases with unknown or undetermined race excluded. Hispanic origin is treated as a racial category following the source databases' convention.

Category	Decedents
White	943
Hispanic	477
Black	387
Asian	54
Native American	46
Mixed/Multiracial	18
Pacific Islander	18

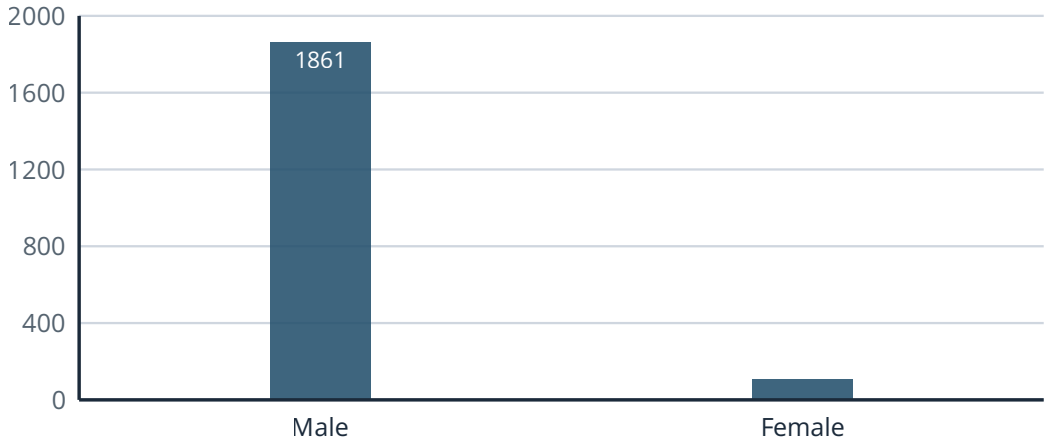

Figure 3. n = 1968. 2 records excluded because not coded. 2 cases with non-binary or gender-diverse coding suppressed (cell below minimum threshold).

Category	Decedents
Male	1861
Female	107