Understanding and Reducing Deaths in Custody

Analysis of the Bureau of Justice Assistance Death in Custody Reporting Act (DCRA) Data

Prepared for

Benjamin Adams, Program Manager
National Institute of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
U.S. Department of Justice

September 2024

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Introduction

This report is part of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Death in Custody Reporting Act (DCRA) study, which is designed to generate significant advances in the knowledge and understanding of deaths in custody and to result in recommendations that support efforts to prevent and reduce such deaths. The DCRA Study is conducted pursuant to the 2014 reauthorization of the Death in Custody Reporting Act (DCRA 2013),[1] which requires the Attorney General to conduct a study and submit a report to Congress to "(A) determine means by which such information can be used to reduce the number of such deaths, and (B) examine the relationship, if any, between the number of such deaths and the actions of management of such jails, prisons, and other specified facilities relating to such deaths" (see 34 U.S.C. § 60105 (f)(1)(A) & (B)).

DCRA further requires states to document and report the death of any person being held in custody by law enforcement, jails, or prisons. The DCRA defines "in custody" as any person who is detained, under arrest, in the process of being arrested, or enroute to being incarcerated or those who are incarcerated at a municipal or county jail, state prison, state-run boot camp prison, boot camp prison operated by the state, any state or local contract facility, or other local or state correction facility.[2]

As of fiscal year 2020, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) is responsible for the collection of DCRA data from state administering agencies (SAAs) that administer the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program funding. The SAAs are responsible for compiling data from local entities, which include the approximately 17,500 law enforcement agencies (LEAs), 3,100 jails, and 1,700 prisons in the United States, and submitting it on a quarterly basis to BJA. Each reported death includes information about the decedent's demographics, as well as the manner and circumstances surrounding each death. This report provides a high-level assessment of the patterns and quality of the DCRA data.

Approach

In the sections that follow, the prevalence of deaths occurring in each sector between 2020 and 2023[3] is described, in addition to trends over time by manner of death and demographic characteristics. The BJA DCRA data were pulled in June 2024 and estimates are presented according to calendar year. Slight differences between this report and other BJA reports are due to differences in reporting year (i.e., calendar year versus fiscal year). Additionally, the number of incidents and incident characteristics are updated when BJA receives new information.

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[1] The DCRA was first passed in 2000 (P.L. 106-297) and required the collection of individual data on deaths in the process of arrest, local jails, and state prisons. DCRA 2013 was reauthorized in December 2014.
[2] Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). (2022). *Death in Custody Reporting Act (DCRA) data collection*. https://bja.ojp.gov/program/dcra/overview
[3] Although BJA has been collecting DCRA data since fiscal year 2020 (with the fourth quarter of 2019 being the first period of data collection), we limit this analysis to the period during which full years of data are available: 2020 through 2023.

Relative distributions and patterns are compared between the data sources used in the *Understanding and Reducing Deaths in Custody: Interim Report*[4] and the DCRA data reported to BJA to assess potential consistencies and divergences. The relevant data sources used in the *Understanding and Reducing Deaths in Custody: Interim Report* include federal data on deaths in jails and prison (Mortality in Correctional Institutions data collection) and open-source data on arrest-related deaths (Fatal Encounters data collection). The years of data available through these collections and the definitions used in some classifications of deaths do not align with available DCRA data collected by BJA, hindering the ability to make direct year-to-year comparisons between sources. The lack of data with which to make direct comparisons poses a challenge in assessing BJA DCRA data quality against other sources, though comparisons may still be made between the relative patterns and distributions of decedents across datasets, which can still be informative. This is the approach taken in this report. In turn, recommendations are made for potential ways to improve the quality and relevance of the BJA DCRA collection.

Deaths Over Time

In 2023, there were 6,705 deaths in custody reported to BJA (**Figure 1**). Of these deaths, 1,029 were arrest-related deaths (ARDs), 1,035 occurred in jails, 3,889 occurred in prisons, 160 occurred in "other" settings, and 592 deaths were "unknown." The 6,705 deaths in 2023 represent only a slight increase to the 6,672 deaths reported in 2020. Across the time period shown in Figure 1, the share of deaths in which the context is "unknown" remains fairly large, accounting for about 10% of all deaths each year on average. However, this share has decreased by more than 6 percentage points between 2020 (696 or 15% unknown) and 2023 (592 or 8.8%). Between 2020 and 2023, the majority of deaths reported occurred in prison, followed by ARDs, then jails.

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[4] Planty, M., Banks, D., Johnson, N., et al. (2024). Understanding and Reducing Deaths in Custody. Prepared for the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

Figure 1.   Number of Deaths by Sector, 2020-2023
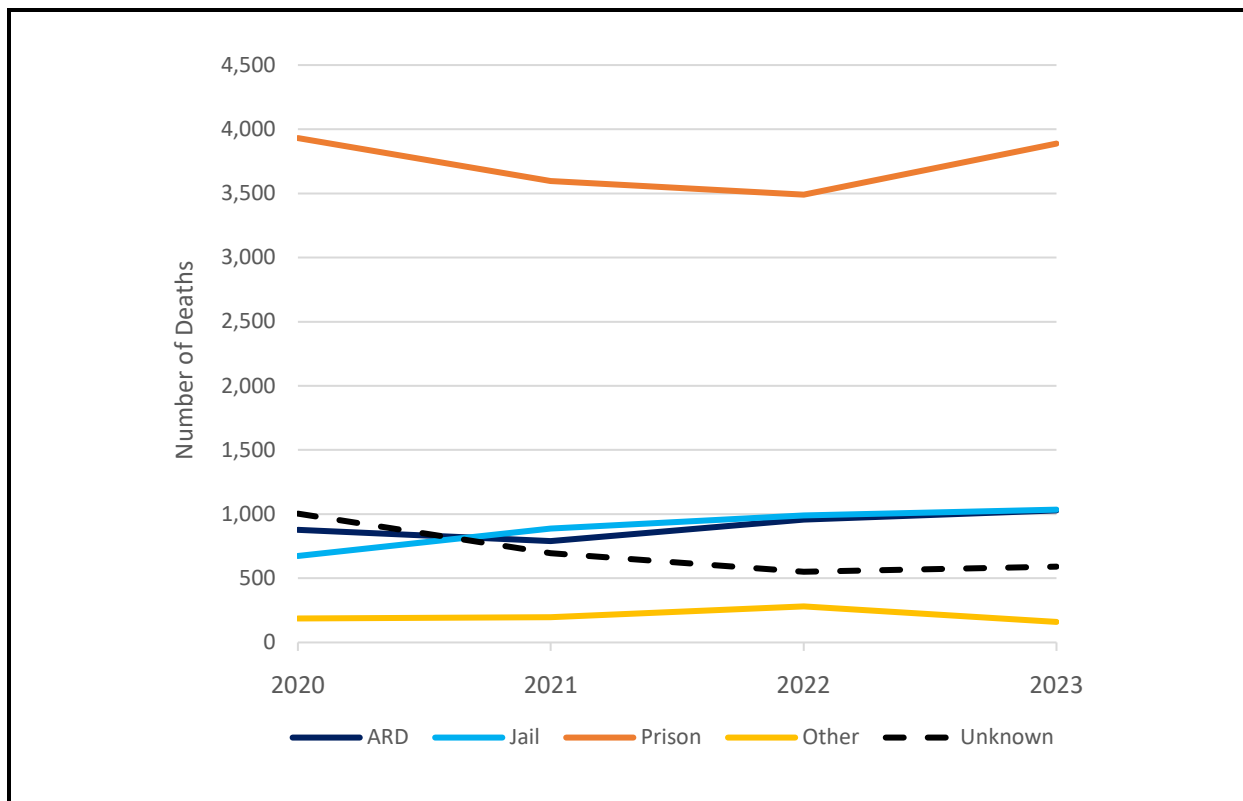
Source. DCRA data reported to BJA by SAAs by calendar year.

Comparison to Other Data Sources

To assess completeness, we compare the distributions to other available data sources. **Figures 2** through **4** show distributions of ARDs, jail deaths, and prison deaths over time as detailed in the *Understanding and Reducing Deaths in Custody* report. Although the time periods do not fully overlap with the analyses of the DCRA data presented here, comparing the relative patterns is still informative. The number of ARDs reported to BJA through the DCRA data collection is relatively close to the number of officer-involved shootings collected by the *Washington Post*, and nearly half of ARDs reported by Fatal Encounters, as shown in Figure 2. The Fatal Encounters collection includes officer-involved shootings as well as a much wider scope of deaths including vehicular, accidents, suicides, and other causes. For jail deaths, the volume of deaths reported to BJA in 2020 was approximately half of the volume reported through the Mortality in Correctional Institutions data collection in 2019; however, the number of deaths reported in the subsequent years (2021 through 2023) appear to be consistent with the volume of deaths reported to the Mortality in Correctional Institutions in 2019. The prevalence of prison deaths appears to be the most similar between the counts reported through the DCRA data collection and the Mortality in Correctional Institutions collection. For example, in 2019, there were more than 3,800 deaths in prison according to the Mortality in Correctional Institutions data collection whereas there were more than 3,900 prison deaths reported to BJA in 2020. In sum, the prevalence of each death type seems to be fairly consistent with other data

sources, and the relative patterning of deaths across sectors is consistent with what was reported through the DCRA data collection.
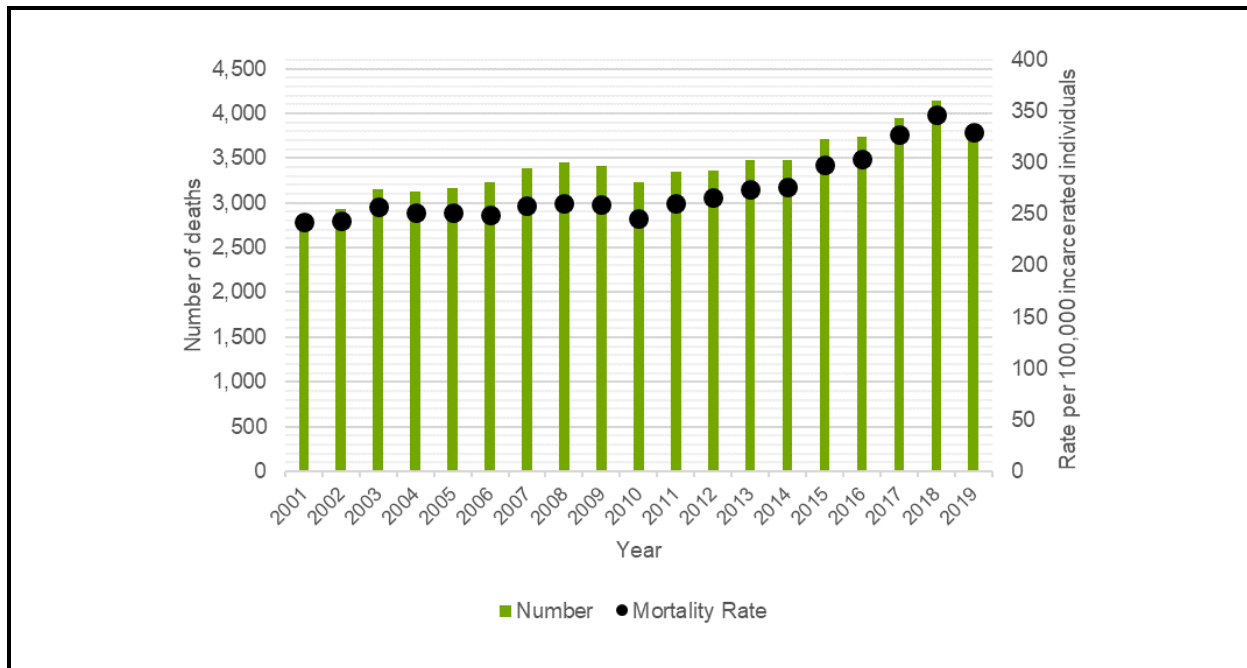
Figure 2. Number of ARDs, 2013–2020
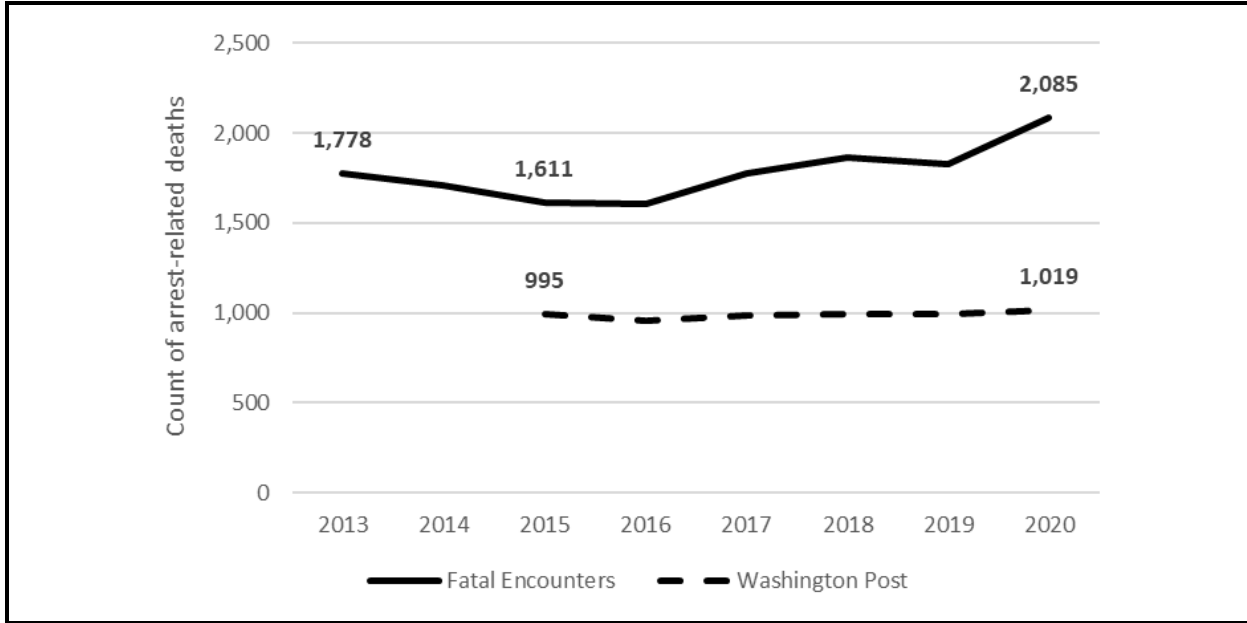
Source: Fatal Encounters, 2013–2020; *The Washington Post* Police Shootings Database, 2015–2020.

Figure 3. Number and Mortality Rate of Jail Deaths, 2000–2019
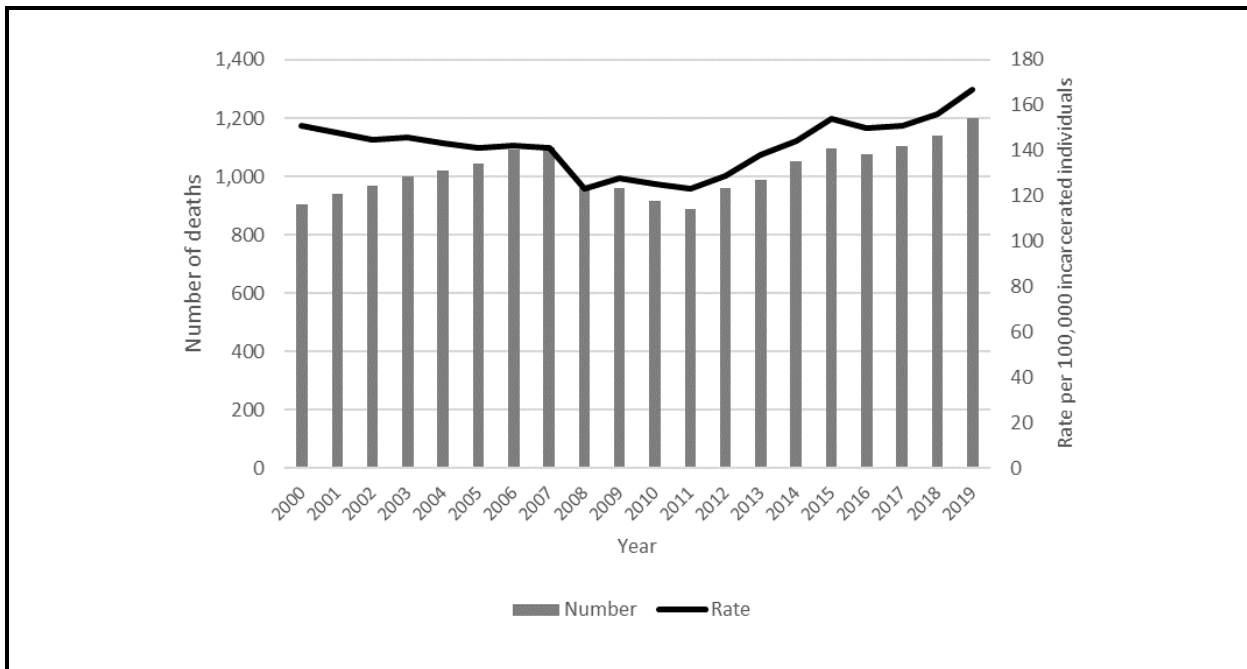
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2000–2019.

Figure 4. Number and Mortality Rate of Prison Deaths, 2001–2019

Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2001–2019.

Arrest-Related Deaths

Manner of Death

Figure 5 shows the manner of death over time for ARDs. The total number of ARDs reported to BJA increased from 877 in 2020 to 1,029 in 2023. The most prevalent manner of death across years is "death attributed to use of force by a law enforcement officer or corrections officer."[5] Death by suicide is the second most prevalent manner of death, followed by accidents and "unavailable" manners of death. The share of deaths in which the manner of death is unavailable because of a pending investigation has been fairly stable over time. On average, around 10% of deaths between 2020 and 2023 have a manner of death that is unavailable because of a pending investigation. Deaths caused by homicide are next most prevalent, comprising between 5% and 7% of the share of ARDs between 2020 and 2023. Finally, deaths caused by "other" manners, natural causes, and execution are least prevalent. The selection of homicide and execution are possible data quality issues. If law enforcement officers use force that results in a homicide, that should be classified under use of force. It's unclear what type of incident would be classified as a homicide given the reporting instructions. Similarly, execution should be exclusive to capital punishment in corrections settings. However, one "Execution" ARD was reported between 2020 and 2023. Since the reporting form is the same across the different sectors (law enforcement, jails, prisons), the manner of death reporting categories are the same. This could lead to some erroneous classifications.

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[5] Denoted by "UOF" in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Number of ARDs by Manner of Death, 2020-2023
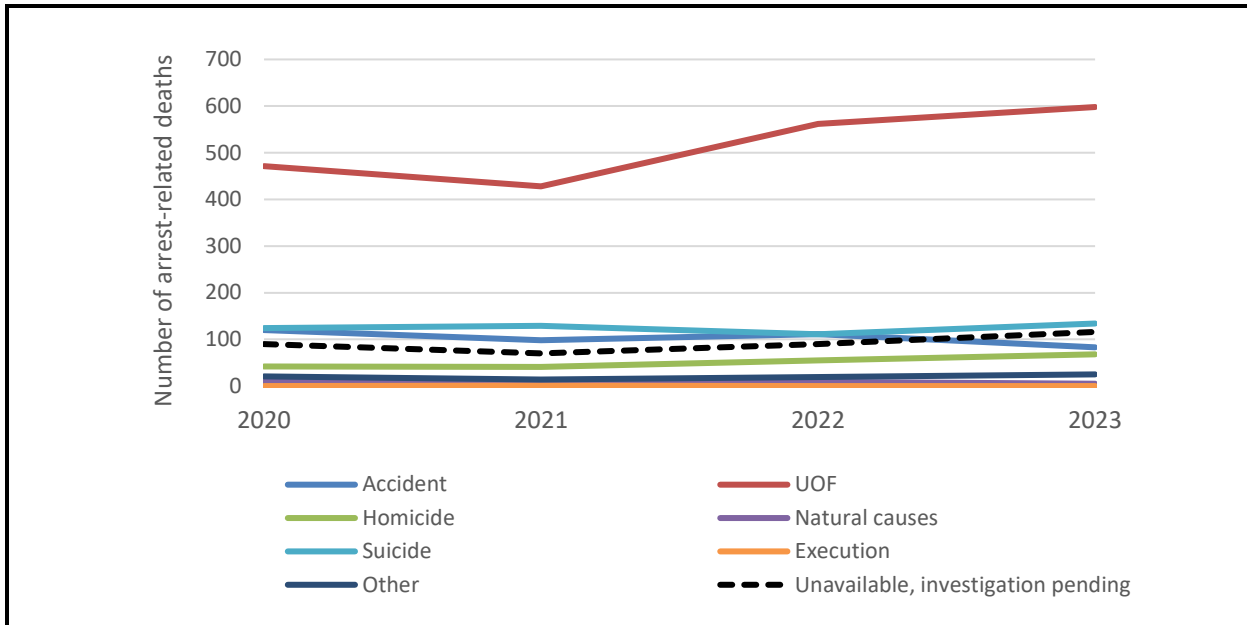
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.
Note. UOF refers to "death attributed to use of force by a law enforcement officer or corrections officer."

In **Figure 6**, we show the prevalence by cause of death as reported in the Fatal Encounters data used in the Understanding and Reducing Deaths in Custody report. The most prevalent cause of death is officer-involved shootings, followed by vehicle-related deaths, then Tasers, medical emergencies, and asphyxiation. Given the categories for manner and cause of death do not align between the two data sources, it is difficult to compare the relative patterns by type. A type of death in one data source could be spread over multiple categories in the other data source. For example, officer-involved shootings were the primary cause of death in the Fatal Encounters data, which could have been captured in multiple categories in the BJA DCRA data, including the "UOF," "Homicide," or "Suicide" categories. Vehicle-related deaths are likely included in the "Accident" category within the DCRA data.

Figure 6.   Most Frequent Cause of Death, 2013–2020
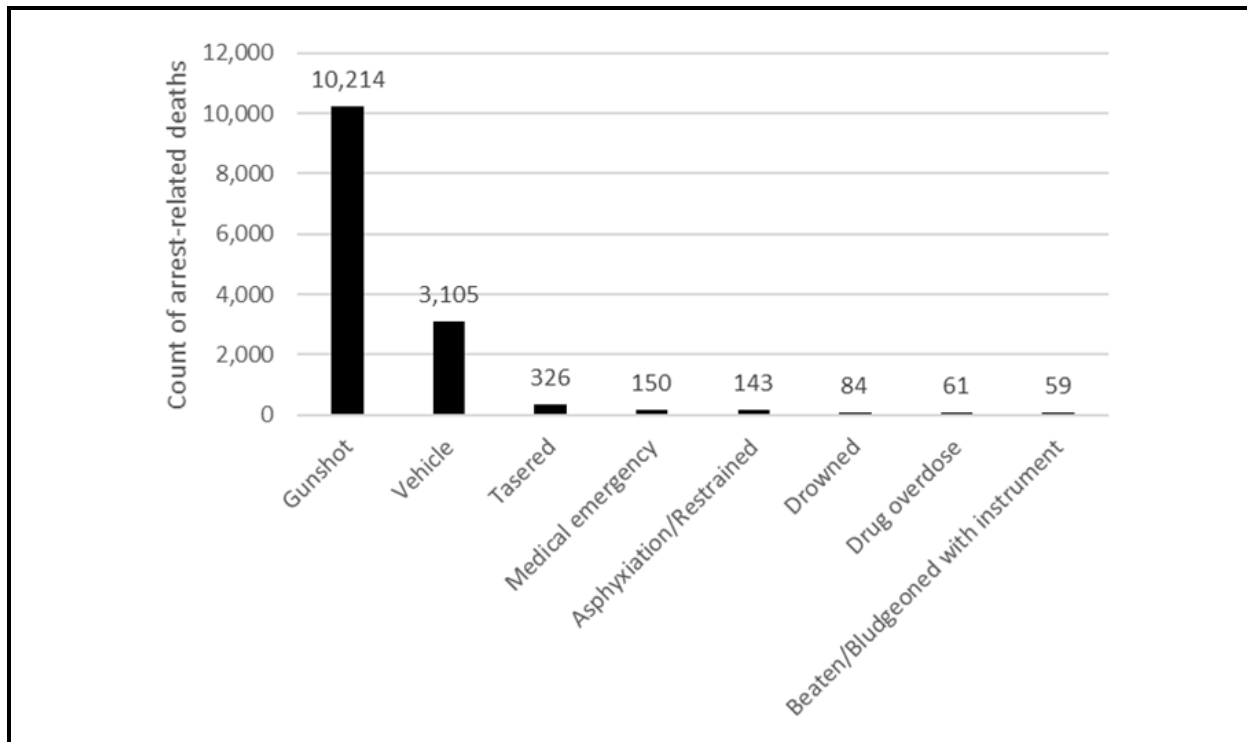
Source: Fatal Encounters, 2013–2020.
Note. Other less frequent causes of death based on the highest levels of force coded in the Fatal Encounters data
     (but not shown here) include falling from a height, burned/smoke inhalation, stabbed, chemical agent/pepper spray,
     undetermined, and other. Other levels of force totaled 116 incidents between 2013 and 2020.

Demographics

Figures 7 through **11** show the count of ARDs per year by different demographic characteristics. In **Figures 7** and **8**, the count of ARDs by decedent gender is shown. In **Figure 7**, male deaths accounted for about 94% of the total ARDs between 2020 and 2023. One death was reported during this time frame with an "other" gender. BJA does not allow for a missing or "unknown" response on this measure; therefore, there were no deaths that were missing information on the gender of decedent.

Figure 7. Number of ARDs by Gender, 2020-2023
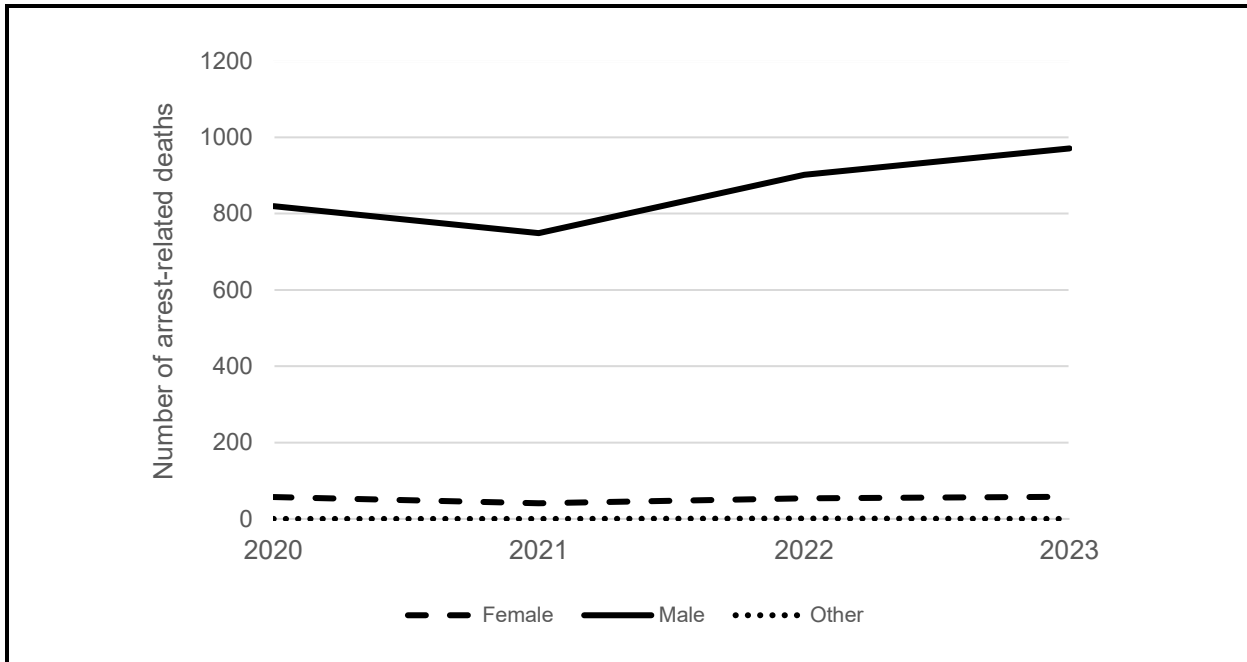
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 8. Number of ARDs Gender, 2013-2020
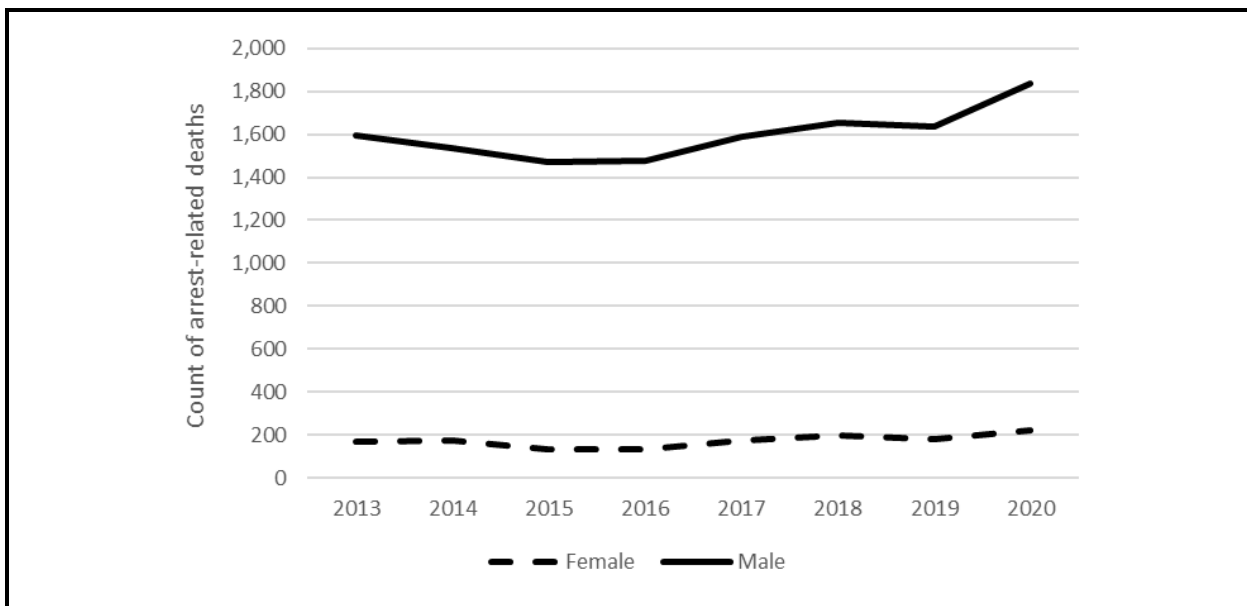
Source. Fatal Encounters data, 2013–2020.

The pattern of ARDs by gender is the same when analyzing Fatal Encounters data. Male deaths comprise the overwhelming majority of ARDs in this data source (**Figure 8**).

Figure 9 shows ARDs by different racial categories over time. Between 2020 and 2023, White decedents accounted for the majority of deaths by volume, followed by Black decedents and then decedents with unknown 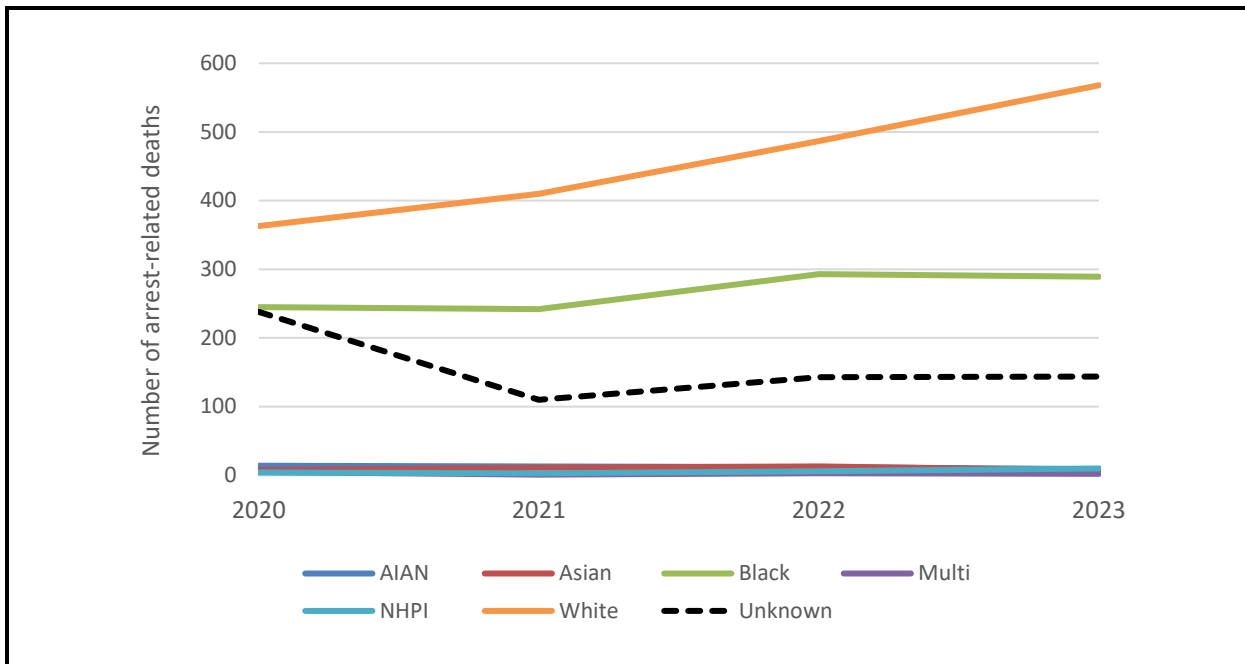race. Although the share of deaths reported with an "Unknown" race was initially high, the percentage has decreased over time, from 27% in 2020 to 14% in 2023.

Figure 9.   Number of ARDs by Race, 2020–2023

Source. DCRA data by calendar year.
Notes. AIAN = American Indian Alaska Native; NHPI = Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Figure 10 shows the ethnicity (specifically, Hispanic, or Latino origin) of decedents over time. Decedents who are not of Hispanic or Latino origin make up the majority of reported deaths by volume between 2020 and 2023. During the same time period, deaths in which the ethnicity of the decedent is unknown made up nearly one-third of the total deaths reported. The share of deaths with unknown ethnicity appears to be declining. For example, this share was 35% in 2022 and 19.7% in 2023.

The Fatal Encounters data used in the *Interim Report* combines race and ethnicity into a single category, and so a direct comparison with the patterns in the DCRA data is not possible. However, it is evident that the relative distribution of deaths among different racial groups is comparable to what is represented in the DCRA data (**Figure 11**). Specifically, ARDs are most prevalent among White individuals, followed by Black individuals, then other racial/ethnic groups.

Figure 10. Number of ARDs by Ethnicity, 2020–2023
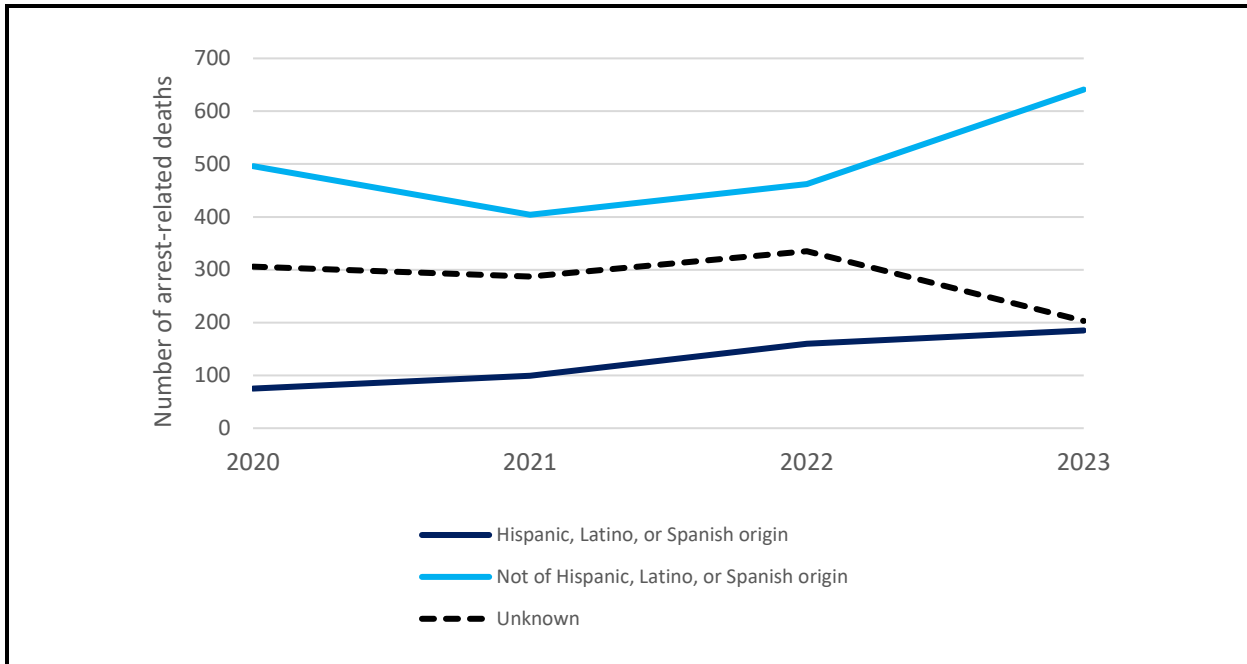
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 11. Number of ARDs by Race and Ethnicity, 2013–2020
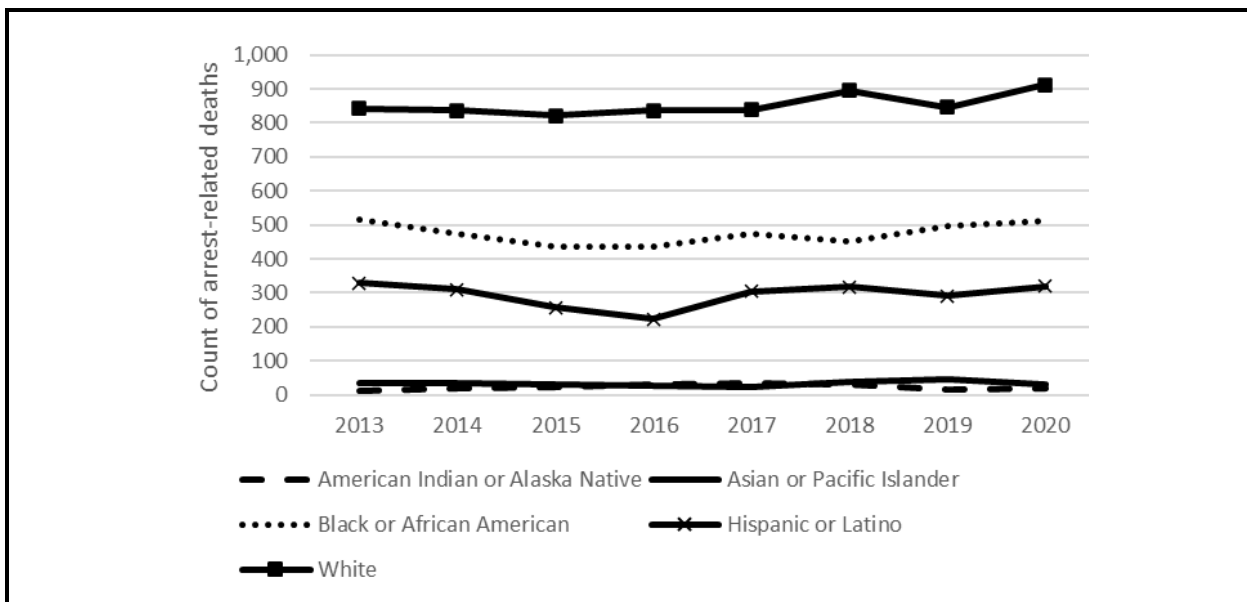
Source: Fatal Encounters, 2013–2020

Figure 12 describes the age distributions of ARD decedents over time. The majority of deaths by volume reported between 2020 and 2023 consisted of individuals aged 25 through 44, followed by individuals aged 45–54. On average, around 10% of deaths had an unknown age associated with the decedent for deaths reported between 2020 and 2023.

Figure 12. Number of ARDs by Age Group, 2020–2023
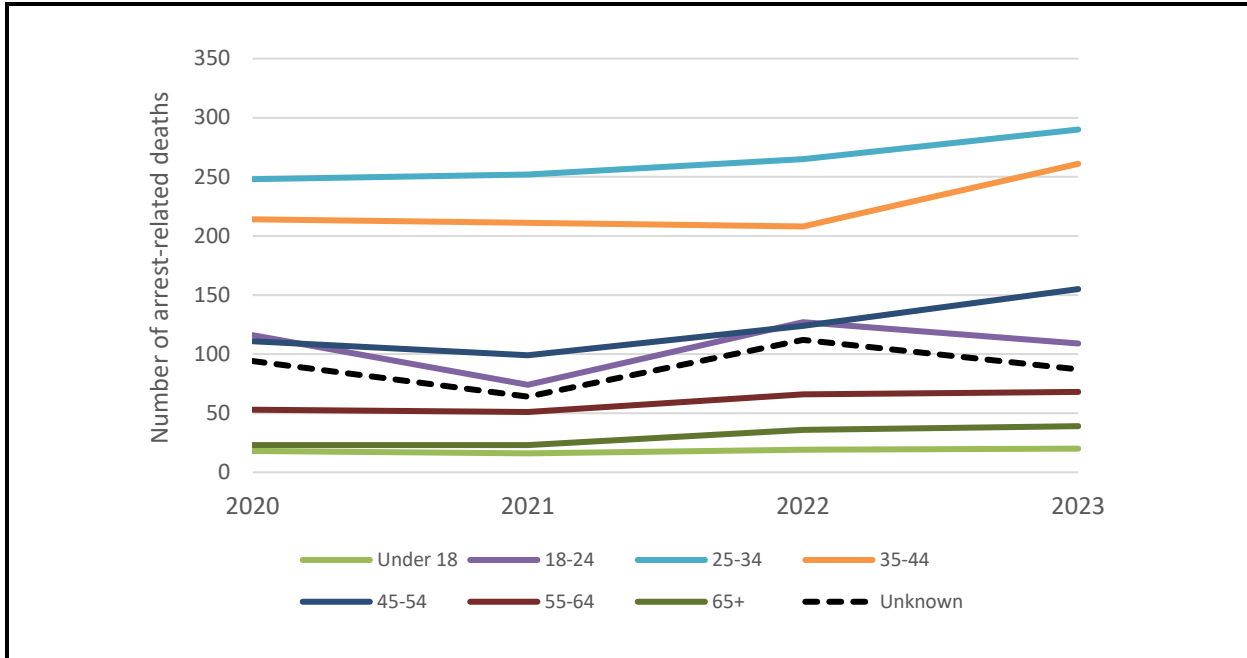
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

The age distribution of ARD decedents in the Fatal Encounters data shows a slightly different pattern (**Figure 13**). Individuals who are 35 to 64 years old experienced the highest volume of ARDs over 2013–2020, followed by individuals aged 25 to 34 years old.
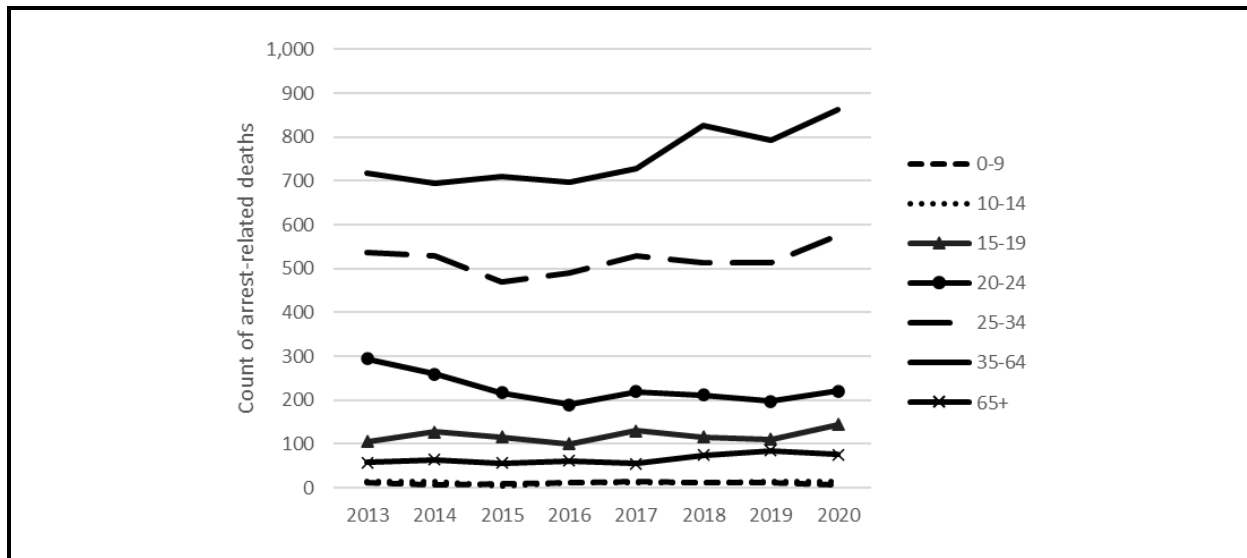
Figure 13. Number of ARDs by Age Group, 2013–2020

Source: Fatal Encounters, 2013–2020.

Summary

In summary, the number of ARDs reported to BJA has increased over time. As expected, death caused by use of force is the most prevalent manner of death, followed by suicide and accident. Manners of death that are unavailable because of pending investigations and deaths reported as homicides were next most common. The share of deaths that are unavailable because of pending investigations have been relatively stable at around 10% each year, on average. For demographic breakdowns of race, ethnicity, and age, there are a fairly large proportion of "Unknown" values that are reported, though these proportions appear to be decreasing over time. When comparing the BJA DCRA data to the Fatal Encounters data used in the *Interim Report*, the relative patterns and distributions of decedent demographics were similar. Use of force–related deaths (including officer-involved shootings) were the most prevalent types of death in both data sources. However, because different categories were used, it is difficult to compare patterns for specific types of ARDs, such as homicides, vehicle-related deaths or suicides.

Mortality in Jails

Manner of Death

Figures 14 and **15** shows the manner of death over time for jails. For the period during which full years of data are available, the total number of deaths reported to BJA increased from 674 in 2020 to 1,035 in 2023. A significant number of deaths do not have a manner of death because it is unavailable pending an investigation. The share of these deaths has increased from 170 in 2020 (25% of total reported deaths) to 362 in 2023 (35% of total reported deaths). Death caused by natural causes and suicide are the most prevalent known manners of death in

jail. Accidents and deaths caused by "other" manners were next. Homicides made up a very small proportion of deaths in jails (on average, 2% of the total deaths each year). Three deaths caused by execution were reported during 2020–2023.

When comparing the pattern of known manners of death in the DCRA data to the BJS Mortality in Correctional Institutions (MCI) data, they appear similar. Like the ARD data, categories for different manners of death do not completely align across data sources. In the MCI data, illness-related deaths make up the majority of jail deaths between 2000–2019. This is similar to the BJA DCRA data in which deaths caused by natural causes make up the majority of deaths (for which the manner is known). Deaths caused by suicide were the next most common for both data sources. In the MCI data, deaths caused by drug or alcohol intoxication make up the next most significant share of deaths in jail custody. However, because of the lack of overlap in categories, it is not possible to make a direct comparison to the DCRA data. Deaths caused by intoxication likely fall within the "Accident" manner of death, which (in addition to "Other") is next most frequent manner of death in jails.
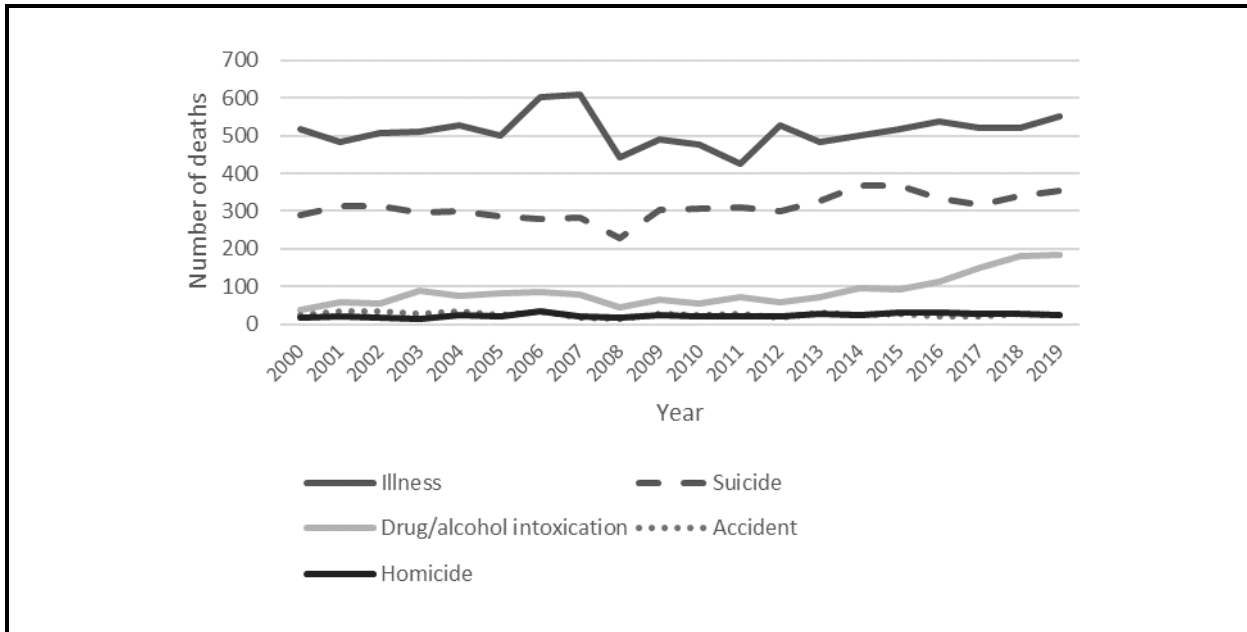
Figure 14. Number of Jail Deaths by Manner of Death, 2020–2023
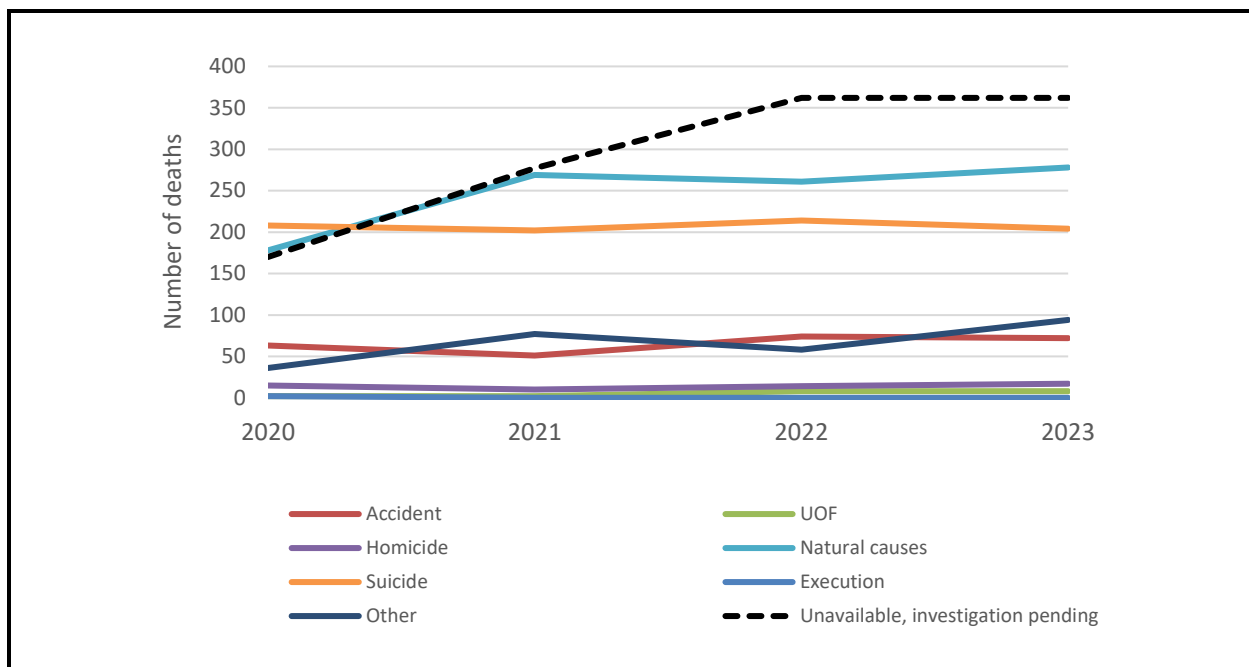
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.
Note. UOF refers to "death attributed to use of force by a law enforcement officer or corrections officer."

Figure 15. Number of Jail Deaths by Manner of Death, 2000–2019

Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2000–2019

Demographics

Figures 16 through **19** show the count of deaths in jail per year by different demographic characteristics. In Figure 16, the count of deaths by decedent gender is shown. Male deaths accounted for about 85% of the total deaths between 2020 and 2023. The share of female deaths in jail has increased slightly from 13.5% in 2020 to 15.2% in 2023. Four deaths were reported between 2020 and 2023 with an "other" gender.

Similar to ARDs, the relative prevalence of male jail deaths reported to DCRA is very similar to that reported in the MCI data collection during 2000–2019 (**Figure 17**).

Figure 16. Number of Jail Deaths by Gender, 2020-2023
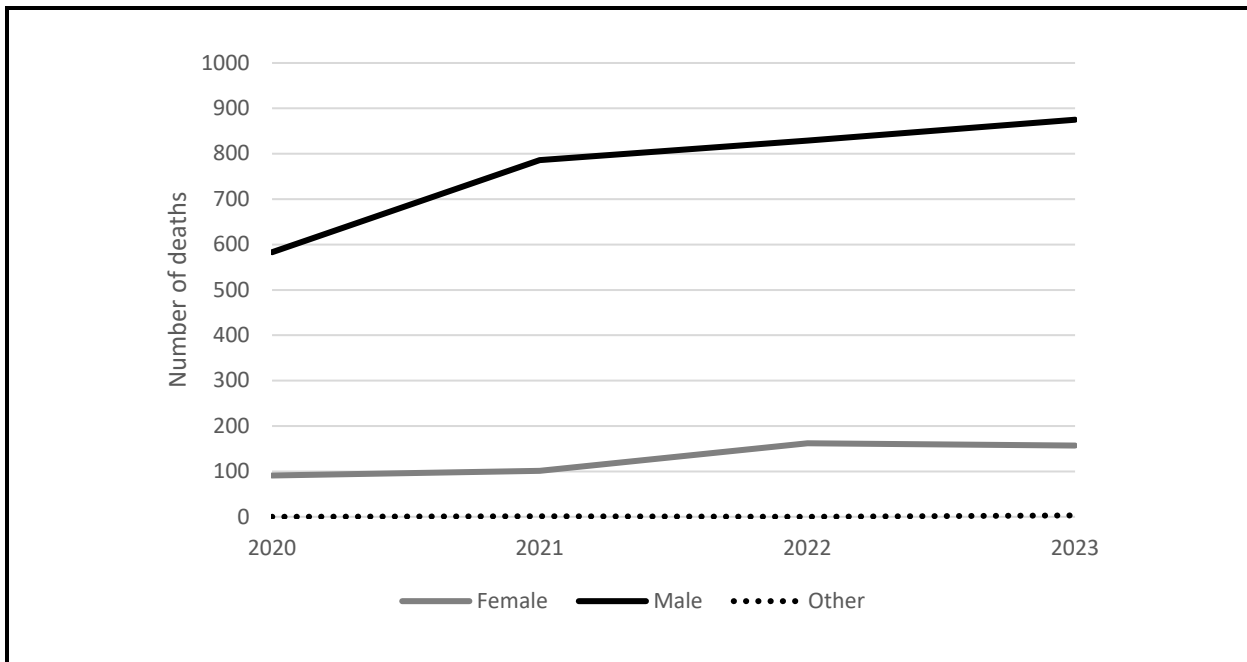
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 17. Number of Jail Deaths by Gender, 2000–2019
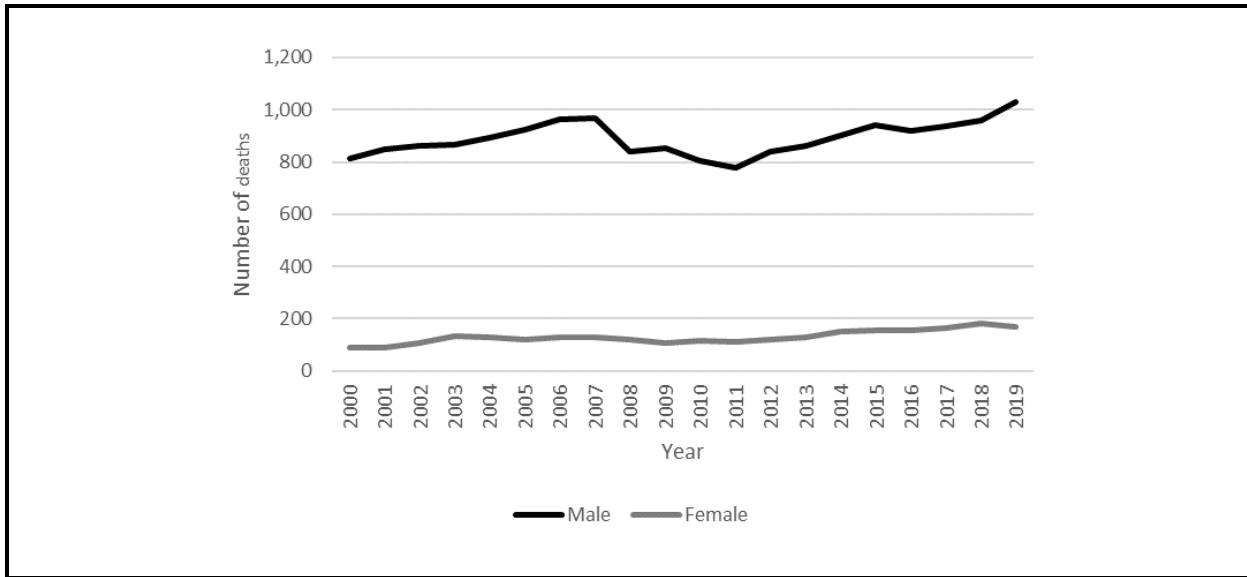
Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2000-2019

Figure 18 shows deaths by different racial categories over time. Between 2020 and 2023, White decedents accounted for the majority of deaths by volume, followed by Black decedents and then decedents with unknown race. American Indian Alaskan Native (AIAN) and Asian decedents were next, comprising 1.5% and 1% of the total deaths between 2019 and 2024, respectively. Although the share of deaths reported with an unknown race remains relatively high (13% on average between 2019 and 2024), the percentage has decreased over time: from 21% in 2020 to 11% in 2023.

Figure 18. Number of Jail Deaths by Race, 2020-2023
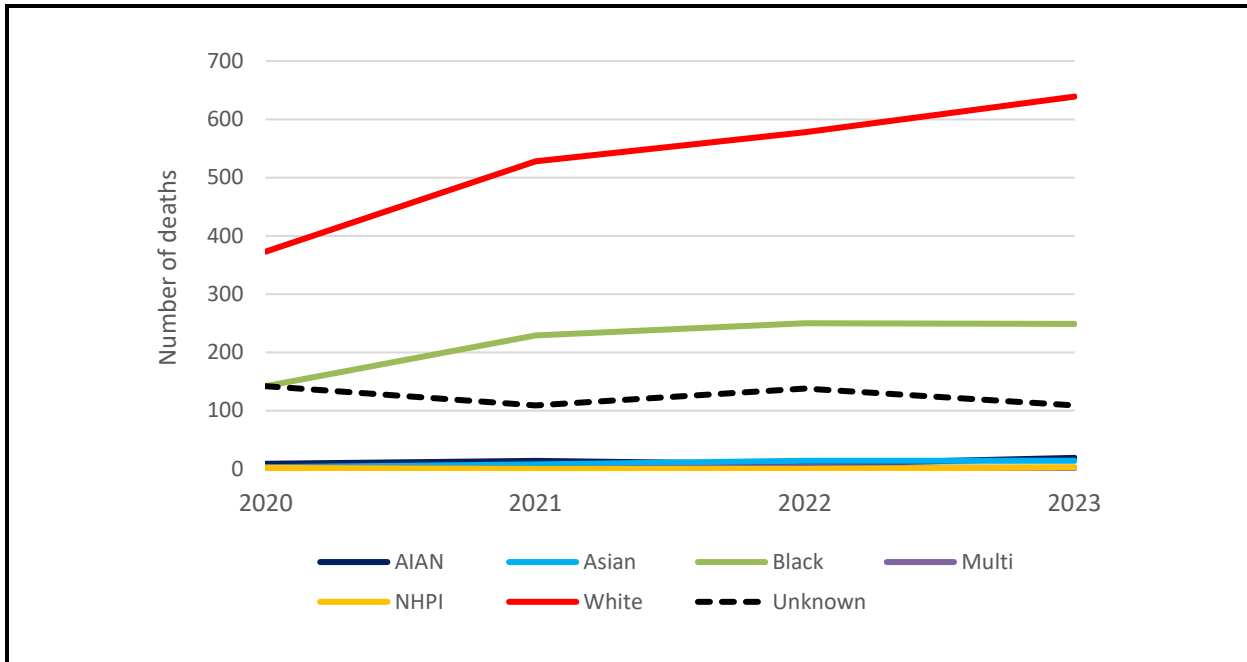
Note. DCRA data by calendar year. AIAN = American Indian/Alaska Native. NHPI = Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Figure 19 shows the ethnicity of jail decedents over time as reported to BJA. Decedents who are not of Hispanic or Latino origin make up the majority of reported deaths by volume between 2020 and 2023. Deaths in which the ethnicity of the decedent is unknown made up 29% of deaths on average between 2020 and 2023. The share of deaths with unknown ethnicity appears to be declining. For example, in 2022, this share was 37%, and in 2023, the share of deaths reported with unknown ethnicity was 25%.

Figure 19. Number of Jail Deaths by Ethnicity, 2020-2023
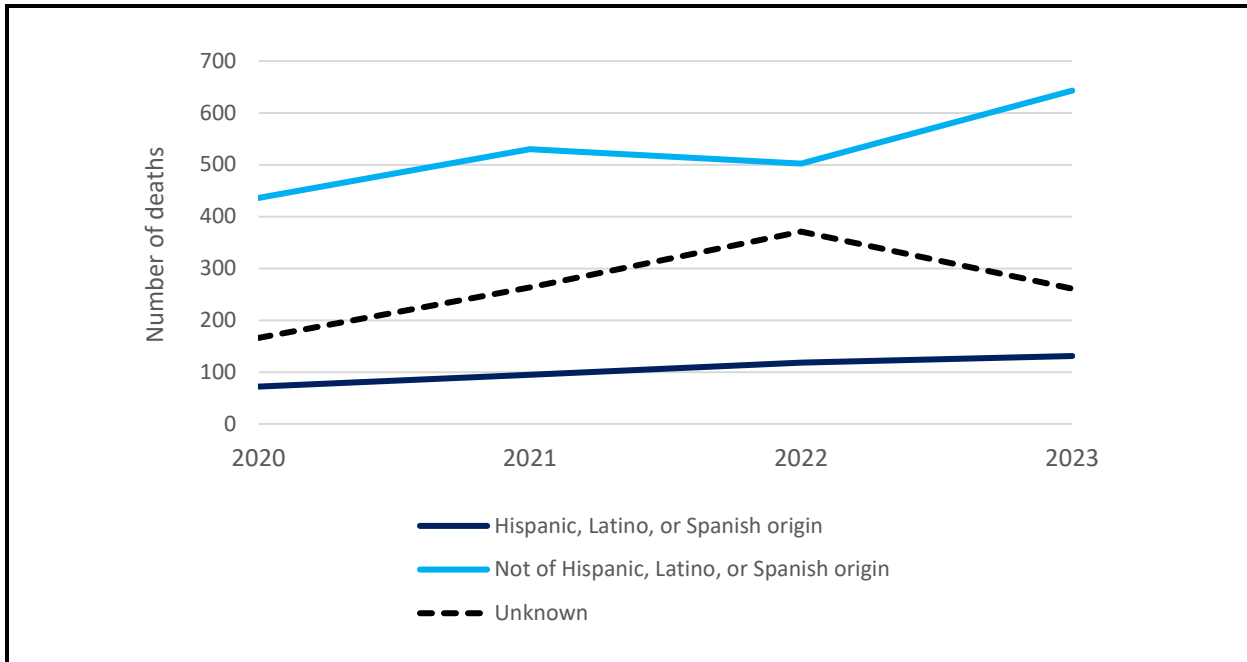
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 20. Number of Jail Deaths by Race/Ethnicity, 2000–2019
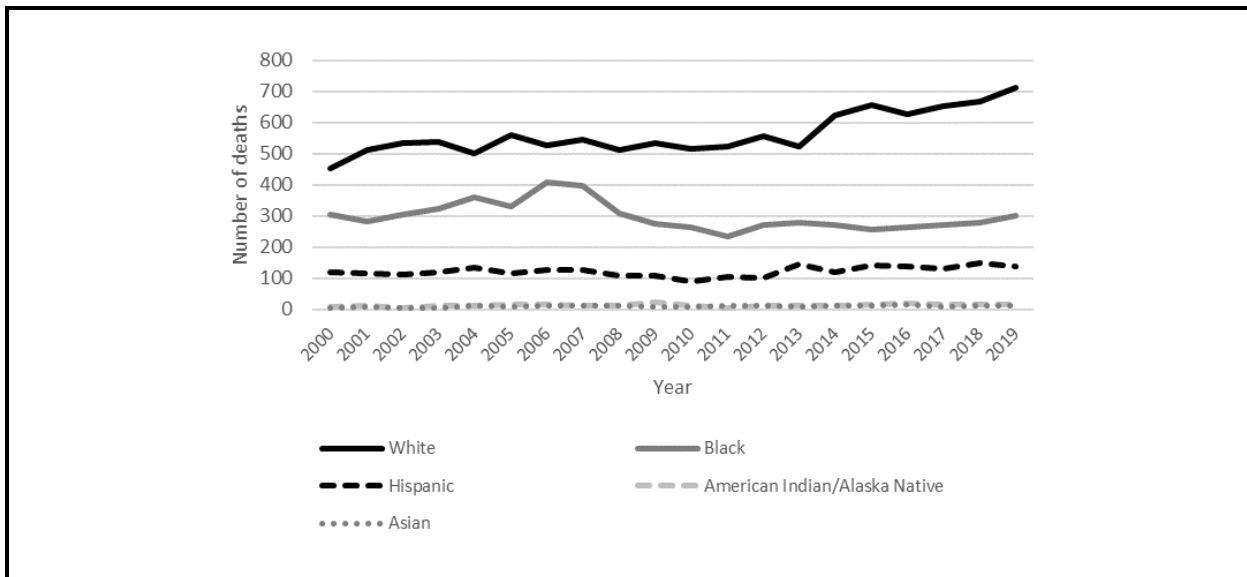
Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2000–2019

The relative patterning of race and ethnicity was largely the same in the MCI data (**Figure 20**). We see that White individuals make up the largest share by volume of deaths in jails, followed by Black individuals, then Hispanic individuals.

Finally, **Figures 21** and **22** describes the age distributions of jail decedents over time. The majority of deaths by volume reported to BJA between 2020 and 2023 consisted of individuals

aged 35–44, followed by individuals aged 25–34, then 45–54. On average, around 7% of deaths had an unknown age associated with the decedent between 2020 and 2023. The share of deaths reported with an unknown age has declined, particularly between 2022 and 2023, going from 11% to 4% of the total deaths. Within the MCI data, deaths are distributed among age groups similar to the BJA DCRA data. For example, decedents aged 45—54, 35–44, and 25–34 are the most prevalent age groups.

Figure 21. Number of Jail Deaths by Age, 2020–2023

Source. DCRA data by calendar year.
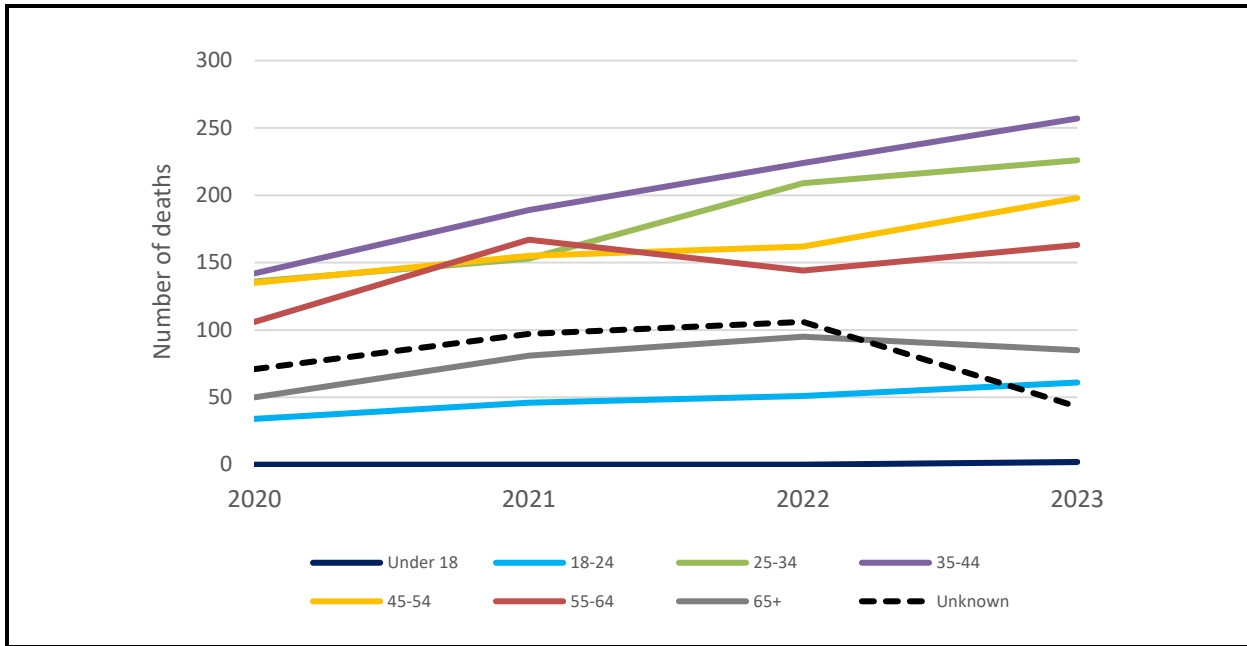
Figure 22. Number of Jail Deaths by Age, 2000–2019
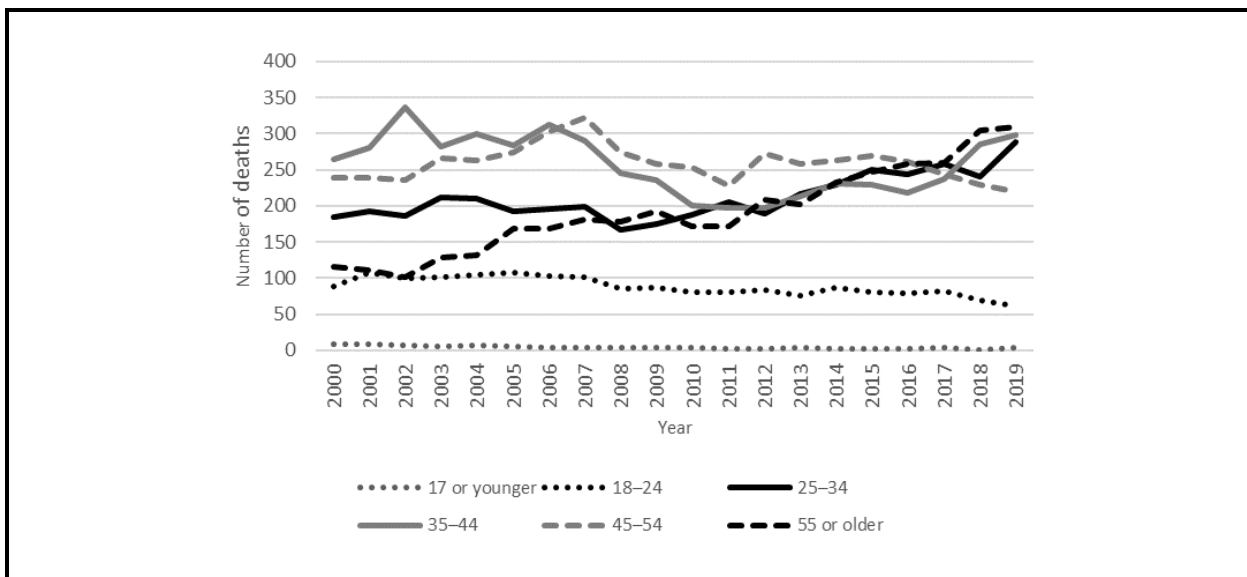
Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2000–2019.

Summary

In summary, the number of jail deaths reported to BJA has increased over time. There is a significant number of deaths without a manner of death classified as "unavailable pending an investigation." Of the known manners of death, natural causes is the largest category followed by suicide. For demographic breakdowns of race, ethnicity, and age, there are a fairly large proportion of "Unknown" values that are reported, though these proportions appear to be decreasing over time. Of deaths where the demographic is known, it appears White individuals followed by Black individuals are most prevalent by volume over time. Non-Hispanic decedents are more prevalent than Hispanic decedents by volume. Additionally, individuals between the ages of 25 and 44 comprise the groups experiencing the most deaths by volume over time, followed by individuals between the ages of 45 and 64. Comparing the BJA DCRA data from 2020-2023 to the MCI data from 2000-2019, there are similar relative patterns and distributions of decedent manners of death, gender, race, and age. Although the manners of deaths are not directly comparable, the most common (known) manner of death reported in the DCRA data are natural causes and suicide, which appear to be similar to the common manners of death reported in the MCI, including illness and suicide. Intoxication deaths are relatively common in the MCI data, though this category is not present in the DCRA data. These deaths may be categorized within the "Accident" category in the DCRA data.
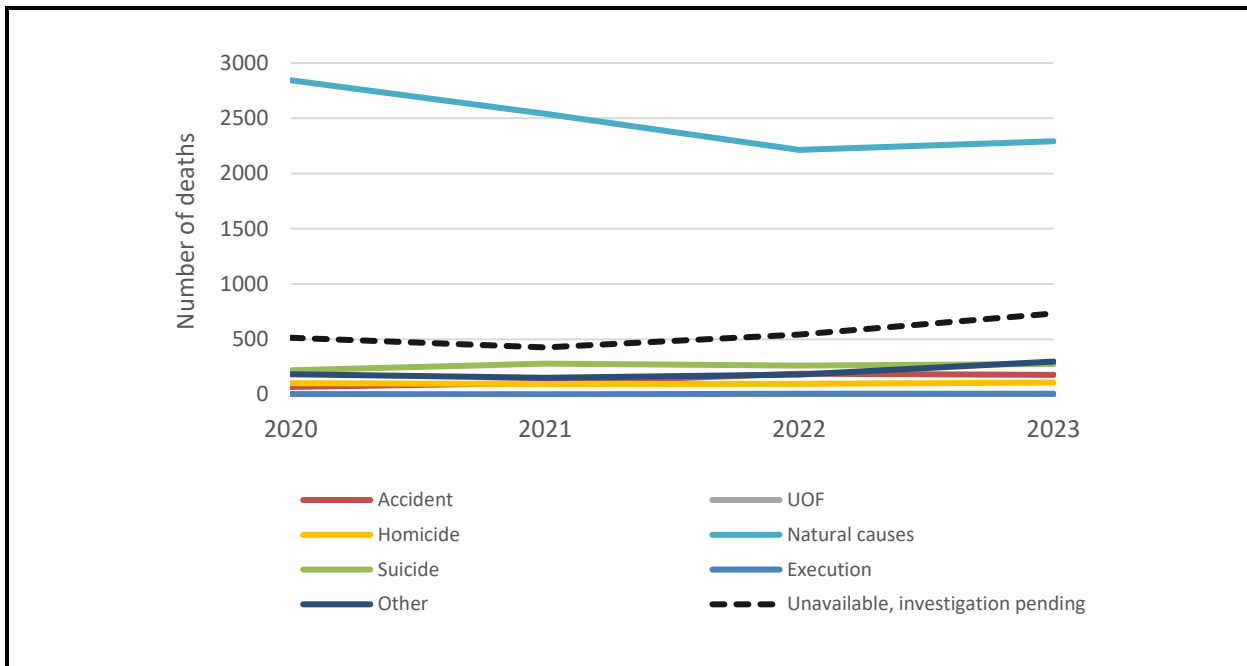
Mortality in Prisons

Manner of Death

Figures 23 and **24** show the manner of death over time for prisons. For the years during which full data are available, the total number of deaths reported to BJA stayed relatively stable, decreasing slightly from 3,931 in 2020 to 3,889 in 2023. The most prevalent manner of death has been deaths because of natural causes, followed by "unavailable, pending an investigation." The share of these "unavailable" deaths has increased from 513 in 2020 (13% of total reported deaths) to 733 in 2023 (19% of total reported deaths). Death caused by suicide and other manners are the next most prevalent manners of death in prison. Accidents and homicides were next. Deaths caused by use of force and executions made up a very small proportion of deaths in jails (on average, 0.1% of the total deaths each year for both manners).

We examine prison deaths in custody using the MCI data for 2001–2019 in the *Interim Report*. Comparing the relative distributions among manners of death between the DCRA and MCI data sources shows they are very similar. Death due to illness comprises the vast majority of deaths in custody in the in the MCI data, similar to death due to "Natural causes" in the DCRA data. This is followed by death due to suicide in both data sources (excluding the unknown cases).

Figure 23. Number of Prison Deaths by Manner of Death, 2020-2023

Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 24. Number of Deaths in State Prisons by Manner of Death, 2001–2019
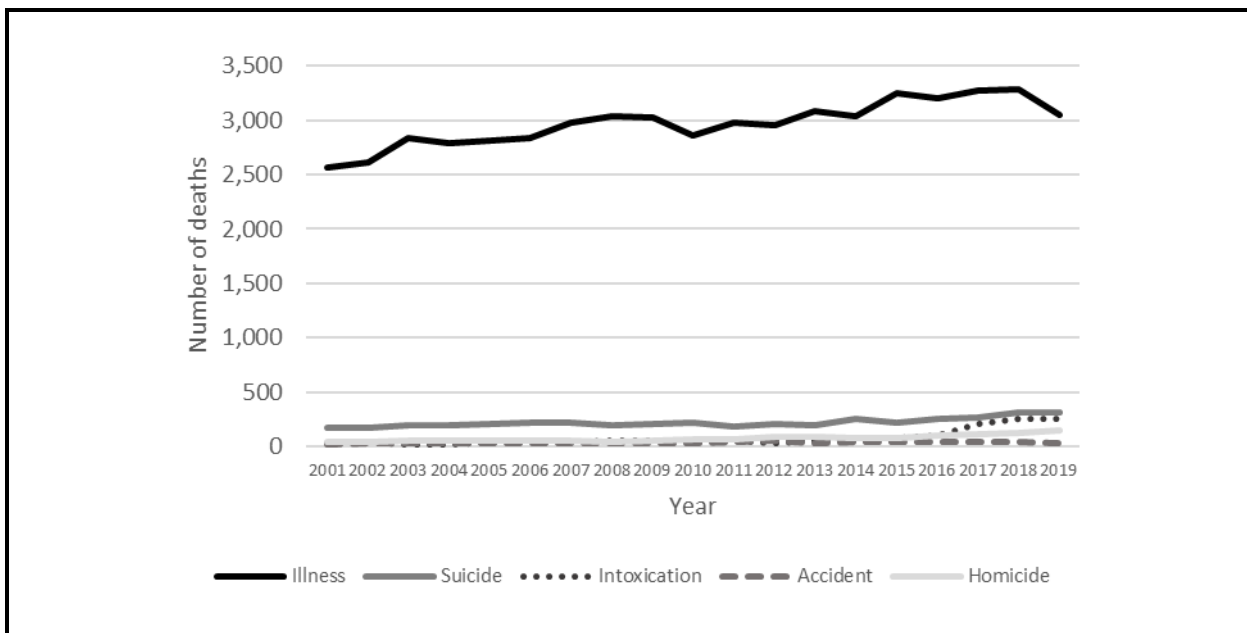
Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2001–2019.

Demographics

Figures 25–28 show the count of deaths in prison per year by different demographic characteristics. In **Figure 25**, the count of deaths by decedent gender is shown for the DCRA

data. Male deaths accounted for about 97% of the total deaths between 2020–2023, and this share has remained stable over time. Three deaths were reported between 2020 and 2023 with an "other" gender.

Deaths reported via the MCI data collection show essentially the same pattern, with male deaths accounting for the vast majority of prison deaths in custody (**Figure 26**).

Figure 25. Number of Prison Deaths by Gender, 2020-2023

Source: DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 26. Number of Prison Deaths by Gender, 2001-2019
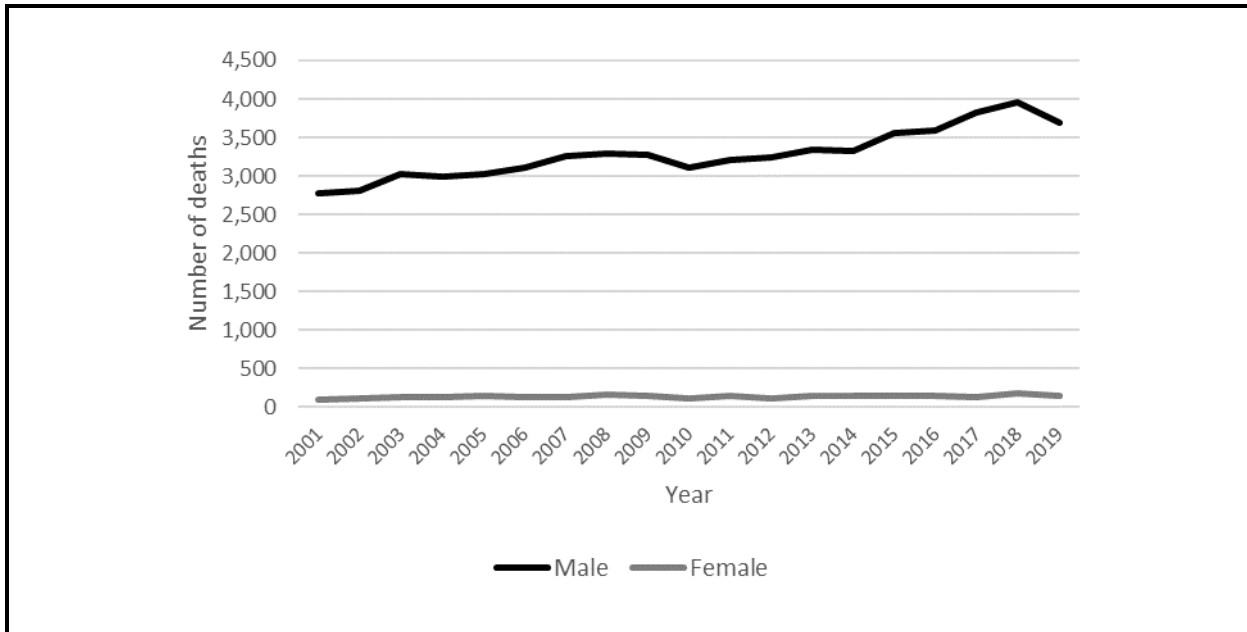
Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2001–2019.

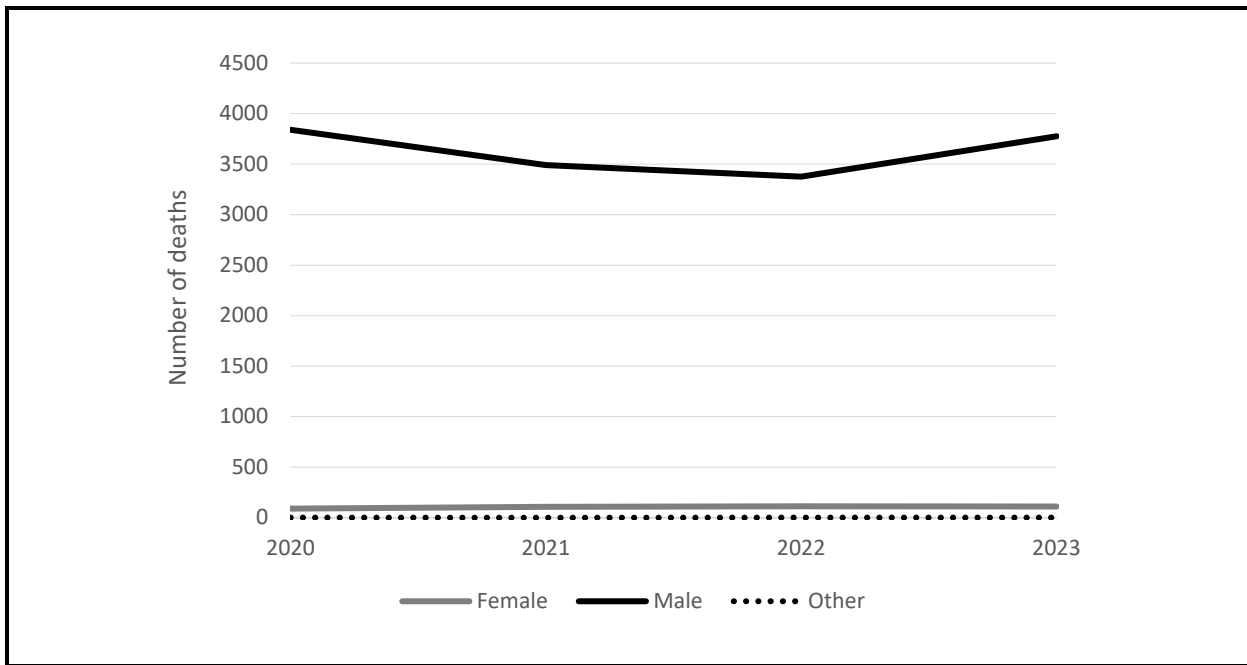**Figure 27** shows deaths by different racial categories over time. Between 2019 and 2024, White decedents accounted for the majority of deaths by volume, followed by Black decedents and then decedents with unknown race. AIAN and Asian decedents were next. On average, AIAN decedents comprised 1% and Asian decedents comprised 0.5% of the total deaths annually between 2020 and 2023. Although the share of deaths reported with an unknown race remains somewhat high (on average, 9% of total deaths reported annually between 2020 and 2023), the percentage has decreased over time from 12% in 2020 to 8% in 2023.

Figure 27. Number of Prison Deaths by Race, 2020-2023
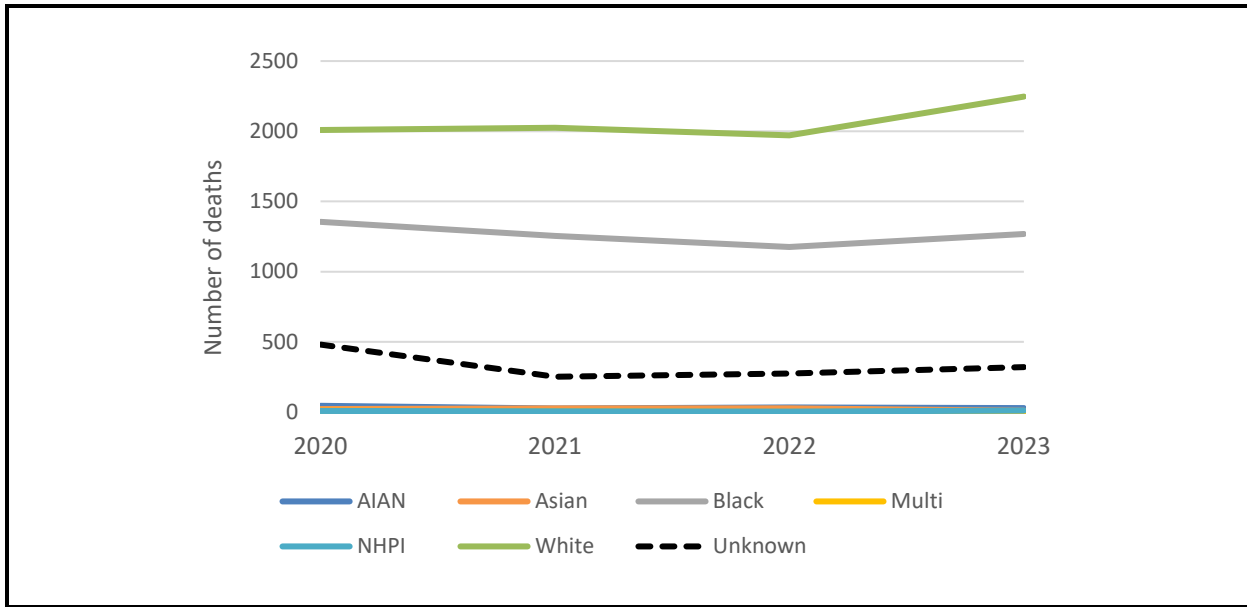
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.
Notes. AIAN = American Indian/Alaska Native. NHPI = Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Figure 28 shows the ethnicity of prison decedents over time. Decedents who are not of Hispanic or Latino origin make up the majority of reported deaths by volume between 2019 and 2024. Deaths in which the ethnicity of the decedent is unknown made up 27% of deaths on average between 2019 and 2024. The share of deaths with unknown ethnicity appears to be declining. For example, this share was 29% in 2022 and 23% in 2023.

The patterns for different racial and ethnic groups hold when comparing to the relative distribution of deaths in the MCI collection (**Figure 29**). White individuals, followed by Black individuals, then Hispanic individuals experience the most deaths by volume.

Figure 28. Number of Prison Deaths by Ethnicity, 2020–2023
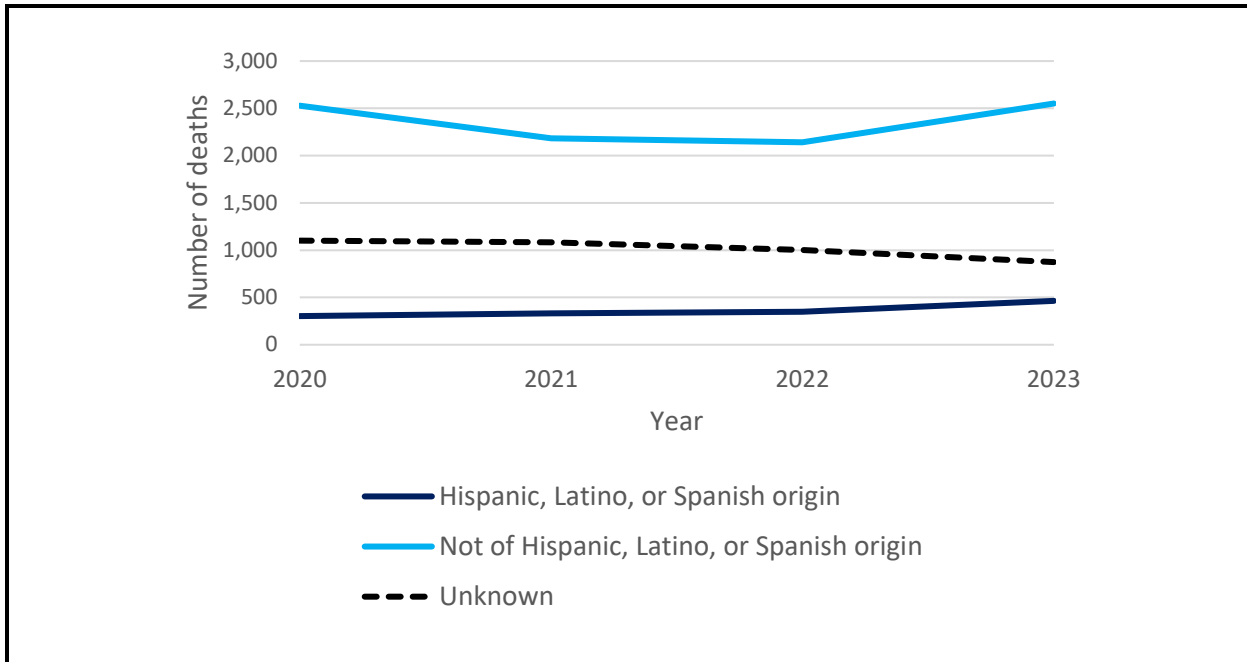
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 29. Number of State Prison Deaths by Race/Ethnicity, 2001–2019
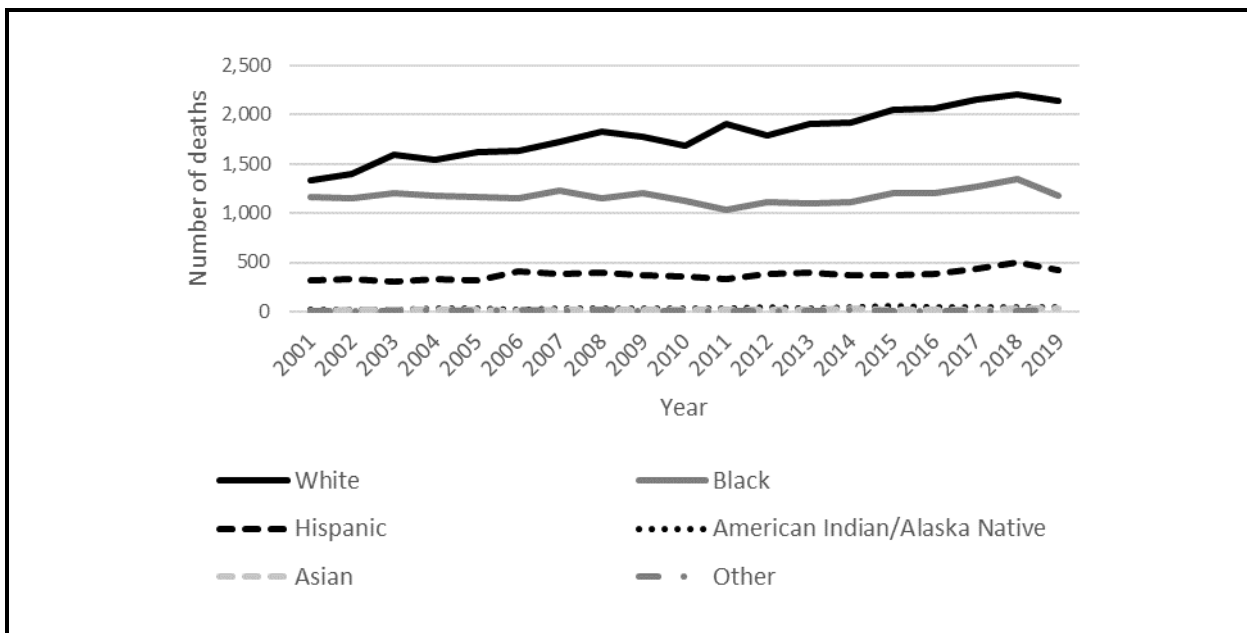
Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2001–2019.

Finally, **Figure 30** describes the age distributions of prison decedents over time. The majority of deaths by volume reported between 2020 and 2023 consisted of individuals ages 65 and over, followed by individuals between the ages of 55–64, then 45–54. The proportion of deaths reported with an unknown age was very small and close to 0. In **Figure 31**, we show the age

distributions of prison decedents as reported to the MCI collection. Consistent with deaths reported to DCRA, older individuals make up the most frequent category, with individuals aged 55 or older and 45–54 being the most prevalent.

Figure 30. Number of Deaths of Incarcerated Individuals by Age, 2020–2023
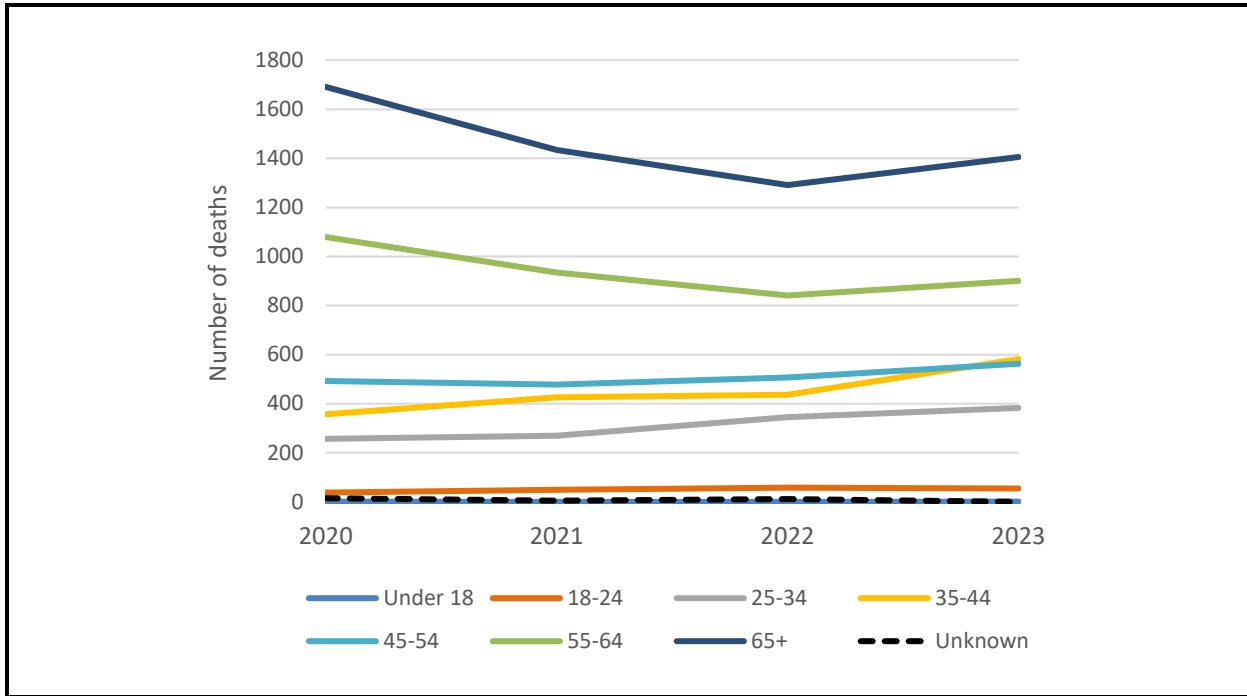
Source. DCRA data by calendar year.

Figure 31. Number of Deaths of Incarcerated Individuals by Age, 2001–2019
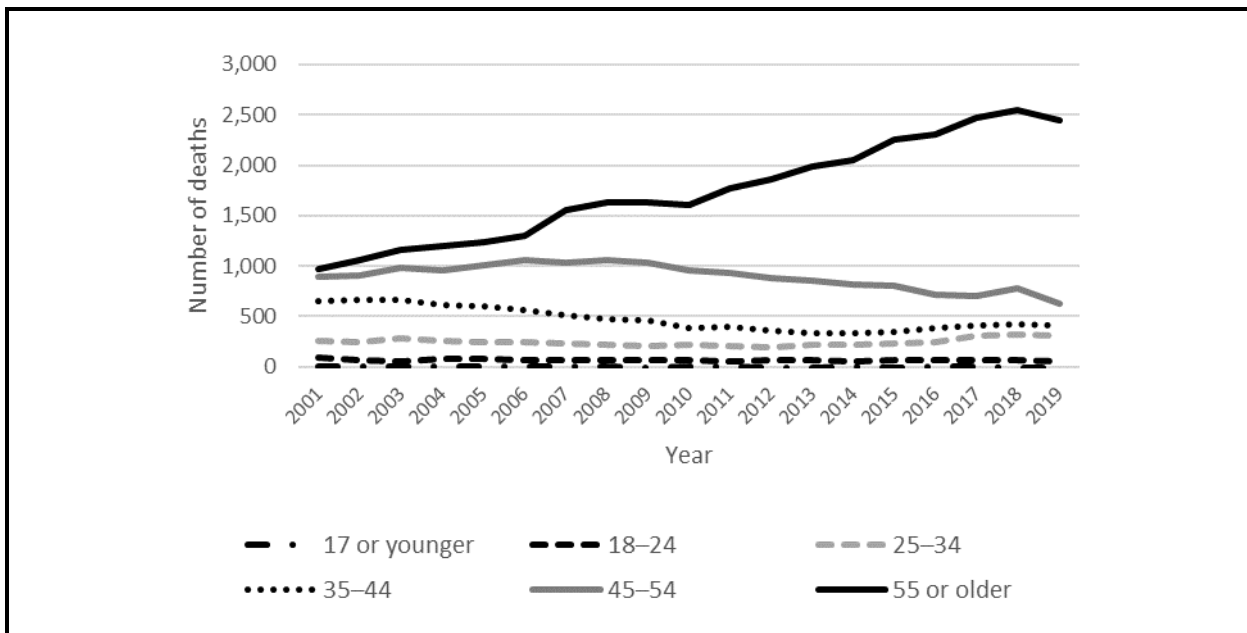
Source: BJS, Mortality in Correctional Institutions, 2001–2019.

Summary

In summary, the number of prison deaths reported to BJA has stayed relatively stable over time. The most prevalent manner of death is natural causes, followed by "unavailable, pending investigation" and then suicide. For demographic breakdowns of race and ethnicity, there are somewhat sizeable proportions of "Unknown" values that are reported, though these proportions appear to be decreasing over time. Of deaths where the demographic is known, it appears White decedents followed by Black decedents are most prevalent by volume over time. Non-Hispanic decedents are more prevalent than Hispanic decedents by volume. Additionally, older individuals 65 or older comprise the group experiencing the most deaths by volume over time, followed by individuals between the ages of 55 and 64, then individuals between 45 and 54 years old.

When comparing to the MCI data collection, the relative patterns and distributions of manners of death and decedent demographics are similar. Individuals who are older, male, and/or White are most frequently reported in both data sources. Similarly, deaths due to natural causes or illness, followed by suicide, are similarly represented in both data sources as the most frequent manners of death in prison.

Conclusion

In this brief report, we provide a high-level overview of deaths in custody data that have been reported to BJA since the inception of BJA data collection efforts in fiscal year 2020. We examined the distributions and prevalence of different manners of death and decedent characteristics within the DCRA data. In order to assess at a high-level the quality and completeness of these data, we examined other data sources and drew comparisons when applicable. Because the comparison data sources were not from the same time period, we limit our comparison to the relative patterns and distributions across the different decedent characteristics.

In 2020, the first full year for which DCRA data were reported to BJA, 6,672 deaths were reported. The volume of deaths dropped in 2021 and 2022 to approximately 6,200 deaths each year, then increased to 6,705 deaths in 2023. Each year, deaths occurring in prison account for the vast majority of those deaths, followed by ARDs, then deaths in jails. Deaths reported as "Unknown" (i.e., not reported as an ARD, jail, or prison death) accounted for the next largest category, followed by deaths reported as "other." The share of deaths reported as "Unknown" has decreased over time, from 15% of the total reported deaths in 2020 to 9% in 2023.

Patterns in the manner of death vary by the context in which the death occurred. For ARDs, death caused by use of force was the most prevalent manner of death, followed by suicide, then accidents. In jails, the most prevalent classification was "unavailable pending an investigation," followed by natural causes, then suicide. In prisons, the most prevalent manner of death was natural causes, followed by unavailable pending an investigation, then suicide. In the DCRA data, it is also clear that decedent demographics varied by context. For ARDs and jail deaths, decedents who were between the ages of 25 and 44 were the most prevalent among reported

deaths whereas in prison, decedents who were 55 years and older were the most prevalent. Across all contexts, deaths involving a male decedent were more prevalent than those with a female decedent. Additionally, deaths involving White individuals followed by Black individuals, then non-Hispanic individuals, were more prevalent by volume than other racial or ethnic groups. When looking at alternative data sources, the patterns observed in the DCRA data generally hold true, though there are some challenges with making direct comparisons. Ultimately, there are several limitations with the DCRA data identified through this analysis.

Large share of characteristics that are "Unknown" or "unavailable pending investigation"
Deaths reported with "Unknown" race or ethnicity characteristics comprised a significant proportion of ARDs, jail, and prison deaths whereas deaths reported with "Unknown" ages comprised a significant proportion of ARDs and jail deaths. Although the share of deaths with "Unknown" characteristics appears to be declining over time, having a relatively large proportion of unknown cases prevents the identification of accurate trends and patterns from which we can inform policy and practice. This is especially true for incidents that have unavailable manner or cause of death. Continuing to facilitate more complete and updated reports on deaths in custody will further decrease missing data.

Categories related to the manner of death are the same across sector
The categories on manner of death collected through DCRA are the same for each sector (i.e., law enforcement, jails, prisons). Although this creates efficiencies for data collection, it may result in erroneous categorizations by those reporting deaths. For example, "Execution" is a possible response option for both law enforcement and jail-related deaths in custody, although in reality this manner of death could only occur in the context of a prison system. Constraining the possible manners of death to those that are relevant to the sector could help those who are reporting data select appropriate categories and ultimately create more accurate data.

Existing categories related to the manner of death are very broad
The existing categories related to the manner of death are broad, possibly because the different sectors share the same categories. It may be more informative for policy and practice to include more specific categories for common manners of deaths in custody that are relevant to each sector. For example, creating more specific ARD categories that break apart the "use of force" or "homicide" categories could inform tracking trends in different types of ARDs. These could include categories such as officer-involved shootings, vehicle-related deaths, and deaths related to less-than-lethal tools, all of which are prevalent manners of ARDs and a focal concern for policy makers, practitioners, and the public. Similarly, DCRA data collection on jails and prisons could include more explicit categories of manners of death in these settings, including intoxication-related deaths. These types of deaths are a central concern for many corrections stakeholders, thus tracking data that can inform new policies and practices to reduce intoxication deaths is important. Tracking different types of deaths related to natural causes (e.g., heart disease, cancer) in correctional settings would also be informative and could extend prior data collections allowing for the identification of historical trends.

Limited variables describing the circumstances around death

Understanding the situations in which deaths in custody occur can be important in creating more effective policies and practices. However, there are currently limited variables obtained through the DCRA data collection that can speak to circumstances surrounding these deaths. For example, ARDs may occur under a wide variety of circumstances and settings given the open nature of police–public interactions (compared to interactions within confinement settings). Including additional information around the circumstances can highlight precipitating factors that tend to lead to ARDs. Some possible metrics include the type of interaction between the decedent and law enforcement leading to the death (e.g., traffic stop, pedestrian stop, call for service) or whether the decedent was in mental health distress or under the influence of substances. Additional information related to circumstances around jail and prison deaths could also be collected, such as the location of the death. Collecting key data elements that describe some of the important context around deaths in custody may make the data even more valuable in informing targeted policy, programs, and practices aimed at preventing or reducing these deaths.