



Community Gun Violence in Virginia

Study resolution

- Directs JLARC to study the impact of gun violence on the
 - physical, mental, and emotional health of individuals living in affected communities
 - social and economic health of affected communities
- Directs JLARC to consider how to address gun violence and its effects

Primary research activities

- Over 120 interviews, including local gun violence prevention and intervention offices and programs, law enforcement and prosecutors, other city departments, schools, hospitals, community-based organizations (CBOs), gun violence victims, local businesses and associations, state agencies, and national subject-matter experts
- Extensive reviews of research literature on the effects of gun violence and approaches for addressing it
- Analyses of law enforcement and public health data on gun-related crimes, homicides, and injuries
- Review of state laws and programs

In brief

Virginia's gun violence rates are similar to national averages, and rates have been declining since 2022.

Nine Virginia localities have higher rates and account for over half of the state's gun-related homicides.

Firearm injuries tend to be more lethal, severe, and costly to treat than other assault injuries.

Gun violence elevates risk of psychiatric disorders in survivors and developmental challenges in exposed youth; Virginia's highest gun violence areas have mental health professional shortages.

In brief (continued)

Community gun violence negatively affects local economies, including business activity and property values.

Community gun violence creates additional challenges for schools, including low student attendance, poor classroom engagement, and staffing challenges.

There are evidence-based programs to prevent, intervene in, and respond to gun violence, many of which are operating or being established in Virginia localities; programs have limited capacity and may not reach all individuals who could benefit.

State funding and technical assistance to help localities address gun violence has increased, but some higher gun violence communities receive less assistance than others.

In this presentation

Background

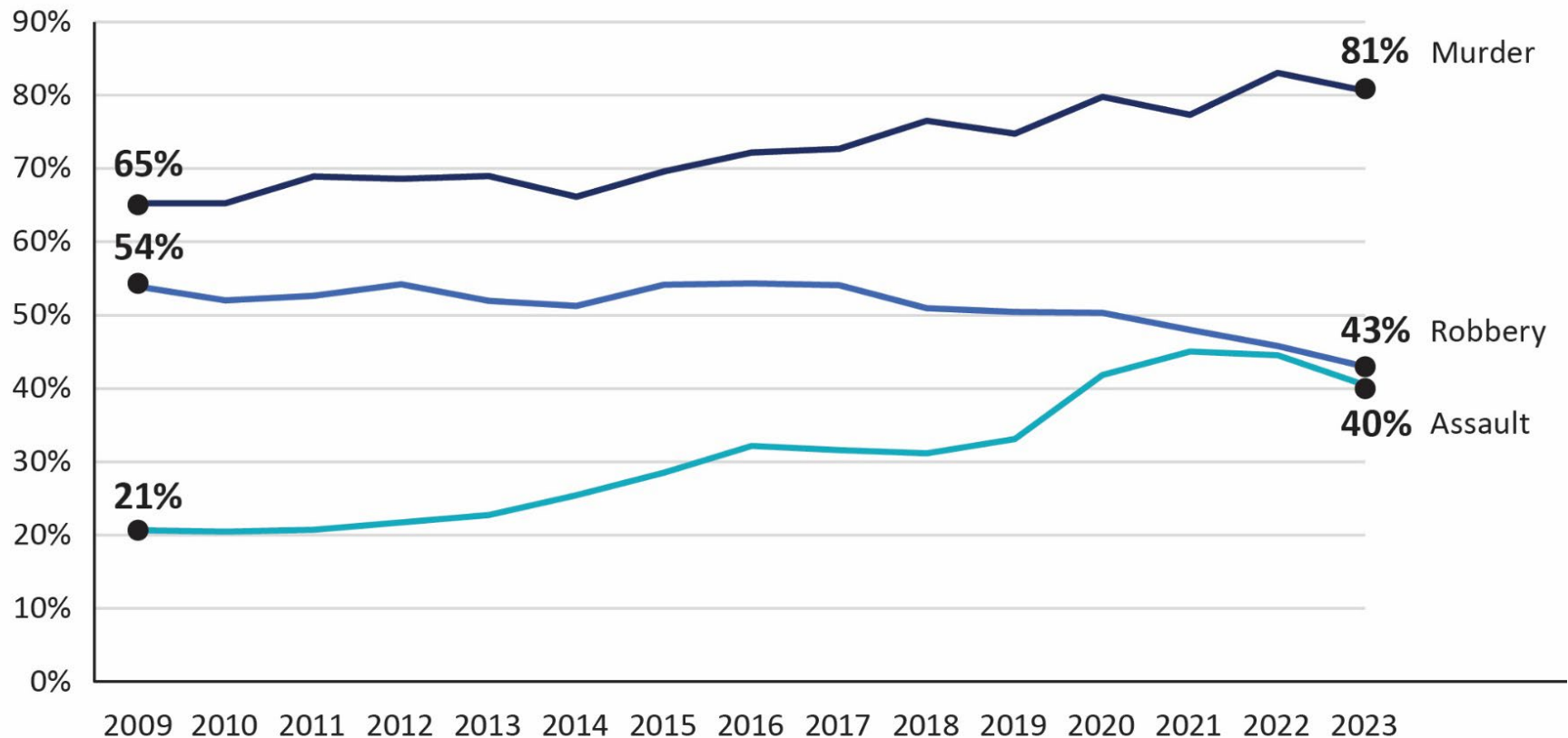
Effects on Victims, Families, and Community Members

Effects on Local Economies and Schools

Strategies for Addressing Community Gun Violence

State and Local Roles

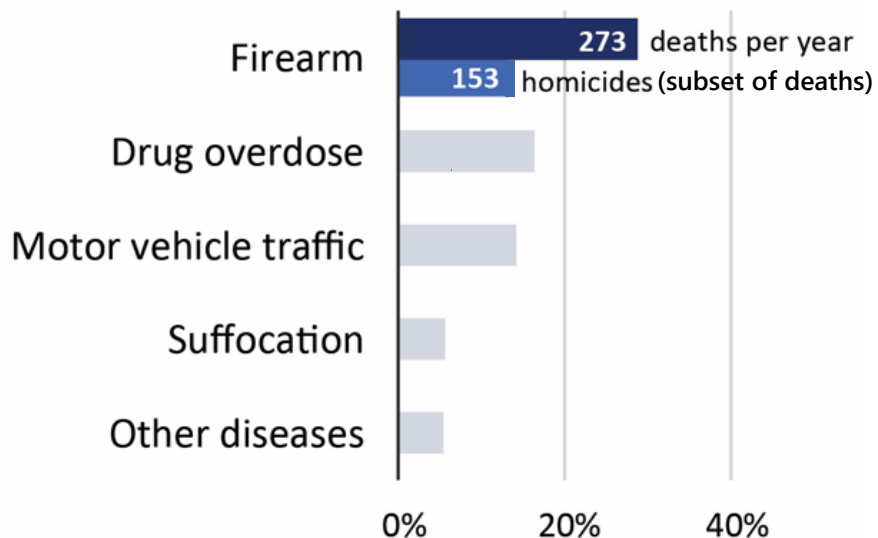
Guns used in high proportion of violent crimes, and increasing proportion of murders and assaults



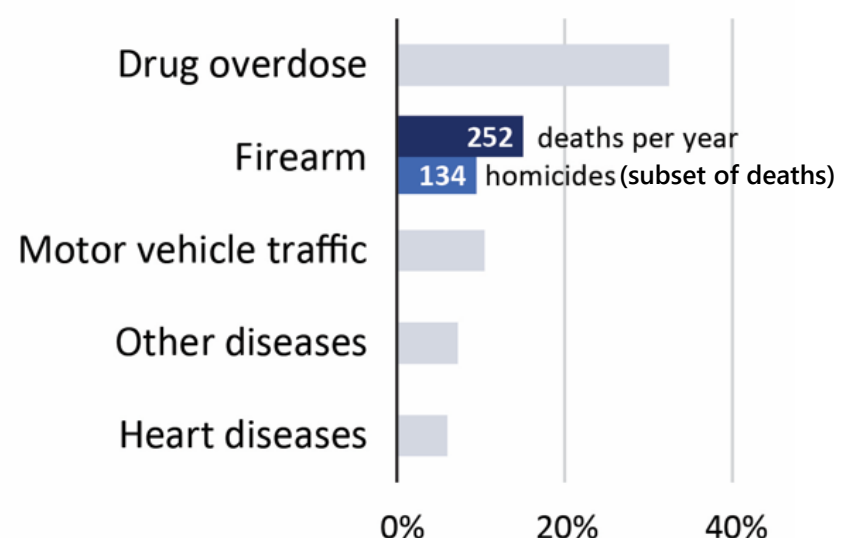
Source: JLARC staff analysis of Virginia State Police Incident-Based Reporting System data.

Gun-related injuries are a leading cause of death among Virginia youth and young adults

YOUTH (10-24)



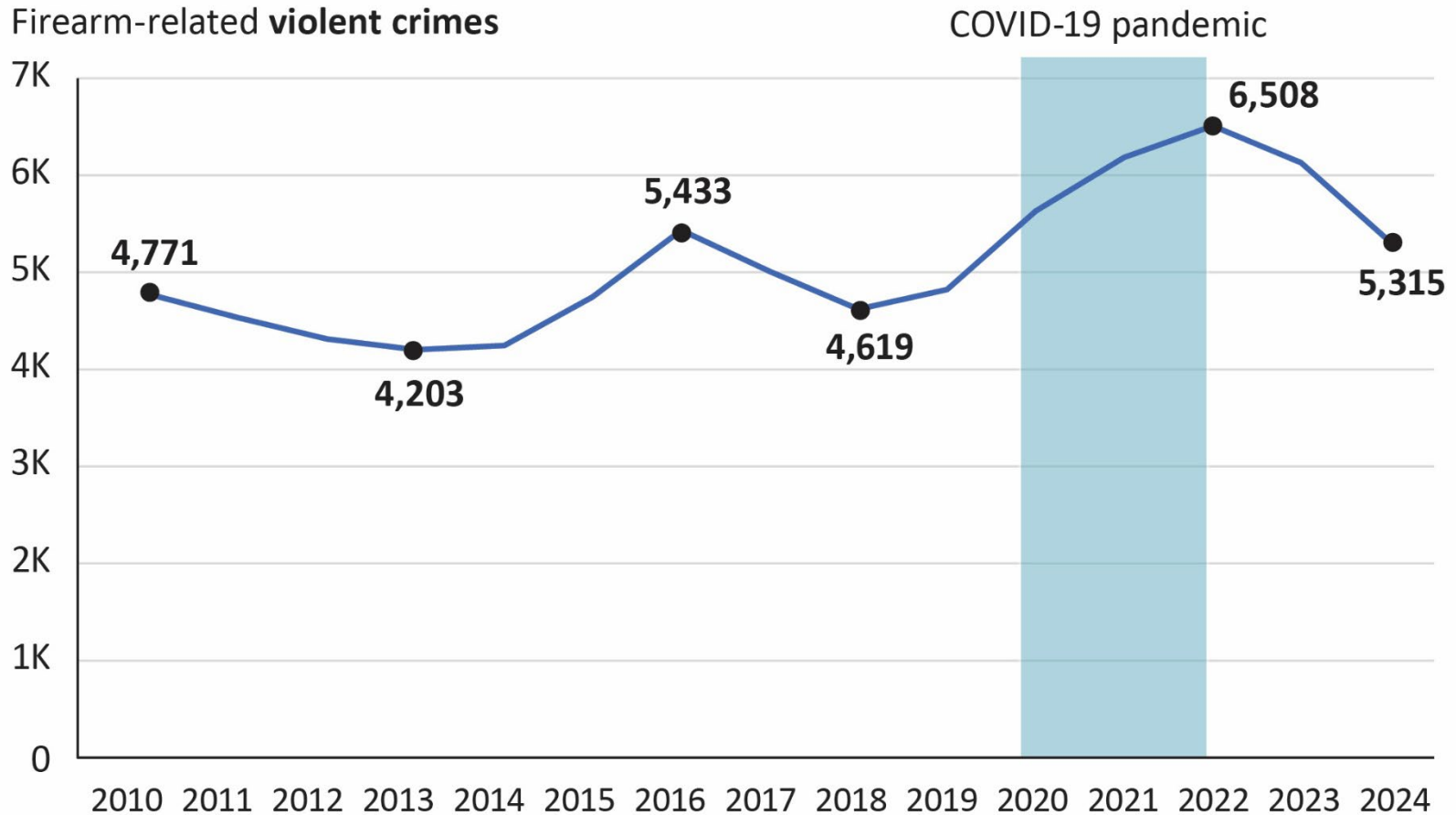
YOUNG ADULTS (25-34)



Source: JLARC staff analysis of Center for Disease Control (CDC) data, 2019–2023.

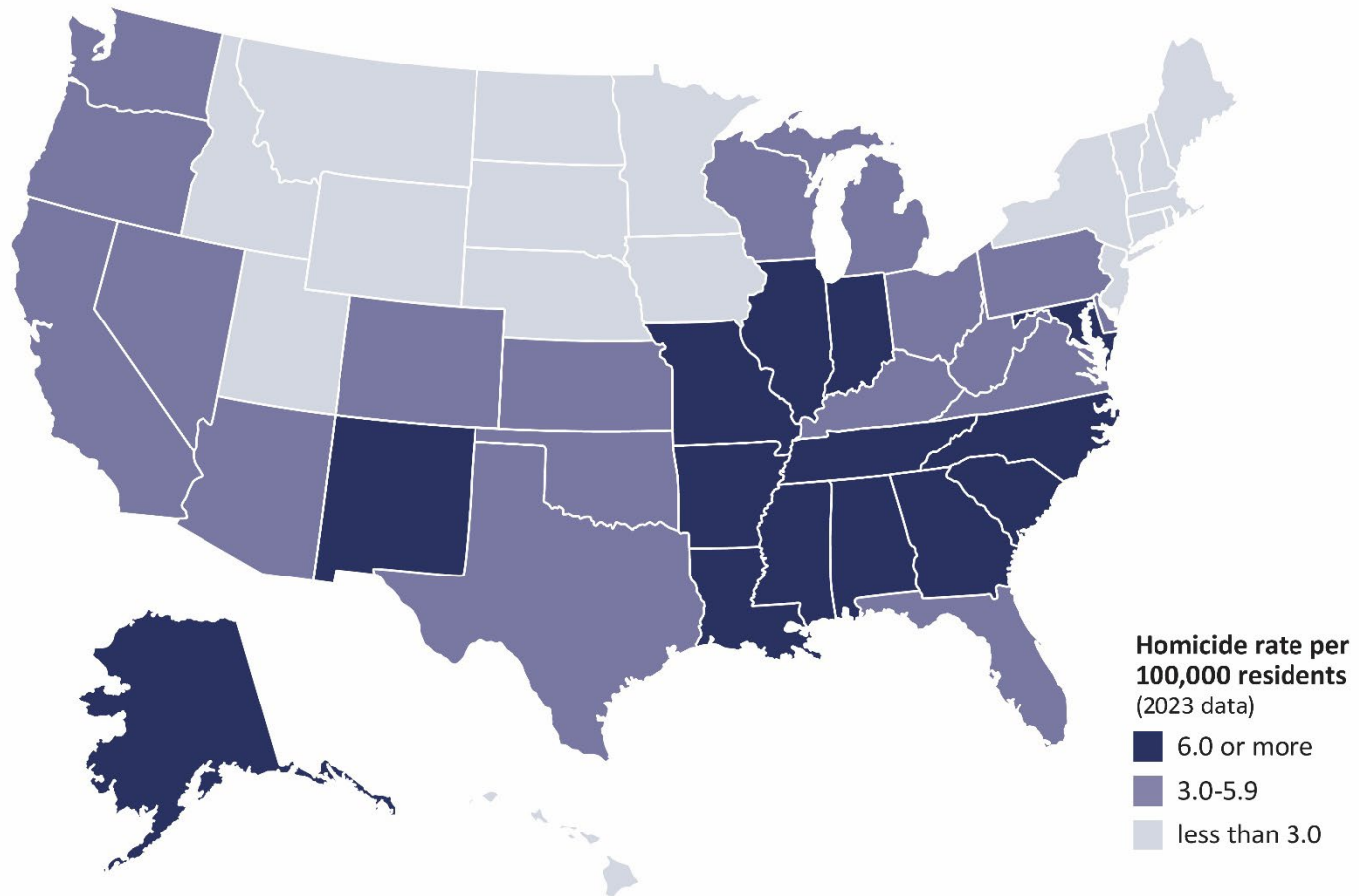
Note: 'Other diseases' include deaths from a wide variety of diseases not otherwise forming their own category in CDC data. Heart disease, cancers, and other common diseases have their own categories, whereas the 'other diseases' category includes several less common diseases.

Gun violence increased before and during the pandemic but has fallen since 2022



Source: JLARC staff analysis of Virginia State Police data, 2010–2024.

Virginia's gun-related homicide rate (5.4) is similar to 50-state average (5.1)



Source: JLARC staff analysis of CDC data, 2023.

Gun-related homicide rates in nine Virginia cities are relatively high, but most are declining

Locality	Gun-related homicides (2020-24 annual average)	Rate (per 100,000)	Rate Trend (last 3 years)
Petersburg	18	54	-58%
Portsmouth	34	35	-17
Richmond city	70	30	-9
Hopewell	6	28	-34
Norfolk	46	20	-47
Roanoke city	17	18	-28
Hampton	23	17	-28
Newport News	28	15	18
Danville	5	13	1
Nine localities	247	23	-24%
Rest of Virginia	230	4	-20%

Source: JLARC staff analysis of the Virginia Department of Health's Virginia Medical Examiner Data System.

“Community violence” is main driver of higher gun violence levels and puts wider community at risk

- Community violence is interpersonal violence that often takes place in public spaces, putting broader community at risk
- 65% of gun homicides in the nine higher gun violence localities occurred in public areas (versus 38% in the rest of the state)
- Community violence is frequent in some neighborhoods and has caused deaths and life-altering injuries to innocent bystanders

Note: Public areas = Streets, sidewalks, parking lots, motor vehicles, and other publicly accessible areas.

Community violence often driven by interpersonal disputes, sometimes related to criminal activity

- Gun-related homicides often result from disputes; at least one-third preceded by an argument or fight
 - Longstanding grudge or sudden escalation of an argument
 - Social media contributes to start and perpetuation
- At least one-quarter related to some type of criminal activity, most often drug dealing or drug use
- Between 4% and 8% categorized as gang-related

Note: Actual proportion of incidents involving each of these circumstances is likely higher than reported, but state data is not complete enough to determine the exact proportion.

Virginia has established laws to regulate legal sale, ownership, and carrying of firearms

- Study focused on *community gun violence*, and there is limited national research on the effects of laws on this type of violence
- Virginia has laws that systematic review by RAND found to be effective at reducing *gun homicides* in general
 - Strongest evidence for child access prevention and required dealer background checks
- RAND found evidence for the effectiveness of other laws (e.g., waiting periods, firearm purchaser licenses) in reducing *gun homicides* is not as strong
 - More research needed to draw firmer conclusions (evidence is stronger for other outcomes, such as suicides, mass shootings)

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Finding

Firearm injuries tend to be more lethal, severe, and costly to treat than other assault injuries.

Firearm injuries more frequently result in death, and non-fatal injuries typically are more severe

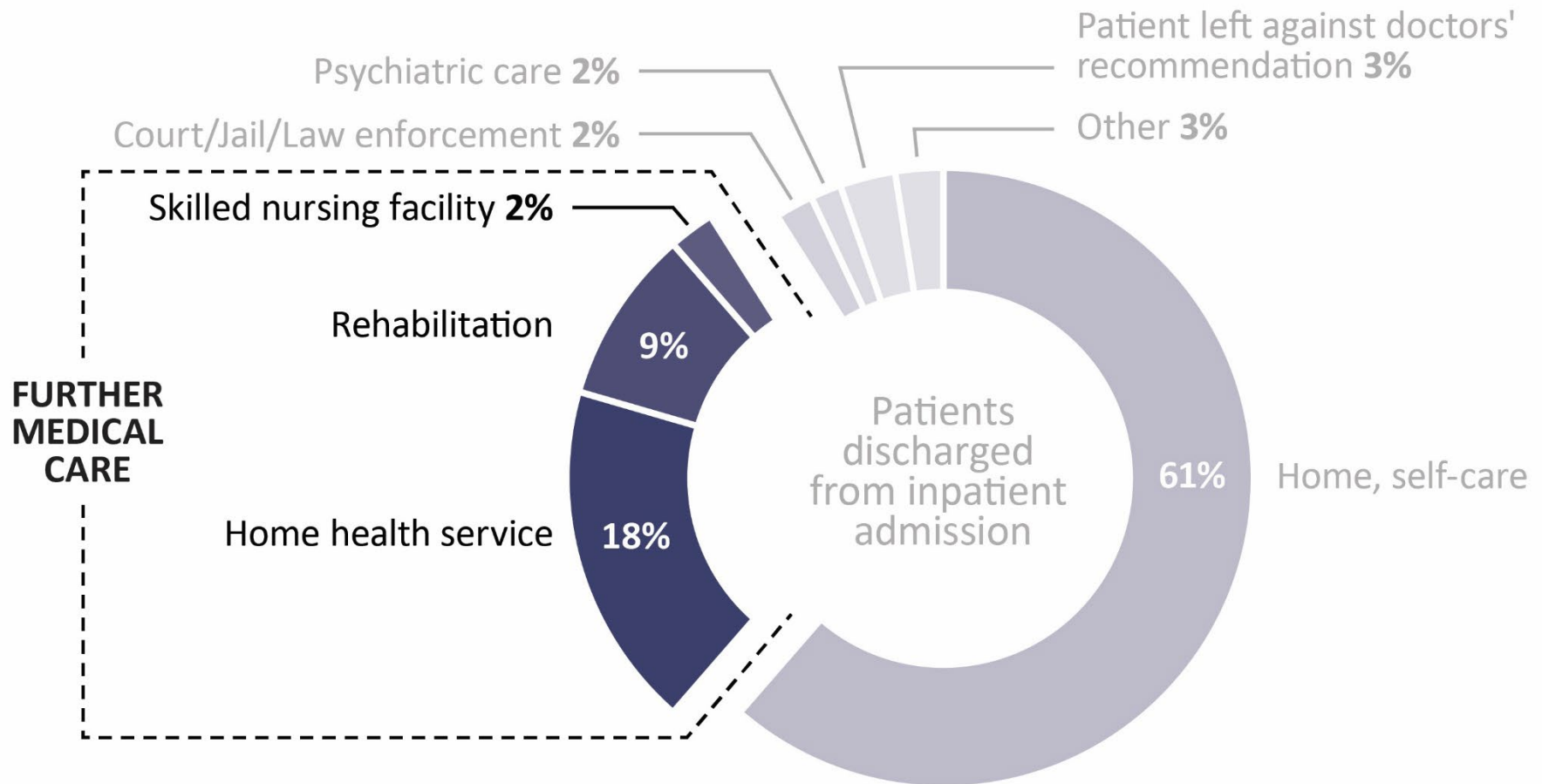
- Firearm assault injuries are associated with higher fatality rates
 - 15% fatality rate for firearm assaults, (versus ~1% for stabbings and <0.1% for blunt objects or bodily force)
- Non-fatal firearm injuries typically are more severe than other non-fatal injuries
 - 28% “severe/critical” for firearm injuries (versus 5% for other penetrating injuries and 10% for blunt trauma)

Initial firearm injury treatment typically more complex and costly than other injuries

- Require more resources to treat and longer hospital stays
 - In Virginia, ~39% of firearm injury patients required inpatient hospital admission
 - Patients required more resuscitative procedures, blood transfusions, and surgeries
- Firearm injury treatment costs are 1.5–2 times higher than stab wounds, 2–3 times blunt or bodily force injuries
 - top quartile of initial treatment costs in Virginia ranged from \$34,600–\$232,000+
 - Medicaid pays ~80% of initial firearm injury claims, but costs are minimal share of total Medicaid expenditures (<0.05%)

Costs based on claims data for an estimated 60% to 75% of the Virginia patient population.

Many survivors of firearm injuries require additional, long-term care after hospital release



Finding

Survivors and others exposed to gun violence often experience negative mental health impacts, and youth are especially at risk; Virginia's highest gun violence areas have mental health professional shortages.

Survivors and their families experience negative mental health impacts

- Survivors are at increased risk for PTSD, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation or attempt, substance misuse, and other mental health conditions
 - 200% increase compared to control, according to one study
 - At one Virginia hospital, 40% of survivors were diagnosed with PTSD after injury; 31% still had symptoms a year later
- Family members and caregivers for gun violence survivors also commonly experience mental health impacts
 - 20% to 40% of trauma survivor caregivers experience significant symptoms of depression and PTSD

PTSD = post-traumatic stress disorder

Routine exposure to gun violence is detrimental to mental health, and accessing care is challenging

- Research finds residents of high gun violence communities report greater rates of social isolation, loneliness, and worse quality of life
 - In Virginia, residents often won't let children play outside, less likely to go for walks and use public spaces like parks
- All nine higher gun violence localities in Virginia designated as mental health professional shortage areas for low-income populations
 - Shortage is pronounced for trauma-focused, culturally competent care and for youth mental health services

Routine exposure to gun violence is especially detrimental to young people

- Research finds exposure to gun violence puts young people at risk of several developmental challenges and clinical mental health disorders
- Community workers report youth often become desensitized to violence
 - More likely to carry firearms for protection, increasing risk of involvement as victim or perpetrator
 - May be more likely to seek retribution for friend's shooting

“People ask why do these kids have guns? Come live where I live and I bet you buy a gun. They are living in a war zone.” – Community worker

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Gun violence negatively affects local economies, including business activity and property values.

Violent crime, particularly gun violence, negatively affects businesses

- Businesses relying on walk-in traffic or leasing office or commercial space to tenants more likely to be affected
 - Virginia businesses much more concerned with violent crime, like shootings, than property crime, like theft
 - People avoid areas they perceive as unsafe

“Now the perception is downtown is full of shootings and crime so it’s not worth coming” – Virginia business owner
- Increases in gunshots or violent crime associated with fewer customer visits, fewer new businesses, downsizing or loss of existing businesses, and higher operating costs

Violent crime associated with reduced residential and commercial real estate values

- Studies show gun violence reduces property values
 - 10% increase in violent crimes reduced nearby residential housing values 6%
 - 9.6% reduction in residential sales prices for each day with a nearby gunfire incident
- Commercial property values can also be affected, making fully leasing spaces more difficult and depressing market lease rates
- Depressed property values affect owners and local governments, who rely on real estate property taxes for 50% of their revenue, on average

Finding

Community gun violence creates additional challenges for schools, including negative effects on student attendance and classroom engagement, and exacerbates school staffing issues.

Community gun violence associated with negative effects on student safety and learning

- Schools in higher gun violence localities have higher chronic absenteeism rates (16–40%) than average of other school divisions (21%)
- Students more likely to report feeling unsafe traveling to school, on school grounds, or in hallways and bathrooms
- Students exposed to violence struggle with processing trauma, which can affect attentiveness and behavior
- Research finds exposure to gun violence is associated with lower test scores, increased grade-level repetition, and decreased high school graduation rates

Community gun violence places additional stress on teachers and staff in some school divisions

- Increased workloads and emotional strain, especially after incidents involving or affecting students

“A murder in an apartment complex could have 100 students living there. A school counselor can easily be overwhelmed.”
- Teachers in higher gun violence localities are twice as likely to report not feeling safe in school or being threatened by a student
- Average teacher vacancy rate is 8% in higher gun violence localities, compared with 3% across other divisions statewide

School divisions have invested additional resources in response to community gun violence

- School divisions in higher gun violence localities have invested in building security (metal detectors, security cameras, and other weapon detection systems)
- School divisions in higher gun violence localities employ more security personnel
 - Average of 3 security staff per 1,000 students, compared with 2 across other divisions statewide
- School divisions provide additional resources for student and staff well-being, including academic and support services, 'Safe Passage,' and 'Handle with Care' programs

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Strategies to effectively address gun violence and its effects should have four key components



PREVENTION

Reduces risk of future violence by addressing risk factors that contribute to violence and involvement in criminal activities



INTERVENTION

Disrupts the cycle of violence by stopping initial incident from occurring or mediating conflict to avoid future retaliations



INCIDENT RESPONSE

Stabilizes victims, families, and communities after a shooting has occurred by helping meet wide variety of short- and long-term needs



LAW ENFORCEMENT

Deters violence through specialized staffing and patrolling approaches

Uses new technologies and community engagement to better respond to incidents and solve crimes

Finding

There are evidence-based programs to prevent, intervene in, and respond to gun violence, and some are already operating in Virginia's nine higher gun violence localities.

Prevention programs help reduce gun violence by providing guidance and support

- **Intensive mentorship-based programs:** provide mentorship for high-risk individuals (e.g., changing behaviors and thinking, providing academic and career advancement)
- **Afterschool and summer:** provide safe spaces for young people in high gun violence communities
- **Employment programs:** provide job opportunities as alternative pathway to behaviors leading to crime

Intervention programs focus on reducing gun violence in the near-term

- **Violence interruption:** employ credible messengers to mediate ongoing conflicts and connect high-risk individuals to needed support services
- **Group violence intervention:** use partnership of police, support providers, and community members to encourage suspected violent individuals to change behaviors
- **Hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs):** intervene immediately following an assault, when survivors are more receptive to positive behavioral changes that can prevent future violence

Response programs help address consequences of gun violence on victims and communities

- **Stabilization and case management:** help gun violence victims and their families meet basic needs
- **Rapid Engagement of Support in the Event of Trauma (RESET) teams:** visit neighborhoods after a gun violence incident and talk with residents about the incident, listen to concerns, and provide information about available resources (e.g., grief counseling)

Law enforcement approaches and technologies help deter gun violence and solve crimes

- **Enforcement strategies:** evidence-based patrolling strategies increase effectiveness, and investigative ‘shoot teams’ ensure minor incidents are fully investigated
- **New technologies:** allow for better, faster, and more effective response and investigations
- **Community engagement:** help build public trust and gain cooperation essential for deterring and solving crimes
- **Prosecution resources:** additional prosecutors and support can help solve more cases

Research finds types of programs implemented in Virginia can be effective at reducing gun violence

- Research finds programs can reduce gun violence when appropriately designed and implemented, for example
 - **Mentorship and youth employment:** found to reduce participant arrests by 20% to 44%
 - **Violence interruption:** found to have contributed to reduced gun violence in several cities
 - **HVIP:** 3.6% reinjury rate for participants versus 15% for non-participants
- Virginia's higher gun violence localities are establishing or operating many of these programs, though gaps exist, and many programs are new

Note: Evidence of effectiveness comes from peer-reviewed research of programs nationwide.

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Localities provide leadership and oversight of gun violence reduction efforts

- Programs for addressing gun violence are implemented at the local level by local governments, nonprofit CBOs, and hospitals
- Local leadership needed to ensure programs and other efforts are well-planned, coordinated, and sustained
- Six of the nine higher gun violence localities have recently established a lead office or position to oversee efforts ^a
 - Hampton (2022), Newport News (2024), Norfolk (2025), Portsmouth (2024), Richmond (2025), Roanoke (2024)

CBOs = community-based organizations

^a Danville, Hopewell, and Petersburg do not have a lead office or position tasked with planning and coordination, although Danville has established a violence prevention manager tasked with developing and implementing city-led prevention programs.

State is establishing a structure to support local efforts to address gun violence

- State has established three funding programs
 - Safer Communities (2023): funding to cities of Norfolk, Portsmouth, Richmond, and Roanoke
 - Firearm Violence Intervention and Prevention (FVIP, 2022): grants to organizations across state, mainly hospitals, local government departments, and CBOs
 - Operation Ceasefire (2022): grants to organizations across state, mainly law enforcement and prosecutors
- State has established DCJS Office of Safer Communities to administer three funding programs and provide assistance and support *all* localities and nonprofit CBOs

DCJS = Department of Criminal Justice Services

Finding

State support to address gun violence has increased, but some higher gun violence localities have received relatively less state funding.

State has substantially increased funding for local gun violence reduction efforts

Biennial appropriation amount

DCJS-administered funding program	FY21-FY22	FY23-FY24	FY25-FY26
Pre-2022 gun violence funds	\$3.8 M	-	-
Safer Communities	-	\$10 M	\$28 M
FVIP	-	\$13 M	\$18 M
Operation Ceasefire	-	\$20 M	\$20 M
Total appropriations	\$3.8 M	\$43 M	\$66 M^a

Note that a substantial portion of appropriated funds have not yet been obligated or spent.

^a Total for FY25–FY26 does not include additional \$2.6 million appropriated to the Office of the Attorney General for its own gun violence reduction initiatives, such as providing prosecution resources and an anti-violence media campaign.

Localities included in Safer Communities have received substantially more state funding

	State funding (DCJS programs, FY21–26)	Funding per resident
Safer Communities localities		
Portsmouth	\$10.9 M	\$112
Roanoke city	\$7.4 M	\$75
Norfolk	\$13.0 M	\$56
Richmond city	\$12.7 M	\$54
Other higher gun violence localities		
Petersburg	\$0.8 M	\$24
Hampton	\$2.1 M	\$16
Hopewell	\$0.3 M	\$13
Newport News	\$1.7 M	\$10
Danville	\$0.4 M	\$10

Does not include FVIP and Operation Ceasefire awards made on December 8, 2025

Other higher gun violence localities could benefit from Safer Communities funding

- Of the three DCJS programs, Safer Communities provides individual localities with more reliable funding
 - Designated for specific locality, instead of competitive grant like FVIP and Operation Ceasefire
- Five higher gun violence localities do not receive Safer Communities funds but have similar needs and are implementing similar efforts
- 2025 Safer Communities expansion vetoed by governor, pending evaluation of effectiveness
- DCJS taking steps to evaluate Safer Communities, but full evaluation will not be complete until 2026 or later

Policy Option

The General Assembly could amend the Appropriation Act to extend Safer Communities funding to the cities of Danville, Hampton, Hopewell, Newport News, and Petersburg.

Finding

Changing expenditure rules for Safer Communities would allow for more effective use, and periodic reporting on all three state programs would provide the General Assembly with information needed to make future changes.

Safer Communities localities have short one-year timeframe to spend their designated funding

- Safer Communities funds are provided to designated localities, who then distribute them to programs run by city departments or CBOs
- Safer Communities funds must be used in the fiscal year they are appropriated, or they revert to state general fund
- Most FY24 funds were not spent, and stakeholders report the one-year timeframe is challenging to plan and implement programs
- By comparison, budget cycles are typically two years, and grant cycles are typically two or three years

Recommendation

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending the Appropriation Act to establish Safer Communities as a biennially reverting special fund administered by DCJS to give recipient localities sufficient time to use the funding for effective planning and program implementation.

State funding programs are relatively new, and future changes may be necessary

- Safer Communities provides designated higher gun violence localities with substantial reliable funding each year
 - Specifying localities and funding amounts in Appropriation Act (as is current practice) may exclude localities needing funding or not account for differences in funding needs
- FVIP and Operation Ceasefire funds benefit wider range of localities and are essential for hospital-based HVIP programs
 - Further evaluation is needed to determine appropriate funding amounts and program qualifications

Recommendations

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending the Appropriation Act to direct DCJS to periodically evaluate if changes are needed to (1) Safer Communities funding distribution among Virginia localities, and (2) FVIP or Operation Ceasefire funding needs and program qualifications.

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