IN THEIR OWN VOICES

How fear & social media lead to youth & community gun violence in post-COVID Virginia—

and what state and community leaders can do (and are doing) to meet the challenge.

> *"**I feel like it goes back to the environment that you're in.** If you feel like simple tasks of going to the store or going somewhere involves you having to carry a gun, it's simply the environment that you're surrounding yourself with. Because that shouldn't be the norm, and that shouldn't be something that you feel like is a part of life, an everyday necessity that you need to survive..."*
>
> —Age 21, Richmond

> *"I spoke before to a room of people and I said, if somebody went in Walmart or somebody come in here and you hear gunshots, and you hear more gunshots and hear people hollering and screaming, how would you feel? And they would feel terrified. I said, now imagine living in a place where that happens all the time. The trauma that you would endure when you feel a sense of, I need something to protect myself. **So the need for a firearm is not necessarily driven by, 'I just wanna go do something criminal,' a lot of it's driven by fear and not wanting something to happen to you...**"*
>
> —Age 52, Newport News

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The community shared the problem with us:

> *"'Okay, nobody helping me, I go and [tell] older people this happening to me, that happening to me and nobody doing anything.* ***So, I'm gonna take it up on my own hand. I'm gonna go get my own help,' and they run to the weapon right there..."***

— Age 25, Charlottesville

The community shared what would help:

> *"We have to create better spaces for kids. We have to, ourselves, create safe spaces for kids. I cannot preach it enough.* ***We need more... us as parents, us as adults—we need to do more."***

—Age 24, Lynchburg

> *"...That's all they want to hear—I got you. That's it. That's all they need.* ***For somebody to tell them, I got you and I love you and you can do it.*** *If you can tell them three things, they'll do anything in the world for you."*

—Age 17, Hampton

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not those of the University of Virginia, or the University of Virginia School of Law.

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Introduction

Most parents, in most communities in Virginia, do not need to worry that their children might get shot or killed when they send their children out to play, or to the store, or to school. Likewise, most children in Virginia don't go outside worried that they might be victims of gun violence, or that they might have to carry a gun themselves for self-protection. Unfortunately, however, in a relatively small handful of communities, young people in the state do have these fears. They take matters into their own hands to feel safe, purchasing or obtaining all too available guns to use as protection.

On the one hand, given their perceptions and fears, and the nature of life in their community, this choice, while potentially lethal, is not irrational. On the other hand, having guns in their possession at a time in their lives when, developmentally, they are most susceptible to bad decisions, risky behavior, and too little consideration of the consequences, can, and too often does, have devastating and tragic consequences for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Separately, while most communities have moved on, in these very same places where gun violence and community safety are daily concerns, residents are still feeling the pandemic's impacts. School attendance rates are still low. Community centers and resources remain closed. And people remain disconnected.

Supported by the research and voices of people from across the commonwealth that both inspired and informed it, this report is aimed at helping both government decision makers and community members in Virginia tackle the problem of youth and community safety by asking and answering an urgent and fundamental question:

"How can we—the adults—make sure that all young people in every community in Virginia feel safe enough that they stop believing they need to carry a gun to protect themselves?"

The question is easy enough to ask. The right answers, of course, are admittedly much more complex and elusive. But the people who make decisions in Virginia have an obligation to try. For as one person we interviewed stated:

"...We shouldn't be scared to walk around our own city without a gun."

—Age 25, Charlottesville

It is important to note, as we consider the question of youth and community safety, that the number of communities we need to focus on are relatively few. Creating the conditions in those places that allow all young people to feel safe is an achievable goal. We just need to focus the right resources, in the right way, and sustain the effort. As another one of the interviewees told us:

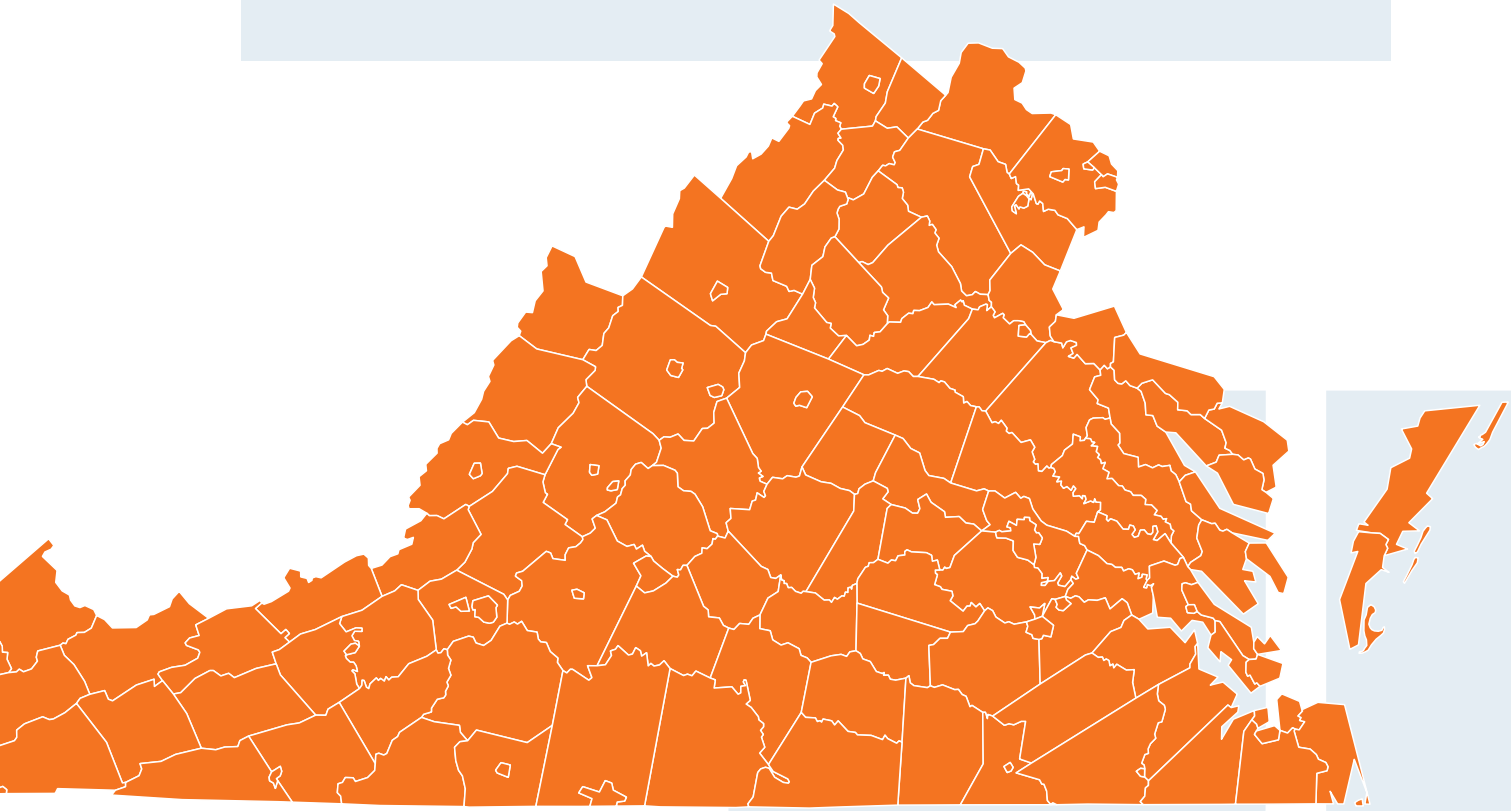
"What we've discovered over a period of time is that while it seems that violence is widespread, it really is happening in limited pockets of our community by certain actors and their associates. And it's not widespread, as the media sometimes portrays."

—Age 43, Hampton

To inform our policy ideas, we set out in our research to help answer the safety question, by first asking another: "What would the people who live in those communities, including the young people who live there, tell us about whether they might carry a gun, and what it might take to help them feel safe?"

To do that, and as explained in greater detail below, we conducted two waves of research involving structured interviews with youth and adults in those same communities from across the commonwealth, engaging them in conversations that flowed from the following four essential questions:

1. **In what ways do fear and perceived threats influence youth engagement with gun violence in Virginia?**
2. **How might social media contribute to youth gun violence?**
3. **Which changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic are still present in Virginian youths' lives, and how do they continue to shape gun violence risk?**
4. **What would it take for people to feel safer in your community?**



The stories and observations were both deeply personal and also powerful. We heard from people with their own lived experience in the criminal justice system who were now trying to give back to their communities—often with scant financial resources—by interrupting the cycle of violence and helping young people choose a safer and wiser path. We heard from people who lost loved ones to gun violence, or who live in fear of losing other members of their families or even becoming victims themselves. While they live in different parts of Virginia, many of the observations they shared were the same—young people are scared and suffering, guns are too easy to obtain, and this combination can have deadly and tragic consequences.

We then, in a series of discussions[1], asked law enforcement, local government officials, and community violence prevention workers who partner with government the same kinds of questions. We also asked them to share data and best practices from their jurisdictions.

This report synthesizes all this information and consists of three main sections:

The first section provides background for our work, briefly outlining the problem of community gun violence in the United States and some of the research in this area, before taking a deeper dive into Virginia, particularly the places and groups it impacts most.

The second section sets out our research process and methodology—principally conversations, with adults and youth in the communities in Virginia most impacted by gun violence, and additional conversations with law enforcement and other local government leaders from many of those same communities.

The second section also details our key findings from these conversations. A key finding, and consensus, from these conversations is that social media plays an outsized and dangerous role in turning individual, lower-level conflict into actual shootings.

[1]In partnership with Virginia First Cities and the University of Virginia's Center for Gun Violence Solutions, we hosted both a virtual call and then a full-day conference with local government officials—including law enforcement and human service employees as well as staff and leaders from local non-profits in hotspot cities working on gun violence prevention. Representatives from the following cities participated: **Charlottesville, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Danville, Hampton, Newport News, Richmond, Fredericksburg, Petersburg, Martinsville, Hopewell, and Emporia.**

Informed by these conversations and voices, and reinforced by additional research, the final section details a set of policy recommendations for both state and local government officials and non-governmental actors in Virginia, ranging from prioritizing conflict resolution programming and community violence intervention, to implementing strategies to increase and restructure state funding, improve school attendance, and monitor youth's social media usage.

We also want to point out that we are not, in this report, covering all aspects of the problem of young people and guns. Specifically, we do not focus on preventing mass school shootings, youth suicide, or accidental shootings—other, all-too-common kinds of tragedies resulting from youth having ready access to firearms. Those problems and challenges deserve their own deep examination and research, but that is not what we have done here. We are also not focusing on shootings by family members of other family members, though that too is a real and pervasive problem.

We instead focus on the problem of community violence, which takes place at higher and more targeted rates.[2] Indeed, what makes this report unique is it incorporates the voices and stories of Virginians younger and older. This report crafts policy proposals from the ground up by spotlighting community-informed advocacy and community engagement when it comes to addressing gun violence.

So, while we do include some data in this report, much of that data is qualitative and not quantitative. We know, however, that the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) is releasing a report on similar topics later this fall which, we are confident, will be rich with quantitative data on gun violence and its impacts in Virginia.[3]

This report is focused on a ***particular kind of gun violence*** that disproportionately takes place in urban areas, impacting high concentrations of people of color and people living in poverty. We also focus on particular kinds of solutions—gun violence prevention—rather than on gun control more generally.

While we recognize the value, and impact, of legislative efforts to constitutionally limit access to firearms, we wanted to focus our research, and this report, on questions of safety and gun possession, in part because we have seen the political stalemates that can often happen around questions of gun control. At the same time, the bipartisan support for spending state dollars on local prevention efforts is relatively stable and even starting to bear fruit in terms of reductions in rates of gun violence in Virginia's hotspots[4].

For example, in recent legislative sessions, even while Governor Youngkin vetoed bills addressing gun control, the General Assembly and the Governor still agreed to continue prevention funding.[5]

[2] Bradley D. Stein et al., *Prevalence of Child and Adolescent Exposure to Community Violence*, 6 Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review 247 (2003).

[3] Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, *JLARC Workplan 2025,* JLARC.VIRGINIA.GOV (2025), https://jlarc.virginia.gov/pdfs/other/2025_Workplan.pdf (last visited Oct 16, 2025).

[4] John Gonzalez, *"Ceasefire Virginia" program credited for sharp decline in violent crime*, WJLA (2025), https://wjla.com/news/local/ceasefire-virginia-program-40wide-effort-curb-gun-violence-national-attention-data-shows-drop-homicides-violent-crime-promising-results-attorney-general-prevention-prosecution-murder-funding-law-enforcement (last visited Oct 17, 2025).

[5] Emily Moore, *2023 General Assembly Budget Passes with Significant Investments for Youth and Family Well-Being*, Voices for Virginia's Children (2023), https://vakids.org/posts/2023-general-assembly-budget-passes-with-significant-investments-for-youth-and-family-well-being (last visited Oct 17, 2025); See also *Firearm Violence Intervention and Prevention —FVIP —Grant Program CY2026-2027*, VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERVICES (Apr. 30, 2025), https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/grants/programs/firearm-violence-intervention-and-prevention-fvip-grant-program-cy2026-2027.

Executive Summary

This report highlights how, in a small number of communities in Virginia, some youth, especially youth of color, carry guns and experience a disproportionate number of gun deaths that are driven by person-to-person shootings in their own neighborhoods. To better understand this problem, we had structured, in-depth conversations with young people, community members and leaders, and law enforcement in these affected areas and throughout the commonwealth. These conversations, supplemented by existing literature, reveal how fear, feelings of lack of safety, and easy access to guns are driving young people's decisions to carry firearms. Participants also highlighted how, in recent years, events like COVID and the pervasiveness of social media have changed the character of their communities and led to an uptick in violence.

Based on these findings, this report offers policy recommendations to advance resources and interventions to make our communities safer at the federal, state, local, and community/organizational levels. These include opening and maintaining more consistent and flexible funding streams, identifying and working with those with lived experience in at-risk communities, revitalizing school time and curriculum, innovating new interventions for online activity, and optimizing mentorship and support for youth and their families.

Key Findings:

- **The number of jurisdictions experiencing high rates of gun violence is small**, and within those jurisdictions, it is only a few neighborhoods that are the true hotspots.

- **While much of Virginia likely experiences one reality—the pandemic is mostly over, young people feel safe on the streets, and schools are robustly attended—a handful of communities experience the opposite.** These are the same communities most impacted by gun violence as well—the negative impacts of the pandemic continue to plague them**, most notably through community atomization, a disconnection between youth and schools, and a loss of services during the pandemic that never returned.**

- Most hotspot communities experience high rates of chronic student absenteeism. **This absenteeism is a likely cause and effect of gun violence.**

- **Many youth and young adults in hotspot communities carry** guns out of fear for their own safety, or the safety of those they love.

- **Young black men and boys (15-34) are the perpetrators and victims of community gun violence** at rates that are tragically, and disproportionately, higher than all other age, gender, and racial groups.

- **Social media use also increased during the pandemic, and it plays an outsized negative role in increasing gun violence**—youth frequently pose with guns or use social media as a tool for both posture and threat, accelerating conflict. In general, social media saturates youth with images of violence, information on using and obtaining guns, and a celebration of gun and gang culture.

- **Family stress and family trauma cycles also contribute to gun violence.**

- **Hotspot communities have a complicated relationship with police and policing,** expressing a lack of trust, but also hope, in those relationships.

- As with young people in all communities across the country, but exacerbated by community violence, **many youth in hotspot communities have experienced substantial trauma and face significant behavioral health challenges**.

- **Holistic and comprehensive community responses are effectively and creatively lowering the rates of gun violence** that spiked during and immediately after the pandemic, and these responses offer real promise.

Policy Recommendations | NOVEMBER 2025

After reporting on our research process and key findings, we lay out a series of recommendations for different levels of government that attempt to align what we heard from community members in our interviews, the feedback we received from law enforcement and local government officials, and research and evidence.

FEDERAL LEVEL

1. **Modify or remove liability protections for social media companies.**

STATE LEVEL

2. **Expand investment in gun violence prevention.**
   - Maintain/expand current funding levels for gun violence prevention.
   - Make state violence prevention funding more flexible and consistent.
   - Fund the Delinquency Prevention and Youth Development Act.
3. **The new administration should establish a pan-secretariat Children's Cabinet to facilitate interagency cooperation and holistic and comprehensive approaches to supporting Virginia's most vulnerable children.** The Cabinet's first priority should be to ensure that all youth in Virginia feel safe enough in their communities that they do not believe they need to arm themselves for protection.
4. **Create an Office of Gun Violence Prevention.**
5. **Use data on gun violence to focus state out-of-school time resources.**
6. **Revitalize the Serious or Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP).**
7. **Develop a state funding stream to be administered through the Department of Housing and Community Development to change built environment to improve neighborhood safety.**
8. **Limit access to social media platforms.**
9. **Limit access to firearms.**

LOCAL LEVEL

10. **Establish high-level interagency steering committees that meet frequently and regularly to share information, coordinate resources, and focus attention on neediest areas.**
11. **Use data to target both interventions and resources—to identify the unforgiving places.**
12. **Employ people with lived experience, or create memorandums of understanding with organizations that employ people with lived experience.**
13. **Do everything necessary to improve school attendance and performance.**
14. **Use time in school to teach violence prevention skills.**
15. **Create safe spaces and services for young people.**

LAW ENFORCEMENT

16. **Build trust with communities and partner with community violence interrupters.**
17. **Use data to target enforcement and prosecution.**
18. **Dedicate the same investigative resources to non-fatal shootings as homicides, and make quick arrests.**
19. **Focus investigative resources on online activity.**

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

20. **Teach youth and young adults to slow down their thinking and make better decisions.**
21. **Provide mentoring services.**
22. **Teach youth about dangers of social media.**
23. **Provide comprehensive support for children and families in hotspot communities.**

BACKGROUND

Guns are the leading cause of death among young people in America,[6] and for Black youth in particular—whether it is murder, often at the hands of other Black youth,[7] or suicide.[8]

Gun violence increased markedly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020. While the nation overall saw a 30% increase in firearm homicides in 2020 compared to 2019,[9] it appears that the increase disproportionately affected children. In four major U.S. cities, firearm assaults against children <18 years old doubled after the start of the pandemic, and Black children were more than 100 times more likely to be victimized by gun violence in this period compared to White children.[10] This is the largest racial disparity in gun violence measured in over a decade[11]. Disturbingly, while the adult gun death rates declined to pre-pandemic levels by 2023, gun homicides among youth ages 10-16 continued to increase during this period, reaching rates double the pre-pandemic rates.[12] With these recent shifts, gun violence surpassed motor vehicle accidents as the leading cause of death among U.S. children under the age of 18 by 2023.[13]

The COVID-19 Pandemic & Youth Gun Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced or accentuated several structural and social disruptions that continue to influence youth gun violence. Lockdowns, school closures, disruptions in social and recreational opportunities, increased economic hardship, social isolation, and disruptions to mental health and community services all are associated with increases in violence, including firearm violence, during and following the pandemic.[14]

In addition, as has been well reported, disruptions such as these caused youth across the country to experience an increase in serious mental health issues including anxiety and depression, increases that have yet to subside.[15]

Disruptions and harm were not evenly distributed across communities, with people of color, and those living in poverty, experiencing higher death rates, and less access to support services.[16]

Although in many communities across the country and in Virginia, life has essentially returned to normal, in some communities—often those with the highest rates of gun violence—what was lost has not been restored. Community centers remain closed. Relationships and connections remain frayed. Chronic absenteeism remains high.

[6] Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, New Report Highlights U.S. 2022 *Gun-Related Deaths: Firearms Remain Leading Cause of Death for Children and Teens, and Disproportionately Affect People of Color*, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY (Sept. 12, 2024), https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2024/guns-remain-leading-cause-of-death-for-children-and-teens.

[7] Fred Clasen-Kelly & Renuka Rayasam, *Gun violence hits Black communities hardest. Trump is rolling back prevention efforts*, NPR (Aug. 19, 2025), https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/08/19/nx-s1-5501679/gun-violence-prevention-trump-black-communities.

[8] New Report Highlights U.S. 2023 Gun Deaths: Suicide by Firearm at Record Levels for Third Straight Year | Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (2025), https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2025/new-report-highlights-us-2023-gun-deaths-suicide-by-firearm-at-record-levels-for-third-straight-year., EVERYTOWN, *The Rise of Firearm Suicide among Young Americans*, Everytown Research & Policy (2022), https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-rise-of-firearm-suicide-among-young-americans/.

[9] P. Ssentongo, et al., *Gun violence incidence during the COVID-19 pandemic is higher than before the pandemic in the United States.* SCI REP 11, 20654, at 1 (Oct. 21, 2021).

[10] Jonathan Jay et al., A*nalyzing Child Firearm Assault Injuries by Race and Ethnicity During the COVID-19 Pandemic in 4 Major US Cities*, 6 JAMA Network Open (2023), https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2802128?resultClick=3.

[11] EVERYTOWN, *Gun Violence and COVID-19 in 2020: A Year of Colliding Crises, Everytown Research & Policy* (2021), everytownresearch.org/report/gun-violence-and-covid-19-in-2020-a-year-of-colliding-crises.

[12] Jonathan Jay, Patrece L Joseph & Jason E Goldstick, *Age-Specific Trends in Pediatric and Adult Firearm Homicide After the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 179 JAMA Pediatrics (2025), https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2831403?guestAccessKey=4826d5d5-9c83-41f6-b5c7-56a2759f6885 (last visited Mar 31, 2025).

[13] Cordelia Mannix, Mark I Neuman & Rebekah Mannix, *Trends in Pediatric Nonfatal and Fatal Injuries, 152 Pediatrics* (2023), https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-abstract/152/5/e2023063411/194344/Trends-in-Pediatric-Nonfatal-and-Fatal-Injuries?redirectedFrom=fulltext.

[14] P. Ssentongo, *supra* note 10.

[15] Ian H. Gotlib, et al., *Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health and Brain Maturation in Adolescents: Implications for Analyzing Longitudinal Data*, vol. 3 BIOL. PSYCHIATRY GLOB. OPEN SCI. 912, 916 (2023).

[16] Vivek H. Murthy, *The Mental Health of Minority and Marginalized Young People: An Opportunity for Action,* vol. 137(4) PUBLIC HEALTH REP. 613-16 (2022).

Social Media & Youth Gun Violence

Of course, many other societal shifts have occurred concurrently over the past five years, in addition to the changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among youth specifically, social media is a rapidly changing landscape that has had far-reaching effects on young people's mental health and behavior.[17] Nearly all U.S. adolescents (96%) report using the Internet daily, and about 1/3 say they are online "almost constantly"—a figure that has remained elevated in recent years.[18] While researchers debate its causal role, pervasive social media use among young people became normative concomitant with a global increase in depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems among youth.[19]

Recent research and case studies have begun to tie social media use to gun violence among youth. For example, a review of fatal shootings involving youth ages 18 or under in Indianapolis, Indiana, from January 2018 to January 2025 found that over one-third have involved social media use, including Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Discord.[20] Exposure to violent imagery or narratives online can influence youth attitudes toward weapons, increase the perceived acceptability or popularity of carrying weapons, or even act as a mechanism through which interpersonal conflicts may spill out into real-world violence—for example, when adolescents feel like they or people they care about have been disrespected online.[21] The ability to share one's location, livestream, share pictures and videos, and tag others in posts can contribute to violence off-screen.[22] For example, violence interrupters have noted that rival gang members may taunt each other by posting photos of themselves in rival territory, disrespecting recently killed rival gang members in posts, and posting photos or videos of themselves in gang colors. A sense of anonymity online seems to encourage young people to use social media in provocative and damaging ways. [23]

Fear, Safety, & Guns Among Youth

These changing cultural conditions may contribute to an increased sense of anxiety and instability among youth. Adolescents commonly report feeling fearful, unsafe, and in need of protection as motivation to start carrying firearms.[24] Youth, their families, and community stakeholders often describe living in neighborhoods where threats, real or perceived, shape daily behaviors in which carrying weapons or engaging in violent retaliation is seen as a means of protection.[25] For example, a recent study found that adolescents who had been exposed to neighborhood violence had more than double the odds of carrying a gun compared to peers not exposed, even after controlling for other risk factors.[26] Research suggests links in both causal directions for the connections between (a) fear and victimization and (b) carrying a gun among youth. Careful longitudinal research has supported both that gun victimization causes youth to start carrying guns,[27] and that carrying guns or other weapons causes an increase in fear of crime, perceived risk, and actual victimization.[28]

[17] J Henri Lahti, et al., *Social media threats and health among adolescents: evidence from the health behaviour in school-aged children study*, CHILD ADOLESC. PSYCHIATRY MENT. HEALTH. 18:62, 13-14 (May 29, 2024).

[18] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health*, HHS.gov (2025), https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/youth-mental-health/social-media/index.html., Michelle Faverio & Olivia Sidoti, Teens, *Social Media and Technology 2024*, Pew Research Center (2024), https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024/.

[19] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (2024)., Jason M Nagata et al., *Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms During Early Adolescence*, 8 JAMA Network Open (2025), https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2834349., Kira E. Riehm, Kenneth A. Feder & Kayla N. Tormohlen, A*ssociations between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems among US Youth*, 76 JAMA Psychiatry 1266 (2019), https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2749480.

[20] Arika Herron, *How social media played part in 1/3 of youth gun homicides in Indianapolis*, Axios (2025), https://www.axios.com/local/indianapolis/2025/09/08/social-media-instagram-snapchat-youth-gun-homicides.

[21] Liz Szabo, *"All we want is revenge": How social media fuels gun violence among teens*, NPR (2023), https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/08/25/1195680218/social-media-fuels-teen-gun-violence.

[22] Caitlin Elsaesser et al., *Small becomes big, fast: Adolescent perceptions of how social media features escalate online conflict to offline violence*, 122 Children and Youth Services Review 105898 (2021), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740920323203#b0115.

[23] Desmond Upton Patton et al., *Sticks, stones and Facebook accounts: What violence outreach workers know about social media and urban-based gang violence in Chicago,* 65 Computers in Human Behavior 591 (2016), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S074756321630379X.

[24] Stephen N. Oliphant, *Bullying Victimization and Weapon Carrying: A Partial Test of General Strain Theory*, 55 Youth & Society (2021).

[25] Deanna L. Wilkinson & Jeffrey Fagan, *What We Know About Gun Use Among Adolescents*, 4 Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review 109 (2001).

[26] Philip Baiden et al., *Exposure to Neighborhood Violence and Gun Carrying Among Adolescents in the United States: Findings From A Population-Based Study*, 39 Journal of Interpersonal Violence (2024), https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38357885/.

[27] Jordan Beardslee et al., G*un—and Non-Gun-Related Violence Exposure and Risk for Subsequent Gun Carrying Among Male Juvenile Offenders*, 57 Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry 274 (2018).

[28] Pamela Wilcox, David C. May & Staci D. Roberts, S*tudent Weapon Possession and the "Fear and Victimization Hypothesis": Unraveling the Temporal Order,* 23 Justice Quarterly 502 (2006).

The Problem in Virginia

While, thankfully, gun deaths in Virginia have taken a recent downturn, gun deaths in the state have steadily increased over the last decade. From 2014 to 2023, the overall gun death rate increased by 34%. [29] As of 2023, firearms were the leading cause of death for young people.[30] According to Everytown for Gun Safety, an average of 119 children and teens die by guns in Virginia every year, of which *62% of these deaths are homicides*.[31]

With a total gun death rate of **13.8 deaths** per 100,000 people, Virginia also has the 34th-highest rate overall of gun deaths in the United States.[32]

And as of 2023, the overall gun homicide rate in Virginia was **5.7 deaths** per 100,000 people.[33]

Virginia's relatively low ranking compared to other states is heartening, but communities across the commonwealth have vastly different experiences and rates of violence. For example, the state's gun homicide rate is on a decline, but some localities, mostly Virginia's older cities, have homicide rates that dramatically exceed state averages.[34]

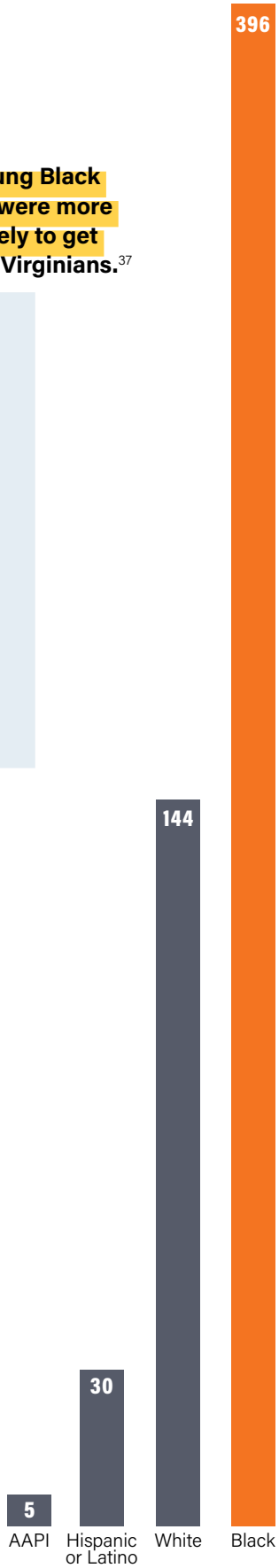
The following localities have gun homicide rates that at least double or triple Virginia's gun homicide rate (numbers given per 100,000 people):

Petersburg, 38.4
Portsmouth, 28.8
Hopewell, 24.6
Richmond, 22.5
Roanoke, 16.3
Norfolk, 16.2
Danville, 15.9
Hampton, 15.5
Newport News, 15.2

Just as different jurisdictions in Virginia have vastly different rates of gun violence, different age groups and racial groups have vastly different gun homicide rates as well. These disparities further reflect the racial and demographic makeup of the localities most affected.[35]

Based on homicide rates through 2023, Black Virginians were 8 times more likely to die from gun violence than white Virginians.[36] Looking at younger ages, young Black males, ages 15-34, comprised only 3% of the total state population, but more than 40% of murder victims.

Taken together, young Black men of ages 15–34 were more than 18 times as likely to get murdered as white Virginians.[37]



Source: Virginia Department of Health, *Injury and Violence Deaths* (Filtered by Homicide Death Type for CY2023)

Hotspots

Just as we know that all places in Virginia do not experience gun violence equally, we also know that not all neighborhoods in cities with high rates of violence experience gun violence equally either. The recent report on CeaseFire Virginia, for example, provides maps highlighting the neighborhoods within certain cities where gun violence is most pronounced.[38]

To further our investigation, and to drill down even further than the jurisdiction level, we used a dataset compiled by The Trace[39]—a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to covering gun violence in the U.S.—to identify the top 10 zip codes in Virginia with the highest number of publicly (i.e., made the local news) youth-involved shootings.

These shootings, which date back to 2014, were recorded by The Trace based upon a review of police and news reports. While this dataset is imperfect given the likelihood that some youth-involved shootings were not recorded due to a lack of "newsworthiness," this resource nonetheless provides a more localized picture of youth gun violence than other datasets like the State Police's Crime in Virginia Report which is broken down at its smallest level by jurisdictions. Consequently, and even if this dataset does not perfectly correspond with other locally available information, we were able to get a much better sense of which neighborhoods are plagued by youth gun violence by using The Trace's dataset. This also allowed us to match hotspot zip codes to school attendance zones for local high schools, with some interesting results.

Virginia Zip Codes with Highest Number of Shootings Involving Juveniles (2014–25)[40]

Rank	Zip	Location	Shootings	High School
1	23223	Richmond (East End)	15	Armstrong
2	23607	Newport News (East End, Jefferson, Washington)	11	Heritage
3	23224	Richmond (Southside)	8	Armstrong, High School for the Arts, Huguenot
4	23222	Richmond (Northside)	7	John Marshall
4	23803	Petersburg (Downtown, Blandford, Pecan Acres)	7	Petersburg
6	23434	Suffolk (Downtown, West Jerrico)	6	King's Fork, Lakeland, Nansemond River
6	23504	Norfolk (Brambleton, Calvert Square, Tidewater Gardens)	6	Booker T. Washington
8	23704	Portsmouth (Lexington Place, Swanson Homes)	5	Manor, I.C. Norcom
8	23707	Portsmouth (London Oaks)	5	I.C. Norcom
10	23324	Chesapeake (South Norfolk)	4	Oscar F. Smith
10	23462	Virginia Beach (Aragona Village, Timberlake)	4	Princess Anne
10	24017	Roanoke (Melrose Rugby, Panorama Heights)	4	William Fleming

[29] *State Data: Virginia | Center for Gun Violence Solutions*, JOHNS HOPKINS BLOOMBERG SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/gun-violence-data/state-gun-violence-data/virginia.

[30] *Center for Gun Violence Solutions, Gun Violence in Virginia*, JOHNS HOPKINS BLOOMBERG SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH (2025), https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2025-07/Gun-Violence-in-Virginia-2023-Factsheet.pdf.

[31] As *Gun Sense Majorities Return to Both Chambers of the Virginia General Assembly, Lawmakers Have the Opportunity to Build on Last Year's Progress on Gun Safety*, EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY (Jan. 8, 2025), https://www.everytown.org/press/as-gun-sense-majorities-return-to-both-chambers-of-the-virginia-general-assembly-lawmakers-have-the-opportunity-to-build-on-last-years-progress-on-gun-safety/.

[32] *State Data, supra* note 30.

[33] *Id.*

[34] Interactive Map, County Firearm Death Data, JOHNS HOPKINS BLOOMBERG SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/gun-violence-data/state-gun-violence-data/virginia.

[35] Approximately 19-20% of Virginia's population is Black, according to recent U.S. Census Data. Many of the cities with the highest gun homicide rates, including affected cities in which we interviewed participants from, have significantly larger Black populations compared to the state average. These include Lynchburg (28.5%), Roanoke (28.7%), Chesapeake (29.9%), Newport News (40.9%), Norfolk (41.6%), Hopewell (42.3%), Martinsville (47.3%), Richmond (47.8%), Danville (49.2%), Hampton (50.2%), Portsmouth (52.7%), Petersburg (77.2%). See https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/virginia/black-population-percentage#map.

[36] Warren Fiske, *PolitiFact VA: Black Virginians are disproportionately killed in gun homicides*, VPM (2022), https://www.vpm.org/news/2022-06-27/politifact-va-black-virginians-are-disproportionately-killed-in-gun-homicides (last visited Oct 17, 2025).

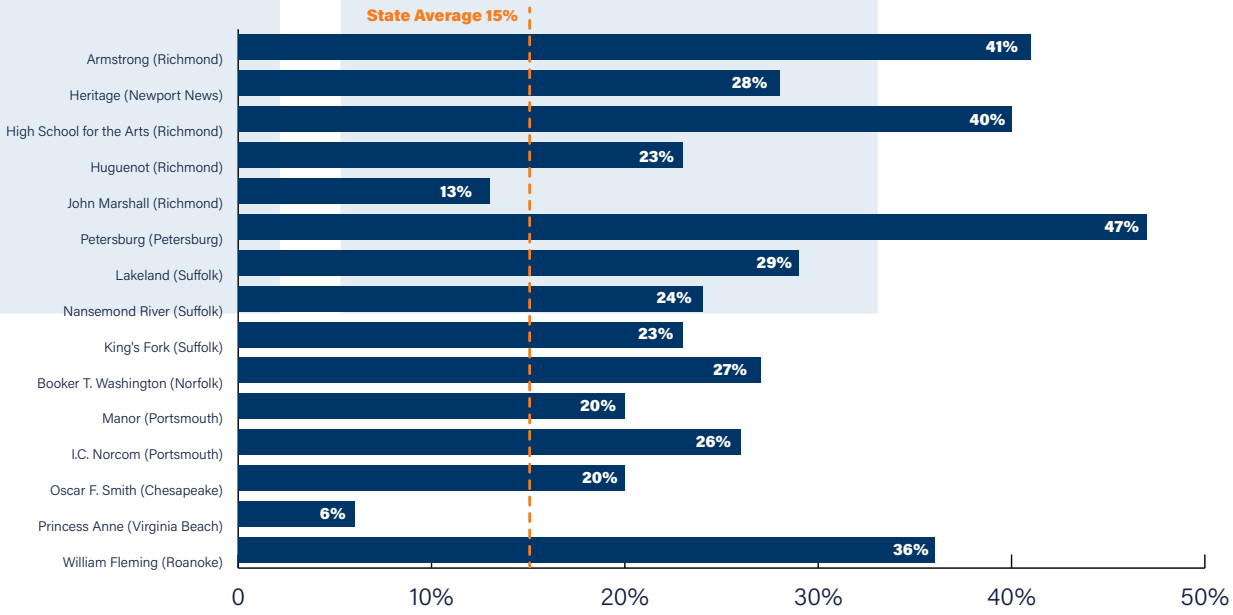
[37] Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, *State Data: Virginia | Center for Gun Violence Solutions, Center for Gun Violence Solutions (2022)*, https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/gun-violence-data/state-gun-violence-data/virginia.

[38] For more information on Cease Fire Virginia, and to read the report see For press release from the Office of the Attorney General, with accompanying link to full report, see https://www.oag.state.va.us/media-center/news-releases/2921-october-14-2025-ceasefire-virginia-smashes-expectations-according-to-new-vcu-report.

[39] See https://www.thetrace.org

As the following figures illustrate, being able to connect hotspots with attendance zones provided us with a glimpse into the educational challenges faced by students living in many of these neighborhoods. We believe that these educational challenges (i.e., high rates of chronic absenteeism and low graduation rates compared to state averages) may not only be symptoms of the youth gun violence in these communities but also possible contributing factors. They also signal the need to think comprehensively about how to tackle the problem.

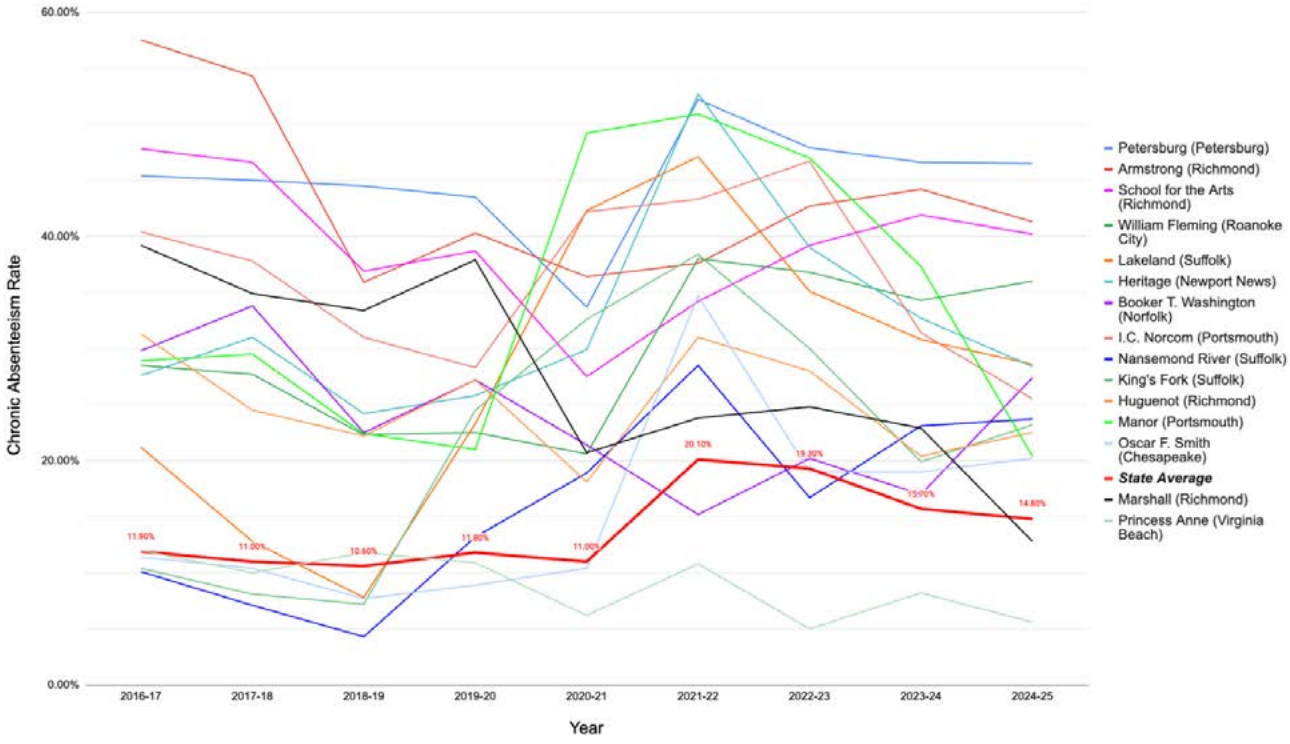
Chronic Absenteeism in Virginia's Youth Gun Violence Hotspots (2024–25)



As the above bar graph makes clear, the chronic absenteeism rates at most high schools in Virginia's youth gun violence hotspots are substantially higher than the state average.

And just as the high rate of gun violence in these communities is not a new problem, chronic absenteeism is sadly a longstanding problem in many of these communities as well. Building on the previous chart, the line graph below shows that while chronic absenteeism rates at these select high schools were exacerbated by the pandemic, they already greatly exceeded the state average well before this inflection point. While the chronic absenteeism rates have improved across the board in recent years, they remain orders of magnitude higher at many of these select schools.

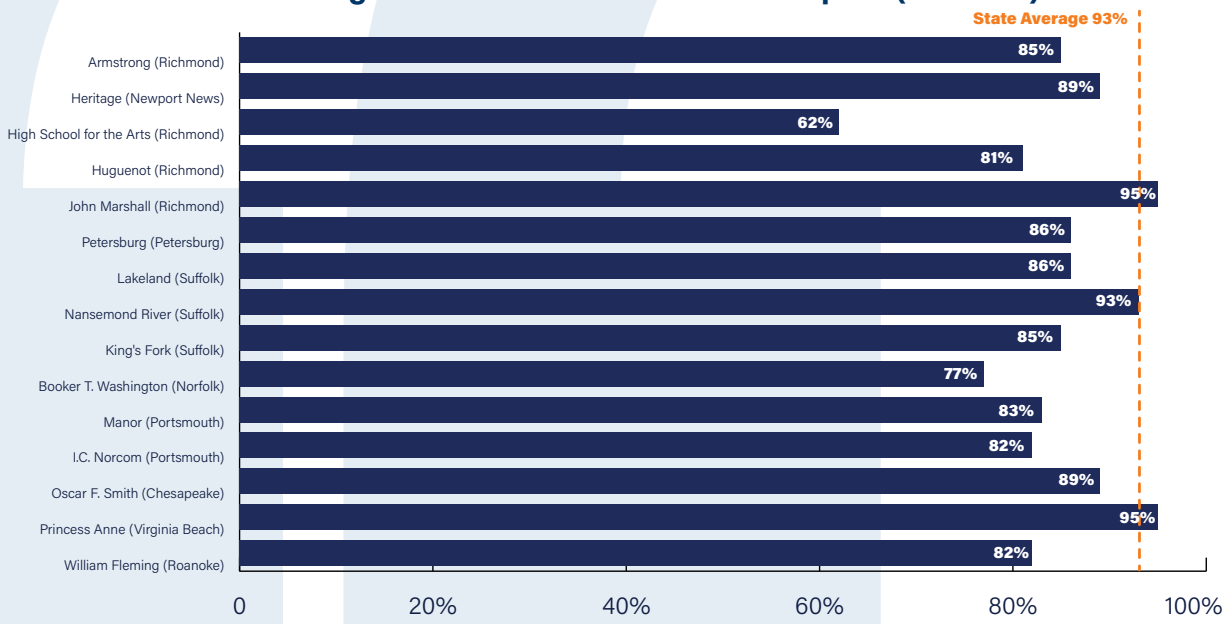
Chronic Absenteeism in Virginia's Youth Gun Violence Hotspots (2016–25)



Education leaders, family members, and community leaders need to address both the causes and effects of these high rates of absenteeism. Children out of school have less contact with supportive adults and less opportunities to join the workforce and live as independent adults. Simultaneously, they will have more unsupervised time on the streets, and more time to be on their phones (which, as we discuss below, can have a toxic impact on gun violence).

Unsurprisingly, the schools in these hotspots also experience lower graduation rates than the state average as well.

Graduation Rates in Virginia's Youth Gun Violence Hotspots (2023–24)



The above bar graph shows that the four-year graduation rates at most high schools in Virginia's youth gun violence hotspots were lower than the state average (92.8%). Looking at the historical data, these levels of underperformance have remained consistent and predate the COVID-19 pandemic. These lackluster graduation rates have significant second—and third-order effects as many jobs require a high school diploma, thus severely restricting the opportunities available to former students who do not reach this educational milestone.

In many ways, this dual reality is mutually reinforcing: **an ongoing lack of educational engagement can drive young people toward riskier paths, including involvement in person-to-person violence, while the persistent threat of these types of violence undermines academic success.**

The overlap between gun violence hotspots and low attendance and graduation rates at local schools is both predictable and heartbreaking. When young people live in vulnerable and high poverty communities, being out of school, failing to complete school, and not advancing into young adulthood with training or academic credentials greatly increases the risk of involvement with gun violence.[41]

In highlighting the connection between schools and gun violence, we also understand that longstanding academic shortcomings do not happen in isolation and that these same communities face numerous other challenges including high rates of poverty, lack of access to housing and employment, and historic (and structural) racism. While not diminishing the significance of any of these problems, we also believe that schools—given their presence in every community, the fact that all enrolled children are supposed to be there every day, and the opportunities they should offer for connection to supportive adults, credentials and training necessary for advancement, and safe places—have a distinct and vital role to play in youth gun violence prevention.

[41] See for example, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-did-u-s-homicides-spike-in-2020-and-then-decline-rapidly-in-2023-and-2024/, drawing the connection between lack of educational completion and homicide spikes during and after the pandemic.

Unforgiving Places

During our research, Professor Jens Ludwig, a behavioral economist at the University of Chicago, published a powerful and compelling book tackling (albeit at a much more sophisticated level) many of the same issues we address here. In *Unforgiving Places*,[42] and at the risk of oversimplification, Ludwig argues three main points:

1. That most community-level shootings and gun violence are the result of bad, impulsive decisions by people in compromised settings (unforgiving places) and situations, and not the acts of serial killers, predators, or people using violence for other purposes;[43]

2. That to address the problem of gun violence, we need to focus more on the violence (bad decision) problem, and less on more more common and widely discussed interventions—such as reducing access to guns (although obviously too-easy gun access can make bad, impulsive decisions more lethal), addressing structural societal problems (e.g., poverty or historic racism), or racheting up punishments as a deterrence to violence;[44]

3. That research has identified a range of interventions, ranging from changing built environments, to police interactions, to supports and behavioral health interventions with youth, that collectively can lead to more "forgiving" places and demonstrably cause measurable reductions in community violence.[45]

> *"The environment's ability to validate, the environment's ability to recognize the limitations of our youth's developmental stages as they move through them, and* ***propel them into stages that they cognitively are not ready for, emotionally they're not ready for, physically they're not able to handle.***"
>
> —Age 45, Roanoke

For point number three, Ludwig wants policymakers to focus on what he calls "unforgiving places" (or what we and others are calling "hotspots"), which he defines as follows:

"I don't mean 'unforgiving' in the sense of what society does after a shooting happens (though one would be reasonable in saying as much). I mean unforgiving in the sense that normal human frailty—including the deficiencies of momentary misjudgments—can become starkly more consequential based on an individual's surroundings and circumstances."[46]

[42] Ludwig, Jens, *Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).
[43] Unforgiving Places at 4-6, 19-20.
[44] Unforgiving Places at 27-30, 42, 45.
[45] Unforgiving Places at 25-26, 229, 232, 234.
[46] Unforgiving Places at 25.

Ludwig's views on violence and decision making are echoed in our recommendations for Virginia. Both focus on prevention and neither, necessarily, are tied to passing new laws to limit access to guns (however much research supports some of these efforts and successes in other states). They also focus on impacting human-level decisions—the decision to carry a gun, or the split-second decision to use one. As he writes:

"Gun violence makes for easy, tidy storytelling—stories about bad people, about the economy and society, about tragic situations. As a closer look at the details of these different tragedies shows, sometimes stories are just that: stories. Accounts of each murder contain what might initially appear to be unspeakable degrees of human malevolence or desperation. ***But looking closer, many of these shootings can also be understood as momentary misjudgments in extraordinarily difficult situations—choices that were made in these instances that might not be made again.***" [47]

Or, as one of our interview participants so clearly stated,

"...And that's the main thing we're trying to prevent. Prevent the kids from making a life-changing decision that don't take but a minute. It'll ruin your life."

—Age 65, Portsmouth

Put another way, it may well be the places that state and local data identify as gun violence hotspots are also the same kinds of places that might meet Ludwig's definition of "unforgiving."

As one of our participants so powerfully told us:

"Why is there so much gun violence? ...I think that it got something to do with what we drink, what we eat, how we raise kids, the things that we see, the music we listen to, the places we go, because we don't really go to so many places. When you live in the hood, you don't get to see much."

—Age 25, Charlottesville

Ludwig centers most of his discussion in the book around efforts to impact, or slow down, what he describes as System I thinking: "the automatic, below-the-level-of-consciousness type of cognition"[48] that we often use in everyday decision making. He argues that System I impulsive thinking, as opposed to calculated logic, can, and often does, drive people's decision to commit acts of violence—especially street or community violence—in the moment. As a result, he writes, if policymakers and service providers want to effectively reduce gun violence, they need to develop approaches (on both a community and individual level) to help people in these situations think and act differently. And, as he illustrates, policymakers, local leaders, and community members have, at their disposal, a range of actions that can lead to people slowing down and thinking better.[49]

To put it in simpler terms: the problem of gun violence in the United States today is a problem of imperfect human beings making decisions in environments that are becoming increasingly difficult to navigate. Efforts to make their environments more "forgiving" can lead directly to less gun violence and fewer tragedies.

We will refer to the book, and this approach, throughout this report, as it aligns with both what participants in our interviews shared, and the work that is already underway in some of Virginia's hotspots to successfully reduce gun violence.

47 *Unforgiving Places* at page 218
48 *Unforgiving Places* at 181.
49 See generally, *Unforgiving Places a*t pp. 181-244, Chapters 8 and 9

RESEARCH METHODS:
Amplifying Community Voices

Research Overview

While research and policy efforts concerning youth gun violence abound, these efforts do not always include the voices of those most directly affected. With the support of Spring Point Partners, we sought to conduct a new research study to better understand why youth gun violence is happening in Virginia and what can be done to stop it. We wanted to interview youth, community stakeholders, and others with lived experience of youth gun violence in Virginia to gather actionable information about perceived causes of, and solutions to, the problem. The overall goal of this community-based project was to inform public and institutional policies and programming to prevent youth gun violence in Virginia.

Ultimately, we conducted individual interviews with 58 community-based youth and adults with firsthand knowledge of youth gun violence in Virginia to investigate their perspectives on the issue—particularly how recent generation-wide changes (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic; social media) may be changing the landscape of youth gun violence. The University of Virginia Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures (UVA IRB-SBS #6513 and #6893). Interviews began with an informed consent procedure and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. We audio-recorded the interviews, with participants' permission, to enable accurate transcription. We conducted two waves of interviews:

> *"...But I feel like my generation, we got shaped at a young age. We've had friends die at young ages. We've had trauma.... **I just feel like we don't really get a voice...I don't feel like we're not heard, but I feel like our voice is not taken as seriously."***
>
> —Age 45, Roanoke

Wave 1 consisted of interviews with 31 community stakeholders working in the field of youth violence prevention and/or adults looking back on their own experiences growing up in Virginia neighborhoods marked by gun violence (age range 29 to 77; median age of 47). For example, stakeholder participants worked with school-based prevention programs for at-risk youth; mentorship programs for at-risk youth; hospital-based interventions for gun violence victims; violence interruption programs; local-government-funded youth developmental offices in cities with youth gun violence; and community-based volunteer groups dedicated to reducing gun violence and assisting victims and their families. We started with these easier-to-recruit populations to refine our research questions and forge relationships with gatekeepers who could help connect us to potential youth participants for Wave 2. Lucy Guarnera, PhD, the study's principal investigator, conducted these interviews in person, via Zoom, or via telephone.

Wave 2 consisted of interviews with 27 community-based youth, or young adults (age range 13-25; median age of 18) who self-identified as growing up in a Virginia neighborhood marked by gun violence. James "Trae" Watkins III—a youth development advocate and mentor from the Lynchburg, Virginia, area—conducted the youth interviews. Mr. Watkins' similar background to our youth participants helped him establish rapport and develop trust, with the expectation that youth participants would open up more to a trusted messenger and enable us to collect richer qualitative data.[50] All youth interviews were conducted via Zoom (rather than in person) for youth safeguarding reasons. For youth under age 18, a parent/guardian gave permission for the youth to participate.

50 L Staples, T., Nixon, N., & Burns, C. (2025). The use of trusted messengers to conduct qualitative research: A community health improvement plan case study in Worcester, MA. American Journal of Health Promotion, 39(4), 688-691.

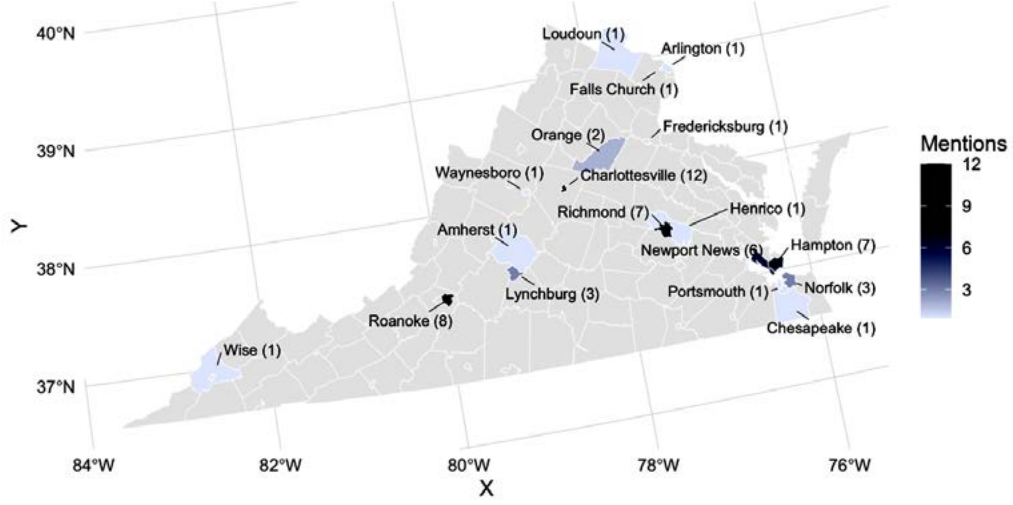
While we were open to hearing anything participants wished to share on the issue of youth gun violence in Virginia, we focused our semi-structured interviews around four key research questions:

1. **Which changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic are still present in youths' lives, and how do they continue to shape gun violence risk?**
2. **How might social media contribute to youth gun violence?**
3. **In what ways do fear and perceived threats influence youth to carry or use guns?**
4. **What tools and resources can help young people feel safe enough not to carry guns?**

While anyone who lived or worked in Virginia and met other inclusion criteria was eligible to participate, we focused our recruitment effort on three "hotspots" of youth gun violence in Virginia: (a) Richmond area, (b) Tidewater area, and (d) Roanoke area. We also conducted a number of interviews with participants based in Charlottesville, given that the first and second authors live and work in Charlottesville, and we wished to engage our local community. Although Charlottesville is not among the jurisdictions with the highest youth gun violence rates in Virginia, Charlottesville has seen a marked uptick in gun violence in recent years.[51] See the map below for the locations of our participants:

Participant Locations

Darker shading indicates higher frequency



[51] Coleman, G., & Allen, J. (Eds.) (2023, April 24). *The gun violence epidemic in Charlottesville. Virginia Law Weekly.* Retrieved from https://www.lawweekly.org/front-page/2023/4/24/the-gun-violence-epidemic-in-charlottesville

Hollins, A. (2024, July 3). *CPD chief says crime rates lower overall despite recent spike in gun violence.* Cville.com. Retrieved from https://c-ville.com/cpd-chief-says-crime-rates-lower-overall-despite-recent-spike-in-gun-violence

Davis, A. (2025, July 15). *'It's getting worse and worse' activist says of Charlottesville youth violence.* 29News.com. Retrieved from https://www.29news.com/2025/07/15/its-getting-worse-worse-activist-says-charlottesville-youth-violence/

Participant Recruitment

We recruited participants in two waves.

For the first wave, we used a "network-based" approach to reach people who worked in the field of youth gun violence prevention across Virginia. We started by identifying 49 community organizations focused on youth violence prevention. A research team member contacted each one by phone or email, explained the study ("We're trying to understand how and why young people in Virginia end up carrying guns, to help guide policy and practice"), and invited them either to participate in an interview or to share our flyer with others in their networks. Again, adults who grew up in a Virginia community marked by gun violence were also eligible to participate in this wave of data collection.

For the second wave, we asked our Wave 1 participants and other contacts to share the study with young people who might want to take part. Youth who were interested reached out to us directly, and participants were also invited to refer others.

The Interview Process

When someone expressed interest, a team member confirmed they were eligible and walked them through an electronic consent form. Interviews were scheduled individually and lasted about an hour to an hour and a half.

Each conversation started with introductions and background questions. For community stakeholders, we also asked about their organization's work on youth gun violence. We then discussed participants' views on the causes of and possible solutions to youth gun violence in Virginia. We focused on three main areas—fear and safety, social media, and the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—but followed participants' lead wherever the discussion went.

At the end, we thanked participants, invited them to tell others about the study, and offered a $50 Visa gift card for their time.

Qualitative Data Coding

All interviews were recorded (with permission) and automatically transcribed, then carefully checked and de-identified by our research team. The audio files were deleted once transcripts were complete to protect confidentiality.

We reviewed the transcripts using a coding system that grouped comments into key themes. We began with three main topics—fear and safety, social media, and the COVID-19 pandemic—and considered both problems and solutions within these main topics. We further divided these main topics into subcodes that we observed frequently (e.g., frequently named ways in which social media intersected with youth gun violence). After coding an initial batch of interviews, we also added four main codes that came up often, involving the roles of police, families, racial inequities, and mental health. Finally, we allowed an "other" option to code uncommon themes. Several trained team members coded the interviews independently using specialized software (MAXQDA), then compared and refined their findings together.

After analyzing the interviews, we invited all Wave 1 participants to attend a follow-up focus group to share what we found and ask if the results matched their experiences. Seven participants attended. They confirmed the themes we extracted were accurate and emphasized one main message: **not enough is being done to stop youth gun violence.**

We tagged excerpts from the 58 interview transcripts—totaling hundreds of pages of transcripts—according to both a priori and emergent themes.

In raw numbers, for Wave 1 (stakeholder/adult) participants, we coded 1,033 text extracts from the interview transcripts regarding causes of gun violence and 391 extracts regarding solutions. For Wave 2 (youth) participants, we coded 719 extracts regarding problems and 181 extracts regarding solutions. As these numbers make clear, participants found it much easier to identify the causes of youth gun violence than to identify solutions. Further, we coded more excerpts per interview, on average, for stakeholder/adult interviews compared to youth interviews. This suggests, unsurprisingly, that adults are generally more verbally fluent and verbose than youth, leading to denser interview content.

In terms of raw numbers of coded extracts, both groups of participants had the same "top 3" codes: social media, fear/safety, and the role of families. However, within this "top 3," for youth the top spot belonged to social media, while for stakeholders/adults the top spot belonged to fear/safety. In both participant groups, the ongoing influence of the COVID-19 pandemic was the least frequently coded topic of our three focus areas, even though we asked about it specifically. In part, this suggests that perhaps participants, particularly youth, may have difficulty remembering life pre-pandemic (5+ years ago) and comparing it to their current circumstances. Finally, we had many "other" codes within our three focus areas, both for causes and solutions. This indicates that participants had different kinds of ideas about youth gun violence, many of which were not easily lumped together into larger themes.

Below, please find visualizations of the aggregated coded data for both the "causes of youth gun violence" and "solutions for youth gun violence" portions of our interviews for both our stakeholder/adult and youth interview participants.

For problems related to our three focus areas (COVID-19 pandemic, social media, and fear/safety), we coded a variety of commonly raised subthemes, depicted as the bubbles in the graphic. The numbers within the bubbles indicate the raw number of codes in each category, giving a rough sense of the frequency of issues raised. The graphics appear in the following sequence:

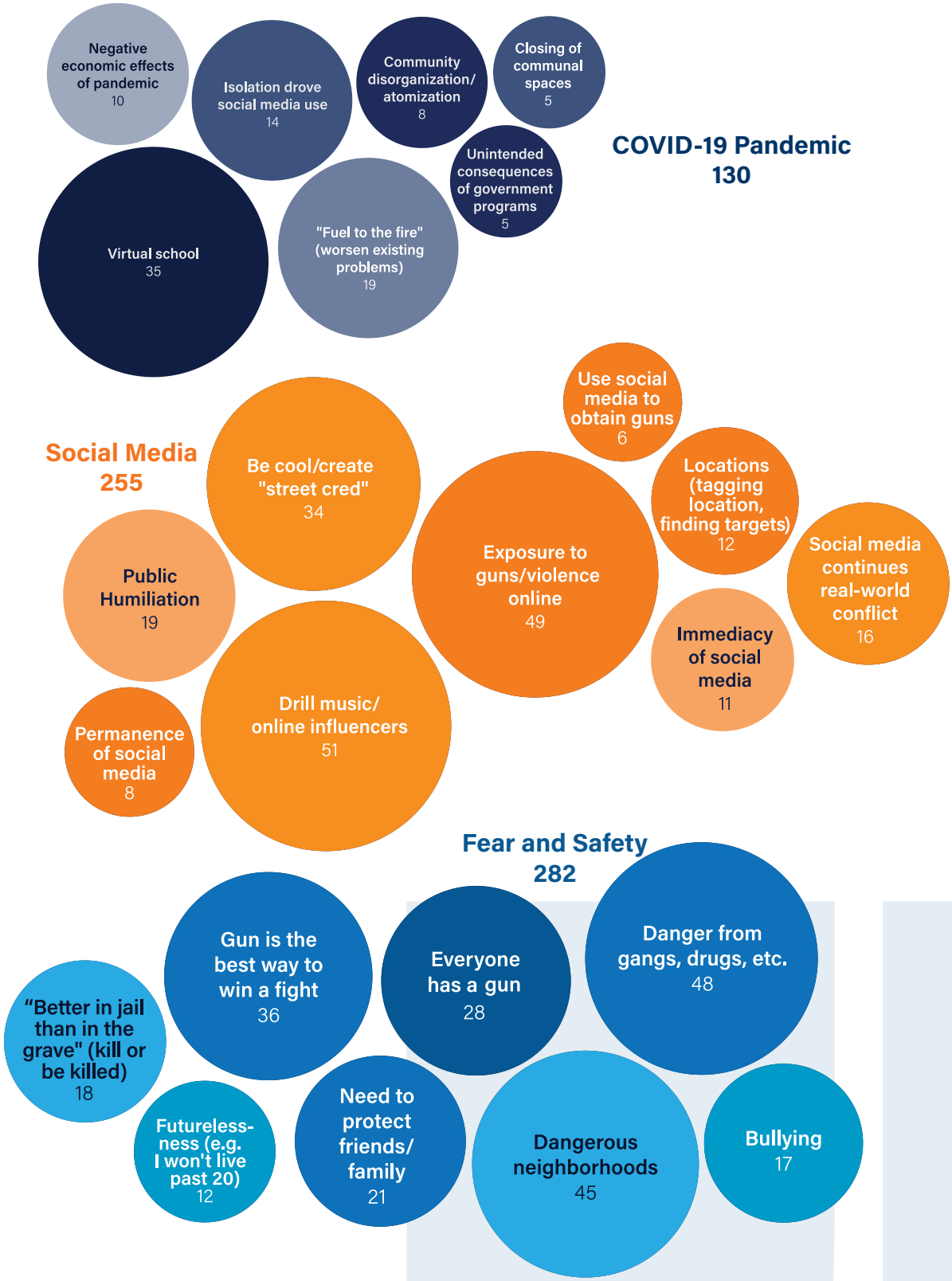
Causes of Youth Gun Violence

- **Stakeholder/Adult Interviews**
- **Youth Interviews**

Solutions to Youth Gun Violence

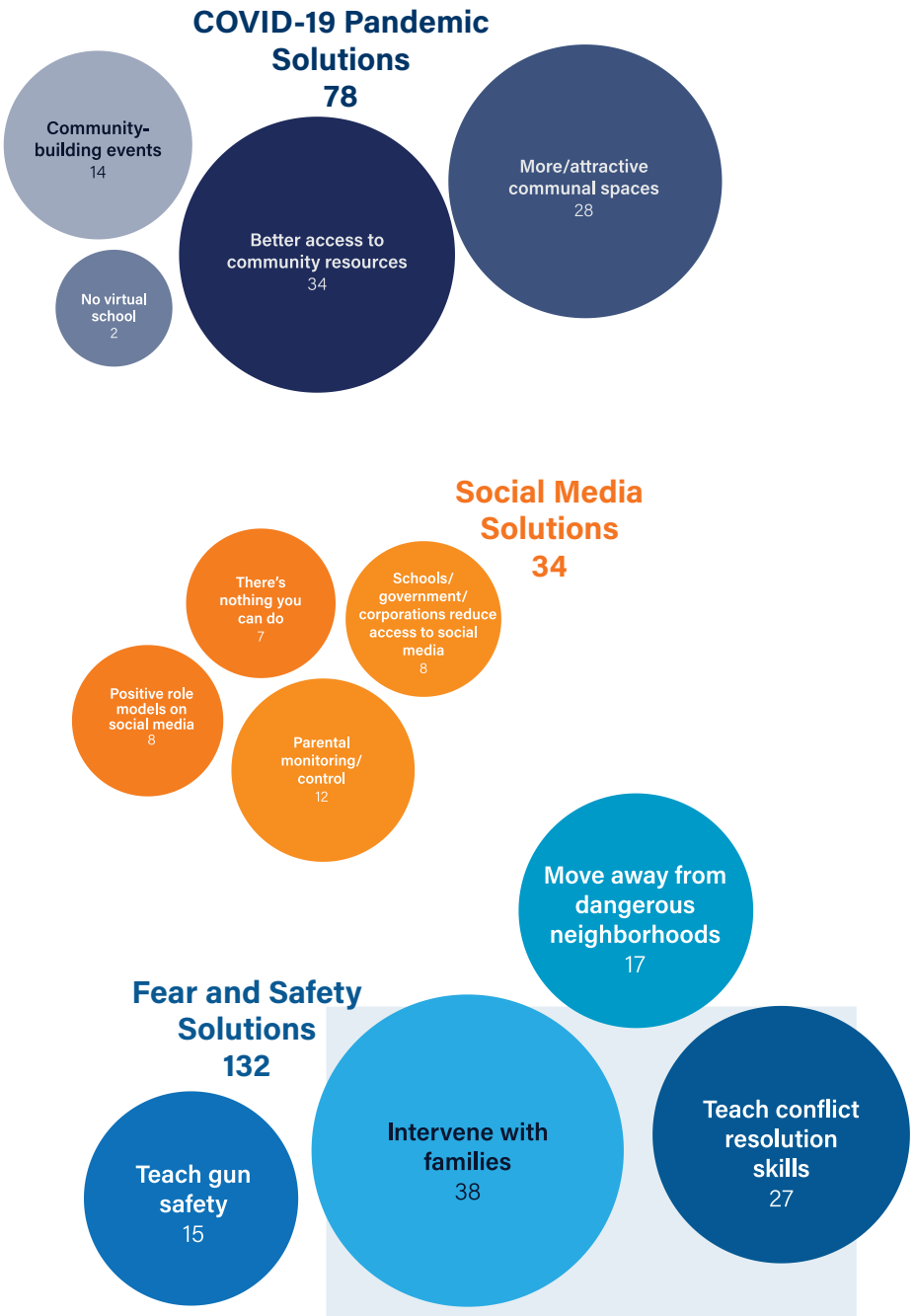
- **Stakeholder/Adult Interviews**
- **Youth Interviews**

Stakeholder/Adult Interviews: Causes of Youth Gun Violence



Youth Interviews: Causes of Youth Gun Violence

Stakeholder/Adult Interviews: Solutions for Youth Gun Violence



Youth Interviews: Solutions for Youth Gun Violence

Research Findings

This section of the report, which details the findings of our research, highlights the voices of the people in the communities we have described above. In addition, we share some of the observations from law enforcement officials and other government officials and violence prevention workers from these same communities.

The short story is that while much of Virginia likely experiences one reality—the pandemic is mostly over, young people feel safe on the streets, and schools are robustly attended—a handful of communities experience the opposite. As the members of those communities shared with us, and as their stories and observations which we share below make clear, the pandemic's negative impacts continue to this day, social media is playing a sinister and insidious role in community gun violence, and too many young people don't feel safe enough in their communities to resist the urge to carry a gun.

Likewise, the communities that remain hardest hit by these challenges are also communities with higher concentrations of people of color and people living in poverty.[52] Just as these very same communities felt the worst effects of the pandemic, they continue to feel the worst effects of gun violence as well.

The good news, and as we also discuss below, is that leaders and community members in Virginia's hotspots are doing things differently these days. Government leaders are reaching across traditional boundaries—law enforcement and community, law enforcement and human services, people who enforce the law and people with a history of violating it—to try out new solutions to old problems. While it is far too early to claim victory, some of the early returns hold promise.

> *"But I also saw a big shift in terms of compounded isolation, which—isolation and disconnection, I said earlier, is something that I see with young people a lot. I saw that compounded, and I think we're still kind of navigating that—**watching young people really struggle with how to manage conflict, having the tools or strategies to do that in person with each other, or in relationships... and so I do think that has been a challenge. I do think it was exacerbated in the pandemic.**"*
>
> —Age 51, Richmond

[52] J. Nadine Gracia, *COVID-19's Disproportionate Impact on Communities of Color Spotlights the Nation's Systemic Inequities,* 26 Journal of Public Health Management and Practice (2020).

1 Communities Most Impacted by Gun Violence Continue to Feel the COVID-19 Pandemic's Impacts

Although many of the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic are no longer active, participants shared many ways that the pandemic is still negatively affecting young people in communities most impacted by gun violence. One sentiment frequently offered is that the stresses of the pandemic (e.g., increased isolation, deaths of family members) intensified all the problems that young people were already experiencing, putting them on a more negative trajectory they still have not completely recovered from. Others spoke of how the pandemic atomized neighborhoods and separated people from each other, leading to a breakdown in the kind of informal monitoring and mentoring relationships with young people that can deter gun violence. Many spoke about how some youth services and safe gathering places (e.g., city-run youth centers) shut down or became harder to access during the pandemic and never reopened to normal operations.

Several participants also mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic opened the "Pandora's box" of virtual school, which is still affecting students today. For example, in some cities, public schools continue to allow students to choose to attend virtual school if they want Other cities now use virtual school as an alternative school for youth with behavior problems, because it relieves the school district of the responsibility of physically managing that behavior in an in-person educational setting. However, this means that the most troubled youth are receiving the least services and supervision.

The pandemic broke up already struggling communities

The participants who spoke about what happened during the pandemic spoke more eloquently and powerfully than we ever could about the harms they experienced and continue to feel, and the ways that the epidemic fractured their communities.

> *"I think it created a separation, because we was all quarantined for so long. I think it just created a separation to where it felt lonely.* ***We just felt loneliness.*** *We didn't have nothing to do. We couldn't be with nobody. It was just lonely. The whole thing about it is it was just lonely."*
>
> —Age 13, Roanoke

> *"COVID created this environment where,* ***it was just everybody kind of just sitting around with a bunch of idle time, and we throw the social media in there, going back and forth on social media because they got nothing to do all day.*** *Like I said, when you mix all that in a bowl, you have what's going on today as far as the level of violence in our communities when it comes to youth."*
>
> —Age unknown, Richmond

"So in my opinion, I feel COVID does have a role in it, especially because COVID lasted for four years. Now we're officially out of the masks, the mass panic, the shutdowns, [but] we were shut down and locked down for two whole years. Kids weren't going to schools. Certain kids didn't even graduate from their school. They had isolated graduations and things like that. Zoom calls, Zoom classes and things. So it was a lot of separation from other human beings. Human interaction was really down. ***So it just made everybody not understand people a lot more, not be around them to be able to develop relationships, [not] develop skills you would use if you dislike something that somebody does or says. A lot of person-to-person skills were not developed in these younger kids."***

—Age 25, Norfolk

"I feel like COVID really had people alone, and I ***feel like people didn't know how to cope with being alone. So that built up rage and tension.*** *People lost their jobs, people lost their family members. I feel like everyone was put on isolation that was unwarranted, and they didn't know how to react off it. So that just built up anger and aggression towards everything..."*

—Age 21, Richmond

"But I also saw a big shift in terms of compounded isolation, which—isolation and disconnection, I said earlier, is something that I see with young people a lot. I saw that compounded, and I think we're still kind of navigating that—watching young people really struggle with how to manage conflict, having the tools or strategies to do that in-person with each other, or in relationships... and so I do think that has been a challenge. I do think it was exacerbated in the pandemic."

—Age 51, Richmond

The pandemic aggravated disconnection from school

One of the most concrete and negative impacts of the pandemic was the way that the resulting shut-downs of schools exacerbated the disconnection from school that many youth in those communities were already experiencing. Remote learning had a particularly devastating and lasting impact on youth in these places.

"I feel like a lot of people hated online school. I didn't like it myself. I liked paper assignments. ***I didn't like all this online stuff, and most kids didn't understand it and didn't take it seriously.*** *People would wake up and get on the Zoom and go back to sleep and not do none of they work. I feel like it set a lot of people back, I ain't going to lie."*

—Age 17, Newport News

"*If I'm taking a kid from public school and sending them to alternative education school, then the parent, the family, and that student has some expectation that there's services in this school, and there's teachers and principals in the school that know how to deal with my behaviors in the school. That's not happening.* ***In fact, they get into these alternate education schools and there is less resources. There's no resources.*** "

—Age 48, Roanoke

"*I think the normalcy has come back. I just think that the mindset has not caught up with the comeback since COVID.* ***Some of your kids, when they had that time without going to school, their mindset is now that they can still not go to school.*** *So I still think we're trying to catch up in changing the mindsets of the ones that were out, to get back into school...*"

—Age 65, Roanoke

The pandemic increased reliance on social media

Frequently stuck in the house all day, and not attending school, young people (and adults for that matter) had more time on their phones and on social media. This increased time and exposure had regrettable effects.

"*I think that's changing our social dynamics a bunch, to make kids draw to social media even more because a bunch of them are like, we don't want to go to school, so, we're just gonna do the online school.* ***But then they're losing the social component of school. So now they're just picking up even heavier on social media.***"

—Age 29, Richmond

"*COVID played a big part, especially with everyone having to be in the house and kids weren't logging on to school, they were on social media. And then with that being said, a lot of kids joined gangs because they were bored.* ***I've seen a lot of kids I've grown up with actually join a few gangs during COVID that were maybe gooder kids before COVID hit.*** *Just the whole thing of being trapped in the house.*"

—Age 17, Charlottesville

Communities lost services

One of the other impacts of the pandemic was that the communities that needed the most help lost it. And, as participants shared with us, that loss continues to negatively impact their already vulnerable communities and residents.

> "***The action of taking out the recreation, people reacted by being violent.***"
>
> —Age 65, Portsmouth

> "*Good question, because I think, day-to-day with my clients, it doesn't feel that different anymore.* ***There were some programs that were started and funded during the pandemic, like emergency financial assistance, that were super helpful, especially as people were not getting jobs. That would be amazing if they still existed.*** *We were able to receive funding to provide rental assistance as a one-time emergency thing for families, and while it was so necessary during the pandemic, it's often still necessary.*"
>
> —Age 36, Falls Church

> "*You see, all that stuff—they were free for us. We'd be…have a bus come out there, pick us up, take us to the beach, bring us back home; or take us to the park, have a little cookout, bring us back home, and all that was free back then.* ***But now they closed everything up and tore everything down. Didn't rebuild up. Now there's no places like that. And if there was, you probably couldn't even afford it now.*** *They probably would charge.*"
>
> —Age 67, Hampton

> "***They wouldn't let individuals come in to the little community center things and that also eliminated…*** *the kids couldn't come into the space and play basketball and stuff like that.*"
>
> —Age unknown, Richmond

> "*We have all this free time, we're not in classrooms, we're not doing things with ourselves, everything's remote.* ***So that gives us nothing but time and opportunity to try things.*** *So that's what I attribute it to is just a lot of nothing. There was nothing to do.*"
>
> —Age 24, Lynchburg

2 Social Media Plays an Outsized Role in Gun Violence

As many of our interviewees told us, the pandemic pushed more youth (and adults for that matter) onto social media, both to combat isolation and because they weren't engaged in school or their communities. But not only has this turn had negative impacts on youth and youth mental health generally, research participants, law enforcement, and community violence prevention workers were in consistent and strong agreement that social media plays a pervasive and insidious role in community gun violence. They focused on three primary and negative impacts of social media on rates of gun violence:

1. **Social media, based on usage, content, and how various algorithms respond to users, saturate young people with images of violence, information on getting or even building guns, and an overall celebration of guns and gun culture.**
2. **Social media also provides a vehicle for public threats, embarrassment, challenges, and provocation that often directly lead to gun violence.**
3. **Social media can create the perception that everyone has a gun, which in turn leads young people to want to have their own.**

In this section we share the voices and perspectives of those interviewed on this growing and dangerous problem. As the visualizations below depict, participants had a lot to say.

Social media saturates youth with images of violence, information on using and obtaining guns, and a celebration of gun and gang culture.

Many of our participants lamented the ways in which social media pushes images and glorification of gun violence to young people's phones. Many participants spoke of a particular segment of rap culture (i.e., drill music) in which famous musicians are posting exactly this kind of content, providing a negative example for young people to follow. Others commented that social media increases the perception that "everyone has a gun" and makes it easier for young people to find ways to purchase a gun.

This cycle is reinforcing, and people are worried, of course, that the images and saturation are changing the way that young people view both violence and each other.

> "***So if you're scrolling Instagram or TikTok constantly and you've seen a hundred videos of people just being careless with weapons, being careless with each other's lives, and you're just going to pick that up and it just repeats over and over.*** *Your brain just attaches to that.*"
>
> —Age 23, Lynchburg

> "*It's like they're feeding it to us.* ***They want the cycle to keep going.***"
>
> —Age 23, Chesapeake

"... They're striving to get their hands on a gun, mind you, they're only 11-12 years old. ***They become completely desensitized to the weight of a gun, both physically and metaphorically because that's not something they've even remotely grown up around, but they see it everywhere once they log on to their devices."***

—Age 25, Amherst

"The negative part of everything is what people love now. You see somebody post a positive video, you're just gonna scroll through it. You're not gonna want to see it, but as soon as you've seen somebody get killed or you see one of these big rappers from Florida got killed behind this situation, and now all his stuff is circulating. ***People really feed off negativity, and it really controls these kids' minds to the point where they...like your parents can do nothing about it. So, there's ways to learn how to do things now. So, social media is the worst for these kids. It most definitely is."***

—Age 35, Richmond

"On social media—in order to be popular, to be known as somebody coming from the hood for real—it's 1 or 2 ways... ***And for the man, he has to be very, very negative. He got to promote negativity. And that's what catch people's attention on the Internet. They like negative things.*** *It could be fighting. It could be people talking about other people or anything. But they want to see something bad about the man. They don't want to see nothing good."*

—Age 25, Charlottesville

"You see everything on social media. That's why my godkids don't got social media—because it is so hypersexualized, hyperviolent. ***You can see somebody shooting somebody on social media. It'll blur it out, but all you got to do is hit 'See Video.' I really done seen people pass away on social media, vivid, point-blank range.*** *I'm like, what if my little godson was looking at that? He just seen somebody freaking die onscreen..."*

—Age 25, Norfolk

This saturation and normalization leads to the next problem: people using social media as a vehicle to escalate conflict and provoke, or promote, acts of gun violence.

According to both law enforcement and community members, social media is too often a tool to accelerate and aggravate conflict, threats, and public shaming leading to community gun violence.

Almost all participants described social media as a negative influence that promotes gun carriage and gun usage among young people. A common theme was that the public nature of social media means that losing a fight becomes a humiliation broadcast instantly to all of one's peers. Many participants stated how young people routinely film fights with their phones and post them to social media, and how peers egg on conflict by posting replies to these videos. Participants stated that some young people "drop their lo'" (i.e., share their location on social media) to prove they are unafraid, leaving them open to retaliation by rivals who now know where they are, or that young people find a rival by monitoring their location on social media.

Surprising to us, multiple participants independently stated that young people do not fistfight much anymore—which was at least usually a nonlethal way to address conflict—because they do not want to risk losing the fight, facing embarrassment on social media, and being seen as "weak" or an "easy target."

Instead, they brandish and perhaps fire a gun. In one participant's words,

"When a young kid get a gun, he's feeling powerful… He feel like a man now because he got something to retaliate with, and it's like he's looking for… somebody to provoke him."

—Age 65, Portsmouth

Participants also spoke about how young people use social media to advance feuds that already exist in real life, particularly among those in gangs. Several gave the example of young people posting videos of themselves with guns or other content that their enemies will interpret as a threat (e.g., themselves in a graveyard where a recently deceased rival is buried):

"They would Facetime the person they trying to kill: 'We smoking weed, man, what are you doing? You know I'm gonna catch you this week.' They going back and forth like they friends. Once they kill you, they'll put a post on Instagram: 'Got you.'"

—Age 53, Charlottesville

"I'm a social media guy, so I know. Social media! I don't think kids realize how much the police be on social media. See, a kid will go do something and post it on social media. This is how bad our generation is. A kid would go kill somebody and post it on social media or put it in a group chat."

—Age 17, Hampton

Likewise, people not directly involved in the conflict will engage online, challenging people to take action:

"A lot of people are goading it on. It's like stepping into a coliseum and now you either the lion or you the gladiator."

—Age 25, Norfolk

Between the saturation and normalization, and the increased opportunities to reignite old conflict, or escalate current ones, virtually everyone we contacted agreed that social media was playing a toxic role when it comes to gun violence.

Law enforcement and other local government officials and community prevention workers were in strong agreement with those we interviewed.

Law enforcement noted that they devote considerable resources to monitoring online activity both to head off bloodshed, and to investigate shootings that have taken place. They also described that most of their community shootings begin online. One chief said that if he could add 20 new staff he would assign them all to online monitoring.

Likewise, local officials are grappling with how to address the negative impact of social media usage and content. Such is their concern and recognition of the problem that one city is even developing its own un-skippable anti-violence public service announcements that it plans to run on popular social media platforms.

Community violence interrupters who engage in violence prevention work also concurred with these views and reported regularly monitoring and receiving information about online conflicts, which they then use to identify those in need of interruption and de-escalation.

Between what happened during the pandemic, and what people see online, it is not surprising, as we discuss in the next section, that many young people carry guns because they are scared and feel the need to protect themselves.

3 Many Youth Carry Guns Because of Fear and a Perceived Need for Protection

All participants stated that one reason young people choose to carry guns is because they feel unsafe and feel the need to carry a gun to protect themselves. Getting back to the issue of unforgiving places, both the adult and youth participants strongly believed that one reason that young people carry guns is that they live, or believe they live, in dangerous neighborhoods. Perception and reality become a tragic self-fulfilling loop: people live in dangerous neighborhoods, so they feel the need to carry guns, which only makes the neighborhood more dangerous leading even more young people to carry guns.

This point requires emphasis: Unless and until policymakers and community members take a comprehensive look at making neighborhoods truly safe, this cycle will only continue.[53]

Compounding these fears is the belief that everyone else is carrying a gun too. Nobody wanted to be the only person without a gun.

"We had the old saying, 'I'd rather get caught with than without it'... There's a threat out there for my life, my friends' life, my family's life. So I gotta be prepared, and that's the conversations that they're having amongst themselves, peer to peer, like... 'You don't have a gun?! Why not?'"

—Age 48, Roanoke

Several participants commented that this was particularly true for young people involved in gangs, drug sales, fights, or other behavior that may prompt retaliation. Whatever the reason, though, or the experience, fear was a common reason that people gave for carrying a gun.

"*And a lot of young boys, they tend to carry guns and feel **like they need to be protected**, because they have been in beef or whatever with other young boys... First of all, they feel like it's to protect them. They feel like that's the only way to solve a problem.*"

—Age 16, Roanoke

"*Now, from my vantage point, **I think every time a young person grabs a gun and tries to put it to use in one way or another, they're using it to defend their safety.** It may not be physical safety—it may be social safety, it may be mental safety, whatever. So it's not always that their two arms, their two legs, their torso or their head, is being put in danger—but they are trying to protect something...They don't feel protected.*"

—Age 25, Amherst

"*I feel like protection, that's for one. They feel like that's they protection right there. Okay, nobody helping me, I go and ask older people that this is happening to me, that happening to me and nobody doing anything. So, I'm gonna take it up on my own hand. **I'm gonna go get my own help, and they run to the weapon right there...**"*

—Age 25, Charlottesville

"*Right. We had a situation like that at school before, a kid bringing a gun to school. And I think it's more so because some kids like to pick on others, because this kid might not have as much as that person, or this person might not like this person because of a girl or whatever. Some people just like to pick on others. **So it be to a point where they feel like, yeah, I got to do this. I got to take this with me in order to feel safe where I'm at.**"*

—Age 17, Hampton

"*They're just ignored. And so the violence just continues to be perpetuated. **And the more that happens, the more kids want to protect themselves and their loved ones.** And so it's just gonna incite them to seek these things out more, in my opinion.*"

—Age 35, Sterling

Other Common Themes—Causes of Youth Gun Violence

We went into this research project with three a priori focus areas related to youth gun violence—namely, lasting changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of social media, and the influence of fear/drive for safety. In this vein, we made sure to ask participants specifically about their views on youth gun violence relevant to these three areas. However, we also asked open-ended questions about participants' views on the causes of and solutions to youth gun violence, and we followed these conversations wherever they led. When we were reviewing and coding the 58 interview transcripts, we noted four emergent themes that were raised frequently, even though we did not specifically ask about these topics:

1. **The role of families**
2. **The role of police**
3. **Mental health, trauma, and PTSD**
4. **Racial injustice**

As a result, we also coded participants' transcripts for these four emergent themes so that we could more readily identify and compare responses in these areas. In fact, both groups of participants spoke about the role of families in youth gun violence more frequently than almost any other topic, behind only the influence of social media and fear/safety.

The Impact of Families

During their interviews, many participants discussed the connections between families and violence. While many discussed the support that positive relationships and love from family provided, others discussed the negative impacts that lack of support created. For some, it was the absence of a supportive family structure that might lead young people to find connections or "family" on the streets. For others, families who themselves had been exposed to, or caused, trauma and violence might end up teaching the wrong lessons to their children. We also heard how stressed and financially burdened parents may have a difficult time supervising and supporting their children.

In sharing the observations below—which were provided in the context of discussing the causes of gun violence—we do not intend to suggest that they represent the truth of all, or most, families in these same communities. On the contrary, we know many families in these same communities are doing all they can, in the face of many challenges, to support their children. Parenting is extremely challenging in even the best circumstances. Trying to parent well in communities that feel dangerous, in places that have been neglected and overlooked, and in periods of financial stress, is even harder. We have deep admiration for all the families in the communities in which we worked who are doing all they can to help their children succeed.

And, as much as participants identified families as one source of challenges for young people, they also implicitly (and even explicitly) were saying that they need to be part of the solution.

ABSENCE OF SUPPORTIVE FAMILIES

"I believe, from what I see, it's young boys. They don't have a home per se. ***They find family or home in these gangs and then they feel the need to do whatever the other people are doing, whether it's involving guns, drugs, money, all that stuff."***

—Age 16, Charlottesville

> *"I think the need to feel safe is just inherent within. I mean, that's just, you know, you want someone supposed to look out and protect you. And if you don't have that, whether you don't have it from your parents, or your nuclear family, or whatever your family looks like—****when you don't feel protected, I feel like you are going to find it at whatever cost,*** *and you don't know how to discern who is actually trying to protect you [from] who is actually trying to use you for their own personal gain."*
>
> —Age 49, Roanoke

"...A lot of these kids are just looking for family. They're looking to be loved and supported and getting involved in these gangs. And then the more you're involved, the more they know that they can depend on you. ***If you're carrying your gun, if you're willing to shoot your gun, then the more they're gonna rally around you, and be your 'family.'"***

—Age 55, Roanoke

RECREATING FAMILY TRAUMA

> *"I think that the relationship that the child or anybody has with their family could impact them a lot.* ***And they don't know how to express their emotions in any other way, so I think it builds up so much that it (turns) into anger****—and they don't know how to release the anger the correct way, so they choose violence."*
>
> —Age 13, Norfolk

"...So I don't even necessarily think it's young people feeling unsafe. If these are minors, they're going home to a family member, friend wherever they're going to, and they're still having to be taught and fed this stuff from their environment. So if this is what's coming to them from their environment, they're going to then act or react on that. ***You're not just coming out of the womb with guns in your hand. That stuff is taught. You're taught that behavior. You're not just like that. You're taught that mindset."***

—Age 24, Lynchburg

> ***"If my parents are not dealing with their mental health, it's gonna be trickled down to the kids, and that's gonna perpetuate into them."***
>
> —Age 44, Waynesboro

IMPACT OF FAMILY STRESS

> *"That's another thing I was about to say—you grow up fast. I was one of those. I grew up fast. So that's another way.* ***You growing up fast; you feel like you got to protect your family.*** *You see mom struggling—'Oh shit, lemme see what I can do to,' excuse my language, 'lemme see what I can do to make something shake.'"*
>
> —Age 23, Chesapeake

> *"The family dynamics—so here's the other thing. There are layers to this. So, these are already situations where families may be struggling financially, they may be single-parent households. There may be school challenges that are going on. There may be transportation challenges.* ***So, the gun violence and that exposure—and for some families the direct impact when they've lost a loved one—it's not happening in a vacuum."***
>
> —Age 48, Hampton

> *"Well, I'm going to speak for myself. Growing up, my father was heavily involved with drug-related things and crimes and things of that nature.* ***So, talking to him, when I talk about his childhood and why he picked up guns and why he did the things that he did, I know that for him, he wanted to make a way out for himself...*** *And again, circling to who you idolize, who you are raised by, sometimes your parents aren't necessarily paying attention, or putting a whole lot of attention on you to make sure that you're going "a straight and narrow way." Because they're dealing with bills and things of that nature."*
>
> —Age 24, Richmond

> ***"And I think young people are not being raised with the same problem-solving skills and conflict resolution skills that probably, while imperfect, generations prior were raised with.*** *So everything is dramatized."*
>
> —Age 25, Amherst

The Role of Police

Not surprisingly, interview participants also had opinions regarding law enforcement. Many participants recognized that young people in their communities did not trust law enforcement or did not want to be viewed as "snitches" by interacting with law enforcement. At the same time others expressed hope and support for various efforts that many departments are making to rebuild trust and strengthen relationships with communities in Virginia's gun violence hotspots.

ON LACK OF TRUST

> *"With police, if you're in a household where you're taught to trust police and police are good and all that, you're not going to feel unsafe when you're around them.* ***But if you're brought up in an environment—or if the news is only publicizing crime against a certain race or a certain type of people that police are doing, then you're going to be more guarded and you're going to feel like you have to protect yourself more."***
>
> —Age 24, Lynchburg

> *"Being led by young people—what our young people, youth advisors, say, is that there is no role for [police], or as an absolute last resort. And so we've really built our programming and a lot of our work around a harm reduction approach, and not just harm reduction at an individual level, but structurally harm reduction around systems [that] are not good for people generally. And so I feel really resistant to things like, 'young people just need to have a relationship with a police officer,' or what I consider traditional old-school ways that I did when I was an early youth worker decades ago that had that mentality.* ***I tend to now think if young people make that decision for themselves, then—we've had young people call the police when they haven't felt like they've had any other options. But most of our young people avoid and resist engaging with police at all costs."***
>
> —Age 51, Richmond

> ***"I don't want to be looked at as a snitch. I don't want to be looked at as a pussy."***
>
> —Age 17, Newport News

> *"These kids are good kids. They're just afraid. But that tells another story around public safety. In their communities, with the history of it, law enforcement has not been one to protect and serve them. So that's those historic harms. I always talk about how the past can have a presence in the present, and I think that's what's taking place.* ***So how do we improve the relationship between kids and cops where they feel confident and their parents feel confident that [cops] are gonna serve and protect [them]? Because I don't think that is the case."***
>
> —Age unknown, Charlottesville

ON WHAT KIND OF POLICING WORKS

"*In a perfect world, more of a community policing, so to speak, approach across the board, and being proactive rather than reactive in the ways that they can... Being willing to not just go into neighborhoods and "police," but actually talk to people.* ***When events are going on—be present, not in a way of force, but in a way of solidarity. And I think that those types of approaches would help... And then, asking: the police actually asking community members—and that includes our young people—what do you all feel like will help?***"

—Age 48, Hampton

"*I think that they definitely need more training...****So, if there could be more of an approach that would be more empathetic and more geared towards de-arming and helping rather than open fire or whatever the situation might be.*** *I know it goes from case to case, but just having more mental health training for the police officers would be ideal in my head.*"

—Age 36, Fredericksburg

"*I'm gonna take it back to where I was in the 7th grade, and I had this D.A.R.E. officer from the police department, and I'll never forget it was a young man that didn't have the proper attire like clothes, and everything. He came in...had his mom called in and came in with like gift bags and like bags of clothes to be able to help out, and that right there, those are the things that I'm talking about with engaging in the community, identifying people.* ***Because I feel like police departments just feel like it's all about policing, but it's also about empathy and showing empathy to the communities.***"

—Age 39, Charlottesville

Mental Health

Many of our participants pointed out that young people in their communities, like many youth around the country, were experiencing mental and behavioral health challenges and that addressing these, and providing necessary support, were key ingredients to addressing gun violence.

> *"It's lot of unhealed trauma. It's people your age and my age right now dealing with unhealed trauma. **You can't grow with unhealed trauma. You can't grow.** I ain't going to say you can't grow, but it is going to be a hard grow."*
>
> —Age 23, Chesapeake

> *"For me personally, I feel like it's not the gun. It's the person behind the gun. **It's a person behind the gun, so you never know what that person going through in life, or you never know what's going on in his mind to even want to go and pull the trigger.** ...Some people have things going on in their life that they don't talk about it, or they won't show it. It's a lot of ways, but you just never know what people going through in they life that made them run to the gun."*
>
> —Age 25, Charlottesville

> *"**Especially our generation now, mental health is such a big factor that we do not still take serious.** Okay, he's at school—he's just coming to school every day and he's sleeping. He don't want to do his work. Okay, what is wrong with him? Where does he live at? What is his atmosphere in where he lives at? Maybe he's going home every day and he can't go to sleep. There's stuff within that household he can't do. There's stuff that he's dealing with. They automatically put him in a box."*
>
> —Age 15, Roanoke

> *"So, you got people who get cyberbullied and they want to go and grab their daddy gun out the car or whatever, and then they go to school the next day and they shoot somebody at school. The mental health is definitely a big part, for instance, there's a phrase called a crash out. To me, a crash out is someone who they don't care about life. They make a split decision, I'm going to do it. **For instance, someone could be getting bullied. They already have terrible mental health and they might be thinking about taking their own life and they're like, you know what? I'm going to go hurt the person who caused me all this pain before I go. They go to school and they shoot the school up.**"*
>
> —Age 17, Newport News

"*And a lot of people, they feel like they can rectify it by going at the people who have wronged them.* ***And at some point, enough is enough, and I am going to snap and snapping is going to cause me to then inflict pain on the ones who have brought that on me because I don't want to talk to somebody about it. I want to solve it myself.*** *And so I'm going to give myself means now I'm in a bigger situation and now I'm the perp.*"

—Age 24, Lynchburg

"*I think that it plays a huge part of it.* ***I mean, I think our mental health determines how we view the world, how we view each other, and most importantly, how we view ourselves. That, I think, is directly linked to violence.*** *And then you throw guns in it and it becomes even worse.*"

—Age 23, Lynchburg

"***They are all dealing with some kind of trauma and it's never addressed.*** *They don't want to address it or they don't know how or it just gets missed.*"

—Age 70, Gordonsville

"***What I see consistently is the lack of the youth ability to regulate their emotions.***"

—Age 45, Roanoke

"***So when you're always in this particular mindset with some therapists and some doctors call the war zone mentality, and it never quits.*** *You may be able to legitimize violence to every circumstance.*"

—Age 48, Roanoke

"***We saw a huge increase in anxiety. Specifically, like, social anxiety going back to school.***"

—Age 35, Sterling

Race and Racism

Given the focus of our research, and the locations and demographics of the participants, it was perhaps inevitable, and important, that many people raised the issue of race and structural racism as being contributing factors to the problems of gun violence in Virginia's hotspots. While it is particularly unpopular to talk about these issues today, given the racial disparities in both perpetration and victimization of community gun violence it is also critical that we name and discuss these issues as well.

The communities with the highest levels of community violence are also the same communities that faced redlining and racial segregation, and neighborhoods that continue to have racially segregated schools, high rates of poverty, and high populations of people of color. This is not an accident. As the Commission to Examine Racial Inequity in Virginia Law pointed out in its 2020 report:

Indeed, even though de jure or explicit discrimination in Virginia has been outlawed for decades, the intended impacts of the preceding state-sanctioned discrimination—most plainly, diminished opportunities and continued subjugation of people of color—have persisted in varying degrees since that time and are apparent in the racial disparities that this report documents. As this report details, many people of color in Virginia still live in segregated communities, attend segregated schools, have disparately negative health, economic, and educational outcomes, and represent a disproportionately large share of the Commonwealth's prison population. And while Virginia has made undeniable progress, these divergent outcomes should come as no surprise; Virginia's more than 350 years of intentional and systemic racism guaranteed, even sought, this result.[55]

Although these structural problems are longstanding it does not make their current impacts any less real. And while we do not provide recommendations to address them specifically here, others, including the aforementioned Commission, certainly have.[56] To keep our commitments to those we interviewed, and for policymakers to understand the views of some community members in these hotspot communities, we also believe it is important to share some of their views here:

> *"It's like they're feeding it to us. They want the cycle to keep going. They building more prisons than schools anyways, and them prisons pay. I was in there, so I know. That's a billion-dollar industry.* ***They feeding it to us, man, it's crazy. They not fixing no apartment buildings and turning them into no great communities or trying to. They fixing everything else though. It's just crazy."***
>
> —Age 23, Chesapeake

> *"I understand people want to protect themselves, people want to gain respect, people want that power.* ***Because we do live in a system that is, I hate to say it, but plotting against us at every turn...*** *I know that we do feel the pressure of the system coming down on us all the time."*
>
> —Age 24, Richmond

> ***"They put us in a box. Especially as Black kids—you look at school when we start declining, they don't ask us [about it] until we're literally on our knees begging.*** *I feel like that is a big factor."*
>
> —Age 15, Roanoke

[55] *Identifying and Addressing Vestiges Of Inequity And Inequality In Virginia Law: A Report from the Commission To Examine Racial Inequity In Virginia Law* (November, 2020) available at https://archives.law.virginia.edu/resources/184215/object/180176

[56] Id. *See also Identifying Virginia's Racially Discriminatory Laws and Inequitable Economic Policies: A Report from the Commission to Examine Racial and Economic Inequity in Virginia Law* (2022) at https://archives.law.virginia.edu/resources/184215/object/183456

"*Yeah, downtown. We already had the museums.* ***Now they building casinos and tearing down neighborhoods that existed for 40, 50 years—where people's grandmas and mothers live.*** *Now they're moving to other cities, because Section 8 vouchers are not being taken in the city that much now. That's the things people see. That's what I see all the time. I see that they're pushing us out.* ***They're pushing us away. Out in my neighborhood, they didn't let us have shrubs and gardens and stuff because they want you to know that it is not permanent. They showed us it's not permanent, but we're also fighting for the neighborhoods,*** *if that makes sense…I wish some of the people that passed away knew what the future would hold. They died still bleeding for neighborhoods that don't even exist anymore.*"

—Age 25, Norfolk

> "***It was all locked up downtown, black businesses and everything. Tore it all down, reconstructed, gentrification, and then built the public housing project…****so we have to accept the truth of how we got to here.*"
>
> —Age 53, Charlottesville

"*So there's this overbearing hopelessness across the community because there is no way out. The only way out is for things that are out of our control to be changed.* ***The people that have the power and authority to set up the systems have to give a flying fuck about the people, enough to stop trying to be racist. Stop trying to be unequal. Stop trying to be in power for their own selfish gain. That's the reality.*** *Because if I have to survive, and all I have is what's in front of me, then I'm going to use what I have in front of me to survive.*"

—Age 45, Roanoke

> "***I often think—what image comes to mind when someone hears the word gun violence, right? What population? What stigma is attached to that population?*** *How does that impact how we see it? Who's deserving and who's undeserving of what we perceive to be limited resources? And how does that play out in terms of the actions, the policies, the practices, the effort?*"
>
> —Age unknown, Charlottesville

"***…It needs to be equity, because if we are seeing a lot of division and a lot of resources allocated other places, it's going to make people seem like they don't care. Nobody cares about us.*** *So I definitely believe in Black and brown communities being self-sustainable as well. But also, we need to know that we already have started 20 seconds after everybody already had a head start. Our race started a lot later than everybody, so we of course should be self-sustaining, but also allocate things to build up [other] Black and brown communities. Don't take 'em away. Don't gentrify 'em. Build them up for the community, not just for the monetary gain. Where I'm from right now, it's a total change. It's about to look like—you know how Philly used to look very urban in certain areas? Now Philly is a travel town. It's a popping big city. That's what it is.*"

—Age 25, Norfolk

We *Can* Solve This Problem

Before we developed our final policy recommendations, we held two convenings with law enforcement and other local government actors and community members. The representatives at these meetings were from Virginia's gun violence hotspots. What we heard in these conversations was both heartening and hopeful.

Using a mix of strategies, and holistic approaches, people in the communities we focused on are making progress in tackling some of the problems we enumerate above. Different government agencies are working together, not only across traditional government lines, but also arm in arm with members of their communities. They are using data to target neighborhoods for both support and enforcement. Perhaps most inspiring of all, and something that might have seemed impossible back in the summer of 2020 with the tragic murder of George Floyd, they are breaking down painful and traditional barriers between law enforcement and communities of color, building trust, and interrupting violence. And not only is law enforcement partnering with community members, and spending more time building trust and relationships, they are also specifically partnering with people with prior experience in the criminal justice system who are working as violence interrupters and credible messengers in these very same communities.

These local efforts align with those kinds of interventions that researchers, including behavioral economists, have found successfully reduce gun violence.[58]

It is also important to point out that while localities have contributed their own resources to violence prevention, they are also often relying on state funding from a range of funding streams to support their work.

One of the statewide, and state supported, initiatives is Ceasefire Virginia, which is a violence reduction initiative launched in late 2022 by Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares, in partnership with local elected officials and law enforcement. Through a mix of prevention, targeted enforcement of serious and repeat offenders, and interagency partnerships, the program's goals were to reduce violence in localities disproportionately impacted by violent crime, while rebuilding trust and safety within Virginia communities. Of particular importance, this initiative provided grant funding to 13 hotspot communities for them to develop comprehensive plans and approaches for tackling gun violence—specific programs across localities include anti-violence grant funding, hospital-based violence intervention programs, community violence intervention, anti-violence media campaigns, support for police departments, and funding for Special Assistant United States Attorneys to increase convictions.[59]

Many of the findings and interventions of Ceasefire Virginia are reflected in our own research findings as well—in particular, the emphasis on supporting children, rehabilitating juvenile offenders, and revitalizing economic development in abandoned communities.

In partnership with a research team at Virginia Commonwealth University, results from the three-year anniversary of Ceasefire Virginia

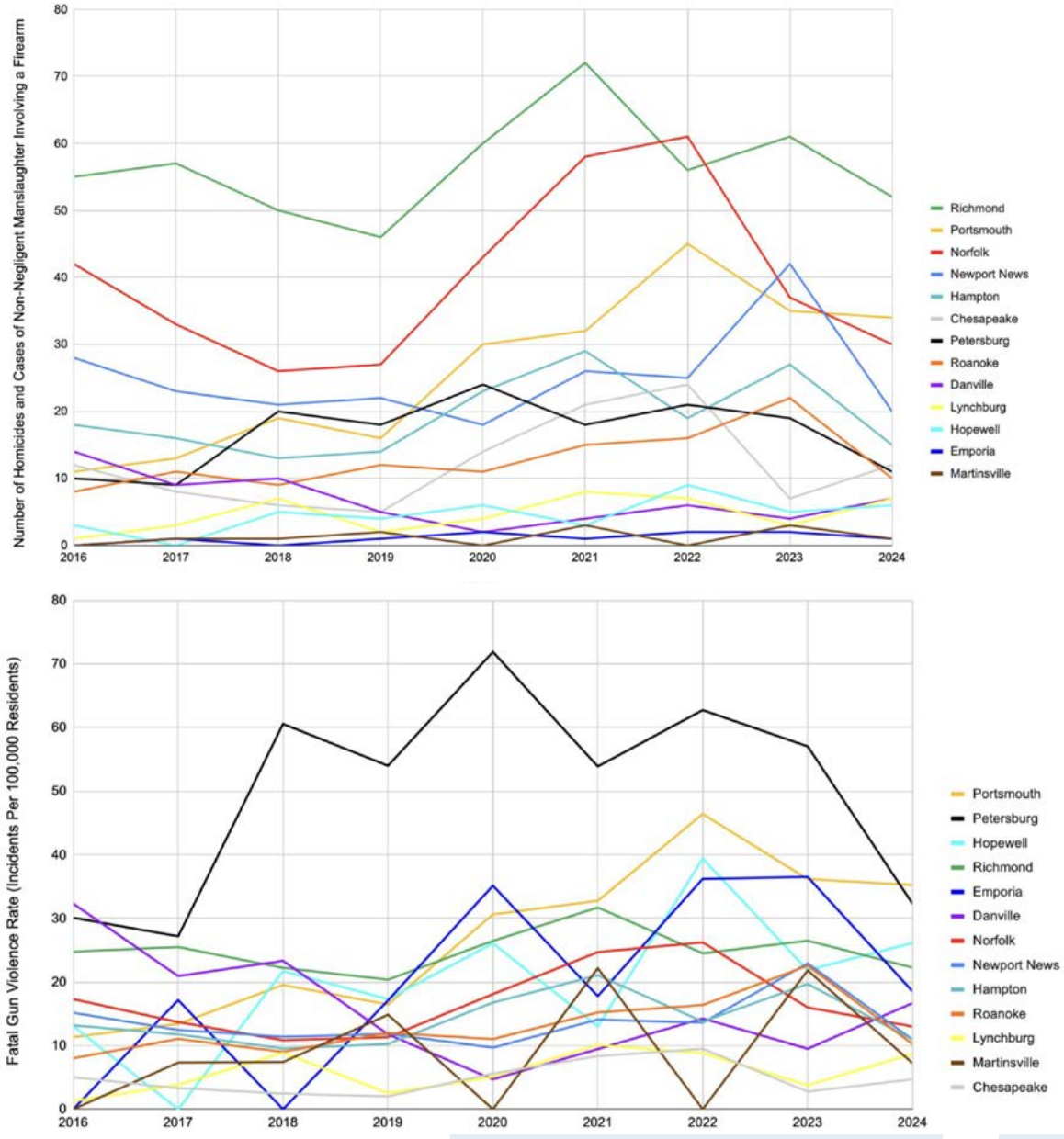
[58] For list of some of these programs see Unforgiving Places, chapter 8.

[59] Office of the Attorney General of Virginia, *March 20, 2024 —Attorney General Miyares Announces Crime Reductions in Ceasefire Cities*, State.va.us (2024), https://oag.state.va.us/media-center/news-releases/2708-march-20-2024-attorney-general-miyares-announces-crime-reductions-in-ceasefire-cities.

have shown it to be a resounding success far exceeding all four benchmarks set at its inception. Since 2022, there has been a 33.49% decline in homicides across Virginia (compared to the 10% expected), a 13% reduction in the combined number of homicides, aggravated assaults, and robberies with a firearm across Virginia (compared to the 5% expected), a 9% reduction in combined homicides, aggravated assaults, and robberies in Ceasefire Virginia localities (compared to the 5% expected), and a 99% conviction rate through Ceasefire-funded Special Assistant United States Attorneys (compared to the 95% expected).[60]

Here are two charts tracking fatal shootings in Ceasefire localities:

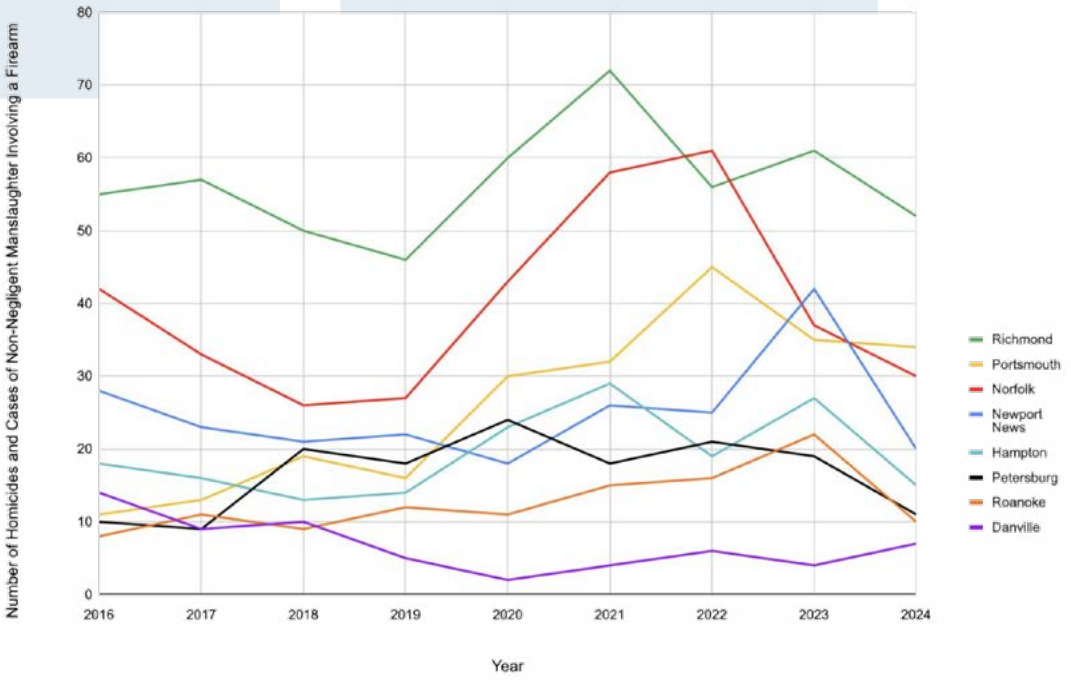
Total Number of Fatal Shootings in Ceasefire Localities (2016–2024)



[60] Virginia Commonwealth University Center for Public Policy, *Ceasefire Virginia Preliminary Report, (2025)*, https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/kpemn0f0259qik6ld834c/Ceasefire-Virginia-Preliminary-Report-FINAL.pdf?rlkey=2lk46xvq9eb50vz6a7l348qsn&e=2&st=d01o1iap&dl=0 (last visited Oct 27, 2025).

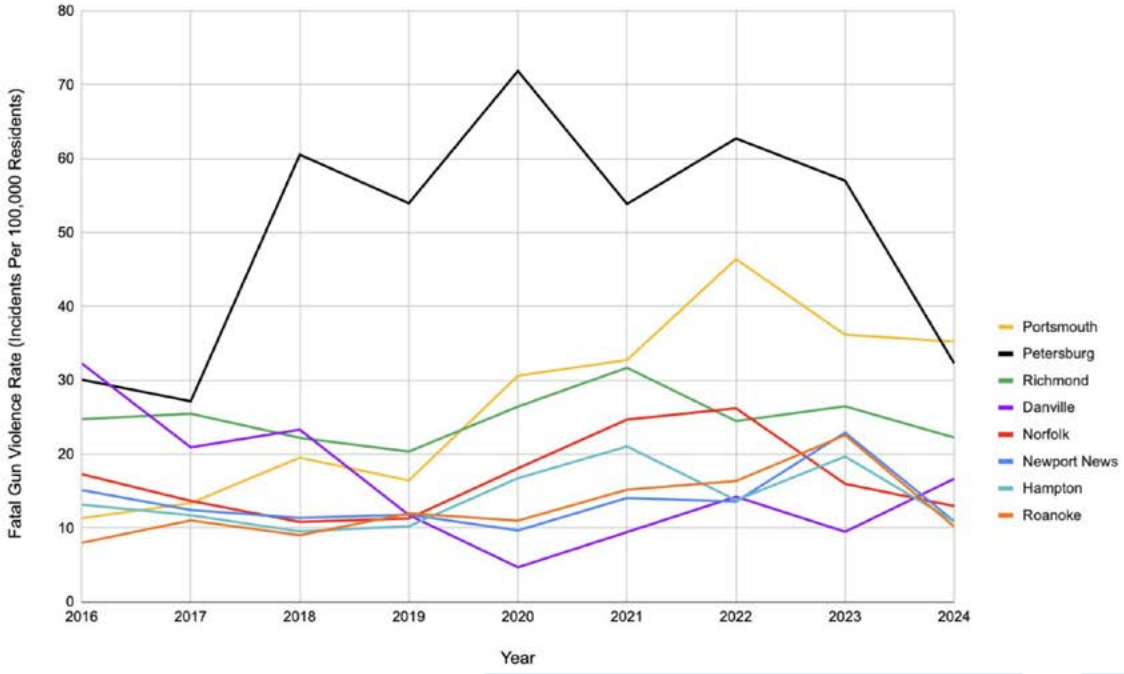
In addition to reviewing this report's findings, we also reviewed data provided from some of the participants in our convenings, who hailed from Ceasefire jurisdictions, as well as data provided by the state police. While the progress is based on the same data, it is easier to visualize it with fewer localities in the graph.

Total Number of Fatal Shootings in Select Virginia Localities (2016–2024)



This progress notwithstanding, many of the local government and community leaders we heard from emphasized that the state and local governments and partners must keep their focus on, and investment in, these effective and collaborative efforts. While the pandemic certainly contributed to higher rates of gun violence in hotspot communities, the rates of violence in these communities have always been disproportionately higher than the rest of the state. Creating enduring and robust community safety, and communities where all children in Virginia feel safe enough to walk around without a gun, will take a long and sustained effort.

Fatal Gun Violence Rate in Select Virginia Cities (2016–2024)



Youth Interview Keywords

Stakeholder/Adult Interview Keywords

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In preparing this report, we realized that much of what community members told us in our interviews—both about the problems and what they saw as solutions—aligned well with what local government leaders and law enforcement are doing on the ground, as well as recommended, research-based interventions that Jens Ludwig writes about in *Unforgiving Places*.[61]

Taken together, these policy approaches and strategies, while not exhaustive, can make neighborhoods more forgiving and young people feel safer. They can slow people down to help prevent catastrophic decisions, create communities that feel supportive, and, hopefully, leave young people feeling safe enough that they can put down their guns. As Ludwig writes, *"If gun violence, uncontrolled, is a challenging headwind... safety is a massive tailwind."*[62]

As the data we shared above shows, rates of gun violence fluctuate, and just because the lines are trending down today, does not mean the same thing will be true tomorrow. Progress, as always, is fragile, and policymakers on all levels need to keep their focus and devote the resources necessary for all children, in all communities in Virginia, to feel safe enough that they no longer feel the need to arm themselves for protection.

> ***"Given the enormous toll that gun violence imposes on society, and our lack of progress, why not start making it as effective as possible in preventing shootings in the first place?"***
>
> —*Unforgiving Places*, page 233

[61] *Unforgiving Places*, chapters 8 and 9.
[62] *Unforgiving Places* at 240.

FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

1. **Modify or remove liability protections for social media companies.**

   While the primary focus of this report is on what state and local government in Virginia can do to advance youth and community safety, given the pervasive and toxic role of social media in fomenting gun violence, it is important to remember the federal role as well. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 shields social media companies from liability for online content. Many advocates for youth safety have long argued that this shield has caused the proliferation of dangerous and damaging content for children. While many of the harms cited have more to do with other issues around youth safety—such as mental health or child trafficking—we hope that advocates and Virginia's congressional delegation will add gun violence to the list of harms that unfettered social media content contributes to.

FOR STATE GOVERNMENT

2. **Expand investment in gun violence prevention.**

   - **Maintain/expand current funding levels for gun violence prevention.**

     As described above, Virginia has made substantial investments in community-level gun violence prevention over the last several years. These funds, which have been distributed through the Department of Criminal Justice Service's Office of Safer Communities, include Safer Communities grants, Ceasefire grants, and Firearm Violence and Prevention grants.[63] While state appropriators will obviously be facing budgetary challenges this year, to maintain gun violence prevention progress it will be vital that they, at a minimum, maintain level funding, which is just over $72M for the two-year budget.

   - **Make state violence prevention funding more flexible and consistent.**

     We heard from both local government leaders and community violence prevention advocates that, in addition to maintaining vital local prevention investments, **state leaders should consider making these funds more flexible and non-reverting**. Put another way, appropriators should make grants such as Safer Communities a direct allocation to localities with reporting requirements rather than allocated on a reimbursement basis with funds reverting if localities have not spent their allocation by the end of the grant period. Local leaders explained that it is not always easy to spend grant funds within a fiscal year, especially when planning and coordination and hiring the right people are keys to success. A recent news report described the negative impact that this approach had on Richmond's efforts to implement a city-wide violence reduction program.[64]

[63] See https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/safer-communities-youth-services/office-safer-communities

As one of our interviewees told us.

"Funding-wise, being able to expand... resources because it's like, if you like what we doing this year and I got the attention, then why would you slow us up the next year and the year after when we know you're not gonna get full results within one year? So it's like, if you like what we doing, and you see we have something that's really workable, then let's make it sustainable and let's look at it 5 years down the line and see the strength and the weaknesses of it."

—Age 52, Newport News

- **Fund the Delinquency Prevention and Youth Development Act.**[5]

  Too many state funding streams become available for at-risk youth only after they have already become court-involved, or had traumatic and dangerous experiences. While Virginia has a system for delivering prevention services to youth—the Delinquency Prevention and Youth Development Act—the General Assembly had not funded this effort in many years. Given the broad support for more youth programming and, in particular, community-based prevention funding, allocating resources to this funding stream will give communities one more tool to keep youth safe, engaged, and better equipped to make good choices.

3. **The new administration should establish a pan-secretariat Children's Cabinet to facilitate interagency cooperation and holistic and comprehensive approaches to supporting Virginia's most vulnerable children.**

   The Cabinet's first priority should be to ensure that all youth in Virginia feel safe enough in their communities that they do not believe they need to arm themselves for protection.

4. **Create an Office of Gun Violence Prevention.**

   At one of the gatherings of law enforcement officials, one tidewater area chief noted how important it was for state and local officials to continue the violence prevention momentum in terms of attention, resources, and effort. Others echoed this sentiment. In addition to maintaining and expanding state funding, state officials should consider providing additional resources, including technical assistance to local efforts. Last year Delegate Cia Price (D Newport News) sponsored legislation to establish the **VA Center for Firearm Intervention and Prevention**[65]. Her bill (HB 1736) passed out both the House and Senate but was vetoed by Governor Youngkin. Such an office, in our view, with proper resources and authority could add critical support to local officials, community organizations, and others to make all communities in Virginia safer.

[64] See recent VPM story, "Richmond looks for holistic solutions to gun violence" (10/27/25) https://www.vpm.org/news/2025-10-27/rva-gun-violence-prevention-andrews-rpd-edwards-stoney-avula-gilpin

[65] See Va. Code Sec.§ 66-26 through 35

5. Use data on gun violence to focus state out-of-school time resources.

As Virginia emphasizes the importance of out-of-school time resources and services it will be critical to focus those resources and funds on hotspot communities, as the people we spoke with emphasized young people need safe and supportive places to be after school and in the evening. Using hotspot data, much like local governments are doing;,to target state and philanthropic resources for these supports will help children in these communities feel safe and connected and reduce the likelihood they will feel the need to resort to carrying guns to protect themselves.

In last year's General Assembly session, the legislature passed **SB 1084**,[67] which, among other requirements, created a workgroup to study and make recommendations regarding out-of-school time programs in the commonwealth. While the legislature created important priorities involving safety of program participants and addressing unmet need for such programs, it did not target the creation of programs in communities most impacted by violence.

The workgroup's final recommendations are due to the General Assembly on December 1, 2025. While this report is likely too late to impact those recommendations, we hope the General Assembly will consider adding this priority as it considers next steps.

As one of our participants told us, when speaking of programs for youth.

"... I think there's not enough, and where some of them are located is not centralized enough for your inner-city youths. So I think they need to be very strategic in putting more youth activities in the zones where you have the most crime. Where they can just walk to, not have to try to drive to. It needs to be in the neighborhood. There's a couple parks that I know. When my kids were young, they went to the park every day, they went to the swimming pool. But it needs to be a safe place, though, and I think that's one of the biggest concerns. It needs to be a really nice facility... It needs to be a general place, especially with close proximity to the youth that don't have a means of transportation, that they can walk to..."

—Age 65, Roanoke

[66] https://lis.virginia.gov/bill-details/20251/HB1736
[67] https://lis.blob.core.windows.net/files/1072575.PDF

Or as a young adult told us.

"Honestly, I just believe in Charlottesville there's not enough for us teenagers to do. So, I feel like a lot of the boys who insert themselves in that situation are just looking for… I wouldn't say a call for help, I would say more of a family, they're looking for more of a family, especially if they don't have one at home. They look like a place that's never going to leave you is the streets. So a lot of the boys that I know are involved in stuff like that because of stuff going on at home or parents not shadowing their kids, which makes their kids want to do more bad. My main root cause would be there is not enough for us to do, be outside or in the house."

—Age 17, Charlottesville

6. Revitalize the Serious or Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP).[68]

Just as it is important for local leaders to coordinate and effectively deploy resources to serve hotspot communities, it is equally, if not more, important to coordinate and effectively deploy resources for at-risk youth. Doing this, however, can be challenging given the range of laws that protect youth confidentiality and make information sharing difficult. Much like the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act has fallen out of use, so too has SHOCAP, which allows law enforcement and service providers to share information regarding the highest-risk youth. The program, administered by the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) in relationship with interested local governments, is virtually non-existent and not in use. While this may be because of the statute's specific components, and legitimate concerns about the misuse of confidential information, it may also be because DJJ has failed for many years (beyond the current administration) to promote its use. Whatever the reason, policymakers, agency heads, and advocates should reconsider this scheme and modify, if necessary, to encourage implementation.

7. Develop a state funding stream to be administered through the Department of Housing and Community Development to change built environments to improve neighborhood safety.

Currently, most funding that flows to localities focuses on economic development and urban renewal. These initiatives, in addition to supporting local economies, can have an important role in gun violence reduction. Depending on where the development takes place, this funding can lead to

[68] *See Va. Code § 16.1-330.1 and following.*
[69] *Unforgiving Places* at 188-189.
[70] *Unforgiving Places* at 190-191.

more commercial activities and "eyes on the street," which research confirms can reduce gun violence. Deploying these resources to hotspot neighborhoods will advance safety in those places.

In addition, Virginia should develop funding streams that focus on those same communities but allocate funding for better lighting, beautifying or "de-blighting" vacant lots, and even cleaning up and maintaining abandoned houses, which research shows can all have significant impacts on gun violence reduction.

As a local example, the city of Hampton has allocated resources to improve lighting and other aspects of the physical environment to improve safety in hotspot neighborhoods.

8. Limit access to social media platforms.

State officials should adopt strategies to limit young people's access to social media. Excessive exposure to social media can increase anxiety, depression, and social isolation among youth. At the same time, it exacerbates feelings of distraction and disruption, undermining healthy development and decreasing academic focus. Several of our interview participants shared with us how social media exposes young people to harmful content through online trends, influencers, and algorithms. These spaces normalize aggression and violent behavior, fueling the glorification of gun access and gun culture. Restricting access to social media—especially during school hours—alongside stronger state regulation and platform accountability can help protect young people's health and safety while restoring their focus and well-being in their communities and educational environments.

For example, recent legislation in California increases safeguards online to protect children from unregulated and dangerous content.[71] These include establishing social media warning labels to inform users about the harms of their usage, heightened disclosure protocols by AI chatbots, mandated age verification features to mitigate youth's access to inappropriate content online, and policies to guide local authorities' approaches to cyberbullying and AI usage.[72]

In Virginia, Governor Youngkin has already signed legislation earlier this year in an effort to curtail young people's social media usage. These changes will include restricting social media use to just one hour per day for kids under 16, implementing age verification features on various social platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, and effectively preventing cell phone usage in schools through a "bell-to-bell" ban.[73]

[71] Governor Newsom signs bills to further strengthen California's leadership in protecting children online, GOVERNOR GAVIN NEWSOM (Oct. 13, 2025), https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/10/13/governor-newsom-signs-bills-to-further-strengthen-californias-leadership-in-protecting-children-online/.

[72] Id.

Virginia's lawsuit against TikTok is another example of state efforts to hold social media companies accountable for their negative impacts on children. The suit, accusing the company of exposing children to addictive, harmful content and deceiving parents about the app's features, relies on the Virginia Consumer Protection Act prohibitions on fraud and misrepresentation. While the suit does not focus on the connection between social media and gun violence specifically, it does suggest ways that state legislation could focus on that problem.[74]

Moving forward, it will be important for state policymakers to build on these efforts by developing comprehensive approaches and policies that balance youth protection with responsible technology use and accountability.

9. **Limit access to firearms.**

While not a focus of our research, or this report, it is nevertheless paramount that state officials do all they can to constitutionally limit the number of guns available and accessible to young people. Giving young people, at the peak of their developmental vulnerability and susceptibility, easy access to guns, especially in unsafe and unforgiving communities, is a recipe for tragedy. Our interview participants, including the young people themselves, repeatedly told us how easy it is for youth to get their hands on guns.

Safe storage laws, including safe auto storage laws to reduce gun theft, and other measures designed to limit access, or to effectively remove guns from youth possession, will all contribute to a greater sense of community safety and reduce the likelihood that a single split-second decision will lead to a death or severe injury.

In addition, in 2020 Virginia passed its version of a "red flag law," codified as the Substantial Risk Order statute. The statute created a civil process to temporarily restrict access to a firearm from an individual who poses a "substantial risk of personal injury to himself or to other individuals." While the law has allowed people to save the lives of loved ones, its use is inconsistent and disparate across Virginia, and across age groups.

In particular, law enforcement has almost never used Substantial Risk Orders to remove guns from youth. While this may be because law enforcement has other tools, policymakers should consider ways to make the statute more accessible and useful to remove guns from young people who pose a threat to themselves or others—especially given how frequently young people use social media to post pictures of themselves with guns or to threaten others.

[73] Ittai Sopher, Youngkin signs bill banning cellphone use in Virginia public schools, WUSA9 (May 31, 2025), https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/education/glenn-youngkin-virginia-governor-cellphone-ban-fairfax-county-politics-schools-education/65-2a033fe3-23c2-49fb-9717-99fec75c3192; Matthew Torres, Virginia limits social media to an hour daily for kids under 16, WVUSA9 (Jun. 3, 2025), https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/education/virginia-makes-cell-phone-use-a-priority-issue-among-kids/65-a01ceb08-2c29-4bac-9b08-505f0bdb74a0.

[74] Judge allows Virginia's lawsuit against TikTok to move forward, 29NEWS (Oct. 27, 2025), https://www.29news.com/2025/10/27/judge-allows-virginias-lawsuit-against-tiktok-move-forward/.

FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Just as the state has a significant role to play in advancing community safety, so too do local governments, especially when it comes to identifying neighborhoods that are hotspots and helping the people in those unforgiving places feel safe.

Planning, targeting service allocation, changing built environments, and helping create neighborhoods that feel like true communities are all important, and demonstrably effective, prevention strategies.

Local schools, too, play a paramount role in cultivating perceptions of safety and belonging specifically, and youth gun violence prevention more generally.

Similarly, local law enforcement plays a vital and frontline role in prevention, not only by removing the people that cause the most fear and harm from their communities, but also by building trust and relationships with people in hotspot communities and partnering with non-police partners to help prevent and interrupt violence.

In combination, local governments have a frontline role to play in helping create places where young people feel safe enough to not carry guns, and where people that might are slowed down or interrupted so that their worst moments do not become fatal. As Ludwig writes, ***"Interrupting someone during one of the ten-minute windows that lead to violence has a real chance to prevent, not just delay, violence. And, moreover, a neighborhood where people are regularly willing to do that sort of interruption is one in which daily life becomes much more predictable for people to navigate."***[75]

Or, to put it another way, ***"Make your city's distressed areas more forgiving places."***[76]

Our participants expressed similar ideas. As one told us.

"...But I also think that making laws doesn't necessarily solve the entirety of the issue. And I think that solving the rest of the issue would be a community resolution, where people in the community and not just the government are committed to educating people, committing to making sure that people understand how dangerous guns are, how to properly use them, when would be a good time to use them, when would not, understanding the harm they cause, cleaning up your community. So I think that laws are important, but the community has to be involved as well... Real change happens when a community is involved in taking care of each other and resolving issues and educating itself."

—Age 23, Lynchburg

[75] *Unforgiving Places* at 190.
[76] *Unforgiving Places* at 243.

10. **Establish high-level interagency steering committees that meet frequently and regularly to share information, coordinate resources, and focus attention on neediest areas.**

Many localities have started this work, with Hampton and Norfolk being two that stand out for frequency, commitment, effectiveness, and data-sharing. Getting different agencies and stakeholders around the table and planning and communicating on a frequent basis ensures that the local government can deploy the right resources to the rights places at the right time.

11. **Use data to target both interventions and resources—to identify unforgiving places.**

While not alone, the city of Hampton has done some extraordinary work to both identify gun violence hotspots and then, in partnership with community organizations, churches, and others, to provide resources to those neighborhoods.

12. **Employ people with lived experience, or create memorandums of understanding with organizations that employ people with lived experience.**

Several jurisdictions at the convenings discussed the value of having people with lived experience serving as mentors, violence interrupters, or outreach staff. Some had intentionally partnered with those with lived experience with gun violence, either by directly employing when they could or creating MOUs with organizations that employ people with criminal histories.

13. **Do everything necessary to improve school attendance and performance.**

As our comparison of hotspot zip codes and school attendance zones revealed, schools in these areas far exceed statewide averages in chronic absenteeism. National research confirms the connection between being out of school and increased risk and rates of gun violence. To bolster attendance, schools, local governments, and community organizations need to partner to make school, and getting to school, safe, engaging, and supportive. Community organizations at our convening discussed local efforts, in Portsmouth for example, to create safe "passages" to schools. Others discussed having community organizations and mentors in school to provide additional support.

Beyond specific strategies, having young people in school and successfully graduating reduces gun violence. Ludwig explores the research on this and writes, *"Every ten-percentage-point increase in high school graduation rates—roughly the amount by which graduation has increased over the last fifty years in the US—**reduces murders by full 20 percent**."*[77]

Not surprisingly, and as we showed above, the cities with the highest murder rates tend also to be the cities with the lowest graduation rates.

Our interview participants understood this connection all too well. As one bluntly stated.

"Pay attention in school. Stay in school. Because if you don't graduate, it'll really be tough for you later on in life, when you're trying to be something for yourself. So definitely stay in school. Definitely stay away from the drugs too, because it may make you feel good, but in the long run, your body not going to like it, it's gonna mess with your mind. Especially if you're young. Your brain's still developing. You still got a long way to go in life, and something could happen. The street life is not really fun. You dead or in jail. It may look cool on social media, it may look cool for the moment, but in the long run—when it all matters—it's not going to be cool, and it's just the act they put on on social media."

—Age 18, Newport News

Or as another said.

"I feel like the safest answer would be school, because I mean, every kid's got to go to school some way, somehow. Parents don't want to go to jail for their kids not going to school. So I feel like you can reach more kids in a school setting because that's where kids have to be..."

—Age 24, Lynchburg

Ludwig also writes, *"[T]eachers who are best at reducing future crime involvement are the ones who have to discipline their students less often in school—something preventive is happening... Teachers, security guards, cops. They don't magically make immoral people moral, or end poverty, or merely reduce crime by locking lots more people up. At least what they seem to be doing is interrupting System I when it's about to make a mistake—about to do something System 2 would regret. And the result seems to be, fairly consistently less violence."*[78]

[77] *Unforgiving Places* at 236.
[78] *Unforgiving Places* at 202.

14. Use time in school to teach violence prevention skills.

Given that enrolled children are generally in school all day, state and local education officials should consider ways to take advantage of that time to help young people build both the knowledge and skills necessary to avoid, or prevent, gun violence. As Ludwig writes, ***"Given the enormous importance of the gun violence problem and our lack of long-term progress, why not make education as helpful as possible in addressing one of the nation's biggest public health crises?"***[79]

15. Create safe spaces and services for young people.

As we described in the section on out-of-school time, young people in hotspot communities need safe places where they can let down their guard, have fun, and connect with supportive adults. Some of the cities where gun violence is the biggest problem are already engaged in these efforts, developing community centers in the hotspot neighborhoods.

One of our participants beautifully described the need for these places and supports.

"They are looking at their environment. What is in their environment right now? If the only thing that's in their environment is gun violence, is violence, is drug-related crimes or just crimes in general, that is all they're going to know. No one is circling on those gifts and skills that they have within, to nurture those things, to help them grow, to know there's more outside of this. You don't have to keep falling into this cycle of getting into these crimes, ending up in the jail cells, then not being able to find a job and then again, back to crime and falling into jail."

—Age 24, Richmond

[78] *Unforgiving Places* at 202.
[79] *Unforgiving Places* at 237.

FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT

Law enforcement, obviously, has a critical role to play in violence prevention, both in terms of playing their traditional roles of arrests and investigations, but perhaps even more importantly as engaged actors and trusted partners in communities plagued by gun violence.

As Ludwig writes, "*One thing [police] do with at least part of their time is help problem solve—including, sometimes, stepping in and interrupting conflict before it escalates."*[81] And, also, after reviewing the research, *"When policing is done right, it seems to be doing something to prevent violence in the first place."*[82]

More specifically, he writes.

"[Randomized controlled trials] confirm that this aspect of policing is enormously valuable. The data show that compared to simply sending more cops to high-crime hotspots and having them just stand there ("create presence") or try to arrest and deter people, having officers engage in problem solving trpes of activities, things that can anticipate and help defuse situations that lead to conflict or its escalation, can increase the amount of crime prevented by up to 60 percent."[83]

16. Build trust with communities and partner with community violence interrupters.[84]

Police, in addition to their enforcement and investigation responsibilities, have other important roles to play in gun violence prevention. And as we heard from many law enforcement leaders at their convening, they are embracing these roles and strategies from community policing and engagement, to partnering with community organizations. They all saw the development of trust and a consistent presence in their communities as important crime prevention strategies.

Our interview participants echoed the need for both approaches—the presence and engagement in the community, and also the sharing of prevention responsibilities with other community violence prevention organizations.

[81] *Unforgiving Places* at 197.
[82] *Unforgiving Places* at 199.
[83] *Unforgiving Places* at 232.

[84] *https://www.americanprogress.org/article/community-based-violence-interruption-programs-can-reduce-gun-violence/ and more generally about Community Violence Intervention, including violence interrupters see https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/solutions/community-violence-intervention#:~:text=Community%20violence%20intervention%20(CVI)%20programs,%2C%20disinvestments%2C%20and%20trauma%20occur.*

In terms of the former, the following are examples of our participants' perspectives.

"I think police training on youth involvement. I think that should be a part of their curriculum, how to communicate. I think them being in the communities, just all of them. I think definitely get trauma informed... Don't just walk around with your head up in the air with your badge on. Not, I'm the po po, what you want. I would say, even go to the schools, the elementary schools, the daycares. Start young because a lot of them are coming out of environments where it's the norm..."

—Age 62, Richmond

"And then, asking. the police actually asking community members—and that includes our young people—what do you all feel like will help? So not automatically coming up with strategies and solutions to challenges that you don't even face every day, and you haven't even bothered to ask the people who are the most impacted what they feel like, could be some possible real solution to the problem."

—Age 48, Hampton

Likewise, participants thought partnership was also important.

"I think there needs to be stronger partnerships with other people, especially around violence of young people, because there needs to be some de-escalation there. I kind of get a lot of times how we get to these escalated police incidents because they're trained a certain way and they probably don't have time to figure out the ins and outs. They're just trying to protect things or people. So, I think it's worth having some partnerships in place to have some people in the community."

—Age 29, Richmond

Law enforcement leaders shared that, with these partnerships in place, they now call their community partners on occasion to visit a home, or intervene, when their roles and relationships are more likely to deescalate a brewing conflict than having an officer show up. At the same time, community members engaged in violence prevention and interruption are dedicated and committed to getting this role right.

"... Like, I walk around every day making sure the kids get off the bus safely during school. This group of men go out and make sure the neighborhood is safe. They walk around, introduce themselves, say, "Hey, if you need anything, we're here to be of assistance to you. If there's anything going on, let us know." And literally, when I was out patrolling one day with our team, we really stopped violence. It was multiple guns out in that situation. We are not armed, and we are talking it out in front of actual live violence. They shot up in the air and everything. We were there to make sure nobody died. It was during a freaking football practice—a kid's football practice. Two young ladies was fighting. And yes, that's the life we live."

—Age 25, Norfolk

17. Use data to target enforcement and prosecution.

As the recent report on Ceasefire Virginia describes, effective violence reduction involves the use of data analytics to identify the relatively small group of individuals responsible for disproportionately large shares of community violence, and to focus law enforcement resources on those individuals. Other comprehensive violence reduction initiatives such as the Department of Justice's Project Safe Neighborhoods[85] or similar efforts known as Focused Deterrence[86] prescribe similar approaches to identify primary targets. In addition to prosecution, these strategies also involve offering these targets choices—help if they desist and more prosecution if they do not.

Either way, efforts such as these to change the behavior of individuals driving community violence hopefully mitigate the threat and fear that these individuals create and lessen the likelihood that others will feel the need to arm themselves for protection.

18. Dedicate the same investigative resources to non-fatal shootings as homicides, and make quick arrests.

Many of the law enforcement leaders at the convenings discussed, with approval, how they had started devoting the same level of investigatory resources to non-fatal shootings as they did homicides. Getting people who are using guns, whether the shooting results in a death or not, off the street as soon as possible promotes community safety. This dedication of resources can lead to faster arrests, which avoids the problem of retaliatory violence.

19. Focus investigative resources on online activity.

While it sounds like all departments are engaged in this strategy already, law enforcement leaders at our gatherings all emphasized the importance of this approach—not only for investigative purposes, but also for prevention.

[85] https://www.justice.gov/psn

[86] https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL261/better-policing-toolkit/all-strategies/focused-deterrence/in-depth.html

FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Government agencies cannot tackle the challenge of preventing gun violence themselves. They all made clear that they need partners in the community. Likewise, the community members with whom we spoke, both in individual interviews and at the larger convenings, made their dedication and commitment to this important work abundantly clear. In addition to the violence interruption work that many are already engaged with, other kinds of targeted support has proven to be demonstrably effective at violence and crime prevention.

20. Teach youth and young adults to slow down their thinking and make better decisions.

Interview participants, government officials, and researchers all agree that helping young people, or adults for that matter, make better decisions and assessments in those moments that otherwise might lead to tragedy is an important goal and strategy. Rather than relying on violence interrupters to get a person to think differently, this approach intends to help people interrupt themselves.

Fortunately, a range of programs have proved themselves successful in randomized controlled trials.[87] Similarly, participants in the convenings shared stories of similar work they were doing in places like Roanoke, Danville, and elsewhere.

It is important to note that programs like the ones discussed in *Unforgiving Places* can take place in a range of settings—from community centers to schools to youth detention facilities. The return on investment in terms of safety and fewer tragedies is high.

21. Provide mentoring services.

Our interviewees consistently suggested that connecting young people with adults who care about them would be an effective measure to reduce gun violence. While most hope these relationships would be with family members, as we suggested above, not all families in hotspot communities are in a place to provide this kind of support. Mentoring, then, and other efforts to build safe and supportive relationships for youth, becomes critical.

[87] For a discussion of some of these programs see *Unforgiving Places* at 202-210.

"I think that having, in my personal opinion, I think having adults who empower children in their lives is so vitally important, and having that safe net to be able to say like, oh, this is an adult that I can look up to, and that I know won't judge me or won't look down on me because I'm a kid. I think that having that type of relationship in their life is really important, whether it be through the parents or through the school counselor, or their own therapist, whatever that looks like. I just think that in adults empowering children is so overlooked a lot of the time. There's just like, not a lot of respect given to kids because they're children, but they really do deserve so much of our respect, and if we teach them that at a young age, I think that's something that can carry over into when they become adults."

—Age 36, Fredericksburg

"Start more programs like this. Start more programs like this. Get kids out and just hear 'em out. Yeah, be more mentoring. Especially for young boys—that's what we need. We need more mentors. Not try to be like a dad—more of a therapist. A therapist or a mentor. Just call them in, here and there. Take them out. Go out to eat. Just ride around, listen to music. Just have deep conversations, because I feel like this is a good program. Just more positive programs to get young boys out, to get them some help. That's all they need, is some help and some good guidance. And I feel like that's why some young boys fall victim to the streets, because they want it. They want that type of love. But they just can't get it."

— Age 17, Hampton

22. Teach youth about dangers of social media.

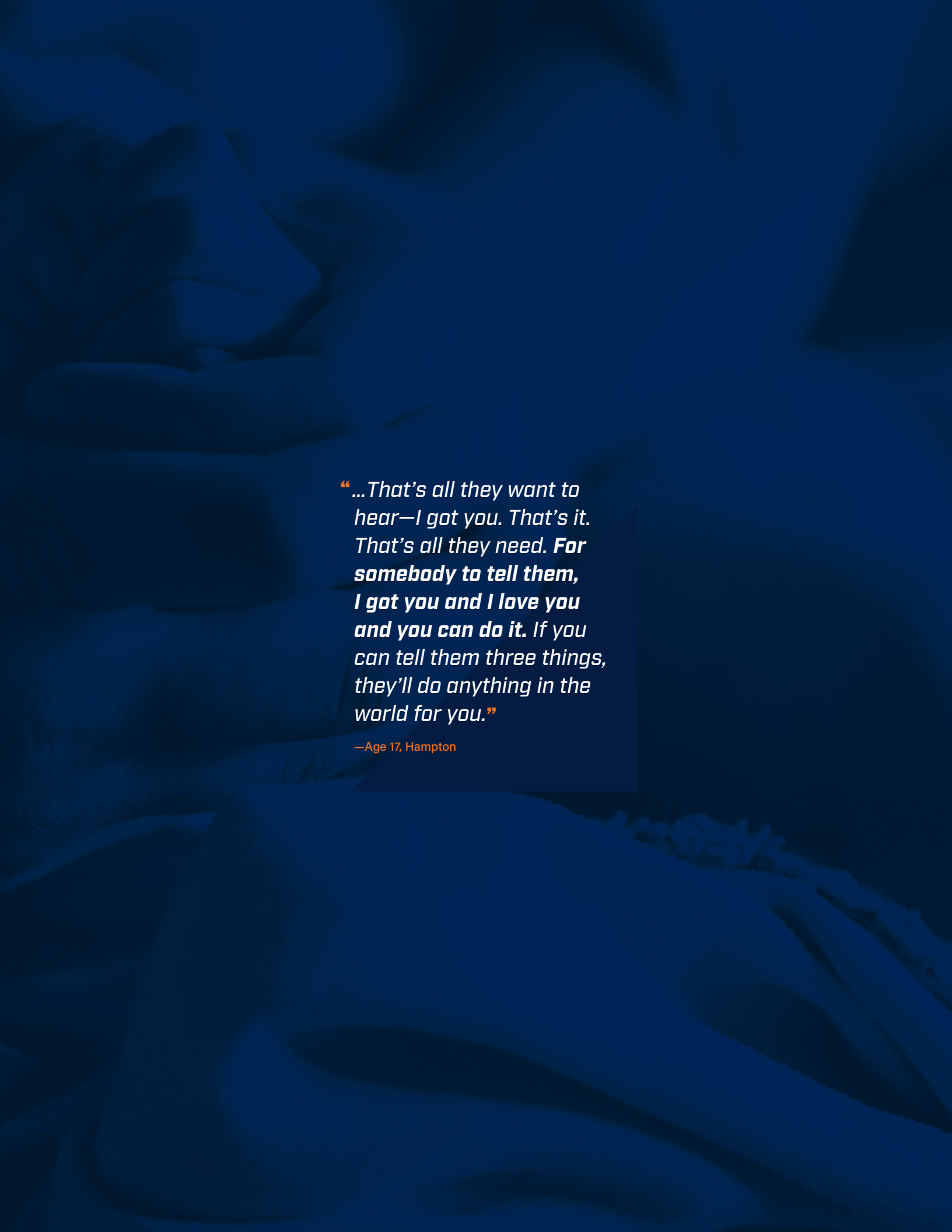
Given the role that social media is playing in exacerbating the problem of gun violence, it might be important for community organizations and other service providers to help youth, and their parents, understand the risks that social media poses when it comes to gun violence. Project Unloaded, which is based in Chicago, is an example of an organization that is actually using social media to help youth understand the risks and myths of gun possession.[88]

In addition to understanding the insidious nature of social media content when it comes to guns and violence, young people and parents need to learn to step away from, and encourage others to step away from, online conflicts, posturing, and provocations. They also need to learn where to seek help when falling victim to these kinds of behaviors.

23. Provide comprehensive support for children and families in hotspot communities.

Another obvious source of support and safety for young people should be their families. Community organizations need to continue and expand their efforts to strengthen families, while also helping individual young people work through exposure to trauma and other behavioral health challenges.

[88] See https://projectunloaded.org



"...That's all they want to hear—I got you. That's it. That's all they need. ***For somebody to tell them, I got you and I love you and you can do it.*** *If you can tell them three things, they'll do anything in the world for you."*

—Age 17, Hampton