

Youth Data & Intervention Initiative

REPORT VOLUME II



NICJR★
National Institute for
Criminal Justice Reform



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INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of serious crimes and acts of violence, especially shootings, are committed by a small group of young adults (ages 18–35) who have a combination of identifiable risk factors. When they were much younger—as young as 11 years old, most of these individuals already had a series of risk factors that distinguished them from other youth.

The National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) has embarked on a detailed, protracted research and data analysis project to learn what specific risk factors within specific local jurisdictions lead children to have a greater likelihood of being involved in gun violence when they grow up. With a clear understanding of these risk factors, school districts or other systems can collect targeted data on young people in their community and, when a youth reaches a threshold number of predictive risk factors, refer them and their family to intensive, community-based interventions.

This report provides an overview of current research into risk factors for youth involvement in gun violence, especially shootings. By synthesizing research in relevant but disparate fields, including criminology, sociology, public health, and psychology, and then conducting primary research with young adults convicted of fatal and nonfatal shootings in five cities across the US, NICJR hopes to provide an actionable framework for identifying young people at high risk for gun violence, particularly shootings.

In addition to summarizing research and local data analysis, this report includes two case studies that highlight the experiences of young people who are participating or have participated in the Neighborhood Opportunity and Accountability Board (NOAB),¹ an innovative, community-driven youth development and diversion program that NICJR developed and operates. Although neither of the young people profiled here have been involved in a shooting, both have been on escalating paths of delinquency and violence amid a variety of extremely challenging life circumstances. These profiles are thus intended to highlight both the extraordinarily difficult lives of many youth who engage in dangerous behavior as well as the difficulty inherent in conducting research into risk factors within such complex and mutually reinforcing circumstances.

Finally, we move into our analyses from Washington, DC and Maryland—two initial YDII research efforts aimed at assessing the characteristics of youth and young adults involved in shootings in order to increase our ability to identify and intervene with similar youth in the future. In reviewing these analyses, we hope to both offer a set of characteristics that can be used to identify young people at future risk for shooting involvement and provide a model for conducting these analyses that can be replicated by other youth service agencies.

Part I: Summary of Predominate Risk Factors

There is no single risk factor that is overwhelmingly predictive of later gun violence involvement for youth. However, having a combination of predictive risk factors and adverse life experiences can distinguish youth who are at heightened risk of being involved in gun violence. Research on the following risk factors is summarized below:



Poverty and neighborhood disorganization



Childhood abuse and neglect



Adverse childhood experiences and trauma



School absenteeism and dropout



Mental health disorders



Substance use



Homelessness and housing instability



Weak social ties



Demographic factors



Gang and group membership



Juvenile justice system involvement



Poverty and Neighborhood Disorganization

Family poverty and community-level socioeconomic disadvantage can both influence youth gun violence.² A multitude of studies have shown the relationship between extreme poverty and adolescent and adult involvement in violent conduct, with people who grow up in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty being more likely to become victims and perpetrators of violent crime.³ Associated issues such as neighborhood disorganization and concentrated socioeconomic disadvantage can contribute to school conduct issues and increase exposure to antisocial peers, both of which also increase the likelihood of firearm violence.⁴ Further, lack of informal social control and neighborhood-level collective efficacy also increase the likelihood of youth violence.⁵

Neighborhood social cohesion, defined as the “network of relationships as well as the shared values and norms of residents in a neighborhood,” is also associated with the prevalence of violence in a community.⁶ A longitudinal study examining Chicago neighborhoods and youth delinquency found that among neighborhoods with low levels of social cohesion and trust between residents, members of the community were less inclined to intervene and stop events such as truancy involving children in the neighborhood.⁷ Conversely, strong social ties and high social cohesion may offer protection against community violence.⁸

Residents in areas known as “hot blocks,” blocks with the highest rates of gun violence in a community, have a risk of involvement in gun violence 1.44 times greater than that of residents living outside of hot blocks.⁹ Hot blocks are usually geographically associated with low-income areas, high rates of crime and violence, and communities of color.¹⁰



Childhood Abuse and Neglect

“Childhood abuse increased the risk of adulthood crime by promoting antisocial behavior during childhood and adolescence, followed by the formation of relationships with antisocial romantic partners and peers in adulthood.”

Childhood abuse and neglect are associated with increased delinquent behavior and increased involvement in the justice system.¹¹ Serious family dysfunction, particularly violence, increases the likelihood of delinquent behavior.¹² A longitudinal study known as the Lehigh Study, which tracked 450 children from early childhood to adulthood, found that “childhood abuse increased the risk of adulthood crime by promoting antisocial behavior during childhood and adolescence, followed by the formation of relationships with antisocial romantic partners and peers in adulthood.”¹³ Neglect and/or abuse can also lead to a range of other negative outcomes including homelessness, mental health issues, substance use, and complex trauma¹⁴ all of which are associated with increased risk for violence involvement.

Involvement in the child welfare system carries similar risks. One study found that youth who had been removed from their homes and placed in child welfare group homes were 2.5 times more likely than other youth to become involved in the delinquency system, even controlling for other relevant factors.¹⁵ Another study found that by age 17, over half of youth in foster care had experienced an arrest, conviction, or overnight stay in a correctional facility.¹⁶



Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma

Many risk factors are related to events known as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which can often affect an individual's future involvement in violence as either a victim or perpetrator. ACEs are characterized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as "potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years) such as experiencing violence, abuse, neglect, substance use problems, and mental health problems."¹⁷

Exposure to violence (one of the traumatic experiences identified as an ACE) has been identified by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) as particularly harmful for future well-being.¹⁸ It is linked to negative health outcomes and a lack of opportunities later in life. Notably, violence exposure is far more common among Black children than White children, undoubtedly affecting the demographic variation in delinquency and violence.¹⁹

In a study of over 17,000 Kaiser Permanente members, individuals who experienced more than four ACEs were at an 800% increased risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression.²⁰ Many of these health-related factors, in turn, affect the likelihood of future violence involvement.



Research also shows that ACEs have a significant and direct impact on the brain development of adolescents: decision making, executive functioning, and executive processing are all impaired by ACEs.²¹ ACEs-related issues can lead to risky behavior and, thus, violence involvement. In a

meta-analysis conducted by the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health, ACEs were directly correlated with a significantly increased risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system as well as an increased likelihood of reoffending.²²



School Absenteeism

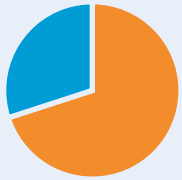
The United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights reported that approximately seven million students were chronically absent in the 2015–2016 school year.²³ Chronic absenteeism is generally defined as missing 10% or more of mandatory schooling and is associated with a host of negative impacts, including but not limited to poor academic performance, substance use, poverty, repeating a grade, dropping out of high school, and criminal justice system involvement.²⁴

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency also found school absenteeism or truancy may predict later violent offenses.²⁵ Conversely, a longitudinal study on school attendance found that "the strength of the relation between lack of control and criminal outcomes was moderated by school attendance."²⁶

Dropping out of high school is also strongly correlated with the likelihood of incarceration in prison. Approximately 70% of men in state and federal prison did not graduate high school.²⁷ Black males born between 1975 and 1979 who dropped out of high school had a 70% likelihood of imprisonment between the ages of 30–34.²⁸



Mental Health Disorders



65-70%

of adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system have some mental health disorder

The prevalence among the general population is approximately

14-22%



Though causality is difficult to ascertain, mental health disorders in youth are correlated with justice system involvement.²⁹ Approximately 65–70% of adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system have some mental health disorder, while the prevalence among the general population is approximately 14–22%.³⁰ Youth in juvenile detention centers also have consistently higher rates of mental health disorders when compared to the general youth population,³¹ though the true disparity may be greater than studies show, as youth in detention centers tend to under report symptoms and potentially problematic behavior. The most frequent disorders occurring in system-involved youth are substance use, conduct disorders, major depressive disorder, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.³²

Additionally, characteristics such as hyperactivity, aggressiveness, concentration issues, antisocial behavior, restlessness, and risk-taking behaviors in youth are correlated with future violence among males.³³



Substance Use

Substance use at the individual, family, and community levels during adolescence has been found to be a significant risk factor for gun violence. A Cities United meta-analysis found that for children ages 6–11, substance abuse is a strong predictor of violence perpetrated after 15 years of age.³⁴ This increased risk may be the result of cognitive impairment as well as a lack of capacity to recognize risky circumstances.

Being present in an environment where alcohol or drugs are accessible, even if there is no individual consumption, also increases an adolescent's risk for gun violence involvement.³⁵

Caregiver or parental substance use is related to poor life outcomes for youth such as experiencing violence or childhood maltreatment,³⁶ and adolescent substance use.³⁷ Parental substance use could affect adolescent violence due to decreased supervision and an unstable home environment.³⁸

Finally, on a community level, a study encompassing 1,050 adolescents found that the increased density of liquor stores was strongly associated with violent behavior in adolescents.³⁹



Homelessness and Housing Instability

1 in 10 young adults (18–24) experience homelessness in the U.S.



Nearly 50% of them have been incarcerated

Adolescents experiencing homelessness are at an elevated risk for involvement in the criminal justice system.⁴⁰ According to a study conducted by the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, approximately one in ten young adults ages 18–24 experience homelessness in the United States. Of those, close to 50% have been incarcerated.⁴¹

Youth experiencing homelessness are also more likely to have been involved with the justice system.⁴² Often, a juvenile record is a major roadblock for housing and can contribute to a cyclical issue of homelessness and delinquency. Inadequate housing also results in school absenteeism and increased mental health issues, which are associated with violence.⁴³



Weak Social Ties

Longitudinal studies have found that adolescents who engage in antisocial behavior and endure antisocial behavior from peers are more likely to engage in gun violence in the future.⁴⁴ Among youth ages 12–14, research has found weak social connections and antisocial peers to be among the strongest predictors of gun violence.⁴⁵ Delinquent peer relations are also associated with other factors that can increase the risk of future gun violence, such as substance use and firearm carrying.⁴⁶

A report on youth violence published by the Office of the Surgeon General explains, “Peer groups are all-important in adolescence. Adolescents who have weak social ties—that is, who are not involved in conventional social activities...are at high risk of becoming violent, as are adolescents with antisocial, delinquent peers.”⁴⁷



Demographic Factors

Within gun homicides, victims and perpetrators are primarily in the 18–34 age group.⁴⁸ Black males between the ages of 18 and 24 have the highest homicide victimization rate and homicide offending rate.⁴⁹ They are 14 times more likely than their White peers to be the victim of a gun homicide.⁵⁰ Notably, gun homicides are the primary cause of death for Black youth.⁵¹

Black males (18–24)

have the highest homicide victim and offender rates

Black males (18–24) are

14X

more likely than White peers to be gun homicide victims



Gun homicides are the leading cause of death for Black youth.

92.1% of gun violence perpetrators are male

82.6% of gun violence victims are male

56.9% of perpetrators were reported as Black

A Bureau of Justice Statistics analysis of homicide trends in the United States over a 28-year period (1980–2008) found that a large majority of both gun violence perpetrators (92.1%) and gun violence victims (82.6%) were male. The study also identified major racial disparities in its analysis; however, it is important to note that the study failed to differentiate Latinos from Whites, a common flaw

in justice system data reporting. The study found that 56.9% of perpetrators and 51.4% of victims were reported as Black, and 41.2% of perpetrators and 46.5% of victims were categorized as White.



Gang and Group Membership

Adolescent gang membership has a significant effect on future violence involvement.⁵² Youth involved with gangs are more likely to commit nonviolent and violent offenses when compared with non-gang-involved youth.⁵³ Gang membership also increases the risk of victimization.⁵⁴ Moreover, gang influence can persist even after an adolescent leaves a gang, and research has found that previously gang-involved youth often have sustained involvement in criminal activities, including robbery and drug-related offenses.⁵⁵

Characteristics that influence gang involvement during youth include socioeconomic status, substance use, and problems at school.⁵⁶ Additionally, adolescent boys who carry guns are at a fivefold increased risk of gang involvement.⁵⁷



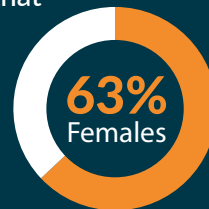
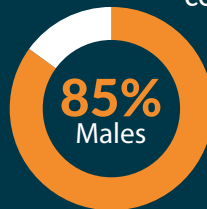
Juvenile Justice System Involvement

A study conducted by Cities United reported that for children ages 6-11, the strongest predictor of perpetrating violence after 15 years of age is a having a prior youth offense.⁵⁸ In addition, juvenile justice system involvement increases the likelihood of other risk factors that lead to violence, including dropping out of school and entering the adult criminal justice system.⁵⁹

Carrying a gun is also linked to gun violence involvement, and recent research has found that a majority of juvenile justice-involved males report carrying guns.⁶⁰ A longitudinal cohort study examining firearm use in youth in a temporary juvenile detention center over a 16-year period found that 85% of males and 63% of females had

previous firearm involvement, defined as having access to, being injured or threatened by, or using a firearm.⁶¹

A cohort study examining firearm use in youth in a temporary juvenile detention center found that



Had previous firearm involvement

A prior history of gun violence, including nonfatal injury shootings, also predicts future gun violence. In a longitudinal study examining justice-involved youth, 25% of participants self-reported a history of gun violence, and 16.3% self-reported additional gun violence involvement over a period of seven years following the initial assessment.⁶²



Part II: Youth Profiles

As noted above, NOAB is a youth development and diversion model that allows young people arrested for offenses for which they would otherwise be detained in juvenile detention and adjudicated through the juvenile court to remain in the community.

Youth and their families referred to NOAB appear before a board of community leaders to develop a support plan and are immediately connected to life coaching and community-based services and supports, with a focus on addressing the underlying causes of their behavior and interrupting a life trajectory toward delinquency. In particular, a strong and sustained relationship with a Life Coach who is a credible messenger is key to youth engagement in the program. After six to nine months of successful program participation, the youth graduates and all charges are disposed.

NICJR launched the first NOAB program in Oakland in May 2020, after a multi-year planning process with community stakeholders and the Oakland Police Department (OPD). Since its inception, the Oakland NOAB has received nearly 100 referrals, with very few of the youth being re-arrested for new offenses after enrollment in the program.

While these successes are deeply encouraging, there are also youth for whom the NOAB model has not been as effective, or who require more intensive levels of intervention and engagement to alter their trajectories. These youth often come from immensely challenging home circumstances, are not attending school, and are from communities with very high rates of crime and violence.

The following profiles highlight two such cases, both of which demonstrate how a variety of factors intersect to set young people on a path that can lead to violent behavior. Neither youth has been involved in a shooting to date, and hopefully they never will be, but both cases demonstrate the escalation in behavior that is characteristic of young people who do go on to such involvement.

Youth names have been changed to preserve anonymity.



Jay

Jay was referred to the Oakland NOAB in March 2023, following a domestic dispute with his mother. He was 12 years old at the time. Jay's parents separated when he was young, with his mother moving to Los Angeles and Jay remaining in the Bay Area with his father. After very limited contact, Jay's mother moved back to the Bay Area when he was nine years old, in an effort to remove herself from gangs, crime, and trauma, as well as a desire to reconnect with her son. Jay was hesitant to welcome her back into his life, and a difficult custody battle between the parents ensued. Eventually, his father's increasing substance abuse issues and frequent jail stays led to Jay having to live with his mother more often. Jay was referred to NOAB following a fight with his mother about wanting to go back to his father's house. When the fight escalated, his mother called the police. While the police were at their apartment, Jay brandished a baseball bat and spat at an officer, leading to his arrest.

In Jay's world, violence and crime are a part of everyday life. His mother has a history of active gang involvement and facilitating prostitution, and as noted above, his father has a history of substance abuse and incarceration. The family also has a history of involvement with Child Protective Services. Since the pandemic, Jay and his mother had been living in one of Oakland's most violent neighborhoods, where there was frequent gun activity outside the home (his mother's car was hit by gunfire early in his NOAB engagement). They lived in a two-bedroom apartment with multiple dogs and seven other people, including Jay's teenage cousin who is actively involved in crime. It was not unusual for the adults living with Jay to openly boast about committing crime when he could overhear them. Jay slept on a pallet of blankets on the floor, and his hygiene suffered because of the overcrowded living conditions. It was clear that Jay felt no one was able or willing

to take care of him, and that crime was a path to taking care of himself.

In many ways, Jay is an ideal candidate for NOAB, particularly because he was referred at a young age, before he had committed any serious crime outside the home. In the spring of 2023, a NOAB Life Coach began working intensively with Jay and his mother. This included providing positive role modelling, taking him out of his community to have formative experiences, encouraging increased engagement in school, working to improve his hygiene, and connecting Jay and his mother to community-based resources. The Life Coach also worked with his mother to try to increase her engagement with Jay. She was often overwhelmed by being in a new city, and she struggled to follow through with her commitments.

The Life Coach talked to Jay and his mother every day and often took them out for lunch or dinner. The Life Coach also frequently transported Jay to and from school. Despite this intensive engagement, Jay's behavior continued to escalate. This culminated in his arrest for attempted robbery and assault and battery, which resulted in a week in detention. Jay's mother sought support from the NOAB team, who communicated with Jay's public defender and accompanied Jay in court. NOAB staff were there when Jay was released on probation with a GPS ankle monitor, which he immediately tried to remove outside of Juvenile Hall.

NOAB worked with partner community-based organizations in Oakland to provide Jay and his mother additional support. One of the urgent issues was finding them a new place to live. The family was relocated to their own apartment that has more space and is in a relatively safer neighborhood, although their new neighborhood does still have high rates of crime and violence. NOAB also connected Jay's mother to her own Life Coach.

Although Jay is very attached and responsive to his Life Coach, he continues to act out in ways that are indicative of his complex challenges. When Jay was at a doctor's appointment with his mother for a psychiatric evaluation, he used the pass-through specimen cabinet in the restroom to throw urine out into the doctor's office. When his Life Coach

spoke with him about the incident, he claimed that when he was younger, his mother sometimes directed him to act as though he was mentally unstable as a way of manipulating situations, and he mistakenly thought that she expected him to do the same in this situation.

In another incident, Jay's Life Coach had taken him out to buy new school clothes and pick out a Christmas present for himself, since he had not received any gifts for Christmas or his birthday. While they were out shopping, Jay began trying to use a torch lighter to surreptitiously burn people passing by. The Life Coach immediately ended the shopping trip and used the situation as an opportunity to talk with Jay about poor decision making and controlling his impulses. To add to the challenges, Jay's dad was incarcerated again and not likely to be home soon.

Though the family continues to struggle with substance abuse in the home and setting boundaries with Jay, they have been making progress, and both Jay and his mother have been meeting with their Life Coaches consistently. Jay remains engaged in school, and he recently began playing on his junior high school's flag football team. Despite his challenges, Jay is a smart, fun-loving youth. His lack of impulse control, family poverty, housing instability, history of negative examples, and experiences of trauma are all significant barriers in Jay's life that may require more intensive interventions than are currently available.

Micah

Micah was referred to NOAB by OPD at the age of 12. He was referred after he was arrested with a group of young people for a string of high-profile robberies for which he was detained but not charged. His referral also came after he was a victim of gun violence.

Early on, it became clear to Micah's Life Coach that he was a very smart and well-spoken young man as well as a talented athlete. However, it was also clear that crime was already a regular part of his life. Micah said his delinquent behavior began when he was nine. When he was referred to NOAB, he was not regularly attending school.

Micah's mom has a small baby and two older children, so he receives limited attention at home, and the attention he does receive appears to be very negative. Despite this, Micah looks up to his mother and seeks her approval. Micah has little to no relationship with his father, who has been incarcerated for most of his life and is a very well-known local gang leader.

A few days after Micah's enrollment in NOAB, his Life Coach, who is also a football coach, led him in football workouts that they continued nearly every day for a week. Unfortunately, Micah's mother was not interested in receiving support with her son and actively blocked the Life Coach from engaging Micah.

A few weeks into his participation in the program, Micah was arrested for a carjacking in Oakland. He spent a few days in detention and was released pending the adjudication of his case. He was allowed to continue participating in NOAB in lieu of formal probation.

Although Micah was reluctant to trust new adults, his Life Coach made significant progress in connecting with him. He was more engaged in school in the eighth grade, and he met regularly with his Life Coach after his mother agreed the Life Coach could work with him at the school, but not pick him up from the house.

Over time, Micah's Life Coach encountered increasing difficulty in connecting with him, in part because his family was unwilling to engage in the program, and in part because Micah himself became less willing to connect. Micah also became less engaged in school and was on the verge of expulsion for chronic misbehavior, including threatening a principal.

In another situation, an older boy stole a shoe from Micah and posted a photo of it on Instagram, as a means of humiliating Micah. This type of social media-fueled incident and retaliatory escalation has become increasingly more common among the young people NICJR works with, and it is not unusual for situations like this to escalate into a shooting.

The increasing difficulties with Micah came to a head when he was expelled from school. None of Micah's family would respond to the Vice Principal's calls that day, so the school contacted the Life Coach to come pick Micah up from campus. There was a sense of urgency around ensuring Micah left campus following the expulsion because when the same thing happened a year before, Micah retaliated by breaking all the windows on the campus security office.

The Life Coach was able to contact Micah's uncle, who agreed to pick Micah up from the Life Coach. The Life Coach took Micah to a restaurant to have lunch, and the Vice Principal came along to help manage the situation. Micah's uncle never showed up, so the Life Coach agreed to take him home.

They first dropped the Vice Principal off back at the school. She was riding in the front seat of the Life Coach's car, and when they dropped her off Micah remained in the back seat. As they were driving to the uncle's house, Micah expressed an interest in remaining with the Life Coach. As they got closer to the uncle's house, Micah pulled out a gun and pointed it toward the Life Coach's head. Fairly certain that the weapon was just a bb gun, the Life Coach acted quickly to forcibly disarm Micah. The Life Coach continued to talk with Micah and dropped him off at his uncle's house. When Micah exited the vehicle, he thanked his Life Coach for the ride and as he always does, saying "be safe Coach" as he walked off.

Micah later returned to the school and was arrested after he brandished the firearm on campus. He was released from detention a few days later and he was transferred to another Life Coach through the Oakland Department of Violence Prevention. A few months later, Micah was arrested for taking part in a homicide. He was arrested for felony murder and accused to be involved in a robbery that resulted in the death of a gas station clerk. The charges against Micah were later dropped.



Part III: Using Research to Identify High-Risk Youth

Although there is an extensive body of research on youth violence, most of this work is not oriented toward facilitating the identification of young people at very high risk of violence for the purpose of intervening. The majority of the public health, psychology, criminology, and sociology research described above emphasizes systemic issues that are complex and beyond the capacity of most youth service systems to solve.

Community violence intervention (CVI) research, by contrast, is focused on identifying people who are at imminent risk of being involved in violence and immediately employing intensive interventions. However, individuals identified through CVI research are often young adults, not youth. Community violence risk indicators informing this research center in large part on people's connection to prior shootings or shooting victims; their prior involvement in the criminal justice system, including the number and seriousness of prior arrests and terms of supervision and incarceration; and their gang involvement. Given that the vast majority of gun violence is committed by and against young adults ages 18–35, youth typically have fewer connections to prior shootings or shooting victims, and youth (even those who do have justice system involvement) almost inevitably have much less system involvement than very high-risk adults.

While focusing on adults allows for more effective and immediate identification of the individuals who are at the highest risk for violence, it also creates a gap in our ability to identify—and intervene with—young people who are at future risk for shooting or being shot. It is imperative that researchers and practitioners partner to improve our collective ability to identify young people at high risk for future involvement in gun violence, especially shootings, in order to more effectively intervene in the early stages.

NICJR seeks to build on and add to existing research on gun violence by analyzing the circumstances and characteristics of youth involved in shootings in two jurisdictions that experienced an increase in juvenile shootings over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic: the State of Maryland and Washington, DC. Because the same data were not available in both jurisdictions, these analyses look different from each other. Nonetheless, both shed light on patterns among youth who have been victims or perpetrators of shootings and begin to lay the groundwork for better identification thereof.

NICJR Research in Washington, DC and Maryland

As with many jurisdictions across the US, both Washington, DC, and the State of Maryland saw notable increases in shootings and homicides from 2020–2022, including increases in the number and percentage of shootings committed by youth. Amid these trends, NICJR has worked with both jurisdictions to help better understand the dynamics of shootings involving youth and support targeted interventions.

Washington, DC



Since 2020, NICJR has worked with Washington, DC, on a number of violence prevention and intervention efforts aimed at youth and young adults.⁶³ In partnership with the District’s Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE), and Office of Gun Violence Prevention (OGVP), NICJR has conducted two Gun Violence Program Analyses, a Landscape Analysis of Community-Based Services and Supports, and a Violence Reduction Strategic Plan. We also work with ONSE and OGVP as convener

of the National Offices of Violence Prevention Network (NOVPN) and are collaborating with CJCC through the Youth Data Intervention Initiative.

Although juveniles still constitute a minority of those involved in gun violence in the District, their involvement—and their deaths—have increased over the past few years. To help the District better understand the dynamics of young people who are involved in shootings, NICJR engaged in two discrete but related research activities. First, we worked with the CJCC to design a quantitative analysis of childhood risk factors for adults who were convicted of fatal or nonfatal shootings that occurred when they were young adults (18–24 years old). Second, we conducted a case review of five young people who were killed by gun violence in the District in 2020. Both research activities trace the life experiences and public system contact of young people before they were involved in any shootings. Interestingly, although the former focuses on individuals who were perpetrators of shootings and the latter focuses on shooting victims, the two analyses evidence enormous similarities, indicating that the same circumstances constitute risk factors for gun violence perpetration and victimization.

State of Maryland



In 2023, NICJR partnered with the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) in a two-part effort to reduce shootings involving youth under the supervision of DJS. First, NICJR and DJS sought to better understand the characteristics of young people who were involved in shootings so that, second, the Department could better identify and intervene with other high-risk youth moving forward. As with our work in Washington, DC, NICJR’s analysis of youth involved in shootings in Maryland has important implications for the larger effort to understand the circumstances that make young people susceptible to shooting involvement.

Findings

Our analyses for these projects reflected established research regarding risk factors for gun violence, but they also shed new light on how these risk factors manifest and can be used to identify and intervene with high-risk youth. Key patterns are discussed below.

Very few young people were perpetrators of serious gun violence.



Data from Maryland underscored the rarity with which young people are the perpetrators of shootings, even amid the COVID-19 increase. Between January 1, 2019, and June 30, 2023, there were 1,018 shootings in Maryland that involved a minor as a victim or a suspect. A total of 978 young people were involved in these shootings, the vast majority of whom (947, or 96.8%) were involved in only one shooting. More than three quarters of these youth (754, or 77.1%) were shooting victims, while 217 (22.2%) were shooting suspects, and seven (<1%) were victims and suspects (at different times). Of the 978 youth involved in a shooting during this time, 492 (or 50.3%) had prior contact with DJS.

Looking more closely at youth who had been involved in the juvenile justice system further demonstrates the infrequency with which young people perpetrate gun violence. In 2019, a total of 12,772 young people had one or more delinquency petitions filed in the State of Maryland. Over the next four and a half years, 98% (or 12,515) of these youth had no known involvement in a shooting. Among the 257 young people who did, 65% (166 youth) were shooting victims, 33% (86 youth) were suspects, and 2% (five youth) were both victims and suspects.

Black boys living in areas with high rates of violence were by far the most likely to be involved in shootings.

Data from both Maryland and the District of Columbia underscore the demographic and geographic concentration of shooting risk. Across Maryland’s 23 counties, 75% of youth involved in a shooting lived in one of four jurisdictions: Baltimore City, Prince George’s County, Anne Arundel County, and Baltimore County (in order of the number of youth involved in shootings). Statewide, more than 70% of youth involved in a shooting were Black boys.

Table 1. The majority of youth involved in shootings were Black boys⁶⁴

Race	Suspects				Victims			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Asian	-	-	-	-	4	0.53%	1	0.13%
Black	150	69.12%	11		553	73.25%	96	12.72%
Latino	34	15.67%	4		32	4.24%	7	0.93%
White	16	7.37%	-	-	47	6.23%	7	0.93%
Unknown	2	0.92%	-	-	6	0.79%	2	0.26%
Total	162	91.53%	15	8.47%	642	85.03%	113	14.97%

Patterns were comparable in Washington, DC. The quantitative study of childhood risk factors found that 97.78% of individuals who met the study criteria were Black and all were male; 71.11% had lived in Wards 7 or 8 prior to their convictions, the DC Wards with highest rates of poverty and violence.

Also in DC, all five of the juvenile justice system-involved young people who were killed in 2020 were Black boys between the ages of 17 and 18. All five young men lived in Wards 5 through 8. Although their ages make them outliers among the District’s gun violence victims, their demographics and geography otherwise reflect the majority of gun violence victims, most of whom are Black men and boys, and many of whom are from the District’s eastern quadrants.

Juvenile justice system-involved youth who went on to be involved in shootings tended to have extensive juvenile justice histories.

Not all youth who are involved in shootings have been involved in the juvenile justice system, but data from both Washington, DC, and Maryland show that among youth who did have juvenile justice system involvement, their involvement tended to be very extensive.

All five of the juvenile justice system-involved young people who were killed in Washington, DC, in 2020 had been arrested more than five times, and all but one had been arrested more than 10 times. There was wide variation in the youths’ age at first arrest and the speed at which their conduct escalated, with one young person having been first arrested at nine years old and another arrested for the first time at age 15. The other three fell between those ages. Despite different ages for first arrests, all the youths’ behavior escalated within two to six months of their first arrests. In some cases, the re-offending happened within weeks of the initial arrest. Most of the initial arrests were for nonviolent offenses, which either were not charged or were charged and dismissed. Nonetheless, by the time of their deaths, all the young people had been detained at least twice, and most had multiple detentions and commitments. Four of the five had gun possession cases prior to their deaths.

Among young adults in DC who were convicted of fatal or nonfatal shootings, more than 75% had been arrested as juveniles and almost half (48.49%) had been arrested for violent offenses as juveniles. Both figures are notably higher than the juvenile arrest rates for the comparison groups (young adults convicted of robberies and young adults convicted of nonviolent offenses). In addition, logistic regression found that people with juvenile

arrests for violent offenses had 2.27 greater odds of being convicted of a homicide or attempted homicide as a young adult. In less technical terms, this means that young adults with violent arrests as youth were more than twice as likely to be convicted of attempted or actual homicide as young adults.

+75% of young adults in DC convicted of shootings had been arrested as juveniles.

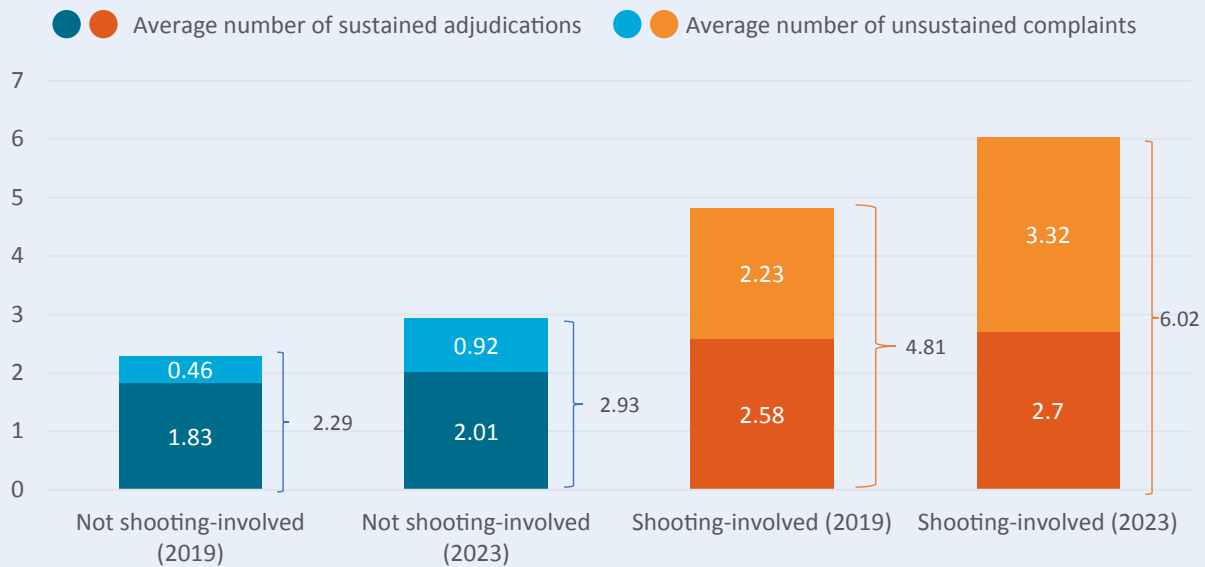
Almost **50%** were arrested for violent juvenile offenses.

In Maryland, where NICJR also had data on youth who were involved in shootings but were not involved in the juvenile justice system, half of the youth who were involved in shootings had no

contact with the juvenile justice system. Those who did, however, tended to have very extensive juvenile justice system histories. This is particularly clear when comparing them to youth involved with DJJ who were not involved in shootings.

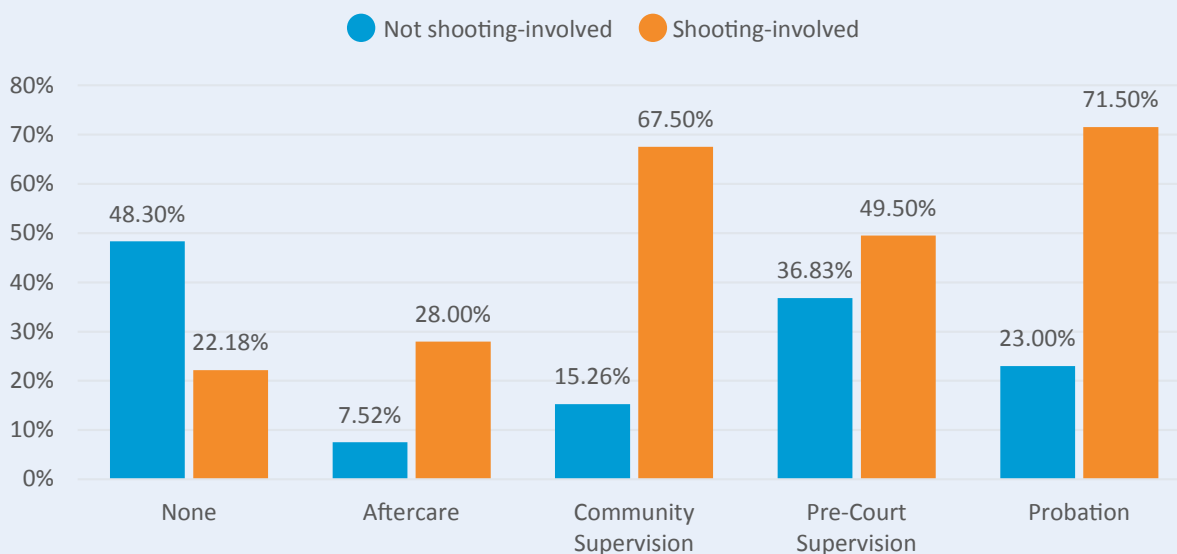
As Figure 1 shows, in 2019, youth who went on to be involved in shootings already had, on average, more delinquency petitions and more sustained adjudications than did youth who did not go on to be involved in shootings—a gap that more than doubled by 2023. In 2019, youth who went on to be involved in shootings had a mean of 4.81 petitions, of which 2.58 resulted in sustained adjudications, compared to other youth who had 2.29 petitions, of which 1.83 were sustained. By 2023, youth involved in shootings had had multiple new petitions and adjudications, for an average of 6 total petitions, of which 2.7 had been sustained. By contrast, the majority of youth who were not involved in shootings during the study period had had no further involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Figure 1. Youth who were involved in shootings had far more contact with the juvenile justice system than other justice system-involved youth



Not surprisingly, given the number of prior petitions and adjudications they had, the majority of youth who were involved in shootings had been under multiple terms of DJS supervision by the time of those shootings. As Figure 2 shows, by the time they were involved in a shooting, almost 80% of these young people had been under at least one form of DJS supervision, with the majority of those having been under multiple terms of supervision, including pre-adjudication, post-adjudication, and post-placement supervision. By contrast, only about half of the other youth (48.3%) had been under any type of DJS supervision by this time, and those who had were likely to have only had a single term.

Figure 2. By the time they were involved in shootings, most youth had been under multiple forms of supervision



Young people who were involved in shootings tended to have a number of complex, simultaneous challenges in their lives.

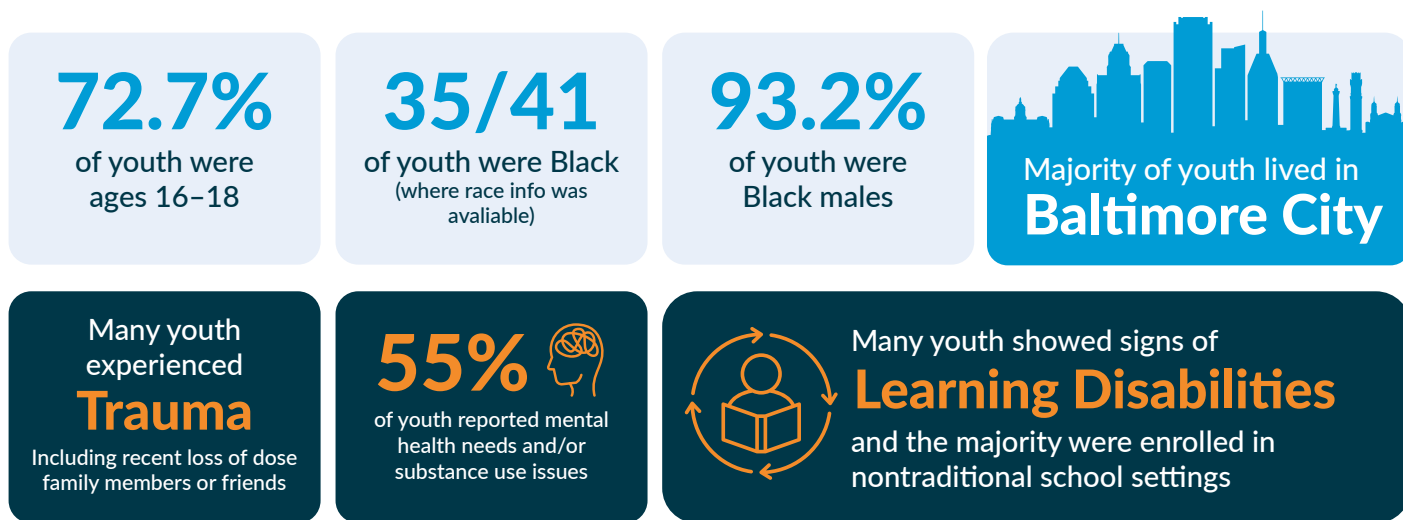
Reviewing the files of these young people in Maryland and DC underscored the myriad challenges most faced, including experiences of trauma, difficult family dynamics, academic struggles, and behavioral health needs.

In Maryland, we reviewed case files from 27 youth who were shooting victims (fatal and nonfatal), 16 who were shooting suspects, and one who was a witness of a shooting involving other youth. A number of these young people had also experienced a traumatic loss, including three who had lost a parent and one who had lost multiple friends to gun violence prior to the shooting incident. Our analysis found similar patterns regardless of the nature of the youth’s shooting involvement.

Many of the youth showed signs of learning disabilities and other difficulties related to education. The majority were enrolled in nontraditional school settings, including alternative schools, online schools, or evening curriculum academies. In addition, most had truancy issues and were performing poorly academically. There were several instances where youth wanted to return to traditional schools but could not due to previous behavioral incidents, lack of transportation, poor grades, or specific learning needs. In some cases, youth were moved to different schools by parents or DJS case management specialists due to safety issues at their prior schools. Sometimes, the families had scheduling and transportation challenges that prevented them from completing the Individual Education Program (IEP) process.

Fifty-five percent of the youth reported having mental health needs and/or substance use issues. The majority of the mental health diagnoses were attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); however, depression was a common diagnosis, and one youth had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Some degree of cannabis use disorder and/or dependency was also very common.

Figure 3. Case files of Maryland youth involved in shootings in 2023 underscored the array of complex issues in their lives



Patterns among the youth and young adults in the DC analyses were similar. Case files for the five youth killed by firearms in DC in 2020 showed that all five had both formal (diagnostic) and informal indicators of mental health challenges. These young men were all diagnosed with ADHD, and all five had treatment plans that included mental health services ranging from medication treatment to family and/or individual therapy.

Unsurprisingly given these factors, all five young people struggled in school. All of them had IEPs, and, in several cases, notes indicate that the youth expressed a high degree of frustration about the fact that they were not on the same educational trajectories as their peers. Perhaps as a consequence, all five youth had significant truancy issues, with more than ten absences in one semester and severe credit deficiencies. In several instances, repeated truancy led the District’s child welfare agency (Child and Family Services Agency, or CFSA) to get involved in an attempt to compel parents to increase their children’s school attendance. Several of the young people also exhibited aggressive behavior at school, sometimes leading to further justice system contact.

Data from the quantitative study in DC showed similar patterns among young people who caused serious harm. The majority had been diagnosed with one or more developmental or behavioral health disorders, including 51% with internalizing disorders and 49% with substance use disorders. These young adults had also struggled in school—more than half (51%) had an IEP to receive special education services, and 60% had been suspended from school at least once. Almost a quarter (23%) had experienced homelessness, and more than three quarters (86.67%) had been on Medicaid as children, indicating that most experienced poverty and many experienced extreme poverty and associated instability.

Extremely challenging—and sometimes abusive—homes were the norm among the youth who were killed.

For all five of the youth killed in DC, the family consisted of a single mother with numerous siblings living in the home. In two of the homes there were more than 10 siblings in residence. Three out of the five families received social services such as Temporary Assistance For Needy Families (TANF), and all the young men received Medicaid. There are reports of substance use including alcohol and marijuana in two of the homes, along with gun possessions.

CFSA was involved in all five cases due to allegations ranging from educational neglect and physical/sexual assault to food insecurity. In-home victimization at the hands of adults who lived in or frequently visited the home occurred in all the cases. In two homes, significant sexual abuse was reported. These complaints went unaddressed, and the abuse continued. Three of the five cases have CFSA records of in-home violence (abuse).

A total of 54 CFSA reports were documented among the five cases, 19 of which were found to be substantiated. There were more than 10 child protective services reports for each of three of the youths. These CFSA reports were made by neighbors, school officials, and the youths themselves. Of the 19 substantiated reports, many community referrals for therapy and family counseling were made but were not effective, as the parent had no desire to engage with the support services that could have addressed the identified needs. No further actions were taken following the referral and none of the children were removed from their homes.

In Maryland, case files did not indicate that the family situations were as dire, although many youth did have complex and difficult home environments. Many were from single-parent households, living in extremely large households, or living with extended family members. Often, youth who resided with their extended families did so because their parents needed additional assistance managing the youth or other issues in the households. For example, one young person lived with eight siblings, and another had physically assaulted a sibling, leading his parents to contact Child Protective Services to find alternative living solutions. Two youth were under foster care guardianship.

There were almost no differences between victims and suspects of shootings.

In Maryland, where NICJR's analysis included data on youth who were shooting victims as well as youth who were suspects, our analyses evidenced very little difference between the two groups in terms of geography, demographics, or prior contact with the justice system.

Of the 978 minors who were involved in shootings in the State of Maryland between June 1, 2019, and June 30, 2023, 492 (50.3%) had previously had a case referred to the Department of Juvenile Services. Almost two-thirds (64.41%, or 143) of the 222 youth who were shooting suspects and almost half (46.16%, or 349) of the 756 youth who were shooting victims had complaints filed with DJS prior to being involved in a shooting. Besides this sizable gap—which is due in large part to the fact that infants and young children are more likely to be victims than suspects—there were no meaningful differences between the juvenile justice histories of youth who were victims of shootings and those who were suspects. (See Table 1, above, for demographic breakdowns of victims and suspects.)

Table 2. Shooting victims and suspects have very similar prior juvenile justice system histories

Offense type	Suspects		Victims	
	% with petitions	% with adjudications	% with petitions	% with adjudications
Person-to-person misdemeanor	84.44%	53.23%	83.83%	48.06%
Property misdemeanor	80%	46.77%	71.86%	37.38%
Crime of violence	66.67%	35.48%	59.28%	30.84%
Property felony	44.44%	9.68%	40.12%	10.28%
Violation of probation	20%	17.74%	20.36%	25.23%
Drug felony	11.11%	6.45%	18.56%	5.61%
Citations	21.11%	1.61%	15.57%	1.87%
Unspecified felony	14.44%	14.52%	12.57%	16.82%
Ordinance offense	5.56%	1.61%	7.78%	1.87%

In Washington, DC, where NICJR analyzed two ostensibly distinct populations, the overlap is even more striking. Both groups consisted almost totally of young Black men from the District’s poorest and most segregated wards. Both groups experienced poverty (often to an extreme degree), behavioral health diagnoses, and learning disabilities. Unsurprisingly given these experiences, most of these young men had prior involvement in the justice system, often including weapons-related and/or violent conduct.

There were multiple missed opportunities for public systems to intervene.

These patterns and the associated contact with multiple public systems intended to protect the well-being of young people—including the special education, health and behavioral health, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems—indicate that there were many opportunities for adults to intervene with these young people.

All the young men included in the DC fatality analysis were referred to a variety of services

and supports, often by multiple public agencies, including schools, child welfare, and the justice system. These included services such as tutoring or other academic support, therapy and other mental health services, substance use treatment, job training, and credible messenger-based mentoring. Notably, while a variety of public agencies did try to intervene in the lives of these young men, case reviews indicate that these interventions were generally ineffective, either coming too late or not ensuring the kind of follow through that could have saved their lives.

Although it is difficult to fully track the trajectory of service referrals and linkages in the information available, it does appear that, across public systems, youths’ needs escalated dramatically before many services were rendered. For example, four of the five young people included in the analysis experienced disturbing levels of abuse in their homes and multiple CPS reports. However, few in-home services were provided to support parents and reduce abusive or neglectful behaviors. In addition, it appears that the juvenile justice system’s level of engagement with these youth

rapidly progressed from non-prosecution of cases to prosecution with minimal supervision to out-of-home placements.

Patterns in Maryland were similar, and, notwithstanding the variety of challenges many of these young people were experiencing, in most cases there appear to have been multiple missed opportunities to intervene more intensively in their lives. The majority had multiple prior delinquency petitions, including either a violent incident or a firearm possession or both. Some youth had a prior petition for attempted murder. Despite this, in almost all cases, a great deal of time passed between a young person being petitioned and receiving any type of community-based services.

There are a number of reasons for this, including many cases being resolved at intake with no provision of services; case processing timelines that involved months between petition, adjudication, and disposition; and delays in services being delivered even post-disposition. Often all of the above occurred. At least half of the youth in the Maryland analysis had been petitioned but not yet had their cases resolved for one arrest when they were arrested again for another, more serious incident. In almost all cases, the court then dismissed the original petition following the filing of the new one. For some youth, this happened several times. As a result, months or even years passed between young people being petitioned and being adjudicated, which meant that there was an even longer period between when a young person was arrested and when they began to receive any kind of community-based services. This was further exacerbated by the lengthy delays between adjudication and delivery of court-ordered services.⁶⁵ In the meantime, conflicts escalated, and young people's lives remained at risk.

Methodological Overview

Although each of these research projects sought to understand characteristics of young people involved in shootings, differences in the available data meant that NICJR took distinct analytic approaches for each project.

In Washington, DC, our approach was designed

to maximize the information we could glean amid data access limitations. In the quantitative analysis of childhood risk factors for subsequent shooting involvement, we worked with CJCC to define domains of interest and identify agencies with the administrative data necessary to develop measures for each domain. CJCC then worked to obtain and link administrative data from various youth-serving public agencies, including Child and Family Services, the Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, and more. Using these data, CJCC conducted both descriptive and inferential analyses to compare characteristics and prior life experiences of young adults (ages 18–25) who were convicted of homicide or attempted homicide with a firearm to young adults with less serious criminal conduct.⁶⁶

For the child firearm fatality analysis, NICJR only had access to publicly available data from the District of Columbia Violence Fatality Review Committee, which included detailed qualitative data on the lives and trajectories of five young people (youth and young adults) who were involved in the District's juvenile justice system when they were shot and killed in 2020. The topics covered included young people's causes of death; family profiles; and involvement with public systems, including Child Protective Services, DC Public Schools, juvenile justice agencies, and more. Given the small number of cases and the detailed but qualitative descriptive data, NICJR took both inductive and deductive approaches to the analysis, coding for categories of interest such as prior juvenile justice system involvement, school engagement, and family dynamics, while also allowing unanticipated themes to arise via an open coding approach.

In Maryland, NICJR had access to varying levels of administrative records on all youth who were involved in shootings in the state from January 1, 2019, through June 30, 2023. DJS worked with the Maryland State Police (MSP) to obtain data on all shootings involving a minor victim or suspect within this timeframe. Using their first names, last names, and dates of birth, youth from the MSP dataset were matched to youth in DJS's Automated Statewide System of Information Support Tools (ASSIST) database to determine which of the youth who were involved in shootings

had also been involved in the State's juvenile justice system. For those youth who did match, NICJR had access to extensive administrative records on their involvement with the juvenile justice system both before and after the shooting incidents. DJS also provided detailed administrative data on youth who had been involved in the juvenile justice system during the same period but were not involved in shootings. For youth who were involved in shootings but did not have juvenile justice records, we had access to the more limited information available via MSP (primarily residence and demographic data).

Using these data, NICJR conducted descriptive analyses of three juvenile populations: 1) an analysis of all youth who had been involved in a shooting during the study period, regardless of DJS involvement; 2) an analysis that compared youth known to DJS who were involved in a shooting to DJS-involved youth who were not involved in a shooting;⁶⁷ and 3) an analysis of youth who were involved in a shooting while under DJS supervision.

1

An analysis of all youth who had been involved in a shooting during the study period, regardless of DJS involvement.

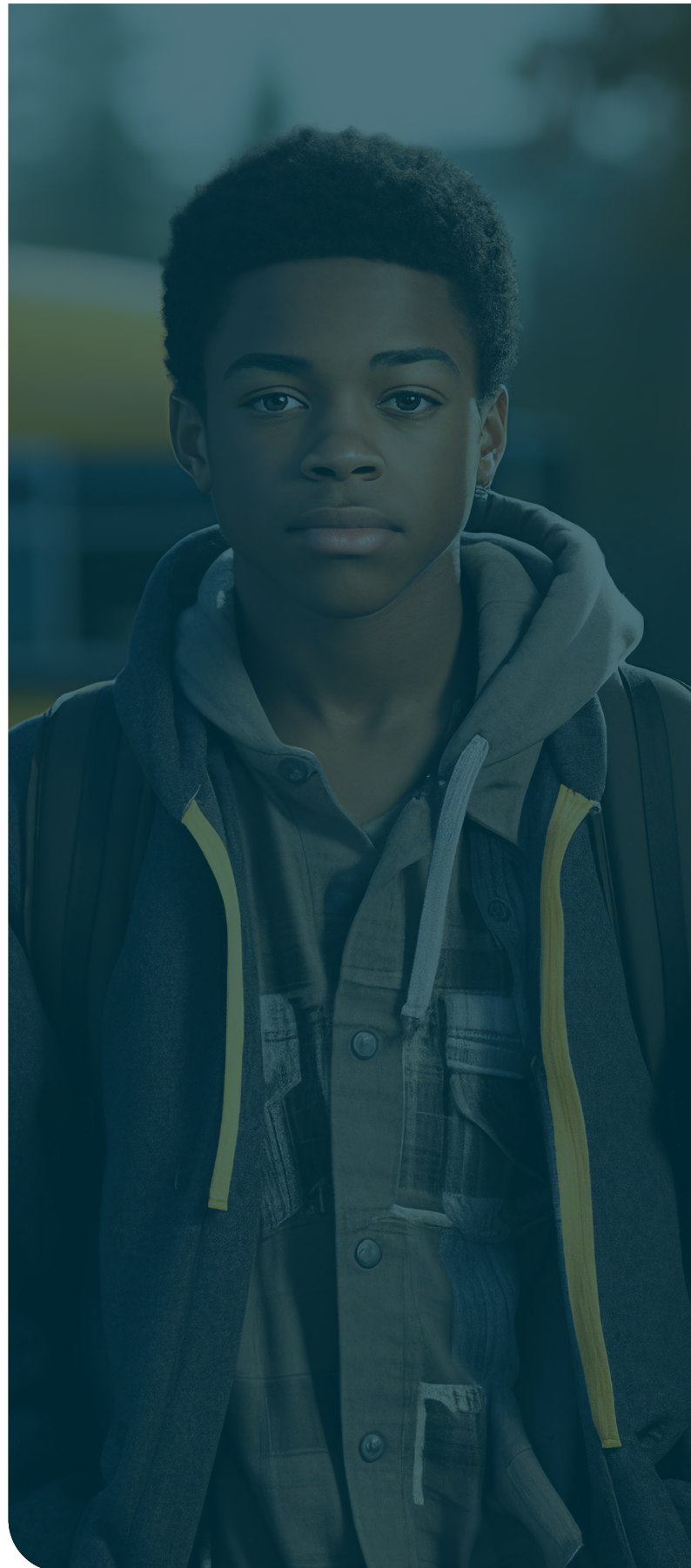
2

An analysis that compared youth known to DJS who were involved in a shooting to DJS-involved youth who were not involved in a shooting.

3

An analysis of youth who were involved in a shooting while under DJS supervision.

These analyses were supplemented by a case file review of 44 youth who were involved in shootings in 2023 while under DJS supervision. These case file reviews were important for providing a more thorough understanding of youths' lives and circumstances beyond the juvenile justice system.



Discussion and Conclusion

The number of missed opportunities for intervention in both DC and Maryland underscores the need for youth-serving public agencies to implement better processes for identifying and intervening with young people at high risk for involvement in gun violence. Although there is an extensive body of research on the factors that increase young people's risk for participating in gun violence, there is, to date, little to no guidance on how to apply this research as part of a screening, assessment, and identification process.⁶⁸

NICJR's research indicates that youth who are involved in gun violence do have a distinct set of characteristics and that these characteristics could be used to screen young people for possible intervention. It is well established that Black boys who live in high-violence neighborhoods are at elevated risk; those who have repeated contact with the justice system, particularly for escalating and violent conduct are at even greater risk. This is even more true when youth live in impoverished households, have experienced traumas, or have challenges like learning disabilities or mental health issues that make it harder to engage in school.

In Maryland, NICJR has helped the Department of Juvenile Services to use this information to identify youth under their care who may be appropriate for intervention, under the new Thrive Academy. Using our findings, NICJR helped DJS create a two-part identification process, whereby youth are first screened based on geography and their prior delinquency system involvement and then identified for intervention based on additional risk factors. As part of this first screening, DJS uses their electronic case management system to identify young people who live in geographic areas with high rates of gun violence and who have escalating justice system involvement, including at least one referral for a violent felony. Having narrowed the pool of youth under their care, DJS staff then conduct intensive reviews of youths' lives and circumstances to identify those with learning disabilities, behavioral health diagnoses, and/or trauma. These young people are then linked to credible messenger life coaches, who work intensively with the young people to give them a pathway to better outcomes. While this effort has yet to be evaluated, preliminary returns are promising. Even as DJS works to hone the intervention, the project indicates an opportunity to use data to identify young people who are at very high risk.

As part of the Youth Data and Intervention Initiative (YDII), NICJR will build on this work, conducting additional research to refine our ability to identify young people who are most susceptible to involvement in shootings and then working with youth-serving agencies to apply those findings and intervene.

The three phases of YDII



Using research and data assessment to identify the risk factors in young people who are at heightened risk of being involved in gun violence over the next ten years.



Supporting local youth-serving agencies such as school districts in using those risk factors to track when youth (ideally ages 11–13) reach the combination and collection of risk factors that make them at very high risk of future involvement in gun violence.



Designing and implementing effective and intensive interventions for youth and families who are identified through this process to prevent these youth from becoming victims or perpetrators of gun violence.

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- 67 For a detailed description of the methodology, please see the full report [here](#).
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YOUTH DATA
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