



# **GUN VIOLENCE ASSESSMENT & ACTION PLAN**

**REDUCTION & PREVENTION  
-A RENEWED STRATEGIC FOCUS-**

## **AUGUST 2023**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over much of the past decade, Columbia, SC has experienced high rates of violent crime that put the city on a par with some of the more violent cities in the country. Of particular concern is Columbia's chronic problem with gun violence. The city has had over 700 person-hit shootings since 2015—that is, criminal incidents in which a bullet hit an individual. In the past six years, one in six shooting victims has died. Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that the already-elevated number of person-hit shootings has been on the rise in recent years, which is in keeping with national trends. Formulating a clear understanding of how, when, where, and why these incidents happen is central to bringing some level of ongoing safety to affected communities. This understanding has and will continue to inform the Columbia Police Department's strategies in dealing with this issue

Shootings in Columbia are concentrated in minority communities and it appears that people age-in and then age-out of involvement in gun violence. Shootings in Columbia are also geographically concentrated with about 40% of these incidents take place in just 2% of Columbia's surface area. The CPD has implemented or is currently implementing a range of strategies to address the problem. These strategies fall under three main categories: people-focused strategies, place-based strategies, and behavior-disrupting strategies.

People-focused strategies center on arresting perpetrators, enhancing investigations, and intervening with at-risk individuals. Holding known shooters accountable is primarily the responsibility of The Violent Crimes Against Persons (VCAP) unit in the Criminal Investigations Bureau. Their work is done in conjunction with the Crime Gun Intel Unit (CGIU), which collects, analyzes, and disseminates data from all gun-involved incidents, as well as intel on gun possession cases and gun purchases. Ceasefire Columbia (CC), a focused deterrence program, seeks to intervene with those most at risk for committing acts of gun violence. The program works by liaising with the SC Department of Probation, Parole, and Pardon (PPP). Together, they identify individuals at highest risk of committing acts of gun violence and seek to dissuade them from reoffending by raising awareness of the consequences of such actions, while simultaneously connecting them with relevant service providers to help them negotiate potentially challenging circumstances that might otherwise lead them to resort to gun violence.

Following the lead of other successful jurisdictions around the country, CPD has implemented place-based strategies and focused attention on the very small number of places where gun violence is concentrated. CPD has deployed ShotSpotter Technology (SST) over the areas of the city where gun violence is most common to give officers complete, detailed, an accurate information on firearm discharges in real time. CPD also engages with community-based groups such as Serve & Connect in the neighborhoods that are most impacted by chronic gun violence. A precise understanding of the

geographical distribution of gun violence in Columbia also informs other measures to reduce gun violence, ranging from the deployment of cameras and other resources of the Columbia Real Time Crime Center (RTCC) to the prioritization of building demolitions in high-violence areas by Code Enforcement.

Behavior-disrupting strategies center on effective prosecution of illegal gun possession. This is a key factor in reducing the number of guns on the streets. Removing a perpetrator from the streets also alerts would-be shooters to the consequences of such actions. To this end, the Crime Gun Intelligence Unit (CGIU) coordinates with the ATF and federal prosecutors to bring federal charges when appropriate. The CGIU also produces and disseminates the Violent Offenders List (VOL), which identifies individuals who are active in violent crime and gun crime, and so ensures that officers and prosecutors are fully informed.

Clearly, one person-hit shooting is one too many, but Columbia is currently faced with a very high rate of such shootings. The goal, therefore, is pressing: to reduce gun violence and limit the terrible social harm wrought both on individuals and the communities in which they live. The CPD is leveraging data and new technologies to hone its strategies so that its policing is both focused and equitable, with the goal that fewer people will be harmed and communities will be able to flourish, free of the fear of gun violence.

# INTRODUCTION

According to FBI crime statistics, over much of the past decade Columbia, SC has experienced a violent crime rate significantly higher than the U.S. national average. A subset of violent crime that is of particular concern in Columbia is gun violence. The overwhelming majority of murders in Columbia are committed with a firearm and the city has had over 700 person-hit shootings since 2015; that is, criminal incidents in which a bullet hit an individual. In the past eight years, about one in six shooting victims has died; perhaps more disturbing is the fact that the already-elevated number of person-hit shootings has been on the rise in recent years, in keeping with national trends. Finding a way to resolve this problem is a top priority for the communities served by the City of Columbia Police Department. This threat assessment regarding gun violence in Columbia has been prepared with two main goals in mind: first, to better understand what is happening with regard to gun violence; and, second, to outline the CPD's varied ongoing and future strategies for reducing gun violence.

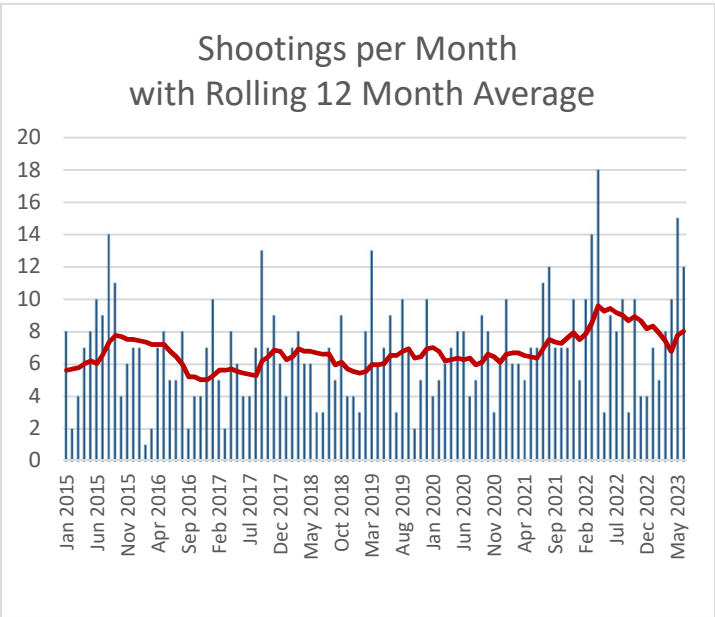
## Part I: A DESCRIPTION OF THE GUN VIOLENCE PROBLEM

### Local Trends and National Context

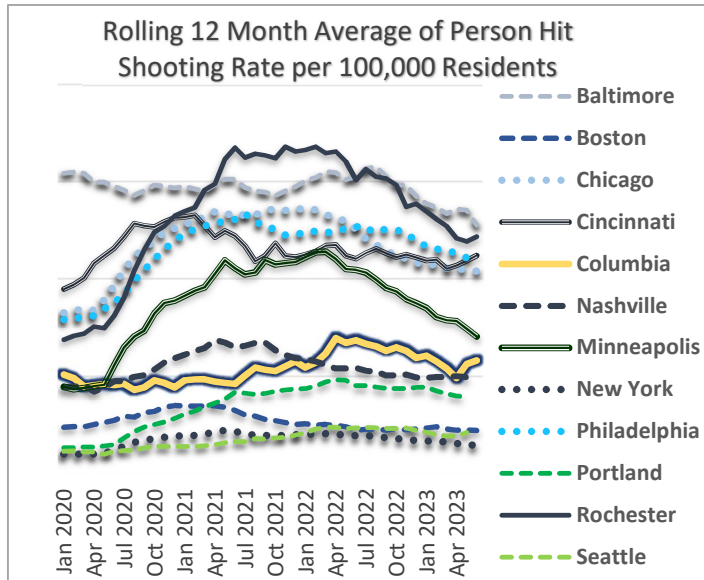
Over the past eight years, (2015-2022) Columbia has averaged 80.7 person-hit shootings per year, with no year having fewer than 60 person-hit shootings.

A look at monthly shooting trends in Columbia reveal a somewhat complicated picture. The number of shootings Columbia sees in a month can vary widely, from as many as 14 or more, to as few as one or two. However, from about 2017 through 2020 the average number of shootings per month remained relatively stable. The numbers trended

upwards from 2020 onwards and peaked in early 2022. While there was a decrease in average monthly shootings in early 2023, the incidence of gun violence in Columbia remains high and difficult to predict.



There is a dearth of timely and detailed data on national-level trends in gun violence. However, several jurisdictions publish gun violence data publicly on a regular basis. This data allows us to get some limited sense of how Columbia's gun violence problem compares to national-level trends. While certain cities, including Seattle, WA, Boston, MA, and New York, NY are safer, other cities, such as Rochester, NY, Chicago, IL, Baltimore, MD, and Philadelphia, PA have a much higher rate of gun violence.

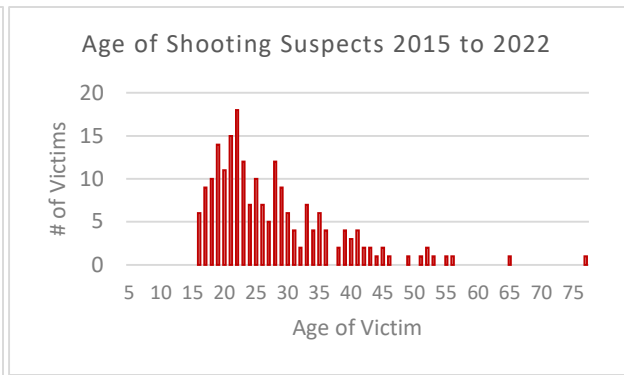
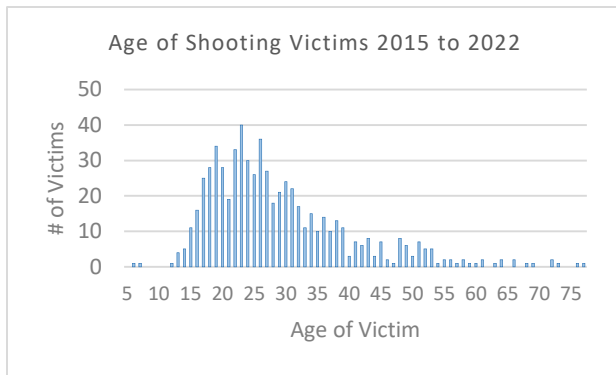


Recent trends in gun violence in other cities often mirror those seen in Columbia, with large increases in shootings sometime after the beginning of 2020 followed by an extended period of declining gun violence.

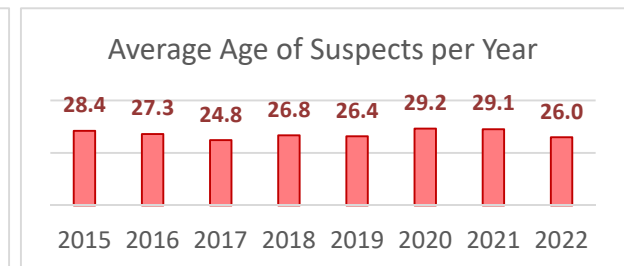
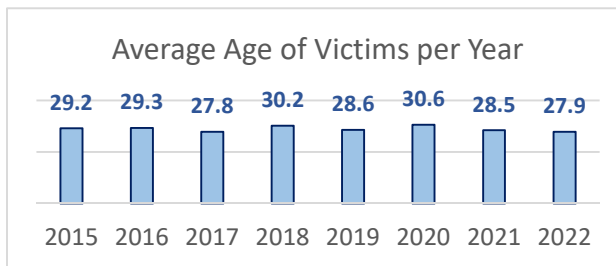
Gun violence is clearly an urgent problem for many American cities and Columbia is no exception. Gun violence rates in Columbia fit squarely in the middle of the pack when compared to cities for which data is readily available. There are, however, success stories from around the country regarding how to address these issues and, by following the example of other successful cities and by continuing with and expanding upon the strategies already in place, there are clear signs that CPD will be able to build on what has been achieved to date and significantly lower the rates of gun violence in the city.

## The Demographics of Gun Violence

As has often found to be the case in American cities, gun violence in Columbia is concentrated in minority communities. In the past eight years, 92% of person hit shooting victims have been Black, as have 95% of the identified suspects. Most victims and suspects have also been found to be male (85%, and 91% respectively). The age distribution of shooting victims and known suspects also mirror one another: the risk of being the victim of a shooting rapidly increases in the late teens, peaks at the early 20s, and slowly tapers off until the late 30s. Many shooters remain unidentified, but the age distribution of the known shooting suspects shows a pattern similar to that of the shooting victims.



The age distribution of shooting victims and suspects has also remained stable from year-to-year. For example, over the past eight years the average age of shooting victims has remained between 27 and 30 years old. For suspects it has been between 24 and 29. More significant, is the fact that the average age of both victims and suspects is *lower* in 2022 than it was in 2015.

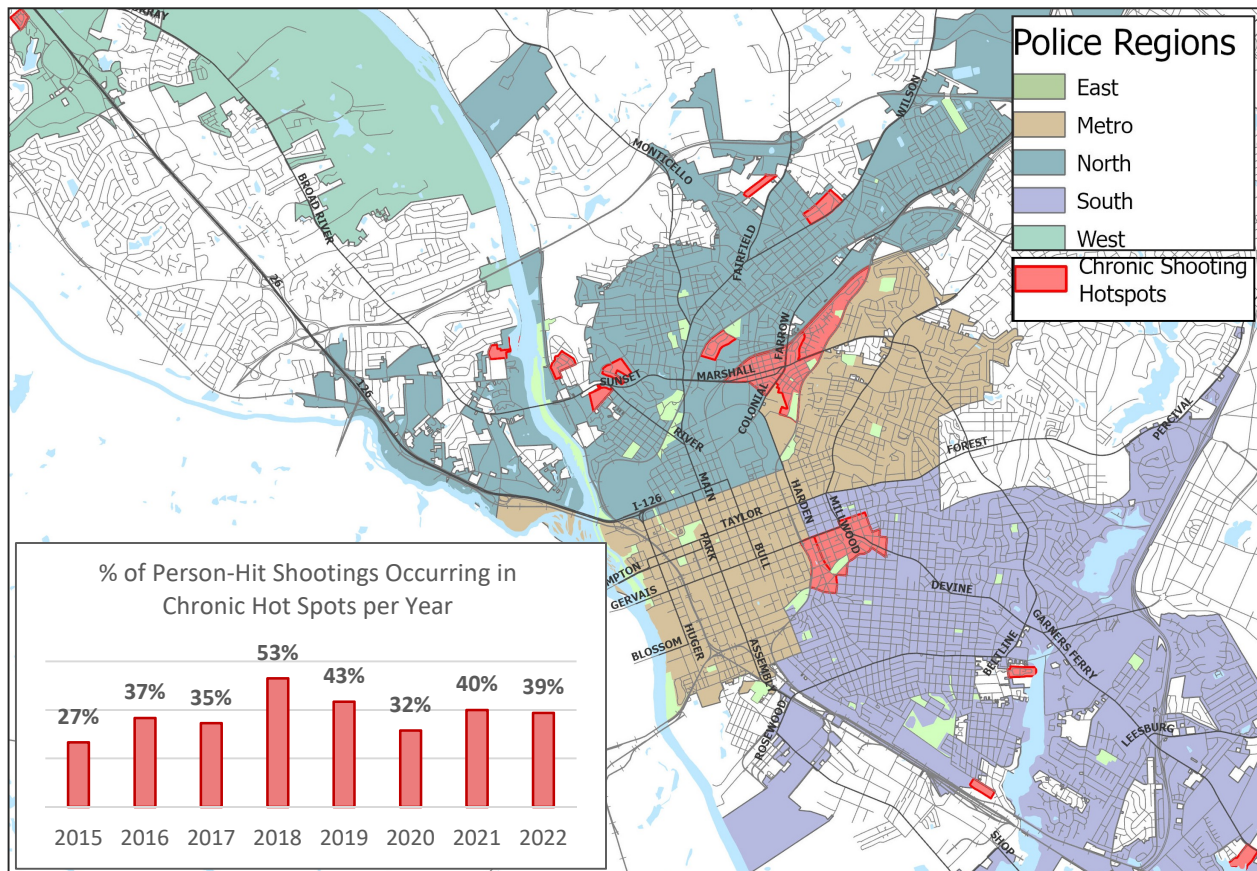


This data indicates that gun violence is not occurring among just one single cohort of individuals but that instead people are regularly aging into and aging out of involvement in gun violence in Columbia.

## Locations Associated with Gun Violence

Although Columbia has a chronic gun violence problem, very few locations in the city are actually affected by the problem. In 2020, for instance, 77% of the police department's report areas did not experience a single person-hit shooting. In that same year, just 9% of the report areas contained 63% of all shootings. This data is consistent with the distribution of shootings in other years. Further analysis of the geographical distribution of person-hit shootings shows that the areas that have the most acute and chronic concentrations of shootings have a combined surface area of just 1.34 square miles. Over the past eight years, these areas have accounted for 38% of all person-hit shootings, even though they comprise just 2% of Columbia's surface area. These areas consistently represent a disproportionate number of shootings, accounting for no less than 27% of

person-hit shootings in any given year, but at times accounting for **more than half** (54%) of such shootings.



## Behaviors Associated with Gun Violence

Manifestly, because shootings can only be committed by someone in possession of a firearm, gun possession is a behavior very closely associated with gun violence. Moreover, many people who are likely to engage in gun violence are prohibited from possessing firearms. Indeed, CPD officers have seized more than 700 guns every year since 2019, a figure that demonstrates just how common illegal gun carrying is in Columbia.

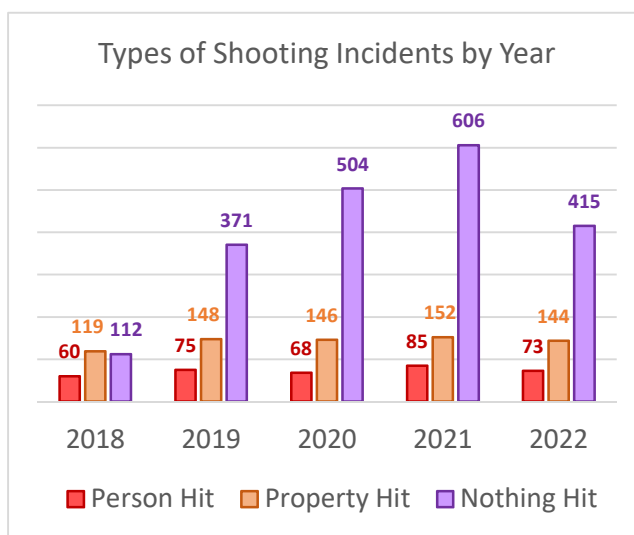
A look at recent incident reports gives us some sense of the types of occurrences that precipitate shootings in Columbia. An analysis of 2022 shooting-incident reports found that, in 26% of cases, a sudden altercation led to the shooting; in 11% of the cases the shootings were the result of an ongoing dispute; 3% of cases were domestic violence incidents, and 4% of the shootings were the result of a robbery attempt. While 56% of the cases examined revealed no clear cause, prior analyses indicate that a large portion of these unknown cases are likely the result of ongoing disputes, in which a lack of victim cooperation—a relatively frequent occurrence—resulted in the specific cause of the shooting remaining unresolved.

## Part II: STRATEGIES TO REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE

### Why Reducing Person-Hit Shootings is a Priority

A person-hit shooting is the quintessential act of gun violence. In the past six years almost one out of six person-hit shooting victims has died as a result of his or her injuries. Tragically, these cases sometimes involve children, as was the case when seven-year-old Knowledge Sims was murdered in April 2020 after bullets were fired into his family's home. While many do survive such shootings, they are often left with life-altering injuries. Martha Childress, a USC freshman, lost the use of her legs after a shooting; similarly, Howard Boone, who was soon to enter the US Army as a Second Lieutenant, was paralyzed from the neck down after being shot while visiting his Omega Psi Phi brothers in Columbia. Clearly, a single person-hit shooting is one too many, but Columbia is currently faced with an unacceptably high rate of such shootings. The goal therefore is evident: to reduce gun violence and limit the terrible social harm wrought both on the individual victims as well as the communities in which these incidents occur.

There are other types of criminal events that could reasonably be categorized under the heading of gun violence, including incidents in which only property is struck by gunfire or in which a firearm is discharged but nothing is hit. While the number of these incidents is much greater, the social harm of these incidents is significantly lower. In the past several years, there have been two property-hit shooting incidents for every person-hit incident, and more than four times as many incidents in which nothing was hit.<sup>1</sup> However, reducing the



problem of property-hit and nothing-hit shootings is both more difficult, and less urgent, than reducing the problem of person-hit shootings. Necessarily, the latter must remain the priority for the CPD because of the individual and social harm they portend.

While the CPD's gun violence reduction plan should and does have one primary goal—the reduction of person-hit shootings—there is no singular strategy available to attain this goal. Rather, the CPD has implemented, and is currently implementing, a range of strategies to address the problem. Moving forward, a cornerstone of CPD's gun violence reduction strategy will be ongoing coordination/partnership

<sup>1</sup> A large increase in the number of nothing-hit cases in 2019 was the result of ShotSpotter implementation



with the newly created City of Columbia Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) which will focus on prevention, intervention, and restoration to reduce rates of gun violence. CPD's various gun violence reduction strategies will lend support to the OVP in various settings. These strategies fall under three main categories, which will be discussed below: people focused strategies, place-based strategies, and behavior-disrupting strategies.

## **People-Focused Strategies for Reducing Gun**

### **Violence: Investigation, Arrest, and Intervention**

The primary person-focused method for reducing person-hit shootings is the arrest and successful prosecution of shooters. This is undertaken most frequently by the Violent Crimes Against Persons (VCAP) unit in the Criminal Investigations Bureau. VCAP is responsible for investigating nearly all person-hit shootings in Columbia. Since fall 2019, VCAP's person-hit shooting investigations have been supported by the work of CPD's Crime Gun Intel Unit (CGIU). The CGIU collects, analyzes, and disseminates NIBIN data (linking guns to multiple incidents), eTrace data (which identifies the last known purchaser of every seized gun), and otherwise offers case support for incidents involving firearms.

In addition to the prosecution of known shooters, the CPD also deploys a program—Ceasefire Columbia—which identifies individuals who are assessed as being at highest risk for committing acts of gun violence, and which sets out to intervene before a shooting occurs. The Ceasefire Columbia (CC) coordinator works with the SC Department of Probation, Parole, and Pardon Services (PPP) to identify people currently under PPP supervision who are at highest risk of committing future violent acts. These are primarily people who have been charged with illegal gun carrying in Columbia, or have been charged as a shooting suspect in Columbia. Other factors such as an individual's previous criminal history and supervision level, are also taken into account. Once a suitable group of offenders is identified, the PPP and the Ceasefire Coordinator organize and hold a notification meeting, wherein the pre-selected offenders are made aware that they are under special scrutiny vis-à-vis local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies regarding any potential acts of gun violence or illegal gun carrying. The offenders are also put in direct contact with community- and government-based service providers. These providers help offenders overcome any number of problems they may be facing in their personal lives, which may well be contributing factors regarding future involvement in gun violence.

After the notification meeting, the Ceasefire Coordinator keeps track of any arrests of Ceasefire offenders in order to be sure that CPD and its law enforcement partners are always prepared to take appropriate action against those who re-offend. The Ceasefire Coordinator also stays in regular contact with the selected offenders. This provides offenders with assistance should problems arise that could be resolved by CPD's service provider partners. In other words, the Ceasefire Coordinator is a first point of contact

and can assess what kind of external assistance is needed. The Ceasefire Coordinator also remains in regular contact with the service providers to better facilitate the flow of services to the selected offenders when possible.

The Ceasefire program aims to dissuade high risk offenders from committing future acts of gun violence by raising their awareness of the consequences of such actions, while simultaneously attempting to address the day-to-day problems these individuals may well be facing, and which may well be causal in future gun violence. The program reflects a significant body of criminological research, the consensus of which is deterrent strategies have among “the strongest and most consistent anti-violence effects” of any strategy used to reduce criminal violence.<sup>2</sup> As such, Ceasefire is a prime example of CPD’s efforts to engage in best practice policing and to put proven theory into practice.

## **Place-Based Strategies: Focused Enforcement and Intervention**

An analysis of the places associated with gun violence in Columbia reveals that a small number of places have a perennial and concentrated problem with repeated acts of gun violence. For this reason, CPD has tailored its enforcement response to focus narrowly on these areas and to engage in enforcement strategies that narrowly focus on deterring illegal gun carrying.

To this end, the CPD has deployed ShotSpotter Technology (SST) in areas that have historically experienced the most gun violence. SST uses a series of acoustic sensors that detect gunshots. This information is analyzed and immediately sent out to CPD officers via a smartphone app. This process allows officers to respond to gunshots more quickly than the traditional method which relied on citizen reports via telephone. The former method was slow and inaccurate and may have missed as many as 75% of gunshots, whereas SST quickly detects nearly all gunshots in the deployment zone. Moreover, SST relays much more precise information regarding the exact location of the gunshot. This more complete, accurate, and timely information on gunshots allows for immediate deployment to the scene, faster medical attention to potential victims, an increased probability of identifying suspects and witnesses, and greatly enhanced ballistics evidence collection. As a result, officers are now able to more frequently locate shell-casings or firearms at crime scenes. To further bolster CPD’s ballistics evidence collection efforts, CPD has also recently deployed a ballistics detection K-9 unit and thermal imaging devices.

This evidence is crucial for investigative purposes, both on a local and a national level. The large amount of ballistics evidence collected by CPD is entered into the National Integrated Ballistic Information

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<sup>2</sup> Abt, Thomas, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence – and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets*, 2019, Basic Books, p.87 & 88.

Network (NIBIN), which logs microscopic images of ballistics evidence (i.e. discharged shell casings) and can compare all pieces of ballistics evidence against each other. By identifying any items that were discharged from the same firearm, the CPD and its local, state, and federal law enforcement partners can identify guns used in multiple crimes and, ultimately, prosecute identified perpetrators, whether within or beyond the immediate jurisdiction.

CPD has deployed 20 automated license plate readers (LPRs) at various locations as a part of a multi-agency initiative. These LPRs are used in previously identified areas of chronic and concentrated gun violence to enhance enforcement activity in these areas. The deployment of these LPRs are complemented by a series of over 600 cameras positioned across the city that make use of the latest in surveillance camera technology. In addition to the introduction of this technology, CPD has centralized intelligence gathering and dissemination with a Real Time Crime Center (RTCC). The purpose of the RTCC, vis-à-vis gun violence, is to leverage technology to allow officers to respond to crimes more quickly and with better operational intelligence.

In addition to this focused policing, CPD also partners with community-based organizations to reduce gun violence in disadvantaged communities where the majority of incidents take place. For example, CPD works closely with Serve & Connect, a nonprofit organization that focuses “on fostering positive change through sustainable police and community partnerships.”<sup>3</sup> Serve & Connect has recently received a Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program grant. The program, which sets out to reduce youth-involved violent crime, is focusing its efforts in the communities identified by CPD as those that are most impacted by gun violence and violent crime. Through the Innovation Grant program, the CPD’s Police Athletic League has been re-established with the purpose of creating more opportunities to engage with our youth. The grant will also support the implementation of a credible messenger program which will ensure that community needs are clearly communicated so that the relevant response or service can be provided post-haste.

## **Behavior Disrupting Strategies: Gun Seizures, Partnerships, and Intelligence**

Put plainly, you need a gun to shoot someone. It follows, then, that the CPD’s ongoing focus on preventing individuals from illegally carrying guns can have an impact on gun violence.

Annual gun seizures by the CPD have greatly increased over the past few years: Over 700 guns have been seized every year since 2019, which is over 100 more guns seizures than were seen in any year from 2014 to 2018.

The prosecution of these crimes is an important element when considering how to affect the behavior of bad actors. The Crime Gun Intelligence Unit (CGIU) reviews all arrests for illegal gun possession in the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.serveandconnect.org/>

city of Columbia and identifies cases that are eligible for federal prosecution. CGIU personnel then work with the CPD's federal partners at the ATF and the US Attorney's Office to bring charges when appropriate. To this end, the CPD has created a position for a Special Assistant United States Attorney (SAUSA) to support this effort. The SAUSA, a city attorney, works with the United States Attorney's Office and aids in the prosecution of cases related to gun violence. CGIU personnel also work with the State Solicitors' Offices to ensure that prosecutors at the state level are aware of important cases and have the tools they need to appropriately prosecute gun possession cases.

Identifying and pursuing bad actors is also part of the strategy of disruption. Accordingly, the CGIU also collates intelligence to produce the Violent Offenders List (VOL), which draws on Tampa PD's Violent Impact Player (VIP) program, which reduced violent crime in Tampa by 7.9%, according to a study conducted in 2017.<sup>4</sup> The CPD's VOL includes people who have been identified as involved in violent crime or gun crime in Columbia. Individuals are assigned a numerical score based on several factors, including: previous firearm arrests, previous violent crime arrests, gang affiliation, past gun crime victimization, involvement in NIBIN linked incidents, and probation status. The highest scoring offenders are placed on the VOL, which is then disseminated throughout CPD and shared with local, state, and federal law enforcement partners. The CGIU works with other law enforcement agencies, as well as federal and state prosecutors, to support cases involving offenders identified on the VOL.

Because a certain percentage of person-hit shooting cases are gang related, CGIU personnel also support the Midland's Gang and Fugitive Taskforce (MGFTF) as needed. Comprised of officers from several local law enforcement agencies, the MGFTF addresses gang-related crime in the Midlands of South Carolina.

While illegal gun carrying is the most frequently discussed precursor to gun violence, there are other closely-related behaviors that precipitate gun violence. These include armed robberies, domestic disputes, and illegal drug sales, among others. Additional data collection and analysis is needed to better understand the ways in which these behaviors contribute to gun violence in Columbia. This would allow the CPD to formulate additional strategies to further disrupt the problematic behaviors that lead to gun violence.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, gun violence in Columbia is a serious problem, and it is not one that will improve without an effective response by the City of Columbia and its partners. Drawing on data-driven analyses and examples of successful departments around the nation, the Columbia Police Department has

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/acting-attorney-general-matthew-g-whitaker-recognizes-outstanding-contributions-project-safe>

implemented a variety of strategies designed to reduce gun violence, and the CPD continues to refine and expand upon those strategies in response to what is an ever-growing problem. By focusing narrowly on the people, places, and behaviors most closely associated with or affected by gun violence, the CPD is combining enforcement and intervention to proactively reduce gun violence. This focused, balanced approach to the people places and behaviors associated with gun violence has been shown to be the most effective way to reduce the problem. Importantly, it also means the CPD can operate in a manner that does not make our most vulnerable communities feel simultaneously over-policed and under-protected, as could well be the case with other less narrowly focused responses. Manifestly, our policing must be both fair and effective to retain the trust of the communities we serve. To achieve this, we intend to maintain and further pursue partnerships that will underscore our ongoing commitment to fair, impartial, and constitutionally sound policing, a process that will reduce violence in the community for the benefit of all.

