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FEATURED TOP STORY

GUNS OUT OF CONTROL

Shootings are up in and around Charlottesville. Officials can't explain why.

Alice Berry

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Members of the Charlottesville Police Department inspect a vehicle where a fatal shooting occurred at the intersection of Hardy Drive and Page Street on Wednesday.

MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Alice Berry

Shootings are up in the city of Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

It's coming up in City Council and Board of Supervisors meetings, School Board meetings and budget work sessions.

Charlottesville Police Chief Michael Kochis says his officers are responding to at least one shots-fired call every day. The Albemarle County Police Department says it's responded to roughly one shots-fired call every other day between January and February.

Gun violence in Charlottesville and Albemarle County has now taken the lives of 13 people and injured 22 others since Sept. 1 of last year, according to an ongoing Daily Progress tally.

In Charlottesville, the number of gun deaths this year to date is now more than double what it was last year at this time.

And while there has only been one gun death in Albemarle County this year, versus three this time last year, gun violence overall is up 9% over the county's three-year average, according to the police department.

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In Charlottesville, the police department has started to focus patrols on "hot spot" neighborhoods, implemented a "community walk and talk" program, held a gun violence forum and recently floated a gun buyback program. In the county, the

commonwealth's attorney has requested more staff to handle the increase case load. "There's been an increase in gun violence specifically," Commonwealth's Attorney James Hingeley told county officials during a recent county budget work session where he requested two more full-time employees. "That's created a lot of additional work on our part, of course."

Albemarle County Police Department spokeswoman Bridgette Butynski cautioned using shots-fired reports as an indication of a rise in gun violence.

"Albemarle is largely a rural area, and the reason I mention that is some of these calls are a result of people hearing hunters or situations like that," she told The Daily Progress. "Not all these calls are from the violence that we have seen over the last year."

And experts and officials say the area is not unique; cities across the country are reporting an increase in violent crime.

But that hasn't made it any easier for residents to grapple with the damage gun violence has inflicted on the community or come to terms with why it has spiked in the past six months.

"I don't get the impression that the Charlottesville area is unique," Hamilton Lombard, a demographer at UVA's Weldon Cooper Center for Public service, which tracks demographic data, told The Daily Progress. "Larger cities had a crime wave earlier. Some smaller cities are having it later, but not all of them."

Nationally, while the total violent crime rate in the United States has not increased significantly in recent years, the murder rate has risen sharply, according to the Pew Research Center. Between 2019 and 2020, the murder rate increased 30%.

"This is not an Albemarle County, not a city of Charlottesville or University of Virginia problem," Albemarle County Board of Supervisors Chair Donna Price told The Daily Progress. "This is a nationwide issue and what we really need is leadership at the highest level."

Albemarle County Police Chief Sean Reeves said the root cause is gangs.

“This increase is largely driven by the shootings in our community that are being linked to individuals with known gang affiliations,” Reeves told The Daily Progress in a prepared statement.

His remarks echo a county report from last fall that pinned the rise in gun crime on middle school- and high school-age children who were joining gangs.

Multiple requests to Reeves for further detail on this assessment went unanswered. When The Daily Progress approached Reeves for comment at a county meeting this past week, he declined to respond, saying he had another meeting to attend.

Lombard and Price said there is no single reason behind the uptick in gun violence the area is experiencing.

“We live in an era right now where culturally, around the country, the ease of access to weapons can quickly lead to violence with those weapons,” Price said.

However, she said the county was coming closer to identifying the cause of the increase in gun violence.

“I do believe that we have been able to identify some specific individuals and then some specific groups that have primarily been engaged in this,” Price said.

Lombard pointed to financial difficulties as one explanation.

“During the pandemic, there was a lot of economic upheaval. A lot of people were knocked out of routine,” Lombard said.

That could have affected more young men, who make up a disproportionate number of the people who commit and are victims of violent crimes, Lombard said. In Charlottesville and Albemarle County, the parties on both sides of the recent gun violence, suspected shooters and their victims, have been disproportionately Black male youths.

Members of Charlottesville's B.U.C.K. Squad, a group that tries to deescalate tensions before they erupt into violence, say that the poverty in the community is the root of the gun violence problem, because it creates family trauma and robs Black children of opportunities to constructively engage with others, particularly in the area of conflict resolution.

"This is an example of the continuous thing that's been going on with the kids," B.U.C.K. Squad member Bryan Page said after the death of Justice Killel at a Cherry Avenue convenience store on March 4. "I don't know how many murders we've got to suffer before we realize and understand that this is a real thing that we've got to do something about."

Years of academic research has found a strong correlation between poverty and violent crime. Efforts to expand economic opportunity and reduce poverty have been linked to lower rates of crime.

The area's population growth may play a role in the increase; though Lombard, who studies population growth, said it would be a minor factor.

"Crime is heavily young males, and that's generally not the population that's growing," Lombard said. "Overall, the growth we're having is older populations."

Though gun violence in the area may appear an intractable issue, Price said she had confidence in county police.

"I feel comforted in knowing that Albemarle County has an exceptional police force," Price said, pointing to the department's low vacancy rate of roughly 6%.

"One of the things we have to do is continue to support law enforcement, so that we can have more visible presence of law enforcement in the community," Price said. "Because that visible presence is an actual deterrent to crime."

In Charlottesville, the police force has been struggling with attrition.

According to Kochis, the Charlottesville Police Department should have 110 officers but currently operates with 81.

Kochis has said it's hurt the police force's ability, not only to investigate reported crimes but patrol neighborhoods and respond to community needs in real time.

"Over the last four or five years, this police department has stopped engaging with the community," Kochis told The Daily Progress last month ahead of his community forum on gun violence. "We stopped having National Night Out, we stopped doing the Community Police Academy, we stopped doing these programs that were designed to involve the community with the police department and build meaningful relationships."

Kochis said his community walks have made one thing clear:

"They want us to be out there meeting with members of the community policing in a procedurally just way and in a way that treats people fairly with dignity and respect," he said. "But also in a way where people don't feel comfortable walking around in broad daylight with a gun."

A working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research indicates that when a city expands its police force, violent crime and arrests for violent crime fall, suggesting that a police presence deters crime. At the same time, having more officers means more people get arrested for crimes such as loitering and drinking in public; Black people are disproportionately targeted by these arrests.

Price, who was worked as a prosecutor, defense counsel and trial judge, said that any response to a rise in crime cannot end at arrest. She said she supports looking for alternatives to imprisonment.

"That can often prevent people from falling into the abyss where they don't see anything coming out," Price said.