

Youth Firearm Injury Report

Indianapolis, Indiana

2016–2023



O'NEILL

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND
ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

IUPUI

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SECTION 1. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the past seven-years (2016-2023) youth firearm injuries in Indianapolis, Indiana have increased substantially, particularly gun-related deaths among young people. Youth homicide rates have tripled from 3.3 deaths per 100,000 young people in 2016 to 9.9 per 100,000 in 2023. Nonfatal shootings, however, are more prevalent than homicides. For every homicide, there are three to four nonfatal shootings.

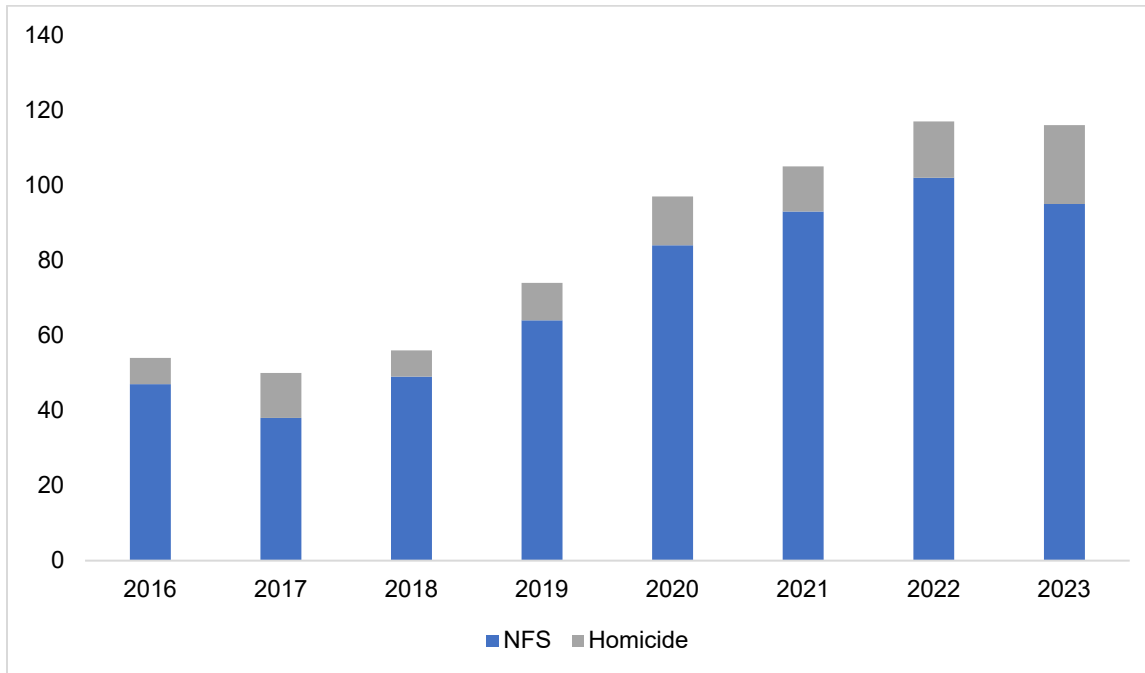
Racial disparities exist among youth affected by firearm injuries, Black youth are 9 times more likely to be a victim compared to white and Hispanic youth.

The majority of young victims are 16 and 17 years of age, and 7% of them experience repeat firearm injuries. Children 12 years of age and younger are most often injured during an unintentional shooting or by being an unintended target.

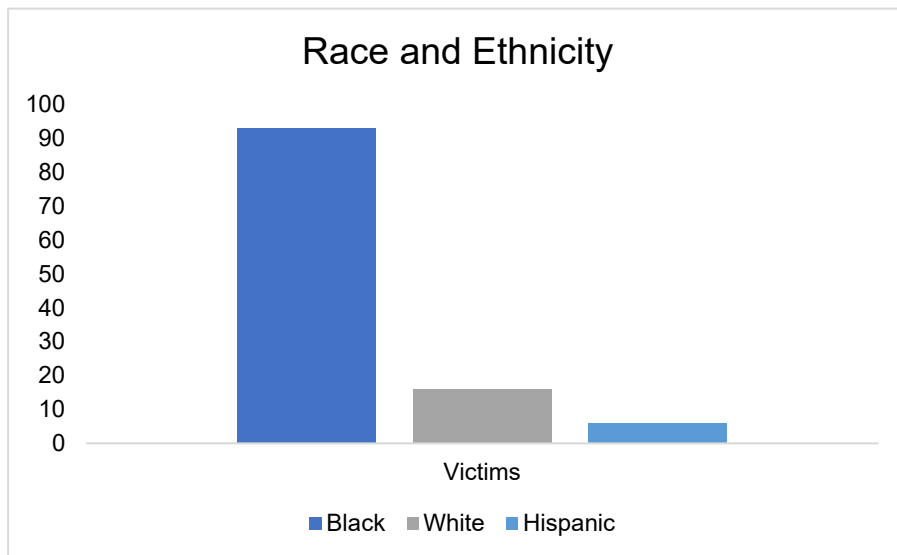
Youth described the role of social media, the prevalence of guns, and prior exposure to gun violence as key reasons for the increase in youth gun violence.

Recommendations to help address youth firearm injuries include the Office of Public Health and Safety (OPHS) should expand the Indy Peace Fellowship program to focus on young people between the ages of 12-17 without taking away from the 18-30/35 efforts. This age group (12-17) is the most at risk for both becoming victims of youth gun violence and having repeat injuries. Additionally, the city should continue the Nonfatal Shooting Advocates program through the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD) and develop partnerships with community groups to ensure that victims and families are connected with the behavioral and social services they need following a nonfatal injury. Given the number of unintentional shootings that harm children, the city should partner with community groups to provide free gun locks, gun safes, as well as educational materials and public health messaging campaigns on the importance of safe storage practices for firearms. All youth programs and violence reduction efforts within the city should be evaluated to determine effectiveness. Lastly, the city should include an Advisory Committee of key stakeholders and youth to help develop and evaluate youth focused interventions.

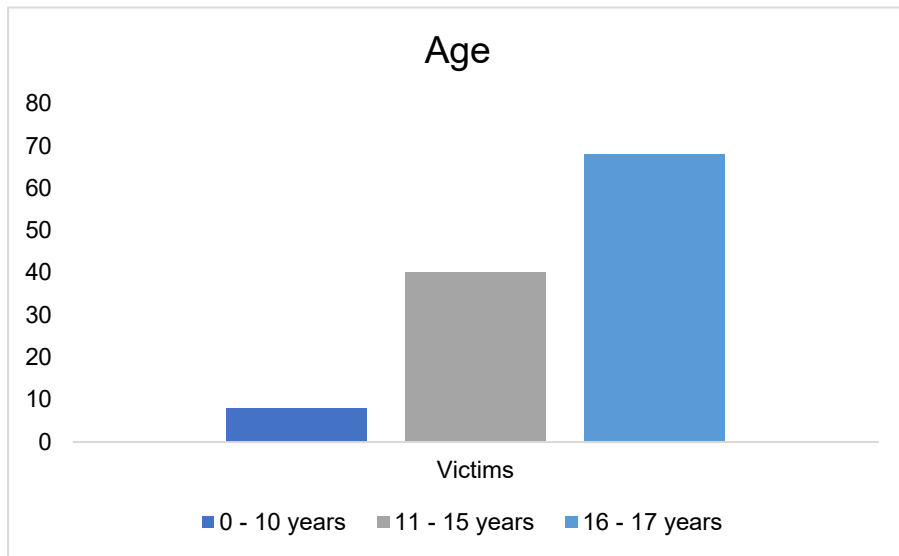
SECTION 2. DESCRIPTIVE DATA



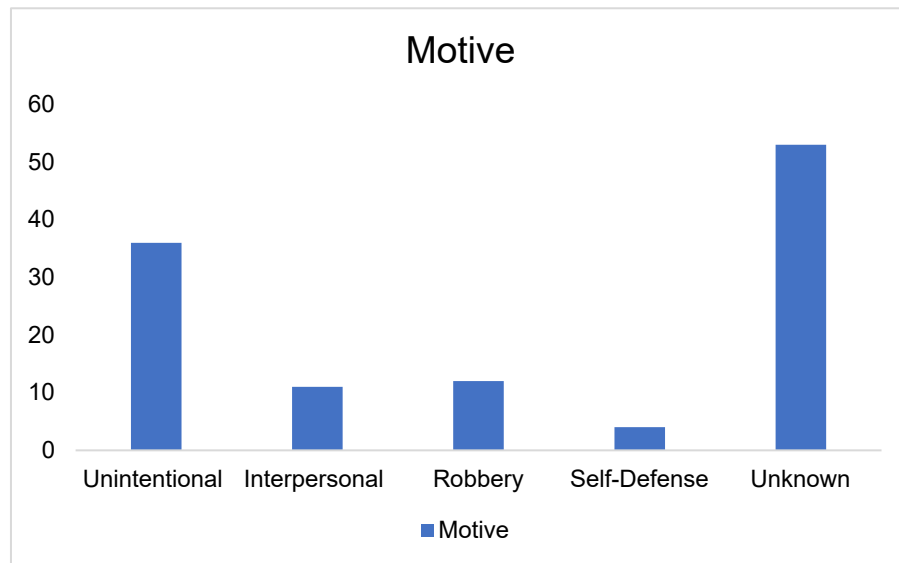
- Youth firearm injuries have increased by 15 times from 2016 to 2023.
- For every 100,000 children in Indianapolis in 2023, 48 were hurt in a shooting, an increase from 33 per 100,000 in 2016.



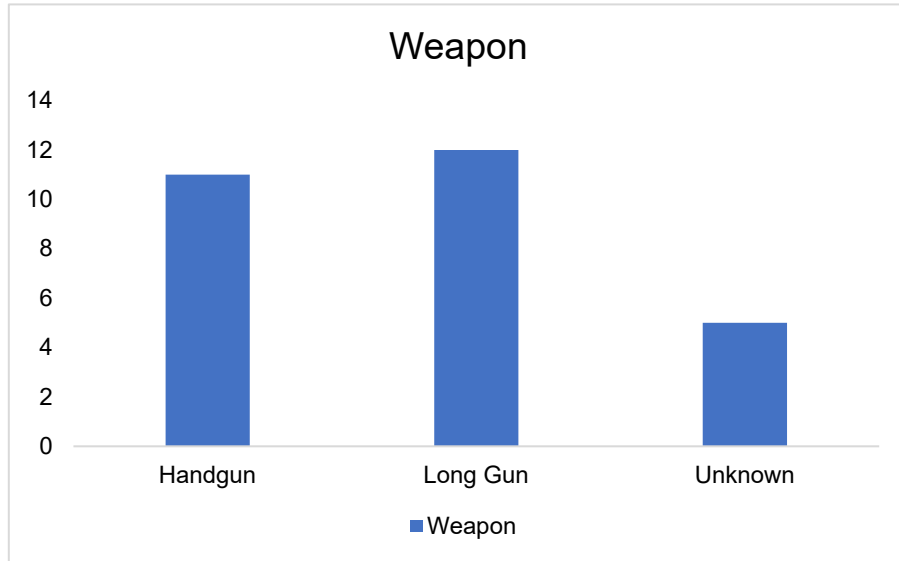
- Black youth become shooting victims at disproportionately higher rates than other groups. For every 100,000 Black youth in Indianapolis, 123 were hurt in a shooting compared to a rate of 17 per 100,000 for white youth.



- 59% of youth firearm injuries happen to young people between 16 and 17 years of age.

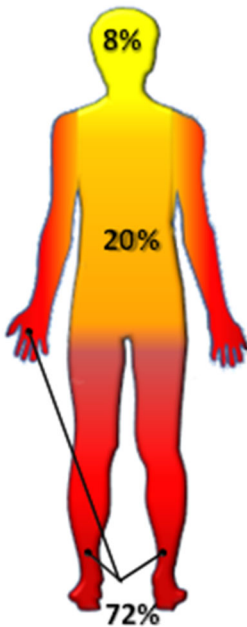


- Of those with known motives, the majority of shootings involving youth are unintentional/accidental.



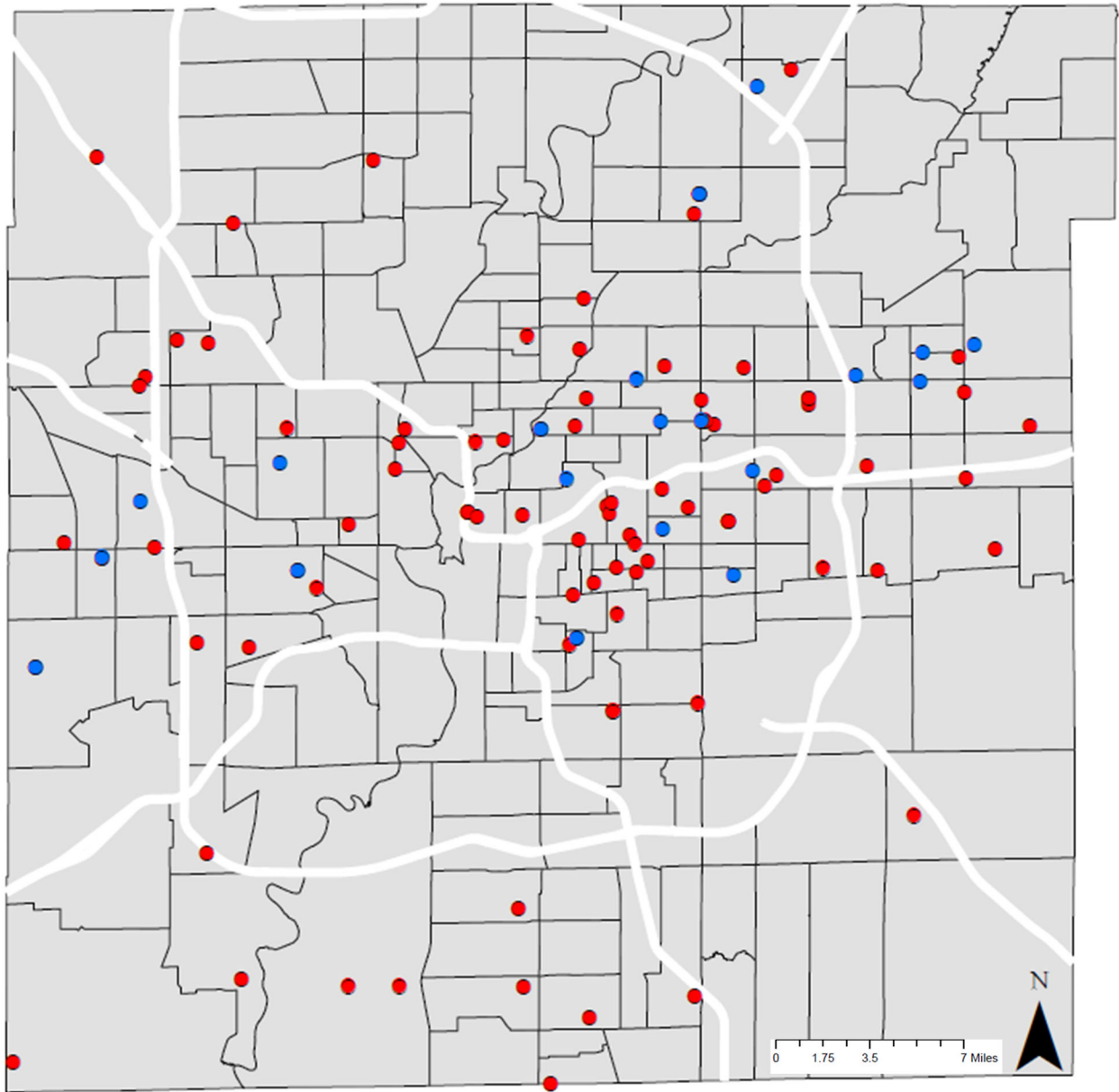
- Firearms are the most common type of weapon documented in youth injuries.

Firearm injury severity



- Nearly 75% of youth gunshot wounds are to the arms, legs, hands and feet.

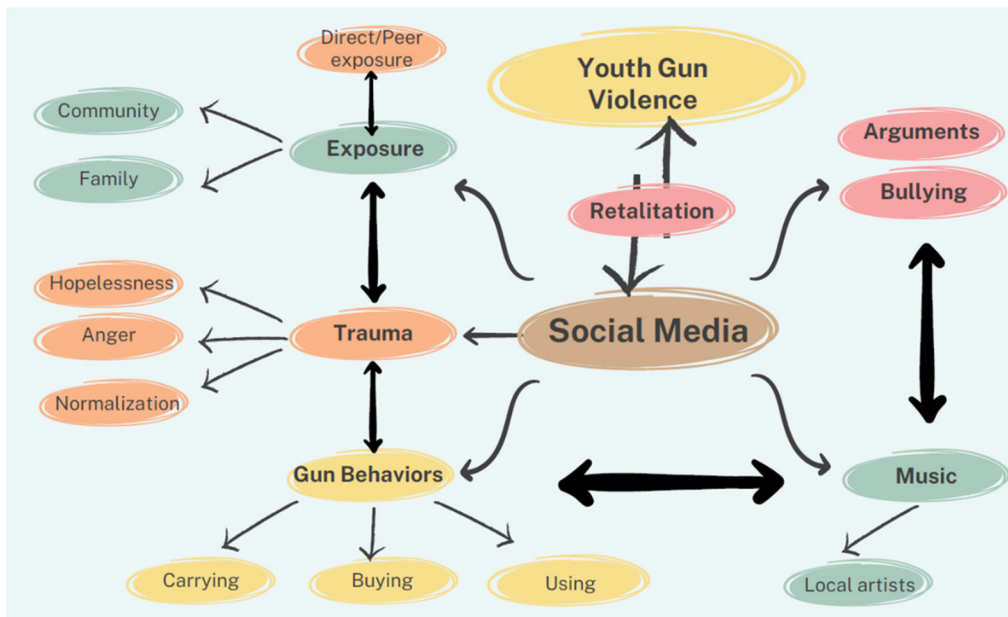
Locations of youth firearm injuries



- NFS
- Homicide

- Youth firearm injuries happen throughout the city but are more highly concentrated on the east side of Indianapolis.

SECTION 3. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS



Youth gun violence is complex. Young people surveyed expressed the importance of social media, the prevalence of guns, a social norm of retaliation, and how prior trauma impacted their views of the world and potential involvement in gun violence.

Social media in particular is a huge contributor to the issue because it exposes young people to gun violence. Their worlds and world views are often based on social media. For instance, seeing other young people post content about guns makes it appear that “everyone” has guns and therefore they feel they need one too.

“Big time. Big time. Usually, you’ll see videos of little boys toting guns and rapping about drugs and money and girls and stuff like that...there’s a little boy, like 9 and he raps about slapping girls and toting guns and drugs and rapping.” Youth Participant

Social media also facilitates where and how youth buy and sell guns and is the nexus of starting beefs/arguments and fueling their need for retaliation. For instance, young people described how a family member who was killed can be disrespected on social media or through music. That notion of disrespect can launch their need to retaliate or take action against the individual and/or group responsible. Additionally, simply being associated with someone or being friends with them on social media can also make a young person a target for retaliation. That is, they can be shot by someone they have never met in “real life.”

“Social media? It really, like with my friend that passed a couple years ago and the people that’s into it with me, it really like, i feel a rage in my body...Somebody sending me what somebody else said about my dead friend that passed. So, it makes me want to go get retaliation. So, I try to stay away from social media unless I’m talking to my friends.” Youth Participant

“It comes from somebody killing your friend, so you gotta go retaliate. And then it’s a never-ending cycle. I’m going to kill you, you gonna kill me, I’m gonna keep killing you, you gonna kill me, and then nobody stops. It’s a never-ending cycle. It just goes in a circle.” Youth Participant

Young people added that the prevalence of guns has noticeably increased in the past few years. While it has been easy to obtain a gun, they say it is even easier now. One suggested reason was because of the change in law regarding the need for a permit. The law change did not directly change the ability of someone older than 18 to purchase a firearm and youth are still unable to possess a firearm. However, the mindset among young people appears to have shifted and they view it as easier to obtain firearms and harder for police to stop them.

“So, basically it just gave them a get out of jail free card. Before permitless carry, it was medium on getting guns, it was slow because you either had somebody that was taking guns from people when they were robbing them or you know like finding guns...but now I can have my older sibling go to the store and buy me a gun...And if you got somebody 18 or older in the car with you give them the gun so it’s a, it just like a superpower.” Youth Participant

They also noted that they carry a gun for protection, the potential need to retaliate, and to impress others – particularly girls. They mostly described the desire to carry a gun because they believe everyone had one and they do not want to be caught by the wrong person – who could be anyone –without a gun. These young people also said they would rather risk being caught by the police with a gun than risk being caught by the wrong person on the street without a gun.

“It plays a role because not also it’s the internet. So, you see one person with a gun, let me buy your gun. And then now that person got a gun and another person got a gun and then everybody’s posting guns. And then if you’re not cool with somebody and ya’ll both got guns, it comes down to who gonna use that gun when it’s time....So, if it comes down to me having to shoot you, I’m gonna shoot you because I want to go home, no matter how I have to do it.” Youth Participant

“Just have guns out like it’s normalized. Many people would rather be caught with a gun than without. It’s to save their life.” Youth Participant

Trauma is a key component of youth gun violence in Indianapolis. Most youth expressed they did not expect to live to the age of 25 and expressed that gun violence is just an expected way of life. There was a general sense of hopelessness among all the youth. Each one of them had lost family and friends to gun violence, had family and friends hurt in shootings, and had witnessed or been shot at –but not injured –themselves. All young people surveyed had been exposed to gun violence by the time they were 9 and 10 years old, whether it was from seeing a gun, witnessing a shooting, or losing family and friends. Exposure to such violence and being left unhealed can lead to unhealthy ways of addressing anger. The combination of anger, unhealthy emotional coping skills, and the prevalence of guns can be a harmful combination.

“When I was living in apartments, I heard gunshots all the time like nonstop. I seen somebody laying out in front of the apartments, I didn’t know if he was dead, but there was blood leaking out his body.” Youth Participant

“I don’t know cause I just instantly ran. I was just like that’s crazy, like how he just, I don’t even know if he killed him or not. I was just like, that’s just crazy how he can just do that. You can just be chilling and somebody want what you got and then they try to kill you or try to take what you got. That’s why you gotta, that’s for instance why people got guns....I don’t know. It just made me feel, it [witnessing a NFS] definitely made me feel like that’s probably why I got a gun though.” Youth Participant

“When my friend died. I really lost it all. When he died, I just lost it all for fighting people and I wanted a gun to fight people.” Youth Participant

“Yeah, I had a couple of friends get shot. That’s it really.” Youth Participant

Methodology

Descriptive data was provided by the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department for nonfatal shooting and homicides between 2016 – 2023. All victims with a mechanism of “gunshot” and shooting intents (assault, accidental, etc.) were included. Victims aged 0 – 17 years of age were included. Accidental shootings are referred to as unintentional shootings, as all “accidental” shootings are preventable. Qualitative interviews were conducted in collaboration with a local community group, Stop the Violence Indianapolis, and five young people were interviewed. Young people were included if they had been exposed to gun injury/violence within their community and/or enrolled in a violence prevention/intervention program.