

# Suicide and Criminal Legal Problems in Virginia:

A Report from the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System

## 2007-2008

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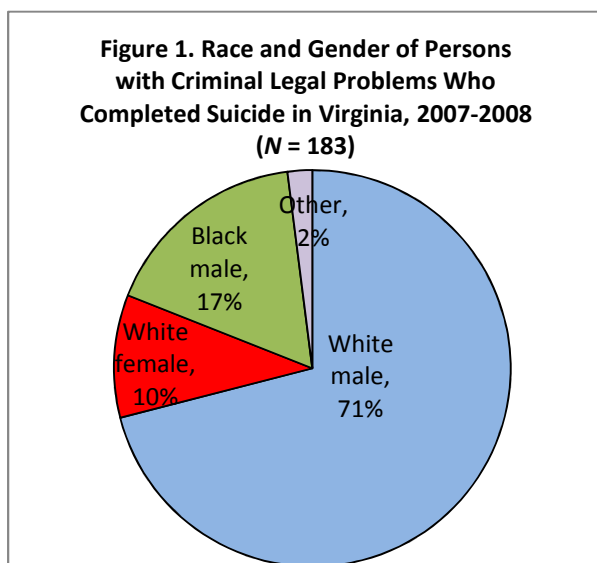
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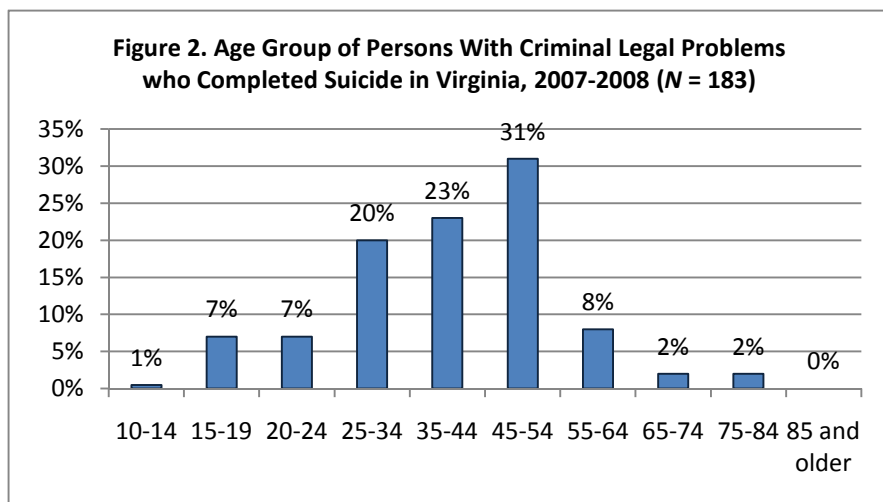
There are many motivating factors that compel persons to complete suicide. These factors may be chronic (e.g., health issues) or acute (e.g., intimate partner conflict). A portion of persons who complete suicide do so, in part, because of existing or impending felony-level criminal charges. Criminal legal problems are a factor for 12% of all persons who complete suicide (14% of males, 5% of females).

This report examines types of criminal legal problems for 183 Virginia residents (186 males, 22 females) who completed suicide between the years 2007-2008. Data are from the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System (VVDRS).<sup>1</sup> The VVDRS abstracts data from several sources, primarily the Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, law enforcement, the Virginia Division of Vital Records, and the Virginia Department of Forensic Science.

Persons with suicides related to criminal problems were primarily White (81%) and male (89%). Figure 1 shows race and gender groupings. While White males comprised 71% of those with a criminal legal problem, a higher proportion of Black males (25% of total) had criminal problems than did White males (13% of total). Median age was 42 (compared to 47 for those without criminal problems) and the most common age group was ages 45-54 (31%). Many completed suicide while incarcerated or just prior to an impending arrest (24%). Greater than one-third (37%) completed suicide after consuming alcohol.



Many of these persons had criminal charges that were violent by nature (43%) including homicide, attempted homicide, physical assault, and sexual assault. Violence was directed towards adult intimate partners in 16%, towards adult non-intimate partners in 11%, and towards children in 10% of all cases.



<sup>1</sup> Virginia is one of eighteen states participating in the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). For more about the NVDRS, see <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/NVDRS/index.html>. For definitions of terms see the NVDRS coding manual: [http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NVDRS\\_Coding\\_Manual\\_Version\\_3-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NVDRS_Coding_Manual_Version_3-a.pdf).

The single most common type of criminal problem (23% of total) was a charge of operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated or under the influence of alcohol (DUI/DWI). This was followed by the molestation or sexual assault of a child (9%); robbery, theft, or burglary (8%); physical assault of an intimate partner (7%); and using, manufacturing, selling, or buying illegal drugs (6%). Table 1 lists the selected categories of criminal legal problems and the specific types of crimes for each broad category.

**Table 1. Selected Criminal Legal Problems for Persons who Completed Suicide in Virginia, 2007-2008 (N = 183)<sup>1</sup>**

Category/Types	#	%
<b>General</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>57</b>
DUI/DWI	42	23
Robbery, theft, or burglary	14	8
Drugs (any type of involvement)	11	6
Money laundering/tax evasion/embezzlement	11	6
Eluding/fleeing from police	10	5
Parole/probation violation	8	4
Moving violation (other than DUI/DWI)	7	4
Child support non-payment	6	3
<b>Rape/Sexual Assault</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>15</b>
Rape/sexual assault of child	17	9
Rape/sexual assault of non-intimate adult	4	2
Rape/sexual assault of unknown relationship	4	2
Rape/sexual assault of adult intimate partner	2	1
<b>Physical Assault (non-sexual, non-fatal)</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>14</b>
Physical assault of intimate partner	12	7
Physical assault of non-intimate partner	5	3
Physical assault of unknown relationship	4	2
Abduction of intimate partner	2	1
Abuse or neglect of child (non-sexual)	1	1
Taking a child hostage	1	1
Threatening to kill intimate partner	1	1
<b>Crimes involving Children</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>14</b>
Rape/sexual assault	17	9
Child pornography	6	3
Contributing to the delinquency of a minor	2	1
Abuse or neglect of child (non-sexual)	1	1
Child endangerment	1	1
Taking a child hostage	1	1
<b>Homicide</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>
Homicide of intimate partner	8	4
Homicide of non-intimate adult	7	4
Attempted homicide of intimate partner	5	3
Attempted homicide of non-intimate adult	4	2
Homicide of unknown relationship	1	1

<sup>1</sup> More than one type of problem can be noted per person.

These persons were experiencing other life stressors. Greater than two-fifths (42%) were having intimate partner conflict, 38% had mental health problems, 33% had a problem with alcohol and/or other substances, and 14% were experiencing financial problems. For 22%, however, a criminal problem was the only noted life stressor. Most of these suicides (78%) were precipitated by a life crisis that had occurred in the 24 hours (56%) or in the two weeks prior to the suicide (22%), suggesting that the suicide was an immediate response to that crisis.

Those with suicides linked to criminal problems often openly disclosed suicidal intentions (31%) or had prior non-fatal suicide attempts (13%). Combined, 38% had one or both of these indicators of suicide risk. Even though most of these persons were going through an acute crisis, greater than one-third presented a clear opportunity for preventative measures to be taken.

These findings illuminate the life stressors among a subset of persons who complete suicide. While many were facing serious criminal charges likely to result in a lengthy incarceration, others were expecting sanctions not likely to involve jail or prison stays. Nonetheless, it appears that they felt that the criminal problems they were facing could not be overcome or that they could not cope with the legal consequences. This information should instruct friends and family members of persons dealing with criminal problems to evaluate suicide risk, and to take seriously disclosures such as “I won’t go to prison” that often sound like hyperbole. For those in the criminal justice system, the wide range of crimes suggests that individuals may consider suicide as an alternative to the consequences of criminal charges, even when these charges are unlikely to result in incarceration.