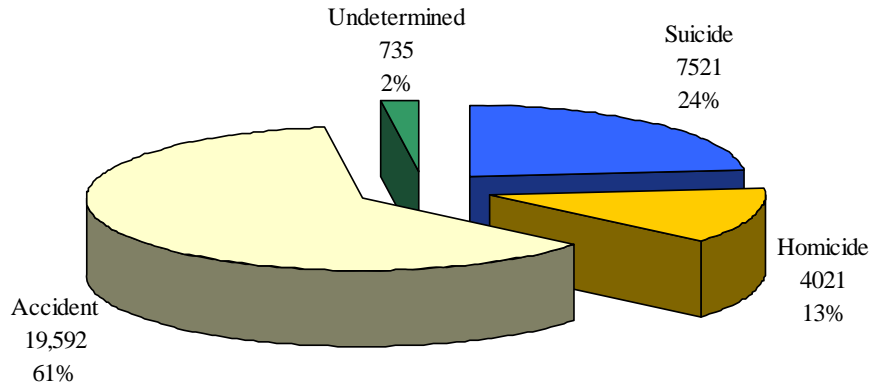


Firearm Deaths in Virginia, 1999-2007

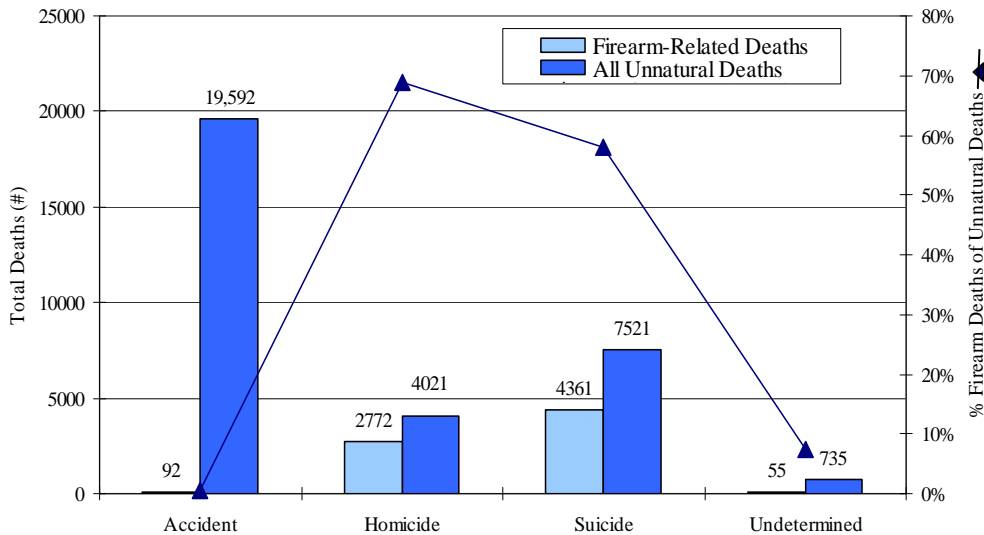
The Virginia Department of Health's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) has jurisdiction over certain types of deaths including all unnatural deaths pursuant to § 32.1-283 in the Virginia Code¹. These deaths can occur by a wide array of means and manners². This article primarily focuses on deaths caused by the discharge of a firearm for the years of 1999 through 2007. During these nine years, there were a total of 31,869 unnatural deaths with 61 percent being accidents and almost a quarter being suicides (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Unnatural Deaths by Manner



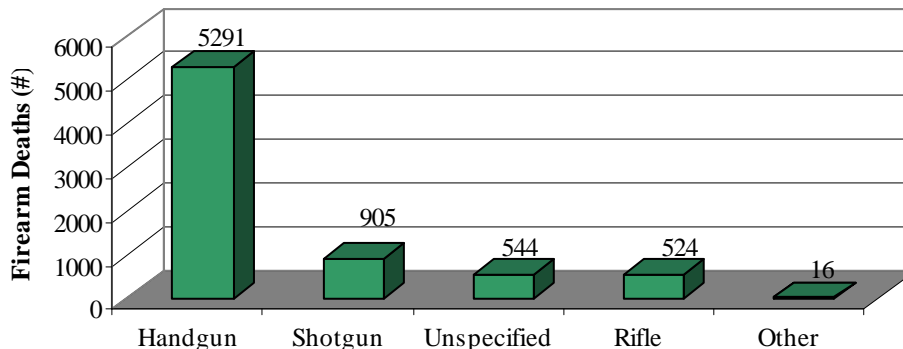
Twenty-three percent of all these deaths were caused by a firearm. The majority of firearm deaths were suicides (n=4361), followed by homicides (n=2772) (Figure 2). Of all manners examined, homicide had the highest percentage of deaths caused by a firearm (69%). Firearm deaths accounted for a very small percentage (0.5%) of accidental deaths.

Figure 2. Firearm & Unnatural Deaths by Manner



Handguns were involved in 5291 or 73% of all firearm deaths (Figure 3). Handguns remained the primary firearm type regardless of the manner of death.

Figure 3. All Firearm Deaths by Firearm Type



¹ The OCME also assumes jurisdiction over natural disease and disorder deaths under particular circumstances. This article focuses only on those deaths caused by unnatural means and specifically firearm deaths.

² Means refers to the method, fatal agency or item causing death present at the time of injury or death. Manner refers to the general category of the circumstances of the event which causes the death. The categories are accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined. Natural deaths are not discussed in this article.

Examining the 92 accidental firearm deaths, the majority of these deaths were male, white, and younger adults (Figures 4-6). The rate of blacks accidentally dying due to a firearm injury was slightly higher than any other race or ethnic group (1.7 blacks/million compared to the next highest group, whites, at 1.3 whites/million). Males were almost 11.0 times more likely to die from an accidental firearm injury than were females. Eighty-two percent of the children 14 years and younger accidentally shot with a firearm were shot by a handgun compared to 55% of all the accidental firearm deaths.

Figure 4. Accidental Firearm Deaths by Gender

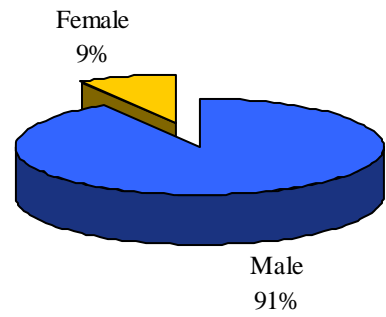


Figure 5. Accidental Firearm Deaths by Race/Ethnicity

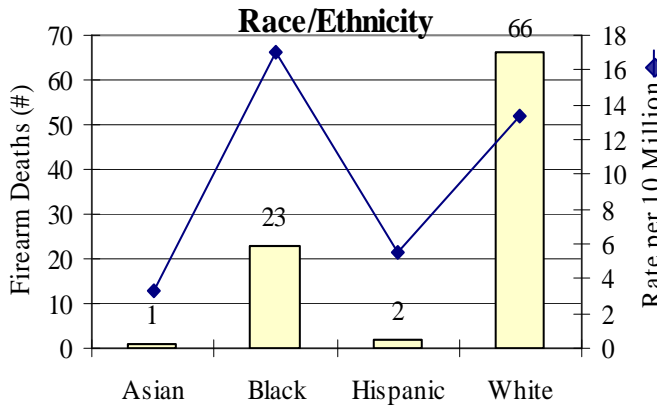
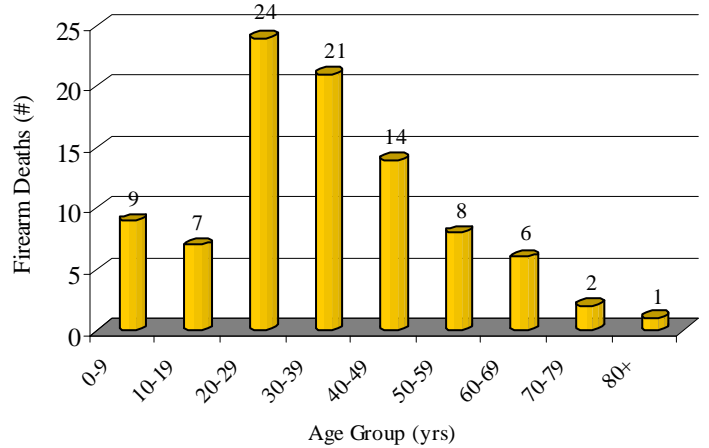


Figure 6. Accidental Firearm Deaths by Age Group



There were 2772 homicides during the nine years covered in this article that were due to firearms; nearly three-fourths (73%) of them involving handguns. Homicides by firearms were more frequent in males, blacks, and adults 20-29 years old (Figures 7-9). The rate of homicide by firearms for blacks was much higher than for any other group; in fact, the rate for blacks was 4.3 times that of Hispanics, 7.9 times that of whites, and 15.7 times that of Asians.

Figure 7. Homicide Firearm Deaths by Gender

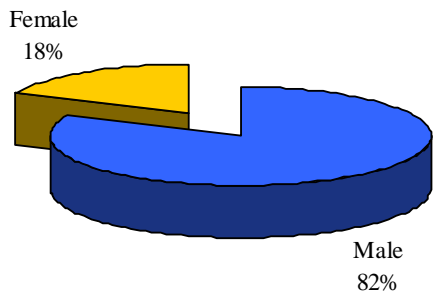


Figure 8. Homicide Firearm Deaths by Race/Ethnicity

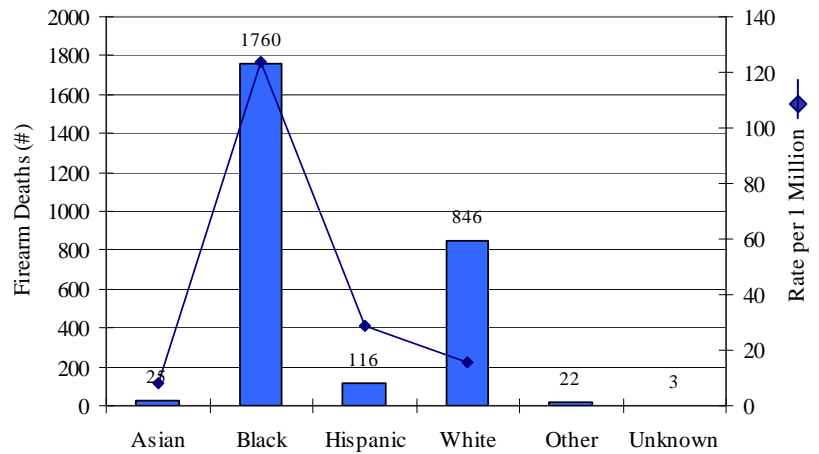
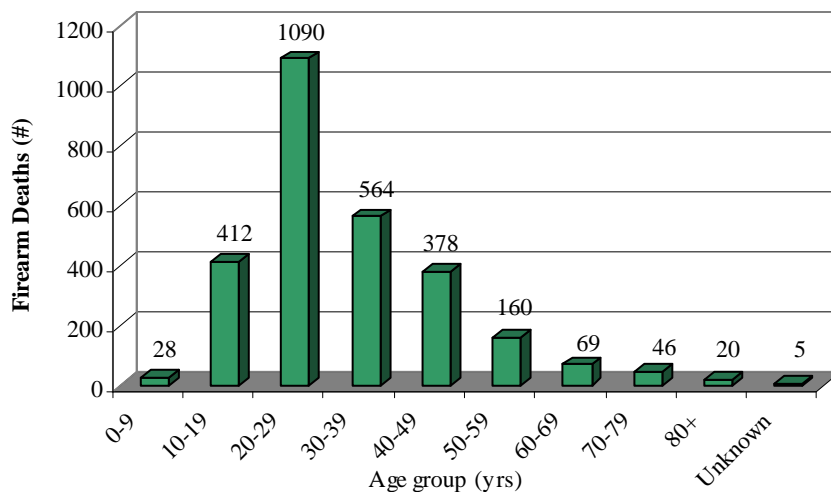


Figure 9. Homicide Firearm Deaths by Age Group



When looking at race/ethnicity, age group and gender collectively, it is clear that young and middle-age black males shouldered the burden of homicides by firearm (Table 1). In fact, black males age 10-49 years old accounted for a total of 1452 deaths or 52% of all the firearm homicides. White males age 30-39 years old held the fifth spot for total firearm homicide deaths. Females first appeared in this ranking at the eighth highest position and were represented by black females age 20-29 years old.

Table 1. Top 5 Totals of Firearm Homicides By Race/Ethnicity, Age Group and Gender

Rank	Race/Ethnicity	Age Group (yrs)	Gender	Firearm Deaths
1	Black	20-29	Male	751
2	Black	30-39	Male	278
3	Black	10-19	Male	269
4	Black	40-49	Male	155
5	White	30-39	Male	143

Suicides had the greatest number of deaths by firearm with a total of 4361 deaths during the nine years of this study. Firearms accounted for 58% of all suicides. Suicides by firearm were most frequent in whites, males, and middle-aged adults 40-49 years old (Figures 10-12).

Figure 10. Firearm Suicides by Race/Ethnicity

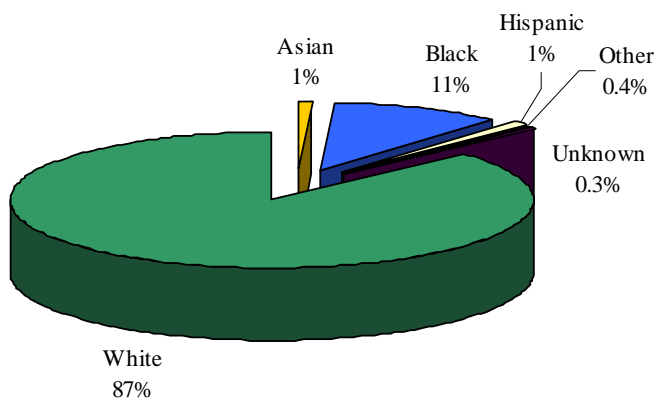


Figure 11. Firearm Suicides by Gender

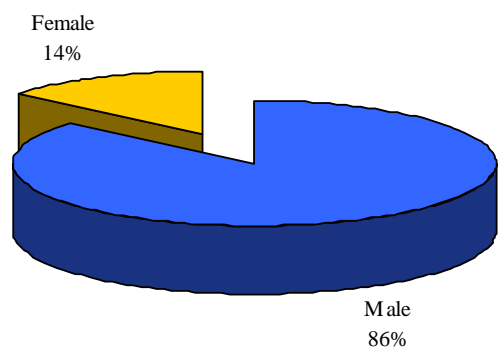
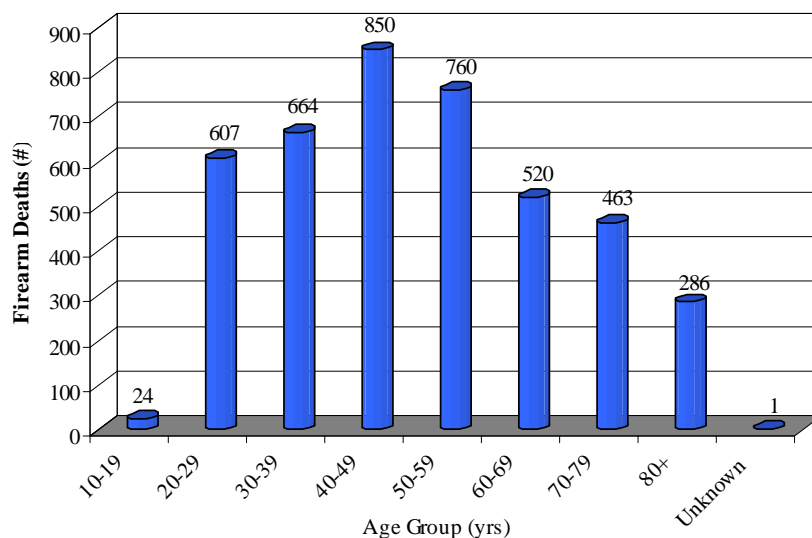


Figure 12. Firearm Suicides by Age Group



Examining race/ethnicity, age group and gender collectively in firearm suicides showed that white males, especially middle aged, were disproportionately affected. White males had the eight highest totals (Table 2). A different racial group for total firearm suicides was not seen until the 10th highest position held by black males age 20-29 years old. Looking at rates, which helps to balance population differences between groups, white males continued to die with more frequency than other groups when considering firearm suicides. The white male rate for suicide by firearm was 7.8 times that of Asian males, 5.5 times that of Hispanic males, and 2.0 times that of black males.

Table 2. Top 10 Firearm Suicides By Race/Ethnicity, Age Group and Gender

Rank	Race/Ethnicity	Age Group (yrs)	Gender	Gun Deaths
1	White	40-49	Male	638
2	White	50-59	Male	571
3	White	30-39	Male	443
4	White	60-67	Male	427
5	White	70-79	Male	396
6	White	20-29	Male	375
7	White	80+	Male	253
8	White	10-19	Male	140
9	White	40-49	Female	136
10	Black	20-29	Male	135

While the data is not shown here, the trends for suicide by firearms has been quite similar to suicides by other means. Please refer to the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System’s webpage for additional information on suicides. (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medExam/NVDRS.htm#reports>). Additionally, the OCME’s annual reports provide general data on all types of manners (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medExam/Reports.htm>).

Safety Tips:

- Store firearms unloaded and locked with a firearm safe, locked box, and trigger or chamber lock
- Store and lock ammunition in a separate place
- Remove firearms from your home if you have a depressed or suicidal family member
- Before you send your child to someone's house, ASK if firearms in the home are stored unloaded and locked; ASK if the ammunition is stored separately; ASK about shotguns and rifles too, not just handguns
- Invite the children to play at your home if you have doubts about the safety of someone else's home
- Talk with your children about the risk of firearm injury in places they may visit or play
- Teach your child if she finds a firearm to leave it alone and let an adult know right away
- Instruct your child to leave the room and tell an adult immediately if another child shows him or her a weapon
- Ask family and friends to use these safe storage steps

Additional Information:

- VDH OCME's Fatality Review & Surveillance Programs & Reports- <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medExam/FatalityReviewSurveillance.htm>
- National Violent Death Reporting System - <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/profiles/nvdrs/>
- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives - <http://www.atf.gov/pub/index.htm#Firearms>
- US Department of Justice - <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/guns.htm>

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