

# Circumstances Surrounding Suicides of Children in Virginia, 2003-2006

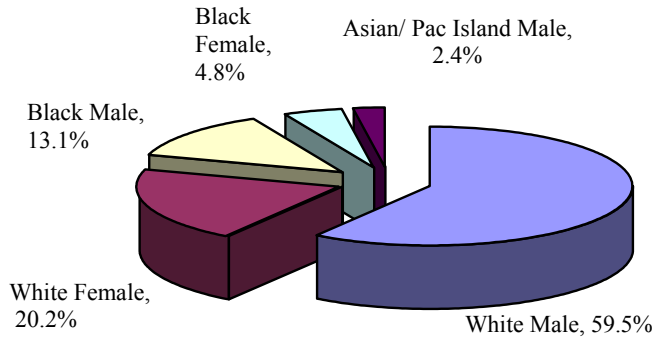
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## Overview

Between 2003 and 2006, there were 3,414 suicides in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Of these, 84 (2.5%) were children under the age of eighteen. This document examines the circumstances surrounding these deaths among children, focusing on patterns and characteristics of suicides.

**Figure 1** displays racial and gender composition of child suicide victims. One male and one female victim were Hispanic.

**Figure 1: Race and Gender of Child Suicide Victims in Virginia, 2003-2006**



Virginia has four medical examiner districts: Central, Northern, Tidewater and Western. **Table 1** lists the total number of suicides within each district, as well as the rate per 100,000 children ages 10-17. The rate of youth suicide in the Western district is over twice that of the Tidewater district.

	Number	Rate
<b>Central</b>	26	2.9
<b>Northern</b>	25	2.5
<b>Western</b>	21	3.4
<b>Tidewater</b>	12	1.6
<b>Total</b>	84	2.6

*\*per 100,000 children 10-17 years of age*

**Table 2** shows the total number of suicides to children by age at death. There is a marked increase in the number of suicides committed starting at age 14.

Most of the suicides (79.8%) took place in the victim’s own home; 94.0% occurred in the city or county of the victim’s residence. Suicides most frequently occurred on a Friday (17.9%). The month with the highest number of occurrences was April, with 12 (14.6% of total). The month with the fewest was October, with two. More children (almost one-fourth) inflicted their fatal injury between 2:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon than in any other two-hour time slot throughout the day.<sup>1</sup>

Age	Number
≤10	0
11	4
12	2
13	5
14	15
15	15
16	17
17	26

## Mechanism of Injury

**Figure 2** represents the mechanism of fatal injury among children. Overall the most common method was firearm (54.8%) followed by asphyxia<sup>2</sup> (32.1%). Among younger children asphyxia was more common: eight out of the eleven victims aged thirteen or younger chose this method. Asphyxia was higher among females (38.1% as opposed to 30.2% of males), while firearm usage was more common in males (57.1% as opposed to 47.6% of females). Older children also exhibited greater variety in choosing their mechanism of fatal injury than did younger children: in four years all victims younger than 14 used either firearms or asphyxia.

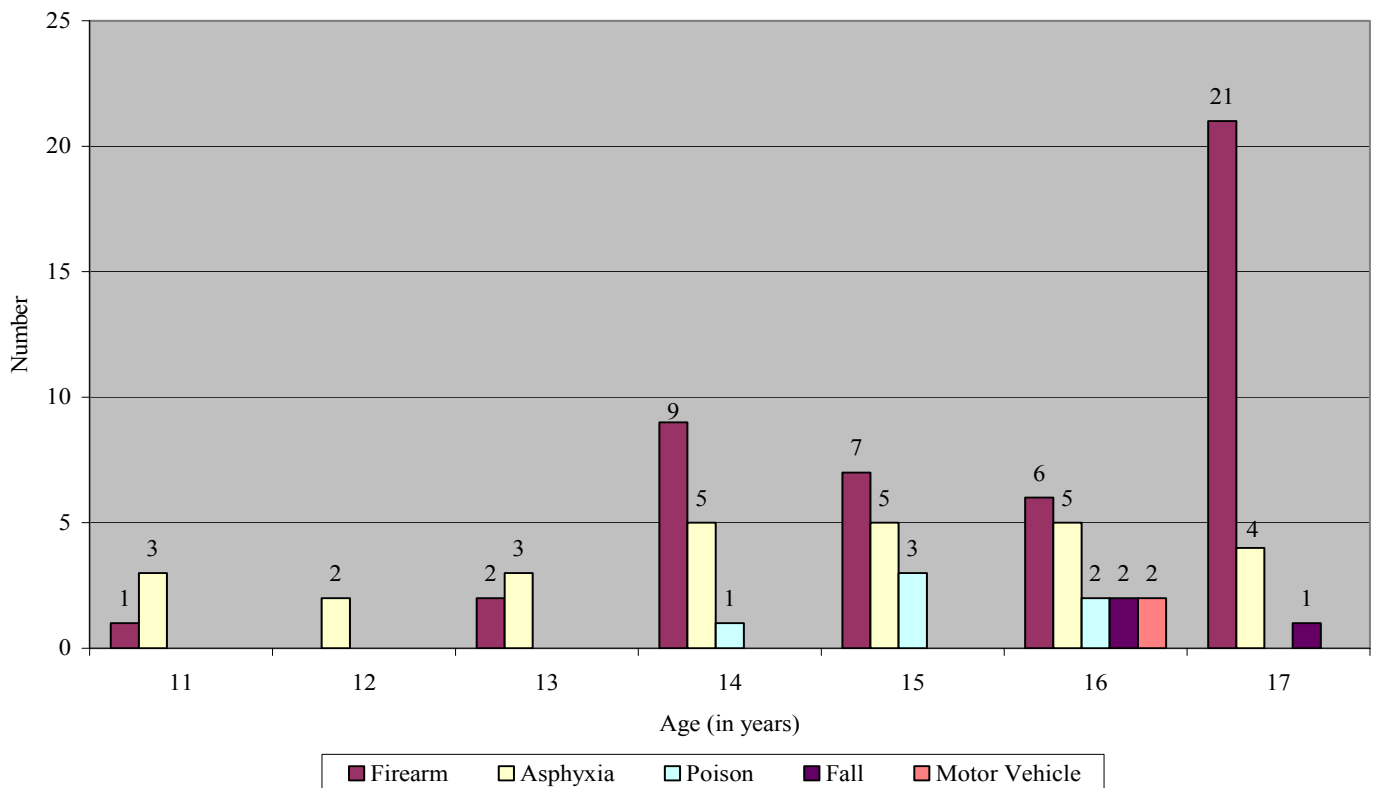
## Characteristics of Injury

Characteristics were known in 79 of the 84 suicides among children. These are listed in **Table 3**. Over one-third of the 79 victims had been treated for mental health issues prior to or at the time of their death. One-third had left a suicide note, and 15.2% had a history of at least one previous suicide attempt. Other factors that were noted in the death investigation included problems with a non-intimate relationship, such as friends or parents (38.0%); legal problems (19.0%); and problems at school (24.1%). Problems with an intimate partner were claimed by 27.8% of victims aged 15-17. Problems with substance use were only factors in the deaths of children 16 and older.

<sup>1</sup> Time of injury was reported in 51 out of 84 cases.

<sup>2</sup> The term *asphyxia* includes hanging, strangulation and suffocation.

Figure 2: Mechanism of Fatal Injury Among Child Suicide Victims in Virginia, 2003-2006  
(Numbers)



Over half of the 79 victims had experienced a crisis within the two weeks prior to their death. In the 42 cases where a crisis had occurred within the past two weeks, 24 (57.1%) had experienced a crisis within 24 hours of the fatal injury, while three had experienced a crisis greater than 24 hours before the injury.<sup>3</sup>

### **Discussion**

In general, children exhibit a sense of impulsiveness when completing suicide. Children, like adults, use mechanisms that are readily available to them. For example, out of the 23 firearm deaths in this study where ownership of the weapon was reported, 20 of the guns (87.0%) belonged to either the victim or their parent. Children also experience problems with interpersonal relationships that may serve as a catalyst to ending their own life, even though the relationships more often involve peers and family members than intimate partners.

### **Conclusion**

Not every child who commits suicide has been treated for mental illness, and not every child will disclose their intentions to end their own life, particularly if they act on the spur of the moment. However, identifying crises in a child's life involving interpersonal relationships may lead to interventions that could save that child's life.

### **Source:**

[Virginia Violent Death Reporting System](#); Virginia Department of Health, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

### **Resources:**

[American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

[Central Shenandoah Youth Suicide Prevention](#)

[Measuring Virginia's Suicide Rate- Virginia Performs](#)

[U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services: National Strategy for Suicide Prevention](#)

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK](#)

[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)

[Virginia Department of Health, Division of Injury and Violence Prevention](#)

[National Violent Death Reporting System](#)

[Youth Suicide in Virginia](#)

<sup>3</sup> The time frame was not reported in 15 cases.

**Table 3: Selected Characteristics of Child Suicide in Virginia: 2003-2006 (Number and Percentage; N=79)<sup>1,2</sup>**

<i>age of victim in years</i>	11 (n=3)		12 (n=2)		13 (n=5)		14 (n=15)		15 (n=12)		16 (n=17)		17 (n=25)		ALL (n=79)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Mental Health Characteristics</b>																
Current Mental Health Problem	-	-	1	50.0	2	40.0	5	33.3	6	50.0	6	35.3	8	32.0	28	35.4
Diagnosis of Depression	-	-	1	50.0	2	40.0	4	26.7	4	33.3	4	23.5	7	28.0	22	27.8
Diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Diagnosis of Anxiety Disorder	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Diagnosis of Schizophrenia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mental Health Treatment <sup>3</sup>	-	-	1	50.0	2	40.0	5	33.3	5	41.7	6	35.3	9	36.0	28	35.4
<i>Current Mental Health Treatment</i>	-	-	-	-	2	40.0	4	26.7	5	41.7	5	29.4	8	32.0	24	30.4
<i>Noncurrent Mental Health Treatment</i>	-	-	1	50.0	-	-	1	6.7	-	-	1	5.9	1	4.0	4	5.1
<b>Substance Use Characteristics</b>																
Problem with Alcohol and/or Other Substances <sup>4</sup>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	17.6	5	20.0	8	10.1
<i>Problem with Alcohol</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Problem with Other Substances</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	11.8	4	16.0	6	7.6
<i>Problem with both Alcohol and Other Substances</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	5.9	1	4.0	2	2.5
<b>Relationship Characteristics</b>																
Intimate Partner Problem	-	-	-	-	1	20.0	2	13.3	3	25.0	4	23.5	8	32.0	18	22.8
Non-intimate Partner Relationship Problem	1	33.3	1	50.0	1	20.0	8	53.3	4	33.3	8	47.1	7	28.0	30	38.0
Perp. Interpersonal Violence Past Month	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	8.0	2	2.5
Victim Interpersonal Violence Past Month	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	6.7	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1.3
<b>Relationship Characteristics</b>																
Death of Family Member/Friend Past Five Years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	5.9	3	12.0	4	5.1
Suicide of Family Member/Friend Past Five Years	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	8.3	-	-	2	8.0	3	3.8
<b>Life Stressor Characteristics</b>																
Physical Health Problem	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	8.3	1	5.9	-	-	2	2.5
Financial Problem	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Job Problem	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4.0	1	1.3
Recent Criminal Legal Problem	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	6.7	2	16.7	3	17.6	5	20.0	11	13.9
Noncriminal Legal Problem	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	8.3	2	11.8	1	4.0	4	5.1
School Problem	-	-	1	50.0	2	40.0	5	33.3	2	16.7	3	17.6	6	24.0	19	24.1
<b>Event Characteristics</b>																
Disclosed Intent to Commit Suicide <sup>5</sup>	1	33.3	2	100.0	2	40.0	4	26.7	3	25.0	5	29.4	7	28.0	24	30.4
Current Depressed Mood	-	-	1	50.0	1	20.0	1	6.7	4	33.3	5	29.4	9	36.0	21	26.6
Crisis within Two Weeks of the Suicide	1	33.3	1	50.0	2	40.0	9	60.0	7	58.3	10	58.8	12	48.0	42	53.2
Left a Suicide Note	1	33.3	-	-	3	60.0	4	26.7	6	50.0	6	35.3	6	24.0	26	32.9
History of Suicide Attempt	-	-	1	50.0	1	20.0	2	13.3	2	16.7	3	17.6	3	12.0	12	15.2

<sup>1</sup> More than one characteristic may be noted for each victim. Characteristics will not sum to the total number of victims with known characteristics, nor sum to 100%. Percentages are based on the number of suicides where characteristics are known.

<sup>2</sup> For complete descriptions of these characteristics, see pages 7-3 through 7-31 of the NVDRS Coding Manual at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/nvdrs-coding/VS2/NVDRS%20Coding%20Manual%20Full.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Treatment is current if received within the two months preceding the suicide and noncurrent if received at some point in the past, but not within the two months preceding the suicide.

<sup>4</sup> Beginning with the 2006 report, suicide victims who had a positive cocaine test, but did not die from cocaine poisoning, were included as having a Problem with Other Substances.

<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the 2006 database, cases where the victim was reported to have suicidal ideation were systematically noted as a dimension of disclosing intent.