

## Unintentional Firearm Deaths in Virginia, 2003-2006

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### Overview

Unintentional firearm deaths result from gunshot wounds where the shooting was not intentionally directed at the victim, there was no intent of self-harm, and the firearm was not brandished to frighten, control, or harm anyone.

There were 59 unintentional firearm deaths in Virginia between 2003 and 2006. Virginia's population over this four-year period averaged 7,514,186 persons per year. Nearly one-third (31%) of Virginia localities had at least one of these deaths occur within their borders. No locality had more than three deaths.

Two-thirds of injuries occurred in a residence. Victims were overwhelmingly male and White.

Figure 1: Unintentional Firearm Deaths by Gender, 2003-2006

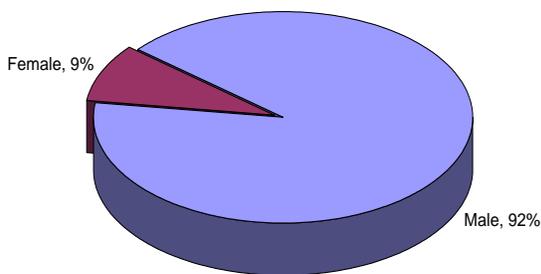
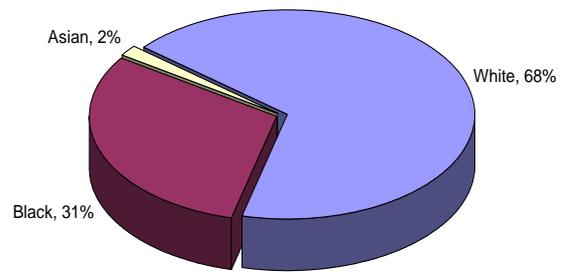
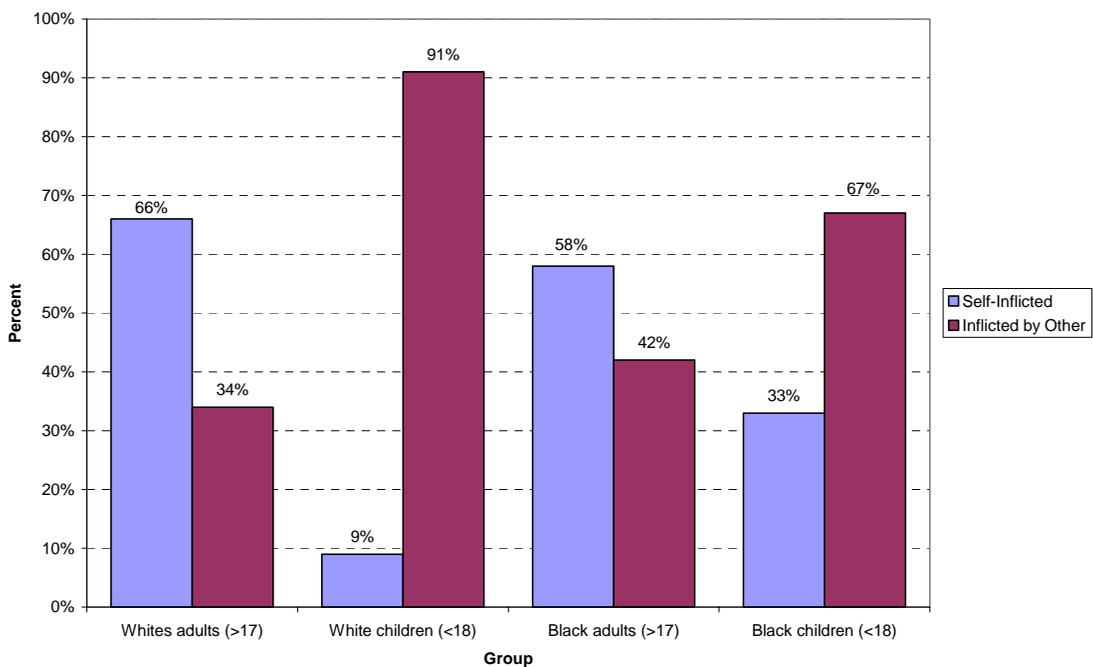


Figure 2: Unintentional Firearm Deaths by Race, 2003-2006



There are two types of unintentional firearm injuries: self-inflicted and inflicted by someone other than the victim.<sup>1</sup> Blacks and Whites had equal proportions of both types of injuries. Overall, adults were most commonly self-injured and children were most commonly injured by others. Black children, however, were self-injured more frequently than White children.

Figure 3: Type of Injury by Race and Child/Adult Status, 2003-2006



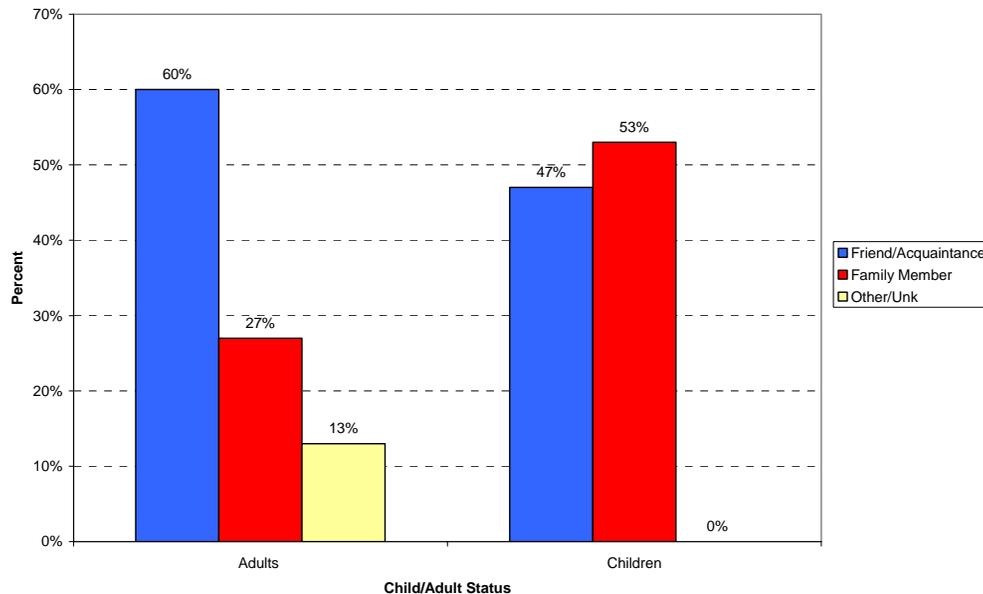
Three-fourths of all victims were adults. Nearly all victims of self-inflicted injury were adults compared to just over half of those who were injured by someone else.

<sup>1</sup> One death, related to a firearm that discharged while not being handled, was excluded from this analysis.

## Unintentional Firearm Injuries Inflicted by Others

Half of victims unintentionally injured by others were adults and half were children. Adults were typically injured by other adults who were friends; children were usually injured by other children who were either friends or family.

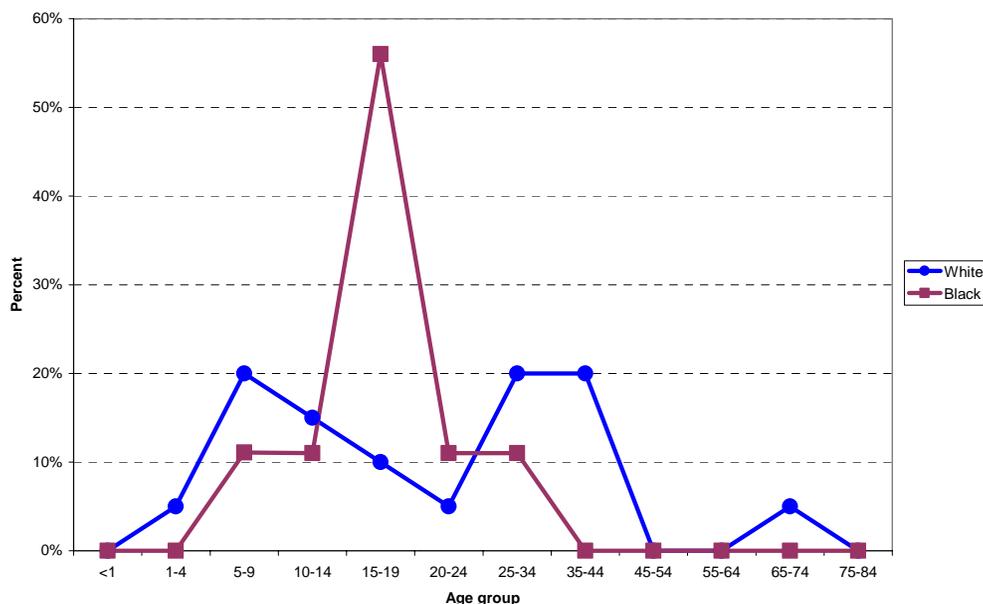
Figure 4: Relationship Between Victim and Shooter by Child/Adults Status, 2003-2006



Injuries inflicted by others involved rifles and shotguns more commonly than handguns. Overall, for children and adults, Whites were most often injured by rifles or shotguns and Blacks were most often injured by handguns.

The median age at death was 18 years. Although Whites and Blacks had almost identical median ages, Whites had a wider age range (2 to 65) than Blacks (7 to 29).

Figure 5: Age Range by Race for Injuries Inflicted by Others, 2003-2006



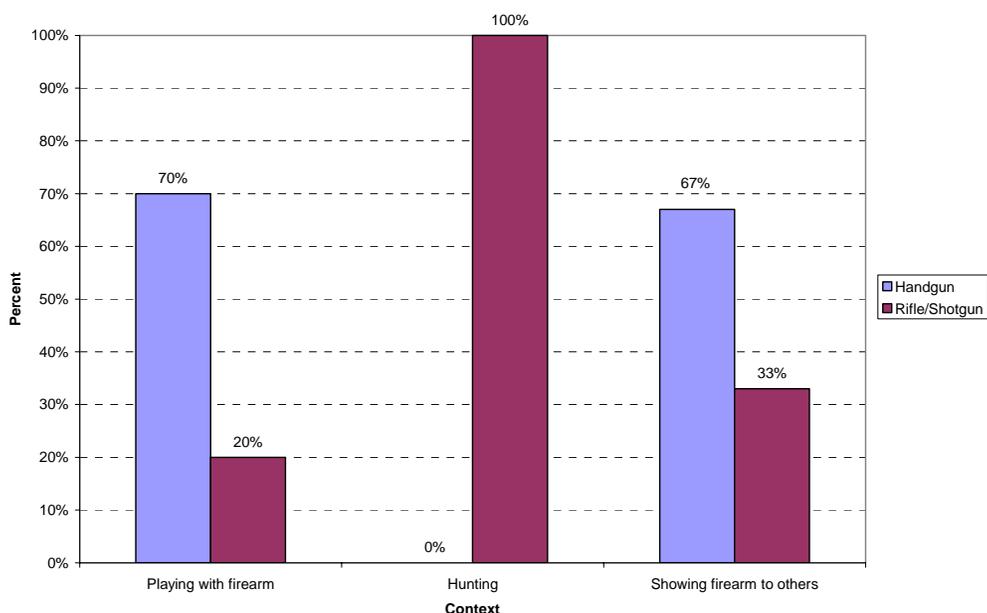
The context of injury<sup>2</sup> describes the setting in which the injury took place and the actions of the persons involved in the incident. The most common contexts were:

- **Playing with a firearm (n=10, 36%)** - The victim was in proximity to someone who was playing with a firearm. This was the context for more than half of all children and three-fourths of Black children. Most injuries related to playing with a firearm involved a handgun.
- **Hunting (n=9, 32%)** - The victim was hunting or in close proximity to others who were hunting. This was the most frequent context for White adults and persons injured in rural areas. No Black victims were injured in this context. All injuries involved a rifle or shotgun.

<sup>2</sup> More than one context may be reported per victim.

- **Showing a firearm to others (n=9, 32%)** - The victim was in close proximity to someone who was showing or displaying a firearm. While this was the context for almost half of all children, it was the context for three-fourths of Black children. Most of these injuries involved a handgun.

Figure 6: Type of Firearm in Common Contexts of Injuries Inflicted by Others, 2003-2006



The mechanism of injury<sup>3</sup> describes the physical force that caused the firearm to discharge. The most common mechanisms were:

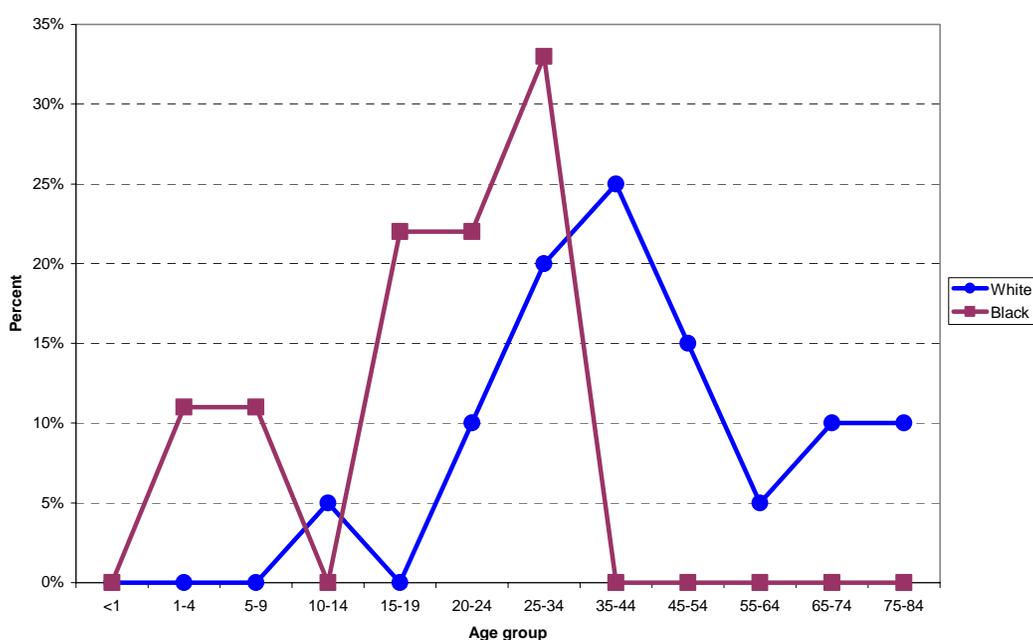
- **Accidentally pulling a trigger (n=9, 43%)** - The victim was in close proximity to someone who unintentionally pulled the trigger of a firearm. This mechanism was nearly twice as common for Blacks than for Whites. Over half of the injuries occurred within the context of playing with a firearm.
- **Mistaking a firearm for being unloaded (n=7, 33%)** – The victim was in close proximity to someone who thought the firearm was not loaded. Nearly three-fourths of injuries related to this mechanism occurred in the context of playing with the firearm.

### Self-Inflicted Unintentional Firearm Injuries

Self-inflicted injuries most frequently involved handguns. Blacks were injured by handguns almost twice as often as Whites.

Median age at death was 31 years. Age differed significantly by race: Whites had a higher median age (42) than Blacks (30); Whites had a wider age range (13 to 78) than Blacks (4 to 29).

Figure 7: Age Range by Race for Self-Inflicted Injuries, 2003-2006



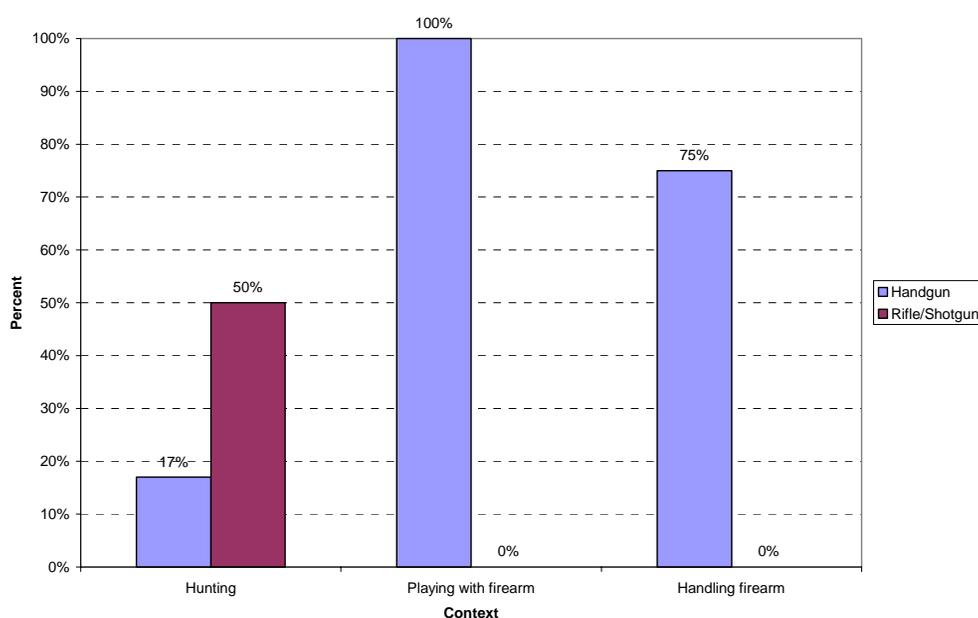
<sup>3</sup> More than one mechanism may be reported per victim. The number of cases where a mechanism was known may not equal the number of cases where a context was known.

Almost one-fourth of victims had a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) level above the legal driving limit at the time of injury.<sup>4</sup> Overall, 38% of victims with self-inflicted injuries had either a BAC above the legal limit, and/or tested positive for cocaine, opiates, or marijuana. All of these victims were males between the ages of 18 and 44; over half of White males and three-fourths of Black males in this age group tested positive for at least one substance.

The most common contexts of injury were:

- **Hunting (n=6, 25%)** - The victim was hunting. This was the most common context for Whites. There were no Black victims injured within the context of hunting. Half of these injuries involved a rifle or shotgun.
- **Playing with a firearm (n=4, 17%)** - The victim was playing with a firearm. This was the most common context for Blacks. There were no White victims self-injured within this context. All of these injuries involved a handgun and occurred in a non-rural area.
- **Handling a firearm, other (n=4, 17%)** - The victim was handling a firearm for the purpose of carrying it from one place to another or removing it from a storage location. All victims injured in this context were adults. This context typically involved a handgun in a non-rural area.

Figure 8: Type of Firearm in Common Contexts of Self-Inflicted Injuries, 2003-2006



The most common mechanisms of injury were:

- **Accidentally pulling a trigger (n=4, 21%)** - This was the mechanism for half of Black victims, but for no White victims.
- **Dropping a firearm (n=3, 16%)** - The firearm discharged when it was dropped accidentally. Most of these injuries occurred in the context of handling a firearm.

### **Conclusions:**

Most unintentional firearm injuries could be prevented by following basic firearm safety rules such as supervising children around firearms, never pointing a firearm at someone, assuming a firearm is loaded, using safe storage practices for firearms and ammunition, and not handling a firearm while using alcohol or illicit substances.

### **Source:**

Virginia Violent Death Reporting System; Virginia Department of Health, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

### **Further Information:**

<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medExam/NVDRS.htm>

### **Resources:**

General firearm safety: <http://www.nrahq.org/education/guide.asp>

Hunter education and safety: <http://www.dgif.state.va.us/hunting/education>

Firearm safety for children: <http://riskwatch.org/topfirearm.html> and <http://www.nrahq.org/safety/eddie>

Firearm safety for parents: <http://www.kidsandguns.org/>

<sup>4</sup> In Virginia, a BAC of .08 or greater is the standard for intoxication while driving. This BAC level is a generally accepted measure of impairment due to intoxication.