**A family wanted to kill a dealer named 'King' but left another man's body riddled with 48 holes**

A trail of red-stained snow led police to a black Nissan stopped on a South Richmond street in the early morning hours of Jan. 7, 2018.

The driver, 28-year-old Garry Harrison Jr., was slumped forward.

His body was riddled with 48 holes ' so many that the medical examiner couldn't say for sure which holes were from bullets entering or exiting the body and which were from other debris or shrapnel like glass and metal from the car as it was torn apart by a semi-automatic rifle.

A female passenger called 911.

"After I ducked, they was just shooting at this car like nonstop it felt like," Sharia Riddick would later testify. "And I felt the first shot in my back and I didn't feel the other nine shots."

She couldn't identify the shooters. But police were able to track calls between Harrison's phone and another man, a drug addict who went by "Wali," who had set up the ambush.

Jon "Wali" Alston was found two months later, shot to death in a wooded area less than a mile from where Harrison and Riddick were gunned down.

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During the opening statements of a trial in Richmond Circuit Court this week, Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Tanya Powell said this senseless violence "was all over some silly money."

On Jan. 6, 2018, Crystal R. Braxton and her longtime boyfriend, Calvin C. Cooper, went to an apartment complex off Jefferson Davis Highway to sell drugs to a woman, Kathy Goode.

Goode was the first of a long list of witnesses to testify in the trial against Cooper, which started Tuesday.

Goode said that she had planned to buy "a 50th," meaning $50 worth of crack cocaine, but she only had $28 cash so she'd collected some cleaning and beauty products to make up the difference. The deal was made, and Braxton and Cooper left.

Some time later, Braxton realized her wallet was missing. In it was a large amount of cash and some pills.

Braxton and Cooper ' along with Braxton's sons, Harry and Jaqwail; goddaughter, Antwanette Usanga; and a cousin of the Braxton's, Jo'leal Burno ' returned to the apartment off Jefferson Davis. Goode, who said some other people had come and gone in the meantime, said the family trashed the place looking for the missing money and pills.

Usanga, who has since been placed in witness protection ' the Richmond Police Department has spent more than $18,000 providing her housing, a cellphone and other amenities ' and Harry Braxton corroborated much of what Goode said.

They filled a bucket with a liquid "like they were going to burn us up," Goode said.

Goode and the two others in her apartment at the time were all beaten.

When the family was satisfied that the money was not there ' the empty wallet had been found outside ' they left with the description of the alleged thief: "a dude with dreads" and the nickname "King."

The family then visited a nearby gas station, where they ran into Alston, or "Wali."

Alston volunteered that a man he'd bought drugs from in the past had dreadlocks and went by the moniker "King," who ended up being Harrison.

A plan was hatched that Alston would set up a drug buy, and the family would kill "King."

They stopped at a home on Halifax Street, still in South Richmond, where two guns ' one "big gun" and a handgun ' were loaded into a car.

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Sharia Riddick said during an earlier hearing that Harrison had gotten a call to "catch a switch," meaning to sell drugs to someone. The location kept changing, making them both nervous, but they finally agreed to one last stop on Warwick Avenue.

Alston was waiting on Warwick when Harrison approached. He rolled down the window and gave Alston the drugs, waiting for money in return.

Riddick, who didn't know Alston, testified that she saw the man buying drugs look up and saw two men with guns approaching from behind a house.

She ducked amid a volley of gunfire.

"I went to open the door to try to get out [of] the car, but the car was rolling back so it was like dragging my body against the snow," she said, according to a transcript from an earlier hearing. "And then once the car stopped, I had to try to like pull my body back in the car and pull my legs because I couldn't lift my legs."

Riddick was hospitalized for a month and was paralyzed for nearly five months. She has undergone numerous surgeries, some to reconstruct her lower spine. She wore a colostomy bag for nearly a year and a half. She still has no feeling in her right foot, so she has to wear a brace to help her walk.

"I'm not me anymore," the mother of two said. "I'll never be the same. I had to learn to walk all over again."

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Usanga and Harry Braxton had been sent home to the 2300 block of Oakland Place, where they played video games. Usanga said she heard on the news that two people had been shot in a car on Warwick Avenue, less than a mile from the home on Oakland Place.

She testified that when Cooper, Crystal Braxton, Jaqwail Braxton, Burno and Alston returned to the home, Cooper was frustrated, saying his handgun had jammed.

Harry Braxton said Alston later told him what happened, and he asked Cooper about it.

"All you need to know is the dude got dealt with," Harry Braxton said was Cooper's response to questions about the shooting of Harrison.

Prosecutors aren't sure exactly when Alston died, but they suspect it was shortly after Harry Braxton's conversation with Cooper. Alston's family in Chesterfield County had reported him missing on Jan. 11.

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In February 2018, Cooper was arrested by Richmond police with $418 in cash and a substantial amount of cocaine in his pocket.

Detective Mark Godwin interviewed him for more than four hours. Clips from the interview were played for the jurors, all but one of which were women.

Godwin testified that he used every tactic he could to break Cooper: offering to drop the drug charges against him, even putting the $418 back into Cooper's pocket while he was handcuffed.

After hours of questioning, Cooper admitted he was there during the shooting on Warwick Avenue in which Riddick and Harrison were shot.

Cooper denied holding a gun himself, waffling between Alston and Burno having the handgun, which forensics showed never fired a shot because it jammed.

"By all accounts, Jaqwail [Braxton] had the '˜big gun,'" prosecutors said. Thirty shell casings from a semi-automatic rifle were recovered at the scene.

Cooper's defense attorney, Ali J. Amirshahi, laid out a theory that police had coerced the confession from his client, and bought the testimony of the other witnesses with promises of lesser charges and/or sentences for other crimes, or actual cash, in Usanga's case.

"It was part of my tactic to put the detective on trial rather than Calvin Cooper. I don't think the jury liked what they saw," Amirshahi said after the trial, referring to the detective's conduct.

Amirshahi was about to cross-examine Godwin on Thursday when, at the start of the third day of testimony, Cooper had a change of heart and decided to take a plea deal in the case.

A surprise witness, an inmate at the Richmond City Justice Center where Cooper is being held, had come forward Wednesday and told prosecutors that Cooper had returned from court crying and regretful of his role in Riddick's shooting. Amirshahi said his client denied some of the statements the informant, who also happened to be related to the Braxton family, attributed to Cooper, but was nonetheless remorseful.

"Although he didn't pull the trigger that caused the devastating injuries, when he saw Ms. Riddick, he was overcome by genuine remorse and that's why he's taking full responsibility," Amirshahi said in court.

Cooper was sentenced to 33 years of active prison time for the aggravated malicious wounding of Riddick, the murders of Harrison and Alston, a conspiracy charge and a drug charge. An additional 117 years were suspended.

While Cooper was on trial this week only for charges involving the shootings of Riddick and Harrison, he was scheduled to go to trial again in two weeks for Alston's murder.

After apologizing to the families of the victims, Cooper said: "It was a cowardly, heinous act. ... I thank you for the leniency because I feel like I should be doing more [time]."

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Prosecutors Powell and Jaime Blackmon said the case was a difficult one because of the family dynamics and the multiple crimes.

A plea "was a sure way to bring closure to the family and Ms. Riddick and guarantee a conviction with a substantial amount of time," Blackmon said.

She and Amirshahi spoke to jurors after they were dismissed. Several said they were disappointed not to see the case through to the end. One juror said they were leaning toward guilty, another said they were leaning toward acquittal, the attorneys said.

In a jury trial, decisions must be unanimous to avoid retrial.

Many jurors were curious about the other individuals involved in the case.

Earlier this year, Harry Braxton pleaded guilty to conspiracy to murder in the slaying of Alston and accessory after the fact. He has not yet been sentenced.

Jaqwail Braxton was initially indicted on a number of charges in this case, but prosecutors dropped them after a key witness died of health-related problems. Based on Riddick's testimony at an earlier hearing, he was sentenced to nine years and six months of previously suspended time from an earlier shooting that injured a women.

Charges against Crystal Braxton, who never cooperated in the police investigation related to this case, were dropped in 2018. Charges can be brought back at any time.

Amirshahi said Cooper refuses to turn on any of the Braxton clan.

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Harrison, whose nickname was "King" and did have dreadlocks, wasn't the "King" that Goode meant to implicate.

Neither he nor Riddick was ever at the Jefferson Davis Highway apartment where Crystal Braxton's money and pills were stolen.

"He was the wrong '˜King,'" prosecutors said.

"It appears to be the tragic irony of the case," Amirshahi said. "The whole thing was a mistake."

**Outgoing Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney's study of root causes of crime spurs little reaction**

As Richmond's top prosecutor steps down after more than a decade, his most ambitious contribution to crime fighting in the city is left unfinished.

For nearly two years, Commonwealth's Attorney Michael Herring has championed an analysis examining the underlying causes of crime. From concentrated poverty and inadequate housing to disjointed education and targeted policing, some causes aren't new; but the study also looked at crime's ties to poor health outcomes, cyclical trauma and race relations.

In February, his office released an 11-page discussion guide titled "Beyond Containment" to spur debate at a citywide summit in hopes of adopting policies that move criminal justice beyond the cycle of arrest and prosecution.

Herring envisions a Richmond without concentrated crime or poverty, with the best schools and with courts that treat the person rather than punish the crime. But the guide doesn't say how to achieve it, and ultimately, there's a less optimistic question being posed: Have the city, its agencies and its policies made crime worse?

Herring and Iman Shabazz, a program specialist in Herring's office who helped write the guide, intentionally chose questions, rather than already formed answers to frame the discussion, anticipating that solutions would come out of the summit. A date for the community meeting still has not been set. Meanwhile, Herring is leaving his office July 1 for a job at a private law firm.

Herring, in a letter to Mayor Levar Stoney on May 31 announcing his resignation, implored the mayor "to continue to support the work of the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office in its efforts to combat the root causes of crime. This work offers our city its best chance at achieving long-term improvements in public safety."

Herring won't say directly why he's not sticking around to carry out his vision, instead becoming a partner at McGuireWoods. He said he hopes to continue "advocacy for smart, equitable changes to the justice system."

In a March interview at the Richmond Times-Dispatch, he sounded frustrated and fed up, questioning the value of his role in the system nearly three months before announcing his resignation.

"You reach a point where doing the same thing and prosecuting, pretty much, the same profile of person, it doesn't necessarily lead to burnout so much as it does a suspicion that it may just not matter all that much," he said.

Colette McEachin, tapped by Herring to take over his office at the beginning of next month, said she plans to continue the work Herring started.

"Under Mike's leadership, criminal justice reform has come too far in Richmond to go back," McEachin said in an email.

Reaction from the city since the guide's release has been muted.

One city official said he thought the study simply confirmed efforts already in progress, especially in the office of Community Wealth Building, which has a goal to reduce Richmond's poverty by 40% by 2030 ' currently, 25% of the city's residents live in poverty.

The city has tried to coordinate efforts along with other organizations, ministries and nonprofits to avoid duplication and to build a "coherent ladder out of poverty." The effort includes enhancing access to better jobs, education, housing and transportation to move people up the ladder from "crisis to thriving."

"We're doing a good job," said Reggie Gordon, deputy chief administrative officer for human services. "The report is just affirmation. So we have to keep going."

Herring said the city has to start thinking bigger and more critically about its practices.

"The whole point of the paper was to NOT affirm or validate what we've been doing" Herring wrote in an email. "We wouldn't be off to the rough summer we are off to if our programming was effective."

The city saw more homicides last month than any other so far this year. The dead include two children: 17-month-old Nariah Ivy Brown, who was brutally assaulted in a hotel room and died two days later; and Markiya Simone Dickson, a 9-year-old third-grader from Chesterfield County who, along with an 11-year-old boy, was attending a community picnic in a park when they were shot after an argument broke out nearby.

Others have applauded Herring's efforts, but fault the report for only asking questions when answers are what they really want.

"He started out with the same kinds of questions that he's still got at the end of the process," said Claire Gastañaga, executive director of the ACLU of Virginia, who was involved in a panel discussion with Herring more than a year ago to help set the direction for the study. "The report shows us how far we have to go. We're still having the conversation about the conversation."

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The question of whether the city has fueled its own crime problem is a tough one to answer politically, Herring acknowledges, but an essential one if Richmond is going to make any dent in crime.

"We know this is a risky sort of thing we're asking for the city to undertake, and it could be risky for politicians because the answers to these questions aren't easy," Herring said. "We really can't do things the way we've been doing them and have anything but false confidence that we are really trying to fight crime."

The guide calls for re-examination of public housing, which concentrates the city's most vulnerable residents into some of the "most dangerous and stressful places to live." Concentrated poverty begets concentrated crime and perpetuates them for generations, the analysis showed.

"Richmond's existing public housing projects were built by demolishing '?blighted' black communities, often with insufficient community input or compensation, and moving them into these segregated units," the guide said. "Discriminatory policies and practices in the following decades, such as redlining, disinvestment, and unfair labor practices, forged many of our current realities. ... The legacies of those practices persist."

Herring said the state's code should likewise be re-assessed; and if state lawmakers won't change, then City Council could pass ordinances within the city limits that are less burdensome on residents and police, courts and jail.

"I shudder to think of the number of felons in the city, who are felons because of stuff that wasn't dangerous but was arguably more harmful to themselves," Herring said. "If the state code isn't going to change, but the city is going to reach a consensus about how the city is going to enforce it, we could probably get away with it."

The guide said that even though crime has trended downward since the 1990s, when the city was known as a murder capital of the U.S., "crime remains frustratingly prevalent." But reasons for the decreases are largely elusive, Herring said.

Between 1988 and 1997, the city's homicide numbers were measured with triple digits, with the highest number coming in 1994 when 160 people were slain. The number of homicides fell to its lowest total in 40 years ' 32 ' in 2008, two years after Herring took office. For nearly a decade, the number settled around 40 homicides a year, until 2016 and 2017, when it jumped back up to 61 and 78 homicides, respectively. Last year, 57 people were killed; and this year, the city's on track to top that number.

Violent crime ' rape, robbery and aggravated assault along with homicide ' has been just as volatile over the years, though property offenses drive a majority of the city's crime. Violent crime reached a 45-year low in 2015, but then jumped back up 17% the following year.

Herring's office has worked closely with Richmond police over the years on strategies that saw a dramatic decline in homicides and violent crime that had plagued the city. They reorganized the department's major crimes unit and paired teams of detectives with attorneys from the start of an investigation, which allowed for multiple perspectives, fresh eyes and accountability on each case.

"We can never truly with any degree of intellectual honesty point to a reason why," Herring said. "So the years that the homicide rate was high, we speculated, and on years that it was low, sometimes people might have verged on taking credit or we might have talked about gun seizure.

"But in truth, we didn't really know. And that, to me, was disturbing. Our policy, our strategy, for fighting crime seemed to be random."

Interim Police Chief William Smith said Herring is right to call some policing reactive. Police don't have a crystal ball to know when and where a crime, especially a homicide, will occur, but the department tries to address crime trends as they develop. For example, if there are back-and-forth shootings between rival neighborhoods, officers would try to interdict gun or gang activity, Smith said.

Meanwhile, Herring also said he's noticed less cooperation and less investment from the community in prosecutions. Fewer people are providing tips to police, making it harder to bring charges, and fewer are willing to testify in court, making it difficult to get a conviction. Yet the wheels of the system kept churning.

So he brought in Shabazz, who started holding focus groups to find out what people thought drove crime. He said such studies are common in the medical field ' doctors regularly investigate what leads to bad health outcomes so they can be avoided rather than just treated ' but the approach is less common when it comes to crime. The theory is the same: address the reason for offending, eliminate the crime.

Shabazz spoke to representatives of half a dozen city departments, including heads of the Richmond Police Department, Richmond Public Schools and the Department of Social Services, as well as ancillary service providers like the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority and the Richmond City Health District. He also spoke to city residents who live in high-crime neighborhoods; former offenders; professors of psychology, African American studies and epidemiology; as well as the ACLU.

Among the statistics and takeaways they included in the discussion guide:

On poverty: The city has "a stunning 25% poverty rate" and at least 40% of its children are growing up in poverty. The guide cites research that has concluded that once a neighborhood crosses a certain threshold of economic stress, growth in the young offender population accelerates rapidly.

On housing: Less than 5% of the city's population live in the six largest public housing projects, while 15% of its violent crime occurred there, the report said. It cited the city's decision 20 years ago to disband Blackwell, "one of its most dangerous housing projects. ... Concentrated area crime fell, and those neighborhoods in subsequent years have flourished and developed."On health: "People who repeatedly show up in criminal courts are the same people who access the emergency room for their health care needs," the guide said. It noted high rates of hypertension and heart disease, especially among those living in substandard housing and with the chronic stress of poverty.

On race and identity: Richmond's population is 48% black, yet 88% of violent offenders and 77% of violent crime victims were black over the past three years. "The demographic of Richmond courtrooms and detention facilities is decidedly brown," the guide said. "We must reflect on whether some of our current methods of maintaining public safety evolved from laws and policies geared historically toward the suppression of certain residents."

On education: "We are getting dangerously close to a city of non-parallel tracks: one for students who are fortunate enough to enroll in adequately resourced schools with low teacher turnover and normal behavioral needs; and another where the students must navigate environmental trauma in their neighborhoods and behavioral distractions during the school day," the guide said. It doesn't mention that the state has one of the highest rates nationwide for referrals to law enforcement. This is about as far as the guide reached to suggesting any sort of solution: "At a minimum, we wonder whether a dollar spent on after-school activities yields a greater return than a dollar spent on traditional law enforcement."

On law enforcement: A person incarcerated in Virginia has a 22% chance of being rearrested within one to three years of their release. "Advocates argue that stiff sentencing seems to improve public safety. But critics respond that the long-term effects of high rates of arrest and conviction damage families and communities, causing more harm than they prevent," the paper said. "Perhaps treatment, intervention, and alternate programs that reduce convictions and rehabilitate offenders would be a better approach. These programs are expensive, but nothing is as expensive as incarceration."

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"For me, it was illuminating," Herring said. "That the diversity of perspective on what drove crime really was a function of who you were talking to."

Shabazz said the idea was to hold a summit to get ideas, solutions and strategies to start addressing the underlying causes. He, along with a University of Virginia law student, wrote the guide to frame the conversation so "when we get to a point of identifying strategies, it's not something abstract."

He wants to point people to outcomes the city can "measurably affect."

For instance, one of the early focus groups was bogged down on the topic of race, which, while a factor in crime and how it is enforced, is not something "we have control over," Shabazz said.

"So the next step won't be a publication or pronouncement from our office on strategies to combat these things," Herring said. And if City Hall doesn't put some weight behind it, Herring said, the commonwealth's attorney's office alone can't realistically make substantial institutional changes outside its courtrooms.

This isn't the first time Herring has endorsed a more progressive agenda. Earlier this year, he ended cash bail, which defendants used to pay to avoid being held for trial. The money was meant to ensure defendants returned to court. Herring said he found no correlation. Now, prosecutors assess a defendant's risk to the community. If they seemed likely to reoffend or to flee, the prosecutor asks a judge to keep them jailed until trial; otherwise, they are released with pretrial conditions.

In 2011, Herring, along with the Public Defender Office, helped to establish a specialized court docket for some of Richmond's mentally ill defendants, allowing them to receive supervised treatment rather than incarceration.

That same year, Herring joined Richmond police and federal officials to crack down on drugs and other crime at two East End housing projects, while allowing a few low-level suspects to avoid convictions if they cleaned up their act. The offers were part of a broader effort by the city to pinpoint drug dealers who lack serious, violent criminal records and provide them services that could give them hope and help get them jobs.

In cases of violent offenders, however, Herring's office made a point of seeking tough prison sentences.

The idea of cutting drug dealers any kind of break was controversial to some at the time, but Herring said it was successful because none of the participating offenders had gone on to commit a violent crime. He said he was frustrated, though, that some dealers refused the opportunity.

During his tenure, Herring has also encouraged general continuances for minor misdemeanor offenses such as underage alcohol possession, first possession of marijuana, or disorderly conduct, where a defendant has little to no prior record. He has directed prosecutors to avoid charging felonies where appropriate, or to consider alternatives to active incarceration for nonviolent offenses.

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Some city department heads have voiced support for moving forward with a community summit, which so far hasn't been scheduled.

Smith, the interim police chief, said he is open to "new, nontraditional methods" to increase public safety. But he criticized the exclusion of "the current and recent philosophical approach of the Richmond Police Department to address a wide spectrum of societal challenges."

Smith pointed to programs for youth and adults who have been recently released from jail or prison, aimed to increase conflict resolution and reduce recidivism as part of the more holistic approach to public safety.

"I understand and agree that the report is a basis to generate discussion of difficult topics," Smith said. "The fact remains that the city needs to have to a serious discussion about its history and how we got to where we are, so that we can move toward a vibrant and positive city for everybody."

Michelle Hudacsko, a spokeswoman for Richmond Public Schools, said the schools already have a plan in place to address policies that are contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. As another part of its strategic plan, RPS plans to institute more "trauma-informed practices" to better equip teachers to understand and deal with students who act out.

"We look forward to beginning this work this summer ' and will definitely use this resource," she said of Herring's guide.

Shawn Utsey, a psychology professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and chair of the African American Studies programs, participated in a panel before the discussion guide was published. His research focuses on the psychology of the African American experience and discusses how modern policing originated from slave patrols.

"My comments at the time was that some serious thinking outside of the box would be required to really address it," he said of his initial meeting with Herring and Shabazz.

He applauded the effort at frank conversation, but "defensiveness was widespread," Utsey said. "I don't think anyone was ready to take any radical steps. I think they gravitated toward the discussions or presentations that were already approximating what they do with some modifications."

Gastañaga, the ACLU leader, complimented Herring's contemplative nature, but said the report left out a fundamental question.

"My overall reaction is that I think there are a lot of good questions that are raised here, and the suggestion here that we should re-evaluate what's important to improve in public safety. But I also think that a fundamental oversight is any real, hard-edged questioning on our basic assumptions about what should be criminal and what should not be criminal," Gastañaga said. "And whether law enforcement is the right mechanism to address significant social ills like substance abuse disorder."

She pushed for decriminalization of such issues as substance abuse, homelessness and poverty by prohibiting laws on possession of marijuana, vagrancy and panhandling, but those issues weren't acknowledged in Herring's report.

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Herring's response to the ultimate question: "Maybe we're all aggravators unintentionally."

"My thought was, if we are all in the room together, and we provided a shared, acknowledged context, that no one agency would be in the crosshairs, because we are all coming in and saying that no agency is as effective as it should be," he said. "I don't think our criminal justice system, our city's criminal justice system, is going to be effective in any meaningful way, if we don't take these sorts of things up."

But after Herring leaves office next month, he will be leaving a discussion he believes is critical for Richmond to others.

**Richmond police data indicate racial disparities in contacts with public; activists call for change**

When Richmond police come into contact with a person for any reason, officers have complete discretion whether to fill out a "field interview report" documenting the encounter.

These encounters could involve intelligence-gathering efforts for suspected drug or gang activity, or they could be as innocuous as an officer stopping to play basketball with some kids. Officers can fill out a report, noting a person's name, age, gender and race, among other things, all of which goes into a searchable department database. Or decide not to document the encounter at all. It's up to the officer.

Of the 29,997 reports Richmond police officers documented in 2017 and 2018, a disproportionate number of them described the subject of the report as a black person. In a city where black residents make up 49 percent of the population, 65 percent of the people documented were listed as black.

The Richmond Transparency and Accountability Project, a group of local advocates for greater oversight in policing, obtained a trove of data from the police department through an open-records request, and their review shows "alarmingly disproportionate policing of young black boys and men."

William Smith, the city's interim police chief, said he shares the group's concerns about racial disparities in the data, but he said the numbers are more indicative of inconsistent report-taking than bias among his police officers. The department is developing a new records management system that Smith said will require officers to fill out fields like gender and race. The system will have a webpage the public can access and run reports of police data, which Smith hopes will improve the reports' accuracy and accountability.

"The quality of the data is not the best that it could be, because of the limitations of the system that we currently have," Smith said.

But Smith said officers should continue to have discretion when deciding to fill out these reports or not, and he doesn't plan to change that.

Liz Coston, a Virginia Commonwealth University sociologist who examined thousands of the field contact reports, said there is enough evidence to show racial disparities, and that they could be even greater if the reports were filled out uniformly.

"There are disparities in the data that show overpolicing of black citizens in Richmond, and this is with them probably underreporting their actual degree of bias," Coston said. "There are some conclusions we can draw, even though it's not the best data or ideal data. It's clear that black residents in Richmond are impacted by policing to a much greater extent than white citizens are."

Officers can assume the race and gender of a person they are stopping based on the person's appearance and record that information. Or officers can leave those demographic questions unanswered, as they did in nearly 7 percent of their reports taken during the two-year period.

Richmond police provided the Richmond Transparency and Accountability Project 27,432 reports that were taken from Jan. 1, 2017, through Oct. 1, 2018. The police department provided the Richmond Times-Dispatch with an additional 13,437 reports spanning all of 2018. An analysis of the data shows:

A black person is more than twice as likely to be documented in a report than a white person.White people make up just 27.4 percent of the reports, and 45.9 percent of the city's population.All but one of the 56 people stopped by Richmond police for a suspected curfew violation in 2017 and 2018 were black. Two of them were over 18, and therefore could not be violating the city ordinance that applies only to minors. Still, a report was filled out.Black individuals accounted for 66 percent of all reports of suspicious activity and 71 percent of all suspicious people. There were only three categories out of 35 in which white people outpaced blacks: nuisance reports for a party house, noise ordinance violations, and homeless encampments. Not a single person was listed as "Hispanic" in field interview reports in 2017, and last year only a fraction of the city's 6 percent Hispanic or Latino population was documented in these reports.

Smith, the police chief, said the lack of reports for the Hispanic population is partly because "Hispanic" is an ethnicity, rather than a race, and was only added to RPD's system in 2017. He also explained that unless an officer directly asks the person their race, an officer might assume a darker-skinned Hispanic or Latino person is black and a lighter-skinned person is white, skewing the data in those categories and others.

"The fact that black Richmonders are overrepresented so greatly, that's what the police think is notable," Coston said at a community meeting where RTAP presented their findings last month. "Because these are discretionary, the police think it's notable when they see a black person doing something they deem suspicious, but maybe they don't think it's notable enough to write that same report if it's someone who's white. The discretionary nature of the data actually makes the overrepresentation of black people a little bit more troubling."

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The police departments in Chesterfield County and Henrico County also use field interview or field contact reports to document potentially suspicious activity, as do many police departments nationwide. Giving officers some discretion seems to be universal, but some departments require the lowest legal standard of "reasonable suspicion" when approaching someone for a field contact.

Unlike Richmond, which doesn't have a general order addressing these reports, Chesterfield has a written policy that spells out its field interview practice under the heading "investigative procedure and constitutional law." It first addresses three forms of investigative contacts: consensual encounters; investigative detentions, also referred to as "Terry stops," when officers can detain and frisk a person based on reasonable suspicion of criminal activity as set in the Supreme Court case Terry v. Ohio from 1968; and arrests, which require probable cause, a much higher legal standard of proof.

The policy appears to prefer treating field interviews as consensual encounters "even when reasonable suspicion exists," and encourages officers to establish a rapport with the person while using neutral or optional language that signals freedom to leave or even participate in the interview. It also states that self-identification or documentation may be requested, but cannot be required.

Richmond's department seems to apply the same preference, saying the reports are "not necessarily indicative of criminal activity."

The International Association of Chiefs of Police's model policy recommends that officers should use field interviews, which it equates to investigation detentions or Terry stops, "only when the officer has a reasonable suspicion, based upon objective facts, that the individual to be interviewed is engaged in criminal activity."

Henrico police have said their officers use field interview cards only when they suspect a crime has occurred or is about to; and do not document consensual encounters.

Similar policies have received scrutiny in other cities like New Orleans, Los Angeles and New York, where in 2013 a federal court ruled the department's stop-and-frisk policy was unconstitutional because of gaping racial disparities.

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Under the same heading as its field interview policy, Chesterfield police outline a policy for "unbiased policing."

It says: "Officers may not consider the race or ethnicity of a person in the course of any law enforcement action unless the officer is seeking to detain, apprehend, or otherwise be on the lookout for a specific suspect sought in connection with a specific crime who has been identified or described in part by race or ethnicity. Biased-based profiling in traffic contacts, field contacts and in asset seizure and forfeiture efforts are strictly prohibited."

Richmond police have no written policy on bias, but spokesman Gene Lepley said the department was one of the first in the state to institute anti-bias training. As part of the department's basic recruit training, it provides eight hours on "fair/impartial policing." The department is planning to update every officer's anti-bias training within a year, Lepley said. It's been about four years since officers, other than recruits, had the training.

Chief Smith said he also plans to make race and gender questions mandatory when the new records system is installed, which may require training on how to ask those questions without bias, and delicately, if necessary.

"There are times when our discretion is important," said Smith, adding that he doesn't believe every contact with police should be documented. "We need to make sure our people know this data is important. Being accurate in what we document is just as important as how we talk to people."

Smith said field interviews are an important crime-fighting tool. The International Association of Chiefs of Police agrees but warns that they "can be perceived by some as police harassment or intimidation conducted in a discriminatory manner." Smith said his officers make these stops in high-crime areas, which in Richmond, tend to be poorer and predominantly black neighborhoods.

"The value of a field interview is when we are addressing crime trends," he said. "We may know the area in which a crime trend is occurring, the rough time frame, but we don't know who."

So police go to that area and ask people for information, which they document in these reports, or parse through past field contacts that occurred around the time and location of a crime as they are looking for a suspect.

"Our field interviews align with our violent-crime density. You see that it aligns very closely, and in places that it doesn't ... look at property crime impact. You see how that combination of factors almost align completely," Smith said. "We put all of our focus on areas of violent crime and areas of property crime. Field contacts reflect that."

Coston, the VCU sociologist, said this method of policing is a "self-fulfilling prophecy" - police concentrate their resources in one area and see increases in small, petty crimes because they are there to make the arrest.

"If you send a lot of your police officer resources into one community, they're going to find crime there," Coston said. "If you don't send your officers to the West End, there are no officers there to find crime."

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Another issue with the Richmond Police Department's reports and the records system is that police can't link the field contacts to other reports, like arrests or searches. Many of these reports originate from calls for service from citizens, Smith said, but those systems aren't linked either.

None of the nearly 30,000 field interview reports resulted in arrests, Smith said. If they had, they would have been logged another way, as several categories reflected in the reports should have been. He hopes the new system will link field interview reports to other department databases so it is easier to make connections, for officers and for the public, and to check that the right report is being filled out.

"There are some [reports] that we are certain the person had not violated the code or ordinance that was cited, because it's impossible for them to," said Kim Rolla, an attorney at the Legal Aid Justice Center's Civil Rights and Racial Justice Program and a member of RTAP. "For example, someone who is over 18, by definition, could not commit a curfew violation. But for the vast majority of these, we have no idea what the result of that interaction was.

"If every single one of these means that this person was not violating the law, then that disparity should be even more alarming," Rolla said. "That also begs the question of how do we know how many people that were arrested were arrested initially because they were stopped for some kind of alleged suspicion."

Rolla said RTAP, and these records requests, came out of a New Virginia Majority campaign calling for a civilian review board for the police department. Neither Smith, nor predecessor Alfred Durham, supports civilian oversight of the department.

RTAP wants to create a board with subpoena power to review use-of-force investigations and complaints against officers, as well as the ability to review policies, making reports like these field interviews mandatory, Rolla said. The group would also like an auditor, whose job it is to review police data for any bias or wrongdoing as it's happening.

"Not addressing the problem certainly does nothing to prevent it," Coston said. "And as long as the Richmond Police Department continues to say, 'Well, this is discretionary data, we don't really have a problem,' the problem will remain.

"You understand that there is a problem, what our concern is, how are you going to address that problem? Our solution is that it needs to be addressed through civilian oversight. We don't want the police policing themselves completely."