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# 'Epidemic' of gun violence prompts call for Virginia to use federal dollars to curb shootings

BY: **GRAHAM MOOMAW** - JULY 19, 2021 12:01 AM



📷 Hundreds mourned 3-year-old Sharmar Hill Jr., who was killed in Hillside Court in Richmond in February of 2020. The child was playing outside when gunfire erupted. He was killed by a stray bullet. (Scott Elmquist/ Style Weekly)

For years, Norfolk Police Chief Larry Boone has been trying to gather data on how firearms flow from gun-store shelves to crime scenes in his city's high-poverty neighborhoods.

Though experts and politicians have floated multiple theories about what's driving an uptick in violence in Virginia and the rest of the country, Boone says guns are too easy to get and too

hard to track as they change hands, and the COVID-19 pandemic made that problem worse.

“The gun sales soared. They soared to such a degree that now we are dealing with Armageddon,” Boone said in an interview. “We have young folks shooting young folks. And that’s the reality of it.”

Virginia’s homicide rate hit a 20-year high in 2020, and many cities are seeing higher rates of violence persist in 2021. Some of the shootings making headlines this summer have involved shockingly young victims, and the accused shooters are often teenagers themselves.

“What’s alarming to me, in the last year and a half, is the age of the shooters and the age of the victims,” Boone said. “That’s the thing that stands out the most. How brazen they are ... They simply do not value life. They will pull a trigger intending to hit a specific person. But they don’t mind collateral damage either.”

When Democrats took control of the Virginia General Assembly in 2019, they wasted little time passing new gun restrictions expanding background checks, limiting handgun purchases to one per month, creating red flag orders to take guns away from people deemed dangerous, boosting penalties for leaving guns accessible to children and requiring gun owners to report lost or stolen firearms.

Gun sales [spiked last year](#) even with those new restrictions, a trend widely attributed to the uncertainty of the pandemic and civil unrest sparked by the police killing of George Floyd.

With Virginia’s homicide stats headed in the wrong direction, a coalition of gun-control groups, community activists and health providers is asking state lawmakers to devote millions in new funding to a not-particularly new idea for reducing gun crimes: focusing on deterrence within the small subset of people most likely to shoot someone or be shot.

Ahead of a special session in August when state lawmakers will decide what to do with \$4.3 billion in federal relief dollars from the American Rescue Plan, the new Virginia Community Violence Coalition wants \$37 million to be used to scale up community-based violence intervention programs.

The [coalition’s letter](#) asks lawmakers to prioritize what it calls an “ongoing epidemic” of violence.

“We can’t continue to fund and do things the way we’ve been doing them with very little outcome,” said Torey Edmonds, community outreach coordinator at Virginia Commonwealth University’s Clark-Hill Institute for Positive Youth Development.

Edmonds was one of 22 signatories on the letter. Other organizations involved include gun-control groups like Brady, Giffords, Everytown for Gun Safety, Moms Demand Action and the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence. Representatives from Sentara Healthcare and VCU Health, hospital systems that treat trauma victims in regions hit hardest by gun violence, also signed, as did community-based groups like RISC, or Richmonders Involved to Strengthen our Communities, and Friends of the Portsmouth Juvenile Court.

Community violence intervention can take many forms. Mike McLively, a Giffords attorney who leads the group's Community Violence Initiative, says it involves identifying high-risk populations and connecting with them through street outreach, mental health services or case management.

"The idea with these interventions is in most cities, if not all in the U.S., it's a very small percentage of people that are driving the majority of violence," McLively said.

Violence intervention programs have been implemented in several cities and states. Operation Ceasefire, an anti-gang violence initiative implemented in Boston in the 1990s, helped reduce youth homicide statistics by more than 60 percent, earning it a reputation as a promising public-safety strategy for other urban areas.

The coalition's letter to state lawmakers cites a 52 percent increase in intentional violent injuries treated at VCU's Trauma Center last year.

According to crime data compiled by the Virginia State Police, murder and non-negligent manslaughter more than doubled in Portsmouth in 2020. Hampton saw a 60 percent increase, Norfolk experienced a 36 percent increase and Richmond had a 20 percent increase.

As in years past, the increase in violence has fallen heavier on some communities than others. Roughly two-thirds of the 528 victims of murder and non-negligent manslaughter in Virginia last year were Black, according to state crime data, as were a majority of offenders. Guns were involved in a vast majority of those cases.

Advocates say it should come as no surprise that communities already suffering from a lack of resources and opportunity saw longstanding problems worsen when the pandemic hit and things began to shut down.

"School can be a protective factor for our kids. It can be a nurturing environment," Edmonds said. "Our young people got up one day and we said 'School is closed.' And at the drop of a dime, they shut school down for a year and a half. I am 62 years old and I have never seen that."

Edmonds said the problem requires focusing "from all ends."

"I think that the availability of guns is one issue. But our attitudes toward firearms is another," Edmonds said. "Where we have a culture that ... they're in love with guns. Then we have communities where we begin to teach our young people that they always got to be ready, don't let anybody disrespect you. And it doesn't keep us safe."

The first half of 2021 saw no shortage of stories illustrating the continued toll of gun violence.

In Richmond, a shootout in an apartment complex courtyard in April [left a woman and her 3-month-old baby dead](#). Earlier this month, a 16-year-old girl was killed amid gunfire at a Henrico County shopping center, with three other teenagers, including a 15-year-old, later arrested in connection with the shooting. Another 15-year-old boy was charged [in a shooting](#)

in Norfolk that injured four other juveniles, including a 6-year-old girl. In late June, two people were shot on the first night of the Salem Fair. Police announced they had taken a boy younger than 16 into custody.

“Whether you’re a Republican or a Democrat... I don’t think you want kids out there shooting each other,” said Susan Fincke, executive director of Friends of the Portsmouth Juvenile Court, a nonprofit that helps youth and families involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. “So let’s collaborate in the areas where we can collaborate.”

Both Democrats and Republicans have signaled support for the strategy in the past, though one sticking point may be the role of law enforcement and whether the programs should or shouldn’t involve a heavier police presence in majority-Black neighborhoods.

Though community-based programs are backed by gun-control groups, they also align with the arguments of pro-gun Republicans who say restrictive laws on gun ownership are less effective than dedicating resources to preventing and punishing gun crimes.

House Minority Leader Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah, who introduced a violence intervention bill this year that failed to advance from a Democratic-controlled subcommittee, said intervention programs would “fall apart” without a strong law enforcement component to ensure there are consequences if intervention fails.



📷 House Minority Leader Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah. (Ned Oliver /Virginia Mercury)

“That is not something our Democratic colleagues have an appetite for,” Gilbert said. “They are always looking to support the narrative that the guns are to blame. We believe that the guns in the hands of criminals are to blame.”

Gilbert said the broader backlash against law enforcement associated with last year’s protests against police brutality, which led Virginia Democrats to strengthen accountability measures for police without going after their budgets, is a factor in the wave of violence.

“Last year was the year that we kept being told that police were bad and criminals were victims,” Gilbert said. “I’m not saying that’s to blame. But it certainly, I believe, has contributed to that environment of lawlessness.”

Virginia Republicans have spotlighted headlines about rising violence, suggesting it’s tied to Democratic policies that make law enforcement less aggressive and the criminal justice system less punitive.

Others say that’s an oversimplification, pointing out the increase in violence last year was a nationwide trend in red and blue states alike.

Nationally, Democrats are signaling that they see the increase in shootings as a problem that requires a response. In a recent memo, President Joe Biden’s administration urged states and localities to use federal relief funding on anti-violence initiatives, including “holding rogue firearms dealers accountable for violating federal laws,” offering more resources to law enforcement and community violence intervention.

U.S. Rep. Donald McEachin, D-Richmond, recently announced he had secured almost \$1 million in federal funding to assist with VCU’s anti-gun violence work.

“Gun violence has destroyed far too many lives in Richmond and disproportionately affects low-income communities and communities of color,” McEachin said in a news release.

Sen. Mamie Locke, D-Hampton, said she too is concerned about what she’s seeing in Hampton Roads and expects addressing gun violence to be a priority in the special session.

“There’s just too many guns on the streets,” Locke said.

Because of the localized nature of law enforcement, violence intervention programs can be tailored to suit the preferences of a particular community.

The new anti-violence coalition has asked the state to use \$24 million to supplement \$2.6 million the General Assembly budgeted for gun violence intervention earlier this year. The original \$2.6 million was supposed to be directed to five localities working on anti-violence initiatives, and the proposed federal infusion could boost those grants and make them available to more local officials. Local leaders would have flexibility to decide specifics of how their program would work.

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Police and paramedics work the scene of a shooting that wounded two people, including a 7-year-old, last month in Richmond's East End. (NBC12)

The coalition also wants \$10 million to go to the Department of Criminal Justice Services to support the development of community violence prevention work through training programs, conferences and the pursuit of additional funding streams. Another \$2 million is proposed to help evaluate the programs' impact and \$1 million is suggested for five new positions in DCJS.

DCJS itself requested \$20 million in funding for community violence intervention in a request sent to Gov. Ralph Northam's administration ahead of the special session.

Virginia Democrats have not yet rolled out a concrete proposal.

"Combating community violence has been a priority of Governor Northam's throughout his administration, and these programs are certainly a part of our discussions around federal relief funding," said Northam spokeswoman Alena Yarmosky.



📷 Norfolk Police Chief Larry Boone. (Roger Chesley/ Virginia Mercury)

Boone, the Norfolk police chief, said community violence intervention programs can be helpful with the right people involved and the right level of commitment. But, he said, policymakers are “chasing our tail if we never impact the flow of guns.” To really make a difference, he said, there should have to be a paper trail every time a gun changes hands. (Virginia [began requiring](#) background checks on gun sales between private parties last year).

“It’s always been on the police to manage things that governments, generations ago, created,” Boone said. “In any urban setting that has poverty, it looks like Norfolk, it looks like Detroit, it looks like Richmond. It has looked that way for decades. I’m going to say it again, until we impact the flow and start tracking guns, we’ll continue to have this conversation.”



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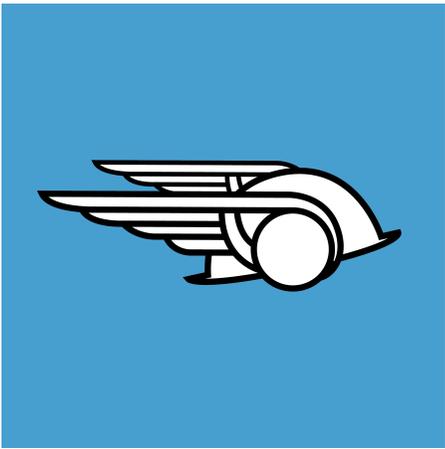
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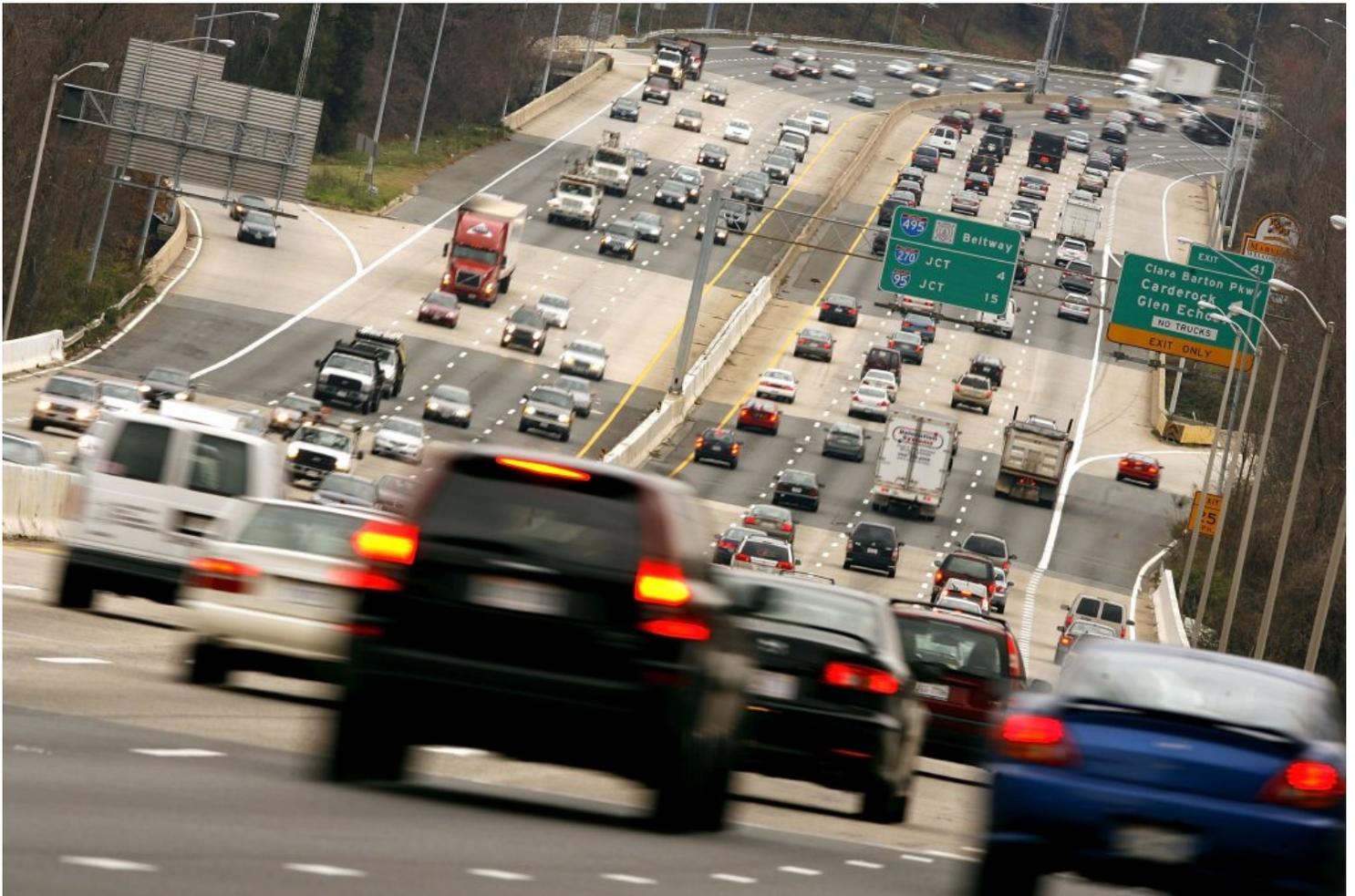




TRANSPORTATION

# Car crashes decreased in Virginia during the pandemic, but deaths went up

BY: **GRAHAM MOOMAW** - JUNE 22, 2021 1:33 PM



📷 Traffic flows over the American Legion Bridge along I-495, the Capital Beltway, on the day before the Thanksgiving holiday November 22, 2006 between Virginia and Maryland. (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

The number of crashes on Virginia roads plummeted in 2020, according to new data, but the number of traffic deaths rose to the highest level in more than a decade.

A total of 847 people died in traffic accidents last year, a roughly 2.4 percent increase over 2019. Numbers worsened in what transportation officials call the “belt, booze and speed”

categories, with a sharp, 16.3 percent increase in speed-related deaths over last year.

While presenting the data Tuesday to the Commonwealth Transportation Board, George Bishop, deputy commissioner at the Department of Motor Vehicles, said the state hadn't seen fatalities that high since rolling out its Traffic Records Electronic Database System 12 years ago.

"This is the highest number of fatalities in the TREDIS era," Bishop said. "Full stop."

Bishop said the 2020 fatality number was the highest since 2007, when the state saw 1,026 deaths.

The new data offers a glimpse of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected traffic safety in Virginia, for better and worse.

TREDIS Data Comparison: 2020 vs. 2019				
Category	2020	2019	+/-	% Change
<b>Fatalities - All crashes</b>	<b>847</b>	<b>827</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>2.42%</b>
<b>Alcohol Related</b>	<b>272</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3.03%</b>
<b>Speed Related</b>	<b>406</b>	<b>349</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>16.33%</b>
<b>Unrestrained</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>12.83%</b>
<b>Distracted</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.83%</b>
<b>Pedestrian</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>-10</b>	<b>-8.06%</b>
<b>Motorcycle</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>-2.25%</b>
<b>Teen Driver Involved</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10.77%</b>
<b>Mature Driver Involved</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>-22</b>	<b>-10.95%</b>
<b>Moped</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>-7.69%</b>
<b>Bicycle</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>-5</b>	<b>-38.46%</b>
<b>Large Truck Involved</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Work Zones</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>-6</b>	<b>-35.29%</b>
<b>Serious Injuries - All Crashes</b>	<b>6,798</b>	<b>7,182</b>	<b>-384</b>	<b>-5.35%</b>

Department of Motor Vehicles  Virginia Highway Safety Office

📷 A screenshot from a presentation to the Commonwealth Transportation Board shows road safety trends for 2020.

Pedestrian and bicycle deaths fell by about 8 percent and 38.5 percent, respectively, which officials called a positive trend in a year when more people were walking and biking.

But officials could only theorize about why traffic deaths went up while the number of crashes fell to 105,600, a significant drop from the 125,000 to 130,000 Virginia sees in a normal year.

Transportation Secretary Shannon Valentine said her staff has suggested people may be so distracted in their cars they may not even have time to brake or try to prevent a high-speed collision.

"The accident comes upon us so quickly that we can't react," she said.

In crashes where wearing a seatbelt was an option, Bishop said, about 56 percent of the people who died weren't wearing one.

Though the Virginia General Assembly has recently approved several traffic safety initiatives, including a ban on holding phones while driving, the legislature has rejected efforts to allow police to stop drivers only for seatbelt infractions, which Valentine said had been a priority for her office. Under current law, not wearing a seatbelt is a secondary offense, meaning drivers can only be stopped for it if they're committing some other infraction.

When a bill allowing police to make seatbelt-only stops failed in the Virginia Senate in 2020, opponents [described it as an authoritarian overreach](#) that could have a disproportionate impact on minority drivers.

"As long as I have breath in my body, I will not allow what I saw in Moscow to happen in Virginia," Sen. Chap Petersen, D-Fairfax, said at the time.

Bishop said safety researchers have indicated making seatbelt infractions a primary offense in Virginia could save up to 100 lives per year.

"The secondary law actually does have an impact on the number of fatalities that are unrestrained in a state," he said.

Statistics show young men in rural areas, he said, are a demographic particularly at risk of dying for lack of seatbelt use.

"It is not by accident that we have messaging that goes to in and around NASCAR events, for example," he said. "These are folks that need to get the message to buckle up."

Bishop also noted that traffic enforcement was scaled down during the pandemic, with speeding convictions down 42 percent in 2020, a sign police may have been trying to limit relatively low-stakes interactions with the public while the virus was spreading.

DUI arrests also decreased in 2020, while alcohol-related traffic fatalities ticked up slightly. The fact that alcohol-related deaths were up 3 percent from 2019, Bishop said, was "distressing" in light of the fact that bars and restaurants were largely shut down for much of the year.

In total, Bishop said, a crash occurred in Virginia about every five minutes in 2020, and an average of 2.3 people died per day in traffic accidents.

"It's very sobering to see these numbers," Valentine said. "We'll just continue to try to determine how we can affect these behaviors."

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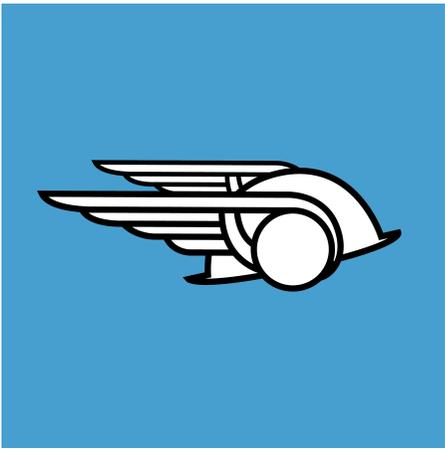
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CRIMINAL JUSTICE + POLICING

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2021

## 'It's not enough:' Anti-gun violence money in Va. relief package falls far short of requests

'If you're going to invest in this it needs to be serious'

BY: **GRAHAM MOOMAW** - AUGUST 9, 2021 12:04 AM



📷 A shooting at the Belt Atlantic apartments in Richmond earlier this year killed a mother and her three-month old baby. (NBC12)

The pandemic relief spending plan crafted by Democratic leaders includes \$5 million for community-based gun violence prevention initiatives, an amount that falls far short of the \$37 million advocacy groups had suggested.

The original proposal was only \$2.5 million. Legislators decided to double that in budget negotiations late last week, an apparent nod to the disappointment some gun-control

proponents were feeling after seeing the funding amounts Democratic leaders had worked out in advance of this month's special session.

"It's not enough. I recognize that," said Lori Haas, Virginia director of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, one of several dozen advocates who signed on to a letter requesting \$37 million. "But there is some process and research and information-gathering needed to make sure these dollars are spent to have the most impact."

The letter from the group of gun-control advocates, health providers and community activists told policymakers funding was "urgently needed to address the severe increase in homicides and shootings associated with the COVID-19 pandemic." Several Virginia cities have seen substantial spikes in violence, and the state's overall homicide rate [hit a two-decade high](#) in 2020.

[The letter from the Virginia Community Violence Coalition](#) suggested substantial new money for violence intervention programs focused on deterring the small subset of people most at risk of being shot or shooting someone else. The state Department of Criminal Justice Services had also requested significant new anti-violence funding, suggesting \$20 million in the immediate budget year and \$17.5 million annually for the next three years.

The original \$2.5 million, part of the \$4.3 billion in American Rescue Plan funding Virginia policymakers are allocating in a special session that started this week, would be routed through Attorney General Mark Herring's office "for gun violence reduction projects in partnership with select localities." In a news release, the attorney general's office said it intends to partner with community groups and law enforcement to replicate anti-violence initiatives that have already shown results in Richmond and Norfolk.

"These efforts will include education and prevention programs in conjunction with law enforcement, the local housing associations, tenant associations, faith-based organizations, non-profits, and more," Herring's office said.

The \$2.5 million legislators added later will go to DCJS, which will give out grant funds to localities interested in starting or expanding anti-violence programs.

The plan also includes a little over \$500,000 for the Department of Forensic Science to boost the state's capacity to analyze gun evidence and an \$800,000 grant to the city of Hampton focused on gun violence intervention and expanding youth employment opportunities.

Mike McLively, an attorney with the Giffords gun-control group, called Virginia's spending package "a small step forward."

"However, community violence is a crisis all across the commonwealth that requires a more significant commitment," he said. "With potentially upwards of \$1 billion of ARP funds still unused and a \$2.6 billion budget surplus, Giffords and the Virginia Community Violence Coalition urge leaders in the General Assembly to make all our cities safer and more equitable by prioritizing robust funding to scale up effective, proactive, community-based public safety strategies."

Democratic leaders have said they want to set aside \$800 million to \$1 billion in federal dollars to hedge against any setbacks in the pandemic recovery. They've also said they want to wait until their regular session in January before deciding what to do with the \$2.6 billion state surplus left over in the budget year that ended last month.

Gov. Ralph Northam's office said the spending package includes a total of \$71 million for general anti-violence initiatives and services, including \$30 million for mental health crisis services and mobile emergency response teams, \$12.2 million for support services for crime victims, \$10 million for substance abuse treatment and \$4 million to improve mental-health training for law enforcement and implement the new Marcus Alert system that aims to create bigger role for mental health professionals when police are called to deal with a person in crisis.

"This comprehensive funding package addresses the systemic roots of violence, with gun safety programs working hand-in-hand with community-based services and substance abuse treatment, among other funding streams," Northam spokeswoman Alena Yarmosky said in an email. "The governor will continue to prioritize gun violence as he puts together his outgoing budget proposal in December."

Northam championed a package of gun-control bills after Democrats won control of the General Assembly in 2019. Most of it passed, including new laws expanding background checks, limiting handgun purchases to one per month, creating red flag orders to take guns away from people deemed dangerous, boosting penalties for leaving guns accessible to children and requiring gun owners to report lost or stolen firearms.

Republicans argued those measures would be ineffective at reducing shootings and say the rise in violence shows a targeted strategy against gun crimes could be a more effective approach than restricting access to guns.

An alternative spending plan House Republicans proposed this week re-upped a proposal from House Minority Leader Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah, to create a Group Violence Intervention Board with its own executive director that would oversee anti-violence grants to localities. That proposal failed along with the rest of the GOP plan.

"If you're going to invest in this, it needs to be serious," Gilbert said in an interview, adding that the programs he envisions need to have a strong policing component else "the logic of it falls apart."

Del. Jason Miyares, R-Virginia Beach, Herring's opponent in this year's election for attorney general, also proposed an unsuccessful amendment to the spending bill that he said would give the office more power to prosecute illegal gun sales at the state level, particularly straw purchases.

Haas said she doesn't buy the argument that the rise in violence indicates stricter gun laws don't work. The COVID-19 crisis, she said, compounded longstanding "systemic inequities."

“If we could arrest and prosecute our way out of gun violence it would’ve happened a long time ago,” she said. “The solution is not more punishment. The solution is interventions using a public health model.”

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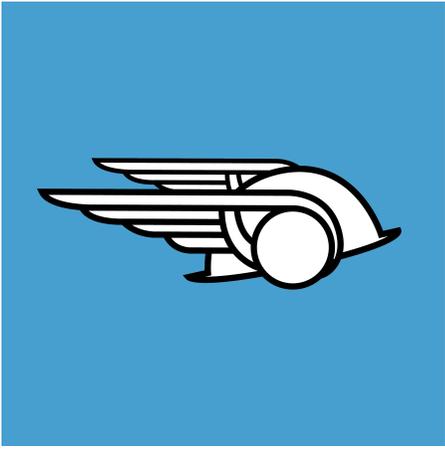
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