

A sudden uptick in homicides offers a stark reminder: Richmond still has work to do

# RETURNING FIRE

By Scott Bass / Illustration by Victoria Borges









**T**he Belt Atlantic apartment complex sits on the edge of Swansboro, one of Richmond's oldest residential neighborhoods, a former suburb for early 19th century tobacco and coal workers who made the trek daily to industrial Manchester. In the 1960s and '70s, this South Side community along Midlothian Turnpike was filled with prominent middle-class Black families.

Today, if you look past its pockmarks — the sagging rooftops and peeling bungalows, the trash-strewn sidewalks — you can still see glimpses of what made Swansboro and its surrounding tree-lined streets a destination.

There are days like April 27, 2021, when the smell of fresh-cut grass lingers, and the spring air feels more like summer. It was a Tuesday evening, and a few dozen people were socializing outdoors at the Belt Atlantic, which borders West Swansboro across from George Wythe High School. Neighbors mingled as children romped in the courtyard.

In an instant, they were all running for cover. A group of young men, armed and wearing ski masks, popped out of a gray Dodge Charger at roughly 6:30 p.m. and began to shoot indiscriminately into the crowd, killing 30-year-old Sharnez Hill and her 3-month-old son, Nezhiah. Three others were struck and injured. The shooting begat more shooting when another group of young men at the complex started firing back. After the smoke cleared, upward of 50 shell casings littered the ground.

"Somebody was having a birthday party. They had a bouncy house. And these guys just walked out," says the Rev. Robin Mines, a pastor who lives in nearby West Swansboro. She wasn't there when the shooting took place but she has since visited the complex weekly — delivering food, running errands, helping residents with finances and housing. "Many of them have no income or very little to survive on," she says. "These children have nothing, so the streets are getting ahold of them and raising them. They are toting guns that are visible. They are carrying them for protection."

Police would later charge five young men in the shooting rampage; one of them, 19-year-old Kevon Tyrek Bynum, has already pleaded guilty to first-degree murder. Two more suspects, Donald Hemmings, 23, and Kevon Bynum's twin brother, Kavon, 19, face trial later this spring, while Shyheem Martin, 24, and Sha Mondrick Perry, 20, await court hearings.

The double homicide at Belt Atlantic last April represents two of the 90 homicides in Richmond last year, a 36% spike from 2020 and the highest count in the city since 2004. The rise in gun violence was unexpected: Amid an overall decline in most crime categories, including robberies, sexual assaults, larcenies and burglaries, shootings jumped. There were 297 aggravated assaults with a firearm in 2021, according to the Richmond Police Department, a 10% increase from 2020, and an additional 249 nonfatal shootings, up from 230 the year

before, an 8% increase.

In a city that's seen enormous changes in the last decade — a growing population, a surging arts and culture scene, and a newfound political will to address social justice amid a national reckoning with systemic racism — the carnage of 2021 offered a stark reminder: Gaping economic divisions and concentrated poverty continue to suffocate many of the city's neighborhoods, conditions that are capable of producing unthinkable anger and violence.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA SPURS SHOOTINGS**

The spate of recent shootings and death recalls the 1990s, when Richmond was known as the South's "murder capital," with homicides routinely eclipsing 100 annually and peaking at 160 murders in 1994. But unlike the gun violence that gripped Richmond 30 years ago — much of it connected to drug trafficking during the crack-cocaine epidemic — the recent uptick isn't as easy to diagnose.

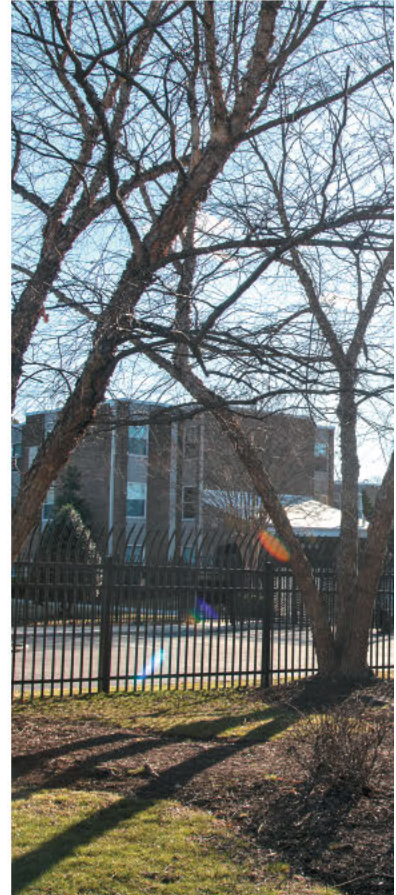
"It's much more citywide than it used to be in the 1990s," says Colette McEachin, Richmond's commonwealth's attorney, explaining that the majority of shooting deaths in the 1990s occurred in the city's six public housing projects. In 2021, only 14 of the 90 murders took place in public housing communities. "What people need to recognize is it's no longer just confined, or primarily confined, to public housing. It unfortunately can happen almost anywhere at any time."

There are still hot spots such as the city's South Side, near Swansboro and Broad Rock, and Hillside Court near Commerce Road, one of Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority's public housing communities. North Side also saw a higher concentration of homicides, particularly near Highland Park and around RRHAs Whitcomb Court.

Police officials and prosecutors offer myriad reasons: A proliferation of guns, the shuttering of schools and limited access to social services during the global pandemic added fuel to the fire. Meanwhile, there's a shortage of police officers, which could be inviting more criminal activity.

There's also been an increase in shootings that stem from disagreements on social media, a relatively recent phenomenon.

"Arguments used to be somewhat private," explains







A mass shooting at The Belt Atlantic apartment community on the city's South Side claimed a mother and her 3-month-old baby in April of last year.

Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney Michael Hollomon, who oversees homicide prosecutions. "Now it's on social media, and if somebody gets disrespected, that disrespect doesn't occur in front of one or two people, it occurs in front of hundreds of people. ... In order to get it to stop, some people feel like they have to resort to violence."

McEachin says that's what spurred the Belt Atlantic shootings last April.

"Social media was integral in that case," she says. "The carload of young men who ended up driving to Belt Atlantic and killing the young mother, her 3-month-old child and wounding and shooting [three] other people were there because a young man who was [at the apartment complex] said to them on social media after they had been beefing, 'Yeah, this is where I am. You going to bring something, bring it here.'"

City Councilwoman Stephanie Lynch, whose 5th District includes The Belt Atlantic apartments, says the shuttering of schools for a year and a half — Richmond was the last public school system in the state to open for in-person instruction last September — has also played a role. With so many students at home left to their own devices without mentors, teachers and other support, they were more susceptible to lashing out.

"Our public school system is that third family member that creates an environment of support," Lynch says. "And that was suddenly taken away ... and many of our kids and our students were left without support, without much to do during the day. And you couple that with the mental

health trauma of people in their family, family members going through significant, significant economic hardship, I think those factors set us on a path."

## A SHORTAGE OF POLICE OFFICERS

The wave of shootings also came as the Richmond Police Department struggled with officer retention and recruitment. As of late January, the department had 136 officer vacancies (RPD is budgeted for 750 officers).

It's difficult to make a direct correlation between fewer officers and an increase in violent crime, but there's little debate that the shortage has impacted policing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, says Police Chief Gerald Smith.

"Of course it [has]. If we had more officers, we could actually use officers to increase those positive contacts," he explains. "Community policing ... works best when you can actually get out into the community."

Since the early 2000s, Richmond has deployed a community policing strategy with the goal of connecting more deeply with the community and its residents. But with a short-handed police force, Smith says, there are fewer officers to patrol and walk those beats and make those casual connections.

"There's law enforcement, which enforces the laws, and then you have policing, which actually is part of the community," Smith says. "To do that, you need officers who don't run from call to call to call."

Has the shortage helped facilitate more shootings? Maybe. There is ample research that supports the idea that police work, the kind of community-focused police work Smith is talking about, when focused on high-crime areas can lead to a noticeable reduction, says David Weisburd, professor of criminology and executive director of the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University.

"Richmond's not alone, but what is it?" Weisburd says. "What I can say about the policing part is that there's evidence that if the police are focused in the right ways ... they can have an impact. They can be an important part of reducing these sorts of problems."

The shortage of officers can be traced to a variety of factors, including lower pay than that of surrounding jurisdictions and general perceptions around urban policing. The social justice protests that stretched on for weeks in the summer of 2020 also affected morale.

The Richmond Police Department's handling of the city's nightly protests in the wake of George Floyd's brutal murder by Minneapolis police in May of 2020 led to public outcry over the use of nonlethal tactics to disperse crowds — including tear gas and rubber bullets — and a special task force that evaluated the department's methods, leading to recommendations for how to improve accountability and >



public safety. The recommendations include the creation of a new system for responding to nonemergency mental health episodes, substance abuse and minor civil disputes with social workers and other professionals instead of gun-carrying officers, along with policy changes aimed at improving officer training and accountability, in addition to a host of nonpolice initiatives.

The police chief says he has no problem with the committee's recommendations. "I think I agreed with everything that's in there," Smith says, adding that he recognizes that some reforms are needed. The department is actively examining its policing efforts, he says, pointing out that Richmond is one of 10 cities from across the country recently selected for a three-year Department of Justice program called the National Public Safety Partnership, which involves working with the U.S. Attorney's office, the FBI and other federal agencies to provide consultation and technical assistance to improve public safety and community outreach.

The department is also "overhauling" its internal affairs process, Smith says, changing the structure so that police supervisors oversee officer discipline and complaints rather than simply assigning those cases to police detectives.

The pay and morale issues have proven tougher to fix.

Richmond's starting pay for officers is lower than in both Chesterfield and Henrico counties. Officer salaries start at \$44,000 in the city, compared to \$51,913 in Henrico and \$48,894 in Chesterfield (after training is completed). Higher pay and more aggressive "lateral" recruiting programs — hiring officers away from other departments — have helped the coun-

ties to shore up their officer ranks. Henrico currently has only four vacancies (the department is authorized for 647 sworn officers and is planning to add additional positions this year), and Chesterfield has just two vacancies (the department is budgeted for 557 sworn officers).

"We have a lot of people who left here because they just didn't want to do it anymore," Smith says of the retention issues. "And you can't talk about attrition without talking about pay."

Luke Geiger, who spent 17 years working as a Richmond police officer, decided it was time to retire from the force last year, leaving on Aug. 1 at age 49. Low pay and the stress caused by the staffing shortage following the 2020 protests, he says, made the job exceedingly difficult.

"I remember when the protests started, as [officers] were leaving they were writing names down on the whiteboard — it was up to 90," Geiger recalls. "After the protests ended, police work wasn't very popular. There's been a huge exodus."

Richmond Police Sgt. Brendan Leavy, president of the Richmond Coalition of Police, says the low pay and what he calls a lack of public support from the mayor and the police chief, especially during and following the protests, only made matters worse.

"Police officers aren't feeling supported," says Leavy, who called for the police chief to resign in December. "The police department is on auto-pilot. This police chief doesn't inspire anybody ... and officers just keep leaving."

On Feb. 3, Mayor Levar Stoney announced a series of initiatives aimed at combating gun violence across the city, including hiring a new community safety coordinator and a partnership with local nonprofit NextUp, which will distribute \$1 million in federal grant money for community programs — after-school tutoring and mentoring, mental health support for children and parents, and other crime prevention efforts. That's in addition to a new program launched by RPD in November, Operation Red Ball, a special task force that offers cash rewards for tips that lead to the seizure of illegal guns. Through early February, the task force, made up of detectives and officers from different precincts, had confiscated 97 firearms. During his State of the City address on Feb. 8, Stoney also said the city was launching a new \$500,000 gun buyback program to get more guns off the street.

At the press briefing on Feb. 3, the police chief introduced yet another initiative. The department plans to add a team of "violence interrupters," based on similar programs in other U.S. cities, which involves hiring civilians — individuals from "the streets," Smith explained — to help "de-escalate and mediate conflicts" and work as peer counselors to at-risk youth.

Increasing officer pay wasn't included in the ini-





tiatives, though a recent pay study with recommendations for improving the salary structure could come by the end of February, after the deadline for this issue. Smith says he's also working to help establish a pay plan committee for "the ongoing review and betterment" of officer and firefighter salaries.

Leavy, however, was bothered by how the violence interrupters program was announced. At the briefing Smith said the positions would pay \$65,000 annually but later corrected the figure in a press release — the pay structure is actually \$31,200 to \$46,000.

Leavy says officers remain frustrated.

"We will take all the help we can get combating gun violence," Leavy says of the violence interrupters program. "But they still did not consult with us."

### 'THE PROBLEM BEHIND THE PROBLEM'

There is no easy solution for gun violence. The underlying causes are systemic, says Brian Williams, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Virginia. And during the pandemic, social isolation and a deadly gun culture seemed to converge.

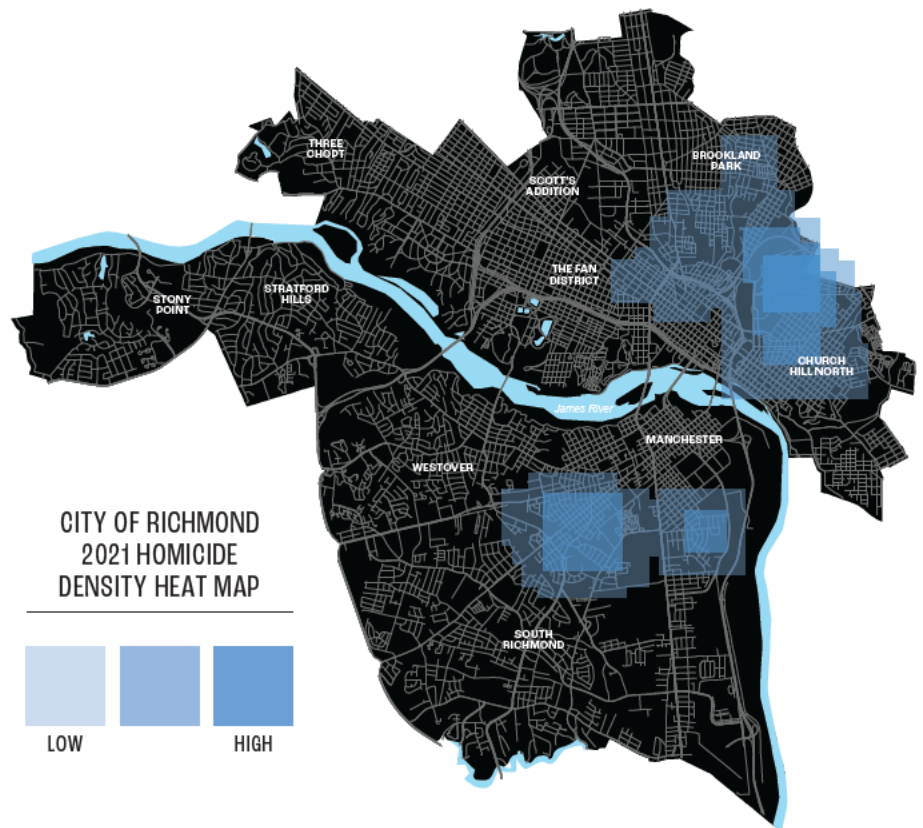
He says the push for police reform, which is healthy, shouldn't be viewed as antithetical to law enforcement, a critical component to keeping communities safe.

"Right now, in this kind of polarized moment, there are obstacles," says Williams, who served on Richmond's police reform task force in 2021. "I think it brings back into focus the shared responsibility sense when we think about community well-being, public safety, public order. ... It's not just law enforcement or policing, it's community coming together."

Weisburd, the professor of criminology at George Mason, says police reform can also play a role in reducing crime. He points to a study he worked on recently wherein officers trained in "procedural justice" tactics — essentially teaching officers how to communicate and treat people with more dignity and respect — led to a 12% reduction in crime over a nine-month period in targeted, high-crime hotspots in three major U.S. cities.

"There's no reason why you can't combine reform of the police with a continued focus on proactive policing to reduce crime," he says. "These are not combating ideas."

Others agree. The broader, systemic issues that lead to violent crime have little to do with the police, says Lynch,



who was elected to City Council in 2019.

"I think there was some, perhaps, misplaced policy alignment and advocacy around police presence," she says of the protest movement. "And I'm not confusing that with police brutality, because, absolutely, there is reform that is needed within departments, one thousand percent."

But what really needs reform, she says, is the criminal justice system.

"If you were to do a focus group with my Belt Atlantic community right now, what has impacted them the most? Every single one of those kids has grown up with a family member that's incarcerated," she says. "What do you think that does to a family system when you got someone who is locked away for 15 to 20 years?"

In cities like Richmond, concentrated poverty, which has roots in redlining, federal interstate construction that cut through Black communities in the 1950s, and "white flight," the migration of white Richmonders to suburban counties following desegregation, created deep economic divisions that still exist.

"Thinking about gun violence, what's the problem behind the problem?" Williams posits. "I think about Carter G. Woodson, who wrote that famous book, 'The Miseducation of the Negro.' There's been a miseducation of America, too. I don't think enough of our society really appreciates that past, and how that past has a presence in the present. And until we kind of acknowledge that, and kind of try to resolve that, we're going to continue to have problems, gun violence, you name it." ■

BY SCOTT BASS

# SMOKE

CULTURE WARS,  
THE PANDEMIC AND  
THE POLITICIZATION OF  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS OBSCURE  
THE BIGGEST PROBLEM  
FACING K-12 EDUCATION:  
**UNDERFUNDING**

# SCREEN

ILLUSTRATION BY DUNCAN ROBERTSON









## THE PAGES WEREN'T BURNED,

pulled from school libraries or cast into the proverbial heap of puritanically censored sexually explicit literature. But when a research paper co-authored by Kimberly Bridges, assistant professor of educational leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University, was scrubbed from the Virginia Department of Education's website in February, it stung.

In 2020, Bridges and six co-authors offered policy solutions for a systemic, disturbing trend: In the decades following desegregation, middle-class neighborhoods began to hollow out. The rich were getting richer, and the poor poorer, which had led to increased segregation in Virginia's public schools.

In the years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled state-mandated school segregation policies unconstitutional, white flight and the Massive Resistance movement that closed schools rather than integrate stymied desegregation efforts. In Virginia, where school boundary lines are drawn to get students closest to their homes in the name of "efficiency," access to housing was key. The race-centered zoning policies and mortgage lending practices known as redlining locked Black families out of higher-income, majority-white neighborhoods. While overtly racist zoning and lending practices were eventually outlawed, economic segregation — reinforced by a state funding formula that relies heavily

on a locality's "ability to pay" for public schools, benefiting wealthier districts at the expense of poorer ones — continued.

Today, segregation of public schools has grown worse. Researchers at the Stanford Graduate School of Education and the University of Southern California recently found that "white-black" segregation within the country's largest school districts increased 35% over the last 30 years; between "poor and non-poor students," segregation increased 47% during the same period.

The income gap continues to grow, condensing wealth and poverty, and this is reflected in school demographics and academic performance. This is especially true in the South, in cities like Richmond, where a long history of restrictive housing policies prevented Black families from generational wealth-building, leading to ever-concentrating poverty in urban areas.

Schools play an integral role in reinforcing those patterns, Bridges says, something that becomes clear in the paper she co-authored, "School Segregation by Boundary Line in Virginia: Scope, Significance and State Policy Solutions."

"Widely disparate exposure to school poverty is a central predictor of achievement gaps between white and

Asian versus Black and Latinx students," the authors wrote. "Largely because of difficult working conditions, schools serving high concentrations of students of color and students in poverty experience higher rates of leader, teacher and student turnover. These schools also offer students fewer opportunities for advanced coursework and receive inadequate funding relative to student need."

The research paper became particularly instructive during the pandemic, which exacerbated those achievement gaps, so much so that the Virginia Department of Education's Department of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion included the paper in its list of resources for addressing and closing "opportunity



VCU professors Genevieve Siegel-Hawley (left), Andrene Castro and Kimberly Bridges are among the co-authors of research paper "School Segregation by Boundary Line in Virginia," published in 2020.

**"WITH INEQUITY HIGHER THAN EVER ... HOW IS IT THAT STATE LEADERS SEE EQUITY — AND THE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS STRIVING TO ACHIEVE IT — AS THE PROBLEM?"**

—Kimberly Bridges, assistant professor of educational leadership at VCU

BELOW: JAY PAUL; RIGHT: ASH DANIEL



gaps” at public school divisions.

In late February, however, the paper was removed from VDOE’s website, along with a multitude of other resources aimed at making schools more equitable. In the name of ridding public schools of “inherently divisive concepts,” Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s recently appointed state superintendent of public instruction, Jillian Balow, cited the research paper in a February report as an example of “critical race theory-based materials” that were being expunged.

“It is noteworthy that the rhetorical emphasis on equity coincided with the widened gaps in student achievement,” Balow wrote in a follow-up report released in May, which in essence argues

that a combination of lowered academic expectations and shuttered schools during the pandemic, along with “divisive” equity initiatives, hurt minority students disproportionately. “Decisions at the state level must correct those errors and reverse these disturbing trends.”

The irony is dumbfounding, Bridges says. “With inequity higher than ever and now getting worse from the pandemic, how is it that state leaders see equity — and the teachers and school leaders striving to achieve it — as the problem?” she asks. “Our report was about how to address school segregation, how to actually stop separating kids. ... At a time when the

school system is more diverse than ever before, and more segregated than before, those initiatives were ways to try to meet unserved needs for populations that have been historically underserved. So when you chill those efforts, you’re actually undercutting the very thing that would do what everybody wants — which is help improve student learning.”

In other words, Bridges poses a simple question: How can equity initiatives aimed at improving school diversity, which research shows leads to improved academic performance for minority and high-poverty students, be responsible for the achievement gap?

#### **PARENTS WERE 'TICKED OFF'**

On his first day in office, Youngkin signed an executive order banning critical race theory from public school curriculums, even though CRT, a collegiate field of study that argues racism is embedded in



Gov. Glenn Youngkin

our government and social institutions, isn’t taught in the state’s K-12 schools. He also created a tip line for parents to report teachers who continued to teach “divisive topics.”

Youngkin, a Republican initially given long odds to defeat Democratic former Gov. Terry McAuliffe in last year’s gubernatorial race, tapped into growing frustration among suburban families over masking policies and school closures at the height of the pandemic. He roped in the culture wars, leaning into the GOP’s obsession with CRT and policies that protect transgender students, arguing that both stripped away parental rights. It’s a strategy that worked.

“Their way to win the suburbs, or win back the suburbs, is through education, turning education into this wedge issue,” says Richard Meagher, associate professor of political science at Randolph-Macon College. “They can stoke people’s fears about race, transgender kids, learning loss. ‘Let’s blame the Democrats who closed schools [during the pandemic].’”

Youngkin, who won the governor’s office by 1.9% of the statewide vote, latched onto “parental choice” as a primary campaign theme at a time when suburban parents were “eminently frustrated” with how school divisions handled the pandemic, says Bob Holsworth, a longtime political analyst and former >





dean of Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Humanities and Sciences. Youngkin vowed to ensure that schools remained open while prohibiting statewide mask mandates.

"They had gone a year or more without their kids in schools, and they were ticked off," Holsworth says. Remote learning was disruptive as parents adapted on the fly to their children suddenly being stuck at home during school hours while districts struggled to navigate online learning and protocols. Schoolchildren were isolated socially and shut off from traditional educational support networks. "Youngkin provided an answer to that," Holsworth says. "The pandemic gave not only Youngkin, but Republicans more generally, a message on education that they had been lacking."

Indeed, there is consensus now that school closures during the pandemic left many students behind academically, in many cases dramatically so, as educators, administrators and government officials grappled with containing a once-in-a-century pandemic. The National Assessment of Educational Progress released a report in early September that found the largest gaps in educational achievement in more than two decades. And in Virginia, standardized test scores remain well below pre-pandemic levels, particularly in math and science. In the 2021-22 school year, the statewide pass rates for

math and science SOLs were 66% and 65%, respectively, compared to the 2018-19 school year, when 82% of students passed the math SOLs and 81% passed the science SOLs, according to the Virginia Department of Education.

Across the country and Virginia, the most alarming drops in test scores occurred among minority and economically disadvantaged students. Test scores in math and science among Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students across the state are still more than 20 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels. In metro Richmond, the numbers are even worse: During the 2021-22 school year, Richmond Public Schools trailed Chesterfield and Henrico students by 24 percentage points in reading, 26 points in writing, 30 points in history, 25 points in math and 33 points in science.

Youngkin has seized on the falling test scores as evidence that Virginia's public schools are in desperate need of reform. "This is a chance for our entire education system to work together to close the achievement gaps for economically disadvantaged and younger learners that arose during school shutdowns," Youngkin said on Twitter in August, shortly after the VDOE released statewide SOL results.

### A HISTORY OF UNDERFUNDING

While few would disagree that the pan-

demic led to significant drops in test scores and academic performance, at least on standardized tests, the underlying issues that led to the growing achievement gap are decades in the making. The primary culprit, says Chad Stewart, a policy analyst at the Virginia Education Association, lies in how the state funds public education.

"I think we have to go back a bit and into Virginia's history, where we started creating a school funding formula that largely relied on local capacity," Stewart explains, referring to the local composite index, a formula devised in the early 1970s that determines how much state funding each school division receives by calculating the locality's property values and tax revenues, as well as overall student population. In theory, the approach seems reasonable: A locality with a wealthier tax base should be able to pay more for public schools, so it receives less state funding per pupil; jurisdictions with less should receive more.

The problem? The formula is blind to differences in "student need," treating all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, equally. Ample research suggests that students from low-income households require between 40% and 200% in additional funding support — for reduced teacher-student ratios, additional counselors, administrative staff, etc. — to have equal access to educational opportunities. In practice, treating all

#### SOL Pass Rates, 2021-22

	Reading	Writing	History	Math	Science
Chesterfield	71%	63%	64%	62%	64%
Henrico	70%	61%	64%	61%	65%
Hanover	81%	61%	79%	80%	74%
Richmond	47%	36%	34%	37%	32%

Source: Virginia Department of Education

#### State Funding Per Pupil (adjusted for inflation)

	2008-09	2021-22	Difference
Chesterfield	\$7,089	\$6,694	-5.6%
Henrico	\$6,776	\$6,533	-3.6%
Hanover	\$6,518	\$5,806	-10.9%
Richmond	\$8,789	\$8,045	-8.5%

Source: The Commonwealth Institute





Chad Stewart, a policy analyst at the Virginia Education Association

**"THERE'S A HUGE OVERLAP IN CORRELATION BETWEEN OUR PAST WITH SEGREGATION AND THE ENTRENCHMENT OF POVERTY IN CERTAIN NEIGHBORHOODS, AND WHERE OUR NOT FULLY ACCREDITED SCHOOLS EXIST TODAY."**

—Chad Stewart, policy analyst at the Virginia Education Association

students the same ignores the realities of educating students who have limited access to resources at home, such as transportation, technology and other family supports.

The LCI calculates a locality's ability to pay, but the cost of educating students is determined by another metric, the state's Standards of Quality. Laura Goren, director of research and education policy

at The Commonwealth Institute, says the SOQs are also flawed.

"The state Standards of Quality as approved by the General Assembly doesn't actually encompass what it costs to actually provide a high-quality education in Virginia," Goren says, pointing to the fact that for decades, localities have paid above and beyond what the state formula says is required for schooling. In

the 2020-21 school year, for example, the state's total share of public school funding was 43.5%, while localities kicked in 46.9% (federal funding, 9.5%, makes up the remainder). In an analysis released in August, The Commonwealth Institute found that during the 2020-21 school year, Virginia localities have spent \$4.2 billion above what is required by the state's funding formula. "Local governments are going well above the required amounts of the LCI in order to make up for the weaknesses of the LCI," Goren says.

While nearly all school divisions pay more than is required, the additional cost of educating minority and low-income students leaves many urban and rural districts disproportionately underfunded in the state formula, resulting in fewer educational supports and opportunities for students who need it most. For example, state funding per pupil in Richmond, adjusted for inflation, has decreased by 8.5% since the 2008-09 school year, compared to a 5.6% drop in Chesterfield and a decrease of 3.6% in Henrico, according to Commonwealth Institute data.

In a November 2020 report by The Commonwealth Institute, an analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights found that Virginia high schools with 75% or more students of color were less likely to offer calculus and chemistry classes, and just 77% of those same high schools offer at least one advanced placement course.

There's also a stark difference in student performance. When you consider where the state's unaccredited schools are located — accreditation is denied when a school's student population falls below certain thresholds on state tests and other student-achievement metrics — there's a distinct pattern, Stewart says.

"The last time we saw the state do accreditation in 2019 [accreditation standards were put on hold during the pandemic], there were 132 schools in the state that were not fully accredited, and the >



vast majority of them were located in not just cities that have been historically Black in the state of Virginia, but actually in the specific neighborhoods that were segregated by state-sanctioned policy through insurance mapping,” he says. “So there’s a huge overlap in correlation between our past with segregation and the entrenchment of poverty in certain neighborhoods, and where our not fully accredited schools exist today.”

Thanks to the state funding formula, those schools also receive fewer resources.

“Our schools that are not fully accredited, at least the last time we did the rankings, received less state and local per-student funding than our schools that are fully accredited,” Stewart says. “Not only do these schools face a lot of additional barriers, have higher poverty rates, but we also give them less funding per student.”

While the state funding formula accounts for differences in jurisdictions’ relative wealth — localities’ ability to pay — those higher-income districts are also underfunded by the state. In fact, Virginia ranks among the worst in the country when it comes to supporting public education with funding, ranking in the bottom 20% of states for per-pupil spending, according to U.S. Census data.

Unexpected disruptions to education, such as the pandemic, only magnify those funding discrepancies, Stewart says, leading to disproportionate impacts on students.

“I think while we’re in the pandemic, and coming out of it, there’s been a consensus amongst a lot of national experts who study education, and that’s that it would take sustained effort over many years to help students recover from lost learning time,” Stewart says. “A core component of that is resources, and you can look at the achievement gap report that the Youngkin administration put out in the spring. If you search for a dollar sign in that report, you can’t find it. There’s



no recommendations for putting additional resources into our schools.”

### POLITICIZING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Youngkin is fond of saying that this year’s state budget includes record spending on public education, and he isn’t wrong. The biennium budget the governor signed in June includes an additional \$3.4 billion in state direct aid for public schools over the next two years.

In a state that historically underfunds education, however, it’s not enough, Stewart says. Virginia is still playing catch-up from previous budget cuts, including capping additional state funding for support staff — such as janitors and counselors — during the last major recession more than a decade ago. Some

of that funding was restored in the current budget — \$272 million — but it’s roughly \$500 million short compared to 2009 levels of funding for school support staff, Stewart says.

The budget also includes 10% raises for public school teachers — 5% over the next two fiscal years — but teachers unions say it’s too little, too late. Rising inflation will likely negate those raises in a state that already pays teachers below the national average, Stewart says. (In the 2020-21 school year, teacher pay in Virginia averaged \$58,506, according to the National Education Association; the national average is \$65,293.) With school districts already struggling with record numbers of teacher vacancies — in metro Richmond, there were more than 1,600 job postings for teaching posi-





In July 2020, during the early days of the pandemic, parents protest the Chesterfield County School Board's decision not to resume in-person schooling.

tions from Aug. 10-11, according to a statewide analysis by the VEA — and the increasing politicization of public education, some worry the shortage will only get worse.

“Education drives so many things. It drives where families live, it drives the health of communities. It requires actual policymaking instead of creating fake bogeymen,” says Del. Schuyler VanValkenburg, D-Henrico, who also teaches government at Glen Allen High School. “My fear is that politics is always going to trump policy. The ease of the political attack is going to overcome the hard work to create education policies that lead to better outcomes.”

He’s also concerned that the governor’s prescription for lagging academic performance — a full-court press for

“school choice,” or charter and lab schools — will draw funding away from those urban and rural schools that are already struggling.

“I’m worried that they are using the achievement gap [to win support] for vouchers and the privatization of schools,” VanValkenburg says. “We’re seeing that from conservative movements across the country.”

One of Youngkin’s signature wins during this year’s General Assembly session was carving out \$100 million to help fund lab schools in partnership with the state’s colleges and universities. Democrats in the state Senate, however, were able to push through legislation that prevented lab schools from diverting per-pupil state funding away from local school districts. More sweeping charter school legislation introduced this year, none of which made it through the Democratic-controlled state Senate, would have either diverted state funding away from local school districts or allowed the state Board of Education to approve and oversee charters instead of local school boards.

Making it easier to fund and establish charters — in Virginia, there are only seven such schools, which must be approved and overseen by local school boards — has long been atop the conservative agenda.

The research on the effectiveness of charters, however, is a “mixed bag,” says Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, associate professor of educational leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University and author of “A Single Garment: Creating Intentionally Diverse Schools That Benefit All Children” (and a co-author of “School Segregation by Boundary Line in Virginia”). If the momentum for school choice is building thanks to concerns over test scores and the effective politicization of public education, Siegel-Hawley warns, ample research shows that charter schools would likely increase the

growing gap in student achievement.

“Without question, charter schools exacerbate school segregation,” she says, “and they do so because they are so often not designed with equity guardrails in mind. Things like making sure everybody knows about the choice. Things like providing transportation to every family, admissions policies based on the interests of the family instead of the academic or behavioral screens. All of those things significantly influence who actually attends charter schools.” Typically, Siegel-Hawley says, charters wind up enrolling children from higher-income families with more resources.

“When you layer market-based ideology on top of an already segregated and under-resourced public school system,” she says, “you end up either illuminating achievement disparities in the case of the Standards of Quality or exacerbating segregation and inequality in the case of school choice.”

Whatever one thinks about charters or lab schools, it’s difficult to see how such initiatives, which take years to implement, would help existing students lost in the growing achievement gap in the near term. In districts where the biggest gaps persist — such as Richmond — the crisis is now.

Bridges, a colleague of Siegel-Hawley, says that the politicization of education couldn’t have come at a worse time.

“Yes, schools were in the hardest possible position they could be in over the pandemic. You have a lot of demoralized people, and a lot of people under a lot of stress. You had people losing family members. You had actual loss of lives,” she says. “And so just to be in an environment now where it’s almost like, in some places, political leaders are kicking folks while they are down, this is the time when we need to be lifting up our school systems and really giving them support and help.

“Where’s that coming from at the state level right now?” ■



# Out of Room



A DWINDLING  
SUPPLY OF  
AFFORDABLE  
HOUSING,  
COUPLED WITH  
A CHANGING  
ECONOMY, HAS  
LED TO A RISE IN  
OLDER ADULTS  
EXPERIENCING  
HOMELESSNESS

**BY SCOTT BASS**  
**PHOTOS BY JAY PAUL**



Barbara Barbour Whittaker, who spent last year living out of motels and her car, now lives at the Church Hill House.





**B**arbara Barbour Whittaker has managed to navigate a lifetime of job losses, drug addiction, broken families and even the tragic loss of her oldest daughter, Neisha, three years ago. But things really started to spiral in February of 2020 when she lost her job as a cook and then, in short order, her apartment in Church Hill.

Then the pandemic hit. A few months later, she and her husband, James, found themselves homeless. Alternating between motels and the front seat of their 2003 Lincoln Continental, they lived day to day. Sometimes they were able to get emergency help to pay for a motel room, other times they slept in her car. James, 61, suffers from rheumatoid arthritis and has days when he simply can't get out of bed, much less work. Things got so bad that Barbara, who is also 61, had to give up her loyal black Lab of 10 years, Precious, and her 16-year-old tabby, Kat-Kat. The additional pet fees at the motel were too much. James "let them go," Barbara says, but he refused to tell her where. Distraught, she spent weeks looking for them on the streets, to no avail.

A life of hard knocks, however, breeds resilience. Barbara managed to scrounge up \$250 to enroll in patient care training, earning her certificate in April to work as an in-home, nonmedical senior caretaker. She now works 20-30 hours a week, bringing home just enough to pay rent at the Church Hill House on Burton Street, which offers affordable, subsidized housing for seniors and those with disabilities. Barbara and James moved into their one-room first-floor apartment in March.

Aside from the drug dealing and general mayhem along Burton and Venable streets — a few weeks ago, she and James awakened to the sounds of a man and woman having sex outside her window — she considers herself one of the lucky ones, save for the loss of her pride and joy, Precious. She still finds herself looking down alleys and around corners when driving to and from work, hoping to find

her lost companion.

"I'm just hoping and praying somebody picked her up and is taking care of her," she says, breaking into tears. "But other than that, I'm doing OK. It's just been a struggle."

After a decade of steady progress, Richmond's homeless population is surging again. A lack of affordable housing and growing economic disparity have stretched local resources and safety net programs. The region's growing senior population, many of whom live month to month on Social Security and fixed incomes that haven't kept up with inflation, has been hit particularly hard. Coupled with the pandemic, when retail and service jobs dried up and government assistance was harder to access, many older adults who were already living on the margins were literally left out in the cold.

### 'A Very Difficult Winter'

An infusion of federal funding and emergency eviction moratoriums over the past two years have helped, serving as a temporary stopgap. But now the money is running out, and the last of the eviction moratoriums put in place during the pandemic expired in June. With dwindling housing inventory driving up rents across the region — metro Richmond's rental vacancy rate stood at 1.9% in the second quarter of this year, the lowest in the state, according to census data — local shelters are struggling to keep up.

"It's going to be a very difficult winter," says Kelly King Horne, executive director of the nonprofit Homeward, which coordinates homeless services in the region. After reaching a 10-year low of 497 people experiencing homelessness in 2019, according to data compiled by Homeward, the number jumped 68% to 834 in 2021. While the numbers dropped 16% to 697 people in 2022 (the data comes from the annual "point-in-time" count that takes place in January), much of the decrease can be attributed to increased federal



funding for local shelters and emergency housing intended to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The number of older homeless adults, which the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care, Central Virginia's umbrella organization for homeless services, identifies as those 55 and older, is increasing. Last year, 642 older adults stayed in area emergency shelters, according to Homeward, and the percentage of older adults served by regional homeless providers increased from 29% in 2018 to 36.7% in 2021.

"We did a lot of work as a community from 2007 to 2012," Horne says of regional nonprofits, 14 to 15 of which work directly with Homeward on a weekly basis. "We created efficiencies, coordinated services — but we already realized those gains."

During that period, Homeward and homeless service providers shifted priorities, putting more resources into helping people find permanent housing — assisting with lease applications, reading credit reports and reaching out to landlords. The idea was to get people housed first and then provide resources and job training





(Above) Whittaker outside her apartment building in Church Hill. (Below) Kenneth Decker is still searching for permanent housing.



bed long-term facility for individuals recovering from substance abuse, are struggling to transition people into more stable housing.

The problem is particularly acute for seniors, many of whom have chronic physical or mental health issues and require supportive housing.

“Roughly close to 60% of our folks in the emergency shelter have a chronic health [or mental health] condition. Oftentimes, the emergency shelter, it’s not really a fit place for them to be,” says Karen O’Brien, chief operating officer at CARITAS. “They are not sick enough to be in the emergency room or the hospital. The assisted living, or nursing care facility, isn’t really ramped up to handle those intakes, or to be able to do it quickly, and then they end up on the street or the emergency shelter. There is this gap, this crater, that’s between the medical system and emergency shelter, and the participants suffer for that, unfortunately.”

Dr. Patricia Cook, chief medical officer at Daily Planet Health Services, which provides health care to the uninsured and people experiencing homelessness, has seen a 10% increase in the number of patients over age 65 during the first half of

2022, from Jan. 1 to July 1, compared to the same period a year ago.

“This year we’re seeing more people for chronic things,” Cook says, explaining that living outdoors can dramatically speed up the aging process. “Chronic pain from lying on concrete rather than lying in a bed. High blood pressure. It’s really

hard to control diabetes if you can’t store insulin on the street. What we see in someone who is over 50 who has had uncontrolled, chronic illness and doesn’t have means for shelter — that person would have complications from that illness that we would see in someone who is 20 years older.”

Of late, Cook has also seen a growing number of men over 50, particularly day laborers, suffer from a physical injury that puts them out of work. She’s had cases where a patient was evicted while still in the hospital. For someone living paycheck to paycheck, a physical injury can quickly lead to mounting bills, eviction and homelessness.

“These are hardworking folks who suddenly are over the age of 50 and unable to do their job, and they suddenly find themselves on the street,” Cook says, “and that’s terrifying.”

### From Shelter to Shelter

After his partner of 15 years died in May, Kenneth Decker found himself evicted with nowhere to go. He had quit his job as a gas station attendant at Sam’s Club in May 2021 to take care of his partner, Wes, who became homebound due to complications from diabetes. As Wes’ condition grew worse, he lost both legs and spent more than a year in the hospital; he also had intestinal cancer.

Without a steady income, Decker was able to stay afloat during the eviction moratorium with limited savings and income from a side job working as a “life model” for art students at Virginia Commonwealth University. When the moratorium expired, he was forced out of his \$1,200-a-month apartment off West Broad Street.

“I managed to cover May’s rent,” he says, by depleting his savings and using a grant from a local nonprofit. “I was trying to find a job and put things together, but I just couldn’t make it.”

Decker, who also has diabetes and a bad knee, managed to snag a bed at the >

to help keep them under a roof and off the streets.

Now, that permanent housing has largely disappeared. Local shelters managed by nonprofits such as CARITAS, which operates two emergency shelters, a 36-bed facility for men and a 28-bed facility for women, in addition to a 334-



Daily Planet's medical respite facility for a few weeks. In early August, he found his way to CARITAS' emergency shelter for men on Dinwiddie Avenue.

At age 60, finding a new job won't be easy, especially with a bum knee. But Decker, a longtime transgender rights advocate, is keeping up hope. He can stay at the CARITAS shelter for two months — federal funding typically requires emergency shelter beds turn over every 30-60 days — but after that he's on his own. With help from CARITAS, he's working on getting Social Security Disability coverage and is putting together a resume with the goal of finding a job in the arts, media relations or something related to social justice.

Despite all that he's been through — in the late 1970s, he lost his first partner, who was beaten to death in Washington, D.C., barely a week after turning 17 — Decker has somehow avoided substance abuse. Not having any money, he jokes, has its perks.

"If I could afford it, I'd plow through a dozen Black Russians a night," he says.

### Searching for Answers

The region's dearth of new housing inventory, which grew worse during the pandemic as remote work and historically low interest rates spurred demand, isn't expected to abate anytime soon. The downward pressure has left more people in apartments for longer, which has driven up rents. Even facilities that accommodate housing vouchers and other government subsidies for low-income families are turning away renters.

"Even now they don't have any availability because individuals who have steady income and have had to move out of their current placements because [rents] are too high are moving into the apartment complexes that we were actively working with," says Jenn Patterson, director of emergency shelter at CARITAS. "Finding an apartment to rent

is a jewel in the rough."

Meanwhile, the city's efforts to increase available shelter beds have yet to pan out. All of the emergency shelters that operate year-round (roughly 300 beds total) are run by nonprofits. With federal funding made available during the pandemic, the city implemented inclement weather and winter shelter programs at local hotels to add additional capacity, but those programs expired in April. A plan to expand Commonwealth Catholic Charities' housing resource hub on Oliver Hill Way to include at least 75 winter shelter beds also fell apart earlier this summer. The city is now seeking bidders for a new winter shelter, or multiple shelters, with up to 150 beds that would operate from November to April using \$3 million in funds from the American Rescue Plan Act and other sources.

Regardless of what happens to the proposed winter shelter, none of it matters much if those facilities don't include case management workers and other wraparound services, says City Councilmember Stephanie Lynch, a social worker who's become a vocal advocate for the homeless. The city's previous winter shelter program didn't include case management workers on-site, she says. For much of the last year, she's been pushing for additional city funding for homeless services (Richmond typically spends between \$500,000 and \$1 million annually). Ultimately, Lynch envisions a permanent city shelter run by nonprofits, with accompanying services similar to those of the Housing Resource Center in Virginia Beach, a \$25 million facility that opened in 2018. The Virginia Beach facility includes 89 temporary shelter beds and 29 permanent housing units, along with a health clinic, showers, laundry services, cafeteria and a multitude of services to help the homeless get back on their feet.

"I don't know how to get people to care about this enough to invest the resourc-

## WANT TO HELP?

Here's a list of Richmond-area homeless services providers

**CARITAS**  
[caritasva.org](http://caritasva.org)

**Commonwealth Catholic Charities**  
[cccovva.org](http://cccovva.org)

**Daily Planet Health Services**  
[dailyplanetva.org](http://dailyplanetva.org)

**Focused Outreach Richmond**  
[focusedoutreachrichmond.org](http://focusedoutreachrichmond.org)

**GoochlandCares**  
[goochlandcares.org](http://goochlandcares.org)

**Good Samaritan Ministries**  
[gsministries.com](http://gsministries.com)

**HomeAgain**  
[homeagainrichmond.org](http://homeagainrichmond.org)

**Homeward**  
[homewardva.org](http://homewardva.org)

**Housing Families First**  
[housingfamiliesfirst.org](http://housingfamiliesfirst.org)

**Liberation Veteran Services**  
[lvsrva.org](http://lvsrva.org)

**OAR of Richmond**  
[oarric.org](http://oarric.org)

**REAL Life Community Center**  
[reallifeprogram.org](http://reallifeprogram.org)

**RVA Light**  
[rvalight.com](http://rvalight.com)

**St. Joseph's Villa**  
[neverstopbelieving.org](http://neverstopbelieving.org)

**The Salvation Army**  
[salvationarmypotomac.org/richmondva](http://salvationarmypotomac.org/richmondva)

**VetLink Solutions**  
[vetlinksolutions.com](http://vetlinksolutions.com)

**Virginia Supportive Housing**  
[virginiassupportivehousing.org](http://virginiassupportivehousing.org)





**Richmond Food Not Bombs delivers meals to the homeless population at Monroe Park in early August.**

es we need,” says Lynch, adding that it often comes down to location. It seems nobody wants a homeless shelter, especially a large-scale intake facility, to open in their neighborhood. And time is running out. While Homeward’s July point-in-time count, a supplement to the federally mandated January count, found 447 people experiencing homelessness, a 36% drop from the year before, it also found 204 individuals were unsheltered (living outdoors), the highest number ever recorded by the nonprofit. “We’ve got to stop playing human shuffleboard with the homeless population,” she says.

There are other options, including tiny home villages, which are popular in places such as California, which has long had the nation’s largest homeless population, but Richmond officials have struggled to find available land that is close to public transit and isn’t contaminated or located on a former landfill. Tiny houses (between 100-400 square feet) can be problematic for other reasons, especially if the villages don’t include on-site health and substance abuse services.

Cathy Ritter, a Midlothian woman who regularly delivered food and clothing to residents of the temporary tent city that

popped up on Oliver Hill Way a couple of years ago, decided she had to do something after city officials shuttered the encampment in March of 2020. Known as “Camp Cathy” (it was named after Cathy Davis, the late co-founder of Blessing Warriors RVA, a nonprofit homeless services provider), the tent community regularly housed more than 100 people who were homeless. After the city shut it down, the residents scattered.

“It was devastating. I couldn’t get it off my mind,” Ritter says. “I thought, ‘Somebody’s got to do something about this.’”

An active volunteer at her church in Chesterfield, she started researching tiny home villages and landed on an organization in Missouri known as Eden Village, which offered programming and licensing akin to a franchise. She met with the proprietors over Zoom and reached an agreement in December 2021. Ritter’s daughter, who’s an attorney, helped her fill out the paperwork and gain nonprofit status earlier this year. A village consisting of up to 30 homes, each typically about 400 square feet, Ritter’s Eden Village will be gated with a community center, requiring tenants to pay \$350 a month, Ritter says, including utilities.

She needs 3-5 acres to build the first one, but so far finding the property has been a challenge. “It’s hard to find that much land,” Ritter says, adding that she’s looked in surrounding counties and has been in contact with city officials. The first village is expected to cost roughly \$4 million, which Ritter hopes to finance through grants and private fundraising.

“This is the missing piece of the puzzle,” she says. Still, it’s not a quick solution. If all goes according to plan, Ritter expects the first village to be completed by early 2025.

For Barbara Barbour Whittaker, things seem to be looking up. Her husband has felt better of late and has been able to pick up a few odd jobs, and she’s hoping to get more hours at her job. Her goal is to find a larger apartment in one of the city’s public housing complexes, but there’s a lengthy waiting list (in early August, there were 189 people ahead of her).

She dreams of the day when she can finally relax a bit and act like the grandmother she is.

“I’d love to have all five of my grandkids around me just kickin’ it,” she says. “Right now, I’m just living one day at a time.” **13**