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Shooting after graduation ceremony ignites fresh anger about gun violence

https://richmond.com/news/local/crime-courts/richmond-graduation-ceremony-shooting-reaction/article_6466f5b6-04c6-11ee-9190-6b5d4870d02e.html

Two men were shot and killed outside the Altria Theater Tuesday evening following the Huguenot High School graduation, locking down a large section of the [VCU campus](#) and [prompting fresh outrage about gun violence in the community.](#)

One of the men killed was an 18-year-old who was graduating on Tuesday afternoon, and the other was a 36-year-old man. Another five people also sustained gunshot wounds.

Richmond's Acting Police Chief Rick Edwards said a 19-year-old suspect is in custody and police, in consultation with Richmond prosecutors, expect to seek charges on two counts of second-degree murder, plus additional charges. Police detained another person with a firearm, but do not believe he was involved with the shooting, Edwards said.

Police believe the suspect knew at least one of the victims, said Edwards, who said he was unsure whether the suspect is a student.

As for the other shooting victims, Edwards said a 31-year-old victim sustained a life-threatening wound.

Four others suffered gunshot wounds that were not life-threatening: a 14-year-old boy, a 32-year-old man, a 55-year-old man and a 58-year-old man.

A 9-year-old girl who was struck by a car in the resulting commotion was treated at the scene, released and later went to a local hospital. She did not sustain a life-threatening injury, Edwards said.

"At this time I'd like to just express my concerns and my sympathies for those who lost their lives today and those whose lives were forever changed by the events today," said Edwards, who also thanked an array of local, state and federal law enforcement partners who also rushed to assist.

Panic as gunshots are heard

[A gunman opened fire at 5:13 p.m. as Huguenot High School](#) was ending its graduation ceremony and Thomas Jefferson was preparing to begin its commencement.

A panic erupted on Main Street as the shots went off. High school seniors dressed in their graduation robes ran from the scene, along with their friends and families who came to watch the ceremonies.

School Board member Jonathan Young, who was at the scene, said he saw “a lot of shock. A lot of people that injured themselves in the melee, the stampede ... All running as fast as they can, no shoes, people tripping over themselves, falling on top of (one) other, crying and yelling.”

A woman who said she is related to one of the graduates said, “As soon as we got out there, we were trying to find my brother, and then all I heard was boom boom boom. They were shooting and we all ran.” She asked not to be identified.

VCU student Saadat Bahrami said he was on his way to the library when he heard gunshots.

“I heard these shots going off and I didn’t really think much of it,” Bahrami said. “And then I saw a bunch of cops racing down the road.”

“Honestly, I think it’s a wake up call,” Bahrami said. “And the fact that there’s no changes being done whatsoever anywhere across the nation that are making a profound effect...I think that just speaks about where the priorities lie in our government, and it’s really not for the safety of the people.”

Richmond Schools Superintendent Jason Kamras, who was attending the graduation ceremonies, somberly pleaded with the community for an end to the violence.

“This is supposed to be a joyous day when our kids walk the stage and get their diploma, which is what they all did here for Huguenot today,” Kamras said. They “walked out the doors into their families’ and friends’ arms, taking pictures, and then this tragedy occurred.”

“I’m just tired of seeing people get shot and I beg of the entire community to stop – to just stop,” Kamras said.

He said the students can’t take it, “the teachers can’t take it, our families can’t take it anymore. I beg of you to stop.”

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney said, “we are going to do everything we can to bring the individuals involved in this to justice.”

“This is tragic, but also traumatic because this is their graduation,” Stoney said at a press conference. “The question that comes to mind right now is: Is nothing sacred any longer?”

'Who is in charge?'

Following the news conference, Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears addressed reporters and appeared to hold Richmond leaders accountable for stopping the violence. Democrats pushed back on Twitter, noting that Earle-Sears, a U.S. Marines veteran, had toted an assault-style rifle in an image she used in her 2021 campaign.

“The people that I represent are not safe – they’re not safe in this city, and we have to figure out why that is,” Earle-Sears said near the Altria Theater. “This is not about law-abiding gun owners, this is about gangs,” she said.

“Who is in charge – is that the mayor, is that the chief, who is that? I mean, let’s start naming names,” Earle-Sears said. “Because otherwise, if no one is accountable, if all we do is come in front of a camera... and keep talking about, ‘oh, this shouldn’t happen, and that shouldn’t happen.’ Well, you’re the one in charge. You’re the one responsible. So let’s cut it.”

House Minority Leader Don Scott Jr., D-Portsmouth, tweeted in response: “This gaslighting and political pandering by a LT. GOVERNOR who LITERALLY campaigned holding a picture of an assault rifle is lecturing others on preventing gun violence. She runs out to the scene with no empathy for the victims just thinking of how to appeal to MAGA,” Scott said, referring to former President Donald Trump’s slogan of “Make America Great Again.”

Gov. Glenn Youngkin said in a statement on Twitter: “My administration continues monitoring the terrible shooting in the heart of Richmond tonight. State law enforcement are fully supporting the Richmond Police Department as this investigation moves forward.”

All Richmond Public Schools classes are canceled Wednesday, the division announced in an email to families on Tuesday evening. The school system said counselors are available.

“For someone to commit this evil heinous act to show zero regard for anyone.. that’s just evil,” Young said. “And it’s long overdue for everyone who resides here, irrespective of their position or title to call it what it is, and that’s evil. If you commit evil acts, you need to pay the consequences.”

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Tuesday shooting was 2nd at school-related event this year in Richmond

https://richmond.com/news/local/crime/richmond-school-shooting-huguenot/article_5fd528c6-04bf-11ee-865a-af149dbbb498.html

Tuesday's shooting outside the Huguenot High School graduation ceremony was the [second to occur at a Richmond public school function this year](#).

According to officials, two people were killed by gunfire and five were wounded as graduating students were leaving the Altria Theater and pouring onto Monroe Park.

Fifty-eight school shootings have happened in Virginia since 1971, according to [The Violence Project](#), a nonprofit group that tracks K-12 school shootings.

That includes April's shooting at George Wythe High School that saw two students injured. [An 18-year-old former student, David Gutierrez, was charged in that attack](#).

After that shooting, principal Kevin Olds said he was focused on "changing the narrative" around school violence.

"What's really happening here isn't starting in the schools," Olds said last month. "It's starting in the streets and spilling over into the schools."

The Wythe shooting was preceded by a Jan. 6 shooting at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News. Then, a 6-year-old first-grader shot his teacher, Abigail Zwerner, through the stomach with a gun taken from his mother.

In September, a 17-year-old Huguenot High School student was wounded while walking to his bus stop on McDowell Road.

In October 2022, a shooting at Westover Hill Elementary School in Richmond left one dead. In that case, a 17-year-old student was charged with the murder of 26-year-old Imani Hill, who was not a student. The shooting occurred near enough to campus to force a school shutdown.

One distinction is that Tuesday's shooting occurred at a graduation. The shooting occurred just after 5 p.m. outside Altria Theater, in the heart of downtown Richmond.

Far more often than not, school shootings in Virginia have occurred during school hours, in school parking lots or at sporting events.

The two schools affected, Jefferson and Huguenot, typically hold their end-of-year graduations downtown. Last year, Thomas Jefferson High School's graduation was at The Diamond.

Nationwide, Tuesday's shooting is the 169th to occur this year, according to The Violence Project. The year prior, there were 304.

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Timeline: Huguenot High School graduation shooting

https://richmond.com/news/local/crime-courts/huguenot-graduation-shooting-vcu/article_bf96f2aa-04d1-11ee-b449-af6d054fe55b.html

[Gunfire erupted in Monroe Park Tuesday afternoon](#), wounding seven people, [two of them fatally](#). The shooting touched off mayhem in the nearby Altria Theater, where high school graduation ceremonies were being held.

Officials are piecing together how the shooting happened.

4 p.m.: Huguenot High School graduation begins at the Altria Theater, 6 N. Laurel St., a historic 3,565-seat venue on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University.

5:13 p.m.: Richmond police officers respond to initial reports of gunfire outside of the theater.

6:05 p.m.: VCU issues a campus alert about "a shooting incident" near the theater.

6:34 p.m.: The Richmond Police Department says officers are concentrating on the intersection of Laurel and Franklin streets. [Multiple injuries are reported.](#)

6:37 p.m.: Richmond Public Schools announces all schools will close Wednesday and graduation ceremonies are postponed.

6:46 p.m.: City of Richmond shuts down nine intersections around the site, as well as the 800 block of West Franklin Street.

7 p.m.: Interim Richmond Police Chief Rick Edwards, Mayor Levar Stoney and Superintendent Jason Kamras hold a press conference. Edwards confirms 13 people were transported by ambulance to MCV. Seven people sustained gunshot wounds, with three of them considered life threatening. Two people sustained injuries in a fall, including one 9-year-old also hit by a car. Edwards reports two people are in custody in relation to the shooting.

9 p.m.: RPD holds a second press conference. Edwards says that an 18-year-old graduate and a 32-year-old male were killed. Edwards also said that the suspect is a 19-year-old who he did not believe was a student. A 9-year old girl struck by a car has non-life-threatening injuries, he said.

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What they're saying about the shooting

https://richmond.com/news/local/crime-courts/how-theyre-reacting-to-shooting-after-richmond-graduation-ceremony/article_2658c524-04bc-11ee-8112-8fb2472838cc.html

[Officials reacted Tuesday to a shooting in Richmond following a high school graduation ceremony:](#)

“This evening, Richmonders are once again devastated by senseless gun violence. At a graduation ceremony, a tradition rooted in honoring a milestone achievement, has been marred by an act that has taken lives and left many others injured.” — *Richmond City Council statement*

“My administration continues monitoring the terrible shooting in the heart of Richmond tonight. State law enforcement are fully supporting the Richmond Police Department as this investigation moves forward.” — *GOP Gov. Glenn Youngkin*

“A shooting outside of a high school graduation ceremony — what should be one of the most exciting, fulfilling moments of a young person’s life. I’m heartbroken for the victims, young Virginians, and families involved. My team and I are closely monitoring for updates.” — *U.S. Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-Richmond*

“Praying for people in Richmond this evening.” — *State Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Richmond*

“This is tragic, but also traumatic because this is their graduation.” — *Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney*

“Graduations should be times of happiness and celebration. Today’s shooting is heart-wrenching and shocking. I send my most sincere prayers to everyone involved on behalf of all of VCU.” — *Virginia Commonwealth University President Michael Rao*

Who is in charge — is that the mayor, is that the chief, who is that? I mean, let’s start naming names.” — *GOP Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle*

“Tonight’s celebration turned into every parent’s worst nightmare. As the mother of two school-aged children, I cannot fathom the profound heartbreak, sense of loss and trauma these families are experiencing.” — *U.S. Rep. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond*

“My heart breaks to see this horrific tragedy in my hometown. I’m sickened that a high school graduation – an occasion that should be joyous – has turned into unimaginable violence. We can’t keep living like this. We’ve got to take action to keep our kids safer.” — *Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va.*

“What should be a joyful day for students and families was shattered by gun violence today. My heart goes out to all affected. No child should have to fear for their life in Virginia, or anywhere in America. We must take further action to keep our communities safe.” — *Former Virginia House Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, D-Fairfax*

