

Monroe County Community Partnership For Gun Safety Strategic Plan

JUNE | 2024

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The development of this strategic plan was only possible with the participation of dedicated individuals who demonstrated a commitment to the project and the community. A collaboration of county leadership and agencies, community providers, law enforcement officers, and community members shared their time, experience, and expertise to inform the plan. Information was obtained through data analysis, surveys, and focus groups and provided the foundation upon which the Community Partnership for Gun Safety constructed this plan.

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency supported and funded this project under the Gun Violence Investigation and Prosecution Grant Program, and Monroe County was awarded a subgrant of \$50,000.



A special thank you to Carey Group for their guidance and assistance in conducting the community needs assessment and developing the strategic plan.



MISSION STATEMENT

The Community Partnership for Gun Safety's mission is to save lives and reduce the harm caused by firearms and gun violence in our community through advocacy and partnerships that provide education, support, and resources.



OVERVIEW OF MONROE COUNTY

Monroe County is a rural community with a population of 168,327. The county is located in the “Heart of the Poconos,” which has a robust tourism industry drawing in 27.9 million visitors annually. It is conveniently located within a two-hour drive from the two largest metropolitan cities on the east coast, New York City, and Philadelphia creating a community with a large commuter population. Monroe County is also home to East Stroudsburg University, with an approximate student population of 5,000. These unique geographic factors have influenced the community’s gun violence problem.



Monroe County spans 617 square miles with a rural density of 267 people per square mile, though this varies significantly. Urban areas include Stroudsburg Borough, East Stroudsburg Borough, and Pocono Township, contrasting with more suburban and distinctly rural areas. Monroe County also features numerous gated communities, primarily consisting of detached single-family homes.

Recreational firearm use is common in Monroe County, with hunting and recreational shooting being popular activities. Gun ownership has been passed from generation to generation for many who were raised in the Pocono Region. Longtime residents grew up in a culture where firearms and guns were the norm, reflecting a longstanding local tradition of gun ownership. Pennsylvania is also an “open-carry state” where people are permitted to carry firearms in the open legally. Additionally, nearly any resident with a firearm can obtain a concealed carry permit from the local Sheriff’s Department.

There are six local law enforcement agencies, including Delaware Water Gap Police, East Stroudsburg University Police, Stroud Area Regional Police, Pocono Mountain Regional Police, and Pocono Township Police. Pennsylvania State Police patrol 45% of the county, covering nine townships. The area’s accessibility via two major highways also links it to interstate challenges such as drug trafficking.

From 2011 to 2020, Monroe County reported a 24.3% increase in weapons cases. In 2021 alone, there were 46 weapons cases and 575 gun violence incidents reported, encompassing a range of violent activities, including murders, shootings, death by suicide, domestic violence, and more.

Responding to community concerns over firearm violence, county officials, including the Commissioners and the District Attorney’s Office, initiated a community needs assessment on firearms violence. Supported by grant funding from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency under the Gun Violence Investigation and Prosecution Grant Program, this initiative aims to develop a strategic plan to effectively mitigate the identified issues.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

Monroe County engaged consultants with subject matter expertise to guide the development of a data-driven, research-based plan free from political biases. The plan aimed to produce realistic and achievable local-level recommendations to promote firearm safety and prevent gun violence.

The county established the Community Partnership for Gun Safety to further this initiative. This group brought together over 70 representatives from various sectors, including state and county government, the judiciary, law enforcement, education, business, and community organizations. Guided by an executive team, the partnership met regularly over several months, both online and in person.

The consultants undertook a comprehensive review of effective gun violence prevention strategies used nationwide. The findings were summarized in the report, *A Review of Gun Violence Reduction Strategies in the United States: Lessons for Monroe County, Pennsylvania*, and served as a roadmap for the partnership's discussions.

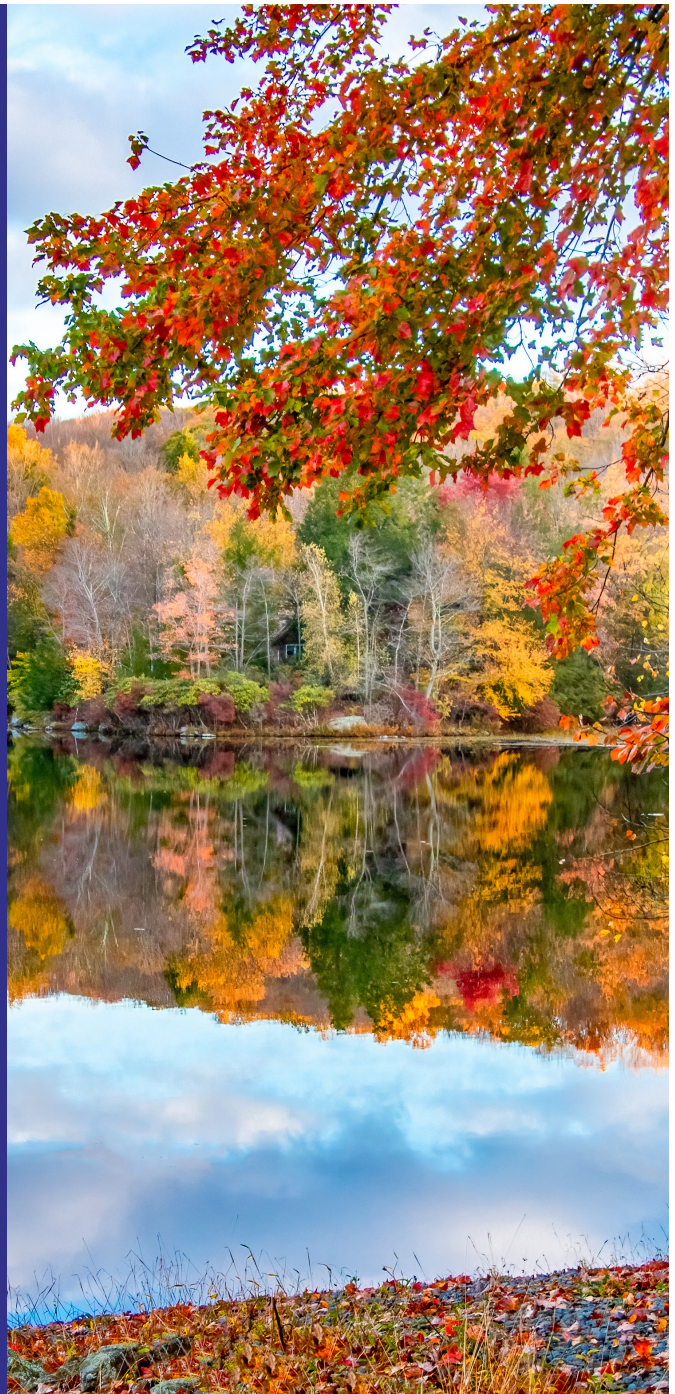
The partnership and consultants gathered essential data and insights from various sources, including crime statistics, medical records, and public surveys, to understand the local context and challenges.

Recognizing the importance of community feedback, the partnership distributed a survey to gauge public opinion on the county's strengths, challenges, and priorities. This survey, completed by 718 respondents, featured validated questions previously used in other regions.

Additionally, the consultants organized four focus groups with diverse participants, including community members, law enforcement, crime survivors, and incarcerated individuals. These groups provided valuable perspectives on where the partnership should focus its efforts.

Through analysis of the data collected, survey results, and focus group feedback, the partnership crafted a strategic plan with a clear mission, defined goals, and strategic objectives that were specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound.

This strategic plan marks the beginning of an ongoing effort. The partnership will continue to collaborate on an implementation strategy including specific actions, deliverables, and performance metrics to achieve its goals effectively.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research process for Monroe County's strategic plan on firearm violence involved comprehensive data gathering, including focus group interviews with 25 participants, surveys of 630 residents,¹ and various sources of crime and health data. Below is a summary of the key findings; a more detailed analysis is available in the Community Needs Assessment section of the document.

Firearm Crime Trends

- Over the last 20 years, Monroe County has consistently reported lower rates of firearm violence from assaults than both state and national averages.
- A concerning trend is the high rate of firearm-related suicides, nearly two-thirds of all suicides in the county, especially prevalent among older white men. This rate exceeds both state and national averages.
- There was a noticeable increase in firearm-related court cases in 2020 and early 2021, particularly felony cases involving firearms.

Crime Drivers

- Areas within Monroe County, such as Stroudsburg and Tobyhanna, show concentrated high rates of firearm-related crimes. These areas tend to have higher population densities and a notable number of disengaged youth.

Community Firearms History and Behavior

- Firearm ownership in Monroe County surpasses national estimates, with motivations largely for self-protection and hunting/recreation.
- Despite high ownership, survey results indicate formal firearms safety training does not necessarily correlate with safe storage or carrying behaviors.
- A significant number of residents have been exposed to firearm injuries, either personally or through friends or family involved in suicide attempts or completions.

Young People and New Residents

- There is concern over newer and younger residents who may not have traditional exposure to firearms or safety training.
- Newer residents own fewer firearms but are more likely to have concealed carry licenses than longer-term residents.
- Younger residents under 35 show notably lower rates of firearms safety training.
- Despite access to firearms, over 99% of middle and high school students reported not bringing weapons to school, with willingness to carry weapons influenced by pro-violence attitudes.

Policy and Programs

- There is strong community support for implementing firearms safety education for individuals under 18 and for offering optional training with firearm purchases.
- Support varies for expanding safe storage options and safety refresher courses, influenced by factors like firearm ownership, license status, age, gender, and exposure to firearm injuries.
- Diverse groups, including military veterans, women, and members of social and hunting clubs, support education and training initiatives, providing a strong coalition to advance these efforts.

¹ The survey was completed by a total of 718 individuals. Survey responses were analyzed for those respondents who were residents of the county.



GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

GOAL 1:

Foster and Maintain Firearm Safety Among Current Owners

Objective 1: Educate on firearm safety and storage at the time of purchase or transfer.

- **Partnerships Development:** Collaborate with county agencies and licensed firearms dealers to distribute literature and brochures on firearm safety, storage, and FAQs.
- **Access to Resources:** Provide a free, voluntary video on firearm storage and safety, accessible online via QR codes to enhance ease of access.

Objective 2: Educate on firearm safety, storage, and legal issues related to concealed carry permits.

- **Educational Videos:** Produce a video featuring credible messengers discussing firearm safety, storage, and the legal aspects of concealed carry. Play the video in the Sheriff's Office waiting areas and on the county website.
- **Voluntary Course Development:** Offer a free course on firearm safety and storage, focusing also on the legalities of concealed carry, using credible messengers.
- **FAQ Development:** Create and disseminate a list of FAQs concerning concealed and open carry, available online and in print.

Objective 3: Partner with firearm clubs, recreational groups, and hunters to reinforce safety and storage practices and assist in community education.

- **Partnerships with Recreational Groups:** Establish relationships with various firearms clubs and hunting groups to co-create educational materials and free firearm safety and storage courses.
- **Parental and Guardian Education:** Develop brochures aimed at parents and guardians detailing safe firearm storage practices in homes with children.

Objective 4: Collaborate with hospitals and first responders to provide education and resources following firearm-related incidents.

- **Educational Materials Post-Incident:** Produce literature and brochures on firearm safety and storage tailored for distribution by hospitals and first responders after a firearm-related incident.
- **Toolkit Development:** Assemble a toolkit offering tips for safety planning and trauma management to be used by families and individuals affected by firearm incidents.
- **Community Training Programs:** Implement training programs like "Stop the Bleed" for community members and groups involved in recreational firearm use to minimize death and injury from firearm incidents.





GOAL 2:

Decrease the Intersection Between Mental Health and Firearm-Related Incidents

Objective 1: Expand the ability of residents to recognize signs of risk for self-harm and harm to others.

- **Partnerships with Mental Health Providers:** Collaborate with mental health professionals and community agencies to develop and expand free educational programs on recognizing signs of suicidality. These programs will be aimed at clubs, recreational groups, hunters, and other community members.
- **“Safekeeper” Toolkit Distribution:** Design and distribute a toolkit that includes information on mental health, firearms, and temporary safe external firearm storage options. These toolkits will be available at various points, such as licensed dealers, the Sheriff’s office, and locations where hunting licenses are issued.

Objective 2: Develop knowledge of and access to mental health programs and services.

- **Strengthening Community Ties:** Build and strengthen relationships between mental health providers and various community groups, such as clubs, recreational groups, and hunters, to enhance the dissemination of educational materials and resources.
- **Enhancing Professional Training:** Explore and implement training strategies for first responders and other professionals to improve access to mental health resources, particularly for isolated individuals.



GOAL 3:

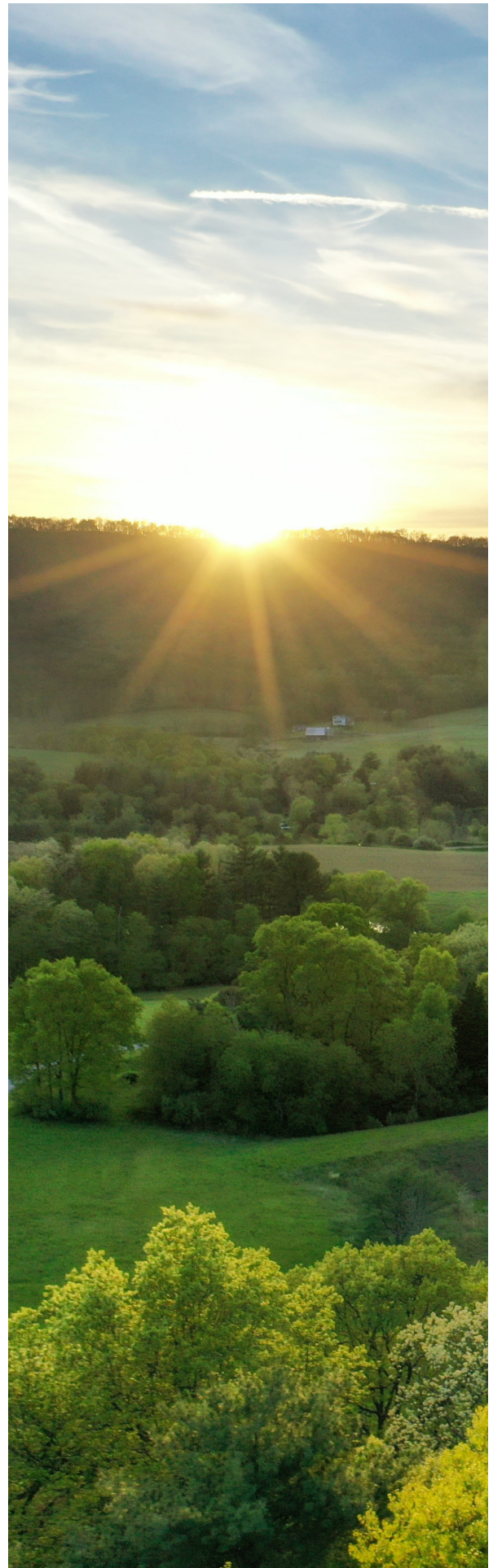
Foster and Maintain Firearm Safety Among Youth

Objective 1: Develop an understanding of youth involvement and attitudes around firearms.

- **Youth Survey Implementation:** Conduct a survey among youth to gauge the prevalence of firearm use and their attitudes toward firearms, using validated tools like the Attitudes Towards Guns and Violence scale (ATGV). The survey will help compare local data to similar areas and track changes over time.
- **Focus Groups with Stakeholders:** Organize focus groups involving young people, educators (teachers, principals, guidance counselors), and service providers (children and youth services, juvenile probation officers, counselors, and community groups) to understand youth involvement with firearms and to develop strategies to address concerns.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Gather and analyze arrest and firearm incident data concerning youth over a five-year period to inform the creation of a community coalition to prevent youth problem behaviors.

Objective 2: Educate youth on firearm safety and storage.

- **Peer Advocacy and Education:** Promote peer advocacy by developing voluntary courses and activities such as essay or poster contests featuring credible messengers such as fellow students and members of rifle teams. These could be integrated into existing social-emotional learning modules and offered in schools.
- **Partnerships with Community Groups:** Collaborate with community organizations such as scouting groups to initiate or continue offering courses and disseminating information about firearm safety and storage.
- **Distribution of Educational Materials:** Create and distribute free firearm safety and storage literature through schools and community organizations.
- **Support and Referral Programs:** Provide programs or referrals for disengaged or at-risk youth to a variety of support options, including employability and mental health support programs, as well as alcohol and drug abuse interventions and job-readiness training.





GOAL 4:

Increase Safety in Communities with a Prevalence of Firearm-Related Incidents

Objective 1: Provide support, resources, and education within neighborhoods with a high prevalence of firearm-related incidents.

- **Develop Community Partnerships:** Foster relationships between county agencies and affected communities to ensure residents have knowledge of and access to necessary resources.
- **Community Engagement and Cohesion:** Organize town hall-style meetings within these communities or leverage existing meetings and programs to discuss available resources and foster community cohesiveness.

Objective 2: Increase collaboration between security and law enforcement agencies.

- **Data Analysis and Understanding:** Collect and analyze data and other relevant information to better understand the drivers behind firearm incidents and related criminal behaviors in neighborhoods with high firearm incident rates.
- **Establish Formal Partnerships:** Create formal relationships between security entities and law enforcement to facilitate open discussions and sharing of information and resources.
- **Community Safety Meetings:** Host town hall-style meetings within communities or integrate into existing meetings and programs to discuss safety concerns. Collaboratively identify top priorities and develop tailored solutions based on community input.



COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

As part of the strategic planning process, a thorough community needs assessment was conducted in Monroe County. This section summarizes the data collected and the subsequent analysis, which informed the development of targeted interventions and policy adjustments.

COUNTY-WIDE DATA ANALYSIS

Monroe County falls within the "lower middle range" of counties in Pennsylvania in terms of health outcomes, ranking between the 25th and 50th percentiles. This ranking is based on various health outcomes analyzed by the Lehigh Valley Health Network in 2022. A significant health concern in the county, as in much of the United States, is firearm fatalities, which are a major contributor to premature death. The breakdown of these fatalities is predominantly from intentional self-harm (54%) and homicide (43%).

Over the last decade, Monroe County has consistently exhibited a higher suicide rate compared to both state and national averages while maintaining a homicide rate lower than both state and national figures. This data highlights specific areas of concern that need addressing, particularly the high rates of suicide, which suggest a need for targeted mental health interventions and community education programs focusing on suicide prevention and firearm safety.

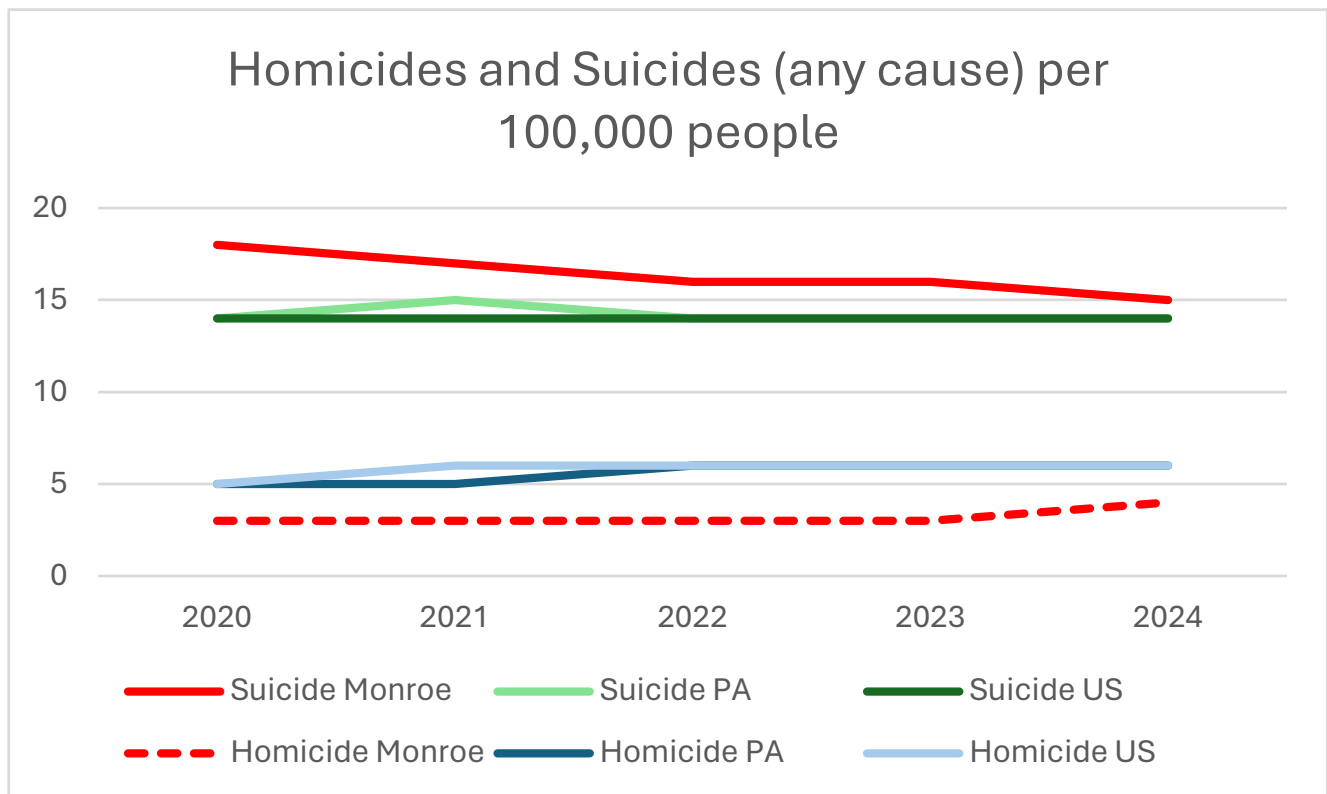


Figure 1: Suicide and Homicides per 100,000 People. Data provided by countyhealthrankings.org

Between 2018 and 2023, Monroe County recorded 31 fatalities due to firearm assaults, with men comprising the majority of the victims (22 out of 31). The annual firearm homicide rate during this period was 3.1 per 100,000 people. This rate is comparable to other class 4 counties in Pennsylvania, though Fayette County reported a slightly higher rate of 3.9 per 100,000. Notably, Monroe County's annual violent crime rate was considerably lower than the state and national averages, with 223 crimes per 100,000 people compared to Pennsylvania's 309 per 100,000 and the national rate of 416 per 100,000.

There were 100 deaths attributed to intentional self-harm with a firearm from 2018 to 2023. The majority of these suicides were committed by men, who accounted for 89% of all firearm suicides during this period, according to the Centers for



Disease Control (CDC) 2023 report. The demographic breakdown reveals that non-Hispanic white residents, particularly older age groups, are disproportionately affected. Specifically, about one-third of these suicides were committed by individuals aged 55 to 64, and 22% by those aged 45 to 54.

In 2022, Monroe County reported that 60% of all suicides were committed using a firearm, translating to 22 out of 36 total suicides for that year. The incidence of firearm homicides remained consistently low, with fewer than 10 occurrences each year. When compared to other class 4 counties in Pennsylvania for the years 2022 and 2023, Monroe County's firearm suicide rate was lower than in Fayette and Schuylkill counties but higher than in Beaver, Butler, Cambria, and Franklin counties.

Figures 2 and 3 provide a more detailed look at suicide trends within Monroe County, offering valuable insights into the patterns and demographic specifics of these incidents. This data is crucial for informing targeted prevention strategies and interventions, particularly in addressing the high rates of firearm suicides among older, non-Hispanic white males and crafting community-specific responses to reduce both homicide and suicide rates related to firearm use.

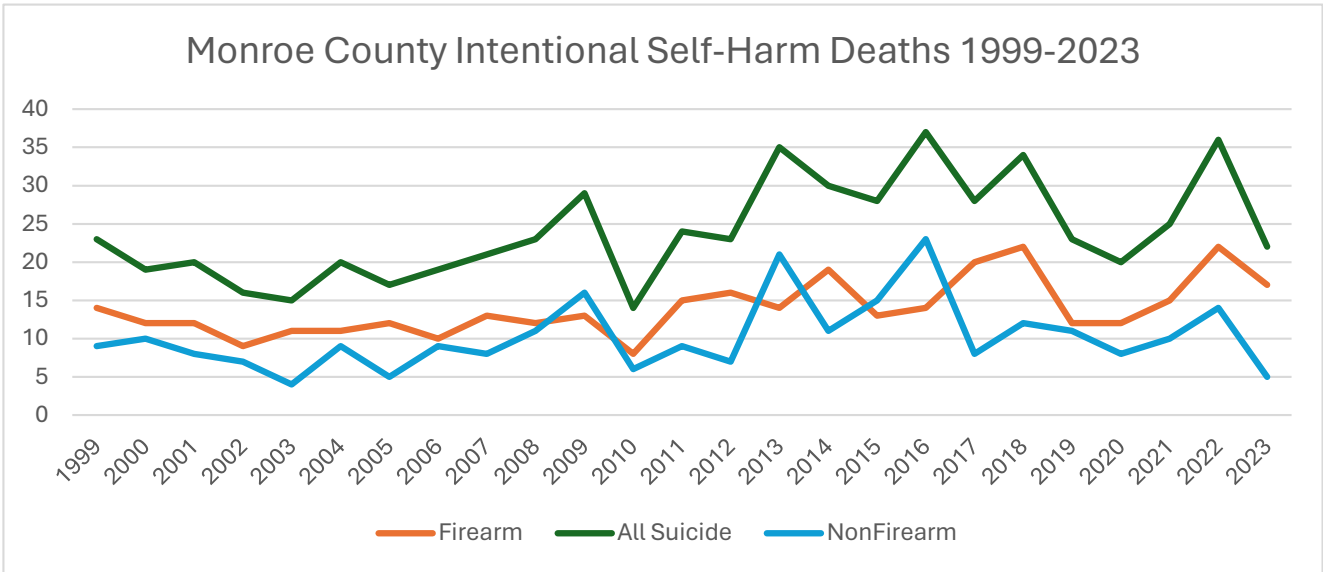


Figure 2: Monroe County Intentional Self-Harm Deaths, 1999-2023

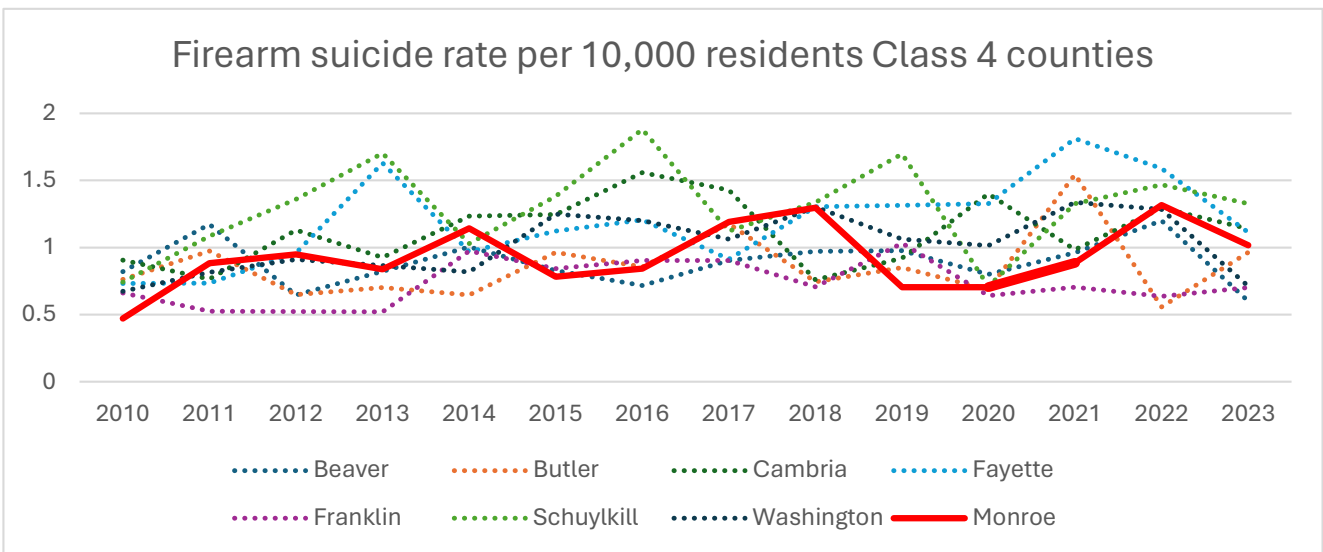


Figure 3: Pennsylvania Class 4 Counties Firearm Suicide Rate, 2010-2023



FIREARM-RELATED CRIME

During the five-year period from 2018 to 2022, Monroe County recorded a total of 998 unique cases involving a firearm-related offense. These cases encompassed a range of charges involving at least one firearm offense. Such offenses included violent crimes, endangering the welfare of a person, illegal possession or manufacture of firearms, and terroristic threats. Notably, approximately 27% of all firearm offense cases involved an attempted or completed violent crime, such as aggravated assault, robbery, homicide, and sexual assault.

The most frequent non-violent crimes involving firearms were recklessly endangering another person, illegal manufacture, possession, or delivery of firearms, and carrying firearms without a license or while prohibited by law.

Data indicate a surge in firearm-related offenses during the latter half of 2020 and early 2021, coinciding with the pandemic period. This spike is also mirrored in other data, including an increase in gunshot wound cases treated by trauma services and a rise in suicide mortality rates. Monthly case numbers for firearm-related offenses have since returned to pre-pandemic levels (trends displayed in Figure 4).

Interestingly, the data reveals very few defendants during this period were repeat felony defendants. The average Offense Gravity Score (OGS) experienced a minor increase from 6 to 7 between 2019 and 2020. Similarly, the average Prior Record Score (PRS) increased from 1.53 in 2019 to 1.57 in 2020 and then to 2.15 in 2021. These scores suggest the average individual sentenced for a firearm-related offense during this time did not possess an extensive criminal history. Among those initially charged with a firearm-related offense between 2018 and 2022, only 36 individuals were recorded as having a subsequent firearm-related offense within the same period in Monroe County.

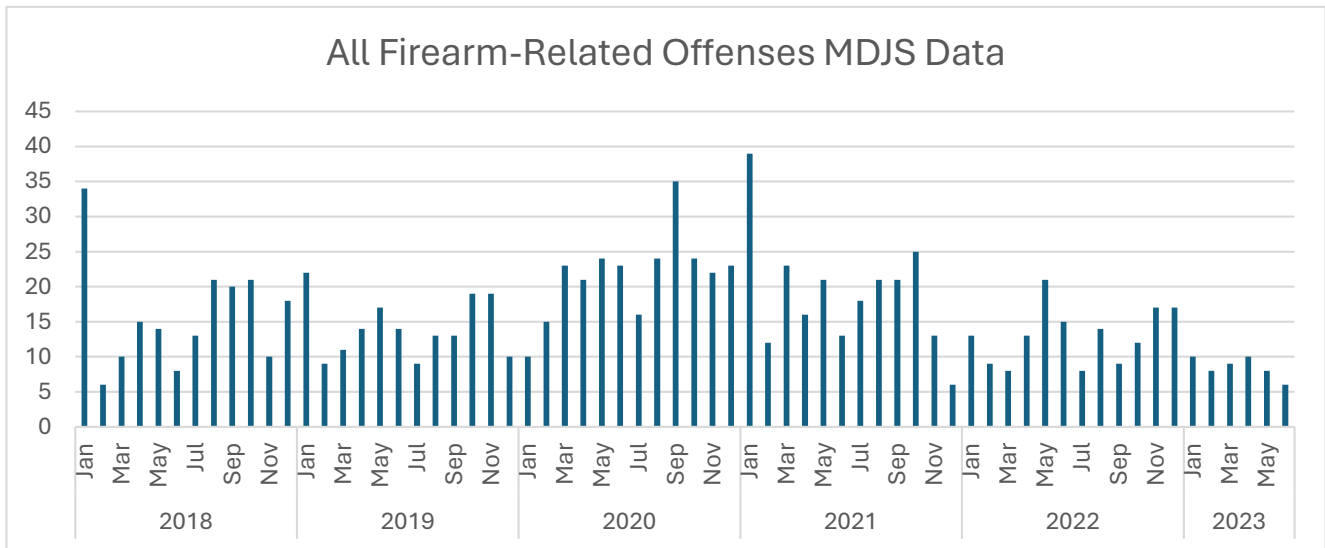


Figure 4: All firearm-related cases filed 2018 – 2023, Magisterial Court Data

During the study period from 2018 to 2022, defendant data were mapped to the 136 block group areas defined by the U.S. Census within Monroe County using the home addresses provided by the defendants. On average, each block group recorded nearly four defendants charged with a firearm-related crime, though the number varied significantly, ranging from zero to a maximum of 28 unique defendants per block group. Consistent with findings in criminology research, such as those by Hipp (2016), most defendants commit crimes close to their homes. However, this study did not include perpetrators living outside of the county, which accounted for 106 individuals residing outside the state.

About 90% of all defendants charged with a firearm-related crime were from Pennsylvania, with 4.5% from New York, 3% from New Jersey, and less than 1% from other states. The distribution highlights significant local variations in firearm-related crime rates across Monroe County, which could inform targeted law enforcement and community intervention strategies.

² The “Offense Gravity Score” (OGS) is the seriousness of the offense and ranges from 1 to 14, with 14 being the most serious offenses.

³ The “Prior Record Score” (PRS) is based on the prior criminal history. Generally, a defendant gets one point for every two misdemeanors, and either 1, 2, 3, or 4 points for each felony. The prior record score can be from “0” to “5” or “RFEL” or “REVOC”. RFEL is for defendants with a score of at least 6 and certain multiple felonies. REVOC is for defendants with a score of at least 9 if part of that score is from two or more 4-point felonies.



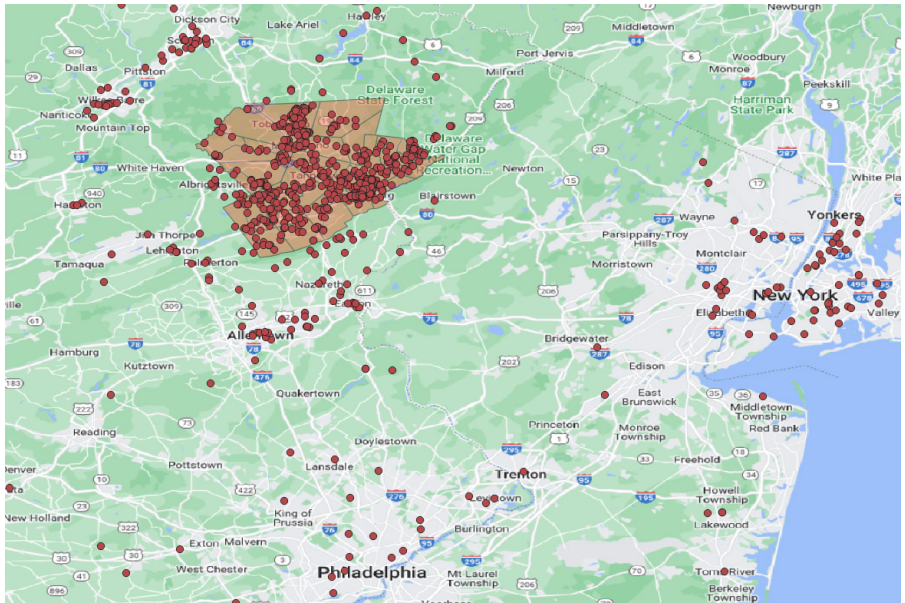


Figure 5: Firearm crime defendant location provided. East Stroudsburg, 20%; Tobyhanna, 14.55%; Stroudsburg, 14.33%; Effort, 4.39%; Saylorsburg, 3.1%.

The offenses were mapped to better understand the spatial patterns of firearm-related offenses in Monroe County, revealing clusters where incidents were significantly higher. This analysis identified several areas within the county where the clustering of firearm-related incidents was particularly pronounced. The highest rates of incidents per 1,000 people within these clusters are detailed in Figure 6 of the report. This mapping provides valuable insights into the geographic distribution of firearm-related crimes, aiding in the identification of hotspots that may benefit from targeted policing and community outreach programs to reduce violence and enhance public safety.

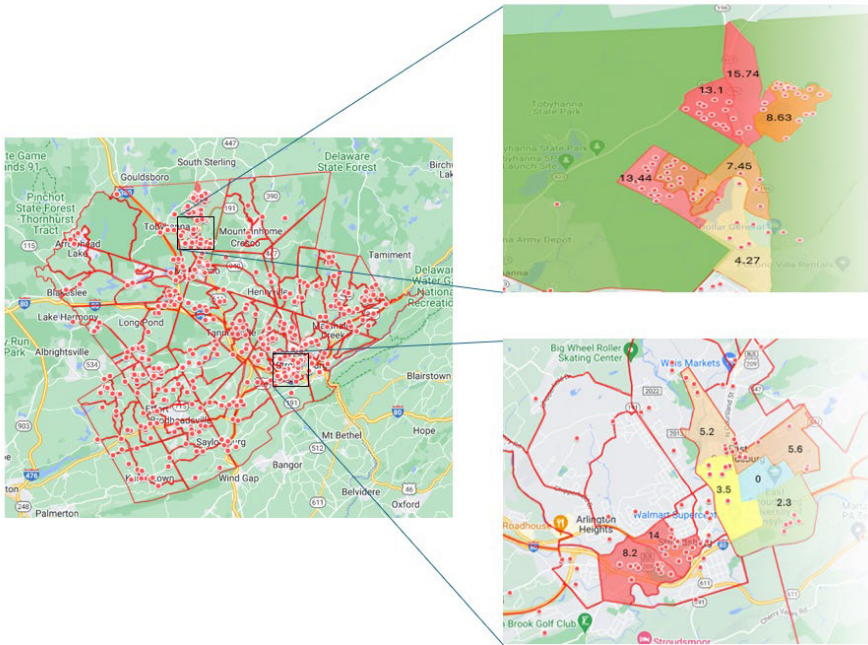


Figure 6: Firearm-related arrest rate by census block area.

The mapping of firearm-related offenses in Monroe County highlighted census block groups with higher rates of firearm-related crime that also shared certain socioeconomic characteristics. These included a higher proportion of residents living alone and a notable number of younger individuals not currently enrolled in school or engaged in the labor force. Notably, juvenile data were not included in this analysis due to unavailability, with the focus strictly on adult defendants, where 11% were aged between 18 and 24, and 36% between 25 and 34 years old.



FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

In early fall of 2023, four focus group interviews were conducted with various community professionals, including those in education, social work, business, and other sectors. There were a total of 10 participants, as well as people incarcerated at the county jail (4), law enforcement (8), and survivors of gun violence (3). These focus groups were designed to gather insights on the support for and barriers to policies aimed at enhancing firearm safety within the community.

Participants discussed a broad range of topics concerning firearm safety, the main causes of violence in their communities, and their perspectives on effective measures to reduce firearm-related injuries. These discussions were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, as described by Denzin & Lincoln (2011), involving the holistic identification of recurring themes and suggestions, which were then coded to ascertain frequency.

Community Concerns

A consistent theme among focus group participants was the perception that gun violence in the community was not noticeably increasing. However, concerns were raised about the rising trend of firearm carrying among young people and newcomers from larger cities. Specifically, all participants from the county jail emphasized that despite not perceiving an increase in gun violence, they had personal experiences with gun violence affecting close friends or family members.

Each jail participant distinguished between how hunters and other legal gun owners in the community understand the consequences of using a firearm, noting how “when people start carrying at a young age, you do not understand the consequences.” This was a distinction shared among most community residents who have noticed a change over time:

“I moved out into an area that was, at that time, largely a changing population going from locals who worked locally, hunted, farmed, and everybody knew each other to a much more diverse and less open population, more isolated within its neighborhoods. I’ve personally witnessed issues with handguns, specifically, people who can suddenly now buy a gun that couldn’t previously due to state laws, and there’s a basic knowledge base, when you grow up around something, you respect it. When you’re suddenly handed something, there’s a maturity level that’s never been developed.”

This statement captures the distinction made across all focus groups between people raised with firearms and receiving training within the context of family and community events, compared to younger people “today” who have limited “respect for firearms” and “knowledge of their power.” A member of the law enforcement focus group echoed an uptick in young people carrying firearms:

“When I was growing up, teenagers really didn’t have access to guns besides for hunting and target shooting with a responsible adult. Over the past couple of years, we’ve seen an uptick in teenagers carrying and using firearms.”

A survivor of domestic violence provided a further example of this concern:

“I was driving my car and this kid walked in front of me. I had to stop. Then they showed me their fingers [making a gun sign] like we’re gonna shoot you, I smiled at them. I just smiled. You have the young kids that have a little attitude with them.”

The focus groups also highlighted concerns about younger residents who are ill-prepared to handle firearms responsibly. Additionally, members from three of the focus groups pointed out the issues with transplant and non-resident perpetrators of firearm violence, which are exacerbated by the county’s location along Interstate 80. Although most acknowledge that most incidents of firearm violence lay with residents. As a law enforcement member explained:

“Traffic stops in general, you never know who the hell you’re going to deal with. That’s where we’re seeing... a lot of times, [people] carrying guns or pushing guns as well. But when you look at the overall numbers, incidents where there’s a firearm involved, I think the numbers are with the residents, whether they’re transplant or born here.”



Perceived Need for Firearms Training and Education

A key overarching theme across all focus groups was the difference between learning safety and respect for firearms from hunting and as kids versus “kids today.” As one community resident asserted:

“Kids have a lot of different mental health issues going on, and parents aren’t really watching their kids. Kids are playing [video] games constantly where they are killing people, and they get back up. It creates a delusion that firearms really don’t kill but they do. I think better education needs to be promoted out there to show our children that guns are dangerous.”

This was echoed by all members of the jail focus group, with one participant noting:

“My dad educated me on handguns and exposed me to them. So, I didn’t have the curiosity to go and look for it myself. And when we left the house, and he didn’t have it on him, it was put away. However, I don’t think that’s the culture in the [county]. Guns kind of lay around every room in the house for safety. We have populations coming from different areas of the US now. Some people were taught correctly to put their guns away, lock them up.”

Law enforcement agreed, noting that although there are certainly just as many perpetrators of gun crimes born and raised in the county, many of the newer perpetrators originate from the city:

“A lot of those families from the city were looking to give their families better lives. They bring them up here and you have the same activity that was going on in the city happening. A lot of that is the families coming in from the cities having that city mentality...we do have that city mentality in schools. I think a big part of it that I see is there’s just lack of supervision, lack of parenting because some of these parents are gone for days or weeks at a time living in the city, leaving their teenagers here to kind of fend for themselves and that leads the problems.”

Focus Group Policy and Training Recommendations

Throughout the focus group discussions, there was a unanimous recognition that local county governments do not have the authority to create or alter laws regarding firearm ownership and carrying. Despite this, many participants expressed concerns about potential infringements on gun rights. A major concern discussed widely was the discrepancy between the comprehensive training required for hunting in Pennsylvania and the less stringent requirements for obtaining a concealed carry license.

This issue was frequently connected to discussions on the need for better education, enhanced mental health services, improved safety training, and periodic requalification for firearm owners. There was a remarkable consistency among the groups regarding the need for increased education. The recommended target audiences for these educational initiatives include children under 18 within school settings, new residents of the county, and parents, emphasizing the importance of secure storage and educating children on the potential dangers associated with firearms. These discussions underscored a community desire to bridge the firearm safety and responsibility gap through targeted educational and policy interventions.

Secure Storage

The county’s ongoing initiatives to distribute gun locks through various agencies, veterans’ groups, and the Suicide Prevention Coalition highlight a proactive approach to enhancing firearm safety. Despite these efforts, community members and law enforcement officials emphasize the need for expansion and continuity in these initiatives. Law enforcement personnel shared instances where entire safes were stolen and later found pried open, with the firearms missing. These anecdotes underline the challenges in completely safeguarding firearms but also reinforce the belief that securing them as effectively as possible is crucial. This is especially important, given secure storage can prevent accidental injuries, suicide attempts, and unauthorized use.

A community member further emphasized the importance of secure storage as a fundamental strategy to prevent accidental deaths, even in light of potential theft risks. This perspective underscores a widespread community consensus on the necessity of robust firearm safety measures to mitigate risks associated with firearm ownership.



“I don’t necessarily expect that everybody should have multiple layers to keep their firearms. They obviously want them to help protect themselves. When somebody is breaking in, you don’t want to be going through three or four different steps to gain access to your firearm. But at the same time, when we talk about accidental deaths, it is when people are able to find the firearms very readily available in a drawer. It’s not just people breaking into stealing the firearms. It’s finding it.”

The issue of secure storage was largely discussed as a response to suicide risk and mental health in the community. As one law enforcement officer said:

“Being a lifelong gun owner, I always get my guns locked up away from my children. I taught them gun safety at an early age. If I knew one of them was going through a tough time there’s no way they’re going to get their hands on guns. Not only should the family take steps to secure firearms, but they should also take steps to get the person help.”

Firearm Safety Training

During discussions in each focus group, a consistent theme emerged: residents believe firearms education should extend beyond simply locking up guns. They argued that it should comprehensively cover mental health and broader aspects of firearm usage. This need for a more holistic approach to firearms education was particularly underscored by community members who work with children. They highlighted a significant shortfall in the county’s resources, noting a lack of counselors in schools and a general shortage of behavioral health professionals in the community. This gap, they stressed, limits the ability to provide a rounded education that integrates mental health awareness with responsible firearm handling.

One participant explained:

“I would love it if we could get the folks to go through mental health, first aid training, and/or QPR [Question. Persuade. Refer.], which is a suicide prevention training because I think it is about education and recognizing signs that someone may be in distress. Sometimes you don’t know.”

In addition to mental health awareness and counseling provisions in schools, the most suggested firearms safety education was school-based education for young people. Each of the focus groups initiated this topic of conversation. The need for school education also appeared often in response to people’s concerns about new residents of the community not growing up around firearms. As one member of law enforcement indicated:

“I think it’s a lot more curiosity than anything. I was raised around guns. I never had any curiosity about them. I knew what they could do. I also knew what my old man would have done to me if I would have ever had an accident. Teach kids that these are not toys. These are not something that makes you cool. These are a tool that can end someone else’s life.”

Community members and jail groups also discussed possible ages for such education, with two participants from the jail agreeing that 13 years of age would make sense because junior hunting licenses are available starting at age 12 (Pennsylvania Game Commission, 2024):

“At 13 years old, you get your hunting license. So, that is when you start learning how to control a gun? They’re figuring out who they are, who they’re not, [and a lot of them are] who they shouldn’t be. That’s right around the age kids start getting in trouble.”

The law enforcement focus group was also asked explicitly what they could do to help if given the resources or authority, with a majority in support of expanded firearm safety training:

“If there was something that could say if you’re going to purchase a gun, you have to take this firearm safety class, kind of like the hunter safety course kids have to go through to get their hunting license. We don’t do anything like that. You have tons of residents that have a concealed carry license but have never trained with a firearm and don’t know anything about firearm safety.”



Many residents and gun owners had to train to obtain a hunting license, which was relevant to their support for expanded firearms training. A firearm owner in the community group discussed their training received from family members and the community:

“I went through gun safety courses and everything of that nature as a young person before I was even permitted to go hunt out in the woods with my father. That doesn’t mean that I wasn’t exposed before the legal age to hunt. I was taught how to shoot .22 rifles and things of that nature. The educational part is a huge factor. I took my sons to formal [gun safety] education, and I’ve not had problems with my children.”

Requalification

A recurring theme in the focus groups revolved around the necessity of requalification and renewal training for individuals holding concealed carry licenses. This viewpoint was echoed by a law enforcement supervisor, who emphasized:

“I qualify my officers three times a year. I also qualify retired law enforcement. I know they can shoot. I’m required to qualify them once a year. I have to go over gun safety, when somebody can walk into the Sheriff’s office when they’ve applied for a concealed carry permit, which is good for at least five years. And they never have to do anything other than show a cause that they want to carry.”

The law enforcement group unanimously advocated for mandatory qualification, at least periodically, for all individuals seeking a concealed carry permit. This requirement aimed to ensure permit holders could safely handle and use firearms. Similarly, survivors of domestic violence who participated in the focus groups also emphasized the importance of requalification and periodic checks.

During discussions focusing on personal experiences with domestic violence, one survivor stressed the need for more frequent background checks, suggesting intervals of every year or every two years. However, there remained a significant concern even with such measures in place, it may not guarantee the identification of individuals who pose a threat. Consequently, survivors collectively proposed integrating medical examinations or psychiatric evaluations into the background check process to the greatest extent possible.

The concept of requalification and ongoing training emerged as a potential safeguard for the elderly, particularly those vulnerable to firearm theft or robbery. A concerned community member shared specific worries about her father:

“As he got older and was living alone, that was one of our primary concerns. Because everybody in town knew that he was vulnerable and that he was an older man living alone. So that was one of the things that that we worried about is someone breaking in because everybody in town knew he collected guns and was a hunter.”

Surveys

Survey respondents were generally more likely to be male, White, college-educated, and older than the county average. Table 1 displays some of the discrepancies.

	Monroe County	Survey Respondents
% White	75.8%	85.7%
% Black	17.5%	4.5%
% Asian	2.8%	2.2%
% Hispanic	18.8%	5.9%
% Female	49.8%	39.4%
% Male	50.2%	58.9%
% Age 18 and under	19.1%	0%
% Ages 18-65	61.3%	73.4%
% Ages 65 and over	19.6%	26.6%

Note: Monroe County characteristics were obtained from the American Community Survey.



To ensure the accuracy and representativeness of the data, post-stratification weights were utilized, aligning with county demographics regarding gender, race, ethnicity, age, military veteran status, and college education. These demographic parameters were sourced from the American Communities Survey 2022. The weighted survey results underwent rigorous evaluation through various modeling techniques.

Table 2: Weighted survey sample characteristics (n=630).

Variable	%
% Agree safety training required for concealed carry weapon (CCW) applications	62.0%
% Agree renewal training required for CCW applications	55.0%
% Agree provide firearm safety training for youth	72.2%
% Agree distribute educational videos on firearm safety	69.7%
% Agree distribute firearm locking devices and safe storage	63.5%
Personal gun ownership	53.0%
CCW license holder	55.6%
Grew up with firearms in home	64.0%
Firearm club member	42.9%
Received firearm safety training (no suicide education)	35.2%
Received firearm safety training (w/ suicide education)	22.0%
Victim of violent crime (ever)	18.9%
Victim of violent crime (past year)	6.1%
Victim - firearm stolen	17.2%
Friend or family victim of violent crime	44.9%
Friend or family suicide	16.8%
Community: Heard of violence victims	60.1%
Community: Heard of suicide	52.3%
Residence: 0-5 Years	23.3%
Residence: 5-10 Years	13.8%
Residence: over 10 years	63.0%
Age: under 35 years	25.2%
Age: 35-64	54.8%
Age: 65+	20.0%
Female	49.0%
Non-Hispanic White	76.0%
Bachelors Degree or Higher	35.0%
Military	6.0%

Note: Observations were weighted on census data estimates for the county age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, and military background.

Table 2 presents the means and percentages for various variables gathered in the survey, juxtaposed with national or Pennsylvania data wherever feasible. Weighted survey responses indicate that 53% of the sampled individuals personally possess a firearm. Interestingly, when considering other household members who own firearms, the overall household gun ownership rate jumps to 71%. Both of these figures surpass national estimates obtained from Pew Research in 2017, where the net gun ownership in households was 42% for all US adults and 58% for adults in rural communities.

The higher prevalence of firearms in households within Monroe County can partly be attributed to the significant interest in firearms for hunting or recreational purposes. While protection remains the primary reason cited by nearly 4 in 5 gun owners (79%), hunting and recreation emerge as the second most common rationale, with 57% of all respondents reporting firearm ownership for such purposes.



Moreover, approximately 43% of respondents identify as members of a gun club or organization, underscoring the substantial presence of hunting activity and community membership within the county. Furthermore, a larger proportion of Monroe County residents report growing up in households with firearms compared to the national average, with 64% indicating such an upbringing, compared to 48% of US adults, as per Pew Research in 2017. This figure climbs to 71% among current gun owners and 75% among those who have resided in Monroe County for over a decade. Conversely, individuals residing in Monroe for fewer than 10 years (48%) and non-gun owners (40%) are less likely to have grown up in firearm-owning households, aligning with national trends.

Interestingly, no significant disparities exist between gun owners nationally and those in Monroe County regarding the number of firearms they possess. Roughly one-third of Monroe gun owners claim ownership of a single firearm (31%), while 39% possess 2-4 firearms, and 30% own five or more. Additionally, slightly over half of gun owners (53.4%) report storing their ammunition and firearms together. Notably, there is no statistical correlation between receiving firearm safety training and storage practices.

Exposure to Firearm Injury and Violence

The survey included several questions aimed at capturing residents' exposure to firearm injury, encompassing direct personal encounters, knowledge of friends or family affected by firearm injury, and awareness of incidents within the community (Semenza et al., 2023). The data revealed a significant level of exposure to firearm injury or violence across various dimensions. For instance, more than half of the respondents were aware of shootings or suicides occurring in their broader community. Furthermore, nearly 17% reported knowing a friend or family member who had attempted suicide using a firearm, while over 40% were acquainted with someone who had been a victim of violent crime.

Ordered logistic regression models were employed to analyze these exposures' impact on mental health outcomes. The findings indicate exposure to friends who have attempted firearm suicide significantly increases the odds of reporting severe levels of anxiety, depression, and difficulty sleeping. Specifically, individuals with such exposure were three times more likely to experience these adverse outcomes compared to those without such exposure. Additionally, for each additional instance of firearm exposure, the odds of experiencing severe mental health issues and sleep difficulties increased by 1.4 times. These results underscore the profound impact of firearm injury exposure on mental well-being, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms in affected communities.

Table 3: Tests of association with support for firearm safety programs.

	Mandatory Training for CCW	Renewal Training	Youth firearm safety education	Firearm safety videos	Provision of gun locks and safe storage
Own a gun	51.69%	43.65%	70.81%	63.68%	51.98%
Not own	80.43%	74.88%	74.67%	80.18%	83.34%
Current CCW License	46.41%	41.37%	68.08%	58.98%	48.37%
No CCW license	81.17%	70.97%	75.38%	82.79%	82.38%
Grew up with firearms in home	50.57%	44.81%	72.06%	60.89%	57.46%
Did not grow up with firearms	82.00%	71.83%	72.55%	85.01%	74.10%
Ages 18-34	54.53%	60.62%	68.09%	61.37%	70.58%
Ages 35-64	62.40%	51.87%	72.04%	70.99%	61.27%
Ages 65 +	70.48%	55.75%	77.84%	76.67%	60.62%
Male	48.21%	40.50%	70.40%	61.90%	47.67%
Female	76.39%	69.71%	74.09%	77.86%	79.80%
College Education	75.35%	63.00%	73.46%	75.94%	70.20%
Less than college education	54.80%	50.50%	71.54%	66.30%	60.00%

Note: Bolded indicates statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) as indicated by Chi-Square tests of association. The Chi-Square test compares the observed values against expected frequencies.



Policies and Programs

Table 3 shows that more than half of the sample supported each suggested program. However, there was considerable variation across policies and among respondents' groupings. Some of the fluctuation was expected. For example, firearm owners and responders who are currently licensed to carry a concealed weapon were much less likely to favor any training required as part of the concealed carry license application or renewal process. Specifically, less than half of weapon owners, licensees, and men. These percentages did, however, rise for the inclusion of educational materials with firearm purchases, while women and those with a bachelor's degree or higher level of education were substantially more likely to express support.

Longer-term county residents were less supportive of the emphasized initiatives. Non-Hispanic White respondents expressed more support for educational and instructional resources than non-White residents.

One important conclusion was that there were no substantial disparities in support for young people's safety education. Almost three-quarters of all respondents supported firearm safety education for those under the age of 18, and there were few significant differences by subgroup.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The purpose of this evaluation is to describe many areas of community concern regarding firearm violence, some of which are confirmed by mortality and criminal justice data. There is a significant degree of consistency in support for programs that try to address concerns about suicide ideation, social support, gun safety training, and education, according to the results of focus groups and community polls. The data further emphasize the importance of coalitional support, which may be utilized to assist in advocating for programs through the employment of trustworthy messengers who are trusted voices.





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