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CITY HALL & POLICING

Gun violence: The other public health crisis that spiked in Oakland last year

Nearly as many Black people died in Oakland from a bullet in 2020 as from COVID-19.



by **Darwin BondGraham**

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Oakland police at the scene of a homicide in May 2020. Credit: Darwin BondGraham

An epidemic claimed 84 lives in Oakland last year. Experts and frontline health workers struggled to slow its spread, but the affliction, which increased suddenly in the spring, resulted in a combined total of 495 fatal and non-fatal

cases before the end of December, a 72% increase over 2019. Stark racial disparities were evident in the list of the deceased and hospitalized.

The crisis we're describing here is an epidemic of gun violence, which reached shocking levels as the city locked down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but has received a fraction of the resources and widespread concern.

Last year, 102 people were murdered in Oakland. Of these killings, 84 were committed with a firearm. It was the city's most violent year since 2012, which saw 127 killings, most of those also shootings. COVID-19 wasn't much deadlier; the virus claimed the lives of 145 people by the end of last year, according to the Alameda County Coroner's Bureau.

The toll of gun violence has been felt mostly by Oakland's Black communities. Fifty-four Black Oaklanders lost their lives last year to a gunshot wound, a figure that's strikingly close to the number of Black Oaklanders who died from complications related to COVID-19 last year—58.

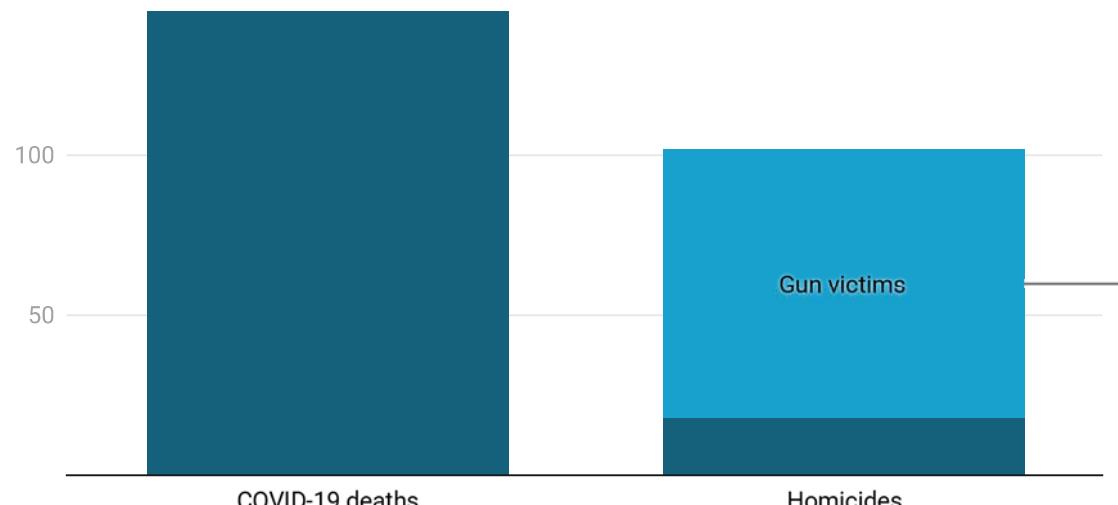
When you factor in age, the risks both of these crises pose in Oakland begin to diverge dramatically. The average age of people whose deaths have been tied to COVID-19 in Oakland was 74. The average age of shooting victims last year was 31-years-old.

And while only one Black person under the age of 50 died from the

coronavirus in Oakland last year, 50 under 50 were shot and killed, including four juveniles.

In a year defined by the COVID crisis, gun deaths and other homicides also claimed the lives of many Oaklanders

In 2020, 145 people died from COVID-19 in Oakland. Over the same year, there were 102 homicides, 84 of which were committed with a gun.



Source: Alameda County Sheriff's Office Coroner's Bureau • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

To combat the viral pandemic, government health agencies and multinational corporations employing thousands of scientists developed new vaccines. Millions of Americans have already been immunized, including over 200,000 Oakland residents. The fatality rate of the pandemic has declined in the U.S., and hospitals everywhere have developed more effective ways to treat COVID-19 patients.

But while the viral pandemic prompted an extraordinary federal, state, and local government response, the gun violence epidemic in Oakland and other large U.S. cities—a long-simmering problem that disproportionately affects young men of color—hasn’t triggered a similar emergency effort.

Violence intervention work was interrupted by the pandemic

There are various theories about why gun violence spiked in Oakland during the pandemic.

One widely held view is that Oakland's main program to intervene in cycles of retaliation was disrupted by the county shelter-in-place order and bureaucratic reshuffling within the city. These challenges came at exactly the same time the pandemic intensified economic stress and trauma.

"The pandemic contributed to anxiety in communities already hit hard by poverty and violence," Peter Kim, a manager at Oakland's Department of Violence Prevention, told The Oaklandsid. "It exacerbated conditions that were already there. These were communities that couldn't shelter in place."

Until last year, Oakland appeared to be successfully stopping gun violence. In 2013, the city launched its **Ceasefire program**, a coordinated effort to identify the small number of people—just a few hundred in the city of 430,000—who are most likely to shoot someone and be shot. A special team of police focused on these individuals to make arrests and take guns off the street.

The city also invested in non-police strategies through the **Oakland Unite program**, which sent social workers, life coaches, and first responders to the scenes of shootings and hospitals, making contact with victims and perpetrators, as well as their families and friends, and offering services to prevent retaliation and treat community trauma.

Shootings fell from 557 in 2012 to 284 in 2019. The Ceasefire plan was working, according to a **2019 report** by several academics who helped design Oakland's strategy. A big part of its success was deemed to be the non-police

team of first responders making contact with victims and perpetrators, offering them alternatives.

“They have to be able to trust the person they’re working with,” Kim said about violence prevention clients his team has worked with over the past few years. “That first initial interaction has to be face to face.”

Most in-person meetings were put on pause in March 2020 because of the fear of spreading COVID-19.

“The hospital limited who got in, so we could no longer get inside to see patients,” said Kim. “Funerals were limited in terms of capacity. No more than ten people could go to a gathering.”

The Oakland police also ran up against restrictions. OPD Captain Trevelyon Jones, who has run Ceasefire since last August, noted that one of Oakland’s most frequently used tools has been large, in-person meetings referred to as “call-ins.” At call-ins, a police officer offers people suspected of engaging in gun violence referrals to the kinds of services Kim’s team provides. The police also give people a warning: if they refuse to stop engaging in violence, OPD will do everything it can to arrest them.

“We couldn’t do the call-ins, the direct communication,” said Jones. As a result, the pipeline of referrals to social services and life coaching dried up.

In September, Reverend Damita Davis-Howard, the city's Ceasefire coordinator, [**said during a press conference**](#) that there were four call-ins in 2019, reaching 47 people at risk of gun violence. Last year, the city still managed to hold four call-ins, but the number of participants dropped to 17.

"We retooled it, reworked it, and started to do some physical distancing, safe PPE call-ins, but they have been intentionally a lot smaller than they were before the pandemic," said Davis-Howard.

Oakland also reorganized its violence prevention work in 2020. The city's [**new Department of Violence Prevention**](#) absorbed the Oakland Unite program, which coordinated most of the life coaches and other services for Ceasefire. The DVP was also tasked with reducing other forms of violence, like abuse between intimate partners and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. As we [**recently explored in-depth**](#), the department's expanded mission and a relatively small budget and staffing have led some to question whether it's resourced enough to ensure gun violence remains a top priority.

Last November, two consultants who helped set up and staff Ceasefire told the city's [**Public Safety and Services Oversight Commission**](#) that life coaching services haven't been prioritized for people most at risk of engaging in gun violence. "We remain concerned that the majority of those currently receiving life coaching support are lower-risk clients from non-Ceasefire referral sources," wrote Reygan Cunningham and Vaughn Crandall of the California Partnership for Safe Communities in their [**report**](#).

Cunningham and Crandall added that Oakland had done a good job studying every shooting that occurred in the city in prior years, mapping the social networks and conflicts that fuel violent feuds, but that the last analysis had been completed in 2017, making some findings obsolete. “Maintaining an updated analysis of the problem is essential to drive an effective strategy,” they wrote.

Other key information-sharing meetings, like OPD’s weekly shooting reviews, where officers examined recent incidents and planned to prevent the next assault, and the city’s quarterly performance reviews, where the police, DVP, and others are held accountable for outcomes, were either put on hold or made virtual.

Oakland isn't the only city to see a spike in gun violence

Gun violence is most frequent in cities where poverty and structural racism are deeply engrained. Coinciding with the pandemic, large and small cities across the country saw massive upticks in homicides. And major cities like New York, New Orleans, and Seattle saw much larger year-over-year homicide increases than Oakland.

Data journalists Rob Arthur and Jeff Asher of The Intercept, a national watchdog reporting outlet, noted that 2020’s nationwide 21% increase in homicides far exceeded the previous record one-year rise of about 13% in 1968. That was also a time of political tumult. Following the assassination of

Martin Luther King, Jr., there was civil unrest in over 100 cities as protesters railed against white supremacy and police violence. There was also a **pandemic in 1968**, caused by a strain of influenza that would kill 100,000 Americans. And the late 1960s saw the start of **America's multi-decade "War on Crime,"** in which the government made huge investments in police and prisons, while the Great Society's **"War on Poverty" programs** were mostly decommissioned. Over the next three decades, violent crime increased, **peaking in the 1990s** and then declining over the past 20 years.

Pro-law enforcement groups and **conservative media outlets** have argued that the national spike in gun violence this year is a reason not to follow through with calls to reduce police budgets. **Black Lives Matter activists** and some progressives counter that America's enormous spending on policing and prisons over the past 40 years hasn't done much to reduce community violence or abuses by police officers themselves, and meant that less money was available for social and economic programs that could treat the root causes of crime.

In Oakland, the spike in gun violence is part of the backdrop for the debate over the next two-year city budget. Mayor Libby Schaaf, who has **opposed**

deep cuts to police spending, is expected to issue her budget proposal next month. The City Council will amend the mayor's plan and approve the city's final budget before the end of June. Some **councilmembers have taken the position** that shifting funds from policing to social services, housing, and violence prevention programs will do more to reduce shootings and other forms of violence.

At a gathering of Black church leaders in West Oakland's DeFremery Park last Saturday, Schaaf said homicides are a "health crisis" facing the city. "This violence has been as heartbreakingly as a pandemic, and it's not new," she told the gathering.

Gun violence has been characterized as an epidemic in Oakland for many years, **deserving of an emergency public health response**. Gunshot wounds have been a **leading cause of death** for young Oaklanders, especially Black and Latino youth, since at least the early 2000s.

Most of Oakland's shooting victims are treated at Highland Hospital. In 2019, 283 gunshot wound patients were given medical aid at Highland. Last year, this increased to 478 victims, a 59% increase, according to data maintained by the Alameda Health System.

About 46% of people shot and killed last year in the city were Oakland residents. The rest were from nearby cities like San Leandro, Hayward, Stockton, Berkeley, and Antioch. Over 90% were men, and over half died as a

result of multiple gunshot wounds.

Despite the existence of just a handful of gun shops in the region, and strict state firearms purchasing laws, guns are readily available in Oakland. Through April 25, OPD reported recovering 334 firearms, an average of three per day. Homemade “ghost guns,” manufactured from untraceable parts ordered off the internet, are becoming more popular, too.

The first few months of 2020 had been promising for Oakland. In early March, homicides were down 43% from the same time in 2019, and other crimes like robberies and burglaries were also less frequent. But by mid-April, about one month into the COVID-19 shutdown, the rate of killing was rising. By July, when the 39th homicide victim was counted, the city’s gains had been wiped out. So many people were shot and killed in Oakland last year that it wasn’t until mid-June that the number of COVID-19 fatalities surpassed the number of killings by firearm.

Then there was a spike in shootings toward the end of June. Oakland residents Gary Nash and Ernesto Herrera were found dead from gunshot wounds in their cars in separate incidents. On June 28, an unnamed 60-year-old man was shot and killed on Dimond Avenue. Police didn’t release his name and it also did not appear in the data the coroner’s office provided us. On July 1, Markese Kelley of Stockton was shot in Fruitvale. His family has petitioned the city to solve his murder. The same day, Stephon Goodrich was shot near Union Point Park and later died at the hospital. On July 2, police responded to a call of a shooting on 72nd Avenue and found Fremont resident Robert

Coleman deceased. This spree of fatal shootings briefly caused the number of Oakland's firearm deaths to again surpass COVID deaths for several days.

If the current pace of fatal shootings and other murders continues, Oakland could witness a year of violence that hasn't been recorded since 2006, when 145 people were murdered. Even worse, if there's a further uptick in shootings in the summer and fall, Oakland could see a degree of deadly violence that rivals the all-time high of 1992, when 165 people were murdered, mostly by someone using a gun.

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Before joining The Oaklandsid as News Editor, Darwin BondGraham worked with The Appeal, where he was an investigative reporter covering police and prosecutorial misconduct. He has reported on gun violence for The Guardian, and was an enterprise reporter for the East Bay Express. BondGraham's work has also appeared with KQED, ProPublica and other leading national and local outlets. He holds a doctorate in sociology from UC Santa Barbara and was the co-recipient of the George Polk Award for local reporting in 2017.

[More by Darwin BondGraham](#)