

# **SALEM, OREGON**

## **GUN VIOLENCE**

### **PROBLEM**

### **ANALYSIS**

2018 - 2023



FINAL REPORT:  
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**SALEM POLICE  
DEPARTMENT**

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# INTRODUCTION

In May 2023, the Salem Police Department partnered with researchers to conduct a detailed analysis of local gun violence. A Gun Violence Problem Analysis (GVPA) is a set of analytical exercises designed to support the implementation of violence reduction strategies. The goal of this analysis was to examine the circumstances of incidents, explore the characteristics of individuals involved, and identify the social networks at greatest risk for involvement in violence. This analysis also explored risk factors and criminal trajectories among violence-involved youth in the City of Salem through a combination of law enforcement data and interviews with a range of criminal justice partners and county personnel.

Consistent with trends in many cities throughout the U.S., the City of Salem has experienced shifting violence dynamics over the past two years. This has occurred alongside growing community concerns regarding disorder issues, homelessness, and perceived increases in juvenile involvement in serious crime. To complete this study, we met with several partners integral to gun violence reduction efforts, including personnel from the Salem Police Department, Marion County Sheriff's Office, Salem-Keizer School District, Marion County District Attorney's Office, and Marion County Juvenile Probation and Parole. This report aims to establish a common understanding of local violence problems that can inform the work of civic, community, and criminal justice leaders to reduce violence.

# BACKGROUND

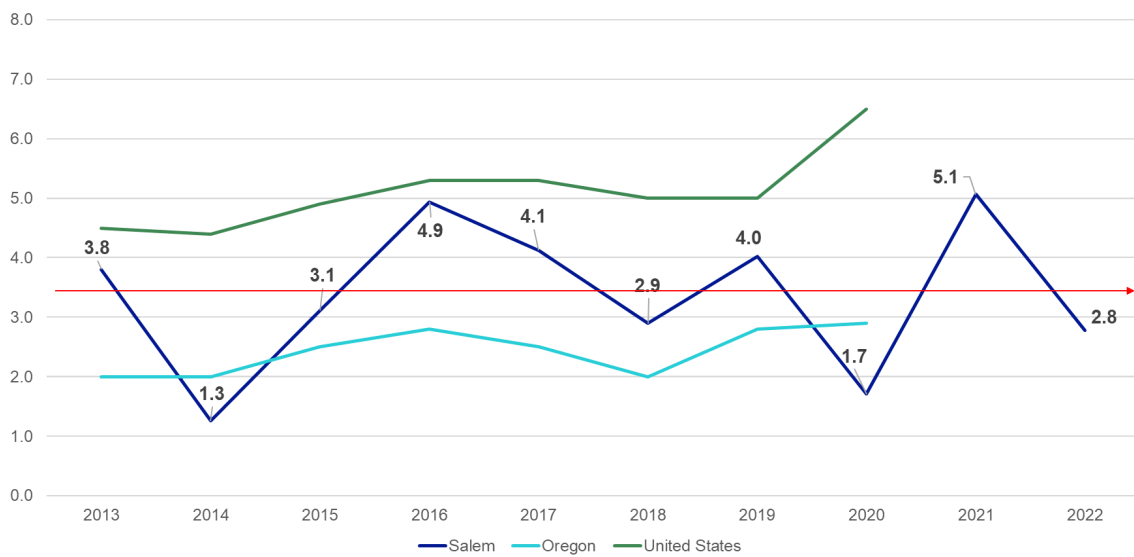
The City of Salem has a population of more than 175,000 within nearly 49 square miles[1]. Its ten-year average annual property crime rate has remained relatively stable, consistently hovering around 3,900 per 100,000 population. The city's ten-year average violent crime rate is about 358 per 100,000 population. Consistent with Oregon's statewide trends, Salem's overall rate of violent crime has increased since about 2017[2].

Salem's average 10-year homicide rate is 3.4 per 100,000 population[2]. This rate falls below the national average (Figure 1) but is often 1-2 times greater than the average statewide homicide rate in Oregon. Like many U.S. cities, Salem did experience an increase in gun violence in recent years. When fatal and nonfatal shootings are combined, the city experienced a 100 percent increase in gun violence incidents over five years (2018 – 2022) (Figure 2).

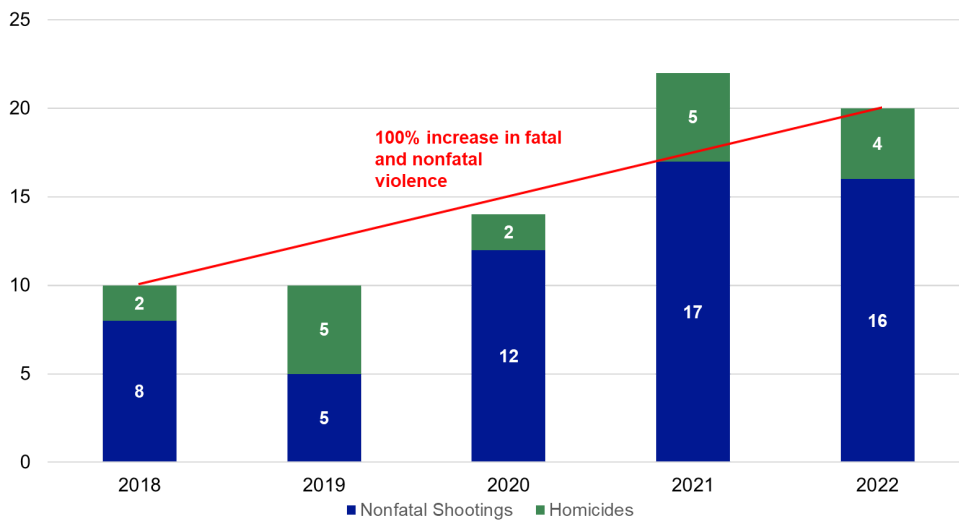
[1] U.S. Census Bureau, 2020

[2] Uniform Crime Reports, Crime Data Explorer, 2021

**Figure 1. Salem Homicide Rate 2013 - 2022 (per 100,000 population)**



**Figure 2. Salem Homicides & Nonfatal Shootings: 2018 - 2022**



In addition to these increases in gun violence, partners in the City of Salem and Marion County highlighted several notable events that may impact violence and violence reduction efforts citywide. Though it is important to note that the effects, or lack thereof, of each of these events are unknown.

In 2019, the Salem Police Department disbanded its Gang Enforcement Team and several City and County personnel noted that this had impacted the ability of criminal justice partners to develop and share quality gang intelligence. In 2020, Senate Bill 1008 took effect, which eliminated mandatory waivers to adult court for Measure 11 crimes and implemented practices to reduce sentence severity for juveniles. Salem's community also experienced challenges seen nationwide in 2020 relating to programming, supervision, and access to services for its highest risk youth no longer attending schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this same time, criminal justice researchers note that civil unrest and a "crisis in legitimacy" following the killing of George Floyd may have also contributed to increases in violence and other crimes across the United States.

Partners reported that in recent years, the City of Salem had seen an increase in serious violence and an increase in incidents involving youth. They noted that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, young people lacked the engagement, supervision, and mentorship otherwise provided in the school environment. Partners also perceived that adult offenders were taking advantage of young people who were significantly less likely to receive harsh penalties for thefts or firearm offenses. In parallel, several believed that a lack of accountability resulting from stoppages and delays across various criminal justice system processes contributed to an increase in crime.

Lastly, partners also described an increase in group/gang activity that had become more difficult to address. Not only had quality gang intelligence sharing waned since the disbanding of the Gang Enforcement Team, but the contemporary gang environment involving social media, online disputes, and fluid loyalties, was said to make messaging and intervention challenging.

## GUN VIOLENCE ANALYSIS

This Gun Violence Problem Analysis examined all gun homicides (n = 18) and all nonfatal injury shootings (n = 68) between January 1, 2018 – June 30, 2023. Officer-involved shootings, confirmed self-inflictions, and cases of justified self-defense were excluded from our sample.

### Demographics of Victims and Suspects

The victims and suspects of fatal and nonfatal shootings in Salem are primarily male, Hispanic, and between the ages of 18-34. About 87% of victims and suspects were male. About 51% of victims and suspects were Hispanic despite Hispanic residents comprising only 22% of the overall population in the city (Table 1). Though making up a smaller proportion of involved individuals, Black individuals made up about 10% of victims and suspects despite only comprising about 1% of the population. Approximately 61% of victims and suspects were between the ages of 18-34, with a mean age of 28.6 (Table 2).

**Table 1. Gun Violence Victims and Suspects: Sex and Race**

	FATAL & NONFATAL SHOOTINGS (N=86)			SALEM POPULATION
	Victims (n=94)	Suspects (n=56)	Victims & Suspects (n=150)	
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	84.0%	92.9%	87.3%	51.0%
Female	16.0%	7.1%	12.7%	49.0%
<b>Race</b>				
Black	12.7%	5.4%	10.0%	1.4%
Hispanic	45.7%	58.9%	50.7%	22.4%
White	38.3%	32.1%	36.0%	65.8%
Other	3.2%	3.6%	3.3%	-

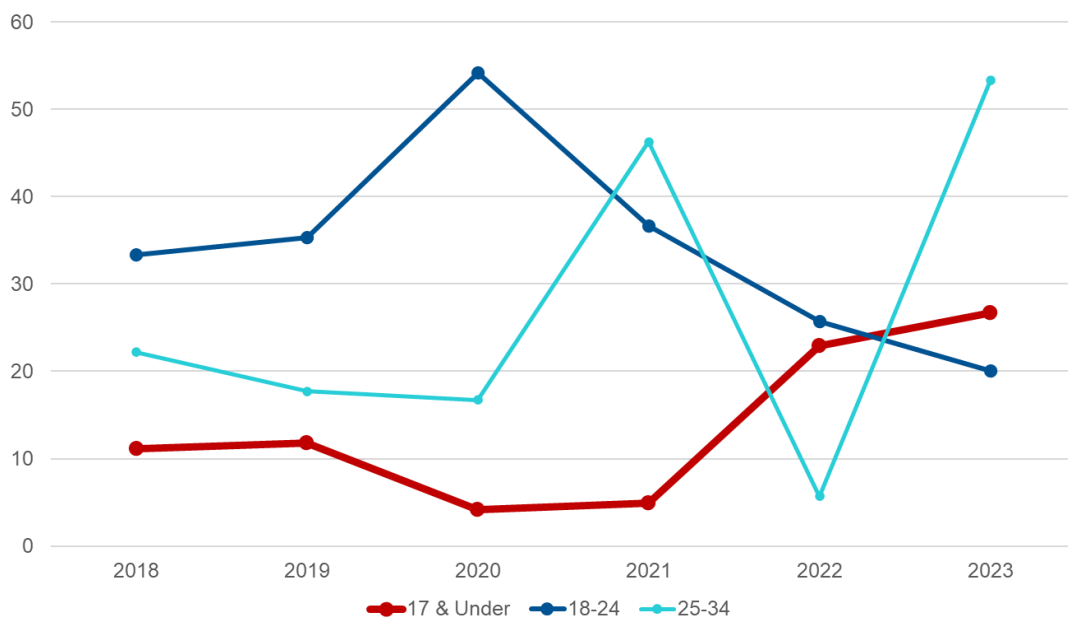
**Table 2. Gun Violence Victims and Suspects: Age**

	FATAL & NONFATAL SHOOTINGS (N=86)		
	Victims (n=94)	Suspects (n=56)	Victims & Suspects (n=150)
<b>Age</b>			
17 & under	9.6%	<b>17.9%</b>	12.7%
<b>18-24</b>	<b>34.0%</b>	<b>35.7%</b>	<b>34.7%</b>
<b>25-34</b>	<b>28.7%</b>	<b>23.2%</b>	<b>26.7%</b>
35-44	17.0%	14.3%	16.0%
45-54	7.5%	7.1%	7.3%
55+	3.2%	1.8%	2.7%
<b>Average Age</b>	29.5	27.1	28.6

### Juvenile Involvement in Violence

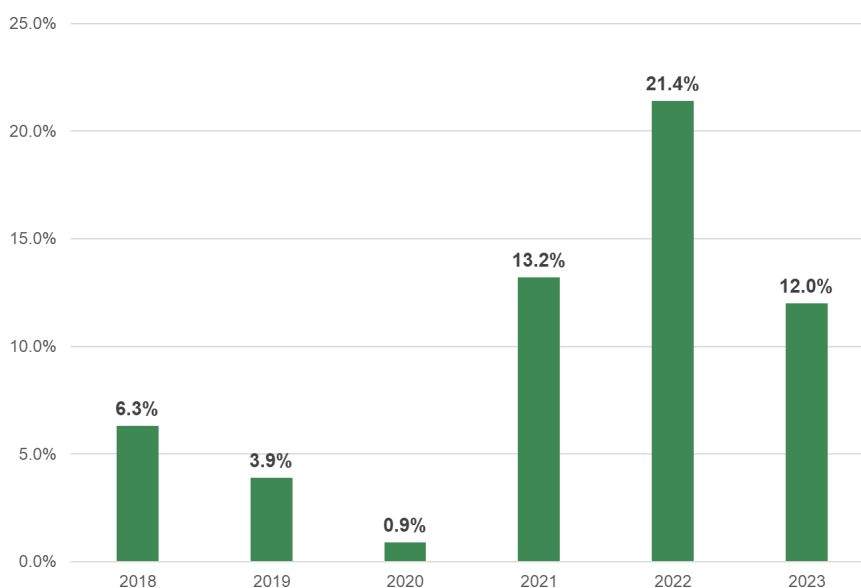
Although most victims and suspects are between the ages of 18-34, juveniles made up a larger proportion of suspects (18%) relative to victims (10%), and this percentage of juvenile involvement is slightly higher than observed in other cities conducting violence analyses. A year-over-year comparison shows that the percentage of juveniles involved in victims or suspects has increased in 2022-2023 (Figure 3). While juveniles were comprised about 5-10% of victims and suspects 2018-2021, they made up well over 20% of victims and suspects in gun violence incidents 2022-2023.

**Figure 3. Gun Violence Victims and Suspects: Percent Involved by Selected Age Group**



Beyond homicide and shooting data, the Salem PD also provided arrest data for aggravated assaults[3] and weapons offenses[4] from January 2018 – June 2023. Both year-over-year comparisons as well as comparisons across two designated time periods were conducted (2018-2020 and 2021-2023). Relative to the earlier time period, 2021-2023 showed a 320% average increase in the proportion of juveniles arrested for aggravated assaults (Figure 4) and an 88% average increase in the proportion of juveniles arrested for weapon law violations. In contrast, there was a 35% average decrease in the proportion of juveniles victimized in aggravated assaults.

**Figure 4. Aggravated Assault Arrest Events: Percent Juvenile Arrestees**



## Homelessness and Violence

Prior to conducting this analysis, community members and city personnel noted that homelessness had significantly increased in the City of Salem. Data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) does show a 189% increase in the total homeless population[5] counted in Marion/Polk counties from 2020 to 2022. We explored potential relationships to violence using data provided by law enforcement partners on whether or not individual victims or suspects were homeless and unsheltered. Annual sample sizes are small, so this data was reviewed across the two previously designated time periods: 2018-2020 and 2021-2023. Relative to the previous time period, there is no change in the proportion of suspects noted as unsheltered in 2021-2023. However, there was a statistically significant increase in the proportion of victims noted as unsheltered. This proportion increased from about 3% of victims in 2018-2020 to nearly 20% of victims in 2021-2023. Overall, about 15% of victims and suspects involved in the gun violence incidents in this study were noted to be homeless and unsheltered.

[3] Offenses labeled by a NIBRS code of Aggravated Assault were further filtered to only include CAD offense descriptions of: Armed Person, Armed Robbery, Assault, Gunshot Wound, Homicide, Robbery, Shots Reported/Fired to more closely capture serious violent incidents of interest to this study.

[4] Inclusive of all CAD offense types coded as Weapon Law Violations.

[5] Includes HUD counts of sheltered and unsheltered homeless.

**Table 3. Gun Violence Victims and Suspects: Percent Homeless**

	FATAL & NONFATAL SHOOTINGS (N=86)		
	Victims (n=94)	Suspects (n=56)	Victims & Suspects (n=150)
<b>Time Period</b>			
2018-2020 (n=59)	2.6%	19.1%	8.5%
2021-2023 (n=91)	19.6%	20.0%	19.8%
<b>Total</b>	12.7%	19.6%	15.3%

Gun violence incidents involving homeless victims and/or suspects did not differ significantly in circumstances when compared to the rest of the incident sample. Most, about 50%, resulted from personal disputes, often over property, money owed, prior thefts, and other miscellaneous interpersonal conflicts. Similar to the full sample of incidents, about 28% of incidents involving homeless victims and/or suspects evolved from unknown motives.

### **Criminal Justice System Involvement**

A victim or suspect was noted to have prior criminal justice system involvement if they had any documented statewide criminal history according to criminal history reports (i.e., arrests, convictions). Prior arrests and felony arrests count the unique arrest events. Offense totals count the number of unique criminal offense types, even if they occurred within the same arrest event. For example, an arrest with burglary-related charges and drug-related charges would be counted as one arrest but two offenses.

Approximately 69% of fatal and nonfatal shooting victims and suspects were known to the criminal justice system prior to the incident (Table 4). Among victims and suspects with prior arrests:

- About 54% had been previously incarcerated.
- About 57% had been convicted of a felony.
- About 58% had previously been on probation and 23% were on active probation.
- About 36% had previously been on post-prison supervision and 14% were on active post-prison supervision.

Victims and suspects of fatal and nonfatal shootings were remarkably similar in terms of the average number and type of prior criminal offenses. Of those who were known to the criminal justice system prior to the incident, most victims and suspects had been arrested for property (avg. 2.0), disorder (avg. 2.0), drug (avg. 1.4), or unarmed violent offenses (avg. 1.2), though most criminal activity was dispersed across offense categories (Table 5). Overall, most victims and suspects with prior criminal offenses had been arrested in Oregon about 7 times for about 9 different criminal offenses by the time of the homicide or shooting. Of these, about 4 of those arrests included felony charges.

**Table 4. Gun Violence Victims and Suspects: CJ System Involvement**

	FATAL & NONFATAL SHOOTINGS (N=86)		
	Victims (n=94)	Suspects (n=56)	Victims & Suspects (n=167)
<b>Known to the CJ system prior to the incident</b>	67.0%	71.4%	68.7%
Of those known to the CJ system:			
<b>Prior incarceration</b>	<b>57.4%</b>	<b>48.7%</b>	<b>54.1%</b>
<b>Convicted of felony</b>	<b>52.5%</b>	<b>64.9%</b>	<b>57.1%</b>
<b>Prior probation</b>	<b>55.7%</b>	<b>62.2%</b>	<b>58.2%</b>
<b>Active probation</b>	<b>16.4%</b>	<b>32.5%</b>	<b>22.8%</b>
Prior post-prison supervision	34.4%	37.8%	35.7%
Active post-prison supervision	17.0%	10.0%	14.1%
Average prior arrests	7.4	6.9	7.2
Average prior felony arrests	3.4	3.7	3.5

**Table 5. Gun Violence Victims and Suspects: Prior Offenses**

	FATAL & NONFATAL SHOOTINGS (N=86)		
	Victims (n=94)	Suspects (n=56)	Victims & Suspects (n=150)
<b>Of those with prior arrests:</b>	(67.0%)	(71.4%)	(68.7%)
Armed violent offenses	0.2	0.3	0.2
<b>Unarmed violent offenses</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>1.2</b>
Firearm offenses	0.4	0.8	0.6
<b>Drug offenses</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.4</b>
<b>Property offenses</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>2.0</b>
<b>Disorder offenses</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>2.0</b>
Fraud offenses	0.4	0.2	0.4
Other offenses	1.7	0.1	1.1
Total	9.1	7.4	8.5

## Incident Analysis

This section analyzes the circumstances of fatal and nonfatal shooting incidents from January 2018 – June 2023 (N=86). This analysis collected homicide and shooting circumstance information from case summaries and detective interviews (Table 6).

Fatal and nonfatal shootings most often occurred as a result of personal disputes (e.g. over money, women, etc.) between known individuals (24%), group/gang-related conflicts (17%), and instant disputes (9%). Instant disputes are conflicts that emerge suddenly without prior history and often occur between individuals previously unknown to each other (e.g., road rage, bar fight). Group/gang members were involved in a significant share of both personal disputes (52%) and instant disputes (38%).



**Table 6. Gun Violence Circumstances and Group/Gang Member Involvement**

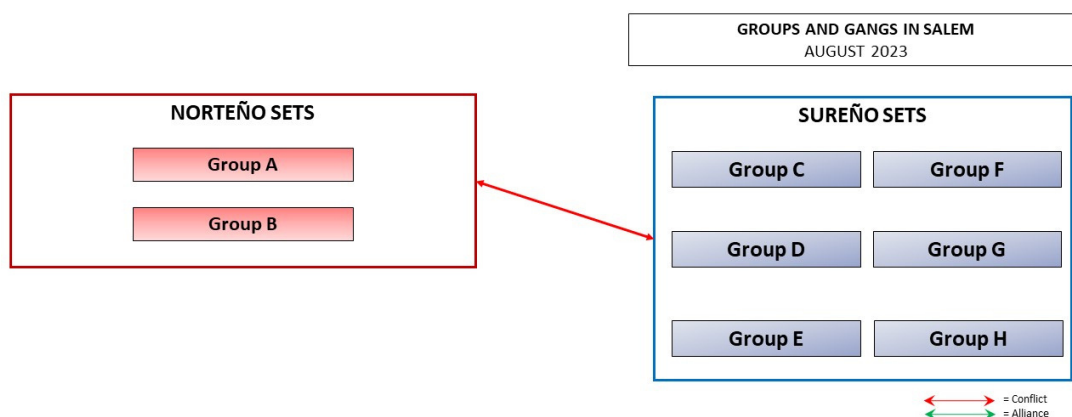
Circumstance	N	All GV Incidents (n = 86)	% Incidents GMI
<b>Personal dispute</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>24.4%</b>	<b>52.4%</b>
<b>Group/gang-related dispute</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17.4%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Instant dispute</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>37.5%</b>
Domestic dispute	5	5.8%	-
Drug-related dispute	5	5.8%	20.0%
Drug robbery	2	2.3%	50.0%
Robbery	2	2.3%	50.0%
Suspected self-inflicted	2	1.2%	-
Accidental	1	1.2%	-
Unknown	25	29.1%	24.0%

Though only 17% of gun violence incidents were motivated by a gang-on-gang conflict, a significant share of fatal and nonfatal shootings were group/gang member involved (GMI). About 49% of gun homicides and shootings were confirmed to involve group/gang members as victims, suspects, or both, and in another 36% of incidents, the group/gang involvement of victims and/or suspects was unknown. Incidents are coded with “unknown” group/gang member involvement if detectives do not have enough information to confirm victim/suspect affiliation or if a suspect had not yet been identified. Therefore, 49%, and potentially up to 85%, of gun violence incidents involved group/gang members as victims, suspects, or both, though the exact percentage within that range is unknown.

### High-Risk Groups and Places

In fatal and nonfatal shootings, between 41-63% of victims and 60-77% of identified suspects were group/gang-involved. At least 8 groups/gangs were identified by SPD and city partners as actively involved in violence in the city (Figure 5). Of those, 4 specified groups/gangs were involved in two or more fatal or nonfatal shootings during the study period.

**Figure 5. Identified Active Groups/Gangs in Salem**

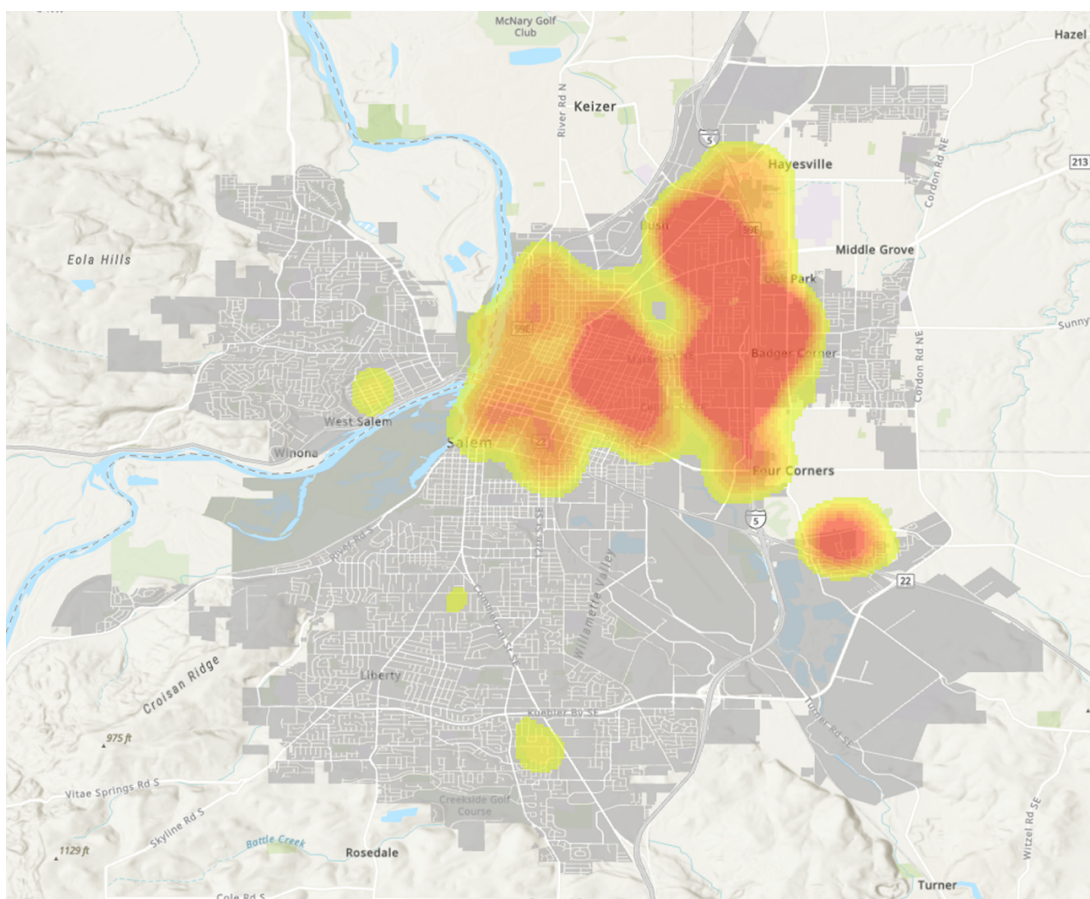


Almost all active groups/gangs in Salem are Sureño or Norteño sets with varying levels of organization and formality. The most violently active groups/gangs during the study period were Sureño sets, but both Sureño and Norteño members were more often shooters than they were victims. Outside of violence, groups/gangs are primarily engaged in narcotics and weapons trafficking, and members also generate criminal profit through thefts, carjackings, and marijuana crimes.

Members of identified groups/gangs were described as being scattered throughout the city, in line with recent trends that have seen dissipating designated “turfs” as group/gang activity has crossed into online venues. Salem’s groups/gangs were also noted to have ties and conflicts to groups in both Portland and CA, and this was also observed in several homicides and shootings involving victims and/or suspects from these areas.

When study samples of incidents are relatively small (i.e., <100), it is sometimes difficult to detect spatial density. However, the gun violence incidents in Salem did cluster reliably within three major hot spots in Northeastern areas of Salem. These hot spots cover just over about 5 square miles, or about 11% of Salem’s land area. About 65% of homicides and shootings occurring between 2018-2023 occurred within these identified hot spots.

**Figure 6. Kernel Density Analysis of Homicides/Shootings 2018-2023**



# SUMMARY FINDINGS

In Salem, most gun violence is tightly concentrated among a small number of very high-risk individuals who share a common set of risk factors like group/gang involvement and significant criminal justice history including prior felony arrests and prior/active supervision. Interviews with law enforcement personnel led to estimates of less than 200 individuals associated with active groups/gangs, comprising about .01% of the city's population. Gun violence similarly concentrates in places, with about 65% of homicides and shootings from 2018-2023 occurring in less than 11% of the city's land area.

Group/gang members were involved in a significant share of violence over the study period. While at least 49% of gun violence incidents during the study period involved group/gang members as victims, suspects, or both, the motives for these shootings are not always gang-on-gang conflicts. Instead, most shootings were precipitated by personal disputes between individuals over money, prior criminal activities, and other interpersonal conflicts. The groups/gangs most often involved in violence are also involved in a range of other criminal activities (e.g., narcotics and weapons trafficking, carjackings) that signal an increased risk of involvement in gun violence.

In line with perceptions of local partners, this data does indicate an increase in the involvement of juveniles in serious violence. Juveniles made up a larger proportion of arrestees for aggravated assaults and weapon law violations in 2021-2023. Juveniles also comprised a larger share of gun violence victims and suspects in 2022-2023. Still, it is important to emphasize that the majority of victims and suspects in homicides and shootings (61%) were between the ages of 18-34.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

While gun violence is a dynamic and complex problem, these patterns and common risk factors suggest that the City of Salem could generate significant impacts with collaborative partnerships and hyper-focused intervention strategies. As the SPD, City of Salem, and Marion County partners shape ongoing violence reduction strategies, several key recommendations emerge from the findings of this analysis:

## 1. ADDRESS HIGH-RISK GROUPS/GANGS

Individuals associated with groups/gangs drive a significant proportion of gun violence in Salem. Though, group/gang member involved violence typically results from personal disputes rather than gang-on-gang conflicts. Still, association with a group/gang increases one's risk of being involved in a variety of violent incidents (e.g., personal disputes, group/gang-related conflicts, sudden disputes).

- Consider a group violence reduction strategy (GVRS) in the City of Salem that relies on collaborative partnerships between community-based organizations and criminal justice agencies. The development of this GVRS should allow for ongoing innovation and flexibility to address the more fluid and dynamic nature of group/gang associations in the city.
- Proactively identifying and intervening with groups/gangs and involved individuals at the highest risk for violence reduces their risk of violent offending and/or victimization. Increase SPD and partner resources dedicated to intelligence gathering and enforcement operations for groups/gangs and involved individuals at the highest risk for involvement in violence.

## **2. ENGAGE VHR PEOPLE**

Those at the very highest risk (VHR) for involvement in gun violence as victims and/or offenders are identifiable and share several common characteristics. Victims and suspects are primarily Hispanic and Black males aged 18-34. Involvement or associations with group/gang-involved individuals (especially Savage Block or Sureño sets) significantly increases one's risk of being involved in a gun violence incident. The majority of victims and suspects also have extensive criminal justice system involvement.

- Utilize these data-informed VHR characteristics to inform who is prioritized for outreach, service delivery, and/or enforcement.
- Partners stated that the City of Salem lacks organizations capable of providing intensive case management or mentorship to very high-risk individuals. Identify community-based organizations (CBOs) to work in partnership with the Salem Police Department to engage VHR individuals and provide these critical services.
- Develop partnerships and processes to share information and generate referrals for collaborative intervention.
- Partner with the Department of Corrections to share information about high-risk individuals being released back into the community. Coordinate with CBOs and other providers for reentry services to reduce recidivism risk.

## **3. IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE HIGHEST-RISK YOUTH**

While the majority of individuals involved in gun violence were aged 18-34, juveniles did comprise a relatively large proportion of gun violence suspects and youth were increasingly involved in violence in 2022-2023. According to Salem PD arrest data, juvenile arrests for aggravated assaults increased 320% in 2021-2023 relative to the prior three years. Similarly, juvenile arrests for weapon law violations increased 88% in 2021-2023 relative to the previous time period.

- Partners felt that the sharing of gang-related intelligence, especially as it pertained to youth, was lacking since the disbanding of the Gang Enforcement Team and removal of SROs from the Salem-Keizer School District (SKSD). Create formal partnerships and processes for reciprocal communication between school and law enforcement personnel focused on young people at the highest risk for involvement in gun violence.
- Identify community-based organizations that specialize in intensive case management with at-risk youth. Create relationships and methods that allow the Salem PD to make referrals to these CBOs as at-risk youth are identified.

#### **4. FOCUS ON HIGH-RISK PLACES**

Violent hot spots in Salem are tightly clustered and cover approximately 11% of the city's total land area. About 65% of all homicides and nonfatal shootings from 2018-2023 occurred within just over five square miles.

- Focus patrols, targeted enforcement, and problem-oriented policing efforts in these locations. Concentrate intelligence-gathering on the VHR groups/gangs and criminal activities driving violence in these areas. Update place-based enforcement priorities regularly to ensure that activities are consistently directed toward the highest-risk areas.
- Citywide outreach, service delivery, and other place-based crime prevention projects should prioritize individuals and neighborhoods within these noted locations.

#### **5. STRENGTHEN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS**

About 69% of gun violence victims and suspects were known to the criminal justice system prior to their involvement in a homicide or shooting. Of those, most were extensively criminal justice system involved. About 54% had been previously incarcerated, 57% had been convicted of a felony, and they had committed an average of nine prior criminal offenses.

- Develop processes to identify to court personnel the VHR and/or group-involved individuals who are arrested for gun or violent offenses with the goal of immediate intervention to reduce one's risk of violent victimization or offending.
- These partnerships can aid in bond/sanction considerations that may reduce the likelihood that individuals known to law enforcement will reoffend, retaliate, or be released back into gang-on-gang conflicts where further violence can occur.