

The Changing Face of Firearm-related Juvenile Justice Contacts

MARCH 2023

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THE CHANGING FACE OF FIREARM-RELATED JUVENILE JUSTICE CONTACTS

Youths charged in gun incidents tend to be older with extensive histories of prior justice involvement, truancy, and family incarceration

SUMMARY

As in many other locations in the US, crime rates for some types of violent crime have increased in Harris County over the past few years, particularly during 2020 and 2021.

Of particular interest to decision makers and the public in general has been the perceived increase in the use of firearms in the commission of these crimes, both by adults and juveniles.

For example, whereas roughly 5% of juvenile justice contacts involved a firearm until 2019, this rate had risen to 15% in 2021. To assist key county stakeholders in their response to address and prevent the use of guns by Harris County youth, this report describes the characteristics of youth charged with offenses involving a firearm.

KEY FINDINGS

- Firearm-related contacts tripled from 5% in 2019 to 15% in 2021
- School-based contacts decreased; prevalence of firearm use increased
- Offenses range from exhibiting guns to robbery

Relative to other youth in the system, youth involved in firearm-related contacts:

- Are older
- Have more prior justice involvement
- Have recently become more likely to have family members who have been incarcerated
- Are more likely to have a history of truancy
- Have similar mental health histories
- Have not experienced similar shifts in the seriousness of their offenses

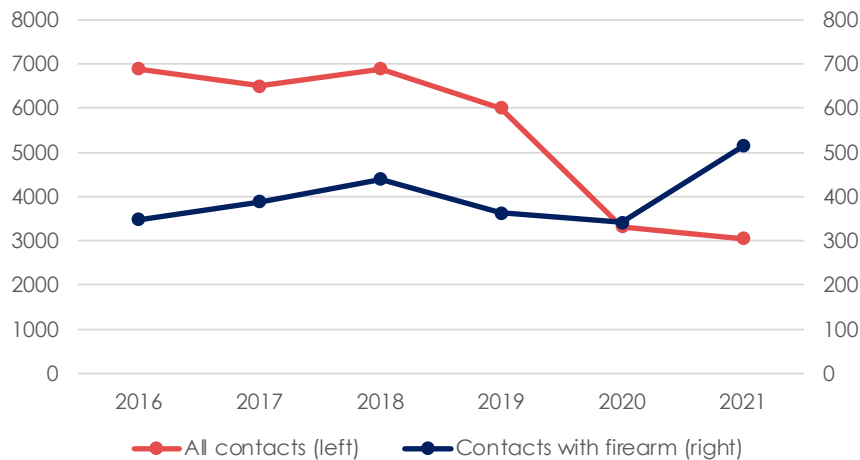
The report begins by showing basic facts about firearm related offenses of youth in Harris County. We note that the increase in the share of contacts with firearm use likely reflects multiple changes, including a large drop in school-based contacts due to COVID-19 and an actual increase in the prevalence of firearm use itself. We also show how firearm related offenses vary in terms of severity, with roughly one third being misdemeanor offenses. Finally, specific offenses range from robbery to exhibiting guns at school, which illustrates the heterogeneity in the types of situations in which youth may use a firearm.



A **contact** is an incident in which a youth is arrested and charged with one or multiple alleged offenses. A contact differs from a **referral**, a commonly used measure of juvenile crime, which corresponds with a specific charge. Thus, a youth who is charged with two specific alleged offenses as part of a single incident will represent two referrals but only one contact.

Juvenile justice contacts

Count of all contacts (left) and contacts with firearm (right) between 2016 and 2021



Against this backdrop of increased use and possession of firearms by youth in Harris County, this report aims at providing answers to three questions:

1. How do youth with contacts involving a firearm differ from those in a typical contact?

We analyze detailed data to characterize contacts by describing multiple characteristics of the youth, the offenses they are charged with, their background and family environment, as well as multiple mental health-related measures. The table below summarizes our comparison between contacts with firearms and typical contacts.

Contacts with a **firearm offense** as compared to all contacts

Characteristics of youth, their families, and offenses

DEMOGRAPHICS	OFFENSE	SCHOOL AND HOME ENVIRONMENT	SUBSTANCE USE, MENTAL HEALTH, VICTIMIZATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Male + Age = Race breakdown = Family structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Felonies + Multiple charges + Prior contacts, felonies - First contact + Prior time in detention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + School problems + Incarceration in family = Rates of other family problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Drug use = Alcohol use = Mental health = Victimization

This Table summarizes multiple comparisons included in section 1. The symbol in red (+, -, or =) indicates whether contacts with firearm have more, less, or similar levels or distributions of each characteristic. For instance, the top left cell states "+ Male", indicating that youth with contacts including a firearm offense are more likely to be male than youth in the typical (average) contact.

When comparing youth in contacts that include a firearm to youth in the typical contact, we find that those in firearm contacts are relatively older, their offenses are more serious, and they have more extensive histories of prior interaction with the juvenile justice system. They are also more likely to experience school-related problems and to have a family member who has been incarcerated.

The racial breakdown is comparable for these two groups of youth. Their family background also appears to be comparable along multiple measures of family structure and environment. Likewise, mental health and histories of victimization are equally prevalent for youth in contacts with firearms and youth in the average contact.

2. How have the characteristics of firearm-related contacts changed? Which of these changes are specific to firearm-related contacts?

We then explore how these characteristics have changed over time. We focus on the recent period of increased use of firearms (beginning in 2020) and describe the ways in which the characteristics of youth in contacts involving a firearm offense have changed, relative to the previous years. However, because the system as a whole has also gone through substantial changes during the same period, we aim at identifying only the changes that are specific to contacts with firearms (rather than widespread changes). Thus, we display the changes in characteristics for contacts with firearms relative to the changes in characteristics for all contacts. The table below summarizes these comparisons.

Changes in contacts with a **firearm offense** as compared to **all contacts**

Changes in characteristics of youth, their families, and offenses

DEMOGRAPHICS	OFFENSE	SCHOOL AND HOME ENVIRONMENT	SUBSTANCE USE, MENTAL HEALTH, VICTIMIZATION
~ Sex	↓ Felonies*	↑ School problems	↑ Drug use
↑ Age	↑ Serious felonies	↑ Incarceration in family	~ Alcohol use
↑ Youth of color	↑ Multiple felony charges	~ Rates of other family problems	↓ Mental health diagnosis, suicidal ideation
~ Family structure	~ Prior contacts, charges		~ Other mental health measures
	↓ First contact		~ Victimization
	↓ Prior time in detention*		

This Table summarizes multiple comparisons included in section 2. The symbol in red (↑, ↓, or ~) indicates whether the specific characteristics of contacts with firearms increased, decreased, or remain at the same level as all contacts. Because characteristics also changed for the typical contact, a downward (upward) arrow does not necessarily mean the characteristic actually decreased (increased) for contacts with firearms. For example, while the share of felonies for contacts with firearms increased by less than 2 percentage points, the share of felonies in the typical contact increased by 17 percentage points. Thus, the table shows a downward arrow to represent that, relative to the typical contact, the increase in the share of felonies for firearm contacts was much lower. These types of cases are denoted with a * in the table.

Overall, we find that the share of youth of color and the average age among firearm-related contacts increased more than in the average contact. During a time in which the system saw fewer but relatively more serious offenses, leading to a substantial increase in the share of contacts with a felony offense, the share of felonies in contacts with firearms remained stable. Thus, although firearm offenses have become more common in

recent years, we find no evidence that the specific offenses have become more serious.. Truancy and school enrollment problems became more pervasive for youth in contacts involving firearms. Similarly, the percentage of youth in firearm contacts with a family member who has been incarcerated grew, relative to the average contact. Mental health measures remained fairly stable for both groups.

3. Are youth using firearms earlier and at a younger age?

We conclude our analysis by exploring whether justice-involved youth have become more likely to use a firearm at a younger age or earlier in their involvement with the system. Our analysis finds no evidence of such a pattern. First, we show how youth coming into contact with the system are generally older now and that this pattern extends to contacts involving a firearm offense. Second, although the use of firearms among younger youth was particularly high in 2021, we show that this fact simply reflects the widespread increase of firearm use in that year, as the use of firearms rose for all age groups. In fact, the increase in the prevalence of firearm use was even larger for older youth. Finally, we conduct a more detailed comparison of youth in different cohorts and analyze various measures of firearm use by age 15. Our analysis shows no differences between older and younger cohorts with respect to any of the measures we analyzed.

DATA

This report uses juvenile justice data provided and assembled by the Data and Research Division at the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department. The data includes detailed personal, referral, and PACT assessment information for all youth referred to the juvenile justice system between January, 2016 and June, 2022 (most figures use data starting in March, 2017). In Texas, 17 year-old youth are treated as adults by the criminal justice system. Thus, with the exception of youth serving probationary periods after their seventeenth birthday, all data in this report comes from youth under the age of 17.

YOUTHS & FIREARMS

INTRODUCTION

As in many other locations in the US, crime rates for some types of violent crime have increased in Harris County over the past few years, particularly during 2020 and 2021. Of particular interest to decision makers and the public in general has been the perceived increase in the use of firearms in the commission of these crimes, both by adults and juveniles.

Using data for youth referred to Juvenile Court in Harris County, this report explores and describes the characteristics of youth charged with offenses involving a firearm. The information presented here aims to assist key county stakeholders in their response to address and prevent the use of guns by Harris County youth.



A **contact** is an incident in which a youth is arrested and charged with one or multiple alleged offenses. A contact differs from a **referral**, a commonly used measure of juvenile crime, which corresponds with a specific charge. Thus, a youth who is charged with two specific alleged offenses as part of a single incident will represent two referrals but only one contact.

Figure 1 shows the percent of contacts with the juvenile justice system that involved a firearm between 2016 and 2022.¹ As shown there, whereas roughly 5% of contacts involved a firearm until 2019, this rate tripled to 15% in 2021. This dramatic increase, however, is likely the result of at least two changes happening at once. First, as shown in Figure 2, the total number of contacts with the juvenile justice system decreased dramatically during 2020 and 2021. This change combines a small secular downwards trend in contacts with a large drop in contacts due to COVID-19 related dynamics. In particular, remote learning led to a decrease in referrals originated at schools, which typically account for one-third of juvenile justice contacts. Second, the use of firearms itself increased. Notably, even as the number of contacts continued to decrease, the number of contacts involving a firearm increased in 2021.

Figure 1: Share of contacts with firearm offense

Share of all contacts between 2016 and 2022*

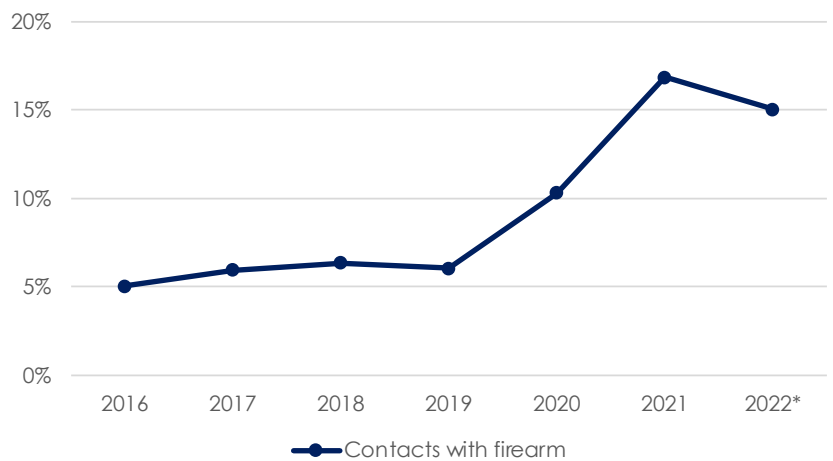
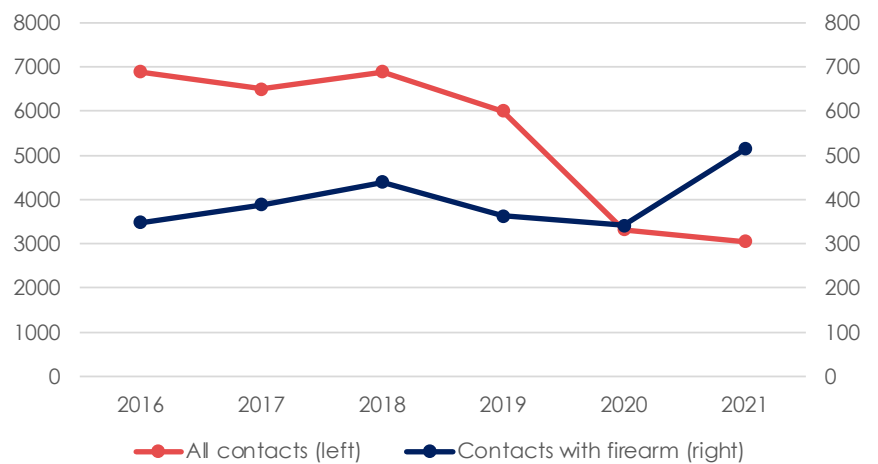


Figure 2: Juvenile justice contacts

Count of all contacts (left) and contacts with firearm (right) between 2016 and 2021



[1] Our access to referral data ends on June 30, 2022. Thus, 2022 numbers are calculated using partial data for that year. Likewise, all figures and tables starting with Figure 4 use data beginning in March 2017, when one of our sources of data, the PACT assessment, was first used. This use of partial data in 2017 and 2022 is denoted by a * in the subheaders of all figures and tables.

Contacts involving a firearm span a wide range of alleged offenses, which differ in their severity. As Figure 3 shows, roughly one out of three contacts with firearms involve a Felony 1 offense, while an identical proportion involves offenses classified as Misdemeanor A, a much less serious level of offense. Only 1% of firearm-related contacts are for a Capital Felony. The majority of the remaining contacts involve felonies of a lower degree of seriousness.

Figure 3: Offense category for contacts with firearm offense

Share of all contacts involving a firearm between 2016 and 2022*

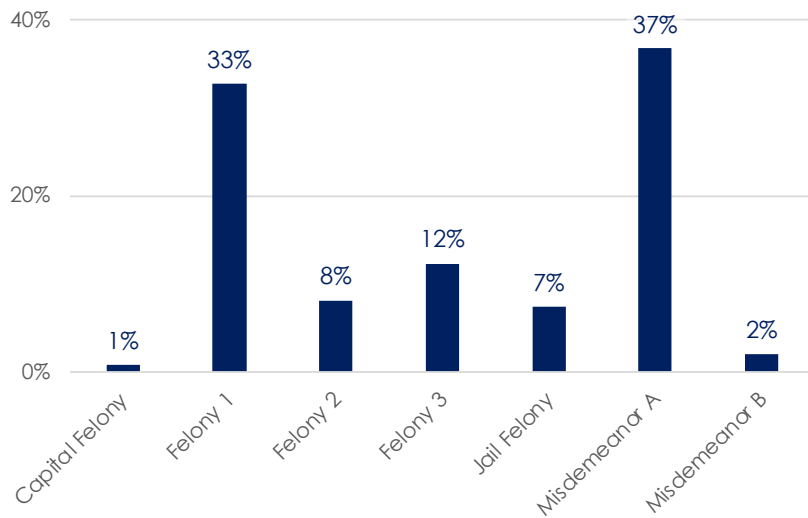


Table 1: Most common offenses in contacts with firearm offense

Count of offenses between January 2016 and June 2022

OFFENSE GROUP	COUNT
ROBBERY	845
UNLAWFUL CARRYING OF WEAPONS	737
EXHIBIT FIREARM IN SCHOOL	313
FELONY ASSAULT	246
THEFT	118
MURDER	44

Note: Offense groups in this table aggregate multiple offenses, including both felonies and misdemeanors. These numbers are likely affected as well by school attendance changes during part of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1 lists the most common types of offenses in which a firearm was used between 2016 and 2022. Robbery is the most common offense, followed by the unlawful carrying of a weapon. Although both are relevant, it is notable that one (robbery) involves the use of a firearm in the commission of a violent crime against another person, while the other (carrying) signals only the potential of using the firearm. Exhibiting or threatening with the use of a firearm at school is the third most common type of offense, illustrating the challenge of preventing violence in schools. There were 44 murder charges during this period.

Against this backdrop of increased use and possession of firearms by youth in Harris County, this report aims at providing answers to three questions:

1 How do youth with contacts involving a firearm differ from those in a typical contact?

2 How have the characteristics of firearm-related contacts changed? Which of these changes are specific to firearm-related contacts?

3 Are youth using firearms earlier and at a younger age?

When comparing youth in contacts that include a firearm to youth in the average contact, we find that those in firearm contacts are relatively older, their offenses are more serious, and they have more extensive histories of prior interaction with the juvenile justice system. They are also more likely to experience school-related problems and to have a family member who has been incarcerated. The racial breakdown is comparable for these two groups of youth. Their family background also appears to be comparable along multiple measures of family structure and environment. Likewise, mental health and histories of victimization are equally prevalent for youth in contacts with firearms and youth in the average contact.

Over time, the share of youth of color and the average age among firearm-related contacts increased more than in the average contact. During a time in which the system saw fewer but relatively more serious offenses, the increase in the share of felonies in the average contact outpaced contacts with firearms. However, some measures of offense severity show that the most serious offenses increased more sharply among firearm-related contacts. School problems became more pervasive for this group of

youth as well. Similarly, the percentage of youth in firearm contacts with a family member who has been incarcerated grew, relative to the average contact. Mental health measures remained fairly stable for both groups.

Finally, our analysis finds no evidence supporting the hypothesis that justice-involved youth have become more likely to use a firearm at a younger age or earlier in their involvement with the system. First, we show how youth coming into contact with the system are generally older now and that this pattern extends to contacts involving a firearm offense. Second, although the use of firearms among younger youth was particularly high in 2021, we show that this fact simply reflects the widespread increase of firearm use in that year, as the use of firearms rose for all age groups. In fact, the increase in the prevalence of firearm use was even larger for older youth. Finally, we conduct a more detailed comparison of youth in different cohorts and analyze various measures of firearm use by age 15. Our analysis shows no differences between older and younger cohorts with respect to any of the measures we analyzed.

We provide the details of our analysis for each of the guiding questions in the next sections.

1 HOW DO YOUTH WITH CONTACTS INVOLVING A FIREARM DIFFER FROM THOSE IN A TYPICAL CONTACT?

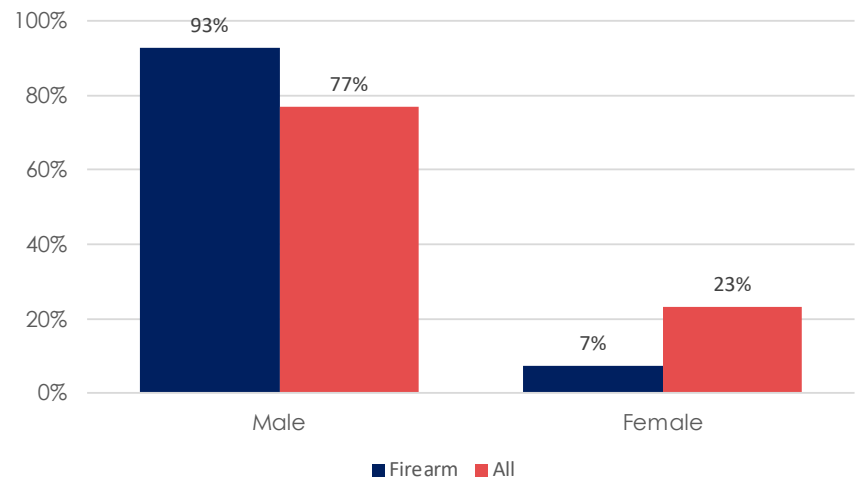
We begin our analysis by characterizing youth involved in contacts where a firearm was used. However, the value of this data alone is limited without a reference point to compare it to. Thus, as a point of comparison, the figures below also include the characteristics of youth in all contacts. We specifically explore the characteristics of youth, the offenses they are charged with, their background and family environment, as well as multiple mental health-related measures. The data comes from all juvenile justice contacts between March 2017 and June 2022. We describe our findings below.

Contacts with firearms more likely to involve youth who are male and older

The vast majority of contacts with the juvenile justice system involve boys (77%). This imbalance is even more pronounced among contacts with firearms, where 93% of youth are male. Youth with firearm contacts are also older than those in the typical contact, with almost three out of four being 15 or 16 years old.

Figure 4: Youth sex, by type of contact

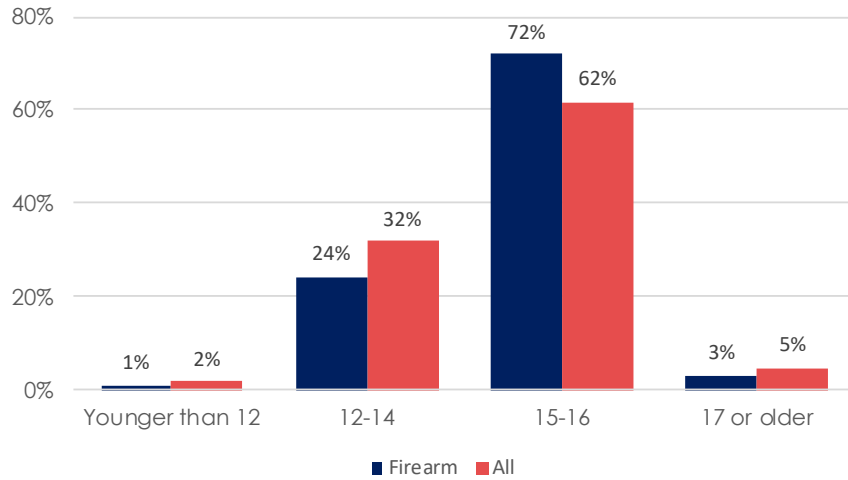
Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*



[2] One of our sources of data is the PACT assessment, which was first used in March 2017. Our access to referral data ends in June 30, 2022.

Figure 5: Youth age at time of offense, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*



Racial breakdown is similar for both groups

It is widely known that youth of color are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. However, the racial distribution of youth with firearm-related offenses is no different from the system as a whole.

Figure 6: Youth race and ethnicity, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*

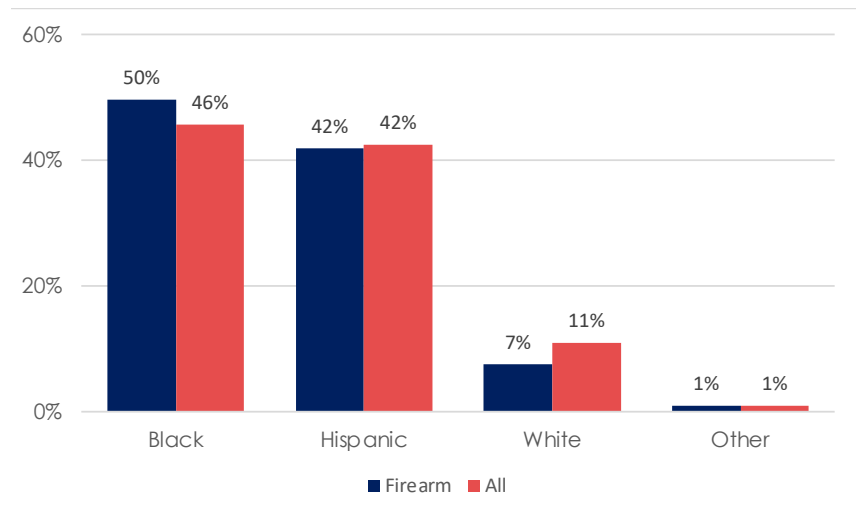
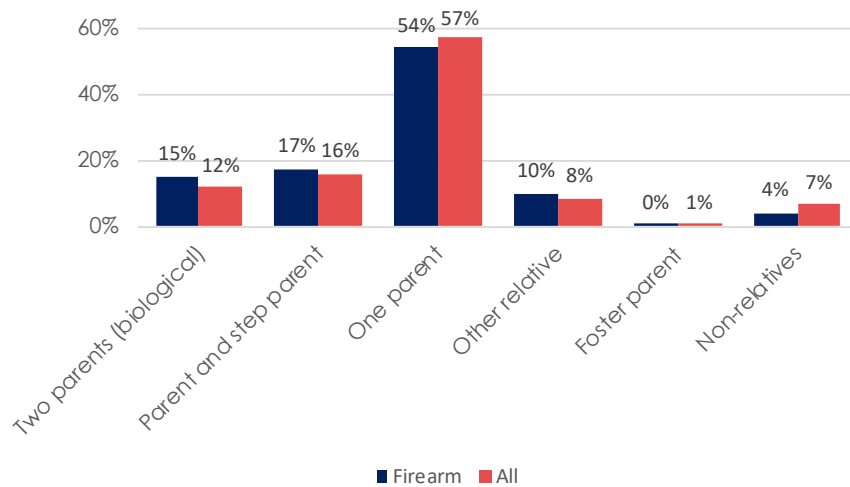


Figure 7: Youth's family structure, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*



Likewise, family structure is similar for both groups

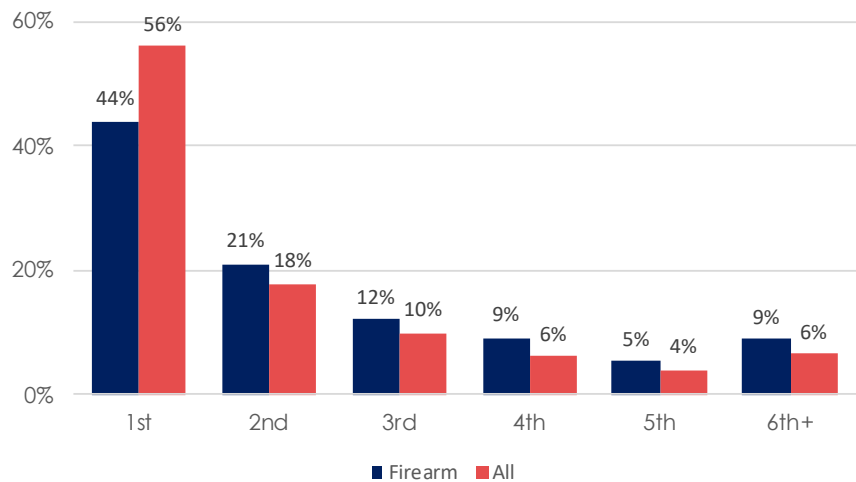
Family structure, measured by the person(s) with whom the youth lives, is identical for youth in contacts involving firearms and youth in the typical contact.

Contacts with firearms are less likely to be a youth's first contact with the system

Some youth have multiple contacts with the system throughout their lives, while others have only one. Figure 8 shows that contacts with a firearm offense are considerably less likely to be a youth's first contact with the system, when compared to the average contacts. Nevertheless, it must be noted that a substantial amount are indeed in their first contact (44%). Thus, in section 3 of this report we explore whether the recent increase in firearm use is associated with youth using firearms at a younger age, or earlier in their interaction with the juvenile justice system.

Figure 8: Contact order and use of firearm, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*



Not surprisingly, offenses involving firearms are more serious and more likely to include multiple charges

As expected, offenses involving firearms are more serious than the average offense. Figure 9 quantifies this pattern using various measures of offense severity. Relative to offenses in the average contact, offenses in contacts with firearm are almost twice as likely to be a felony, three times as likely to be a more serious felony (Felony 2 and above), and three times as likely to be an against-person felony, which approximates violent felonies.

Figure 9: Selected measures of offense severity, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*

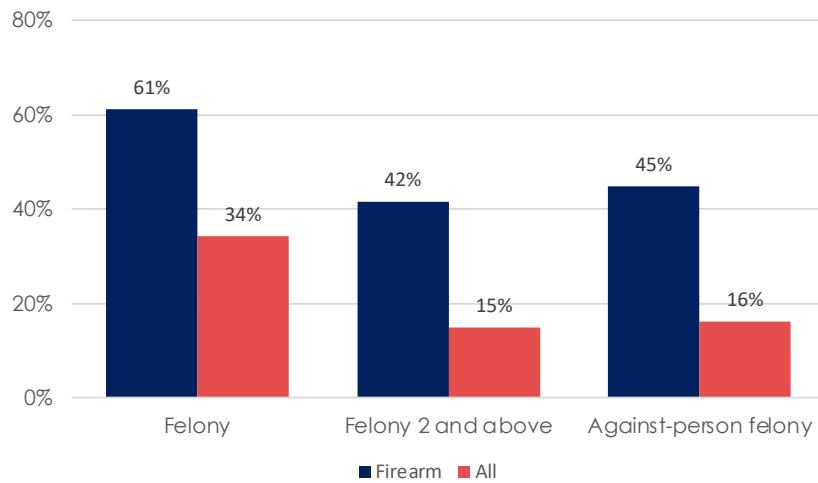
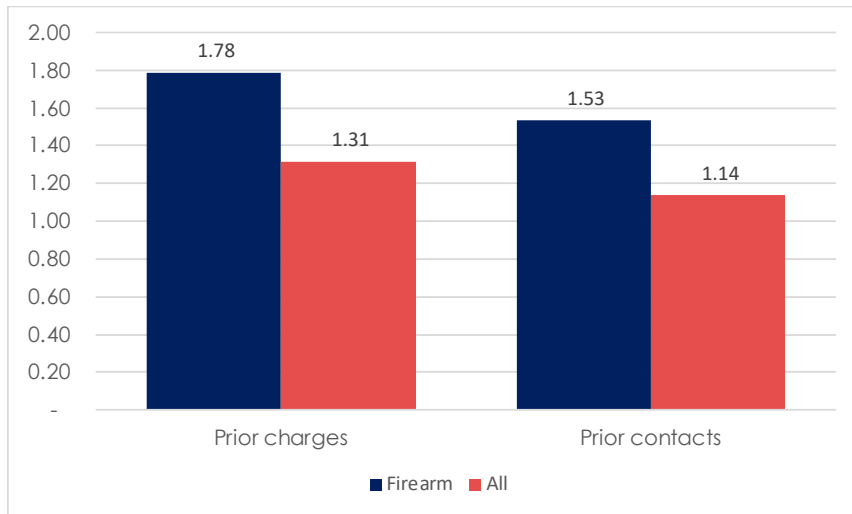


Figure 10: Summary measures of prior contacts, by type of contact

Average number of prior contacts and charges
Contacts with firearm and all contacts, between 2017 and 2022*

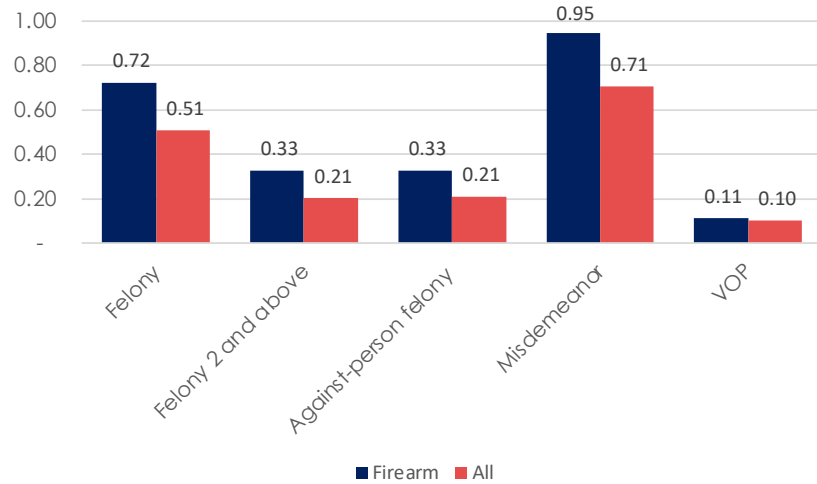


Youth with offenses involving firearms also have more serious histories of prior offenses

When compared to youth in the typical contact, youth in contacts with firearm offenses have a longer and more serious history of prior involvement with the juvenile justice system. On average, they have a higher number of prior contacts (1.5 vs 1.1) and charges (1.8 vs 1.3). These differences encompass both felonies and misdemeanors, but appear to be relatively salient among the most serious offenses.

Figure 11: Summary measures of prior offenses, by type of contact

Average number of prior contacts with each type of offense
Contacts with firearm and all contacts, between 2017 and 2022*

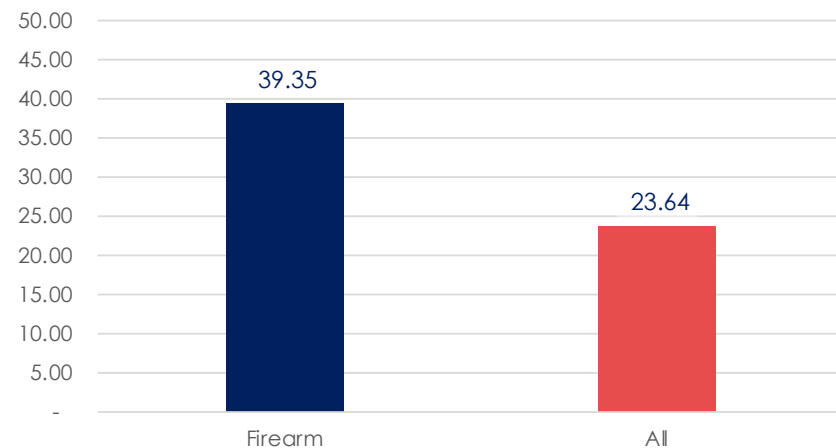


Youth in contacts with firearms have also accumulated more time in detention

During previous contacts, youth with contacts involving firearms have spent 40 days in pre-adjudicated detention. In comparison, a youth in a typical contact has spent only 24 days in detention.

Figure 12: Days in pre-adjudicated detention prior to offense, by type of contact

Contacts between 2017 and 2022*



Youth with offenses involving firearms are more likely to have a history of truancy or to not be enrolled in school

We analyze three measures of school-related problems. Youth in contacts with firearms are slightly more likely to not be enrolled in school and to have a history of truancy. However, we find no difference with respect to reported conduct problems in school.

Figure 13: Measures of school-related problems, by type of contact

Share of contacts with a history of each type of problem, contacts between 2017 and 2022*

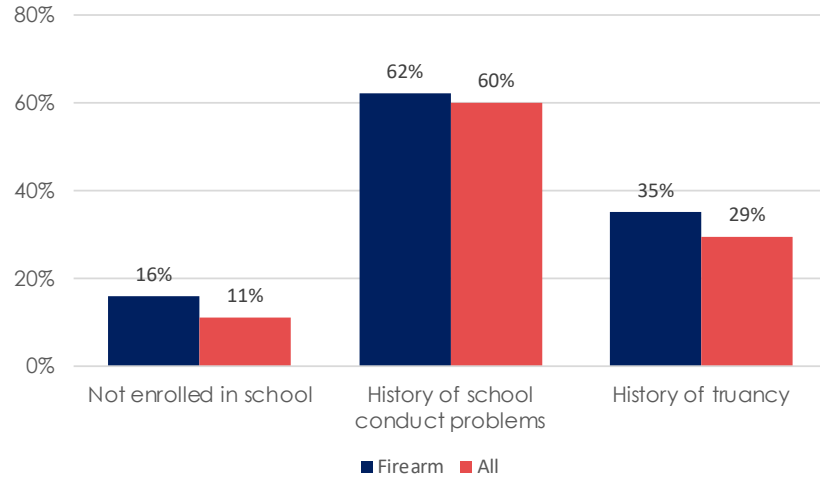
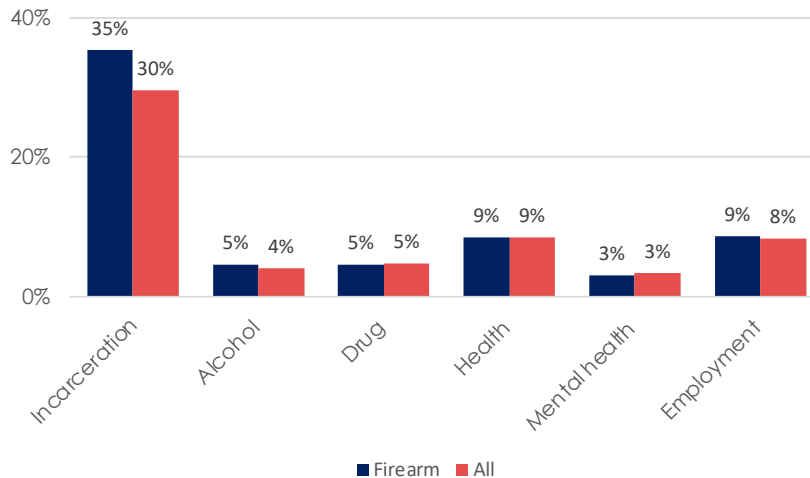


Figure 14: History of family problems, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*



Youth with offenses involving firearms are more likely to live in households where someone has been incarcerated

We also explore a battery of measures of family problems. We find no difference between the two groups when we look at histories of family problems with alcohol, drugs, health, mental health, or employment. We do find, however, that youth in contacts with firearm offenses are more likely (36% vs 30%) to have a household member who has been incarcerated.

Histories of mental health issues and victimization are similar for both groups

We analyze various measures of mental health, including diagnosed mental health problems and histories of trauma, and find no difference between youth in the two types of contact. Likewise, we find both groups have similar histories of being victims of various types of abuse.

Figure 15: History of mental health problems, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*

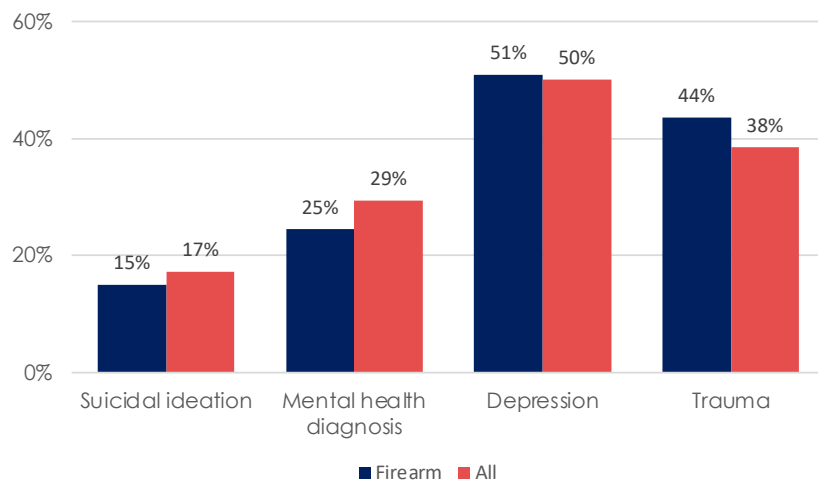
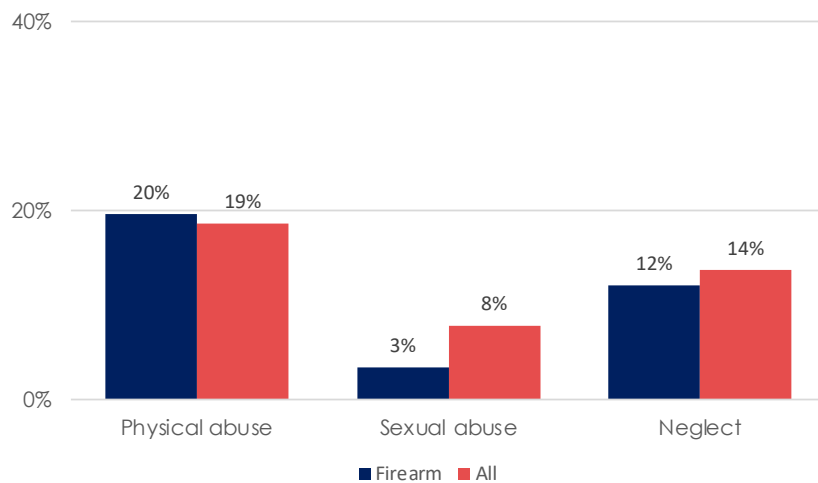


Figure 16: History of victimization, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*

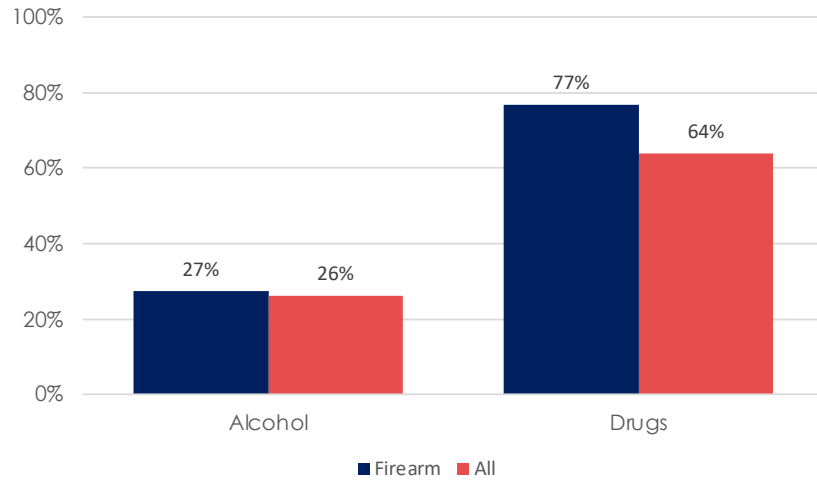


However, drug use more prevalent among youth with contacts involving a firearm

Although alcohol use is similar, drug use is more prevalent among youth in contacts involving a firearm offense.

Figure 17: History of substance use, by type of contact

Share of contacts between 2017 and 2022*



2 HOW HAVE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FIREARM-RELATED CONTACTS CHANGED? WHICH OF THESE CHANGES ARE SPECIFIC TO FIREARM-RELATED CONTACTS?

As shown in Figure 1, there was a substantial increase in the share of offenses with firearms since 2020. Thus, we now explore whether the characteristics we analyzed in the previous section changed as the prevalence of firearm use increased. Specifically, we measure the changes in these characteristics between two periods, 2017-2019 and 2020-2022. However, the system as a whole also experienced dramatic changes between these periods. Thus, we compare the changes in characteristics for firearm contacts with the changes for all contacts. By doing this, we aim at identifying only the changes that are specific to contacts with firearm (rather than widespread changes). We describe our findings below.

Firearm contacts now more likely to involve youth of color

The proportion of white youth among contacts with firearm decreased roughly 6 percentage points (from 10% to 4%). The share of white youth among all contacts also decreased, from 12% to 9%, but the change was significantly larger for contacts with firearms.

However, we don't find any other demographic changes that are specific to firearm-related contacts

As Table 2 shows, most other demographic characteristics, including sex, age, and with whom the child lives remained relatively stable for both groups.

Table 2: Changes in demographic characteristics, by type of contact

Differences in shares of contacts between 2017-2019 and 2020-2022*

	TYPE OF CONTACT						(F-C) STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT?
	FIREARM			ALL			
	2017-2019 (A)	2020-2022 (B)	CHANGE* (C)	2017-2019 (D)	2020-2022 (E)	CHANGE* (F)	
MALE	92%	93%	1.6	76%	80%	4.3	NO
RACE/ETHNICITY							
BLACK	47%	50%	3.3	45%	48%	3.7	NO
HISPANIC	41%	45%	3.5	43%	42%	-1.1	YES
WHITE	10%	4%	-6.0	12%	9%	-2.5	YES
OTHER	1%	1%	-0.8	1%	1%	-0.1	NO
AGE							
YOUNGER THAN 12	1%	1%	-0.5	2%	1%	-0.7	NO
12-14	27%	21%	-6.4	33%	29%	-3.8	YES
15-16	69%	75%	6.0	61%	64%	3.5	NO
17 OR OLDER	3%	4%	0.9	4%	5%	1.0	NO
YOUTH LIVES WITH							
TWO BIOLOGICAL PARENTS	15%	15%	-0.2	13%	9%	-3.3	YES
TWO PARENTS, ONE IS STEP PARENT	18%	15%	-2.8	17%	12%	-4.9	NO
ONE PARENT	53%	54%	1.2	56%	59%	3.0	NO
OTHER RELATIVE	9%	11%	1.7	8%	8%	0.2	NO
FOSTER PARENT	0%	0%	0.2	0%	1%	0.3	NO
NON-RELATIVES	4%	4%	-0.1	5%	10%	4.7	YES
AGE AT FIRST REFERRAL							
YOUNGER THAN 12	4%	5%	0.9	4%	5%	0.4	NO
12-14	51%	49%	-1.9	50%	50%	-0.1	NO
15-16	45%	46%	0.9	45%	45%	-0.3	NO

This table measures changes in characteristics by type of contact (involving firearm and all) and compares these changes. The last column on the right shows which of these comparisons result in a statistically significant difference between the two groups. For example, the first row examines the change in the proportion of male youth for each of the two types of contacts. Even though the change is larger for all contacts (column F) than for contacts with firearms (column C), the difference between these two changes is not statistically significant, meaning we can't be certain it is not due to chance or normal variations in the data.

*Changes are measured in percentage points (i.e. a change from 50% to 55% is displayed as a change in 5 percentage points)

Firearm contacts now even less likely to be a youth's first contact with the system

As described earlier, contacts with firearms are less likely than average contacts to be a youth's first contact with the system. This gap widened between the two periods we analyze. The proportion of first contacts among contacts with firearms decreased from 48% to 41%. For all contacts, the share of first contacts decreased only 4 percentage points, from 57% to 53%.

Firearm contacts now less likely to involve felony offenses

One of the most pronounced changes in the system over this period is a decrease in referrals, especially those with low-level offenses. As a result, there has been an increase in the **share** of felony referrals (but not necessarily the **number** of felony referrals). Specifically, for the typical contact, the share of felonies increased 17 percentage points, from 29% to 46%. However, the share of felonies did not increase in the same way for contacts with firearms and remained around 60% (59% and 61% for each period, respectively). Thus, even though it is true that firearm contacts are generally more serious than the average contact, there is no indication that the types of offenses in these contacts have become more serious over time (unlike what has happened for the system as a whole).

Histories of prior offenses more serious for all youth, not only for those in contacts involving firearms

Similarly, the overall changes in the system – with fewer but more serious contacts on average – have resulted in longer histories of prior offenses for the youth in the average contact. For instance, the number of prior felony offenses for youth in the typical contact increased from 0.4 to 0.78. The increase for youths in contacts with a firearm increased by a similar magnitude, from 0.54 to 0.95 prior felony offense on average. We observe the same pattern for all other measures of prior offenses, with the exception of prior technical violations of probation (VOP). Thus, although the histories of youth in firearm contacts became more serious over the period, this change simply reflects the widespread changes observed for the system as a whole.

Table 3: Changes in offense characteristics, by type of contact

Differences in shares of contacts between 2017-2019 and 2020-2022*

	TYPE OF CONTACT						(F-C) STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT?
	FIREARM			ALL			
	2017-2019 (A)	2020-2022 (B)	CHANGE* (C)	2017-2019 (D)	2020-2022 (E)	CHANGE* (F)	
CONTACT ORDER							
1ST	48%	41%	-7.0	57%	53%	-4.5	YES
2ND	20%	20%	0.6	18%	18%	-0.2	NO
3RD	10%	14%	3.7	10%	10%	0.1	YES
4TH	9%	9%	-0.2	6%	6%	0.4	NO
5TH	5%	6%	1.6	4%	4%	0.6	NO
6TH+	8%	10%	1.3	5%	9%	3.5	NO
CURRENT OFFENSE(S)							
FELONY IN CONTACT	59%	61%	1.8	29%	46%	17.0	YES
FELONY 2 AND ABOVE	36%	45%	8.4	12%	21%	9.0	NO
AGAINST-PERSON FELONY	39%	48%	8.9	13%	23%	9.8	NO
MISDEMEANOR	41%	39%	-1.8	62%	49%	-12.9	YES
MULTIPLE CHARGES (%)	19%	25%	5.6	10%	13%	3.4	YES
MULTIPLE FELONY CHARGES (%)	13%	19%	6.1	5%	9%	4.4	YES
HISTORY (PRIOR CONTACTS)							
CHARGES	1.64	2.00	0.36	1.19	1.61	0.42	NO
CONTACTS	1.43	1.70	0.27	1.05	1.37	0.32	NO
DAYS IN DETENTION	36.67	39.96	3.29	19.99	32.31	12.33	NO
PRIOR CONTACTS WITH:							
FELONY OFFENSE	0.54	0.95	0.41	0.40	0.78	0.38	NO
FELONY 2 AND ABOVE OFFENSE	0.25	0.43	0.18	0.15	0.35	0.20	NO
AGAINST-PERSON FELONY OFFENSE	0.24	0.46	0.22	0.14	0.37	0.23	NO
MISDEMEANOR OFFENSE	0.95	0.97	0.02	0.69	0.75	0.07	NO
VOP	0.15	0.08	-0	0.11	0.08	-0.03	YES
<p>This table measures changes in characteristics by type of contact (involving firearm and all) and compares these changes. The last column on the right shows which of these comparisons result in a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Panel A shows whether the contact was a youth's first, second, and so forth contact with the system, Panel B looks at offense characteristics during the current contact. Panel C looks at characteristics of prior contacts. For example, the row examines the change in the proportion of male youth for each of the two types of contacts.</p> <p>*Changes are measured in percentage points, when comparing rates (percentages), or average differences, when comparing averages.</p>							

Problems with school now more likely for youth with contacts involving firearms

The share of youth in contacts with firearms who have a history of not attending school (either not being enrolled or truancy) increased substantially between the two periods. On the contrary, these rates remained stable for youth in the typical contact. For example, roughly 30% of youth in both groups had a history of truancy during the period 2017-2019. However, the rate increased to 4% for youth in contacts with firearms but remained at 31% for the typical contact.

Youth with contacts involving firearms now even more likely to live in a household where someone else has been incarcerated

As described in section 1, youth in contacts with firearms are more likely than youth in the typical contact to live in a household where someone has been incarcerated. This difference, however, became apparent only recently. For the 2017-2019 period, rates were roughly similar for both groups (33% vs. 29%). However, the rate increased to 38% for contacts with firearms, while it remained at 31% for all contacts.

Table 4: Changes in offense characteristics, by type of contact

Differences in shares of contacts between 2017-2019 and 2020-2022*

	TYPE OF CONTACT						(F-C) STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT?
	FIREARM			ALL			
	2017-2019 (A)	2020-2022 (B)	CHANGE* (C)	2017-2019 (D)	2020-2022 (E)	CHANGE* (F)	
SCHOOL							
NOT ENROLLED IN SCHOOL	12%	20%	8.4	10%	14%	4.2	YES
HISTORY OF SCHOOL CONDUCT PROBLEMS	63%	62%	-0.8	62%	56%	-5.9	YES
HISTORY OF TRUANCY	29%	42%	12.8	28%	31%	2.9	YES
HOME STABILITY							
ANY OUT OF HOME PLACEMENT	11%	11%	0.5	14%	15%	1.5	NO
HISTORY OF RUNNING AWAY	36%	47%	10.5	38%	47%	8.4	NO
HOUSEHOLD MEMBER WITH HISTORY OF:							
INCARCERATION	33%	38%	5.8	29%	31%	1.8	YES
ALCOHOL PROBLEMS	5%	4%	-0.4	4%	4%	0.1	NO
DRUG PROBLEMS	5%	4%	-1.7	5%	4%	-0.5	NO
HEALTH PROBLEMS	9%	8%	-0.2	9%	8%	-1.1	NO
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS	3%	3%	-0.7	3%	4%	0.7	YES
EMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS	9%	8%	-0.4	8%	8%	0.0	NO
<p>This table measures changes in environment characteristics by type of contact (involving firearm and all) and compares these changes. The last column on the right shows which of these comparisons result in a statistically significant difference between the two groups. *Changes are measured in percentage points.</p>							

Mental health and victimization remain similar for both groups

All mental health indicators remained stable for youth in contacts with firearms. Although we observe a small increase in some mental health indicators (suicidal ideations, mental health diagnosis) for youth in the average contact, we do not see similar increases for youth in contacts with firearms. Likewise, all measures of youth victimization remained relatively stable and changes are comparable for both groups. With respect to substance use, the only difference of note is the increase in drug use, which we find only for youth in contacts with firearms.

Overall, both groups remain comparable to each other in terms of mental health and victimization. There is no indication that youth involved in firearm contacts are now more likely to experience mental health issues. Thus, it is unlikely that the recent increase in firearm use stems from a deterioration of the mental health of justice-involved youth.

Table 5: Changes in substance use, mental health, and victimization, by type of contact

Differences in shares of contacts between 2017-2019 and 2020-2022*

	TYPE OF CONTACT						(F-C) STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT?
	FIREARM			ALL			
	2017-2019 (A)	2020-2022 (B)	CHANGE* (C)	2017-2019 (D)	2020-2022 (E)	CHANGE* (F)	
HISTORY OF SUBSTANCE USE							
ALCOHOL	28%	27%	-1.0	26%	19%	-7.7	NO
DRUGS	73%	81%	8.6	63%	66%	2.8	YES
MENTAL HEALTH HISTORY							
SUICIDAL IDEATION	16%	14%	-2.2	17%	19%	1.9	YES
MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSIS	25%	24%	-1.8	28%	32%	3.6	YES
DEPRESSION	53%	50%	-3.0	49%	51%	1.7	YES
TRAUMA	43%	44%	0.5	38%	39%	1.2	NO
HISTORY OF VICTIMIZATION							
PHYSICAL ABUSE	18%	21%	2.7	17%	22%	5.0	NO
SEXUAL ABUSE	3%	4%	0.6	7%	9%	1.6	NO
NEGLECT	13%	11%	-1.5	13%	14%	0.9	NO
<p>This table measures changes in mental health and victimization characteristics by type of contact (involving firearm and all) and compares these changes. The last column on the right shows which of these comparisons result in a statistically significant difference between the two groups.</p> <p>* Changes are measured in percentage points.</p>							

3 ARE YOUTH USING FIREARMS EARLIER AND AT A YOUNGER AGE?

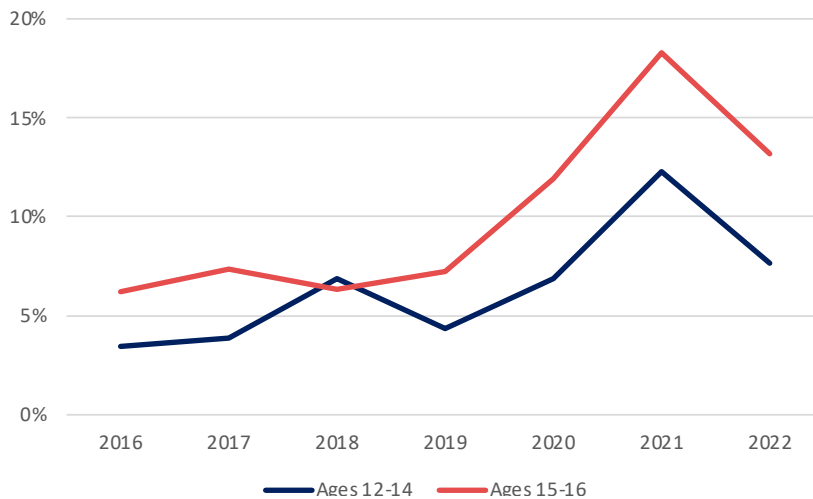
We conclude our analysis by exploring whether justice-involved youth have become more likely to use a firearm at a younger age or earlier in their involvement with the system. Our analysis finds no evidence of such a pattern. We provide three facts to support this conclusion.

First, as shown in Table 2, youth in the typical contact are now older than before. If anything, this change is even more pronounced among contacts with firearms. For example, between the two periods we analyzed, the share of youth 15 or 16 years old among those in contacts with firearm increased from 69% to 74%. For the average contact, this same share increased from 61% to 64%

Second, although the use of firearm has become more prevalent among younger youth, this change simply reflects the increased use of firearm among justice-involved youth of all ages. For example, Figure 18 shows how the share of contacts of youth ages 12 to 14 that involved a firearm increased in 2021. However, a similar and larger increase can be observed for youth ages 15 to 16. Thus, although it is true that the prevalence of firearm use increased for younger youth in 2021, this change appears to reflect the widespread increase of firearm use in that year.

Figure 18: Prevalence of firearm offenses by year and age of youth

Shares of contact involving a firearm offense for two age groups



Finally, in Table 6 we explore measures of the first instance of firearm use among youth. Because detailed firearm data is only available starting in 2016, we restrict our sample to youth for whom we are able to observe all or most of their potential contacts with the system. Thus, our analysis uses only data for youth who turned 12 years old in 2016 or later. However, for younger youth in this group, such as those who turned 12 in 2019, we observe their contacts only up to age 15 (they turned 15 years old in 2022). Therefore, all of our measures of firearm use at young ages are defined **only for youth who have had** any contact before age 15.

Table 6 compares four **cohorts** of youth, as defined by the year in which they were born. The oldest cohort, born in 2004, turned 12 in 2016 (the first year with firearm data) and turned 15 in 2019. On the opposite end, the younger cohort, born in 2007, turned 12 in 2019 and turned 15 in 2022.

As Table 6 shows, we find no evidence indicating that younger cohorts are more likely to use firearms sooner or at a younger age. For example, among youth with any contact prior to their 15th birthday, we do not see any difference in the prevalence of any firearm use before age 15. Older and younger cohorts are remarkably similar in this respect. We further investigate if youth in older and younger cohorts differ with respect to the prevalence of firearm use during the first contacts with the system. As the table shows, youth in all cohorts are similarly likely to use a firearm in their first or second contacts with the system.

Table 6: Firearm use by age 15

Comparison of different cohorts of youth

	COHORT (YEAR OF BIRTH)				
	2004	2005	2006	2007	ALL
YEAR TURNED 12	2016	2017	2018	2019	
YEAR TURNED 15	2019	2020	2021	2022	
YOUTH WITH ANY CONTACT BY AGE 15	2,213	1,601	1,295	390	5,499
YOUTH WITH ANY CONTACT INVOLVING A FIREARM BY AGE 15	212	171	177	45	605
PERCENT WITH ANY OFFENSE INVOLVING A FIREARM BY AGE 15	10%	11%	14%	12%	11%
FIRST FIREARM OFFENSE IN:					
1ST CONTACT	6%	6%	8%	7%	7%
2ND CONTACT	8%	11%	13%	13%	10%
3RD CONTACT	11%	9%	11%	11%	10%
4TH CONTACT	13%	12%	7%	23%	12%
5TH CONTACT	8%	8%	16%	11%	9%
6TH OR MORE CONTACT	5%	10%	8%	0%	7%