

After decades of declining violent crime rates, cities across the country experienced a drastic increase in gun violence over the last two years. Philadelphia, like other cities, also saw its shooting rates climb. However, Philadelphia's uptick pre-dates the pandemic. Homicides, the vast majority of which are committed with a gun, have increased every year since 2016, while non-fatal shootings have increased every year since 2017. The city experienced 562 homicides in 2021, making it the deadliest year in Philadelphia's recorded history.

The increase in gun violence coincided with other concerning gun-related trends. As gun violence surged over the last six years, clearance rates — the share of cases solved by the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) — for homicides and non-fatal shootings declined. In 2020, just 37% of fatal shootings were cleared by the PPD. At the same time, the number of individuals arrested for illegal gun possession increased by more than 100% between 2015 and 2020. While gun possession arrests have drastically increased, conviction rates — the share of cases prosecuted by the District Attorney's Office (DAO) that result in conviction — for gun possession declined. Between 2015 and 2020, the share of illegal gun possession cases resulting in conviction fell from 65% to 42%.

As the financial watchdog for the City of Philadelphia, the Office of the City Controller works to ensure the efficient and effective use of taxpayer money and evaluates issues that impact the city's operations. As public safety conditions have steadily declined in recent years, the Controller's Office has issued several reports and data projects focused on the ongoing gun violence crisis since 2019, including an analysis of the economic costs of gun violence, an examination of best practices in peer cities, an interactive map of shootings and shooting-related court cases, and an examination of the City's anti-violence spending.

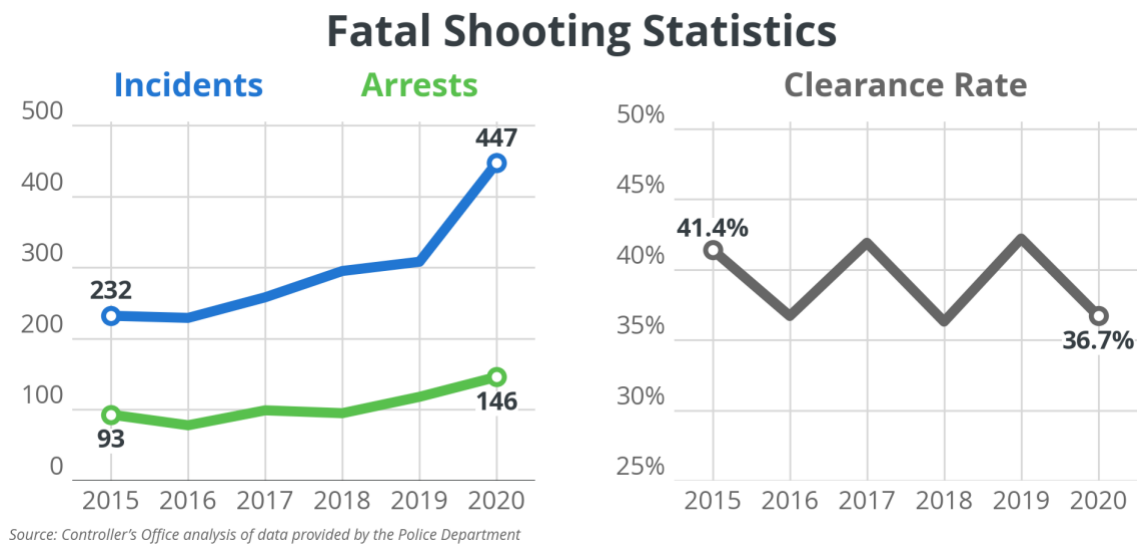
This data release is a continuation of the office's previous public safety work. It examines trends around gun crimes in Philadelphia between 2015 and 2020, a period when the city's gun violence crisis has escalated dramatically. The review is based on a series of inquiries sent to the Police Department, the First Judicial District, and the District Attorney's Office that identified the prominent issues surrounding the gun violence epidemic and sought the insight of these departments. The District Attorney's Office declined to participate in this effort.

Specifically, this release provides data for 1) fatal and non-fatal shooting clearance rates and 2) conviction rates for illegal gun possession, also known as violations of the Uniform Firearms Act (VUFA). It includes public information released previously by the DAO and PPD, as well as additional data provided to the Controller's Office by the PPD.

1. Shooting Clearance Rates

While Philadelphia’s gun violence has reached historic levels during the pandemic, shootings and homicides have increased steadily in the city since 2015. There were about 1,200 shooting victims in 2015. By 2019, that number had risen to nearly 1,500, and in 2020, it increased to 2,266, an 83% increase relative to 2015. Over this period, the PPD struggled to keep pace with the city’s rising shooting totals, with the total number of arrests for shootings increasing from 301 in 2015 to 476 in 2020 (+58%).

Between 2015 and 2020, the number of fatal shooting victims increased by 93%, with a total of 447 fatal shootings in 2020. This dramatic increase in fatal shooting incidents outpaced the number of fatal shooting arrests made by the police, which increased from 93 in 2015 to 146 in 2020. As a result, clearance rates¹ for fatal shootings declined from 41% to 37% over this period, as shown in the following figure.

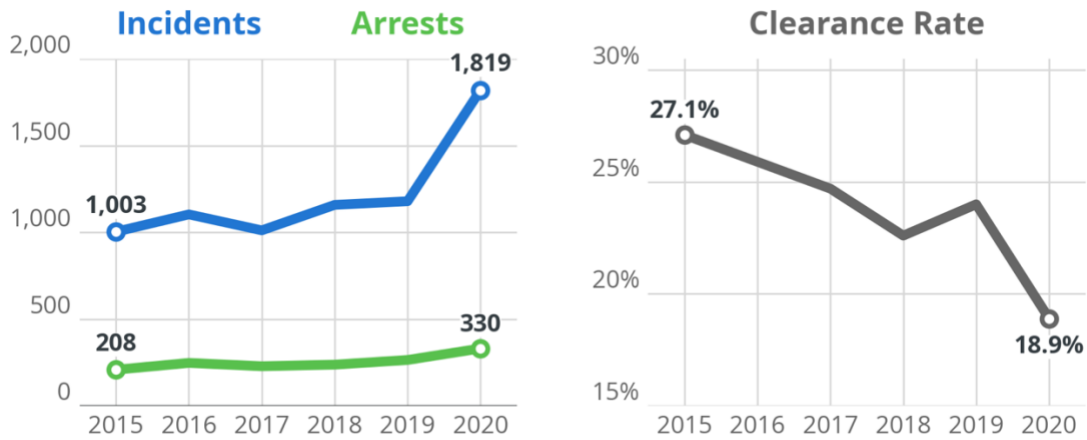


In 2015, clearance rates for non-fatal shootings were already low at 27%. As non-fatal shooting victims increased by more than 80% from 2015 to 2020, clearance rates continued to decline. The clearance rate reached a low point in 2020, when only 19% of non-fatal shooting incidents² were cleared by the PPD. This clearance rate translates to nearly 1,500 non-fatal shooting incidents for which no arrest was made in 2020.

¹ Clearance rates are calculated using the number of arrests made for shootings incidents in a year divided by the total shooting incidents within a year, so arrests for incidents in 2020 may have been made in 2021. In addition to arrests, clearance rates also include exceptional clearances such as when a suspect has died or fled the country.

² Incident is defined as the number of individual shooting victims.

Non-Fatal Shooting Statistics

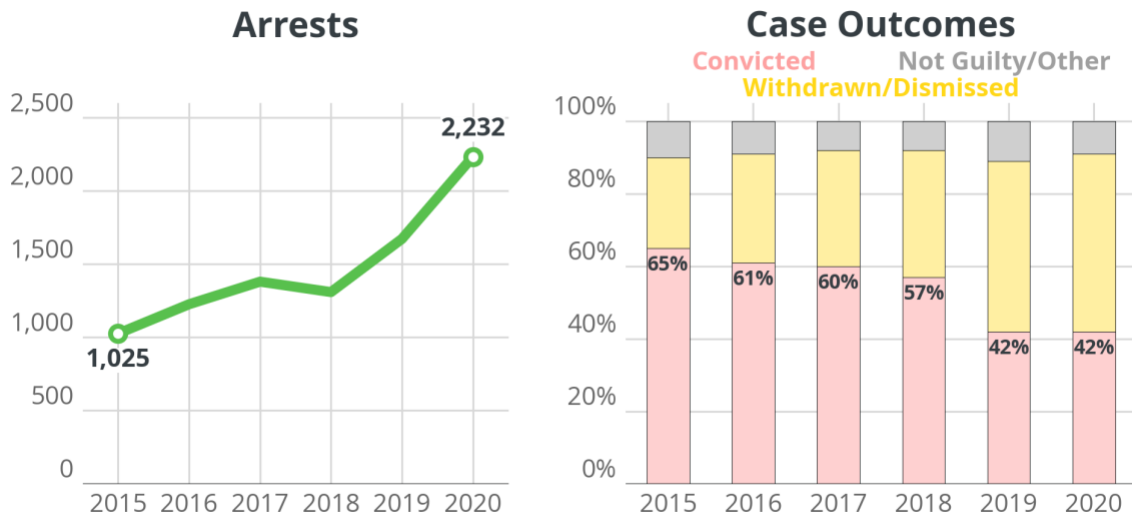


Source: Controller's Office analysis of data provided by the Police Department

2. VUFA Conviction Rates

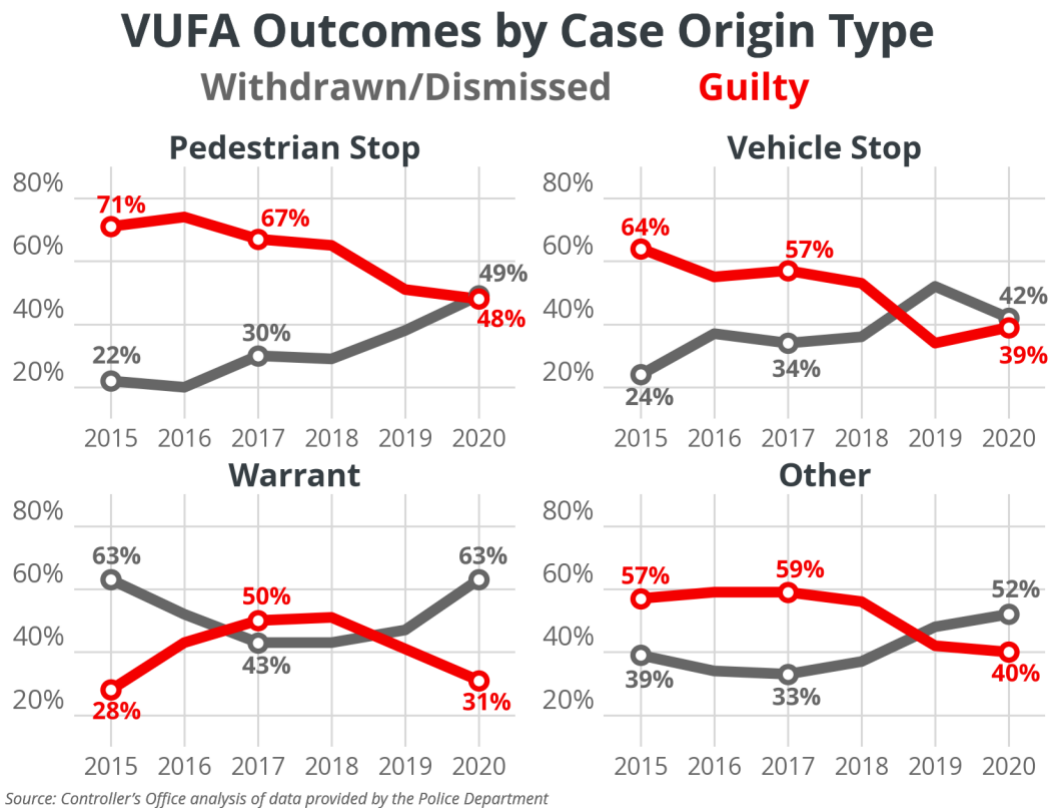
As the city's gun violence crisis has worsened, illegal gun possession offenses also increased across the city. Between 2015 and 2020, VUFA arrests made by the PPD increased by more than 100%. Over this same period, conviction rates for VUFA cases prosecuted by the DAO declined significantly, from 65% in 2015 to 42% in 2020. This decline was driven primarily by an increase in dismissals (a decision by a judge to end prosecution) and withdrawn cases (a voluntary decision by the DAO to end prosecution). The share of these dropped cases grew from 25% in 2015 to 49% in 2020.

VUFA Statistics



Source: District Attorney's Office Data Dashboard
Note: Convictions include guilty and guilty plea case outcomes

The DAO has identified VUFA arrests stemming from vehicle stops as a potential driving factor in the decline in conviction rates.³ According to the DAO’s testimony to City Council in December 2020, VUFA arrests from vehicle stops commonly lack evidence proving actual possession by an individual and are more difficult to prove than cases in which guns were found in the physical possession of the defendant. However, as shown in the figure below, the share of VUFA dismissals/withdrawals in recent years has increased for cases originating from all stop types. While the dismissal/withdrawal rate for vehicle stops increased from 24% in 2015 to 42% in 2020, the increase for pedestrian stops has been even larger, more than doubling from 22% in 2015 to 49% in 2020. While vehicle stops may be contributing to declining conviction rates, they are not the sole determinant of adverse case outcomes.



Appendix: Definitions

- **Clearance rate:** the share of incidents for which the PPD has “cleared” the case, which includes both arrests and exceptional clearances (e.g., a suspect has died; an identified suspect has fled the country).
- **Conviction rate:** the share of cases prosecuted by the DAO that result in a guilty verdict or guilty plea
- **Dismissal:** a decision by a judge to end prosecution in an individual case

³ Source: [Supplemental testimony](#) provided by the DAO to the Special Committee on Gun Violence, 12-30-2020

- **Withdrawal:** a voluntary decision by the DAO to end prosecution in an individual case
- **Violations of the Uniform Firearm Act (VUFA)** charges include:
 - Persons not to possess, use, manufacture, control, sell, or transfer firearms;
 - Firearms not to be carried without a license; and
 - Carrying firearms on public streets or public property in Philadelphia