

# Community Safety

Understanding homicide and gun violence  
in Baton Rouge

*Baton Rouge  
Area Foundation*

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## About the Baton Rouge Area Foundation

**Among the largest community foundations in the country, the Baton Rouge Area Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life in greater Baton Rouge and across south Louisiana.**

The Foundation pursues its mission by:

- Serving donors to build the assets that drive initiatives and solutions
- Supporting local nonprofits to ensure overall impact and sustainability
- Engaging community leaders to develop appropriate responses to emerging opportunities and challenges, and
- Partnering with others to leverage collective resources and create the capacity to be a stimulus of positive regional change.

## About Common Good Labs

**Common Good Labs is a research organization that designs actionable solutions to improve communities.**

We use data science tools to empower leaders at foundations, non-profit organizations, and in government.

Our work focuses on reducing poverty without displacement, enhancing public safety and health outcomes, improving education, supporting small businesses, and other related topics. For more information, visit [commongoodlabs.com](http://commongoodlabs.com).

## Introduction

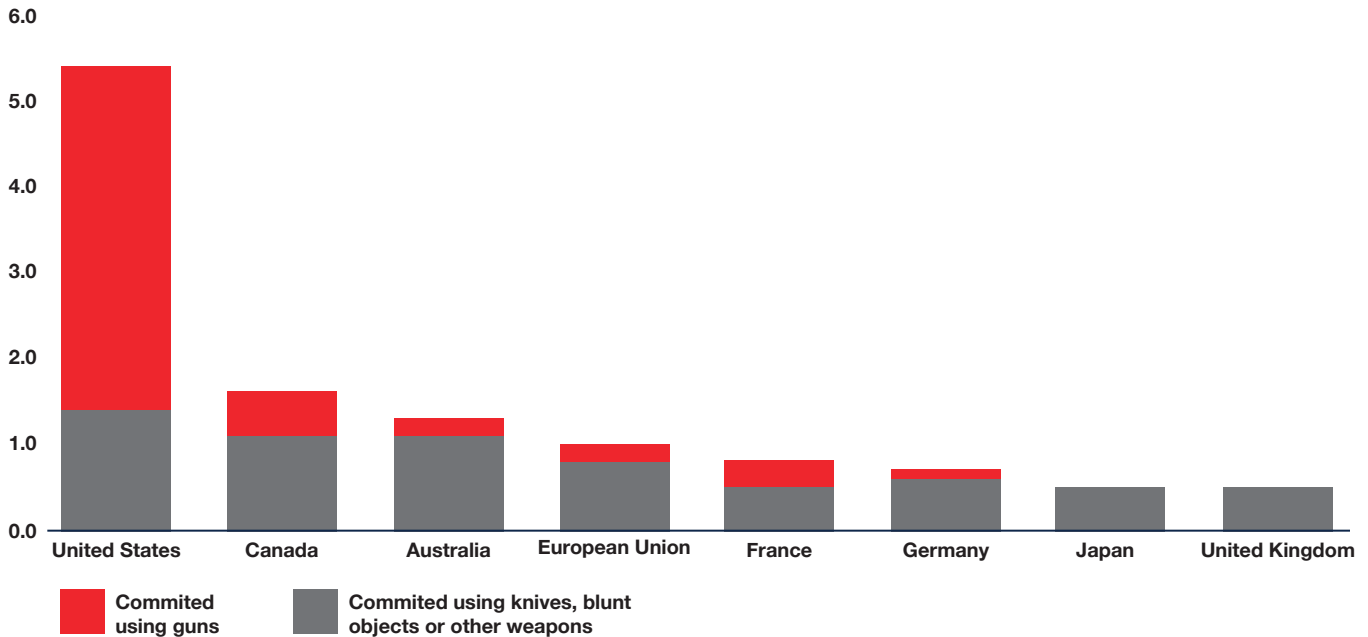
This community briefing was created by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation and Common Good Labs as part of the Opportunity Data Project. It is designed to help local residents understand why homicide and gun violence are so high in East Baton Rouge Parish.

The first section examines these issues across the entire United States. The second shares analyses on the specific challenges in East Baton Rouge Parish.

There are **three facts** that local residents should understand about homicide and gun violence in **the United States**.

## Fact #1. Violent crime in the United States is unusually high.

### Country comparison: Homicides per 100,000 residents



Source: Analyses of data from the [Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#).

The chart above compares homicide rates in the United States to those of other nations with similar levels of education and wealth. It shows that the United States had more than five murders for every 100,000 residents. By contrast, countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, and France had fewer than two.

**Though high rates of homicide may seem common in some U.S. cities, it is abnormal for people living in a wealthy and educated society to be so violent.** This fact offers a hopeful message for Baton Rouge. If similar cities across the world can succeed at promoting safety, so can Louisiana’s capital.

What can explain the high levels of homicide found in America? Some have suggested that it may be due to alcohol and drug

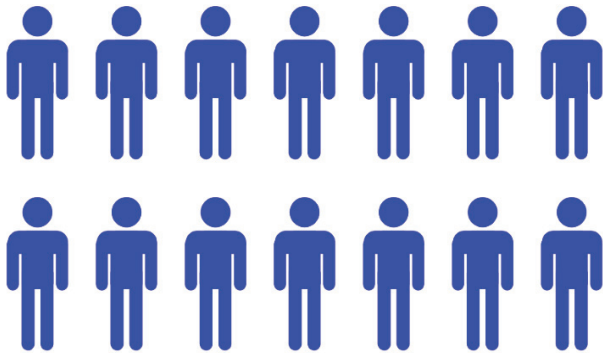
use, or mental health issues. However, the United States has similar levels of substance abuse and mental health disorders compared to these other nations.<sup>1</sup>

One major difference between the United States and other countries is the number of homicides committed by people using guns. The likelihood that you could be killed with a knife or in a fistfight is relatively similar across countries with high levels of wealth and education, but you are much more likely to be killed with a gun in the United States.

For this reason, the most effective way to reduce homicides in U.S. cities is to limit gun violence. The analyses shared in this brief will provide data on where local shootings occur and examine how to reduce them.

**Fact #2. Police cannot solve the problem of homicides and gun violence on their own. Community-based solutions are also required.**

**New police officers needed to reduce the annual number of homicides by one murder in an average U.S. city**



Source: [Police Force Size and Civilian Race, 2020](#).

A recent study examined the relationship between increases in the number of police officers and changes in the local homicide rate. It found that in order to prevent one murder each year, the average U.S. city would need to hire around 14 additional police officers.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that while increasing the size of a local police force can be beneficial, it is unrealistic for most communities to recruit and hire enough officers to significantly reduce violent crime.

Data from other cities in the southeastern United States offers additional insights. Many of the most economically vibrant cities in the region — such as Austin, Charlotte, and Nashville — are significantly safer than Baton Rouge.

**Policing levels and local homicide rates in southeastern U.S. cities**

	Number of police officers per 1,000 residents (2021)	Homicide rate (2022)
<b>Baton Rouge</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>43.2 per 100,000</b>
Austin	1.6	6.8 per 100,000
Charlotte	1.8	12.5 per 100,000
Nashville	2.1	15.9 per 100,000
Houston	2.2	19.0 per 100,000
Dallas	2.3	16.6 per 100,000
Atlanta	3.1	34.2 per 100,000
Memphis	3.1	45.9 per 100,000

Source: Analyses of the most recently available data from the [Baton Rouge Police Department](#), the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), and [Bloomberg](#).

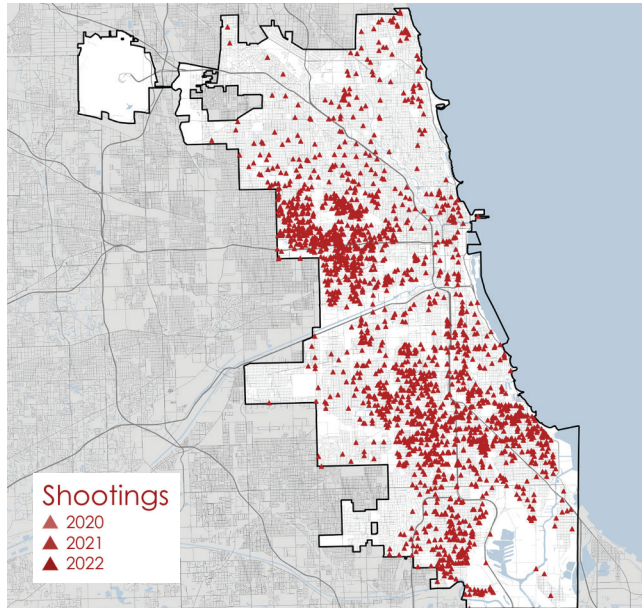
However, these cities have fewer police officers relative to their size. By contrast, other cities with higher rates of violence have much larger proportions of police officers.<sup>3</sup>

**This demonstrates an important point. The safest cities in the United States are not necessarily the ones with the most police.** Community factors not directly related to law enforcement play important roles in public safety.

## Fact #3. Homicide and other forms of violent crime are concentrated in specific places and among specific groups of people.

### Gun violence in Chicago

2020 to 2022



Source: Analyses of data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#).

The map above shows the locations of gun violence incidents in Chicago during 2022. It reveals that a large portion of the violence in the city is clustered in a relatively small area. The majority of Chicago's homicides occur in neighborhoods that contain a much smaller proportion of the city's population.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous studies confirm that the pattern seen in Chicago exists in many other U.S. cities. **A large share of violent crime is often concentrated in a small number of local neighborhoods.**<sup>5</sup>

Violent crime is also concentrated among specific groups of people. Teenage boys and young men in their twenties account for about half of all U.S. homicides.<sup>6</sup>

**The young men and teens who commit violent crime are more likely to be disengaged from school and work.** Estimates suggest that over 40 percent of people incarcerated

### Who commits violent crime?

Summary of existing research

**Teenage boys and young men in their twenties** are responsible for around half of all U.S. homicides.

People who commit violent crime are often **disengaged from school and work.**

People who commit violent crimes also tend to **live in the same neighborhoods where their crimes occur** or within a few miles.

Source: Synthesis of existing research studies.<sup>10</sup>

in U.S. prisons did not graduate from high school, compared to about 9 percent of all adults in the country.<sup>7</sup> Since so many young men who participate in violence lack a high school diploma, it is no surprise that they are also much more likely to be unemployed.<sup>8</sup>

Children do not grow up wanting to commit murder. However, without education and access to a job, these teenagers and young men have few options to engage in the community in more positive ways and are more susceptible to becoming involved in violence.

Research reveals one final trend that is important to understand. People who commit crimes often live within just a few miles of where their crimes occur.<sup>9</sup> **Therefore, if you know the neighborhoods where violent crime is most common, you also know the places where many of the people who commit violent crime live.**

There are **three facts** that local residents should understand about homicide and gun violence in **East Baton Rouge Parish**.

**Fact #1. Gun violence and homicide in Baton Rouge are incredibly costly and have grown significantly.**

**Gun violence in Baton Rouge**  
2019 to 2022

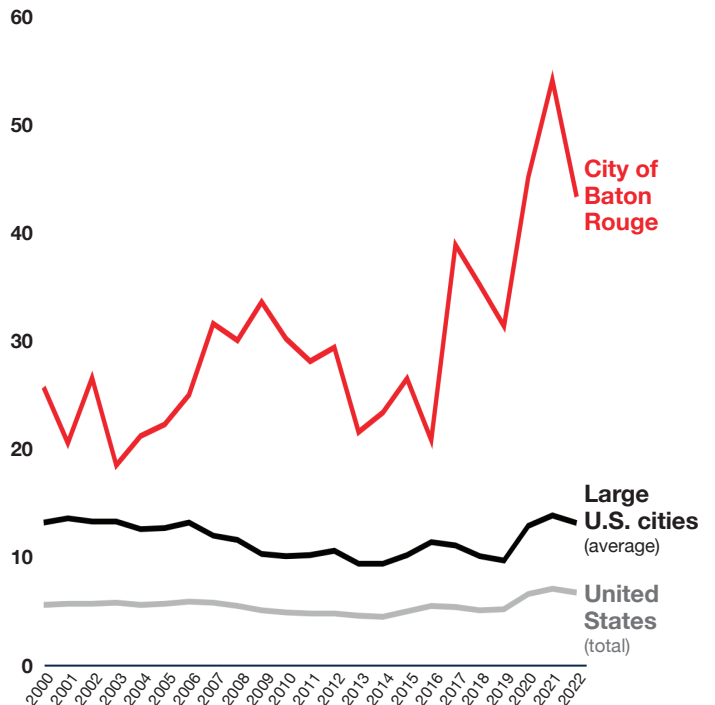


Source: Analyses of data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#).

Gun violence is widespread in East Baton Rouge Parish. The map above illustrates the locations of local shootings between 2019 and 2022 that were mentioned in news media reports. It shows that every neighborhood in the city of Baton Rouge was within a few miles of a shooting.

This violence has significant economic consequences. Research indicates that each homicide has a direct cost of \$3.3 million for communities in the United States, on average.<sup>11</sup> This includes payments for medical care, criminal investigation, prosecution, and incarceration, as well as the loss of workers earning money to support their families.

**Homicides per 100,000 residents**  
2000 to 2022

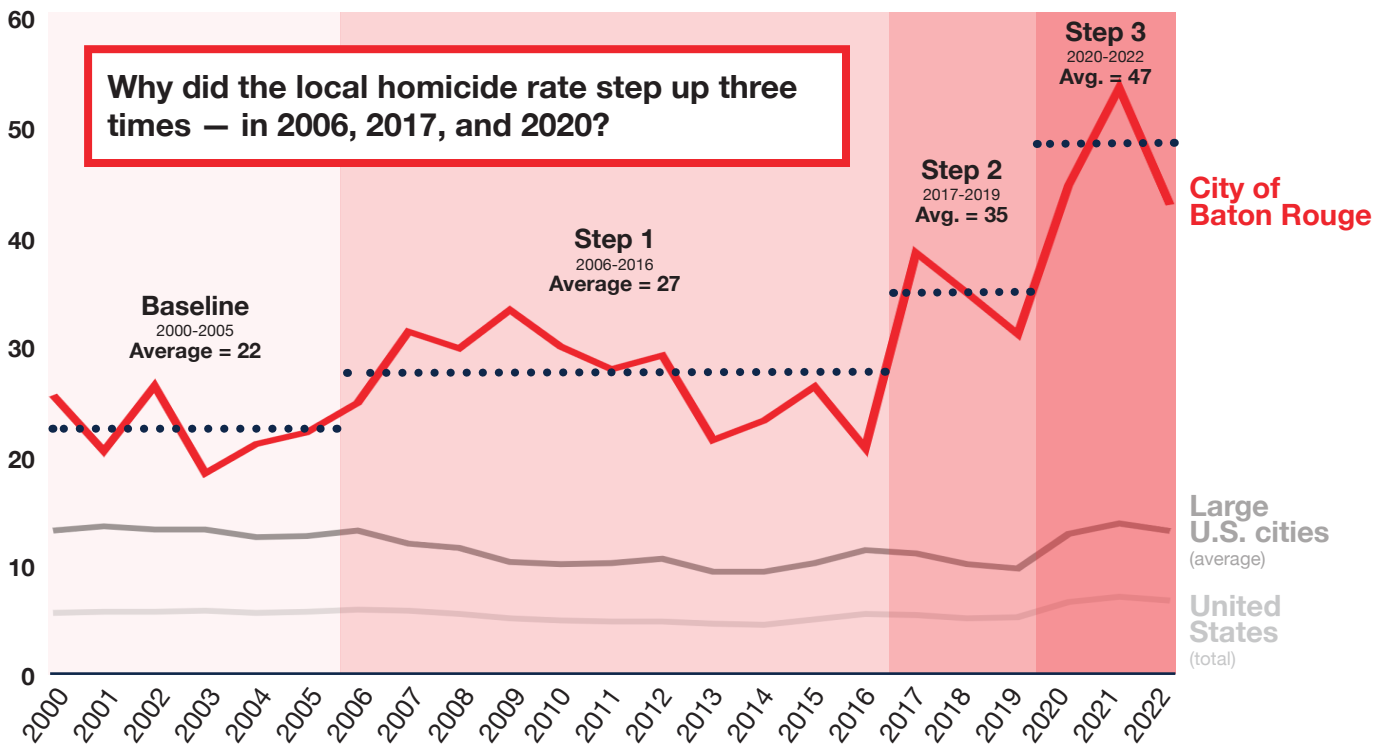


Source: Analyses of data from the [Baton Rouge Police Department](#), the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), [TheTrace](#), and [AH Datalytics](#). Data on large cities for 2021 and 2022 is estimated.

There were more than 400 murders in East Baton Rouge Parish during the last four years. **This means that the total cost of local homicides was over \$1.3 billion between 2019 and 2022.**<sup>12</sup>

The homicide rate in Baton Rouge is quite high compared to the rest of the country. The United States had an average of 5 to 6 homicides per 100,000 residents over the last two decades; while large U.S. cities had around 11 to 12. The rate for the City of Baton Rouge ranged from a low of 18 per 100,000 to a high of 54.

## Homicides per 100,000 residents 2000 to 2022



Source: Analyses of data from the [Baton Rouge Police Department](#), the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), [TheTrace](#), and [AH Datalytics](#). Data on large cities for 2021 and 2022 is estimated.

**Only five large cities had homicide rates above Baton Rouge in 2022: Baltimore, Detroit, Memphis, New Orleans, and St. Louis.** Last year, Baton Rouge’s murder rate per 100,000 residents was 1.7 times greater than Chicago’s and 8.3 times greater than New York City’s.<sup>13</sup>

Rates of violent crime declined significantly across the country in the first three quarters of 2023, including in Baton Rouge.<sup>14</sup> This decline should be celebrated. However, the local homicide rate remains on track to be around three times higher than the average for large U.S. cities during the last two decades.

In order to understand why Baton Rouge is so different from other places in the United States, it is important to look at what has happened in the community in recent decades.

Data indicates that there have been three distinct “step-ups” in the local murder rate since 2005.

- **Step 1 (2006):** The homicide rate increased in 2006 and reached an average of 27 per 100,000 people during the next ten years, compared to an average of 22 in the early 2000s.
- **Step 2 (2017):** The rate went up again in 2017 — maintaining an average of 35 between 2017 to 2019.
- **Step 3 (2020):** The murder rate increased a third time in 2020. It reached an average of 47 homicides per 100,000 residents from 2020 to 2022.

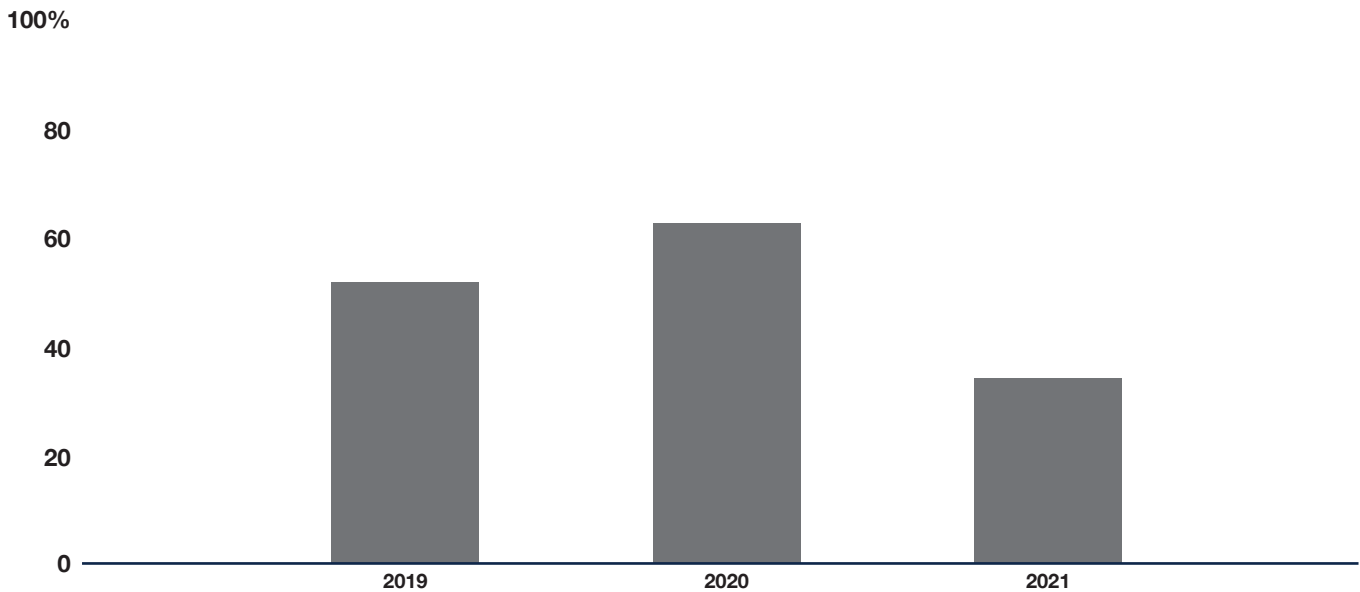
This poses an important question: why did Baton Rouge’s homicide rate step up three times — in 2006, 2017, and 2020? The analyses on the next pages will help to offer an explanation.



## Fact #2. Local police face significant challenges that indicate community-based solutions may be uniquely important in the region.

### Percentage of homicides cleared by the Baton Rouge Police Department

Cleared crimes are those in which an arrest was made or the crime was solved without an arrest (e.g., murder-suicides)



Source: Analyses of data from the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#).

The chart above visualizes the proportion of homicides in the City of Baton Rouge that were solved — e.g., an arrest was made — during the latest years in which federal data is available. Local evidence suggests that performance in 2022 improved from a historic low in 2021.<sup>15</sup> However, the overall trend in recent years indicates around half of all murders committed in the city of Baton Rouge are not solved.

**Recent media reports have also highlighted challenges local law enforcement face related to officer misconduct.**<sup>16</sup> The vast majority of local law enforcement officers are law-abiding public servants who willingly risk their lives for residents of the parish, but a small number do not meet the standard set by their peers.

These challenges indicate that solutions to violent crime that do not involve law enforcement may be even more important in Baton Rouge than they are in other cities.

## Fact #3. Violence in Baton Rouge is concentrated in low-opportunity neighborhoods that also have large numbers of young men who are disengaged from school and work.

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Researchers at Harvard University compiled data on U.S. men who were born between 1978 and 1983 and followed them until they reached their mid thirties to track their life outcomes — including their incomes, levels of education, and whether they went to prison. This data offers a number of local insights. For example, it reveals that 5.1 percent of men who were born in the late-1970s and early-1980s and who grew up in East Baton Rouge Parish were incarcerated in 2010.<sup>17</sup>

Some people might assume that men who grew up in low-income families would be more likely to become incarcerated. However, this isn't always the case. In Baton Rouge, the neighborhood where you grow up is also very important. This can be seen by comparing two different types of places:

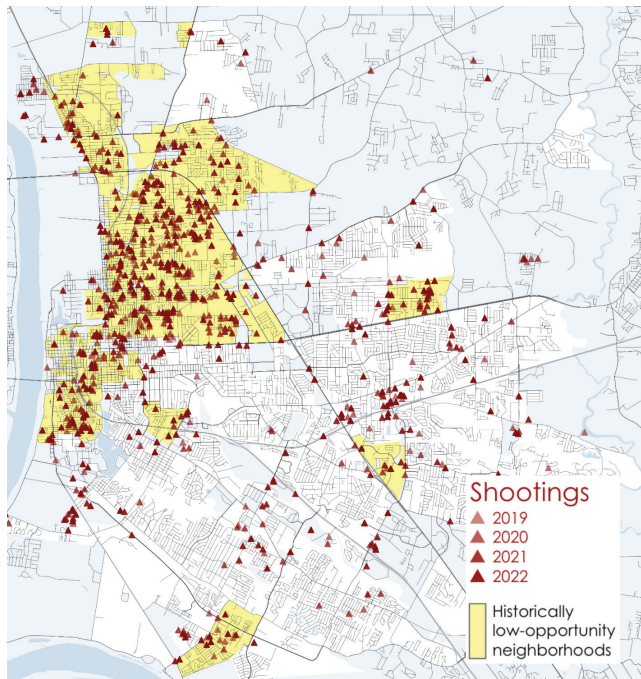
- **High-opportunity neighborhoods**, defined as areas where the average person went on to earn income close to the national median or above it; and
- **Low-opportunity neighborhoods**, places where the average person went on to earn income that was much less than the national median.

**Data from the same study of men born between 1978 and 1983 who grew up in East Baton Rouge demonstrates why local neighborhoods are important.**

- Men who grew up in low-income families and **high-opportunity neighborhoods** had an incarceration rate of 3.5 percent.<sup>18</sup>
- Those who grew up in low-income families and **low-opportunity neighborhoods** in the parish had an incarceration rate of 9.1 percent — meaning that one in eleven were in prison in 2010.<sup>19</sup>

## Local shootings reported in the news media

2019 to 2022



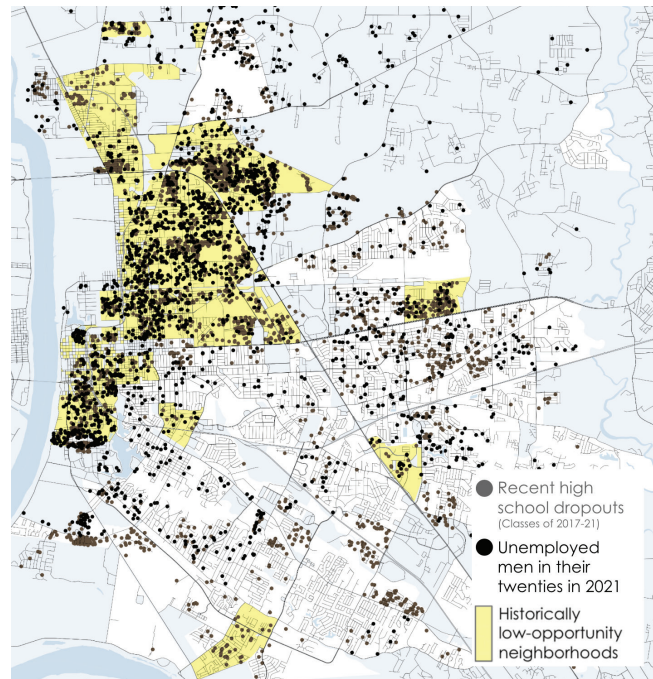
Source: Analyses of data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#), [Opportunity Insights](#), and the [American Community Survey](#).

The illustration on the left above compares data on local gun violence to a map showing the location of these neighborhoods that had low opportunity in the 1980s and 1990s when men in the study were growing up. It shows that the same places have very high rates of gun violence today. These historically low-opportunity neighborhoods contain around one fourth of the parish population, but had more than half of all local homicides in recent years and they continue to have much higher rates of incarceration than the rest of the parish.<sup>20</sup>

What could be causing this to happen? The map on the right highlights a potential explanation. **Historically low-opportunity neighborhoods have large numbers of young people who have dropped out of school in recent years and large numbers of unemployed young men.** These areas are home to around half of recent dropouts from East Baton Rouge Parish high schools and about 40 percent of local men in their twenties who lack a job.<sup>21</sup>

## Unemployed men under 30 years old and recent high school dropouts

2021



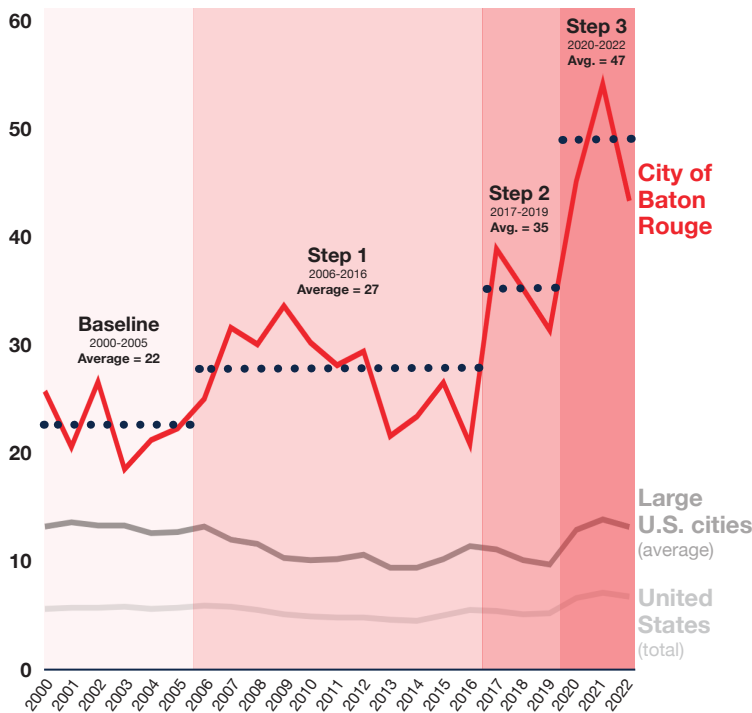
Source: Analyses of data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#), [Opportunity Insights](#), the [American Community Survey](#), and the [East Baton Rouge Parish School System](#).

There are neighborhoods in the southeastern part of the parish that struggle with high dropout rates and significant levels of unemployment among young men. But, these traditionally high-opportunity areas do not have the same difficulties with violent crime.

There is an obvious pattern in Baton Rouge. **Homicide and gun violence are concentrated in historically low-opportunity neighborhoods that also have large numbers of teen boys and young men who are disengaged from school and work.**

## Homicides per 100,000 residents

2000 to 2022



**Why did the local homicide rate step up three times — in 2006, 2017, and 2020?**

- Step 1** 2006-2016 **Hurricane Katrina** caused a multi-year spike in dropouts in the parish. Anecdotal evidence also suggests a large number of disengaged young men moved to Baton Rouge after being displaced from New Orleans.
- Step 2** 2017-2019 **The 2016 Flood** displaced thousands of young people from their homes leading to another increase in high school dropouts in low-opportunity neighborhoods.
- Step 3** 2020-2022 **The COVID-19 Pandemic** led to another dramatic jump in dropouts. Young workers in low-income areas were also highly affected by shutdowns.

Source: Analyses of data from the [Baton Rouge Police Department](#), the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), [TheTrace](#), and [AH Datalytics](#). Data on large cities for 2021 and 2022 are estimates.

This pattern can help to answer the question posed on page six. **Why did Baton Rouge’s homicide rate step-up three times — in 2006, 2017, and 2020?**

**Step 1 (2006):** After Hurricane Katrina, the East Baton Rouge Parish School System reported a multi-year spike in dropouts. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that a large number of unemployed young men moved to Baton Rouge after being displaced from New Orleans.<sup>22</sup>

**Step 2 (2017):** The 2016 Flood displaced thousands of young people and led to another spike of local dropouts over the next several years in historically low-opportunity neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup>

**Step 3 (2020):** The COVID-19 Pandemic led to another dramatic jump in dropouts, especially among teens in low-opportunity neighborhoods who often lacked Internet

access at home and could not participate in virtual classes. Young workers in these neighborhoods were also among the most likely to work in service occupations that had large numbers of layoffs during the shutdown.<sup>24</sup>

Each time an event caused large numbers of young men in historically low-opportunity neighborhoods to become disengaged from school and work, the local homicide rate increased.

To put it another way, there is a clear formula for violent crime in East Baton Rouge Parish:

- Low-opportunity neighborhoods**
- + Large numbers of teens and young men disengaged from school and work**

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- = Increases in local homicides and violence**

**Baton Rouge can significantly reduce homicides and gun violence by supplementing effective policing with community-based solutions.** The analyses shared on the previous pages indicate that there are four goals local leaders should focus on to accomplish this.

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**Goal #1. Reshape neighborhood environments to reduce gun violence.**

Research has shown that the physical characteristics of local neighborhoods influence the likelihood of crime being committed. For example, areas that have fewer streetlights, larger numbers of vacant lots and abandoned buildings, fewer trees, and fewer video cameras all tend to have greater rates of crime.

Many of the neighborhoods with the highest rates of violence in Baton Rouge include almost all of these characteristics. Analyses can help pinpoint where targeted efforts to reshape the local environment can be most effective for reducing crime.

**Goal #2. Offer alternative paths to disengaged teens and young men that connect them with school and work.**

There are hundreds of teenage boys and young men who have not completed high school in local neighborhoods with high rates of violence. Data also indicates that these areas have large numbers of young men who are unemployed.

There are a number of programs that can help to connect these residents to opportunities to complete their high school education, reengage with academic studies to earn an associates degree, and find a formal job.

**Goal #3. Prevent future disengagement from school among local children.**

One of the best ways to reduce violent crime in the long-term is to assist local children who are at risk of failing to earn a high school diploma. Due to the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, many public schools in Baton Rouge have strikingly high rates of chronic absenteeism, failure to promote to the next grade, and dropouts.

Research suggests that working with school and community leaders to identify and support these children before their challenges become critical will prevent them from becoming involved in violence. These efforts will also help to improve educational outcomes and increase the number of young people prepared for the workforce.

**Goals #4. Increase opportunity in historically low-opportunity areas with high rates of gun violence.**

The neighborhoods with the highest rates of gun violence are also the place in the parish that have historically had the lowest levels of opportunity. Studies have demonstrated that efforts to invest in improving communities by boosting homeownership, increasing

self-employment, and supporting community-building organizations can help to create better outcomes for local residents. Leaders in Baton Rouge can help to improve these residential areas and provide more pathways away from becoming involved in violence for local youth.

## Endnotes

- 1 [Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#).
- 2 [Police Force Size and Civilian Race](#) (Chalfin, Hansen, Weisburst, and Williams).
- 3 [2022 End of Year Statistical Analysis, Baton Rouge Police Department](#); [Crime Data Explorer](#), Federal Bureau of Investigation; [Pandemic Murder Wave Has Crested. Here's the Postmortem](#). (Fox).
- 4 [Gun Violence Archive](#); [The Crime Spike Is No Mystery](#) (Sharkey).
- 5 [Mapping gun violence: A closer look at the intersection between place and gun homicides in four cities](#) (Rowlands and Love).
- 6 [2019 Crime in the United States](#), Federal Bureau of Investigation.
- 7 [Educational Characteristics of Prisoners: Data from the ACS](#) (Ewert and Wildhagen); [Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data](#), U.S. Census Bureau.
- 8 [Employment of State and Federal Prisoners Prior to Incarceration, 2016](#) (Maruschak and Snell).
- 9 [Journey to crime: How far does the criminal travel?](#) (Andresen and Shen).
- 10 See citations 4 to 9 above.
- 11 [Incidence and Costs of Personal and Property Crimes in the United States, 2017](#) (Miller, Cohen, Swedler, Ali, and Hendrie). Adjustments made for inflation to bring 2017 costs to 2023 dollars.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 [Pandemic Murder Wave Has Crested. Here's the Postmortem](#). (Fox).
- 14 [Killings in East Baton Rouge saw dramatic drop in the past few months, data shows](#) (Carmosino); [Murder Remains Down Nationally Through September](#) (Asher).
- 15 [2022 End of Year Statistical Analysis](#), Baton Rouge Police Department.
- 16 [Half of BRPD's narcotics division was arrested or transferred. What happens to their cases?](#) (Skene); [Baton Rouge police arrests: Officers wrongly Tased someone, tried to hide evidence, chief says](#) (Nicholson and Carmisino).
- 17 Common Good Labs analyses of data from [Opportunity Insights at Harvard University](#).
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Common Good Labs analyses of Baton Rouge Police Department data from [OpenBR](#) and state incarceration data from the [Prison Policy Initiative](#).
- 21 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the [American Community Survey](#) and the East Baton Rouge Parish School System.
- 22 [Dropout Rates Decline Across Louisiana](#) (Chalwa).
- 23 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the East Baton Rouge Parish School System.
- 24 Common Good Labs analyses of data from the East Baton Rouge Parish School System and the [American Community Survey](#).



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