

Have gun? Will travel

Criminals are afraid to arm themselves in a Virginia city that simply enforced the law

By Elaine Shannon/Richmond
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Not long ago, Edward sold crack cocaine for a living. He considered himself a businessman and made businesslike calculations of risk and reward. He was afraid rival dealers might try to rob him of his drugs or the wad of cash in his wallet. So he carried a 9-mm handgun. "Everybody had a gun," he says, "for defense." But now he has a bigger fear: if he gets caught with a weapon while committing a crime in his hometown of Richmond, Va., he faces at least five years without parole in a distant federal prison. That's why Edward, 25, doesn't pack a pistol anymore.

It's a calculation many criminals and would-be criminals are making these days in Richmond and other cities that have emulated **Project Exile**, the Virginia capital's innovative program to combat gun crime. **It is credited with helping cut in half the number of murders in Richmond over the past two years.**

Two years ago, Richmond's homicide rate was second only to that of Gary, Ind. Gun toting had become common in the city's poorer neighborhoods. Says James Comey, criminal-division chief in the local U.S. Attorney's office: "People carried guns because gun-possession crimes were not treated as anything more than a misdemeanor. What might have been a fistfight or stabbing 20 years ago was a shootout because everybody had a gun in his pocket."

After the new law was introduced, murders in Richmond dropped sharply, from 140 in 1997 to 94 in 1998 and 32 in the first six months of 1999. Armed robberies showed a similar decline. As of June 18, the Exile task force had won long prison sentences for 279 gun-carrying criminals. Says Fahey: "We've taken them off the streets."

In Richmond today, young toughs still deal and steal because they're not afraid of a stint in the local jail. Most, however, are leaving their guns at home. When Sergeant Steve Ownby recently frisked a suspected robber, the suspect said scornfully, "Hell, no, I don't have no gun. Project Exile will get you five years. I'll be an old man when I get out." Ownby observed later that "I've seen a lot of programs come and go, but Exile has made a difference."

Edward, the former pistol packer, agrees: "All my friends started going away to prison." One got 16 years, another 20. "And then I had a son. He's three. That's why I straightened up. I couldn't leave him." Edward says he drifted into crime because his dad wasn't around, and he doesn't want that to happen to his boy. Police confirm that Edward has not only laid down his arms but has also stopped dealing drugs and taken a construction job. He often works overtime late at night, and that has helped make him an Exile booster: "It's made the neighborhood a lot safer."

The first and last paragraphs tell the story of Edward, whose life was changed by the new gun law.

The thesis is in the second paragraph.

The body paragraphs tell about (1) before the new law, (2) when the law was passed, and (3) today