
Analysis of Weapons Relinquishments in Protection-from-Abuse Orders in Pennsylvania, 2019-2022

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Main Findings

Information on the prevalence and scope of Protection from Abuse (PFA) petitions, orders, and cases is difficult to find and typically lacks important details, especially when such orders require the relinquishment of firearms from the alleged perpetrator. Using a rich dataset from the Pennsylvania Protection From Abuse Database (PFAD), researchers from PCCD/IUP performed a statistical analysis of PFA orders and cases from May 2019 to January 2023, finding the following:

- **Overall Orders and Cases:** Pennsylvania courts conducted PFA hearings for over 105,000 unique cases – 67,670 cases that consisted only of temporary orders (either ending in agreement or not being granted a final order) and 38,107 cases that ended with a granted order after a final hearing. As many cases include multiple orders (i.e., temporary and final), more than 200,000 orders were granted over this timeframe.
- **Weapons Relinquishment Orders:** 13,504 unique cases ended with a final weapons relinquishment order (35% of cases). Again, many cases may contain both temporary and final orders for

relinquishments or cases with a temporary relinquishment may not proceed to a final relinquishment order due to agreement or the closure of the case. Overall, there were over 60,000 weapons relinquishment orders granted across these cases.

- **Successful Retrieval Rates:** When a final relinquishment order is issued, the defendant has 24 hours to comply. Successful retrieval of weapons occurred in 85% of these cases, with over 90% being retrieved on the same day or before (i.e., retrieved after a previous temporary order). Sheriffs' Departments perform over 75% of all retrievals across the state.
- **Three-year Growth:** Keeping in mind that 2020 (our baseline year) was a ten-year low in terms of the number of orders granted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, PFA cases that did not end in a final hearing grew by 12%. Those that ended with a final hearing leading to a final order grew by 29% and those that ended with an additional weapons relinquishment order by 47%. Successful retrievals also increased by 45%. Results consistently show that weapons cautions and requirements are becoming a more common occurrence in PFA cases.
- **Case Prevalence Across PA Households:** As one of the first studies to analyze unique cases between a plaintiff and defendant, we attempt to estimate the prevalence of cases and relinquishment orders. For 2022, we find the 645 per 100,000 households go through a PFA case and that 259 per 100,000 households owning firearms experience a case with a relinquishment order. Prevalence grew over the three years in the timeframe.
- **Weapons Cautions:** Weapon relinquishment orders were granted in 61% of cases where the plaintiff indicates that a weapon was involved or present during the act of abuse. This rises to 79% when the plaintiff requests that a weapon be relinquished in the petition.
- **PFA Case Characteristics:** Weapons were involved in 7% of the cases analyzed. Most petitions were filed by the intimate partner of the alleged abuser, although a growing number of cases included protection for children. Whether an order required weapons relinquishment or not, most included prohibitions of possessing a firearm.

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Project Disclaimer

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Introduction

On August 16, 2019, Governor Tom Wolf signed [Executive Order 2019-06](#) tasking state agencies, including PCCD, with undertaking coordinated efforts to prevent and reduce gun violence in the Commonwealth. The Order tasked PCCD to work with other state agencies to advance effective cross-agency strategies to prevent firearm-related crime and violence from a public safety perspective. The Order also established an 18-member Special Council on Gun Violence within PCCD, which was responsible for studying and making recommendations to reduce and prevent community gun violence, suicide by firearms, domestic violence-related shootings, accidental shootings, and mass shootings. The [Council](#) hosted a series of public hearings and conducted several meetings throughout 2019. Their work culminated in a [Report of Findings, Recommendations & Action Steps](#), which was adopted in March 2020.

One of the Special Council’s recommendations included examining the “impact and implementation of Act 79 of 2018, which established new requirements and procedures for firearm relinquishment in cases of Protection from Abuse orders” (Recommendation 19 of the Report) and bolstering “comprehensive supports and protections for victims/survivors” (see Recommendation 9, page 9).

The research presented in this report stems from these recommendations. It describes a descriptive, statistical analysis that informs how the Protection From Abuse (PFA) process is being implemented along with the requirements for firearm relinquishment. The report details how PFA order and firearm relinquishments have increased over time, explains characteristics of these cases, and estimates a prevalence of cases and relinquishments across Pennsylvania households.

The PFA Process

The PFA process is a legal procedure designed to provide protection to individuals who are victims of domestic violence, harassment, or abuse. The purpose of a PFA order is to provide for the safety and well-being of the victim by prohibiting the abuser from engaging in abusive and harassing behaviors that may also include not contacting the victim.

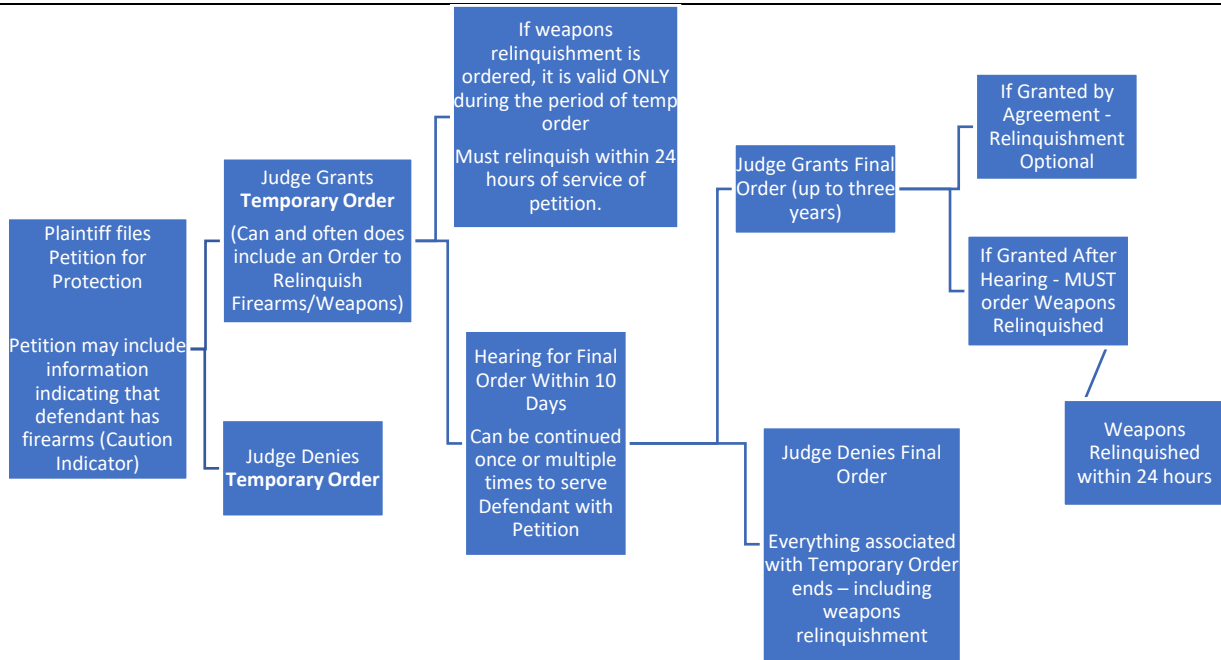
Figure 1 describes the PFA process, which consists of a few primary steps:

1. *Filing a Petition:* The process begins with the victim, or plaintiff, filing a petition at the courthouse in the county where they reside or where the abuse occurred. The petitioner can also seek assistance from a local domestic violence or legal advocacy organization to help with the process. The petitioner must provide information about themselves (or other victims of abuse, such as children) and the specific relationship with the defendant, along with details about the incidents of abuse, harassment, or violence. They may also request temporary custody, child support, and other related relief. Additionally, they can include information about whether a firearm or other weapon was involved in the incident or present at the location of the incident, and whether they request that the weapon be relinquished – this information may serve as a caution indicator to the court and law enforcement.
2. *Temporary Order:* After reviewing the petition, a judge may issue a temporary PFA order if there is an immediate threat of harm. If the temporary order is granted, then the petition must be served to the defendant, usually by a sheriff or law enforcement officer. Once served, the defendant is legally bound to comply with the order's terms and restrictions. If the court determined that the defendant's possession of a firearm or weapon license poses additional harm, they can prohibit the defendant from possessing any firearm or license during the pendency of the temporary order. Further, if the court determines that actual firearms that are accessible to the defendant pose additional danger, they can order that the weapons be relinquished to local law enforcement or other designated 3rd parties. A date for a final hearing is scheduled within ten days, although this hearing may be continued more than once.
3. *Final Hearing and Order:* Within 10 business days of the temporary order, a final hearing is scheduled. A final order can be granted in two ways. One, the plaintiff and defendant can agree upon the terms of the final order, perhaps with less stipulations for the defendant going forward. Or, the order can be granted after a hearing. Both the plaintiff and the defendant have the opportunity to present their cases in front of a judge and provide evidence. The judge will evaluate the evidence and make a decision regarding the issuance of a final PFA order. If the judge determines that the plaintiff has met the burden of proof and is in need of protection, a final PFA order

may be issued. This order can last up to three years and may include provisions such as a no-contact order, custody arrangements, and support payments. Pursuant to Act 79, if a final order is granted after a hearing, it must include a provision that requires the defendant to relinquish their weapons. Orders that are entered by agreement between the parties, do not require that weapons be relinquished by the defendant.

Once a final PFA order is issued, it is legally binding. Violating the order can result in penalties, such as arrest, fines, or imprisonment. The petitioner may also seek modifications to the order if circumstances change, such as requesting an extension or modifying custody arrangements.

FIGURE 1: PFA Process Flowchart



Note: Authors' model of PFA process..

Act 79 changed Pennsylvania law to require that all final PFAs entered by the court *after a hearing* must include an order that the Defendant relinquish their weapons. In addition, Act 79 created new procedures regarding the process for relinquishment of firearms, ammunition, and other weapons by the defendant named in a PFA Order. Prior to this Act, firearms could be relinquished to a family member, friend, or county

Sheriff's Office and defendants were allowed at least 30 days to comply with the relinquishment order. Now, firearms must be relinquished to law enforcement or specific 3rd parties within 24 hours of being served the order.

Act 79's primary purpose was to reduce access to firearms among PFA defendants (and also those convicted of domestic violence) by narrowing the timeframe for defendants to relinquish firearms, thus preventing DV/IPV-related injuries or homicides. PCCD is interested in understanding whether the early implementation of the law is meeting the law's intended goals.

Purpose of This Research

Information regarding PFA process described above is contained in the Protection From Abuse Database (PFAD). PFAD established and maintains a database that includes all PFA proceedings in the Commonwealth. It is designed to complement the operation of the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP) Protection Order Registry. The database automates the PFA process in the courts; provides critical statewide data for analysis by the courts and law enforcement; creates and disseminates the PSP Protection From Abuse Summary Data Sheet - information necessary for inclusion in the PSP Registry; and contains all standardized PFA forms approved by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court as well as other forms necessary for protection from abuse cases.

While PFAD has been in existence for over 20 years, the data within PFAD remains largely unexplored. Specifically, analysis around the subject of PFAs and firearm relinquishments within Pennsylvania is nonexistent. PFAD offers the opportunity to undertake long-overdue statistical analysis in an area of critical importance. Useful data metrics for each Pennsylvania county that can be extracted or created from PFAD include: the timeframe between PFA petition filing and firearm relinquishment, the number of PFAs ordering firearms relinquishment and the rate of ordered-relinquishment, the locations/entities (e.g. law enforcement, commercial armory, licensed firearms dealer, etc.) where firearms were relinquished to, and the most common types of relationships between defendant and plaintiff, among others.

This report analyzes PFAD data to better understand the prevalence and scope of PFA orders and firearm relinquishments since the

implementation of Act 79. The research team sought to answer the following questions:

- How many PFA cases captured in PFAD involve firearms?
- How many PFAs (temporary and final) are issued in Pennsylvania county's that include a caution indicator (i.e., indication by the plaintiff that a weapon was used during the incident or is present on the property) for law enforcement? Of these, how many have firearm relinquishment orders?
- What are the numbers/rates of PFAs with a firearm relinquishment order following the implementation of Act 79 and how has this changed over time?
- What is the average length of time between a firearm relinquishment order and the actual removal of firearms from a property?
- To where/whom are firearms most frequently relinquished (e.g., sheriff, law enforcement agency, licensed firearms dealer, commercial armory, attorney, etc.)?
- What is the prevalence of PFA cases across Pennsylvania households and of relinquishment orders across households possessing firearms? In other words, what is the approximate frequency that these cases occur across PA households?

The goals of this report are to bring clarity to this complex process in a number of ways:

- To better understand the relationship between weapons relinquishment and overall PFA orders – the prevalence and growth over time of each.
- To better understand the extent to which weapons play a role in PFAs.
- To better understand the implementation of Act 79 and retrieval processes.
- To understand whether relinquishment orders are being carried out and at what rates.
- To understand whether this is becoming a larger use of local agency resources/time.

This report is an initial, exploratory, descriptive statistical analysis that seeks to shed light on these questions and open the door to further research.

Previous Research

With the enactment of a domestic violence-related weapons relinquishment law, Pennsylvania joined a number of other states and jurisdictions adopting such measures. Some states have also enacted similar "Extreme Risk Protection Orders" (ERPO) laws, which establish a

preemptive civil process that allows law enforcement or family members (and, in some states, medical professionals and other authorized individuals) to seek an order from a judge preventing an individual from accessing or obtaining firearms when their behavior or actions indicate a danger to themselves or others.

Whether ERPO laws reduce intimate partner or domestic partner gun violence, or homicide, has not been studied widely and is thus largely unknown. Campbell et al. (2003) found that a perpetrator's access to a firearm was one of the factors most associated with intimate partner femicide and that abusers with firearms are 5-8 times more likely to kill their victims than those without. Wintermute et al. (2014) evaluated a law enforcement initiative to recover firearms from individuals who were served restraining orders for domestic abuse. The authors found that approximately half were successfully recovered without adverse events and cite policies such as prohibiting firearm purchase or possession in restraining orders and requiring relinquishment within 24 hours (similar to those implemented in Pennsylvania) as being potentially effective. Finally, in the broadest statistical analysis of this policy across 45 states, Zeoli et al. (2018) found that relinquishment laws in restraining orders were statistically associated with reduced rates of intimate partner homicide.

A few studies have touched on the potential of other ERPO laws to possibly reduce firearm violence (and not specifically to domestic abuse situations). Although limited in the number of states with ERPO laws, Gius (2020b) found a possible reduction in firearm murder rates in Connecticut but a possible increase in Indiana. However, this study has difficulty linking potential effects of ERPO laws to specific effects on murder rates. Zeoli et al. (2022) focused on ERPO cases across six states where the defendant was indicated as being a threat to at least three people, with a subset of these being family members. They found that judges granted 93% of temporary petitions and 84% of final petitions in these cases. Barnard et al. (2021) find even lower granting rates in Colorado with family or household members making up on 15% of overall petitioners.

The two studies above do not report whether an ERPO led to a firearm retrieval by law enforcement. Overall, even less is known about successful retrievals/removals of firearms from an individual deemed by courts to be a threat to others. In a systematic study of 75 ERPO petitions in King County, Washington after the state's ERPO law took effect in

2017, researchers found that it was being applied when someone was threatening violence to themselves or others and/or brandishing a firearm, and that successful removal/relinquishment of firearms occurred in 81% of the cases (Frattaroli et al., 2020). Expanding on the implementation in Washington, Rowhani-Rahbar et al. (2020), found that 87% of petitioners were law enforcement officers (much different from the PFA/Act 79 process in PA). Statewide, they found that firearms were successfully relinquished in 64% of cases.

Data & Methods

Data for the project comes from the PFAD, described above. PCCD accumulated the data needed to analyze PFA filings for the months from May 2019 to January 2023. This data came to the IUP research team in the form of de-identified PFA cases, with details on whether the order was temporary or final, whether it was granted or denied by a judge, the date of filing, and the county that it occurred in. Since this data came from court petitions, demographic data related to PFA filings was limited. However, PFAD includes a number of important characteristics:

- *Weapon cautions*: in a PFA petition, the plaintiff can indicate whether a weapon was involved or present in the situation. They can also request that a weapon be relinquished.
- *Relationship between plaintiff and defendant*: the plaintiff indicates this relationship when filing the petition and a PFA is available only where the plaintiff has a certain relationship with the defendant, including: spouse (or ex-spouse), parent, current or former intimate partner, child, or person related by blood or marriage, including siblings. Multiple plaintiffs seeking protection may be indicated.
- *Order characteristics*: the data include information about whether an order prohibits abuse, contact, or additional restrictions, such as evicting or excluding the defendant from the plaintiff's residence or awarding temporary custody of minor children to the plaintiff. Additionally, the data include the order expiration date.
- *Weapons orders*: PFA orders can include restrictions on possession of a weapon or a license. The data include these restrictions as well as whether the order requires the defendant to relinquish any weapons.
- *Weapon retrieval*: the PFAD data also include details about the retrieval of weapons for the orders that require weapons relinquishment. This includes the date of retrieval and the law enforcement department that performed it.

Additionally, unique case identifiers were included in the data to link orders between the same plaintiff and defendant over time. This allows the team to conduct analyses at both the case and the order level. Analysis at the level of orders allows us to track the numbers and

characteristics of orders over time and is an indicator of the resources and time spent by justice agencies and courts. Analysis at the case level is a better indicator of the potential harm to a family as well as the true prevalence of orders/retrievals across Commonwealth households. Additionally, firearm retrievals are typically linked to an entire case, which may have multiple relinquishment orders (i.e., both temporary and final).

A number of limitations to the data should be noted. First, a number of important indicators were not reported by Philadelphia and Lehigh Counties, including whether a case had a relinquishment order. Second, while case identifiers are included, there is no consistent docket number to tie a case together or to link it to other cases that may be occurring (i.e. hearings for criminal acts). Finally, there is no indication in the data whether a final order was entered by agreement, or after a hearing in front of the Judge.

The descriptive analysis presented below proceeds in three areas. First, we analyze characteristics and growth of complete cases (i.e., those that have both a temporary and a final order). As the focus of this study is on final weapon relinquishment orders, we seek to understand the full process that leads to that outcome. We compare case characteristics between cases with and without final relinquishment orders. Additionally, we estimate the prevalence of PFA cases across all Pennsylvania households (using Census estimates of the number of households in Pennsylvania) and relinquishment orders across household with firearms. As not all households own a firearm, we use approximations from a study by RAND that estimates the percentage of household ownership (Schell et al., 2020).

Second, we present a number of case characteristics by county, showing the variation of cases across location. We also report case numbers, relinquishment rates and a number of other statistics at the county-level via state maps created using a geographic information system application (QGIS). Finally, we report totals and characteristics of all orders over time.

PCCD staff reviewed the data to ensure that there were no occurrences of personally identifiable information (PII) before transmitting to IUP, and the research team received IRB approval to work with data before receiving the data. Once received by IUP, the research team analyzed the data for inconsistencies and reporting errors (e.g., duplications, missing

data, radical aberrations, etc.). The sample included 219,031 temporary and final PFA orders.

Analysis of Cases

From May 2019 to January 2023, Pennsylvania courts conducted PFA hearings for over 105,000 unique cases. Table 1 breaks these into two groups: 1) 67,670 cases that consisted only of temporary orders (either ending prior to a hearing on a final order or not being granted a final order after hearing) and 2) 38,107 cases that ended with a granted final order. Of the second group, approximately 35% also included final weapons relinquishment orders, 13,504 cases over the timeframe. Also included are the number of retrievals executed for the second group of cases, 14,463 in total. The reason that more retrievals were executed than final relinquishment orders given is that many retrievals occur for a case upon the granting of a temporary order. Details on retrievals are discussed more below.

For the three full years of data available (2020-2022), we find that cases are increasing in every category, shown in Figure 2. While cases consisting only of temporary orders increased by 12%, those with a final order increased by 29%. Of these, orders with a final relinquishment provision increased by 47% (and retrievals by 45%) compared to only 19% for orders with no relinquishment provision.

TABLE 1: Summary of Cases

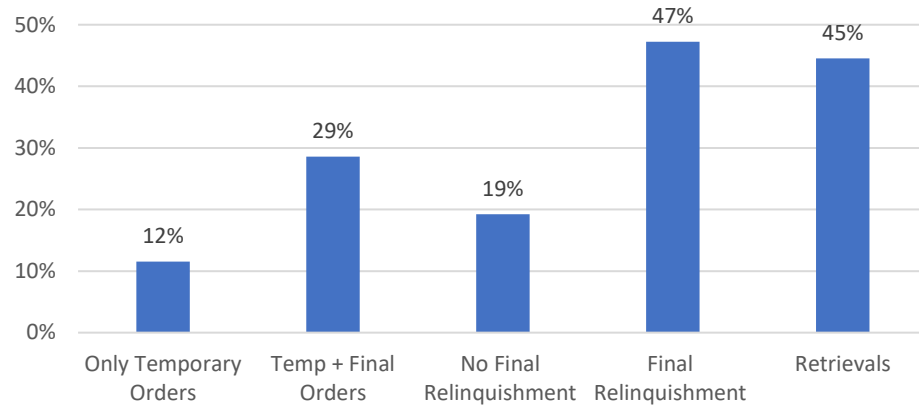
	Only Temporary Orders	Temp + Final Orders	No Final Relinquishment	Final Relinquishment	% with Relinquishment	Retrievals
2019*	12,079	6,452	4,507	1,945	30%	2,206
2020	16,696	8,792	5,857	2,935	33%	3,172
2021	17,390	10,487	6,594	3,893	37%	4,068
2022	18,629	11,304	6,982	4,322	38%	4,584
2023*	2,876	1,072	663	409	38%	433
Total	67,670	38,107	24,603	13,504	35%	14,463

Source: PFAD data on individual cases from May 2019 to January 2023.

Note: Does not contain Philadelphia and Lehigh Counties.

* Partial year data.

FIGURE 2: Three-Year Growth of Cases



Source: PFAD data on individual cases from May 2019 to January 2023.

Note: Does not contain Philadelphia and Lehigh Counties.

The higher rate of weapons-related cases is notable, as is the growing rate of all cases. Whether this is an indicator of increasing rates of abuse, especially when a weapon is involved, cannot be determined from the data. This may instead be an indicator of growing understanding and usage of PFA courts, as well as improving implementation of Act 79. Part of the growth rate may also be due to especially low totals of PFA cases in the base year of 2020, which was found to be a 4-year low from 2017 (Yerger et al., 2022). Monitoring and reporting of these totals should continue in the coming years to better understand these growth rates.

TABLE 2: Prevalence of Cases with Final Orders across Pennsylvania Households

	Households	Per 100,000 Households		% HHs with Firearm*	Per 100,000 HHs with Firearms	
		Only Temporary Orders	Temp + Final Orders		With Final Relinquishment	With Retrieval
2020	4,526,525	353	194	37.21%	174	188
2021	4,604,555	360	228	36.44%	232	242
2022	4,515,146	395	250	36.98%	259	275

Source: PFAD data on individual cases from May 2019 to January 2023.

Note: Does not contain Philadelphia and Lehigh Counties.

*RAND Estimates.

Table 2 estimates the prevalence of cases across households in the state. We find that the rate of PFA cases was 645 per 100,000 households in 2022 (395 with only temporary orders, 250 with final orders). Again, it is notable that these rates increased from 2020 to 2022. To put the prevalence of final orders in the context of other harms, it is higher than the prevalence of all injury deaths (unintended, homicides, and suicides) across the U.S. population of approximately 225 per 100,000 households (CDC, 2023).

As not all households own a firearm, prevalence measures for weapons relinquishments require a narrower scope to approximate actual risk. Using approximations from a study by RAND (Schell et al., 2020), we also calculated the prevalence of relinquishments and retrievals among households with a firearm (based on estimated ownership rates for the state), finding that 259 households per 100,000 experienced a PFA case with a final relinquishment order and 275 per 100,000 a weapon retrieval in 2022.

FIGURE 3: Weapons Cautions

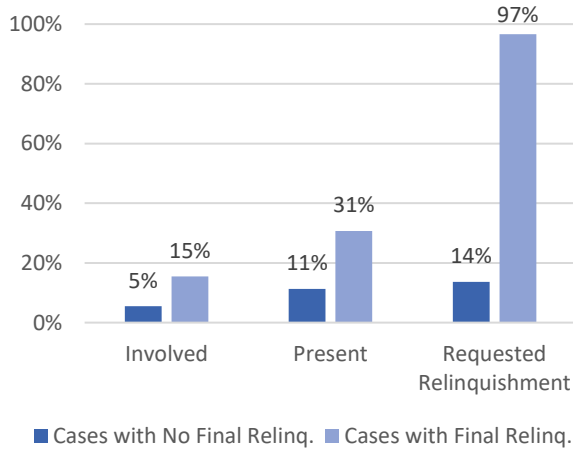


Figure 3a: Percentage of Cases with Weapons Cautions

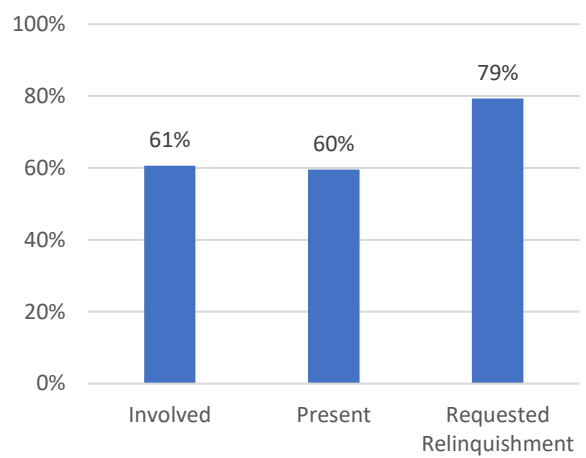


Figure 3b: Percentage of Cautions That Result in Final Relinquishments

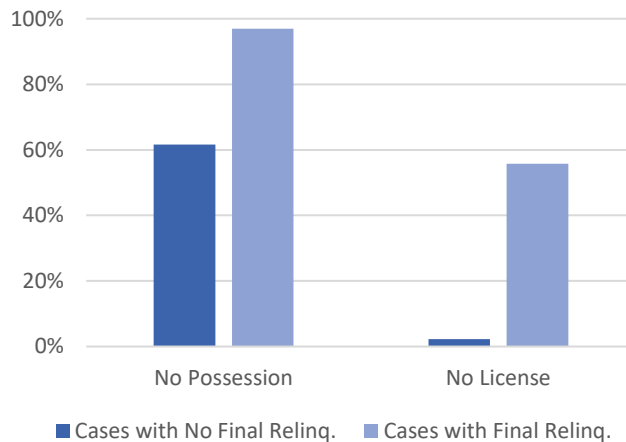
Source: PFAD data, analysis of 38,107 cases.

In the Petition for Protection from Abuse, the plaintiff can check caution indicators for whether a weapon was involved, present on the property, or requested to be relinquished, at either the temporary or final order stage. Figure 3 compares the rates of these caution indicators across cases with and without final relinquishment orders.¹ Across both case groups, cautions to request a relinquishment occur much more frequently than those indicating that a weapon was involved or present, as shown in Figure 3a. As can be seen however, 14% of cases that did not end with a relinquishment order indicated a caution from the plaintiff for that to be done.

When a caution is indicated by the plaintiff, how often does that result in a final relinquishment order? Figure 3b presents answers to that question. Across all these cases, 79% of cases with a request for weapon relinquishment were granted a final relinquishment. Perhaps surprisingly, only 61% of cases where a caution of a weapon being involved in the incident cited by Plaintiff in the petition resulted in a final order for weapon relinquishment.

¹ Cases with only temporary orders have similar caution rates to cases that end with a final order but no final relinquishment and are left out of the figure.

FIGURE 4: Firearm Prohibition Rates, by Case Type



Source: PFAD data, analysis of 38,107 cases.

Petitions for a PFA can result in several firearm-related prohibitions, including prohibiting the defendant from possessing a weapon, a firearm license, and/or requiring the defendant relinquish their weapons. Figure 4 moves from cautions indicated by a plaintiff to court-ordered prohibitions across cases. A large majority of all cases result in a prohibition of the defendant possessing a firearm (62% of cases with no relinquishment provision compared to 97% of those that required weapons relinquishment). Fewer cases result in an order prohibiting the possession of a license. For cases resulting in a final relinquishment, almost all also include a prohibition of any firearm possession and almost 60% prohibit possession of a firearm license.

When a plaintiff is filling out a petition for a final PFA, they are asked to indicate the relationship between the plaintiff(s) and defendant. This can include the relationship between oneself and the defendant and/or the relationship of other parties, such as children, to the defendant.

Figure 5a presents the distribution of relationships indicated in final PFA orders. Most petitions are made by an intimate partner of the plaintiff (over 55% in both case groups). Parents of the defendant request the

FIGURE 5: Final Order Relationships and Abuse/Contact Prohibitions

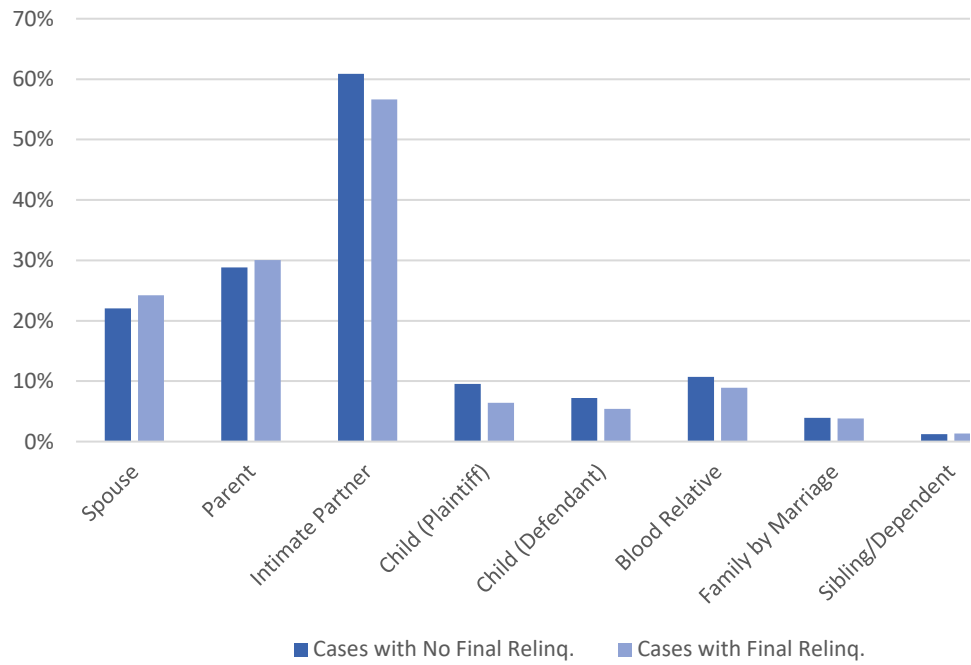


Figure 5a: Plaintiff Relationship(s) to Defendant in Final Order

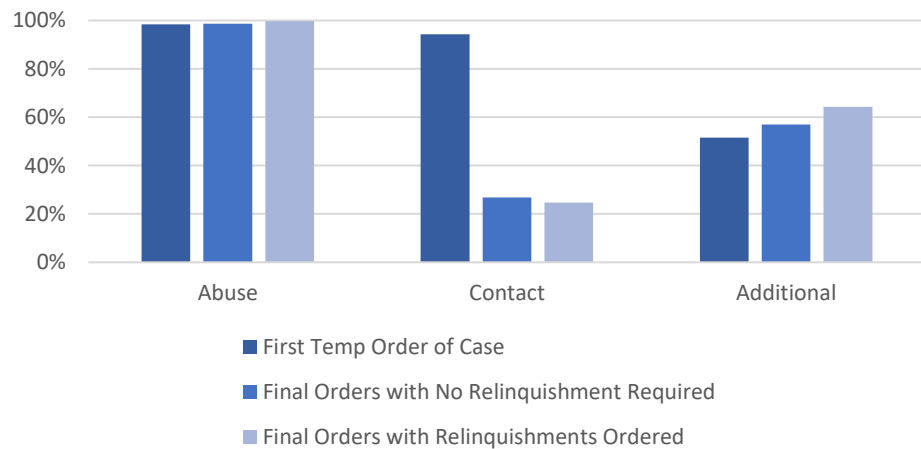


Figure 5b: Abuse/Contact Prohibitions in Final Order

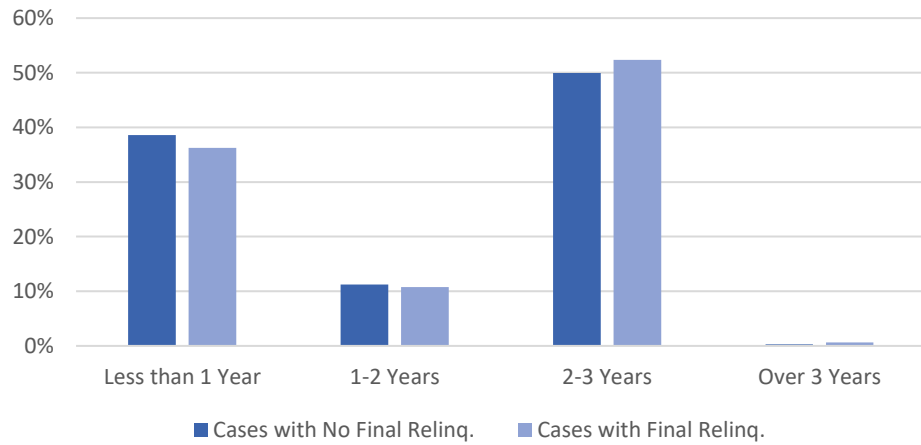
Source: PFAD data, analysis of 38,107 cases.

petition in nearly 30% of cases and spouses of the defendant in just over 20% of cases. In approximately 40% of cases, multiple relationships are noted, such as spouse and child. Again, these relationships indicate the plaintiffs (and their relations) that are protected by a final order.

Figure 5b details the specific protection/prohibition ordered by final PFAs. Protections from abuse and/or contact by the defendant can be ordered in both the temporary and the final order. To identify changes across that process, we present protections for both the initial, temporary order stage of a case, as well as the protections laid out in the final order of a case.

Since this report analyzes all PFA cases, it appears that the court orders that the plaintiff be protected from abuse by the defendant in nearly 100% in all case categories and at the temporary and final order stages. Interestingly, protection from contact is ordered in 94% of cases during the initial temporary order. This falls to approximately 25% of cases in the final order, for both those ending with and without a relinquishment. Additional protections, such as evicting or excluding the defendant from the plaintiff's residence or awarding temporary custody of minor children to the plaintiff, increase from the temporary order stage in 52% of cases to 57% of cases ending with a final order but no order to relinquish weapons and 64% of cases with weapons relinquishment required by the final order.

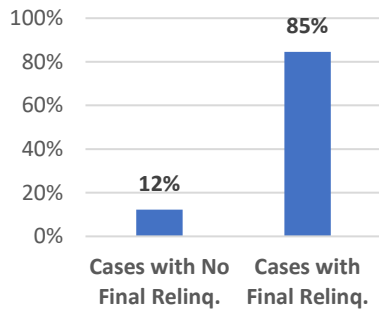
FIGURE 6: Case Expiration



Source: PFAD data, analysis of 38,107 cases.

The court either sets a specific expiration date for a final order or allows the default expiration of three years from the date that the order is issued. Figure 6 shows the distribution of cases with a final order across expiration date. Over 50% of cases have an expiration date between 2-3 years, with a majority of these having the default of three years. Just under 40% of final PFA orders expire within one year of the effect date.

FIGURE 7: Retrieval Rates



Source: PFAD data, analysis of 38,107 cases with final orders.

Relinquishment orders may be made at either the temporary or final PFA hearing. Of those that end with a relinquishment in the final order, 85% indicated successful weapons retrieval. This is in line with previous studies that suggest about 80% of ERPOs (extreme protection orders/red flag laws) resulted in confirmed weapons/firearms relinquishment. Of cases that did not end with a final relinquishment, 12% were relinquished in the temporary order phase and presumably returned upon the final order (with no further relinquishment being given).

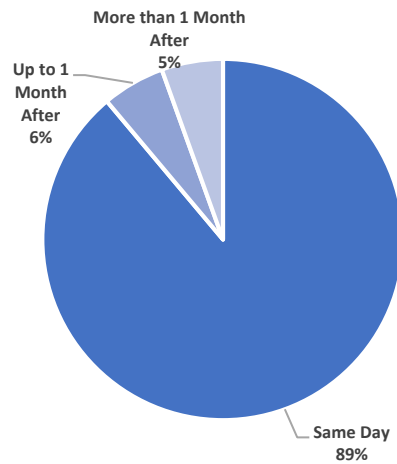
Table 3 gives a yearly breakdown of the number of retrievals and non-retrieval percentage for cases with a final relinquishment order. Over the four-plus year timespan of the data, 2,043 cases did not indicate in the data a successful retrieval (approximately 15% of all cases).

TABLE 3: Final Relinquishment Orders & Retrievals

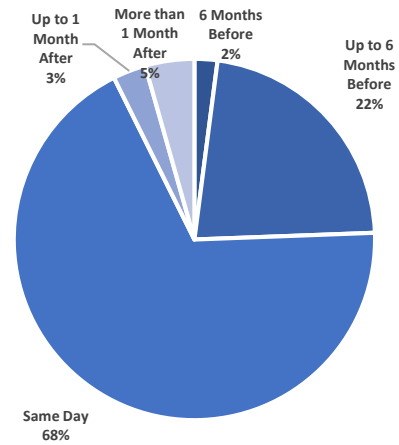
	Final Relinquishment	Retrieved	Not Retrieved	%
2019*	1,945	1,641	304	16%
2020	2,935	2,539	396	13%
2021	3,893	3,281	612	16%
2022	4,322	3,661	661	15%
2023*	409	339	70	17%
Total	13,504	11,461	2,043	15%

Source: PFAD data, analysis of 13,504 cases with final relinquishment orders.

FIGURE 8: Retrieval Times Of Cases with Final Orders



8a: From First Order Date (Temp or Final)



8b: From Final Order Date

Source: PFAD data. Figure 7a is an analysis of 14,138 cases with any relinquishment order where the relinquishment was successful. Figure 7b is an analysis of 11,427 cases with a final order where relinquishment was successful.

According to Act 79, defendants are allowed 24 hours after the effective order date to comply with a relinquishment order. As shown in Figure 8, relatively few cases that result in a successful relinquishment take longer than one month. From the date of the first relinquishment order in a case (Figure 8a), 89% of cases saw a relinquishment taking place in the same day. Only 5% of these take longer than one month. From the date of the final order (Figure 8b), many cases have already seen successful relinquishments (24% prior to that date). 68% more are successful on the day of the final order. Again, only 5% of cases see a successful relinquishment more than one month after the final order.

County-Level Analysis

While it is important to see the state-level totals of cases and their characteristics, county-level analysis of these same cases show a large variation in PFA petitions and orders. Figure 9 presents the distribution of relinquishment and retrieval rates across counties while Maps 1-3 indicate case totals and rates for each county.

Figure 9a shows the percentage of cases with both a temporary and final order ($n = 38,107$) that also have a final order for weapons relinquishment. As above, the state rate is 35% (depicted by the red dot on the figure), but the range across counties goes from 0% of cases (Jefferson County) to 100% of cases (Sullivan County). Six other counties have relinquishment rates of less than 10% of PFA cases (including Allegheny County), while five other counties have rates above 95%. Map 2b presents this data with the corresponding county rate.

For the subset of cases that have a final relinquishment order, counties also vary as to the percentage that report successful retrievals, shown in Figure 9b. Forty-seven counties are near or above the state rate of 85% or more. Of the nine counties that have retrieval rates under 65%, all of them have relatively low relinquishment order rates (all under 25%). County rates can be seen in Map 3b.

Timing of retrieval has considerably less variation across counties. Figure 9c shows that 47 counties have same-day (or before) retrieval in 90% of their cases or more (close to the state rate of 93%) and 11 more have rates over 80% of cases. Only six counties have rates under 80% and three of these also have very low relinquishment rates, as shown in Map 4.

FIGURE 9: County Distribution of Relinquishments and Retrievals

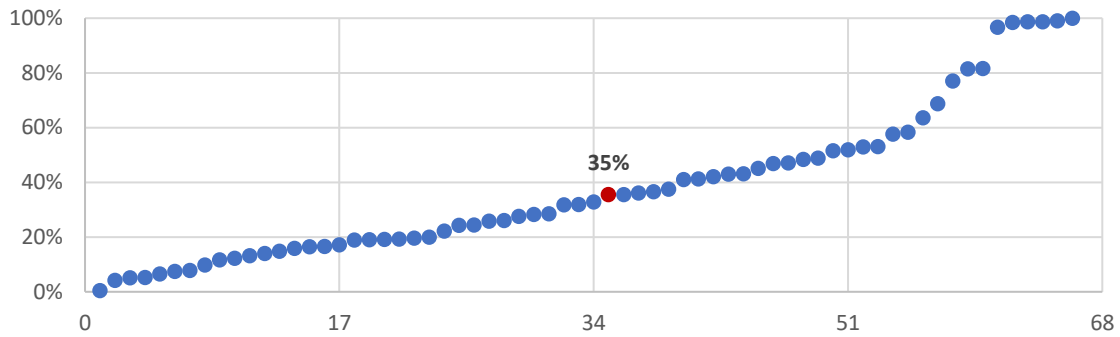


Figure 9a: County Rates of Relinquishments to All Final Order Cases

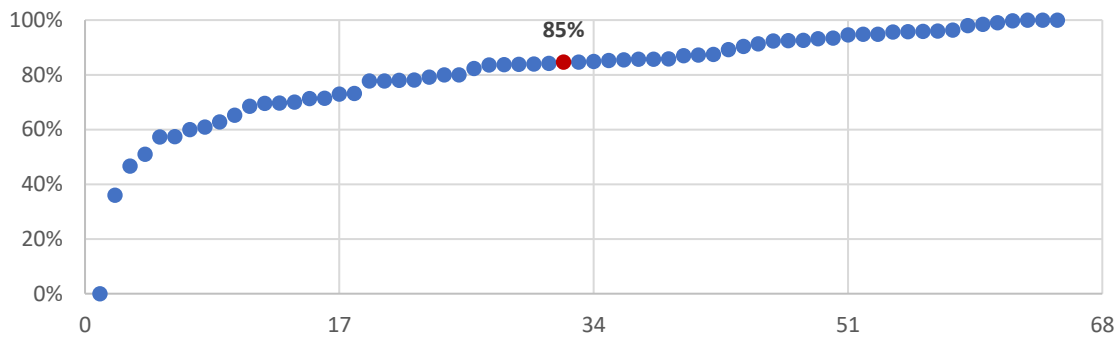


Figure 9b: County Retrievals Rates of All Final Cases with Relinquishments

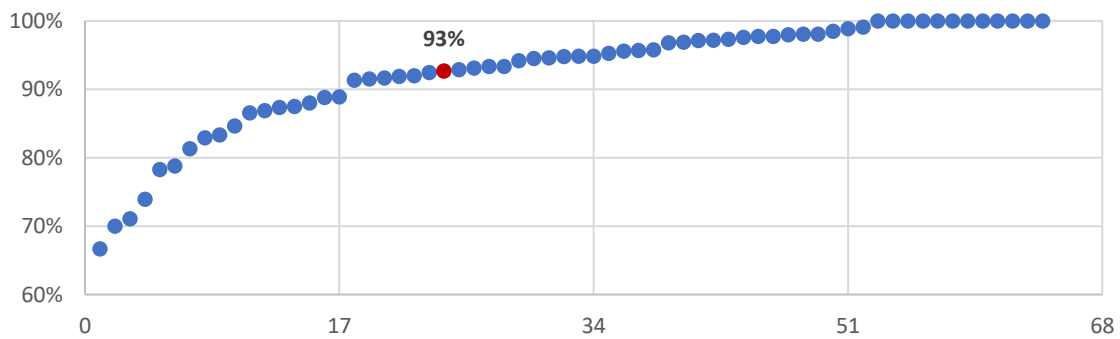
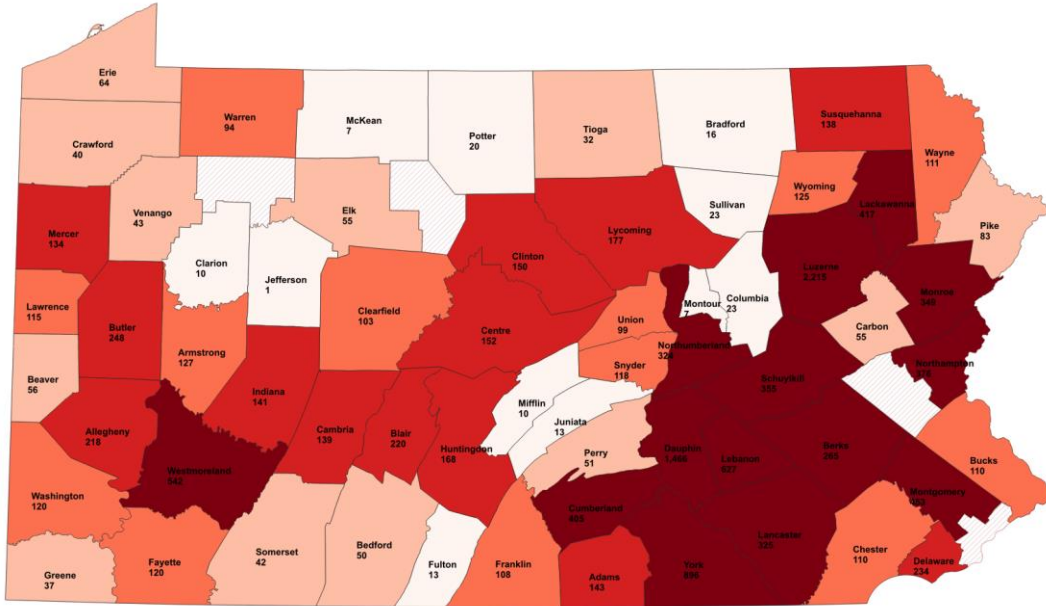


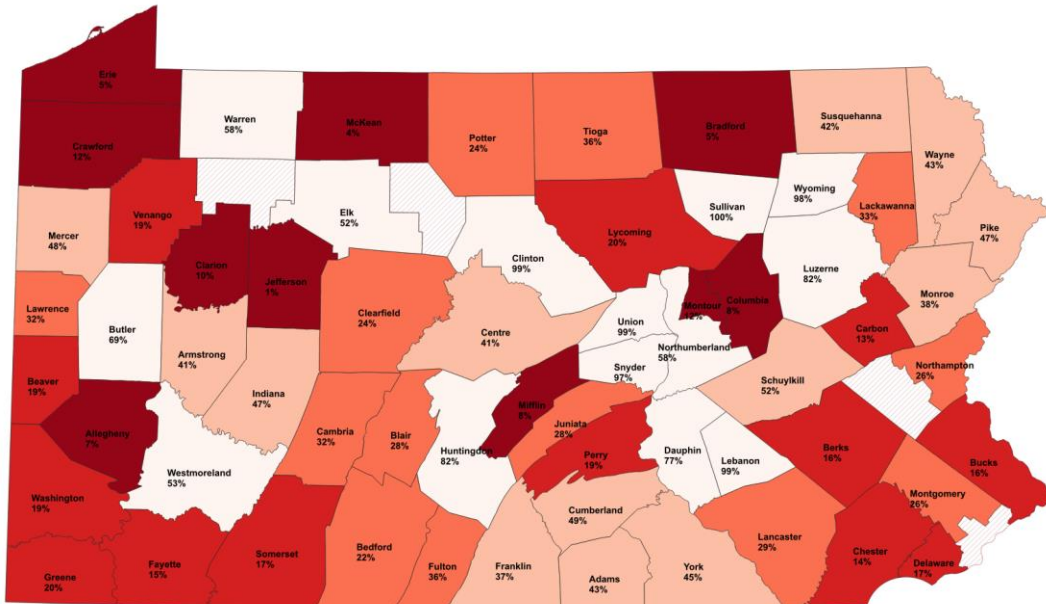
Figure 9c: County Rates of Retrievals Occurring on/Before Final Order

Source: PFAD data on 38,107 full cases from May 2019 to January 2023.
Note: Does not include Philadelphia and Lehigh counties.

MAP 2: PFA Cases with Final Relinquishment Orders and Rates, by County



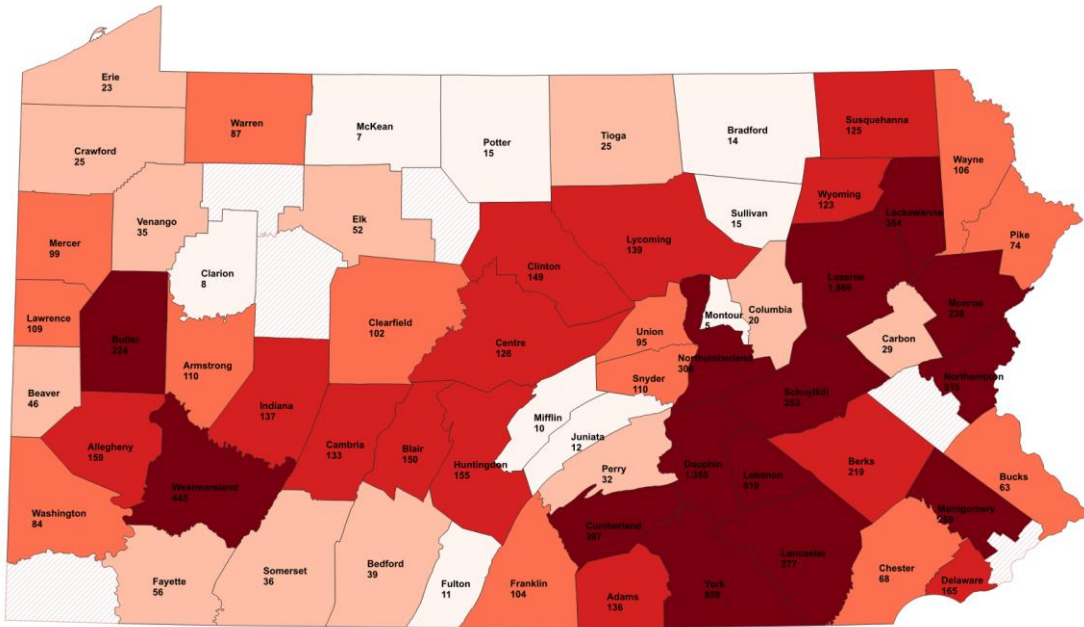
2a: Final Relinquishment Orders



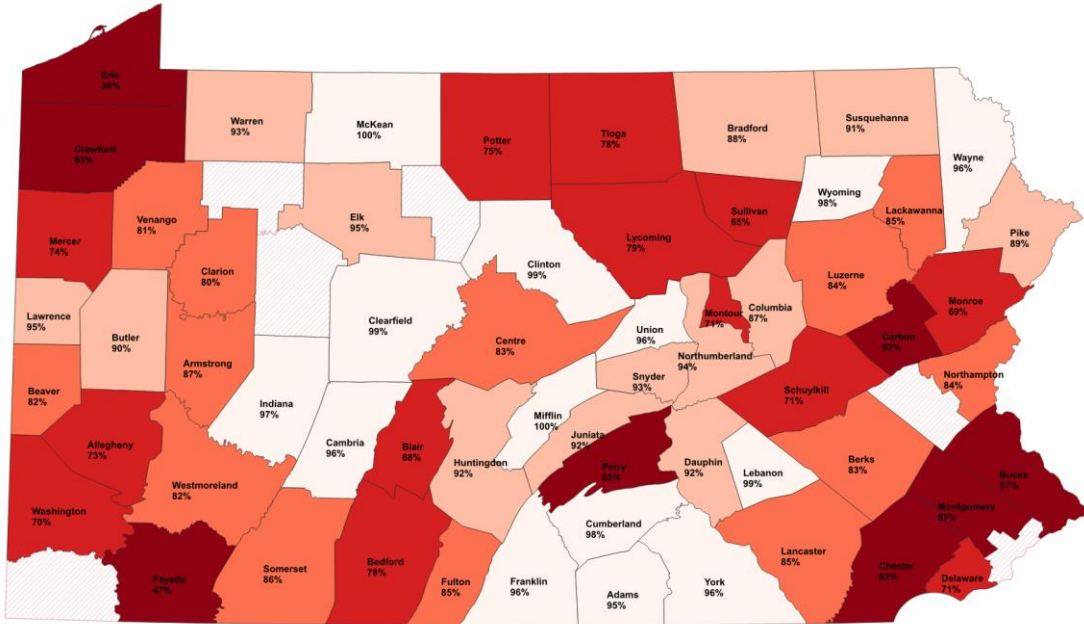
2b: Relinquishment Rates (Relinquishments-to-Full-Cases)

Notes: Results were withheld for counties that had less than 20 cases in the data. 2a: Lighter colors represent the 25 percent of counties with the lowest number of cases that include a final relinquishment order; darker red represents counties with the most total cases that include a final relinquishment order. 2b: Lighter colors represent the 25 percent of counties with the highest relinquishment rates; darker red represents counties with the lowest rates.

MAP 3: PFA Cases with Retrievals and Rates, by County



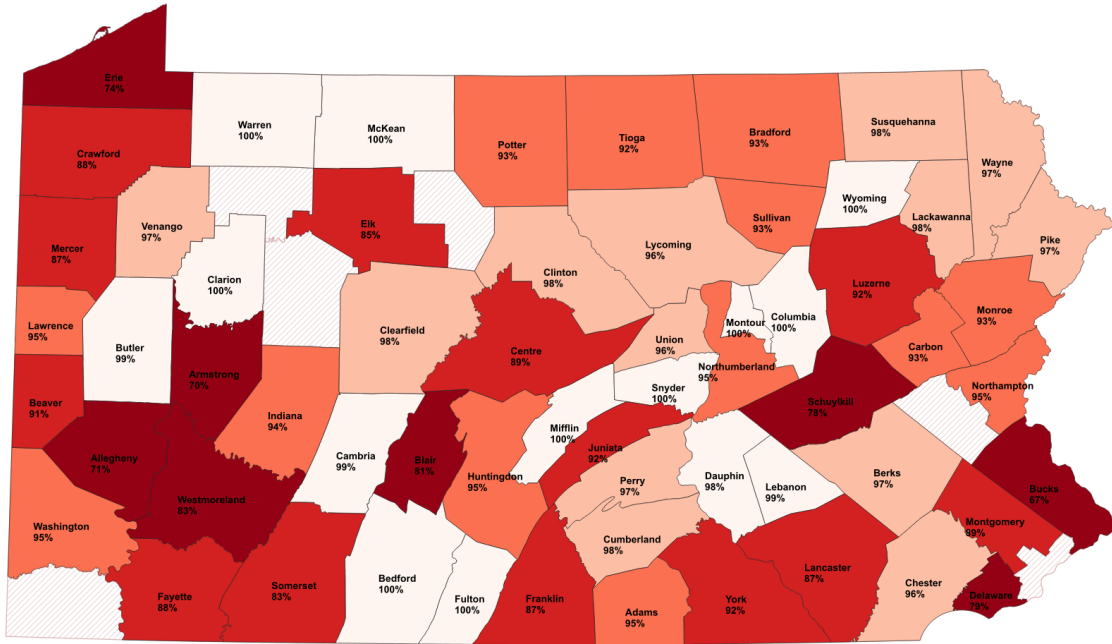
3a: Total Retrievals



3b: Retrieval Rate (Retrievals-to-Final-Relinquishment-Orders)

Notes: Results were withheld for counties that had less than 20 cases in the data. 3a: Lighter colors represent the 25 percent of counties with the lowest number of retrievals; darker red represents counties with the most total retrievals. 3b: Lighter colors represent the 25 percent of counties with the highest retrieval rates; darker red represents counties with the lowest rates.

MAP 4: Same-Day Retrieval Rates (% of Total Retrievals)



Notes: Results in the map were withheld for counties that had less than 20 cases in the data. Lighter colors represent the 25 percent of counties with the highest retrieval rates; darker red represents counties with the lowest rates.

Another set of indicators worth comparing across counties relates to weapons-related cautions indicated in petitions. Again, we see large variation across counties, indicated in Figure 10. Statewide, 47% of cases include a weapon caution or request for relinquishment in the petition. However, a number of counties see any caution at half the rate or lower, depicted by the lighted-shaded counties in Map 5a. A number of counties have rates of 80% or more of their cases, indicated in the darker shading in Map 5a. Figure 9b shows the percentage of cases indicating that a weapon was involved, with the statewide rate of 7%. The range across counties is from 0% of cases in Luzerne County to over 20% in Franklin and Fulton Counties.

FIGURE 10: County Distribution of Weapons Cautions

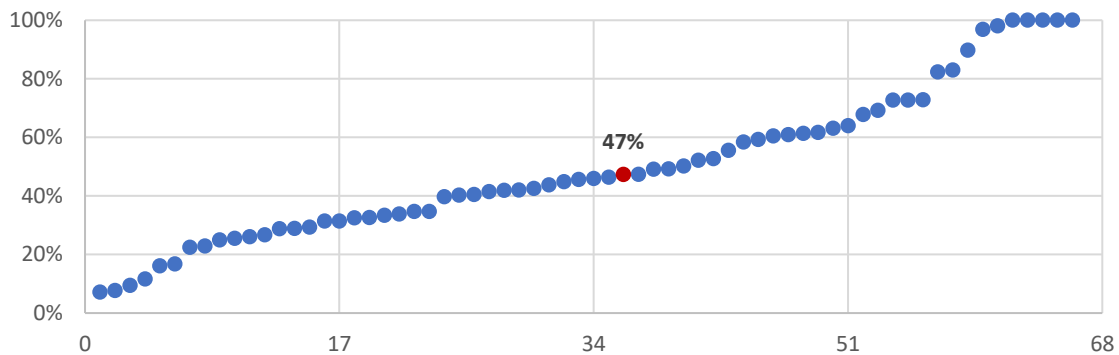


Figure 10a: County Rates of Any Weapons Caution (Including Relinquishment Request)

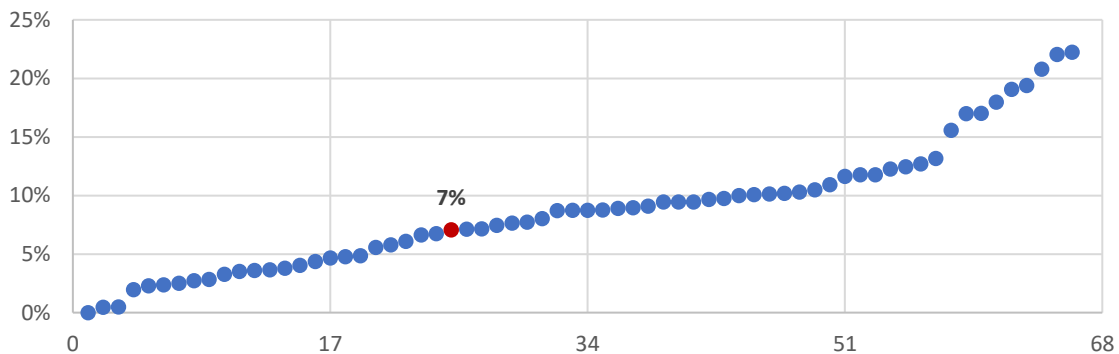


Figure 10b: County Rates of Weapon-Involved Caution

Source: PFAD data on 38,107 full cases from May 2019 to January 2023.
 Note: Does not include Philadelphia and Lehigh counties.

Order-Level Analysis

While case-level analysis gave insights into household prevalence and the complexity that goes on within the PFA and weapon relinquishment process, an analysis of orders gives insights into the overall time and resources being spent towards protection orders and enforcement. Again, we see overall numbers of orders increasing but weapons-involved orders increasing at faster rates.

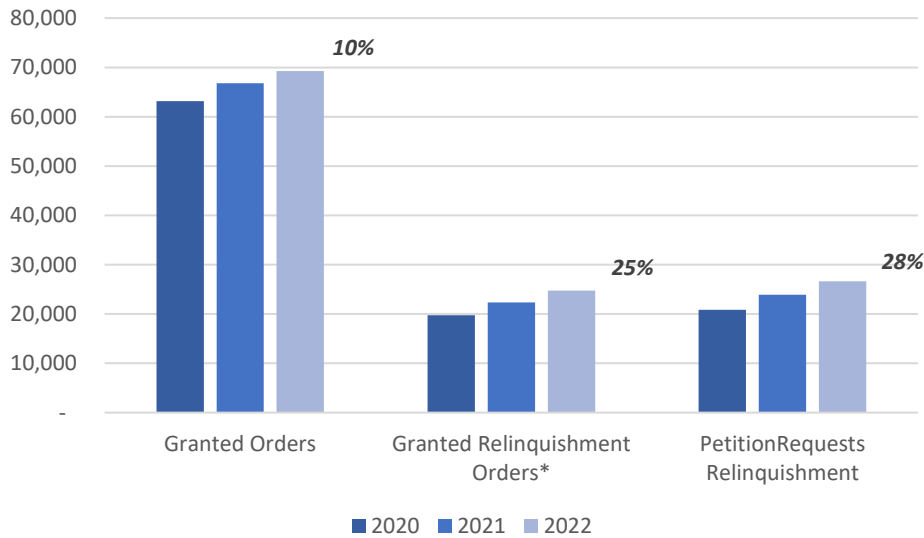
State-wide Approximations

While some counties in the data do not include whether a weapons relinquishment was granted or not, we can make approximations due to the strong correlation between actual relinquishments and the caution indicator where a petitioner requests a weapon relinquishment. State-wide totals presented below reflect approximated weapons relinquishment orders based on this calculation.

Figure 11 presents the total number of granted orders across the state from 2020-2022. Total orders rose from around 63,176 to over 69,240, a 10% increase in three years. Orders that included a weapons relinquishment rose from 19,742 to 24,766, a 25% increase. Orders where the plaintiff requested a weapon be relinquished also increased during this time.

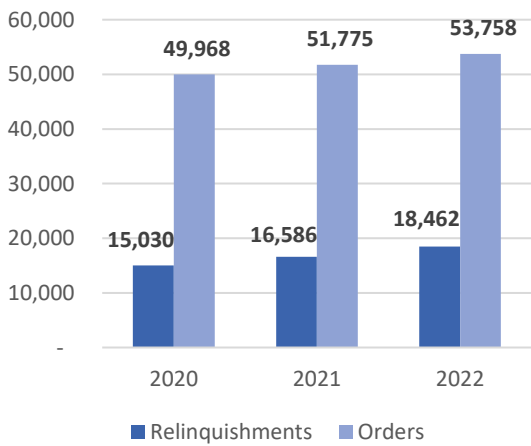
Figure 12 breaks these totals into temporary and final orders separately. Temporary PFA orders increased by 8% over this period compared to 17% for final PFA orders. Also shown are orders including relinquishments: temporary relinquishments increased by 23%, compared to a 34% increase in final relinquishment orders.

FIGURE 11: Order Totals and 3-year Growth

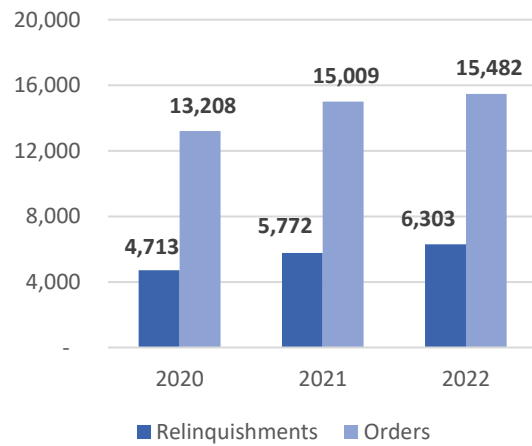


Source: PFAD data on 199,200 orders from 2020-2022.
 Note: Includes estimations for Philadelphia and Lehigh number of orders.

FIGURE 12: Temporary vs. Final Order and Relinquishment Order Totals



12a: Granted Temporary Orders

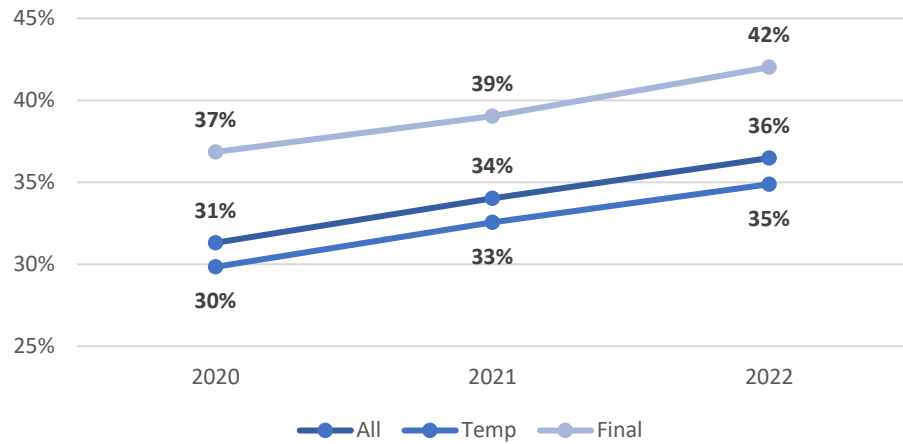


12b: Granted Final Orders

Source: PFAD data on 199,200 orders from 2020-2022.
 Notes: Includes estimations for Philadelphia and Lehigh number of orders.

In fact, a higher proportion of PFA orders that had weapon relinquishment orders rose from 31% of orders in 2020 to 36% of orders in 2022. In 2022, 42% of final PFAs included a weapon relinquishment order. Figure 13 shows the 3-year growth in the percentage of relinquishments in PFA orders. Both temporary and final orders increased in this rate by five percentage points. It should be noted that relinquishments play a larger role in final PFA orders than in temporary ones.

FIGURE 13: Relinquishment Orders as a Percentage of All Orders

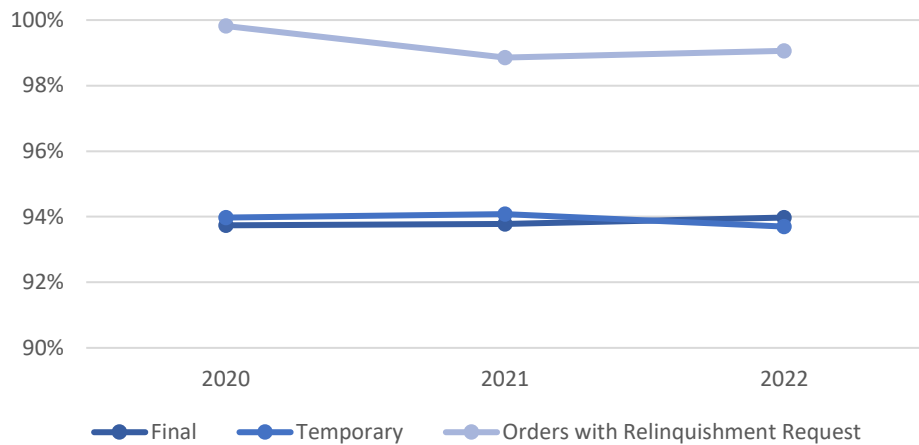


Source: PFAD data on 199,200 orders from 2020-2022.
Note: Estimations for Philadelphia and Lehigh counties included.

PFA Petition and Order Characteristics

This section presents descriptive characteristics of PFA petitions and orders. Figure 14 gives the percentage of PFA petitions that are granted by the court either by agreement between the parties or after a hearing on the matter. About 94% of both temporary and final orders are granted by courts. This jumps to 99% when orders being considered (either temporary or final) have a request for weapons relinquishment by the plaintiff.

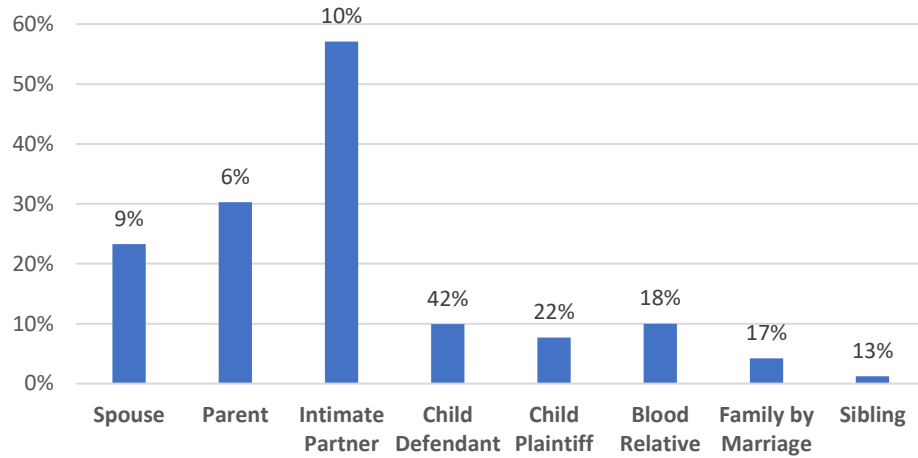
FIGURE 14: Percentage of PFA Petitions That Are Granted Orders



Source: PFAD data on 175,191 orders from 2020-2022.

Note: Philadelphia and Lehigh counties did not have data on relinquishment orders.

FIGURE 15: Relation Protected by Final Order and 3-Year Growth



Source: PFAD data on 39,092 final orders from 2020-2022.
Note: Does not include Philadelphia and Lehigh counties.

Similar to Figure 5 above indicating the relationship between the plaintiff(s) and defendant within a case, Figure 15 shows the distribution of relationship status across all final orders over three years. Of note is the 3-year growth rate shown above each bar. The largest growth rates involve cases with a child as a co-plaintiff, either of the defendant or the plaintiff. Cases involving the child of the defendant increased 42% from 2020-2022, compared to the overall growth of final orders of 17%. Cases involving the child of the plaintiff increased by 22%. That more orders indicate children in need of protection from abuse by a parent should be studied further to determine whether this is due to increasing levels of child abuse or due to factors mentioned above, such as greater awareness and utilization of the protection system.

**FIGURE 16: Caution and Order Percentages
All PFA Orders**

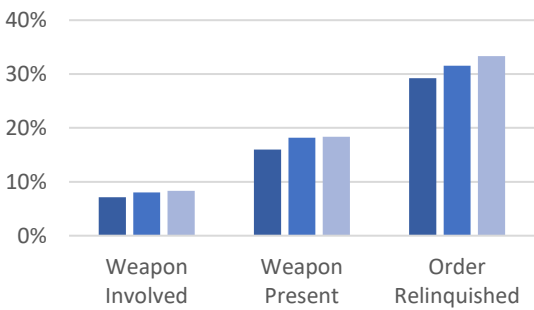


Figure 16a: Weapon Cautions

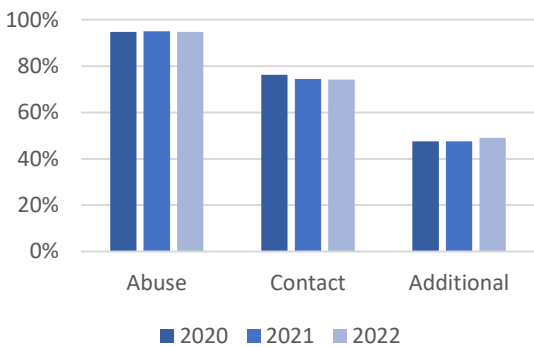


Figure 16b: No Abuse/Contact Orders

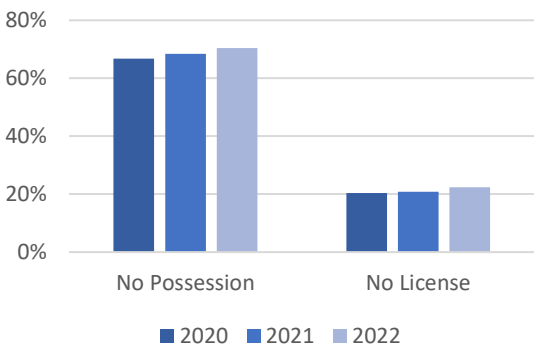


Figure 16c: Weapon Orders

Source: PFAD data on 175,191 orders from 2020-2022.
Note: Does not include Philadelphia and Lehigh counties.

Figure 16 presents other characteristics about temporary and final orders. The percentage of petitions indicating a weapon being involved increased to 8% in 2022 and being present to 18%. Over 30% of petitions request that a weapon be relinquished.

Keeping in mind that granted orders increased by 10% from 2020-2022 (Figure 11 above), orders involving weapons grew at a higher pace, over 20% growth in orders indicating that a weapon was involved, present, or that a request was made for relinquishment.

Figure 16b shows that no-abuse, no-contact, and additional orders (i.e. eviction, etc.) remained fairly stable as a proportion of all orders over the timeframe.

Figure 16c shows that no possession orders increased from 67-70% of all orders while no licenses requirements in the order increased from 20-22% of all orders, similar to other findings regarding increasing indicators of weapons involvement in abuse cases.

Table 4 shows the growth of PFA orders that include a weapons relinquishment. Temporary orders with a relinquishment increased by 18% while those with final orders by 28% from 2020 to 2022. On the whole, all relinquishment orders increased by 20% while retrievals increased by 22%.

Again, acknowledging that many individual cases include both a temporary and a final petition, weapons retrieval should be measured against the case rather than individual orders. As a defendant has 24 hours to comply, an actual retrieval may take place before the final order (which would show up as both a temporary and a final retrieval for the case). Figure 6 above gave the statistic that 85% of case relinquishment orders result in a retrieval. Table 4 here simply points out that overall retrievals are growing faster than overall relinquishment orders. A final note about retrievals – for each year of the analysis, sheriff departments perform the actual retrieval for over 75% of orders.

Year	Temporary	Final	Total Relinquishment Orders	Retrievals
2020	12,732	3,765	16,497	7,363
2021	13,650	4,674	18,324	8,275
2022	14,966	4,822	19,788	8,987
3-Year Growth	18%	28%	20%	22%

Source: PFAD data on 175,191 orders from 2020-2022.
 Note: Does not include Philadelphia and Lehigh counties.

Summary

In summary, the analysis of full PFA cases (across multiple orders for each case) unveils a number of important findings. First, the number of cases that go through the full process (temporary plus final hearings) grew more rapidly from 2020 to 2022 than cases with only temporary orders. While this data cannot determine the reasons for the difference in rates, one possibility involves a growing willingness and/or knowledge of plaintiffs to move further in the PFA process, perhaps due to growing access to and usage of support services. Another possibility may be a growing awareness of the court to use these protections in cases. A potentially greater willingness to pursue and grant greater protection is also found in the difference growth of cases with final order: those also having a weapons relinquishment order grew over twice as fast as those with no relinquishment order.

Second, there may be growing confidence in the process by both plaintiffs and courts. When a petition indicates caution that a weapon was involved or present during an abusive event, 60% result in a final relinquishment order. When the stronger caution requesting that a weapon be relinquish is checked in the petition, nearly 80% of cases result in a final order that includes a provision that weapons be relinquished. Confidence in the process may also be growing due to the rates of compliance: 85% of relinquishment orders result in a successful retrieval and 92% of these occur on the same day or before. This could be seen by victims as an indication that the system is reliably working to intervene and protect.

Third, this analysis is one of very few to attempt to estimate a prevalence of PFA orders across the Pennsylvania population. In 2022, nearly 7 in 1,000 Pennsylvania households experienced a PFA case and nearly 3 in 1,000 households with a firearm present experienced a case requiring a weapon relinquishment. The use of the PFA petition to warn of potential harm from a weapon increased from 44% of cases in 2020 to 51% of cases in 2022. The number of final cases having a weapons relinquishment order grew from 33% in 2020 to 38% in 2022 – *petition use, indication of a weapon caution, and order of weapon relinquishment are all growing in prevalence in Pennsylvania.*

County-level analysis showed considerable variation across cases: the percentage that have a relinquishment order, the retrieval rate, and the

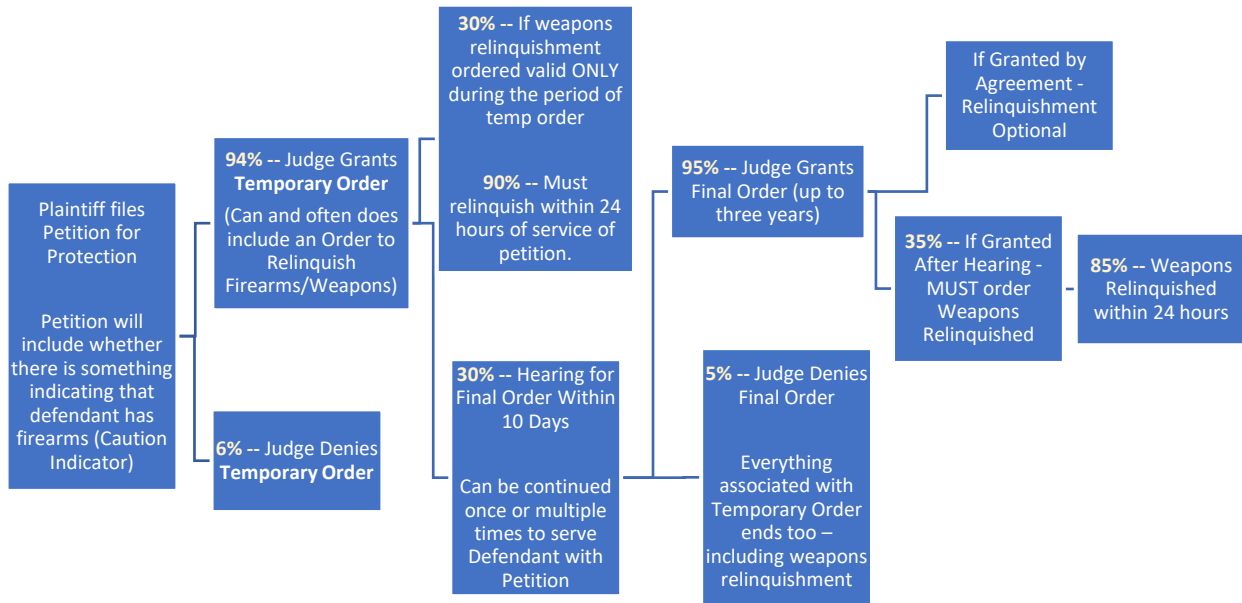
rate of performing retrievals on the same day or before. Additionally, counties vary in the percentage of cases involving a weapon. In overall order totals, we see a 10% increase since 2020 (a relatively low year of granted orders due to COVID-19) but a 28% increase in orders containing a weapons relinquishment.

Implications & Suggested Next Steps

With the results above, we have a better understanding of the PFA and weapons relinquishment process presented above in Figure 1. The complexity of this process should be highlighted. Figure 17 re-presents this flowchart with percentages from the results section. After an initial temporary petition is filed, we know that approximately 94% of these are granted temporary orders. Approximately 30% of these temporary orders also contain a weapons relinquishment and 90% of those are successfully retrieved within 24 hours. About 30% of these cases continue to the final order hearing, where 95% of those are granted by the judge either after a hearing or by agreement between the parties. For those that include a final weapons relinquishment order, 85% are successfully retrieved (and over 90% of those within 24 hours, if not before). The results from this analysis have helped with clearing up uncertainty surrounding the PFA and relinquishment process.

The complexity of the PFAD data, linking petition information to court orders to relinquishment orders and retrievals, created barriers to case analysis. In working with the PFAD data, the team identified a number of areas that could improve reporting of cases over time, add greater efficiency and transparency of the relinquishment process, and enhance the public's and law-enforcement agencies' understanding of the process and its implementation.

FIGURE 17: PFA and Relinquishment Process with Results



Note: Authors' model of PFA process.

First, cross-system capabilities could be enhanced if PFA cases were linked to corresponding court docket sheets, which are maintained by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC). Additional disposition data, dates, and docket entries could be added to the information created on PFA cases above to create a more thorough understanding of how cases start and play out over the whole process. One limitation of the current analysis is that there is no way to tell if a case is withdrawn or otherwise not further pursued by the plaintiff, although that is inferred by the number of cases that have temporary order only. AOPC docket information could be linked to the PFAD data that we report regarding weapons cautions and relinquishments.

Second, a few enhancements in the PFAD data could enable better analysis of cases, given their extreme complexity. Many cases between a plaintiff and defendant have multiple temporary orders, while some even have multiple final orders. However, the PFAD system does not have an iterative numbering system for subsequent petitions or hearings (i.e. temporary hearing #1, #2, etc.). Further, the system does not indicate if an order is brought through the emergency PFA process. These can be requested after hours or on weekends when a victim needs immediate

protection from abuse. A future analysis on emergency PFAs and rates of weapon cautions and relinquishment orders would be informative as it is possible that an emergency situation would be more likely to involve a weapon. Additionally, no link exists to match up a specific relinquishment order (temporary or final within a case) to the subsequent retrieval attempt – this was approximated in the analysis above by date. Finally, the data does not include the method by which a final order was entered, whether by agreement or hearing after a judge. This factor is imperative to determining whether the court was required by Act 79 to order that weapons be relinquished. Hearing number tracking, emergency order indicators, and specific order-to-retrieval tracking would streamline the process of full-case analysis and reporting.

Third, missing data in the PFAD system should be addressed. Large counties, namely Philadelphia and Lehigh, are missing important final order information, such as whether there is a no-abuse order or there is a relinquishment order. A number of other counties have no indication for weapons involved but have weapons relinquishments, as shown in the county maps above. As stated above, 85% of relinquishment orders have a confirming entry for retrieval; but 15% of cases have no retrieval information. In these cases, we do not know whether the retrieval was attempted, was successful and not logged in the system, or what otherwise happened. While there is an indicator for weapons not retrieved in the PFAD system, it does not match up our calculations of no retrieval information (15%).

The results presented above create an informative baseline of trends in PFA orders and weapons relinquishments. They have helped stakeholders better understand how the PFA process is currently being implemented. Continued improvements in the data entry and reporting systems, along with continued monitoring and reporting of this data, will better establish whether the growing numbers of cases represent increased instances of violence or greater access to and usage of systems of protection from domestic abuse.

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