

Violent Crime Rates Up in City

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Samuel Stebbins and Evan Comen are analysts for 24/7 Wall St., a news and opinion company delivering content over the Internet. Many of the nation's largest news organizations like USAToday regularly republish the company's articles.

Comparisons of American cities and counties are a frequent theme in 24/7 Wall St. news. "The Happiest (and Most Miserable) Cities in America," "Most Religious County in Every State," and "The Most Obese County in Every State" are some 24/7 Wall St. headlines from the past month alone.

Stebbins and Comen recently wrote, "25 Cities where Crime is Soaring." Subsequently, USAToday picked up and distributed the article locally on gosangelo.com because our community is one of 25 metropolitan areas across the nation with the most rapidly increasing rates of violent crime. The article caught our attention, because we were working to update the West Texas Violence Index.

The Violence Index is one of several projects in the portfolio of statistical indicators produced and distributed each year by ASU Community Development Initiatives (CDI). Since 2012, CDI has analyzed six violent trends in San Angelo and three neighboring urban centers; Abilene, Midland, and Odessa. One of the six factors in the CDI Violence Index is the violent crime rate based on incidents of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

The basis of Stebbins and Comen naming our city was the observation that the violent crime rate increased by 32.5% between 2011 and 2016 in the San Angelo metropolitan area including Irion and Tom Green counties. Although CDI's violent crime rate data focuses strictly on the city proper, it agrees with the Stebbins and Comen finding.

San Angelo had an increase from 287 violent crimes in 2011 to 371 in 2016. These numbers convert to rates of 263.8 per 100,000 residents in 2011 and 364.2 per 100,000 in 2016. Similar to Stebbins and Comen's finding for the metro area, San Angelo city's rate of violent crime climbed by 38% between 2011 and 2016.

Of course, nobody wants to see a 38% increase in violent crime. However, CDI's Violence Index helps bring perspective to this finding by including five other trends and comparing San Angelo with its neighboring cities. Taken in context, the rising violent crime rate is clearly not the city's only serious violence problem and it is not the only city showing these problems.

Indeed, San Angelo does not have an especially high rate violent crime, despite its rapid increase.. For instance, the city's 2016 level (364.2 per 100,000) is less than half the rate for Odessa (808.4 per 100,000), and Abilene's rate of 445.6 per 100,000 is 22% higher than San Angelo. Violent crime in Texas was 433.4 per 100,000 residents in 2016, 19% higher than San Angelo.

Furthermore, San Angelo has some significantly higher rates for other types of violent events. Take family violence, for instance. There were 1,444 incidents of family violence per 100,000 people in the city during 2016. This was 2nd highest among the four area cities, and it was more

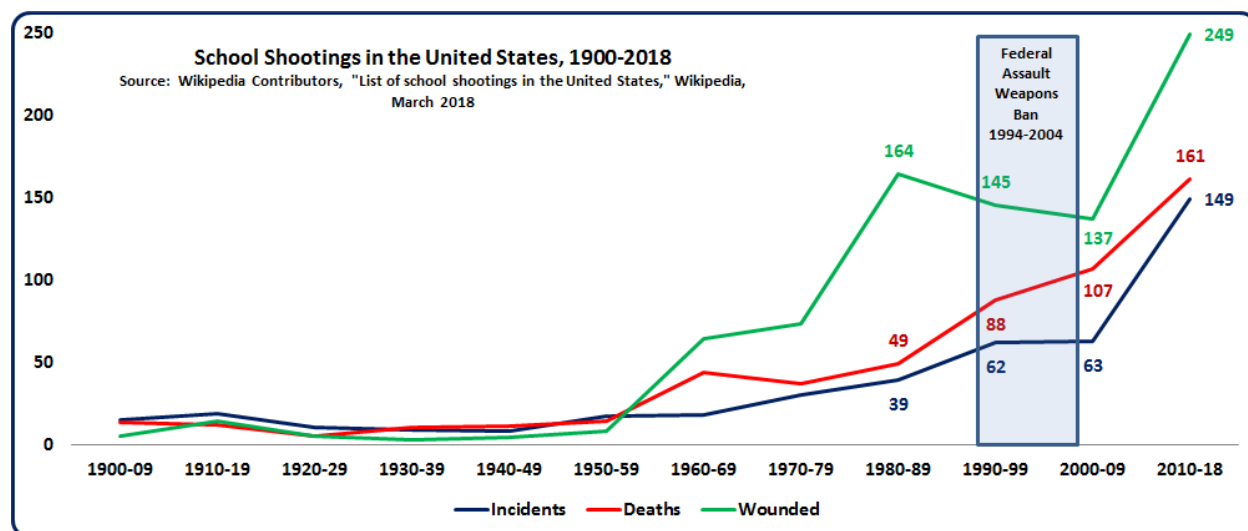
than double the statewide level of 706.5 per 100,000 Texans.

Child abuse is another major issue in our community. With 27,484 children in Tom Green County during 2016, there were 297 confirmed abuse incidents. This computes to a rate of 1,080.6 per 100,000 kids. Again, it is the 2nd highest among the four area urban centers and 36% higher than the state level of 791.7 per 100,000 children.

The school shooting that left 17 dead at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida during February was one reason Stebbins and Comen decided to compare violent crime. They wanted to show that violence is on the rise in many metro areas across the country that are “hometown” places not typically viewed as having crime problems.

The most comprehensive data we found on school shootings is a list of 439 incidents that occurred in the US between 1900 and March of this year. Compiled by Wikipedia contributors, the list includes 21 shootings in Texas, all occurring since 1960. The Texas shootings resulted in 32 fatalities and serious injury to 51 other people. The well-known tower shooting on the UT campus in 1966 accounted for 17 deaths and 31 wounded.

The most striking aspect of the school shootings data is what happened before and after the Federal Assault Weapons Ban that was in effect between 1994 and 2004. There had been relatively few incidents across the country during each decade between 1900 and the 1950s. Numbers started to run up in the 1960s; rising to 39 shootings in the 1980s resulting in 49 deaths and 164 wounded. Shooting incidents continued to increase into the early 1990s, but then stalled during the Assault Weapons Ban going into the early 2000s.



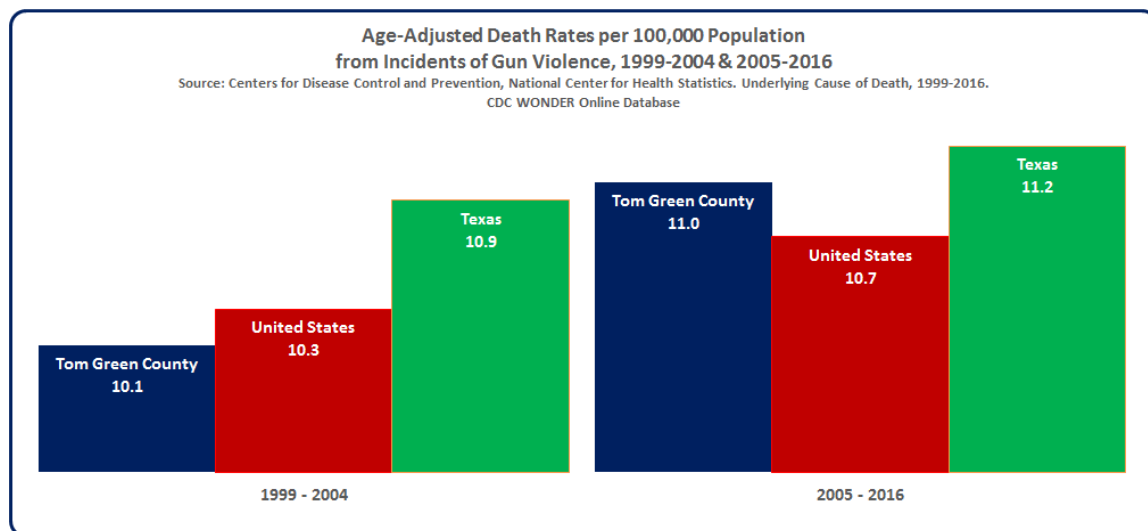
After the Ban expired, the numbers soared. Shooting incidents in the US leaped from 63 in the 1st decade of the century to 149 since 2010. The numbers of wounded jumped from 137 during the 2000s to 249 so far this decade. Fatalities have grown from 107 in the 1st decade to 161 so far in this decennial.

To dig deeper, we obtained death data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to identify all shooting fatalities in Tom Green County, the State of Texas, and across the nation as a whole. The records include deaths connected to a wide range of violent events including accidents, acts of terrorism, assaults, murders, robberies, suicides, and gunshot

incidents of unspecified or unknown intent.

CDC records identify 976,423 gun deaths in the US between 1999 and 2016. They included 80,539 deaths in Texas and 354 fatal shootings in Tom Green County. One advantage the CDC data is that it includes 6 years (1999-2004) leading up to expiration of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, plus 12 years (2005-2016) following its demise.

CDC data also provides for age-adjusted death rates which control for population size and the age distribution of people living in various times and different places. Thus, age-adjusting assures that comparisons of death rates are not distorted by the presence of younger versus older people, or by large versus smaller populations.



The CDC data clearly shows increased fatalities from gun violence after expiration of the Assault Weapons Ban in 2004. This is true of the nation, of Texas, and of our local community.

Indeed, gun fatalities in Tom Green County increased by 8.9% from 10.1 deaths per 100,000 people during the 6 years before the Weapons Ban expired to 11.0 per 100,000 in the 12 years that followed. This compares to a 2.8% rise from 10.9 to 11.2 fatalities per 100,000 Texans and a nationwide 3.9% upswing from 10.3 to 10.7 deaths per 100,000 Americans.

In the March 7th edition of the Standard Times, reporter Krista Johnson filed a follow-up report on the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. With news of major national retailers adopting stricter store policies on gun sales, Johnson reported that locally owned gun merchants not only dismissed ideas about change, but were anticipating increased sales.

According to Johnson, one local operator commented about the idea of raising the age limit, “If my kid got shot in a school because some 18-year-old kid got his feelings hurt, I’d probably be on board.” Continuing, he dismissed any need for change by saying, “But fortunately, I haven’t experienced a tragedy like that.”

In a recent meeting of San Angelo’s Pachyderm Club, the City’s Police Chief similarly dismissed the finding of the 24/7 Wall St. article according to reporting by John Tufts of the Standard Times. Showing a slide with counts of criminal offenses, the Chief noted the Police Department’s own data indicated a 19% increase in crime between 2015 and 2016 alone. He

attributed this large increase to “duplicated offenses” in the Department’s records resulting from a long process of switching to a new computer system between 2014 and 2016.

The problem with this explanation is that Stebbins and Comen did not use the Department’s duplicate records. Their source is the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports which document only a 3.2% increase in San Angelo’s violent crime rate between 2015 and 2016, as well as the metro area’s 32.5% increase between 2011 and 2016 as reported in the 24/7 Wall St. article.

The best quality data about violence show that the local community is fortunate, perhaps more blessed than we know, to have avoided a tragic shooting spree leaving some of our own students and teachers dead and wounded. San Angelo can be equally thankful that violent crime, while showing alarming increase, is not yet out-of-control.

However, the community is not insulated from the nation’s broader trends. Texans should be deeply troubled that the state’s fatalities from gun violence have run 4.7% higher than the national level over the 12 years since the end of the Assault Weapons Ban. San Angelo should not dismiss its facts either.

The truth is that our city’s increase in violent crime tops most US cities in recent years. Furthermore, death from gun violence in the county was well below the national level in the earliest years of this century, but it has now climbed above the national watermark.

Prevention of all forms of violence ranging from gun deaths and violent crime to family and domestic violence demands engaged action from all members and sectors of our community.