

Too Much Violence

Kenneth L. Stewart and Laurence F. Jones

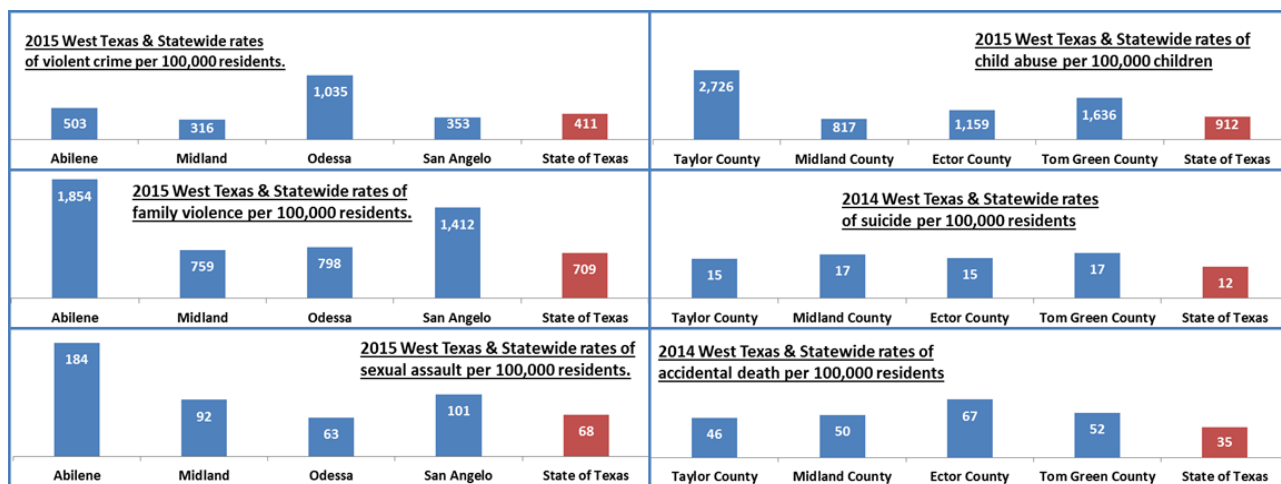
February 2, 2017

Just days before an assassin took his life in 1968, Martin Luther King spoke at the Washington National Cathedral where he declared, “It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence.”

King’s comment at the time was part of a proclamation against the global violence of the Cold War and America’s role in Vietnam. Nevertheless, it reflects his lifetime of learning and teaching that violence is no solution to human problems. It frames the significance of the fact that San Angelo has higher levels of violence than average for Texas. Indeed, the most recent update of the West Texas Violence Index (WTVI) shows that all four cities in this region of West Texas have more violence than the overall state.

ASU’s Community Development Initiatives produces annual updates of the WTVI. The project compares statistical measures of six different types of violence for Abilene, Midland, Odessa, and San Angelo with equivalent metrics for the state as a whole.

To develop the WTVI, Community Development Initiatives retrieves the most recent available data on violent crime, family violence, and sexual assault from the Texas Department of Public Safety. We obtained statistics on child abuse from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Texas Department of State Health Services data on suicides and accidental deaths completes the six types of violence covered in the WTVI.



The results show clearly that the four cities in our West Texas region have higher rates of violence on 20 (83%) of 24 comparisons with the overall state. Only two cities, Abilene and Odessa, have a higher violent crime rate. However, each of the West Texas communities has higher levels of family violence, child abuse, and suicides.

In some instances, the elevated levels of violence in regional urban centers are dramatic. For instance, Abilene’s rates of family violence, sexual assault, and child abuse are more than double the current statewide benchmarks. In addition, Odessa’s rate of violent crime is more than twice that of the state, and San Angelo’s family violence level is almost double. On the

other hand, Midland and San Angelo's violent crime rates, Odessa's level of sexual assault, and Midland's child abuse numbers are below state averages.

Another important observation from the WTVI is that violence levels in this part of West Texas have generally exceeded the state for quite some time. A look back to 2011, for instance, reveals that 18 (75%) of the 24 comparisons with the state tabbed higher violence levels in the cities of our region. The long-term trend raises an essential question. Why are West Texas cities experiencing generally high levels of violence than the state over the years?

City Level Measures of Violence in West Texas	Abilene	Midland	Odessa	San Angelo
Violent Crime, 2015	23%	-23%	152%	-14%
Family Violence, 2015	161%	7%	13%	99%
Sexual Assault, 2015	171%	36%	-7%	48%
County Level Measures of Violence in West Texas	Taylor County	Midland County	Ector County	Tom Green County
Child Abuse or Neglect, 2015	199%	-10%	27%	79%
Suicide, 2014	25%	39%	27%	43%
Accidental Death, 2014	30%	40%	90%	46%
Sources: Calculations by ASU Community Development Initiatives based on from data retrieved from the Texas Departments of Public Safety, Family and Protective Services, State Health Services				

Looking for quick answers, people sometimes blame heightened levels of family violence and child abuse on things like an upsurge in drugs or alcoholism. No doubt, substance abuse pours fuel on many social problems. The roots of domestic violence, however, lay deeper in the mundane dynamics of family relationships and individual behavior. Several factors may help engrain these into the fabric of the community by creating conditions that increase the risk of being exposed to domestic violence.

The fact that more men and women in West Texas marry at younger ages, is one possible factor. It is true that some marriages at young ages result in strong families. For the most part however, mixing youthful inexperience and lack of preparation with the demands of marriage and family often elevates risks of violence and abuse.

In the four West Texas cities, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey estimates that three percent (999) of 32,984 boys and girls age 15-19 were married or had been married in 2015. This compares to 1.8 percent across the state. These youthful marriages in West Texas also included 4.4 percent of adolescent girls, compared to 2.4 percent statewide.

These proportions rise when we add young adults up to age 24 to the picture. Fourteen percent of more than 77,000 urban West Texas males and females between the ages of 15 and 24 reported being married or previously married in 2015. The corresponding number for Texas was 9.2 percent. Among West Texas adolescent and young adult women, 17.6 percent were currently or previously married. This compares to 11.8 percent statewide.

Poverty is another factor. Risks of exposure to domestic violence and child abuse increase with the grinding conditions that families living in poverty face. This is especially true when families lack access to cash assistance to help supplement income.

Few things rile American taxpayers more than the idea of public funds being spent to put cash money into the pockets of the poor. Many think that the majority of poverty laden families are

receiving such assistance. Yet, according to American Community Survey estimations for the years 2011-2015, only about 33 percent of an average 5.9 million American families in poverty received benefits from major federal programs including Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, and direct cash public welfare. The numbers were smaller in Texas where 25 percent of an average 638,953 poor families received cash payments, and in our four regional West Texas cities where 27 percent of the average 8,068 families in poverty got benefits.

Data on female-headed families gives further insight. First, it is important to know that female-headed families across the county are generally about five times more likely than married-couples to be in poverty. In the four West Texas cities, for instance, an average of 5 percent of married-couple families was in poverty between 2011 and 2015. The average rate for female-headed families was 29 percent. At the same time, an average of about 33 percent of married-couples in poverty received cash benefits from Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, or direct cash public assistance. The average for female-headed families in poverty was 22 percent.

When looking for solutions to problems of violence, policing most easily comes to mind. Certainly, police play an important part in responding to the elevated levels of family violence and child abuse in West Texas. However, the public more often looks to counseling, education, health, social services, and faith-based agencies for spearheading prevention or deterrence programs.

Yet, thoughtful leaders in these types of community-based organizations know they cannot address these problems without committed moms, dads, households, and families throughout the community. Lifelong children's advocate Marion Wright Edelman said it bluntly when she asked, "What's wrong with our children?" Her reply, "Adults telling children to be honest while lying and cheating. Adults telling children to not be violent while marketing and glorifying violence. I believe that adult hypocrisy is the biggest problem children face in America."

West Texans clearly need to step up with increased financial and volunteer support for agencies working in the trenches to prevent family violence and child abuse. However, the requirement is deeper. Just as surely as Edelman saw our hypocrisy, Martin Luther King foretold the need to speak up for nonviolence in our communities.