



The Austin/Travis County Victim Services Task Force (VSTF) is a collaboration of providers in Travis County, Texas, seeking to improve the delivery of services to victims and their families. The VSTF produced this FAQ for the Community Action Network as an update to the Victims of Violent Crime Community Assessment report released in June of 2003.¹ The information included here is the most current available.

Overview

All people in our community are at risk of victimization. However, certain groups of people are at higher risk for experiencing violent crime, specifically: persons with disabilities, the elderly, immigrants, children, persons with mental health issues and persons who are socially isolated or under the influence of drugs/alcohol. Victimization costs individuals and society billions of dollars each year in health services and absenteeism from work and diminishes the quality of life for all residents in our community.

Highlights

1. Nationally it is estimated that one-half of all violent crime goes unreported; in Texas only 18% of victims of sexual assault make a report to law enforcement (Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault – The University of Texas at Austin).
2. The vast majority of victims of violent crime know their perpetrators.
3. Violent crime disproportionately affects certain groups within our community. For example, in 2004, 50% of all robbery victims and 38% of all homicide victims were Hispanic or recently immigrated Spanish-speaking individuals.
4. Children who are victimized are more likely to become violent, fail in school or develop substance abuse problems; childhood trauma can also interfere with normal brain development.

Q: What is the relationship between victims and offenders?

The majority of victimization occurs between people who know one another, although women are more likely to know their offender than are men.

- Children and older adults are most likely to be abused by family members and caregivers or other non-strangers. According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), of confirmed abuse/neglect cases in 2004, 86% of abusers were related to their adult victims and an additional 6% were the adult victims' friends, neighbors or staff. In the same year, 91% of abusers in confirmed child abuse/neglect cases were related to the victims.
- Individuals who are raped or sexually assaulted are likely to know the perpetrator – in 2004, 89% of the sexual assaults and rapes in Austin were committed by non-strangers, including recent acquaintances as well as friends and family members.
- In domestic and intimate partner violence cases, violence is committed by spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, parents, children and partners of the same or opposite sex.
- Austin Police Department (APD) victim services reported in 2002 that 77% of their clients knew their offenders.

Victimization is usually committed by individuals who are known to the victim.

¹ For the purposes of this report, a victim is a person who has suffered physical, sexual, emotional or financial harm as a result of criminal conduct, abuse, neglect or exploitation.

Frequently Asked Questions about Victims of Crime

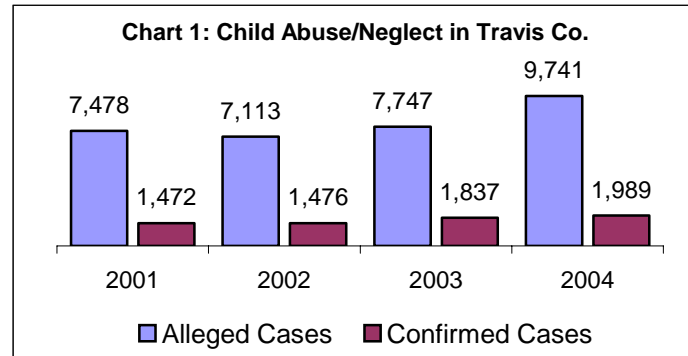
What are the primary types of violent crime and victimization in our community?

Elder Abuse

The confirmed number of elder abuse cases in Travis County increased 7% since 2001. In 2004, there were 1,187 confirmed victims in Travis County. That same year, several Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) cases in El Paso and Tarrant County attracted the attention of the news media and elected officials. As a result, the Governor of Texas ordered a review and reform of the agency, which is now undergoing significant changes and receiving more resources (E-mail communication with Kezeli Wold, DFPS Services, August 2005).

Child Abuse

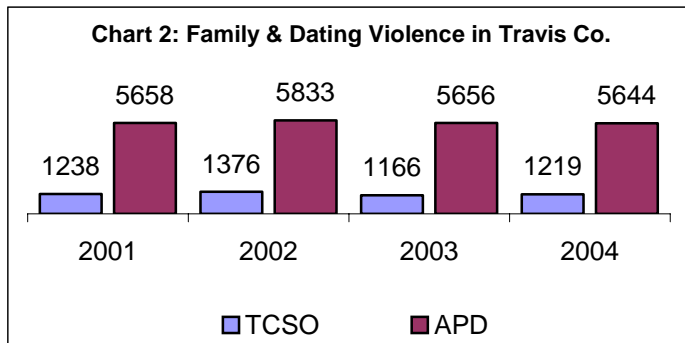
In 2004, 1,989 Travis County children were confirmed victims of abuse/neglect – a 35% increase since 2001. The number of alleged victims of abuse/neglect as well as the rate of victimization also increased during this period (See Chart 1). The rate of victimization per 1,000 children increased from 7.49 in 2001 to 9.79 in 2004.



Source: Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Sexual Assault and Rape

In 2004, APD reported 721 sexual assaults and rapes, an increase from 639 in 2003; the Travis County Sheriff's Office (TCSO) reported 163, an increase from 158. The majority of sexual assaults (89% in Austin) are committed by non-strangers. Nationally, these are the cases least often prosecuted. According to APD, the majority of sexual assault victims – approximately 70% in 2004 – are between the ages of 10 and 30.



Source: Austin Police Dept. and Travis Co. Sheriff's Office

Family and Dating Violence

Family and dating violence incidents stayed relatively constant over the last four years (See Chart 2). The APD reports that in 2004, individuals ages 18-29 were the most frequently assaulted (50% of total), followed by individuals ages 30-44. Hispanics were involved in 45% of all incidents, followed by Whites (32%) and Blacks (22%).

DWI Traffic Fatalities

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Texas has the highest number of traffic fatalities involving alcohol and the highest number involving blood alcohol content above the legal limit (.08). However, a recent report indicates that fatalities are declining in Texas – an indication that efforts to decrease drunk driving are having a positive impact. In 2004, APD reported that 49% of all fatal crashes and 18% of serious injury crashes involved drug/alcohol impairment.

Homicide, Robbery, Aggravated Assault (Select Index Crimes) Aggravated assault and robbery incidents are up significantly from previous years. In 2004, there were 2,196 aggravated assaults in Travis County, an increase of 7% from the previous year and an increase of 9.8% since 2001. In 2004, there were 1,454 robberies, a 12.6% increase from 2003 and a 16.7% increase from 2001. Homicides remained relatively constant over the four years with 30 in 2004 and 37 in 2003.

Frequently Asked Questions about Victims of Crime

Q. What do victims need and what are the rights of victims?

The needs of victims vary depending on the type and severity of the victimization. They include financial, medical, psychological, legal, and the need for shelter. When surveyed, victims and service providers in Texas ranked psychological and financial needs as most important. Victims need short term crisis intervention services that respond to immediate needs for safety, medical treatment, and shelter, for example. Victims also need long term services such as mental health counseling to address psychological trauma or legal services to secure protective orders from abusive partners.

Victims need services that are designed to meet their needs rather than a system that is designed to prosecute and incarcerate individuals who commit crimes.

In 1989, Texas passed a constitutional amendment giving victims the right to participate in the criminal justice process, including the right to complete a victim impact statement. For a complete list of these rights please see Ch. 56, Sub A, Code of Criminal Procedure (Rights of Crime Victims) <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/statutes/cr.toc.htm> or Ch. 57, Family Code (Rights of Victims of Juvenile Crime) <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/statutes/fa.toc.htm>.

Q: What resources and services are available to help victims and how is the community responding to victim's needs?

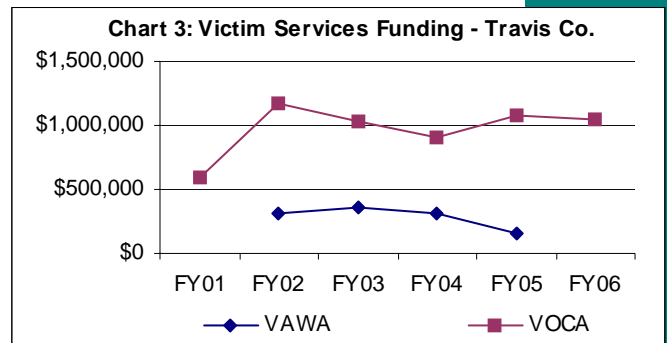
- The Crime Victims' Compensation Fund (CVC) is one of the most important resources available to victims. This fund is administered by the Office of the Texas Attorney General and provides financial compensation to victims of crime who suffer physical and or emotional harm or death. For more information and eligibility, please visit: <http://www.oag.state.tx.us/victims/cvc.shtml>.
- A wide range of direct services is available to victims. Call 2-1-1 for more information or access the 2-1-1 Texas database at <http://www.rtmdesigns.net/uwcaparea/> to search for services.

Austin and Travis County have a well developed system of victim services with a number of best practice models in place to ensure availability of quality services. Following are two examples of new key efforts that address neglected service areas or increased effectiveness:

- In 2004, the Austin-Travis County Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) was one of eight teams across the U.S. chosen to attend an intensive multi-disciplinary training on how to improve the criminal justice response to non-stranger sexual assault cases – the most frequently occurring but least often prosecuted cases.
- The Central Texas Coalition Against Human Trafficking, a collaboration of non-governmental organizations and law enforcement, focuses on improving the response to trafficking victims and works closely with the newly developed APD Immigrant Protection Team Unit. For more information: <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/fs/34563.htm>

Victim services providers are strained by recent federal funding cuts, the rising cost of doing business, and the unpredictability of funding sources. In the last few years, Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) funding decreased by \$135,000 and Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) funding decreased \$160,000 (See Chart 3). The financial instability of the CVC may result in further decreases as some of those funds are used for grants to local organizations.

Private funding sources generally focus on new programs or only offer shorter term support, creating challenges for building a system of services. The closing of a local women's shelter in 2005 demonstrates the impact of these challenges.



Source: Capital Area Council of Governments

Frequently Asked Questions about Victims of Crime

Q: What barriers may prevent victims from reporting crime?

Approximately one-half of all violent crime goes unreported to the police. Underreporting impacts the ability to access services as well as the amount of resources that are dedicated to help crime victims. A number of issues impact a victim's ability and/or willingness to report crime, including:

- Physical or cognitive disabilities
- Confusion or incomplete memory of the crime due to trauma impact
- Fear of reporting because of immigration status
- Lack of trust in government or a system that is not always responsive
- Threats or intimidation by perpetrator
- Shame that he/she contributed to or caused the victimization
- Lack of memory or self-blame due to alcohol or drug use at the time of the crime

Frequently in cases involving family violence, child abuse, elder abuse and sexual assault, the victim is hesitant to report due to his/her relationship with the perpetrator. The victim may be dependent on the perpetrator, fear retaliation or may want to protect the perpetrator from legal and social consequences.

Q: How do I know if someone has been victimized or is in an abusive environment?

People respond to trauma differently and signs of victimization vary. Some persons may not show outward signs while others may show significant or dramatic changes in their daily functioning. Possible indicators may include, but are not limited to:

- *Physical:* unexplained injuries/bruises, changes in eating or sleeping habits, changes in personal hygiene
- *Psychological/emotional:* shock, withdrawal, depression, mood swings, new fears, anxiety, angry outbursts
- *Behavioral:* self-destructive behavior, increased drug/alcohol use, animal abuse, bedwetting, aggression toward others/bullying or being bullied
- *Environmental:* unkempt household, unmet basic needs, neglected children, mistreated animals

Q: What can I do to help?

- Know what to do if someone has been victimized. For more information visit: <http://www.atcvstf.org/>
- Educate yourself and your loved ones about risk reduction, warning signs of abuse, victims' rights and resources: <http://www.atcvstf.org/>
- Know your legal responsibility: in Texas all adults MUST report any suspicion of abuse or victimization of children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. Contact local law enforcement or call the state hotline: 1-800-252-5400.
- Donate and/or volunteer for a victim services organization: <http://www.atcvstf.org/>

Believe a victim. If someone you know discloses victimization to you, reassure the victim that you believe him/her and are available to help.

Additional Information

To access this document or additional, current information regarding victims or other issue areas, go to www.caction.org. Hard copies are available at the Community Network Action offices, 1111 West Sixth Street, Suite B220, Austin, Texas 78703. Phone: 512-414-8203.



CAN Partners: Austin Area Human Services Association ~ Austin Area Interreligious Ministries ~ Austin Area Research Organization ~ Austin Independent School District ~ Austin Travis County MHMR Center ~ Capital Metro ~ City of Austin ~ Community Justice Council ~ Greater Austin Chamber ~ Health Partnership 2010 ~ Higher Education Coalition ~ Travis County ~ United Way Capital Area ~ WorkSource