

## **PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Child abuse. Yes, it happens here. And the numbers might stun you.**

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — Violence involving young people is shocking. Dramatic cases regularly populate the national media such as the senseless shooting death of a teen in Sanford, Fla., or the suicide of a gay Rutgers student after finding that his roommate used a webcam to watch his gay liaisons.

Occasionally a case of violence involving youth turns into a saga of survival and empowerment, such as the inspirational kidnapping story of Elizabeth Smart that riveted a sellout audience at San Angelo's "Day of the Woman" event last month.

As compelling as that story is, however, instances where child victims of violent acts become celebrities leading popular causes to ensure child safety are rare. Much more often, these events lead to wrecked lives.

While keen awareness and fervor arises out of famous cases in other places such as those involving Trayvon Martin, Tyler Clementi and Smart, young people in the local community face a threat-level of violence that is stunning.

In 2011, Texas Child Protective Services investigated 297,971 alleged instances of child abuse across Texas and confirmed 65,948 allegations. Tom Green County contributed more than its share to this picture.

The county's 26,373 children comprised only about four of every 1,000 children living in Texas. Yet the county's 1,596 alleged victims of child abuse made up slightly less than six of every 1,000 accusations across the state.

The lowest child abuse rate for Tom Green County over the past decade occurred in 2004, when the rate was 6.4 confirmed cases per 1,000 children. The high rate of 20 confirmed cases per 1,000 children was in 2010.

The local rate of child abuse has increased by 56 percent since 2000. This compares with an increase of just 19 percent for all of Texas. The local community also usually registers higher rates than the state for incidents of violent death of teenagers, family violence and for abuse of disabled and elderly people.

### **Dangerous place**

Tom Green County, in short, is a violent place for kids and families despite any wishful

thinking or pretensions to the contrary.

Local families, children and the community at large are paying for the extraordinary violence. For instance, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services places many abused children in foster care.

Between 2001 and 2011, the number of children younger than 18 in foster care increased by more than 194 percent in Tom Green County compared with an increase of just over 21 percent for Texas. Only 14 Texas counties had a higher number of children in foster care than Tom Green County in 2011.

Studies show that children in foster care have a higher probability of having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety and other developmental problems. Once leaving foster care, many young adults also experience higher degrees of incarceration, poverty, homelessness and suicide.

These may be some reasons why the Annie E. Casey Foundation's projects to help vulnerable kids succeed classify foster care as a "safety and risky behavior" issue.

Some child abuse victims also may find themselves in family violence shelters. There was a consistent increase in the number of Tom Green County children living in family violence shelters from 2000 through 2006. In 2007, the latest year of available data, the rate significantly decreased by 38 percent. Still, only 24 Texas counties had a higher family violence shelter placement rate than Tom Green County in 2007.

### **Helping organizations**

Accompanying the startling facts on violence and local youth are an astonishing number of local programs and agencies with missions to protect and aid the development of children and their families.

Many churches and faith-based organizations have special youth and family ministries and missions, most public social services have a focus on families and children, and the majority of nonprofits are family- and child-centered.

Most of these local entities do marvelous things. Just a few local places where heroic actions occur daily include the Children's Advocacy Center's Family Enrichment Services to improve parenting and prevent child abuse, the House of Faith programs for positive youth development and the Concho Valley CARES Coalition's activities to reduce youth substance abuse.

Efforts are now under way to add Smart's personally endorsed safety education and anti-bullying radKIDS program to the long list of local initiatives tackling one piece or another of the youth and violence picture.

As the list of programs grows, however, someone must seriously ask why the big picture is not also improving. After all, the numbers show that this community is a risky place for young people and adding one more new program, no matter how much glitter surrounds it, is unlikely to dent the dangers.

In fact, shining starlight on narrow aspects of preventing violence involving children can

have the ironic effect of diverting attention from the violent nature of the community toward a perception that the problem boils down to performing a few common sense techniques of self-protection against a small number of ruthless perverts hiding in the shadows.

Truth is that there are many moving parts to the violence surrounding young people. It has the face of poverty; it involves drug and alcohol abuse; ineffective parenting is part of it; racial tension and intolerance of social differences impinges; insular and inept social programs and services aggravate the situation; legal and law enforcement issues impose; and the politics of public funding and taxation is onerous.

Programs for family enrichment, reduction of substance abuse, positive youth development and safety education can help, but the help is attenuated in a community thinking the problem is only to contain a malicious few in the population. Former first lady, senator and now Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave insight by noticing that "it takes a village" to raise a child. Now is the time to understand that it also takes a village to keep one safe.

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