

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Avoiding complacency

Troubling figures despite crime rate dip

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — Nelson Mandela, a person who knew from life experience, said of violence: “We owe our children — the most vulnerable citizens in any society — a life free from violence and fear.”

Yet in recent America, Florida teenager Trayvon Martin was shot to death, 12 mostly young lives were lost during a shooting spree in a Colorado movie theater and 20 students and six adults were slain in a Connecticut elementary school. Accounts of violence dominate the news in America.

In Texas there were more than 4,200 crimes for every 100,000 people in 2010. The Houston Police Department responded to more than 137,000 criminal offenses, resulting in a rate of more than 6,000 crimes per 100,000 residents.

Closer to home, San Angelo police responded to more than 4,400 crimes in 2010, but since the population is under 100,000, the resulting crime rate was 4,802 per 100,000 people. Crime affects people living in bustling urban centers, but it also burdens residents who choose the more calm environs of West Texas cities.

Seven basic crimes reported to various police authorities each year are tracked by the FBI in its Uniform Crime Reports. These are regularly used by the media to provide information on the crime rate of the nation and its many local communities.

Analyzing crimes reported to police is one way to examine the extent of violence in a community. Crime, though, is not the only form of violence that affects the lives of local residents. The impact of motor vehicle fatalities, child or elder abuse and suicides are other faces of violence that take a toll.

Because it takes many forms and affects many lives, the team at ASU's Community Development Initiatives decided to create a 16-indicator index of violence using data from the Texas Department of Public Safety, the Department of Family and Protective Services, the Department of State Health Services and other similar sources.

The West Texas Violence Index, or WTVI, measures and compares the level of violence in San Angelo and three comparable West Texas cities: Abilene, Midland and Odessa. It also compares these cities of West Texas against the state as a whole.

The 16 factors in the index cover crime, of course, but also personal events such as

suicides, traffic wrecks and poisoning; familial violence and violence experienced by juveniles.

Using the year 2000 as the baseline, we used a 100-point scale to score each location based on its annual results on the 16 indicators. This method allows us to examine and compare change for each location for any given year during the decade.

A strength of this method is that it goes beyond specific, often dramatic, instances to review the many faces of violence in communities and how they change over time.

Results for 2010, the most recent year of available data, indicate that San Angelo is the second most violent of the four cities based on all 16 indicators in the WTVI. Only Abilene shows a higher level of violence on the combination of 16 factors.

Three of the cities — Odessa, San Angelo, and Abilene — display higher overall levels of violence than the state as a whole. The data say Midland is the least violent of the four West Texas cities, the only one with a lower violence level than the state.

A closer focus on trends in various forms of violence in San Angelo reveals a conflicting picture. We use the word “conflicting” because there are signs of progress and regression at the same time.

San Angelo residents and local police can take satisfaction in the 8 percent reduction in the number of UCR crimes per 100,000 residents since the year 2000. Specifics on just one of the seven UCR crimes not shown in the chart indicate that locals who struggle and suffer with the horrors of rape should take heart from the 43 percent decrease since 2000 in the rate of that crime.

At the same time, a more sobering fact is that San Angelo has a higher overall UCR crime rate than Abilene, Midland or Odessa. This fact is driven in part by the city’s 23 percent increase in the rate of robberies, burglaries and auto thefts since 2000. This is our conflicting picture: While we have a declining overall crime rate in San Angelo, we cannot be flattered by its comparison to other West Texas cities.

The chart presents some other “good news” and “bad news” scenarios as well. For example, Tom Green County experienced a 12 percent decline in the number of suicides per 100,000 residents. On the other hand, there was a 23 percent increase in the number of traffic fatalities per 100,000 residents in the same period.

In addition, the county saw a drop in the juvenile violent crime rate by 87 percent since 2000. At the same time, however, there was a 45 percent increase in the number of violent deaths per 100,000 teens between the ages of 15 and 19.

One area where we cannot find much “good” in the WTVI results for San Angelo is in the family violence indicators. Since 2000, Tom Green County has reported increases in confirmed child abuse cases per 1,000 children under age 18 (138 percent), validated abuse cases per 1,000 elder and disabled residents (39 percent) and police-reported incidents of family violence per 100,000 residents (67 percent). These results are especially troubling considering how families sustain communities.

Mahatma Gandhi was among the world’s deepest thinkers about the nature of violence

and its consequences. Of nonviolence, Gandhi said, a “double faith” is required: one that is recognized by many others is faith in God. Fewer people know, as Gandhi did foremost, that nonviolence requires “also faith in man.”

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