

ALLinLEON
Working together to make Leon County safer



Anatomy of a Homicide Project

*An exploratory review of
the homicides committed
in Leon County between
2015-2020*



A collaboration between the
Leon County Sheriff's Office
and the Florida Sheriffs
Association

Introduction

At the direction of Sheriff Walt McNeil, the Leon County Sheriff's Office (LCSO) began a review of data related to the 141 homicides recorded in Tallahassee-Leon County from 2015-2020.¹

The purpose of this exploratory project was to gain a better understanding of the commonalities between the people, conditions, and circumstances contributing to the incidents and research evidence-based solutions to reduce or prevent future homicides.

Through collaboration with the Florida Sheriffs Association (FSA) Research Institute, the project team prepared a 90-page report of findings summarizing Tallahassee-Leon County data related to homicide victims and offenders, homicide locations, the days and months when homicides were most prevalent, weapons used, circumstances, and primary factors. In addition, the report contained a summary of evidence-based strategies to reduce violence, violence reduction strategies and programs utilized in other cities and states, ongoing LCSO efforts, and recommendations for moving forward to address this problem in our community. This document serves as an executive summary of the findings in the full report.

Additional research is needed to fully diagnose the problem and move forward with a series of people, place, and behavior-based strategies. When treated as a public health problem, using a scientific epidemiological approach, homicides can be prevented. It will take an ALLin community working together with focus, fairness, and a balanced approach of prevention and enforcement.

The Leon County Sheriff's Office dedicates this report to the victims of the homicides which occurred in Leon County and the families, friends, and neighborhoods impacted by these tragedies. While we will never fully understand the circumstances of these events, we will build on what we have learned by advocating for additional research, improved data collection and analysis, increased collaboration and information sharing between agencies, providers, and the community, and solutions which are both evidence-based and community informed.

Methodology

The findings in this report were derived using a combination of the following sources: Uniform Crime Report (UCR) Supplemental Homicide Reports (2015-2020), LCSO investigative reports, Tallahassee Police Department (TPD) homicide data (2017-2020), Leon County Justice Information System (JIS), Law Enforcement Information Exchange (LInX), Office of the State Attorney, 2nd Judicial Circuit, Corrections Integrated Needs Assessment System (CINAS-Lite) Assessment reports, and open-source data.

After initial review of the 141 homicides noted in the UCR Supplemental Homicide Reports, 22 cases meeting the following criteria were removed from the sample:

1. Negligent manslaughter cases (UCR Circumstance codes 1-6).
2. Homicides committed while incarcerated (UCR Circumstance code P).
3. Justifiable homicides (UCR Justifiable Circumstances codes 2 and 3).

¹ Florida Uniform Crime Report Supplemental Homicide Reports 2015-2020.

After the initial case review was completed, 16 additional cases meeting the following criteria were removed from the sample:

1. Cases deemed justifiable/self-defense during trial. (8)
2. Domestic violence cases.² (6)
3. Cases where the offender was deemed incompetent. (2)

The final Anatomy of a Homicide sample included 103 cases involving 108 victims and 125 offenders. Twenty (20) of the 125 offenders were unknown (suspect info not on file). Of the remaining 105 offenders, the project team was able to obtain data for 92.

Limitations

Information about TPD cases was obtained from summary data they shared for homicides that occurred between 2017-2020 and by reviewing reports available in LInX. LCSO did not have access to the actual reports, which may have contained additional information pertinent to the project. Additionally, the summary data was not available for the 2015-2016 cases. With 85 percent of the cases being investigated by TPD, this was a significant limitation. Demographic information was available for all 108 victims within the sample. However, in most cases³, the offender data represents only 105 of 125 offenders (84%). The project team was able to obtain information about 92 of 105 known offenders. Therefore, the offender demographics noted in this report, are underrepresented based on the unknowns.

Additional Considerations

The review was conducted by multiple team members and required a significant amount of data entry. Much of the data was unstructured, which prevented automated analysis. The manual nature of the data collection and analysis presents a risk for human error. The data presented was compiled from the sources available to the project team at the time of this report and should not be considered official data. This project was intended to be a first step in gaining a better understanding of the homicides that have occurred in Leon County and developing actionable steps to mitigate and prevent future homicides. Additional academic research, data analytics support (expertise and software), and input from the Tallahassee Police Department could greatly enhance these findings.

Summary of Findings

Although it is acknowledged that the findings in this report are not without limitations, the available data indicates that the homicide problem in Leon County is not unique compared to other areas. A summary of detailed findings and data visualizations are contained in an appendix and are available upon request.

1. Homicides predominantly occur in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and most victims and offenders reside within these same areas.

² Domestic violence cases are unique in motive, victim/offender relationships, locations where they occur. Since they represented a small number of the cases, they were removed to maintain focus on the more prevalent acts of general violence. Domestic violence homicide cases can be reviewed collectively to gain a better understanding of the specific nature of those crimes.

³ For two (2) of the unknown offenders, UCR Supplemental Homicide reports indicated the race and sex only. Therefore, race and sex data are only missing info for 18 (rather than 20) offenders in these calculations.

- The 32304 zip code was the most adversely impacted zip code in Leon County. While comprising only 17 percent of Leon County's population, 32304 had the highest homicide frequency with 35 percent of the total sample.
 - Additionally, 24 percent of victims and 12.3 percent of offenders resided in the 32304 zip code at the time of the homicide.
 - Griffin Heights and Frenchtown had the highest density per square mile (8.3 - 15), followed by South City and Bond & Providence neighborhoods (7.4 - 8.3). Apalachee Ridge and Jake Gaither communities had a density of 5.7 - 7.4 incidents per square mile and Chapel Ridge neighborhood was close behind at 5.4 - 5.7.
2. The majority of homicides are committed with firearms, which in many cases are not legally owned.
 - A firearm of some kind was used in 76 percent of homicides within the sample. A firearm was used three (3) times as often as all other weapon types combined.
 - Black males used firearms in 79 percent of the homicides they committed, compared to white males at 45 percent.
 - The firearm was not legally owned in at least 35 percent (27 of 78) of the cases where a firearm was used.⁴
 3. Many homicides are committed in the commission of another crime such as a robbery, drug deal, or theft.
 - Thirty-three (33) percent of homicides were committed in conjunction with another crime (robbery, drug deal, theft, etc.). Sixteen (16) percent of cases noted that the homicide occurred during the commission of a robbery.
 4. Victims and offenders are overwhelmingly young Black males.
 - Eighty-one (81) of 108 total victims were Black which is over 4 times greater than the number of white victims (25). This is significantly disproportionate to the racial composition of Leon County which is approximately 61 percent white and 32 percent Black. Only two victims were of other races.
 - Eighty-six (86) of 125 offenders were Black, while 21 were white. Race was unknown for 18 offenders. Black males represented 67 percent of offenders which is almost five (5) times more than white males.
 - The 15-24 age group was the highest for both victims and offenders. Forty-two (42) percent of victims and 35 percent of offenders fell within this age group.
 5. The majority of homicide offenders have previous criminal histories, often violent. Most had committed crimes as juveniles.
 - Eighty-four (84) percent of offenders and 52 percent of victims had previous criminal charges, with 58 percent of offenders and 28 percent of victims having one (1) or more previous charges for a violent crime.⁵
 - Thirty-five (35) percent of offenders and 14 percent of victims had one (1) or more previous firearm-related charges.⁶

⁴ Count was derived when noted in the investigative report, or when an illegal firearms possession charge was noted in JIS with the murder charge.

⁵ Criminal history data obtained from JIS and TPD summary data.

⁶ Count includes individuals with charges for possession of a firearm by a convicted felon or delinquent, commission of a previous crime with a firearm (robbery, aggravated assault, etc.), and carrying a concealed weapon without a permit.

- Four (4) of the known offenders and one (1) victim had previous homicide charges. With 20 of the 125 offenders unknown, and information only available for 92 of those, the percentages of offenders with charges are likely higher than what is represented.⁷
6. The majority of homicide victims and offenders are at least acquaintances and are infrequently strangers.
 - Victims and offenders were acquaintances in 59 percent of the cases, strangers for 11 percent, friends in 7 percent, and co-habitants in 3 percent.
 - The victim/offender relationship was not determined for 21 of the 103 cases, based on the information reviewed.
 7. Offenders typically have unfavorable views of the justice system and lack trust in law enforcement.⁸
 - Eighty-three (83) percent of offenders indicated that law enforcement officers are just as bad as the people behind bars and 57 percent stated that most people in their neighborhood did not like the police.
 - Only 48 percent felt society had the right to enforce laws or values on others, 17 percent of offenders felt they had been treated fairly by the justice system, and 13 percent believed that laws are applied fairly to everyone.
 - These views are consistent with a population lacking feelings of trust and legitimacy toward the justice system. Less favorable views of law enforcement increase the likelihood that offenders will carry a gun⁹ and decrease the likelihood of cooperation with the police.
 8. The majority of homicide offenders have been suspended or expelled from school.¹⁰
 - Eighty-five (85) percent had been suspended or expelled from school and 52 percent had attended an alternative school of some sort.
 - This may be an area that warrants additional research to determine if outreach or interventions could be planned for children who are disciplined with a suspension or expulsion.
 9. The majority of homicide offenders are arrested for the first time before age 18.¹¹
 - Half of the offenders indicated that they committed their first crime when they were 12 or younger. Only three (3) respondents indicated that they had committed their first crime after the age of 18.
 - Sixty-seven (67) percent of offenders were 18 years old or younger at the time of their first arrest.
 - These responses seem to indicate that these individuals are engaging in criminal behaviors at a young age and early interventions are needed.

⁷ Criminal history data obtained from JIS and TPD summary data.

⁸ Derived from CINAS-Lite Assessment data from 46 offenders.

⁹ Abt, Thomas. (2019). Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence – And a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets. (p. 66). Basic Books. ISBN 978-1-5416-4572-1.

¹⁰ Derived from CINAS-Lite Assessment data from 46 offenders.

¹¹ Derived from CINAS-Lite Assessment data from 46 offenders.

Recommendations

As the shootings continue in our community, we are inspired to take immediate action. Although the research on violent crimes and recommendations for violence reduction are plenty, we must approach this problem by first fully identifying and understanding how violence is impacting Leon County, and then agreeing on how we will remedy the issue together as a community. Sustaining the unwavering focus required to combat a problem of this complexity and magnitude will be critical to our success. This is not a problem that can be solved by law enforcement alone. Although there are many agencies, organizations, and resources currently working to reduce violence, we must strive to improve coordination, collaboration, and information sharing in order to comprehensively address this issue.

Recommended next steps are as follows. To be successful these steps must be taken collaboratively, by the community at large, not solely by the Leon County Sheriff's Office.

Fully Define and Understand the Problem

Before appropriate strategies can be identified and implemented, a specific focus should be established, and additional analysis should be conducted on the most recent incidents within the selected focus. Four (4) questions must be answered:

1. What violent crimes will be the focus? Homicides in general, shootings (fatal and nonfatal), other violent crimes?
2. Who is committing the crimes?
3. Where are the crimes being committed?
4. Why are the crimes being committed?

With this information, a variety of people, place and behavior-based strategies can be selected to address the crimes.

Improve Data Collection and Analysis Capabilities

Data needed to effectively analyze the lifecycle of a homicide case is maintained in multiple systems. Critical information is buried in text fields which is not easily located. At this time, the Leon County Sheriff's Office lacks the systems and data integration capabilities needed to perform a comprehensive analysis. With the majority of homicides and shootings being reported to and investigated by the TPD, a large portion of the data is not accessible to LCSO analysts. This presents the analysts with the monumental task of manual data collection and analysis.

In order to address these data needs going forward, LCSO and TPD would need to work together to determine what data is pertinent for analysis, how data collection and reporting could be standardized between the agencies and establish a data sharing agreement to ensure both agencies have access to each other's data. Modifying existing systems with data fields for the information may be an option, as would creating an independent tracking system/method for this effort. Collecting consistent data and making this data publicly available, would promote transparency and allow researchers to study the data.

Explore Additional Research Opportunities

LCSO should leverage the assistance of local universities to assist with scholarly and scientific research and advanced data analysis. The focus of this project was homicides; however, the number of nonfatal shootings and attempted homicides is far greater. Examining these incidents

would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the violence that is occurring in the community. Victim Offender overlap is a topic that warrants further review. There is existing research that indicates being a victim of violent crime can be a risk factor for becoming a future perpetrator of crime. The network of victims and offenders is suspected to be relatively small, so a closer examination of these individuals may be useful.

Develop a Plan to Address the Problem

After fully analyzing the problem and selecting an initial area of focus for the violence reduction efforts, a team should be assembled to develop a comprehensive plan.

Identify and Engage Key Stakeholders

The lifecycle of a homicide spans a multitude of stakeholders. From the community members impacted by the violence, the schools, law enforcement agencies, the courts, the social services agencies, community organizations, the universities, etc. It may be beneficial to hold a series of listening sessions or town hall meetings to open dialogue with the communities most impacted by violence. The impacted community members should be actively engaged in the efforts to reduce violence in their communities.

Designate a Working Group or Committee to Lead the Effort

Efforts need to be focused and well-coordinated. Having individuals with full plates take on this responsibility as an additional duty will not be successful. Whether it takes the form of establishing an Office of Violence Prevention, a task force, or simply assigning specific individuals, there must be a central point of coordination whose main priority is to lead the effort. The team should be comprised of high energy problem solvers from the stakeholder groups.

Develop Specific Goals and Strategies with a Timeline for Completion

With a definition and understanding of the problem, and a team assigned to lead the effort, the plan would be developed with specific goals and strategies. Although it is tempting to set overarching goals such as reducing violent crime in general, goals should be targeted, achievable, and measurable. Focus on smaller areas (specific people, specific places, and specific behaviors) to be most effective. The planning process should also identify costs and funding needed to support the strategies. The plan must include an anticipated timeline and the process for measuring the effectiveness of the strategies.

Multi-dimensional approaches, balancing prevention and enforcement, are typically more successful than single strategies. When developing the plan, consider the following:

- 1. Identify and engage those determined to be most at risk.**

- a. Use the findings from the data analysis. Consider a combination of the following:
 - i. Young Black males.
 - ii. Juvenile offenders.
 - iii. Those suspended or expelled from school or in second chance/alternative schools.
 - iv. Those living in the 32304 zip code or neighborhoods deemed high density for homicides/shootings.
 - v. Recent violent crime victims.
 - vi. Individuals known to carry illegal guns.
- b. Explore Social Network Analysis or mapping criminal associations.
- c. Explore Street Outreach.

- 2. Provide targeted services to the identified individuals.** Potential services:
 - a. Early childhood interventions (0-5 years).
 - b. Support services for children/young adults and their parents such as cognitive behavioral therapy, family functional therapy, counseling and support to address previous trauma.
 - c. School related support for truancy and dropout prevention.
 - d. Mentoring/life coaching programs, specifically those that assign a mentor/coach that is available on-call and for daily or weekly check-ins to support and hold the mentee accountable.
 - e. Job training.
 - f. Enrichment activities such as spiritual activities, stress management and wellness, youth leadership training, life skills training, sporting and arts activities.
 - g. Inmate Programming.
- 3. Focus on the areas with the greatest amount of violence.** Potential options:
 - a. Focus on serious repeat offenders residing in or frequenting these areas.
 - b. Work with property owners, code enforcement, and city and county services to address vacant buildings and lots, restore services, and remove trash/dumping.
 - c. Work with the community to implement or improve neighborhood watch programs.
 - d. Hold frequent community meetings in these areas to communicate the status and results of the efforts.
- 4. Focus on the behaviors associated with the violence.** Potential behaviors:
 - a. Carrying illegal firearms.
 - b. Robberies and drug dealing.
 - c. Mistrust in police and the criminal justice system. Continue to work on building trust in the communities impacted by violence.

Implement Strategies and Monitor Results

Once the strategies are implemented, results must be continuously monitored, reported, and evaluated. Data collection and analysis will continue to be a key component for the efforts. The violence didn't start over night and will take time to improve. Strategies that work for some individuals and in some areas, may not work in others. Improving the situation in some areas may push the problems to others. The monitoring process must look beyond the statistics to fully understand the impacts and the plan must be flexible and adaptable. Understanding why something worked or didn't work will be important for sustainment.

Ongoing LCSO Efforts

While fully diagnosing the problem and developing a plan takes time, we will not stand idle while the violence continues. The Leon County Sheriff's Office is currently engaging in the following efforts, which are aligned with evidence-based strategies for reducing violence.

- Back on Track
- Scoutreach
- Youth Advisory Council
- Worship With Me

- Suppression Prevention Intervention Referral Intelligence Tool (SPIRIT)
- Reentry Case Management and Transition Planning
- The RISE Center
- The Pathways Program
- Vocational Education Encouraging Reform (VEER)
- ALLin Business Pledge
- U.S. Marshals Service Regional Fugitive Task Force
- Deputies Without Borders
- The Multi-Agency Violence Reduction Campaign (MAVRC)
- CeaseFire

Closing

Communities all throughout the county are working to solve the problems of violence and there is no magic solution. While we may not be able to fully eradicate violence like a disease, there is evidence to support prevention, reduction, and mitigation of violence is possible. Facing the challenge is overwhelming and solving a problem of this complexity requires focus, the dedication of specific resources (people, time, money, tools, etc.), and rigorous and continuous measurement and assessment. The path to success requires a unified ALLinLEON response of people, agencies, and organizations working collaboratively to reduce violence in Leon County.

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