

Behind the Numbers



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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DEATHS

One of the indicators that the FCFC tracks is Domestic Violence Deaths. The indicator has two aspects to it. The first is simple. The language is straightforward. “The Family and Children First Council has zero tolerance for domestic violence-related homicides.” Domestic Violence Deaths are not the “canary in the coal mine” warning of danger and death. They are death. The FCFC stance is part of a wider acknowledgement that the continuation of domestic violence is based on social norms that tolerate the behavior. Assertions of zero tolerance for all forms of domestic violence help to set a new social norm and force attention on how to change those norms.

At the same time, domestic violence deaths are the canary in the coal mine because for every domestic violence death, there are many more families in which “coercive behaviors—verbal insults, emotional abuse, financial deprivation, threats, and/or sexual and physical violence” are used to exercise power over other people in the family. Such families are not stable. By “Stable Families,” the FCFC means four things:

- The community respects and supports families, recognizing that family composition in a diverse society is varied.
- Family members have healthy relationships with each other.
- Families nurture their members and provide a sense of well-being and safety.
- Family members work together and feel that they also belong to something larger than themselves.

Years Covered	Average Annual Domestic Violence Deaths
1992	23
1992-1999	14
1993-1999	12.7
2000-2005	10.7
2000-2006	11.7
2006	18

Domestic Violence Deaths is an indicator for the second (healthy relations) and third (safety) aspects. As such, it has not had much to say over the last few years. The numbers seemed to suggest a slight decrease in domestic violence deaths in the early 2000s relative to the 1990s, even ignoring the large value for 1992 when 23 domestic violence deaths occurred. (See Table above and page 32.) From 1993-1999, there was an average of 12.7 domestic violence deaths per year, while from 2000 to 2005, the average was just 10.7 domestic violence deaths per year. Then in 2006, there were 18 domestic violence deaths, the highest number since 1992. It is worth looking at what is behind the numbers.

A recent review of domestic violence prevention efforts (Sartin et al., 2006) summarized the review by noting:

“Perhaps the most important suggestion for future research is the need to study domestic violence as a part of the family violence picture. As one looks over the literature on domestic violence, it is impossible to miss the broad overlap between research on domestic violence and research on child abuse...Further, there appears to be much overlap with studies on general violence and even some overlap with research on juvenile delinquency.”¹

¹Robert M. Sartin, David J. Hansen, Matthew T. Huss 2006 “Domestic violence treatment response and recidivism: A review and implications for the study of family violence” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 11(425-440)

The domestic violence death statistics used in Montgomery County already incorporate this broader view of domestic violence. The table below provides a detailed accounting of the relationship of the offender to the victim in domestic violence deaths in Montgomery County for 2003-06. “Intimate partner violence (IPV) death” is used to describe specifically deaths resulting from violence by spouses, ex-spouses, and current or former boyfriends or girlfriends.² Such deaths have remained

almost constant over the last four years. There were six in 2003, 2004 and 2005, and five in 2006. “Other domestic violence deaths” (deaths which cross generational lines and include parents, children and more distant relations) is the category associated with the 2006 increase. In 2005, there were four such deaths while in 2006 there were 13. The increase was in deaths caused by daughters and sons.

Domestic Violence Deaths broken down by Relation of Offender to Victim

Relation of Offender to Victim	2003	2004	2005	2006	2003-06
Intimate Partner Violence Deaths	6	6	6	5	23
Spouse		3	4	1	8
Boyfriend/ex-boyfriend	4	3	2	3	12
Girlfriend/ex-girlfriend	2			1	3
Other Domestic Violence Deaths	5	3	4	13	25
Parent/Step-parent	2	1	1	2	6
Brother/Sister		1	1	1	3
Step-son				1	1
Daughter			1	4	5
Son	2		1	5	8
Cousin/Nephew	1	1			2
Total Family/Domestic Violence Deaths	11	9	10	18	48
Male Victims	4	2	3	8	17
Female Victims	7	7	7	10	31
Total Homicides (Including Domestic Violence)	43	58	47	63	211
Domestic Violence Deaths as % of Homicides	26%	16%	21%	29%	23%

While domestic violence deaths are an important indicator in their own right, there are clear inadequacies in using them to measure whether domestic/family violence or, more narrowly, intimate partner violence is increasing or decreasing. The problem is similar to the issue the FBI faces when reporting violent crime. Homicides are a very small part of violent crime and exhibit greater variability than the broader index. One would expect the same to be true for domestic violence.

As part of a broader community effort to reduce domestic violence by holding offenders accountable, additional broader measures of domestic violence must be developed. Unfortunately, offense data is not useful for that purpose because accountability efforts that help increase the efficiency of police and legal response may well result in an increase in reported domestic violence. Offense data is unreliable as well because current social norms result in more police involvement on domestic violence in low-income communities than in middle- and upper-income communities. Confidential survey methodologies that are similar to victimization surveys might be the most reliable indicators but are difficult to conduct. Over the past year, hospitals have been required to develop new emergency room protocols to screen for domestic violence. With standardization, the aggregate information from those protocols might be the most useful source of information on the extent of domestic violence in the community.

²The CDC defines “Intimate partner violence” as “actual or threatened physical or sexual violence, or psychological/emotional abuse by a spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, ex-boyfriend/ex-girlfriend, or date.”

