



2020

# FATALITY REVIEW

TARRANT COUNTY, TEXAS



INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

# WHAT IS ADULT FATALITY REVIEW?

**THE TARRANT COUNTY INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) ADULT FATALITY REVIEW TEAM WAS REAFFIRMED BY THE TARRANT COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT UNDER JUDGE GLEN WHITLEY IN 2016. IT IS LED BY THE TARRANT COUNTY CRIMINAL DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SAFEHAVEN OF TARRANT COUNTY, THE COUNTY'S ONLY 'FAMILY VIOLENCE PROGRAM' AS DESIGNATED BY THE STATE OF TEXAS.**

The Fatality Review Team consists of selected partners that conduct in-depth case analysis; each partner provides relevant information on each case. The contributing partners are listed here:

- Alliance For Children
- Arlington Police Department
- Baylor Scott and White
- Office of the Tarrant County Criminal District Attorney
- Department of Family and Protective Services
- Fort Worth Police Department
- JPS Health Network
- MedStar
- Office of the Tarrant County Medical Examiner
- SafeHaven of Tarrant County
- Texas Health Resources

Using a multi-disciplinary approach and professionals from each field, the Team collaborates in order to best determine possible systemic, policy, and practice improvements in our County. The goal is to prevent IPV homicides by identifying how the coordinated response to domestic violence (DV) in Tarrant County can keep victims safe and hold offenders accountable, ultimately initiating change based on those findings.

Solely for purposes of reviewing homicides

in the Fatality Review Team, the agreed upon definition of an IPV homicide is: "An ongoing pattern of abusive behavior that can include physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, or psychological aggression (including coercive control) by a former or current intimate partner that is motivated by the offender's desire for power and control over the victim, where the relationship ends in homicide."\*

The Fatality Review Team reviewed 28 deaths that occurred in 2020 and determined, for purposes of the report, 17 deaths were intimate partner homicides. The data included in this report represents these 17 cases. Because case information comes from several different sources, names and identifying details have been withheld from this report. The data is therefore presented in aggregate.

*\*This is not the legal definition, nor does this serve as a standard definition in healthcare, education, social services, or other industries. This definition is solely for purposes of this specific review and was agreed upon when the team was formed in its current iteration in 2016. It stems from a combination of the definitions offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Hofstra University's Law School. This definition is intentionally more broad than the legal definition of Family or Dating Violence in the State of Texas.*

# BY THE NUMBERS

**17** VICTIMS DIED AT THE HANDS  
OF THEIR INTIMATE PARTNER.

**2020 WAS THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF IPV HOMICIDES ON RECORD FOR TARRANT COUNTY, TOPPING THE PREVIOUS HIGH OF 16 RECORDED IN 2016.**

## THE RELATIONSHIPS

- Twelve of the relationships involved couples who were dating, while five were married. Regardless of status, **the majority of the relationships had ended prior to the homicide.**
- Most of the relationships had only lasted a matter of months, not years, and only four lasted five years or longer.
- Most victims and offenders were ages 41 – 65. The youngest victim was 21 and the oldest victim was 67. The youngest offender was 20 and the oldest offender was 62.
- Five of the cases had a prior strangulation on record.
- Fourteen of the cases had prior police involvement, including charges other than family violence.
- Two of the cases had a prior protective order.
- Nine of the offenders were gun owners (legal status unknown).

## THE HOMICIDES

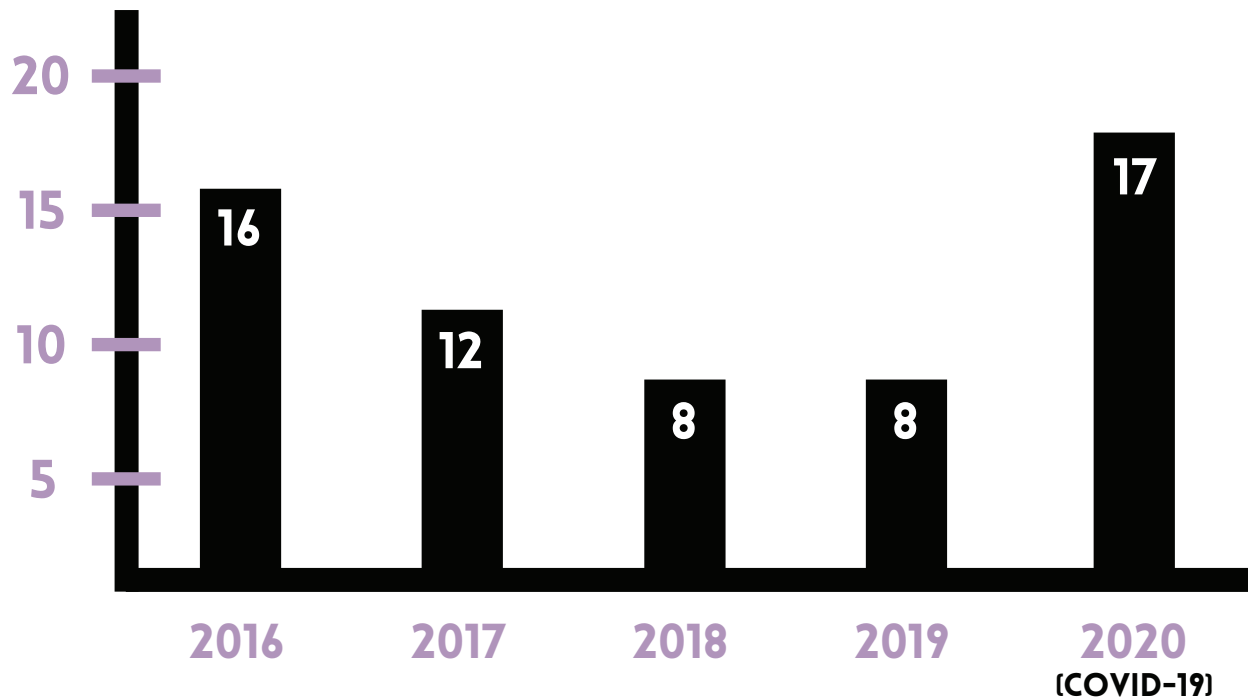
- 59% of the homicides happened in Fort Worth, while others were in Haslet, Arlington, Grand Prairie, Keller, and Mansfield.
- **Nine of the homicides (53%) were caused by gunshot**, four by a blunt force trauma, four were stabbings, and none were strangulation.



**SEVEN CHILDREN WERE IMPACTED BY THESE HOMICIDES (THE MAJORITY ARE ADULT CHILDREN). ONE CHILD WAS SHOT BY AN OFFENDER AT THE TIME OF A HOMICIDE, BUT SURVIVED.**

**THREE CHILDREN DIED AS SECONDARY VICTIMS - TWINS IN UTERO AND A TEENAGE BOY.**

# HOMICIDES BY YEAR



## RELATED INTERVENTIONS IMPLEMENTED BY YEAR

### 2016

1. The Tarrant County Commissioners Court, under Judge Glen Whitley, reaffirmed the County's Fatality Review Team.
2. John Peter Smith (JPS) Hospital implemented the Validated HITS Screening tool, created by Dr. Kevin Sherin. Using this tool within the electronic health record provides a safe space for patients to disclose violence. A strangulation assessment is also included.
3. The Tarrant County Criminal District Attorney created an Intimate Partner Violence Felony Prosecution team.

### 2017

1. SafeHaven piloted Tarrant County's Domestic Violence High Risk Team (DVHRT). High risk domestic violence cases began being monitored by a multidisciplinary team that shares case information and implements coordinated intervention plans to mitigate danger and prevent homicide.
2. Law enforcement's Family Violence Packet, used on-scene throughout the county, was standardized and distributed. The packet includes the evidence-based "Danger Assessment" tool, which quantifies the danger in a relationship.

### 2019

1. Fort Worth Police Department's Victim's Assistance added a High Risk Family Violence Advocate to their team. The specialist provides intensive outreach to victims exhibiting high-risk factors in hopes of preventing repeat victimization and intimate partner homicide.
2. Law enforcement's Family Violence Packet was updated and redistributed.

### 2020

1. The Fatality Review Team formally published the County's first public report for homicides from the 2019 calendar year.
2. The Tarrant County Criminal District Attorney's Office started an intake program. Each case is reviewed by a felony attorney, a misdemeanor attorney and an investigator. Cases are then upgraded, accepted or rejected based on the review, and same-day contact is made with the victim.

# WHAT WE LEARNED AND CONFIRMED

- 1. INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IMPACTS EVERY COMMUNITY, REGARDLESS OF GEOGRAPHY, RACE, AGE, OR SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS.**
- 2. NONE OF THE VICTIMS IN THESE CASES UTILIZED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE, SHELTER OR OTHER SOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES FOR DV PRIOR TO DEATH.**
- 3. LEAVING DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN SAFETY. MOST OF THE RELATIONSHIPS WHERE A HOMICIDE OCCURRED HAD ENDED BY THE TIME OF THE FINAL INCIDENT. THE MOST DANGEROUS TIME IN A RELATIONSHIP MARRED BY VIOLENCE IS WHEN THE RELATIONSHIP ENDS AND THE THREE MONTHS THAT FOLLOW.**
- 4. NONE OF THE 17 CASES CONTAINED A SEXUAL ASSAULT COMPONENT.**
- 5. MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF THE OFFENDERS WERE KNOWN TO OWN A GUN. THE PRESENCE OF A GUN IN A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RELATIONSHIP INCREASES THE LEVEL OF DANGER FOR A VICTIM.**

# DID COVID-19 HAVE AN IMPACT ON IPV HOMICIDES?

**AS WITH EVERY OTHER ASPECT OF HUMAN LIFE IN 2020, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES AND SERVICES WERE HEAVILY IMPACTED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.**

It is important to remember, however, that COVID-19 is and was not a 'cause' of domestic violence – domestic violence is caused by an issue of power and control in a relationship, where one person has power and uses that power to control a victim. Domestic violence can be aggravated by outside factors like substance abuse, unemployment and a global pandemic, but those things are not causes - rather they are catalysts. Violence is a choice an abuser makes in an intimate relationship.

COVID-19 contributed to an increase in calls to the domestic violence hotline (locally: 877-701-7233) and requests for the shelter intervention specifically. It is notable that SafeHaven of Tarrant County saw an increase in severity of violence reported on hotline calls and during assessment of clients for services.

## OF NOTE:

The victim in one homicide case from 2020 was an organ donor, and through her death, she certainly saved the lives of others.

While an abuser took her life, she was not done giving to this world. If you're interested in being an organ donor – for any reason – go to [www.donatelifetexas.org](http://www.donatelifetexas.org) for more information and to sign up.



TARRANT COUNTY  
MEDICAL EXAMINER

