

Austin, Texas

GUN VIOLENCE PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Summary Report | January 2021 - January 2022



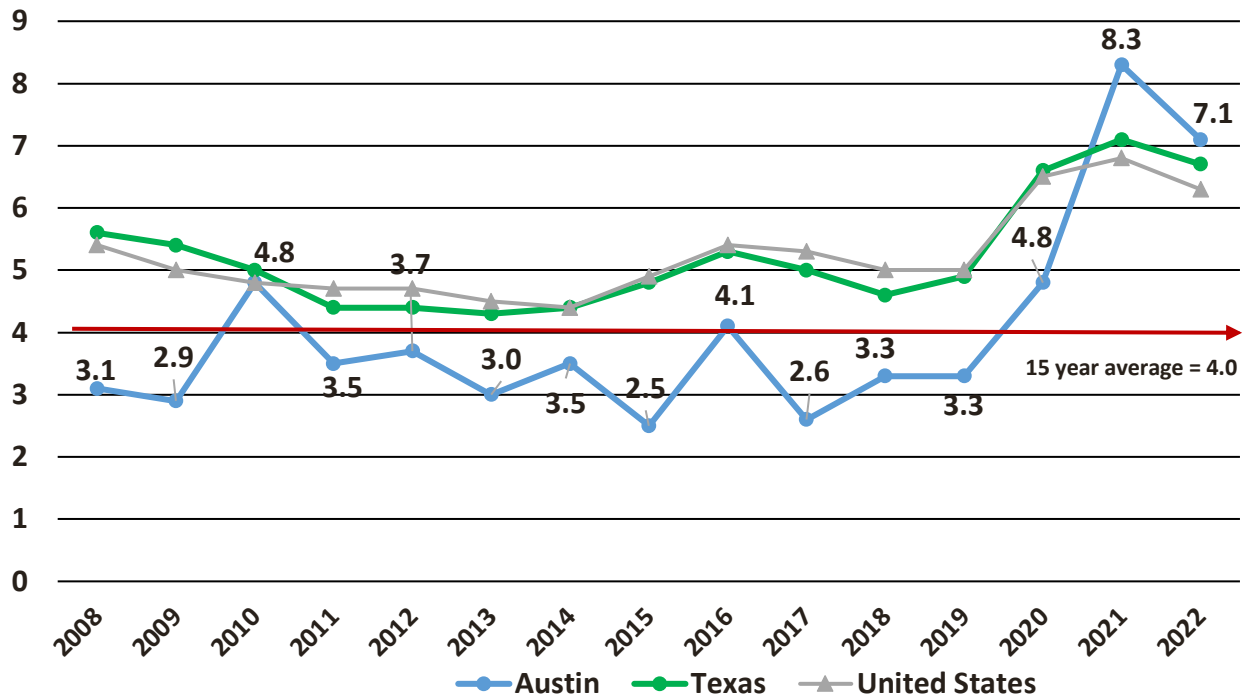
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Austin, Texas – Gun Violence Problem Analysis January 2021-January 2022 Summary Report

The National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) partnered with the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) and Austin Police Department (APD) to conduct this Gun Violence Problem Analysis (GVPA). A GVPA is a set of analytical exercises designed to support the implementation of violence reduction strategies, and this analysis is a research-based methodology used in several cities nationally.

Austin’s 15-year average homicide rate is 4.0 per 100,000 population (Figure 1). This rate is consistently lower than the U.S., and Texas homicide rates. However, Austin’s rate rose above the U.S. and state averages to 8.3 in 2021 and 7.1 in 2022. There was a 39% increase in homicides from 2019-2020 and an additional 74% increase in homicides from 2020-2021. Despite a 14% decrease in homicides (n=69) in 2022 and another 4% decrease in homicides (n=66) in 2023, counts remain elevated 100% over 2019. Still, it is notable that even with this increase, the APD cleared homicide cases at a rate well above the national average. The APD cleared nearly 91% of 2021 cases and 94% of 2022 cases.

Figure 1. Austin Homicide Rate 2008 -2022 (per 100,000 residents)



This problem analysis examined 142 homicides occurring in Austin from January 1, 2021 – December 31, 2022. Officer-involved shootings, accidental self-inflictions, and cases of justified

self-defense were excluded from our sample. The goal of this analysis was to examine the circumstances of the event itself, explore the characteristics of individuals involved, and identify the networks associated with the highest risk of violence. This work establishes a common understanding of the local violence problem that can help guide policy, tailor interventions to those at the highest risk of violence, and inform the work of civic, community, and criminal justice leaders to reduce gun violence in Austin.

NICJR usually examines both non-fatal shootings and homicides in a GVPA, but we were only allowed to conduct interviews for homicide incidents in Austin. Homicide case review interviews are typically conducted directly with the investigators who worked those cases. However, the APD is facing resource limitations and only sergeants within the Homicide Division were made available to review these cases with researchers. This approach typically limits the detailed information researchers can collect regarding motives and the individuals involved. Still, APD sergeants took time to gather information on each case and consulted with detectives directly when needed prior to these interviews, and they were generally able to provide detailed information on these homicide events. Limitations also exist in our review of victim/suspect criminal histories because we were unable to access state criminal history data. Those data limitations are discussed in that section specifically.

Before summarizing these findings, it is important to define key terms used throughout this report:

- **Homicide:** In this report, the term “homicide” refers to criminal homicides in which a killing was intentional or due to criminal negligence (i.e., murder or manslaughter).
- **Group:** We use the term group to refer to the wide range of dynamics and structures present in criminally active street groups. Individuals at high risk for violence are likely to associate within particular groups and social networks, ranging from more highly organized, formal gangs to more loosely associated, informal neighborhood crews. Labels aside, attention to groups is important because criminally active groups, gangs, crews, and social networks tend to drive a substantial amount of violence.

Victims and Suspects of Homicides

Demographics

The victims and suspects of homicides in Austin are primarily male and between the ages of 18-34. About 87 percent of victims and suspects in homicides were male (Table 1). Nearly 54% of victims and suspects were White and nearly 43% were Black. About 32% of victims and suspects were Hispanic. **Compared to representation in the population overall, Black individuals are overwhelmingly overrepresented as homicide victims and suspects by a factor of 5.4.** The overall age of homicide victims and suspects is 30.4, and 59.2% are between the ages of 18-34. On average, suspects tend to be younger than victims. Nearly 32% of victims were 24 or younger while about 50% of suspects were 24 or younger.

Table 1. Homicide Victims and Suspects: Sex and Race

	HOMICIDES (N=142)			AUSTIN POPULATION
	Victims (n=145)	Suspects (n=190)	Victims & Suspects (n=335)	
Sex				
Male	83.1%	90.1%	87.0%	51.3%
Female	16.9%	9.9%	13.0%	48.7%
Race				
White	63.0%	46.7%	53.8%	63.2%
Black	32.6%	50.0%	42.5%	7.9%
Asian	2.2%	1.6%	1.9%	8.4%
Other	2.2%	1.6%	1.9%	-
Ethnicity				
Hispanic/Latino	36.2%	28.6%	31.9%	32.5%

Table 2. Homicide Victims and Suspects: Age

	HOMICIDES (N=142)		
	Victims (n=145)	Suspects (n=190)	Victims & Suspects (n=335)
Age			
17 & under	7.0%	10.9%	9.2%
18-24	24.5%	39.3%	32.8%
25-34	25.9%	26.8%	26.4%
35-44	23.1%	15.9%	12.9%
45-54	9.8%	5.5%	7.4%
55 & older	9.8%	1.6%	4.8%
Mean Age	33.6	27.9	30.4

Criminal Justice System Involvement

In-house criminal history data was provided by the Austin Police Department and conviction data was accessed through the public Travis County case search portal. The research team coded prior criminal involvement and convictions, but several data caveats increase the likelihood that victim and suspect criminal history is undercounted in this section.

Due to arrest/offense searches being limited to APD data rather than accessing state criminal histories, prior arrest and offense data only accounts for criminal activity within APD's jurisdiction. Victims and suspects may have criminal history in other cities and counties not

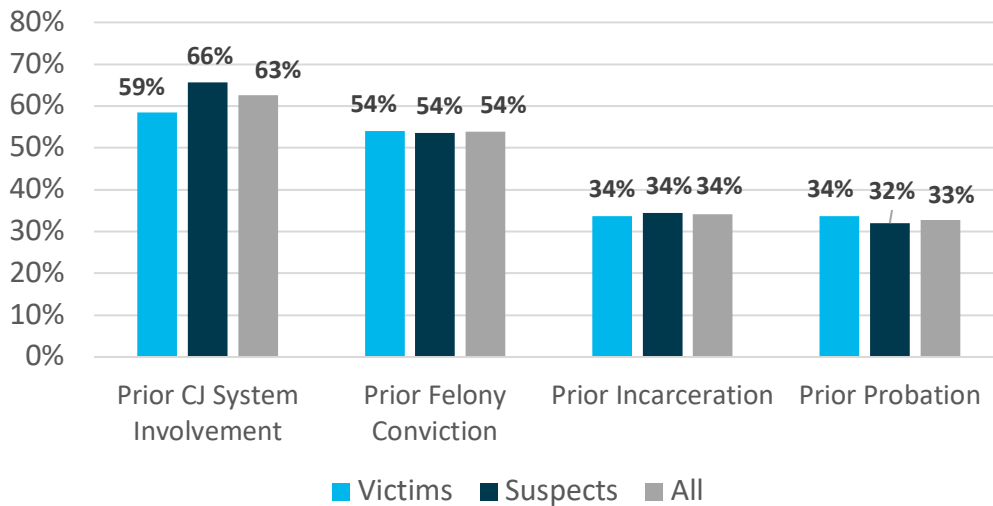
counted in this report. Additionally, because prior conviction, incarceration, and probation was limited to searches within Travis County from 2008 forward, the data in this report does not account for prior arrests, convictions, or sentences for cases in other Texas cities and counties. Finally, probation data was inconsistent and was only recorded as when prior probation status was clearly noted in prior arrests (e.g., violation of probation charges) and/or public case recorded. However, due to these data inconsistencies, the percentages in this report reflect only the minimum number of victims or suspects with prior probation. Parole data was largely unavailable and was not analyzed for this report. Due to these limitations, results in this section are conservative estimates of criminal justice system involvement and should be interpreted with caution.

A victim or suspect was noted to have prior criminal justice system involvement if they were ever arrested in Austin, regardless of conviction, prior to their involvement in the homicide. Of all homicide **victims**, 59 percent had prior criminal justice system involvement. Of all homicide **suspects**, 66 percent had prior criminal justice system involvement.

In this report, prior arrests and felony arrests refer to counts of unique arrest events. Offense totals refer to counts of unique criminal offense types, even if they occurred within the same arrest event. For example, an arrest with burglary-related charges and drug-related charges would be counted as one arrest but two offenses.

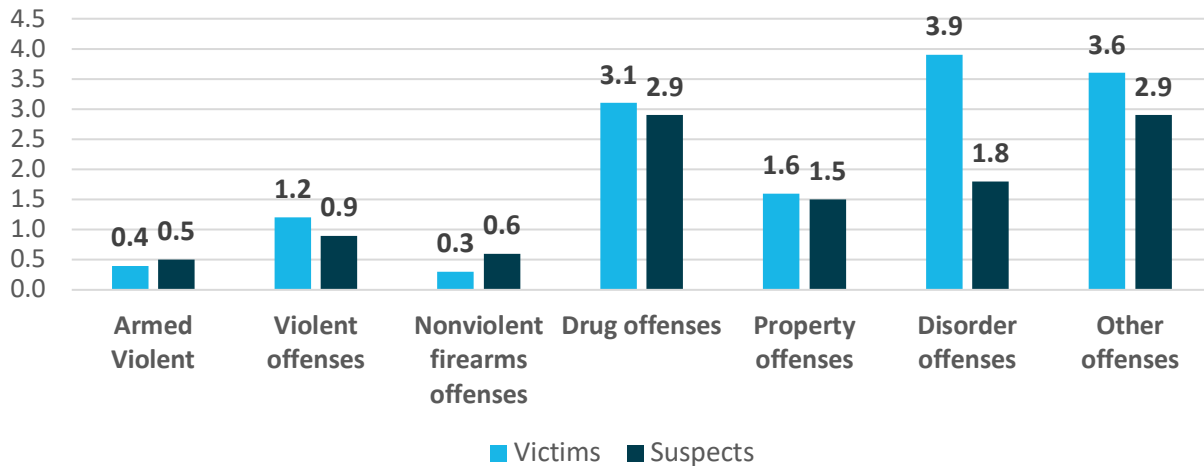
Approximately 63 percent of homicide victims and suspects were known to the criminal justice system prior to the incident. Of those with prior criminal justice system involvement, at least 54 percent had a prior felony conviction, 34 had previously been incarcerated, and 33 percent had prior probation (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Victims and Suspects of Homicides: Criminal Justice System Involvement



Of those who were known to the criminal justice system prior to the homicide, most victims and suspects had been arrested for drug (avg. 3.0), disorder (avg. 2.6), and property (avg. 1.5) offenses (Figure 3). **Overall, most victims and suspects with prior criminal offenses had been arrested about 11 times for about 12 different offenses by the time of the homicide.**

Figure 3. Victims and Suspects of Homicides: Prior Offenses by Offense Type



Of all homicide victims and suspects, about 8 percent had previous shooting and/or stabbing victimization. Victims and suspects with prior victimization were most likely to be Black (58%) males (92%) with an average age of 34.

Of all homicide victims and suspects, about 12 percent had previously been arrested for a fatal or nonfatal shooting. Those suspected of prior shootings were most likely to be Black (67%) males (100%) with an average age of 27.

Incident Analysis

This section analyzes the circumstances of homicide events from January 2021 – December 2022 (N=142). Of these, 80 percent were gun homicides. About 20 percent of homicides were confirmed to involve group members as victims, suspects, or both (Figure 4).

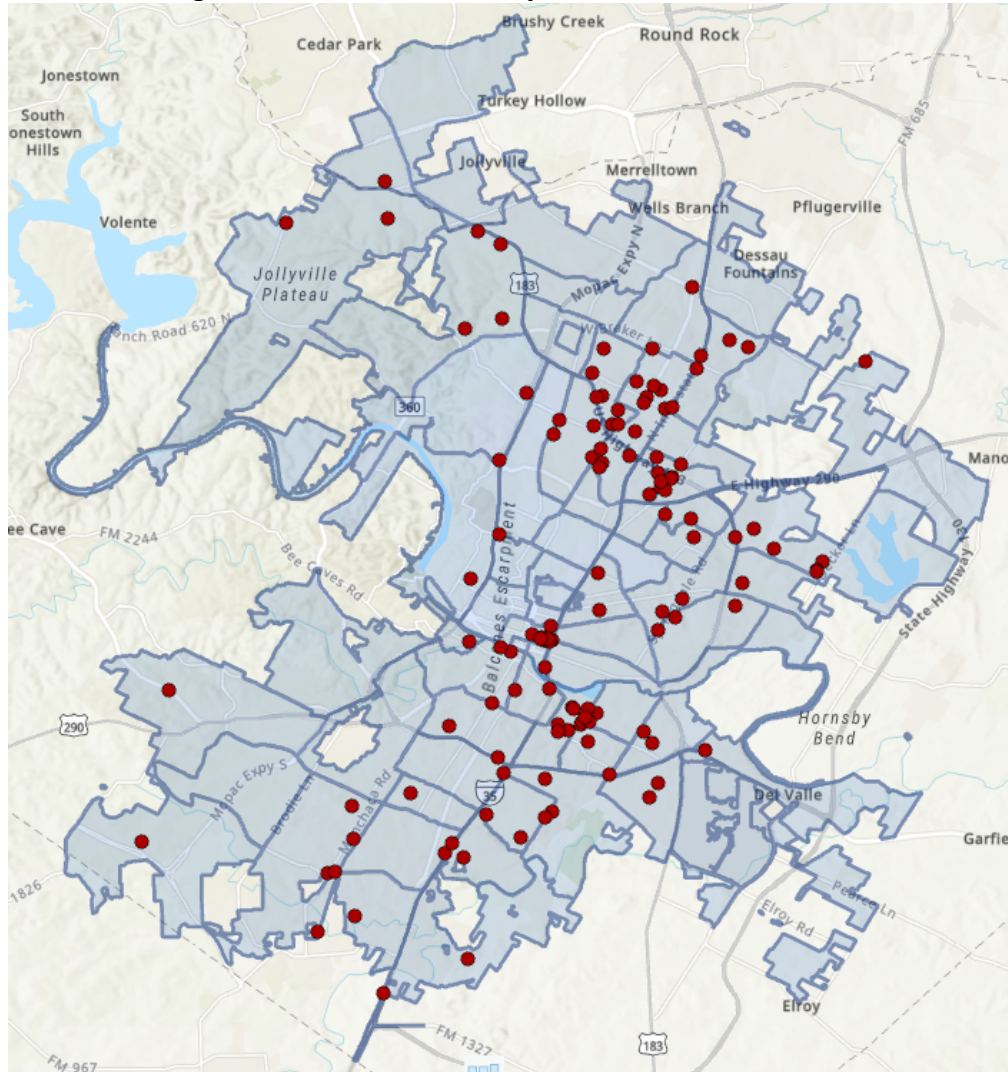
This analysis collected homicide circumstance information from case summaries and detective interviews (Table 3). Homicides most often occurred as a result of instant disputes that occur suddenly between individuals who typically have no prior relationship (20 percent). Personal disputes between known individuals accounted for 17 percent of homicides and domestic disputes accounted for 13 percent. Group-related conflicts motivated less than two percent of homicides but about 20 percent of homicides involved group members, regardless of the motive for the incident itself. Meaning, while the motive of the shooting may not have been a

group/gang dispute, group members were involved in a large share of shootings. Group members were involved in a significant share of homicides emanating from personal disputes (29%), instant disputes (24%), drug-related disputes (31%), and robberies (22%).

Table 3. Homicide Circumstances and Group Involvement

	All Homicide Circumstances		Proportion Group-Member Involved	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Instant dispute	29	20.4%	7	24.1%
Personal dispute	24	16.9%	7	29.2%
Domestic dispute	18	12.7%	1	5.6%
Drug-related dispute	16	11.3%	5	31.3%
Robbery	18	12.7%	4	22.2%
Mental illness	12	8.5%	0	-
Drug robbery	4	2.8%	1	25.0%
Group-related dispute	2	1.4%	2	100%
Child abuse/neglect	2	1.4%	0	-
Other	2	1.4%	0	-
TOTAL	142		29	20.4%

Figure 4. Homicides January 2021 – December 2022



High-Risk Groups and Networks

Conversations with APD personnel, along with information gathered from shooting reviews, suggest at least **13** different groups/gangs who are most actively involved in recent gun violence in the city. At least nine percent of homicide victims and 17 percent of homicide suspects were known to be associated with a group or gang. The groups most actively involved in violence are Blood sets and the 700 Gang, which is also a Blood subset.

Many smaller groups identify as either Blood or Crip sets. Most of these groups are heavily engaged in narcotics sales and robberies. Many conflicts between groups and/or group members were said to evolve from interpersonal disputes, drug-related disputes, and social media conflicts. Group associations were noted to be growing more unstable, involving small groups of youth and young adults with somewhat rapidly shifting loyalties.

Conclusion

While Austin continues to have a relatively low rate of shootings and homicides for a city its size, the significant increase in shooting incidents following the COVID-19 pandemic was alarming. In the past two years, homicides have declined, but they remain higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Most shootings in Austin are concentrated among a small group of young adult males with detailed criminal histories – 18-34 year old White and Black males, with more than 10 previous adult arrests, and many who are associated with groups or gangs.

Although this study was an exhaustive examination of homicides, due to the limited access NICJR was given to non-fatal shootings and criminal histories, further analysis is warranted.

There are promising efforts underway to implement focused deterrence measures in the APD and community violence intervention programs out of the Austin Office of Violence Prevention. Expanding and coordinating these efforts could prove successful in reducing gun violence in Austin.