

Gun violence in H-F Taking a look at where we stand

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Editor's note: This story is about citizen-based violent gun crime, and does not include information about police shootings. The Chronicle is committed to covering issues of police violence, and this edition includes a story on page 3 about the recent police shooting by a Flossmoor officer. We will continue to follow this story as it develops.

Local perception is that violent crime, especially gun violence, is increasing in Homewood and Flossmoor.

Last Halloween Eve, four people were shot – one, Kevin R. Jones of South Holland, died – when a party got out of hand. That incident and others brought gun violence to the fore of many residents' thoughts and worries.

LaShawn Littrice couldn't believe that there had been a shooting at the Halloween party in the Ballantrae neighborhood of Flossmoor where she lives with her husband and children.

"My daughter is good friends with the boy who gave the Halloween party. When we found out about the shooting, we were flabbergasted," Littrice said. "Our hearts dropped because we knew our daughter and her friends were there."

Fortunately, the girls had decided to leave the party early after it got too crowded.

Littrice said the family that lives at that home has hosted a Halloween party for the last five or six years. When it got too big, the parents asked some people to leave. An argument ensued and one of the disinvited guests fired a gun indiscriminately toward a group of people outside the house.

"Then, there was a big hush over everything, and it was never really discussed in the community," said Littrice. "A mother has lost her child, and nobody is talking about this."

In addition to being a passionate Flossmoor resident, Littrice is a social justice advocate working mostly in Chicago. She holds a doctoral degree in community psychology, and she said that the worst thing community members can do is ignore the issue of gun violence.

"Don't wait until it happens to you, and hits your doorstep," Littrice said. "Be proactive about fighting for justice. There's no way we can fix anything if we act like it doesn't exist."

How the statistics stack up

To understand if the perception of

increased firearm violence in the Homewood-Flossmoor community is accurate, one place to start is with the statistics.

Homewood Police Chief Denise McGrath and Flossmoor Police Chief Tod Kamleiter both provided the Chronicle with statistics related to gun violence in their villages. Reporting for this story focused on the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. (Statistics for crimes dating back to 2012 can be found online.)

Comparing the villages' numbers comes with some caution about their differences, first on a per capita basis. In the 2020 U.S. Census, Homewood's population was nearly half that, at 9,704.

Also, encompassing 5.26 square miles, Homewood is about one and a half times larger than Flossmoor, which is 3.6 square miles.

In 2020, Homewood had one arrest for firearms-related murder and one for reckless homicide. Homewood police made one arrest for murder in 2021, and none since, according to police data.

Flossmoor police made one arrest for firearms-related murder in 2021.

Aggravated assault and aggravated battery present some of the most concerning types of violent crime involving guns. Flossmoor experienced two aggravated assaults in 2021, while Homewood experienced five in 2021 and two as of June 2022.

Homewood made one arrest for aggravated battery with a firearm in 2021, and three in 2022. Flossmoor arrested one in both 2020 and 2021, and two in 2022.

According to police data, Homewood experienced eight armed robberies in 2020, 12 in 2021, and two as of June 2022. In those same years, Flossmoor experienced two, two and zero armed robberies, respectively.

Aggravated vehicular hijacking cases are those in which an offender uses a weapon to take possession of a person's motor vehicle. Homewood experienced three cases of aggravated vehicular hijacking in 2020, one case in 2021, and three as of June 2022.

Flossmoor police last experienced an incident of aggravated vehicular hijacking in 2019, when it made two arrests.

These basic statistical sets provide an impression of gun-related crime in H-F, but they only paint a portion of the picture.

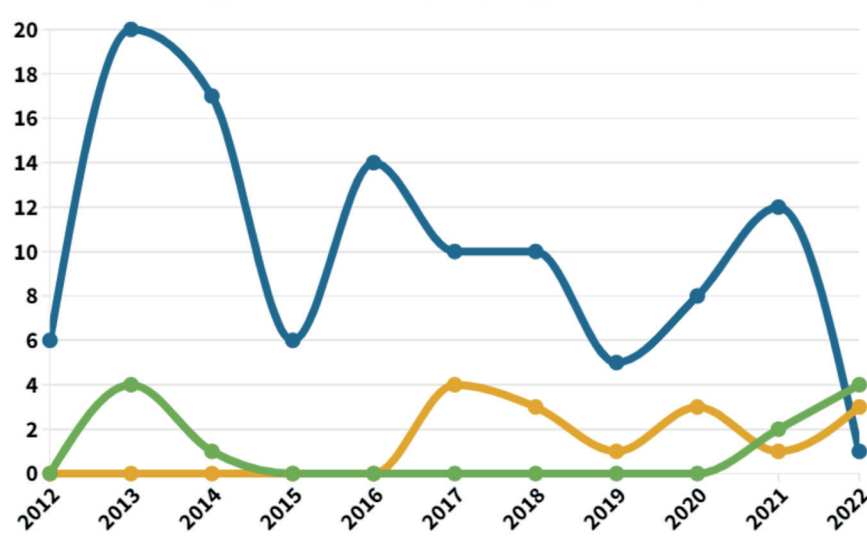
Trends and behaviors, a continuous cycle

Flossmoor Police Chief Tod Kamleiter

Homewood Violent Firearms Crime 2012-2022

Data provided by Homewood Police Department, June 2022

■ Armed Robbery ■ Aggravated Vehicular Hijacking ■ Aggravated Robbery



has worked as a law enforcement officer in the village for more than 25 years. He said crime is cyclical, and it seems the pendulum has been on the upswing.

"Violent crime ... we know there's been an increase in our area. Not just the South Suburbs, but the entire Chicago metro area. I think you could say that for every metro area right now," Kamleiter said.

Flossmoor has felt the weight of gun violence in the last year, with the Ballantrae killing and a subsequent shooting in late April. Kamleiter said the man Flossmoor police believe to be the perpetrator of both those shootings was himself shot and killed in Hazel Crest in May. It was at least the third deadly shooting in that village in the last year.

"Here's an example of someone from outside of our community coming into our community and causing these problems," Kamleiter said.

Homewood Police Chief Denise McGrath started the department's top job in 2021, but she's worked for the department since 1995, and she grew up in Homewood. She said she believes it has remained a stable, diverse and overall safe place.

"I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a community that doesn't experience some level of crime or incidents involving firearms," McGrath said. "Some recent incidents we've had where we've made an arrest have been domestic related or known associates."

Considering the wider South Suburbs,

McGrath said her impression is that there seems to be a rise in violent crimes that are perpetrated by young people.

"There seems to be an increase in the numbers of juveniles that are committing offenses. Why are we seeing that occur and what can be done to stop that?" McGrath said. "Prosecution is one thing. What are the consequences for your actions? It's a big part of that picture."

'Pass-through violence'

However a person views the relative safety of Homewood and Flossmoor, these villages exist amid a much larger Chicago metropolitan area, including northwest Indiana. People constantly cross borders to work, shop, worship and visit family and friends, leaving no one village in a vacuum.

The residents regularly see Chicago's gun violence recapped on their nightly news and splashed across newspaper front pages. This proximity heightens people's worries, McGrath said.

"We live in a very mobile society, with cars, buses, trains," McGrath. "Because we are so close to Chicago, when there is a spike in violence or carjackings, that's on people's minds."

Kamleiter characterized Flossmoor's recent spate of gun activity as pass-through violence, perpetrated by someone who resided outside the village.

"It's selfish for me to say as a chief that the spike in violent gun crimes we've had were pass-through crimes," Kamleiter said.

Homewood Violent Firearms Crime, 2012 to June 2022

Data provided by Homewood Police Department, June 2022

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Armed Robbery	6	20	17	6	14	10	10	5	8	12	1
Agg. Veh. Hijacking	0	0	0	0	0	4	3	1	3	1	3
Aggravated Robbery	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
First Degree Murder	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Aggravated Battery - Firearm	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Aggravated Assault - Firearm/Device/Motor Vehicle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	2

"I don't know if that makes our residents feel any better. I don't know if that would make me feel any better if I was living on that street last week when shots rang out, regardless of where the criminals came from. I guess it may bring a certain level of comfort to know we're not raising criminals within our community."

Even if known perpetrators of recent local gun crimes call other communities home, Littrice said people shouldn't fool themselves into thinking that young residents of H-F are only on the outside looking in at this violence.

"I don't believe it's all pass-through violence. Most of these young people (committing crimes) know people who live in our communities. That's what brings them to our communities. They've been through, and they're coming through again," Littrice said.

"If you say it's pass-through violence, you could say the same thing about Chicago. The people committing violence don't stay in the same neighborhood all the time. They get gas on Halsted Street and then go see a buddy."

Homewood residents also have experienced armed carjackings recently. In February 2021, a man avoided a carjacking at his Jonathan Lane home by driving away as two offenders fired after him, striking nearby homes and vehicles.

In February 2022, Homewood police arrested two 16-year-olds for allegedly forcing a passenger out at gunpoint and carjacking a vehicle from a parking lot in the 17500 block of Dixie Highway.

Another armed carjacking happened in May at a Shell gas station on Halsted Street. It ended in Indiana when one suspect was shot by police, then jumped off

a bridge in an effort to escape.

According to data provided by the Homewood Police Department, the village has experienced seven aggravated vehicle hijackings since 2020, with three this year, as of June.

Flossmoor Police Department reported that village experienced two aggravated vehicle hijackings in 2018 and 2019, with none since.

Bigger guns, better cameras

While the country continues a debate over the use of AR-15 rifles by civilians, local police departments say they haven't encountered those.

In Homewood, McGrath said officers haven't noticed an increase in more powerful firearms among the people with whom they come in contact. Guns are sometimes found with extended magazines, she said, increasing the volume of ammunition they can fire before needing to be reloaded.

Handguns are also the most common type of firearms encountered by Flossmoor officers, according to Kamleiter, though he said homemade modifications have been noticed lately.

"The most significant change is that we've recovered two firearms, both Glocks, that were converted to shoot fully automatic," Kamleiter said. "We've found two of those in the last year. That's a very dangerous weapon because it can fire continuously."

The people arrested in those instances were charged with possession of a fully automatic weapon, a more serious charge than they would have received without modifying the gun.

As firearms change, technology is improving to help apprehend violent sus-

Flossmoor Violent Firearms Crime, 2012 to June 2022

Data provided by Flossmoor Police Department, June 2022

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Armed Robbery	1	3	1	0	6	2	2	2	2	2	0
Agg. Veh. Hijacking	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0
Aggravated Robbery	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0
First Degree Murder	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Aggravated Battery - Firearm	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	2
Aggravated Assault - Firearm	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0

pects. Kamleiter said officers used Ring doorbell footage and license plate-reading Flock cameras to help identify the vehicle involved in the May incident.

"In this last shooting, we had a Ring doorbell that gave us the make and model of the car that was used. Officers were able to see it, along with the color," Kamleiter said. "We put that information into the Flock data system to find a license plate number, and that license plate number hit on a Flock camera in Homewood."

Flock cameras are stationary mounted units that record the license plate number of every car that passes by. The data are stored and can be accessed later to aid in law enforcement investigations. The cameras are currently in place around Homewood and other nearby towns, and Kamleiter is hoping to bring them to Flossmoor.

Helping victims of violence

To reduce the flow of cyclical gun violence, both Kamleiter and McGrath said they believe perpetrators should be held more accountable for crimes. That involves prosecuting the cases aggressively, and also working to help victims have a voice throughout the process.

Showing compassion to gun violence victims comes first, Kamleiter said, and that accountability should continue throughout the prosecution process. Many cases result in the offender taking a plea for a lower charge or less jail time, often without victims being consulted.

"Repeat gun violations should not be tolerated, especially repeat gun violations that involve the inflicted use of force, or that inflict injury to someone," he said.

Littrice said it can be easy to view gun violence as an issue of "us versus them," when the problem actually affects us all. It's part of the reason she got upset with Ballantrae residents who didn't want to talk about the shooting in their neighborhood, and distanced themselves from the family who hosted the Halloween party.

"It's definitely an 'us and them' mentality," Littrice said. "They are the people who don't mean 'us' any good. Especially when you look around the country, you can't separate 'us' from 'them.' What we deem a safe neighborhood can still experience violence."

Rather than feel discouraged, Littrice said she's optimistic at finding solutions to gun violence. As times change, society must shift the way it views young people and what they need to be successful.

"If young people are growing up and connecting with people on social media, we need to account for that. Access to guns is completely different now. We have to address it with kids. What do they need to steer their lives in another direction?" she said.

In addition to traditional police work, McGrath said supporting families and their needs can make a big difference in preventing future violent crime, especially gun crime. Homewood Police Department partners with local crisis agencies, social service organizations, religious organizations and businesses that are willing to provide opportunities for families.

"Whether it's an individual in crisis or a family in crisis, if you can intervene and help early on, hopefully you avoid that incident from escalating," McGrath said. "I firmly believe those are the things that can prevent gun violence down the road."