

St. Paul gun incident reports up 65% so far in 2012 (w/ searchable map)

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Two times in one day, Mary Anne Davis' grandchildren were in harm's way as bullets flew on her St. Paul street.

The first time, Davis, 58, was on the phone with her 14-year-old granddaughter in the morning as the girl walked down a street. Then she heard "pop, pop, pop!"

"They're driving down the street -- they're shooting" at a neighbor, the girl told her. "I said, 'Hit the ground.' "

Then, silence. Davis feared the girl had been hit. She was OK -- she stopped talking because she was running.

Later that afternoon, on June 6, more shots were fired. A bullet hit the front of Davis' house, striking two walls inside, as her three grandchildren were heading to the front door.

The gunplay on Davis' Frogtown street is part of a trend in St. Paul: In the first five months of this year, gun incident reports were up 65 percent, compared with the average for the same period between 2008 and 2010, a Pioneer Press analysis of St. Paul police data found.

St. Paul police, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and community members are holding a news conference Thursday, June 28, to talk about gun violence and what they're doing to combat it.

"I'm angry because I feel they have no value for life in general," Davis said of the people who have been firing guns on her block. "There are kids in the area and stray bullets do not have a name on them."

In North Minneapolis, a 5-year-old boy sleeping on his grandmother's couch was killed Tuesday when someone fired at the house. The slaying came six months to the day after a stray bullet killed a 3-year-old boy, also in his Minneapolis home.

MORE SHOTS, MORE ASSAULTS

Reports of shots fired and aggravated assaults with guns in St. Paul started to increase last fall. But the winter months saw the largest increases -- the reports were more than double what has been typical.

In April and May, the number of reports were just slightly higher than normal.

There have been six homicides so far this year. There were four at this time last year.

The Pioneer Press looked at two categories of reports for police service in St. Paul -- "shots fired" and aggravated assaults with guns. The numbers don't speak to whether police found evidence that a crime took place.

For shots fired, especially, police say they check out every report, but can't always verify whether the sound someone heard was a gun fired vs. a car backfiring, firecrackers or something else.

The aggravated assault reports encompass cases of individuals being shot, being shot at, having a gun pointed at them or the implied threat of a gun.

The "encouraging piece" of what's been happening in St. Paul has been the increase in gun-related arrests and recoveries, said Cmdr. Paul Iovino, who heads the St. Paul police gun and gang unit.

Police recovered 67 percent more guns from Jan. 1 through June 15, compared with the same period in 2011, Iovino said.

The Ramsey County attorney's office has charged at least 20 people with second-degree assault involving a gun this

year, compared with 14 in the same period last year and 17 in 2010. It charged five people with reckless discharge of a firearm so far in 2012, compared with eight people during the same time period in 2011 and two in 2010.

A 'GUN FIRST' CULTURE

There doesn't appear to be one answer to explain the increase in gun crimes.

Some could be linked to retribution for other crimes. One example: Tension was high after Dekota Galtney, 24, was fatally shot in Dayton's Bluff on Sept. 28 and gun violence seemed to follow in the months after, Iovino said. A 22-year-old man was sentenced Monday to 8 1/2 years in prison for the murder.

Police see a link between warm weather and crime -- more people tend to be out when the weather's nice -- and the mild winter could have contributed to the high number of gun-related reports, Iovino said.

"This year, we never had the break in crime we usually see in winter," he said.

While police know some gun crimes are gang related, they can't say how many, Iovino said. They don't track reports that way, plus it can be complicated to discern whether a case genuinely has a gang connection, Iovino said.

Iovino has made note of another trend: An increase in people being shot in the leg.

"The stakes were high enough that they were willing to shoot, but conscientious enough of consequences that it seemed to be safer to do that in the leg," Iovino said.

Overall, access to guns and the attitudes of young people could be driving forces in the increase in gun crimes, said Damone Presley, director of Youth Count, an activity and mentoring program at the Aurora/St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corp.

"I think their belief system is that it's better to have a gun than not," Presley said. "Young men tell me nobody fights with their fists anymore. It's no longer 'I'll push you, you push me.' It's gun first."

Young people have also told Presley that getting a gun is as easy as "going to the candy store," he said. "If they don't have the means to get one, their friends have one or they know where they can go get one."

Iovino said police hear similar stories. When they talk to young people during prevention/intervention programs, officers will ask them, "If you had to find a firearm by this weekend, how many of you would know where to start or where to look and how many could come up with a gun?"

"Depending where we are, we always have hands that go up and sometimes a lot go up," Iovino said. "That's alarming, but it's also our reality now."

The takeaway message for Iovino: "We encourage parents to have that conversation with their kids. That's probably not likely a conversation to come up around the kitchen table, but it's an important one to have."

SOURCING THE GUNS

In Minnesota, guns used in crimes generally come from within the state (compared with Southern California, where most come from Arizona or Nevada, for instance), said Bernard J. Zapor, special agent in charge of the ATF's St. Paul field division.

The profile of a gun trafficker in Minnesota, Zapor said, is someone with no criminal history, who has a driver's license and a permit to purchase, and legally buys a firearm at a gun shop. Then, that person, often a young woman, turns around and gives the gun to someone else, which is a violation of federal law, he said.

In addition to the straw purchasers, the ATF is interested in going after the people who are receiving the guns, Zapor said. The agency partners with local police departments, including St. Paul and Minneapolis -- they deputize officers

to follow gun cases where they take them, often outside their jurisdictions, and seek federal charges.

FROGTOWN NO. 1 IN REPORTS

The gun violence where Mary Anne Davis lives on Edmund Avenue has been part of a series of events in a small area in St. Paul. Officer Eric Vang-Sitcler said the cases seem related to the E-block gang.

E-block, which refers to Edmund Avenue, is a group of members of different gangs who live in the same area, Vang-Sitcler said. They hang out with each other, but are still aligned with their respective gangs, he said.

Overall, Frogtown (also known as Thomas-Dale) has had the highest concentration of gun-related reports. The neighborhoods that follow are Summit-University, Dayton's Bluff and Payne-Phalen.

Vang-Sitcler, who has studied the E-block gang, has been trying to sort out the current dispute, but he doesn't know the origins yet. It could be "E-block guys flexing their muscles, trying to show they own this territory, or it could be a retribution thing," he said.

In his 12 years as a police officer, Vang-Sitcler said he hasn't seen such a high level of violence from a gang that wasn't retribution for a homicide, and there's not one that he can link the current cases to.

"If we can figure out what started it, maybe we can figure out how to stop it," he said. "Every time shots are fired in that neighborhood, they're affecting anybody who can hear it. If they miss one house, they hit another one. If they miss one car, they hit another one."

These are some cases that Vang-Sitcler has been looking at as connected to the E-block gang:

-- May 15, 9:05 p.m.: A bullet grazed an 8-year-old boy in the arm while he was playing outside near Thomas Avenue and Mackubin Street. Gregory James Cook Jr., 19, is charged in the case. The complaint says he was shooting at three young people on Edmund Avenue, and one heard someone yell "E-block." (Cook's attorney, Bill Orth, said, "I do my commenting in the courthouse, not in the press.")

-- June 6, 1 a.m.: Travon Williams, 20, was dragged into a vacant house in the 400 block of Edmund Avenue, the street where he lives, and assaulted. His keys to a BMW disappeared at the time and the car was stolen June 12. Soon after, the car was driven into Loeb Lake and two people were seen running. (A young man who answered the door at Williams' home said there was no one there who could talk to a reporter. Phone calls were not returned.)

-- June 6, 10:50 a.m.: Two men got out of separate vehicles and started to fight in the street in the 500 block of Edmund Avenue. One pulled a tire iron and threw it at a vehicle, smashing out the rear window. Both men got into their vehicles and drove away with shots fired as they did. Seven .40-caliber casings were found. This was when Davis' granddaughter was walking down the street.

-- June 6, 5 p.m.: Shots were fired at Williams' house and a bullet hit Davis' house.

-- June 6, 10:30 p.m.: A 19-year-old man whom Cook allegedly shot at May 15 reported shots fired at him and his brother on Sherburne Avenue, by Kent Street. Cook is also charged in this case.

-- June 9, 1:25 p.m.: Shots were fired at two men in the area of Grotto Street and Lafond Avenue.

-- June 9, 11:15 p.m.: A vehicle suspected of being involved in gunfire earlier that day stopped at Grotto Street and Aurora Avenue. Two stolen guns were found and three people, including Williams, were arrested. He has been charged with possession of a firearm by an ineligible person and receiving stolen property. (His attorney could not be reached Wednesday.)

-- June 11, 8:15 p.m.: Shots were fired at Williams' 24-year-old brother outside the family's house.

Davis said she is friendly with the Williams family, and all the adults who live there have jobs and work hard at

them. She doesn't see a gang connection to what's been happening but thinks Williams' former friends have been targeting him because they're jealous that he's been successful at working and bettering himself.

Davis moved into her house in November 2001 and said the neighborhood was "lousy" in the beginning, with drugs and prostitution problems, until police cracked down.

"The neighborhood changed for the better," she said. "I hope it can stay that way because it has come a long way."

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ONLINE

Go to TwinCities.com to search an interactive map of reported incidents of gun violence in St. Paul since 2008.