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## Fact Sheet

# Murder and Public Health: The Gardere Community in 2008 as a Case in Point

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Violent crime, murder in particular, continues to grab public attention even though violent crime rates in the United States as a whole remain near their lowest point in four decades. Although making for sensational headlines, criminologists have long recognized that the risk of violent victimization is not evenly distributed across subgroups of the population. Members of some demographic groups have a fairly negligible risk of being murdered (e.g., middle age women), while the members of a few groups have an exorbitant risk of being murdered (e.g., young nonwhite males). The same can essentially be said of geographic areas, with some communities consistently being plagued by high rates of murder and others experiencing no murders for literally decades on end.

This analysis focuses on one community in East Baton Rouge parish that has periodically over the last decade – and perhaps longer - been recognized as a hot spot for violent crime among Baton Rouge neighborhoods. The Gardere community in the southern part of the parish is not technically part of the city of Baton Rouge, but in fact is classified by the US Bureau of the Census as an Unincorporated Census Designated Place (CDP). This means that it resembles an incorporated place (a concentration of population), but lacks a municipal government. In terms of law enforcement, it is under the jurisdiction of the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office, which maintains a substation in the community on Burbank drive. Because of its classification as a CDP, the US Bureau of the Census has collected detailed demographic data on the community

during standard census years. Moreover, because of its size, geographic configuration, and relative isolation, it is a reasonable approximation for a neighborhood community. Given these features, it is possible to project the size of the young, nonwhite male population (as well as other groups). These population projections can then be coupled with information available on the murder victims in this community during 2008 to calculate murder victimization rates. This approach is useful because it allows us to illustrate that a very limited segment of the population is subjected to an extraordinarily high risk of being murdered, while the risk for the rest of the population in the geographic unit is essentially nothing more than chance.

### **Analysis**

According to public information sources, during the course of 2008 there were 7 murder victims in the Gardere community which came to the attention of law enforcement. While 7 murders in and of itself may not seem like a lot, the statistical meaning of this fact has to be placed in the larger geographic, population and historical context. For example, 7 murders that occurred throughout the geographic area that is East Baton Rouge Parish may not be of concern to many people, but 7 murders within a few blocks of one another probably would. Likewise, 7 murders occurring in a parish of nearly a half a million people may not be disconcerting, but what about when they occur over a population that is roughly the size of a neighborhood of about 10,000 people? Finally, although 2008 has been a year with an unusually high number of murders in this community, there have been at least 29

murders there since 2000 according to newspaper reports.

To estimate the murder victimization risk for this community for 2008, we first take into account the demographic characteristics of the victims. Examining the age, race or ethnicity, and sex profile of the victims from available data, it is easily discerned that all victims were nonwhite males between the ages of 15 and 37 years old. It is critical to take into account that only a very specific demographic segment of the population experienced murder victimization, because failure to do so would be extremely misleading, as we illustrate below.

With basic victim demographic profiles established, it is next necessary to determine the size of the group from which the victims are drawn. In this case, the US Bureau of the Census does not release intercensal population estimates, and analysts must use existing information from prior time periods to extrapolate estimates for the relevant group size. We first drew on data from the 1990 and 2000 Census of Population. As we show in Table 1, the size of the 1990 nonwhite male population age 15-39 (categories conveniently provided by the Census Bureau) is about 935 people. By 2000, this population had grown to about 1,495 people. Using these benchmarks, we linearly interpolated a baseline estimate forward to 2008 for this group using both a yearly raw rate of change and a yearly relative rate of change. These methods provide us what we call a lower boundary estimated population at risk size and an upper boundary estimated population at risk size in 2008 for nonwhite males age 15-39.

**Table 1: Nonwhite Males Age 15-39 in Gardere CDP**

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1990 Census Bureau Estimate	935
2000 Census Bureau Estimate	1495
2008 Estimate Based on Raw Rate of Change (Lower Boundary Estimate)	1943
2008 Estimate Based on Relative Rate of Change (Upper Boundary Estimate)	2201

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Using these figures, we then develop the standard murder victimization rate per 100,000 people for this demographic group in this community. In Table 2, the upper boundary population estimate results in a victimization rate of about 318 murder victims per 100,000 people at risk. The lower boundary figure results in an estimated victimization rate of about 360 murder victims per 100,000 people. To contextualize these figures, we also provide a mix of recent murder victimization and offending rate estimates for the nation as a whole, the state of Louisiana, and for the city of Baton Rouge using recently available figures. As can be seen, the national victimization rate for all groups in 2005 according to the U.S. Department of Justice was about 5.6 per 100,000 people. For the state of Louisiana, typically ranked in the top 10 for violent crime rates, the murder rate was about 14.2 per 100,000 people, and for the city of Baton Rouge in 2007, the FBI murder offense estimate was about 31 per 100,000. The estimate we provide for the Gardere CDP that is demographically disaggregated far eclipses any of these estimates.

**Table 2: Murder Victimization Rate Estimates for Nonwhite Males Age 15-39 in Gardere CDP in 2008**

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<b><u>Gardere Estimates</u></b>	
Lower Boundary Estimate	360.27
Upper Boundary Estimate	318.04
<b><u>Estimates for Comparative Purposes</u></b>	
National Homicide Victimization Rate, 2005	5.6
Louisiana Homicide Offending Rate, 2007	14.2
City of Baton Rouge Homicide Offending Rate, 2007	31.08

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\*All figures are per 100,000 people at risk

## **Discussion**

The data provided in this fact sheet illustrate several important points. First, the Gardere community in East Baton Rouge Parish has been considered a hot spot for serious crime for at least a decade. The year 2008 was a particularly bad year in terms of murders. It is critical to note however, that all of the murder victims during the period under consideration were drawn from a very specific demographic group – nonwhite males age 15-39. The estimates provided here of the murder victimization rate for members of this group is nothing short of astronomical. By the same token, the victimization rate for all other demographic groups in this community is by definition zero, which, on balance, is good news for members of the other groups. Second, we suggest that murder victimization for this demographic group is a major public health problem. Comparing our estimated rates to similarly calculated cause-specific mortality rates from the Centers for Disease Control, we suspect that murder is probably the leading

cause of death for this segment of the Gardere community.

Imagine for a moment if 7 young men suddenly died from cancer in any moderately sized neighborhood in Baton Rouge during the course of 1 year. Would people not start to wonder if they were living on polluted land or consuming contaminated water? For the general public, the intuitive reaction is a criminal justice response, and all indications are that the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office has implemented appropriate measures within the purview of their expertise and authority to curb the violence problem in this community. Indeed, every time the senior author of this report has done fieldwork in the Gardere community, law enforcement has been highly visible. But we suggest that recognizing the public health threat this problem presents would generally augment the efforts of law enforcement, not supplant them. Such an approach would apply scientific methods to understand individual, family, and community level factors which breed the propensity for interpersonal violence in the first place. For example, it would focus on normative and cultural forces which make violence a viable dispute resolution mechanism. It would also focus on the role of firearms in the

etiology of violence. Extra-legal mechanisms which could help reduce community violence rates - such as clergy, civic leaders, health care providers, educators, local employers, and the like – would also play a central role in public health related efforts to address the problem.

A third point we wish to emphasize is that the link between the notions of 'community' and 'public' health are important because serious violence tends to be fairly geographically contained, as in the case of Gardere. In a broad community like the Baton Rouge area, there are in fact only a handful of localized communities that experience extremely high rates of murder. As we have shown here though, even in those places there is only a limited, although valuable and important, segment of the population that really has an extremely high risk. What this ultimately means is that in our broader community, most people and most places do not have a high risk of experiencing murder victimization. However, we also suggest that in light of how spatially, socially, economically, culturally, and politically integrated the Baton Rouge area actually is, the burden of addressing the public health threat that murder does present in this community is carried by all of us.

## About the Authors

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