

Posted on Sun, Jul. 23, 2006

## Everybody pays

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CONTRA COSTA TIMES



Dean Coppola/Contra Costa Times

Theresa Harris, center, is consoled after the funeral of her son, Brian Donnelly Payne, at the New Gethsemane Church of God in Christ in Richmond last year. Donnelly Payne, 27, was shot to death in a car in June 2005.

Every click of a trigger comes with a cost.

That's obvious in the flatland neighborhoods of Richmond and Oakland, where people live with danger and disruption every day.

That's not so obvious in the distant suburbs, where most view such troubles through the filter of the evening news.

But everyone pays -- whether they realize it or not.

"If we spent less money dealing with the aftermath of crime, our libraries would be open longer, more potholes would be fixed, we'd have more animal service officers, more money for health care," said John Gioia, president of the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors. "Those are really tangible, true examples."

Gioia, whose district includes Richmond and surrounding West County, has spent the past year trying to tally the public expense associated with a typical shooting. His best guess: at least \$150,000, including court and hospital bills.

"And that's even before a convicted individual has walked into prison to serve their time," he said.

The costs of shooting cases vary widely. No single price tag captures all the ways injury or sudden death damages victims and society.

Neighboring streets, for example, empty of patrols when police cluster at a shooting scene.

Miles away, suburban patients share the emergency room of their private hospital with uninsured gunshot victims.

And local government foots the bill for processing bodies, prosecuting gun cases and jailing perpetrators.

Nationwide, the bill is staggering: A single year's shootings in the United States cost \$2.3 billion in lifetime medical costs, of which taxpayers covered \$1.1 billion, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

### **When bullets fly**

When a gunman hits his mark, police converge from miles around, abandoning their normal duties to interview witnesses, hang crime tape and search the gutters for shell casings. This happens everywhere.

"Other calls have to wait. In that respect, I think most departments are identical," said Danville Police Chief Chris Wenzel, whose suburban town is among the region's safest. "When you're dealing with a really serious incident, such as a murder, you apply all of your available resources to that situation."

In cities such as Richmond, where police documented 40 homicides and 213 nonfatal shootings last year, the diversion of resources grinds the department to a halt daily.

During the three hours after a May 9 shooting, for example, city police responded to two other high-priority calls within five minutes. But 13 lower-priority calls -- a genre typified by burglary reports, fender-benders and complaints about loiterers -- each sat for up to three hours.

Nearby unincorporated communities experience fewer shootings but often feel more pronounced effects from them because sheriff's deputies patrol larger areas than city officers.

A homicide in North Richmond might affect response times to nonemergency calls in Crockett, Rodeo and El Sobrante, for example. A shooting investigation in Bay Point could affect regular patrol in Pacheco or Clyde.

Shootings not only slow police response times, but they also cost money to investigate.

"There is no 'average' homicide," sheriff's spokesman Jimmy Lee said. "It can take anywhere from dozens to hundreds of hours to follow up on a case. It can cost anywhere from thousands to tens of thousands of dollars."

On-duty officers, for example, earn the same whether they spend their shift working their beat or standing at the perimeter of a crime scene. Detectives, on the other hand, rack up significant overtime pay during the critical first hours of a homicide investigation, particularly if called in at night or on the weekend.

The Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office estimates a detective earns \$50 an hour for overtime. If four detectives and a sergeant attend to a late-night homicide for six hours, they will collectively receive about \$1,500 in overtime.

Such investigations rarely end by morning, however, and during the 72 hours after a killing, detectives may work many more hours, both on the regular clock and overtime.

Complex investigations tend to accumulate new costs with time, such as crime lab expenses for processing blood or firearms evidence and travel expenses, Lee said.

## **You pay the bill**

While insurance normally picks up the tab for ambulance rides, only about half the county's shooting victims are insured or can pay the transport fee, typically \$1,061 or \$1,238 for gunshot patients.

"When your trauma goes up and your ability to collect goes down, there's no one to go to," said Leslie Mueller, an operations director for American Medical Response. "There is no additional funding source."

AMR's contract with the county makes it the sole provider of advanced life-support ambulances, meaning it has cornered the market on lights-and-sirens rides to local emergency rooms. But with that monopoly comes responsibility. AMR serves everyone and charges all the same rate.

"It certainly affects the total cost to everyone when you have a large number of people who cannot pay," said Art Lathrop, the county emergency medical services director. "It's being made up for in charges to other patients ... who can pay."

That's one reason CALSTAR, the nonprofit helicopter ambulance that flies from Buchanan Field in Concord, bills \$15,000 per flight: It collects only half the time.

Most gunshot patients come from West County. Most are flown, because 25 miles of hilly terrain and congested roadways separate them from John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek, the region's trauma center.

Once on the ambulance pad, trained handlers whisk the patients into one of the emergency room's trauma bays, where a team of 13 surgeons, nurses and other specialists, including a social worker, assemble to assess and treat them.

Operating rooms halt regular business in case immediate surgery is needed.

"With a trauma activation, you are paying the cost of staffing a trauma surgeon in-house, 24-7," Lathrop said. "You're paying for the operating room that John Muir must keep available at all times."

In 2005 alone, gunshot patients racked up nearly \$25.7 million in charges at John Muir, up from \$11.8 million in 2004. The leap came partly from more patients -- 158 vs. 112 -- and partly because of unusually high-cost injuries.

In the past three years, 62 percent of gunshot patients at John Muir were classified as "self pay." Most didn't.

While federal law prohibits hospitals from discussing specific patients without their consent, county records show some gunshot victims accumulate tremendous bills at John Muir. One victim stayed 192 days in 2005, racking up \$3.4 million in charges.

"It's phenomenal the amount of resources John Muir Medical Center puts into uninsured and underinsured patients," said Kacey Hansen, the hospital's trauma director.

This phenomena translates into higher health insurance premiums, not just higher hospital fees, said Mohit Ghose, spokesman for a trade group called America's Health Insurance Plans.

"There is a private payer offset to the indigent care being provided across the country," Ghose said. "We've known that for years."

A lobby group called Families USA estimated that in 2005, the cost of providing health care for uninsured people accounted for \$379 of the \$3,586 average premium for health insurance through private employers in California.

Under federal law, hospitals must treat anyone who arrives with an emergency medical condition. Once stable, a patient can't be transferred or sent home without an "appropriate discharge plan" -- which for gunshot victims could include home caregivers, paraplegic rehabilitation, or extended care in a skilled nursing home.

Until hospital officials can arrange aftercare, the patient stays put. Sometimes, the only way to free a bed in acute care is to pay for the patient's care elsewhere.

### **The cost of dying**

The meter of public expense does not stop when a shooting victim dies.

Each body in a homicide case goes to the Contra Costa Coroner's Office, where a pathologist performs an autopsy to determine what killed the victim and find anything else that might prove noteworthy in court.

The autopsy costs the county \$525. Laboratory fees for processing blood and tissue samples usually add another few hundred dollars to the bill, coroner's Sgt. Chris Forsythe said.

Once released from custody, the body remains in the coroner's refrigerator until a mortuary picks it up.

If the body goes unclaimed, or if a family cannot afford a mortuary's services, the county pays \$842 to provide a free cremation.

Most families pay much more. In the Bay Area, a minimal service typically costs \$4,000 to \$6,000. Extras quickly swell the bill.

California often chips in through its Victim Compensation Fund, a service that provides financial aid for those victimized by crime through no fault of their own. If a family cannot pay, the fund will spend as much as \$7,500 on a funeral.

The program, funded through Superior Court fees and fines, also provides crime victims and their families with supplemental help for medical bills, funeral expenses, mental health and lost wages.

"We are the payer of last resort," said Pamela Schneider, spokeswoman for the program. "If someone is injured as the result of a crime, and they are insured but can't afford their co-pay, we would fill in the gap. That's how it works. If there is any other possible source, we won't pay it."

Contra Costa residents filed 1,069 claims with the state Victim Compensation Program in 2004-05 and received \$1.9 million, public records show. Alameda County residents filed 2,553 claims that year and received nearly \$3 million.

County programs not only refer victims to services such as the Victim Compensation Fund, but they also provide case workers to help with applications and bureaucracy.

Contra Costa's Victim Witness Assistance Program is run by the District Attorney's Office and funded by a grant that pays \$488,000 this year. The program has helped about 800 victims so far this year, mostly shooting victims or their families.

"We make sure they fill out applications correctly, go with them to court, write them letters so they can get counseling right away," program director Eileen Dowell said. "We also contact service providers to assure them the money is coming, to keep their bills out of collections."

### **The ledger of justice**

Public expense mounts further if police find a shooting suspect.

In Contra Costa County, it costs roughly \$25,000 to prosecute a noncapital homicide case, plus another \$75,000 for a public defender.

The public pays about \$117 per day to jail a suspect awaiting trial in Contra Costa County. Incarceration of each convicted shooter in state prison averages \$34,150 annually.

Bob Kochly, Contra Costa's district attorney, reserves five of his most experienced deputies specifically for homicide cases. He calls gun violence "a tremendous resource drain."

"Then you factor in on top of that other shootings that are nonfatal," he said. "There's a lot of those, and they're generally particularly troublesome cases. We're often dealing with victims who are still alive and able to testify but don't want to."

Gun violence must remain a top priority for prosecutors. But if Contra Costa had fewer shootings, attorneys would have more time to attack quality-of-life issues such as elder abuse or low-level drug dealing, Kochly said.

"We're so concerned about making the community a safer place to live that we don't always have time to make it a better place to live," he said.

Some of the largest costs of gun violence remain the most difficult to tally: its effect on real-estate values, for instance, or the way it depresses small-business investment.

Others are beyond measure: What is the value of a mother's suffering? The worth of a young life lost?

Still, even a partial accounting proves the connection between troubled urban neighborhoods and the county's more affluent households, Gioia says.

"I don't think we have to make them feel connected to the areas with high crime. We just have to make them understand that their support can make a difference. And that it does affect their taxes."

"Sometimes, it does come down to self-interest."