**'One death every five days': Record year for domestic violence-related deaths in Wisconsin at 60**

[**Chris Mueller**](https://www.postcrescent.com/staff/4386974002/chris-mueller/)

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James Gruettner, 59, was [shot and killed in Oshkosh by his daughter's ex-boyfriend](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/crime/2021/07/21/oshkosh-shooting-man-sentenced-life-killing-1-wounding-2/7989452002/), who had been [repeatedly sending her text messages about getting back together](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/crime/2020/08/12/oshkosh-shooting-victim-describes-past-domestic-abuse-suspect/3353170001/). Two other people, including Gruettner's daughter, were wounded in the incident.

Zyana Corbin, a 3-year-old girl from Appleton, was [killed by the father of her mother's unborn child in a violent attack](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2021/03/26/appleton-man-who-killed-3-year-old-wounded-mother-gets-life-in-prison/4800209001/) he planned after she began to take steps to end their relationship. Corbin's mother, who was pregnant at the time, was wounded in the attack, but ultimately survived.

Two children, [3-year-old Danielle Beyer and 5-year-old William Beyer](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2020/02/27/kaukauna-brother-and-sister-were-inseparable-and-always-smiling/4895013002/), of Kaukauna, were killed in their sleep, [stabbed to death by their biological father](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2021/09/10/kaukauna-child-deaths-matthew-beyers-attorney-seeks-competency-exam/8274100002/) the same day he was scheduled to appear in court to address custody, according to police.

Those are only a few examples of the 58 victims of domestic violence homicide last year in Wisconsin, according to a statewide report released Wednesday by End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin.

The 58 victims, along with two perpetrators killed by police, add up to the highest number of domestic violence homicides recorded in Wisconsin since at least 2000. In total, 68 people, including both victims and perpetrators, lost their lives last year due to domestic violence.

The report, which is released annually, puts it this way: "In 2020, individuals died in Wisconsin due to domestic violence at a rate of approximately one death every five days."

The rise in domestic violence last year is described in the report as a "shadow pandemic," happening as the entire world grappled with the impact of COVID-19.

“The pandemic really highlighted the risk factors present in domestic violence situations,” Sara Krall, the organization's homicide prevention program director and one of the authors of the report, told USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin in an interview Thursday.

A pandemic-related disruption of the most basic things that kept people safe — a job or access to health care, for example — often made things worse for anyone at risk of domestic violence, Krall said.

The anxiety and stress that came with the pandemic, as well as the isolation of social distancing, has been "triggering and dangerous" for survivors of domestic violence, the report says.

In response, advocates have focused on training police officers and prosecutors to take the issue of domestic violence seriously, Krall said, while also supporting programs that help people meet basic needs: health care, for instance, or housing.

"If people have access to get their basic needs met, they're not relying on the criminal justice system to help keep them safe," she said.

The domestic violence homicides detailed in the report happened in 17 counties in Wisconsin.

Milwaukee County had by far the most victims of domestic violence homicide of any county in the state last year with 24, including an incident in April 2020 with five victims: Teresa Thomas, 41, and her two children, Tiera Agee, 16, and Demetrius Thomas, 14, along with two teens related to the perpetrator, Marcus Stokes, 19, and Lakeitha Stokes, 17. The perpetrator, Christopher Stokes, was [sentenced in July to 205 years in prison](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2021/07/27/christopher-stokes-milwaukee-sentenced-205-years-prison-killing-family/8074836002/).

Waukesha County had the next highest total with six, followed by Winnebago County with five, then Brown and Outagamie counties, with four each.

The ages of victims in the report range for 3 to 73, while the ages of the perpetrators range from 17 to 71. The wide ranges show how far-reaching the issue of domestic violence can be, Krall said.

Many of the younger victims, along with some of the older victims, were killed as an extension of violence between other people in the household, Krall said.

“That, really, is why we should all care about it,” she said. “None of us are immune from experiencing domestic violence, but we're also not immune from being caught in the crossfire.”

A gun was used in more than half of the incidents of domestic violence homicide last year in the state. In more than one- third of those cases, the perpetrator was already legally prohibited from possessing a firearm.

"We have laws on the books intended to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people, but clearly this statistic means that isn’t working," Krall said.

Democratic members of the state Assembly and Senate introduced legislation Thursday that included extreme risk protection orders and universal background checks on gun sales.

"States with simple checks like this one have shown to have nearly 40% fewer women shot and killed annually," Jenna Gormal, director of public policy for End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin said in a statement released Thursday. "That is a staggering and significant number — we urge legislators to support the swift passage of this legislation."

The report also includes a section about missing and murdered Indigenous peoples, including a section written by Kristin Welch, founder and director of the [Waking Women Healing Institute](https://www.wakingwomenhealingint.org/).

“People think it’s either a historic issue that doesn’t exist anymore or they think it’s a recent issue,” Welch said in an interview Thursday. “Neither of those are true — it’s both. It’s a historic and recent issue.”

Some estimates show Indigenous women are murdered at a rate many times higher than the national average, with [84% expected to experience acts of violence](https://www.wakingwomenhealingint.org/Our-HERstory) at some point in their life. Welch believes that estimate, as high as it is, might still be too low.

Welch urged people to get engaged by contacting local leaders in an effort to get them to take action on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous people, especially women and girls.

A task force formed in July 2020 by the Wisconsin Department of Justice has been working to address the issue and got [a boost earlier this year in the form of a $300,000 federal grant](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/native-american-issues/2021/05/11/wisconsin-doj-sets-funding-fight-violence-against-indigenous-women/5025646001/).

"This is not being treated with the urgency that it deserves," Welch said.

**Resources**

*National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)*

*A list of local domestic violence victim service providers in Wisconsin can be found at*[*endabusewi.org/get-help*](http://www.endabusewi.org/get-help)*.*

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