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# Dallas kids are under assault. What's behind uptick in violence involving young victims?

Voiceless children are too often the collateral damage when adults' lives go off track.



Flowers were placed at a vigil Tuesday at the apartment where four people were fatally shot weekend. An unharmed baby was also found at the murder scene. (Liesbeth Powers / Staff Photographer)

By [Sharon Grigsby](#)  
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Picture your own child or one you care about. Maybe a nephew, a friend's daughter or a youngster in the Sunday school class you teach.

Now think about these children:

The three Ellis County kids, ages 5 and 6, who police say [were stabbed to death by their mother](#) two weeks ago in an attack that left two younger siblings hospitalized in serious condition.

[The 11-year-old who police say was fatally shot](#) by his mom's ex-boyfriend as the youngster slept in his home on the edge of Dallas' Preston Hollow neighborhood last weekend.

[The 2-year-old hospitalized](#) in unknown condition the same day after police say he discharged a loaded gun in his Oak Cliff home.

The infant whom police discovered unharmed last Sunday night in the northwest Dallas apartment [where four adults lay shot and killed](#).

The 7-year-old Dallas boy who police say [witnessed his dad being shot to death](#) as they waited in the family car for the pre-arranged sale of two laptops and a cell phone in a warehouse area just south of I-20. It was the little boy who called 911 to seek help for his mortally wounded father.



Candles burned at a vigil Tuesday outside the apartment where four people were fatally shot over the weekend. (Liesbeth Powers / Staff Photographer)

What if your child had been one of these innocent victims of death, injury or trauma?

To those of you who want to stop reading because the awfulness is too much to sit with, stop and think what it was like for the children at the heart of these stories.

To those pulled by the undercurrent of bias or disapproving snap judgment, push beyond those reactions. Ignore that desire to say these tragedies occur in families nothing like yours.

Let's quit looking for the differences, shake off our collective numbness and instead focus on how we can help heal this scourge of violence.

I don't have iron-clad answers, but I know we can't let these children's stories go unnoticed. We have to stand up for them.

The word victim gets a lot of airplay in today's society. Victims of sexism, racism and ageism. Victims of bad bosses and social media stalkers.

The victims you don't hear from are kids. You don't see their faces or hear their voices because they can't stand up and speak for themselves.

Yet what population is more vulnerable than children, whose present and future are tied tightly to the grownups around them?

Through no choice of their own, kids are too often the collateral damage when those adults become lost in their own chaotic lives.

Sometimes it's the result of domestic violence, of drug or alcohol abuse, of mental illness — or a combination of all three. Other times it's the environment poverty fosters — insufficient housing, jobs and the economic neglect of an entire neighborhood.

In a perfect world, these conditions wouldn't exist. The best we can hope for in an imperfect one is to give defenseless kids as much support and protection as possible.



A portion of the gun inventory available for purchase in August at a local pawn shop. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

It would be pure hypocrisy not to start with an acknowledgement of this nation's love affair with guns and our increasingly trigger-happy ways.

Nowhere are children less safe than in Texas, where [permitless carry is the law of the land](#) and the government's default position is, "We'll give you a gun until you prove in some tragic way you don't deserve one."

Gun violence has lost the power to shock any of us. The Texas Capitol reverberates this legislative session with [cries that kids deserve to be safe in school](#), but too few lawmakers talk about keeping them safe in their neighborhoods and in their homes.

In a parallel irony, the Republican-controlled state government exalts in victory [on behalf of the rights of unborn kids](#) while continuing to care little about the rights of those already born.

One group that does care is [Dallas CASA, a practical and apolitical antidote](#) for the violence that too often upends the lives of kids.

“The children in our community are under assault,” is how CASA president and CEO Kathleen LaValle assesses things.

“We are the grownups, and it falls to us, it is all of our responsibility, to protect them,” she said as we talked about the most recent headlines.



Kathleen LaValle, president and CEO of Dallas CASA, at the organization's office. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

LaValle speaks with the authority that comes from years of running an organization committed to child protection.

Among her chief concerns is that many of the safety nets torn apart during the pandemic — social connections that create a fabric of support for adults in stressful situations — remain unended.

The resulting chaos, whether emotional or economic, swamps not just the adults but pours down on the children.

A recent study by the [Region 3 Foster Care Consortium](#), which covers nine North Texas counties, found 77% of substantiated Dallas County neglect cases in 2022 were closed without the family of a youngster being offered any services at all.

“That’s a staggering statistic,” LaValle said. “A victim was confirmed, but nothing was put in place to monitor or mitigate possible risk of a child’s safety being at risk.”

The families received no parenting classes, no substance-abuse recovery programs, no anger management help, no financial education sessions.

Nothing.

LaValle also worries about data that might at first glance seem a cause for celebration — the dramatic drop in the number of local children coming into protective care.

Here’s why that’s actually an ominous number. Even as removals from the home decrease, “we have seen increases in the hotline reports of suspected abuse and neglect,” she said.

[A statutory change in September 2021](#) modified the definition of neglect to require showing immediate danger to a child rather than the prior standard of substantial risk of serious injury or harm.

LaValle thinks about the teacher, the grandmother or the neighbor who previously made calls of concern on behalf of a child’s living situation and saw nothing happen. “Next time they may not pick up the phone.”



Toys lay along the side of the home and bikes leaned against an enclosed porch where three children were killed and two more were found wounded in the Ellis County city of Italy. (Liesbeth Powers / Staff Photographer)

So what can you do in response to this sorry state of affairs?

- Despite the long odds, continue to raise your voice on sensible gun control.
- Speak up if you have concerns about family situations. That mother down the street loves her kid as much as you love yours, but she may need help regaining her emotional balance.
- Donate to organizations that provide services and programs to strengthen families and mitigate risks.
- Call on our state government to be accountable for the consequences of not intervening to help families.
- Learn more about becoming a Dallas CASA volunteer. [Check out its website](#) for the next information session.

We talk all the time about social inequities. What inequity is more important than this one?

We can choose for things to be different. All that is required is for numbed onlookers to become engaged participants.



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Dallas Morning News story link: <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/commentary/2023/03/17/dallas-kids-are-under-assault-whats-behind-uptick-in-violence-involving-young-victims/>