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Explanation for rash of shootings difficult to find Experts cite recent trends and the normalization of violence in society as possible causes.

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A recent outbreak of shootings in **Omaha** has to have people asking what the heck is going on around here, and wondering what can be done about it. There was a shooting in a hospital lobby for the second time in seven months. A man was fatally shot in broad daylight in busy Seymour Smith Park.

Those continued a stretch of brazen assaults in **public** places where such events once seemed unthinkable. In January, a student fatally shot a vice principal and critically injured the principal at Millard South High **School**.

The most recent shootings occurred during a four-day stretch in which 12 people were shot in **Omaha**, three of them fatally. A 25-year-old mother of two was killed April 10 when a gunman in her driveway shot into her home near Miller Park. And a wanted man was killed and a Douglas County sheriff's deputy wounded during a struggle when officers served an arrest warrant April 13 near Lauritzen Gardens.

So what's going on?

Two criminal justice experts who study gun violence patterns in **Omaha** and elsewhere say the shootings appear to continue a number of trends. University of Nebraska at **Omaha** professor John P. Crank and Mark T. Sundermeier, a retired deputy **Omaha** police chief, cited seasonal spikes in shootings; ongoing violence in neighborhoods traditionally plagued by crime; and occasional high-profile shootings in increasingly **public** places scattered around the city.

Those trends don't totally explain the recent spate of shootings, Crank said, but reports of shots fired usually hit two peaks each year in **Omaha**. The first is shortly before **school** lets out for the summer. The second is in the fall, shortly after **school** begins.

Each of the incidents this month, like the high-profile shootings over the past several years, had different circumstances. If the shootings are linked by anything, Sundermeier said, it may be the increasing normalization of violence in society.

"Sometimes, it's like fusion," Sundermeier said. "There's violence because there's violence. There's like almost a madness. It's infectious. It seems a reasonable thing to do because other people are doing it."

Should Omahans be shocked?

Yes.

Should they be scared?

Not necessarily.

Is the situation hopeless?

No, but it's difficult.

The latest incidents "could be a wake-up call to people that they are not immune to urban violence," said Dr. Ayman El-Mohandes, dean of the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of **Public Health**. "It's not in some dark street where nobody is directly involved. It seems to be happening more and more around more of us. ... People are beginning to say, 'My God, this is becoming my problem.'"

Omaha remains relatively safe, and a growing number of community groups are working with police to try to prevent violence in the city, said academics, police and community leaders.

"Overall, crime is down," Crank said. "We have had spectacular events that have captured people's imaginations, for better or worse."

He and Sundermeier said such shootings as those at Westroads Mall, Millard South and last fall at Creighton University Medical Center are "one-way missions" that are hard to predict but unlikely to happen often.

Unlike most street crimes, in which the perpetrator doesn't want to be caught, those on one-way missions do not expect to survive, Sundermeier said.

Added Crank, "These highly brazen crimes aren't going to happen much. They're self-limiting. These people are self-selecting themselves out of criminal activity."

Omaha Police Chief Alex Hayes said gun assaults were down about 16 percent for the first quarter of 2011 from the same period last year, from 43 to 36. Aggravated assaults were down 17 percent for the same period.

Twelve homicides had occurred in **Omaha** through April 10 of this year, compared to 10 last year. **Omaha's** 35 homicides in 2010 were two less than the city had in the year 2000.

Hayes said he thinks people should be shocked anytime someone is shot. He said he didn't want to downplay any incidents and that police are working hard on prevention. But he cautioned against lumping the early April shootings and other high-profile incidents together and concluding that **Omaha** has more violence than it does.

For example, the two shootings at Creighton University Medical Center were "completely different," Hayes said. Neither was a mass shooting. In the first one, last fall, a man disturbed over problems at home shot at police and was killed. On April 6, a man went to the hospital and shot a man with whom he had argued.

The Westroads shooting, Hayes noted, occurred in 2007.

"I don't think that there's been any more **public** events than we've ever had," he said.

He said the early April shootings were unrelated incidents that had little in common, other than happening within a few days of each other.

The Seymour Smith Park shooting captured **public** attention, but it's hardly the first in a **public** park. That's not to say that **Omaha** parks are unsafe, Hayes said, but to put recent events in perspective.

He said there were four shootings in parks in 2010, including two homicides. There were three felony assaults in parks in 2008, including one with a gun and one homicide. In 2006, there were two homicides in parks.

The chief said police are trying to be more proactive in assessing crime trends, using enforcement tools and encouraging community involvement to suppress violence and collaborate on long-term prevention strategies. That includes pulling a lot of illegal guns off the streets, Hayes said.

Jannette Taylor, executive director of the anti-violence effort Impact One Community Connection, noted that **Omaha** has a lower murder rate than some cities of similar size. Still, she said the community shouldn't accept the level of violence that **Omaha** has.

"We shouldn't allow the abnormal to become normal," she said.

"There is more awareness to the issues, to the effects of violence and the causes of violence," Taylor said.

She hopes that awareness will spark more community involvement. Too often, she said, too many people dismiss gun violence as a north **Omaha** problem. Taylor said it shouldn't take a shooting at 72nd and Harrison Streets to make people pay attention.

That said, she added that the wider community has been getting more involved in violence-prevention efforts such as jobs programs, events and sharing information on resources.

Summer activities, such as jobs and Harmony Week in May, were high on the agenda Wednesday when about 50 people gathered in an **Omaha** Home for Boys auditorium for the weekly meeting of a violence intervention and prevention task force. People came from hospitals and **schools**, clergy and police, business, government and nonprofit organizations. The effort is part of **Omaha** 360, an initiative of the Empowerment Network.

More people are recognizing violence as a citywide problem and getting involved, said Dave Gehrls, who started an effort to pray at homicide sites and bring neighbors together.

"It's critical that we have north **Omaha** and South **Omaha** and west **Omaha** working together," he said at the meeting. "And we're starting to see that."

Willie Barney, president and facilitator of the Empowerment Network, urged people to promote the "10 things you can do right now" identified by **Omaha** 360. Among them: becoming a mentor or joining the Adopt-a-Block program, in which churches and neighbors work together in specific neighborhoods.

For the north **Omaha** community, Barney said, the top priority is summer jobs - and then building those into full-time, year-round employment.

As for the April shootings, Barney said that they appeared to be isolated incidents. He said his organization has been around long enough to see such spikes before.

"When you see things that are so unrelated, there's not a whole lot you can say about that," Barney said. "You just intensify your efforts."

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