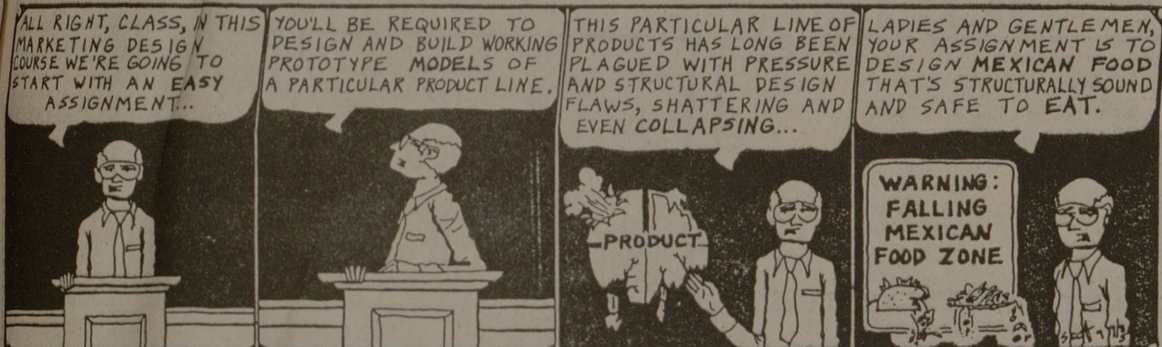


Warped

by Scott McCullar



San Antonio's murder rate increasing

Associated Press  
SAN ANTONIO — San Antonio police, facing a 30 percent rise in the city's murder rate over the first eight months of 1985, say there's no one reason for the increase.

As of Sept. 1, San Antonio had recorded 130 homicides in 1985, compared with 97 reported for the first eight months of 1984. A total of 166 homicides took place in San Antonio last year, police say.

"Sure, we're alarmed at any increase," said homicide Lt. Jack Summey. "We don't like it if there's just one murder. But there's real pattern in homicides in San Antonio. We go through ups and downs in our murders, just like any big city."

Summey said part of the increase in the murder rate is attributable to an increase in the number of illegal aliens from Mexico and Central America.

"We're seeing a greater number of illegal aliens than before on both ends of the picture, both as victims and suspects," Summey said. "It's a conservative guess that about 15 to 20 percent of the homicides this year involved aliens."

Another factor is San Antonio's growth, police say. Since 1980, San Antonio has experienced a growth rate of 10.8 percent, increasing its population by more than 80,000.

Drinking, narcotics use, poverty and the weather also are factors, Summey said, but what prompts people to kill remains elusive.

"Friday and Saturday nights are out heaviest homicide nights. That's when folks are off, they've been paid and they're drinking," Summey said. "Most of the homicides occur in the lower-income areas. And the biggest increase in homicides this year occurred during the last three months, when it got hot."

But Summey said there's "no such thing as a typical homicide."

"You can't say what will trigger it," he said. "We're dealing with people. And where people interact, there's a potential for violence."

Victim's Bill of Rights allows legal input for victim, family

By JENS B. KOEPKE  
Staff Writer

A young boy is murdered. During a meeting between the judge and the attorneys, the boy's father asks the judge to hear his side of the story. The judge replies, "I don't give a damn about you, this is between me and the defendant."

This is an example of the exclusionary judicial process that victims and their relatives have encountered, said Joyce Knoll, chapter leader with The Parents of Murdered Children.

Addressing the growing criticism from victim's groups, the state legislature passed House Bill 235, the Crime Victim's Bill of Rights. It took effect on Sept. 1, 1985.

"It's high time that the victims were brought into the process... after all they were the ones who were traumatized," said Rep. Frank Tejada, co-sponsor of the bill.

The bill mandates that courts explain the procedure of all judicial processes to the victims and notify the victims of any trial cancellations or postponements. Often, said Knoll, victims take off work to attend a trial only to get there and find out it has been postponed.

In addition, the legislation allows, at the judge's discretion, for the victim's presence in the courtroom.

"Before, witnesses were paraded through the courtroom, saying what a great guy the defendant was, but

"Before the law, the victim was totally dependent on the system; he had no legal input," said James Knoll, leader of Parents of Murdered Children.

now victims will have more say at trials," said James Knoll, president of Parents of Murdered Children and Joyce's husband.

"I think you'll see some stiffer penalties as a result of the family being present," Mrs. Knoll said.

Also, magistrates must now take the safety of the victim into consideration when setting the amount of bail.

The law also broadened the definition of "a victim" to include spouses, parents, adult relatives or legal guardians, if the victim died.

The most important aspect of the new law, said Tejada, is the establishment of the Victim Impact Statement. The statement allows the victim to tell the court how the crime affected his family financially, physically and psychologically.

The statement is considered by the judge when sentencing the defendant and by the Parole Board at

parole hearings. The statement is included in the defendant's Texas Department of Corrections folder.

"I think it (the statement) will bring the violence of the crime more into focus at sentencing," Knoll said.

"Before the law, the victim was totally dependent on the system; he had no legal input," Knoll said.

The bill exemplifies the more accommodating posture that courts are taking toward victims, said Texas A&M sociology professor Ben Crouch. He cited the construction of separate waiting rooms for witnesses and victims and for offenders at a Beaumont courthouse as an example of the court's new outlook.

At this point 28 states have passed crime victims legislation similar to the Texas law. In addition, the federal Victims of Crime Act was passed in 1984.

"I think the law gives the victim a better sense of satisfaction," said Suzanne Willms, director of the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse.

The bill directs the Clearinghouse to conduct a survey on the number and type of people to whom state and local agencies provide Victim Impact Statements during each year.

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