

Without a doubt, 2020 has been a very difficult year for people all around this country and the world. From natural disasters to coping with a global pandemic to civil unrest, rapid change and new stressors are the new normal in our daily lives. It is understandable that the shine on our Minnesota nice has dulled a bit. One alarming trend emerging out of this daily battle against the forces of chaos has been an increase in violent and aggressive behavior. In June, I wrote about the rise seen in domestic violence cases since the outbreak of COVID-19. However, this upturn in violent and aggressive behavior is not limited to domestic abuse cases. A collection of nine categories of call types which are all associated with interpersonal conflict indicate that, in general, we are having a problem getting along with each other. These nine categories include acts of disorderly conduct, disputes, harassment, threats, and unwanted persons. This collection of conflict incidents has seen a 40% increase in call volume for 2020 when compared to the same time period in 2019.

This is a disturbing trend when you consider that these types of behaviors are the starting point for situations that have the potential to turn violent or even deadly given the wrong combination of circumstances. What may seem like a minor conflict can quickly turn into a life-altering event. Take the case of Anthony Shriver, a 22-year-old man who died in St. Cloud in 2017 after being involved in a verbal altercation that escalated to a physical fight. The man who punched Shriver and began a chain of events that lead to Shriver's death was ultimately sentenced to seven years in prison, resulting in two lives being changed forever.

One doesn't need to resort to violence to find themselves on the wrong side of the law. Harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence are all behaviors which may not be protected by the First Amendment and carry penalties in the law. Regardless of how righteous you may think your cause is or your motivation for engaging in this kind of behavior, that self-justification will likely serve you poorly as your case works its way through the criminal justice system. Whether the issue causing conflict is an interpersonal conflict, neighborhood dispute, or even a nation-wide social debate, behaviors associated with these conflicts become increasingly problematic as they move toward intending to cause a specific person to feel fear. Discussions, conflicting points of view, and protests are protected speech and helpful in advancing conversations. When the intent of these activities changes from advancing the conversation to imposing a particular view through harassment, threats of violence, or intimidation, the law may be broken. When considering how to act when involved in a conflict, for your own safety, take a moment and evaluate whether your actions are advancing the solution or creating more problems. If you are not sure whether you are advancing a solution, ask yourself if you will be proud of your actions six months from now.

Keeping safe in these turbulent times requires individuals to be restrained and smart. When dealing with conflict, the best advice is to either disengage or be the person who works to de-escalate the situation. A top priority in our mission to keep Benton County safe is to find and arrest people who engage in physical violence. However, arresting the perpetrator won't heal your black eye or mend a broken bone. When conflicts escalate into physical fights, both sides lose regardless of who threw the first punch. When faced with conflict, get to a place of safety and call local law enforcement. Law enforcement will work to ensure your safety, determine if any laws were broken, and hold accountable those who have broken the law. For chronic conflict situations, the courts offer solutions like

harassment restraining orders and orders for protection. These orders give law enforcement valuable tools in diffusing these situations and keeping them from escalating into violence.

Finally, I think we could all benefit from keeping in mind that the angst we feel about the current conditions in which we find ourselves is likely shared by most everyone else you meet. The rude behavior of that driver in the lane next to you or that neighbor that won't stop annoying you is likely just as frustrated about something in their life as you are with their behavior. I've yet to see a conflict situation that is escalated by using patience and kindness, so maybe we could all try that first. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.