

Over the Limit: Alcohol is a factor in many violent crimes

Joshua Vaughn The Sentinel 20 hrs ago



Hampden Township Police Officer Matthew Grunden holds a preliminary breath tester. BUY NOW Alcohol was a key factor in nearly half of all homicides in Pennsylvania, according to the CDC.

Joshua Vaughn Photo Illustration, The Sentinel

On March 12, Mark Jante, a 59-year-old Middlesex Township man, called 911 to report that he had stabbed someone and was in need of medical attention.

When police arrived on the scene they found Jante covered in blood, and the victim — a man Jante referred to as his “buddy” — bleeding from his back, according to an affidavit of probable cause filed by the Cumberland County District Attorney’s Office.

The victim died as a result of injuries, and Jante became the first of two people charged with criminal homicide in Cumberland County in 2017.

While killings are rare in the county, there is one factor of the crime Jante is accused of that has become common in the commission of violent crimes: alcohol.

When police spoke to Jante on the scene, they reported he smelled of alcohol. Jante, who has been held in Cumberland County Prison without bail since the attack, told police he had been drinking with the victim all day, according to the affidavit.

CLOSER LOOK



Alcohol and violence

“Any situation where there’s a potential for violence, you add alcohol and it’s like adding gasoline to a lit fire,” said David Jernigan, associate professor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

Between 2006 and 2010, alcohol was a key factor in more than 300 homicides in Pennsylvania according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Those 300 people account for more than 14,000 years of potential life lost in the state, according to the CDC.

The CDC reports that alcohol played a pivotal role in nearly half of all homicides and nearly a quarter of all suicides in Pennsylvania.

Alcohol is so prevalent in the commission of violent crimes that domestic assaults fell roughly 9 percent after North Dakota instituted a program that aimed to keep repeat DUI defendants abstinent from alcohol.

Jernigan said there are two main factors why alcohol is so prevalent in violence.

One he said is physiological through a disinhibiting effect, meaning a person may make decisions while under the influence of alcohol that they would not otherwise.

“Alcohol basically disables judgment,” he said. “That’s one of the effects it has on the brain.”

A person who may be prone to violence, but is able to control those tendencies when sober, may not be able to when drinking.

Jernigan said the disinhibiting effect is also amplified by a social expectation that alcohol will act this way.

“Expectancies change when people are drinking,” he said.

Jernigan said in studies in which people are given nonalcoholic beverages but are told the drinks contain alcohol, the participants will disinhibit despite being completely sober.

Binge drinking

Both Jernigan and Daniel Webster, a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, said drinking to excess, or “binge drinking,” is the main concern when it comes to alcohol and crime.

“Generally, a little bit of alcohol doesn’t affect our behavior all that much,” Webster said. “It might affect our driving a little bit, but really it affects our behavior in respects to our judgment, our ability to control our impulses and a whole range of things that potentially increase your risk for being involved in a violent encounter. Those things tend to occur on the heavier inebriated range of the spectrum.”

Binge drinking tends to be most prevalent among 18 to 34-year-olds, according to the CDC.

More than a quarter of 18- to 34-year-olds reported binge drinking in 2013, according to the CDC. That drops to roughly 20 percent for 35- to 44-year-old and tapers off with age, reach roughly 4 percent for people 65 years old or older.

People age 18 to 34 are also typically considered to be in the peak of prime offending age.

In 2016, nearly 60 percent of all charged assaults in Pennsylvania were committed by people between the ages of 18 and 34 years old, according to an analysis of court records conducted by The Sentinel.

Men are also nearly twice as likely to binge drink compared to women, according to the CDC.

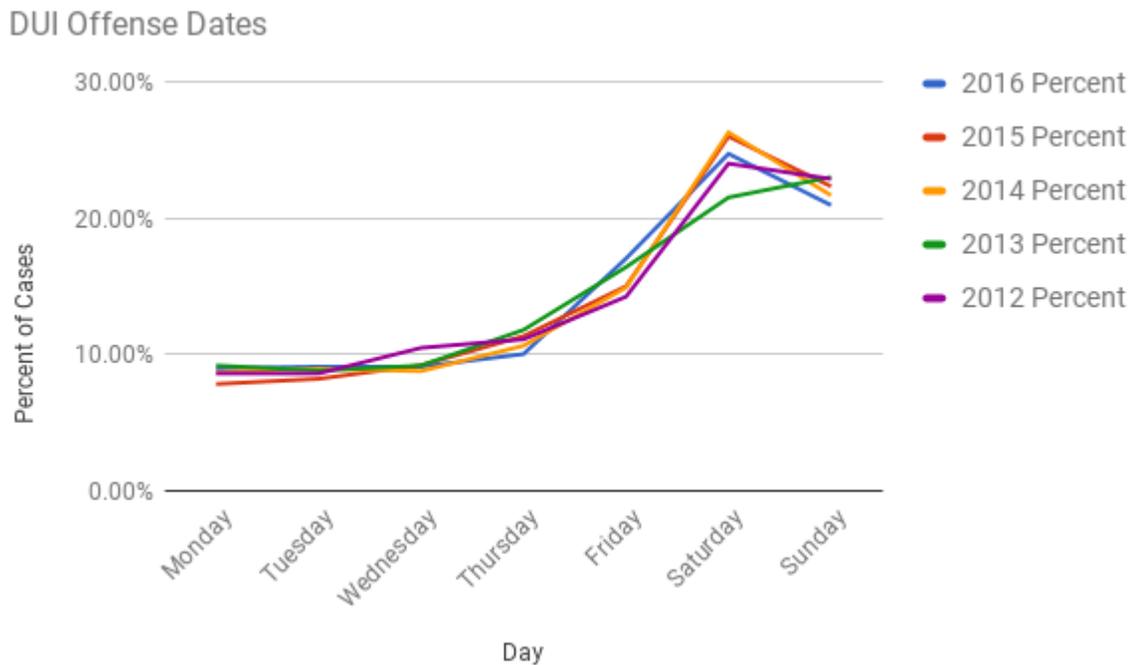
In Cumberland County, men accounted for nearly 90 percent of the people charged with aggravated assault in 2016 and more than 80 percent of the people charged with any violent crime, according The Sentinel’s analysis.

County stats

Most crime types have a general pattern for when they are committed throughout the week. The prevalence of a charged criminal offense

will rise and fall during the week depending on a host of social and behavioral factors and how police resources are allocated to detect those crimes.

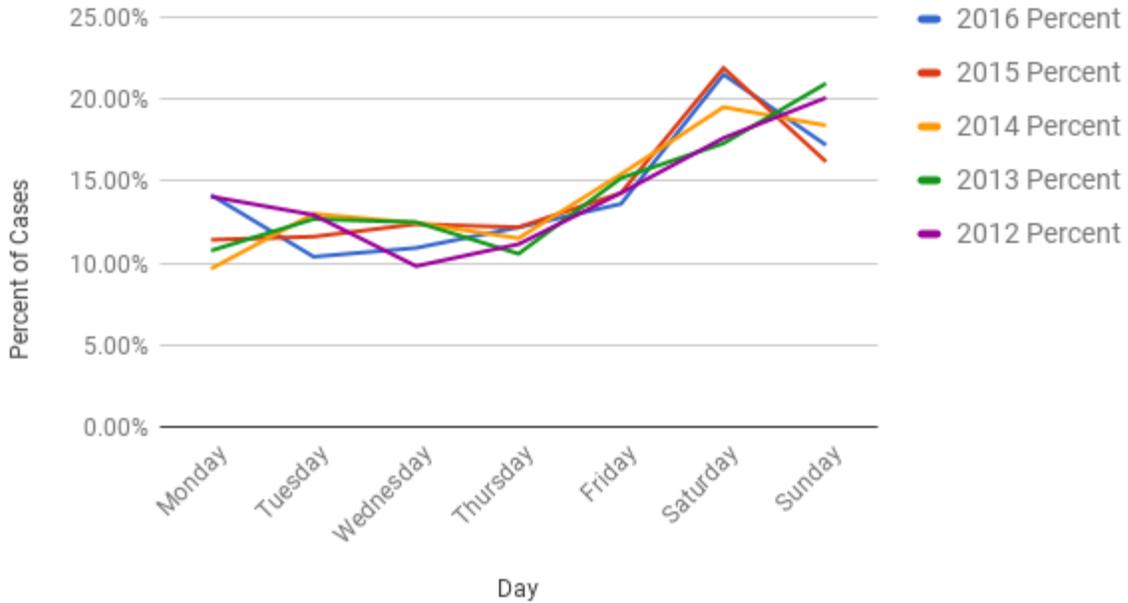
For example, DUIs tend to remain relatively steady through the beginning of the week, with a small uptick on Thursday before rising sharply into the weekend, according to an analysis of court records conducted by The Sentinel.



This chart shows the percent of all DUI cases charge by the day of the week. Information is pulled from criminal dockets entered into the Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania.
Joshua Vaughn, The Sentinel

Assaults track very closely to this pattern, according to the analysis. A potential reason for this is that both have a heavy alcohol us component and drinking is more socially acceptable during the weekend than it is during the traditional work week.

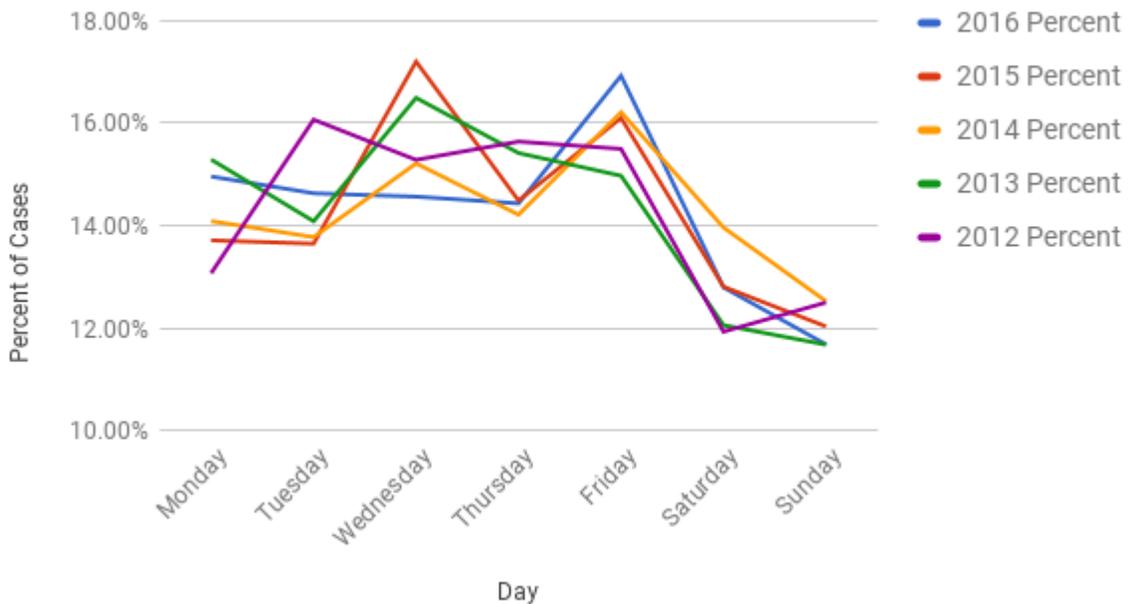
Assault Offense Dates



This chart shows the percent of all assault cases charged by the day of the week. Information is pulled from criminal dockets entered into the Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania. Joshua Vaughn, The Sentinel

Other crime types do not follow this pattern.

Property Crime Offense Dates



This chart shows the percent of all property crime cases charged by the day of the week. Information is pulled from criminal dockets entered into the Unified Judicial System of Pennsylvania. Joshua Vaughn, The Sentinel

Property crimes and non-DUI offenses tend to ebb and flow throughout the work week and generally have the highest percentage of cases occur on Friday before tapering off during the weekend in Cumberland County, according to court records.