

How do we stop rise in violent crimes?

It's disturbing to see Casper buck one national trend. The number of violent crimes increased here last year.

And it rose in every major crime category — murders, rapes, robberies and aggravated assaults. That's exactly the opposite of what happened in the United States during the first half of 2007, according to the latest figures released by the FBI.

What accounts for the difference? Casper Police Chief Tom Pagel said he believes alcohol and drug abuse has contributed to more violent crimes.

"Casper is a hard-drinking community, and people don't make good decisions when they are drunk," Pagel explained.

As much as we hate to admit it at a time when many people in Casper are working hard to make the city a regional center for business and health care, the chief's assessment is pretty accurate.

The city's image as a place where people drink more alcohol and party harder than they do in many other Wyoming cities apparently hasn't changed much in the past few decades. This isn't the first time law enforcement officials have noted the link between alcohol and violent crimes.

In recent years local police have cracked down on drugs, and there are anecdotal signs and actual statistics that show the use of meth has decreased. But alcohol is a legal substance and much harder to control.

Until our residents exhibit more responsible behavior when it comes to alcohol,

not much is likely to change. But there are things police and others can do.

Police can step up enforcement of drunken driving laws, even more than they have in the past year, when a record number of DUI arrests were made. Keeping drunks off the streets is one way to reduce violent encounters between motorists and others.

Focusing on reducing teen drinking is another step police and educators should continue. The more we make young people aware of how dangerous alcohol abuse is, the better off our city will be.

For people addicted to alcohol and other drugs, the opening of the new regional substance abuse treatment center in August should help. But some people don't have to be addicts to radically alter their personalities — and become more violent — when they drink.

Casper is a growing, bustling community with many positive things going for it. But we can't afford to deny that we're also a city that has a major problem with alcohol abuse. It's a question of accountability: We collectively need to take control of the situation so our population is protected.

The increase in violent crime is a trend we can reverse, but we can't expect law enforcement alone to take care of the problem. It's a process that can start with individuals but needs to grow to include families, schools, churches, neighborhoods and the entire city.