

# City murder toll lowest in decades

By **David Heinzmann and Rex W. Huppke**

Tribune staff reporters

DECEMBER 19, 2004

**T**his year, for the first time in almost four decades, there will be fewer than 500 murders in Chicago, a city that has long struggled to shed its reputation for lethal gang violence and a vicious drug trade.

With less than two weeks left in the year, the murder count was down a staggering 25 percent from last year's nation-leading 598 homicides.

"There are still too many shootings, there are still too many murders," Police Supt. Philip Cline said Friday, when the homicide total stood at 431. "But I never dreamed we'd be this low this year."

The decline in Chicago's murder toll is a story of politics and police strategies. After watching murder rates fall dramatically in New York and Los Angeles, officials here embraced techniques that poured swarms of officers onto streets where violence was at a boiling point. Dozens of corner drug markets were busted. Surveillance cameras were mounted on light poles to help keep dealers from returning.

And yet, in some impoverished neighborhoods on the South and West Sides killing remains so common the drop barely registered among residents. According to a Tribune poll, 19 percent of Chicagoans living in high-crime areas feel less safe this year than they did in 2003, and more than half have no idea there has been a decline in homicides.

Numbers mean nothing to people like Sharlene Curry, whose brother joined the list of this year's victims Dec. 6 when a robber put a bullet through his head.

"Yeah, that's good," Curry said of the drop in killings, "but it's a shame my brother had to be a statistic."

The question now is whether this year will be remembered as a turning point, or simply a brief interruption in the violence that has long plagued Chicago.

Coming up in 2005 are a number of obstacles, the first being whether the Police Department can sustain the intensity that led to this year's historic reduction. Funding is threatened for programs that help police, including the federal Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative and the Chicago-based anti-violence group CeaseFire.

But the most troubling issue on the horizon, police say, is the parole of nearly 25,000 Illinois prison inmates, most of whom will return to crime-ridden Chicago neighborhoods. More than 70 percent of homicides are committed by ex-offenders, and just less than 70 percent of those killed are ex-offenders themselves.

In 2004, about 18,000 inmates finished their sentences and moved to Chicago.

"Most of them are going to be returning to neighborhoods with high overall crime rates and among the highest homicide rates in the city," said Arthur Lurigio, a criminal justice professor at Loyola University Chicago. "No doubt some of the people returning are going to be involved in violence that's going to escalate into homicide."

From drive-by firefights on the Northwest Side to stone-cold murders on the haywire street corners of Englewood and Little Village, Chicago's gang-ruled neighborhoods have made the city a hub of homicide in the country for decades.

'Dubious distinction'

Murder declined gradually nationwide starting in the early 1990s, but killings in Chicago in 2001 and 2002 began trending up. Chicago led the nation in murders in 2001 and 2003 and ranked second in 2002.

"I think the mayor was embarrassed about Chicago's dubious distinction," Lurigio said. "We were beating New York not only in murder rate but also in absolute numbers. That was a terrible black mark against the city."

Police leaders at the time tried to muster political support to tinker with the department's 279 patrol beats, shifting officers from stable areas like Jefferson Park into more dangerous neighborhoods like Englewood and Lawndale. But that proved a political challenge City Hall wasn't willing to take.

While that debate was playing out, Cline, at the time second in command of the department, went to New York and Los Angeles with Matt Crawl, the mayor's top aide on crime. They went to study CompStat, an innovative police initiative that helped push New York's murder totals down 70 percent since 1994.

That remarkable drop in killing, and in reported crime in general, made the nation's largest police department the most studied force in the world. Police from Baltimore to Miami to Los Angeles had already adopted New York's vaunted CompStat system by 2002.

New York and Los Angeles police told Cline and Crawl to abandon the idea of changing patrol beats because gang violence shifts from place to place.

"They both said move resources, don't move boundaries," Cline said. "When you're fighting gang wars, you want to have more flexibility to move resources."

Daley bought into the idea, and in June 2003, Chicago police, then led by Supt. Terry Hillard, unveiled the Deployment Operations Center, the Targeted Response Unit and a spate of other initiatives modeled after the CompStat program. Crafted to divine where violence would break out and, more importantly, why it was happening in the first place, the system helped police target neighborhoods and saturate them with extra officers, sometimes for a month at a time.

Violent crime has fallen steadily in those areas since the program was introduced.

"The fact of the matter is, we needed to get police in the areas where the crime was," said Ald. Isaac Carothers (29th), chairman of the City Council's Police and Fire Committee. "So what happened is the superintendent took a different approach. He took people out of the offices and got them into the areas where they needed to be."

The true litmus test of the new strategy lay over six square miles of the West Side, where the parts of North Lawndale, Garfield Park, Austin and West Humboldt Park in the Harrison Police District had led the city in murders for a dozen years.

In 2003, there were 57 people murdered in the district; 345 had been slain over the last five years.

With the Eisenhower Expressway cutting across the middle of the district, Harrison is a drug dealer's dream location. Racked by poverty, the area has a high rate of drug use among residents, and the expressway provides convenient access for suburban drug users who come by the thousands.

In the last five years, police made 40,000 felony drug arrests in the Harrison District, by far the most of any district.

Deeply entrenched gangs, dominated for decades by the Vice Lords, run the drug business on the West Side. Some gangs make deals to share lucrative 24-hour drug spots, but competition and rivalries fill days and nights with the pop and crackle of gunfire.

The Targeted Response Unit's first job was to stop the killing in Harrison. The unit's details descended into the district.

Every shot fired, whether it hit anyone or not, was swarmed with unit officers, tactical and gang teams, extra patrol officers and even desk cops reassigned to a night on the streets. Sometimes police looked like they were tripping over each other, but the message was clear--gunfire in Harrison was no longer a ho-hum affair.

While shootings were being tag-teamed, Cline ordered a methodical attack on drug dealing. Using intelligence analyzed in the Deployment Operations Center, the department began taking over one drug corner after another.

The department added street-light surveillance cameras after the busts to help keep gang members from resuming business. And police went after the owners of buildings used to sell drugs--pressing them with housing code violations.

"Coppers used to refer to the [Harrison] District as the homicide capital of the world," Cline said. "It's down 50 percent this year. That's double the rate for the whole city."

More than half of Chicagoans say Cline and the Police Department are doing a good or excellent job reducing crime, according to the Tribune poll. And while 18 percent would like to see a greater police presence in their neighborhood, 25 percent said community action is the most important way to reduce homicides.

Members of the anti-violence initiative CeaseFire spent the year holding community rallies and trying to change attitudes in dangerous neighborhoods. Employing former gang members as outreach workers, CeaseFire more than doubled in size in 2004, giving it a presence in 12 Chicago communities.

But CeaseFire ended the year facing funding problems. State money for the 2005 fiscal year will run out by the end of December--six months early--and half of the program's outreach workers could be laid off.

And in another blow to community-based efforts, Congress recently cut much of the funding for a federal anti-crime gun program, Project Safe Neighborhoods.

CeaseFire Director Gary Slutkin says the work people do in their own communities will be critical in helping police move past this year's milestone and further drive down homicide numbers.

"How many should there be?" he asked. "Arguably, there should be very close to none. Because even if you say 50, you'd still be scratching your head saying, 'Why should there be 50?'"

Slutkin, police and criminologists agree homicide figures that low will remain out of reach until real help is made available to the thousands of men cycling from Chicago's troubled neighborhoods to prison and back.

Men like Norris Jordan, a 24-year-old from the West Side who was killed this year in a gang shooting just three months after he finished his third prison sentence. Family members and parole officials say his attempts to go straight were brief and futile. When he got out, he applied for a job at a fast-food restaurant but never heard back. Discouraged, he spent most of his time at home playing video games. He shrugged off his parole officer's suggestions for job referrals, eventually gave up and returned to the street life he had always known.

Jordan's wasted life illuminates a problem that looms larger than ever for Chicago next year. The Illinois Department of Corrections predicts a record 25,000 felons will be released and return to Chicago in 2005.

Uneducated, unskilled, carrying felony records and hardened by prison, most parolees need persistent help to find honest jobs.

#### Aid for parolees lags

Counselors who work with ex-offenders say Chicago doesn't have enough resources to reach those in need. As the number of parolees swells, funding from state and federal budgets lags, said Jodina Hicks, vice president for public policy and community partnerships for Safer Foundation, the leading organization helping ex-offenders find

employment in Chicago.

From 2000 to 2004, the number of ex-offenders seeking help from the Safer Foundation doubled, to about 8,300, but the organization saw only about a 20 percent increase in funding.

"In Chicago there are some extremely well developed organizations poised and already offering re-entry services, whether it be housing, substance abuse or employment," Hicks said. "But there's not enough. The services need to be threefold, and they need to be available for everyone that wants them."

City, state and county officials will have to wrestle with ways to catch the thousands who fall through the cracks as they leave prison. But police say anyone who tries to solve their problems with a gun will be headed straight back.

As Harrison District Cmdr. James Jackson bluntly put it to a group of parolees earlier this year: "We'll do everything we can to send you away for a long time. No longer in a civilized world, in the city of Chicago, are we going to put up with this nonsense."

*Tribune staff reporters Glenn Jeffers and Carlos Sadovi contributed to this report.*

Copyright © 2015, Chicago Tribune