

Murders drop for third year

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The number of people murdered in Dallas last year fell to a 43-year low.

In 2010, the tally was 148 victims. The last time fewer people were murdered in Dallas - in 1967 when there were 133 - the United States was at war in Vietnam and Elvis married Priscilla. That year, the city had about 500,000 fewer residents.

The city's murder total has also declined about 40 percent since 2004, and 2010 was the third consecutive year of declines.

Good news all around, but no one is exactly sure what's behind the steady decline. Better emergency treatment for trauma victims and a larger police presence are among the possible contributing factors.

The Dallas Police Department has grown from about 2,900 sworn officers in 2004 to about 3,650 today.

"We did exactly the right thing, and all of a sudden you're getting the results from that," said Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert.

Dallas is part of a trend that has swept the country. Chicago had 435 murders - its fewest since 1965. Detroit had 308 - a 15 percent decline.

But notable exceptions this year are New York City, with a 13 percent increase and more than 500 murders, and, closer to home, Fort Worth, which had 63 murders, up from 46.

Other Dallas-area cities also saw the tally creep higher, with Arlington reporting 16 murders, up from 12, and Irving reporting six, up from four.

For the small southern Dallas County city of Lancaster, 2010 was a particularly tough year. The city saw four murders, including the deaths of police Officer Craig Shaw and bystander Jeremy McMillian, who were killed in a Father's Day shooting rampage. The other two 2010 murders were domestic violence-related.

"We were up from nothing to four," said Lancaster Police Chief Keith Humphrey. "That's a 400 percent increase, but these were situations that we couldn't have prevented. {ellipsis} It's unfortunate and sad."

As is the case with previous years, most of Dallas' murder victims were minority and male.

Ninety percent of the city's murder victims in 2010 were either black or Hispanic, with blacks accounting for more than half. Eighty-seven percent were men, and 64 percent were age 34 or younger.

Why the decrease?

Divining why murder tallies have plummeted, not just in Dallas but nationwide, has long been a primary topic among criminologists.

Timothy Bray, director of the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas, said criminologists generally agree that the introduction of crack cocaine caused murder rates to soar in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Dallas' murder tally topped out at 500 in 1991. Nationally, most of that increase was confined to murders involving handguns and the victims were primarily young black males, he said.

"When we saw homicides drop from those precipitous levels, that was because the drug market itself had stabilized and the violence associated with the emerging market subsided," Bray said.

Bray, as well as Dallas police officials, believe that advancements in medical technology have further driven down the number of victims who die.

"Medical facilities do a great job keeping people alive," said Sgt. Bruce McDonald, a homicide unit supervisor. "I know people who have been shot eight times and make it to the hospital and survive. I would never have thought they would have survived, but they do."

Dallas City Manager Mary Suhm credits the work of "an amazing police department," and said the police force should continue to grow over time, something the city failed to do during times when murder numbers peaked in the early '90s.

She noted that the low number of murders makes the city more attractive to new residents and businesses.

"When people look at numbers that are the lowest in history, their comfort levels and their feeling of safety, that's how people make decisions of where they live, so we're pleased with it," she said.

Police Chief David Brown said he's not persuaded by any one particular factor. "It takes a whole lot of hard work to keep a city safe," he said.

"It's all of the above, but you can't discount really good police work as being one of the major reasons that our murder rate is declining," said Brown. "Policing has gotten smarter in this country, and I think Dallas is on the cutting edge on some of strategies that we've been using as far as reducing crime."

Solving crimes

Dallas' 2010 solve rate for murders wasn't available Thursday - it is likely to be released today, when the city plans to announce an overall decline of about 10 percent in 2010 crime. But in recent years, the clearance rate has been higher than the national average, with 68 percent of murders solved in 2009.

Dallas Deputy Chief Craig Miller, who oversees the homicide unit, credits the department's intelligence-gathering and analysis unit, the Fusion Center, with providing real-time intelligence to solve cases.

"We can give a group of phone numbers to them, and they can tell us all of the people who have called that number," Miller said. "They are an invaluable tool, and it really expedites things."

More solved cases can mean fewer killers on the streets.

Miller's homicide unit showed significant success in solving some of the city's most high-profile slayings from recent years. This summer, police arrested three men in connection with the 2008 robbery-slaying of money courier Phillip Leon Washington.

More recently, police closed the case on the December 2009 murder of a 97-year-old woman in her west Oak Cliff home. Authorities obtained a capital murder warrant after identifying the fingerprints of a habitual burglar at the home of Inez Skelton.

"For someone to go in and take her life and her property for no reason at all, that bothers me," said Tommy Raley, the lead detective on the case.

Every murder solved in the calendar year, regardless of when it happened, is factored in that year's solve rate.

Still, even with all the positive news, Raley remains frustrated at other cases, such as the double murder of 72-year-old John Raybon and 57-year-old Kenneth Perry in late October. The two men had been playing dice in a vacant lot in South Dallas at the time of the killings.

"What's really surprising to me is that someone can walk up and shoot two people ... and we have absolutely no leads at all," Raley said.

For Raybon's family, it was particularly heartbreaking as he had married his sweetheart of 27 years just before his death.

"Why would somebody do that to a man who wasn't bothering anybody?" said Beatrice Kemps, Raybon's niece.

Staff writers Rudolph Bush, Valerie Wigglesworth, Ray Leszcynski and Brandon Formby contributed to this report.

Dallas-area murders

City 2009 2010 Allen 2 0 Arlington 12 16 Dallas 166 148 DeSoto 2 1 Duncanville 4 1 Frisco 2 0 Fort Worth 46 63 Garland 7 7 Grapevine 0 2 Highland Park 0 0 Irving 4 6 Lancaster 0 4 Rockwall 0 0 University Park 0 0 NOTE: Not all cities were surveyed. Some area cities said they did not have final data available or did not respond to inquiries. Plano declined to release the 2010 number pending an open records request. SOURCE: Area police departments

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