

Murders hit 43-year low

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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 straight 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 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 are in 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.

Ninety percent of Dallas' 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.

Divining why murder tallies have plummeted, not just in Dallas but nationwide, has long been a favorite 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.

"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 and Dallas police officials say medical advancements have further driven down the murder total.

"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."

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