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Most crime down in '05 across N.J.

Still, murders rose 7 percent. Locally, Camden's declining numbers were among the bright spots.

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New Jersey's overall crime rate continued to drop last year, but murders increased by 7 percent, state officials said yesterday.

There were 26.9 victims for every 1,000 residents in 2005, a decrease of roughly 4 percent from 2004, according to the uniform crime report, an annual statistical review compiled by the state police.

The incidence of violent crimes - murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault - remained about the same, 3.6 per 1,000 residents, while the rate of nonviolent crimes - burglary and theft - fell 4 percent.

Camden, considered one of the most dangerous cities in the country, made an especially strong showing, with drops in all but one of seven "index crimes."

With the exception of a spike in 2001, crime statewide has fallen each year for more than a decade.

Attorney General Zulima Farber said the picture painted by the statistics was encouraging and troubling all at once.

"The increasing numbers of murders and the increased use of firearms make it imperative that we are vigilant in our fight against illegal gun trafficking and gang violence," she said.

Last year, 418 murders were reported statewide, and 66 percent involved guns. The year before, 392 murders were committed, 58 percent involving guns.

In Burlington County, where the overall crime rate fell 6 percent, murders rose from four to six and aggravated assaults from 448 to 460.

Other South Jersey counties bucked that trend. Gloucester County recorded two murders, down from seven. Its overall crime rate decreased 6 percent, with the incidence of violent crime dropping by 12 percent.

In Camden County, where overall crime fell 7 percent, murders dropped by 25 percent, from 55 to 41.

The city of Camden recorded an even more significant decrease in murders, from 49 to 34. Overall, the city posted reductions in almost every category of crime, with the exception of robberies, where the numbers remained steady.

Like the state as a whole, all three South Jersey counties recorded fewer rapes, robberies, burglaries and car thefts.

Spokesman Bill Shralow said the Camden County Prosecutor's Office was "particularly pleased" with the improvements in Camden.

"While we cannot pinpoint any particular reasons," he said, "we would note that law enforcement is working hard every day to deter and vigorously prosecute crimes."

Other county officials, too, credited the falling crime rates to vigilant law enforcement.

Burlington County Prosecutor Robert Bernardi said the numbers in his county "reflect an enhanced quality of life."

"While we are always pleased to see the reduction in the number of crimes committed in Burlington County, we will always strive to reduce them further," he said in a statement.

Gloucester County Prosecutor Sean F. Dalton said he was "pleased that law enforcement has been able to stay on top of problems in such a vast, growing county."

"The Prosecutor's Office and local law enforcement have received a lot of support and done a good job working with residents, civic groups and clergy in taking a proactive approach to crime prevention," he said.

To see a copy of the report, go to <http://go.philly.com/crime>

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