



The Star-Ledger

As other crime drops, murder rises

Slayings take steepest toll since 1993, mostly in cities, report says

Wednesday, August 09, 2006

BY RICK HEPP
Star-Ledger Staff

There were 418 people murdered last year in New Jersey, the highest toll in a dozen years, and more than half of them were slain in major cities where officials have struggled to combat gun violence, according to a report released yesterday by the State Police.

Overall, crime in the state dropped 3 percent between 2004 and 2005, reaching its lowest level in a generation, the annual Uniform Crime Report showed. Most types of violent crime were down, including rape, which was down 9 percent.

Murders, however, rose by 7 percent, from 392 to 418 -- the highest number since 419 were killed in 1993.

Nonfatal shootings, weapons possession offenses and drug abuse violations -- including the sale of narcotics, long considered the economic engine behind most street gangs -- were also up compared with 2004.

More than half of the slayings occurred in New Jersey's six major cities, and most involved a firearm, the analysis found. Newark led the way with 98 followed by Jersey City, Camden, Trenton, Paterson and Elizabeth. The city of Irvington, which has a much smaller population than those cities, had 28 people murdered within its city limits.

"The increasing number 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," said Attorney General Zuñiga Farber, who created a gangs and organized crime unit last February.

Gov. Jon Corzine and the attorney general also have pledged to increase the presence of state troopers in urban areas, enlist the help of citizens and seek tougher penalties for gang members who try to recruit members or threaten witnesses.

"These statistics further illustrate the need for aggressive action to curb gun violence in our state," said Corzine spokesman Brendan Gilfillan. "Families, communities, nonprofit organizations and government at all levels must all join together in the effort to prevent gun violence."

While the number of murders increased last year, the percentage of them being solved reached historically low levels, according to the report. Police cleared 57 percent of the state's 418 murders last year, the worst rate since at least 1987, the earliest year for which data were available. A crime is considered cleared when police have sufficient evidence to charge a suspect.

The murder figure includes killings that result from fights, arguments, assaults or the commission of another crime. It does not include negligent manslaughter, justifiable homicide, accidental death or suicide.

Michael Wagers, executive director of the Police Institute at Rutgers-Newark, said the increase in murders in New Jersey's cities, particularly in Newark, mirrors what happened last year in mid-sized cities like Boston, Charlotte and Orlando.

"I don't want to discount or trivialize homicides ... but you also have to look at the other numbers," Wagers said. "Homicide, relatively speaking, is a rare occurrence compared with auto theft or robbery. When you see auto theft and robbery moving, that concerns me more."

Auto thefts decreased statewide last year by 9 percent, while the number of robberies increased by 1 percent, the State Police reported. The 13,209 robberies reported last year, however, were the second fewest since at least 1985.

Criminologists also point out that New Jersey's population has increased by an estimated 770,000 residents since the last time the number of murders was so high.

"What's most important are the trends, and the trends are very positive," said Andrew Karmen, a sociology professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. "Relatively speaking, even though we're still very much worried about crime, it's still better than it used to be in the late '80s and early '90s."

The report, which compiles statistics from 552 law enforcement agencies, focuses on seven categories of crime: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft.

New Jersey authorities reported 30,904 violent crimes in 2005, just below the previous year and the fewest since 1977. They also reported the fewest nonviolent crimes since the State Police began compiling such statistics in 1967.

Bias crimes -- those committed based on the victim's skin color or personal beliefs -- were down by 9 percent compared with 2004, which saw such investigations jump by about a third. Authorities reported 756 bias incidents, almost half dealing with race.

The State Police also reported decreases in many offenses not included in the normal "crime index," including manslaughter, simple assault, arson, forgery, fraud and embezzlement.

Despite an increase in murders in the state's urban areas, those communities overall have seen a 16 percent decrease in all crimes since 2001 -- more than twice the decline rural areas saw during that time and slightly better than the reduction in the suburbs, the report noted.

Rick Hepp covers criminal justice. He may be reached at rhepp@starledger.com or (609) 989-0398.

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