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### Climb in violent crime seen for 2005

Report shows increase in murders

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**BY MICHAEL J. SNIFFEN**  
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WASHINGTON -- Americans were robbed and victimized by gun violence at greater rates last year than the year before, even though overall violent and property crime reached a 32-year low, the Justice Department said yesterday.

Experts said these increases buttress reports from the FBI and many mayors and police chiefs that violent crime is beginning to rise after a long decline. Bush administration officials expressed concern but stressed that it was too soon to tell if a new upward trend in violence had begun.

Last year, there were two violent gun crimes for every 1,000 individuals, compared with 1.4 in 2004, according to the department's Bureau of Justice Statistics. There were 2.6 robberies for every 1,000 persons, compared with 2.1 the year before.

"This report tells us more the serious events -- robbery and gun crimes -- increased and the FBI already told us homicides increased," said criminal justice professor James Alan Fox of Northeastern University.

"So while the report shows the more numerous but least serious violence -- simple assaults, which is pushing and shoving -- went down, the mix got worse in terms of severity. That wasn't a very good trade-off," Fox said.

A preliminary FBI report in June on crimes reported to police showed a 4.8 percent increase in the number of murders and 4.5 percent increase in the number of robberies in 2005.

With congressional elections approaching, these reports could pose political problems for the administration, and department officials have been scurrying to understand and deal with the problem.

Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty listened to complaints about dwindling federal anti-crime aid from several dozen mayors and police chiefs at a public meeting in Washington on Aug. 30. Several days later, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales told reporters that cities will have to work harder but should not count on more federal money because of growing demands in the fight against terrorism.

Nevertheless, Gonzales arranged a private meeting in New York last Thursday with three state police executives and the police chiefs of Los Angeles, Miami and Providence, R.I., The Associated Press learned.

One of them, Providence's Dean Esserman, came away "impressed at how much he listened. He wasn't there to defend himself. He could have used the time to preach; instead he used it to hear our concerns."

Esserman said all but few cities have fewer police officers now than in 2001, with big reductions in New York, Boston and Detroit "because of the loss of federal money." A Clinton administration program paid for local departments to hire community-oriented police officers, but the Bush administration stopped the money for such hiring.

"I believe in homeland defense, but I also believe in crime fighting," Esserman said. "I don't want one neglected for the other. Every year we're losing 16,000 people to murder, mostly young people and mostly killed by guns, and that's more than three times the number that died at the World Trade Center" in attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Professor Alfred Blumstein of Carnegie Mellon University said the rise in gun violence was particularly troubling.

"A major police effort to confiscate guns helped bring down the surge in violent crime that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s," Blumstein said. "But gun distribution is easier now because we have begun to back off gun control."

Backed by the National Rifle Association, the Bush administration has been cool toward gun control measures.

The statistics bureau's victimization report found that the overall violent crime rate was unchanged in 2005 from the year before, at just over 21 crimes for every 1,000 individuals over age 12.

The property crime rate fell in 2005 from 161 crimes to 154 for every 1,000 people because of a drop in household thefts. Both rates were the lowest since the survey began in 1973.

McNulty noted the record-low rates but said "we are concerned about" in increase in the violent firearm crime rate. "Whether the increase ... marks a change in the trend toward reduced firearms victimization rates cannot be determined from one year's data," McNulty added.

He said some cities are seeing violent crime increases and noted the department has several programs in which federal agents join state and local officers combating gangs and drug abuse.

Unlike the FBI report culled from police blotters, the statistic bureau makes estimates based on interviews with 134,000 people, so it counts not only reported crime but also crimes the police never hear about. Also, 53 percent of violent crimes and 60 percent of property crimes are never reported to the police.

Statistician Shannan Catalano, who wrote the new report, said the increases in gun violence and robbery rates reinforce the FBI data and the anecdotal evidence from local officials. But she cautioned that so few people in the survey reported robberies that the bureau cannot be certain whether those figures represent a true increase or a random sampling variation.

Because it is based on interviews with people about their firsthand experiences with crimes, the bureau's survey does not include homicides. It also tallies crimes such as simple assault and personal theft that are not covered by the FBI reports.

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