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# Violent Crime in Cities Shows Sharp Surge

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Violent crime rose by double-digit percentages in cities across the country over the last two years, reversing the declines of the mid-to-late 1990s, according to a new report by a prominent national law enforcement association.

While overall crime has been declining nationwide, police officials have been warning of a rise in murder, robbery and gun assaults since late 2005, particularly in midsize cities and the Midwest. Now, they say, two years of data indicates that the spike is more than an aberration.

“There are pockets of crime in this country that are astounding,” said Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, which is releasing the report on Friday. “It’s gone under the radar screen, but it’s not if you’re living on the north side of Minneapolis or the south side of Los Angeles or in Dorchester, Mass.”

Local police departments blame several factors: the spread of methamphetamine use in some Midwestern and Western cities, gangs, high poverty and a record number of people being released from prison. But the biggest theme, they say, is easy access to guns and a willingness, even an eagerness, to settle disputes with them, particularly among young people.

“There’s a mentality among some people that they’re living some really violent video game,” said Chris Magnus, the police chief in Richmond, Calif., north of San Francisco, where homicides rose 20 percent and gun assaults 65 percent from 2004 to 2006. “What’s disturbing is that you see that the blood’s real, the death’s real.”

The research forum surveyed 56 cities and sheriffs’ departments — as small as Appleton Wis., about 100 miles northwest of Milwaukee, and as large as Chicago and Houston. Over all, from 2004 to 2006, homicides increased 10 percent and robberies 12 percent.

Aggravated assault, which is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or by a means likely to produce severe injury or death, according to an [F.B.I.](#) Web site, increased at a relatively modest 3 percent, but aggravated assaults with guns rose 10 percent. And some cities saw far higher spikes.

Homicides increased 20 percent or more in cities including Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Hartford, Memphis and Orlando, Fla. Robberies went up more than 30 percent in places including Detroit, Fort Wayne, Ind., and Milwaukee. Aggravated assaults with guns were up more than 30 percent in cities like Boston, Sacramento, St. Louis and Rochester.

Seventy-one percent of the cities surveyed had an increase in homicides, 80 percent had an increase in robberies, and 67 percent reported an increase in aggravated assaults with guns.

This study relies on numbers from cities, rather than yearly F.B.I. totals, which are typically released in the fall. The group collected similar numbers last year, and those numbers were largely borne out by the data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Police chiefs say the trends in aggravated assaults are particularly alarming. They are often considered a better gauge of violence than homicides; the difference between the two is often poor marksmanship or good medical care.

“Had we not had some of the trauma rooms we have here in Rochester, our homicide numbers would be higher,” said Mayor Robert Duffy, who served as a police chief for seven years.

While murder rates hit 11-year highs in places like Boston, police officials note that they are not seeing the highs of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when crack cocaine fueled spikes, particularly in large cities. Some cities like Denver and Washington had declines in homicides.

Still, the overall trend is mirrored in other places not covered by the report. New York City, for example, which had enjoyed remarkable declines and seemed immune to the rising murder rate elsewhere in 2005, reported a 10 percent increase in homicides in 2006. In Chicago, which had been cited as another model of declining violence, homicides rose 4 percent from 2004 to 2006.

Police officials say the violence tends to happen among young men in their late teens and early to mid-20s. In some cases, it is random. But in many cases, it is among people who know one another, or between gangs, as a way to settle disputes. Arguments that 20 years ago would have led to fistfights, police chiefs say, now lead to guns.

“There’s really no rhyme or reason with these homicides,” said Edward Davis, the police commissioner in Boston. “An incident will occur involving disrespect, a fight over a girl. Then there’s a retaliation aspect where if someone shoots someone else; their friends will come back and shoot at the people that did it.”

In Richmond, Chief Magnus said he would often go to the scene of a crime and discover that 30 to 75 rounds had been fired. “It speaks to the level of anger, the indiscriminate nature of the violence,” he said.

“I go to meetings, and you start talking to some of the people in the neighborhoods about who’s been a victim of violence, and people can start reciting: ‘One of my sons was killed, one of my nephews,’ ” he said. “It’s hard to find people who haven’t been touched by this kind of violence.”

Many chiefs blame the federal government for reducing police programs that they say helped cut crime in the 1990s. But they also say the problem is economic and social. “We seem to be dealing with an awful lot of people who have zero conflict-resolution skills,” Chief Magnus said.

In Rochester, Mr. Duffy said his city had the state’s highest dropout rate — half of all students drop out— and the highest child poverty rate, with 40 percent of children under 18 living below poverty level.

“There’s a direct correlation between the kids who drop out of our high schools who get involved in selling drugs and who end up in homicides,” Mr. Duffy said.

As a police chief, Mr. Duffy brought in programs that had reduced crime in other cities: a project cease-fire to end gun violence, a Compstat data collection program to identify the areas of most stubborn crime. But it has not helped.

“We’re doing all the right things consistently, but we have not seen relief,” he said. “It takes much more than law enforcement.”

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