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New York on Track for Fewest Homicides on Record

By [AL BAKER](#)

There were days upon days in New York City when not a single person was murdered in 2009. Two such stretches, in February and March, lasted nearly a week each.

There were some pockets of the city where homicide was a singular occurrence: 12 of the city's 77 police precincts, in locations as varied as Hamilton Heights, in Upper Manhattan, and Park Slope, Brooklyn, had logged one each through Sunday.

The story line of murder in New York is one that has been undergoing constant revision since 1963, when the Police Department began tracking homicides in a way that officials now deem reliable. (Before then, homicides were not counted until they were solved.) There have been rises — the number peaked at 2,245 in 1990 — and subsequent falls. But there have never been as few homicides as this year.

The city is on track, for the second time in three years, to have the fewest homicides in a 12-month period since the current record keeping system began. As of Sunday, there had been 461; the record low was in 2007, when there were 496 for the entire year.

The toll has gone down despite predictions that it would rise in a bad economy — a notion rejected by the city's police commissioner, [Raymond W. Kelly](#). But challenges persist: With the city facing a \$4.1 billion budget deficit, the police force — which has been reduced by 6,000 officers since 2001 — may have to shrink further.

“The mantra of ‘do more with less’ is certainly a very important principle in the Police Department,” Mr. Kelly said. “And these numbers show it.”

The decline in homicides is happening not only in New York. According to the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#)'s uniform crime report for the first half of 2009, homicides fell 10 percent nationwide compared with the same period in 2008. But New York showed a 19 percent decline, the report said, and the city's homicide rate of 6 per 100,000 people was far lower than those of New Orleans, Chicago or Baltimore.

In the first half of 2009, homicides fell in Los Angeles by 29.8 percent, in Atlanta by 14 percent, in Chicago by 11.8 percent, in Philadelphia by 11.2 percent and in Boston by 10.3 percent. They rose in Detroit by 11.6 percent, in Baltimore by 9.5 percent and in New Orleans by 3.2 percent.

“All the experts said it couldn't be done in a down economy,” Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) said Monday in a speech to a graduating Police Academy class.

Later, in an appearance with Mr. Kelly to herald the latest crime statistics, the mayor said the lower “murder rate is an indisputable measure of progress.”

Overall, major crime — which includes seven categories like murder, rape, robbery and auto theft — was down 11 percent from last year. The only classification that rose was felony assault, which was up 2 percent.

In examining the city's 461 homicides so far this year, much can be learned about how the police count the victims. For instance, homicides caused by negligence or those deemed justifiable by prosecutors are not counted. In 2008, at least five deaths fit those circumstances and were not included in the homicide tally, according to an analysis of department data. The 2009 number is not yet available.

By contrast, some crimes from years ago are included in the 2009 count. There are 16 reclassified cases involving victims who died this year from injuries sustained in the past.

One of those victims was James Crawford, 65, who died in October of injuries related to an assault in 1965. In March, William Jenkins, 67, died after he was admitted to [Montefiore Medical Center](#) in the Bronx, where he was treated for multiple infections. The medical examiner's office attributed those infections to the fact that he had been paralyzed after being shot on Oct. 21, 1960, the police said.

In the nearly five decades of the current record keeping system, one thing has not changed: guns are still the deadliest of weapons.

Most of this year's victims — 283 of them — were killed with a gun fired by someone they knew. Others were stabbed (90 cases), hit with a blunt instrument (28) or asphyxiated (16). One victim was murdered with a car.

Only 34 percent of the victims, no matter how they died, were killed by strangers.

Curbing gun use is linked to lowering the homicide rate, officials said, and Mr. Kelly lauded the mayor's effort to stop illegal guns from flowing into New York, saying 90 percent of the guns that are confiscated after they are used in crimes come from out of state. He also cited the department's program of questioning and frisking some people on the streets as a “lifesaving” strategy that had led to the seizure of 7,000 weapons this year, including 800 guns.

“We have a policy of engagement, and I think it's working,” Mr. Kelly said. “We believe young people who may have a gun think twice before they take it out on the street.”

The commissioner said the city's success in lowering the homicide rate can also be traced to programs like [Operation Impact](#), which increases the police presence in areas where a higher crime rate stubbornly persists, and the [Real Time Crime Center](#), which feeds detectives instant intelligence data.

“We always modify, hone and adjust our strategies,” Mr. Kelly said. “We are getting better and better at it.”

The Central Park Precinct is the only one that has logged no homicides so far this year. The dozen that have had only one include the 123rd on the south shore of Staten Island; the 111th in Bayside, Queens; the 45th, in the northeast area of the Bronx that includes Co-op City, and the 50th, which covers Riverdale, Kingsbridge and other neighborhoods in the northwest Bronx; in Brooklyn, the 68th in Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights and Fort Hamilton, the 78th in Park Slope and the 84th, which includes Brooklyn Heights and Boerum Hill; and in Manhattan, the Fifth, in the Chinatown area, the Sixth, in the West Village, the 10th in Chelsea and parts of Midtown, the 13th, which covers Gramercy Park, and 30th in Hamilton Heights.

The borough breakdown of the 461 homicides that were counted through Sunday showed 200 in Brooklyn, 108 in the Bronx, 79 in Queens, 58 in Manhattan and 16 on Staten Island.

Killers and their victims were overwhelmingly men, and were between 18 and 40 years old.

Can murders drop again? That is always the question, said [Thomas A. Reppetto](#), a police historian.

“And the answer is, ‘Yes,’ ” he said, “if the federal government would shut off the flow of illegal guns from other states to New York.”

Andrew W. Lehren contributed reporting.

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