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Chicago homicides drop for 2009

Killings are down 11 percent, but experts are cautious about why

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At the end of his first year, Chicago Police Superintendent Jody Weis had already faced angry aldermen and repeated questions about low morale and arrests.

And then 2008 ended with this: a troubling double-digit homicide increase.

But nearing the end of this year, homicides in the city have dropped by 11 percent, apparently reversing the 2008 spike and bringing the city more in line with a decline that started in the early part of the decade.

There had been 453 homicides through Monday, compared with 509 at the same time last year. Shootings were down 6 percent.

"I said at the end of the year that 2008 was the year of transition," Weis said. "I (expected) 2009 to be the year of results."

Experts cautioned against blaming or crediting any one person or strategy for a one-year crime trend, but Weis and other department officials said several efforts launched this year have chipped away at the violence.

City gang teams were reorganized, and they were given a new mission: more search warrants and fewer street-corner drug investigations. They were also told to ramp up their use of informants so they could make more informed arrests.

In the districts, commanders and community members say they've been working -- from tracking gang anniversary dates to dog-walking -- to make a difference on the blocks where they police and live.

Still, because Chicago's homicide total brings the city in line with declines experienced here and nationally throughout much of the decade, some suggest the more compelling question could be what happened in 2008.

"(Last year) was the anomaly," said James Alan Fox, a professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University in Boston. "This year is part of the pattern."

Weis doesn't agree that the 511 slayings in 2008 were too out of step with the declines of the decade, especially compared with the 1990s when homicides were still in the 900s.

But 2008 was marked by high turnover. Several commanders were moved into new positions, including many in the districts.

Weis said he spent a good part of 2009 encouraging commanders to be creative and find solutions unique to their crime patterns instead of using cookie-cutter approaches.

"I want commanders who are risk-takers," he said. "It took a while to have commanders understand that."

But even if experts are hesitant to assess a one-year crime trend, they did note that some of the programs and strategies put to use in 2009 reflect the now widely accepted idea that policing should be based on quickly analyzing crime data and responding.

For example, on the Northwest Side in the Grand Central District, where officials estimate there are more than 20 street gangs fighting for territory, Cmdr. Robert Lopez started tracking the anniversaries of gang slayings so police could flood rival neighborhoods and look for trouble.

On at least one occasion an alleged gang member wearing a hat emblazoned with an anniversary date was arrested with a gun in rival territory, Lopez said. Investigators believe he was on his way to a shooting.

"He had a gun," Lopez said. "It was the anniversary of someone getting killed. And he had the hat to prove it."

Perhaps the most troubled area of the city, as a whole, has been the Far South Side. The area receives a lot of support from citywide units that tamp down the violence.

But like in other districts, homicides were down nearing the end of the year. Calumet District Cmdr. John Ball credits coordination among all the local commanders, who meet weekly to look at crime data and decide where specialized teams would be best used.

Ball also agrees that 2008 was a transition year in many ways. He and three of the other five commanders were new to the area.

"We had to change and develop and recognize who was what," he said.

Still, this fight for a neighborhood can't only be fought by the police, experts said.

Professor Dennis Rosenbaum, a criminologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, calls it a "battle for the control of the space as well as the hearts and minds of young kids" -- and says the community has to get involved.

On the Far North Side, when police in Rogers Park decided to start the year with a "zero tolerance" policy on one troubled strip, they demanded that residents help.

Police flooded Howard Street, which backs up to one of the most challenging parts of the district, to make arrests for anything from felonies to misdemeanors.

Meanwhile, residents Toni Duncan and Eva McCann also took to the neighborhood on foot, spiral notebooks in hand, jotting down anything that was amiss.

Duncan and McCann, community policing facilitators, noted decrepit buildings, busted street lights and even the color of gang members' shoelaces. Dog walkers sometimes joined. They had anti-violence marches and got to know some of the troublemakers.

"We know who they are; they know who we are," said Duncan, a seven-year resident. "It gives a sense of neighborhood or community. I am sure if I fell down, one of them would help pick me up. They're not bad all the time."

McCann, who has lived in the area more than 20 years, said zero-tolerance had its detractors because some residents have felt targeted. But since the program started she sees a more vigilant police force and a chance to attack real problems. "They're ... dealing drugs," McCann said of some people in the area. "They are causing fights. They are loitering, and they are gambling and drinking. The list goes on."

Another effort that comes from the community is CeaseFire, an anti-violence program working in some of the city's most violent neighborhoods. Studies have shown a reduction in shootings where CeaseFire works. But after losing its funding, most of the work halted in August 2007. It was not brought back until March 2009, and the program has since mediated 350 conflicts and made more than 1,000 referrals for service.

"Any time you can talk a guy down from shooting someone, we save lives," said Tio Hardiman, the director of CeaseFire Illinois.

Gangs drive at least half the shootings in the city, and the department also refocused its approach to these investigations in 2009, in part to try and arrest more people like Pierre Manning.

Since 2007, Manning, an alleged West Side gang leader, had been suspected in 10 crimes in Chicago -- among them shootings and a homicide, according to police records. He was among the most wanted gang members on the West Side and, police said, was behind an internal gang fight, sparking shootings across the community.

His February arrest in an alleged shooting -- after he led police on a chase -- came after weeks of gang officers investigating him. Manning was later charged with an unrelated killing.

To police, the arrest highlights how the newly structured gang teams work -- policing larger areas and gathering information they need to arrest people who cause the most violence.

Investigating the most violent individuals is not a new idea, but some say there is now more communication among the various units involved: gangs, narcotics and homicide detectives.

Department brass said they increased the use of confidential informants and the number of search warrants -- from 300 to 1,200 in the narcotics section alone. Cash seizures are also up \$7.5 million.

"Gang activity is driven by the illicit trafficking in narcotics," said Ernest Brown, the chief of the Organized Crime division. "By increasing the number of search warrants, we are attacking first their source of revenue. ... The people who sell narcotics are also violent."

The search warrants, in part, replaced the street-corner conspiracy investigations that have been done over the last several years. The investigations aimed to dismantle drug corners with months of surveillance and arrests of offenders and seizures of narcotics.

Brown said the department has not abandoned street-corner operations. Seventeen were done in 2009, but that is down from 34 the previous year.

"They frequently did not result in us arresting either a source of supply or a particularly violent group of offenders because they were more likely to be guys who were just 'running' the packs," Brown said. "And as soon as the takedown was completed, there would be a whole group of replacement players."

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