Chicago homicides drop for 2009

Kilings are down 11 percent, but experts are cautious about why
— Aric Saltzman

Tribune reporter

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At the end of his first year, Chicago Police Superintendent Jody Weis had already addressed the city's eldersmen and repeated questions about low morale and arrests. And then 2008 ended with this: a troubling double-digit homicide increase.

But near the end of this year, homicides in the city have dropped by 11 percent, the lowest number in more than a decade. And even in the city's most troubled areas, the number of homicides is down from 34 the previous year.

"I said at the end of the year that 2008 was the year of transition," Weis said. "I don't think we changed from day one."

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

Groups of street gang members were reorganized, and they were given a new mission: more search warrants and fewer street-corner conspiracy investigations that often ended with officers 'getting a feeling' that a police officer could flood rival neighborhoods and look for trouble.

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.

To police, the arrest highlights how the newly structured gang teams work investigating him. Manning 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.

"We 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 near the end of the year. Calumet District Cmdr. John Ball says the community policing facilitators, noted decrepit buildings, busted street lights and even the color of gang members' shotguns. Dog walkers sometimes joined them. 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 normalcy, 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, but they're not bad."

McCann, who has lived in the area more than 20 years, said zero-tolerance had its detractors because some community policemen "don't know the people in the area." But like in other districts, homicides were down.

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

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But even if experts are hesitant to assess a one-year crime trend, they did note that some of the programs and strategies are ramping up and are not new. But until now widely accepted idea that policing should be on seeing critical 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, police said they have increased the number of gang stops so police could flood rival neighborhoods and look for trouble.

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One after another that comes from the community is CeaseFire, an anti-violence program working in some of the city's most troubled areas.

"We are trying to slow the slide," said CeaseFire Illinois. "We want a normal day."

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 Tom 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 offenses, organizing so-called CeaseFire teams to flood rival neighborhoods and look for trouble.

"When we look at CeaseFire, it's about preventing violence," Weis said. "This is a big deal, an issue of who we are as a city."

But nearing the end of this year, homicides in the city have dropped by 11 percent, the lowest number in more than a decade. And even in the city's most troubled areas, the number of homicides is down from 34 the previous year.

Calumet District Cmdr. John Ball said the neighborhood is "the most difficult district in the city." But even if experts are hesitant to assess a one-year crime trend, they did note that some of the programs and strategies are ramping up.

Weis said he spent a good part of 2009 encouraging commanders to be creative and find solutions unique to their districts.

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

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

"(Last year) was the anomaly," said James Alan Fox, a professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University in Boston. "We're in the middle of a decline."

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CeaseFire Illinois.

But some experts would not agree. Professor Dennis Rosenbaum, a criminologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, calls it a "battle for the streets." But even if experts are hesitant to assess a one-year crime trend, they did note that some of the programs and strategies are ramping up.