

Murder Rates Rising Sharply in Many U.S. Cities

By Monica Davey and Mitch Smith

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MILWAUKEE — Cities across the nation are seeing a startling rise in murders after years of declines, and few places have witnessed a shift as precipitous as this city. With the summer not yet over, 104 people have been killed this year — after 86 homicides in all of 2014.

More than 30 other cities have also reported increases in violence from a year ago. In New Orleans, 120 people had been killed by late August, compared with 98 during the same period a year earlier. In Baltimore, homicides had hit 215, up from 138 at the same point in 2014. In Washington, the toll was 105, compared with 73 people a year ago. And in St. Louis, 136 people had been killed this year, a 60 percent rise from the 85 murders the city had by the same time last year.

Law enforcement experts say disparate factors are at play in different cities, though no one is claiming to know for sure why murder rates are climbing. Some officials say intense national scrutiny of the use of force by the police has made officers less aggressive and emboldened criminals, though many experts dispute that theory.

Rivalries among organized street gangs, often over drug turf, and the availability of guns are cited as major factors in some cities, including Chicago. But more commonly, many top police officials say they are seeing a growing willingness among disenchanted young men in poor neighborhoods to use violence to settle ordinary disputes.

“Maintaining one’s status and credibility and honor, if you will, within that peer community is literally a matter of life and death,” Milwaukee’s police chief, Edward A. Flynn, said. “And that’s coupled with a very harsh reality, which is the mental calculation of those who live in that strata that it is more dangerous to get caught without their gun than to get caught with their gun.”

The results have often been devastating. Tamiko Holmes, a mother of five, has lost two of her nearly grown children in apparently unrelated shootings in the last eight months. In January, a daughter, 20, was shot to death during a robbery at a birthday party at a Days Inn. Six months later, the authorities called again: Her only son, 19, had been shot in the head in a car — a killing for which the police are still searching for a motive and a suspect.

Ms. Holmes said she recently persuaded her remaining teenage daughters to move away from Milwaukee with her, but not before one of them, 17, was wounded in a shooting while riding in a car.

“The violence was nothing like this before,” said Ms. Holmes, 38, who grew up in Milwaukee. “What’s changed is the streets and the laws and the parents. It’s become a mess and a struggle.”

Urban bloodshed — as well as the overall violent crime rate — remains far below the peaks of the late 1980s and early ’90s, and criminologists say it is too early to draw broad conclusions from the recent numbers. In some cities, including Cincinnati, Los Angeles and Newark, homicides remain at a relatively steady rate this year.

Yet with at least 35 of the nation’s cities reporting increases in murders, violent crimes or both, according to a recent survey, the spikes are raising alarm among urban police chiefs. The uptick prompted an urgent summit meeting in August of more than 70 officials from some of the nation’s largest cities. A Justice Department initiative is scheduled to address the rising homicide rates as part of a conference in September.

“If you have that many cities that are having that kind of experiences, we ought to worry about it,” said Darrel W. Stephens, executive director of the Major Cities Chiefs Association and a former police chief in Charlotte, N.C.

In New York and Chicago, homicides have risen from the 2014 numbers, which officials said were the lowest in decades.

In New York, killings have increased by about 9 percent, to 208 through mid-August from 190 a year earlier. Homicides in Chicago are up about 20 percent over the same period a year ago.

The police superintendent in Chicago, Garry McCarthy, said he thought an abundance of guns was a major factor in his city’s homicide spike. Even as officials in both parties are calling for reducing the prison population, he insisted that gun offenders should face stiffer penalties.



Edward A. Flynn, Milwaukee’s police chief. Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

“Across the country, we’ve all found it’s not the individual who never committed a crime before suddenly killing somebody,” Mr. McCarthy said on Monday. “It’s the repeat offenders. It’s the same people over and over again.”

Among some experts and rank-and-file officers, the notion that less aggressive policing has emboldened criminals — known as the “Ferguson effect” in some circles — is a popular theory for the uptick in violence.

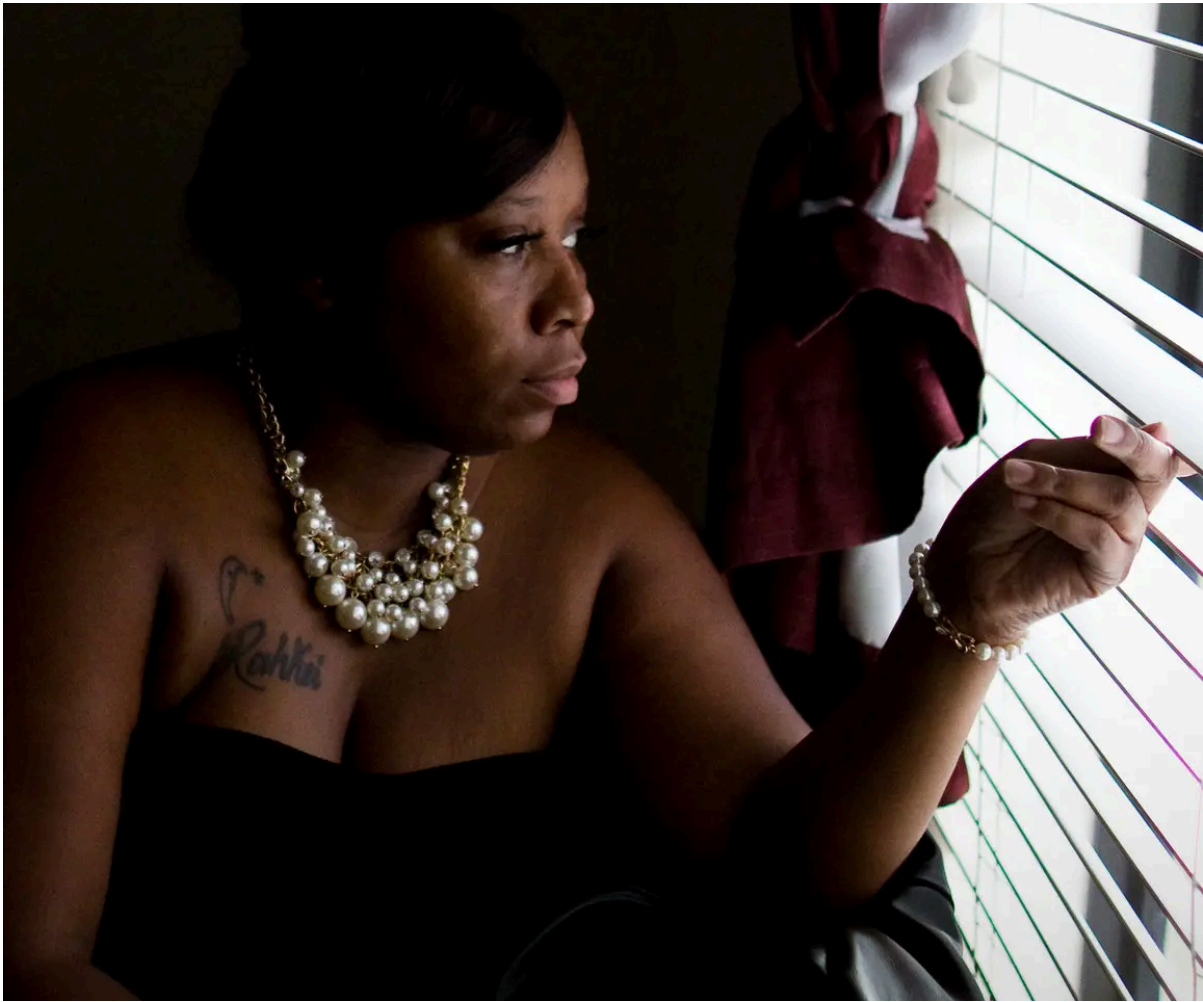
“The equilibrium has changed between police and offenders,” said Alfred Blumstein, a professor and a criminologist at Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University.

Others doubt the theory or say data has not emerged to prove it. Richard Rosenfeld, a criminologist from the University of Missouri-St. Louis, said homicides in St. Louis, for instance, had already begun an arc upward in 2014 before a white police officer killed an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, in nearby Ferguson. That data, he said, suggests that other factors may be in play.

Less debated is the sense among police officials that more young people are settling their disputes, including one started on Facebook, with guns.

Capt. Mike Sack, a homicide commander in the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, cited killings there that had grown out of arguments over girlfriends, food and even characters on a TV show. “Most remarkable is that individuals get so upset over things that I or others might consider petty but resort to such a level of violence,” he said.

In New Orleans, Michael S. Harrison, the police superintendent, said the city’s rise in homicides did not appear to reflect any increase in gang violence or robberies of strangers, but rather involved killings inside homes and cars by people who know their victims — particularly difficult crimes to predict or prevent.



Two of Tamiko Holmes's five children were killed this year. Nick Cote for The New York Times

“That is not a situation that can be solved by policing,” Superintendent Harrison said. “It speaks to a culture of violence deeply ingrained into a community — a segment of the population where people are resolving their problems in a violent way.”

In New York, there have been a larger number of gang-related killings, Stephen Davis, the department's top spokesman, said. But he also said many homicides remained unexplained, the result of disputes with murky origins. “There are a lot of murders that happen in the spur of the moment,” Mr. Davis said.

In eight years as police chief in Milwaukee, Chief Flynn seemed to have brought the pace of murders under control. After a high of 165 in 1991, killings had dipped significantly.

“We thought we were having an impact,” Chief Flynn said. But as murders have multiplied in recent months — a death in a suspected drug house, a roommate beaten to death, a teenager shot at a kitchen table — Chief Flynn sounds far less certain. “I don’t even want to hazard what pace we’re on right now.”

Mayor Tom Barrett of Milwaukee, who is up for re-election early next year, receives text messages about every homicide; they come faster now, every few days. The issue already is taking center stage in the race: Some of Mr. Barrett’s critics say he is not doing enough to stop crime, while citing what they consider low investment in the city’s African-American neighborhoods and mistreatment of black residents by the police.

“I have to find a way for these young kids to understand that they have a stake in society,” said Mr. Barrett, who has met with pastors, community leaders and others to discuss the killings.

In Milwaukee, most of the victims and the suspects in their killings are black men under 30, police data shows, who come from neighborhoods where foreclosures, joblessness and poverty are also high. Most involve guns and people — both victims and suspects — who have been arrested before. The most common motive in the slayings was not robbery or gang rivalry but an argument, according to the data.



A double murder scene in Milwaukee, where the homicide rate is up 76 percent from 2014. Mark Hoffman/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, via Associated Press

On July 3, as an annual fireworks display along Lake Michigan ended, Tariq Akbar, 14, was shot in the back of the head while he was leaving the crowded celebration to meet his mother, who was parked not far away.

“The police were right there — not even 50 feet away,” his mother, Arifah Akbar, said. “This is when you know how bad Milwaukee has gotten.”

The police said the shooting had stemmed from a dispute on social media. A 15-year-old has been charged.

Chief Flynn was among those close enough to hear the shots that night. He said that dozens of officers were near the lake, but that was not enough to deter the shooting.

As in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, tensions over race and police conduct have risen in Milwaukee, where the population is 40 percent black, compared with 6 percent statewide. Demonstrators took to Milwaukee’s streets after the death of Dontre D. Hamilton, 31, a black man who was shot in a downtown park last year by a white police officer. Mr. Flynn fired the officer, but local prosecutors did not file charges against him. Witnesses said Mr. Hamilton, who had been sleeping before the encounter, had grabbed the officer’s baton and hit him or was trying to do so.

Chief Flynn said that his officers were responding to crimes as they always have, but that they were making fewer traffic stops and conducting fewer field interviews, a fact he attributed to “free-floating anxiety” among officers around the nation.

“This is a job that requires judgment, but it requires judgment being exercised under pressure in ambiguous circumstances,” he said. “In that context you are going to sometimes, trying to do the right thing, still make the wrong decision.”

Along the streets on this city’s North Side, residents said the problems reached far deeper than guns or fights on Facebook.

“Everybody’s struggling out here, trying to stay afloat, with no jobs, no opportunities,” said Bethann Maclin, whose 13-year-old daughter stays mostly inside these days. “The violence won’t end. Where do you start?”

Monica Davey reported from Milwaukee, and Mitch Smith from Chicago. Matt Apuzzo contributed reporting from Washington, and J. David Goodman from New York.

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