

The New York Times® Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



December 7, 2011

New Orleans Struggles to Stem Homicides

By **CAMPBELL ROBERTSON**

NEW ORLEANS — Two days had passed before the family of Brenting Dolliole learned that he was dead. When his battered body was found by the police, on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, he was simply John Doe.

But he was not just any John Doe.

Mr. Dolliole, who was 22, was the 175th homicide victim in New Orleans this year, a tally that matched the previous year's homicide count, but with more than a month before 2011 was out. Since [Mr. Dolliole's killing](#), there have been eight more victims, including two men shot dead in a pickup truck, two shot dead in a sedan and another shot on the street in broad daylight.

Of all the challenges facing the city of New Orleans, none is as urgent or as relentlessly grim as the city's homicide rate. It was measured at 10 times the national average in 2010, long before shootings on Halloween night in the crowded French Quarter revealed to a larger public what was going on in poor neighborhoods around the city every week. There were 51 homicides per 100,000 residents here last year, compared with less than 7 per 100,000 in New York or 23 in similar-size Oakland, Calif.

“From September of last year to February of this year,” said Mayor [Mitch Landrieu](#) in a recent speech, after reciting a litany of killings from one city high school, “a student attending John McDonogh was more likely to be killed than a soldier in Afghanistan.”

As it happens, the mayor was picked to be a jury member in a murder trial this week. It ended with a deadlocked jury.

New Orleans has long been a violent town; in 1994, there were 421 killings here, one of which was a hit ordered by a police officer. With federal intervention, the homicide rate dropped precipitously but began rising again around 2000 and has been fluctuating since [Hurricane Katrina](#). The killers and their victims are overwhelmingly young black men, according to an analysis of homicide cases

by outside experts last March, and sponsored by the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance. As police officials frequently point out to the anger of some families, most victims and offenders had prior contacts with the police, often for violent crimes. Less than a quarter were listed as having a steady job.

The narrower causes are less clear. There are no large organized gangs in town, nor are there major drug wars, though some killings are turf disputes over the drug market, made worse by the drastic reshuffling of the urban poor after Hurricane Katrina and the demolition of public housing projects.

Many killings in New Orleans are a result of conflicts and vendettas among small, loosely organized groups, the analysis concluded, but in nearly half the cases, the experts listed the primary motive as uncertain or unknown. Only about half the homicide cases are cleared.

City officials have been pushing what they call a public health approach, a “paradigm shift,” they say, in a city that has been known for soaring arrest and incarceration rates.

Working off a program that started in Milwaukee, the city is [setting up a commission](#) to analyze past killings and try to prevent violence. Businessmen have pledged to find work for people returning from prison. A few hundred volunteers have begun training to set up neighborhood watches or become mentors. The city has also announced that it is adopting a Chicago program that recruits people who have experience in violent neighborhoods and sends them out to counsel and intervene.

Most of these efforts are in the early stages. People working on the front lines say they welcome a focus on a public health approach. But it is not hard to find those who are skeptical as to whether these efforts will have sufficient scale, financing or community involvement.

“People are sitting around waiting, waiting, waiting — all this is talk,” said Norris Henderson, a founder of a group for former prisoners called [Voice of the Ex-Offender](#).

Fighting the homicide epidemic is doubly hard with a police department already known for corruption and facing a major federal overhaul. For nearly a year officials from the Department of Justice have been in [negotiations](#) with city officials over the terms of a consent decree, a legally binding blueprint for reform.

While that overhaul is being mapped out, scores of New Orleans police officers have been convicted, charged, terminated or pushed to resign over abuses, cover-ups or in some cases killings

— this week began the federal trial of two officers who are charged with lying about the shooting of a man after Hurricane Katrina. The police superintendent himself has been tied to several controversies, and though he has been cleared of wrongdoing by the city inspector general, some have called for his resignation.

What remains is a serious breach of trust between the police and residents in the poorer wards of the city, many of whom feel that the authorities are more problem than solution, and so are more inclined to settle their troubles on their own — settlements that can often involve firearms.

“They do not trust the police,” said [Ameer Baraka](#), who served time for manslaughter and drug charges in his youth, but has since become an actor and a community activist. “When these people are looking for help, they’re looking for inside help.”

But the drumbeat of discipline and bad publicity has also undermined the morale of some police officers, who say privately that they feel like they are constantly being second-guessed. Budget pressures and staffing shortages have not helped.

“It’s created this paralyzed, passive police department,” said Peter Scharf, a professor of criminology at Tulane University.

The police superintendent, Ronal W. Serpas, disputes that there is widespread discouragement within the department, though he acknowledges that cleaning up the force is a long, difficult and unfinished process. He points to various signs, like a 17 percent increase in the number of people calling into a tip line, that residents are steadily regaining faith in the police.

“2011 has been a year consumed by rebuilding all the infrastructure in the department that had collapsed,” said Mr. Serpas, who had earlier set a goal of a 5 percent reduction in the homicide rate for the year.

With grants and a bigger budget next year, he said, the department will be expanding community policing programs, adding homicide detectives and using more sophisticated tools to analyze crime trends.

The homicide problem in New Orleans is not unique, said Prof. David M. Kennedy of John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, the author of “Don’t Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America.”

The city is not alone in having a tense relationship between the police and the citizenry, nor is its

pattern of violence — driven by conflicts among small groups, and carried out by an especially violent subset of those groups — particularly rare. And, Professor Kennedy added, there are existing, proven methods to bring the homicide rate down.

“There is the deep and tragic misunderstanding between the three main parties involved,” he said, describing his theory of how violence works in just about any American city. “You’ve got the cops and you’ve got the neighborhoods and you’ve got the guys on the street. The killing stops because you undo those dynamics.”

Mr. Dolliole’s killing was different from many of the others. It did not involve a firearm, for one, and Mr. Dolliole was not caught up in any feuds, family members said, other than being in an abusive relationship with his male partner. But he was like many others in that he was black, he was young and he had spent some time in jail.

Since the killing, the family had one meeting set up with a detective; she failed to show, the family said, calling five hours later to say she had been delayed by another homicide. They spoke by phone for half an hour. No one in the family has heard from anyone since. A police spokesman said on Wednesday that the detective was working on the case though there were no suspects.

“It’s like it’s just been swept under the rug,” said Brenting’s younger brother, Brian. “He’s just another body in the city of New Orleans.”



OPEN

MORE IN U.S. (2 OF 34 ARTICLES)

2 Character Models for a Single Cinematic Point: Winning Elections at Any Cost

[Read More »](#)