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Murder Mysteries - Camden: Slayings and other crime are down reasons remain elusive.

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A small mercy could be found in the numbers at Sister Helen Cole's annual vigil for Camden murder victims this weekend at St. Joan of Arc Church.

In 2004, the number of people slain in the city was 54.

For 2005, it was 38.

"I've been doing this for a little over 10 years, and I tell families they will ache until they go to the graves themselves," Cole said.

A last-minute wave of killings, including two shootings after Christmas, made December the deadliest month for 2005.

Yet all categories of crime, including homicide and murder, appear to be down for the year, giving minor relief to a city branded the nation's most dangerous two years in a row.

Overall, crime was off 16 percent from January through the end of November, compared with the same period last year, according to the Camden County Prosecutor's Office.

Rapes dropped 17 percent, auto thefts 29 percent, and burglaries 13 percent. Aggravated assaults were constant.

Though numbers are down, the statistics for 2005 still give a grim glimpse of city violence and the toll it has taken on families, such as that of Nadira Hinson, who was killed in May by a stray bullet fired during a gunfight. She was 25 and the mother of three boys, and was driving home when shot.

Two men have been charged.

"It's indescribable," her mother, Millicent Hinson, said of the loss. "You have to live it to know it, to understand it."

The vigil at St. Joan of Arc brought comfort, Millicent Hinson said. She is raising the boys.

"It lifts my spirits high to know that people care in this city," she said. "I truly thought I was alone."

The average age of those slain in the city was 29. Eighty-five percent were male. Eighty-three percent were shot. Of all 38 homicides, 35 were classified as murder.

Ciarra Cox, 6 weeks old, who was beaten to death, was the youngest victim. Her father, Clifton, has been charged with murder.

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Vincent Latta, a 68-year-old retired roofer and who had been working as a Wal-Mart greeter, was the oldest. He was strangled a few weeks before Christmas. His wife, April, 43, and 30-year-old Marcus K. Perkins have been charged.

"He gave me away at my wedding," Latta's sister-in-law, Lorrie James, recalled. "He was a very kind, giving man. It's been very hard, very hard. We can't seem to get him off of our minds. I don't think there was anyone who knew Vincent that didn't love him."

The slaying has rent the family. It was James who introduced Latta to his wife.

"Not only did we lose him, but her, too," James said.

As grim as the data are, the numbers are down enough that Camden could drop from its spot as No. 1 on the list of America's most dangerous cities by publisher Morgan Quitno.

That ranking the last two years hammered city morale but was based on 2003 and 2004 data.

No one has determined precisely why crime would drop so dramatically this year. Some are crediting stepped-up law enforcement, spurred in part by the Morgan Quitno ranking, while others point to simple human nature.

Officials say they hope that lower crime figures will help erase negative publicity that Camden has garnered from the most-dangerous rankings and from the deaths in June of three boys who had climbed into a car trunk and not been found for days despite a massive police search.

Such news has made officials fearful that efforts to revitalize the city could be hampered.

Police Chief Edwin Figueroa credits the number of arrests that his department made this year for the drop in crime.

"It shows we're out on the street doing our jobs," he said.

The Police Department's partnership with the U.S. Marshal's Office is among the biggest factors for the decline, he said.

"We've arrested 350 of the city's most dangerous fugitives," Figueroa said.

That roundup allowed city detectives to focus on other investigations.

"It sends out a message that no matter what crime you commit in the city, we're going to find you and bring you back," Figueroa said.

The city also launched a 28-day crime-suppression plan that targeted high-crime areas and flooded them with patrol officers.

The areas were determined by the department's new CompStat (comparative statistics) and crime-mapping programs.

"We're breaking all records in arrests, money, and street-level narcotics seizures," Camden County Prosecutor Vincent P. Sarubbi said.

He also credited a focus on executing search warrants, the number of which has tripled in narcotics investigations.

That's the result of stronger coordination between his office, a federal task force, and city and state police, Sarubbi said.

Allan Jiao, chairman of the department of law and justice studies at Rowan University, said that police deserve credit. But he said that something else is also at work.

"My first thought is that it's a regression to the mean," Jiao said, "which basically means you go back to the historical average."

Jiao said a similar phenomenon happened about 10 years ago, when the city's homicide rate shot up, then dropped by almost half the next year.

In fact, the historical average over the last 20 years has been about 38 slayings a year, according to the most complete data from the prosecutor's office.

"There is simply a tendency in terms of crime rates to go back to a normal range," Jiao explained.

Federal and state law-enforcement involvement in Camden is nothing new, he said.

Derek Ziegler of **CamConnect**, a nonprofit that studies data about Camden, said he was "encouraged by the trend in crime reduction."

Yet Ziegler wasn't sure what would lead to such a steep drop in crime, particularly homicides.

"I think the increased attention and the U.S. Marshal's task force have appeared to help," he said.

Jeff Brenner, a family doctor and activist, credited multiple efforts by city, county, state and federal law-enforcement agencies for the improvement.

"We have lots of work left to do," said Brenner, a member of the state attorney general's panel making recommendations to improve the Camden Police Department. "But it's been a good start."

If there has been a twist to homicides this year in Camden, it's that many cases remain unsolved. In previous years, the clearance rate hovered around 80 percent, climbing to 86 percent in 2003.

For 2005, it has dipped below 39 percent.

"It's the kind of thing you can never precisely predict," said Sarubbi, the prosecutor. "Over the long haul, you're going to have good years and bad years. We don't make promises about clear rates. But we can promise we'll have the same professionalism and intensity with each and every investigation."

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Caption: PHOTO

MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff Photographer Sister Helen Cole lights the candle for Marcus Williams, 32, who was fatally shot in April, while Father Ken Hallahan and Lillian Santiago say a prayer for his family at St. Joan of Arc Church. DAVID SWANSON / Inquirer Staff Photographer A memorial on Federal Street in Camden marks the spot where a man was found fatally shot Monday. Sister Helen Cole, who counsels victims' families, notes that many find an outpouring of support at first. But "from the second year on, it becomes much more difficult." MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff Photographer At a vigil for those killed in Camden in 2004, Rosanna Mahan takes a cell-phone photo of the candle for her boyfriend, Kalee Chaplin, who was killed in November.

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