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Cleveland has the most homicides since 1996

01/02/03

Sarah Treffinger and Karl Turner
Plain Dealer Reporters

Sadness marred a season of celebration this week as families and friends held vigils in remembrance of loved ones lost to street violence.

The vigils came at the end of a year in which homicides in Cleveland rose to the highest level since 1996. The number of people killed increased to 89, up six from the previous year and up 15 from 2000.

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City leaders knew early on that violent crimes were on the rise. Mayor Jane Campbell convened a safety summit in May to discuss ways to stop the killings. About 150 leaders, activists and concerned residents met at the Cleveland Convention Center.

They talked about what it would take to make communities safer. They urged people to lock their doors and called on the city to hire more officers and on legislators to toughen gun control laws.

For a few months the number of homicides seemed to level off, said Judy Martin, who helps organize vigils for people who died in violence.

"At times it looked like it was going to get worse than 2001, then it calmed down and the numbers started looking better," Martin said. "All of a sudden, the numbers just jumped."

Martin, whose 23-year-old son was killed in 1994, has an up-close perspective of the effect that violent crime has on families and neighborhoods. She stood with mourners twice this week and plans to attend another vigil Saturday. All three victims were men under 30.

The vigils give victims' families and friends an opportunity to start healing and activists a chance to spread a message of peace, love, tolerance and nonviolence, Martin said.

"We offer a prayer for strength for the families, a prayer to stop the murders, a prayer for the loss," she said. "It's a plea for people to come together and stop this violence."

The highest homicide total in the city was 333 in 1972. The total remained in the triple digits through 1996, when 111 were killed.

Cleveland, like the rest of the country, had experienced a downturn in the number of homicides for much of the past decade. The homicide rate dropped each year from 1994 to 2000.

But crime reported to police began to rise in 2001, both locally and nationally. The nation's crime rate rose 2 percent in 2001 - the first increase in 10 years.

Criminologists cite a variety of factors for the increase in crime, including the declining economy, budget cuts to social-service agencies, more prisoner releases and a population surge among people ages 15 to 25.

Cleveland was not the only city to experience an increase in homicides again in 2002. Los Angeles - a city of 3.6 million people - became the homicide capital of the country last year, recording 656 homicides through Saturday, according to the Los Angeles Daily News. It was an increase of 12 percent from 2001.

Each violent death has a lasting effect on the entire community, said Debbi Melaragno, leader of the Cleveland chapter of Parents of Murdered Children. The group holds monthly sessions to educate and support those left behind.

Melaragno's brother was killed in January 1995.

"You never get over it," she said. "You learn to deal with it. There's no such thing as closure. How can you close a chapter of a loved one's life?"

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