

Study says Pennsylvania leads nation in black murder rate

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A study ranking Pennsylvania as the nation's leader in the rate of black homicides doesn't shock Adrienne Young.

The founder of the Tree of Hope, a local support group for the families of black homicide victims, has helped parents bury three slain sons in the past three weeks.

"When is somebody going to do something about the guns in our community?" asked Young, whose son was fatally shot in December 1994. "Where are these guns coming from?"

Pennsylvania recorded nearly 30 homicides for every 100,000 black residents in 2004, according to FBI data analyzed by the Violence Policy Center. Following Pennsylvania were Louisiana, Indiana, California and Missouri.

The national rate of black homicides was 18.71 per 100,000. The national homicide rate overall was 4.86 per 100,000.

Nationwide, eight in 10 black homicide victims in 2004 were killed with guns. In Pennsylvania, the figure was closer to nine in 10.

Josh Sugarmann, executive director of the Violence Policy Center, said this was the first time his group examined the rates on a national level. He hoped the results would help create a community dialogue about how to address the problem of getting guns off the street.

"Every other state thinks it's some other state's problem," Sugarmann said. "People are often shocked -- forget No. 1 -- that they're in the top 10. Certainly, Pennsylvania knows there's a gun problem in the state. This places it in a national context."

There were about 400 black homicide victims in Pennsylvania during 2004, accounting for more than 60 percent of all homicides in the state that year. The figures in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County for that year were significantly higher, with both at 80 percent.

The figure has grown in the two years since -- to 87 percent in 2005 and 84 percent last year, according to the Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Reporting System.

Blacks account for less than 30 percent of the city's 284,000 residents and only 13 percent of Allegheny County's population of 1.2 million, according to 2005 census figures.

Al Blumstein, a crime expert at Carnegie Mellon University, didn't put much credence in Pennsylvania's ranking No. 1 in the nation because the rates for the top five states were separated by less than a percentage point.

He did, however, support the study's finding about guns and the correlation to violent crime, especially homicide.

"That's certainly an issue of concern," Blumstein said. "The answer has to be controlling the guns in those communities."

The federal government and local law enforcement agencies have started a number of programs in recent years designed to reduce the number of guns on the streets in Pittsburgh and surrounding areas. Those efforts include Project Safe Neighborhoods, the Violent Crime Impact Team Initiative and roaming "saturation patrols" of officers in trouble spots.

"We have recognized that African-Americans, particularly men in their late teens and early 20s, are at a greater risk of becoming victims of homicide," said U.S. Attorney Mary Beth Buchanan. "We have been targeting areas where the greatest need exists."

Violent crime and homicide rates have dropped from all-time highs in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, figures show.

"It doesn't feel like it to us," Young said.

She applauds efforts like the ones Buchanan has helped foster in Pittsburgh, but Young thinks more needs to be done. Homicide rates might have dropped, but 164 of the 187 homicides in Pittsburgh over the past three years involved black victims.

Her son, Javon, was killed on the first day of Christmas break from Carnegie Mellon University. The person who killed him is serving a life sentence.

Young said she later found out that the killer bought the weapon he used at a jitney stand in Garfield. As far as she knows, police never attempted to find out where the gun came from.

"Why is there not some large-scale investigation into where these guns are coming from?" she asked. "I applaud any and all efforts to stop all of this. But until we look at the root causes and the origins, we're spinning our wheels -- and we're going to continue to bury kids."

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