

## Poverty , drugs drive Detroit murder rate : Officials brainstorm solutions

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**DETROIT** -- Gracie Jones refused to move from a deteriorating neighborhood despite the pleas of her seven grown children. On a blustery afternoon in February, her son found the 74-year-old woman lifeless on her bedroom floor, the pillowcase her killer used to silence her still on her mouth and an aluminum ladder propped against her bedroom window.

On a warm evening three months later, Kewan McKinnie, 19, became embroiled in an argument with a man who abruptly ended the discussion with a shotgun blast into the 19-year-old's back. His death came the day before he was due in court on **drug** charges.

The feisty grandmother died in an attempted robbery and the troubled teen in a shooting police believe was related to **drugs** . They shared nothing common in life. But they are bound in death as No. 41 and No. 187 on the pages of the gray cloth-covered book **Detroit** homicide detectives use to record the year's **murders** .

**Murder** has surged even as other crimes in the city have fallen.

Although **murder** is often thought of as a random crime, a **Detroit** News analysis of 185 of the 224 slayings that occurred between Jan. 1 and July 31 shows it's often where you are or who you are that can get you killed. The bulk of the **murders** , six of every 10, were committed during a robbery or in some way related to **drugs** .

Deadly disputes among family members and acquaintances, which FBI statistics show were responsible for half the **murders** nationwide, accounted for about 20 percent of **Detroit** 's **murders** this year. All of this comes in a year when **Detroit** 's **murders** have surged even as other violent crimes in the city have fallen -- putting Wayne County's top prosecutor and the police at odds.

**Detroit** 's homicide **rate** is stubbornly refusing to mimic the steep declines seen over the past decade in many of America's other big cities, spurring the region's top federal prosecutor and others to find out why.

"Somebody has got to put a stop to this. The violence and the killing -- it's just senseless," said Annette Lewis, 39. Her son, 19-year-old Marcus Ashe, was gunned down Jan. 5 in front of her home on the city's west side. Other cities' **murders** decline

Violent crime -- especially **murder** -- has fallen dramatically over the past five years in many of the largest U.S. cities. New York City finished last year with 633 **murders** , less than a third of the number reported in 1993.

Officials there and in other places credit more aggressive policing as part of the reason.

**Detroit** had 25 percent fewer homicides last year than in 1993, down to 429 last year compared with 579 five years earlier, according to the FBI's uniform crime reports. But **Detroit** 's decline isn't quite as impressive when one considers that in Los Angeles, a city with 3 1/2 times more people, homicides fell from 1,076 in 1993 to three fewer than **Detroit** last year.

**Detroit** likely will see a year-end increase in **murders** for 1999. Department statistics show 224 slayings over the first six months of this year, a 16.7-percent increase over the first half of last year.

The increase has come despite nearly a 15.8-percent drop in all serious crimes for the same period. Assaults and robberies each were down more than 9 percent. Tougher stance needed

U.S. Attorney Saul Green still believes **Detroit** is on firmer footing now than it was a decade ago, when the number of people killed routinely topped 600 a year.

But in January, Green began meeting monthly with other top local and federal law enforcement officials to come up with a strategy for what he hopes would be a drastic reduction in homicides and other violent crime in the city.

Suggestions on the table include automatic jail time for anyone caught carrying a gun illegally and tougher prosecution of people with a history of violent crime, Green said.

"The thought is that we can do better and we ought to do better," Green said. "The sense of public safety and just having a healthy community requires us to do something about the culture of violence."

Carl Taylor, a Michigan State University sociologist and **Detroit** native who studies crime and **poverty** trends in the city, worries that not enough people feel the urgency.

"There are communities that have become so weakened they can't defend themselves, communities where the riots never ended," Taylor said. "Everyone should be outraged. But when you get right down to it, few people are." Impoverished areas targeted

Gracie Jones, the grandmother killed in a robbery last winter, lived in an east-side neighborhood the U.S. Census Bureau estimated had a household median income of just more than \$15,000 a year in 1996, the latest year for which figures are available. Her neighborhood was poor even by **Detroit** 's standards, where one in three people live in **poverty** .

A News analysis of slayings showed that the household median income in the neighborhoods where at least one killing took place this year was nearly 16 percent lower than the citywide median of \$20,357.

The National Institute of Justice last month published a study that found a strong correlation between homicide and **poverty** in Philadelphia, St. Louis and Phoenix.

The study's author, Margaret A. Zahn, a professor at North Carolina State University, looked at 14 years' worth of homicide statistics in the three cities and found that the neighborhoods with the lowest incomes and fewest owner-occupied properties consistently had the most slayings.

"There's no social support network in many of those neighborhoods, and you lose the formal control you would have in other places," Zahn said. Victim was a fighter

Timothy Jones, 35, didn't need a census map to realize his mother's **Detroit** neighborhood was in decline. In the past few years, it seemed any car left on the street for too long would be stolen. An abandoned house next to his mother's had become a magnet for squatters and **drug** users.

In May 1998, a man propped a ladder against her house and broke into her second-floor bedroom. Gracie Jones, who kept a half-dozen Bibles close at hand, reached for a baseball bat and greeted the intruder at the window.

"She told the man, 'You take one step further into my house and I'll bust your brains out,'" the son recalled his mother telling him. "The man told her he didn't want any trouble and went back down the ladder. My mom was a fighter, no question."

Gracie Jones harnessed her fighting spirit and pushed six of her seven children to become college graduates despite having less than an eighth-grade education herself.

After the first break-in, Jones said that he and his siblings realized their mother's fight might not save her from the next intruder.

But Jones said she refused to leave her home or add an alarm. She feared forgetfulness would cause her to set off a burglar alarm long before any intruder.

Gradually, Jones said he and his brothers and sisters came to understand that there was no way to talk their mother into moving.

"Her thing was that she wasn't moving until they carried her out," Timothy Jones said, shaking his head. "And they did."

Her slaying remains unsolved. Police reports show that the killer climbed a ladder and broke through her bedroom window. She apparently was awakened because there were signs of a struggle. Watch is only loot

Although robbery was the likely motive, the only thing of value missing was her watch.

Detectives told Timothy Jones that they are narrowing their list of suspects to transients who squatted in a vacant house next door to where his mother lived. The killer may well be the same man who tried to break in six months earlier.

"They said it will take some time, but that they'll get who did this," Jones said.

As a general rule, **Detroit** police say they know the circumstances and the people involved in 80 percent of homicides.

But as of July 31, only 57 percent of **Detroit** 's cases had been closed with an arrest and formal charges, said Cmdr. Gerald Stewart, the head of the police department's major crimes section.

Insp. William Rice, who oversees **Detroit** 's 50 homicide investigators, expects his unit to finish the year by closing better than 60 percent of its cases.

The national average for homicides closed by arrest and prosecution was 67 percent in 1997, the latest final FBI statistics available.

**Detroit** 's closure **rate** mirrored the national average last year and drastically improved from 1997, which ended with only 44 percent of the homicide cases being closed by police, according to FBI statistics.

Rice cautions that year-end statistics are misleading because cases often are closed more than a year after the slaying. He said his office hopes to improve its performance with the creation this year of a squad of detectives who pursue older cases with a fresh eye and another squad dedicated to solving **drug murders** . Smaller staffs stretched thin

Last month, Wayne County Prosecutor John O'Hair asked county commissioners for extra money to double the staff of his homicide prosecution unit to 10 prosecutors.

O'Hair, who isn't running for re-election, blamed the police for failing to address the 1999 rise in slayings.

Police Chief Benny Napoleon countered that prosecutors have offered plea bargains that freed too many felons who later committed crimes and had failed to approve **murder** warrants on cases police felt they'd gathered enough evidence.

Their underlings in both the police department and the Prosecutor's Office agree that frustrations have run high this year. But both sides point out that they are doing the best they can with fewer resources than other cities with crime problems.

They cite Philadelphia as an example. That city, which had 414 homicides last year, has 22 prosecutors dedicated to **murder** cases, compared with five in **Detroit** .

Despite staff increases in the homicide section, each detective averages 10 new cases a year, compared with a national average of five new cases a year.

Green, the U.S. attorney who continues to meet with representatives from both sides, doesn't expect change to come quickly -- or easily.

"This is not like instant coffee," Green said. Problems surface with **drugs**

Homicide plagues troubled people, as well as poor neighborhoods.

Kewan McKinnie, the young man who died in a shooting police believe was related to **drugs**, had been arrested at least once before. A News analysis of 57 homicides this year that police believe were related to the **drug** trade showed more than half of the adult male victims had at least one prior brush with the law.

On May 28, the day after McKinnie was killed, he was due in Wayne County Circuit Court for a hearing on an arrest a month earlier for allegedly possessing less than 25 grams of cocaine.

But police say his path crossed instead with Deshawn Flippen, a 25-year-old who has been charged with McKinnie's death and has at least two prior **drug** arrests. Flippen, whose nickname is Candyman, has eluded arrest.

According to police reports, the men argued in front of a house in the 15600 block of Wabash. The pair had been in a dispute over stolen car parts in a house Flippen wanted to turn into a **drug** house, according to witness statements to police.

Flippen left after the argument and returned with a shotgun. McKinnie tried to flee.

"I missed you!" Flippen yelled as his first shot went wide. His second did not. 'A young man with promise'

McKinnie suffered massive internal injuries and was pronounced dead on arrival at Grace Hospital.

Two of McKinnie's sisters say their brother had a story-telling ability he inherited from their father, George McKinnie, 61, who recently retired from General Motors.

George McKinnie called his son a young man with much promise.

Kewan McKinnie had landed a job working at Wendy's, and, more important, was within a year of graduating from Highland Park College for Culinary Arts and Builders Trade.

George McKinnie said he believes his son would have been cleared of the **drug** charges. His son, he said, was merely at the wrong place during a police **drug** sting.

In any case, Kewan McKinnie was not an evil person, his relatives say.

His sister, Lisa Hardy, 32, said she'll always remember her brother rough-housing with his nephews, who adored him.

"My brother probably wasn't always the best person he could be," she said. "But he never killed anybody. Never cut anybody. Never hurt anybody. He was somebody's son, somebody's uncle and somebody's brother. You'll never know how much it hurts to lose him."

**Detroit** News Staff Writers George Hunter and David G. Grant contributed to this report.

Caption: Photo 1: McKinnie Photo 2: Police believe the fatal shooting of Kewan McKinnie was related to **drugs** . Deshawn Flippen has been charged.

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