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KC homicide clearance rate declines

By CHRISTINE VENDEL
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DeQuai Wilson remembers the last time she saw her only child alive.

As Cortez Wilson, 17, prepared to leave their south Kansas City home, she called out: "Be safe. Put on your seatbelt. I love you."

That was the extent of her concern: a car wreck.

But hours later, police were called to a park near 113th Street and Sycamore Terrace, where they found Cortez in the driver's seat, shot to death. He was alone. No witnesses came forward. Falling snow buried any possible evidence.

Eleven months later, the killing remains unsolved — one of 55 darkening the department's unsolved list for 2010, as of Wednesday.

Police have solved fewer homicides this year than any year in recent memory. By mid-November, the clearance rate stood at 39 percent, down from 50 percent at the same date last year. Since then, the rate has nudged upward to 41 percent. But that's way too low, police admit.

Twenty years ago, detectives solved 70 to 80 percent of homicides. The percentage has declined steadily since then, reaching 56 percent at the end of 2008 and 2009.

Kansas City isn't alone. National studies have shown steady declines from 90 percent in the 1960s to 65 percent in recent years, despite an overall decrease in the number of homicides and improvements in DNA and other technologies. National experts blame the drop in part on the changing nature of homicides, with more killers having little or no traceable connection to victims. Killings involving drugs, gangs and botched robberies can be among the toughest to solve, especially compared to those involving domestic disputes, bar fights and child abuse.

In Kansas City, police believe lack of witnesses and the police department's system for assigning and investigating homicides also could play roles.

Whatever the reasons, many killers have gotten away with murder. For now, anyway.

Their victims include a 34-year-old woman found in a burning motel room. A 19-year-old college student shot blocks from his mother's home. A 33-year-old man gunned down while riding a bicycle. A 45-year-old owner of a siding company killed while standing in front of a friend's house.

As detectives continue to work those cases and many more, parents like DeQuai Wilson continue to crave answers for the deaths of their children.

Reluctant witnesses

The kind of murders being committed seems to play a role in Kansas City's low clearance rate, said homicide Capt. Floyd Mitchell, who was assigned to the unit five months ago.

Of this year's unsolved cases, two-thirds are like Cortez Wilson's, he said. Arriving police found nothing more than a victim in a vehicle or a body in the street or yard.

"That plays a huge role in the solvability of a crime," he said. "Lots of these are crimes of opportunity that go wrong."

Finding cooperative witnesses is a big problem, police said, and one that seems to be getting worse each year.

"We know who committed most of these murders, but we've got no witnesses to come forward," said veteran homicide Detective Ray Lenoir. "The days of manhandling are gone. And we can't go out and arrest witnesses. They know they're not going to get serious jail time for not cooperating."

Some witnesses share their knowledge, but they don't want their names attached to it. This does no good, Lenoir said.

"We can't put people in jail based on anonymous witness testimony."

The low clearance rate could contribute to more violence, he said.

"We know who killed these people and so does the community. It's totally irresponsible for them not to cooperate. ... Then the killers are left on the street, and they're emboldened."

Time for a change?

Kansas City police use a unique, decades-old system to investigate homicides. The intent was to create a squad of detectives that could focus intensely on the city's toughest cases. But the concept now may be outdated, police said.

Currently, detectives are divided among three squads that rotate every 28 days: day shift, night shift and murder squad. Seven detectives work on each.

Day- and night-shift detectives investigate all deaths, including natural, accidental and suicidal. But if they come across a homicide without a known suspect, they call in murder squad detectives, who focus on "whodunit" homicides.

The concept works well when killings are spaced out. But when they occur on the same day or in consecutive days, detectives can be overwhelmed and understaffed.

"If you catch seven homicides in five days," Mitchell said, "the first homicide will have seven detectives at the scene. But when you get the second homicide, two detectives will stay with the first case, so you'll only get five detectives at the scene. Then by the third homicide, you have to see if you're at a stopping point with the first homicide so you can pull people off the first case to help you.

"By the time you get to homicide number seven, you're pretty backed up. We're going to see if there's a better way."

Police Chief Jim Corwin said his investigations bureau also was looking at whether to try harder to retain more experienced detectives in the homicide unit.

Homicide detectives said they would like to add one detective to each squad because detectives work in pairs and an eighth detective could boost productivity substantially.

Partners needed

Nelson Hopkins Sr., whose son was killed last year in a homicide that remains unsolved, said he was actually impressed by the number of cases police had solved, considering the "code of silence" that has taken over the East Side.

Nelson suggests that police boost their community policing efforts in crime-ridden neighborhoods. Corwin conceded the point but said police needed partners.

"We can't do community policing by ourselves," he said, pointing to the West Side as an example of a community with a strong neighborhood leader, Lynda Callon.

"We're looking for partners," he said.

Mitchell said he was investigating variables that could affect detectives' ability to solve killings.

"This is fresh to me," he said. "I'm asking a lot of questions right now."

He plans to visit other police departments to see their tactics and borrow successful ones.

Meanwhile, the low clearance rate bothers police.

"It's how we are judged by the public," Mitchell said. "The numbers don't lie."

By the numbers:

A sampling of 2010 homicide clearance rates, through mid-November:

Kansas City: 39 percent (36 of 93)

St. Louis: 47 percent (54 of 116)

Baltimore: 37 percent (73 of 200)

Austin, Texas: 88 percent (29 of 33)

Kansas City, Kan.: 70 percent (21 of 30)

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