



MOBILE REGISTER

DA: Guns, drugs to blame for increase in homicides

Sunday, January 15, 2006

By NADIA MOHANDESSI
Staff Reporter

Guns, drugs, alcohol and domestic violence are the threads that tie together each of Mobile's 34 reported homicides in 2005, according to Mobile County District Attorney John M. Tyson Jr.

Homicides in the Mobile police jurisdiction were up more than 20 percent in 2005 from the 28 homicides recorded in 2004.

"It's certainly not unusual," Tyson said. "These things (that contribute to the number of homicides) are the things we always deal with."

Though the number of homicides increased, the total remains significantly lower than the mid-1990s, when the annual homicide total hovered around 50 in Mobile. The highest total was 56 homicides in 1995.

Seven of the homicides in 2005 were related to domestic violence and in more than half of those cases, a firearm was used as the deadly weapon, according to Tyson and police statistics.

Almost 80 percent of the total homicides recorded in Mobile in 2005 involved firearms, police statistics show.

"It's not new that guns are deadly instruments and the most frequently used weapons in homicides and assaults," Mobile police Chief Sam Cochran said. "But the underlying theme to all of these (homicides) is drugs. There is an influx of drugs back on the streets and we are trying our best to combat that with the resources we have."

Drug crimes often lead to violent crimes, including homicide, Tyson said.

"Don't let anybody tell you that drug crimes are victimless crimes," Tyson said. "I've been on too many homicides to tell you otherwise. They say 'Oh, it won't hurt if I smoke a little dope, do a little crack, ice, meth, what have you. It won't hurt anyone.' But manufacturing (illegal substances) and distribution charges are full of lethal danger."

The Mobile Police Department needs more funding to tackle drug-related offenses and to hire more narcotics officers and investigators, Cochran said.

"We've been working our narcotics officers day and night for some time now, and we just don't have the sufficient manpower to do it all," Cochran said.

Twenty-two investigators are assigned to the narcotics and vice beat, while 15 work the homicide and robbery beat, according to a report released in December by the Police Department.

Cochran said the increase in homicides in 2005 was not unique to Mobile.

"There was an uptake in homicides this year, but that seems to be a trend elsewhere in the country as well and in particular in the South," Cochran said. "Other cities are experiencing similar instances and I think we are in a better stance than they are."

Alabama's other major cities saw a moderate to sharp increase in homicides in 2005.

Montgomery recorded 31 homicides last year, up from 25 in 2004, according to the Montgomery Police Department. Six of the homicides in 2005 remain unsolved.

Birmingham police recorded 105 homicides in 2005, an increase of almost 65 percent from the 64 homicides in 2004. No arrests have been made in 43 of the Birmingham homicides in 2005.

"Our population that we police is actually bigger than (the population that) Birmingham (polices)," Cochran said. "I'm particularly pleased that we did not see the level or increase that Birmingham saw this year."

Nationally, the total number of homicides nationally in 2004 decreased by 2.4 percent from 2003, according to the FBI. Figures for 2005 will not be available for several months.

Five of 2005's Mobile homicides remain unsolved, Cochran said. Suspects have been identified or arrested in the other 29 cases.

"Those solvency rates are way higher than national averages," Cochran said. "I attribute that to the hard work of the detectives as well as the officers in the field and the cooperation of our citizens who step forward to give us information."

Mobile's arrest rate for homicides in 2005 was 85 percent, far surpassing the national average in 2004.

Nationally, agencies cleared 62.6 percent of the homicides in 2004, while in the South, the number was slightly higher, at 65.7 percent, FBI crime reports show.

The South as defined by the FBI includes 16 states and the District of Columbia, from Maryland and Delaware to Oklahoma and Texas.

An agency can "clear," or close, a homicide case in two ways, according to the FBI.

The first way a case is deemed clear is if a suspect is arrested, charged with the offense and turned over to the court system.

The second way is when an agency can't make an arrest because of "exceptional means," such as the death of an offender, the refusal of a victim's family to cooperate with prosecutors after police identify a suspect or the refusal of a jurisdiction to extradite an offender, the FBI states.

Though the numbers were ultimately on the rise in Mobile in 2005, authorities said they remain hopeful.

"I think we have the resources to do what we need to do," Tyson said. "But it is set upon the peace and dignity of the community. Without (that), nothing can happen."

© 2006 The Mobile Register

© 2006 al.com All Rights Reserved.