Cracking a culture of silence key to thug-on-thug crimes

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The face of homicide investigation is changing. New technologies and shifting demographics have altered the types of crimes committed. Detectives and police find themselves having to adapt to the changes, in order to remain on top of crime.

City Police Chief Gregory A. Foresman said victims fall into two categories.

The first category, according to Foresman, is a "true victim," or a victim who has no real criminal record beyond, say, traffic violations.

The second category involves victims who have previous criminal records and who keep company with other people who have criminal records. The latter, he said, can be called "thug-on-thug crime."

Within a group of habitual lawbreakers, or his thug-on-thug category, "we have a culture of people who won't talk to police," Foresman said.

"When these individuals who get shot or are involved in a shooting and they have a previous record, they won't be as forthcoming with the information investigators need," Foresman said.

Of the open homicide investigations, Foresman categorized the Berkheiser/Matthews case and the string of shootings that took Randy Speck's life as being the only open homicides locally that involve "true victims." Foresman categorized the open homicide cases of Rasheed Watson, Josh Lee and Terence L. Speller as thug-on-thug, a trend that he says has been on the rise.

"Within the last three to five years, almost all the homicides involved individuals with pretty extensive criminal histories," Foresman said.

He said the prevalence of criminal society is becoming an increasing problem for investigators.

Mayor Gabriel J. Campana agreed that he, too, had noticed a change.

"To me, a victim is a victim. It doesn't matter what types of choices they've made in the past. However, we do see that we're dealing with a different type of clientele than we used to when solving crimes," Campana said.
Thirty years ago, the most common type of homicide in the United States was acquaintance homicide, where the victim knew his or her attacker, according to the 2007 Police Effective Research Forum of the U.S. Department of Justice.

These days, police are seeing far more stranger-to-stranger homicide cases, which researchers have determined to be the most difficult type of homicide to solve.

With acquaintance homicides, people around the victim are usually aware of the victim's personal conflicts. If a homicide occurs, family members can point police in the right direction based on that knowledge. An acquaintance who kills may voluntarily turn themselves over to the police, out of regret. Because the attacker has previous knowledge of the victim, the victim still may be viewed as a person in the attacker's mind.

However, with stranger-to-stranger homicides, the motive is much more difficult to determine. Because there is little or no previous relationship, the assailant is free to feel less sympathy for their victim. In the case of gang-related or drug-related homicides, the murderer may have killed in the past, or may have been raised in a group culture where killing an outsider is not associated with guilt and talking to the police is frowned upon.

The culture is changing to include more drug- and gang-related activity, which brings with it more stranger-on-stranger homicides.

Street life breeds a culture of silence when it comes to talking to authorities, according to Foresman.

"When I first came on the job, 25 years ago, we didn't have the type of disrespectful individuals we have now, who discount you, who try to go out of their way not to engage you," Foresman said.

"When victims are suspicious and withhold information, they make it extremely difficult to track down or even talk to them. That's what makes a lot of these investigations extremely difficult when you're dealing with people involved in that criminal culture, where they believe they are 'snitching' if they come forward with information."

Foresman explained that sometimes witnesses won't even give police general information, let alone reveal finer details.

"They think, 'Carry a gun, you die by the gun.' These people have their own ways of dispensing justice that has nothing to do with the police solving the crime," Foresman said.

When police are unable to obtain information from witnesses, they are forced to base their cases entirely on scientific analysis, which is extremely costly and can take months, according to Foresman.

"It's extremely expensive to send evidence to the lab. It weighs heavily into the city's budget," Foresman said.
Motivations behind violent crime also are changing, according to Foresman.

"Even if the victim and aggressor are not associates, somehow on the street they know of each other's activities; usually they're rivals. That's typically when the violence takes place," Foresman said.

"Say one is cutting in on another's turf, or someone owes someone else a large amount of money or product, that's typically what these kinds of shootings are about," he said.