



Tracking America's Unsolved Homicides
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Murder clearance rates decline at most major police agencies

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More than half of America's major police departments are struggling to solve homicides at the same level of success they enjoyed a decade ago, according to a study of federal crime records by the nonprofit Murder Accountability Project.

The study focused on the nation's 160 police departments that investigate at least 10 homicides a year and that also faithfully report crime data to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report. Of these, 86 departments (54 percent) reported less success in solving murders committed during the 10-year period 2006-2015 than in the preceding decade of 1996-2005, while 74 police agencies (46 percent) reported improving clearance rates.

The study found most departments with declining murder clearance rates also experienced rising numbers of homicides. These departments often are in states or counties with declining tax bases or facing other kinds of fiscal challenges.

The purpose of MAP's study was to learn which law enforcement jurisdictions in the United States generally have improved homicide clearance rates and which jurisdictions experienced declines. Under U.S. Justice Department definitions, a homicide is "cleared" if at least one person is arrested, formally charged and handed over for prosecution.

Using data from the Uniform Crime Reports, MAP separated twenty years of data into two parts. The first decade examined was 1996 to 2005, and the second was 2006 to 2015 (the last year for which UCR data is available). The UCR data was assembled from information submitted to the FBI by state agencies.

Nationally, the clearance rate for the first decade was 64.8 percent and 63.6 percent for the second decade.

The clearance rate of the second decade was compared with the clearance rate from the first decade. The study identified the 10 police agencies that reported the most improvement in homicide clearances and the 10 departments reporting the worst decline in solving murders.

The law enforcement agencies with the most improved homicide clearance rates were:

1. Mesa Police Department, Arizona
2. Tulare County Sheriff's Office, California
3. Metropolitan Police Department, Washington, DC
4. North Little Rock Police Department, Arkansas
5. East Orange Police Department, New Jersey
6. Fresno Police Department, California
7. Winston-Salem Police Department, North Carolina
8. Richmond Police Department, Virginia
9. Santa Anna Police Department, California
10. Oxnard Police Department, California

These agencies increased their clearance rates by a range from 36 percentage points in the case of Mesa Police down to 21 percentage points in the case of Oxnard Police.

The 10 law enforcement agencies reporting the largest declines in homicide clearance were:

1. Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office, California
2. City of Yonkers Police Department, New York
3. Camden City/County Police Department, New Jersey
4. Flint Police Department, Michigan
5. Elizabeth Police Department, New Jersey
6. Chester Police Department, Pennsylvania
7. Pine Bluff Police Department, Arkansas
8. Trenton Police Department, New Jersey
9. Little Rock Police Department, Arkansas
10. Newark Police Department, New Jersey

The range of homicide clearance rate declines was from 52 percentage points as reported by the Stanislaus Sheriff and 24 percentage point as reported by Newark Police.

The MAP study found the agency with the least successful clearance rate during the second decade – Flint, Michigan – reported solving 11.6 percent of its homicides for the decade. The agency with the most consistent clearance rate over the twenty years studied – the San Francisco Police Department – had a clearance rate of 49.4 percent in the first decade and 49.7 percent for the second decade.

Here are MAP's detailed finding when contacting local police, starting with the 10 most improved homicide clearance rates:

Mesa Police Department

Looking at the top ten departments with the most improved clearance rates, the most improved jurisdiction in the analysis was the Mesa, Arizona, Police Department. Their improvement was 36 percentage points.

The Department investigated 170 homicides¹ in the first decade under study and cleared 81, for a clearance rate of 47.6 percent. In the second decade, the department investigated 175 homicides clearing 147 of them for a clearance rate of 84 percent.

Sergeant Kevin Baggs, of the Mesa Police Department Homicide Unit, was interviewed for this story.² He credited the expanded use of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) with increasing the clearance rate. Contributions of DNA to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS)³ database increases the probability that submitted, unidentified DNA will be matched to an identified offender.

Sgt. Baggs added that the small number of homicides per year experienced in Mesa – between 26 and 28 events, he said – allowed the city's nine homicide detectives to better concentrate on their investigations.

A discrepancy in numbers was revealed during the interview with Sgt. Baggs. Mesa PD's numbers showed a few more homicides and a few more clearances than found in UCR data. This may be due to the department considering as cleared cases where the offender is identified and a 'long form complaint' is filed with prosecutors, or where an identified offender flees to another country.

Tulare County Sheriff's Department

The Tulare County Sheriff's Department in California reported a clearance rate improvement of 33 percentage points. For the first decade studied -- 1996 to 2005 – Tulare County reported 128 homicides and 78 homicide clearances for a clearance rate of 61 percent. In the second decade -- 2006 to 2015 – Tulare County reported 175 homicides and 165 clearances for a clearance rate of 94 percent. Contacted repeatedly, the Tulare County Sheriff's Department agreed to comment on their closure success but never did so. Instead, a source close to the Department's clearance rates reported that the data reported to the FBI were incorrect.⁴

The source said the County never had a 94% clearance rate for the last decade. Rather, there was an average clearance rate of 70% for the last two and a half years

¹ All homicide and clearance figures are from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). The data are contributed by local agencies to their respective state agencies. The state agency contributes data to the FBI, which produces the final UCR report.

²Telephone interview on April 25, 2017.

³ The Federal Bureau of Investigation maintains the CODIS database.

⁴ C.f. Note 1, above.

and about a 50% clearance rate for the decade before that. No explanation was provided for these discrepancies.

Washington DC Metropolitan Police Department

Third in the top ten departments with improved clearance rates was Washington, D.C.'s Metropolitan Police Department with a reported improvement of 33 percentage points.

MPD investigated 2,572 homicides in the first decade under study and cleared 1,049, for a clearance rate of 41 percent. In the second decade, the department investigated 1,378 homicides and cleared 1,019 of them, for a clearance rate of 74 percent.

Assistant Chief Robert Alder, of MPD's Investigative Services Bureau, told MAP that a number of factors affected the increase in the homicide clearance rate.⁵ The first change was re-centralizing homicide detectives in one location. In the early 1990s, former Chief of Police Larry Soulsby decentralized the Homicide Branch and scattered detectives among the city's seven police districts. The detectives returned to one, central unit until another chief, Charles Ramsey, dispersed them again. In the early 2000's the detectives were re-centralized. Co-location facilitated conversation among detectives that was not previously practical.

Another factor, said Alder, was switching to a squad concept. Homicide cases continued to be assigned to individual detectives but under the squad concept they were now assigned to a sergeant as well. Case reviews were more frequent, with all sergeants and lieutenants participating with a view to finding more quickly a piece of investigation that might have been missed.

Additional investigative information is garnered through more focused approach targeting the area in which a homicide was committed. Neighborhood canvasses are conducted, allowing the community direct contact with members of the Department. Neighbors are asked for their assistance and told that a reward of \$25,000 is given for the arrest and conviction of the offender.⁶

A telephone tip line allows citizens to communicate information to the police with only an assigned number as an identifier. All of these initiatives allow the Department to, "... reach out to the community and build trust," said Chief Alder. Homicide scenes processed at night are routinely held by police until the next day. Increased daylight allows for the collection of physical evidence that might otherwise be missed, said Alder.

Chief Alder credited increased use of technology as aiding the clearance rate. DNA was mentioned first. Next mentioned was the use of television cameras placed by the Department in strategic locations. These cameras are supplemented by privately-

⁵ Telephone interview on April 27, 2017.

⁶ Although expensive, the rewards are paid for each and every arrest and conviction, said Assistant Chief Alder.

owned cameras. Also cited by the chief were “Shot-Spotter” technology, license plate readers, cellphone data, computers, and forensics.

The clearance rate is enhanced by the reduced number of homicides experienced by the Department. Fewer homicides translates into a lighter caseload for homicide detectives, well within suggested guidelines of four to six cases per detective per year. Assistant Chief Alder said that the Department is receiving the financial resources and technology it needs to clear homicides.

North Little Rock Police Department

Fourth in line for improvement of homicide clearance rates was the North Little Rock Police Department in Pulaski County, Arkansas. The Department’s reported improvement was 30 percentage points.

North Little Rock Police Department investigated 89 homicides in the first decade under study and cleared 43 of them, for a clearance rate of 48 percent. In the second decade, the department investigated 113 homicides and cleared 89 of them, for a clearance rate of nearly 79 percent.

Asked about the NLRPD success in clearing homicide cases, Sergeant Brian Dedrick, of Media Relations, replied that in 2016 the Department cleared 100 percent of their cases.⁷ Sgt. Dedrick credited social media as helping to clear cases. NLRPD has Department Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages.

Captain Brian Scott cited four factors as increasing the clearance of homicides.⁸ He credited department-wide greater in-depth involvement with the community; ensuring that homicide detectives work only homicides and no more than seven or eight of them per year; “improvements in crime scene processing, specifically in regards to DNA testing.,” and the aging demographics in the community.

Captain Scott went on to say, “All of these factors played a role in the increased clearance rate. However, the most important factor is the cooperation of Investigations and Patrol Divisions. This cooperative effort leads to greater communication and a great team approach to solving major cases.”

East Orange Police Department

The fifth agency with the most improved clearance rate percentage was the East Orange Police Department in Essex County, New Jersey, with a reported improvement in its clearance rate by 29 percentage points.

⁷ Email dated 04/20/2017 from Sgt. Dedrick.

⁸ Ibid.

The East Orange Police Department investigated 151 homicides in the first decade and cleared 81 of them, for a clearance rate of 48 percent. In the second decade, the department investigated 70 homicides and cleared 54 of them for a clearance rate of 77 percent.

Rounding out the ten law enforcement agencies with the best percentage point improvement in their homicide closure rates are those listed in Figure 1, below:

Figure One

Agency	1st Decade Clearance Rate	2nd Decade Clearance Rate	% Point Change
Fresno PD, CA	53.9%	79.0%	25.1
Winston-Salem, NC	59.8%	84.7%	24.9
Richmond PD, VA	48.8%	72.9%	24.1
Santa Anna PD, CA	68.5%	90.9%	22.4
Oxnard PD, CA	44.8%	66.1%	21.3

Most “Middling” Closure Rate

The San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) reported little improvement in their clearance rates over the two decades analyzed. SFPD reported 705 homicides in the first decade, clearing 328 of them for a clearance rate of 46.5 percent. In the second decade, the Department reported 642 homicides, clearing 300 of them, for a clearance rate of 46.7 percent.

The clearance rate for the SFPD demonstrated the smallest clearance rate improvement (0.2%) for all of the agencies in this study. Essentially, the SFPD’s clearance rate remained the same for two decades although about nine percent fewer homicides were recorded in the second decade.

Here are MAP’s detailed finding for the 10 law enforcement agencies that reported the worst declines in homicide clearance rates:

Stanislaus County Sheriff’s Department

MAP found that the Stanislaus Sheriff’s Department, California, experienced the greatest decline in homicide clearance rates during the two decades under study. The reduction in clearances was measured at 52 percentage points.

SCSD reported investigating 106 homicides in the first decade under study and clearing 112, for a reported clearance rate of 105 percent.⁹ In the second decade the department investigated 116 homicides clearing 62 of them for a clearance rate of 53 percent.

SCSD did not reply to several requests for information about the department's reported declining clearance rate.

Yonkers Police Department

The Yonkers Police Department in Westchester County, New York, reported a 34-percentage point decline in its clearance of homicides.

Yonkers investigated 116 homicides in the first decade under study and cleared 98, for a clearance rate of 84 percent. In the second decade, the department investigated 70 homicides and reported clearing 35 of them for a clearance rate of 50 percent.

Authorities in Yonkers said the department had made errors in the information it reported to the UCR.

The Yonkers Police Department re-examined their homicide data for 2006 through year-to-date in 2017. In an interview with Captain Paul Rice, an eighteen-year veteran of the department and the assistant commander of the Field Services Bureau, he reported that for the decade 2006 through 2015 there were 68 homicides with 51 of them cleared, for a clearance rate of seventy-five percent.¹⁰

With these numbers, the clearance rate for the Yonkers Police Department only decreased nine percentage points, from eighty-four percent in the first decade to seventy-five percent in the second decade. Data provided by Captain Rice would remove the Yonkers Police Department from the ten departments experiencing the greatest decline in clearance rates.

Yonkers Police clearance rates for both decades were above the national clearance rates for those decades.

The difference between this data and the UCR, said Capt. Rice, is “. . . a disconnect when we report our homicides.” “That’s an issue we need to address,” he said. Clearances of some prior cases were not reported.

Capt. Rice said that the department was getting the resources it needed to close homicides, “. . . although we could always use more.” “All-in-all,” said Rice, “we’re satisfied.”

⁹ Clearances from prior years may be reported to the SHR and included in the current reporting year. In some instances, this may result in a clearance rate of more than one hundred percent.

¹⁰ Interview with Capt. Rice on 06/07/2017.

Camden County Police Department

The third department with a declining homicide clearance rate was the Camden County Police Department in New Jersey. The reduction in clearances was measured at 31 percentage points.

Camden County Police was formed in 2013 and assumed policing functions for the City of Camden, which has experienced severe fiscal challenges in recent years. Camden County replaced the City of Camden Police Department, whose disbanding was announced on August 2, 2011. Camden County Police performs police services only in the City of Camden.¹¹

The City of Camden Police Department reported investigating 330 homicides in the first decade under study and clearing 240, for a clearance rate of 73 percent. In the second decade, the department investigated 435 homicides cleared 182 of them for a clearance rate of 42 percent.

Camden authorities did not reply to requests for comment on the declining clearance rate.

Flint Police Department

Fourth in the reduction of the homicide clearance rate is the City of Flint Police Department in Genesee County, Michigan. The FPD experienced a reduction of nearly 30 percentage points (29.6%).

FPD investigated 352 homicides in the first decade under study and cleared 145, for a clearance rate of 41 percent. In the second decade, the department investigated 440 homicides clearing 51 of them for a clearance rate of nearly 12 percent (11.6%).

Expressed somewhat differently, only one in eight homicides in Flint were cleared in recent years. This was the lowest clearance rate for any of the major police departments in the MAP study.

Like the Camden, the city of Flint has faced severe fiscal challenges from an eroding tax base in recent years.¹²

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camden_County_Police_Department; viewed 04/07/2017.

¹² <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-crisis-in-flint-goes-deeper-than-the-water>; viewed 04/07/2017 Flint, under the Michigan Emergency Manager Law, was placed under a state appointed manager to address the chronic financial distress.

Elizabeth Police Department

Fifth in the reduction of homicide clearances is the Elizabeth Police Department in Union County, New Jersey. Elizabeth Police experienced a 29-percentage point decline in the rate of clearance.

For the first decade, the Department had a 79 percent clearance rate, clearing 85 of the 107 homicides it investigated. In the second decade EPD had a 50 percent clearance rate, clearing 62 of the 123 homicides it reported.

It should be noted that four of the 10 major departments suffering the worst decline in homicide clearance rates are located in New Jersey, which has experienced statewide chronic fiscal shortages and growing indebtedness. New Jersey is frequently ranked at the bottom in national studies of fiscal conditions.¹³

Numbers for the next five departments with declining clearance rates are captured in Figure 2, below:

Figure Two

Agency	1st Decade Clearance Rate	2nd Decade Clearance Rate	% Point Change
Chester, DE	57.9%	31.2%	-26.7
Pine Bluff, AZ	68.9%	43.2%	-25.7
Trenton, NJ	79.0%	54.2%	-24.8
Little Rock, AK	75.1%	50.9%	-24.2
Newark County, NJ	61.4%	37.6%	-23.8

Conclusions

Of the 10 law enforcement agencies which had the largest reported increase in reported clearance rates in the second decade, five reported more homicides in the second decade than in the first decade, and five agencies reported fewer homicides in the second decade than in the first decade. Nonetheless, all of the agencies experienced an increase in their clearance rates.

Of the 10 agencies experiencing a decrease in homicide clearance rates, only two jurisdictions reported a decrease in total number of homicides when comparing the second decade with the first decade, while eight agencies reported an increase in homicides.

¹³ http://www.nj.com/politics/index.ssf/2016/05/poor_state_of_njs_fiscal_health_laid_bare_in_new_study.html, viewed 06/07/2017; <https://www.mercatus.org/statefiscalrankings>, viewed 06/07/2017

The agencies commenting on their increase in clearance rates credited, in part, a reduction in the total number of homicides. The reduction afforded a lighter case load for investigators. The aggregation of investigators in one location also had a beneficial effect.

Also mentioned as aiding the increase in clearance rates was the availability and implementation of technology to include DNA recovery and analysis, and public and private closed circuit television.

Methodology

The Murder Accountability Project study focused on the 160 police departments in the United States that have averaged at least 10 homicides a year in the last decade and also report crime data reliably and completely to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report.

Several large police departments were excluded because of this methodology. The Chicago Police Department ceased reporting homicide clearance data in 1994, excluding it from this study even though Chicago in recent years suffers the nation's largest annual murder totals. The New York Police Department was also excluded because it failed to report homicide clearances for several years during this study.