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Fewer homicides in Yakima and Yakima County in 2023, but rate exceeds Seattle's

Donald W. Meyers; Yakima Herald-Republic

Jan. 12—As far as homicides go, Yakima started the year ominously.

Three people were gunned down at an East Nob Hill Boulevard convenience store, sparking a day-long search for the killer. With that start, one could wonder what the rest of the year would hold.

"When you have three people killed in a homicide at the first of the year, it's surprising where it ended," Yakima police Chief Matt Murray said.

Yakima ended the year with a total of 12 homicides, seven below the record of 18 set in 2018, and slightly above the 10-year average for killings in the city — 10.8.

While he considers homicides an inaccurate gauge for violent crime, Murray said the city has seen reductions not just in homicides, but in most crime categories, a trend he said is in its third year.

Countywide, 33 people were reported killed in acts of homicide, according to records from local police departments. It was three short of the record 36 homicides that were reported in 2022. The 10-year average for the county is 27.1.

The past year was also the first since 2021 to have homicides involving multiple victims.

On Jan. 24, 2023, Roy C. Knoeb Jr., Nikki T. Godfrey and Jeffrey David Howlett were shot to death at the Circle K, 1712 E. Nob Hill Blvd. Their accused killer, Jarid Lawrence Haddock, 21, died more than 12 hours later from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, ending an hours-long search for him.

Police were not able to determine a motive for the killings, but said that Haddock was a methamphetamine user, and an autopsy found meth in his system.

The other occurred in Toppenish where Alicia Castro, Altagracia Mancillas-Herandez and Isaac Corpuz were shot to death. Raymundo Lopez, 19, whom authorities identified as the killer, died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

A fifth person was wounded in that incident.

Toppenish saw seven homicides this year, including two at the El Corral Motel. No arrests were made in any of the Toppenish cases.

Yakima County Sheriff's Office investigated 10 homicides this year, sheriff's spokesman Casey Schilperoort said. Of those, Schilperoort said the sheriff's office considers six of the cases cleared, as arrests were made in four cases and detectives have submitted charging recommendations to the Yakima County Prosecuting Attorney's Office in two.

Guns were used in 30 of the year's homicides, while two people were strangled and one person, Manuel Guzman-Gomez, had a cause of death listed as "homicidal violence." Yakima County Coroner Jim Curtice said that revealing the exact cause of death could compromise the sheriff's office investigation into the Oct. 24 killing near Mabton.

Of Yakima's dozen homicides, two remain as open investigations while a warrant has been issued for Juan Rosales-Montes De Oca in the killing of Sergio Salinas-Gonzales in a drive-by shooting on East Nob Hill Boulevard and South 18th Street July 17.

Two homicides, Augustin Tello and Daniel Ortega, who were killed hours apart on Feb. 5, continue to be reviewed to see if they were justifiable cases of self-defense.

While not record-setting, Yakima's per-capita homicide rate exceeded Seattle's, with 12.2 per 100,000 compared to Seattle's 9.4 per 100,000.

Yakima County's per-capita homicide rate, 12.9 per 100,000, exceeded King County's rate of 5.9 per 100,000. Both Seattle and King County saw record numbers of homicides in 2023, with 73 and 141, respectively.

Aggravated assault down 13%

However, Murray does not believe homicide should be the indicator of violent crime in a community. He said whether someone is a homicide victim depends upon multiple variables, such as the killer's aim and how quickly the victim received medical care.

"It's hard to prevent homicides," Murray said. "We had two that were in the midst of drug deals, and it's hard to prevent that when drugs were legal," referring to a state Supreme Court ruling that deemed the state's drug-possession law unconstitutional.

Instead, he said the better metric is aggravated assault, which WASPC defines as assaults that result in serious injury or a weapon was used that could have caused significant injury or death.

In 2023, aggravated assault cases decreased 13%, while the state saw a 14% increase, Murray said. He also said robbery cases have declined 50%, with vehicle theft down 18%. The only area that saw a significant increase was drug offenses, which went up 100% after the Legislature passed a bill criminalizing drug possession again.

He credited the change to YPD's efforts to take a data-driven approach to crime fighting, including targeting those who were responsible for most of the crime. Police arrested five people who were responsible for a quarter of the shootings in the city, Murray said.

He pointed out that only one of the homicides in the city this year was gang related, which he said was a sign that efforts to disrupt gang activity were paying off.

YPD has also created a cold-case unit to tackle unsolved homicides. Detective Kevin Cays is reviewing cold cases and highlighting a case each month on the department's social media.

There is no statute of limitations on murder charges.

One area that has seen an increase is in traffic enforcement. Through a combination of requiring officers to make four traffic stops a day — Murray stressed that it is not a ticket quota — and hiring a second drunken-driving enforcement officer, the department has seen a 37% increase in traffic citations issued and a 26% increase in DUI arrests.