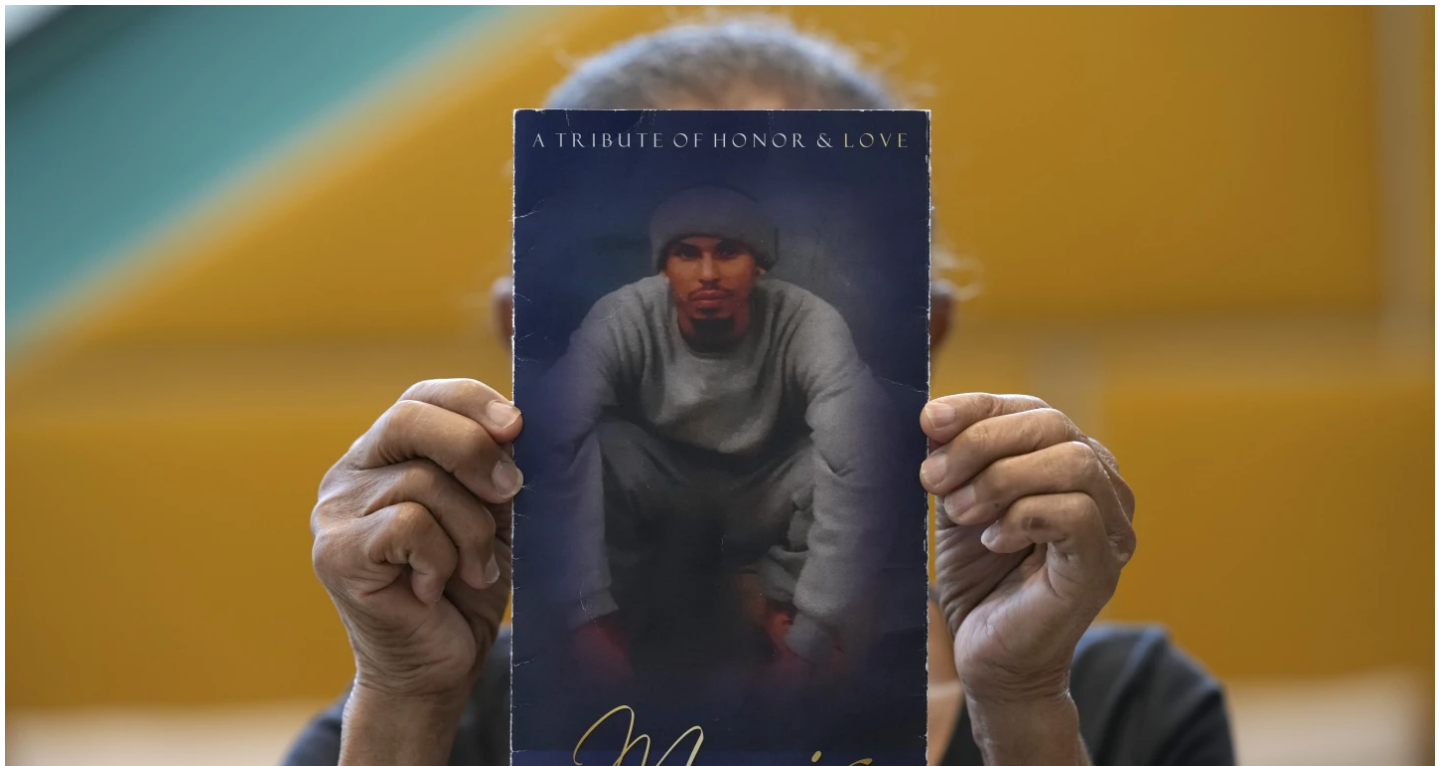


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POLITICS

Homicides are rising in the nation’s capital, but police are solving far fewer of the cases



BY ASHRAF KHALIL

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Though it’s no longer the homicide capital of the United States, [the nation’s capital](#) is witnessing a multiyear spike in [the number of homicides](#) but solving far fewer of them.

And for families of the victims, the issue of unsolved killings cuts deep.

Asiyah Timimi’s husband, Aqueel, was stabbed in a dispute in January 2021 and died several days later. “You just don’t feel safe until they’re caught,” Timimi said. “I could be walking past the person that killed my husband.”

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An advertisement banner with a purple background. On the left side, there is a graphic of a grid of squares in various colors (orange, yellow, pink, white). The main text in the center reads "Producing your greatest asset – tech talent" in white and orange, followed by an orange arrow pointing to the right. On the right side, there is the Virginia Tech logo (a stylized 'V' and 'T') and the word "VIRGINIA" in white.

Natalia Mitchell wants justice for her son Morris, who was fatally shot in March 2022, and closure for herself. A successful arrest of her son’s killer, she said, “doesn’t bring Morris back, but it would help.”

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The percentage of homicides that are [solved](#) by the Metropolitan Police Department has declined sharply in 2023, leaving the city on track to record its lowest so-called “clearance rate” or “closure rate” in more than 15 years.

As of Nov. 13, only 75 of the 244 homicides committed this year have been solved by police. Factoring in the 33 prior-year homicides cleared thus far in 2023, the overall closure rate stands at around 45%. That would be the lowest rate dating back at least to 2007, according to [statistics provided by the MPD](#).

Nationally, the average clearance rate tends to hover between 50% and 60%, said Rick Rosenfeld, a professor of criminology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

A low closure rate, particularly on homicides, can erode police morale and community trust in the police and lessen the public cooperation between citizens and police that is vital for many investigations, said Christopher Herrmann, an associate professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a former crime analyst supervisor with the New York Police Department.

“That whole process can kind of spiral down, where the community doesn’t trust the police that much anymore or there’s a lack of faith,” he said. “There’s much less cooperation between the community and the police. And once the police see a lack of cooperation from the community, some of them will kind of throw their hands up in the air and say, ‘Why should we care when no one in the community wants to help?’”

Deputy Mayor for Public Safety Lyndsey Appiah acknowledged that closure represents “some sense of justice for victims.”

In addition, she said, “The surety of consequence is a deterrent to crime. So it’s important that we are, as quickly as possible, closing cases and solving cases.”

The drop in homicide closures is just part of a complicated public safety crisis facing the nation’s capital. Appiah, in testimony to the House Judiciary Committee this year, flatly acknowledged the scope of the problem.

"Oxford defines a crisis as a time of intense difficulty, trouble or danger," she testified. "So I would say there is a crisis."

Homicides in Washington are up 33% this year over last year. Violent crimes involving juveniles also are rising steadily, as are [carjackings](#), with [a U.S. congressman](#) and a diplomat from the United Arab Emirates among the recent victims.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Appiah cited police staffing issues and difficulties with crime scene analysis among the potential factors impacting the clearance rate.

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The MPD is at around 3,300 officers this year, down from 3,800 officers since 2020 — a decrease of 500 over three years. Police union officials have publicly blamed the D.C. Council for what they say are anti-police policies that have driven away officers and stifled recruiting efforts. The mayor, however, wants to get the number of officers up to 4,000.

D.C.'s crime lab, the Department of Forensic Science, also lost its accreditation in spring 2021 over allegations of flaws in its analysis. Appiah said the lab hopes to regain its accreditation early next year; in the meantime, the city is outsourcing its crime scene analysis, a process that consumes time and money, she said.

Appiah said that 10 months into the year is too soon to judge the success of homicide investigations that can take months or years. And, in fairness, the MPD just arrested a man in late October for a killing that took place in 2009. In cases like that, the arrest counts as part of this year's clearance rate.

But with just a few weeks left in the year, it would take a remarkable run of successful arrests to prevent 2023 from having the lowest homicide clearance rate in more than 15 years.

The impact of these unsolved killings can have a corrosive effect in multiple directions.

"It devastates the Black family, and it can devastate the police department," said Ronald Moten, a community activist who, in his youth, spent time in federal prison on drug charges. "It always gives the family some sense of relief if there's a closure. It doesn't help you heal by itself, but it's part of the healing process."

Moten's half-brother was slain in 1991, during the period when homicides in D.C. regularly exceeded 400 per year. The case was never solved.

"It hurts because you feel like somebody's gotten away with killing your child with no consequences," Moten said. "That's painful. You want closure, and you want somebody to be held accountable."

Preventing that negative cycle from becoming entrenched is one of the city's top priorities. To close cases, police need residents to help uproot violent criminals from their communities, said Appiah, the deputy mayor.

“We need their help. And they need to trust that if they come forward with information and help us, that it will move towards accountability,” she said. “If they provide us tips on someone engaged in a shooting and then that person is just back in the community, they will not trust MPD in the same way. ... We need the community to help us close cases, and then we need the rest of the system to work to help keep them safe.”

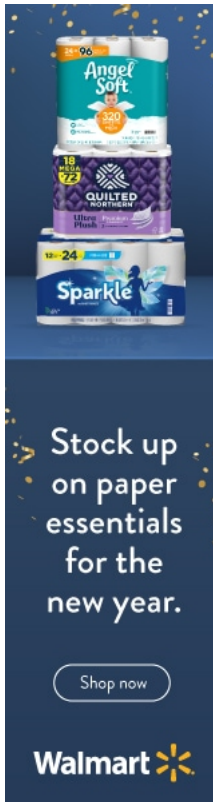
Timimi, whose son Khalil was shot outside of Washington in neighboring Prince Georges County in Maryland about six weeks after her husband was stabbed, now cares for her paralyzed son and runs a charitable organization teaching modern life skills to urban youths.

She said she fears a return to the days when Washington routinely led the nation in per-capita killings. Two of her former neighbors have lost children to gun violence in recent years, and in 2021 her godson was caught in a crossfire and killed while he was home from college because of the national COVID-19 pandemic shutdown.

“In the '80s and '90s, I remember going to a funeral every week,” she said. “And when it’s unsolved, you just feel like they’ve forgotten you.”

Follow Khalil at <https://twitter.com/ashrafkhalil>.

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