

ABQ on track to shatter homicide record

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Mayor Keller and Albuquerque Police Chief Michael Geier prepare to address the media on Wednesday in Civic Plaza about the city's homicide numbers so far this year. (Roberto E. Rosales/Journal)

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In less than 48 hours in Albuquerque, one man was apparently shot eight times inside a vehicle following reports of gunfire near Unser and Tower. Another man was killed in a fight at the Econo Lodge on Central near Interstate 25. And a woman was shot to death in the driveway of her West Side home.

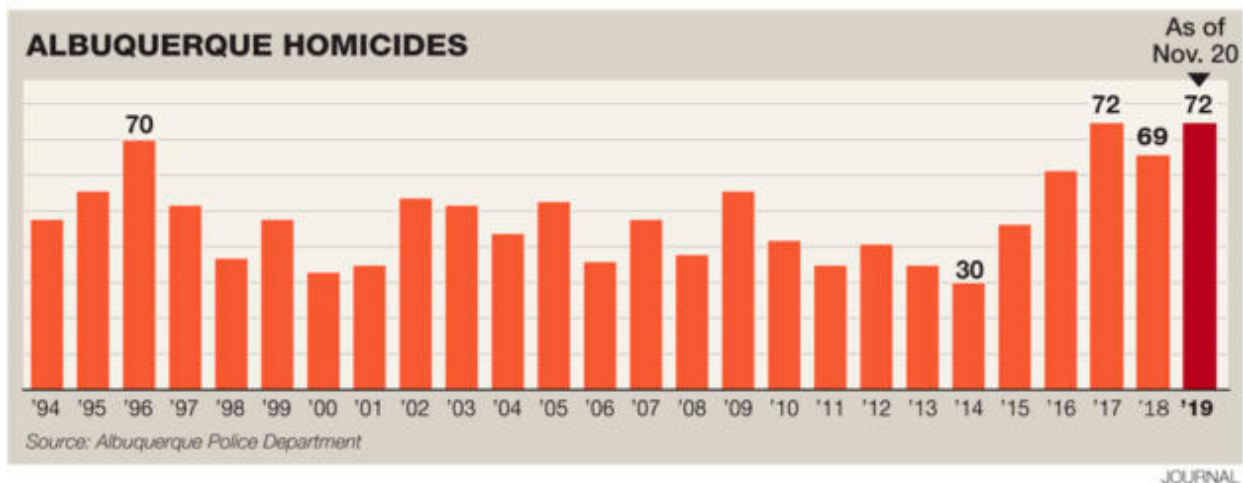
The man shot multiple times on Wednesday night was rushed to University of New Mexico Hospital, where he was clinging to life as of press time.

The victim killed at the Econo Lodge, who was in his 40s, and Jacqueline Vigil, the 55-year-old mother of two State Police officers, were declared dead on opposite sides of town on Tuesday.

It was a brutal two days in Albuquerque, punctuating the violent year that has gripped a metro. Indeed, the two slayings pushed the city to 72 homicides this year – already matching the highest year-end total in recent history. Neither of those cases has been solved.

“With five or so weeks to go, we know this is going to be one of our worst years on record,” a somber Mayor Tim Keller said.

Keller and Albuquerque Police Department Chief Michael Geier spoke about the violence in a news conference Wednesday afternoon, and also laid out plans the city has to address it.



In what Keller characterized as a “constant, slow, build,” Albuquerque had seen spikes in almost all crime categories leading into 2018, with the city being regarded as worst – or second-worst – in the nation in violent crime, auto theft and robbery.

Then, in 2018, the city recorded its first drop in nearly a decade in those same categories, mostly property crimes. There was also a slight decrease in violent crime and homicides.

This year is looking to buck that downward trend, at least when it comes to homicides.

Cycle of violence

Few additional details were released about Vigil’s death Wednesday, but the family sent out a statement through APD.

“We are heartbroken by the loss of our incredible mother and loving wife Jackie Vigil,” the family said. “Her senseless murder has left our hearts heavy and hurting. We know this community shares in our pain and we are pleading with you to come forward with any information.”

In what police suspect was an attempted robbery, they said, Vigil was fatally shot at 5 a.m. as she got into her car to go to the gym.

Vigil’s death is just one of several high-profile slayings in the city this year.

There was the death of a University of New Mexico baseball player shot in front of a Nob Hill club; a mother and daughter stabbed to death inside their home; and a hail of gunfire that killed four members of a family in a Southwest Albuquerque mobile home park.

There were murder-suicides, drug deals gone bad, deadly neighbor disputes and a highway shooting allegedly spurred by a meth-fueled delusion.

The victims range in age from a 9-year-old girl allegedly raped and killed by her cousin during a sleepover to an 89-year-old man found dead in the kitchen of his University-area home. Others include a young woman playing Pokémon GO and a high-school student attending a homecoming party.

One of the city’s homicides – the slaying of a letter carrier who intervened in a fight between a teen and his mother while on his postal route – was investigated by the FBI. The investigation ended with a 17-year-old behind bars.

Gilbert Gallegos, an Albuquerque Police Department spokesman, said detectives have solved 37 of the 72 homicides.

Those arrested include estranged boyfriends, an Uber driver and a number of teenagers.

Some cases came and went without many details or news coverage. Others rocked the community and had political leaders weighing in.

In early May, Jackson Weller, a 23-year-old UNM baseball player, was shot and killed outside a Nob Hill club allegedly by Darian Bashir, 23, after an altercation. The shooting shocked the community and prompted Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham to deploy 50 State Police officers for several weeks to Albuquerque to help quell the violence.

On June 21, the bodies of Laura Hanish, a longtime social worker, and her daughter Shanta Hanish, a UNM student, were found stabbed to death inside

their University-area home. Shanta's ex-boyfriend Jesus Cartagena, 20, has been charged in their deaths.

On Sept. 12, Daniel Baca, 17, was standing outside his South Valley mobile home when gunfire erupted; killing Baca, his mother, grandmother and teenage cousin. That case has not been solved.

"Every act of violence that takes a life leaves behind a family and friends, and is a tragedy also for our entire community," Keller said. "... We not only have to have individual justice for those killers, but we have to stop a cycle that has been repeating for nearly a decade in our city."

Flanked by the chief and several high-ranking APD officials, Keller said underlying almost every murder is a combination of gangs, drugs, domestic violence or guns, but the biggest issue "far and away" is addiction and the drug trafficking that feeds it.

"It's this recipe that is eroding our community, eating away at our families and our neighborhoods," Keller said. "We must keep up the fight against what's happening with respect to homicides in our community each and every day."

Law enforcement response

City and law enforcement leaders have developed a number of initiatives meant to address violent crime over the years.

Some of the initiatives have been implemented already, including increasing the number of homicide detectives from five to 10 in the Keller administration's first year in office, and creating a unit of paralegals to prepare cases for the District Attorney's Office. APD has also "resuscitated" its use of the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN), which matches casings to specific guns.

Other initiatives will be rolled out in the next couple of weeks and months, officials said.

"We came into a situation where violent crime was rising every single year," Keller said. "I know that ... we have made some progress in some categories of crime. It's true we have not made progress in violent crime; that's why it's our No. 1 priority moving forward."

Keller said that on Friday, his administration will announce a "violence intervention program" that it has been developing over the past six months. He said it has looked at what other cities have been doing to address violence.

The city plans to ask the Legislature for \$10 million to fund that program.

He said his administration also plans to ask for an additional \$20 million to modernize the police department so officers can better communicate and share data with other agencies in the state.

“We are dealing with systems that are decades old,” he said. “It is a situation that is holding back everything we are trying to do as a department. It is essentially a deferred investment that we wish we’d made a decade ago.”

Other agencies have tried their own hands at fighting crime.

Just last week, U.S. Attorney General William Barr was in town to announce the results of a three-month operation conducted with local agencies that arrested more than 300 people on warrants in Albuquerque. The Department of Justice also launched “Project Guardian” to tackle gun violence across the nation.

The Bernalillo County Sheriff’s Office has conducted, and continues to conduct, “stabilization operations” to round up people wanted on warrants in the city, and the governor has created a Fugitive Apprehension Unit, made up of New Mexico State Police officers and Corrections Department staffers, to work statewide.

Keller acknowledged the work other agencies are doing and said his administration would be happy to collaborate.

But in an apparent reference to Attorney General Barr’s comments about New Mexico’s “subpar” legal system and that judges are releasing dangerous defendants pending trial, Keller said he isn’t interested in staging photo ops, blaming others or finger pointing.

“We want to bring every group together in the judiciary and come up with something that is definitely better than what we have now,” Keller said. “That’s what we’re committed to. We want to ... get an answer and get an answer fast.”