

Ace Capone: A two-part series

Drug trade linked to rise in homicides

Seizures of guns and cocaine doubled between '02 and '06.

Philadelphia's spike in homicides in the last five years is directly linked to a growing drug trade, law enforcement officials and criminologists say.

Drugs and guns "are deeply interwoven," said Chief Inspector William Blackburn, head of the Police Department's Narcotics Bureau.

While the percentage of Philadelphia murders characterized by homicide investigators as "drug related" is about 20 percent annually, "if you look at the victims, the offenders and their backgrounds, you're going to find a large percentage have significant narcotics offenses," he said.

"There may be a host of reasons for a killing, but the reason the shooter is carrying a gun to begin with is because he is involved in drugs."

Between 2002 and 2006, according to annual statistics gathered by Blackburn's office, the number of guns seized in narcotics investigations doubled - from 625 to 1,268.

So has the dollar value of cocaine seizures - from \$34 million in 2002 to \$68 million last year.

Through the first nine months of this year, Blackburn added, law enforcement has seized cocaine with a total street value of \$72 million and have confiscated 770 guns.

Sean Patrick Griffin, a criminologist at Pennsylvania State University and a former Philadelphia police officer, says that the drug-violence link is "hard to track" statistically.

"How do you define *drug related*?" he asks.

But the introduction of crack cocaine into the drug market in the 1980s upped the ante, said Griffin, author of two books on black organized crime, including *Black Brothers Inc.: The Violent Rise and Fall of Philadelphia's Black Mafia*.

"It was quick money . . . big profit margins," he said. And dealers were willing to fight - even kill - for market share.

The violence attributed to drug dealing today, says **Charles Branas**, associate professor of epidemiology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is similar to the gangland slayings sparked by rum running during Prohibition in the 1920s.

"Even though these are illegal markets, they still function like a business," Branas said. "There's branding and diversifying . . . but there's no judicial mechanism to solve disputes. That's part and parcel of why they arm themselves."

Branas, with the Firearm and Injury Center at Penn, has been studying guns, violence, drugs and alcohol for years.

"Everybody in the [drug] business has a gun," he said. And most "don't know how to use one. . . . This creates a chaotic situation."

- George Anastasia

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