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Martin

Potential headline: “A new normal”

Subhead: Joliet’s low homicide closure rate means that families often have to move on without answers

On March 2, 2009, Jackie Roth got a fateful phone call that would change the rest of her life. Her daughter, Angela, and her son-in-law, Brian, were found dead in their home in Joliet. Their two-year-old son, who was asleep in his crib, was untouched, but Roth, who was 46 at the time, now had to act as grandmother and mother to the boy who bore a heavy resemblance to his deceased mother.

Along with that role, Roth also sought justice. The day after her daughter was found, former Joliet police chief Gary Reichenberger promised an arrest. Hours passed and then days. It wasn’t until Roth called the police department that she found out no arrest had been made.

Eight years later, she’s still waiting.

“(The police) have treated me like dirt,” Roth said, describing her interactions with police officers. “I want justice. I want Angela and Brian to rest in peace. Our families want closure, we want answers. They say it’s an active case, but, and I’m not accusing them, but if it was, wouldn’t they update me?”

Roth’s daughter is not the only open homicide case. In other similar cases, the killer has not been found, charged or convicted.

For the state and the municipalities within it the closure rate has dropped steadily over the course of the last decade. Joliet, where Roth’s daughter and son-in-law lived at the time of the shooting, has a closure rate of 11 percent according to data from the Murder Accountability Project (MAP).

The state’s homicide closure rate, which is 37 percent, trails every other state in the nation — the national average is around 62 percent. In Chicago, the homicide closure rate is roughly 26 percent, according to MAP. Of the cases cleared in the city, only 6 percent led to charges.

East St. Louis, which is around four hours southeast of Joliet, only cleared 26 percent of its homicides. Rockford, which is two hours northeast of Joliet, cleared roughly 16 percent of its homicides.

For Roth, who is now raising her daughter's son, achieving a new normal while still searching for answers for herself and her grandson is something that she has had to grow into.

"You reach a certain age and you shouldn't be raising children, you should be letting the parents do it — letting your children raise their own kids," she said. "Well, somebody had to step up to the plate here. It's an unfortunate thing because I can't be a normal grandma to him.

"I have to be his mom, I have to be his dad. I have to teach him right from wrong and discipline him... I don't get to spoil him the way a grandmother should because I have to raise him, but I make it work. Nothing's impossible."

If you talk to Joliet Mayor Bob O'Dekirk, he'll tell you the city once had its crime under control. He'll tell you about police officers stationed in schools and in neighborhoods once ridden by crime.

All of that was before 2008.

The downturn in the economy meant a cut back in police officers and neighborhood policing programs like the one O'Dekirk champions as the reason crime was lower in the early aughts. In the years that followed — 2009, 2010, and 2011 especially — the situation began to "slip," O'Dekirk said.

The police force grew weary after going back to patrolling when the neighborhood policing programs were cut; the town was on the verge of returning to its Wild, Wild West status of a time long past.

In 2015, the year that offers the most complete uniform crime reporting data, Joliet saw 11 homicides. The number may seem small given that the city — Illinois' third largest — has 147,861 residents, according to census data. But it's the closure rate that has drawn the attention of O'Dekirk and outside organizations that focus on murder accountability.

"We don't have anything specific in place to (curb the homicide rate)," O'Dekirk said. "We're now trying to get that program back in place. We hope it makes a difference."

Without the policing program, the homicide rate ballooned for a few years. Directly related to the rise in homicides, the homicide closure rate dropped.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation considers a homicide closed if an arrest is made, if someone is charged with the commission of the offense, or if someone is turned over to the court for prosecution.

To understand this on a city level, if Joliet were the example, of the 11 people killed, only one murder for the year would be closed. But cities around the state, like Chicago, have fudged homicide closure numbers in the past to keep their rates down, investigations from Chicago magazine have shown.

“The failure to inform the public contributes to how things got so bad,” said Hargrove, founder of the organization. “There are two reasons for these poor numbers. The first is lack of political will by local leaders — they haven’t made it a priority. The other is the lack of resources. There’s not a sufficient number of trained homicide investigators, but it goes back to the public knowledge.

“Without public knowledge of the problem, people can’t make change.”

Contributing factors to the state’s low closure rate could be that Illinois reports the bare minimum of data on these homicides and closures to the FBI. The practice was adopted in 1994 and impeded not only the public’s knowledge of the situation, but also the federal government’s.

To get this data on closure rates, Hargrove and those at MAP gathered information from the FBI’s uniform crime reporting database from 1965 to present and the supplemental homicide report from 1976 to now.

MAP also filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to get information on nearly 22,000 homicides that states did not report to the Justice Department, making their information “the most complete data on U.S. homicides available anywhere.”

Though MAP’s data shows the city has an 11 percent closure rate, Alan Roechner, deputy chief of investigations for the Joliet Police Department, says the rate is closer to 45 percent.

Five cases from 2015 were closed — three by arrest, one ruled a justified homicide and another, which occurred during a robbery at a convenience store, was left open because the killer was killed at the scene by the victim in an act of self defense.

“We know what we do here,” Roechner said. “We’ve lost many hours of sleep over the cases we work and the victims. I’m not happy with the numbers — I’ll only be happy when (the closure rate) is at 100 percent, but it’s a failure on (MAP’s) part that they didn’t check their facts.”

Roechner said the disagreement between the numbers isn't going to impact how officers do their jobs. When homicides occur, he and those on the force do everything they can to help families get the answers they seek. Within the first day or so, he said, they often know who to bring in, but the "hardest part is when you know who did it but you can't prove it."

In situations like these, Roechner said, police officers will often rely on the community, but this also proves difficult.

They revisit old cases and do case reviews, bringing cases before different sergeants and other officers in the department to try to get a fresh set of eyes on colder cases. Answers from the police department remain elusive because of an unwillingness to work with police.

"It's hard getting people to cooperate and getting people to come forward," he said. "What people fail to realize is that (the killers) are cowards and they're helping them get away with murder."

The reasons why the clearance rate is so low can be tied to shrinking resources, Hargrove said, but for the cities like Joliet and Chicago there may be other factors at play, such as increased gang activity, that makes it harder to close the case.

Killers are rarely found, charged or convicted. Closure — for families and the state — is hard to come by.

For Roechner, the reason why the homicide rate is 45 percent is because of a need for community involvement and cooperation. More homicides could be solved if those who knew something, said something. Roechner said that police officers go to community and church meetings to get to know community members, but said "I can't do my job if the public doesn't help."

For Roth and those in situations similar to hers, the search for answers depends largely on the same community cooperation that Roechner talked about. If answers don't come from the police, some try to find other ways to get answers and spread awareness.

Grace Flynn, who runs the Illinois Cold Case website, sees this search for closure and answers daily. Her site, and its corresponding Facebook page, are the only ones dedicated to posting the photos and descriptions of missing and deceased people whose family members want justice.

Flynn started the website in 2011 and it was initially meant to focus on missing people, but it expanded when families of homicide victims began to send her information about their loved ones. Now, a day rarely passes without an email — sometimes three or four a day — with a new person to add to the website.

“I stress to them that I’m not law enforcement, I can’t solve the case. My goal is to raise awareness,” Flynn, who also helps plan events for families of missing people and homicide victims, said. “Ninety-nine percent of these families feel like law enforcement just forgot about them, like their loved one isn’t worth it.”

Flynn said that while she knows resources have been cut, there could be other ways to continue to reach out to and support those who are still dealing with unsolved cases.

“I understand that there have been budget cuts, but meet with [the families] once a month,” Flynn said. “These people are hurting. You can’t get past the grieving, it’s like you have to find a new normal.”

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In the years following the deaths of Angela and Brian, Roth said that she has had to carry on. She moved to LaSalle county. She raises her grandson and she works as a waitress to keep food on the table and the lights on. She posted on Flynn’s website about her search for justice two years ago and the two keep in touch.

Roth said that police ignored the evidence in front of them and, after telling them everything she knew, such as the death threats her daughter and son-in-law received, nothing happened in terms of the case.

In her pursuit for answers, she said was called a gossip by some officers. Another time, when she called the man in charge of her daughter’s case, he did not remember her daughter’s name or Roth’s. She called the Will County State’s Attorney’s Office, but said they also were not helpful to her.

“I’m sure I’m not the only one,” she said of her treatment.

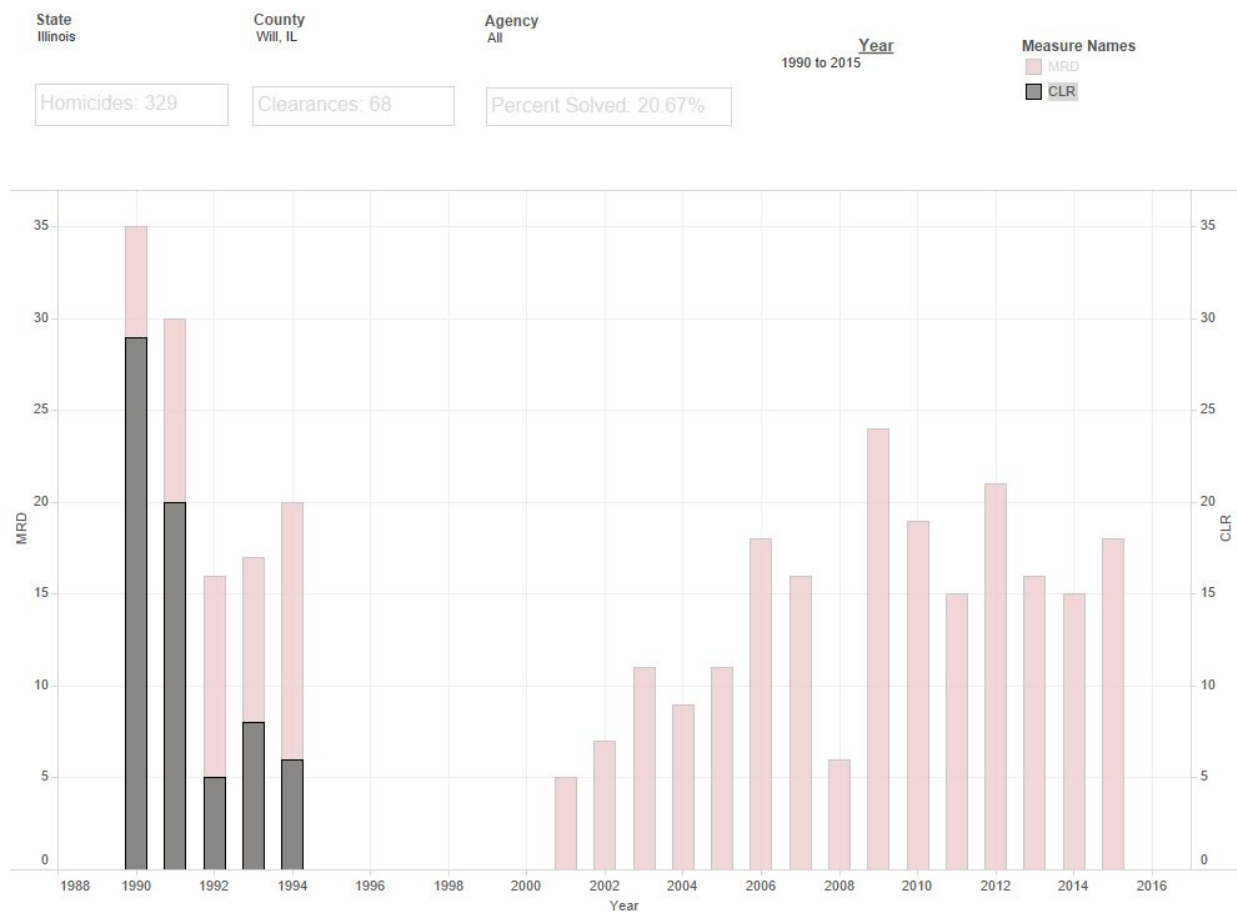
Besides work, Roth also focuses on her grandson who’s now 10. He was recently promoted from the fourth grade to the fifth. If he asks about his parents, she tries to describe them in relation to him — if he likes something Roth will say “oh, your mom liked that” or, if he starts to laugh like her, she’ll say “your mom used to do that too.”

She attributes his growth and wellbeing to his school, his “good Christian home” and his friends. He does great, she said, in spite of what he’s been through.

“He doesn’t say too much,” Roth said. “I think he knows because he’s asked, but it hurts him because he sees these other kids at school — they all have their moms and dads picking them up and he’s got me.

“(The police and others) don’t have a clue as to what it’s like. If it was one of their kids they’d be on it. If it happens to someone else, they could care less. It’s so upsetting. I can’t believe they would just let it go.”

Uniform Crime Report for Homicides: 1965-2015



Graphic by the Murder Accountability Project