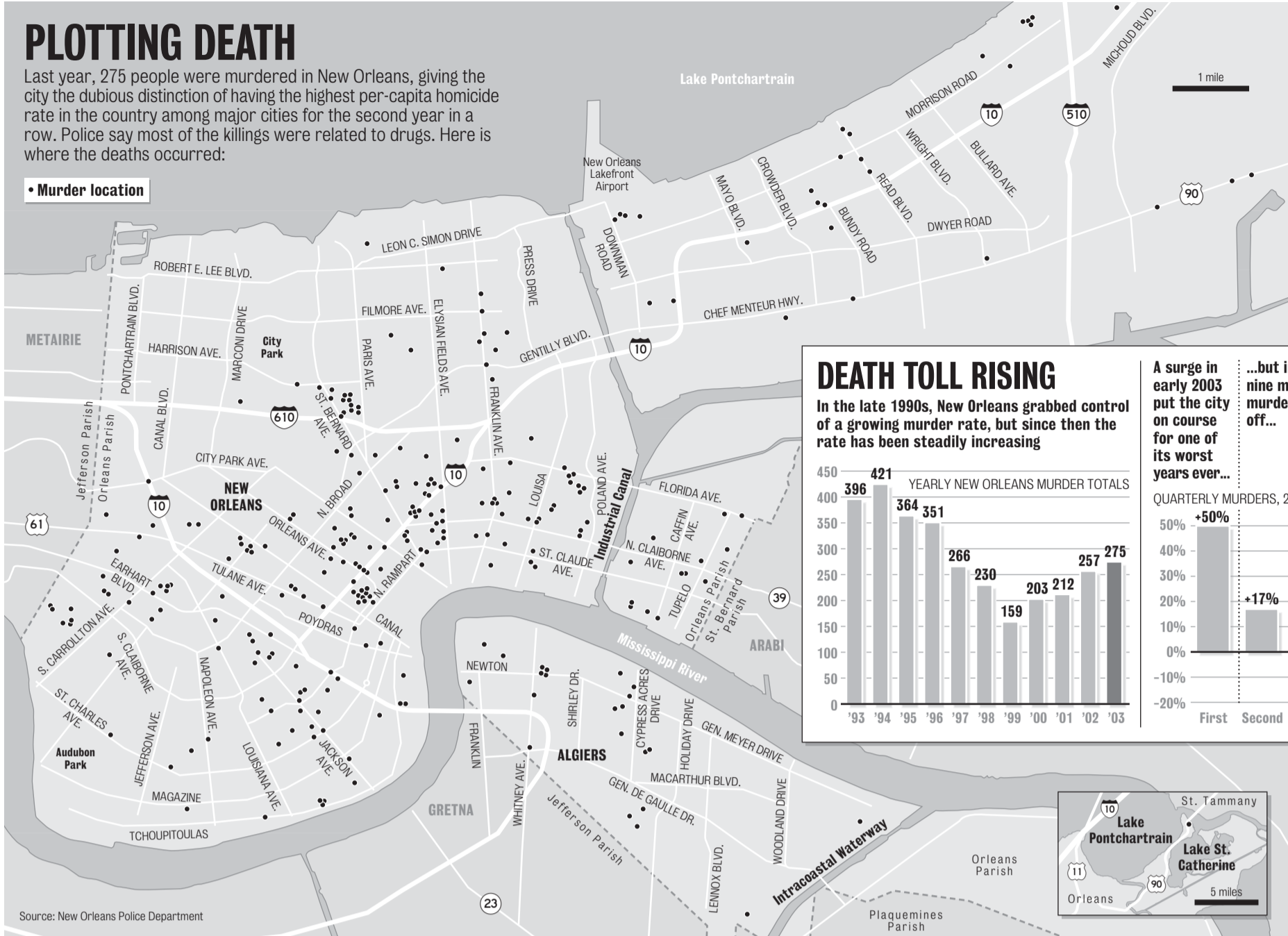


HOW NEW ORLEANS BECAME THE NATION'S MURDER CAPITAL  
CYCLE OF DEATH

PLOTTING DEATH

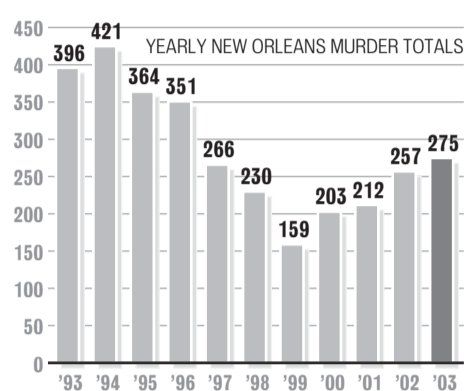
Last year, 275 people were murdered in New Orleans, giving the city the dubious distinction of having the highest per-capita homicide rate in the country among major cities for the second year in a row. Police say most of the killings were related to drugs. Here is where the deaths occurred:

• Murder location

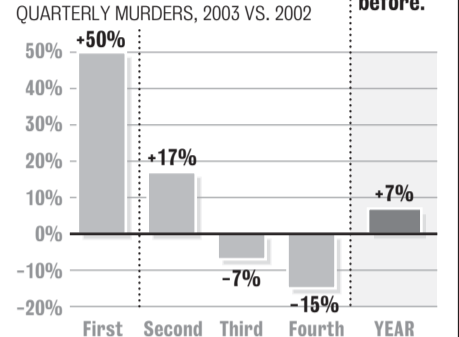


DEATH TOLL RISING

In the late 1990s, New Orleans grabbed control of a growing murder rate, but since then the rate has been steadily increasing



A surge in early 2003 put the city on course for one of its worst years ever... but in the next nine months the murders tapered off... resulting in only a 7 percent increase from the year before.



STAFF GRAPHIC BY EMMETT MAYER III AND MATT SCALLAN

VIOLENCE THRIVES ON LACK OF JOBS, WEALTH OF DRUGS

MURDER, from A-1

capita homicide rate in the nation among major cities, a distinction it earned for the second consecutive year. In 2002, with 257 murders, New Orleans had 53 slayings for every 100,000 people. In 2003, the rate was up to 59 per 100,000, more than eight times greater than the rate in New York City and three times greater than in Chicago.

"We won the prize, no doubt," said criminologist Peter Scharf, director of the Center for Society, Law and Justice at the University of New Orleans, which has surveyed the nation's major cities and found New Orleans to have the highest murder rate for last year. "We were off the chart in terms of the rate of homicide nationally."

The numbers are daunting, but for a time they had looked much worse. By the end of April, the number of murders was on track to outpace the previous year by an appalling 58 percent. In collaboration with the FBI and federal prosecutors, the New Orleans Police Department went into overdrive, revamping the homicide division and, along with it, their strategies for combating murder.

Murder is a cyclical phenomenon that leaves experts debating where crime-fighting strategies leave off



STAFF PHOTO BY ALEX BRANDON

Murder scenes have become almost spectator sport. A crowd gathers near the driveway where Terrell Lampton, 35, was ambushed on July 17 as he pulled up to a house on Deslonde Street to visit his daughters.

and social trends begin. Whatever the reason, by year's end, something had gone right in New Orleans, and the uptick in murder had been whittled to a 7 percent jump over 2002's total.

As horrifying as the city's experience was, it was also deeply instructive, shedding light on the nature of the disease — murder, much of it retaliatory — that eats so ravenously at the city's well-being and self-

team. The lessons extended to crime-fighting techniques and the challenges posed to police and prosecutors not just by the killers but by their unwitting accomplices: witnesses who refuse to come forward; the drug culture that underlies so much of the slaughter; the failure of the judiciary to intervene effectively in the lives of career criminals; those who equip killers with firearms.

Nearly all 275 of those slain in

2003, along with the people accused of killing them, had criminal records. Among the victims, 104 — more than a third — were killed within three months of their last arrest. And police say 15 percent of people identified as suspects committed murder within three months of their last brush with the law.

Much of the blood was shed in a handful of neighborhoods — indeed, a mere seven square miles — where

guns are plentiful and life often seems cheap.

The violence reached deep into pockets of the city. In a six-month period that ended in April, one woman who lived near the St. Bernard public housing complex until she fled in fear lost her nephew, her husband and a son, all casualties of what she calls an Uptown-Downtown rivalry.

"They've taken everybody," she said. "We have two or three (men) left. They took everybody."

Drugs play major role

Although homicide trends hinge on no single factor, drugs and joblessness are almost always entwined.

The youth unemployment rate in New Orleans is high, giving young men few legitimate options and making them feel trapped and marginalized, said Ronald K. Barrett, a psychology professor who specializes in urban youth violence at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. "Instead of lashing out at the system, they lash out at each other."

But except when bullets claim innocent bystanders, the few square miles that comprise the city's killing fields are the domain of a relatively small, self-contained cadre — maybe 1,000 to 1,500 men, most of them

See MURDER, A-6

FACES OF MURDER

INNOCENCE NO SHIELD IN THE EYES OF A KILLER

Some are drug addicts who owe money or steal to feed their habits. Some are drug dealers pushing their trade on another dealer's corner. Others may be witnesses who can identify a killer. Still others may be doing nothing more than sitting on their porches. Here are faces of murder in New Orleans.

For years before he was killed, Ronald Love's family warned him to be more cautious.

They worried about the sometimes sketchy Irish Channel neighborhood around Juicy's Bar, where Love, 43, worked as a janitor. They worried too about the uncommon, if not unlimited, trust he had in other people.

"But Ronald was carefree, he just went about his way," said his older brother, Lawrence Love.

It had already gotten him into trouble a few years before, when a group of acquaintances who knew he had just earned some cash from a temporary job "ran a game on him" and walked away with the money, Lawrence Love said.

Even after that, "we tried to make him understand that people aren't as friendly as he is," said his sister, Alice D'Anastasio. "It's almost like he didn't know harm."

But Love didn't change, his brother said. He continued to work at the bar, and it was his habit to walk almost everywhere he went, rather than take public transit.

On Sept. 7, after the bar had



RONALD LOVE, 43

THE BYSTANDER

closed for the night, two men pounded on the door, asking for drinks, and the owner let them in. As their drinks were being readied, the men pulled guns with the apparent intent of robbing the place, police said. The owner scuffled with one of them, then ran from the establishment unharmed. The gunmen shot Love and Jay Foxworth, 55, a cus-



STAFF PHOTO BY ALEX BRANDON

The brothers and sisters of Ronald Love, killed in the robbery of an Irish Channel bar, say the what-ifs haunt them.

tom who had lingered in the bar's bathroom after last call, police said.

Both men died. Robert McDaniels, 31, and Jamar White, 21, were booked with first-degree murder and are awaiting trial.

Since the killing, Love's siblings have been haunted by the what-ifs that might have spared them their loss.

"It was my baby sister's birthday," D'Anastasio said, recalling that night. "If I had said, 'Maybe we could bake a cake and you can come over,' this wouldn't have happened."

It was not the first time a member of the Love family had been a victim of crime. Lawrence and his brother Kenny Love were robbed in separate incidents about a decade ago, but they managed to escape unharmed.

The apparent randomness of Love's murder has left relatives with the nagging fear that they could just as easily be victims.

"I wonder about that all the time," Lawrence Love said. "For a while it really had me concerned: Will I be a victim of circumstance like he was?"

"The fear has always been within us because of the things that happen within the city of New Orleans," D'Anastasio said. "It's just hit closer to home."

Their mother, Geraldine, who has cancer and has difficulty remembering things, still has not been told about her son's death.

"I think that would have killed her," D'Anastasio said.

— By Steve Ritea