

The Progress-Index

NEWS

18 homicides, few arrests: Petersburg continues to have Virginia's worst homicide rate in 2021

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Note: This story has been updated on 12/23/21 to reflect an 18th homicide victim, and the arrest of a suspect in that crime. Police have also made an arrest in one of the previous homicides, which is reflected in this update.

PETERSBURG — When Wanda Tatum does her holiday grocery shopping this season, she will not have her favorite helper alongside her.

"I loved grocery shopping with him because he had long legs," Tatum said of her son, Avery Taylor III. "He would run and get stuff that you forgot about. Loading the car, he did all of that for us. Those are the times that created the memories."

Taylor was one of 18 people killed in Petersburg this year. He was just 24 years old.

"This Thanksgiving was so hard," Tatum wept. "It was so hard. He was my only son, so my joy cooking for the holidays was just to make him happy."

When 2021 dawned, 18 families here had no idea that a year that began with so much promise of finally turning the corner on the pandemic would end as probably one of the worst years of their lives.

They are the families who got the call or the visit that no one wants or should ever get.

"We regret to inform you..."

The 18-murder total is not as high as in recent years. Last year, for example, 24 homicides were recorded in Petersburg. In 2019, we had 19.

Both totals were record numbers for the city.

The Virginia State Police show Petersburg as having the highest murder rate per capita of any locality in Virginia in 2020, and that includes far more populated cities such as Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Richmond. According to VSP estimates, when you apply a per-capita rate (what the rate would be for every 100,000 citizens) to the actual number of 2020 homicides here, then the murder rate in Petersburg is 85. That is almost double the number of the second-highest rate in southwest Virginia's Bland County, which was 47.

The actual number of Bland killings in 2020 was three.

The victims

Through a Virginia Freedom of Information Act request, The Progress-Index asked the Petersburg Bureau of Police for the names, ages, sex and race of each of the 18 victims.

All but one were Black, and 14 of the victims were men.

Nearly a quarter were teenagers, and nearly half were under the age of 25.

They were all shot to death.

Here is the somber roll call of homicide victims in Petersburg so far this year:

Kimberly McQueen, 48, of Richmond, was killed Jan. 18 in a murder-suicide on Henry Street. After shooting the victim, the suspect then turned the gun on himself.

Erica Eldridge, 31, of Petersburg, was killed March 19 in what police call a domestic shooting at the Henry William Townhomes complex on South Street. Kevin Craig, 45, of Petersburg, was charged with her death.

Omaryon McDaniel, 17, of Petersburg, was killed March 26 on Talley Avenue. Police charged Oliver Spratley, 18, with involuntary manslaughter.

Ravon Mays, 31, of Petersburg, was killed May 6 at the OYO Hotel on South Crater Road. Police have charged Franklin Coleman, 21, of Petersburg, in her death.

Austin Hargrave-Evans, 19, of Petersburg, was killed May 22 on University Boulevard. *No suspect has been identified as of yet.*

Willie Noise, 74, of Petersburg, was killed June 6 following an incident in Petersburg's Patton Park. Jimmy Merhout, 54, of Chesterfield County, has been charged with his death.

Dazmon Gary III, 20, of Emporia, was killed June 8 while leaving a recording studio on Spring Street. *No suspect has been identified as of yet.*

Ta'Meyah Caldwell, 19, of Petersburg, was killed July 1 at a house on Blick Street. Police said she was one of four victims in a double-shooting hours apart at the residence. *No suspect has been identified as of yet.*

Anthony Butcher, 38, of Petersburg, was killed July 17 on South Adams Street. *No suspect has been identified as of yet.*

Avery Taylor III, 24, of Chesterfield, was killed Aug. 1 on Commerce Street. Jamar Street of Petersburg was indicted last week on a murder charge.

Corey Seward, 34, of Petersburg, was killed Aug. 3 on Mingea Street. The suspect, Shawn Kirkland, 29, of Petersburg, was later arrested in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Jordan Stith, 18, of Petersburg, was killed Sept. 11 at the intersection of Grigg and Church streets following an argument. *No suspect has been identified as of this writing.*

Derian Vaughan, 22, of Petersburg, was killed Oct. 15. While responding to a call of shots in the area of Mecklenburg Street, officers found him lying in the road. *No suspect has been identified as of yet.*

Clifton Mason, 69, of Petersburg, was killed Nov. 7 on Linda Lane. *No suspect as been identified yet.*

Corbett Beverly, 47, of South Chesterfield, was killed Nov. 13 on South Street. Officers responding to calls of shots fired found him lying in the road. *No suspect has been identified as of yet.*

Tasean Greene, 24, of Petersburg, was killed Nov. 19 on Poplar Street. Officers responding to a shots-fired call found him lying in the middle of the road. *No suspect has ben identified yet.*

William Parham Jr., 46, of Petersburg, was killed Nov. 25 on Adams Street. Rayshawn Scott, 24, has been charged with his murder.

Fequon Stith, 22, was shot on Dec. 19 and later succumbed to his injuries. Edward Spencer, 25, has been charged for his murder.

In 9 of 18 homicides this year, no suspects have been identified.

When will justice be served?

Families of most of this year's victims are still living on edge, waiting for justice to be done.

The mother of Avery Taylor has been in distress since her son died on Aug. 1. Her son's killer is still at-large.

"He died protecting a woman from getting beat," said Wanda Tatum.

According to Tatum, they were at a family party in Hopewell that Saturday, then Taylor went to Petersburg to meet up with a girl he was interested in. He picked her up from work and brought her home. Afterwards, an altercation broke out between the girl's mother and another man. The man punched the mother's face while she

was holding a baby in her arms, and Taylor intervened to protect her. The man then shot Taylor — seven times.

"The last conversation I had with my son was about how much he liked this girl. Because he liked her so much, he had to protect her mother. That was just his character," Tatum said. "My son gave the ultimate sacrifice to save somebody else. They took a good person for nothing."

Following the shooting, the mother, her daughter, and her sister came to Tatum's house to give back Taylor's slippers. According to Tatum, the sister told her that Jamar Street was the father of the child and the person that was arguing with the mother.

When Tatum met with the detectives after that, they also confirmed that Jamar Street was a person of interest. But detectives said the mother and daughter were not cooperating.

"The mother and daughter were telling us that they were cooperating, but the detectives were saying pretty much the opposite," said Tatum.

Police arrested Street in September, and a court hearing happened on Nov. 15.

The neighbor, who was a witness, testified. He was only a couple feet away from the scene.

"He saw everything, but he just couldn't say it was Jamar. What he did say was he knew it was the mother and that the person she was arguing with was arguing over a child. That's what he said he heard," said Tatum.

Because the neighbor couldn't identify without a doubt that Street was the one who shot Taylor, the case was dismissed and Street was released from jail.

After connecting the dots from the neighbor's testimony and the information the family told her, Tatum was convinced that Street is the one who killed her son.

"I can't let my son die in vain," she said in an early December interview.

A family's pain multiplied

Adeshia Taylor lost her sister Ta'Meyah Caldwell just after midnight on Thursday, July 1. That Wednesday afternoon, the killer had come around her house, shooting Adeshia's son who was outside. While Adeshia was in the hospital visiting her son, someone then shot multiple times through the door. Those bullets ended up wounding her son's friend and killing Caldwell. Though her son's friend was taken to the hospital, Caldwell wasn't. Her family never saw who the shooter or shooters were.

Adeshia says neither her son nor her sister were involved with people with criminal activity in this seemingly random act of shootings.

"It makes no sense," she said.

Caldwell, 19, had just moved to Petersburg from South Carolina last year. Caldwell was staying with Adeshia's brother, but that night she insisted on staying with Adeshia to comfort her after her son was hospitalized.

"I don't want to leave you by yourself," Adeshia recalls Caldwell saying.

"She told me, 'Tell my nephew I said hi and I love him and I'll see him tomorrow.'"

Caldwell was sitting on the sofa in the living room before Adeshia left.

The police still haven't been able to find the killer. Caldwell's family is left in the dark with unanswered questions, including why she wasn't taken to the hospital immediately after she was wounded.

"I don't understand how people could sleep knowing that they killed her," Adeshia said.

Why are there so many homicides?

There is not a one-size-fits-all reason to why people will resort to violence.

"We do know that economic stress has an impact," said criminal justice associate professor Kristine Artello from Virginia Commonwealth University. "We know that when individuals are employed, and earning a living wage, that crime goes down. We know that when there's stability, crimes goes down. We've seen through the pandemic a rise in mental health issues, which also could potentially impact that."

The pandemic has also caused domestic violence to rise nationwide. Erica Eldridge, 31, of Petersburg, was a victim of domestic violence.

According to Commonwealth Attorney Tiffany Buckner, in the cases she's worked on the homicides have not been random acts of violence. Rather, it's usually two people who have had previous relations and choose to use violence when in a conflict.

"It's usually an escalation of what should be encounters that both individuals should be able to walk away from and result in the loss of life. So that's what I can tell you that I'm seeing trend wise," said Buckner. Her office prosecutes the perpetrators once there's enough evidence to press charges.

With 10 of this year's homicides, there aren't even suspects.

Buckner does not know how many of these incidents are gang related, if any.

"Some homicides occur in the processes of other crimes being committed," said Virginia State University criminology professor C. Nana Derby.

Are there enough cops?

Petersburg has admitted in the past that its police department is understaffed, but when pressed for numbers on just how short-staffed police are, the city is reluctant

to say.

Back in 2016, the city reduced all its full-time employee salaries by 10 percent due to its \$17 million budget deficit. Some officers left as a result. Though the police salary was eventually raised back up the following year, vacancies were never fully filled during the time that former police chief Kenneth Miller was in office.

Miller, who served Petersburg from 2017 to Nov. 2020, could not provide a straight answer as to whether the department had the resources it needed when he was working there.

"Yes and no," Miller said. "You have to make do with what you have. When you don't have funding and there's no revenue coming in, you can't go over budget and just create positions. I also had support from the federal government and support from the US Attorney's Office and support from the FBI. So we had additional resources that were force multipliers."

According to the Petersburg website, there are 120 sworn officers on the police payroll. But the information on the site is from 2018, and persistent efforts to find out just how many cops currently are on the street have been met with reticence on the city's part.

Like many of its counterparts, Petersburg does have a continuous opening for police officers posted on various job boards such as Indeed and Glassdoor. The salary range is around \$44,000 for non-certified officers and \$47,000 for certified officers.

That starting salary is roughly \$5,000 less than what a police officer is paid in the city of Hopewell, which has roughly 10,000 fewer people and about a third less homicides this year. According to its latest job posting, the range for a Hopewell officer is \$49,000-\$57,000 depending on experience and certifications.

Also, according to the job listing on the GovernmentJobs.com website, any final candidates for a police officer position in Petersburg must agree to working a

minimum of three years for the city following their training.

"In the event an employee resigns, the employee will be obligated to reimburse the City for training," the job requirement section reads. "Such reimbursement will be calculated proportionately on the number of months remaining in the thirty-six (36) month period at the time of separation."

"Many police departments, including Petersburg's, have suffered significant staffing shortages," said Professor Derby. "And for that matter, they may not be able to commit the needed personnel resources to investigate cases."

Why haven't the killers been arrested?

Another reason police are unable to catch the suspect could be because community members and witnesses don't want to give information to the detectives.

"A sub-cultural practice of no snitch emanating from poor police-community relations may thwart efforts of investigation," Derby said. "Recent OYO hotel incidents and the refusal of eye witnesses to share information with the police, or even one of the victims refusing to cooperate with the police, are prime examples of why some cases remain unsolved."

Miller has a less academic and more street-worthy take. He says that he never had an encounter where people were unwilling to share information. "I can't tell you how many times people didn't even speak to me because folks always spoke to me. That's the impact of community policing," he said.

"I can tell you about folks in certain places who were slipping in my hand addresses to where guns were, where drugs were, where people who were wanted by the police were."

After learning that the suspect for Taylor's case had been released from jail, *The Progress-Index* went to Commerce Street, the site of the shooting, on Dec. 16 to see

if witnesses would talk. The mother of the child declined to answer any questions regarding the shooting and denied that Street was the father.

Soon after the shooting, Taylor's grandfather, Avery Taylor Sr., went to the Commerce Street to light candles in his grandson's remembrance. That's when the neighbor who testified came up to him and told him what he saw.

"He said a lot of people ain't talking. Because people are afraid of what might happen."

Over the past decade, Street has been charged with more than a dozen offenses, including an attempted robbery and possession of drugs with the intent to sell.

When police arrested him in September, they found two firearms, including a stolen gun, cash, and half a kilogram of cocaine in his home.

The grandfather suspects that Street may be connected to other people who have the ability to retaliate.

"I know because of what he does and how he sells those drugs all over the place. You can't do that much in Petersburg with no one backing you," said Taylor Sr.

"It's like they [the mother and her daughter] don't want to tell because they know his reputation."

Remembering the lives cut short

The holidays are traditionally a time when families come together.

"It was hard for Thanksgiving, and knowing that Christmas was around the corner and then [Caldwell's] birthday," Adeshia said. "She was a sweetheart."

One of Tatum's favorite pastimes with her son was cooking. Taylor would be her taste tester and would even try the food while it was still raw.

Tatum's family had named him the "gentle giant."

"He's nothing but a big teddy bear," his mother said. Taylor was the kind of young man who would open doors for people and help the elderly load their grocery bags in the trunk. One time, he was late picking up his mom from work because he was helping someone in need.

"I remember he picked me up and I was so furious. And he was like, 'Mom I had to push them off the road because their car stopped.' He had a heart of gold."

Tatum misses the kisses her son planted on her forehead every morning. They had dates that they went on just by themselves, sneaking out of the house so that her daughters wouldn't catch on. During those times, they would share everything that was happening in their lives, and the things on their hearts and minds.

"He was my voice of reason, so during our time I got to learn what he was thinking, how he felt, his humor. It was just our time."

Tatum was an aspiring tattoo artist. Just before he died, he and his mom bought a space for him to start his own business. After having her son's life cut short, Tatum feels an urgency to take action and change things from the ground up. She's even considering running for city council.

"We're going to have to change the city," Tatum said. "We have to do something, because I can't let anyone else's child die."

On Dec. 16, the Commonwealth Attorney's office put out a direct indictment on Street and issued another warrant for his arrest.

"I think that's a great Christmas gift," said Tatum after hearing the news just days before Christmas. "I was just relieved. He's out here but they're trying really hard to

seek justice."

For nine other families, the wait for justice continues.

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