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Homicides fell in St. Louis after 'Operation Legend.' As they always do that time of year.

Janelle O'Dea

Dec 14, 2020



Homeland Security agents help search for a man who led police on a high-speed chase in Illinois that ended in the car on Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2020. The chase began when the man fled from a traffic stop in Belleville. Dispatcher: connected to an aggravated discharge of a weapon on Tuesday in Belleville. Photo by Robert Cohen, rcohen@post
Robert Cohen



Janelle O'Dea



Federal officials were comparing two time periods between which there's almost always a drop in crime.

Christine Tannous

ST. LOUIS — When U.S. Attorney General William Barr came to St. Louis in October, he touted a striking 49% drop in homicides and gave credit to a federal anti-crime initiative that sent more than 100 federal officers into the city for eight weeks.

And Barr was right — homicides after the initiative, dubbed Operation Legend, had dropped drastically.

But Barr's claim was propelled by some convenient statistics: Homicides surged in June and hit records in July. And federal officials were comparing two time periods between which there's almost always a drop in crime.

A Post-Dispatch analysis of St. Louis police data shows that in seven of the last 10 years, violent crime and homicides rose in the summer and dropped in the fall. And this year's violent summer — the 76 homicides then were double that of previous records — made the drop particularly dramatic, leaving criminologists and sociologists doubting Barr's claims.

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“There is no evidence that the change in homicide or overall violent crime from summer to fall of 2020 was associated with Operation Legend,” Richard Rosenfeld, a criminology professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, said in an emailed response to questions about the Post-Dispatch findings.

Rosenfeld said he’s seen similar seasonal drops in more than 20 cities across the country. And a November study by Rosenfeld of crime in 28 cities during the COVID-19 pandemic also found a spike in homicides and other violent crimes during May and June.

“The summer-fall drop this year looks larger than before only because the summer peak was higher,” Rosenfeld said.

Operation Legend, which began in Kansas City and was later expanded to St. Louis and seven other cities, came at a time of surging crime across the country. It brought a tough-justice, pro-law enforcement tactic to the problem, even as criminal justice reformers pushed officials to better address the root causes of crime.

On Tuesday, Jeff Jensen, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Missouri and the top federal prosecutor in the region, denied that the feds cherry-picked statistics. The time period started when federal agents were in place, he said.

“There’s always a question of correlation versus causation,” he told the Post-Dispatch. “I cannot say that Operation Legend is what caused the tide to turn, and these ridiculously high crime rates get back to our typical, terrible crime rates. But the only way to tell for

sure would be to rewind the clock and not deploy Operation Legend.”

But he defended the results: 650 arrests, 219 weapons seized and 274 defendants charged in federal court as of the eight-week mark.

“What I can say is those 274 defendants charged federally during the eight-week period are no longer committing crimes,” he said.

Roots of Legend

Operation Legend, named for 4-year-old **LeGend Taliferro**, who was fatally shot in June while asleep at home in Kansas City, started there in July, and then expanded to other cities facing surges in crime: Albuquerque, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, Memphis and Milwaukee.

The program involved an influx of federal agents and cash to bolster crime-fighting efforts.

In St. Louis, various federal law enforcement agencies brought in or reassigned 124 officers to target violent crime. The Missouri Highway Patrol contributed 15 of those.

They were assigned for eight weeks to police districts in north St. Louis and to homicide and fugitive task forces.

The initial eight-week period was June 18 to Aug. 12, during which St. Louis saw 76 homicides, double the totals for 2015, 2017 and 2019, previous highs this decade. The second eight-week period, when Operation Legend was underway, was from Aug. 13 to Oct. 8, a stretch that historically sees homicides taper as summer comes to an end.

There were 41 homicides in the second eight-week period this year. That number was still high — in the past decade, there were 29 homicides on average in the same time period — but it was indeed a marked drop.

At the 12-week mark, the statistics looked even better. **Prosecutors said** homicide was down 52% and violent crime had dropped nearly 27%.

St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kimberly M. Gardner, who was not invited to be part of the operation, **immediately questioned** any cause-and-effect relationship with the federal effort. And she has continued to do so.

In an interview on Wednesday, she called the claims “gerrymandering statistics to fit a narrative” from the administration of President Donald J. Trump, and “pandering to a political base.”

Gardner said the root causes of crime need to be addressed. She advocated treating crime as a public health crisis and asked for better cooperation between federal officials and local prosecutors.

Gardner said she was not aware of any Operation Legend arrests being submitted to her office for prosecution.

Why did crime rise?

Criminologists and law enforcement suggested the coronavirus pandemic may be to blame for some of the increase in crime.

Rosenfeld’s report says social-distancing requirements hampered the ability of police to prevent and investigate crimes, as well as “the anti-violence efforts of street outreach workers and other non-police actors.”

Jensen attributed the crime spike to multiple factors, from education and employment challenges to “a lack of respect for human life,” and said the pandemic exacerbated the problems.

St. Louis Police **Chief John Hayden said** that it was perhaps a perfect storm of job losses, pandemic-related stress and civil unrest around the country that was leading people to have “shorter fuses.” Half of the homicides are drug-related, he said, and many are rooted in domestic or personal disputes. He also cited the “drained” morale of an understaffed department faced with those same stressors.

Hayden defended Operation Legend, too: In a Post-Dispatch podcast in November, he cited 821 arrests, 324 federal prosecutions and 256 weapons seized at that point due to the initiative. And he said many of the arrests were of violent felons.

“That’s going to have an impact,” he said. “And what you hope is that the effect of that will be lasting.”

In Memphis in October, **Barr said** there had been 5,500 arrests around the country, including about 276 for homicide and more than 2,000 guns seized. Of those arrested, roughly 1,124 were facing federal charges, he said. St. Louis’ federal prosecutions were leading the country.

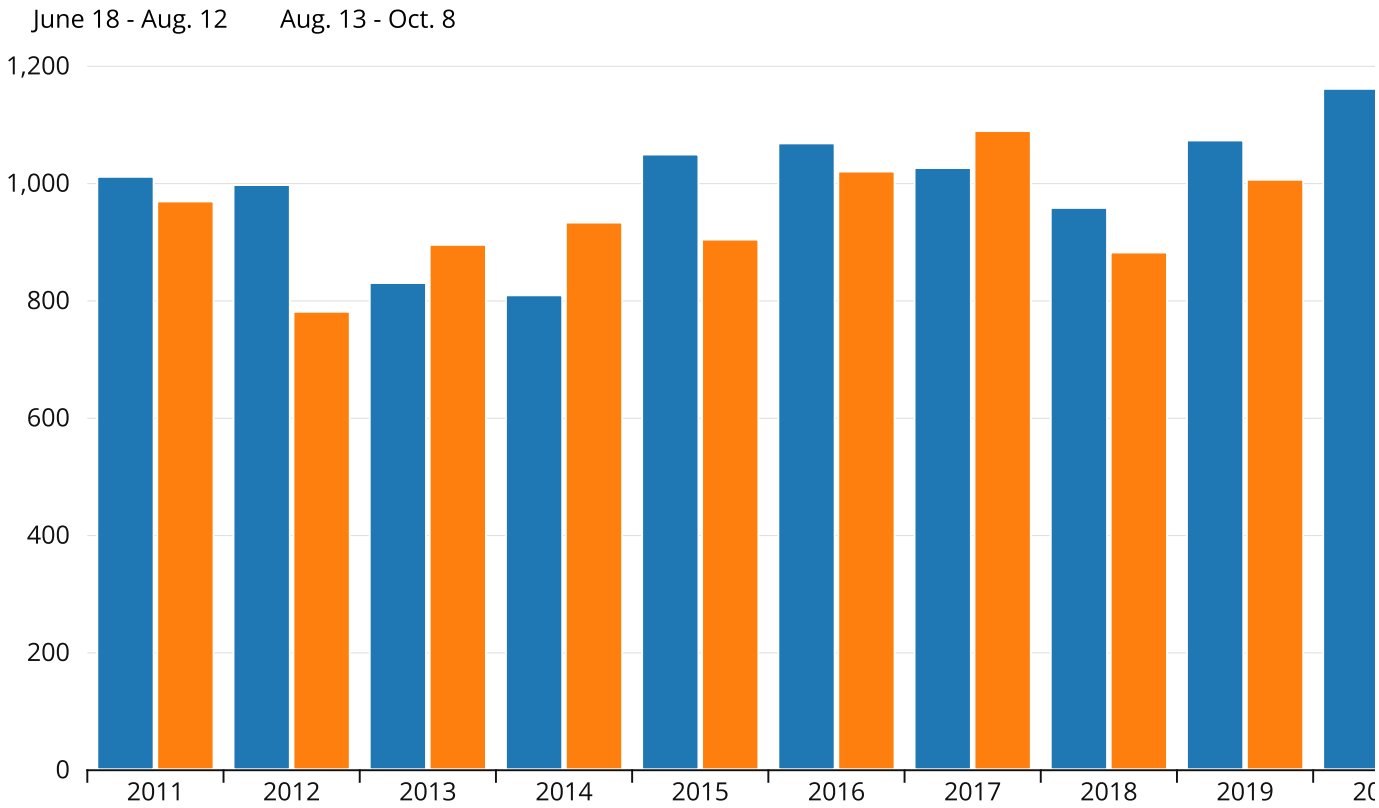
Memphis is still breaking homicide records, however, with **302** by the first week in December.

The St. Louis homicide total now stands at 250, police said, compared to 186 at the same time last year.



Operation Legend

Violent crimes

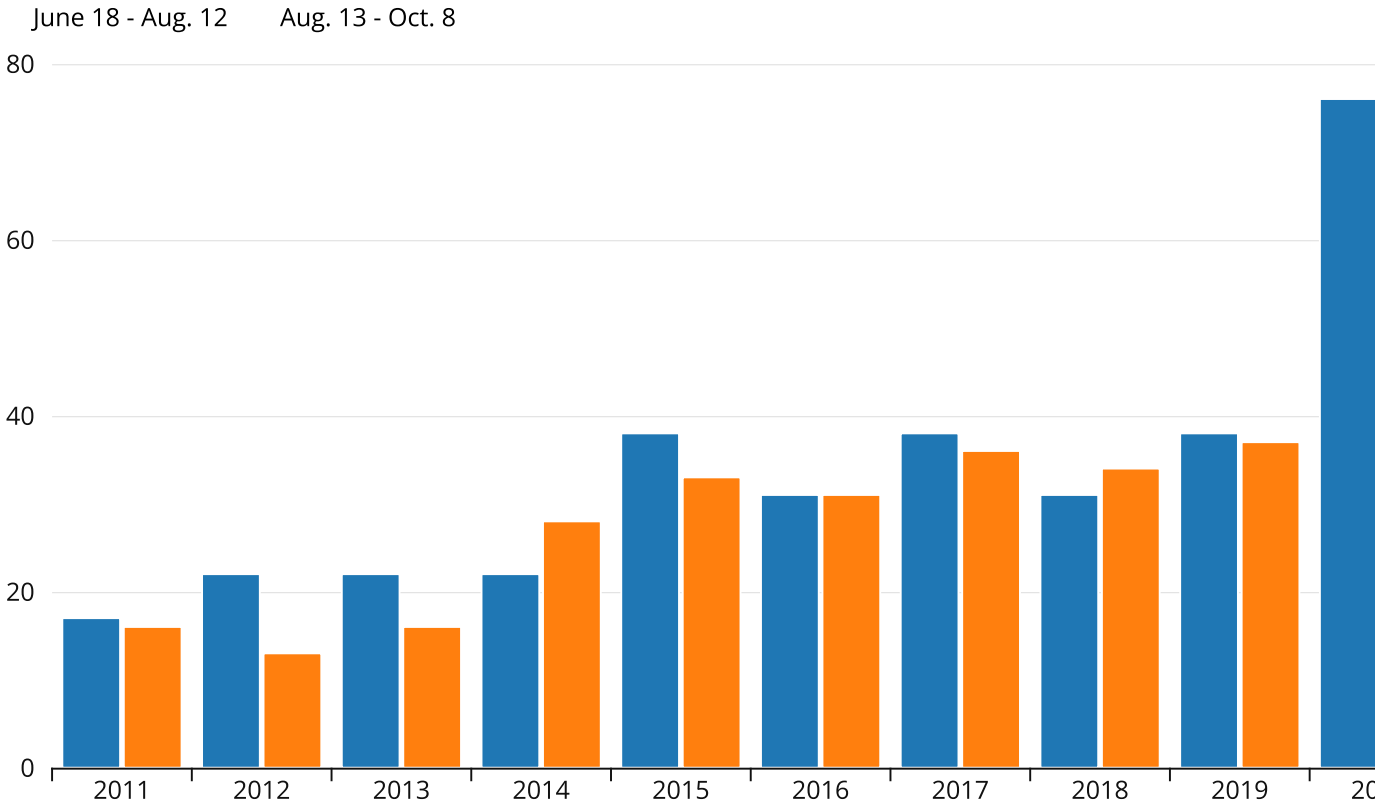


SOURCE: SLMPD

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Operation Legend

Homicides



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By Janelle O'Dea
