

Police chiefs focus on disparities in gun violence

By Erica Goode, New York Times

WASHINGTON – In a single week last April, three people were killed with guns in Philadelphia, 14 more were shot and wounded, 68 robberies were carried out at gunpoint and a total of 144 crimes involving firearms were reported.

During that same week in San Diego, a city of roughly the same size with far fewer police officers, there were no gun-related homicides, two people wounded by gunshots, four robberies committed at gunpoint and a total of only 20 gun-related crimes.

What made the difference? About 250 police chiefs from around the country debated this question and gun violence more generally at a meeting here this week, taking as their focus a survey of crimes occurring in six cities – Philadelphia, San Diego, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Austin, and Toronto – over a seven-day period in April 2011. The survey was carried out by the Police Executive Research Forum, a nonprofit police research group that sponsored the session as part of its two-day annual meeting.

Coming two months after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in Florida, the wide-ranging discussion encompassed the proliferation of laws that make it easier to own, carry and use a gun; the role of gangs and narcotics; the characteristics of perpetrators and victims; and the need for more aggressive prosecution and greater investment in technology to trace and identify firearms.

If there was a central message to be drawn from the survey, it was that gun violence is tightly concentrated in the poorest urban neighborhoods, its victims mostly minorities, who

receive little attention from politicians and the news media.

“Nobody in this room, unless you’re from Sanford, Fla., would even know the name of Trayvon Martin if it was a black kid that had shot Trayvon Martin,” said Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey of Philadelphia, who is African-American.

“It happens every single day in Philadelphia. It happens every single day in cities across the country, but if it’s a black killing a black,” no one cares, Commissioner Ramsey continued, noting that the week studied by the forum was less violent than many other weeks in Philadelphia. “Our streets are bleeding, and they’re bleeding profusely.”

The survey found that, using conservative estimates, the cost to taxpayers of the crimes committed with firearms during the week of April 4 to April 10 was more than \$38 million in medical care, social services, criminal justice costs and other expenses.

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