Murder in the Bull City

Durham saw twice as many homicides in the first six months of 2019 as it did through June of 2018. What's fueling the violence—if anything is?

By Thomasi McDonald and Cate Pitterle, p. 9
Durham’s first homicide of 2019 took place seventeen hours into the New Year, with a domestic squabble that was interrupted by a neighbor with a handgun. The second and third homicides followed a few hours later, setting a deadly pace that hasn’t relented. Over the ensuing six months, twenty-three more people have fallen victim to homicide—i.e., a death at another human’s hands, which can include justified and police-involved killings—in the Bull City.

That’s twice as many as in this same period last year, and on track to surpass the city’s bloody 2016. As of June 22, the police department had classified twenty of these as “criminal” homicides—i.e., murder and involuntary and voluntary homicide—compared to fourteen and nine at the same points in 2018 and 2017, respectively.

Of the twenty-five victims identified by press time, the oldest victim was sixty, the youngest just ten months old. Most had been shot, a few stabbed. All but three were black or Hispanic. All but two, a mother and daughter, were men. The killings have happened all over the city: at single-family homes, in apartment complexes, in working-class neighborhoods, in hotel rooms, in cars, outside.

These homicides are taking place against the backdrop of gentrifying neighborhoods and a revitalized downtown that hums day and night—and they’re particularly unsettling for city leaders touting Durham’s emergence on the national stage and eager to shed its dangerous reputation once and for all.

In January, after Durham recorded its sixth homicide in eleven days, Mayor Steve Schewel called the killings an “anomaly.”

“I don’t want to minimize it,” he said. “But going forward, I expect this to change.”

It didn’t.

We tend to think of crime rates in the abstract, and when the victims aren’t famous, their names and lives soon fade from our collective memory. This story, which looks at Durham’s homicide victims cumulatively, has two goals: First, to remember those the city lost and, even in a small way, to recognize their humanity. Second, to look for patterns that might speak to what’s fueling the violence—if anything is.

Police chief C.J. Davis says that “at this point, it does not appear that any particular case is related to another.” But the killings aren’t random. City council member Jillian Johnson points out that most of the victims and alleged perpetrators appear to know each other.

There’s another, more troubling commonality: More than 90 percent of the victims are black, as are most of the suspects charged in their deaths.

That prompts a question: Why are black men in Durham killing one another? And beyond herding the perps through the justice system—indeed, beyond policing and the seemingly futile hope of getting guns off the street—what can city leaders do to stem the bloodshed?

Durham County Commissioner Wendy Jacobs says the city and county need to break cycles of systemic black poverty that trace back through slavery and segregation. While 8 percent of white children in Durham grow up impoverished, she notes, 36 percent of African American and 37 percent of Hispanic children do.

County leaders are trying to take a holistic approach, investing in pre-K, focusing on reaching children from abusive homes, and treating violence as a public health crisis. Among the county’s programs is Violence Interrupters, which trains former gang members to return to their communities to teach conflict resolution.

But for family members who’ve already lost loved ones this year, all of this comes too late, and the situation feels hopeless.

“A lot of people’s children done went down like that, and there’s nothing we can do,” says Valerie Watson, the mother of Keith Antonio Watson, the city’s first homicide victim of 2019.

### CRIMINAL HOMICIDES BY YEAR (THROUGH JUNE)

[CRIMINAL HOMICIDES BY YEAR (THROUGH JUNE)]

*NOTE: A CRIMINAL HOMICIDE INCLUDES MURDER AND VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY MANSLAUGHTER. IT EXCLUDES HOMICIDES THAT ARE DEEMED JUSTIFIED, INCLUDING SELF-DEFENSE AND SOME OFFICER-INVOLVED SHOOTINGS, ACCORDING TO THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE.

SOURCE: CITY OF DURHAM, DURHAM POLICE DEPARTMENT

*AS OF JUNE 22. DOES NOT INCLUDE A HOMICIDE REPORTED ON JUNE 24.
By the time police arrived at Watson's apartment complex, Watson was dead, and his longtime girlfriend, Lakendra Hunter, was critically wounded. Watson and Hunter had a tumultuous and often-violent relationship, Watson's family says. On New Year’s Day at about 5:15 p.m., they had another altercation. Watson struggled to get control of Hunter's gun. According to family members, a neighbor intervened, shooting Watson seven times and Hunter once. The neighbor has not been charged.

Just after 8:00 p.m., investigators sped to reports of another shooting about five miles away in West Durham. They found the bodies of Domingo and Mendoza in the street. Mendoza had one child. Little information could be found about Mendoza. The alleged gunman, twenty-year-old Jose Manuel Regino-Vargas, fled but was arrested while trying to cross the border into Mexico. Eighteen-year-old Jonathan Cabrera was charged with two counts of accessory after the fact.

Moor was shot to death in his home just before 5:48 p.m., allegedly by his thirty-three-year-old son, Chivalry Moore. Moore was taken into custody after a five-hour standoff with police. A twenty-five-minute video in Willie Moore's honor shows photos of him doting on his children and grandchildren. Stepdaughter Rhonda Moore says the military veteran instilled strong values in her. "Although he was not my biological father, he added his name to my birth certificate," she wrote in an online tribute.

Zhytila Wilkins and her daughter, Ruia Reams, were found dead shortly before 10:00 a.m. inside of their home. Police have charged Ruia's father, Ramir Reams, with two counts of first-degree murder in what they described as a murder-suicide attempt.

Wilkins, an animal-rights advocate who dreamed of becoming a veterinarian, was set to begin college when she became pregnant. Wilkins's mother, Monica Biggs, is an N.C. Central administrator who lives in the home where her daughter and granddaughter died.

"Honey was so sweet. I can't understand why anyone would want to harm her," Biggs says.

Shortly before the shooting, Biggs says, she called 911 when Reams tried to force her daughter into his car to leave with her. The operator asked her if he'd hit her daughter; she says. She said no. Finally, her daughter told her, "Forget it, mom. I'll just go."

"Maybe if the police had showed up, it would have prevented him from coming back to kill her," she says.

The police found Thompson in the passenger seat of a car parked outside of Captain D's in North Durham, though they say he was shot at a nearby intersection shortly after 7:30 p.m.; he later died at the hospital. The day after he died, someone posted on Facebook a photo of Thompson—whose nickname was "Whitefolk"—holding a gold-colored balloon and kneeling beside his daughter during her pre-school graduation. Investigators say the shooting was not random. In March, police arrested thirty-seven-year-old Willie Reginald Hart Jr. and charged him with Thompson’s death.

Shaw was fatally shot a little after 2:00 p.m. Police say Shaw and Roland Richardson, thirty-four, were fighting when Richardson went into his car, retrieved a handgun, and fired multiple rounds at Shaw. "I lost my child behind nothing," Shaw’s mother told WRAL. Richardson turned himself the next day and was charged in connection with Shaw’s death.

Jackson was shot at about 11:15 a.m. at the Lenox West apartment complex. Police have charged Shajuan Dwatray Ervin, twenty-five, with his death, but have not disclosed a motive. Jackson graduated from John A. Holmes High School in Edenton and attended the Advanced Institute of Technology in Virginia. His nicknames were "Sno" and "Big Brain." He was the father of one child, according to posts on gunmemorial.org.
the weapon with one hand and struck Lanier in the face with the other. Masnik used a Taser to subdue Hutchinson, "but it was ineffective in diminishing the fight," according to a police report, so Officer R.E. Jimenez shot him. He later died at the hospital.

Last week, city officials released police body-camera footage that showed an angry and frustrated Hutchinson repeatedly telling the police that he was "righteous" and warning the officers not to touch him. Hutchinson struggled with the officers as they tried to handcuff him. He briefly broke free and went for Officer Lanier's gun, the footage shows. Despite repeated commands from the officers, Hutchinson refused to let go of the weapon. Three shots were fired, and Hutchinson fell in the home's driveway.

District Attorney Satana Deberry announced that Jimenez would not be charged.

**NO. 14: JENORYE BRITT**

**AGE:** 20  
**DIED:** March 30  
**LOCATION:** 1700 block of Palmer Street  
**CASE STATUS:** Charges dismissed

Tall, handsome, and athletic, Jenorye Britt had just turned twenty when he was found mortally wounded at 12:15 a.m. in the parking lot of a West Durham apartment complex. He was two months away from completing his first year at North Carolina A&T.

In June, Britt's seventeen-year-old brother, Jemazze, was indicted on charges of involuntary manslaughter and discharging a weapon into an occupied property inflicting serious bodily injury; he turned himself in, but the charges against him were later dismissed.

Residents of Britt's hometown of Enfield—a tiny hamlet about ninety-five miles east of Durham—are baffled.

"I heard so many stories about what happened. I don't want to talk about it," says Britt's high school football coach, Antione Alston.

Britt was a leader on the field and in the classroom, Alston adds, recalling the "short kid, really skinny" kid who didn't have the best athletic talent but had a great work ethic. Britt got an assist from Mother Nature during his sophomore year, when he grew six inches and stood at six-five. Alston says the rambunctious athlete had a "big breakout year" when he was a junior, starring on basketball and football squads that won conference championships.

"He was a vocal leader. He was a big leader. He wanted to do everything perfect," Alston says.

**NO. 15: EMANI LETREO RICKS**

**AGE:** 21  
**DIED:** March 31  
**LOCATION:** 2000 block of Chapel Hill Road  
**CASE STATUS:** No suspect charged

Police found Ricks shot to death on a sidewalk near the Dragon Gate Chinese restaurant in the Lakewood Shopping Center, just across the street from where Britt died the day before. Ricks, a rapper and musician from Greensboro, was the youngest of four children.

**NO. 16: DARREN DIXON**

**AGE:** 22  
**DIED:** April 11  
**LOCATION:** 3000 block of South Roxboro Street  
**CASE STATUS:** Suspect charged

Police found Dixon found fatally shot at about 12:30 a.m. in a gazebo at Hillside Park. Investigators charged Antonio Stamey with his murder, but police have not said what led to the shooting or if the victim and suspect were acquainted. Dixon's obituary says that he attended Durham public schools and worked for an insulation company in Charlotte. His family described him as an outgoing person who always had a smile on his face, and said that his daughter, Za'vah, was his life.

**NO. 17: THADEUS DARNELL HOLLOWAY**

**AGE:** 36  
**DIED:** April 15  
**LOCATION:** 100 block of Elm Street  
**CASE STATUS:** No suspect charged

Holloway was killed at about 5:15 p.m. in the 100 block of Elm Street, where he lived. According to CBS 17, he was shot while he walking home from a store in the neighborhood. His obituary called him "a happy person with a beautiful smile. He loved hate."
NO. 18: JOHN KENNETH MASON

AGE: 58
DIED: April 28
LOCATION: South Roxboro Street and East Cornwallis Road
CASE STATUS: No suspect charged

Police found Mason mortally stabbed just after 10:00 p.m. He later died at the hospital. They have not disclosed a motive.

“John never met a stranger,” the obituary said.

NO. 19: DAVID KELLY

AGE: 31
DIED: May 4
LOCATION: 3700 block of Hillsborough Road
CASE STATUS: Suspect charged

Just after 9:00 a.m., police found Kelly stabbed to death inside of a room at the Quality Inn. Investigators accused an acquaintance, twenty-year-old Whitney Barbara Turner, of stabbing Kelly following a fight. Investigators have not disclosed a motive.

NO. 20: ALJAWON SUMPTER

AGE: 32
DIED: May 4
LOCATION: Linwood Avenue and Colfax Street
CASE STATUS: No suspect charged

Sumpter was one of two people shot at about 10:45 p.m. near the intersection of Linwood Avenue and Colfax Street. While the other victim suffered non-life-threatening injuries, Sumpter succumbed to his wounds. Sumpter, known as “AJ,” had three daughters. Police have not yet made an arrest.

“I truly have no words,” his mother wrote on his Facebook page. “I still can’t believe it. Lord, why my son?”

NO. 21: DWAYNE WILSON

AGE: 32
DIED: May 19
LOCATION: 100 block of Hoover Road
CASE STATUS: No suspect charged

Wilson died after being shot at around 8:30 p.m. Police say Hoover and a twenty-nine-year-old man, who has not been identified, were shooting at one another. They were both struck by gunfire and taken to the hospital. The twenty-nine-year-old survived, but Wilson died. On gunmemorial.org, friends and family described Wilson as a regular guy, nicknamed “Weezy.” A GoFundMe page to raise funds for his children shows Wilson was active “physically and financially in his children’s lives.”

NO. 22: JAY AARON FOUST

AGE: 46
DIED: May 20
LOCATION: 400 block of North Mangum Street
CASE STATUS: No suspect charged

Foust was fatally shot at about 3:00 a.m. while working as an unarmed security guard just outside of a new parking garage in downtown. The father of three daughters, Foust worked for Allied Services. He was a supporter of TROSA and loved animals. In an online obituary, family members wrote that Foust was known for his smile, positive outlook, and mellow demeanor. He enjoyed life and spending time with his daughters. Foust started working for the security company on March 20. Two days after the shooting, police announced that they were looking for a black Ford F-150 from between 1987 and 1991, with a long bed and tinted windows. The truck was last seen with an orange traffic cone and several bags in the bed, police said.

NO. 23: DEESHAWN CATES

AGE: 20
DIED: May 21
LOCATION: Dayton and Wabash Streets
CASE STATUS: No suspect charged

Cates was fatally shot at about 11:00 p.m. in McDougald Terrace. It was the city’s third homicide in as many days. A GoFundMe page set up to raise money for Cates’s burial expenses indicates that his mother came home that night to “a devastating tragedy.”

NO. 24: DUWAYNE CLAY JR.

AGE: 16
DIED: May 27
LOCATION: 2301 Erwin Road
CASE STATUS: No suspect charged

It was shortly after 12:30 p.m. when Clay—whose nickname was “Weezy”—was found shot to death inside of a stolen, parked car on Emergency Drive, near the emergency room entrance of Duke University Hospital, police say. Investigators think the car had been parked there overnight, but the teen had been shot somewhere else. They believe his death may be related to gang and drug activity at an apartment complex on Junction Road, according to search warrants made public last month. Friends and family members posting on gunmemorial.org wrote that Clay was “fun to be around” and had a “big heart.”
NO. 25: EDWARD TIVNAN

AGE: 49
DIED: June 5
LOCATION: 1007 West Main Street
CASE STATUS: Suspect charged

At about 10:15 p.m., Daniel Peter Mohar, thirty-four, allegedly punched Tivnan after Tivnan made what prosecutors described as a drunken “remark” to a woman who turned out to be Mohar’s girlfriend. Tivnan fell and hit his head on the patio of the Social Games and Brews. He died two days later at a hospital. According to WNCN, Tivnan’s sister said her brother had a huge personality and wanted everyone to be happy. Mohar has been charged with murder.

NO. 26: UNIDENTIFIED VICTIM

AGE: N/A
DIED: June 24
LOCATION: 1002 East Geer Street
CASE STATUS: No suspects charged

An as-yet-unidentified victim was found shot to death at 9:00 a.m. in a parking lot at 1002 East Geer Street. Police say the victim was inside a dark-colored Dodge Durango. Investigators had not made any public updates by press time.

tmcdonald@indyweek.com

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SHAN STUMPF