

# Good old days? Not for killings - Homicide rate for 1930 nearly same as last year's

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*By Frank Main June 8, 2004 Publication: Chicago Sun-Times (IL) Page: 27 Word Count: 380*

What is perhaps most amazing about a new Web database of 11,000 Chicago homicide cases from 1870 to 1930 is that violence in the city was about the same almost 75 years ago.

Back in 1930, Chicago cops listed 676 homicides in their handwritten reports. That's 20.2 homicides for every 100,000 people. Last year in Chicago, the police recorded 598 homicides. In a city whose population was pegged at 2,896,016 in the 2000 census, that's 20.6 homicides per 100,000. The cops' entries were discovered several years ago in three dusty volumes stored in the Illinois State Archives. Leigh B. Bienen, director of the project, said she hopes researchers will use the Web-based information to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding Chicago crime, such as why homicides jumped from 238 in 1920 to 603 in 1929. "The folklore surrounding the colorful mob figures in Chicago during the 1920s may be obscuring our understanding of crime and homicide during the period," she wrote in a 2003 paper in the *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*. Most people think Capone-era gangland killings fueled the rise -- but less headline-grabbing deaths may have been partially responsible, too, Bienen said. Another discovery was that more than 1,500 cases in the database were automobile-related deaths. "The world was so much more full of risk in a way we would find totally unacceptable today," said Bienen, who recruited more than 25 students to type the entries into a database. The hand-scrawled police entries could lead to inquiries such as an

examination of whether killings went up or down with the fortunes of certain Chicago neighborhoods. Students can use the database for class projects. An Ohio State University professor e-mailed Bienen that his students will use microfilmed newspaper clips to further research homicides in the database. And families can use the database to look up relatives who met an untimely demise, though not all research has to be grim. "We just want people to have fun with this," said Bienen, a lecturer at the Northwestern University School of Law and wife of Northwestern President Henry S. Bienen.

The St. Valentine's Day Massacre added to a bad year for killings, 1929. The number of murders jumped that year to 603.

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**Chicago Sun-Times (IL)**

**Date:** June 8, 2004

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