Mack Julion has always been in love with Chicago. A Southwest Side resident, he swore he would never flee to the suburbs, playfully mocking friends as not being "real Chicagoans."

But now, crime in his neighborhood and across the city has worn that devotion thin.

"I've traveled around the country and have always said I wouldn't consider living anywhere else besides this city," said Julion, 45. "But I'm to the point now where I'm looking to move out to the suburbs. It's just getting too crazy here."

Julion's sense that Chicago's crime problem is growing worse is shared by nearly half of the city dwellers who responded to a new poll for Tribune/WGN. But the reality is that overall crime in Chicago is down when compared with last year and homicides are nearly flat, with no significant uptick compared with recent years.

The telephone poll of 800 male and female heads of household from the six-county Chicago area began July 8, one day after Chicago police Officer Thor Soderberg was gunned down in Englewood. A little less than two months earlier, Officer Thomas Wortham IV was killed in the
Chatham neighborhood. And on Sunday, four days after the poll was completed, Officer Michael Bailey was killed outside his Park Manor home.

Experts agree that these high-profile homicides, coupled with a bad economy and a steady stream of news about shootings, have fed a public perception that crime in Chicago is getting worse. The Market Shares Corp. poll — which has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points — found that only 30 percent of Chicagoans feel their neighborhoods are safe.

"Police officers are the embodiment of authority," said Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago. "When officers are getting shot, that gives citizens a sense that the social order is completely collapsing. The average citizen, the regular guy and woman on the street, are going to think, 'If they're shooting police, what chance do I have?'"

Lurigio also said there has long been a public perception that when the economy is bad, crime goes up. Not so, he said.

"In some cases, the economy goes south, crime goes down. In some cases, the economy is strong and crime goes up," he said. "People believe there's a very strong correlation between the economy and crime, and it makes sense. It's intuitively appealing but not accurate."

Homicides are up less than 1 percent in Chicago compared with last year, according to unofficial crime statistics through Tuesday. There were 245 homicides between January and July 20, two more than the same period last year.

Overall crime, including violent crimes such as criminal sexual assault and robbery, are down, according to official crime statistics through the end of June. For instance, shootings are down slightly compared with January through June of last year. The facts, however, have done little to prevent perception from becoming reality for people in all parts of the city.

Linda Paul lives across the street from a park in Longwood Manor, but she doesn't feel it's safe enough to go outside.

"I love the outdoors, but I'm afraid to be out there in the park because you don't know when they are going to start shooting," said Paul, 52.

Kathleen Conlon considers herself a "North Side girl." She used to feel comfortable walking the streets of her Jefferson Park neighborhood, but not anymore.

"You can't live safely here," said Conlon, 70. "There was a time when the bad guys didn't kill policemen, that's not the case anymore. Whether it's a policeman or a baby, they don't care."

Many polled also believe crime is more violent and no longer isolated to certain parts of town.

"Bullets don't have eyes," said a 54-year-old black woman who lives in the South Loop and asked not to be named. "Crime started out as petty, but it's stepped up to another level. They used
to just snatch your purse, now they kill you. They used to snatch your necklace, now they slit your throat."

Suburban residents, however, have a notably different outlook. Only 23 percent of people outside the city believe crime is rising, and 65 percent believe their neighborhoods are safe.

Clementine Moore said she feels like her Palatine neighborhood has even less crime than it did when she moved there 20 years ago.

"Sometimes things happen here, but it's not as bad as Chicago," said Moore, 57. "You don't hear about anybody getting shot or anything."

She attributes the low crime to the lack of bus routes between Palatine and Chicago, which ties into the opinion of many suburbanites that Chicago is the root of the area's crime problems.

Take, for example, Alyet Sisson, 78, who lives in suburban North Chicago but attends church in the city every Sunday. She said she doesn't linger after the services.

"When services are over, we get into our car or the bus and we go home. We don't stay there," said Sisson, who has lived in North Chicago for more than 40 years. "If I have to go (to Chicago), I do what I have to do and get out."

Omar Gobby, 41, of Evergreen Park, said "hooliganism" has recently taken over his neighborhood.

"It's not like serious crimes, but more vandalism, more graffiti, that kind of stuff," said Gobby, whose garage was tagged with graffiti more than a year ago. "When we first moved here, it was much quieter."

When asked what were the worst things about living in the Chicago area, a majority of respondents — 53 percent — said crime. Other high-ranking answers were political corruption, high taxes and cost of living.

Evonne Kolovos, who is raising her three grandchildren in the Portage Park neighborhood she has lived in for 22 years, agreed wholeheartedly.

"For goodness' sakes, they're killing our police," Kolovos said. "Where can we really, really call safe?"