Aldermen want Emanuel to hire more cops
*But experts says that's no magic solution*

By Hal Dardick and Jeremy Gorner
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Mayor Rahm Emanuel's proposed budget for next year would boost the ranks of police officers a bit and then keep their numbers steady, but many aldermen, echoing their constituents' concerns over the spike in violence this year, want even more cops hired.

The department's staffing needs promise to be at the forefront Wednesday when police Superintendent Garry McCarthy appears before the City Council Budget Committee. Aldermen have called for more cops for years to no avail because of budget and tax concerns, but this time they will be armed with a more potent argument: a 25 percent increase in homicides through Monday compared with a year earlier.

According to a Tribune review, though, Chicago already has the most officers per capita compared with the nation's four other most populous cities — 454 officers for every 100,000 residents. And crime experts say how a police department mobilizes its officers is just as significant as how many it employs.

"Having more would certainly help," said James Alan Fox, a criminology professor at Northeastern University in Boston. "But how you deploy them is important."

In a year in which the mayor has sworn off a tax, fee or fine increase, McCarthy maintains the solution is not hiring a lot more cops. Instead, he has moved officers to parts of the city where he thinks they're needed most, using gang intelligence, crime statistics and other data to identify those areas. The city has refused to make public, however, how it has deployed officers in its 23 police districts.

McCarthy's critics contend that his disbanding of strike forces that operated in high-crime areas — as the department shifted its focus to maintaining a steady, bigger beat presence — helped fuel the factional gang violence behind the higher homicide rate.

The hiring of hundreds more cops could solve that problem by allowing those units to be redeployed, said Michael Shields, president of the Fraternal Order of Police, the union that represents rank-and-file officers "I would definitely bring back the specialized units," he said.

But hiring more officers would require cuts elsewhere in the mayor's $6.5 billion spending plan. And Ald. Carrie Austin, 34th, head of the Budget Committee, vowed Tuesday to beat back any measure that would require an increase in taxes, fees or fines.
"How do we pay for them?" Austin, whose Far South Side ward has seen its share of violence, said of hiring more police. "If you can find more solutions on how we can pay for more police officers, I welcome those ideas."

A handful of aldermen interviewed by the Tribune conceded they had yet to come up with a specific budget plan to hire more officers.

Emanuel's budget also calls for continued increases in officer overtime in crime hot spots. And with pressure to keep costs in line, the department is looking for ways to improve efficiencies, including an effort to reduce how often officers respond to routine 911 calls.

Chicago has 12,282 officers, including 194 in training and not yet on the street, city officials said. Shields said hundreds more being counted by the city are on disability or leave.

Before year's end, the city plans to hire 263 more officers, city officials said. And the mayor's proposed 2013 budget calls for hiring an additional 500 officers — four quarterly classes of 125. The goal is to keep the total number of officers at about 12,500.

If retirements outpace the planned number of recruits entering the academy, "we'll make sure those classes are larger," Alexandra Holt, budget director, told aldermen last week.

According to FOP data obtained from the city's police pension board, the number of officers in Chicago has dropped by about 1,000 over the past six years. Experts said other cities have seen similar drops during the recent economic downturn.

Shields said the hiring plans are insufficient, and he also was critical of plans to promote only 70 officers to detective when hundreds of detectives have retired in recent years. "Our (murder) clearance rates are in the toilet," he said.

But crime experts said there's little correlation between the number of officers in a city and the homicide rate, though the presence of police affects the public perception of safety.

"What the police do on the ground and where they do it is as or more important than the size of the police department," said Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago.