January homicide count worst since 2002

By Jeremy Gorner and Jennifer Delgado
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When Kimberly Common visited her mother in the hospital Monday, the two spoke of how much they missed Common's son, Antonio, who was slain 15 months ago at the age of 23.

By Tuesday afternoon, the family's tragedy deepened as Common's older son, Devin, 27, was fatally shot near their home in the Park Manor neighborhood a little past noon. As she stood on a sidewalk by her son's sheet-covered body, Common recalled his last words to her: "I'll be back. I'm going to the store."

"That's the same thing" Antonio said before he was killed in October 2011, the mother of two other children said as tears streamed down her face.

A little more than two hours later, a 15-year-old girl had also been shot to death, bringing to 42 the number of homicides so far in 2013, making this month the most violent January in Chicago since 2002. The bloody start to the new year comes as the Police Department hoped it had begun to turn the corner after a violent 2012 that saw homicides exceed 500, bringing unflattering national attention to Chicago.

At a press conference a day after meeting with President Barack Obama in the White House along with police chiefs from Newtown, Conn., and Aurora, Colo. — sites of horrible mass shootings last year — Chicago police Superintendent Garry McCarthy expressed concern and regret for the wave of gun violence as January draws to a close. Seven people were killed Saturday alone.

"It's disappointing," said McCarthy, who defended his crime prevention strategies while noting that he had sat down with some of the "brightest minds" in the country for four hours in Washington and heard little advice beyond what he's already been doing.

"You don't throw out everything you're doing because you had a bad couple of days," McCarthy told reporters. "And unfortunately today's (Tuesday) a bad day, too."

By Tuesday evening, three people had been slain — all in broad daylight — on a day in which temperatures soared to 63, a record for Jan. 29. In addition to Devin Common, a 20-year-old man was shot in the head in the East Side neighborhood at about 8 a.m.; the 15-year-old girl was shot at about 2:30 p.m. a few blocks from King College Prep after finishing classes at the North Kenwood high school.

With two days still left in the month, this marked the second consecutive January in which Chicago has hit at least 40 homicides. The 40 homicides last January represented a jump of 43
percent from 28 in January 2011. While Chicago never quite recovered over the rest of the year from an even sharper jump in violence over the first quarter of 2012, homicides fell or were flat in the year's last four months.

Crime experts caution it's way too early to suggest the disappointing January numbers mean violence in Chicago will continue at a similar pace throughout this year.

But Arthur Lurigio, a criminologist, said the January numbers sure aren't encouraging.

"It certainly bodes ill for this year's projected homicide figures because it appears to be a continuation of the violent trends observed through many months of 2012," says Lurigio, a professor at Loyola University Chicago.

The city's homicide woes continue to draw unwanted attention for McCarthy and Mayor Rahm Emanuel, including an article Tuesday in the satirical national publication The Onion that was headlined: "Chicago's Annual Homicide Drive Off To Most Promising Start In Decades."

But there was no humor to be found in violence-plagued spots principally on the city's South and West Sides.

Through Monday, the West Side's Harrison District leads the city in homicides with seven, three on Saturday alone, followed by the South Side's Englewood District with five. While it is clearly too early to draw conclusions, those numbers could be unsettling for police officials because throughout 2012, Emanuel and McCarthy had touted those two districts as successes after they flooded "conflict zones" in both with additional officers a year ago.

University of Chicago criminologist Jens Ludwig said a plausible explanation for the woeful January homicide numbers could be the budget problems confronting cities throughout the country. Emanuel's budget for 2013 calls for the hiring of an additional 500 police officers, but the police union has contended that number falls far short of the void created by cops retiring.

Ludwig said big cities such as Chicago could use help from the federal government.

"Cities can't run budget deficits when economic conditions turn down, which means that usually cities have to scale back police spending at the very time you'd want them to, if anything, increase the number of police on the streets," Ludwig said. "Only the federal government can help solve this with their ability to run budget deficits during economic downturns."

At the press conference Tuesday, McCarthy continued to emphasize that Chicago police are removing more illegal guns from the streets than authorities in any other major city in the U.S. During the first three weeks of January, he said, two of Chicago's 22 police districts seized more illegal guns than were collected in all of New York City.

But one reason for that, McCarthy said, was New York's tougher penalties for gun offenses. "... When people get caught with (illegal) guns in New York, they go to jail," he said. "... As a result they're not carrying guns with impunity."
For Devin Common's mother, the loss of her second son was almost too much to bear. Police said Common was on his way to buy coffee when he was shot Tuesday near East 75th Street and South Champlain Avenue.

Standing by his body at the crime scene, Common's sister, Jermaka, 26, cried softly as friends and neighbors embraced her and her mother.

"This didn't make no sense for him to get gunned down like that," she said. "This is not fair at all."