February homicides drop dramatically

By Jason Meisner
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After a violent start to the year for Chicago, the number of homicides plummeted in February to a level not seen in more than a decade, police statistics show.

By Thursday evening, with just hours left in the month, 14 homicides had been logged in Chicago, down from 29 in February 2012 and less than a third of the 43 killings in January.

A Tribune analysis of department statistics since 2002 showed that the previous low for a February came in 2006, when the city recorded 17 homicides. Over the past 11 years, the month has averaged just under 25 homicides, the analysis showed. A month-by-month breakdown for years before 2002 was not available Thursday.

The up-and-down numbers could be due to a variety of factors, including bad weather, an increase in officers on the streets and the worldwide attention given to Chicago's epidemic of gun violence after the slaying of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton, Arthur Lurigio, a Loyola University criminologist, said Thursday.

"Statistics fluctuate for a variety of reasons, but for us to be confident of crime reductions, they have to take place over the course of years," Lurigio said.

Lurigio said the downward trend might have roots in the December massacre in Newtown, Conn., which galvanized the nation's attention on gun violence. The spotlight turned to Chicago during a particularly bloody January, which was the deadliest start to any year since 2002 and was capped by Hadiya's slaying. Chicago also exceeded 500 homicides in 2012, the most since 2008.

In recent weeks, President Barack Obama came to Chicago to speak about gun violence, and Mayor Rahm Emanuel and police Superintendent Garry McCarthy moved 200 officers off desk duty to bolster "saturation teams" aimed at suppressing outbreaks of violence in trouble spots. The department also beefed up an overtime initiative for patrol officers and sergeants.

All of that heat eventually is felt by the gang members responsible for the vast majority of the city's homicides, Lurigio said.

"This past month, Chicago has probably been given more pointed attention to the homicide problem that at any other time in history," Lurigio said. "If you combine all those elements, I think the light was shining brightly on the mostly young men who decide to use guns as a way to settle disputes."
"Why would we expect the weather to affect all of us but not the people who are committing crimes?" he said.