

World

Sickness in Seattle as death rate soars

Killings and overdoses are rising following a campaign against the police, scared locals tell Keiran Southern

Andrea Suarez can recall in vivid detail the first body she discovered on the streets of Seattle. Suarez, a volunteer who cleans up drug-infested neighbourhoods, found decomposing human remains in a portable lavatory near a children's playground in 2021.

The victim is believed to have suffered an opioid overdose, one of many Suarez, 48, has stumbled upon while sweeping the streets of needles, burnt foil and other drug paraphernalia.

However she and others determined to improve life in Seattle are now contending with another scourge: a wave of violent crime threatening to make 2023 the city's bloodiest year on record.

The Emerald City, a scenic Pacific Northwest hub previously best known as the home of Starbucks, grunge music and Dr Frasier Crane, has already recorded more murders this year than in all of 2022. Seattle's overstretched police department has investigated 57 homicides and could exceed the record of 69 from 1994, according to figures compiled by The Seattle Times.

The police investigated 33 murders in 2019, 53 in 2020, 41 in 2021 and 54 in 2022 — an increase triggered by the pandemic and possibly a more political cause. Critics of the city's leaders say the "defund the police" movement, which gained traction following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, led to the Seattle force losing about 600 officers in three years.

Floyd was killed after an officer in Minnesota knelt on his neck during his arrest, fuelling a protest movement that demanded police funding be reduced, with the money instead reinvested in services.

Among Seattle's high-profile killings this year was the daytime shooting of a 34-year-old mother who was eight months pregnant. Eina Kwon was driving to the Japanese restaurant she ran with her husband when an assailant emptied a 9mm handgun into their car in June. Her unborn child also died.

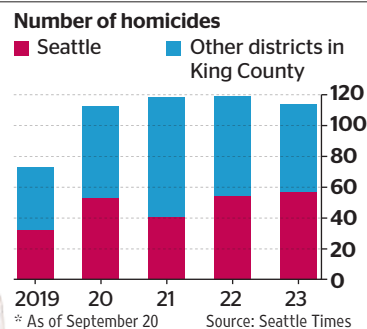
Kwon's killing stunned a city that has become wearily accustomed to reports of gun



Campaigners have found bodies of drug addicts in rubbish-covered encampments in the city previously known for grunge and as the home of TV's Frasier, below



Not so pacific northwest



deaths and the community rallied around the family's sushi restaurant, demanding an end to the violence.

Suarez, who combines her day job at delivery company DHL with running the We Heart Seattle organisation she founded, believes many of the killings can be traced back to the drug trade.

She said that fentanyl and the open-air drug scene are prevalent now on a record scale, creating "a co-dependent ecosystem of dealers, users, pushers, the sex trade — you name it. And

that, along with turf wars and general desperation to do anything to not get dopesick [symptoms of opioid withdrawal], has created this perfect storm."

The chronic shortage of police officers has added fuel to the fire, according to Suarez.

She lives in the Belltown neighbourhood where Kwon was shot and says the area is no longer safe. Suarez has renamed it Helltown.

Criminals, she adds, know only too well that the police department is chronically short of officers and exploit the subsequent lack of oversight. "It's become a no-rules playground," she said of her once vibrant neighbourhood. "It's really opened the floodgates for criminal behaviour of all kinds, including homicide."

Suarez blames the lack of funding for the police on the "defund" movement. However, far-left activists want to go even further and abolish the police department altogether.

"Criminals come here from all over the country because they know they won't get arrested," she said.

Suarez and her fellow volunteers, who offer help to addicts, have come

across nine bodies while conducting their clean-up operations, finding remains in tents and portable lavatories.

Jim Fuda, executive director of Crime Stoppers of Puget Sound, the valley filled with water from the Pacific Ocean, said many of Seattle's problems are, to a degree at least, self-inflicted.

Fuda, who spent 33 years in the police, said what is happening in the city is the predictable result of demoralising officers. "It's a sad state of affairs," he said, adding that there are not enough detectives to investigate the many homicides, while less severe crimes are also going unpunished.

Seattle is showing signs of recovery, though — at least according to some. James Sido of the Downtown Seattle Association said the city is on the up, with visitors and locals feeling confident enough to return to the city centre.

Suarez is also confident that Seattle can emerge from the twin crises of fentanyl and what may be its deadliest year, but said that the city's future was in the hands of voters. "Just get out and vote. Vote for public safety and vote for humanity, because the current trajectory is dangerous for all."

Army poised to fight lethal crimewave of armed gangs

Sweden
Oliver Moody

The Swedish prime minister is preparing to deploy the military to tackle rising gang crime after three people were killed by gunshots and an explosion in the space of 12 hours.

The country has been racked by gun violence as criminal networks hire teenagers to carry out contract killings because they get more lenient sentences if they are convicted.

This month there have been 11 deaths from shootings or bombings, a monthly record. On Wednesday two young men were shot dead in the suburbs of Stockholm and a 25-year-old woman died of injuries inflicted by a bomb near

the university city of Uppsala. The woman was the seventh innocent bystander to have been killed in cross-fire over the past 12 months. Last week a man in his seventies died after being struck by a stray bullet outside a bar in Sandviken, on the east coast.

"Sweden has never seen anything like this," Ulf Kristersson, the prime minister, said in a televised speech to the nation. "We will hunt the gangs down and we will kill them."

It is unclear what role the military will play in tackling the problem.

Much of the violence has been traced to a kingpin called Rawa Majid, known as the Kurdish Fox, who was raised in Sweden by Iraqis and runs the country's most brutal gang from exile in Turkey.

Dead man warbling for jail reform

Will Pavia New York

Prison reformers in the United States have led demonstrations, organised petitions and lobbied Congress — but for the most part they have not considered the potential of opera to change minds.

"This is definitely a first," said Jamila Hodge, executive director of Equal Justice USA, which campaigns against the death penalty. She was talking about a collaboration with Ryan McKinny, a baritone currently appearing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York as a death row inmate in *Dead Man Walking*.

The opera, like the 1995 Oscar-winning film, is adapted from Sister Helen Prejean's memoir and centres on a prisoner waiting to be executed. It begins with a horrendous crime. "You start off hating him," McKinny said of his character. "But can you still see him as a full



Ryan McKinny's visits to a condemned prisoner have aided his performance

human being?" McKinny's performance is partly informed by his own friendship with a death row inmate from Texas, Terence Andrus, who killed two people in an attempted carjacking in 2008. Andrus, 20 at the time

and high on marijuana laced with PCP, panicked when the owner of the car pulled out a gun of his own.

McKinny, 42, would visit Andrus at a Texas prison, speaking to him over the phone through a glass screen and bringing him sweets and crisps.

As a death row inmate, Andrus was in solitary confinement and "had a downward turn during Covid", McKinny said. "He took his own life in January of this year. He was 34 years old."

The singer said the death of Andrus left him with "a lot of guilt" as well as a sense of "a responsibility to tell his story". It also made his performance in *Dead Man Walking* an intense experience: he wanted "not just to deliver the opera in a way that hits emotionally, but also to try to give the audience some direction if they feel strongly — to say, here are some things you can do."