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ON THE WEB

Violent Crime Dipped in '03; Murder Rose

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Violent crime dropped 3 percent last year even as the number of murders rose, the Federal Bureau of Investigation said Monday in a report that had immediate reverberations in the presidential campaign.

The new statistics, drawn from law enforcement agencies across the country, showed continuation of a general national decline in crime rates that began in the early 1990's. But some criminologists said they were troubled by the rise in murders, which were up 1.7 percent last year, to 16,503.

"We've seen a disturbing growth in youth killings and gang killings in many cities," said James Alan Fox, a professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University. "The homicide numbers should give us reason to pay more attention to street crime than we have."

Crime has received scant attention in the presidential campaign, with issues like guns, the death penalty, sentencing policies and money for the police the subjects of much less debate than in past elections. Polls show that many voters still consider crime a priority, but political analysts say declining crime rates at home and the overarching importance of terrorism abroad have made it a less potent political issue.

Still, Republicans and Democrats alike seized on the F.B.I. statistics.

Attorney General John Ashcroft noted that the rates of violent and property crime were at their lowest levels in three decades and said law enforcement officials around the country were succeeding in prosecuting gun violence, drug offenses and other criminal activity.

But Senator John Edwards, the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, said the statistics "remind us how much more we have to do to fight crime and keep our communities safe in America."

Mr. Edwards cited a 6 percent increase in murders since 2000 and a 25 percent rise in gang killings. He said a surge in methamphetamine abuse and a cutback by President Bush in federal money for police departments were causes for concern.

The F.B.I. data released Monday, in the bureau's annual Uniform Crime Report, showed about 1.4 million violent crimes in the United States last year, a drop of 3 percent. Murder was the only type of violent crime to increase.