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Linn attorney concerned about lack of murder convictions

Christoph Trappe The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS ... The math from last year's murder cases in Cedar Rapids is somewhat discouraging ... four murders, zero convictions. Linn County juries have acquitted defendants on first-degree murder charges in three of the four deaths. A fourth case is still under investigation.

"When we don't get a conviction, there's a concern," said Linn County Attorney Harold Denton. "We try to convict people."

Last year, Cedar Rapids saw the most murder cases since 1999, when there were also four. There have been no murders in the city this year, police investigators said.

In last year's cases, Denton points to the February 2003 death of 3-year-old Kayla Blahnik as a difficult case to prosecute. Her mother's husband, Charles "C.J." Goddard, was tried in that death but found not guilty.

"There were no witnesses to the event," Cedar Rapids Police Chief Mike Klappholz said. "It's a difficult case that relied on expert witness testimony."

Klappholz said investigators give cases their best shot but he won't second-guess a jury's verdict. Prosecutors can't appeal an acquittal.

In the other case, Brian Zirtzman was tried on two counts of first-degree murder in the deaths of Jay Grahlman, 38, and his daughter, Jaymie, 6. The Grahlmans died from injuries suffered in

a fire at their home in April 2003.

Those deaths were investigated by the Fire Department. Zirtzman was found not guilty earlier this month.

"I think the expectations of the jurors are becoming higher and higher," said fire Capt. Al Brockhohn, who investigated the case.

"I think TV does have an impact in terms of what their (juror) expectations are in investigations. They want a proof higher than reasonable doubt."

The final case in 2003 was the Jan. 6 death of Joseph Harris.

Harris' body was found in the front passenger seat of a green 1995 Lincoln in the 3600 block of Wenig Road NE with gunshot wounds to the head. Nobody has been charged with murder in this case, and the investigation by Cedar Rapids police continues.

