

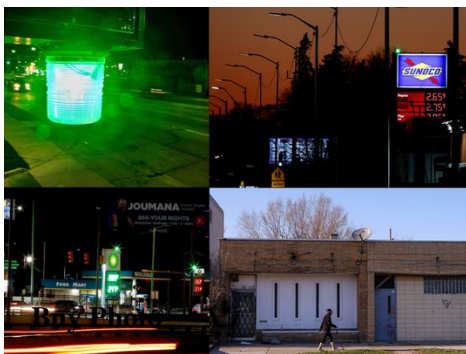
SALE EXTENDED

**99¢ PER WEEK**

**Subscribe Today**  
([HTTP://OFFERS.FREEP.COM/SPECIALOFFER?](http://offers.freep.com/specialoffer?GPS-SOURCE=BENB&UTM_MEDIUM=NANOBARAP20&UTM_EXCHANGE&UTM_CAMPAIGN=2019FIVEDAY)  
**GPS-**  
**SOURCE=BENB&UTM\_MEDIUM=NANOBARAP20&UTM\_EXCHANGE&UTM\_CAMPAIGN=2019FIVEDAY)**

# Does Detroit's Project Green Light really make the city safer?

**Allie Gross, Detroit Free Press** Published 2:39 p.m. ET April 20, 2018 | Updated 12:59 p.m. ET April 21, 2018



(Photo: Detroit Free Press)

The afternoon Antonio Fountain died, a small team of Detroit police officers congregated along East 7 Mile and Westphalia — the crossroads where, four days earlier, on Jan. 7, Fountain and two other men were shot (</story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2018/01/07/three-people-shot-detroits-east-side-sunday-morning/1011166001/>) outside of an after-hours club.

What had been one of the hundreds of violent offenses occurring in the city each week — all competing for the attention of an ever-dwindling police force (<https://www.bridgemi.com/detroit-journalism-cooperative/facing-police-shortage-detroit-seeks-stop-new-cops-jumping-ship>) — was now a homicide, tied to a much-scrutinized clearance rate.

As the detectives moved between the inconspicuous cement compound that housed the bar and the Super Clean Coin Laundry across the street, it was difficult to ignore the flashing green light clipped to the laundromat's sign. A message to the neighborhood that this was a Project Green Light partner. That the Detroit Police Department was watching. That this was a safe place.

But Fountain's death raised an important question: Does rapidly expanding Project Green Light actually boost public safety and curtail crime? Skeptics say that can't be proven and the program tramples on privacy and misdirects money.

Police Chief James Craig, in an interview with the Free Press in January, cited the city's overall drop in crime as evidence Green Light is working.

"I think the best evidence is, first of all, crime reduction. Take a look at our stats," Craig said. He said that since January 2016, crime had decreased by 40% at the first eight Project Green Light sites and that the composite of all Green Light locations in 2017 — just more than 200 locations at the time — had seen an 11% decrease in crime from 2016. (The city as a whole experienced a 7% decrease in violent crimes in 2017 compared with 2016.)

## Read more:

[Detroit school joins crime-fighting program](https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2018/04/03/randolph-career-school-detroit-project-greenlight/481390002/)  
(<https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2018/04/03/randolph-career-school-detroit-project-greenlight/481390002/>)

[Detroit's Greektown district unveils surveillance to boost security](https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2018/01/30/detroits-greektown-district-unveils-green-light-corridor-surveillance-boost-security/1080965001/)  
(<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2018/01/30/detroits-greektown-district-unveils-green-light-corridor-surveillance-boost-security/1080965001/>)

Researchers, however, deem Craig's first example too small of a sample and the second too short of a time frame. No study compares Green Light locations to non-Green Light locations, and the chief says no such dataset exists.

In the absence of this, researchers including Bryce Peterson of the Urban Institute say it is nearly impossible to tie Detroit's crime reduction to specifically Green Light.

"Violent crimes have been declining in many cities across the country," said Peterson, who is advising Milwaukee police on surveillance options. "Without rigorous evaluations that use comparison groups, it is difficult to attribute the decline in any city to a specific program or policy,"

Peterson said he looked into Project Green Light last year as a possible option for his client. While he had heard many positive reviews of the program, his team "hit a wall" when it came time to look at the data.

"I am trying to be neutral in that I've heard mostly good things about it, but, at the same time, I have not seen any direct evidence of its effectiveness. It's only anecdotal information that we've heard from sources with a vested interest in it," Peterson said.

Milwaukee opted to use other tactics.

Back at East 7 Mile and Westphalia, two of the detectives searched for a laundromat manager who could release any private surveillance footage, should it exist. Nobody was there — the fluorescent room was monitored remotely by cameras — and so, after leaving a note, they walked back outside and joined the rest of their group. Asked whether they had checked the Green Light surveillance video, they said "downtown" would do that.



Members of Detroit Police Department's homicide unit stand in front of a Project Green Light partner as they investigate the death of Antonio Fountain, 58, on Jan. 10, 2018. (Photo: Allison Gross)

## Lights, cameras, monitoring

For decades, Detroit has been haunted by crime — and the larger-than-life fears of it. Even as the city off-loaded (<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2015/10/01/fbi-murder-rates/73139988/>) its "Murder Capital" nickname to St. Louis in 2015 and its violent crime rates have, in general, fallen since the early 2000s, it has struggled to shake the reputation of being an unsafe city.

DPD has experimented with various initiatives over the years but none has been so prominent — in part because of the hard-to-miss strobes — as Project Green Light.

While the program is best recognized for the green lights partners place in front of their buildings, at its core, the initiative is about cameras. Participating businesses pay about \$4,000 up front, plus a monthly fee, for surveillance cameras that stream directly to DPD's Real Time Crime Center at its downtown headquarters.

When the program started in 2016, Craig pitched the initiative as an opportunity to catch crimes in real time. Then at a news conference in January announcing the first Green Light Corridor — a section of Greektown where 11 businesses have agreed to install a total of 15 cameras facing the street — Craig said the No. 1 goal was for Project Green Light to act as a deterrent. Sometimes the aim is described as being about nabbing suspects after a



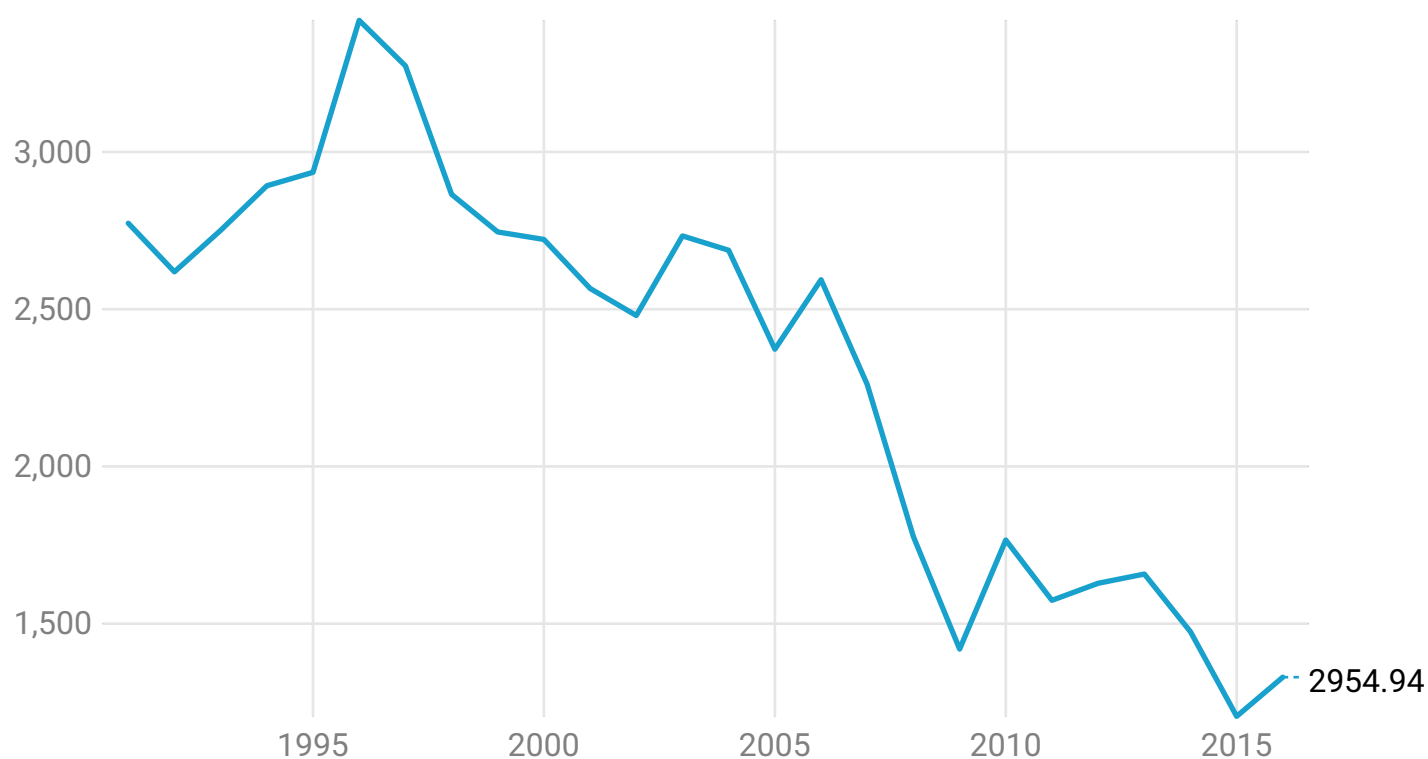
A time exposure showing gas stations that are part of the Green Light program at Grand River Avenue and Southfield Freeway in Detroit on Thursday, April 19, 2018. (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)

In the January interview, in addition to the first-year statistics, Craig pointed to a reduction in carjackings as evidence of the deterrent effect. He cited data from the whole city: A 20% reduction in carjackings from 2016 to 2017.

"Carjackings typically will occur — have occurred — at places where there is an increased opportunity," Craig said. "And where is that? If it's during darkness, it's where people congregate. Where do they congregate after darkness in the neighborhoods? Gas stations. So if we're seeing a reduction in robberies, a reduction in carjackings, then I believe Green Light is playing a role in that. Evidence of it is by the statistics."

## Motor Vehicle Theft in Detroit

Rate per 100,000 Population



Source: [UCR Data Tool](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Attorney Eric Williams, who is working with the American Civil Liberties Union on a committee opposing Project Green Light, said Craig's hodgepodge of statistics is unconvincing.

"It's word salad with numbers," he said, noting that it was difficult, based on the limited stats Craig cites, to actually pinpoint what could be attributed to Green Light.



"Given that there is substantial evidence that live camera surveillance systems do not decrease crime — but increased lighting and police patrols do — the burden is on DPD to establish Project Green Light's camera surveillance as an exception before expanding the program," Williams said.

And the program has been expanding at breakneck speed. Today, the city has more than 300 Green Light partners, including the first school to join, and Mayor Mike Duggan has talked about making it mandatory for all businesses open between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m.

While much of the cost of Project Green Light is being shouldered by the businesses that buy into the program — a factor that has been criticized as being both pay to play and an additional public safety tax — taxpayers also face costs.

Nearly \$8 million in bond money (<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2016/02/25/detroit-uncovers-unspent-bond-funds/80934318/>) was allocated to the department's Real Time Crime Center in 2016. And in August, City Council approved a request to pay Genetec ([https://www.michigan.gov/documents/treasury/Detroit\\_FRC\\_City\\_Resolution\\_2017-23\\_601932\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/treasury/Detroit_FRC_City_Resolution_2017-23_601932_7.pdf)) — the private company behind the Project Green Light technology — \$131,785.70 to support the cameras, license plate readers and hardware for the Real Time Crime Center.

Additionally, as Project Green Light expands, the department will have to "continue to grow," Craig said, acknowledging the need to have more people monitoring the ever-growing database of video footage.

Jonathan Smith, former chief of the Special Litigation Section at the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, who was in charge of monitoring Detroit during its 13 years under DOJ oversight, said Craig is "relying on his gut, rather than science." He asserts that Project Green Light creates a "civil liberties nightmare by placing everyone under constant surveillance," while also focusing resources on the wrong things.

"There is little benefit," he said. "You're spending a lot of money when it could be spent on investing in communities."

Buy Photo 



**A customer walks out of Southern Smokehouse on West McNichols Road in Detroit, Michigan, on Thursday, April 19, 2018. This carryout BBQ restaurant participates in the Detroit Police Green Light program. This restaurant has four cameras that are connected to the Detroit Police. (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)**

Williams sees the financial ripple effects as going beyond just the city and businesses and to those who trust the system.

"You're essentially taking money out of the community and giving it to these vendors for no proven benefit," he said, pointing to an instance where last spring the Detroit Association of Black Organizations raised \$2,500 to help a neighborhood gas station buy Project Green Light.

"Oh, my God, you're just ripping people off," he said. "If you wanted to have the city help people improve the lighting at stores all across the city, that's fine. If you want to engage in community policing across the city, that's fine. Those are all beautiful, wonderful things that have been established to reduce crime."

It's the use of cameras, he and Smith contend, that misses the point and circumvents a good opportunity to address bigger systemic issues.

"If there is a problem with what's going on between midnight and 4 in the morning in a community, understand what the source of that problem is, and address that through true community policing," Smith said, which he describes as police on the streets interacting with neighborhoods in a positive way, and wraparound services.

"You can use that money much, much better, providing employment, housing, education, recreation opportunities," he said, making clear the ties between crime and a lack of economic opportunities and community support.

## Public perception

As the detectives paced the block where the shooting occurred, the snow, a light dusting, seemed to mute the typically loud thoroughfare.

"I am glad to see police anywhere," Denise Roberts, 65, said as she began to move her sheets from the washer to the dryer inside the Super Clean Coin Laundry.

She didn't mind live monitoring by police.

"It doesn't make me uncomfortable because I don't do anything wrong," she said, looking up as the two officers, the ones looking for the laundromat's private surveillance video, entered the otherwise empty building.

Will the program really change behavior? She remained unconvinced.

"When people wanna act a fool," she said, "they gonna act a fool regardless."

Buy Photo 



**Roy Swanson of Detroit watches his clothes wash at Super Clean Coin Laundry on E. 7 Mile in Detroit on Thursday April 19, 2018. "It feels a little safer. I think that the bad guys know that the cameras are on here as well," Swanson said about the comfort of the business being a part of the Green Light Program with the Detroit Police Department. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)**

Other residents echoed Roberts' sentiment. Many were fine being watched, they liked the idea of Green Light and found themselves more inclined to go to businesses that had it. But they also still described neighborhoods as "hot" and high-crime, unsure whether the program actually works.

Down the street from the laundromat, Latonya Rodgers, 35, walked into the Green Light-monitored Brown's Mini Mart. Asking customers to sign a petition to raise the minimum wage to \$12, Rogers said that she found herself gravitating toward Green Light stores.

Many shoppers seemed to feel this way. While the street was quiet, the mini-mart was bustling. A steady stream of customers moved in and out, picking up chips, eggs, cigarettes, Faygo, and boxes of cereal — necessities that are otherwise difficult to get when a neighborhood lacks a staple grocery store or reliable public transportation to get to one. The 48205 ZIP Code, which includes East 7 Mile and Westphalia, has a poverty rate hovering just below 35%.



Abraham Ajrouch, who owns Brown's, stood in the back room. While he has 16 personal cameras already lining his station, about a year ago he decided to get Green Light as well. It seemed like the thing to do, he explained.

The 56-year-old said he was still trying to figure out whether it has been worth it or not.

In 2015, the year before Brown's got Green Light, the mini-mart had 103 calls to police; in 2016, the year it got Green Light, the number jumped to 181. This past year, it was at 116. For comparison, the Citgo down the street, which does not have Green Light, made 35 calls to DPD in 2015, 23 in 2016 and 31 in 2017.

The stats on such a small sample make it difficult to draw conclusions. The man behind the counter at the Citgo, who declined to give his name, said his boss did not feel the need to have Green Light, but that he had it at another gas station he owned.

It depended, in large part, on customer demand, he said, speaking toward a trend that has become more noticeable as the program has received more media attention and public accolades.

In September, for example, community members on the east side protested a gas station at Eight Mile and Gratiot for not buying into the Green Light program.

"We just want a safer establishment, well lit, with the cameras to cut down on some of the drug activities and loitering around in the areas," Tonya Wall of Regent Park told [WDET](https://wdet.org/posts/2017/12/22/86150-what-are-those-flashing-green-lights-doing-on-detroit-businesses-map-chart/) (101.9) at the time. "I would think as a business owner I would want my patrons to be safe."

Buy Photo 



**A Valero gas station on W. McNichols in Detroit is seen on Thursday, April 19, 2018. The owner would like to be a part of the Green Light Program with the City of Detroit Police Department. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)**

Furqan Alam, the owner of a Valero on the west side, noted neighborhood pressure as well.

Alam, who has owned his store since 1992, is next to the Detroit Public School Community District campus that just became the first Green Light campus. Twenty-one cameras now line Randolph Career and Technical Center's facade and two cameras, adhered to metal detectors, greet each visitor at the entrance.

Alam said he will add Green Light when his building renovation is done in six months.

"People understand it will make them feel safer. It's a state of mind." But, he added, "If you notice in the media, crime happens in Green Light places, too."

Williams, with the ACLU, sees a tragedy here. People — namely poor and already marginalized — are all too happy to give away their security and privacy in the name of a public safety program that may not work as promised.

"The reason people feel this way is because they constantly have the chief of police and mayor saying it works. There isn't a constant drumbeat of questions; all they're hearing are these BS statistics," he said.

"It's a self-fulfilling prophecy; we keep telling people it will make them feel safer in the absence of evidence," he said. "It's inevitable that they're going to believe you, particularly when they're desperate for a solution to a real issue, which is crime."

## Surveillance studies

Studies on the use of surveillance for policing have been inconclusive.

In September 2011, the Urban Institute, an economic and social policy think tank, published a paper analyzing surveillance trends in Washington, D.C., Baltimore and Chicago. Drilling into the question of whether the program was worth the cost, the organization reported mixed findings.

"Results varied, with crime falling in some areas and remaining unchanged in others," it said, noting that success or failure depended on how the surveillance systems were set up and monitored and how they balanced privacy and security.

Baltimore, which "virtually saturated" its downtown area with blue lights and cameras that were then monitored around the clock by police, found a significant decline in total crime, violent crime, and larceny downtown. The effects, however, were mixed in the neighborhoods. Crime fell by 25% in one area, 10% in another and stayed the same in a third.

In Chicago, the report documented two neighborhoods in the same precinct that had cameras. One saw crime fall by nearly 12% while the other saw no change. The reason for the discrepancy, according to the report's authors, was that residents in the latter community "believed police weren't consistently monitoring their neighborhood's cameras."

Buy Photo 



The inside of a laundromat on East 7 Mile Road in Detroit, Michigan, on Thursday, April 19, 2018. This laundromat participates in Detroit Green Light program that has a green strobe light outside the store and cameras inside and out that have a direct video feed to the Detroit Police. (Photo: Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press)

The issue of what is being watched came up for Eric Piza, an associate professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who spent time studying camera use in Newark, N.J.

Piza said that research suggests that cameras work best in small, contained environments. To this extent, he said, Project Green Light is promising.

A problem, however, is when the program gets too big.



"My own research suggests that there is, for lack of a better term, a tipping point at which the police can get to a situation where they've installed so many cameras that they can no longer effectively police them," he said. His advice to police departments was to install only the number of cameras they can "realistically and proactively" monitor.

With more than 300 feeds now active in Detroit, not all are being monitored at once.

"Even if we had 200 people sitting in the room, we couldn't view 200 [cameras] — it would be impossible," Craig said in January, noting that when businesses join Green Light they are reminded they are "not the only Green Light."

The Memorandum of Understanding between Green Light businesses and the police, in fact, notes that DPD will monitor cameras at its "discretion" and will not guarantee but rather make "its best effort to monitor" a business's cameras should it make a 911 call.

"This MOU does not oblige DPD to monitor the Entity's cameras at any time," it states.

It raises questions of what would happen should, as Mayor Duggan has indicated he's interested in exploring, all businesses open late nights be required to get Green Light.

"If they don't monitor it, then you're going to run into the problem that you read about in our report, which is once people know that the cameras are not being monitored, they're going to lose their effectiveness," said Peterson of the Urban Institute. "You can get to the point where it's so saturated the market, that it becomes ineffective for everybody."

## Real Time Crime Center

Buy Photo 



A crime analyst monitors video screens in the real time crime center at the Detroit public safety headquarters in Detroit. (Photo: Romain Blanquart, Detroit Free Press)

When the Free Press visited the Real Time Crime Center in January, eight people — civilians and sworn police officers — monitored feeds from about 230 partners. According to DPD, at the start of each daily shift — 7 a.m., 3 p.m. and 11 p.m.— each Green Light location is flicked through to make sure the cameras are working. Then cameras are monitored if a 911 call is made, or if the area is considered a hot spot — a rotation of eight to 10 high-crime Green Light locations that get extra attention.

Six Mile and Woodward, an area of Detroit across from Palmer Park where johns go to pick up transgender sex workers, is one of the hot spots. One of Craig's Green Light success story deals with a transgender woman who was robbed and shot in front a Green Light location on the strip.

While the Green Light did not deter the case, and the crime was not stopped in real time, the strip had been a hot spot that night and police were able to respond almost immediately, tracking down the suspects' vehicle and, following a high-speed chase, making an arrest that night. The Green Light video was then used during the prosecution.



"Let's say we don't see it in real time but we're aware a crime occurred at this location," Craig said, explaining that many 911 calls come after the fact. "We have the ability to go back, extract the video, and then ... identify the suspect."

While this was viewed as a success for Craig, for Williams it raised questions.

"What use is a live feed if it doesn't prevent crime in progress?" he asked, cutting to the heart of his issue with the cameras: If there was no specific evidence that the cameras were deterring crime, and the live feed has yet to stop a crime in progress, why must all the footage — crime, and non-crime — stream directly to DPD 24/7?

"I am surprised more people aren't offended," he said highlighting several potential abuses of the system, such as catching a glimpse of someone who may have a warrant out for their arrest for being unable to pay a traffic ticket and going down to arrest them when they just went to the corner store to grab a bag of Cheetos, or allowing immigration authorities to have access to the Green Light footage.

Craig laughed at the suggestion his department would do this. Williams is leery.

"Who wants to live in a surveillance state?" he asked. "If the government wants to follow you around, if they want to put GPS on you, they have to get a warrant, they can't just put a GPS marker under your car, they have to get a warrant, right? But if you see some of the video demonstrations of what this technology can do, combined with the facial recognition software, it can literally follow a person down the street. It's spooky. All without a warrant and with no proof."

## Antonio Fountain's death

In February, 22-year-old Denzel Biggs was charged with first-degree murder in the death of Fountain. His case, which also includes charges in the nonfatal shootings of the two other men, goes before a jury in May.

DPD, citing the ongoing trial, would not discuss whether Green Light footage from the laundromat played a role in Biggs' charges, stating only that "there were some things captured on the video."

The prosecutor's office contends the Green Light video "had little to do with this particular case."

Buy Photo 



**A motorcycle drives past the scene where a homicide occurred outside an after hours bar on Detroit's east side at Westphalia and East 7 Mile earlier this year on Thursday, April 19, 2018, across the street from a laundry mat that is a Green Light Partner with the City of Detroit. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)**

Four days before Fountain was shot, Police Chief Craig and Mayor Duggan joined forces to host a news conference announcing 2017's crime stats.

Detroit's homicide rate had dropped to the lowest in decades, and the mood was celebratory. Project Green Light was one of several initiatives highlighted and credited for the improvements.

As Craig discussed the stats, he pulled back for a second. It wasn't just crime that was dropping — so, too, were fears.

"We can talk about statistics all day long, but as important is reducing the perception of crime," he said, adding, "... I mean certainly if you've been a victim you know someone who's been a victim that's going to have a direct impact on you. But all in all, people feel safer."

For Fountain's family, public perception is a tough concept. The week of the crime stat news conference, that first week of January, 26 people were shot in Detroit. Fountain was one of them. He was sitting in a car less than 250 feet from a Green Light partner — a distance DPD uses when evaluating crime at Green Light locations.

"My uncle, my brother, guidance counselor, my best friend, thanks for all the laughs, the pain, the enjoyment of each other," Steven Fountain, the 58-year-old's nephew, posted Jan. 10 on Facebook, the same day the homicide unit arrived at the intersection. "You will always be with me no matter what. ... I remember everything you taught me even when I felt you wasn't right you was always right. Love you Uncle Tony."

*Contact Allie Gross at [aegross@freepress.com](mailto:aegross@freepress.com). Follow her on Twitter @[@allie\\_elisabeth](https://twitter.com/allie_elisabeth)*

Read or Share this story: <https://on.freep.com/2HQOanC>