RICHMOND — They've noticed.

As days have turned into weeks and weeks into months, those around Richmond can’t help but notice the big zero on their crime scoreboard. Under “homicides” is a giant goose egg that’s as big as an elephant.
Yet many — like teammates avoiding a pitcher with a no-hitter — would rather not say anything.

“It’s like any time we have these broad periods where the killings stop. We’re all nervous to mention that it hasn’t happened,” Police Chief Allwyn Brown said. “But it’s really important to talk about it, because many efforts have gone into it, and we feel like it’s been part of a process that has seen this city go from a place of blame to a place of responsibility. So let’s talk.”

Once the center of talk regarding the Bay Area’s most violent cities, Richmond on Sunday entered its fourth month of 2018 without a homicide. This spell comes after 2017 saw 15 people killed within city limits, capping a three-year spell in which Richmond recorded 61.

Police records date back to the early 1970s, and the 4 1/2-month gap between homicides is “unprecedented,” Brown said.

Federal task force arrests that have curbed gang violence helped, Brown said. So have a combination of communication and strategical policies that Brown likened to small mechanical adjustments in a pitcher’s rotation. But mostly, he said, it’s been the getting-to-know-you interaction between the department and the community, the seeds of which were planted long ago.

“I call it the ‘secret sauce,’ ” Brown said.
Nobody has been shot to death in the city since Nov. 14, when a man and woman were killed in a shooting in the Hilltop Green neighborhood. The city hasn’t recorded a homicide of any kind since Nov. 25, when four people died in a freeway crash on eastbound Interstate 80 that authorities say happened because Sacramento resident Fred Lowe was driving under the influence (he faces four counts of murder).

It’s not only the police who are noticing changes in Richmond homicide numbers. Residents are seeing changes in the city too.

“I’m new to Richmond — a couple of years — but I’ve been in the Bay Area my whole life, and the stereotype about Richmond and what we always heard is that it was a hardscrabble town and that it was unsafe, and maybe for years it was,” resident Lorne Evje said. “But the things that the police have done here going on years are having the kind of significant effect that you don’t see in a lot of places.”

Evje is a member of Richmond’s Community Safety Academy — aka the ‘secret sauce,’ a squad of city residents that engages with its community brethren by walking neighborhoods and befriending residents and merchants.

Group members carry the biggest influence in the curb of killings, Brown said, because they “speak through their actions for the values the department. We want people to trust us and believe in us.”

“What it shows, I think, is that policing is more than just an officer driving through a neighborhood,” Evje said. “They’re on foot, on bikes, in the shops, in the schools. The academy gives us the tools to engage with people. It’s as simple as helping people realize that if you see trash collect somewhere in a neighborhood, people will only litter more and trash it more. But if you clean it up, you send a different message, and that person is more than likely to throw something away.

“It’s a collection of small things, but add them together and it makes a big difference in how people view themselves and the city around them.”

How big?

“People call in suspicious activity now,” Brown said. “They open their doors now to officers who are asking questions. Over time, the work of the CSA has made it the norm for people to trust us and cooperate with us … The days of a going to a neighborhood crime scene and nobody seeing anything are over.”

Nevertheless, history always resides close by, and many remain wary that this long stretch is just the most abnormally long blip ever.
“Every year, we go a day or two, or a week or two or three without a homicide, and then we get word of the first one, and it's like, ‘Here we go again,’ ” Richmond Mayor Tom Butt said. “The bottom line is a lot of the shootings over the years have been over really stupid stuff. You'd find out about them and wonder why anybody would kill another over that particular thing. Maybe we've turned that corner.”

Maybe.

“I knock on wood constantly,” Butt said. “Cross my fingers and throw salt over my shoulder. Can you suggest anything else?”