

## Crime Is Down, Again

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Violent crime has been declining in New York City for several years, and at dramatic rates in the last two. The recent multiple killings in the Bronx and Harlem have drawn national headlines, but in fact crime has fallen more over a longer period of time in New York City than in most other big cities or in the nation as a whole. **Either a major social phenomenon is under way or the police and the criminal justice system deserve substantial credit.**

Consider the following remarkable statistic. According to Federal Bureau of Investigation numbers, issued last weekend, serious crimes throughout the country went down 1 percent, or about 67,000 crimes, in the first six months of 1995, compared with the same period a year earlier. In that same period in New York City there were 41,000 fewer crimes, or about a 16 percent drop.

The big gains cannot continue indefinitely. In the last six months, murder and some other serious crimes in New York City dropped at a slightly lower rate than they did in the first six months of 1995. But the police say they are certain there is no significant tapering off of the declines in crime rates. They note that crime in the second half of this year has dropped at a more rapid rate than it did in the second half of 1994. **The police project about 1,200 murders this year, a remarkable drop from the 2,245 in 1990. The statistics, combined with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's crackdown on "quality of life" crimes — drunkenness, illegal peddlers, public urination and the like — have begun to make New Yorkers actually feel safer, something no one would have thought possible a few years ago.**

What is going on? Criminologists say that the decline in gang wars, the aging criminal population and falloff in the use of crack and other drugs are major factors. But demographic and social trends take place slowly, and the drops in crime have been

rapid. Police Commissioner William Bratton seems entitled to argue that police tactics are what have paid off, particularly the use of computerized tracking of crimes so that the police can respond more quickly to trends than in the past.

**Until recently, the most commonly cited study of the effect of the police as a deterrent against crime was conducted in Kansas City in 1974. It found that there was no connection between the numbers of police on patrol and the occurrence of crime. Now criminologists say that crime is affected if the police think strategically.**

Mr. Bratton argues, for instance, that closing brothels and drug and gambling locations and using sweeps to arrest people on weapons possession or other charges has the same effect on crime that arresting fare-beaters did in the subway. The arrested suspects, the police say, are the ones who carry out bigger crimes, or know the people who do. After two years of stepped-up seizures of guns, handgun homicides are down 40 percent from 1993.

How long the current trends can keep going is uncertain. At some point the recent dramatic declines in crime will have to level off; some experts believe this has already begun. Another concern is that the number of teen-agers in the city will be growing rapidly in the next few years, and crimes carried out by this group are not falling as rapidly — and in some cases are increasing.

Much still needs to be done to instill discipline and honesty in a police force that has had more than its share of corruption scandals in recent years. But at a time of rising social stresses and cutbacks in education and social services, the declining crime rate is perhaps the brightest spot in Mayor Giuliani's two-year-old record as Mayor. The police, the district attorneys and other elements of the system surely deserve some of the credit.