

Safe? You Bet Your Life

New York can still be murder, but your chances of surviving in the Big Apple have just improved

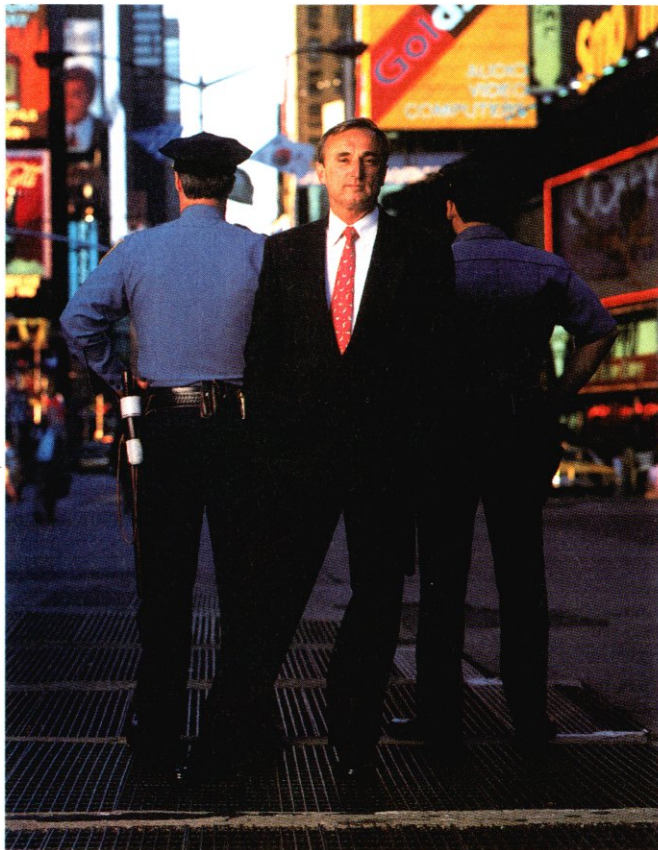
By JOHN MOODY

IT WAS THE KIND OF GRISLY ONE-MAN crime spree that leads off the local newscasts and confirms everyone's worst fears about New York City. Last week a mentally unstable man hacked his wife with a meat cleaver, killed his mother-in-law, stabbed her 2-year-old grandson, stole a car and rammed it into a throng of homeless people waiting outside a soup kitchen on Manhattan's East Side, injuring 18. As horrible as the episode was, it was eclipsed by the most promising crime statistic to come out of the city in years: the 585 murders reported in the first half of this year represent a 31% decrease from the 1994 rate. Not only that, but also of the 25 most populous cities in the U.S., New York ranks 21st in overall crime according to the city's police department, compared with 18th in 1993. The city has come a long way from the 2,245 killings recorded in 1990 (fueled largely by a crack-cocaine epidemic), when tabloid headlines implored then Mayor David Dinkins to DO SOMETHING, DAVE!

Experts cite many reasons for the dramatic decline—changes in demographics, shifts in the drug trade, more active community involvement—and they note that murder rates are down in most major U.S. cities. But it is clear that in New York aggressive police work is at least partly responsible. And this news comes at a good time for Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Police Commissioner William Bratton. They have been trying to offset the damage caused in May, when rowdy police, including some of New York's finest, went on a spree during a convention in Washington, groping guests and prancing naked through hotels. "It's not the weather," says Bratton. "It's not demographics. It's not economics. What's happening is that you have 38,000 hardworking cops, a mayor who supports us and a public who is with us."

Much credit belongs to an old-fash-

ioned show of strength. Though facing a \$3.1 billion budget gap, the mayor, following his predecessor's lead, has pumped up the uniformed force to a record 38,310, compared with about 26,000 in 1990. But numbers make up only part of the picture. Since he took over City Hall in January 1994, Giuliani, a hard-nosed former federal prosecutor who has long made a specialty of studying local law enforce-



HELLUVA TOWN: "By dealing with the quality of life," Police Commissioner Bratton says, "you improve the sense of safety"

ment, has had a laboratory with 7.3 million residents in which to test some innovative theories. One of the most commonsense measures links cops' promotions and future assignments not to the number of arrests they make but to their ability to keep crime out of their territory. "An arrest is almost a failure," Giuliani explains. "The better way to manage a police department is to prevent crime in the first place and find ways of measuring that."

The keystone of the strategy is to make

each of the city's 76 precinct commanders directly responsible for keeping the peace in a well-defined area—formerly the beat officers' job. When Captain José Cordero of the 40th precinct in the South Bronx learned that shootings in his precinct had edged up 15% earlier this year, for example, he authorized sweeping searches of housing projects and mailboxes, two common hiding places for guns and drugs. By blocking off streets, officers denied potential drug buyers access to the neighborhood. The result: a 22% drop in shootings over the next two months. Says Cordero: "The point was to send a clear message to the criminal element that we're serious about this." His boss has also laid on the pressure. "If they don't perform, they're taken out very quickly," warns Bratton, who in the past 18 months has replaced three-fourths of the city's precinct heads.

Some experts also believe Giuliani's crackdown on petty offenders, like squeegeers who hassle motorists for change at stoplights or graffiti artists who vandalize the subways, has worked to ease more serious offenses.

Explains criminologist Lawrence Sherman of the University of Maryland: "Ironically, the best way to reduce murder may be to make lots of arrests for spitting on the sidewalk, simply as a way to deter criminals from carrying concealed weapons."

Indeed, gun homicides in New York have declined 41% from the 1994 rate.

Still, some New Yorkers caution that Giuliani's determination to balance the budget by slashing funds for schools, hospitals, welfare and Medicaid will create problems that a phalanx of blue uniforms cannot solve. "I understand there are budget constraints, but you can't ignore the other side," says Bronx District Attorney Robert Johnson. "Reducing crime has to rely on continuing efforts in education and social services. That's what's going to make a long-term difference."

No matter what the numbers show, the voices that count belong to everyday citizens hardened to the reality of city life. Do they feel safer? Brenda Clark, 45, still complains about the nightly crackle of gunfire outside her South Bronx home. Anna McClendon, 71, distrusts police efforts to enlist civilians in identifying criminals. Says she: "You're liable to get yourself killed." That may be true, but on paper, anyway, the streets aren't as mean as they used to be.

—Reported by Sharon E. Epperson/New York

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