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Newark Murder Rate Dropped 30 Percent in 2008

By [NATE SCHWEBER](#)

[NEWARK](#) — The murder rate dropped more than 30 percent here last year, but that is little comfort to Preisy Ragin, 29.

On [Halloween](#), Mr. Ragin's cousin Lamar Ragin, 27, was shot and killed at the Pilgrim Baptist Village apartment complex when he went to pick up his 8-year-old sister, who was dressed as Cinderella to go trick-or-treating. Police charged a 21-year-old Newark man with the murder.

"Losing my cousin still hurts me," Mr. Ragin said.

Newark recorded 67 homicides in 2008, according to the police, the fewest since 2002, when there were 65. In 2007, there were 97 homicides; in 2006, just over 100.

City officials and community leaders credit new police strategies for the declining murder rate. The yearly total is still higher, though, than was hoped for at midyear, when the city was on pace to match its lowest homicide totals in a generation.

Most officials are optimistic that the murder rate will continue to go down, despite concerns that the nation's economic downturn could have adverse effects.

Some say that the new statistics are the first step toward changing the violent reputation of Newark, [New Jersey's](#) largest city.

"When you look at the murder rate and see it decline, it does give you a real sense of hope about the city," said Al Koeppe, chief executive of the Newark Alliance, a nonprofit group dedicated to improving business and public education.

But [James Alan Fox](#), a professor of criminal justice at [Northeastern University](#) who recently published a study on homicide rates among young blacks, said that the 2008 statistics should be "taken with a grain of salt, and possibly the whole shaker."

"This reflects hard work and smart policing," he said. "But some of the decline is probably random fluctuation."

Since the mid-1980s, Newark's homicide totals have vacillated between a high of 117 in 1985 to 57 in 1997, according to statistics from the Department of Justice. From 1985 to 2005, the city averaged 90 killings a year.

Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#), who has made reducing crime a priority, said that while he was pleased that homicides had dropped, they remained too common. He said he was looking forward to cutting the number further by using better technology and putting more officers on the streets.

“I think that 2009 is going to show the trend is going to continue going our way,” he said.

Around City Hall, the police director, Garry F. McCarthy, is credited with putting into effect policies that may have helped to achieve the reduction in homicide rates since he was appointed in 2006. The strategies of Mr. McCarthy, a former New York City police commander, have included closer monitoring of drug dealers and violent offenders and responding to more quality-of-life issues like noise and vandalism.

Derrick Hatcher, president of the Fraternal Order of Police in Newark, the city’s main police union, said he believed that Mr. McCarthy’s best practice was putting more officers on duty at night and on weekends, when most homicides occur.

Mr. McCarthy said he was “pleased, but not satisfied” with last year’s homicide statistics.

“We had a good year, but that brings no solace to the families of the 67 people murdered,” he said.

Murder rates also sank in the neighboring towns of East Orange and Elizabeth, though they rose slightly in Irvington; officials there speculated that the increase could be linked to drug dealers moving across the city line because of increased police pressure in Newark.

“Is there a displacement issue? Possibly,” said Sgt. Keith Sandberg of the Irvington police. “Newark made a push, and when you push, people are either going to push back or move.”

Chip Hallock, president of the Newark Regional Business Partnership, said the statistics were the beginning of a change in dialogue about the city, one that does not center on its reputation for violence.

“Now we can begin to tell a different story because of the reduction in crime,” he said.

Al-Tarik Onque, co-founder of Stop Shootin’, a nonprofit group founded in 2005 to lead a grass-roots effort against violent crime, said that last year’s homicide trend was emblematic of a groundswell.

“These stats are about people from Newark stepping up and saying, ‘Enough,’ ” he said.

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