

Newark crime fighters offer N.O. working plan

IN LATE FEBRUARY, police officers in Newark, N.J., had to erase a number they had written that day on a white board: 43.

That's how long Newark, one of America's most dangerous cities, had gone without a murder. Statistical anomalies do happen but Newark's winning streak was not just dumb luck. It followed specific crime-fighting policies Mayor Cory Booker has put in place since taking office a year and a half ago. More importantly, it was also due to a sea change fostered by Booker when he declared the buck stops with him when it comes to economy-killing violent crime.

New Orleans can take a lesson.

Newark has a poverty rate of 28.4 percent.

New Orleans's poverty rate before Katrina was 27.9 percent.

Both cities have suffered middle-class flight for decades. Newark, with about 280,000 residents today, is down 40 percent from its peak mid-century population.

New Orleans lost nearly a third of its peak mid-century population before Katrina and today, with about 300,000 residents, has lost about half, at least temporarily.

Both cities have long had residents who face poor educational and employability prospects. Both cities must struggle to overcome national reputations for corruption: Newark's former mayor, Sharpe James, is on trial right now.

Here's another similarity: persistent, viciously violent crime. In 2004, the last full year before Katrina, New Orleans had a homicide rate of 56 per 100,000 residents, compared with Newark's 30, putting the Crescent City near the top of violent city lists.

New Orleans had a rate of 948 violent crimes per 100,000 residents while Newark averaged 1,024, twice the national rate.

That's why Booker's recent progress on the crime front is good news for New Orleans: If Newark can start to make progress, so can New Orleans, with the right leadership.

Booker first took responsibility for the problem. "It is not acceptable for us to have such a high rate of murder," he said at his inauguration.

Booker knows he can't just throw up his hands and say he can't fix crime until the education system is fixed and the job situation is better. While courting investment in Newark, he understands his city can't support good jobs and deep-seated education reform until it first makes it an attractive place to live for middle-class taxpayers and job creators. Such outsiders won't come or stay if they're terrified a robber will accost their families as they move from their house to their car in the evening.

Booker took proven approach to crime fighting ignoring any potential political fallout. Booker is pragmatic, looking to other cities to see what's worked and adapting it.



Nicole Gelinas

He hired a proven New York veteran to head his police department, which then launched an aggressive stop-and-frisk program in violence-plagued neighborhoods because New York cops have long known that when you stop a suspicious loiterer and find he's carrying an illegal gun, you've prevented a violent crime.

When criminals expect they'll be stopped and frisked, they start leaving the weapons

at home, further reducing violence.

Newark is also working with local and federal prosecutors to raise the city's abysmal conviction rate, understanding that a criminal who knows he faces a rational and consistent punishment for a crime will more likely base his future actions on expected consequences.

The results are starting to show. After a tough start, including a triple-murder of college students in a parking lot, Newark had 109 fewer shootings last year. Assaults are up this year but other violent crimes have fallen. Residents of violence-plagued neighborhoods say they feel safer outside.

Newark has had four murders this year, while New Orleans, with roughly the same population, has already suffered more than 30.

Other crime is way up on a per capita basis in New Orleans since Katrina. Residents live with the very real risk of being robbed or worse, which isn't a normal fear in a functional city.

The good news for New Orleans, though, is that while it is far too early to declare unqualified success, Newark is showing that even in a city with every disadvantage, crime isn't like the weather, as New Orleanians seem to think it is: something oppressive that citizens complain about but can't fix.

New Orleanians should keep that in mind as they assess Mayor C. Ray Nagin's terms in office and start to look toward who will be their next mayor. •

Nicole Gelinas, a former resident of New Orleans, is a contributing editor of City Journal in New York, available at www.city-journal.org