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City's Puzzling Crime Picture

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In the weeks since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, police have been arresting an average of 571 people a day in the city — about half as many as the usual daily average of 1,120.

Yet, the city's crime rate since the terrorist attacks has remained about the same, a phenomenon that criminologists are at pains to explain.

The crime conundrum is complicated by the fact that, after the attacks, the Police Department was forced to curtail some targeted policing strategies frequently hailed as instrumental in bringing about record crime reductions — and still crime did not spike.

For most of the past three months, drug dealers have been able to operate with little fear that their customers might be undercover officers, because the Police Department temporarily shelved specialized units, such as narcotics squads, to meet trade center security concerns.

In another law-enforcement cutback, Operation Condor — in which extra officers saturate areas showing spikes in crime, whether from drug-dealing or robberies — was suspended until about two weeks ago because of manpower needs caused by the trade center tragedy.

Experts perplexed by static rate since attacks

Even with these pullbacks in policing, department statistics show that for Jan. 1 through Sept. 9 of this year, so-called "index crime" — murder, robbery, rape, assault, grand larceny, burglary and stolen cars — was down 13.27 percent over the same period in 2000. From the first of the year through Nov. 25, index crime was down 12.77 percent over the same period last year.

"The statistical evidence suggests that there must be other important factors besides police crime-fighting strategies that influence the crime rate," said Andrew Karmen, professor of criminology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan. "Even with police preoccupied with other matters after the World Trade Center attacks, the crime rate did not explode as one might imagine it would."

Karmen, in his book "New York Murder Mystery," poses a theory of "fortuitous confluence" to explain plummeting homicide rates and record-breaking drops in other crime categories over the past several years.

"A lucky coming-together. A favorable economy, favorable demographics; less young men in the high crime-prone years," he said, referring to males ages 18 to 24. "An influx of immigrants who traditionally have been better behaved than native New Yorkers. A waning crack epidemic and a changing of the mood among the young people."

His theory, he said, explains why cities across the nation also have experienced record crime reductions in recent years, even though various police strategies have been used.

Still, during the past few months, some of the factors Karmen plugs into his "confluence" have started to change: The economy began to sour, and the number of college-aged youths increased. Couple those elements with a recent hike in the number of shootings and some experts, including Karmen, are wondering if "perhaps we're at a crossroads."

From Sept. 9 to Nov. 25, there were 437 shootings, compared with 369 during the same period last year, and 503 people were shot, compared with 419 during the same period in 2000.

The increase so concerned police brass that, in a move effective this week, they ordered the Narcotics Unit's 3,000 officers to work a sixth day each week,

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during which the cops will be deployed to patrol areas where shootings have increased, NYPD spokesman Thomas Antenen said.

Despite the rise in shootings, though, the weeks following the terrorist attacks have offered criminologists contradictory signs about future crime trends.

In the week after two hijacked jetliners crashed into the Twin Towers, the number of crimes reported across the city plunged. Some experts postulated that even criminals were too shocked by the mass murder of thousands to continue to break into houses, hot-wire cars or pull off stick-ups.

"We never have been attacked the way we were on Sept. 11," said Robert McCrie, professor and chairman of the Department of Law, Police Science and Criminal Justice Administration at John Jay. "It was shocking to the sensibilities, including those persons who might be inclined to criminal behavior."

From Jan. 1. through Sept. 9, the city averaged 12 slayings, 39 rapes, 464 assaults, 511 robberies, 603 burglaries, 550 stolen cars and 870 grand larcenies a week.

In the week following the trade center attacks, most of those numbers fell, for an overall 18 percent drop in major crime when compared with the pre-attack averages: Reported were 27 rapes, 375 assaults, 471 robberies, 535 burglaries, 527 auto thefts and 552 grand larcenies. (In an anomaly, there were 14 murders that week, two more than the city had averaged weekly through Sept. 9.)

James Fox, a criminal justice professor at Northeastern University in Boston, pointed out that an "X" factor in that first week's reduction is the number of victims who did not report crimes.

"There was less likelihood that victims were going to report, particularly the less-serious crimes," he said. "The thinking may have been, 'The cops are real busy. I'm not going to call in because my bike is stolen.' There may have been a real reluctance to report."

For the 11 weeks since the attacks, the average weekly number of index crimes increased to 3,255 from the pre-attack average of 3,049, a rise of 6.3 percent. Spikes in robberies (18 percent), stolen cars (15 percent) and burglary (12 percent) fueled that increase.

But experts say there are several factors to consider when viewing that increase:

- The crime rate actually had been on the rise since July 1. Traditionally, crime goes up during the second half of the year, with its more favorable weather conditions.
- Even with the increase, there still were 12-percent fewer index crimes reported between Sept. 11 and Nov. 25, a time when police resources supposedly were stretched to their limits, than during the same period last year.
- Crime is still down 12.8 percent for the year to date over the same period in 2000. And in 2000, crime was down 5.56 percent from that in 1999.

"Since Sept. 11, we've had twice the decline in crime that we had all of last year," Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said at a Nov. 24 news conference. "That's a very substantial decline."

Fox said one possible contributing factor is that since the Sept. 11 attacks, far fewer people have been coming into the city.

"It could be a case of fewer potential victims coming to town these days and fewer potential perpetrators coming to town," he said. "If the actual number of people in New York City drops substantially because of fear, the crime rate is going to go down, too."

An NYPD patrol supervisor, however, noted that Manhattan is the only borough that would be affected significantly by a drop-off of that sort, and Manhattan is not where most of the crime in the city occurs.

The supervisor, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that after the chaos of the week following the disaster, the department was able to maintain full patrol strength on the street, with about 4,000 officers per shift, by upping officers' shifts from 8 to 12 hours. The supervisor said he thinks the NYPD caught a break during that first week because criminals also were shocked and, after so many years of tough-nosed law-enforcement tactics, "The bad guys have been conditioned to know we'll respond."

But Fox predicted that if the department's arrest rate does not increase, the "bad guys" gradually will become more fearless and crime will spike.

"With arrests going down in the short term, it's possible that there may be no impact on the crime rate," he said. "But in the long term, it definitely could be a problem. With fewer offenders arrested and being jailed and doing time, eventually it could come back to haunt the city."

Now, nearly three months from the catastrophe, the NYPD is returning to its normal rhythms. More and more specialty units have been pulled back from World Trade Center duties to resume jobs like tracking gang members and going after drug dealers.

The NYPD once again is paying officers overtime to work Operation Condor, mainly to arrest people who have outstanding warrants, under the presumption that every such arrest may prevent future crimes.

What effect the World Trade Center attacks will continue to have on the city's crime rate remains an open question.

"Everyone would like it to be a nice, clear-cut picture," Karmen said. "But it can be argued that right now we have a confusing picture, a mixed picture. Some things are up; others are down. Right now, there's still a big question mark: Which way will the crime rate go?"

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