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NYPD shootings down

Better training is cited as reason fewer hit and killed

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The number of civilians shot by the NYPD is on pace for an all-time low, the result, say experts, of better trained cops who know when to pull the trigger.

As of yesterday, cops had shot 36 persons, four fewer than last year, according to the NYPD's weekly firearms report. Ten of those shooting victims were killed, meaning there were two fewer fatalities this year.

The victims this year include criminal suspects and one bystander who was hit accidentally, officials said.

Even the number of bullets fired by police officers was down, dropping to 466 rounds, four fewer than last year.

After years in which the NYPD was dogged by controversial civilian shootings that sparked angry charges about police aggression, the department appears to have addressed the problem.

"We have to be one of the most restrained police departments in the United States," said Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik. "The cops are doing an exceptional job."

DAILY NEWS EXCLUSIVE

The improvement is truly staggering, when compared with police shootings in the early 1990s.:

- In 1991, cops wounded 78 people, 27 of them fatally.
- In 1993, 54 people were wounded by police, 23 fatally.
- Sixty-one people were wounded by cops, 30 fatally, in 1994, the first year of the Giuliani administration.

Different training

James O'Keefe, the former director of training for the NYPD, said the improvement can be directly traced to a shift five years ago in firearms training.

"We always had trained marksmanship, shooting a hole in the middle of a target, but we made a deliberate effort to teach judgment," said O'Keefe, a professor of criminal justice and legal studies at St. John's University. "The question became not 'how to shoot,' but 'when to shoot.'"

To accomplish that goal, the NYPD acquired video systems and training scenarios using paint-ball guns to recreate encounters that cops might face, O'Keefe said.

Other police experts point out that there was much more crime 10 years ago, therefore, cops were involved in more violent encounters.

But Kerik pointed out that there are about 9,000 more cops today than in 1990.

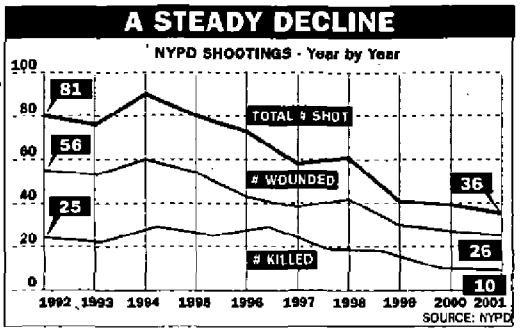
The commissioner said there is a public perception that cops fire their weapons more than they actually do, probably because of the disproportionate publicity that controversial shootings generate.

Retired Deputy Inspector John Cerar, the former commander of the NYPD firearms and tactics unit, said 10 fatal police shootings this year is "unbelievable."

"Training always takes it on the chin when something goes wrong, so let's blame these fantastic numbers on training," Cerar said.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said the NYPD deserves credit for reducing the use of deadly force by cops.

"That deadly force is down doesn't answer the question of whether police abuse is down," she said. "I think public awareness of the police is shaped by everyday encounters they have."



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