

N.Y. / REGION

# The Crime Rate Drops, and a City Credits Its Embrace of Surveillance Technology

By RICHARD G. JONES    MAY 29, 2007

## Correction Appended

EAST ORANGE, N.J., May 28 — Detective Robert Harris starts patrolling the raw streets of this worn-down city before he even leaves the parking lot at Police Headquarters.

After climbing into his patrol car last Thursday, Detective Harris flipped open his dashboard-mounted laptop computer and, with a few clicks, was able to access live images of the streets ahead from video surveillance cameras.

A few more clicks, and he could view up-to-the-second police reports in this city of 70,000, which within the past half decade posted crime rates as high as twice the national average and where an average of five cars were reported stolen every day.

And if that were not enough, electronic listening devices mounted around the city send an electronic signal to alert officers within seconds of a shooting.

“This is something else,” Detective Harris, 30, said with a smile.

The convergence of those technological crime-fighting tools is in large part the reason why police statistics show that the crime rate here has declined by more than 50 percent in the past three years, East Orange officials say.

Significant pockets of East Orange remain perilous. But by almost any measure, the declines recorded here are substantial. From 2003 to 2006, murders declined by nearly two-thirds, rapes by nearly a third and robberies by half, according to police statistics. Property crimes have also declined, with burglaries down by more than half and car theft falling by two-thirds.

The declines are particularly striking considering the spike in crime in two of this city's neighboring communities. In Newark, the rising murder rate has become a top priority for Mayor Cory A. Booker. And in Irvington, gang violence is so rampant that the city has sought the assistance of the New Jersey State Police.

What's happening in East Orange is the byproduct of the work of the city's 300-member police force, which has remained about the same size over the past few years; more than a million dollars in new electronics and surveillance equipment, most of it paid for with money seized from criminals; and a fine-tuning of the Compstat data collection program for crime statistics pioneered by the New York Police Department.

The director of the East Orange police, Jose M. Cordero, is a Bronx-born former New York City police inspector who ran the eight precincts in the Queens South division and believed that the Compstat model could be successfully applied to the streets of East Orange.

"What we've tried to do is take Compstat to another level," Mr. Cordero said in an interview last week.

That has meant getting the latest crime statistics to officers in real time via computers instead of paper printouts back at the station house. Or using Compstat numbers to identify problem areas where surveillance cameras should be focused and manpower concentrated. The department has also begun collecting DNA samples at every crime scene and, starting last week, deploying officers on Segway Personal Transporters.

Residents say that the pastiche of crime-fighting tools used by the department is helping to change the tenor of many neighborhoods. Barbara Jackson, a community advocate and unabashed gadfly who has lived here for 30 years, recalled an East

Orange that was as tricky to navigate as a minefield, where shootings were a weekly occurrence and car thefts almost routine. In 2003, East Orange reported more than 1,900 stolen cars — an average of more than five each day.

“You would be almost afraid to drive your own car,” said Ms. Jackson, 72, who has lobbied Mr. Cordero to increase safety in the city. “When he first came in,” she said of Mr. Cordero’s arrival in 2004, “I told him I was going to be on him like feathers on a duck.”

And now? Last year, the city reported 638 stolen cars, still too many to keep Ms. Jackson from being completely unruffled, but an improvement just the same.

“Things are changing,” she said. “Our crime is going down, and I’m really proud of that.”

But officials here view the numbers warily, saying that despite the change, there is room for improvement.

“I’m not one who believes a lot in statistics,” said Robert L. Bowser, the mayor of East Orange. “It’s very hard to tell someone that stolen cars are down,” he said, “and they had their car stolen last week. But the numbers speak for themselves.”

The crime rate statistics are a bit of encouraging news for the East Orange Police Department, which in 2005 was jolted by the disclosure that a former chief had underreported crime numbers from 2003 and 2004.

Since the episode, in which an internal investigation found that about 1,500 crimes went unreported, Mr. Cordero has promised to be straightforward about the latest round of figures.

“I have no problem going to a community saying, ‘Crime is up,’ ” Mr. Cordero said. “But at the same time, I also tell them, ‘This is what I’m going to do about it.’ ”

Mr. Cordero has made a crackdown on so-called quality-of-life crimes a priority — the hope being that attention to relatively minor issues like loitering and curfew violations by youngsters will deter such infractions from evolving into more serious crimes.

John M. Paitakes, a criminal justice professor at Seton Hall University, said the role of Compstat and other technological advances in lowering crime rates has been significant. But he also underscored the importance of using existing police techniques to reduce seemingly intractable crime rates in places like East Orange.

“There’s always room for improvement,” Mr. Paitakes said.

***Correction: June 4, 2007***

An article on Tuesday about a drop in crime in East Orange, N.J., which city officials attribute to the Police Department’s use of new surveillance technology, misstated the number of precincts in the Queens South division of the New York Police Department, a division that the East Orange police director, Jose M. Cordero, formerly ran. There are 8, not 18.

A version of this article appears in print on , on page B5 of the New York edition with the headline: The Crime Rate Drops, and a City Credits Its Embrace of Surveillance Technology.

---

© 2016 The New York Times Company