

High Profile Crimes Post Election

by {ga=ddean}

Thursday, December 01, 2005 12:00 AM

Mayor Michael Bloomberg won re-election in part because he fulfilled an unlikely promise he made in his first campaign four years ago -- to continue the drop in crime -- and spent millions of dollars making sure New Yorkers knew about it. Assuming you believe the numbers (and Paul Moses, writing in the Village Voice, [clearly does not](#)), major crime has decreased by 18 percent citywide since Bloomberg was first elected in 2001.

Yet for all his efforts at publicizing the drop as his major accomplishment, New Yorkers may (as a recent poll suggests) [give primary credit for the drop in crime to Police Commissioner Ray Kelly](#) and his several initiatives:

[Operation Spotlight](#) targeted the low-level, quality of life offenders that repeatedly cycle through the court system by providing stiffer penalties for these “career misdemeanants.”

[Operation Impact](#) sent floods of rookie officers and police resources into targeted “impact zones,” an initiative that Kelly credits for reducing violent crime in those neighborhoods.

[Operation Atlas](#) focused on protecting the city from future terrorist attacks.

No new Operations were promised (nor further crime-fighting strategies specified) in the re-election campaign, and if Bloomberg is not getting the credit for the good crime news of the past four years, it is probably safe to assume that he will be blamed for any bad crime news over the next four.

The bad news seems to have begun; at the end of November, the New York Post, in an article entitled [Bloody Legacy](#), reported an increase in shootings of six percent from last year.

While crime levels remain low for now, the public perception of public safety can be easily shaped by the kind of high profile cases that have been in the news since the election last month.

Police Officer Killed in Brooklyn

Dillon Stewart, a 35-year-old New York City police officer, was shot and killed on November 28th after stopping man for running a red light in East Flatbush, Brooklyn. Reports indicate that even after being shot, Stewart continued driving after the suspect until the chase ended at a nearby parking garage.

The next day, police arrested 27-year old Allan Cameron and charged him with the murder of Stewart, as well as the attempted murder of another New York City police officer, Wiener Philippe, on November 19th. According to the New York Times, Cameron has had [run-ins with the law before](#) in both New York and Pennsylvania. Cameron was arraigned in Brooklyn after being led to the courtroom through a [hallway lined with police officers](#)

Governor Pataki used Dillon Stewart's death as an opportunity to call for the [reinstatement of the death penalty](#) /

Mayor Bloomberg responded by restating [his opposition to capital punishment](#)

, noting that he'd "rather lock somebody up and throw away the key." The mayor also reiterated his support for stricter gun laws. With the Post reporting that [the gun used to shoot Stewart has quite a criminal history](#) of its own, perhaps this time people will listen.

High-Profile Sexual Assaults

In recent weeks, several sexual assault cases have also gotten traction in the local media. While the Police Department's statistics say that reported cases of rape are down 4.3 percent compared to a year ago, these cases play on some of our most basic fears about violent crime.

On November 21, two police officers were arrested and charged with sexually abusing a woman while they were on duty. The officers allegedly attempted to assault the woman after stopping her car in Bushwick, Brooklyn, then followed her back to her apartment where the assault continued.

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More prominent has been the case of Peter Braunstein, which has captivated the local papers and television news for much of November. According to reports ([“An assailant on the loose. A city in fear.”](#) said the Daily News), the police suspect that Braunstein, a former journalist, is the man who attacked a Chelsea woman on Halloween night. Police say he dressed up as a firefighter, and set several small fires to get into the woman’s apartment, where he assaulted her. But Braunstein has remained at large, and New Yorkers are reporting Braunstein sightings all over town -- a cafe, a dry cleaner, etc.

Extended Sentences and Increased DNA Collection

Governor George Pataki and Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau have both recently called for [an end to the five-year statute of limitations for rape cases](#) . With backlogs at DNA laboratories and delays in identifying perpetrators even where a DNA sample exists, there have been cases where police have identified probable rapists too late to bring charges. In Manhattan, prosecutors have attempted to bring so-called “John Doe indictments” where they have a DNA profile but do not know a perpetrator’s identity. However, as the Daily News notes, only thirty-two such indictments have been handed up, and the legality of the practice is an open question.

The governor has also advocated for a law requiring the state to collect [DNA samples from anyone convicted of a crime](#) , including misdemeanors. In a statement , Pataki said that expanding DNA collection will help [“convict the guilty, exonerate the innocent, and bring justice to victims.”](#) Opponents argue that such a measure is an invasion of privacy, and brings the potential for abuse. Those who might look to DNA as a panacea would also be wise to recall recent large-scale foul ups at DNA labs in [Virginia](#) and [Houston](#) , Texas as suggesting that the technology is still vulnerable to human error.

An even more questionable strategy has been the attempts to keep sex offenders locked up after their prison terms have run out. On November 15th, Manhattan judge Jacqueline Silbermann ordered the state to release twelve individuals who had been involuntarily committed to state psychiatric hospitals following their state prison sentences. Noting that, for example, two of the men had been diagnosed only with Antisocial Personality Disorder (a diagnosis shared by 75 percent of the prison population, and, one imagines, many outside the prison population), Judge Silbermann said that the twelve (dubbed “The Dirty Dozen” by the tabloids) were being held in violation of state law. Governor Pataki responded by [locking up fourteen more offenders](#)

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, and appealed the judge's ruling to a higher court, where he was granted a stay.

Bloomberg stopped short of endorsing Pataki's tactics, instead calling on the legislature to impose higher mandatory sentences for sex offenders, including up to life in prison. D.A. Morgenthau has called for a similar change in the law.

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