by {ga=jvitullomartin}
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MURDER RATE PLUNGES

June held a triumphant announcement: The city's murder rate had fallen 13 percent over the first six months of the year. The police department had logged 289 murders through June 24--or 46 fewer than in the first six months of 2000. Were this rate to continue, the city would experience 581 murders by year end--far fewer than last year's 673.

But the triumph was marred by an earlier outbreak of harsh mayoral behavior. In late May Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik had told Jack Newfield, then a columnist for the New York Post, that he intended to keep city murders to under 600 - a number not seen since 1963 during Mayor Robert Wagner's administration.

Kerik backed up his prediction with what seemed to be a sensible strategy: He was going to stick to basics, go after violent felons with outstanding warrants, focus on gangs, get guns off the streets, and fine-tune the department's assault on drugs.

Fine. Then Mayor Giuliani issued a reprimand so harsh that it even attracted the attention of the Times of London. A goal of under 600 was "very highly unrealistic," said Giuliani, his annoyance reflected--as it often is--in bad syntax.

The month's figures show that murders have continued along Kerik's predicted downward slope.

CONDOR DEFENDED

It wasn't just the murder rate that plummeted, important as that is. Reported rapes over the first six months of the year were down five percent, felony assault down eight percent, robbery down 15 percent, and burglary 17 percent.

The largest single decline in any category was in car theft, which fell 18 percent. Some 3,000 car owners did not have their cars stolen in the first half of the year.

The Daily News chose to combine these figures with comments from Harvard criminologist

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George Kelling in support of Operation Condor, the undercover program aimed at violent drug activity. Because Condor costs the city millions of dollars in overtime, it is financially controversial as well as politically volatile. Kelling warned that the next mayor and police commissioner should be careful about dumping Condor or tinkering with it, since it is not broken.

Condor, combined with near zero-tolerance policing, will be ongoing issues for the city. Whether emphasizing the stick of punishment or the carrot of safer, better living conditions, the idea behind the city's aggressive policing strategy is that police confront citizens they suspect of even minor wrongdoing. This is politically dangerous territory.

What's more, for most of the last few years the Giuliani administration has been ratcheting up the consequences of being caught in "minor wrongdoing."

At a recent mayoral forum sponsored by the Century Foundation, former corrections commissioner Michael Jacobson pointed out that misdemeanor arrests went from 130,000 in 1993 to 215,000 in 1998. Even more serious, the police practice of releasing minor offenders with desk appearance tickets--permitting them to go home while requiring their appearance at a later date before a judge--is gradually being discontinued. Some 43 percent of minor offenders were held for arraignment--jailed--for 24 to 48 hours in 1993. In 1998, 85 percent were held.

SWEEPS TRAP CITY COUNCIL SPEAKER

One increasingly common way for middle-class New Yorkers to encounter their police is via "sweeps," by which the police target and barricade some discrete area and check every vehicle for minor infractions. The resulting traffic jams are often horrendous. Even prominent officials can find themselves swept.

City Council Speaker Peter Vallone had trouble making it to the Manhattan Institute's conference last week on "New York at the Crossroads." On the way into Manhattan, he found that "all the traffic coming in from Queens bottled up to France" because the cops at the Midtown Tunnel were checking for seat belts violations. "The Midtown Tunnel," he said. "How busy is it?"

Richard Brookhiser of the New York Observer pointed out that Vallone was blasting "the policy

of stop-and-frisk," though "in a very old-ethnic Queens fashion." He suggested that young black males "suffered the same frustrations as harried outer-borough commuters," wrote Brookhiser.

DRAG RACING CURTAILED

Shortly after the New York papers carried lead stories on the fatal drag-racing accident on Long Island, Newsday ran a piece saying that organized drag racing at longtime trouble zones in Queens seems to have been ended. Newsday quoted a young man who said, "They have all sorts of roadblocks now, and they've timed the lights so you can't race anymore." The success is attributed to a crackdown called "Operation Hermes," run jointly by the police department's 107th Precinct and the office of Queens district attorney.

Since its start in June 1999, Operation Hermes has arrested 53 people and seized 33 cars--which seems like an astonishingly high number. Newsday cited police officers who credited the department's "zero-tolerance assault on reckless and drunken driving."

Julia Vitullo-Martin, a long-time editor and writer on urban affairs, is the former director of the Citizens Jury Project at the Vera Institute of Justice. She is now writing a book entitled The Conscience of the American Jury.