A Look At Nightclub Mayhem

by Julia Vitullo-Martin
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New Yorkers who think that the city has seen a lot of murders this year are right. Police department statistics (in pdf format) show that 151 people were murdered in the five boroughs between January 1 and April 13, up from 138 over the same period last year. This 9.4 percent year-to-date increase in murders parallels a 6.2 percent increase in rape. The city has had 561 reported rapes so far this year, up from 528 last year. Other major crimes have declined: felonious assault is down 9.8 percent through mid-April, and burglary and grand larceny auto are both down 15.2 percent. The rise in murder is particularly worrisome to analysts, however, because it is the one crime that everyone agrees to be recorded accurately.

MURDER UP

It has been a murderous few weeks. February 8 was the first night of a murder spree that killed four men (a fifth was wounded) in Brooklyn and Queens. Saying he had targeted Middle Easterners to avenge September 11, a Brooklyn man confessed and was indicted on multiple counts by a grand jury on April 11. On April 13, Dana Blake, a bouncer at Guernica on Avenue B, was stabbed to death after a melee involving smokers. A Guernica patron confessed, and has been charged. On April 24, Lyric Benson, a beautiful, 22-year-old aspiring actress, was shot to death in front of her apartment by her former fiancĂ© as her mother, who had opened the door for her, looked on in horror. The fiancĂ© then turned the gun on himself.

In the early morning of April 25, a rap star and his entourage got into a violent argument with a car full of apparent strangers following a traffic accident outside Centro-Fly, a hip-hop club at 45 West 21st Street. Rapper Freaky Zeeky was shot twice and run over by a car. His bodyguard was killed. "This has nothing to do with rap," a man who called himself a close friend told the New York Times. "Just two groups of men who got into trouble."

But the two groups of men got into trouble because they had driven to Chelsea to go clubbing.

NEW YORK'S TROUBLED NIGHTLIFE

Residents of Chelsea have complained for years about the proliferation of nightclubs in their neighborhood. Even as many notorious clubs have been shut down, the hip-hop clubs that have opened around the Flatiron Building have added new problems to the old. Certainly the mix of alcohol, drugs, and late-night partying is volatile, and few neighborhoods want drug- and alcohol-fueled youngsters roaming their streets.

The Bloomberg administration has continued the Giuliani administration's campaign against nightclub violations .
After a 22-month drug investigation, the NYPD
closed two clubs
on February 7-the Sound Factory, at 616-620 West 46th Street, and Exit, at 610 West 56th Street.

The police said both clubs had flourishing drug trades, particularly in Ecstasy (methylenedioxy methamphetamine or MDMA) and Special K (ketamine), but also in cocaine and marijuana.

Exit was re-opened March 21 by order of a judge, who reprimanded the police for wasting "tremendous resources" on a "less-than-productive probe." The police are very angry, according to the Daily News, the only paper to cover the reopening of the "drug-fueled dens."

But Exit's problems persist. On April 19, one of its patrons was arrested for harassing other patrons. It turned out that he was already facing charges for brutally beating an off-duty New York City police officer at a Jersey City karaoke bar in November. The cop was left paralyzed, according to the Daily News. Police said the arrested patron was strung out on Ecstasy, one of the drugs they had been able to buy so readily during their investigation.

Clubs like Exit that handle 10,000 patrons a weekend are bound to attract trouble, even when they are well run. They need sophisticated security, always a very limited, expensive commodity. Club owners recently asked the Bloomberg administration to allow them to hire off-duty cops, but were rebuffed. As former Tunnel and Limelight owner Peter Gatien once com plained
to the New York Press, "The industry is singled out for a standard that no one can live up to. When you have an event at Madison Square Garden, you have 300 cops helping people. At nightclubs, they set roadblocks to ruin your business."

Yet the nightlife industry is crucial both to New York's image and its economy. A 1998 study by Audience Research & Analysis found that music and dance clubs contribute about $2.9 billion yearly to the city's economy, directly employing over 4,700 people. The number of clubgoers-24.3 million annually-exceeds the number of people going to Broadway acts, sports events, the Empire State Building, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art combined. Over a third of clubgoers are from outside New York, and 89 percent of them say that dancing or seeing a band was their main reason for coming to New York.

SMOKING BAN ADS FUEL

Because of the immense difficulties facing anyone trying to get a New York cabaret license, club sites often have multiple lives. Any site that comes with a cabaret license is disproportionately valuable. Thus Guernica, where bouncer Dana Blake was killed, is attempting a new life as a sedate, upscale club. But it is housed in the space that once held Save the Robots, a glamorous but infamous after-hours bar that didn't make it.

Guernica and the club scene in general had plenty of problems before Mayor Bloomberg's smoking ban . Now club
and bar personnel are responsible for enforcing a smoking ban under the most trying of circumstances. Many of them don't really believe in it since the ban is causing them loads of trouble, costing them money in business and tips foregone. Income in bars has dropped by 20 percent since the ban went into effect on April 1, says the
Economist
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Club owner David Rabin, president of New York Nightlife Association, told CBS News that "We predicted all of it. We predicted worse, and I think worse is coming."

And now the ban has cost bouncer Dana Blake his life. The three siblings who were first charged with Dana Blake's murder told police that their father was a famous gangster. He had directed a secretive cabal of businessmen involved in drug deals, gambling, extortions and contract killings in Chinatown. He cooperated with federal investigators after being indicted in 1995 for ordering three murders and conspiracy in a fourth. The Manhattan D.A. refused to prosecute the three siblings. One of their friends has since been arrested and charged.

RAPE KEEPS GOING UP

The city has averaged four reported rapes per day since January 1, about 9 percent more than last year. That's the bad news. But the city has also averaged four arrests per day, which is an increase over last year, although NYPD sex crimes chief Susan Morley has not specified by how much. Urged on by Morley and the NYPD, the City Council has submitted a resolution to the state legislature asking it to pass a bill extending or abolishing (Governor Pataki's preference) the 10-year statute of limitations on unsolved rape cases.

The NYPD says it has reviewed two-thirds of the 13,000 rape kits in its backlog, and has produced almost 1,000 DNA matches. Morley says they have matches back to the late 1980s-which will do no good unless the legislature extends the statute of limitations. Surely if ever an extension was needed it is this.

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.