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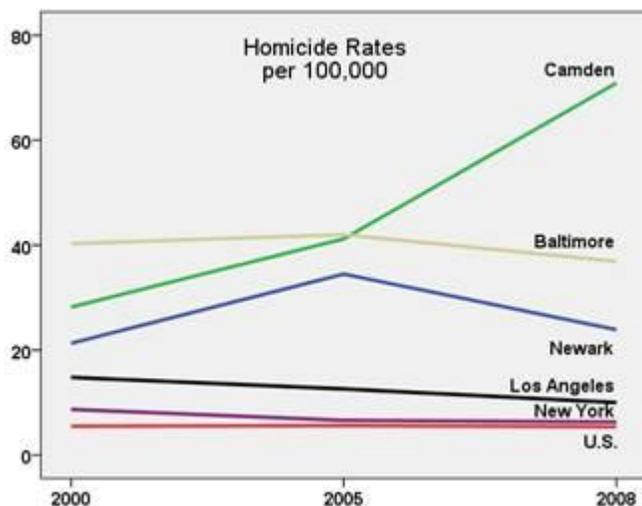
## A VERY DUBIOUS ACHIEVEMENT

*Camden PD fights crime and violence. And its own officers.*



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Being first is normally an honor. But when the [FBI reported](#) that Camden, New Jersey, pop. 76,182, had 1,777 violent crimes and 54 murders in 2008, yielding a sky-high violence rate of 2332.6 per 100,000 and a dismal murder rate of 7.1 per 10,000, it was hardly bestowing praise. Just like in 2004 and 2005 (and nearly 2007, when it was number two) [Camden was once again](#) the most dangerous city in the U.S.

While the UCR warns against simply ranking communities – after all, there are demographic variables such as age, educational attainment and income to consider – there’s no escaping the implications. Aggregating all Part I crimes except arson, [Camden’s 2008 crime score](#) was twenty-four percent higher than runner-up St. Louis, a stunning fifty-eight percent more than fifth-placed Flint, and a ridiculous two-hundred-and-four percent higher than twenty-ninth placed Newark, itself no slouch in the violence sweepstakes. [Current-year figures](#) are mixed. As of last month homicides and shootings were both down (although still ahead of 2006) but aggravated assault has increased, driving overall violence up five percent over 2008.

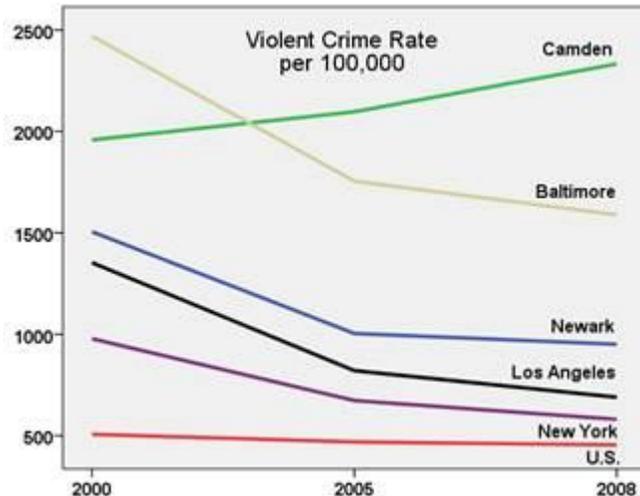


No matter how one slices and dices, the troubled community’s crime stat’s are grim. Reproduced from an [earlier posting about Newark](#), these crime charts (Camden was included as a worst-case scenario) portray what many

consider the indisputably criminogenic effects of [de-industrialization](#). Adding insult to injury – the troubled community’s poverty rate has for years hovered at one-third – [its unemployment rate](#) reached a stunning 17 percent in May 2009.

It’s no surprise that in 2002, in what was billed as the “biggest municipal takeover in American history,” New Jersey [brought Camden under State control](#). Taking over in exchange for injecting a \$175 million stimulus, it appointed a “Chief Operating Officer” with authority to approve all decisions of the Mayor and City Council. One year later New Jersey’s attorney general appointed a “Police Director” to oversee the struggling police department.

What’s been the result? [A recent headline](#) by the Philadelphia Inquirer says it all: “Camden Rebirth: A promise still unfulfilled.” Despite years of intervention the local economy remains stagnant. Empty, boarded-up storefronts litter vast sections of the city. During rainstorms raw sewage overflows into basements, driving hapless residents from their homes. And while crime and violence remain unacceptably high, police strength, which Trenton promised to keep at then-existing levels, has plunged from fifteen to *thirty-four percent* depending on how one’s counting. Equipment shortages and malfunctions are also rampant, with [police cars in such disrepair](#) that twenty recently flunked State inspection.



That’s not to say that the State hasn’t tried. In 2008 a leap in the homicide rate led to [the sixth command change](#) in as many years. Luis Vega, a tough-minded ex-NYPD cop became the new police director while veteran Camden officer John Thomson was installed as the new chief. Tactics were thoroughly revamped. Compstat is being used to track crime patterns and assess effectiveness. Police regularly swoop down on hot spots, ticketing and arresting petty violators in an attempt to remedy quality-of-life problems that were supposedly ignored in the past. To insure that cops are doing as they’re told Jose Cordero, the attorney general’s gang czar, shows up each week to monitor progress.

Alas, there’s been considerable blowback from the rank-and-file. With only 290 officers on active status, as compared to 440 when the State took over, the weight of the new style has fallen heavily on the shoulders of ordinary cops. Their [complaints](#)

range across a broad spectrum, from missing lunch breaks and being denied vacation time, to being pressed to arrest and stop citizens without adequate cause, to being told how and where to patrol while camera-toting internal affairs detectives run around making sure they comply.

Something had to give, and it did. Like each of his predecessors, Police Director Vega lasted only one year, resigning in August for “family reasons”. If [Camden’s Mayor](#) has her way, he won’t be replaced:

I dare anyone to show me any police department in the country that has been studied as often as the Camden Police Department, has had as many leadership changes and . . . [such a] confusing and fractured command structure.

Is Camden’s aggressive approach the appropriate response? Hot-spot strategies are nothing new, but the city’s “[mobilization drill](#)” version seems more like the work of an occupying force than a civilian police:

...out of nowhere, 16 police cruisers, lights flashing, pull into the neighborhood. Car doors slam, officers fall into formation. There’s a 30-second briefing before officers are off to look for speeding motorcycles, teenagers smoking pot, and men wanted on warrants. In less than two hours on a summer evening, 38 pedestrians are questioned, 14 traffic tickets are issued, and one arrest is made...

Citizens aren’t the only targets. The union leader calls Compstat meetings “nightmares.” A recent example featured Mr. Cordero, the AG’s man, browbeating a veteran captain because one of his teams made only a single arrest in four days. (A newsman who was present didn’t report whether Mr. Cordero asked about the nature of the case.)

Any city that thinks it can cite and arrest its way out of a perfect storm of poverty and joblessness is badly mistaken. Same goes for any department that tries to bully cops or turn them into robots. It’s no secret that many of the *forty officers* who left the department last year did so because they were disgruntled. What’s more, those still hanging around don’t seem much happier. That’s a bad sign. In the real world – and that presumably includes Camden – most police work is done outside the presence of supervisors and internal affairs. It’s well known that micromanagement and heavy-handed supervision can destroy morale and stifle innovation. They can also break the bond between staff and line, yielding platoons of independent contractors who could care less what the chief thinks.

As the Mayor suggests, Camden PD really *is* an excellent case study. It's for that reason that its troubles became the topic for a midterm essay at Cal State Fullerton. Here is what a student who happens to be a working street cop had to say:

The problem associated with the officers' resistance [to being told what to do] stems from the type of individual that is hired for law enforcement. An assertive, decision-making type of person would not want to be told when to exercise that assertiveness and how to make one's decisions.

Camden PD badly needs to find a balance that will allow it to implement effective strategies while allowing officers the discretion and flexibility they need, and the job satisfaction they seek. Perhaps its managers could begin by looking past Compstat and asking those most familiar with field conditions – their own officers – to help devise sensible and sustainable responses to crime and violence.

If they'd like, we could send a couple students to help them get started.