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A Bleeding City, Seeking More Than a Band-Aid

By [ANDREW JACOBS](#)

NEWARK, May 18 — Kelvin Kelley, who was 16, was laid to rest on Monday, the gunshot wounds to his torso concealed by the crisp beige suit he had recently worn to a high school speech team competition at [Harvard University](#). The following day, mourners said goodbye to his best friend, Hassan Ferguson, 16, who was killed alongside Kelvin in a Central Ward parking lot on May 9.

It was the same day that Newark elected [Cory Booker](#) as the city's first new mayor in two decades.

These two killings and another shooting on Wednesday brought the number of murders in 2006 to 40, 11 more than during the same period last year. Nearly half of those killed were under 21.

Hopes for a safer, saner city are squarely focused on Mr. Booker, a suburban-raised Rhodes scholar and former Newark council member who has promised to bring law and order to a city awash in illegal guns, gang violence and fear. A big part of his plan hinges on overhauling the city's troubled Police Department.

"Everything falls on my shoulders now," he said after attending Kelvin's funeral. "The challenge is to switch from talking about solutions to implementing solutions."

Public safety, most everyone here agrees, is the issue that could make or break the mayoralty of Mr. Booker, a 37-year-old Democrat who is often mentioned as a national up-and-comer. He is to take office on July 1.

In Mr. Booker's own polls taken during the campaign, more than 80 percent of residents cited crime as the No. 1 issue, far outstripping concerns over the city's beleaguered school system, a lack of decent jobs and a poverty rate that keeps Newark mired in the bottom tier of America's most battered municipalities.

The good news about overall crime dropping more than 50 percent in the last decade has been largely diluted by a spate of shootings and the killings in the last year of more than a dozen high school students who were caught in a numbing cycle of gratuitous bloodshed.

"If people don't feel safe on the streets, even if it's just a perception, then the private investment and job

creation that's needed to bring about the city's revitalization cannot move forward," said Ken Zimmerman, executive director of the [New Jersey Institute for Social Justice](#), an urban research and advocacy group based in Newark.

Neither officials from the Police Department nor the office of Mayor [Sharpe James](#), who declined to run for a sixth term, would respond to questions about the police, crime and the battle against lawlessness. In previous interviews, Mr. James and his police director, Anthony F. Ambrose, have defended the department's performance and blamed a flood of gang activity for the recent spike in violence.

In late 2004, Mr. James said he would create seven new precincts and hire 80 new officers. Construction has begun on two of the new precinct buildings.

"The Newark Police Department has made a lot of strides over the last 10 years but there's so much more that could be done," said Michael L. Wagers, executive director of the Police Institute at Rutgers University in Newark. "What Cory Booker does with the department will make or break him as mayor."

Although he has proposed a raft of measures that touch on public safety, Mr. Booker is preparing to spend much of his political capital on bringing change to the Police Department, which has been plagued by low morale, a shortage of working vehicles and modern equipment, and the kind of dysfunction that makes local residents and outside observers cringe.

Examples of the department's troubles abound: Last month, officials suspended a veteran officer who was present at a local bar during two separate shootings that took the lives of four people. In both cases, one in 2003 and another in April, the officer was on duty but out of uniform and made little effort to intervene in the shootings, according to investigators.

In another recent case, officers could not find the body of a 19-year-old man killed in a car accident last December. Five days later, the victim's father found his body on an embankment at the scene.

In interviews, residents say their calls to 911 are met with a sluggish response. Mr. Booker's brother, for one, said he waited four hours for the police to arrive after a stolen car flipped over and crashed into his house. Many crime scene investigations are bungled, prosecutors say, and the city has been beset in recent years by the slaying of witnesses who were set to testify in murder trials.

Msgr. William Linder, a founder of the city's largest social service organization, New Community Corporation, said his agency spends more than \$3 million a year on private security, an expense he attributes to the failings of the Police Department.

The money, he said, pays for 125 guards who patrol the organization's residential projects, schools and a nursing home it operates.

"A lot of people in Newark have just given up on the police," said Monsignor Linder, a critic of Mr.

James who supported Mr. Booker in his two bids for mayor. "The whole force needs to be reformed."

But beyond the claims of ineptitude is a widely held belief that the 1,043-member force is sorely lacking in integrity.

In 2004, a group of rogue officers were convicted of robbing and terrorizing criminal suspects in the West Ward, and many residents were not especially surprised earlier this year when the department promoted a commander who was under investigation for having sex in his patrol car while he was facing sexual harassment allegations.

Last year two high-ranking officers were punished: the commander in charge of counterterrorism for collecting a pension and a salary for the same position and a deputy police chief for failing to disclose a conviction for recklessly causing the death of a woman two decades earlier.

Many of the department's problems, some critics say, start at the top. They cite the police chief, Irving Bradley, who was hired by Mayor James two years ago despite his 1999 guilty plea for leading Rahway police on a chase and assaulting an officer after they discovered him drinking in his car.

In interviews, a half-dozen officers still in uniform described a police force in which promotions are based on political loyalties and an officer's willingness to make election-year contributions to the incumbent's re-election campaign. The officers, who were granted anonymity because they feared retribution, said many of the department's most important units, including homicide and narcotics, had been diminished by transfers that replaced seasoned investigators with recent academy graduates.

Augusto Amador, a council member who represents an area largely made up of Brazilian and Portuguese immigrants, said a handful of popular commanders in his ward were reassigned to other precincts after the 2002 election, when Mr. Booker received heavy support from the neighborhood and came close to beating Mr. James.

"They were doing a great job but they were punished anyway," said Mr. Amador, a longtime supporter of Mr. James who says he switched to Mr. Booker's side after the transfers.

Mr. Booker said he was well aware of the department's deficiencies and said he planned to end the tradition of politically based hiring. He would not comment on the futures of Mr. Ambrose, the police director, or Mr. Bradley, the police chief, but said they would be asked to submit their résumés for consideration.

His plans for the force are both simple and sweeping.

During an interview last week, he said he would put an additional 100 officers on the street by moving uniformed officers out of desk jobs. He wants wireless laptops in every patrol car to replace the 30-year-old typewriters that many officers now use to fill out crime reports.

Mr. Booker plans to go after gangs with more personnel and the aggressive use of federal racketeering laws. No quality-of-life annoyance, no matter how small, he said, will be overlooked.

But law enforcement, he said, is only one part of his plan for restructuring civic life in New Jersey's biggest city. He speaks of programs using mentors to keep teenagers from the embrace of gangs, alternative sentencing for drug addicts and local legislation to end the background checks that prevent former convicts from getting jobs as city clerks, trash collectors and bus drivers.

"There's no reason an entire segment of the population should be denied access to employment," he said.

To pay for this municipal largess, Mr. Booker said he would chase the assets of drug dealers, increase the city's low rate of payroll tax collection and install cameras at intersections to squeeze money out of red-light runners. "I'm also not going to make painfully wrong investments with our money, whether it's \$300 million for a downtown arena or using housing authority dollars for plasma-screen TV's," he said.

Such promises, if made real, are appealing to many Newarkers, especially the young people who have come to fear the space between school and their front doors.

Packed into Whigham Funeral Home last week, hundreds of them, many wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the image of a smiling Kelvin Kelley, loudly wept or listened, numb, as preachers, relatives and friends spoke about the death of a young man who had dreamed of being an actor.

When Marques-Aquil Lewis, an 18-year-old antigang worker, took the microphone and urged the mourners to rally against violence at a downtown park, the crowd applauded. "We've got to stop the killing," he said, turning toward the coffin, "because I'm tired of putting pictures of black brothers on T-shirts."

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