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With 101 Homicides, Newark Nears a Record

By [ANDREW JACOBS](#)

NEWARK, Dec. 15 — The flickering votives, the tearful relatives and the angry activists scolding City Hall for the death of a young mother. It was a familiar tableau as a small crowd huddled to mark the killing of Taheerah Sweat, who the police say was shot twice by a man who had taken her out on the town but then left her to die on the chilly pavement after they had a fight.

Ms. Sweat's killing early on Dec. 10 was the 101st homicide in Newark this year, the authorities said, one body short of a 1995 record, when Newark was buckling under a wave of crack-fueled mayhem.

With three times the number of homicides per capita as New York, Newark remains one of the most violent cities in the country. New York's homicide rate has edged up this year, but it is nowhere near that of the late 1980s. Cities across the country, including Philadelphia, Phoenix, Orlando, San Antonio and Boston, have seen increased killings, part of a two-year rise in major crimes after a decade-long drop.

"If I were an epidemiologist instead of a criminologist, I would say it looks like we have the makings of an epidemic of violence in a number of cities across the country," said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington-based law enforcement group. "Newark is not alone."

At a news conference here on Friday, Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#) and his police director, Garry F. McCarthy, tried to draw the focus away from homicides by highlighting successes of recent weeks, including a newly fortified warrant squad that had arrested 75 people, and an overall drop in crime.

Officials also noted an aggressive quality-of-life campaign that has yielded 600 summonses in recent weeks. With two weeks left in the year, City Hall is bracing for another killing and the inevitable headlines that will thrust Newark back into public consciousness as a blood-soaked city where young thugs, guns and drugs rule the streets.

For a mayor staking his administration on both the perception and reality of Newark as a safe place, every shooting is a blow.

“It’s frustrating because these murders are overshadowing all the progress we’ve made making Newark a safer city,” Mr. Booker said shortly after learning of the death of Ms. Sweat, whose killer is still on the loose.

On Friday, as he unveiled a “12 Most Wanted” poster with two mug shots triumphantly crossed out, the mayor added, “I want to be held accountable, but not for the 60 murders that happened this year before I took office.”

Every other category of crime, he repeatedly says, is down 25 percent since he took office in July, with shootings, robberies, rapes and car thefts all recording double-digit drops. And while homicides have edged up, Mr. McCarthy, the police chief, said that the pace of killings had slowed markedly since the summer.

“We have a hundred things going, and they will start to pay off in the coming months,” he said. “People just have to be patient.”

But patience is wearing thin on the streets of Newark, especially among the loved ones of victims of violence. “You can put a thousand cops on the street, and it isn’t going to stop these knuckleheads from killing people,” said Chris Sweat, 40, as she stood beside an impromptu sidewalk memorial for her niece. “I know it’s not the mayor’s fault, but something has to change. And soon.”

Since he came to Newark in September from the New York Police Department, Mr. McCarthy has pledged to shake up a department often criticized for sluggishness and a lack of professionalism. He has given more autonomy to precinct commanders, and demanded greater accountability from them, and he has shifted 150 uniformed officers from desk jobs to the streets.

Also in the works are a new narcotics division and a video surveillance program that will put 60 cameras in the city’s most crime-battered neighborhoods.

In Newark, as in other cities, the rise in homicides and other violent crimes is mostly in low-income, minority neighborhoods, where guns are plentiful and the narcotics trade is flourishing. In many cases, both perpetrators and victims have criminal pasts that involve drugs, the police here say.

Because guns are used in 90 percent of Newark’s homicides, a fundamental challenge is reducing their abundance. The streets are awash in Glocks, AK-47’s and .357 Magnums, and even someone unable to muster the \$200 to buy a cheap pistol can rent one for the day, the police say.

“In the past, a drug dealer might have had a gun stashed nearby,” said Michael Wagers, executive director of the Police Institute at [Rutgers University](#). “Now it’s in his waistband, so small disputes quickly lead to gunfire.”

Mr. McCarthy is taking a page from New York's playbook, where the decade-long drop in homicides has been partly tied to a crackdown on illegal guns. He said the department was tracking buyers and sellers to other states and forcefully prosecuting people caught with illegal guns to discourage them from treating the weapons as everyday accessories.

Mr. McCarthy also said he was hoping that word of Newark's participation in a tough federal program that leads to stiff sentences for some gun possession cases would trickle down to the streets.

"Instead of spending a half-hour in the county jail, you're going to spend five years in a federal penitentiary in South Dakota where no one will visit you," he warned.

But Tony Edwards, a former convict who helps run Street Warriors, a group that tries to steer young people away from trouble, said Mr. Booker's success in reducing violent crime would depend not on how many prison cells he filled, but on how many jobs he created.

"Increased law enforcement is all good, but we have to look at the bigger picture," Mr. Edwards said. "It's about jobs, it's about poverty, it's about education and it's about paying attention to our kids. If we all work together, I think we can turn this city around."

Ms. Sweat, 25, whose death last week left four children without a mother, had not been planning to stick around for the dawn of a new Newark. According to relatives, she had grown weary of the violence and was weeks away from moving her family to Virginia.

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