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Camden Turns Around With New Police Force

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#) AUG. 31, 2014 [Continue reading the main story](#)

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CAMDEN, N.J. — In the summer of 2012, the year this city broke its own record for homicides, there were 21 people murdered here. This summer, there were six.

Just as remarkably, with shootings down 43 percent in two years, and violent crime down 22 percent, Osvaldo Fernandez now lets his sons walk to school alone. Nancy Torres abandoned plans to move to Florida. And parents from Center City Philadelphia are bringing their children here — notoriously one of the nation's poorest, most crime-ridden cities — to play in a Little League that has grown to 500 players from 150 in its first season three years ago.

It has been 16 months since Camden took the unusual step of [eliminating its police force](#) and replacing it with a new one run by the county. Beleaguered by crime, budget cuts and bad morale, the old force had all but given up responding to some types of crimes.

Dispensing with expensive work rules, the new force hired more officers within the same budget — 411, up from about 250. It hired civilians to use crime-fighting technology it had never had the staff for. And it has tightened alliances with federal agencies to remove one of the largest drug rings from city streets.

But mostly, the police have changed their culture. Officers have been moved from desk jobs and squad cars onto walking beats, in what Chief J. Scott Thomson likens to a political campaign to overcome years of mistrust. Average response time is now 4.4 minutes, down from more than 60 minutes, and about half the average in many other cities. The number of open-air drug markets has been cut nearly in half. The department, [the Camden County Police](#), even created its first cold-case unit.

In June and July, the city went 40 days without a homicide — unheard-of in a Camden summer. The empty liquor bottles once clustered on the porches of abandoned houses as memorials to the murdered have disappeared. There are fewer killings to commemorate. The city is beginning to brush up its image.

“At night it’s like living in Cherry Hill!” said Miguel Torres, 63, who has built makeshift benches for his neighbors in the rubble of a demolished home near a notorious drug-dealing block.

His laugh gave away the joke, if the broken sidewalks and iron gates barricading the surrounding rowhouses did not. Camden is still far from nearby Cherry Hill, with its prosperous lawns and shopping malls; even with the drop in crime, Camden’s murder rate this year is higher than Detroit’s, and several times the national average.

Nearly 40 percent of residents live below the poverty line. Unemployment is double the national rate. The worn rowhouses and abandoned buildings — more than 3,400 of them in a city of nine square miles — seem especially heartbreaking set against the gleaming towers of Philadelphia across the Delaware River.

No one, least of all law-enforcement officials, is declaring victory on crime: Camden has seen too many promises and rescue packages to be so bold.

Still, the improvements have come faster than anyone predicted. And while the unrest in Ferguson, Mo., has drawn attention to long-simmering hostilities between police departments and minority communities, Camden is becoming an example of the opposite.

“We’re not going to do this by militarizing streets,” Chief Thomson said. Instead, he sent officers to knock on doors and ask residents their concerns. He lets community leaders monitor surveillance cameras from their home computers to help watch for developing crime.

The police have held meet-the-officer fairs at parks and churches, attended baseball games and sent Mister Softee trucks into neighborhoods. Officers stand at school crossings and on corners where drugs and violence flourished. Chief Thomson's theory is that in a city of 77,000, there are thousands more well-intentioned people than bad, and that the police must enlist them to take back the streets.

"For a city to be prosperous, it needs to be safe and busy," he said. "The police are a variable in that equation, but we are just one variable." He tells his officers that he measures their success not in tickets written, but in the number of children riding bicycles on the street.

"It's absolutely a different place," said Tim Gallagher, a social worker who works with students. "You feel safe walking the streets now. The police officers aren't afraid to come out of their cars and interact with the community, and that's changed how people feel about them."

Last month, he watched as officers got out of a squad car where teenagers were playing football in a narrow street. He feared they might break up the game. Instead, they challenged the teenagers to a push-up contest. (The police won, 45-43.)

"The police are working hard not to intimidate people so they don't have to intimidate people," Mr. Gallagher said.

The previous police contract included extra pay for longevity and for working anticrime patrols, even for day shifts. But absenteeism averaged 30 percent. The department was so overwhelmed, it stopped responding to property crimes or car accidents without injuries. Dealers sold drugs in plain sight of surveillance cameras, confident the police would not intervene. Residents, too, had largely given up on the police; microphones recording gunshots in the worst neighborhoods showed that 30 percent went unreported.

The new force took over in May 2013. As it added officers, the department put 120 civilian clerks and analysts in a new operations and intelligence center, monitoring 121 surveillance cameras and the gunshot-mapping microphones. When shots are fired or a 911 call comes in, the system automatically dispatches the two nearest police units.

Car-mounted cameras read license plates, which are checked against law-enforcement databases. A disembodied voice announcing "medium alert" signals a car whose owner has bought drugs in Camden before. "High alert" flags a stolen car.

Patrols walked even during winter storms, sending a message about commitment. The department set up substations on the north and south ends of the city. And last month, 120 unarmed civilian "ambassadors" in bright yellow shirts began strolling five main business districts.

The increased police presence has pushed drug dealing off the streets, and as a result, pushed a majority of homicides inside — and random gunfire away from children playing on sidewalks.

Relations are not always warm. In Whitman Park, near where [federal agents arrested 22 people](#) this spring in the biggest drug crackdown in 10 years, officers stood on one side of the street while residents congregated on the other, teaching a boy to ride a tricycle and largely ignoring the police.

Still, two years ago, residents on the same block shook their fists and shouted obscenities when the police chief drove by.

Now, a girl on a porch spotted Officer Christian Jeffries and hollered, “Hi, cop!”

“When they see you every day, they can pull you aside,” said Officer Jeffries, who worked in Atlantic City before becoming one of Camden’s first newly hired officers. “I’ve had people say, ‘Act like you’re writing me a ticket.’ ”

Across the city, parks once given over to drug addicts have been reclaimed. The North Camden Little League has grown to six divisions, plus T-ball and a fathers’ league on Sundays.

“Before, you wouldn’t bring your kid here,” said Osvaldo Fernandez, watching his two sons play. “You could be here, and a shootout in the park just over a little argument.” He said he never used to let the boys play in the street, but now lets them go out alone. And he feels safe driving his cab at night.

The old police union fought the overhaul. But the new force is now unionized, and leaders welcome the added resources. “Anyone would want to not have to do the jobs of four or five other people anymore,” said Sgt. Bill Wiley, the president.

The most stubborn critics still object that newer officers do not know the city well enough; the new force hired about 150 of the 195 officers in the department when it was eliminated.

“Why should I believe that 250 rookies are going to be more effective than veteran police officers we had before?” asked Colandrus Francis, who heads the local N.A.A.C.P.

He, like others, accuses the police of harassment, for pulling over cars for having tinted windows or playing loud music, or for rolling through stop signs.

But Eulisis Delgado, who protested the new force for months before it began, now says residents should be grateful. “It’s almost like a normal town,” he said. “You do something bad, they are going to stop you.”

Minorities make up 45 percent of the force, similar to the old department but hardly reflective of a city where 95 percent of residents are black or Hispanic. Still, the new force includes speakers of Spanish, Haitian Creole and nine other languages.

At a meet-the-police fair, officers played teenagers in a hybrid of touch and tackle football, lumbering in their bulletproof vests and instinctively checking for their holstered guns when the boys toppled them. (The teenagers won.)

Nancy Torres watched with her son, 7, who wore balloons fashioned into a sword and belt by a balloon artist at the fair. “He used to be afraid of the police,” she said. “Now he wants to be one.”

There are other signs of life. The county has put millions into park improvements. The state has paid to knock down some abandoned houses. Charter schools are rising, and a ShopRite, the city’s first new supermarket in three decades, is to begin construction next year.

“It’s like we always had a flat tire,” said Sister Helen Cole, who has counseled families of murder victims in Camden for 25 years. “We would have an acting police chief, an acting prosecutor, an acting superintendent, or the mayor was being investigated.”

“Right now,” she added, “I want to have hope that we have four fully inflated tires.”

Correction: September 1, 2014

An earlier version of a slideshow with this article misspelled the surname of the chief of the Camden County Police. He is J. Scott Thomson, not Thompson.

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