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Murders fall to new low as New York becomes safer

James Bone in New York

The random killings that once made New York the murder capital of America have all but disappeared as the city's homicide rate plummets to its lowest point since reliable records began in 1963.

The figures show that New York City is on track to record fewer than 500 murders this year for the first time since the police department began recording violent deaths, instead of only those that led to an arrest.

So far this year there have been 428 killings – a 16 per cent decline from the 511 at the same time last year, when the annual total was 579. That means New Yorkers are getting murdered at a rate of just over one a day, compared to more than six a day at the height of the crack cocaine epidemic in 1990, when the total peaked at 2,245. (The 2,749 deaths in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre are not counted in the crime figures.) New Yorkers now have a roughly 1 in 17,000 chance of getting murdered each year, and the killer will probably be somebody they know.

The city still has plenty of headline-grabbing murder cases, such as the recent killing of former Ramones manager and estate agent to the stars, Linda Stein, in her Fifth Avenue home. Increasingly, though, the murders are carried out by friends, family members, former lovers or acquaintances.

An analysis by The New York Times yesterday revealed that fewer than 100 people are likely to be victims of stranger-on-stranger killings this year – a tiny number in a city of 8.2 million. The newspaper reported that, with half the killings studied so far, only 35 were found to have been committed by strangers. Last year 121 murders were committed by strangers.

Battles among drug gangs continue to fuel violent crime. Killings are now committed overwhelmingly by people who have criminal records, often against others who have also had brushes with the law. So far this year about 77 per cent of assailants had previous arrest records, as did 70 per cent of the victims.

The figures show that 61 per cent of the killers and 66 per cent of the victims were black, with whites making up seven per cent of victims and assailants and Hispanics accounting for almost all the rest. Experts credit a variety of factors for the fall in New York's murder rate, ranging from better policing to a demographic drop in the number of teenagers.

The question of who can claim credit has achieved national importance with Rudy Giuliani, a former prosecutor, running for the Republican nomination for president on his record as the crime-busting mayor of New York from 1994 to 2001.

Detroit has now reclaimed the dubious distinction of being America's murder capital, overtaking St Louis.

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