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THE MAYORAL TRANSITION: THE LEGACY; Crime Shows Biggest Drop In Five Years

By ANDY NEWMAN

Violent crime in New York City registered its biggest drop in five years in 2001, a decline all the more startling because it came as the violent crime rates in many other cities finally started to increase.

Across the city, both violent crime and overall crime fell by more than 12 percent, and the number of murders was the lowest since 1998 -- there were 640 as of Sunday, 31 fewer than there were last year as of Dec. 30.

The latest drop, announced yesterday by Rudolph W. Giuliani at his final news conference as mayor, brought the eight-year decline in crime during Mr. Giuliani's tenure to 64 percent.

"We have exceeded even our own expectations and succeeded in bringing about an unprecedented reduction in crime that has improved the quality of life for all New Yorkers," he said at City Hall. "The N.Y.P.D. has defied the skeptics who doubted whether the city could continue to build upon the dramatic reductions in crime."

Mr. Giuliani gave much of the credit for the drop in 2001 to his police commissioner, Bernard B. Kerik, who took over in August 2000.

"Commissioner Kerik took over a Police Department that was leading the country in crime declines," he said, "and somehow he was able to figure out how to create even more crime reduction and to do that against a national trend in which crime is going up in much of the rest of the country."

The crime figures do not include the roughly 3,000 people killed when terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center. The Police Department classifies that attack as an act of war.

Violent crime, which was already starting to fall when Mr. Giuliani took office in 1994, has declined by at least 6 percent each year since then, a trend that turned Mr. Giuliani into a national symbol of crime-fighting.

The drop, many criminologists say, is a product of general societal trends like a decreasing teenage population and declining use of crack cocaine, as well as crime-fighting tools Mr. Giuliani and his police commissioners introduced.

The most prominent of these tools is Compstat, a crime-tracking system that involves examining precinct-by-precinct statistics every week to catch and respond to problems as soon as they crop up.

Elsewhere in the country, crime seemed to rebound in 2001.

As of mid-December, murders were up by more than 60 percent in Boston and Phoenix and several other big cities, including St. Louis, Houston and Atlanta, which all posted double-digit percentage increases in murders.

For a couple of years, experts have been saying that crime nationwide had fallen as low as it could go and might start inching back up.

In New York City, though, the continuing decline was both significant and across the board. Murders dropped by 5 percent in 2001, rapes by 6 percent, robberies by 14 percent and felony assaults by 11 percent.

Burglaries and car thefts were both down at least 15 percent. And the total of 640 murders was reminiscent of the mid-1960's: there were 654 murders in 1966. In 1993, the year before Mr. Giuliani took office, there were 1,952.

The 12 percent fall in violent crime last year was the biggest drop since 1996, when crime fell by 16 percent from the previous year.

Local exceptions to the citywide trend were seen.

In the two precincts that cover Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, murders nearly doubled, reaching 51 as of Dec. 23 though there were only

26 by the same date last year.

Mr. Kerik said that in general, the police were quick to respond to patterns of violence.

As proof, he cited the way the department handled a citywide increase in shootings during November. That increase was generally attributed to the decision reached after the Sept. 11 attacks to move officers from regular crime-fighting jobs to security details and other terrorism-related assignments.

After that citywide increase was recorded, Mr. Kerik put officers from the gun, warrant and gang intelligence units back on their old duties and ordered that all narcotics officers would have to work six-day weeks.

A result, Mr. Kerik said yesterday, was that during the last three weeks of the year, shootings in the city were down by about 12 percent from the same period last year.

"Basically, we looked at where the crime was happening, why it was happening and then we redeployed troops and resources to make sure that those areas were focused on," Mr. Kerik said. "That's how you reduce crime."