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NEW JERSEY BLUES

How is the Garden State responding to increased violence? By shedding cops.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. New Jersey's disturbing uptick in homicide reportedly began last summer, when [thirty-five persons were murdered](#) in Newark in three months. New Jersey's largest city (pop. 279,203) wound up with 85 murders in 2010, a disheartening rate of 30.4 per 100,000 population. That's nothing new. In 2009, the most recent year for which national data is available, its homicide rate (28.7) was nearly [six times the U.S. mean of 5.0](#).

Beset by gangs, drugs and guns, Newark is in deplorable shape. But it doesn't hold a candle to Camden. [Second only to St. Louis in serious crime](#) among the nation's 400 largest cities, the troubled community (pop. 79,980) closed 2010 with thirty-six homicides. Its murder rate of 45.0 was nearly half again Newark's. One year earlier Camden's rate was 43.0, *nearly nine times* the U.S. average.

Compared to its brethren, Trenton (pop. 82,609) seems like a safe place. After all, [it had "only" 15 killings in 2010](#); its murder rate, 18.2, actually fell from 2009, when it was 20.6. That's still more than *three times* the national average and plenty sufficient to earn New Jersey's capital a spot along with Camden and Newark in the most crime-ridden seven percent of American cities.

In 2010, following three years of improvement, New Jersey reported a [thirteen percent increase in homicide](#), from 320 to 363, as murder trended up in a majority of counties. And things may be getting worse. Although optimists point out that violence in Camden hasn't reached the levels experienced last summer (well, it's not summer yet) [it's still up 17 percent](#) when compared to the first quarter of 2010.

It's a similar story in Newark, where [twenty murders occurred during January-March](#), double the number (10) for the equivalent period last year. Aggravated assault increased two percent and robbery 11 percent. Burglary is up eight percent and auto theft jumped about a third.

So what's being done? They're laying off cops.

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[Bloodletting in the police ranks began in earnest last year](#) when Atlantic City laid off 60 officers, 16 percent of its force. In December Newark PD lost 13 percent of its strength with a stunning 167-officer cut. This January [Camden let go 163](#), slashing the troubled department by nearly half. (Forty-five superior officers were also demoted and put on patrol. A Federal grant has since let the city rehire fifty-five cops, but the funds are only expected to last a year.) And that's not all. Only last month, just as a national police organization announced it was honoring Camden's chief for innovating his way through the chaos (don't ask), [the city of Paterson cut 125 cops](#), one-quarter of its force.

All in all, it's estimated that [New Jersey has trimmed about 3,000](#) from its law enforcement ranks. [With the state in dire financial shape](#), few are expected to be replaced anytime soon. Unemployment, the loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs, sharp drops in property values, burgeoning public pension costs, declines in investment income and a host of other factors have brought the Garden State to its knees. And the problem may be getting worse. In March Governor Chris Christie announced that the lifelines traditionally extended to the state's poorest cities – a stunning eighty percent of Camden's budget comes from Trenton – [would be cut \\$275 million](#), a full 17 percent.

You see, there's urgent need for the loot elsewhere. Only days ago [New Jersey was ordered to reimburse](#) the U.S. \$271 million in Federal tax funds that the state expended on a tunnel project it has since refused to complete. Interest on the debt, which New Jersey is contesting, amounts to a tidy \$50,000 per week. Gov. Christie is refusing to raise taxes or restore prior tax cuts and suggests de-unionization and givebacks as a solution. Lacking that, letting public servants go is the only option.

When America's founders chose to keep government close to the people they inadvertently set into motion a process that would inevitably consign poor citizens to poor public services. Wealth is unequally distributed. Local governments rely on property and sales taxes, and when economic downturns strike less affluent communities are hit the hardest. Paradoxically, they're also the ones with the far greater need for police services in the first place.

New Jersey's cities may be an extreme example, but they're not alone. We've all heard what's been taking place in Detroit. Is it any wonder that the Motor City appears right next to Camden on CQ's list? [Scan the most crime-ridden municipalities](#) and you'll see one impoverished community after another. Flint, Michigan ([100 officers laid off](#)); Compton, Richmond and Oakland, California ([80 officers laid off](#)); Cleveland, Ohio ([66 cops laid off](#)); Gary, Indiana; Baltimore, Maryland. And yes, Washington, D.C. Then look at the opposite end of the list, where the safest cities are. Try to find a poor place, or any where a substantial number of cops have been let go.

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Just try.