

# New Jersey Law Journal

VOL. CXCIII - NO.12 - INDEX 887

SEPTEMBER 22, 2008

ESTABLISHED 1878

## COMMENTARY

### The Task Ahead, Now That N.J.'s Death Penalty Is Gone

By Janine G. Bauer

**A**bolition of the death penalty last December was hailed as a way of restoring some of New Jersey's luster as a progressive state. Yet New Jersey had effectively annulled the death penalty decades ago. No one had been executed under the 1982 law, and no one had been executed under the prior law since 1962. Its mere existence had proven no deterrent to crime, either.

New Jersey's cities, like many Northeastern urban areas, continued to register high murder rates into 2006 and 2007, some showing alarming increases. Newark had two murders a week in recent years (although that was down significantly from the highest rates in the 1990s). Drivers to Newark were greeted by a large billboard with a banner that read "Help Wanted," blaring the enormity of the murder problem. People debated whether the publicity harmed or helped Newark, but the fact is, our cities and suburbs are riddled with gangs, drugs and related violent crime. Leaders got the point, and intensified efforts on the real problem — murder, and violent crime.

In the first few months after abolition of the death penalty, Newark's murder rate fell. The city went 43 days without a murder. Correlation is difficult, as results

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would be skewed by too many factors. Yet it wasn't just homicide that dropped in Newark this year, but all seven forms of serious violent crime. What's going on? Quite a bit.

Two weeks ago in Newark, for instance, Mayor Cory Booker announced a \$5 million program with county, state and federal funding — and backing — to help Newark's ex-convicts get job coaching, job readiness training and mentoring. The Bush administration provided \$2 million of the total as part of the Department of Labor's Prisoner Re-entry Initiative. During a press conference on the funding, Attorney General Anne Milgram noted that of the thousands of convicts released from prison, 60 percent are re-arrested and 50 percent are re-convicted. With the expansion of the re-entry program, Milgram predicted progress on the recidivism rate.

At the same time, Newark has been prosecuting petty crimes, such as loitering and drunkenness, that create situations that can lead to murder and other serious crimes. In recent months, there has been increased cooperation among Newark, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the state police, the Essex County Prosecutor's Office and the U.S. Marshal's Office. And the city installed more than 120 surveillance cameras in high-crime areas. (In New York City, citizens can assist law enforcement not simply by calling in news of a crime, but by uploading photos and videos of a crime while it is occurring.)

Over the long term, the best way of retarding serious crime and murder will be to increase assistance to the juvenile justice

sector and improve school systems that serve at-risk youths. Teenagers need life skills, job training and assured entry into trades and higher education. Some of our efforts aimed at juveniles — such as Court Appointed Special Advocates, juvenile conference committees, municipal court mediation, child placement reviews and the Juvenile Intensive Supervision Program — continue to be underfunded and understaffed, but show promise.

Our leaders in government and in the bar — and we, ourselves — need to figure out how to make the end of the death penalty a footnote in New Jersey's goal to move New Jersey to a place where kids don't become criminals in the first place, and where those kids who did have better opportunities can straighten out. We must do everything possible to give children, teenagers and ex-prisoners the knowledge, skills and esteem to earn a good living and take their beneficial place in society. The jobs that do exist are still entry-level and low-paid. We must take the long view but intensify efforts in the short term. Only these investments will lessen murder and violent crime.

Several other states are considering a moratorium or outright abolition of the death penalty. All eyes are on New Jersey. Murder is tougher to tackle than capital punishment, however. Murder doesn't have a bill number, a sponsor or a grassroots base of faith-based lobbyists penning letters. Yet something akin to that effort is needed to tackle serious, violent crime. The bar should be a part of it.

It was said in the 1970s that wherever America's cities are going, Newark will get there first. Now is the time to give our leaders and legislators the support and encouragement they need to reduce recidivism and make progress on preventing serious crime. ■