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Domestic Murders Drop Again; Credit Law's Helping Hand & Visits to Troubled Homes

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The home front was less bloody last year, as the number of New Yorkers killed in domestic violence assaults fell for the second year in a row.

Domestic murders dropped by 9.5% in 2004, while family assaults fell nearly 1% – thanks in part to the tens of thousands of surprise visits cops made last year to homes with a history of trouble.

“We are making a difference,” said Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly. “Domestic violence is complex. We are focused and paying attention to the causes. “

The numbers continue a four-year downward trend that has seen domestic homicides fall nearly 12% and brutal assaults plummet 28%, according to the NYPD's year-end statistics.

“These are crimes people don't like to talk about,” said Deputy Chief Kathy Ryan, head of the NYPD's domestic violence unit. “But we are showing that we can help.”

One of cops' most effective tools is the home visit – unannounced stops to check up on victims of domestic violence.

“We don't wait for a crime to happen. It is a preventative visit,” Ryan said. “If everything is fine, the victim still knows that someone is looking out for her.”

Police made 53,359 visits last year – more than twice the number they made four years ago.

And cops aren't waiting for a major blowup before stepping in. A loud family argument could be enough for officers to note an address and make an unannounced return visit.

“One day, the cops just show up to ask if I am all right,” said Tess, a 68-year-old East New York, Brooklyn, grandmother. “I have to say, it was a relief to see them.”

Her 27-year-old grandson had been inviting “drugged-out friends over day and night,” and he got abusive when she told him to move out, she said.

“He didn’t want to go. But having the police just show up one day, no call or nothing, well, let’s just say that changed his mind,” said the retired housekeeper, who did not want her full name used.

“It’s a shameful thing to have to rely on outsiders to help you with your family, but I needed the help. It may have saved me from something worse.”

Officer Jose Barreto and his partner are among the more than 240 city officers who requested to work in domestic violence units. They make 20 home visits a week – more than 1,000 a year – working Brooklyn’s 72nd Precinct, in Sunset Park.

“The first thing they say is always, ‘We didn’t call the police.’ Then they understand we’re just here to see how they are doing, and they are grateful,” said Barreto, a 13-year veteran.

The NYPD’s definition of domestic violence includes any dispute between blood relatives, married and divorced couples, straight or gay couples that live together and couples with a child in common.

More casual relationships – including lovers who do not live together – are not included.

Domestic violence cases were always reviewed during the NYPD’s regular COMSTAT meetings. But the department began holding separate biweekly domestic violence sessions six months ago.

The city also plans to give each precinct digital cameras, the better to document injuries.

District attorneys also will be more easily able to tap into the NYPD’s database of individuals’ history of domestic abuse.

Still, intransigent problems remain. The number of domestic rapes rose by 8% in 2004. And a city Health Department review found that the number of women killed by lovers and boyfriends rose last year.

“These are the real toughies,” said Assistant Health Commissioner Dr. Susan Wilt. “We struggle with the question: What do you do when it goes on behind closed doors in someone’s house?”

Part of the problem with domestic abuse is the victims’ reluctance to report the crimes. An NYPD review found that in roughly 70% of the domestic homicides, the victims had no prior contact with police.

“Family and friends knew there were problems and that the violence was escalating, but no one called police,” Ryan said.

“We have to get beyond our reluctance and feelings that we shouldn’t get involved in a person’s private business, because there is so much help.”

The domestic help hotline is (800) 621-4673.

SAFER AT HOME

Here's a look at domestic violence statistics and preventive visits made by cops to victims' homes:

DOMESTIC HOMICIDES

2004	67
2003.....	74
2002.....	76
2001	76

DOMESTIC FELONY ASSAULTS

2004.....	4,042
2003.....	4,070
2002	4,626
2001	5,588

DOMESTIC RAPE

2004.....	422
2003.....	389
2002.....	371
2001.....	406

ALL DOMESTIC CRIME

2004	62,592
2003	64,047
2002	69,426
2001.....	79,122
2000	80,725

HOME VISITS

2004.....	53,359
2003.....	43,866
2002.....	31,604
2001.....	26,001

Source: NYPD

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