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To Fight Crime, a Poor City Will Trade In Its Police

By KATE ZERNIKE

CAMDEN, N.J. — Two gruesome murders of children last month — a toddler decapitated, a 6-year-old stabbed in his sleep — served as reminders of this city’s reputation as the most dangerous in America. Others can be found along the blocks of row houses spray-painted “R.I.P.,” empty liquor bottles clustered on their porches in memorial to murder victims.

The police acknowledge that they have all but ceded these streets to crime, with murders on track to break records this year. And now, in a desperate move to regain control, city officials are planning to disband the Police Department.

The reason, officials say, is that generous union contracts have made it financially impossible to keep enough officers on the street. So in November, Camden, which has already had substantial police layoffs, will begin terminating the remaining 273 officers and give control to a new county force. The move, officials say, will free up millions to hire a larger, nonunionized force of 400 officers to safeguard the city, which is also the nation’s poorest.

Hardly a political battle of the last several years has been fiercer than the one over the fate of public sector unions. But Camden’s decision to remake perhaps the most essential public service for a city riven by crime underscores how communities are taking previously unimaginable steps to get out from under union obligations that built up over generations.

Though the city is solidly Democratic, the plan to put the Police Department out of business has not prompted the wide public outcry seen in the union battles in Chicago, Ohio or Wisconsin, in part because many residents have come to resent a police force they see as incompetent, corrupt and doing little to make their streets safe.

A police union has sued to stop the move, saying it is risking public safety on an “unproven” idea. But many residents, community groups and elected officials say that the city is simply out of money, out of options, out of patience.

“There’s no alternative, there’s no Plan B,” the City Council president, Frank Moran, said. “It’s the only option we have.”

Faced with tight budgets, many communities across the country are considering regionalizing their police departments, along with other services like firefighting, libraries and schools. Though some governments have rejected the idea for fear of increasing police response time, the

police in Camden — population 77,000 — are already so overloaded they no longer respond to property crimes or car accidents that do not involve injuries.

The new effort follows a push by New Jersey's governor, Chris Christie, a Republican, and Democratic leaders in the Legislature to encourage cities and towns to regionalize government services. They maintain that in a new era of government austerity, it is no longer possible for each community to offer a full buffet of government services, especially with a new law prohibiting communities from raising property taxes more than 2 percent a year.

Most municipalities have so far remained committed to local traditions, fearing a loss of community identity, but officials in Camden County say they expect others will soon feel compelled to follow the city's example.

Camden's budget was \$167 million last year, and of that, the budget for the police was \$55 million. Yet the city collected only \$21 million in property taxes. It has relied on state aid to make up the difference, but the state is turning off the spigot. The city has imposed furloughs, reduced salaries and trash collection, and increased fees. But the businesses the city desperately needs to attract to generate more revenue are scared off by the crime.

"We cannot move the city forward unless we address public safety," the mayor, Dana L. Redd, said. "This is about putting boots on the ground."

Even union officials acknowledge that the contract is rich with expensive provisions. For example, officers earn an additional 4 percent for working a day shift, and an additional 10 percent for the shift starting at 9:30 p.m. They earn an additional 11 percent for working on a special tactical force or an anticrime patrol.

Salaries range from about \$47,000 to \$81,000 now, not including the shift differentials or additional longevity payments of 3 percent to 11 percent for any officer who has worked five years or more. Officials say they anticipate salaries for the new force will range from \$47,000 to \$87,000.

In 2009, as the economy was putting a freeze on municipal budgets even in well-off communities, the police here secured a pay increase of 3.75 percent.

And liberal sick time and family-leave policies have created an unusually high absentee rate: every day, nearly 30 percent of the force does not show up. (A typical rate elsewhere is in the single digits.)

"How do I go to the community and say 'I'm doing everything I can to help you fight crime' when some of my officers are working better hours than bankers?" the police chief, J. Scott Thomson, asked.

Chief Thomson, who is well regarded nationally, is expected to lead the new force. Though Camden County covers 220 square miles and includes 37 municipalities, the proposal calls for a division focused exclusively on the nine-square-mile city of Camden.

Camden, in the shadow of Philadelphia's glimmering towers, once had a thriving industrial base — a shipyard, Campbell Soup and RCA plants along the waterfront. About 60,000 jobs were lost when those companies moved or shifted them elsewhere.

Nearly one in five of its residents is unemployed, and Broadway, once the main shopping strip, is now a canyon of abandoned buildings.

The burned-out shell of one house, a landmark built by one of the city's founding families, has become a drug den.

This month, a heroin user there demanded that a passer-by give her some privacy to use it. "Can you show me a little respect?" she said. "I'm in a park."

Camden reorganized its Police Department in 2008 and had a lower homicide rate for two years. Then [the recession forced layoffs](#), reducing the force by about 100 officers.

The city has employed other crime-fighting tactics — surveillance cameras, better lighting, curfews for children — but the number of murders has risen again: at 48 so far this year, it is on pace to break the record, 58.

The murder rate so far this year is above 6 people per 10,000. By contrast, New York City's rate is just over one-third of a person per 10,000 residents.

Many of the drug users come to Camden from elsewhere in the county, getting off the light-rail system to buy from the drug markets along what police call Heroin Highway in the neighborhood of North Camden.

"That is cocaine, that is heroin, that is crack," Bryan Morton, a community activist, said recently as he used his car key to flick away empty bags while his 3-year-old daughter played nearby. This summer, Mr. Morton tried to set up the city's first Little League in 15 years in nearby Pyne Poynt Park. Drug users colonized even the portable toilets set up for the players, littering them with empty glassine drug packets and needle caps.

Like other residents, he is resentful of the police union for making it so prohibitive to hire more officers. "The contract is creating a public safety crisis," Mr. Morton said. "More officers could change the complexion of this neighborhood."

John Williamson, the president of the Fraternal Order of Police, blamed the city for creating the problems by shifting officers onto patrols, where they receive extra pay, from administrative positions. He said he was open to negotiation but believed that the city simply wanted to get rid of the contract.

"They want to go back to a 1930s atmosphere where employees and officers have absolutely no rights to redress bad management and poor working conditions," he said.

Under labor law, the current contract will remain in effect if the new county force hires more than 49 percent of the current officers. So county officials say they will hire fewer than that. Nevertheless, they expect that the new force will eventually become unionized.

Officials say that simply adding officers will not make all the difference, given the deep suspicion many residents harbor toward the police. As the chief and his deputy drove through the Whitman Park neighborhood this month, people sitting on their stoops stood up to shake their fists and shout obscenities at them. When police officers arrested a person suspected of dealing drugs in a house on a narrow street in North Camden last year, residents set upon their cars and freed the prisoner.

The new county officers will be brought in 25 at a time, while the existing force is still in place, and trained on neighborhood streets, in the hopes that they can become part of their fabric and regain trust.

Ian K. Leonard, a member of the Camden County Board of Freeholders and the state political director for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, said he did not blame the union officials who won the provisions. But he said he believed that the contracts were helping to perpetuate the “most dangerous city in America” title that he and others hate.

“If you add police, it will give us a fighting chance,” Mr. Leonard said. “People need a fighting chance.”