

# DAILY NEWS

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## Cops Can't Retreat in Crime War

From time to time in New York, there are crimes that arouse the passion and concern of every citizen the murder of Kitty Genovese in Kew Gardens while her neighbors listened and did nothing, the rape and beating of the Central Park jogger, the knifing of Yankel Rosenbaum in Crown Heights, the choke hold by Francis Livoti that killed Anthony Baez.

The brutal attack on Abner Louima in the bathroom of the 70th Precinct in Brooklyn is the latest entry on this list of pivotal events.

The Louima case is a watershed because it should help eliminate the opportunities for criminal behavior by renegade cops. But it should not mean an end to the decline in crime.

That is, unfortunately, a real danger because the city's successful war on crime will be over if cops misconstrue the public outrage over the brutality of the Louima case and adopt a hands-off approach to law enforcement.

Serious crime is markedly down in the city, the result of a larger police force, new management techniques that hold precinct commanders responsible for crimefighting and a highly aggressive approach to crime that allows zero tolerance for lawbreaking.

But New York City police officers are beginning to feel the fallout from Brooklyn's 70th Precinct. In many communities, the Louima case has crystallized long-simmering anger at aggressive police tactics, and the Blue Wall of Silence that protected cops has finally been broken.

Even the mayor has stopped defending cops and insulating them from criticism. A strong, independent panel with the power and resources to investigate civilian complaints may even be created.

The underlying problem is that the strategy of aggressive police behavior has been interpreted by too many cops as an implicit endorsement of techniques such as harassment, intimidation and physical abuse.

But with federal prosecutors prepared to send cops from Brooklyn's 70th Precinct to prison, police misconduct suddenly looks as if it really will be a punishable offense.

And according to recently published reports, the perception among cops that their public support is withering away in many neighborhoods has led some officers to be reluctant to risk confrontations, or what they call "police actions."

So, facing penalties from above and verbal abuse from the streets below, New York City cops are increasingly wary about fighting crime. In fact, it appears that some police will treat the much-needed and long-overdue reforms as an excuse to not do their jobs.

Just as a handful of cops misinterpreted the strategy of aggressive policing, so many others may incorrectly interpret the new approach to police misconduct. Rather than cleaning up their own act, these cops may decide to stop the cleanup of the streets.

Effective policing should not and need not entail police brutality. New York City cops should be trained to handle insults and challenges to their authority without responding violently, whether in the back of a police car or the bathroom of a stationhouse.

It should come as no surprise to citizens and public officials that law enforcement is a rough business that can all too easily go over the line, as it certainly did at the 70th Precinct. But what is understandable is not necessarily tolerable. The heinous attack on Abner Louima is an opportunity to eliminate the climate of tolerance that allowed such brutality. It must not, however, signal an end to the war on crime.

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