Scared Police Force Tries to Regroup after Storm

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Oct. 9—NEW ORLEANS—Like everything else in New Orleans, law enforcement has been turned upside down. The highest crime neighborhoods have been wiped off the map and replaced with rolling wastelands of mud, lumber and filth. The courthouse is in the train station, and most of the Police Department's office help was given pink slips last week.

Once one of the most violent cities in America, New Orleans is now mostly making arrests for curfew violations and petty drug offenses. The real dangers in New Orleans are sickness and despair wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

Against that backdrop, roughly 80 percent of the 1,450 police officers now working are homeless and living on a Carnival cruise ship leased by the federal government and docked on the Mississippi River. Humiliated by allegations that some of them deserted their posts during the storm, the exhausted and heartbroken rank and file now have grave anxieties about their futures as New Orleans cops.

Rumors abound about pay cuts, or even officer layoffs, and hundreds of officers will have to decide in the coming months whether to try to stay in this devastated city or relocate to build new lives with their families.

"We're basically just working day to day," Officer Roger Jones said one morning last week as he headed out after 7 a.m. roll call. "I have friends who have sent applications to different departments. A lot of the veterans say that, after the rebuilding, they're just going to leave."

More than 50 officers quit in the wake of the disaster, and the department is investigating 249 officers whose whereabouts and conduct during the first days of the storm have been questioned.

Although it must first determine how to police the redevelopment of a catastrophically damaged and unstable city, the NOPD's biggest challenge over the next year may be surviving its own instability. Interim Superintendent Warren Riley said one of his biggest concerns is preventing a slow, quiet drain of good officers over the coming months.

"That's a major problem for us right now, as it relates to housing our officers. That's going to be a problem for a long time," Riley said last week in an interview with the Chicago Tribune. "A lot of officers' families are settling in other cities... So we will probably lose some officers because... the fact that you can't bring your family back home for a very long time will make it a difficult situation."

Policing in the wake of Hurricane Katrina would be terrifyingly uncharted territory for any big-city police department to navigate. But NOPD is also saddled with a checkered past and a reputation for corruption and inefficiency.

A decade ago, the department was rocked by corruption charges, including officers helping drug dealers murder rival gangsters. The force was purged of about 200 corrupt cops in the late 1990s, and leaders reorganized the way the department fights crime and how it oversees police conduct.

The force's reputation has improved in recent years, but the department is still struggling. Riley was appointed after the sudden resignation of his boss two weeks ago. And many of the 249 officers under investigation will likely be fired.

But cops here, and in the region, say NOPD has gotten a bad rap in the aftermath of Katrina.

After the levees broke and flooded the city, police officers "found themselves in a situation where they literally didn't have a place to stand and call headquarters," said Louisiana State Police Lt. Col. Joseph Booth. "Given what they went through, they've actually made a fairly quick recovery."

Riley said many of the officers who were unaccounted for in those early days were actually working—just not in their assigned districts. Many went to any district headquarters they could reach and then were cut off from communications with the rest of the department because radios and phones didn't work. Three of the city's eight district headquarters were under water, and officers working there were stranded for days.

And as Riley pointed out, many officers were victims of Katrina.

"We have over 80 officers we had to rescue off of roofs and out of attics," he said. "And some of them were there for three or four days."

Some cops reportedly took advantage of the chaos to loot merchandise. But Officer Jones said he viewed much of that behavior as necessary to survival.
Early on in the disaster, “I was in a grocery store and people were coming up to me and asking if they could take things. I said as long as it was basics, food and clothing, it was OK.”

It was the same with cops, he said. Most needed clothes and food, and vehicles to function.

“Most of our cars were trashed,” he said, so they commandeered vehicles that were still operative. “The first couple days, no one knew what was going on. We looked to headquarters for direction, but headquarters was in disarray itself.”

Now that the water has receded, and officers have settled into the bizarre routine of living on a ship, the mood has changed from desperation to anxiety.

Mayor C. Ray Nagin laid off half of the city’s workforce last Tuesday, but said police officers, firefighters and ambulance crews would be spared. Not all police officers are convinced. They fear the battering their reputation took in the first days could make them vulnerable when the city’s fiscal problems get worse.

Riley has tried to set minds at ease about job security. The housing situation will remain up in the air for a long time, he said, but he believes the federal government won’t leave New Orleans in the lurch with no means to pay cops and firefighters.

To adjust to the ravaged city’s different needs, Riley created a 100-officer anti-looting squad, and reassigned everybody except a few detectives to work patrol. Ordinarily about 68 percent of sworn officers would be patrolling the city. Now, it’s more like 92 percent, Riley said. And they’re in different areas.

Before the storm, the impoverished Lower Ninth Ward was the most troubled part of the city. But it is now a no-man’s land of crushed houses and debris, its streets lost under tons of dried muck.

In a city that had more than 400,000 residents, there are now fewer than 100,000. Most are in neighborhoods that suffered less storm damage—such as Algiers on the west bank of the Mississippi.

“What we’re really focusing on is, obviously, that the areas that are most populated will have a high visibility of police,” Riley said. “We want to welcome our citizens and the contractors back into the city. We want to assure them they will be safe. And we will expect nothing but professionalism from our officers.”

With so many empty neighborhoods, police have seen almost no violent crime since the initial chaos wrought by Katrina. But French Quarter nightlife began sloshing into Bourbon Street again last week and police found themselves cuffing drunken revelers. And every morning in a shabby, borrowed room at the train station, a judge sets bond for a handful of people hauled in for curfew and drug violations the night before.

Of the 21 suspects in bond court Wednesday morning before Judge Gerard Hansen, none was charged with violent crimes, and only one had been caught with a gun.

“There aren’t enough people here to commit violent crime, and the people who commit violent crime are now elsewhere,” Hansen said.

But crime problems more typical to New Orleans are beginning to reappear. At night, patrol cars creep through deserted neighborhoods plunged into utter darkness. Officers have caught criminals sneaking back into the city after curfew, either to loot or to retrieve drugs they stashed during the storm.

“Lots of people left their drugs and guns here, and it’s still here,” said Officer Roland Doucette, steering a borrowed pickup through the ruined Lower Ninth. He said police are seeing dealers racing each other back into dangerous areas to see who can find the stashes first.

Police have no idea how much of the hard-core drug and violent crime will return to New Orleans, but it is clearly going to be less of a concern for a while. Riley said he doesn’t anticipate the city having a population of more than 200,000 for a long time.

Law enforcement officials say that would be helpful for dealing with all of the unknowns they face.

Jones said he was one of the lucky members of the force, because his list of uncertainties does not include a place to call home. His house in Algiers survived with minimal damage, and his wife and kids have not needed to relocate. Because of that, he said, there is no question that he’ll be patrolling New Orleans streets—whatever they look like—for years to come.

“I have no intention of leaving,” Jones said. “You couldn’t drag me away.”