The Crime Conundrum

Unpacking Clinton's pledge to cut the murder rate.

Clinton vowed to cut homicide rates in half.

By Suzanne Smalley | Newsweek Web Exclusive
Apr 14, 2008 | Updated: 5:34 p.m. ET Apr 14, 2008

In short, the city, reeling from 392 murders last year, is a sensible place for a politician to talk about how to crack down on violent crime. Sen. Hillary Clinton availed herself of the opportunity Friday, unveiling a crime initiative in which she pledged that, if elected president, she would "focus on cities with high homicide rates—and cut those rates in half."

Could she? Like many other major American cities, Philadelphia suffers from a toxic mix of poverty and addiction that plagues communities where opportunities for education and employment are too few and too far between. Most criminologists agree that these factors help drive violent crime—a problem that is often exacerbated during economic downturns. Clinton says she will target specific high-crime cities where she will deploy more police using "improved technology and tactics"; bestow grants for reducing gang violence and drug markets; improve community partnerships with police; and spearhead a federal initiative to crack down on gun trafficking.

But would any of that come close to cutting the murder rate in half? Jake Sullivan, Clinton's deputy policy director, tells NEWSWEEK that the 50 percent murder-rate-reduction goal is "both ambitious and achievable with the right resources and right strategies ... She looked at New York's success in reducing murders from more than 2,000 to less than 500 and other examples of successful efforts, including recent ones in Cincinnati and Chicago, and concluded that 50 percent was the right figure."

David Kennedy, a professor at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice who has worked with many cities to reduce gang violence and open-air drug markets, helped Clinton's team design the proposal. Kennedy says cutting the crime rate in half in Philadelphia and cities like it would not be