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SOCIOLOGY

How New York Beat Crime

With its judicious use of cops and innovative methods, the Big Apple is a model for how to stem homicides, muggings and other ills

By Franklin E. Zimring

FOR THE PAST TWO DECADES NEW YORKERS HAVE BEEN THE BENEFICIARIES OF the largest and longest sustained drop in street crime ever experienced by a big city in the developed world. In less than a generation, rates of several common crimes that inspire public fear—homicide, robbery and burglary—dropped by more than 80 percent. By 2009 the homicide rate was lower than it had been in 1961. The risk of being robbed was less than one sixth of its 1990 level, and the risk of car theft had declined to one sixteenth.

Twenty years ago most criminologists and sociologists would have doubted that a metropolis could reduce this kind of crime by so much. Although the scale of New York City's success is now well known and documented, most people may not realize that the city's experience showed many of modern America's dominant assumptions con-

IN BRIEF

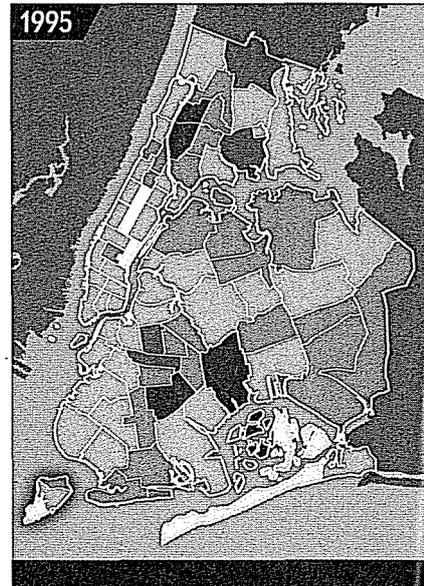
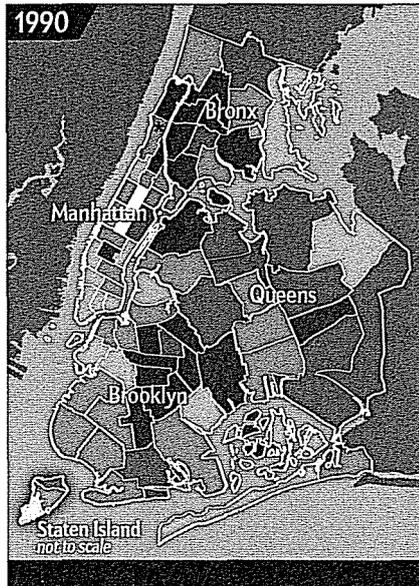
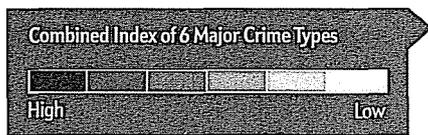
In the 1990s rates of the most common crimes plunged in most of the U.S., but in New York City the drop has lasted twice as long and has gone twice as deep.

New York's successes have defied common assumptions, such as that drug use fosters crime and that locking people up reduces it. The city's story shows that peo-

ple are not hardwired to be criminals and suggests that other cities might achieve similar results by putting more cops on the streets, especially at "hotspots" of crime.

A Citywide Cool-Off

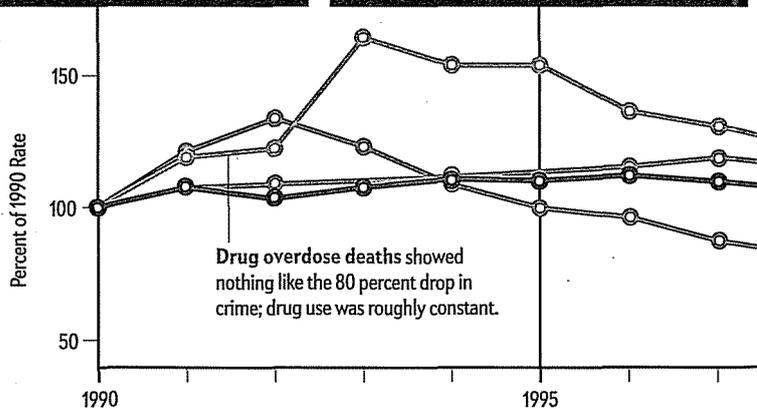
Crime rates fell across the U.S. throughout the 1990s, but in New York they kept falling for another decade, and the decline went twice as deep as in most other big cities. Here a combined index of the six most serious crimes (homicide, rape, assault, car theft, burglary and robbery) is displayed by police district. The most dangerous neighborhoods, in Brooklyn and the Bronx, typically showed the biggest improvements. [See details of the calculations, as well as more maps and data, at ScientificAmerican.com/aug2011/crime.]



*The 33rd Precinct was created in 1994. In 1990 it was still a part of the 34th.

Urban Myths, Shattered

Several common assumptions about how best to fight crime—such as lowering drug use, reducing poverty and unemployment or locking more people up—have been proved wrong by New York's numbers: the city cut down crime by 80 percent in the past two decades without making significant changes along those lines. Still, to improve things much further, New York may need to tackle deeper social issues such as income inequalities, racial segregation and the quality of education.



cerning crime to be flat wrong, including that lowering crime requires first tackling poverty, unemployment and drug use and that it requires throwing many people in jail or moving minorities out of city centers. Instead New York made giant strides toward solving its crime problem without major changes in its racial and ethnic profile; it did so without lowering poverty and unemployment more than other cities; and it did so without either winning its war on drugs or participating in the mass incarceration that has taken place throughout the rest of the nation.

To be sure, the city would be even better off, not to mention safer, if it could solve its deeper social problems—improve its schools, reduce income inequalities and enhance living conditions in the worst neighborhoods. But a hopeful message from New York's experience is that most crimes are largely a result of circumstances that can be changed without making expensive structural and social changes. People are not doomed to commit crimes, and communities are not hardwired by their ethnic, genetic or socioeconomic character to be at risk. Moreover, the systematic changes that the city has made in its effort to reduce crime are not extremely expensive and can be adapted to conditions in other metropolises.

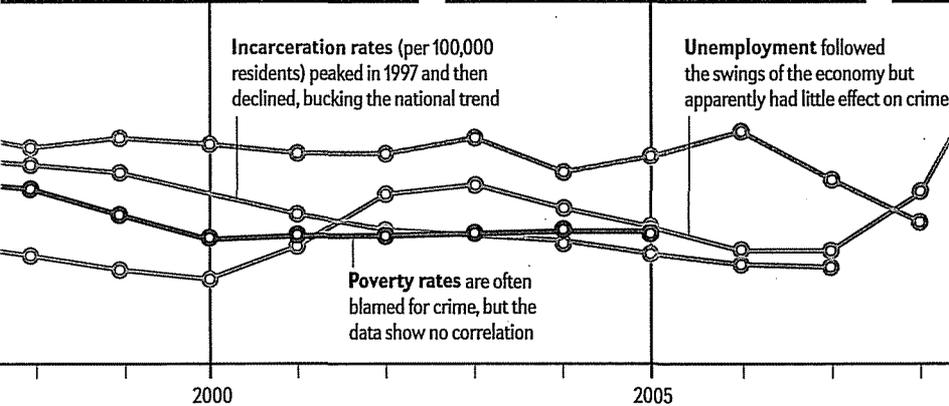
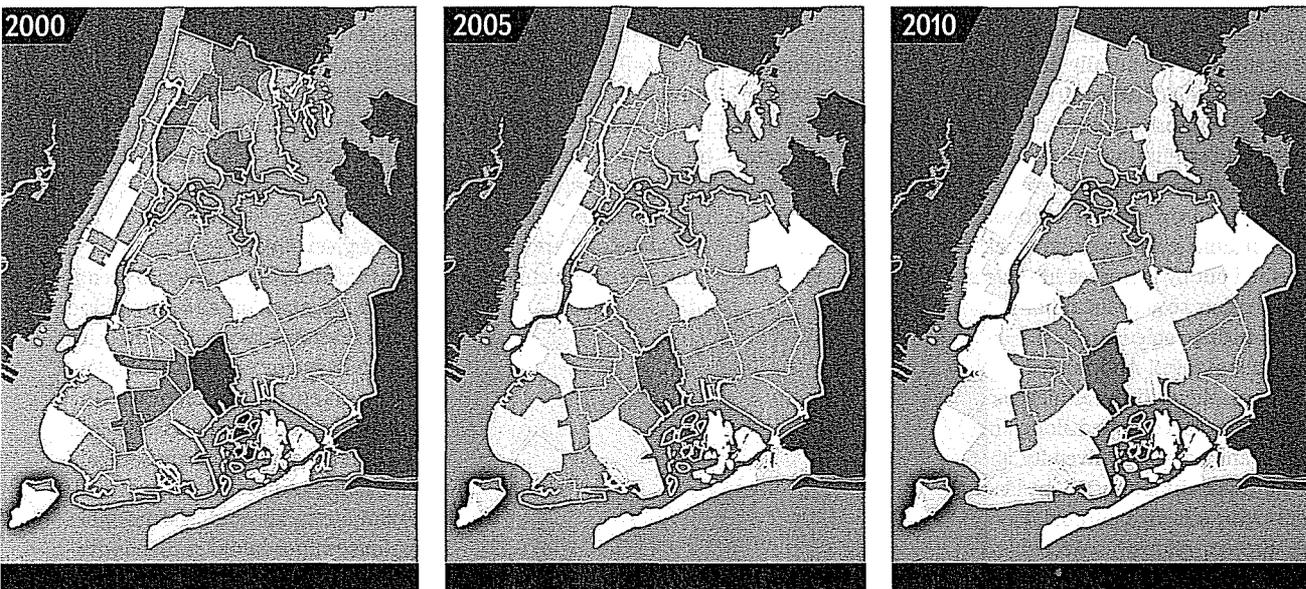
A TRUE DECLINE

THE FIRST NINE YEARS of New York City's crime decline were part of a much broader national trend, an overall drop of nearly 40 percent that started in the early 1990s and ended in 2000. It was the longest and largest nationwide crime drop in modern history. What sets New York apart from this general pattern is that its decline was twice as large as the national trend and lasted twice as long.

That extraordinary difference—between drops of 40 and 80 percent—can be seen in comparing homicide rates from 1990 and 2009 in the five largest cities in the U.S.: New York, Houston, Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles. The great crime decline of the 1990s reduced homicide in all five cities, in four of those by a substantial amount. But New York went from being dead center in its homicide rates in 1990 to being the lowest of the five—more than 30 percent below the next best city and only 40 percent of the mean rate for the other four places.

Of course, official crime statistics are generated and verified by the same police departments that get credit when crime rates fall and blame when they increase. And indeed, allegations of the New York City Police Department (NYPD) fudging data to make the numbers look pretty have received much media attention. But

SOURCE: NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT (NEW CRIME DATA BY PRECINCT)



How It Happened

What may have made a difference for New York crime was policing and, in particular, a focus on “hotspots.” The NYPD compiled detailed crime statistics in real time and used the data to systematically focus its efforts on the most dangerous street corners. (Having more cops on the streets may have also helped in the 1990s, but crime continued to drop even when NYPD rolls fell back somewhat during the 2000s.)

anecdotal evidence of police misconduct arises frequently in other places as well, including many American cities where the official numbers are not as rosy. Still, how can we be confident that the spectacularly good news reflects the reality of street crime?

The best method to verify trends is with independent data. Fortunately, agencies apart from the police have kept track of two key crime indices, and their findings have corroborated the NYPD’s data. First, county health departments keep meticulous records of all deaths and provide specific reports of what the police classify as murder and “nonnegligent” manslaughter. Over the 19 years when the police reported the dramatic decline in most crimes, the agreement between the health and police reports each year was practically perfect. In the second case, auto theft (which went down by a spectacular 94 percent), insurance companies record claims by victims. I obtained reports of theft and loss by year from two separate industry data bureaus. The most complete statistics of insurance claims indicated a decline in theft rates of slightly more than 90 percent.

I also found independent evidence for the big drop in robbery. Whereas simple robberies are reported at the police precinct level, killings from robberies are reported independently by a city-

wide police office, which also provides data to the FBI—and they are harder to conceal. The rate of killings from robberies fell more than 84 percent in all robberies. Victim surveys also have confirmed the dip in both robberies and burglaries (which are break-ins, usually in which the crime victims are not around, whereas robberies involve a direct encounter with the victim) in the city.

By American standards, then, New York City has become a safe, low-crime urban environment. How did this happen?

GOTHAM CRIME MYTHS

THE PART OF NEW YORK’S crime drop that paralleled the larger national downturn of the 1990s did not seem to have any distinctive local causes. The decline was not easy to tie to specific causes either at the national level or in the city, but the same mix of increased incarceration, higher prosperity, aging population and mysterious cyclical influences probably was responsible in both cases.

What caused the roughly half of New York City’s decline that was distinctively a local phenomenon may be easier to single out, as we will see. The answers, however, are not what many people would expect.

SOURCES: NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND COMMUNITY SUPERVISION; NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS; NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES; AND BUREAU OF JUSTICE (for incarceration); U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (poverty); BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS (unemployment); OFFICE OF VITAL STATISTICS, NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE (drug deaths)

For example, very few drastic changes occurred in the ethnic makeup of the population, the economy, schools or housing in the city during the 20 years after 1990. The percentage of the population in the most arrest-prone age bracket, between 15 and 29, declined at essentially the same rate as it did nationally, and economic growth did not reduce either poverty or unemployment in New York significantly below the national average.

A common assumption is that the U.S.'s inner cities became safer because they were "cleaned up," or gentrified—which is when formerly blighted neighborhoods begin to attract people of higher income, and lower-income populations are progressively pushed out by increases in rents and property taxes. During gentrification, so goes the thinking, all the poor people leave, driving down crime rates. And indeed, in Manhattan, the city's wealthiest borough, crime rates dropped along with ethnic and economic diversity. But in the other three most populous boroughs (Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx), diversity did not drop; if anything, it increased. And yet crime went way down—and at comparable rates—in *all four* of those boroughs.

The momentous drop in street crime—especially certain kinds—is surprising in another respect. New York has been the illicit-drug-use capital of North America for at least seven decades. By all accounts, it continues to be. In the 1980s the widespread introduction of crack cocaine was associated with sharp increases in homicide. The perceived close link between drugs and violence was one of the animating theories for the War on Drugs that was declared in the decade after 1985. From the perspective of the late 1980s, a significant reduction in violence without massive reductions in the sale and use of illegal drugs would have been an impossible dream. But that is exactly what seems to have happened in New York.

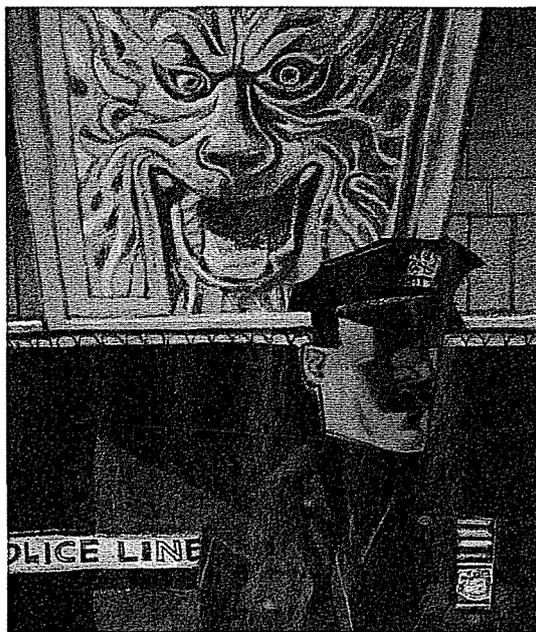
Drug-related killings (such as dealers shooting one another) dropped 90 percent from peak rates. Meanwhile drug use appears to have stayed relatively stable in the city, whether the indicator is overdose deaths, hospital discharges for drug treatment, or urine tests of criminal suspects. New York seems to be winning the war on crime without winning the war on drugs.

Finally, and perhaps most remarkably, the city's successful crime policies bucked the national trend toward locking up more and more people. The policy tactics that have dominated crime control in the U.S. assume that high-risk youth will become criminal offenders no matter what we do and that criminals will continue to commit crimes unless they are put away. In the mid-1990s proponents of the "supply side" theory of crime were warning that cities such as New York with high numbers of minority youth growing up in single-parent fami-

lies would require massive new investments in prisons and juvenile facilities. Since 1972 these supply-side theories were the central justification of the sevenfold expansion of imprisonment in the U.S. In the 1980s New York participated in the trend. But in the 1990s, while the U.S. prison and jail population expanded by half, New York went its own way. In the first seven years of the decade its incarceration rate rose only 15 percent, and then it began to fall. By 2008 it was 28 percent below the 1990 rate; nationally, incarceration was up 65 percent.

So where have all the criminals gone?

Many of them just seem to have given up on breaking the law. The rate at which former prisoners from New York were recon-



As incarceration rates rose 65 percent nationwide, New York's dropped—and serious crime fell by 80 percent.

victed because of a felony three years after release—which had increased during the late 1980s—dropped by 64 percent over the years after 1990. The NYPD still catches criminals, and prosecutors and judges still send them to jail. But the city has reduced its most serious crimes by 80 percent without any net increase in prison populations. These numbers disprove the central tenets of supply-side crime control.

ESTIMATING POLICE EFFECTS

THE ONE ASPECT of crime policy wherein the municipal government enacted big changes—and the only obvious candidate to take credit for the city's crime decline—was policing. Beginning in 1990, the city added more than 7,000 new uniformed cops and made its police efforts much more aggressive and focused on high-crime settings.

The presence of more police on the street was originally thought to have caused most of the New York decline in the 1990s. But because at that time crime was abating everywhere in the nation, it is hard to know how much of New York's success stemmed from its own policing changes as opposed to the same mysterious set of causes that operated nationally. Moreover, after 2000 the NYPD actually cut its force by more than 4,000 uniformed officers, and yet reported crime kept dropping and doing so faster than in other large cities.

Nevertheless, a close look at the data after 2000 does point to the importance of policing. In spite of the loss of 4,000 officers, the most recent period still has substantially more police on the street compared with 1990. And the number of police relative to the amount of crime kept growing because crime slowed faster than police rolls shrunk. It is also possible that the cumulative effects of increased manpower lasted into the decade when force levels went down. And the impact of cops is reflected in the fact that New York City experienced the largest drops in the crimes that happen on the street or require access from the street—burglary, robbery and auto theft—

and thus are especially deterred by increased police presence.

The police department did not only add more cops on the streets, it also implemented a number of new strategies. It is difficult to determine how much credit, if any, each of the policing changes should get, but some clear indications have appeared.

Once again, the simple explanations are not of much help. Some of the authorities' more prominent campaigns were, in fact, little more than slogans, including "zero tolerance" and the "broken windows" strategy—the theory that measures such as fixing windows, cleaning up graffiti and cracking down on petty crimes prevents a neighborhood from entering into a spiral of dilapidation and decay and ultimately results in fewer serious crimes. For instance, the NYPD did not increase arrests for prostitution and was not consistent over time in its enforcement of gambling or other vice crimes.

But other campaigns seem to have had a significant effect on crime. Had the city followed through on its broken-windows policing, it would have concentrated precious resources in marginal neighborhoods rather than in those with the highest crime. In fact, the police did the opposite: they emphasized "hotspots," a strategy that had been proved effective in other cities and that almost certainly made a substantial contribution in New York. Starting in 1994, the city also adopted a management and data-mapping system called CompStat. At a central office in downtown Manhattan, analysts compile data on serious crimes, including their exact locations, and map them to identify significant concentrations of crime. Patrols then deploy in full force on-site—whether it is a sidewalk, a bar or any other public place—sometimes for weeks at a time, systematically stopping and frisking anyone who looks suspicious and staring down everyone else. Although one might expect that criminals would just move to another street and resume their business as usual, that is not what happened in New York. Thus, crimes prevented one day at a particular location do not ineluctably have to be committed somewhere else the day after.

The biggest and most costly change in police tactics is the aggressive program of street stops and misdemeanor arrests that the police use in almost every patrol operation. In 2009 New York's finest made more than half a million stops and nearly a quarter of a million misdemeanor arrests. The police believe these tactics help to prevent crime. Aggressive patrol, however, has a history almost as long as that of street policing itself, and its effectiveness has not always been clear. Although it could in principle be more effective in New York than in other places, the evidence that it adds distinctive value to the hotspots and CompStat strategies is not strong.

LESSONS LEARNED

TO ESTABLISH CONCLUSIVELY what works and what does not will require scientific field tests measuring the effectiveness of additional manpower and of other techniques from the NYPD's full kitchen sink of tactics. Then there should be trial-and-error adaptations to other urban settings. But even this early in the game, several lessons from New York City should have a significant influence on crime policy elsewhere.

First of all, cops matter. For at least a generation, the conventional wisdom in American criminal justice doubted the

ability of urban police to make a significant or sustained dent in urban crime. The details on cost-effectiveness and best tactics have yet to be established, but investments in policing apparently carry at least as much promise as investments in other branches of crime control in the U.S.

Two other important lessons are that reducing crime does not require reducing the use of drugs or sending massive numbers of people to jail. Incidentally, the difference between New York's incarceration trends and those of the rest of the nation—and the money that the city and state governments avoided pouring into the correctional business—has more than paid for the city's expanded police force.

Unfortunately, New York's successes in crime control have come at a cost, and that cost was spread unevenly over the city's neighborhoods and ethnic populations. Police aggressiveness is a very regressive tax: the street stops, bullying and pretext-based arrests fall disproportionately on young men of color in their own neighborhoods, as well as in other parts of the city where they may venture. But the benefits of reduced crime also disproportionately favor the poor—ironically, the same largely dark-skinned young males who suffer most from police aggression now have lower death rates from violence and lower rates of going to prison than in other cities. We do not yet know whether or how much these benefits depend on extra police aggression.

If New York continues on the same path, it may be able to achieve even greater reductions in crime. After all, even after its vast improvements, its homicide rate is still much higher than those of most major European cities and six times higher than Tokyo's. At some point, though, it is possible that rates could reach a hard bottom, beyond which further progress could require solving the deeper social problems, such as economic inequality, racial segregation, or lack of access to quality education.

Perhaps the most optimistic lesson to take from New York's experience is that high rates of homicides and muggings are not hardwired into a city's populations, cultures and institutions. The steady, significant and cumulatively overwhelming crime decline in New York is proof that cities as we know them need not be incubators of robbery, rape and mayhem. Moreover, it demonstrates that the environment in which people are raised does not doom them to a lifetime outside the law—and that neither do their genes. That result is a fundamental surprise to many students of the American city and is the most hopeful insight of criminological science in a century. ■

COMING UP

For more articles on how cities are solving their own and the world's problems, see next month's *Scientific American*.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing: The Evidence. Edited by Wesley Skogan and Kathleen Frydl. National Academies Press, 2004.

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New York Murder Mystery: The True Story behind the Crime Crash of the 1990s. Andrew Karmen. New York University Press, 2006.

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The City That Became Safe: What New York Teaches about Urban Crime and Its Control. Franklin E. Zimring. Oxford University Press (in press).

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN ONLINE

Explore more data and hear an interview with the author at ScientificAmerican.com/aug2011/crime