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Book Reviews

Franklin E. Zimring, **The City That Became Safe**, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012, 257 pp.

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During the 1970s and 1980s, New York City was widely perceived as one of the most crime-ridden metropolises in the industrialized world. The city was a seemingly hardened amalgam of social pathologies. The economic downturn of stagflation afflicted the city rather badly, and in 1975, Manhattan and the four boroughs were on the verge of fiscal collapse, only narrowly avoiding bankruptcy with the aid of billions of dollars in federal loans. After a blackout in 1977, looting and arson broke out in the city, thousands were arrested, and hundreds of police officers were injured. During the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s, drug distribution, property theft, and violence ran rampant. Indeed, there were a staggering 2,262 murder victims and over 100,000 instances of robbery in 1990 alone. New York City was broadly viewed as a town in decline.

But within a short decade, a miracle seemed to have occurred. During the 1990s, crime rates quickly rushed downwards. By the mid-2000s, crime had stabilized at reasonably low levels. Franklin E. Zimring's work on New York City crime trends asks why crime fell and why it dropped even more in the Big Apple than in the rest of the US. As Zimring astutely reveals in the brief first part of the book that makes up his ''anatomy of a crime decline,'' the crime drop truly was astounding. Over the course of two decades, categories of crime like homicide, robbery, burglary, and auto theft declined by more than 80 percent, rates of sexual assault fell by nearly 70 percent, and theft contracted by more than 60 percent (p. 4). New York City went from being one of the most dangerous cities in America to becoming one of the most crime-free metropolises in the developed world.

Received wisdom contends that the crime drop was largely the work of one William J. Bratton, New York City Police Commissioner from 1994–1996, architect of ''zero-tolerance policing,'' and instigator of the CompStat program of monitoring crime events using computer technology. Inspired by the ''broken windows'' theory of James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, who postulated that maintaining well-ordered urban space and clamping down on seemingly innocuous, low-level street crime was a cost-efficient way of preventing more serious offences, Bratton set about ridding the streets of New York of crime and its perpetrators. This was the era of ''tough on crime'' policies and penal expansionism which some academics and think tanks embraced. Fortunately, Zimring's portrait of New York crime is far more sophisticated than such conventional mythologizing.

After running through the vitals of the crime decline, the second part of the book deals with explanations—the search for the ''New York difference.'' Some have argued that crime declined because of expanding prisons. With more offenders incapacitated behind bars, so the argument goes, fewer potential criminals would be out on the streets to commit crime. Zimring rejects this explanation, showing that while the US incarceration rate grew by 65 percent between 1990 and 2008, the New York City incarceration rate had declined by 28 percent. There is a certain irony, Zimring notes, in the fact that New

York City limited its participation in the project of hyperincarceration and yet experienced stronger crime declines than just about any other city in the US. For scholars of corrections, there is an important lesson in the disconnection between crime and punishment: Whatever New York City did right, it did it without the aid of concerted prison expansion.

But skeptics of aggressive police strategies may find more troubling Zimring's suggestion that more police officers on city streets probably contributed to greater safety. Social scientists like Loïc Wacquant and Bernard Harcourt have made short shrift of the empirical claims of "broken windows" policing. One wonders how they would react to Zimring's suggestion that, as the number of personnel employed by the New York Police Department (NYPD) grew by about 35 percent parallel to the crime decline, more cops may in fact have made the city a safer place; or his provocative assertion that two "proven successes" have underpinned the NYPD's war on crime: the emphasis on "hot spots" enforcement by singling out particular areas as privileged targets of police crackdown and prioritizing open drug markets for "arrest, surveillance and attack" (p. 142).

The third part of the book presents a series of lessons for crime control policymakers. First, the doctrine of incapacitation should be seriously disputed. New York showed that it was possible to reduce crime without an aggressively expanded prison system. Second, crime rates can be highly volatile and variable, and therefore, at the macro level, societies are not doomed to high rates of crime; equally, at the micro level, individuals can have widely varying commitments to offending behavior within their lifespan. While the actuarial, risk-evaluating school of thought would have us locking up "high-volume offenders with fixed criminal proclivities" (p. 190), the uncertain act of predicting just how criminal an individual will be over the life course remains pockmarked by uncertainty. Zimring is dismissive of the fixed criminal proclivity position because individuals and societies exhibit volatile commitments to crime.

Third, the war on drug use may have failed, but the war on drug-related killings succeeded, and perhaps that is all that really matters to the public. While drug use has remained high, a police-driven containment of public drug markets has minimized drug-related violence and kept drug wars from bursting out onto the streets. It is hard to argue with such conspicuous hallmarks of harm reduction. Finally, the fourth lesson lies in the resurrection of belief in police work. Police officers are not by necessity agents of unacceptably oppressive strategies of surveillance, nor are they waging an impossible uphill struggle against rampant deviance. Still, it is difficult to accept unequivocally the importance of the NYPD in the absence of rigorous empirical work in the field; indeed, Zimring recognizes as much, commenting wryly that US crime control in the last 30 years has been driven primarily by strong beliefs, not science. Admissions of this kind should temper any rash and reckless export of New York police strategizing.

Teasing out the relevant factors that could explain why New York City became so much safer is hard work. Zimring notes as much in several places. And yet it is the problem of causality that will no doubt hold the greatest interest for readers beyond the horizon of the five boroughs. One of the fundamental challenges of the book is that Zimring largely goes to battle with causality armed with descriptive statistics. Readers will hunger for the whys and wherefores of the New York crime decline, but they may instead find themselves uncovering yet another tabular trove of patterns and correlations—alluring and suggestive, but far from the final word. Certainly, the public has a strong desire to understand crime, as evidenced by intense debate over the idea that lead-free gasoline has driven declining rates of violence in the US, or Steven Levitt's contentious notion that legalized abortion fueled the crime decline. In such a landscape of thought, Zimring's work is needed more than ever.

Zimring's book is an authoritative account of the astounding New York City crime decline, and it should only serve to inspire further study, particularly of the experimental and ethnographic persuasion, that can elucidate relevant mechanisms on ground level. Without such insight, crime drops may prove as fleeting as erstwhile crime epidemics.