

# THE NEW YORK EFFECT

**The following is an edited review of *The City that Became Safe* by Franklin E Zimring, from the June issue of *Police News*, the magazine of the New Zealand Police Association. The original article appeared in the April 2012 issue of *Metline*, the magazine of the Metropolitan Police Federation (Britain).**

In the late 1980s, New York had become a byword for crime and violence and Mayor David Dinkins was under pressure to do something about it. He chose to invest in his police force.

The current wisdom among social scientists and politicians at the time was that this was a waste of effort. The academics believed the only way to reduce crime was to reshape society by promoting greater equality of opportunity and improved education, among other things.

The politicians had decided the only way to control crime was to lock up more criminals and for longer. Mayor Dinkins, however, had little option. The massive social engineering that the academics wanted wasn't possible and prison building was the responsibility of the state, not the city. It was the police or nothing.

But Mayor Dinkins and his police confounded them all. With a big increase in officer numbers and radical new strategies they produced results which were astounding. By 2009, the homicide rate – the number of homicides per 100,000 of the population – was down by 82 per cent compared with 1985, which was the city's peak year for crime. Rape was down 77 per cent.

Robbery was down 84 per cent. The assault rate was down by 67 per cent. Burglary was down by 86 per cent and vehicle theft was down by a scarcely believable 94 per cent.

When he backed his police, Mayor Dinkins had backed a winner. Or had he? Were there other factors at play – changes in the city's demography, perhaps, or a drop in the usage

of illicit drugs? That's what criminologist Franklin Zimring set out to discover.

His conclusions: yes, it was the police, and they had been so successful it was clear they represented better value for money than prisons and should attract investment accordingly. In New York, at least, they had achieved the ideal set by Metropolitan Police founder Sir Robert Peel – they had moved beyond controlling crime to preventing it.

The New York crime story, Professor Zimring concludes in his book *The City That Became Safe*, suffered not from exaggeration but quite the reverse – too little had been claimed for it. To discover the true role of the police in the astonishing drop in New York's crime rate, Professor Zimring, who is

chairman of the Criminal Justice Research Programme at the University of California, began by looking for any other factors that might have played a part, such as changes in levels of employment or demographics. He found none that were significant and those changes which had occurred were generally in line with changes elsewhere in the US, where a drop in crime of the magnitude of New York's had not occurred.

Did New York benefit from the general – and largely unexplained – drop in crime which occurred across the US in the 1990s? Very probably, he says. But, he says, these years of falling crime ended in 2000 everywhere except New York, which continued to get safer.

At least 40 per cent of the vanished crime in the city could be attributed only to "the New York effect". So how had the police done it?

Professor Zimring says that is hard to answer because so many new strategies and initiatives were introduced at the same time, along with a big rise in police numbers, that gauging the effect of any one factor is difficult.

The media and other commentators often attributed the New York Police Department's success to its adoption of "zero tolerance" policing. Street patrols certainly became, in Professor Zimring's words, "very aggressive"

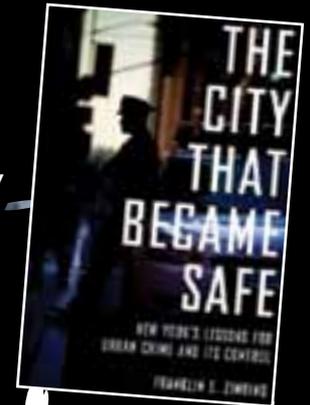




## The City that Became Safe

by Franklin E Zimring  
(Oxford University Press).

Enjoyed this review?  
Then email us at  
[Journal@tpav.org.au](mailto:Journal@tpav.org.au)  
for your chance to  
win a copy of *The City  
that Became Safe*, by  
Franklin E Zimring.



and the rate of stop and search increased 14-fold in the years after 1990. But, Professor Zimring says, "zero tolerance" was never seriously pursued although police behaviour made it look as though it was.

As evidence, he cites arrests for marijuana possession. A survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (an organisation set up by Congress) indicated that white, non-Hispanic people accounted for about 40 per cent of the country's marijuana users.

But in New York, they comprised less than 10 per cent of marijuana arrests. This, he suggests, was because patrolling officers were not trying to stop low-level crime per se, but were seeking opportunities to apprehend burglars and robbers, take them off the streets, relieve them of their weapons and contraband, identify people wanted for other crimes and acquire fingerprints – and non-Hispanic whites, who, between 2006 and 2009, accounted for only 6.3 per cent of the city's robbery arrests and 8.4 per cent of burglary arrests, were not seen as major offenders and were largely ignored in respect of marijuana. Similarly, the police showed little interest in stopping street prostitution; a true "zero tolerance" approach should have seen them coming down heavily on this activity.

This, Professor Zimring says, is because prostitution was a largely female activity and women were not major players when it came to robbery and burglary; very few were arrested on marijuana charges, either.

When it came to class A drugs, the police followed a completely different game plan. The rule book stated that total war should be waged on all drug suppliers and users. The New York police threw it out the window.

Drug use, as estimated by the number of drug-related hospitalisations, responses to government-sponsored telephone surveys and the price levels of drugs on the streets, didn't change much during the 1990s and beyond. What did change was the way in which drugs were bought and sold on the streets. In fact, these transactions no longer took place on the streets at all because the police had closed down "public" drug markets.

Drug dealing was forced behind closed doors and that, it seems, cut the homicides and other violence that ensued when dealers came into conflict through, for example, turf wars (drug related homicide declined by 90 per cent between the early 1990s and 2005).

It was, Professor Zimring notes, a strange case of a conservative organisation

– the New York police – energetically implementing a liberal strategy, ie, tackling the harm caused by a crime rather than concentrating on the crime itself.

As officers wrestled down the city's crime rate, a number of the cherished beliefs held by criminal justice theorists began to look decidedly shaky. The NYPD maximised the potency of resources by concentrating on crime hotspots which, logic dictates, should have left other neighbourhoods vulnerable as the criminals moved their operations to areas with fewer police. But this displacement didn't happen.

Nor did New York export its crime to neighbouring cities. The criminals stayed where they were, but generally ceased to be criminals, at least in respect of major crime.

And it was not just criminals in situ who lowered their rate of offending. The re-offending rate of prison inmates who had been released (as measured by new offences committed within three years of release) also sank from 28 per cent for those released in 1990 to 10 per cent for those released in 2005 – a fall of 64 per cent. Although the precise mechanism which caused this is not yet understood, New York represents the triumph of policing over imprisonment as a means of controlling and preventing crime, according to Professor Zimring.

As Professor Zimring points out, there has been much research into why crime increases but little into why crime declines. In this respect alone, his book is valuable for partially plugging a gap in research. He admits that much more work needs to be done on this topic, but it is nonetheless refreshing to see an evidence-backed study of just how much police can achieve given the political will and adequate resources.