

Evidence on zero-tolerance policing

The New York crime drop

Recent research by Zimring (2011) has shown that crime has been falling in New York City since 1990, and that this fall has exceeded the drop in crime in the next nine largest US cities. For example, between 1990 and 2009, the homicide rate declined by 82 percent in New York and by 56 percent across the other cities. A wide range of factors have previously been put forward as possible explanations for the New York crime drop, including population changes, a stabilisation of drug markets, and increased rates of imprisonment (see, for example: Bowling 1999; Kelling and Sousa 2001).

However, Zimring concludes that little is known about why crime actually fell during this period. His analysis showed that New York's sustained crime drop can not be explained by major structural or social changes, or changes in the rate of imprisonment (which did not rise much before 1997 but declined substantially afterwards). Instead, he speculated that small situational changes (e.g. the increased supervision and urine testing of offenders on parole), which would have made it harder for people to break the law, were likely to have had a substantial impact on crime. In this respect, he also suggested that police activity may have made an important contribution, given the evidence from elsewhere on targeting crime hotspots (see [Targeted approaches to crime and disorder reduction](#)) and tackling drug markets (Mazerolle et al. 2007).

Zero-tolerance policing

Zero-tolerance is a policing strategy that involves relentless order maintenance and aggressive law enforcement, against even minor crimes and incivilities. While zero-tolerance is most commonly associated with New York Police Department (NYPD) during the 1990s, the term does not accurately describe the approach that was adopted.

Bill Bratton – the NYPD chief during the 1990s – has said that he finds zero-tolerance a “trouble-some” term and that does not “capture the meaning of what happened in New York City” (1998: 42-43). While recognising that it can send out a powerful rhetorical message, Bratton has said the language of zero-tolerance oversimplifies the complexity of policing and suggests an over-zealous approach. Advocates of order maintenance policing have also observed that NYPD officers simply started paying attention to offences that had previously been ignored, and only sometimes took formal action (Sousa and Kelling 2006). There is a risk that law enforcement without targeting could be counter-productive in the longer term if it was perceived to be unfair, and therefore eroded public trust in the police (Weisburd, Telep and Braga 2010) (see [What stops people offending](#)).

Bratton described the NYPD approach during the 1990s as “better, smarter, and more assertive policing in partnership with the criminal justice system and the community we serve – community policing” (1998: 40). He mentioned an overall increase in officer resources as a springboard, although the evidence on police numbers suggests targeting of resources is most important (see [The impact of police numbers on crime rates](#)). This finding is reflected in the elements of NYPD reform highlighted by Bratton:

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- The setting of clear organisational goals to reduce crime, disorder and fear.
- The development of concrete plans for crime reduction.
- Organisational decentralisation which pushed responsibility and accountability to a local level.
- A focus on quality of life issues as well as serious crime.
- The targeting of crime hot spots and the use of problem-solving (see [Targeted approaches to crime and disorder reduction](#)).
- The introduction of regular Compstat performance meetings (see [Compstat](#)).

Broken windows

'Broken windows theory' is often mentioned in connection with zero-tolerance policing (Kelling and Wilson 1982). Bottoms (2012) provides an overview of the literature on broken windows. Briefly, this theory suggests that low-level disorder must be tackled quickly ('mending the broken windows') or else the problems in the area will quickly escalate. Serious offenders from elsewhere, sensing an opportunity, will move in, while residents become increasingly more worried about crime. However, while there is evidence that low-level disorder, if not addressed, can lead to other disorders and crimes, research has failed to find convincing evidence of the long-term sequence of events originally put forward in the broken windows theory. There are probably two reasons:

First, the evidence suggests that serious offenders have other priorities when deciding where they should operate.

Second, the assumed sequence of events did not take account of the potential for a local response to what was happening. In many areas, residents become concerned and often call on authorities to become more visible (see [The effectiveness of visible police patrol](#)).

References

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