

# Zero-tolerance policing

Relentless order maintenance and aggressive law enforcement to reduce serious crime.

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Zero-tolerance policing (ZTP) is a strategy that aims to reduce minor offences and more serious crime through relentless order maintenance and aggressive law enforcement, against even minor disorder and incivilities (Dur and Van Der Weele, 2013).

A systematic review of the evidence has, however, shown that aggressive order maintenance has not reduced crime, and concluded that ZTP is not an effective crime reduction strategy (Braga and others, 2019).

The review found that policing disorder can reduce crime, but only when community policing and problem-solving were used. ZTP is most commonly associated with New York Police Department (NYPD) during the 1990s, a period when crime fell dramatically in New York City (Zimring, 2011). It does not necessarily follow that ZTP caused crime to fall.

A wide range of alternative explanations have been put forward for the New York crime drop. These include population changes, stabilisation of drug markets, increased rates of imprisonment and changes to abortion laws (for example, Bowling, 1999; Kelling and Sousa, 2001; Kim and others, 2015; Roeder and others, 2015; Wendel and others, 2016a; b; Donoghue and Levitt, 2001).

Changes to policing may have also made an important contribution (Zimring, 2011). Bill Bratton, chief of the NYPD at the time, said he finds ZTP a 'troublesome' term and one that does not 'capture the meaning of what happened in New York City' (1998: 42-43). While recognising the language of ZTP can send out a powerful rhetorical message, Bratton has said it oversimplifies the complexity of policing and suggests an overzealous 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 is perceived to be unfair and undermines the legitimacy of the police (Weisburd, Telep and

Braga, 2010; Greene, 2014) ([read more about 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 ([read the research on police numbers and crime rates](#)).

This finding is reflected in the elements of NYPD reform highlighted by Bratton.

- 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 ([read more about targeted approaches to crime](#)).
- The introduction of regular [CompStat performance meetings](#).

## Broken windows

Broken windows theory is often mentioned in connection with ZTP (Kelling and Wilson, 1982).

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 worried about crime. Bottoms (2012) and Welsh and others (2015) provide overviews of the literature on broken windows.

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. For example, the relationship between disorder, fear and collective efficacy has been questioned (Weisburd and others, 2015) or may follow an indirect pathway whereby mediating factors should be considered (Hinkle, 2013).

There are probably two reasons.

- The evidence suggests that serious offenders have other priorities when deciding where they should operate.
- 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](#)).

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## Tags

Crime reduction