



# ZERO TOLERANCE

## Cracking down on crime in New York City

Ben Bowling

It would be surprising if Michael Howard had not been taking an interest in recent events in New York. The news arriving in the UK from across the pond has looked good, and in ways which are true to Mr Howard's heart. Here are the headlines:

- **New York, the Suddenly Safer City.**
  - **Homicide at 20 Year Low.**
  - **Tougher Law Enforcement Drives Down Urban Crime**
  - **Crackdown Curbs Killings.**
- Or even as *New York* magazine put it, with hyperbole to be found only in the Biggest Apple,
- **The End of Crime as We Know it.**

To the Law 'n' Order Conservative these are obviously headlines to die for. But is the Home Secretary justified in drawing lessons from the New York experience? Only if he can answer three questions:

One, is the reduction in crime in New York 'real' or is it spurious, just fiddled figures perhaps?

Two, is it policing, or something else, which has brought about this reduction?

Three, is the nature of crime and policing in New York sufficiently similar to that in London, for example, for what works over there to work over here?

To cut to the chase, my answers to the above, based on pilot fieldwork in New York this spring, are (1) yes; (2) partly; and (3) no.

### Plummeting murder rates

The reduction in murder in New York is undoubtedly real, startling and unprecedented. Between 1990 and 1995 the number of murders in New York City plummeted from 2245 to 1182, a drop of 47 per cent, most in 1994 (20%) and 1995 (24%). There have been big dips in New York murder before - 24% in 1943, for example, and more recently, 24% between 1981 and 1985. But never has there been such a large and sustained reduction since reliable records were kept in the late 30s. The most vocal among those taking credit for the drop in crime

is the former Commissioner of the NYPD, William Bratton. But is it possible that the police could have brought about so huge a reduction in murder?

When Bratton was appointed in 1994, he probably got the right job at the right time. Mayor Giuliani was elected on a tough law 'n' order ticket, with strong help from the police union. Increases in police strength financed by a new tax imposed by the former Mayor Dinkins had just come on-stream, along with matching funds for conflict resolution, open all hours 'beacon' schools, leadership training and a plethora of other community based crime prevention projects.

Most significantly, the crack 'epidemic' of the mid to late 1980s had peaked and was waning. There were fewer new users while supply and distribution networks shrank and stabilised. The massive and unregulated expansion of a high volume, illegal and extremely profitable supply and distribution business involved 'systemic violence' similar to that of the Prohibition era. A senior medico-legal examiner described one murder during the 'distribution wars' of the late 80s and early 1990s. "Someone got pissed (off). (The victim was) tortured. Beaten. Shot 15 times. I never saw such a display." By the time Bratton took office and unleashed the cops, much of the drug war had already been won and lost, and murder was on the decline.

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### A cop's cop

Nonetheless, Bratton made a significant mark on the NYPD during his two years in office, simultaneously innovating and turning back the clock. Among his innovations are regular 7 am meetings at headquarters in which computer generated maps of crime and police activity are displayed on huge screens to a wide audience of police brass, other agencies and the media. In these meetings (likened by one police cartoonist to being



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in front of a firing squad), the Chiefs grill precinct commanders in detail about the 'hot spots' - what's going on, and what they are doing about it. At the same time resources and responsibility were decentralised to precinct level with more direct accountability to headquarters.

For all his innovations, Commissioner Bratton was very much a 'cop's cop'. On the ground floor, many felt that the PD had 'got out of the business of policing and into community affairs'. Bratton acted to change that, 'taking a more aggressive posture. Demanding more from people at the precinct.' The success of the organisation and of the individuals employed within it would no longer be judged (as it had been in previous years) by 'avoiding trouble' but on its success in reducing crime. For Bratton and his supporters, this meant more aggressive policing from headquarters on down. A sergeant explained: "They're yelling and pointing fingers at me at headquarters. I come back and yell and point fingers at my people. They then go out on the street and do the same thing". As the macho slogan puts it, "We're not just report takers, we're the police!"

### Aggressive policing

This shift to aggressive policing includes a range of tactics including strict enforcement of so-called 'quality of life' offences, so called 'beer and piss patrols' targeting public drinking, public urination, begging, vagrancy and fare



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dodging. Misdemeanours are dealt with by a summons for those who have i.d., by arrest for those who do not. In addition to searching anyone arrested for these minor public order offences, stop and frisk is used widely against anyone suspected of carrying a weapon or drugs.

The link between this shift to aggressive policing and the reduction in murder does not, in my view, require faith in the 'broken windows' theory of order maintenance. Rather, aggressive policing has observable consequences. Most murders in New York - between 70

## **"Hit 'em, hit 'em and hit 'em again."**

and 80 per cent - are the results of shootings, most with hand guns. Some of these shootings are instrumental, but many result from a 'beef' which escalates into gunplay. For shootings of this type to occur, young men must routinely carry guns. And, as one anti-crime-officer told me, at the turn of the decade young men were carrying guns "as if they were legal". Then came 'cuffs off policing', stop and frisk and crack downs on drug dealing locations or 'spots'. The same sergeant: "Crime analysis helps. We identify outside spots. Then, milk them. Milk them to death. As soon as one dries up, find another one. Hit 'em, hit 'em and hit 'em again". In one two square mile precinct 12 specialist 'anti-crime' officers made around 300 gun arrests in two years, confiscating 155 guns in 1994 and 90 in 1995. The result of persistent stop, frisk and arrests meant that young men think twice before carrying their guns on

their person. Even if there were no fewer weapons on the street, they were more likely to be left at home or hidden elsewhere. That guns were not immediately accessible during routine confrontations was a frequently cited, and to my mind, plausible

explanation for the striking reduction in murder in the mid 1990s.

### **New York and London**

Despite cautious credit to the NYPD for implementing desperate measures to a desperate situation (and there is no doubt that this involved serious personal risk to individual officers), the nature of crime and policing there is utterly different from that which exists anywhere in the UK. Importing a New York solution to murder in UK cities would be like dispatching Batman from Gotham City to help PC Plod with the Toytown violence problem.

The extent of homicide in New York during the early 1990s was quite exceptional, both historically and compared to London. The total of 2245 murders, including 1572 resulting from shootings that year is completely unlike

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anything that the UK has ever experienced. In 1990 there were twelve times fewer murders in London than in New York. Even after the "end of crime as we know it" in 1995 there were eight times as many killings in the former 'murder capital of the USA' than the 147 occurring in the British capital.

But it is not only volume that distinguishes murder in the two cities. Here, the method of killing is most often stabbing, hitting or strangling and only rarely shooting. The most likely victim is under a year old, killed by someone known to the child. Young men shoot each other with pistols on street corners very rarely. Consequently, the capacity for London police to impact on the murder rate in the way of New York is negligible.

Not only would a New York solution not help to solve the problem of violence in UK cities, it would be counter-productive. New York is a more aggressive city than London or any other in the UK, and so are its police. So, although civilian complaints against the police have increased sharply and there are campaigns against repressive policing and excessive police violence, voices calling for restraint are muted. But as Ron Clarke, former head of the Home Office Research Unit and now Dean at Rutgers University Criminal Justice school noted recently in the *Independent on Sunday*, it is very doubtful that New York style policing could be sustained here for very long before physical confrontations between police and people broke out on the streets. A Superintendent visiting from England said of New York's policing: "It sounds like Operation Swamp '81". Any current or future Home Secretary who thinks that "aggressive order maintenance" will solve the problems of serious violence in London or elsewhere in the UK is not only mistaken but dangerously so. ■

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