

# Crime In New York: A Success Story

By *Eli B. Silverman*

Crime is down substantially in the Big Apple. Many are the conversations about the conversion of the Crime Capital into the Disney Destination. The statistics are singularly startling. In 1994, crime in New York City declined 12% in the major index categories as opposed to a 2% national drop-off. In the first six months of 1995, the city's crime rate declined 16% compared to the same period in 1994, as opposed to 1% in the nation as a whole. The New York decreases for 1995 and 1996 accounted for over 60% of the national decline in crime. Over the last three years, the overall crime rate in the city's seven major categories has plummeted a whopping 38%. New York is the engine driving down the nation's crime rate.

## **Incidence of Crime in New York City Percentage Change 1996 Compared to 1993**

Murder	-48.9%
Rape	-10.6
Robbery	-42.6
Felonious assault	-25.7
Burglary	-38.7
Grand larceny	-31.6
Motor vehicle theft	-46.8
<b>Total Index Crime</b>	<b>-38.7</b>

To appreciate the magnitude of this decline, one only needs to consider the nearly 50% drop in the homicide rate. The 985 homicides in 1996 represent the first time that homicides have dropped below 1,000 since 1968—28 years ago! Even more astounding, the trend accelerates in 1997. April 1997 recorded 45 murders, the lowest incidence since November 1966, the last month to have fewer than 50 killings. Overall crime dropped about 16% for the first four months of 1997 compared to the same period in 1996.

### **Explaining Crime**

How do we account for New York City's disproportionate share of the nation's crime drop? Commentators often stress prevailing social, economic and demographic conditions. One researcher has recently asserted that crime rates in large cities can be predicted accurately 80 to 90% of the time when one takes into account such economic and social factors as income, unemployment, education, prevalence of minorities, households headed by single women, household size and home ownership.

While it is possible that any combination of such factors plays a role, data-based explanations for New York City's dramatic 1993-96 crime drop have not emerged. One reason is that explanations based solely on social, economic, and demographic factors leave no room to consider the effectiveness of police activities. For far too long, the Kansas City experiment and other analyses led many to conclude fallaciously that there were ironclad constraints on police effectiveness.

The view was that, to have any real impact on crime rates, contemporary policing practices required radical reforms, from reactive, incident-driven, crime responses to more coherent, information-driven, problem- and community-oriented police organizations. Since these types of police reforms had been historically frustrated by bureaucratic resistance and barriers such as insularity, defensiveness, and organizational rigidity, police performance was not considered part of the crime rate equation.

As recently as 1990, two criminologists observed that "no evidence exists that augmentation of police forces or equipment, differential patrol strategies, or differential intensities of surveillance have an effect on crime rates."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, police were warned not to take credit for declining crime rates, since they would be blamed for the inevitable cyclical rise in crime.

These views, however, failed to acknowledge the importance of situational crime prevention, an approach to crime policy that emphasizes constant analysis of opportunities for criminal acts, information about victims, and the nature and patterns of times, places and choices. This omission contributed to a condition where the predictive ability of criminologists barely exceeded that of meteorologists. Most recent research, however, has begun to take situational crime prevention into account. The new approach clearly demonstrates greater impacts of policing on the incidence of crime.

### **The Revolution In New York City Policing**

The most prominent crime-related changes in New York from 1994 to 1996 occurred in the organization, management, decision-making and strategies of the police department. These multifaceted and interwoven components have had an enormous impact on crime.

Prior to 1994, crime prevention was not the primary focus of the New York City Police Department. Constrained by the notion that the police could have only limited impact on crime in the face of the host of social, economic and demographic factors that produced it, more departments concentrated on efficiently and effectively responding to crime than on trying to keep it from happening.

The primary underpinning of change was a shift in mindset. This consisted of transformed objectives as to what the police

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should and could accomplish, and a belief, desire and commitment to fundamentally recast police strategies and organizational responsibilities to accomplish the objectives. This fundamental change in perspective and orientation posited a clear desire to focus more specifically on so-called quality of life crimes such as graffiti, aggressive pan handling, street peddling, car window washing, noise, prostitution, low level drug dealing, the maintenance of disorderly premises, and the running of illegal social clubs. The belief was that these occurrences not only contributed to fear of crime and disorder, but they also provided the conditions which bred further community decline and more serious crime.

The notion that there is a connection between disorder and crime is no longer just a hypothesis. The studies and examples are legion. One 60-day pilot study of illegal window washers revealed that 50% had previous arrests for serious felonies, and 50% had previous drug-related offenses. What's more, it is the quality of life crimes which consistently arouse citizens' greatest concerns and prompt their demands for police services.

### **An Enhancement of Resources**

An increase in the quantity of resources deployed by New York City police in crime fighting began in 1990 with the expansion of a police force of about 26,000 members to its current level of approximately 38,000. About half of this increase of 12,000 was made possible by general and special city funding. The other half came from the 1995 merger of the previously independent Transit and Housing Police Departments with the New York City Police Department.

Most important in this expansion was the fundamental recasting of deployment and operations that took place. Two approaches were key. The first was the organization,

management and deployment of resources centering on the nature of specific crime problems. The second related to the shift from resource allocation based on hierarchical, specialized crime-fighting units to a system founded on geographic authority.

### *Problem-Solving Resources*

Numerous strategies were devised to allocate resources based on the diagnoses of specific crime problems such as guns, drugs, domestic violence and the deterioration of public spaces. Although all of the strategies relied on common crime fighting techniques and methodologies, the NYPD analyzed the existing criminal conditions in each instance and created a precise "game plan" for addressing each particular problem.

Many of the new crime-control strategies required the formation of teams designed to break down barriers that had separated the generalists assigned to patrol from specialized units such as the detective and organized-crime bureaus. There was a recognition, for example, that the incidence of drugs and guns often occurred in overlapping geographic patterns. In this case, the problem-solving approach resulted in

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the initial replacement of specialized drug units with Strategic Narcotics and Gun (SNAG) teams, which investigated situations involving both types of criminal activities. Today, more sophisticated integration of police specialist and generalist is occurring, and task forces are readily created and dispersed to concentrate on shifting target problems. The focus is on replacing incident-based strategies with problem-solving strategies to attack precinct crime and quality of life problems.

### *Geographically-Based Resources*

From the outset, the primary focus was on narrowing the lines of decision-making authority by placing resources close to the delivery level. Precinct and borough commands were redefined so that select units could be redeployed "to the lowest operational level without diluting their effectiveness."<sup>2</sup> Rather than allow headquarters to determine staffing and deployment on a city-wide basis, it was decided that reduction in crime, fear of crime, and disorder would flow from patrol borough, and precinct coordination of selected enforcement efforts. Instead of being governed by headquarters allocations, geographically-based teams now operated in defined precinct areas supported by precinct-wide special resources.

### **The Implementation of CompStat**

Information is key to a police department's ability to manage crime. Early in 1994 the department made a concerted effort to overcome the lag of three to six months in its reporting of crime statistics. New, updated data began to appear in a document known as the CompStat (comparative statistics) book. The CompStat, compiled on a city-wide, patrol borough and precinct basis, included current weekly, monthly, and year-to-date statistics for criminal complaints, and arrests for major felony categories and gun violations.

Decision-makers now have more reliable and timely data at their disposal through the streamlining of informational retrieval and sharing. New administrative positions were created to facilitate and coordinate the flow of data, such as a designated precinct "Domestic Violence Prevention Officer," charged with the creation and maintenance of information relating to domestic violence incidents within the precinct. These officers would be responsible for monitoring the status of specific cases through the review of department records and personal contacts via home visits, correspondence, phone calls and station house interviews.

The strategies also provided for the continued expansion of existing databases. "NITRO," for instance (Narcotics Investigative Tracking of Recidivist Offender), a database designed to track career felony drug offenders, demonstrates the nexus between illegal drugs and violent crime.

### **Using Technology to Map Crime**

Although crime mapping is not new, CompStat data and crime strategy meetings supplant previous pin mapping by integrating the use of sophisticated computer technologies and software mapping capabilities with statistical analyses and deployment data. The twice-weekly crime strategy meetings represent the first time multiple sources of crime information are being gathered for display before all key organizational members at meetings devoted solely to fighting crime.

These meetings focus attention on the use of crime analyses and provide a cross reference tool. How is deployment stacking up against crime patterns? Where are narcotics and other arrests being made? When are summons activities up? How do precinct patterns compare to patterns in other precincts?

Examination of geo-mapping by all concerned participants is extremely important in addressing the complexity of the city and its neighborhoods. CompStat crime mapping facilitates both uniformity of some crime strategies to the extent they are applicable in all areas, and diversity in areas that call for special approaches. In the past the impact of particular drug operations, for instance, would not have been systematically and simultaneously observed for their impact on adjoining precincts.

### **Empowerment of Precinct Commanders**

Unless individuals are given the tools and held accountable for crime reduction, then resources, information and mapping will be inert innovations. Geo-based problem-solving requires a focal point. Precinct commanders in New York are empowered in numerous ways. Familiar with community needs, they are provided with the authority and latitude to make resource deployment decisions to address community-specific conditions.

The exercise of this new authority is constantly held to account and monitored through the twice weekly CompStat

meetings. CompStat assesses the commanders' crime fighting results and strategies and is the central tool in accomplishing the devolution of crime management.

### **In Defense of Conscious Public Policy**

It was noted above that a lot of commentary on crime rates has been highly deterministic, emphasizing the importance of social, demographic, and economic factors to the exclusion of all else. However, as an editor of a scholarly journal recently wrote, "Over the last two decades, criminologists have had an attack of conscience. Humbled by past theoretical mistakes, some major and others simply naive, we are properly wary of imposing our limited insights on the world."<sup>3</sup>

In the case of New York City, the plummeting of crime rates since 1993 provides a dramatic demonstration that more is at work than can be explained by comparatively glacial changes in the social fabric. Clearly, a great deal more can be accomplished through policy reform in the area of policing than analysts have heretofore been willing to acknowledge.

#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>M. Gottfredson and T. Hirschi, *A General Theory of Crime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 270.

<sup>2</sup>New York City Police Department, *Report of the Re-Engineering Committee: Geographic vs. Functional* (New York, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Edna Erez, "From the Editor," *Justice Quarterly* 12(4):619, December 1995.



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