

Book Review – *The City That Became Safe*
By Scott R. Letteney

Zimring, Franklin E. *The City That Became Safe: New York's Lessons for Urban Crime and Its Control*. Oxford University Press: Oxford (2012). 217 pp. Appendices pgs. 219-215. References pgs. 237-244. Index pgs. 245-257.

During the 1990s, the crime rate in the United States was reduced by about forty percent. Through that same period and in the decade to follow, in New York City the crime rate fell by eighty percent. In *The City That Became Safe: New York's Lessons for Urban Crime and Its Control*, University of California–Berkeley Professor Franklin E. Zimring addresses the statistical data demonstrating this significant reduction of crime in New York City, the reasons for such a decline, and lessons to be taken from the New York experience. In so doing, Zimring challenges the notion that high crime is an unavoidable part of urban life and tests the traditional belief that the prevalent practice of arrest and conviction leading to incarceration is the answer to meaningful crime reduction.

The book has three distinct parts. First, Zimring focuses on a statistical analysis of crime in New York City from 1990 to 2009. He addresses the decline in crime over that period and then considers the question of whether New York City is now safe. In the second part of the book, Zimring addresses the factors that made the decline in the crime rate in New York City different from the country writ large. He does so through an exercise in deductive reasoning, eliminating commonly held crime-reduction explanations and schemes as possible explanations for the New York City difference. In the final three chapters, Zimring analyzes the strategies and tactics that were successful in New York and that could be effective in other cities.

New York City is a useful case study because of three factors, specifically “the magnitude of [its] declining crime rates, the breadth of the drop, and the length of the decline” (pg. 3). Any of these factors alone would have made the New York experience unique. However, it is the three simultaneously operating together that caused Zimring to undertake his analysis.

Zimring studied the crime rates in New York from 1991 through 2009 for seven index offenses, specifically homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, auto theft,

and larceny. The length of this decline is remarkable, because it is twice the length of a trend in the reduction of the crime rate that occurred on a national scale through the 1990s. The reduction in the crime rates in New York was so great that Zimring considers them “astonishing” (pg. 4). The crime rates for the seven index offenses fell from between sixty-three percent and ninety-four percent from rates in peak years, with the homicide rate in 2009 having fallen to eighteen percent of the 1990 rate and the auto theft standing at six percent of the 1990 rate.

Recognizing that there are motivational and consequential differences among the various index offenses, Zimring found the breadth of the drop in crime rates to be worthy of particular stress. The occurrence of each of the index crimes reduced “in at least 14 of the 17 transitions during the period” (pg. 9). Additionally, Zimring found that the breadth of the reduction in crime rates had a geographical component. The crime rates fell to a similar degree in each of Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens during the two decades studied.¹

Based upon his analysis, Zimring finds New York City to be safe, at least to the extent that he is willing to define that term. As compared to other American metropolises, New York’s property and violent crime rates are such that it can credibly claim to be safe. As for the reasons that New York’s crime rates dropped so precipitously, Zimring recognizes that the first decade accompanied a national trend in lower crime. However, he rejects the argument that New York’s experience was simply part of the larger pattern, especially because of the magnitude and length of the change in New York. He also argues that changes in demographics, including an aging and more affluent population, or higher incarceration rates cannot explain the reduction in crime in New York. While national rates of incarceration among youths and young adults increased between the 1990s and 2010, fewer members of those groups were being imprisoned from New York City. Zimring also challenges conventional wisdom regarding the interplay of drug use and sales and other crime. During the period of declining crime rates in New York City, there was no appreciable reduction in the use or sale of illegal drugs.

¹ Zimring did not include Staten Island in his analysis because of the structural and demographic differences between Staten Island and the other four boroughs. In a word, Staten Island is not as “urban” as the other boroughs, and so it was excluded from Zimring’s analysis.

Although he concedes that more research is necessary, Zimring's analysis of available circumstantial evidence suggests that the principal protagonist in New York City's long, deep, and broad reduction in crime rates was a sea change in policing philosophy.² The strategy first employed in New York City starting in the 1990s included "(1) crime reduction as a central priority, (2) sustained resources allocated to hot spot identification and control, and (3) very aggressive street police behavior in target areas, including stop and frisk and minor offense arrests targeted at suspicious street behavior or persons" (pg. 129). In order to gain greater organizational control over the police department and its enforcement efforts, a crime information and statistics analysis system known as "Compstat" was employed. Operationally, Compstat resulted in more centralized control of policing activities. In addition, there was an increase in police manpower. In 2009, manpower in the New York City police department was 121.9% of the 1990 level.

Although "there is no good way to apportion crime control credit among the several very different changes in policing" (pgs. 101-102), Zimring finds that the successful tactics included an "emphasis on hot spots for enforcement, aggressive street intervention, and sustained monitoring," and making the "targeting of public drug markets for arrest, surveillance, and sustained attack" an emphasis (pg. 142). While there is some overlap between these tactics, the police in New York City placed a focus in terms of surveillance and patrol on sites of repeated violent crime. This included so-called open-air drug markets, with their attendant drug-related violence and other crimes.

Zimring argues that the strategies and tactics employed successfully in New York run counter to the "broken windows," quality-of-life-focused, style of policing. Where the broken windows theory emphasizes various non-predatory offenses such as gambling and prostitution, arrests for such offenses actually fell in New York City from 1990 to 2009. He recognizes, however, that the broken windows theory is broad enough to permit "the rather frequent conflation of the order maintenance focus of 'broken windows' with the crime-centered crusade" employed by the police in New York during this period (pg. 130).

Zimring concludes his work by posing a series of remaining questions, including whether New York's crime rates can fall further and what happened to the criminals during

² Zimring acknowledges that the "current state of empirical knowledge on the impact of New York policing is tantalizing but grossly inadequate" (pg. 101).

the period studied. In order to answer such questions, Zimring urges that additional research be undertaken. Zimring demonstrates that great reductions in crime and violence, especially drug-related violence, can be obtained even without attendant reductions in drug use and sales. He also argues with some force that crime and violence are not inevitable companions to urban life. He stresses that “the *great majority* of street crimes are not a necessary part of modern big cities in the United States” (pg. 203, emphasis in original).

The City That Became Safe is an important chapter in the evolving conversation regarding the causes of and useful responses to urban crime. Still, some of what Zimring has shown us is disconcerting. The hard-nosed policing tactics, including hot spot emphasis and the aggressive use of stop-and-frisk, have the effect of impacting, if not targeting, minority communities. In addition, as Zimring concedes, his analysis is based more upon inferential than direct evidence. Nevertheless, Zimring has gone to great lengths to eliminate the extraneous and focus on the essence of his argument that it is possible to reduce urban crime without increasing incarceration.