Book Review

The city that became safe: New York's lessons for urban crime and its control

Franklin E. Zimring

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Franklin E. Zimring's *The City That Became Safe: New York's Lessons for Urban Crime and its Control* is a recent publication from Oxford University Press. Zimring's book is a carefully dissected data analysis of city demographics, crime and crime control practices in New York City, focusing mostly on the causes for the crime drop over the last two decades. Zimring has carefully layered the logic of his argument to attempt to clarify how and why New York City has experienced a crime drop (in terms of longevity and magnitude) that is unrivaled by other major cities. The book is published several years after his 2007 book *The Great American Crime Drop*, which takes a broader, national approach to the crime drop of the 1990s and early 2000s. Zimring's ultimate goal with *The City That Became Safe*, is to separate myth from reality surrounding New York City's profound accomplishments. This is not a book that offers a simple solution to urban crime or one that rallies behind a certain politician as being the saving grace of the city. Instead, this book, which provides a visual data representation on nearly every page, is a scholarly well-written book that is accessible for a wide range of readers. In the end, the author confirms many commonly held beliefs that New York City police tactics and management have had an impact on crime reduction. Beyond that conclusion is an important lesson for crime policy and prevention: New York City accomplished this crime reduction feat while also reducing incarceration.

The book is comprised of eight chapters divided into three parts, all of which provide the reader with access to a lot of visual data presentation that accompanies his analysis. Part 1 of the book is largely descriptive and heavily visual. In Chapter 1, Zimring sets up historical, inter-city and intra-city comparisons of UCR Part I index crime rates and its patterns across time (one exception: arson is not included in this analysis). The conclusion is, of course, that since the 1990s crime has drastically decreased in all four boroughs (Staten Island statistics are available in the appendix). However, in Chapter 2, Zimring begins a more complex comparison with the introduction of city demographics. The city is safer on several levels of comparison, including historical comparisons and comparisons to other major national and international cities. The conclusions of Part 1 are clear: New York City is different from other cities and from its earlier self – major crime has dropped nearly four-fifths of the levels seen in 1990.

Part 2 begins with an examination of the changing demographics between the four major boroughs. Manhattan, specifically, has undergone a major decline in population trends for traditional risk groups and increased economic progress in comparison with national trends.

The same cannot be said for Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx that have all experienced stable trends across this same time period. Yet, the crime drop was experienced in all four boroughs. In Chapter 4, Zimring examines past explanations for the sharp rise in city violence during the 1980s: the rise of the super-predator and the introduction of crack-cocaine. The youth predators never appeared in New York City. In fact, social indicators of crime, such as age, are not good predictors of crime in the city during the crime drop of the last 20 years. Also during this time, drugs were readily available on the streets. Prices for hard drugs fell, yet overdoses remained stable across time. Drug related homicides spiked in the mid to late 1980s and again in 1994; however, since that time violence has fallen drastically. In Chapter 5, Zimring discusses the role of the New York City Police Department and the comprehensive policing strategy that can partly accept responsibility for the crime drop. 'Preventative policing' – part of which includes an aggressive stop and frisk method of suspicious looking persons – was instituted by Police Commissioner Bratton primarily to search for illegal handguns. Also, at this time, the use of Compstat allowed the police to organize the patrols for heavy crime areas. Nationally, New York was selling 'Broken Windows' and 'quality of life' policing as being behind the changes in city crime. However, in Zimring's 'acid test for Broken Windows' this type approach does not hold up. What worked in New York City is a result of a package of changes in police approach to crime, including an emphasis on hot spot policing and aggressive policies of targeting public drug markets.

In Part 3, Zimring begins with Chapter 6 and poses questions for further research. Of note, the New York experience cannot be completely attributed to the policing changes because these results have not been replicated in other cities. Next, in Chapter 7, Zimring discusses the lesson for crime control including the use of incarceration and policies that lead to mass incarceration beginning in the 1980s. New York City's incarceration rate has been much lower than national trends since the early 1990s, due largely to the effective strategies of street policing. In the final chapter, Zimring challenges social scientists to rethink theory that attempts to describe crime because, according to his findings, some of the traditional criminological dogma cannot be supported when applied to the New York experience.

Given recent crime trends that show the national crime drop has plateaued or is even rising in some cases, as well as policies in many states where offenders are being released early from incarceration, this book is both timely and relevant. Zimring does not appear to be fond of criminological theories and explanations, and it shows at times. The reader should note that this analysis does not include any hypothesis testing of data, as it is mostly descriptive comparisons. Still though, this is a valuable text likely to spur further research into the New York City crime drop and could inform policymakers looking to impact crime without driving up incarceration costs.

While several researchers have attempted to describe the reasons behind crime drops of the last 20 years, Zimring's has been the most comprehensive attempt of New York's experience to date.

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