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**Zero Tolerance:  
Policing a Free Society**

**Enlarged and Revised Second Edition**

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# **Crime is Down in New York City: Blame the Police**

**William J. Bratton**

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**N**EW YORK City, a city that only three years ago had a reputation as 'the crime capital of the world', is now being lauded as one of the safest big cities in the world. How did this quick turnaround happen? Blame it on the police. The men and women who make up the New York City Police Department (NYPD) are principally responsible for the dramatic crime decline that continues today in New York City. Over the past three years, the City's crime rate has dropped by 37 per cent. The homicide rate alone has plummeted over 50 per cent.

To truly appreciate the significance of the dramatic crime decline in New York City, it is important to take a walk back through time to understand how New York City gained its reputation as the 'crime capital of the world' in the first place. It is also important to understand how American policing has changed over the past quarter century to effect the decline in the crime rate presently being experienced in cities across the nation.

## ***The Professional Era***

During the 26 years I have been involved in American law enforcement, there have been several very significant changes in policing throughout the United States. I entered policing during the 1970s, a time in America when the Vietnam War was still raging. Huge demonstrations were occurring. We had just come through the race riots and resultant civil rights era of the sixties and were fast becoming a much more permissive society. Coupled with this was the nationwide phenomenon of moving patients out of our mental institutions, many of whom became

the 'homeless' populations of our inner cities. Simultaneously, American society and its cities' streets were becoming more disorderly and fear-inducing. American policing was also moving into a new era called 'The Professional Era,' which ironically reduced police presence and control of the streets simultaneously with the new social disorder problems that would provide so much fear and crime in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Professional Era of policing is best defined as the time police relied on what I call the 3 R's: Rapid Response, Random Patrol and Reactive Investigation. As we began to take advantage of emerging technologies like the 9-1-1 system<sup>1</sup> and computer-aided dispatch, police also began to rely upon motorized patrol, replacing the foot patrol officer in most American cities. The ever expanding number of 9-1-1 calls required us to take police off walking posts and put them into cars so officers could rapidly respond. When not on call, these cars would randomly patrol, hopefully preventing and deterring crime. And as they had always done, once something did happen, police reacted and investigated.

There was an old television show called *Dragnet* that best epitomised the Professional Era of Policing. *Dragnet's* main character, Sergeant Jack Webb, was famous for his style of questioning a witness or taking a citizen complaint. He was best known for one famous line: 'Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts.' This line was typical of the Professional Era which called for no personal touch and required little personality. The almost computer-generated voice which the fictitious Sergeant Webb used ironically fitted this period's environment, characterized by an increasing use of computers throughout the policing profession. The policing style of the 1970s was going to be the end-all policing methodology; objective, detached and impersonal. During the Professional Era, by focusing on process and not results, police were going to finally be able successfully to control crime using modern technology, rapid response and better management systems.

What happened, however, was quite different. This new type of modern-day policing was ill-prepared for the large volume of calls that were generated by the 9-1-1 system. Most major American cities were overwhelmed. As other city services were declining, the police became the catch-all. Dial 9-1-1 and they would come.

Police had more and more calls and less time to investigate, less clearance and solving of crime. And perhaps most importantly, the police had less time to interact in a positive way with members of the community.

And then came the 1980s, a time characterised in the United States by the growing phenomenon of drugs. Drugs, particularly cocaine and the emerging crack cocaine, came into vogue in the mid-1980s. With the drugs came guns, increasingly more powerful weapons such as semi-automatics with fifteen and seventeen rounds instead of the old thirty-eight with five or six rounds of ammunition. Drug-related gun violence, especially among youth, became a mean reality. In what we once thought were safe areas of our cities arose random violent crime. When New York City experienced this in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it began to scare everybody. The problems and violence of the ghettos suddenly seemed to be everywhere. Nobody seemed safe. As noted by George Kelling, co-author of the broken windows article, we had effectually de-policed the streets of our cities.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Evolution of Community Policing***

The late 1980s saw some police researchers and police leaders beginning to realize that some of the basic assumptions behind the Professional Era were flawed. The effects of rapidly responding to crimes were muted because research showed it took people almost 10 minutes to decide to call the police in the first place.

And police riding in air-conditioned squad cars, rapidly going from call to call, did not make people feel safer. In fact, it further separated the police from the public, the consumers of police services.

Fortunately, the researchers and practitioners did not stop their work at finding what was not working, but began to look at how to think differently about crime and disorder and develop strategies that would work. From this evolved the concept of community policing. It began all over the country in little bits and pieces culminating in a process at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Criminal Justice where, through a federal grant over a period of several years, police leaders, academics, community leaders, media and politicians came together to talk about policing and the development of community policing. The

primary focus was prevention. Policing had come full circle, returning to the concept of being a part of the community, not apart from it, with an emphasis on preventing crime, not just responding to it.

Community policing is a concept that you hear a great deal about. There is a continuing debate as to whether community policing is a philosophy, style of policing or programme and whether it is tough or soft on crime. However, I have always discussed community policing in simpler terms. Just as the three R's best described the Professional Era, community policing is defined by three P's: Partnership, Problem Solving, Prevention. Remember in the 1970s and 1980s police said: 'If you give us additional personnel, equipment and resources we'll take care of your problems and control crime'. This didn't happen because there was no partnership with the community to jointly identify those problems. By working in partnership with the community, other institutions of government and the criminal justice system, police can have a significant impact on crime and disorder. This is the basic premise behind community policing and, when properly applied, it is tougher on crime than anything else we've ever tried. New York City's experience is proof positive of this.

Chasing after those thousands of 9-1-1 calls meant putting bandages on the symptoms of the problems generating the calls. We were not taking effective action to solve the problem that generated the call in the first place. Repeat calls brought police back to the same street corner time and time again to kick the same group of rowdy kids off the corner or address the same domestic violence problem. During the Professional Policing Era, police managers had focused more on measuring response time and time spent on calls. Efforts were focused more on process versus the results of preventing and reducing crime and disorder. Police needed to work harder and more strategically at solving the problem. Community policing enabled police to refocus resources on the most basic reason for our being. The primary reason that London Metropolitan Police force was created by Sir Robert Peel in 1829 was to *prevent* crime from occurring in the first place (see p. 126).

Interestingly, policing's shift from the Professional Era to community policing did not involve a complete changeover. It was more a melding of ideas and strategies. The three R's still have

their place for certain crime situations, but not all and not as an overall crime control methodology. Blending the benefits of rapid response and random patrol as well as top notch investigative work with the development of strong community partnerships to solve problems that lead to crime reduction and prevention describes the foundation of policing in America in the 1990s and in New York City in particular.

### ***Policing in New York City in the 1990s***

The cover of *Time* magazine calling New York City the Rotten Apple and the 'Do Something Dave' headline in the *New York Post*, begging then Mayor David Dinkins to take action against rising crime and disorder, characterised the state of frustration in New York City in 1990.

How did New York City get such a negative image? How did it become a city so seemingly out of control? In New York City over the previous twenty years, as a result of police corruption scandals in the 1970s, the City consciously opted to remove its police from dealing with anything with the potential for corruption. Police were precluded from entering licensed premises and from giving citations or summonses on many disorder-related street conditions for fear of corruption. The direct result of these restrictions as well as the impact of the Professional Policing

model were that the NYPD seemed to withdraw from controlling behaviour on the streets of New York and conditions worsened. Graffiti and other signs of disorder abounded. In the 1970s and most of the 1980s, there was not a subway car in the City that was not completely covered with what some inappropriately described as an urban art form, graffiti. Subway stations became shantytowns for the homeless and aggressive begging increased, exacerbating a climate of fear, compounded by a significant and notorious decline in the quality of life as a whole.

When I first came to New York City from Boston in 1990 as the new Chief of Police for the City's Transit Police Department, I remember driving from LaGuardia Airport down the highway into Manhattan. Graffiti, burned-out cars and trash seemed to be everywhere. It looked like something out of a futuristic movie. Then as you entered Manhattan, you met the unofficial greeter for the City of New York, the Squeegee pest. Welcome to New York City. This guy had a dirty rag or squeegee and would wash

your window with some dirty liquid and ask for or demand money. Proceeding down Fifth Avenue, the mile of designer stores and famous buildings, unlicensed street peddlers and beggars were everywhere. Then down into the subway where everyday over 200,000 fare evaders jumped over or under turnstiles while shakedown artists vandalised turnstiles and demanded that paying passengers hand over their tokens to them. Beggars were on every train. Every platform seemed to have a cardboard city where the homeless had taken up residence.

This was a city that had stopped caring about itself. There was a sense of a permissive society allowing certain things that would not have been permitted many years ago.

The City had lost control. It was the epitome of what Senator Daniel Moynihan had described as a process of ‘defining social deviancy down’— explaining away bad behaviour instead of correcting it.

### ***The Beginning: Hiring Additional Police Officers***

In 1990, Mayor David Dinkins and the City Council realised something had to be done and, with public support, enacted legislation to hire an additional 7,000 police. This hiring was designed to support the community policing programme that was being implemented in the New York City Police Department (NYPD). However, then Police Commissioner Lee Brown wanted to dedicate these 7,000 new young police officers to 1,500 beats throughout the City. The average kid joining the NYPD at that time was a 22-year-old, with only a high school (12 years) education.

- Many of the new hires had never held a job until they applied to the NYPD.
- Many had never even driven a car.
- Many lived outside the City and had never interacted with a minority person.
- Many were under 21 and not even old enough to legally drink.

And these were the 7,000 young police officers who were supposed to solve the problems of New York City, one of the most complex cities in the world, after only six months of police academy training. They were simply not equipped to deal with the city’s problems of race, crime and disorder.

Although legislating the hiring of 7,000 additional police officers in the early 1990s was a start and crime began to go



down slowly, more was needed. When I became Police Commissioner in January 1994, aware of this deficiency in the previous administration's approach, I undertook a strategic re-engineering of the NYPD that significantly contributed to the dramatic crime reduction and quality-of-life improvement that continues in New York City today.

### ***Re-engineering the Organisation***

Like many private corporations that have chosen to re-engineer, the NYPD was an organisation that wasn't living up to its potential.

The process of re-engineering requires the setting of clear-cut goals, the restructuring of the organisation to meet those goals and priorities and maximum involvement of Department personnel and outside expertise.

Instead of being satisfied with incremental declines in crime, we set ourselves the mission of dramatically reducing crime, disorder and fear.

We re-engineered the NYPD into an organisation capable of supporting these goals. We created 12 re-engineering teams covering areas crucial to achieving short- and long-term crime reduction goals such as training, equipment and technology re-engineering teams. We tapped expertise from inside and outside the Department to work on goals and implementation strategies to meet these goals.

### ***Decentralization***

In 1994, precinct commanders had very little authority to do anything unless headquarters demanded it.

We cut through the 'wedding cake' of centralised hierarchical bureaucracy and put the focus of crime prevention and disorder reduction back on the police in the precincts. In other words, we decentralised policing in New York City.

We pushed responsibility and accountability down, but not to the new, inexperienced beat cop, as the previous administration had done, but rather to the precinct commander level, so that we really had 76 miniature police departments. In view of the complexity of many of New York City's problems the earlier policy had been setting those newly-hired young men and women up for failure by putting them in charge of problem-solving efforts. We changed the focus from that young officer to a more mature (by fifteen years on average), college-educated, veteran police

commander who knew how to police the city.

**We demanded that precinct commanders place dual emphasis on quality-of-life or signs of crime as well as on serious crime.**

New York City government had not paid attention to the quality-of-life drinking and minor street crime that citizens had experienced every day for over 25 years. As a result the police had stopped enforcing many of the City ordinances which were intended to prevent these violations. I set the macro-level goal of crime reduction and enhancing quality of life, but then let precinct commanding officers manage at the precinct or micro-level by determining how best to do this. In addition to decreasing felony crime, this led to a successful city-wide effort to reduce and prevent graffiti as well as an ongoing elimination of those infamous squeegee pests.

Essential to police enforcing quality-of-life laws for the first time in 25 years was public and political support. New York fortunately had this. In 1994 the newly elected Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had campaigned on the issue of crime and disorder. Upon his election, unlike his predecessors, he authorized the police and their new Police Commissioner to develop and implement strategies to deal with identified problems. As Mayor, he then co-ordinated the activities of other city agencies to support these crime control strategies.

### ***Strategic Crime Fighting***

Over a two-year period, the police developed eight crime control strategies to address drugs, guns, youth crime, auto theft, corruption, traffic, domestic violence and quality-of-life crime throughout the City. We developed a geographically-based strategic drug reduction initiative that has been implemented in two areas of New York City with successful preliminary results. We created an innovative system to measure the success of the crime control goals called the Compstat Process. Compstat stands for Comprehensive Computer Statistics. It incorporates four basic premises: timely accurate intelligence data; rapid response of resources; effective tactics and relentless follow-up. In the NYPD, at twice-weekly Compstat meetings, the Department's top executives meet. Each command presents the results of their efforts in the previous month compared to their plan for the same period of time.

### ***Changes at the Precinct Level***

Before I became Police Commissioner, the emphasis on community policing had resulted in police being assigned to beats in the neighbourhood with the responsibility to solve all crime problems. New police officers, many no more than 20 or 21 years old, were expected to use problem-solving methodologies associated with community policing to address any crime problem, from youths loitering on street corners to rampant drug dealing on their beats. This approach was not working. Some neighbourhoods were so crime-ridden that these young officers could not cope with such complex problems and issues.

Precinct commanding officers had little control over these officers who were assigned via a strictly enforced community policing deployment formula from Police Headquarters. Moreover, resources were more difficult to allocate appropriately under a rigid plan that placed authority and accountability at multi-functional and poorly co-ordinated higher levels. To correct this situation, as previously mentioned, I decided to focus accountability and authority at the precinct commander level. This meant that precinct commanders could decide how many and how best to use beat officers. They were charged with developing problem-solving initiatives because precinct commanding officers had the experience and knowledge to solve complex crime issues. Working within the framework of the Department's eight strategies and Compstat process, they developed problem-solving tactics and deployed officers according to a strategy they developed specifically to work on problems in their precinct.

### ***Commanding Officer Authority and Accountability***

Beat officers were just one example of commanding officers' lack of authority over the men and women who worked in their precinct. Specialised units, such as detectives, narcotic units and anti-crime units, were also controlled by other police managers at headquarters. Precinct commanders did not have authority or influence over the assignment and management of these officers. Their hands were tied under a one-dimensional, function-orientated hierarchical police structure. Precinct commanders had been denied greater authority and accountability because it was feared that there was a risk of corruption if

headquarter's oversight could no longer be achieved through specialised services provided to the precincts, particularly in traditionally corruption-prone areas.

I ensured that commanding officers were put in charge of their personnel and their assignments. They were given the authority to put together a co-ordinated and focused plan to attack crime in their precinct. They were able to identify crime 'hot spots' and assign necessary patrol officers, detectives, undercover and narcotics officers to these problems. I gave precinct commanding officers the authority and made them accountable. Precinct commanders could bring sufficient deterrents to bear on difficult crime areas, resources could be re-allocated from one 'hot spot' to another within the precinct, results could be measured with greater consistency and reliability, and the precinct was a large enough unit to support its own specialised forces.

### ***The Compstat Meeting***

As precinct commanders became the focal point for carrying out their own and the Department's crime-reduction strategies, the Compstat meetings and associated activities became the engine for the effort. They were a product of the favourite four-step philosophy for action of Jack Maple, Deputy Commissioner for Crime Control Strategies and Operations. This philosophy has become a mantra in the Department: (1) accurate timely information, (2) rapid, focused deployment, (3) effective tactics, (4) relentless follow-up and assessment. Twice-weekly Compstat meetings require precinct commanders to be ready to review their up-to-date computer-generated crime statistics and relate what they are going to be doing to achieve crime reduction. These meetings are held at Headquarters in the Department 'War Room' which contains large computer-fed screens and other devices for displaying statistics. One reporter sitting in a Compstat meeting described it as follows:

Maple called the precinct commanders to the front of the room in turn, questioning, prodding, cajoling and occasionally teasing information out of them. They discussed on-going investigations, special operations and any unusual criminal activity. When the men and women from the 81<sup>st</sup> Precinct got their call, the precinct commanding officer and his staff were asked to explain a recent spate of shootings.

What's going on, Maple wanted to know. Why are these shootings

happening? Is it a turf war? No? Well, somebody's not happy. Maybe they're cranky 'cause it's hot outside, but something's happening. When the shooting locations were put up on the huge map projected on the wall, along with those of drug complaints in the precinct, there was a clear overlap. Maple asked what was being done about the drug spots, and one of the narcotics officers said it was a tough area because the business was done inside and there were lots of lookouts. That's fine, Maple said. That's why we're detectives. Tell me what tactics we can employ to penetrate these locations. The detectives said they would try some buy-and-bust operations and maybe get a couple of guys behind the Plexiglas to rat when an arrest was hanging over their heads. Maple wasn't satisfied. I want you back here next week with a plan, he said to the Precinct Captain. Normally each precinct comes in once every four to five weeks.<sup>3</sup>

In order to respond to the kinds of questions posed at Compstat meetings, precinct commanders began bringing with them representatives from other bureaux, such as detectives who were assigned to their precincts. Compstat meetings thus encouraged inter-bureau functional co-ordination.

### ***Making Drug Arrests***

We also changed the Department's position against police officers making drug arrests. In the past, it was deemed too risky for street officers to make drug arrests. Since there was a great deal of cash involved in drug transactions, it was thought that the risk of corruption was too great. Heavily supervised special squads had primary responsibility for enforcing drug laws. We changed this policy and even encouraged officers to seek out drug arrests during peak drug dealing times.

### ***Internal Affairs Investigations***

Similarly, I changed the way Internal Affairs were conducted in the NYPD. Prior to my tenure, the Head of the Internal Affairs Bureau and the Police Commissioner were sometimes the only two people who had overall knowledge about corruption investigations in the Department. I changed this policy as well, noting that you have to have confidence and be able to trust the integrity of the command staff and precinct commanders. NYPD's 76 precinct commanders in essence ran 76 mini-police departments. Not trusting them with on-going investigations occurring

or involving members of their precincts weakened their authority as well as sending a negative message about their trustworthiness. Inclusion became a very strong team builder and motivation tool.

### ***Computer Access for Detectives***

Before my tenure, detectives were not allowed to use a number of computer systems because it was thought they would jeopardise the integrity of other investigations. In other words, they were not trusted. These systems included such basic investigatory tools as the computer-assisted robbery system, narcotics databases and on-line warrant system. I gave the detectives access to these computer systems. Integrity was not jeopardised and the NYPD continues to experience some of the steepest crime declines in the country. During my tenure, violent crime was reduced by 38 per cent and the murder rate declined by 51 per cent.

### ***Give the Police the Credit***

However, even as the crime numbers continue to decline today at unprecedented rates across the entire city, there are the sceptics. Some are criminal justice researchers, others are political pundits. They cite theory after theory as to why crime is falling except the one that is of the most significance in New York City: better, smarter and more assertive policing in partnership with the criminal justice system and the community we serve—community policing.

To these critics I unequivocally can say the crime rate did not fall because of the weather. It did not drop due to changing socio-demographic trends. Crime is not down as a result of changes in the economy. The declines may have been affected somewhat by higher prisoner incarceration rates, but the drop in crime in the City has been so precipitous over such a short period of time that the traditional causes of crime, or what we believed to have been the principle causes of crime increases or reductions, just don't apply.

In January 1994, all the young kids in the city did not suddenly become old. All criminals did not suddenly march into jail. 1995 was one of the mildest winters in New York City

history: 1994 was one of the worst. Crime went down dramatically in both years, so the weather did not have a significant impact on crime. Murder is not a crime that can be covered up or over-reported. The murder rate has declined by over 50 per cent in New York City because we found a better way of policing. We are results-focused. We are decentralised. We are co-ordinated. We have enough cops and we are using them more effectively.

We have partners. We have shown in New York City that police can change behaviour, can control behaviour and, most importantly, can prevent crime by their actions—independently of other factors. We have, in summary, to again quote George Kelling, ‘re-policed our city streets’.

In response to the criticism that this new policing is too assertive and that citizens are being abused in significantly greater numbers, I am comfortable in saying there is no sustainable evidence to support these assertions.

In response, I point to the 166,737 fewer victims of violent crime in the three-year period 1994-96 under our new policing strategies, with our emphasis on prevention rather than reaction, and on public order maintenance as a way of changing behaviour to reduce crime. Did complaints against police increase? Yes they did, but it should be noted that there are over 38,000 police officers making over 300,000 arrests and issuing millions of summonses each year. Compare that activity to the approximately 9,000 citizen complaints that were filed in 1996.

New Yorkers are reporting that they are feeling safer. Residential and commercial real estate markets are booming. The economy has stabilised. Tourism is skyrocketing. New York City is slowly revitalising itself.

There are still serious crime problems in New York City that will require additional strategizing and resources. However, as illustrated by the initial success of the newly-implemented geographically-based rather than functionally-based drug reduction strategies in the Brooklyn North and the upper Manhattan areas of the City, the police can have an impact on even long-standing crime problems. The NYPD, or for that matter any successful policing organisation, cannot solve all problems or all crime. However, they should be recognised for what they can do and how well they are doing it today. Fair is fair. We shouldered most of the blame when crime went up. Give us some of the credit when it goes down—and stays down as I

confidently predict it will in New York City. And the good news is, 'if you can make it in New York you can make it anywhere'.

### ***And Finally ... A Word About 'Zero Tolerance'***

Many police, policy and political leaders have adopted the phrase 'zero tolerance' to characterise the model of policing I initiated in New York City—a phrase used in the title of this book. While the phrase is used more widely in Britain than in the United States, it has gained some currency there as well. The phrase is troublesome.

Throughout my career as a police officer and police administrator, I have been impressed by the complexity of, first, the problems police face and, second, police responses to problems. This was not always apparent in American policing where, within my memory, it was believed that patrol officers handled 'simple' incidents with rote responses—riding in cars, responding rapidly to calls for service, and arresting offenders. My own experience as a young police officer in Boston, especially with early variations of community policing—called neighbourhood team policing during the late 1970s—confirmed for me what a generation of police research has shown: there is nothing rote about police work, it is incredibly complex.

Phrases such as 'zero tolerance' send powerful messages. That is why they catch on so quickly. Clearly, zero tolerance conveys a forceful message about the importance of civility and order in complex societies and about the need for police to restore and maintain order. But it sends other messages as well, and this is what worries me about the equation of 'New York-style' policing with zero tolerance.

First, the phrase smacks of over-zealousness—a real danger when communicating expectations about policing. No one familiar with the business of order maintenance really believes that complex problems such as prostitution, aggressive begging, drug dealing, teen drinking, and others are going to be eradicated in society. The can be managed: that is, they can be reduced and their social costs lessened, but such problems have been, and always will be with us. Second, it is not a credible policy: it communicates to political leaders and the general public an unrealistic view of what police can accomplish. Moreover, it is not credible to trouble-makers. Many know the limitations of



police power and authority. For too long, police and other criminal justice agencies have sent 'tough' messages to offenders and miscreants and then have not been able to deliver, either because of limitations on their power (limitations that are given in democracies) or because of lack of resources and facilities. Third, and finally, zero tolerance as a slogan belies the complexity of police work. The idea, which some unthinking police administrators have put forward, that 'Tomorrow we will adopt a zero tolerance or "broken windows" philosophy' and follow it up with a few general orders, dooms order maintenance. Reviving order maintenance as an integral aspect of policing requires leadership, planning, training, guidance and ongoing managerial direction. Given its potential for crime prevention and the improvement of the quality of urban life, it is well worth the effort. Improperly and unthinkingly done, however, order maintenance has considerable potential for trouble, especially in the form of improper, discriminatory, or abusive policing.

Consequently, zero tolerance is neither a phrase that I use nor one that captures the meaning of what happened in New York City, either in the subways or on the streets.