



CENTER FOR CIVIC INNOVATION  
AT THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE

## **This Works: Preventing and Reducing Crime**

**By George L. Kelling and Ronald Corbett**

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### **Introduction**

The most impressive achievement of city governance during the urban renewal of the 1990's was the enormous decline in crime. Over the last decade, police departments across the country adopted innovative new crime prevention strategies and realized unprecedented results. Despite those successes, however, much work remains to be done in reducing crime and increasing public safety. While some cities across the nation have made great strides, driving down the national crime rate to levels unseen since the 1960's, there were many that missed out on the national trend, reducing crime only marginally, if at all. Moreover, in the last year, with several notable exceptions, crime rates have plateaued, and in some cities have even begun to track upward once again. If the success of urban America is to continue, it is essential that police departments and civic leaders not rest on their laurels, but rather continue to improve and refine their crime prevention strategies, adopting the most effective methods displayed in recent years.

Two principal goals must guide the creation of strategies to replicate the most impressive crime

prevention successes of the 90's: Order Maintenance and the creation of law enforcement structures to support it. The guiding vision for law enforcement must be to maintain order within each city, not to catch criminals. Creating an environment that is not conducive to illegality, rather than seeking to punish illegal conduct after the fact, is the key to preventing crime. Having adopted this vision, implementing it on the streets requires that local police units have the resources to do their job properly and the freedom to use them innovatively, and that they be held strictly accountable for the results, whatever they may be. This naturally requires careful tracking of crime patterns and close communication within police departments in order to target resources appropriately and to place responsibility accurately. It also requires the integration of other law enforcement and public sector agencies, as well as the local communities, into an order maintenance framework. By adopting the combination of an order maintenance philosophy and a flexible, accountability-driven law enforcement structure, cities that have made little progress to date can achieve reductions on par with the most dramatic declines in urban crime during the last decade, while those cities that have already experienced

such successes can continue to force crime down to ever lower levels.

### Maintaining Order

The purpose of law enforcement is, ultimately, to prevent crimes rather than to solve them. Solving crimes and punishing criminals is a necessary, but by no means sufficient, aspect of defending the citizenry. In order to effectively reduce crime, law enforcement must focus its efforts on maintaining order within its jurisdiction, eliminating as far as possible the conditions that allow illegality to flourish. To achieve this goal police departments and other law enforcement officials must adopt strategies designed under this vision, rejecting a reactive, after-the-fact, policing approach. They must target factors, such as small-scale public disorder and illegal guns and drugs, that spawn both contempt for the law and ever greater crime trends. They must also work to ameliorate communal problems even before they become criminal, and to employ the advantages afforded by the parole and probation system to exercise control over those people who are statistically most likely to commit crimes. Finally they must manage those problems they cannot solve, accepting that perfect crime prevention is unobtainable and focusing on ensuring that criminal conduct they cannot eliminate has the minimum possible effect on the community.

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#### *Reject Response-Oriented Strategies*

There is a natural temptation for any police department to focus their efforts on responding to reports of crimes. Certainly it is the least complicated approach. When a crime is reported, the police respond as quickly as possible to stop the

crime if it is in progress, or to work the case and catch the perpetrator. Such activities naturally represent a large part of the necessary work of any police force. However, when this kind of response-oriented policing becomes the central mission of law enforcement it will have an extremely damaging impact on the success of crime prevention. Removing criminals from the streets is a means to reducing crime, not an end in and of itself, and police departments cannot afford to focus on it to the exclusion of other, equally important methods of crime prevention. It is crucial, therefore, that the focus of law enforcement officials be on proactive measures, rather than reactive ones.

#### *Adopt "Broken Windows" Policing*

One of those proactive methods, and probably the single most important tool for maintaining order available to law enforcement, is the "Broken Windows" approach to policing. "Broken Windows" policing focuses on small "quality of life" crimes, such as prostitution, public drunkenness and urination, aggressive panhandling, and the like, putting large numbers of cops out on the streets at all times and ensuring that the city's public spaces are free of any illegal activity. When communities fail to enforce laws against these so-called minor offenses, accepting a low level of disorder as inevitable and not worth the trouble of addressing, the result is that the disorder increases and major offenses, from robbery to murder, follow in its wake. Taking action against crime at its most innocuous sends a clear message that illegal behavior will not be tolerated, reducing the incidence of every level of crime.

At the same time, many of those arrested for small crimes prove to be wanted for other more serious offenses. In this way "Broken Windows" policing both reduces the number of current criminals in the general population and creates an environment

in which new criminals are far less likely to emerge. The most comprehensive, and successful, application of this policing approach has been in New York City, where a recent analysis of its decline in crime found that between 1989 and 1998 over 60,000 violent crimes were prevented solely by the use of “Broken Windows” policing.

Beyond its effectiveness in reducing crime, this approach to policing is extraordinarily effective in securing many of the subsidiary benefits of a less crime-ridden city. Citizens not only are safer, they feel safer. Robbery of local shops is not merely less likely to occur, storeowners believe they can operate without constant concern. By freeing the streets from low-level disorder as well as high levels of crime, police provide city residents with the freedom from fear that is essential to a flourishing urban environment.

#### *Embrace Problem Solving*

A key principle, intimately linked to “Broken Windows,” underlying effective crime prevention is that the proper business of police is *problems*, not incidents. Response-oriented policing approaches police work as a series of disconnected incidents that had neither history nor future. In fact, most such incidents have both. The factors that lead to a certain crime will usually evidence themselves in one form or another and likely would resurface in similar terms. Thus, incidents of spousal abuse or noisy and boisterous bars, for example, are often indicative of an ongoing communal problem that can be managed or solved before it blossoms into broader illegality. Doing so requires police to engage in activities, from mediating disputes to issuing friendly warnings to loitering teenagers, that do not directly address criminal activity. The tremendous results generated by Boston’s “Pulling Levers” program, which explicitly embraced problem solving, provide a perfect example of

its effectiveness. Just as adopting “Broken Windows” allows police to stop major crimes by controlling smaller ones, accepting problem solving as a legitimate role and goal for the police can stop bad situations from blossoming into crime.

#### *Remove Illegal Guns From the Streets*

Illegal weapons are a major factor in exacerbating crime rates. High rates of criminal gun possession tend to increase the overall violence associated with crimes, and are incredibly destructive of public order. It is impossible for a community to believe that crime will not be tolerated if they see people flouting the law by carrying illegal guns on a daily basis, let alone if the night is occasionally punctuating by gunfire. The fewer guns on the streets in malicious hands, the fewer shootings there will be, and the safer and more orderly a city will be.

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It is important, therefore, for police to specifically target illegal guns. One strategy simply requires police to check the identification of those stopped for less serious offenses. Persons wanted for other crimes can be searched, and they will often turn out to be carrying illegal guns, which can then be confiscated. This dovetails neatly with “Broken Windows” policing, which naturally increases the number of people stopped for minor offenses. Another effective strategy is to trace how those arrested with illegal guns obtained their weapon. In New York, which pioneered the most aggressive targeting of illegal guns in the 90’s, police interrogations of those arrested with illegal guns have netted the arrest of hundreds of gun dealers and record levels of illegal gun confiscations.

*Target Illegal Drugs*

In most cities, there is a clear link between crime and illicit drugs. Crime and drug use follow one another, and where drug markets exist other crime will be practically inevitable. Even more so than in the case of illegal guns, a thriving drug trade engenders contempt for the law, as it is so obviously unenforced. Devoting resources to effective anti-drug initiatives will therefore result not only in reductions in the drug trade, but also make a major impact in reducing other related crimes and restoring order. The central strategy that informs successful initiatives is to blanket areas where the drug trade flourishes and give drug dealers no place to hide. Employing tactics such as “buy and bust” operations, a major uniformed patrol presence, and putting neighborhood drug gangs out of business can transform drug-ridden communities into safe, orderly spaces. Carried out broadly enough, they can have the same effect on entire cities.

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*Use Probation and Parole Enforcement to Increase Public Safety*

It is a well-established fact that the people most likely to commit crimes in the future are those who have already done so in the past. Of all people currently in the correctional system, two thirds to three quarters are still on the streets, serving a term on probation. Others, having been incarcerated for a time, are now out on parole. Unsurprisingly, this population is responsible for committing a significant share of urban crimes. Fortunately for crime prevention efforts, it is exactly this

population that is most susceptible to order maintenance. Under the terms of their parole or probation, they can, if enforcement is carried out appropriately, be kept under close supervision, making them both far less capable of carrying out crimes without being caught, and far less likely to do so because of the increased risk involved.

Unfortunately, traditional probation enforcement in particular has relied to an enormous extent of self-regulation by the probationers, coupled with an anemic supervision structure. In order to realize the potential crime reduction that effective probation enforcement can provide, probation departments must adopt crime prevention and public safety as their mission. When they do so, however, the results can be impressive. Governments around the country have achieved important gains by using innovative probation enforcement techniques, notably “Operation Night Light” in Boston and Texas’ statewide use of the Boston model in its “Spotlight” program.

Focusing on those goals will require major reforms in most traditional probation operations. The theoretical nature of probation, as formal social control over the probationer by the authorities, must become the actual state of affairs. Supervision can no longer be a rare luxury, carried out, if at all, with easy checks during the day when probationers will likely be at home or work. Round-the-clock supervision, focusing especially on supervision at night, when probationers would be far more likely to commit crimes, must be instituted.

In the enforcement of both parole and probation, officers must become a presence on the streets, working, just like the police, within a particular neighborhood instead of mainly from behind a desk, having interviews with their probationers and parolees and working cases by paper. This will allow for better supervision and demonstrate that past offenders will no longer be able to get away

with even minor violations of the terms of their supervision. It will build trust and cooperation with the community, invaluable in any effort at serious supervision. Neighborhood watches, civic leaders and average citizens sitting on a stoop are all more likely to know which parolees and probationers are sliding back into crime than the case officer, and their help should be enlisted. Finally, violations of parole or probation must be punished immediately and consistently. Currently, many infractions, particularly of the terms of probation, are completely ignored, even when officers are aware of them and know exactly where to go to pick the violators up. When people can commit infractions, in the open as it were, without consequences, then respect for the law is seriously compromised, encouraging further, more serious illegal behavior among parolees and probationers. More specifically, it vastly reduces the deterrent value of probation as a punishment in the first place.

#### *Manage Problems With No Solution*

In developing a vision for crime prevention, it is important to recognize that not all crime problems can be solved. Reducing the amount of crime, or even of a particular type of crime, to zero simply isn't a reasonable goal for urban law enforcement authorities. Efforts to reach unachievable targets can sap morale, reduce public confidence, and most importantly lead to a misallocation of police resources. Instead, police must learn to deal with problems without a solution by managing them in a way that reduces their impact on the citizenry to its lowest possible point. For example, prior to the mid-90's, large areas of New York City were infested with drug dealing. Employing a variety of tactics, the NYPD was able to dramatically reduce the problem, but they were, and still are, unable to eliminate drug use and dealing from their city. Realizing this, the police focused their efforts, with immense success, on driving drug dealers off the streets and indoors where, while continuing their

illegal activities, they ceased to instill a climate of disorder and lawlessness on the city. Thus, by managing the problem rather than trying fruitlessly to solve it, the NYPD maintained order even where they could not totally eliminate crime.

#### Structuring for Success

Applying an order maintenance strategy can only succeed so far without a law enforcement structure that properly supports it. Creating that structure requires extensive central data collection and analysis, and constant feedback and review of the effectiveness of police programs. It also requires the creation of strategic partnerships between the police, other branches of law enforcement such as parole and probation departments and district attorney's offices, non-law enforcement public service agencies, and community groups. Such partnerships are essential both to marshal all the necessary resources government and the public can bring to bear to prevent crime, but also to gain the consent and involvement of each community's members, without which maintaining order within the communities will be nearly impossible. Perhaps most importantly of all, a culture of accountability must be instituted within the structure. At every level, from the whole city to a single street, the law enforcement personnel entrusted with preventing crime must take responsibility for failure, and be recognized for their success.

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#### *Hold the Police Accountable for the Crime Rate*

No matter what vision of crime prevention is chosen and what strategies are selected to implement it, no law enforcement organization is likely to succeed in reducing crime unless it is held responsible for doing so. Far too often in the decades

preceding the 90's reforms, criminologists and political leaders argued that social, economic, and demographic "root causes" were responsible for crime, and that nothing mere police officers could do would change the crime level afflicting a city. This attitude, which unfortunately still infects a significant portion of the national debate on crime, undermines any attempts at better crime prevention.

Insisting that police don't matter eliminates all the pressure and most of the incentives for them to succeed, saps the morale of officers, and leads inexorably towards a response-oriented brand of policing, the flaws of which were outlined above. A key principle of crime prevention, therefore, must be an absolute insistence on the accountability of police departments for the crime rate. While the police do not have limitless capabilities, and will often require partnerships with other groups to succeed in preventing crime, theirs is the central role. Using the proper strategies, including such partnerships, the police can reduce crime, and failure to do so must not be written off as an inevitable result of amorphous social trends.

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#### *Institute Compstat*

The "Compstat" program, short for "comparison statistics," first implemented by the New York Police Department in 1994 and since adopted by departments across the country, is perhaps the single most important organizational/administrative innovation in policing of the last half century. Under Compstat, a police department collects timely statistics and uses them to monitor crime levels in specific areas throughout the city. This allows them to deploy resources immediately to areas where they're most needed, stopping crime

trends before they worsen, and also to judge how well anti-crime strategies are working.

At the NYPD's Compstat meetings, crime statistics are displayed on computer maps in order to give commanders a clear picture of what's happening where. Precinct and district commanders are held accountable and they must devise tactics that drive down crime spikes. If they fail, they lose their commands. Compstat also allows for much better coordination between precincts and other specialized department units, the commanders of which all attend Compstat meetings when issues relevant to their commands are discussed and strategies are plotted. Adopting the Compstat system forces police commanders at all levels to pay attention to substantive community problems rather than traditional bureaucratic machinations, and focuses them on situation on the ground, as opposed to the events at central headquarters. By combining detailed information on crime trends with strict accountability for problem solving, Compstat provides the best possible organizational structure for urban law enforcement.

#### *Perform Frequent Analysis*

One aspect of the Compstat program that has often been poorly replicated is its emphasis on following ongoing initiatives. Many police departments are good at starting programs but are less effective at tracking their impact. Yet building mechanisms to determine when successes are being achieved and when new approaches are needed is nearly as important as recognizing patterns of crime and directing resources to deal with them in the first place. In order to accomplish this, regular feedback, literally on an almost daily basis, is critical. By maintaining a constant awareness of how crime prevention efforts are working, police are prepared to try new tactics and reallocate resources as needed.

Equally valuable is the ability to recognize success that frequent analysis provides. Just as the police must be held accountable for problems, they must be lauded when they succeed. Not only is recognition of success essential for maintaining police morale and citizen confidence, it also helps avoid mistaken assumptions about ongoing crime problems. Even in New York, which arguably places the most emphasis on regular analysis of any major city, this can be an issue. When units dedicated to removing illegal guns from the streets began to achieve declining results, it raised major concerns among police leaders. The problem, however, was that the only measure of unit success was the number of guns seized. After years of stunning gains in ridding the city of illegal weapons, there were simply far fewer of them to be confiscated, making it appear as though the unit was becoming less effective when it had actually largely solved the problem. This kind of simple mistake can only be avoided by constant analysis of local crime data and a focus on the amount of crime taking place, not the number of criminals apprehended or items seized.

#### *Integrate Probation and Parole with Policing*

Using probation and parole enforcement to improve crime prevention, as discussed above, requires effective integration and coordination between the police and probation officers. The information possessed by probation and parole authorities, both in terms of databases and the personal knowledge of local conditions by individual officers, is invaluable to police in their own efforts to maintain order. Bringing these groups' efforts together enables each to operate far more effectively. Probably most important is the incorporation of probation and parole data into Compstat. Trends in probation and parole populations and infractions should be tracked just as general crime trends are, and the connections between the two monitored. At the same time, officers from

all three departments should work together on the streets, especially on basic patrols. This will help each identify potential problems; the police will be more aware of large concentrations of former, and quite possibly current, criminals, while probation and parole officers will be kept informed of potential crime problems their charges may become caught up in. Integrating these three different aspects of law enforcement will allow them all to do their job more effectively.

#### *Create Partnerships to Solve Problems*

Police departments will always play the central role in crime prevention. However, they remain limited in what they can do, and many crime problems include facets that are beyond the scope of their prevention capabilities. As a result, partnerships with other government agencies and community groups are essential to effective crime prevention. Almost every crime problem is associated with issues that fall under the responsibility of other government agencies. Zoning regulations can have

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a large impact on the operation of drug houses. Chop shops are affected by waste disposal policies. An awareness of how the work of the rest of the public sector relates to criminal activity, among both the police and the other agencies, makes possible strategies to prevent crime that aren't available to the police alone. Making sure that the whole government is concerned with crime prevention can be an enormous advantage. In recent years, both Newark, New Jersey and Charlotte, North Carolina have had significant success in using apparently unrelated policy decisions to reduce the incidence of specific types of

crime. Close contact with both prosecutors and between police departments is also an important potential resource. The willingness of district or even U.S. attorneys to aggressively prosecute offenders the police have identified as likely to repeat the same or greater crimes, for example, provides a crucial complement to targeted policing. Cooperation between police departments can also pay significant dividends. On the one hand, many crime problems, most obviously the drug trade, are not always locally based. Coordinated strategies to deal with problems affecting multiple jurisdictions may often be essential. Even where this is not the case, crime problems afflicting cities are largely similar everywhere. Regular communication to share particularly effective new tactics, or to warn of ineffective ones, can help police departments tailor their efforts without the hit-and-miss results that naturally characterize many new initiatives. There are immense advantages, and no drawbacks, to this kind of information-sharing.

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Finally, faith and service organizations and community groups can provide vital support to crime prevention in ways beyond the abilities of the public sector. Such institutions, be they community centers or places of worship, are, for example, the ones who can provide alternatives to crime for the youth, or ways to reform for past offenders. Boston police, in particular, made major strides in revitalizing previously crime-ridden neighborhoods by partnering with local leaders, faith-based organizations and community groups in preventing crime among the city's young men. These groups are also vital for rallying community support for the police and their crime prevention efforts.

Every problem requires different partners for its solution. The best efforts at crime prevention therefore require both an appreciation for which problem requires which partners, and a mechanism to keep all the potential partners involved and committed to the enterprise. Perhaps the best example of this approach is the Greater Newark Safer Cities Initiative, which brought police, probation, parole, prosecutors, and community groups together in regular meetings on preventing crime, as well as creatively utilizing the powers of non-law enforcement agencies.

#### *Involve the Whole Community*

One last crucial component to effective crime prevention is community support. Without the consent, and hopefully active involvement, of the people among whom the police operate, it is extremely difficult to reduce crime. The entire project of maintaining order, after all, is only possible in an area where the majority of citizens actually want order. If the majority opposes the police, denying the consent of the community to their efforts, the community as a whole can itself act to maintain disorder by active opposition to the police. While the extreme version of this phenomenon, such as the Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King case, is quite rare, even fairly small degrees of community opposition can cripple law enforcement efforts and provide aid and comfort to illegal activity. It is, therefore, absolutely essential to work with leaders in the community being served, and to pay careful attention to the concerns of normal community members.

If gaining community consent is essential, involving community members actively in the effort to maintain order is nearly as significant. Police resources are necessarily finite, and retaking the streets of a neighborhood from disorder and illegality, not to mention keeping them once efforts are directed to other troubled areas, requires the

help of the people who live and work there every day. Community residents know what the local problems are and community institutions are the ones that can combat acceptance of criminal activity. Close cooperation with the people crime prevention is designed to benefit must be a part of any law enforcement strategy.

### Conclusion

The formula for massive crime reduction developed in major cities across America over the past ten years has been tested, and found effective. Order maintenance-based policing implemented

through a law enforcement structure designed to support it has resulted in the most dramatic crime prevention successes in the history of the nation. Continued reductions in crime are certainly possible, even as the national downward trend seems to be coming to a halt. Cities such as New York and Baltimore have seen precipitous crime declines in the last year, even as crime elsewhere has stabilized or risen. It is not a coincidence that both cities employ an aggressive order maintenance policing strategy. If other cities wish to continue to see safer streets and more secure citizens, they would do well to follow the same path.

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