



# How New York cut crime

The Metropolitan Police, says NORMAN DENNIS, could learn from New York where crime has been cut dramatically

**IN THE 1970S** and the 1980s New York was a by-word for the severity of its street crime. By contrast London was relatively law-abiding, with effective policing of its safe streets.

In the 1990s this situation was sharply reversed. In 1991 there were 22,000 robberies in London. In 2000-01 there were 41,000, an increase of 87 per cent. But in 1991 there were 99,000 robberies in New York City. In 2001 there were 28,000, a decrease of 72 per cent.

The fall in numbers of crimes other than street crime in Britain from 1992 to 2000-01 was mainly associated with improved security measures of a physical and commercial or personal kind, rather than with either 'better behaviour' or more effective policing.

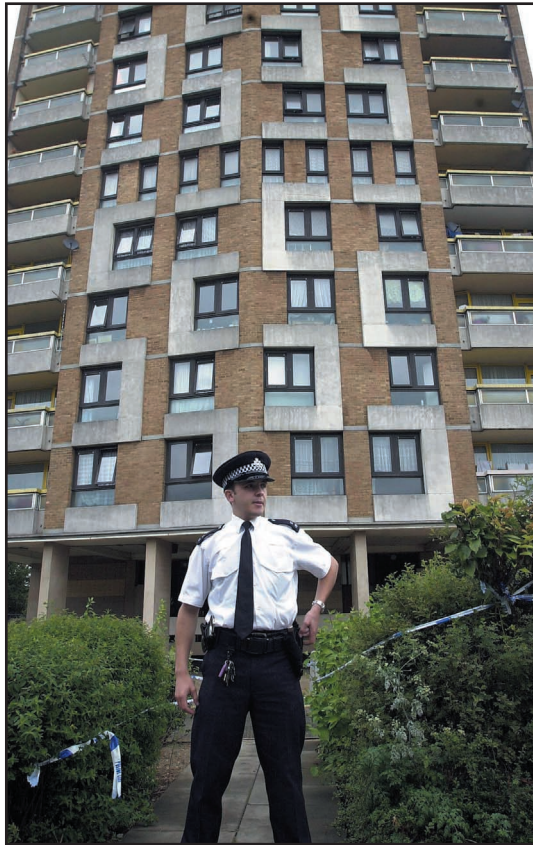
But the control of crime on the streets is out of the hands of the individual citizen. It is essentially in the hands of the police. And in the absence of effective policing, the number of robberies continued to rise throughout the 1990s. Robberies rocketed

in 2000-01 and 2001-02. In one London borough alone – Lambeth – there were 443 robberies of personal property in April 2001, rising to 620 in September. The six month increase alone was more than the total for all robberies for the whole of England and Wales in 1929.

Though much lip service is undoubtedly paid to the importance of 'the bobby on the beat', 'community partnerships' and other initiatives, in practice the embattled response of the London police has taken the form of leaving petty crime and disorder to take care of itself. Nationally, we have chosen to throw in the towel, and spurious justify decriminalisation of many offences on the grounds that they aren't so bad after all.

New York started with far worse problems of street crime than London has ever had. It had never been famed as a law-abiding city, and its street-crime problem sharply worsened in the mid-1970s. New York nearly went bankrupt, and it was not until 1983 that it was again solvent. The

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police force was cut by a third. It was frequently portrayed in the cinema as a place that had turned into a junk yard or even an enormous walled-in prison ruled by under-class warlords.

The acute and chronic shortage of patrol officers in the 1970s and 1980s made the NYPD into a proactive force. It came to seem good policy to overlook petty crime and disorder, especially when progressive public opinion insisted that it was quite wrong to bother about them anyway.

In 1975 there were 83,000 robberies in New York City. By 1981 there were 107,000. From 1982, police numbers slowly built up again from a low point of 22,000. But the police culture that had discarded the patrol officer on foot did not weaken. Robberies were cut to some extent, but they still numbered 100,000 in 1990, and 86,000 in 1993.

In 1994 Rudolph Giuliani was elected mayor. He greatly expanded the size of the NYPD. The 'uniformed headcount' was 28,700 in 1993. By the end of 1994 it was 30,500, and by the year 2000 it was 40,300. With the larger number of officers at his disposal, Giuliani bore down heavily on 'harmless' quality-of-life social nuisances and 'victimless' crimes that nevertheless were the seedbed of those crimes that did have victims.

Getting prostitutes off the streets (much the easiest police job compared with removing drug dealers and users, or the homeless, whether mentally ill or not) was the start of the virtuous circle, just as allowing the prostitutes to occupy the streets had been the start of the vicious circle. Public places were once again occupied by the endless variety of the well-behaved, instead of the bleak and dangerous monotony of a city's low life.

In Harlem's five police precincts there were 6,500 robberies in 1981, when the NYPD was at

its lowest ebb. With the gradual recuperation of the NYPD's numbers, the number of robberies had been reduced to 4,800 by 1990. But the cuts in the numbers of robberies were much greater in the 1990s under the steady and consistent pressure of Giuliani's policies. Robberies dropped from the 4,800 of 1990, to 1,700 in the year 2000. In the most notorious of New York's precincts, precinct 67 in South Brooklyn, the numbers were cut in the 1990s from 2,200 robberies in 1990 to 743 in the year 2000.

The experience of the Giuliani years showed that arrests as the criterion of success were as misleading as body counts of Vietcong. What had been essential then, in the case of war, was essential now in the case of crime and disorder: to dislodge the enemy permanently.

Whether Giuliani was right or wrong in what he did, he was not cynically picking easy targets. He was acting on the common-sense view that Jane Jacobs put at the centre of her book on the death of great cities, that, civically, if you look after the behavioural pennies, the behavioural pounds will look after themselves.

The principal exponent of 'broken windows' policing, George Kelling, emphasised that any city can tolerate a few rowdy

youths, scroungers, drug users, or even muggers. But if their numbers are unchecked the normal functioning of the city is affected as ordinary citizens are driven away.

New Yorkers themselves attribute the successes of the NYPD in cutting street crime so early and so dramatically, as compared with London, to the NYPD's return to the principle of law enforcement enunciated by Sir Robert Peel: that the sole test of police efficiency is 'the absence of crime and disorder'. Today's Metropolitan Police in London have forgotten that principle. New York's Met are putting it into practice.

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## New York started with far worse problems than London ever had

POLICE NUMBERS AND CRIME COMPARED		
	New York	London
<b>Population</b>	7.5 million	7.28 million
<b>Police numbers</b>	40,300 (2000)	26,200 (2002)
<b>Crime rates</b>	Between 1992 and 2000, police numbers rose by 42 per cent.	Over the same period police numbers fell by 10 per cent.
	There is one police officer for every 7 recorded crimes.	There is one police officer for every 41 recorded crimes.
	Between 1992 and 2000, crime fell by 54 per cent.	Over the same period crime rose by 12 per cent.
	The number of murders fell by 66 per cent. In January 2002 there were 33 homicides, the lowest since records began in 1962.	In January 2002, there were 26 murders in London.
<b>Police budget</b>	£1.7 billion	£1.9 billion

Sources: Daily Mail, 9 February 2002; Observer, 10 February 2002; Evening Standard, 13 February 2002, and the Police Federation

