

Crime, interrupted

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Treating violent crime as a disease

2009 IN BRIEF

To the annoyance of airlines and their foreign passengers, foreigners are to be fingerprinted before they leave American soil.

Crime will rise slightly in 2009, thanks largely to America's wobbly economy. Higher unemployment will drive more people to seek an illegitimate income, and budget shortfalls will force cities and counties to cut back on police officers, or at least fail to hire enough new ones to cope with their growing populations. The search will be on for a cheaper, smarter crime-fighting method—and one will be found.

For the past 15 years a single model of policing, developed in a single city, has dominated thinking about law and order in America. In the early 1990s New York hired thousands of extra police officers and told them to crack down on petty offenders in high-crime areas. Local commanders were held accountable for recorded crimes in their territory, which were tracked by means of a simple spreadsheet programme known as Compstat. The results were extraordinary. Murders fell from more than 2,200 in 1990 to fewer than 500 in 2007.

New York's "zero tolerance" methods seemed simple, and have been widely copied. Yet no other city in America or anywhere else has achieved quite such good results. This may be because most cities are poorer and less densely populated than New York, and so find it harder to flood the streets with cops. And New York had

is almost the exact opposite of zero tolerance. Rather than cracking down on petty offenders such as turnstile-jumpers and squeegee men, the authorities will focus on those who are most likely to kill or be killed. Some may be drug dealers recently released from prison. Others may be the associates of people recently wounded by gunfire. What makes the approach particularly novel is that it depends on local people. Rather than insisting on zero tolerance from the police, it tries to change what the residents of crime-infested areas will tolerate.

The approach that will come to prominence in 2009 is almost the exact opposite of zero tolerance

hit the streets to sniff out trouble. Often former gang members and graduates of the prison system, the interrupters have a hard-nosed approach to law and order. They may, for example, encourage an aggrieved man to consider beating someone instead of shooting him, or try to convince rival drug-dealers that a turf war would be bad for business, as it would attract the police.

In May 2008 Operation Ceasefire was evaluated in a report for the Justice Department. The results were encouraging: in five out of seven areas examined, shootings dropped sharply. In four of these areas the decline was much steeper than in comparable parts of the city where Operation Ceasefire was not in place. But even these results do not explain why so many police forces are looking to Chicago for inspiration. The approach seems to offer a solution to what has become an intractable problem in inner cities from Los Angeles to London. Young people seem to be killing for inane reasons, such as somebody looking at their girlfriend the wrong way. And they appear to be unafraid of prison.

Operation Ceasefire's chief architect is Wesley Skogan. An epidemiologist, he likens shootings to a health crisis and insists that they can be tackled in a similar way to unsafe sex or needle-sharing. Zero tolerance's slogan was "take care of the small stuff and the big stuff will take care of itself". Mr Skogan's slogan is even snappier: "violent crime is a disease".

The approach may not travel perfectly. Chicago has relatively well-organised gangs and a strong tradition of community mobilisation.

What has worked splendidly there may not work as well in, say, Phoenix. We will soon find out, because Operation Ceasefire is swiftly spreading. Baltimore, Newark and Kansas City have projects inspired by it. A further ten or so cities are in the planning stages. In 2009 one of the cities to roll out a trial programme will be New York. ■

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two big advantages in the early 1990s: its police chief, William Bratton, who now manages the cops of Los Angeles, and its mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, who was last seen running for the American presidency. Both men had a superb feel for police culture and knew how to motivate officers through a combination of praise and fear.

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