

Zero Tolerance for Crime



Under Mayor Rudy Giuliani, New York City experienced a dramatic plunge in crime rates in the late 1990s. Many attribute this achievement to the mayor's "zero tolerance" approach to law enforcement. Giuliani's policies were influenced by the "broken windows" theory of criminal behavior advanced by criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in the 1980s, which advocated moving away from the traditional policy of mainly pursuing serious crimes. Strictly enforcing laws against offenses such as trespassing and vandalism, Wilson and Kelling argued, creates a sense of public order that deters criminals from committing major offenses.

University of California, Berkeley law professor Franklin Zimring has a different perspective. He argues that the city's partial adoption of the approach formed the cornerstone of its success. Rather than pursuing perpetrators of low-level offenses across the board, police aggressively targeted individuals they suspected of more serious violations, using minor crimes as a pretext for making arrests. In particular, they focused on "hot spots" - places with consistently high crime rates. Wilson and Kelling, in contrast, dismissed the worst areas of cities as being beyond improvement, advocating instead the concentration of resources in neighborhoods not completely given over to violence and crime. But, as Zimring points out, New York experienced a staggering 82 percent drop in homicides, and such marginally safe neighborhoods "aren't where the homicides are."

One tactic that emerged from New York's anticrime strategy has come under attack in recent years. "Stop-and-frisk", which was adopted and expanded by Giuliani's successor, Michael Bloomberg, allows police officers to stop anyone on the street and search them for weapons or illegal substances. Though such searches are ostensibly based on credible suspicion, civil rights groups claim the practice unfairly targets minorities, violating their right to equal protection under the law. Of the more than 4 million citizens stopped by police since 2002, around 90 percent have been black or Latino, even though the city's population is nearly half white. In 2013, a federal judge ruled stop-and-frisk unconstitutional. Although the ruling is under appeal, the current mayor, Bill de Blasio, has himself vowed to reform the racial-profiling aspect of what he has deemed a "broken and misused" policy.

1. Did you know the Japanese police can stop foreigners anytime in Japan?