

# Strategies of U.S. Law Enforcement Professionals Against Lawless Areas and Crime Hot Spots

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## ABSTRACT

The article begins by painting a bleak picture of the American *inner city*: violence of all kinds culminating in frequent shootings and homicides by and against African Americans. Added to this are social disorganization, the powerlessness of local actors to control the thugs, exclusion, and poverty. In these areas where people fail to live together in peace, victims no longer call the police. By failing to respond or neglecting to intervene, the police are said to have displayed a “*laissez faire*” attitude in the *inner city*, unlike in other neighbourhoods. However, beginning in the 1990s, teams of reform-minded police officers in New York, Boston, and elsewhere launched innovative strategies that were evaluated by criminologists and later succeeded in significantly reducing violent crime, including homicides. In the first category of strategies, teams targeted crime hot spots, micro-locations in the urban area, such as street segments, where an increase in crime could be observed. For example, an analysis of the spatial distribution of 911 calls in a city showed that 50% of all crimes were concentrated in 5% of these crime hot spots. In each of these micro-locations targeted, police officers developed an appropriate action plan that included a greatly increased police presence and vigilance, interventions against disorderly conduct, incivilities, parking tickets, and other offences. These police officers also organized the implementation of situational prevention measures. The second strategy was developed in New York and called *ComStat*. It started with excellent digitized and updated crime statistics for real-time decision making. Then, police officers in neighbourhood stations found ways to deter criminals by checking, questioning, searching, and disarming offenders, mischief-makers, and other criminals. The third strategy addressed a unique manifestation of American violence: shootings and deadly settlements of scores. It involved real-time personal deterrence of gang members, confiscation of their weapons, and hit-and-run operations. These strategies have been the subject of numerous quasi-experimental evaluations, and the overall results

have been positive: violent crime has significantly decreased in hot spots and areas where police have implemented one of these strategies. A fourth measure—initiated by legislators—was to decriminalise cannabis possession and trafficking to end the harassment and locking up of dealers. In this way, police officers were able to focus on fighting violent crime rather than wasting their energies on artificial offences. The article concludes by arguing that American police officers who incorporate these new strategies into their practice are now legitimate in claiming the title of *professional*, as they know the difference between effective strategies and ineffective or even counterproductive expedients.

**Keywords:** policing strategies, police professionals, lawless areas, crime hot spots, evaluations, *Crime Hot Spots Policing*, *ComStat*, *Focused Deterrence*, cannabis decriminalization, New York, Boston

## **Estrategias de los profesionales de las fuerzas del orden de EE. UU. contra áreas sin ley y puntos críticos de delincuencia**

### RESUMEN

El artículo comienza pintando un panorama sombrío del centro de la ciudad estadounidense: violencia de todo tipo que culmina en frecuentes tiroteos y homicidios por y contra afroamericanos. A esto se suma la desorganización social, la impotencia de los actores locales para controlar a los maleantes, la exclusión y la pobreza. En estas áreas donde las personas no logran vivir juntas en paz, las víctimas ya no llaman a la policía. Al no responder o no intervenir, se dice que la policía mostró una actitud de «laissez faire» en el centro de la ciudad, a diferencia de otros barrios. Sin embargo, a partir de la década de 1990, equipos de policías con mentalidad reformista en Nueva York, Boston y otros lugares lanzaron estrategias innovadoras que fueron evaluadas por criminólogos y luego lograron reducir significativamente los delitos violentos, incluidos los homicidios. En la primera categoría de estrategias, los equipos se centraron en puntos críticos de delincuencia, microubicaciones en el área urbana, como segmentos de calles, donde se podía observar un aumento de la delincuencia. Por ejemplo, un análisis de la distribución espacial de las llamadas al 911 en una ciudad mostró que el 50 % de todos los delitos se concentraron en el 5 % de estos puntos críticos de delincuencia. En cada una de estas microubica-

ciones seleccionadas, los agentes de policía desarrollaron un plan de acción apropiado que incluía una presencia y vigilancia policial mucho mayor, intervenciones contra la alteración del orden público, incivildades, multas de estacionamiento y otros delitos. Estos policías también organizaron la implementación de medidas de prevención situacional. La segunda estrategia se desarrolló en Nueva York y se llamó ComStat. Comenzó con excelentes estadísticas criminales digitalizadas y actualizadas para la toma de decisiones en tiempo real. Luego, los oficiales de policía en las comisarías de barrio encontraron formas de disuadir a los delincuentes controlando, interrogando, registrando y desarmando a los delincuentes, malhechores y otros delincuentes. La tercera estrategia abordó una manifestación única de la violencia estadounidense: tiroteos y acuerdos de cuentas mortales. Implicaba la disuasión personal en tiempo real de los pandilleros, la confiscación de sus armas y operaciones de atropello y fuga. Estas estrategias han sido objeto de numerosas evaluaciones cuasiexperimentales y los resultados generales han sido positivos: los delitos violentos han disminuido significativamente en los puntos conflictivos y las áreas donde la policía ha implementado una de estas estrategias. Una cuarta medida, iniciada por los legisladores, fue despenalizar la posesión y el tráfico de cannabis para acabar con el acoso y el encarcelamiento de los traficantes. De esta forma, los agentes de policía pudieron concentrarse en combatir los delitos violentos en lugar de malgastar sus energías en delitos artificiales. El artículo concluye argumentando que los policías estadounidenses que incorporan estas nuevas estrategias en su práctica ahora tienen legitimidad para reclamar el título de profesionales, ya que conocen la diferencia entre estrategias eficaces y expedientes ineficaces o incluso contraproducentes.

**Palabras clave:** estrategias policiales, profesionales de la policía, áreas sin ley, puntos críticos de delincuencia, evaluaciones, Vigilancia de puntos críticos de delincuencia, ComStat, disuasión enfocada, despenalización del cannabis, Nueva York, Boston

## 美国执法专家针对不法之地和犯罪高发区的策略

### 摘要

本文首先描绘了美国“内城”（inner city）的荒凉景象：各类暴力集中于此，表现为非裔美国人发起的（以及针对非裔

美国人的) 频繁枪击事件和他杀。此外还存在社会混乱、地方行动者在控制罪犯方面的无能为力、排斥和贫困。人们在这些地方无法和平共处, 受害者不再呼叫警察。与其他邻区不同的是, 因无法对此加以响应或忽视干预, “内城”的警察被认为展现“自由放任”的态度。不过, 自20世纪90年代起, 纽约市、波士顿以及其他地区具有改革思想的警察团队启动了创新策略, 后者经犯罪学家评估并显著减少了暴力犯罪事件, 包括他杀。第一类策略中, 警察团队以城市地区的犯罪高发区和微型地点为目标, 例如街区这类犯罪情况可能增加的地方。例如, 一项关于城市911呼叫电话的空间分布分析显示, 50%的犯罪事件集中在5%的犯罪高发区。这些微型地点中, 警方采取适宜行动计划, 包括大幅提升警力和警戒、混乱行为干预、不文明现象、违章停车以及其他违法行为。警方还组织了场景预防措施的执行。第二类策略在纽约市提出, 被称为ComStat。这类策略以优秀的数字化及更新的犯罪统计数据为出发点, 用于实时决策。随后, 片区公安局警察通过一系列方法威慑罪犯, 包括对犯罪分子、违法人员和其他罪犯进行检查、盘问、搜查以及解除武装。第三类策略针对美国暴力的独特情况: 大规模枪击和死亡案件。这包括针对犯罪成员的实时个人威慑、武器没收以及肇事逃逸操作。这类策略一直是许多准实验评估的主题, 并且整体结果是积极的: 犯罪高发区的暴力犯罪数量显著减少。第四类策略由立法者发起, 用于对大麻持有及交易一事去犯罪化, 以期结束对交易商的骚扰和监禁。如此一来, 警察能聚焦于打击暴力犯罪, 而不是浪费精力在人为违法行为 (*artificial offences*) 上。本文的结论主张, 将这些新策略融入实践的的美国警察如今能合法获得专家的称号, 因为他们知道有效策略与无效策略甚至是起反作用的权宜之计之间的差异。

摘要: 治安策略, 警察专家, 不法之地, 犯罪高发区, 评价, 犯罪高发区治安, ComStat, 集中威慑, 大麻去犯罪化, 纽约市, 波士顿

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**V**iolent crime emerges in some parts of American cities as some of the most serious crime problems in the country, particularly for African Americans living in these troubled urban areas. In the latter, crime proliferates in the form of violent robberies, gang fights, score-settling, and murders, but also drug trafficking and the gang wars that follow. Americans refer to these neighbourhoods where outlaws rule in a variety of ways: *inner cities, slums, black ghettos*. (The French equivalent are *zones de non-droit, quartiers sensibles, cités interdites, and zones de développement prioritaire*.)

Intense research has been conducted on Chicago, where homicides are committed with terrifying annual frequency. As an example, between 1965 and 1989, the area of the city with the highest number of homicides had a rate of 75.0 per 100,000 inhabitants (in comparison, the quietest area of Chicago had a rate of almost zero: 0.34 per 100,000). The most affected areas also suffer from other woes: unemployment, poverty, lack of commerce and services, social disorganization. The inhabitants of these lawless areas are reportedly powerless to take charge of their lives, to act effectively to solve their own problems, to trust others, and to control the violence of their children and adolescents. Reasonable adults thus seem to be reduced to impotence and do not dare reprimand or punish the thugs around them. In Chicago, this passivity and ineffectiveness in the exercise of informal social control is seemingly strongly correlated with homicide rates.<sup>1</sup>

African Americans live in large numbers in the *inner cities*, where they struggle to coexist with Latinos and poor whites. Yet African American homicide rates are six times higher than those of whites. Across the United States, between 1979 and 2018, the average homicide rate was 27 per 100,000 population for blacks, compared to 4 per 100,000 for whites.<sup>2</sup>

In these areas, there may be many motives for the killings. A drug dealer could be taken out by a competitor or shot dead because he dared to venture into enemy territory. Members of gang X might drive into gang Y's territory and riddle their enemy's lair with bullets. A young man could be provoked by a fellow gang member, leading them to come to blows, and then one of them might raise his pistol and shoot. In the environment where these two young men lived, one does not go out without a loaded pistol. Moreover, the code of honour dictates that one must be respected at all costs and should not tolerate offence or humiliation. Three other cases of homicide exist: a robber shouts, his wallet or his life, the victim resists and pays with his life, or the robber is killed because the victim was armed. A burglar breaks into a house at night. When confronted by the owner of the house, he shoots him, unless he is shot by the owner himself. A drunken and angry spouse beats his wife to death because she wants to break up with him.

The term *black ghetto* highlights the close relationship between the problems of a lawless area and the miserable lives of African Americans who live in constant fear of violent death. More than 80% of homicides involve a murderer and a victim who know each other and belong to the same social environment. This is also the case among African Americans: in the United States, between 1976

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1 Block, R.; Block, R. 1992. Homicide Syndromes and Vulnerability. Violence in Chicago Community Areas over 25 Years. In *Studies on Crime Prevention*, Vol. 1, No. 1, National Council for Crime Prevention. Sampson, R. J. 2012. *Great American City: Chicago*: University of Chicago Press.

2 My thanks to Claire Chabot for providing me with these figures. See also Chabot, C. 2021. *Ending the convergence of black and white homicide rate ratios in the United States, 1979-2018*. Doctoral dissertation in criminology. University of Montreal.

and 2005, 94% of black homicide victims were killed by blacks.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in *black ghettos*, people seemingly fail to live together in peace. The victims have given up calling the police, who are absent and hate to set foot in this hostile environment. When the police dare to go there, they turn a blind eye and stand by when a fight breaks out. What doesn't help the police and the investigators is that the gangs keep a lid on the situation by intimidating the victims, the parents, the teachers, the young girls, the small shopkeepers, and the good students. For their part, the judiciary reportedly doesn't bother investigating crimes committed by black murderers on black victims. As a result, the latter conclude that the only defense they have against violent people in their neighborhoods is armed retaliation or revenge. Also, residents of an *inner city* only call the police as a last resort. A black man who kills a black man is likely to get away with it because such crimes are not considered a priority by investigators and because police too often fail to prove the murderer's guilt. Indeed, police officers are seen as racist by African Americans. On the one hand, law enforcement officers reportedly racially profile and target black drug dealers, and on the other hand, police officers seemingly do not move when it comes to ensuring the safety of African Americans. In the eyes of *inner city* residents, the police tolerate behaviors in their neighborhoods that they would not condone in a white neighborhood. It appears clearly that the relationship between cops and African Americans is atrocious, marked by fear of the other. They are terrorized by the police, some of whom are ready to shoot a black person at the first sign of trouble. Indeed, it is estimated that the police are responsible for nearly 1,000 killings of citizens in the United States each year.<sup>4</sup>

While violent criminals are rarely punished in these lawless areas, millions of small-time drug dealers (mostly African Americans) are arrested and incarcerated each year, one of the reasons for the overcrowding of American prisons.

The social-economic-institutional factors that account for the high rates of homicide by and against African Americans in the *inner city* have been documented. Social factors include ineffective social control within families and neighbourhoods and the criminogenic influence of gangs; economic factors involve inequality, unemployment, and poverty; institutional factors, encompassing the shortcomings of incompetent policing, which alternates between absence, passivity, and abuse of force; and finally, justice, which is inaccessible except when it comes to incarcerating a drug dealer.<sup>5</sup> The causality also goes in the opposite direction: the high crime rate of a lawless district ends up being known elsewhere, which leads employers to stop hiring candidates from those poor neighbourhoods, resulting in unemployment and poverty.

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3 I would like to thank Claire Chabot for giving me this figure.

4 Jobard, F. 2019. The use of force by the police. In Cusson, M. Ribaux, O. Blais, É. and Raynaud, M-M. 2019. *New treatise on security*. Montreal: Hurtubise and Quebec: Septentrion.

5 Anderson 2012. *Code of the Street*. New York: Norton and Sampson, R. J. 2012. *Great American City*.

Faced with this disastrous equation, how have law enforcement authorities responded? Very unevenly. In many cities in the South and West, including St. Louis, Missouri, and New Orleans, police authorities turn a blind eye, allowing their officers to alternate between passivity and excessive force.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, as in New York and Boston, from 1990 onwards, police chiefs supported by criminologists tackled the problem head on, and they have innovated, implemented, and then evaluated quasi-experimentally with positive results. Thus, in several cities, police organizations have implemented *Crime Hot Spots Policing*. In New York, the program was named *ComStat* and, in Boston, *Focused Deterrence*. Then, on a completely different note, in some 20 American states, legislators decriminalized the possession and sale of cannabis, so that in these states, the police now focus on cracking down on real crime rather than wasting their time arresting and incarcerating small-time drug dealers.

### **The crime hotspot as a primary target**

In 1989, a team of criminologists led by Lawrence Sherman published a landmark article in which the researchers succeeded in identifying with great precision in an urban area micro-locations affected by excessive crime, *crime hot spot*. The researchers had compiled hundreds of thousands of telephone calls to the police in the city of Minneapolis. These calls were recorded with the callers' street addresses, which made it possible to determine precisely where the call came from. Once this was done, a digital map of the city was used to identify street segments, intersections, and other micro-locations where more crimes had been committed. It was discovered that nearly 50% of all criminal activity in the city was concentrated in as little as 3% of Minneapolis's street addresses. A similar finding was made in several other cities. Weisburd went so far as to state a "law of criminal concentration. It states that in a large city, 50% of crime is concentrated in 5% of the city's micro-locations."<sup>7</sup>

A crime hot spot is not necessarily where the offenders live, but rather where they converge to find their victims or steal their possessions. It is more often their hunting ground rather than where they live.

A crime hotspot is a micro location—a segment of a street, a crossroads, a shopping center, a council flat, a car park, a nightclub, a stadium, a railway station—where crimes, misdemeanours and incivilities abound. In the words of Marcus Felson, in this place, active offenders come into contact with victims in the absence of a "guardian," that is to say, a protector, a supervisor, a policeman. It is a crime hot spot where active offenders converge to find vulnerable victims, loca-

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6 See: Roth, R. *American Homicide*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

7 In New York City, Boston, Minneapolis, Tel Aviv, Seattle, Lowell, the percentages of crime hotspots responsible for 50% of crime range from 3% to 6%: see Weisburd et al. 2018: *Place Matters and Sherman & al. 1989; Hot Spots of Predatory Crime. Criminology vol 27.*

tions exposed to theft and impunity (as guards, police officers, controllers, supervisors and private security are absent or passive).

In these hot spots, vulnerable people have unfortunate encounters with armed and brawling criminals. Buildings—shopping malls, slums, small businesses, low-income housing—remain unprotected against intruders, burglars, vandals. There is no access control, no concierge, no alarm system, and no one in charge of the security of the location.

In Seattle, crime hotspots—far from being evenly distributed across the city—tend to be located in close proximity to each other in the same neighbourhood. Thus, a lawless area is defined as an area of the city that contains several crime hotspots, including areas that are not affected by crime.

The hot spot—rather than the neighbourhood—is a prime target for preventive and enforcement operations, simply because police strike the bull's eye when they focus on these micro-locations: law enforcement officers track down offenders and have the opportunity to protect many victims and secure poorly protected buildings. That's why Weisburd and his colleagues insist that crime hot spots should be a priority for an urban police force. The target should not be the neighbourhood or the area, but the micro-location where crime and incivilities are concentrated. And the smaller the area targeted by police interventions, the more effective the action is likely to be. Rather than spreading out over a territory in which there are areas where there is nothing occurring, we prevent and deter where the criminal activity is taking place. For it is in these places that victims are calling out for help. Offenders need to be monitored and controlled, and the need for situational prevention is felt and apparent.

Based on this knowledge of crime hotspots, small teams of police officers in American cities have been developing response plans tailored to each of the hotspots identified as priorities in their city since 1990. In Lowell, Massachusetts, the city police launched a series of operations in 17 hotspots in the city. Three captains are in charge of the teams. Together with their colleagues, they take stock of the available information and come up with an appropriate plan of action. Most of the time, it is obvious that a police presence must be restored where it had been neglected. A significant number of police officers are now patrolling the area. They make themselves accessible to plaintiffs and victims. They do not hesitate to intervene in the occurrence of incivility, traffic violations, disturbances at night and fights. They do not hesitate to intervene in cases of incivility, traffic violations, night-time disturbances and fights. They have situational prevention measures implemented: repairing light fixtures, installing remote surveillance cameras, demolishing a dilapidated, abandoned and squatted building, fencing off a vacant lot used as a meeting place for drug dealers and their clients, advising victims of burglaries to install better locks.



As a result, these 17 crime hotspots were compared to 17 others also affected by crime. They were made comparable through randomization. And where increased police presence and situational prevention measures had been put in place, the numbers of violent robberies had significantly decreased compared to the experimental group: 42% less in the experimental group; in addition, there was a decrease (-34%) in non-family assaults.<sup>8</sup>

Lowell was far from the only city in which law enforcement succeeded in curbing crime by tackling hot spots. In fact, between 1990 and 2017, there has been an accumulation of targeted intervention projects on crime concentrations. Of the batch, 78 were the subject of published experimental evaluations, allowing Braga to compile, in 2018, a review of 65 scientific articles describing and evaluating these 78 projects. It was found that 62 of these policing operations resulted in significant decreases in the number of crimes.<sup>9</sup>

### ***ComStat* in New York: precise statistics and quick decision-making**

In 1994, Bill Bratton became Chief of Police of New York. At that time, the city was ravaged by a crime made of violent robberies, shootings, burglaries, murders . . . that year, the city's homicide rate peaked at 30 per 100,000 population (in comparison, in France, there are, depending on the year, 1 or 2 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants). Added to this was a police force plagued by racketeering, corruption, and sloppiness. Supported by a strong team of deputies, Bratton remobilized the police force and launched a radical new strategy whose centerpiece was called *ComStat*. The new system began by digitizing the city's crime statistics to provide decision-makers with accurate, timely, digitized, and mapped information. This data was provided on a weekly basis to the headquarters and the chiefs of the 74 *precincts* in the metropolis. Police analysts used geomatics software to map the various types of crime in the area to describe the increase or decrease in crime. These data and maps were distributed to the headquarters and to each district station. *ComStat* pinpointed the previous week's crime hotspots and the types of crime that were occurring there. *ComStat* provided access to reliable, up-to-date crime figures from the top to the bottom of the police hierarchy for the various crimes committed in each neighbourhood and at the crime scene (as opposed to annual crime statistics aggregated at the national, provincial, or large city level, which are of almost no operational value).

Bratton directed *ComStat*. Every week, early in the morning, he called his deputies and the neighbourhood station chiefs to a meeting (to which journal-

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8 Braga and Bond 2008. Policing Crime and Disorder, a Randomized Control Trial. *Criminology*, Vol. 46.

9 Braga, A. B. Turchan, A. V. Papachristos, D. M. Hureau, 2019. Hot spots policing of small geographic areas effects on crime. *Campbell Systematic Review*.

ists were invited). On large screens, the crime statistics of the previous week were presented and thanks to a *Mapinfo* type software, everyone could see and locate the micro-locations where burglaries, robberies, shootings, etc. had been committed. The two deputies of the chief were constantly questioning one or other of the neighbourhood captains: What do you know about this shooting that was heard in your neighbourhood? Do you have any information about the perpetrators? Do you have any background information on them? Have you arrested any of them? Have any offenders in the area been stopped and searched? If so, how many guns were confiscated? And the captain, when questioned, had an interest in giving specific answers. The important matter was getting the information to the decision-makers so that the necessary action could be taken quickly. All these exchanges were public. *ComStat* was the opposite of the cult of secrecy and confidentiality that had previously prevailed in the NYPD.

In the areas of New York City identified by *ComStat* as problematic, Bratton encouraged his officers to implement a strategy inspired by the work of Wilson and Kelling. In 1982, Wilson and Kelling wrote a famous article entitled "Broken Windows." The two authors illustrate their points with an anecdote. On a rundown street in a neglected neighbourhood, there is a derelict building with a recently broken window. At the sight of this window, two kids get the idea of breaking more windows. Then other vandals come and continue the destruction. During this time, nothing is done, nothing is repaired. No one to watch, no one to intervene. Eventually the street takes on a sinister, intimidating air. Some people would prefer to avoid it, but being a shortcut, they venture at their own risk. One day, a group of thugs, knowing that they were safe, attacked a passer-by and snatched her purse. It's the beginning of a black series.

Bratton concludes that it is important to take incivilities, disorder, and damage seriously. And that we must listen to the people who complain about nighttime noise, people who urinate in front of their door, and thugs who make obscene remarks to passers-by. In order to ensure safety, the police have a duty to deal with incivilities and disorder. Police officers have a duty to maintain order. In such a way that honest people will stop being afraid and will dare to intervene, to blame, to reprimand a youth that is too turbulent and offensive. How to achieve this? The police officer will make a point of approaching the individual he or she has caught in the act of contravention or incivility. He will question him and, if the answers do not satisfy him, he will want to see his identification, then he will search the suspect. Experience has shown that in the process he may find false papers or a gun that is being carried illegally. And then the policeman will make a proper arrest. This procedure is called "stop and frisk." It was a real deterrent. However, over time, police officers began to abuse this practice and misuse it. Instead of reacting to tickets or incivilities, law enforcement officers judged on the basis of the customers' faces and, not surprisingly, the colour of their skin. And, over time, they

started stopping and questioning individuals constantly. So much so that in 2011, in New York City, 700,000 “stop and frisk” cases were recorded in a single year, resulting in only 12% of arrests based on serious grounds. The practice had degenerated into harassment. Bratton likened the abuse to “overmedication”: the patient is cured and no longer needs the drug, but the incompetent doctor insists: keep taking your pills. It was therefore necessary to put an end to such abuses. It was in 2014 that Bratton, having returned to office, put a stop to this wave of unwanted stops: that year, the number of “stop and frisk” dropped by 98%.<sup>10</sup>

*ComStat* and the practices and policies inaugurated by Bratton were successful. We have seen that in 1990, the homicide rate in the American metropolis was 30 per 100,000 inhabitants. However, by 2009, that rate had dropped to 6 per 100,000. The robbery rate had also dropped by 80%, as had the burglary rate. Combined, the most serious crimes (murder, burglary, auto theft, robbery) had dropped by 46%. On the other hand, in other American cities, no decrease similar to that of New York was recorded.<sup>11</sup> The conclusion is that a system such as *ComStat*, which combines an excellent 911 call recording system, patrol officers who systematically write event reports, data digitization, fact classification, geolocation and timely communication of information to local decision-makers, who immediately send a surplus of reactive police officers to the field, who are attentive to any offence and who adopt situational prevention measures, is effective. Another conclusion is that contrary to a persistent prejudice, crime varies not only under the influence of social and economic factors, but also under the effect of police action or inaction, of the competence or incompetence of police officers and, finally, of innovations in policing.

## **Boston, “face-to-face” deterrence and pacification**

The early 1990s were a period of great urban violence in the Boston metropolitan areas. Residents of underprivileged neighbourhoods would often hear shootings at night, and passersby in the morning would regularly see young men’s bodies lying on the ground. In an attempt to provide a solution to this situation, criminologist David Kennedy worked with local police officers and first calculated that between 1990 and 1994, Boston had suffered a total of 155 homicides involving teenagers or young adults under the age of 21, often members of violent gangs.

The first investigated solution was called the *Ceasefire* initiative. David Kennedy gathered police officers, local community leaders, a prosecutor, probation and parole officers to launch a *focused deterrence* operation named *Ceasefire*. After

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10 Bratton, B. Knobler, P. 2021. *The Profession*. New York: Penguin Press P, 337.

11 Silverman, E.B. 1999. *NYPD Battles Crime*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. Zimring, F. E. 2006. *The Great American Crime Decline*. Oxford: Oxford U. Press. Zimring, F. E. 2012. *The City that Became Safe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Bratton, B. Knobler, P. 2021. *The Profession*. New York: Penguin Press.

gathering information, including shooting, victims, and suspects records. Hence, they gained great knowledge of victims' and perpetrators' background and of the dynamics of violent territories across the city. The working group then called in gang members involved in nighttime gunfights. They encouraged gang members to look for peaceful coexistence with other city gangs, additionally warning them severely on potential consequences of their actions by authorities, were they to continue.

At the same time, the Boston Police Department launched a sting operation whenever a murder was committed during gang wars. A large team of police officers was mobilized to arrest as many members of the two warring gangs as possible. Where nighttime shootings occurred, police presence was immediately intensified, and gang members were tracked down and arrested as soon as possible.

Resulting from this action, the annual average of homicides involving victims younger than 24 years old fell from 44 between 1991 and 1995 to 25 in 1996 and 15 in 1997. Deterrence, gun confiscation, and interventions in the neighbourhoods were effective and this model was emulated elsewhere. This led to 24 *focused deterrence* operations inspired by Boston's experiment, of which the currently-studied results seem to announce significant crime-level reduction.<sup>12</sup>

## **Decriminalization of cannabis: dealers become sellers**

While police departments in New York, Boston, and elsewhere were implementing the aforementioned strategies, legislators in some 20 American states were progressively decriminalizing the possession and sale of cannabis. Arguably, this was not without consequence in the *inner cities*, which were centres of intense drug trafficking.

For almost half a century, the American repressive apparatus waged a relentless war on cannabis trafficking: "The War on Drugs." As a result, millions of small-time drug dealers —mostly African Americans—ended up incarcerated. This massive incarceration movement continued into the early 21st century. In 2006, for example, there were 1.9 million *drug arrests* in the United States and 48% of the federal prison population were drug dealers.<sup>13</sup>

These aggressive repression policies worsened the already tense relationship between the police and the population of an *inner city*, especially where there

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12 Kennedy, D. (2001). *Reducing gun violence: the Boston gun project's operation ceasefire*. Washington: Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice. Kennedy, D. (2009). *Deterrence and Crime. Prevention*, Routledge. Braga et al., 2018. "Focused Deterrence Strategies and Crime Control: An Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Evidence," *Criminology and Public Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2018.

13 Caulkins, Jonathan P. and Peter Reuter. 2017. Dealing with Drugs More Effectively and Humanely. In *Crime and Justice - Reinventing the Criminal Justice System*, ed. Daniel Nagin and Michael Tonry. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 46(1): 95-158.

were concentrations of African Americans. Not long ago, in Washington, D.C., 30 percent of African Americans under the age of 25 had at least one prior conviction. These young people had criminal records that prevented them from getting regular jobs.<sup>14</sup>

The failure of crackdown policies seems to be unanimously accepted. Easy profits ensured a constant supply of dealers' workforce, replacing incarcerated ones. Law enforcement proved powerless on the demand side as well. The numbers of cannabis users remained at high levels with fluctuations unrelated to law enforcement. Most criminologists agreed that the criminalization of acts such as dealing small quantities of drugs leads to injustices and produces perverse effects. Criminologists mostly argue that carrying and trafficking cannabis are offences that do not deserve such repression, especially for the quite harmless effects of cannabis on consumers compared to that of alcohol. It appears that investing in cannabis trafficking repression leads to a diversion of police and judicial resources away from real crimes.<sup>15</sup> This has partially justified the decriminalization of cannabis sale and possession in the 20 states that have already done so.

Decriminalization has not been followed by a significant increase in cannabis while former drug dealers no longer risk jail sentences. Gangs face profits reduction while the police entertains better relations with underprivileged neighborhoods' inhabitants. More time can be allocated to other crimes. Our hypothesis seems thus plausible: where cannabis is legalized, violent crime seems to have declined in *inner cities*, but this remains to be tested against the figures.<sup>16</sup>

## **A conclusion that looks like a summary**

The last decades saw a rise in U.S. law enforcement authorities' efforts to reduce violence in lawless metropolitan areas. Criminologists have observed their significant success, as violent crimes have been lowered. Innovative police officers not only targeted crime hotspots, but focused on deterrence operations against gangs and implementing situational prevention measures for pre-crime situations.

Over time, lessons were learned from failures and successes of such policies. Restoring peace and security, these initiatives show that the fight against crime can

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14 Caulkins, Jonathan P. and Peter Reuter. 2017. Dealing with Drugs More Effectively and Humanely. In *Crime and Justice - Reinventing the Criminal Justice System*, ed. Daniel Nagin and Michael Tonry. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 46(1): 95-158.

15 Caulkins, Jonathan P. and Peter Reuter. 2017. Dealing with Drugs More Effectively and Humanely. In *Crime and Justice - Reinventing the Criminal Justice System*, ed. Daniel Nagin and Michael Tonry. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 46(1): 95-158.

16 Brochu, S., N. Brunelle, and C. Plourde. (2016). *Drugs and crime. A complex relationship* (third edition), Montreal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal. Reuter (2013). "Why Has US Drug Policy Changed So Little over 30 Years?" in Tonry, M. [ed.], *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, vol. 42. *Crime and Justice in America, 1975-2025*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. On artificial incrimination, see Gassin, R. Cimamonti, S. Bonfils. *Criminology*. Seventh edition. Paris: Dalloz. And Cusson, M. 2021. *Security, Liberty and Crime*. Quebec City: Septentrion.

be effective. Therefore, fighting the roots of crime, such as poverty, inequality, exclusion is not the only solution available. These results prove that police strategies can be fruitful, far from counterproductive expedients of the past.

Four strategies stand out from thirty years of experimentation. The first requires to identify precisely micro-sites with high crime frequency, analyze the phenomenon's cause and monitor, control, and sometimes arrest involved individuals. The second strategy, *ComStat*, is similar to the first. It begins with statistical vigilance to detect in real time the emergence of localized criminal problems and then seeks ways to deter criminals through undelayed, direct actions against them. The third is a manifestation of violent law enforcement practices. It involves live, personal deterrence of gang members, shootings, confiscation of weapons, and hit-and-run operations. The fourth measure—initiated by legislators—was simple, but necessary: decriminalize cannabis possession and trafficking to stop harassing and locking up dealers. Through such evolution, the police could focus more effectively on high-end criminal networks.

These four strategies encourage us to learn a simple but insufficiently taught lesson : focusing on proper crime matters more than petty criminals. Little, drug-trafficking related crimes will require too many officers for uncertain results. Crime hotspots should be the sole object of law enforcement, in order to ensure the main goals: deter and remove opportunities from thieves.