ZERO TOLERANCE AND THE NYPD:  
HAS IT WORKED THERE AND WILL IT WORK HERE?

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Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not of the  
Queensland Criminal Justice Commission
Introduction

In recent years the New York Police Department (NYPD) has attracted world-wide attention as an exemplar of the ‘zero tolerance’ approach to policing. Within Australia, the media has given considerable prominence to stories about the New York ‘miracle’ and some politicians - such as the former Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, Shane Stone - have declared themselves to be enthusiastic adherents of this style of policing. At the same time, critics have queried the claims which been made about the effectiveness of the New York approach, questioned its applicability to societies like Australia, and argued that it is discriminatory, leads to increased police-citizen conflict, and is unsustainable in the longer term (Pollard 1998; Dixon, 1998; Wadham 1998).

In this paper, I aim to shed some light on the debate over the pros and cons of the ‘NYPD model’ by addressing the following questions:

• What are the key elements of this model and how does it differ from the traditional reactive policing model, community policing and problem-oriented policing?

• To what extent have the policing reforms which were introduced into New York contributed to a reduction in crime in that city? To the extent that there have been positive effects, are these capable of replication elsewhere?

• Have any negative consequences been associated with the introduction of these reforms?

• Can - and should - the model be embraced by Australian police services?

A Note on Terminology

The term ‘zero tolerance policing’ connotes strict enforcement of minor offences, but this is only one element of the NYPD approach. Moreover, it has been strongly argued by those associated with the NYPD reforms that ‘zero tolerance’ tactics were intended to be used selectively as a crime control strategy, rather being applied indiscriminately throughout the City (Bratton 1998a, p.43). I have therefore opted to eschew the use of the term ‘zero tolerance’ in favour of the more neutral phase ‘the NYPD model’.

What Has Been Done in New York and How is it Different?

The election of Rudolph Giuliani as Mayor of New York City in 1993 and the appointment of William Bratton as NYC Police Commissioner in January 1994 ushered in a process of vigorous organisational ‘re-engineering’ (to use Bratton’s term) in the NYPD. This re-engineering exercise had the following elements:

1. The NYPD and its officers were provided with clear crime reduction objectives, such as ‘get guns off the streets’, ‘curb youth violence in the schools and on the streets’ and ‘drive drug dealers out of NYC’.

2. Information systems were improved to provide police managers with up-to-date data on crime ‘hot spots’ and trends down to precinct level.
3. Local commanders were made accountable for crime in their areas and, more particularly, for developing and implementing focused local crime reduction strategies. There was a strong emphasis placed on follow-up and assessment, particularly through the mechanism of the Compstat meeting (McDonald, Greenberg and McEwen, 1998, p.22-4).

4. Strong emphasis was placed on deploying personnel and resources as rapidly as possible to deal with the problems which had been identified.

5. Police were encouraged to utilise a variety of enforcement strategies, tailored to the problem at hand, rather than continuing to rely on the traditional responses of random and reactive patrolling. These strategies included: strict enforcement of minor offences (primarily as a means of ‘flushing out’ offenders with more serious records, disrupting patterns of criminal activity and discouraging the carrying of firearms); saturating areas with uniformed or plainclothes officers; setting up checkpoints to find stolen cars; vertical patrols in buildings; using nuisance abatement laws to shut down illegal businesses; sting operations and narcotics’ buy and bust’ operations (McDonald, Greenberg and McEwen, 1998, p.16).

6. Steps were taken to break down the traditional barriers between detectives, specialist squads and uniformed police. Local commanders were empowered to deploy detectives and specialised units to assist in tackling crime problems in designated areas, rather than these units operating to their own individual objectives as had traditionally been the case (Bratton, 1998a, p.38; McDonald, Greenberg and McEwen, 1998, p.14).

More generally, Bratton set out to re-energise the NYPD. According to Bratton, when he arrived at the NYPD officers were demoralised and the emphasis was on ‘staying low and keeping out of trouble’. The reforms which he initiated were aimed, amongst other things, at raising the morale and work rate of operational police, and communicating to them that ‘it was OK to be a cop’.

In the absence of any published independent evaluation of the NYPD reforms, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which what was supposed to happen actually translated into action on the ground. Police routines and work practices are very resilient to change and the capacity of operational police to subvert (intentionally or otherwise) reforms driven from the top is well known. However, even if the new model developed for the NYPD has been imperfectly implemented in practice, it undoubtedly embodies a significant departure from how the business of policing had previously been conducted in that city.

Bratton and Giuliani’s talent for self-promotion, and the rest of the world’s fascination with New York City, has contributed to the impression that the NYPD occupies the ‘cutting edge’ of modern policing. The current Police Commissioner, Howard Saffir, has added to the hyperbole by declaring that: ‘there is no doubt that New York City is the safest large city in the nation, truly the World’s Capital’ (NYPD Internal Affairs Bureau 1997, foreword). However, for much of its history, the NYPD has been a laggard rather than a leader in matters relating to policing reform; other large police departments in the United States, such as San Diego, Portland and Minneapolis have shown a much more sustained capacity for innovation than has the NYPD. The Compstat meetings run by the NYPD are a genuine innovation, but the NYPD is by no means the only police department using crime data to identify hot spots and direct policing activity. Likewise, measures to break down the demarcation between detectives, specialist squads and uniformed police had been introduced in other police organisations in the US and elsewhere long before the NYPD began to move in this direction (Pollard, 1998, p. 51).
Although claims about the innovativeness of the NYPD model may be overstated, it does have some distinctive features which set it apart both from the traditional reactive policing approach, and from the concepts of community policing and problem-oriented policing which have underpinned policing reform initiatives in other jurisdictions.

As set out in Table 1, the NYPD model is distinguished from the latter two approaches by its focus on outcomes rather than processes, the emphasis placed on the utilisation of vigorous policing strategies, and the fact that it tends to exclude non-police players from participating in the design and implementation of crime reduction initiatives. In these respects, the NYPD model represents an important – although not necessarily more desirable – philosophical departure from the thinking which has dominated discussion about policing reform over the last 20 years or so.

Table 1  
Comparison of Different Policing Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Reactive Model</th>
<th>NYC Model</th>
<th>Community Policing Model</th>
<th>Problem-Oriented Policing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Priorities</strong></td>
<td>Process-focused</td>
<td>Outcome-focused</td>
<td>Process-focused</td>
<td>Outcome and process-focused</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>responding to calls;</td>
<td>reducing crime and</td>
<td>improving police-</td>
<td>identifying and solving</td>
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<td></td>
<td>investigating and</td>
<td>disorder</td>
<td>community relations;</td>
<td>policing problems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>solving crimes</td>
<td></td>
<td>addressing community</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>concerns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extent of involvement of</strong></td>
<td>Low - policing seen as a</td>
<td>Relatively low - police</td>
<td>High - emphasis on</td>
<td>High - emphasis on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>others</strong></td>
<td>specialised activity</td>
<td>primarily responsible for</td>
<td>working with ‘the</td>
<td>establishing ‘partnerships’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>developing and implementing</td>
<td>community’ and its</td>
<td>with other agencies to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>crime reduction strategies</td>
<td>representatives</td>
<td>address problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilisation of</strong></td>
<td>Low - delivery of</td>
<td>High - information used to</td>
<td>Moderate - emphasis on</td>
<td>High - information used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>information</strong></td>
<td>policing services</td>
<td>identify problem areas,</td>
<td>using information at</td>
<td>to identify problems,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>highly routinised</td>
<td>target resources and</td>
<td>local level, rather than</td>
<td>develop strategies and</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>evaluate impacts</td>
<td>using it to drive</td>
<td>evaluate responses</td>
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<td>organisation-wide</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>responses’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilisation of</strong></td>
<td>Moderate - occasional</td>
<td>High - extensive use of</td>
<td>Low - emphasis on</td>
<td>Low to Moderate -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>coercive</strong></td>
<td>‘crackdowns’ and ‘blitzes’</td>
<td>arrest, stop and search</td>
<td>policing by consensus;</td>
<td>coercive strategies only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>policing</strong></td>
<td>; some tolerance of minor</td>
<td>powers; vigorous</td>
<td>locating police within</td>
<td>one of a menu of options;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>strategies</strong></td>
<td>offences</td>
<td>enforcement of minor</td>
<td>the community</td>
<td>whether utilised</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>offences</td>
<td></td>
<td>depends on nature of</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>problem</td>
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Some champions of the NYPD model have sought to downplay the differences between it and community policing and problem-oriented policing approaches. For example, McDonald has argued that it is possible to integrate community policing and the New York style of policing into a ‘seamless web’ (McDonald, Greenberg and McEwen, 1998; p.68). Bratton has taken this argument further, asserting that:

Blending the benefits of rapid response and random patrol as well as top notch investigative work with the development of strong community partnerships to solve problems that lead to crime reduction and prevention describes the foundation of policing in America in the 1990s and in New York in particular (1998, p.33)
However, while such claims might assist in deflecting criticisms of the NYPD model, they need to be viewed with some scepticism; as I have argued the NYPD model – and the philosophy which underpins it – is different from these other approaches in some important respects (see Dixon, 1998, for a similar argument). This is not to deny that there are some common threads - for example, the NYPD model and problem-oriented policing both emphasise the need for policing to become more information-driven - but it is difficult to see how the model as a whole can co-exist comfortably over time with these other approaches.

The Effectiveness of the NYPD Model as a Crime Reduction Strategy

Much has been made of the success of the NYPD model as a crime reduction strategy. With characteristic confidence, Bratton has written that:

New York City, a city that only three years ago had a reputation as ‘the crime capital of the world’ is now being lauded as one of the safest big cities in the world. How did this quick turnaround happen? Blame it on the police. The men and women who make up the New York City Police Department are principally responsible for the dramatic decline that continues today in New York City (1998a, p.29)

As evidence of this success, Bratton and his supporters point to large and sustained reductions in reported crime in New York City in the years following his appointment as Police Commissioner: for example, a 36 per cent reduction in the violent crime rate between 1993 for and 1996, and a 50 per cent reduction over the same period in the homicide rate. However, it is a fundamental rule of statistical analysis that a correlation should not be equated with a cause.

First, as indicated by Figure 1, the violent crime rate and the property crime rate (as measured by the rate of reported burglaries) began declining in New York City from 1990 onwards - well before Bratton’s reforms were introduced. The rate of decline did accelerate from 1993 onwards, but on the basis of the trend of the preceding years it seems reasonable to assume that there would have been at least some fall in reported crime after 1993, even if the NYPD had not changed tack.


Notes: 1. The violent crime rate is the number of homicides, rapes, robberies and assaults per 100,000 population.
2. 1998 data are for January—June only and have been annualised to ensure comparability.
Second, there has been a general drop in reported crime rates in the United States in recent years, particularly in the larger cities. To support claims about the particular crime reduction benefits of the NYPD model, it is necessary not only to show that crime fell more sharply in New York after the Bratton reforms were introduced, but also that it dropped by a greater amount than in other cities where different policing approaches were employed. Employing this test, the evidence in support of a special ‘New York City effect’ can probably best be described as equivocal.

Figure 2 shows trends in the annual violent crime rate for five large American cities over the period 1989 to 1998: New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego and Washington DC. The San Diego Police Department is considered to be at the forefront in applying the principles of problem-oriented policing. Since 1993, the Chicago Police Department has been engaged in an ambitious exercise to implement a community policing model on a department-wide basis (Skogan and Hartnett 1997). In 1997 Washington DC Police implemented a proactive patrol-based strategy which appears to have several aspects in common with the NYPD model (Swope, 1998, p.22). The Los Angeles Police Department, on the other hand, has generally not been regarded as a leader in any of these areas.

![Figure 2: Trends in Annual Violent Crime Rate](image)

Source: As per Figure 1.

Note: See Figure 1 for the definition of violent crime. The violent crime rate does not include forcible rape.

In all of the cities, 1991 or 1992 seems to have been a turning point. From 1992 onwards, San Diego shows the slowest rate of decline in the violent crime rate, but this may partly be because its’ rate was relatively low to begin with. The trends for the other four cities track each other reasonably closely, although it is worth noting that the largest drop in Washington DC came in 1997 and 1998, after the new patrol strategy was introduced.

There has been a greater percentage fall in the homicide rate in New York than in Chicago or San Diego. On the other hand, there is not much to separate Los Angeles and New York (Figure 3). Again, Washington stands out for the magnitude of the reductions which have occurred in the last two years.
Turning finally to the burglary rate (Figure 4), we again find little evidence to support claims for New York exceptionalism. Chicago appears to have fared relatively poorly in comparison to the other cities, but the trends for New York, San Diego and Los Angeles are virtually identical.
The fact that reported crime rates have declined across-the-board in the larger cities strongly suggests that broader social and economic developments - such as a booming economy, the stabilisation of drug markets and particularly reductions in crack cocaine use - have been primarily responsible for the drop in crime rates (Grabosky, 1999, p.2). I do not subscribe to the view held by some criminologists that police can have little or no impact on crime levels. As discussed above, while crime rates were trending down in New York City prior to Bratton’s arrival on the scene, the rate of decline did accelerate after he took over. The example of Washington DC - where reported crime rates dropped sharply following the introduction of a new patrol strategy - is also instructive in this regard. However, in both instances what we see is an acceleration of a trend, rather than the ‘turnaround’ which Bratton (1998b) claims to have achieved in New York. Police departments may be able to make a difference by working ‘smarter’ and making better use of their available resources, but their impact is likely to be primarily on the pace - as opposed to the direction - of change.

Another conclusion which can be drawn from these data is that, to put it colloquially, there seems to be ‘more than one way to skin a cat’. The reforms introduced by Bratton may well have had some beneficial crime reduction effects in the context of New York City, but the data also suggest that similar effects have been achieved in other jurisdictions operating under different policing models. If so, then arguments about the relative merits of different approaches perhaps should be focused less on their effectiveness in dealing with crime and more on the collateral effects, such as the impact of these different approaches on police-community relations and the operation of other elements of the criminal justice system.

A final point is that arguments about the crime reduction benefits of the NYPD model would be more persuasive if, instead of relying solely on macro-level data such as city-wide crime rates, they were backed up by some well-documented examples of micro-level effects. A key feature of the
NYPD model has been the emphasis on identifying ‘hot spots’ and then focusing resources and strategies on reducing crime in those areas. It follows that, if these strategies have been effective, there should be evidence that crime has fallen by a greater amount in these areas than in those other parts of New York City which did not receive the same level of treatment. It may be that the NYPD has undertaken studies of this nature but, if so, they are yet to become public.

Collateral Impacts of the NYPD Model

Justice System Impacts

Some commentators have asserted that one of the likely consequences of the introduction of a more aggressive style policing along New York lines will be a substantial expansion of the prison population (Wadham 1998, p. 51; Dixon, 1998 p.101). The basis for this prediction appears to be that a more active approach to enforcement will result in more people being arrested and convicted, and subsequently incarcerated. The countervailing argument is that any increase in the number of people being incarcerated will be counteracted by a reduction in serious crime and hence in the overall number of offenders.

New York’s custodial population has increased in recent years, with the number of sentenced prisoners in state and federal prisons in New York State growing by 13.4 per cent between 1992 and 1997 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998). However, to put this in perspective, over the same period the US prison population increased by 41.5 per cent and by 22.6 per cent in the Northeast states. Also, it seems probable that a fair part of the increase in the New York prison population reflects the cumulative effects of ‘get tough’ sentencing policies, rather than being attributable specifically to the activities of the NYPD.

Another - and perhaps better - indicator of the impact of the NYPD model on rates of incarceration is the trend in the size of the New York City jail population. (In the US, jails are used to house remandees and short-term prisoners, most of whom have been convicted of relatively minor offences.) As Table 2 shows, there has been only a relatively small - and apparently short-lived rise - in this population.

Table 2
Average Daily Population of New York City Jails 1993-97

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pop'n</td>
<td>17307</td>
<td>18171</td>
<td>18143</td>
<td>19890</td>
<td>17528</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


It could be argued, of course, that the general drop in crime in New York City and elsewhere in the United States has disguised the impact of the NYPD model on incarceration rates, but this is a matter of speculation. Whatever might happen in the longer term, the explosion in the custodial population anticipated by some commentators is yet to occur.
Police-Civilian Conflict

The NYPD style of policing has trenchantly been criticised by some commentators for its potential to contribute in increased police-civilian conflict, on the basis that:

- the increase in enforcement activity associated with the introduction of this model of policing leads to more arrests and other forms of potentially conflictual encounters, such as stop and search exercises
- the approach legitimises the use of aggressive policing tactics likely to generate conflict, such as street and building ‘sweeps’ and the New York Transit Police practice of serving warrants at 2:00am ‘for effect’ (McDonald et al, 1998, p.81).

A related criticism is that relations between police and visible minority groups such as blacks are placed at risk, because these groups are most likely to be on the receiving end of the upsurge in aggressive policing activity (Wadham 1998, p.52). On the other hand, defenders of the NYPD model have countered by arguing that poorer communities are actually more satisfied with the police than they were prior to the introduction of Bratton’s reforms, because they have been the primary beneficiaries of reduced crime (Silverman 1998, pp 57-8).

A rough indicator of whether there has been an increase in the level of police-civilian conflict in New York City since 1994 is the number of excessive force complaints against NYPD officers. This is a far from ideal measure: complaint trends can be distorted by shifts in the willingness of victims of police violence to complain, and changes in complaint recording practices. It is also probable that only a small proportion of excessive force incidents ever become the subject of a complaint. However, in the absence of other, more direct measures, such as periodic surveys of the public and arrestees, we have little choice but to utilise this indicator.

Figure 5 presents data on the number of force allegations against NYPD officers made to the New York Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) from 1990 onwards. The figure shows a marked rise such in complaints, in the order of 62 per cent between 1993 and 1995, which corresponds with Bratton’s arrival on the scene, but there has been an equally significant drop in the last three years.
There are at least three possible explanations for the recent decline in complaints: (a) police activity levels have dropped off; (b) police standards of behaviour have improved; or (c) the willingness of citizens to complain has diminished. Of these, the first would seem to be the most plausible - the decline in the jail population in 1997 and the large falls in reported crime would seem to indicate that there has been some reduction in levels of enforcement activity. However, without additional data, it is not possible to discount the other two explanations.

Another source of trend data about complaints is the NYPD Internal Affairs Bureau Annual Report. The Bureau only reports on the small proportion of complaints which in its assessment amount to allegations of serious misconduct, but this arguably may be a better indicator of whether police behaviour is ‘getting out of hand’ than are aggregate complaints, many of which relate to relatively minor incidents.

The most relevant category of complaints for the purpose of this analysis is what the Internal Affairs Bureau defines to as ‘arrest-effected complaints’. These are allegations which are made against arresting or assisting officers and encompass assault, victimisation, bribery, abuse and fabrication of evidence. Table 3 shows that in 1997 (the last year for which data are available) the number of such complaints jumped by 87 per cent, from 62 to 116. Given the size of the NYPD this still seems like a relatively small number of complaints, but the rise is nonetheless of some concern. It is possible that the NYPD Internal Affairs Bureau has relaxed its criteria for determining what constitutes ‘serious misconduct’, but there is nothing in the Bureau’s Annual Report to indicate that this has occurred. In fact, in 1997 the Bureau set up a special unit to investigate serious excessive force allegations, which would seem to indicate that it also is concerned about this trend.
Table 3

Arrest Effected Complaints Recorded by NYPD Internal Affairs Bureau, 1994-7

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complaints</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1994 does not include complaints against officers of the Housing and Transit Bureaus.

Finally, mention should be made of a recent police shooting incident in New York which has also attracted attention in the Australian media (“Blasted to Death for The Crime of Looking Suspicious’, *The Australian*, February 10, 1999.) In this incident a team of heavily armed plain-clothes police shot dead Amadou Diallo, an unarmed black street vendor, late one evening outside a Bronx apartment building, in the course of searching for an alleged serial rapist. A total of 41 shots were fired at the victim, who according to the police had appeared to be drawing a gun. The officers responsible were members of a special Street Crimes Unit with the motto ‘we own the night’. Three of the four members of the unit had previously been involved in other shootings.

This incident has prompted large-scale demonstrations by members of the New York City black community, complaining of ongoing police harassment, and has ignited a debate in the mainstream media about whether the NYPD has become too aggressive in its approach. (See, for example, the editorial in the New York Times of 12 February entitled ‘The Mayor’s Other Crime Rating’.) Possibly the shooting was an isolated event rather than a trend - as the New York Times conceded in its’ editorial, the number of police shootings in New York in 1998 was the fewest since 1985 - but the case has drawn attention to some negative aspects of the NYPD organisational culture, particularly the combativeness inherent in slogans such as ‘we own the night’. In any event, in a volatile community like New York one does not need very many ‘isolated’ incidents of this kind for large-scale riots to become a real possibility.

In summary, there is mixed evidence as to whether adoption of the NYPD model has led to an increase in police-civilian conflict in New York City. On one hand, excessive force complaints are now back to pre-1994 levels, but on the other hand, the upsurge in serious arrest-related complaints in 1997 and the Diallo shooting and its aftermath lend some weight to arguments that the level of conflict is on the rise. Perhaps the situation will become clearer in another year or so, but there are certainly some grounds for concern.

**Does the NYPD provide a Good Model for Australian Policing?**

In principle, there are no insurmountable obstacles to translating the NYPD model to the Australian context. The basic elements of the model - greater accountability, better use of information, more assertive policing, a more focused approach to the deployment of available resources - are eminently transportable, provided there is managerial and political support for introducing these changes. If anything, the model may be easier to implement than alternative approaches such as community policing and problem-oriented policing, because it fits in more readily with the prevailing police culture. However, whether Australian police services should embrace the NYPD model in its entirety is another question.
First, those who think that introduction of this style of policing into Australian police services will lead to large reductions in crime are likely to be disappointed. As discussed above, the drop in crime in New York City over the last few years has been the result of a complex set of factors, of which changes to the method of policing have only been one element. Moreover, the problems which confronted police in New York were different in both magnitude and kind to those with which Australian police services must deal. As Grabosky has pointed out, in 1992 New York City’s homicide rate was 15 times greater than Australia’s (1999, p.2). In addition, the crack epidemic was still in full swing and gang-related violence was widespread. Australian police services are starting from a very different base; the problems may be less severe, but for that very reason there is arguably less scope to ‘make a difference’ using New York-style strategies.

Second, the NYPD model relies heavily on fairly orthodox policing strategies such as strict enforcement, saturation patrolling, ‘stings’ and so on, as opposed to emphasising more broadly-based responses. These strategies may be well suited to addressing certain types of problems, such as gang violence and subway crime, but they do not necessarily offer the most effective response to other forms of offending.

Consider, for example, residential burglary, which is the most frequently identified neighbourhood crime concern of Australians. Tactics such as vigorously enforcing the law against second-hand dealers, and increasing police patrols in identified burglary hot spots, should certainly form part of a comprehensive anti-burglary strategy, but this needs to be done in conjunction with other approaches, such as: providing security advice to burglary victims, target hardening, alerting neighbours, and working with housing authorities and local councils to address urban design issues. Development and implementation of these other approaches requires police who can think more broadly and who are prepared to work in partnership with other agencies and community groups. It is questionable whether the NYPD approach encourages this more broadly based problem-solving approach - notwithstanding the assurances offered by Bratton and others.

Third, a major shortcoming of the NYPD model, particularly for the longer term, is that it gives primacy to outcomes over processes. At one level, there is much to be said for making police more goal-oriented, but how they achieve their objectives is also important, I have argued, the aggressive language and style of the NYPD model carries with it the risk of increased conflict, ‘corner-cutting’ and over zealousness on the part of police.

Fourth, the NYPD model is pre-eminently about reducing crime, particularly reported crime, which tends to overlook the fact that police services are complex organisations with complex functions. There is a danger that elevating the objective of crime control above all others will lead police to neglect other priorities (such as making our roads safer, or dealing with community problems which do not fit the narrow definition of crime). In addition, a preoccupation with getting crime down can have dysfunctional consequences for an organisation’s management processes (for example, by putting increased pressure on police managers to make their crime figures look good). A single-minded focus on reducing crime might have been appropriate for a time in New York City, where crime was at epidemic proportions in some areas, but as I have argued, Australian police services do not face problems of this magnitude.
Conclusion

It is difficult to provide a balanced assessment of the NYPD model given the lack of reliable evaluation data and the amount of hype generated about the New York ‘miracle’ over the last few years. However, the following conclusions seem warranted:

1. Bratton’s re-engineering of the NYPD probably did contribute to a reduction in crime in New York City, although not to the extent that has been claimed.

2. The recent experience of other large American cities indicates that a variety of policing strategies have been associated with marked reductions in crime; there is little evidence available to support claims of New York exceptionalism.

3. Contrary to the fears expressed by some, the introduction of this new style of policing into the NYPD does not appear to have had a major impact on the city’s custodial population to date.

4. There is mixed evidence as to whether the model has been associated with an increase in police-civilian conflict, but there are some indications that tension levels are increasing between the police and the black community in particular.

As to whether the NYPD model is appropriate for adoption by Australian police services, I have expressed a number of reservations. The NYPD model undoubtedly has some positive aspects, such as the emphasis which it places on utilising information to drive decisions, identifying and focusing resources on ‘hot spots’, breaking down the traditional demarcation between detectives and uniformed officers, and making local commanders more accountable for what is happening in their areas. However, Australian police services need to be very wary about embracing the more problematic aspects of the model, in particular, the preoccupation on ‘results’ and the emphasis given to employing aggressive policing strategies.

New York City may well be the World’s premier city, as its’ boosters claim, but it does not follow that it also has the World’s premier police force. It is important that we do not allow ourselves to be mesmerized by all of the attention which the NYPD has attracted, and that the net is cast widely in the search for new and better ways of delivering policing services to the Australian community.
References


