

The City that Became Safe:  
New York and the Future of Crime Control

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Over the 20 years after 1990, New Yorkers were the beneficiaries of the largest and longest sustained drop in street crime ever experienced by a big city in the developed world. In less than a generation, rates of several common crimes that inspire public fear - homicide, stranger assault, robbery and burglary - have dropped by 80% or more. By 2008, the homicide rate in New York was lower than it had been in 1961 despite changes in the racial and ethnic profile of the city that normally increase risks. Figure 1 shows the recent crime rates in New York City in an unconventional fashion for crime statistics - by expressing the crime rate in 2009 as a percentage of its 1990 level.

[Insert Figure 1]

The risk of being killed in New York City was less than a fifth of its 1990 rate in 2009, the risk of being robbed was less than 1/6<sup>th</sup> the former rate and the risk of car theft declined to 1/16<sup>th</sup> of its 1990 level.

The arithmetic of the decline is amazing but the recent public reaction to New York's epidemic of public safety is rather complacent. In one sense, this is

understandable - crime statistics only command attention when citizens are worried about crime just as people only think about dentists when their teeth hurt.

But New York's crime adventures demand scientific and public attention for three reasons. First, this is a Guinness Book of World Record's crime drop. The size and the length of the city's crime decline have never been documented in a major metropolis before. Indeed, most professional observers would have doubted that a major city could reduce safety crime by 80%. So New York City has witnessed what many of us would have thought impossible for any city.

The second noteworthy lesson about New York's experience is that the systematic changes which have contributed about half of the city's crime decline are not extremely expensive and can be adapted to conditions in other cities. New York shows what is possible in many other cities.

The third surprise from New York is that the city made giant strides toward solving its crime problem without either winning its war on illicit drug use or massive

increases in incarceration. So the great success in this city is a challenge to the two dominant priorities of crime control policy in modern America.

### The Crime Decline

The first nine years of decline in New York City was part of a much broader decline in crime during the 1990s in the United States, a close to 40% drop in crime that started in the early 1990s and ended in 2000. This nationwide crime decline was the longest and largest drop in modern history. What sets New York City apart from this general pattern is that its decline was twice as large as the national trend and lasted twice as long.

The extraordinary difference between a 40% and 80% drop in safety crime can be seen in comparing homicide rates in the five largest cities in the United States in 1990 and in 2007.

[Insert Figure 2]

The great crime decline of the 1990s reduced homicide in all five cities and in four of those five by a

substantial amount. But New York City went from being dead center in its homicide rates in 1990 to being by far the lowest of the major population centers - more than 40% below the next best city and only 35% of the mean rate for the other four places.

Even after its 80% drop, the homicide rate in New York City is much higher than in most major European cities and six times that of Tokyo. But rates of many property felonies in New York City are significantly lower than in London and Sydney, Australia, as shown in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1]

Homicide in the contemporary New York City is much higher than in the comparison sites, but rates of forcible rape are lower in New York than in Sydney and London; rates of New York robbery are lower than in London. Burglary and auto theft are lower in New York City by far than in the other major Western cities in the table.

Too Good To Be True?

Because official crime statistics are generated and verified by the same police departments that are praised when crime rates fall and blamed when they increase, many observers greet very good news from police statistics as untrustworthy pronouncements by an interested party (*The New York Times*, September 9, 2010). Since police have a special interest in lowering rates, how can we be confident that the numbers behind Figure 1's spectacular good news reflect the reality of street crime?

The best method to verify trends is with independent data. Two of New York's seven index crimes are also counted by agencies that are independent of the police: county health departments keep meticulous records of all deaths and provide specific reports of what the police classify as murder and non-negligent homicide. Over the 19 years when the police reported the 82% decline in Figure 1, the agreement between the health and police reports each year was almost perfect (a correlation of annual rate trends of .999). For auto theft - the crime rate with the spectacular 94% drop - insurance claims by victims are recorded by insurance companies. I obtained theft loss reports by year from two separate industry data bureaus. The most complete city-wide claim loss statistics from

insurance projected a decline in theft rates (accounting for population change) of just over 90%. So the biggest decrease (auto theft) and the most important decrease (homicide) are both confirmed by independent sources. And there is confirmation as well for the big drop in robbery, because the number of killings from robberies dropped more than the 84% decline in non-fatal robberies.

By American standards, New York City has become a safe and low crime urban environment. How did this happen? Can other states and cities match the New York achievement?

#### Explaining the New York Difference

About half of the New York City crime drop was part of a larger national downturn in the 1990s that did not have any distinctive local causes. The same mix of increased incarceration, 1990s prosperity, an aging population and cyclical influences that created the national pattern operated as well in New York City. The decline was not easy to tie to specific causes at the national level (Zimring 2007) and cannot be connected any better in New York City.

But about half the New York City decline (and all of the city's decrease after 2000) is a distinctive local phenomenon. What local conditions generated this extra 40% crime decline that transformed the happy windfall of the almost 40% national decline into an unprecedented public safety achievement? For this half of the city's decline, plausible answers are easier to obtain.

There were very few drastic changes in population, economy, schools or housing in the city during the 20 years after 1990. One of the four major boroughs, Manhattan, had a drop in ethnic minority population but the other three boroughs had increases - and crime went way down in all four. The percentage of the population in the arrest prone 15-29 age bracket declined at the same rate as nationally, and economic growth did not reduce either poverty or unemployment in New York City below the national average during the first 18 years of the crime decline.

[Insert Figures 3 & 4]

More remarkable, the rate at which the city filled its jails and the state's prisons was well below the national pattern all through the two decades after 1990. Figure 5



shows combined trends in persons imprisoned from the city with those held in city jails.

[Insert Figure 5]

While the U.S. prison and jail population expanded by half during the declining crime 1990s, New York's incarceration rose only 15% in the first seven years of the decade and was under its 1990 rate by 2000. By 2007, the rate of incarceration was down 28% in New York City. So what had been regarded as high-risk populations in three of the large boroughs of New York City did not change or increase and the number of offenders locked up did not increase while robbery, burglary and murder dropped by over 80%. In a nation where we have long believed that criminal offenders will keep offending unless they are locked up, the first mystery from New York City is this: Where have all the criminals gone?

There is a second respect in which the momentous drop in New York street crime is a policy surprise. Figure 6 shows trends in three measures of illegal drug use over time, the New York hospital discharges from drug treatment,

drug overdose deaths and the percent of Manhattan men arrested who test positive for an illegal drug.

[Insert Figure 6]

These indirect measures of the amount of illegal drugs purchased and used in the city have not dropped with crime rates. While the cocaine using population became older in New York (and elsewhere) and the location and visibility of drug sales may have changed, the overall illicit drug volume appears relatively stable. So New York City appears to be winning the War on Crime without winning the War on Drugs.

The one aspect of crime policy where New York made big changes was policing, and these are the only obvious candidates to take credit for the city's larger crime decline. Beginning in 1990, the city added 9,000 new uniformed police, changed its management of police efforts and made its street policing tactics both more aggressive and more focused on high crime settings. Without doubt, this combination of changes made a major contribution to reducing street crime in the city. But how much of the

drop did the package of police changes cause and which changes should get most of the credit?

The sheer weight of new police on the street was originally thought to have caused most of the distinctive New York decline, and Figure 7 shows that homicide dropped much more during the 1990s when the police force was growing quickly than after 2000 when the force was reduced by more than 4,000 uniformed officers.

[Insert Figure 7]

The problem with relying on the total size of the 1990s decline, however, is that was the period when crime was declining everywhere. Figure 8 provides a second method of exploring the impact of manpower changes on city crime, by comparing the relative performance of New York against the median city crime trend of the other nine of the ten largest cities for average decline in the seven "index" offenses.

[Insert Figure 8]

Using this strategy, what economists call a "difference-in-difference" approach, New York City shows about the same advantage in crime during the period of 50% expansion (21%) as during the period when police manpower dropped by 19% (23%). Does that mean that police numbers are irrelevant? An alternative explanation is that the cumulative effects of increased manpower may have lasted into the decade when force levels went down. This kind of long-term cumulative effect would be novel in the study of policing. But the high magnitude of effects one derives from any research strategy that attributes the city's distinctive drop to policing is also unprecedented.

There have been hopeful indications that so-called "hot spot" police interventions produce measurable reductions in crime, but a citywide crime reduction of 30 or 40% is vastly greater than any police impact estimates derived from rigorous evaluative research. So the scale of policing effects in evidence in New York (and perhaps in Los Angeles) is unproven but very encouraging.

The management contribution to the enhanced effectiveness of policing also seems obvious from the sheer size of total impact but has yet to be rigorously tested.

Because expansion of police has never before had the impact apparent in New York City, the way the police were managed must have contributed to the positive results.

But what is known about the contribution of aggressive and problematic elements of the New York policing efforts - the street stops and pat-downs targeted at the young men of color that are always close to the bull's-eye of proactive street policing? Many police believe these tactics reduce crime, but this faith, too, has not yet been rigorously tested.

There are also a number of labels used to describe styles of policing that clearly don't describe what happened in New York City. "Zero tolerance" has always been a slogan without definition in political discourse about policing. Police in New York did increase arrests for minor offenses but only where this was believed to prevent more serious crime. "Broken windows" policing as originally designed would have avoided pouring resources in the highest crime rate areas that became a central priority in New York's "hot spots" strategy. So the New York strategy did not fit the "broken windows" prescription either.

The next important steps in policy analysis are to rigorously field test the impact of additional manpower and some of the specific field techniques that have been part of the kitchen sink full of changes the New York police put in place. Then there should be trial and error adaptations to other urban settings.

#### Five Lessons

But even this early in the game, there are already five lessons from New York City that should have a significant influence on crime policy.

##### 1. Police Matter.

For at least a generation, the conventional wisdom in American criminal justice doubted the capacity of urban police to make a significant or sustained impact on the crime rates in cities. Powerful circumstantial evidence from New York City (and preliminary confirmation from Los Angeles) has already altered informed opinion. The details on cost-effectiveness and best tactics have yet to be established, but investments in policing apparently carry

at least as much promise as other branches of crime control in the United States.

2. The Irrelevance of Increased Incapacitation.

The supply-side policy tactics that have dominated crime control in the United States assume that high risk youth will become criminal offenders no matter what we do and that criminal offenders will continue to commit high rates of crime unless they are locked away. These supply-side theories are the central justification of the sevenfold expansion of imprisonment in the United States, and supply-side proponents were warning in the mid-1990s that cities like New York with high numbers of minority youth growing up in single-parent families would require massive new investments in prisons and juvenile facilities.

From this perspective, the New York Story is a game-changing example of effective crime control without additional incarceration. Police still catch criminals in New York City and prosecutors and judges send them to jail. But the city has reduced its most serious crime rate by 80% without any net increase in secure confinement. The central assumption of supply-side crime control has been

disproved because crime has been reduced without increasing incarceration.

If three or four fewer prisoners are the equivalent of one more uniformed police officer then 27,000 to 36,000 fewer prisoners could buy the peak period expansion of the New York City police department, and 18,000 fewer prisoners could finance the expansion of the police from the 1990 level to the current rate per 100,000. So the difference between New York City's incarceration trends and those of the rest of the nation have more than paid for the city's expanded police force.

### 3. Crime Control without Drug Control.

New York City has been the illicit drug use capital of North America for at least seven decades. By all accounts it continues to be. The widespread introduction of crack cocaine to the city in the 1980s was associated with sharp increases in homicide. The belief by the public and government officials that illegal drug sales and use was closely linked to urban violence was one of the animating theories for a drug war declared in the United States in the decade after 1985. From the late 1980s perspective, a major reduction in violence without massive reductions in



the sale and use of illegal drugs would be an impossible dream. But that's exactly what seems to have happened since 1990 in New York City.

Drug use appears to have stayed stable in New York City while crime rates dropped, whether the drug use indicator is overdose deaths, or hospital discharges for drug treatment or urine tests of criminal suspects. Indicators for all drugs other than cocaine stay stable for the entire period. For cocaine, drug use for the young does drop in the late 1990s, but the consistent pattern for older users shows that the change in age profile (a national trend) was not associated with cocaine becoming scarce or more expensive.

#### 4. The Poor Pay More and Get More from Crime Control

Both the costs and benefits of New York's crime control are spread unevenly over the city's neighborhoods and populations. The street stops, bullying and pretextual arrests that are the common tactics of aggressive street policing fall disproportionately on young men of color, in their own neighborhoods and in other parts of the city when they dare. So police aggressiveness is a very regressive tax. But the benefits of reduced crime also

disproportionately favor the poor, ironically the same young males with dark skins who suffer most from police aggression. About 65% of the reduction in homicides in New York were Black and Hispanic men between ages 15 and 44, a group which comprised only 13% of the population. The good news is that lower crime was the one public benefit of the last 20 years which had its greatest impact on the people who needed help the most. The bad news is that the physical and dignitary harms of police aggression also fall the hardest on those who can least afford more trouble from the government.

##### 5. The *Inessentiality* of Urban Crime

The contrast between the modest changes in the conditions of urban life in New York and the game-changing changes in its crime rates establishes one further point about crime in modern cities that applies to most cities and has nothing to do with determining the particular causes of New York's good news. What we know in 2010 is that most of the homicide and robbery in modern big cities isn't hardwired into the populations, cultures and institutions of these cities. We know this because serious crimes dropped by 80% without any of these conditions being transformed. So we don't have to change either the nature

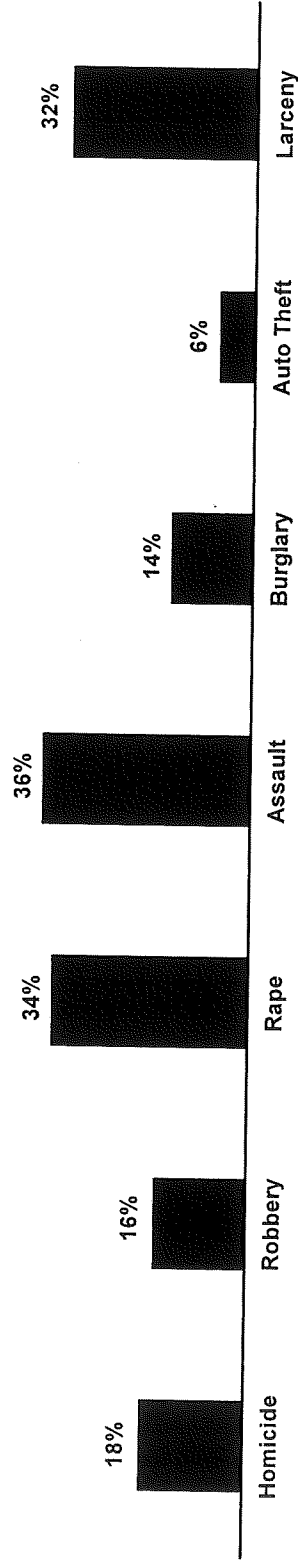
of cities or of urban populations to create homicide rates much closer to six per 100,000 than to New York's 30 per 100,000 in 1990. Of course even lower rates than 6 per 100,000 are desirable, but finding that 80% of the serious crime rates prevalent 20 years ago are not a necessary part of city life is beyond good news.

Since most big cities in the United States have already benefited from crime drops that were part of the 1990s New York decline, the additional declines that they can expect from catching up to New York will be closer to 50% than to 80%, and the shifts in policing and environmental controls that will best serve Baltimore or Cleveland may be different from the New York City portfolio. But modest changes can produce big effects in all cities. And if New York's rates drop further after 2009, that will also indicate that other cities should aim for greater reductions.

The two decades of New York experience after 1990 doesn't merely suggest that there is no deep structural linkage between urban cultural and social conditions and very high rates of violent crime, it proves the point. The steady, significant and cumulatively overwhelming crime

decline in New York is proof positive that cities as we know them need not be incubators of robbery, rape and mayhem. High rates of serious crime simply are not an essential part of urban living. If traditionally high rates of killings and robbery were essential to the fabric of American urban life, the 80% drop in New York that did happen couldn't happen. That is a fundamental surprise to many students of the American city, and the most hopeful insight of criminological science in a century.

Figure 1. New York City Crime Rate in 2009 as Percentage of 1990 Rate, Seven Index Offenses.



Source: New York City Police Department.

Table 1. Crime Rates in New York City, London, Sydney, and Tokyo, 2007 (Rate per 100,000).

	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Burglary	Auto Theft
<b>New York</b>	6	10.6	265	254	161
<b>London</b>	2.2	30.7	610	1,290	501
<b>Sydney (2006)</b>	1.5	51.4	159	1,008	461
<b>Tokyo</b>	1	1.8	4.7	137	12
<b>Toronto</b>	2	N.A.	133	362	279

Figure 2. Homicide Rates in Five Largest U.S. Cities, 1990 and 2007.

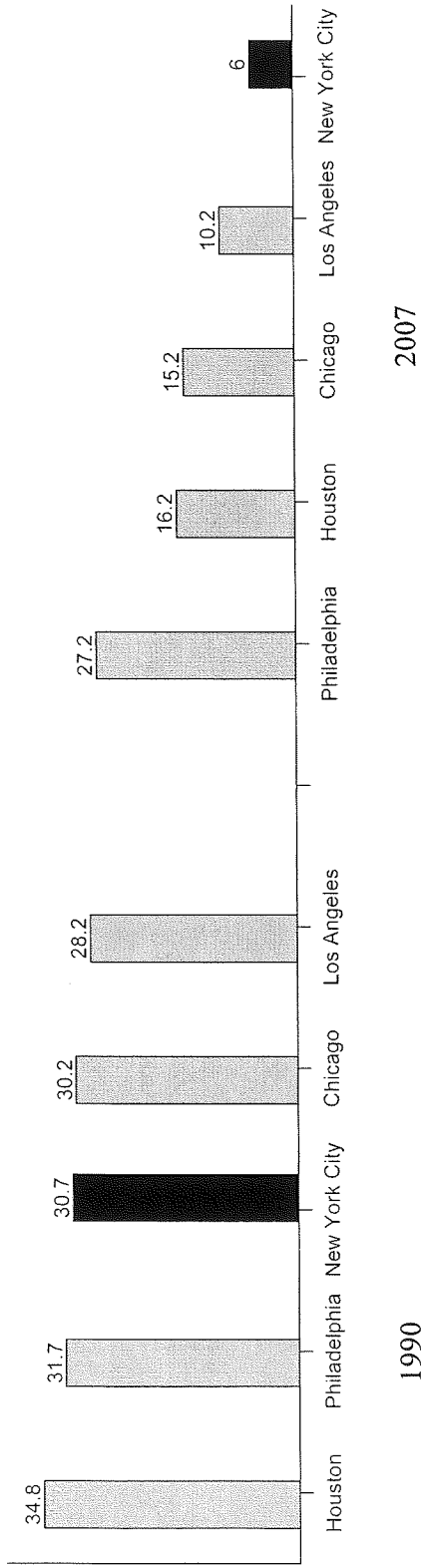
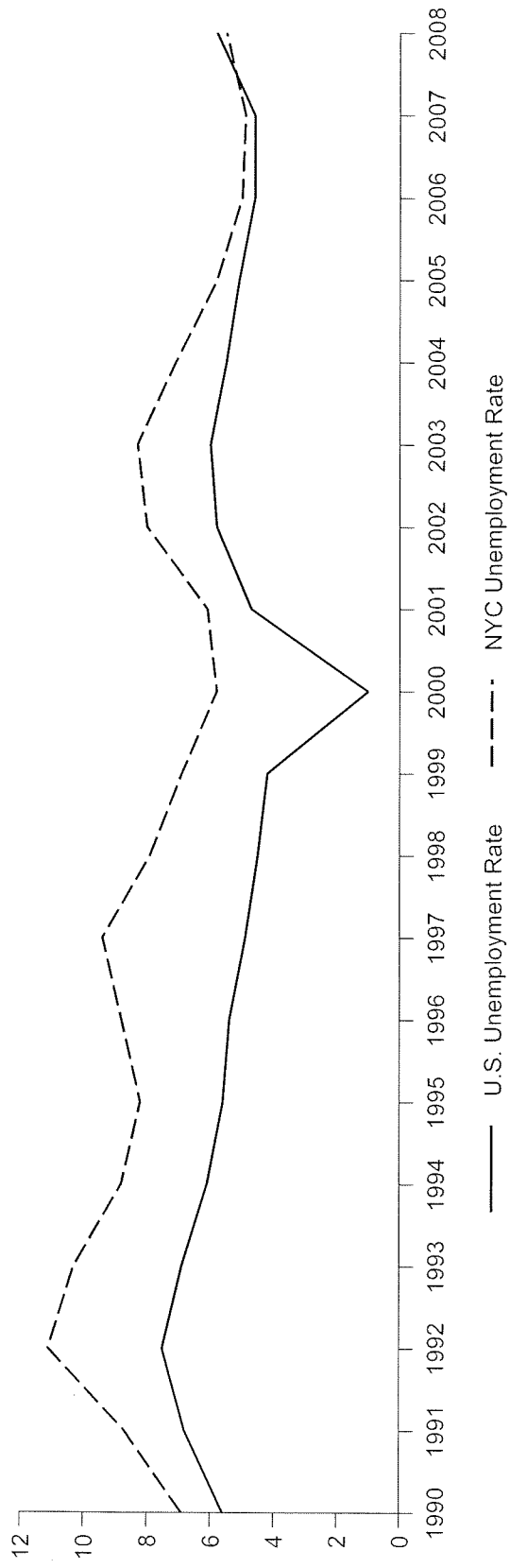


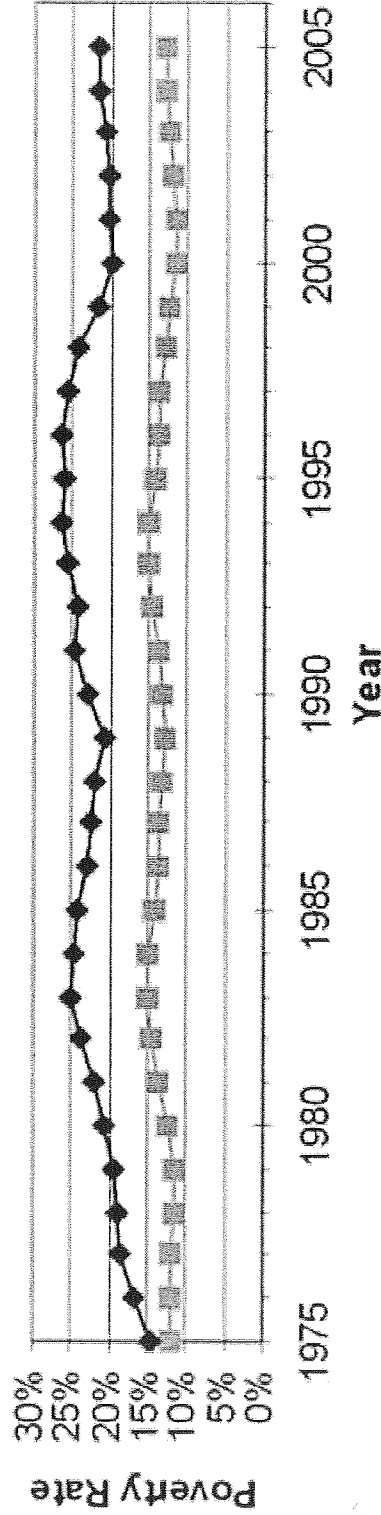
Figure 3. Unemployment Rate for Persons 16 and Over, New York City and United States 1990-2008.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics at <ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/lf/aat1.txt>



**Figure 4. Poverty Rates Since 1975  
United States and New York City**



\* Based on 2-year moving averages

Source: Current Population Survey (CPS), U.S. Census Bureau. New York City  
CPS tabulations performed by Community Service Society of New York.

Figure 5, Trends in Incarceration In Adults, New York City and the United States

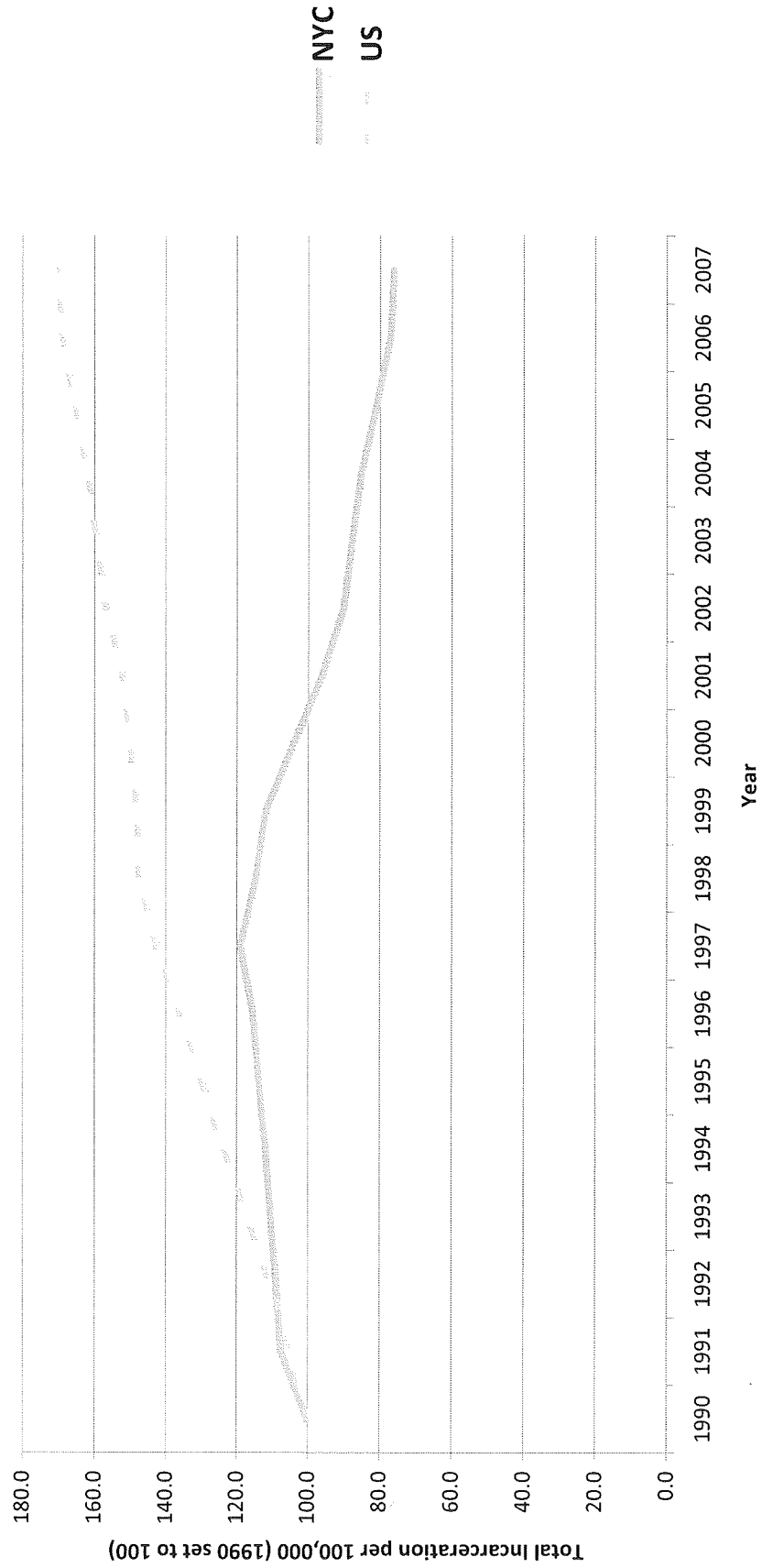


Figure 6. Drug Use Indicators in New York City, 1990-2006.

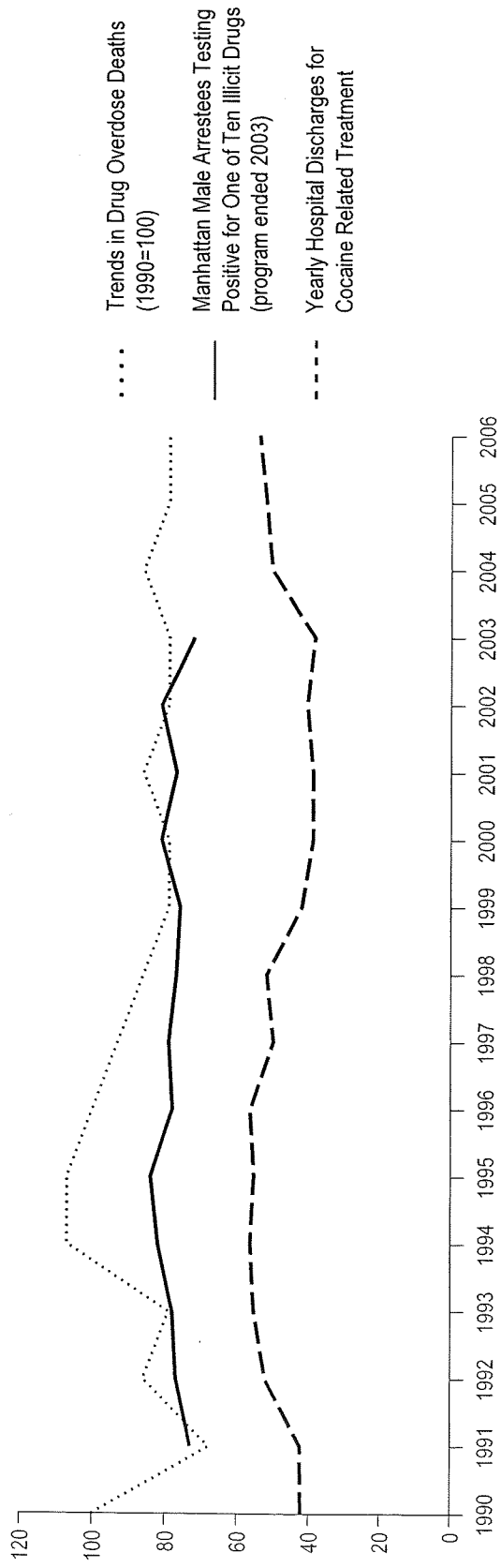


Figure 7. Trends in Police Manpower and Homicides, 1990-2007.

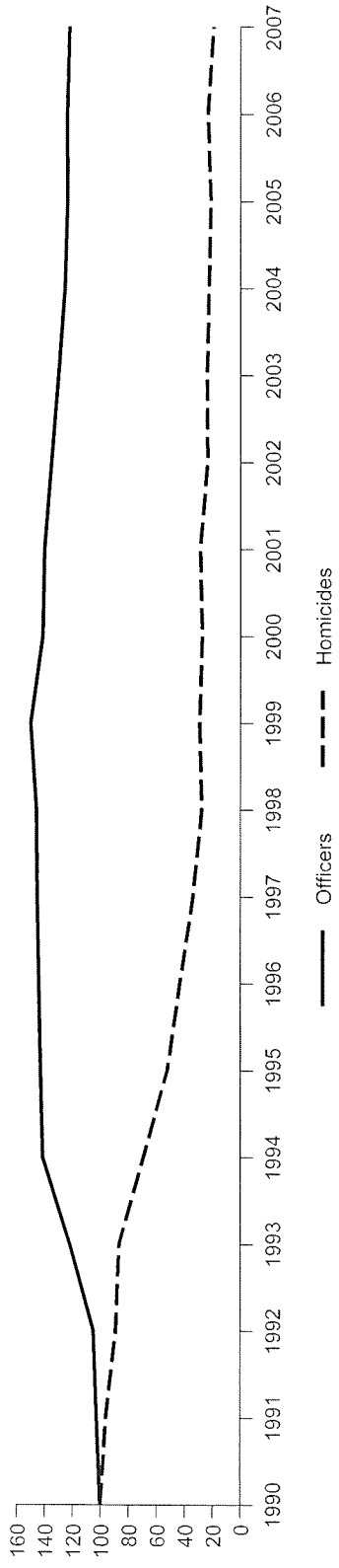
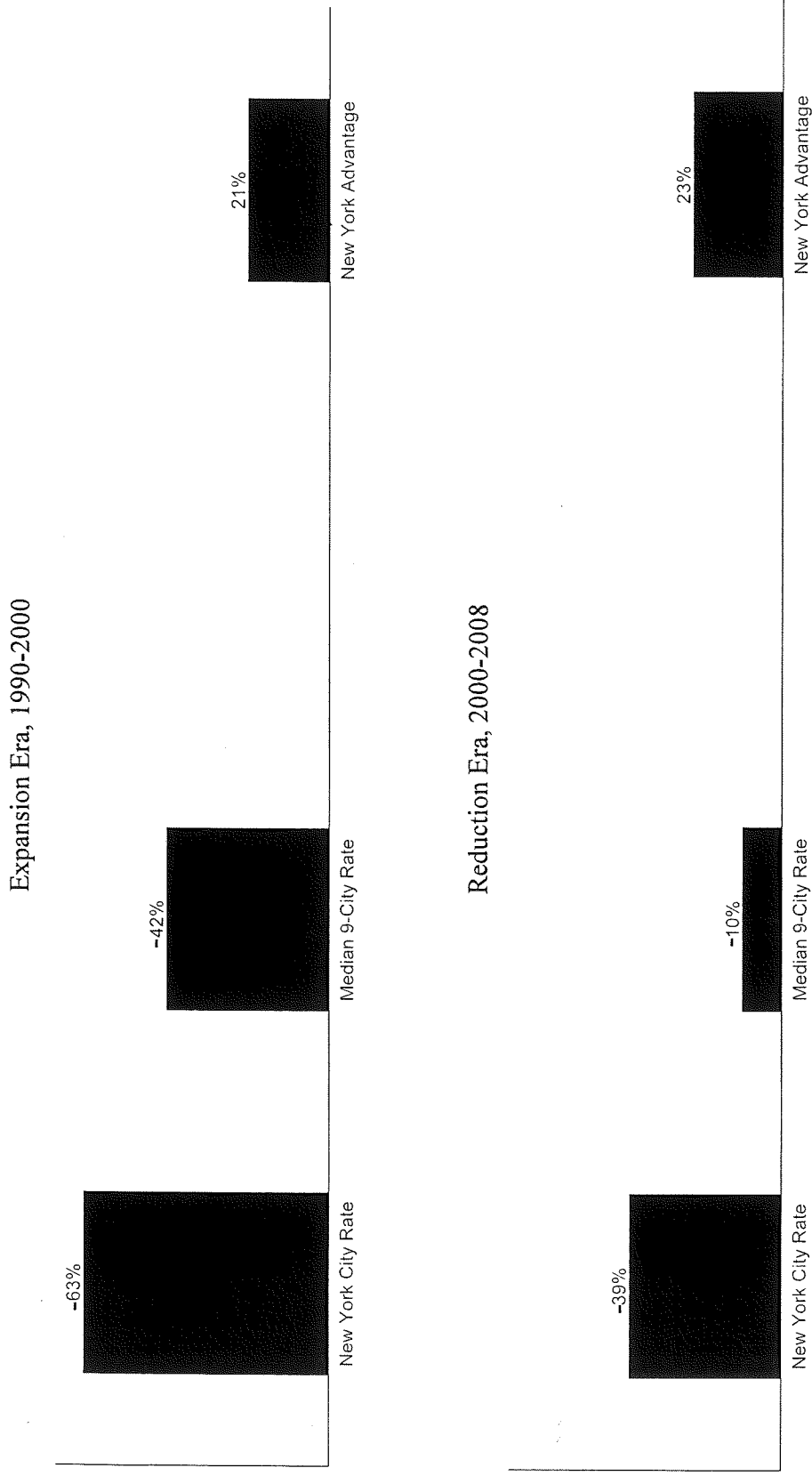


Figure 8. New York City Advantage over Median Crime Trends in Two Eras, Seven Index Crimes.



Source: Uniform Crime Reports