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## Opinion | NYC cut crime and grew; so can Memphis

**Bill Gibbons, Guest columnist** Published 12:00 p.m. CT May 16, 2018



(Photo: Thinkstock)

The meeting room at Columbia University in the heart of Manhattan was packed with parents and their children. We were there with our daughter, then a student at White Station High School in Memphis.

A Columbia official began his comments noting that, within just a few short years, Columbia had gone from the Ivy League school with the least number of applicants to the one with the most number of applicants for one reason: parents like us now felt it was safe for our kids to go to school in New York City.

That had not always been the case. There was a point when New York City was considered one of the most dangerous cities in America. The city was losing population, with surveys showing crime as a chief reason people were leaving. The population of the city dropped by almost a million people within a 10-year period.

Vincent Cannato wrote "[The Ungovernable City \(https://www.amazon.com/Ungovernable-City-Vincent-Cannato/dp/0465008445\)](https://www.amazon.com/Ungovernable-City-Vincent-Cannato/dp/0465008445)", which chronicles what many felt was the beginning of the end for New York. In 1990, a cover story in Time magazine featured "[The Rotting of the Big Apple \(http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19900917,00.html\)](http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19900917,00.html)".



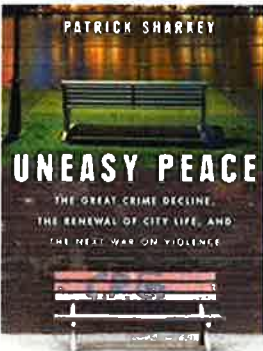
Time magazine 1990 (Photo: Time magazine)

By the early 1990's there was a true sense of urgency in New York, but the city turned a corner within a fairly short period of time. The terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, was the worst crime ever committed on American soil.

Yet, by then, on a day-to-day basis, New York had become one of our safest big cities. Crime has continued to drop dramatically in every major category. In 2017, the homicide rate was the lowest since the 1950's.

From 1995-2015, the population of New York City mushroomed by over 1.2 million people, accompanied by job growth and growth in the city's tax base. By 2017, New York had a record population of 8.6 million. Simply put: a dramatic drop in crime has spurred New York's growth.

How did New York City do it? In his recently published book, "[Uneasy Peace \(https://www.amazon.com/Uneasy-Peace-Divide-Renewal-Violence/dp/039360960X\)](https://www.amazon.com/Uneasy-Peace-Divide-Renewal-Violence/dp/039360960X)", New York University sociology professor Patrick Sharkey points to three keys to the turnaround in New York (as well as in a number of other cities), along with some warnings and limitations tied to each.



First, tougher sentencing laws in New York have resulted in simply incapacitating serious offenders for longer periods of time. However, Sharkey does not view this as a sustainable solution and feels it needs to be replaced with concerted efforts to break the cycle of entrenched urban poverty and reduce the pool of potential offenders.

Second, there has been a commitment to more police resources and use of those resources in a data-driven manner. Sharkey warns that this increased police presence should not be as "an occupying force" but rather as "guardians" committed to building and maintaining strong relationships with communities.

Third, citizens have become more involved, sending a clear message that the criminal element will not control their streets and neighborhoods. But Sharkey warns that most community-based efforts depend largely upon a limited number of committed, involved citizens who, over time, can "run out of steam." Structures must be in

Public spaces in New York have become safe again. The subway system is a much safer way to move throughout the city. Children feel safer in their schools and neighborhoods, with resulting improvements in student performance. And as Sharkey points out, while all New Yorkers (and those of us visiting) have benefited, it is lower income citizens who have benefited the most.

Numerous observers have noted that, once crime started dropping in New York, a positive domino effect occurred. Less crime meant more people on the streets, in the parks, and on the subways. In turn, that drove crime down even more.

Of course, there is still crime in New York City, but expectations have changed among both citizens and law enforcement. Crime is no longer acceptable or expected behavior.

Our daughter ended up at Columbia and stayed in New York City after graduation. Currently, she and her husband are proud residents. And she has witnessed up close the change in New Yorkers' reactions to crime.

One day upon leaving work in midtown Manhattan, she was the victim of a purse snatching. What happened next, though, reflects the change among New Yorkers. People around her began chasing after the purse snatcher. They got her purse back. A police officer escorted her to the subway station just to give her an extra level of comfort. We were grateful and impressed.

On another occasion, a man attempted to push open the door to her Brooklyn apartment. Before she could even get off the phone to 911, police officers were coming up the stairs. The next day, a police officer came back just to check on her. Once again, we were grateful and impressed.

In Memphis, we have leaders who understand that getting a handle on crime is the key to economic and population growth. We have a balanced Operation: Safe Community crime reduction plan that focuses on (1) reducing violent crime and (2) more citizen involvement. Throughout our community, we must have the same sense of urgency New Yorkers have demonstrated.

*Bill Gibbons is president of the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission and executive director of the University of Memphis [Public Safety Institute](http://www.memphis.edu/psi/) (<http://www.memphis.edu/psi/>).*



**Bill Gibbons** (Photo: University of Memphis)

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