A PUBLIC SAFETY AND POLICING PLAN FOR NYC’S NEXT MAYOR

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Introduction

In 2020, New York City saw the biggest one-year spikes in shootings and homicides—97% and 45%, respectively1—in more than a half-century; and 2021 is off to a discouraging start, as shootings across the city were up almost 42% through March 7.

While much of the most serious violence has been concentrated in a relative handful of the city’s already-struggling neighborhoods, a growing problem of public disorder seems to be hitting even the city’s most exclusive enclaves.

Crime control will likely prove one of the biggest challenges faced by the city’s next mayor, who will be tasked with positioning the five boroughs for a return to the pre-pandemic normal. Whether the city can achieve that sort of recovery is much less certain in light of the growth of remote work, which makes it possible for a great many New Yorkers to relocate and significantly reduce their cost of living (and increase their living space) without having to sacrifice their jobs.

The willingness of current residents to continue paying a premium to live within the city limits will depend largely on the degree to which they feel safe—not just where they live but where they work, where they find entertainment, and on the trains and buses that they ride. A recent Manhattan Institute (MI) survey found that “[n]early half of those who claim public safety as their top issue rate it poorly” and that “[r]esidents for whom public safety is a top priority are also more likely to say that they would prefer to leave the city if they could.”2 And, as MI’s Nicole Gelinas has noted, a regular MTA poll in October 2020 showed that “only 42% of riders said they felt safe from crime on subway trains, a huge decrease from the 67% who felt secure the previous year.”3

The city’s next mayor will have to commit not only to resecuring the city’s streets and subways but will also have to adopt a successful approach to tackling this challenge. To that end, this issue brief offers four recommendations that the city’s next mayor should consider incorporating into a comprehensive public safety improvement plan:

• Reinforce the ranks of the New York Police Department (NYPD) with a focus on attracting highly educated, motivated recruits.

• Recommit to a conception of community policing that addresses public disorder and other quality-of-life issues.

• Work diligently to address the misconceptions feeding legal cynicism—particularly in minority communities.

• Revamp the city’s approach to serious mental illness with an emphasis on more (and better) supervision.

A Public Safety and Policing Plan for NYC’s Next Mayor

1. Reinforce the ranks of the NYPD with a focus on attracting highly educated, motivated recruits.

Due to Covid-19, the NYPD canceled its March 2020 academy class. Throughout 2020—a year in which officers faced untold numbers of angry protesters, violent rioters, and emboldened looters—the department saw its senior ranks decline sharply as eligible officers filed for retirement at a much higher-than-normal rate. From January through September 2020, 72% more officers left the department than in the same period in 2019.4 The city council also passed a budget that significantly cut the NYPD’s funding, resulting in the cancellation of its July 2020 academy class.5

By October 2020, the number of uniformed officers within the department was down 7%,6 accelerating a preexisting and troubling national trend.7 Between cutting the July academy class and officer attrition (which may or may not continue at an elevated rate), the city will need to develop a plan to put more cops on the street—something that the most rigorous empirical
analyses tell us is one of the most impactful things that any city can do to reduce crime. As Rafael Mangual noted in a recent MI issue brief:

A robust body of research suggests that replenishing departments can and will have significant crime-reduction effects. Economists Jonathan Klick and Alexander Tabarrok found a strong causal connection between police presence and crime, showing that the latter declined when the former was boosted. In another study, Klick, along with criminologist John MacDonald and law professor Ben Grunwald, found that an increase in police patrols “decreased crime in adjacent city blocks by 43%–73%.” Criminologist Aaron Chalfin, along with law professor Justin McCrary, found “reduced victim costs of $1.63 for each additional dollar spent on police in 2010, implying that U.S. cities are under-policed.”

In addition to hiring more officers, the department should be working to maximize officer time on the street by diverting more administrative tasks to civilian employees.

Providing reinforcements to the NYPD—which will take a significant financial investment—may prove politically difficult, given the persistent constituency for “defunding” the police. One possible way to pursue plugging the hole in the NYPD is to deploy an experimental recruitment strategy to attract more highly educated officers who can be put on a fast track to fill investigative roles (which were hit particularly hard by the recent spike in retirements). This could serve two functions, the first of which—putting more cops on the street and more quickly filling the growing need for criminal investigators—is obvious. The second, which should help allay the concerns of some police critics, is illustrated by research suggesting that bringing more officers with college degrees or higher levels of educational attainment into a police department may help reduce use-of-force incidents and officer misconduct.

One way to structure a recruitment strategy along these lines—which, again, should be done as a small-scale experiment and evaluated before it is expanded—would be to model it after how the U.S. military incentivizes those with four-year degrees to serve in the armed forces: allowing these men and women to commission as officers places them on a higher pay scale and a professional track with more leadership opportunities, as well as a higher ceiling for promotion. Applying this approach to the NYPD would result in officer recruits with four-year degrees or higher (if they meet certain requirements on the written exam and in their academy performance—requirements that should be developed in partnership with the department) being paid at a higher rate and placed on a faster, more direct, route to the rank of detective.

Ultimately, how the city’s next mayor chooses to address the shortage of NYPD officers on the beat is less important than that the problem gets addressed—and quickly.

2. Recommit to a conception of community policing that addresses public disorder and other quality-of-life issues.

In addition to the best available evidence pointing to the conclusion that more police lead to less crime, a growing body of evidence seems to support the proposition that the degree to which police can reduce crime is at least partly dependent on the degree to which they are proactive—that is, the degree to which they work to suss out and prevent crime, rather than merely respond to calls for service. For example, consider a recent study by Harvard economists Roland Fryer and Tanaya Devi, which found that federal pattern-and-practice investigations in five American cities led to just under 900 additional homicides and about 34,000 additional felonies over a two-year period. Pattern-and-practice investigations are carried out by federal officials seeking to determine whether the departments subjected to them are systemically racist. What does this have to do with police proactivity? According to Fryer and Devi, the “leading hypothesis for why these investigations increase homicides and total crime is an abrupt change in the quantity of policing activity,” such as pedestrian stops. What might explain the connection between this decline in police activity and the federal investigations? In essence, the heightened scrutiny of investigators (and the implicit accusation undergirding it) seems to feed a sense of fear among officers that any mistakes made in the field will be responded to with unjustifiable harshness. That fear, in turn, dissuades certain kinds of police activity, with detrimental effects on crime.
Of course, establishing that police should be proactive doesn’t necessarily tell us how they should do so. The late George L. Kelling—a prominent criminologist, senior fellow at MI, and cocreator of the Broken Windows theory of policing—argued in his last article on community policing that the public safety gains made since the early 1990s “were achieved largely through dramatic innovations in policing, especially the adoption of an approach that,” among other things, “stressed order maintenance in communities.” “Community policing, properly understood,” Kelling continued, “reflects a department’s reorientation around public concerns.”

A recent MI survey shows that one in five New York voters is currently concerned about public safety more than anything else. More important, 68% of the respondents “somewhat” or “strongly” supported “using a community policing model, where police actively collaborate with a particular community and focus on disorder as well as on serious crime” (emphasis added).

Fortunately, there are good reasons to believe that these dual focuses will reinforce each other; by focusing on disorder, police often discover and prevent more serious crimes. One example that Kelling pointed to was that, when New York City’s transit police undertook to address fare evasion, they discovered that one out of every seven fare evaders was wanted on a warrant, while one out of 21 was carrying a weapon. Another example comes from Kelling’s earlier work with William Sousa, which found that “[t]he average NYPD precinct could expect to suffer one less violent crime for approximately every 28 additional misdemeanor arrests made.”

These findings are important because one of the rationales undergirding recent calls to shrink the footprint of urban police departments like the NYPD is that police resources are better spent on “serious” crime. This claim ignores the reality that serious crime can often be discovered or prevented by enforcement actions directed at quality-of-life offenses. There is another reason, however, that police may not want to ignore low-level quality-of-life offenses: a large body of empirical evidence that has long linked the public’s fear of crime more closely to public-facing disorder and incivility than to serious crime itself. Now that a substantial portion of the city’s taxpayers realize that they can be productive in home offices, a substantial uptick in their fear of crime may dissuade a great many of them from continuing to pay the substantial premium that one pays to live in New York (think income taxes, housing prices, and $6 coffee drinks).

3. **Work diligently to address the misconceptions feeding legal cynicism—particularly in minority communities.**

For a productive working relationship to exist between the NYPD and minority communities—particularly those most in need of police resources—a certain level of mutual trust must be achieved. This will be a challenge. Since 2014, a number of viral incidents of police uses of force—deadly force, in particular—against black suspects (including Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd) have led to mass protests, as well as episodes of rioting and looting in cities across the country. The past year seems to have seen more such unrest than any in recent memory. This sort of social unrest is particularly detrimental to minority communities. It also reflects a breakdown in trust between the police and the people in those communities.

The root of that distrust may be hard to pin down, but recent evidence suggests that a key driver may be the elevated rate of what researchers call “legal cynicism.” One example of legal cynicism comes from a 2016 study published in the *American Sociological Review*, which found that, in the wake of a viral incident of police use of force, black residents were significantly less likely to call 911. Additional evidence suggests that such cynicism might be driven at least in part by important misconceptions about the prevalence of police violence within communities of color. One example can be found in a 2016 Morning Consult poll in which twice as many black respondents reported worrying more about themselves or someone they knew becoming victims of police brutality than of gun violence in general. Such a sentiment is held in complete contradiction to what the available data tell us. A recent study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* put the odds of dying at the hands of police at one in 1,000 for black men. Those odds are dramatically lower than the odds of being killed by gun assault for Americans of all races—which, according to the National Safety Council, are one in 298. Given that black men
are more than 10 times more likely than their white counterparts to be the victim of a homicide, their risk of death at the hands of police is far lower than criminal homicide more generally.

While there is no doubt that police do sometimes engage in abusive behavior, the prevalence of the sort of misconceptions highlighted above does not serve anyone well—even less so if those misconceptions drive support for increasingly radical reform proposals that put public safety at risk. History tells us that the burdens of violent crime increases will fall disproportionately on minority communities. In New York City, 95% of shooting victims every year over the past decade have been black or Latino.

Understanding racial disparities in rates of criminal victimization and crime commission is a prerequisite to understanding disparities in rates of enforcement; the latter can be fully understood only in context—much of which is provided by the former. Honestly engaging with these statistical realities is a necessary first step toward building an all-too-important sense of mutual understanding between the police and communities of color, which, in turn, is the best basis for the sort of collaborative relationship that can help reduce violence in the communities that have been hardest hit by the recent crime wave.

4. Revamp the city’s approach to serious mental illness with an emphasis on more (and better) supervision.

Between Christmas Eve 2020 and Valentine’s Day 2021, at least six people were shoved onto the tracks of New York City subways. According to police, the alleged perpetrators “were all strangers with mental health issues.” In 2020, the NYPD reported 26 incidents of people being pushed in front of oncoming trains or onto the train tracks. That’s more than half the incidents that were reported in New York during 1975–91. A 1992 study found that during those 17 years, 49 incidents of subway pushings occurred in the city, victimizing 52 people. The study was able to acquire data on 20 of the 26 offenders who had been referred for psychiatric evaluation and treatment. It found that “19 (95%) of these offenders were psychotic, and 13 (65%) were homeless” and that most offenders had “extensive histories of psychiatric hospitalization and several prior arrests and convictions, often for violent crimes.”

These data make clear that the city’s current approach to serious mental illness puts New Yorkers at risk. The next mayoral administration should consider two policy proposals that can mitigate this risk.

First, the city needs to commit to increasing and improving the supervision of New Yorkers suffering from serious mental illness. More effective supervision would reduce the number of mentally ill people “falling through the cracks,” to use a phrase that seems to have been uttered with increasing frequency in recent years. City government spends more than $1 billion on a sprawling array of mental health services. Despite those efforts and numerous and expensive programs run by the state Office of Mental Health, every year tens of thousands of mentally ill New Yorkers receive no treatment for their condition. A greater proportion of public mental health resources should be directed toward the neediest cases that are most likely to be involved in violent incidents such as subway pushings.

Inpatient psychiatric care may be provided as a first step and, on a short-term basis, in a general hospital ward run by NYC Health + Hospitals—a city agency—or a private nonprofit system like Montefiore. New York has lost more than 100 psychiatric beds in general hospitals in recent years, and Health + Hospitals is bearing an increased share of the inpatient burden. The ongoing pandemic exacerbated pressures on the inpatient system as hospitals repurposed psychiatric beds for Covid-related needs. The next administration should explore how it can provide incentives to nonprofit systems to cease reducing their bed counts, and it should also ensure that Health + Hospitals has the financial support that it needs (even if that means diverting resources from other initiatives such as ThriveNYC) to pick up the slack.

On a longer-term basis, supervision will have to be provided in a community setting in which patients will be stabilized both before and after they enter a state of crisis of the sort that would necessitate hospitalization. Examples of such community health services include Fountain House, probation-style programs like mental health courts, and Kendra’s Law (which provides for outpatient civil commitment).
Second, the next mayor will have to come to terms with the reality that the NYPD is, at least for the foreseeable future, going to be fielding a large number of calls related to serious mental illness. A recent ABC News story reported that the NYPD currently fields an average of 175,000 calls for “emotionally disturbed persons” annually. The city’s next administration ought to consider focusing resources on the development of an intensive training program aimed at a smaller number of NYPD officers who show an aptitude for, and interest in, dealing with such calls and tasking them with responding to high-priority calls while pairing other officers with trained civilians when responding to lower-priority calls.
Endnotes


5 NYC Office of the Mayor, “In the Face of an Economic Crisis, Mayor de Blasio Announces Budget That Prioritizes Safety, Police Reform, Youth Services, and Communities of Color,” June 30, 2020. The effective cut was less than the $1 billion announced by the mayor, according to a Citizens Budget Commission (CBCNY) analysis; see “Was the NYPD Budget Cut by $1 Billion?” CBC (blog), Aug. 13, 2020. Nevertheless, the impact of the cut on the department’s size is, and will be, significant.

6 Parascandola, “ ’Blue Flight’ Retirements Thinning NYPD Ranks.”

7 A sizable majority (63%) of police department respondents to a survey administered by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) stated that applications had decreased over the last five years. See “The Workforce Crisis, and What Police Agencies Are Doing About It,” PERF, September 2019. The survey also showed that more than a third of respondents (36%) characterized the decrease as “significant,” as opposed to “slight.”


16 Hendrix, “Taking the City’s Temperature,” 9.

17 Ibid., 12.

18 Kelling, “Community Policing, Rightly Understood.”


21 As noted earlier in this paper, MI’s survey “Taking the City’s Temperature” also found that residents who gave top priority to public safety were “more likely to say that they would prefer to leave the city if they could.”


24 Ibid.


28 See, e.g., Corinne A. Riddell et al., “Comparison of Rates of Firearm and Nonfirearm Homicide and Suicide in Black and White Non-Hispanic Men, by U.S. State,” Annals of Internal Medicine 168, no. 10 (May 2018): 712: “In 2016, non-Hispanic black men were nearly 10.4 times more likely than non-Hispanic white men to die by homicide in the United States.”

29 NYPD, “Crime and Enforcement Activity Reports.”


31 Ibid.


34 “Serious Mental Illness Among New York City Adults,” NYC Vital Signs 14, no. 2 (June 2015).


