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Master Talk:

Assessing the Crime Decline: Did BIDs Play a Role?

Jeremy Travis

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The International Downtown Association

2013 World Congress

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

The City University of New York

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Dear colleagues:

I am delighted to appear before you this morning, for two purposes. First, on behalf of the faculty, students, staff and alumni, I wish to welcome The International Downtown Association to John Jay College of Criminal Justice. We are a unique educational institution – the only college in the world devoted to the mission of “Educating for Justice.” As you spend time on our campus today, I encourage you to speak with some of our 15,000 students, interact with our faculty, and experience the intellectual and global reach of our educational programs. As a community that shares your “passion for cities,” we welcome you to our campus.

The second purpose of my remarks is to offer a brief Master Talk on the topic of crime – more specifically, to draw some connections between the phenomenon of crime, recent trends in crime around the world, and the role of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and other Public Private Partnerships that are represented at your conference.

Let’s start with the remarkable news that has certainly caught your attention: all over the world, in almost every country, we are experiencing significant reductions in crime. Let me be specific. In America, rates of violent crime started to decline in 1991 and have fallen by about a third since then. In Great Britain, the crime rate started dropping around 1995, and murder rates started to fall in the mid-2000s. In France, property crime rates have fallen by a third since 2001. Since 1995, the murder rate in Estonia has dropped by 70 percent.

This remarkable drop in crime has been particularly sharp in large metropolitan areas. In America, the number of violent crimes has fallen overall by 32% since 1990, but in the biggest cities, the drop has been by 64%. For some crimes, the numbers are simply staggering. In 1997, some 400,000 cars were reported stolen in England and Wales; in 2012, just 86,000 cars were reported stolen. In New York City, the number of car thefts has fallen by 93% over the past 20 years.¹

¹ The Economist, “Falling Crime: Where have all the burglars gone?” July 20, 2013.

In the time allotted this morning, I will not be able to catalogue all the hypotheses that have been advanced to explain this important phenomenon and these trends. Some experts cite improvements in policing; others look at increased rates of imprisonment. Some cite demographic trends; others cite the advent of legal abortions or the changes in exposure to environmental toxins such as lead. Still others point to the shifts in the population profile of urban areas as the middle class has returned to city life; others call our attention to the many ways that modern technology has reduced opportunities for criminal activity.

This debate will rage on for years to come in the academic community, but one thing is certain: no single answer offers a full explanation. There is a temptation, one that we New Yorkers have fallen into, to say that all crime reductions can be attributed to the work of the police. Yet this cannot be the sole answer to our quest for explanation. Let me cite one example: Did car thefts drop by 93% in New York City solely because of something the NYPD did? Do we give no credit to car manufacturers that have made it exceedingly difficult to break into a car? Do we give no credit to Congress that mandated car parts to be identified with distinctive markings to deter people from selling auto parts of stolen cars? So while I believe that effective policing can reduce crime – and can point to strong experimental research showing that certain crime tactics are very effective at reducing crime – I would also urge caution, and ask us to remember that criminal behavior is in significant part situational and that broad societal changes can, and do, influence anti-social behavior.

This observation brings me to the topic of this conference – the role of Business Improvement Districts in promoting safety. Over the thirty years that I have been involved in issues of crime policy in New York City, I think we have missed one of the most important elements in the formula that has made New York the safest large city in America. The Business Improvement District movement in NYC has been an enormous success. By one count there are 67 BIDs in NYC, which invest over \$100 million in programs and services for neighborhoods throughout the city's five boroughs.²

² NYC.gov, "What is a BID?" 2013, http://www.nyc.gov/html/sbs/html/neighborhood_development/bids.shtml.

Although I have not seen an exact count, my guess is that each of these BIDs has also sponsored programs designed to promote public safety. Many of them have hired community safety officers. Many have worked with the corporate security officers of the participating businesses to improve coordination on crime prevention strategies. All of them, by promoting economic development, tourism, and activities that bring people back to the downtown areas, are contributing to the activities that have been demonstrated as promoting public safety.

Four years ago, the noted policing scholar George Kelling – the co-author, with James Q. Wilson of the 1982 ground-breaking article entitled “Broken Windows” – addressed the question that has so fascinated criminologists and proud New Yorkers: Why has crime fallen so much faster and more steeply in New York City, when compared with other American cities? He agrees that policing has made a difference, but offers this conclusion that should interest the attendees at this conference: “As soon became clear, sporadic police programs weren’t enough. Only when a wide range of agencies and institutions began to work on restoring public order did real progress begin.”³ Professor Kelling then cites the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation, the Grand Central Partnership, and the BIDs from around the city that were developing similar approaches to public order. In Kelling’s view – and mine – the pioneers who created these Public-Private Partnerships, and others who mobilized community capacity to reclaim public spaces – are every bit as much the heroes of the New York City crime decline narrative as are the better known Police Commissioners Bratton and Kelly.

In reviewing the global phenomenon of downward trends in crime, a recent issue of the Economist makes this provocative observation about the future: noting that policing is still improving, that drug consumption continues to fall, that the recent economic recession has not triggered a rise in crime, the magazine posits that “the period of rising crime from the 1950s through to the 1980s looks increasingly like an historical anomaly.”⁴ Even with this optimistic prediction, the challenge facing the urban centers of the world is how to continue to bring crime rates down. Too many people still live in

³ George L. Kelling, “How New York Became Safe: The Full Story.” City Journal, July 17, 2009.

⁴ The Economist, 2013.

fear. Too many young people are involved in groups engaged in violence. Too many families are marked by violence, particularly against women and children. We clearly need to accelerate the recent downward trends in crime, and focus on the pockets of criminal activity that remain. These concentrations of crime may be found far from the downtown business areas, but their existence threatens the overall vitality of an urban center nonetheless. So the challenge is to refocus, and recommit, but to remember the important lesson that promoting public safety is everyone's business, including the Business Improvement Districts, because it really promotes the health of a community.

In reflecting on the crime decline, and the current political stalemate in our nation's capital, I find myself attracted to the analysis of urban policy found in the *The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros Are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy*, by Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley. As you certainly know, they argue that cities and metropolitan areas are becoming the leaders in the nation by experimenting, taking risks, and making hard choices. I can think of no area where our cities have more potential for leadership than the public safety domain. And I firmly believe that Public Private Partnerships, such as those represented in this room, have the potential to demonstrate that we can significantly improve the safety of the public. If we do, these vital urban centers will continue to flourish – economically, culturally, socially, educationally – in short, in all the ways we believe possible in our “passion for cities.”