

The Tipping Point

Some new ideas in crime prevention have implications for schools.

By Malcolm Gladwell

(Adapted with permission from The New Yorker, June 3, 1996)

East New York is the home of the Seventy-Fifth Precinct, a 5.6-square-mile tract where some of the poorest people in the city live. East New York is not a place of office buildings or parks and banks, just graffiti-covered bodegas and hair salons and auto shops. It is an economically desperate community destined, by most accounts, to get more desperate in the years ahead — which makes what has happened there over the past two and a half years all the more miraculous.

Today, New York has a city-wide violent-crime rate that ranks it 136th among major American cities, on a par with Boise, Idaho. And nowhere have the decreases been sharper than East New York. On the streets of the Seventy-Five today, it is possible to see signs of everyday life that would have been unthinkable in the early nineties. There are now ordinary people on the streets at dusk — small children riding their bicycles, old people on benches and stoops, people coming out of the subways alone.

So what accounts for the drop in crime rate? According to William J. Bratton, until recently the police commissioner, new policing strategies made the difference. “It’s aggressive policing,” he says. “it’s a no-nonsense attitude.” In the Seventy-Five, there is a team of officers who go around and break up the groups of young men who congregate on street corners, drinking, getting high, and playing dice — and so remove what was once a frequent source of violent confrontations. Streamlined internal procedures mean that the police can now move against drug-selling sites in a matter of days, where it used to take weeks.

All the changes make good sense. But how does breaking up dice games and streamlining bureaucracy cut murder

rates by two-thirds? The size of the gap between the scale of the policing changes and the size of the decrease in crime suggests that violent crime doesn’t behave the way we expect it to behave. It suggests that we need a new way of thinking about crime, which is why it may be time to turn to an idea that has begun to attract serious attention in the social sciences — the idea that social problems behave like infectious agents.

What if homicide, which we often casually refer to as an epidemic, actually *is* an epidemic, and moves through populations the way the flu bug does? Would that explain the rise and sudden decline of homicide?

Epidemics have their own set of rules. Suppose for example, that one summer 1000 tourists come to Manhattan from Canada carrying an untreatable strain of 24-hour flu. The virus has a 2% infection rate, which is to say that one out of every 50 people who come into close contact with someone carrying it catches the bug himself. Let’s say that 50 is also exactly the number of people the average Manhattanite comes into contact with every day.

What we have, then, given the recovery rate, is a disease in equilibrium. Every day, each carrier passes on the virus to a new person. And the next day, those 1000 newly-infected people pass it on to another 1000 people, so that throughout the rest of the summer and the fall the flu chugs along at a steady but unspectacular clip.

Then comes Christmas. Instead of 50 people a day, the average Manhattanite now has close contact with, say, 55 people a day. That may not sound like much of a difference, but for our flu bug it is critical. All of a sudden, one out of every 10 people with the virus will pass it on not just to one new person but to two. The 1000 carriers run into 55,000 people now, and at a

2% infection rate, that translates into 1100 new cases. By Christmas, Manhattan has a full-blown flu epidemic on its hands.

When it comes to fighting epidemics, small changes can have huge effects.

Tomato Ketchup in a bottle — None will come and then a lot’ll.

In the language of epidemiologists, 50 is the “tipping point” in this epidemic, the point at which an ordinary and stable phenomenon — a low-level flu outbreak — can turn into a public-health crisis. Every epidemic has its tipping point, and to fight an epidemic you need to understand what that point is.

What does this have to do with the murder rate in Brooklyn? Quite a bit, as it turns out, because in recent years social scientists have started to apply the theory of epidemics to human behaviour. Now, knowledge of the tipping point is used to attack, for example, “white flight” from neighbourhoods or drive-by shootings.

Some of the best new ideas in preventing violence borrow heavily from the principles of epidemic theory. Take, for example, the “broken window” hypothesis that has been used around the country as the justification for cracking down on “quality of life” crimes like public urination.

In a famous experiment, a car was parked on a street in Palo Alto where it sat untouched for a week. An identical car was parked in a roughly comparable neighbourhood in the Bronx, only in this case the licence plates were removed and the hood was propped open. Within a day, it was stripped. And, as soon the experimenters smashed one of the Palo Alto car’s windows, that car was destroyed within a few hours. The broken window was the tipping point.

(Mr. Gladwell is a native of Elmira, Ontario.)