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## *Book Review*

# **Book Review – *Back from the Brink: Inside the NYPD and New York City’s Extraordinary 1990s Crime Drop***

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**Book:** Peter Moskos, *Back from the Brink: Inside the NYPD and New York City’s Extraordinary 1990s Crime Drop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025). ISBN: 978-0-19-779777-8 (hardcover).

**Keywords:** Policing, Crime Reduction, NYPD, CompStat, Broken Windows Policing, Police Reform, Organizational Change, New York City, United States.



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## Central Argument

Peter Moskos's *Back from the Brink* examines New York City's dramatic decline in crime during the 1990s and challenges explanations that give insufficient attention to policing. Moskos does not argue that poverty, inequality, demographics, drug markets, or other structural conditions are irrelevant. Rather, he questions whether these factors alone can explain the timing and magnitude of New York's decline. His central argument is that changes within the New York City Police Department (NYPD), particularly leadership, organizational culture, accountability, deployment, management, and a sustained focus on crime reduction were important contributors to the city's transformation. As Moskos observes, "Within academia, there is a strong reluctance to credit policing for the crime decline" (p. xi). His goal is to bring police organizations back into the discussion of why crime changes.

## Structure and Methodology

The book examines the NYPD's transformation from a period of organizational crisis to one of reform and declining crime rates. Moskos begins by establishing the severity of New York's crime problem and the institutional weaknesses within the department. Homicides increased from 390 in 1960 to more than 1,800 in 1980. Fiscal pressures further weakened the department: in 1975, approximately 5,129 officers were laid off, nearly one-fifth of the NYPD (pp. 1, 4). Former officers describe an organization characterized by low morale, weak accountability, and bureaucratic inertia. Jack Maple recalled that "No one cared. Crime wasn't addressed in a systematic way. People were without hope" (p. 21).

The book then turns to reform, including changes in the subway system and Times Square and the leadership of William Bratton. Bratton defined the department's mission as "to fight crime, fear of crime, and disorder" (Moskos 154). CompStat became central to this approach by requiring officers to identify crime patterns, explain their responses, and demonstrate results. Moskos also examines Broken Windows policing, particularly enforcement of disorder in the subway system. Following its implementation, subway felonies began declining (p. 77). Rather than attributing New York's transformation to a single policy, Moskos emphasizes the interaction of leadership, management, accountability, deployment, and policing strategy.

Methodologically, the book relies heavily on interviews and oral histories involving police officers, commanders, prosecutors, journalists, and other participants. This approach allows Moskos to examine organizational culture and implementation in ways that crime statistics alone cannot capture.

## Contribution to the Literature

One of the book's most important contributions is its effort to place policing more prominently in debates over crime reduction. Much criminological and sociological research emphasizes poverty, inequality, unemployment, family instability, and social disorganization as explanations for crime. Moskos instead asks why crime can decline rapidly even when some of these conditions remain unchanged.

Moskos uses New York's experience to challenge explanations that primarily point to broader social conditions. He acknowledges that demographic, economic, and social factors may have played a role, but argues that they do not fully explain how quickly or how dramatically crime declined. His analysis therefore shifts attention toward the police organization itself, particularly the ways leadership, accountability, management, and deployment can influence police behavior. The significance of his argument is not that policing alone explains New York's crime decline, but that organizational change should be taken seriously as part of the explanation.

The book also stands out for its use of oral histories. Moskos draws on interviews with officers, commanders, prosecutors, journalists, and others involved in New York's crime decline. These firsthand accounts help show how leadership, organizational culture, morale, and changes within the department actually played out; things that crime statistics alone cannot fully capture.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The greatest strength of *Back from the Brink* is its focus on the organizational side of policing. Moskos does not simply credit Bratton or CompStat for New York's transformation. Instead, he shows how leadership, accountability, management, deployment, and institutional culture came together to change how police officers worked. This makes the book especially useful for understanding how police reform actually happens in practice.

Its main limitation is the difficulty of establishing causation. The fact that police reforms and declining crime occurred at the same time does not necessarily mean that the reforms caused the decline. New York was also experiencing changes in demographics, drug markets, incarceration, economic conditions, and other social factors. Moskos considers some of these alternative explanations, but he does not systematically test them against his argument. Comparative research involving cities with different levels and types of police reform could have provided stronger evidence for his causal claims.

The use of oral histories presents a related limitation. Firsthand accounts provide valuable insight into what happened within the department, but participants may interpret events differently in light of the eventual success of the reforms. Officers and administrators who were directly involved may also place greater emphasis on their own contributions. For this reason, the interviews are most convincing when considered alongside independent quantitative and comparative evidence.

### **Significance and Future Research**

*Back from the Brink* is particularly valuable because it connects the practical realities of police management with broader debates about crime and public safety. For police leaders and practitioners, the book highlights the importance of organizational culture, accountability, leadership, and effective management. For scholars, it provides a practitioner-centered account that can be evaluated alongside competing explanations for New York's crime decline. For students, it offers a concrete case for examining how institutional reform can influence policing and public safety.

Moskos's argument also opens several avenues for future research. Comparative studies should examine whether reforms similar to those used in New York produced comparable results in other police departments and under different political and social conditions. Researchers should also examine these reforms separately, including CompStat, Broken Windows policing, leadership changes, accountability measures, deployment strategies, and increased police resources, rather than treating them as one unified approach. Future research should move beyond a simple opposition between policing and structural explanations by examining how police organizations interact with demographics, drug markets, economic conditions, incarceration, and community characteristics.

### **Conclusion**

*Back from the Brink* makes an important contribution to the study of policing by challenging the tendency to view police departments primarily as responders to broader social conditions. Moskos's strongest contribution is not definitive proof that NYPD reforms caused New York's crime decline, but his demonstration that organizational change deserves a more prominent place in explanations of crime reduction. By examining leadership, accountability, management, deployment, and institutional culture, he shows how changes within a police organization can shape the way officers respond to crime.

Ultimately, Moskos raises a question that extends beyond New York: what organizational conditions allow police departments to reduce crime effectively and sustain those gains? Answering that question requires attention not only to policing strategies but also to the institutions, incentives, and organizational practices through which those strategies are implemented. In that respect, *Back from the Brink* remains a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary policing.

### **Authors**

Grant Li and Enoch Yu are Stevens Institute of Technology students studying AI and Robotics and serve as research assistants to Dr. Derek Levine. Their work focuses on technology and public policy, and both contribute to academic conferences and Dr. Levine's forthcoming 2027 book on institutional determinants of sustained U.S. and Chinese leadership in artificial intelligence.

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