

[Can gang crime be stopped?](#) [1]

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Bill Bratton, arguably the world's most successful police chief ? he was able to reduce crime significantly in New York, Boston and Los Angeles ? spoke in London this week on the subject of gang crime. A good place to talk about it. Some 22% of London's violent crime is gang-related, along with 10% or so of all London crime in general. It could be worse. The US, says Bratton, is dealing with its fourth generation of latino gang problems and its third generation of black gang problems. It is estimated that there are 400 gangs with 40,000 members in LA, which has a population of around 4,000,000 people. The good news for us is that the UK is experiencing only its first generation of serious gang crime. So we can learn from other people's mistakes and successes.

Bratton, who is advising the UK government on policing and crime, has always maintained that you cannot arrest your way out of crime, in particular gang crime. There aren't enough officers, courts or prisons. And responding to crime after the fact is not the best way to make people safer: you need to work out how to stop crime happening in the first place. For that, says Bratton, the police have to partner with the local community - with schools, health providers, housing departments, welfare agencies, local community leaders and everyone else. It's a big job, but it works. A housing department, for example, might be able to save a young person from getting trapped in a gang by simply moving their family, if they agree, to a new area. You have to think creatively.

Doing just that led to a reduction of violent crime in Los Angeles ? where half the violent crime was once attributed to gangs ? and a fall in murders by more than half. And, says Bratton, his community policing approach created better race relations and much better relations between the police and the public. It's often called the 'broken window' approach: yes, the police should have zero tolerance of serious crime, but they should not tolerate petty crime that seriously affects the quality of life and the local environment that people have to live in. So fix the broken windows, clean up the graffiti, and you're sending out a signal from local people about how they are prepared to live and what they are not willing to put up with.

Will this approach work in the UK, where policing is very different? Regrettably, the recent spate of anti-terrorist legislation that gave the police draconian powers of stop, search and arrest made them seem more like the enemy of the public than their allies. Give police officers power and they will use it, whether it is appropriate and proportionate or not. Especially if you incentivise them to make more arrests and get more convictions. It is high time that the police became part of the community again, rather than officious controllers. Maybe the new wave of elected police commissioners will provide the opportunity for fresh leadership, fresh organisation, and fresh ideas.

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