

Book Notes

UNEASY PEACE: THE GREAT CRIME DECLINE, THE RENEWAL OF CITY LIFE, AND THE NEXT WAR ON VIOLENCE

by Patrick Sharkey

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While the US saw a historic low in violent crime in 2014, the nation is experiencing an “uneasy peace,” according to sociologist Patrick Sharkey. For more than two decades, violence has been on the decline in American cities. And while a portion of this reduction can be explained by policing and incarceration, the diminished crime rate is largely attributable to other identifiable phenomena, such as community engagement and greater neighborhood integration along socioeconomic lines. At the same time, the methods and social costs of the law and order approach, including yawning inequalities, militarization of law enforcement, mass incarceration, and police brutality, have become increasingly visible and intolerable to the public. The US is, therefore, at a crossroads, Sharkey contends: crime-fighting strategies that began with the Safe Streets and Crime Control Act of 1968 must now give way to a new way of thinking about public space and its protection, along with meaningful investment in city infrastructure, human services, and education.

In his new book, *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence*, Sharkey builds on his prior research on the effects of exposure to community violence on academic performance and the achievement gap by using David Diamond’s predator stress framework. Diamond, a neuroscientist, demonstrated that the presence of a potential threat—a cat allowed to roam throughout a lab where rats were kept in cages—evoked an extended stress response that interfered with learning and with performance of previously mastered tasks. Hypothesizing that high levels of community violence constitute predator stress for young people, Sharkey reanalyzed data from the Chicago Longitudinal Cohort Study for predator stress. By overlaying police calls on academic performance records, Sharkey found that children lost the equivalent of two years of schooling on their test scores following exposure to violent crime in their neighborhood. The loss was greater for students who lived closer to where a homicide took place and for those who were tested soon after a violent episode.

Surprised by the magnitude of these effects, Sharkey undertook similar analyses with a number of extant data sets. His results and those of other researchers were consistent. For example, Gershenson and Tekin found that

students who lived within five miles of a shooting by the Beltway Sniper in 2002 were 5–9 percent less likely to reach proficiency on English and math assessments. Like Sharkey, these researchers found the effects of proximity were much greater for children in under-resourced schools compared to children in suburban schools.

It is important to note, as Sharkey does, that not all exposure to violence in the community stems from street crime; young men of color, in particular, are also at risk of police brutality. Records of stop-and-frisk stops, police reports, dash and body cam video, and court records show pervasive police intimidation and verbal abuse as well as physical assault. Readily available videos show “a man being choked to death, another man being shot while attempting to flee, or a twelve-year-old boy being shot while playing in a park reveal very clearly the extreme version of what is possible for young men of color in the United States” (p. 118) at the hands of police. Thus, Sharkey argues, as “a potential target and a potential suspect” (p. 87), urban youth, especially Black boys, face extensive predator stress that explains a portion of school performance as well as the achievement gap.

Exposure to community violence does not make children less smart, Sharkey says, although children in urban schools continue to score lower on standardized tests. Instead, each instance of violence takes a toll on students’ ability to perform for a time. Analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress data found that the greatest increase in scores over time occurred in states where violence has decreased the most, such as California, and there were decreases in states where violence has remained steady or even increased, such as Oklahoma. Thus, while the great crime decline has not reversed educational inequality, improved safety has contributed to academic achievement, a trend consistent with findings from biological studies.

Under-resourced schools are one facet of what Sharkey calls “abandonment policies” (p. 129), the absence of funding for urban infrastructure and essential services. He powerfully illustrates this with his account of the 1977 New York City blackout caused by the physical collapse of the city’s electrical grid. Complete darkness at the height of summer heat exposed the dangerous fragility of urban infrastructure; nearly four thousand individuals were arrested for looting and arson during the blackout. Decades of abandonment are neither an accident nor the unintended consequence of well-meaning policies, Sharkey contends, but an active choice in response to an ongoing political narrative of “lawlessness and disorder” (p. 129). As a result of Lyndon Johnson’s Safe Streets and Crime Control Act of 1968, investment in housing and antipoverty efforts gave way to investment in policing and incarceration. Over the course of the Nixon presidency, “the abandonment of poor urban neighborhoods and the punishment of their residents” (p. 126) came to dominate federal initiatives and remains prominent at all levels of government today. At the same time, the pursuit of integration and equality all but disappeared. Although labeled as “benign neglect” (p. 129) by political con-

temporaries, Nixon's abandonment policies resulted in greater concentration of poverty and more entrenched segregation along racial and economic lines. At the same time, federal investment in local police to advance the war on drugs resulted in an expanding police apparatus as well as militarization of law enforcement, what Sharkey calls "warrior policing" (p. 146). While policing did have an important role in the great crime decline, police presence accounts for 15–20 percent of the reduction, with larger effects in the highest violence neighborhoods, the balance of the "great crime decline," upward of 80 percent, is explained by other public strategies and community-level processes. Sharkey argues that a combination of other strategies and the transformation of policing are essential if the US is to make peace with the compromises and social costs of warrior policing.

At the center of Sharkey's vision for the future is "guardianship," a concept drawn from criminology to describe individuals and roles responsible for protecting the public space on behalf of the community. Police are one example of guardians, as are neighbors who watch over children playing outside. Paraphrasing Cohen and Felson, Sharkey states that "the likelihood of a crime occurring depends on three elements: a motivated offender, a vulnerable victim, and the absence of a capable guardian" (p. 43).

Sharkey contends that over the course of the "great crime decline," the concept of guardianship, particularly in hyper-segregated urban areas experiencing concentrated poverty and where violent crime is most common, has narrowed to mean warrior policing. Given the high social costs of this kind of aggressive and militarized policing, and its surprisingly small contribution to reducing violence, Sharkey suggests that a new kind of guardianship is needed, one where neighbors and community have a greater role.

In Sharkey's view, progress requires reimagining the guardianship role so that police are not the only actors in this space, transforming policing from a warrior to community-building stance, and developing the leadership and funding of guardians who are part of the community. While Sharkey's description of how to accomplish these goals is somewhat thin, he does offer a few illustrative examples, such as Manhattan's Jack Maple CompStat Center, where crime data are shared with members of the public, including representatives of public housing developments, as part of an effort at transparency. With new guardianship, public safety is as a subset of community well-being rather than its defining feature; thus, the convening of neighbors, service providers, and government departments, including police, with the purpose of understanding current conditions is a necessary prerequisite to the identification of needed investments and initiatives.

Working together is not enough, however. Sharkey also suggests that community members need the opportunity to function as guardians and to be supported with reliable funding, leadership development, and training. He points to Nyoongar Patrol, an Australian initiative that employs, trains, and supports local residents in overseeing public spaces with the purpose of improving com-

munity life and safety for Aboriginal peoples, who, like African Americans, experience disproportionate policing. Program employees mirror community values, act as a buffer with police, and “make sure every resident is safe, cared for, and welcomed” (p. 179). Guardianship of this kind, he says, must be understood, and compensated, as an essential contributor to public safety.

Finally, Sharkey argues for “durability,” or sustainability. This, he says, will require a deeper understanding of the relationship among poverty, trust in others, and mutual commitment to public space. While there have been community engagement efforts in the past, consistent with the policies of abandonment, funding is often not sufficient to pay for their work and tends to be temporary, contingent, and easily cut off. An investment approach is needed, Sharkey contends. Anything else constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of the “crisis in America’s cities, and a misguided response” (p. 144) that leaves marginalized Americans “blocked from opportunity by hatred, discrimination, oppression and public policy . . . concentrated in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods of urban America” (p. 144).

In *Uneasy Peace*, Sharkey distills four key messages for the next generation of urban policy. First, he contends that this is the “safest period of U.S. history” (p. 180). Reductions in violence have transformed and renewed urban life, changing how poverty is experienced. Second, while policing has played a role in crime reduction, he says it is only by examining the role of abandonment policies, and their relationship to neighbors’ cohesion with one another, that we can truly understand trends in the crime rate. Third, the crime decline has benefited the most disadvantaged more than others, particularly African American males, which has resulted in improved educational outcomes, better physical health, and reduced segregation by income. However, abandonment and punishment policies come with tremendous costs, including continuous surveillance, aggressive and abusive policing, mass incarceration, crumbling infrastructure, academic achievement constrained by the effects of constant fear, and increasing concentrations of poverty in predominantly black neighborhoods. Sharkey’s careful documentation of these costs should inspire us to a new, more durable way forward premised on investment in infrastructure, housing, social and health programs, and human potential.

Readers will enjoy the storytelling in *Uneasy Peace*, each chapter begins with a powerful example from an American city. Some recount the nation’s policy failures and others its moral failings. Although we speak of crime in terms of a “crime rate,” something that can be conveyed in simple graphs, Sharkey’s work suggests that a range of factors, from education to infrastructure funding, play a role. Not surprisingly, Sharkey comes to the rather unsexy conclusion that crime (and crime fighting) is complicated. Despite the book’s far-reaching analysis—based in sociology, demography, economics, public administration, and neurobiology, among other fields—it offers no quick fix or singular solution. Instead, it offers a framework for action: begin with a narrative of justice and equality; resist the impulse to link investment in urban infrastructure

and services to the crime rate, policing practices, or sentencing guidelines; rethink guardianship; think in terms of repurposing current police resources, developing the capacity of community members to be guardians and to foster guardianship, and sustaining investments.

For those interested in the school-to-prison pipeline, social justice, or the achievement gap, *Uneasy Peace* is a call to action and a plea to resist any path forward that ignores the visceral needs of poor children living in the nation's most disadvantaged neighborhoods.

KRISTA GOLDSTINE-COLE

WHEN GRIT ISN'T ENOUGH: A HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL EXAMINES HOW POVERTY AND INEQUALITY THWART THE COLLEGE-FOR-ALL PROMISE

by Linda F. Nathan

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In the mid-2000s, researchers made the provocative case that *grit*—a form of self-discipline applied toward long-term pursuits—is as important to predicting future achievement as are general intelligence and talent. Since then, the concept of grit has garnered something of a cult following in popular culture, with devotees attracted to the familiar notion that anything can be accomplished through hard work and determination. However, in the context of high-poverty urban public schools, efforts to support the development of grit have been met with equal parts advocacy and derision. Proponents believe cultivating noncognitive traits like grit will have positive effects on student achievement, while critics argue that efforts to promote grit give rise to misdirected initiatives aimed at “fixing” students rather than addressing the inequitable ecosystems in which teaching and learning are embedded.

Against this backdrop, Linda F. Nathan's *When Grit Isn't Enough: A High School Principal Examines How Poverty and Inequality Thwart the College-for-All Promise* makes a timely and valuable contribution to the growing discourse on how educators can prepare students to succeed—as well as creating structures that bolster student efforts—in an increasingly uneven sociopolitical context. Whereas much of the discourse on student achievement in impoverished settings has been dominated by academic voices and theoretical insights, *When Grit Isn't Enough* draws from Nathan's formidable career as an educator and school leader. Throughout the text, Nathan weaves together student narratives, current research, and her own reflections to question the potential grit may hold for students who have been marginalized from social and economic power—particularly students of color, students from mixed-status households, and first-generation college students.

As the former principal of a high school in Boston, Nathan recalls promising her students college and career success in exchange for conscientious effort and making efforts to enact a school culture that celebrated grit and