



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence

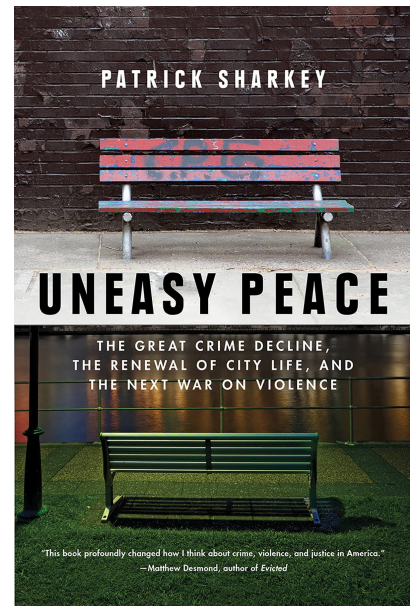
By Patrick Sharkey

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Feb. 1, 2023 to discuss *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence* by Patrick Sharkey. Sharkey is a sociology professor and head of a research organization that studies crime, violence and poverty.

The book's main messages: Violent crime soared from the 1960s to the 1990s. Then, suddenly, crime rates declined rapidly. By 2014, violent crime in America was at a historic low.

The reasons for the “great crime decline” are many, but some of the methods used—particularly police treatment of African-American men and boys and the use of mass incarceration—were neither just nor sustainable. This may explain some of the rise in crime since 2014.

But in looking for new approaches, the book stresses, we shouldn't forget that the greatest beneficiaries of the crime decline of the 1990s and 2000s were African-American males who lived longer, learned more in school and earned more as their neighborhoods became safer..



Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five “big ideas” from *Uneasy Peace*:

1. We must do all that is just and sustainable to reduce violent crime because those who benefit most from safer streets and neighborhoods are the least fortunate in our cities.
2. Neighborhoods should be partners in the effort to reduce crime. A promising way is with a version of New York's "NeighborhoodStat" program that identifies public safety problems at the neighborhood level and engages neighborhood leaders in reducing them.
3. We must create alternative public safety services so we do not depend on the police alone to make cities safer. These could range from violence interrupters to mental-health units.
4. We must invest in programs that have a record of reducing violence, from community centers to after-school programs. We need these to target young people.
5. We need local leaders to speak calmly and clearly about the value of public safety, everyone's role in maintaining it, the paths to public safety that are effective and just, and the benefits to the police of having others involved in making communities safer.

Why Do These Things?

As Sharkey makes clear, everyone benefits from less violence, and he gives the 1992-2014 decline in crime credit for the renewal of cities. But while all benefited, those who benefited most, he found, were residents of low-income urban neighborhoods who had suffered greatly from the rise of crime from the 1960s to the 1990s—especially black males. Among the things cited in the book that members of the book group found especially important:

- There were improvements in life expectancy. (Starkey writes: "For every 100,000 black men, over 1,000 more years of time with friends and family have been preserved because of the drop in the murder rate.")
- There were similar improvements in educational achievement and income as crime declined in neighborhoods. (Again, from the book: A child whose family or close friends were victims of violent crime, on average, lost the equivalent of two years of education in the wake of the homicide.)
- Not surprisingly, less crime makes life in neighborhoods better (people are willing to use parks or walk to stores at night) and makes investments in those neighborhoods more likely.

Members found one more reason:

- Social justice demands it. In a city that gave the world Martin Luther King, Jr., we should expect nothing less than safe neighborhoods for everyone.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes generate opposition. That's true even for something as desirable as safer neighborhoods. So our members discussed the obstacles or barriers the book's big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Crime creates fear, and this gives rise to demagoguery and racism.
- When we don't understand what causes crime, it makes it difficult to make good choices. Do we invest in more police or police alternatives? More prisons or more after-school programs?
- The news media do not help. One example: Many people are unaware that violent crimes reached a historic low in 2014 and remains far below the levels of the 1990s. This is a failure of reporting.
- While creating alternatives, engaging with neighborhoods, and investing in services for low-income young people will make the jobs of police officers easier, police chiefs may not see it that way. Given the level of trust that most mayors and city councils have in the police, if they are not persuaded, there is little chance of success.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers:

- We need a new “narrative” for public safety. The narrative must explain the trends in violent crime (we’ve dramatically lowered violence in the past; we can do it again), the benefits (for cities in general and their most vulnerable citizens in particular) and the reasons for trying something different (the recent rise in violent crime and the numerous incidents that show the old ways no longer work). And it must have a reasonable set of alternatives that are worth trying in Urban Atlanta.
- We also must be much better at gathering and analyzing data about violent crime. One of the most impressive aspects of New York’s NeighborhoodStat program is its identification of conditions that give rise to crime, from trash in the streets and broken streetlights to truant kids and places that attract drug dealers. Many of these cannot be solved by police alone. They require public works departments, schools, businesses and neighborhood leaders and residents working together.
- In this, we need the police to be allies and not enemies. We must be sure police chiefs see engaged neighborhoods and alternatives such as mental-health units as win-wins and not win-lose propositions.
- Finding “converts” among the police—that is, chiefs and others who are willing to support something new—is a key. This book gives us hope in the story of how William Bratton, who championed aggressive police tactics when he was New York’s police commissioner in the 1990s, returned as commissioner 20 years later and dismantled some of the most egregious practices such as “stop and frisk.”

A Synopsis of *Uneasy Peace*

Uneasy Peace is 185 pages, not including notes and index. It has 10 chapters, divided into three parts, plus a preface.

Sharkey is a professor and chair of the Sociology Department at New York University and scientific director of the Crime Lab New York, a research organization that looks for new ways of addressing crime, violence and poverty.

The book has four primary messages:

- Violent crime soared from the 1960s until the early 1990s, when it reversed and declined rapidly. By 2014 America’s crime rates were at historic lows. Then, in 2015, crime began rising again and is once again a threat.
- Crime fell over that 20-year period because a number of groups mobilized to fight it, from police departments and courts to private groups like business improvement districts. Neighborhood organizations also played a role in making their neighborhood safer.
- The benefits of the historic decline in crime were felt in low-income neighborhoods, where African-American males lived longer, learned more in school and earned more as their neighborhoods became safer.
- But because of the way that the police and courts dealt with the 1990s crime wave— especially their treatment of African-American males and the use of mass incarceration—these methods will not work with the crime problems we face today. Cities must find new ways of making neighborhoods safer.

Some of Sharkey’s findings will surprise readers. So, in the first two-thirds of the book, he documents how and why violent crime escalated from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, how and why crime trends were suddenly reversed, and what the effects were on cities and their residents. The final third of the book is about Sharkey’s search for a new model for public safety, one that does not require mass incarceration or require police officers to be occupiers of black neighborhoods.

There is much at stake today in finding a new model for public safety, Sharkey writes, including the fate of cities. Cities saw a historic revival in the 1990s and early 2000s as crime receded, new people moved to old neighborhoods, retail returned, and city services improved.

This came at a price, of course, as rents rose for longtime residents. But it also brought benefits to those who had lived through the crime-ridden 1970s and 1980s, he writes.

Residents lived with less fear. They could enjoy parks again and walk the streets after dark. Their loved ones lived longer and had better lives. And their children and grandchildren learned more in school. And that came because violence has a devastating impact on children's ability to learn. Research shows, Sharkey writes, that children can lose the equivalent of two years of education when someone close to them is killed by homicide, perhaps a family member or neighbor. Reduce the violence and children will learn more.

But can we reduce violence without brutalizing people or locking them away? Sharkey thinks so. His recommendation is to make police a second level of enforcement, brought into some situations only after others have intervened.

To see what a first level could look like, he traveled to Australia where trained, uniformed but unarmed Aboriginal "night patrols" keep order in Aboriginal neighborhoods. These workers, who are paid by cities, use friendly faces and deescalation techniques to quiet rowdy people and help those in trouble find assistance.

He finds other models in Boston and, surprisingly, in Atlanta, where the revival of East Lake Meadows showed how to improve neighborhoods by involving the residents.

These models involve a new kind of public safety approach, one that puts more uniformed people on the streets, but not just armed police officers. These new "guardians" come with more knowledge of the neighborhoods they look after because they're from these neighborhoods. And the regular police? They're on call and still important. They're just not the first ones—or only ones—to arrive when there's trouble.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define "urbanism" broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.