Reprinted from *Urban Land*, published
by ULI–the Urban Land Institute, 1090 Vermont Avenue, N.W.,
Washington, DC 20005.

CRIME AND DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

N. David Milder

The growth and economic well-being of the 31-county New York/New Jersey/Connecticut urban region have concerned Regional Plan Association, a private, nonprofit planning organization, since the 1920s. In its downtown revitalization work with business and government leaders in numerous cities in this area, the association found that crime and the fear of crime can become a major barrier to downtown revitalization. Corporate leaders, for example, told the association that the fear of crime made many downtowns undesirable places in which to locate their new offices or retail facilities.

In 1984, Regional Plan initiated the Downtown Safety, Security, and Economic Development Program to combat this problem. Focusing at first on three downtowns in the outer boroughs of New York City, evidence drawn from surveys of trade area residents and downtown merchants, police records, interviews with key corporate executives and security directors, office worker focus sessions, and countless days of field observation was analyzed to learn precisely how crime works to dampen downtown economic growth. Downtowns across the nation were then surveyed to find programs that could counteract the negative effects of crime on downtown development. The results of this research were used to assist task forces in downtown Brooklyn and Jamaica Center to formulate and implement programs that would enhance their images.

How Crime Thwarts Downtown Development

As national surveys show, the variety and quality of stores most influence where people will shop. Successful downtowns not only provide a comparatively large and diverse shopping environment, but also opportunities for people to engage in a wide range of other activities.

In successful commercial areas, visitors tend to go to more than one "destination." A shopper visiting a department store in a shopping mall, for instance, also is likely to shop at other stores located in the mall. But successful downtowns offer more than multiple shopping destinations. The downtown office employee not only can shop at various stores but also can go to a restaurant, attend a concert, visit a museum or doctor's office, or even live nearby. Similarly, someone going downtown to file a legal document may also shop, dine, or visit the library. The ability of downtowns to generate these multiple-purpose trips gives them their true competitive advantage over other types of commercial districts.

Fear of Crime versus Actual Crime Rates. Many assume that those residential neighborhoods or business districts in which people fear for their safety must therefore be riddled with crime—especially crimes involving the threat of personal violence. But evidence provided by many studies suggests that the relationship between the fear of crime and actual crime rates is very loose and indirect. One study, for example, found that although the likelihood of being robbed was actually 20 times greater in Washington, D.C., than in Milwaukee, the residents of Milwaukee only felt slightly safer than did the residents of Washington. Another study concluded: "The patterning of fear across areas does not match the patterning of crime levels. Although some studies do find that actual victims of crime are more fearful than nonvictims, it is not the case that areas with higher crime or victimization rates have residents who are more fearful."

Regional Plan structured its program to deal with fear of crime, rather than with actual crime, because fear more strongly influences the way people act downtown and, consequently, how successful a downtown will be.

Fear and Visitation Rates. Conventional wisdom holds that the fear of crime prevents people, especially the "respectable" middle class, from visiting downtowns. Thus, in many downtowns visited during the course of this project, municipal leaders were intent on devising anticrime programs aimed at drawing more "traffic" downtown.

Yet Regional Plan's trade area telephone surveys showed that people's perceptions of a downtown's safety and the probability of becoming a victim of various crimes downtown could provide, at best, only a weak statistical explanation for the frequency or infrequency of respondents' visits downtown. These results were confirmed in two other Regional Plan studies.

Although people who do not visit their downtowns may indeed be afraid, fear is not the primary factor that keeps them away. More likely, downtowns fail to draw visitors because they cannot compete with other nearby locations in terms of access, attractiveness, and quality and quantity of shops, offices, and other attractions. Conversely, downtowns can draw people—even those afraid of crime—if they offer attractions that are unique in terms of product, service, or price. For example, three of New York City's most popular restaurants are located in high crime areas.

Figure 1
Factors That Influence Perceptions of How Safe a Downtown Is
(In Order of Most to Least Influential)

	Squared Correlation Coefficient[1]
Perception of Downtown's Attractiveness	.1444
Likelihood that One's Own "Type of People" Are Downtown	.1296
Perception of the Risk of Assaults/Rapes	.0784
Perception of the Risk of Street Robberies	.0784
Clean Streets	.0676
One's Race	.0676
Gangs on the Streets	.0676
Perception of Risk of Car Thefts/Break-Ins	.0625
Drug Use and Sales	.0529
Abandoned Buildings	.0484
Graffiti	.0400
Convenience of Visiting Downtown	.0324
Prostitution	.0289
Likelihood of Finding Desired Merchandise	.0225
One's Income	.0196
One's Gender	.0196
Broken Windows	.0169
Groups Hanging Out	.0169
Indigents and Homeless	.0144
Well-lighted streets	.0049

[1]*Pearson correlation coefficient* between perception of downtown safety and the particular factor, squared to compare the strength of each variable. Squared correlation coefficients of .10 or higher are of analytic importance.
Source: Regional Plan Association.

Fear Decreases Pedestrian Activity. Fear of crime causes downtown visitors to alter their behavior: they avoid walking in particular areas or being downtown at certain times. Probably the most noticeable example of this behavior is the "five o'clock flight" that occurs across the country: workers and shoppers rush to be out of the downtown before dark, leaving empty sidewalks and closed shops and restaurants.

Studies have shown that the fear of crime can do more to discourage walking in urban areas than the weather, the condition of the sidewalks, heavy auto traffic, or pollution. In one outer borough downtown, for example, 54 percent of the office workers interviewed in 1984 reported that they avoided walking through a park that was noted as a haven for drug transactions and use, even though it provided a far more convenient route.

Such "avoidance behavior" will ultimately result in less pedestrian activity. Nonwalking visitors tend to confine their downtown trips to a single purpose, thus stifling the downtown's ability to benefit fully from the traffic it has already attracted.

What Makes People Afraid Downtown?

Regional Plan's 1984 trade area telephone surveys showed that the fear of crime downtown is most influenced by how attractive respondents perceive a downtown to be compared to other shopping areas that they use (see Figure 1). Far less important in explaining downtown fear are such particular aspects of its appearance as clean streets; the presence of abandoned structures, broken windows, or graffiti; and street lighting.

The second factor that Regional Plan found most influenced levels of fear is the probability respondents assigned to finding the type of individuals they prefer to be with if they shopped downtown. This finding is consistent with the "fear of strangers" theory that holds that dissimilar people tend to distrust (and thus fear) each other because they do not know what to expect.

The trade area survey also revealed that people are much more likely to feel that they will be victims of street robberies and violence in downtowns where they observe heavy drug activity, public drinking, and gangs hanging out or loitering on the streets (see Figure 2). Such behavior downtown appears to communicate a significant message: the authorities are not maintaining order here; this is a dangerous place. And in this regard, the public displays good sense; a recent study confirms that drug users commit many more crimes than those who do not use drugs.

Figure 2
Environmental Factors That Influence Expectations That Assaults Are Likely to Occur
(In Order of Most to Least Influential)

Drug Use and Sales
Gangs on Streets
Public Drinking
Graffiti
Prostitution
Broken Windows
Indigents and Homeless
Abandoned Buildings
Groups Hanging Out
Street Lighting
Street Cleanliness

Source: Regional Plan Association.

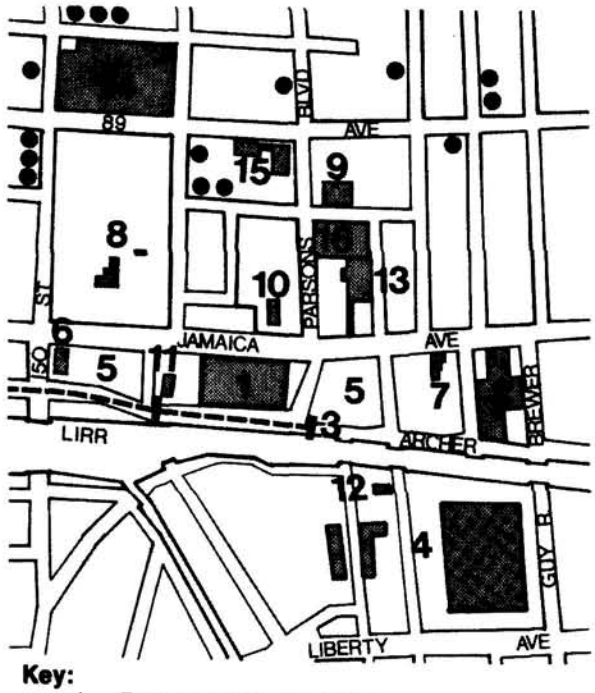
How to Overcome Fear of Crime In Downtowns

Create a Dense, Compact, Multifunctional Core Area. A downtown can be designed and developed to make visitors feel that it—or a significant portion of it—is attractive and the type of place that "respectable people" like themselves tend to frequent. This core area can also be the basis for future expansion.

A core downtown area that is compact, densely developed, and multifunctional will concentrate people, giving them more activities; will shorten distances between potential pedestrian destinations; and, consequently, will generate heightened pedestrian flows. The activities offered in this core area will help determine what "type" of people will be strolling its sidewalks; locating offices and housing for middle- and upper-income residents in or near the core area can assure a high percentage of "respectable," law-abiding pedestrians. Such an attractive redeveloped core area would also be large enough to affect the downtown's overall image.

It is important that pedestrian trips be kept within a certain length in the core area. The length of pedestrian trips in Manhattan's central business districts is about two times longer than in other downtowns, yet the median length of Manhattan shopping trips is only about 1,200 feet and 75 percent of all pedestrian trips are under 2,000 feet. This suggests that the diameter of a downtown core area should usually be well under one-half mile.

Jamaica Center, New York, is emerging as a good example of a dense, compact, multifunctional core area. When development now under construction is completed in 1988 there will be within a 1,200-foot radius of the key intersection at Jamaica Avenue and Parsons Boulevard: 7,000 office workers and 1.6 million square feet of new or rehabilitated office space



Key:

1 Federal Office Building
2 Gertz Plaza
3 New IND and BMT Subway Station
4 York College
5 Office Development Sites
6 Renovated Office Building
7 Jamaica Arts Center
8 Rufus King Historical Mansion and Park
9 YMCA
10 Grace Church
11 Former Reformed Church
12 St. Monica Church
13 Jamaica Farmers Market
14 Mary Immaculate Hospital
15 Family Court
16 Municipal Parking Garage
• Renovated Apartment Buildings

Jamaica Center is an emerging dense, compact, multifunctional core area in New York City.

with cleared, assembled sites for 1.4 million square feet of additional office space; the new campus of York College with its 4,500 students and 650 faculty and staff members; 90,000 square feet of new or recently renovated retail space including a new farmers' market similar to the Reading Market in Philadelphia; and many other new and rehabilitated buildings and development sites, as noted on the accompanying map.

Bring in Housing and Mixed-Use Development. Mixed-use developments will have a variety of pedestrian traffic generators that have different periods of high activity. Residential peaks tend to occur with the surges of people returning home between 6:00 and 7:00 in the evening, a time by which most of the pedestrian action in office buildings is over. More middle- and upper-income housing might well allevi-

ate fears that workers have when they leave their offices after the evening rush and find downtown streets deserted and threatening. Restaurants can attract substantial traffic until 8:00 or 9:00 in the evening, but they need a reliable base of customers to stay open that late. Downtown employees may give local restaurants a hefty lunchtime trade, but not enough business for them to remain open in the evenings.

Create Off-Street Networks? Through the use of bridges (often enclosed) over streets and tunnels under them, off-street networks in more than 30 North American cities link office buildings, retail stores, boutiques, department stores, restaurants, convention centers, hotels, apartment buildings, and railway stations. Some cities have as many as 38 overstreet bridges and five miles of walkways. Often built to help retailers capture the consumer dollars of downtown workers, these bridges and walkways have few pedestrian entrances from the street.

Such networks can reduce pedestrian traffic on downtown sidewalks, making them more frightening. Networks also can reduce customer traffic for nonnetwork shops; a study of the impact of the off-street retailing network in Charlotte, North Carolina, showed that 40 percent of the "on-street" merchants felt the network had hurt their businesses.

Some critics argue against off-street networks on the grounds that they take pedestrians off the streets and represent a nontraditional type of downtown in which the "automobile is victorious." Yet these networks do encourage pedestrian flows and multiple destination/multiple purpose downtown trips, which make a downtown competitive, interesting, and successful. As one developer in Charlotte put it: "The Overstreet Mall is Main Street Charlotte."

Institute Police Foot Patrols. Downtowns are increasingly using foot patrols to make people feel more secure during the day. Such patrols are now being used, for example, in Atlanta, Charlotte, Cleveland, downtown Brooklyn, and Jamaica Center.

Interest in foot patrols derives from the findings of two studies of neighborhood programs in Flint, Michigan, and Newark, New Jersey. These evaluations demonstrated that while foot patrols may not reduce crime rates, they did:

- make local residents believe that crime rates had decreased, thus instilling a firmer sense of security;
- generate strong support from local merchants;
- generate more favorable opinions of police performance among local residents;
- reduce previous discrepancies in the evaluations among blacks and whites of overall police performance; and
- generate strong support across racial lines for the foot patrol program in particular.

It has been argued that foot patrols work because "they elevate the level of public order" and address two of the primary fears of urban pedestrians: the fear of being suddenly and violently attacked by a stranger and the fear of being bothered by disorderly people such as panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, and the mentally disturbed. The officer on foot patrol keeps an eye on strangers and makes certain that the "disreputables" obey some "informal" but widely understood rules. By enforcing these rules, the foot patrol officer creates a sense of public order.

Use Mounted Patrols. To make police officers more visible in crowded downtowns and thus alleviate the fears of downtown pedestrians, cities more frequently are using "10-foot cops"—mounted patrols. Merchants, corporate executives, and police officials in Atlanta, Cleveland, and Oakland expressed positive attitudes toward horse patrols, maintaining that besides making people feel safer, they also help improve relations between police and downtown users. One of the first actions taken by the Jamaica task force was to support the Chamber of Commerce in donating two horses to the New York Police Department to be used for mounted patrols in Jamaica Center.

Establish Special Assessment Districts. A popular strategy for improving downtown management and reinforcing police strength is to create special downtown assessment districts. These are geographically defined parts of the downtown, usually including the commercial core, in which special tax assessments are levied to pay for additional municipal services—sanitation, parking, planning, sewage, police, and so forth. Cities of all sizes are using them, including New Orleans, Tulsa, downtown Brooklyn, Jamaica Center, Denver, Charlotte, Winchester (Virginia), Allentown (Pennsylvania), and several smaller towns in North Carolina.

In Denver, Tulsa, and New Orleans, revenues generated by the districts are paid to the city in return for more police officers. In Denver, the district's management corporation contracts with the city for 10 additional officers and a supervising sergeant for its "mall patrol." In New Orleans, part of the district's revenues is used to provide 13 additional officers and a sergeant. In Jamaica Center, revenues fund "information officers," who are dressed in blazers, but engage in many traditional private security functions on downtown streets.

Regional Plan's research suggests that the fear of crime need not impede downtown development if local leaders adopt a revitalization strategy that emphasizes dense, compact, multifunctional development and combines this with police patrol tactics stressing citizen contact and reinforcing actual safety, as well as the perception of safety. ■

N. David Milder is a consultant to Regional Plan Association and directs its Downtown Safety, Security, and Economic Development Program. Principal funding for this program was provided by the National Institute of Justice.