

New York Needs a Turnaround to Show That Big Cities Still Work



Anyone paying attention could be forgiven for wondering just what is going on in New York, which lately seems hellbent on affirming the worst, most tired tropes of critics of big-city liberalism.

The crimes taking place in the subways are genuinely alarming. Over the holidays, a man lit a woman on fire on the F train in Brooklyn, killing her. The man, who is an undocumented immigrant, has pleaded not guilty and told investigators he was too drunk to remember what happened. It's among the grimmest crimes in New York I can remember. On the same day, a man was stabbed to death on a train in Queens, and on New Year's Eve a man was shoved in front of a subway train in Manhattan, fracturing his skull.

Felony assaults in the subway system are up 55 percent since 2019. Though overall crime is down throughout the city and homicides have fallen, felony assaults last year were up 5 percent over 2023, and the number of reported rapes was the highest since 2020.

Instead of leading New York to better days, Mayor Eric Adams has engulfed City Hall in corruption and scandal. Mr. Adams was indicted on federal bribery charges in September. Aides and top police officials continue to resign while under criminal investigation or indictment.

In less than two weeks, a man who rode to office describing American cities as places of "carnage" and New York a "city in decline" will occupy the White House. New York has rarely had more to prove. Its leaders will have to find a way to turn this story around, not only to improve the quality of life for residents but also to show America that big cities can still work.

Success will mean at last bringing an end to the spikes in many crimes that have dogged the city — particularly in its subway system — since the pandemic. New York remains among the safest big cities in the United States, but the statistics are often overshadowed by growing fear, which can hurt transit ridership and the economy.

Success will mean backing bold ideas like congestion pricing that keep the project of the American metropolis moving forward without apology. That means setting aside the complaints of suburban drivers and the tabloid headlines trying to cause a panic over the arrival of the system, which went into effect last Sunday. It's a landmark program that charges drivers for entering the busiest part of Manhattan, with a goal of reducing traffic and helping to pay for mass transit. It's been in the works for decades and will benefit the majority of New Yorkers, including working-class residents who use public transit.

And success will mean building more housing on a large scale across the region, an undertaking that requires strong leadership from Gov. Kathy Hochul, the State Legislature and city officials, who need to resist those who oppose new development.

New York is not only the country's largest city but also, arguably, its most unapologetically urban: loud, dirty and dense. Millions share a crowded bit of land with strangers from all over the world. That's how many of us like it. But over the years, there has been no shortage of voices raising questions about whether it was such a good idea.

The historian Vincent Cannato, in his biography of Mayor John Lindsay, called the city "ungovernable."

Theodore Roosevelt, the city's police commissioner at the turn of the 20th century, wrote to his children that he encountered in his post "all kinds of squalid misery and hideous and unspeakable infamy."

This newspaper, too, has taken its shots over the years. In an 1895 article, The Times heralded what was apparently a successful campaign to clean city streets. "The Times man had seen dead cats there festering on a July day, black with buzzing swarms of flies; piles of decaying vegetables, and green gutters, with bubbles bursting with fetid gases," the article declared. "Now he noticed that there were clean gutters and absolute sweetness."

The clean streets didn't last. But somehow, the city endured.

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