Can Pools Help to Deter Crime?

The pandemic has limited access to public pools in New York this summer — and violence has soared.

By Ginia Bellafante

Sept. 4, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

In August of 1969, New York mayor John V. Lindsay flew by helicopter to the Bronx to commemorate the opening of two new municipal pools, each of them appointed with murals and built with great investments of hope. He used the occasion to announce that many more pools were planned for the city. Pool construction had lagged in New York since the Depression, when the Works Progress Administration oversaw the creation of some of the most impressive recreational facilities ever built in the country. Lindsay was committing to a new period of aquatic innovation.

Progressives like him believed that pools were essential in urban environments for cooling off both bodies and tempers, for diffusing the tensions so reliably incubated in the heat. For decades, pools had served multiple functions, as escape and safety net. What would happen if there were even more of them?

In 1967, Lindsay had served as the vice-chairman of the Kerner Commission, a task force established by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate the causes of the race riots that had erupted in cities across the country the previous summer. The group concluded that relentless racism had forced so many Black lives into squalor and that frustration, rage and violence were the inevitable results. Solutions were to be found, the resulting report determined, in the delivery of more robust social services, better and safer neighborhoods and more sensitive policing.
Although the president largely ignored the advice; urbanists did not. Before the country defaulted to mass incarceration in the 1980s as its chief means of managing crime, civic leaders often looked toward imaginative uses of public space and design to deter violence.

In 1966, under Lindsay’s watch, dozens of prefabricated mobile pools began to appear in low-income neighborhoods in New York. Carted around by truck, they were shallow and typically placed in the middle of the street. Other miniature pools turned up in blown-out empty lots.

Between 1970 and 1972, 19 large permanent pools were built as well, predominantly in underserved parts of the city. A collection of pools, one of them Olympic sized, in the Bronx’s Van Cortlandt Park, set a record for the completion of a capital project in the city, taking just under a year from the point of conception, suggesting the sense of urgency surrounding the enterprise.
All of that history bears on the current moment as we consider the reasons behind the rise in urban violence in recent months. This week, New York City released data indicating that shootings in August more than doubled over the same period last year. During the course of the summer, the city recorded 180 murders, representing an increase of 51 percent compared to last summer, even as crime overall has remained flat.

The causes are both myriad and uncertain — the pandemic has forced us into isolation and brought with it a surge of unemployment, poverty and desperation. Police may also be staging a slowdown in response to protests against their long history of brutality. But it is also plausible that something as seemingly peripheral as the limited availability of places to cool off is having a distinct impact.
The pandemic delayed the opening of public pools in the city until the end of July. When they were eventually permitted to open, only 15 of the 53 pools did. At the same time, many recreation centers managed by the city’s parks department were converted to coronavirus testing sites and food distribution areas.

Each year, as September becomes warmer and warmer, there are calls made for the city to keep pools open until the official beginning of fall. Given that schools in New York now will not begin until September 21, leaving so many young people idle, it would seem crucial that pools remain open all month; instead they will close on Labor Day.

While there is no research providing any kind of definitive link between municipal pools and their effects on mitigating crime, what we know from classical criminological theory tells us that young people need to be occupied. “There is strong evidence that when young people are out in space without supervision or without being engaged in some activity,” the Princeton sociologist Patrick Sharkey explained, “particularly in the absence of normal means of social controls, there will be problems.”
In March of 1973, after Lindsay’s pool initiative was completed, New York’s then-police commissioner, Patrick V. Murphy, announced an 18 percent decline in serious crimes reported to the police during 1972. No one mentioned the expansion of municipal pools but the correlation was uncanny. Overall, what the department distinguished as “serious crime” — muggings, holdups, purse-snatchings, break-ins, burglaries, larceny, auto theft — had reached its lowest level since 1967, even as the murder rate, attributable to an increasing influx of guns into the city, experts speculated, continued to rise.

When the crisis around the coronavirus ultimately subsides, the city will be left to return to the various emergencies of global warming. Five years ago scientists at Stanford and Berkeley published an article in the Annual Review of Economics looking at the relationship between climate and discord and determined that deviations from moderate temperatures and rain levels correlated with increases in conflict between individuals and groups.

By this account a heightened investment in ecologically sound city pools begins to look less like indulgence and more like necessity — a way to preserve sanity. That was made clear, especially among young people, when pools finally did open in New York. Some people were so relieved they almost jumped in, still wearing their masks.

Ginia Bellafante has served as a reporter, critic and, since 2011, as the Big City columnist. She began her career at The Times as a fashion critic, and has also been a television critic. She previously worked at Time magazine. @GiniaNYT

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 6, 2020, Section MB, Page 3 of the New York edition with the headline: Can Public Pools Deter Violence?