

## Broken Windows and Policing

Robert R. Friedmann, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Criminal Justice, Founding Director, Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE), Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University

There have been three primary phases in the recent history of U.S. policing. The political era (1840–1930) was characterized by close ties between police and politicians with an emphasis on appeasing politicians. The reform era (1930–1970) attempted to cope with police corruption and lack of professionalism, and law enforcement strived to develop a professional crime-fighting force with police resources focused on arrests; it was reactive in nature. Yet, as police leaders sought to impact and minimize the amount of crime produced, the third phase emerged: the community problem-solving era (1970–present), characterized by a proactive attempt to fight crime through partnerships between police agencies and communities.<sup>1</sup> Problem-oriented policing and “Broken Windows” are two key approaches of this phase. The Broken Windows theory postulates that the better the urban conditions (i.e., less disorder), the less likely the occurrence of crime.<sup>2</sup> The assumption is that ignoring minor crimes will send a message that the area is not under control, which will lead to more serious crimes in the area.

Broken Windows and Policing Community policing is the first approach in the reform movement of policing that aims to depart from the reactive approach—typified by a revolving door cycle of crimes and arrests—and to attempt to proactively reduce crime in the community. Starting in the mid-1980s, the community policing approach was guided by various assumptions, but the first definition offered (after almost 20 years of practice) by Dr. Robert Friedmann shifted the focus from dealing with crime in a reactive format to dealing with it proactively by focusing on changing crime-causing conditions:

Community policing is a policy and a strategy aimed at achieving more effective and efficient crime control, reduced fear of crime, improved quality of life, improved police services, and police legitimacy through a proactive reliance on community resources that seeks to change crime-causing conditions. This assumes a need for greater accountability of police, greater public share in decision making, and greater concern for civil rights and liberties.<sup>3</sup>

Less than 15 years after the emergence of community policing, it was superseded by homeland security, instituted after 9/11; the fight against terrorism and the fight against crime employ similar principles.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, with the increasing popularity, attention, and budgets devoted to homeland security, community policing became less fashionable, to the extent that practitioners of community policing were advised that there was no need to reinvent the wheel, even when budgets and popularity have shifted away.<sup>5</sup>

Community policing suggested key changes within the police department and to the interactions between the police and other social service agencies and between the police and the community. Broken Windows fits rather well within the overall framework of community policing by attempting to change crime-causing as well as terrorism-causing conditions. According to Broken Windows, this is done, at least partially, through solving quality-of-life problems before they grow into more serious issues.

The original article by social scientists George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson suggested that readers consider a building with broken windows.

[D]isorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence.... if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in rundown ones. Window-breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are inhabited by determined window-breakers whereas others are populated by window-lovers; rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, deteriorating conditions send out a signal that neglect is acceptable; thus, minor neglect will grow into larger neglect. The authors argued that, in the same way that social control is diminished with increased blight, it is also diminished with crime as neglecting petty crimes could lead to more serious crimes.

Kelling and Wilson were influenced by research that showed that blight and lower quality-of-life factors are directly related to vandalism because they send a signal that no one cares about the community. They also were influenced by research that showed a concern for minor offenses and disorderly conditions. Therefore, the authors recommended that “broken windows” be “fixed” so as to control smaller problems before they become larger. Namely, control vandalism and petty crimes before they turn into more serious crimes.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the theory proposes that dealing with petty crimes functions as a social control mechanism that helps “regulate” the amount of crime produced in a community.

Broken Windows is based on three elements of social control: (1) norms, (2) monitoring, and (3) signaling. Social norms set expectations for compliance, and monitoring depends on signals or messages of what the norm is and the expectation to comply with it. It is not just quality-of-life issues pertaining to urban environmental disorder that are of concern to Broken Windows. The physical deterioration will likely be followed with social deterioration with the addition (or increase) of vagrants, drunks, street prostitution, and aggressive panhandlers. This creates a change in what is considered the prevailing norm and shifts the normative standards from order to disorder. In this way, unwanted elements shape the environment, and the environment in turn shapes the residents within it. This environmental-social nexus is translated into criminal behavior and the likelihood that petty crimes will turn into more serious crimes increases.

## Policy Implications

The first implementation of Broken Windows into practice was in 1985 with the cleaning of graffiti in the New York subway system. This initiative employed Kelling as a consultant, and, after his work with the New York Transit Police, he also served as a consultant to the Boston, Massachusetts, and Los Angeles, California, police departments. William Bratton headed the New York Transit Police in 1990, and when he later became commissioner of the New York Police Department (NYPD), he hired Kelling as a consultant for NYPD, which implemented the widest-ever Broken Windows approach using a “zero tolerance” policy and focusing on quality-of-life issues. The mayor of New York at the time, Rudolph Giuliani, also bought into Broken Windows and set out to prove that the problems of New York could be managed. The city’s police focused on petty crimes such as fare dodging, graffiti, public urination, and the “squeegee men.” Crime in New York went down significantly and stayed low for more than 10 years. By the end of the 1990s, violent crime had dropped by 56 percent compared to the pre-Broken Windows levels, and New York was declared “safe again.”<sup>8</sup>

Similar efforts in Lowell, Massachusetts, showed a 20 percent reduction in crime in areas that were cleaned and suggested that cleaning was more effective than arrest for petty crime.<sup>9</sup> Experiments in Holland also concluded that one example of disorder can indeed encourage another like stealing.<sup>10</sup> Another large city in the United States that fully adopted Broken Windows was Boston, Massachusetts, where the mayor publically endorsed it. Boston police chief Kathleen O’Toole

expressed it this way: "We in Boston not only embraced [Broken Windows] back then, but we've expanded on it since."<sup>11</sup>

Acceptance of Broken Windows as a general approach to policing strategies was also adopted by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office). The agency sees Broken Windows as one element of the wider overarching policy of community policing that can help advance "the organizational changes necessary to make broken windows interventions." The COPS Office argues that community policing philosophy can aid in the proper implementation of Broken Windows and prevent or avoid some of the pitfalls of earlier implementations.

When broken windows is correctly understood within a broader community policing philosophy, improper implementation of its central tenets through such things as ignoring community concerns, applying a zero tolerance one-size-fits-all approach to minor offenses, and conducting cursory or no analysis of problems, are less likely to occur."<sup>12</sup>

Police and government organizations are not alone in embracing Broken Windows. Business groups across the United States, in city after city, have established a Downtown Improvement District (DID). For example, the Atlanta DID focuses, through self-taxation of businesses, on cleaning streets, downtown development, introducing streetcars, improving transportation, employing goodwill ambassadors, maintaining parks, stopping panhandling, focusing on civil and human rights, and conducting other activities—all in an attempt to improve the physical landscape and make the downtown more orderly, safe, and appealing to employees and visitors alike. Therefore, the DID can be seen as an added and measurable dimension to crime control efforts that attempt to minimize conditions conducive to crime. More recent research in support of Broken Windows includes a study of Reno, Nevada, neighborhoods that documented a direct link between crime and disorder, concluding that "higher rates of disorder" did increase the rate of violent crime.<sup>13</sup>

What makes testing Broken Windows difficult is that there may be other factors at play that are not easy to identify, isolate, and control. For example, unemployment dropped in New York by almost 40 percent in less than 10 years (1992–1999) during the Broken Windows original implementation. At the same time, felony arrests increased by 50–70 percent, which reduced the criminal population in the city.<sup>14</sup>

Wide acceptance of Broken Windows exceeded the realm of law enforcement and was also prevalent in the area of court supervision, a trend that still exists. The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for the District of Columbia has incorporated principles of Broken Windows into its program model so that

the external control exercised through close supervision, meaningful sanctions, and surveillance drug testing can complement the offender's participation in support programs. If the principles of "broken windows" are aimed at establishing a system of external accountability—the offender is watched and is punished when non-compliance is detected—treatment and other programming are intended to establish a system of internal accountability.<sup>15</sup>

## Criticism

With the wide popularity of Broken Windows and the largescale implementation in cities like New York and Boston, it was only a matter of time before critics focused their attention on this practice. Indeed, several studies turned out to be highly critical of Broken Windows. Most of the criticism concerning Broken Windows focuses on rejecting its premise that disorder leads to crime. At best, argue the critics, Broken Windows confuses association with causality. Namely, disorder and crime may appear together, but that is not to say that disorder causes crime. Some even go as far as suggesting that Broken Windows is racist because of the negative impact this approach may have on minority communities where individuals often face a higher risk of arrest.<sup>16</sup> Police discretion in implementing vague ordinances is blamed for skewed arrests of minorities and the disenfranchised.<sup>17</sup> Yet, this particular criticism is raised against a specific ordinance issued by the City of Chicago, Illinois, and is not necessarily directed at Broken Windows or the practice of it in New York or elsewhere.

In their book *Freakonomics*, authors Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner present a far more controversial approach than Broken Windows, suggesting that what caused the drop in crime was the legalization of abortion in the 1970s, resulting in a decrease in the birth of would-be juvenile delinquents, hence the big drop in the last part of 1990s. Levitt and Dubner argue "There is frighteningly little evidence that [Bratton's] strategy was the crime panacea that he and the media deemed it."<sup>18</sup> However, they do not explain why New York had a far steeper drop in crime (including violent crime) than many other cities. In fact, New York was a leader in the decline in crime, and there is no evidence to support their claim that there were (relatively) more abortions in New York than elsewhere. While certainly provocative, *Freakonomics* itself was subject to severe criticism of misusing data, relying on irrelevant events, or making implausible ties between economic and social factors. The argument that the decline in unwanted births contributed to the decrease in crime is relying on one single variable; missing are other variables in the equation, such as economic development, education levels, downtown improvement, policing strategies, and so forth.<sup>19</sup>

A more grounded criticism of Broken Windows is found in the work of professors Bernard Harcourt and Jens Ludwig who used the same precinct crime statistics that Kelling used to corroborate Broken Windows. They argue that the drop is not due to policing methods, but due to what they call "Newton's Law of Crime." Namely, what goes up must come down. The authors argue that as some criminal trades became less lucrative, the incentive to get involved in them decreases. Again, this does not explain the fact that in New York the crime drop was steeper than in other cities that did not use some form of Broken Windows or other community policing strategies. Harcourt and Ludwig also argue that, based on data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), it was found that public housing tenants who were moved to safer, more orderly communities did not demonstrate a decrease in criminality. They therefore reject the Broken Windows theory that disorder causes crime.<sup>20</sup> The problem with this criticism is that it ignores the fact that the change did not occur in the same neighborhood—what Broken Windows espouses—but rather there was a relocation of tenants to another neighborhood. Even if the neighborhoods were perceived to be safer—at least in the eyes of Harcourt and Ludwig—the criticism ignores other factors like the need to adjust to change, which could be an intervening factor in their continued criminality.

In a study by social psychologists Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush, they argue that even if the central tenet of Broken Windows is accepted—disorder impacts crime—they doubt that there is much the police can do about it. The authors claim that it is not disorder in the neighborhood, but rather race that makes the difference. They studied collective efficacy and argued that it was disrupted by those perceiving minorities as an outside threat. If so, it renders any police intervention useless; it also matters little if broken windows are fixed or not.<sup>21</sup> However, Kelling pointed out a methodological flaw in the study by Sampson and Raudenbush—the researchers observed signs of disorder only between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. and not during other times of the day and night.<sup>22</sup>

Policing researchers Jacinta Gau and Travis Pratt argue that concentrated social disadvantage is associated more with disorder than recognized by Broken Windows and that community residents do not make a clear distinction between disorder and crime. Their study tested this hypothesized lack of separation and, indeed, found that "people who believe their neighborhood to be more disorderly were more likely to make distinctions between disorder and crime."<sup>23</sup> So while seemingly critical of Broken Windows, this study actually shows that residents who notice disorder may also see it as causing crime. However, even if this is not the case, the criticism has only limited value. After all, it has measured what people think about disorder and crime, not what people do about it. Attitudinal measures have limited value as their relation to behavior is not always linear or direct. Also, even if these attitudes are directly related to behavior, if one of the factors of the disorder-crime nexus is eliminated, it is plausible to assume that the other factor will be impacted by its disappearance or reduction, even if in an associational, but not causal, manner.

Another criticism of Broken Windows focuses on the perceived negative outcome of improved neighborhoods. With improvement, there is an increase in the cost of living that may not be affordable to the residents of the neighborhood who find themselves evicted, through a process of gentrification, because they are perceived as contributing to the disorder.<sup>24</sup> Carrying this argument further may result in a policy of "no improving on blight" because it may actually improve the lot of some people but not others.

Other criticism is aimed at the inconsistent policing policies with regard to different types of crime across cities with populations exceeding 10,000, with one study recommending increased gun ownership and more concealed carry laws as a solution.<sup>25</sup> This approach received its own share of criticism about its methodology, measurement, and conclusion, with some even arguing that it amounts to "junk science."

Probably the most significant recent writing critical of those criticizing Broken Windows is the argument that the measure of disorder and fear is problematic because it is subjective and imprecise and, thus, is not fit to test Broken Windows theory.<sup>26</sup> This rejects the very foundation on which much of the criticism against Broken

## Concluding Remarks

Broken Windows emerged in 1982 in a seminal article by Kelling and Wilson, who postulated that untreated signs of blight (one broken window) in a neighborhood will beget further blight (more broken windows). They argued that increased disorder will result in increased crime because social control mechanisms in the community are not strong enough to withstand the negative messages that increased disorder is sending.<sup>27</sup> This approach has been very influential on law enforcement policies. It was adopted by the New York Transit Police, New York Police Department, Boston Police Department, and the COPS Office, as well as in other cities. Crime in New York decreased significantly—more so than in most other cities.

There was little wonder that the widespread practice of Broken Windows and its adoption by major cities, where seemed to have made a measurable difference, attracted a great deal of attention and precipitated research and publications both supporting and criticizing the theory.

It is important to address the criticism raised against Broken Windows. None of the critical studies cited in this article put a real dent in the practice of Broken Windows or swayed major chiefs or professional associations to change their view or acceptance of the theory and the related practices. This is not only due to the popularity of Broken Windows; it is also due to the criticism itself suffering from major theoretical and methodological flaws. The critical research misapplies theories, misses key variables, relies on a single variable, mixes attitudes with behavior, provides erroneous or incomplete measures, employs incorrect units of analysis, ignores social changes, ignores lengthy social processes, or errs by using comparisons that are perhaps irrelevant. In short, research critical of Broken Windows failed to refute it and did not provide convincing evidence that Broken Windows should be discarded.

To be fair to the critical research, it goes up against a difficult challenge in social science. It has to do with the difficulty of designing a true field experimental design that will include all relevant variables on a longitudinal basis and under full control of the research. So, in the same vein of fairness, if crime in New York City will start to swing upward following less aggressive policing, researchers ought to approach that change with caution and not immediately attribute it to changing police policies. Perhaps other variables co-function to impact that change.

Broken Windows is still popular and viable as a key element of community policing. The concept itself is widely practiced by the police, the government, and the private sector. Community policing—and Broken Windows as its subset—provides a formula to fight crime and terrorism: to change crime-causing conditions, a community needs to be proactive; develop appropriate partnerships; and continuously seek to improve physical, social, and economic conditions. ♦

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup>Larry K. Gaines and Victor E. Kappeler, *Policing in America* (Waltham, MA: Elsevier, 2011).
- <sup>2</sup>George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *The Atlantic* (March 1982), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465> (accessed August 25, 2015).
- <sup>3</sup>Robert R. Friedmann, *Community Policing: Comparative Perspectives and Prospects* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).
- <sup>4</sup>Robert R. Friedmann and William J. Cannon, "Homeland Security and Community Policing: Competing or Complementing Public Safety Policies," *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* 4, no. 4 (2007).
- <sup>5</sup>Robert R. Friedmann, "Community Policing: Reinventing the Wheel?" *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 2 (2013): 291–293.
- <sup>6</sup>Kelling and Wilson, "Broken Windows."
- <sup>7</sup>George Kelling and Catherine Coles, *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities* (The Free Press, 1996).
- <sup>8</sup>William J. Bratton, *Turnaround: How America's Top Cop Reversed the Crime Epidemic* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998); Christina Sterbenz, "How New York City Became Safe Again," *Business Insider*, December 2, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/criticism-for-giulianis-broken-windows-theory-2014-12> (accessed August 25, 2015).
- <sup>9</sup>Carolyn Y. Johnson, "Breakthrough on 'Broken Windows,'" *The Boston Globe*, February 8, 2009, [http://www.dcvb-nc.com/cr/Broken\\_Windows-%20Lowell02-08-09.pdf](http://www.dcvb-nc.com/cr/Broken_Windows-%20Lowell02-08-09.pdf) (accessed August 25, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup>Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Linda Steg, "The Spreading of Disorder," *Science* 322 (2008): 1681–1685.
- <sup>11</sup>Daniel Brook, "The Cracks in 'Broken Windows,'" *The Boston Globe*, February 19, 2006, [http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/02/19/the\\_cracks\\_in\\_broken\\_windows/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/02/19/the_cracks_in_broken_windows/?page=full) (accessed August 25, 2015).
- <sup>12</sup>Matthew C. Schneider, "Broken Windows and Community Policing," *Community Policing Nugget*, *Community Policing Dispatch* 2, no. 1 (January 2009), [http://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/January\\_2009/nugget.htm](http://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/January_2009/nugget.htm) (accessed August 25, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup>Lyndsay N. Boggess and Jon Maskaly, "The Spatial Context of the Disorder–Crime Relationship in a Study of Reno Neighborhoods," *Social Science Research* 43 (January 2014): 168–183.
- <sup>14</sup>Hope Corman and Naci Mocan, "Carrots, Sticks, and Broken Windows," *Journal of Law and Economics* 48 (April 2005): 235–266.
- <sup>15</sup>Joyce McGinnis, "The 'Broken Windows' Theory and Community Supervision: Public Safe is Sometimes a Matter of Appearance," *CSOSA Newslink*, August 2003, [http://www.csosa.gov/newsmedia/newsletter\\_articles/brokenwindowstheory.aspx](http://www.csosa.gov/newsmedia/newsletter_articles/brokenwindowstheory.aspx) >[http://www.csosa.gov/newsmedia/newsletter\\_articles/brokenwindowstheory.aspx](http://www.csosa.gov/newsmedia/newsletter_articles/brokenwindowstheory.aspx) (accessed August 25, 2015).
- <sup>16</sup>Gary Stewart, "Black Codes and Broken Windows: The Legacy of Racial Hegemony in Anti-Gang Civil Injunctions," *The Yale Law Journal* 107, no. 7 (1998): 2249–2279.
- <sup>17</sup>Dorothy E. Roberts, "Foreword: Race, Vagueness, and the Social Meaning of Order-Maintenance Policing," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 89, no. 3 (1999): 775–836.
- <sup>18</sup>Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2009), 129.
- <sup>19</sup>C. R. Sridhar, "Broken Windows and Zero Tolerance: Policing Urban Crimes," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 19 (2006): 1841–1843.
- <sup>20</sup>Bernard E. Harcourt and Jens Ludwig, "Broken Windows: New Evidence from New York City and a Five-City Social Experiment," *University of Chicago Law Review* 73 (2006): 271–320.
- <sup>21</sup>Robert J. Sampson and Stephen W. Raudenbush, "Disorder in Urban Neighborhoods – Does It Lead to Crime?" *Research in Brief*, National Institute of Justice, February 2001, [http://www.scholar.harvard.edu/files/sampson/files/2001\\_nij\\_raudenbush.pdf](http://www.scholar.harvard.edu/files/sampson/files/2001_nij_raudenbush.pdf) (accessed August 25, 2015).
- <sup>22</sup>William Bratton and George Kelling, "No Cracks In 'Broken Windows' Strategy," *National Review Online*, February 28, 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/no-cracks-in-broken-windows-strategy> (accessed August 26, 2015).
- <sup>23</sup>Jacinta M. Gau and Travis C. Pratt, "Revisiting Broken Windows Theory: Examining the Sources of the Discriminant Validity of Perceived Disorder and Crime," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 4 (2010): 758.
- <sup>24</sup>Bruce D. Johnson, Andrew Golub, and James McCabe, "The International Implications of Quality-of-Life Policing as Practiced in New York City," *Police Practice and Research* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17–29.
- <sup>25</sup>John R. Lott, Jr., *More Guns, Less Crime: Understanding Crime and Gun Control Laws*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- <sup>26</sup>Joshua C. Hinkle and Sue-Ming Yang, "A New Look into Broken Windows: What Shapes Individuals' Perceptions of Social Disorder?" *Journal of Criminal Justice* 42, no.1 (2014): 26–35.
- <sup>27</sup>Kelling and Wilson, "Broken Windows."

Please cite as

Robert R. Friedmann, "Broken Windows and Policing," *The Police Chief* 82 (October 2015): 60–65.

[Top](#)

From The Police Chief, vol. LXXXII, no. 10, October 2015. Copyright held by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 515 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 USA.

[Return to Article](#)

The official publication of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.  
The online version of the Police Chief Magazine is possible through a grant from the IACP Foundation. To learn more about the IACP Foundation, click here.

All contents Copyright © 2003 - 2015 International Association of Chiefs of Police. All Rights Reserved.  
Copyright and Trademark Notice | Member and Non-Member Supplied Information | Links Policy

44 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA USA 22314 phone: 703.836.6767 or 1.800.THE IACP fax: 703.836.4543  
Created by Matrix Group International, Inc.©