

# **'BROKEN WINDOWS' LAW ENFORCEMENT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A pair of social scientists, James Q Wilson and George Kelling, explained the new 'Broken Windows' theory of crime sometime twenty years ago. Using a mixture of research findings on policing and 'self-proclaimed common sense', Wilson and Kelling produced a working theory about the role of the police in promoting neighbourhood safety through reducing the fear of crime.

They claimed that if low levels of disorder and deviance are not prioritized by law enforcement, more serious crimes will likely follow. Wilson and Kelling used an analogy that they called 'broken windows' to describe what they perceived to be modern processes of urban decay. Houses, they argued, are generally safe until there are outward signs of disrepair such as broken windows. The presence of these signs of decay initiates a period of rapid decay and deterioration (Crank, 2004:92). They also claimed that when signs of disorder are ignored, problems of violence and delinquency will manifest and begin to spiral out of control. Thus, one way for law enforcement agencies to be effective in reducing crime is to begin by targeting minor problems.

## **CONCEPT**

The image of "Broken Windows" is used to explain how neighbourhoods descend into incivility, disorder and criminality if attention is not paid to the maintenance. It suggests that crimes in our neighbourhood follow a fairly predictable pattern: if various forms of incivilities, disturbances and petty crimes are allowed to go unchecked, overtime the community becomes increasingly fearful, demoralized and fragmented (Hughes: 1998:112). In turn citizens will begin to feel uncomfortable, perceive their neighbourhood as unsafe and curtail their activities. An unrepaired broken window signals to law abiding citizens and criminals alike that no one cares. Gradually other windows in the building will be smashed and this will reinforce the sense that the local community and the authorities have relinquished ownership and that disorder is tolerated. For them, petty disorderly acts, which are not necessarily breaches of the criminal law, trigger a chain reaction that undermines community safety and paves the way for serious criminality.

If a neighbourhood or a street is perceived to be increasingly in disorder and unsafe, people modify their behaviour accordingly. People, fearful of being harassed, will avoid or withdraw from these areas as quickly

as possible and respectable residents, aware that things will deteriorate, will move out or fortify their homes. Only the weak and vulnerable are left behind and this leaves the neighbourhood open to 'colonization' by drug pushers, pimps and prostitutes and other 'street criminals'. It is they who then lay claim to ownership of the streets and who set the appropriate norms of behaviour. Then, they create the conditions within which more serious forms of criminality can flourish.

## **DOES 'BROKEN WINDOWS' LAW ENFORCEMENT WORK?**

While few direct tests of the 'broken windows' theory have been performed, researchers have tested some of the ideas that flow from Wilson and Kelling's argument.

Skogan (1990) was one of the first researchers to examine the relationship of fear and disorder to crime. He reported on a survey of 13,000 residents in 40 neighbourhoods of six different cities and found that crime and fear were linked to disorder. He concluded that this relationship was even stronger than that between poor socioeconomic conditions and crime. He added that disorder preceded crime in the neighbourhoods surveyed.

One method of policing that finds support in Wilson and Kelling's view is the so-called 'aggressive policing'. The police supporters claim that law enforcement agencies must aggressively target minor crimes and disorder problems in order to send a signal that such problems will not be tolerated in the community. Indeed, research by Wilson and Boland (1978) to examine the relationship between aggressive policing and crime found that as the number of traffic tickets issued increased, the serious crime rate declined. Later researches by Sherman (1990) and Sherman, Gartin and Buerger (1989) support a similar conclusion. They found that aggressive enforcement of the laws in crime 'hot spots' causes crime to decline.

In contrast to aggressive policing which focuses on 'tough on crime', 'quality-of-life policing' is intended to make neighbourhoods more pleasant and livable for those whose well-being is threatened by the presence of criminal activities. Quality-of-life policing has found a wealth of support in the law enforcement community (Bratton 1996, Kelling and Bratton 1998) as well as academicians (Roberts 1999, Kelling and Coles 1996).

Sherman (1990) found that focused enforcement of public drinking laws and parking regulations caused citizens to feel safer. However, the strategy did not appear to exert an influence on serious crimes. Another policing strategy that shares the concern of the 'Broken Windows' is 'zero tolerance'. It concerns controlling minor disorders and incivilities and places great emphasis on hard-edged policing. It is argued that 'zero tolerance' policing will help 'reclaim' the streets for respectable, law-abiding people and help overcome the culture of fear syndrome (Furedi 1997).

The latest macro-level research conducted by Warrall (2002) on the effects of 'broken windows' law enforcement on serious crimes in California confirmed that vigorous enforcement of laws against minor crimes can help reduce the future incidence of more serious crimes. Prof. Warrall (2002) indicates that broken windows law enforcement strategies can be effective in reducing more serious crimes. Specifically, the results of this analysis indicate that an increase in arrests for minor offences is associated with a reduction in more serious crimes. In addition, the results also show that an increase in charges filed by District Attorneys for minor offences is also associated with a reduction in more serious crimes.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

The compelling research findings underpinning 'Broken Windows' fed into policy discussions about the need for new approaches to urban policing. What is significant from the last two decades is the nature of police-community relations which has changed as a result of:

- the police claiming that the fight against high profile serious crimes was their priority,
- deploying officers in patrol cars,
- concentrating resources in high-crime or crime prone areas,
- the bureaucratization and professionalization of police work, and
- the emergence of a strident civil rights culture and the decriminalization of victimless crime.

As police officers become more distant from local communities and less able and willing to intervene in petty 'non-police' matters because they have become more passive, lack initiative and 'play-safe' in their routine work, neighbourhoods are at risk of tipping over into disorder. 'De-policing' has a disastrous effect because it means that respectable residents have no support from the authorities (Warrall, 2002).

According to Wilson and Kelling, shifts in policing styles also have certain neighbourhoods and streets exposed to chain reactions. The reason why the public is so supportive of foot patrols even though this particular mode of policing style has been discredited as a method of effective crime control is that it heightens the sense of public safety and the impression of social order. Experienced foot patrol officers with a sense of duty and an aura of authority, intuitively recognize that their primary role is 'order maintenance' and 'community safety' rather than crime fighting or law enforcement.

This form of police work enables officers to become intimately acquainted with law-abiding and respectable citizens as well as criminals and the disreputables. Consequently, the police enjoy the confidence and support of the community because they are effective in responding to and dealing with the 'quality of life' matters that exasperate people on a daily basis. In a neighbourhood where policing is defined as a collaborative effort between patrol officers and the community, there is considerably less likelihood of disorder and incivilities going unchecked and fewer opportunities to break windows with impunity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite its apparent advantages, 'broken windows' law enforcement has been criticized for the costs imposed on communities as a result of the more aggressive policing strategies supported by the theory. Some have expressed concerns that the tactics endorsed by 'broken windows' law enforcement can lead to harassment of the innocent. Thus, it is important to take note that, the strategy's potential negative consequences are an important element to be considered before any decision is made to proceed with its implementation.

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