

There Are No Cracks in the Broken Windows

Ideological academics are trying to undermine a perfectly good idea.

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By William Bratton & George Kelling

We've argued for many years that when police pay attention to minor offenses — such as prostitution, graffiti, aggressive panhandling — they can reduce fear, strengthen communities, and prevent serious crime. One of us co-originated (with James Q. Wilson) this theory, which has come to be known as “fixing broken windows”; the other implemented it in New York City, first as chief of the transit police under Mayor David Dinkins, and then more broadly as police commissioner under Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Yet despite the demonstrable success of this theory, some criminologists and sociologists continue to attack it, with arguments that are factually and philosophically false. Policymakers should not be misled by these misrepresentations into returning our cities to the failed police policies of the past.

According to a recent *Boston Globe* article by Daniel Brook, for instance, “scholars are starting to question whether fixing broken windows really fixes much at all.” In fact, the theory always had its critics. Some were anti-police groups seizing any opportunity to detract from police achievements. Others were liberals who deeply resented Giuliani and his policies.

An early charge of these critics was that the police had to be “cooking the books.” They abandoned this argument, though, as the homicide rate in New York City plunged, from 2,262 murders in 1990 to 629 in 1998; it's hard to hide that many bodies.

Others argued that crime reductions came with an unacceptable level of police harassment and brutality. This charge was not sustainable, either. Police shootings, and complaints against police, actually declined in New York City during the Giuliani years. In 1998, police shootings reached their lowest level since the 1970s, when data on police shootings was first recorded.

The most sustained attack on broken windows and NYPD achievements has not been practical or factual, but political and ideological. Many social scientists are wedded to the idea that crime is caused by the structural features of a capitalist society — especially economic injustice, racism, and poverty. They assume that true crime reduction can come only as the result of economic reform, redistribution of wealth, and elimination of poverty and racism.

Responding to such academic criticism is difficult when it claims support in “scientific” evidence. While challenges to their scientific research on the basis of research design, sampling methodology, data interpretation, or misrepresentation of theories can come across as academic quibbling, these elements of research lie at the core of the issue and determine the validity of conclusions reached.

Take the attacks of University of Chicago law professor Bernard Harcourt. To debunk broken windows, Harcourt re-analyzed Northwestern University's Professor Wesley Skogan's *Disorder and decline: Crime and the spiral of decay in American neighborhoods*, originally presented in 1990. Skogan's original findings, however, supported the link between disorder and serious crime.

To dispense with that inconvenience, Harcourt omitted from his analysis two neighborhoods with strong relationships between disorder and crime.

Harvard sociology professor Robert Sampson and University of Michigan education professor Stephen Raudenbush, criticizing broken windows in *The American Sociological Review*, were similarly selective. To measure levels of disorder, they filmed neighborhoods systematically — but only between 7 A.M. and 7 P.M., when light was sufficient for their cameras. That's like looking for lost car keys under the lamppost because that's where the light is good, not because that's where the keys were lost. Missed in this approach were bar closings, early-morning drug sales, prostitution, and other forms of disorder that take place between dusk and dawn.

Sampson and Raudenbush also misrepresented the broken windows hypothesis. They claimed that broken windows posits a *direct* link between disorder and serious crime. From the first presentation of broken windows we have argued, to the contrary, that the link, while clear and strong, is *indirect*. Citizen fear, created by disorder, leads to weakened social controls, thus creating the conditions in which crime can flourish.

It's easy for academics to claim that they have “disproved” broken windows. It fits nicely into a sound bite. More carefully considered evaluations of the theory, which we welcome, require complex and subtle reasoning, less easily formulated for general readers. Nevertheless, this research is available to those who seek it out. Harvard researcher Anthony Braga, and others, have conducted policy studies in Jersey City, New Jersey, and in other areas, that support broken windows. The recent critics ignore their research.

What particularly galls police about these critiques is that ivory-tower academics — many of whom have never sat in a patrol car, walked or bicycled a beat, lived in or visited regularly troubled violent neighborhoods, or collected any relevant data of their own “on the ground” — cloak themselves in the mantle of an empirical “scientist” and produce “findings” indicating that broken windows has been disproved. Worse, they allege that police have had little to do with the declines in crime. Police don't have time for these virtual-reality theories; they do their work in the real world.

In Los Angeles, where Bratton has been chief since 2002, the LAPD has reduced crime by 26 percent overall, and homicides by 25 percent in three years, using many strategies, but always emphasizing order-restoration. These achievements in Los Angeles, like those in New York and in other cities, prove that broken windows is, in fact, thriving.

Fixing broken windows is not the panacea for all crime problems. But it's a proven base on which to build. Research suggests that citizens — especially minorities — appreciate it; it reduces fear; and it has an impact on serious crime.

— *William J. Bratton, chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, was chief of the New York City Transit Police from 1990 to 1991, and New York City police commissioner from 1994 to 1996. George Kelling is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and a professor in the School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers Newark University.*