



How Broken Windows Do —and Do Not— Matter

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“Broken windows theory” has been one of the most influential – and controversial – perspectives generated by the social sciences in the last thirty years. According to this theory, signs of urban disorder such as graffiti, panhandling, and dilapidation can directly hurt affected neighborhoods – either by encouraging serious crime or by harming the health of residents. This perspective informs “zero-tolerance” policing, which operates on the assumption that cracking down on low-level misdemeanors can head off serious crimes. Critics of zero-tolerance policing say it can be counterproductive, by encouraging racial profiling and stoking contention between police and people in vulnerable communities.

A more fundamental issue remains unresolved, however: Do the basic tenets of broken windows theory hold true? We have tackled this question by assembling and reviewing all studies that tested the effects of disorder on residents, including hundreds of studies that explore a variety of outcomes and use different research methodologies. Our review specifically probed the impact of neighborhood disorder on crime and public health, and we find little support for key claims in broken windows theory. This brief summarizes our findings and suggests alternative ways for policymakers to think about disorder in urban areas.

Little Evidence for Broken Windows Theory

Does disorder lead to crime in neighborhoods? Proponents of this claim believe that disorder signals that crime will go unpunished. People inclined toward criminal activity and aggression, the argument goes, will be emboldened by signs of neighborhood disorder to perpetrate serious crimes; and other members of the community will perceive the environment as threatening and retreat from public spaces. However, our review of available studies found no consistent evidence that disorder induces higher levels of aggression or makes residents feel more negative toward the neighborhood.

We also assessed evidence for three pathways through which proponents of this theory posit that disorder worsens public health. We considered whether disorder discourages physical activity, whether it encourages risky behavior, and whether disorder may create signals that worsen people’s mental health. We do find that perceived disorder consistently predicts lower mental health and self-reported health problems, as well as associated problems such as substance abuse. But we find no evidence that neighborhood disorder leads to other risky behaviors, like unprotected sex, or to diminished physical activity.

In both of our reviews, claims in support of broken windows theory disproportionately came from studies that relied on weak research designs. Two deficiencies were widespread. Many studies failed to consider key variables, such as socioeconomic status, that can account for positive correlations between disorder and criminal behavior. What is more, the strongest evidence in favor of broken windows’ claims comes from studies that measure disorder via surveys completed by the same people whose experiences were in

question. People's pessimism about the maintenance of their neighborhoods could be confounded with their worries about crime or associated with the mental health problems many report. Such associations are not evidence that neighborhood disorder directly causes misbehavior or undermines wellbeing.

Alternative Perspectives on the Effects of Disorder

Our results question the premises of broken windows theory – especially as applied to policing. However, we are not saying that disorder is irrelevant, just that we need to reconsider how and why disorder matters in the urban landscape. Here we articulate four perspectives that are consistent with current research, each providing its own distinct logic for why disorder matters. These perspectives can prove useful for policymakers and practitioners.

The psychosocial model of disadvantage. Sociologists have argued that many of the negative outcomes experienced by disadvantaged people are attributable to high levels of stress in their daily lives and environments. Disorder contributes to such stress and is ever-present in poor neighborhoods. We find support for this perspective, because our reviews show that residents of neighborhoods with high levels of disorder consistently have diminished mental health.

Ecological advantages for criminals. Disorder may not elicit crime, but it can provide advantages for people already inclined toward such activity. Abandoned buildings, for example, offer hiding spots for illicit drugs, guns, or other contraband. Municipalities might be wise to fix disorderly places that facilitate crime, rather than seeking to eliminate all forms of disorder.

Social escalation. Some forms of social disorder may be precursors of serious violence. For instance, studies have shown that domestic disputes, landlord-tenant troubles, and other types of interpersonal conflict in neighborhoods do tend to predict increases in violent crime. If left unchecked, such interpersonal conflicts can escalate or spill into public spaces. This finding suggests the value of policing that works with community members to short-circuit social disputes, an approach in many ways at odds with zero-tolerance efforts that target minor infractions such as panhandling.

Custodianship. Long before broken windows theory was first formulated in 1982, urbanists emphasized neighborhood disorder, but as a symptom of social health rather than a cause of crime. Custodial steps that community members take to prevent or eliminate disorder can be a key indicator of how well communities accomplish shared goals. Hundreds of cities have implemented 311 call systems to engage residents in maintaining public spaces and infrastructure – a theme further explored by O'Brien in a recent book on "the urban commons."

Our systematic research reviews found little support for the broken windows theory and zero-tolerance policing. Nevertheless, we do find evidence that neighborhood disorder harms mental health; and we conclude that policy and practice seeking to improve urban life would be better served by other perspectives on neighborhood disorder.

Read more in Daniel T. O'Brien, Chelsea Farrell, Brandon C. Welsh, "Looking Through Broken Windows: The Impact of Neighborhood Disorder on Aggression and Fear of Crime is an Artifact of Research Design," *Annual Review of Criminology and Social Science & Medicine*, 2, (2019): 53-71; and Daniel T.

O'Brien, *The Urban Commons: How Data and Technology Can Rebuild Our Communities*, (Harvard University Press, 2018).