

Broken windows theory within a community policing model

[Law](#), [Criminology](#)



The notion that serious crime is stemmed from minor disorders and fear of crime was a well-developed hypothesis in the 1980s by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling (Hinkle & Weisburd, 2006). Wilson and Kelling (1982) had coined this theory as “broken windows”. Broken windows theory states that disorder in a society causes the residents of the society to develop fear (Hinkle & Weisburd, 2008). The authors go on to state that fear is the fueling source behind delinquent behavior, which resulted in higher rates of serious crimes (2008).

The main concept of this theory illustrated that if police were to target and eliminate minor disorders through community policing, it would have an overall impact on the reduction of crime rates (Gau & Pratt, 2008). Broken windows theory was not accepted by all, in fact it sparked a great deal of controversy (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). The opposing views of broken windows theory argued that it was too weak because of the lack thereof empirical evidence proving the correlation between implementation of broken windows policing methods and decrease in crime (Harcourt, 1998).

The purpose of this essay was to compare and contrast the two different perspectives on the broken windows theory. This paper shall also conclude whether the broken windows theory can be successfully used within a community policing model. In my opinion the broken windows theory had enough substantial groundwork presented that it was successfully used within community policing. To begin, according to Clyde Cronkhite (2004) the theory was true. Cronkhite connects “disorder and crime as part of a developmental sequence” (2008, p. 46). The main concept that Kelling and

Wilson stated, was that if small minor disorders such as littering, public drinking, graffiti etc. were tolerated in a society than it would spiral out creating more serious crimes (Cronkhite, 2004). Cronkhite (2004) gave reasoning behind their theory stating that serious crimes stem from criminals assuming that once there was social acceptance of minor delinquent behaviors, the community became vulnerable and were less likely to act against such behaviors. Broken windows entails a process whereby unchecked visible disorder signals to residents that community lacks social control. This assumption is that the law-abiding citizens and the criminal alike are attuned to this signal” (Gau & Pratt, 2008, p. 164). Gau and Pratt (2008) gave an explanation as to why criminals tend to flood the streets when minor disorders are present in society. The authors reasoned that it is because the general public sought shelter or safety off of the streets which in turn allowed criminals to occupy the area (Wilson & Kelling, as cited in Gau & Pratt, 2008).

From personal experience in third year of University I attended a midnight street walk of downtown Toronto, which allowed me to draw on the same conclusions as Gaa and Pratt. During the street walk it was clear that certain geographical areas provided an outlet for further crime to exist based on social senses, such as Regent Park. Also, based on physical evidence that remained on George St in front of Seaton House; needles on the floor, graffiti on the walls and empty alcohol bottles not only concluded that this area was a favorable environment for crime, but that indeed some form of illegal acts had occurred.

Furthermore, Gaa and Pratt (2010) discussed how the perceptions of disorder in a community instilled fear into its members and how fear created social disengagement from the community. The broken windows perspective outlined the cognitive thought behind what individuals viewed as disorders (Cronkrite, 2004). In other words, disorder was always in the eye of the beholder, which in this case was the community. The way the community interpreted the delinquent behavior for example littering, determined whether the community was going to reject or accept it into their societal values.

Based on the community's decision we must consider an outsider's perspective on such behavior as well. James McCabe (2008) goes on to talk about how it was not the physical aspect of the act (litter in itself) but rather the symbolism it created that led to an increase in crime. McCabe also stated that if individuals saw littering as a threat to social order, this threat would no longer be overlooked or considered unimportant, instead littering would be viewed as a key catalyst to a chain of negligent behavior (2008).

Fear was a result of the negligent behavior, fear also generated attachment to the visible characteristics of delinquency, helping outsiders derive a negative stigma about a community (J. Irwin, personal communication, Oct 3rd, 2012). Tepperman and Curtis (2011), provided an explanation as to why crime occurs based on the social functionalist approach coined by Emile Durkheim "in order to have a well-functioning society it requires values, cohesion and social control" (p. 19).

This theory was based on the principal that social problems are socially created (Tepperman and Curtis, 2011), the social functionalist approach supported the original work on the broken windows theory, which stated that minor disorders are classified and looked at based on individual perception (source). Structural functionalist approach established that problems in a society originate from the observation of others' consequences (Tepperman and Curtis, 2011). In this particular case the consequences of the minor delinquent acts created greater chaos.

To combat the growth in crime rates in any geographical area, "broken windows philosophy entails addressing the minor problems in a community before they create conditions that welcome and/or permit more serious offences" (McCabe, 2008, p. 291). McCabe (2008) also theorized that if you were to control the disorder you could then control the crime. The outcome this theory had on police response was that it created the order maintenance policing strategy (Cronkhite, 2004). This was the gateway introduction to community based policing.

Broken windows theory demanded that there be community involvement (McCabe, 2008). The positive correlation between community policing and reduction of crime rates, was not necessarily in the affects the police have on the disorder itself, but rather the sense of order being restored into the community through hands on approach (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). When the community saw active policing, and a restored sense of community, people began to feel safer within society and were more inclined to help with community restoration initiatives (McCabe, 2008).

The order maintenance strategy operated based on a community policing model, which is known as The Ontario Association of Chief of Police (OACP) Model (G. Hanna, personal communication, Sept 26th 2012). Wilson and Kelling's theory was based on the social science experiment of Phillip Zimbardo, who had studied the snowballing effect on vandalism at the Stanford University Campus parking lot New York City in 1969, once a vacant car was left unattended to (McCabe, 2008).

Kelling and Wilson (1982), indicated that disorder and crime have a strong positive correlation based on the yielded results from Zimbardo's experiment. The first to implement the order maintenance approach was the New York Transit Authority (NYTA) (Corman & Mocan, 2005). The NYTA tackled the Subway vandalism problem head on, they eliminated graffiti, and arrested those who tried to cheat the subway fare system (Corman & Mocan, 2005). Bratton the main leader in organizing the initiative, stated that the theory was accurate (Corman & Mocan, 2005). Bratton went on to explain that there was a dramatic drop in crime rates committed in the subways following this approach, thus backing up the broken windows theory (date). After realizing the positive results of aggressive order maintenance strategy, the broken windows theory was then put to the test by the NYPD (Corman & Mocan, 2005). The NYPD were also only reaping the benefits from this decision. Deploying this strategy had an impact on the offender's belief that the risk of apprehension was high, thus the NYPD sent a clear message to the community that law and order prevail over petty and serious crimes (Sampson & Cohen, 1988).

Immediately after the implementation of order maintenance, NYPD saw significantly decreasing numbers in serious crimes such as homicide, robbery and rape (Corman & Mocan, 2005), the city ended up reaching its all-time low. Kelling in his later work wrote, " Both experience and substantial formal research demonstrated that disorder left untended ultimately leads to serious crime... Fighting disorder, by solving the problems that cause it, is clearly one the best ways to fight serious crime, reduce fear, and give citizens what they actually want from the police force". Kelling 1999, p. 29 as cited in Gau & Pratt, 2008, p. 167). Another Dutch researchers conducted an experiment that revealed how visible social disorder increased an individual`s temptation to indulge in delinquent behaviour (Kaplan, 2008). A Dutch researcher, Keizer tested this theory by; " placing an envelope containing a 5 euro-note hanging from a mailbox... when the mailbox was clean, 13 percent of passers-by stole the envelope. When the mailbox was surrounded by trash, the percentage jumped to 25 percent, and then 27 percent when it was covered by graffiti. (Kaplan, 2008, p. 1). It was evident that the presence of litter (minor disorder) increased the rate of crime double fold. This Netherland experiment bolstered the broken windows theory (Kaplan, 2008). On the contrary, these results fueled the debate of whether the broken windows theory was the driving force behind crime reduction in the area. While researchers tried to determine the root causes to a particular crime, the macro-social approach shed light on crime originating from " poverty, unemployment, racism, class conflict, etc. " (McCabe, 2008, p. 92) Kennedy and Moore (1995) believed that the police did not have direct impact on these crime causing issues, therefore no direct impact on crime.

Harcourt was the main author to challenge the broken windows theory. He scrutinized the theory as well as the data gathered by author Skogan, stating that although there were several measures of serious crime (assault, sexual assault, and burglary) available in Skogan's research, he only disclosed the findings on crime correlated to robbery (Harcourt, 1998). This made Skogan's work discreditable and biased.

Another reason why broken windows was said to be invalid is due to people's perceptions on the relationship between crime and disorder; whether or not they are separate entities (Corman & Mocan, 2005). " If disorder and crime seem to be different in the eyes of neighborhood residents, then order maintenance policing may have a fighting chance at crime reduction. If however, the two phenomena merge into one in the minds of those residents, then broken windows theory and its accompanying order maintenance policing strategies will need to be rethought. (Gau & Pratt, 2008, p. 170). Furthermore, the main concept of broken windows theory was attacked. The idea that if disorder is not found frightening, citizens remain on the streets, therefore streets are not being opened to criminals, thus criminal behaviour would not take place (Hinkle & Weisburd, 2006). Interestingly, the studies conducted against the theory have not given much attention to the relationship between disorder and fear, which was surprising given its importance in the model. (Hinkle & Weisburd, 2006).

Studies based on broken windows are too inconsistent to be able to draw a definite line as to whether or not the theory was accurate and the possibility of integration into community policing. Researchers have stated that there

are statistically better predictors of crime such as community stability and collective efficacy of the neighborhood, therefore police should not focus their time into “fixing” the broken windows theory but rather dedicate their time to other predictors (Weisburd & Braga, 2007).

Consequently, if police were to dedicate their time on the other factors rather than on minor disorders there would be less objectivity in regards to police involvement (Weisburd & Braga, 2007). The authors point out that although all individuals would be in favour of collective efficacy, it was hard to address and improve upon (2007). Making it easier said than done. These other statistical predictors of crime were rational and helpful in regards determining all possible causes of crime, but they were far too ambiguous of concepts to be solved through practice (Weisburd & Braga, 2007).

Thus broken windows theory was a practical option, it was applicable to any community and it was able to be implemented quickly. According to the OACP Model order maintenance policing would be considered as part of the community mobilization and crime prevention sector. This sector allows the police to take charge and impact minor disorders preventing future crime while encouraging community members to get involved, thus transitioning toward safer communities and to the ultimate goal of low need for police assistance (G. Hanna, personal communication, Sept 11th, 2012).

In conclusion, the macro-social approaches, lack thereof empirical evidence, relationship between fear and disorder as well as perceptions on social disorders were the critiques made against the broken windows theory. Despite these critiques, the theory proved to be true through real life

application. Therefore I draw to the conclusion that it was and continues to be successfully incorporated into the current policing model. If police services in Ontario dedicate more time to target the social disorders visible in our communities, they will help build positive relations in the community.

By restoring order in our communities we are another step closer to eradicating serious crimes (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). References Corman, H. , & Mocan, N. (2005, April). Carrots, sticks, and broken windows. *Journal of Law and Economics*, 48(1), 235-266. doi: 10. 1086/425594 Cronkhite, C. (2004, March 1). Illusions of order: The false promise of broken windows policing (Book). *Criminal Justice Review (Georgia State University)*, 29(1), 245-248. Retrieved October 1, 2012, from [http://web.ebscohost.com.subzero.lib.uoguelph.ca/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?id=50642dd3-c8cc-4a96-aa51-1baee6674c01%40sessionmgr114&vid=1&hid=107](http://web.ebscohost.com/subzero/lib/uoguelph.ca/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?id=50642dd3-c8cc-4a96-aa51-1baee6674c01%40sessionmgr114&vid=1&hid=107) Gau, J. M. , & Pratt, T. C. (2008, May 1). Broken windows or window dressing? Citizens (in)ability to tell the difference between disorder and crime. *Criminology & Public Policy* , 7(2), 163-194. doi: 10. 1111/j. 1745-9133. 2008. 00500. x Gau, J. M. , & Pratt, T. C. (2010, August). Revisiting broken windows theory: Examining the sources of the discriminant validity of perceived disorder and crime. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38(4), 758-766. Retrieved October 1, 2012, from