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Author Name: Jalaj Kumar Rohit

THEORY OF BROKEN WINDOW

Introduction

One of the controversies that will never stop is whether or not “Broken Windows” police strategies succeed, mostly because there are so many conflicting understandings of what Broken Windows entails. Whenever anyone addresses Broken Glass, which edition could the question be? “Says Jonathan Mummolo, a political scientist at Princeton University, who is suspicious of Broken Windows-linked arguments regarding the success of stop-and-frisk tactics and high-volume prosecutions of misdemeanors.

Discussion

The word “Broken Glass” derives from an essay by criminologist George L. Kelling and political scientist James Q. Wilson in the 1982 Atlantic journal. “Social psychologists and police officers appear to agree,” They said, “that if a window is broken and left unrepaired in a home, all the other windows will soon be broken.”¹ As observational evidence for this claim, Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo, who planned to park one vehicle with the hood up and no license plate on the street in the deprived New York City region of the Bronx, and another on the street in wealthy Palo Alto, California, gave Kelling and Wilson a smart if not an entirely dispositive late-1960s experiment. The Bronx car was targeted by robbers and vandals and robbed of all its worth in 24 hours, while the other one in Palo Alto remained untouched for more than a week. Furthermore, with a sledgehammer, Zimbardo crushed it in a few places. Locals had ripped the vehicle apart within a few hours and flipped it upside down.

However, Kelling and Wilson’s report focused mainly on policing tactics and what they see as the police’s need to stick to their conventional position in keeping order rather than only

¹ Adam J. McKee, *Broken windows theory*, BRITANNICA (Dec 14 2018, 10:06 AM), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/broken-windows-theory>.

attempting to solve crimes. Zimbardo then crushed it with a sledgehammer in a few places. Locals had ripped the vehicle apart within a matter of hours and flipped it upside down.

However, Kelling and Wilson's report was mostly about policing methods and what they saw as the police's need to stick to their usual position in keeping order rather than only attempting to solve crimes. Kelling and William Bratton, the first transit police chief, appointed in 1990, targeted anarchy on trains and stations, cracking down, among other items, on panhandlers and turnstile-jumpers. Newly elected Mayor Rudolph Giuliani placed Bratton in charge of the entire New York Police Department in 1994, and violence decreased in the area. The experiment was seen as an outstanding achievement. At least, that is how Bratton and Kelling claim it; there is a convincing two-part episode of last year's Reply All podcast that gives much of the credit to transit police officer turned Deputy Police Commissioner Jack Maple, whose crime-tracking device CompStat helped the police to help recognise patterns and hot points for the crime that they wanted to pursue. In this account, Bratton comes out perfect, but Giuliani does not. The mayor tried to press Maple for further convictions of minor wrongdoers, even though crime rates dropped. Maple refused, and he and Bratton both left the department in 1996. Maple died in 2001; from 2014 to 2016, Bratton returned to manage the NYPD and espouse his version of Broken Glass.

Crime, however, kept falling. Not only in New York but, anywhere in the U.S.

The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime

Violent crime rates are also much higher than before the 1970s, although it is likely that this is an artifact of increased crime detection and authorities treating such crimes more seriously (for example, domestic violence). The homicide rate is around as it was in 1960, and is less likely to be impacted by those shifts.²

The Fall and Rise of the Murder Rate

Of course, the temptation to attribute this spectacular decline in violence to the police of Smashed Windows was overwhelming to Giuliani and his supporters, but it did not sit well for many scholars. The decline was too high and too common in a few areas to account for police tactics change. Alternative theories ranged from the waning of the crack epidemic, and

² Roger P. Alford, A Broken Windows Theory of International Corruption, 73 OHIO St. L.J. 1253 (2012).

academics presented the Baby Boomers’ aging to legislation minimising youth lead contamination and the liberalisation of abortion laws.³

Several others attempt the direct results of policing tactics to check out. The hypothesis that targeting disorderly conduct decreased violence was backed up by some research, but others were not. In 2004, a study on “Fairness and Efficiency of Policing” by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine supported Kelling and Wilson’s original statement that “disorder should be an important subject in neighbourhood crime prevention.” However, they found no compelling proof that arresting many offenders for small offences contributed to decreases in violent crime.⁴

In fact, even Kelling argued that “I have never been long on arrests as an outcome.” (Kelling died this May; Wilson in 2012.) The one police tactic for which “significant proof of success” was identified by the 2004 National Academies panel was “problem solving in hot spots,” that is, adaptive, not inherently arrest-focused approaches to resolving localised crime issues. Meanwhile, some essential findings were given by Broken Windows study that did not rely on police conduct. Previous reports of the effect of physical disturbance (i.e. real broken windows) on violence, with mixed results, have been undertaken. But with a 2008 paper in the journal Science that published the findings of an experiment on whether disorderly situations in the Netherlands city of Groningen-graffiti on a wall behind a no-graffiti sign, bikes locked to a fence without parking sign, shopping carts littered around a parking lot, etc.-the issue seems to have taken on new life. The University of Groningen’s Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg and Linda Steg argued that, indeed, “Signs of improper conduct such as vandalism or broken windows contribute to other inappropriate behaviour (e.g., trash, stealing), which in turn results in other standards being inhibited.”⁵

University of Pennsylvania epidemiologist Charles started searching for further ways to examine the idea that disorder spreads, motivated in part by that research. He designed a series of quasi-experimental studies along with Penn criminologist John MacDonald and other researchers. They contrasted crime around abandoned buildings in Philadelphia that had been fitted by their owners with new doors and windows in line with new city law and identical ones that had not, and around unoccupied lots that had been cleaned up by the Pennsylvania

³ *Id.*

⁴ George Kelling & James Q. Wilson, *Broken Windows The police and neighbourhood safety*, THE ATLANTIC (March 1982) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/>.

⁵ S.N. Matwejeff, *Criminal Investigation of Broken Window Panes*, 2 AM. J. POLICE Sci. 148 (1931).

Horticultural Society The results: a 39% drop in gun crime around the fixed-up abandoned homes, and a 5% decrease around the vacant lots. More experiments have since followed in what sociologist Eric Klinenberg of New York University calls “one of the most stimulating research experiments in contemporary social science.”

One research found similarities between signs of physical disorder contained in Boston calls for non-emergency care and related crimes; another found that city blocks in Detroit were more vulnerable to violence with lesser population densities and higher numbers of liquor licences, while others found that home foreclosures in Chicago and the Chandler and Glendale neighborhoods of Phoenix have carried jobs. A group of researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology put together a Google-Street-View-based instrument to “predict the perceived protection of one million streetscapes,” while it has been mostly used to predict other items so far.

The results of crime due to physical disabilities that have been reported are not necessarily large, and some reports have found none at all. However, in a 2018 review of police tactics, a group of the National Academies referenced the findings of Keizer and Branas and found that evidence for what it termed “Broken Windows Policing II” was both “solid” (that is, the experiments were well designed) and “positive” for sweeping up vacant lots. And other “place-based, problem-solving activities to mitigate social disorder.” “As was practiced in New York City before being rolled back after 2013 in the face of court decisions and political criticism, more generalized stop-question-régime scored only a “medium” and “mixed,” as did “Broken Windows Policing I,” which panel defined as “high-volume arrests for certain misdemeanors.

Conclusion

The message here is that it eliminates violence by removing broken windows, while police attempt to preserve order. In part because the literature is huge, and because police tactics have ranged too broadly, the data on the latter is more mixed. Princeton sociologist Patrick Sharkey wrote of a growing consensus in his 2018 review of the causes and effects of the excellent crime downturn, “Uneasy Harmony,” that “more cops on the street translates into less crime.” However, it is astonishing how little of the policy movement of Broken Windows has centred on the physical forms of chaos that created the concept in the first place. They introduced Broken Windows, but they attacked individuals instead of attacking windows,” says Princeton’s Mummolo, he studies police but has not been interested in Broken Windows II study focused on the physical disorder.” “It was too metaphorical, maybe.”