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Press Release

Doubts about Broken Windows Theory

Sociologists at the Universities of Mannheim and Munich criticise zero tolerance policy

A wall covered in graffiti, litter on the street, a broken window – the first outward signs of urban decay can trigger a downward spiral, paving the way for serious crimes such as robbery or murder. This is the basic idea underlying the popular Broken Windows Theory. 32 years after it was first published in the US magazine *The Atlantic*, it remains more controversial than ever. Now a scientific study by sociologists Tobias Wolbring and Marc Keuschnigg casts further doubt on the theory.

In their essay “Broken Windows” published in 1982, US criminologist George L. Kelling and political scientist James Q. Wilson used a picture of a broken window to symbolise the physical and moral decay of an urban district. During the 1990s their Broken Windows Theory prompted the New York Police Department to introduce a zero tolerance policy and rigorously pursue minor misdemeanours such as fare-dodging, begging or illegal parking.

The success of this policy would appear to justify its introduction, at least on the basis of the statistics in New York, where recent years have seen a significant decline in serious crimes such as robbery, rape, or murder. In fact New York now has the lowest number of murders since statistics first began 52 years ago – a total of 333 cases were registered in 2014, compared with over 2,200 as recently as 1990. However, critics of the Broken Windows Theory and zero-tolerance policing claim that the murder rate has gone down largely because of the economic upturn, demographic change and the decline of the crack cocaine epidemic.

For years there was a lack of reliable scientific evidence for the effectiveness of a zero-tolerance policy. It was not until 2008 that the Dutch social psychologists Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Linda Steg identified patterns of behaviour in field studies that indicated the existence of a downwards spiral in certain urban districts. However, the nature of the experiment they carried out was far removed from the working environment of the police in American cities: The Dutch researchers attached flyers to the handlebars of bicycles parked in an alley near a shopping street in Groningen and observed how many of them ended up as litter on the ground. In some cases the walls of the surrounding buildings were clean and in others they were covered in simple graffiti. When the alley walls were clean, only one

bicycle owner in three discarded the flyer in the street; when there was graffiti, 69 percent did so – more than twice as many. In a second experiment, Keizer and colleagues demonstrated that the presence of graffiti and litter can even encourage passers-by to steal. There is, of course, a considerable difference between stealing a small sum of money – in this case an envelope containing a banknote – and capital crimes such as murder. But the study, which was published in the specialist magazine *Science*, is still regarded as one of the best empirical proofs of the Broken Windows Theory.

Now social scientists Tobias Wolbring (University of Mannheim) and Marc Keuschnigg (Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich) have reproduced the experiments carried out by Keizer and colleagues. They found that, as in the case of Keizer's experiment in Groningen, passers-by in Munich were more inclined to throw the flyer on the ground when there was already litter lying around. A tendency to cross the road on a red light also increased when other pedestrians were observed doing so. "Once the first norm violation has occurred – for example littering – people are less inhibited about committing further violations," explains Wolbring. Most surprisingly, the experiments carried out by Keuschnigg and Wolbring also indicate that the imitation effect is strongest in districts with higher social capital. "An external stimulus such as the placing of litter is even more effective in areas where one would least expect it." In other words, the Broken Windows Theory seems to work particularly well in areas where prevention of crime is least required.

In a further experiment, Keuschnigg and Wolbring investigated whether a disorderly environment would incite passers-by not only to violate minor norms but even to commit a crime. The researchers placed stamped and addressed envelopes near public mail boxes, with either a 5, 10, or 100 euro banknote visible inside. "It appears that as soon as a considerable sum of money is concerned, passers-by are no longer guided by weak environmental stimuli," says Wolbring. "Whatever the physical state of the surroundings, the proportion of people stealing the envelope containing 100 euros did not change." In other words, the researchers' observations suggest that while broken windows and litter can provoke minor violations of norms, they do not necessarily lead to more severe criminal actions such as theft, robbery, or murder. According to the University of Mannheim academic, the findings raise doubts on the downward spiral predicted by the Broken Windows Theory. The behaviour of passers-by changed for the worse especially in those districts in which one would have least expected it. "In particular people living in districts with high social capital changed their behaviour under the influence of external stimuli such as litter or other indications of disorder. In the light of our results, the police approach of zero tolerance towards minor misdemeanours especially in so-called 'problem districts' or 'crime hot-spots' would seem at the very least to be questionable," says Wolbring.

[On the study \(Rationality and Society, Vol. 27, P. 96-126, 2015\)](#)

Background: “Broken Windows – Broken Lives” – protests against police violence

Even though American cities are safer today than they were 20 years ago, zero-tolerance policing remains extremely controversial. In recent months alone, thousands of US citizens have demonstrated against police violence in New York, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago and Washington. One of their slogans was: “Broken windows! Broken lives!” The unrest was triggered by the killing of several Afro-Americans including the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson and the violent suffocation of Eric Garner in New York. According to an analysis by *USA Today* based on FBI figures, an average of 96 black people per year were killed by white policemen between 2007 and 2012.

The New York Police Department's ‘Stop-and-Frisk’ strategy has been the subject of criticism for years because of the way it mainly targets minorities: Of 4.4 million people stopped and searched between January 2004 and January 2012, 84 percent were Blacks or Hispanics and only 16 percent were white. Overall, only six percent of all 4.4 million cases resulted in convictions. In 2013, in response to a complaint from the *Center for Constitutional Rights*, a US federal court declared the police ‘Stop-and-Frisk’ practice to be unconstitutional. At the beginning of March the New York Police Department therefore released new, detailed guidelines according to which individuals should only be stopped and frisked in the case of individualized, reasonable suspicion. The guidelines no longer permit police officers to search individuals merely because they are present in a high crime area.

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