POLICY ESSAY

BROKEN WINDOWS: WHY—AND HOW—WE SHOULD TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY

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What is disorder? Wilson and Kelling's seminal 1982 "broken windows" article introduced the concept, at least in spirit. Although they did not give it that name, they focused on what we now call social disorder. Their original list included public gambling, public drinking and urination, street prostitution, congregations of idle men and bands of youths dressed in apparently gang-related apparel, and activities such as panhandling, disturbing the peace, loitering, and vagrancy. Since then, the list has grown to include truant high-schoolers, squeegee men looking for tips, dumpster divers in search of dinner, street preachers armed with bullhorns, "urban campers" in parks under cardboard tents, people with a "street lifestyle," the presence of sexually oriented establishments, street harassment of women, open gambling, threatening phone calls, recreational violence in pubs and clubs, and—in the article by Gau and Pratt (2008, this issue)— "noise" and "dogs running at large." The title of Wilson and Kelling's article implied that the signs of physical decay needed to be addressed as well. In various studies, physical disorders have included dilapidation, abandoned buildings, stripped and burned-out cars, collapsing garages, broken streetlights, junk-filled and unmowed vacant lots, litter, garbage-strewn alleys, alcohol and tobacco advertising, graffiti, and the visible consequences of vandalism.

Taken as a whole, these items constitute an untidy list. In contrast, criminal codes seem to encompass a more bounded and orderly set of prohibitions. What the common crimes listed above have in common, however, is only that legislators do not like them. Otherwise, they also encompass a potpourri of behaviors, motives, and modalities. The *length* of the disorders list is not a problem. The disorder indicators used in any particular research or evaluation project should be selected judiciously for their relevance to the setting, just as no study includes "all" crimes. Disorders were overlooked for a long time by criminologists because many have only a tenuous link to the criminal law or are clearly civil law matters. Many evade attention from the police because they lie on the fringes of being "serious enough" to warrant attention; Albert Reiss (1985) dubbed these disorders "soft crimes." Others items from the list hover in the vicinity of protected rights to speech and assembly; street

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preachers, panhandlers, sex shop operators, and the visibly idle fall in this category. Some items were traditionally overlooked because they were not captured easily by police information systems. Importantly for the police, the "victims" of many disorders do not experience them as incidents but as conditions. They do not know whether it is a police matter; what they know is that they want something done.

Why should we take disorder seriously? Although they have a varying relationship with criminality, what disorders have in common is that they have demonstrably serious consequences for communities. From the beginning, the broken windows argument has principally discussed the effects of disorder at the aggregate level. Wilson and Kelling advanced a list of ideas that researchers have taken up: Disorder undermines the capacity of neighborhoods to defend themselves; those who can do so move away, many of those remaining withdraw from community public life, and everyday uses of public space wither. In their view, the directly criminogenic effects of disorder stem from the attendant decline of informal social control; predatory troublemakers from outside the neighborhood join unruly insiders in creating new possibilities for crime in undefended places. Gambling and drinking can lead to robberies and fights; prostitution and drug sales attract those who prey on the customers. Disorder thus begets an even broader range of problems and can, in short order, inundate an area with serious and victimizing crime.

Not all aspects of this broad view have been tested robustly, and little research has been directed at the neighborhood level where it belongs. I found that a broad, neighborhood-level disorder index constructed from 40 separate community surveys was linked to declining confidence in neighbors, a diminished capacity for collective action, lower levels of neighborhood satisfaction and a desire to move to the suburbs, perceptions of levels and trends in crime, and fear of crime and robbery victimization (Skogan, 1990). I was actually agnostic about what path models would reveal about the last possibility because, in my view, the other things on the list of disorder's consequences would amply justify spending time on them. Others (see Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004) have pointed out that perceived disorders are linked in complex ways to race and class and that structural features of neighborhoods explain why they have disorder problems. This finding is not surprising—almost everything in criminology is correlated strongly with neighborhood structural factors. About half the between-neighborhood variance of my disorder measure could be attributed to poverty, instability, and racial diversity, but where disorder comes from was not the focus of the project. An independent relationship exists between disorder and the outcomes, including robbery victimization.

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Whether disorder is somehow "real" or just "in the eyes of the beholder" and a measure of intolerance has been the subject of considerable discussion. Gau and Pratt's article (2008) sidesteps this question by positing that disorders are "real in their consequences" (nothing in the study explained consequences), but the issue cannot be ignored. Observational studies of selected disorders find high interrater reliabilities, so disorders are "really there" in the empirical tradition; I am not sure why we should think that pairs of students who come in for an hour or so are more accurate raters of local conditions than many pairs of people who live there. One limit of observational studies is that they tend to be conducted during daylight hours, which is when things are visible and it is safer to be looking; thus, observers count many conditions that fall in the physical disorder category (for an example, see Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). Residents are present after dark and on Saturday nights; what we know about the temporal distribution of 911 "disorder" calls (see Weisburd et al., 2006) indicates that they are positioned to observe wild and wooly events much more often. The match between survey and observational measures—a "multi-method" correlation—is another test of the "reality" of disorder, which is perhaps the toughest methodological test in social science (it is a validity test; see Campbell and Stanley, 1963). Do the research observers see the same things as resident observers? To examine this topic, we would like the survey and observational measures to focus on the same specific disorders, but it is not always the case. In Sampson and Raudenbush's (2004) Chicago study, observers looked for many more and really different conditions (including "alcohol/tobacco advertising") than were included in the survey, and this information was placed in the observational index. The neighborhood-level correlation between the two indices still turned out to be +0.62. In a Baltimore study, the correlation between differing survey and observational indices of disorder was again +0.62 (Jang and Johnson, 2001). Some multi-method studies (not that many exist) report weaker links between survey and observational reports of disorder, but more work is called for on this topic. A thorough study would take into account that the upper bound on a validity coefficient is the product of the reliabilities of the measures being cross-validated, for example.

What can be done about disorder? One unfortunate aspect of the conversation about dealing with disorder has been its stilted character. Discussion of policy alternatives by criminologists has revolved around "disorder policing" or (as in Gau and Pratt's article [2008]) "broken windows policing" concepts that are often conflated with "zero tolerance policing." This information is surprising, for at the same time, most criminologists and many sophisticated practitioners would agree that enforcement-oriented policing is *not* always the most effective strategy for

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addressing common crimes. That "we cannot arrest our way out of crime problems" is widely understood in this community. The same is certainly true when it comes to conditions and events that fall in the disorder category. Disorder is addressable by the same kitbag of policy tools that crime experts have lauded. Besides enforcement, the toolbox includes interagency coordination; regulatory leverage created by civil statutes; and the involvement of organized community residents, nonprofit service providers, and the commercial security sector. Like common crimes, the sources and solutions to particular disorders are diverse and highly situational, and tailored, problem-solving approaches to disorder reduction should be the order of the day. Problem solving is a counterpoint to the traditional model of police work, which usually entails responding sequentially to individual events as they are phoned in by victims. Problem solving, on the other hand, calls for examining patterns of incidents to reveal their causes and to help plan how to deal with them proactively. It is most easily applicable to disorders, many of which—as I noted above—are best characterized as conditions rather than as events. Perhaps common crimes and disorders fit the same perceptual factor structure, but it does not mean that their *solutions* are likely to be "one size fits all."

Researchers who observe closely the actual implementation of community policing understand this dynamic well. When neighborhood residents gather to discuss their problems with the police, they inevitably bring a broad spectrum of concerns to the table. They do not make neat legal or bureaucratic distinctions about who is responsible for what, and it turns out that they are as worried about garbage-strewn alleys and graffiti on garage doors as they are about burglary and car theft. In 2,500 police-community meetings we examined in Chicago (see Skogan, 2006), residents discussed 11,221 distinct problems. The largest category, which involved 36% of these concerns, was the social disorder category. Residents talked most about loitering, street prostitution, public drinking, and various fears about teenage misconduct. Next on the list (at 24%) was discussion of street drug markets, which is a common crime. But the third most frequent topic of concern, which constituted 12% of the issues brought up at beat meetings, was physical decay. The issues that residents talked about in this category included graffiti, vandalism, abandoned buildings, abandoned cars, and trash and junk in vacant lots. Even at police-sponsored beat meetings, discussion about individually victimizing crimes like robbery and burglary made up only 9% of the total, which was tied exactly with complaints about parking and traffic problems.

Community policing takes seriously the public's definition of its own problems, which inevitably includes issues that lie outside the traditional competence of the police. An expansion of the police mandate is an

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almost unavoidable result of involving the public in neighborhood priority setting. So when Chicago's program was developed, planners knew that if their officers' response to community concerns was "that's not a police matter," many residents would not show up for the next meeting. Police knew they needed to have structures in place that would enable them to deal effectively with the issues that concern the public, many of which fall in the disorder category and some of which fall in the traditional domain of other city service agencies. Although at a public meeting officers can learn that loose garbage and rats in an alley are big issues for the residents who attend, another agency must deliver the solution to that problem. Interagency collaboration becomes a key component in securing neighborhood safety and security when police organize to address disorder problems.

As a result of adopting broken windows theory of neighborhood decline wholeheartedly (see Skogan, 2006), Chicago police now find themselves involved in a host of new activities. They orchestrate neighborhood cleanups and graffiti paint-outs by volunteers and city workers, distribute bracelets that will identify senior citizens if they fall down, and take note of burned out street lights and trees that needed trimming. Officers drop into stores to ask merchants to display signs requesting that patrons refrain from giving money to panhandlers. The public steers police toward problems created by the sale of loose cigarettes and individual cans of beer at convenience and grocery stores because they encourage loitering and public drinking, Those sales are illegal but truly soft crimes.

On their side, residents have taken to "positive-loitering" campaigns to retake their streets. These campaigns are efforts to increase the frequency with which law-abiding residents occupy public spaces to discourage street prostitutes, loiterers, drinkers, and nascent drug markets. They do so by scheduling dog walks and walking clubs to get out and about during times when these problems are most intense. In a riskier place, police guard residents at prayer vigils and marches and at barbeque "smoke-outs" in which residents congregate in drug and prostitution zones. A popular approach to addressing troublesome liquor outlets is a "vote dry" referendum. City statutes allow area residents to vote to prohibit the sale of alcohol in a particular electoral precinct (a very small area) or at a particular address in their precinct. Community groups are well informed about the mechanics of these referenda, and they constitute such a threat that they have facilitated the informal but effective resolution of many problems with liquor establishments.

Police can facilitate the mobilization of city service agencies. We would like to think those bureaucracies could decipher neighborhood priorities on their own, but in truth it is largely only the police who remain open 24/7, have people walking the streets, and have discovered how effectively

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they can build legitimacy and support among the voters and taxpayers by responding to their definition of their problems. In Chicago, complaints at beat meetings trigger graffiti removal missions by the city's Graffiti Blaster teams, who are so named for their high-pressure soda sprays. Likewise, complaints routinely trigger tree trimming, rat poisoning, clearing and mowing vacant lots, repairing streets and sidewalks, new street signs, and paint jobs for fire hydrants and public structures. Getting seemingly abandoned cars towed is a logistical problem, but it is not complicated; severely dilapidated or abandoned commercial and residential buildings are another story, and addressing them involves many agencies and money. Police districts have "problem-buildings officers" who inventory dilapidated and abandoned structures and track down property owners for civil prosecution over building, health, fire, sanitation, zoning, and business-license violations. Police participate in joint multi-agency teams with representatives of the city's buildings, fire, police, revenue, and health departments "swatting" prioritized buildings with documented code violations that are then taken over by city prosecutors who work out of district stations. All these actions have nothing to do with putting anyone in jail. Rather, civil courts and administrative hearings can force building owners to repair code violations, install security measures, and securely board up buildings. The worst buildings can be demolished on a fast track if they are unsafe. Landlords can be required to post "no loitering" signs, evict problem tenants, and upgrade exterior lighting. In short, effective approaches to the wide range of problems that make up the disorder category do not just involve arresting people. In Chicago, at least, a solution for broken windows is to fix them.

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