

### RESEARCH ASSESSMENT 3: BROKEN WINDOWS THEORY

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#### SOURCES:

1. Peters, Justin. "The Racist, Classist Origins of Broken Windows Policing." Slate Magazine. N.p., 05 Dec. 2014. Web. 14 Oct. 2016.
2. McKee, Adam J. "Broken Windows Theory." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2016.

#### ANALYSIS:

The Broken Windows Theory is an academic theory in Criminology that implies that implies that vandalism leads to urban decay which leads to a significant increase in crime. Essentially, the theory say that we can ensure order and lawfulness and prevent serious crimes in an area by monitoring urban communities and preventing petty crimes such as vandalism and public indecency. The following diagram illustrates the basics of the Broken Windows Theory.



So how did this theory come about? The Broken Windows theory was introduced to the public in 1982 by sociologist James Q. Wilson and criminologist George Kelling in an article. The article, published in the March issue of *Broken Windows*, was titled *The Atlantic*. Now, the theory received its unusual name from a metaphor used in the article regarding broken windows. The following lines are from the original article and show how the theory was monikered. "Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside. Or consider a pavement. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of refuse from take-out restaurants there or even break into cars." Once it was published, the article was widely read and led to a follow up in the form of a sociology

written by George L. Kelling and Catherine Coles and elaborated on the details of the theory.

This theory encourages cities to maintain a clean and safe environment by picking up trash and litter, making sure to fix minor things such as broken windows, maintaining grass and hedges, and cleaning up graffiti. By doing this, a respectable environment is created because people are less likely to commit crimes in such places. According to the theory, a organized and clean environment, broadcasts a message that the area is monitored and that criminal behavior is not tolerated. On the other hand however, a dirty environment with graffiti and trash sends a message that the area is not monitored and that criminal behavior has little risk of detection. This concept is evident when you compare Dallas to Frisco. Not only does Dallas have a significantly higher crime rate but it also has much more graffiti, vandalism, etc. Of course it should be noted that Dallas is a city whereas Frisco is a suburb, but the example still serves its purpose. As a result of the high crime rate, which according to the Broken Windows Theory can be attributed to petty crimes and vandalism that weren't stopped or cleaned up, Dallas has the need for a large police department. In fact, the Dallas Police Department is one of the largest in North Texas and is so large that it has a uncommon full-time permanent SWAT Team.

Support for this theory is plentiful since numerous police departments across the globe have implemented what is called Broken Windows Policing. Locations such as New York City, Los Angeles, and in cities in the United Kingdom. The most well-known instance that is pointed to as an model of success regarding implementation of the the theory is New York City. Police Chief William Bratton of New York City Police Department introduced a "quality of life initiative" based off of the Broken Windows Theory. The 1990s initiative "cracked down on panhandling, disorderly behaviour, public drinking, street prostitution, and unsolicited windshield washing or other such attempts to obtain cash from drivers stopped in traffic." Accordingly, by the time Chief Bratton resigned in 1996, the felony rates were down forty percent and the homicide rate down by fifty percent.

While there are a few real life instances that support it, the theory is still widely criticized and very controversial. By simply searching 'broken windows theory' in Google, many critical articles pop up such as

*classist origins of broken windows policing.*

and

So why exactly do critics oppose the theory? Well, some criticize that there is not enough 'empirical evidence' that disorder causes crime. They argue that there are other factors that cause crime that haven't

*The race, class, and crime through controlled experimentation.* Others like the writer of

find that policy derived from the theory often are felt by minority groups even though the theory doesn't target minorities, thus the classist aspect. Additionally, as stated by the writer himself many critics feel that "the idea that lower-class men are inherently dangerous and untrustworthy

is at the root of broken windows policing." Moreover, with classism comes unintended racism because "in modern America, 'lower class' basically means 'black.'"

Ultimately, I do not agree or disagree with either side of the argument because although I've learned a significant amount about the Broken Windows Theory, I still do not know enough to give an opinion on its validity. Perhaps with more research I will be able to weigh in on the matter. However, I found it crucial to learn about because it is still implemented by police departments today. Now, some may be moving away from such policing but to understand criminology as a whole, one must understand past, present, and future concepts. Additionally, I came across some information on other interesting topics that I was unaware of that I can now write a assessment about. I initially simply chose the topic because I had heard of it before and wanted to know what it was all about, now I know a little bit more about one of the numerous theories in criminology.