Broken Windows Policing:

Complex Connections with

Police-Community Relations

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Broken windows policing has become a serious issue for police-community relations across America and currently lies in a state of limbo being neither very effective nor very nominal. The broken windows theory was developed in 1982 by social scientists James Wilson and George Kelling. Together, they crafted a theory that described the relationship between the state of a community and its crime rate. Specifically, they argued that a community that was in a physical state of disarray (broken windows, trash, decaying infrastructure) would have higher rates of crime than other communities. Brought down to its core, the theory essentially states that communities with visible signs of physical decay will have higher rates of crime because they are less policed and less funded by the state. The people will therefore feel abandoned and do whatever they think is necessary to survive/thrive in the broken community they live in.

Naturally, a style of policing was born from this theory. Broken windows policing is based in the original theory but stretches the boundaries of the theory to form a crime control style of policing. The core idea of broken windows policing has officers cracking down on more minor offenses in the hopes that lower petty crime rates will directly lead to lower major/violent crime rates. Unfortunately, there is no standardized model for broken windows policing, making it hard to scientifically study. The NYPD's style of broken windows policing is different than Chicago PD's style and so on. The single constant that can be observed across the nation is the community displeasure with broken windows policing. There is major pushback against broken windows policing in America, and current events with George Floyd and Jacob Blake have only increased the community anger surrounding the topic. Though police tactics in general have been under attack, a common community scapegoat is broken windows policing. Distrust towards broken windows policing is nothing new, and it has acted as a divide in police-community relations for years.

In 2014, 43-year old Eric Garner was killed by Daniel Pantaleo, an officer with NYPD. Pantaleo put Garner in a prohibited chokehold which eventually resulted in Garner's death. Garner's death sparked protests against police brutality and broken windows policing in New York. Professor Brian Jefferson (2016) from the University of Illinois explains that protestors were against broken windows policing because it, "…is commonly attributed to the astonishing racial disparities in police brutality and arrests…" (p. 1270). Broken windows policing has been commonly compared to racism and systemic oppression. The primary communities that Kelling and Wilson focused on in their original broken windows thesis are low income. This was perhaps an unintended implication, but the implication cannot be denied. Low income communities in America are primarily minority communities. Thus, people make the easy connection and see that police utilizing broken windows style are policing minority communities harder than other communities. Jefferson (2016) says, "The broken windows model is grounded in discursive constructions of urban space that are pared down to the micro-scale, and are bereft of structural economic, social, or political considerations," (p. 1273).

Are all police who use broken windows style operating from a racially charged base? It's unlikely, but this is one of the main perceptions of those that are against broken windows policing. Broken windows policing doesn't have a definite structure either. It appears different in different cities. The broken windows policing of New York is more aggressive and adapts more of a zero-tolerance policy whereas the model in Chicago focused on more warnings and less arrests (Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy [CEBCP]). Jefferson (2016) further argues that broken windows can be used to misinform, saying, "Precinct spokespeople also play a central role in deciding which visible signs constitute 'disorder', which is fundamental to reinforcing broken windows strategy as a taken for granted solution in the minds of the residents," (p. 1278).

Jefferson essentially argues that in certain communities, residents are tricked into thinking that broken windows policing is just the way things are and that's how police operate. The fact that this literature exists alongside widespread public disdain for broken windows policing proves that there is a serious divide in police-community relations on this issue. This begs the question though, do police actually support the model of broken windows?

New styles of policing are usually mandated by the higher ups in the police department. The street cops will receive their orders and do their jobs to the best of their ability. So, do officers actually support their orders? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. In the context of broken windows policing, there has been largely supportive feedback from officers. In a test covering 3,250 sworn in officers from Midwestern American departments, support for broken windows policing was high, (Michael Jenkins, 2015, pp. 230-232). Going further, Jenkins (2015) says:

> The results from this study also showed support for tenets of the broken windows theory. Items corresponding to the relationship between disorder and crime received the largest proportion of agreement—effectively revealing respondents' overwhelming support for the broken windows policing's underlying assumption. (p. 231)

Though this study is centered in Midwest American policing, there is evidence to prove that broken windows policing is a rapidly spreading model, and not just in the U.S. According to research from Jefferson (2016), "Variations of the strategy have not only emerged throughout US cities, but have also been replicated in Buenos Aires, Essen, Glasgow, London, Mexico City, Milan, Santiago, São Paulo, Stockholm, Tel Aviv, Tokyo…" (p. 1271). The list continues from there. Broken windows policing is being internationally recognized and adopted across the world, not just in western countries. This—combined with the American support of the

model—would naturally lead researchers to believe that the model is highly successful in lowering crime rates. This isn't necessarily true though.

The first and most obvious problem with monitoring the relationship of broken windows policing and crime rates is that nearly every department has a different interpretation of what broken windows policing looks like. As the CEBCP stated before, the models differ across cities and districts. The NYPD took an approach closer to zero-tolerance and called it broken windows policing. They arrested people more for petty violations like, "…marijuana smoking, underage alcohol consumption, noise disturbances, littering, or jaywalking…" (Jefferson, 2016, p. 1278). NYPD saw a rise in arrests whereas other agencies saw less arrests for petty violations (CEBCP). Some departments that adopted broken windows policies saw statistically significant albeit modest drops in crime (CEBCP) whereas other departments saw little to no change after adopting the policies.

In a recent study by criminologists David Weisburd, Joshua Hinkle, Anthony Braga, and Alese Wooditch, it was found that broken windows policing cannot be the sole factor judged when observing crime rates in a community. Weisburd et al. (2015) laid out the basic model of broken windows policing as:

> …police-led reductions in disorder should reduce fear of crime among residents, empowering them to reengage in community affairs, and thereby increasing levels of informal social control in the community. That chain of events should then lead to reductions in serious crime. (p. 594)

Weisburd et al. (2015) go on to say, "The model is undermined if any steps of this sequence do not occur and/or are not impacted by police reductions in disorder. This means that

we cannot simply measure crime outcomes to identify whether the broken windows model is causing crime declines," (p. 594). This is the fundamental problem when evaluating the broken windows model of policing. It is reliant on a set of standards while also being unstandardized. There exists no step-by-step model for departments to organize their models from. Every department has its own idea of what broken windows policing looks like, and how it acts out in a community. Weisburd et al. reveal that even Kelling and Wilson are unsure about their own theory. They say, "Kelling and colleagues have been quick to point out that an attention to minor crimes and disorder is not the same as a mindless set of crackdowns on such misbehaviors," (Weisburd et al., 2015, p. 592). Kelling later goes on to say that the theory, "never specified a direct relationship between disorder and crime," (Weisburd et al., 2015, p.592). If the creators of the theory are unsure about it, how are police expected to interpret it and apply it correctly?

This misunderstanding between researchers and active police officers doesn't bode well for broken windows policing or the community's acceptance of it. If the theory has so many variants, how can it ever be fairly judged? The public perception of the theory will become even more negative than it already is when they realize that the theory and its policing is seemingly random and ineffective. Why use a theory that no one really understands? Perhaps a better question that the public might ask is why use this theory if it is ineffective and misunderstood by the police themselves? Perhaps police need to focus more closely on the specific actions they can take to improve police-community relations rather than sticking stubbornly to a system that is hated across the country's public. Perhaps the theory needs revision, and the departments using it need to change with those revisions.

Unfortunately for the broken windows theory, it stands as a major block in police-community relations while sitting in a limbo of use and interpretation among police. With

continuing civil unrest bred from negative police-community relations, something needs to give. Though the broken windows theory had good intentions, it has become a multi-faced enigma that the American public neither understands nor likes. Reliance on broken windows policing will only negatively impact police-community relations for the future. In this scenario, there are no winners. Both the police and the community suffer and will continue what seems like an endless circle of distrust and hate.

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