

Recollections of James Q. Wilson and Broken Windows

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Although I had read his book, *Varieties of Police Behavior*, earlier, I first met Jim when I was hired by the Police Foundation in 1971 to assist in evaluating its programs. The Police Foundation was created by the Ford Foundation in 1970 and funded with \$30m to improve policing. Jim was on the board. Early on we had occasional contacts but, for the most part, they were polite and professional – the kind of relationship that would be typical between a foundation board member and a staff member. Along with other board members he would read and react to proposals, among them mine.

Our first real contact that went beyond this was after I completed a draft of the *Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment*. One reviewer, an eminent sociologist, did everything he could to prevent the study from being published. Ultimately, Jim successfully intervened and urged the rapid publication of the study.

Our second real contact was after I had published the *Newark Foot Patrol Study*. By this time I had left the Police Foundation and was a fellow in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The foot patrol study stood in sharp contrast to the Kansas City study. The Kansas City study indicated that increasing or decreasing the levels of automobile patrol in neighborhoods had no impact on crime, fear of crime, or citizen satisfaction with police. In fact, citizens didn't even recognize changes in patrol levels. In contrast, citizens were not only very aware of adding or withdrawing foot

patrol, foot patrol had powerful impacts on fear of crime and citizen satisfaction with police: if foot patrol was added, fear declined and satisfaction increased; if foot patrol was withdrawn, fear increased and citizen satisfaction declined.

The question was, what accounted for such dramatic outcomes? It didn't seem that presence alone could account for the changes since beats were patrolled for just one shift, five days per week – a small percentage of time, and predictable at that. Happily I was able to present this question to a brown bag lunch at the Kennedy School. Among those attending were Mark Moore, Lloyd Ohlin, Egon Bittner, Donald Black, and Walter Miller – some of the best-known names in sociology and criminology. More than anyone else, Egon Bittner kept pushing me. “Go back to your field notes.” “What did police *do*”? “How did citizens react”? After doing so and in response, I wrote the final chapter of the study. Based on my field experiences I argued that fear reduction and increased satisfaction were the result of police order maintenance activities – controlling rowdy and/or drunken behavior, resolving minor disputes, controlling public spaces (especially bus stops), and so on.

Several weeks after the foot patrol study was published Jim called me to congratulate me. He indicated that he especially liked the last chapter and asked me if I would like to do a paper with him based on it – the *Atlantic Monthly* had asked him to do a piece on crime. I was surprised and honored. I responded that I would be more than happy if he were merely to cite me in

the article. But Jim insisted. He also warned me that if I wrote with him I shouldn't be surprised if we got a lot of criticism. I assured him that that wasn't a problem for me: the outcry after the Kansas City study had more than inoculated me against criticism. We agreed to do a paper together.

So, Jim asked me to write down everything I thought should be in the paper and get it to him. I did. Jim got back to me with a draft in a surprisingly short time and we began to sort out a few issues. I can't remember most of them now. Clearly, and I have always tried to acknowledge this, the broken windows metaphor was Jim's idea. The "ass-kicking" incident recounted in the article was mine, and I think that Jim was a little nervous about it but he went along with me.¹ (I think that he believed that it was an anecdote that could easily be misrepresented. He was right. Nonetheless, I would still include it in the paper.) My recollection is that an early draft linked disorderly behavior to crime more strongly than the final draft, but I wouldn't swear to it. When finished, the metaphor of broken windows went like this: just as a broken window left untended is a sign that no one cares and leads to more broken windows, so disorderly behavior and conditions left untended are signs that no one cares and lead to fear of crime, serious predatory crime, and urban decay – in sum, minor offenses matter.

¹ My insistence that that we include the "ass kicking" comment was based on my experience in Chicago's public housing developments. I wanted to emphasize the ambiguity that confronted officers when caught between the limits of law and police policy on one hand and the demands of preyed-upon and demanding victims on the other.

To my surprise (I don't know if it was a surprise to Jim), "Broken Windows" was the cover story of the March 1982 edition of *The Atlantic*. Also to my surprise was how rapidly the article spread, both among citizen groups and police. For example, during the summer of 1982, a few months after Broken Windows was published, I regularly attended meetings of some of Boston's 82 named neighborhood organizations in an attempt to get some idea of what impact they might have on crime. What happened several times went like this: I would be introduced at the beginning of the meeting as a researcher from Harvard who was interested in community crime control groups. Often after the formal meeting, the members would have refreshments. During this social period, many queried me about my interests. I would explain that I was interested in their problems, what they did about them, their relationship to police, and other such issues. Several times one of the members would reach for some material, hand it to me, and say something like, "If you want to know what are problems are, read this," and hand me a copy of "Broken Windows." Often this would lead to an animated discussion – the central feature of which was that a substantial gap existed between their concerns and police priorities. Police focused on serious crime; citizens were concerned about neighborhood problems: scantily dressed prostitutes hustling husbands in front of their families, graffiti, youths drinking in parks, aggressive panhandling, and other such minor offenses.

Likewise, “Broken Windows” started to circulate among police. Their response was not dissimilar. They acknowledged the problems and the gap that existed between police and citizens, but believed that routine patrolling in cars and responding to calls for service – both of which were intended to deal with serious crimes – were so important that they simply didn’t have time to deal with disorderly conditions and behavior.

The initial academic response was muted. A couple of comments and critiques appeared during the mid-1980s, however, few mainstream social scientists gave the ideas much attention. Nonetheless, we were aware from the *Atlantic* publishers that the article was gathering momentum: they and we were getting a lot of requests to republish it in different venues. For me, the big breakthrough came when Robert Kiley, Chairman of the New York State Transportation Authority, asked me if I could help deal with what was referred to as “homelessness” in New York City’s subway system.

What followed is widely known and has been discussed by Catherine Coles and me in *Fixing Broken Windows: Restoring Order & Reducing Crime in Our Communities* and by Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point*. In sum, an order maintenance plan was devised, William Bratton was recruited to implement it, and order was restored and crime reduced in the subway in a matter of months. “Rudy” Giuliani took note of this, ran for mayor a second time, and this time largely ran against crime and disorder (with special attention to “squeegee men” – young men who extorted money from car drivers, by ostensibly washing their windows). This was at a time, early

1990s, when crime and disorder were almost literally driving citizens out of New York City. Giuliani won, recruited Bratton to become police commissioner and, again, Bratton made a broken-windows approach one of the basic ingredients in his overall strategy.

The New York successes, and the attempts by other communities to replicate them attracted legal, academic, and media attention to the ideas in broken windows. Although the challenges were broad and many, legal attention (and challenges) tended to focus on the sources of authority for police order maintenance activities; academic attention tended to focus on whether or not disorder and serious crime were truly linked; and, of course, media was attracted both by New York City's successes and the legal and academic disputes that arose.

By the late 1990s, despite academic disputes, broken windows policing was widely adopted by police departments, although I must add that at times it was adopted in a fashion that made me quite nervous. Given that order maintenance policing is a highly discretionary activity by police, I was dismayed that many police departments began such efforts without providing additional training or developing guidelines to help officers use their discretion wisely. Today, it would be hard to find a police department that did not embrace order maintenance policing in one form or another whether it did so explicitly or implicitly. At least two generations of police have had broken windows theory as an integral part of their training and practice. I would also note that the language of broken windows theory has

also penetrated many other disciplines: probation and parole, prosecution, public health, education, business, and others.

Although we never really talked about it, I believe that Jim largely left the broken windows “domain” in policing to me. I suspect that he referred many calls for lectures, comments, or advice to me, both out of his eagerness to pursue a much broader agenda and out of his generosity: that is his willingness – no his eagerness – to allow others to share the limelight and engage in the controversies of developing new ideas and, at least in my case, new policies and practices.

Jim and I wrote several other articles together about broken windows, the last of which was “A Quarter Century of Broken Windows” in the September/October 2006 edition of *The American Interest*. It fittingly wraps up where Jim and I were in our thinking about broken windows.

The broken windows idea does two things, one indisputably good and the other probably effective: It encourages the police to take public order seriously, something that the overwhelming majority of people ardently desire, and it raises the possibility that more order will mean less crime. The first goal requires no evidence. The second does, and so far most studies suggest that more public order (along with other factors) is associated with less predatory street crime. With all this in mind, we believe that it remains a strategy worth pursuing.