Is Broken Windows a Plausible or Puerile Theory?

Have you ever seen an abandoned building and thought “This seems dangerous, I better get out of here?” Well if so, then you have just bought into the “Broken Windows Theory.” An abandoned building is a sign that an area has been neglected. A law abiding citizen would see this, and turn the other way. The opposite is true for criminals, however. Most criminals want to go unnoticed. Unnoticed usually means unpunished in the criminal world. One could argue, “what does an old building have to do with crime?” The theory states the more dysfunctional an area looks, the more disfunction it invites.

Broken Windows is a two-fold idea. Just as a dysfunctional area invites disfunction, a well maintained area usually invites orderly conduct. People want to live in like-minded communities. If an area starts to take a bad turn, families will move out. Likewise, if an area is fixed up, families will notice and start to congregate.

Although this idea seems plausible, there are both benefits and limitations when applying this theory to law enforcement and communities. Some benefits for law enforcement would be: problems in certain places would be recognized right away, the police would need less manpower to patrol, and they would be able to see the changes they're making. There are many benefits for the community including things like a greater desire to maintain properties and a desire to create safer environments. Along with these benefits, there are limitations. For law
enforcement, these would include: over-policing, increased suspicion of certain communities, and other effects of racial profiling. Limitations for the communities can also include a sense of feeling targeted and unfairly accused.

An analysis of the benefits is important. For police, there are many. Law enforcement wants to see an impact in decreasing crime rates by their activity in a community. With this theory, police can focus on the benefits of making specific changes to an area. By quickly taking care of small crimes such as vandalism and burglary, it will show the public that crime is not tolerated. Another benefit would be smaller scaled patrolling. Cops can better police an area with patrol cars driving through the streets in more focused areas. It gives the public a sense of safety and rapid response to calls for help. By applying the Broken Windows Theory, police can focus more attention on the more run down parts of town, rather than patrolling the whole town equally. This is helpful because the ability to patrol is directly correlated with the availability of cops. (Moskos 92-94)

Benefits of Broken Windows for communities are similar to those of the cops. The city is given more of an incentive to keep areas clean, so in theory the high crime areas will be better maintained. Also, with a higher police presence, the public should feel safer. As the police are patrolling, they should have constant contact with the public. This should make communication easier and more natural between both parties.

Along with these benefits, there are some serious limitations. First, the cops can exert too much power. A good example of this comes from an interview on the podcast “Cops See it Differently: Part 2,” about a man named Earl. Earl is a childlike 20-something year old black man. He suffered from an extreme case of police brutality. This story takes place in a crime
ridden town called Miami Gardens. The area was so bad that they started their own police force to try and control the crime. This town and specifically a “Quick Stop” was targeted for it’s high black population. Earl was arrested sixty-three times for “trespassing” at his place of employment, residence, and leisure. He would do things like take out the trash, and get arrested. (Meek)

Another limitation for the cops would be that they have limited interaction with other parts of the community. When primarily dealing with higher crime communities, it’s hard to stay unbiased with suspected persons. It’s easy to begin to generalize and assume wrong doing before weighing all the facts. This is best explained through the story of Thomas from the “Cops See it Differently: Part 1.” Thomas and his girlfriend, both black, called the police after being shot at by a woman. When the cops showed up and questioned Thomas, he did not come off as a reliable source. They were suspicious of of him and interrogated him instead of the woman. Regardless, Thomas kept pressing that there was a shot fired. The police then searched this woman’s house and found a recently fired gun. Deciding who is telling the truth and who isn’t is a tough job, but cops completely surrounded by liars and criminals can easily generalize an entire public or race without meaning to. (Reed)

Although there are many limitations with the theory of Broken Windows, this will be true of any crime theory. The challenge with any crime theory is that the human element impacts the full benefit that it could have. Humans make mistakes and undermine these benefits. Broken Windows has proven itself over the years, however. Philip Zimbardo did an experiment to test the theory. In order to do this, he took two cars and put them on the side of the road. One, was banged up and had its hood popped. Within hours it was vandalized and stripped for parts. The
other, was an average nice looking car and it sat untouched for a week. This experiment just shows that the appearance of crime, invites crime. When people are asked where the “unsafe areas” are of their town, the main response is the more run-down areas of the community. (Kelling and Wilson)

In conclusion, Kelling and Wilson put it best in their article “Broken Windows: The police and neighborhood safety” when they said, “Serious street crime flourishes in areas when disorderly behavior goes unchecked.” Disorderly behavior often occurs and is connected to places in a city where people allow properties to be vandalized or run down. Although Broken Windows has some serious limitations, these limitations come from human error. In theory, this idea is a reliable explanation to crime rates in certain areas. By applying Broken Windows correctly, the police can better protect its citizens and incentivise people to better maintain their communities.
Works Cited


