

Could you begin by summarising the argument you make in *Fixing Broken Windows*?

Policing disorder

George Kelling and Catherine Coles talk to Ian Loader about their new book, 'Fixing Broken Windows - Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in Our Communities'.



GK: Basically it's an extension of the argument James Wilson and I made in *Atlantic Monthly* in the early 80s; that is, just as a broken window left untended is a sign that nobody cares and leads to more serious damage, so disorderly behaviour left untended is a sign that nobody cares and leads to more serious crime, as well as urban decay and fear. The 'fixing' goes beyond it in the sense that it develops the legal

justification for order maintenance and presents examples of efforts to restore order in New York City, Seattle, Baltimore and San Francisco.

Both the article and the book make a connection between crime and disorder. What do you see as being the precise nature of that connection?

CC: Disorder - meaning, street prostitution, graffiti, aggressive begging, youths hanging out on street corners intimidating elderly people, loud music, drug dealing - creates fear on the part of citizens in a neighbourhood. When citizens feel that fear they respond in two ways. They withdraw physically from public places, and when they do so, they withdraw those kinds of normal social controls that tend to operate. Once that social control is gone, once good citizens have withdrawn from the streets, what you have then is an invitation to perpetrators of serious crime. It's not necessarily the perpetrators of low level misbehaviour that will carry out more serious crimes. But eventually you have this invitation extended to perpetrators of more serious crime, and the neighbourhood essentially moves along a path towards greater levels of crime, and to a potential spiral into decline. That's the transition.

The book details a number of examples where public spaces have been successfully reclaimed, notably in New York. How far do you attribute these successes to the actions of the police, as opposed to other agencies in the community?

GK: We argue that the best test of the broken windows idea is not New York City, but New York subway. The only change in the subway was the implementation of order maintenance approaches to deal with disorder and to deal with fare beating, which was an enormous

problem. The interesting thing about the subway is that because it's a simpler social system, there aren't the usual compounding variables that would impact on a city, and my reading is that it is hard to find any alternative explanation of why crime dropped so radically on the subway and basically stopped being a problem. Crime dropped by 80% over a couple of years. I think New York City itself is far more complicated and I think any argument that it was solely the police or solely order maintenance is essentially quite naive.

CC: In addition to the police and public, both of whose cooperation and involvement is essential, you also need to get the prosecutors on board, judges on board, and the courts. We do not advocate a high arrest and prosecution type of strategy. But initially you may need a period of high arrests until people really learn that we mean what we say. Therefore you have to bring the prosecutors in, to educate them about these issues, they have to understand the importance of perhaps prosecuting some of these cases. In the same sense you have to have judges who are willing to hand out sentences and are not simply dismissing people with court costs or whatever. You need to bring in every actor in the criminal justice system. You need to bring in various groups within the community to back you up. You need to have social service providers on board. It is with that broad cooperation that you get the most effective examples of this kind of programme working. What is important is that you get everyone to the table. That you're not excluding any groups within the community.

Since the original article was published your thesis has become entangled in a broader political battle between left and right, and has become

"We do not advocate a high arrest and prosecution type of strategy. But initially you may need a period of high arrests until people really learn that we mean what we say."

controversial on that stage. Why do you think that has been the case, and where does the 'broken windows' thesis fit in those larger debates?

GK: I think the driving ideology for criminal justice in the US has come out of the war on poverty that developed in the '60s, and that was basically that crime was caused by poverty, racism and social injustice, and that in order to deal with crime you have to deal with those problems. Some of us have developed arguments that suggest that while dealing with racism, poverty and social inequities is important, that does mean that in the meantime you cannot deal with problems of crime, minor and serious offences. The far left held crime control hostage to massive social change. We are saying that you can do things in the meantime to ease the plight of especially ethnic minorities and poor citizens in the US who are being victimized left and right. Now there's a far right variation of that as well, that crime is caused by the breakdown of family values, that's caused by welfare, and so until you deal with welfare you can't deal with serious crime. So both the left and right have somewhat conspired to hold crime prevention in the centre, hostage to extreme ideology. I think we are trying to carve out a middle territory that says that criminal justice agencies historically had a preventative function, but that these got lost to law enforcement - arresting wrongdoers rather than preventing crime. Ours is a high activity but low arrest approach.

In this country, the broken windows thesis has recently become associated with what's called 'zero tolerance policing'. What are your feelings about that?

GK: I've been very bothered by the equation of 'broken windows' and 'zero tolerance'. I understand

'zero tolerance' can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but what worries me is that it is really a political slogan that comes close to implying zealotry. It denies the discretion officers have and will use in enforcing low level offences. When I'm talking about the development of standards in neighbourhoods, I include those people who are potential troublemakers who many times have been left out of negotiations, such as homeless people who may hang around in parks. So it's the development of a community consensus that includes potential troublemakers.

CC: Zero tolerance is not sustainable. It's not a credible policy that the police are going to be able to implement for any length of time and offenders know that.

One of the things that has worried critics in his country is that, despite your best intentions, a 'broken windows' approach can create a climate with certain predictable consequences, such as the abuse of police powers, or the harassment of youths. Do you think this fear is misplaced?

GK: No I don't think it's misplaced. It means that we just have to work harder to make sure its property understood. I know it's a powerful tool and it's a powerful tool that is subject to a lot of abuse. But think about criminal investigation at least in the US. We know that criminal investigation was conducted with torture throughout the first 50 years of the 20th century and probably before then. Nobody suggests that we shouldn't do criminal investigations because criminal investigation has the power of abuse. Likewise, I think order maintenance is a powerful tool that can be abused. So I take your point. We understand the dangers of abuse, but for every powerful technology there's always that danger. My

"Both the left and right have somewhat conspired to hold crime prevention in the centre, hostage to extreme ideology."

concern was that unless we restored order to American streets, poor people, minorities were suffering. We'd abdicated our responsibility to poor communities. There are areas in many cities in the US in which we literally lost control, where drug dealers would literally control entire neighbourhoods, and people were living in absolute terror.

In this country - following the riots, and a period in the 1980s when the police got a lot of resources and crime continued to rise - many police managers have started to say that there are no policing solutions to these problems, that we should de-centre the police from crime prevention activity. You seem to want to reverse that train of thought.

GK: I think that view started to gain a lot of dominance in the US and there were many of us who were bothered by that, who thought the police had a legitimate crime prevention role that didn't overlap with social work. I think the '60s and '70s when the police attitude was 'citizens, crime is our problem' showed us that approach failed. I think the 1980s showed us that communities could organize and have some impact upon crime and part of the New York story is that crime was declining during the '80s. I think the 1990s show that when you put together a reinvigorated police department with a mobilised community you can have a big tipping point. I think that this is very important in the New York story. The community, business, citizens, can go so far without the police. But when [Commissioner] Bratten reinvigorated the police and they become very active, I think then suddenly, especially with violent crime, but with all crime, we had a very big drop, almost

unprecedented in history.

Is 'broken windows' an American theory for American problems?

GK: I guess other communities, other countries have to decide that for themselves. It seems to me that the assumption that a particular definition of a problem, or a particular method, is going to work in one neighbourhood doesn't mean the same is going to hold for another neighbourhood. I think that what disorder is has to be carefully defined. The problems in neighbourhoods have to be carefully defined, they are very, very different even in cities and neighbourhoods within the US. So I think it's easy to get into the law of the instrument, that is, you give a small child a hammer and everything he or she encounters needs hammering. I don't want to get into that position and that's why we need to point out that crime prevention takes place basically in four ways. One, by persuading people to behave, two, by restoring order, three, by reduction of opportunities or solving problems- and four, by police presence. I think that we ought to be focusing on prevention in those terms and that might have some global applications. But of course, I'm taking that directly from Sir Robert Peel.

George Kelling is a Professor at Rutgers University and Catherine Coles is a Research Associate at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Their book 'Fixing Broken Windows - Restoring Order and Reducing Crime in our Communities' is published by The Free Press.

Ian Loader is Lecturer in the Department of Criminology at Keele University.