Paradise lost: White flight, broken windows, and the construction of a criminogenic origin myth

Aaron Roussell & Jason Chester Dunbar
Washington State University

American Society of Criminology
San Francisco, CA 2014
Community policing

• An umbrella of initiatives
  • E.g., community meetings and the Police Athletic League
  • Also: James Q. Wilson and George Kelling’s broken windows theory, most famous?
    • “Neighborhood decline” and “urban decay”
    • Disorder causes crime
    • Crime causes “urban decay”
  • Because of disorder, neighborhoods are lost
Critiques of broken windows

  - False dichotomies: law abiders/disorderly people; order/disorder
- Herbert (2001) “Fixing broken windows or shoring up neoliberalism?”
  - Disorder supplants community-oriented efforts
- Walker (1997) “‘Broken Windows’ and fractured history”
  - Over-romanticized figure of the “constable” or “night watchman”
The conventional narrative

- Historical eras of policing (Kelling & Moore, 1988; Wilson & Kelling, 1982)
  - Parochial/political era
  - Professional era
  - Community policing era
The conventional narrative

• A normalizing tool
  • Police as necessary and sensitive to public needs and opinions
  • Erases structural oppression of non-White groups (particularly African-American), organized labor, non-heterosexual-normalities
• Enables the “night watchmen” motif (Walker, 1997)
Broken windows’ popularity

• What story does broken windows tell?
  • Why does it resonate with certain sections of the American populace?
  • What mythmaking power does it possess?
• White flight as a racial project (Omi & Winant, 1994) in search of coding
  • “Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized...”
Paradise lost

• Criminogenic myth-making
  • Suburbanization of the US (beginning 1950s)
  • *Brown v. Board* (1954), Civil Rights Act (1964) symbolic (and actual) galvanization
  • Whites flee neighborhood and school integration
    • US just as segregated now (Massey & Denton, 1993)
Paradise lost

• Underpinnings of broken windows’ popularity
  • Reconstruction of 1950s as White fantasy
  • Colorblind mechanisms of exclusion
    • Crime, as usual, is the lynchpin (Muhammad, 2010)
• Repackages massive resistance and resegregation efforts as protection against disorder/crime
Breaking the first window

1. Isolated, hermetically sealed community
2. Resident youths commit disorder
3. Informal social control fails to address
   a) Tipping point—homeostasis or progressive decline?
4. Criminal in-migration
5. Police impotence
Who is to blame?

1. Isolated, hermetically sealed community
2. Resident youth commits disorder
3. Informal social control fails to address
   a) Tipping point—homeostasis or progressive decline?
4. Criminal in-migration
5. Police impotence

Indigenous mischief
Crimes of the Other
Broken Windows/White Flight

1. Homeostatic “decent” community
2. Criminal in-migration & youth focus
3. Good folk = mischief/bad folk = crime
4. “Decent folk” driven out by fear of crime
5. “Decent folk” and police must raise “communal barriers”
Racial mythology of disorder policing

• Myth is colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2003)
  • “Since both residents and gang members are Black, race is not a factor”
  • Police only appear in reaction to criminals
    • “Officer Kelly” is White; community is Black
  • Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes = Palo Alto, CA
    • Post-industrial decline vs. high tech information economy?
Racial mythology of disorder policing

• Black in-migration: always-already disorder (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004)

• “[E]xamples of behavior ‘the public’...may disapprove of....a Negro wearing a ‘conk rag’....girls in short skirts and boys in long hair...or interracial couples—all these are seen by many police officers as persons displaying unconventional and improper behavior.” James Q. Wilson (1968)
Conclusion: Broken windows as an origin myth

• Functions to separate “urban decay” from White supremacist and post-Fordist deregulatory economic policy

• Message:
  • Desegregation is the cause of “urban decay”
  • Crime, not racism, is reason for White flight

• Solutions:
  • Re-establish and strictly enforce 1950s social norms in “disordered communities”
  • Re-segregate and rigorously enforce community boundaries against in-migration in “decent communities”
"The middle-left hates Giuliani getting credit for crime reduction," Kelling says. "They held crime control hostage to macro social change since the late sixties. Broken Windows changed that."

-New York Magazine (Kolker, 2002)
Questions or comments?

• Contact Aaron Roussell or Jason Dunbar
  • a.roussell@wsu.edu
  • jason.dunbar@wsu.edu
REFERENCES


Kolker, R. (2002, April 22). Street fight: As the left tries to assault Rudy's legacy on crime, the Manhattan Institute strikes back. *New York Magazine*.


