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People inclined to steal if others breaking rules

Study finds that crimes are more likely to be committed where graffiti and litter flourish

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If you saw \$10 in an envelope sticking out of a mailbox, would you steal the money, or pop the envelope in the mail?

If there is graffiti all over the mailbox or lots of litter on the ground, you'd be twice as likely to take the cash, according to a provocative study that taps into a shady side of human behaviour. It also lends support to the controversial "broken windows" theory behind crime and anti-graffiti prevention programs from Vancouver to Rome.

The study, published online Thursday by the journal *Science*, found people are more inclined to litter and steal when it seems other people have been breaking the rules. "The mere presence of graffiti more than doubled the number of people littering and stealing," it says.

The experiments were done in the Netherlands, but the researchers say the behaviour is likely universal and indicates petty crime and disorder should be quickly stamped out.

"There is a clear message for policy-makers and police officers: Early disorder diagnosis and intervention are of vital importance when fighting the spread of disorder," say social psychologist Kees Keizer and his colleagues at the University of Groningen.

Patrick Condon, who studies sustainable urban design at the University of B.C., says the study provides valuable scientific proof to bolster correlations and anecdotal evidence about the benefits of maintaining an atmosphere of social order.

But he cautions that wiping out graffiti and litter is "no panacea," and stresses that factors like poverty and homelessness also need to be addressed.

Keizer and his colleagues set out to test the broken windows theory that originated the New York in the 1990s. It is based on the idea that broken windows, litter and graffiti breed more disorder.

Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani has been championing the theory -- along with zero-tolerance policies for petty crime -- which has been embraced by many U.S. and Canadian cities, which spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year wiping away graffiti.

Keizer's team conducted six experiments to see if signs of vandalism, litter and low-level law-breaking could change the way people behave. They found that leaving shopping carts scattered around a parking lot was enough to induce 58 per cent of people to litter leaflets that had been left under the windshield wipers of their car. Graffiti splattered on the wall in front of a bicycle stall had a similar affect on people who returned to find flyers attached to their handlebars.

But it was the money-in-the-mailbox experiment that was most dramatic, and most surprised the researchers. "It was quite shocking," says Keizer, whose team secretly watched people as people strolled by a mailbox with a letter sticking out of the slot with a five euro note visible through a transparent window on the envelope. They found a quarter of the people walking past pocketed the money when there was litter on the ground or graffiti all over the mailbox. Only 13 per cent took the money when there was no litter or graffiti.

Keizer says the findings are not all bad, and do not mean there are huge numbers of social deviants just waiting for a chance to break the rules.

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