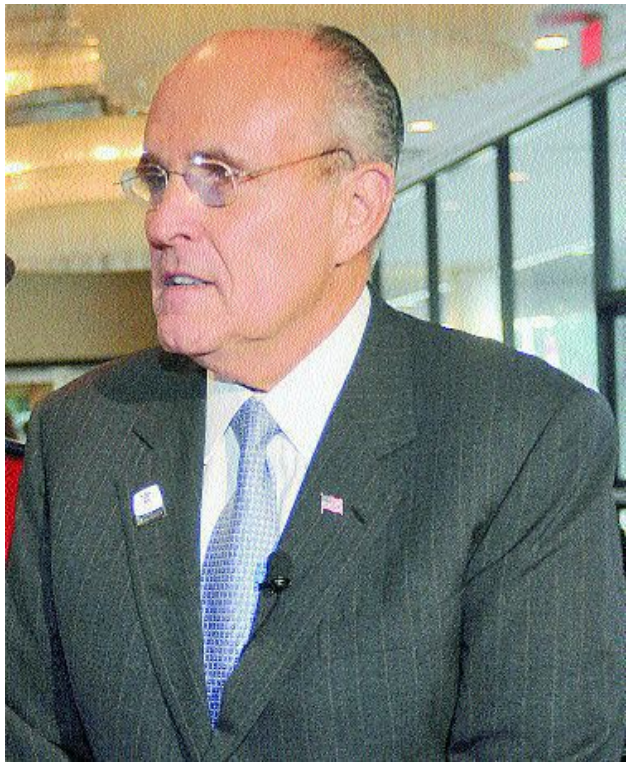
Fixing windows doesn't have to be about fighting crime

Law and order I The argument made by Rudy Giuliani when he was mayor of New York was based on misinterpretation of the theory

By Dan Gardner November 29, 2008 6:00 PM



Vancouver sun / Rudy Giuliani's contribution to cleaning up New York may be overrated.

Photograph by : Jenelle Schneider

Someone breaks a window. Nobody bothers to fix it. Another window is broken. Graffiti is sprayed on a door. Trash is thrown on the sidewalk. Disorder escalates into serious crime.

Want to stop the spiral? Stop the punk who breaks the first window.

Anyone who follows public policy debates knows this is the famous "broken windows" theory, which first appeared in a 1982 Atlantic Monthly article written by sociologists George Kelling and James Wilson. A darling of conservative think-tanks in the 1980s, "broken windows" was embraced by Rudy Giuliani.

In the late 1990s, when Giuliani's New York City experienced a renaissance, "broken windows" became the rock star of academic theories.

In country after country, politicians and police chiefs touted it as the proven solution to crime and Giuliani -- the Man Who Saved New York -- made a fortune telling others how to do it.

But contrary to what officials and journalists have been saying since the 1990s, the connection between disorder and crime has never been clearly demonstrated. New York certainly didn't settle it. There were too many factors in play. Long debates about the causes of the Big Apple's turnaround have been inconclusive.

That's what makes recent research in the Netherlands so valuable.

Researchers at the University of Groningen conducted six quite ingenious experiments. In one, they attached flyers to the handlebars of bikes parked at a rack so people would have choose between littering or pocketing the annoying paper for later disposal.

When the area around the bike racks was up to the usual Dutch standards of order and cleanliness, one-third of people chose to litter. But when researchers sprayed a nearby wall with graffiti, 69 per cent pitched the flyer and pedalled away.

In another experiment, an envelope with a transparent address window -- that revealed a five-euro note inside -- was left sticking out of a mailbox. When the surrounding environment was neat and tidy, 13 per cent of passersby snatched the money. But when litter was strewn around the mailbox, 25 per cent stole the envelope. Graffiti on the mailbox pushed theft up to 27 per cent.

So does this prove Giuliani really is the greatest crime fighter since Batman? Not really.

That's because the core idea behind "broken windows" -- the idea that passed muster in the Netherlands -- is different than the "broken windows" made famous by Giuliani and the New York-based media.

During his time in the mayor's office, Giuliani rolled out many reforms in New York City. Directing the police to strictly enforce minor offences against public order -- which is how Giuliani interpreted "broken windows" -- was only one of them. Another famous tactic was "zero tolerance" -- cracking down on turnstile jumpers in the subway, for example, in the belief that a wide net that catches lots of minor offenders would also snag the occasional serious suspect.

In popular perception, these measures were jumbled together. Even today, it's hard to find an article about "broken windows" which doesn't mention "zero tolerance" as a related, or even synonymous idea.

More generally, "broken windows" is used as a sort of shorthand for a right-wing attitude: Don't give the punks an inch and we'll have safe streets, dammit.

But go back to the original article by Kelling and Wilson and it's clear this misses the central point.

"Window-breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are inhabited by determined window-breakers whereas others are populated by window-lovers," Kelling and Wilson wrote. "Rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares . . . ."

Social psychologists have long understood that environmental cues can have a profound influence on the choices we make, even when we are not consciously aware of those cues. Kelling and Wilson readily acknowledged that they were borrowing this insight from another field. Then they applied it to policing.

But notice that the core insight -- one broken window can lead to a downward spiral -- isn't about law enforcement. It's about how allowing disorder to stand can create more disorder.

Law enforcement can certainly play a role in stopping the initial disorder that starts the spiral. But so can many other interventions that have nothing to do with the police.

There's the humble street sweeper, for one. The Dutch experiments confirm that cleaning the streets promptly can be expected to pay dividends in the form of better behaviour.

So will many other efforts to erase disorder. When graffiti appears, paint over it. If it sprouts again, get rid of it. The aggravation and expense may be substantial but this is just what the New York City subway did starting in the late 1980s (long before Saint Rudy became mayor, incidentally) and this is generally credited with being a major factor in the transformation of a grubby, dangerous underground world into a clean and functional transit system.

Social marketing can also work, as the "Don't Mess With Texas!" slogan demonstrated.

After unsuccessful efforts to convince Texans to stop throwing trash out the car window, the state hit on the idea of "a tough slogan that would also address the unique spirit of Texas pride."

A series of ads featuring the famous slogan followed and within a year visible roadside litter had been reduced 29 per cent. Within six years, it was down 72 per cent.

None of this involves handcuffs and jail. All it takes is a basic knowledge of social psychology, a little creativity, and a few dollars.