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Broken windows syndrome

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Excerpt:

'In a 1982 Atlantic Monthly article titled "Broken Windows," James Q. Wilson and George Kelling argued that disorder in a community, if left uncorrected, undercuts residents' own efforts to maintain their homes and neighborhoods and control unruly behavior. "If a window in a building is broken and left unrepaired," they wrote, "all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. . . . One unrepaired window is a signal that no one cares, so breaking more windows costs nothing. . . . Untended property becomes fair game for people out for fun or plunder."

'If disorder goes unchecked, a vicious cycle begins. First, it kindles a fear of crime among residents, who respond by staying behind locked doors. Their involvement in the neighborhood declines; people begin to ignore rowdy and threatening behavior in public. They cease to exercise social regulation over little things like litter on the street, loitering strangers, or truant schoolchildren. When law-abiding eyes stop watching the streets, the social order breaks down and criminals move in.

"Stable neighborhoods can change in a few months to jungles," declare Wilson and Kelling. Disorder also can have dire economic consequences. Shoppers will shun an area they perceive as being "out of control." One study analyzing crime in 30 different areas found that the level of disorder of a neighborhood -- more than such factors as income level, resident turnover, or racial makeup -- was the best indicator of an area's lack of safety.'

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