

How 'broken windows' impact political activism

February 12 2014, by H. Roger Segelken

(Phys.org) —If you left your apartment today to this scene – louts loitering in the street, drugs openly sold on the corner, prostitution and public alcohol consumption – would you call your city councilperson to complain? Become a community organizer like the young Barack Obama in Chicago? Or cover your eyes, kick the syringes aside and keep walking?

Perceptions of social disorder where people live or work are a powerful influence on their likelihood to become politically engaged, according to Jamila Michener, assistant professor of government in Cornell's College of Arts and Sciences.

"Sometimes grassroots politics starts where nothing else will grow," Michener says. "But if we're not troubled by disorder – or if we are so overwhelmed by it that we become mired in a perpetual state of fear and loathing – we're not likely to seek participatory pathways to reinvigorate failing neighborhoods."

Michener makes that case in the December 2013 issue of the *Journal of Political Behavior*, with her article, "Neighborhood Disorder and Local Participation: Examining the Political Relevance of 'Broken Windows.'"

The "broken windows" theory is used by social scientists and law-enforcement officials to explain criminal behavior in neighborhoods marred by graffiti, litter and abandoned buildings. Michener wanted to be the first to explain how such things affect [political behavior](#)

So Michener designed a study to evaluate the relationship between neighborhood disorder and political participation. She tried to account for "tangible markers of disorder," essentially broken windows and other physical signs that could be objectively measured, and "subjective perceptions" of disorder, like "How awful is this for you?" (her raw data came from the landmark Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods).

Reporting her results in a London School of Economics [blog](#), Michener wrote, ". . . while objective conditions are politically consequential, these perceptions are a more powerful and consistent mechanism through which neighborhood disorder affects citizen engagement."

Graphing the roots of grassroots activism

She's no graffiti artist, but government's Jamila Michener can draw a graph. The trending lines in her scholarly paper, "Neighborhood Disorder and Local Participation: Examining the Political Relevance of 'Broken Windows,'" tell a more nuanced story of objective signs vs. subjective perceptions – and getting involved vs. being apathetic.

In one graph, increasing levels of objective social disorder were associated with a decreasing likelihood of citizens reaching out to political officials. That is to say, the more broken windows researchers objectively counted, the less willing neighbors were to participate in the formal political sphere.

A second graph, mapping perceptions of disorder, showed that neighborhood residents who were more troubled by disorder were more likely to attend meetings and discuss problems.

Yet another graph, illustrating the impact of perceptions on neighborhood residents proclivity for reaching out the political officials,

looked like a mound of uncollected trash: Neighborhood residents with "average" perceptions of disorder were at the peak of the heap, while those with most negative perceptions and those with the most positive perceptions were at the lower extremes – not talking to politicians, just holding their noses.

"The lenses through which community residents interpret 'broken windows' are critical determinants of grassroots politics," Michener wrote in her blog. "This is not just a nifty scholarly finding; it bears directly upon the factors that policymakers must consider ... for promoting strong neighborhoods and urban renewal."

More information: "Neighborhood Disorder and Local Participation: Examining the Political Relevance of 'Broken Windows.'" Jamila Michener *Political Behavior*. December 2013, Volume 35, Issue 4, pp 777-806. link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11109-012-9217-x

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