

Researchers find little evidence for 'broken windows theory,' say neighborhood disorder doesn't cause crime

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More than 35 years ago, researchers theorized that graffiti, abandoned buildings, panhandling, and other signs of disorder in neighborhoods create an environment that leads people to commit more crime.

In the "broken windows [theory](#)," as it has come to be known, such characteristics convey the message that these places aren't monitored and crime will go unpunished. The theory has led police to crack down on minor crimes with the idea that this will prevent more serious crimes and inspired research on how disorder affects people's health.

Now, Northeastern researchers say they have debunked the "broken windows theory." In research published in the *Annual Review of Criminology* and in *Social Science & Medicine*, they have found that disorder in a neighborhood doesn't cause people to break the law, commit more crimes, have a lower opinion of their [neighborhoods](#), or participate in dangerous or unhealthy behavior.

"The body of evidence for the broken windows theory does not stand, in terms of how disorder impacts individuals," said Daniel T. O'Brien, associate professor in the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs and the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northeastern.

The methodology behind the findings

O'Brien and his research colleagues—Brandon Welsh, a professor of criminology and criminal justice at Northeastern, and doctoral student Chelsea Farrell—conducted two studies. One, published in *Annual Review of Criminology*, focused on whether disorder affects crime. The other, published in *Social Science & Medicine*, focused on the impact of disorder on public health.

O'Brien outlined the findings of both studies in an article published in April by the Scholars Strategy Network, an organization that connects journalist, policymakers, and civic leaders with researchers.

They wanted to see if the "broken windows theory" holds up. They sought answers to two questions: Does disorder cause crime, and does it

have an impact on public health?

The researchers discovered that disorder in a neighborhood does not cause its residents to commit more crime. They found "no consistent evidence that disorder induces higher levels of aggression or makes residents feel more negative toward the neighborhood," they wrote in their paper in the *Annual Review of Criminology*.

They also did not find that these signs of physical and social disrepair discourage people from exercising outside or encourage people to engage in unprotected sex.

However, the researchers did find a connection between disorder and mental health. They found that people who live in neighborhoods with more graffiti, abandoned buildings, and other such attributes experience more mental health problems and are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. But they say that this greater likelihood to abuse drugs and alcohol is associated with mental health, and is not directly caused by disorder.

O'Brien and his colleagues used a procedure called meta-analysis to conduct their research. This means that they searched online research databases to find studies to include in their research, tested and recorded the results of each study, and pooled all those results together in order to draw a conclusion about the "broken windows theory."

The researchers analyzed nearly 300 studies that examined the effects of at least one element of neighborhood disorder (say, graffiti or public drunkenness) on at least one outcome at the individual level (say, committing a violent crime or using drugs).

They then tested the effect that disorder was found to have on residents in each study. In the crime study, they tested to what extent disorder led

people to commit crime, made them more fearful of crime in their neighborhoods, and affected their perceptions of their neighborhoods. In the health study, they tested whether disorder affected whether people exercised outdoors, experienced mental health problems, or engaged in risky behavior, including abusing drugs and alcohol or having unprotected sex.

O'Brien says that his team took into account the research methods used in each study in order to assess whether its design led researchers to find more evidence for the "broken windows theory" than there actually was.

The Northeastern researchers say that they found two widespread flaws in how past studies that found evidence for the broken windows theory were designed. These flaws, they say, led to conclusions that overstated the impact that elements of neighborhood disorder had on crime and health.

The first flaw, they say, is that many studies didn't account for important variables, including the income levels of households in the neighborhoods that were analyzed. O'Brien says that past research has found that the more poverty there is in a neighborhood, the more crime and disorder occurs there. His team's meta-analysis revealed that the studies that didn't account for socio-economic status found a stronger connection between disorder and crime than those that did account for the income levels of residents.

The second flaw, they say, relates to how researchers measured the levels of disorder in neighborhoods. O'Brien says that many studies evaluated disorder by surveying residents who were asked to assess how well their neighborhoods are maintained and either whether they worried about crime or suffered from mental health problems.

O'Brien says that the results of these surveys can be unreliable because

people's perception of the disorder in their neighborhoods may be intertwined with their assessments of [crime](#) as well as how they describe their own mental or physical health. The studies in which residents were asked both of these questions yielded the strongest evidence in favor of the broken windows theory. But studies in which researchers visited the neighborhoods and observed signs of disorder for themselves found less evidence to support the theory.

"There are other ways to think about disorder"

O'Brien says that his team's findings have significant implications. He says that policing and public health strategies shouldn't be based on the idea that disorder causes people to break the law or participate in dangerous or unhealthy behavior.

But he also says that disorder, if studied in a more precise way, can provide valuable insight into what's happening in neighborhoods and inform public policy.

"There are other ways to think about disorder," says O'Brien, who co-directs the Boston Area Research Initiative, which is based at Northeastern's School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs. "It's not to say we should look at neighborhoods and say, 'You know, graffiti and abandoned buildings don't matter.' It's that they matter, but they didn't matter in a way that the broken windows theory claims that they do."

More information: Daniel T. O'Brien et al. Looking Through Broken Windows: The Impact of Neighborhood Disorder on Aggression and Fear of Crime Is an Artifact of Research Design, *Annual Review of Criminology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1146/annurev-criminol-011518-024638](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-011518-024638)

Daniel T. O'Brien et al. Broken (windows) theory: A meta-analysis of the evidence for the pathways from neighborhood disorder to resident

health outcomes and behaviors, *Social Science & Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.11.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.11.015)

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