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The Other Side of “Broken Windows”

What if vacant property received the attention that, for decades, has been showered on petty crime?

By [Eric Klinenberg](#)

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Recent research on crime rates in Philadelphia points toward a new approach to crime prevention, focussed on the restoration of abandoned spaces.

Photograph by Mark Makela / NYT / Redux

In the nineteenth century, British researchers began studying the variation in crime rates between and within cities. Some of these studies offered relatively simple accounts of the variance, in which concentrated poverty led to higher crime. Others went further, asking what explained the disparities in crime rates among poor neighborhoods. Most of this work “offered theories,” the University of Pennsylvania criminologist John MacDonald wrote in a recent paper, “but did not attempt to provide guidance on how to curb crime.” He compared this tradition, unfavorably, with the work of British health scholars, most notably John Snow, whose research on cholera “noted the importance of the spatial environment,” and who “suggested the separation of sewers and drinking water wells to prevent water-borne diseases.”

Of course, social scientists have long influenced crime policies. Consider the “broken windows” theory, which the Harvard political scientist James Q. Wilson and the Rutgers criminologist George Kelling introduced, in a piece in the *Atlantic*, in 1982. According to Wilson and Kelling, criminals perceive broken windows and other forms of disorder as signs of weak social control; in turn, they assume that crimes committed there are unlikely to be checked. “Though it is not inevitable,” Wilson and Kelling argue, “it is more likely that here, rather than in places where people are confident they can regulate public behavior by informal controls, drugs will change hands, prostitutes will solicit, and cars will be stripped.”

“Broken Windows” is one of the most cited articles in the history of criminology; it’s sometimes called the Bible of policing. Since the nineteen-eighties, cities throughout the world have used Wilson and Kelling’s ideas as motivation for “zero tolerance” policing, wherein officers monitor petty crimes, such as graffiti, loitering, public intoxication, and even panhandling, and courts severely punish those convicted of committing them. “If you take care of the little things, then

you can prevent a lot of the big things,” the former Los Angeles and New York City police chief William J. Bratton has said. (Bratton has also applied the theory in overseas consulting work.) In practice, this meant stopping, frisking, and arresting more people, particularly those who live in high-crime areas. It also meant a spike in reports that police were unfairly targeting minorities, particularly black men.

Broken-windows theory always worked better as an idea than as a description of the real world. The problems with the theory, which include the fact that perceptions of disorder generally have more to do with the racial composition of a neighborhood than with the number of broken windows or amount of graffiti in the area, are numerous and well documented. But more interesting than the theory’s flaws is the way that it was framed and interpreted. Consider the authors’ famous evocation of how disorder begins:

A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up, a window is smashed. Adults stop scolding rowdy children; the children, emboldened, become more rowdy. Families move out, unattached adults move in. Teenagers gather in front of the corner store. The merchant asks them to move; they refuse. Fights occur. Litter accumulates. People start drinking in front of the grocery; in time, an inebriate slumps to the sidewalk and is allowed to sleep it off. Pedestrians are approached by panhandlers.

Things get worse from there. But what’s curious is how the first two steps of this cycle—“A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up”—have disappeared in the public imagination. The third step—“a window is smashed”—inspired the article’s catchy title and took center stage. Debates about the theory ignored the two problems at the root of its story, jumping straight to the criminal behavior. We got “broken windows,” not “abandoned property,” and a very different policy response ensued.

But what if the authors—and the policymakers who heeded them—had taken another tack? What if vacant property had received the attention that, for thirty years, was instead showered on petty criminals?

A few years ago, John MacDonald, the Penn criminologist, and Charles Branas, the chair of epidemiology at Columbia University, began one of the most exciting research experiments in social science. Branas is a leading scholar of gun violence, having become interested in the subject while working as a paramedic. He met MacDonald in the aughts, when they were both working at the University of Pennsylvania, in a seminar on gun violence at the medical school’s trauma center. Both were frustrated by the science that linked crime to neighborhood disorder. “A lot of it, from ‘broken windows’ on, was just descriptive,” Branas told me. “You didn’t know exactly what counted as disorder. And it wasn’t actionable. Outside of policing, which was obviously complicated, there wasn’t much you could do about it.”

The two began meeting on campus. While they were brainstorming, Branas was invited to discuss his research at a conference in Philadelphia. During his presentation, he briefly mentioned his interest in running an experiment on the physical factors related to gun violence. “When I finished, someone from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society approached me,” Branas recalled. That person was convinced that vacant properties—Philadelphia had tens of thousands of empty lots—were driving up violent crime in poor neighborhoods. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, or P.H.S., had incredible data, and offered to help.

Branas and MacDonald were excited about the idea. There was, after all, an established literature on the relationship between abandoned properties and crime. In 1993, the criminologist William Spelman published a paper showing that, in Austin, “crime rates on blocks with open abandoned buildings were twice as high as rates on matched blocks without open buildings.” In 2005, the sociologist Lance Hannon showed that, in New York City’s high-poverty areas, the number of abandoned houses in a given census tract correlated with homicide levels. But Branas and MacDonald wanted to draw from an even deeper study, which required collecting an enormous amount of data and designing an experiment. They invited more scientists to join them: a health economist, a professor from Penn’s Department of Emergency Medicine, and a medical anthropologist.

One of the team’s first research projects involved two natural experiments in Philadelphia. In one, they examined violent crime around 2,356 abandoned buildings that had been in violation of Philadelphia’s anti-bligh ordinance. A set of six hundred and seventy-six buildings had been remediated by the owners, which meant they had been “treated” with replacement doors and windows; the rest had not. Every month, for a three-year period between 2010 and 2013, the researchers compared violent-crime levels around the treated buildings with violent-crime levels around a randomly

selected, geographically matched group of buildings that remained in disrepair.

The second experiment compared violent crime around vacant lots. According to the team’s research, there were 49,690 such lots in Philadelphia. P.H.S. had remediated at least 4,436 of them, which meant it had cleared trash and debris, graded the land, planted grass and trees to create a parklike setting, and installed low fences with walk-in openings to facilitate recreational use and deter illegal dumping. Again, Branas and his colleagues compared the treated sites with a set of randomly selected, geographically matched properties. In this study, they measured crime annually, over a full decade, from 1999 to 2008.

On a warm and windy day in September, I visited Philadelphia to observe the sites that P.H.S. had remediated. Keith Green, a P.H.S. employee with a salt-and-pepper beard, picked me up in his blue Ford pickup truck, and told me that we’d begin by driving to West Philadelphia, where P.H.S. maintains 2.3 million square feet of vacant land. Green, who grew up in a part of Philadelphia that’s so gray it’s known as “the concrete city,” started working at P.H.S. twenty-one years ago, first as an intern and then on community-garden projects. “I never thought I’d be doing this for so long,” he told me. “But I found my niche when we started fixing up abandoned property.”

As we drove, Green told me about one of his first jobs. “The city asked us to clean up a two-block area in North Philadelphia where there was a flea infestation. We got there, and it was like the entire area had turned into a jungle. Weeds, tall grass, messed-up trees. People were using it as a dumping ground.” The team ended up treating a hundred and twenty-five empty lots. “It was a horrible job, but when we finished you could tell that the neighborhood was going to be different,” he said. “And people were so happy. I’d have kids running up to my truck, yelling, ‘Mr. Keith! Mr. Keith! Can you come back tomorrow?’ They treated me like I was Mister Softee.”

Green drove slowly up Fortieth Street, on the west side of the city. “You’re gonna want to keep your eyes open,” he said. The area looked a lot like Englewood and North Lawndale, neighborhoods I’d studied in Chicago, where row houses and apartment buildings, some empty, some well-kept, sat adjacent to large, open lots that were thick with weeds, debris, and six-foot-high grass. “See that?” He pulled over at a corner lot with a low-lying wooden fence, two benches, trimmed trees, and a neatly cut lawn. “That’s one of our treated sites. You can tell because it’s so well maintained.”

We got out and walked through the pocket park to a vacant house and large lot a few steps away. There, the grass had grown both high and wide, so that it came through the sidewalk and out to the curb. “Now this—this is a disaster,” Green said. “It’s probably got an owner who wouldn’t let us work here, or someone we couldn’t track down. If you live here, you’ve got to deal with all the problems this attracts into the neighborhood: pests, insects, garbage, crime. And you know it’s gonna make it hard for new development to work here. People see that and they want to run.”

We crossed the narrow street to look at another property. Loretta, a woman in her late twenties, out for some exercise, was walking briskly toward us. I paused and asked if she lived there. “No,” she replied. “But I walk around this neighborhood all the time.”

“Have you noticed all the little parks with small fences?” I asked.

“Not really.” She looked around, took them in. “They’re nice, though.”

“What about the abandoned lots with all the weeds and garbage?”

“Um, yeah,” Loretta answered, cracking a little smile. “Why do you think I’m walking on the other side of the street?” She paused for a beat, then looked over at the lot. “Those places are scary. You don’t know what’s going on in that mess, who’s around. There’s a lot of places like that around here, and I just try to keep away.”

Green and I headed up the road again before turning onto Westminster Street. He pointed to a large remediated lot that residents had converted into a community park, with picnic tables and a small garden. “A guy who owns a store a few blocks away helped fix up this block,” Green explained. “He just wanted the neighborhood to look nice, to get more people out on the sidewalks and gardens. We see a lot of that. If we maintain things, residents go a little further, and put in what they like.”

We crossed over to a set of three row houses that had pocket parks on either side. As we approached, a man with gray hair, sunglasses, and a wooden cane was sitting on a picnic table and talking on a flip phone. He stood up, nodded, and introduced himself as Micky. Green asked if the park made the neighborhood better. “Oh, you know it does,” he replied. He pointed to the front porch of the row house next door, where a woman named Joyce, in sandals and a white T-shirt, was relaxing on a rocking chair. “Ask her. She knows.”

Joyce was nodding. “I’ve been staying here ten, twelve years now. Those lots were bad when I first got here. Drugs and all that. Kids up to no good. People would let their dogs run all around them, too—oh, did it smell!” She grimaced and shivered a little. “But they fixed it up pretty soon after I got here. Put them tables in—big umbrellas, too. Kids started coming around. We got the garden going. Before, everybody would avoid this block. It was ugly, and dangerous, ’cause you didn’t know who was gonna jump out of those bushes. Now it’s a lot better.”

Green and his colleagues at P.H.S. suspected that fixing up the empty lots and buildings was improving Philadelphia’s poor neighborhoods, but they weren’t certain. Branas and MacDonald had a more specific hypothesis: that remediation would reduce violent crime nearby. “It’s not simply that they are signs of disorder,” Branas told me. “It’s that the places themselves create opportunities for gun violence; they take what might just be a poor neighborhood and make it poor and dangerous.”

The reasons are straightforward. Abandoned houses are good places for people involved in crime to hide when on the run. They’re also good places to store firearms. Untended lots are notoriously useful for drug dealing—in part because most law-abiding residents avoid them, and in part because dealers can hide their products in the weeds and tall grass if the police drive by. For communities, and for the police, they are hard places to monitor and control.

Compelling theories, as critics of broken-windows policing know all too well, are often betrayed by evidence. That’s why Branas was so surprised by the findings from their first study, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, which showed a thirty-nine-per-cent reduction in gun violence in and around remediated abandoned buildings and a smaller—but still meaningful—five-per-cent reduction in gun violence in and around remediated lots. These are extraordinary numbers, at a level of impact one rarely sees in a social-science experiment.

Equally powerful, Branas said, was that there was no evidence that the violence had simply shifted to nearby places. The declines were real. And they lasted from one to nearly four years, making the benefit far more sustainable than those of other crime-reduction programs. “Honestly, it was a bigger effect than we’d expected to find,” he said.

For Branas, the results pointed toward a new approach to crime prevention. Early in his career, he worked on what, in hindsight, he views as a failed experiment—conventional anti-violence research that focussed on the people most likely to commit crimes. “When I started at Penn, we had been working hard to reduce gun crime in Philadelphia. We had the interpreters, the social workers, the community leaders,” he said. “Some of them were amazing, and we had some successes. But they were always short-lived. . . . In the end, it wound up helping only, I don’t know, about fifty kids, just the ones who were there at the time.”

To this day, most policies that aim to reduce crime focus on punishing people rather than improving places. The President has called for a national “stop and frisk” police program; the Attorney General wants more severe sentencing; advocates of “law and order” are resurgent. We invest little in housing and neighborhood amenities like libraries, senior centers, and community gardens, which draw people into the public realm and put more eyes on the street. And we spend even less to address criminal “hot spots”—the empty lots and abandoned buildings that, according to Branas’s team, account for fifteen per cent of city space in America.

What the Philadelphia studies suggest is that place-based interventions are far more likely to succeed than people-based ones. “Tens of millions of vacant and abandoned properties exist in the United States,” Branas and his team wrote. Remediating those properties is simple, cheap, and easily reproducible. What’s more, the programs impose few demands on local residents, and they appear to pay for themselves. “Simple treatments of abandoned buildings and vacant lots returned conservative estimates of between \$5.00 and \$26.00 in net benefits to taxpayers and between \$79.00 and \$333.00 to society at large, for every dollar invested,” the team wrote. It’s not only more dangerous to leave the properties untended—it’s more expensive.

Slowly, word seems to be spreading. After Branas began publishing his findings, cities throughout the U.S. and beyond began similar efforts. “In the last few years we’ve had people here from so many cities,” Keith Green told me. “Detroit, Chicago, Trenton, and Seoul. When the guy from Chicago was here, he kept saying, ‘This is incredible! This is incredible!’ ” By 2016, the team had raised millions of dollars in federal grants, and blight-remediation projects had been launched in New Orleans; Newark and Camden, New Jersey; Flint, Michigan; and Youngstown, Ohio. Each experiment included, at Branas’s insistence, trained frontline researchers and paid community residents.

These are not new ideas. In 1854, John Snow, the British health researcher, began studying a cholera outbreak on Broad Street, in the Soho section of London. At the time, most people, scientists included, believed that the cause of the epidemic was “miasmata,” or foul air. Snow was a skeptic. He mapped the cases and noticed that they clustered around a single water pump, which he persuaded the local council to disable. That action—which stopped the outbreak, founded the field of epidemiology, and spurred fundamental improvements to the public’s health—came from an attention to the environment, not to the individual. “We’re proud that we’ve been able to employ people in these neighborhoods,” Branas said about his work. “But the bigger, more sustainable effect will come from fixing places.”

This excerpt is drawn from “[Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life](#),” which will be published this September, by Crown.

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