

## "Broken Window Theory"

We judge what is attractive and unattractive by various symbols or signs. For some it is unpainted buildings, for others it is a weed-filled yard, for many it is litter and refuse while for some it is the broken window in an abandoned or vacant building. They are all signs of a lack of pride and disregard for our neighborhoods. They may also be a sign of other problems in the community.

Dr. George Kelling in a presentation before the 1999 National Summit on "Building Clean, Livable Cities" - a joint initiative of Keep America Beautiful and the U.S. Conference of Mayors outlined his theory on "broken windows" - a metaphor for the breakdown of community organization and stability.

The theory is that a broken window left unrepaired sends a signal that there is a lack of concern about the building. It indicates that the rest of the windows are free to break. Left untended this leads to more broken windows. This key event causes a chain reaction, because residents see that vandalism is being ignored and they soon begin to tolerate other negative activities as acceptable. In the same way, disorderly behavior, if left unattended, leads to fear and more serious crimes. Neglect and apathy take root in a neighborhood. This in turn fuels further deterioration and often leading to societal ills.

The theory is one that many of us recognize and can appreciate. In order to restore order, Dr. Kelling outlined several important elements of community organization that are required:

- Residents taking personal responsibility for the neighborhoods
- Citizens and police departments working together to combat crime
- Business improvement Districts being essential to clean and safe downtown areas
- Civic and church groups providing active support in neighborhoods
- Community courts providing enforcement

Restoration of authority for parents and teachers over children in the community  
Dr. Kelling makes it clear that the "broken window" can be symbolized by litter on the streets, refuse in the yards, unkempt and unpainted facilities, weeds or unmowed lawns, rundown signs and generally areas that are not maintained. He further recommends that each one of us make the commitment to eliminate the "broken windows" in our neighborhoods through active and positive community volunteerism.

"Quality of life and disorder continue to be among the most urgent issues local politicians address..." Additionally, "Restoring order is key to revitalizing our cities, and to preventing the downward spiral into urban decay, regardless of whether a reduction of crime results."

It is these concepts that provide a strong basis for the programs of Keep America Beautiful and other affiliates like Keep Iowa Beautiful.

Dr. Kelling's book is entitled Fixing Broken Windows.

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*Helping to Keep Iowa Beautiful*

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