Law-abiding residents of high-crime neighborhoods keep proving George Kelling right and most of his colleagues wrong. Kelling, 83, died yesterday of cancer at his home in New Hampshire. Go to a police-community meeting in any troubled neighborhood—whether the South Side of Chicago or South Central Los Angeles—and you will rarely hear complaints about what most criminologists call “serious” crimes, such as robbery or shootings. Instead, residents will plead for surcease from open-air drug dealing, the unruly teens colonizing corners, loud music, and other affronts to civility. Kelling recognized this yearning for public order among the poor and in so doing created one of the most important contributions to urban policy in the last half century: the Broken Windows theory of policing.

Kelling formulated that theory in a seminal 1982 essay in *The Atlantic*, coauthored with social scientist James Q. Wilson. “Broken Windows” grew out of Kelling’s passion for observing what police officers actually do. He had accompanied cops walking foot beats in Newark, N.J., and had documented how they enforced local norms of order, whether keeping panhandlers away from bus shelters, quieting noisy youth, or roasting unknown loiterers. The law-abiding residents of the community backed the officers wholeheartedly, ridiculing norm violators and providing information on who was a “regular” and who a “stranger.”
Kelling and Wilson hypothesized that communities where public disorder goes unchecked were likely to enter a spiral of decline. Most people avoid public spaces perceived as being out of control, fearing that such hubs of disorder give cover to criminals. That perception becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as the law-abiding stay indoors, ceding terrain to miscreants who flout the bourgeois social order. As aggressive begging, public inebriation, graffiti, and vandalism increase, thieves and robbers spot an environment where they can target victims with impunity.

Kelling and Wilson ended the \textit{Atlantic} essay with a plea to return to the “night watchman” role of policing. That model, stemming from America’s colonial period, focused on discretionary order maintenance. It had been supplanted in the 1960s by the rule-bound, rapid-response model of policing, whereby officers in patrol cars raced to crime scenes as quickly as possible. Kelling and Wilson urged departments to put cops back on foot patrol. In a now-overlooked but prescient coda, they rejected the emerging libertarian consensus that authorities should ignore disreputable behavior—such as drug dealing and use, public prostitution, and illegal gambling—that allegedly hurts no one. If such behavior occurs en masse, it destroys whole neighborhoods. The police, they concluded, have a responsibility to protect communities as well as individuals.

The first big test of the Broken Windows concept occurred in New York City’s subway system in the 1980s. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) had lost control to graffiti vandals who defaced entire subway cars. New Yorkers who could not flee to private automobiles or to the suburbs cowered underground under a pall of ugliness and crime. In 1984, the MTA announced that it would eradicate subway graffiti, which it did by cleaning every car when it returned to the train yards, thus denying vandals the satisfaction of seeing their spray-painted aggressions touring the city. By 1989, the MTA declared victory. A relieved public returned to the now graffiti-free subways in ever-higher numbers, creating an informal bulwark against subterranean crime.

Ray Kelly drew on Broken Windows insights during his first tour as New York police commissioner under Mayor David Dinkins, cracking down on the infamous “squeegee men” who “offered” to clean the car windows of drivers.
stuck in New York’s bridge and tunnel traffic. In 1994, Broken Windows theory went citywide under newly elected mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his police commissioner, William Bratton. Bratton and Kelling had collaborated at the Kennedy School of Government in the 1980s, studying how midlevel police commanders can best use their authority. As New York commissioner, Bratton targeted public prostitution, aggressive begging, and, most significantly, subway turnstile-jumping. The trains themselves may no longer have symbolized a city out of control, but the sight of youth defiantly breaking the rules with impunity underscored the perception that the forces of anarchy still ruled over the forces of civilization in New York. Bratton instructed the transit cops to arrest the fare-beaters, rather than standing by passively waiting for more “serious” crime. Many of the fare thieves were wanted precisely for those serious crimes, including rape and murder. Criminals, it turned out, do not scrupulously obey one set of laws while violating another—they are polymorphous offenders. Subway riders cheered on the arrests, which signaled a broader determination to restore order.

The Broken Windows concept spread beyond policing. Business-improvement districts seized on Kelling’s work to revive central business cores, wrenching trash- and graffiti-filled streets back from chaos. Without the advances in policing and urban management that Broken Windows ushered in, New York City would never have experienced its 1990s economic renaissance.

Kelling’s research interests were always expanding, but they remained grounded in a commitment to hands-on engagement with his subjects. He studied how prosecutors can manage their work more strategically to fight crime, and returned to Newark in 2009 to forge a partnership between police, prosecutors, and churches to reduce youth violence. Though unfailingly wry and affable, he lamented the increasing dominance of number-crunchers in criminology. The most recurring theme of his work was how officers use their discretionary authority. A cop may do as much to enforce norms of public order, he insisted, by pouring out the booze of the vagrant drinking on the corner and giving a stern warning as by making an arrest.
In the 1990s, Kelling chaired a panel at Rutgers University (where he taught) on whether the New Jersey State Police were engaged in “racial profiling.” The panel rightly challenged the conventional wisdom among political and journalistic elites that racially disparate car stop-and-arrest rates indicate police racism, rather than racially disparate rates of offending.

Kelling endured withering attacks for his public-order advocacy. Ivory tower criminologists and law professors view order-maintenance policing as a pretext to oppress minorities. A Columbia University law professor, Bernard Harcourt, has made a career arguing that Broken Windows enforcement is racist. Anti-police advocates seized on the tragic death of Eric Garner in 2014 to try to eliminate public-order maintenance in New York. Obese and suffering from asthma and heart disease, Garner hung out in a small public park outside a struggling commercial strip on Staten Island, racking up arrests for the illegal sale of loose cigarettes and marijuana. On the day of Garner’s death, officers tried to pick him up again for illegal cigarette sales, and he resisted. It was the struggle over that arrest that triggered his death, not the NYPD’s policy of responding to community complaints about public disorder. Nevertheless, after the outcry over Garner’s death, officers in Staten Island all but stopped misdemeanor policing. Crime and disorder skyrocketed, leading, predictably, to community complaints about police inaction.

Academic critics and the press also challenged the idea that allowing disorder to fester invites more lawbreaking. In 2007, sociologists in the Netherlands constructed an elegant series of experiments to test the hypothesis. The social scientists defaced discrete urban locations with graffiti and litter and created other signs of public-norm violation. In every case, passersby were far more likely themselves to litter, trespass, and disregard other social rules in the disorderly environment than in the orderly one. They were twice as likely to steal a stamped envelope visibly containing cash from a mailbox that was covered with graffiti than from a mailbox that was pristine.

Even if it were not the case that tolerating street incivility invited more crime, however, enforcing quality-of-life laws would be a moral imperative, since that is what the good residents of high-crime areas beg police to do, as Kelling
observed time and again. Critics who insist that Broken Windows policing is racist have never explained why it is that demands for low-level misdemeanor enforcement come disproportionately from minority neighborhoods. Nor have they suggested what the police are supposed to do when a minority community asks for more Broken Windows activity—ignore the requests as racist? The fierce desire for public order among the poor is so ubiquitous, however, that even the media cannot avoid noticing it on occasion. In February 2019, the Baltimore Sun accompanied Baltimore’s new police chief as he met with community groups. A week before, a shooting had taken place inside a West Baltimore high school, but local residents focused their demands on eradicating the open-air drug markets that plagued their lives, according to the Sun. In 2017, New York Times reporters observed commanders in Brooklyn’s Bedford Stuyvesant precinct explain to locals why the police could not easily stop people from smoking marijuana in privately owned buildings.

Fortunately, most police chiefs don’t take their cue from Bernard Harcourt and his colleagues. In August 2018, after a particularly bloody weekend in Chicago, Superintendent of Police Eddie Johnson announced a Broken Windows campaign against the public alcohol and marijuana consumption and loud music at the huge, unauthorized street parties that had served as seedbeds for that weekend’s shootings and many others drearily like them.

In recent years, Kelling insisted on separating the Broken Windows concept from “zero tolerance” policing, a term that implies a lack of discretion regarding enforcement. He also rejected any association with hard-and-fast activity quotas for officers, whether pedestrian stops or arrests. Police critics conflate Broken Windows policing with the NYPD’s highly contested stop, question, and frisk policies, but the two are distinct. As the second decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, however, worrisome signs abound that the NYPD, beaten down by a determined, tireless opposition, is losing its previously unwavering determination to nip street incivility in the bud.

The endgame for much of academia and for “progressives” is to eliminate proactive policing in minority neighborhoods. These critics remain wedded to the idea that crime can be lowered only by solving its alleged root causes:
racism and poverty. Kelling asserted the opposite: that constitutional, responsive policing is the best hope that law-abiding residents of high crime areas have to live free from fear, a right that people in safer neighborhoods take for granted. Portraying the police as a force for evil is one of the most destructive consequences of the 1960s revolt against traditional authority. George Kelling’s empirically based wisdom revived the understanding that protecting public order is an essential and humane function of government—and that the viability of cities rests on respect for the law.

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