



**City Journal**  
**Broken Windows Turns 25**

And it has worked wonders on both coasts.

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Spring 2007

Twenty-five years ago, social scientist James Q. Wilson and criminologist (and Manhattan Institute senior fellow) George Kelling first introduced the phrase “Broken Windows” into the public policy lexicon. In a pathbreaking *Atlantic Monthly* article, Wilson and Kelling pointed out that people were likelier to vandalize a building with one broken window than a building with none, since a broken window sends the message that nobody cares, encouraging vandals to act on their destructive impulses. Similarly, they suggested, if a community tolerates quality-of-life offenses, such as drug use and prostitution, it signals to all potential lawbreakers that it doesn't care what happens to it; more serious crime will soon result.

In the early nineties, the chief of New York City's transit police, William Bratton, put the Broken Windows theory into practice. With Kelling as consultant, Bratton began to go after the fare evaders, aggressive panhandlers, pickpockets, and other petty (and not so petty) criminals who had turned the subway system into what he called “the transit equivalent of Dante's Inferno.” Bratton also had cops enforce anti-loitering laws to steer the homeless away from the subways and toward social services. Homeless advocates and civil libertarians fought him every step of the way, but Bratton prevailed, bringing order to the chaotic system. Sure enough, not only did minor crime plummet; serious crime did, too, and ridership soared. In nabbing low-level offenders, Bratton also discovered that many of them were wanted for much more serious crimes.

A few years later, Mayor Rudy Giuliani chose Bratton as his top cop and charged him with leading a similar revolution above ground. The rest, as they say, is history. With Broken Windows as a key part of a broader reform of policing (including the introduction of new accountability measures and computer analysis of crime patterns), the Giuliani era saw serious crime fall 65 percent in Gotham, sparking a citywide revitalization. Bratton's successors—Howard Safir and Bernard Kerik under Giuliani, and now Ray Kelly under Mayor Mike Bloomberg—have kept the policing innovations in place.

Bratton is now the chief of police in Los Angeles, where he has successfully employed many of the tactics that worked in New York. His latest challenge is restoring order and civility to Skid Row, a section of downtown L.A. that may be the nation's largest homeless encampment and open-air drug market. As Kelling, again a consultant to Bratton, puts it, Skid Row is “perhaps the only place in the United States that could compete with the old New York City subway system in the magnitude of its sheer lawlessness, pathology, and tragedy.”

Six months ago, Bratton launched an initiative in Skid Row that includes both stepped-up law enforcement and social outreach. The initiative has added 50 officers to the area's regular police contingent to target not only drug-related crime but also misdemeanors like littering, property defacement, and theft. So far, they've made some 5,000 arrests, mostly for felony narcotics sale. They are also enforcing a new ordinance that prohibits sleeping on the sidewalk during the day, now that the rule has survived an array of legal challenges. And the police have removed the shantytown of boxes and tents that the homeless had erected on Skid Row's sidewalks.

At the same time, these officers have been working hand in hand with social workers to help the truly homeless—most of them mentally ill or addicted to drugs and alcohol—get the services they need. Further, Democratic mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has charged the city attorney with investigating a host of cases in which hospitals denied service to Skid Row's homeless and literally dumped them onto the street.

The American Civil Liberties Union has predictably dragged the LAPD into court, claiming that the cops are “harassing the homeless” and “criminalizing the poor.” But Bratton sensibly retorts: “Being homeless is not a crime. What Mayor Villaraigosa and I are trying to do is rid the neighborhood of the drug dealers and violent criminals who prey on the homeless, and help the genuinely homeless find the housing and services they need.”

The results of the Skid Row cleanup recall New York's crime turnaround. Violent crime in the area is down 32 percent from this time last year; property crime has fallen 38 percent. The homeless population sleeping on the streets is now fewer than 700, down from about 2,000 before the campaign. The LAPD has also dismantled the leadership of the notorious 5th and Hill gang, which controlled drug sales in Skid Row. Downtown business leaders are unanimous in praise, and social-services providers report that more people who need help are getting it.

Happy birthday, then, to Broken Windows. Citizens on both coasts now have reason to celebrate the theory—and the return of urban civility.