Sociology Shortcuts

D3. Right Realism

While Right Realism is clearly related to New Right Administrative criminology, it offers a theoretical explanation for offending lacking from the latter, based on three fundamental assumptions:
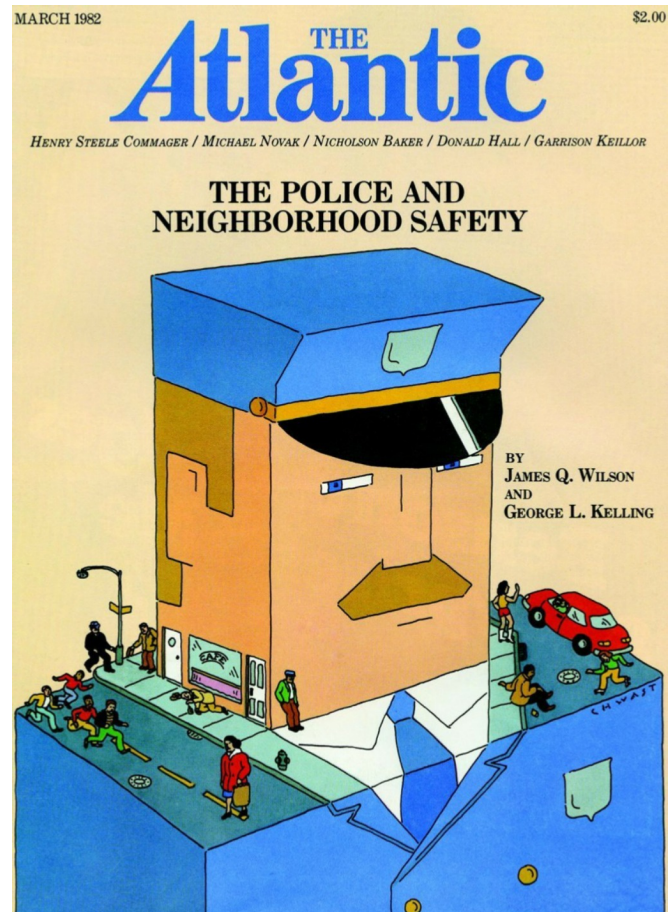
1. Criminal behaviour is a developmental process: *minor disorders*, allowed to go unchallenged, lead to *major disorder, o*r as Wilson and Kelling (1982) argue, "*One unrepaired broken window is a signal no-one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing*".

2. Crime is a problem of order:
▪ unchecked criminality leads to disorder within a community.
▪ This, in turn, feeds into the development of more and greater criminality

As Kleiman (2000) argues, where people *fear crime* they take steps to *avoid it*, to the detriment of community life; the streets, for example, become the preserve of lawbreakers. Establishing order, therefore, breaks this "cycle of disorder" and reduces both *crime* and the fear of crime.

3. People make rational choices about offending / conforming and this translates into a 'cost / benefit' explanation of offending. Potential offenders *rationally* weigh the:

▪ *likely benefits* of crime, in terms of money and status, for example, against:
▪ *likely costs*, such as being caught and punished.

Possible punishments, however severe, are not in themselves deterrents since no-one commits a crime believing they are going to be caught.

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THE POLICE AND NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY

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Wilson (1983) notes individuals don't *always* act rationally, in their own best interests, because they may have no real idea about the chances of being arrested for a particular crime.

Rational choice, therefore, operates at a *general level*, where beliefs are propagated through the media, community, family and peer group – sources that, Wilson suggests, "*supply a crudely accurate estimate of the current risks of arrest, prosecution, and sentencing*".

Offenders are likely to have a good working knowledge of situational variables, such as the best places and times to commit crimes with the least possible risks. Wiles and Costello (2000) provide empirical support for this idea when they note *convicted burglars* gave three main reasons for their choice of target:

▪ poor security.
▪ unoccupied premises.
▪ somewhere isolated / quiet.

For Wilson, crime control involves:
▪ increasing the risk for offenders in order to
▪ raise the costs of crime to outweigh any possible benefits.

If a community deploys highly visible measures to deter crime it makes offenders think rationally about the general risk of being caught.

Evaluation

One criticism of this overall approach involves questioning the developmental link between *minor* and *major* disorder on the basis it involves a form of exception fallacy: the idea that something characteristic of an *individual* can be extrapolated to *all* similar individuals.

Someone who allows their room to accumulate litter will find this rapidly escalates from a minor problem of tidiness to a major problem of infestation - an example of minor disorder causing major disorder.

We can't, however, simply extrapolate this principle from the individual to a community because communities contain people, such as the police, who help *prevent disorder*. Communities may experience *low-level disorder*, such as teens hanging around the streets without this ever developing into major disorder precisely because it is kept in check.

Further criticism involves questioning the Right Realist argument that the direction of causality is *from* crime *to* disorder: if low-level crime goes unchecked a neighbourhood declines into disorder; property prices fall, the middle classes move away, criminals move in and so forth. Removing crime, therefore, removes the cause of disorder.

Lea (2007) however suggests this causality is actually *reversed*; disorder creates crime. There is more crime in working-class areas *not* because it is allowed to go unchecked but because crime is a *consequence* of disordered social relationships, such as unemployment and single-parenthood caused by inequality.

Remove the causes of disorder and you remove the causes of crime. This interpretation also solves a problem not adequately explained by Right Realism, namely why people engage in crime in the first place?

Social Order and Social Policy

The New Right and Right Realism generally have a symbiotic relationship in the sense that while they can be marked-out as theoretically-separate approaches there is a great deal of overlap between them in terms of the kinds of social policies on crime that have developed out of each approach.

It's important to note, however, that one crucial difference between the two approaches is the weight each gives to the question of social order.

For Right Realist approaches the focus is on maintaining order through a range of offender-centred policies, one of which - zero-tolerance policing - has come to epitomise a "broken windows" approach to policing.

In basic terms zero-tolerance policing involves every deviant or illegal act being acted upon by the police: arresting even trivial offenders sets clear behavioural boundaries for potential offenders and the law-abiding alike.

Some versions have, for example, been applied in both America (Bratton in New York) and the UK (in Hartlepool and Middlesbrough), although, as Pease (1998) notes, there is some debate about what it precisely involves and whether "zero-tolerance" actually has any meaning outside of how it is represented in the media: Bratton, the main architect of zero-tolerance, does not recognise the term.

> **Zero-Tolerance Policing**
> The general strategy has claimed some level of success in reducing crime; over the past 20 years:
> ▪ crime in New York fell by around 40%
> ▪ murder in New York fell by 50%.
> ▪ in Hartlepool crime fell by 40% in 3 years
> ▪ in Middlesbrough crime fell by 20% in 18 months.
> ▪ in London, "Operation Zero Tolerance" targeted petty crime around King's Cross station and 80% of residents reported "feeling safer".

Criticism of zero-tolerance policing points to the fact the long-term fall in *New York crime* was mirrored by similar falls in *other American cities* that did not use the strategy. Two reasons have been suggested for this across-the-board decline:

1. Demographic change in the shape of a fall in the number of young males - the social group most-likely to be involved in crime - in the US population.

2. A fall in the availability and use of crack cocaine.

Corman and Mocan (2002) further argue that zero-tolerance policing has little or no effect on low-level criminality and does not influence crime rates for more serious offences such as robbery or murder.

This follows, they argue, because low-level offences (*misdemeanours*) only involve very short prison sentences at worst and there is no overlap between low-level offenders and more serious types of criminality. They did find, however, that by targeting police resources at more-serious offenders crime rates fell significantly.

Kelling (2016), however, has argued maintaining social order is *not* simply a case of employing more police officers or being "tough on every crime". He argues order maintenance is a matter for *negotiation* between a range of cooperative stakeholders (such as the police, local and national politicians and members of the local community).

He's also argued that while Right Realist policies don't always lower actual crime rates, they demonstrably lower the fear of crime. People, in other words "feel safer" in their homes and on the streets. These claims have, however, been disputed:

Irving (2001) points out fear of crime is notoriously difficult to measure, not least because it's based on subjective feelings rather than objective conditions; "fear of crime" means different things to different people, such that it may not relate to crime at all: people interpret how they *feel* about their community and the people around them in terms of unhappiness, which is translated into a general fear of crime.

Ditton's (2000) study of the introduction of CCTV surveillance in Glasgow found both the fear of crime and crime itself actually *increased,* findings he attributed to electronic surveillance reducing levels of "natural surveillance" by the public. CCTV lead to a retreat from "*collective and individual responsibility to self interest and a culture of fear*".

Zero-tolerance policing is not always effective in reducing crime. It has more success in high-density urban areas with high levels of community style policing and a large amount of low-level crime.

In low-density areas with relatively lower levels of petty crime it doesn't influence crime (as opposed to offending) rates. Criminalising large numbers of young people for relatively minor public order and opportunistic offences can have the unintended effect of creating large numbers offenders "hardened" by their experience of prison; this leads to higher levels of disorder than if the "problem" had been treated in a less retributive way (which Kelling (2016) has also been at pains to point out).

In Britain a range of social policies have been introduced over the past 30 years that, somewhat ironically, are much closer to Wilson and Kelling's (1982) original Broken Windows thesis than their American counterparts - particularly attempts to prevent persistent, low-level, "anti-social" / criminal behaviour amongst the young through a range of measures:

▪ Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs): 40% of these issued in 2007 were to those under 18. .

▪ Curfews: named individuals must stay in their own home between certain hours.

▪ Dispersal zones: groups in a named area can be ordered to disperse by police or face arrest simply for being in that area.

These have met with varying degrees of success - partly because they risk contributing to a deviancy amplification spiral, where minor acts of deviance become more serious criminal acts, and the creation of what Becker (1963) called deviant careers; by drawing young people into the judicial system there is a risk of "confirming individuals" as criminals.

Closer still to the Broken Windows ideal is something like Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (1998) that require local authorities to work in partnership with:

▪ Police
▪ Health authorities
▪ Local residents and
▪ Local businesses.

The objective here is to devise and implement an overall strategy for reducing crime and disorder in their community.

For some this has meant the development of community policing, where the police, aided by community support officers (established in 2002), are integrated into and trusted by the community. The objective here is to develop informal self-regulation, such that the members of a community learn ways to protect it.

In 2012 the first elected Police and Crime Commissioners were introduced in an attempt to provide a central focal point for community-led policing initiatives.