

# The Broken Window Theory

By Gary on Ramsgate  
December 9, 2008

As I walk my rounds through the neighborhood each morning, I do a lot of thinking. I also get to "kill two birds with one stone", as the saying goes. I get my exercise and the dogs get theirs. In the process of our walks, I check for the "Broken Window Theory". This is a theory that suggests, "signs of disorderly and petty criminal behavior trigger more disorderly and petty criminal behavior, thus causing the behavior to spread".

I have lived in Rancho Cordova, and the same neighborhood, for 36 years. During that time, I have seen many changes in the area. The major changes have been the construction of Highway 50 and the developments in the surrounding area. Most of the other changes have been the people, with varying backgrounds and ethnicity.

Rancho Cordova has always been a diverse community. I've watched it change from the multiple cultures that were tied to Mather Air Force Base. Then, after the Viet Nam war ended, there were the immigrants escaping the tyrants of North Viet Nam and Cambodia. Shortly after that came the immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Then, Mather Air Force Base closed leaving many vacant apartment complexes. This apparently attracted many low income people from the surrounding Sacramento region, the San Francisco region, and Southern California, with the promise of cheap rents. It also brought with it the dregs of society, gangs of thugs with their drugs and unsociable, uncaring behavior. I watched the neighborhood and surrounding area deteriorate. I saw an increase of litter, graffiti, abandoned cars, and abandoned shopping carts. Along with the drug dealers, violent crime in the area increased.

I began thinking, "Why is this happening here and what can be done about it." We needed more enforcement of the laws. We weren't getting it from Sacramento County. We became the City of Rancho Cordova. Finally, we would have local control over our neighborhoods. We would have a local police force. I started to see results immediately. I realized that it would take more than just the police and government bodies to accomplish what was needed. It was necessary to have each person in the neighborhood become involved in making a better community. The police could only do so much. Every citizen had to step up and start cleaning up.

When you see litter, pick it up and dispose of it in an appropriate container. Better yet, don't litter. Walk that extra few feet and put it in a trash container. When you see graffiti, remove it as soon as possible. When you see an abandoned shopping cart, call the store and report it. One thing I have observed in my neighborhood in most cases is, when the litter, graffiti, and garbage are removed quickly, those who have these bad habits tend to stop littering and tagging.

You may want to ask yourself this question. Why don't you see litter, graffiti, abandoned shopping carts, abandoned cars, and higher crime rates in El Dorado Hills, Granite Bay, and other upscale communities? We all have to do our part. It only takes YOU to do A LITTLE.

A recent study by Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Linda Steg (Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, Netherlands) seems to reinforce the "Broken Window Theory". Here are the results of that study:

## **Test One:**

The researchers found a tidy alley in a shopping area where people parked their bicycles. There was a no-littering sign on the wall.

The researchers attached flyers for a nonexistent store to the bike handlebars and observed behavior.

Under normal circumstances, 33 percent of riders littered the alley with the flyer. But after researchers defaced the alley wall with graffiti, the share of riders who littered with the flyers jumped to 69 percent.

**Test Two:**

A fence partly closed off the main entrance to a parking lot. There was a narrow gap and a no-admittance sign that pointed out a new entry, 200 yards away. A second sign prohibited locking bikes to the fence.

When the fence was clear, 27 percent of people heading for their cars ignored the no-admittance sign and squeezed through the gap in the fence. But after several bikes were locked to the fence in defiance of that ban, 82 percent of people going to their cars squeezed through the prohibited entry.

**Test Three:**

Flyers were placed under the windshield wipers of cars in a parking garage next to a market. A sign on the wall asked people to return their shopping carts to the market.

When the lot was clear of shopping carts, 30 percent of drivers littered the lot with the flyers. But when a few carts were left in a disorderly state around the garage, 58 percent of people littered.

**Test Four:**

Two weeks before New Year's Day researchers visited a bicycle parking shed near a train station and attached flyers to the handlebars. Under normal conditions 52 percent of the riders littered the shed with the flyers. Then the researchers set off fireworks outside the shed, which residents know is illegal in the period before New Year. Hearing the fireworks, 80 percent of riders littered the shed.

**Tests Five and Six:**

An envelope with money visible through the address window was placed sticking out of a mailbox.

Under ordinary conditions 13 percent of passers-by stole the envelope.

When the same mailbox was defaced with graffiti the percentage taking the money jumped to 27 percent.

After researchers cleaned the mailbox, but messed up the area around it with litter, 25 percent stole the money.