Broken Windows, Police, & Traffic Safety

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Theory & Practice: Implementation

This research explores application of the Broken Windows framework to the pattern and problem of police officer deaths and injuries in on-duty motor vehicle incidents, which until recently had been the leading cause of on-duty deaths of police officers for more than a decade.

The original article introducing Broken Windows Theory (Kelling & Wilson, 1982) and the book Fixing Broken Windows (Kelling and Coles, 1996) assert that a relationship exists between public disorder and serious crime. Theoretically, property allowed to remain untended, in disarray, and in disorder leads to more decay and disorder. Kelling and Coles advocated partnerships between police chiefs, officers, and citizens toward restoration of trust and respect for authority.

Experts generally agree, and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration confirms, that the number of traffic fatalities for the general population is down because of safer vehicles and the aggressive enforcement of behavioral traffic safety laws. Police fatalities do not follow the same pattern. Why?

Questions Raised; Policies and Practice

✓ Is something else happening with police officers?
✓ Is “Broken Windows Theory” applicable to order maintenance in police organizations?
✓ Is there a relationship between police officer traffic-related fatalities and injuries and disorder in police organizations?

Timeline of Traffic Safety Milestones

While 60% of police agencies surveyed report using research conducted by other agencies, only 34% report using academic journals to inform practice, indicating the need for researchers to make findings available to practitioners (Rojek, Alpert, Smith, 2012) who may benefit from the findings.

Literature Review

Robertson et al. (1974)
Lipsky (1980)
Kelling and Wilson (1982)
Reuss-Ianni (1983)
Kelling and Coles (1996)
Von Kuenssberg Jehle et al. (2005)
NHTSA/FARS
Eterno (2003)

Albuquerque PD used Broken Windows Theory to design a collaborative community program to address road rage in a project championed by the chief of police. It reduced the crime rate and strengthened the community (NHTSA, 1997, DOT HS 809 279).