

Even Tiny, 'Victimless' Sins Cost Society: Economist

"Modern masters of science are much impressed with the need of beginning all inquiry with a fact," said G. K. Chesterton. "The ancient masters of religion were quite equally impressed with that necessity. They began with the fact of sin—a fact as practical as potatoes." Recognizing the fact of sin should be the beginning of all inquiries in how we should arrange public policy. This is especially true for those of us who champion liberty. Because order is a necessary precondition of liberty, we need to maintain order by limiting and impeding certain types of sinful behavior. Throughout human history, sin has been restrained through norm, rules, customs, and laws, and traditions. Inevitably, certain individuals push back against these restrictions and complain that they hinder their own personal liberty. Sometimes this is true, of course, but more often than not it is merely an individual wanting to put their own self-centered actions and behaviors ahead of the reasonable needs of society. Some have argued that as long as only a relatively few people break the norms and rules that it would have little to no affect on society. But this misses, as Chesterton might say, that fact of sin, especially the fact of sin as a social contagion. Take, for example, the victimless crimes of prostitution, vagrancy, or public drunkenness. Theoretically, we could justify the decriminalization of all these acts since they do not necessarily harm other people or their property. I'm not likely to become a vagrant because I see one on the streets so what harm does it do? As it turns out, such actions do lead to harmful affects on society. As the renowned criminologist James Wilson notes:

This wish to "decriminalize" disreputable behavior that "harms no one"- and thus remove the ultimate sanction the

police can employ to maintain neighborhood order—is, we think, a mistake. Arresting a single drunk or a single vagrant who has harmed no identifiable person seems unjust, and in a sense it is. But failing to do anything about a score of drunks or a hundred vagrants may destroy an entire community. A particular rule that seems to make sense in the individual case makes no sense when it is made a universal rule and applied to all cases. It makes no sense because it fails to take into account the connection between one broken window left untended and a thousand broken windows.

This is the heart of Wilson's famous Broken Window theory of crime:

At the community level, disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence. Social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in rundown ones. Window-breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are inhabited by determined window-breakers whereas others are populated by window-lovers; rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing.

As Christians we can recognize that at the heart of the broken window theory is the fact of sin as a social contagion. Translated into social science terms, we could say that when individuals encounter law/norm breaking behavior, they are more likely to break other laws/norms at a higher rate. Despite what critics of the broken windows theory might say, there is considerable evidence this is true. For instance, economist Vera L. Te Velde was recently at a conference on social norms and institutions that presented the "huge and extremely statistically significant findings" of how broken

windows theory applies to the world. Here are a few examples that Te Velde presents:

- Bikes are parked in a row next to a fence with a conspicuous “no graffiti” sign, and flyers are attached to each bicycle such that they must be removed to use the bike. If no graffiti is on the fence, 33% of subjects will litter their flyers. If graffiti is on the fence, 69% will. This was so surprising that a news station paid the researchers to replicate the study while they watched from rented rooms looking down on the area. The finding replicated very closely, and now the Netherlands requires immediate removal of graffiti.
- An envelope is left partially hanging out of a mailbox and visibly has a 5 Euro note inside, showing through a window in the envelope. In the control condition, 13% of people who passed the mailbox on foot stole the envelope. If the mailbox was covered with graffiti, 27% stole the envelope. If the mailbox was not covered in graffiti but litter was on the ground next to the mailbox, 25% stole the envelope.
- A bike is on the ground in an alley, having apparently accidentally fallen off its stand. If passersby have just entered the alley from an empty, clean street, 20% of individuals and 27% of groups right the bicycle. If garbage bags had been left on the street, then 6% of individuals and 5% of groups did so. If prior to entering the alley, passersby passed by someone who dropped an aluminum can and then picked it back up, 34% of individuals and 35% of groups picked up the bike.
- A person on the sidewalk accidentally drops some oranges just before meeting another pedestrian. Normally, 40% of passersby help the stranger pick up their oranges. If approximately 20 yards earlier, the passersby had witnessed someone drop an aluminum can and pick it up back up, 64% will help the stranger. If 20 yards earlier, the passerby had witnessed someone (a private

citizen) sweeping the sidewalk, 82% helped the stranger.

The breakdown of community standards does not break down all at once. Rather each “broken window” of virtuous behavior leads to more “window-breaking” until the community lacks the inherent virtue necessary to govern itself and requires a higher level of governance (e.g., the state) to step in to maintain order. When government replaces norms with laws, they usually overcompensate, resulting in unnecessary restrictions on our liberty. Liberty requires order, but order does not arise spontaneously. It is either cultivated from within, through self-discipline, or is forced upon an individual from forces outside themselves (i.e., by the laws or mores of the community) if they lack the requisite character. Once established, this order has to be maintained to be effective. In the absence of order there is no peace, no justice, and certainly no natural harmony. Graffiti and litter may seem like menial crimes and trivial sins, but because they lead others to disregard societal norms, they become threats to our own liberty. *Reprinted from the Acton Institute.*