

When Celebrate!Spanaway first started, we repeatedly proved the “broken window” theory. When we cleaned up several blocks for the street fair, painting buildings, removing grafitti and trash, absentee landlords and other landowners for blocks around followed suit. Putting a scenic mural on a tagged building stopped the tagging. When a junk-auto littered yard appeared on Park Avenue, and the owner refused to clean it up, two other junky “auto-repair shops” quickly sprang up nearby. We asked those new residents if they were aware they were violating the area’s residential zoning. Their answer: They turned their home garages into repair shops because they saw the first one and “figured it was OK.” When the county failed to enforce the zoning ordinance in a timely manner, the visual blight destroyed home values. Several long-time, elderly owners had to sell because of the illness or death of a spouse. No one wanted to buy in a blighted neighbrohood, so these homes became rentals. The rentals brought in meth labs, drug dealers, and serious crime – including home invasions. It took Safe Streets, Neighborhood Watch, Celebrate!Spanaway, the Pierce County Sheriff’s department, and all the homeowners in our historic neighborhood demanding action and investing their time and labor to clean up the area and restore order and safety.

Every resident must help keep Spanaway a livable community.

To report a junk auto, illegal dumping, animal mistreatment, zoning or other violation:

<http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/index.aspx?nid=1571>

The Broken Window Theory

The broken windows theory was first introduced In a March 1982 Atlantic Monthly article¹ by social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. The title comes from the following example in the article:

Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside.

Or consider a pavement. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of refuse from take-out restaurants there or even break into cars.

¹ James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. "BROKEN WINDOWS: The police and neighborhood safety"

A Stanford psychologist, Zimbardo, had tested the broken-window theory in 1969. Zimbardo had two automobiles with no license plates and the hood up parked in a Bronx, New York neighborhood a Palo Alto, California neighborhood. The car in the Bronx was attacked by "vandals" within minutes of its "abandonment," by a father, mother and a young son, who removed the radiator and battery. Within twenty-four hours, everything of value was stripped from the vehicle. The car's windows were smashed in, parts torn, upholstery ripped, and children were using the car as a playground. At the same time, the vehicle in Palo Alto, California sat untouched for more than a week. Then Zimbardo deliberately smashed it with a sledgehammer. Soon after, people joined in for the destruction. Zimbardo observed that majority of the adult "vandals" in both cases were primarily well dressed, clean-cut and respectable caucasians. It is believed that in a neighborhood such as the Bronx, where the history of abandoned property and theft are more prevalent, vandalism occurs much more quickly as the community gives off a "no one cares" vibe. Similar events can occur in any civilized community when communal barriers – the sense of mutual regard and obligations of civility – are lowered by actions that suggest "no one cares."

A successful strategy for preventing vandalism, say the book's authors, is to fix the problems when they are small. Repair the broken windows within a short time and vandals are much less likely to do further damage. Clean up the sidewalk every day, and litter tends not to accumulate, or the rate of littering will be less. Problems do not escalate and thus respectable residents do not flee a neighborhood.

Oscar Newman, in his 1972 book, *Defensible Space*, explained that the presence of the police is not enough for a safe and crime-free city. People in the community also need to lend a hand towards crime prevention, investing some time to repair "broken windows" to keep the community safe.²

1.

1. ² Oscar Newman. "Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design."