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Broken Windows Policing: Regulating the Behavior of Gangs

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Street gangs pose a pernicious problem. The sight of gang members – wearing distinguishing clothing, flashing hand signs, marking territory with graffiti – evokes fear among citizens. They intimidate, terrorize, and customarily commit violent acts.

Typical strategies to address the problem of gangs include prevention programs aimed at steering young kids away from gangs. These programs, many of which are school-based, attempt to educate kids about the dangers of joining a gang in the first place. Intervention programs generally entail trying to get gang-involved individuals out of a gang, usually by offering help and support in the form of social services. Suppression programs are principally a law-enforcement response and make use of the criminal justice process to deal with offenders.

For gang-specific programs to be more successful and lasting, the criminal habitat has to be transformed. Reducing overall crime, where gangs predominate, has to be the first priority for police agencies.

One way to do that is through “broken windows” policing, an approach often associated with the historic reduction in crime in New York in the 1990s. The theory argues that disorder that goes unchecked - such as concentrations of public drunks, gangs of disruptive youth, graffiti covered spaces, and other incivilities –heightens fear among citizens, weakens the social fabric of a community and, undermines the normal informal control mechanisms that regulate behavior in public spaces.

Broken windows policing might best be described as “paying attention” to minor offenses. Sometimes paying attention involves formal action – such as arrest or citation – but more often than not it involves no official action at all. The key aspect of broken windows policing is that it disrupts disorderly behavior that is allowed to take place in an area. If disorder is reduced, so to is fear. This will allow law-abiding citizens to become prevalent in a particular area, not gang members.

Broken windows reduces disorderly gang behavior because it puts police in closer contact with serious offenders. Police paying attention to minor offenses encounter individuals intent on doing untoward things. When New York City police began

arresting turnstile jumpers for the minor crime of fare evasion, they came into contact with a sizable percentage of individuals who possessed a weapon or had an open warrant out for their arrest. Broken windows policing allowed officers to deal with active offenders prospectively. It is not a reactive strategy.

As a result of broken windows policing New York City offenders became less likely to carry a gun. This had an obvious effect on the number of shootings and homicides in the city. Murders dropped from over 2,000 per year preceding the implementation of broken windows, to fewer than 600 last year.

Broken windows policing is not unrealistically aimed at eliminating gangs. It can be used quite successfully as a general crime-reduction strategy in areas with gangs. By doing so, broken windows policing regulates the behavior of serious offenders. By paying attention to minor crimes, police “check” the actions of gang members and don’t allow them to act with impunity.

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