DISORDER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD: A LARGE-SCALE FIELD EXPERIMENT ON DISORDER, NORM VIOLATION, AND PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOR


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A highly-visible paper, published in Science, using field experiments in a Groningen neighborhood found strong support for the broken windows hypothesis: disorder increases norm violations (Keizer et al. 2008). The study has been replicated in several other European countries. We attempt to replicate this study in the U.S. by embedding a mailbox field experiment in six Seattle neighborhoods that vary in social capital and collective efficacy. Our experiment places a lost letter with a visible $5 bill near the mailbox. The treatment is graffiti and/or trash in the area. We examine three outcomes: passersby ignoring the letter, stealing the letter (a norm violation), or mailing the letter (a form of altruism). We use multinomial and nested logit methods to model the 2,786 cases. Results indicate physical disorder attenuates pro-social behavior while neighborhood collective efficacy and concentrated disadvantage are associated with rates of norm violation. Overall, we fail to replicate Keizer et al. but find evidence that disorder attenuates pro-social behavior.