Do Broken Windows Cause Violence?[1]

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SUMMARY

In New York City, former mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Police Commissioner William Bratton believed Broken Windows Policing (aka. zero tolerance policing) to be an effective approach to fighting crime. Therefore, they targeted their attention on disorder—minor crimes and nuisance behaviors based on a belief that eliminating such problems will also reduce more serious crime. Police strategies based on this idea have been implemented in both the U.K. and the U.S. in many urban cities including New York City, Los Angeles and Atlanta. This study examines the fundamental basis of the broken windows policing---does disorder actually cause violence in an urban city over time?

DATA AND METHODS

Three longitudinal databases were collected by public agencies from Seattle, Washington. The number of violent crimes (1989-2004) was obtained from crime incident data collected by Seattle Police Department.[2] The measure of disorder was categorized into two types of disorder--social disorder and physical disorder. The social disorder measure includes: disorderly conduct, noise, alcohol and public drinking, gambling, drug-related offenses (not including large scale drug trafficking), and prostitution. This information was also drawn from the crime incident database. Physical disorder refers to the deterioration of urban landscapes. I include items like illegal dumping, litter, graffiti, weeds, vacant lots and buildings, abandoned cars on the street, junk storage, exterior abatement, substandard housing and minor property damage. These data were provided by the Seattle Public Utility Service and the Seattle Planning and Development Department. To test the causal argument made by the broken windows scholars, I used two different statistical methods designed for longitudinal data to explore both the correlations and causations between disorder and violence and see if fluctuations in the disorder trend lead to changes in violence.

FINDINGS

Despite the fact that disorder and violence seem to cluster geographically, places with disorder do not necessarily have violence problems. Moreover, correlation between the disorder and violence does not imply causality. Opposite of the expectation of the broken windows thesis, the findings of longitudinal analysis show that urban violence is not a result of disorder. In sum, the results do not support arguments made by the broken windows thesis. Substantial amounts of police manpower have been allocated to targeting disorder rather than other more severe types of crime without empirical support. The results suggest that such police efforts may not reduce urban violence rates while they may cause other collateral consequences such as increased complaints against the police, human rights violations, and restrictions of freedom.

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[1] For more, see: Yang, Sue-Ming. (2007). Causal or merely co-existing: A longitudinal study of violence and disorder at places. A dissertation submitted to the University of Maryland, College Park.

[2] In terms of the definition of violent crime, I follow the official definition and include the following types of offenses in my violence measure: aggravated assault, non-aggravated assault, homicide, kidnapping, drive-by shooting, rape, robbery, and sexual offenses.

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BROKEN WINDOWS THESIS

- Minor violations lead to severe crime (Wilson and Kelling, 1982)

- Inspired police policy like "Zero Tolerance Policing" or "Broken Windows Policing"
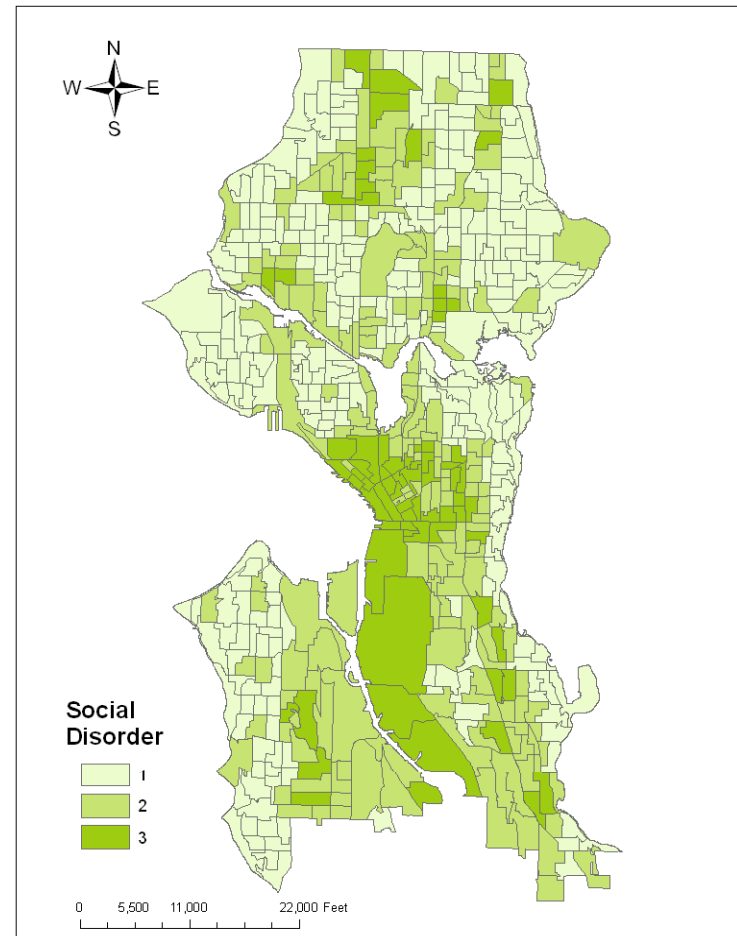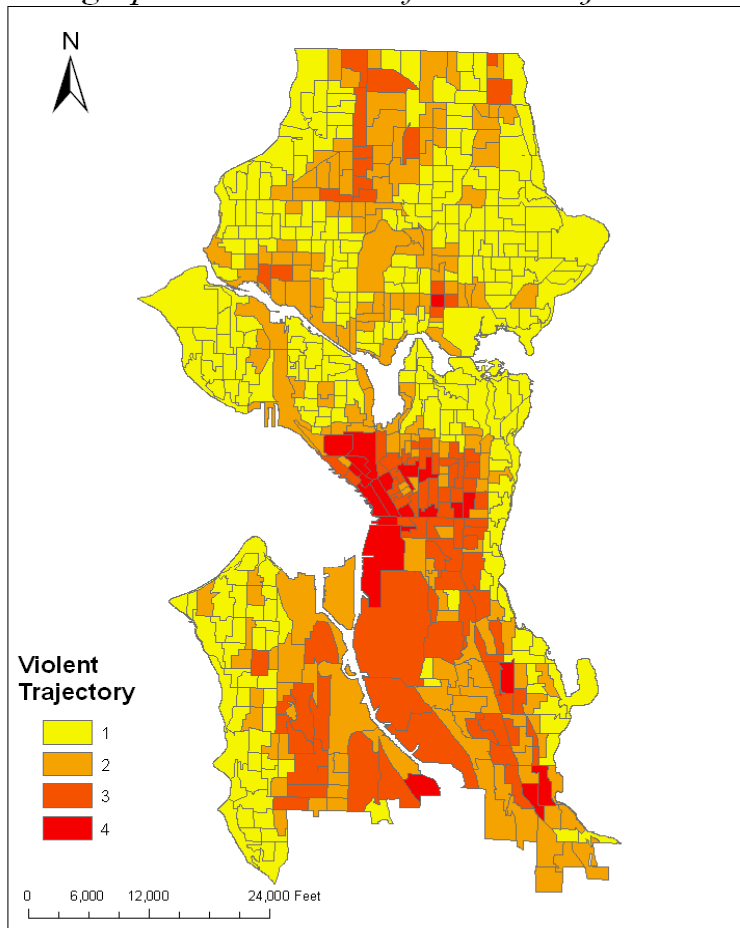 - Popular in both UK and US (in NYC, Atlanta, LA)
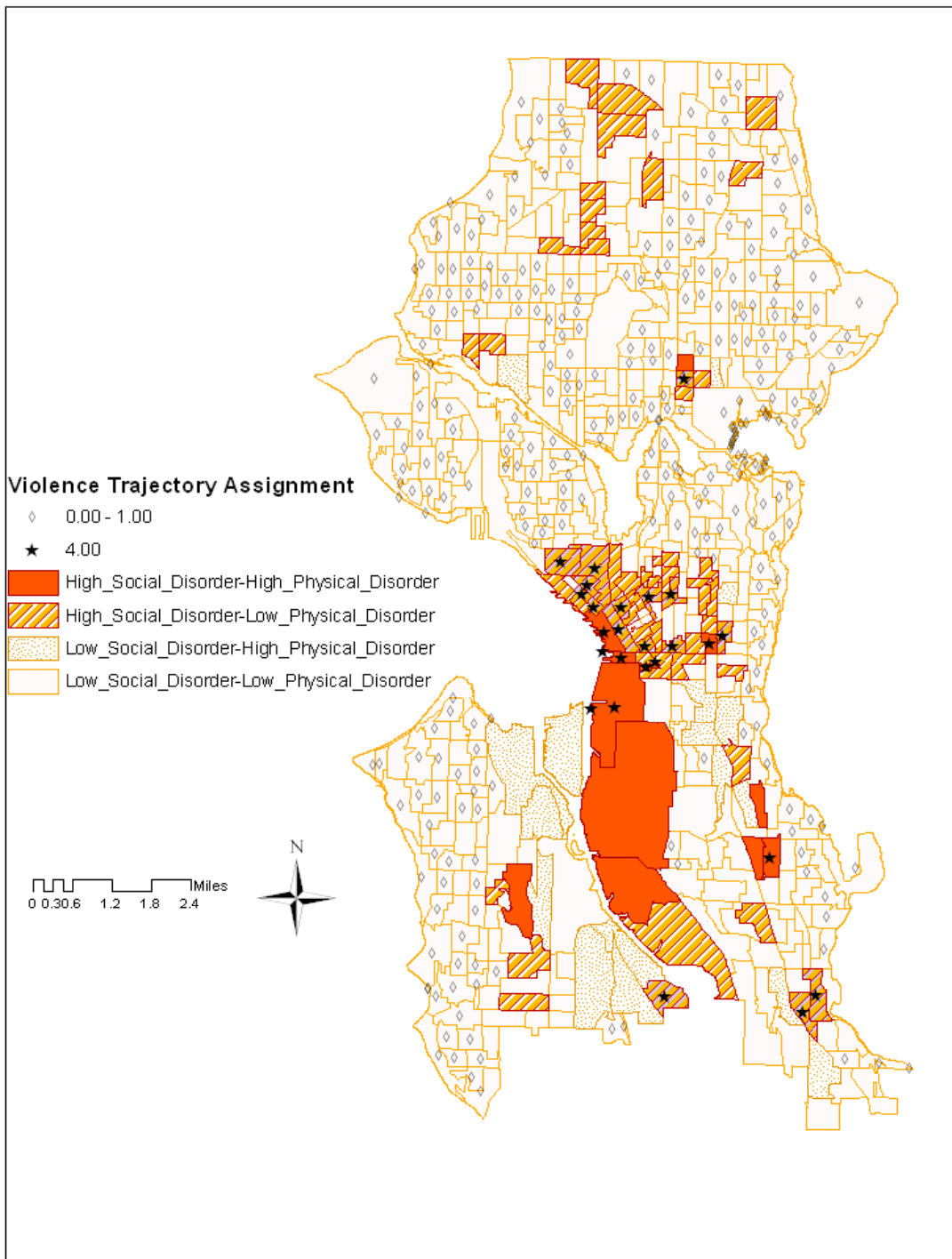
DO BROKEN WINDOWS CAUSE VIOLENCE?

○ Violent Crime Incident Data provided by Seattle Police Department (1989-2004)

○ Social Disorder: threatening behaviors perceived by others (1989-2004)

○ Physical Disorder: deterioration of urban landscapes (1993-2003)

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•FINDING I

Violence and disorder tend to geographically cluster at the same places
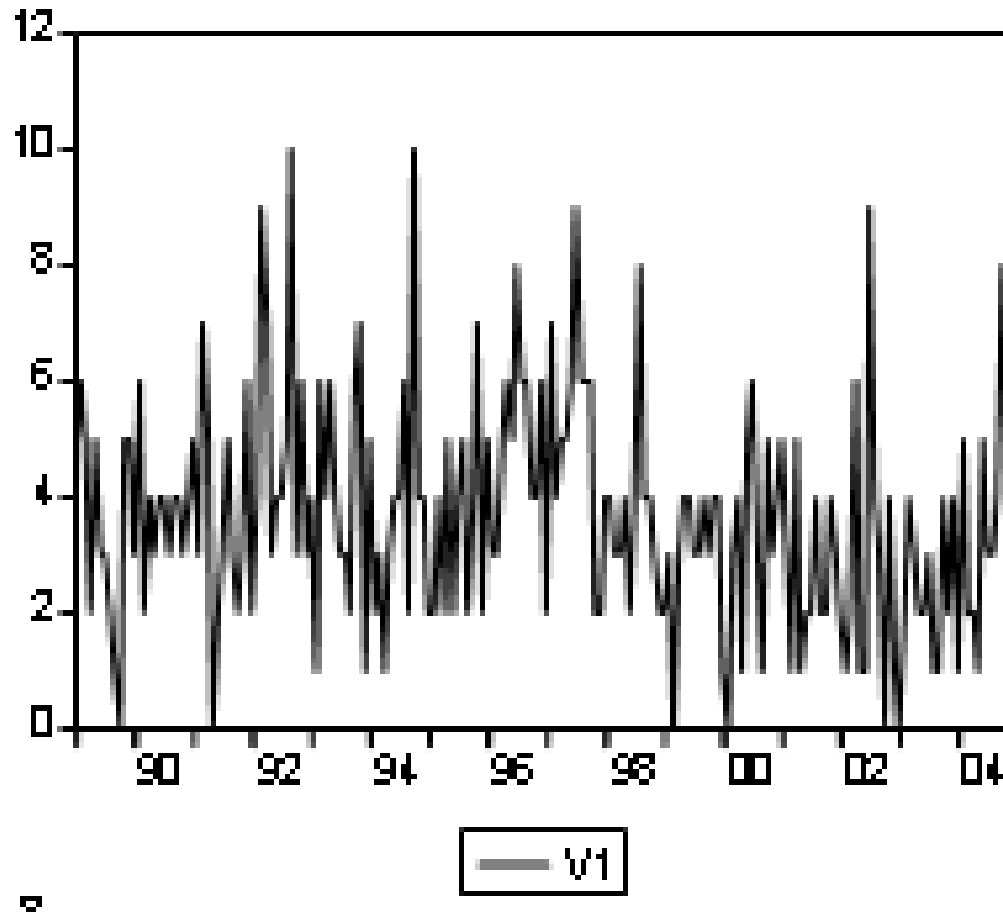
Geographic Distribution of Violent Trajectories

FINDING II

- Specifically, places with high violence tend to have high social disorder

- However, majority of disorder block groups DO NOT necessarily have high violence problem

Violence Trajectory Assignment

◇   0.00 - 1.00

★   4.00

🟧   High_Social_Disorder-High_Physical_Disorder

▨   High_Social_Disorder-Low_Physical_Disorder

░   Low_Social_Disorder-High_Physical_Disorder

▢   Low_Social_Disorder-Low_Physical_Disorder

Miles
0 0.3 0.6   1.2   1.8   2.4

N

FINDING III

- Longitudinal tests found that disorder at places does NOT *cause* higher levels of violence

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DO BROKEN WINDOWS CAUSE VIOLENCE?

- Disorder and violence often occurred at same places
  - But majority of places with disorder did not necessarily have violence problem

- When looking at the relationship over time, changes in disorder did not cause fluctuation in violence

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WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT BROKEN WINDOWS?

- Correlation does not equal causation

- Longitudinal examination of public policy is important
  - Evidence-based policy vs. common sense based policy

TARGET THE RIGHT THINGS

- Disorder is important, but not for violence reduction

- Allocate limited police manpower on more effective aspect to reduce violence

- Targeting disorder may further result in other collateral consequences