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**Who Will Police the Criminologists?**

*The dangers of politicized social science*

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If you’ve ever wondered why police officers tend to be skeptical about social science, pick up volume 9, issue 4 of *Criminology & Public Policy*, a journal published by the American Society of Criminology. The issue is titled “Reducing Homeless-Related Crime,” and its focal point is a research paper by University of Pennsylvania professors Richard Berk and John MacDonald that evaluates the Safer City Initiative (SCI). SCI was implemented by the Los Angeles Police Department in 2006 to reduce crime, lawlessness, and disorder in the Skid Row neighborhood. Despite its limitations, Berk and MacDonald’s useful evaluation concludes that SCI had a significant impact on serious crime, and it adds to the literature illustrating the impact of Broken Windows policing. The remainder of the issue comprises essays that reflect on either the study’s methodology or its public policy implications. An essay that examines the former—University of Cincinnati professor John Eck’s “Policy Is in the Details”—is especially valuable, emphasizing the need for criminologists like Berk and MacDonald to “describe the policies they study.”

But Eck’s observation happens to underscore a fundamental weakness in the public policy essays that follow: for the most part, their authors ignore or seriously misrepresent the nature of Skid Row’s difficulties before SCI was implemented. Instead of seeking out data that accurately document conditions on the ground, they accept a piece of conventional wisdom, one that the title of the issue makes plain and that, over time, has evolved into an ideological position: that homelessness, rather than a culture of lawbreaking, was at the root of Skid Row’s woes.

That view is more pernicious than it may sound, since it has long contributed to criminology’s party line about Skid Row–like situations and Broken Windows policing. It dates back to the late 1980s, when seemingly everyone in New York City—the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the *New York Times*, politicians, advocacy groups—thought that the main problem in the city’s subways was homelessness. Conventional wisdom held that the solutions were homes, jobs, and welfare.

Yet if one went into the subways and observed conditions there, as two of us (Kelling and Bratton) did, such assumptions became shaky: youths were blocking entrances and forcibly collecting fares from passengers, predators were stalking fare booths and breaking open fare boxes to steal money, and 250,000 people were riding without paying fares—all because of homelessness? Yes, a troubled population—homeless, mentally ill, or drug-addicted—was trying to use the subway as a surrogate shelter, often encouraged by irresponsible advocates, who ignored the risks that these vulnerable people would face there. Yet homelessness was a relatively small part of the subway’s real problem: lawlessness. Homeless individuals can still be seen in New York’s subways today, but gone is the culture of lawlessness that plagued the subway until 1990, when the transit police created a safer environment.

Skid Row’s crisis in the early 2000s was even more complex than the New York subway’s had been. Fires raged in the middle of streets at night; people urinated, defecated, and engaged in sex acts in open view; youths partied with drugs and alcohol; sexual predators roamed free; the neighborhood became a dumping ground for released prisoners and for sick people, probably homeless, whom ambulances left on the street, still in hospital garb and on gurneys. The area was such a lucrative place to deal drugs that gangs didn’t bother fighting over turf. Certainly, there were large numbers of homeless, in part because the city’s missions and service centers lay in the heart of Skid Row. But the neighborhood’s core problem wasn’t homelessness. Just as in New York, it was a culture of lawlessness that had been tolerated for decades (see “[The Reclamation of Skid Row](http://www.city-journal.org/html/17_4_skid_row.html" \t "new),” Autumn 2007). If any of these researchers had bothered to go into the streets, they would have seen that.

The authors of the public policy essays also misrepresent the nature of SCI, presenting a preconceived image of the LAPD’s approach rather than a description of what it actually did. Yale professors Michael Rowe and Maria O’Connell—observing that one of us, Chief William Bratton, brought to Skid Row the Broken Windows tactics that he developed in New York—say that those tactics “demonize persons” and are “applied to putatively ‘broken people’ who apparently . . . are not to be fixed but instead are cited for the crime of brokenness and removed from sight.”

Likewise, Arizona State University professor Michael D. White characterizes SCI as “zero tolerance policing, which is perhaps the antithesis of peacekeeping.” He goes on to argue that “the adoption of zero tolerance strategies represents a step away from professional policing,” characterizes the LAPD’s approach as “ ‘homelessness-is-a-crime’ philosophy,” and deems it “poor craft.” Where are the descriptions of actual tactics used by the LAPD? Where are the primary data on SCI implementation upon which to base such conclusions?

White argues that SCI should have been built on problem solving and community policing. In fact, it was. Sponsored by the mayor’s office, with strong support from the city attorney, the initiative sought to include every relevant public and private agency, even groups often hostile to police approaches, such as the American Civil Liberties Union. (These groups continue to meet with one another.) The strongest support for SCI came from the area’s missions, not-for-profit organizations established to help the genuinely homeless. The goals of SCI included not just crime reduction but also developing support among social agencies, reducing citizen fear, getting agencies like the city’s health department to meet their responsibilities, involving the private sector (through Business Improvement Districts and the like), protecting the personal property of people living on the street, fostering street civility, and increasing shopping in neighborhood stores.

The journal’s examination of SCI exemplifies a politicized social science. It’s particularly discouraging that such a flawed approach would appear in a publication of the American Society of Criminology. Unfortunately, it represents at least the second generation of such misrepresentation. In response to earlier crime reductions in New York City, many scholars eagerly attempted to prove that the declines had little to do with police efforts. Then, as now, they interpreted data—reported crime, arrests, police stops—without bothering to do firsthand research. The consequences of confusing research and scholarship with hubris, polemics, and uncritical secondary-data analysis—in short, of politicized social science—are enormous: distrust between academia and policing, gross misrepresentations of policing, and, above all, widespread failure to understand what works and what doesn’t work in policing.

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