



The Meaning of Community in Community Policing

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This publication was made possible by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to the School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University. The information contained herein represents the views and conclusions of the authors and not necessarily those of the Mott Foundation, its trustees, or officers.

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Introduction ⁽¹⁾

Any attempt to explain and define the community policing movement must include grappling with what the word "community" is intended to mean in this context. Though it might at first seem that a simple one sentence definition would suffice, a review of the literature quickly shows that "community" can mean very different things to different researchers.

Understanding the dynamics of community is critical to the prevention and control of crime and disorder. Social control is most effective at the individual level. The personal conscience is the key element in ensuring self control, refraining from deviant behavior even when it can be easily perpetrated.

The family, the next most important unit affecting social control, is obviously instrumental in the initial formation of the conscience and in the continued reinforcement of the values that encourage law abiding behavior.

The extended family, especially if they are in close geographic proximity, as well as neighbors, are also important in supporting the norms of positive behavior.

Unfortunately, because of the reduction of influence exerted by neighbors, the extended family and even the family, social control is now often more dependent on external control (the criminal justice system), than on internal self control.

The purpose of this paper will first be to show how the concept of community has evolved over the years, as a way of clarifying areas of confusion. As a review of the literature will demonstrate, there is now a distinct difference between a geographic community and a community of interests a distinction easily blurred in the past when both kinds of community typically overlapped to cover the same population. This has particular relevance to the use of community in community policing, as we will explain, because crime, disorder, and fear of crime can help create a community of interest within a geographic community. Enhancing and emphasizing this particular community of interest within a specific geographic community can provide the impetus for residents to work with a community policing officer to create a positive sense of community in the fullest sense of the term. Therefore the use of the word community in community policing can refer to many different and sometimes overlapping entities. The community of interest generated by crime, disorder, and fear of crime becomes the goal to allow community policing officers an entre into the geographic community. Then together the officer and the residents can develop new structures and tactics designed to improve the overall quality of life, allowing a renewed community spirit to build and flourish.

Past Usage of Community

At the turn of the century, when this country was primarily an agrarian society with less than 10 percent of the population living in cities, the term community hardly seemed to require definition, conveying as it did the idea of a distinct area where residents shared both a common geography and a common culture, as well as elements of mutual interdependence. As increasing industrialization drove people from farm communities into cities, the term community seemed apt in describing how even the largest cities break down into smaller units that seemed to meet these three criteria.

According to Donald R. Fessler, (rural) sociologists defined community as "any area in which people with a common culture share common interests."⁽²⁾ The problem with so broad a definition is that it can be applied to anything from "a rural village of half a hundred families" to "one of our major cities."⁽³⁾ As Fessler noted, large cities are not what we mean when we talk about communities, because the inherent depersonalization that dominates large cities militates against the cohesive sense of community.⁽⁴⁾

In the 1920's, the so-called "Chicago School," comprised of sociologists such as Robert E. Park, continued attempts to refine the rural model so that it could be applied to communities within major metropolitan areas.⁽⁵⁾ According to sociologist Thomas M. Meenaghan, the Chicago School technique relied on identifying central locators, such as businesses, churches, and schools, and then drawing a community's boundary lines by finding those who lived the furthest away and yet who still used these services, strongly tying the concept of community to the land.⁽⁶⁾ "...Park saw the community as a group of people living in a specific geographic area and conditioned by the subcultural or life processes of competition, cooperation, assimilation, and conflict. The unplanned life processes created so-called natural areas that not only had a defined territorial frame, but also shared special or unique cultural and social characteristics," wrote Meenaghan in his treatise, "What Means 'Community'?"⁽⁷⁾

By the 1950's, so many definitions of community had proliferated that George A. Hillery, Jr., of the University of Atlanta, attempted to classify 94 different definitions, by content, to see whether he could identify areas of common agreement.⁽⁸⁾ His conclusion was that, "Most...are in basic agreement that community consists of persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having one or more additional ties."⁽⁹⁾

This makes it easy to see how the term "community" began to become synonymous with "neighborhood," when applied to areas within cities, though sociologists and ecologists continued to draw distinctions between the two terms that often tended to confuse rather than illuminate the difference. Back in Hillery's time, a decade after World War II, when many major cities were still dominated by clear cut, virtually self contained, ethnic neighborhoods that also met many of the numerous definitions of community, drawing distinctions between these two terms seemed like needless hairsplitting. In her paper, "The Neighborhood," published in 1982, Suzanne Keller defined neighborhood in terms that echo common definitions of community, demonstrating that confusion concerning how these two terms differ persists today: "The neighborhood, viewed as an area or a place within a larger entity, has boundaries either physical or symbolic and usually both where streets, railway lines, or parks separate off an area and its inhabitants or where historical and social traditions make people view an area as a distinctive unit. Usually these two boundaries reinforce each other: the physical unit encourages symbolic unity, and symbolic boundaries come to be attached to physical ones."⁽¹⁰⁾

Though community study had, to a great degree, fallen out of fashion in the 1960's, efforts to update and refine the definition of community in the 1970's focused on identifying new unifying principles. The University of Chicago's Albert Hunter, in his book, *Symbolic Communities*, noted the close association among the words "common," "communication," and "community" and posited that both language and shared symbols could help in identifying what he called the "natural community."⁽¹¹⁾ Meenaghan focused on "social area analysis," where census tract information was used to break out urban groups of 3,000 to 6,000 people where the data on the homogeneity of economic, family, and ethnic characteristics could be used to identify the boundaries of communities.⁽¹²⁾ Again, as now seems obvious, both community and neighborhood were terms that could often be substituted for one another with little argument, as long as they were applied to ethnic enclaves, but those were becoming more the exception than the rule.

It should also be noted that the continuing interest in finding a viable definition for the term community has not merely been an intellectual exercise. The theme underlying much of this research is that once you can identify a community, you have discovered the primary unit of society above the level of the individual and the family that can be mobilized to take concerted action to bring about positive social change. Though she may somewhat overstate the case, Rita Mae Kelly writes in *Community Control of Economic Development*, "Prior to the riots in Watts, Hough, and other ghetto areas of large cities, the word 'community' was almost never applied to neighborhoods or blocks in cities."⁽¹³⁾ The necessity of finding ways to cope with urban social problems that contributed to those riots obviously made identifying the primary unit above the family level that could be harnessed for social change a far more burning issue than it had seemed previously.

However, what many researchers have failed to address adequately is that at least three profound changes that have occurred in the United States since World War II have dramatically altered the concept of community. The impact of mass transit, mass communications, and mass media have widened the rift between a sense of community based on geography and one based on a community of interest.

Technological Change

In some ways, the often unexpressed idea embodied in the word community has long implied a wistful longing for a less complicated past. As Victor Azarya of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem wrote about many of the definitions of community analyzed by Hillery: "These approaches are clearly mixed with some nostalgia for a glorious past in which people were thought to be more secure, less alienated, and less atomized."⁽¹⁴⁾ Yet those who can remember the cohesive, strong, urban ethnic city neighborhoods that still existed in the decade following World War II recognize how much has been lost in the intervening years.

What many traditional definitions of community failed to address was that the term community implied both a physical and psychological component. The physical aspect of community related to the fact that the individual lived in a specific geographic area, bounded by functions in daily life that are tied to concrete structures and institutions, such as schools, churches, and shops. Yet a sense of community also contains an emotional component based on a community of interest. The glue that held communities together flowed from the communication between community residents that took place during those daily activities.

To understand what it meant to be part of a cohesive community in the past, consider the emotional satisfaction that could typically be derived by a housewife in an urban ethnic neighborhood when she made a routine trip to pick up groceries for that night's supper. On her way to the store, she would likely smile at the familiar cop on the beat, as well as friends and neighbors she would see on the street. At the store, not only would she find ethnic specialty foods suited to her particular taste, but she would also take the time to chat and gossip with clerks. Even though these people might not be close friends with whom the family socialized, the owner and workers in that store would likely know the woman's name, her husband's name and the names and approximate ages of any children. And it would not be at all unusual for the store owner to provide interest free credit during hard times in fact, the owner would be likely to know when the woman's husband was ill or out of work and when the family would need this kind of helping hand.

Contrast the emotional content of that exchange with the typical depersonalization that is part of any trip to a modern supermarket. Obviously, people today must seek out other sources of psychic sustenance, since there is little likelihood that the daily activities of life that take place within the geographic neighborhood/community will offer enough emotional content.

In a brief piece on "Community and Community Feeling," Suzanne Keller wrote about rupture between the physical and psychic aspects of community: "It is now possible for individuals to travel throughout the globe without ever leaving home, while others are at home wherever they set foot. Expanding spiritual and physical horizons have severed the original link between place and community."⁽¹⁵⁾

The three major technological changes mass transportation, mass communication, and mass media have played a great role in the divorce between geography and community. And while some researchers have touched on the effects of one or more of these factors, it is almost impossible to overstate the impact this trio has wrought.

In the rural model of the past, the overlap between a community of interest and a geographic community blurred the distinction between the two. For example, when a crisis occurred perhaps a neighbor's barn burned neighbors linked by a common geography and a community of interest pitched in to help the farmer build a new barn. While altruism may well have played a role, the underlying reality also operating was that neighbors stuck together because the farmer who lent a hand today knew he might well need a helping hand himself tomorrow.

It's easy to see how mass transportation and mass communication have altered the equation. Today, if you break your arm, instead of asking the stranger next door for help, chances are you will be far more likely to pick up the phone (mass communication) to call a friend or relative across town or across the country asking for help. Then he or she can climb into a car or hop on a plane (mass transportation) to come help.

Chances are as well that you made the decision concerning whom to call based on a community of interest. Maybe you became friends all the way back when you studied the same subject in college. Or perhaps your avid interest in jogging initially brought you together. It could be you found enough common ground as coworkers, back before you were transferred 2,000 miles away. Perhaps you met at the same cooperative daycare center when your first child was born.

Those shared experiences or shared activities allow people to identify enough of a community of interest to establish a bond of trust. In our rural past, when we did not have the freedom to talk with or visit people far beyond our immediate locale, we were forced to learn to trust our neighbors. Today, it takes less effort to call a friend 1,000 miles away for advice, comfort, or assistance than to walk ten feet to the neighbor next door. And we can choose from among the telephone numbers in our address book a nonsmoking jogger whose children are the same ages, instead of trying to find common ground with the sedentary next door neighbor whose eldest son bullies our youngest.

While the effects of mass transportation and mass communication have been identified as influences that have contributed to the breakdown of the geographic connection in the traditional definition of community, scant attention has been paid to the role the mass media plays. The relatively recent proliferation of "lifestyle" pieces in newspapers and in nightly television news demonstrates how much individuals and families crave a shared identity. To meet that need, both journalists and advertisers reinforce our perceptions of ourselves as members of well defined subsets whose identity is based on community of interest.

Instead of defining ourselves by the neighborhood/community where we live, we are likely to label ourselves in terms invented and reinforced by the mass media: baby boomer, born-again Christian, feminist, yuppie, New age, dink (double income, no kids). For many in today's society, we are what we do we define ourselves primarily in terms of career. Those who find less satisfaction in their work define themselves by their leisure time activities as a tri-athlete, a classic car buff, an antique hound. Others see themselves in more political terms: neoconservative, prolifer, tax protester, peace activist.

If this seems an overstatement, consider that the "invention" of the teenager as a defined community of interest has been a fairly recent invention. Access to the automobile and the telephone, combined with reinforcement of their existence as a special community with defined needs and values, allowed young people between the ages of 12 and 20 to begin seeing themselves differently than they did in the past, when they were simply young people approaching adulthood. The primary community of interest that has encouraged them to group together is the ambivalence in their relationship to their parents, upon whom they depend for support but who rarely allow social autonomy as quickly as most teens would like.

Today, mimicking adults, teenagers no longer see themselves as a monolithic group. Within that broad age defined community of interest, teens break down into subsets based on divergent communities of interest, visibly identified by rigid (though informal) dress codes and shared language (slang). And teen publications reinforce the individual's identity as a punker, New Ager, dooper, heavy metal head banger, and so on.

Freed from the link to place, an individual can shift gears into and out of various communities of interest during the day. For example, a young woman who identifies during the day with her position in upper management may switch to seeing herself as an aerobics enthusiast at her class that evening.

When paring community of interests and geography was still relevant in defining community, a certain political unity was also implied. That's why, in an earlier era, political candidates would make required visits to neighborhoods, particularly ethnic neighborhoods, in search of votes. Many such neighborhoods literally voted as a block, because their shared community of interests meant that certain issues were of particular concern. In addition, because of the cohesion inherent in such communities, the ward heeler approach could turn out the vote, since face-to-face politicking was singularly effective within such unified communities.

Obviously, the pervasive influence of mass media played a role in changing the political equation in communities, since TV ads have replaced handshaking as the most effective political tool.

No longer are neighborhoods as likely to vote as a block, which not only means that they exhibit political apathy but reduced political clout. Under the old patronage/ward heeler form of neighborhood politicking, corruption flourished, but a politician had to address enough of the community's needs in order to maintain loyalty. Now that voters are fragmented into varied communities of interest more often than their votes are tied to place, the voters' ability to lobby as a unit for their neighborhoods' needs has suffered.

In addition to the combined effect of both these technological and political changes, we can add the changes caused by a profound shift in this country's economy. What sustained many ethnic, blue-collar neighborhoods was the relative economic opportunity offered by factory jobs. Rising wages, often the result of collective bargaining, offered hope of an improved standard of living even for unskilled labor. Such jobs also provided some hope of advancement for the ambitious.

The difference now, reflected in the growing gap between rich and poor, is that many of those relatively lucrative jobs have evaporated. In addition, the new jobs being created are often service jobs, which tend to pay far less and offer less opportunity for promotion. The resulting decline in overall standard of living, combined with the growing gap between rich and poor, has eroded many people's optimism concerning the future. The prevailing ethos in many neighborhoods in the past was hope for the future. Even those who felt their goals might not be reached had faith their children would live better. Today, as the media bombard us with "lifestyles of the rich and famous" and other glorifications of the "good life," those who feel frustrated at securing their piece of the pie question whether the future holds much promise.

Any examination of urban communities today must also address the change that has taken place after generations of white and then black flight. As the automobile freed people from the need to live close to their jobs and a rising standard of living put cars within the reach of more families those who could, typically opted to escape to the suburbs. The explosion of urban crime that has persisted almost unabated since the 1960's persuaded those who could afford to leave that it was prudent to do so.

The irony, of course, is that the departure of those dollars reduced urban services even more. At a time when employers were demanding better educated workers, many city schools suffered budget cuts that contributed to their relative decline, which meant that even those students who graduated typically possessed fewer skills than children raised in the suburbs. In addition, the dropout rate among urban black students now approached 60%.⁽¹⁶⁾ The spiral decline contributed to urban decay, with fewer dollars, public and private, to put toward escalating problems.

In neighborhoods of the past, those who provided public and private services came to the community they served. Everyone the "paper/rags" man, the public health nurse, the scissors sharpener, the cop on the beat, and the social worker came into the community to work. Today, the equation has changed and now individuals must seek out those services. Ironically, residents of poor neighborhoods, the ones with the fewest resources, must now find a way to travel to those services or substitute a telephone call.

Planned Versus Natural

To fully comprehend how these forces have altered our concept of community, let's compare and contrast a blighted innercity neighborhood with a "planned" community, such as an upscale apartment complex for childless couples. As both demonstrate, people still tend to live with others of the same socioeconomic class, though there are obvious differences between the welfare economy that dominates many inner city neighborhoods and the affluence required to obtain housing in an upscale development.

As Hunter noted earlier, the prevailing concept of community included the idea that their occurrence was natural and that the sense of bonding among residents was the result of forces they were not consciously aware of. By that definition, the inner city neighborhood qualifies as a community, while the couple's apartment complex does not since it was specifically structured to be homogeneous.

What Hunter's definition ignores, however, is that the forces that keep people trapped in a blighted inner city neighborhood so restrict their freedom of choice that such places are far from being "natural." Even in the past when those who lived in an ethnic neighborhood may have aspired to a big home in the country as first choice, there were still other choices available within their means. For instance, a family in "Little Italy" would have been able to afford to live in a similarly priced Polish neighborhood, but it would have been an illogical choice since the family probably would have felt out of place. Instead, it made excellent sense to live in a community more conducive to their way of life. Today, those who live in innercity ghettos have no alternatives, since one bad neighborhood is virtually indistinguishable from another and housing is in such short supply that many of the poor now risk becoming homeless.

Ironically, mass transportation and mass communication play important roles in the development of both our model communities one because these advances denote freedom and the other the lack thereof. The couples in the complex can afford to live there regardless of whether it's close to their jobs or not. In fact, many two income couples cannot live close to both jobs, so typically both own a car.

In contrast, many blighted welfare neighborhoods are dominated by single- parent families, most often women, as evidenced by the fact that since 1981, unwed motherhood has become the reason most often cited for welfare eligibility.⁽¹⁷⁾ No job typically translates into not enough money to own a car, so the autonomy that comes from such mobility simply doesn't exist within these communities.

In contrast, as well, is the disparity in access to mass communication. While the affluent apartment dwellers no doubt have a telephone, many also own such technological marvels as car phones and personal computers that can be linked by phone lines to other home computers nationwide. Should some problem arise, the apartment dwellers can use these resources to contact friends or professionals; then they can hop into one of their two cars if that proves necessary. Meanwhile, the welfare mother in the blighted neighborhood may not even have a phone. To venture out for assistance often means she must use overburdened and decaying public transportation, either taking her children along or leaving them behind unattended.

The one constant often found in both households is a television set, which would seem to even the scales in terms of access to mass media. However, it should be noted that the upscale, childless couple is far more likely to have access to other media newspapers, magazines, movies, videotapes, professional journals in addition to television. In part, this is a reflection of economics and higher rates of illiteracy among the welfare class. And while studies show that blacks, for instance, watch far more TV than their white counterparts, if television is your primary or only source of information, your world view will be distorted by its biases. As noted in the aftermath of the aforementioned riots, the rising expectations promoted through TV advertising and network entertainment may have played a role in the increased frustration levels in blighted neighborhoods.

Riots occurred during the domestic ferment of the 1960's. The legacy of those years prove that, after a brief flurry of concern manifested in increased government aid, those blighted communities now find themselves worse off than before. The present shift in the economy away from high paid unskilled jobs in industry and manufacturing to new minimum wage jobs in the service economy only adds to the gap between these two very different kinds of communities.

Policing for Today's Communities

The point in this comparison is not to point any finger of blame concerning the apparent growing inequity between rich and poor in this culture, but to examine the dynamics that play a role in shaping the new kinds of community today's police must serve. What this analysis shows is that traditional definitions of community fail to describe communities on either end of the spectrum, rich or poor. In the upscale, planned communities, people are linked by geography, but their affluence allows them access to technologies that frees them to exercise a community of interest with people who live elsewhere. In the poor neighborhoods of the underclass, their lack of access to those technologies roots them to one place as it also inhibits their ability to develop ties to others.

To define how community is used in community policing, therefore, requires defining community in new terms. It was the late social activist, Saul Alinsky, who proposed we begin viewing community through the prism of issues which, in essence, constitute the most urgent kind of community of interest.⁽¹⁸⁾ Within any geographic area, the issues that provide the police with the unifying principle necessary to allow them access to the community so that they can most effectively do their job are crime, disorder, and fear of crime.

Much of the renewed interest in defining community, so that this unit can be targeted for change, occurred after the devastating riots in our inner cities. The initial police response to the riots was to institute "community relations" programs, the failed precursor to the community policing movement that has sometimes confused what the new movement does. Most community relations programs were based on the traditional definition of community, the idea that there was a cohesive group within a specific geographic area that could be persuaded through an educational effort that the police are "good guys."

Though that might seem to denigrate some of the sincere efforts made by this problem riddled effort, the fact remains that community relations programs failed because they did not address the issues crime, disorder, and fear of crime that provide modern communities and the police with a mutual community of interest that can allow for meaningful interaction.

As noted earlier, the era that saw the rise of the technological, political and economic changes that have so drastically altered the definition of community, also ushered in an explosion in the rates of serious crime. It also pays to consider that this may not be a coincidence. Those same forces that fragmented traditional communities may well have played a crucial role in eroding the internal controls that had helped control crime. This is crucial to understanding the philosophy of community policing, since its underlying rationale includes the proposition that by using crime, disorder, and fear of crime as the issues to unite the community and the police, the first vital link in restoring a traditional sense of community that had proved an effective internal control against crime might be established.

What community policing does is put an officer in daily face to face contact with the community, so that he or she can have the input of the community in setting priorities. Unlike police programs of the past where police administrators or so called community leaders set the police agenda, the community policing movement encourages average citizens to become involved.

Another element that is often overlooked is that community policing need not be restricted to blighted, inner city neighborhoods. For instance, the Clearwater (Florida) Police Department not only employs community

policing in troubled neighborhoods, but also in their new beach patrol. This reflects the fact that the beach "community" made up of shopkeepers, residents, and tourists not only inhabit the same geographic location, permanently or temporarily, but that their community of interest lies in their desire to reduce crime and disorder on the beach.

It is true, however, that many community policing efforts have demonstrated success in blighted neighborhoods. While many affluent neighborhoods have a strong desire to reduce crime, the fact is that they tend to have fewer problems with serious crime than their innercity counterparts; they have more private resources to deal with the threat (ranging from burglar alarms to hired security guards); and the lack of social and physical disorder tends to act as a deterrent to crime, since it conveys the message that crime will not be tolerated within that community.

The fact is that neighborhood decay acts as a magnet for crime, and police departments must allocate scant resources where they hold the promise of making the greatest impact. Putting a community policing officer into a blighted neighborhood can be a very positive first step in reclaiming that traditional sense of community because of the variety of roles the officer plays. The officer's primary duty is, of course, to control crime. However, the single most important thing an officer needs to carry out that mandate is information. The rapport engendered by having the same officer in the same geographic area every day facilitates a two way information flow, where the officer receives input on community priorities in exchange for which the residents provide vital information. The officer becomes a "member" of the community.

The officer also acts as a visible deterrent to crime, of crucial importance to those who may lack even the resources to afford a telephone to call the police. Quite obviously the elderly retiree who has no car and must walk to the bank to cash his pension check would find the armed officer's presence reassuring. The officer's presence can also deter open drug sales, a potent symbol that the community has lost control. By allowing law abiding citizens to reclaim their streets, the community policing officer helps inspire a renewed sense of confidence in the community. The officer can be the catalyst in the formation of block clubs and associations so that people can be the "eyes and ears" of their neighborhoods.

In the role of community ombudsman/liaison, the community policing officer also acts as the community's link to other public agencies. The police are the only governmental agency open 24 hours a day, which makes them the ideal public agent to begin regenerating community spirit. Perhaps the community's priority is to remove abandoned cars or to have regular trash pickups. While that may not seem like "crime fighting," crime and decay cluster together, so towing cars and removing trash may be crucial first steps in transmitting the message that the community will no longer tolerate crime.⁽¹⁹⁾

Creative community policing officers have developed a wide variety of new approaches to meet local needs. In one community, an officer held a job fair, including speakers who used role playing to teach interview skills. Another tapped local businesses to donate paint to upgrade the homes of the indigent. The teenagers who helped were rewarded with donated sports gear. One enterprising officer persuaded youngsters who had been vandalizing a local park to instead become the park's protectors, ensuring everyone in the community could enjoy the facility. In the role of community catalyst, the community policing officer provides the hope that urban life can again be enjoyed in safety.

Perhaps because we have failed to study and understand the ways in which communities change, that all important sense of community that can be the most important weapon in fighting crime has often been lost. External control can never substitute for internal control. The sad fact is that many communities have lost the collective will to fight the battle against drugs, decay, disorder, and crime. By getting back to the basics and by stimulating communication between police and neighborhoods processes that allow residents to rebuild that traditional sense of pride in community life the community policing movement holds the promise of improving

the quality of life in our cities. And perhaps even more importantly we must recognize the need to restore our communities before this opportunity disappears forever.

As author Lewis Mumford wrote: "We shall never succeed in dealing effectively with the complex problems of large units and differentiated groups, unless at the same time we rebuild and revitalize the small unit...The home and the neighborhood are an integral part of the region."⁽²⁰⁾

ENDNOTES:

1. For an expanded discussion of this topic refer to *Contemporary Policing*, Robert Trojanowicz and Bonnie Bucquerous, Anderson Publishing Co. (forthcoming).
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19. Wilson, James Q., and Kelling, George L., "The Police and Neighborhood Safety: Broken Windows," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1982, pp. 29-38.
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