

A LINE ON LIFE

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A Sense of Community *

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Many of us are worried about the increasing crime rates in our cities. What can be done about it? One idea is espoused by Dr. Philip Zimbardo, an eminent social psychologist at Stanford University. It developed from some research he was doing.

When he was in New York City, he commuted daily from Brooklyn to the Bronx. He noted a "*seemingly endless array of automobiles that had been devastated, strewn in the city streets and highways.*" These cars might have been stolen, abandoned or merely had some breakdown and been left by the owner for a while. The local police indicated that this was the work of "*vandals.*" Although the police had not seen these vandals at work, the vandals were assumed to be juveniles, most likely Black or Puerto Rican. Zimbardo wanted to test their assumption with direct observation.

Zimbardo and his associate, Scott Fraser, set up an attractive, used car on a New York City street just across from the psychology labs at NYU. The license plate was removed and the hood set ajar. With a camera ready in a hidden vantage point, they waited to observe the demolition. Surprisingly, they only had to wait 10 minutes. A passing car stopped and a family got out. After a short discussion, the mother ransacked the interior, while the child looked through the trunk. Meanwhile, dad took out the battery and removed the radiator with a hacksaw. All worked with the precision of a racetrack pit crew, and they were gone in minutes. Fifteen minutes later, two men stopped, jacked the car up, took its best tire and left.

Over the next several hours, passersby stripped the vehicle until nothing of value remained. Later, others smashed the windows, cut the remaining tires and defaced the metal surfaces. Rather than being concealed by the dark of night, these deeds took place any time the vandals happened upon the unfortunate car. In 48 hours, they noted 23 separate instances of destroying the car. Of those, only one involved adolescents. The rest were well-dressed adults driving good-looking cars. Most of these vandals were Caucasian, not Black or Hispanic. For the most part, they were middle-class white adults. The carnage was so devastating that it took two trucks to remove the wreckage from the scene!

As a comparison, a similar car was left – without license plates and with the hood raised – just across the street from the Stanford University Campus in Palo Alto, California. For one week's time, a concealed time-lapse camera was left to film any vandalism that would occur. In contrast to the 48 hours in New York City, not one instance of vandalism occurred during that week – there was no vandalism at all! In fact, when it started to rain, one charitable person put the raised hood down, probably so the motor would not get wet.

If you want to take "*a bite out of crime*," get to know your neighbors.

What caused the difference in vandalism between the two cities? In New York City, there is an atmosphere of "*free-floating anonymity*" – nobody cares who you are, and you return the same feeling. In contrast, Palo Alto had a **sense of community** – people know and care about their neighbors. For example, when Zimbardo moved the car to the Stanford campus to see if passing students would deface it, three neighbors called the police that an abandoned car was being stolen.

If you want to reduce the crime rate in your area, the job starts with you. You can be ambitious and start a **Neighborhood Watch Program**. However, if you are not that ambitious, you can merely get to know your neighbors and be friendly. It's a start!

* Adapted from Philip G. Zimbardo's talk, "The Times of my Life – Synergy Between Teaching and Research," presented at the American Psychological Association Convention in Los Angeles, August 13, 1994.