

[The Broken Windows Theory Of Health Clubs](#)

March 7, 2007

By Keva Silversmith

All this talk of barbells sailing through actual [gym windows](#) got me thinking about sociologists' [theory of Broken Windows](#).

Some researchers believe that municipalities can prevent serious crime by addressing problems when they are small: Repair broken windows quickly and vandals are much less likely to break more windows or do further damage. New York City applied this theory on a wide scale in the 1990s, cracking down on turnstile jumpers, public drunkenness, urinators, and the rest. Rates of both petty and serious crime fell.

I wish that gyms would adopt a similar approach to their facilities.

I belong to two gyms with equipment of similar quality. Gym A is well lit, the machines sit atop new carpeting, and management is responsive to comments dropped in the prominently displayed Suggestion Box. As you would imagine, members cooperate when it comes to re-racking weights, sharing equipment, and attractive women aren't scared away. At Gym B, the carpet is coming apart in patches all over the place. Weight plates load down unoccupied machines. Workouts often include a five minute hunt for matching dumbbells. And of course, the membership roll provides marvelous fodder for this blog.

But here's the thing: It's really a bunch of small details that lead to a sustainable business versus a place in decline. If you don't vacuum the floor enough, if you don't promptly repair broken equipment, members receive a clear message about how to treat the club. At some point, you might even experience actual crime: equipment that can fit inside a gym bag starts to disappear (barbell collars, cable machine handles, small weight plates). Items left in gym lockers are no longer safe. Pretty soon you've got your very own fitness version of the 4-5-6 subway line heading too far north.

The sociologists are right, at least when it comes to gyms. Run the vacuum at least once a day, clean the bathrooms, empty the trash. You might save yourself a bigger headache down the road.

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