

The Curse of the Shiny Object

How Humans Fight Problems Where They Are Visible, and Why We Need to See Beyond

BY GRETCHEN S. PETERS

Human beings have a strong tendency to fight problems where they are visible. This intuitive and usually well-intended response to visible cues often produces inefficiencies and can result in spreading greater harm. This is the curse of the “shiny object”—when the attention-grabbing aspect of a problem distracts from identifying and countering the core drivers.

The curse impacts many aspects of life. It can cause the U.S. Government (USG) and other organizations to overcommit resources to fight visible symptoms of security problems, while initiatives to counter the structural or systemic drivers of those problems are under-resourced if not entirely ignored. In the worst cases, initiatives to restore order have ended up spreading greater harm by targeting people or entire communities that are victims, not drivers, of the original security problem.

States and law enforcement agencies could have more impact if they focus on fighting the less visible drivers of disorder. While more complex, striking at core drivers of crime will ultimately have greater, longer-lasting impact, and cause less harm.

The purpose of this article is to describe a common and often harmful tendency in the way people approach problems, in particular social disorder. The article will describe the shiny object curse, and offer several examples where the curse has had grievous impacts on U.S. national security interests. I will show how a similar tendency in law enforcement practice—the so-called “broken windows” approach—has been misinterpreted in such a way that its utility

Ms. Gretchen Peters is President of the Center on Illicit Networks and Transnational Organized Crime, and author of Seeds of Terror.

has been lost. The article concludes with reflections on the ramifications of the shiny object curse for national and international security.

Treating the Disease, Not the Symptoms

The curse of the shiny object can be found anywhere. Imagine a patient presents themselves to a doctor with skin lesions. If the doctor simply prescribes a topical cream to treat the lesions (the symptom), and fails to identify that the lesions are a result of an autoimmune deficiency disease (the cause), the doctor has fallen prey to the curse. In a far worse scenario, imagine a doctor treats a patient's crippling headaches with an addictive pain medicine, not diagnosing a malignant growth in the patient's temporal lobe. In time, the patient ends up addicted to narcotics and suffering from brain cancer. The patient now has more problems than before; harm has increased, and the problem remains unsolved.

The shiny object curse manifests itself in similar ways in the international security and law enforcement arena. Like the proverbial iceberg, visible only at its tip, society's most complex threats are far more profound than what we easily observe. Confronting these threats effectively requires a comprehensive response that understands and addresses the profound drivers, not just the visible symptoms. Strategies to restore order must be designed to diminish, not increase harm.

Our Minds at Work

To understand the shiny object curse, we must look at three well-documented aspects of the human psyche. First, human beings have a demand for order in their communities. Multiple assessments have found that

visibly maintaining order, sometimes called "disorder policing" or "community policing," can cause a reduction in crime and an increase in public confidence in the state, while communities allowed to fall into visible disarray can experience a correlated crime increase and decrease in state confidence—more on this complex dynamic later.¹

A second, related issue is that visual stimulation deeply impacts the mind. Recent studies have found that the brain's visual cortex, once thought to only process incoming information, also plays a powerful role in decisionmaking and shaping values.² What we see around us has a tremendous impact on our perception of order, and how to restore it. Terrorist groups capitalize on this, spreading fear and disrupting order through dramatic attacks that have profound impacts on national psyches, economies, elections, defense spending, and policy. As recent elections in the United States and Europe have also demonstrated, some constituencies respond positively to candidates who promise visible approaches to impose order, such as building border walls or banning immigrants.

This relates to the third relevant aspect of the human psyche; the fact that humans are not the objective, rational creatures we believe ourselves to be. In fact, our subconscious routinely shapes our decisionmaking process, providing justifications when contradictory evidence conflicts with our existing beliefs or desires.³ The simultaneous presence of contradictory ideas or information is known as "cognitive dissonance." The rationalization process allowing individuals to justify foolish or immoral behavior, or to believe wrong information, is called "motivated reasoning." An example of this is, "I

know smoking is bad for me, but it helps keep my weight down.” In some cases it results in individuals doubling down on bad decisions or finding justification for bad ideas, strategies, and untruths.⁴ If a person has already decided the answer, he or she will not behave rationally, nor look at evidence objectively.

In the security and law enforcement realm, these three psychological forces create a feedback loop, resulting in the shiny object curse:

- Disorder, particularly when highly visible or shocking, produces a demand for order to be restored.
- States respond with interventions designed to restore order, often treating the visible symptoms of disorder rather than its core drivers.
- Highly visible interventions may soothe some constituencies, while distressing others. These interventions will often provide political rewards for elected officials, who won’t have to endure the costs.
- In some cases, these interventions will make the problem worse.
- Policymakers and members of the public may realize that the interventions are having limited or even negative impact, but will find reasons to justify and perpetuate them nonetheless, even doubling down on clearly failing strategies.

The Curse at Work in Counternarcotics

The shiny object curse has struck U.S. counternarcotics policy on multiple occasions, in particular with regard to the eradication of narcotics crops in Colombia

and Afghanistan. When coca and opium poppy fields blanketed the countryside in both countries, USG policymakers decided that the best way to reduce the flow of illicit narcotics was to destroy the fields. Despite being dangerous, complex, and costly, eradication has often been the dominant pillar of multi-pronged counternarcotics strategies in both countries, gobbling up the bulk of resources, sucking focus from other potential interventions, and complicating military and diplomatic efforts to stabilize war-torn rural areas.⁵ Eradication is complex because drug cultivation tends to occur in remote, rural areas where the state has limited control and resources, and where ground eradication forces are susceptible to corruption. Also, when eradication may bring political benefits to some elected officials, there will be longer-term costs that outweigh any short-term gains. Multiple studies have concluded that eradication programs have produced more harm than good, causing environmental degradation, economic upheaval, and a sharp decline in public support, as they sent impoverished rural communities, which often farmed coca and opium out of desperation, into the welcoming arms of insurgents.

Colombia

Previously a transit country that mainly processed and trafficked cocaine, Colombia began increasing its coca output in the 1980s and by 2000 was growing 70 percent of the world’s coca, having surpassed Bolivia and Peru to become the world’s largest producer.⁶ At its height, Colombia’s coca crop covered more than 160,000 hectares, and for decades, eradication through aerial spraying was the dominant response.⁷ From 2004–14, on

average 218,000 hectares were sprayed annually.⁸ Multiple studies have concluded that this response did more harm than good.

Eradication programs may have convinced people in Bogota and the United States that action was being taken, but they also caused serious negative economic and political consequences in the impacted areas. The spraying killed all crops, meaning that some poor rural communities were driven into deeper poverty by eradication, whether or not they grew coca. Thus, such villages ended up planting more coca, or sought protection and/or financing from communist rebels, who in turn gained greater influence in the countryside and were themselves drawn into trafficking drugs to finance their insurgency.⁹ Overall eradication failed to dramatically impact the price of cocaine yet, when it did affect price, it merely encouraged farmers in other parts of Colombia to get into coca cultivation, thus ensuring that national output levels remained steady.

Identifying and countering the drug cartels, and interdicting the cocaine supply chain at a level where cocaine had greater value, ultimately had a much greater impact than eradication.

Other negative consequences were harder to measure. Glyphosate, known in the United States by its commercial name Roundup, is the active ingredient used in the herbicides sprayed in Colombia.¹⁰ Although authorities have repeatedly claimed that aerial eradication is harmless, scientific analyses have concluded that incessant spraying in bio-diverse regions produced

negative long-term effects to fauna, flora, and water sources, and also harmed legal agricultural output and public health.¹¹

From a tactical and financial standpoint, aerial spraying was also a bad investment. Farmers found and implemented various adaptations to protect their crops, which so reduced the impact of the chemicals that 32 hectares of coca needed to be sprayed in order to kill just one hectare worth of output.¹² Various analyses concluded that it cost \$240,000 for every kilogram of cocaine ultimately removed from the retail market through spraying, or more than five times the retail value of the cocaine.¹³

In 2006, Colombia shifted gears, radically diminishing emphasis on spraying, putting more resources into interdiction of drug cartels and destruction of drug labs. The number of hectares being sprayed dropped by 40 percent, while the number of cocaine seizures climbed by 60 percent and the number of drug labs destroyed grew by a quarter.¹⁴ This new strategy cut the global supply of cocaine by more than half, causing a spike in retail cocaine prices.¹⁵

Identifying and countering the drug cartels, and interdicting the cocaine supply chain at a level where cocaine had greater value, ultimately had a much greater impact than eradication. This not only impacted the value of the retail cocaine market, but also coca cultivation, which dropped 40 percent.¹⁶ One study found that, for every cocaine lab detected and demolished, coca production decreased by a corresponding three hectares, as demand for coca dropped.¹⁷

On top of that, processed cocaine represents a product of far greater value than coca leaves per kilo. The amount of money lost when a cocaine shipment was captured

and destroyed was magnitudes greater than losses incurred when a coca field was destroyed. Moreover, it is magnitudes harder for crime syndicates to adapt and replace workers at the trafficking phase of the supply chain than at the farming phase.

Alternative livelihood projects in Colombia generally were assessed to be poorly implemented and resourced when compared to Colombia's eradication efforts, yet multiple studies concluded they still had more promise, both in the short and long run, because they addressed the drivers of coca cultivation—poverty, lack of access to markets, and insecurity.¹⁸ One alternative livelihood program that was viewed as successful, if just briefly, was the *Plan de Consolidación Integral de la Macarena*, which successfully integrated state presence into a coca-growing region through a variety of programs focused on increasing police and judicial presence, while also improving healthcare, education, and economic opportunities.¹⁹ This model improved social and economic indicators in a short period, but was nonetheless canceled by the government.²⁰

Afghanistan

For counternarcotics experts, shifting from Bogota to Kabul was like watching a bad movie all over again. With pink poppy fields carpeting the rural south, the 2001–08 USG drug strategies relied almost entirely on eradication, with comparatively miniscule resources applied to interdiction, public education, and demand reduction. This imbalance predictably produced the same results it had in Colombia; despite billions spent on eradication efforts, poppy output increased steadily from 2002–08. Rampant

corruption and poor implementation led the eradication teams to mainly destroy the fields belonging to Afghanistan's poorest farmers, since rich, politically connected growers could escape eradication through bribery.²¹ Compared to the resources poured into eradication, efforts to impact other aspects of the heroin business were under-resourced. Until around 2008, traffickers based in Pakistan and Iran continued to smuggle heroin and import precursor chemicals with little fear of disruption from law enforcement. Hawaladars and other money service businesses could launder drug money with virtual impunity. In other words, the bulk of efforts to combat the Afghan heroin trade focused on the one, highly visible aspect of the drug supply chain, the point where the drugs were grown.

Another key problem with counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan centered around the reluctance of either Afghan authorities or their U.S. partners to confront prominent individuals, tribes, and constituencies involved in the opium trade out of concern for potential effects on other political outcomes or counterterrorism operations. Afghan officials argued to USG officials that counternarcotics strategy must be balanced “with the requirement to project central authority” across Afghanistan and should not target prominent tribes whose support was needed.²² This meant that counternarcotics efforts were not applied evenly, and actions that brought short-term political gains for a few elected officials or corrupt eradication teams, spread longer-term harm in rural areas by strengthening the Taliban insurgency, which itself profited from the opium trade.

In communities where the United States or local forces implemented a heavy-handed

approach, they suffered heavy casualties and failed to implement order.²³ Eradication at times took a huge toll on communities and eradicators alike, sparking insurgent attacks and community-led rebellions.²⁴ In 2013, for example, 133 members of the eradication forces lost their lives to attacks by insurgents and communities trying to protect their crops.²⁵ Meanwhile in places where alternatives were made available, or where communities were engaged regularly to be part of the process, it was possible to restore order, even in just pocket-sized districts surrounded by violence.²⁶

As with Colombia, the solution in Afghanistan is not a heavy-handed approach. Rather it is a nuanced, holistic approach that generally improves security and confidence that the state—and foreign forces—can together provide order and are on the side of the community.

The Curse in the Conservation Realm

Africa's elephant population has plunged by a staggering 111,000 in the past decade, with multiple countries, including Tanzania and Mozambique, losing more than 50 percent of their herds to poaching. The global rhino population has plummeted by more than a quarter in a poaching surge that has grown 90-fold since 2007.²⁷ Elephant ivory is sought after for jewelry and decorative objects, while rhino horn is prized as a palliative in traditional Chinese medicine. Unless something can be done to halt the current poaching crisis, both animals will become extinct within a decade.

Conservation groups, private foundations, and governments are pouring millions of dollars into fighting this scourge. The focus of most of these efforts, as well

intentioned as they may be, is fighting the problem only where visible, and neglecting the less visible drivers of the problem.

Wildlife crime is a transnational organized crime challenge. Animals are being poached or illegally harvested at unsustainable rates and fed into transnational illicit supply chains that deliver end products to consumer markets. This criminal market is visible at either end of the global supply chain: at its beginning where the animals are killed, and at its end, where the products are retailed. It is at those two points where the majority of the interventions are taking place. Those controlling and financing the wildlife supply chain are less visible—and motivated by the huge profits they can earn from trafficking in wildlife parts. The global market for illicit ivory is valued at \$4 billion per year, while rhino horn now sells for more than gold or cocaine per ounce.²⁸

On the African end of the crisis, many organizations are mounting Herculean efforts to protect the animals, a challenging prospect especially given that pachyderms live across vast, wild spaces, and can cover huge terrain during their daily travels. To keep them safe, parks, reserves, private ranches, and conservancies install costly, high-tech fences and surveillance systems that include hidden cameras, animal collars and even drones.²⁹ Security teams and paramilitary forces patrol parks and conservancies, some of which have become bloody war zones. One rhino in Kenya even has his own 24-hour bodyguard unit.³⁰ In interviews with people in the field, they acknowledge they are fighting a losing battle, but many continue to double down instead of modifying their strategy.

This is the curse of the shiny object, distracting attention from the drivers, and

focusing it on the visible. The anti-poaching unit in Kruger National Park has shot more than 300 poachers, for example, but few middlemen and only a single exporter have been brought to justice in South Africa.³¹ Perhaps the most striking example of the curse is the “Rhinos Without Borders” effort, which is airlifting 100 rhinos from high-poaching areas in South Africa to safer ones in neighboring Botswana.³² The process, which involves darting the animals with tranquilizers, and then shifting them using a combination of helicopters and cargo planes, is expensive and risky in and of itself. It takes at least three months to move each animal and costs a breathtaking \$45,000 per rhino.³³

Projects like the rhino airlift are understandable in a region where corruption is rampant and political will to counter organized crime is low. The airlift also represents a highly visible response to the most emotional aspect of the crime: the iconic animals being slaughtered. It is hard

to imagine a shinier object than a 3-ton pachyderm. It is noteworthy that, across Africa, there are far fewer efforts, all of them poorly resourced compared to anti-poaching and animal protection efforts, aiming to identify and interdict the traffickers moving ivory and rhino horn to Asia, or to counter the corrupt state actors who protect these illicit markets.

This is significant for three reasons. First, most poachers cannot afford to hunt without receiving financing from criminal bosses; most cannot even afford to buy the bullets they fire, which sell for more than \$20 per round.³⁴ Therefore, interdicting the criminal bosses will have a cascading effect down the supply chain, causing poachers to lose this critical financing. Second, when interdiction strategies focus on the trafficking stages where the greatest increase in value occurs, criminal profits decline far further than when policies are aimed at the early stages of procurement. Third, it is harder for crime



Michael Dalton-Smith

A Northern White Rhino in Kenya that has 24-hour security.

syndicates to adapt and replace goods and people when they are lost to seizure or arrest at the trafficking phase. It is critical to understand these aspects of the supply chain in order to design a strategy that has the most disruptive impact.

Community buy-in and popular support are present in nearly all projects in Africa that have succeeded in reducing poaching.

In many parts of Africa, the local kingpins are more or less known; however, those fighting the problem struggle to build a solid body of evidence and put forward successful cases in often corrupt court systems. As in other crime sectors, there appears to be a limited number of syndicates moving the vast majority of endangered wildlife parts transnationally. A few targeted operations mounted alongside the existing physical efforts to protect the herds could have a profoundly disruptive impact in a relatively short period of time, buying more time for the animals at risk of extinction.

Lastly, there is the corruption problem, another invisible driver. Few groups across Africa have mounted anticorruption campaigns to support anti-poaching efforts. A handful of community-based projects have found success in protecting animal herds when coupling tactical protection efforts with projects focused on simultaneously interdicting poaching syndicates, while also collaborating with and protecting local communities, improving economic opportunities, and reducing graft at the local level.³⁵ Zakouma National Park in Chad, which lost 90 percent of its elephants from 2002–10, today has a

healthy and growing elephant population and also a stable environment for local communities.³⁶ The nongovernmental organization Africa Parks was brought in to manage Zakouma in 2011, weeding out corruption among rangers in the Rhode Island-sized sanctuary, improving capacity, equipment, and discipline, and improving lives for local villages by building schools and health clinics.³⁷ There is also cautious optimism about Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo where park managers are working to professionalize the rangers, fight corruption, and provide protection and jobs for communities in and around the park. Community buy-in and popular support are present in nearly all projects in Africa that have succeeded in reducing poaching.³⁸ Poaching decreases in places where local communities have ownership or partial ownership of reserves or a share of the revenue from reserves, as well as jobs.³⁹ Implementing these strategies may be more complex, but they are ultimately no more expensive than installing hi-tech surveillance systems or airlifting multi-ton animals to safer places. Moreover, they produce multiple positive outcomes for local communities, including greater general stability and increased confidence in the state.

Broken Windows Policing

In 1982, prominent criminologists George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson published a paper in *The Atlantic* arguing that, “at the community level, disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence.”⁴⁰ Their broken windows theory was based on a 1969 experiment, which parked a car without

plates and its hood open in a run-down part of the Bronx. The vehicle was vandalized within 10 minutes of being parked, at first by affluent-looking white people, and virtually destroyed within 24 hours of being parked. Meanwhile, another car parked in affluent Palo Alto sat for a week untouched, until the researchers returned and smashed a window with a sledgehammer, after which, it was destroyed within a few hours, again by predominantly white people.⁴¹ In both neighborhoods, visible indicators that order was not being maintained appeared to lead to further vandalism and crime.

The authors of the article explicitly argued that race played no intrinsic role in maintaining order, citing the case study of a white police officer whom they tracked as he patrolled a mostly black neighborhood in Newark, where he collaborated with community members to both define and maintain order. Rules of the street, the authors argued “were defined and enforced in collaborations with the ‘regulars’ ...another street might have different rules, but these, everybody understood, were the rules for *this* neighborhood. If someone violated them, the regulars not only turned to [the officer] for help but also ridiculed the violator.”⁴² Community members and the security enforcer alike agreed on the rules and collaborated to enforce them. Enforcement was not arbitrary, but impacted rule-breakers who engaged in begging, petty theft or loitering, or who were visibly inebriated or harassing others. When these basic rules were enforced, the level of more serious crime also went down. Even though the Newark neighborhood was poor, it was secure, and people enjoyed a sense of community.⁴³

The idea that Kelling and Wilson wanted to impart was that, if police focused on countering disorder and less serious crime in communities, they could reduce public fear, increase confidence in the police, and deter more serious crime.⁴⁴ When police operated in collaboration with the community, residents themselves helped take control of their neighborhoods and also prevented more serious crime from infiltrating.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, this deceptively simple broken windows narrative was often misinterpreted.

In 1993, Rudy Giuliani was elected mayor of New York City on a campaign promise to reduce soaring crime and clean up the streets. Giuliani embraced the broken windows theory, and implemented a program in which disorder was aggressively policed and all violators were ticketed or arrested. The New York City Police Department cracked down on misdemeanors, arresting people for smoking marijuana in public, spraying graffiti, and selling loose cigarettes.⁴⁶ Police also focused on cleaning up the New York City subway system, which at the time suffered 250,000 turnstile jumpers every day.⁴⁷ Their aggressive response seemed to work. Almost instantly, crime began falling, and the murder rate plummeted. Giuliani called the strategy miraculous, and was reelected in 1997.

However the Giuliani approach—many criminologists now refer to this as “zero tolerance” or “stop and frisk” policing—has come under fire. First, criminologists began to note that crime had dropped at corresponding rates around the United States, including in other big cities that did not implement New York’s approach.⁴⁸ Some began to question whether Giuliani’s

approach had anything to do with New York's crime decrease. Moreover, minority communities and civil rights groups hit back against "zero tolerance," saying such policies caused police to disproportionately target minorities, thus increasing disorder and mistrust amid rising complaints of police misconduct.⁴⁹ More recent high-profile killings of African Americans by white police, such as Michael Brown, who was stopped for jaywalking in Missouri, and Eric Garner, who was confronted for selling loose cigarettes in New York, were said to be examples of broken windows policing run amok. George Kelling, one of the authors of the original broken windows article himself hit back against the way his theory had been applied, writing in 2015 that, "broken windows was never intended to be a high-arrest program," and had been grossly misinterpreted.⁵⁰

Other academic analyses have come to the same conclusion. One 2015 study published in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* found that "disorder policing strategies generate noteworthy crime control gains," but that "the types of strategies" implemented can matter greatly.⁵¹ Comparing 30 different instances of disorder policing, the study concluded that aggressive order maintenance strategies focused on making high numbers of arrests do not generate significant crime reductions.⁵² In contrast, it found that "community problem-solving approaches" seeking to change "social and physical disorder conditions" can produce significant crime reductions.⁵³ It found examples of successful strategies that yielded consistent crime reduction effects across a variety of violent, property, drug, and disorder outcome measures.⁵⁴

These findings support the idea that police and other security forces should pay attention to visible signs of disorder when seeking to reduce more serious crimes in neighborhoods. The key to success is that they focus on a community cooperation model over a zero-tolerance or stop and frisk model.⁵⁵ The 2015 study concluded that, "in devising and implementing appropriate strategies to deal with a full range of disorder problems, police must rely on citizens, city agencies, and others in numerous ways."⁵⁶ Moreover, a sole commitment to increasing misdemeanor arrests is likely to undermine relationships in low income, urban communities of color, where distrust between the state and citizens is most profound.⁵⁷ As Kelling put it in his 2015 article, levels of crime and demand for order remain high in minority and poor communities in the United States, but zero-tolerance approaches have exacerbated the problem.⁵⁸

The final lesson was that disorder problems, and the responses to them, are highly contextualized to local conditions. Since each community and its problem are unique, so should be strategies to counter them.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it is important to make a distinction between imposing order on the general public, and targeting highly violent syndicates, repeat offenders or gangs. An aggressive program focused on the disorderly behaviors of violent gang members, for example, could include focused deterrence tactics more rigorous than those used in a program to control the more general disorderly conduct of ordinary citizens.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to help communities, states, and organizations comprehend

and address why they fall into the very understandable psychological trap of the shiny object curse. The most important takeaway should be that identifying root drivers of problems and engaging—not isolating—communities impacted by these threats must be the first order of business. Community members hold the keys to success, and in every occasion encountered here, they have felt as desperate for peace and security as the rest of us. Trust between the community and the state depends on whether policymakers fall victim to the curse.

The Drivers of Disorder are Typically More Profound than What is Immediately Visible

Therefore, it is imperative that security forces and policymakers alike conduct thorough information gathering and analysis to understand how illicit networks operate, obtain financing, and solicit protection. Just as each community is unique, so must be interventions. Unless a fairly complete analysis is conducted prior to shaping and implementing policy, that policy may cause greater harm than it alleviates.

It Will be Necessary to Engage Communities to Help Fight Disorder

Community members often hold a great deal of intelligence about the drivers of disorder, and are able to identify ringleaders. Moreover, they have an interest in improving levels of order in the place they live, and are vital partners in restoring and maintaining order. This idea can have relevance for policymakers trying to protect communities domestically, or trying to implement peace-building strategies or stability operations abroad.

Elected Officials May Perceive Benefits from Implementing Highly-Visible Interventions that Ultimately Have Negligible or even Negative Impact on Affected Communities

These visible interventions may bring those politicians short-term political gain, or give the appearance that the elected officials are taking action, when in fact the elected officials are avoiding doing what actually needs to be done. Advocating for elected officials to take a tough stand against illicit activity is a complex arena for security forces, but security forces may find useful allies in the community if they already have mutual trust and a solid working relationship. **PRISM**

Notes

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