

small short-term rewards (dessert) over bigger long-term gains (longevity). People have tried to thwart this tendency since at least Odysseus's voyage past the Sirens, whose beautiful singing lured men to their deaths. The Greek hero had his men stop their ears and tie him to the mast of their ship so that he would not be able to yield to temptation. Now some people are suggesting that individuals and businesses should adopt a modern equivalent—"precommitment."

Most people already do some of

this, writes journalist and novelist Daniel Akst. They skip buying the jar of peanuts to prevent themselves from wolfing down the whole thing or sign up for an automatic savings plan to avoid spending their entire monthly paycheck. Three economists several years ago founded a "precommitment store" on the Internet called www.stickK.com (the extra "K" stands for contract), which offers those with frail willpower a binding contract to meet laudable goals or else have some up-front money funneled to a charity. Choices include quitting smoking,

losing weight, or an individualized goal, such as "stop calling my ex." One or two slip-ups, according to the terms of the contract, and off the money goes.

There's a renewed trend in America toward paternalism by government and others, Akst writes. But skeptics wonder whether politicians or other well-meaning folks ought to be telling the public how to behave. The beauty of precommitment mechanisms such as stickK.com is that they amount to do-it-yourself paternalism.

SOCIETY

Contagious Crime

THE SOURCE: "The Spreading of Disorder" by Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Linda Steg, in *Scienceexpress*, Nov. 20, 2008.

ONE OF THE GREAT STRENGTHS of the "broken windows theory" of crime control is its appeal to so many lawn-mowing, graffiti-scrubbing, litter-bin-using Americans. They believe that order and cleanliness are cornerstones of urban safety and that promptly fixing small things such as broken windows sends a social signal and prevents bigger problems such as break-ins and thefts. Sociologists have cast serious doubt on some of the most extravagant claims for this crime-fighting technique, for instance, that it is responsible for the dramatic reduction in New York City's crime rate in the mid-1990s. But criticism has slid off

the theory like water off an unbroken windowpane. Now researchers in the Netherlands have put the theory to some ingenious tests.

Kees Keizer, Siegwart Lindenberg, and Linda Steg of the social science faculty at the University of Groningen attached annoying "Happy Holidays" flyers to the handlebars of bicycles parked in an alley with a big "No Littering" sign on the wall. No trash can was provided. When the alley walls were pristine, 67 percent of the

People are twice as likely to steal from a graffiti-covered mailbox as from one that's pristine.

bicyclists took the flyer with them to dispose of properly. When the same area was scribbled with graffiti, only 31 percent did.

The researchers conducted an experiment with an envelope, allowing it to protrude out of a mailbox with a five-euro bill visible through the clear window showing the address. When the mailbox was free of graffiti, 13 percent of passersby pocketed the money. When it was covered with graffiti, 27 percent did so. In another experiment, the researchers partially blocked the entrance to a parking lot with a temporary fence. Customers were ordered by the parking lot's owner not to lock their bikes to the fence and to walk about 220 yards to an alternate entrance. When four nearby bikes were clearly *not* locked to the fence, 73 percent of the people walked the extra distance; when the bikes were locked to the fence, in violation of the posted order, only 18 percent did.

The researchers found that the

more Groningen residents saw examples of illegal or improper behavior, the more they violated other rules. Signs of previous “inappropriate behavior” such as graffiti or broken windows led to other such acts, including littering or stealing, the authors write. Each new example of antisocial activity undermined the general goal of doing the right thing.

SOCIETY

Training Mere Mortal Teachers

THE SOURCE: “Charter Schools and the Limits of Human Capital” by Steven F. Wilson, in *The Education Gadfly*, Nov. 6, 2008.

CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE GENERALLY failed to find a Petraeus-style solution to the urban school crisis. A surge of troops may have reduced sectarian violence in Iraq, but a surge of private innovation has produced only isolated successes in a sea of low test scores. Only 200 or so of the nation’s roughly 4,500 charter schools stand out as shining lights in the classroom firmament. Inevitably, writes Steven F. Wilson, the president of a charter school management company and senior fellow of an education think tank in Washington, the question turns to scale. Can rare exceptions be turned into everyday reality?

In a detailed examination of seven successful charter schools in Boston, Wilson found that all but one hewed to what is called the “no excuses” model: the phi-

losophy that every child can succeed and neither family dysfunction nor poor preparation is sufficient reason for failure. A rigorous academic program was established to prepare every child for college. The key to schools’ success was the hiring of driven and highly educated teachers who made “nearly heroic” efforts to overcome years of accumulated learning deficits in the students. More than half of these schools’ staff members had attended elite undergraduate institutions, and 82 percent had attended at least a “very competitive” college.

Each year, about 142,000 students graduate from these highly selective colleges, so even if one of every 10 of their graduates went into charter school teaching for the usual two years, this cohort would provide only six percent of the educators employed in the nation’s large urban school districts. And even if many non-elite teachers were highly capable, the gap would remain great. Success in school reform will always depend on tens of thousands of “mere mortals” who mostly aren’t interested in working more than the standard 40-hour week.

The keys to success, Wilson says, are vision and good management. That means precise adherence to an effective instructional system with tools for “school culture-building,” placement tests, a content-rich curriculum, frequent assessments, and other detailed help. Legislatures should raise the pay of starting teachers, and drop the certification requirements that bar many worthy

recruits. Teachers should be rewarded for performance in the classroom and not for seniority or degrees.

The entire social system does not need to be reformed before inner-city students can succeed. If shortages of qualified workers can be overcome in order to staff entire governments in developing countries, surely enough great teachers can be found to educate America’s most disadvantaged children.

SOCIETY

Mission Being Accomplished!

THE SOURCE: “Are We Finally Winning the War on Cancer?” by David M. Cutler, in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Fall 2008.

AMERICA’S OFFICIAL 38-YEAR war on cancer has reduced deaths from the disease dramatically. But most of its success has not come from bravura breakthroughs in treatment. More lives have been saved by relatively humdrum screening tests.

In the first two decades after President Richard M. Nixon launched the war on cancer in 1971, cancer mortality rates rose twice as fast as before. By 1986, *The New England Journal of Medicine* was pronouncing the effort a “qualified failure.” But starting in 1990, cancer deaths for each 100,000 people of the same age began to decrease. By 2004, the cancer mortality rate was down 13 percent from its peak, writes David M. Cutler, an economist at Harvard University.

The four leading killers among all