

Bad language has become a gateway to violence

We can lower the temperature, starting with ourselves

[Washington Times](#), By Gerard Leval, Jan. 14, 2026

For some years, the “broken windows” theory of crime fighting gained support. When it was implemented in New York City, crime rates plummeted, and the Big Apple became the safest large metropolitan area in the U.S. Although this theory has been cast aside in recent years, it remains the most viable approach to reducing street crime.

The underlying premise of the theory is that rectifying small defects, including fixing broken windows, removing graffiti and tackling minor crime, will help reduce serious crime. A neighborhood that allows itself to deteriorate physically becomes more susceptible to antisocial behavior, along with its attendant criminal activity. Reversing that deterioration is a means of reversing the propagation of crime.

This theory should now be applied to another aspect of our lives: our personal speech.

In recent years, we have become increasingly aware of the extent to which speech can mutate into violence. We have borne witness to individuals so negatively affected by words, either heard or read, that they have resorted to violence, sometimes fatal. Language has come to be an instrument of choice for provocation and anger.

Our everyday exchanges, private and public, have demonstrated an uptick in the use of vulgar and even violent language, accentuated by social media. Profanity, vile expressions and threats of bodily harm seem interspersed throughout conversations of all types. In the past, there was a reluctance to use such language in “polite conversation,” but now that reluctance has dissipated. In fact, it often appears that vile language has become a kind of status symbol.

Cable programs, whether “The Late Show With Stephen Colbert” on the left or “Gutfeld!” on the right, show little restraint in the use of the most profane and vile expressions. Yes, there is still some “bleeping out” of these, but it is done in a way intended to let the audience understand precisely the words being excised. Mainstream TV now places few limits on vulgar expressions, despite a semblance of gestures in that direction.

Even in my own law firm, a major national one, profanity is frequently heard during meetings of our partnership. I cringe at the words, but few of my colleagues even seem to notice.

There are those who will object to the notion of limiting any form of speech, arguing that the use of vulgar speech is guaranteed under the First Amendment. Of course it is. However, that hardly ends the matter. In fact, it's really only the beginning. Just because a mode of expression is permitted doesn't mean it should be used. On the contrary, the right to misbehave is actually an opportunity for good behavior, but there must be a will to do so.

The prevalence of profanity in everyday speech and public discourse, including various remarks by the president and the recent comment of the mayor of Minneapolis, has cheapened the nature of our conversations, public and private. Four-letter words and related expressions, by their very use, add to the growing coarseness of our society and promote dysfunctionality, even violence. Removing them from our speech can be a first step to improving our discourse. Elevating the quality of our discourse might just lower the level of societal violence.

An example may very well be the "broken windows" approach that has worked strikingly well in reducing urban crime. Just as addressing minor offenses serves to reduce the prevalence of much more serious offenses, so we could contemplate an effort to remove vulgarity and violent expressions from our daily speech as a prelude to eliminating vile and violence-producing speech more widely, with the potential for even greater beneficial consequences.

This approach would begin by having each of us crack down on our use of vile language. Each of us would be prepared to call out and chastise those around us who choose to use profanity in ordinary speech. Whenever, in the course of any conversation, whether in public or private, an interlocutor resorts to a profane remark, we will call it out, reminding the speaker that it's unwelcome.

If this sounds difficult to do, we need to remember that, but a generation ago, it was customary for adults to express disapproval whenever a young person resorted to profanity. Anticipation of such a reprimand was enough to make the use of profanity by the young, at least in the presence of an adult, infrequent. Today, there is no such constraint; in fact, there is tacit encouragement to use such language. Removing that encouragement and reinstituting a sense of shame in the use of inappropriate language could help lower the tone of our verbal exchanges.

As we enter a new year, if we can take this very modest first move, perhaps a certain momentum may be developed toward the marginalizing of vile and violent language, the "broken windows" of social interactions. It could result in a reduction of calls for violence, and that just might reduce the level of violence itself.