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Purposively smashed glass is a massive issue throughout Ōtepoti Dunedin and one that has been publicly broached on numerous occasions.¹ Yet, no real action has been taken to address it, despite the fact that broken glass is not simply a nuisance, but of serious concern in a number of ways. Firstly, it is a health hazard: there is a very real danger of pedestrians and cyclists falling and hurting themselves on the shards, as well as animals wounding their feet. In 2017, pre-school children from the Otago University Childcare Association even wrote letters to the flats along and around Castle Street in which they asked students occupying them to stop smashing glass on the streets because they were afraid of tripping and being injured.² Members of the public have also reported to Spokes Dunedin of having to cycle into the road to avoid riding over glass. Cyclists already have to be aware of other road users and pedestrians: smashed glass in cycleways and on the road thereby becomes an additional hazard, not simply an inconvenience.

Secondly, it makes certain areas of the city hostile. For instance, cyclists have described bypassing certain areas to avoid getting a puncture. One member of the public described to Spokes Dunedin how they know of children and parents who will refrain from walking down certain streets all together because they feel uncomfortable. Even tourists have commented on the state of certain areas of the city.³ We also know of cases in which glass bottles have been used as weapons and purposefully thrown at people. Such areas should not exist in Ōtepoti Dunedin. Purposefully smashing glass is clearly not just an anti-social behaviour, but leads to inhospitable neighbourhoods, which impacts all members of a community.

Thirdly, one of the reasons given by members of the public as to why they dislike riding their bicycle or even chose not to cycle in Ōtepoti Dunedin is the amount of smashed glass on the roads and in the cycleways. Cycling infrastructure has been put in place throughout the city, but, once strewn with glass shards, it is no longer fit for purpose. If the DCC is keen to present cycling as a real option, this issue clearly needs to be properly addressed.

However, it is not simply a case of cleaning up more regularly and throughout the city, as opposed to certain areas: there needs to be real consequences for committing this act in the first place, as has happened in the case of couch burning. Couch burning was once considered

¹ For example, <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/broken-glass-spurs-cleanup>;
<https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/broken-glass-empties-daily-event>;
<https://www.odt.co.nz/news/south-today/rubbish-broken-glass-castle-st>;
<https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/smashed-glass-growing-hazard-say-cyclists>

² <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/pre-schoolers-ask-street-without-glass>

³ <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/cyclists-visitors-complain-about-broken-glass>

part of the “student culture”: now that the university has introduced harsher punishments, there has been a massive decline in this activity.⁴

Purposefully smashing glass is akin to couch burning: it is a dangerous, anti-social behaviour. Yet, it is accepted as part of the student culture in Ōtepoti Dunedin, even though it is deemed an offence under the Litter Act 1979, section 16. One of the main issues appears to be that very little action is taken against the perpetrators: despite its blatant occurrence throughout the city, from 24 March 2018 to 24 March 2021, only one arrest was recorded under the Litter Act for wilfully breaking glass in a public place according to the Police Data Base. Over the same period, a number of people are recorded as being charged with wilful damage, some of whom may have been responsible for breaking glass in a public place; however, there is only the one arrest under the Litter Act. And, according to the proctor’s Annual Code of Conduct Reference Group Report, only 24 people were caught for purposefully breaking glass in 2020.

The reasoning given by both the University of Otago’s proctor and Community Law Otago was that there are simply too many people purposefully smashing glass for it to be taken seriously by either the university or the police. Which leaves us in a Catch 22 situation: too many people are committing this offence for it to be properly addressed, and so too many people continue to commit it.

The excuse that this offence is too prevalent is unacceptable, and essentially condones this form of anti-social behaviour. This review of the Litter Compliance Policy is an opportunity to ensure that purposefully smashing glass is no longer condoned, but taken as a serious offence with real consequences. As the DCC states, “The purpose of the Litter Compliance Policy is to ensure Dunedin’s people and environment remain protected from harm by minimising the negative effects of littering and illegal dumping/fly tipping.” Smashed glass through the streets of Ōtepoti Dunedin clearly has negative effects not just for cyclists, but the city as a whole, and it is high time that this issue was given the attention it deserves.

Yours sincerely,



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⁴ <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/heat-out-couch-burning>

Jon Dean

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