

# The Effectiveness of Juvenile Curfews at Crime Prevention

By  
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Juvenile curfew laws have become a pervasive and popular strategy for controlling juvenile crime. Public opinion is solidly behind the use of curfews, and the primary basis for this support is the notion that curfews make streets safer. This article provides preliminary results from a systematic review of empirical research on juvenile curfews, concluding that the evidence does not support the argument that curfews prevent crime and victimization. Juvenile crime and victimization are most likely to remain unchanged after implementation of curfew laws. Other aspects of curfew research, such as efficiency at detecting criminal activity, costs of enforcement, crime displacement, counterintuitive findings, and characteristics of curfew violators also are discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research are offered.

*Keywords:* juvenile curfew; juvenile crime; crime prevention; law enforcement

Juvenile curfew laws restrict the presence of youngsters in public during specified hours on a continuing basis. As a way of controlling juvenile crime, curfews have enjoyed immense popularity during the past decade or so. For many, curfews represent a simple and effective strategy for curbing juvenile offending by keeping would-be delinquents off the streets and at home. From this perspective, curfew laws benefit from commonsense thinking and reinforce important social values, such as parental responsibility. For others, however, curfews represent a dubious crime control strategy that abridges

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important civil rights and is open to discriminatory enforcement. In particular, minority groups feel that they unfairly bear the brunt of curfew enforcement efforts and tend to view curfews as an instrument of political oppression. From this perspective, curfew laws are seen as a quick fix to the juvenile crime problem, with little concrete support for their effectiveness, tipping the scale too far against individual freedoms, such as free movement, and too far in favor of communal rights, such as public safety.

In this article, the history and current popularity of curfew laws are discussed first. Next, questions regarding curfew effectiveness at crime prevention, along with questions bearing on related policy issues, are identified. Then, results of a systematic review of research on curfew effectiveness are presented, followed by a discussion of research findings on related issues. Finally, plans for a more comprehensive review and suggestions for future research are offered.

## Background

### *History of curfews*

Curfews are not a new idea; they have been used throughout history as a provisional measure to control civil disorder and unrest, especially by victorious armies (A brief history of curfews 2002). William the Conqueror introduced the curfew as a normal part of social life in England in the 1000s. Specifically, a curfew bell would be rung at night, signaling to people that they should put out their lights (fires) and stay off the streets until daybreak. This practice is reflected in the etymology of the word “curfew,” which derives from the Old French phrase *cuevrefeu*, meaning “cover the fire” (*American heritage dictionary* 1985). The purpose of the curfew at this time was fire prevention and keeping the peace.

The first juvenile curfew law in the United States seems to have been enacted in 1880 in Omaha, Nebraska (Curfew 1997). Within a short period, America quickly and enthusiastically embraced the concept of juvenile curfews. In 1897, the Boys and Girls’ National Home and Employment Association called on states to enact curfew laws (Townsend 1896). Also, by 1897, three hundred cities had adopted curfew ordinances, and claims were being made that commitments to stationhouses and reform schools dropped 50 percent to 75 percent in these cities (Curfew ordinances 1897).

### *Current popularity of curfews*

The renaissance of interest in curfew laws across the nation has been well documented. In a survey of 387 cities in 1997, the U.S. Conference of Mayors (1997) found that seven out of ten respondents reported having a curfew law. Similarly, in a survey of 200 cities, Reufle and Reynolds (1996) found that more than three-quarters of the respondents had a curfew law. In 1993 alone, more than 100 communities in New Jersey passed a curfew ordinance (Sherman 1995). In some com-

munities, curfew laws have been on the books for a long time, and when the community develops a renewed interest in curfew enforcement, statutory modification of the curfew laws may be needed to address contemporary court rulings. In 1996, Camden, New Jersey, for example, began enforcing its curfew ordinance, which actually had been in effect for more than four decades. Old practices die hard, so the start of the curfew was announced each night by sounding a siren atop city hall. The curfew, which applies to juveniles younger than eighteen, runs from 10:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. on weekdays and from 11:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. on weekends. Violations of the curfew law carry a maximum \$1,000 fine against parents (American Civil Liberties Union 1996).

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*Overall, the weight of the scientific evidence, based on ten studies with weak to moderately rigorous designs, fails to support the argument that curfews reduce crime and criminal victimization.*

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Curfews have flourished as a crime control measure for several reasons. In terms of broad political factors, there has been growing concern about the juvenile crime problem. Young offenders, specifically those fourteen years old and younger, have been described as the "leading edge of the juvenile crime problem" (Butts and Snyder 1997). Although this group accounts for only about one-third of juvenile crime, violent crime rates between 1980 and 1995 for this group grew at twice the rate of older juveniles (94 percent for juveniles fourteen years and younger, 47 percent for older juveniles) (Butts and Snyder 1997). These observations led to widespread cries for more effective handling of young offenders by the criminal justice system. For conservatives, these concerns translated into more vigorous law enforcement, increased social controls, and harsher punishments. For liberals, these concerns were reflected in early identification of potentially serious delinquents, followed by intervention strategies designed to prevent development of serious delinquent careers. Within this context, curfews had something useful to offer to both sides of the political spectrum.

Another attractive feature of curfew laws is that they can be used as a means for identifying children who are at high risk for criminal offending and victimization. Chances are that youngsters who are outside during the late night and early morning hours are not being supervised appropriately. Perhaps the issue is insufficient

supervision by parents who are indifferent about their child's welfare. Perhaps the problem is ineffective supervision by concerned parents who have difficulty dealing with an unruly child. In any case, crime prevention goals are assumed to be advanced when curfew laws focus on the youngest children and are coupled with intervention strategies intended to improve parental supervision.

The law enforcement community generally favors curfew laws in part because they provide police with additional authority and opportunity to stop and question suspicious youngsters. In this process, police may detect criminal behavior that might otherwise go unnoticed. Even the possibility of being stopped and questioned may have a deterrent effect on juveniles who are contemplating wrongdoing. These crime control benefits can accrue in addition to any crime reduction effects that compliance with curfew restrictions may have.

Another attractive aspect of curfew laws is that they are a seemingly inexpensive way of addressing juvenile crime problems. While the actual costs of curfew enforcement depend on operational details, such as whether the violator is issued a citation or taken into custody, there seems to be a general notion that curfew enforcement can simply be added to the list of an officer's law enforcement duties without need for any significant increase in police resources. Some commentators, however, will point out that curfew enforcement, which involves a relatively minor offense, detracts from the time that an officer can devote to dealing with serious crime. While this may be true, the argument does not seem particularly compelling given a lack of information on how curfew enforcement operates.

Thus, curfews are attractive to a broad audience that encompasses a wide variety of philosophical and political persuasions. As an instrument of social policy, curfews can be used to reinforce parental responsibility and strengthen family ties. Curfew laws that emphasize parental responsibility view parents as the first line of enforcement for curfew laws. Many curfew laws sanction both parents and children for violations, and some exclusively target parents. As a related matter, family ties may be strengthened as children spend more time at home, and there may be benefits in other domains, such as school performance. As a crime control instrument, curfew laws promise to reduce both juvenile offending and victimization. They also provide law enforcement with an additional tool to investigate and detect juvenile crime more aggressively.

### *Key assumptions regarding curfew effectiveness*

The rationale behind the effectiveness of curfew laws is a relatively straightforward example of opportunity theory: juveniles are less likely to commit crimes and to be victimized if they are not on the streets. To fully understand the impact of curfews, however, several implicit assumptions should be considered. For example, it is assumed that children have parents or caretakers who watch over and provide for them and that these adults are motivated or can be motivated to supervise the child's behavior. As early as 1896, Mrs. John D. Townsend advocated this position, arguing that "the curfew ordinance places responsibility where it belongs, on the parents" (Townsend 1896, 725). However, a strategy of holding parents responsi-

ble for their children's behavior may not always be realistic for children who are at high risk for delinquency. For example, although precise statistics are difficult to come by, it has been estimated that 10 million children have a parent who is or has been incarcerated (Center for Children with Incarcerated Parents 2001).

It also is assumed that children have a safe and secure place to live and that a child is better off at home than on the streets. In some cases, these assumptions may not be valid, particularly for children who are at highest risk for offending. For example, homicide at home is among the top five causes of death for children (Dawson and Langan 1994).

Finally, it is assumed that adolescents will not change their delinquent activities in ways that accommodate a curfew. On the contrary, delinquents may shift their activities to times of day when the curfew is not in effect. They might also relocate their delinquent activities to nearby towns or areas that do not have a curfew. Temporal or geographic displacement of delinquent behavior could mean that the net effect of curfews on total crime is negligible.

These observations suggest that variations in family structure and in patterns of offending behavior need to be considered in understanding the impact of curfew enforcement efforts and that on occasion there may be unintended consequences of curfew laws that are injurious to juveniles.

Having briefly reviewed the history of curfew laws and discussed the rationale behind their use as a crime control measure, we can ask the following questions regarding curfew effectiveness. Do curfews reduce crime? Do they reduce criminal victimization? Do they facilitate discovery of criminal activity? Is there temporal or geographic displacement that mitigates the impact of curfews?

In addition to questions of effectiveness, we can identify another set of policy questions to be addressed through research. These questions include, What does the public think about curfew laws? Specifically, how do adolescents, who are the targets of curfew laws, view them? What do curfew laws cost to enforce? What are the characteristics of curfew violators? What types of families do they come from? What is their criminal history? Finally, is there any evidence of discriminatory enforcement against certain segments of society, such as racial or ethnic groups? It is to these questions that we now turn and examine the empirical evidence.

### *Curfews and crime prevention*

Perceived effectiveness of curfews as a crime prevention measure leads to strong support for these laws. In a New Orleans survey, 81 percent of parents and 76 percent of teenagers agreed or strongly agreed that a curfew helped reduce juvenile delinquency in their city (Reynolds, Thayer, and Reuffle 1996). Perceived efficacy also is a major consideration of public officials in deciding to enact curfew laws and of judges in determining their constitutionality. For example, 88 percent of mayors in cities with curfew laws believe that enforcement of these laws makes the streets safer (U.S. Conference of Mayors 1997).

Some claims for the efficacy of curfew laws border on incredible. The police chief in Monrovia, California, maintained that a curfew law reduced juvenile crime

by 31 percent to 94 percent across various crime categories (CNN 1998). Such extravagant assertions are easy targets for critics, who launch counterclaims that seem equally incredible. In response to the claims of the Monrovia police chief, the Justice Policy Institute (1999) argued that youth crime actually increased by 53 percent during the school year, when a curfew was in force, and dropped by 12 percent during the summer, when the curfew was not in force. What is often missing from these debates is solid empirical evidence, facts that meet social scientific standards of inquiry. There are only a handful of studies on the impact of curfew laws, and many of them are fairly recent. We now examine these studies, considering separately the impact of curfews on juvenile crime and juvenile victimizations.

## Systematic Review Method

### *Methodology of review*

This article reports preliminary results of a systematic review of research conducted for the Campbell Collaboration Crime and Justice group. The purpose of the review is to assess the impact of juvenile curfews on crime. Studies with the following characteristics are included in the review: (1) the study investigates the effects of a curfew statute that restricts the presence of juveniles on the street during certain hours (daytime or nighttime); (2) the study includes measures of public safety, criminal offense behavior, or victimization as outcome variables; and (3) the study makes or allows for statistical comparisons of outcome variables before and after curfew implementation. Published and unpublished works are eligible for inclusion in the review. The following databases were searched for eligible studies: Criminal Justice Periodicals Index, Psychological Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Criminal Justice Abstracts, National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Educational Resource Information Clearinghouse, and Dissertation Abstracts. In addition, the Internet was searched using the Google search engine. Keywords for all the searches were “juvenile” and “curfew.” These electronic search activities, while essential, are not necessarily sufficient to yield an exhaustive search of empirical research on curfews. Additional search methods to be added include writing to researchers and hand searches of research journals.

### *Findings regarding impact on offense behavior*

Ten empirical studies of juvenile curfews were identified. Since all these studies met the criteria for inclusion, none were excluded from the review. Characteristics of these studies, as well as their overall findings, are displayed in Table 1. In general, the studies do not involve strong research designs. None of the studies used randomization; all of the studies were quasi-experimental in design, predominately comparing before and after measures in curfew areas without control or comparison groups.

TABLE 1  
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF JUVENILE CURFEWS

Author	Year	Location	Unit of Analysis	Time Period	Data Source	Design	Primary Analytic Method	Outcome	Curfew Type	Relations Examined	None	Negative Effects	Positive Effects
Adams	2002	Texas	4 cities and comparison areas	1987-1995	State arrest records	Time-series, nonequivalent control groups	Least-squares regression	11 crimes	Day Night Noncurfew hours	18 38 20	16 31 16	0 4 1	2 2 3
Fritch, Caeti, and Taylor	1999	Dallas	5 target and comparison areas	1995-1997	Police offense and gang records	Pre-post comparison, nonequivalent control groups	Difference in means	13 crimes	Enhanced Regular	17 17	10 13	5 3	2 1
Levy	1988	United States	47 states	1975-1984	Fatal accident reporting system	Pooled cross section	Multivariate regression	2 auto crashes	Night driving	2	0	0	2
Males	2000	Vernon, CT	City and comparison areas	1990-1998	Police and Uniform Crime Reports arrest records	Multiple pre-post comparisons, nonequivalent control group	Percentage change	1 crime	Night	1	0	1	0
Males and Macallair	1999	California	State and 12 counties	1978-1997	State arrest records	Pre-post comparison	Correlation	6 crimes	Night	Statewide: 6 12 counties: 72	5 62	0 2	1 8

Mazerolle, 1999 Brown, and Connover	Cincinnati	Areas surrounding 15 schools and 8 hangouts	1997-1998	Police call for service records	Pre-post comparison	Percentage change	2 crimes	Day	School: 30 Hangout: 16	8 4	11 10	11 2
McDowell, 2000 Loftin, and Wiersema	United States	52 counties and 12 city/ counties	1985-1996	Uniform Crime Reports arrest and National Center for Health Statistics homicide records	Pooled cross section, time series	Least- squares regression	12 crimes	Night	County: 30 City/ county: 30	27 27	3 1	0 2
							1 victim (homi- cide)	Night	County: 1 City/ county: 1	1 1	0 0	0 0
Preusser et al.	1984 United States	4 states	1976-1980	Police records	Nonequivalent control group, time series	Percentage difference	3 auto crashes	Night driving	15	4	11	0
Reynolds, 2000 Seydlitz, and Jenkins	New Orleans	City	1993-1995	Police arrest and victim- ization records	Time series	Least- squares regression	1 crime	Night	2	2	0	0
							4 victims	Noncurfew hours	2	2	0	2
								Night	8	5	1	0
								Noncurfew hours	8	5	1	0
Sutphen and Ford	2001 Unnamed city	City	1992-1998	Police arrest records	Pre-post comparison	Difference in means	17 crimes	Night	17	17	0	0



Only a few studies used a series of measurements before and after curfew implementation, which potentially improves the chances of detecting change, especially change that is short lived, and potentially allows temporary or permanent change and abrupt or gradual change to be identified in the analyses. Although multiple locations often were involved in the research, all of the locations usually were subject to a curfew. Nonequivalent control groups not subject to curfew laws were used infrequently, so in most cases, it was not possible to distinguish the effects of curfew implementation from the effects of all other possible influences on juvenile crime. Multiple outcome variables often were used, allowing for investigation of restricted effects. Finally, all the studies relied on administrative data, such as arrest records, to measure changes in juvenile crime. These records may have been subject to reporting and detection biases that masked actual changes in criminal activity. Indeed, if curfews are efficient at uncovering criminal behavior, one might expect the arrest rate for some offenses to increase after curfew implementation. Moreover, it often was not possible to isolate offenses committed during curfew hours. By measuring changes in total juvenile crime, the impact of curfew laws may have been diluted.

A formal meta-analysis of the data was not conducted, since the data were so diverse and of uncertain quality. Nonetheless, the studies show mixed results, usually reporting a combination of no change in crime, a decrease in crime, and an increase in crime after curfew implementation. By and large, however, the research fails to demonstrate that curfews produce a decrease in juvenile crime. If one tallies all the relations between curfew laws and crime examined in these studies, researchers report no significant change in crime rates in roughly three out of four instances. When significant changes in crime rates are observed, about half the studies show increases while the other half show decreases.<sup>1</sup> The findings of one study, however, could be interpreted as suggesting that curfews, when combined with aggressive police patrol focused on juvenile gangs, can have an impact on crime. Also, two studies on driving curfews suggest that traffic fatalities may be reduced. Thus, it is possible to draw on a single study or several studies to show that curfews work. However, a more comprehensive review of the research indicates that curfews generally do not produce statistically significant changes in crime and that when such changes are observed, they are just as likely as not to be in the direction opposite that predicted by curfew theory.

The first study, by Males and Macallair (1999), to report a lack of effect was conducted in California. On a statewide basis, only one of six correlations between annual differences in arrests rates (for misdemeanors) and rates of curfew enforcement was statistically significant, the relation being substantial and positive.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of juvenile crime rates as a ratio to comparable adult crime rates produced similar results. Analyses also were conducted at the county level for the twelve largest counties in the state. The analyses revealed that in only one county was curfew enforcement negatively correlated with juvenile crime, specifically for juvenile homicide.<sup>3</sup> Again, an analysis of the ratio of juvenile crime rates to adult crime rates produced similar results. Specific comparisons between counties with high and low levels of curfew enforcement did not reveal any systematic differences.

Another study by Mazerolle, Brown, and Conover (1999) examined the impact of a daytime curfew in Cincinnati. The analysis involved comparisons made a year before and a year after curfew implementation and focused on the area contained within a 1,000-foot radius of fifteen public schools and eight juvenile hangouts. Five categories of police calls for service involving public order offenses by juveniles (e.g., disorderly conduct, noise, fireworks, etc.) and five arrest categories that covered a range of offenses (i.e., both felonies and misdemeanors) were studied. In addition, school statistics, pertaining to items such as enrollments, suspensions, and dropouts, were examined.

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*[T]here is some scant evidence to suggest that short-term, highly focused, and geographically limited curfew enforcement can reduce juvenile crime.*

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The analyses showed that for areas surrounding the schools, police calls for service went down in nine instances and up in six instances. Regarding juvenile arrests, the number decreased in six instances and increased in nine instances. For areas surrounding the hangouts, calls for service went down in five instances and up in two instances, and there was no change in one instance. The same results were obtained when juvenile arrests were examined. Interestingly, school attendance rates, which were used as a reverse indicator of truancy, went down in twelve instances, meaning truancy increased, and up in five instances. Results of tests of significance are not reported, so it is not known if some or all of the observed differences can be attributed to random error.

The finding that truancy increased in twelve out of seventeen schools is significant because it shows that a major goal of the daytime curfew law, which was to increase school attendance, was not achieved. The finding that police calls for service decreased in two-thirds of the schools areas (yet increased in one-third of areas) can be seen as supporting the effectiveness of curfews to a limited extent. However, opposite findings were reported for juvenile arrests, going down in one-third of areas and up in two-thirds of areas. An argument for the effectiveness of curfews with regard to areas surrounding juvenile hangouts could be made, although given an increase in truancy, it is not clear whether juveniles changed their behavior by hanging out in other locations.

McDowell, Loftin, and Wiersema (2000) investigated the impact of curfew laws among fifty-seven large American cities. During the study period, twenty-eight cit-

ies passed new curfew laws and fourteen implemented revised curfew statutes.<sup>4</sup> The analysis focused on ten crime categories,<sup>5</sup> and the design used a pooled cross section, so the model estimated the average impact on crime rates across all cities. Two sets of time-series analyses were conducted, the first using a binary indicator to represent the year of curfew implementation or revision, and another using number of curfew violations as an indicator of enforcement.<sup>6</sup> Because the curfew laws applied to cities and the arrest statistics applied to counties, a second set of analyses were conducted on twelve cities/counties to address the problem of ecological inference.

The analyses revealed that implementation of new curfew laws did not have a statistically significant impact on any of the crime categories examined. With regard to revised curfew laws, statutory changes had a statistically significant impact on only three crime categories: burglary, larceny, and simple assault. In each case, the effect was in the expected direction, or negative, and the average reduction in crime rates was estimated to be 14 percent. Slightly different results were obtained for the analysis of the twelve city/counties. Passage of a new curfew law showed a statistically significant increase in homicide, and curfew law revision showed a statistically significant decrease in larceny.

Analyses of the impact of curfew enforcement arrests on arrests for other crimes showed no statistically significant relations for the fifty-two county analyses and a statistically significant increase in simple assault for the twelve city/county analyses.

Sutphen and Ford (2001) examined the impact of a curfew law in an unnamed city. Juvenile arrest statistics were examined for three years before and after curfew implementation. Visual inspection of graphic displays indicated that the curfew did not have an effect on arrest rates, while a comparison of mean arrest rates before and after curfew implementation showed that the overall arrest rate had dropped a bit. When specific crime categories were examined, it was found that arrest rates for violent crimes and felonies increased slightly, while rates for property crimes decreased slightly. None of the observed differences were statistically significant.

Adams (2002) investigated the impact of curfew laws on juvenile crime in four Texas cities: Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. Two of the cities, San Antonio and Houston, had both day and night curfews.

The results for night curfews indicated that out of thirty-eight relations between curfew implementation and crime rates, four showed a significant decrease in crime, two showed a significant increase in crime, and thirty-two showed no significant change. For cities with day curfews, eighteen relations between curfew implementation and crime rates were investigated. None showed a significant decrease in crime, two showed a significant increase in crime, and sixteen showed no significant change. Finally, among the twenty relations between crime during noncurfew hours and curfew implementation, one showed a significant decrease, three showed a significant increase, and six showed no significant change.

Reynolds, Seydlitz, and Jenkins (2000) investigated the curfew law in New Orleans, which they described as "the most restrictive curfew law in the United States." They examined police arrest and victim reports spanning a one-year period

before and after implementation of the curfew law.<sup>7</sup> With regard to juvenile arrests, time-series analyses indicated that there were no significant effects of curfew implementation and curfew enforcement on crime during both curfew and noncurfew hours.

A study of the impact of a gang suppression program on juvenile crime by Fritch, Caeti, and Taylor (1999) suggests that curfew laws may have an impact on crime under some circumstances. The suppression program consisted of saturation patrol combined with aggressive enforcement of curfew and truancy laws. Comparisons before and after implementation of the program were made in five target areas that were subject to the program and in five comparison areas that were not. It should be noted that both target and comparison areas were subject to a curfew law, so the intervention involved enhanced curfew enforcement in target areas.

The analyses revealed a statistically significant drop overall in gang-related violence for both target (57 percent) and comparison (37 percent) areas. In other analyses, three of the target areas showed a statistically significant decrease (69 percent overall) as compared to two of the comparison areas (47 percent).

For Uniform Crime Reports offenses, statistically significant declines in criminal mischief and weapons offenses were observed in the target areas (15 percent and 29 percent, respectively), coupled with statistically significant increases in robbery and auto theft (24 percent and 15 percent, respectively). In comparison areas, there was a statistically significant drop in criminal mischief (13 percent) and an increase in thefts (11 percent).

Overall, the findings of this study are mixed and do not make a strong case for the effectiveness of curfew laws. Substantial drops in gang-related violence, which sometimes are quite large, are reported for some target areas. However, declines also occurred in some nontarget areas, albeit of lesser magnitude. It may be that there was a contamination of treatment such that the nontarget areas showing declines were subject to some aspects of the intervention. Changes in measurement also may be at work since police must decide whether a given act of violence is gang related or not. Finally, there may be an interaction effect, such that the impact of a curfew is enhanced when combined with other crime control strategies. Nonetheless, the findings could be viewed as sufficiently suggestive that future research should investigate the efficacy of short-term, highly focused curfew enforcement efforts, particularly when curfews are used as part of a multifaceted crime control effort.

Finally, Preusser and colleagues (1984) investigated the impact of curfew laws on automobile crashes. Using a nonequivalent control group design, they concluded that vehicle crashes and injuries were lower in three states with driving curfew laws as compared to nearby states without such laws. In one state, where an interrupted time series design was possible, implementation of a curfew law did not result in a significant decrease in vehicle crashes or injuries. Subsequently, Levy (1988) investigated the impact of driving curfew laws on teenage traffic fatalities in forty-seven states from 1975 to 1984. The findings suggest that states with curfew laws have fewer fatalities. Although these studies indicate that nighttime

driving restrictions for teenagers increase highway safety, the results are dated and may not apply to current driving conditions and laws. Also, the studies did not include measures of enforcement and could not fully resolve issues of spuriousness and temporal order.

### *Findings regarding impact on criminal victimization*

Reducing juvenile victimization is an important justification for curfew laws. Advocates of curfew laws claim that they protect potential young victims by keeping them off the street, and the pool of prospective predators includes persons not covered by the curfew law. Several of the studies in the review address this issue.

In the New Orleans study, Reynolds, Seydlitz, and Jenkins (2000) examined the impact of a curfew on both violent and property victimization using official police reports. The findings point to a drop in all (juvenile and adult) violent victimizations. The impact, however, was abrupt and temporary. By the end of the first year of curfew enforcement, the number of victimizations returned to its original level. In contrast, the curfew led to an abrupt and permanent increase in all property victimizations and an abrupt and temporary increase in juvenile property victimization. Thus, property victimization increased after curfew implementation.

Reynolds, Seydlitz, and Jenkins (2000) also investigated changes in victimizations during noncurfew hours. They found that juvenile violent victimizations decreased, but the change was abrupt and temporary. In contrast, all violent and all property victimizations increased. In both cases, the increase was gradual and permanent.

McDowell, Loftin, and Wiersema (2000) examined juvenile homicide victimizations using health statistics. Their analyses indicate that neither implementation nor revision of a curfew law had a statistically significant impact on juvenile homicide victimization.

The research by Reynolds, Seydlitz, and Jenkins (2000) highlights the importance of examining various types of impacts, such as gradual or permanent, or temporary or abrupt. In the short run (i.e., weeks or months), curfews could bring about substantial drops in crime that fade over the longer term (i.e., years) as enforcement or compliance wanes or as criminal behavior adapts to a new set of environmental conditions. Their findings show that a pattern of abrupt, temporary change characterizes the impact of curfews on violent victimizations in New Orleans, which is unsurprising given that the pattern is characteristic of many police crackdowns (Sherman 1990). Changes in time perspective can yield very different pictures of curfew effectiveness, and it is important that research investigate such differences.

### *Counterintuitive findings*

Many studies report a statistically significant increase in some types of crimes after curfew implementation. Indeed, among studies that report significant changes in crime rates, increases are almost as common as decreases. These find-

ings are counterintuitive since they are in a direction opposite of that predicted by theories of curfew effectiveness. There are several possible explanations for these findings.

First, it is possible that observed increases in crime rates are the result of random error. Although tests of statistical significance are intended to address this situation, they only reduce the possibility of such error (generally to a probability level of .05) but do not eliminate it. If enough tests of statistical significance were done, we would expect in five cases out of one hundred (i.e., .05 confidence level) to conclude erroneously that there is a statistically significant change when in fact there is none. Since random error is equally likely to have a positive or negative sign, situations in which the error is positive could lead us to conclude erroneously that the curfew led to an increase in the crime rate.

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*There is evidence that as many as one-third of curfew violators taken into custody have to be sheltered for the night because no parent or adult guardian is available to pick up the child. These children and their families probably are at risk for a wide variety of problems.*

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A second possibility is spuriousness, meaning that some third factor may be positively related to the presence of a curfew and to increasing crime rates. For example, an increase in drug use or drug sales could bring about implementation of a curfew and could also lead to an increase in crime rates. Similarly, curfew laws may be part of a get-tough attitude toward juvenile crime that leads to stricter enforcement of many laws, including curfew laws. In this scenario, marginal crimes that were overlooked or treated with leniency in the past become more likely to result in arrest.

A third possibility is that curfew laws are used by police as an investigation tool that leads to the discovery of additional crime. In this scenario, curfew laws would lead to an increase in arrests for crimes that do not depend heavily on victim reporting and rely instead on proactive police work. For example, in the process of being stopped for a curfew violation, illegal drugs may fall out of a juvenile's pockets as he or she searches for identification. However, research findings discussed in the next

section dealing with the efficiency of curfews at detecting criminal behavior indicate that curfew violations rarely lead to arrest, thus diminishing the credibility of this particular explanation.

A fourth possibility is that curfew laws change the behavior of juveniles in ways that make it more likely that they will commit crimes. For example, curfew violators may gravitate more toward out-of-the-way places as a way of avoiding detection, and such environments may increase the chances of offending (e.g., auto theft, burglary) owing to perceptions of reduced guardianship and surveillance.

Future research should explore possible explanations for increases in crime rates after curfew implementation when these increases are observed. Such inquiries, which focus attention on possible negative or harmful consequences of curfew, will lead to a more complete picture of curfew effects.

## Other Issues

In addition to questions of effectiveness at crime prevention, researchers have investigated other issues regarding curfew operations. Some of these issues, such as efficiency at detecting criminal activity and displacement of crime, are related to questions of effectiveness. Other questions, such as public opinion, costs of enforcement, and characteristics of curfew violators, deal with policy issues that more broadly bear on the attractiveness of curfew laws as a crime prevention strategy. These issues are now examined, drawing on the ten studies previously reviewed as well as a few other studies.

### *Efficiency at detecting criminal activity*

Besides keeping potential offenders and victims off the streets, curfew laws provide justification for stopping and questioning juveniles about their activities. Thus, law enforcement officials tend to support curfew laws because they are viewed as an investigatory tool that potentially allows police officers to identify more criminal activity.

A few studies have examined the number and types of criminal arrests incident to curfew violations. Males (2000) reported that 410 curfew stops in Vernon, Connecticut, produced 10 arrests. Seven of the arrests were for curfew violations, and only 3 were for other crimes. Adams (2002) reported that in Dallas, Texas, a weekend curfew sweep involving 98 curfew detentions yielded 8 arrests. Finally, Sutphen and Ford (2001) reported that 377 curfew violations led to 65 additional charges, the most frequent being intoxication and eluding police and the least frequent being running away and possession of contraband.

In general, the available research indicates that curfew laws are not an efficient mechanism for uncovering criminal behavior. Furthermore, most of the criminal activity that is uncovered by curfew enforcement consists of minor offenses or curfew-related infractions. Given the small number of studies involved, however,



these conclusions should be considered open to reconsideration based on future research, which should continue to explore this issue.

### *Displacement of crime*

The issue of displacement, although widely recognized, seldom has been investigated in the context of curfew research. Hunt and Weiner (1977) conducted what is probably the earliest published empirical study of curfew laws. The study, which was conducted in Detroit, examined the percentage distribution of offenses by time of day across three offense categories, which were total Uniform Crime Reports part 1 offenses, robbery, and burglary.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that the design of the study is intended to address specifically the issue of time displacement, not overall reductions in juvenile crime.<sup>9</sup>

The results, which were based on a visual inspection of graphic displays, indicated that there was relatively less crime during the curfew hours and relatively more crime during the afternoon hours. Specifically, offenses committed from 2 P.M. to 4 P.M. went from 13 percent of total crime during the comparison period to 22 percent during the curfew period.

Adams (2002) investigated the possibility of geographic displacement of juvenile crime from Dallas to Fort Worth after Dallas implemented a juvenile curfew law. Although the distance involved is about thirty miles, a major highway connects the cities. Furthermore, the Fort Wayne Police Department urged implementation of a curfew, arguing in part that juvenile crime was being displaced from Dallas. The analyses, which looked at eleven types of crimes, showed that there was no statistically significant increase in juvenile crime in Fort Worth after Dallas implemented its curfew law.

On the basis of available research, which is limited, it appears that curfew laws can lead to displacement. One study found that curfews lead to temporal displacement, although another did not find evidence to support geographic displacement. Future curfew research should investigate displacement effects to build a more substantial body of knowledge about this phenomenon. Displacement can be particularly important in weighing the full set of costs and benefits that attach to curfew laws.

### *Public opinion*

With regard to nationwide public opinion, roughly even proportions of the general public (51 percent) and of parents (54 percent) strongly endorse the idea of a curfew, indicating that a curfew would be “very effective” in helping children. When those who view curfews as “somewhat effective” are included, the level of support rises to 81 percent and 84 percent, respectively (Public Agenda 1997).

Questions posed to a nationwide audience often are hypothetical for some respondents because they have limited experience with curfews. It may also be that they support curfews in other places but not in their hometown. Thus, opinions



may differ in areas that actually have curfews because people will have direct experience with how curfews operate and with circumstances precipitating the implementation or reinvigorated enforcement of curfews.

Reynolds, Thayer, and Reufle (1996) conducted a citywide telephone survey in New Orleans about the curfew. The survey included 317 parents and 283 teens between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, with roughly even numbers of respondents across race (African American, white) and gender. Support for the curfew was overwhelming. When asked to respond to the statement that a curfew is a good idea for their city, 87 percent of parents strongly agreed. Similarly high levels of support for curfew laws have been found in surveys conducted in other cities. For example, it has been reported that 92 percent of respondents in Cincinnati and 77 percent of respondents in Washington, D.C., support their juvenile curfew (Crowell 1996).

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*Future research should explore possible explanations for increases in crime rates after curfew implementation when these increases are observed. Such inquiries, which focus attention on possible negative or harmful consequences of curfew, will lead to a more complete picture of curfew effects.*

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Among teenagers, however, support for curfews is not nearly as strong. Nationwide, 27 percent of teenage respondents see curfews as "very effective," and 34 percent see them as "somewhat effective." Taken together, however, a majority (61 percent) of teenagers support curfews on the grounds that they help children. In New Orleans, 85 percent of teens agreed (strongly or somewhat) that a curfew is a good idea. Interestingly, 54 percent of teens also agreed that a curfew is unfair. Focus groups with eighty teenagers helped to inform this seeming inconsistency (Reynolds et al. 1999). Although teenagers were concerned about unfair enforcement, they strongly supported the curfew because they thought it would make their neighborhood safer. It is worth noting that only half of the youth in the focus groups said that they complied with the curfew law.

Opinion polls show that curfew laws enjoy widespread support. The basis for this support stems from a fear of crime and a belief that curfews are an effective

crime control mechanism. Criminal justice administrators can expect to enjoy broad political support if they propose a curfew law. Indeed, levels of support are so high among the public that there may be political liability in failing to support a curfew. Citizens might perceive this stance as signaling a lack of concern or complacency about crime problems. Even those at whom curfews are directed, teenagers, support curfew laws, although they harbor reservations about fairness of enforcement. While teens are concerned that they might be subject to unfair curfew enforcement, it is a trade-off they seem to be willing to make based on fear of crime and perceived effectiveness of curfews. At this time, we do not know if minorities differ in their views of curfew laws, nor do we know the opinions of those who live in areas with aggressive curfew enforcement.

### *Costs of enforcement*

There is scant information on the cost of curfew enforcement programs. While the total cost of a curfew will be influenced by a variety of administrative and organizational factors (e.g., police salary structure, use of overtime, taking juveniles into custody, etc.), such information needs to be collected so that work can begin on cost-benefit, cost-effectiveness, and other types of financial analyses. Reynolds, Seydlitz, and Jenkins (2000) reported, "During the first year of the curfew law the department spent in excess of \$600,000 for curfew enforcement" (p. 221). They also noted, "During the first year of the curfew law 3,572 youth were arrested for curfew violations (p. 13). Adams (2002) observed a weekend curfew enforcement initiative in Dallas. The initiative involved thirty-six officers in two-officer patrol units spread over six patrol districts. A centralized processing unit was set up so that officers could maximize time spent in the field. During the two days, ninety-four juveniles were detained. The cost for the initiative, which involved overtime pay, was \$10,500.

Clearly, substantial sums of money are being expended on curfew enforcement. The question is whether this money is well spent in terms of the costs and benefits of curfew enforcement as well as in relation to other programs that are intended to produce similar results. More sophisticated economic analyses that develop a fuller picture of the financial aspects of curfew enforcement are needed.

### *Characteristics of violators*

Characteristics of curfew violators, with regard to items such as age, race, gender, family structure, and criminal history, are important for understanding the operation of curfews. Personal characteristics of curfew violators, such as race, are relevant to issues of perceived fairness and justice. Schiraldi (1999), for one, charged that curfew enforcement is susceptible to racial discrimination. He pointed out that in New Orleans, African Americans are arrested for curfew violations at a rate nineteen times greater than that of whites. He also noted that San Francisco essentially stopped curfew enforcement in response to an incident in

which an African American youth was arrested while nearby white youth of similar age were not. In contrast, Males and Macallair (1999) described curfew enforcement in California as evenly distributed over races, although there are four counties that serve as important exceptions.

This issue of racial discrimination is complicated given that some racial or ethnic groups may be more likely to violate curfew laws. The issue becomes more complex when we recognize that some racial or ethnic groups are more likely to live in high-crime areas that are subject to more aggressive curfew enforcement. Empirical research addressing these issues is sparse.

A study in Charlotte, North Carolina, reported that African Americans were more likely to be cited for curfew violations. However, within the community, African American youth also were disproportionately involved in arrests (Hirschel, Dean, and Dumond 2001). Sutphen and Ford (2001) examined police records generated during the first year of curfew enforcement. Preliminary analyses indicated that African American children and parents were more likely to be cited for curfew violations. Further analyses indicated that a higher curfew citation rate for African American children was primarily a function of increased curfew enforcement in low-income, high-crime areas. However, African American parents were cited at a higher rate than other parents, taking into account the seriousness of the youth's curfew violation. Thus, the available research suggests a pattern of disproportionate curfew enforcement against minorities, although the relation often can be explained by factors other than race. Additional research is needed on the issue of the role that race or ethnicity plays in curfew enforcement.

Little information is available on other characteristics of curfew violators. With regard to criminal history, Lersch and Sellers (2000) found in Largo, Florida, that self-identified curfew violators reported higher levels of involvement in criminal activity across eighteen categories of self-reported offense behavior. They also were more likely to report criminal victimization. Among curfew violators, nearly half (49 percent) reported multiple curfew violations. Adams (2002) found that a minority (29 percent) of curfew violators in Dallas had a prior arrest record. As a group, however, the twenty-seven youth with a police record accounted for forty-nine arrests and ninety-one runaways, field interrogations, and city citations. These findings suggest that some curfew violators show a sustained pattern of involvement with the criminal justice system. Males (2000) reported that roughly 10 percent of curfew violators are repeat violators having three or more stops.

Finally, Adams (2002) reported that for roughly 30 percent of the curfew violators picked up in a weekend sweep in Dallas, police could not arrange for a parent to come and pick up the child. Overnight accommodations had to be found for these children, which was problematic because some social service agencies would not deal with juvenile offenders. This finding rebuts to some degree the assumption that juveniles on the streets who are at risk for delinquency have parents or guardians who are interested in or available for responsible parenting. It also highlights some of the cost and logistical challenges that police face when taking large numbers of juveniles into custody.

## Summary and Conclusions

Curfews are an old practice that has become exceedingly popular in modern times. As a device for controlling juvenile crime, most large cities have a curfew law on the books. Arguably, curfews reduce juvenile offending and victimization by keeping children off the streets. They also may encourage parental responsibility and family cohesiveness, which may bring secondary benefits in areas such as school performance. In principle, curfews can be used to promote increased crime prevention, improved child welfare, and more effective law enforcement, all at modest cost to taxpayers.

Public opinion shows overwhelming support for curfews, and even teenagers, who are subject to enforcement, favor curfew restrictions. The primary basis for support is the conviction that curfews reduce crime and make the streets safer. However, research fails to support this hypothesis.

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*The seduction of commonsense reasoning  
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Although the number of studies on curfew effectiveness is modest, as a group, the studies cover a wide range of characteristics. They include both small- and large-scale investigations, micro and macro units of analysis, short and long time periods, crime and noncrime outcome variables, and basic and sophisticated methods of analysis. Overall, the weight of the scientific evidence, based on ten studies with weak to moderately rigorous designs, fails to support the argument that curfews reduce crime and criminal victimization. Studies consistently report no change in crime in relation to curfews. When changes in crime are observed, they are almost equally likely to be increases in crime as opposed to decreases. Furthermore, curfew enforcement rarely leads to discovery of serious criminal behavior precipitating arrest. For the most part, curfew violators tend to be arrested for curfew-related offenses, such as lying about one's age, and it could be argued that these arrests needlessly add to the criminal histories of some juveniles. There is some evidence, however, to suggest that driving curfews, which may reduce the rate of teenage licensure by making driving less attractive, may reduce automobile crashes and injuries. In the next stage of this review, a more comprehensive search

for research on curfew effectiveness will be conducted so as to identify the contours of existing knowledge more definitively. In addition, use of meta-analysis techniques will be explored in an attempt to summarize the set of research findings with more precision and greater methodological rigor. Finally, given the lack of highly rigorous research designs in curfew research, the question of whether stronger designs, such as experiments, are desirable will be addressed.

Ardent supporters of curfew laws, including numerous police administrators and perhaps much of the general public, likely will resist the conclusion that curfews fail to reduce juvenile crime. The seduction of commonsense reasoning sometimes is too strong to be swayed by scientific evidence, which by nature is always open to reconsideration.

In this regard, three observations come to mind. First, as noted previously, the existing studies are fairly diverse in terms of research design, and none provides convincing evidence for the effectiveness of curfews. Thus, it is questionable whether use of more rigorous designs in future research will yield different results. Second, existing studies can be faulted on a variety of grounds, including measurement and analytic technique, so chances are that shortcomings in research design alone are not responsible for our inability to detect an effect, assuming that one exists. Third, prior research asks generally whether curfews are effective, and given the lack of conclusive evidence in the affirmative, future research might better concentrate on the conditions or circumstances under which curfews might be effective. This approach is consistent with the view of policy makers and law enforcement professionals for whom the issue will be that of how to make curfews effective rather than eliminating them. In this regard, two ideas come to mind.

First, there is some scant evidence to suggest that short-term, highly focused, and geographically limited curfew enforcement can reduce juvenile crime. This finding is consistent with research on police crackdowns and hot spots, and more study is needed on the role that curfews can play in such enforcement strategies. Issues of crime displacement, temporal patterns of change, and counterintuitive increases in crime come to the fore with this strategy, and these issues should be investigated as vigorously as possible in the context of various curfew enforcement strategies. Nonetheless, one can think about deploying curfews for spots that become too hot in an attempt to bring the situation under control. In this manner, contemporary use of curfews harkens back to their original function, which was control of temporary civil disorder.

Another strategy is to emphasize the social welfare aspects of juvenile curfews, meaning that curfews can be used to identify children and families who can benefit from additional social services. There is evidence that as many as one-third of curfew violators taken into custody have to be sheltered for the night because no parent or adult guardian is available to pick up the child. These children and their families probably are at risk for a wide variety of problems. The issues that need to be investigated by research include whether curfews are a proper, desirable, and efficient way of identifying such children and families in light of other alternatives that are available.

A variety of issues, secondary to the general question of effectiveness at reducing crime, need considerably more attention by researchers. The issues include costs of curfew enforcement, particularly in relation to its various configurations, and characteristics of curfew violators, particularly in relation to race or ethnicity, criminal history, and family situation. The information is needed to weigh the full set of costs and benefits of curfew enforcement, to address fundamental assumptions regarding curfew effectiveness, and to reassure disenfranchised segments of society that police do work in their best interests. Opportunities for curfew research abound throughout the country, and potential investigators need not worry that the pervasiveness of curfews will fade into near-term oblivion. As the scientific record accumulates, we will be in a better position to make informed policy decisions regarding juvenile curfews.

## Notes

1. In the aggregate, 75 percent of relations tested in the studies reviewed fail to reject the null hypothesis, 14 percent reject the null hypothesis in favor of the hypothesis that curfews decrease crime, and 11 percent reject the null hypothesis in favor of the hypothesis that curfews increase crime. It should be recognized that this simple tally has several shortcomings: (1) it gives all hypothesis tests equality, giving them the same weight; (2) it does not take into account that studies disproportionately contribute to the tally based on the number of hypothesis tests involved; and (3) it does not take into account the fact that multiple hypothesis tests with the same data set are not independent.
2. The six categories are felonies, homicide, violent crime, property crime, misdemeanor, and drug offense. In addition, a summary variable of all crimes was included in the analysis. The correlation was .54 for misdemeanors. A significant correlation (.47) also was observed for an all crimes variable. Since the all crimes category includes misdemeanors, it is likely that this correlation is an artifact of the correlation for misdemeanors and is not discussed here.
3. A statistically significant correlation for an all crimes variable also was reported. See note 2.
4. Five cities were omitted from the analysis of arrest statistics as a result of missing data.
5. The categories are homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, simple assault, vandalism, and weapons offense.
6. The model also included total county population, infant mortality ratio, cocaine arrest rate, and real per capita personal income as covariates.
7. The curfew was enacted on 1 June 1994.
8. The curfew period investigated was August 1976, the month in which curfew enforcement was said to be highest, and comparisons were made to the average number of offenses in August during four preceding years. Offenses were averaged over 1971, 1973, 1974, and 1975. Data for 1972 were not available.
9. Details provided in a note indicate that there were considerably more offenses during the curfew when compared to past years. The data indicate that juvenile crime increased 15 percent for all Uniform Crime Reports part 1 offenses, by 24 percent for robbery offenses, and by 19 percent for burglary offenses compared to the base period.

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