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. 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.

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.

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