

# Home by 11: The Effect of Juvenile Curfews on the Health of Teenagers

## Introduction

The leading cause of death for teenagers between the ages of 12 and 19 years is unintentional injury. When this category is further broken down, it is seen that 73% of these fatal unintentional injuries are motor vehicle accidents (Miniño, 2010). Furthermore, 40% of fatal crashes experienced by 16 and 17 year olds occur between the hours of 9 PM and 6 AM (Williams & Preusser, 1997). Juvenile curfew laws make it illegal for minors to be in public spaces during specific hours of the night. Most commonly, these hours fall within the range of 9 PM and 6 AM. Thus, the high rate of fatal crashes due to nighttime driving by inexperienced drivers aims to be decreased by prohibiting minors from driving during these hours. As an added effect, curfew laws restrict minors from being out after certain hours of the night in an effort to reduce the amount of crime committed by minors during certain hours of the night. However, there has been much controversy over the efficacy of juvenile curfew laws and the implications that they have for reducing the amount of teenage deaths due to unintentional injury.

## Background & Research Findings

### *Effects on Juvenile Crime*

Of the 48% of teenage deaths due to unintentional injury, homicide is the second highest cause of death (Miniño, 2010). Given that curfew laws reduce the amount of time that teenagers spend out of their homes, curfew laws have been marketed to have the

strong potential to limit both the rate of crimes, such as homicide both committed by and inflicted on teenagers (McDowall, Loftin, & Wiersema, 2000). It has also been proposed that curfew laws have the potential to strengthen parental control by making it easier for parents to limit the amount of time that their children are allowed to spend out of the house (McDowall et al., 2000). However, while a reduction in the rate of violent and property crimes committed by minors was shown in one study (Kline, 2010), the majority of studies that have looked into the effects of curfew laws on crime rates have found no significant reduction in crime accountable to the implementation of juvenile curfew laws (McDowall et al., 2000; Sutphen & Ford, 2001; Mascalair & Males, 1998).

Many cite a lack of proper enforcement of curfew laws as a possible explanation for why significant decreases in crime rate are not seen in correlation with the implementation of curfews (McDowall et al., 2000; Reynolds, Seydlitz, & Jenkins, 2000). This would suggest that because police are not actively enforcing the curfew, teenagers may continue to stay out of their homes to late hours of the night, possibly participating in criminal activity without even realizing that there is a curfew to be followed. In fact, numerous studies have shown that greater results, in terms of a reduction in crime rate, have been seen with curfew laws in places where there the laws are actively enforced to a greater extent (McDowall et al., 2000; Reynolds et al., 2000). It is also suggested that parental enforcement of curfew laws is necessary in order for the rules to be

effectively enforced and followed (Kline, 2010). However, it is hard to measure the degree to which parents enforce or are even aware of the statutes set forth by these laws.

#### *Effects on Motor Vehicle Accidents*

A greater level of effectiveness regarding benefits of curfew laws has been seen in respect to the ability of curfew laws to limit the amount of night driving time that minors can participate in. Locations with curfew laws in effect have experienced significantly fewer nighttime crashes in general (Shatz, Zhang, & McGrath, 1999) and have, in particular, seen significant reductions in crashes involving 16 year old drivers during curfew hours (Ferguson, Leaf, Williams, & Preusser, 1996; Preusser, Williams, Zador, & Blomberg, 1984). In fact, one study found a 23% reduction in fatal injury for 13 to 17 year olds between the hours of 9 PM and 6 AM with the enactment of a juvenile curfew law. The researchers attributed this finding to a decrease in the number of highway fatalities incurred by minors during these hours (Preusser, Zador, & Williams, 1993).

#### *Effects on Health*

As it has not been rigorously shown that curfew laws cut back crime rates, it is hard to conclude whether the laws have any effect on health of juveniles in this regard. However, it can be hypothesized that, if the laws were actually able to limit the amount of crimes committed, there would be a drop in violent crimes that would lead to less injuries and fatalities and a drop in general criminal behavior that would have led to a slew of unhealthy behaviors. Nonetheless, there have been certain instances in which the enactment of a curfew law was associated with a drop in the rate of emergency medical services requested for pediatric injury and trauma during curfew hours (Weiss, Couk, Nobile, Ernst, & Johnson, 1998; Shatz et al., 1999).

As discussed above, drops in the number of trauma cases, and specifically, fatal crashes, have also been seen to be associated with the implementation of curfew laws in

some places. In this way, curfew laws have been seen to carry the powerful effect of reducing the number of teen fatalities by unintentional injury and, more specifically, by motor vehicle crash. Thus, curfew laws do seem to be an effective method of tackling the leading cause of death amongst populations of teenagers.

While research has not been done looking into further health effects of curfew laws it would be interesting to look into whether curfew laws are able to improve parent health by limiting parental stress levels or improving family life, as children spend more time at home and less time away from their parents and families. From this perspective, curfew laws have great potential to improve health outcomes not just for teenagers, but for their families as well.

#### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Most of the current research on the effects of curfew laws finds little association between lower crime rates and curfews; however much of this research also finds that locations with greater levels of curfew enforcement experience greater drops in criminal activities. To this effect, it appears necessary to ensure that, with the implementation of curfew laws, curfews are enforced to the maximum possible extent. The greatest returns from curfews cannot be realized unless the curfews are enforced, so it follows that curfew laws should not be implemented without strong support from law enforcement, as no effect will be seen from curfews if they are not enforced.

Further, because strong drops in crime have not been seen with the implementation of juvenile curfew laws, it is not enough to rely on curfews alone as a way to significantly reduce juvenile crime rates. While homicide remains the second most significant cause of fatal unintentional injury (the leading cause of death for teenagers), the evidence surrounding the effectiveness of curfew laws does not support a

decline in violent crimes, such as homicide. In this way, curfew laws should not be relied on to reverse the trend of homicides being a major cause of death for teenagers.

However, linking what is known about curfew laws and fatal crashes and curfew laws and crime prevention, it can be hypothesized that with greater enforcement, curfew laws have the potential to have an even larger effect on lowering the number of fatal crashes that teenagers are involved in. Thus, it is recommended that, in order to most efficiently reduce the leading cause of death of teenagers, curfew laws be implemented and enforced to the maximum extent, such that teenage night driving time is significantly lowered.

In addition, one mechanism cited as a possible driving force of the positive effects of curfew laws is increased parental enforcement of juvenile curfews (Kline, 2010). To this effect, it may be beneficial to enact policy that promotes awareness of parental discipline and control over the activities of minors. Possibilities for this type of policy include community campaigns to empower parents or public service announcements that encourage the growth of parent-child relationships. These policies would seek to increase parent-child connectivity in promoting the growth of parental ability to effectively moderate the activities of their children. However, in order to better establish the details of these types of policies, as well as range of potential benefits, more research is necessary that seeks evaluation of the total effects of parental discipline and involvement in children's lives.

An additional idea for policy is the implementation of teen programs that aim to cut back on juvenile crime in an alternative manner to curfew laws. These policies may include programs for teens to pursue hobbies and interests instead of being involved in criminal activities and programs to teach teens about healthy behaviors and activities that counter criminal acts. The goal of these programs would be to directly reduce the number of violent crimes that juveniles are involved in. In this way, it would be possible to

reduce both the number of teenage fatalities due to violent crimes and to decrease the amount of unhealthy behaviors, like criminal activity, that juveniles partake in.

While juvenile curfew laws have not been seen to be highly effective at curbing the rate of juvenile crime, the implications that curfew laws present for teen driving behavior are promising. To this effect, it would be most beneficial to either adapt the enforcement of curfews, as proposed, or to adopt new policy that seeks to curb juvenile crime rates in an alternative manner.

### Links to Other Resources of Interest

- Juvenile Curfew Laws - The Basics: <http://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-charges/juvenile-curfew-laws-the-basics.html>
- Curfew - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: [http://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/reform/ch2\\_c.html](http://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/reform/ch2_c.html)
- Recommendations for Prevention and Control of Juvenile Violence: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/jvr/4.html>
- A Status Report on Youth Curfews in America's Cities: <http://www.usmayors.org/publications/curfew.htm>

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