

Light Pollution and Crime

The most prevalent reason given for nighttime lighting is to reduce crime in cities. This is generally based on the notion that more light improves visibility, and that this visibility discourages criminals. Based on before and after studies of crime statistics, there is no clear evidence that outdoor lighting reduces crime¹. Although there are anecdotal reports that “improved lighting” (i.e. improved visibility) reduces crime², there is no evidence that crime is reduced with “more or brighter lighting”³. In some cases crime was simply displaced, or the altered lighting was prompted by or caused a change in use of the streets by “...strengthening informal social control and community cohesion”⁴ and this may have affected the pattern of crime.

Anecdotal studies report that most property crime occurs during the day and violent crime is usually between persons that know each other. The public’s belief in the prevalence of random violence is not proven by the research.

There are different types of crime. Theft is more prevalent during daytime hours, violent crime occurs more often in the evening and after midnight.⁵ There was an unconfirmed report that the brightly lit City of Manila found violent crime was more prevalent after dark and the presence of police was effective at reducing nighttime crime. The city lights were not the deterrent to crime. In a lengthy Report to Congress, by the National Institute of Justice⁶ it is stated that there is no evidence that artificial lighting deters crime. It reports that most studies are poorly designed, without controls, which undermines any conclusions to the contrary. They state that: “We can have very little confidence that improved lighting prevents crime”. It further reports that lighting can assist in the crime by putting the victim on display. The feeling of safety provided by the light may have the opposite effect.

Vandalism provides an example of the opposite effect of securing lighting than is generally accepted. Studies conclude that lighted areas are more subject to vandalism and graffiti. Anecdotal evidence⁷ and more focused studies⁸ support the policy of turning lights off when security staff is not around. Apparently, vandals want to see the results of the damage and for others to see it. When lights are off, there is less gratification in vandalising an area or painting graffiti.

¹ The Influence of Street Lighting on Crime and Fear of Crime, Prevention Unit Paper No. 28, Stephen Atkins, Sohail Husain and Angele Storey, 1991, ISBN 0 86252 668 X

² Effects of Improved Street Lighting on Crime: A Systematic Review, Home Office Research Study 251, by David P. Farrington and Brandon C. Welsh, August 2002

³ The Indiana Council on Outdoor Lighting Education (ICOLE), P.O. Box 17351, Indianapolis, IN 46217

⁴ *ibid*, page 2.

⁵ www.bpap.org/bpap/research/DCA_briefing_dtd.pdf

⁶ National Institute of Justice Grant Number 96MUMU0019 (www.ncjrs.gov/works/)

⁷ “Darkened Streetlights Fail to Raise Crime Rate”, DesMoines Register, T. Alex and T. Paluch, May 6, 2004 www.dmregister.com

⁸ Effects of improved street lighting on crime: a systematic review, Home Office Research Study 251, August 2002