

**The deterrent effect of curfew enforcement:  
Operation Nightwatch in St. Louis**

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the curfew check program in St. Louis, Missouri, known as Nightwatch, to determine whether the program meets its stated goals of reducing recidivism and victimization, as well as the mechanism by which this is accomplished. The rationale behind the program is that the threat of formal controls by way of home visits and sanctions will elicit compliance with curfew and increase the perception of certainty of punishment, and that juveniles who must remain at home will have fewer opportunities for crime and victimization experiences. Perceptual deterrence and lifestyle and routine activity theories were used to test this rationale.

The research design consists of a pre test with multiple post tests. A purposive sample of 118 offenders recently referred to the juvenile court for an official charge was selected and surveys administered. The experimental group consists of juveniles who received Nightwatch visits, the comparison group consists of juveniles with comparable demographic and offense characteristics, who did not receive visits.

Results of the process evaluation reveal that the program functions well in terms of execution of home visits, but that record keeping and number of visits are inconsistent with stated procedures. The outcome evaluation revealed that between Time 1 and Time 2 the experimental group had significantly fewer self-report delinquency and victimization incidents. The comparison group had significantly more victimization experiences between these two time points. The mechanism for the reduction in delinquency appears to be opportunity rather than a change in perceptions. Thus, the juveniles apparently changed their behavior but not their perceptions of certainty of punishment. Several policy and research implications are presented.

This study should not be generalized directly to other sites, given the small sample size, high rate of attrition, and that it is limited to only one study site. Jurisdictions considering a curfew check program such as Nightwatch must carefully consider budgetary, logistic, and feasibility issues prior to considering implementation.