

Lighting & Crime

Lighting is often assumed to reduce crime without question. However, there is a growing body of evidence indicating that lights lead to no change in crime levels but may actually increase crime.

How lighting can aid crime

The majority of crime occurs either in daylight hours or beneath artificial lights. Possible explanations include:

- Crime usually occurs where or when there are few (if any) witnesses, so lighting levels are irrelevant.
- Lighting can highlight potential targets, security lapses and even escape routes. In short, light can help criminals be quick and quiet.
- Outwards shining lights can hide criminal activity with glare, providing ideal cover for a burglar at night by blinding potential witnesses and CCTV.
- Motion-activated floodlights are so frequently triggered that they are ignored by neighbours.
- The Greater Manchester Police document "Designing out Crime: Parks & Public Open Spaces" states: "In certain situations, lighting may aid or encourage congregation, crime and disorder. Consideration should be given to (1) avoiding lighting in remote locations under minimal surveillance and (2) lighting car parks and buildings only during periods when authorised staff retain a site presence."

Lighting has no effect or even increases crime: the evidence

- Thieves steal Brighton and Hove streetlamps (*Brighton & Hove Argus*, May 2010).
- "CCTV cameras in Sussex are being hampered by street lights... Glare from lamps is causing such poor picture quality that individuals filmed committing a crime cannot be identified." (*Brighton & Hove Argus*, February 2010)
- In Essex, a trial to turn off suburban street lights between midnight and 5.30am proved successful in reducing crime. Police state: "A year-on-year comparison for April 2006 to May 2007 (when street-lights were left on all night) and April 2007 to May 2008 (when street-lights were turned off at midnight) has shown that night-time crime has almost halved in Saffron Walden and reduced by over a third in Dunmow."
- *The Influence of Street Lighting on Crime and the Fear of Crime* (Crown Copyright 1991) states, "The principal conclusion is that no evidence could be found to support the hypothesis that improved street lighting reduces reported crime. The main database for the study consisted of over 100,000 reported crimes... The area studied, an inner London Borough, has a high crime rate in a national context and thus represented a fair test for environmental crime prevention measures. In short, if street lighting does affect crime, this study should have detected it."
- The majority of crimes occur in the summer months (see *Seasonality in Recorded Crime* by Hird & Ruparel, Home Office). According to this report, although domestic burglary peaks in

January, there is less domestic burglary in the dark days of February than in any of the summer months.

- According to the UK Government's Home Security & Crime Reduction website, "Harsh, glaring floodlights are not a deterrent to criminals."
- The Association of British Insurers does not recommend outdoor lighting as a crime deterrent. Indeed, insurance companies do not offer a reduction in your premiums if you have security floodlights, due to the lack of evidence to suggest that lighting reduces crime.
- A survey by the UK Home Office "Decision-making by house burglars: offenders' perspectives" (Home Office website), reported that burglars saw the following factors as a deterrent:
 - Belief that house is occupied (84%)
 - Presence of alarms outside property (84%)
 - Presence of CCTV/camera nearby property (82%)
 - Apparent strength of doors/window locks (55%)
 - Other factors include convenient approach and exit routes and there being a ready market for the goods.
 - Nowhere in the report is the presence of lighting mentioned as a deterrent.
- Des Moines Register, USA, reported "A money-saving decision to turn off thousands of Des Moines streetlights met with dire predictions from critics who warned that darkened streets would create a haven for crime. Statistics tell a different story. The first four months of 2004 saw a 3.5 percent drop in vandalism, burglary and robbery..."
- In 1996, the National Institute of Justice in the USA published an assessment of crime and violence, "Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising" which found little support for the misconception that "brighter is safer", and even suggested that poorly-designed lighting might actually increase personal vulnerability. The report states: The problematic relationship between lighting and crime increases when one considers that offenders need lighting to detect potential targets and low-risk situations. Consider lighting at outside ATM machines, for example. An ATM user might feel safer when the ATM and its immediate surrounding area are well lit. However, this same lighting makes the patron more visible to passing offenders. Whom the lighting serves is unclear."
- "Outdoor Lighting Principles for Australia" shows how crime was cut drastically during a period of power cuts
- Detroit, Michigan, a city with one of the highest crime rates in the USA, experienced fewer police calls than normal during the power failure of August 2003, which lasted through the whole night. Officials stated that "Police had fewer calls within the city of Detroit than an average day, even with the blackout."
- Belgium celebrates an annual Night of Darkness celebration, where local councils and businesses switch off part of their outdoor lighting. At the same time, public events are organised on the theme of the night. In 2005, around 20,000 people participated in the celebration. In the streets where lights were turned off, no crime was reported. One car was stolen from a street where the street lights remained on.