

How might “improved” street lighting reduce crime?

A Synopsis Summary of Conclusion to be drawn from HORS 251
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It has been suggested that natural, informal surveillance is a key to crime prevention by using environmental measures which directly affect offenders’ perceptions of increased risks and decreased rewards. Modification of the physical environment by street lighting “improvements” could prevent crime by reducing opportunity and increasing perceived risk (Clarke, 1995); and in strengthening informal social control and community cohesion through more effective street use (Jacobs, 1961; Angel, 1968) and investment in neighbourhood conditions (Taub et al., 1984; Taylor and Gottfredson, 1986).

I can find no technical definition of either the word “improved” or the word “improvement” as employed in this document.

Jacobs (1961) emphasised the association between levels of crime and public street use, suggesting that less crime would be committed in areas with an abundance of potential witnesses who had good visibility.

The following are possible ways in which “improved” lighting might reduce crime (Painter and Farrington, 1999b; Pease, 1999).

1. Lighting “may” reduce crime by improving visibility. This deters potential offenders by increasing the risks that they will be recognised or interrupted in the course of their activities (Mayhew et al., 1979). The presence of police and other authority figures also becomes more visible.

2. Lighting “improvements” “may” encourage increased street usage which intensifies natural surveillance. From the potential offender’s perspective, the proximity of other pedestrians acts as a deterrent since the risks of either being recognised, or interrupted in the commission of crime, are increased (Cohen and Felson, 1979).

Summary of main findings

The main aim of the report was to complete a systematic review of the effects of “improved” street lighting on crime. Sixteen potentially relevant studies were excluded for various reasons, including the lack of a comparable control condition, no outcome measurement of crime and too small numbers.

Most studies suggested that “improved” street lighting was followed by a decrease in crime.

Eight American evaluation studies met the criteria for inclusion in the review. Their results were mixed: four found that “improved” street lighting was effective in reducing crime, while the other four found that it was not effective. It was not obvious why the studies produced different results, although there was a tendency for “effective” studies to measure both day-time and night-time crimes and for “ineffective” studies to measure only night-time crimes. The eight studies, taken together, showed that “improved” street lighting reduced crime by 7 per cent. However, all except one of these American evaluations date from the 1970s.

Five more recent British evaluation studies met the criteria for inclusion in the review. Their results showed that “improved” lighting led to decreases in crime. These five studies showed that “improved” lighting reduced crime by 30 per cent. However, these studies did not find that night-time crimes decreased more than day-time crimes, so a theory of street lighting having a role in increasing community pride and informal social control may be more plausible than a theory focussing on increased surveillance and increased deterrence. In short HORS 251 does NOT prove that street lighting can prevent crime!

Whilst the 30 percent crime reduction claim, taken out of context, suggests this to be the case, any use of the statement, without the caveats, is untrue. A little bit like the claims made for WMD in the September Dossier?

All references on this page can be found in the original Adobe pdf document which is a UK Government document, which can be found at - <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors251.pdf>