
This article is based on the Campbell Review:

Brandon C. Welsh & David P. Farrington: *Effects of Improved Street Lighting on Crime*. Campbell Collaboration 2008

This article is written by the Nordic Campbell Centre. The article has been approved by the authors of the review. Published December 2008

See the light! Street lights prevent crime

There is an alternative to increased surveillance as a means of preventing crime in public space. The solution is closer than we think: improved street lighting. A new Campbell systematic review shows that improved street lighting reduces crimes by 21 percent. Furthermore, improved street lighting even reduces daytime crime. Researchers believe the improvement in crime rates happens because better lighting is a sign of an orderly neighbourhood; a neighbourhood where people call the police if they see a crime.

Street lights prevent crime

When the sun sets, streets are much easier to use if there is street lighting. Street lighting is essential for people who want to go from A to B after dark.

However, street lighting is about more than merely making it easier to use streets at night. Street lighting is also about helping people feel safe: in areas with much crime, improved street lighting can abate the problem. A new Campbell systematic review finds that improved street lighting reduces crime by 21 percent in experimental areas compared to comparable areas with no street lighting improvements.

At the same time, researchers point out another remarkable result, namely that improved street lighting reduces daytime crime.

Why does improved street lighting work - even during daytime?

Most of us are familiar with feeling insecure in dark places. Street lighting makes us feel safer, because we can see other people who, like ourselves, are out at night, and they can see us. The fact that others can see us, if we were to be confronted by an offender, increases our feeling of safety. Moreover, we expect criminals to avoid potential crime scenes, if there is a high probability of being caught. Finally, street lighting increases the feeling of safety because more law-abiding citizens use the streets at night. When there are more people in the streets, we perform natural surveillance of each other.

Is it, however, only the increased natural surveillance that causes the decreases in crimes? Not according to the authors of the review. If natural surveillance were the sole cause of the reduction in crime, this reduction would only be evident in nighttime crime. However, daytime crime is also reduced.

Community pride

Researchers therefore believe that improved street lighting is also efficacious because it increases the feeling of pride, and thereby also informal social control in the neighbourhood.

The theory is that when local government chooses to improve conditions in our neighbourhood, for example through improved street lighting, they send a signal that they care about us. This might lead us to have a more positive image of our neighbourhood, and our neighbourhood will moreover appear better cared for. This in turn strengthens community cohesion and pride. When we become more proud of the place we live, we also become more observant of each other on an everyday basis. We feel that public space belongs to us all. We develop a greater sense of responsibility and this leads to more social control and reduced night-time and daytime crime in the neighbourhood.

What have researchers studied?

The systematic review is based on high-quality evaluation studies that examine whether crime in public space (e.g. burglary, violent assault, theft and street robbery) is reduced when street lighting is improved. The review specifies that improved street lighting has a positive effect on reductions in burglaries and thefts, however not in violent crimes.

Thirteen studies were included in the review: eight US studies and five UK studies. The review shows that the positive effect of improved street lighting has been greater in the UK than in the US. All of the studies concentrate on the isolated crime-prevention effect of street lighting – and nothing else. This means that the fall of 21 percent in crime rates does not stem from combined interventions, e.g. street lighting and video surveillance, or street lighting and improved playgrounds.

See the light!

The overall final conclusion of researchers is that improved street lighting is an effective means of preventing crime. The financial costs can be recouped through savings from reduced crime, and there seems to be no immediate negative consequences for society – on the contrary.

Improved street lighting benefits the entire neighbourhood, not just individual citizens. Lighting improvements are not an infringement of civil rights but improves the general feeling of safety and ensures greater public street use in neighbourhoods at night time.