

Teen Curfew?

by Jennifer Morron

Sunday, March 05, 2006 09:41 AM

In a car with my boyfriend and some of our friends, I was listening to the loud bass of the song "Gasolina" by the reggaeton artist Daddy Yankee, when I looked at my watch. It was already 10:03 p.m. and we were just heading to a movie theater. "I'm having second thoughts," I said. "Remember, I have to be home early."

"Damn, Jen, you're 18," one of my friends complained from the back seat. "Why do you have to be home so early?" But I decided to go home. The last time I had stayed out past my curfew, my mother punished me by taking away my phone, and forbidding me from going out, for a week.

Now, parents like my mother are not the only New Yorkers who think a curfew is a good idea. Some members of the New York City Council would like a citywide curfew for teenagers. The curfew would keep anyone under the age of 18 off the streets and out of public places between midnight and 6 a.m. During those hours, police could stop anyone who looked like a minor and ask for proof of age. It would affect the 24 percent of the city's residents who are under 18.

In 2004, two Republican members of the New York City Council, Dennis Gallagher of Queens and James Oddo of Staten Island, proposed the curfew for the city, and while nothing has come of it yet, Gallagher said he is going to try to get the council to vote on the proposal this year.

"It's about helping children," said Gallagher. "There are those who may be out past curfew." Under this proposed law, "you could send them home. A large number of them may be getting in trouble."

Teens caught after midnight could be required to perform up to 25 hours of community service for their first offense. A second offense could result in 50 hours of community service.

Parents May Be Fined, Businesses Held Liable

Their parents could be held responsible, too. If they let their children out past midnight, they could be fined up to \$75 for the first offense.

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Business owners and their employees would be held liable under the law if they knowingly allowed kids to hang out at their businesses after midnight. They could get fined up to \$250 for a first offense.

There would be several exceptions to the proposed law. Minors could be out after midnight if accompanied by a parent, guardian or an adult age 21 or older, or if they were working or traveling directly to or from their workplace.

Would It Reduce Crime?

Several parents I interviewed are in favor of the citywide curfew. They argue that the curfews are necessary to keep young people out of trouble. They also say that teenagers are more likely to get in trouble late than they would during daylight. With a curfew, police wouldn't have to wait for teens to commit crimes before moving young people indoors.

By keeping young people off the streets at night, parents say curfews will protect teens from becoming victims of crime.

After curfews were implemented in San Diego, California, violent crime by juveniles dropped by 20 percent and violent crime against juveniles dropped by 40 percent. In Dallas, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana, juvenile arrests dropped by about 20 percent after curfews were put in place.

But teens and others who argue against curfews say that the public is misinformed about the number of crimes committed by teens. A five-year-old report entitled ["Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News"](#) demonstrated this: 1998 was a year in which violent crime by youth was at its lowest point in 25 years. Nevertheless, 62 percent of that people surveyed in that year believed that juvenile crime was on the rise.

The study also found that when youth appear in the news it is frequently connected with violence, even though youth do not commit the majority of violent crimes. A close look at 840 newspaper stories and 109 network news segments that appeared across the nation in 1993 found that 40 percent of newspaper stories and 48 percent of television stories about young people were about violence. When it came to children, there was more overall coverage of

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crime and violence than of all other policy issues combined, the study found.

Here in New York City, where juvenile arrests accounted for only four percent of the total arrests in 1999, the New York City Youth Media Watch found that New York Times articles published between January and March 2000 over-represented youth crime and school violence. Moreover, reporters most frequently quoted police about youth crime, as opposed to teens themselves or the adults in their lives.

It's hard to tell which came first — the media's associating youth with violence or the public's fear of youth in general. Either way, "In an environment in which fear of youth crime and actual crime are so out of sync," writers of the Off-Balance report found, policies affecting young people, like teen curfews, "are bound to be influenced."

Would It Increase Safety?

Many parents, like my mother Arelis Morron, say they believe in curfews not because they think their kids are going to commit crime, but because they worry about their kids' safety. "It's very dangerous to be out in the streets so late at night, especially for young girls," my mother told me. "There are many men out there who have perverted thoughts and will not let anything stand in their way to accomplish them."

I worry about my safety too. Before I met my boyfriend who has a car, when I violated curfew in the past, I ended up walking the 15 minutes back home from public transportation by myself. I'd get scared and tried to watch for people who were walking behind me.

Even many teens I know understand that curfews might be a good idea, even if they don't like them.

"Parents try to teach you good morals and they want everything that is best for you," said my friend Michael Frankowski, 18, a recent graduate from Christ the King HS in Queens, who now attends Farmingdale University. "That's why they give you curfews."

Not the Government's Job?

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But even many of the teens who do believe in curfews say that setting them is a parent's or guardian's job, not the government's. And some believe that curfew laws can violate teenagers' constitutional rights, like freedom of association and freedom of speech. (I'm pretty sure my boyfriend isn't thinking about my constitutional rights, though, when he's pressuring me to hang out and break my curfew.)

Me, I've had the same curfew since I was 16. Even though the proposed curfew would allow teens over 18 to stay out past midnight, I'd still have to be home by midnight at the latest. My friends think my mother is way too strict.

"I believe 18 is the age you should not have a curfew, because you know what is right from wrong and you are mature enough," said my friend Jennifer Fernandez, 17, a recent graduate of Grover Cleveland HS, who now attends New York City College of Technology.

Of course my mother doesn't agree, and I'm not so sure myself. Although I envy most of my girlfriends who do not have to be home until 2 or 3 a.m., I often think about them and wonder, "Do their parents realize that their daughters are out that late?"

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