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Just a Minute on Kids, Crime, and Summer

Bad premises beget worse policies. Spend just a minute with us so that we can do better.



Photographer: Busà Photography via Getty Images

Summer should be the season when kids get to live their best lives. School's out, pools are open, parks are packed, there are endless daylight hours, and even more sweet, frozen treats. But for too many young people, especially Black and Brown youth, summer doesn't bring freedom. It brings increased surveillance, criminalization, and policing.

The pattern is as predictable as it is dangerous. As the weather heats up, like clockwork, so do the headlines painting an ominous picture of the havoc sure to be wreaked by a particular kind of youth in the summer. Policies like youth curfews and increased policing follow. And it's nothing new. This summer marks 35 years since the sentencing of the Exonerated Five—then known as the Central Park Five—some of the most well-known survivors of this very cycle.

Of course we all want to be safe year-round. And the lack of school, summertime youth employment opportunities, and public space or programming for young people presents some real challenges. A [systematic review of 83 studies](#) found that hotter weather is linked to an increase in crime—specifically, a 20-degree increase in temperature is associated with about 9% more violent crime. But addressing these challenges seriously requires a level of rigor that's often missing from the conversation about youth and safety. Instead we rely on tropes, stereotypes, and disproven policies that harm kids without making anybody safer.

So spend just a minute with us on three things we get flat wrong about kids, crime, and summer.

Let's Back Up

1 Curfews Are A Bust

They Don't Work

Youth curfews have been repeatedly challenged in the courts for their questionable infringement on the First Amendment rights of youth. Insofar as they've been upheld, their legality explicitly depends on their ability to advance the governmental interest in maintaining public safety. Despite their widespread use, there is a robust body of research over several decades that has repeatedly shown that youth [curfews fail to reduce youth crime or victimization](#). One [study](#) even found that curfews increased gun incidents in D.C. by 150%.

They Trade False Security for Real Harm

Youth curfews rely on police either arresting, ticketing, or escorting kids home—all of which carry serious risks. Even a single [court appearance](#) increases a teen's chance of dropping out of school, while incarceration lowers young people's graduation rates, college enrollment, and future earnings, as well as leading to worse health outcomes.

Police escorts expose more children to a deeply under-addressed threat: law enforcement officers sexually abusing minors. A 2024 [Washington Post investigation](#) revealed that at least 1,800 officers had been charged with child sex crimes over the prior two decades. Similarly the Explorer Scouts—a Boy Scouts affiliate that pairs kids with law enforcement—has been repeatedly rocked by child sexual abuse scandals and lawsuits. According to the Courier-Journal, [at least 137 girls and 26 boys](#) have allegedly been exploited, raped, fondled, kissed, or otherwise abused by officers across 28 states. Because most child sexual abuse goes unreported, these numbers likely capture only a small share of the harm kids experience.

2 The Kids Are Alright

You wouldn't know it from the headlines, but youth crime and incarceration have plummeted over the past three decades. This doesn't mean youth violence and victimization aren't real or serious but we can't confront that effectively if we ignore the incredible progress we've made or distort the facts. Even during the summer months, youth crime is just a fraction of what it once was. In fact, fewer young people were arrested in summer 2023 (the most recent year of national data available) than in any summer from 1985 to the start of the pandemic. Remarkably, these dramatic declines in youth crime and the arrests accompanied an equally [dramatic reduction](#) in youth incarceration. Between 2000 and 2022, youth incarceration dropped 75%, and nearly 1,800 juvenile facilities closed nationwide.

Unfortunately, this critical context is often missing from the discourse about crime and safety, in part because media coverage skews public perception. For example, a recent Sentencing Project [report](#) found that in Baltimore, youth made up just 5% of arrests but were the focus of 28% of crime-related news stories on major outlets that specified the age of the person arrested.

3 What Really Keeps Kids Safe in the Summer? Spoiler: It's Not Police

The good news is that we already know what keeps kids and communities safe. Clean, welcoming public spaces, especially in the evening, make a big difference. [Midnight basketball programs](#) in places like Maryland, Kansas City, and Atlanta have been credited with lowering youth crime. In Los Angeles, [Summer Night Lights](#)—keeping parks open late with food and activities—helped drive gang violence to 50-year lows and inspired similar programs across the country.

Summer job programs [have repeatedly](#) been shown to reduce youth arrests. And there's a mountain of evidence that investing in public spaces keeps us all safer. [Communities](#) with more green space experience fewer property crimes and fewer violent crimes. Well-designed and maintained green spaces [reduce](#) gun violence and have even been [linked](#) to reductions in homicides.

Continue the Conversation

Listen

To [Good Things: Rethinking Youth Crime](#) for insights about how we think about youth crime, and to [City Cast DC: Youth Curfew Controversy](#) on Washington D.C.'s latest youth curfew

Read

[What Happened When America Emptied Its Youth Prisons](#), James Forman Jr.'s New York Times Magazine article offering lessons from a radical 20-year experiment and a quiet triumph of public policy

We can't afford to scale up, export, or leave unchecked what we've already gotten wrong. We'll be using this note to unpack the faulty thinking about crime, safety, and justice that underpins some of the most consequential discussions and decisions playing out in this American moment. You can find our previous notes [here](#).

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