

Summary of Forum Held on March 1, 2002: Police-Probation Teams Address Juvenile Violence in Boston Through Operation Night Light

Summary's Highlights

Note: Hosted by the University of Pennsylvania's Jerry Lee Center of Criminology, this Forum was the third in a series highlighting promising and pioneering state and local efforts to address crime.

Boston's Operation Night Light targets what many regard as an almost insoluble problem: youth violence. Initiated in 1992 when fear of youths and the homicides they spawned was widespread, Night Light consists of teams of probation and police officers in patrol vehicles that cover designated areas during what traditionally had been off-hours for probation officers: 4:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m., 7 days a week. To ensure juveniles are not violating curfew hours and other probation conditions, officers not only patrol the streets but also visit the youths' homes. Thanks in large part to the unique powers of probation officers, violators can be dealt with swiftly and effectively, including arrest, probation revocation, and incarceration.

Night Light, however, is not a "tail 'em, nail 'em, and jail 'em" strategy. The primary goal is to help juvenile probationers avoid further crime and violence. Officers' visits to probationers' homes, for example, are often sparked by reports, such as from schools, that certain youths seem unusually troubled. The home visits seek to get to the root of problems through officers' talking with probationers and their parents and, perhaps, calling on clergy, social service agencies, or others to help. Results: a dramatic decline in youth violence and related homicides.

Providing practitioner perspectives on Operation Night Light, now replicated in many cities, were the following Forum presenters: Bill Stewart, Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Dorchester (MA) District Court; James Jordan, Director, Office of Strategic Planning and Resource Development, Boston Police Department; and Tito Whittington, Detective, Boston Police Department.

Since its inception in 1992 in the Dorchester area of Boston, Operation Night Light has addressed juvenile crime and violence through police and probation officers' partnering to focus on youths sentenced to probation. The approach employs both early intervention to prevent future crimes by those youths and, when needed, enforcement and prosecutorial action. That strategy was

¹The Forum summarized here was one of a series to afford Capitol Hill and Executive Branch staff, selected representatives from the practitioner and research communities, and key interest group leadership an opportunity to hear innovative perspectives of state and local frontline criminal justice practitioners and researchers. The Forum was held in Washington, D.C. University of Pennsylvania Senior Fellow Laurie Robinson serves as Executive Director of the Forum on Crime & Justice. William D. Falcon prepared this summary.

highlighted during opening remarks by Forum Advisory Board member Scott Harshbarger, former Massachusetts Attorney General and current Common Cause president, who added that the strategy “could work anywhere, with good people and good support.”² His comments provided context for introductory observations by Forum Advisory Board member The Honorable Edwin

Meese III, former U. S. Attorney General and, previously, a local prosecutor. After noting that juvenile crime is an increasingly serious part of the current crime picture despite recent declines in the overall crime rate, he introduced three key frontline practitioners involved in Boston’s Night Light, which is “a truly outstanding program” and “represents thinking outside the box.”

Operation Night Light From the Perspective of Bill Stewart, Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Dorchester (MA) District Court, and a Night Light Founder

Launched in 1992 amid fear in many Boston neighborhoods of youth violence and surging juvenile homicides, Night Light targeted the crisis by combining the traditional powers of police with powers held only by probation officers. Police and probation officers ride together in police vehicles during hours heretofore not worked by probation officers: 4:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m., 7 days a week to more effectively enforce juvenile probationers’ compliance with their terms of probation, including curfew hours. Probation officers must allocate 20 percent of their time to those Night Light hours. They have intimate knowledge of juveniles who have come before the court and released on conditional liberty as probationers: their names, street names, mothers’ and fathers’ names, addresses, etc.

Caught off guard by a police-probation team during the first Night Light ride in 1992, a surprised juvenile probationer said, “What are you doing here? Probation don’t work at night.” Each probationer gets the message that those teams *will* be out to check, that the choice is to comply with probation terms (curfew, area restrictions, etc.) or go to jail, and that if you are home and the teams catch you doing something right, then you are earning them out of your life by complying with your terms. The teams find that the overwhelming majority of juvenile probationers make good choices and that very few need to be targeted for revocation and incarceration.

Among the results:

- Citywide, homicides overall plummeted to 31 in 1999 from 152 in 1990. The high point was a period of more than 30 months when not a single juvenile under age 17 was lost to a homicide.³
- Partnerships expanded from police-probation to include clergy and neighborhood.

²Comments of Forum participants are paraphrased unless placed between quotation marks.

³A number of strategies adopted in Boston in the ‘90s to combat youth violence (including Night Light) contributed to this decline. Additionally, juvenile homicides dropped from a high of 16 in 1990 in Boston to zero in 1997, and the rate of curfew compliance among juveniles more than doubled to 70 percent over the same period.

- Quality of life improved markedly. Formerly dark, dead neighborhoods whose residents lived in fear now have playgrounds filled with children after school, for example.

The downside is that not everyone is as committed to Night Light as they probably should be, although probation officers throughout Massachusetts are now required to work Night Light hours. Also, incarceration of some probation violators is regarded as failure, not success.

Remarks of James Jordan, Director, Office of Strategic Planning and Resource Development, Boston Police Department

From the standpoint of resource allocation, Night Light makes sense. Crime does not occur randomly. Studies reveal that much crime is concentrated in areas where juvenile probationers reside. Should not resources and agency collaboration, such as exemplified by Night Light, focus on where crime is especially severe?

In terms of the power inherent in Night Light, the message to probationers and other residents is that the public safety strategy is pursued in a fair, just manner in the interest of the community, which has praised the approach. Night Light is a very assertive measure. Probationers have limited rights. Accordingly, probation officers' powers are substantial whether exercised on the street or in probationers' homes.

As for Night Light's efficiency, a medical analogy is appropriate: Is not taking steps today to prevent a disease, such as cigarette-related cancer, less costly and more effective than doing nothing and contracting and dealing with the illness several years from now? Similarly, is it not more cost-effective to intervene and deter crime early on through Night Light than to bear the cost associated with future crime and incarceration?

Comments by Tito Whittington, Detective, Boston Police Department

Night Light can draw on a number of resources, depending on the specifics of a given probationer's situation. For example, a minister's efforts may replace those of a probation officer in certain circumstances, such as when a probationer has been identified by a teacher, school administrator, or parent as not attending school or acting up in the classroom. Home visits and talks with parents yield information on the quality of home life, the probationer-parent relationship, and whether the juvenile comes home on time and has a job. A helping hand is extended to parents. At this point, another resource may be called upon—youth services providers, who are social workers ready to assist parents address problems.

Probation officers intervene directly when the situation warrants, such as persuading a gang to stop harassing a probationer in an effort to recruit him. Or probation may partner with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), as occurred in a successful targeting of a juvenile probationer who was bringing guns into Boston. ATF traced them and determined they originated in Mississippi and Alabama. The juvenile was found responsible for eight shootings in a four-square-block area.

After spending 10 years in the Boston Police Department's gang unit and making close to 3,000 career arrests, Detective Whittington said to himself, "I am knocking my head against a wall here. It's a revolving door. What am I not doing? I need to do my job a little bit more efficiently." Result: his rewarding participation in Night Light, which, he concludes, converts not only kids to a legal lifestyle but also officers to a nontraditional, yet effective, approach to their jobs.

Questions and Answers

What are some of the hurdles and problems faced by Night Light? Stewart: An initial hurdle was to beat down the institutional mentality that defined a probation officer's work week as limited to 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. Those who persisted in such an attitude were asked, "Why don't you try to move on and do something else?" Jordan: Greatest resistance comes from those just below the top—e.g., the 35-year veteran who may be calls-for-service oriented and does not adjust to the shift in police mission represented by Night Light's prevention emphasis. Whittington: Will money be shifted from Night Light to other areas of the Department? How can we maintain requisite officer commitment when current Night Light personnel move on?

How has Night Light been received by lieutenants, sergeants, and others who do not directly supervise Night Light but command precincts and operations generally? Jordan: At first, they resisted a little but once Night Light got up to speed and they saw that it worked, it was accepted. Whittington: Night Light runs itself—middle management is not needed.

What about parents who do not have the skills to cope with the issues at hand? Whittington: In such cases, Night Light plugs in other community resources to assist those parents—to help them bridge the gap between home and school, for example.

What kind of caseload model is followed? Jordan: The key is prioritizing. We get away from the notion that all cases should be treated equally. Probation officers initiate prioritization, inform their police-officer partners, and they engage in a bit of give-and-take.

For More Information...

- For general information about Operation Night Light and other elements of Boston's strategy to prevent youth violence, visit http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/12_OpNiteLite.html.
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