

Police Floodlights are Unlikely to Reduce Crime, But Could Harm Your Health

Months after the study they were a part ended, bright lights remain in New York housing projects.

Every night, starting in the early evening, Benjamin Cherner can see blinding floodlights from some of the windows in his apartment. The architect has lived with his family on this stretch of New York City's East 8th Street between Avenues C and D for most of the past two decades, and while there have always been lights up—ringing the rooftop of the Police Service Area 4 (PSA4) building on the northeast corner of E. 8th and Avenue C—leaving them on all night is a change he noticed last year.

In late December Cherner told me he thinks the lighting is "just so insidious, because it seems like it's the idea that eventually all of Manhattan will be flooded with light." In an email the month before he noted that the lights had "seldom been used" in the past 18 years he's lived on the block.

Mobile floodlights at the Jacob Riis Houses bathe the other end of the block in white light. The Riis Houses are one of many NYC Housing Authority developments where the growling, generator-powered machines (different from the lights adorning PSA4, also incredibly bright) have appeared in the past few years.

Little consideration has been given to the potential health hazards that the lights pose to NYCHA's overwhelmingly black and Latinx residents. Some view the lights as helpful or a minor nuisance, but others, like the residents at the Bayview Houses and Tompkins Houses in Brooklyn, describe being kept awake every night by the glare and the noisy generators. In a June report in Crain's, a teenager and resident of a housing block told the reporter, bluntly, "These lights are for you."

Most of those installations are part of a second wave of funding for the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety. In the first wave, announced July 2014, MAP put \$210.5 million towards reducing crime at the fifteen housing developments that accounted for twenty percent of crime across NYCHA's 328 locations. One of the most prominent features of the plan was more nighttime street-level illumination, so the city set up 150 temporary light towers in housing projects that summer. About half of planned permanent installations have been completed in the two years since.

In launching the initiative, de Blasio said he hoped "to light up the areas that have previously been obscure and problematic, and make it easier for the NYPD to do its job." But a VICE article argued that the machines were part of a larger strategy of "omnipresence," which the *Times* had already reported entails increasing police patrols while deemphasizing interaction with community members. In further illuminating sidewalks teeming with cops, the lights add the impression that police are always watching NYCHA residents.

Loss of sleep is only the initial problem: The mobile floodlights generate excessive blue light, which appears white to the eye and suppresses melatonin more than some other wavelengths of light. Dr. Randy J. Nelson, a professor in the Department of Neuroscience at The Ohio State University's medical school, told me via email that exposure to such light at night can disrupt biological rhythms, including the circadian rhythms "that optimize physiological and behavioral functioning." The epidemiological research on other circumstances where people are exposed to bright light at night suggests that their glow could be detrimental to the health of residents. By way of comparison Nelson noted that workers on night shifts are more likely to suffer from a litany of illnesses, including "sleep disorders, depression, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, and cancer," than those who work during the day.

"The more intense [the light] is, the worse it is," added Richard Stevens, an epidemiologist at the University of Connecticut who studies why people get cancer, especially breast cancer. He thought the NYCHA lights would be "just terrible for people. And not only for certain diseases that I'm interested in, but just for your wellbeing."

Citing recent research findings that "brighter residential nighttime lighting is associated with ... impaired daytime functioning and obesity," the American Medical Association adopted a set of guidelines for reducing the potential harm some types of LED streetlights could cause last June. The new guidelines recommend that outdoor lighting shouldn't have a color temperature above 3,000 degrees kelvin (K). Many of the mobile lights set up in NYCHA housing, including those at the Riis Houses are 1250-watt Allmand Night-Lite Pro II models, which give off light with a color temperature of 3954K.

Asked whether last year's study was based on other research, a spokesperson for the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice said that "there have been some promising studies on light. Specifically, they cited "one showing that daylight savings time (more hours of evening light) was linked to crime reduction." But while the lights may make people feel safer, the conventional wisdom that street lighting reduces crime is faulty. A 2015 study of 62 British cities that had reduced street lighting showed that over four years, there had been no meaningful increase in burglaries, robberies, car theft, or sexual assault." Indeed, MAP's own results have been mixed: In December 2015 the city found that, while crime had decreased overall among the original fifteen NYCHA developments, seven had seen an increase in a number of crime categories, including murder, rape, robbery, and felony assault.

Nonetheless, the mayor appears to have doubled down on his program. Last March, citing the "need to use every tool at our disposal to ensure that every New Yorker is safe," de Blasio commissioned a study that placed 400 more towers in 40 NYCHA developments, the Riis lights among them. The six-month study ended in September, and a final report was slated to appear by year's end, but has yet to materialize. A spokesperson for the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice told said that "there is not currently a firm timeline" for the removal of the lights used in the study. The NYPD did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

As the city waits to receive a final report on the expansion, the New Yorkers the lights supposedly protect continue living with the consequences. And down the street Benjamin Cherner worries that, at this rate, the report will be irrelevant.

"People can get used to anything, everybody's got their lives to live," he said late last year on a phone call. "And I think there's a window that, if this keeps going on for another six months, people are gonna say that's the way it is."

https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/z48j83/police-floodlights-are-unlikely-to-reduce-crime-but-could-harm-your-health

ETHAN CHIEL Feb 25 2017, 12:00pm



Image: Ethan Chiel