

Raising the Curtain on Curfew

CURFEW POLICY: A Plain-English Version

On the Street

The Curfew Policy puts Pittsburgh Police in charge of enforcing curfew. First, a police officer will use the following criteria to identify a "potential curfew violator":

- observation and experience assessing people's ages, including personal attributes and conduct.
- responses to such questions as, "How old are you?" and "May I see some identification?"
- commentary from other people who may be present.
- the officer's personal knowledge.

Next, the officer tells the teen that he or she is violating curfew and should go home. If the teen refuses to go home or is seen violating curfew a second time that night, the officer next "cites" the teen. (This means that information that the teen has broken curfew will be noted on that teen's record.) Then the officer will take the teen to the Curfew Facility.

At the Curfew Facility

At the Curfew Facility, the teen is turned over to the custody of the personnel operating the facility. After getting some information from the police and the teen, the Curfew Facility Personnel next call the teen's parent or guardian. If the parent comes to the facility for the teen, the teen and parent can go home just as soon as they schedule a date for a hearing in front of the Magistrate.

However, if the parent refuses to come to the facility or if the Personnel can't reach a parent or guardian (and so conclude that the teen has no supervision at home), then the Curfew Facility Personnel will contact the Allegheny County Children and Youth Services officials. Any teens remaining in the Curfew Facility when it closes at 6:00 a.m. will be turned over to CYS officials or, in some cases, to school officials.

All of this assumes the teen has done nothing more than violate curfew. However, if the teen is found with a weapon or with drugs, or has an outstanding arrest warrant or is on probation, the officer will apprehend the teen and take him or her to Shuman Detention Center.

About the Curfew Facility: The Curfew Facility will be a special type of "emergency juvenile shelter" licensed by Pennsylvania's Department of Public Welfare. At the facility, doors will be locked so no one can come in. Although they won't be locked on the inside (that would be against the law), teens who try to escape will be confined again and cited for violating another curfew. Police officers and metal detectors will provide security for the facility.

What problems might there be with trying to identify a "potential curfew violator"?

What would it take for teens and police to achieve mutual respect?

What might be some consequences of contacting CYS?

What might actually happen at the curfew facility?

What are some alternatives to the city's curfew policy?

THE COMMUNITY LITERACY CENTER

A Collaboration of the Community House and the Center
for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon University

The Story-Behind-The-Story Strategy Might Make the Curfew Safer for Teens and Cops

by Andre Ashby

What do I mean by “Story Behind The Story”?

Sometimes adults (police) don't know what teenagers are really thinking, and they misunderstand teenagers' actions and intentions. Since they haven't “been there,” they can't see the hidden logic behind what teenagers do. This is what I mean when I say, “Story Behind the Story.”

How can adults (police) be helped to see the story behind the story? One way is to simply include more details of the story - details that are clearly obvious from your perspective but perhaps not so evident to an adult (police). An example of this is, if a police officer asks you why are you out after curfew, don't just say that you're on your way home, also tell him where you are coming from. The police also can ask more questions about the situation. Another is to describe peoples' inner thoughts.

I've been studying the curfew policy. If the curfew would begin right now, I think there would be a lot of conflict between teens and cops past curfew time. The curfew policy is not clear for everybody to understand, teens or adults. It only talks about the teens' conduct and attributes, but it doesn't talk about how cops should be. This is important because a cop can treat you any way because he is the police, and it won't be equal because teens will have to take it and show respect to someone that may not be showing respect to them.

Sometimes there has been bad blood between teens and cops. Some teens have bad attitudes towards cops, and cops have bad attitudes toward teens. Both disrespect each other. I don't like that this disrespect is like a rivalry between police and teens. I don't understand the way cops feel, but I do understand the way teens feel because I have had my own personal experiences.

It seems like every time I see a cop car I feel angry, because they just want to harass me and pull me over for no reason. I've had this happen to me a couple of times.

One day last spring about 5:00 or 6:00 PM, one of my friends and I were walking down the street and the cop car went past. It slowed down, stopped and turned around. They got out and told us to put our hands against the car.

[In the following account, SBS indicates the Story Behind the Story.]

(SBS: *We respected the fact that they were cops, listened to them, and put our hands on the car.*)

Then they started searching us.

(SBS: *They didn't do it rough. They gently patted us down.*) and while they were searching us they told me (SBS: *They let me ask why they stopped us.*) I looked like someone in a picture that they were looking for. I don't know why they searched my friend; they didn't say he looked like someone in the picture.

(SBS: *The only time they raised their voice was when they told my friend to pull up his pants. I guess most adults hate that look, and so does my mother.*) I was angry because they didn't show me the picture they said I looked like. They just said because of my hair, because of my afro, they were stopping me. They searched me, told me to get in back of their car. (SBS: *They opened the door and spoke in a regular voice like he was just talking to me.*) and then drove me in a police van to my house. That's what I didn't understand. I thought if I looked like someone they were looking for, why didn't they take me to the police station instead of to my house? They went up the stairs of my house and started talking to my mom, asking her all kinds of questions. They really didn't have any reason to do this because they didn't see me doing nothing and they don't know me. I am a good person, I don't get into trouble and I don't start any conflicts with anybody. As a result of this happening, I have less respect (but I still have some because all are not bad cops) and it upsets me to see and have this done.

One thing I know is that bad attitudes won't help anybody. Cops and teens are just as guilty of bad attitudes. I've seen a lot of this on TV and some on the streets. Bad attitudes just make the problem worse and can also start more conflict.

Even if there is a curfew, I think things can change. I mean that some of the conflict will stop between teens and cops, if there's not as many kids on the street, a cop would rather handle one or two people than a whole group. It will be easier for cops to pick up the bad kids because they will stay out; they ain't going to listen to the curfew policy. This is the best way I see the rivalry between cops and teens starting to change, if cops could be taught to use the “Story Behind The Story.” I learned it here at the CLC and it helps you understand the whole story instead of parts of stories.

I wish that the strategy “Story Behind The Story” could be taught in police training, at the academy. Police training teaches cops how to deal with everyday situations. If the officer is new or doesn't know how to handle everyday situations, I think the best best way to show him/her is to act out or describe a situation that the SBS strategy could be used in. One example is, if a cop stops a teen for being out after curfew, don't just give the cop a one-sentence story. Tell the cop why you are out, how long you have been out, where you live, about how long it's going to take you to get home, etc. Also the police should take the time and listen and try to help teens find a way to prevent being out after curfew. One way is to have an actual play, where people act out the parts, or it can be a tape for them to watch on TV. After they see how to handle these situations, I think that the police should then study and practice it themselves.

Bad Experiences After Hours

by Frank Boyd

Dennis is 16 years old. He's from outside the city but is visiting his friend Shawn, who's also 16, on the North Side. Both are black males with braids, wearing baggy clothes, dickies and t-shirts. They're dressed in mostly blue, so they look like gang-bangers.

They're coming from a Perry football game. Perry won, so they're excited. It was a night game, so they don't get back to the North Side until after 11. They get off the bus, but they have to walk to Shawn's house. They take a shortcut through the alleyway where they run into the cops.

As the cops approach Dennis and Shawn, they say, "What're ya doin' in dis alleyway at dis time of night. Don't ya know there's a curfew?" (*Thinking: I know these two teens are neighborhood drug dealers cuz they're dressed like most drug dealers I see all the time. And now with this curfew we can catch 'em in the act and put 'em behind bars.*)

Dennis explains, "I'm from outside da city, and I thought it didn't apply to me cuz I'm not from da North Side."

At this point, the curfew policy says that the officer should "tell the teen that he or she is violating curfew and should go home."

Instead, (*Thinking: Gimme a break!*) the cop hollers at them, "You 're da third kid to tell me dat story tonight, and dis time I'm not buyin' it."

Shawn tries to explain that Dennis is telling the truth, "He's just comin' over my house for the night. We're on our way home from da Perry football game."

The cop says, "Get your ass home. This is ya first warning. Don't let me catch ya out here again!" (*Thinking: I told them I'm not buyin' it. We'll just follow them and pick 'em up.*)

The cops pull off. Dennis and Shawn continue walking home, but since the cops saw them in the alleyway, they don't believe their story. They drive around the corner.

When the cops catch Dennis and Shawn again, they drive up to them, jump out of the car, and tell them to put their hands on the wall.

The curfew policy states that if the teen "is seen violating curfew a second time that night, the officer next 'cites' the teen. Then the officer will take the teen to the Curfew Facility."

{Thinking: We got ya now!}

These officers put the teens on the wall and search them aggressively. They're pushing, mugging, hitting them. Dennis and Shawn try to plead their case, asking what's going on. The cops say, "Didn't we already stop ya in the alleyway? This is your second violation. Get in the car before we throw ya in."

The teens hesitate getting into the car because they don't understand what they did wrong. (*Dennis and Shawn thinking: We shouldn't have to get in the car. We did nothin' ' wrong.*) They tell the cops they're still on their way home. One of the officers grabs Dennis by the arm and Dennis, afraid of getting hurt, quickly reacts to the cop's hand, smacking it away. The officer, thinking he has to quickly regain control, hits Dennis in the leg with his billy-club knocking him to the ground. The officer places his knee on Dennis's back to hold him. Shawn looks on in fear before trying to run. The other officer grabs him, slamming him on the car to handcuff him.

Options and Outcomes for the Police:

OPTION: The officers could talk to Dennis and Shawn calmly rather than yelling at them.

OUTCOME: Dennis would be able to explain his story so the officer would believe him.

OPTION: The officers could ask Dennis and Shawn what they're still doing out rather than putting them against the wall.

OUTCOME: Dennis and Shawn wouldn't have been as excited and wouldn't have reacted the way they did.

Options and Outcomes for Dennis and Shawn:

OP'TION: Dennis could just listen to the cops and go home.

OUTCOME: The police wouldn't follow them because they wouldn't think of Dennis and Shawn as such bad people.

OP'TION: Dennis and Shawn could get in the car with no questions asked.

OUTCOME: The cop would never grab them.

OUTCOME: The cops would push them in the car anyway.

Options and Outcomes for the Policy:

OPTION: A procedure for calculating how much time the teens have to get home could be included. The police could give the teens a voucher with a time on it to show that they had been warned and are still going home.

OUTCOME: This situation with Dennis and Shawn wouldn't happen.

OPTION: Education about the policy could be provided to teens through schools.

OUTCOME: Teens would know more and prevent cases such as Dennis's and Shawn's.

THE COMMUNITY LITERACY CENTER'S STATEMENT ON CURFEW

November, 1996

"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. "

Thomas Jefferson

The CLC offers a forum for teenagers to express their own thinking on issues affecting their lives. Because the viewpoints discussed in the earlier pages of this newsletter are those of teenagers and not always of the CLC staff, we would like to add our thoughts to the discussion.

We know relationships with teenagers in urban environments are some of the trickiest we encounter. Empirically, these teens are tremendously at risk, vulnerable to the stress and violence that threaten the health of the inner city. And when resources are limited and safe havens few, a problematic minority of teenagers will participate in the crime they see going on around them. Ideally, the city's curfew would protect the at-risk majority of teenagers from the dangers of night-life. And we agree with the city's policy makers that it is better to be on this side of the problem -trying to prevent further violence -rather than going to another funeral. However, we believe it is unacceptable and short-sighted for teens to be at the risk of harm yet excluded from the table when problems are analyzed and policy is made that directly affects them.

Curfew may be tested, but we believe it should not be endorsed until we see evidence that the reality matches its educational intention. In particular:

- The manner in which curfew is being instituted in our city is symptomatic of the strained adult-teen relationships in our city and, likewise, City Council's approach to issues affecting the city's young people: Teens are not part of the problem-solving equation. Curfew will have a tremendous effect on the ways teens live. Yet, when it was being discussed in Council, there were no mechanisms in place to hear systematically from teenagers from across the city. To find real solutions to the problems facing Pittsburgh, teenagers must be included as working partners at the table when issues of urban youth policy are addressed.
- Curfew is a family-community responsibility which enforcement by police turns into police action at a time when our city needs occasion for cooperation, not confrontation.

As progressive advocates for teens, we want to interject better thinking into the midst of a number of muddled ideas. Curfew alone is not the solution to Pittsburgh's problems. Together, as working partners with teens, we need to find better ways to prevent the victimization and violence of teenagers.