

A BRIGHT IDEA ON CRIME

KITE & KEY
MEDIA

[VIDEO TRANSCRIPT]

It's a basic part of being human: **we're scared of the dark.** And sure, most of us act like it's something that only applies to kids, but think about where adults go to get their thrills.

A fear of the dark may be universal, but it's far from our biggest worry. A [2018 study in The Lancet Psychiatry Journal](#) found that the most common phobias amongst Americans are a fear of animals or a fear of heights. Over 70% of Americans report having one or more unreasonable fears.

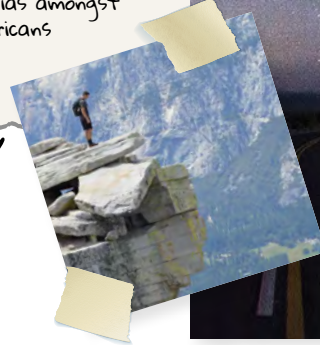
Horror movies? In the dark.

Haunted houses? In the dark.

Shame-eating an entire pack of Oreos? Yeah, you're probably doing that in the dark too.

But here's the thing: our fear of the dark is, in some ways, deeply *rational*. In fact, in cities throughout America, being scared of the dark...could save your life.

Why are humans so creeped out by darkness? Scientists conjecture that it's an evolutionary response to a pretty basic fact: before modern technology, **we weren't exactly at the top of the food chain.** If our ancestors ventured out onto the African plains after dark... they might not make it back.



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What's the animal most dangerous to mankind? Probably not the one you suspect. The World Health Organization estimates that mosquitoes kill 725,000 people a year. Over the entire history of the species, they're believed to have killed 52 billion humans—about half those who have ever lived. In recent years this has led to proposals to drive mosquitoes to extinction through gene editing that would kill their offspring before they're able to reproduce.

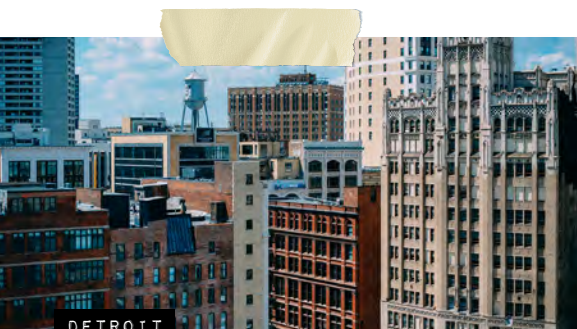


In fact, a 2011 study in Tanzania showed that the vast majority of lion attacks on humans occur *at night*—and disproportionately on the darkest nights of the month.¹ Because when you can't see is when you're at your most vulnerable.

And what was true in the wild tens of thousands of years ago is equally true when it comes to life in major cities today: darkness tends to be followed by disorder.

In cities across America, public spaces are too often unlit, either because local officials aren't keeping up on maintenance, criminals are shooting out the lights, or both. And chaos too often follows.

In 2012, for instance, it was reported that around 40 percent of the streetlights in Detroit were broken.² That same year, *Forbes* magazine ranked Detroit as America's most dangerous city.³ Some experts suspect that's not a coincidence.



As of 2019—the most recent year for which data is available—Detroit was still America's most dangerous major city, followed by St. Louis, Memphis, Baltimore, and Cleveland.

In 2016, researchers from the University of Chicago's crime lab set out to see just how much of a difference lighting could make for public safety. A team in New York City took 80 public housing complexes with high crime rates and randomly separated them into two groups of 40. Half of them were given bright nighttime lighting. Half of them weren't.

The result: in places that got new lights, index crimes (offenses like murder, robbery, assault, and car theft) dropped by 36 percent within a two-block radius. If you focused just on the area where the lights were actually installed, they were down 60 percent.⁴

The effects aren't limited to artificial light. A 2015 study by a pair of economists found that the switch to Daylight Savings Time decreased robberies 27% during evening hours that had been dark only days earlier.

Just this one simple change had the same effect as increasing police presence by 10 percent.

Now, you might think this sounds impractical. After all, it's not like we can cover every inch of the country in light. But here's the good news: we don't have to. Because one of the keys to understanding public safety in the United States is this: serious crime is overwhelmingly concentrated in a small handful of neighborhoods.

Just two percent of counties in America, for instance, have 51 percent of the country's murders.⁵

As of 2019, Baltimore has the nation's highest murder rate—followed by Detroit, New Orleans, Memphis, and Cleveland. As for the states: Louisiana had the highest murder rate—followed by Mississippi, Alaska, Missouri, and Maryland.



A 2004 study in Seattle found that 50 percent of the city's crime came from just five percent of its street segments.⁶ Brightening up places like those could literally be a life-saving proposition for the people living in and around those neighborhoods—and by the way, those people are overwhelmingly underprivileged. After all, if the lights go out in a nice suburb, you better believe they'll be fixed within a few days.

More lights can't solve everything, of course. To keep our neighborhoods safe, we'll still need well-trained cops walking the beat and citizens monitoring their communities through programs like the Neighborhood Watch.



A 2008 meta-analysis by the U.S. Department of Justice estimated that the average effect of Neighborhood Watch programs is to reduce crime by about 16%.

Combatting violence and disorder is hard work. But that just makes it all the more important to take advantage of the rare situations where **reducing crime is as simple as flipping a switch.**

[END OF SCRIPT]

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SOURCES:

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