

Curbing curfew violations: Police keep eye on kids at cinema, hot spots

[By Pink Rivera / El Paso Times](#)

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EL PASO -- Kids roaming the streets late at night can be a recipe for fights, car accidents, vandalism and worse.



To enforce the city curfew for people younger than 17, police say they pay extra attention to hot spots such as theaters, arcades and bowling alleys.

At Cinemark Tinseltown USA, one of the main attractions in the city for young people, 497 kids were stopped last year on allegations of curfew violations. Police lined them up against a wall, wrote out citations and held them until their parents picked them up.

The City Council enacted the curfew ordinance in 1997 because it said it wanted to deter gangs and violence. The ordinance made it a violation for anyone younger than 17 to be in any public place or establishment between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. unless he or she had parental supervision.

Even with particular attention paid to Tinseltown and similar diversions, police actually wrote only about half as many curfew citations in 2009 as in 2007, when a record 2,686 teenagers were accused of violations. The total for the first 11 months of 2009 was 1,328 curfew citations. Police issued 1,699 in 2008.

Of the citations last year, more than 25 percent involved kids near Tinseltown.

"There was a situation where kids were congregating outside the building and just hanging out," police spokesman Javier Sambrano. "Officers received complaints from the theater as well as surrounding businesses."

He said groups of teenagers, some of whom had not purchased movie tickets, crowded the sidewalk entering the theater. They took their time crossing the street to businesses such as Kohl's, Claire's, Rack Room Shoes and Krispy Kreme Doughnuts.

"Some kids were simply waiting for their parents to pick them up from the movies," Sambrano said. "The officers did release those kids. They can tell when the kids are lying and have no intention of purchasing anything from the businesses and are just there to hang out."

Joanna Lopez, the mother of four boys, including one who graduated from Hanks High School last year, said the curfew law is too harsh.

"I think over the weekend they should be allowed to stay out and be with their friends if they want to visit or window-shop. There's not a lot for kids that age to do in El Paso," Lopez said.

City Rep. Steve Ortega said he supports the curfew law.

"There are very few reasons for a child to be out at the wee hours of the morning or late at night," he said. "Unfortunately, some parents aren't as concerned as they should be with the oversight of their children."

Most curfew violations last year occurred in the summer. The totals were 117 in June, 177 in July and 145 in August. But police continued on curfew details, especially through the winter holidays.

Gabriela Valle, a municipal court employee, works with violators, some as young as 11, in setting them up with community service to lessen their \$150 fine.

"They help with the elderly or the Miracle League to help with disabled kids and setting up events," Valle said. "They also help clean up at recreation centers. It's important they take care of the citation and turn in their paperwork within the 90 days."

Not everybody cited is found in violation, as some of the cases end in dismissals.

Assistant Municipal Court Clerk Lilia Worrel said convictions are not typically reported to the Department of Public Safety, but citations may appear on a teen's record for up to five years.

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