

Chicago imposes ban on youth in downtown area on weekends

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23 May 2022

On Friday the Chicago City Council Committee on Public Safety voted 14–3 to pass a city-wide ordinance imposing a curfew on all minors aged 12–17. These youth are now banned from being in the streets, or any other public place, later than 10 p.m. any day of the week. In addition, the city will not allow anyone under the age of 18 to enter Millennium Park in the city’s downtown area later than 6 p.m. Thursday through Sunday unless accompanied by an adult.

The new ordinance allows for few exceptions, including attending a ticketed concert or other event like the Lollapalooza summer music festival. These events are generally attended by wealthier middle-class youth and tourists, rather than Chicago’s young workers.

The curfew law was introduced by Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot after 16-year-old Seandell Holliday was shot and killed in Millennium Park on May 14.

Minors found in violation with the curfew will be subject to arrest by Chicago police, a confrontation that carries with it the threat of lethal violence if an officer claims to fear for their safety. On the night of May 18, an unarmed 13-year-old boy was shot and critically wounded by Chicago police in an alleged carjacking incident. The child was running away.

Lightfoot claimed the law is intended to protect young people from gun violence. “It gives me no pleasure to impose these rules and restrictions. But having exhausted every other opportunity, every other tool and remedy, we’ve got to go to this next step to make sure that our jewel of Millennium Park is available and open to everyone,” Lightfoot said when the youth bans were announced.

The curfew was criticized by the American Civil Liberties Union, which issued a statement saying the law will only cause “unnecessary stops and arrests.”

Some members of the city council have also opposed the law. Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, affiliated with

the Democratic Socialists of America, said he opposed the measure based on studies that show historically curfews have no effect on reducing crime. Alderman Ray Lopez, who is challenging Lightfoot in the 2023 mayoral election from the right, criticized the proposal, pointing out that Chicago already has an 11 p.m. curfew and that in recent years it has gone unenforced with curfew citations dropping from 2,453 in 2018 to 364 in 2021.

In recent years Chicago has indeed seen an intense rise in violent crime. In 2021 nearly 800 homicides were reported, an increase of about 300 deaths compared to 2019 and 25 more than 2020. So far this year there have been over 200 shooting deaths.

None of the Democratic officials spoke to the root cause of gun violence: economic devastation and decline in living standards for the city’s working class, and the Democratic Party’s decades of privatization and austerity that have created a social crisis to which it has responded to with police patrols dispensing lethal violence.

The response of the mayor to criminalize youth and use the police to crack down on them does nothing to prevent violence. Rather, the police-state measures have only been deployed now that the crisis of working-class youth has spilled over into the wealthy downtown areas and threatens to spook customers away from Chicago’s lucrative tourism industry.

The vast majority of all shooting deaths in Chicago take place within the impoverished and working-class areas on the south and west sides of the city. These areas, once home to countless manufacturing and industrial jobs, have been stripped of resources and public services, including massive cuts to education, mental health and social services.

The effects of deindustrialization and general lack of economic opportunities has profoundly impacted young people. A 2020 study found that in Chicago over 8 percent of young people aged 16–19 were neither in

school nor employed. For ages 20–24 over 20 percent were out of work. When looking at just Chicago’s black residents, who are overwhelmingly working class, the unemployment rate for the 20–24 age group jumps to 38 percent.

In West Garfield Park, the neighborhood with the most homicides per capita in 2021, at 21.8 killings per 10,000 people, the median income is just \$25,648 per year. Similarly, in neighboring North Lawndale, the area with the most total homicides, 44 deaths, the median income is \$26,781 per year. The poverty line in Chicago is estimated to be around an annual income of \$26,000 for a family of four.

A 2020 study from the Northwestern Institute for Policy Research found that in 2019 the median age of a homicide victim was 27 years old, and that young people aged 18–24 were the most likely to be killed in a violent crime. Black youth aged 18–19 were the highest-risk group, facing a homicide rate of 182.7 per 100,000 residents.

Despite the crisis-level deterioration in many areas, Democratic leaders are deepening their attack on public education. Just last month, parents of Chicago Public Schools students protested outside the schools headquarters to oppose budget cuts.

Earlier this month, *Forbes* magazine announced the state of Illinois now has *twenty* billionaires, all living in the Chicago area (except Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker, who officially resides in the state capital Springfield while in office). There is no lack of resources for social needs—schools, jobs, health care and social services or transportation infrastructure. Chicago has also received \$1.9 billion in federal pandemic relief funding. But the Lightfoot administration gave some \$281.5 million to the police for payroll, and \$465 million to JP Morgan Chase bank, retiring short-term city debt.

Damayanti Wallace, co-founder of “GoodKidsMadCity” (GKMC), a Chicago youth organization dedicated to ending violence, spoke with the WSWs and shared thoughts on the curfew.

“The curfew further enforces the idea that punishment is the only way to produce changed behavior in people and especially youth. I believe it is to target young people in general. Instead of offering resources to young people and giving them the option of whether or not to be in one place or another, they are automatically being punished and restricted.”

On the effects of the curfew, Wallace said, “The violence may reduce, it may not. Regardless, the root problem is still there. Youth are looking for things to do

as they come into their adulthood. Those curiosities should be fostered instead of pushed away.”

“Youth require resources. They need to be given opportunities and see what the world has to offer otherwise the influences of their neighborhood, television shows, music become the only world they know... Chicago is hyper segregated, and poverty is concentrated, Black and Brown youth are forced to compete for resources and the colonized violence we experience, plus the police state makes us further marginalized.”

GKMC has been petitioning the city to pass a “PeaceBook” ordinance that would provide resources for various youth programs in the poorest communities in Chicago. So far, their demands have been ignored by Lightfoot and other city officials.

Wallace concluded saying that the PeaceBook is only an initial proposal and that ultimately young people desire to be free of racism, homophobia and capitalism. “Black youth should be able to move freely without restrictions!”

The imposition of the curfew comes after thousands of youth in Chicago have come into open struggle against the city government that is dominated by the Democratic Party and presides over the city’s inequality. Hoping to suppress further political opposition, like those of the massive George Floyd protests in the summer of 2020, Lightfoot and the ruling class are embracing authoritarian police state measures. That same summer the mayor instructed police to make arbitrary arrests of young people ahead of the July 4 weekend.

Increasingly, young people are coming into conflict with capitalism and the social misery, including violent crime, that it produces. More and more of these youth are moving politically to the left. We greatly welcome this movement and insist that young people turn to the working class of all races and take up a serious fight for socialist principles. We encourage all young people in Chicago and throughout the country who agree to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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