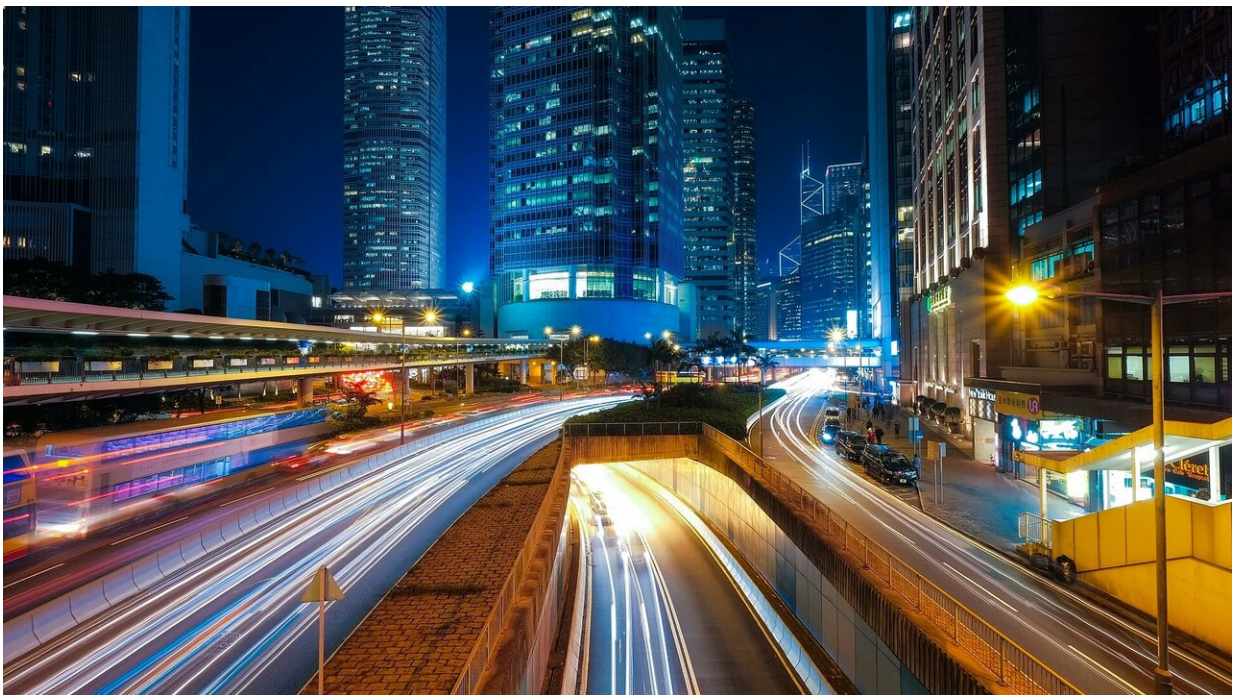# Why more cities are hiring 'night mayors' and establishing forms of nighttime governance

May 31 2023, by Jess Reia

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Growing up in a small town in Brazil, my daily life was shaped by the rhythms of my family's working hours. My father has been a night shift worker for over three decades at a local factory. We got used to silent days and busy nights, noticing how our lives weren't in sync with those

of our neighbors.

After all those years, my fascination with the night as a separate, habitable world became a research project as a Mellon Fellow at McGill University. Then it became an opportunity to work with [local governments](#) and communities on nightlife policies.

From June 2020 to November 2022, I was a member of the [MTL 24/24's first Night Council](#) in Montreal, where I contributed to data research and policies for nighttime governance.

While trying to understand nocturnal life, two main questions emerged: Why should cities govern themselves after dark? How can they responsibly do so?

The recent calls for a "[science of the night](#)" and evidence-based nighttime policymaking are taking place, as over [50 cities around the world](#) have developed new forms of nighttime governance.

A complex ecosystem

Often, when people think about the nighttime in cities, a core set of impressions come to mind.

There's fear of the dark, safety concerns and noise disturbances. It's a period that's ripe for partying, illicit activities and recklessness. And then there are the traditional notions of night: silence, sleep and rejuvenation.

Much work has gone into figuring out how to alleviate some of these fears and facilitate quietude, such as [building out a public lighting infrastructure](#) and passing [noise codes](#) with [special hotlines](#) for noise complaints.

However, the nightlife of any given city is far more complex.

In my research, I mapped people, activities, organizations and communities that operate primarily during the night, forming a nightlife ecosystem.

Some cultural spaces and institutions operate at night, like museums, college libraries and cafes. Media outlets don't stop reporting about the world at night, while some restaurants and convenience stores serve up food, drinks and cigarettes 24/7. If an accident happens at night, people need access to health care. Childbirth doesn't wait for the sun to rise.

Waste management and roadwork often take place after dark to avoid interrupting traffic, and many formal and informal laborers do the work of keeping cities running efficiently while other people sleep. In many cities around the world, public transit runs late or overnight, and various communities make use of the city after dark to congregate, learn and explore, whether it's at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, night school or open mic nights.

Governing and studying the night

Fortunately, policymakers and scholars have recently made a push to prioritize the hours when cities are supposedly asleep.

Amsterdam was the first city to formally recognize the night as a space and time that requires special attention from elected officials, citizens and civil servants.

Following more than 10 years of appointing unofficial night mayors, Amsterdam formally institutionalized the position in 2014, which set the stage for a bureaucracy of councils, departments and commissions dedicated to governing the city after dark.

Perhaps not surprisingly, New York—the largest city in the U.S.—was at the forefront of this movement in the country.

In September 2017, the city established its [Office of Nightlife](#) with the appointment of Ariel Palitz as its founding director—the equivalent of a night mayor or night czar. With Palitz [stepping down from the role in early 2023](#), the city is looking for a new "nightlife mayor." This office is tasked with the routine regulation of after-hours businesses and issuing licenses, as well as confronting abstract challenges like the ways in which gentrification leads to rising rent prices, which threaten cultural and community spaces that operate at night.

Since then, Washington has established [an office for nocturnal governance](#), Boston recently created [the position of night czar](#), and Atlanta [formed a Nightlife Division](#).

Night governance is more institutionalized in the higher-income parts of the world, but experiments and studies also exist in lower-income countries. In 2022, Bogotá joined the "24-Hour Cities Network," following the publication of [an extensive report](#) commissioned by the local government in 2019, to help city leaders understand the nocturnal needs of the Colombian capital.

Other cities in Latin America, such as San Luis Potosí in Mexico, have self-appointed night ambassadors. Cali, the third-largest city in Colombia, launched an initiative that [mapped the nighttime priorities of its residents](#).

In academia, there's also been a push to better understand the night. As the authors of [a 2022 nighttime manifesto](#) wrote, "Nightlife inspires individuals, forms communities, and ignites cities. Rather than serving as an escape from the present, nightlife provides us with a window into different realities."

Encompassing disciplines like geography and history, an interdisciplinary field called "night studies" has emerged, bringing together scholars from various backgrounds to better understand the urban night from a range of perspectives. There have been studies on light pollution and its effects on humans and wildlife, how the shuttering of LGBTQ nightclubs has weakened communities and how late-night venues and businesses spur higher rents.

Responsible tech adoption

As cities formally adopt systems to govern the night, one of my key concerns centers on the rise of surveillance technology and the deployment of big data.

Even if technology isn't one of the main pillars of nighttime governance just yet, municipal governments have already been investing in smart technologies, often without proper frameworks in place to safeguard human rights. One of the most controversial examples is the deployment of facial recognition technologies in public spaces, which has happened in cities such as New York, Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. The use of facial recognition at music festivals in 2019 led to campaigns for its ban.

In my view, the urge to make the night safer should not simply mean more surveillance.

The use of surveillance technologies has also been shown to increase racial and gender discrimination because they often incorporate biased data sets and disregard historical inequalities. There's a long history of night regulations and policing that has disproportionately targeted minorities.

With responsible, careful deployment, however, certain data can be a useful tool for night governance. For example, responsibly tracking

movement at night can help cities understand where more nighttime public transit might be useful.

Expanding safety and a sense of belonging is essential. While [consulting with residents of Montreal](#), I learned about the ways in which they wanted [the night to be safer](#) for LGBTQ communities and free from racial and ethnic discrimination. The [city](#)'s nightlife was also entangled with the fight against gentrification and more reasonable noise mitigation policies—issues that affect many places in North America.

As more American cities adopt nighttime governance mechanisms, lessons learned from cities like Montreal are valuable—and can help families like my own, who don't operate on the traditional 9-to-5 clock, [thrive](#).

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