

## Center for Problem-Oriented Policing

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## Loud Car Stereos

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## The Problem of Loud Car Stereos

This guide addresses the problem of loud car stereos, one of the most common sources of noise complaints in many jurisdictions.<sup>†</sup> The guide begins by describing the problem and reviewing factors that contribute to it. It then identifies a series of questions that might assist you in analyzing your local problem. Finally, it reviews responses to the problem and what is known about these from evaluative research and police practice. Throughout this guide, the term loud car stereos is used as a shorthand way of saying car stereos that are played loudly. The problem is attributable mainly to the use of special stereo equipment capable of producing extremely loud sound, rather than factory-installed stereo equipment.

<sup>†</sup> Sound, noise and annoyance are not the same thing. Sound is merely a physical property entailing sound waves. Noise is unwanted sound. Annoyance is the negative feeling one gets from being exposed to noise. Sound can be measured in terms of its pressure, frequency, variation, character, and quality. Annoyance is a subjective measure.

Most jurisdictions have some form of noise law that regulates loud car stereos. Police are concerned about loud car stereos for two main reasons: 1) they annoy some people, and 2) they inhibit drivers' ability to hear emergency signals on the road. This guide focuses on the annoyance aspect of loud car stereos, rather than the safety aspect, because there is not much published research and practice related to the latter.<sup>††</sup>

<sup>††</sup> Police in Prince William County, Va., demonstrated through controlled tests that loud car stereos impair drivers' ability to hear emergency vehicle sirens, and concluded this is a serious aspect of the problem (Smith 2000).

Loud car stereos can also make another noise problem worse: they can activate some car alarms. In some jurisdictions, drug dealers advertise by cruising neighborhoods with the car stereo turned up loud. In most jurisdictions, the problem of loud car stereos falls to the police to address, primarily because enforcement carries the risk of violent confrontation.<sup>†††</sup>

<sup>†††</sup> At least in the United States, noise control has become almost exclusively a matter for local authorities since the federal government drastically cut back funding for noise control in the early 1980s (Sickler-Hart 1997[[Full text](#)]; Lief 1994; Schultz 1999; Sedgwick 1991[[Full text](#)]).

The problem of loud car stereos is more widespread than a simple tally of complaints would reveal. Perhaps only 5 to 10 percent of people bothered by any type of noise will file an official complaint, because other factors influence people.<sup>1</sup> Many citizens are not aware of their legal right to quiet and do not know where they can register a complaint.

Consequently, the volume of official complaints about loud car stereos might indicate the existence of a problem, but not necessarily how intense or widespread it is.

## Factors Contributing to the Problem of Loud Car Stereos

Understanding the factors that contribute to your problem will help you frame your own local analysis questions, determine good