# CITIZENS AGAINST CRIME:

# AN ASSESSMENT OF THE

# NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH PROGRAM

# IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

by

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## AN ASSESSMENT OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH PROGRAM IN WASHINGTON D.C.[1]

In late February of 1981, Mayor Marion Barry and his police chief, Burtell Jefferson, announced their plan to battle crime. Their "Unified Program to Reduce Crime," the mayor declared, was "the most carefully conceived, most comprehensive, and most ambitious anticrime program ever developed for the District of Columbia."[2] Traditionally, crime-fighting in the District and othar large cities had tended to mean just one thing: more police. While the Mayor's proposal included minor manpower changes, th* emphasis was elsewhere. Citizens were to play an important role, and one way they were to do so was by organizing into small groups of neighbors who would monitor events on the street, watch over each other's residences, and speedily report any suspicious occurrences to the police.

That year 67,910 serious crimes — homocides, forcible rapes, aggravated assaults, robberies, burglaries, larcenies, auto thefts — were recorded throughout the city. The next year, 1982, that figure dropped by over 2,200 crimes, about 3.3 percent. And the year after that saw a further decline of over 7,999 crimes, another 12 percent.[3] In the eyes of the new chief, Maurice T. Turner, Jr., the neighborhood watch program was entitled to much of the credit. A spokesman for the International Association of Chiefs of Police was even more enthusiastic about the neighborhood watches, when asked to comment on the crime drop throughout the metropolitant area. "By God they work, and they work beautifully," he proclaimed.[4]

Have police and citizens finally discovered the key that will unlock the door to safe streets and secure homes? Or, are neighborhood watches simply the latest in a series of crime-fighting strategies that have been introduced with a bang then faded out with a whimper? Even if they are effective, watches may hold more promise for some types of neighborhoods than others. Will crime watches help those in the poorest, most deteriorated and crime-ridden sections of the city? Or are they another example of a program — like mortgage interest deductions or tuition tax credits — that provides greater benefits to those with lesser needs?

This report presents the results of a study of neighborhood watches in one police district in Washington, D.C. The study was conducted by students taking part in a research seminar for urban affairs majors at George Washington University. Because the.project had to be completed within a single semester, and because it was conducted without the benefit of any outside funding support, the decision was made to undertake a limited pilot study rather than a major analysis that would aim for definitive answers. Some of the findings, nonetheless, are interesting and potentially of value to city officials and neighborhood activists, flmong the conclusions are:

* * There is some evidence that, within relatively high crime areas, watches are more likely to be formed in more prosperous blocks and in those with a higher percentage of white residents.

* * A significant minority of those blocks sporting neighborhood watch signs no longer have active organized watch programs. Some may never have participated in any but the most limited manner.

* * Among those blocks that have watches, there is some evidence that the more active and more orçpnized are located in pro sperous neighborhoods with a hi gher percentage of white residents.

* * Most block watch captains believe that the watch program has made residents feel more secure, and many believe that the program has succeeded in deterring criminals.

* * When reported crime figures are examined/ however, there is no clear evidence that crime has dropped more rapidly in participating blocks than in those that are not participating in the neighborhood watch program. Nor do reports of crime fall more rapidly in blocks with active watches than in those with inactive watches.

## WHAT NEIGHBORHOOD WATCHES ARE SUPPOSED TO DO

The reasoning behind the neighborhood watch program is straightforward. It is increasingly apparent that police cannot win the battle against crime if they are forced to fight that battle alone. Even the most vigilant police officers, cruising slowly in their cars on patrol, cannot possibly see most of the strange and

suspicious behavior that might alert them to illegal activities. Only through coincidence and rare good luck could they hope to spot a crime underway. Even the most astute detective is unlikely to solve the average crime without cooperative and observant witnesses. By improving communication between police and residents, the neighborhood watch program is intended to provide police with additional "eyes and ears." And by encouraging neighbors to talk and cooperate with one another it is expected to help citizens to help themselves.

The Police View; From Resistance to Support That many police departments are actively promoting citizen involvement in crime-fighting represents a major turn of events. During most of this century, police authorities have emphasized the message that crime-fighting is a serious, dangerous, and complicated enterprise that is best left to professionals. Many police reformers aggressively sought to discourage interaction between police and the community. They felt that too intimate a relationship between police and local political organizations inevitably led to corruption and favoritism.

Law enforcement under the political machines that dominated many large cities during the early twentieth century was neither uniform nor effective. Those individuals, ethnic groups, and neighborhoods that found themselves in favor with the local ward bosses could count on patrol officers to interpret the law in their favor. Illegal behavior on their part might be handled informally, or even overlooked. Less favored individuals and groups — such as the unfortunate black person found walking, without good cause, through

an all-white neighborhood — could find themselves harassed by police, or charged with disorderly conduct or another vaguely defined offense. More systematic forms of corruption thrived under the machine system as well. Some politicians and party officials received pay-offs in return for protecting criminals from police interference. "As the patrolmen well knew, or soon found out," Robert Fogelson reports, "they were no match for an influential gambler, liquor dealer, or other disreputable businessman, let alone a well-organized, highly mobile, fully armed gang of criminals closely allied with the ward leader."[5]

As an antidote to corruption and favoritism, reformers recomnended a series of changes intended to bring police under a central authority and to insulate police departments from "interference[1]* from the political realm. While many of these changes succeeded ' in improving the quality and reliability of law enforcement, they may also have had the effect of placing a barrier between citizens and police. To turn police into a more effective crime-fighting unit, reformers stripped police of various noncrime responsibilities, such as supervising elections, operating ambulances, inspecting boilers, and censoring movies.[6] In order to reduce opportunities for corruption and favoritism, reformers rotated patrolmen among available beats rather than assigning them permanently to a neighborhood. And, in order to increase police visibility and increase the area an officer could keep under surveillance, reformers assigned police to patrol cars instead of foot patrol. By reducing social contact between police and citizens, and by limiting contact to emotionally charged situations in which

crimes had occured, these changes increased the likelihood that citizens and police would regard each other as strangers.

The reformers argued that they were bringing professionalism to law enforcement. Portraying themselves as professionals — experts trained in an exclusive body of knowledge — helped the police gather popular support for their efforts to disentangle themselves from political meddling and increased their status and salaries as well.

In adopting a self-image as professionals, however, police also adopted a tendency to view citizens as a source of interference. Doctors cringe at the notion of consulting their patients about the proper therapy, and some find that pestering by patients can best be reduced by keeping their patients unaware. In latching onto the "professional" label, police took on some of the same self-righteousness. Efforts by citizens to play a role in law enforcement frequently were smacked down with the claim that "we are the experts — your role is simply to let us get on with our job."

Two factors convinced many police officials to reconsider their resistance to the idea of providing citizens with a more active role in the law enforcement process. The first was the demand for community control and civilian review boards that began to be heard from many minority neighborhoods during the late 1960s. Complaining about police brutality, insensitivity, and ineffectiveness, spokespersons — particularly from among the black community — insisted that police be made more accountable. Their demands included the reversal of many of the reformers' actions. "Instead of centralization, they insisted on administrative decentralization, instead of professionalism, they pressed for citizen participation.

and instead of bureaucratization, they called for political accountability."[7]

Police, for the most part, did not take kindly to these demands. They perceived the call for community involvement as an anti-police movement which threatened their independence. Fairly mild reforms that were intended to give citizens a role in monitoring police behavior were resisted vehemently. Mayor John Lindsay gave citizens a role on a board that advised the police commissioner of New York City. The Patrolmen's Benevolent Association — the equivalent of the local police union — spearheaded a petition drive to force the issue to be submitted to a referendum where it was soundly defeated by an almost two-to-one vote.[8]

Nevertheless, the demands did have an effect. Some of the momentum to change was imposed upon the police by broad external forces. Demands by minority groups were given added potency by the atmosphere of urban unrest. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders had cited "deep hostility between police and ghetto communities as a primary cause[1]* of the riots that plagued U.S. cities from 1964 until 1968.^ The Commission recommended that police put greater emphasis on community services and community relations. Black and American Indian activists in a few cities became so alienated from the local police that they launched their own patrols, intended to monitor police as well as provide additional protection for neglected neighborhoods. In an effort to blunt these extreme challenges, some police officials began to consider mild forms of community involvement as a desirable alternative: better to encourage citizen involvement under the control of the police than to see the

emergence of vigilante operations.

Possibly more important than demands for community control, in propelling the police toward cooperating with citizen anti-crime activities, was a growing awareness that the public was increasingly restless over the failure of the police to stop crime. Between 1960 and 1975 the crime rate more than tripled, in spite of the fact that state and local government spending on police had risen nearly 350 percent. In 1960 there had been 1.7 police employees per 1,000 residents nationwide. By 1975, there were 2.6.[10] And still crime continued to rise. In this environment some police felt that acknowledging citizens' responsibility to reduce crime could help shield the force from charges of ineffectiveness. The police could argue that they were unable to do anything unless and until citizens did their own share.

A few important studies, moreover, began to convince some police that citizen involvement might actually work. These studies made it clear that most crimes reported to the police are never solved. But when an arrest does occur, the evidence revealed that "it usually is because the victim or witness is able to identify the offender; because the police were called rapidly enough to catch the offender at or near the scene of the crime; or because a victim, witness, or police officer spotted evidence...that clearly linked a suspect to the crime."[11] Arrests, it was further found, are more likely to lead to convictions when witnesses are available as well. A study in the District of Columbia, for example, found conviction rates to be nearly twice as high when at least two lay witnesses were available to testify as when fewer than two witnesses were available.[12]

Their dependence on witnesses and victims makes it critical that police be informed quickly after a crime occurs. Recognizing this, police have long emphasized the importance of police response time, which measures how long it takes for the police to arrive once they have been called. But a study in Kansas City dramatically proved that police response time is considerably less important than citizen response time. Kansas City police were found to respond to assualts, on average, in about 3 minutes; to robberies in about 3.5 minutes; and to burglaries in 6 minutes. But victims of assault, on average, did not call the police until over an hour after the crime. Robberies were not called in until 23 minutes had passed. Burglaries were reported a little over 30 minutes after being discovered, although they often were discovered many hours after they had taken place.-*--*

By involving citizens through block watch and similar programs, police hope they can increase the likelihood that crimes will be reported swiftly and that witnesses will be observant and willing to testify. And, if they succeed in these goals, they expect that they can increase the proportion of criminals caught and sent to prison.

Enc our aging Se 3f -Help While police usually describe neighborhood watch activities as extensions of their own efforts — their "eyes and ears" -- some advocates have a broader goal in mind. Rather than simply helping the police, they suggest, the cohesive and organized neighborhood can replace the police, to some degree.

Central to this perspective is the notion of informal social cont rol s. Criminologi sts such as James Q, Wilson and Ge or ge L. Kelling have suggested that healthy neighborhoods are governed by a set of unspoken rules regarding acceptable behavior.[14] These rules

are enforced by residents themselves: when neighbors admonish disruptive children, when those who fail to keep their property up are scolded or made to feel embarrassed, or when strangers are watched quietly from upstairs windows. When these informal mechanisms break down — as they often do when population changes rapidly, when families with children are replaced by those without, when residents do not trust their neighbors to hold up their end of the bargain, or when police treat all neighborhoods alike without sensitivity to differences in values and senses of order — crime is likely to rise.

Some believe that such informal means of maintaining order were much more widespread earlier in our history, when communities were smaller, more homogenous, and more stable. Neighborhood watches may help to reestablish the sense of community that is lacking in the anonymous urban environment by bringing neighbors together and demonstrating that they share common interests and concerns. The most optimistic advocates suggest that neighborhood watches, in this sense, may become the bridge to a broad range of cooperative, self-help ventures in areas beyond that simply of fighting crime.

## EVIDENCE FROM OTHER CITIES

The District of Columbia's neighborhood watch program is one among many. There are over 20,000 communities — and an estimated 5 million persons — engaging in watches or citizen patrols nationwide.[15] Citizen involvement in law enforcement — through personal vigilance or organized vigilante activities — has a long tradition in this country. But organized watches, operating in a

formal or informal partnership with the police, are a more recent development. Many of the existing efforts got an early boost from the federal government. Congress, in 1976, directed the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to encourage programs at the local level; LEAA's Office of Community Anti-crime Programs had a $15 million budget.[16]

Because most watch programs are too new for their accomplishments to have been rigorously judged, enthusiasm for neighborhood watches has outrun evidence that they really work. Anecdotal reports, however, have been extremely encouraging. One neighborhood in Detroit formed a watch in the early 1970s. Crime, especially burglaries, dropped dramatically — about 60 percent. Pittsfield, Massachusetts started its program in 1979. The burglary rate dropped from 682, that year, to 547 in 1981.[17]

But anecdotal reports, such as these, must be regarded cautiously. Police officials, politicians, and neighborhood activists may have a stake in declaring their efforts to have been successful, even if the methods used to determine success are impressionistic or slipshod. Ideally, evaluations of neighborhood watch programs should consider the possibilities that crime has been simply displaced to a adjoining neighborhood; that the drop in crime is only temporary; that police may be be choosing to record fewer of the crimes that are taking place; or that the decline is due to other factors, such as an upturn in the national economy, the institution of stricter sentencing procedures in state courts, or a drop in the proportion of citizens in the crime-prone teenage years.

Only a few evaluations are sophisticated enough in their design

to begin to address these issues. Those, too, are generally upbeat. Seattle, Washington initiated its Community Crime Prevention Program in 1975. As in the District, neighborhood watches were part of a multi-pronged strategy that included home inspections, property identification, and the distribution of crime prevention information. Surveys were conducted to determine rates of victimization both before and after the program. Burglaries declined between 48 and 61 percent in the households that participated. Crime did not rise in neighboring, nonparticipating households, or in adjacent areas, suggesting that crimes were prevented and not simply pushed elsewhere. The Seattle evaluators concluded that block watches were "the single most important feature" of the community crime prevention program, with the other strategies only a "complement to this one indispensable service."[18]

Hartford, Connecticut implemented its Neighborhood Crime Prevention Program in a single neighborhood on an experimental basis during the mid-1970s. Along with programs designed to encourage community involvement, the Hartford program emphasized physical changes (such as street and alley closings) and reorganization of the police department to make it more neighborhood oriented. Block watches were established, consisting of pairs of volunteers who were to walk the streets armed with two-way radios. Burglary rates dropped from 18.4 per 100 households to 10.6 in the first year. Robbery/purse snatch victimization also declined. Surveys indicated that residents of the neighborhood became less fearful, more willing to walk the streets during the daytime, better able to recognize strangers in the neighborhood, and more likely to make arrangements

with neighbors to watch each others' houses.[19]

Proponents of the neighborhood watch program in the District of Columbia can find much satisfaction front findings such as these. But the experiences in other cities raise some warnings as well. One very real danger is that the benefits of neighborhood watches may be short-lived. In Pittsfield, where burglary rates dropped from 682 to 547 in two years, the third year of the program saw rates shoot back up to 670.[20] The Hartford evaluators admitted that it was "possible that the effects observed...resulted from a short-term response of citizens and police to the unusual attention to crime...."21 As a 1982 Ford Foundation paper warned, there is a danger of "burn out" as participants' initial enthusiasm gives way to weariness, boredom, and inconvenience.[22] In Seattle, a follow-up survey showed that, after about 18 months, the burglary rate in participating households actually climbed above that in households not taking part in the crime prevention program.[2-*]

Also troublesome is the evidence that some robberies may have been displaced to adjoining neighborhoods. The Hartford surveys, moreover, failed to support the expectation that watches would stimulate a broad growth in community attachment and cooperation. Participating residents did indicate that they were better able to recognize their neighbors, and they were somewhat more likely to make arrangements with their neighbors to watch one anothers' homes. Otherwise/ however, the Hartford study concluded that there was "little evidence of improved resident interaction and relationships.[1124] Particularly disturbing to those who would like to see the watch program grafted onto the District's poorest and most

crime-ridden neighborhoods is the conclusion, in Seattle, that the program "is best limited to single-family or duplex houses."[25]

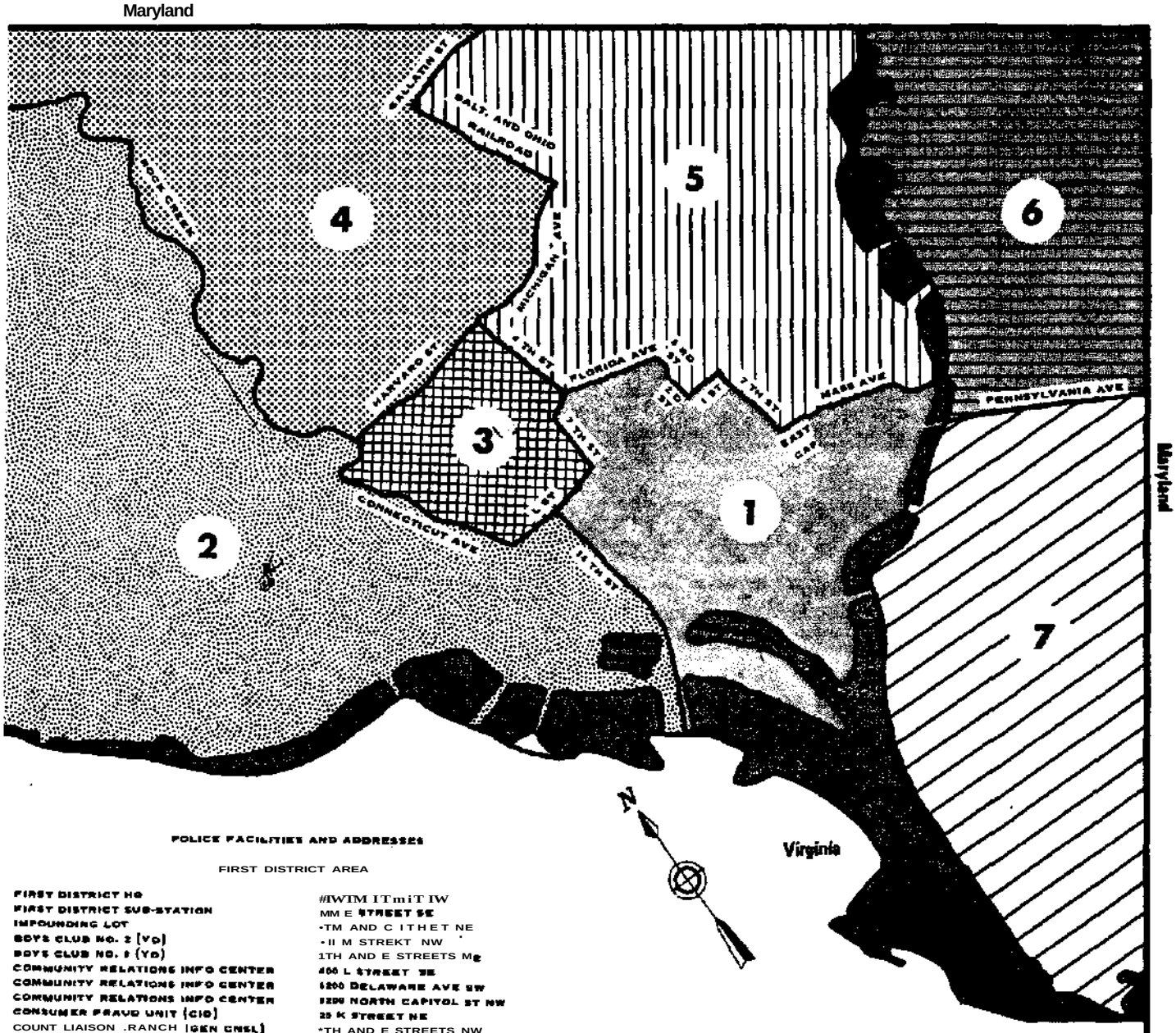
## THE FIRST POLICE DISTRICT

The First Police District is perhaps the most diverse in the District of Columbia. Bounded, roughly, by the Anacostia River and Washington Channel on the south, 14th Street on the west and a jagged diagonal including Florida and Massachussetts Avenues on the north and east, the First District inlcudes all the residential areas of the Southwest quadrant, much of the Mall, most of the Old Downtown area, Chinatown, and the Capital Hill and Shaw neighborhoods, (see Map) It includes census tract #72 that, according to the 1980 census, is over 93 percent black with median household income only $6,605. And it includes areas like tract #66, on Capitol Hill, with a population that is 8.5% black, median income nearly $24,000, and homes values averaging over $150,000 in 1980.

Judged simply by the total number of index crimes (homocides, forcible rapes, robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries, thefts, and auto thefts), the First District is also the most dangerous of the city's seven police districts. In 1983, there were 2,190 crimes against persons and 8,410 crimes against property in the First District. Only the Third District (which includes Dupont Circle, Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, LeDroit Park, and Logan Circle) had more crimes against persons. Only the Second District (which includes Foggy Bottom, Georgetown, and all of the neighborhoods west of Rock Creek Park) had more crimes against property {See Table 1).

# Washington, D.C., by Police Districts

## With Locations of Police Facilities




POLICE FACILITIES AND ADDRESSES

FIRST DISTRICT AREA

| | |
|---|---|
| FIRST DISTRICT HQ | #IWIM ITmiT IW |
| FIRST DISTRICT SUB-STATION | MM E 9TREET SE |
| IMPOUNDING LOT | -TM AND C ITHET NE |
| BOYS CLUB NO. 2 (VD) | • II M STREKT NW |
| BOYS CLUB NO. 9 (YD) | 1TH AND E STREETS Mg |
| COMMUNITY RELATIONS INFO CENTER | 400 L STREET SE |
| COMMUNITY RELATIONS INFO CENTER | 1200 DELAWARE AVE SW |
| COMMUNITY RELATIONS INFO CENTER | 1320 NORTH CAPITOL ST NW |
| CONSUMER FRAUD UNIT (CIB) | 25 K STREET NE |
| COUNT LIAISON .RANCH (GEN CNSL) | *TH AND E STREETS NW |
| "*»»O« SKCTION (SOD) | HO WATER STREET IW |
| IMPOUND LOT (TRAFFIC Oiv) | TTH AND MT VBNNON PL Nw |
| PKRSONNEL DIVISION (D/C P AND T) | •It-TTH STREET NW |
| POUCK HIADBUAHTIRI | >M INDIANA AVKNUK NW |
| POLICK MdIUITINO BRANCH (pER« DIV) | IS K STREET NE |
| SPECIAL OFFICERS IRANCH (INTKI. Div) | •!* H STREET Nw |
| NKW CAN SHOP (PROP DIV) | SOUTH CAP AND 1 ST SE |

SECOND DISTRICT AREA

| | |
|---|---|
| SECOND DISTRICT HO | MM IQAMO AVENUE N*J |
| SECOND DISTRICT SUB-STATION | ZIII VOLTA PLACE NW |
| BOY* CLUB NO. • (VE>| | MASS AND WISC AVE Nw |
| SPSCIAL OPERATIONS DIVISION |PO|| | HOI L STREET HW |

THIRD DISTRICT AREA

| | |
|---|---|
| THIRD DISTRICT HQ | • MO V STNEET NW |
| THIRD DISTRICT SUB-STATIO*| | MI NEW YORK AVE NW |
| BOYS CLUB NO. II (vo) | 2*1 V STREET NW |

FOURTH DISTRICT AREA

| | |
|---|---|
| FOUftTH DISTRICT HO | • M I SRonai* AVC n* |
| •OV« CLUB NO. I (YD) | *«» BLASDEN AVK NW |
| BOY* CLU* NO. ID (VD) | HTH AND NEWTON STS N«w |
| CHAPLAINS OPFICC | •vot oconaiA AVE NW |
| COMMUNITY RELATIONS /t'IFO CENTER | 3247 MT PLEASANT ST NW |
| TACTICAL IRANCN (« OD) | 97M GEORGIA AVE NW |

FIFTH DISTRICT AREA

| | |
|---|---|
| FIFTH DISTRICT HO | IMS BLADBNSBUNe RO HI |
| •OVI CLUB NO. *It* |VD) | 1421 U a m I N C I STNBBT NE |
| COMMUNITY RELATIONS INFO CENTEn | 7K-IIST STREET */* |
| OFFICER FRIENDLY OFFICE (cRo) | • •» BLAOENSBUNB RO NI |
| RADIO MAINT BRANCH |cOHH Div) | ItIMTH STNEET NE |
| TRANSPORTATION BRANCH (PROP Div) | 1229-4TH STREET NE |
| YOUTH DIVISION (FOB) | 1748 RHODE ISLAND AVE NE |

MIITH DISTRICT AREA

| | |
|---|---|
| SIXTH OI STRICT *HO* | 4HS MNNINO ROAD N( |
| •OYS kLUI NO. 14 (Vtt) | I-I)KD PLACE BE |
| COMMUNITY RELATIONS INFO CENTER | 4135 BENNING ROAD NE |

SEVENTH DISTRICT AREA

| | |
|---|---|
| SEVENTH DISTRICT H« | tIU MISSISSIPPI AVE SK |
| ADMINISTRATIVE DUTY BHANCH | 1 DC VILLAGE LANK SW |
| • OY9 CLUB NO. If (VD) | •» MILWAUKEE PL SE |
| SIftLS CLUB (YD) | •M ICLLIVUt ST SK |
| HKLICOPTER SECTION | H D ) | US NAVAL STATION |
| •MPOUNDINB LOT (PROP Div) | •LUC PLAINS |
| POLICE AND FIRE CLINtC (ASB) | S DC VILLAOK LANE SW |
| FNOFEHTY DIVISION IT**) | MM RAILROAD AVE SE |
| RCTIRBMKNT BOARD | 2 DC VILLAGE LANK SW |
| TRAIN1NS ACAPCMV |t>fc *f* AND T) | •MI BLUE PLAINS DR SW |
| WAHENOWSB (PROP Dtv) | U30 SHANNON PLACK SK |

TABLE 1
TOTAL INDEX CRIMES, BY POLICE DISTRICT, 1983

| | First | Second | Third | Fourth | Fifth | Sixth | Seventh |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Homocide | 35 | 7 | 39 | 18 | 30 | 25 | 32 |
| Rape | 76 | 17 | 51 | 55 | 56 | 53 | 98 |
| Robbery | 1513 | 679 | 1542 | 1032 | 1247 | 677 | 1008 |
| Aggravated Assault | 566 | 211 | 738 | 502 | 613 | 359 | 657 |
| Subtotal: Crimes Against Persons | 2190 | 914 | 2370 | 1607 | 1946 | 1114 | 1795 |
| Burglary | 1778 | 2081 | 1926 | 1834 | 2073 | 1069 | 1722 |
| Theft | 6027 | 6687 | 4860 | 3774 | 3898 | 1791 | 2368 |
| Auto Theft | 605 | 399 | 514 | 744 | 741 | 484 | 468 |
| Subtotal: Property Crimes | 8410 | 9167 | 7300 | 6352 | 6712 | 3344 | 4558 |
| TOTAL | 10600 | 10081 | 9670 | 7959 | 8658 | 4458 | 6353 |

SOURCE: Planning and Development Division, Crime Research and Analysis Section, Crime Index Offenses; Statistical Report. Washington, D.C. : Metropolitan Police, 1983.

Two factors soften this dismal picture a bit. First, because the First District includes the downtown and many tourist areas, the crime figures probably exaggerate the risk of crime to residents. Second, things seem to be getting better. There were over 2,100 fewer crimes in 1983 than in the previous year, representing a sharp decline of 17 percent.

We chose to focus on the First District for two reasons. We were interested in the way that the economic and racial characteristics of blocks affects the likelihood that watches will be formed or the manner in which they subsequently will operate. The diversity in the First District allowed us to observe watches in wealthy as well as poor blocks and in predominantly white as well as predominantly black blocks. The cooperation of the responsible officers at the First District provided an additional incentive. While officials at all levels of the Metropolitan Police Department were careful to protect the identities of individual households participating in the neighborhood watch program, the First District readily provided a list of all blocks that had established watches.

The decision to focus on a single district — rather than the city as a whole -- necessarily places some limits on the breadth of the conclusions that we are able to draw from this one study. On the other hand, the decision was necessary if the project was to prove practical, and we have *no* reason to assume that the First District is markedly atypical in any important sense.

## METHODS OF ANALYSIS

According to the list provided by the First District, 211

neighborhood block watches were organized between April, 1981 and December, 1983. After eliminating those blocks which appeared to be listed more than once and those in which a single address, rather than a block per se, was listed, we were left with 193 blocks. Each block, then, was located on a large map indicating the U.S. Census Bureau's census block boundaries. Assigning each watch to a census block allowed us to determine certain characteristics of the residents and housing units in 1980 and to assess changes that had occured over the previous ten years.[26] This information makes it possible to determine whether blocks that formed watches differ in any important way from others within the First District.

In addition to knowing what kinds of blocks formed watches, we were interested in two questions that required more detailed information. First, we wanted a sense of how actively blocks were participating: Was membership in the neighborhood watch program an indication that residents on that block were actively working together to prevent crime, or did it simply mean that those residents had done the minimum necessary in order to obtain a neighborhood watch sign? Secondly, we wished to estimate the effectiveness of the watch program in reducing crime.

For these parts of our analysis we randomly selected a sample of 25 watches, all of which had been established by January of 1982. Phone interviews with residents and on-site evaluations helped us to guage the activity levels for these blocks. And the Metropolitan Police Department graciously provided a computer-generated ran of reported crime data for the blocks in our sample.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATING BLOCKS

Table 2 compares the characteristics of the 193 participating blocks to the First Police District as a whole.[27] The figures indicate that blocks that have a higher number of white residents/ more homeowners, more expensive rental housing, fewer children, and fewer elderly persons are more likely to have formed a neighborhood watch. The figures also suggest that participating blocks are more likely to fit the pattern associated with gentrlfication: a sharper than average increase in housing costs, an increase in the percentage of residents that are white, and a decline in the number of children.

This does not mean that neighborhood watch program is a program only for white, wealthy, gentrifying neighborhoods. To the contrary. The 193 blocks included in this study include several with no white residents. They include some with no owner occupied homes and some with home values as low as $33,300. They include blocks in which the average monthly rent is $81 — only about one-third the average rent for the city as a whole. It does suggest, however, that there is a tendency for white, wealthy, gentrifying blocks to take greater advantage of the program than blocks without those characteristics.

The relationship between race, class, and participation in the block watch program is probably even more complex than this evidence indicates. If the relationship was a simple and direct one, we would anticipate that participation rates — on a citywide basis — would be highest in neighborhoods west of Rock Creek Park. According to a police spokesperson, however, this is not the case. Participation seems to be higher in the far southeast and in the Fourth Police District, which comprises predominantly middle class black families

TABLE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF 193 WATCH BLOCKS COMPARED WITH FIRST DISTRICT AS A WHOLE

| | Participating Blocks | First District |
|---|---|---|
| 1980 | | |
| Percent Black | 57.1 | 65.0 |
| Percent Owner Occupied Units | 32.6 | 23.7 |
| Average Home Value | 104,358 | 106,238 |
| Average Jfonthly Rent | 267 | 245 |
| Percent Under 18 (KIDS) | 19.3 | 22.3 |
| Percent Over 65 (OLD) | 9.8 | 11.1 |
| Change 1970-80 | | |
| Population | - 6.7% | -25.7% |
| Owner Occupied Units | +79.9% | +18.7% |
| % White 1980 - % White 1970 | +11.1 | + 6.6 |
| Home Value (%) | +332.5% | +267.1% |
| Rent (%) | +142.2% | +101.7% |
| % Kids 1980 - % Kids 1970 | -11.9 | -10.9 |
| % Old 1980 - % Old 1970[a] | - 0.8 | - 0.8 |

[a]1970 estimate of the number who are elderly is based on those 62 years and over; that for 1980 is based on those 65 years and over.

in upper northwest. That participation is not higher in the wealthiest and whitest neighbor hoods of the city may singly reflect the fact that lower crime rates — particularly lower rates of violent crime — reduce the perceived need for such actions. Alternatively, it may reflect the fact that, in stable and homogenous neighborhoods with high percentages of owner-occupied homes, the primary functions of a block watch — increasing cooperation with police, increasing cooperation with neighbors — are accomplished through existing civic organizations, or through informal arrangements among individual households. Our study, limited as it is to a single district, cannot directly address these issues. Our conclusion that participation tends to be higher in white and wealthy blocks may be most applicable within core urban areas — like the First District — marked by relatively high crime, racial and economic diversity, and neighborhood change.

Sever a 1 fac tor s he lp expl ain why part icipa tion in the block watch program would be higher in wealthier and whiter neighborhoods. Numerous studies have discovered that there is a general association between political participation and socioeconomic class.[2]** While formation of a neighborhood watch differs in some respects from more conventional forms of political involvement/ the greater resources, education, stability, and confidence that make the wealthy more likely to vote may make them more likely to band together with their neighbors in anti-crime activities as well.

Homeownership, too, has been found to be positively associated with other forms of political activism, even after income and race have been taken into account. This may result from a greater sense of

commitment that cones with ownership or, as some suggest, from the fact that owners are less free than renters to pick up and move to another neighborhood if conditions deteriorate.[29] It is possible, too, that the key factor is something other than ownership per se. Owner occupied homes are more likely to be single-family homes, and single-family structures may facilitate community involvement by virtue of their design. "When looking out from the windows of an apartment, a resident may be several stories removed from the business of the street/ and the front door opens on a usually empty hallway. But the windows and doors of a single-family home bring its residents into closer contact with the public domain of the neighborhood and may lead them to appropriate a stretch of the street frontage as their own." Matthew Crenson found that both owners and renters living in single family homes were more likely to monitor their neighbors' homes when they were away than were those in multi-family buildings.[30]

## CHARACTERISTICS OP ACTIVE AND INACTIVE WATCHES

To many D.C. residents, the orange, black, and white neighborhood watch signs are the most important component of the watch program. In theory, the presence of these signs is enough to deter crimes. Police increasingly are convinced that most criminals approach their crime in a somewhat rational manner — that they are sensitive to risks and that they will tend to choose a target that is more vulnerable and less likely to resist. Such a rational criminal, choosing a home or apartment to break into, is expected to shy away from blocks that have signs indicating their participation in the

watch program. There is no shortage of other targets. If the signs indicate that residents are more likely to be on the lookout for unusual activity and more likely to report such activity should they observe it, the rational thief should conclude that it is simpler and safer to look elsewhere.

Both police and those who stress the importance of informal social controls, however, stress that the signs are simply one element of the anti-crime strategy. The police tend to believe that the marking of possessions, improvement of locks and other target-hardening strategies, and citizen vigilance are the real muscle behind the watch program. Those who emphasize informal social controls believe that interaction, shared vales, and confidence that one's neighbors will back you up are the critical ingredients.

Police officials in the District of Columbia, in keeping with this belief that the neighborhood watch program should mean something more than the wholesale distribution of block watch signs, developed a policy intended to force residents to attain a certain level of unity and commitment before they could qualify for membership in the watch program. Before signs would be provided, police requested that at least 60-70 percent of the households on a block be active club members. This was interpreted to mean that those households understood and were commited to the watch concept, that they agreed to mark their personal belongings as part of the Operation I.D. program, and that they agreed to have a police perform a crime survey in order to identify steps they should take to make their home or apartment more secure.

These guidelines, however, proved impractical to enforce. Paced

with a group of residents interested in forming a watch, D.C. police have found it difficult to turn down a request, even if the percentage of block residents involved falls considerably below the stated goals. No effort is made to follow up on the request that members participate in Operation I.D. and undergo a crime survey. And once a sign is awarded, no mechanism is available to ensure that the watch organization is maintained.

In order to assess whether the possession of neighborhood watch signs is an indication of an ongoing level of awareness, cooperation, and interaction, we developed an activity score for the watches in our randomly selected sample. The score was based on interviews with residents presumed to be knowledgeable about activities on the block. Whenever possible interviews were conducted with block captains. In some cases the block captain had moved away, or there no longer was a block captain, or no block captain could be identified. In such cases, we interviewed other knowledgeable residents (e.g. Advisory Neighborhood Commission representatives) or simply phoned residents who lived on the block in question. We were, in the end, able to interview the captain, an area coordinator, or former captain in 16 (64%) cases. In 7 cases (28%), where there was no captain or where the captain could not be identified, the score was based on phone interviews with residents. For two blocks we were unable to gain enough information to assign a reliable activity score.

Scoring was based on a system encompassing four dimensions of activity. These dealt with: meetings, recruitment, information, and sense of comnunity. Blocks were given a score of +1, 0, or -1 for each dimension. Blocks that had regular meetings or which had good

attendance at meetings when they were held, for example, were given a +1. Those which had no meetings, or only meetings with very poor attendance, were given a -1. A score of 0 was assigned to blocks that fell somewhere in the middle or for which we could not determine the frequency or turnout with any confidence. The information score was based on whether the block had a newsletter, whether it had other regularized channels for communicating to members, and whether it had crime data that was disseminated to residents. The recruitment score was based on the presence or absence of a method for contacting and involving new residents, Nationally, approximately one out of five households move every year; block watches — especially in transient neighborhoods and those with many renters — are unlikely to last for long if they remain dependent upon the original cadre of members. The final dimension depended upon our respondents' characterization of interest and involvement by block residents. Those blocks in which respondents explicitly mentioned a broad interest and growing sense of community surrounding the watch were given a score of +1. Those for which respondents explicitly mentioned apathy and lack of interest were given a score of -1. Others received a zero. Totalling the scores on all four dimensions provides an overall activity score running from +4 (very active) to -4 (very inactive).

Most of the neighborhood watches in our sample proved to be quite active by this standard. Eight watches — or a bit over one-third of those scored — received a perfect score. These included some in which procedures are quite formal. One block, for example, distributes an agenda before each of the three yearly meetings; several have written by-laws and regularly scheduled

elections to choose block captains. Also receiving scores of +4, however, were some blocks in which informal contact and word-of-mouth communication seems to fill the bill. Seven additional blocks received positive scores of +2 or +3. Some of these, too, were very well organized. One block which scored a +3 keeps a roster of all members, with working hours listed so that neighbors know when to expect the unit to be empty and work phone numbers available so that they may be contacted if anything out of the ordinary occurs. That block lost one point, however, because it had no apparent mechanism for recruiting new residents.

One out of three watches scored below zero on our activity scale. In all cases this indicated a weak organization; in some cases it indicated that there was no organization at all. One block watch, for example, was started by a single individual, who was concerned about the fear of crime that was plaguing the elderly residents in that area. Although the block managed to show enough interest to qualify for the neighborhood watch signs, there was never a functioning organization in place. The current block captain indicates that residents are too afraid to get involved and too suspicious of their own neighbors to join in a collective enterprise. The official signs have been stolen, an irony that was repeated in at least one other of our sample watches. One block on the First District's list of participating watches proved to be a commercial strip. None of the merchants was aware of a watch functioning on the block.

Table 3 compares the characteristics of the watches with positive activity scores to those with negative scores. The inactive

TABLE 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTIVE VERSUS INACTIVE WATCHES

| | Active Blocks | Inactive Blocks |
|---|---|---|
| Number | 15 | 8 |
| **1980** | | |
| Percent Black | 47.8 | 64.2 |
| Percent Owner Occupied Units | 38.4 | 21.1 |
| Average Home Value | 112,782 | 116,865[a] |
| Average Monthly Rent | 303 | 189 |
| Percent Under 18 (KIDS) | 14.2 | 31.8 |
| Percent Over 65 (OLD) | 8.0 | 15.2[b] |
| **Change 1970-80** | | |
| Population | -15.5% | +65.9% |
| Owner Occupied Units | +125.0% | +289.6% |
| % White 1980 - % White 1970 | + 5.4 | - 5.6 |
| Home Value (%) | +313.7% | +303.1%[C] |
| Rent (%) | + 99.2% | + 95.5% |
| % Kids 1980 - % Kids 1970 | - 9.9 | - 2.3 |
| % Old 1980 - % Old 1970* | - 1.6 | + 3.0 |

[a] This figure is based on only three of the eight inactive blocks. The others had no owner-occupied units, or too few of such units for the U.S. Bureau of the Census to report.

[b]1970 estimate of the number who are elderly is based on those 62 years and over; that for 1980 is based on those 65 years and over.

[c]Only one tract in 1970, and only three in 1980, had sufficient amounts of owner occupied units for the U.S. Bureau of the Census to provide data on housing value.

watches tend to have a larger percentage of residents who are black. Running counter to the gentification trend in much of the area, the inactive blocks also tend to show in increasingly black population between 1970 and 1980. In several respects the pattern revealed in the table reflects and extends that which we found when we compared all watch blocks to the First District as a whole. Blocks with more children, more elderly persons, fewer owner occupied residences/ and less expensive housing are less likely to join the watch program and, when they do join, are less likely to maintain a functioning and active organization.

## NEIGHBORHOOD WATCHES AND CRIME PREVENTION

Neighborhood watches have several goals. Proponents of the watch program argue that watches can increase the sense of community, make residents feel more secure, improve police/community relations, and increase citizens' reporting of crimes. Hatch programs may also make it easier for police to solve crimes and for prosecutors to earn convictions by making citizens more observant and more cooperative witnesses. In most people's minds, however, the central goal — and the true "acid test" upon which the success or failure of the nei^iborhood watch program should be judged — has to do with their effectiveness in reducing the actual rate of crime.

We attempted to assess the success of neighborhood watches in reducing crime in two ways. The first involved the judgements of the watch captains and other residents interviewed from our sample blocks. These respondents were asked whether they believed that residents "feel more secure as a result of the neighborhood watch"

and whether "crime has gone up, gone down, or stayed about the same since the watch was established."

This approach to assessing the impact of the watches has advantages and disadvantages. Block captains are well placed to have a "feel" for residents' fears and for the local crime picture. Given the well known fact that many crimes are never reported to the police, it is quite possible that these respondents have a more accurate picture of the crime situation than do the police themselves. On the other hand, it is possible that block captains will be tempted to overstate the effectiveness of the organization in which they are involved. And , without accurate information about crime trends in other areas of the city, most are not in a position to judge whether changes in crime trends on their particular block are attributable to the watch or to broader, coincidental, city-wide or national changes.

Respondents who answered our question about feelings of safety were nearly unanimous in their belief that the watch made their neighbors feel more secure. Fifteen of the 18 who responded (83%) said residents felt more secure as a result of the establishment of the watch. Several added emphatic remarks, such as "definitely" and "of course." Representatives of only two blocks said residents did not feel more secure — both of these were from watches with negative scores on the activity scale. One captain from a highly active watch answered that it was "hard to say." Some of his neighbors had wanted to take an even more active role — for example by instituting a citizen patrol — and he believed they might have .been disheartened when the police discouraged them from such an undertaking.

Belief that crime had declined since the establishuent of the watch program was almost as widely shared. Of the seventeen respondents who answered this question, one believed that burglaries had increased, another said crime had gone "up and down," one felt crime declined initially but had subsequently begun to climb again, and two felt that crime was "about the same." Again, it was the respondents from blocks which scored low on our activity scale that were less optimistic. Of the three-quarters who did believe that crime had fallen, however, several took pains to point out that the decline might not be due to the neighborhood watch itself. But most did seem to feel that the watches deserved much or all of the credit.

Examining police crime reports provided our second test of the effectiveness of the neighborhood watch program. Crime reports have some advantages over respondents[1] subjective judgements. They are not subject to memory lapses and they permit comparison with trends in nonparticipating blocks and in the city as a whole. But crime reports are far from a perfect measure. As already noted, many crimes go unreported: because victims consider it is a waste of time, because the crime was committed by a family member or acquaintance, or because the victim fears retribution. Moreover, not all reports of a crime to police are officially recorded. Police on the beat have some discretion as to whether to treat certain incidents as crimes — a brawl in a bar, a domestic squabble, a child's "borrowing" of a friend's bicycle. And officials at headquarters sometimes apply their own cri teri a, re classifying some inc idents so they are re corded as lesser crimes or not crimes at all. Some respondents in our study indicated that they were suspicious of the fact that official police

records of crimes in their neighborhoods seemed to have omitted crimes with which they were familiar.

The limitations of of f icial crime reports are particularly troublesome when attempting to judge the effectiveness of programs like the neighborhood watch. One goal of the watch program, after all, is to increase the rate at which citizens report the crimes that do occur. Ironically, should the watch accomplish this goal, there is a danger that official crime reports would increase, even if no change in real crime had occured. Slight declines in actual crimes might be masked as well. For such reasons, it is desirable to supplement reported crimes with surveys of citizens before and after the watch program is put into effect. Since we did not have the resources to undertake such victimization surveys, we will have to be cautious in interpreting tha findings regarding the impact on crime.

Table 4 presents four years of crime statistics for our sample of participating blocks, the First Police District, and the city as a whole. Since all the blocks in our sample formed their watch between January 1981 and January 1983, the 1980 column can be considered a rough "before" measure and the 1983 column can be considered an "after" measure. Comparison to the First District and city as a whole helps us judge whether changes are unique to participating blocks or due to more general factors.

The crime data reveals a somewhat erratic picture. Only in the case of robberies is a clear and steady drop in crime evident. For some types of crime the numbers in our sample blocks are so low that interpretation is risky. Nonetheless, certain general patterns are evident. Crime in our sample or participating blocks, particularly

## TABLE 4: CRIMES IN PARTICIPATING BLOCKS COMPARED TO FIRST DISTRICT AND CITY, 1980-1983

### SECTION A: NUMBER OP CRIMES

| | 1980 | 1981 | 1982 | 1983 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Robberies:** | | | | |
| Sample | 20 | 16 | 13 | 12 |
| 1st District | 2057 | 2197 | 2055 | 1513 |
| D.C. | 8897 | 10399 | 9137 | 7698 |
| **Assaults:** | | | | |
| Sample | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| 1st District | 556 | 648 | 656 | 566 |
| D.C. | 3236 | 3432 | 3645 | 3646 |
| **Burglaries:** | | | | |
| Sample | 4 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| 1st District | 2745 | 2648 | 2007 | 1778 |
| D.C. | 16260 | 16832 | 14774 | 12483 |
| **Larcenie s:** | | | | |
| Sample | 31 | 47 | 40 | 28 |
| 1st District | 7819 | 8227 | 7297 | 6027 |
| D*C. | 31068 | 32845 | 33435 | 29405 |
| **Auto Theft:** | | | | |
| Sample | 5 | 4 | 12 | 3 |
| 1st District | 760 | 710 | 628 | 605 |
| D.C. | 3568 | 3765 | 4083 | 3955 |
| **All Part I Offenses:** | | | | |
| Sample | 62 | 72 | 71 | 44 |
| 1st District | 14053 | 14508 | 12722 | 10600 |
| D.C. | 63688 | 67910 | 65692 | 57779 |

### SECTION B: YEARLY CHANGE (%)

| | 1980-1 | 1981-2 | 1982-3 | 1980-3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Robberies:** | | | | |
| Sample | -20.3 | -18.8 | - 7.7 | -40.0 |
| 1st District | + 6.8 | - 6.5 | -26.4 | -26.4 |
| D.C. | +16.9 | -12.1 | -15.7 | -13.5 |
| **Assaults:** | | | | |
| Sample | +100.0 | -50.0 | -50.0 | -50.0 |
| 1st District | +16.5 | + 1.2 | -13.7 | + 1.8 |
| D.C. | + 6.1 | + 6.2 | + 0.3 | +12.7 |
| **Burglaries:** | | | | |
| Sample | -100.0 | +400.0* | -100.0 | -100.0 |
| 1st District | - 3.5 | -24.2 | -11.4 | -35.2 |
| D.C. | + 3.5 | -12.2 | -15.5 | -23.2 |
| **Larcenie s:** | | | | |
| Sample | +51.6 | -14.9 | -30.0 | - 9.7 |
| 1st District | + 5.2 | -11.3 | -17.4 | -22.9 |
| D.C. | + 5.7 | + 1.8 | -12.1 | - 5.4 |
| **Auto Theft:** | | | | |
| Sample | -20.0 | +200.0 | -75.0 | -40.0 |
| 1st District | - 6.6 | -11.5 | - 3.6 | -20.4 |
| D.C. | + 5.5 | + 8.4 | - 3.1 | +10.8 |
| **All Part I Offenses;:** | | | | |
| Sample | +16.1 | - 1.4 | -38.0 | -29.0 |
| 1st District | + 3.2 | -12.3 | -16.7 | -24.6 |
| D.C. | + 6.7 | - 3.3 | -12.0 | - 9.2 |

*Change from 0 to 4,

larcenies and assaults, rose more rapidly In the year preceding the establishment of the first watches than did crime In the broader areas. This may indicate that an unusually sharp increase in crime is a spark that impels blocks to organize. Such a conclusion fits with the comments of several of the block captains, who indicated that a rise in crime, or a particularly dramatic single crime incident led to the origination of the block watch.

Crime dropped throughout the city in the subsequent years, but it dropped more sharply in the participating blocks. This suggests that the watches may, indeed, have played a role in accelerating the reduction of crime. Such a finding is particularly encouraging in the face of the possibility that increased reporting in the participating blocks could be leading us to underestimate reductions in actual victlmlzations.

The watches in our sanple were formed at different times throughout the 1981-1982 period. Because of this, there is a chance that Table 4 might understate the real impact of the watches on neighborhood crime. The problem is due to the imprecision that follows from equating "before" and "after" with 1980 and 1983. For a watch that formed in April of 1981, for example, we would expect the iupact on crime to show up during the second half of 1981, not, perhaps, as late as 1983. And, for a watch that formed in September of 1982, it would be better to conpare the "after" crime rate to the January-August trends of that year, not just to those of 1980. This inprecision would be most misleading if watches tend to be formed after brief but sharp upsurges in crime or if the impact of the watches wears off after a few months. Presenting the data as we did

in Table 4 was useful because it allowed us to compare the crime rates to those in the First District and the city. But it also is important to determine whether a more precise definition of before and after would alter our findings in any significant sense.

Table 5 solves this problem. Only *crimes* that occured in the year before and the year af ter the formation of each watch are included. These are further broken down into six month intervals. If the formation of a neighborhood crime watch has an immediate but short-lived effect on crime, we would expect to see a sharp fall of in the number of crimes between column #2 and column #3. As can be seen, no such drop occurs. In fact, overall, there is a slight increase in the number of crimes occurring in the 6 months immediately following the establishment of a watch.

A sharp decline does appear in the period 7 to 12 months after the watches were formed. This suggests the possibility that watches have a delayed effect. During the first several months crime may continue unabated while organizational problems are ironed out, while residents get used to working with each other and with the police, and while word that the watch is in effect filters through to the potential criminals. While this is an interesting possibility, it should be considered with some skepticism. It is not at all clear that the degree of organizational coordination required is significant enough to warrant such a "warm up" period. Just as likely is the possibility that the fall in crime apparent in the last 6 month period simply reflects the drop in crime that was occuring through the entire city in 1983. The reduction in crime, in other words, may be coincidental — due to changes in the population, the

TABLE 5: CRIME IN PARTICIPATING BLOCKS
IN YEAR PRECEDING AND YEAR FOLLOWING ESTABLISHMENT OF CRIME WATCH

(number of crimes)

| | BEFORE | | AFTER | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 12-7 months | 6 months to start | 0-6 months | 7-12 months |
| Robberies | 8 | 3 | 9 | 6 |
| Burglaries | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| Assaults | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Larcenies | 17 | 27 | 28 | 12 |
| Auto thefts | 3 | 2 | 9 | 3 |
| Total | 29 | 42 | 50 | 23 |

economy, availability of drugs, judicial policies or other factors that have little or nothing to do with the neighborhood crime watch program.

Table 6 provides some additional discouragement to those who are anxious to prove that crime watches have a sharp and significant impact on crime. That table separates watches that received positive scores on our activity score from those that received negative scores. There is no evidence that crime has fallen more sharply in the active than in the inactive blocks. In both groups, crime falls in the 7-12 month after period. But the speculation that this might be due to a learning or adjustment period does not seem very credible where these inactive blocks are concerned; as far as we have determined, those blocks never achieved more than a superficial level of activity. If anything, those blocks tend to have been more active in the first few months while the initial enthusiasm ran high. This suggests the likelihood that the decline in crime that occured during this period is attributabvle to something other than the watch program.

That the total number of crimes is higher in the inactive blocks than the active blocks before as well as after the watches were formed is interesting. There are, after all, about twice as many active blocks in our sample. This is just another indication that functioning neighborhood watches may be least likely to emerge in the blocks that have the greatest need.

CONCLUSIONS

crime is going down in the District, as it seems to be in much

**TABLE 6: CRIME BEFORE AND AFTER IN ACTIVE VERSOS INACTIVE BLOCKS**

**(number of crimes)**

| | BEFORE | | AFTER | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 12-7 months | 6 months to start | 0-6 months | 7-12 months |
| ACTIVE BLOCKS: | | | | |
| Robberies | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 |
| Burglaries | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Assaults | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Larcenies | 5 | 9 | 5 | 4 |
| Auto thefts | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 9 | 11 | 12 | 6 |
| INACTIVE BLOCKS: | | | | |
| Robberies | 5 | 6 | 4 | 4 |
| Burglaries | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 |
| Assaults | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Larcenies | 12 | 18 | 23 | 8 |
| Auto thefts | 3 | 2 | 8 | 2 |
| Total | 20 | 31 | 38 | 16 |

of the country. This is exceedingly good news. However, we still do not have a solid understanding of why crime is going down. Gaining such an understanding is important. Without such understanding we do not know whether the decline is likely to continue, or whether it will prove to be idiosyncratic and short-li-ved. Nor can we judge whether the decline is due to factors under policy-makers' control. If policy-makers are doing something right, we want them to do more of it. But if the decline is due to the aging of the population — as some suggest — or other forces not amenable to policy control, doing more may simply mean spending money and effort that will have little if any additional impact.

This study finds little support for the proposition that neighborhood watches are responsible for the drop in crime. Although crime does seem to be declining somewhat more rapidly in blocks that have watches in place, this decline seems attributable social and economic changes in those areas rather than the neighborhood crime watch per se. We found that watches were most likely to form in blocks undergoing gentrification. Gentrification may account for both the higher levels of watch involvement (as residents more activist in orientation and with a greater inclination to cooperate with police officials move into a high crime environment) and the drop in crime (as population densities fall and as households with teenage children and other crime-prone groups are replaced). The fact that crime (or at least reported crime) does not drop in the six months following the establishment of the watch, and the fact that the drop is not more evident in active than inactive areas, represent challenges to the simple assumption that watches work.

Does this mean that the neighborhood block watch program is a failure that should be discontinued? From the standpoint of neighborhood residents a contrary conclusion can be drawn. We found strong support for the watches, a belief that they made people feel more secure, and citizen confidence in their effectiveness as crime-fighting tools. Our interviews led us to believe, too, that the watch program has been successful in building better relationships between police and the community. Any neighborhood that can mobilize its residents and maintain a functioning block watch has every incentive to do so. After all, the cost, at the neighborhood level, is slight.

From the standpoint of police officials, too, the neighborhood watch program might be judged worthwhile, even in the absence of evidence that it leads directly to reductions in crime. Achieving greater report with citizens, if nothing else, makes the job of policing easier on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps as importantly, it provides a broader constituency, a source of political support that police officials may mobilize in order to defend against budget cuts or efforts by others to limit their discretion or control. As currently Implemented, the cost of the watch program probably is minor. Most of the manpower is provided by community service officers who already were in place.

But some serious policy concerns are raised when the question of equity is introduced. Not all neighborhoods are capable of achieving the level of organization necessary to form and maintain a block watch effort. Some neighborhoods are stymied by the transitory nature of their populations. In other neighborhoods, levels of fear

and suspicion are too high to allow the kind of cooperation and mutual self-help that the watch program depends upon. This may be particularly true in areas with high numbers of elderly residents.

In middle and upper class neighborhoods the absence of feelings of community and neighborliness is bemoaned as an artifact of our modern culture, which puts a premium on job-over-neighborhood and privacy-over-comnunity. These cultural barriers are not as powerful, however, as the barriers that block collective action in many poorer neighborhoods. Fear and mistrust of one's neighbors, it must be remembered, may be a reasonable response for those families living in harsh and hostile environments. In seme neighborhoods block watches are impractical for the simple reason that residents know or suspect that it is their very own neighbors who constitute the threat of crime.

When considered from the standpoint of police administrators or public officials responsible for the well-being of the city as a whole, an attitude of "How can it hurt?" might be irresponsible. Hatches, especially active watches, appear to be less likely to form in the areas that need them the most. This could provide an opportunity to increase equity —- if the police department reduces patrols in areas served by watches in order to increase them in high crime, disorganized neighborhoods where no watches get off the ground. Unfortunately, the dynamics of patrol distribution are more likely to work in the opposite direction. Organized blocks tend to demand that police attend their meetings. They are more likely to monitor the police to determine the frequency of patrols. They are more likely to know the officers responsible for their beat and to

respond negatively if those officiers are shifted around in order to meet the department's long or short-term needs. Block captains favor more patrols in their area, they argue that such patrols are necessary if the neighborhood watch is to work in practice, and some indicate that they have received more attention since their watch was formed. It is doubtful whether police and elected officials would be able to withstand such demands from these wealthier, more politically organized groups. If this proves to be the case, the danger that the neighborhood block watch program may increase inequities is genuine.

Some writers have warned that the new urban gentry may use their political and economic clout to demand disproportionate resources from local governments.^ Such favoritism toward gentrified constituencies would seem less likely in the District, given its black mayor and predominantly black city council. Yet, the broad forces operating on the District are little different from those bearing on other older cities in the northeast and upper midwest. Fiscal problems that can be traced to the movement of people and businesses to the suburbs, aggravated by the scaling back of federal support in the 1980s, make it tempting for local officials to encourage the reinvestment that gent rificat ion represents — no matter what their color, party, or ideological orientation. In the District, the allegiance of the gentry might be courted less through outright grants of patronage and services than through increasing re liance on programs, like the neighborhood watch, that — while available to all neighborhoods in principle — can best be exploited in practice by neighborhoods that can be effectively organized.

Either of two strategies might make the neighborhood watch

program more equitable in its effects. The first, as alluded to earlier, would involve instituting a systematic process of redistributing police patrol resources away fro* areas with effective blocks in place towards high crime neighborhoods structurally incapable of organizing. Unless done quietly and without public awareness, this approach is likely to meet strong resistance, not least among the newly organized blocks that the police would refer to maintain as their allies.

The second strategy would involve the coupling of the program with concerted efforts to help organize currently disorganized neighborhoods and to help blocks maintain their organization after the initial sense of crisis and enthusiasm abates. This paper is not the appropriate forum for detailing the form such efforts might take. But two observations must be made: (1) such an organizational undertaking would significantly increase the financial costs associated with the watch program; and (2) it would be unwise to expect the police themselves to have either the skills or the manpower needed to put such a program into effect.

Barring the institution of either of these approaches, the best that can be hoped for may be the recognition that the neighborhood watch program is not the simple cure-all that overly enthusiastic exponents have suggested. It is a worthwhile program that can be helpful in some neighborhoods. If a real dent is to be made in crime, and if the needs of all neighborhoods are to be met, other substantial initiatives must be designed and put into effect.

FOOTNOTES

1. This paper grew out of a class project conducted in the Spring of 1984. The students in that seminar conducted most of the research and contributed in many ways to this final product. They were: Stephen Pulco; Lori Gillen, Mary Nagelhout, Bob Rendine, and Jennifer Yohalem.

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26. Census block boundaries do not conform with those of neighborhood watch blocks. In most cases we used the information from the two census blocks facing the block with the watch. This has the effect of including some housing units and people who may live in other areas (for example, those on blocks around the corner from the block that has the watch in effect). This is as precise an equivalent as we could obtain, and, since adjoining blocks normally are quite similar, this approach should not affect our findings to any meaningful extent.

27. Data on the First District is based on the totals from census tracts 46, 47, 48.1, 48.2, 51, 58, 59, 60.1, 60.2, 61, 62.1, 63.1, 63.2, 64, 65, 66, 68.2, 69, 70, 71, 72, 82, 83.1, 86.

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