CRIME, FEAR, *and* THE NEW YORK CITY SUBWAYS

The Role of Citizen Action

Dennis Jay Kenney

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Introduction

This study is concerned with the ability of citizen-action crime-fighting organizations to reduce both the amount and fear of crime in our society. The roles that citizens and their organized efforts can play in crime control have been advocated in recent years by a chorus of supporters who offer citizen action as a necessary supplement to "assist undermanned, overtaxed, and often non-community oriented police forces in the development of healthy and secure neighborhoods."[1] Many of these observers are so convinced that these methods can cause substantial reductions in crime that manuals are now available not only to promote the concept,[2] but to assist interested communities as they plan, develop, finance, and operate their own citizen-based crime-control efforts.[3] Despite their existence in hundreds of communities across the United States, however, few systematic efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of any existing or developing organizations have been attempted to date.

The central purpose of this book is to address this void of information. With the assistance of the Guardian Angels, one of the nation's most visible—and perhaps controversial—citizen-action organizations, a careful evaluation has been undertaken to examine the potential reductions that citizen patrols can cause in both crime and the fear of crime. Using "before-and-after" data collected from both citizens and police, the project measures any impacts that occur as the group's patrols are first withdrawn and then reintroduced into selected sections of the New York City subway system. With the results produced, a more thorough assessment of this organization—and perhaps others like it—is possible. This in turn permits a clearer determination of the extent to which they contribute to a solution to our crime-control problems.

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The Role of Citizens in the U. S. Law-Enforcement Process

Reservations about the ability of the police to prevent crime were exceptionally rare until only quite recently. Instead, most of us were willing to accept that "without the thin blue line which the police form between the criminals and the rest of society, our present way of live could not last."[1] By the late 1960s, however, as reported crime began to increase dramatically, as awareness of unreported crime became more widespread, and as the spending for police activities began to mushroom, many criminologists and practitioners alike began to question the relationship between the police and the rate of criminal occurrences. By the early 1970s, serious doubts were beginning to emerge.

Surprising to some, it was the police themselves who made the first major attempt to provide information. Having identified several law enforcement problems within their city, the Kansas City, Missouri Police Department began, in 1971, searching for workable remedial strategies. As they considered their options, it became evident that any concentration by the department on these specific problems would significantly interfere with their normal preventive patrol operations.[2] Because patrol is considered by many, perhaps most, police officials to be the "backbone" of modern police technology, this was no insignificant problem.

Building upon the work of Albert Reiss and others who had suggested that police patrol was far less productive at preventing crime and deterring criminals than was previously believed,[3] the Kansas City Patrol Division Task Force proposed to put their methods to the test. With the Washington, D.C.-based Police Foundation assisting, a yearlong experiment was designed to measure the true impact of patrol upon both the rates of crime and the community's sense of

of security. Known as the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment, the project was implemented in 1972.

The results of the experiment were quite surprising. After analyzing and comparing crime and arrest statistics, augmented by victimization surveys, the researchers concluded that neither doubling nor virtually eliminating preventive patrol had produced any real effect on the number of crimes committed. Additionally, from residential and commercial surveys, they discovered that large variations in patrol activities had no effect on citizens' fear of crime or on the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the police. While the authors of the experiment's evaluation were careful to make clear that the findings did not establish that a police presence was unimportant, the limitations of that presence were quite evident. To the extent that these results could be generalized beyond Kansas City, the belief in the police as a powerful deterrent force was now in question.

If patrolling police are unable reliably to prevent crime, then what of our expectations of police investigators? Although the police patrolmen may have traditionally been the frontline troops of law enforcement, it is often noted that the detectives are not far behind. Virtually all but the smallest U.S. police organizations rely on this corps of investigative specialists, whose responsibility it is to solve crimes by interviewing suspects, accumulating physical evidence, and playing hunches. It is the police detective who is most heavily fictionalized by the media and about whom there exists the greatest mystique.

Because most research on policing has been primarily concentrated on the "basic" issues and concerns, few police administrators, and probably even fewer outside observers, possess any real knowledge about the nature or effectiveness of investigative operations. As a result, in 1975 the Rand Corporation, at the request of the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, undertook a two-year nationwide study to fill in the gaps in knowledge. Like the Kansas City results, the findings of the Rand project belied many of our popular conceptions.

While the objectives of the Rand study were broad, the conclusions were quite specific. Not only were the often reported arrest and crime-clearance rates shown to be unreliable measures of investigative success, they were actually deemed more representative of the crime-fighting abilities of a community's citizens than of its police. Of cases that the police reported as solved, approximately 30 percent of the clearances were the result of officers being summoned and arriving at the scene prior to the offender's departure. In

roughly another 50 percent of cleared crimes, the identity of the suspect was known—usually provided by a victim or witness—at the time the initial crime report was taken. In these cases, the primary investigative responsibility consisted of little more than locating the suspect, taking him or her into custody, and assembling the facts for a courtroom presentation. This left only 20 percent of cleared crimes whose solution could be attributed to investigative work. Even with these cases, however, the study showed that most were solved either by patrol officers, by citizens spontaneously providing further information, or by routine procedures that could have been followed by clerical personnel. In the words of the project's authors:

> we estimate that no more than 2.7 percent of all Part 1 crime clearances can be attributed to special techniques by investigators. The remaining 97.3 percent of cleared crimes will be cleared no matter what the invetigators do, so long as the obvious follow-up steps are taken.[4]

In light of these apparent limitations on effectiveness of both police presence and investigative ability, and given a considerable body of research indicating that crime is heavily opportunistic,[5] some critics have begun to suggest that there is little that the police can do either to reduce crime or make citizens feel safer. After pointing out that the police departments in the 58 largest U.S. cities vary in size from 1.7 to 7.0 officers per 100,000 citizens, at least one observer has noted that there is no observable correlation between the size of a community's police organization and either the number of crimes that are committed or the proportion that are solved.[6] Additional support for this observation has appeared in recent research showing that crime rates do not increase appreciably during police strikes[7] and that increases in police employment cannot be shown to have reduced the levels of crime in a community.[8] If this is so, then the popular solutions to crime that involve improving police technology and increasing manpower are unlikely to produce any significant and lasting results.

DEFINING THE CITIZEN ROLE

As long ago as 1968, respected observers were beginning to suggest that crime problems in the United States could not be solved without increased levels of citizen involvement. Although none were

openly advocating a return to the days when "community watchmen" were responsible for patrolling city streets, many did contend that the obligation for crime control and social control ultimately rested with each individual in the society. If the criminal justice system were to work, the participation of citizens would be essential, with some form of a partnership between the police and the community being highly desirable. This suggested that officers need to be less concerned with technical efficiency, but instead must concentrate on effectively working with the public so that citizens may at least participate in their own self-protection. In light of these recommendations, many jurisdictions have more recently been prompted to experiment with methods aimed at increasing the citizen role through community-organization efforts,[9] "team" or "neighborhood" policing methods,[10] and a return to the use of the neighborhood foot patrol.[11]

Essentially, the citizen role in the law-enforcement process can fall into either of two general categories: passive or active. While these are by no means the only important distinctions, this division recognizes the different approaches and goals currently employed by citizen anticrime groups. Because the focus of this study is the potential impact that direct citizen action can have upon crime, this method of classification becomes particularly useful. In light of other research indicating that the level and type of activities employed by a group have significant implications for the numbers and kinds of participants it will attract,[12] the passive/active distinction becomes even more meaningful.

PASSIVE CITIZEN ACTION

The variable of importance in classifying an organization as either passive or active is the type of action that the members are prepared to take in response to crime. Therefore, while groups of each type could conceivably use similar activities in an effort to prevent and deter crimes, the passive citizen-action organizations are satisfied, once they discover that a crime has occurred, to call an official police agency and leave the incident in the hands of the police.

Obviously, the passive label should not be interpreted to imply a lack of commitment or effort on the part of an organization's members. To the contrary, it is meant only to indicate the participants' intentions to address their crime problems and to improve their community's safety by either assisting or easing the burden upon the established law-enforcement system. The degree of

independence of organizations of this type is typically quite low, with the group's activities—usually including efforts at "target hardening," noninterventive patrols, and police public relations—generally being both encouraged and supervised by the local police agencies. Although the concerns of members of passive citizen-action organizations about crime may be both high and deeply felt, these groups tend to attribute crime problems to causes beyond the control of the police.

Among the many examples of passive, community-based, anticrime efforts, a few of the more frequently noted programs include the following:

Operation Identification. This involves residents in a community-based group that disseminates crime-prevention information. Electric pens are often supplied so that residents may put personal identification numbers on their belongings to aid the police if the items are stolen.[13]

WhistleSTOP. This involves an organized attempt to encourage the purchase and use of whistles by citizens observing a suspicious or criminal event. The blowing of whistles is intended to increase the level of risk perceived by an offender who is committing a crime.

The Beat-Rep Program. This attempts to promote police-citizen interaction by encouraging residents to organize and "become the eyes and ears" of neighborhood police units. Initiated in Chicago, this program develops "block captains" who are responsible for recruiting the residents of their block to participate in this surveillance effort.[14]

Mobile Patrols. These exist in many communities under a variety of names. These projects involve groups of citizens, either in automobiles or on foot, who patrol their neighborhoods looking for suspicious activity and crime. Once a suspected crime is discovered, the patrols report the event to the police by walkie-talkies and payphones. In emergencies they are often instructed to blow their horns and shine their headlights and flashlights at offenders. This action is intended to frighten the offender and alert others.[15]

While each of these programs can be found in many areas of the country, perhaps the most well known of the passive forms of citizen action is crime watch. During the 1960s and early 1970s crime-watch activities, often known as block and neighborhood watch, were initiated in a number communities. In some cities—Philadelphia, for example—neighborhood leaders promoted these strategies; in others, such as Los Angeles, the police

department took the initiative.[16] Regardless of their origin, crime-watch methods have spread throughout the country and have gained considerable public support.

The essence of the crime-watch concept is people looking out for one another in an effort to increase neighborhood cohesion and integration. In so doing, interested residents will first organize, and then agree to keep an eye out for suspicious or criminal activities. When a behavior which is "improper" by that neighborhood's standards is discovered, the police are immediately notified and asked to investigate. In many communities, participating neighborhoods will often put signs up to deter would-be criminals by warning that they are entering a crime-watch area. In at least one neighborhood, residents went so far as to sign house-watch contracts with neighbors who were going away.[17]

Because it has been hypothesized by social theorists that neighborhood cohesion largely determines the capacity of a community to exert control over the conduct of both residents and passersby, it is felt by many that the crime watch concept offers considerable potential for crime control. Support for this optimism can be seen in recent research that has found that many crimes, particularly burglaries and other property offenses, are primarily low-skill acts of opportunity. Offenders tend to be young, to operate in or near their own neighborhoods, and to rely heavily on spur-of-the-moment opportunities in the selection of their targets. Norman Okihiro and Irvin Waller go so far as to suggest, from their 1978 study of Toronto burglars, that offenders will avoid the more cohesive and integrated neighborhoods in which many homes are occupied by families with children. They fear, it seems, that the increased interaction caused by families and children playing together increases the chances of detection.[18] George J. Washnis's conclusion that in some neighborhoods where crime had declined, the only recognizable change was the formation of a block organization would seem to indicate that the crime watch activities, in addition to children playing, can have a positive effect on reducing crime.[19]

Whether or not crime is reduced, Wesley Skogan and Michael J. Maxfield note that for individuals who are well integrated into their neighborhoods other important benefits may occur.

> They seem to know more intimately the groups, individuals, and dangerous areas to be avoided in their locales, and to have a clearer sense of the boundaries of secure areas. This knowledge of the rhythms of life around them enables them to more

> effectively manage the risks of that environment. Because they have developed working social relations with their neighbors, those who are more integrated should find it easier to call upon community members for support in risky situations, and could depend upon them to intervene. This in turn reinforces their own willingness to act, and to join in concert with others in collective efforts to solve community problems.[20]

Perhaps these benefits are made even more obvious by the tenant in a New York City apartment building who, in telling of her local organization, remarked, "we now have friends to run to, not just faceless, nameless neighbors. I now know when to be suspicious of people I pass in the halls and when to smile and say hello."[21]

While the potential benefits of participation in a passive citizen-action organization are well recognized, the maintenance of these groups is nonetheless a problem. Since they most frequently begin in neighborhoods possessing considerable cohesion and only minimal crime problems, the work is often boring, the attrition rate of members high, and the life span of the organization short. This means that program viability will usually depend upon strong leadership and effective coordination, both internally and with the local police. However, if too many organizations exist, police resources will be spread thin and many groups will not be serviced properly.[22] These groups will frequently become difficult to sustain.

ACTIVE CITIZEN ACTION

Partially due to these difficulties, but probably more in response to a real or perceived ineffectiveness of the formal law-enforcement system, some citizen activists choose to take a more active role in the law-enforcement process. Unlike its passive counterpart, the active citizen approach goes beyond simply helping the authorities and involves groups of citizens actually fighting crime themselves as either a replacement or a supplement to the police. The degree of independence of the active organizations is generally quite high and the activities, as well as the organizations themselves, are often opposed by the police. Although these groups may also attribute their area's crime problems to forces beyond the control of the police, they are far more ready than the passive groups to consider law-enforcement agencies at least somewhat blameworthy.

Active citizen participation has a well-established tradition in our society. From his research on the subject, historian Richard

Maxwell Brown reports that its emergence can be linked to the transition in the United States from deferential to democratic social values. This transition, which occurred from the time of the Revolutionary War to the Jacksonian era, led to acceptance of the idea of the "rule of the people" by all but the most skeptical. With this concept in place, U.S. citizens throughout our history have been quick to rely upon "popular sovereignty" as they asserted "the rights of the people to take the protection of their property into their own hands." Active citizen action, including vigilantism, came to be viewed by many U.S. citizens as an indisputable right involving nothing more than the community exercising its sovereign power in the interest of self-preservation.[23]

Although references to citizen action typically conjure images of vigilante and regulator movements combating rustlers and robbers with a healthy dose of violence, recent historical studies have discovered that the tradition of involvement is far more broadly based. For example, it was fear of armed attack by other nations that led many citizens of Virginia, Florida, and Texas to form home-guard organizations for self-defense during the early 1800s.[24] Slavery was the issue from the 1820s through the 1850s when citizen organizations were formed in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts both to aid fugitive slaves in their escape and to prevent slave traders from pursuing them. In the world of commerce, the prevention of fraud was deemed sufficiently important in 1845 to cause the formation of the Merchant's Vigilance Association of New York City. This group was actually somewhat of an early white-collar crime fighting organization in that its mission was "to investigate and expose abuses of trade."[25]

Nor were all extralegal crime-control organizations dependent upon the use of violence, as is sometimes commonly believed. With the close of the Revolutionary War, many citizens—mainly farmers—found that the established law-enforcement system was all too often incapable of either detecting or pursuing thieves, especially horsethieves. Since their economic survival was often closely linked to the availability of horses for work and transportation, an antihorsethief movement consisting of hundreds of thousands of members in local citizen-action organizations began to emerge. From the birth of the first such organization in Massachusetts in 1782 until well into the early 1900s, this movement not only survived but spread throughout the country. In New Jersey alone, a fairly typical state in this regard, over 100 local antihorsethief societies were founded between 1788 and 1915. In 1851 that state's legislature officially approved the formation of the

societies so that they could exist as a legal supplement to the formal law-enforcement system. It was not until automobiles became readily available that these citizen-action organizations became unnecessary. Until that time, these citizens were actively involved in the pursuit of horsethieves who, once captured, were turned over to local police.[26]

Far from having disappeared over the years, the doctrine of popular sovereignty, and its principle of citizen action, has actually flourished. Although efforts to explain its resiliency are inconclusive, an examination of recent organizations and movements does produce some interesting similarities. From these, it is possible to group organizations based upon the common variables that appear to have generated their birth.

According to Brown, "during the turbulent, riot-torn, crime-ridden 1960s and early 1970s," three distinct sections of U.S. society were particularly prone to organize for action.[27] In his first group, Brown included members of black enclaves feeling the need for self-protection against white harassment and violence. These movements are best illustrated by the formation in May 1965 of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Under the leadership of Charles Sims, the Deacons gained prominence in Bogalusa and Jonesboro, Louisiana, where they fielded armed patrols to protect blacks and white civil rights workers from Klansmen, rowdies, and the police. At their height, the Deacons claimed an organization of 7,000 members in Louisiana and 60 loosely federated chapters in Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and both Carolinas.[28]

A second type of organization involved white residents of both urban and suburban neighborhoods who felt threatened by a possible incursion of black rioters and looters. Anthony Imperiale's North Ward Citizen's Committee in Newark, New Jersey, is a prominent example of groups of this type. Formed in 1967, Imperiale's organization came to life within only a few months of a series of devastating Newark riots which left over $10 million in property damage, 1,029 businesses either looted or seriously damaged, and 23 persons dead in the neighboring Central Ward.[29] With the rioting now only a distant memory, the Citizen's Committee has expanded its role to include crime-prevention patrols and free ambulance service for the 90,000 residents of the North Ward. Organizational membership has declined from a high of around 1,500 volunteers to the current level of 250. Since the birth of his organization, Imperiale has been elected by his community to the offices of councilman, state senator, and state assemblyman, where he recently served his second term.[30]