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CRIME FILE

Neighborhood Safety

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Your discussion will be assisted by your knowing the history of neighborhood safety strategies, findings from research on the role of fear of crime in neighborhood safety, and findings from more recent research on new strategies for making neighborhoods safe.

The Problems History Made

The current problems of neighborhood safety are closely linked to the kinds of neighborhoods we have developed. They provide easy targets for criminals in two respects. First, very often an intruder may find no one home and, second, there are few passers-by who can spot intruders.

For the first time in the history of human habitation, large numbers of dwellings are completely unattended for many hours a day. The rising percentages of single-person households and of two-wage-earner families, the smaller average number of children per marriage, and the divorce-related rise in the number of single adult heads of households (who are also wage earners) together mean that many houses are empty for much of the day for at least 5 days a week. The unattended house was not possible in colder climates before the invention of central heating a century ago, since someone was needed at home to "keep the home fires burning." Other technological changes sped the development of this process, such as the invention of household labor-saving devices, but social changes such as mass migration from rural to urban areas were also important.

The second historically distinct aspect of modern neighborhood safety is the low density of residential neighborhoods. Although townhouses and condominium apartments have recently become popular, single-family detached homes have been the dominant form of housing built since automobiles became widely available after World War II. This low density reduces informal "watching" by neighbors even when they are home, since there is so much more territory for each "watcher" to cover. In many suburban neighborhoods, it is possible for a moving van to pull up in front of a house and empty its contents before anyone sees it, let alone asks whether the occupants are planning to move.

The rise of unattended spread-out housing attracts house and car burglars, auto thieves, youthful vandals, and other property criminals. It has little to do with the violent crimes of rape, robbery, assault, and homicide, but it has much to do with how safe people believe their neighborhoods to be.

The modern neighborhood also poses distinct problems for the police. While higher density neighborhoods once made it efficient for police and citizens to use walking as their major means of transportation, low density neighborhoods require automobiles. And the etiquette of automobile driving, unlike the etiquette of walking, discourages people from stopping to chat with neighbors or police officers. The absence of neighborhood "gossip" means that neighbors rarely talk with each other about local crime or suspected criminals, and what they do know they rarely share with the police.

Police have thus been cut off from some of their traditional sources of information and leads about likely suspects. Law-abiding citizens who once served as the "eyes and ears" of the police now spend more time out of the neighborhood, and don't know any police officers by name. Most people, when they do have face-to-face contact with a police officer, have either violated a traffic law or been the victim of a crime they wish to report. Neither situation is conducive to building the personal relationships with local police that must precede a flow of informal communication.

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Nor is there really such a thing as a "local" police officer in most urban and suburban police departments. The most efficient allocation of patrol cars over a large low-density jurisdiction makes it difficult to assign officers consistently to the same neighborhood. It is easier to dispatch officers over a large area depending upon whether they are readily available, rather than being limited by local neighborhood boundaries.

In short, the past half-century has broken down both the informal methods of deterring crime through surveillance and the formal police strategies of solving crimes through neighborhood "tips." We have only recently noticed this process and begun to address it through the kinds of citizen and police programs discussed in this Crime File program.

The Causes of Fear

We now know that *fear of crime results from many causes besides crime itself*. Some kinds of people, and people in some kinds of neighborhoods, probably fear crime more than they need to, given their low risk of actually becoming victims. What makes them fearful is seeing things they associate with crime.

The "signs of crime" associated with higher levels of fear are both *social* and *physical*. The social signs include prostitutes soliciting for customers, drug dealers conducting visible transactions, rowdy teenagers loitering on corners, derelicts panhandling or lying down on the street in a stupor, and mentally ill persons shouting at the tops of their lungs to unseen enemies. The physical signs include broken windows, garbage littered on sidewalks, abandoned cars, and broken bottles and glass.

Both physical and social signs of crime indicate disorder in the neighborhood and convey a sense that things are "out of control." Ultimately, disorder may attract such predatory violent crimes as robbery: a neighborhood that can't control minor incivilities may advertise itself to potential robbers as a neighborhood that can't control serious crime either. But long before serious crime develops, the residents of disorderly areas suffer undue fear. Neighborhood businesses suffer loss of patronage due to that fear. Property values may decline. People who have sufficient resources may move elsewhere. That is why the fear of crime is an important problem in itself.

It is tempting to describe disorder as an inner city problem especially concentrated in minority and poor neighborhoods, and unprotected, low-density residential areas as a middle-class suburban problem, but that would be an oversimplification. While there are some differences of degree, middle-class suburbs often suffer disorder problems at shopping centers and even on residential street corners. Poor inner city neighborhoods in many cities are quite low in density, with many houses empty during the day. Both problems pose a challenge to almost all kinds of police departments. Many have developed a variety of programs to deal with these problems.

These programs share the goal suggested by one of the discussants in the Crime File film: "breaking down the barriers" between the police and the public that are created by the low-density, automobile-based life style. Other programs address problems of disorder and the causes of fear of crime. To the extent that these programs are successful, the better quality of life may leave people better off than they were before, even if crime is not reduced. If police can help foster a sense of community in an anonymous, atomized residential neighborhood, there are good reasons to believe the neighborhood will be a better place to live in.

Three general types of new programs will be discussed:

1. ***Community organizing***. Efforts at community organizing, such as "Neighborhood Watch" programs, attempt to mobilize citizen involvement in local crime prevention efforts.

2. ***"Storefronts."*** These and other local police facilities have been established to replace some of the precinct headquarters that were closed in earlier periods.

3. ***Neighborhood foot patrol***. Greatly reduced in earlier periods, this activity has been reinstituted as a means of increasing citizens' contact and constructive interaction with police.

All of these initiatives are attempts to reduce fear of crime and crime itself. The key question is whether these programs can work.

Community Organizing: Neighborhood Watch

The major response to the problem of unprotected, low-density neighborhoods has been the Neighborhood Watch program adopted in thousands of cities and towns. This program encourages citizens to get to know their neighbors, to attend block club meetings to discuss crime problems, and to call the police if they observe any suspicious activity in the neighborhood. The program may have police officers in attendance at the block club meetings, but it is otherwise divorced from police operations. The citizens may even go out on patrol on a regularly scheduled basis, but they do not work in radio contact with police.

The appeal of the Neighborhood Watch concept is substantial. Almost one-fifth of the people responding to a recent national survey said they participated in some kind of community crime prevention program. Many neighborhoods have, with police assistance, installed street signs warning potential criminals that the area is protected by a Neighborhood Watch group.

Just how much participation these groups attract, however, is unclear. Many of them have one block club meeting and no further activity. There is rarely any scheduling of responsibilities to watch the neighborhood at particular times, so there are still many "unwatched" hours of the day. Most groups seem to lack a focus for continuing efforts, so they let the program exist more in name than in fact.

The Minneapolis Community Crime Prevention agency tried to address the problem of maintenance of interest and activity by getting police more closely involved with block clubs under a program called "Cop-of-the-Block." Each participating police officer was assigned one or more block clubs to work with on an ongoing basis, stopping by several times a week to ring doorbells and chat with local residents, and keeping them apprised of reported local crime problems and patterns.

For a variety of reasons, however, few officers actually carried out the plan. They attended the block club meetings but found it difficult to do much else. Sometimes front doors were slammed in their faces when they attempted to meet with neighborhood residents; few found it convenient to go to headquarters to obtain neighborhood crime computer printouts to give to local residents; and the pressure to answer radio calls over a wide area was always an impediment to spending much time on the block.

The "Cop-of-the-Block" program also ran into another major problem: it was well received in middle-class, owner-occupied areas but poorly received in more transient, rental housing areas. The paradox is that areas with the greatest crime problems are least receptive to Neighborhood Watch, while areas most receptive to the program rarely have substantial crime problems. The Minneapolis program demonstrated this paradox by undertaking a bold experiment: offering the program to neighborhoods that had not requested it, such requests being the typical way in which Neighborhood Watches have been organized in the past.

Few of these problems have been widely discussed. More often we hear substantial claims being made that Neighborhood Watch has reduced crime. The methods used to evaluate the programs, however, have been questionable, and no one knows whether the programs really work. The Minneapolis Community Crime Prevention program has set up a special project to help answer that question through random assignment of the program to different neighborhoods, a procedure that helps control for the effects of other factors besides the program itself.

Preliminary results from a Police Foundation evaluation of a community organizing effort by the Houston Police Department found that it showed no measurable reduction in crime but, compared with a similar area that had not received the program, it had a significant impact in reducing fear of crime. While these results are not conclusive, they do help allay the concern of some analysts that such community-centered programs might raise the level of fear rather than lower it.

Storefronts

Similar results were obtained in the preliminary analysis of another Houston experiment, the Community Police Station Project. This project built on an idea that first appeared in the late 1960's as an antidote to the closing of many police precinct houses when foot patrols were abandoned. Opening a storefront office for police in a commercial zone provided an opportunity for citizens to see and talk to police on a more personal basis than the telephone allowed. In many older, high-density cities, police storefronts became community centers, a positive environment where people could meet and chat with each other. But for all its appeal, the storefront idea was never systematically evaluated.

Under a grant from the National Institute of Justice, the Houston police and the Police Foundation developed and tested an expanded concept of the storefront—to use the storefront as a base for community outreach. The storefront became a focus for building community identity, even for giving a name to the community. The community police station officers organized neighborhood meetings and activities, working with schools, churches, and other local institutions.

The cost of the community police station in furnishings (donated by a local corporation), rent, and personnel time was substantial. But the demonstrated effects in reducing neighborhood fear of crime were also substantial.

Personal Contact Patrol

The fear-reduction experiments in Houston sought to increase communication with local residents by having police stop to talk to as many local citizens as possible. One area designated as a test site had reportedly received very little police attention, and not even much routine police patrol. The police started to drive through the neighborhood to knock on doors and chat with pedestrians, thus creating a visible presence. They also sent out the message that special officers had been assigned to that local area who wanted to know about area problems.

This Houston program suffered some of the same problems as the Minneapolis "Cop-of-the-Block" effort. While a number of officers were assigned to the task, one officer alone accounted for about half of all recorded contacts. The other officers made very few personal contacts with residents or shoppers. Only one-third of the households had any personal contact with the police over the evaluation period. At some point, all of the officers in the program felt "burned out" and found it difficult to continue making cold contacts with citizens. But for all the problems, a substantial amount of contact was made.

The impact of this contact was impressive: the prevalence of households victimized by crime was reduced by almost one-half, the level of fear declined substantially, and residents' attitudes on other local issues improved. While some methodological problems with the research make these results more suggestive than conclusive, they strongly suggest personal contact patrol is an improvement over routine, anonymous policing.

Police in Newark, Brooklyn, and other places have adopted similar strategies and have received much favorable public comment. The crime reduction effects may not hold up in other evaluations, but the public approval will probably be more consistent. Survey research shows a broad reserve of public support for police, if only the police will exploit it. In doing so, they may not only enhance the "image" of the department. They may also make people feel as safe as they ought to, and work harder to make the neighborhood safer from crime.

Environmental Design

The Crime File film and this commentary are about police and community organizing approaches to making the neighborhoods safe and neighborhood residents less fearful. A different, "environmental" approach to achieving those aims involves efforts to change the physical layouts of neighborhoods. Examples include redesigning streets to make them one way or to turn them into cul-de-sacs, adding street lights, or designing buildings in ways that make it possible for residents to keep an eye on the neighborhood. Although the results of such efforts have been mixed—for example, improved street lighting has had no consistent impact on crime—there have been some successes in reducing some kinds of crime. The best test was in the Asylum Hill area of Hartford, Connecticut. Between 1976 and 1979, the layout of streets and intersections was changed to make more one-way streets, cul-de-sacs, and "gateways" in residential blocks. The changes reduced the amount of outside traffic and increased citizens' efforts to watch the neighborhood. A short-term reduction in crime was noticed but there was no lasting reduction. The program did seem to forestall economic deterioration of the neighborhood where it might otherwise have occurred.

Comprehensive efforts to improve neighborhood safety will probably include both organizational and environmental elements.

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Discussion Questions

1. Do you know any police officers who work in your neighborhood?

2. What specific facts do you know about where, when, and what kind of crime occurs in your neighborhood?

3. How much "watching" goes on in your neighborhood? How many hours a day is the neighborhood empty?

4. Do you know your neighbors? Would they ask questions about a moving van emptying your house?

5. Does fear of crime affect your shopping habits? Your recreation? Your property values?

This study guide and the videotape, ***Neighborhood Safety***, is one of 22 in the CRIME FILE series. For information on how to obtain programs on other criminal justice issues in the series, contact CRIME FILE, National Institute of Justice/NCJRS, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 or call 800–851–3420 (301–251–5500 from Metropolitan Washington, D.C., and Maryland).

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