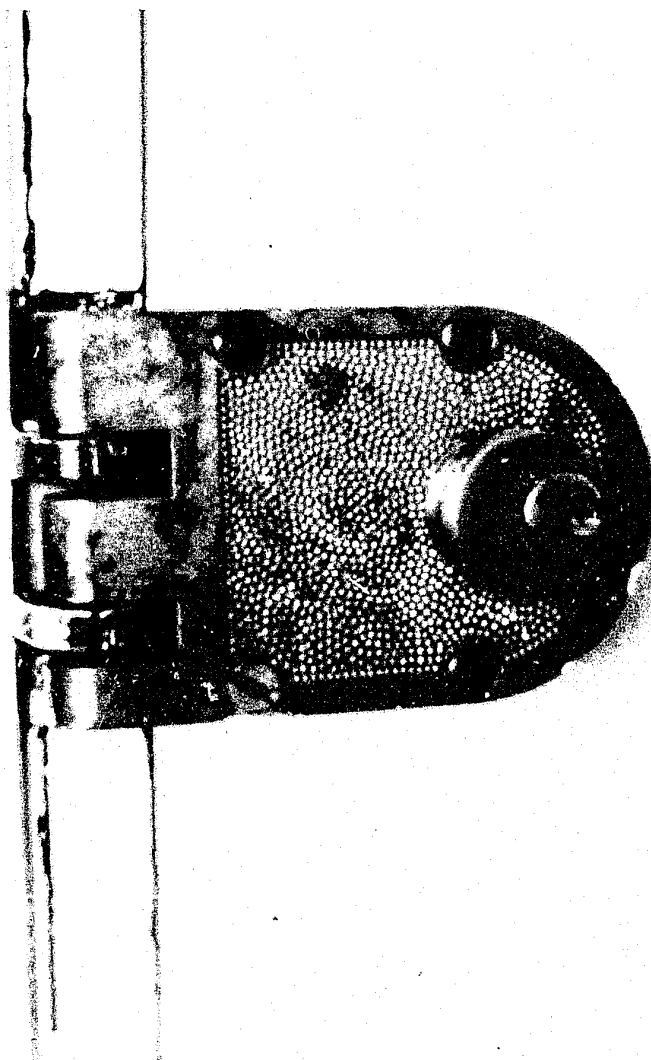


50559



Mobilizing the Elderly in Neighborhood Anti-Crime Programs

William J. Arnone*

Feelings of helplessness, isolation, and hopelessness are the real enemies of the Senior Citizen Anti-crime Network (S.C.A.N.), which is mobilizing elderly New Yorkers to deter crime against themselves.

S.C.A.N. was funded on March 1, 1977 with a grant from the Administration on Aging to the New York City Department for the Aging in conjunction with the New York City Foundation for Senior Citizens, Inc. The program is one of seven projects in six cities which are part of the National Consortium on Crime and the Elderly,

coordinated by the National Council of Senior Citizens.

As part of a multi-faceted attack on crime against older New York City residents, S.C.A.N. is attempting to demonstrate that crime and the fear of crime can be reduced through the concerted efforts of citizens of all ages within urban communities.

How—and where—is S.C.A.N. trying to fulfill our mandate to organize city dwellers in crime prevention activities?

Two target areas with vastly different characteristics were selected as

anti-crime demonstration sites by the Executive, Field Operations, and Research Divisions of the New York City Department for the Aging.

The Target Areas

One area includes a 160-block-square section of Flatbush, a community in the borough of Brooklyn that has undergone great social change in the last decade and is now populated by men and women with widely divergent incomes and life-styles. Since 1963, young Blacks and Hispanics have migrated to this neighborhood

in large numbers; at the same time, equally large numbers of middle-aged and older whites have moved out. Some 12,645 people 60 and over still live among the 56,703 persons in the census tracts that comprise this community, and the rate of crime against these aged residents is one of the highest in New York City.* In four of the five categories of crime against the elderly monitored by the City's Police Department (open area, residential, dwelling and pocketbook robberies and purse-snatch larcenies), the crime rate in Flatbush is the highest in the City.

The other area is a 150-block-square section of Long Island City, a neighborhood in the borough of Queens that is relatively stable but has an ethnically and racially diverse population with a mean individual annual income of approximately \$8,900. Private homes, multiple dwellings, and light industry are interspersed throughout the community, but the 5,558-tenant Ravenswood public housing project physically dominates the neighborhood. Of the 42,547 residents of the census tracts that cross this target area, 22 percent are estimated to be 60 or older. The rate of crime against this elderly population is relatively low, when measured against other sections of New York City, although a 26 percent increase in residential robberies against elderly residents of S.C.A.N.'s area was recorded by the Police Department in 1977.

* Population and income statistics quoted in this article are derived from the 1970 U.S. Census.

In these two contrasting neighborhoods—one rent by social change and afflicted by a very high crime rate; the other stable but diversified, with a low but rising crime rate—S.C.A.N.'s two community organizers set up inexpensive street-level offices and hired a staff of part-time community aides last spring. Then, utilizing the "community development" method of organization, they began the uphill task of mobilizing groups within the target areas in anti-crime activities.

Under the "community development" method, the organizer's role is to foster a good working relationship among the different community groups and to provide them with workable problem-solving methods. To attain these ends, the organizer creates small task-oriented groups. He supplies them with the technical information they need to plan solutions to problems; he helps members to work constructively together; he keeps them focused on their primary goal(s) and improves their ability to maintain their focus; and he teaches groups to implement procedures that attack and solve the community's problem. Finally—so that the groups can eventually function independently of the organizer—he teaches them how to *maintain* problem-solving procedures.

To this traditional formula, S.C.A.N. organizers have added large amounts of support and concern. For they perceived that, when an organizer directs his efforts towards older persons, he must provide a very strong degree of psychological support, and he must demonstrate a sincere concern for the welfare of the elderly.

The Elderly and Crime Prevention

In our view, several dimensions must be added to the organizer's role when he works with the elderly.

For one, our society too often regards the aged as incapable of acting on their own behalf. This attitude has been internalized by many older Americans, who therefore do not *feel* that they are capable of playing a dynamic part in the amelioration of their own problems.

In addition, many elderly persons are, in fact, frail. For this reason, many aged people feel extremely helpless.

Also, many older persons feel that members of other age groups are not concerned about the problems of the elderly. They often regard themselves as "out of the mainstream of life," while they see people of other ages as "in." The elderly thus feel alienated from the "ins," and believe that those in other age groups care little about their problems.

S.C.A.N.'s neighborhood activities are geared to the reversal of these attitudes and feelings and are rooted in the principles that the elderly are able to carry out neighborhood crime-deterrence activities. They are not only capable of acting in self-protection but can also make a *unique contribution* to all residents of communities by devoting significant amounts of time and energy to neighborhood-based crime-deterrence activities. Finally, all age groups—including the elderly—can and must take an active part in crime prevention activities if they are to be effective.

Translating these beliefs into action, S.C.A.N.'s organizers first identified major community institutions that

represent *all* age groups in each target neighborhood: senior citizen centers and clubs; churches and synagogues, government agencies; business groups; schools; block, tenant and civic associations; youth organizations, and precinct-level police. The organizers met with leaders of these neighborhood support systems, and subsequently marshalled them into a 33-member Flatbush Neighborhood Task Force on Crimes Against the Elderly and a 26-member Long Island City/Ravenswood Task Force on Crimes Against the Elderly. The organizers then provided technical information and resources by identifying persons with specialized information and skills in the community, who were asked to serve as resource arms of the Task Forces; and providing information on successful crime-deterrence techniques to the Task Forces, so that they could choose those that were most appropriate for their neighborhoods.

The Task Forces use a range of techniques to combat crime involving the elderly, younger residents, and the police in those activities which can best be carried out by them.

Residents of all ages are being used in citizen street and building patrols, door-to-door surveys to identify the communities' isolated elderly, telephone reassurance programs, and the mass enrollment of neighborhood residents in the New York City Police Department's Blockwatchers and Operation I.D. programs, which use civilians to report crimes accurately and to register valuables to deter theft and aid in the identification and return of stolen property.

Special projects involving specific

age groups have also been launched. A volunteer corps of older residents provides peer support to elderly witnesses in criminal court cases and monitors local criminal court proceedings involving elderly victims. High school students are also helping by providing escort services to the elderly.

In addition, the N.Y.C. Police Department has stepped up security surveys of older persons' homes. Following these surveys, locks, recommended by the police, are installed, and those elderly who are most isolated are provided with Freon horns. They are then linked to neighbors who respond to this call for help.

The participation of elderly volunteers in these programs was gained by recruiting members of other age groups to work with them, thus lending them psychological support. This strategy has bolstered the confidence of elderly residents in the target communities; however, S.C.A.N. views this support as a bridge for older volunteers. We believe that once senior citizens have been involved in crime-deterrence projects for a period of time—and once they have developed a sense of control over their environment—they will feel capable of acting independently in self-help anti-crime projects.

Older volunteers have also been brought into the program by demonstrating that young and middle-aged professionals who are "in the mainstream of life"—personified by S.C.A.N. organizers, community aides, and training personnel—are concerned about the problems of the aged and are carrying out activities designed particularly to mitigate these

problems.

The success of these two strategies will hopefully demonstrate that, when the aged feel that others care about them and are willing to help them help themselves, negative self-images and lack of confidence will be replaced by constructive attitudes and positive self-images. When this happens—when feelings of helplessness, isolation and hopelessness are displaced by feelings of pride, confidence, and hope—the elderly can play a very significant part in the deterrence of crime and in the strengthening of the neighborhoods in which large numbers of older people live.

Mr. Arnone is Director, Senior Citizen Anti-crime Network (S.C.A.N.)

END