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THE COVER: Birmingham's Block Watch Program—a community's involvement in crime prevention. See story page 1.

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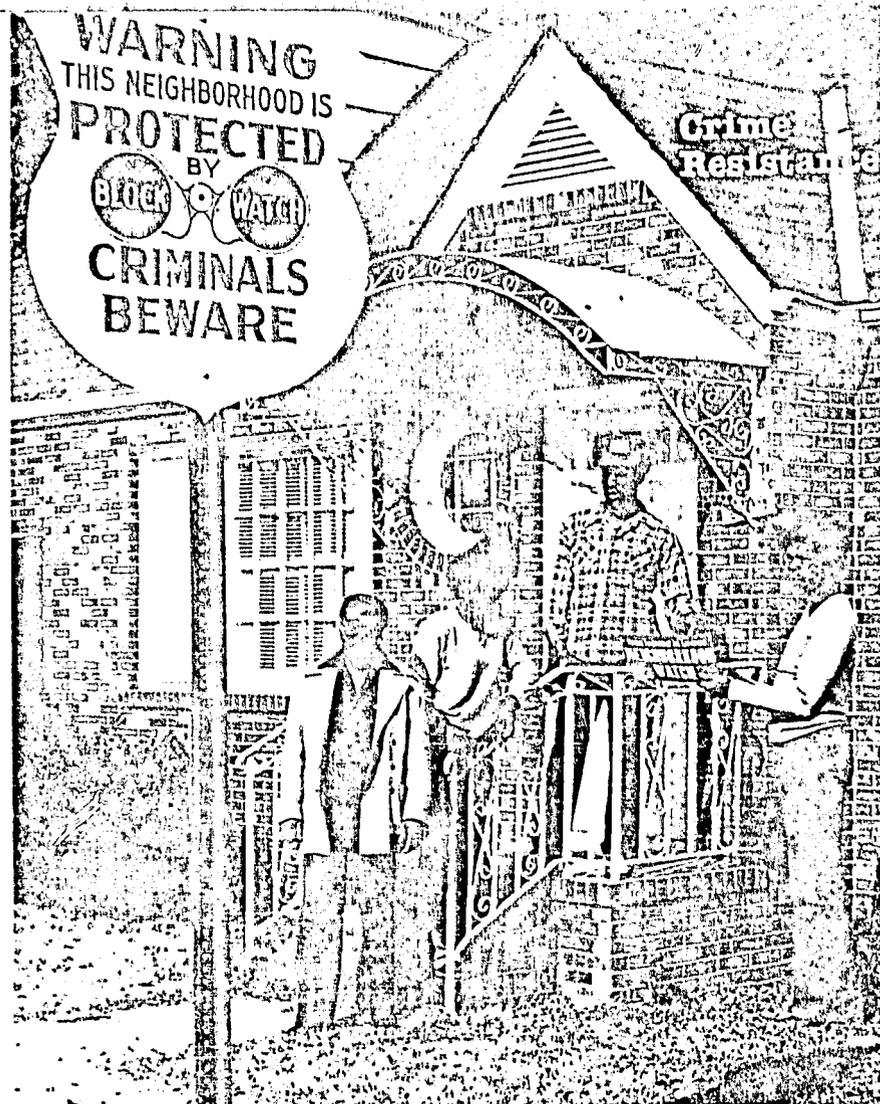
William H. Webster, Director

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Residents participating in the block watch program. Signs are placed at end of participating blocks.

Neighborhood Involvement

By SGT. JOHN G. RYE

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Fear of crime is one of the deadliest aspects of criminal activity—deadlier, not necessarily to the victim of a specific crime, but to the community as a whole. It is nourished with each crime committed. Its consequences are more pervasive than the effects of any actual crime. It is an intangible whose cost cannot be allocated to each crime committed, yet its overall cost can be seen in the decline and deterioration of any community. Citizens perceive crime to be more encompassing than it actually is. They are afraid to visit and conduct business in the central business district of any city. Businesses relocate because of lost income, higher costs, or real or imagined danger. Fear of crime is a cancerous growth which affects the whole fabric of society. Like cancer, it is not always recognized or treated until it is too late.

11-299



Sergeant Rye



Chief Myers

Reduce the Fear of Crime—Create an Informed Public

The Birmingham Police Department has adopted the philosophy that it is just as important to reduce the fear of crime in the city as it is to reduce the actual level of crime. Upon entering office, Chief Bill R. Myers established the following goals for the department:

- 1) Reduction of crime through community involvement.
- 2) Reduction of fear of crime.
- 3) Solicitation of information and ideas from the public which would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the department.
- 4) Involvement of the community in the police function, and
- 5) Improvement of the department's image.

Just as the military has recognized the need to control rumors in order to maintain morale, there is a need to control rumors concerning crime. One story about a crime, spread from mouth to mouth by different citizens, becomes a crime wave to each one, touching their lives. As in any other situation, the best method for sinking a rumor is to use the truth.

To this end, the goal of the Birmingham Police Department has been to create an informed public. Our department maintains that in order to eradicate the rumors, myths, and half-truths surrounding the level of crime in our city, there must be public involvement. We must reach out to citizens at all levels of our society and the best method for reaching people, getting them involved, developing an effective program, and keeping them informed is through neighborhood involvement—getting the facts about crime home to people at their homes.

We must make people aware of the situation in neighborhoods. Who are the victims, i.e. what characteristics of each victim make them unique? When are the crimes happening—is there a pattern as to the time of day, day of the week, or month? Where are the crimes taking place? Are they occurring in the home? What geographical (locale) factors are involved in each crime? By opening channels of communication and making citizens aware

of crime in their neighborhoods, we cut through the clouds of fear of the unknown that cause them to believe that crime is omnipresent. We remove the unknown quality of crime by making people aware of the crime in their neighborhoods and advising them of the measures being used to combat the different types of crime, both city-wide and in their respective neighborhoods. But if such a program is to be effective, it must involve citizens as well as the police.

As a starting point, the Birmingham Police Department explored the possibility of using the existing structure within the framework of city government, with an eye toward establishing a program of neighborhood involvement. Then methods of extending our reach were sought. This required the assistance of agencies far down the ladder of the community's structure—down to each block within the city, if possible.

Methods

The mayor of Birmingham established a Police/Community Relations Committee within his office. All members of that committee are appointed by the mayor. At present, the committee consists of 16 members, 11 of whom are permanent members with as diverse backgrounds as those of our city's population. The chief of police, two other members of the police department, a representative of the mayor's office, and a representative of the Community Development Department also meet with the committee. The committee does not act as a civilian review board on matters of police conduct or procedures, but operates with the purpose of maintaining the lines of communication between the citizens and the police in order to promote better understanding and cooperation

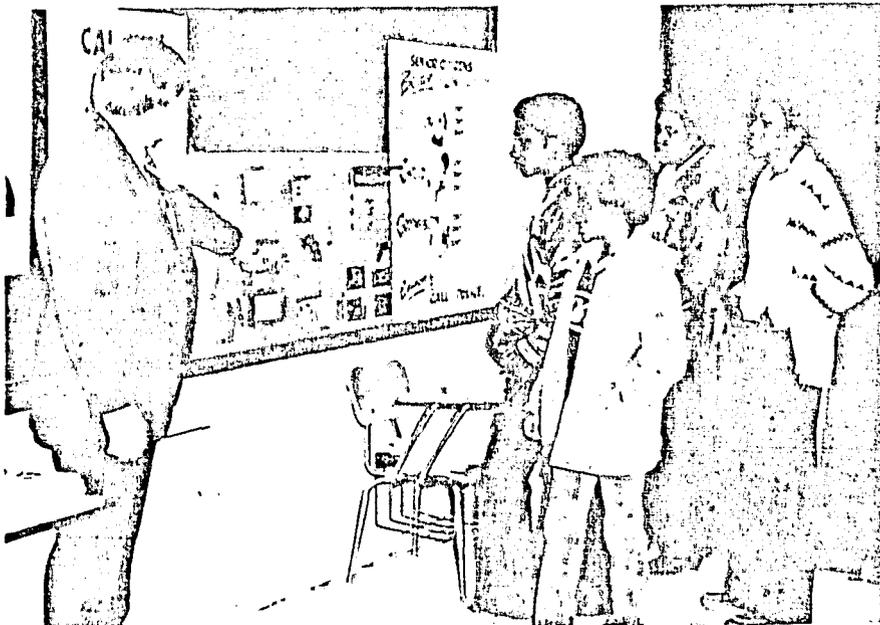
between the two groups. The committee meets every other week and discusses matters which concern the whole city. It acts as a clearinghouse of information and as an advisory board to the mayor and chief of police. The committee seeks ways and means of promoting better understanding and more involvement by citizens and officers through such programs as its newly instituted "Officer of the Year" and "Neighborhood of the Year" awards. These awards are presented to the officer and neighborhood who have contributed most to promoting better understanding in the field of police/community relations.

The Birmingham Police Department consults this committee regularly in an effort to discover what matters relating to the activities of the police department and crime most concern the overall community.

Another existing agency within the city government is the citizen participation program. Under this program the city is divided into 21 major communities which are subdivided into 90 neighborhoods, with several neighborhoods comprising a community. Elections are held at the community and neighborhood level, with individuals from these respective groups running for the offices of president, vice-president, and secretary. The citizen participation program functions through three committees, one of which is the Citizens Advisory Board which consists of the presidents of all the citizens' community committees. This board maintains a standing committee which parallels those of the mayor-council form of government in the city. The board meets bimonthly and relays the concerns of these committees to the council. With the Police/Community Relations Committee, the board discusses methods of resolving problems that concern both the department and the various communities and brings these matters to the attention of the city fathers and the department. Just as information flows from the board to city government, information from the city government and the police flows to the board and its members.



Residents of local neighborhoods sign in at the information desk during a community-level crime prevention program.



Officer discusses shoplifting and forgery with young residents of a neighborhood.

The Birmingham Police Department operates out of four major precincts—north, south, east, and west. Each precinct has created a police/citizen precinct meeting, which parallels the existing community committees in that its basic members are the presidents of all the neighborhoods within the geographical boundaries of each precinct. The fact that police precinct boundaries and boundaries of the citizen participation program overlap has not presented any problem since the department's aim is at the precinct neighborhoods. Also attending police/citizen precinct meetings are the precinct commanders, each shift commander, and the precinct police crime prevention officer (PCPO). These committees meet quarterly at their respective precincts to discuss problems within the neighborhoods.

A Team Approach To Involve the Public

In the beginning, these meetings were stilted affairs, with reservations shown by both the police and citizens. As time progressed and each party came to know, respect, and understand each other, the meetings became lively and candid. The meetings became sessions of "tell it like it is" and "how can we, together, resolve the issues confronting us?" A team approach to problem solving is stressed with officers and citizens as equal partners. Emphasis is placed on the realization that unless citizens share the burden and participate actively in the police function, effort expended by the police will result only in half-measures toward reducing crime. Another important phase of each meeting is determining from the neighborhood leaders what problems they and their constituents believe they are experiencing during their daily dealings with police officers. Do they feel that their respective neighborhoods are getting the kind of police service they want and need? What types of services or responses do they want and expect from the department? Do their expectations of police-rendered services actually fall under the realm of the police function? How can the police provide better service? The questions

are discussed in an endless effort of self-examination and explanation of factors involved in individual situations.

During these question-and-answer sessions, the nature of crimes occurring throughout the city and how such criminal activity is affecting respective neighborhoods are covered. The Crime Analysis Unit furnishes each precinct and each neighborhood president with the latest information on the criminal activity in his area, along with a monthly recap of the latest statistics. This information is explored as thoroughly as possible at the precinct meetings to insure that a clear picture is being presented. Measures being used to combat a particular problem area are explained, and at the next meeting, the effect of these measures is discussed.

These meetings are also used for the purpose of developing initial contacts between the PCPO and the community. Each of the precincts has a PCPO who is a civilian trained in crime prevention. He explains and coordinates the progress of the various departmental programs aimed at aiding citizens in reducing the opportunities for crime in their neighborhoods and decreasing the possibility that they may become victims. At this time, the PCPO presents to the neighborhood presidents any new or additional information concerning such activities and makes appointments for followup at the monthly Neighborhood Citizens Committee meetings.

The basic element of the citizen participation program is the Neighborhood Citizen Committee, which consists of residents within that neighborhood. Each neighborhood elects a president, vice-president, and secretary to preside over the meetings. The tenure of each of these positions is 2 years. For each Neighborhood Citizen Committee there is an advisory group selected by the president in consultation with the vice-president and secretary. The advisory group's pur-

pose is to keep the elected neighborhood officers aware of local citizens' feelings on issues affecting the neighborhood or city. The Neighborhood Citizens Committee, guided by its elected officers and the advisory group, analyzes its own area in order to maintain a current listing of local problems, priorities, goals, and objectives.

Neighborhood meetings, which are scheduled monthly, are regularly attended by the precinct commander, shift commander, district sergeants, beat officers, and the precinct's PCPO. Here the people get to know the officers regularly assigned to their neighborhoods and the officers get to know the people who live on their beats. The beat officers inform the citizens of the crimes occurring in their area. This exchange of information leads to a better understanding between the officers and citizens. The beat officer tells when and where particular crimes are occurring and what measures citizens can take to prevent themselves from becoming victims. Neighborhood residents also keep the officers aware of things happening in the neighborhood. Though some officers feel that these meetings place an unnecessary burden on them, most find that such interactions are beneficial. There has been some reluctance on the part of some citizens to participate, because they believe that they should not become involved in the police function. Yet, on the whole, the response has been positive—barriers between people and the police have been removed.

During the course of the neighborhood citizens meetings, the PCPO details current departmental crime prevention workshops that have been scheduled and goes into detail about the block watch program.

The block watch program is designed to get citizens involved in helping the beat officer protect their neighborhoods. The PCPO presents a general outline of the program and then schedules appointments for meeting with interested residents in their homes.

The basic element in the block watch program is one neighborhood block. The PCPO sets up a date for a meeting at one house on a given block and has as many residents of that block attend the meeting as possible. The PCPO explains the fundamentals of the block watch program and schedules subsequent meetings at interested citizens' homes. Beat officers are introduced to the residents of that block. The officers make the citizens aware of the level and type of criminal activity occurring in their area and what steps can be taken to reduce opportunities for crime. This very basic level of involvement between beat officers and residents of one city block is the foundation of neighborhood involvement. Emphasis is placed on individual rather than direct action by citizens when they witness a crime. The PCPO assists the residents in developing their own neighborhood block watch program. Block captains, who function primarily as coordinators of the program, are elected. For such a program to be successful, it must be emphasized that the citizens run the program. The block watch committees hold monthly meetings attended by the PCPO's and the beat officers. Again, the Crime Analysis Unit furnishes statistical information about criminal activity within the parameter of the block participating in the block watch program. Signs at the ends of blocks warn potential criminals that "this block is under the protection of a block watch program and any criminal activity and all suspicious persons will be reported to the police." Decals and placards are placed on the windows of participating residences. An available form allows citizens to report suspicious persons or vehicles wandering through their neighborhoods. This form goes directly to the beat officer.



A public information officer discusses various aspects of crime prevention with neighborhood residents during a community development crime prevention program.

The block watch program is new to Birmingham, and because of its nature, it covers thousands of block-sized units. It takes a great deal of time and effort to establish; however, in those blocks which have subscribed to the program, the effect has been dramatic. In several instances when a neighborhood with a high crime rate created a neighborhood block watch, the rate actually dropped to zero. Such figures effectively demonstrate that the program does work and that neighborhood and citizen involvement does pay high dividends both to the community and the police department. It reduces the fear of crime—people know what's going on in their neighborhoods because they have the facts at hand. Rumors have no chance to grow. The community regains its vitality because the fear of the unknown is no longer present. The unknown has become a known entity with which one can deal.

Because such citizen involvement reduces the opportunities for crime, the actual crime rate declines. People

know what measures can be taken to reduce the chances of their becoming victims.

By attending the various citizen meetings and using the structure within the city government, information and ideas for increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the department are forthcoming. Knowing what the community wants, expects, and needs of the department allows for better allocation of manpower and other resources.

Attending citizen meetings on the smallest scale, establishing programs for citizen participation, and assisting citizens in participating in these programs, allows the community to become involved in the police function. The most important aspect of these programs, committees, and meetings is that they are citizen-dominated. In order to thrive, they must be nourished by active citizen participation.

Finally, when the results are tabulated and the facts point toward more active people involvement, the perception of the department in the community has only one way to go—up. **FBI**

END