



MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Community Crime Prevention

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By the MOTHER EARTH NEWS editors



Community courts are a community crime prevention strategy successfully used in two San Francisco neighborhoods.
ILLUSTRATION: FOTOLIA/KENJITO

Very few community issues provoke stronger reactions than does the problem of crime. When criminal activity is on the rise, rich and poor of all races agree that something should be done to reverse the trend. Until recently, however, the grassroots response to such a situation usually consisted of needling the police and courts with demands for increased patrols, tougher sentencing, or the establishment of civilian review boards. Lately, though, a few communities have been dealing with crime on their own. The results of independent community crime prevention actions so far are a mixed bag of successes, failures, promising efforts, and potential troubles.

Community Courts

One community-based crime control program that's received considerable attention has operated in San Francisco since 1977. Dispute boards that have been established in two of this city's neighborhoods—Bernal Heights and Visitacion Valley—handle more than one hundred cases a year, ranging from burglaries and

assaults to housing and consumer disputes. The panels are made up entirely of neighborhood residents. There are no lawyers, no records, and no sentences, and the entire process takes place *independent of* the courts or the police.

Can this sort of "people's court" really be effective? The group's organizers say yes, but they emphasize that the real value of such boards is not limited to putting a dent in crime statistics.

"Essentially, a community program is one of the best neighborhood stabilization plans imaginable," says Ray Shonholtz, who helped start the San Francisco program. "In the process of bringing church people, community organizations, schools, and businesses together, it's possible to create—in a very short period of time—a strong, multi-ethnic, multi-racial organization dedicated to meeting a neighborhood need."

Pittsburgh's Community Association for Mediation *also* depends upon neighborhood trust to make its program work. The group's procedures are informal, and involve on-scene mediation and meetings in people's homes. But the association takes a more active role in problem solving than do the San Francisco boards, suggesting resolutions that are mutually beneficial to the parties involved. They've also been available to mediate any school desegregation complaints, providing students and parents the chance to have public hearings *before* fears and feelings could boil over.

Some Mixed Results

The block-watch association—another type of community crime control project, and one that *is* often closely linked with police and court efforts—offers mixed results. Successful programs, in which a neighborhood organizes to make residents more aware of crime and to report it quickly, operate in Philadelphia and Detroit. Under some such systems, burglaries have dropped by 40% or more and robberies have been cut almost in half.

A variation of the block-watch concept often works successfully when a community is dealing with a *specific* type of crime, such as rape. Columbus, Ohio's Community Action Strategy to Stop Rape is often cited as the best organized of such programs, which typically rely on volunteers rather than on professionals.

Although the Columbus group does help women deal with the police or courts once a rape has occurred, it *concentrates* on rape prevention. Its program includes education, a whistle alert system, and pressure put on officials to improve street lighting and increase patrols.

While the intentions of such efforts *are* admirable, citizen action on crime also has potential dangers. In certain sections of New York City, for example, tension between Hasidic Jews and blacks—coupled with poor response from the police—has led to the creation of well-organized and well-financed citizen patrols, sometimes with their own two-way radios and emergency vehicles. In many instances, these patrols beat the New York City police to the scene of the accident or disturbance. However, in some situations the groups may be less than helpful. In circumstances with racial overtones, for instance, they have sometimes added to the tension.

Anyone who'd like to learn more about such programs can contact Ray Shonholtz, San Francisco Community Crime Control Program and Larry Ray, Staff Director, Special Committee on Resolution of Minor Disputes, American Bar Association.

For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's admirable efforts ... which is why we've made this "what's happening where" report by ILSR staffers one of MOTHER EARTH NEWS' regular features.