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## CITIZENS ON PATROL

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Many residential neighborhoods are known to have “eyes on the street,” meaning that neighbors are maintaining casual vigilance over the neighborhood’s public areas. The neighbors are watching for any untoward behavior whenever they look out the windows of their homes, sit on their porches, or take walks in the neighborhood. From the standpoint of public safety, such vigilance usually is considered to be a positive sign, also reflecting a degree of solidarity on the part of the residents.

Taking this volunteer activity one step further, the residents in many neighborhoods have organized themselves to operate formal patrols. The patrol members usually do not carry any weapons. The patrol routine involves systematically covering the neighborhood’s streets and other public places, and the patrol members are ready to call the local police should they see or suspect any untoward behavior. Understanding how such patrols work and whether they might create their own problems, such as becoming “vigilante” groups, was the topic of a study covering many such patrols under a variety of neighborhood settings. The following chapter contains a description of but one of the patrols that were the subjects of separate case studies. As part of the same overall study, other patrols were the subject of a survey (see **BOX 6**).

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: This application was written expressly for the present book. The application is based on an earlier case study that appeared, along with many other case studies, in *Patrolling the Neighborhood Beat: Residents and Residential Security*, Rand Corporation, Washington, D.C., March 1976, as part of a project designed and directed by Robert K. Yin and supported by the U.S. Department of Justice.

**BOX 6****Case Studies as Part of a Mixed Methods Study**

Mixed methods research consists of single studies that employ two or more different methods (e.g., a survey and a case study as part of the same overall study). The single-case study presented in this chapter was part of a fuller, multiple-case study that was a mixed methods study.

First, it involved 32 case studies, such as the one in the present chapter, and covered patrols across the country. Second, the research team conducted phone interviews with the patrol leaders of 100 other patrols. All this information became part of a cross-case synthesis and then the basis for drawing conclusions about the workings of citizen patrols.

Among other contributions, the findings included a newly articulated typology of patrols: patrols limited to buildings or residential compounds (*building patrols*); patrols of neighborhood streets more generally (*neighborhood patrols*); and patrols offering escort, delivery, and other community services (*service patrols*). Of the three, the neighborhood patrols are most prone to accusations of vigilanteism because the patrol members cannot readily distinguish the residents who live in the neighborhood from those who do not. The patrol in this chapter was one of the neighborhood patrols.

(For more information, see Yin, 2009a, Chapter 2, section on "Mixed Methods Designs.")

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**STUDYING CITIZEN PATROLS****Residential Crime Prevention**

In the face of rising crime rates and a declining sense of security, residents may undertake their own crime prevention activities. Participation is entirely voluntary. Although some actions—such as adding locks and alarm systems—take place in private dwellings, other actions—such as organizing a surveillance routine around the neighborhood—take place in public settings. Both kinds of activities represent excellent opportunities for doing descriptive case studies.

With regard to crime prevention in public places, although residents demand greater protection from the local police, they also feel that their own preventive efforts can be important. For instance, you may have encountered *Neighborhood*

*Watch* signs when driving through some of the neighborhoods in your area. The signs alert passersby to the presence of a higher degree of residential vigilance, especially aimed at preventing burglaries, car thefts, and even robberies. The vigilance means that the residents maintain a more watchful orientation, paying attention to any irregular behavior that may signal a crime underway or suggest the prelude to a crime.

One of the more proactive activities arises when residents organize some type of patrol, either by foot or in cars. These *citizen patrols* raise new issues worthy of field-based research. Questions include, “How does a patrol operate?” “What connection does it have with the local police?” “Under what circumstances might a patrol slide from acceptable *vigilant* behavior to less acceptable *vigilante* behavior?” These and other related questions were examined through the following descriptive case study.

## Defining Citizen Patrols

Unlike a school or a classroom, a citizen patrol is not a readily defined entity. Starting a study of a citizen patrol, therefore, illustrates well the problems of defining the “case” in a case study. Without careful definition, many other similar activities might be incorrectly labeled as citizen patrols, creating misleading findings and conclusions. Three criteria helped exclude those activities that were not considered as representing citizen patrols.

First, the activity of interest had to be aimed at preventing *criminal* acts. Not of interest were citizen groups organized to pursue personal or political interests, such as harassing particular social groups of people (e.g., Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazi groups). Similarly, outside the realm of interest were groups that themselves engaged in nuisance if not illegal behavior, such as gangs that put graffiti markings on private and public property.

Second, the activity of interest had to be organized and implemented by a residents’ group or organization—often a homeowners’, tenants’, or neighborhood association. If the residents or property owners merely hired an outside private security agency to do the patrolling, this situation did not qualify as a citizen patrol. That kind of case study would then have been about private security guards, who have different training and may establish different relationships with residents and the local police than might a citizen patrol.

Third, the prevention activity had to be primarily directed at residential, not commercial areas. Thus, crime prevention organized by a group of storeowners or business firms to protect the premises where people work rather than reside also fell outside the realm of interest.

After applying the preceding exclusion criteria, many types of activities still remain (see Exhibit 5.1). All these activities were deemed acceptable as the subject of case studies of citizen patrols. The following case study describes the workings of one such patrol (all names are fictitious).

**Exhibit 5.1 Illustrative Activities Qualifying as Citizen Patrols**

- A volunteer group patrolling neighborhood streets in cars
- A volunteer group patrolling neighborhood streets on foot
- A service for escorting pedestrians, staffed by residents
- Residents patrolling a housing compound or housing project
- Residents serving as watchmen or gatekeepers for a residential compound

**THE RANGEFIELD URBAN CITIZENS PATROL**

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**Origins**

The Rangefield Patrol operates in a four-block area in the middle of a multiethnic community. The four blocks are dominated by renovated townhouses and their resident owners. The surrounding area, including adjacent neighborhoods, has faced constant threats from drug dealing, muggings, burglaries, and car thefts.

J. B. Compton, an artist and graphic designer, has lived in the neighborhood for nine years and is a patrol member. He has had several personal experiences with crime since moving to the Rangefield area. First, he was a victim of what he described as “a spectacular burglary” in which his house was “virtually cleaned out.” Second, his car was vandalized several times, and third, tools were stolen from his backyard on three separate occasions.

Compton’s experiences are not unique. Two years earlier, there was a rash of housebreaks and muggings, and the residents in the four-block section met to discuss ways of stemming the crime wave. The area already was highly organized by neighbors who had banded together around environmental and political issues affecting them, and people already had experience working together. David High, a recognized community leader who later initiated the Rangefield Patrol, noted that “it’s a neighborhood where everyone knows each other and a spirit of unity exists” (see **BOX 7**).

**BOX 7****Open-Ended Interviews**

The numerous quotations of the words spoken by the participants in this case study represent one way of presenting the data from open-ended interviews. The quoted phrases and sentences help present the participants’ perspectives and

thinking. In other case studies, you may want to explore these insights more deeply. You can present lengthier renditions of quoted materials, representing whole paragraphs or even large portions of a chapter.

Of course, taking quoted words while actively participating in a field setting is a challenge. Without some kind of recording device, the quoted material is likely to be short, as in the present chapter. To use longer passages will either require you to use such recording devices or to develop a facile note-taking procedure. An alternative option, also found in many case studies, is to use longer passages but to paraphrase rather than directly quote the participants. Now, however, some of the value of having directly quoted materials is lost because the paraphrasing does not assure that a participant's exact mood, tempo, attitude, or content have been captured properly.

(For more information, see Yin, 2009a, Chapter 4, section on "Interviews.")

As an initial response to the crime wave, High said, the community at first requested additional surveillance by the local police. The community also discussed ways of increasing the residents' "security consciousness," resulting in many homeowners purchasing lights for the front and rear of their houses and installing burglar alarms. Although the local police promised increased protection, the residents felt no such increase, with several of them watching the streets and counting the presence of patrol officers and patrol cars.

"When we saw that we were getting no response from the police, we decided to see if we could stop crime in the streets ourselves," High recalled. Four residents volunteered to plan a citizen patrol. When they presented the plan at a neighborhood meeting, 15 to 20 persons immediately volunteered to participate. Soon, the volunteers numbered around 60. "It was not without some difficulty that we ultimately gained support from the broader community," High also noted. "Initially, we were charged with being vigilantes and as people with guns trying to preserve our homes."

The original and continuing goal of the Rangefield Patrol has been to make the four-block area safer. An independent organization, the patrol performs only crime prevention activities, although many of the members also belong to the larger Rangefield Neighborhood Association that sponsors many social, political, and service-oriented activities. All members of the patrol are adult males.

## Patrol Operations

At the time of the case study fieldwork, the Rangefield Patrol worked from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. every night but Friday (the local police have an augmented patrol on Friday nights). The four-hour shift is manned by two volunteers on a rotating basis.

The most important instruction to all patrol members is to remain visible. "Visibility," explained High, "makes residents feel secure and also deters potential criminals." The main activities of the patrol include these: walking and standing around the four-block area, talking to and greeting residents as they approach their homes, escorting people into their homes or around the block if requested, and periodically checking the back alleys of the blocks. Compton said he did not feel that his patrol activities were dangerous. "You have to be careful because you don't know if a passerby is armed or not," he said, "but a little common sense eliminates most of the danger in this work."

If a patrol member witnesses a crime, his instructions are to call the police, blow his whistle, but if at all possible, not to become involved in any confrontation. "We will confront a criminal if we have to," High said, "but so far, we haven't had to do that because our whistle campaign has been so successful. Our neighborhood's show of force has successfully intervened in several incidents." All residents, whether on patrol or not, carry tin whistles, and upon hearing the sound of a whistle, all neighbors are instructed to call the police immediately and then to go outside and lend assistance to the patrol and any victims. According to High, at least five or six muggings and several auto thefts have been broken up by residents responding to the call of a whistle. "Response to whistle calls has been fantastic, even late at night," High said.

The inexpensive whistles are essentially the only equipment used by patrol members. They wear no special uniforms or badges and do not carry weapons. High remarked, however, that he would like to see the patrol acquire claxon horns, which are easier to use than whistles and which emit louder sounds.

### **Patrol Organization**

The patrol's current membership hovers around 60 adult males. A woman, however, serves as a patrol coordinator, and several other female residents assist in distributing flyers or doing other chores. The coordinator is responsible for shift scheduling, finding substitutes for absentees, keeping written records of patrol-related incidents, and convening the occasional meetings of the patrol members. In addition, she maintains close communication with the police and, as a representative of the neighborhood, frequently presents the local police with security-related requests and demands.

According to High, the patrol has no specific leadership positions or administrative infrastructure except for the coordinator's position. "Several of the more active volunteers have emerged, through their involvement, as patrol spokesmen," High explained, "but none have titles of any sort." Decisions, he added, usually are made by the coordinator or at meetings of the entire patrol. Likewise, Compton emphatically asserted that all patrol volunteers can have a voice in running the operation. "There are no real patrol leaders," he said, "and we usually have group meetings where people can criticize, make suggestions, or just talk out their problems."

During the past two years, the need for patrol recruitment has been minimal. The 60-person membership has remained constant. According to Compton, in order to join the patrol, all one must do is express an interest in getting involved. He himself

joined the patrol a little over a year ago, hearing about it through the neighborhood grapevine. Most patrol members have joined because they are committed to making the area a safe, enjoyable place to live, he said, although some residents have not participated because they feel that the job is dangerous or because they are in poor health. “Others, especially renters, just aren’t interested.” When asked what members gain from being part of the patrol, Compton replied that more acquaintances are made with neighbors, fostering a heightened sense of community spirit. The greatest rewards, however, are passive ones, he noted, “such as everyone in my family simply being safe. When things are quiet, when nothing is happening, that’s our best reward.”

The only “dues” for patrol members are the hours pledged to patrol. High estimated that he spends about 12 hours per month on patrol efforts. Compton said that he usually patrols twice each month for a total of about eight hours. “The patrol certainly can be a burden,” he remarked, “but I try to work out my schedule accordingly.”

Each patrol member is expected to be level-headed and willing to participate. Each novice is trained by a veteran volunteer who accompanies the novice on his first few patrol shifts. No written rules or behavioral guidelines exist. “The general tone for our patrol activities was set in our planning discussions,” said High, “and we all have a sense of what we should or should not do. Foremost is an understanding of being careful for our personal self and of only getting involved in absolute emergencies.” Since the patrol has been in existence, no members have been disciplined or discharged for acting with poor judgment.

Incipient attendance problems may be starting to arise, however. High said that “people are getting bored because things are so quiet.” When the patrol first began, patrol members intervened in several muggings and attempted auto burglaries and turned away countless suspicious-looking loiterers. Now, people are beginning to lose interest because there is very little activity on the streets.

In general, the patrol seems to be widely supported by residents. “We get tons of feedback from neighbors who personally thank us for making the area safer,” High said. Compton said he also feels that most residents have a positive opinion of the patrol, but he added, “I have no idea” what the local police think about the group. “Because our direct contact is so minimal, I sometimes get the feeling that they don’t care that we exist.”

## **Relationships With the Local Police**

The Rangefield Patrol sees itself as an organization that supplements the local police and that affords its neighborhood extra protection. Although there is no routine contact with the police, the coordinator keeps the police informed of all patrol activities. The police, in turn, try to provide the area with additional patrols on Friday nights. High rated the police as “fairly good” in responding to patrol calls and said that the quality of police protection probably has improved since the Rangefield Patrol began. “That may be, though, because our neighborhood has proven to be particularly vocal,” High speculated. He added that overall police protection still is not adequate, “or we wouldn’t be out there.”

Officer Jon Lindh, the director of community relations at the local police station, said that the Rangefield Patrol has had no effect on the deployment of the local police in the area. Police officers are allocated according to crime levels in a neighborhood or in relation to police workload, he explained.

Officer Lindh said he has been in contact several times with members of the Rangefield Patrol. “As far as citizen patrols go, they behave themselves pretty well,” he said, adding that he is unaware of any police complaints regarding the patrol’s behavior or activities. However, contact between the local police and the patrol members is minimal. Officer Lindh said that the beat patrolmen stop occasionally to chat briefly with a patrol member, but that is the exception rather than the rule. He did mention, however, that patrol members have come to the station several times to talk with the captain or “to present a list of grievances about things happening in their neighborhood.”

In discussing the patrol’s accomplishments, Officer Lindh said that they primarily have been twofold: The patrol has fostered a sense of community awareness and concern and also has kept the police informed of neighborhood happenings. In general, however, he does not think the concept of citizen patrols should be supported because “these people can’t take the place of the police. They usually don’t know what to look for or how to handle a serious problem.” Basic crime reporting, he added, is a good thing. “We encourage people to do that.” He said the police also have praised other citizen patrols’ efforts at various crime prevention seminars throughout the city.

Compton said that the success of the patrol has far exceeded his original expectations. There has been a visible reduction in the neighborhood’s crime rate, and increased community cohesion has accompanied the concern about security. In discerning the effect that the patrol has had on crime in the neighborhood, High asserted that “boredom is success.” “There have been no housebreaks, muggings, or other criminal activity in the last eight or nine months,” he said, “and there is no telling how many potential criminals we have deterred.” Regarding crime displacement, Officer Lindh said that, although no figures exist to verify his statement, he feels that because of the Rangefield Patrol’s activities, some criminals might have avoided the Rangefield neighborhood and victimized other neighborhoods instead.



## INSIDE STORY FOR CHAPTER 5

### **Personal Security When Doing Fieldwork**

Studying citizen patrols, much less accompanying residents while on patrol, poses a potential threat to your own security. Although you will not be able to

avoid unexpected events and will have to exert extreme caution and care if such events occur, some preparatory steps still can be helpful.

Two steps can be extremely important. First, you should have received appropriate clearance to do the study and to carry out your specific field routines. For citizen patrols, the providers of such clearance will be persons of authority, such as the main persons responsible for organizing the citizen patrol and also local police officials. The least desired situation would be if you had obtained clearance only from the member of the patrol whom you were accompanying. (Such need for the higher clearance has counterparts in doing other kinds of fieldwork; for instance, you would want to obtain clearance from the principal of a school even if you were going to study only a single classroom and that classroom's teacher already had agreed to your presence in it.)

Second, you would want to let a trusted colleague (or two) know about the exact time of your planned fieldwork but request that they not call you during that period of time. As part of this procedure, you also would want your patrol companion to know that you had alerted your colleague(s), to deal with any unanticipated communication need.

### **For Class Discussion or Written Assignment**

Discuss other precautionary steps that might be taken when doing fieldwork in different settings. Speculate how fieldworkers should respond when an untoward event occurs (e.g., when a patrol member encounters a problem and confronts someone in some threatening manner). Should the fieldworker assist? Observe? Depart?

