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As Police Budgets are Cut, Citizens Step In

REUTERS/Tim Shaffer
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Dabney Lawless, 38, took it personally when criminals targeted her neighborhood in east Oakland with a rash of burglaries. It was December 2010, and due to the city's budget shortfall, Oakland — a city with the California's highest violent-crime rate — had just laid off more than 10 percent of its cops.

So Lawless started going door to door, recruiting neighbors to revive a dormant neighborhood watch group. The group, of which she's a block captain, decided to do more than patrol the streets. Last year more than a hundred of them chipped in about $250 each to hire a private security company to cruise through the neighborhood in a patrol car. Lawless says that investment, plus neighbors using the watch group to keep each other informed about suspicious behavior, has already made the neighborhood feel safer, and though she doesn't have the data to support it, she's certain the number of burglaries has dropped dramatically.

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With the economic slowdown pushing municipal budgets to the brink, police layoffs and rising crime levels have been a common story in the hardest-hit American cities. Survey results from more than 700 police departments, released in April, showed that 21 percent had layoffs in the past two years. Another 56 percent shrank as a result of employee attrition. "In places like Camden New Jersey, and Oakland California, the budget cuts are having a direct impact on violent crime, which is significantly higher," says Chuck Wexler, director of the Police Executive Research Forum, the group that did the study.

That has citizens in the toughest areas taking charge of their own protection — many are joining neighborhood watch groups, hiring armed guards, and using new online tools to communicate about shady activity on their streets.

In Newark New Jersey, for example, arrest numbers dropped and the crime rate spiked after 167 officers were laid off in December 2010. Between January and June of 2011, police made almost 4,000 fewer arrests than they did during the same period in 2010, according to the *New Jersey Star-Ledger*. And the city had 91 homicides last year, the most since 2007, while the number of non-fatal shootings rose 35 percent between 2009 and 2011.

That's led a group of residents in the city's Ironbound neighborhood to work with the police to recruit volunteers for a block watch program there. A local company has kicked in a thousand dollars to install dozens of neighborhood watch signs, and a business improvement group has offered to clean up litter and graffiti.

In the past, there's been evidence to show these types of efforts can cut into crime. A 2008 U.S. Department of Justice meta-analysis of 18 studies done between 1977 and 1994 concluded that block watch programs were associated with a 16-percent decrease in crime compared with control areas. In the late 1980s in Philadelphia, for example, John Goldberg, a former community organizer, put together neighborhood watches in Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood. The group's tips to police about drug dealers, he says, led to more than 650 arrests in

just 18 months.

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Matt Peskin, who directs the National Association of Town Watch has noticed an increase in calls about joining watch programs since the recession started, though he has no hard numbers. He says block watch groups tend to grow and get active in response to specific neighborhood threats like a spate of muggings. Once they've cut into the crime problem though, interest tends to flag again as people start feeling safer he adds.

Stockton, Calif., is one place where neighborhood watch groups are on the rise. The city, which just declared bankruptcy, has laid off 25 percent of its police officers since 2009. Last year there were a record 58 homicides, an all-time high, and there have been 35 halfway through 2012. The city already has about 100 neighborhood watch groups, and more are being created all the time, according to Stockton police.

Peskin says an active block watch doesn't mean crossing the line from vigilance to vigilantism. Volunteers aren't allowed to carry guns while on patrol nor intervene in crimes in progress, except to call police — the program's official manual notes that watch volunteers "shall not carry weapons." About the recent George Zimmerman-Trayvon Martin case, Peskin says "it just breaks all the rules."

Even so, while there are 25,000 registered neighborhood watch organizations, there are also many unregistered groups, according to the National Sheriff's Association, which sponsors the program. It's unclear whether groups that aren't registered follow the national guidelines, and there have been some reported incidents of armed citizens conducting watches. In July 2009, an armed watch volunteer in a suburb of Salt Lake City, Utah, was shot by another man who felt that the volunteer was harassing his teenage daughter.

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STEVE YODER writes about business, real estate and other domestic policy issues. His work has appeared in print and online at Salon, The American Prospect, Men's Health, The Crime Report, and elsewhere.

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