

# When Armed Citizens Patrol The Streets

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(CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR) *This article was written by Tom A. Peter.*

The Edgewood neighborhood near downtown New Haven, Conn., is probably one of the last places you'd expect to find residents patrolling the streets with pistols.

Turn-of-the-century carriage houses sport manicured lawns. Tall elm trees really do line Elm Street. And every night since youths beat up a rabbi's son three weeks ago, members of the newly formed Edgewood Park Defense Patrol (EPDP) have been walking the streets at night. Roughly half of them have permits to carry concealed weapons and take a handgun on patrol.

Although there's nothing illegal about the practice, this ratcheting up of a traditional neighborhood watch worries local officials and national experts. Citizens rarely, if ever, have the training that police routinely receive to defuse volatile situations. But as budget woes and other priorities cause some localities to cut back neighborhood police patrols, advocates say that stepped-up citizen policing is an understandable response, although it's a risky one with guns.

Longtime residents say Edgewood was a peaceful place until the 1980s, when residents started moving out to the suburbs and drugs and prostitution moved in. The situation started to improve in the late 1990s, in part due to neighborhood revitalization projects and New Haven police working closely with the community, says Avi Hack, a high school teacher and EPDP spokesman. But about five years ago, officers who used to work with Edgewood were reassigned — something Mr. Hack blames on the police chief — and "gangs of marauding youth" began harassing the neighborhood, he says.

After working with a variety of city officials and seeing no results, Hack says, "at a certain point we felt the only way to put the pressure on the mayor to either dismiss the police chief or get the police chief to do his job, which he seems incapable or unwilling to do, and ensure our own security was to form EPDP."

In an act of apparently random violence earlier this month, a group of youths attacked a local rabbi's adult son in his own home. Shortly afterward, members of the Jewish community along with some local African-Americans and others formed the EPDP.

On this particular night, Hack and Gary Lynes, a retired musician, are on an hour-long patrol in matching black EPDP T-shirts.

"I'm with you 100 percent!" shouts Tina Salters as the two pass by. Down the street, they're met with a scowl from Nancy Brown. "The police are working real hard and they don't need no one else coming out here with guns." Hack and Lynes don't carry guns. Despite the EPDP criticism heaped on him, Chief Francisco Ortiz, a staunch advocate of community policing, says he "wholeheartedly" supports EPDP, though he made a point of officially not supporting their decision to carry weapons on patrol. He says neighborhood police patrols were reduced largely due to funding cuts.

"We used to get a lot of grants to help [with community policing] — a couple million dollars a year. But we lost those grants over the last six years," says Chief Ortiz. He explains the war on terror came at a price to community policing efforts that allowed officers enough time to work small beats and get to know the residents and their concerns. "The country shifted its focus. Like Cyclops with one eye, it took its eye off" community policing, he says.

Traditionally, community policing efforts encourage citizens to be the "eyes and ears" for police but to remain on the sidelines.

Neighborhood watch groups "should not be armed. Period.... They are not trained; they are not educated in the laws, and it is distinctively a law-enforcement function," says Robbie Woodson, program manager of USAonWatch, an umbrella group that oversees the national Neighborhood Watch Program. "Leave the law-enforcement activities to law-enforcement officials, and part of that is armed patrols."

Although Curtis Sliwa, founder and president of the international community policing organization Guardian Angels, strongly supports EPDP, he, too, is concerned about members carrying weapons. "The ingredients are here for a major problem," says Mr. Sliwa. "Lawyers are perched. The moment there's an incident with this patrol ... you know there's going to be some civil suit filed claiming that their client's civil rights were violated by arms-toting posses."

Armed civilian patrols may have a hard time meeting the higher standards authorities have adopted over the past 40 years for how and when to use firearms, says Samuel Walker, emeritus professor of criminal justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. "I'm not sure that these kinds of neighborhood patrols are aware of these kinds of rules.... The risk of them shooting someone who should not be shot is very high."

While armed civilian groups like the EPDP are rare, they are not unprecedented. In 2003, the "Oregon Rangers Association" raised eyebrows when it began patrolling Oregon's national forests armed with pistols and shotguns, intent on stopping crime in the

wilderness and helping rangers stretched thin across the parks. With reports following 9/11 that terrorists planned to target Jewish neighborhoods, Rabbi Yakove Lloyd made international headlines when he announced his intent to organize civilian patrols armed with licensed firearms, baseball bats, and walkie-talkies through Jewish areas in Brooklyn, N.Y. The effort fizzled after a public outcry.

Crime overall in New Haven has fallen by 56 percent since 1990, according to New Haven's Uniform Crime Report.

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