

Ordinary Kiwis are volunteering to be their communities' eyes and ears in the fight against crime. Chalpat Sonti reports.

The British High Commissioner and the Russian ambassador can rest easy at night. Anyone lurking around their plush residences in Wellington suburb Karori will be spotted. Not by men in dark suits, or the Security Intelligence Service, but a far less obtrusive group of New Zealanders. They are the men and women of the 36-strong Karori community patrol.

Like most such groups in New Zealand, they are a diverse lot with assorted occupations and ages from 22 to 65. Set up in response to a series of arsons in the early 1990s, the group has flourished as extra "eyes and ears" of police in New Zealand's biggest suburb.

But don't think of these patrollers as suburban supermen. Or even the shoring up of the thin blue line. Community patrollers go out of their way to reject such notions. For starters, they are only there to observe. If they see a crime being committed they must call police and stand back. They have no special powers to place them above any other citizen. This is no place for vigilantes.

One recent Friday night was a case in point. Alastair, a member for about three years, took rookie Andrew out on patrol. What happened? Nothing. Much like many nights. But they would bristle at any suggestion that their efforts were a waste of time. The pair used their knowledge of the suburb, home to embassies and high commissions as well as every shade of the social spectrum, and the people who live there to note down licence plates of cars parked outside homes of people euphemistically described as being "of interest" to police. Those parked up in car parks at popular lookouts. Or people walking around the streets late at night without apparent good reason. They do this unobtrusively, in an unmarked car that changes each night. Any information will be passed on to Karori community constable Dave Ross, who values such intelligence. "I can pay some of those crims a visit days later and tell them I know what they're up to. It always surprises them as they never saw me, but it keeps them wary."

Patrollers have that impossible-to-buy inside knowledge that comes from living and interacting with their community. Andrew, for example, has lived in the suburb all his life. He displays an impressive knowledge of local low-lives. Alastair and Andrew also did the rounds of schools. At one, they spotted a window open and lights on. They called the school's security guards. Though nothing came of it (the "intruder" was the cleaner), the service is free to the community. Cash-strapped schools certainly aren't complaining. Neither are the patrollers.

Alastair sees the Karori patrol as proof that community spirit is alive and well. After all, they are not paid for their efforts. Not even for petrol (they travelled 70 kilometres in a four-hour patrol and used their own cellphone to contact police). Though they didn't catch any criminals in the act that Friday night, their presence is likely to have prevented crime.

Studies show up to 80 per cent less crime in areas patrolled by volunteers. It is one of a number of impressive statistics trotted out by Community Patrols of New Zealand chairman Neil Sole. The organisation, formed in 2001, boasts 80 volunteer patrols from Kaikohe to Invercargill, a total of about 6500 members, with about three new groups joining a month. Other groups have been declined membership because "we wouldn't have a bar of them because they were descending into becoming vigilantes". Groups from around the world even come to New Zealand to see if the community patrol model can be adapted to their own countries.

There are glaring gaps though. The big cities. Though Christchurch has several groups, Wellington and Auckland have been less inclined. The Karori group is the only one in the Wellington City area (though there are others in Wainuiomata, Porirua and along the Kapiti Coast). Mr Sole says the reason for the lack of patrols in the big cities is simple: community spirit. "The sheer nature of the beast is 'yes, we'd like it as long as someone else is doing it'." What about Wellington City Council? Could it have more of a part to play in organising patrols? The idea doesn't appeal to Mr Sole, who prefers control to be retained by the grass roots. City council community services manager Laurie Gabites says the fact that community patrols have aligned themselves with police meant the council really only played a support role. It funds the Walkwise street patrols, a group of about 15 paid security staff who patrol inner-city Wellington. It's all a bit of a shame, Alastair says. Wellington City, with its geography and centralised police force, would be an ideal place for community patrols. "When we hear something going on in Karori we can get there so much quicker than a patrol car from town. We can keep an eye on things till police get there and if someone does a runner, we can point out where they've gone."

Alastair reels off stories about tracking burglars who thought they'd made a clean getaway, unaware police were being told of their every movement. Mr Sole, a patroller in Katikati, tells similar tales. One he uses to illustrate the value of patrols isn't from personal experience, though. It happened in the back of a police car in South Auckland. An offender on his way to prison was talking about where he committed crimes. In one neighbourhood, while walking the streets looking for likely targets, he kept running into a marked community patrol car. He finally went home. "He told the cop it was a waste of time doing anything when it seemed he was being watched all the time."

Police are taking community patrols seriously. It's not just the helping hand or the extra intelligence-gathering that impresses national community support manager Inspector Morris Cheer. "These are people taking responsibility for their communities, which is what we're asking everyone to do." Police have a memorandum of understanding with the patrols organization, which sets standards and provides research and helps with training. How the patrols work is up to them. Some are covert, while others, such as Wainuiomata, have a high profile. When it comes to funding, groups like Karori's might be the victim of their covert style, Alastair says. "A business owner is hardly likely to get excited when they can't get their company name splashed all over our

car. But it would be nice if some of these people could see the good we're doing in this community and help us out anyway."

* Anyone interested in forming or joining a community patrol should contact their community constable.

Courtesy of The Dominion Post. Published 18 June 2005.
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