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Cincinnati Residents Try High-Tech Crime Stopping

Published July 15, 2003

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Some Cincinnati residents are taking neighborhood crime stopping into their own hands.

With the city falling victim to an increase in street crimes in many of its 52 neighborhoods over the past few years and also suffering from budget cuts, residents wanted a way to help police track down felons.

So some private citizens have installed wireless "crime cams" in crime-ridden business sections of their communities in an effort to clean up the streets. Residents go through a "Citizens on Patrol" training course so they can log on from their computers and keep an eye on happenings around them.

"This allows more of their community members to get involved because they're not being put at risk," said Ben Moore, a principal of **CityWatcher.com** ([search](#)), the monitoring system used in some Cincinnati neighborhoods like Walnut Hills, Avondale and Corryville.

The system was first used when Moore's partner, Sean Darks, saw crime running rampant around some buildings he owned in Walnut Hills. He had \$30,000 stolen from one of the buildings in one day alone.

"That was really unacceptable," Moore said.

The two researched the use of cameras in neighborhoods and found that public surveillance is common in many parts of Europe, notably England, where there are more than 2 million to help nab **IRA** ([search](#)) terrorists.

Moore and Darks commissioned Agent Technologies to evaluate different types of surveillance gadgets, and the result was Citywatcher.com, an e-surveillance site using network video servers that connect directly to the Internet -- allowing cameras to be redirected, zoomed and tilted anywhere within the community.

Moore and Darks put some cameras up around Darks' properties, and police were able to make five arrests in one day.

"It became a tremendous deterrent because of all the illegal activities there," Moore said, adding that litter also decreased and consumers finally felt comfortable enough to patrol businesses in that area more frequently.

About six cameras were put up while Moore and Darks talked with city officials about expanding the network to other crime hotspots. They plan to have 75 to 200 installed throughout city business districts and neighborhoods by the end of the year.

"The residents have been very receptive, primarily because these are common areas they're being used," Moore said. "As they start seeing the impact of how these are working, they want them in other areas."

But the legal issues become entangled, privacy advocates say, if private citizens give police or government officials access to the images or provide the tapes to the government or the media.

"You could, under some legal theory, consider them [citizens] as government agents," said Cedric Laurant, policy counsel for the **Electronic Privacy Information Center** ([search](#)). "If they act as government agents, they would have the same duties and they would be subject to oversight" by city or state councils.

If business owners, private citizens and police want the cameras installed to help deter crime in business districts, that's usually okay. But it's how those images are used and who will have access to them that may be a problem.

The **American Civil Liberties Union** ([search](#)), says it's okay to focus cameras on specific, high-profile public places that could be terror targets -- such as the U.S. Capitol building in Washington -- but it says blanket use of cameras in streets

and public spaces is a bad idea.

The group argues that video surveillance hasn't been proven effective and points to Britain as an example.

That country spends about \$18 million a year on its police cameras to deter terror IRA attacks -- but not one terrorist has been caught so far.

In an era when surveillance is becoming more prevalent, more than 20 cities use cameras to stop criminals in their tracks. Cameras are used in schools, by state departments of transportation to catch speeders and other traffic violators, in banks, and even in some of the country's national parks and monuments, as well as very high traffic areas such as **New York's Time Square** ([search](#)).

But what's not as common is residents taking the initiative and finding ways to get the money to pay for them, although it is becoming more of a trend.

Using cameras as a crime-fighting tool has become a "mainstay" in many communities, said George Rice, spokesman for the **National Crime Prevention Council** ([search](#)).

The council is hearing anecdotes of more citizen groups taking it upon themselves to get the cameras installed and aid police in nabbing bad guys. The deterrent factor alone -- if a criminal sees the camera and gets out of Dodge -- is often reason enough to pony up the cash.

The historic Lander Street Apartments in Newburgh, N.Y., were crime-infested. Now it has a CCTV surveillance system that was paid for by the property owner and operator. Ellenville, N.Y., and Port Jervis, N.Y., have similar systems.

Residents in some Nashville, Tenn., neighborhoods are trying to raise money to install cameras around high-crime street corners, although officials there also acknowledge that those neighborhoods could face legal and privacy issues.

But it seems that the citizens' desire to get rid of crime on their streets and around their businesses is paramount.

"Usually the target for this, for most part, is your crime-ridden, drug-infested areas," Rice pointed out. And "anecdotally, there are fairly positive results to rid a particular area of street crime and blight."



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