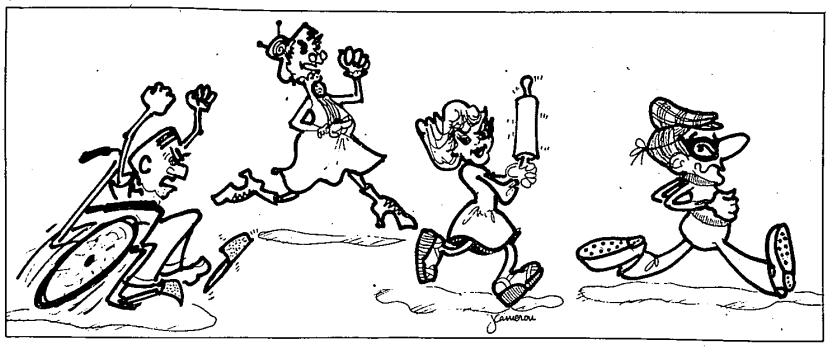

# Catching crooks without cops

In Maricopa County, Ariz., over 200 elderly citizens have left their flower gardens and golf courses to form the Sun City Posse—a group of amateur crime fighters dedicated to running burglars, rapists and murderers out of town.

After a series of rapes last fall in Washington, D.C., neighbors in the Adams-Morgan District put together an artist's sketch of the man some of them had seen. When the suspect, who lived in the neighborhood, walked into a liquor store one night, he was recognized and held until the police came.

All over America, private citizens are organizing just such "posses" to fight crime in their own neighborhoods.

While criminologists cite the severe winter cold as a major factor in last year's decreased crime rates, law enforcement officials point to the growth of a community anti-crime movement.

Community assistance was cited by police officals in Wayne and Oakland counties last month to explain a more than 20 per cent drop in crime so far this year.

Los Angeles Police Chief Ed Davis credits the proliferation of neighborhood anti-crime groups with a 25 percent reduction of crime there.

But others, including some police and residents of poor and black neighborhoods, see the boom of amateur crime-stoppers as a sinister threat liable to promote racist attitudes and to produce unofficial police spying.

"I think they could turn into racists or into a bunch of vigilantes," warned John Jones of Washington's Adams-Morgan Organization (AMO), a community action alliance that refused to cooperate in the neighborhood manhunt and seizure of the alleged rapist.

AMO representatives point out the citizen crime fighters were mostly comfortable, middle-aged professionals who work for the federal government—and that few of them were the blacks and Latinos who until recently made up most of the neighborhood's population.

Despite AMO's criticisms, many of the crime fighters are clearly without racial motivation.

Black Men Against Rape, for example, was organized in black southeast Washington, D.C. after a series of rapes and murders went too long unsolved with insufficient attention from the police department.

**A LOSS OF FAITH** in the police accounts for the evolution of many urban crime-fighting clubs.

"The police just can't handle all the rapes and muggings anymore," says one city cop. "People have to start standing up for themselves. Two or three years ago, we couldn't get any information on a hit-and-run accident because people didn't want to get involved. Now that's changing. People are getting involved—there's no longer a choice about it."

The Citizen's Local Alliance for a Safer Philadelphia (CLASP) organized in 1972 as a response to the rape of a woman in a tough, almost all-black section of the city.

Now there are members all over Philadelphia and CLASP receives funding from the Justice Department's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to teach crime-fighting techniques to groups in other cities. Project officials say crime has decreased as much as 20 per cent in some sections of Philadelphia because of CLASP.

**IN THE SUBURBS**, most neighborhood crime-fighting groups concentrate on burglary, the fastest growing crime in the country.

Beginning with residential security surveys and marking property with identification numbers, Bowie Against Burglary, a Maryland group, plans block watches or block patrols. Armed with maps listing their neighbors' names, addresses and phone numbers, volunteers look for suspicious activity and immediately report their suspicions to their neighbors as well as to the police.

"One block had a problem with vandalism," says Sherry Ann Kinikin, who organized Bowie Against Burglary, "and it seemed like the incidents were occurring around sundown when everyone was having dinner and putting their children to bed. They patrolled the neighborhood in groups of two during the vulnerable time periods. They'd had seven cases of vandalism in two weeks; since the patrol started, they haven't seen one."

Sure, you bet these groups cut down on crime," admits one experienced Washington police detective. "If I'd been in Germany during Hitler's day, I'd have done the same thing. If you've got every second house on a street covered, naturally it'll cut down on crime, but it'll also expand a real police state.

"The problem with them is that they don't have expertise or arrest authority. They have to turn to the police, and pretty soon they're all out working for the police. Otherwise they become vigilantes."

**AMATEUR KOJAKS** could become gun-toting vigilantes, but most clubs discourage that. "Occasionally when I go out to speak with groups about neighborhood crime prevention, some nut in the audience will start waving a gun and talking about taking the law into his own hands," says Philadelphia's Ellie Wegener, organizer of CLASP.

"But when his neighbors inform him they won't go near his house on the block patrol if they have to be afraid he'll mistakenly shoot them, the gun lover usually quiets down."

The elderly are easily victimized and more anti-crime clubs are becoming geared to crime prevention by and for senior citizens. In Maricopa County, Ariz., where 3,000 citizens make up the biggest volunteer law enforcement program in the country, the Sun City Posse is composed almost entirely of senior citizens.