

CRIME ON THE SUBWAYS: MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE GUARDIAN ANGELS

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For the past several decades, criminal justice practitioners and observers have begun to suggest that our crime problems cannot be solved without increased levels of citizen involvement. Advocates of this philosophy were especially fueled by research throughout the 1970s—such as that conducted in Kansas City on patrol and by the Rand Corporation on detectives—which showed that the police were largely unable to deter and prevent crime and that citizens, far more than police, solved crimes. In response, many communities have begun to actively promote methods aimed at increasing citizen participation in law enforcement. In other communities, many private groups have organized on their own initiative to become actively involved in crime prevention and fighting.

Despite the rapid proliferation of these citizen action organizations, few efforts have been made to determine their effectiveness in reducing either crime or its related fear. Since this question is so central to decisions concerning the role these organizations might properly play in our law enforcement process, and since many of the more active organizations pose additional questions concerning group control and the protection of the rights of individuals with whom they come into contact, it is important to conduct such evaluations. This study is an effort to measure the potential for effectiveness of such citizen groups.

PASSIVE AND ACTIVE CITIZEN ACTION

While there are many different ways to characterize citizen action, for the purposes of this study the variable of greatest importance is the degree to which a citizen group is prepared to take direct, overt action to stop a crime.

Those organizations content to act merely as the eyes and ears of the official law enforcement system can be defined as “passive” citizen action organizations. Examples of these efforts are the *Beat-Rep Programs*, *WhistleSTOP* and the more familiar *Crime Watch* efforts. In defining them as passive, the study is not making a comment on the commitment of these groups. The “passive” label recognizes that once a crime is discovered, the group members are satisfied to call an official police agency and leave the

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incident in the hands of the police. Because these organizations take only passive action, they are far less intrusive into the affairs of their community and pose far fewer problems than others.

The active citizen action organizations, on the other hand, are far more aggressive in their efforts. Often arguing that the passive groups are worse than nothing (see Sliwa 1983), these groups advocate their rights to not only search out crime but to take direct action to stop the incident and apprehend offenders. In so doing, these organizations contend that they offer an added sense of security and safety to a community, as well as a promise of real reductions in crime.

Despite these claims, many critics of active citizen action have pointed out that historically these groups have a tendency to degenerate into socially destructive forces (Marx and Archer 1976; Rosenbaum and Sederberg 1976; Brown 1983). Further, they have suggested that the dangers posed by these groups are both real and well documented. Therefore, the problem confronting decision makers and interested observers is one of weighing the potentials for good offered by these active citizen-action organizations against their possible negative consequences. Drawing on the Guardian Angels, undoubtedly the best known of the active organizations, this study attempts just such an examination.

THE ORGANIZATION

Claiming that crime, especially subway crime, was out of control, the Guardian Angels officially began their operations on February 13, 1979, as "The Magnificent Thirteen Subway Safety Patrol." With a declared purpose of deterring crimes by their presence and making citizen arrests when serious crimes were observed, their founder, Curtis Sliwa, and 12 volunteers began riding the New York City subways during what were thought to be peak crime hours. Although reportedly not seeking confrontations, they made it clear in their mannerisms and statements that they would not shy away from them either.

The idea was instantly popular, making Sliwa an overnight media hero. As the word spread, volunteers were attracted to the group in large numbers. This resulted in the formation of a formally organized group structure, the adoption of their now familiar uniform of a tee-shirt and red beret and a name change to the Guardian Angels (Weinberg 1982). By 1981 they claimed that their expansion had taken them to a membership of 1,000 nationally, 700 within the five boroughs of New York City. By 1985, membership estimates ran as high as 5,000.

While they contend that the police are all but impotent to combat crime, the Angels actually place the blame for most crime problems on the communities themselves. For the most part, they claim, it is not law enforcement which has broken down, but citizen involvement. Offering themselves as examples to be emulated, the Angels report that by as early as 1982 their patrols had interrupted crimes and made arrests in over 258 instances—136 of which involved suspects armed with guns or knives (Newport 1982). Additionally, they report numerous cases of locating missing children, helping the elderly, assisting the injured and even rescuing one police officer who was endangered by suspects he was attempting to arrest. As impressive as these claims may be (and there is considerable disagreement concerning their accuracy), advocates of the organization argue that the statistics are unimportant. "What the Angels and other civilian patrol groups do best is prevent crimes," was the explanation given by one police official. "If, by their presence, they have prevented a mugging or rape, that's terrific all by itself." (Rosario and Singleton 1982)

THE METHODS

Several efforts at measuring citizen group effectiveness have been attempted using a one-shot case study approach (Washnis 1976; Yin, et al. 1976; California Crime Resistance Task Force, unknown date). The results lack persuasiveness, however, since few have been able to introduce more than minimal levels of scientific control (see Skogan 1978). This absence of thorough evaluation means that observers and decision makers have little but journalistic accounts and rhetoric upon which to base their opinions and judgments. This, in turn, increases the probability that either poorly considered panaceas will be adopted, or that potentially successful solutions will be rejected by communities attempting to reduce crime and fear of crime.

To address the questions of citizen group effectiveness, this study relied upon a quasi-experimental design. After collecting ridership and reported crime data for 1983 from the transit police, we selected a project area of 24 stations (and the trains running between those stations) on the A, D and #4 Lines from 86th Street in Manhattan to Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx. These stations and trains were chosen partially because they, more than any other sections of the subway system, are well used during the nighttime hours (when the Guardian Angels patrol) and are commonly perceived as being high crime (and, presumably, high fear) areas. Additionally, it was possible to divide this general project area into four natural groups which were not only comparable in

terms of ridership and reported crime, but also were easily accessible for on-site interviewing.

The actual project areas selected were then organized into:

- Group 1:** (Control)—six stations on the A-Line from 86th Street to 125th Street in Manhattan.
- Group 2:** (Experimental)—seven stations on the D-Line from 145th Street in Manhattan to 174-175 Streets in the Bronx.
- Group 3:** (Experimental)—which overlaps with group #2 and involves seven stations on the D-Line from 167th Street to Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx.
- Group 4:** (Control)—eight stations on the #4-Line from 167th Street to Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx.

The Guardian Angels agreed that during the summer of 1984 they would modify their operations in the experimental areas from normal patrolling (June), to no patrolling (July and August), to intensive patrolling (September) so that whatever impact they may have upon incidents of crime and passenger perceptions (fear) could be measured.

With a project area selected and the participation of the Guardian Angels promised, a survey of subway riders was then conducted. This survey was administered during each of the project's three phases through face-to-face interviews with a total of 2,700 consenting riders on both the subway trains and at the station platforms. Because of the difficult conditions for interviewing in each of these locations, the interviews were kept brief by utilizing close-ended questions which asked only for each respondent's own beliefs and attitudes.

Since the randomization of subway riders was obviously not possible, respondent selection relied upon a systematic method within an overall quota sampling framework. This meant that interviews, like crimes, were comparably distributed between passengers riding on trains and those waiting in stations. A second stage of selection was then used to ensure that each section of a train (front, middle and end cars) and each portion of the platform were equally represented. Within this distribution, individual passengers were then chosen in a systematic manner until the assigned number of interviews was completed. Slightly more than 79 percent of all respondents approached agreed to be interviewed. Of those refusing, almost one-third reported speaking no English. A comparison of the remaining passengers who refused interviews with all other respondents revealed no obvious differences or characteristics.

As reported earlier, the first phase of actual data collection began in June 1984. During that month, the Angels continued to operate normally while initial measurements were taken of the dependent variables (reported crimes and fear). Although the four project areas were originally matched only on the variables of numbers of riders and amounts of reported crime, during this phase the groups were also discovered to be comparable in terms of the individual characteristics of the riders within each.

During the second phase of the study, the Angels eliminated all patrols in the two experimental areas and continued routinely in the control sections. Because of the possibility that their absence might not be immediately noticed by potential offenders (and, therefore, not produce any immediate effect), the Angels agreed to maintain this condition for two months—July and August—with data collection being repeated during the second month. Unfortunately, compliance with this condition cannot be independently verified. While this might have been a serious problem, it was not; no significant differences in crime or fear were found to have occurred between the first and second phases.

At this point, a third condition was added. During September, the Angels resumed their patrols at increased levels in the test areas. Once again, data collection was repeated. Since the Angels were actually nearby during all test area interviews during this month, the interviewers themselves are able to verify that this condition was satisfied. When the data from this period were compared to that collected during the first two phases, some important differences were found.

CRIME ON THE SUBWAYS

The initial concern of the study was to determine the Angels' impact on crime. From the beginning, however, there was a concern that this might not be possible due to the few crimes that actually occur (or, at least, are reported) on the subways. Despite selecting the project's areas partly in an effort to maximize reported crime, this, in fact, proved to be a problem.

Although it comes as a surprise to most people, the number of crimes occurring on the subways appears to be quite small indeed. In absolute numbers, subway incidents account for somewhat less than 2.7 percent of New York City's crime. For the system as a whole, this means there is only one murder for every 142 million subway trips and one robbery for every 213,000 trips (Rangel 1985).

The problem is not much worse in the project areas. During the study's three phases of measurement, a total of 550 criminal incidents—felony and misdemeanor—were reported to the police as

having occurred within the project's four groups. By removing those incidents committed against the transit authority, so that only those crimes committed against passengers remain, the total is reduced to only 257 crimes. Since an estimated 12 million passengers are known to have entered the subway system in these areas during these times, only slightly more than two passengers out of every 100,000 subway rides were victimized by any of the dozen or so included offenses. In fact, even this is probably an overestimate, since the vast majority of potential victims did not enter the project area through the turnstiles where they could be counted but on trains from other parts of the city.

Even if we adjust for the inevitable amounts of nonreporting of crime, the estimates of victimization remain quite low. Such an adjustment is, in fact, possible since the interviews asked riders about past reporting practices. From this we learned that of those riders who had been victimized, almost 64 percent reported the violation to the police. More specifically, this estimate included crimes ranging from rape (all of which were reported) to purse snatching (only one-third of which were reported).

By increasing the police data by the estimates of nonreporting, an estimate of the true extent of crime against passengers in the project area can be set at between 257 and 481 incidents. Even using the highest estimate, this means that for every 100,000 known subway rides in the project area, only four produced victims of crime.

While this is certainly a pleasant finding for those who must use the subways, it posed great problems for the study. Because incidents of crime in the project areas occurred so sporadically, the desired reduction which could be associated with intensive patrols could only be accomplished if the Angels virtually eliminated all crime from the experimental areas. Not only did this not occur, but only one area—a control group—achieved any reduction. Although it is clearly not a positive finding for the Angels, I believe that the relative absence of crimes prevents us from reaching any definitive conclusions about the organization's impact. It does, however, suggest other complications for the organization.

FEAR ON THE SUBWAY

Of equal importance is the ability of the Guardian Angels to reduce fear. Many observers have theorized that if fear can be diminished, citizens will become able to use their communities more fully. This, in turn, will strengthen community cohesion which may ultimately result in a reduction in crime (see Washnis 1976; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; and Hallman 1984).

To examine fear in the project area, the study dealt with several—often differing—aspects of fear (National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice 1979; Skogan and Maxfield 1981:49). To do so, questions were asked which attempted to distinguish among:

- a) a rider's evaluation of how "big" possible crime problems were;
- b) a rider's estimation of the likelihood that he or she would become future victims of specific crimes;
- c) a rider's definition of the "most important" subway crime problem, and probably the most direct aspect of fear; and
- d) how "worried" a rider was about subway crime in general.

From these differing types of measures, several interesting observations about rider fear are possible.

Table 1 indicates that subway riders as a whole were almost evenly divided as to how worried they were about being robbed, threatened, beaten-up, etc. while riding the subway after dark. Although this means that one of every five riders is very worried about the occurrence of these violations, over one-half of all riders report being either not at all or only a little worried. Another 26 percent reported that they were somewhat worried.

TABLE 1
Degree of Worry About Nighttime Subway Crime
(By Sex of Respondent)

Degree of Worry	All Passengers	Male	Female
Very	21%	14%	39%
Somewhat	26	25	30
Only a Little	27	30	19
Not at All	25	31	11
	(2693)	(1926)	(767)

Level of significance (Mann Whitney U) for tests between male and female passengers = 0.000.

When compared to other settings where similar questions have been asked, the results of this measure of fear are disappointingly high (see, for example, National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice 1979). Nonetheless, in light of what popular wisdom would have us believe, these results would appear to indicate that the overall levels of fear are below what might be expected. They certainly are not reflective of the "dread" which *Time* magazine (1985) reported that "most New Yorkers feel upon descending into the underworld," nor do they support the idea that

“urban residents feel terrorized wherever they go.” More likely, they show, as many riders explained during their interviews, that subway passengers are “aware of what can happen down here, but can’t go through life worrying about it.”

Although fear on the subways may be a less serious problem than was assumed, for many riders it is still a deeply held concern. For example, from Table 1, it is clear that females are far more worried about crime than are male riders. Even worse, over one-half of Hispanic females reported being very worried, while only six percent were not at all worried. At the other extreme, however, are white males with only 10 percent feeling this highest level of fear. Additionally, it is somewhat surprising that while riders were found to be significantly less worried about subway crime than either black or Hispanic passengers. This is especially so when we remember that the project area is centered in Harlem and the south and west Bronx—primarily black and Hispanic neighborhoods. This may simply reflect the larger crime problems which may be found in the minority respondents’ above ground neighborhoods—problems which may influence the levels of fear the riders bring with them onto the subways (for related discussions on the role of neighborhoods see Research and Forecasts 1980; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; and Fowler and Mangione 1982).

While subway riders, as a whole, may have levels of fear below what was initially expected, when asked to look into the future and estimate the likelihood that they will become future victims of crime, the levels of fear rose considerably. Overall, 61 percent of respondents thought it very likely that something would be stolen from them within a year of subway riding. Another 50 percent thought that they would be robbed; 47 percent thought that they would be mugged; and 40 percent thought that it was very likely that someone would beat them up or hurt them within the next year on the subways.

Initially, these results would appear to contradict those concerned with the extent passengers are worried. In fact, however, it may be that these differences in rider attitudes are the result of the differences in the reality and in the perception of the subway crime problem. For example, when asked how worried they are, the passengers’ responses are, of course, heavily influenced by their own experiences. Since the subways are, in reality, remarkably free of crime, the riders’ own experiences most likely include little to fear (Rangel 1985). However, when asked to look forward and predict future victimizations, the rider must rely to a greater degree not upon his or her own experiences but upon what he or she has heard and come to know—their perceptions—of the crime

problem (see Conklin 1975; Clemente and Kleiman 1977). These perceptions are, of course, fueled by the media, many of New York's public officials, and even the Guardian Angels. As one of this study's interviewers explained it, the passenger may be saying: "Nothing has happened to me, but I hear that everyone else is being [robbed, mugged, etc.], so I probably will be too!"

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE GUARDIAN ANGELS

From his considerable research into the history of citizen action, Richard Maxwell Brown has suggested that the degree to which an organization can be described as either socially constructive or socially destructive is related to the extent to which the group represents a genuine community consensus. When such a consensus is absent, the group will often provoke a strong opposition with the resulting conflict between the group and its opponents producing tension and often violence in the community (Brown 1983:66). If this is so, then the degree to which subway riders are willing to support the operations of the Guardian Angels may directly impact the organization's potential for effectiveness.

The expectation among subway passengers that Guardian Angel patrols can improve their safety is broad and unmistakable. Overall, 61 percent of passengers interviewed reported that they believed that the Guardian Angels make people like themselves less fearful of crime. For the most part, those riders who were most fearful of subway crime showed the greatest confidence in the Angel's fear-reducing impact. Further, those respondents who thought it very likely that they would become future victims of subway crimes were more convinced of the Angel's abilities to reduce fear than were those who believed it not very likely they would be victimized. Beyond these differences, female passengers, respondents riding earlier in the evening and those riding least often each week had the greatest confidence that the Angels reduced a passenger's fear. Oddly, residents of Manhattan, Hispanic riders and teenaged passengers were least likely to believe that the patrols reduced fear in riders like themselves. In each case, however, well over 50 percent considered the Angels a help in fear reduction.

Contrary to the expectations of some critics of the organization, support for the operations of the Guardian Angels appears not to be limited only to their potential to reduce fear. When asked if they believed that the Angels could reduce crime itself, an even larger share of riders (66 percent) expressed confidence in the group's abilities. Perhaps even more important than the size of this support is its consistency among the many differing types of

TABLE 2
"Do the Guardian Angels Reduce Fear in People Like Yourself?"
(By Sex, Race, and Age of Respondent)

Rider Opinion	SEX		RACE			AGE		
	Male	Female	White	Blk	Hisp	Teen	Adult	Eldly
Yes	58%	68%	64%	62%	56%	53%	62%	73%
No	41	31	34	37	43	46	37	25
Don't Know	>1 (1883)	>1 (753)	1 (416)	>1 (1674)	>1 (521)	>1 (409)	>1 (2154)	1 (71)

Test of independence (Chi-Square) between passengers by sex, race, and age are each significant at the 95% confidence level.

passengers. Thus, male and female riders, those of each race, passengers at all hours of the evening and respondents from each borough were equally likely to support the organization's ability to reduce crime on the subways.

With these levels of confidence in their operations, it should come as no surprise that a majority of respondents approve of the Guardian Angels and their methods. When given the choice of approving or disapproving, almost 74 percent of respondents chose the former while only 16 percent reported the latter. Ten percent of passengers interviewed either were unable to decide or advise that they didn't know enough about the group or its methods to have an opinion.

Riders with differing degrees of worry about crime, at all ages, and all hours of the evening were about equally likely to approve of both the Angels and their methods. Additionally, neither the location of a respondent's residence nor the frequency with which he or she uses the subways was found to be associated with differences in his or her attitudes toward the organization. Only a passenger's sex and race were significantly associated with his or her approval or disapproval of the Angels, with female and black riders showing the highest levels of support. Surprisingly, although considerable attention has been given to the tension which is alleged to exist between the Angels and the New York City transit police, 16 of the 22 respondents known to be off-duty police officers reported that they approved of both the organization and its methods.

While these results are (and, in fact, were) clearly satisfying to the Guardian Angels, before they are interpreted as a ringing endorsement by passengers in the project area, one additional fact must be remembered. Because the questionnaire encouraged respondents to assume a position of either approving or disapproving of the Angels, it was able to measure the breadth but not the

TABLE 3
“Do You Approve or Disapprove of the Guardian Angels and Their
Methods?”
(By Sex and Race of Respondent)

Rider Opinion	SEX		RACE		
	Male	Female	White	Black	Hisp
Approve	71%	80%	66%	77%	69%
Disapprove	18	9	21	13	20
Unknown/Undecided	10	11	14	10	11
	(1880)	(753)	(414)	(1673)	(521)

Tests of independence (Chi-Square) between passengers by sex and by race are both significant at the 95% confidence level.

depth of support. Many riders, in fact, explained that they approved “in general” but that they actually knew little about the specifics of the group. As such, what passengers may have been expressing is support more for the concept of the Angels than for the organization itself. As more specific information about the Guardian Angels becomes widely known, these levels of support may vary significantly—depending upon the extent to which the group is perceived to embody that concept. Regardless, it is clear from these initial levels of support that the Angels possess at least the potential to contribute in a constructive way to their community.

THE IMPACT OF THE ANGELS ON FEAR

Despite the considerable support shown for the Angels and their operations, their presence or absence appears to have little impact upon a passenger’s overall and long-range levels of fear on the subways. Most riders in both the control and experimental areas reported statistically similar levels of worry about subway crime during each of the three project periods. Altering Angel patrols from normal, to virtual elimination, to intensive left most types of riders nearly unchanged in the degree in which they were worried about becoming victims of subway crime.

Beyond their overall levels of worry, the alterations in Angel operations appears to have little impact upon other rider attitudes as well. Passenger opinions of future safety, approval of the organization, the willingness of respondents to help others in need and the perception of the willingness of others to help those in need remained largely unchanged as the Angels’ operations were varied. These last two variables, concerning the willingness to help others

during a crime, must be a disappointment to supporters of the Angels, since it is the group's goal that from their example, other citizens will be encouraged to help each other.

While their overall impact may be small, the results of the study do indicate that Guardian Angel operations may have a more temporary effect on some riders. When asked specifically if the Angels made people like themselves less fearful, recall that most respondents were agreed that they did. However, when passengers in Group #2 (the first experimental area) were asked this same question while the Angels were patrolling intensively and were on the train in which the interview was occurring, they were significantly more likely to report that the group had a fear reducing effect. Surprisingly, the passengers most influenced by the Angel's presence were the adult black males, especially those living in the Bronx and those riding during the middle evening hours (9 pm to 12 am). As expected, those respondents most worried about crime overall were more likely to increase their estimate of the Angels' impact upon fear when the group was actually present.

TABLE 4
Passengers Who Believe the Guardian Angels Make People Like
Themselves Less Fearful of Crime

Patrol Status	Group #1 (Control)	Group #2 (Exp)	Group #3 (Exp)	Group #4 (Control)
None*	57%	57%	61%	58%
Normal*	65	59	61	62
Intensive	58	71	66	60

Test of independence (Chi-Square) between passengers in Group #2 is significant at the 95% confidence level.

* The elimination of all patrols in the experimental areas during the project's second phase cannot be independently verified. Additionally, patrol logs detailing what levels of Angel patrol are maintained during "normal" conditions were not supplied as promised. Therefore, the differences—if any—in actual Guardian Angel operations between these two periods are not known. This is not seen as a serious limitation, however, since no significant differences between these periods which could be attributed to Guardian Angel operations were found. That the Angels intensified their patrols in the experimental areas during the project's third phase is certain since a patrol presence was maintained at all times during interviewing.

Although the differences in the responses of passengers in Group 3 (the second experimental area) are not as great as those of Group 2 and are not statistically significant, when examined individually, some passengers in this project area also appear to have been influenced by the Angels' presence. Here again, it was the male passengers who were most likely to show an increased belief that the Angels reduced fear when they were present on the respondent's train. With the riders of this group, however, there

were no differences which could be attributed to race, age, ridership patterns or degree of overall worry about subway crime. As such, while it would certainly appear that Guardian Angel operations, when intensified greatly, have some ability to at least temporarily reduce some passengers' immediate fear of crime, that ability is not consistent in all areas of the subway system. What appears to work well in one place, seems to have far less impact in another. Since the passengers within these areas were quite well matched on most identifiable variables, this suggests that additional factors may exist which influence the perception of the group's effectiveness.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SUBWAY FEAR

From these results, it is fair to conclude that the operations of the Guardian Angels do not increase overall or long-term feelings of passenger safety. However, when Angels are present, many passengers, especially adult black males, reported an increased belief that the group reduced the fears held by persons like themselves. From this, it appears that for some the Angels do offer a temporary sense of added security. Before it is concluded that the organization reduces fear, however, these results must be considered with two additional factors in mind.

From this and almost every other examination of crime on the subways (Chaiken 1974; Rangel 1985), it can be seen that the absolute number of incidents is probably insufficient to support the levels of fear found to exist. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that a large portion of the expectations of danger are likely the result from factors other than actual crime. Among these are the unpleasantness of the surroundings, the sense of being closed in and defenseless and the considerable media and public rhetoric that constantly characterizes the system as unsafe (Farber 1984). It is popular wisdom, rather than actual crime, which makes us aware of the potential perils of subway ridership. While the Angels obviously have no impact upon the physical setting or conditions of the system, they, like the media and public officials, are an important part of the public's perceptions. Passengers need only short memories to recall images of Curtis Sliwa pronouncing them unsafe from the "mutants" who, he claims, continually prey upon them on subway lines he has dubbed "The Mugger's Express" and "The Beast."

The second factor involves the frequency with which subway passengers see the Guardian Angels. Although the Angels may lessen the fears of many riders by being present on a train, most passengers advised that they seldom or never see them patrolling.

Less than one in ten riders reported usually seeing Angels while on the subways. Even this may be somewhat inflated, since a large portion of the interviews were conducted during the period when Angel patrols were artificially intensive.

When these two factors are considered with the question of the organization's effect on fear, far more troubling conclusions emerge. While the Guardian Angels certainly deserve credit for making many passengers feel safer due to their presence, they also must accept responsibility for contributing to the overall sense of a system out of control. As such, it can be argued that they are helping to raise the apprehensions of most passengers while lowering them for only a few. Even worse, because their patrol coverage is so sporadic, their fear reduction impact is, at best, infrequent. As a result, the Angels may, in fact, be contributors to one of the very problems they are attempting to solve.

AN EVOLVING ORGANIZATION?

Previously, it was noted that as a result of the surprisingly small number of subway crimes it was not possible to reach any definitive conclusions concerning the abilities of the Guardian Angels to prevent crimes. While this is disappointing (from a research perspective), we must be careful not to overlook the importance of this absence of crime to both the organization and the future of the Angels.

People who join organizations do so for reasons. In the case of the Angels, we are told that the primary motivation is the desire to do something good for one's community by helping others to avoid falling victim to crime. If this is true, we have to wonder what will become of the Guardian Angels as an awareness of the infrequency of crime begins to spread throughout the organization.

From an historical perspective, it is known that as the threat which brought them together fades (or is discovered to have never existed) most active citizen action organizations have a tendency to evolve from purely crime control into more social control activities (see, for example, Brown 1975). Additionally, many such organizations have experienced difficulties in maintaining their membership as those who joined because of a felt need to do something about the protection of the community leave to return to more fulfilling activities. In the case of the Guardian Angels, there is ample evidence that each of these processes has already begun to occur. If so, then what has been shown by others to be weak recruitment, selection and training procedures (Cordts 1981) will undoubtedly come under even greater strain as the leaders attempt to replace lost members and maintain the organization's growth.

Less desirable and less motivated persons may then find it easier to join the organization and rise to positions of leadership and responsibility. Further, in an effort to hold existing members, the organization may choose to evolve into more diverse and, perhaps, less acceptable activities so as to fulfill a greater range of member needs. While, obviously, such an evolution need not have negative consequences, the constant emphasis which the Angels have been found to place on confrontation, action and the machismo aspects of membership are certainly cause for concern.

BALANCING THE BENEFITS AND COSTS

In summary, the results of this study concerning the Guardian Angels and their role in the law enforcement process are mixed. Although the overwhelming majority of respondents expressed approval of the group and confidence in its abilities, it is difficult to determine how deeply these opinions are held. Further, while their presence appears to have a temporary fear reducing effect, the group's rhetoric, especially in light of their sporadic operations, may more than compensate by contributing to the overall exacerbation of subway fear. Finally, the organization's claim that its operations reduce actual crimes on the subways remains unproven but doubtful. All of this lends a degree of support to those who have expressed concerns that the possible contributions of the Guardian Angels to our problems of crime and fear are more than offset by the possibility that they, like many of the active citizen action organizations before them, will evolve into socially destructive forces.

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