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As more Dallas neighborhoods pay for extra patrols, some question fairness

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Sometimes, you get what you pay for.

The police officers are happy to help out vacationing families if their newspapers, or their mail, start piling up.

They stop and chat with residents. They cruise the neighborhood just like cops used to do all the time, keeping an eye out for suspicious characters. And if someone calls 911, they're probably going to arrive very quickly.

Dallas' wealthier neighborhoods increasingly are funding private patrols staffed by off-duty officers. In 2003, there were about 50 "Expanded Neighborhood Patrols" in Dallas. Now there are more than 80.

Where those patrols are located, to a degree, follows the money. Almost four out of every five are north of Interstate 30.

Supporters say the extra patrols reduce crime in the neighborhoods that can afford them. They ease the burden for on-duty officers. And it's an opportunity for Dallas officers to supplement their relatively low salaries.

"It's the single best crime deterrent," said Michael Malouf, chair of the crime watch in the Greenland Hills neighborhood in Old East Dallas. "I credit our low crime rate to that primarily."

But critics say the neighborhood patrol program promotes unequal policing. Richer, safer neighborhoods get better police services, they say.

And some Dallas residents complain that they pay taxes and shouldn't have to pay dues for adequate police protection.

"It's almost like a double tax," said Ken Smith, president of Revitalize South Dallas Coalition. "If you pay your tax dollars for policing, you should expect parity with policing everywhere."

Urma Santoyo works at McDonald's and lives in an east Oak Cliff neighborhood that doesn't have its own patrol. She said she's called the police several times after hearing gunshots outside her house, but they often take 30 minutes or an hour to arrive.

"It's really bad here," she said in Spanish. "We need more security."

When she heard about the program, she said she wasn't sure she could pay for it.

"I work so much, but for very little money," she said.

Fair distribution?

Police officials say the extra patrols don't take away resources from other areas. The cars, gas and salaries are all paid for by the neighborhood associations.

Patrols add "extra eyes and ears to a particular area," said Steve Bishopp, a Dallas police sergeant assigned to the Caruth Police Institute. Bishopp has worked neighborhood patrols since 1998.

First Assistant Chief Charlie Cato said that on-duty officers are deployed based on a combination of factors: 911 calls, crimes, arrests and traffic accidents. Police supervisors, he said, don't move an on-duty officer away from an area just because they know it's already being patrolled by an off-duty officer.

"We give as fair a distribution of manpower as possible," said Cato, who is Chief David Brown's second-in-command. "If folks want to have an additional police presence in their neighborhood, we believe it's a benefit because it helps them feel more comfortable."

The program gives residents more control over where police patrol, said John Worrall, a criminologist at the University of Texas at Dallas.

The residents elect their own board and choose administrators who direct the officers.

"It's the democratic process at work," Worrall said.

Worrall said that affluence can create other disparities, such as with school funding.

"It's not fair to all neighborhoods, but just because it isn't fair doesn't necessarily make it a problem," he said.

Ron Pinkston, president of the Dallas Police Association, said the neighborhood patrol program is great for the upper-class communities that can afford it, "but it skews the number of overall police officers we have in Dallas."

A council member who can afford to live in a neighborhood with a private patrol doesn't see the need to hire more police officers, Pinkston said.

"He has police service at his fingertips," he said. "They're going to be right there, right then."

'They're expensive'

The Dallas City Council established the Expanded Neighborhood Patrols in 1991.

Yearly dues for each household in a neighborhood with a patrol appear to range from \$200 to \$400 each year.

Police officials said they don't know how much money is collected from residents or how many hours the officers work each year. That's because the neighborhood groups pay the officers directly.

A coordinator in each police division makes sure officers fill out the required paperwork and don't work too many hours off-duty.

Renting a patrol car costs the neighborhood associations \$13.50 per hour. The city collected more than \$1.3 million over the 2015 fiscal year. In fiscal 2014, the city took in \$900,746.

Based on those numbers, patrol cars were used in neighborhood patrols for more than 100,000 hours in fiscal 2015. Add that to what the off-duty officers typically are paid — from \$30 to \$40 per hour — and neighborhood associations probably spent at least \$4.3 million.

"They're expensive," said Sgt. Roderick Dillon, who used to coordinate the neighborhood patrols in the Northeast Patrol Division, which has consistently had the most in Dallas.

The average association pays about \$50,000 to \$75,000 each year for a neighborhood patrol, Dillon said, but some cost \$300,000 or more.

Paying dues

The percentage of residents in a neighborhood who pay for the patrols varies. In North Oak Cliff, for example, about 15 percent of the more than 3,000 households pay the \$365 annual fee. More than half of the residents pay a \$240 annual fee in Forest Hills.

Those who pay the dues get extra perks from the off-duty officers, like hiding mail and newspapers. Officers get a list of houses that they're supposed to check on — locations where the residents may be on vacation or temporarily living somewhere else during a renovation.

Overall, supporters say, police presence and response times benefit everyone.

Malouf, of Greenland Hills, said some people who don't pay "are getting some of the benefits of the added police presence."

Dillon, the sergeant, said he largely ignored the list he was given of paying members.

"I don't care who's paying — I want to know my geographical boundaries and I'm going to protect everybody inside," he said.

Success stories

Many neighborhood leaders say the patrols have helped to dramatically cut crime.

In North Oak Cliff, crime is down by about 60 percent across several neighborhoods that have paid for off-duty officers to patrol since 2007, said Russ Aikman, president of the North Oak Cliff United Police Patrol.

"It works because they are proactive rather than reactive," Aikman said.

On-duty officers, he said, are "typically so busy responding to one 911 call after another that they don't have a whole lot of time just to be driving around looking for suspicious characters, suspicious vehicles."

"We're paying our officers to do just that," he said.

Forest Hills was plagued by home burglaries when residents first funded a neighborhood patrol in 2003. Crime dropped by 50 percent that year.

"It helps to have an officer visible," said Judy Whalen, who heads the Forest Hills Security Program. "But we did more and we caught people."

Criminals figure out that there's more police around, she said, "and they just go away."

She said the patrol also has helped raise property values and residents' awareness of security measures.

Officers enjoy working the extra neighborhood patrols because they get to know the communities in a way that they don't have time to do when they're on the city's clock, said Pinkston, the DPA president.

"You get to say hi to neighbors and be the Officer Friendly everybody wants to be," he said.

Dillon said he even knew the names of the kids and the dogs. But he also got to know the neighborhoods well. He knew what was out of place. A truck that shouldn't be there. A man who doesn't belong.

"It's like a very small, tiny town that you're responsible for," Dillon said. "You feel a personal stake in it."
