



## Eyes on the street — but at what cost?

*The rise of online neighbourhood watch groups.*

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**BY XIMENA GONZÁLEZ**

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At a time when face-to-face communications are being replaced by online interactions, social media helps us sustain some sense of community. In Calgary, community-watch groups on Facebook seem to be helping fill an important gap left in our disconnected lives, but despite the good intentions behind these groups, the bonds we form with some of our neighbours can cost others.

According to Aimee Benoit, a cultural geographer who delved into practices that promote belonging and participation in eight Calgary neighbourhoods in her PhD thesis, “people need to be aware of the way that good intentions can also lead to exclusionary effects.”

Research suggests that social media based community-watch groups can decrease a sense of safety and increase suspicion based on difference. Even though these groups are similar to the community-led block-watch groups that became popular in Canada in the late '60s, their negative implications are now amplified by the speed and reach of social media, as well as by the ubiquity of surveillance technology, such as security cameras and smart doorbells.

“When people have a vested interest in the neighbourhood, usually homeowners, they want their [community] to be a great place for everyone to live,” Benoit said. “But sometimes that can have the effect of blaming

certain individuals in the neighbourhood for decline, and that becomes an exclusionary process.”

Indeed, according to Kevin Walby, an associate professor of criminal justice at the University of Winnipeg, neighbourhood watch groups aren't so much about community development as they are “about certain affluent members of a community banding together to protect property.”

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*Aimee Benoit, Cultural Geographer*

And this can have unintended consequences.

“More vigilance and more surveillance cause more harm because it's all channeled towards a police response,” Walby said, noting that police aren't properly equipped to deal with the underlying issues of poverty, mental health and addiction.

## **Human eyes on street replaced by tech**

Under the guise of progressive urbanistic practices prescribed by Jane Jacobs, the need for “eyes on the street” has transformed into a form of lateral surveillance on social media that relies on residents reporting on anything and anyone they deem out of the ordinary in their communities.

But some argue that that's not necessarily what Jacobs meant when she first wrote about “eyes on the street” in 1961—especially when it comes to relying on cameras rather than on actual people, says Matt Patterson, an associate professor of urban sociology at the University of Calgary.

“In a neighbourhood where people's activities are always taking them out onto the sidewalk, people will feel like they're always in public,” he said. “And that does two things. On the one hand, it makes people feel safer that there are other people around and are paying attention to them; [and] it also means that people feel held to some level of civility.”

In *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, Jacobs wrote that “the safety of the street works best, most casually, and with least frequent taint of hostility or suspicion precisely where people are using and most enjoying the city streets voluntarily and are least conscious, normally, that they are policing.”

***It makes people feel safer that there are other people around and are paying attention to them.***

*Matt Patterson, University of Calgary*

Having activities take place in public, as Jacobs suggested, is meant to encourage pro-social behaviour, Patterson says.

“When there are lots of people around—not security guards, not security cameras, not police officers—just people sitting on the sidewalk, having a coffee, a storekeeper standing in the doorway waving to potential customers, a busker with a guitar; all these people just out doing their own daily stuff, that creates a feeling that there is a social order.”

The shift away from spontaneous social activity to surveillance can cause a hyper awareness of crime among neighbours, whose suspicion increasingly grows and reinforces each other’s fears.

## **Fighting social isolation through surveillance**

Tavis Settles and his family have lived in Coventry Hills in far north-central Calgary for nearly two decades, yet it wasn’t until 2016 that he finally got to know his neighbours beyond a polite greeting from a distance.

“It was like a movie of suburbia,” he recalled. “Five o’clock rolls in, all the kids are coming home, the mini-vans pull into the garage, the garage door goes down and nobody talks to each other.”

Indeed, over the last six decades, our homes have become increasingly hermetic. Front porches have become smaller or disappeared altogether to

give way to two-car garages, and a concern for privacy has taken our social lives (and our eyes) away from the street.

In his 1999 book, *A History of Domestic Space*, Peter Ward describes how design changes reflected a switch in the values of Canadians, writing that “the front of the house has migrated to the back, the living and dining rooms cut off from the street by the garage.”

***The mini-vans pull into the garage, the garage door goes down and nobody talks to each other.***

*Tavis Settles, Building Safer Communities Block Watch*

But as our lives withdrew from the public eye in car-centric neighbourhoods, we’ve tried to maintain our sense of safety by installing security cameras, smart doorbells, and by joining community-watch groups in our neighbourhood where we can share concerns about crime—which is what Settles did about seven years ago.

When his security cameras revealed an unsettling incident in his backyard, Settles organized to form the first Facebook-based block-watch group in his neighbourhood, Building Safer Communities Block Watch. “The [incident] that really spooked me was we had some guy come into our yard and leave the gates open, which let the dogs out,” he said.

Settles’s fears were echoed by his neighbours, who were quick to join the group to share safety concerns and report suspicious activities taking place all over the neighbourhood. Posting to the group encourages others to do the same as soon as something happens, Settles says, noting that doing this gives residents a sense of conclusion and validation.

“What we’ve noticed is not only does it encourage reporting, but it closes the loop. And I think that’s the critical thing that’s missing with Calgary police right now.”

## **A popular model expands throughout city**

After its creation in 2016, the popularity of Settles's group grew quickly, and by 2017 Building Safer Communities Block Watch had expanded its reach beyond Coventry Hills to residents from adjacent communities within the Northern Hills area in north central Calgary.

With support from both the Northern Hills Community Association—where Settles is president—and a community resource officer of the Calgary Police Service's District 7, Settles says the group's reports helped reduce the number of transgressions in the Northern Hills area.

Word of their success spread across the city. Today, Building Safer Communities Block Watch helps manage Facebook groups in 22 Calgary communities, five of them located outside of District 7, including the Bridgeland-Riverside Eyes on the Street group, which Settles describes as a model of success.

But despite data showing minor reductions in the number of property crimes so far in the Northern Hills neighbourhoods, research suggests the influence of these groups on long-term crime prevention is limited.

***As a society, and as communities, we have to ask ourselves: How do we want to address those minor transgressions?***

*Kevin Walby, University of Winnipeg*

What surveillance does is displaces transgression to adjacent neighbourhoods, Walby says.

“You can increase a police budget, you can have more policing, you can have more surveillance, and have almost no impact on rates of crime or transgression,” said Walby. The reason is that surveillance doesn't address the root causes of petty and property crime: poverty, inequality, addictions and lack of affordable housing.

“If we decrease inequality by giving people access to housing, to education, to jobs, to education, that will be actually the number one strategy to reduce transgression, and it will be long term,” Walby said.

## **A way to form social bonds**

Crime issues aside, these online groups can serve an important social function in neighbourhoods.

“One of the key drivers behind why the group wanted to do this is that we wanted to know our neighbours,” Settles said. “We wanted to know [what] was going on, and we truly wanted to put the sense of community back in the community.”

This sense of community, however, can come at the expense of excluding, and even endangering, others.

Benoit says community cohesion can be a double-edged sword. “Belonging has a strong dimension of power relations,” she said.

“It can be an inclusive thing where people from diverse walks of life can feel included, but it can also be very exclusive.”

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*Aimee Benoit, Cultural Geographer*

The speed and reach of reports via social media can also increase the perception of transgression, even when crime rates aren't actually increasing in an area.

“The idea of some of these groups is to fill the security gaps,” Walby said. “And they're acting in response to some perceived harm; sometimes the harm might be something like destruction of property, or maybe there's a break and enter.”

Building Safer Communities Block Watch encourages residents to report all suspicious activity to the police.

But what is to be deemed suspicious in one's neighbourhood?

Research shows that the hyper-vigilance promoted in these groups can lead residents to identify as suspicious a broad range of behaviours and even appearance.

In his research, Walby has found that neighbourhood watch groups frequently reported on people who "didn't seem to belong" rather than actual transgressors. "So it's not even actual harm, but perceived harm," Walby said.

Settles himself had his photo taken and shared on the community's Facebook group while walking his dog one night.

"There's this guy with a massive dog and he's checking neighbours and checking stuff, should we call this in?" he remembered reading in a Facebook post, to which he replied, "Yeah, absolutely you should. That was me, but please call it in."

## **Building safer communities—but for whom?**

If you are a white, middle-aged, cis-gender man, having the police called on you may seem inconsequential, but this is not the case for marginalized populations. "Maybe they call the police on that person. That person could be arrested or shot—that's not decreasing the harm," Walby said.

Even marginalized populations have embraced community-watch groups on social media. In Abbeydale, where Michelle Robinson lived for 16 years, neighbours actively engage in the same type of surveillance encouraged by the Building Safer Communities Block Watch—despite belonging to racialized or marginalized communities themselves.

"It's really demeaning to see it, because a lot of the people who are saying these things are very much the people that could be in that position in six months," said Robinson, a Sahtu Dene activist and host of the Native Calgarian podcast.

In Abbeydale, neighbours are encouraged to call the police if they see anything suspicious, which, Robinson says, could be just about anything.

“If they have a motion camera that shows the face of somebody who maybe took a package off of their doorstep, they will post something about that,” she said, noting that racist connotations and stereotypes can run rampant depending on the preferences of the group’s administrators.

***A lot of the people who are saying these things are very much the people that could be in that position in six months.***

*Michelle Robinson, Native Calgarian podcast*

But the social connection fostered by these groups can be hard to resist.

“I used to be able to walk my dog in about 15, 20 minutes, because I wouldn’t be able to talk to any of the neighbours,” Settles said. Now walking the dog takes him at least an hour, as he’s gotten to know more neighbours better.

For Settles, the crime watch aspect of these groups is essential to give neighbours “a grounding sense of commonality,” as well as a sense of purpose.

“When it comes to wanting to live in a safer community, and wanting to build up a safer community, there’s no hesitation [regardless of] race, creed, background, education level, or politics,” he said. “So when you start from that premise, it gives you the ability to build that sense of community and start collaboration.”

And this is not necessarily a bad thing.

“The desire to belong and the desire to have a community is a good thing,” Walby said.

“But there are other ways to go about seeking it. Instead of monitoring, criminalizing, excluding, what if the community had a mutual-aid project? There are lots of ways to have belonging without having surveillance.”

## **Ideally, community associations can play a role**

Benoit believes that community associations have the potential to foster alternatives—but they have to be intentional about it.

“[Community associations] can work to be more inclusive, and help people feel a greater sense of belonging, or they can feed an exclusionary dynamic—depending on the extent to which they work to reach out and make sure that they’re both hearing from and representing a fuller range of people in their neighbourhoods,” she said.

Leslie Evans, executive director of the Federation of Calgary Communities (FCC), says “building a sense of belonging is at the core of everything that we talk about in terms of the mandate of community associations.”

However, there’s one big obstacle: funding.

For most Calgary community associations, “money is always a barrier,” Evans said. “They have no steady income. There’s no operating dollars that are given to community associations.”

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*Leslie Evans, Executive director, Federation of Calgary Communities*

Many community associations can’t afford paid staff or office equipment, and some don’t even have a community hall to rent out and raise funds, or to offer programming. Larger community associations such as Hillhurst-Sunnyside and Bowness have social service funding or are registered charities, Evans noted, “so they can access funds that most of our communities cannot.”

To spearhead inclusive projects that benefit all residents, support social cohesion, and address crime at its roots, funding is essential for community associations.

But in the meantime, engaged Calgarians could examine a better path forward and consider creative alternatives to surveillance.

“As a society, and as communities, we have to ask ourselves: How do we want to address those minor transgressions?” Walby said.

“Do we want to do so in a way that adds more surveillance, more security, more harm, or do we want to do something that tries to bring people in to build a whole community?”

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