

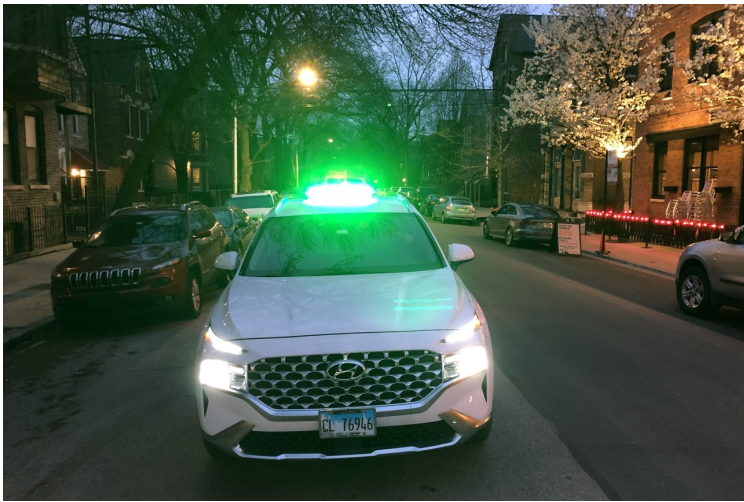
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U.S.

In Chicago, Wealthy Neighborhoods Hire Their Own Private Police as Crime Rises

Armed patrols by off-duty police officers in marked security cars combat carjackings, robberies



By [Joe Barrett](#) [Follow](#)

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CHICAGO—Alarmed by growing numbers of carjackings and other street crimes, several neighborhoods on Chicago’s affluent North Side have signed up for patrols by armed off-duty police officers to create what some security companies are calling virtual gated communities.

At least five neighborhoods in or adjacent to Chicago’s North Side have added patrols for the first time in the past six months or are planning to sign up for patrols with P4 Security Solutions LLC, said Paul Ohm, executive vice president and principal.

The officers, who ride in marked security cars equipped with overhead lights, cameras and high-tech communications tools, aren’t tasked with making arrests, even though they are allowed to carry guns because they are sworn police officers. They contact 911 in an emergency and act as a deterrent, Mr. Ohm said.

The willingness of neighborhood associations to pay for security in neighborhoods such as Lincoln Park, Bucktown and Lakeview comes amid a surge of crime in Chicago and other cities, where interest in private security is also on the rise.

Sean Meehan, director of sales and marketing at United Security Inc. in Red Bank, N.J., said that he has received numerous calls for the first time in the past year from people in the Northeast looking to add security patrols in their neighborhoods, even though his company mostly guards malls, offices and other businesses.

“It’s crime,” he said. “Straight up crime—and the people in those areas not feeling safe.”



In San Francisco, Alan Byard, a licensed police officer who works for private clients under a program dating to the Gold Rush, said he has seen a big increase in interest in his services. Before the pandemic, he said he had 75 clients in the Marina area. Today, he has 175.

“As the pandemic was getting into the first six months, the clients started calling me up and saying, ‘Crime is out of control, what can you do?’” he said.

Private security patrols on public streets aren’t new, but they have more typically been found in gated communities and downtown business districts.

“It’s a force multiplier,” said Alderman Brian Hopkins, whose Chicago district includes Bucktown, one of the neighborhoods that has recently begun the patrols. “You actually do have police officers on the street. They just happen to be in security vehicles as opposed to police cars, but their experience comes with them.”

Data compiled by P4 from the Chicago Police Department show that reported crimes in the area it patrols in Bucktown were up 30% for the first quarter of this year compared with the same period in 2021, but reported crimes were up by 47% and 86% in two similar nearby neighborhoods.



Private patrols can reduce crime in areas they serve, said Jens Ludwig, head of the University of Chicago's Crime Lab. But they tend to exacerbate racial and economic divisions that are already wide in the city, he added, and could potentially reduce political pressure to attack the problem at a citywide level. "That would be the open question and potential big concern," he said.

The contracts with services like P4 typically require the formation of a new neighborhood association, which raises funds to pay for the service. Sometimes, only one or two neighbors will foot the bill, P4 officials said. In one section of Lincoln Park, neighbors were seeking contributions of \$100 a month from anyone interested in pitching in, with a goal of raising \$175,000 a year, according to a letter distributed to homeowners.

Josh Lane, a 34-year-old Bucktown resident, said he was knocked to the ground and robbed last summer by two young men with a fake gun when he was out walking his dog, Dante, one of several incidents that spurred the community to action.

His injuries weren't serious and the robbers only made off with \$12, his bank card and an old cellphone, Mr. Lane said. Shortly after that, the neighborhood began holding meetings and set up a new neighborhood association that is paying for the patrols.

Mr. Lane says he still feels generally safe in the neighborhood and has mixed feelings about the patrols.



“It’s a little like a dystopian sci-fi movie when you see the flashing green lights go by,” said Mr. Lane, who works in the medical-publishing business. He said he is also uneasy about the patrols being armed, fearing that they will eventually harm someone.

“The guys who attacked me were stupid kids, but they don’t deserve to get shot,” he said.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot has expressed skepticism about the program. “People are concerned about their security, I’m concerned about their security,” she said in a December media briefing in which she called private security patrolling public streets a slippery slope. “Responsibility under state law and local law to patrol our streets lies exclusively with the Chicago Police Department.”

She declined to comment further through a spokesman.

The Chicago Police Department said it encourages everyone to help police by reporting crimes and urges people not to take matters into their own hands. It declined to comment further.

On a recent afternoon in Bucktown, Colton Jeralds, a police officer on weekends in Pecatonica, Ill., radioed P4’s operations center to begin his shift on the neighborhood security detail. He drove a late-model Hyundai SUV and wore a black short-sleeve shirt with a bulletproof vest. He had a Glock 43 9mm handgun strapped to his left hip.



He slowly circled the perimeter of the 24-block area, which includes a bookstore, a perfume shop and cafes, then weaved through tree-lined neighborhood streets and alleys with a mix of newer mansions and traditional two- and three-story brick homes and apartments. He covers the entire area for the start of his shift, then splits it with another officer for the rest.

He said he enjoys talking to residents, helping dig them out of the snow, securing packages and alerting them to things like an open garage door. Many shifts are uneventful. A recent highlight was meeting with a man who had contacted him through a private social-media channel open to residents to discuss several packages that had been stolen from the man's porch.

"I do think people notice us and they know that we are here patrolling the streets. I think that it has helped," he said.

Jim Higgins, owner of Club Lucky, an Italian restaurant in the middle of the patrolled area, said last summer had been a particularly tough time but the patrols are starting to make people feel safer.

"I think people's comfort has been raised. It's a pretty small area that they patrol, so you'll be walking your dog or your baby or going to the store and within a half-hour you'll see them at least once—maybe every 20 minutes," he said.

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