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# Neighborhood watches are on the front lines in bad economy.....



**A** neighbor saw the man trying to break into a house and called police. "There was nobody at home at the house," Borbon said. "[The alleged thief] didn't know that a neighbor was watching from her window." Borbon is a Citizens' Crime Watch volunteer for his Westchester neighborhood in south Miami, where residents have been trained to be alert to suspicious behavior and report it promptly to police. With the economic downturn, neighborhood watch groups are proving to be a first line of defense in battling property crimes.

The Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington, D.C.-based independent research organization made up of local and state police officials, released a survey in January showing that 44 percent of police departments reported increases in crimes they believed could be attributed to the economic crisis. Of the departments surveyed, 39 percent reported an increase in robberies, and 32 percent said they had seen a rise in burglaries. Those surveyed also reported a 40 percent increase in thefts, including those of GPS devices from cars and other "opportunistic" crimes. See how you can protect yourself and your property. The survey also revealed that while quality-of-life crimes are rising, budget money is falling.

Of the 233 responding police agencies, 63 percent said they expected their total funding for the next fiscal year to be slashed. And as police departments grapple with budget cuts and hiring freezes, neighbors are stepping up and battling back against burglary, theft and vandalism. Police Chief Dean Esserman of Providence, Rhode Island, said that for a time, his department saw a dramatic increase in copper thefts resulting from empty, foreclosed homes and the increased value of copper on the commodities market.

Things have gotten much better in Providence, Esserman said, but other communities haven't been as fortunate. "Most cities are having a tough time," said Esserman, who added that his department is dedicated to community policing and has a strong partnership with neighborhood watch groups. "In the last year or two, the economics have been really rough." Borbon said his community has definitely noticed more criminal activity. "We've never had so many problems before," he said. "Nowadays, you have so many people just walking around pretending, leaving fliers, doing marketing surveys or some such baloney. But what they really are doing is looking for opportunities, watching to see who is or isn't in their homes."