Nancy McPherson is a crime-stopping pioneer. First, she helped the San Diego Police Department come up with a new and effective kind of policing; now she wants to create a way for citizens to police themselves.

When McPherson first came to San Diego in 1988 she was promoting a new idea called Problem Oriented Policing. The essential idea, piloted in Tampa, Atlanta, Tulsa, Philadelphia and San Diego, was to help police deal with the underlying causes of crime. For example, rather than simply responding over and over to crack-house violence, police were taught how to get the house condemned. Problem Oriented Policing worked; a course developed here is taught today in more than 150 law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and Canada.

McPherson, SDPD's manager of neighborhood policing, believes the next frontier of crime fighting is you and I. She wants to make us the crime fighters and crime preventers.

"I really don't care much for the traditional neighborhood watch concept," says McPherson. "We need a new approach."

Most neighborhood watch organizations are structured around a single block captain who arranges for neighborhood watch signs to be erected, gathers neighbors for meetings with the police and and encourages them to call 911 when they witness suspicious or criminal activity.

"That model works well for people with good social skills, people who are comfortable and trusting of their neighbors," she says. "But it doesn't work so well in neighborhoods with a high level of fear and a low level of community involvement."

Ethnic diversity poses another problem. "For example, in the Indochinese community, for cultural reasons, people aren't comfortable meeting in a neighbor's home, so the meetings are best held in the yard. Yet, we tend to impose a standardized neighborhood watch model on everyone, and then we wonder why it doesn't always work." She also questions relative passivity of neighborhood watches. Traditionally, they serve as the eyes and ears of the police department. "At its most extreme, the public image is neighbors spying on one another," she says.

But the next generation of neighborhood watches will spend less time reaching for the phone to call the police, and more time preventing crime.

As a good model, she points to the San Diego Organizing Project, a network of
churches and neighborhood activists. SDOP, by marching, protesting, and lobbying the city, was able to shut down a market that was selling booze to minors and serving as a hangout for criminals and drug dealers.

Another model is the City Heights Partnership. Born when a handful of citizens took to the streets to protest crime, it now enlists residents, city staff and other organizations to solve problems ranging from crime to land use to economic development. Such efforts to take back the neighborhoods go way beyond the traditional definition of a neighborhood watch.

With McPherson's encouragement, then-Chief of Police Bob Burgreen appointed a neighborhood watch advisory board two years ago. Chaired by Ron Boostrum, a professor at San Diego State, the board presented its report, "Neighborhood Watch: The Next Generation," to the new police chief, Jerry Sanders, in January. Among its intriguing recommendations for the city and police department:

- The creation of a Neighborhood Watch Block Captain's Association with a board of trustees appointed by the chief of police. One task of this board would be to assure that the neighborhood watch program has some financial independence from the police department, McPherson says. The association may be launched in October, she adds.

- A mobile Academy of Block Captains, which would give ongoing training and certification to block captains.

- A Neighborhood Leadership Institute to teach citizens how to solve their own problems.

- Enrolling the help of Americorps, the new national service corps, in providing "neighborhood mobilizers."

- More emphasis on non-traditional models of community organizing methods that fit San Diego's different ethnic cultures.

- An electronic community bulletin board accessible by block captains and other community members. The board would provide information on crime, city resources and community programs and activities.

- Establishing some kind of evaluation criteria to help decide whether a neighborhood watch program works.

McPherson admits that it's difficult to measure the effectiveness of neighborhood watches. One reason: Reports of crime go up when more citizens are involved. And some critics of this approach contend that neighborhood watches simply displace crime from one neighborhood to another. But John Eck, director of the Crime Control Institute, a research organization in Washington, D.C., says that recent research disproves the displacement theory.
The San Diego Police Department deserves credit as a national leader in developing new ways to discourage crime, Eck says. "Nancy has been critically important to this work," he says. "Every institution needs someone to light the fire. I'm not certain your city needs her anymore."

This week, McPherson leaves San Diego to take a job with the Seattle Police Department. But her legacy is going to be around for a long time in our neighborhoods.

RICHARD LOUV'S column appears here on Wednesdays and in Currents on Saturdays.