



Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2009

Who Is Setting Fire to Coatesville?

By Sean Scully / Philadelphia

John Pawlowski has lived in the small city of Coatesville, Pa., all his life, and he's never seen anything like this: neighbors so afraid they're threatening violence against strangers. "I heard from one guy who said, 'If I see someone who I don't know walking in my backyard, they're going to have to carry him out,'" says Pawlowski, 75, a retired newspaper worker. "And he said that with malice in his voice."

Since New Year's Day, Coatesville has seen 14 arsons, including one on Saturday night that destroyed 15 row houses on Fleetwood Street, leaving up to 60 people, including a city-council member, homeless. There has been nearly \$2 million in damage done. The city, an aging steel town of about 12,000 an hour west of Philadelphia, usually records about two arsons per year, according to the police. But last year there were 15 reported arsons, including one in October that killed an 83-year-old woman. One man was arrested in connection with that fire, and two others were charged with other fires around the same time, but police told reporters they have no suspects in the latest wave of blazes. ([See the top 10 crime stories of 2008.](#))

"People are scared," Pawlowski says. "They are almost desperate." Angry residents showed up at city hall on Sunday at a long-scheduled meeting to discuss re-establishing a Town Watch program and demanded answers from city officials. According to local newspapers, at least 100 people packed the meeting, causing the police chief, city manager and city-council members to hurry over to deal with the crowd. Police chief William Matthews tried to reassure the residents. "We cannot have people roaming the streets with guns," he said, according to the *Daily Times* newspaper.

Shortly after Sunday's gathering, city manager Harry Walker declared a "state of emergency," which he said would allow the city to ask for assistance from the state and might allow Coatesville to impose some regulations in the name of public safety, such as a curfew, although no specific regulations were in the works. He and other officials, however, said they were not yet willing to ask for help from the National Guard, as some residents suggested. Coatesville was once a thriving steel town, before [the Lukens Steel Co.](#) was bought by Bethlehem Steel in 1997. [Bethlehem went bankrupt in 2003](#), taking with it the pensions of many Coatesville residents. The local steel facility is now run by Arcelor Mittal and employs only a fraction of the total staff [Lukens had at its height](#).

City-council president Marty Eggleston says officials are trying to simultaneously reassure residents and urge them to be vigilant without resorting to vigilantism. "This is a situation no one has prepared themselves for. No one would expect that we would have individuals who would go out and covertly terrorize this community," he told TIME on Monday, several hours before a packed city-council meeting

that addressed the crisis. "We can protect ourselves by not giving these 'opportunists' an opportunity to do things to us," he said. "For example, we talked about turning your porch light on at night to light up the neighborhoods, removing any kind of unnecessary debris from the outside of the residence, front and back. Just the tiny things." He says he is "prayerful" that residents will follow through on plans to create a peaceful Town Watch. At Monday's meeting, the council approved the purchase of motion-activated lights, which the city will sell to residents at a discount to help illuminate dark yards that might invite arsonists. ([See the top 10 everything of 2008.](#))

Police have not said exactly who they think is behind the arsons. In the early hours of Sunday, as firefighters were finishing up at the scene of the latest fire, Matthews told local media that the blazes "may in fact be gang-related," but he has not repeated that statement in other news reports. Eggleston refused to confirm the gang connection on Monday, but he did say the fires are clearly the work of more than one arsonist. He wouldn't speculate, though, on whether they were coordinated events or unrelated copycat incidents. "We don't want to divulge the information we have, especially to the media, because the bad guys read the paper too," he said. ([Read a 1972 TIME cover story on gangs.](#))

Pawlowski, meanwhile, says he wouldn't be surprised to find the arsons are gang-related. He says he has seen an increase in graffiti using the names of famous gangs such as the Bloods and Crips in the past two years and has led community efforts to remove it. However, it is unclear whether this reflects real gang activity or simply wannabes. Either way, Pawlowski says, allowing the graffiti to remain simply perpetuates decay and emboldens whoever put it there.

While he wouldn't comment on whether there are gangs operating in the area, Eggleston says there is clearly a sense of alienation developing in the city. "We don't know each other as well as we used to, and there is a detachment in that sense of ownership," he says. "I think that type of attitude is degrading to any community. When you lose that sense of ownership — 'This is mine and I will do anything I can to uphold it, respect it and preserve it' — that's a decline in any community."

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