108618

108618

National Institute of Justice / Research in Action

James K. Stewart, Director

April 1988

Improving the use and effectiveness of Neighborhood Watch programs

NCJRS

by James Garofalo
and Maureen McLeod

JUN 7 1988

ACQUISITIONS

Citizen involvement in crime prevention has grown considerably during the last 10 years, resulting in programs that promote home security, area surveillance, and citizen reporting of crimes to the police. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported in 1986 that about one family in five lives in a neighborhood with such a program. In those areas, a substantial proportion—38 percent—participate.

These programs have different names in various parts of the country: Crime Watch, Block Watch, or Community Alert, for example. The most commonly used label is Neighborhood Watch. Thousands of Neighborhood Watch programs exist in the United States, and it is fair to describe them as the backbone of the Nation's community crime prevention effort.

Neighborhood Watch asks residents of an area to get to know each other, watch out for each other, be alert, and be willing to call the police when something is amiss. Thus, it can be a vehicle toward a number of community crime prevention goals: decreasing opportunities for offenders to act undetected, improving

citizen-police relationships, overcoming people's feelings of powerlessness about crime, enhancing a "sense of community" among neighbors, and raising the level of informal social control that people exercise over their environments.

This *Research in Action* outlines the results of a national study of Neighborhood Watch carried out in 1985. The study assessed what is happening in Neighborhood Watch programs (including their strengths and weaknesses) and identified ways to improve existing programs and facilitate the development of new programs. Examination of local evaluation reports on Neighborhood Watch programs shows:

● Neighborhood Watch can produce at least short-term reductions in certain types of crime, particularly residential burglary, though the amount of crime reduction in some Neighborhood Watch programs may be difficult to ascertain because of weaknesses in the local evaluation.

● Neighborhood Watch programs are more likely to be effective when they are part of general-purpose or multi-issue community groups, rather than when they address crime problems in isolation.

● Participation in Neighborhood Watch tends to increase *awareness* of crime as a problem, but effects on the *fear* of crime are uncertain.

● The ability of Neighborhood Watch to produce greater community attachment is uncertain.

Research method

The research had three primary components. First, questionnaires were sent to 2,300 Neighborhood Watch leaders nationwide. Given the response rate of 26 percent, the survey results must be interpreted cautiously. Researchers then visited 10 communities to observe programs in operation and interview program managers and participants. The researchers also reviewed evaluation reports, handbooks, newsletters, and training manuals. Other documents, including funding proposals submitted by local crime prevention groups to a State agency and the results of a survey of 500 block captains in one city, were examined.

National overview

The Neighborhood Watch programs that responded to our survey were relatively new ones. The formation of programs peaked in the late 1970's and early 1980's, a time when several national projects emphasized Neighborhood Watch. Few programs were established before the mid-1970's, and there appears to be a decline in program initiation during recent years.

The survey responses paint a picture of voluntary citizen activity in close association with law enforcement. Virtually all the programs received startup and ongoing advice from local police or sheriff's departments. However, fewer than half reported receiving financial assistance during startup. For them, the primary

source of funds was voluntary contributions. More than 70 percent indicated that they have no formal operating budget. Approximately 80 percent of the administrative staffs of the programs are volunteers.

The neighborhoods in which programs exist are predominantly middle-income, racially homogenous areas with no commercial establishments. In most cases, the population consists primarily of long-term residents living in single-family, owner-occupied homes. Residential burglary seems to be the focal concern of the program. Neighborhood Watch was much more likely to be instituted to prevent development of a crime problem than to deal with an existing crime problem.

Newsletters and regularly scheduled meetings are used extensively to disseminate information to participants. Approximately 60 percent of the responding programs report using at least one of these and 40 percent use both.

Neighborhood Watch groups engage in a wide range of specific crime prevention activities as well as crime-related and community-oriented activities.

Engraving property with identification numbers and conducting home security surveys are especially common. There is also a focus on physical environmental concerns, crime reporting mechanisms, and assisting crime victims.

All the surveyed programs use informal surveillance, but less than 10 percent restrict themselves to that activity, as Table 1 shows.

The 66 programs engaging in "organized surveillance" use citizen patrols in addition to informal surveillance. The popularity of efforts to resolve environmental concerns (graffiti, trash collection, etc.), and to improve street lighting, as well as crime-tip hotlines and block parenting, were confirmed in site visits and through other contacts with Neighborhood Watch programs. However, these sources suggest that the survey under-

Table 1

Activities engaged in by Neighborhood Watch Programs
(based on program survey responses)

Activity	Number	Percent
Neighborhood Watch only	49	8.9
Crime prevention specific		
Project Operation Identification	425	80.6
Home security surveys	357	67.9
Street lighting improvement	183	34.7
Block parenting	144	27.3
Organized surveillance	66	12.0
Traffic alteration	37	7.0
Emergency telephones	24	4.6
Project Whistle Stop	18	3.4
Specialized informal surveillance	18	3.4
Escort service	12	2.3
Hired guards	11	2.1
Environmental design	7	1.3
Lock provision installation	4	0.7
Self defense rape prevention	3	0.5
Crime related		
Crime tip hotline	197	37.5
Victim witness assistance	101	19.2
Court watch	17	3.2
Telephone chain	7	1.3
Child fingerprinting	2	0.4
Community oriented		
Physical environmental concerns	201	38.1
Insurance premium deduction survey	20	3.6
Quality of life	9	1.6
Medical emergency	4	0.7

estimates the extent to which telephone chains are used in Neighborhood Watch and overestimates the proportion of programs engaging in victim/witness assistance.

Organization and sponsorship

There is a typical Neighborhood Watch structure in the United States. A single agency, usually a police department, sponsors programs throughout the jurisdiction. The basic organizational unit is a single block, whose participants choose a block captain. Groups of blocks are generally headed by a neighborhood coordinator.

In some places, an additional organizational level exists between neighborhoods and the jurisdiction-wide sponsor. This model is found most often in small- to medium-sized cities, towns, and suburbs. Variations exist primarily in larger cities where major subsections of a city have well-established identities not easily amalgamated into a unified structure.

Another important variation on the structure is the use of some organization or agency other than the police as the jurisdiction-wide sponsor. While non-police sponsors may exhibit a more single-minded concentration on community crime prevention than do most police departments, they often lack the authority that many Neighborhood Watch participants seek.

However, there are benefits to sponsorship by organizations that address a variety of issues, including those not directly crime-related. Neighborhood improvement groups, homeowners' associations, block clubs, and so forth have established organizational structures, and their memberships consist of the people who are most active in dealing with community issues. These groups can integrate crime prevention with other local concerns because of the range of interests among their members and their links with other organizations, institutions, and public agencies.

Issues in Neighborhood Watch operations

Information from site visits identified a variety of issues that commonly confront Neighborhood Watch programs.

1. Role of the police

Police departments are heavily involved in starting and managing Neighborhood Watch Programs. Most citizen groups appear to want the legitimacy that police sponsorship confers. Current evaluations indicate that successful programs are more likely to involve some form of citizen and police collaboration (Rosenbaum et al. 1987).

Deteriorated, low-income, heterogenous neighborhoods with a high crime rate are more resistant to Neighborhood Watch organizing efforts than stable, homogeneous middle-class neighborhoods populated by homeowners. Intergroup conflicts and distrust of the police make it more difficult for Neighborhood Watch to succeed under police sponsorship in such neighborhoods.

The police role in program initiation can be characterized by whether police crime prevention officers actively try to organize citizen involvement or respond to citizen requests for their assistance.

After the program is established, police departments rely primarily on formal links to maintain contact with programs: Newsletters, meetings, organizational structures, and criteria that groups must satisfy periodically in order to retain official certification as Neighborhood Watch programs.

Police departments face certain problems sponsoring Neighborhood Watch programs. These include: (1) providing leadership and setting goals while fostering self-sufficiency and experimentation among citizen groups; (2) integrating of crime prevention with more traditional police functions without allowing crime prevention resources to be absorbed by those functions; (3) generating citizen interest without using scare tactics or promising more than can be delivered; and (4) selecting police officers with the interest and aptitude for working with citizens and providing adequate reward structures for such officers.

2. Participation and survival of programs

Continuing participation by residents is critical to a program's survival and effectiveness. Programs in stable, low-crime neighborhoods do not give participants enough to do; motivating people to remain alert is difficult when the situations for which they are to remain alert rarely occur. In contrast, crime in other neighborhoods may be so frequent and deep-rooted that the relatively mild intervention represented by Neighborhood Watch may be seen as insufficient to deal with the problem.

For both kinds of neighborhoods, the solution seems to lie in linking Neighborhood Watch with more general community problem-solving efforts, placing Neighborhood Watch within multi-issue local associations, and addressing local concerns that arouse and enlist the energies and interest of the residents, whether these be jobs for youth, deteriorating housing, drug dealing, trash pickups, or barking dogs.

3. Program operations

A variety of techniques have been developed by Neighborhood Watch programs. Among these are:

● *Internal communications*. Approaches used include a hierarchical organizational structure (in which each participant is only responsible for contacting a small number of others), telephone chains, computer-assisted telephoning, periodic meetings, and newsletters.

● *Neighborhood Watch signs*. The design and size of Neighborhood Watch signs vary little throughout the Nation. However, communities follow different procedures for deciding where to place signs and how to pay for them.

● *Enhancing surveillance*. Improving street lighting and removing visual impediments are the primary physical means of enhancing surveillance. A number of jurisdictions also are involving mail carriers and utility workers as

a way of increasing the numbers of persons "watching out" on a more routine basis.

● *Beyond watching and reporting.* The basic instruction to Neighborhood Watch participants is to watch and report to the police. Some Neighborhood Watch groups take more active steps, and participants may be encouraged to go outside when something suspicious is observed, demonstrating their collective presence. In some programs participants leave their homes to photograph suspicious persons or vehicles.

● *Police innovations.* Several police departments give their crime prevention officers sufficient latitude and resources to engage in community organizing and problem-solving efforts that go well beyond the traditional police role. These officers become key resources in the neighborhoods where they operate, helping residents to deal with other public agencies, to resolve disputes, and to address quality-of-life issues not normally considered within the police purview.

Conclusions and recommendations

Neighborhood Watch has the potential for reducing property crimes, particularly residential burglary. The extent of crime reduction that has actually occurred is difficult to ascertain, however, because of weaknesses in some evaluation designs. There is little evidence that Neighborhood Watch, by itself, produces increased neighborhood attachment or sense of community.

The primary issues facing Neighborhood Watch today are how to maintain citizen participation in existing programs and how to make Neighborhood Watch attractive and effective for heterogenous, low-income, unstable, high-crime neighborhoods.

There are costs and benefits associated with police or civilian sponsorship of Neighborhood Watch. The police provide expert information and a stamp of legitimacy that most Neighborhood Watch participants want, but community

crime prevention functions are often secondary to the other duties police departments perform.

Civilian organizations do not possess the aura of authority, but they are often more capable of giving crime prevention their undivided attention. Some form of partnership or collaboration between citizens and police in Neighborhood Watch can achieve the best of both worlds.

The following recommendations can help improve Neighborhood Watch programs:

● The people who organize, lead, and participate in Neighborhood Watch should be encouraged to develop innovative practices and link Neighborhood Watch to other local concerns. Less emphasis should be placed on formal standards for Neighborhood Watch programs, primarily certification and recertification criteria. Alternative ways of operating Neighborhood Watch should not be precluded by jurisdiction-wide, predetermined criteria.

● Neighborhood Watch organizers and managers should make greater efforts to consider the characteristics and needs of specific neighborhoods and to tailor Neighborhood Watch efforts to them. Neighborhood Watch functions should be lodged within existing neighborhood or block associations when possible. Where a local association does not exist, organizers should be open to Neighborhood Watch as a possible starting point for one.

● Police departments, as the primary sponsors of Neighborhood Watch, need to strengthen crime prevention units by enhancing their organizational status, giving them sufficient resources, selecting personnel likely to work well with community groups, and providing appropriate rewards and a career path for such personnel.

● When citizen interest wanes, Neighborhood Watch sponsors should innovate rather than merely exhort. Flexibility and innovation in the basic Neighborhood Watch model can be enhanced by building on such existing tools as meetings and newsletters to create networks for exchanging promising ideas and information among jurisdictions.

Related reports

The following reports address the development, maintenance, and effects of community crime prevention efforts such as Neighborhood Watch and thus provide an additional source of information on this topic:

Feins, J.D., et al. *Partnerships for Neighborhood Crime Prevention.* Washington, D.C., National Institute of Justice, 1983.

Rosenbaum, D., ed., *Community Crime Prevention: Does It Work?* Beverly Hills, Sage, 1986.

Whitaker, C. *Crime Prevention Measures.* Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, 1986.

National Crime Prevention Institute. *Understanding Crime Prevention.* Stoneham, Massachusetts, Butterworth, 1986.

National Crime Prevention Council. *Preventing Crime in Urban Communities.* Washington, D.C., 1986.

Heinzelmann, F. "Promoting citizen involvement in crime prevention and control." In *Taking Care: Understanding and Encouraging Self-Protective Behavior*, ed. N. Weinstein. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Titus, R. "Residential burglary and the community response." In *Coping With Burglary: Research Perspectives on Policy*, ed. R. Clarke and T. Hope. Boston, Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1985.