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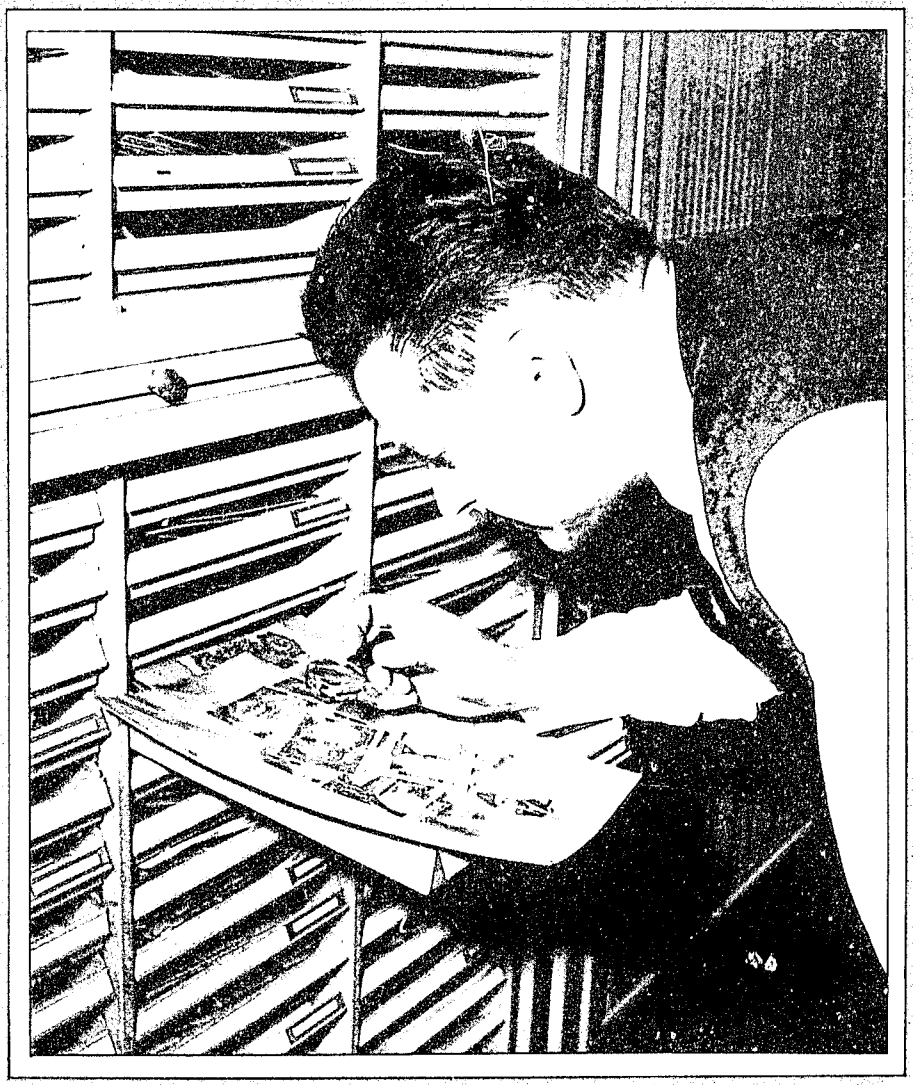

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The Cover: Interpol employee searches counterfeit currency file at Interpol's headquarters in St. Cloud, France. See article p. 1.

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William H. Webster, Director

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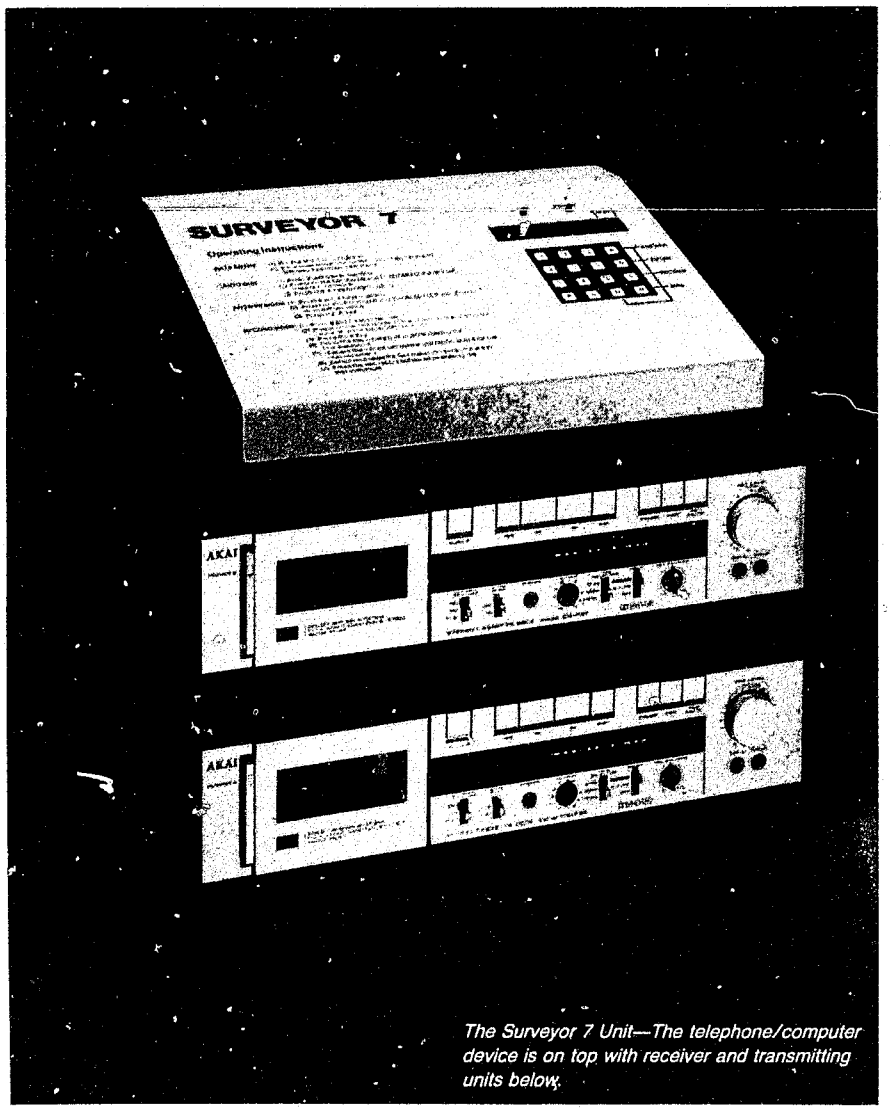

The Surveyor 7 Unit—The telephone/computer device is on top with receiver and transmitting units below.

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Neighborhood Crime Watch
A Communication Problem

"The fundamental element in the success of any neighborhood watch program is communication."

By
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Crime Prevention Section
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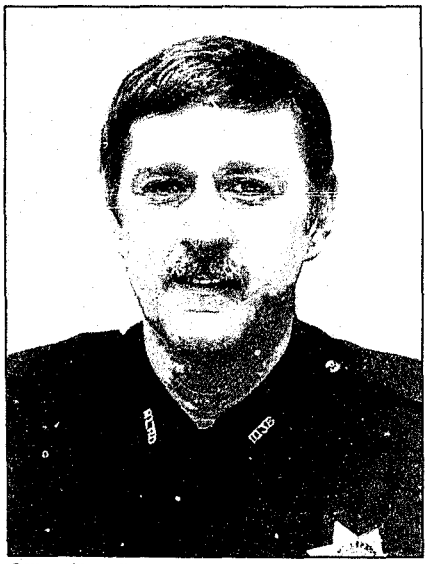

Officer Howell

David A. Varreiman
Chief of Police

The Mt. Lebanon Police Department began its formal crime prevention program in 1978 with the establishment of a neighborhood crime watch program. The need for this type of program was sparked by a rash of residential burglaries and minor arson cases. The value and success of this one neighborhood program laid the foundation for the establishment of a full-time crime prevention unit and 27 additional watch groups. The neighborhood watch group program is continuing to grow, and by 1985, the entire community will be covered by 35 individual groups.

Mt. Lebanon is a residential community bordering the city of Pittsburgh. Slightly over 6 square miles in area with a population of about 35,000, Mt. Lebanon's mean family income is approximately $36,000, which is significantly above the average for the geographical area. As in most affluent, midlevel executive communities, the primary crime is burglary. About 95 percent of these burglaries are residential. Vandalism is also an annoying problem which, in volume, surpasses any other offense that occurs within the community.

Since the inception of the crime watch program, a noticeable reduction in burglary and vandalism has occurred. In 1978, our department investigated 199 burglaries, which decreased to 128 in 1983. At the same time, the burglary clearance rate went from 21 percent to 34 percent. Although Mt. Lebanon has experienced the same phenomenon of crime rate reduction as other communities over the past 2 or 3 years, this process has been accelerated in Mt. Lebanon and has been somewhat greater than in communities in the surrounding area. We believe that the neighborhood watch program has been a major contributor to the swift reductions in crime.

The fundamental element of any successful neighborhood watch program is communication. The watch group must be kept informed of the events as they occur within their area and must be able to communicate suspicions and observations to the police. When the program is small, involving only 100–200 residences, this is a comparatively easy task. As the program grows, however, the task becomes more difficult.

Mt. Lebanon has organized neighborhood groups to conform with police reporting areas or computerized grids. This allows for quick retrieval of information pertaining to the group that can be disseminated at meetings or as the need becomes apparent. Also, if a series of events occurs, the group can be immediately notified. The problem of how to get this information to each member of the group then arises.

As in most neighborhood watch programs, we began our communication chain with a telephone pyramid calling system. The crime prevention officer would call the group coordinator who in turn called block captains who relayed the message to other members within the group. This method is effective for small groups but does have some serious drawbacks. As in most verbal messages, changes occur as the message is passed down the chain, and at the same time, meanings become confused. It is also difficult to ensure that

all members of the pyramid are contacted, and it is almost impossible to make a record of those who have not been reached. Finally, as the program grows and additional watch groups are added, the pyramid calling system becomes less and less effective. Mt. Lebanon experienced all of these problems as the program grew to encompass approximately 9,000 individual homes and/or apartments. It was at this time we discovered a marketing device used by private industry that solved our problem.

In late 1982, we included, as part of our crime prevention program, the use of the Surveyor 7 computerized telephone calling device. The Surveyor 7 is a small 62K computer coupled with a telephone transmitter/receiver unit. The face of the computer contains a touch pad similar to a telephone, with several additional keys. Telephone numbers obtained from members of each watch group are fed into the computer through regular cassette-type recording tapes by volunteers from the watch groups. This involves simply entering each telephone number and pushing the enter code. Streets are first entered alphabetically and then numerically by house number. When a street has been entered, those numbers are then permanently recorded on the cassette tape.

Each tape contains entries for two streets, one on each side, and there is a master tape with all phone numbers for that particular watch group. The tapes are filed by watch group and backed up by both a computer disk and a printed list.

Should a neighborhood watch alert become necessary, the tape cassette of the street or group to receive information is placed into the transmitter and the numbers are automatically fed into the Surveyor. The number tape is then removed and a voice tape (which is made on the unit) containing the specific message is placed into the transmitter. The Surveyor is wired into a dedicated phone line and begins to call each number when the auto call command is given. When the telephone is answered, the voice tape gives the resident the prerecorded message. Each call is documented on a printer by phone number, time called, and time answered. If the call is not answered, the Surveyor calls back three times. An update of total number of calls entered, answered, unanswered, or to be placed is printed every 15 minutes. The device can be programmed to call only during certain hours of the day, ensuring that no calls will be transmitted during late or unusual hours.

An added feature of the unit allows for a question-and-answer program to be incorporated into the initial call. The prerecorded tape will ask a question and wait for the response of the individual being called. This process can handle up to three questions and answers, plus the initial message.

Burglary in Mt. Lebanon 1978–1983

	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983
Reported.....	199	221	283	269	160	128
Percent change..		11%	28%	−5%	−41%	−21%

Updating and Editing Tapes

Our community experiences a residential turnover rate of 7 to 10 percent. One of the obvious problems created by this turnover rate is maintaining an accurate phone list. The Surveyor 7 editing capabilities have eliminated this problem. Phone number tapes of the street requiring a revision are placed into the Surveyor 7, and the unit is placed into an edit mode. Each number is displayed and either totally deleted or changed without disturbing other numbers on that tape.

Setup time for the Surveyor 7 is minimal, and a basic element of crime prevention—communication—is accomplished effectively, accurately, and perhaps best of all, cost effectively. The initial investment is approximately $7,000, plus a dedicated phone line. This system has allowed our department to relay messages to individual citizens quickly and accurately. It has reduced the time necessary for individual officers to make telephone calls and has met with a favorable response from our citizens.

Additional Programs

In the time the Surveyor has been employed, other programs have been developed. When burglaries occur on a particular street, residents are called and given specific information. Department policy allows for resi-

"Since the inception of the crime watch program, a noticeable reduction in burglary and vandalism has occurred."

dents to be given all available information including where the burglary occurred, a complete description (if available) of burglar and vehicle, point and method of entry, time, date, and articles taken. Anyone with information is encouraged to call the detective unit directly. Investigators can now canvass several streets around the crime scene with the Surveyor 7; the savings in man-hours is impossible to estimate.

Lost Children

When the department receives a lost or missing child report, the Surveyor is used to contact several streets around the area in which the child was last seen. Residents receive a complete physical description of the child and are asked to check around the perimeter of their property. Within a very short time, 40 or 50 individuals begin assisting the department in the search, reducing the need for P.A. announcements from radio cars.

Bunko Operations

A fraudulent prescription operation was recently uncovered involving individuals who purported to be relatives of recently deceased persons. The suspect would call a local doctor stating that he was in town for the funeral, had run out of a prescribed medicine, and would need a prescription to "hold him over" until after the funeral. Because of this problem, local doctors have consented to having their telephone numbers stored on a special tape. If this bunko operation occurs, all doctors within our area can be notified within minutes. This idea can also be adapted to problems with pharmacies, banks, or businesses to curtail bad checks, retail theft, or quick-change artists.

Blind and Physically Handicapped Persons

We are now developing a blind and physically handicapped program in which weekly contact will be maintained with those persons in our community who have physical handicaps that restrict their mobility or confine them to their homes. The device will be used not only for checking on the health of the physically handicapped but also as a method of passing on special safety information.

Notification of Neighborhood Watch Meetings

Using the master tape, residents are notified of the location, date, time, and subject of neighborhood watch meetings. This is done bimonthly to keep residents informed of changing crime patterns within their particular area and is a reinforcement of the neighborhood watch concept. It is a valuable aid in maintaining the residents' participation in the program and has resulted in larger watch meeting attendance.

Emergency Notifications

This system can also be used in other emergencies, i.e., chemical spills, hazardous waste accidents, or other unforeseeable emergencies which may require evacuation of certain areas. It is also used to provide emergency general callouts of police officers or for special squads, such as SWAT, fatal accident teams, etc.

Summary

The need to communicate information to members of neighborhood watch groups is critical to the success of these types of programs. Traditional methods of pyramid telephone chains, while effective for very small programs, are not suited to communitywide efforts. The use of a marketing device previously thought to have application only in the private sector has provided an efficient, reliable, and cost-effective method of providing direct communication with the citizens of our community. Its uses are unlimited, and most importantly, adaptable to police departments of all sizes. It also provides immeasurable assistance to the department during police emergencies and other unforeseen events. **FBI**