Neighbourhood Watch

Article · December 2012

DOI: 10.1016/B978-0-08-047163-1.00558-0

1 author:

Richard Yarwood
University of Plymouth
112 PUBLICATIONS **1,846** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Neighbourhood Watch

Abstract

Neighbourhood Watch is a community-based crime prevention scheme that relies on residents acting together to reduce or prevent crime through surveillance of their neighbourhood. It is a remarkably popular scheme that is now present in most first world countries. This article explores the growth of the schemes and critically evaluates its social significance, location and impact on crime prevention.

Keywords: 10 – 15 for indexing

Neighbourhood Watch, Crime, Policing, Police, Social control, surveillance, community, voluntary, neighbourhood, geographies, crime-prevention.

Author Contact Information

Dr Richard Yarwood

School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences

University of Plymouth

Drake Circus

Plymouth

PL4 8A

UK

01752 585983

ryarwood@plymouth.ac.uk

Draft version. Final version published as:

Yarwood R, Neighbourhood Watch. In: Susan J. Smith, Marja Elsinga, Lorna Fox O'Mahony, Ong Seow Eng, Susan Wachter, Montserrat Pareja Eastaway, editors. International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home, Vol 5. Oxford: Elsevier; 2012. pp. 90–95.

Neighbourhood Watch

Richard Yarwood, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

Glossary

Neighbourhood Watch. A community-based crime prevention scheme that encourages vigilance between residents

The Police: A state agency tasked with enforcing the law and maintaining social order.

Policing: The maintenance of hegemonic behaviour, moral codes and values beyond those defined by the law. Policing is undertaken by a range of voluntary, public and private agencies, as well as the police.

Social Control. The conscious or unconscious coercion of people to behave in ways deemed to be acceptable

Surveillance. A means of social control based on watching or appearing to watch subjects.

What is Neighbourhood Watch?

Neighbourhood Watch (NW), also known as Block Watch, Community Watch or Home Watch, is a community-based crime prevention scheme that relies on residents acting together to reduce or prevent crime through surveillance of their neighbourhood. It aims to:

1. ‘cut crime and the opportunities for crime and anti-social behaviour;
2. provide reassurance to local residents and reduce the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour;
3. encourage neighbourliness and closer communities; and
4. improve the quality of life for local residents and tenants’ (Moley and Budd 2008, p.56)

Neighbourhood Watch Schemes (NWS) operate in a specific area that can vary in size from a few houses to a large town. Most schemes, as the name suggests, cover several streets that are recognised by local residents as ‘their neighbourhood’. The boundaries of a scheme are usually marked with street signs (Figure 1) and participating households display their involvement with notices on their properties.

The daily operation of a NWS relies on members simply being ‘good neighbours’ and keeping an eye out for suspicious activity or persons. Should participants view behaviour that they regard as criminal, anti-social or simply ‘out of place’, they are encouraged to phone a local co-ordinator who, in turn, liaises with police officers for information and advice. If a crime is witnessed in progress residents call the police through the usual emergency number. Other than reporting crimes or incidents,

members are told specifically not to involve themselves in direct or vigilante action: it remains the job of the police to deal with any trouble and, if necessary, make arrests.

Schemes are organised by local residents who act as co-ordinators. These co-ordinators organise the daily operation of the scheme by, for example, providing information; circulating newsletters; acting as a contact point for other members and liaising with the police.

Support for NW varied between police forces when it was first introduced (Bennett, 1990) but the programme has now been incorporated into community policing strategies of most first world forces, largely because it has helped to improve public relations (Yarwood and Edwards, 1995). Schemes are often supported by police officers or auxiliaries that have a dedicated community or 'beat management' remit. These officers are often instrumental in the establishment of schemes and work with community groups, such as parish councils, to initiate new ones. On a day-to-day basis, meetings with NW members contribute to pro-active, community-based policing and can help to improve the visibility of the police in local areas. The cost of running a scheme may be borne by the public and/or the police although, recently, there has also been evidence of private sponsorship (Figure 2). Insurance companies may also offer participating households a discount from their home insurance premiums.

Operationally, Neighbourhood Watch Schemes draw upon two theories of crime prevention (Bennett, 1990) that rely on the definition, communication and enforcement of a specified territory (Yarwood and Edwards, 1995).

First, schemes use a situational approach by reducing opportunities for crime in a particular area. Thus, NW schemes can be used to disseminate information and resources on 'target-hardening' (the often visible strengthening of building's properties and contents to deter or resist crime). This might include advice on how to install window locks or the use of property-marking pens to identify processions. Increased vigilance may also lead to more crimes being reported or cleared up. Some NW schemes have evolved to incorporate more active forms of surveillance, such as 'citizens patrols' where members walk the streets.

Secondly, NW attempts to reduce criminal or undesirable behaviour by using surveillance to increase social control. Those entering a NW area are made aware, through signs and symbols (Figure 1), that are being watched and, as Foucault (1975) argues, are disciplined to conduct themselves in ways that are deemed acceptable. Although at any particular time NW members may or may not be watching their street, the threat of increased surveillance thus serves as a deterrent to criminal behaviour. However, it is unclear whether either of these approaches is effect as there has been limited research on *how* NWS actually works (or not) (Bennett et al 2008).

NW has proved to be a remarkable popular scheme that has been adopted by many households, governments and police forces in many countries. Its advocates note, with some justification, that ‘Neighborhood Watch (sic) is undoubtedly one of the oldest and most well-known crime prevention programs in history’ (USAonWatch, 2009). However, its impact on crime rates is unclear and NW has been criticised for its social bias towards middle-class, owner-occupied housing in low-crime areas. The following sections explore these issues in more detail.

Histories and Geographies of NW

A key distinction between NW and other, more autonomous forms of policing is its support from the police and state. NW emerged in response to changes in state policing in many first world countries. From the 1960s onwards, policing became increasingly driven by the demands of efficiency (Fyfe, 1995). Reactive, ‘fire-brigade’ policing became the norm, with less emphasis placed on pro-active, community based methods that were viewed as inefficient in time, money and organisation. Consequently the police were withdrawn from many community roles and, in effect, from low-crime areas, often middle-class suburbs or rural communities. Thus, following the 1964 Police Act 158 local area police forces in the UK were replaced by only 43 with centralised headquarters. This drive for efficiency, today evidenced by performance targets and league tables, reflected increasingly pervasive neo-liberal policy-making by successive Western governments (Yarwood, 2007). The proverbial ‘bobby on the beat’ (an officer patrolling on foot who is known by the community), in itself steeped in myth and nostalgia, became a mourned figure in the eyes of the public.

Despite drives for greater police efficiency, increasing crime rates, coupled with a seemingly distant police force, reduced public confidence in the police and led to greater demands for greater police visibility. NW offered a way of increasing police contact with some, and often the most vociferous, members of the public without onerous cost, time or staff commitments.

A further impetus to NW was given by the ‘active citizenship’ polices of the late 1980s and early 1990s that encourage members of the public to involve themselves more closely in the running and management of their own localities, including policing (Fyfe, 1995). Public agencies, including local governments and police forces, were obliged to work with and encourage local actors to improve the quality of life in local neighbourhoods. Such policy implies a shifting of blame for social problems from government to community, as the following example implies:

> ‘crime is higher in "socially disorganized areas" marked by weakened informal control due to an erosion of shared norms. Since formal control organizations (specifically law enforcement) cannot be in all areas at one time, informal control of residents is necessary if that community is to experience low crime rates. When neighborhoods become disorganized, the people and institutions that once assisted in maintaining standards of behavior no longer hold such

> status, resulting in a breakdown in informal control. This, in turn, produces high crime rates' USAonWatch, 2009

Given that NW had the potential to meet the demands of the public, government and police it is perhaps of little surprise that NW developed so quickly. The first formal Neighbourhood Watch Schemes were established in Seattle in 1972 by The National Sheriffs' Association in the USA (Bennet et al 2008). By 1981, it was estimated that 12 percent of the USA's urban population was involved in a scheme, which had risen to as high as 20 percent by 1988 (USAonWatch, 2009). The first scheme in the UK was established in Mollington, Cheshire in 1982. Membership of increased dramatically during the 1990s and the British Crime Survey (BCS) estimated that 27% of households in the UK were members of a scheme in 2000 (Moley and Budd, 2008). According to Home Office data based on registrations for public-liability insurance, there are 129,357 active schemes covering over 9 million households in the UK.

Although NW schemes are now a presence in most first world countries, they reflect spatial and social differences in society. Numerous studies have confirmed that NW schemes are favoured in middle-class, owner-occupied, low-crime areas (Hourihan, 1987; Hussain, 1988; Yarwood and Edwards 1995; Moley and Budd, 2008) and that there is 'less support for NW in those areas where the need for it is greatest' (Hough and Mayhew,1985, p. 42). This is because schemes rely on existing community ties rather than creating them (Fyfe, 1995). Schemes are likely to flourish in places with high numbers of middle-aged, middle-class residents with the skills, time, confidence and opportunity to run schemes. Conversely, 'socially disorganised areas' (to borrow the terminology of USAonWatch) with high levels of mistrust between neighbours, poor police relations and few community groups are less likely to possess the social capital needed to establish and maintain a scheme. The location of NWS tends to reflect rather than affect community relations and fear of crime. Despite the need for more vertical integration across society, generics such as 'horse-watch', 'marina-watch' and 'vehicle watch' have emerged to protect different types of property rather than a wider range of people.

Like any form of policing, NW has the potential to enforce dominant codes, standards and ideals held by society and, in doing so, to exclude certain social groups from space. In some cases residents are seeking more direct control of public spaces and there is clearly a danger that NW can be used to police behaviour that is 'out of place' rather than criminal, such as young people 'hanging around' street corners. This said, experienced police officers may be able to distinguish more clearly between these behaviours and be capable of mediating and diffusing some of the more outrageous demands made by some NW members. But certainly NW, like the twitching of net-curtains, has become a metaphor for an ordered, heterogeneous suburbia.

Yet, if NW enforces and re-produces suburban norms then it is of little surprise that it has not spread widely out of these places. It also raises important questions about its remit and the extent to which it could or should be used to enforce certain norms. Both of these premises, however, assume that NW is effective in its operation and, as the next section discusses, this is far from assured.

The Effectiveness of Neighbourhood Watch

The effectiveness of Neighbourhood Watch at reducing or preventing crime has been difficult to evaluate (Bennett, 1990, Bennett et al 2008). Many schemes operate in areas where crime rates are already low and so it is hard to gauge with any statistical significance their impact on relatively minor fluctuations in crime. As NW encourages the reporting of crime, recorded crime rates may actually increase when a scheme is implemented reflecting increases in vigilance rather than offences. Furthermore, schemes cannot be considered in isolation. Thus, changes in crime rates may reflect wider changes in local, regional or national crime rates rather than the action of a scheme in a specific locality. It has also been suggested that the 'target hardening' associated with NW schemes may lead to the displacement of crime to other 'softer' targets in other areas, making it hard to assess the overall impact of schemes on crime rates.

Given these difficulties, there has been no academic consensus on the effectiveness of NW. Some studies have suggested that NW can reduce crime, especially low-level offences and anti-social behaviour (Hussain, 1990); others that NW has made little difference (McConville and Shepherd, 1992) and others still that can lead to apparent increases in crime (Bennett, 1999). In an effort to draw these disparate threads together, Bennett et al (2008) concluded after a review of selected literature that 'Neighbourhood Watch is effective in reducing crime' (p.34). They note, though, that little is known about *why* schemes are effective and *how* NW works. Closer research on the mechanisms of NW may help to answer questions about its effectiveness but, until then, academics, policy makers and the police are likely to remain divided about its impact on crime.

It seems that NW's main contribution is to increase feelings of security and improve relations between the police and the public (Bennett, 1990; Yarwood and Edwards, 1995; Moley and Budd, 2008). Given that NW is cheap and easy to implement, it is therefore of little surprise that so many forces have adopted and promoted schemes in order to gain from these benefits.

What is clear is that although NW *can* work in particular circumstances (Hock and Kosfeld, 2007) its success is far from guaranteed. Many schemes fall on stony ground: they are warmly received by residents but this initial enthusiasm often wanes. McKonville and Shepperd (1992 p.114) suggest that 'crime is not a salient feature issue in most people's lives. It is not for the most part enough central enough to drive communities together.' Thus, schemes in low-crime areas are liable to cease

operation; become dormant until awakened by a real or perceived crime; or experience sporadic active through occasional meetings, newsletters and the actions of key, individuals. Like any community-based organisation, NWS relies on strong social capital and key local stakeholders, such as local residents or police officers, to maintain operational schemes. By way of example, a scheme in Plymouth, UK recently ceased operation after its co-ordinator left the neighbourhood and, despite police requests, nobody volunteered to replace him.

When evaluating NW it is also important to note the relation of NW with other forms of policing and security. Thus, Putnam (2000) notes that while eleven percent of US residents have attended a NW meeting many more (43%) have invested in extra locks to secure their home according to some surveys. He argues that individual rather than community-based actions are of greater significance to most people (although the two are not mutually exclusive as NW schemes encourage greater personal security). Gated communities, private security and Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) surveillance in now play a more active role in the policing of space, including certain residential areas, than NW. In South Africa, for example, private security companies are a more significant feature of the policing landscape than voluntary schemes (or indeed state patrols). Paying rather than volunteering may provide a more convenient and effective form of security for those with the means to do so, reflecting the social and geographical inequalities of policing in a neo-liberal society. Other forms of neighbourhood policing, such a Community Support Officers and Local Policing Teams in the UK, are also emerging to re-assert the value of professional policing in residential areas. These new forms of policing are attracting academic interest (Yarwood, 2006) and, since the 1990s, research into NW has waned (Bennett et al 2008).

Future

The twenty-first century has been a moribund period for NW. Schemes remain active in many areas and have become an established part of the ‘community policing’ strategies of most police forces. Yet numbers are static or in decline: reaching saturation point in middle-class communities but with little osmosis into more needy areas. Numbers of schemes in the UK are generally declining: according to the 2006/7 BCS only 16% of households were members compared to a peak of 27% in 2000 (Moley and Budd 2008). Policy makers too are less concerned with NW, evidenced by the dropping of questions about NW from the British Crime Survey.

Efforts have therefore been made to re-launch, re-brand and expand the role of Neighbourhood Watch. By 1999, Neighbourhood Watch in New Zealand developed into Neighbourhood Support with, as the name suggests, a broader civic remit. As well preventing crime, members are encouraged to work together and with other community groups to ‘solve local problems’ and to ‘identify the needs of neighbours and ways to assist each other’. Neighbourhood Support groups have also been trained to work with Civil Defence teams during local or national emergencies by, for

example, checking neighbours following an earthquake or flood event. In wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Neighbourhood Watch in the United States was re-launched as 'USAonWatch' with a remit to not only to defend homes against crime but also terrorist threats. The aim is to 'empower citizens to become active in homeland security' (USAonWatch, 2009). Scheme members have been encouraged to re-train as 'Community Emergency Response Teams' (CERT) capable of providing first response and assistance at a time of civic emergency.

Neighbourhood Watch is set to remain visible presence in the suburban landscape of most first world countries. It offers a sticking-plaster approach to crime, dealing with the symptoms of insecurity but doing little to deal with the underlying causes of crime. Although doubts remain about its effectiveness at reducing crime, its convenience and low-cost continue to make it an attractive if token element of community-based policing. The scheme will continue to benefit and reflect the values elite social groups and areas, rather than people and places more in need of better security. Consequently, the location of NW reveals more about the spatialities of community, home and policing than it does about crime.

Could you please link with other related entries?

Further Reading

Bennett, T. (1990) *Evaluating Neighbourhood Watch*. Aldershot: Gower

Bennett, T., Holloway K., and Farrington D., (2008) *The effectiveness of Neighbourhood Watch*. Oslo: The Campbell Collaboration

Foucault, M. (1975) *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison.* New York: Random House.

Fyfe, N. (1995) Law and order policy and the spaces of citizenship in contemporary Britain *Political Geography* 14, 177-189

Hock, S. and Kosfeld, M. (2007) The dynamics of Neighbourhood Watch and norm enforcement. The Economic Journal **117**, 270-286.

Hourihan, K. (1987) Local community development and participation in NW: a case study of Cork, Ireland. *Urban Studies* 24, 129-136.

Hough, M. and Mayhew, P. (1985) *Taking Account of Crime: Key Findings of the Second British Crime Survey.* HMSO, London.

Hussain, S. (1988) Neighbourhood Watch in England and Wales: A locational analysis. London: HMSO

McConville , M. and Shepperd, D. (1992) *Watching police, watching communities*. London: Routledge.

Moley, S. and Budd, S. (2008) Neighbourhood Watch membership. In Nicholas, S., Flatley, J., (eds), Hoare, J., Patterson, A., Southcott, C., Moley, S., & Jansson, K. Circumstances of crime, *Neighbourhood Watch membership and perceptions of policing: supplementary volume 3 to Crime in England and Wales 2006/07 findings from the 2006/07 British Crime Survey.* pp. 55-67. London: Home Office.

Neighbourhood and Home Watch Network (2009) http://www.mynhw.co.uk/about.php Accessed 8th October.

Putnam, D. (2000) *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

USAonWatch (2009) About USAonWatch http://www.usaonwatch.org/about/default.aspx (Accessed 5th October 2009)

Yarwood, R (2007) The geographies of policing. *Progress in Human Geography* **31**, 447-466.

Yarwood, R. and Edwards, W. (1995) Voluntary action in rural areas: the case of Neighbourhood Watch. *Journal of Rural Studies* **11**, 447 - 460.

Figure 1. The boundaries of a Neighbourhood Watch scheme indicated by a street sign.

Figure 2: Neighbourhood Watch as a partnership between the public, police and private companies.