

A HELPFUL EYE

Dutch city wardens: prevention first

Bart Hofstra
PhD Student,
University of Leiden

Growing concern in the inner city

The Netherlands in the early 1980s faced a growing dissatisfaction amongst inhabitants of and visitors to the bigger cities. Many citizens were annoyed at anti-social behaviour and at what was considered the decline of the city. Fear increased. People felt that the police were not visible enough (foot patrols had been abolished to a large extent). It became clear that formerly propagated measures to create a free and uncomplicated society in many respects did not comply with recent developments.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Netherlands had witnessed a significant reduction in the numbers of agents of social control. Janitors were removed from schools, the number of ticket inspectors on rail systems fell. There also seemed to be a drop in levels of informal and formal social control between individuals.

Now, public transport faced an increase in fare dodging after abolishing conductors. Big department stores almost provoked shop lifting by decreasing the number of personnel and by dramatically extending the self-service concept. Janitors and caretakers were badly needed in big blocks and housing estates.

This *laissez faire* mentality started to annoy more and more people. Irresponsible behaviour became a nuisance to many citizens. The rise in crime such as vandalism, graffiti, shop lifting, pickpocketing, bicycle theft and theft from cars caused growing anxiety. But also harmless acts like cycling in pedestrian areas, parking offences and dropping litter caused increasing annoyance.

In the early 1980s the Dutch Ministry of Justice established the 'Commissie Kleine Criminaliteit' (called the Roethof Committee, from the name of its chairman). It was set up to provide recommendations for the reduction of anti-social behaviour and petty crime or 'plague crime'. In their interim report of 1984 the Roethof Committee recommended an increase in levels of social control.

Extending social control

As the Dutch government implemented

the recommendations of the Roethof committee, crime prevention was accorded a major status in relation to 'plague' crime and was linked to measures to reduce unemployment. The government presumed that in an emancipated society morality should not be enforced. Convincing citizens of the usefulness of certain standards and rules was assumed to be more effective than the use of repressive controlling agents. In this respect the office of *stadswacht* was established. Literally translated *stadswacht* means city warden (or city guard). The city warden is a supervisory official without any formal police powers. His tasks include providing information and assisting the public and bringing the commission of offences to the perpetrators' notice. There are approximately 650 city wardens employed, spread over 50 cities.

Most city warden projects have a tight relationship with the police. The coordinator of the project generally is a police officer. It is essential that where the city wardens are completely independent, they have a good relationship with the police. Without the guaranteed back up and support of the police, the role of a city warden is severely limited.

Crime prevention

The city warden's task is to provide services to the public and to prevent crime rather than to fight crime. The main activity of the city warden is daytime patrolling of the city centre. The wardens will speak to citizens who break the law. But they can also expect to be approached by members of the public who are lost or require information.

Although city wardens have no police powers they are considered to be effective in their corrective contact with the public. Most citizens experience the interactions as embarrassing (because of the presence of the public) and as annoying (because of the delay). But however effective the interactions may be, a far more important aspect of the wardens' duty is crime prevention. The simple presence of uniformed officers in the inner city already reduces the opportunities to commit crimes in many cases. Moreover city wardens can recognise conditions that are unsafe for the public and respond immediately in a preventive way. They will, for instance, shut unlocked car doors and leave a service ticket with crime prevention tips in the car. Finally, suspicious situations are reported to the police. Because of this last duty city wardens are regarded as the ears and eyes

of the police.

Going equipped

There is not yet any single uniform for the city warden, the choice being left to each town or city. Although the uniform may differ it generally makes the city warden easily recognisable.

It is worth noting that the city wardens usually do not wear a cap. In the Netherlands caps are regarded as psychologically associated with a repressive form of social control.

The city warden does not carry firearms or indeed any weapons. Handcuffs and batons are also not issued. However some cities allow the city warden to carry a large metal flashlight which can be used as a weapon in case of an emergency. As a rule city wardens carry a small first aid kit and some small street maps to give away to tourists.

Conclusion

Several researchers show that citizens' feelings of safety are positively influenced by the city wardens, especially those aged over 40 years. Furthermore in a number of cities the zealous patrols on parking lots has led to a substantial decrease in the number of thefts out of cars.

From the existing city warden projects, a number of points need to be raised with regard to their implementation and success, including working in problem solving schemes, a thorough public information campaign at the start of the project, having a good relationship with the police, the presence of an enthusiastic and stimulating coordinator, a practical and practically-orientated education, a helpful attitude on the part of the city warden and a financial guarantee for the continuity of the project.

Motivating city wardens is extremely important. *People* make the project. Enthusiasm and dedication are crucial.

References

- Andel H van (1989) 'Crime Prevention that Works', *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 29, no. 1: 47-56
- Eysink Smeets & Etman *Stadswachten in Heerhugowaard*. Den Haag, 1991.
- Hauber, A R, Hofstra, L J Toornvliet, L G and Zandbergen, J G A (1993) *Veiliger door Stadswachten, Wens of Werkelijkheid*. Leiden: Institute of Criminology.
- Hauber, A R Hofstra, L J Toornvliet, L G and Zandbergen J G A (1993) *Hoe Functioneel is Functioneel Toezicht?* Leiden: Institute of Criminology.