Crime prevention in the community: the case of Neighbourhood Watch

Neighbourhood Watch has recently been promoted as an element of community engagement in crime and disorder partnerships, but how effective is it at reducing crime? **Sharon Bolton** investigates.

Neighbourhood Watch is a widely-recognised community-based crime prevention activity. It usually involves local residents joining a 'scheme' (set up with the help of police) to minimize the risk of property and other crime in their neighbourhood. The scheme may carry out such activities as property marking, reporting 'suspicious activity' and improving home security.

The first schemes were established in the USA during the 1970s. The US administration of the time was keen to reduce expenditure on policing and urge members of the community to protect themselves potential to divide, rather than unite local residents, creating a 'them and us' situation where those who did not join up were viewed with some suspicion. Neighbourhood Watch members were often viewed as 'nosy meddlers' into other people's business, which further served to put people off.

Certain pre-existing demographic characteristics seemed to be necessary for Neighbourhood Watch to be successful (Husain, 1988). Schemes tended to become established best in communities with high levels of home ownership, where residents were married or cohabiting (often with children), drawn

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from rising rates of residential burglary. British police forces soon took up the idea, and the first scheme was started in Cheshire in 1982. The idea that the public could help to prevent crime themselves was a politically popular measure (a cheaper option than recruiting more police officers and stepping up patrols). Thus, Neighbourhood Watch was quickly established throughout the UK and hailed as a success by the Home Office. Schemes continued to grow in large numbers throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the blessing of successive Conservative and Labour governments. By 2002, Neighbourhood Watch schemes covered six million British homes and 10 million people. In light of these numbers, it would seem to be a thriving community crime prevention movement.

The bulk of early research into Neighbourhood Watch was designed to test whether schemes 'worked' or not in terms of reducing recorded burglary rates. In many cases they did not; recorded crime rates either stayed constant or rose in the areas examined (though this may have been due to participants reporting more crimes than before the scheme started). Some later studies did attempt to dig deeper (e.g. McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Laycock and Tilley, 1995) to see whether, crime rates apart, Neighbourhood Watch really 'engaged' the public, engendering community spirit and making people join together to prevent crime. These studies revealed that it was not the community panacea that had been intended; there was some evidence to suggest that schemes had the from the skilled or professional workforce, and aged over 40. In other words, Neighbourhood Watch flourished among stable, affluent communities with low mobility, where residents have time to get to know their neighbours, have the resources to obtain physical crime prevention measures such as locks, lights and alarms, and to purchase insurance (many major providers will offer a discount on premiums to Neighbourhood Watch members). These also tend to be the very communities with the lowest crime rates, where organised crime prevention schemes are arguably least needed (McConville and Shepherd, 1992).

Other issues also affect the efficacy of Neighbourhood Watch. After an energetic start, many schemes wither and die after a few months, even where favourable demographic conditions exist. This has been generally attributed to apathy (Husain, 1988; Laycock and Tilley, 1995), but also important is the uncertain relationship many schemes seem to have with local police; after an initial flurry of meetings and visits, police involvement often reduces to a minimum, disappointing many Neighbourhood Watch members. Interest subsequently wanes until the scheme becomes dormant. Scheme members complain that the police are dismissive of the problems they report, and in turn the police dismiss the information received as inappropriate, usually concerned with inconsiderate parking and noisy teenagers (McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Bolton, 2005). This deadlock makes attitudes harden; what is

an inconsequential matter to the police may not be so to those who have to live with it.

Efforts to establish Neighbourhood Watch schemes in higher-crime areas (where they are perhaps most needed) have also failed; beyond fear of being seen as 'interfering', residents may be worried about reprisals and be reluctant to identify themselves as allies of the police. Janet Foster's (1995) work on informal social control in high-crime areas notes that residents often prefer to deal with low- and medium-level crime and disorder informally, through existing social networks, rather than reporting them to the police. Formally-endorsed Neighbourhood Watch schemes are therefore unlikely to be effective. Foster also noted that contrary to official opinion, strong social cohesion can and does exist in higher-crime areas, without a Neighbourhood Watch scheme to rally residents and engender it.

It would therefore seem that Neighbourhood Watch is at best an unreliable way to establish good crime prevention behaviour in the community, having been tried and found wanting. Its popularity within crime prevention policy should have waned accordingly, but this is not the case. The *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* required local authorities to establish crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs) between the police, local authorities and other organisations. This includes those based in the business and voluntary sectors, and means in many cases a new and strengthened role for Neighbourhood Watch, despite its uncertain reputation. This has brought new considerations. Like many similar statutory bodies, the CDRP has to report performance indicators, and as part of it, Neighbourhood Watch is also subject to them. This raises an important question: how appropriate and effective is it to impose performance measures on informal, voluntary schemes? This question was addressed during research conducted in Colchester, Essex, (Bolton, 2005), a relatively affluent East Anglian market town with low levels of crime and high rates of employment and home ownership; exactly the environment that should be favourable to the establishment of Neighbourhood Watch. During the study, police personnel indicated that even the Home Office's *Neighbourhood Watch Training Package* (first produced in 1998 and now the 'official' manual for Neighbourhood Watch schemes), was likely to be too 'organised' for scheme members. Increased administration would be the very factor that would condemn more schemes to wither and die. Fears were expressed that otherwise enthusiastic Neighbourhood Watch members would become stressed and discouraged at such a burden, at the risk of further damaging relations between police, local government and community.

A further issue for Neighbourhood Watch is the increasing pluralisation of policing (see Lister, in CJM 63). Given the reported uncertain nature of the relationship between police and Neighbourhood Watch, this could bring additional problems. The recent introduction of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) is explicitly intended to resolve low-level crime and disorder issues, whilst regular police officers deal with more 'serious' matters. The duties of PCSOs include "work[ing] with partners and community organisations to address anti-social behaviour, the fear of crime, environmental issues and other factors that affect the quality of people's lives. For example; reporting vandalism or damaged street furniture, reporting suspicious activity; providing crime prevention advice, deterring juvenile nuisance and visiting victims of crime." (Essex Police, 2004). Thus, the very concerns reported by Neighbourhood

Watch schemes are now covered by support personnel (not to mention local authority-controlled Neighbourhood Wardens). Whilst on the one hand scheme members may simply be glad that someone is listening, there is also a danger that they may feel even more isolated. Is Neighbourhood Watch no longer worthy of professional police attention? The most publicised route to the establishment of new Neighbourhood Watch schemes remains via contact with local police rather than the local CDRP, so members may still feel that they are left alone after the scheme startup process.

There are of course some individual Neighbourhood Watch schemes that flourish, actively promote community spirit and do a valuable job in reducing crime and fear of crime in their localities. However, they seem to be the exception to the rule. Some schemes may of course be kept alive simply by the prospect of reduced household insurance premiums. In general, Neighbourhood Watch has largely failed over time to engage the community, due to a combination of all the factors covered above. Its renewed promotion as the voluntary sector crime prevention tool of choice and an essential ingredient of the CDRP gives cause for concern, but on examination of recent government rhetoric, it is not surprising. The idea of local residents working together to prevent crime fits in nicely with talk of 'citizenship' and 'rights and responsibilities'. Yet if Neighbourhood Watch is to be a success, the issues outlined here must be properly addressed; sidelining schemes to support staff, and expecting the informal and voluntary to fit successfully into the official CDRP structure without some change, simply will not work.

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