



Overview:

Neighbourhood Watch programmes incorporating property marking and home security surveys (Neighbourhood Watch Plus) are effective in reducing crime.



What is a 'what works briefing'?

The aim of this briefing is to summarise the 'best available' evidence in relation to the effects of Neighbourhood Watch (NW) programmes on crime and to highlight the implications for police policy and practice.



This document briefly summarises a Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review which is a longer and more technical report that trawls for all available evaluations of Neighbourhood Watch and summarises findings from only those experiments which have designs with comparison or control groups.

What is neighbourhood watch?

Neighbourhood Watch is seen as a method of reducing crime through residents looking out for suspicious activities and reporting them to the police. It therefore seeks to reduce crime by:

- Increasing surveillance in an area – residents acting as “eyes and ears” of the police;
- Reducing opportunities for crime to be committed – residents reporting suspicious behaviour;
- Increasing community cohesion – residents working together to solve problems;
- Enhancing police detection.

Neighbourhood Watch has developed across a number of other areas in recent years and you can find out much more on the NW website:



What is 'neighbourhood watch plus'?

Interventions sometimes introduced in tandem with Neighbourhood Watch include: property marking to make stolen items less marketable; and home security surveys to provide advice on the target-hardening of property and other personal possessions. Inclusion of these other interventions distinguishes these programmes as 'Neighbourhood Watch Plus'.



Does it work?

Yes, it does. When all the data were considered together, the review found that Neighbourhood Watch programmes were associated with a relative reduction in crime of between 16 and 26 per cent. A more nuanced analysis of the data found that Neighbourhood Watch alone has no significant effect on crime, while Neighbourhood Watch Plus was effective. The evidence therefore shows that NW programmes that incorporate property marking and home security surveys (NW plus) are effective in reducing crime, provided they are implemented properly.

When does it work best?

Neighbourhood Watch is most effective when it is run as part of a larger programme of activity. Neighbourhood Watch is often implemented as part of a package of measures sometimes referred to as the "big three", which includes Neighbourhood Watch, property marking and home security surveys. The findings of the review suggest that inclusion of these other measures makes Neighbourhood Watch more successful.

The review found that both large and small schemes are equally effective. NW schemes can vary in terms of size of the area covered, from just a few households to thousands (one scheme in Los Angeles covered over 30,000 residents). The review found that the size of the scheme has no bearing on its effectiveness in reducing crime. Schemes of all sizes appear to be equally effective, provided they were implemented and operated properly.

The review was unable to identify whether specific types of crime or disorder appear more amenable to Neighbourhood Watch than others. The vast majority of NW schemes evaluated were targeted on residential burglary. However, there is also evidence of such schemes being targeted at all crime in a neighbourhood, or specific crime types e.g. vehicle crime, vandalism and disorder. The review did not find enough evidence to determine whether or not Neighbourhood Watch is more effective against certain crime or disorder problems than others.

The review provides evidence that NW works in both deprived and more affluent areas. A common argument against NW is that it seems to work best where it is needed least - relatively affluent areas of low crime. However, the review provides evidence to suggest that NW is an effective tool in both affluent and more deprived areas. For example, a 30 per cent reduction in burglary was achieved following the introduction of NW in one neighbourhood on the edge of Birmingham where three-quarters of households were on state benefits and one-third were single-parent families.

Is it still effective today?

The review found that Neighbourhood Watch was as effective in recent schemes as in earlier schemes. You should not therefore think of Neighbourhood Watch as a "spent force" and an initiative that has "had its day". The review has shown that Neighbourhood Watch remains effective and you should therefore give serious consideration to the value of it as an effective way of addressing crime. There is now much more support available to those setting up and running schemes.



How and why does neighbourhood watch work?

The review does not address the questions of 'how' and 'why' Neighbourhood Watch works, and concludes that further research is needed to investigate differences between more effective and less effective schemes in order to guide good practice. However, there are a number of theories which may explain how NW schemes help reduce crime:



NW schemes increase surveillance. Visible surveillance was a significant deterrent to crime and disorder². Most offences against property are committed by stealth and the last thing offenders' desire is to be recognised.

NW schemes alter offenders' perception of risk. Advertising a street as a 'Neighbourhood Watch' area through notices in windows and lampposts alerts criminals to the prospect of being seen and identified. If residents are watching out for each others' property it is more likely that they will notice suspicious events, people or vehicles, which might enhance the prospects of conviction.

NW schemes alter the behaviour of residents. NW schemes encourage residents to protect their own and their neighbours' property. Property marking schemes are designed to make stolen goods more difficult to sell and 'security surveys' encourage 'target-hardening'.

NW schemes encourage other forms of informal social control and neighbourhood cohesion. A major US study³ concluded that the single most influential factor in propelling an area into a spiral of decline was 'residential instability'. In neighbourhoods where residents came and went frequently, small lapses from 'acceptable behaviour' were informally tolerated because no one was sure what the prevailing standards were amongst people who hardly had time to get to know each other. NW schemes may help increase community cohesion, which can bring people together around a common concern and establish informal 'standards'.

Conclusion

The review concludes overall that Neighbourhood Watch programmes are associated with a reduction in crime, but that there is some variation across schemes in terms of the outcomes achieved. NW-only schemes have no significant impact on crime, whereas NW Plus programmes are successful in reducing crime.

The review provides support for the widespread implementation of NW Plus schemes. However, little is known about the factors that influence whether or not these schemes are effective. As there is variation across schemes in terms of the outcomes achieved, further research is needed to investigate differences between more effective and less effective schemes in order to guide good practice.

Implications for good practice

Encourage NW in your area. Developing and sustaining Neighbourhood Watch in the area for which you are responsible is likely to have a positive effect. NW schemes have worked consistently well for over thirty years, and continued support for schemes from the police service is likely to have benefits in reducing crime.

Evaluate the impact of your NW intervention. Neighbourhood Watch has been a good news story for over 35 years, but the review was unable to find any robust evaluations after 1994. Without support and encouragement from the police service, NW schemes might die out - and the benefits of the approach could be lost.



Advice and guidance

Neighbourhood Watch news, toolkits and links can be found at:

<http://www.ourwatch.org.uk/>

Many local areas also have their own websites dedicated to neighbourhood watch.

Other useful sources include:

Sherman, L.W. and Eck, J. (2002) Policing for crime prevention. In L.W. Sherman, D.P. Farrington, B.C. Welsh and D.L. MacKenzie (Eds.) Evidence-based Crime Prevention. London. Routledge (pp295-329)

Sims, L. (2001) Neighbourhood Watch: Findings from the 2000 British Crime Survey. Research Findings 150. London: Home Office. Available here: <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/hofindings/r150.pdf>

Burglary Reduction: Findings From Safer Cities Scheme. London: Home Office. Available here: <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/hopolicers/fcpu51.pdf>



¹Bennett T, Holloway K, Farrington D. The effectiveness of neighbourhood watch. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2008:18 DOI: 10.4073/csr.2008.18. You can access the full review online at: <http://campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/248/>

²Shapland, J. and Vagg, J. 1988. Policing by the Public. London: Routledge.

³Skogan, W. G. 1990. Disorder and Decline. New York: Free Press.

This guide is published by the College of Policing which hosts the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction.

College of Policing Limited is a company registered in England and Wales, with registered number 8235199 and VAT registered number 152023949. Our registered office is at College of Policing Limited, Leamington Road, Ryton-on-Dunsmore, COVENTRY CV8 3EN.