

Neighborhood Watch: Make it a Permanent Force for Community Betterment

Neighborhood Watch - this most widespread crime prevention effort in the United States has a long track record of success. It is so well respected that major criminologists do not generally undertake studies of whether it works-just how it works.

Individual communities and neighborhoods have demonstrated time and again that this simple concept -neighbors who reduce their own crime risks by marking property through Operation Identification and implementing home security survey recommendations from local law enforcement, coupled with training in how to be observant, how to help each other, and how to work with law enforcement-has enrolled more than 30 million people in its various forms.

Watches have been set up to bring together residents of marinas, campgrounds, apartment buildings, city blocks, rural counties, suburban developments, and dozens of towns, and other kinds of settings.

Results: here is a sampling of the effectiveness studies. Most were performed in the 1980s, but their validity remains widely accepted by professionals and community residents alike.

- Fifteen neighborhoods in Birmingham, Alabama, were studied by researchers. Prior to Neighborhood Watch, all but two had experienced burglaries. After the program was in place, twelve of the fifteen were burglary- free.
- Lakewood, Colorado, documented a 77 percent drop in burglaries after implementing Neighborhood Watch.
- Cypress, California Neighborhood Watch cut burglaries by 52 percent and thefts by 45 percent. Volunteers-a group of real estate agents organized the program which saved police an estimated \$79,000!

Typically, Neighborhood Watch groups organize to respond to an immediate threat-a series of rapes, a sharp increase in burglaries, rising fear of street crime. Often, when the crisis is resolved, membership and commitment to the Watch start to fade away. After all, why keep looking out for criminals if they've been arrested or gone elsewhere?

This short-sighted attitude ignores key benefits of the contemporary Neighborhood Watch - a Watch group empowers people to prevent crime, forges bonds between law enforcement and the communities they serve, and builds a foundation for broader community improvement. Neighborhood Watch is far more than a quick fix for an immediate crisis - it can be a moving force for positive changes that tackle root causes of crime.

Why Do Some Neighborhood Associations Thrive and Others Die?

In the mid-1980s, the Citizens Committee of New York City (CCNYC), with funding from the Ford Foundation, undertook the Block Booster Project, a two-year study of relationships among block associations, crime, and community development. The study found that active block associations substantially reduced fear of crime, encouraged crime reporting, stimulated members' involvement in crime prevention, inhibited drug trafficking and spurred beautification activities.

The Block Booster Project also examined why some groups thrived while other withered and died. Use of resources emerged as the key factor. Active, healthy block groups had the same resources as inactive ones, but they used them more effectively. Here are key survival tactics discovered by the Block Booster Project:

- Spell out roles and responsibilities of the association and its members. Adopt bylaws and elect officers.
- Decentralize planning and work. Delegate tasks and establish standing committees.
- Keep in touch with members. Use personal contacts, in and outside of meetings. Distribute a newsletter to communicate regularly with members.
- Plan for and train new leaders. Don't bum out existing ones.
- Mobilize collective resources and use them. Know members' skills and personal and business contacts. Be realistic about how many people you need to do a job.
- Use outside resources, such as government agencies and community-based organizations.
- Strike a balance between business and pleasure. Conduct business meetings on time and efficiently, but have a time for socializing before or after the meeting.
- Involve all elements in the community-single parents, renters as well as home owners, teenagers, senior citizens, business owners and managers.

Extending the Scope of Neighborhood Watch

Successful Neighborhood Watches move beyond the basics of home security, watching out for suspicious activities, and reporting them to law enforcement. They sponsor community cleanups, find solutions to local traffic problems, collect clothing and toys for homeless families, organize after-school activities for young people, help victims of crime, tutor teens at risk of dropping out of school, reclaim playgrounds from drug dealers, and for task forces that influence policymakers. They can even start a safe house program for children or Block parent program, which are reliable sources of help for children in emergency or other frightening situations. After a number of natural disasters in the Midwest, Neighborhood Watch Groups there have designed Family Emergency Preparedness plans. The scope of Neighborhood Watch continues to grow, however its fundamental mission still remains - people are helping people.

Looking for Leaders

A Neighborhood Watch's effectiveness depends heavily on its leaders. Good block captains usually:

- Are reliable.
- Get along well with people.
- Have good communication and negotiating skills.
- Do not view the position as a power trip or a chance for personal gain.
- Are willing to delegate tasks and listen to others' opinions.
- Are organized and can conduct meetings efficiently.
- Don't get discouraged easily.
- Don't stop at prevention - have a long-range vision for community improvement.

Motivating leaders(and Other Volunteers)

- Hold special training events. Look to police departments, community action and social service organizations, religious institutions, colleges, business associations, schools, and youth organizations for help.
- Communicate with them often. A volunteer will burn out quickly if he or she feels left out of the action.
- Provide public recognition through awards and articles in newsletters and newspapers.
- Issue certificates of appreciation from the mayor or chief law enforcement executive.
- Organize a coalition of Neighborhood Watch captains so leaders can learn from each other and join forces to address community-wide issues.
- Always look for emerging issues that could affect the community's quality of life.

Motivating Residents

While the motivation of leaders is critical in volunteer management, the average participant is what these programs are all about.

Some communities are harder to organize than others. High crime areas can be difficult due in part to fear and suspicion. In these neighborhoods, encourage interested citizens to work through organizations they trust, such as churches or tenant groups. Emphasize the opportunity to address community needs and the importance and effectiveness of crime reporting.

Members of any organization are motivated by factors like achievement, recognition, responsibility, and pride in their work and in the goals of the group.

- Organize around the positive.
- Personalize involvement.
- Emphasize success.
- Don't emphasize fear.
- Don't make large demands on time.
- Share results.
- Keep program convenient and in the neighborhood.

Mobilizing Community Resources

Community businesses and organizations offer numerous resources for crime prevention programs. Look to:

- Religious institutions for meeting space, copying services, and access to volunteers.
- Service clubs and businesses for partnerships in fundraising initiatives.
- Libraries for research materials, videos, computers, and meeting space.
- Printing companies for free or discounted service for newsletters, fliers, and certificates.
- Parent groups, volunteer centers, and labor unions for advice on organizing and recruiting volunteers.
- Local media for publicity. Senior centers and schools for facilities and equipment.

When Your Neighborhood is Multicultural

The United States has experienced a dramatic increase in cultural and ethnic diversity in the last decade. An estimated 19.7million persons-just under 8 percent of the population- were foreign-born. Never before have so many immigrants lived in this country. This wave of immigration has spread unevenly throughout the nation, with the Northeast and West experiencing far greater increases in foreign-born residents than the Midwest and South.

Organizing a Neighborhood Watch in a multicultural community poses unique challenges. Recent immigrants may not speak English, and many may still be adjusting to life in this country. Disputes or misunderstandings can erupt between neighbors of different cultures, races, and ethnic backgrounds. Cultural conflicts arise because two groups of people have established different values, different standards of acceptable behavior, different traditions and communication patterns, and different ideas about such things as dress and attitude. Often, the hardest thing for everyone to learn is that different does not always equal wrong or improper.

When working with individuals raised in different cultures, you need to consider such things as:

- Their length of time in the United States.
- English or other language skills.
- Possible distrust of law enforcement, stemming from a fear of people in uniform and in government offices based on experiences in their native country.
- Educational level and social class (especially the social class in the native country for immigrants and first-generation residents).
- Role expectations for males and females, parents, grandparents, and children.
- Religious and ethical values.
- Rules and expectations for interpersonal relationships.
- Ways to share and get to know cultural differences by hosting international: potluck dinners: youth performances; musicals, and oral histories by elders.

When You Start To Organize

Determine the ethnic groups of non-English speaking residents and what language they speak. Then look to local government agencies, private advocacy and service organizations, religious institutions, mediation services, and other groups experienced in dealing with immigrants for help. A translator is essential when you hold a Neighborhood Watch or crime prevention meeting. Learn to speak slowly and to establish rapport with the translator. Print materials in different languages if possible.

Don't be discouraged. In talking about his efforts to organize Neighborhood Watch presentations in ethnically diverse Modesto, California, crime prevention officer David Huckaby says, "It's tough, but Asians- Cambodians, Lao, and Hmong -and Hispanics are very interested in crime prevention information."