

Neighbourhood Watch

Directly involving the community in activities that promote safety or assist with the detection of crime.

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Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost
 Overall reduction	 Strong	 Low	 Moderate	 Low	

Focus of the intervention

Neighbourhood Watch schemes aim to reduce crime by directly involving the community in activities that promote safety or assist with the detection of crime. They actively seek the greater involvement of local people in crime prevention activities.

The first schemes were seen in the USA in the late 1960s and they are now very common in both the USA and the UK.

They are known under a variety of names, including home watch, block watch and community watch.

This narrative is primarily based on one systematic review covering 18 studies.

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that Neighbourhood Watch can reduce crime.

There are however some important considerations, such as variation in practices across schemes and large differences between countries in terms of observed reductions.

The review estimated that overall for every 100 crimes, an average of 26 crimes were prevented with Neighbourhood Watch (based on 18 studies).

There was no evidence of a backfire effect (where crime increases) across the evaluations reviewed.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that many forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

This evidence is taken from a systematic review covering 18 studies. The review demonstrated high quality in terms of having a transparent and well-designed search strategy, featured a valid statistical analysis and considered the validity of the way outcomes are measured and combined.

The review did not quantify an overall effect for unanticipated outcomes, such as displacement caused by the intervention. While it considered publication bias, it did not consider bias introduced by coder subjectivity or statistical outliers.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The authors note that it is 'difficult to determine from current research how Neighbourhood Watch works'.

However, they go on to suggest that Neighbourhood Watch might reduce crime by:

- deterring burglary offenders through increasing their awareness of residents' tendency to look for and report suspicious activity
- reducing perceived opportunity through increasing signs of occupancy in vacant homes (for example, moving bins and removing newspapers)
- enhancing community cohesion and increasing the effectiveness of informal social control
- facilitating detection through an increased flow of intelligence between public and police

The authors raise the possibility that reductions might be a result of programme components other than the watch element. For example, the effect of property marking on theft of stolen goods and the effect of target hardening as a result of security surveys.

Since Neighbourhood Watch is generally implemented together with these other components, it is difficult to rule this out.

In fact, the watch element is often implemented with both property marking and security surveys – collectively referred to as the big three. The schemes reviewed below include those with such combinations, unless stated otherwise.

None of these potential mechanisms are empirically tested and the authors note that this should be done.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

There is evidence that Neighbourhood Watch effectiveness varies considerably by context.

In the reviewed studies, for every 100 crimes:

- an average of 47 crimes were prevented for schemes in the USA and Canada (based on four studies)
- an average of 15 crimes were prevented for schemes in the UK (based on 14 studies)

Evaluations of Neighbourhood Watch conducted in the USA and Canada were significantly more likely to show a reduction in crime than studies conducted in the UK.

The authors tested for differences in effect by size of scheme. They reasoned that large schemes (seven studies) might be more effective because more neighbours would look out for suspicious behaviour, or alternatively that smaller schemes (11 studies) might increase the interactions between neighbours who knew each other. There were no significant differences in the effects of larger and smaller schemes.

The reviewers found no significant differences in the outcomes of schemes implemented earlier (up to 1988, 11 studies) compared with later schemes (1989 onwards, 7 studies). There was a large

drop-off in frequency of evaluations in the latter period.

The authors note the very large variation in size of the schemes. For example, the cocooning schemes in Rochdale, UK involved three households, whereas one large scale programme in the USA covered 30,000 residents. Such contrasting schemes are likely to be very different in nature.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

There is very little information on the implementation of Neighbourhood Watch.

A notable complication in determining effectiveness is that the watch component of Neighbourhood Watch is often implemented along with other elements – most commonly property marking and security surveys. Interactions between these elements are not considered in detail.

For example, it might be that a scheme was focused on property marking and had Neighbourhood Watch as an add-on, or the opposite could be the case.

Further, those where all three were implemented might differ from those with different combinations of two of them.

The analysis demonstrated that the mean difference in effect was not significant for those with property marking and security surveys (10 studies) and those without (8 studies). The authors therefore concluded that the presence or absence of extras did not affect the outcome.

This counter-intuitive conclusion was discussed with one of the authors of the review. The revised conclusion is that there is some evidence that Neighbourhood Watch plus extras might be effective in reducing crime, but no evidence that Neighbourhood Watch alone is. In this case, there is added value to implementing the fuller versions of the scheme.

Schemes differed as to whether they were police or public initiated. Some schemes were initiated by police in areas where it was unlikely that the public would make a request.

There is also variation in terms of who runs the scheme. In general, this is likely to be a block or street captain who reports to an area co-ordinator. The latter then liaises with the police.

There is little available information on number or type of meetings or whether meetings involve the general public or just the organisers.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

There is no monetary information on the costs of Neighbourhood Watch.

In terms of coverage, the authors note the large-scale implementation of this type of scheme in both the UK and the USA.

The 2000 sweep of the British Crime Survey estimated that over a quarter (27%) of all households (approximately six million households) in England and Wales were members of a Neighbourhood Watch scheme (Sims, 2001).

The 2000 National Crime Prevention Survey (US National Crime Prevention Council, 2001) estimated that 41% of the American population lived in communities covered by Neighbourhood Watch.

These calculations do not account for differences in levels of engagement or activity when signed up to the scheme – many households are inactive members.????

In terms of funding, the authors note that this is nearly always jointly supported by the police and fundraising activities of scheme members, such as voluntary contributions or raffles.

The balance of the two contributions varies considerably. Sometimes the police provide just an information pack, other times they offer premises for meetings or support newsletter production.

General considerations

- ??It is unclear how Neighbourhood Watch schemes achieve reductions in crime. Specifically, it is unclear what the independent contribution of the watch part is, over and above activity that can be categorised as publicity, property marking, or target hardening. The best advice at present is to include the big three – Neighbourhood Watch plus property marking and security surveys – in any planned Neighbourhood Watch scheme.

- This review has highlighted some gaps in the research base. Specifically, more is needed to test directly the mechanisms underlying Neighbourhood Watch and how it works. This might assist in isolating the elements that are particularly effective.
- Displacement of crime or diffusion of benefits to neighbouring areas are possibilities and should be considered.

Summary

There is evidence that Neighbourhood Watch, as typically defined and implemented, modestly reduces crime overall.

It appears that it is more effective in the USA and Canada than it is in the UK.

There is little evidence on how it works in practice.

Schemes vary considerably in terms of coverage, management, funding and initiation. ???

Reviews

Review one

Reference

- Bennett, Trevor, Farrington, David and Holloway, Katy (2008) [The Effectiveness of Neighbourhood Watch: A Systematic Review](#). Campbell Systematic Reviews. ??

Summary prepared by

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