No.8
Neighbourhood watch: issues and policy implications

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The sign which displays the presence of a neighbourhood watch program is now a familiar sight in many parts of Australia. At a time of substantial community concern about the state of crime, and especially residential burglaries, neighbourhood watch has been at the forefront of a combined effort by police and citizens to 'turn the situation around'.

Just how successful the effort has been is the important question considered in this Trends and Issues report. The good news is that where a high level of citizen participation occurred in a neighbourhood watch program significant reductions were likely to be achieved in reported residential burglaries. The bad news is that these positive results were mixed with other less encouraging findings, including a possible displacement of crime to offences other than residential burglaries, or to other areas not covered by neighbourhood watch.

The widespread enthusiasm and support for neighbourhood watch exhibited by large numbers of Australians should not be dashed or diminished by these research results. Neighbourhood watch remains a symbol of renewed emphasis by police and citizens alike to work together in the task of preventing crime. The challenge now is to find ways of continuing this task within neighbourhoods and the community at large.
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Director

In this report we raise issues relating to neighbourhood watch programs with the object of sensitising policy makers, criminal justice administrators, and researchers to the need for systematic research and the development of data bases for 'watch' programs. Victoria has been selected for analysis because the anti-crime program discussed in this report is well developed there and also because of the distinctive nature of its neighbourhood watch program.

There have been increases of significant proportion in most serious crimes in Australia during the last decade. It is, however, difficult to discover how much of this increase actually occurred and how much has resulted from the improvements in crime-reporting and recording practices. Serious assaults have almost tripled; robberies, rapes (including serious sexual assaults), fraud and forgery and motor vehicle theft have doubled. During the decade, the incidence of burglary also doubled, with a sharp increase in residential burglaries which currently account for over

60 per cent of all burglaries. Concomitant with the increases in crime, there has been a gradual but persistent decline in crime solution rates.

Understandably, the situation is of serious concern to the law enforcement agencies in particular and the community in general. The first concrete measure to deal with the problem of rising residential burglary incidents was the neighbourhood watch program in Victoria implemented in early 1984. Subsequently, all other jurisdictions in Australia introduced such schemes. Neighbourhood watch is not a novel scheme, although some aspects of it in Victoria may be different from similar schemes that have been in operation overseas at least since the early 1970s.

What Is Community Crime Prevention

Citizens tend to believe that crime prevention is the task solely of the police and other criminal justice agencies and that crimes occur because of the failure of these agencies. Such a belief exists partly because of the impression created by official agencies and partly because of ignorance. The demands by police for more personnel and their calls for increased powers in the face of rising crime generate a strong impression to the public that these steps are needed to check crime. Yet, historically, members of the community looked after the safety of local areas and it was only when modern police emerged in the early nineteenth century that law enforcement agencies took over a task formerly undertaken by citizens.

The most important element of community crime prevention appears to be to bring about social interaction, whereby residents of the community maintain a degree of familiarity with each other. Such interaction and familiarity should, in theory at least, make it possible to detect strangers in

the community. And finally, crime prevention theory suggest that such interactions may lead to a cohesive neighbourhood. The basic philosophy of community crime prevention is that social interaction and citizen familiarity can play an important role in preventing, detecting, and reporting criminal behaviour.

The neighbourhood watch program is one of many types of community crime prevention activities. A major thrust of watch programs is to reduce opportunity for crime. This task is carried out by improving citizens' awareness about public safety, by improving residents' attitudes and behaviour in reporting crime and suspicious events in the neighbourhood and by reducing vulnerability to crime with the help of property identification and installation of effective security devices. The individual watch programs within a state or district may vary in emphasis and organisational context.

New South Wales has 1024 neighbourhood watch districts and 1.25 million homes are expected to be covered by the scheme by mid-1987. In Victoria there are 617 watch programs covering over 1.3 million persons. The number of areas covered in other states and territories is far fewer: the ACT has 88, South Australia 18, Western Australia 15, Tasmania three and Queensland one.

The social and geographical characteristics of the areas covered by neighbourhood watch vary enormously with some areas presenting special problems for citizens committees and the police.

The Victorian Neighbourhood Watch Program

In Victoria, the neighbourhood watch program is co-ordinated on a state wide basis by a central project team based at police headquarters. In addition, each of the 16 police districts that have neighbourhood watch select a team of between two

and four members who have a co-ordinating role for programs within the district. On the average, each watch committee is established after 18 hours of police implementation and four hours is spent by one police officer for maintenance each month.

A most distinctive feature of the neighbourhood watch in Victoria is that the public initiate the introduction of crime prevention measures. If residents of an area desire a program they are asked to approach the police department with a letter of interest signed by at least 50 citizens in the area. Once such a petition has been received trained officers begin working with the residents. Each 'watch' program covers between 600 and 900 households and is administered by a committee of citizens from the area. The size of the committee ranges from 20 to 35 with the average of 30. Records are kept of crime in each area and regular training courses are held for citizen and district and area representatives at police headquarters in Melbourne. In short, a sophisticated and well maintained administrative structure, involving both police and citizens, maintain the neighbourhood watch program in Victoria.

Effects Of Neighbourhood Watch

The first neighbourhood watch program was implemented in Australia about three years ago. However, no evaluation of the program was planned, and none has been implemented since the launch of the watch program. In Victoria the program was lunched in March 1984 and the police report that by May 1985, residential burglaries were 16.04 per cent lower than the first five months of 1984. At this stage neighbourhood watch involved only 120 programs suggesting that a 'ripple' effect was operating throughout the state.

By September 1986 the Victorian Minister for Police and Emergency

Serves asserted that 'the average reduction in residential burglaries in neighbourhood watch areas is about 30 per cent'. The Minister went on to state that the 'police estimated that as a result of the 12.6 per cent drop in burglaries in 1985, the community had saved over $6 million'.

While there is no doubt that there was initially a substantial drop in residents burglaries in Victoria and other states, questions remain as to whether this drop is due directly to neighbourhood watch programs or changes in the general economic climate.

The Victoria Police themselves are cautious in ascribing reductions in burglary rates entirely to neighbourhood watch programs. They note that, while they do not attribute all of the reduction to neighbourhood watch, the program has been the only significant change in policing strategy in recent times and therefore is certainly part of the reason for such significant reductions.

Neighbourhood watch programs, or variants of these, have been in existence overseas for almost a decade and a half. A number of evaluations have been carried out particularly in the United States and Britain. It is instructive to review briefly the results of some of these. In a recent critical review of evaluation studies of community crime prevention programs, Lurigio and Rosenbaum state that a large majority of such studies are:

'...characterised by weak designs, an under use of statistical significant tests, a poor conceptualisation and definition of treatments, the absence of a valid and reliable measurement of program implementation and outcomes, and a consistent failure to address competing explanations for observed effect'.

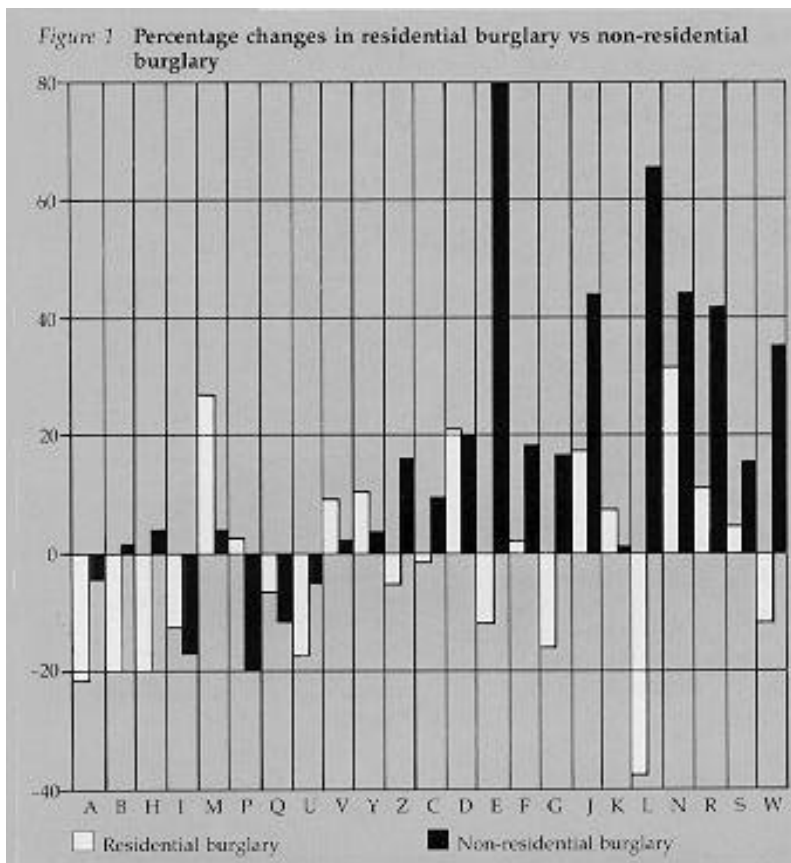A large majority of the community crime prevention programs begin without any plans for systematic evaluation. Rosenbaum, in a recent review of the soundness of community crime prevention strategies, suggest that in his view 'only two evaluations to date can be viewed as reasonably strong tests of neighbourhood watch model...'

These two concerned the watch programs in Seattle (Cirel, *et al.,* 1977; and Lindsay and McGillis, 1986) and the Ford Foundation funded Chicago evaluation (Rosenbaum, *et al.*, 1986, 1986). He further indicates that whereas the Seattle evaluations showed decline in residential burglary in target areas, the Chicago evaluation of two sites with neighbourhood watch to have generally a negative impact.

Across the Atlantic, Bennett, in his evaluation of two sites with neighbourhood watch in London observed doubtful results. The executive summary of the study indicates that the level of residential burglary did not change in one site and increased in the other. However, the study did show a marginal reduction in fear of crime in one of the sites.

Neighbourhood Watch And the Displacement Effect

Changes in the incidence of crime as a consequence of neighbourhood watch is referred to as displacement of crime and this denotes a redistribution rather than reduction in crime. Displacement can occur in several ways. A 'successful' anti-crime program may result in changes in criminal behaviour. Offenders, by circumventing preventive measures, may move to other neighbourhoods where no such schemes are in operation, select different targets, use different methods or change the time

Table 1 **Proportion of population covered by neighbourhood watch**

	Melbourne metropolitan police district										
Year	A	B	H	I	M	P	Q	U	V	Y	Z
June 1985	22	8	12	24	10	4	5	9	4	7	7
June 1986	40	23	42	44	24	20	18	37	6	25	17
	Victorian country police districts										
Year	C	D	E	F	G	J	K	L	N	R	S	W
June 1985	1	1	-	-	3	2	-	-	-	-	2	-
June 1986	3	1	-	-	5	16	-	-	-	-	9	-

Figure 1 Percentage changes in residential burglary vs non-residential burglary

☐ Residential burglary   ■ Non-residential burglary

of committing burglaries, or engage in other offence type, etc. What follows in the remaining part of this section is a preliminary attempt to examine this issue.

The State of Victoria is divided into 11 metropolitan (Melbourne) and 12 country police districts. All the 11 metropolitan and five of the country districts had neighbourhood watch programs operating as at 30 June 1986. However, at that date the proportion of population covered by the watch program in each district varied markedly. In Melbourne this coverage varied between a low of 6 per cent of the population in district 'V' to a high of 44 per cent in district 'I' as at 30 June 1986; the coverage in the country districts varied between 1 and 16 per cent.

Statistics on the number of reported incidents of residential burglary, other burglary, motor vehicle theft, and other theft for each of the 23 police districts for the years 1982, 1983, 1984-85 and 1985-86 were extracted from the *Statistical Review of Crime* published by the Victoria Police Department. These statistics are expressed as rate per 100

000 population. We treat the first two years as pre-neighbourhood watch and the last two as post-watch periods.

For each of the districts, average percentage change in rates were calculated. Since preventing residential burglary remains the main objective of neighbourhood watch, attempts have been made to examine changes in residential burglary in comparison with changes in residential burglary in comparison with changes in the other three offence categories. Figure 1 demonstrates the changes in the level of residential vs non-residential burglaries for each of the police districts. It is quite apparent that there is no systematic movement. Instead, there appears to be a number of movements. In Melbourne, seven of the eleven police districts showed declines in residential burglary, but only four also showed declines in non-residential burglary. Only district 'I' (44 per cent of the population covered by neighbourhood watch) recorded a significant reduction in both types of burglaries. District 'M' (24 per cent of the population covered by neighbourhood watch) showed a very high increase in residential burglary

and some increase in the other. Neighbourhood watch operated in only five of the 12 country districts and the population coverage was low. The changes in the rate have been chaotic. Non-residential burglaries increased in each of the twelve districts (five of the districts showed increases of well over 40 per cent). In the district where the largest number of watch programs of any country district operated, significant increases in both types of burglaries were recorded. A district which hosted no neighbourhood watch showed a sharp reduction in residential burglary. Comparison of changes between residential burglary and motor vehicle theft presents an altogether different picture. In each of the metropolitan police districts and in ten of the country districts motor vehicle thefts increased substantially (Figure 2). All but one of the police districts in Victoria showed increases of various dimensions in the theft (other than motor vehicle theft) rate (Figure 3). The changes in the rates of the four crime types examined here do raise the issue of redistribution of crime. The average rate of increase in motor vehicle theft and other theft in the post neighbourhood watch years (1984-85 and 1985-86) in Victoria has been higher than that in the pre-watch years. The preliminary crime figures for 1986-87 also show a continuing and substantial rate of increase.

Further analysis

It is premature, however, to conclude that these increases demonstrate a define shift as a result of neighbourhood watch. We subjected the data to two statistical tests: (i) examination of the standard scores for each of the police districts for all the four offence types; and (ii) use of multiple regression technique. The results of the first test, which expresses deviations from the mean in units of the standard deviation, are produced in Tables 2.1 to 2.4. During this analysis it became clear that the 23 police districts, in terms of watch

Table 2.1 **Trend in residential burglary, 1983 to 1985-86**

Intervention level	Good result	Average result	Pooor result
No neighbourhood watch	L	F,W,E	R,N,K
Low intervention		C,G	V,D,S
Medium intervention	B	Z,P,Q	M,Y,J
High intervention	A,I,U,H		

Table 2.2 **Trend in non-residential burglary, 1983 to 1985-86**

Intervention level	Good result	Average result	Pooor result
No neighbourhood watch	K	F,R,W	E,N,L
Low intervention	C	D,G,S	V
Medium intervention	P,Q	B,M,Y,J	Z
High intervention	A,I,U		H

Table 2.3 **Trend in motor vehicle theft, 1983 to 1985-86**

Intervention level	Good result	Average result	Pooor result
No neighbourhood watch		E,N,F,L,W	R,K
Low intervention	G,S	V,D	C
Medium intervention	B	M,Q,Z	P,Y,J
High intervention	I	A,H,U	

Table 2.4 **Trend in other theft, 1983 to 1985-96**

Intervention level	Good result	Average result	Pooor result
No neighbourhood watch	E,F,L	N,K,R,W	
Low intervention		V,C,D,G	S
Medium intervention	P,Q	B,M,Z,J	Y
High intervention	H,U		A,I

content, can be divided into four groups: districts with no neighbourhood watch, those with population coverage of under 16 per cent (low intervention), districts with 16 to 30 per cent coverage (medium intervention), and districts with a coverage of over 30 per cent.

Looking at the impact on residential burglary (Table 2.1), it is quite clear that all the four high intervention districts (A, I, U and H) and only medium intervention (B), produced good results in reducing residential burglaries. Thus, they lend very reasonable support to the objective of neighbourhood watch in suppressing residential burglary. Three of the high intervention districts also showed good results in reducing non-residential burglaries (Table 2.2). The district with the highest concentration of neighbourhood watch also attained significant reduction in motor vehicle thefts (Table 2.3). On the negative side, in the high intervention district H, non-residential burglary increased significantly and in districts A and I other thefts jumped sharply. Figures in the four tables tend to suggest that the expansion of neighbourhood watch will attain desirable results in reducing residential burglaries, but the impact of such schemes on other property crimes is unclear.

These results were confirmed by the multiple regression analysis. Again, the most significant results were in relation to population coverage and impact on residential burglary. In the Melbourne metropolitan districts, residential burglary in the pre-neighbourhood watch period increased by an average of 19 per cent. Regression analysis revealed that extension of neighbourhood watch produces decreases in residential burglary. At this point in time, however, because of the lack of sufficient number of data points, the result of the multiple regression analysis cannot be used with a great deal of confidence.

Program Maintenance

It is clear that maintaining citizen and police interest in neighbourhood watch programs is vital to their continuing success. Though reviews of American programs generally show that reductions in burglary rates occur in the first few months after the implementation of such programs, doubt exists as to their long term efficiency.

Non-Crime Prevention Functions Of Neighbourhood Watch

It is possible that future research might establish that though neighbourhood watch programs do reduce rates of burglary, displacement effects occur so that, for example, auto theft concurrently increases. Even if this results is found in subsequent evaluation research, it

does not mean that this form of community crime prevention is a failure. Other crime prevention programs and strategies could well be implemented in order to deal with the rise in auto theft or other crime activity occurring as a result of a possible displacement effect.

In addition, there may be advantages associated with neighbourhood watch programs not related to reductions in specific crime activities in residential areas. The following assertions, for example, have been made regarding the benefits of neighbourhood watch programs.

- Individuals, often previously isolated and unknown to each other, form social relations as a result of neighbourhood watch programs and activities. Increased interaction between residents assist in breathing life into neighbourhoods marked previously by alienation and community apathy.
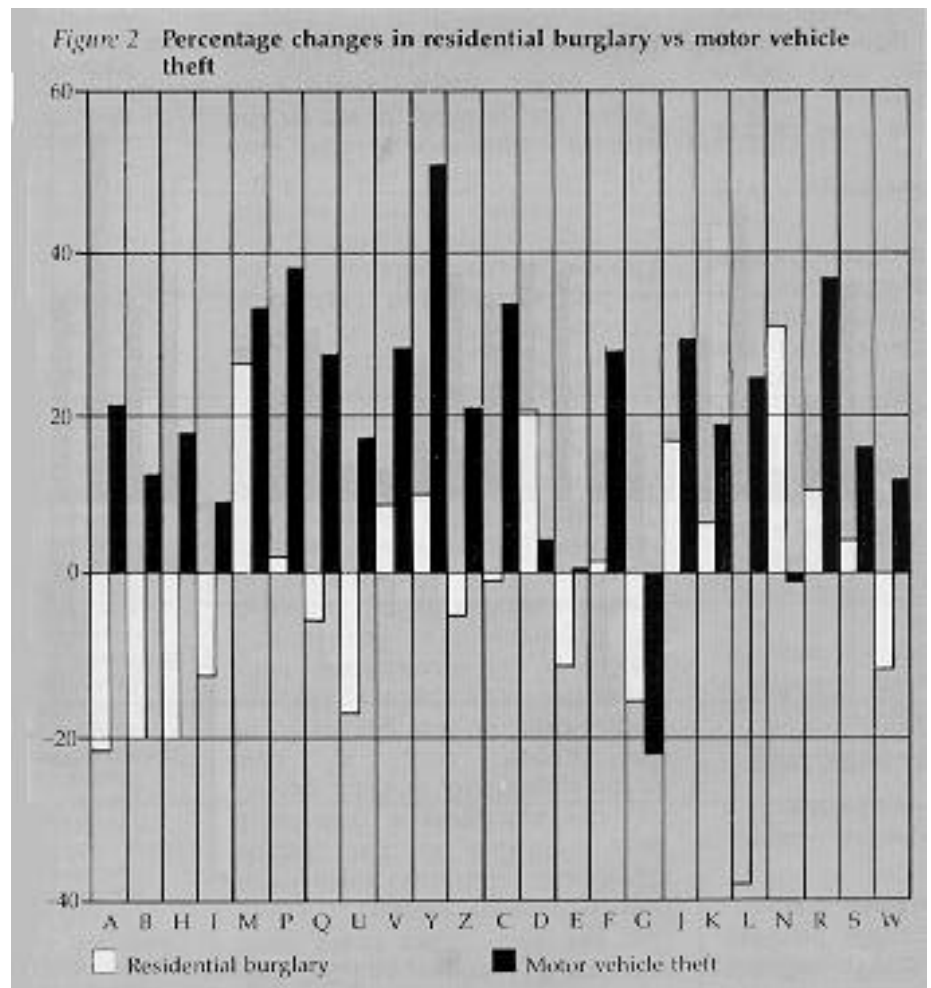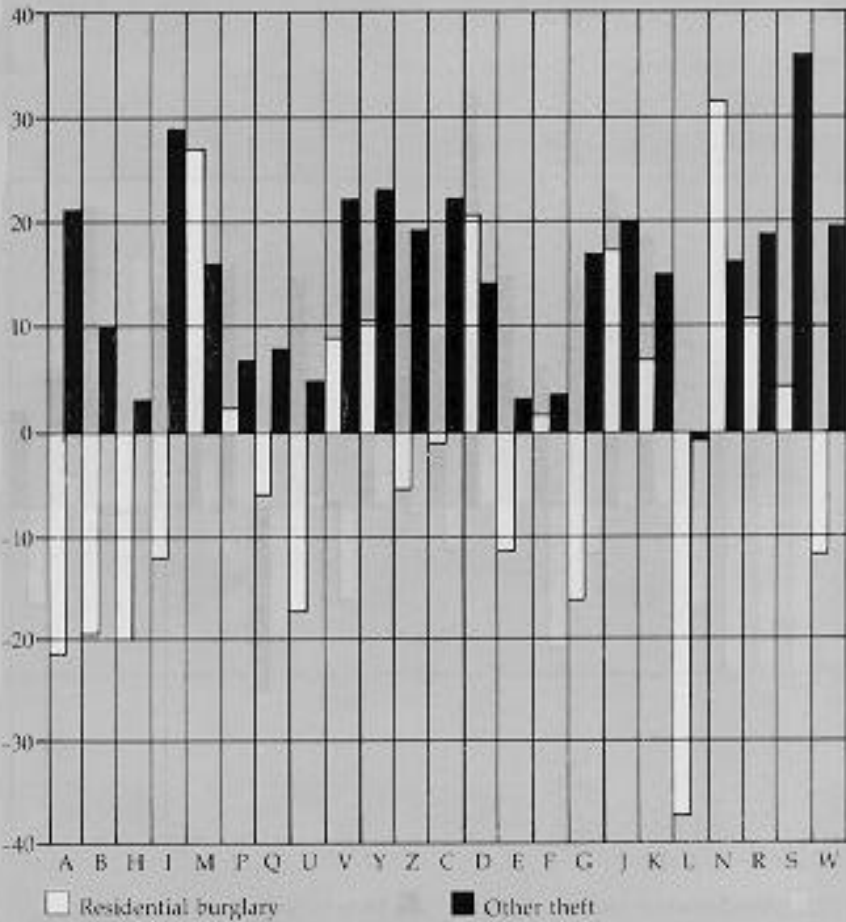

Figure 2   **Percentage changes in residential burglary vs motor vehicle theft**

Residential burglary

Motor vehicle theft

Figure 3 Percentage changes in residential burglary vs other theft

On balance, it would appear that community crime prevention, in the form of neighbourhood watch, has some redeeming values. Although it is realised that the official crime statistics are not the best set of data for evaluation, decreases in recorded number of residential burglaries in some neighbourhood watch areas cannot be overlooked. There remain however, many nagging issues; establishing causal links between neighbourhood watch and crime reduction and displacement effects are but two of these which need to be examined more fully. Examination of these issues is by no means an easy task as there appear to be numerous conceptual and methodological impediments. A few of the important obstacles are summarised below and it is hoped that systematic evaluation of neighbourhood watch programs in Australia, will grapple with these and other obstacles.

Producing social cohesion

It has been pointed out that an important element of a community crime prevention program is to bring about social cohesion. During the past few decades, the ever changing life style of urban centres has resulted in almost complete erosion of informal social interaction. Can a program with a single objective of reducing residential burglary reverse this complex social trend?

Defining neighbourhood watch

The operation of neighbourhood watch incorporates many activities and each activity can vary in content. This means that the definition of a program has to define the activities involved fairly specifically. For example, public education programs, informal surveillance by residents, increase in police patrols, marking of property, increased use of security devices, improved methods of burglary investigation, and so on, are some of the activities which constitute a watch

- The police and the public, previously suspicious and distant from each other, are able to interact in productive and creative ways. As a result of these positive interactions, police/public relations markedly improves.
- The police, who often interact with the public in conflict situations (serving summonses, charging persons, booking motorist, etc) tend often to become overtly cynical and mistrustful of the public. The formation, implementation and maintenance of neighbourhood watch programs may well reorientate the attitude of officers towards citizens in a more constructive and positive direction.
- Fear and anxiety associated with worrying about crime may decrease. As a result of realising that surveillance measures are operating within a neighbourhood, residence are more willing to walk the streets, interact with their

neighbours and leave their house for social activities. Neighbourhood watch will, in short, reduce the fear and anxiety associated with crime even if the actual level of crime remains the same.

- Neighbourhood watch activities can be generalised into other constructive community initiatives such as improving road and traffic conditions, child minding networks, commuter-transport sharing and so on.

However, for each of these assertions counter-arguments can be mounted. For example, it is possible to argue that increased community activity as a result of a neighbourhood watch program may lead to increased fear of crime.

program. Yet since it is possible for each of these activities to be carried out in more than one way, each should be properly clarified.

Targeting anti-crime measures

Research and statistical evidence indicate socio-economically disadvantaged areas have high crime rates. It is not sufficiently clear whether these areas receive priority for crime prevention efforts. Significant reduction in crime may not be possible unless interventions are operative in high crime areas.

Describing organisational elements

It is important that the method of selection and characteristics of committee members, the structure of the committee members, the structure of the committee, its relationship with the local police and many other organisational matters be described in sufficient detail. It is also necessary to monitor changes in the organisational elements over time.

Measuring unintended outcomes

Crime reduction and not redistribution is the goal of anti-crime measures. Careful attention needs, therefore, to be given to assessing the displacement effects, if any.

Eliminating root causes of crime

Success of neighbourhood watch in reducing residential crime and fear of crime is not the end of the story. The public must also consider action programs targeted at the root causes of crime. For example, criminological research demonstrates that youngsters are disproportionately represented in illegal activity. Research also shows that much of the criminogenic process is linked to the development stages of the youth. Improving educational, employment, health and recreational opportunities available to the youth would seem, therefore, to be of paramount significance.

To conclude: we believe that although neighbourhood watch programs offer considerable promise as a method of reducing certain crimes, the schemes should not be adopted uncritically. Preliminary evidence suggest that the effectiveness of such schemes may dissipate over time and that displacement effects can occur. What are badly needed, in the Australian context, are system evaluations of both the process and the outcome of implementing neighbourhood watch programs.

Notes

1. For the sake of convenience we chose the term 'burglary' rather than break, enter and steal.

2. A.J. Lurigio and D. P. Rosenbaum, 'Evaluation Research in Community Crime Prevention : A Critical Look at the Field' in D. P. Rosenbaum (ed.) *Community Crime Prevention; Does it Work*? Saga Publications, Beverly Hills 1986, p. 20.

3. D.P. Rosenbaum 'The Theory and Research behind Neighbourhood Watch: Is it a Sound Fear and Crime Reduction Strategy?' *Crime and Delinquency*, vol. 33, No. 1, January 1987, p. 109-10.

4. T. Bennett, *An Evaluation of Two Neighbourhood Watch Schemes in London*. Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, March 1987.

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