Neighborhood watch works

There is good reason to keep a watchful eye over the neighbor’s fence, if you want to keep light-fingered burglars at bay. A new Campbell Review shows that neighborhood watch schemes prevent about one-fifth of neighborhood crime. Crime is brought down irrespective of whether a neighborhood watch scheme is set up as a small stand-alone program, or as part of a larger crime-prevention initiative.

About neighbourhood watch

Many people have experienced the fear of coming home to a ransacked house in which everything has been pried into and valuables such as jewelry, watches or antiques have been taken. In order to prevent burglaries, people in many residential areas have set up neighborhood watch schemes.

Neighborhood watch covers more than ferreting out irregularities from a fixed surveillance post through the kitchen window. It is a structured scheme in which residents organize themselves to keep watch of each others’ houses as well as people and cars moving “unusually”.

Either the residents themselves, or the local police, may take initiative to set up a neighborhood watch scheme. The scheme can either be a stand-alone scheme, or part of a more comprehensive program, perhaps including installation of alarms or property marking.

Interest in neighborhood watch originated in the 1980s and today schemes are particularly widespread in the US and the UK. Latest figures show that almost half the population in the US and a quarter of the UK population live in areas with neighborhood watch schemes. Huge resources are spent on the area, and in this context the Campbell Review deemed it relevant to examine whether neighborhood watch schemes had any effect.

Neighbourhood watch prevents crime

The researchers concluded that neighborhood watch schemes are effective if burglars are to be kept away from houses left empty during vacations for example. The Systematic Review shows that neighborhood watch reduces crime by between 16% and 26%. These are less serious offences such as burglary, vandalism and offences of violence.

The research also indicates that this positive effect on crime is independent of both the size and the type of surveillance program. Small stand-alone neighborhood watch programs work just as well as large and more comprehensive programs in which neighborhood watch is combined with other crime-prevention initiatives.
**How does neighbourhood watch work?**
The idea behind neighborhood watch is to reduce crime by residents organizing themselves and keeping their eyes and ears open. If they see or hear anything suspicious, they call the police. Residents help each other for example, by putting a full bag of garbage in a neighbor’s trash can while they are on vacation, or by emptying their mailbox or mowing their lawn. The degree of organization varies from program to program, but in by far the majority of neighborhood watch programs, residents appoint a coordinator and set up a system of watches or citizen patrols.

The theory behind neighborhood watch is primarily that increased surveillance deters criminals because of the greater risk of being caught. Creating signs of occupancy also means that it is much harder for the burglar to determine whether or not a dwelling is empty. The burglar is deceived into thinking that someone is home by the neighbors making the house look lived-in while you are on vacation.

Researchers also point out that neighborhood watch schemes improve social cohesion, i.e. citizens show more respect, community spirit, and patience with each other. Through this, citizens develop a set of norms for the area and they organize themselves to limit deviant actions such as crime.

**What have the researchers studied?**
The Systematic Review is based on high-quality studies which examine whether crime falls when neighborhood watch is introduced in an area. The information originates from either citizen’s own reports, or from police reports. Crime was measured at least one year after a scheme had been established. The researchers measured the changes in the number of burglaries. When they could not find information about burglaries, crime was measured as the number of property crimes or as the total number of offences in the area.

The Review summarizes studies of 18 neighborhood watch programs, of which nine are from the UK, eight from the US, and one from Canada. Most of the studies are from the mid-80s to the mid-90s, and researchers are therefore looking for more up-to-date studies. The conclusion of the Systematic Review is that neighborhood watch prevents crime, but there is a need for more complete knowledge about the underlying mechanisms for the relationship between neighborhood watch and crime.