# Evidencing the impact of Neighbourhood Watch

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## 1. Background

Similar to many non-profit organisations, Neighbourhood Watch is increasingly being required to demonstrate the 'impact' of their activities by stakeholders and funders. As such, it is committed to moving towards being an evidence-based organisation. UCL were asked to undertake a project to support Neighbourhood Watch (and the individual Associations) in developing their knowledge and skills to monitor, evaluate and build evidence on the impact of their activities.

It is important to acknowledge that whilst Neighbourhood Watch is universally associated with crime reduction, this is not the only possible consequence, or outcome, of the activities of members. In recognition of this, the recent Strategy statement drafted by the Neighbourhood Watch Network for 2018-2021 describes that the mission of Neighbourhood Watch is: "to support and enable individuals and communities to be connected, active and safe", with the purpose of increasing wellbeing as well as reducing crime.

> The *neighbourliness* component is therefore just as important as the *watch* component of Neighbourhood Watch.

This report outlines the routes or processes through which Neighbourhood Watch activities might have an impact on crime reduction and other, associated, outcomes. These are broken down into chains of events (the 'theories of change' or 'mechanisms'). Commonly used in evaluation projects, a theory of change is intended to simply but elegantly explain how and why something works[1]. The first step is determining the intended outcomes of the activity, i.e. crime reduction or increased neighbourliness; the second is determining the logical sequence of specific actions and processes that are required to make that outcome likely to happen. The result is a process map that links activities and required conditions to produce intermediate changes and final outcomes.

Articulating a theory of change before conducting any evaluation has the advantage of exposing measurement points along the process where data can be collected to evidence whether something is working as assumed. Therefore, measurement points along each theory of change we present are highlighted. Subsequently, the advantages and disadvantages of different data sets that can measure and evidence these points in the theory of change are summarised.

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[1] Weiss, 1995

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## 2. Methods

A number of different methods were used throughout this project. These can be summarised as:

- Observations of the Neighbourhood Watch Board and meetings.
- Interviews with key Neighbourhood Watch staff.
- The collation of documentation that contained information on routine practices and available data.
- Reviewing the research literature to extract out plausible mechanisms (theories of change) that explain the link between Neighbourhood Watch activities and outcomes such as crime reduction.
- Focus groups held with a non-representative sample of Neighbourhood Watch associations to collect information in the activities they undertook and their perceptions of the mechanisms through which they believe their activities achieved particular outcomes.
- The creation of survey questions that relate to measurable outcomes identified through the previous methods.
- The validation of specific survey questions with Neighbourhood Watch volunteers.

## 3. The impact of Neighbourhood Watch

Since the rise of popularity of Neighbourhood Watch in the 1980's, many mechanisms have been suggested that describe the processes through which activities by Neighbourhood Watch members might plausibly reduce crime and other crime-related outcomes. These fall under two broad categories; situational crime prevention and social control, although there are overlaps between them. Both of these prevention philosophies involve elements of deterrence theory.

In what follows we define distinct theories of change – presented as process charts - that might be operating. This recognises that the final intended outcome of reducing crime or reducing fear of crime can be achieved in different ways, or through the activation of different mechanisms. We represent potential measurement points in CAPITALS and prerequisites for the theories of change to happen noted in blue text. The measurement points refer to outcomes, which can be *interim* outcomes or *final* outcomes. Interim outcomes (in ORANGE in the figures) are effects that can be measured to see which particular pathway Neighbourhood Watch activities are following; in other words, which theory of change is likely to be operating. Final outcomes (in GREEN in the figures) are the eventual outcome if the theory of change is completed.

One important assumption that underlies each of these process pathways is that neighbours need to trust each other before they participate in neighbourhood watch2. Without trust between neighbours, it is unlikely that any substantial efforts to work together as a community will be sustained.

### 3.1 How Neighbourhood Watch might impact on crime

It is widely assumed that crime prevention (or reduction) is the primary objective of Neighbourhood Watch Associations. This section describes how this outcome (i.e. crime) might be achieved in three ways – firstly, via manipulating the environment to reduce crime opportunities; secondly, through social control mechanisms, i.e. informal pressures on individuals to conform to social norms; and finally, as a result of the interaction between reducing opportunity through informal social control

#### 3.1.1 Manipulating the environment to reduce opportunities for crime

Situational crime prevention operates by manipulating the environment (the 'situation') to reduce opportunities for crime to occur. It works by altering an offender's perception of the attractiveness of a crime opportunity, so either by making it more difficult to commit crime, more risky, or by reducing the rewards of crime. For example, residents removing valuables from their cars may reduce the rewards available for offenders so that the decide it's not worth their while to break into the car.

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2 Sherman and Eck, 2002

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*Dissemination of crime prevention advice*

This theory of change, illustrated in Figure 1, depends on the dissemination of crime prevention advice to members (sometimes, but not always, preceded by communicating information about new crimes or modus operandi, e.g. 'scams'). It is assumed that due to this communication, Neighbourhood Watch members will be more security conscious[3] and will take sensible precautions to protect themselves and their properties[4]. This may also extend to protecting their neighbours property (e.g. taking out bins, increasing signs of occupancy). Consequently, this is thought to increase the would-be offender's perception of the risk of being caught, which acts as a 'deterrent effect'[5]. As a result, they may displace their offending to different neighbourhoods, times or types of crime[6] or they may not offend at all. This theory of change predicts a decrease in near-repeat victims[7] (these are crimes that occur close in time and space to an original victimisation), and crime itself. These are measurable outcomes, albeit the police hold the data that could be used in such analysis. A measurable interim outcome – which is a point in the middle of the chain of events - is collecting information about the crime prevention actions that are taken by residents in a Watch area, after they have been contacted by their Coordinator.

Raising awareness of new crimes

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Dissemination of crime prevention advice

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Greater security awareness by members

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**CRIME PREVENTION ACTIONS BY RESIDENTS** ⬆

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Increases offender's perception of risk

↓

Deterrent effect

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Displacement may occur to other places/ times/ crimes

↓

**NEAR REPEAT VICTIMS** ⬇

↓

**CRIME** ⬇

*Figure 1*: crime prevention advice theory of change

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[3] Fleming, 2005
[4] Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2008
[5] Bennett & Wright, 1984; Rosenbaum, 1987
[6] Mukherjee & Wilson, 1987
[7] Laycock & Tilley, 1995

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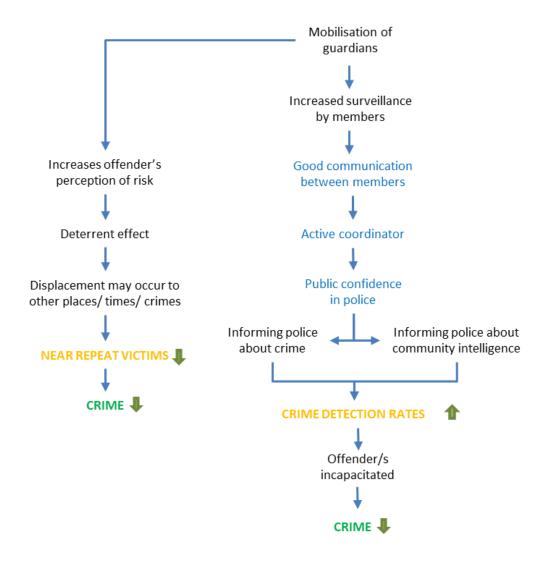
*Mobilising guardians*



*Figure 2*: mobilising guardians theory of change

This theory of change, depicted in Figure 2, supposes that members are mobilised to act as 'guardians', which means that they are motivated to increase surveillance of behaviour in their neighbourhoods. This can potentially impact on crime in three ways:

1) Offenders notice that people in a particular neighbourhood are monitoring what goes on on the streets they live on. These activities consequently increase the would-be offender's perception of risk as outlined in the previous section.

2) Increased monitoring of the neighbourhood results in members collecting information about unreported crime and community intelligence. If there is good communication between members in a Watch, and there is an active coordinator and confidence in the police, then the local police are informed about this information. Through such information, it is possible that the police may be better

positioned to detect crime and incapacitate offenders. Therefore the crime detection rates are predicted to increase under this pathway, and when the offenders themselves are incapacitated due to their sentencing conditions, crime will decrease as a result. This is a difficult pathway to evidence because: first, due to the complexities of police investigations it is very difficult to link intelligence to successful detection outcomes; and second, it is difficult in many cases to link reductions in crime to specific offenders being incapacitated.

3) Following on from the previous point, an active coordinator may feed this information on unreported crimes and community intelligence back to their Watch members. In tandem, this might trigger the dissemination of crime prevention advice, which would then follow the theory of change outlined in section 3.1.1.1.

Other situational measures include actions such as Neighbourhood Watch signs being displayed prominently in a neighbourhood. This similarly increases the offender's perception of risk and may persuade them not to offend in that particular neighbourhood. Related to this, measuring the geographical[8] 'displacement' of crime is possible, but requires crime data for the area in which something (i.e. Neighbourhood Watch) is active, a buffer area around this action area, and a control area, which is comparable to the action area[9].

### 3.1.2 Social control mechanisms

Under this theme, 'informal social control' is commonly the mechanism through which crime reduction is possible. Informal social control can be thought of as the everyday reactions of individuals and groups that encourage or pressure others to conform to social values and laws. These can include reactions such as disapproval, criticism, sarcasm, ridicule and shame.

*Individual and collective efficacy*

Informal social control can be activated at the individual level or the community level (see Figure 3). Taking the individual level first, if tolerance of crime and disorder decreases as a result of being a member of Neighbourhood Watch then residents can employ informal social control in challenging undesirable behaviour (such as incivilities) by others[7]. Informal social control – when it happens – serves to monitor and challenge undesirable behaviour

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[8] For example, crimes can be displaced in *space*, *time*, or can happen to a different type of *target*, use different *tactics* (modus operandi), be a different *type of crime* or have the *perpetrator* be replaced by a new one (as sometimes happens in drug markets).
[9] The Weighted Displacement Quotient is the standard method used to calculate (geographical) displacement effects (Bowers and Johnson, 2003).

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(i.e. incivilities)[7]. This can maintain public order and discourage offenders from continuing their behaviour, which may subsequently escalate to criminal behaviour. Community regulation of behaviour in this way has been proposed to keep neighbourhoods from 'tipping' into higher crime areas[7]. Overall, crime is expected to be suppressed through this mechanism.
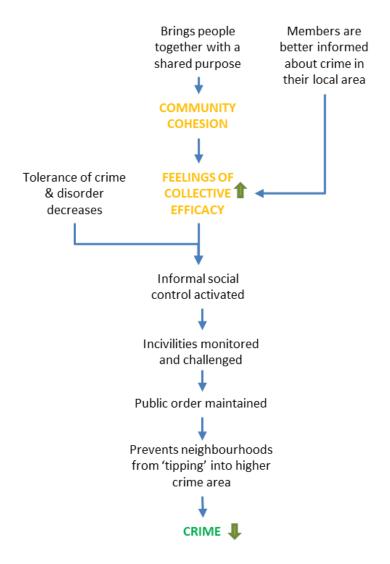


*Figure 3*: Individual and collective efficacy theory of change

Informal social control at the community level is known as 'collective efficacy' and is defined as social cohesion amongst neighbours combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good[10]. Neighbourhood watch is an organisation that can unite people with a shared purpose – to make their neighbourhoods safer. It is plausible that community values may be consolidated through this coming together, and community

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[10] Sampson et al., 1997

cohesion may increase as a result, consequently sparking collective action. This may (or may not) require members of the community to be informed about crime in their local area. Both community cohesion and collective efficacy are important concepts in social crime prevention, have been studied widely, and are therefore measurable. Some research (predominantly done in US cities) has found increased collective efficacy is associated with lower levels of (particularly violent) crime[10].

*Positive police-public relations*

Another way in which social control might influence crime reduction is through positive relations between the public and the police (see Figure 4). Public confidence in the police is a likely (and measurable) outcome of such relations which, in turn, can result in enhancing police legitimacy[2] which can be thought of as the degree of public support for the police's authority and their cooperation with the police's efforts to reduce crime. Importantly, police legitimacy is also linked to a greater willingness to obey the law[3] which can lead to a reduction in criminal behaviour.

Public confidence in the police can also strengthen informal social control (see previous section) so that community members feel that they can challenge incivilities and that their actions may be backed up by more formal sanctions.
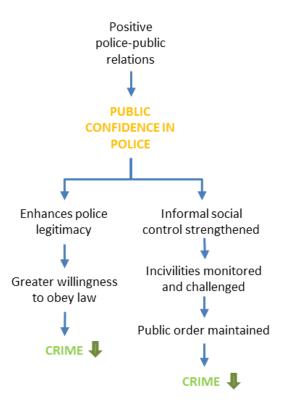


*Figure 4*: positive public-police relations theory of change

### 3.1.3 Interactions between situational and social control mechanisms

There are, of course, interactions between these two themes of situational crime prevention and social control. For example, when incivilities are monitored and challenged, this increases the would-be offender's perception of risk that they might be caught doing something in the future. There may also be 'feedback loops' so that in exercising informal social control, communities feel more empowered, which encourages them to actively maintain their crime prevention actions which deters would-be offenders.

*3.2 How Neighbourhood Watch might impact on feelings of safety*

Feelings of safety amongst members of a community can be just as important an outcome as crime prevention. Fear of crime has been studied extensively over the past two decades

and, whilst there remains debate about how to effectively measure it, it is a fairly established outcome to measure.

*Being informed about local crime*

Being informed about local crime can work in two ways. Some studies have found that if an individual is already fearful of crime (a precondition), then knowing more about the crime in their area can *increase* fear of crime.

On the other hand, being informed about local crime, when combined with increased feelings of collective efficacy (see section 3.1.1) may increase an individual's sense of control over their local area and consequently reduce their fear of crime.

*Figure 5*: Collective efficacy theory of change

*Positive police-public relations*

Research has found that enhancements in police legitimacy, brought about by public confidence that the police will exercise their authority in a fair and just way, can reduce the fear of crime in some communities[11].

*Figure 6*: positive police-public relations theory of change

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[11] Dalgleish and Myhill, 2004

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## 4. Evidencing impact

One of the frequent observations in the research literature is that the causal processes linking Neighbourhood Watch to crime reduction are indirect, convoluted and difficult to measure. In effect, the only way to robustly test whether the activities of Neighbourhood Watch have a deterrent effect on crime is to ask offenders themselves. Interestingly, a recent study from the U.S. has interviewed offenders in prison about the situational cues that might cause them to displace their offending[12]. This found that around 13% of offenders would refrain from offending if they saw a Neighbourhood Watch sign, 28.7% would offend elsewhere and 58.4% would carry on regardless. This figure of 13% reduced offending is strikingly similar to UK research that found that Neighbourhood Watch areas were associated with a 10% decrease in property crime compared to similar areas (using British Crime Survey data)[13]. From these studies it is clear that there is relationship between Neighbourhood Watch and crime reduction. Evidencing this relationship outside of large-scale research projects is though extremely difficult.

This section summarises various data sets that can be used to measure the outcomes illustrated in Figure 1-6 and described in section 3 of this document.

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[12] Rossmo and Summers (unpublished).
[13] Tseloni, 2006.

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| Section | Outcome | Data set | Advantages | Disadvantages | Can be benchmarked against |
|---------|---------|----------|------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| 3.1 | Crime | Police recorded crime incidents | • Geographically precise<br>• Contains many data fields of interest to analysis<br>• Can be linked to criminal justice outcomes (e.g. arrests/detections). | • Difficult to access<br>• Requires analytic skills to make best use of. | • Other police areas (e.g. Wards/ Neighbourhoods) |
| 3.1 | Crime | Police.uk | • Open source<br>• Already processed so little analysis needed<br>• Available nationally | • Geographically inaccurate<br>• No date or time information<br>• Broad crime categories | • Other police areas (e.g. Lower Super Output Areas) |
| 3.1 | Crime | Crime Survey for England and Wales | • Considered the most robust estimate of crime levels<br>• Questions on Neighbourhood Watch are rotated into some years of data collection | • Not available at the local level<br>• Subject to sampling bias<br>• No date or time information<br>• Dependent on victim's memory | • Previous years of the survey (and the predecessor, the British Crime Survey) |
| 3.1 | Crime | Local victimisation surveys | • Can be tailored to local data requirements<br>• Can be administered swiftly | • Participation rates may be low<br>• Resource intensive to undertake<br>• Requires research skills to design a robust survey | • The Crime Survey for England and Wales |
| 3.1 | Near repeat victimisation patterns | Police recorded crime incidents | • Can identify if patterns of offending have been disrupted over space and time (good for evidencing offender displacement)<br>• Easy to generate analysis through open source near repeat calculator | • Requires analysis on police recorded crime data (see disadvantages above). | • Historical near repeat patterns in local area |

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| 3.1 | Crime detection rates | Police recorded crime incidents | • Shows some indication of whether detection rates of local crime are better than elsewhere | • Difficult to link detection of individual incidents with Neighbourhood Watch activities (as investigations can be complex).<br>• Difficult to access. | • National detection rates (reported by the Home Office) for the same crime type. |
| 3.1 | Crime prevention actions by residents | Local surveys | • Can be tailored to local data requirements<br>• Can be administered swiftly | • Participation rates may be low<br>• Resource intensive to undertake<br>• Requires research skills to design a robust survey | • Unaware of any other surveys that use this as a measure. |
| 3.2 | Fear of crime/ feelings of safety | Local surveys | • Can be tailored to local data requirements<br>• Can be administered swiftly | • Participation rates may be low<br>• Resource intensive to undertake<br>• Requires research skills to design a robust survey | • Crime Survey for England and Wales |
| 3.2 | Community cohesion | Local surveys | • Can be tailored to local data requirements<br>• Can be administered swiftly | • Participation rates may be low<br>• Resource intensive to undertake<br>• Requires research skills to design a robust survey | • Metropolitan Police Public Attitudes Survey |
| 3.2 | Collective efficacy | Local survey | • Can be tailored to local data requirements<br>• Can be administered swiftly | • Participation rates may be low<br>• Resource intensive to undertake<br>• Requires research skills to design a robust survey | • Metropolitan Police Public Attitudes Survey |
| 3.2 | Public confidence in the police | Local survey | • Can be tailored to local data requirements<br>• Can be administered swiftly | • Participation rates may be low<br>• Resource intensive to undertake | • Crime Survey for England and Wales |

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| | | | | • Requires research skills to design a robust survey | • Metropolitan Police Public Attitudes Survey |

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