

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH AND CRIME PREVENTION

Historically, the neighbourhood watch schemes were introduced forcewide in England by the Metropolitan Police in September, 1983, and they represented probably the largest crime prevention initiative with a single launch date anywhere in the world. In fact the area covered by the Force is about 780 square miles containing a total district population of 7 million people. In Malta, these have not really ever been officially, launched although discussed in various occasions, yet the police department does favour every initiative for their setting, and is prepared to assist in making them workable and successful. We must however discuss first their aim, and why sometimes they fail. If we manage to analyse properly these two, then we can organise a better scheme to those that were originally initiated in the early eighties in England.

The launch of the N.W. schemes, was designed to combat the disturbing increase in opportunist burglary at that time by encouraging residents to share with the police the responsibility for protecting their own and their neighbours property. In our case we are primarily concerned in protecting our hotels and related complexes in the places where we work in, the tourists that stay in and the neighbouring residence if any in the area. The schemes adopted in England were those existing models in the USA with one fundamental difference, being the absence of patrolling by civilians.

The schemes need to be flexible in their structure if they were to appeal to all and the essential elements were to encourage people to:

1. look for and report suspicious activity to police.
2. improve their domestic security arrangements following free advice from the police or security agencies.
3. mark their property using the postcode followed by the numbers or first two letters of the house name and.
4. consider their environment and make recommendations that could remove the opportunity for criminal nuisance.

There is naturally a wide variety in both the number of households covered by schemes and area. We will discuss late in this report how these should be organised, however, before actually discussing their organisation, one must first appreciate that neighbourhood watch should not be viewed as a short term solution to the reduction of crime, but as part of a long term strategy shared between the public and the police. They N.W.'s themselves at least reduce the fear of crime and inject a better dialogue with the Police, which certainly is a most significant achievement.

This crime prevention programme of what neighbourhood watch is all about, in particularly aimed at decreasing the incidence of preventive crime such as breaking-in, voluntary damages, car

thefts, and drug related crimes, such as drug consumption and drug pushing within a defined area. Its success on the actual desire of that particular community in such an area to undertake the programme.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Although society is not sanctioned by law to cooperate with the police, yet it is society which suffers if co-operation is lacking. Society in general has a responsibility for crime prevention. In term this involves co-ordinated initiatives between police and every member of society. Indifference and apathy amongst one is a crime against all. This neighbourhood watch is a mutual responsibility to prevent crime. It has been recognised as a catalyst for bringing people altogether, particularly in newer communities like hotel populations and its surroundings, where the support of the Maltese traditional extended families is missing.

TYPES OF PREVENTIVE MEASURES

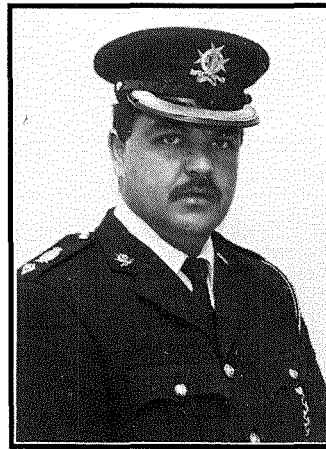
First we must know what obvious preventive measures have to be taken before actually discussing neighbours watch. It is a fact that theft can be reduced by making it extremely difficult for the thief through security conscious operations. This certainly implies the training of the staff in security. One in the producer involved or even consumer involved, in the delivery of stock and stock-taking, has to be taken regularly. One is presumed to know that shop lifters for example prefer to cover their activities by taking advantage of the busy periods of the day. They often work in pairs, one diverting the attention of the sales assistance while the other steals your stock. So in our shop outlets in the hotel complexes the use of convex mirrors have to be ascertained in order to help us see around behind corners and other obscure areas from one position. The putting up notices in well sited places that shop lifters will be prosecuted is always recommended.

ISSUE RECEIPTS

The issue of receipts is a sure way of knowing that a customer has paid for an item or service. Keep the staff alert and make rigid rules especially on regular stock taking. The greatest deterrent to theft by staff is to keep a very close eye on the till. Every day the money must be balanced with the recorded sales and services. Here I am including everything from the sale of a sunbathing lotion to the hiring of a self drive car or an overseas telephone service.

DOORS AND WINDOWS

If the doorway is recessed, keep it well lit. In all places adequate doors and windows have to be fitted. Rear windows should be secured with locks and preferably steel bars. The place has to be well equipped with burglar alarms and lightening.



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If large sums of cash one regularly deposited in the bank, make sure, ideally to get a security firm to it, saving you and your staff from worry and possible injury. There has to be an agreed arrangement with the local bankers, where the depositor can deposit the money in any branch and this would give the depositor in our case the hotel to choose and change regularly the route to a bank.

COMPANY CARS AND OTHERS

Ideally cars and vehicles of the company including those used by tourists, besides being locked, must be garaged rather than parked. This is the best way to protect such property. In the absence of adequate garage space, at least they should be parked in good lightening areas of the hotel complex. Interesting to know is that some car makers have introduced the deadlock central locking system. This means that even if a raider smashed a window to get in, he would have to climb in and out through the broken glass and would not be able to use the doors.

MARKING THE GOODS

When the goods are marked, then it would make it harder for the criminal to dispose of. The best marking system on goods, is that of writing down in a permanent way, the postal code and the number of your address or the first two letters of the name of your house. By doing such an exercise, the victim stands always a better chance to identify his stolen goods whenever the object cannot be practically marked, then the best thing is to photograph it in order to have a record of it. The record of the Valuable property.

WHAT IS NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH?

It is a group of concerned neighbours who combine together with the aim of reducing crime in their immediate areas. Participants select their own representatives to act as a co-ordinator between the police and the community. The combined effort of these neighbours is to reduce local opportunities for crime by deterring would be thieves and vandals. As other aim is to establish a community spirit so that anyone can contribute in the protection of their property by mutual co-operation and communication. The neighbours have to inform the police or their co-ordinators of any suspicious activity and must also make every one more aware of local crime problems and more security conscious about their own homes. Ideally the co-ordinator has to be responsible for say 20 - 25 dwellings.

HOW THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH IS LAUNCHED

As we are discussing, a meeting is to be called with all those interested in the neighbourhood watches. A brief introduction outlining the job is to be allowed. This includes an explanation of what neighbourhood watch entails and analysis of the specific crime problems in the area. The physical security of each individual's responsibility has to be discussed and the meeting has to include also a general view on what to look for, what constitutes a suspicious person, a suspicious vehicle and a suspicious incident. In the latter case, members of the neighbourhood watch scheme should be encouraged to take a note of all

suspicious incidents and vehicles and take details on the standard incident report. If the incident warrant no delay, then the report has to be made at once by telephone to the local police or via their scheme co-ordinator.

THE CO-ORDINATOR

In this initial meeting, a co-ordinator should be elected. He has to be the spokesman for the group and has to be liason between the police and the neighbourhood watch scheme. He has to receive all the informations from the participants. Any relevant information would then be forwarded to the police, either by telephone or through the resident beat officer. In our case, this has to be assigned. He has to organise when necessary the neighbourhood watch meetings. He has to maintain an up to date master list of all members. He has to designate and delegate of special duties such as (1) recruiting of new members, (2) looking after homes/areas of members who are on holiday, (3) fund raising activities, (4) maintenance of street plans and, (5) distributing of stickers, property marking equipment and so on. The street plan mentioned here is simply a planned drawing of the relevant area, with the names and telephones numbers. A copy of this street plan is distributed among the members and to the police officer assigned to the particular scheme.

ACTIVITIES OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH SCHEME

Of course the thief, the criminal or the drug pusher has to know of the existence and operation of the scheme in a particular area and so in order to deter him from perpetrating the crime, every watch area, should quite literally, be plastered with signs. Those signs should prominently indicate that the area is neighbourhood watched. For example each entrance of a hotel, of a house or living unit should have at least from two to four stickers prominently displayed. These should also be place in road signs, public announcements, newsletters and any other media that could be publicised in this area. In England and Wales the neighbour watch circulate a newsletter indicating amongst other things their activities and advices on security of one's property. Information about local criminal activity can also here be very easily circulated to all members of the scheme, so that everyone is aware of exactly what is going around in the area. Other activities organised by the neighbourhood watches include charity events and community functions for disadvantaged people which all in all, help to generate greater sense of pride.

WHY NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH WORKS

It has been scientifically shown that crime in general and neighbourhood watch in particular, are based on the premise that the majority of criminals have no wish to be caught or at the very least, raise the balance of probabilities of it, and so they will be deterred from committing that crime. This would in itself push the criminals to commit the crime elsewhere.

So we have to make the criminal "take more time" to commit his offence through better locks, window locks, fences etc. We have to make the criminal make more noise to commit his offence through the use of burglar alarms, smashing glass and doors and other

similar noises. We have also to make the criminal or his stolen goods be 'more conspicuous', that is through lighting removing cover, post coding goods removing anonymity and improving recognition.

TIME.... NOISE.... CONSPICUOUS.....

TIME TO COMMIT A BURGLARY

It is estimated that the average house burglary takes about 5 minutes to commit. This includes the time to spot the target, making sure that it is unoccupied, get in, find the goods, get out and get away. Certainly, if there are no signs to help him as indicated above, the criminal is already being made to make more time than he would prefer. Anything which could make a criminal have to observe has to be removed.

COMPLEMENTING MEASURES TO ENSURE N.W. BEING SUCCESSFUL

There are also what today are called 'Crime Prevention Panels'. These are panels made up of police and local people who examine crime problems in the locality and after analysing them, they come up with practical solutions based on their knowledge, experience and expertise. These in themselves will discourage crime by raising awareness of it throughout the community. The idea of such a panel is however that it is not a panel run by police. Projects undertaken by the panel itself include, calling on the authorities to improve lighting in an area, where for example, there are frequent night time burglaries and obtaining sponsorship from commercial companies for large projects.

VICTIM SUPPORT SCHEME

These deal with distressing human reactions to crime. Although they in themselves do not reduce crime, yet do reduce what has been earlier remarked as the fear of crime and as such are an important element in influencing the climate in which the crime is committed. For example, in burglary cases, the victims, very often feels that they can no longer bear to live in the burglaried premises. These V.S.S. can be staffed by unpaid volunteer helpers whose function is to visit crime victims to give support and re-assurance and where necessary practical help.

The type of help envisaged include:

1. Windows and locks may have to be replaced immediately often during unsocial hours,
2. Loss of 'bus passes or bank cards, keys and other valuables need to be checked and accounted for.
3. Advice may be needed about claiming insurance and improve security and,
4. Sensitively dealing with emotional reaction of children.

The co-ordination of the V.S.S. is to contact the police every 24 hours for the reported offences, and at first hand check who of which mostly deserve help.

WHY PREVENTIVE MEASURES NOW

Some say, sometimes nightly that if they want to get in badly enough, nothing that I do will make any difference. However statistics show that the

overwhelming majority of crimes (approximately 80%) are committed by opportunities, either casual or deliberate, and it follows, therefore, that if the opportunity to commit is removed, or reduced then there is a very good chance that an offence can be prevented. Prevention is not the "panacea for all ills" but it is a realistic method of substantially improving the quality of life for great many citizens, and of reducing the levels of crime and victimization committed against them. Moreover the justification for prevention, there is also the pragmatic consideration that if prevention is practised on frequent enough scale by enough police officers, it is a practical method of permanently reducing calls of valuable police man power resources and freeing them for other use.

CONCLUSION

Studies on the NW schemes in England and Wales' show that in residential environment, the neighbourhood watch has been very useful. These should be no reasons why it should fail in Malta. To ensure the success of such NW schemes, there is a need for continuing involvement, and it is perhaps to the co-ordinators that one should turn for leadership in this direction. These should constantly receive instructions from various interested bodies including the police and not left to alone soon after the scheme is launched. I am here also pointing that there need to be greater selectivity in the appointment of co-ordinators complemented by better guidance about what they should be doing. N.W. scheme as a community based crime prevention initiative they should be regularly supported from the police and the insurance companies. In my opinion the latter should straight away lower the insurance premiums of all those involved in the neighbourhood watch scheme or schemes are successful run.

Each member of the society has to make up for his part. After all Edmund Burke (1729 - 1797) was always right when he said, "All that is necessary for evil, to triumph is for good men to do nothing".

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