



Rural Crime Prevention: Neighborhood Watch Programs

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Introduction

The increasing frequency with which crimes are being committed in rural communities has transformed a relatively tranquil environment to one of growing anxiety. Crime in rural communities is essentially property oriented. However, while property crimes are individually considered less serious than violent crimes (crimes against the person), on a collective basis, the magnitude of property crime in rural communities far outstrips the seriousness of violent crime.

Among the factors contributing to the increase in rural crime is the rise in affluence of rural citizens. Within the past few decades most rural households have come to include televisions, stereos, microwave ovens, specialized tools and equipment, and other easily fenceable items. These households become ideal targets for burglary as a growing number of women join their husbands in working away from home.

While crime was once considered an urban problem, the tremendous mobility of American society today enhances a criminal's ability to cover great distances to strike and quickly get away. The increase in mobility has been realized not only in terms of transportation but in where we make our homes as well. Thus, the makeup of many neighborhoods changes frequently enough that neighbors lose track of those living around them. Therefore, seldom is any attention given to a stranger in a rural community who otherwise would have been scrutinized.

Even when the presence of an unfamiliar person or vehicle raises suspicion, many people are reluctant to call police or to get involved in any way. The fears of overreacting or appearing nosy are great.

One of the ways concerned citizens have begun to protect themselves from crime is simply to watch out for one another, not to replace the police, but to become the eyes and ears for the local law enforcement agency. Participation ranges from individuals just being good neighbors to formally organized Neighborhood Watch Programs that work with the local law enforcement agency to systematically patrol an area.

However simple or complex a neighborhood watch effort might be, care should be taken not to exceed the needs and capabilities of the neighborhood participants. The following discussion details some of the basic activities an effective neighborhood watch effort should include.

Involve Local Law Enforcement Agencies

The most important factor in any neighborhood watch effort is the level of communication and cooperation with

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the sheriff and police. The effectiveness of a neighborhood watch program can be enhanced by obtaining advice from these local experts in crime prevention. Law enforcement officials can provide useful insights regarding crime patterns, neighborhood watch techniques appropriate for a specific community and coordination with crime prevention activities they are pursuing.

Furthermore, the credibility of various crime prevention activities is enhanced from the perspective of local law officials when the activities are associated with a well-planned program.

Neighborhood Watch

Any neighborhood watch program must begin with the cooperative efforts of those living around you. By simply exchanging information with those living on each side of you, the eyes and ears of up to eight additional households can be alerted to suspicious activity at your home. The information to be exchanged with your neighbors should include:

1. Name, address, telephone number (home and work)
2. Work schedules
3. Description of cars and trucks owned
4. Vacation schedules

A neighborhood watch map such as the one illustrated in Figure 1 might also be completed and posted near the telephone.

Being a Good Witness

Once you have taken steps to become familiar with your neighbors, their living patterns, when they are at work, etc., you are in a good position to identify suspicious activity in your neighborhood. However, an effective neighborhood watch participant should know what to watch for and the steps to take when suspicious activity is spotted.

Although the symptoms of criminal activity may seem readily apparent, suspicious situations can easily go unnoticed unless one remains cognizant of the symptoms and remains alert for them. Table 1 includes some of the most important situations to which one should be alert and the possible significance of these situations.

Neighborhood/Community Watch Map

Emergency Telephone Numbers:



POLICE _____



DOCTOR _____



SHERIFF _____



HOSPITAL _____



FIRE _____

AMBULANCE _____

Emergency Instructions:

Know your neighbors. Make sure they know you.

If you see suspicious persons, automobiles or activities in or around your neighbor's home:

1. Contact your neighbor, at home or at work.
2. Call local police or sheriff.
3. **DO NOT HANG UP. STAY ON THE PHONE UNTIL YOU ARE SURE HELP IS ON THE WAY.**
4. Help preserve evidence.

Write down descriptions of people and automobiles.

Write down license plate numbers.

Write down direction of escape.

Instructions: Fill in all of the blanks below. Make sure your neighbors fill out one of these forms too.

(This is a general form. Please adjust it to fit your needs)

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

Street, Alley or Road Name (if applicable) _____

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

YOUR HOME

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

Street, Alley or Road Name (if applicable) _____

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

Name _____
Address _____
Home _____
Work _____

NOTICE: If you will be gone for an extended period of time, tell your neighbors. Notify the police or sheriff's office as well.

Table 1

Situations Involving Vehicles

Vehicles following an aimless or repetitive course (especially if moving slowly and with lights out).

Vehicle parked in neighborhood for long period with one or more occupants (especially at unusual hour).

Vehicle in neighbor's drive being loaded (even if vehicle appears to be legitimate such as moving van, repairman's van, or other commercial vehicle).

Apparent business transactions being conducted from a car.

Situations Involving Persons

Door-to-door solicitors (especially if one goes to the back of the house while the other stays in front).

Person waiting in front of a neighbor's house.

Person(s) taking short-cut through yards.

Window air-conditioner being removed by an apparent repairman (especially if residents are known to be absent).

Person(s) running (especially if carrying items of value unwrapped or unboxed).

High volume of human traffic in and out of a residence.

Situations Involving Property

Several items of the same kind in homes, garages, or storage areas.

Property being removed from a house or building (especially if residents are known to be absent).

Doors standing open, broken window or door (or other sign of forced entry).

Possible Significance

Casing neighborhood for a robbery or burglary target, drug pusher, sex offender, vandalism.

Burglary in progress. True even if occupants appear to be lovers.

Burglary in progress.

Drug sales.

Possible Significance

Casing for burglary, burglary or robbery in progress.

A lookout for a burglary in progress.

Fleeing the scene of a crime.

Burglary in progress.

Fleeing the scene of a crime.

Drug sales, vice activities, "fence" operation.

Possible Significance

Storage of stolen property.

Burglary or robbery in progress.

Burglary in progress or the scene of a recent burglary.

Upon observation of suspicious activity, the most valuable action to be taken is to get a good description of the person(s) and vehicle(s) involved. **Do not try to investigate the situation on your own.** Call the police using the emergency number (which should be posted near your telephone) and provide the following information in the order listed:

1. Your name and address
2. Location and nature of the suspicious activity
3. Description of the suspicious person
 - a. sex
 - b. race (white/black/Mexican-American/oriental/other)
 - c. weight (heavy/medium/thin)
 - d. height (short/medium/tall)
 - e. dress (color and type of clothing)
 - f. hair (color, length, and style)
 - g. color eyes
 - h. age
 - i. unusual features (scars, beard, mustache, etc.)
4. Description of the suspicious vehicle
 - a. color
 - b. basic type (car, truck, van, motorcycle)
 - c. make (Ford, Chevrolet, etc.)
 - d. age (within 2-3 years of model year)
 - e. model
 - f. state of license plate
 - g. license plate number
 - h. condition of vehicle (unusual marks, dents, etc.)

If a crime is suspected, do not hesitate or feel embarrassed to contact the police immediately. The police or local law enforcement agency will be appreciative of your concern. Your name and the information you provide will be kept confidential.

Statistics released by the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation show that in 1982 about 70 percent of all burglaries in Oklahoma occurred in private residences. Neither the time of day nor the season of the year are significant factors in the burglary rate. So it is important to remember that burglaries can happen at any time and to remain alert!

Neighborhood Patrol

In many neighborhoods, particularly in rural areas, considerable distance exists between homes. When implemented alone in such areas, a program to simply "keep an eye out" for a neighbor's property can be ineffective and perhaps impractical.

Thus, the characteristics of the neighborhood may require citizen patrol activity in order to serve as the eyes and ears for local law enforcement officials. The level of sophistication of a neighborhood patrol can range from walking patrols to vehicle patrols maintaining contact with a dispatcher through citizen band radios.

The first step in organizing a neighborhood patrol is to involve as many citizens in the area as possible. Experience has shown that maintaining regular patrols becomes more difficult once the novelty wears off. Sufficient participation to allow each member to patrol once every two to four weeks is best.

Leaders should be chosen from the group to chair meetings, raise and account for funds necessary to purchase equipment and supplies, serve as liaison with law enforcement agencies, and schedule patrols. Patrol leaders should obtain a list of those interested in participating with a designation of the time(s) available for patrol activity. Some member's schedules will allow for day patrol while others may be available for evening and night shifts (patrol members should be at least 18 years of age).

Based upon recommendations from local law enforcement officials, leaders of the neighborhood patrol should coordinate patrol schedules, routes, and times according to the capabilities of the participants. Patterns of crime in the neighborhood, the nature of these crimes, and the availability of the neighborhood patrol participants are the bases for planning the patrol program.

Regardless of the nature of the neighborhood patrol, participants may be confronted with many situations never before encountered. Therefore, rules of self-discipline and common sense must be followed to prevent (1) personal injury, (2) civil liability, (3) criminal liability, (4) interference with critical police activities, and (5) loss of community and police support for neighborhood watch.

The guidelines for citizens on neighborhood patrol include:

1. Patrol members should carry standard identification approved by the local police.
2. Always patrol in pairs.
3. Do not touch anyone unless in self-defense.
4. Do not get out of your vehicle unless to visually investigate the extent of injuries at an accident scene.
5. Do not perform any investigative functions such as checking doors or searching areas on foot.
6. Do not shine a light at anyone, into the windows of any vehicle, or into an occupied dwelling.
7. Do not discuss what is seen or heard while on patrol with anyone other than police or others on patrol.
8. Do not move or attempt to rescue any accident victim unless there is an obvious threat to the person such as fire, falling debris, etc. Limit first aid to stopping bleeding.
9. Do not involve yourself with the work of the police unless specifically requested by a police officer.
10. Do not become involved in the high-speed pursuit of vehicles.
11. Do not carry any weapon while on neighborhood patrol. Use only eyes and ears.
12. Do not get near any person with a weapon whether police officer or possible criminal. (Withdraw immediately to a safe distance and observe).
13. Do not violate traffic regulations. Neighborhood patrol cars are not emergency vehicles.
14. Patrol at moderate speeds.

Record-keeping is an important part of the neighborhood patrol, because logs of a neighborhood patrol can be used in serious court cases as evidence. Therefore, each patrol shift should have a detailed log sheet. Information on the log should include (1) patrollers' names and vehicle for the shift, (2) date and time patrol begins and ends, (3) pertinent information from each message sent by radio or telephone

(including exact time of messages), (4) all information received from police officers, sheriffs, or other neighborhood patrols (including time of receipt). The patrol log should be filed with the neighborhood patrol leaders for future reference.

Organizing a Neighborhood Watch Association

Many times a neighborhood watch effort will begin with the participation of a few households and expand as the idea catches on. As the size and complexity of activity increases, establishment of a Neighborhood Watch Association may be required to maintain continuity, favorable public relations, and financial control.

These considerations become particularly important when a neighborhood watch group is considering neighborhood patrol activities. A considerable amount of organizing effort is required to assemble and schedule patrol teams, and, since the patrol teams will actually venture into all parts of the neighborhood, the general public must be apprised of the nature of these activities. Also, the equipment requirements of neighborhood patrols can necessitate fund-raising efforts and the accompanying accountability controls.

Steps to take in organizing a neighborhood watch include the following:

1. Contact the County Extension Educator and the local law enforcement agency and request their support and assistance in organizing.
2. Arrange for a meeting at the county Extension office, the community building, or a church. Invitations should be extended to all residing in the neighborhood. However, publicity of the meeting should be sufficiently discrete that burglars are not invited to your neighborhood while you are away!
3. Elect a person to chair the meeting. The County Extension Agent or local law enforcement official can conduct the meeting until the election.
4. Through discussion by the group and advice from the local law enforcement officer, determine the activities to be pursued by the neighborhood watch association.
5. Elect officers and establish association by-laws relative to the activities to be pursued (Figure 2 may be used as a general guide).
6. Distribute application forms for membership in the association. The application should include:
 - a) Name, address, telephone number.
 - b) Place of employment, position, years employed.
 - c) Driver's license number and availability of a car.
 - d) Availability of communications equipment.
 - e) Physical limitations.
7. Membership applications should be screened by the local law enforcement agency for any prior criminal activity and given final approval by the association officers.

Once the association is organized, meetings should be scheduled at regular intervals for discussion of any problems and to maintain member cooperation.

Crime Watch Signs and Window Decals

Signs can be posted at the entrances to a community or neighborhood which warn that a neighborhood watch

Figure 2. By-Laws of a Neighborhood/Community Watch Association

By-Laws of a Neighborhood/Community Watch Association

Article 1 — Name of Organization

This organization shall be known as “_____ Neighborhood/Community Watch Association.”

Article 2 — Objective

The objective of the association shall be to assist the police department or sheriff's department through a community volunteer security patrol service. The association shall be a non-partisan civic action group dedicated to maintaining the safety and peace of the community.

Article 3 — Membership

Section 1. Membership in the association shall consist of responsible volunteer residents of the neighborhood or community, age 18 or over, who are willing to exercise assigned duties without expecting monetary compensation, and who sign a membership agreement.

Section 2. Applicants for membership shall be issued identification cards only after a trial period on patrol and with the approval of the executive committee and police department or sheriff's department.

Section 3. A general meeting of the association shall be held annually to elect a board of directors. Directors shall be elected for 3-year terms. Three directors shall be elected each year. The term of each director shall be determined at the first election on a voluntary basis or by drawing lots. Additional directors shall be elected by the membership to fill vacancies as they occur to complete the term of the vacated directorship. Voting shall be by written ballot. Mail-in votes and proxies shall not be accepted. Special meetings of the members may be called at any time by the president or board of directors, or by the membership-at-large when 10 or more members request the officers to call a meeting. General meetings of the association shall be held at places in the neighborhood or community designated by the president or board of directors.

Article 4 — Officers and Duties of Office

Section 1. The association shall be governed by a nine-member board of directors elected annually by the general membership. The board shall elect its officers — a president, base chief, crew chief, secretary and treasurer. The officers shall comprise the executive committee, and will meet as required to carry out the directions of the board of directors and/or to make decisions in the absence of the board of directors. Vacancies on the board of directors may be filled by a majority vote of the board of directors. Such appointed directors shall serve until the next general election.

Section 2. The *president* will preside at all meetings of the association and as an ex-officio member of all committees. The president shall call all executive committee and board of directors' meetings, and appoint the chairman of all standing committees, with the majority approval of the board.

The *treasurer* shall receive and keep an accurate record of all association monies, and pay bills. Expenditures of more than \$10.00 must be approved by the executive committee.

The *secretary* shall record the proceedings of all meetings, and receive and respond to the association's correspondence. The secretary will issue identification cards to eligible members.

The *base chief* shall be responsible for proper operation of equipment, for specifying equipment needs and for base operation. The base chief shall be responsible for training base operators (making sure the base operates during every patrol session) and transmitting required data to base operators before patrol sessions.

The *crew chief* is responsible for fully staffing all patrol sessions, and for maintaining the membership list and specifying recruiting levels. The crew chief must communicate with the base chief and forward patrol data.

Section 3. Board meetings shall be held at a time and place set by a majority of the directors, or as designated in the notice calling the meeting. The board shall hold regular meetings at least four times per year.

Article 5 — Standing Committees

Section 1. The functions of *standing committees* appointed by the president shall be:

Ways and Means — fund raising.

Membership — assist crew chief, recruit and maintain membership list.

Base — assist base chief in maintaining equipment and facilities.

Public Relations — education, presentations, recruiting, general publicity.

Administrative — assist secretary.

Section 2. A director shall act as chairman of each standing committee, even if he* holds another office.

Article 6 — Policies

The board of directors shall prescribe rules for the association's government and write regulations for duties for the best interest of the neighborhood/community watch association.

*"He" is used throughout this publication to mean he or she.

Article 7 — Amendments

Section 1. By-laws of the association may be adopted, amended or repealed by a majority vote of the board members.

Section 2. Members entitled to vote may change or repeal by-laws by a two-thirds vote of members present at a duly organized meeting.

Membership

Neighborhood/community watch members usually are drawn from the population of the areas the organization will patrol. Men and women residents, usually 18 years of age or older, are eligible. Some organizations allow 17-year-olds, while others require a minimum age of 21.

Applicants receive identification cards only after a trial period of patrolling or as base operator. After

the board and the police or sheriff's department approve, members receive a permanent identification card. Police or sheriffs' departments usually screen and approve all members for neighborhood/community watch. Conditions under which an applicant would be considered for membership are often spelled out in the by-laws. In some neighborhood/community watch organizations, a member must have a CB radio. In other groups, a person is not required to own a CB radio or even a car.

Experienced neighborhood/community watch members train individuals as base operators or as patrol members. Single persons, married couples and senior citizens are all needed as neighborhood/community watch members. Many of these organizations provide CB equipment. Examples of membership applications and release forms are included in this guidebook to help you develop appropriate forms for your organization.

program is in effect. The criminal is looking for opportunities which promise the least number of problems. Thus, a potential burglar may be inclined to look elsewhere for opportunities if a neighborhood watch effort is known to exist. Contact the local law enforcement agency for information in obtaining these signs.

Window decals in a home which announce participation in neighborhood watch can also be effective in warding off criminals. These decals and other materials are available at minimal cost from:

National Sheriff's Association
Suite 320, 1250 Connecticut Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202-872-0422)

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