Summary of the Systematic Review

Effects of Neighbourhood Watch in Reducing Crime

Authors and report:

T.H. Bennett, K.R. Holloway & D.P. Farrington (2008): The Effectiveness of Neighbour-hood Watch in Reducing Crime, Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2008:18

http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/

This summary is completely based on the referred report, although the text is slightly edited.

Background

Neighbourhood watch is a widespread and popular crime prevention measure. One of its main aims is to reduce crime and, in particular, to reduce residential burglary and other household and neighbourhood crime. It is often implemented as part of a comprehensive package comprising neighbourhood watch, property-marking and home security surveys (sometimes known as 'the big three'). Neighbourhood watch grew out of a movement in the US during the late 1960s that promoted greater involvement of citizens in the prevention of crime. Since then, the international interest in neighbourhood watch has grown considerably and the report of the 2000 *British Crime Survey and the 2000 National Crime Prevention Survey* (National Crime Prevention Council, 2001) estimated that over a quarter (27%) of all households (approximately six million households) in England and Wales and 40% of the American population were members of a neighbourhood watch scheme. This makes Neighbourhood watch one of the largest single organized crime prevention activities, especially also considering investments in resources and community involvement.

Research Methods

Asking researchers whether neighborhood watch is effective in reducing crime, there are several mechanisms by which neighbourhood watch might reduce crime. One method is that it encourages residents to look out for suspicious activities and report these to the police. This might have a deterrent effect on potential offenders who might perceive that surveillance by residents increases their risks of being caught. It might also have the effect of providing the police with useful information which might lead to successful arrests and convictions.

The analysis combines the results from a number of evaluations that are considered to satisfy a list of empirical criteria for measuring effects as reliably as possible. The analysis then uses the results from these previous evaluations to calculate and produce an overview of the effects that a given measure does and does not produce. Thus the objective in this instance is to systematically evaluate the results from a number of studies from different countries in order to produce a more reliable picture of the possibilities and limitations of neighbourhood watch initiatives in relation to crime

prevention efforts. In this case, the research review builds upon a relatively small number of evaluations and examines mainly evaluations that have been conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Studies were selected for inclusion in this review if they were based on a watch scheme either alone or in combination with any of the other 'big three' elements. The main quality control was that the studies should be based on random allocation or a pre-post test design with a comparison area. Studies were identified by searching 11 electronic databases. In addition, studies were sought using online library catalogues, literature reviews, lists of references, and published bibliographies. Leading researchers in the field were also contacted when there was a particular need to do so. The narrative review was based on 17 studies (covering 36 evaluations) and the meta-analysis was based on 12 studies (covering 18 evaluations). The data included police-recorded crimes and victimization surveys.

Results

The main finding of the narrative review was that the majority of the schemes (19) indicated that neighbourhood watch was effective in reducing crime, while only 6 produced negative results. The main finding of the meta-analysis was that neighbourhood watch was followed by a reduction in crime of between 16 and 26 percent. This review concludes that across all studies neighbourhood watch was followed by a reduction in crime. However, it is not immediately clear why neighbourhood watch is effective. The analysis of moderator variables failed to show any clear differences between more and less effective studies in terms of methods used or programme design. It is possible that the reductions in crime were associated with some of the essential features of neighbourhood watch schemes. Neighbourhood watch might serve to increase surveillance, reduce opportunities for crime or enhance informal social control. Unfortunately, this kind of information is not provided in the majority of evaluations and the precise reasons for the results are not clear at present. Nevertheless, the existing evidence justifies the continued use of neighbourhood watch and suggests that further research is needed to identify the key features of effective programmes.

Conclusions

There are a number of implications that can be drawn from this review for future research on the effectiveness of neighbourhood watch. First, the review has drawn attention to the common problem of a relatively small number of good-quality studies in terms of research design. Only 36 evaluations could be included in the narrative review and only 18 could be included in the meta-analysis. Second, it is unclear why evaluations of neighbourhood watch stopped abruptly in the mid 1990s. It is possible that researchers felt that the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of neighbourhood watch had already been established and that there was no need for further investigation. Third, none of the studies was based on random allocation of areas to treatment or control conditions. Instead, all studies were based on some version of a quasi-experimental design because of the difficulties involved in implementing community-based programmes in areas where communities have not requested them. Fourth, a particularly important problem for the current review was that a number of potentially eligible

studies did not report data that were suitable for a meta-analysis. This was either because studies presented the results using an unusual statistical notation or left out the data entirely (e.g. when the results were presented in graphical form only). It would be helpful if published evaluations included, at a minimum, raw data, cell sizes and other relevant information in order to facilitate future meta-analyses. Finally, very few evaluations disaggregated the findings in a way that would show differential effects for subgroups and provide detailed information on the effectiveness of features of the programme.

Neighbourhood watch has often been described as one of the most widespread methods of reducing crime supported by governments. The current review provides support for this level of implementation. Existing evaluations, taken together, show that neighbourhood watch is effective in reducing crime. However, little is known about the factors that influence the degree of effectiveness. Governments and those responsible for crime prevention policy should investigate differences between more effective and less effective schemes in order to guide good practice. A nationally co-ordinated programme of research on neighbourhood watch is needed, with different schemes implemented and evaluated in different areas to try to establish which features of schemes are most effective and the optimal conditions for effectiveness.