UTILIZING TECHNOLOGY IN NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

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ABSTRACT

The research is a feeble attempt to pass the SPSC course with time constraints. The research was initiated in response to a renewed demand for crime prevention and Neighborhood Watch programs. Neighborhood Watch groups have been established for years now. To be more effective, Neighborhood Watch programs must utilize available technologies, supported by consistent communication between citizens and law enforcement. But for law enforcement agencies like Washtenaw County, who are not only experiencing widespread growth in population, but also staffing and budgetary shortages, this is a real problem. The purpose of the research was to explore successful models that utilized technology at varying levels. Success was noted at all levels of technological implementation in the Neighborhood Watch programs examined. The common thread that appeared in all of them was just having a Neighborhood Watch program of some kind that was supported by a strong commitment and constant communication between law enforcement and the community members.

Recommendations for a step type implementation process to enhance the agencies Neighborhood Watch programs was provided to include community involvement on an enhancement task force, placement of a designated crime prevention liaison, training for officers. Further research must be done to establish more proximate costs of implementing a Crime Mapping/GIS system and locating funding sources.
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INTRODUCTION

Since September 11 the demand to police for community education and neighborhood watch programs have increased. Requests for these services have been both by local citizens, community groups, schools and the Federal Government. The Washtenaw County Sheriffs Office receives calls on a daily basis requesting Neighborhood Watch and Crime Prevention information. This should be a good thing. This renewed interest by citizens is another opportunity for law enforcement to reach the community and build partnerships. It is an opportunity to create well-planned Neighborhood Watch programs with a strong support base, structured for success. With the technology of today and commitment of personnel, the potential for success is limitless. But for agencies with limited resources, are we only creating a “feel good” program? And are we even able to keep up with that? Neighborhood Watch groups have been established for years now. To be more effective, Neighborhood Watch programs must utilize available technologies, supported by consistent communication between citizens and law enforcement. But for law enforcement agencies like Washtenaw County, who are not only experiencing wide spread growth in population, but also staffing and budgetary shortages, this is a real problem. Therefore the problem lies not only with the agencies willingness to commit to these programs, but a police agencies ability to supply the time and resources to meet the needs of the prevention programs.

The research for this paper will examine the effectiveness of established Neighborhood Watch programs and what resources would be needed for the Washtenaw County Sheriffs Office to establish and maintain effective programs. The research will
utilize articles, periodicals, law enforcement books and interviews to agencies with implemented programs.

**BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The modern day concept of Neighborhood Watch became familiar in the late 1960’s. In 1972 the National Sheriffs’ Association with funding through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration established the National Neighborhood Watch Program. The program was initially instituted as a tool to address the increasing numbers of burglaries being experienced nation-wide. Around this same time, federally funded police-community relations models were developed around the country. In the 1980’s Community Oriented Policing and Problem Oriented Policing models were becoming more prevalent. The adoption of community policing concepts by local law enforcement agencies increased by the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, more commonly regarded as the “Crime Bill”. “Neighborhood Watch fits nicely within the framework of law enforcement/community partnerships, and Neighborhood Watch meetings can be a useful forum to discuss neighborhood problems and practice problem-solving techniques”. (National Sheriffs Association [NSA], 2002).

In many communities, due to limited staffing, funding, or management structure, Neighborhood Watch is one of the only “community policing” commitments law enforcement will make. Many agencies are not able to fully adopt the “Community Policing” philosophy. Often COPS officers are responsible to respond to calls for service and balance attendance at Neighborhood Watch meetings. Implementing the basic
Neighborhood Watch program is inexpensive. A text documenting the success of Neighborhood Watch, Stegenga (1998) refers to Jackson County, Mississippi Neighborhood Watch groups as being “organized along traditional lines, with members acting as the “eyes and ears” of law enforcement and reporting suspicious activities. [The] crime prevention officer serves as the link between community members and the sheriff’s office.” Traditional Neighborhood Watch groups may utilize simple resources, like distribution of newsletters or crime watch bulletins or “phone trees” to enable them to alert one another to potential criminal activity. Even with limited resources, these watch groups have experienced success, due only to the continuous commitment of both law enforcement and the community.

When discussing community partnerships, Whisenand and Ferguson (2002) wrote, “People control crime; the officer is the catalyst. Police departments can no longer take a “paternalistic” attitude toward protecting the community from crime. Departments need community support coordinated by the police.” Neighborhood Watch requires initiative by citizens, followed by dedicated law enforcement support. Police agencies need to maintain continuous lines of communication and encourage Neighborhood Watch members to participate and expand their program. Often, when this is lacking, Watch participants feel they are only getting “lip service” when they are told that their program is important and that they are the “eyes and ears” for law enforcement.

But these days, it is widely known that successful Neighborhood Watch groups are more than “eyes and ears”. Many participate in Operation Identification, home security surveys, environmental/beautification problems, Block Parenting programs’ and some forms of victim assistance. (National Crime Prevention Manual pg 20). These
established programs, among others, and increased citizen involvement may have been part of the inspiration for implementing future national programs. In a letter addressed to Americans on April 4, 2002, President George W. Bush described, as part of the Freedom Corps initiative, the Citizen Corps. He encouraged cities and counties across the country to develop Citizen Corp Councils that are designed to fit the needs of the community. These councils would bring together first responders, volunteer organizations, law enforcement agencies, and community serving institutions such as schools, hospitals and houses of worship. They will also “feature local activities that reflect new and existing national programs such as Neighborhood Watch.” Attorney General Ashcroft announced a campaign to revitalize Neighborhood Watch. The Office of Justice Programs announced “The Department of Justice in cooperation with the National Sheriff’s Association will double the number of active Neighborhood Watch Programs throughout America.” (US DOJ, 2002)

Will this revitalization improve already established Watch groups or will it stretch resources that are already limited? For many, just maintaining the “traditional” Neighborhood Watch is difficult. Are we keeping up with the criminals? What happens if we don’t make investments in our communities? Law enforcement continues to change. There are many innovative programs and technologies available that would enhance a law enforcement agencies ability to work with the community to solve problems at their roots, to reduce crime and increase criminal apprehensions; giving the community a sense of satisfaction. Utilizing technology and Neighborhood Watch to it’s full potential would be costly. Would the outcomes be worth the cost? Would successes be more tangible?
LITERATURE REVIEW

Innovative Programs

The following are examples of Innovative expansions to Neighborhood Watch utilizing volunteerism.

An article in Sheriff Magazine talks about the Citizen Observer Program (COP)

“They’ve deterred criminals, kept watch over vacant homes, helped ease traffic jams, and fingerprinted more than 10,000 children for their parents' records. They've also donated more 210,000 hours of labor and logged enough patrol miles to circle the earth 40 times, in the process providing more than $1.5 million worth of free public safety services to the citizens of Volusia County, Florida.” The writer goes on to say that the “COP volunteers have been credited with foiling dozens of robberies and helping to locate numerous missing children. They’ve even spotted graffiti vandals in the act” since being established in 1989. (1997)

Yavapai County Sheriff’s Office in Arizona, like many agencies today are experiencing rapid increases in population, with not so rapid increases in law enforcement personnel. Concerned about reaching residents of unincorporated areas Sheriff Buchanan met with residents to identify their specific needs. “With this in mind, Sheriff Buchanan met with other under-funded law enforcement officials throughout the nation to examine their approaches to community policing. From these efforts, Volunteers in Protection (VIP), a program which utilized volunteers to perform administrative, patrol, and certain law enforcement functions was established.” After completing the same application requirements as a full-time employee, VIPs attend the
Volunteers in Protection Academy. Patrolling the streets in their own neighborhood, VIP’s have “discovered crimes in progress…They have recovered stolen vehicles, decreased acts of vandalism, worked on special projects with traffic deputies, and are currently spearheading programs to offer services and act as liaisons to the elderly”.

VIP’s are also utilized for administrative functions around the department. Requests to participate and community support appear to be overwhelming. “The Sheriffs Office does not have to be concerned with the public acceptance of the program, rather it is concerned with meeting the demands for the program.” Beyond limited Sheriff budget allocations, the VIP group established its own fundraising mechanism under a 501 C3 tax exemption. (Hadley, 1997)

In 1998, Queen Anne’s County, Maryland reported a 15% drop in crime and a 25% drop in burglaries since the establishment of the Cloverfields Neighborhood Watch. In less than a year, police response reports were reduced from four pages to a half page. The program began with strong leadership by retired steel worker, Len Morrison, who acted as coordinator and strong support by the Sheriff’s Office. 52 volunteers attended several training sessions conducted by law enforcement to prepare them to patrol the streets after dark. They report anything suspicious to police using a cell phone programmed to dial 9-1-1. (Stegenga, 1998)
Neighborhood Watch and technology - Simple to Complex

One of the simplest and least expensive means of communicating is through the utilization of fax machines and computers. According to Swanson, Territo and Taylor the Internet system is used most widely by police for effective global scale communication. With virtually no barriers with it’s communication reach, and it’s speed and efficiency, it is a unique tool for law enforcement. (Swanson et al., 2001)

Lake County Sheriff’s Office in Florida utilizes internet email and fax machines as part of its efforts to keep the lines of communication open between the police department and Neighborhood Watch groups. Community Service Specialist, Henry Minor, sends email messages to Neighborhood Watch captains regarding criminal activity that they should be aware of. He also sends out newsletters once or twice a month. If a block captain does not have access to the Internet, the sheriff’s office supplies them with a fax machine where they receive the same information. The system has been successful in keeping the lines of communication open and keeping the groups viable. The increased communication has resulted in tips and apprehension criminals. (Gaseau, 2002)

The Orlando Police Department in Florida, created the Crime Alert Program, which utilizes the e-mail based system to distribute notices, tips and articles. Information is provided among six categories (i.e. retailers, apartments, hotels, etc), which the users sign up for on the department website (http://www.cityoforlando.net/police/index.htm). Email notices are sent to subscribers when a crime occurs pertaining to their category of interest. The notice contains details of the crime and information on reducing risk, as well as department contact information. (Martin, 2002)
Cattaraugus County Sheriff’s Office established what they are referring to as an “Electonic” Neighborhood Watch program. Interested people can subscribe through a website (http://www.sheriff.cattco.org/enw.htm) to be placed on an “automated” mail list and receive information on topics such as… “crime trends in an area, such as a rash of burglaries or larcenies, with safety reminders, advice or warnings; suspicious activities or vehicles in an area; scams or fraud schemes that have been passing through the area; wanted or missing persons, with composite or actual pictures attached when possible; drug activities; [and] public safety messages and news released by the Sheriff’s Office.”

(Cattaraugus County Sheriffs Office, 2002)

The Arlington Police Department in Texas created an Online Searchable Database for use by citizens and has been particularly promoted to Neighborhood Watch groups. This has relieved the responsibility of the beat sergeant who had been responsible for preparing crime statistics by hand and distributing them to the groups. The statistics can be searched by: Location, Police Reporting Area, Geography using an online map, Apartment complex name, Business name, School name or Park name, date range and call type. To protect victims, information is not address specific, providing only block numbers to streets. The site is user friendly and boasts “10s of thousands of hits per month”. (Gaseau, 2002)

Numerous innovative websites were located providing users the ability to access information, not only on Neighborhood Watch, but extensions to Neighborhood Watch. The sites had information encouraging community volunteerism, emergency preparedness and other crime prevention tools. (Appendix A)
Another innovative tool that police agencies are using are automated high-speed notification systems, often referred to as “REVERSE-911” after one of the many companies offering similar systems. This system does not interact with the e911 system that many police agencies utilize when taking incoming calls for service, but is rather a stand-alone product. (Porter, 2002) Bowling Green Police Department in Kentucky is just one of many agencies utilizing and sharing the success of their automated notification systems. After researching available systems and obtaining funding through a Department of Justice grant, they began implementation in 1997. Deciding to go with Microsoft Windows operating system, the department purchased software and hardware, as well as a GIS mapping interface. Minimal support fees, software upgrades, and the installation of additional phone lines were additional reported costs. It has developed into a cross-jurisdictional resource for local, state, and federal agencies across the region that utilize Bowling Greens system. Expenses for department have been reduced with these other agencies sharing the costs. This system has allowed them to apprehend suspects who commit crimes across jurisdictional lines. For example, a suspect who was going from bank to bank with fraudulent checks was apprehended after an alert was sent to all of the banks. A similar notification was utilized to apprehend a suspect attempting to purchase drugs with a stolen prescription pad at local pharmacies. The system has been utilized to enforce drug trafficking laws along a 145-mile stretch of highway. And is now being used for anti-terrorist taskforce notifications. (Raymor & Wimberly, 2002)

Clark County Nevada has established a notification system, which is connected to Sprint with a fiber-optic data line and utilizes a database of telephone numbers and addresses. The equipment was purchased with a $60,000 grant through FEMA. The
$200.00/month maintenance costs for the fiber-optic line are paid with the city’s emergency management fund. The database will be automatically updated online by Sprint. Some of the system issues that are of concern are reaching those with unlisted phone numbers, those without residential phones, or those who do not answer the phone or have privacy lines. (Oliver, 2002)

In California, Berkeley Police Department has Reverse 911 software and uses it as a similar crime-fighting tool. According to Overton, the calling process to reach 4,262 phones in the south campus district takes two days. The system will stop dialing at 9 p.m. and then restart at 8 a.m. the next day. (1999). Berkeley provides its website name in the alert messages to allow those with Internet access to gain additional posted information. Their goal is to eventually create an integrated system utilizing phone and email listings with the Reverse 911. (Overton, 1999)

Of the available technological crime prevention and analyzing tools, Crime Mapping or utilization of GIS/GPS systems is probably the most advanced. Swanson writes, “The last decade has given rise to the integration of automated database operations, crime analysis, and high-level mapping. The merger of these powerful programs is commonly referred to as geographic information systems (GIS).” (Swanson et al. 2001). Crime Mapping or GIS has the attention among local and federal law enforcement these days. Since 1997, the U.S. Department of Justice COPS office has funded the Police Foundation’s Crime Mapping Laboratory. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the “Lab” has “provided information on technology and analytical techniques through reports, training and technical assistance” as well as assisting law enforcement agencies with implementation of crime analysis and mapping technology.
Crime Mapping News, a quarterly newsletter is among the numerous guidebooks that have been published by the Lab. (U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing [COPS], 2002). After reviewing over 100 samples of crime analysis reports from 20 police agencies across the country, the Lab created 11 product templates for law enforcement to adapt for department use. (Appendix B) (COPS, 2002)

GIS crime analysis utilizes information from existing computer systems, such as computer aided dispatch and record management systems that share common geography and allow them to be “layered” for analysis. These layers may include, street crime data, geographic data, as well as demographic data from the Census Bureau. Rich states, “The potential for institutional use of mapping software is far greater in police departments than in other organizations involved in crime control and prevention activities because computerized “geocoded” data are the byproduct of routine, day-to-day police department work.” Rich emphasized that mapping software for crime control and prevention “has two primary goals: to further an understanding of the nature and extent of criminal and social problems in a community, particularly the relationship between criminal activity and possible contributing factors, and to improve the allocation of resources to combat these problems.” (Rich, 1995)

PROCEDURES

I researched the above information, utilizing the World Wide Web, criminal justice related books and magazines. Utilizing the Web was very helpful as many sites referred to and connected with other related sites that I would not have known about, allowing access to endless amounts of information. As much as it was useful, it was also
at times overwhelming and distracting. While most sites were very useful, some were only advertisements or subscription sites, which caused some delay in the research process. It was difficult to find current information regarding “traditional” Neighborhood Watch programs, many materials focused on innovative programs.

RESULTS

The research showed that there is a large variety of successful crime prevention and Neighborhood Watch models available that utilize technology at it’s most basic to it’s most complex. A common thread among all of them appears to be a mutual support base, with shared commitment and open communication among the law enforcement agencies and their communities. Commitment from the community was usually expressed in the form of “volunteerism”. Commitment from law enforcement was usually from the designation of a Crime Prevention Officer or department liaison, to funding computer equipment and software.

Models like Volusia, Yavapai, and Queen Anne’s County report success through volunteers patrolling the streets, an expansion to their Neighborhood Watch programs. Each of the counties exhibited a strong commitment by their communities. Commitment by the law enforcement agencies to communicate and support these groups was the most important item for their part of the success. Besides training and limited personnel costs these programs had minimal expenses.

The next cost-effective method of communicating with Neighborhood Watch, in order to reach its potential was the use of the Fax Machines, Internet, and Department
Websites. This method was relatively inexpensive, with most agencies and Neighborhood Watch coordinators already having Internet access. These models, however, all had a designated crime prevention officer in order to be effective in getting out information when it is useful, rather than during a monthly meeting.

Although requiring more investment by law enforcement the most effective and innovative models are utilizing the automated high-speed notification systems, combined with the Crime Mapping/GIS technologies. These systems not only allow law enforcement to make rapid, wide-spread alert notices to the community resulting in hundreds of “eyes and ears” being activated, but it also allows for needed communication during an emergency or disaster. The crime mapping/GIS model works hand in hand with the community policing and Neighborhood Watch philosophies, using a problem solving approach. The software for these programs could cost an agency anywhere from a few hundred to a few hundred thousand dollars, depending on the agencies established computer system.

**DISCUSSION**

Committed involvement by citizens is the “key” to the success of crime prevention programs like neighborhood watch. But who truly holds the lock to open the door to success? A community’s law enforcement agency will ultimately determine if that door will open and how far. An individual officer may commit to a program and the door may open. But the door will not open to its potential, and success will not be fully realized without the commitment of law enforcement management, community leaders
and those holding the purse strings. Without the individual commitment of each officer
and the commitment of administrators both in philosophy and fiscal priority, the “lock”
will only turn and turn until it wears out and the door to success will not open. When a
community, a governmental entity, a police department says they want to reduce crime
and create a safe and secure environment and they want to do this through community
policing philosophies and crime prevention programs, each of these groups must be
willing to pay for it. Whether they choose to use new available technology or good old-
fashioned methods, there are costs. It is this researchers opinion that the integrated GIS
system will be the most effective law enforcement tool in crime prevention and
Neighborhood Watch thus far. The ability to not only target crimes, allocate patrols more
effectively, but to identify and target problems at the “root” would be cost-effective in the
long run.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that the Sheriff's Office create a step approach for improvement
of our Neighborhood Watch program. Initially, measures must be taken to maintain
current watch groups and keep new groups interested in forming. Letters should be sent
advising them that we are looking to enhance the Neighborhood Watch program in
Washtenaw County and would like their assistance by sending a delegate to sit on the
enhancement task force. Regular meetings should be established, with members
providing input, as well as taking on assignments and tasks of the group. This task force
may come up with some innovative ideas that lead us in another direction, or solve some of the issues we battle.

The agency must find a way to place a crime prevention/neighborhood watch liaison in the department to coordinate the Neighborhood Watch programs. This could be an officer, civilian, part-time or dedicated volunteer. The liaison would be responsible for regularly distributing information and training to Neighborhood Watch groups, as well as officers. They would coordinate with other area law enforcement agencies, as well as supporting the efforts of enhancement.

Knowing that a crime mapping/GIS system is a large investment for an agency in deficit, more research must be completed regarding actual costs of program implementation, as well as possible funding sources. This research may be of a more urgent nature, as this is currently a focus of government funding.
APPENDIX A

INNOVATIVE WEBSITES

Corporation for National Community Service:  
http://www.nationalservice.org/serve.asp

Points of Light Foundation:  
http://www.volunteerconnections.org/VCP_volunteercentermap.cfm

Virginia Crime Prevention Association:  http://www.vcpa.org/

City of Tulsa:  http://www.tulsaprojectimpact.org

Citizen Corps:  http://www.citizencorps.gov/

National Crime Prevention Council:  www.weprevent.org

Bureau of Justice Assistance:  www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bja
  www.usdoj.gov/cops/cp_resources/default.htm

www.usaonwatch.org
www.policefoundation.org
APPENDIX B

CRIME ANALYSIS TEMPLATES
REFERENCES


