

Communication Key to Success of Community Policing Programs

Successful crime prevention not only comes from having eyes on the streets, but meaningful partnerships between citizens and law enforcement.

Open communication is important to maintaining those partnerships. Police must educate residents on what to look out for and encourage them to be proactive in reporting suspicious persons and activities.

“Educating the public is key to effective crime prevention,” says Denny Powers, Criminal Justice program director at South University in Columbia, South Carolina. “Residents have to feel that the police are on their side as a partner. Being dedicated or committed to helping residents and being responsive to their concerns are key to establishing working partnerships.”

Watch groups have been vital to the safety and well-being of communities. These programs enlist the active participation of residents and police to reduce crime in neighborhoods. They address all types of crime, but mainly focus on drug- and gang-related activities and crimes against property, including burglary.

Watch Out Criminals

The National Neighborhood Watch Program is the National Sheriffs' Association program that informs citizens about how to help themselves by identifying and reporting suspicious activity in their neighborhoods. The program was started in 1972 because of a need for a crime prevention initiative focused on residential areas and involving local citizens.

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“Nobody knows the neighborhood better than the people in it,” says Chris Tutko, director of the Neighborhood Watch Program for the National Sheriffs' Association. “They know if a car has been sitting out for days or if someone has been lurking around houses in the neighborhood.”

“Having police patrol the neighborhoods was not enough to prevent crime,” Powers says about the Neighborhood Watch Program. “Community education and community participation in crime prevention programs have worked well.”

Keep Watching

Neighborhood watch programs usually get started when there is a sudden problem, but once the problem calms, group involvement can dwindle.

The National Sheriffs' Association provides a toolkit for law enforcement, block captains, and community volunteers to help when involvement starts to dip. The toolkit offers information and training on public and community safety topics, including partnerships and skills for conducting effective meetings. These tools, templates, and forms can also be tailored to meet the individual needs of the local neighborhood watch program.

“For a police officer, there is nothing worse than public speaking if you are not prepared,” offers Tutko, who was a police officer for 30 years. “You come across as not being knowledgeable or caring, so we put together the toolkit so officers know what they should say and how to best address the residents' concerns.”

To keep up with current issues that threaten safety, community crime prevention organizations have also created toolkits for terrorist awareness and pandemic issues.

“What we did for those toolkits is looked around to see what resources are available for dealing with pandemics such as the swine flu or terrorism awareness,” Tutko says. “Rather than start a new committee, the Neighborhood Watch participants can be involved. The discussions at meetings can be centered on these threats.”

Powers says crime prevention is more than just locking up criminals in a particular neighborhood. He says crime prevention through environmental design can have more lasting effects.

"There are strong correlations between poverty, poor education, ineffective parenting, single-parent families, alcohol, and substance abuse coupled with the influence of juvenile gang membership," he says. "Deteriorating neighborhoods, a high drop-out rate for schools, unemployment, and a lack of access to quality medical care are all contributors. Crime incubates when these conditions are present."