"The community supporting the community . . . that's where its strength is": exploring the contemporary position of Neighbourhood Watch in the United Kingdom

Melissa Pepper and Karen Bullock

Abstract

Purpose – *Neighbourhood Watch is a voluntary movement which brings people together with the aim of creating safer, stronger and more active communities. This paper aims to explore the contemporary position of Neighbourhood Watch in the UK through three key themes: the focus of Neighbourhood Watch schemes and how this extends beyond crime; Neighbourhood Watch membership and efforts to expand this beyond traditional residential boundaries; and the operation of Neighbourhood Watch, with a particular focus on technology-enabled methods.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper draws on data generated through interviews with key stakeholders working in the field of Neighbourhood Watch (*n *= 7) and interviews (*n *= 7) and two focus groups with Watch volunteers (*n *= 5) in the United Kingdom (UK).*

Findings – *Findings highlight aspects of Neighbourhood Watch that have remained the same – most notably the initial "roots" of schemes which have always looked beyond crime to tackle issues of health and well-being. In addition, issues of scale and diversity continue to present challenges within membership. However, there have also been changes, in particular the use of technology and moves to a model which offers more flexibility in terms of Neighbourhood Watch membership.*

Originality/value – *Findings position contemporary Neighbourhood Watch as a responsive and adaptable model; however, they also highlight how this must operate alongside traditional face-to-face, in-person methods to achieve meaningful community engagement.*

Keywords *Neighbourhood Watch, Community safety, Community engagement, Crime reduction, Volunteers, Volunteering, Police, Policing*

Paper type *Research paper*

Melissa Pepper is based at the School of Law and Criminology University of Greenwich, Greenwich, UK.

Karen Bullock is based at the School of Social Sciences, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK.

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Introduction and context

Neighbourhood Watch [1] is a voluntary movement which operates around the world. Initially established in the UK with the aim of bringing together neighbours to look out for suspicious behaviour in their local areas and report to the police (Brunton-Smith and Bullock, 2019), citizens became "the eyes and ears" of the police, reducing opportunities for crime through increased surveillance, target hardening and greater communication – both with each other and law enforcement agencies (Henig, 1984; Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Bennett *et al.*, 2006). The ethos of Neighbourhood Watch has arguably shifted from its initial inception – from a primarily police-led activity with the aim of observing and reporting suspicious behaviour in the 1980s to a more community-based approach in the 1990s in

which the public are supported by the police to take action to secure their own safety and that of their neighbours (Laycock and Tilley, 1995). More recently, this approach has expanded beyond a sole crime prevention and community safety focus, with the current Neighbourhood Watch website (www.ourwatch.org.uk) setting out its mission to "support and enable individuals and communities to be connected, active and safe, which increases well-being and minimises crime", and values centred on being neighbourly, community focused, inclusive, proactive, trusted and collaborative.

The activities of Neighbourhood Watch are variable but have traditionally included property marking, information sharing, surveillance and vigilance in the local area, training events, disseminating advice and personal security equipment and displaying stickers in windows and other community spaces to communicate to others that there is a scheme operational in the area (Mukherjee and Wilson, 1987; Garofalo and McLeod, 1988; Bennett, 1990; Laycock and Tilley, 1995). The result, in principle, being the creation of a type of "territorial neighbouring" aimed at overcoming residents' feelings of powerlessness about crime and to send a message to would-be offenders that the risk of detection and apprehension by law enforcement officers was high (Rosenbaum, 1987, p. 106; Garofalo and McLeod, 1988; Webb, 1994). Neighbourhood Watches were also assumed to promote mechanisms of informal social control, aiding social cohesiveness and in so doing helping to prevent and reduce crime (McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Bennett, 1990; Laycock and Tilley, 1995). The establishment of Neighbourhood Watch in the UK is associated with the US Neighbourhood Watch movement, which gained momentum from the 1960s (see Bennett, 1990; Bullock, 2014). Neighbourhood Watch, as a distinctive "brand", was founded in the UK in the 1980s with the earliest scheme in a village in the English County of Cheshire in 1982 (although it is likely that similar "prototype" Watches predated it) (Bennett, 1990). Following this, the number of Watches grew rapidly. By 1987 there were 42,000 schemes covering 2.5 million households, with an expansion rate of 25 new schemes per week (Husain, 1988).

The development of Neighbourhood Watch in the UK chimed with wider social and political movements: increasing understanding of the failures of the "standard" or "traditional" model of crime control characterised by police patrol, response to calls for service and follow up investigations to control crime (Kelling *et al.*, 1974; Pate *et al.*, 1986; McConville and Shepherd, 1992); "fractured" relationships between the police and communities and attempts to reconnect them (see, for example, Scarman, 1982; Reiner, 2010; Bullock, 2014); and wider political discourses, particularly, government attempts to consider new options for delivering public services, with the role of the citizen forming a central plank (Himmelfarb, 1997; Howlett, 2010; Siegel, 2012). In this sense, Neighbourhood Watch was "promoted as evidence of a break with a past" and as a "potentially effective" response to crime and security within neighbourhoods [2] (McConville and Shepherd, 1992, p. 1). Despite studies reporting significant falls in participation rates since the early 1990s (a decline from 76% of households living in areas operating a Neighbourhood Watch scheme in 1992 to 36% in 2016/17) (Tseloni and Tura, 2019), current Neighbourhood Watch figures suggest that there are upwards of 2.3 million members in England and Wales [3]. Indeed, Neighbourhood Watch is thought to be the largest voluntary crime prevention movement in the UK (Neuberger, 2009), with a distinctive brand and a range of sub-genres of the traditional residential schemes, including Vehicle Watch, Taxi Watch, Pub Watch, Boat Watch, Shop Watch, Caravan Watch, Horse or Saddle Watch and Sheep Watch (Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Moore, 2017) [4]. Local schemes are supported by area groups, Neighbourhood Watch Area Associations and the Home Office funded Neighbourhood Watch Network, the overarching charity established in 2007 to help develop local Neighbourhood Watch groups and volunteers. Neighbourhood Watch is not part of, or managed by, the police but rather a grassroots charitable movement which is volunteer-led within communities, although fostering strong and positive links with the police is an important part of their work (www.ourwatch.org.uk).

Aims and contribution of this article

As the above makes clear, Neighbourhood Watch is a significant voluntary movement in the policing and community safety arena in the UK as it is around the world [5]. Accordingly, the function and operation of Neighbourhood Watch and its outcomes are of interest to academics, policy makers and practitioners. However, there is relatively limited research – and certainly very little in the way of recent studies – currently available. Drawing on data generated through interviews with key stakeholders working in the field of Neighbourhood Watch and interviews and focus groups with Watch volunteers, this research set out to explore the contemporary position of Neighbourhood Watch in the UK following its rapid growth and subsequent decline in membership and consider the implications of Neighbourhood Watch going forward. The article is structured within three key themes emerging from the data: the focus of Neighbourhood Watch schemes and how this extends beyond crime; Neighbourhood Watch membership and efforts to expand this beyond traditional residential boundaries; and the operation of Neighbourhood Watch, with a particular focus on technology-enabled methods. By exploring the contemporary position of Neighbourhood Watch through these three themes, the article considers implications going forward, including potential to reinvigorate the diversity and contribution of schemes to community safety in the UK and beyond.

Methods

The article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders (paid members of staff working on the strategic direction and oversight of Neighbourhood Watch schemes) ($n = 7$) and interviews ($n = 7$) and two focus groups ($n = 5$) with Neighbourhood Watch volunteers. A purposive sampling approach was initially used with participants selected because of their specific experience in the field (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003). As recruitment to the study slowed, an invitation to take part was included in a paper delivered at a volunteers in policing symposium. This led to recruitment from a broader UK geographical spread than initially expected, arguably enhancing and diversifying findings.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between April 2022 and March 2023 and ranged between 22 min and 1 h 11 min in length (with an average length of 44 min). Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed in a Word document and transferred to NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software package for thematic coding. This was approached from a grounded theory stance, allowing categories and themes to emerge and guide the analysis (Patton, 2002). Key stakeholders interviewed ranged from the 22–24 years age bracket to 55–64 years. There were four female and three male interviewees, and the majority ($n = 5$) were White British. They had worked in the field of Neighbourhood Watch between two and six years, although some had long (up to 30 years) careers prior to this in community safety, policing and crime prevention. In terms of Neighbourhood Watch volunteer interviewees and focus group attendees, there was an even split between male and female participants ($n = 6$ each). Ages ranged between the 35–44 and 75–84 age brackets, with over half of the sample ($n = 7$) aged between 45 and 74 years. The majority ($n = 8$) were White British, with the remainder Black British ($n = 1$) or not stated ($n = 3$). Four participants were retired, four worked full or part time, with the remainder not in work/unemployed ($n = 2$) or not stated ($n = 3$). Length of volunteering "service" ranged between two months and 40 years, with the majority of those who gave this information ($n = 5/8$) volunteering for 10 years or more.

The research approach received ethical approval from the University of Greenwich Research Ethics committee on 10 March 2022 (reference UREC 21.3.7.7). All research participants were provided with an information sheet, consent form and contact details for the research team. Participants consented to taking part in the research, confirming their right to anonymity, confidentiality and to withdraw (and have their data destroyed) at any

time. All interviewees were designated pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, which have been used throughout this paper.

The sample size in this study was small; however, as Romney *et al.* (1986) in Guest *et al.* (2006) reported, limited sample sizes such as this can be sufficient in qualitative research if participants possess a degree of expertise about the domain of enquiry. This allows the researcher to achieve a point of saturation or diminishing returns where key themes recur, and additional interviewees may not enhance findings further. The sample did not include police officers. While they are, and have always been, a central partner, Neighbourhood Watch is not part of or managed by the police. It is a grassroots charitable movement which is volunteer-led within communities. This paper reflects the views and experiences of volunteers within communities and paid members of staff working on the strategic direction and oversight of Neighbourhood Watch schemes. While it is not possible to comment on the views and experiences of police officers involved with Neighbourhood Watch, the generalisability of findings presented in this article, or the extent to which they reflect broader experiences of Neighbourhood Watches across the UK or globally, they offer a useful addition to a currently under researched and somewhat dated knowledge base.

Results

Beyond burglary: the focus of Neighbourhood Watch schemes

Neighbourhood Watch is traditionally associated with crime prevention and had an original emphasis on property crime, particularly burglary (Bennett, 1990; Bullock, 2014). Participants in this study still referred to this crime prevention function and the "basic value" of looking out for your neighbour, which Gareth, a stakeholder interviewee, maintained was "still very relevant today". Sharing crime prevention advice was often aided by digital alert platforms which enabled police officers and staff to tailor messages to a large volume of people by demographic or community. Kate, a stakeholder interviewee and Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator, spoke about the actions of her scheme following a murder in the area and the value of being embedded within the local community at such times:

> The Neighbourhood Watch group was already there [. . .] because they're already part of the community, which is the strength of Neighbourhood Watch. They're not an outside agent [. . .] they are the community supporting the community. So that's where its strength is.

Kate went on to highlight the added benefit this brought in terms of intelligence gathering:

> Instead of just giving out leaflets, what we did is we talked to people. Were they in that area on that day? Did they see any people in previous days, you know, looking a bit suspicious or anything like that?

Throughout interviews and focus groups, there was a strong sense that Neighbourhood Watch was responsive and adaptable to shifting patterns of crime – as stakeholder interviewee, Kate stated. "Neighbourhood Watch has that relevance and will continue to change". This highlights the wide-ranging focus of Neighbourhood Watch on, for example, technology-enabled crime, cyber watches and support for people vulnerable to digitally enabled crime, county lines, dog theft, hate crime and modern slavery. Contemporary Neighbourhood Watches are also conceiving their remit in terms of community safety much more widely. As Shirani, a stakeholder interviewee, explained:

> Instead of it being purely about policing and crime, it is about general community safety messaging. So that's about safety in the home, safety on the roads. Safety in relation to fire, safety in relation to scams. Safety in relation to thefts and burglaries. Safety in relation to flooding.

Furthermore, Chris, a long-standing volunteer, felt that Neighbourhood Watch could be more effective in preventing some crime types than the police:

> We could put a police officer at the end of every road and it still won't reduce fraud. The police themselves are being affected by fraud more and more. Neighbourhood Watch is proactively getting messages out there.

However, the reach of Neighbourhood Watch goes beyond crime prevention. Indeed, participants in this study frequently framed the focus of contemporary Neighbourhood Watch in terms of connection, resilience and building community capacity. As stakeholder interviewee Gareth stated:

> Building that community resilience, and [. . .] ultimately that community engagement about working together [. . .] We really want to try and kind of expand it so that it's not just seen by the public as a nosey neighbour type of thing. It's more about community resilience and safety.

There was a social aspect to Neighbourhood Watch for many participants, with stories shared of street parties, barbeques and community events bringing residents and sometimes the police together. As stakeholder interviewee Daniel explained, while the focus of Neighbourhood Watch is crime, the way in which it operates contributes to community health and well-being:

> Neighbourhood Watch works in terms of connecting people [. . .] it clearly has lots of other benefits in terms of people being connected and improving loneliness and community and individual mental health, that kind of thing.

Daniel went on to share his ambitions for Neighbourhood Watch to be viewed as a form of "community prescribing":

> [. . .] you know, my prescription for you would be to get involved in your community – local Neighbourhood Watch – which might take you elsewhere and then you'll be more connected and more involved. In a perfect world I would see that as a kind of a potential for Neighbourhood Watch.

Participants often highlighted the link between the broader effects of Neighbourhood Watch – building connection, capacity and resilience – and crime prevention. This presented in two ways. Firstly, by getting to know their neighbours, individuals are aware when something is "not quite right". As Neighbourhood Watch volunteer focus group attendee, Rakesh, stated:

> This has brought everybody together to know their neighbour, so when there is somebody that's not quite right, people sort of recognise that that's not quite right. So, it's helping to fill the gap, like bridge the gap if you see what I mean?

In a similar vein, stakeholder interviewee and Neighbourhood Watch volunteer Kate spoke about the "power of hello" and how getting to know people in your community makes people more likely to "look out for them next time".

Secondly, instilling pride in people leads to safer communities. Kate went on to explain the effects of Neighbourhood Watch on this:

> People's pride in the community is much higher and they feel responsibility to their neighbours [. . .] so then crime comes in as a natural addition to that [. . .] people are looking out for each other. And even if they don't realise it at the time, actually they are making their place safer [. . .]. I think, more relevant today than it's ever been. The need for something to belong to.

This expanded remit is not new. As stakeholder interviewee Gareth stated "the organisation has moved from something that is purely about crime, although in reality it never really was". Indeed, long-standing Neighbourhood Watch volunteer interviewee, Margaret, spoke about a scheme they helped to establish in the mid-1980s:

> Our slogan was *'crime will not survive where community life thrives'* and to me that says it all. If you've got a good strong community, you each are looking out for one another all the time.

Beyond postcodes: Neighbourhood Watch membership

Participants were clear that it was community – rather than the police – who were central to driving Neighbourhood Watch activity. While a strong relationship with the police remains important (Garofalo and McLeod, 1988; Husain, 1988; Gresham *et al.*, 2004), a bottom-up community approach is crucial to establishing and maintaining Watches over time. As stakeholder interviewee Hannah stated:

> I would say that there is a lot less reliance on police involvement in active and healthy Neighbourhood Watch schemes. They don't need to be hand-held as much [. . .] in my view [Neighbourhood Watch] has adapted to be more reflective and more flexible of the communities it serves or of modern communities.

The extent to which police were actively engaged with Neighbourhood Watch varied by area and resource availability and was influenced by senior leadership commitment to schemes. As stakeholder interviewee Lynne stated:

> You can't force somebody to be, you know, enthused about something. And without that enthusiasm you don't get the buy-in. You don't get the delivery; you don't get the support. And that's whether it's from the public or the police or staff [. . .] it really has to be the right people.

Indeed, "buy-in" is essential, but generating community support and getting people to actively engage is not straightforward. Lars, a Watch volunteer interviewee, outlined this:

> Every time I did a poll or looked for people to get involved [. . .]. Many of those don't even bother picking up emails or responding. And then a further smaller subset who are actually active, I mean, a tiny subset.

This reflects wider questions, asked over many years, about the extent and diversity of involvement in Neighbourhood Watch. Previous research indicates that Neighbourhood Watches have proliferated in affluent areas with low crime rates, made up of longer-term residents living in single-family owner–occupier homes, and that members tend to be older and of White ethnicity (Rosenbaum, 1987; Garofalo and McLeod, 1988; McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Webb, 1994; Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Gresham *et al.*, 2004). Stakeholder interviewee Rian observed the situation as follows:

> The demographic is an older population. And again, as you say, quite a lot of affluent areas where there is literally zero to no crime. The consequence being that, although residents might be engaged with the Watches in terms of actually preventing crime, they don't really see, there's usually no crime to prevent.

Stakeholder interviewee Daniel added:

> It's reputation [. . .] as kind of curtain twitching, it being older, well-off, white and kind of middle class members [. . .]. I think that's a bit of a – well, it is a bit of a lazy stereotype [. . .] but, as often with stereotypes, it's not without its merit, you know, it's not without some sort of truth in it.

There was a sense across all participants of the need to attract a diverse membership to Neighbourhood Watch, in terms of residential areas, ethnicity, sexuality and – perhaps most frequently mentioned – age. As stakeholder interviewee Daniel suggested: "Where Neighbourhood Watch groups are vibrant, they tend to have younger, more diverse members". It was clear that efforts were (and had been for some time) underway to address lack of diversity in membership. A key part of this was developing a flexible model of engagement – beyond the traditional face-to-face "village hall meeting" style. Stakeholder interviewee Gareth spoke about a "your Watch, your way" approach:

> Neighbourhood Watch is about the values, and [. . .] looking out for each other. Now how you want to do it that's up to yourselves [. . .] 'cos all communities are different [. . .]. What community groups have you already got in place? Have you got a community council? Have you got a resident's association? If you've something that's already constituted, then it's easy to take in the

> values of Neighbourhood Watch [. . .]. It's a doorway for anyone to have access to the platform, and then hopefully with time they might set up a Watch.

The value of an "affiliate model" (as referred to by stakeholder interviewee Gareth) such as this, in which existing groups can receive resources, information and advice and "dip in and out" of involvement, was often highlighted by participants. As Watch volunteer, Chris, stated: "If you can get a community together, it has to be an opportunity". However, the challenges of such an approach were also recognised – particularly being able to reflect such engagement in membership data. Another approach to attracting a more diverse membership was, as stakeholder interviewee Lynne put it: "Recognising what communities people belong to and what communities people identify with beyond where they pay their council tax". Lynne used two Watch sub-genres – Rural Watch targeting the agricultural business community and Construction Watch working with those in the building trade – as examples of this.

Participants often mentioned the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and move to home working for many on the willingness and ability of people to be involved in their local communities. While some participants spoke of a greater sense of community spirit during the pandemic, Neighbourhood Watch volunteer interviewee Lars suggested: "It isn't Covid that has driven people towards communities; those communities already existed". Establishing ways to identify and tap into such communities, together with a flexible model for engagement, perhaps offers opportunities to engage a broader membership going forward.

Beyond technology: the operation of Neighbourhood Watch

Technology is central to Neighbourhood Watch as part of their approach to being a flexible and responsive organisation. Participants in this study referred to two strands of technology: licenced platforms used by the police and Neighbourhood Watch professionals to communicate with members and more informal community driven forms of technology such as WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media platforms and specific community-targeted apps. The use of technology has become increasingly prevalent in the management and operation of Watches. Stakeholder interviewee Shirani saw this as an important way for Neighbourhood Watch to "[. . .] stay relevant – they need to use various methods of communication as opposed to just a [traditional] Watch". Commenting on the future direction of Neighbourhood Watch, volunteer interviewee, Chris, felt that: "it's definitely going to be social media based, that – there's no doubt. It cannot go in any other direction. It cannot go the opposite way".

The rapid development of the use of technology was, in part, connected to the Covid pandemic lockdowns and need for information which could be more effectively met by WhatsApp and other social media platforms. Watch volunteer interviewee Margaret reflected on this:

> I think because of the lockdown a lot of people started WhatsApp groups because it's like quicker, you know, having a social platform and Facebook pages rather than starting, if you like, a traditional Neighbourhood Watch with a coordinator on the ground.

This participant also drew attention to the importance of online Neighbourhood Watch to addressing wider social issues such as loneliness during the pandemic. Volunteer interviewee Peter also commented on the wider benefits of WhatsApp groups during lockdowns:

> The WhatsApp group works quite well, and also definitely over Covid, it was great because [. . .] it was more about, where's everyone getting their takeaways from and does anyone know where you can get flour? [. . .] It did become quite community spirited.

Indeed, there was a sense that the pandemic had catalysed people to seek out connection:

> When the pandemic started [. . .] we had a quite a big rush of people joining Neighbourhood Watch. We had quite a surge of people wanting to be more involved with their community, which was fantastic (Kate, stakeholder interviewee).

Stakeholder interviewee Hannah also highlighted the scale of these connections, commenting on the "hyperlocal kind of digital relationships being formed [during lockdowns] [. . .] attracting thousands and thousands and thousands of people who've got a relationship to the area".

It was recognised that technology offered an opportunity to reach a more diverse membership, particularly those who would be unlikely to attend a physical meeting or engage in-person, perhaps due to work or family commitments or because of living in isolated areas. However, the limits of this were recognised, particularly the mostly one-way nature of communication: "Social media has been a great tool to reach more people. It is not a Neighbourhood Watch; it is a way of communicating the messages out" (Kate, stakeholder interviewee). Furthermore, there were concerns about General Data Protection Regulation implications of large-scale unregulated groups, sections of the community who were not digitally literate or did not have access to technology, and Watch co-ordinators who were unable or unwilling to manage WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms. Indeed, technology was not seen as a panacea for an all-encompassing Neighbourhood Watch approach.

As Peter, a Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinator interviewee, stated "You've got be very careful about this thing about technology is the answer to all prayers. I don't think it is because we're all human beings". Stakeholder interviewee Kate agreed, outlining how technology and social media could not replace traditional communication but instead should complement one another:

> What I say to people around WhatsApp groups is that [. . .] they complement Neighbourhood Watch [. . .] that's a different way of communicating with each other. So, the actual Watch group is able to communicate things quicker with each other, but it doesn't replace Neighbourhood Watch. It just enhances the work that they do.

Kate likened this to a "microwave meal" – quick, easy and effective – but a "home cooked meal" (referring to more traditional in-person Neighbourhood Watch approaches) "tastes better when it's made from scratch".

Discussion

Evident in the UK for over 40 years, the starting part of this paper was the observation that Neighbourhood Watches have played, and continue to play, a central role in both crime prevention and community safety practice. Despite this dominant position, there is relatively little research – in particular, very little recent research – on the focus and operation of Neighbourhood Watch. Drawing on interviews with key stakeholders working in the field of Neighbourhood Watch and interviews and focus groups with Watch volunteers, this study has explored the contemporary position of Neighbourhood Watch through three key themes which emerged from the data: the focus of Neighbourhood Watch schemes and how this extends beyond crime; Neighbourhood Watch membership and efforts to expand this beyond traditional residential boundaries; and the operation of Neighbourhood Watch, with a particular focus on technology-enabled methods.

While crime prevention remains a priority – including responding to shifting patterns of crime (e.g. digitally enabled crimes, dog theft, etc.) – it was clear that the focus of Neighbourhood Watch reached beyond this. Participants spoke about social events, contributing to well-being, connecting people and tackling loneliness and instilling pride in

communities through activities such as litter picks and hanging basket competitions. Such themes of social integration, cohesion, neighbourliness and a sense of "community spirit" have underpinned the organisation from early days with open fun days, street parties and pensioners' Christmas lunches all featuring (Bennett, 1990; McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Laycock and Tilley, 1995; ERS, 2009). Indeed, in a US context, Huck and Kosfield (2007) highlight the importance of community programmes that involve multiple forms of cooperation between neighbours to improve viability of schemes. This study confirmed that the foundations of Neighbourhood Watch have always been much wider than crime (especially property crime), and this has remained.

An aim in the Neighbourhood Watch Strategic Plan (2020–2025) is to be a recognised contributor to community health and well-being. The connection between this broader focus and crime prevention activities came across clearly in interviews and focus groups with more resilient and connected communities, rather than those that rely on the police or other state organisations, seen as key to any objectives regarding crime control. Indeed, enhancing community cohesion and actively engaging residents in caring for the place in which they live (Bennett *et al.*, 2006; Davies and Jenkins, 2010), and the symbolic guardianship that being part of a Neighbourhood Watch scheme brings (Sintemaartensdijk *et al.*, 2022), has been linked to subtle contributions in the "fight" against crime and disorder, creating extra vigilance and acting as a "useful extension of the police and auxiliary services" (Lub, 2018, p. 921). It also chimes with an acknowledgement of the weaknesses in formal social control and limitations in the traditional model of policing to prevent and respond to crime (Kelling *et al.*, 1974; Pate *et al.*, 1986; McConville and Shepherd, 1992). Furthermore, Bullock and Fielding (2017) argue that community-rooted approaches such as Neighbourhood Watch have flourished in light of the failure of traditional policing models to deal with quality of life issues. Indeed, Laycock and Tilley (1995, p. 8) argue that, while not directly related to crime reduction, the value of catalysing community cohesion should "not be underestimated as preparing the ground for later crime-related action".

While a community focus and activity were clearly seen as the heart of contemporary Neighbourhood Watch, securing community support – in terms of both membership and coordination – was not always easy to achieve. Research suggests that, even in areas which attract widespread support for Neighbourhood Watch, there are challenges around securing and maintaining commitment from members, with schemes often relying on one or two committed individuals, presenting challenges when they move on or are unable to continue the role – an issue highlighted by participants in this study (Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Gresham *et al.*, 2004). Tseloni and Tura (2019) noted a drop in national membership from a peak in 2000, where just over a fourth of households – nearly 4.5 million – in England and Wales were members, to 9% or about 2.2 million households in 2016/17. This is still a sizable community, and although systematically collected data is difficult to find, "Our Watch" states that the Neighbourhood Watch movement in England and Wales currently has upwards of 2.3 million members (www.ourwatch.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are). Anecdotally, some participants reported that interest in Neighbourhood Watch and other community engagement methods had increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. While specific data is not available, this does support wider trends around formal and informal volunteering at this time driven by a desire to "do something", changes in working and home patterns and an "outpouring of community spirit" (Mak and Fancourt, 2022; Mao *et al.*, 2021, p. 9; Kanemura *et al.*, 2022).

Diversity of Neighbourhood Watch membership was also a concern for participants, with perceptions around the profile of members largely reflecting that reported in previous research – stable, affluent communities with lower crime rates (Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Brunton-Smith and Bullock, 2019), longer-term residents living in single-family owner–occupier homes (Garofalo and McLeod, 1988; Bolton, 2006), few commercial establishments (Mukherjee and Wilson, 1987), and those with the "necessary social, cultural, economic and political capital to

comfortably engage with the police force" (Moore, 2017, p. 238). Research also suggests that Neighbourhood Watch members are more likely to be older (Webb, 1994), female (Brunton-Smith and Bullock, 2019), more fearful of victimisation (Bennett, 1989) and involved in other community organisations with a strong value orientation that encourages participation (Hourihan, 1987; Schreurs *et al.*, 2020). Yarwood and Edwards (1995, p. 452) suggest that Neighbourhood Watch confirms the "contradiction of voluntarism: namely that it favours those people with the time and assets to help themselves and who may be quite often in least need of help".

It was clear that stakeholders and volunteers in this study were both aware of this stereotype and keen to address it. This often centred on offering a more flexible model of Neighbourhood Watch membership which allowed individuals to engage digitally or in more episodic ways and recognised communities beyond residential areas through sub-genres such as Rural Watch and Construction Watch. It also sought to identify and "tap into" existing community collectives and join up with a range of organisations beyond traditional police partners. Rosenbaum (1987) suggested that "multi-issue" community organisations – those that connect with a range of individuals and interests – are the best vehicles for sustaining citizen participation in crime prevention activities. Furthermore, an approach that allows flexibility of engagement and function offers promise in terms of diversifying and increasing membership.

The growing role of technology in the operation of Neighbourhood Watch was often mentioned in relation to broadening and diversifying membership. Technology, especially social media, has become central to the day-to-day operation of many (but seemingly not all) Watches, facilitated further by the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced much communication and interaction online. This was recognised to offer greater coverage and scope for Watches as well as engendering greater efficiency in their operation. Furthermore, it was seen as likely to become more important and to evolve over time. However, the proliferation of technology was not considered to be without problems. The reach of technology can be limited, in terms of those who are able and willing to engage with it. Whilst this research cannot cast any light on the characteristics of users of digitally enabled Neighbourhood Watch tools, other studies have indicated a mixed picture suggesting that such approaches favour those who are more able to engage, thus replicating biases found in traditional Neighbourhood Watches. Indeed, Lub (2018, p. 920) argued that residents in high-status areas tend to have greater social and political capital and are more familiar with the possibilities of digital technology and social media.

Furthermore, there was concern about the one-way nature of technology-enabled approaches with membership to a Neighbourhood Watch WhatsApp group or other social media platform not necessarily resulting in meaningful and practical engagement. Schreurs *et al.* (2020) reported a lower sense of community amongst online Neighbourhood Watch members, arguing that this could be linked to digital contact with neighbours via WhatsApp being experienced as more distant compared to traditional "in person" face to face contact. Kelly and Finlayson's (2015) study of Project Eyewatch (New South Wales, Australia) found that, although Facebook gave access to larger and more diverse audiences, the project fell short of its objectives to engage meaningful interaction and dialogue between the police and the public. Whilst the police used Facebook to transmit information, this often took the form of a press release, rather than interaction and two-way communication. The authors argue that, in doing so, the police used "new technology to communicate in old ways" (Kelly and Finlayson, 2015, p. 74).

Indeed, face-to-face communication and interaction were seen as important to continue to meet Neighbourhood Watch aims of promoting community building and social cohesion. Technology could not replace conventional face-to-face activity but rather complement it, and the suggestion was that the two approaches need to work together. This phenomenon has been noted in other studies. In their research on the Italian "Social Street", an online platform for neighbours to connect, Mosconi *et al.* (2017) outlined the importance of bridging online and offline spheres. Connecting neighbours via the digital platform was not seen as an end in itself, but rather a "stepping stone" for face-to-face encounters to

accomplish material impact in the neighbourhood. The value of this hybrid online–offline environment has also been highlighted in health (Scruby *et al.*, 2017) and education (Sentance and Humphreys, 2015) settings with digital spaces seen as important, but face-to-face engagement invaluable, to participants. Indeed, technology is an important part of working "smarter" and developing Neighbourhood Watch into a flexible and changing organisation. However, while the tools to "do" Neighbourhood Watch may have increased, the ethos remains the same, and that ethos requires more than one-way digital communication. As Kelly and Finlayson (2015, p. 75) argue, the police and Neighbourhood Watch organisers must find more effective and innovative ways to engage the public using social media platforms, being more interactive and responsive to "bring Neighbourhood Watch into the 21st century."

Concluding points

By considering the contemporary position of Neighbourhood Watch, this paper has identified aspects which have changed over its 40-year history and, perhaps most notably, those which have remained the same. Adhering closely to its initial "roots", the focus of Neighbourhood Watch continues to look beyond crime to address issues linked to social integration, cohesion, neighbourliness and garnering a sense of "community spirit". In addition, issues of scale and diversity of membership continue to challenge Neighbourhood Watch. However, much has also changed. Neighbourhood Watch as an organisation seems to be adopting a more dynamic operating model which recognises and taps into existing community groups and allows flexibility in terms of how and when people can get involved. Furthermore, technology, including WhatsApp and other social media platforms, is now a central feature of Watches, engaging broader and more diverse sections of the community. While this article focused on the views of key stakeholders working in the field of Neighbourhood Watch and Watch volunteers, future studies should explore police officer experiences, including their role and contribution, and how they engage with Watches within the communities they police.

In what remains one of the most comprehensive studies almost 30 years on, Laycock and Tilley (1995, p. 3) argue that "Neighbourhood Watch has become an empty vessel into which differing practice contents can be poured". In the 21st century, that "vessel" has shown itself to be flexible and adaptable and offers a model that can evolve going forward. It is vital that the Neighbourhood Watch Network, and the local schemes and area associations that it supports, embrace new ways of working, including a more fluid, dynamic operating model which enables greater diversity of membership and technology-enabled communication tools. However, these must continue to operate alongside traditional face-to-face "in-person" features of Neighbourhood Watch, which this study has shown remain fundamental to meaningful engagement.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, Neighbourhood Watch is referred to as "Watches" or "Schemes" interchangeably.
2. Research and evaluation on the effectiveness of Neighbourhood Watch have focused on the crime prevention (e.g., Pate *et al.*, 1986; Mukherjee and Wilson, 1987; Bennett, 1990; Husain, 1988; McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Davis and Taylor 1997; Sherman and Eck 2002; Bennett *et al.*, 2008), fear of crime (e.g., Rosenbaum 1987; Husain, 1988; Bennett, 1990; Skogan, 1990; Laycock and Tilley, 1995; Sherman and Eck, 2002), and community cohesion (e.g., Bennett, 1990; McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Laycock and Tilley, 1995). Findings have been mixed and contested, with some suggesting links and others not.
3. www.ourwatch.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are (accessed 27/03/2024)
4. The extent to which these sub-genres are officially affiliated with the Neighbourhood Watch brand varies.

5. For example, the USA, Canada, Australia (Benett, 2008), The Netherlands (Schreurs *et al.*, 2020), Austria, Germany, Spain (Ball, 2018), Malaysia (Haron, 2015), and South Africa (Meyer and Van Graan, 2011) – albeit with varying operating models.

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Corresponding author

Melissa Pepper can be contacted at: m.j.pepper@greenwich.ac.uk