

**CALIFORNIA NEIGHBORHOODS  
THE ELITE CRIME FIGHTING FORCE**

**by**

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**March, 2012**

**COMMAND COLLEGE CLASS 50**

The Command College Futures Professional Article is a study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is not to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the professional article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

## **California Neighborhoods: The Elite Crime Fighting Force**

Is it a plan that deploys tactical officers in the neighborhood environment? Are Special Forces headed to the cities and counties of California? No. California's choice crime fighters might well in fact be the every-day resident or homeowner who has realized that taking a bigger role in the protection of their neighborhood is the responsibility of the individuals that reside there. A concept central to this practice often referred to as Neighborhood Watch. Rather than thinking of Neighborhood Watch in its traditional form, now is the time to consider ways we can enhance the role of the community through the added benefits of crime mapping, analytics, technology and increased volunteerism. Our future elite crime fighting force might well be the neighborhoods that are able to effectively combine a multitude of safety resources under the banner of neighborhood watch.

Formed in 1972 by the National Sheriff's Association (NSA) in response to the rising crime rate in the 1960s, Neighborhood Watch's central theme is resident-based crime prevention. Neighbors or individual members of a community are the mechanism by which Neighborhood Watch is intended to reduce crime by looking out for and reporting suspicious activities to the police (Bennett, 1990). Today, one would be challenged to find a community that does not employ some form of this concept, and police agencies across the U.S. tout their programs as one way in which their citizenry helps them fight crime.

The premise of Neighborhood Watch is to use the collective senses of the people living, working, or recreating in a particular area to deter crime through a concentrated awareness that makes residents the prevention mechanism. Law enforcement has bought in to this appealing concept as a means to several ends; including crime reduction, force enhancement, and improved communication and cooperation with the public they serve. One question remains, though; is it effective?

Actually making your neighborhood a safer place has been reported in many studies as viable, attributing the increased safety to the presence of Neighborhood Watch programs. For example, in Fairfax County, Virginia, crime statistics show Neighborhood Watch Programs aided the

police department in reducing residential burglary by almost 60 percent from 1980 to 1993 (Fairfax County Police Department).

Although the bulk of data related to the efficacy of Neighborhood watch was gathered in the 1980s and 1990s, there are more recent indicators seeking to answer the question of efficacy in its intent to reduce crime. A systematic review of literature related to the topic was conducted and reported on in 2008 by the U.S. Department of Justice in their 2008 report “Does Neighborhood Watch Reduce Crime?” The primary conclusion of the report was that “... across all eligible studies combined, Neighborhood Watch was associated with a reduction in crime.” (U.S. Department of Justice, Does Neighborhood Watch Reduce Crime? 2008, P. 28) This research was based on preexisting Neighborhood Watch surveys and the results are understood to be rigorous and transparent replicas of existing data. Promising accounts of Neighborhood Watch from a less scientific standpoint can be readily accessed in a variety of sources.

A 2010 study of Neighborhood Watch effectiveness in reducing crime shows that in 79 percent of the cases researched crime reductions occurred (Lincolnshire Police Burglary Dwelling Scrutiny 2010). The objective of this project was to look at the available literature providing evidence of the impact of Neighborhood Watch on crime reduction from around the world. As recently as January 2012, the citizenry of Moses Lake, Oregon mobilized to help stop crime. There, a local man moved into a neighborhood that he felt was isolated from the rest of the City and was experiencing property crimes. The new resident organized others in the neighborhood to stop these crimes through the creation of a local Neighborhood Watch. With support and direct interaction from the Moses Lake Police Department, the community has experienced reduced crime rates in “block watch” areas (Columbia Basin Herald).

A recent analysis in the City of Bakersfield California regarding their Neighborhood Watch program revealed that a large sample of Neighborhood Watch participants have a great desire to work collectively to reduce crime in their community. More importantly, they also desired the state of feeling safe. While some citizens would enjoy a safer community from a statistical standpoint, others noted they were not concerned about crime data per se, but did wish to “feel safe” through whatever legal means possible (Bakersfield Police Department Neighborhood Watch Experiential Survey, 2011). Although the survey respondents were individuals who had already volunteered to protect their neighborhood, they nonetheless represent the sentiment of

municipal residents who have a desire to volunteer more of their time so they can feel and potentially live in a safer environment.

A common sentiment expressed by Bakersfield residents was they were willing to do something above and beyond the police protection they count on for their safety. These neighborhood, business, and park watch participants all showed tremendous interest in a system that increased security, even if that required them to volunteer more time toward that end. Their commitment is an indicator that community involvement can be counted on as an honest consideration for police forces in tasking the public with an increased responsibility in making neighborhoods safer.

An expert panel was convened in April, 2011 to study the issue of Neighborhood Watch's ability to expand and enhance perspectives about public safety. The panel's view of the future for California law enforcement was troubling. They were reasonably certain California could declare some state of bankruptcy unless current economic trends were reversed. Attached to that concern was the mechanism to fund law enforcement and the impact on local police forces if the State was to declare bankruptcy. One panel member, a crime analysis practitioner, identified a confluence of the aforementioned bankruptcy, as well mass prisoner release and poor economic times as "doomsday" events she was sure California would experience. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated viewpoint. In fact, it has already been a topic noted by the federal government.

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the Cops Office) in a 2008 report entitled, "The Impact of the Economic Downturn on American Police Agencies" states that 25 years of gains in the number of civilian and police personnel serving at various local, state, and federal levels has come to an end. The Washington based National League of Cities (NLC) identifies in its "City Fiscal Conditions Survey," released in October 2011, that municipal finance officers from throughout the U.S. expect general city revenues will continue to fall, identifying a five year decline in that category. Subsequently, these same finance officers have reported a seventy-two percent (72%) cut in personnel. "For the first time, because of the economy, police departments ... may have to change how they do business," says Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a law enforcement think tank. "People will see a change in the basic delivery of services," from longer police response times to a dramatically reduced police presence in some communities.

Some of California's Central Valley police agencies have indeed reduced their presence. The Bakersfield Police Department had reduced its police staffing level by twenty-nine positions in the past two years, a nine percent (9%) decline in sworn staffing. In that community, the police redeployed resources from specialized units during this period simply to maintain an attempt at providing basic service levels. Stockton and Sacramento CA saw significant force reductions as well. Add in to the equation the Central Valley's population has grown substantially in recent decades, with growth between 1980 and 1995 accelerating more rapidly than for the remainder of the State as a whole (K. Umbach, 1997) and the confluence of problems seems daunting from the broad perspective as well as a local one. The issues can be summarized as:

- Police budgets and their compliment of police officers are shrinking
- California's Central Valley population continues to increase
- Citizens are willing to volunteer more time in making neighborhoods safe
- Neighborhood Watch programs are in place and operational

With a clear understanding that nothing absolves law enforcement agencies of the responsibility to protect and serve; new ideas must be explored in the pursuit of delivering core police services. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice report called specifically for police agencies to identify successful programs and develop ways to maintain those endeavors while dealing with the financial problems besieging most governmental agencies. Merging programs or concepts to test the synergy of such a pairing is not just a need, but a responsible endeavor for police to explore. In fact, this is not necessarily a new thought.

In 1997 and 1998 the City of Hartford, CT provided community-based organizations with a crime mapping and analysis system. As reported in a National Institute on Justice (NIJ) research brief in 2001, the system enabled users to map crime locations as well as crime report and arrest locations with the basic premise of enabling analysis by the community beyond what was provided by law enforcement (Crime Mapping and Analysis by Community Organizations in Hartford, Connecticut. 2001). NIJ concluded the majority of residents who used the system frequently gained a better understanding of crime conditions in their neighborhood. The participants also believed that access to data allowed them to better participate in problem solving contributions to their neighborhood. The interaction between police and community in projects such as this create an interdependence in the work of both the police and community in

the reduction of crime. This program continues to this day, according to Sergeant Patrick Farrell, Supervisor of Crime Analysis and Statistics Unit at the Hartford, Ct. Police Department. He advised that one of the more important aspects of the program is neighborhood based problem solving in specific geographical areas or zones. Farrell related that Part One crimes are down six percent currently in Hartford. While there is no way to attribute this reduction solely to the combination of crime mapping and community groups, he stated “it helps.”

With that in mind, what if communities and law enforcement agencies combined Crime Mapping, technology, and Neighborhood Watch to create a volunteer-assisted crime analysis and response effort? Imagine a community with this capacity as described in the following scenario, taking place in the near future in a city near you:

California recently mandated GPS tracking for all parolees, in part as a means to save money in State prisoner management. California’s Central Valley cities would be the hardest hit by the ongoing fiscal duress, and will also receive more than 40,000 convicted felons released to relieve overcrowding and to save money.

In response to these events a Total Neighborhood Security Initiative was established at local police agencies throughout the Central Valley. This multi-pronged approach to integrate successful strategies, partnerships, and technology into a specific design that provides comprehensive neighborhood security was seen by Central Valley residents as an alternative to the total reliance on government resources for community safe. Empty buildings and foreclosed homes were converted into Neighborhood Watch Centers. These facilities were staffed by members of the community. The volunteers were able to utilize the latest technologies available, and through their Neighborhood Watch organization, they monitored crime mapping, GPS tracking and helped conduct crime analysis activities. This includes the tracking of the newly released parolee population, ensuring the police were notified whenever a parolee was in the vicinity of any reported serious crimes.

Electronic billboards stationed at the main thoroughfares within the neighborhood are also a part of the system. A picture of the individual felon is shown on the billboard as well as their current, real-time, location within the neighborhood. These billboards are complimented by a network of pan, tilt, zoom cameras that can be operated by volunteers, police dispatchers or police officers.

Reflecting on that image of the future, imagine every resident in a neighborhood having real-time data sent to their cell phones so they could act as added eyes and ears to the police. Imagine also a community where the norm is to go on the offensive against criminals before the actual crime occurs, suspicious people in vehicles or on foot tracked and recorded as they traveled throughout this networked neighborhood. Networks such as these include police officers and dispatchers tapping into the same information and extracting intelligence for a coordinated response. This can be how neighborhoods of the future will protect themselves, in effect, becoming their own elite crime fighting force.

Community policing is a philosophy that promotes the use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address public safety issues such as crime and the fear of crime. It requires the active participation of the community and police in concert, as in Hartford Ct. When local police there took crime map data, specific to an area, and shared the information with the community that was being affected by the crime, they were empowered to affect both their own safety and future criminal acts in their neighborhood. Police reliance on the community, in the protection of themselves is only going to grow. Command level police personnel should embrace this growth and steer it toward increased productivity in problem-solving. The synthesis of Crime Mapping and Neighborhood Watch has value and tremendous growth opportunity. But, we must begin to plan and implement changes in those systems now, such as:

- Open dialogue with current Neighborhood Watch groups regarding Crime Mapping
- Form GIS, Neighborhood Watch, Community Policing, Crime Prevention, I.T. Focus Group with in jurisdiction
- Provide communities with additional crime mapping resources
- Implement various aspects of a combined program into future strategic planning
- Identify interested citizens for Beta testing on small scale implementation
- Develop funding sources/ideas i.e. Grants, General fund allocations, Asset Forfeiture

While crisis such as a state declared bankruptcy, budget cuts, police force reductions, and mass prisoner release will be the genesis for change in innumerable government functions and process, this research shows that proactive steps toward the end of combining Neighborhood Watch and Crime Mapping , at the very least, has the potential to address many of these issues' effects on our communities in a positive way

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