

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

Our way of life has changed considerably since the days when neighborhoods were the center of social activity, and every family knew every other family on the block. Today, people move from one part of the country to another with increasing frequency, and families prefer the privacy of fenced backyards or closed apartment doors. People often do not know the family two doors down the street, or two flights upstairs. The friendly security built into old neighborhoods has disappeared.

In an effort to restore neighborhood safety and security, the National Sheriffs' Association launched a Neighborhood Watch program in 1972. Burglary was chosen as the target crime because of its prevalence -- New York State has more than one burglary every two minutes -- and because police can combat burglary effectively with public cooperation.

Most people say local police do a good job, but still feel that more should be done to reduce crime. Despite this public attitude, more than half of all household burglaries are never even reported to police.

Many citizens realize they need police to protect them, but obviously police cannot fight crime they don't know about. When police are alerted quickly to suspicious circumstances, they are more effective against crime, and citizens benefit from improved protection and safer neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Watch, which gets police and citizens working together for neighborhood safety, is a self-help anti-crime program. Residents make a community effort, in cooperation with their law enforcement agencies, to protect each other and their property. Local law enforcement personnel show citizens how to report crimes or suspicious persons to police. Residents of a community know, better than area patrol officers, who belongs in the neighborhood and who doesn't. They accept deliveries, mow lawns, shovel snow, and pick up mail and newspapers while neighbors are away, to give their homes a "lived-in" look. Neighbors help neighbors, turning streets and apartment complexes into communities again. Citizens take the initiative for their own safety.

Neighborhood Watch does not require that people reveal family secrets. It offers attentive concern without loss of privacy. It is not snooping; it is not binocular-wielding busybodies; it is not vigilante groups. One person is not responsible for an entire apartment complex or block of houses. It costs members no money.

The program is built on cooperation and reciprocity on a small scale, multiplied many times as more and more groups of neighbors participate. People help each other for the protection of their neighborhood. They watch only the homes or apartments immediately around them. Police and neighbors agree that each group needs the other to ensure safe places to live. Police need timely information, neighbors need trained law enforcement -- and Neighborhood Watch builds a two-way bridge between them.

Getting Started

When a local police department or a citizens' group decides to start a Neighborhood Watch program, community support and cooperation are essential.