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A preliminary review of Neighbourhood Watch in Victoria

Neighbourhood Watch (NHW) has been in operation in Australia since 1983, with a primary focus on reducing burglary, but its effectiveness has been questioned by both Australian and overseas research. An Australian study found NHW had limited value in combating burglary, leading to only modest decreases or having a displacement effect (Fleming 2005). Recently the Victorian police conducted a review of the program in their state (De Ridder & Johns 2007). NHW coordinators and volunteers were identified and sent terms of reference on six areas. The data were collected from 60–100 stakeholders through face-to-face consultations, telephone, verbal and written responses, and through discussions at conferences. The review concluded that the strengths of NHW included a high level of community respect, support and recognition, and its role in fostering a community sense of security, safety and wellbeing. However, it identified a number of weaknesses that placed the program at risk of becoming irrelevant. It had not developed since its inception and remained a grass roots community organisation, often with poor communication between stakeholders, ill-defined roles for active members and board, and a focus on preventing residential burglary that limited its impact on other criminal activities of concern to the community. Among the problems identified by NHW members were:

- ageing of volunteers and NHW coordinators and inability to attract younger members
- reduced levels of volunteerism
- resistance to change and to new technologies within the NHW movement
- perceptions of irrelevance and doubts as to the future role of NHW
- perceived lack of commitment from Victoria Police
- poor marketing at local and state level
- poor performance measures.

The report made the following recommendations to reinvigorate the program to address contemporary crime concerns and align the program with police objectives:

- strengthen communications and working relationships between the board, NHW coordinators and volunteers to avoid inefficiencies and 'turf wars' (similar to those examined in CRM 52)
- broaden NHW aims to include contemporary problem areas of graffiti, wilful criminal damage and 'hoon' driving
- utilise new technologies including digital photography, email newsletters and security surveillance
- appoint a chief executive officer to oversee the program to professionalise NHW operations.

References

De Ridder T & Johns R 2007. *Review of Neighbourhood Watch: final report and recommendations for consideration*. Melbourne: Victoria Police

Fleming J 2005. 'Working Together': Neighbourhood Watch, reassurance policing and the potential of partnerships. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 303.
<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi303.html>