

***Neighbourhood Watch as an effective
crime prevention method in Estonia***

by

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Useful Concepts

Neighbourhood Watch (NHW) - A Neighbourhood Watch (also called a crime watch or neighbourhood crime watch) is a citizens' organisation devoted to the prevention of crime and vandalism within a neighbourhood. It is not a vigilante organisation, since members are expected not to directly intervene in possible criminal activity. Instead, Neighbourhood Watch members are to stay alert to unusual activity and contact the authorities.

Neighbourhood Watch sector – an area (apartment block(s) or private houses) where people are organising Neighbourhood Watch.

Neighbourhood Watch leader – a person who is elected from Neighbourhood Watch sector members and who represents the Neighbourhood Watch sector in relation with other cooperation partners.

The Association – Estonian Neighbourhood Watch Association. This is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) which is organising and developing Neighbourhood Watch movement in Estonia.

Introduction

Neighbourhood Watch is well-known community action where people's communication and cooperation helps to create safe a living environment. The implementation of Neighbourhood Watch varies in different countries but the common keyword is the role of community members. It is a theory whereby everybody has a duty and opportunity to act towards safer homes. In this article the author gives an overview of the Neighbourhood Watch movement in Estonia. The first section describes the history of Neighbourhood Watch and in second, there is a description of how Neighbourhood Watch works in Estonia. In third section there is information about the results of Neighbourhood Watch in Estonia and the last section describes the difficulties faced during the implementation of the actions.

1. History of Neighbourhood Watch.

Neighbourhood Watch, as it is known today, began in the United States in the 1970s in order to combat the escalating rate of crime. In 1981 similar schemes began in the United Kingdom. The Neighbourhood Watch concept is widespread within the western world, particularly the USA, Canada, UK, New Zealand, Singapore and Australia.

The Neighbourhood Watch scheme in the United Kingdom is a partnership where people come together to make their communities safer. It involves the police, community safety departments of local authorities, other voluntary organisations and, above all, individuals and families who want to make their neighbourhoods better places. It aims to help people protect themselves and their properties and to reduce the fear of crime by means of improved home security, greater vigilance, the accurate reporting of suspicious incidents to the police and fostering a community spirit. The UK's first Neighbourhood Watch was set up in 1982 and 10 million people are now claimed to be members of different Neighbourhood Watch schemes.

1.1 Estonian Neighbourhood Watch movement

The Estonian Neighbourhood Watch had its roots in people's fear of crime and their desire to protect themselves. The Estonian NHW model was developed, following the UK's example. The model has changed over the course of time, and through the influence of local conditions and has achieved the necessary approach which works well in Estonia.

ENHW is an association, founded on May 5th, 2000 as a civic initiative, whose goal is to increase of sense of security of in and around homes by the inhabitant's own active practice of Neighbourhood Watch. This was the citizens' reaction towards the dramatic cut of the number of police officers in 2000. The primary aim of this organisation is to raise interest among inhabitants of private houses as well as apartment buildings towards Neighbourhood Watch and to inform them of the goal, principles and potential of Neighbourhood Watch.

To achieve this aim, the Association facilitates the forming of non-governmental associations and movements dealing with Neighbourhood Watch and supports their activities, introduces principles of Neighbourhood Watch, publishes print-outs and carries out training, and develops cooperation with state and municipal governments, police and other institutions.

The task of the Association is to be an organisation that unites non-governmental associations and people dealing with Neighbourhood Watch, to share information and training with its members. The Association acts on behalf of its members in finding partners and in the development of cooperation with them.

2. How does Neighbourhood Watch work?

The first condition of starting Neighbourhood Watch in a district is that people should realise that they both need and want to participate in this movement. If the initiative comes from the police or the Association, then they probably start with NHW but the activity might not be so effective. So if there is initiative within one area then it is important that they receive adequate information about NHW. Usually the people organise a meeting and the representative of the Association (with police if possible) comes to introduce the potential of NHW. Then people can decide – is this what they need and do they want to participate in NHW?

If they want to join a NHW, the first step is to gather their data – name, address, e-mail, telephone number(s), car number and colour. Each participant confirms with his/her signature that they agree to the using of this data in NHW activities. After the meeting there is enough time for everybody to sign on to the NHW scheme if they are interested. It is of course possible to join or leave the scheme at a later date. This data will be updated at least once a year but usually after each new member joins or when somebody leaves the NHW scheme.

The members of NHW sector choose a leader who will represent them in the cooperation agreement, in NHW meetings and who will be a contact person for other institutions. One further obligation of the NHW sector leader is to update the data of NHW members.

2.1. Neighbourhood Watch cooperation agreement

Once the data of the NHW members is gathered, the next step is to sign the contract. It is a cooperation contract between four (in Tallinn five) parties - NHW sector, the police, the local government and the Association (in Tallinn also the Municipality police). The contract is a joint agreement that we all make an effort to promote greater safety in this area and we work in close cooperation. The contract is signed by the highest ranking person in each party – NHW sector leader (elected by the members of the NHW sector), the mayor, the head of the district police and the managing director of the Association. The process of contract signing is very important to people who have just joined the NHW. They can see that their activity is noticed and recognised at the highest level of authorities and of course it is a good opportunity to discuss the possible solutions to the problems which the NHW sector might have.

2.2. What happens after the agreement?

After the contract signing the members of NHW sector will receive a folder, which contains a different kind of advice-leaflet and information booklets about safety. Furthermore there is a document with the contact details of their neighbours and some information about our cooperation partners in the field of safety.

The Neighbourhood Watch sector members are given signs by the Association, so that strangers can see that people living in this particular area are observant and will react if they see something suspicious.

2.3. The actions of Neighbourhood Watch members

The main principle of NHW is that if you see something suspicious, you do react. How does one know how to react? How does one know when to call the neighbour, the police or the local government? Usually new members of NHW have such questions. To answer those questions and give basic information about safety, the Association organises training. This meeting, where all the members of the NHW sector are invited, is usually held shortly after the signing of the agreement. The Association, the police and the local government send their

representatives to the meeting to share information and answer questions. If neighbours weren't familiar with each other previously, this meeting is a good opportunity to get to know each other.

2.4. The document with contact numbers.

As mentioned in paragraph two, members of NHW sector give contact details to the NHW sector leader. The Association makes a document with the details of neighbours, police, local government contacts and Association contacts. All emergency numbers are included as well. This document helps the neighbours to know how to react if there is some kind of problem. For example if a member sees a stranger in his neighbour's garden, he can make a call to the neighbour and share this information. If it is clear that there should be nobody in the garden, they will call the police and a possible theft will be prevented. Or another example from the apartment building, where one woman notices that there is water dripping from the ceiling. She goes to the upstairs neighbour's apartment but they are out. She has the neighbour's contact details in her NHW folder, so can make a call to prevent worse damage. Those examples are from everyday life and could happen to anybody. Usually we tend not to notice such things (first example) or we can do nothing and just wait for neighbour (second example). In Neighbourhood Watch it is important that you NOTICE and then you REACT. Learn to notice comes with time and experience but also by following the example of other people. The basic information about how to react is shared in the first training meeting of the NHW sector and whenever the need for new knowledge appears.

Being part of a Neighbourhood Watch should be integrated into each member's everyday life. There are not many extra duties or obligations for a NHW member. The NHW sector leader is a contact person for other cooperation parties and if there are meetings, this person is invited to represent the NHW sector. Once a year the Association organises a general meeting where all the NHW sector leaders are invited. This is a meeting to develop the Association and to discuss future activities.

2.5. Neighbourhood Watch patrols.

Usually it is the opening question in NHW's first meeting "do we have to start patrolling?" In Estonia patrolling has a very small part in the NHW movement. It is not very common to see NHW patrols in the Neighbourhood Watch area. However, there are some sectors where patrols are organised. The Association supplies them with patrolling vests, the local police give a short basic training - what to look for and how to react. The idea is that NHW patrols are the eyes and ears of the police, if they notice something where intervention is necessary, they will call the police, but shouldn't intervene themselves. The police are aware of the NHW sectors where people go patrol. Patrolling is voluntary and the Association supports the initiative of NHW members.

3. The impact of the Neighbourhood Watch movement in Estonia.

Neighbourhood Watch has been practiced in Estonia for about seven and a half years. The members usually feel and notice the results of their activity but what is the overall impact? Is NHW an effective model for reducing fear of crime and preventing crimes? To get answers to those questions the Association ordered surveys from the University of Tartu. The first survey was conducted in 2004, and the second in 2006. In 2007, the Ministry of Justice conducted the audit of the Association' activities during the period of 2003-2006. The next survey by the University of Tartu is planned to take place at the end of 2008.

In the study which was conducted by the University of Tartu the author describes the latest survey which was conducted in 2006. The aim was to find out how the members of NHW sector evaluate the effectiveness of NHW, how they rate the cooperation with the police, the local government and also the Association. Also we wanted to know suggestions for future activities.

The target group was selected from the biggest areas where NHWs operate – Tallinn city, Harju and Viljandi county. The sample consisted of 283 respondents (members of different NHW sectors) who were interviewed by telephone. The questionnaire included 36 questions which were divided into different sections.

The first section gave an overview of how the respondents evaluate the NHW in terms of crime prevention. 67% of respondents said that their home has become safer after starting with NHW. 72% believe that help is now closer than before. 18% of respondents know that in their sector a crime has been prevented, while 10% know a case where the action of NHW has helped to catch a criminal. This should be considered a very good result considering how rarely we actually witness a crime. Also this data is not available anywhere else, as the police only records crimes committed, not the prevented ones.

The second section of the interview concerned relations between neighbours. 13% of respondents said relations have improved after starting NHW. The rest reported relations remained the same. The third section described the actions of the NHW sector. 48% of respondents have helped to improve safety within the NHW sector (new locks, safety doors, gates, patrolling etc).

We also asked about the motivation to participate in NHW activities. The main motivation is the need but demonstrated results are also important. So if all is peaceful and there are no problems, people do not need to think about NHW, it is integrated in their everyday life. This seems a good result since NHW shouldn't be guarding and watching but rather acting when intervention is needed.

The survey also gave information about relations between the NHW sector and the police and the local government. 20% of respondents think that the cooperation with the police has im-

proved. But most of the respondents consider the cooperation with the police to be at the same level as before the NHW participation. Cooperation can not be one-sided and there is enough room for development for both the police force and NHW members.

Cooperation with the local government is occasional and many respondents do not actually know anything about it. This is also a field where improvements are necessary. The last section of the survey was about the need for training. Almost every respondent indicated the need for some kind of training – 83% of respondents request training in how to act in an emergency situation, 75% need training about law enforcement legislation, 71% need information about how to make their home safer (technical possibilities) and 71% need more information about how to improve NHW activities in their district. This is the actual working field for the Association because one of our aims is to offer varied training to our members. But there is one problem that makes it difficult to satisfy the need for training. In the research there was also a question about the time to take part in this training, and it emerged that only half of the respondents actually have enough time to take part in the training. So we can not draw conclusions here that organising training will improve the quality of NHW activity, because many people simply do not have time to participate. But this is a subject where the Association has to find a solution with NHW members.

To sum up the survey, the results show that NHW helps to prevent crime and reduce the fear of crime. The members of NHW know that the necessary help is closer and if necessary, they can cooperate with their neighbours. The Association coordinates the work of the NHW sector - the main duties are counselling, organising training and compiling information documents. The unique cooperation model of local people, the local government, the police and organisation who coordinate the structure has received the support of all parties and is effective in preventing crime and reducing the fear of crime.

A brief note about the audit of actions which was conducted by the Estonian Ministry of Justice in autumn 2007. The Ministry of Justice has supported financially the Association's actions and the main aim of this audit was to find out if the work which has been done with their support has been effective and had a positive influence on the target group. The auditor studied the reports of the Association's work between 2003-2006, interviewed the managing director of the Association and also conducted a survey among NHW sector leaders. The auditor's final report suggests that Neighbourhood Watch is an effective method to prevent crime and to increase the safety in one community. Furthermore, Neighbourhood Watch gives people the opportunity to change their community positively, and not just to wait for somebody else to act. The auditor recommended continuing the implementation of NHW.

The Association has tried to get crime statistics from the police as well, but this is complicated because of the structure of the database. Unfortunately it is therefore not possible to relay on police statistics and analyse the effect of NHW. Still, in 2006 one police officer in Lasnamäe, a city district of Tallinn, made a comparison between two apartment houses. The blocks were situated closely to each other and both had 90 apartments. In one block there was

NHW, in the other there was not. The block with NHW had no crime against property during the period of January- December 2005, whereas the other had 7 offences. It is not possible to draw deep conclusions from this example, but this is here just to support the surveys described above.

4. Difficulties in implementing Neighbourhood Watch.

The text above can lead to the impression that NHW is the magical solution for every problem. But crime still exists, people become victims and that also happens in NHW sectors. When considering the difficulties in implementing NHW in Estonia we should start with Estonians' values, attitudes, history, traditions and nature. We are developing from a society where everything was organised and people should not, or actually were not, allowed to intervene in the functioning of society. Society in Estonia has now been organised differently for some decades, but many people still think that somebody else is responsible for the individual's life, actions and safety. People say that we have police and safety companies – they work towards our safety, so why is Neighbourhood Watch necessary? This is the mindset of many people in Estonia and no-one else but themselves can change this belief.

One problem that we have noticed is passiveness and a lack of knowledge. It concerns the values – what is important and how one tries to live one's life. It is noticeable in everyday life in traffic, in relations, at work. It is hard to change this attitude and it can also damage the positive enthusiasm of others. But here it is possible to draw a parallel with school atmosphere – if the majority have a positive attitude towards learning in a classroom, and the main values are friendship, helpful and empathic relations, the whole class has a positive atmosphere. In society generally, it is the same, so the solutions in this case would be a more positive example to follow.

The third difficulty is related to the development of nongovernmental organisations and it may be that these problems are specific to Estonia. It regards financing crime prevention programmes, and financing the implementation of all the activities which are mentioned in this article. NGO Estonian Neighbourhood Watch budget consists of different financial sources: 50% from local governments, 30% from the Ministry of Justice, 10% membership fees and 10% sponsorship. The state thinks that NHW members who participate and benefit from the movement should contribute 50% towards its budget. On the other hand, the NGO offers a service – an effective crime prevention programme which is the only of that kind in Estonia. Should the state have a long term contract with NGO since crime against property has the largest share of criminal offences (63% in 2006)? Or should the local government pay for this, as the direct user of the service? Those questions are raised every year and there is no straightforward answer. Still we have chosen to adapt our actions to the current situation and we are working towards better conditions both for us and for other NGOs who are in a similar situation.

Conclusion

In Estonia there are 365 Neighbourhood Watch sectors and 9862 members of NHW (10.12.2007). Over the course of seven years, the organisation has found a place in Estonian society and now people turn to it to find information about NHW, whereas just a few years ago NHW sent members around door-to-door, to ask if people would be interested in joining. It shows that NHW is necessary and helps to fill a place in society where neighbours can get to know each other and work in cooperation.

It is said that Estonians are big individualists, who tend to prefer being alone rather than working in a group. Our experience shows that although it is difficult to start, with good leadership and common goals there can be really positive and effective cooperation.

The key to the success of NHW is cooperation and the exchange of information between house/apartments owners, the local government and the police. Living in an apartment building or private house where you know your neighbours and have contact with them, you can be sure that in case of trouble they can help you.

If neighbours know each other, social control increases among the inhabitants – it is more embarrassing to misbehave if all the people are acquainted. Kids and young people would probably also behave when they realise that everyone knows their parents.

Communicating with the neighbours certainly gives many good ideas about how to make the staircases, playgrounds, parking lots or cellars a safer place. If the whole neighbourhood supports someone's idea, it gets a wider base and it is easier to put it into practice.

NGO Estonian Neighbourhood Watch has changed significantly since the beginning. Now that more attention is accorded to the quality of NHW sectors, the number of sectors is not of primary importance, compared to how they work. Also the organisation has become the only means of representing people's interest in safety and crime prevention, we are unique not only in Estonia but also in the whole world. So we are an influential partner for national and local government, police as well as security, insurance and lock companies.

In the future the NHW movement should receive greater attention in society since the people's role in creating safer living environments is increasing. But they need some tools to start caring for their homes and communities. They need the chance to act on the lowest level – their home, neighbourhood, but also the highest – state and government level. The NGO Estonian Neighbourhood Watch gives them the opportunity. It just takes some activity, caring and willing!

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