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Implementing Business Watch: Problems and Solutions

Kate Charlton and Natalie Taylor

While community-based crime prevention initiatives have become popular in recent years as a means of combating crime, actual evaluations have rarely been documented. One initiative on which very little research has been conducted is Business Watch (which has been present for about 20 years). This paper outlines the results of a study that evaluated the processes of a Business Watch program through a survey in 2002 of the members of a business association which managed the scheme. The results point to a severe lack of awareness about the program by association members, which in turn resulted in low levels of participation. In addition, members found it difficult to contribute sufficient time and resources to the scheme. Together, these problems highlight the necessity of ensuring that the aims and objectives of such programs are well developed, that the components which comprise the program are designed to meet those objectives, that the time and resources required by proprietors to become involved are not too onerous and that the program is widely publicised prior to its commencement. The recommendations in this paper should help to guide the development of future Business Watch programs and to increase the likelihood of their success.

Adam Graycar
Director

In acknowledgement of the fact that it is difficult for authorities and police to combat crime alone, attempts to involve the community in crime prevention campaigns have become popular in recent years. One well-known type of community crime prevention initiative is Neighbourhood Watch, which began permeating suburban areas in the 1980s and has continued with similar popularity to the present (Laycock & Tilley 1995; Mukherjee & Wilson 1987). These programs centre on the principle of increasing natural surveillance in the local area, noting suspicious behaviour and then alerting the relevant authorities and/or potential victim. In theory, this was intended to reduce crime through potential criminals becoming aware of the program (via signposting and publicity) and as a result becoming less likely to target that particular area for fear of apprehension. Neighbourhood Watch schemes were also thought to reduce fear of crime, through participants being more actively involved in crime prevention, and community ties being strengthened. However, despite good intentions, Neighbourhood Watch programs have had only varying success in reducing crime and fear of crime, with some such as "cocoon watch" (a scheme which targets repeat victims and encourages residents to form a cocoon around the vulnerable home) proving more effective than others (Laycock & Tilley 1995; Pease 1991).

As a result of the popularity of Neighbourhood Watch, other "watch" schemes arose with similar objectives. Business Watch (a community scheme aimed at preventing crime against businesses through surveillance and other activities) is one such spin-off, with business owners being eager to reduce rates of crime against their business. It should be noted, however, that although Business Watch originally sprang from the Neighbourhood Watch concept of "watching" the local area, Business Watch programs generally involve wider crime prevention

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
OF CRIMINOLOGY

trends

&

issues

in crime and criminal justice

February 2003

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24289 5



Australian Institute
of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9221

Fax: 02 6260 9201

For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series, visit the AIC web site at:

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activities than simply "watching" (Thomas 1999). This divergence stems partly from the fact that, contrary to their residential counterparts, business proprietors do not generally have the time, capacity or necessarily the inclination to physically watch the local area.

Despite initial interest in the scheme, little research has been published about Business Watch, resulting in a substantial gap in the literature both in describing the programs and in evaluating them. In the 1980s, New South Wales police launched Business Watch as a preventive option for local businesses, yet despite the published articles promoting the scheme (see, for example, Daley 1986; Security Australia 1986a, 1986b, 1987) no information about its level of success has since been forthcoming.

Similarly in the United Kingdom there is a considerable disparity between the apparent popularity of Business Watch and the published literature. Although Business Watch has been incorporated into some UK Home Office and policing programs designed to prevent crime against business (see Pengelly 1997; Tilley 1998; Tilley & Hopkins 1998) - which have not resulted in conclusive evidence to support or reject Business Watch as an effective crime prevention tool—only one article has been published which details an evaluation of a Business Watch program (Thomas 1999). This study surveyed participants in two schemes in place at industrial estates in England and investigated the degree to which participants were involved with the program and the perceived effectiveness of Business Watch in reducing crime. More than half the respondents in both estates felt that crime had reduced since the implementation of Business Watch, and 95 per cent and 82 per cent of respondents at each estate respectively felt that the program was "an effective security management strategy for industrial estates" (Thomas 1999, p. 59). However, despite the encouraging results, the very low survey response rate (6.4 per cent on one estate, and 6.7 per cent on the other) brings the validity and wider applicability of the results into question.

The present paper aims to address the paucity of evaluative research by describing a Business Watch program in Australia and outlining a process evaluation—the first of its kind to measure Business Watch in Australia.

What is Business Watch?

Business Watch schemes can entail a variety of components, depending on the objectives of the scheme, the financial resources available, and the size and involvement of the participating membership. As might be expected, a Business Watch program may include a system of alerting fellow businesses or the relevant authorities to suspicious or potentially criminal activity in the area. This information can then be filtered through a network (of phone numbers or contacts) without the need for the initiating business to tell each business in the chain.

A Business Watch scheme may also include improving the level of business operators' crime and security knowledge. Educational aspects of a program may entail the distribution of materials designed to improve a business operator's understanding of the need for security measures, the risks posed to them in running a small business and information about conducting security audits. Other activities in a program may include property marking (the engraving or marking of valuables to prevent their theft and to enable easier return by police), and the use of advertising material such as stickers or signs to be placed as a deterrent for criminals.

As with all community-based initiatives, however, success will depend heavily on the combined efforts, commitment and cooperation of all members. Understanding whether and how Business Watch programs are effective as a crime prevention tool therefore requires a number of questions to be answered. The process evaluation described in this paper attempts to address this issue by investigating the following:

- What percentage of businesses being targeted were aware of the program's existence?
- How many businesses became actively involved in the scheme?

- What were the reasons for non-involvement by businesses?
- What did business proprietors believe were the objectives of the program?
- Did those who got involved perceive the program to have been effective?
- How willing were proprietors to be involved in a future Business Watch program?

A Business Watch Program Under Analysis

In September and October 2002, the Australian Institute of Criminology conducted a process evaluation of a Business Watch program currently underway in the Northern Territory. This area of Australia is sparsely populated, with only 210,700 residents (approximately one per cent of Australia's entire population) located in a territory occupying approximately 17 per cent of Australia's total land mass (ABS 2002a, 2002b). Close to 70,000 of these residents are located in the capital city of Darwin, with the remainder in "satellite" centres close to Darwin, and other regional centres (NT Government 2002).

The Business Watch program was phased in over approximately eight months within an existing business association (comprising 256 businesses) from August 2000 until early 2001 when some external funding for the purpose was accessed. The impetus for the scheme was a spate of burglaries experienced by members of the association at the time, resulting in a suggestion by the police (made at a monthly association meeting) that a Business Watch scheme be established. The program was discussed at meetings (however only a small proportion of members attend meetings) and a brief letter was sent to members detailing a proposed telephone alert network (however this letter did not elaborate on the purpose of the program and its other components).

It should be noted that as different components of the program were phased in at different stages, it was not possible to assess the success of the program in reducing crime by comparing current victimisation data with data from

before implementation (as no specific date marked commencement of the program). The evaluation measures used in this study are therefore related to levels of awareness and involvement in the scheme and perceptions of effectiveness by members.

The scheme in the Territory incorporated several components. Educational aspects in relation to business crime prevention (in particular conducting safety and security audits) were incorporated into monthly meetings, with materials and experts provided by police and other sources. Publicity materials were distributed, with stickers sent out to members to attach to their premises, and identification numbers were provided for the purpose of property marking. At the commencement of the program a telephone network was established in order to link businesses into various "zones", with members expected to alert the other businesses in their zone to any suspicious or criminal activity occurring in the area. Unfortunately that component of the program did not survive due to logistical difficulties in maintaining the network.

The evaluation comprised a mail-out survey to the entire membership of the association (256 business proprietors). The questionnaires were posted with reply-paid envelopes enclosed in an initial mail-out in early September 2002, which was subsequently followed by a reminder letter and additional envelope (three weeks later) and a second mail-out of questionnaires in October 2002 (with reply-paid envelopes enclosed). These sustained efforts resulted in a response rate of 42 per cent (107 respondents). The questionnaire included items relating to awareness and involvement in Business Watch, perceptions of the program and various demographic items about the business. The questionnaire was specifically designed, however, to address the six questions listed above.

The Sample

The responding businesses were largely diverse, which would be expected given the diverse membership of the association

from which the sample was drawn. Thirty per cent had an annual turnover greater than \$1 million but less than \$5 million, while 15 per cent had a turnover higher than \$5 million and 33 per cent had revenue of less than \$500,000. Eighty-six per cent of businesses were small, employing fewer than 20 full-time staff. Over two-thirds of the sample stated that their business had a single address. Almost half of the businesses were located on industrial estates, with others commonly at shopping centres or home-based (13 per cent for each).

In order to assess the type of business responding, proprietors were asked to write a very brief description of their business (for example, newsagency, service station), and these descriptions were used to derive a category of business based on ANZSIC industry classifications (ABS 1993). The sample was then compared with the original business association to determine how representative it was in terms of business type. For the five most common categories (manufacturing, retail, wholesale, construction, and property and business services) proportions of each of these categories in the population and sample were largely consistent, although property and business services were slightly over-represented (see Table 1).

Degree of Awareness and Involvement in Business Watch

An important goal of the survey was to accurately quantify the number of members who had become aware of and participated in the Business Watch program, as this information is often not available to the administrators of a scheme but is

Table 1: Representativeness of the sample, by the five most common ANZSIC categories

	Population %	Sample %
Manufacturing	13	15
Construction	10	8
Retail	25	21
Wholesale	5	5
Property & business services	15	24

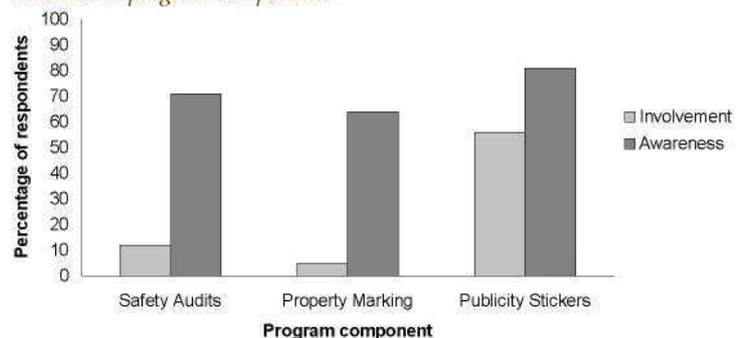
Source: AIC Business Watch survey 2002 [computer file]

crucial if a program is to have any chance of success. Of the entire sample, 70 per cent were aware that the program existed (prior to receiving the questionnaire), with the remaining 30 per cent unaware that a Business Watch program was in place. Those who indicated that they were aware of the program were also asked about their familiarity with its individual components, such as safety audits (a focus of the educational materials and discussions), property marking, and publicity stickers. It should be noted that although meetings were a component of Business Watch, members were not asked about their awareness of this element because the meetings are an integral part of the association (they are used as a platform for many issues, not just Business Watch) therefore all members would know about them.

Figure 1 shows that only about two-thirds of members who were aware of the program knew about each component, indicating that dissemination of information to participants is a critical issue for such programs.

In addition to awareness, respondents were asked about their level of involvement with each of the components (Figure 1). While approximately 50 per cent of

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents aware of Business Watch (N=75) who were aware of and involved in program components



Source: AIC Business Watch survey 2002 [computer file]

participants aware of the Business Watch program had attended at least one meeting in the 2001-02 financial year:

- only one in 12 members aware of the property marking function actually participated and marked their property in accordance with the guidelines;
- only one in six members aware of safety and security audits conducted a safety audit; but
- approximately two-thirds of members who were aware of the Business Watch stickers (publicity material) had affixed the item prominently.

It is noteworthy that, of all the program components, the sticker required the least effort on the part of proprietors and was the activity most commonly performed.

Reasons for Non-involvement

In order to ascertain areas for improvement, and understand the constraints on participation, respondents who indicated that they were not involved with aspects of the program were asked to indicate why. In relation to involvement with safety audits, property marking and meetings, 32,38 and 76 per cent of non-involved respondents respectively indicated that they lacked the time to participate in these components. Other respondents varied on reasons for non-participation with examples being:

- a belief that the particular component was not useful;
- a simple unwillingness or lack of enthusiasm on the part of the participant; or
- the presence of other security systems at their business.

Perceived Objectives of the Business Watch Program

In order to measure respondents' comprehension of the objectives of Business Watch, members who indicated that they were aware of the program (70 per cent of all respondents) were asked to choose statements which reflected their understanding of what such a program was primarily meant to achieve. (As respondents could select more than one statement, the data overlap and totals are greater

Table 2: Perceptions of the success of Business Watch by those involved with the program and/or its components

Statement	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %	Don't know %	Total %
Business Watch reduced crime against my business (N=67)	18	31	9	39	97
Business Watch reduced my fear of crime (N=67)	16	51	13	18	98
Meetings provided me with useful information (N=37)	51	19	5	22	97
Stickers deterred offenders from my business (N=42)	0	29	43	28	100

Note: Some rows do not total 100 per cent due to the small percentage of missing data. The Ns are different for each row as results are only presented for those members who became involved with each component (or in the case of the first two rows, any aspect of the program).

Source: AIC Business Watch survey 2002 [computer file]

than 100 per cent.) Fifty-six per cent believed the purpose was to encourage the entire business community to share information with each other about crime prevention, 39 per cent believed the purpose was to alert fellow businesses to suspicious activity, and 27 per cent thought it was to promote individual crime prevention. A small number (four per cent) was unable to make a judgment about the purpose of Business Watch. These results clearly indicate substantial confusion about the objectives of the program.

Perceived Effectiveness of Business Watch

To gauge the perceived effectiveness of the Business Watch scheme, members who were involved with the scheme, and/or an individual element (whichever was applicable) were asked to assess whether they felt the program had reduced crime overall, and whether the individual components had reached objectives (for example, meetings providing useful information about reducing crime against business). The results from these analyses (excluding those relating to property marking and safety audits as the number of respondents who participated in these and could therefore pass comment was too low for meaningful results) are presented in Table 2.

For those components included in the table, and the overall program, the majority of respondents were simply unable to provide an assessment of the effectiveness of the program (possibly due to the lack of awareness and

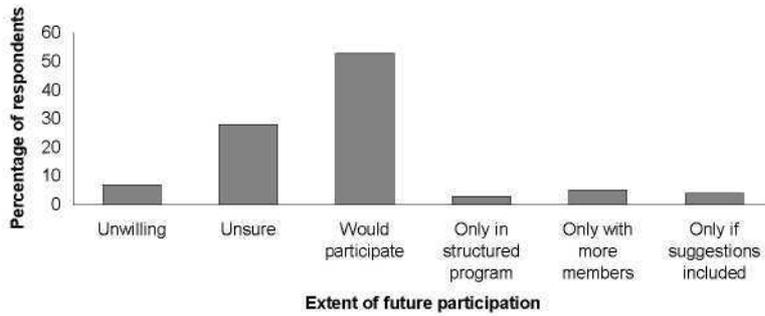
understanding of the nature of the scheme and its purposes). In terms of the overall perceived reductions in crime and fear of crime, only 18 and 16 per cent of respondents respectively agreed that these objectives had been met while the large majority of respondents could not say. This perceived lack of effectiveness of the individual components will be discussed in subsequent sections, when we investigate reasons why Business Watch schemes can be less than optimal, and suggest paths to improvement.

Willingness to Participate in a Future Business Watch Program

A final consideration was the continued interest in Business Watch; that is, the extent to which respondents who were aware of the previous program were willing to participate in a future program. This could be in the context of a different program, a similar one or not at all. This question was included as it was thought to be an indicator of the perceived importance and value placed on Business Watch as a crime prevention tool. The results are provided in Figure 2.

It can be seen that while a considerable number of members who were aware of the existing program indicated a willingness to participate in a similar program in the future (53 per cent), 28 per cent were unsure and seven per cent unwilling. Some members were only willing to participate if the program was amended, either with more members getting involved, a more structured program or by incorporating their own suggestions

Figure 2: Willingness to participate in a future Business Watch scheme for members aware of the program (N=75)



Source: AIC Business Watch survey 2002 [computer file]

(for example, improving the timeliness of the alerting system, greater publicity of the scheme). This means that almost half of the businesses aware of the current program were, for various reasons, unwilling to commit to future involvement in Business Watch, at least as it presently stood. This finding has important implications for the program administrators because the current program (without changes) was still in place and had the potential to be for some time in the future.

Obstacles and Solutions

This study has illustrated the level of difficulty experienced in the implementation of a Business Watch program. Although reasons for this difficulty have been alluded to, the following will examine the problems in more detail and suggest possible solutions for Business Watch managers.

The problems experienced appear to revolve around the following:

- lack of time on the part of participants and program administrators;
- lack of enthusiasm throughout the broader membership;
- the competitive nature of business proprietors;
- broader membership being unaware of the program due to insufficient publicity;
- program design having unrealistic expectations for members;
- specific objectives not being articulated prior to commencement; and
- little or no evaluation.

The Problem of Time

A major problem which faces initiators of a Business Watch scheme is the considerable lack of time

available to both the developers of the program, and the proprietors required to participate. The managers of a scheme may be volunteers (as was the case in the present scheme), choosing to use their own time to manage Business Watch in addition to their own business. This can prove very difficult, and result in the more time-consuming components of the program being abandoned (as occurred in the telephone alert network described earlier). Business proprietors who are to be involved in the program as members may also lack the time to invest in crime prevention and thus either not become involved at all, or limit their involvement to those components which require minimal time and effort (as was seen in the present study with the higher uptake of stickers than other elements).

In order to combat these issues, individual components should be designed to maximise the likelihood of people wanting to be involved, and the probability that they will get involved. This means ensuring that realistic estimates of time and effort required to be involved are made and assessed, that the financial costs of involvement are not too great for members, and that participation does not require the use of equipment which members do not have. For instance, the engraving of valuables was one activity rarely engaged in by respondents in the present program—to increase participation in this activity an engraver could perhaps be provided, or even a service allowing proprietors to leave their valuables with a central manager who then arranges for them to be engraved. This would reduce the time, effort and resources required by proprietors

and may increase the likelihood of their involvement in this component.

Enthusiasm and Competition

In addition to overcoming the time and effort problem, a program must also actively harness interest and enthusiasm throughout the broader membership. Often this can be a challenge as some members may feel that their involvement would be a waste of time, particularly if they were not suffering as much crime as other businesses. Related to this issue is the problem of business owners being accustomed to competing rather than cooperating with one another (for business, customers, profit and so on). This could make them reluctant to cooperate for the common goal of preventing crime. This can especially be the case when some businesses are being victimised often while others remain relatively untouched, as those who are not suffering may be less inclined to take the time to help a competitor.

While this is a rather difficult issue to address, a number of suggestions are offered. First, business proprietors should be properly informed of the risk of victimisation and, in the case of businesses that are receiving less than others, the need to drive criminal activity away from the whole area so they will continue to be protected from crime. It may be that they are currently protected because a nearby business has fewer security measures, but if that neighbour were to upgrade their protection, opportunistic criminals could turn their attentions elsewhere, putting others at risk.

Second, if lack of effort and/or time is a problem and the program has been designed accordingly (as was recommended earlier), then a concerted effort should be made to emphasise that the time and effort required by proprietors would be minimal.

Finally, in order to address the problem of businesses' competitive goals interfering with the cooperative nature of Business Watch, the program should not require proprietors to share information with other businesses which they might feel compromises their business (such as the level and types of crime experienced).

The Need for Information

Adequate dissemination of information related to the project is essential for the success of any Business Watch program. As demonstrated from the findings in this paper, many proprietors were unaware of the program, its elements and/or purpose. If business proprietors are not aware that a program exists or do not know how it works, it is hardly surprising that they do not get involved.

Hence, a substantial effort must be made to increase awareness and knowledge of the program in the local area (particularly throughout the business community). This could be done by informing local businesses of the full range of services available to them as members, explaining how the program will lead to reduced crime, what they will be able to achieve and how it will benefit their business. This process would best involve a targeted publicity campaign including detailed information about the program's objectives and design, an explanation of how the individual components of the program will lead to a reduction in crime and why it is necessary for all local businesses to become involved. This information could be distributed through the media, forging contacts with other community groups, letter drops and signposting.

Targeted Goals and Evaluation

Programs are often developed where the objectives of the scheme are not clearly established (Thomas 1999). In order for a Business Watch program to be effective, it must be geared toward specific goals and at some point after commencement it should be evaluated in terms of how well it met the defined goals. Designers of a scheme may wish to target a particular crime (for example, burglary or robbery) or a particular type of business (for example, retail or industrial), however it is important that such goals are specified first in order to tailor the program to meet these objectives. Once program goals are decided, the particular initiatives which are to comprise the program can be determined. As mentioned,

there are numerous options which can be selected for a Business Watch program but their inclusion will depend heavily on the aims and objectives of the program.

Finally, an outcome evaluation should be conducted some time after the commencement of the scheme. This evaluation should measure the degree to which the program met the goals defined in the planning stage. So this evaluation can be effective in measuring a reduction in crime (the common central goal of Business Watch), it is imperative that managers assess self-reported levels of crime prior to implementation in order to establish a baseline level.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the potential use of Business Watch as a community crime prevention initiative aimed at businesses, by conducting a process evaluation of a program currently in operation. Results from the present study have highlighted the problems which Business Watch programs can face, namely a lack of awareness and enthusiasm coupled with the scarce time and resources which business proprietors have to invest in crime prevention. However, as discussed above, there are steps which may be taken to overcome these issues. Moreover, it is crucial that further evaluative studies are conducted in order to establish whether programs are meeting objectives and whether they are worth pursuing as a crime prevention strategy for businesses. Certainly there is a market for Business Watch, and should it be applied productively to the business community, a substantial contribution could be made to the field of crime prevention.

Acknowledgement

This paper is part of a project investigating crimes against small businesses funded by the National Crime Prevention program in the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department.

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Kate Charlton is a Research Assistant at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Dr Natalie Taylor is manager of the Social Policy and Crime Program at the AIC.



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:
Dr Adam Graycar, Director
Australian Institute of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

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Project no: 0035 Ethics no: PO37, PO39