

Crime Prevention and Security Management

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Vasco Lub

Neighbourhood Watch in a Digital Age

Between Crime Control and Culture of Control

palgrave
macmillan

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PREFACE

This book presents new and original research on the topic of neighbourhood watch as a form of community crime prevention, using Dutch data. Following the English-speaking world, neighbourhood watch schemes have become increasingly popular not only in the Netherlands, but also in other European countries. Yet the literature has been silent about this topic for a number of years, and shows several theoretical gaps. Moreover, securitization sentiments and technological innovations like social media have changed the landscape of coproduction in public safety, widening citizen's opportunities for situational control and their public involvement in safety issues. These developments make contemporary research on watch groups all the more timely.

Drawing from newly obtained data from 340 municipalities in the Netherlands and ethnographic fieldwork in four districts, the book will present original quantitative and qualitative data on how neighbourhood watch groups have developed in the Netherlands and illustrates how their actions contribute to lower crime levels and collective efficacy, advancing theoretical notions from the literature. However, this form of coproduction of public safety is not without its moral problems. Although innovations such as social media and smartphones have made the organisation, surveillance and deployment of neighbourhood watch groups more effective, they have simultaneously increased the risk of vigilantism. From the Dutch data, it becomes clear that stigmatisation, ethnic profiling and excessive social control are real issues, especially in suburban middle-class neighbourhoods. These findings—which are illustrated in the book through the ethnographic

fieldwork using ‘thick description’—nuance some of the traditional criminological and urban sociological notions about formal/informal social control that often locate risks of vigilantism solely in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Contrasting effects raise questions about how both the phenomenon of neighbourhood watch and the increasing popularity of community crime prevention in the digital age should be framed: as a welcome civic instrument of crime control, or as a social phenomenon adding to an undesirable culture of control. This topic will be discussed at the end of the book—in conjunction with some policy recommendations. The primary audiences for this book are criminologists, students in the social sciences, researchers on surveillance practices and social media, senior city officials, policy makers and anyone who studies multiple aspects of (digital) vigilantism or neighbourhood activism.

This research was accomplished thanks to the *Kenniswerkplaats Leefbare Wijken* with joint funding from Erasmus University Rotterdam, *Stadsbeheer* Rotterdam and the Rotterdam Security Council. A big word of thanks to these institutes. In addition, I thank my trainee Daisy Grönefeld, who tirelessly collected data about neighbourhood watch groups with municipalities and on the Internet. I also owe gratitude to my trainee Mathilda von Burg who assisted me in part of the fieldwork. Finally, thanks to Erik Snel and Godfried Engbersen of Erasmus University Rotterdam, and Steven Wierckx and Wendy van der Krift. Of course, the biggest word of thanks goes to the participants of this research. This includes all the municipalities who freely shared their information with me, but especially the neighbourhood watch teams who provided me with a look behind the scenes.

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SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Neighbourhood watch has been widely discussed, although the evidence on its effectiveness is mixed; there are reports of successes and failures on varying criteria. What is less in evidence is work focusing on how it operates. This is among the factors that make this book distinct, but it is not the only thing. You will also read about the influence of social media and the implications of this new type of surveillance; you will also learn more about how neighbourhood watch is practised in the Netherlands; about the roles of different actors, voluntary and professional in communities and the ways they work together or sometimes don't do so; and this text provides a much needed critique of neighbourhood watch.

The book is based on extensive qualitative research; Vasco Lub's style renders it an interesting read. Indeed, his work helpfully highlights the value of ethnographic work in criminological research. Although government policy has been supportive it will be encouraging to many that it is residents themselves that start most schemes. He finds that neighbourhood watch is alive and well albeit it that it is practised in diverse ways.

Lub provides revealing insights into the ways in which proactive patrolling of the streets takes place. Volunteers help tackle a range of community issues, not just crime and nuisance—including some serious offences like burglary—but also broader community issues such as reporting street lights that are not functioning and responding to illegal littering. In their work volunteers deal directly with the community of course, and in so doing engage with conflict situations, sometimes aware that official backup is not

guaranteed. The author discusses the implications providing a different take on how we should look at neighbourhood watch initiatives.

It has long been recognised in scholarly studies of voluntarism that to be effective unpaid personnel need to be effectively managed. This book ably supports that; voluntary activity is not an opt-out for the state sector albeit it appears it is sometimes treated that way. In one case the management of volunteers was undertaken by a consultancy firm throwing up more variations and possibilities for practice. As you will read the work of volunteers was only sometimes supported; some incidents were not responded to serving to undermine their work. Yet it was not just the lack of support that emerges as a problem, sometimes volunteer leaders were ineffective and this led to fall out including, in one case, mass resignations.

Lub spends time evaluating the various factors that are deemed to contribute to the effectiveness of neighbourhood watch. While he finds many benefits—including reducing the risk of vigilantism for communities and creating personal opportunities and benefits for volunteers—he also highlights the various ways in which this type of initiative is far from an unqualified good. All those interested in this measure, from either a scholarly or policy and practice perspective will find this book an essential read.

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Martin Gill

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