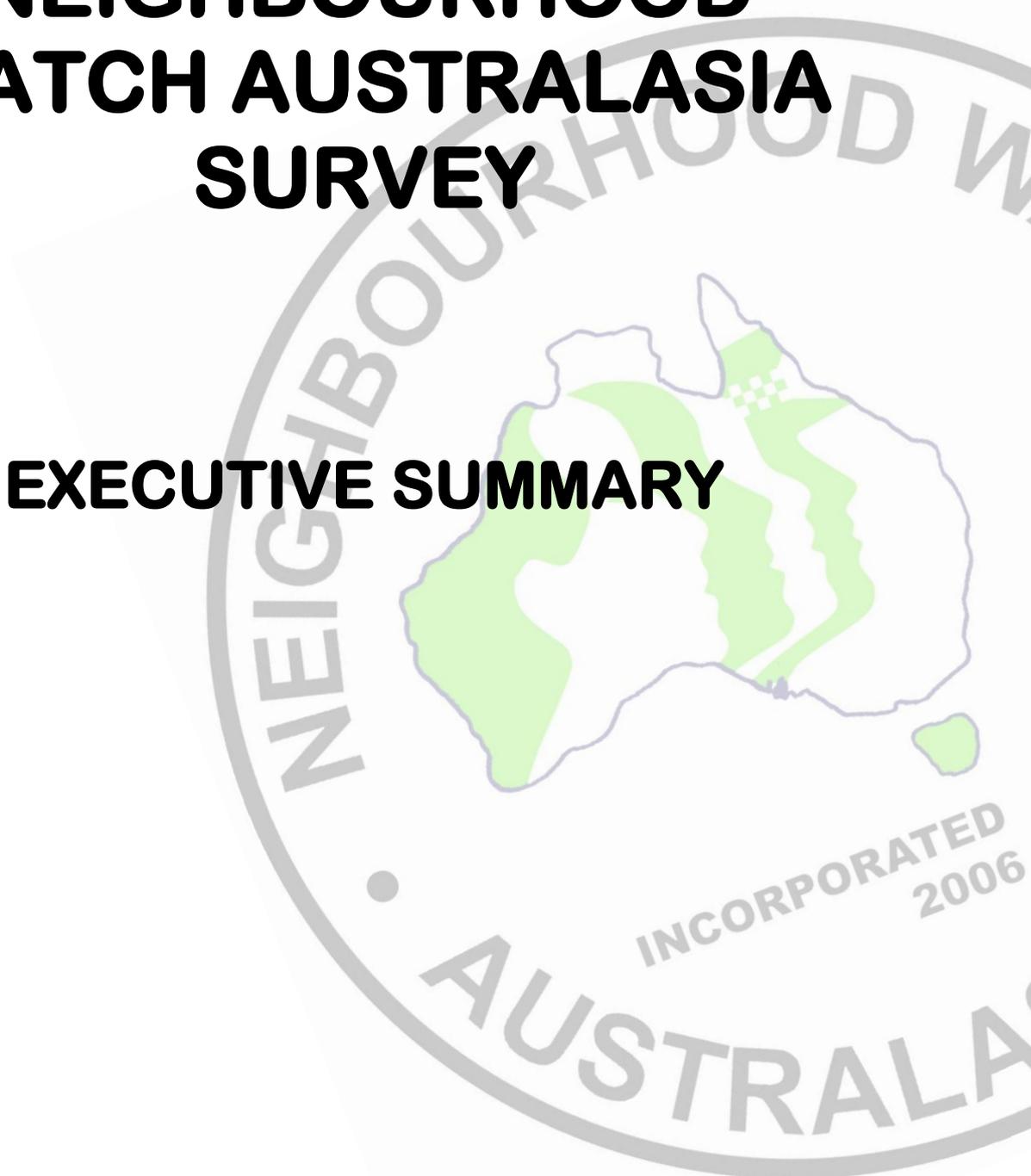


# **NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH AUSTRALASIA SURVEY**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**MARCH 2013**





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The Neighbourhood Watch Australasia Survey was undertaken in 2012.  
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## INTRODUCTION

One of the main explanations for high levels of crime, social disorder, and fear of crime in certain neighbourhoods has been the erosion of informal social control processes that are believed responsible for maintaining order (Rosenbaum, 1987). Similarly, over the past several decades discussions have been had about a declining sense of community and social cohesion within neighbourhoods. Community crime prevention programs such as *Neighbourhood Watch* have been recommended as a feasible and attractive solution to these crime-related neighbourhood conditions.

Neighbourhood Watch programs commenced in the 1960's and have grown to become the largest single crime-prevention activity in the world.<sup>1</sup> Neighbourhood Watch programs aim to reduce crime by having citizens watch out for and report suspicious activities to the police and to deter potential criminals from offending. These tasks are usually achieved by improving citizens' awareness of public safety, by reducing vulnerability to crime. One particularly important aspect of Neighbourhood Watch programs has been to bring about social interaction between residents of a community. Neighbourhood Watch programs can be initiated either by the public or the police.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH PROGRAMS

Given the significant number of resources and community involvement devoted to Neighbourhood Watch programs, scholars and policy makers have been interested in identifying whether Neighbourhood Watch programs are effective in reducing crime. Early studies that evaluated Neighbourhood Watch programs in the US, UK and Australia revealed a greater reduction in burglary levels in areas where Neighbourhood Watch had been introduced.<sup>ii</sup> More recently, Holloway, Bennett and Farrington (2008) undertook a worldwide systematic review of Neighbourhood Watch programs. They found that some evaluations revealed Neighbourhood Watch was associated with a reduction in crime, others showed that it was associated with an increase in crime, while others provided uncertain results. Taken as a whole, however, Holloway, Bennett and Farrington concluded that on balance Neighbourhood Watch did reduce crime.

One of the major limitations of these previous studies is that their focus was on the evaluation of crime outcomes. The studies were not interested in determining the impact that Neighbourhood Watch programs also had on people's fear of crime, residents' satisfaction with their communities, or on police-community relations. It has been acknowledged that there are many other advantages associated with Neighbourhood Watch programs that are not related to crime reduction outcomes, which include the following:

- Neighbourhood Watch allows individuals of a community who may have felt previously isolated and unknown to each other to form social relations. The advantage of this is that increased interaction between residents can foster social cohesion in communities previously marked by alienation and community apathy.
- Neighbourhood Watch has the potential to build positive interactions between police and community members. This is particularly important in neighbourhoods where police and the public may have been previously distant and distrustful of each other.
- Fear and anxiety associated with worrying about crime may decrease. By working with other community residents people may gain a sense that their neighbours are looking out for them, which may make them more willing to walk the streets, interact with their neighbours, and participate in social activities. So even if actual crime levels do not decrease as a result of a Neighbourhood Watch program, citizens may feel safer and less anxious about living in their community.<sup>iii</sup>

It was within this context that the Neighbourhood Watch Australasia Survey (referred to from now as the NHTWA Survey) was conceived.

## THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH AUSTRALASIA (NHW) SURVEY OVERVIEW: BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Neighbourhood Watch Australasia is the governing body of Neighbourhood Watch in Australia and incorporates Neighbourhood Support in New Zealand. While one of the major objectives of Neighbourhood Watch Australasia is to reduce crime in Neighbourhoods and to promote a sense of safety and security among residents, and importantly to reduce neighbourhood crime, its ideals also include:

- Strengthening community-police engagement and empowering communities; and
- Promoting greater social inclusion among communities leading to enhanced well-being and overall quality of life.

In 2012, Neighbourhood Watch Australasia made the decision to survey its community members about the value of being involved in a Neighbourhood Watch program. Rather than simply seek to address whether Neighbourhood Watch programs reduced crime in communities, however, Neighbourhood Watch Australasia was particularly interested in assessing public perceptions about the additional benefits offered by involvement in Neighbourhood Watch/Support programs.

The NHWA Survey was the first of its kind in Australia and New Zealand. It aimed to survey a broad sample of people involved in Neighbourhood Watch/Support programs throughout Australia and New Zealand on a range of topics. The NHWA Survey sampled members from each of the eight States and Territories of Australia and from both the North and South Islands of New Zealand (nine member jurisdictions across Australia and New Zealand combined). An overview of some of the key survey findings are presented in the sections below.

### Demographics of survey respondents

A total of 1,333 responses were received to the survey (1207 via electronic means and 126 via hard copy surveys). A total of 897 Australian NHW members participated in the survey, and 436 New Zealand Neighbourhood Support members participated, with the jurisdictional breakdown presented below in Table 1.

Jurisdiction	Percent
Queensland	19.7
New South Wales	11.1
Victoria	8.9
Australian Capital Territory	3.7
Tasmania	3.7
South Australia	12.3
Western Australia	11.5
Northern Territory	2.3
NZ – North island	24.5
NZ – South island	2.0
Postcode not provided* (* These 5 missing values were from Australian respondents)	0.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 Response by jurisdiction

## **Response by age group**

Persons aged 50 years and over comprised over three quarters (78.4%) of survey respondents. From the overall group, 43.3% of respondents were aged 65 years or over. This indicates that responses were heavily weighted to the opinions of older members of Neighbourhood Watch and Neighbourhood Support across both Australia and New Zealand.

## **Response by gender**

Unlike the variable of age, the survey has a somewhat even distribution of both male (48.2%) and female (51.8%) responses.

## **Respondent description of their ethnic background**

The majority of respondents described their ethnic background as either Australian (53.7%) or New Zealander (22.4%), with a small group of respondents coming from the United Kingdom or Europe more broadly (18% combined). Very few respondents identified themselves from an ethnic minority group.

## **Employment status of respondent**

This indicated that almost half (44.9%) of respondents were either employed on a full time or part time/casual basis, with a similar percentage (43%) of the respondents being retired. This last figure is not surprising given the high proportion of respondents who were aged 65 years or older.

## **Length of time at respondent's current address**

The vast majority of survey respondents had lived in their current residence for greater than 10 years. Ninety one percent of the sample had lived in their current home for two or more years. An additional question was asked about the time spent living in the same neighbourhood. Similar figures were reported for the number of years people had spent living in their neighbourhood.

Respondents were also asked about the relationship they shared with the people who lived with them. Eighty two percent of respondents lived with family members, 15 percent lived alone, 1.4 percent of respondents lived with both family and non-family members, and 1.6 percent of the sample lived with non-family members.

## **SURVEY FINDINGS**

The results of the NHTWA Survey provide an interesting insight into the beliefs and attitudes of those involved in Neighbourhood Watch and Neighbourhood Support groups across Australia and New Zealand. In particular, the NHTWA Survey provides information on the overall wellbeing of respondents, current victimisation experiences of members as well as their perceived levels of crime, safety and more broadly, their wellbeing. It also highlights their current relationship with police liaison officers in each jurisdiction.

### **Overall wellbeing**

Nine individual survey items of the NHTWA Survey were combined to form a scale, termed “Overall Wellbeing”. Results indicated that those who were more heavily involved in their Neighbourhood Watch group were more likely to see such programs to be beneficial to their sense of well-being. When examined individually, results also indicated that those actively involved in Neighbourhood Watch/Support programs were significantly more likely than non-active members to feel safe in their community, and to perceive levels of crime to be lower in their community. They also indicate that Neighbourhood Watch had better facilitated their meeting of new people in the community and had improved police-citizen relationships.

As noted in the introduction to this report, the presence of a Neighbourhood Watch program in a community does not always reduce the actual level of crime in a community. However, it has other benefits to its members, which include raising the belief that crime levels are lower.<sup>iv</sup> This can leave people feeling safer and more satisfied with their community. In fact, when asked whether they believed Neighbourhood Watch programs should only focus on reducing levels of crime, 50 percent of the sample believed that they should be more than just about crime reduction.

### **Perceived levels of crime in the neighbourhood**

Respondents were asked to describe the current level of crime in their neighbourhood. Approximately 62 percent of respondents believed their neighbourhood had ‘very low’ or ‘somewhat low’ levels of crime. Almost 29 percent felt it was about average, while about 10 percent felt they lived in a high crime area.

### **Worry about becoming a victim of crime**

Respondents were also asked how worried they were about becoming a victim of crime. Fifty seven percent of the sample were not at all worried or were not very worried. Surprisingly, forty three percent of respondents indicated some level of worry about becoming a victim, with 12.6 percent indicating quite high levels of worry. Interestingly, when comparing those respondents who were actively involved in a Neighbourhood Watch group with those who were not, it was found that those actively involved were significantly less likely to feel their neighbourhood had high levels of crime and were less likely to worry about becoming a victim of crime.

### **Crime victimisation and reporting behaviour**

Six commonly experienced crimes were presented, and respondents were asked to indicate whether they had been the victim of any of these crimes in the previous 12 month period. If respondents reported being the victim of a crime sometime in the past 12 months they were asked to indicate whether they had reported their victimisation to police. One of the main aims of a Neighbourhood Watch/Support program is to encourage members to feel confident reporting crime and victimisation to police.

Approximately 41 percent of respondents had experienced at least one of these six crimes in the past 12 month period. The most commonly experienced form of victimisation was property damage or vandalism. This was followed by a theft of a possession (not including break and enter), a burglary, and cyber crime. Results indicated that very few respondents reported a theft of a motor vehicle or a physical assault.

Surprisingly, it was found that the majority of victimisations did not get reported to police. These findings stand in stark contrast to many population survey findings that show that the majority of survey respondents say they do report these forms of victimisation to police.<sup>v</sup>

In the present study, it can be seen that theft of a motor vehicle was the least likely form of victimisation to be reported (only 5.4% of victims reported it to police). Respondents indicated they were most likely to report vandalism, burglaries, and other property theft to police.

This result clearly shows an area which requires further attention to determine the underlying reason/s for the non-reporting of crimes and to improve this response rate.

### **Attempts to protect belongings**

According to theories of situational crime prevention, the volume and distribution of predatory crime (violent crimes against a person and crimes where an offender tries to steal an object directly) are closely related to the interaction of three variables.<sup>vi</sup> The presence of each of these variables increases the likelihood that a predatory crime will take place. These variables include:

1. The availability of suitable target (such as a home containing easily saleable goods or a person walking alone);
2. The absence of a capable guardian (e.g., guardians may be police, homeowners, neighbours, friends, security devices); and
3. Presence of a motivated offender.

According to these crime prevention theories, targets are more likely to be victimised if they engage in risky behaviours, are poorly guarded, or are exposed to a large group of motivated offenders. Based on research in this area, attempts to secure and protect property have therefore been seen to be an effective deterrent to a motivated offender. Neighbourhood Watch programs therefore spend time informing members of this fact and encourage people to more effectively secure their properties, valuables, and their own person.

Results indicate that an overwhelming majority of respondents implemented some security measures to secure belongings in their own homes. This included having someone collect the mail (95.8%) or watch their home while they were away (96.2%), through to installing security doors (67.2%), alarms (43.2%) and identifying valuables (52.2%).

## INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL

Informal social control refers to the willingness of community residents to take either direct or indirect action to address community problems (including crime) when they occur.<sup>vii</sup> To measure informal social control, respondents were asked to report on whether they believed people in their local area would engage in informal social control actions – i.e. whether their community had the capacity to respond to community problems including crime and disorder. For example, respondents were asked whether people in their neighbourhood would intervene if: a) kids were spray painting graffiti on a building; b) a group of kids were skipping school and loitering; c) a violent argument broke out between a man and woman in their private residence. Neighbourhoods that are seen to have higher levels of community capacity, social cohesion and lower crime rates are those that typically score highly on measures of informal social control such as the one assessed here.

### Level of informal social control in neighbourhood by level of Neighbourhood Watch involvement

Overall, participants were more likely than not to believe that people in their community would ‘do something’ when problems arose. Importantly, when compared to respondents who had little involvement in their Neighbourhood Watch group, those with a high level of involvement in their Neighbourhood Watch group were more likely to indicate they lived in a neighbourhood with high levels of informal social control. Again, this particular finding suggests that having a Neighbourhood Watch program in a community can have far broader benefits than simple crime reduction.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH POLICE

The NHWA Survey examined two different aspects of the relationship between respondents and the police. First, it asked about respondent's current relationships with police through their Neighbourhood Watch or Neighbourhood Support group and second, it sought to determine their attitudes towards police at a broader level.

### Communication with police in Neighbourhood Watch/Support groups

Respondents were asked how their police liaison officers were currently communicating with them, as well as how they would prefer to be communicated with in the future. Email communication (71%), followed by actual face-to-face meetings (67%) were the most common forms of communication members received from the police liaison officers.

Turning to where respondents would like to receive information from, most members wanted to see information continuing to come through face-to-face meetings and via email. A large proportion of respondents also indicated they would like to see information disseminated by phone. This may reflect the fact that the sample is on average in the older age bracket and may not feel as comfortable with computer technology. In particular, those aged under 40 indicated they would like to see more information disseminated by their police liaison officer through the use of a webpage or electronic newsletter, as well as receiving information via Facebook or other social media.

### Attitudes towards police

The following section explores the respondent's attitudes towards police more broadly and examines respondent's perceived legitimacy, effectiveness of police, as well as their willingness to cooperate with police.

#### Police legitimacy

Scholars have suggested that the public's willingness to cooperate with police in face-to-face encounters and their willingness to collaborate with police in crime control efforts is largely linked to people's belief that the police are legitimate authorities.<sup>viii</sup>

Legitimacy has often been defined as a property of an institution that leads people to feel obligated to defer to and obey their directives.<sup>ix</sup> Where authorities are judged to be legitimate, people will be more likely to trust and have confidence in that authority, and will feel a sense of moral obligation to cooperate with the authority, defer to their decisions and rules, and follow them voluntarily. A legitimate authority can garner compliance and cooperation from a sense of obligation rather than through fear of punishment or from anticipation of a reward.<sup>x</sup> This suggests that if police work to build greater levels of legitimacy they will be more likely to encourage intrinsically motivated cooperation—that is, people will want to cooperate and comply with police because they believe it is the right thing to do.<sup>xi</sup>

Police legitimacy in the NHWA Survey revealed that, on average, Australian respondents viewed the police with a very high level of legitimacy. Again, it was found that Australian respondents who had higher levels of involvement in Neighbourhood Watch programs were more likely to view police as legitimate.

For the New Zealand respondents, they too were very likely to view police as legitimate and rated police as extremely trustworthy. Interestingly however, those New Zealanders who were active members of their Neighbourhood Support group were not significantly more likely to view police as legitimate than those who were inactive members of their Support group.

### **Perceived police effectiveness**

Perceptions of police effectiveness have been found to play an important role in predicting how satisfied people feel with their police force<sup>xiii</sup> and also how legitimate the public views them to be. One argument put forward by police legitimacy scholars is that police can increase support from the public when they effectively control crime and social disorder problems in the community. The NHWA Survey measured how the respondents viewed the performance of police in dealing with various crime and disorder issues. On average, respondents felt the police did the best job for keeping order, working with the community to solve local problems, and solving crime. While still viewed as being dealt with effectively, police were ranked lower on their performance on preventing crime and dealing with problems that concern respondents.

### **Willingness to cooperate with police**

Respondents were asked about their willingness to assist the police in crime control should the situation arise through their willingness to call police to report a crime or to report dangerous or suspicious behaviour. On average, respondents indicated they would be very willing to cooperate with the police. In fact, this measure received the highest support (average score of 4.72 out of 5). Of the five individual cooperation questions, participants were least likely to indicate they would call Crimestoppers to report information.

These findings are interesting because they contradict the actual reporting behaviour presented earlier, when respondents were asked if they had been victims of a variety of crimes in the previous 12 months. Of those that had been, the majority did not report the incident to police. While the survey did not ask why people chose not to report their victimisation to police, these survey results suggest that what people say they do does not always correspond with what they actually will do. The findings taken together suggest that Neighbourhood Watch/Support groups may need to work more with members of the community to encourage them to report victimisation to police, even if they believe the incident may not be important enough to police or if they believe the police would not be able to solve the problem.

## CONCLUSION

The NHWA Survey has provided a valuable insight into the attitudes and perceptions of active and inactive members of Neighbourhood Watch and Neighbourhood Support across Australia and New Zealand. Overall it provides positive results that indicate the wider ambit of Neighbourhood Watch and Neighbourhood Support. While these results have also indicated areas for improvement (such as the reporting of crime) importantly, it has demonstrated the positive benefits associated with active involvement in Neighbourhood Watch and Support across a variety of categories outside of crime reduction. These results provide evidence to support the ongoing work of Neighbourhood Watch and Neighbourhood Support to further strengthen community engagement as well as fostering relationships between these groups and the police in each jurisdiction.

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