

■ safe community



by David Thomas

features@algarveresident.com

David Thomas is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police, consultant to INTERPOL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. He has recently formed *ISECA the Independent Security Agency* here in the Algarve to help authorities and the community prevent crime.

Neighbourhood watch in Portugal

The origins of neighbourhood watch date back to the late 1960s when following the rape and murder of a lady in Queens, New York, a neighbourhood watch was formed by concerned citizens.

However, the neighbourhood watch scheme, as many of you know it, started in Cheshire in the United Kingdom in 1982 and has developed into a structured and comprehensive series of local committees covering an estimated 10 million residents.

Neighbourhood watch is not confined to the United Kingdom but also operates in other countries under different names including Canada, Germany and New Zealand.

In fact, only in 2011 did France introduce a Bill to create neighbourhood watch committees.

So what are the concepts of neighbourhood watch and is it appropriate to develop such a scheme in Portugal based on overseas experience?

Regardless of the title, the concept and aims of neighbourhood watch are the same, namely the coming together of people to make communities

safer and helping to protect the community through greater vigilance, and the accurate reporting of suspicious activities to the police. It is these two aspects which I aim to cover in this article.

The traditional village culture in Portugal is one of close integration, where everyone knows one another. Often neighbours are related covering several generations. The elderly are respected and provided with help by the younger generation.

There is also a culture that the village can take care of its own problems including minor crime. However, there have been significant changes in the last few years with a greater mobility, people travelling more frequently, greater independence within the younger generation, an increase in foreign residents (some 17% of the population in the Algarve) and a tendency for many of these to live in more remote areas.

This can lead to communities becoming more fragmented with less community integration.

In conducting security surveys, often people say to me that they seldom, or never, have contact with their

neighbours and some feel isolated. It is also the case that in the last few years crime patterns have changed with a greater use of violence than before. This is where neighbourhood watch can help.

For neighbourhood watch to operate as a structure with local neighbourhood watch committees, perhaps regional co-ordination points and a national advisory association as in the UK, requires the formal participation of the police, councils and community groups.

In Portugal, such a structure does not exist, but that does not mean that the concepts of neighbourhood watch cannot be applied here leading to a reduction in crime.

Safe Residence Programme

Where this has been done so successfully is in the *Safe Residence Programme* (SRP) created in Loulé in January 2009 where residents and the police work closely together to help prevent crime. Some 17 villages and over 1,000 residents are currently covered by the programme (read story on page 7).

In other areas of the Algarve, the SRP covers a number of households, but for demographic reasons is slightly different in that it is not initiated by villagers themselves and therefore there is no village focal point. The strengths of the Loulé programme are that it promotes integration within the village, the sharing of information, and helping one's neighbours, all with the aim of reducing crime. As such, it is more aligned to the traditional neighbourhood watch concept.

Safe Communities Algarve (SCA)

I created the SCA to fulfil one of the major roles of neighbourhood watch which is increasing crime prevention awareness and education within the community. It works closely with the GNR and provides a wide range of downloads covering a diverse range of crime prevention material tailored to the Algarve from various



Photo: TURISMO DO ALGARVE

authorities including the GNR itself.

It also helps promote the SRP and keeping the community up to date with SRP developments. It is the only dedicated on-line crime prevention community platform in Portugal.

Assisting your neighbour

This is one of the main concepts of neighbourhood watch and can be applied regardless of whether your area is covered by the SRP. You can start by talking to your neighbour and offering to keep an eye on their home whilst they are away.

Arrange to check periodically that their property is secure with no signs of a break-in. They may wish you to switch on an outdoor light on from time to time and even move their car. This creates an "at-home" impression and hence reduces the risk of burglaries which is much higher when properties are empty.

Neighbourly co-operation can be extended in other ways by watching out for suspicious activities, not outside your home but also near your neighbour's home.

Finally, listen out in case of an emergency where your

neighbour may require help. Of course this works both ways and by helping your neighbour they will help you.

Assisting the police

It is without a doubt that many crimes can be avoided by residents informing the police of suspicious activities in their area. Speaking to GNR commanders, it is clear that this sort of information has helped the GNR in conducting pro-active operations leading to the arrest of wanted persons in connection with earlier crimes, who may be in the process of planning new ones.

In fact, there are recent cases where a number of burglaries have taken place and, acting on information provided by residents, the culprits have been arrested and property recovered.

In one example, information from a resident led to the arrest of two men for burglary and attempted murder who are now serving 8 and 11 years in prison respectively. In another case, in a village near Loulé, two men were arrested in connection with

four to five burglaries following information provided by an observant resident.

You can act as the "eyes and ears" of the police by reporting anything that you may feel is suspicious in your area. Often your instincts will be right and by taking this course of action you are protecting both yourself, your family and neighbours.

A good source of such information is bar talk. It is surprising what can be learned about what is actually going on in the area. Likewise "loose talk" in bars is the cause of many burglaries through people discussing their wealth, their possessions, recent high value purchases, and even when their property will be empty.

This is often overheard or unintentionally passed on until it reaches criminal elements. So be on your guard!

Two common examples of what constitute suspicious activity and what to look out for, which have been extracted from a GNR publication, are given in the panel on the left.

Reports can be made either in person or by telephone, contact your local SRP team or the local GNR station.

SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY – WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR AND REMEMBER

Activity: Unknown vehicles driving slowly or parked close to your home. Occupants appear to be observing properties.

Remember and report

- Vehicle number plates
- Type of vehicle and model
- Colour
- Number and description of occupants
- Direction which the vehicle took when leaving

Activity: Strangers in area who may be acting suspiciously by observing you or your home or neighbour's home.

Remember and report

- Gender, age and ethnicity
- Height, hair and eye colour
- Distinguishing marks such as moustache, beard, piercings and tattoos
- Clothing
- Disabilities

The above are just two examples. You can best judge suspicious activity by knowing your area and your neighbours.

■ David Thomas, Director of ISECA – the Independent Security Agency can be contacted at 913045093 or by email at info@iseca.net. More about ISECA is available on its website www.iseca.net and Safe Communities Algarve on www.safecommunitiesalgarve.com.