

Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Watch – Participatory Mapping and Socio-demographic Uptake

Dr John Topping

jr.topping@ulster.ac.uk

Institute for Research in Social Sciences/

School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy,

University of Ulster

Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Watch (NINW) was launched in December 2004 in partnership with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) and Community Safety Unit of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). Indeed, neighbourhood watch (NW), as a means of creating partnerships between police and locally identifiable communities, has a long pedigree within the context of policing in the United Kingdom – with the first scheme set up in 1982 in Cheshire. Thus, the relatively recent introduction of the schemes in Northern Ireland may be viewed as indicative of wider shifts towards more ‘normalised’, community-oriented policing delivery and as part of the more inclusive, post-Patten era of police-community interaction in the country.

Since its introduction in 2004, NW has remained a much lauded strategy of both the NIPB and PSNI, described as a vehicle for reducing fear of crime, fostering community spirit and improving the environment¹. With recent research presenting a largely positive picture of NW for stakeholders in the country, it has been contended that communities involved in NW schemes ‘believed there was less crime, felt safer and felt a greater sense of community in their home environment than people who did not live in a neighbourhood watch area’ (SMR/ICR, 2007:5). But on the basis of a range of empirical studies, it is well documented that NW schemes do not prevent crime, reduce fear of crime or increase meaningful information flow between police and communities (Bennett, 1990; Fleming, 2005; Sherman and Eck 2002; Sherman, 1997).

¹ http://www.psni.police.uk/index/support/support_neighbourhood_watch.htm

Outside the wider NW research and debates, on a local and national level a significant gap in knowledge relates to *who* actually participates in NW. At least for Northern Ireland, one of the only studies touching on the issue has evidenced that Protestant communities have more readily participated in NW since their inception, indicative of the historical and political dynamics which (continue to) underpin policing country (Topping, 2008a). But in view of the all-party political support for the policing institutions since 2007, the socio-political dynamics of such participatory barriers have undoubtedly decreased.

Though significantly, participation in NW according to wider socio-demographic variables still remains an outstanding and untested issue in either academic or statutory research. This is especially pressing when the majority of NW international literature points to participation in schemes largely being characterised by white, middle-class, low crime communities (Fleming, 2005). In this regard, the following evidence sets out the first empirical analysis of socio-demographic characteristics related to community participation in NW for Northern Ireland.

Mapping Participation

The basis for this research derives from a Freedom of Information (FoI) request made to the Department of Justice for Northern Ireland (ref: FoI/11/30). The substance of the request related to the locations of all registered/accredited NW schemes in Northern Ireland (accurate to April 2011). At the time of writing, there were 594 registered NW schemes in Northern Ireland.

The first phase of the research involved using GIS mapping to accurately plot all schemes in the country according to postcode (see *Figure 1*).

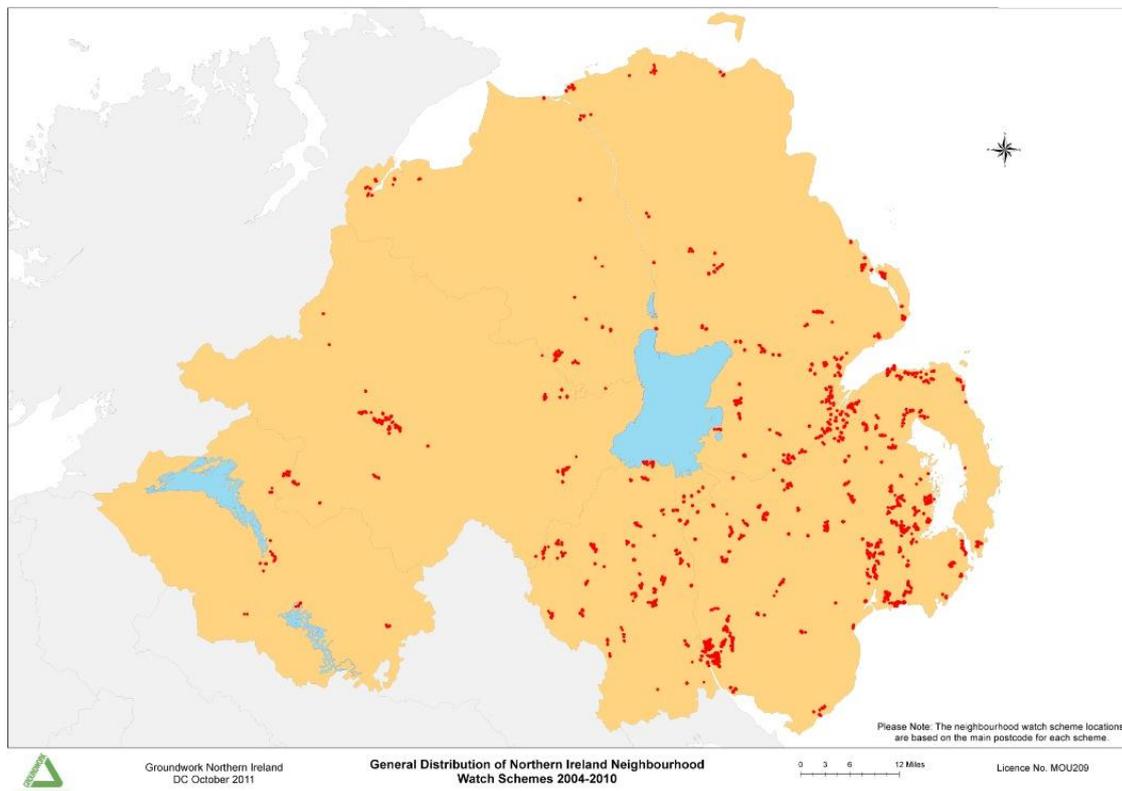


Figure 1: Locations of all registered/accredited Neighbourhood Watch Schemes in Northern Ireland

The second phase of the research then used the locations of the schemes, and plotted those against a number of socio-demographic variables derived from Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS) data. Because of the location accuracy derived from the GIS mapping, it was possible to calculate socio-demographic variables down to the 'Census Output Area' (COA). The COA is one of the smallest geographical measurements to which NINIS data can be calculated, covering populations of approximately 340 people. There are 5022 COAs in Northern Ireland, providing data to fine levels of granularity across the country.

The following socio-demographic variables derived from NINIS data were mapped against the locations of NW schemes:

1. Religion – broken down into either Protestant or Catholic

2. Multiple Deprivation Measure² – as the concentrations of a number of types of deprivation. The types or 'domains' of deprivation are combined to form the multiple deprivation measure. The index is a relative measure of deprivation, meaning that it is possible to say that one area is more or less deprived than another but it is not possible to say how much more or less deprived it is than another (see *Figure 2*).

3. Crime and Disorder Domain³ - as a measurement of the rate of crime and disorder at the COA level. This includes recorded crime, deliberate fires and incidents of anti-social behavior (see *Figure 3*).

For both the Multiple Deprivation Index (2) and Crime and Disorder Domain (3), each COA area is ranked from 1 to 5022 – where 1 equals the highest deprivation and highest levels of crime and disorder in the country; and 5022 equals the least.

² Description of Multiple Deprivation Measure derived from <http://www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/>

³ Ibid.

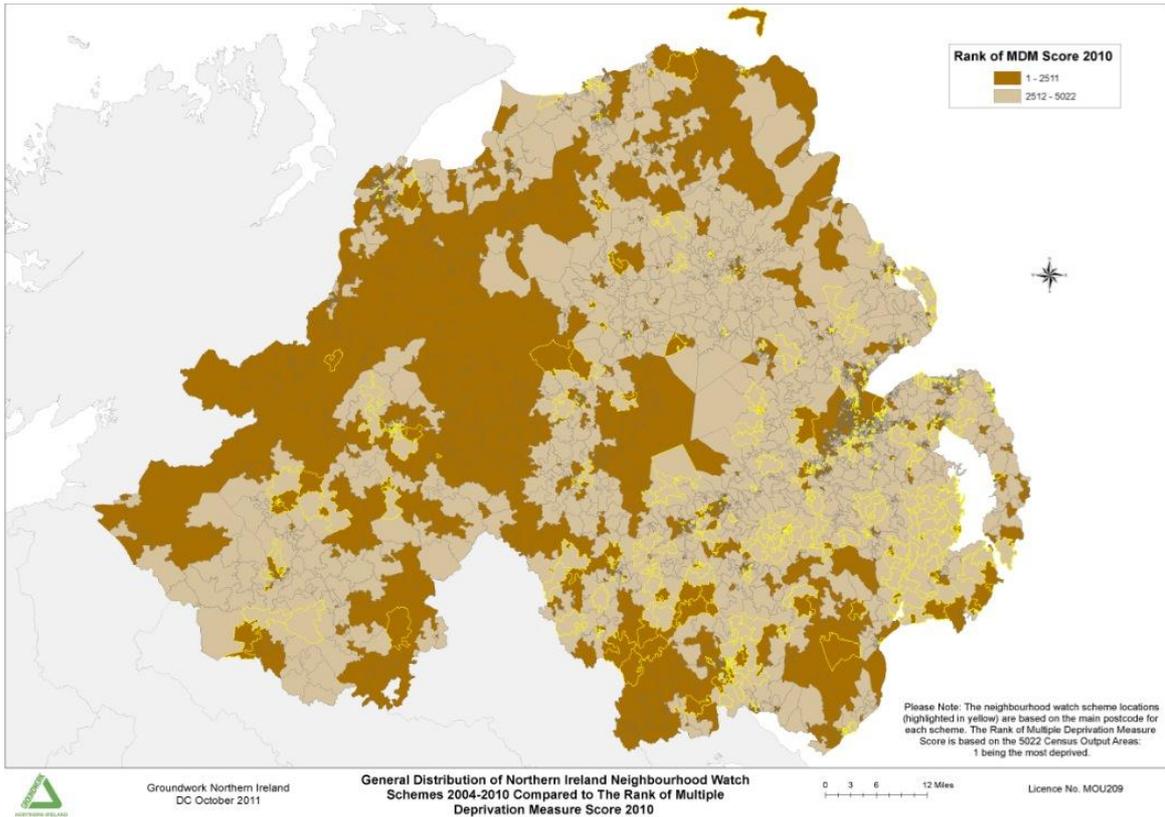


Figure 2: Location of NW schemes mapped against multiple deprivation measure (yellow areas denoted location of schemes).

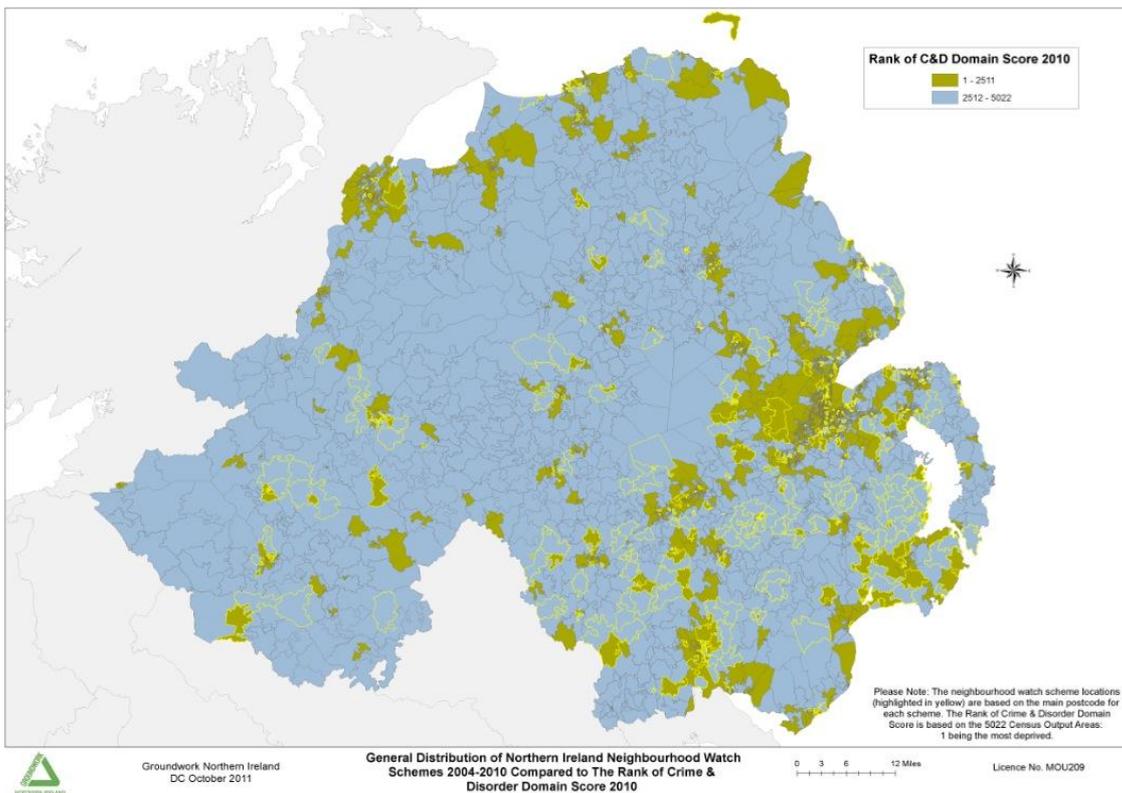


Figure 3: Location of NW schemes mapped against crime and disorder domain (yellow areas denoted location of schemes).

Analysis of Data

While *Figures 1-3* provide visual representations of NW scheme locations and variables, it is also important to examine the data in terms of considering a more definitive picture of NW participation. The following data provides a breakdown of the data according to the range of socio-demographic variables as noted above:

1. Religion

14% of NW schemes are located in COAs with a majority (80%+) Catholic population;

55% of NW schemes are located in COAs with a majority (80%+) Protestant population.

2. Multiple Deprivation Measure

0.5% of NW schemes are located in COAs which reside in the **top 10%** of the multiple deprivation measure (i.e. most deprived areas);

90% of NW schemes are located in COAs which reside in the **bottom 10%** of the multiple deprivation measure (i.e. least deprived areas).

3. Crime and Disorder Domain

1.1% of NW schemes are located in COAs which reside in the **top 10%** of the crime and disorder domain (i.e. highest crime areas);

89% of NW schemes are located in COAs which reside in the **bottom 5%** of the crime and disorder domain (i.e. lowest crime areas).

A Brief Interpretation of the Data

Religious Differential

One of the first issues to note in relation to participation in NW schemes are the religious differentials between Protestant and Catholic communities. Undoubtedly, with the launch of the schemes pre-dating all-party political support for policing in 2007, within predominantly Catholic communities there still exists a ‘lag-period’ between the social and political acceptability of engaging with policing more generally (and potentially by extension, NW schemes) and actual participation in the schemes in comparison with predominantly Protestant communities. Indeed, research would suggest that in both a historical and contemporary context, Republican/Nationalist communities in certain areas of the country remain either ambivalent about engaging with PSNI; or ‘satisfied’ with the police where they remain absent – with NW schemes potentially perceived as symbolic of police presence (Ellison and Mulcahy, 2001; Topping, 2008b; Topping, 2009).

However, a related explanation as to the relative lack of participation in NW schemes by predominantly Catholic communities may reside in the existence of alternative or pre-existing community infrastructures and forums in such (mainly urban) areas. Indeed, with Northern Ireland comprising of strong civic society organising, especially in relation to the issue of policing and community safety (in its broadest sense), NW schemes in predominantly Nationalist/Republican areas may be viewed as superfluous or un-necessary additions to the pre-existing community organising which itself provides a *de facto* (alternative) form of neighbourhood watch in its own right – albeit through an alternative format (NICVA, 2005; Office of the Oversight Commissioner, 2007; Topping, 2009; Topping and Byrne, 2012). Though regardless of interpretations relating to the data, seven years after the introduction of NW schemes, the findings demonstrate that significant variations between Protestant and Catholic community participation in NW remains. Although it must be noted that such issues cannot solely be laid at the feet of the PSNI or NIPB.

Deprivation Levels

As noted from the data, 90% of NW schemes are located in the lowest 10% of NINIS MDM rankings, as the least deprived (or most affluent) areas of Northern Ireland. Indeed, this would go a significant way to confirming the broad contention in international NW literature that schemes are most successful in what would be termed ‘middle-class’ areas (Fleming, 2005). One explanation may relate to the fact that affluent areas already possess high levels of social capital - described as the combined value of social relationships, community cooperation and confidence which sustains the community vibrancy and connections of a particular area (Putnam, 2000). In this respect, NW may be viewed as a natural extension of pre-existing community pathways or connections – with a significant number of community networking characteristics in favour of scheme uptake already embedded at the community level.

However, there is no automatic assumption that more deprived areas have lesser levels of social capital; nor may social capital or community connections be so readily ‘visible’ in comparison to more affluent areas. Especially in urban areas where schemes tend to be located, there may be some overlap with the ‘community organising’ thesis as noted in the previous section. In this regard, a variety of alternative or self-help community-based associations may already exist to cope with the reality of living in deprived areas and which act as a conduit for community information flows – of which crime/policing are but one of many concerns. Indeed, such pre-existing organising could potentially act as competition to, or limit the reach of, additional forums such as NW in terms of embedding them at the community level (Topping and Byrne, 2012).

Crime and Disorder

One of the most striking features of evidence related to the location of NW schemes is the relationship with levels of crime and disorder for the areas in which they are located. With 89% (529 schemes) located in the bottom 5% of NINIS crime and disorder rankings (lowest crime areas in the country), it presents somewhat of an inverse pattern for uptake when set against policing need – at least on the basis of crime levels. What is clear from the data is a strong correlation between low levels of crime and disorder and low levels of deprivation. In this regard, one interpretation of NW uptake is that schemes may be viewed as the collective, community expression of such localised, low crime and affluent characteristics. This is particularly salient when international literature would suggest that the empirical link between the existence of NW schemes and reductions in crime levels in any given area, is at best unproven (Fleming, 2005). And on a basic level, studies point to the fact schemes are generally more ‘implantable’ in areas which have pre-existing low levels of crime in the first instance (*ibid.*).

For higher crime areas, only 1.1% (6 schemes) are located in the top 10% of NINIS crime and disorder rankings (the highest crime areas in the country). What is clear from the data is the strong correlation between high levels of crime and disorder and high levels of deprivation. It is therefore possible to suggest that either NW is perceived as ineffective at dealing with the range of crime and disorder problems (and related social issues) faced by those communities; or on a more practical level, that high crime areas have a greater police presence because there is more crime to be dealt with. Therefore, with higher ‘presence availability’ of police in the first place compared to low crime areas, such communities may not wish to increase (or feel the need to) increase levels of police presence in their areas further – by whatever means.

Wider exploration of criminological research would also suggest that class differentials more generally (itself related to deprivation and concentrations of crime) are strongly correlated with community ‘tolerance’ of certain activities (Foster, 1995). With more affluent communities less tolerant of anti-social behaviours than less affluent communities, the data would suggest that NW participation may further be viewed as symbolic of class divides in Northern Ireland – between ‘respectable’ and ‘less respectable’ areas (Millie, 2009).

In this regard, the lack of NW schemes in high crime areas (also characterised by high deprivation) is consistent with international literature relating to unwillingness of people in such areas to organise themselves (in relation crime prevention) in partnership with police (Fleming, 2005). Furthermore, with greater potential tolerance and acceptance in high crime/high deprivation communities of anti-social – type behaviours (Foster, 1995), the perceived utility of NW in such areas may itself be largely lost where their stated purpose is to ‘*promote confidence within communities that something positive is being done to prevent local crime and improve the quality of life in the area*’⁴.

⁴ http://www.psni.police.uk/full_colour_neighbourhood_watch_leaflet.pdf

Summary

In summary, it is clear that community participation in NW schemes across the socio-demographic variables (as noted above) is sharply divided. The present study provides the first such empirical analysis of NW participation in Northern Ireland; as well contributing to limited international research on socio-demographic analysis of NW uptake more generally (Husain, 1988). While the statistics present a particular pattern of community engagement with NW, it is clear that further research is required beyond the current study and research conducted with stakeholders (SMR/ICR, 2007) – as a means of more accurately gauging *general* awareness of NINW in terms of community knowledge of their function, scope and purpose. Indeed, with the availability of modern socio-demographic datasets such as MOSAIC⁵, further research could provide a much greater analysis of precisely what sort of communities become involved (or not) in NW schemes.

From an objective viewpoint, the evidence points to a strong correlation between religion (Catholic); high levels of deprivation; high levels of crime and disorder; and lack of engagement with NW schemes across Northern Ireland. On the one hand, this is undoubtedly linked to the recent history and legacy of policing in Northern Ireland, along with issues related to the normalization of, and changes to, policing in the country.

But on the other hand, and setting religion aside, the patterns of engagement evidenced are also remarkably consistent with international research on NW in terms of its successful implementation in ‘middle-class’, low crime areas (Fleming, 2005). Thus, it is possible to argue that apart from the legacy of conflict in the country, the implementation of NW in Northern Ireland has been no more or less successful than other countries with a western policing tradition.

Finally, the data points to the fact that NW, as a type of police-community partnership is more effective in terms of uptake for communities with particular characteristics over others. Rather than viewing the current research in any pejorative sense, it would be of more utility to see NW as but one of many policing ‘tools’ on a spectrum of

⁵ <http://www.experian.co.uk/business-strategies/mosaic-uk-2009.html>

community-oriented policing practice. While NW clearly works better in low-crime, more affluent communities in Northern Ireland, the question to be asked relates to whether other partnership means by PSNI and the NIPB should more fully be explored to bridge the socio-demographic divide which underpins current efforts at police community-engagement through the vehicle of NW.

References

- Bennett, T. (1990) *Evaluating Neighbourhood Watch*. Aldershot: Gower Publishing
- Ellison, G. and Mulcahy, A. (2001) 'Policing and Social Conflict in Northern Ireland', *Policing and Society* 11, pp.243-258
- Fleming, J. (2005) 'Working Together: Neighbourhood Watch, Reassurance Policing and the Potential of Partnerships', *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* no. 303, Australian Institute of Criminology. Available at www.aic.gov.au
- Husain, S. (1988) *Neighbourhood Watch in England and Wales: A Locational Analysis/Crime Prevention Unit Paper 12*. London: Home Office
- Millie, A. (2009) *Anti-Social Behaviour*. Berkshire: McGrawHill/Open University Press
- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (2005) *State of the Sector IV*. Belfast: NICVA
- Putnam, R. (2000) *The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster
- Sherman, L. (1997) 'Policing for crime prevention', In Sherman, L., Gottfredson, D., MacKenzie, D. Eck, J., Reuter, P. & Bushway, S. (eds.), *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*. Washington, D.C.: US Office of Justice Programs.
- Office of the Oversight Commissioner (2007) *Overseeing the Proposed Revisions for the Policing Services of Northern Ireland Report 19*. Belfast: Office of the Oversight Commissioner
- Sherman, L. and Eck, J. (2002) 'Policing for Crime Prevention', in Sherman, L., Farrington, D., Welsh, B. and MacKenzie, D. (eds.) *Evidence-based Crime Prevention*. London: Routledge
- Social Media Research and Institute for Conflict Research (2007) *Research into the Views and Experience of People Involved in Neighbourhood Watch Schemes in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: NIPB/CSU/PSNI
- Topping, J. R. (2008a) 'Community Policing in Northern Ireland: A Resistance Narrative', *Policing and Society* 18(4), pp.377-398

Topping, J. R. (2008b) 'Diversifying from Within: Community Policing and the Governance of Security in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Criminology*, 48 (6). pp. 778-797

Topping, J. R. (2009) *Beyond the Patten Report: The Governance of Security in Policing with the Community*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Ulster.

Topping, J. R. and Byrne, J. (2012) *Community Safety: A Decade of Development, Delivery, Challenge and Change in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium