

CRIMINAL BEWARE: A SOCIAL NORMS PERSPECTIVE ON POSTING PUBLIC WARNING SIGNS

The use of Neighborhood Watch signs as a crime deterrent method has become the nation's most widely implemented community-based, crime-prevention program. Most Neighborhood Watch signs convey a strong injunctive message against criminal activity, however, the signs suggest that "crime is a problem here" – otherwise, why would the community need such a sign?

Background

- Research has suggested that crime-prevention strategies tend to interact with characteristics of the community in such a way that what works in one community might not work in another.
- In this study, we consistently find the potential for publicly posted Neighborhood watch signs to produce unintended consequences such as increased fear of crime and worry about victimization.
- Loose use of information/terms can even backfire to produce an effect that is opposite to what is intended.

Findings:

- Posted Neighborhood Watch signs have a causal impact on worry about victimization, fear of crime, and self-protective behaviors.
- In high-SES (socioeconomic status) communities, posting a generic Neighborhood Watch sign led to a decrease in perceived likelihood of victimization and fear of crime. However, in the low-SES communities, and presence of a Neighborhood Watch sign increased fear of crime and decreased perceptions of community safety.
- The physical condition of the Neighborhood Watch signs affected worry about victimization, but the effect was particularly prevalent in the low-SES area where aged signs and defaced signs led to increases in worry.

Implications:

- Neighborhood Watch programs have many different elements that are represented to varying degrees across the hundreds of programs nationwide.
- Given the mixed conclusions in regard to the impact of Neighborhood Watch programs, a needed next step is to examine the elements of the program to figure out what works and what does not.
- It is important to point out that our results do not speak directly to the deterrent value of the Neighborhood Watch program. Our focus was on perceptions of the community and crime rates, not on actual acts of crime.
- For the retail setting, we could view this similarly to in store signage. Signage in the store can be influential in affecting offender decisions. By pointing out that there is "monitoring in progress" or that "shoplifters will be prosecuted" can convey to shoplifters that a particular store is not a good choice to steal from
 - Conversely, overloading the customer with these signs may give them the perception that the store is rampant with theft which is also associated with other crimes. The same relationship may be held here, where stores in low-SES communities with signage could provide the customer with a sense of unease.
- Parking lot signs, as well as product display shelves and wall signs should all be carefully designed using marketing literature, crime theory, and customer and offender feedback to make sure they quickly and accurately grasp the sign's intent, meanwhile, not too disturbed by it.