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Article

When Citizens Are "Actually Doing Police Work": The Blurring of Boundaries in WhatsApp Neighbourhood Crime Prevention Groups in The Netherlands

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Abstract

Neighbourhood watch messaging groups are part of an already pervasive phenomenon in The Netherlands, despite having only recently emerged. In many neighbourhoods, street signs have been installed to make passers-by aware of active neighbourhood surveillance. In messaging groups (using WhatsApp or similar communication apps), neighbours exchange warnings, concerns, and information about incidents, emergencies, and (allegedly) suspicious situations. These exchanges often lead to neighbours actively protecting and monitoring their streets, sending messages about suspicious activities, and using camera-phones to record events. While citizen-initiated participatory policing practices in the neighbourhood can increase (experiences of) safety and social cohesion, they often default to lateral surveillance, ethnic profiling, risky vigilantism, and distrust towards neighbours and strangers. Whereas the use of messaging apps is central, WhatsApp neighbourhood crime prevention (WNCP) groups are heterogeneous: they vary from independent self-organised policing networks to neighbours working with and alongside community police. As suggested by one of our interviewees, this can lead to citizens "actually doing police work," which complicates relationships between police and citizens. This paper draws on interviews and focus groups in order to examine participatory policing practices and the responsibilisation of citizens for their neighbourhood safety and security. This exploration of actual practices shows that these often diverge from the intended process and that the blurring of boundaries between police and citizens complicates issues of accountability and normalises suspicion and the responsibilisation of citizens.

Introduction

Walking the streets of Dutch suburbs and villages, one is likely to come across several similar sights. Cars are parked along the clean streets, and often small trees are planted every ten metres near sidewalks made of brick pavers. Blocks of identical linked houses with small well-kempt front yards have open curtains that enable a glimpse of the interiors and the homey scenes. Additionally, in many neighbourhoods, official looking street signs display a WhatsApp-logo and the text: "*Attentie! WhatsApp Buurtpreventie*" ["Attention! WhatsApp neighbourhood crime prevention"]. Many of these signs include a villain-like icon and reference to the website wabp.nl. These signs alert the viewer that neighbours within this area are connected via WhatsApp messaging groups focused on neighbourhood safety and crime prevention. It is a visible marker of an otherwise mostly invisible participatory surveillance network.

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***Figure 1**: WNCP Sign (available at https://webshop.wabp.nl/Webwinkel-Product-253598914/WhatsApp-Buurtpreventie-bord.html)*

WhatsApp neighbourhood crime prevention (WNCP) groups are a popular phenomenon in The Netherlands. Through the use of the mobile phone application WhatsApp[1] (or similar communication apps), a group of neighbours exchange warnings, concerns, and information about incidents, emergencies, and (allegedly) suspicious situations related to their neighbourhood. These exchanges often lead to citizens actively protecting and monitoring their streets, using camera phones to record events or people they see as suspicious. Since 2014, more than eight thousand groups have been registered on the primary WNCP website www.wabp.nl,[2] which enables citizens to find and connect to the WNCP group in their neighbourhood. As of 2018, eighty per cent of the Dutch population above fifteen years old was using WhatsApp for personal use (van der Veer et al. 2018). As such, the widespread availability of this application and the ease of joining a WhatsApp group have become important factors in the popularity of the WNCP phenomenon (Bervoets, van Ham, and Ferwerda 2016). Research in this context has shown how these groups can lead to a (temporary) decrease in break-ins (Akkermans and Vollaard 2015) and can further social cohesion in local communities (van der Land, van Stokkom, and Boutellier 2014). However, WNCP groups can also lead to the displacement of criminality (van der Land, van Stokkom, and Boutellier 2014), raise privacy concerns (Pridmore, Mols, Wang, and Holleman 2019; de Vries 2016), and increase discriminatory practices and feelings of anxiety (Lub 2016).

The arrival of these groups signals a shift in relations between ordinary citizens and policing practices. As such, this study explores everyday practices within WNCP groups, which vary from self-organised, citizen-led, DIY policing practices to police-initiated surveillance projects. WNCP practices can be seen as a form of participatory policing, whereby citizens actively assist law enforcement. While the role of these groups as a form of participatory policing is still in the process of stabilising, WNCP groups can be heterogeneous local surveillance networks that provide the potential to collaborate with police or create semi-autonomous citizen policing practices. As such, most WNCP groups (all groups in our sample) have begun to use the

[1] WhatsApp is "a cross-platform instant messaging application for smartphones" (Church and de Oliveira 2013: 352).

[2] www.wabp.nl is a website run by two Dutch citizens who are behind the WABP foundation. The website offers free information about WNCP groups across The Netherlands; however, the web shop serves a commercial purpose. The web shop offers WNCP stickers, advice meetings, presentations on location, and reports (for municipalities) (https://webshop.wabp.nl).

"SAAR guidelines" promoted by www.wabp.nl. These guidelines were developed in one of the WNCP groups in our sample. In 2013, when the first WNCP groups emerged, two community police officers and one moderator came up with the abbreviation SAAR, which stands for:

> *Signaleren:* Be aware and notice suspicious situations
> *Alarmeren:* Alert the police
> *App:* Inform the WNCP network via WhatsApp
> *Reageren:* React in a safe manner (for example, by approaching the suspicious person)
> (Vuurvreter, n.d; WABP 2015)

These guidelines appear as an attempt to normalise the use of these groups, presenting idealised model WNCP practices as a template that can be duplicated in other neighbourhoods. However, upon closer examination, the actual and often invisible use of WNCP groups diverges from the intended process in the SAAR guidelines.

In what follows, we discuss how these practices can be understood in light of current research about participatory policing and its consequences, turning then to an introduction of the qualitative research design and discussing, in relation to each step of the SAAR method, how these have been interpreted and improvised in actual practices by group members. Our research demonstrates that the everyday use of WNCP groups complicates the ways in which citizens make their own neighbourhoods "safer" in collaboration with the police. These complications have to do with shifts in power dynamics between citizens and police and how the use of such groups increases the "responsibilisation" of citizens for their own safety, something which can be seen to both aid and interfere with police practices and investigations. This fits with a broader global neo-liberal trend of citizen responsibilisation that critiques the "off-loading" of responsibilities from formal political institutions such as the police onto citizens, creating responsible individuals in self-governing communities (Rose 1996; Yesil 2006).

We argue that the responsibilisation of citizens in WNCP groups and the way their everyday practices divert from the intended process default to more problematic forms of lateral surveillance, including increased discriminatory practices, normalised suspicion, vigilantism, and issues of accountability. Importantly, this type of participation amplifies concerns about both racially biased police practices and xenophobic citizen perspectives and the effects these have on marginal populations in The Netherlands. By incorporating forms of citizen-initiated participatory policing alongside discussions with community police officers, this study adds a new and interconnected dimension to prior research about participatory policing. As such, this study's focus on citizen-led participatory surveillance differs from existing literature, which tends to emphasise government-initiated campaigns. This in-depth account of local processes of citizen responsibilisation provides insight in police–citizen interaction in a country where community policing practices are more and more pervaded by digital and physical citizen initiatives. It demonstrates that these WNCP groups are both an innovative and problematic development and highlight several tensions that arise between the more visible and invisible aspects of these participatory policing practices.

WNCP Networks in the Context of Community Policing

In order to examine the relations between WNCP groups and police, this study draws on interviews with citizens and police across twenty neighbourhoods in The Netherlands. All neighbourhoods are monitored by Dutch police as part of their core tasks, described as maintaining public order, investigating criminal offences, providing assistance in emergencies, and identifying safety and security problems (Toorman and den Engelsman 2009). The Dutch police organisation is divided into national, regional, and local levels. On the local level, the police are specifically responsible for ensuring a safe and liveable neighbourhood and city (*politietaken,* Politie, n.d.[3]). In this context, community police officers are increasingly seen as important actors. The Dutch police organisation strives to have one community police officer for every five

[3] www.politie.nl/themas/politietaken.html

thousand citizens. Community police officers have an awareness, advisory, and directive role in neighbourhoods, mainly targeted towards social issues, minor crimes, environment, and traffic (*wijkagent,* Politie, n.d.[4]). More specifically, one of the interview respondents describes his work as a community police officer as follows:

> A community police officer is expected to know what's going on in the neighbourhood, to be visible in the neighbourhood, and to be in contact with the business owners, residents, and with all professionals working in the neighbourhood.… And it's not only the social but also the repressive [restrictive approach, for instance concerning] … youth nuisances. Is there a specific approach to youth groups needed? Then you need to know who hangs out where and what they're doing. And apart from that, there are many different reports. If there's a report in the neighbourhood about noise or domestic violence, then you're expected to go there, to check what's happening. (Bart, community police officer)

These reports and the awareness of problems and nuisances at a local level are central to this study. More specifically, we look at how citizens connect and collaborate with community police officers in WNCP networks as well as how they independently carry out policing practices. Citizens increasingly engaging in monitoring, information sharing, and crime-disrupting practices is a form of participatory policing through these messaging groups.

Participatory Policing, Lateral Surveillance, and Responsibilisation

As suggested by Larsson (2017), participatory policing entails citizens actively assisting law enforcement by engaging in monitoring, information-sharing, reporting, and preventative actions. The emergence of participatory policing highlights a transition in policing methods. In previous decades, the concept of and everyday engagement in policing changed from a focus on apprehending criminals towards one of prevention and problem solving. This later focus involved non-police actors in various ways, ranging from private security firms to active citizens (Shearing 1994). Citizens appear as social actors who can aid police and make the social control process more effective by being aware of suspicious behaviour in their neighbourhood and by showing "a readiness to report incidents to the police and to co-operate" (Avery 1981: 76). Moreover, the emergence of community policing as part of a preventative transition in part enabled a change in defining police as a "force" towards police as a "service" in which policing becomes in fact "everybody's business" (Shearing 1994: 8).

Most research about participatory policing has focused on law-enforcement-initiated campaigns, such as nationwide vigilance campaigns in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia. Research about local projects and campaigns focuses on community police-led participatory policing practices (Ryan 2008; Shearing 1994; Varghese 2009; Walker and Walker 1990). These local participatory policing projects are based on proactive cooperation between citizens and community police (Walker and Walker 1990). In contrast, nationwide public vigilance campaigns have a top-down structure, whereby law enforcement requests participatory policing in the form of being aware of particular signs of threats and criminal or terrorist activity (Larsson 2017). Subsequently, citizens are asked to share their suspicions via "antiterrorist hotlines," online reporting forms, text messaging services, and smartphone applications (Larsson 2017).[5] Many of these campaigns emerged after September 11, 2001, and have names like "If You See Something, Say Something" and "If You Suspect It, Report It" (Larsen and Piché 2010; Larsson 2017; Reeves 2012). These public participatory surveillance campaigns "involve the many watching the many on behalf of the few" (Larsen and Piché 2010: 196). For our study, one of the key differences between the participatory

[4] www.politie.nl/themas/wijkagent.html

[5] Two examples of public vigilance campaign smartphone applications are *See Something, Send Something* (New York State Homeland Security and Emergency Services https://www.ny.gov/programs/see-something-send-something) and *See Say* (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority https://mbta.com/news/2012-05-21/see-say-smartphone-app).

policing projects described above and WNCP groups is their origin. Whereas public vigilance campaigns have been largely initiated by institutions or governments, this form of participatory policing emerged in a grass-roots fashion. WNCP groups are by and large citizen-initiated, organised, and led. While this study includes both police- and citizen-initiated participatory policing practices, our analysis shows how these different configurations bring specific challenges and power structures.

Increasingly, forms of participatory policing have become predicated on the use of new technologies, as suggested by Larsson (2017). Whether this involves the use of the telephones to call emergency numbers, the use of online reporting forms, or the more recent use of specific apps, technology has become a crucial component in the modern variations of both the "see something, say something" campaigns as well as in WNCP groups. In theory, smartphone applications and social media channels make participatory surveillance practices accessible to all citizens (ibid.). There is a low threshold to communicate information for members of WNCP groups because they make use of messaging applications that are freely available and already in use. Unlike the "if you see something, say something" numbers to call or text in suspicious activities, which are used for public participatory policing campaigns, the messages within these messaging apps are not monitored or owned by government institutions. Instead, they are owned by commercial institutions (WhatsApp is part of Facebook) and the conversations play out in (to a large extent) an invisible and uncontrolled environment (Sutikno et al. 2016).

Despite this invisibility and limited control, such forms of public vigilance to observe and report concerns can be seen as a way to identify threats, prevent criminality, and reduce certain pressures on police. Yet these also can become the default in normalising policing practices, potentially creating and increasing forms of social distrust. Inevitably participatory policing practices, initiated by either law enforcement or citizens, make citizens more aware of potential criminal activity in their community and sensitises them to security threats that may be perceived as real regardless of whether there is imminent danger. This orientation to one's surroundings and engagement in participatory policing practices has become normalised and "many citizens have assimilated into their everyday lives suspicion-driven rituals of lateral surveillance" (Reeves 2012: 238). In the process, citizens become surveillance agents whose distrust towards strangers and suspicion and ambivalence amongst neighbours is increasingly perpetuated (Larsen and Piché 2010; Larsson 2017; Reeves 2012). A specific way of life is normalised, in which unwanted persons can be identified and specific appearances and behaviours will be seen as suspicious (Larsson 2017).

These public vigilance campaigns are about encouraging citizens to assist law enforcement in surveillance activities—participatory surveillance practices based on forms of lateral surveillance; peer-to-peer monitoring "of spouses, friends, and relatives" (Andrejevic 2004: 481). In contrast to the more often described forms of digital lateral surveillance, that is, individuals watching one another via interactive technologies such as social media, cell phones, Google, and online surveillance services (Andrejevic 2007), lateral surveillance in public vigilance campaigns has important nondigital components. As such, our understanding of lateral surveillance includes digital as well as physical peer-to-peer monitoring practices. This means that alongside everyday digital connections such as on social media, citizens watch one another in person and spend time checking their environment and the behaviour of other citizens in that space. Chan (2008) argues that lateral surveillance as requested by (trans)national public vigilance campaigns creates and induces a culture of suspicion driven by vigilance and constant suspicion—this is seen to easily diverge into a culture of hatred, characterised by racial stereotyping, discrimination, and harassment.

This paper reiterates that crime prevention campaigns are geared towards the responsibilisation of citizens (Chan 2008; Reeves 2012) and that these new forms of participatory surveillance prompt citizens to take responsibility for their own neighbourhood safety (Purenne and Palierse 2016). Not only are citizens mobilised to monitor their environment in order to identify and assess risks for crime and terrorism prevention purposes, but they are made responsible for "policing their own territory" (Ericson and Haggerty 1997: 156). Thus, they are not only expected to monitor their neighbourhood, but also to actively safeguard it. Responsibilisation of citizens can be understood as the precarious transition of law enforcement responsibilities to community members. In this case, WNCP entails a voluntary and citizen-initiated form

of citizen responsibilisation. However, while voluntary, as Sandhu and Haggerty (2015) suggest, citizens are actively stimulated to take this greater responsibility within their communities to manage potential security risks. Arguably they internalise law enforcement strategies and use these in their own community (Andrejevic 2004). Consequently, citizens become responsible for the safety and security of not only themselves but their communities and fellow citizens (Reeves 2012). In many participatory policing projects, it is implied that failure to be vigilant is risky and irresponsible (Larsen and Piché 2010), and this implicitly accuses citizens who refuse to participate of obstructing processes of safeguarding the neighbourhood. Crucially, this responsibilisation blurs the boundaries between police, citizens, and suspects and makes more ambiguous the role of the actors involved in participatory policing practices (Reeves 2012). By contrasting the SAAR guidelines with the actual practices of our interviewees, this paper highlights the precarious consequences of responsibilisation within WNCP groups for different actors in these diverse configurations.

Research Method

Given the diversity of WNCP networks, the range of potential motivations and experiences of members, and the novelty of these practices, an in-depth qualitative understanding of the practices in WNCP groups was needed. Therefore, twenty-six semi-structured in-depth interviews and two focus groups were conducted amongst persons involved in these groups. In total, twenty WNCO group moderators, five police officers, and fifteen citizen-members participated in this study. Table 1 lists the interview participants, gives an indication of the type of neighbourhood they live in, and provides information about the involvement of police in their groups.

The respondents were recruited in several ways, including personal networks, social media, and snowball sampling. The interviews (twenty-four of which were conducted face-to-face, two via telephone) were semi-structured. The interviews with group moderators covered a diverse range of topics including the start and development of the WNCP groups, the perceived benefits and concerns, and monitoring practices. On average, these interviews took an hour. The interviews with community police officers focused mainly on their experiences with WNCP groups and their contact with citizens. The interviews and focus groups with citizen-members explored their personal experiences in WNCP groups. Both focus groups lasted approximately ninety-five minutes. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed, and prepared for analysis. All interviews were conducted in Dutch, and relevant quotations were translated into English for this paper. The respondents' names have been pseudonymised in Table 1 and in the analysis section.

The resulting data from the interviews and focus groups was imported for coding into *Atlas.ti,* a qualitative analysis software. The inductive coding process (inspired by a constructive grounded theory approach; see Charmaz 2014) forms the basis of analysis, which identified emergent themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Lincoln and Guba 1985). In the coding process, we focused on the general practices whereas the analysis zooms in on the responsibilisation of citizens within these practices.

Table 1: *List of interview respondents*

Name	Role	Group initiated by	Police involvement
Yves	Moderator	Citizen	None
Carolina	Moderator	Citizen	None
Marianne	Moderator	Police/citizen	Indirect
Harry	Moderator	Citizen	Indirect
Kate	Moderator	Citizen	None
Rachel	Moderator	Citizen	Indirect
Paul	Moderator	Police/citizen	Indirect
Marcia	Moderator	Citizen	None

Leo	Moderator	Citizen	None
Anthony	Moderator	Citizen	None
Donny	Moderator	Citizen	None
Jeremy	Moderator	Citizen	Direct
Nick	Moderator	Police	Direct
Albert	Moderator	Citizen	Indirect
Tom	Moderator	Citizen	None
John	Moderator	Police	Direct
Diana	Moderator	Citizen	None
Erik	Moderator	Citizen	None
Dave	Moderator	Citizen	Indirect
Nils	Moderator	Citizen	None
David	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Alex	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Lydia	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Derek	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Jay	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Julia	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Darren	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Sophie	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Christine	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Monica	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Ellen	Citizen	Citizen	Indirect
Dan	Citizen	Citizen	None
Eva	Citizen	Police	Direct
Mike	Citizen	Police	Direct
Juliana	Citizen	Citizen	None
Jim	Police	Citizen	Indirect
Bart	Police	Police	Direct
Ron	Police	Citizen	None
Rick	Police	Citizen	Indirect
Jesse	Police	Police	Direct

Results: The Gap between Guidelines and Everyday WNCP Practices

As noted, the WNCP groups studied are heterogeneous networks of citizens, mobile phones, and police actors, in some cases further supplemented by other municipal actors. Even when WNCP groups are not initiated or (in)directly supported by police, citizen practices targeted towards neighbourhood safety are always connected into the domain of policing more broadly. While WNCP practices may not yet be fully stabilised, we argue that they can be seen to be in a (somewhat problematic) process of normalisation. As more and more communities introduce WNCP, the practices of existing groups are used as a template and are increasingly becoming the norm for how a WNCP group should and must operate. As we discuss below, this is still not universal; however, a key factor in this process has been the implementation of uniform guidelines across these groups. It was one of the neighbourhoods in our sample that came up with the set of rules indicated above using the acronym SAAR, which is used in almost all WNCP groups and forms the "house rules" for participation indicated by the primary WNCP website (https://wabp.nl/huisregels/).

Though it is not clear to what degree the average user is familiar with these guidelines, SAAR has been recommended by the national Dutch police (Politie 2017).

In what follows, we use the terms of the SAAR approach and focus on how these instructions can be seen to relate—or not—to actual practices. From our research, it is evident that practices often diverge from the intended processes, which leads to various internal and external tensions. For us, these tensions are related to a process of responsibilisation, which obscures the differentiated formal and informal roles of actors within WNCP networks (Reeves 2012). Based on this SAAR method, our results carefully compare intentions to actual practice, which leads to some precarious consequences for this form of participatory policing.

Signaleren: Be Aware and Notice Suspicious Behaviour

The SAAR method starts with an instruction that does not require direct action. Instead, the method demands a state of constant awareness and attentiveness from WNCP group members. Neighbours can participate in safeguarding their neighbourhood by keeping an eye out and by carefully watching their street. As citizens engage in participatory surveillance practices when they actively monitor their environment, they become increasingly responsible for the safety of their neighbourhood. Moderator Paul explains why neighbours can play a crucial role in moderating practices: "As neighbours we can see the difference between a resident and a stranger. For them [the police] everyone is unfamiliar; they have to use their intuition while we have the facts." Community police officer Ron further describes how he and his colleagues direct these participatory surveillance practices through the WhatsApp group: "You can focus this on a specific area: 'pay attention to this' or 'look out for a particular car.' And people can notify you what they directly see." As in these cases, police officers are making active use of "responsible" citizens' monitoring practices.

However, these monitoring practices are based on a somewhat problematic premise: monitoring suspicious activities in the neighbourhood defaults to monitoring neighbours. As people become constantly alert and scan their neighbourhood for suspicious behaviour or for security and criminal problems, this behaviour reinforces lateral surveillance practices. For instance, group member Darren describes the routines of his neighbours: "I know quite a few [neighbours] that, with their dog, walk through the whole neighbourhood. They do this every night around eleven, eleven thirty, because my garden lights will switch on and I see them passing by." Though Darren's monitoring practices are not directly targeted at neighbours, they give him insight in their behavioural patterns. Group moderator Leo actively monitors his neighbourhood and purposefully checks up on his neighbours:

> Often, I walk around the neighbourhood once or twice a week, because it is healthy, but also because I am the [WNCP group] moderator, I just make a round. And then you'll see, I kind of check what's going on. People keep their curtains open at night, which is special, but you'll directly see if the right people are on the couch or not. (Leo, WNCP group moderator)

The fact that Leo checks if the "right people" are on the couch is predicated on him presumably knowing whom the right and wrong persons might be. It seems his evening walks are less motivated by his health and enjoying his neighbourhood and more by the desire to check if something is wrong in the neighbourhood. This impetus towards monitoring is visible in most WNCP practices. Notably, Leo has made himself increasingly responsible for checking his neighbourhood.

Both Leo and Darren's practices show how being watchful for neighbourhood safety can easily lead to monitoring the daily behaviour and patterns of neighbours. Even though citizen-member Derek says that the alertness of his neighbours "gives me a sense of safety," not all neighbours feel comfortable with these practices. A moderator of one of the WNCP groups, Jeremy, describes his own ambivalent feelings: "It is good that people keep an eye out, but eh, I'm always a bit, well, [concerned about] social control…. Not in a positive manner, they just don't have to know everything about me." Notably, whereas Jeremy and other

WNCP group members are aware that they might be monitored by their neighbours, this form of lateral surveillance includes an uneven balance between members and non-members of the groups. Most non-members are unaware of when and how they might be targets of surveillance by their neighbours, specifically because they are not included in conversations about monitoring experiences and results. The use of a WhatsApp group for *signaleren*—which, although the Dutch word hints at signalling suspicious activity, is really focused on awareness and attentiveness—leads to a neighbourhood where lateral surveillance becomes the status quo. This intensifies the in/out group dichotomy at a local level, with suspicion and distrust towards strangers and neighbours increasingly a default view. Though conceived of as a means of engaging neighbours in securing their own neighbourhoods, these responsibilisation practices begin to normalise a culture of suspicion within these groups (Chan 2008).

Alarmeren: Alert the Police

When WNCP group members come across situations they deem suspicious, they are instructed to *first* alert the police. This is supposed to happen before they inform the WNCP network or take any action. The police can then assess the situation and provide instructions for the group. However, our interviews show that WNCP group members often skip this step because they are hesitant to call the police. They would rather inform their neighbours first. WNCP group moderator Marianne describes her hesitation:

> The first time it was kind of a hurdle. You think: "should I call, or shouldn't I?" You start to doubt your own feelings, what if you, eh, put the blame on an innocent person? … And the first time, it turned out to be nothing, but still I received feedback from the police officer, like, "Yes, good that you notified us." (Marianne, moderator WNCP group)

In practice, within several groups, the WNCP network is alerted before the police are informed. This means that suspicions are first directly made visible to large groups of people. In principle the SAAR guidelines enforce a shared responsibility between citizens and police to take appropriate steps when suspicious behaviour occurs. Though, in practice, when WNCP members fail to notify the police first, they make themselves and their fellow WNCP group members responsible. At times the advice from fellow WNCP members is to ignore the situation or to correct misinformation, but this raises questions of accountability early in the process. Who is held accountable for the outcome of actions to deal with suspicious situations?

The idealised SAAR model prescribes that citizens only need to voice suspicions based on actual behaviour, yet in practice it is difficult for citizens to determine what constitutes suspicious behaviour. Several interviewees indicated that their suspicions are constructed based on particular characteristics instead of behaviour. Many people, interactions, and cars will not be seen as suspicious, while particular persons are directly mistrusted. As noted by Larsson (2017: 98), "only certain appearances and behavioural patterns will become reported as 'out of the ordinary,' and individuals behind this veil of distrust will indeed have a hard time 'participating' in securing anything once they become deemed potential threats and mere action-points for authoritative force." The characteristics employed in making suspicious persons or situations visible in WNCP groups often have to do with any deviation from the unexpressed norms. Jeremy, group moderator, explains one situation: "A while ago, a car with a foreign licence plate drove by and stopped at multiple corners of the street. So then, the police were called." Other examples in the interviews revolved around people with a Polish, Moroccan, or Turkish licence plate or nationality, or a specific skin colour, characteristics that align with marginalised groups in The Netherlands. The two following examples about allegedly suspicious persons with a Turkish nationality show that suspicion and distrust are based on appearance:

> She [a neighbour] accused someone: "Hey that is a suspicious person who is not okay." Unfortunately, that was the Turkish, what's he called, window cleaner that comes here often…. At a certain point she posted a picture of him, and then someone said: "Whoa! That man has been coming to my house for years!" (Jeremy, group moderator)

> That happened one time in the WNCP group. Someone said: "there was a suspicious car, the door was open for a long time, but they were chatting, and when I looked in their direction, they immediately left." And then a girl reacted angrily: "What the hell! That was my boyfriend and we were chatting. Why is he suspicious? Because he is Turkish?" That sort of thing happens, you know. (Rachel, moderator)

These discriminatory practices show a deep distrust towards particular societal groups. In many occasions, WNCP group action is structured by categories deriving from a fear of an ambiguous "other." Many WNCP groups have deeply problematic views on suspicious activities and persons, mirroring discriminatory practices for which the police are often accused. As Haggerty (2012) notes, citizens may replicate police practices which (possibly unintentionally) categorise people and selectively discriminate against the persons and behaviours of people within specific groups. "Selective monitoring often gives rise to accusations that the police are discriminatory; that police surveillance is being used to control and criminalize certain groups" (ibid.: 236). While the overall intentions of most WNCP group members may not be by default discriminatory, both intentional and unintentional discriminatory monitoring practices of these groups are even more invisible than bias by police.

Of course, some Dutch community police officers are involved in WNCP groups. Concerns about discriminatory practices in WNCP groups are amplified by the fact that, as an organisation, the Dutch police have been accused of ethnic profiling several times (Çankaya 2015; van der Leun and van der Woude 2011). For the most part, ethnic profiling practices have been primarily directed towards migrants or, more specifically, people with a Turkish, Moroccan, West African, Antillean, or Eastern European background (see the examples offered by Çankaya 2015). Though these concerns are not new, having been prevalent for years (for example, see Esmeijer and Luning 1978), the possibility that these discriminatory perspectives may be integrated into WNCP networks, which themselves have limited diversity, creates a potentially volatile situation. Arguably the police have an important role in enforcing cultural-normative order and should be active in uniting disparate communities (Çankaya 2015), but it is unclear whether this is happening within these contexts. As WNCP groups often show similar problems on a smaller scale, certain neighbourhoods become increasingly unwelcoming, or even inaccessible, for citizens from more diverse backgrounds than the more homogenous members of WNCP groups. The potential normalisation of discriminatory behaviour and acquiescence by the police to these practices make it difficult to determine who is responsible for an open neighbourhood environment and who can be held accountable when tensions and conflicts arise from discriminatory WNCP group practices.

App: Inform the WNCP Network Via WhatsApp

When the intended SAAR process is followed, this is the stage where WNCP members are supposed to inform the WNCP network about the suspicious situation they have encountered and already reported to the police. Ideally, this is also the point at which the group member can forward police instructions to the WNCP members in order to direct citizen actions. However, as noted above, this phase often occurs before or even in place of notifying the police. Whether or not the police are included in the process, this moment is the crucial component for the existence of WNCP groups themselves—this is when (vital?) security information is passed on to other neighbours.

Ideally, all neighbours that live in an area would be involved in the WhatsApp group in order to ensure the widest range of coverage and increase the likelihood of a secure and safe neighbourhood. As such, most moderators make substantial efforts to include as many neighbours as possible in their groups. However, not all community members are part of the WNCP groups. Participation levels vary across neighbourhoods. For instance, group moderator Marcia estimates fairly high participation in her neighbourhood: "I believe we have a hundred houses in the street, and seventy per cent is part of the group." In Jeremy's village, with a population of twelve hundred, his group covering the whole village only has 167 members. Moderator Leo even describes a difference in participation rates between his two WNCP groups. One neighbourhood is larger and includes citizens of many cultural backgrounds, but that WNCP group has considerably fewer

members than the group in the other neighbourhood where the population is more homogeneous. When asked about a reason behind this difference, Leo stated, "I think that it is, eh, socio-culturally determined…. People might not know about this or maybe even feel less responsible for their neighbourhood." Although his comment that people in culturally diverse neighbourhoods may take less responsibility is unfounded, it illustrates that it can be difficult for moderators to connect with groups that may diverge from their own personal cultural or ethnic heritage. This comment also shows a fairly common fact amongst the WNCP groups in our sample: they are more popular amongst homogeneous Dutch groups. Even with efforts to reach out to culturally diverse members of such groups, the interview and focus group respondents for this research predominantly had a Dutch background (mostly white, Dutch-speaking, and of Dutch cultural origin). The lack of diversity in WNCP groups seems to reinforce the uneven and discriminatory power relations mentioned above in neighbourhoods with more diverse populations. Arguably, the lack of diversity within WNCP groups may perpetuate problematic discriminatory practices.

The issue this raises is that in participatory policing campaigns, not everyone can freely participate. Rather, based on specific traits or behaviours, some persons can be seen primarily as potential threats instead of actors that can participate in policing activities. "Only a privileged few get to be watchers, i.e. those who comply with authority, agree to play the reporting-game, and 'fit in' as usual and ordinary elements of society" (Larsson 2017: 98). This is evident in WNCP groups; while seemingly open to all interested neighbours and not only a privileged few, citizens do have to abide by the rules of the group and fit in with the WNCP practices and mentality in order to successfully participate. If members break the rules, moderators have the power to remove them from the group. WNCP group moderator Marcia describes her responsibilities:

> My duty is about the importance, a bit of awareness, and to try to prevent calamities, to prevent discordance, or that things are followed up incorrectly…. It is sometimes a bit of a mediator role, ha-ha. (Marcia, WNCP group moderator)

Group moderators make themselves responsible for gatekeeping and controlling the groups, though often they share these responsibilities with one or more other moderators. Here is where the power dynamics differ between participatory policing campaigns and WNCP groups, as the rules and actions are policed by citizen moderators instead of government actors. Additionally, WNCP group conversations are largely transparent to the members themselves, because they may see incidents unfold in the group and receive a message when group members are either removed or remove themselves. Yet these processes related to group moderation can be seen to perpetuate an uneven power balance between the moderators and the members, leading to friction within the group. Moreover, there is also an uneven power balance between WNCP group members and other neighbourhood residents based on visibility. For non-members, it is unclear how many of their neighbours are part of the group and how these neighbours might be seen to keep an eye on them. Even though group moderator Albert assures that the group will also help non-members—"When these people need help, of course, we will never hesitate to jump in and help them out"—non-members lack direct access to other people in the neighbourhood. Group conversations take place on the smartphones of WNCP members and remain invisible to other neighbours. Non-members may be unaware of citizen-initiated events unfolding in their streets and do not know if or when they are the subject of WNCP suspicions or actions.

Again, the make-up of WNCP groups is diverse. In WNCP networks, police actors are actively or less actively involved. Table 1 indicates that the involvement of police officers in the groups varies, including in several groups where police are not involved at all. In relation to his group, moderator Yves says, "The police do not want to be involved; we think that that is a pity." When asked for an explanation about why this may be more generally, community police respondents in our research unanimously said that they fear an overload of messages: "If I would join the group, I am sure I would be responding to messages day and night" (Jim, community police officer). Some community police officers avoid this by not joining the WhatsApp group with all the members; rather, they are connected only to the moderators in a separate WhatsApp group. Yet, there are also community police officers who deliberately choose to be part of the

neighbourhood WhatsApp group. In this way, some group moderators feel they can benefit by having a direct line to the police department in the group: "We have a community police officer in the group…. He has a police radio and can directly call the control centre to ask why a notification is not followed up" (Dave, group moderator). In addition, neighbours can ask their community police officer directly for advice when they are not sure if they need to call the public alarm number for an incident: "Often, we first consult our community police officer" (Anthony, group moderator). Arguably, the involvement of community police officers can lead to shared responsibilities and accountability regarding neighbourhood safety, crime prevention, and a sense of community.

However, as suggested, the (in)direct involvement of police also has downsides. Group moderator Jeremy explained that his community police officer is actively involved, "So he also reads everything." Of course, when police officers read the content of WNCP groups, they are simultaneously monitoring citizens in the groups. This form of monitoring can be somewhat invisible, particularly because group members are often unaware of the presence of a police officer in the group. These groups only include a list of phone numbers which, except for moderators who are listed as *beheerder* in Dutch or "admin" in English, do not automatically indicate members' names or roles. This subtle monitoring may enable a community police officer to know certain things about the neighbourhood or even when and how to mobilise which neighbour:

> Well, I have people in the street who have webcams placed in their windows, and when you make an inventory of the WNCP group members, like, he has a dog, that person works at night, she comes home at 2 AM and walks the dog…. You can use that directly. (Rick, community police officer)

But the invisible monitoring of citizens can become problematic when WNCP group members fail to abide by the rules or share details about how they actively engage in "citizen policing" in ways that might not be legal. Even though the conversations within WNCP groups are transparent, the (police) actors involved often remain invisible to most members. Community police officer Ron explains, "They don't want the community police officer looking over their shoulder." As such, there is limited clarity about the involvement of police within these groups and their connection with moderators or other groups, something that needs to be worked out more completely. Despite being a "citizen"-based movement open to all to participate at a local level, the homogeneous nature of many groups, the fact that they are only open to citizens following the WNCP mentality, and the often invisible involvement of police actors show that they are not that free, open, or transparent.

Reageren: React in a Safe Manner

Despite the complexities noted above, in the idealised situation, once suspicious activities are identified, the police are alerted, and WNCP actors are informed, the final stage of the SAAR method is reached. The intention for this phase of response is to disrupt the activities of those seen as suspicious by actively intervening. The guidelines emphasise that this should only be done safely, avoiding risks, for example by approaching the suspicious person with some small talk (WABP 2015). Moreover, showing that you are watching can also be a way of intervening: "Reacting, well, that's also, just pulling aside the curtain to watch what's happening" (Paul, WNCP group moderator). This last step in the SAAR process suggests that these participatory policing practices can lead to the prevention of crime or apprehending criminals. Group moderator Marcia describes how citizens and police collaborated in the arrest of two burglars:

> Two guys were arrested in the street…. They fled from another street and were walking through our street. Then the police were called and informed via the neighbourhood app: "they are now at number something, and they are walking in that direction." … The police, who were already informed, were able to throw them to the ground. So that was a good action. (Marcia, group moderator)

While this fits within expectations of the SAAR process, WNCP members often first inform their network before they alert the police. Sometimes this can lead to activities or behaviours that go against police desires or instructions. Julia describes:

> We've had a situation with a dark-skinned man at the [name of street] who was reported [in the WNCP group], and everyone went out to look for him. Even though someone reported: "the police are informed," they started searching for him anyway. (Julia, group member)

This incident depicts a moment in which WNCP group members attempt to actively safeguard their neighbourhood—they take this responsibility onto themselves rather than wait for the police to deal with the situation. In some cases, the WNCP activities may jeopardise police investigations. Group moderator Dave describes a situation where WNCP members interfered with a police case:

> Some time ago, we had an incident with a drug dealer and four to five people alerted the police and were wondering if something was happening. But it turned out that they already had the group in view but didn't want to intervene because they wanted to know what else they were up to. (Dave, group moderator)

In another group, citizens interfered with a police drill about a fake burglary and an escape by car: "And before the car was there, it did not go as planned, because a group of men was waiting for the car with baseball bats. So, they had to cancel the drill" (Paul, group moderator). It seems that though WNCP groups actively request police visibility, they may also create significant tension due to the invisible nature of many police practices.

Even beyond this, in some groups, neighbours bypass police completely and start their own investigations and actions. Monica, group moderator in a village, often collaborates with another active WNCP group member: "I saw a potential burglar in the afternoon, and I followed him…. Later we reported this to the police, and Darren [group member] found the same person on his camera footage. So, we reconstructed that [incident]" (Monica, group moderator). So, even when WNCP networks include police members as in this case, citizen safeguarding activities might remain unnoticed by the police, even though in this process they can harm themselves or intentionally or unintentionally harm the allegedly suspicious people they follow or approach.

When citizens assist police in actively monitoring the street or by interfering with criminal activities, the boundary between police and citizen territory becomes fuzzy. According to Jesse, community police officer, this boundary even disappears:

> When citizens report a suspicious situation, they are actually doing police work. So, eh, there is no boundary…. We would like citizens to facilitate us in the arrest [of an offender] by telling us where he is, but, honestly, we prefer that citizens don't make arrests themselves. (Jesse, community police officer)

As the title of our paper, this represents a key comment illustrating the blurring of boundaries between police and citizens (Reeves 2012). When citizens actively monitor their streets, record events, and report about suspicious situations or persons, they are informally taking over police duties. Citizen policing (a term which is interestingly not directly translatable to Dutch, see Pridmore et al. 2019) raises questions about accountability and responsibility. Mobilised citizens may act as "embodied surveillance units" (Larsen and Piché 2010: 197) who become responsible for the security of themselves and others, but can they also be held accountable when their safeguarding practices fail or a dangerous situation escalates? The citizens in WNCP networks often operate on intuition and instinct, lack professional training, and can further be motivated by excitement. "I have to be honest, I always find it very exciting and am really curious…. If I know it's near my house, I'll think: Let's take a look" (Lydia, group member). The motivations of WNCP group members (often) remain invisible, though this can have an enormous impact on the safety of

themselves and others in the neighbourhood. In this way, the responsibilisation of citizens may lead to certain forms of risky vigilant behaviour that can then create even riskier situations that arguably the formation of these WNCP groups was intended to reduce (Larsen and Piché 2010).

Conclusion

By examining each of the steps in the promoted SAAR method for WNCP groups, our analysis highlights several issues. Most importantly, we focus on the responsibilisation of citizens both formally and informally to participate in and take care of their own neighbourhood. As this happens alongside the members' desires to engage in promoting security in and for their own neighbourhoods, the everyday activities in these groups often default to more problematic forms of lateral surveillance. As noted above, this includes an increasing distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders," the normalisation of suspicion, a potential reinforcement of discriminatory practices, challenging relations with the police, and the potential for illegitimate citizen actions. All of this is occurring in a "free" forum that places several "formal" and informal expectations on its members.

Yet the focus here on these problematic issues should not outweigh the growing popularity of these groups—many Dutch citizens have become willing partners in citizen-led crime prevention groups that span The Netherlands. Participation in these groups varies; interpersonal connections with neighbours in these groups varies; discrimination against outsiders varies; and relations with the police varies, and so on. Yet, it is hard to overlook something which might be one of the most successful forms of participatory policing occurring at a local level, at least in terms of its rapid growth. Given our highly critical accounting of this practice, what then can be made of this phenomenon? How best, from a surveillance studies perspective, can we minimise the more obtrusive surveillance practices and allow for the potential social benefits that have perhaps made these groups so popular? To that end, we have three important suggestions and several areas which need further research.

First, what is clear is that increased transparency is needed in how these groups interact with more formal police structures. This is something that needs to be addressed in this case by the police in The Netherlands, and potentially in Germany and Belgium as well, where these specific groups are gaining popularity. Other engagements with citizen-led participatory policing or social-media-style information groups that have "security" related components like that of Nextdoor (https://nextdoor.com) will likewise require an increasingly clear delineation about how police will and should participate with these groups. But in our specific case, moderators of these groups also require some systematic or regular informational messages being sent about the group purpose and the group's connection with the police to increase transparency. As far as has been determined in this research, this only happens on a limited and ad hoc basis.

This raises our second suggestion, that although the SAAR method has its value, the method is also limited in addressing the ambiguities of neighbourhood crime prevention situations. Although these groups are built on a low threshold for access and participation, an increased flow of information or public campaigns is needed regarding the most appropriate use of these groups. Strategic and informational campaigns may help reduce some of the more discriminatory practices our research has uncovered, but this also may begin a more public dialogue about what local involvement and engaged citizenship may look like in a digitally connected era.

We further see that this engagement should be built on our third suggestion: initiatives should be made to develop purposeful trust building amongst neighbours and within neighbourhoods, particularly where there is a diverse population. This may be the most challenging suggestion given the seeming reinforcement of dominant cultural narratives and expectations in these predominantly homogenous groups, but these efforts can increase the potential for possible more democratic unity and a more representative citizen involvement.

Given our evaluation of these WNCP groups and their implications for increased surveillance, these suggestions may be obvious and cliché. However, they do require further substantiation. We note that our

research is limited to largely homogeneous groups, which demonstrate some discriminatory practices. Experiences of those from more diverse backgrounds—those who are involved in WNCP groups and those who purposely choose not to participate—would greatly increase our understanding of these groups. Further, this research would benefit from a more systematic understanding from the policing side in terms of policy developments related to citizen involvement in policing (as recommended in Lub and De Leeuw 2017).

Although clear implications of this research remain in the policy domain, we have not detailed this here given our primary focus on citizen practices. We have likewise focused only on these messaging applications, whereas Dutch citizens learn about police activities and respond and engage with their actions in a variety of formats including numerous social media channels, websites, and forums. How these media intersect with these messaging groups would provide a richer understanding of the digital means for participatory policing practices.

While a WNCP street sign may act as a visual marker of a mainly invisible crime prevention network, the actual practices of these groups (with significant variance) remain largely invisible to outsiders. This has created and may continue to create precarious situations in many Dutch neighbourhoods, which are in part related to the blurring of boundaries between citizens and police (see Reeves 2012). As citizen initiatives, WNCP networks are themselves the impetus leading to the responsibilisation of citizens, something of which, to varying degrees, police have made use. But this responsibilisation further generates issues of accountability within these formal and informal modes of policing, even when a SAAR type approach is employed. While the context of these specific practices may be unique to The Netherlands, the more general drivers of surveillance in this case—the protection of homes, the appeal of looking, increased social connections, the feeling of doing something good, succumbing to curiosity, amongst others—are more universal. When we examine participatory policing practices more generally, it is the interrelationship between these drivers and their social (and political and economic) effects that require careful consideration—something this study has only begun to detail.

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