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PROJECT CONNECT UP

SUMMARY REPORT

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CONNECT UP: BUILDING VERTICAL NEIGHBOURHOODS

Pilot Program: Summary Report

prepared for Safety Alliance Victoria

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Front cover photo credit: Alistair Harkness (Melbourne CAD, 6 November 2022)

ABOUT SAFETY ALLIANCE VICTORIA

Safety Alliance Victoria (SAV) was established in 2017 as a means to coalesce various bodies under a single umbrella to address issues specifically about residential burglary in Victoria.

A collaboration agreement was created between Victoria Police, Neighbourhood Watch Victoria, Crime Stoppers Victoria, the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) – as an industry partner – and Federation University (as an academic research partner).

A substantive research project undertaken during 2017–18 focused on the use of Transferable Liquid Property Marking as a means for the reduction of thefts from residential properties.

Following a change in employment arrangements, researchers from the Centre for Rural Criminology at the University of New England (formerly of Federation University) maintained an ongoing and active involvement from July 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have been involved in this project from its gestation to completion: indeed, too many to mention individually. Special acknowledgement, though, is made to Bambi Gordon, the Chief Executive Officer of Neighbourhood Watch, Geoff Kloot (from Neighbourhood Watch Manningham) and Maureen Bathgate (who provided extensive desktop design expertise); Megan Ballantine and Karinda Kelly from RACV; and Stella Smith from Crime Stoppers Victoria.

As is the way with large policing organisations, there has been a change of personnel involved in this project over time, but special mention is made of Scott Johnson and Graham Caldwell for their stewardship – and most particularly First Constable Mitch Hoare for his infectious enthusiasm and energy. Members of the Proactive Policing Unit and Neighbourhood Policing at Victoria Police provided unwavering support.

We wish to also acknowledge and thank the various building managers and security staff who willingly acceded to multiple requests for assistance, such as allowing access to their properties and for distributing printed and electronic communications.

Finally, thanks are extended to the residents of the buildings for engaging in various aspects of the project, including by completing surveys and attending organised events.

CONTENTS

- ABOUT SAFETY ALLIANCE VICTORIA 2
- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 3
- CONTENTS 4
- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 5
- RECOMMENDATIONS 6
- BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT 8
 - Issues 8
 - Campaign objectives 9
- DISCUSSION 14
 - Partner relationships 14
 - Resident engagement and community forums 14
 - Safe Plate events 15
 - Surveys and social cohesion 15
 - Limitations and future directions 16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Connect Up emerged from the work conducted by the Safety Alliance Victoria, and commenced in September 2019. Prior to the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, a series of planning meetings were convened to map out a project aimed at producing: (i) a base of evidence; and (ii) program of initiatives to address crime issues in Melbourne-based high-rise apartment buildings.

An initial survey of residents garnered insights into perceptions of crime and crime prevention behaviours, and formed the basis of a proactive campaign which followed. A second survey consolidated understandings of attitudes, and measured responsiveness to the campaign activities.

Key findings from this project indicate that a soft approach in itself is insufficient to change behaviours or lessen the extent of fear of crime. Indeed, there is more an underlying anger about the incidence of crime as opposed to a worry about crime. This is particularly so for incidents of crime and anti-social behaviours occurring in the vicinity of high-rise apartment buildings rather than in the buildings themselves. The exception to this is the incidence of noise-related complaints, largely emanating from short-term rentals of individual apartments.

Some logistical issues exist in preventing or reducing certain crimes: the lack of physical space, for instance, for the location of secure parcel lockers is an issue in pre-existing buildings which could be remedied in the planning stage of new building developments.

A successful suite of engagement activities with residents will rely heavily on a high level of energy from partner organisations; a consistency in approach (such as, for example, policing messaging); and ought to also include organisation of engagement activities above and beyond passive letterboxing or display of information materials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

That developers consider (or are mandated to throughout the planning approval process for a development) the provision of physical space on the property for a storage locker of sufficient size to service the building; and that body corporates/building managers are encouraged to consider the retrofitting of storage lockers at existing residential towers and/or work with their local government for public space for the installation of a storage locker.

Recommendation 2:

That consideration be given to innovative localised environmental approaches (for example, such as the installation of overt crime prevention signage at strategic locations).

Recommendation 3:

That access control to mail rooms is implemented where possible, either retrofitted to existing buildings or incorporated into new builds.

Recommendation 4:

That consideration be given to specific policing operations for surrounding areas; and that police “close the loop” on targeted operations by informing local residents of actions taken.

Recommendation 5:

That environmental design of the surrounding areas be considered for varying land uses (such as separate entry and exit points) through a CPTED audit.

Recommendation 6:

That further research be conducted around prevalence and issues associated with short term accommodation rentals; and that a communication strategy be developed around complaint mechanisms (which may require policy and procedure changes).

Recommendation 7:

That in replicated projects, a strong partnership be forged between participating organisations at the outset, and that changes to the membership of a project team be limited as much as feasible; and that each organisation clearly articulates as to what their motivations are and desired outcomes.

Recommendation 8:

That extensive resources are not expended on fliers, and that more effective means of communicating with residents be considered such as, for example, applying signage on parcel lockers to directly target those who use them, engagement in online forums, and provision of materials electronically (such as through existing established building-specific networking groups).

Recommendation 9:

That, for replicated projects, a three-phase program be implemented, involving:

Phase 1: Forum & Pre-Survey

Aim: Identify issues & Build rapport & Establish lines of communication

Phase 2: Intervention & Follow-Up Forum + Survey

Aim: Maintain rapport and lines of communication, implement additional interventions

Phase 3: Final Survey

Aim: Evaluate program effectiveness

Recommendation 10:

That a variety of social cohesion-building measures be considered, developed and implemented such as trivia nights, 'coffee with a cop', creation of building-specific Whatsapp groups and so on.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Project Connect Up emerged from the work conducted by the Safety Alliance Victoria, and commenced in September 2019. Prior to the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, a series of planning meetings were convened to map out a project aimed at producing: (i) a base of evidence; and (ii) program of initiatives to address crime issues in Melbourne-based high-rise apartment buildings.

Six buildings in the Melbourne Central Activities District (CAD), one building in North Melbourne, and one in Doncaster (in the City of Manningham) were selected organically for participation in this pilot project. To elaborate, buildings were selected mainly via personal contacts of individuals involved when the project was in its infancy. Residents at the Doncaster building participated in the first tranche of this project, but not in the second which focused on buildings in the Melbourne CAD and in North Melbourne.

The central aim of this project was to pilot various activities and communication strategies which, when implemented within selected high-rise residential apartment buildings, would increase residents' perception of safety, and reduce the reporting and occurrence of anti-social behaviour and actual crimes. This was to be grounded within an empirical evidence base, derived from surveys of residents.

Issues

From the survey work undertaken in 2021, the primary issues for residents of the nominated high-rise developments (excluding sexual assault or family violence) were:

1. Theft from storage cages (typically within basement car parks)
 2. Bike theft (bikes which may be stored in a cage or in the general car park area)
 3. Parcel theft
 4. Incivility and anti-social behaviour by neighbours (including short-term tenants, e.g., Air BnB guests)
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5. Theft of/theft from motor vehicles
6. Forced or attempted entry

Campaign objectives

1. To encourage residents to undertake simple target hardening activity (such as locking storage cages and so on) to reduce their fear of crime
 2. To identify what activities can be undertaken by residents themselves (including Owners Corporations and Building Managers) and those that will require intervention by Victoria Police, local government, or advanced design/renovation/installations by property developers.
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PILOT PROGRAM

Chronology of actions taken

Table 1: Chronology of project activity

Date	Activity
September 2019 – January 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meetings for scoping and planning the project; development of Survey 1• Ethics approval gained from Federation University's Human Research Ethics Committee (B17-081)
February 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meetings for finalisation and advancement of deployment of Survey 1 (including translation of Survey 1 into Simplified Chinese)
March 2020 – November 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Suspension of project owing to COVID-19 pandemic
November 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preparation of flier to accompany Survey 1• Creation of QR codes for both English and Simplified Chinese versions of Survey 1
April 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adjustments made to survey 1• Compilation of advertising materials• Re-engagement with property managers
May – June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Posting of advertising material; Pilot promotion• Distribution of surveys (online via Survey Monkey and in hard copy form)• Data collection
July 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In-person promotion of survey in building foyers (with hard copy surveys available for completion)
August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Manual data entry of hard copy surveys collected
November 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further in-person promotion of survey in some building foyers (with hard copy surveys available for completion) to enhance response rate
March 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data analysis of Survey 1 and presentation of summary to project team
Early September 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Letter box drop of postcards and A3 signage deployed in common spaces – Theme 1: Parcel theft
Mid-October 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Letter box drop of postcards and A3 signage deployed in common spaces – Theme 2: Car park security

25 October 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community information session – one location, in the community room of a target building in Melbourne CAD
26 October 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community information session – one location, at North Melbourne Police Station
Early November 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Letter box drop of postcards and A3 signage deployed in common spaces – Theme 3: Identity theft
Sunday 6 November 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safe plate day sessions: one location in Melbourne CAD for 90 minutes; one location in North Melbourne for 60 minutes)
November – December 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of Survey 2
December 2022 – January 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of fliers, production of QR codes; deployment of survey
February 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysis of data for Survey 2 Preparation of report

Array of strategies for engagement and crime reduction considered

An array of engagement strategies were developed for this pilot project, although not all were ultimately deployed.

- Distribution of a monthly or bi-monthly Bulletin created by SAV focusing on a single target hardening initiative, to residents via letterbox and email (from Building Manager/Owners Corporation in association with VicPol, CrimeStoppers Victoria, and Neighbourhood Watch)
 - Provision of ‘reminder’ adhesive stickers to residents that they could place within their entry to remind them to keep doors locked when at home
 - Provision of posters that could be displayed in public areas of the high-rise, including messaging regarding tailgaters, keeping doors, mailboxes and cages locked, arrangements for parcel delivery and reporting suspicious behaviour
 - Production and distribution of a short brochure advising all residents of the actions they should take if there is a rowdy and/or destructive gathering in their building
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- Organisation of meetings where residents can attend with local police, CrimeStoppers Victoria and Neighbourhood Watch to discuss local issues – addressing misconceptions or perceptions about crime, how/who to report, and outline future actions that will be undertaken as part of the Connect Up pilot
- Neighbourhood Watch to host a Safe Plate event in the basement carpark or nearby alternative venue to fit one-way screws to number plates
- RACV to host an event to assist residents to line their storage cage with opaque material (so that contents can't be easily viewed from outside).
- In-house messaging, utilising television monitors in the foyers to play pre-recorded messaging from VicPol on personal safety and crime prevention strategies
- Development of a proactive media campaign, incorporating Eyewatch, local media, internal Facebook groups, etc.
- Promotion of PPU CPTED assessments for amenity of identified locations
- Crime reduction material posting in areas such as private car parks
- Encouragement of the use of parcel lockers; and Australia Post engagement – cost, available space in complexes to be established

Communication with residents and property managers

Between the deployment of Survey 1 (May to June 2021) and Survey 2 (December 2022 to January 2023), a number of specific activities were undertaken to re-engage with stakeholders.

Feedback was provided to property managers, including provision of a synopsis of the survey results and an outline of plans for a crime prevention and community engagement strategies. Feedback was also provided to participants by way of letterbox drops in buildings (thanking for participation and synopsis of results). This correspondence contained a QR code link to a Chinese interpretation of the letter which was uploaded to the Neighbourhood Watch Victoria website (www.nhw.com.au)

Thematic postcards and posters

Based on the results of the first survey, three key themes were identified for a suite of crime prevention messaging: parcel theft; car park security; and identity theft. Postcards and posters were designed by an in-house graphic designer.

Community meetings

Co-ordinated community meetings were arranged for all involved in the pilot (residents and property managers), and 'registered interest' in attending a community meeting was sought to ensure numbers before solidifying the venue and other arrangements. The aim was to hold meetings at the actual properties where facilities were available to increase attendance: this occurred for the first meeting which was aimed at residents of a cluster of buildings, but the second meeting was convened at a police station owing to the lack of meeting space in the building itself.

Safe Plate day

Safe Plate Days are an initiative of Neighbourhood Watch. These days involve members of the community being invited to attend with their vehicles to a central location (oftentimes a Bunnings car park) and one-way screws being used to affix number plates to vehicles, as a means of preventing number plate theft. This was trialed as part of the Connect Up Project, with residents invited to participate by bringing their vehicles to the entrance of the basement car parks (at two buildings, in the Melbourne CAD and in North Melbourne).

DISCUSSION

Partner relationships

This pilot program was advantaged by the introduction of the Neighbourhood Policing Framework. Though the program was delayed by COVID-19, it was a convenient delay, as once the Neighbourhood Policing Framework was introduced, the Connect Up program grew in its appeal internally within the various partner organisations (and most particularly Victoria Police).

The involvement of a highly committed, enthusiastic and proactive First Constable, combined with a strong sense of leadership and direction from senior VicPol members in the post-COVID time period, helped SAV develop and deploy the pilot. This commitment will be essential if the initiative, if replicated, will be successful.

Resident engagement and community forums

Direct face-to-face engagement in the foyers of the buildings was far more worthwhile than asking residents to attend an event at a set time. In December 2021, a VicPol Neighbourhood Policing officer engaged with residents from 4pm to 6.30pm as they came home from work and in turn went out for food, resulting in great conversations.

With regard to the time of day, the forums were too early in the evening (6pm), although perhaps if convened later in the evening then residents would likely be comfortably ensconced at home and not interested in going out again – even if the location was within minutes of their apartments. If the initiative is to be replicated in suburban locations, such as Frankston, Doncaster and so on, then allowance will need to be made for people to actually travel home from work.

A combination of emails from building managers and letterbox inserts was relied upon to communicate with residents. In retrospect, it is likely that most emails went directly to owners (as opposed to residents), yet a high proportion of residents are tenants.

It is also likely that recipients perhaps were not interested in opening an email from the building manager (presuming that the information they often get from the manager is about poor behaviour within the building). Emails are oftentimes likely to be ignored or glanced over.

With regard to the postcards which were letterboxed, people are likely to receive bank statements, invoices and so on electronically. Letterboxes have morphed into a place for catalogues and other general unaddressed material. It is unclear how often are letterboxes are emptied and whether the contents are read or immediately thrown out.

Safe Plate events

For the Safe Plate events, there was a reliance on residents making an 'appointment'. Attendance and participation in this activity was not high. This may be owing to lack of awareness, or perhaps the timing on a Sunday morning (9.00 am to 10.30am at one location and 11.00am to 12.00pm at a second location, impacted for some by a stronger desire for a sleep in. Alternatively, it may be that residents were not convinced of a compelling reason to implement this crime prevention measure. A bespoke A5 size flier was prepared and distributed to residents via letterboxes at the two target locations.

Surveys and social cohesion

Rather than launch the first survey effectively cold, there ought to be a greater emphasis on opening dialogue with residents, though a clear means of communication. For this specifically, and for building social capital building more generally, other "non crime events" such as trivia nights could be considered. Social cohesion reduces worry – but fliers do not. The pilot program

did not have the scope to tackle this, so any replication of this initiative ought to consider the inclusion of programs/activities to engage people more.

Improving social cohesion will develop trust, and it is recognised that people with trust are less worried about personal victimisation (although not property victimisation).

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of the current project is that direct comparisons between each survey was not possible. Future projects should consider a three-phase data collection approach, as identified in the recommendation above, where survey items are as similar as possible across each phase. Additionally, participants could be assigned a unique identifier code to be used in each of the three surveys. This approach would allow individual participant responses to be tracked and compared across each phase of the project.

As noted in the discussion above, there were generally low levels of engagement with the project from residents. The effects of this low engagement may have contributed to the non-significant impact of the flyers and events. Future programs will need to identify ways of generating greater engagement, such as through face-to-face contact, scheduling events at more accessible times, and incentives for participation.

The sites selected for the pilot program were pre-existing apartments. As a result, changes to infrastructure (e.g., installation of parcel lockers) were not available interventions.

Furthermore, residents' concerns expressed in each of the surveys often related to broader issues that were not associated with the apartment building itself and were not within the control of the project team. For example, in survey 2 participants expressed concerns about the construction of a homeless shelter adjacent to one of the project sites.
