

**Vancouver Island University (VIU) Area**  
**Neighbourhood Safety Audit Report**



**City of Nanaimo Community Policing**  
**August 2022**

## **Introduction**

The Nanaimo Neighbourhood Safety Audit is a hands-on crime prevention initiative undertaken by Nanaimo Community Policing in collaboration with the RCMP, neighbourhood associations, Vancouver Island University, and many other people and organizations in Nanaimo. The development and implementation of Safety Audits began in 2021 in Nanaimo, and are a community policing tool which have been used in many cities throughout Canada and the United States.

The framework for the division of the City of Nanaimo for the Safety Audits followed the area outlines developed and utilized in the 2006 census tract divisions (see Appendix “A”). This divided the municipality into 18 neighbourhoods: Dover, North Slope, Hammond Bay, Rutherford / Pleasant Valley, Long Lake, Linley Valley, Departure Bay, Diver Lake, Northfield, Newcastle, Townsite, Westwood, Vancouver Island University, City Centre, Harewood, Southend, Chase River, and Duke Point.

Safety Audits work to promote neighbourhood safety by identifying factors relating to safety and crime, and offering informed recommendations to address the concerns of the neighbourhood. These recommendations are based on the experiences of residents of the examined neighbourhood and their perceptions of crime and safety, empirical data, and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) assessments of locations in the neighbourhood. Safety Audits have the potential to bring about a wide range of benefits, including:

- Reduction in opportunities for neighbourhood crime by addressing criminogenic factors.
- Identify a neighbourhood’s strengths and weaknesses in regards to crime and safety, and make effective recommendations to address issues.
- Increase awareness of neighbourhood crime and crime prevention initiatives, as well as reduce levels of fear of crime through spread of information.
- Strengthen connection between residents as they work together to build a strong and healthy neighbourhood.
- Create a strong relationship between residents, RCMP, neighbourhood associations, and other organizations through collaboration and communication.

The Neighbourhood Safety Audit seeks to give residents an opportunity to have their voices heard, and prioritizes effective collaboration between neighbourhoods and other aspects

of the community. The recommendations presented in this report are based on the needs identified by neighbourhood residents, and are intended to inform effective, long-term interventions to address issues of safety and crime. If the appropriate steps are taken, this could greatly contribute to safer and healthier neighbourhoods in Nanaimo.

## **Background**

The VIU neighbourhood of Nanaimo, was selected (along with the Diver Lake Neighbourhood) to be one of the two sites of a Safety Audit in the spring of 2022. For a variety of reasons, it was concluded that the Neighbourhood Safety Audit project could benefit this area by helping to address safety issues, strengthen social cohesion, and promote positive change. This area borders the Harewood (to the south) and City Centre (to the east) neighbourhoods, which were the subject of a similar audit in 2021.

In 2021, a comparison of neighbourhoods was done using a variety of factors and collected information including police statistics, census data, City of Nanaimo priorities, and anecdotal or supporting information. Within the category of police statistics, the VIU neighbourhood was one of the highest for “Count of Property Offences” and “Sum of Crime Index”. For census data it scored the highest for “Unemployment Rate” and “Prevalence of Low Income, while it was one of the lowest for “Median Household Income”. Data from 2021 Crime Statistics was used in this study, due to an absence of a criminal analyst during this time.

A further analysis of crime trends determined that the VIU neighbourhood had been impacted in recent months, specifically for the crime types identified as Break and Enters (both business and residential), Thefts from Auto, and Vagrancy. In February 2022 VIU was also identified through a scan of social media that identified news articles where newsworthy criminal events had occurred.

## **Vancouver Island University (VIU)**

The Vancouver Island University (Nanaimo campus) takes up a significant portion of the area designated as the Vancouver Island University neighbourhood. Consultation was conducted with representatives of the VIU management, their own security, and their contracted security partners.

There were several areas of concern that had been identified over the last few years, which they had worked to address:

- 1) Bike thefts had been increasing, and were unaffected by the installation of cameras. The use of the 529 Garage (a bike registration program being utilized by the Nanaimo Community Policing in coordination with local bike shops) has resulted in the return of 11 of the 12 bikes that had been reported stolen. They have since installed a fence around the bike lock up area, which has stopped these thefts.
- 2) The large, flat surface around the VIU grounds make ideal targets for graffiti. They try to remove the images within 48 hours, discouraging further graffiti, and reducing the impact.
- 3) Although assaults rarely occur, when they do, security responds in force to address the issue. This has increased confidence by the students, and improved reporting.

The University has also implemented several changes over the last few years, utilizing CPTED principles (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) to reduce the incidence of crime, and the fear of crime. These include improving sightlines and visibility through the removal of shrubs; improved outdoor lighting; a Safe Walk Program, where a security person accompanies a student to their vehicle for safety; 24 hour security services with increased visibility; and restricting the hours that power outlets in outdoor spaces are turned on, as these had a tendency to attract persons not associated to the University.

### **Pre-Audit Online Survey**

There were 122 respondents to a voluntary, anonymous, confidential online survey that was provided to people within the Vancouver Island University Neighbourhood. The survey consisted of 36 questions covering demographics, neighbourhood connections, feelings of safety, crime impact, and crime prevention. These were mostly multiple choice, with some sections for additional comments. The results were collated into a single document detailing all the responses.

The demographics revealed the majority of respondents (almost 82%) were 19 to 60 years old, and 85% were born in Canada. 65% of the persons that completed this survey were female, and about 82% Caucasian. Although over 55% were married or cohabitating with a significant other, nearly 58% had no children living with them. 50% reported a household income of \$50,000 or more, while only 2.59% reported they were unemployed.

About 65% would recommend this neighbourhood to others, and felt a strong connection with their family within their community. 82 of the 122 respondents had positive things to say about where they live, and the majority felt a sense of community. When asked about personal safety, over 35% were not happy. Their most commonly identified reasons were the transient/homeless populations, open drug use, and a lack of police presence. Almost 79% felt safe walking alone during the day, but only 39% felt safe at night. Similar reasons were noted including drug use, homeless / transient persons, aggressive behaviour, and mental health issues. Although these are social issues beyond the capability and scope of this project, there were some identifiable issues that were common to these answers that could be addressed locally—a lack of suitable lighting, and sidewalks. A large portion of the respondents had either been the target of a Break and Enter or theft, or knew someone that had. The common thread through the responses showed that the main concerns were repeatedly that of homelessness and transient persons in the area, drug use, and concern over theft. There were several themes identified in their suggestions on how to improve their community: increased /better lighting, graffiti removal, addition or maintenance of side walks, and additional patrols of the area.

### **Safety Audit Walk**

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022, a walk around the area was organized, and was lead by Christy Wood (the previous Community Policing Coordinator), Cst. Gary O'Brien (RCMP Community Policing), and some VIU practicum students. The purpose of this walk was to identify and inventory possible areas where changes could affect the crime rate (or perception thereof), utilizing CPTED principles, in a typical area of the neighbourhood.

A laneway walk from Wakesiah Ave to Jingle Pot Rd. identified several areas of concern. Short-term rental units and empty lots decrease the ownership of the area by residents. High fences restrict viewing of the contents of the yard, but also prevent visibility of what is

happening on the outside of the property. The presence of graffiti and litter increases the perception of disinterest and a lack of concern for a neighbourhood.



*Graffiti was noted in several areas along Wakesiah Ave.*



*Unkempt properties can contribute to the perception of crime.*

Public areas and pathways with inadequate sight lines decrease the feeling of safety to those using the area. Shrubs around public pathways were not well trimmed, and there was not enough illumination. Together, these also contribute to the perception of higher crime rates, and the opportunity for crime to occur. Improvements to sightlines on public lands by removing low branches and trimming back shrubs could improve the feeling of safety in the area. Additionally, working with owners to improve their properties and remove graffiti could have a similar effect.



*Dense underbrush can provide opportunities for crime, and reduce the sense of safety.*

## **Recommendations**

The purpose of the Neighbourhood Safety Audit is to support local neighbourhoods in building resiliency and increase safety. Work is done by activating the neighbourhood by capturing their real lived experiences through tools such as the pre-audit survey, the group audits and/or self-directed audits. Engagement of the neighbourhood is important to help create safety and connect agencies that can provide support in developing and carrying out community safety initiatives or appropriate crime prevention activities.

Crime and community safety issues are complex and are often a symptom of a lack of access to the social determinants of health not only for individuals but neighbourhoods and communities. The root causes of crime are often the results of adverse social, economic, cultural and family conditions. The recommendations made here are suggestions on activities that neighbourhoods can do to contribute to the overall safety and security of the neighbourhood. They do not guarantee that crime will never happen as a result of implementing these recommendations nor will the following recommendations solve complex problems such as homelessness, the opioid crisis or the lack of resources around mental health services.

- 1) The Vancouver Island University Neighbourhood has several Block Watches. This has allowed a network of neighbours to evolve into an intricate network. Having relationships with neighbours is a positive indicator for increasing neighbourhood safety. A tightly knit network can be used as a resource to improve conditions in neighbourhood. It is important to sustain this work especially as people move in and out of the

neighbourhood. A consideration may be hosting block or work parties several times a year in areas of the neighbourhood that might need some clean-up or beautification. These types of events also support relationship building between residents. There are several options that may cover the costs, for instance, the City of Nanaimo often provides social planning grants that support projects that build resiliency and social connectivity. The Nanaimo Foundation also provides Neighbourhood grants to help build safer communities. These grants can cover supplies and food for event. Community Policing can provide the support of additional volunteers to help with painting, garbage pickup or support with refreshments and cooking. Always ensure you have the permission of the property owner prior to conducting any clean-up events or block parties. It is always a good idea to reach out to the municipality to let them know about your plan and if there is any protocols or regulations that might apply to the area you are looking to clean up or host your block party.

- 2) Actively encourage new Block Watches in the neighbourhood. Cst. Gary O'Brien is the local co-ordinator for this program. He can be contacted through the Nanaimo RCMP Detachment. An expansion and/or re-engagement of Block Watch within this neighbourhood would increase the ownership of the area.
- 3) Community Policing volunteers conduct will conduct Crime Watch patrols in a marked Community Policing vehicle. These patrols are conducted under the guidance of the Community Policing Coordinator, and are directed to locations identified through these Neighbourhood Safety Audit reports, along with changing crime rate hotspots. The Buttertubs Marsh parking lots have been identified and forwarded for further patrols.
- 4) Speed Watch is also a program undertaken by the Community Policing volunteers. This program targets speeders through monitoring and display of vehicle speeds, to ensure they are aware of the speed limit. The registered owner of a vehicle exceeding the speed limit, may receive a letter advising of the possible infraction. Additionally, the driver may receive a ticket if a police officer is also in attendance. Speed Watch will be deployed to the area where traffic speeds have been identified are an issue (Jinglepot and Wakesiah).
- 5) Consider engaging private property owners who might be having challenges with criminal activity on their property and see if they might be interested in having a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) Assessment. CPTED incorporates a



set of strategies that help to reduce the opportunities to commit crimes, reduce the fear of crime, and prevents negative activity by replacing it with generators of positive activity (International CPTED Association, 2020). CPTED is grounded in practical and theoretical knowledge primarily from the fields of criminology, sociology, psychology, and architectural design.

### **Opportunities for Change:**

- 1) A common challenge plaguing urban centres and mid size cities like Nanaimo are the number of vacant properties popping up. Vacant lands or buildings are often associated with physical disorder, and can indicate a lack of control within neighbourhoods and these types of environments are subject to criminal activity, prostitution, drug use and the sale of drugs. Vacant lots can also contribute to lowering the value of properties nearby. There are several vacant lots that have posed problems in the area. Working with owners to develop or maintain these properties can increase ownership and property values.
- 2) Another large concern of within the VIU Neighbourhood is the public disorder correlated with the drug, mental health and homelessness crisis. Police statistics show an increase in public disorder type events - for instance, there is an increase in General Occurrence type events which includes infringements on the Trespass Act, Quarantine Act, lost property events, Safe Street Act, etc. It is important to note that the coding and reporting of police statistics changed in January 2019 which accounts for some of the increase however the sheer number of General Occurrence events warrants mention. This can also be said with the number of Suspicious Occurrence events. Many residents are concerned with the lack of housing, and support services for individuals with mental health and addictions issues. Linkages and collaboration between neighbourhoods and the Health and Housing Task Force will be key to get the community support and resources the Task Force may need to carry out their Action Plan. Partnerships such as these also help to tackle stigma and correct any harmful myths with evidence based research on what is working to address homelessness and our current drug and mental health crisis.
- 3) Although out of the scope of this audit, there were also identified issues surrounding youth at risk. The City of Nanaimo was identified by Public Safety Canada, as a community to receive funding through the Building Safer Communities Fund (BSCF).

Through Statistics Canada and Universal Crime Reporting, Nanaimo had a sufficiently high crime index to receive funds to address gun and gang violence within the municipality. At this time, the City of Nanaimo has put forward a proposal to the Federal government. If approved, the BSCF will cover 4 years of programming and provide supports to the youth at risk in the area.

## **Conclusion**

In general, the VIU Neighbourhood has a high sense of community, and people are happy to live here. The general dissatisfaction trends are over the occurrence of thefts, and the presence of homelessness and drug use (often reported hand-in-hand with each other). Improvements to infrastructure may decrease the perception of crime, by increasing the feeling of safety and pride within the community. These improvements could include increased lighting in public areas, cutting back brush to increase visibility, and expanding the amount of sidewalks in the area. Working with property owners to ensure the upkeep and maintenance of properties could also assist with reducing the opportunities for crime.

This audit provided a snapshot of the community in which it was held, at the time it was conducted. For change to be meaningful and lasting, the community must take on the ownership of their neighbourhood. The people living within this area must work to implement these recommendations, and lobby for any necessary infrastructure changes through the municipal government. Nanaimo Community Policing will assist by undertaking to fulfil the recommendations listed in this document, where they can be controlled by the Community Policing program. It is planned that there will be a follow up to this audit in 2-3 years, to determine if any of the recommendations have been followed through with, and whether changes that have been made were effective.

Jon Stuart

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August 2022.

# Appendix "A":

## 2006 Census Tract Neighbourhood Boundaries

