

Townsite Area

Neighborhood Safety Audit Report



City of Nanaimo Community Policing

December 2022

Townsite Neighborhood Safety Audit Report

Introduction

The Nanaimo Neighborhood Safety Audit is a hands-on crime prevention initiative undertaken by Nanaimo Community Policing in collaboration with the RCMP, neighborhood 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 neighborhoods: 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, South end, Chase River, and Duke Point.

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

- Reduction in opportunities for neighborhood crime by addressing criminogenic factors.
- Identify a neighborhood’s strengths and weaknesses in regards to crime and safety, and make effective recommendations to address issues.

- Increase awareness of neighborhood 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 neighborhood.
- Create a strong relationship between residents, RCMP, neighborhoods associations, and other organizations through collaboration and communication.

The Neighborhood Safety Audit seeks to give residents an opportunity to have their voices heard, and prioritizes effective collaboration between neighborhoods and other aspects of the community. The recommendations presented in this report are based on the needs identified by neighborhood 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 neighborhoods in Nanaimo.

Background

The Townsite neighborhood of Nanaimo, was selected by Jon Stuart (City of Nanaimo Community Policing Coordinator) and Vincent Millette, a Criminology student from the University of Moncton. Based on the 8 neighbourhoods completed to date, and the remaining neighbourhoods in Nanaimo, it was decided to compare crime statistics for two neighborhoods that connected with previously examined areas, Townsite and Departure Bay. As a result of these comparisons, Townsite was selected as the area to conduct the Safety Audit in the fall of 2022. The main goal from this safety audit was to get feedback from the people that are living in this area of Nanaimo and assess their perceived safety issues. Also, completing a Neighborhood Safety Audit promotes positive change and builds a sense of community in the neighborhood. There are three schools and a hospital in this area which brings a lot of traffic into this area. This community is also a mix of residential and light commercial use, but there are only a few small businesses in this neighborhood. This neighbourhood is triangular in shape, and borders Terminal Ave (to the east), Townsite Rd (to the south) and Boundary Crescent (to the west).

A comparison of neighborhoods was done using a variety of factors and collected information including police statistics, census data, City of Nanaimo priorities, and anecdotal or supporting information. The group looked at two different neighborhoods, and debated between the Townsite and Departure Bay area. The population of the Townsite neighborhood is smaller

than the Departure Bay neighborhood but there is more criminal activity by population in the Townsite area. For example, between January 1st 2022 and September 9th 2022 there was double the amount of assaults in the Townsite neighborhood. One of the main concerns from the population of this area was the amount of Break and Enters and fear of crime. When comparing both neighbourhoods with all the factors, the Townsite neighborhood was selected as the next area to conduct a Safety Audit.

Once the neighborhood was identified, a further analysis of the area could be done. The analysis showed the importance of the presence of homelessness in the area. The student drove around the neighborhood to observe and get a feeling of what was happening. The Unitarian shelter is located in the area and it brings a lot of marginalized people to the neighborhood. It supports and helps the people in need but this population also appears to contribute to the criminal activity in the area. There was also different news articles that described criminal activities in the Townsite area.

In October 2022, a discussion with Cst. Gary O'Brien, an officer with the Community Policing section, confirmed that this neighbourhood would be suitable to conduct a Safety Audit. He knows the area very well and has a connection with many of the neighborhood associations. Gary works with the Block Watch community and knows all the captains, as well as the area Neighbourhood Association. He's also in charge of public relations for the RCMP and he was instrumental in connecting with the community and local media to getting the word out about the online survey and the project as a whole.

Pre-Audit Online Survey

There were 29 respondents to a voluntary, anonymous, confidential online survey that was provided to people within the Townsite Neighbourhood. This survey consisted of 34 questions covering demographics, neighbourhood connections, feelings of safety, crime impact, and crime prevention. They were mostly multiple choice questions, with some sections for additional comments. The results were collated into an excel document including details of all multiple choice responses and another document including the long answers. It was hoped that more respondents would have completed the survey, however, there was enough participants to get an idea of the areas of concern for the neighbourhood. A press release about the safety audit made the front page of the local paper and gave a greater attention to the project. It is believed that this increased the number of respondents to the level it was.

The demographics revealed the majority of respondents (51%) were 61 to 75 years old, and 86% were born in Canada. 44% of the individuals that completed the survey were male, and about 86% were Caucasian. Over 48% were married, 24% were single, and 41% had 2 children living with them. Over 20% reported a household income between \$50,000-\$74,999, while 17% reported they were working full time, and 62% reported they were retired.

The majority (79%) would recommend this neighbourhood to others, and 55% felt a strong connection with their family within their community. All of the respondents had positive things to say about where they live, and the majority cited their neighbours and the local green spaces as highlights. They also like the proximity of everything around the neighbourhood. When asked about personal safety, 82% were either “dissatisfied” or rather “satisfied”. Their most commonly identified reasons for their dissatisfaction were the transient/ homeless populations, open drug use, and a lack of police presence. 79% felt safe or very safe walking alone during the day, but only 55% felt safe or very safe at night. Similar reasons were noted including persons high on drugs, homeless / transient persons, 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 large portion of the respondents had either been the target of a Break and Enter or theft, or knew someone that had. A commonality in their responses highlighted theft from vehicles, the marked increase in homeless/transient persons, increased drug use, and persons with mental health issues. In relation to crime reduction, 89% felt the police have an important or extremely important role to play in ensuring neighbourhood safety, and yet only 27% felt that the crime prevention strategies were ineffective.

Safety Audit Walk

On November 15th, 2022, a walk around the Townsite neighborhood was organized, and was led by Jon Stuart (Community Policing Coordinator), Cst. Gary O’Brien and a student from the University of Moncton. The purpose of this walk was to identify and establish possible areas where changes could affect the crime rate (or perception thereof), utilizing CPTED principles, in a typical area of the neighbourhood.

The Unitarian shelter on the corner of Townsite and Millstone brings a lot of concerns from the people that are living in the area. Unfortunately, the marginalized individuals that congregate here raise concerns for the surrounding neighborhood. One citizen voiced his thoughts in regards to his observations around the shelter during night. The problem addressed is that residents of the neighborhood have concerns around having a shelter in the area but are aware that the marginalized individuals need somewhere to go. During the walk, individuals stated “the neighborhood is completely out of hand”.



This is the back alley that marginalized individuals use to get to the Unitarian Shelter. Not enough lights.



There is some graffiti on the outside of a businesses at the Townsite strip mall.

Jon also spoke about the pros and cons of fences during the walk through the neighborhood. Some of the fences/bushes in the area pose a problem. Some of them are too high which gives the owner of the property privacy but no one can see what's happening on the other side of the fence. For example, if there was a Break and Enter in a house which has a fence that is too high, neighbors couldn't see what's happening and couldn't call the police. Having a lower fence gives owners less privacy but it provides them and their neighbours with more with security/safety.



Here's an example of bushes/fences being too high.



This fence is the perfect size.

The people that are living in the neighborhood mentioned that a lot of them have a surveillance system or motion lights. The purpose behind it is to scare the criminals and make them re-evaluate what they are planning to do. Also there are some poorly illuminated back alleys in the neighborhood that get really dark at night. Furthermore, during the walk volunteers noticed that some trailers were left unlocked. Cst. Gary O'brien mentioned that there are many individuals on bicycles checking for unlocked vehicle doors.

Recommendations

The purpose of the Neighborhood Safety Audit is to support local neighborhoods in building resiliency and increase safety. Work is done by engaging the neighborhood 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 neighborhood 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 neighborhoods 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 or changes that neighborhoods can do to contribute to the overall safety and security of the neighborhood. 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 Townsite Neighborhood has several Block Watches. This has allowed a network of neighbors to evolve into an intricate communication network. Having relationships with neighbors is a positive indicator for increasing neighborhood safety. A tightly knit community can be used as a resource to improve conditions in neighborhood by sharing information, concerns, and solutions. It is important to sustain this work especially as people move in and out of the neighborhood. A consideration may be hosting block or work parties several times a year in areas of the neighborhood 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 Neighborhood grants to help build safer communities. These grants can cover supplies and food for an

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 coordinator 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 Neighborhood Safety Audit reports, along with changing crime rate hotspots. The back alleys, especially the one that connects Rosehill and the Unitarian Shelter, have been identified and forwarded for further patrols.
- 4) 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. Jon mentioned that he just completed this course and can now conduct a CPTED Assessment.

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 neighborhoods 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 Townsite Neighborhood 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 Townsite Neighborhood 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 if possible, reinforce the police patrol in some areas of the neighborhood. Working with property owners to ensure the upkeep and maintenance of properties could also assist with reducing the opportunities for crime. The main concern from the population of this neighborhood is the presence of marginalized people. It is an issue in Nanaimo and raises crime concerns in all the neighborhoods. If the city can somehow help individuals in need by having more housing, substance use and mental health support, the crime rate in the city could decrease.

Appendix “A”:
2006 Census Tract Neighborhood Boundaries

