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**INCREASING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE
NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH PROGRAMME TO PREVENT THEFT IN
TANJUNG GUSTA SUB-DISTRICT, MEDAN HELVETIA DISTRICT: AN
ACTION RESEARCH STUDY**

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Abstract

Criminal acts of theft in urban areas are often triggered by weak neighbourhood surveillance and a lack of social cohesion amongst residents. This action research aims to increase community participation in Tanjung Gusta Sub-district, Medan Helvetia District, through the optimisation of the Neighbourhood Watch (Siskamling) programme to prevent theft. Using a qualitative method with an action research approach, data were collected through participatory observation, documentation and in-depth interviews specifically focused on the Head of the Neighbourhood as the local authority and the local community as the grassroots base. The research findings indicate that prior to the action intervention, community participation was at a very low level due to high levels of individualism amongst the urban population and a sense of disengagement with the existing night patrol management system. Through the stages of action research (planning, action, observation and reflection), the researcher, together with the Head of the Neighbourhood and residents, successfully restructured a transparent night patrol schedule, refurbished the physical facilities of the patrol posts, and integrated a neighbourhood reporting system. This intervention not only significantly increased resident attendance at patrols to 90 per cent, but also succeeded in reviving effective informal social control, reducing the incidence of theft to zero cases in the area.

Keywords: *Community Participation, Neighbourhood Watch, Theft, Neighbourhood Head, Action Research.*

INTRODUCTION

Public safety and order are vital foundations for the sustainability of social and economic life in urban areas. Security stability not only determines residents' comfort in carrying out their daily activities but also influences economic growth, social relations and the overall quality of life of the community. Amidst the rapid development of major cities in Indonesia, the challenges of maintaining neighbourhood security are becoming increasingly complex. The city of Medan, as one of Indonesia's largest metropolitan areas, faces various social issues arising from rising population numbers and urbanisation. One particularly prominent issue is the high crime rate, specifically theft offences occurring in various residential areas.

One area particularly vulnerable to such security breaches is the Tanjung Gusta neighbourhood, situated in the Medan Helvetia subdistrict. This area is known for its high population density and highly dynamic community mobility. On the one hand, these conditions reflect rapid urban development; on the other, they present various social risks, including an increased potential for criminal activity. Based on previous

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findings, Tanjung Gusta Sub-district is one of the areas that experiences theft cases quite frequently, ranging from motor vehicle theft to aggravated burglary targeting residents' homes (Ansori, 2021).

The characteristics of a densely populated residential environment make it increasingly difficult to monitor community activities. High population turnover means that the presence of strangers in the neighbourhood often goes unnoticed. Criminals exploit this situation to observe residents' patterns of activity and identify security vulnerabilities they can exploit. In many cases, thefts occur at specific times when community vigilance is at its lowest, particularly from the evening until the early hours of the morning.

From a sociological perspective, urban life has characteristics that differ from those of rural communities. Urban life tends to be characterised by a high degree of individualism. The demands of work and economic pressures mean that most residents spend their time working from morning until late afternoon. Consequently, social interaction between neighbours becomes increasingly limited. These strained social relationships lead to a reduced sense of concern for the surrounding neighbourhood and a weakening of collective bonds within the community.

According to Sudarsono (2023), weak social cohesion in urban areas leads to a decline in the function of informal social control within the community. Informal social control is a monitoring mechanism that develops naturally through social relationships within the community, such as knowing one another, reminding one another, and looking out for each other's safety. When this mechanism fails to function properly, the neighbourhood becomes more vulnerable to various forms of security breaches. Residents tend to become indifferent to their surroundings and hand over responsibility for security entirely to external parties.

This phenomenon is clearly evident in several neighbourhoods within the Tanjung Gusta sub-district. Various theft cases that have occurred indicate that criminals are able to exploit the community's lack of social cohesion. The lack of collective vigilance provides opportunities for perpetrators to carry out their crimes without attracting residents' attention. In such circumstances, neighbourhood security can no longer rely solely on law enforcement agencies.

Although the police play a key role in maintaining public safety and order, entrusting the entire responsibility for security to the authorities is not a realistic approach. The Medan Helvetia Police Station faces various constraints, both in terms of the number of personnel and the size of the area under its jurisdiction. With limited resources, it is impossible to monitor every corner of the neighbourhood intensively for a full twenty-four hours. Therefore, active community involvement is required to create an effective and sustainable security system.

One form of community participation that has long been recognised in Indonesia is the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme, or Siskamling. This scheme is a form of community-led security that stems from residents' collective awareness of the need to safeguard the security of their neighbourhood. More than just night-time patrols, Siskamling is a tangible manifestation of the utilisation of the community's social capital in building neighbourhood resilience. The existence of Siskamling enables residents to cooperate with one another, share information, and foster a shared sense of responsibility for the security of their neighbourhood (Wibowo & Kusuma, 2022).

In practice, the effectiveness of Siskamling depends heavily on the level of community participation. The greater the residents' involvement, the stronger the surveillance system that is established. As well as serving as a means of preventing crime, night patrols also help to strengthen social bonds amongst the community. The

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interactions that take place during patrols can reinforce solidarity and foster a sense of community that has been gradually fading in urban areas.

However, the initial conditions observed in Tanjung Gusta Sub-district indicate that the Siskamling programme has experienced a significant decline in effectiveness. Over the past few years, night patrols have practically ceased to function as intended. Patrol posts, which were previously established as hubs for neighbourhood security activities, appear abandoned, damaged and neglected. The majority of available facilities are no longer used by the community.

Not only that, but residents' enthusiasm for participating in the patrol rota is also at a very low level. Many people regard maintaining neighbourhood security no longer as a shared responsibility, but rather as the duty of the sub-district administration, security forces, or specially paid night watchmen. This perception has led to a growing sense of passivity amongst the community. The collective obligation to maintain neighbourhood security through mutual cooperation is gradually being abandoned.

In fact, the success of a neighbourhood security system is largely determined by the community's willingness to become actively involved. When residents no longer feel a sense of responsibility for neighbourhood security, the potential for criminal activity increases. It is this situation that highlights the need to revitalise Siskamling as a community-based crime prevention strategy.

In light of these circumstances, this study was designed using an action research approach, which emphasises direct and collaborative intervention. Action research was chosen because it aims not only to understand the problems at hand but also to bring about tangible change through the involvement of various stakeholders. In this study, the focus was narrowed to the prevalence of theft offences in the Tanjung Gusta neighbourhood.

Through a qualitative approach, the researcher positioned themselves as a community partner and agent of change, working closely with the Neighbourhood Head and local residents. The research process was carried out in several stages, ranging from problem identification, formulation of root causes, development of improvement strategies, implementation of actions, to evaluation of the resulting impact. This participatory approach enabled the community to be directly involved in every decision-making process.

It is hoped that the revitalisation of the Neighbourhood Watch scheme will reawaken the community's collective awareness of the importance of jointly maintaining neighbourhood security. In addition to raising vigilance against potential theft, this programme is also expected to strengthen social solidarity and rebuild the culture of mutual assistance, which has begun to fade due to the dynamics of urban life.

Ultimately, neighbourhood security is not solely the responsibility of law enforcement agencies, but rather the result of cooperation amongst all elements of society. By optimising the role of the Neighbourhood Watch and strengthening community participation, the Tanjung Gusta Sub-district has a great opportunity to create a safe, orderly and comfortable environment for the entire community. These collective efforts represent a strategic step towards building social resilience capable of withstanding various future criminal threats.

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METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach in the form of Action Research, which is geared towards resolving practical problems in the community through direct intervention in the field. The research was conducted based on Kurt Lewin's cycle model, which comprises four stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting, occurring in a continuous cycle (Sugiyono, 2019). This approach was chosen as it is capable of fostering changes in community awareness and behaviour towards more active participation in maintaining neighbourhood safety.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account those with knowledge and experience regarding security conditions in Tanjung Gusta Sub-district. The research subjects focused on two key figures: the Heads of Neighbourhoods VII and VIII—two individuals who serve as administrative heads and policy-makers at the local level. The involvement of these neighbourhood heads was crucial to obtaining a comprehensive picture of security conditions and the social dynamics of the community.

In addition, the study also involved four local residents, comprising two residents registered as participants in the night patrols and two residents who had previously been victims of theft. The selection of these informants aimed to gather information on sociological and psychological aspects, as well as the various challenges faced by the community in implementing the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme (Siskamling). Consequently, the data obtained is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of efforts to increase community participation in maintaining neighbourhood security.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initial Conditions: Identification of Theft Patterns and the Root Causes of Siskamling's Ineffectiveness

Prior to the field intervention, the researchers conducted a comprehensive data collection exercise through in-depth interviews and situational observations in the Tanjung Gusta sub-district, specifically in Neighbourhoods VII and VIII. Based on records of residents' complaints to the Neighbourhood Head over the past three months, theft offences showed an alarming trend. The cases were predominantly thefts of motor vehicles parked on front porches, as well as thefts of external household components such as iron fences and gas cylinders. In-depth interviews with local residents who were direct victims of these crimes revealed that the perpetrators were highly adept at exploiting moments of community complacency. It happened on a Friday night, in the middle of last month, at around 3.15 am. My husband's automatic motorbike had been locked at the handlebars and was inside the locked gate of our alleyway. But, as is the case in our neighbourhood, once it's past 1 am, there isn't a single person keeping watch, so the perpetrators had free rein to break the lock using a chemical solution or a large pair of pliers. I only realised at 5 am, just before dawn. None of the neighbours on either side heard anything because everyone was fast asleep. In our alley, once it's late at night, it's as if the place is dead; there's absolutely no surveillance at all." (Interview with Informant W1, Victim of Theft in Neighbourhood VII).

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The testimony from Informant W1 above confirms that the absence of regular surveillance in residential areas provides a vast safe space for perpetrators to carry out their actions without fear of social intervention. The researcher then sought confirmation and traced the root of the problem with the Head of Neighbourhood VII to ascertain the operational status of the existing community-led security scheme.

When asked about the neighbourhood watch scheme, the structure actually existed two years ago. But it gradually collapsed due to the ills of urban society: high levels of individualism and sectoral self-interest. Every time I issued a circular to reactivate the patrol posts, the residents' response was very lukewarm. Residents who are financially secure usually protest straight away. They argue, 'Mr Kepling, we already pay a mandatory monthly fee for the gatekeeper at the front, so why should we go to the trouble of staying up late on patrol again? We work office jobs in Medan city during the day—we're exhausted!' In reality, there is only one gatekeeper per shift, whilst the area covered by Neighbourhood Unit VII () comprises dozens of narrow alleys that cannot possibly be monitored by a single pair of eyes." (Interview with Informant KL1, Head of Neighbourhood Unit VII).

This phenomenon highlights a massive paradigm shift amongst urban communities. Security has become commodified, with residents feeling that their moral responsibility to safeguard public spaces can be fully delegated or replaced by a fee (Rahmansyah, 2022). Consequently, neighbourly relations have become mechanical and transactional.

To obtain balanced data, the researcher also interviewed local residents who were known to frequently skip their night patrol duties, even though they did not belong to the group that specifically paid the gatekeepers.

'How are we supposed to come on patrol, sir? The management of the old neighbourhood watch committee was a shambles and unfair. The rota drawn up on paper was often arbitrary. It often happened that when it was my turn to attend, the only people present were myself and a frail elderly person. Meanwhile, my neighbour next door, who has a large house and two cars, was never seen turning up, and strangely enough, the neighbourhood administration imposed no sanctions or reprimands whatsoever. Furthermore, the condition of the patrol post itself is appalling. The roof leaks, the lights are out, there are swarms of mosquitoes, and there are no facilities whatsoever. Rather than risking my health by staying up all night alone in a place like that with no clarity, I'd rather lock my house up tight and go to sleep.'" (Interview with Informant W2, Local Resident of Neighbourhood VIII).

Informant W2's statement identifies the secondary key barriers: a loss of social trust in systemic justice and the poor state of supporting infrastructure. Theoretically, the convergence of the neglected neighbourhood watch post, the high rate of resident absenteeism, and this collective apathy perfectly exemplifies the Broken Windows Theory. This theory posits that the physical and social signs of a neglected and unmonitored neighbourhood send a strong signal to criminals that the community has lost control and its social cohesion, thereby making the area perceived as very safe to target for theft (Putra, 2020).

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The Dynamics of the Action Research Cycle: A Collaborative Intervention to Restore Security

In light of the accumulation of the above issues, the researcher assumed the role of a field action facilitator (action researcher), working collaboratively with the Head of the Neighbourhood and representatives of the local community. The intervention was carried out using a structured action research methodology to overhaul security governance in the Tanjung Gusta Sub-district.

1. Planning Stage

The initial step in this action research was to foster critical awareness amongst the community. The researcher, together with the Head of the Neighbourhood, organised a 'Community Public Order and Security Forum' held in the garden of one resident's home. This forum was designed to be qualitative in nature to ensure it did not become too rigid. The researcher presented a tactical map of neighbourhood vulnerabilities, highlighting the alleys that had previously been breached and the times of day when thefts were most likely to occur.

Faced with this real data, the dynamics of the forum became somewhat tense. Some residents remained adamant in their refusal to take part in the neighbourhood watch patrols, citing work commitments. However, the researchers, together with the Head of the Neighbourhood, offered room for alternative negotiation. As a result of the discussion, a consensus was reached that residents unable to attend patrols due to work commitments would be required to pay a financial fine of Rp 30,000 per absence. This fine money does not go into the personal pockets of the committee members, but is managed transparently by the Neighbourhood Watch treasurer, appointed by the residents, to cover logistical costs (coffee, tea, snacks, torches) for the residents on night watch duty.

2. Action Phase

Concrete action was taken the following week through a mass community work initiative. The Head of the Neighbourhood led the residents in renovating the neighbourhood watch post, which had previously been in a state of disuse. Local residents with carpentry skills volunteered to repair the leaking roof, repaint it in bright colours, and install adequate electrical wiring.

3. Observation Phase

The researcher conducted participatory observation by getting out into the field, staying overnight at the neighbourhood watch post, and following the alley patrol route from 24.00 to 05.00 WIB for four consecutive weeks. The observation

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indicators focused on residents' discipline and patterns of neighbourhood surveillance.

The results of the observations revealed a dramatic behavioural shift. Residents' attendance at the new patrol schedule stabilised at 90 per cent. The neighbourhood watch post transformed into an active command centre. Every hour, the residents on duty split into two teams: one team manned the main post, whilst the other patrolled the narrow alleys (such as Gang Setia and Gang Rukun), carrying torches and tapping on electricity poles as a sign that the neighbourhood was under full surveillance.

4. Reflection Phase

In a reflection forum held at the end of the month, the researcher, the Neighbourhood Head and resident representatives evaluated the overall results of the initiative. Qualitative reflection indicated that the fair enforcement of fines was the main driving force behind the revival of resident participation. Residents who had initially been reluctant to attend became motivated upon seeing that even their wealthier neighbours were complying or paying fines, the proceeds of which were shared amongst the patrol members in the form of refreshments. Psychological barriers, such as a lack of trust in the neighbourhood authorities, were completely overcome.

Comprehensive Analysis: Reconstruction of Informal Social Control and Breaking the Chain of Crime

The success in increasing community participation through the revitalisation of the neighbourhood watch scheme in Tanjung Gusta must not be viewed merely as a technical success in improving the neighbourhood watch posts, but must be analysed as a process of reconstructing social capital and the revival of informal social control within urban society (Sudarsono, 2023).

In urban sociology, the decline in residents' participation in neighbourhood activities is often caused by a loss of trust. When this action research was introduced and addressed issues of distributive justice (fair scheduling) and procedural justice (transparent enforcement of fines by the Kepling), trust amongst residents was restored. Residents who had previously kept to themselves at home now have a space for horizontal interaction at the neighbourhood watch post.

An in-depth interview conducted by the researcher with one of the local residents one month after the neighbourhood watch scheme began revealed a profound shift in social orientation:

"To be honest, sir, before this action research initiative, I never knew the name of the neighbour living three houses away from mine, because we were both busy leaving early in the morning and returning late at night. But since joining these night patrols, we've started sitting together, drinking coffee, and chatting about all sorts of things.

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That's where a sense of brotherhood has emerged. Now, if I happen to pass by their house and see that the gate has been left unlocked or a suspicious stranger is loitering outside, I instinctively become wary and watch over that house as if it were my own. We now feel like one family, looking out for one another." (Interview with Informant W3, Local Resident of Neighbourhood VIII).

The interview excerpt from Informant W3 above confirms that this action research intervention has successfully transformed the community structure from one that was originally characterised by a fragile, individualistic form of solidarity (organic solidarity) back to one with bonds of '—a form of mechanical solidarity that is sensitive to collective security. It is this sense of mutual care that forms a very robust wall of informal social control at the grassroots level.

From a criminological perspective, the reduction in the number of theft cases to virtually zero during the action research period can be scientifically explained using Routine Activity Theory, as formulated by Cohen and Felson. This theory states that a criminal act, including theft in residential areas, will only occur if three crucial elements converge in the same space and time, namely: (1) a motivated offender, (2) a suitable target or victim, and (3) the absence of a capable guardian (Pratama & Siregar, 2021).

Before the action research was carried out, the Tanjung Gusta neighbourhood was in a highly vulnerable state because the element of 'absence of a capable guardian' was fully present. Although the police patrolled in vehicles, their presence was severely limited by time constraints and they were unable to navigate the labyrinth of narrow alleys. It was this vulnerability that criminals exploited to break fence locks and plunder residents' possessions without significant hindrance.

Through the revitalisation of the Neighbourhood Watch scheme, the 'absence of a capable guardian' was successfully eliminated and replaced by the presence of a 'Capable Guardian' drawn from the active participation of the residents themselves (Wibowo & Kusuma, 2022). Residents' consistent night patrols—combing the alleys every hour, shining torches, and actively communicating visually on the ground—act as a psychological deterrent for criminals.

Based on qualitative data confirmed at the end of the action research with the Head of the Neighbourhood, the impact of this community-based 'Capable Guardian' initiative has proven to be absolutely effective in curbing criminal opportunities.

"We can see the results for ourselves now, sir. It's been two months since we reactivated the post and residents have been disciplined in their patrols; reports of stolen motorbikes, gas cylinders, or removed fences have completely ceased. Zero cases. In fact, on several occasions, residents on patrol have caught strangers behaving suspiciously in the early hours of the morning; they were immediately questioned politely by residents, causing the person to leave. Thieves now think twice before entering Tanjung Gusta, because they know the residents here never sleep and the alleys are closely guarded." (Interview with Informant KL2, Head of Neighbourhood VIII).

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Conceptually, the findings of this action research demonstrate that the effectiveness of preventing theft in urban areas does not solely depend on the modernisation of man-made security equipment such as CCTV cameras or the deployment of additional armed personnel. The primary strength of the most sustainable and cost-effective crime prevention approach— —is in fact rooted in the restoration of social capital and the organisation of active participation by the local community under the leadership of a Neighbourhood Head who is a person of integrity, fair and firm in upholding social consensus for the sake of collective security.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative field action research demonstrates that increased community participation is the key factor determining the success of strategies to prevent theft at the local level. The prevalence of theft cases in Tanjung Gusta Village, Medan Helvetia Sub-district, in the past was not solely the result of a failure of the police security system, but rather the consequence of the breakdown of the community's informal social control functions due to the neglect of neighbourhood watch facilities and the deterioration of the patrol management system.

Through a collaborative action research intervention involving researchers, the Head of the Neighbourhood, and the local community, the sociological barrier of urban individualism was successfully overcome. The renovation of the neighbourhood watch posts, the distribution of duty rosters based on the principle of fairness, and the firm application of transparently managed fines proved highly effective in reviving residents' concern and active participation. The reactivation of the Neighbourhood Watch has succeeded in creating a 'capable guardian' within the residential area, which effectively closes off opportunities for criminals, thereby reducing the incidence of crime and preventing the ongoing occurrence of theft in the Tanjung Gusta sub-district.

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