Chapter 26

Active Citizenship in Urban Security Policies: Is Neighborhood Watch a Solution?

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be protected? To live in a constantly monitored space, or feeling heard by the institutions? Supervise the neighborhood or be involved in the design of security policies? The chapter analyzes citizens’ active participation as a further element for an effective implementation of urban safety policies. It will analyze citizen involvement in ensuring the safety of their territory through neighborhood watch groups in the European context. The authors try to answer the following questions: Why are the neighborhood watch groups born and why do some people choose to join these programs? What value do citizens give to the groups? What are the potential benefits and risks for local communities?

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this chapter on the participatory approach to urban security is to stimulate critical thinking regarding the citizen participation in neighborhood watch activities, in order to contribute to the maintenance of security in their neighborhoods.

In particular, the question is whether and how social ties impact the perceived feeling of security and the role they have or could have in planning and developing security policies.

The area of reference is therefore that of policies of crime prevention which, as well as being an extensively discussed issue in criminological literature, takes on great importance in the public debate and strongly conditions political agendas.

These policies head in the direction of integrated prevention or new prevention, characterized by a set of measures and actions with the aim of preventing the perpetration of deviant behavior, understood in the widest meaning - including both criminal offenses and acts of rudeness - and hindering its spread.

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The main figures and the object itself of preventive policies have changed. The players promoting such policies have multiplied, with it being no longer only the State, but also local authorities, voluntary associations and citizens themselves. Security is increasingly the product of a common effort. The community therefore becomes at one and the same time the addressee and the promoter of actions and interventions aimed at reinforcing the bonds of trust and collaboration and is increasingly a leading figure in the context of policies of public security.

The active involvement of the citizens in the phases of planning and developing policies of urban security was also emphasized in the Manifesto *Security, Democracy and Cities: Co-producing Urban Security Policies*, adopted in 2017 at the International Conference of the European forum for urban security (Efus). The Manifesto states that security co-production must involve citizens in all phases of the planning, implementation and evaluation of security policies, avoiding limiting their participation in a function of simple surveillance. This means that it is necessary to give priority to forms of participation based on principles of solidarity, ensuring that these co-production mechanisms involve civil society in all its diversity (EFUS, 2017).

It is in particular with community prevention that the focus shifts to the active role of the citizens in maintaining security. These policies are characterized by a set of coordinated social and situational activities with a certain continuity, implemented by groups of citizens organized at various levels, with the aim of improving the social and environmental conditions underlying disadvantage, disorder and crime, in a geographically defined area (Hughes & Edward, 2004).

Community crime prevention means, in operational terms, participatory security policies and refers to a set of actions intended to change the social conditions that are believed to sustain crime in residential communities. It concentrates usually on the ability of local social institutions to reduce crime in residential neighborhoods (Hope, 1995, p. 21).

The importance of taking into consideration this approach is the fact that security is a polysemantic concept and requires polycentric management. This is why situational prevention policies that focus on regeneration of urban areas to reduce potential crimes, should be accompanied by a proactive community prevention policy, involving the whole community.

The policy makers and the police, in particular at local level, have to review the public policies and the interventions on urban security, including in relation to the increased spread of insecurity amongst citizens.

Concern about crime, understood as a widespread social concern, or fear of crime, understood as the individual fear of being the subject of a victimizing episode (Furstenberg, 1971), appear in a context where daily life is lived between global and local concerns which escape our control, undermine our perception of security and our trust in the institutions. The threats from terrorism and the increasingly widespread fear of foreigners, the waves of migration, the economic recession, precarious social conditions and youth unemployment are only some of the global fears to which we increasingly respond at an individual level, closing ourselves up in ourselves.

The concept of anomie developed by Durkheim and reviewed subsequently by Merton, may be applied to our society which consistently lacks points of reference and solid social relationships. Anomie concretely appears in periods of instability and economic crisis, but also in a context of rapid and uncontrolled social change. It is in this frame that the sense of helplessness, feelings of insecurity and anguish may arise causing repercussions not only on individuals and collective social actors but also on one’s configuration of urban spaces (Durkheim, 1971; Merton, 1957).
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