

The New Neighborhood Watch: An Exploratory Study of the Nextdoor App and Crime Narratives

Megan Parker* and Mary Dodge

University of Colorado Denver, 1380 Lawrence St Ste 500, Denver, CO 80204, USA

Abstract: Community members use the Nextdoor App to prevent crime and circulate information when suspicious activity or criminal misconduct is afoot. The Nextdoor App operates like other popular social media platforms, but unlike Facebook and Twitter, it connects citizens based on geography instead of areas of interest. One unique aspect of the app is posting events and perceptions of suspicious behavior and criminal acts. User posts can provide narratives on feelings, incidents, and perceptions of crime in designated neighborhoods. This exploratory study focuses on how community members in an urban Colorado area use the app as a high-tech Neighborhood Watch. A qualitative research approach with a thematic analysis is implemented to examine neighbors' perceptions of crime events and community safety. The findings depict that citizens engaged in Nextdoor communications are frustrated with petty community incivilities, property crimes, and law enforcement actions. In addition, the results show that lessons in being a capable guardian, possible increases in fear levels, and surveillance activities are important aspects of understanding social media and crime.

Keywords: Crime in the Community, Crime Prevention, Neighborhood Watch, Nextdoor App, Public Safety, Social Media, Public Perception.

The Nextdoor App is a social media platform launched in the United States in 2011 that rapidly gained popularity, acceptance, and widespread use. The Nextdoor website boasts its ability to unite communities, including availability in 11 countries and 305,000 neighborhoods globally (<https://about.nextdoor.com>). Nextdoor's popularity is also evident by the more than 60 million registered users. The app operates similarly to other popular social media platforms but connects citizens based on geographical location and allows for general chats about community concerns, and other assorted postings. Unlike Facebook and other social media platforms that have been used by law enforcement and citizens, the Nextdoor App maintains a specific safety feature for connecting known and unknown neighbors that offers a means to report, categorize, and communicate criminal activities. The platform is distinct because it allows residents to establish shared community space for a particular neighborhood. Furthermore, the platform permits users to post content where viewers can share events, pictures, videos, and information. Citizens frequently employ the Nextdoor App to circulate information regarding suspicious activity and specific illegal incidents. Thus, the app's popularity has appeared to proliferate in the past decade, and posts provide a narrative of feelings and perceptions on various crime-related topics.

The current study is an exploratory analysis that focuses on community members' posts on "crime"

located in Denver, Colorado, and adds further insight to an area that has only recently received attention in the literature. The research aims to gain a preliminary understanding of users' posts and their neighbors' reactions to crime-related topics. A qualitative thematic analysis of posts and responses was conducted that identified and explored incidents of crime, public reactions, and perceptions of safety. These social media posts also provide some insights into current citizen views of law enforcement and governmental responses to alleged criminal incidents.

This article proceeds by exploring the extant literature on community members' use of social media platforms related to crime, including Nextdoor, which has transformed the notion of neighborhood watch groups, enabling citizens to virtually communicate thoughts on law enforcement, discontent with neighborhood conditions, alerts of suspicious activities, and perceptions of community safety. Next, the article articulates the qualitative research method, including the sampling technique employed to gather an array of Nextdoor App posts. The comments were analyzed to identify major themes related to crime. Finally, the findings are presented, underscoring citizens' attitudes toward law enforcement, prejudice originating from the observation of outgroup apprehension, and beliefs that criminals are freely roaming the streets unchecked.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The (R)evolution of the Neighborhood Watch

Before the development of the Internet and widespread use of social media platforms such as

*Address correspondence to this author at the University of Colorado Denver, 1380 Lawrence St Ste 500, Denver, CO 80204, USA; E-mail: Megan.2.Parker@Ucdenver.edu

Facebook, Twitter, Ticktock, and the Nextdoor App, community members often engaged in neighborhood watch groups and assembled at town council meetings taking place in precinct lobbies, auxiliary buildings, and occasionally schools to convey public safety concerns (Bloch, 2021; Kelly and Finlayson, 2015). The accessibility and convenience of the internet provided citizens with methods to avoid face-to-face communication and to express their thoughts openly without fear of public or personal reprisals. Social media offers a medium to convey messages and thoughts about the good, the bad, and the ugly. Massive information can be regurgitated and ingested instantaneously with a push of a button. Thus, high-tech platforms, including the Nextdoor App, have made face-to-face interactions less essential for raising community concerns and disputes (Bloch, 2021; Kelly and Finlayson, 2015).

Social media platforms such as the Nextdoor App have reinvigorated the traditional function and procedures of neighborhood watch groups, enabling them to operate virtually (Bendler *et al.*, 2014; Bloch, 2021; Kelly and Finlayson, 2015). Neighborhood watch groups developed from a movement in the late 1960s to encourage residents to look out for suspicious activity, meet neighbors, and report concerns to the police (Bennett, Holloway, and Farrington, 2006). Researchers suggest, however, that traditional neighborhood watch groups are slowly diminishing and have yet to combat crime successfully, leaving police agencies to question the efficacy of such community programs (Bennett, Holloway, and Farrington, 2008; Kelly and Finlayson, 2015). NextDoor is not a community prevention or neighborhood watch program but has the potential to act in this capacity. Nevertheless, some scholars assert that with social media platforms, neighborhood watch programs have evolved into virtual interactions (Bendler *et al.*, 2014; Kelly and Finlayson, 2015).

Some academics propose that social media platforms that connect citizens based on location stimulate the expansion of social capital, cohesion, and a sense of safety (Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Masden *et al.*, 2014; Mols and Pridmore, 2019). Masden and colleagues, for example, posited that social media sites allow for activities like sharing photos and posting comments, which helps build social capital by enriching networks. Thereby, citizens have gained a sense of autonomy, independence, and cohesion with social media platforms that allow them to build shared narratives. Furthermore, Kelly and

Finlayson (2015) argued that the social media platform "Project Eyewatch" is like the Nextdoor App and can overcome the problems of neighborhood watch by engaging with unrepresentative sections of the community and avoiding direct engagement with the police. Mols and Pridmore (2019) discovered that the WhatsApp Neighborhood Crime Prevention Groups in the Netherlands increased feelings of safety and cohesion. Their findings from 14 semi-structured interviews and 183 survey responses depicted only a small percentage of citizens who feel less safe due to the messages, suggesting that the constant warnings from neighbors neither intensified their fear of crime nor colored perspectives of social cohesion.

Who Belongs, Where, and What to Do?

After the Nextdoor App became available, accusations emerged that users were utilizing the platform to propagate racial stereotypes and prejudices (Bloch, 2021; Kurwa, 2019). Some posts labeled persons as outsiders who were considered unwelcome and undesirable in particular neighborhoods. Kurwa, for instance, theorized that it "has been clear that it [Nextdoor] and other apps like it have become important contributors to surveillance and policing of race in residential space - resulting in digitally gated communities" (Kurwa, 2019: 111). The use of social media apps to engage in participatory policing practices can generate a sense of safety and social cohesion but also produce ethnic profiling, risky vigilantism, and distrust among neighbors (Bloch, 2021; Kurwa, 2019; Larsen and Piche, 2010; Larsson, 2017; Mols and Pridmore, 2019). Mols and Pridmore's research highlighted an incident where a suspicious woman was discussed using a social media platform. The researchers noted in their findings "that a woman was just someone looking for a specific house... and a picture was made of this woman and was sent to the police, even though this woman had no bad intentions" (Mols and Pridmore, 2019: 109). Ultimately, many users (i.e., surveillance agents) fostered such high levels of distrust and suspicion of unsavory characters based on skin color that a stereotype paranoia developed among neighbors (Larsen and Piché, 2010; Reeves, 2012).

These conversations typically occur unsupervised; consequently, they might generate mistrust among neighbors and a sense of being inappropriately watched within one's residence. Nextdoor recognized the widespread reports of racist behavior and acknowledged the problem. In response, the

organization began to explore methods for combatting race-based postings (Bloch, 2021). Public surveillance efforts also occur on online message boards, chat applications, and Facebook groups (Associated Press, 2016; Lowe, Stroud, and Nguyen, 2017). Nextdoor might be an even better venue for encouraging surveillance behavior based on implicit or explicit biases (Kurwa, 2019), which in turn may promote vigilantism.

The demand for citizen engagement and participatory policing, according to Reeves (2017), has been an element of the liberal policing project and is at the core of America's cultivated political culture. Participatory policing involves citizens actively assisting law enforcement (Mols and Pridmore, 2019; Reeves, 2017). According to Mols and Pridmore, these citizens may be depicted or labeled as vigilantes who monitor crime, share information, report suspicious activities, and engage in preventative actions. Many citizens are aware of suspicious behavior and show an overt willingness to report these types of activity to neighbors and, at times, inform law enforcement.

Social Media and Fear of Violence

Crime issues are among the most prevalent reports, stories, and narratives distributed by journalistic outlets and social media platforms. With the focus on violent crime stories disseminated daily, particularly the recent increase of mass shootings in the United States, which almost doubled from 2018 to 2023 (BBC, 2023). These depictions are likely to impact and shape individuals' perceptions of crime. Garland (2000) indicated that the media consumed by civilians eventually becomes their reality, which influences policy preferences (e.g., "get tough on crime") and levels of fear.

The emergence of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Ticktock, and Nextdoor, functions as an influential component of the current media terrain. These prominent platforms now enable consumers to distribute information and interact with peers. Näsi *et al.* (2020) asserted that users seeking content that aligns with their perspective are easily done, and connecting with like-minded individuals who support their stance is reaffirming. Näsi and colleagues explored crime news consumption and discovered that "about one in five respondents (18%) had used Facebook or Twitter actively as an information source on violent crime. In the past few years, the rise of various so-called alternative information sources has been quite notable" (Näsi *et al.*, 2020: 591). Despite

empirical evidence, social media users also often challenge traditional media outlets' reliability and proclaim their perspectives as more legitimate (Haller and Holt, 2018; Näsi *et al.*, 2020).

Research also depicts a connection between crime news consumption and fear of crime (Garland, 2000; Haller and Holt, 2018; Näsi *et al.*, 2020). Smolej (2011) stressed that previous research had established an apparent correlation between crime reporting and perceived fear of crime. Altheide (2002), a well-known scholar on media and crime, asserted that the media has been influential in creating the discourse of fear. This discourse is associated with pervasive communication and heightened expectations of danger related to one's environment.

Previous research also suggests that although fear of crime and media coverage are related, distinct attributes of an individual may have a more pronounced effect on levels of fear, including education, gender, race, employment status, residency, and past victimization (Jackson and Ferraro, 1996). Therefore, fear levels are exacerbated when various demographic factors amalgamate with crime media consumption. Chiricos *et al.* (1997), for example, found that white women, compared to other groups, experienced more significant levels of fear when they consumed crime television shows. Additionally, research indicates that previous violent victimization is associated with a fear of crime and media consumption (Chiricos *et al.*, 2000; Rühls *et al.*, 2017). Numerous researchers have discovered an association between the consumption of crime news and increased fear (Hollis *et al.*, 2017; Romer *et al.*, 2003; Smolej, 2011). The Nextdoor App connects crimes closer to home, which may result in higher levels of concern. However, the connection between media consumption and fear of crime is not straightforward, and other factors also impact levels of fear of crime, such as gender, residency, employment status, past victimization experience, and education (Chiricos *et al.*, 2000; Rühls *et al.*, 2017).

Neighborhood watch efforts were marketed as a method of preventing crime and, in some cases, intervening in bad behavior by using police notification. The construction and nature of the Nextdoor App have developed a new landscape for citizen crime-fighting efforts. The discussions on the social platform, in many ways, reveal helpful behavior. That is, the sentiment that "this happened to me" and "others can learn from my experience." Although this study was not designed

to test theory, a thoroughly likely explanation of users and events appears to fit within Cohen and Felson's Routine Activities Theory (1979) model. Users are acting as capable guardians that warn others of motivated offenders and give advice on target hardening. The data in this study are unable to test or address a particular theoretical viewpoint fully, and perhaps social engagement that requires little effort might provide catharsis for people who feel frustrated and victimized.

In contrast to the potentially beneficial aspects of the Nextdoor App is the problematic nature that arises with increased perceptions of fear and concerns about personal and property safety. The perpetuation of stereotypes associated with potentially suspicious persons includes the individual's personal characteristics such as race and gender, their choice of attire, including wearing black jackets, hoodies, and hats, while carrying a backpack, and loitering where "neighbors" assume they do not belong. When unfounded accusations are levied at innocent citizens, the consequences can be calamitous for law enforcement and the community. While specific racial information is prohibited in posts, certain types of labeling may endure. Thus, this exploratory study contributes to the literature by offering a qualitative narrative depicting how Denver residents employ the Nextdoor app to express opinions about crime and report suspicious activity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This exploratory study utilizes data from the Nextdoor App. Because the data are sourced from a publicly accessible online platform and no identifiable information, such as usernames, is included in the study, approval by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) is not required. A qualitative approach was utilized to gain a more in-depth understanding of how users employ the platform to monitor suspicious activity, alert neighbors, and react to alleged criminal activity. The nonrandom sample includes 100 Nextdoor App posts that generated 7,349 responses, which were made in six months, ranging from August 2022 to January 2023. The convenience data sample showed no obvious qualitative differences among the neighborhoods. Additionally, the goal of the current study was not to engage in comparisons of areas based on crime rates. Each initial post contained an average of 73 comments, with 982 responses constituting the highest number for one post. The response data ranged from 2 to 982 (SD = 119). One post elicited 982 comments (considered

an outlier) and spurred a conversation regarding the legalization of mushrooms. Specifically, the user's post stated: "I'm just curious how everyone's thoughts are on proposition 122 (legalization of psychedelic plants and fungi) passing this past week? Personally, I'm very excited that Colorado finally took a step in that direction." In return, several users responded to the initial post, which sparked a heated debate regarding the legalization of drugs. A sliver of the exchange is provided below:

I'm trying to think of a pot user I know that hasn't work a food line at least once...I don't think I can. They're all active in community affairs. As for hallucinogens, the people I know that use them only use them occasionally...maybe a couple of times a year if that much.

I think it's a terrible idea. Frightening to think that it passed.

And we, the taxpayers, always get stuck with paying for the rehab bill.

You might be surprised by who is on that list and can't afford rehab. In fact, if you contact the rehab facility to get a room for someone in need, there's a waiting list.

Another post similar to the legalization of mushrooms that initiated a vehement debate generating over 500 responses was the opening of a gun store near a school. Ultimately, the posts that received the most responses involved issues seeking to ignite a dialogue regarding criminal justice reform or policy.

Initial posts were selected using three keywords: crime, suspicious activity, and law and order as search terms. Next, the keywords were inserted into the Nextdoor App search bar, where posts dating back several years appeared. After identifying relevant posts related to a crime that fit the criteria and time frame, the post was bookmarked and stored. As a stipulation of inclusion, the post had to entail the engagement related to the key terms, including a crime, law-related, or information on suspicious activity. Posts warning neighbors of criminal behavior were also included; for instance, one user offered this warning: "Beware! I was getting my kids ready for breakfast when this man came up to the house and stole some packages off my porch." Posts that did not involve a crime, suspicious

activity, or law enforcement were omitted from the analysis. Nextdoor App users, for example, often ask for recommendations regarding products and services. Additionally, the app serves as a marketplace for prospective buyers and sellers – any posts that sought to sell or inquire about guidance unrelated to law and order were excluded.

Qualitative Analysis

The current study employs a qualitative approach using thematic analysis to provide an interpretation of the text data originating from the Nextdoor App posts through the systematic review of relevant themes. By implementing a thematic approach, the analysis avoids merely counting words to identify themes and patterns that might remain latent and undeveloped (Berg, 2001; Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). The thematic coding of content provides a deeper understanding of the social reality of Nextdoor users.

The content analysis of the initial posts first involved a count of types of incidents and big-picture themes. The counts of incident types provide insight into manifest content, and the final, though more subjective analysis, allowed for the results to be organized by narrative themes (Neuendorf, 2017; Rennison and Hart, 2019).

Initially, all posts were printed and read thoroughly by the authors using open coding to organize and identify pertinent data. Qualitative software such as NVIVO or Qualtrics was not used because the exploratory goal was to present narratives. In this respect, careful and repeated readings of the data by the researchers provided a deeper interpretation. The thematic (axial coding) analysis was based on reoccurring ideas, labels, and similarities identified by the researchers, first separately and then in combination, to determine major narrative areas (Berg, 2001; Rennison and Hart, 2019). Inter-rater reliability was strengthened based on verbal agreement between the two researchers on identified themes.

An inductive approach was used to develop the central themes. As previously mentioned, the data were organized and analyzed, first, according to the initial post and, second, for the subsequent responses and comments. The findings are presented as initial posts and answers because the two areas portray distinct information that often extends beyond the original topic.

FINDINGS

The content analysis of the initial posts revealed an assortment and range of crimes (see Table 1). Few posts mentioned egregious crimes such as murder and sexual assault, while others merely reported suspicious activity with no attestation of a crime occurring. From the initial 100 posts sampled, vehicle theft was the most common crime reported. The findings imply that community members typically employ the Nextdoor App platform to report non-violent crimes such as vehicle thefts, suspicious activities, and traffic incidents. Additionally, users in 26 initial posts utilized the app to initiate a dialogue that discussed criminal justice issues and reform. Several posts in this category, for example, noted issues related to firearm regulations, the legalization of drugs such as mushrooms, and community democratic involvement (e.g., voting, attending council meetings, and exercising First Amendment rights).

Table 1: Initial Posts on the Types of Incidents

Offense type	Count (N = 100)
Vehicle theft	21
Suspicious activity	16
Traffic offenses	14
Home break-ins	8
Gun violence	7
Scam alert	4
Vandalism	3
Sexual assault	1
No crime reported (discussion/conversation based)	26

Thematic Analysis of Initial Posts

Two distinct themes emerged in the initial posts, including (a) users alerting neighbors of a perceived threat of the occurrence of a crime and (b) seeking information and assistance from other users to help solve criminal incidents (see Table 2). Initial posts that comprised users warning others of potential threats and criminal activity included 49 out of 100 posts: constituting almost half of the initial posts. Keyword phrases were exemplified by posts such as “I know this is common, but heads up,” “Hi neighbors, just a friendly warning,” “Lock your doors at night,” and “Be on the lookout.” Additionally, posting pictures and videos of suspected offenders is common on the platform,

Table 2: Initial Posts Major Themes

Themes	Counts (N=100)	Narrative Examples
Beware: Users alerting neighbors of the occurrence of a crime	49	<i>"I know this is common but heads up." "Hi, neighbors, just a friendly warning." "Be on the lookout."</i>
Help: Seeking information and assistance from other Nextdoor app users to help solve criminal incidents.	35	<i>"Seeking help" "Any information would be appreciated." "Please private message me with any information." "Does anyone recognize these...."</i>

specifically when neighbors warn one another of suspicious activity. The comments originating from this categorization often specified the suspect's appearance, such as gender, height, perceived age, and clothing. For instance, one user posted, "Be on the lookout!! Male and female walking down the streets wearing all black, carrying a big bag and backpack. They didn't realize I was in my car, and they were scoping out vehicles. Lock your car doors." This post, which shares stark similarities to many others, demonstrates how users notify neighbors of potential crimes occurring in their neighborhood and allude to which individuals are perceived as dangerous or unwelcome.

Furthermore, if the alert comment involved suspects in vehicles, the users typically provided a vehicle description; for instance, they uploaded license plate numbers and the model. For example, one platform user warned others by posting, "Be on the lookout. I just caught this car [thief] trying to steal my dad's truck. Black VW Jetta, Slight driver-side damage. License #7ZEV395 OR # 7ZEV395 Lighter skin Male Light blue hoodie Female passenger If anyone has cameras on the northeast side of 38th and federal area around 6:15 am." Common alert posts are exemplified by the following:

Just a heads up my car was rummaged through for a second time this month.

Let's be careful out there!

Lock your cars and be on the lookout!

We saw someone in our driveway next to our car. They saw us in the window and ran from the house. They were wearing hoodies.

The initial alert posts usually provided key and some meaningful information regarding recent crimes

and specific incidents that community members should be aware of in their neighborhoods. Ultimately, the analysis of the initial posts found that at least some Nextdoor users are employing the platform to bolster neighborhood awareness, safety, and transparency that is unavailable through other avenues.

The second distinct theme that repeatedly appeared in the initial Nextdoor posts was users actively seeking information regarding the occurrence of a crime. Although not as prevalent as crime alerts, the probing for additional information was identified in 35 initial posts. Typical idioms that demonstrated users searching for further information included "seeking help," "any information would be appreciated," "please private message me with any information," and "does anyone recognize these individuals...." These posts also included exchanges between neighbors asking each other for video footage derived primarily from home security cameras. These posts show that Nextdoor users are not merely notifying one another of possible criminal misconduct but are actively pursuing investigations and attempting to aid law enforcement in solving crimes. For example, one user sought to help law enforcement locate the person who assaulted their daughter; they wrote, "My daughter was attacked tonight by a white man in a black SUV (Hyundai) across from the Home Depot of Centennial/Belleview - Steeplechase Condos. It happened around 7:30 - 7:45 tonight. We are working with police and the hospital, but I need anyone with a security camera in the area to check and see if they see a vehicle matching this description." In similar cases, neighbors asked, for example: "Does anyone recognize these young teens?" "If anyone recognizes this pair of low life smash and grab thieves, please PM me." Ultimately, these posts illustrate that users are employing the Nextdoor App as a tool to disseminate particulars regarding a crime and seek assistance from neighbors swiftly without relying on news outlets and encountering bureaucratic delays.

Table 3: Response Posts Major Themes

Theme	Totals	Narrative Examples
Crime as the New Normal	100	"It's a jungle out there! I had a similar experience. Hope you find justice." "What has happened to the beautiful city of Denver, attracting and encouraging this type of behavior?"
Blaming Crime on the Government	105	"I'm sorry you had to experience such a violation. The problem is that the government is more concerned about the welfare of criminals. Until that changes, crime will continue on the rampant course." "Denver DA Beth McCann's office fails to prosecute car thefts even when there is clear evidence such as video & fingerprints in the car. No deterrent for these criminals. You can all thank her failures for the incredibly high cost of car insurance."
Blaming Crime on the Police	62	"Good luck getting any interest from cops these days unless you get shot. Criminals don't worry about cops." "Just this morning, I was driving around looking for my stolen tools, and this guy in a truck without any plates had a bed full of stuff - what looked like exhaust pipes. He sped off when I got close - citizens are now doing police work."
Taking Back our Streets	41	"I catch someone screwing with my car, and they'll eat lead." "Between porch pirates and these a-holes, I wish we had the lose a hand penalty for stealing. Barbaric? Yes, but his is getting out of hand (no pun intended)."
Prevention Suggestions	450	"Dogs, weapons, cameras, motion detecting lights, additional community training."

Please note: These totals exclude one-word responses, irrelevant comments, or emojis.

In sum, the Nextdoor App, in this manner, serves as an alert system and as an investigation tool that can reach many neighbors quickly.

Response Analysis

After analyzing the initial posts, an analysis was conducted of the response posts. Several narratives emerged from users' conversations that offered extended content to the initial posts (see Table 3). Many response comments expressed condolences related to victimization, and a few noted the uptick in crime because of legalized marijuana, though this type of post failed to emerge as a major theme.

Crime as the New Normal

Nextdoor users, when responding to initial posts, often replied that crime is currently out of control and has become a normalized feature of the community. A total of 100 comments were identified after the initial posts when users expressed the sentiment that criminal activity is rampant, with specific neighborhoods espousing an escalation of crime. Users quickly noted that "Colorado is the car thief capital of the U.S.A. from the media," and "So sorry this happened to you-the overall crime rate throughout Denver and Colorado is the worst I have seen in my 24 years of living here." Specifically, these commentators believe that because of the increased criminal activity, community members are no longer safe to venture outside. A user

responded, for example, to a hit-and-run incident by writing that, "It's a jungle out there! I had a similar experience. Hope you find justice." Several commentators also forewarned neighbors that they should become accustomed to crime because it is a pervasive and intractable aspect of life. A user noted that "thousands of children's [sic] disappear all the time, never to be found. I worry every time I see a child strolling along to or from school. Times are different now it's not safe at all." Multiple users also asserted that they no longer recognized the city. One user stated, for example, "what has happened to the beautiful city, attracting and encouraging this type of behavior." A similar post noted: "What is happening to this world?? I try not to look at the news, but now Nextdoor has me freaked out. Some strange characters out there." Other pervasive comments included labeling the city as a mecca for crime and notifying neighbors that they were moving due to the high crime rates.

Blaming Crime on the Police

Another typical response that commentators cited when discussing the issue of crime was the notion that law enforcement officers are doing an inadequate job serving the community, upholding the law, and deterring potential criminals. Notably, users suggested that law enforcement officers are apathetic and essentially unhelpful when responding to calls and conducting investigations. Various users implied they

were compelled to engage in police work because officers refused to do their jobs. One user, for example, sought to obtain a do-it-yourself fingerprinting kit after a home break-in, citing that officers failed to conduct an exhaustive investigation. A total of 62 comments were identified where users condemned law enforcement. Multiple users went as far as suggesting that the absence of law enforcement's commitment to proactively apprehending suspects is resulting in the deterioration of neighborhoods and the flourishing of crime. For example, a user responded to a crime alert: "Good luck getting any interest from cops these days unless you get shot. Criminals don't worry about cops."

Furthermore, commentators suggest that law enforcement is too soft on crime and lacks the appropriate resources to apprehend alleged criminals. For instance, a user proclaimed that "what's really sad is due to de-funding the police, softness on crime, and lack of pro-active policing - they will probably get away with it, if caught, will be treated leniently." Ultimately, based on the comments, it appears that many Nextdoor users in the current study are dissatisfied with law enforcement.

Blaming it on the Government

Another pronounced theme in the data originating from comments is the assumption that crime is currently disruptive because of the prevailing political narratives on criminal justice reform and decision-making. Multiple users contend that politicians are "too soft on crime" and should embrace the goal of retribution. A total of 105 comments were identified that maintained that the government is to blame for the "presumed" rise in crime. Multiple responses implied that because policymakers are "too soft on crime," potential offenders are no longer deterred by punishment. Several users were intransigent, declaring that state decision-makers are enacting statutes that engender minimal punishment and permit offenders' leniency in the judicial system. A user wrote: "[A police commander] told a small group of us that the officers are giving up out of frustration because our criminals don't go to jail. And that problem is political." Many of the comments by users indicated sentiments such as "our judicial system has failed us," "we need to make crime illegal," and "The problem is the government is more concerned with the welfare of criminals. Until those changes, crime will continue on its rampant course."

Several users possess such myopic views that they insist that politicians have a stake in organized crime.

For example, a comment originating from a post detailing a car theft asserted: "I think [the Governor] has an in with organized crime." A similar post emerged on the same comment thread stating, "It's hard to feel bad for people when they reelect the [Governor]." Several other users shared this sentiment, directly admonishing the governor and the city's district attorney for contributing to high crime rates: "The DA will not prosecute crime." The comments related to blaming crime on the government affirm that many Nextdoor users in this study are dissatisfied with government policy and decision-making capabilities.

Taking Back Our Streets

Although not as prevalent as the previous themes underscored in the comment analysis, Nextdoor users mentioned in 41 comments that community members should initiate the process of "taking back our streets." To elucidate, these posts specifically advocated for neighbors to confront possible suspects and criminals verbally and physically. These responses often promoted risky vigilantism and retribution. In this context, vigilantism refers to actions that seek to punish, prevent, or investigate a crime without proper legal authority. Numerous commentators encouraged neighbors to secure access to weapons, including firearms, metal bats, pepper spray, and tasers. The respondents to the initial posts stressed that until community members confront offenders, residents' quality of life will continue to deteriorate. For example, a user's comment regarding a vehicle theft notes, "I catch someone screwing with my car, and they'll eat lead." Some citizens endorse violence and are willing to go to extremes to eradicate criminal behavior. Heated responses to crime solutions were common:

People like that should be locked up!!!
Castration would be more effective. I really wish our justice system had some actual justice and used methods for vile scum like him instead of jail time. The scum out there would think twice before pulling out their willies and or raping.

Similar sentiments are shared by Nextdoor users who advocate for harsh treatment during judicial proceedings and more severe penalties. For instance, one user states, "Between porch pirates and these a-holes, I wish we had the lose-a-hand penalty for stealing. Barbaric? Yes, but this is getting out of hand (no pun intended)." The ideology embodied in the previous quote suggests that some Nextdoor users fail to support the nebulous "get smart on crime" initiatives

and remain committed to the “get tough on crime” policies passed in the 20th century. Additionally, the post highlights the desire of citizens who want to reinstate corporal punishment and return to a more punitive criminal justice system.

Preventing Crime Suggestions

Finally, the most prevalent theme identified in the analysis was users offering crime prevention techniques and resources to enhance neighborhood safety. Crime prevention strategies were identified in 450 comments. These posts included informing users of what tools might reduce the likelihood of victimization. For example, common advice urged neighbors to get a big dog, purchase weapons, acquire community training, or install outside cameras and motion-detecting lights. Users often encouraged others to file a police report or notify the proper authorities. A user, for instance, commented on a suspicious person's initial post, “I don't understand posting here. Call the police if you think there's an actual threat.”

Crime prevention comments also spurred a series of recommendations involving neighbors informing others about activities and risk enhancers to avoid, such as walking alone at night, attending events, or frequenting certain high-crime areas. One commentator responded to a vehicle theft report stating: “Never leave your car at a hotel parking lot or one of the trains or plane lots when you go out of town. They are unguarded and basically a shop and rob for thieves.” These recommendations were broad; several users commented on parenting techniques and blamed the victim of a crime for not being responsible, such as locking one's house or car. Overall, these comments suggest that Nextdoor users are at least partially employing the platform to offer crime prevention advice, though sometimes unsolicited and unwarranted.

DISCUSSION

This study presents one of the first exploratory analyses of the use of the Nextdoor App. The amount of potential data in the app is extensive, and the company's collaboration would provide a fruitful database covering a wide geographical area and a higher number of incidents. Future research that replicates this work in other areas of the United States using more comparisons (e.g., urban versus rural, pre- and post-COVID, socioeconomic neighborhood status, social structure issues, and neighborhood surveys) will provide valuable information on the importance,

influence, and narratives that appear on the Nextdoor App. This study can be improved in several ways. First, the current study uses a nonrandom sample, and the results may not reflect all area neighborhoods. Second, Nextdoor App users are self-selected and may not be representative of community members' perceptions. To elucidate further on the previous point, who in our communities is not a member of the platform, and does residency, demographics, or age influence who is utilizing the Nextdoor App? Thus, it is essential to note that any research employing Nextdoor App posts, regardless of whether a random sampling technique is utilized, may not be generalized to the larger population and merely unique perspectives of registered platform members.

Additionally, future researchers should aspire to generate a larger sample and employ a random sampling technique comprised of posts entailing instances of crime for a longer time span. The present study incorporated data from a six-month time frame. Additional and more sophisticated research methods, particularly time series analyses, are needed to frame or generate data stemming before and after significant national and local events (e.g., mass shootings, excessive use of force by police, pandemics, elections, or political scandals). Although the suggestions previously mentioned would yield a more extensive and comprehensive study, collaboration directly with the Nextdoor App, as previously mentioned, is paramount. For the current study, attempts to communicate with the Nextdoor App on two separate occasions requesting access to a comprehensive catalog of posts concerning criminal activity resulted in no replies. Obtaining a directory of posts would offer the ability to use a random sampling frame, which would provide greater generalizability and more accurate comparisons. Overall, despite the limitations confronted with this exploratory research, distinct patterns emerged that illustrated the role of the Nextdoor App, including users' perceptions of law enforcement officers, government officials, and views of crime.

CONCLUSION

Social media, such as Nextdoor, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, infiltrate many aspects of our lives with positive and negative consequences. As major issues surrounding crime and justice continue to be unresolved at a national level, the seemingly less micro-level severe incidents that cities and communities battle are, at times, swept aside. The actual factors that contribute to crime, admittedly, are

so numerous that most news and social media outlets focus on the circumstances of major events such as excessive police force or mass shootings, overshadowing the concerns and perspectives of community members that criminal behavior is escalating to high levels. Given the amount of misinformation promoted through social media platforms, this perspective is difficult to counter. In 2023, Denver was rated as having one of the country's highest rates of vehicle theft, property crimes, and rape, though crime rates in the United States were decreasing. Further study of the users who post on Nextdoor in the 15 most dangerous neighborhoods may offer more insight into perceived causes. The current study included only one of the recently identified high-crime neighborhoods.

Any number of factors likely influence explanations of the narratives from Nextdoor. Cities in Colorado, like many other places in the U.S., are experiencing rapid change, which can result in anomie. The strain of any large-scale criminal justice reform, in other words, involves issues so overwhelmingly complex that the average citizen may gain a sense of control by focusing on broken window-type problems. Headlines related to defunding law enforcement, mass shootings, the dangers of fentanyl, massive political fraud, and gun control are major societal problems with such enormous implications that smaller incivilities that may be somehow resolved are more salient to Nextdoor users who rely on surveillance methods to gain a sense of control for handling perceived crime chaos. Additionally, Denver, like other large cities, is experiencing problems with recruiting and retaining sworn police officers, an increasing number of unhoused people, and dealing with the unexplored issues associated with the legalization of marijuana and the decriminalization of psilocybin mushrooms. All these factors may contribute to citizens' views that crime is out of control and demand from their perspectives private or professional action.

The Nextdoor App, as a neighborhood watch platform, encourages "capable" guardians to reduce criminal events by identifying motivated offenders and engaging in target hardening (Cohen and Felson, 1979). As previously mentioned, survey research that compares neighborhoods and users versus nonusers may shed additional light on the efficacy of the social media platform. The results of the current study offer some insight into the narratives that crime is out of control and relying on your neighbors instead of law enforcement may be more satisfying, though not

necessarily effective. Law enforcement efforts must extend beyond social media communication to ease the dissatisfaction of the public. Police departments that are able to reestablish legitimacy and personal connections will likely foster more positive public perceptions on social media.

One weighty critique of the Nextdoor App was the steady stream of reports associated with unfounded accusations. Nextdoor has attempted to curb the use of stereotypes, and in this analysis, race was seldom mentioned in posts and comments. "Hoodies" and vehicle information are now the most descriptive items in the posts. Ironically, it was an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* that called attention to identifying a Black person out of place in a predominately White neighborhood. The concern, real or fictionalized, however, continues to be citizens who become surveillance agents whose distrust toward strange people feeds suspicions and ambivalence among neighbors (Piché and Larsen, 2010; Reeves, 2012). The results of this study suggest that many users engage in cathartic rants that neighbors are quick to absorb and sometimes call out. In contrast, these posts may act as a platform for encouraging community cohesion. Also, regarding the forewarning of suspicious behavior, the study demonstrates that in some cases, users increasingly use Nextdoor to spread feelings that crime is out of control, which is often unsubstantiated. Citizens are no longer only hearing about crime via news outlets but through communications on social media platforms. Several users noted that they are removing the app from their mobile devices because the crime posts are making it where they no longer want to venture outside because of the fear of crime originating from the Nextdoor platform. However, an early study found no relationship to increased fear of crime or changes in social cohesion (Mols and Pridmore, 2019). Fear of crime failed to emerge as a major theme in the current research. Law enforcement agencies can reduce fear of crime by using Nextdoor to engage in crime prevention and positing positive information. Stronger bonds between neighborhood residents and police agencies also may be reinforced to bridge communication gaps.

Overall, if used accurately, the platform offers users a means to disseminate crime information promptly and opportunely. Additionally, the app enables users to remain informed and updated on what is occurring within their neighborhoods, a task that is not easily achieved through traditional mechanisms such as law

enforcement notifications and local news. Nevertheless, this exploratory study also illuminates how the platform can be used to spread false accusations, propagate stereotypes, and instill spurious fear in a community. Policing social media is an area of concern that requires more research and can be used to reinforce negative and positive behavior. The latter is a goal for all communities and agencies.

FUNDING

No funding was provided for the completion of this research.

REFERENCES

- Altheide David. 2002. "Children and the Discourse of Fear." *Symbolic Interaction* 25(2): 229–50.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2002.25.2.229>
- BBC. 2023. "How Many US Shooting Have There Been in 2023?" BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>.
- Bendler Johannes, Tobias Brandt, Sebastain Wagner, and Dirk Neumann. 2014. "Investigating Crime-To-Twitter Relationships in Urban Environments - Facilitating A Virtual Neighborhood Watch." Paper presented at ECIS 2014 Proceedings | European Conference on Information Systems (ECIS) | Association for Information Systems (aisnet.org).
- Bennett Trevor, Katy Holloway, and David P. Farrington. 2008. "A Review of the Effectiveness of Neighbourhood Watch." *Security Journal* 22 (2): 143–55.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.sj.8350076>
- Bennett Trevor, Katy Holloway, and David P. Farrington. 2006. "Does Neighborhood Watch Reduce Crime? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 2 (4): 437–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-006-9018-5>
- Berg L. Bruce. 2001. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bloch Stefano. 2021. "How Surveillance Technologies and Neighborhood Watch Apps Are Capturing and Reflecting Communities' Prejudices." *USApp—American Politics and Policy Blog*.
- Chiricos Ted, Kathy Padgett, and Marc Gertz. 2000. "Fear, TV news, and the Reality of Crime." *Criminology* 38, (3): 755–786.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2000.tb00905.x>
- Cohen Lawrence E. and Marcus Felson. 1979. "Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach." *American Sociological Review* 44 (4): 588–608.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2094589>
- Ferraro Kenneth F. 1995. "Fear of Crime: Interpreting Victimization Risk." Sunny Press.
- Garland David. 2000. "The Culture of High Crime Societies." *British Journal of Criminology* 40 (3): 347–75.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/40.3.347>
- Halavais Alexander. 2014. "Networked: The New Social Operating System." *New Media & Society* 16 (7): 1185–87.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814543078>
- Haller André and Kristoffer Holt. 2018. "Paradoxical Populism: How PEGIDA Relates to Mainstream and Alternative Media." *Information, Communication & Society* 22(12), 1665–1680.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1449882>
- Hampton Keith. 2003. "Grieving for a Lost Network: Collective Action in a Wired Suburb Special Issue: ICTs and Community Networking." *The Information Society* 19 (5): 417–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/714044688>
- Hollis Meghan E., Sharece Downey, Alex del Carmen, and Rhonda R. Dobbs. 2017. "The Relationship between Media Portrayals and Crime: Perceptions of Fear of Crime among Citizens." *Crime Prevention and Community Safety* 19 (1): 46–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41300-017-0015-6>
- How surveillance technologies and neighborhood watch apps are capturing and reflecting communities' prejudices | USAPP (n.d.). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2021/09/10/how-surveillance-technologies-and-neighborhood-watch-apps-are-capturing-and-reflecting-communities-prejudices/>.
- Kelly Andrew and Amalie Finlayson. 2015. "Can Facebook Save Neighbourhood Watch?" *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* 88 (1): 65–77.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X15570557>
- Kurwa Rahim. 2019. "Building the Digitally Gated Community: The Case of Nextdoor." *Surveillance & Society* 17 (1/2): 111–17.
<https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v17i1/2.12927>
- Lowe Maria R., Angela Stroud, and Alice Nguyen. 2016. "Who Looks Suspicious? Racialized Surveillance in a Predominantly White Neighborhood." *Social Currents* 4 (1): 34–50.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496516651638>
- Masden Christina A., Catherine Grevet, Rebecca E. Grinter, Eric Gilbert, and Keith Edwards. 2014. "Tensions in Scaling-up Community Social Media." Paper presented at the proceedings of the 32nd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI '14.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/2556288.2557319>
- Mols Anouk and Jason Pridmore. 2019. "When Citizens Are 'Actually Doing Police Work': The Blurring of Boundaries in WhatsApp Neighbourhood Crime Prevention Groups in the Netherlands." *Surveillance & Society* 17 (3/4): 272–87.
<https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v17i3/4.8664>
- NäsiMatti, Maiju Tanskanen, Janne Kivivuori, Paula Haara, and Esa Reunanen. 2020. "Crime News Consumption and Fear of Violence: The Role of Traditional Media, Social Media, and Alternative Information Sources." *Crime & Delinquency* 67 (4): 001112872092253.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128720922539>
- Neuendorf, Kimberly. 2017. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Sage.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802878>
- Piché Justin and Mike Larsen. 2010. "The Moving Targets of Penal Abolitionism: ICOPA, Past, Present and Future." *Contemporary Justice Review* 13 (4): 391–410.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2010.517964>
- Pridmore Jason, Anouk Mols, Yijing Wang, and Frank Holleman. 2018. "Keeping an Eye on the Neighbours: Police, Citizens, and Communication within Mobile Neighbourhood Crime Prevention Groups." *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* 92 (2): 97–120.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032258X18768397>
- Reeves, Joshua. 2017. *Citizen Spies: The Long Rise of America's Surveillance Society*. New York: New York University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ct11gk095j>
- Rennison, Callie and Timothy C. Hart. 2019. *Research Methods in Criminal Justice and Criminology*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Romer Daniel, Kathleen H. Jamieson, and Sean Aday. 2003. "Television News and the Cultivation of Fear of Crime." *Journal of Communication* 53 (1): 88–104.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb03007.x>

Rühs Farina, Werner Greve, and Cathleen Kappes. 2017. "Coping with Criminal Victimization and Fear of Crime: The Protective Role of Accommodative Self-Regulation." *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 22 (2): 359-377.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12106>

Smolej Mirka. 2011. "Violence in Crime-Appeal Programming and in Crime Statistics." *Nordicom Review* 32 (1): 59–73.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2017-0105>

Zhang Yan and Barbara Wildemuth. 2009. Qualitative Analysis of Content. https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~yanz/Content_analysis.pdf.

Received on 25-01-2024

Accepted on 28-02-2024

Published on 18-03-2024

<https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2024.13.04>

© 2024 Parker and Dodge; Licensee Lifescience Global.

This is an open-access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.