

**WHITE BOOK 2026 SERIES**

*A Pan-European Analysis of Neighbourhood Watch Models*

**COUNTRY REPORT: AUSTRIA**

# The Evolution of Participatory Security in Austria

From Civic Movements  
to Institutional Partnership  
(2007-2025)

White Book



Copyright © 2025 European Neighbourhood Watch Association

This publication is available as a PDF on the European Neighbourhood Watch Association website under a Creative Commons license that allows copying and distributing the publication, only in its entirety, as long as it is attributed to the European Neighbourhood Watch Association and used for noncommercial educational or public policy purposes.

Published by:

**European Neighbourhood Watch Association – EUNWA**

Via Terraglio 64

30174 Venice, Italy

[www.eunwa.eu](http://www.eunwa.eu)

For more information contact:

[head-office@eunwa.eu](mailto:head-office@eunwa.eu)

**Date of publication:** February 2026

**Note on images:** All photographs and images used in this document are distributed under Creative Commons (CC) licences, are in the public domain, or are reproduced with the express permission of the copyright holders. Specific author attribution is provided in the captions or in the photo credits list.

**WHITE BOOK 2026 SERIES**

*A Pan-European Analysis of Neighbourhood Watch Models*

**COUNTRY REPORT: AUSTRIA**

# **The Evolution of Participatory Security in Austria**

From Civic Movements  
to Institutional Partnership  
(2007-2025)

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## Abstract

This research analyses the evolution of citizen participation in community safety in Austria, examining the transition from pioneering civil society-led initiatives to a structured, nationally coordinated model. The study is divided into two main parts.

**Part 1** analyses the emergence and development of the first volunteer associations, with a specific focus on "proNACHBAR", the country's first and best-known neighbourhood initiative, which operated from 2007 to 2021. Its operational mechanisms, based on bottom-up vigilance and communication, and its role in fostering a culture of prevention are examined.

**Part 2** of the research is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the "GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich" (*TOGETHER.SECURE in Austria*) programme, launched by the Federal Ministry of the Interior in 2016. This programme has institutionalised cooperation between citizens, municipalities, and law enforcement through a formal framework of "security partnerships," shifting the paradigm towards a state-managed, top-down approach. By comparing the two models, the research highlights how Austria presents a unique case study in the evolution of community policing policies. It demonstrates a shift from an emphasis on civic vigilance to one of participatory security governance, in which the citizen's role is redefined from being the "eyes and ears" to a "dialogue partner" within a state-run structure.

## Zusammenfassung

*Diese Forschungsarbeit analysiert die Entwicklung der Bürgerbeteiligung an der Sicherheit in Österreich und untersucht den Übergang von zivilgesellschaftlichen Pionierinitiativen zu einem strukturierten, staatlich koordinierten Modell. Die Studie ist in zwei Hauptteile gegliedert.*

***Teil 1** analysiert die Entstehung und Entwicklung der ersten Freiwilligenvereinigungen, mit besonderem Fokus auf „proNACHBAR“, der ersten und bekanntesten Nachbarschaftsinitiative des Landes, die von 2007 bis 2021 aktiv war. Ihre Funktionsmechanismen, die auf „Bottom-up“-Wachsamkeit und Kommunikation basieren, sowie ihre Rolle bei der Förderung einer Präventionskultur werden untersucht.*

***Teil 2** der Forschungsarbeit widmet sich einer eingehenden Analyse des Programms „GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich“, das 2016 vom Bundesministerium für Inneres ins Leben gerufen wurde. Dieses Programm hat die Zusammenarbeit zwischen Bürgern, Gemeinden und Strafverfolgungsbehörden durch einen formellen Rahmen von „Sicherheitspartnerschaften“ institutionalisiert und damit einen Paradigmenwechsel hin zu einem staatlich gesteuerten „Top-down“-Ansatz vollzogen. Durch den Vergleich der beiden Modelle zeigt die Forschungsarbeit auf, wie Österreich eine einzigartige Fallstudie in der Entwicklung der bürgernahen Polizeiarbeit (Community Policing) darstellt. Sie belegt einen Wandel von der Betonung bürgerlicher Wachsamkeit hin zu einer partizipativen Sicherheits-Governance, in der die Rolle des Bürgers von den „Augen und Ohren“ zu einem „Dialogpartner“ innerhalb einer staatlichen Struktur neu definiert wird.*

# White Book 2026 project

In 2015, the European Neighbourhood Watch Association (EUNWA) published its landmark White Book, the first comprehensive endeavour to map and catalogue the diverse landscape of Neighbourhood Watch organisations across Europe. For the first time, it provided an essential inventory of a movement dedicated to community-led safety. This pioneering work offered a snapshot of the structure, scale, and presence of associations that form the backbone of civic participation in crime prevention.

A decade on, the environment in which these organisations operate has evolved dramatically. Our societies have faced profound shifts, from technological advancements that have reshaped communication and crime, to new challenges affecting public security and social cohesion. The very nature of what it means to be a "good neighbour" has been tested and redefined. It became clear that a simple update of the 2015 inventory would no longer suffice to capture the current reality of Neighbourhood Watch in Europe.

Therefore, the 2026 edition of the White Book has a new, more profound ambition. It moves beyond a simple inventory to offer a rich, qualitative portrait of the movement today. This volume is an attempt to describe, from the inside, the life and activities of the associations that empower our communities. We will examine their vital and often complex relationships with the citizens they serve, the police forces with whom they partner, and the public institutions they seek to influence.

Throughout this report, we will explore the tangible successes celebrated by these groups, the persistent challenges they navigate—from funding and volunteer engagement to adapting to new forms of crime—and their prospects for the future. By presenting this in-depth analysis, we aim to provide not just data, but a deeper understanding of what makes Neighbourhood Watch effective, resilient, and indispensable to the fabric of a safe and engaged European society.

## Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach. In the first stage, desk research is conducted through the review of academic literature, institutional reports, and official databases. Artificial Intelligence tools are also used at this stage to support the retrieval and organisation of secondary sources, making the process more efficient while ensuring that all data are subsequently verified against official and peer-reviewed references. Where peer-reviewed or official sources were not available for specific contextual details, non-academic materials (e.g., reputable media reports, organisational websites, or encyclopaedic entries) were used strictly for background context and were triangulated wherever possible.

In the second stage, primary data are collected through questionnaires administered to relevant stakeholders, allowing both quantitative and qualitative insights to emerge. The two sets of findings are then integrated and compared, applying triangulation to highlight convergences and divergences and to strengthen reliability. Finally, all results and interpretations are reviewed by an independent and competent source, ensuring objectivity, credibility, and validity. This methodology allows for a comprehensive and evidence-based analysis that combines existing knowledge with validated field data.

# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>PART 1 Citizen-Led Community Safety Initiatives in Austria</b>	<b>14</b>
General Overview: Historical Evolution and Context	14
Key Stakeholders and Promoters	15
Operational Mechanisms and Structure of Initiatives	18
Role of Public Institutions and Legal Framework	19
Use of Technology, Communication Tools, and Training	20
Participation: Groups, Membership and Geographic Distribution	22
Achievements, Challenges, and Future Outlook	26
<b>PART 2 An Analysis of "GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich": Austria's National Community Policing and Participatory Security Initiative</b>	<b>33</b>
Programme Name	33
History and Context	33
Main Actors	35
Tools	37
Local Organisational Structure	38
Institutional Support	41
Impact Data	42
Cultural and Sociological Aspects	45
Recurrent Problems and Solutions	46
Evaluation and Prospects	47
<b>Key Learnings from the Austrian Model</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>53</b>

## Appendix A - Guest contribution (Peter Komposch)

57

## List of Tables

Table 1: Comparative Results on the Impact and Perception of proNACHBAR in Vienna (2009 Data)	26
Table 2: Key Indicators of Subjective Security and Trust in Austria (2019-2023)	44

## List of Figures

Figure 1 – GEMEINSAM.SICHER Organisation Structure	36
Figure 2 – GEMEINSAM.SICHER Communication Flow (Police to Citizen)	39
Figure 3 - GEMEINSAM.SICHER Communication Flow (Citizen to Police)	40

## Acknowledgements

EUNWA extends its sincere gratitude to all the individuals and partners whose dedication and support made this White Book possible. This publication is the result of a significant collective effort, and we are thankful for every contribution.

Our deepest appreciation goes to the entire project team for their tireless work in research, analysis, and writing. In particular, we would like to thank **Karl Brunnbauer** and **Peter Komposch** for their valuable insights and dedicated support throughout this process.

We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to the EUNWA Advisory Board for generously dedicating their time and expertise. Their insightful feedback and critical perspectives have been invaluable in strengthening the quality and accuracy of this report.

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## Preface

The concept of "participatory security" has assumed an increasingly central role in European public debate over the last two decades. Faced with a growing perception of insecurity, often at odds with crime statistics, many countries have sought to actively involve citizens in local safety and crime prevention. Austria offers a particularly illuminating evolutionary path in this field. Unlike other nations with a long tradition of Neighbourhood Watch, the Austrian model has undergone a rapid and profound transformation, moving in little more than a decade from an approach based almost exclusively on volunteerism to an integrated, institutionally managed system.

This research stems from a desire to understand the dynamics, philosophies, and implications of this transition. The analysis in **Part 1** begins with the experience of "*proNACHBAR*", an initiative born from the enthusiasm and determination of ordinary citizens, which for years represented the archetype of bottom-up community safety. **Part 2** then delves into the complex architecture of "*GEMEINSAM.SICHER*", an ambitious government programme that has redefined the roles and responsibilities of all actors involved.

It is crucial to clarify a key point from the outset: the conclusion of *proNACHBAR*'s activities in 2021 and the rise of *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* are not linked by a cause-and-effect relationship. Rather, they represent two distinct chapters—almost two different philosophies—in the history of participatory security in Austria. Understanding both models is not just about reconstructing a timeline; it is also about reflecting on the changing meaning of civic participation, the role of the state in mediating social anxieties, and the delicate balance between spontaneous initiative and institutional coordination in building safer communities.

The EUNWA Board – February 2026

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## Introduction

Austria, despite consistently ranking among the world's safest countries according to official statistics, has experienced a growing gap between objective safety and the public's subjective feeling of insecurity since the 2000s. This discrepancy has become a key driver of national security policy and has created fertile ground for the development of new forms of collaboration between citizens and institutions. This research aims to analyse the evolution of such initiatives in Austria, tracing the shift from a model of spontaneous civic participation to a fully institutionalised programme of security governance.

The Austrian journey is characterised by two emblematic phases. The first phase saw the emergence of grassroots volunteer organisations, the most significant of which was "*proNACHBAR*". Launched in 2007, this initiative introduced the concept of active neighbourliness to Austria, encouraging residents to be the "eyes and ears" of the community and to establish direct communication channels with law enforcement to prevent crimes such as burglaries and scams.

The second phase was inaugurated in 2016 with the launch of the national programme "*GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich*". This initiative, promoted by the Ministry of the Interior, marked a paradigm shift by implementing a top-down model that structures citizen participation within a formal network of "security partnerships", in which citizens ("*Sicherheitspartner*"), municipal representatives, and police officers collaborate according to predefined roles and procedures.

This study is structured into key sections. **Part 1** will examine the history, operational structure, and impact of civic initiatives such as "*proNACHBAR*", highlighting the strengths and challenges of a volunteer-based model. Subsequently, **Part 2** will provide a detailed analysis of the "*GEMEINSAM.SICHER*" programme, discussing its philosophy, institutional architecture, tools, and data related to its impact on the perception of security. Finally, the research will compare the two models, not to establish a causal line of succession, but to analyse them as two distinct approaches to community policing that reflect a transformation in the relationship between the state, citizens, and security. The objective is to offer a critical understanding of the implications of this evolution for the future of security governance in Austria and across Europe.

# PART 1

## Citizen-Led Community Safety Initiatives in Austria

### General Overview: Historical Evolution and Context

Citizen participation in community safety in Austria emerged in the mid-2000s, relatively later than in some other European countries. The first significant initiative was action *proNACHBAR* (**proNEIGHBOUR**), launched in 2007–2008 in Vienna (Hietzing) as a partnership between residents, police, and district officials [19]. This was the country’s inaugural “*Sicherheitspartnerschaft*” (security partnership), aimed at encouraging neighbours to be vigilant and share information with authorities – essentially an Austrian take on the Neighbourhood Watch concept.

The term *Nachbarschaftswache* (neighbourhood watch) itself is not widely used in Austria; initiatives often speak of *Nachbarschaftsinitiativen* (neighbourhood initiatives) or *Sicherheitsinitiativen*, emphasising cooperation rather than vigilantism.

Early on, Austrian police and policymakers were cautious to distinguish these citizen groups from **Bürgerwehren** (citizen militias), underscoring that volunteers should “*hinschauen statt wegschauen*” („To look closely and not to look the other way!”) but not take the law into their own hands [19]. All activities had to remain within legal bounds, with citizens acting as the “eyes and ears” of the community and reporting suspicions to the police rather than intervening directly [26]. This cautious, law-abiding approach set the tone for Austria’s model of community safety involvement.

Over the subsequent years, Austria’s citizen-led safety efforts evolved via both grassroots initiatives and increasing institutional support. **proNACHBAR** (literally “pro-Neighbour”) grew from its Vienna origins into a nationwide network and became the country’s best-known neighbourhood safety association [27]. Founded by Karl Brunnbauer in cooperation with the Vienna police, *proNACHBAR* aimed to improve communication between neighbours and law enforcement to prevent crime [27]. By raising public awareness and sharing timely warnings about local crime, it sought to empower citizens to protect themselves and their communities. From its inception in 2007, *proNACHBAR* quickly gained traction: within a decade it counted several **thousand members (approximately 6,000 by 2016)** across Vienna and other provinces [23].

The success of *proNACHBAR* also catalysed international collaboration. In 2014, Brunnbauer and partners took the lead in founding the **European Neighbourhood Watch Association (EUNWA)** in Vienna [2]. The establishment of EUNWA was a milestone, bringing together neighbourhood watch and crime prevention groups from 19 countries to exchange best practices and strengthen citizen participation in safety across Europe [20]. This illustrates how an Austrian grassroots initiative expanded its

influence beyond national borders, positioning Austria as an early contributor to a Europe-wide community safety dialogue.

Despite these developments in civil society, Austria's **institutional context** for community safety remained relatively ad-hoc until the mid-2010s. Unlike countries with long-established national neighbourhood watch schemes (e.g. the UK or Ireland), Austria did not have a formal government-backed programme for neighbourhood watch through the early 2010s [25]. Initiatives like *proNACHBAR* and regional groups operated as private associations, with support from individual police officers or municipalities, but without a coherent national policy.

By 2015, however, rising public concern about burglaries and subjective insecurity – despite Austria's objectively low crime rates – prompted authorities to consider a more structured approach [21]. The Federal Ministry of the Interior acknowledged that while “Austria is one of the safest countries in the world”, fear of crime was increasing, and purely relying on police efforts was not enough [25]. This set the stage for a significant policy shift: the launch of a nationwide **community policing and citizen partnership programme** in 2016 under the banner “*GEMEINSAM.SICHER*” (“Safe Together”).

## Key Stakeholders and Promoters

***proNACHBAR* Association:** The foremost stakeholder in Austria's citizen-led safety landscape was the *proNACHBAR* association. Founded in 2007 by Karl Brunnbauer (a concerned resident) in collaboration with the Vienna police, *proNACHBAR* was the first organised neighbourhood watch-style movement in the country [26]. It operated as a **volunteer-driven NGO**, with no membership fees and open participation.

The idea behind *proNACHBAR* was to provide real-time information on local criminal activity to residents via email and internet platforms [22]. An online portal was created where citizens could register for crime alerts, and a network of volunteer coordinators helped manage information flow.

Backed informally by sympathetic police officers and local officials, *proNACHBAR* focused on burglary prevention and street crime awareness. Over the years it developed close “working in partnership” relationships with law enforcement: for example, Vienna's police provided crime pattern data that *proNACHBAR* distributed as warnings, and *proNACHBAR* volunteers relayed citizen tips back to the police [23].

The association's **principal goals** were raising public awareness, deterring criminals through vigilant communities, and ultimately reducing burglary and theft rates [26]. By the late 2010s, *proNACHBAR* had gained widespread recognition – it was featured in hundreds of media reports and credited with helping prevent crimes (e.g. enabling the arrest of a con man through community tips) [4].

However, it is worth noting that *proNACHBAR* has faced sustainability challenges (discussed later): by 2021, after 14 years of activity, the organisation announced it was

winding down operations, citing lack of formal support from authorities in Austria and Germany [30].

Another important actor has been **Safer Cities Villach**<sup>1</sup>, a regional community safety initiative in Carinthia. Founded in 2010 by a group of concerned citizens led by **Peter Komposch**, Safer Cities is an independent, non-partisan association aimed at improving safety in the city of Villach (population ~60,000) [27]. The creation of Safer Cities was a local response to crime concerns (at the time, one political party had even proposed a municipal “*Ordnungswache*” or auxiliary city guard) [27]. Instead, the Safer Cities group positioned itself as a **community-based platform without political grandstanding** – “*aus der Bevölkerung heraus ohne Effekthascherei helfen*”, as its founders put it [27].

The association focuses on practical crime prevention measures: it provides security advice to residents (e.g. consulting on home alarms and organising discounts for alarm installations) [35, 36], conducts awareness campaigns, and even runs training programmes such as self-defence courses and certified doorman training in cooperation with local institutions [5].

Safer Cities Villach actively collaborates with other stakeholders – for instance, it forged partnerships with the local homeowners’ association and sought to network with groups like *proNACHBAR*. The city of Villach recognised the value of this civic initiative by signing a multi-year cooperation agreement with the association and involving it in the city’s security strategy [27].

Safer Cities thus represents a **municipality-level citizen safety effort** that complements nationwide ones. It has been promoted as “Austria’s most informative security platform” (per its website) and continues to operate, focusing on information-sharing (its website features analyses of crime trends, preventive tips, and reports on security topics). [24]

**Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior and Police:** Alongside these civil society-led initiatives, the landscape of citizen participation in security in Austria underwent a decisive transformation beginning in 2016. In that year, the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) launched the ***GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich*** (“TOGETHER. SECURE in Austria”) programme, marking a shift from a model based on private associations to a structured, nationally coordinated community policing initiative.

This programme represented a fundamental policy shift aimed at institutionalising cooperation between citizens, municipalities, and law enforcement through a formal framework of “security partnerships”. The objective was to bridge the gap between Austria’s low official crime rates and the population’s deteriorating subjective feeling of security by fostering a proactive and professional dialogue.

Given its complexity, its evolution, including the initial controversy surrounding the concept of the *Sicherheitsbürger* or “Security Citizen”, and its impact on Austria’s entire

---

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed, first-hand account of the history and evolution of Safer Cities, see the contribution from its founder, Peter Komposch, in “Appendix A”.

security architecture, the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* initiative is the subject of a separate, in-depth analysis.

**For a detailed examination of its history, structure, actors, tools, and outcomes, please refer to the Part 2 of this report: An In-Depth Analysis of 'GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich': Austria's National Community Policing and Participatory Security Initiative".**

**Local Governments and Municipal Associations:** City and town authorities are crucial partners in community safety initiatives. Many mayors and municipal councils support neighbourhood watch-style groups by providing venues for meetings, modest funding for materials (e.g., warning signs or reflective vests), or public endorsements.

The **Austrian Association of Municipalities (*Gemeindebund*)** has formally backed the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* programme – at its 2016 launch, the *Gemeindebund's* president noted that there were youth councillors and EU councillors in towns, but previously “no function in the municipality dedicated to security”, expressing strong support for creating Security Councillors roles [25]. Since then, numerous municipalities have nominated council members to serve as safety liaisons, and some have integrated safety topics into local governance.

Additionally, a few city administrations have their own community safety schemes (for example, the city of Graz employs a municipal *Ordnungswache*, or order guard unit, though these are paid city employees rather than volunteers). Local government buy-in is important because it lends legitimacy and resources to citizen initiatives.

In Villach, as mentioned, the city's cooperation agreement with Safer Cities provided a framework and recognition for the volunteer group's activities. In Vienna, district councils in areas like Hietzing and Döbling actively promoted *proNACHBAR* meetings in the early years. Thus, **municipalities act as facilitators and supporters**, aligning community efforts with local safety policies and sometimes mediating between citizens and police.

**Networks and Associations:** Beyond individual initiatives, Austria is connected to broader networks that promote citizen-led safety. The **European Neighbourhood Watch Association (EUNWA)**, though now headquartered in Italy, was founded by Austrians and continues to include Austrian representation. EUNWA provides a platform for Austrian stakeholders to share experiences with peers from across Europe and draw on international best practices. Austrian delegates (from both NGOs and the Interior Ministry's crime prevention department) have regularly participated in EUNWA conferences [32].

Another relevant body is the **EUCPN (European Crime Prevention Network)**, where Austria's Ministry of Interior shares its community policing approaches. In fact, *proNACHBAR* was showcased on the EUCPN website and in European Crime Prevention Award entries as an example of community-oriented policing innovation [26].

The ***Kuratorium Sicheres Österreich (KSÖ)*** – a public–private safety advocacy group – and the ***Österreichischer Zivilschutzverband*** (Civil Protection Association)

are also tangential stakeholders: while their focus is broader (covering disaster preparedness and general crime prevention), they intersect with community safety and sometimes provide guidance or training materials that local groups use.

In summary, Austria's citizen-led community safety ecosystem comprises a mix of volunteer associations (such as *proNACHBAR* and Safer Cities), public institutions (including the national police with the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* programme and local municipalities), and network organisations (EUNWA and EUCPN) that promote collaboration.

The interplay of bottom-up initiatives and top-down support defines the Austrian model. Initially, grassroots actors like *proNACHBAR* were the primary drivers; today, thanks to *GEMEINSAM.SICHER*, the **Austrian state itself is a leading promoter**, aiming to scale up citizen participation in security nation-wide. This multi-stakeholder approach aims to leverage the strengths of civil society vigilance, complemented by the structure and legitimacy provided by public authorities.

## Operational Mechanisms and Structure of Initiatives

**Grassroots Group Operations:** Volunteer neighbourhood safety groups in Austria typically operate by creating localised networks of residents who share information about suspicious activities and receive crime prevention advice.

For example, *proNACHBAR* built its operation around a **central online platform and email alert system** [22]. Residents signed up (for free) to become members, providing their contact information and area of residence. When the police or community members reported a burglary, scam, or other incident in a neighbourhood, *proNACHBAR* volunteers compiled the details into an alert. These alerts are then rapidly disseminated via email newsletters and sometimes through the *proNACHBAR* website or social media [22]. In this way, “real-time information about criminal activities in the neighbourhood” reaches citizens who can then take precautions [22]. *proNACHBAR*'s structure included a network of **regional coordinators** (volunteers) who act as points of contact for their district or city. They gather local input and help verify information before it's shared.

An important aspect of the operational ethos is that members are encouraged to **stay vigilant and report** anything unusual to the authorities, not to intervene directly [26]. As Brunnbauer explained, *proNACHBAR* was not a patrol group – “We're not walking the streets with guard dogs” [19] – but rather a form of “*Grätzl-Kontakt*” (neighbourhood contact and communication). The motto “*Hinschauen statt Wegschauen*” (“observe, don't ignore”) is instilled in members. Practically, this means neighbours might, for instance, remind each other of basic safety (such as warning someone who leaves a purse unattended in a shopping cart) as well as keep an eye out for prowlers.

Regular **meetings and info-sessions** are another operational element: *proNACHBAR* and similar groups often organised neighbourhood meetings where police officers give presentations on home security, or ex-burglars (invited as guest speakers) explain how

break-ins occur, followed by Q&A sessions. Through these mechanisms – information sharing, local coordinators, and community meetings – Austrian neighbourhood watch initiatives function as a “communication and prevention service” embedded in the community.

Volunteer admins also moderate **hotlines and web forms** where citizens can submit tips. *proNACHBAR*, for example, had a telephone hotline and an online form on its website for people to report suspicious observations; the volunteers would filter these and forward credible, urgent reports to the police immediately [23]. This kind of structured liaison process ensures that valuable intelligence (like noting a possible burglar scouting houses) is quickly passed on, enhancing police response without citizens taking risks themselves.

In contrast to these grassroots models, the state-led *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* framework introduced a more formalised and structured operational model. This approach, coordinated by the police, relies on a multi-tiered network of designated roles for citizens, municipal officials, and police officers, as examined in the dedicated report on the initiative.

A crucial operational principle for all Austrian community safety initiatives, whether grassroots or state-supported, is the strict adherence to the rule of law. Volunteers possess no special legal powers beyond those of an ordinary citizen and are consistently instructed to “observe and report” but never to intervene directly, confront suspects, or put themselves in danger. This disciplined approach ensures a clear distinction from vigilantism and respects the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

## Role of Public Institutions and Legal Framework

The role of public institutions became central to community safety in Austria with the nationwide rollout of the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* initiative starting in 2016. Rather than enacting a specific “Neighbourhood Watch law,” Austria integrated citizen participation into the existing governance and legal structures.

The Interior Ministry's programme provides an official administrative framework that gives local police forces a clear mandate to collaborate with and guide citizen groups, lending them institutional legitimacy. This state-led approach allows for flexibility while ensuring that activities remain within established legal limits. Support is primarily institutional and in-kind, with an emphasis on police coordination and provision of materials rather than direct financial subsidies to volunteer groups.

A key function of this institutional oversight is to set clear boundaries. Austrian authorities actively discourage and monitor any unsanctioned or politically motivated “*Bürgerwehren*” (vigilante groups), particularly those with extremist tendencies, to maintain the state's monopoly on security and prevent the usurpation of police functions. This ensures that legitimate, cooperative citizen participation is clearly distinguished from illegal vigilantism.

## Use of Technology, Communication Tools, and Training

Effective communication and appropriate use of technology are central to Austria's community safety initiatives, both in the older grassroots schemes and the newer institutional programmes.

From the outset, *proNACHBAR* leveraged technology to amplify its reach. The initiative was built around an **online notification system**: a website and database where residents could sign up with their email addresses to receive security alerts [22]. This was quite innovative in 2007, predating the ubiquity of smartphones and social media. *proNACHBAR* volunteers, some with IT experience, created a user-friendly platform that could send out bulk emails whenever a noteworthy incident occurred. For example, if a burglary was reported on a street, an email alert describing the suspects or modus operandi would be blasted to all members in that district, often within hours of the incident (after consultation with police) [26, 22]. The service was **free of charge** and available to anyone, which encouraged widespread uptake.

By raising awareness quickly, these alerts enabled residents to take immediate precautions – such as locking down windows if a burglar was at large or being on the lookout for individuals using known scam tactics (like the “drain inspector” trick mentioned in *proNACHBAR* warnings) [26]. *proNACHBAR* also used its website to post general crime prevention information (Information being one of its three pillars). Articles on how to secure doors, updates on new fraud schemes, and summaries of local crime statistics were regularly updated online.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, email remained the primary tool, but *proNACHBAR* gradually expanded into **social media** – creating Facebook pages for community groups and using Twitter to disseminate brief alerts. The volunteer team curated content so as not to flood residents with minor issues, focusing on salient threats.

Two-way communication was also facilitated by tech: the *proNACHBAR* site offered an **online tip submission form and a hotline** where citizens could report suspicious activities or near-misses (e.g. attempted break-ins). These inputs were reviewed by *proNACHBAR* coordinators, and if credible, passed to the police and sometimes also turned into warnings for other members (minus any sensitive details) [23]. This essentially crowdsourced intelligence gathering, mediated by the organisation's tech tools.

Other local initiatives similarly embraced communication technology. **Safer Cities Villach** runs a comprehensive website (safercities.at) which serves as an information hub, labelled “Austria's most informative security platform” [30]. The site aggregates crime news publishes analysis of trends (including interactive maps of local incidents), and links to resources like the national crime statistics. Safer Cities also engages via a Security-Blog and social media to keep safety topics in public discourse [25]. Importantly, technology is used not just for reactive alerts but for **preventive education** – e.g. videos on how to spot ATM tampering, or infographics about common burglary

entry points. Many of these materials are shared among networks; for instance, Safer Cities and *proNACHBAR* exchanged content and links, effectively creating an informal digital network of safety-conscious communities.

With the launch of the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* programme, the use of communication tools and training became more standardised under government guidance. The Interior Ministry developed official digital platforms, including a dedicated website with a search tool to help citizens find their local police liaisons, and promoted outreach campaigns like "Coffee with Cops" to foster informal dialogue. Furthermore, the programme established a formal training curriculum for both volunteer "Safety Partners" and the police officers in liaison roles, covering essential topics such as legal principles, crime prevention strategies, and communication skills.

In terms of **training**, Austrian community safety initiatives place heavy emphasis on educating both the public and the volunteers themselves.

*proNACHBAR* and Safer Cities regularly hosted **crime prevention workshops** for residents, often in collaboration with police experts. Topics included home security assessments, how to recognise con artist tricks (like phony utility workers at the door), personal safety tips, and first aid or self-defence classes.

Safer Cities Villach, in particular, ran self-defence courses and even a certified doorman (*Türsteher*) training programme in partnership with the local chamber of commerce (WIFI) to professionalize club and bar security [27]. These trainings not only impart skills but also strengthen the community network (people who train together often stay connected and vigilant together).

The **content of volunteer training** became more systematised with *GEMEINSAM.SICHER*. The Interior Ministry, through its crime prevention unit, developed a curriculum for *Sicherheitspartner* (Safety Partners) when the programme rolled out. Volunteers who step up to be active Safety Partners are offered training sessions covering what the Ministry calls the "foundations of community policing".

According to official sources, the training includes: basic legal knowledge (what a citizen can and cannot do, understanding police procedures), **crime prevention strategies** with a focus on property crime and violence prevention, awareness of **constitutional protection** (so volunteers can spot signs of extremism or hate crimes and report responsibly), and communication & conflict resolution skills [21]. Project management is also taught – because volunteers may initiate local projects like setting up neighbourhood watch rounds or organising safety days, they benefit from tips on how to plan events and mobilise participants.

This structured training is delivered either by police prevention officers or sometimes in cooperation with institutions like the *Kuratorium Sicheres Österreich*.

Police officers involved in community liaison roles also receive specialised training. The **community police officers (*Sicherheitsbeauftragte*)** are trained in community engagement techniques and problem-oriented policing methods. The district **Safety Coordinators** attend workshops on how to facilitate multi-agency cooperation and how to evaluate the effectiveness of local safety projects. In 2018, for example, the Interior

Ministry ran a national workshop for all Safety Coordinators to exchange experiences and refine the communication flow from local groups up to the federal level [35].

An important tech tool in use, albeit on the police side, is the **SIMO Crime Monitoring system** (mentioned in internal presentations) which allows tracking of crime developments in near-real time. Police use data from SIMO to decide what information to feed back to community groups. For instance, if SIMO shows a spike in thefts in a certain area, the police might proactively alert the local safety partnership to be on guard, even before residents complain. In a sense, data analytics are quietly supporting the community efforts by targeting communication where it's needed. [32]

Finally, it's worth noting the careful balance maintained in using technology: Austrian initiatives strive to improve communication without causing unwarranted panic or violating privacy. Alerts are worded neutrally (e.g. "Police warn of increased break-ins in the district – ensure doors are locked and report suspicious behaviour"). Individuals are rarely identified in community alerts (unless a wanted notice is public). And after some early experiences, guidelines were set that digital group chats moderated by volunteers should not devolve into rumour mills or witch-hunts against "outsiders" in the neighbourhood. Thus far, technology has been a force multiplier for legitimate information and community bonding in Austrian neighbourhood watch efforts, and the training and communication strategies aim to keep it that way.

## Participation: Groups, Membership and Geographic Distribution

Participation in citizen-led safety initiatives in Austria has grown from a handful of pilot communities to a broader, though still developing, network of groups across the country. **By the numbers**, Austria's involvement levels are modest compared to some countries (like the UK's millions of Neighbourhood Watch members), but they are significant in a context where such participation was virtually nil 15 years ago.

The largest membership base was achieved by **proNACHBAR** during its peak. Starting from one Vienna district in 2007–2008, **proNACHBAR** quickly expanded city-wide and then into other regions. Within the first year, it had active groups not only in Hietzing (Vienna's 13th district) but also in Döbling (19th) and Liesing (23rd) – basically covering much of the Vienna suburbs. Public information events drew hundreds of attendees, indicating strong interest. As **proNACHBAR**'s reputation spread through media coverage, residents in other provinces reached out, and the organisation helped set up local chapters or affiliated groups in those areas.

By 2016, **proNACHBAR** counted around **6,000 members nationwide** [23]. The bulk of these were in urban and suburban areas with higher burglary rates (Vienna and its surroundings, Lower Austria, and some in Upper Austria and Styria).

The membership primarily comprised homeowners and tenants in residential neighbourhoods, but also some small business owners. While there isn't an official

breakdown, anecdotal evidence suggests many members were middle-aged or older – the people most settled in communities and often most concerned about home security. However, younger participants did join, especially in later years, as communication shifted to social media.

The initiative's strong local presence was confirmed by a 2009 official survey, which showed that awareness of *proNACHBAR* had reached 58% of residents in its home district of Hietzing. Crucially, of those who knew the initiative, 39% confirmed that it had directly influenced them to adopt better personal security measures [37].

**Regional initiatives** like **Safer Cities** Villach had a more concentrated but locally significant participation. In Villach (Carinthia), the Safer Cities association engaged hundreds of residents through its programmes. The formal membership might have been a few dozen paying members (as it charged a small annual fee of €30 for individuals to support its activities) [27], but the reach was much wider through public events and the city's endorsement. They targeted “50% of all households with alarm systems within five years” as a goal, which implies aiming to influence thousands of people in that city. Other towns in Carinthia and Styria occasionally formed similar citizen committees (some short-lived) – for example, in Kapfenberg (Styria) a neighbourhood watch was tried out by a community policing officer in the early 2010s, and in Tyrol there were informal patrol groups in a couple of villages in response to burglary sprees, though these did not formalise into lasting associations.

The *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* participation can be measured by the adoption of Safety Partnerships and Security Councillors in municipalities. As of around 2021, over 500 municipalities (out of ~2,100 nationwide) had appointed a *Sicherheitsgemeinderat* (Safety Councillor) [21]. This indicates roughly one in four communities were actively part of the programme. The distribution of these is uneven: some regions enthusiastically embraced the concept, while others lagged. For example, the district of Mödling in Lower Austria was highlighted as a success – 14 of its 20 municipalities (70%) had functioning Security Councillors and active cooperation with safety officers [21]. Lower Austria in general, as well as Styria and parts of Upper Austria, saw higher uptake, possibly due to strong promotion by local officials or because these areas had experienced more burglaries in the past and thus perceived a need. In contrast, many small rural communities and some larger cities like Vienna were slower to nominate councillors. In Vienna's case, the unique structure (Vienna is both a city and a province with 23 districts) meant the programme had to adapt – eventually Vienna designated Safety Councillors at the district level, and community police officers there engaged through existing district community forums. By 2023, the Ministry indicated that the number of Security Councillors had grown further (some sources indicate approximately 600+) [29, 36], and efforts were underway to encourage the remaining towns to join.

As for **Safety Partners (volunteer citizens)**, the Interior Ministry has not published an exact count, but they have noted there are “more than a thousand” active volunteer partners working with the police [21]. These range from individuals involved in single-issue groups (e.g. a local farmer who works with police on preventing equipment theft) to more formally organised neighbourhood groups. The number of *Sicherheitsbeauftragte* (police contact officers for communities) was also cited as over

1,000 nationwide, aligning with roughly one per police station or major community – an indication of how widespread the programme’s potential footprint is.

**Geographically**, participation tends to correlate with both population density and crime rates. Vienna and the surrounding populous provinces (Lower Austria, Styria, Upper Austria) have most organised groups. Western Austria (Tyrol, Vorarlberg) historically had fewer such groups; this may be due to lower crime rates in some alpine rural areas, but also possibly a cultural factor (tight-knit villages where informal vigilance is already a norm, or simply later adoption of the formal programme). However, even in these areas the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* programme has made some inroads by embedding Safety Councillors in larger towns. By contrast, **Burgenland** (the eastern border province) which faced issues like cross-border burglary tourism in the 2010s, saw quite active citizen involvement – some villages there formed watch schemes and cooperated closely with police to patrol the border areas at night (often these were farmers using their own vehicles and night vision gear, coordinated by local police). While not officially dubbed “*Nachbarschaftswache*”, these efforts mirrored neighbourhood watch and were folded into the Safe Together framework as it rolled out.



In terms of the **type of groups** and participants, Austria’s initiatives cover a spectrum: from small village teams to city-wide networks. Some operate under formal names and branding (like *proNACHBAR* had a recognisable logo – an eye symbol with a house in the pupil – and distributed stickers for members’ doors), whereas others are very informal (just a WhatsApp group of concerned neighbours without an official title).

The **demographics** of participants tend to skew toward those who have the time and inclination for community work, such as retirees, neighbourhood association members, and civic-minded professionals. That said, there has been an effort to involve youths as well – for example, a few Safety Partnership projects in 2019 engaged high school student representatives to act as Safety Partners focusing on issues like school bullying and park safety for teenagers. Also, the police have highlighted the inclusion of diverse community members: “from student representatives to tobacconists, doctors to pensioners, up to councillors – anyone can become a safety partner” [29]. This inclusivity is seen as important for reaching different segments of the community.

**Trends in citizen engagement** show both growth and challenges. On one hand, the number of active groups and volunteers is rising thanks to institutional support and broader awareness of the concept. Citizens have become more proactive in voicing security concerns and partnering with police, which is a cultural shift in a country where traditionally many relied entirely on the state for security.

On the other hand, sustaining engagement can be difficult. Interest often spikes after a security incident (say a spate of burglaries) but can wane once the immediate threat subsides. This is a common pattern where a neighbourhood that experienced crime rallies to set up a watch, and a year or two later, if crime drops, meetings become sporadic. The formal structure of *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* tries to counter this by

regularising meetings and embedding them in local governance, but it still requires motivated individuals to keep momentum.

Another trend is the **digitisation of community**: more neighbours connect via online community forums (like Nebenan.at, a local networking site like Nextdoor, which some Austrian neighbourhoods use) or Facebook groups, which can function as virtual neighbourhood watches sharing information about anything from lost pets to break-in alerts. These digital communities sometimes operate parallel to or integrated with the official programmes.

The **engagement is largely volunteer-driven** and thus reliant on civic spirit. Notably, Austria has a strong tradition of voluntary organisations (fire brigades, mountain rescue, Red Cross, etc.), and neighbourhood safety is increasingly joining that tradition. However, it is still developing: unlike volunteer firefighting – which is deeply ingrained and socially esteemed – volunteer crime prevention is a newer volunteer role that is carving out its place in the public consciousness. Surveys conducted by EUNWA in recent years (including a 2025 questionnaire) indicate that while many Austrians value community safety initiatives, only a minority have directly participated so far, suggesting room to expand public involvement (for instance, by recruiting more young people or residents of apartment blocks, who are currently underrepresented in some watch schemes).

Geographically, one can map the **hotspots of participation** to where organised associations exist or where the police have focused efforts: Vienna (multiple districts), Graz and wider Styria, Lower Austria's districts around Vienna (Mödling, Baden, etc.), parts of Upper Austria (e.g. the city of Wels had a notable neighbourhood watch programme run by a local NGO), Carinthia (Villach, and possibly Klagenfurt with some smaller initiatives), and Burgenland border towns. In Salzburg and Innsbruck, community policing forums exist but are often more general (addressing traffic or noise issues as well) rather than branded neighbourhood watch; still, they embody the same participatory approach.

In conclusion, **participation in Austria's citizen-led safety initiatives has progressed from virtually zero to a network covering roughly 25% of communities in an organised fashion, plus various informal groups**. Thousands of Austrians have at least tangentially engaged with these efforts (be it by signing up for alerts or attending meetings), and a committed core of volunteers – likely numbering in the low thousands – actively work alongside police to keep neighbourhoods safe. The trend is upward, but the movement is at a formative stage relative to some of Austria's European peers. There remains a large untapped potential in those three-quarters of municipalities without any safety partnership yet, as well as in big-city apartment communities that have yet to organise. The groundwork laid in the past decade suggests that with continued support, participation can further broaden in the coming years.

## Achievements, Challenges, and Future Outlook

**Achievements and positive outcomes:** Austria’s citizen-led community safety initiatives have yielded several noteworthy successes.

Perhaps the most tangible achievement has been an **increase in crime prevention and awareness among the public**, which has contributed to reductions in certain types of crime. During the 2010s, Austria saw a significant drop in residential burglaries – by some reports, break-ins fell to the lowest level in decades by 2018, with thousands fewer cases than the mid-2000s peak. While enhanced police work and international cooperation were major factors, officials acknowledge that community vigilance played a role by hardening targets and prompting quicker reporting of suspicious activity.

Initiatives like *proNACHBAR* can claim direct credit for preventing specific crimes: for example, *proNACHBAR* alerts helped foil a serial con artist scam, and a real-time warning about impostors using a “drain cleaning” ruse prevented further victims in one neighbourhood [26].

Moreover, *proNACHBAR*’s efforts “raised awareness for personal security measures considerably in the Austrian population”, as evidenced by over 500 media mentions and partnerships with homeowner associations to promote better home security [4].

**Table 1: Comparative Results on the Impact and Perception of *proNACHBAR* in Vienna (2009 Data)**

Indicator	Hietzing (with high <i>proNACHBAR</i> presence)	Hernals (Control district)
<b>Awareness of the <i>proNACHBAR</i> initiative</b>	58% of residents were aware	27% of residents were aware
<b>Influence on personal security measures (among those aware)</b>	39% adopted new security measures	18% adopted new security measures
<b>Trend in perceived risk of home burglary (2007-2009)</b>	Slightly decreased	Sharply increased
<b>Perceived risk of physical assault (rated as high/rather high)</b>	4% of residents	13% of residents

Source: [37]

This effect was empirically demonstrated in a 2009 study by the Austrian Federal Criminal Police Office, which compared the districts of Hietzing (with high *proNACHBAR* activity) and Hernals. The study found that between 2007 and 2009, the perceived risk of a home burglary significantly increased in Hernals but slightly

decreased in Hietzing, suggesting a direct positive impact of the initiative's prevention work [37].

These outcomes align with the group's goal of not just stopping crimes but also **increasing the feeling of security**. Surveys in areas with active neighbourhood watch groups often show residents feel safer due to the knowledge that neighbours and police are in close communication.

On a community level, the formation of safety partnerships has **strengthened social cohesion and trust**. For instance, through *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* forums, previously unconnected groups (like immigrant youths and local park users in Graz) were brought together to discuss issues, dispelling mutual mistrust and coming up with shared solutions [31]. In Graz's example, residents had been fearful of asylum-seekers gathering in parks; facilitated dialogues led to better understanding and cooperative measures, easing tensions without incident [31]. This is a model for how community policing can build bridges.

Another achievement is the **institutionalisation of citizen participation in security policy**. By creating the Security Councillor role and incorporating citizen input in safety planning, Austria has made participatory security a part of governance (in line with the principle of "horizontal subsidiarity" as it's sometimes called in policy discussions). This is reflected in the fact that security is now a standing item in many municipal council agendas, where it never was before.

At the national level, the Interior Ministry's embrace of community policing marks a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive approach to security. The Austrian "*proNACHBAR*" initiative, based on the principle of "looking closely and not looking the other way," has gained increasing international recognition for its model of community-based crime prevention.

The long-standing voluntary work of the *proNACHBAR* team was honoured with an invitation to Valencia, Spain. As part of the EU project SELPE (Sharing Experiences in Local Policing in Europe), *proNACHBAR* founder Karl Brunnbauer was asked to present the community-led model for preventing burglaries to an international audience of professionals. On 25 May 2013, Brunnbauer discussed crime reduction strategies in Valencia with high-ranking Spanish police experts and officials from various EU member states. In early July, a delegation of senior representatives from the Valencia Police visited the *proNACHBAR* office in Vienna to learn about its "Local Policing" model in the federal capital. The Valencia police intend to adopt *proNACHBAR*'s expertise and implement best practices from Vienna.

*proNACHBAR* was also represented at the German Prevention Day in Bielefeld in April 2013, and at a security conference on burglary prevention in Bremen, Germany, in December 2012. Karl Brunnbauer stated: "Through the network we have built over the years, we can learn from the programmes of other countries and offer our members even more prevention and protection across Austria." He believes that the future of the fight against home burglaries lies in strong networks between citizen initiatives and the police. "Crime prevention through the active involvement of citizens is becoming increasingly important."

This international networking led *proNACHBAR* to establish the European Neighbourhood Watch Association (EUNWA).

Internationally, Austria's experience contributed to and benefited from cross-border knowledge exchange. The visit and contact by the police in Valencia in 2013 were the catalyst for the founding of EUNWA [20]. It was a significant milestone, positioning Austria as a leader in promoting neighbourhood watch in Europe. Austrian delegates have since been active in European forums and have drawn inspiration from other countries. For example, the French *Voisins Vigilants et Solidaires (VVS)* platform, which amassed over a million members, has been studied by Austrian stakeholders as a best practice in leveraging technology for neighbourhood networks. Conversely, Austrian practices (like the integrated police-community model of *GEMEINSAM.SICHER*) have been showcased to other European partners as an example of state-supported community policing. This exchange of ideas in the European context is itself an achievement, ensuring Austria's relatively newer programmes are not isolated but part of a broader movement.

Another success has been maintaining a **balance between citizen initiative and respect for the rule of law**. Austrian neighbourhood watch groups have largely avoided the pitfalls of vigilantism that have troubled some other countries' efforts. There have been no widely reported incidents of abuse by watch members – no controversial “citizen's arrests” gone wrong or profiling-based harassment – which indicates that training and clear norms have worked. Police officials note that so far “no concrete cases [of problematic *Bürgerwehren*] are known in Austria” [28], even as they stay alert to any such developments. The avoidance of any serious vigilantism incidents, despite a few attempts by extremist groups to form patrols, can be seen as a success of the Austrian approach of **early engagement and firm boundaries**. When a far-right group tried to organise “Vikings” street patrols in 2021, the swift condemnation by authorities and likely lack of public support meant the initiative did not appear to gain traction [33]. Meanwhile, the legitimate citizen initiatives continued to enjoy police backing, showing that the public and authorities alike can distinguish responsible community efforts from provocations.

**Challenges and critical issues:** Despite progress, there are several challenges facing citizen-led community safety in Austria.

One ongoing challenge is **sustainability and volunteer fatigue**. Many of these initiatives rely on a core of passionate volunteers, which can be a vulnerability. The case of *proNACHBAR* is instructive: after 14 years, the association ceased its activities in 2021, citing burnout and the lack of institutional support or funding to keep going [30]. The end of *proNACHBAR*, which had been a flagship project, revealed the difficulty of maintaining momentum in a volunteer organisation – especially once the founding leadership steps aside. It also highlighted how dependence on a few individuals (like Mr. Brunnbauer in this case) can limit longevity.

To address this, newer efforts under *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* try to embed roles in official positions (so that if one Safety Councillor quits, the mayor can appoint another, etc.), but even so, the enthusiasm of volunteers is not guaranteed to last indefinitely. Ensuring **continuous community engagement** is hard; people have busy lives, and

unless there is a pressing need, attendance at safety meetings can drop. This is evidenced by some local groups becoming inactive after an initial spark. The challenge is how to **keep citizens invested in prevention during “quiet” times** when crime is low – ironically, the success in reducing crime can lead to complacency.

Furthermore, the focused prevention work highlighted a complex challenge: while effective at reducing the fear of specific crimes like burglary, the constant discussion of risks may have contributed to a paradoxical rise in the general feeling of insecurity. The 2009 official study noted that while the fear of burglary in Hietzing decreased, the overall subjective feeling of insecurity slightly worsened, leading the authors to question whether heightened awareness campaigns might inadvertently increase general anxiety. [37]

Another issue is **fragmentation and uneven coverage**. As noted, only about 25% of municipalities have formally joined the security partnership programme by 2021 [21]. That leaves many areas without any organised mechanism for citizen participation. Some of these places might indeed be very low-crime and feel no need, but others might simply lack awareness or local champions to start a group.

Additionally, Austria’s framework must bridge differences between urban and rural settings. What works in a Vienna neighbourhood (e.g. email alerts) might not be as useful in a tiny alpine village, and vice versa (a village might prefer a WhatsApp phone tree, which in a big city would be impractical due to numbers). Tailoring approaches while still maintaining a cohesive national strategy is a delicate task.

There is also a bit of **competition or overlap** between different initiatives historically. For example, in Villach in 2010, there were two parallel citizen safety initiatives at one point – the independent Safer Cities and a short-lived political party-driven “*sicher furtgehen*” project – which led to some confusion and “mutual criticism” until the party-backed one dissolved [27]. Similarly, early on, there may have been a sense of rivalry or at least lack of coordination between *proNACHBAR* and other regional groups. EUNWA’s formation partly helped mitigate this by linking everyone, but within Austria, there still isn’t a single umbrella for all citizen initiatives (*GEMEINSAM.SICHER* is broad, but some private groups operate somewhat outside of it). This **fragmentation** can lead to duplication of efforts or inconsistent standards.

**Politicisation risks** present another challenge. Community safety can become a political football – for instance, local politicians might co-opt a neighbourhood watch for their own image, or conversely, opposition might portray it as vigilantism. In some cases, far-right groups have tried to hijack the narrative of community safety to justify anti-immigrant rhetoric, claiming that citizens need to patrol because of immigrant crime (even if statistics do not support such claims). The police and mainstream initiatives must consistently distance themselves from any extremist or xenophobic agenda to maintain credibility and inclusivity. The “Vikings Security” episode in 2021 is a prime example of the **far-right attempting to exploit citizens’ fear** to form parallel structures, which authorities identified as “racist-motivated patrols aiming to influence public perception and question the state’s authority” [33]. Thwarting such attempts requires vigilance by law enforcement and clarity in public messaging that legitimate neighbourhood watch is about community solidarity, not targeting particular groups.

Additionally, **privacy concerns and data protection** pose subtle challenges in the era of digital communication. Neighbourhood groups must be careful in how they handle personal data (e.g. sharing someone's license plate who was seen driving suspiciously can be sensitive). Austria has strong privacy laws, and even the police are cautious about what information they release to citizen groups. Getting the right balance – sharing enough to be useful but not so much as to infringe privacy or cause defamation – is a constant consideration. This sometimes frustrates volunteers who want more detailed info (like exact addresses of incidents), but police may withhold details for legal reasons. Overcoming these frictions requires trust and understanding of each other's constraints.

Looking at the **outlook**, there are several expected developments and potential policy directions for Austria's community safety initiatives leading up to and beyond the White Book 2026:

**Integration and Expansion:** A key goal is to bring more communities and citizens into the fold. The Interior Ministry, in partnership with the *Gemeindebund*, will likely continue encouraging the remaining ~1,500 municipalities to nominate Security Councillors and start local safety partnerships [36]. We can expect campaigns or incentives to boost participation in those areas. One idea floated is to tie it into broader community programmes – for example, linking Safety Partners with *Zivilschutz* (civil protection) volunteers so that the same network can be utilised for crime prevention and disaster preparedness. This comprehensive approach could attract people interested in general community resilience.

**Digital Platform Enhancement:** Inspired by successes abroad, Austria might develop a more robust digital platform or app dedicated to neighbourhood safety. France's VVS system, which has separate interfaces for citizens, municipalities, and police, has been noted as a best practice [32]. Austria could adopt similar technology: an official app where citizens can receive push notifications about local alerts (instead of or in addition to emails), and where they can easily send non-emergency reports. The groundwork is partially there with the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* finder and existing communication channels, but a unified app could streamline interaction. Any such development would have to consider data security and possibly work in tandem with the EU's data protection guidelines.

**Sustainable Funding and Support:** The experience of *proNACHBAR*'s dissolution highlights a need for sustainable support structures. We might see proposals for modest public funding or sponsorship to support the logistics of citizen initiatives – for example, grants to cover printing materials, organising training events, or even small compensation for coordinators' expenses. In the White Book 2026, policy recommendations could include establishing a **national support fund for community safety** or integrating it into existing crime prevention budgets. Additionally, recognising volunteers (through awards, public appreciation, insurance coverage while on duty, etc.) can help sustain morale. Notably, EUNWA's Mythos Award, started in 2022, already honoured exemplary citizen coordinators in Europe, and an Austrian volunteer could be a future recipient [32].

**Legislative Clarity:** While new laws specifically for neighbourhood watch might not be on the immediate horizon (and might not be deemed necessary), there could be moves to formalise the roles within existing legal frameworks. For instance, an amendment to police regulations could formally recognise Safety Partners as a category of community helper, like how some jurisdictions have volunteer police auxiliaries. This would clarify insurance and liability questions. Another area is data sharing legislation – perhaps allowing police to share certain types of non-personal incident data more freely with accredited community groups.

**Addressing Politicisation:** The outlook also includes mitigating any political or extremist exploitation. The authorities will likely keep a close eye on any emerging *Bürgerwehr* groups at the fringes, ready to respond as they did with the Vikings case. The continued emphasis in training on democratic values and human rights will be crucial to inoculate citizen networks against any racist or undemocratic tendencies. Given Austria's broader socio-political climate, where issues of migration and security can become heated, maintaining the **neutral, civic character** of neighbourhood watch efforts is a priority. This could involve partnerships with sociologists or conflict resolution NGOs to monitor the community climate and provide intervention if any group starts veering off course.

**Measuring Impact and Research:** We expect more systematic evaluation of these initiatives. The White Book 2026 process itself suggests a reflection on what has worked and what hasn't over the past decade. Metrics such as crime rate changes in areas with active groups versus those without, or surveys of citizen fear of crime over time, will inform future decisions. Early indications are positive – for instance, police in pilot districts reported improved information flow and sometimes quicker case closures thanks to citizen tips. Continuing to document such successes will justify the programme's expansion. Austria may also participate in EU-wide studies (via EUCPN or academic research) to compare models – as indicated by contributions to international conferences on community policing [35].

Austria's citizen-led community safety movement is at a **consolidation and growth phase**. The achievements to date – reported reductions in specific crime types in some targeted areas, a new culture of police-community cooperation, and empowered citizens – provide a strong foundation. Challenges like sustaining volunteer engagement, preventing politicisation, and ensuring even coverage are recognised and are being addressed through structured programmes and awareness. The future likely holds a more **technology-driven, professionally supported, and widely adopted** network of neighbourhood partnerships. With ongoing support from public institutions and adaptation to emerging needs, these initiatives are poised to become a permanent fixture in Austria's safety landscape, contributing not only to crime prevention but to the wider goal of resilient, cohesive communities. As the Europe-wide study coordinated by EUNWA is likely to highlight, Austria's experience offers valuable lessons in balancing grassroots initiative with institutional framework – a balance that will continue to evolve through 2026 and beyond, in the pursuit of safer neighbourhoods for all.

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## PART 2

# An Analysis of "GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich": Austria's National Community Policing and Participatory Security Initiative

### Programme Name

The official name of Austria's national participatory security initiative is **GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich**.<sup>[1]</sup> No official acronym is in common use; the programme is typically referred to by its core name, "GEMEINSAM.SICHER".

The name, which translates to "TOGETHER.SECURE in Austria," was strategically chosen to embody the programme's foundational philosophy. It signals a departure from the traditional view of security as the exclusive domain of law enforcement. Instead, it frames security as a shared societal responsibility that necessitates a proactive and professional dialogue between citizens, municipalities, and the police.<sup>[2]</sup> This collaborative ethos is further underscored by the programme's official slogan, "HINSEHEN, REDEN, HANDELN" ("Look, Talk, Act"), which calls for a mindful and engaged citizenry. <sup>[3, 34]</sup>

The programme's geographical scope is national, implemented across all of Austria's federal states (*Bundesländer*) and centrally coordinated by the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI). <sup>[4]</sup> Despite its national framework, its implementation is highly localised, with operational structures established at the district (*Bezirk*) and municipal (*Gemeinde*) levels to address local needs. <sup>[2]</sup>

The very construction of the name "GEMEINSAM.SICHER" serves as a strategic communication tool. It is not merely a label but a deliberate piece of policy branding. By presenting two simple, positive words, a partnership concept ("Together") leading to a desired outcome ("Secure"), the name creates a memorable and inclusive message. This framing was crucial for managing public perception and gaining acceptance, particularly considering the significant controversies that marked the programme's inception. It was designed to build what the ministry calls a "society of looking and active, responsible action" (*Gesellschaft des Hinsehens und aktiven, verantwortungsvollen Handelns*) from the very first point of contact. <sup>[2]</sup>

### History and Context

The **GEMEINSAM.SICHER** initiative was formally announced in March 2016 after a two-year development period. <sup>[6]</sup> It was launched as a pilot project in April 2016 in four distinct regions: the districts of Schärding (Upper Austria) and Mödling (Lower Austria),

and the cities of Graz (Styria) and Eisenstadt (Burgenland). Following an evaluation of this pilot phase, the programme was rolled out nationwide on June 1, 2017. [4]

The primary motivation behind the initiative was to address a critical paradox in Austrian public perception: while official crime statistics indicated stable or declining crime rates, the population's subjective feeling of security (*subjektives Sicherheitsgefühl*) was deteriorating.[6] Officials from the Interior Ministry explicitly linked this growing anxiety to the societal impact of the 2015 European migration crisis and a heightened fear of terrorism across Europe. [6] The programme was therefore conceived as a tool to bridge this gap between objective reality and subjective fear by fostering dialogue, increasing transparency, and rebuilding public trust. [9]

Conceptually, the programme is explicitly modelled on the Anglo-American philosophy of "Community Policing". [6] This approach represents a fundamental shift from a reactive, incident-driven model of law enforcement to a proactive, problem-solving partnership between the police and the community. Austrian officials described the initiative as a "cultural change in the police" (*Kulturwandel in der Polizei*), with the goal of empowering citizens to actively participate in shaping the security of their own local environment. [4]

However, the programme's development was not without significant challenges. The initial concept, which introduced the role of the "*Sicherheitsbürger*" (Security Citizen), immediately prompted significant public controversy. [7] Critics from across the political spectrum, including opposition parties, local mayors, and the police union, raised concerns that the programme would create a "spy state" (*Spitzelstaat*) or legitimise the activities of "private sheriffs" and vigilantes. [8] This debate proved formative and led the Ministry to rethink and refine its approach.

In response, the programme underwent a significant evolution. The terminology was softened from the authoritative "*Sicherheitsbürger*" to the more collaborative "*Sicherheitspartner*" (Security Partners). [2] The programme's messaging was pivoted to focus almost exclusively on dialogue and prevention, with officials repeatedly disavowing any intention of creating "auxiliary sheriffs". [9] This process of reactive policy adaptation demonstrates how the programme's final identity was not pre-determined but was shaped through public debate. The need to navigate a deep-seated cultural suspicion of citizen surveillance in a country with Austria's specific historical experiences was paramount. The programme's survival and eventual institutionalisation depended largely on its ability to successfully manage this complex political and cultural context. This evolution culminated in a major organisational restructuring in 2024, when the initiative's functions were formally integrated into a new, permanent "Community Policing and Citizen Participation" unit within the Federal Police Directorate, cementing its place in Austria's security architecture.[5] However, there is limited publicly available evidence that the 2024 reorganisation was widely publicised among Austrian citizens.

## Main Actors

*GEMEINSAM.SICHER* is built upon a highly structured "four-partner" model, which establishes a formal network of cooperation between citizens, police, and local government. This structure is a deliberate departure from organic, bottom-up Neighbourhood Watch schemes, representing a state-managed framework for civic engagement in security. [2]

### Citizens as "*Sicherheitspartner*" (Security Partners)

The foundational citizen role is that of the *Sicherheitspartner*. These are volunteers from the community who express an interest in co-shaping local security. Their function is not one of enforcement but of communication. They act as multipliers, disseminating official crime prevention information from the police to their neighbours, and as sensors, providing feedback to the police about local safety concerns, problems, and the general mood of the community. [2] Crucially, *Sicherheitspartner* possess no special legal powers, privileges, or authority. The Interior Ministry has been unequivocal that they are not "auxiliary sheriffs". [7] The name of the role itself was changed from the original, more contentious "*Sicherheitsbürger*" (Security Citizen) to "*Sicherheitspartner*" (Security Partner) to underscore this collaborative, non-hierarchical relationship. [2]

### Law Enforcement

The police are represented by two distinct, tiered roles:

- "***Sicherheitsbeauftragte***" (Security Officers): These are specially designated police officers stationed at the local police station (*Polizeiinspektion*). They serve as the primary, day-to-day point of contact for Security Partners and other local actors like businesses or schools. They are described as the "extended arm" of the district-level coordinators, responsible for managing the local security partnership and providing prevention advice. [2]
- "***Sicherheitskoordinatoren***" (Security Coordinators): Operating at the district police command level (*Bezirks- und Stadtpolizeikommando*), these coordinators serve as the central hub for the initiative within their region. They act as a liaison between all participants, coordinate the implementation of larger-scale prevention campaigns, and leverage their regional knowledge to guide security measures. [2]

### Local Authorities

- "***Sicherheitsgemeinderäte***" (Security Council Members): This role is filled by an elected member of the municipal council (*Gemeinderat*) who is officially nominated by their municipality. They function as the formal interface between the local police station and the municipal government on security-related matters. Their inclusion ensures that local government is an active participant in the security

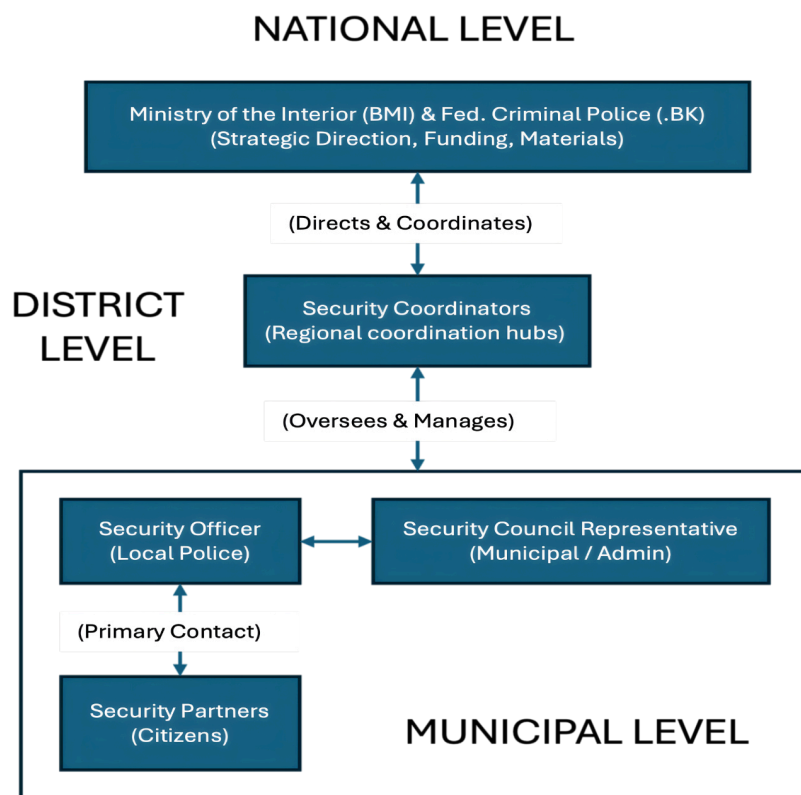
dialogue and can bring municipal resources to bear on solving problems. [2]

### Central Authorities and Other Partners

The initiative is steered at the national level by the **Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI)** and the **Federal Criminal Police Office (.BK)**. These bodies are responsible for the programme's strategic direction, funding, and the development of prevention materials. [1] The programme also actively cultivates "security partnerships" with a broad range of non-state actors, including academic institutions for scientific evaluation (e.g., University of Klagenfurt), major private companies for collaboration on specific topics like retail crime (e.g., SPAR, Gebrüder Weiss), and other civil society organisations. [2]

The design of this four-pillar structure is revealing. By creating a formalised, top-down network where all roles and communication channels are pre-defined by the state, the model effectively occupies the space where a more independent, grassroots Neighbourhood Watch might otherwise emerge. It encourages citizen participation but ensures that this participation is channelled through official, police-managed pathways. This may be understood as a state-led approach that channels participation through official pathways. A practical implication is that information flows are largely mediated through official channels, which may shape what is disseminated and how.

**Figure 1 – GEMEINSAM.SICHER Organisation Structure**



## Tools

The tools employed by *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* are overwhelmingly oriented towards facilitating dialogue, disseminating information, and promoting prevention, rather than enabling active surveillance or patrolling by citizens.

### Digital Platforms

- **Official Website ([gemeinsamsicher.at](https://gemeinsamsicher.at)):** The website serves as the programme's central information hub. Its most critical operational feature is the "**GEMEINSAM.SICHER finden**" (Find *GEMEINSAM.SICHER*) search tool. This function allows any citizen to quickly identify and find contact information for their designated local Security Coordinators and Security Officers via their respective police stations. [2] This tool is fundamental to delivering on the programme's promise of creating a direct and easily accessible line of communication between the public and the police.
- **Social media:** In a move to broaden its reach, particularly to younger demographics, the programme launched an official Instagram channel (@gemeinsam.sicher) in March 2025. It is used to share current information, security tips, and announcements about local activities and campaigns. [10]
- **Absence of a Citizen Alert App:** A notable distinction from many modern Neighbourhood Watch programmes in other countries is the lack of an official mobile application for *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* that would allow for peer-to-peer warnings or the creation of neighbourhood-level messaging groups. The programme's digital tools are designed for citizen-to-police communication, not for facilitating an independent citizen-to-citizen alert network.

### Physical Materials and In-Person Meetings

The core of the programme's methodology relies on direct human interaction and traditional informational materials.

- **Prevention Materials:** The Federal Criminal Police Office (.BK) produces a wide array of printed and digital prevention materials. These include detailed brochures, flyers, and checklists on topics such as burglary prevention, protecting oneself from online fraud, and ensuring personal safety. [1] A key practical tool offered is the *Eigentumsverzeichnis* (property register), a form that helps citizens catalogue their valuable items with serial numbers and photographs to aid in recovery and insurance claims after a theft. [1]
- **Dialogue-Oriented Events:** The programme's most emphasised "tool" is direct, in-person dialogue. Key formats include:
  - **"Coffee with Cops":** A nationwide initiative where police officers meet with

citizens in informal settings like local cafés. The goal is to break down barriers, build personal relationships, and discuss security concerns in a relaxed atmosphere. [10] However, the available information provides no evidence to confirm how successful this communication model has been or whether it is widely used by citizens to dialogue with their neighbourhood police officers.

- **Information Booths and Community Events:** Security Officers and Security Partners regularly set up stands at local fairs, markets, and community festivals to distribute materials and engage directly with the public. [10]
- **Security Forums (*Sicherheitsforen*):** More structured meetings where citizens, police representatives, and municipal officials convene to discuss specific local problems and collaboratively develop solutions. [6]

The specific choice of tools—or lack thereof—is highly indicative of the programme's core priorities. The absence of a peer-to-peer alert application is not an oversight but appears to be a deliberate design choice. Such a tool would empower citizens to form their own information networks, potentially operating outside of direct police mediation. The existing tools, in contrast, consistently position the police as the central node for information verification. This approach prioritises accuracy and the prevention of misinformation over speed, ensuring that all security-related dialogue flows through validated, official channels.

## Local Organisational Structure

The local organisational structure of *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* is a direct operationalisation of its four-partner model, creating a clear, hierarchical, and interlinked network for communication and action at the community level.

### Coordination and Communication Mechanisms

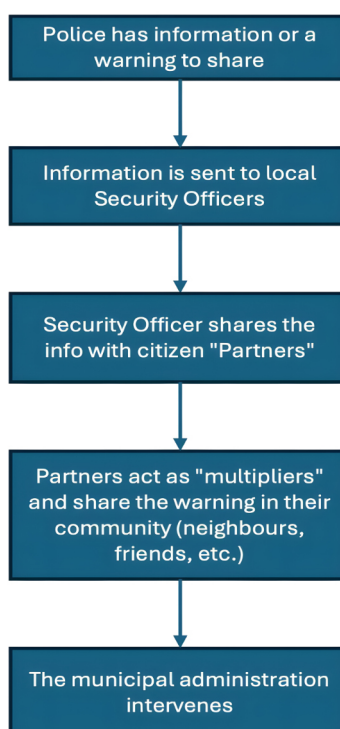
The structure is designed to ensure a formal and efficient flow of information. At the municipal level, the *Sicherheitsgemeinderat* (Security Council Member) serves as the political anchor, liaising with the local ***Sicherheitsbeauftragter*** (Security Officer) at the police station. [2] Citizen volunteers, the *Sicherheitspartner* (Security Partners), are the programme's grassroots foundation, and their official point of contact within the system is their local Security Officer. [2] Overseeing this entire local apparatus is the *Sicherheitskoordinator* (Security Coordinator) at the district police command, who ensures consistency across multiple municipalities, manages district-wide campaigns, and serves as a higher-level contact point. [2]

Communication is designed to be bidirectional but is channelled through these formal roles. A citizen partner with a concern—for instance, recurring vandalism in a park—would report it to their Security Officer. The officer can then initiate an operational response, or, if the issue requires a non-police solution (like better lighting or youth

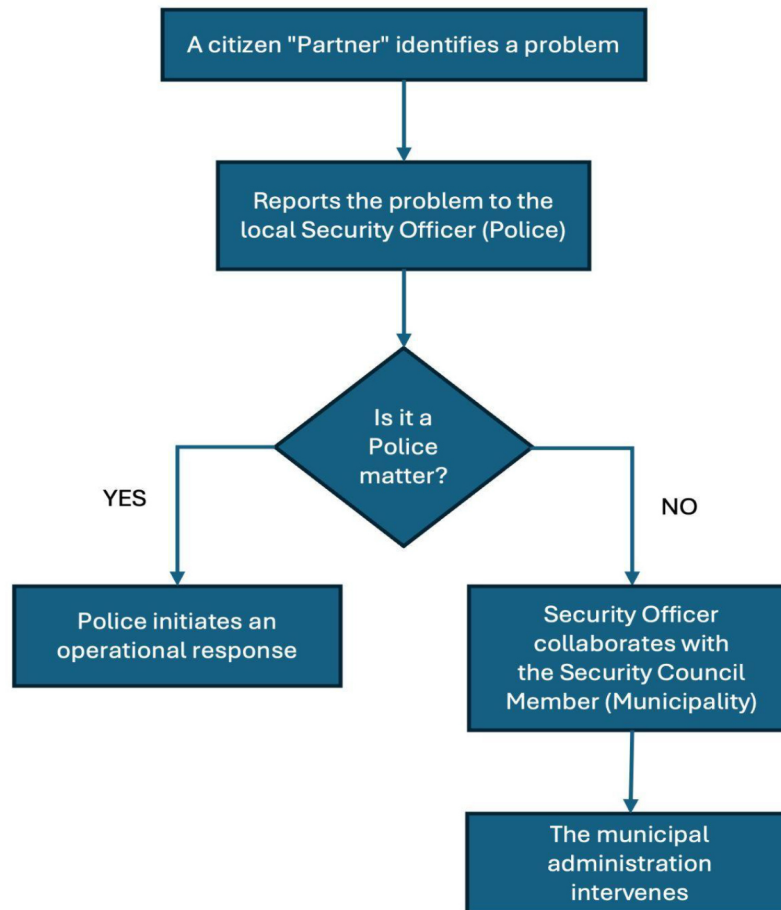
outreach programmes), they can collaborate with the Security Council Member to engage the municipal administration. Conversely, information from the police, such as a warning about a recent string of burglaries or new prevention advice, is disseminated down through this same network. Security Partners are then expected to act as communicators and multipliers, sharing this information within their personal and community networks. [2] However, the effectiveness of this entire model depends critically on the speed of communication. For information about active threats—such as a specific burglary method being used in the neighbourhood or key details from witnesses—to be useful, it must be provided promptly. Delays in this formal network can render the intelligence obsolete, prevent residents from taking immediate security measures, and result in the loss of valuable, time-sensitive knowledge.

Furthermore, a critical operational barrier arises from the strict data protection policies applied to these roles. Unlike the Neighbourhood Watch model, where the coordinator is a visible and accessible reference point for residents, the identities and contact details of the *Sicherheitspartner* are generally kept confidential and are not accessible to the public. As confirmed by police protocols, direct contact between residents and their local 'partner' is not foreseen; all communication must be channelled vertically through the police. This lack of horizontal accessibility prevents the *Sicherheitspartner* from acting as a true community trusted figure, which may limit the ability of *Sicherheitspartner* to function as visible, community-facing trusted figures, and may make the information flow appear primarily police-mediated rather than peer-to-peer.

**Figure 2 – GEMEINSAM.SICHER Communication Flow (Police to Citizen)**



**Figure 3 - GEMEINSAM.SICHER Communication Flow (Citizen to Police)**



## Autonomy versus Central Coordination

The programme strikes a balance between centralised strategic direction and localised operational flexibility.

- **Central Coordination:** The overarching strategy, the core concepts and branding (such as the "Coffee with Cops" initiative), the development of standardised prevention materials, and the training curricula for police officers are all determined centrally by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Criminal Police Office. The 2024 restructuring that created a permanent Community Policing unit further solidifies this strong central guidance and control. [5]
- **Local Autonomy:** While the *framework* is national, the *content* is local. The system is explicitly designed to be adaptable to the unique security challenges of

traffic safety, online scams targeting seniors, or public disorder. [9] The local police officers are tasked with identifying the relevant local "players"—be it a school principal, a business owner, or a social worker—who can contribute to solving a specific, localised problem. [9]

This organisational structure effectively fuses police work with local political and administrative governance. By formally embedding a political representative from the municipal council (the *Sicherheitsgemeinderat*) into a security partnership network with police officers, the programme creates a hybrid "security governance" apparatus. This ensures that security problems identified through the network are not treated solely as "police problems." It provides a built-in mechanism for integrated, multi-agency responses that can leverage municipal resources, from public works to social services, in concert with police action. This elevates the programme beyond simple community policing to a framework for integrated local governance, where security becomes a shared administrative and political responsibility.

## Institutional Support

*GEMEINSAM.SICHER* is firmly embedded within Austria's state apparatus, benefiting from strong institutional backing, public funding, and a network of strategic partnerships.

## Normative Framework

The programme is not based on a specific, standalone law. Rather, it exists as a **high-level strategic policy initiative** of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI). [6] Its legal authority is derived from the general mandate of the Austrian police to engage in crime prevention and maintain public order, as outlined in existing legislation governing police activities, such as the Security Police Act (*Sicherheitspolizeigesetz*, SPG). There is no special statute that defines the roles or grants unique powers to the programme's participants; it operates entirely within the established legal framework. [1] The absence of a specific legal act can be interpreted as providing administrative flexibility. It grants the BMI maximum administrative flexibility to shape and adapt the programme's structure, terminology, and focus without undergoing a complex legislative process. This agility was instrumental in allowing the ministry to quickly rebrand the initiative after the initial "*Sicherheitsbürger*" controversy, a pivot that would have been far more difficult if the roles had been rigidly codified in law.

## Funding and Resources

The initiative is fully **publicly funded** through the budget of the Interior Ministry. The most significant resource allocation is in the form of **personnel**, specifically the dedicated time of thousands of police officers who serve as Security Officers (*Sicherheitsbeauftragte*) and Coordinators (*Sicherheitskoordinatoren*) as part of their duties. [4] Additional public funds are used for the development and printing of prevention materials, the maintenance of the official website, and the organisation of

national campaigns and local events. [1] There is no evidence of direct financial subsidies being provided to volunteer citizen partners or to participating municipalities; the support is primarily institutional and in-kind.

## Networks and Connected Projects

*GEMEINSAM.SICHER* is intricately woven into Austria's broader security and administrative landscape through a web of formal partnerships.

- The Österreichischer Gemeindebund (Austrian Association of Municipalities) has been a key partner from the programme's inception, facilitating the critical link to local governments and the nomination of Security Council Members. [6]
- The Kuratorium Sicheres Österreich (**KSÖ**), a non-partisan national platform for internal security, is another foundational partner. [1]
- The programme has engaged with **academic institutions**, notably the University of Vienna and Johannes Kepler University Linz, which were commissioned by the BMI to conduct a scientific evaluation of the initiative, reflecting a commitment to an evidence-based approach. [12]
- Formal "**Security Partnerships**" have been established with major **private sector** entities, including national retailers like SPAR and REWE, and logistics companies like Gebrüder Weiss. These collaborations extend the programme's focus to commercial issues such as preventing shoplifting and enhancing security for employees and customers. [2]. The programme also partners with civil society organisations, such as the integration project 'Global Family', to reach diverse communities. [41]
- *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* functions as the primary vehicle for community engagement, while the Federal Criminal Police Office runs other specialised prevention programmes—such as "**UNDER18**" for youth crime prevention and various campaigns targeting domestic violence and cybercrime—which are often promoted and disseminated through the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* network. [40]

## Impact Data

Evaluating the impact of *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* requires looking beyond raw crime statistics to its primary goal: improving the subjective feeling of security and strengthening police-citizen trust. While a definitive causal link to crime reduction is elusive, data on public perception, participation, and official evaluations provide a nuanced picture. Impact indicators in this report should be interpreted with caution: reported crime figures, perception surveys, and participation metrics capture different dimensions and are not directly comparable. Where data are incomplete or derived from secondary reporting, findings are presented as indicative rather than conclusive, and causal attribution is avoided.

## Participation and Awareness

A critical finding from a 2024 survey commissioned by the Interior Ministry is that the GEMEINSAM.SICHER initiative has a low level of public awareness. [13] This indicates that despite its nationwide implementation and institutional backing, the programme has not yet established itself as a widely recognised public brand. Operationally, the programme is carried out by a network of approximately **2,000 prevention officers** nationwide, who perform these duties alongside their regular police work, and around **40 full-time Security Coordinators**. [5] Precise data on the number of active volunteers "Sicherheitspartner" is not available in the provided sources.

Consequently, the centralised nature of the model can result in situations where the institutional framework remains in place even when civic participation is absent. Official correspondence from the Vienna State Police Directorate indicates that, in certain districts, the structure continues to operate with designated Security Coordinators and scheduled networking meetings, even where no private citizens have been recruited as Security Partners. This suggests that, in contrast to volunteer-dependent Neighbourhood Watch arrangements, the Austrian model ensures institutional continuity. The framework remains operational and ready to engage, providing a stable structure that is not solely dependent on the fluctuation of volunteer participation.

## Crime Reduction

It is not possible to establish a direct causal link between GEMEINSAM.SICHER and national crime trends. However, the programme operates within a context of long-term reductions in certain key crime categories. For example, **residential burglaries** have decreased dramatically, with the number of reported cases halving from 15,516 in 2015 to 6,930 in 2024. [14] While the programme's prevention activities aim to contribute to this trend, it is one of many influencing factors, including improved home security technology and other targeted police operations. The official *Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik* (PKS) provides crime data but does not evaluate the impact of specific prevention programmes. [14]

## Perception of Security and Trust in Police

The most relevant impact data comes from the annual "Subjektive Sicherheit in Österreich" (SUSI) surveys, which directly measure the programme's core objectives.

The data reveals that **trust in the police remains exceptionally high**, with 84% of the population expressing trust in 2023. [15] This high level of trust is a crucial foundation for the programme. However, the overall feeling of security has seen a decline from its peak during the COVID-19 period. The data also highlights a shift in public concern, with the perceived likelihood of facing cybercrime (37%) now far exceeding that of burglary (20%). [15]

## Official Evaluations

A scientific evaluation was commissioned from the programme's outset, led by **Professors Christian Grafl (University of Vienna) and Helmut Hirtenlehner (JKU Linz)**. [12] Their initial project, which concluded in late 2017, aimed to establish a baseline for evaluation by surveying citizens in the pilot municipalities on victimisation, fear of crime, and their assessment of the police. [12] A subsequent 2018 publication based on this data confirmed the programme's founding premise, identifying a growing fear of crime in Austria that was closely linked to broader social anxieties. [16] However, a comprehensive final evaluation report (*Endbericht*) detailing the programme's long-term effectiveness on crime and public perception is currently not available in the public domain. Publishing such data in the future would be beneficial to further substantiate the programme's long-term impact and evidence base. [17]

The available data presents a paradox. While the police enjoy high levels of trust and satisfaction, the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* brand itself has low public recognition, and its primary target metric—the overall feeling of security—has recently declined. This suggests the programme may be more impactful as an internal police philosophy that improves the quality of police-citizen interactions at the local level, rather than as a national brand that directly shapes macro-level public sentiment. Its success may lie in subtly changing how police operate, a significant but less visible achievement than raising a national security index.

**Table 2: Key Indicators of Subjective Security and Trust in Austria (2019-2023)**

Indicator	2019	2020 (Post-Lockdown)	2022	2023
Feel "Safe" or "Very Safe" in Austria (Overall)	94%	97%	91%	84%
Trust in Police ("Full" or "Predominant")	89%	90.5%	88%	84%
Satisfaction with Police Work	N/A	N/A	N/A	79%
Feel "Safe" or "Very Safe" in Own Neighbourhood at Night	N/A	N/A	N/A	76%
Perceive Burglary as a "Likely" Personal Threat	N/A	N/A	N/A	20%
Perceive Cybercrime as a "Likely" Personal Threat	N/A	N/A	N/A	37%

Source: [15]

## Cultural and Sociological Aspects

The structure and reception of *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* are deeply influenced by Austria's specific cultural and sociological context, particularly regarding trust, neighbourly relations, and civic participation.

### Trust, Surveillance, and Neighbourly Relations

Austria is characterised by a high degree of **vertical trust**—that is, trust placed by citizens in state institutions. The police consistently rank as one of the most trusted institutions in the country, with 84% of the population expressing trust in 2023. [15, 44] This high baseline of public confidence is a fundamental precondition that allows a state-led, police-centric partnership like *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* to be viable.

This contrasts sharply with a significant suspicion of **formalised horizontal surveillance** (citizen-on-citizen). The intense and immediate negative reaction to the initial "*Sicherheitsbürger*" concept, with widespread fears of a *Spitzelstaat* (spy state), reveals a strong cultural aversion to empowering citizens to formally monitor one another. [8] While informal *Nachbarschaftshilfe* (neighbourly help)—such as watering plants, collecting mail, or keeping an eye on a neighbour's property during holidays—is a valued social norm, Austrians draw a clear line when this shifts towards organised security surveillance. [45, 46] The programme's design is a careful navigation of this cultural paradox: it leverages the high vertical trust in the police to facilitate a controlled and non-surveillant form of horizontal cooperation, where citizens talk to the police, not report on each other.

### Demographic and Cultural Barriers to Participation

Data reveals several potential barriers to the programme's universal reach.

- **Migration Background:** The 2023 SUSI survey indicates that individuals with a migration background report significantly lower levels of trust in the police and are less likely to agree that police officers treat all people with respect. [15] This highlights a critical challenge for the programme to build bridges and ensure its activities are perceived as inclusive and legitimate by all segments of the population.
- **Age:** A generational gap is also evident, with younger people (ages 16-29) expressing significantly less trust in the police compared to older cohorts. [15] The programme's recent expansion to social media platforms like Instagram is a direct attempt to address this gap and engage with a younger audience on its own terms. [10]
- **Socio-economic Factors:** Broader studies on civic engagement in Austria show that participation in voluntary activities is strongly correlated with higher levels of education and is less prevalent in large urban centres compared to smaller towns

and rural areas. [18] This general pattern likely extends to *GEMEINSAM.SICHER*, suggesting structural challenges in recruiting a diverse range of Security Partners, particularly in working-class and urban communities.

## Recurrent Problems and Solutions

Throughout its development, *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* has faced several significant challenges, the solutions to which have fundamentally shaped its current form and philosophy.

### Challenge: The "*Sicherheitsbürger*" Controversy and Fears of Vigilantism

The programme's most formidable obstacle was the controversy surrounding its initial framing. The introduction of the "*Sicherheitsbürger*" (Security Citizen) role was widely and vocally criticised as a dangerous step towards creating state-sanctioned "private sheriffs" or a network of informants (*Spitzel*). [8] This backlash, fuelled by historical sensitivities, threatened to delegitimise the entire initiative. Critics, including politicians and even police union representatives, feared the role would attract querulants and individuals seeking to exercise unwarranted authority over their neighbours. [7]

**Solution:** The Interior Ministry responded not by doubling down, but by executing a strategic retreat and rebranding.

- 1. Terminological Change:** The title "*Sicherheitsbürger*" was officially abandoned and replaced with the more collaborative and less authoritative "*Sicherheitspartner*" (Security Partner). [2]
- 2. Explicit Disavowal of Powers:** Officials launched a concerted communication campaign to stress that partners have **no special powers, authority, or enforcement role** whatsoever. They are not "*Hilfssheriffs*". [9]
- 3. Refocusing on Dialogue:** The programme's core mission was redefined and communicated as one of fostering "dialogue at eye level" (*Dialog auf Augenhöhe*), joint problem-solving, and prevention. This effectively shifted the citizen's role from a potential actor in security to a pure communication partner, a move that directly addressed and neutralised the underlying cultural anxiety about citizen surveillance.

### Challenge: Low Public Awareness and Participation

Despite being a nationwide initiative for several years, a 2024 survey showed that the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* brand itself is not widely known to the Austrian public. [13] This points to a challenge in national-level communication. Furthermore, structural patterns in Austrian civic engagement suggest difficulties in recruiting a broad and

representative base of volunteers, particularly in urban areas and among less educated or immigrant communities. [18]

**Solution:** The programme has implemented several outreach strategies to increase its visibility and encourage participation.

- 1. Grassroots Outreach:** The "**Coffee with Cops**" initiative is a prime example of a less formal, community-based approach designed to make police officers more accessible and to introduce the programme's philosophy in a non-threatening environment. [10]
- 2. Targeted Digital Communication:** The launch of an official **Instagram channel** in 2025 is a clear strategy to reach younger demographics who are less likely to be engaged through traditional media or community meetings. [10]
- 3. Leveraging Partnerships:** Collaborating with large, highly visible private sector partners like the retail chains SPAR and REWE allows the programme to use their public footprint to disseminate security messages and information. [2]

### **Challenge: Defining the Scope of "Security"**

A potential early problem was that the initiative could become a repository for all manner of minor neighbourhood grievances, overwhelming police with issues far outside their core mandate, such as disputes over parking or uncut hedges. [9]

**Solution:** The programme's four-pillar organisational structure provides an inherent solution to this problem. The inclusion of the **Sicherheitsgemeinderat** (Security Council Member) creates a built-in triage system. When a problem is raised, the partnership can determine the appropriate responsible party. Issues that are clearly municipal matters can be channelled directly to the local government via the council member, allowing the police to remain focused on matters of crime and serious public disorder. [2]

## **Evaluation and Prospects**

The future of *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* appears secure, with its focus shifting from establishment to long-term integration and adaptation to new security challenges.

### **Institutionalisation and Permanence**

The most significant development for the programme's future is its **2024 restructuring**. The formal integration of the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* agenda into a new, permanent "**Community Policing and Citizen Participation**" unit within the Federal Police Directorate marks its transition from a political "initiative" to a core, enduring function of the Austrian police. [5] This move signals the final victory of the community policing philosophy within the police bureaucracy. It may help to the programme's long-term survival, embeds its principles in police strategy and training, and guarantees its

continuity beyond the influence of the specific politicians or officials who launched it. This represents the successful conclusion of the "cultural change" that was envisioned at its inception. This refers to institutional embedding rather than an evaluative judgement on citizen-led models.

## Adaptation to Evolving Crime Trends

The programme's continued relevance will hinge on its ability to apply its dialogue-based model to emerging security threats.

- **Cybercrime and Disinformation:** Public fear of cybercrime now significantly outweighs fear of traditional offences like burglary. [15] Police have identified combatting online fraud and "Fake News" as key future challenges. [5] A primary future role for the *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* network will be to act as a trusted channel for disseminating digital literacy skills and cyber-hygiene advice to the public, particularly to vulnerable groups. [42]
- **Bandenkriminalität (Organised Gang Crime):** Law enforcement views the dialogue-based network as a crucial early warning system to help identify and prevent the establishment of organised criminal gangs at the local level before they become entrenched. [5]

## Technological Evolution and Public Debate

While the programme has been cautious in its adoption of citizen-facing technology, largely due to the cultural and privacy concerns that marked its birth, its future will likely involve a greater use of digital tools for communication and education. The Instagram channel is a first step. [10] However, there is no indication of any plans to introduce tools like predictive policing algorithms or citizen-to-citizen alert apps, as the core philosophy remains centred on human dialogue. The public debate will likely continue to revolve around the appropriate role for citizens in security, with the programme's expansion focusing on deepening the quality of existing local partnerships and improving outreach to underrepresented communities rather than on introducing radical new models of participation.

## Key Learnings from the Austrian Model

Drawing on the comprehensive review of Austria's transition from the grassroots *proNACHBAR* initiative to the state-led *GEMEINSAM.SICHER* programme, EUNWA has identified critical strategic lessons for National Associations across Europe.

### 1. The "Founder's Trap": The Imperative of Succession Planning and Resources

The dissolution of *proNACHBAR* in 2021, after fourteen years of successful operation, serves as a stark warning regarding organisational sustainability. The reliance on a small core of founding leaders created a vulnerability; when these individuals stepped back due to burnout, the structure could not sustain itself. Furthermore, the sheer volume of volunteer management requires resources that cannot be fuelled by enthusiasm alone.

- **Strategic Takeaway:** National Associations must not rely solely on the charisma of their founders. To ensure longevity, it is imperative to implement active succession planning and, crucially, secure a stable financial basis. Volunteer management is time-consuming work that requires professional structures and funding to prevent burnout.

### 2. Cultural Sensitivity: Trust through Transparency

The initial public backlash against the government's proposal for a "*Sicherheitsbürger*" (Security Citizen) highlighted a deep-seated cultural aversion to horizontal surveillance, evoking fears of a "denunciation society" (*Spitzelstaat*). The programme only gained acceptance after rebranding, but terminology alone is not enough.

- **Strategic Takeaway:** Security models cannot simply be imported; they must be adapted to local cultural sensitivities. To avoid the "spy" label, Associations must prioritise honest, complete, and timely information. Trust is built when citizens perceive the organisation not as a surveillance tool, but as a source of reliable, factual updates that the state might be too slow to provide.

### 3. The "Institutional Vacuum": Structure as a Defence

The Austrian experience demonstrates that nature abhors a vacuum. As volunteer-led initiatives faced resource constraints, the Ministry of the Interior stepped in to fill the gap with *GEMEINSAM.SICHER*. This effectively institutionalised community safety under police coordination because the civic alternative lacked the necessary scale and robustness.

- **Strategic Takeaway:** For National Associations to remain relevant and autonomous, they must demonstrate they are indispensable, organised partners. This requires a clear organisational structure, sufficient financing, and a defined information workflow (Police > Organisation > Citizen). If civil society cannot fully sustain professionalised operations, state institutions will inevitably intervene to manage the gap.

## 4. The "Security Paradox": Targeted Information vs. General Anxiety

Data from the 2009 evaluation of *proNACHBAR* suggested that alerts might increase subjective insecurity. However, this must be contextualised: general media reports often cause broad, undefined anxiety, whereas Neighbourhood Watch alerts are specific and actionable.

- **Strategic Takeaway:** Communication strategies must be balanced and solution-oriented. Associations should avoid "alert fatigue" by ensuring information is strictly targeted to the affected areas (avoiding unnecessary noise for others) and always paired with concrete security measures and prevention tips. Actionable knowledge empowers residents, whereas vague warnings breed paranoia.

## 5. The "Digital Speed" Gap: The Value of the Intermediary

A clear trade-off is evident between the two models. The state-run GEMEINSAM. SICHER avoids citizen-to-citizen alert apps to prioritise information accuracy, resulting in a more structured, top-down flow. Independent associations, however, can act as agile intermediaries.

- **Strategic Takeaway:** Independent associations possess a competitive advantage in agility. They can act as a trusted filter, managing the flow of information from Police to Citizens and, crucially, facilitating Citizen-to-Citizen warnings. While the state is often risk-averse, Associations can provide the rapid, peer-to-peer digital communication tools that communities demand, provided the information is vetted and accurate.

## 6. The "Success Trap": Sustaining Engagement beyond Crisis

Interest in Neighbourhood Watch often spikes during crime waves but dissipates once the immediate threat subsides. Relying on security concerns as the sole motivator leads to unstable engagement that collapses in low-crime periods.

- **Strategic Takeaway:** To ensure longevity, Neighbourhood Watch must be marketed as a mechanism for social cohesion, not just crime prevention. Furthermore, sustainability requires cultivating external sponsors and supporters. A robust network of financial and institutional backers ensures the organisation remains viable even when volunteer activity naturally dips during safer periods.

## References

1. **Bundesministerium für Inneres** - accessed 11 August 2025, [GEMEINSAM.SICHER general information](#)
2. **Bundesministerium für Inneres** - accessed 11 August 2025, [GEMEINSAM.SICHER in Österreich \(BMI Magazin, 2021\)](#)
3. **Bundesministerium für Inneres** - accessed 11 August 2025, [community policing introduction \(BMI Magazin, 2016\)](#)
4. **Bürgernahe Polizei | KOMMUNAL**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://kommunal.at/buergernahe-polizei>
5. **Gemeinsam.Sicher: Polizei rüstet gegen Kriminalität... - MeinBezirk.at**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.meinbezirk.at/c-politik/polizei-ruestet-gegen-kriminalitaet-und-gewalt-auf\\_a6919686](https://www.meinbezirk.at/c-politik/polizei-ruestet-gegen-kriminalitaet-und-gewalt-auf_a6919686)
6. **Bürger spielen bei der Sicherheit eine entscheidende Rolle - kommunal.at**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://kommunal.at/buerger-spielen-bei-der-sicherheit-eine-entscheidende-rolle>
7. **Mikl-Leitner-Plan... - krone.at**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.krone.at/501922>
8. **Grüne und FPÖ kritisieren Pilotprojekt... - parlament.gv.at**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr\\_2016/pk0607](https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr_2016/pk0607)
9. **Polizei forciert die Bürgerbeteiligung... - MeinBezirk.at**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.meinbezirk.at/urfahr-umgebung/c-lokales/polizei-forciert-die-buergerbeteiligung\\_a2022387](https://www.meinbezirk.at/urfahr-umgebung/c-lokales/polizei-forciert-die-buergerbeteiligung_a2022387)
10. **GEMEINSAM.SICHER News**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.gemeinsamsicher.at/news.html>
11. **Eigentum schützen - Bundeskriminalamt**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.bundeskriminalamt.at/202/eigentum-schuetzen/start.aspx>
12. **Erhebung Ist-Zustand für die Evaluierung... - ALES UniVie**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://ales.univie.ac.at/>

[fileadmin/user\\_upload/i\\_strafrecht/Grafl/CG/ALES\\_Projektbeschreibung\\_Gemeinsam\\_Sicher.pdf](#)

- 13. subjektive Sicherheit in Österreich - Erhebung 2024 - BMI**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.bmi.gv.at/114/files/susi/Subjektive Sicherheit in Oesterreich 2024 Ergebnisreport nBf 20062025.pdf](https://www.bmi.gv.at/114/files/susi/Subjektive_Sicherheit_in_Oesterreich_2024_Ergebnisreport_nBf_20062025.pdf)
- 14. Kriminalstatistik 2024 - BMI Magazin**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.bmi.gv.at/magazin/2025\\_05\\_06/02\\_Kriminalstatistik.aspx](https://www.bmi.gv.at/magazin/2025_05_06/02_Kriminalstatistik.aspx)
- 15. Subjektive Sicherheit in Österreich / Erhebung für das Jahr 2023 - BMI**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.bmi.gv.at/114/files/Umfrage Subjektive Sicherheit/Subjektive Sicherheit Erhebung fuer 2023 Ergebnisreport.pdf](https://www.bmi.gv.at/114/files/Umfrage_Subjektive_Sicherheit/Subjektive_Sicherheit_Erhebung_fuer_2023_Ergebnisreport.pdf)
- 16. Verbrechensfurcht als Furcht vor „Ausländerkriminalität“... - SIAK-Journal**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.bmi.gv.at/104/Wissenschaft und Forschung/SIAK-Journal/SIAK-Journal-Ausgaben/Jahrgang 2018/files/Hirtenlehner 2 2018.pdf](https://www.bmi.gv.at/104/Wissenschaft_und_Forschung/SIAK-Journal/SIAK-Journal-Ausgaben/Jahrgang_2018/files/Hirtenlehner_2_2018.pdf)
- 17. Endbericht Legalbiografien - Universität Innsbruck**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.uibk.ac.at/media/filer\\_public/5a/ed/5aed0744-af80-44f7-a674-699e48dac74d/endbericht-legalbiografien.pdf](https://www.uibk.ac.at/media/filer_public/5a/ed/5aed0744-af80-44f7-a674-699e48dac74d/endbericht-legalbiografien.pdf)
- 18. Freiwilliges Engagement in Österreich - Statistik Austria**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/publications/Freiwilligentaetigkeit 2022 Ergebnisbericht.pdf](https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/publications/Freiwilligentaetigkeit_2022_Ergebnisbericht.pdf)
- 19. Die Presse (2008) – „Bürgerwehr light: Hietzing kämpft gegen Kriminelle“**
- 20. EUNWA White Book 2015 – G. Halvax (2015)**
- 21. KOMMUNAL journal (2021) – „Fünf Jahre Initiative `Gemeinsam sicher`“**
- 22. Nachbarschaftswache – Wikipedia** <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nachbarschaftswache>
- 23. Gemeinsam gegen Verbrecher: Karl Brunnbauer betreibt die Initiative "proNachbar" – Hietzing** <https://www.>

[meinbezirk.at/hietzing/c-lokales/gemeinsam-gegen-verbrecher-karl-brunnbauer-betreibt-die-initiative-pronachbar\\_a1787052](https://meinbezirk.at/hietzing/c-lokales/gemeinsam-gegen-verbrecher-karl-brunnbauer-betreibt-die-initiative-pronachbar_a1787052)

- 24. Österreichs informativste Sicherheitsplattform - Safer Cities** <https://safercities.at/>
- 25. Mit "GEMEINSAM SICHER" Sicherheitsgefühl steigern (Gemeinebund)** <https://gemeinebund.at/mit-gemeinsam-sicher-sicherheitsgefuehl-steigern/>
- 26. proNACHBAR | EUCPN** <https://www.eucpn.org/document/pronachbar>
- 27. März | 2011 | Ruhe und Ordnung - Das Sicherheitsmagazin (Safer Cities Blog)** <https://sicherheitwien.wordpress.com/2011/03/>
- 28. Bundeskriminalamt - GEMEINSAM.SICHER program info** <https://www.bka.at/gemeinsam.sicher>
- 29. Mehr Sicherheit in den Gemeinden | KOMMUNAL** <https://kommunal.at/mehr-sicherheit-den-gemeinden>
- 30. Eunwa - Neighbourhood Watch** <https://www.eunwa.eu/web/index.php/component/k2/itemlist/tag/Neighbourhood%20Watch.html>
- 31. Gemeinsam.Sicher zieht erste erfreuliche Bilanz - steiermark.ORF.at** <https://steiermark.orf.at/v2/news/stories/2814148/>
- 32. PowerPoint-Präsentation (EUNWA)** [https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/at\\_community\\_policing\\_in\\_austria.pdf](https://eucpn.org/sites/default/files/document/files/at_community_policing_in_austria.pdf)
- 33. Österreich – Was die "Bürgerwehren" wollen – und was sie dürfen | Heute.at** <https://www.heute.at/s/vikings-security-burgerwehren-formieren-sich-in-osterreich-45121161>
- 34. Initiative GEMEINSAM SICHER in Österreich – YouTube** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lOcJ3l6qhQ>
- 35. Joining Forces for Our Security in Austrian Community Policing (ResearchGate)** [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318039613\\_Joining\\_Forces\\_for\\_Our\\_Security\\_in\\_Austrian\\_Community\\_Policing](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318039613_Joining_Forces_for_Our_Security_in_Austrian_Community_Policing)

- 36. Paket für mehr Sicherheit in den Gemeinden (Gemeindebund)** <https://gemeindebund.at/paket-fuer-mehr-sicherheit-in-den-gemeinden/>
- 37. Bundeskriminalamt (2009) – Vergleichende Ergebnisse der Sicherheitsumfragen 2007 und 2009...**
- 38. Gewaltschutz- strategie zur Koordinierung und Vernetzung...**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.bmfwf.gv.at/dam/jcr:5115d0cd-4f30-42b2-bd48-ba0b52a4495e/gewaltschutzstrategie\\_beratung\\_gewaltbetroffener\\_frauen\\_oesterreich\\_2024\\_nbf.pdf](https://www.bmfwf.gv.at/dam/jcr:5115d0cd-4f30-42b2-bd48-ba0b52a4495e/gewaltschutzstrategie_beratung_gewaltbetroffener_frauen_oesterreich_2024_nbf.pdf)
- 39. Jugendprogramme - Bundeskriminalamt**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.bundeskriminalamt.at/205/start.aspx>
- 40. 'UNDER18': Prävention statt Strafe...**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.bundeskriminalamt.at/news.aspx?id=32664A6F78394E73447A493D>
- 41. GEMEINSAM.SICHER: 'Global Family' und Bundespolizei..**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.bmi.gv.at/news.aspx?id=357273733843415A5635633D>
- 42. Gemeinsam sicher digital - AUVA**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://auva.at/praevention/kampagnen/gemeinsam-sicher-digital/>
- 43. Aktuell - Umfrage: Polizei genießt höchstes Vertrauen**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.polizeifreunde-wien.at/de/Presse/Aktuell/SWS.htm>
- 44. Hohes Vertrauen in die Polizei (BMI Magazin, 2020)**, accessed 11 August 2025, [https://www.bmi.gv.at/magazinfiles/2020/09\\_10/umfrage\\_bf\\_20200917.pdf](https://www.bmi.gv.at/magazinfiles/2020/09_10/umfrage_bf_20200917.pdf)
- 45. Nachbarschaftshilfe in Österreich (Noracares)**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.noracares.at/blog/nachbarschaftshilfe-%C3%B6sterreich/>
- 46. Team Österreich Nachbarschaftshilfe (Rotes Kreuz)**, accessed 11 August 2025, <https://www.roteskreuz.at/tirol/ich-will-helfen/team-oesterreich-nachbarschaftshilfe>

## Appendix A - Guest contribution (Peter Komposch)

*EUNWA warmly thanks Peter Komposch for this guest contribution. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of EUNWA. The piece is shared as a personal perspective to broaden the range of viewpoints presented in this White Book.*

### A Contribution from the Founder of Safer Cities

#### 15 Years of 'Safer Cities'

Safer Cities was founded in 2010 by Dipl. Ing. Peter Komposch and colleagues as a private, independent association. There were two main reasons for its creation:

- The burglary rate in residential homes was so high that more than one-third of homeowners among our acquaintances had been affected.
- Simultaneously, the city of Villach faced growing political conflicts regarding safety in its evening leisure zones, as assaults, harassment, and brawls became increasingly frequent. There were even public discussions about creating a private city police force.

The association's initial goals were to rapidly and effectively reduce burglary rates in a way that was affordable for everyone, and to steer the city's political discussion on additional security forces towards a fact-based, solution-oriented analysis.

#### Phase 1 - Burglary Protection and Security Projects for the City of Villach

##### a) "Alarm Systems for All" as the most effective burglary protection:

In a city with a rapid-response police force, alarm systems were, from the outset, the most effective form of burglary protection. However, with costs ranging from €3,000 to €5,000, they were too expensive for many homeowners. Furthermore, **a high number of false alarms** were being triggered, leading to systems being deactivated or becoming inoperable after only a few years due to poor maintenance.

Detailed analysis later revealed that visibly activated alarm systems not only reported burglaries but often prevented them entirely.

**This insight reduced** acquisition costs to less than half, simplified installation, and stabilised operation. In households secured with this new approach, burglaries ceased immediately—without exception.

##### b) At the same time, measures were developed to make Villach's inner city safer:

An analysis of security incidents in the city centre during the evening showed that:

- Assaults mainly occurred in dark side streets. The proposed measure was to **improve** lighting in critical dark alleys. This fitted perfectly with the city's transition from halogen to LED lighting and was implemented within a year.
- Acts of aggression **frequently occurred** near nightlife venues, where youths who had been denied entry often vented their frustration on passers-by. The proposed measure was to use trained doormen to ensure de-escalating refusals. In partnership with the Chamber of Commerce, Austria's first doorman training programme was introduced, covering de-escalation, self-defence, first aid, fire safety, and legal basics. All participants successfully completed the five modules.

This initial local phase was mainly subsidised by the city of Villach. After a few years, the situation stabilised. Through contact with Mr. Karl Brunnbauer, founder of *proNACHBAR* and later the international EUNWA organisation, the association decided to expand the positive experiences from Villach to the whole of Austria—not by enlarging the organisation, but through an online security platform.

### **Phase 2 - Establishment and Operation of the Security Platform [www.safercities.at](http://www.safercities.at)**

The running costs of this information platform were covered by advertising from alarm system installers and alarm monitoring centres. It became highly successful, with increasing user engagement and even a real-time crime map of Austria, until the COVID-19 lockdown.

### **The COVID turning point: a near-total collapse for the alarm system market.**

- From the lockdown onwards, burglaries declined significantly, and interest in security measures temporarily almost disappeared.
- With the rise of low-cost smart home systems, many traditional alarm companies closed down.
- Some major alarm system manufacturers ceased or shifted their production.
- Electricians who had handled alarms as a side business switched to the booming solar energy market.
- At the same time, the **official reporting of burglaries was politically downplayed**: while up to 10% of incidents were previously reported, this figure often dropped to 1% or less.

**Taken together, these factors** almost eliminated the issue from public discourse. Only years after the pandemic did demand for burglary protection begin to slowly re-emerge.

### **Urban Safety Takes on a New Meaning in the 2020s**

Urban security challenges have evolved significantly in the context of recent demographic changes and migration flows. By 2024, Germany was reporting 76 knife attacks daily (source: German Police Union; no comparable Austrian figures are yet available). In February 2025, Villach—the founding city of Safer Cities—suffered an

Islamist attack by a radicalised asylum seeker from Syria, leaving one teenager dead and three seriously injured.

In this new environment, Safer Cities has clear solution-oriented approaches, though they have been scarcely acknowledged by the current government:

- Comprehensive camera surveillance of pedestrian zones with immediate incident analysis, which is both technically and financially feasible.
- Strict enforcement of existing laws regarding offenders facing repatriation.

### **Phase 3 - The Final Phase of Safer Cities: Back to the Roots**

After the collapse of traditional alarm system companies, a new path has emerged for providing "alarm systems for all" with effective burglary prevention: carefully selected Smart Security Systems, a subset of smart home technology. In this latest phase, Safer Cities provides know-how and finances itself through modest membership fees. This phase is also intended to bring new personnel into the leadership team, and the search for suitable board members has begun.

**Peter Komposch, Villach - September 2025**

*This page intentionally left blank.*

## ABOUT EUNWA

**EUNWA (European Neighbourhood Watch Association)** acts as a bridge to facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation among National Neighbourhood Watch associations across Europe. Founded in 2014, EUNWA aims to enable member nations to learn from one another, sharing best practices, operational protocols, and crime prevention strategies.

We believe that in a digital age, the strongest defence remains human connection. **Our strategic objective is to establish a collaborative network with National Boards** and security experts to provide a platform for exchange, respecting the autonomy of each country while building a safer, more connected Europe.



EUNWA - European Neighbourhood Watch Association

[www.eunwa.eu](http://www.eunwa.eu)

[head-office@eunwa.eu](mailto:head-office@eunwa.eu)

Via Terraglio 64, 30174 Venice, Italy, CF 90194770278

