

The Neighbourhood Watch Podcast Episode 5 with Bobby Seagull

Welcome along to the Neighbourhood Watch podcast with me, Alfie Moore. I used to be a police officer and now I work in the world of stand-up comedy. I'm the presenter of It's a Fair Cop on BBC Radio 4 and it's my pleasure to host this new podcast series.

Neighbourhood Watch is the largest volunteer-led crime prevention charity in England and Wales. Loads of you are already involved and help make Neighbourhood Watch what it is today, with over 60,000 active volunteers and over 2 million supporter households. Teams work on local, regional and national level to empower and educate people, working from the belief that connected communities are safer communities.

Whether you know everyone on your street by name or you haven't met a single person in your block of flats, the aim of this podcast is to offer advice about crime prevention and to share experiences, and allow ourselves a little fun on the way. I'm joined by a familiar face in each episode to find out about their neighbourhoods where they grew up and hear about what happened to them or their loved ones as victims of crime. In this episode, I'll be chatting to the multi-talented Bobby Siegel.

Believe me when I say he's an absolute force of nature. He's the broadcaster, maths teacher, quiz host, author and co-host of the Maths Appeal podcast. Bobby was awarded an MBE in 2025 in recognition of his services to libraries, sorry, LIBRARIES, and he spent a lot of his childhood reading in his nearby East Ham library.

He was raised in Newham, East London and still lives in the area, and he's had several experiences as a victim of crime, most notably person-on-person street crime. And he turned back and looked at me and said, bruv, you are lucky you didn't have your phone out a second earlier. And I was confused as to how he would have taken it.

Mugging, pickpocketing and phone snatching can all be defined as person-on-person street crime and they're especially prevalent in large urban areas. Phone snatching in particular is fairly common, but do you know how many people have their phones taken each year in England and Wales? Is it the equivalent of 100, 200 or 300 thefts a day? Mull it over and I'll reveal the answer a little later. Right now it's time to welcome our guest to the podcast.

Hello Bobby Siegel. Hello Alfie. How are you doing? I'm all the better for seeing you.

The first thing I see is that a West Ham shirt behind you where it says Siegel 6. Yes, as I'm from, I grew up in East Ham, live in Stratford. I'm a West Ham season ticket holder for nearly a quarter of a century. Oh, well done.

Good effort. Yeah. And you grew up then in Newham, East London? Exactly.

It's my, as a part-time teacher, my students would call it, it's my hood. Okay. And what are your memories from growing up? What was the community like? So Newham has always been like, East London has always been this melting pot of different cultures, different immigrant groups, and local East End, sort of white working class British people.

It was always vibrant. It was always busy. You get the sense of the whole world being there near the docks of East London.

And to be honest, that shaped my view of the world. I've always seen the world as, oh, I don't need to travel the world, East London has the world here. Oh, that's great.

And any neighbours from your childhood that sort of are in your memory? Any quirky characters that you can recall? So we had this elderly gentleman, like a traditional white working class man called Jack. He was quite old in his seventies. And then you could see like the age, you know, in his sixties, he was very strong and walking down the street confidently with his bag of fruit and veg.

And over time, he had a stick and then a wheelchair. But he was a lovely man that was a West Ham fan, and we had little conversations occasionally about how's the team doing this year? We're okay. We're good.

And it was just lovely to have someone that you felt like was bringing his memories of, you know, the forties and fifties and sixties. Yeah, lovely. Yeah.

And the football is a community within a community, isn't it? Where you live. Yeah, really. I think it just unifies people together.

And let me ask you, because you're brilliant at maths, I think that's fair to say. When did your love of maths first appear? So actually it was in primary school, so even though in secondary school, I had a brilliantly named teacher called Mr. Workmaster. Come on.

He was our maths teacher. That's a great name. Correct.

But in primary, it was actually through football stickers, because back then, like children right now were obsessed by football. And I have friends of mine who used to speculate about which players are better than the other. But I like being a nerd in the early, mid nineties, I actually input in all the data from every single Premier League team into a spreadsheet.

And I would do simple comparisons, not complicated maths, that my students in year 8, 12, 13 could do about averages of goals scored per game, excluding penalties. And actually, he gave me the confidence to go, well, actually, there's nothing you can, you know, you got an opinion, but if you got numbers, it can sort of give you a grounding. Ever since then, I've been obsessed by numbers and maths and stats.

And was that spotted early on by your teachers, by your school? So I think my teachers, yeah, I think my teachers recognised. So they'd give me, again, nowadays, teachers try to be more like, ah, everyone does the same work, we'll put an extension up. But back then when they were probably less enlightened, the teacher would say, Bobby's really good at maths, I'm going to sit him on a separate table, I'm going to send him to the headteacher and do some additional work.

And I'd be like, no, don't send me to the headteacher, I'm fine at maths. We'll punish him, that's what we'll do. And also when people are really good at one subject, they're weak at

others, but you're a bit of an all-rounder, aren't you? More of a bit of an all-rounder, university challenge and all that.

Yeah, I think it's because I've always just been curious, interested in the world. And we're not really born with knowledge. In fact, one of my TV shows at one stage was called Monkman, my friend, and Seagull, my surname, is Genius Guide to Britain.

And I never liked the title genius. So even though I know a lot, it's because I've spent years and years, again, reading in my library and listening, paying attention and having conversations with people about their lives. And then afterwards, going back in those days, I would've been going to the library and getting a book about it.

But it's just that constant appetite and curiosity to learn. That's made me smart and knowledgeable. But I wasn't born that way.

And we're talking about East Ham Library, where you spend a lot of time. Yes, that's the one. Beautiful.

In fact, I've had friends. I got a scholarship to Eton for my local council estate for my A-levels. And I've had some posh Etonian parents driving through East London.

And the thing that they love is the East Ham red-bricked Edwardian building. It's beautiful. To be honest, it's like if I bring people to East London, Stratford is cool now because it's buzzing and, you know, it's got young people and it's trendy.

But East Ham Library, the old one, the town hall, is still like the creme de la creme of the area. I've never had such enthusiasm. But libraries, I guess, feel, I don't know, secure places, aren't they? I don't know what the crime rate is in libraries, but I believe it's almost zero.

Do you want to say the crime rate is when people forget to give books back on time? Yes. That's probably me. I have committed crimes where I've returned books late, had to pay a fine, so I'm sorry to my librarians.

But generally, libraries are really safe places. Again, growing up, my family used to go to East Ham Library every single Saturday after lunch, week after week, month after month, year after year. And actually, it was that safe, secure environment where you meet the same people, the librarians, that again made me the person who I am today, I think.

Yeah. Any other places that you feel safe other than your library? To be honest, I actually feel safe in a football ground. Wow.

Even the football grounds, and I've been to away games in my sort of late teens, I used to go to away games at Stamford Bridge and Highbury for Arsenal. But if you're on home territory, unless you're playing like West Ham Millwall, generally, you feel comfortable because I know where I'm going to sit, I know where the exits are, I know where the stewards are. So I think with safety, a lot of it's not necessarily about real safety, but about perceptions.

If you feel comfortable. And again, in football games, especially at London Stadium and especially in Upton Park, I know what's going on. So that safety is like that, also that self-perception of it.

Good. This is a Neighbourhood Watch podcast. I'm just wondering if there was any sort of version of that when you were growing up, any sort of community group or watching out for each other? We grew up pre-mobile phones and WhatsApp, where my parents, I'm sure, and my mum is part of every single WhatsApp and Facebook group there is known to humanity.

So she would have been back then. But in the 90s, I don't remember specific groups, but there were communities of people that talked to each other about issues, about safety. So if they saw a crime or they saw milk bottles going missing, they'd have little huddles of adults having a conversation, they'd cross their arms and have a chat.

So even though it wasn't a formal Neighbourhood Watch, it sort of was our own little version of it. And clearly, you love the place you live, and that's great. And you love East London.

But I'm assuming it's changed over your lifetime. What have been the major changes? So I think one is just like the development of the place in terms of infrastructure, buildings. Again, when I grew up, Stratford didn't have much.

It was, you know, some people call it Fridge Mountain, the old Stratford Olympic Park. So that whole Olympic Park has transformed the area in terms of opportunities, sports venues. We've got the Westfield.

But I think it's still a vibrant place in terms of people when they move to London. London can be quite expensive, all parts. But East London, Stratford is still relatively affordable compared to the rest.

So it's still a melting pot, where I live, there are people that are from East Asia, there are Aussies and Kiwis, there are South Africans that might have been from South Africa. So you've got people from all over the world coming to East London still. This is the Neighbourhood Watch podcast with me, Alfie Moore.

Police Sergeant Vincent Chan from the South East Unit of the Met will join us soon. But right now, I'm with Bobby Siegel, math teacher, writer and quiz host. And it's a moment in the podcast when we turn our thoughts to crime.

Bobby, tell me about your experience of person to person, we'll call it. Street crime. I believe that you were actually mugged when you were younger.

Yes. So there's a couple of incidents. One was, this is almost like a mugging without realising I was being mugged.

Again, I was a teenager coming back from school, and a couple of boys stopped me and a friend. And they said, do you guys have any money? And I was like, I don't think so. And they said, you sure? I'm like, no, I don't have any.

They're like, can you show us your wallet? I was like a deer stuck in headlights. I was like, yeah, I'll show you my wallet. I opened it up.

I think I had a fiver inside it. And they're like, yeah, can we have that? And me and my friend are like, yeah, sure, yeah, take our money. And we handed it over.

And as we walked over, we were like, we were just mugged, weren't we? And I'm not the kind of person that would have put up a fight anyway. But I didn't realise it. It was the first time that ever happened to me.

But it was afterwards like, oh, no, my friend and I were silent for a bit and then realising what had happened. A smart play for, you know, a fiver, you're not going to sort of put yourself at risk, I wouldn't suggest so. But that was just the first instance.

Were there others? Yes. So another time. This is where I was a bit feisty.

I think it was a little bit later, maybe a year or two later, I was at Eastham tube station coming through the ticket barriers, put my ticket through. And then someone came and my ticket's part of my wallet. Somebody came, again, a teenage boy, saw me taking my wallet out and he tried to grab my wallet and I was in a tussle.

I was like, no, give it back. What are you doing? He's like, give it to me. And he's pulling it.

And it almost looked like a slapstick comedy in real life because he didn't have any weapons as far as I was concerned. So he was just trying to steady off me. And then the staff attendant at the tube station came and sort of ran and like, stop.

And then the other teenager got a bit scared and scarpered. So funny enough, the memory I have it. That's one old then, Poppy, isn't it? Sounds like.

I got it back and I actually wasn't shaking up. It was, if anything, I was the thrill of not losing it and having people like, not appalled me. They're like, oh, well done, young man.

You stood up to yourself. So I felt kind of good about myself. That's interesting.

Interesting. OK. And then you've also had phone snatching issues.

What happened there? Yes. This was a. So my family have had phones snatched off them, often coming out of tube stations, entering the vicinity with the phone in their hand. But mine was a near miss.

It was very close. So I was walking, I think it was about a couple of years ago in Stratford. And as I was on the phone and I put the phone in my pocket and as I put it in my pocket, someone again, I couldn't tell, this was a young man mounted the pavement on his bicycle and he looked and he turned back and looked to me and said, bruv, you are lucky you didn't have your phone a second earlier.

And I was confused as I would have taken it. And he whether he was like giving me a warning, whether he was like an illusion of a mind, he was definitely a real person that came on the pavement. But again, had I taken my phone and had it for another five seconds, he would have brushed past and possibly taken it.

So the cheek. I know the cheek. The only thing about that warning that was useful is since then, I obviously there are times where we need to use our phones in public if you need to call for an emergency.

But I now I always never take my phone out in public. And if I do, I will make sure like I tell this to my friends and family and my girlfriend, like I will walk, find a place where I've got a back against me and I will take it out, make sure I'm holding it, gripping it in my hand and also still be vigilant of what's going on. But that's like if I really need to use the phone on the whole, I'll keep it in my bag.

So no other phone issues, but some from your family by the sounds of it. Yes. So these were two of my sister's-in-law.

One was she had the phone in her hand walking outside Stratford bus station and someone on a bicycle gone in five seconds, didn't even see the person. And they often like gone in 60 seconds as they'd gone in 0.6 seconds rather. And then the other sister-in-law, her phone was taken from a bag on the underground.

And she again, she wasn't aware of it at the time. She vaguely recalled someone like brushing up against quite close, looking at it shifty. And then when she got off the tube through the doors, checked in her bag, oh, and then she remembered that person that and again, there's one, there's a small percent chance it wasn't that person.

But this person was very shifty and like very unnecessarily close to my sister-in-law. So these were two incidents that happened in the last few years. Got you.

OK. It's a good time then to bring in Police Sergeant Vincent Chan. I keep saying you're from the southeast unit of the Met.

I don't know if that's still the case, Vincent. It is. Good.

I'll lead you in with a nice, easy question. Why haven't you solved any of Bobby's crimes yet? I wish you were allocated to me, Bobby. They would have been completely solved.

You'd have all your phones back, no problem at all. So we've heard about, just tell us a little bit about the team you work with, Vincent. So I work in the town centre team over in Woolwich.

Obviously, you get a concentration of people, businesses, crimes, where you have, you know, like town centres. And as a subsequent, you know, reaction to these crimes, they concentrate a high number of police officers in these areas. So across the Metropolis, there's just town centre teams that deal with the specifics of that area.

And what's your bread and butter sort of daily workload? Well, I don't know how to put it. Woolwich is a bit of a buffet if you're talking bread and butter. We've got everything there.

And I'm sure Bobby's popped over to Woolwich a few times because it's a bus hub. We've got the DLR, we've got the BR, we've got Lisbeth line. It's just such a hub for that area.

So we get retail crime, gang, drugs, thefts, snatches, a lot there. So the handbag snatches and the phone snatches and the pickpockets. So I guess theft from person is what we used to call that.

Is that OK? Any initial advice what listeners could do to lower their risk? Well, in a way, Bobby's pretty much hit the nail on the head. Criminals look for easy targets. So I'd say there's two things in terms of crime prevention.

We would say, A, don't make yourself an easy target. Bobby, you mentioned coming out of Stratford, where you've got a high concentration of people. Criminals can pick and choose who they would like rather than wait and hope someone comes along.

So just be vigilant in high bottleneck areas like chief stations, train stations, and also the opposite way. Just be vigilant in areas where there's fewer people, like parks, little alleyways where there's not many people. Just be alert.

That's the main thing. Sometimes it's easy when you're on the phone, your attention is drawn away. You just need to be a little bit aware of your surroundings.

Yeah. I mean, good advice. And I know that London's got sort of highs, theft from person, violent crime, robbery type numbers.

But I guess so as every large city, lots of people about, as you say, to pick your target, a crowd to disappear into. So I think that's every city. What about then? Well, you've said off the tube.

Is there anywhere else where you're particularly vulnerable, do you think? Again, Bobby hit on this as well. Quite often they won't be on foot. So a lot of statutes we get are typically moped or pedal cycle.

So just be wary as well when you're by the road, because it's quite easy for people to drive along or ride along and either take it from you or in Bobby's case, just mount the pavement quickly. Just take it and go. And is there any sort of demographic wise, any groups of people more likely to be targeted in your experience age wise or? No, we find a lot of the thefts are quite opportunistic.

So if a target presents, they'll take. Okay. And so talking specifically about phones then, what's the reason for the phone theft? Is it the phone they're after? Is it the personal data within? What is it they're looking for? I mean, depending on the phone, they can take personal data, but it's much easier.

And a lot of criminals will go for like the easy route to get the money, get what they need. And typically a phone will not be resold as a phone. Well, it may be, but a lot of times they'll break it down, use the components, ship off overseas and get their money from that.

So a phone's IMEI number can help please track the device. I don't want to put you on the spot, but can you just tell us a little bit about what that is and how that helps? So where we were talking about before in terms of how to prevent the crimes, this is more linked in how we try and solve the crimes. So each phone has a unique number, the IMEI number.

And that's unique to your specific phone. So sometimes it's on the back of your phone. If you take the cover off the back, it's usually written inside as well.

And on the cover of your box, it'll be on that as well. When you buy a new phone, you'll get the IMEI number on that. If I could just add a bit with that, you should register that.

So you can go online, register your IMEI number on it. And whenever, for example, we arrest someone, we'll typically check the IMEI number and see if that phone is stolen or then possession of a stolen phone. Got you.

So even if you think your phone's long gone, you're still assisted with the police potentially in future enquiries. Yes. Bobby, what do you wish you'd have known about the pickpocketing type crimes you've been a victim of before you've experienced it? Is there anything that you'd wish you'd have known? So I think it's, don't assume even if you've got your property within you, you're completely safe.

Like I think once, this is actually quite recent, the last few months, I had my Oyster card taken from me on the bus. And I'd put it into my pocket. It wasn't a zip pocket.

It was one of those open pockets. And again, there was someone that was quite close to me brushing up. And I was just, I think I was tired.

You know, at the end of the day, you're like, you lose your visions when you're not as fully awake and alert. And when I got off the bus, I went into my hand like, ah, no, it's gone. And again, I'm not 100% certain as a mathematician, I can't say categorically, but I'm like 90, 95% certain it was that particular person, individual.

But with Oyster card, at least you can block it quite quickly. But I think it's more just when I'm tired, like in the daytime, in the mornings, I'm actually quite alert. I'm like, phone's away.

But in the evenings, when you're tired and you're hungry, I think that's when you're more likely to make mistakes. So just increase the vigilance there. Yeah, well, you seem a really chirpy, happy, smiley person, Bobby.

But how do you feel that when you get things stolen? How does it affect you? It's difficult because you try not to take it personally, because if you don't, then you get into the cycle of like, oh, crime's going up everywhere. You think, oh, my city's not safe. And I think you have to try and detach obviously all big cities in the world, whether you're in Paris, New York, Sydney, they'll have issues.

And we're no different. But again, I'm not very much into this, oh, London's the worst place. And some people use it for their political rhetoric.

It's as good as anywhere else. But as long as you as an individual, make sure that you keep your vigilance and don't let it damage your perception of living in such a buzzy, incredible place. You're a glass half, well, overflowing, a glass overflowing.

So, Vincent, what should people do if they've had the phone stolen? What advice would you give at that point as it regards sort of, well, you tell me, I'm no technical, but locking and

stuff like that? Well, you should report it. If there's an opportunity of the police catching the perpetrators, you should report that as soon as possible. Right.

Do report it at some point, depending on the immediacy. A lot of phones or some people keep their cards in with their phone. Just make sure your card is cancelled and you've alerted the bank, any apps or anything on there.

The phone, a lot of phones have the tap and use one. So just be wary of that. So make sure all that is cancelled.

Your provider is aware. And can you remotely lock these things? I'm talking about iPads and laptops and phones after the event. Yeah, so some phones, depending on the apps you've got on it and the phone you've got, you can remotely cancel it or you can contact your service provider and they can also assist you in cancelling.

As well as your banks, et cetera. So, and we ought to mention insurance companies as well, I guess, for most people, the value of phones these days, they'll want to make a claim. And that's why it's important as well, I guess, to have a crime report incident number, a crime report number for that process.

A lot of insurance companies won't progress a claim without a crime reference number. Okay. Which you can only get from the police.

That's correct. Tell me how the system works these days. So it's a non-emergency, people either ring in 101 or they'll go online.

Those two processes will both produce a crime report number? Yes. So I would probably go online and do it, depending how urgent it is. And it's just fill in all the bits from the Metro website, if you're from the Met or your own local force.

And it's quite simple. That will generate an email with a crime reference number for your insurance company. Great.

All this information and more can be found on the Neighbourhood Watch website, ourwatch.org.uk. It's quiz time. I know you've had a few quizzes before, Bobby, but this is on a different level altogether. So you're a very accomplished quizzer.

Of course you are, Bobby. And we've got a serving cup. So this should be a piece of cake.

Honestly, I can't see you going wrong. First question. And this is the one I asked earlier.

How many people have their phone snatched each day in England and Wales? Is it 100, 200, or 300? So over to Bobby first. You've buzzed in. I don't know, because I think vaguely I remember reading an Economist article about maybe 70,000 to 80,000 snatches.

I'm not sure whether that's London or not. So I'm going to go for 200. OK.

All right, Bobby. I like how you've answered and given your work, you know. I like that a lot.

Are you going with that, Vincent? Yeah, sounds about right. Oh, sounds about right. The answer, and this is impressive, Bobby.

The Crime Survey in England and Wales, 2024, reveals 78,000. So as you said, between 70 and 80 phone and bag snatches, which averages down to 200 a day. And I can see Bobby grimacing now, because he's already mentally dividing 78,000 by 365.

And probably already worked out it's actually 213.698630. Well done. I'm impressed by that. So let's move on to question two.

According to a Neighbourhood Watch survey, what percentage of stolen phones were pickpocketed without the owner noticing at the time? What percentage are taken without the owner realising? On a basis on data I have within my own family of people that have had phones taken. So you said what percentage of phones have been taken without people realising? Yeah, or a fraction. Do you prefer percentage or fractions? You'll be a percentage man, won't you, Bobby? Yeah, I can do percentage.

OK. So just based on data, extrapolating, assuming the national is the same, maybe like 60%, 70%? OK. No, it's nearly a quarter, nearly a quarter, which is almost 25%.

Bobby, I just did that. I wore that out to try to impress you. I like that one and four.

I like that. This is a maths lesson as well as a Neighbourhood Watch. Let's try this one then.

Maximum sentence for theft from person. The maximum sentence. We'll do you first, Bobby, because I expect Vincent may know this.

So theft from person, assuming there's no violence on the person. It was just a... Yeah, yeah. It's just a straight, straight... I'm going to go for maybe two years.

Two years. Vincent, what do you think? Oh my God, I don't know either. Well, I threw you with theft from person because it's just a theft, which is seven years.

But what if there was violence involved? And again, it's a grey area because when somebody's after your phone and they're tugging at the phone and you're tugging back again, that wouldn't be classified as a robbery. I don't know if Vincent would agree with that. But if somebody's put in fear of immediate violence or there is violence, we step it up to robbery.

And what is the maximum sentence for robbery? Have a guess, Bobby. Think high, because you only went... 15. 15 years.

Yeah, that's too low. That's too low. Too low.

Life. Life imprisonment is the maximum sentence for robbery. I mean, serious stuff, robbery.

That will be, obviously. Last one then. In a single morning in 2024, how many phones did one London thief manage to snatch while riding a motorbike leading to his arrest? In one morning.

Okay, so the average in the UK is 213. So it's clearly below that. I'm going to benchmark.

One person. I'm going to go for like 23 phones. Oh, Vincent, what's the answer? 24.

24. Oh, so close. I mean, yeah, that's worth a bonus two points.

Yeah, I know. Bobby, I reckon. 24 unsnatched in an hour and then he got caught.

Good. And jailed for two years. Even better.

That's what happens when you get greedy. Yes. So well done, the Met Police.

Thank you so much, Bobby. Is there anything else that, well, let me ask you about your podcast. I think that's only polite.

Tell us about your Maths Appeal podcast. Yes, it's with me and a fellow maths teacher, Susan Okereke, and we show how maths connects to the real world. Whether it's like the fun of geometry and buildings or whether it's the numeracy with money, decision making, but just showing maths come to life in a fun way.

We've got puzzles, we've got fun facts, making it all come to life, I think. That sounds great. Lovely to have you on the show.

Thank you so much for coming on. And I'm glad you've maintained this absolutely positive outlook because you're a modest guy who's been very successful and yet you still are true to where you're brought up and you love where you live and you love that community. And I think that's brilliant.

Thank you. I think it's all about, obviously, sometimes events can leave you a bit traumatised, but it's about making sure it doesn't change how you think about the place. You're just being a bit more aware and adapting rather than withdrawing.

So if you love a place, be there and support it. Lovely. Thank you so much.

And Vincent, thank you to you as well, Vincent.