

**VEHICLE WATCH AND CAR THEFT:
AN EVALUATION**

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The Home Office Police Research Group (PRG) was formed in 1992 to carry out and manage research in the social and management sciences relevant to the work of the police service and Home Office policy divisions. One of the major police department divisions which acts as customer for the PRG is the Home Office Crime Prevention Unit which was formed in 1983 to promote preventive action against crime. It has a particular responsibility to disseminate information on crime prevention topics.

The object of the present series of occasional papers is to present research material in a way which should help and inform practitioners, including the police, whose work can help reduce crime.

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Foreword

Neighbourhood Watch has proved to be one of the most popular of crime prevention measures with over 115,000 schemes in existence in England and Wales covering some 5 million households. It has spawned a wide variety of look-alikes – Boat Watch, Shop Watch and, of course, Vehicle Watch.

The scheme was popular with the public and on the Welsh housing estate which was the focus of a pilot scheme. The police too were enthusiastic supporters.

However, as with all these initiatives a key question is the extent to which they reduce crime and this report attempts to assess the extent to which Vehicle Watch reduces the risk of vehicle theft for members of the scheme. This proved a difficult question to answer because of evidence provided in the report that Vehicle Watch members were more likely to take greater care of their cars than non-members – they garage their vehicles overnight, for example, which significantly reduces risk, and they are more likely to leave their cars where they can keep an eye on them.

Vehicle Watch, if implemented properly, is extremely resource-intensive for the police. This report shows that it may well be worth the investment in local areas suffering high rates of motor vehicle theft, but that we should not necessarily expect major reductions in vehicle theft across the board.

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Deputy Under Secretary of State
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The Authors

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1. Introduction

Origins and development of Vehicle Watch

Vehicle Watch, like Neighbourhood Watch, has North American origins. The basic concept has been credited to US Senator P. Stavisky who, in April 1986, persuaded police in the Queen's area of New York to set up a pilot project called 'Combat Auto Theft', or 'CAT'. Under this project, participating car owners signed a form stating that their vehicle would not normally be in use between 1am and 5am. They also gave permission for police officers to stop and check their car, without further reason, if it was seen being driven during those hours. A bright yellow sticker was then attached to the windscreen of each member's car in order that such vehicles could be readily identified by the police.

The first British police force to adopt a similar scheme, and to coin the name 'Vehicle Watch', was Cumbria Constabulary. In October 1989, it issued stickers for front and rear windows of cars to all owners willing to give permission for police stops between midnight and 5am. Several other forces quickly followed suit and a survey conducted by the Home Office Crime Prevention Unit during 1990 identified a total of 13 forces with such schemes. In February 1990, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) noted that the various schemes had failed to adopt any standardised code of practice and issued guidelines for future operation. These recommended that night-time schemes, which were by far the most common, should cover the period chosen by Cumbria Constabulary (midnight to 5am) and should use circular, fluorescent yellow stickers made of high quality plastic, displayed on front and rear windows.

The most recent national picture of the development of Vehicle Watch was obtained by Brown (1992) through a survey of all the 43 police forces in England and Wales, which was conducted in September-October 1991. This showed that 27 of the 43 forces were operating, or would be operating by the end of 1991, a Vehicle Watch scheme in at least part of their territory. Brown's survey showed that schemes were still developing in a diverse and generally uncoordinated fashion, varying from force wide initiatives to 'shoestring' projects in small areas. They also varied widely in terms of whether or not members were formally registered and lists kept of their names, whether or not a joining fee was levied and whether incentives, such as free window etching, were offered. Owing to the generally poor standard of the registration and record-keeping systems used, Brown rightly questioned the accuracy of the levels of 'take up' reported by many of the forces. With suitable expressions of caution, he estimated total participation in England and Wales at just under 440,000 vehicles at the end of October 1991. This represented well under two percent of all registered vehicles.

Vehicle Watch in Wales

Forces in the Principality of Wales have demonstrated a particularly high level of commitment to the Vehicle Watch concept. The first scheme was set up in Septem-

ber 1990 by Gwent Constabulary in Bettws, a large housing estate with a population of about 9,000, which is situated on the outskirts of Newport, Gwent. This area was chosen as car crime made up an abnormally large proportion of its recorded crime figures. The Bettws scheme conformed to the ACPO guidelines, but differed from most others in terms of the extra benefits which it offered to members. Owing to an exceptional level of cooperation between the local police and other organisations (especially garages, motor manufacturers and insurance companies), membership was free and included the provision of security markings for cars and car radios, publicity in the local media – in the event of a member's car or contents being stolen – and various insurance and motor trade discounts. Largely as a result of the energy with which the scheme was promoted, enhanced by a well organised enrolment system, membership rates in Bettws were impressive with over 50 percent of car owners on the estate joining within a few weeks. This was far in excess of rates reported by other schemes.

A brief initial evaluation of the Bettws scheme, which was undertaken by Gwent Constabulary (Brown, 1990), suggested that it had proved successful in gaining public support and had resulted in an immediate fall in the level of car crime on this estate. Consequently, Gwent Constabulary enlisted the cooperation of the other Welsh police forces in setting up an all-Wales Vehicle Watch scheme, which was launched, with considerable publicity, in September 1991. The extended scheme was less elaborate than that implemented in Bettws, but membership remained free and some of the additional incentives were still provided. Membership rates among the Gwent public were particularly impressive with over 25,000 people enrolling within the first four months and more than twenty percent of relevant vehicles registered in the force area ultimately entering the scheme. Like its predecessors, the Gwent scheme was targeted at private cars and light vans. Precise figures are not available for other force areas in Wales, but the membership rate is generally accepted to be far lower. The higher penetration of the Gwent scheme has been attributed to the strong sense of local identity in this small county coupled with the publicity surrounding the launch which is believed to have reached a high proportion of the population and to have fixed the scheme in people's minds as a local initiative.

Existing analyses of Vehicle Watch

Reliable evaluations of Vehicle Watch are very difficult to achieve. Several police forces have claimed encouraging results but there are only two evaluations, both highly favorable to the scheme, which deserve serious attention. These are a more detailed study undertaken by Gwent Constabulary (Brown, 1992) and an assessment carried out by the Hartlepool Safer Cities Project Research Unit (1992).

Hartlepool study

The Safer Cities evaluation, which examined the operation of a Vehicle Watch scheme in Hartlepool during the period August 1990 to July 1991, concluded that

“vehicles not registered with the scheme are ... over four times more likely to be stolen than vehicles which are registered” (page 7). However, the authors concede that, encouraging though this sounds, there was no conclusive evidence that it was an effect of Vehicle Watch *per se* rather than a feature of other differences (e.g. in security behaviour or exposure to risk) between members and non-members of the scheme.

Furthermore, the method used to calculate the relative victimisation rates of these two groups may be open to some criticism. This involved constructing a list of the registration numbers of all vehicles recorded by the police as ‘taken without consent’ during the one year period in question and comparing the contents with vehicle registration numbers given by all 4,172 people who had joined the Hartlepool Vehicle Watch scheme in that year. This showed that only 66 (less than four percent) of the enrolled vehicles appeared in the stolen vehicle records. The figure of under four percent was juxtaposed with a figure of approximately fifteen percent for the Vehicle Watch ‘take up’ in the town and the conclusion was drawn that thefts from members stood at about a quarter of the ‘expected’ rate. Unfortunately, this conclusion did not take into account that:

Vehicles were constantly moving in and out of the area: Hartlepool residents’ cars, including those registered with Vehicle Watch, may be stolen elsewhere. Equally, vehicles belonging to non-residents, a few of whom would be enrolled in other Vehicle Watch schemes, may be stolen in Hartlepool. At a minimum, thefts of vehicles belonging to people not resident in Hartlepool should have been excluded before further analysis was undertaken;

Membership of Vehicle Watch was not static throughout the year: the authors point out that the figure of 4,172 members includes people joining at any time during the twelve month period. No detailed information on joining dates was available to determine whether the reported thefts occurred before or after any individual joined;

People frequently change their vehicles and some of the stolen cars assumed to belong to non-members may have belonged to members who had transferred tickers from a previous vehicle without recording the change. Similarly, some non-member vehicles might still have displayed stickers belonging to a previous owner;

Some of the non-members’ vehicles which were stolen were likely to have been motor cycles, lorries and other commercial vehicles, rather than the private cars and light vans which constitute the bulk of vehicles registered to Vehicle Watch members. If the researchers were to make an accurate comparison, all such thefts should have been excluded from the initial sample to avoid biasing results in favour of the Vehicle Watch scheme.

All of the above factors are likely to have reduced the accuracy of the estimates of the vulnerability of members and non-members of Vehicle Watch to car theft. It is not possible to determine with any certainty whether this led to an over or under estimate of the impact of Vehicle Watch. The researchers were of the opinion that the second and final factors may have exercised particularly biasing effects and together produced an over estimate of the impact of Vehicle Watch.

Gwent study

Brown's study (1992) of Vehicle Watch in Gwent concludes that:

“While there are many factors which can influence the degree of vehicle crime, there can be little doubt from the evidence examined that the implementation of Vehicle Watch has resulted in lower crime rates for its members and has had a significant impact on the overall level of vehicle crime in the county. In addition, fear of crime has been reduced and police/public relations have improved. There is also evidence to suggest that Vehicle Watch has led to members being less complacent and more security conscious, many fitting additional security devices to their vehicles.” (p 125).

Unfortunately, although the study provided much valuable material unavailable elsewhere, it again failed to produce a completely reliable answer to the key question of whether membership of Vehicle Watch reduces a person's chances of falling victim to car theft. The research design employed represents an important advance on that adopted in Hartlepool: efforts were made to take account of the possibility that the kinds of people who join Vehicle Watch constitute a population which is already less vulnerable to car theft than the population not inclined to enrol. However, there were certain flaws in the data purporting to establish the actual rates of theft against members and non-members. The central problem stemmed from the method chosen to classify offences according to whether they were against 'members' or 'non-members'. Here, Brown's system was potentially weaker than that used in Hartlepool, in that it depended upon the diligence of the numerous individual police officers responding to reports of car theft.

The classification system used required all Gwent officers attending such incidents to ask victims whether they were members of the scheme and, if they were, to mark the crime report form with 'Vehicle Watch'. Members of CID Administration staff were then required to pick out all reports marked 'Vehicle Watch' and to pass these on to the Vehicle Watch office at police headquarters. This faith in the memory and commitment of busy police officers may have been misplaced and, as later analysis will demonstrate (see section 3), can lead to major under-counting of cases in which the victims were members. Brown also failed to exclude from his theft rates vehicles such as lorries which would not normally be targeted by the scheme, and may accordingly have over-estimated further the level of crime against non-Vehicle Watch members. Finally causality was perhaps too readily attributed by this study when the level of vehicle crime in Gwent fell after Vehicle Watch was introduced (see section 2).

Aims and methods of the current study

The study described within the current report was designed to throw further light upon questions about the impact and effectiveness of Vehicle Watch. This involved a more detailed evaluation focusing upon the whole of Gwent and taking separate account of findings for the main town in the area (Newport) in some instances. Four key research questions were addressed:

- i. Does Vehicle Watch appear to have had any effect upon the overall level of vehicle theft (including unauthorised taking) in the areas studied?
- ii. Does membership of Vehicle Watch reduce an individual's chances of becoming a victim of vehicle theft (in comparison with non-members)?
- iii. Does the Vehicle Watch scheme attract individuals who are anyway less vulnerable to vehicle theft? In addition, does membership of the scheme have any impact upon the security behaviour of those who join?
- iv. What do members, non-members and police officers see as the main benefits and the main disadvantages of the scheme?

It has to be acknowledged at the outset that this was not an exhaustive study of the impact of Vehicle Watch. The study does not consider effects on theft from vehicles and on crime detection; longer term impacts of Vehicle Watch are not assessed and the offender's perspective is not addressed. A full and conclusive evaluation would inevitably have involved the detailed consideration of these and other questions, several of which raise complex methodological problems and all of which merit attention in future studies. For example, separate analysis of each category of car crime (theft of, theft from, damage to, unauthorised taking of and so on) might subsequently be required. A wider variety of possible effects produced by Vehicle Watch, including those relating to crime displacement and public perceptions of the police, could also be considered. The question of whether the level of impact 'peaks' at a certain membership level, with growth thereafter having a lesser (or even negative) effect, might also be addressed.

Structure of the report

Section 2 of the report presents a comparison between car theft figures for Gwent and those for surrounding areas before and after the launch of the initiative. A comparison is also made with national data. The extent to which this material confirms that Vehicle Watch has had a positive impact upon car theft is considered. An attempt is then made in section 3 to compare victimisation rates for members and non-members using data gathered in a postal survey of Gwent residents who had their cars stolen between 1 April and 30 June 1992. Section 4 describes results from a street survey, which was carried out to discover whether there were any key differences between

members and non-members in Newport, including age, gender and attitudes and/or behaviour in respect to car security. Section 5 goes on to provide a general description of the views and experiences of the scheme communicated by both police officers and the general public. Final conclusions about the impact of Vehicle Watch are presented in section 6.

Fuller discussion of data sources and the research methodology is presented at appropriate points in the course of the report; questionnaires and research instruments are reproduced within the appendices.

2. Vehicle Watch & Trends in Vehicle Theft

The possible impact of Vehicle Watch on trends in vehicle theft in Gwent was first examined directly using police data. It was anticipated that, if Vehicle Watch had had any impact, the level of car theft might have diminished after the scheme was launched in this area during September 1991. These car theft figures were compared with those for surrounding areas in order to measure Gwent's relative performance and to ensure that less marked impacts, or even reductions on the expected increase, were not overlooked.

It might be expected that, if Vehicle Watch exhibited any real impact on car crime, Gwent would outperform South Wales, which in turn might have been expected to outperform Avon and Somerset. This is so in that the "take up" rates in South Wales are widely believed to be much lower than those in Gwent even though the "All Wales" scheme was launched in all counties of the principality at the same time. The situation for Avon and Somerset is quite different and deserves brief mention.

There is no police-led Vehicle Watch scheme in Avon and Somerset, rather there is a scheme in operation that is described by the police as "co-ordinated by volunteers through the Crime Prevention Panel with police advice only", i.e. the scheme is not supported by police involvement in the way that it is in Gwent.

There is, moreover, a one pound charge levied for membership, funds for which are used for a variety of different crime prevention projects. Voluntary effort is directed towards returning forms and stickers. No membership records have been kept but membership is estimated to be a negligible proportion of the number of registered vehicles according to the chair of the Crime Prevention Panel (personal communication to the authors). This is consistent with Brown (1992) who reports membership of 18,000 in the Avon and Somerset scheme at November 1991. Using December 1991 'plg' vehicle registration figures as a base this would give a membership level of less than three percent. On any criterion, the Avon and Somerset scheme is unlike that operating in Gwent.

Monthly totals of vehicle thefts recorded by the police in the Gwent, South Wales and Avon and Somerset force areas, as well as in the Newport division of Gwent Constabulary, were obtained from the various forces in support of the exercise¹. These figures covered the year leading up to the launch of Vehicle Watch in Wales and the year following its introduction i.e. September 1990 through to August 1992. A less detailed comparison of the Gwent situation with national figures was also undertaken.

Before examining these figures, it should be remembered that the reporting rate for car theft, i.e. the proportion of all car thefts known to victims which are subsequently

¹Newport is used throughout consideration of police crime houses as shorthand for 'A' Division of Gwent Constabulary.

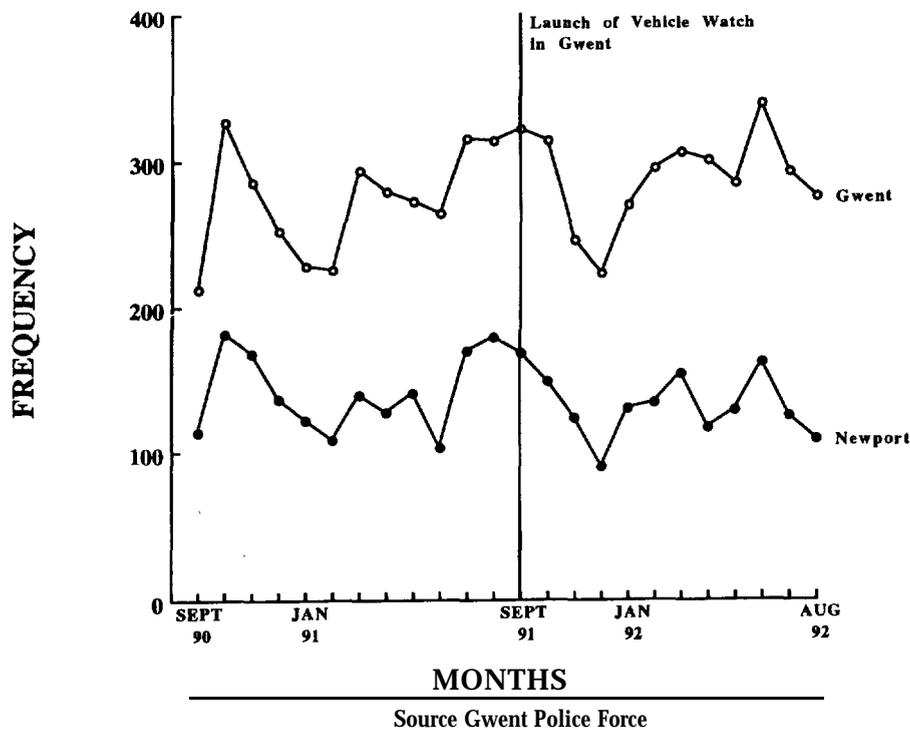
reported to the police, is higher than that for virtually any other kind of offence (Hough & Mayhew, 1985). Therefore, any observed shifts in the officially recorded totals for this category of crime are unlikely to be explained simply by changes in the reporting habits of the public or the recording practices of the police.

Trends in vehicle theft in Gwent

Figure 1 depicts monthly fluctuations in the totals for the offences of theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles recorded by the police, both in Gwent as a whole and in the Newport division. (Raw data used in the construction of this figure are provided in Appendix A.) These graphs cover the one year periods leading up to and following the official launch of Vehicle Watch in Gwent.

It is immediately apparent that the Newport pattern closely follows that of the rest of the county. It can also be seen readily that, between the launch of Vehicle Watch in Gwent during September 1991 and the end of that year, there was a strong fall each month in the total number of car thefts recorded. Indeed, the December totals for both Gwent and Newport were the lowest for 15 months. Encouraging though such results are, it must still be borne in mind that this fall took place from a point at which

Figure 1. Monthly figures for theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles in Newport and Gwent, September 1990 to August 1992



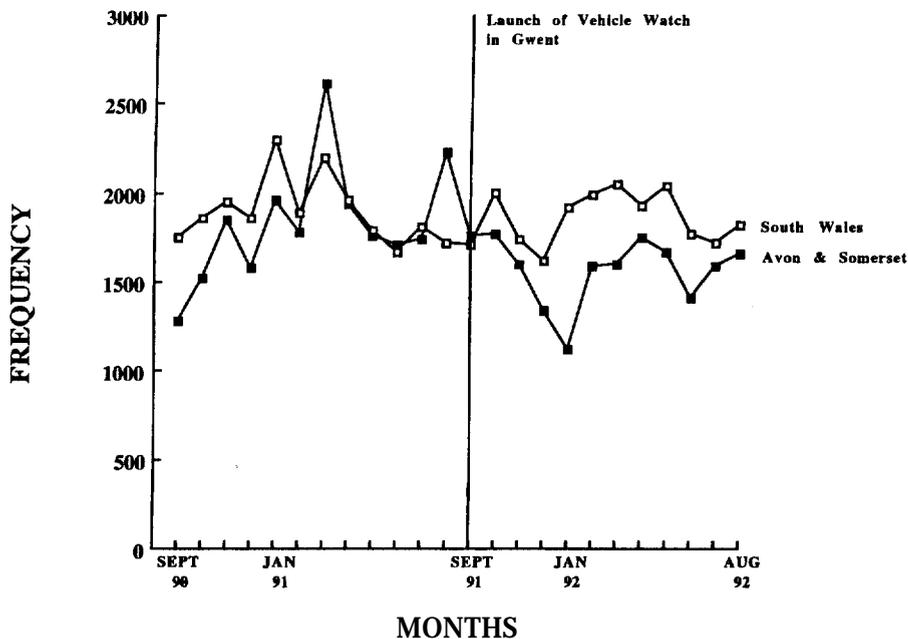
car thefts were historically high, i.e. there is a possibility that a random peak was simply followed by an equally random trough. Moreover, figure 1 demonstrates that recorded thefts began to rise again from the beginning of 1992 and by mid-summer stood at or above the pre-launch level. The incidence of car theft did, however, fall in the last two months included in the analysis (July and August 1992).

Vehicle theft: comparison with other force areas

Figure 2 presents monthly fluctuations in the total number of offences of theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles recorded by the police in South Wales and Avon & Somerset. (The data on which figure 2 is based are included within Appendix A.) This covers the one year periods immediately prior to and after the launch of Vehicle Watch within Gwent (and Wales) during September 1991.

Comparison of the trends presented within figures 1 and 2 does not suggest that the pattern of vehicle theft in Gwent (which hosted one of the most successfully promoted Vehicle Watch schemes in Britain) was markedly different from that experienced in the neighbouring force of Avon & Somerset (which had no directly comparable scheme). Indeed, the fall in car theft depicted for Avon & Somerset in the last few months of 1991 was, if anything, more dramatic than that shown for

Figure 2. Monthly figures for theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles in South Wales and Avon & Somerset police forces, September 1990 to August 1992



Source S.Wales, Avon & Somerset and Gwent Police Forces

Gwent. This does not immediately suggest that the introduction of Vehicle Watch exerted any significant impact upon the level of car crime in Gwent.

The comparison with South Wales, Gwent's other neighbouring force, provides a more ambivalent picture. Nevertheless, an overall comparison of information contained within figures 1 and 2 suggests that car crime trends in all the areas followed roughly the same pattern and that Gwent did not exhibit a more marked decrease.

It had also been planned to compare car crime trends for Newport with those from Cardiff (the principal city in South Wales) and Bristol (the principal city in Avon & Somerset). Unfortunately, changes to the boundaries used in the collection of statistics within the two latter cities meant that comparable data were not available over the two year period of interest. Changes in offence totals in Newport (and Gwent) between the years before and after the Vehicle Watch launch could, however, be calculated and were compared with those experienced in South Wales and Avon & Somerset. The results presented in table 1 suggest that Newport performed considerably better than the rest of Gwent and slightly better than South Wales. When compared to other areas, Gwent does not appear to have experienced any particular success in combating car theft. Even the six percent reduction recorded for Newport was overshadowed by a more dramatic decrease of fourteen percent in Avon & Somerset where there was no comparable Vehicle Watch scheme.

Table 1: Changes in the annual totals of car theft, September 1990 to August 1991 and September 1991 to August 1992 - one year before and one year after the Gwent launch of Vehicle Watch.

	Change in Total Number	Percentage Change
Newport	-102	-6.0%
Gwent	+195	+6.0%
Avon & Somerset	-3106	-14.1%
South Wales	-451	-2.0%

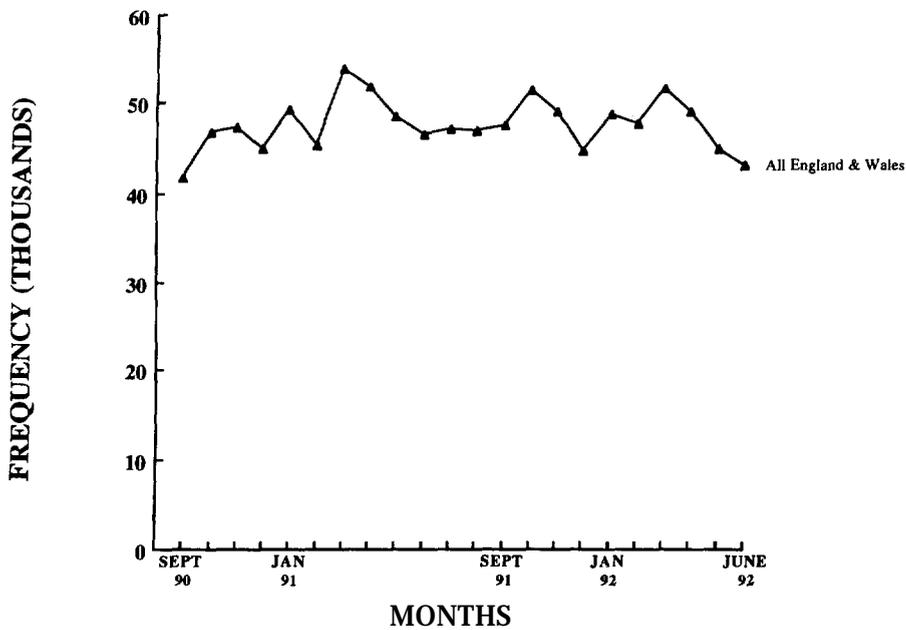
Source: Gwent, Avon & Somerset and South Wales police forces.

Vehicle theft: comparison with the national figures

Figure 3 shows monthly fluctuations in the total number of offences of theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles recorded for the whole of England and Wales between September 1990 and June 1992. (The raw data used are provided in Appendix B of the report). The pattern is not entirely clear-cut, but the basic trend was a growth in total offences in the latter part of 1990 and in the early months of 1991, followed by a stabilisation in the second half of that year with signs of a significant decrease in the middle of 1992.

In this context, it becomes apparent that the decline in car theft experienced in Gwent following the introduction of the Vehicle Watch scheme (see figure 1) needs to be interpreted with utmost caution. It was not significantly out of line with national trends. Indeed, if one compares all forces over a longer period, Gwent does not rate as one of the more successful in reducing car theft. The total offences of car theft in England and Wales for the year July 1991 to June 1992 (the latest 12 month period for which figures were available at the time of writing) were 3.6 percent greater than the total for the previous twelve months. In Gwent, the increase over the equivalent period was 16.4 percent.

Figure 3. Monthly figures for theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles in all England and Wales, September 1990 to June 1992



Source: Home Office, London

Discussion of findings

The data presented in this section suggest that while it is possible that Vehicle Watch had a *temporary* effect on car theft rates in Gwent, the case is by no means a strong one. It is anyway notoriously unsafe to draw causal inferences from apparent associations between any one factor and a change in recorded crime rates, even when the association appears strong and consistent. There are so many other possible factors which could account for the change. To do so on the basis of a 'dip' in car crime figures in one area is unjustifiable, especially if there is evidence of decreases in surrounding areas which have negligible take up rates.

It is also tempting, given the high level of publicity which accompanied the launch in Gwent, to conclude that Vehicle Watch produced there what Cook (1980) has referred to as a "slam bang" deterrent effect. A sudden fall in crime rates, followed by a steady return to previous levels. This effect is observed with many high profile crime prevention initiatives (Maguire, 1982) and could have manifested itself in this case by promoting temporary caution among potential car thieves or 'joy riders', who were faced with a new and not yet fully understood threat of being caught. However, the results of a small number of interviews conducted by Brown (1992) in Gwent and a much larger number carried out by Light (1993) in other parts of the country, contains little evidence to suggest that the presence of a Vehicle Watch sticker particularly deters potential offenders. Eighty two percent of the offenders in Light's study did not think the scheme would be effective in stopping cars being stolen, and a small number had taken cars with Vehicle Watch stickers in them. According to Light, some offenders claimed that the stickers could be easily peeled off, and one even claimed to steal 'Vehicle Watch' cars deliberately – "because as it's got a sticker in they [the police] never bother" (Light 1993, p53).

In sum, from this part of the analysis, there is no conclusive evidence of any impact of Vehicle Watch on the overall incidence of car theft in a particular area.

3. Comparison of Members' and Non-Members' Victimisation Rates

Difficulties in establishing levels of victimisation

Earlier discussions of existing studies (see section 1) suggested that the question of whether there were discernible differences in victimisation rates between Vehicle Watch members and non-members requires careful attention if it is to be answered accurately. Ideally, a scrupulously accurate list of vehicles stolen in a defined area and time period would be available and every case would be carefully checked against perfectly maintained records of local Vehicle Watch membership providing precise joining dates. This procedure would ensure that victims would be more accurately classified as members and non-members before comparisons were made with expected levels of victimisation (based on detailed local population statistics) for both groups. Nonetheless, the calculation of the relative theft rates would still be complicated by the problem of vehicles from other areas being stolen in the area of interest and vice versa, as well by the need to separate out, from the full set of vehicle thefts, those against private cars and light vans

Available data and statistics in Gwent did not allow the above procedures to be followed. It quickly became apparent that membership records were inadequately structured and that it would prove enormously difficult to check the victim of each recorded crime against a full list of members. Even if each name could have been checked, the absence of a date on the Vehicle Watch enrolment form meant that there would still be no way of knowing whether the person had joined before or after the theft took place¹. Gwent Constabulary had already recognised these difficulties and, to counter them, had introduced a method of identifying victimisation against Vehicle Watch members which instead relied upon officers noting "Vehicle Watch" on crime reports. Potential problems with this approach have already been discussed (see section 1) and, as will be shown presently, it is considered to lead to substantial under-reporting of crime against Vehicle Watch members. The researchers consequently concluded that the most practical and reliable way of establishing whether or not victims had been members of Vehicle Watch at the time of the theft was to contact them and ask for this information. The question then became how to achieve this economically with a large enough sample of cases to allow confidence in the results.

Methodology adopted in the current study

The strategy adopted in the current study revolved contacting a sample of victims drawn from police crime reports through a short postal questionnaire. This device was

¹Members' details are slowly being recorded on the Police National computer, which could eventually be searched for the relevant information, but large backlogs have built up with only one third of members recorded. This makes the PNC as yet an unreliable source of information about members. Furthermore, adding members' details to PNC is also considered to be a time consuming and expensive exercise and will need to be carefully monitored.

used to establish what proportion of the sample had been displaying a Vehicle Watch sticker on their car at the time it was stolen. The resulting figure was then compared with the proportion of Vehicle Watch members in the local car-owning population as a whole. The hypothesis was that if the former proportion was significantly lower than the latter, this would provide prima facie evidence that Vehicle Watch members were less likely than non-members to have their cars stolen.

Before undertaking this exercise, it was necessary to establish the overall proportion of Vehicle Watch members among car-owners in the area selected. Preliminary plans had been made to base the study upon the town of Newport, but this proved impossible as a major manual sorting exercise would have been first required in order to separate Newport members from those resident elsewhere in Gwent. This exercise would anyway have been seriously undermined by the absence of information about the date of joining on the individual Vehicle Watch enrolment forms. By contrast, reasonably accurate monthly membership figures were available for the whole county, based upon a count of forms returned to the Vehicle Watch office (see Table 2). In view of this, it was instead decided to base this part of the study upon a sample of victims drawn throughout Gwent.

Table 2: Vehicle Watch membership in Gwent to September 1992

	New members	Cumulative total
1991		
pre-September	1,500	1,500
September	7,143	8,643
October	8,756	17,399
November	3,404	20,803
December	6,055	26,858
1992		
January	2,083	28,941
February	1,676	30,617
March	1,600	32,217
April	1,316	33,533
May	956	34,489
June	1,390	35,879
July	825	36,704
August	534	37,238
September	860	38,098

Source: Gwent Constabulary.

The months of April, May and June, 1992 were then selected as the sample period. During this period, a total of 921 offences of theft or unauthorised taking of vehicles had been recorded in Gwent. However, further investigation revealed that these 921

offences were by no means synonymous with 'car thefts' against Gwent residents. The routine force statistics incorporate four categories:

- i. Car or light van (PLG tax class) theft against Gwent residents;
- ii. Car or light van (PLG tax class) theft against non-Gwent residents;
- iii. Other vehicle theft against Gwent residents;
- iv. Other vehicle theft against non-Gwent residents.

As the aim was to establish comparable data sets for thefts against members and non-members, only the first of the above categories was considered to have further relevance. The process of exclusion of the remaining three categories is shown within table 3, by month and by the three divisions which makeup the force. The top part of the table shows the official totals of vehicle theft; the middle part shows how many of these offences were against vehicles other than private cars (or light vans) and/or against non-Gwent residents; and the lower part, by a simple process of subtraction, reflects the 'true' figure of car thefts against Gwent residents. This exercise was carried out by CID administrative staff based at Gwent Constabulary Headquarters.

Table 3: Method of arriving at a 'true figure' for thefts of cars from Gwent residents, April to June 1992

All officially recorded offences of theft and unauthorised taking				
	April	May	June	Total
'A' Division	117	128	161	406
'B' Division	97	78	92	267
'C' Division	85	78	85	248
TOTAL	299	284	338	921
Offences against vehicles other than cars and against non-residents				
	April	May	June	Total
'A' Division	24	50	62	136
'B' Division	37	30	36	103
'C' Division	28	28	36	92
TOTAL	89	108	134	331
'True' figure for thefts of cars from Gwent residents				
	April	May	June	Total
'A' Division	93	78	99	270
'B' Division	60	48	56	164
'C' Division	57	50	49	156
TOTAL	210	176	204	590

Source: Gwent Constabulary.

It can be seen that a large minority of offences are excluded as a result - ranging from 21 to 42 percent over the various divisions and months. The final total of Gwent

residents who had been victims of theft of cars or light vans in the three month period considered was 590, which represents an overall reduction on the critical figures of 36 percent. The largest category excluded was that of vehicles other than private cars and light vans, which accounted for 236 of the 331 offences excluded from further consideration. Most of these latter thefts related to motor cycles and lorries, but a surprising number of coaches, farm and builders' vehicles, and cars for sale on garage forecourts were also found to have been stolen.

Obtaining victim information

In August 1992, Gwent Constabulary sent a letter on the researchers' behalf, with a covering letter from the Superintendent of Community Affairs, to the 590 'genuine' Gwent-based victims of car theft identified in the above way. Enclosed was a simple one page form which asked respondents to state whether or not Vehicle Watch stickers had been displayed at the time their car or van was taken¹. The form was then returned direct to the researchers. (The form and the accompanying letter are reproduced in Appendix C.) In total, 259 of the 590 victims (44 percent) replied to the questionnaire; five of the letters were returned 'address or person unknown'.

Results of the analysis

Forty one (sixteen percent) of the 259 questionnaire respondents stated that a Vehicle Watch sticker had been displayed on the window of their vehicle at the time of the theft. Thirty two of these 41 gave their names and addresses, which allowed some extra confidence to be placed in the veracity of their replies. The total of 41 'member victims' uncovered in this way showed that victimisation was considerably higher than suggested by the number of crime files which had been marked "Vehicle Watch" by police officers; only six of the 590 victims had been identified as Vehicle Watch members in this way. In other words, if this file marking method had been used to assess the relative victimisation rates of members and non-members, it would have pointed to the false conclusion that only one percent of all car thefts had been against Vehicle Watch members, thus underestimating the true rate to a dramatic extent.

Given that direct, unsolicited postal contact with car crime victims is, as far as can be ascertained, a novel procedure, it is not possible to judge whether or not a 44 percent response rate without a follow-up letter is reasonable. However, a higher rate would clearly be desirable in order to allow more definitive conclusions to be reached. Unfortunately, methodological considerations dictated against a follow up mailing. Following advice, from Gwent's Data Protection Officer, it was agreed that return forms would not be marked, so respondents could not be identified if they did not volunteer their name and address in their reply. Thus, non-respondents could not be identified and targeted as part of a follow up study. The possibility of re-contacting the entire

¹It was decided not to ask victims at what time of day their car was stolen for two reasons: first, reports of actual time of car theft are notoriously unreliable, and second, there would be no merit in a scheme that displaced crime against members to periods outside the curfew hours.

sample and asking only non-respondents to return their forms was considered. The latter approach might, however, have resulted in “double” returns from some victims. Future studies employing postal surveys of this kind would benefit from a procedure that allowed a targeted follow up to achieve a higher response rate from victims.

Clearly, given that only 44 percent of the population returned their forms, it is not possible to make a definite statement about the relative risks of members and non-members falling victim to car crime. Working on the assumption that Vehicle Watch membership in the population of non-respondents was the same as that for respondents, it would be concluded that sixteen percent of car thefts had been committed against Vehicle Watch members. This could be seen as an upper estimate since it is likely that the proportion of replies from Vehicle Watch members was actually higher than that from non-members owing to greater interest in Vehicle Watch¹. If it was assumed that all of the non-respondents were not members, then the proportion of crimes against members would reduce to seven percent. This being so, it seems reasonable to conclude that the proportion of victims who were members of Vehicle Watch lies somewhere between the logically possible, but highly unlikely, lower limit of seven percent and the actually recorded level of sixteen percent. The researchers’ intuition suggests that the actual figure may lie somewhere around the mid-point of the two estimates (approximately eleven to twelve percent), but no further objective evidence is available to support this view.

Summary of Findings

During the three month period in question, about twenty one percent of car and light van owners in Gwent were estimated to have been members of Vehicle Watch². The mid-point estimate of eleven to twelve percent victimisation for members supports the conclusion that members of Vehicle Watch are less likely than non-members to have their cars stolen. In simple terms, the twenty one percent of the population at risk of car theft in Gwent who were members of Vehicle Watch appear to have suffered only some eleven to twelve percent of the total theft. If the estimate of victimisation rates is correct, this suggests that the risk to Vehicle Watch members was nearly one half of the risk to the population as a whole. Although this is, superficially at least, a positive finding for the scheme, the existence of dramatic differences in victimisation rates for members and non-members, as reported by Brown (1992) and the Hartlepool Safer Cities Project Research Unit (1992), was not borne out. Certain methodological criticisms could be levelled at this aspect of the study because of the low response rate, but it nonetheless demonstrates clearly that the procedures adopted by these earlier studies were likely to have led to an under estimate of victimisation among Vehicle Watch members.

¹The logically possible upper limit of theft against members would assume that all non-respondents were members. This has been calculated at 63%. However, it seems highly implausible that persons voluntarily involved in an initiative (in this case Vehicle Watch) would be less likely to respond to questions about that initiative.

²The total number of registered vehicles in the relevant ‘PLG’ classes in the Gwent area in December 1991 was 160,154.

4. Comparison of Members' and Non-Members' Vulnerability to Car Theft

Methodology employed

Any comprehensive evaluation of the potential benefits of Vehicle Watch membership must take into account the point that there may be prior differences in the characteristics or behaviour of those who are and who are not likely to join such a scheme. For example, behaviour with respect to vehicle security might affect the relative vulnerability to crime of the two groups more than membership *per se*.

In order to answer the question of whether people who join Vehicle Watch fall, independently of their membership of the scheme, into a below average risk category, a street survey of car owners was carried out. This was undertaken in Newport on 10-13 August and 17-19 August 1992. In total, 422 people resident in the town were interviewed. The interviews were staggered throughout the day and early evening, in order to catch as wide a cross-section of the target population as possible. Interviewers were instructed to approach every third person aged 17 or over. The first part of the survey questionnaire (see Appendix D) covered age and model of car driven, driving and security habits and experience of car theft. After this information had been obtained, respondents were asked if they were members of Vehicle Watch and about their views and experiences of the scheme. (The latter issues are discussed in section 5 of the report.)

In the first week of interviewing, some 23 percent of those interviewed were found to be members of Vehicle Watch – a proportion closely in line with the best estimates of the level of Vehicle Watch membership in Newport as a whole. This gave some confidence in the capacity of the survey method to produce a sample adequately representative of Newport drivers. A second week of interviewing was then initiated and the approach amended so that the interview was continued only if the person approached indicated that he or she was a Vehicle Watch member. This revised strategy was adopted to produce samples of members and non-members of roughly equivalent size. Eventually, a final total of 422 car-owners resident in the town (and present on the streets at the appropriate points in time) were interviewed; 199 of these were members of Vehicle Watch and 223 were not.

Age, gender and vehicle ownership

Members of Vehicle Watch can be compared to non-members on a number of dimensions. Analysis showed that there was no significant difference between the Vehicle Watch members and non-members in terms of gender: males made up 58 percent and 53 percent of the two samples, respectively. However, the Vehicle Watch members were considerably older as a group: 87 percent were over thirty years of age and 50 percent over fifty; the comparable figures for non-members were 75 percent and 26 percent.

Where the type of car owned was concerned, the differences between Vehicle Watch members and non-members were not appreciable (see Table 4). The only difference of any note was that none of the members, but nine of the non-members, owned a make of car which fell into the highest risk category, as defined by the Home Office Car Theft Index¹. Generally, the differences were too small to expect any significant effect on victimisation rates. Members also owned a higher proportion of new cars, ten percent owning vehicles registered in 1991 or 1992, compared with four percent of non-members.

Table 4: Membership in relation to risk category of car owned

	Members (N=199)	Non-Members (N=223)
Car Theft Index	%	%
High	0.0	4.0
Medium to High	30.7	30.5
Medium	26.1	27.8
Medium to Low	9.0	9.0
Low	30.7	28.3
N/K	3.5	0.4
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Car use, parking and security behaviour

Clear differences were, however, apparent in terms of car use, parking and security behaviour (see table 5), all of which are likely to affect the chances of car theft occurring. The most striking difference was that, while thirteen percent of the non-members named either 'evening' or 'night' as the time at which they most often used their cars, only a tiny minority (1.5 percent) of Vehicle Watch members gave these answers. This result might well have been expected as Vehicle Watch schemes are almost certain to be more attractive to those who do not normally use their cars within these hours. It may also account for the earlier finding that older people, who might be expected to make less use of vehicles in the early hours, were over-represented within the member sample.

It can also be seen from table 5 that non-members (35 percent) were more likely than members (22 percent) to leave their cars parked in streets overnight. Almost two-fifths (34.1%) of the Vehicle Watch members normally left their vehicles locked in their own garage; for non-Vehicle Watch members this fell to just over a quarter (27.1 percent). (Full details of parking habits are provided in Appendix E). This is especially significant considering that 70 percent of car thefts are thought to occur

¹The Home Office Car Theft index (see Houghton 1992) is essentially a three category system: high, medium and low risk. However, some respondents were unable supply sufficient information on their car to allow a definitive categorisation. In ambiguous cases, two further categories: 'medium to high' and 'medium to low' were necessary.

between 6 pm and 6 am, compared with 23 percent in the morning or afternoon¹. In addition, slightly higher proportions of members were able to 'keep an eye on' their vehicle most of the time when it was parked during the day. Members appeared to be somewhat more diligent in locking their vehicles, but the differences were not sufficient to reach any real conclusions. It is perhaps encouraging that the proportions were so high in both cases.

Table 5: A summary of the differences in security related behaviour between members and non-members of Vehicle Watch

	Members (N=199) %	Non-Members (N=223) %
Use car mainly evening or night	1.5	13.0
Parked overnight on street	21.8	35.3
Parked overnight in own garage	39.1	27.1
Can keep 'eye on' most of time when parked during day ¹	30.5	19.5
Never left unlocked	89.9	82.1

¹Based on respondents who parked for relatively long periods in main streets, side streets, estates or car parks not open to the public; excludes open public car parking or multi-storey car parking.

There appeared from the interviews to be a slight tendency for Vehicle Watch members' cars to be fitted with more security devices. For example, 71 percent had window etching compared with 64 percent of non-members; ten percent had locking wheel nuts compared with six percent of non-members. However, such small differences do not provide any conclusive evidence of pre-existing attitudes to security between the groups. The survey showed anyway that fourteen of the 199 members interviewed had implemented one or more additional security measures (usually window etching and occasionally steering lock columns or alarms) as a direct result of becoming a members of Vehicle Watch.

Finally, it may be significant that the relative victimisation rates of members and non-members were different prior to anyone joining Vehicle Watch. Only four (two percent) of the Vehicle Watch members reported that their car had been stolen at least once between 1987 and 1990, compared with thirteen (six percent) of the non-members. This is one more indication that those who join Vehicle Watch have a lower than average risk of becoming a victim, even before they join. However, the numbers here are quite small and obviously need to be treated with caution.

Overall, the findings from this part of the survey appear to suggest that, quite apart from any protection membership of Vehicle Watch itself may offer, the cars of those who join the scheme are generally less vulnerable to theft, particularly during the night-time period of highest risk, than those of non-members. It should be empha-

¹Data from 1988 British Crime Survey kindly supplied by Mrs. P. Mayhew of the Home Office Research and Planning Unit.

sised that most of the differences were relatively small. Nevertheless, their cumulative weight does point to the conclusion that the Vehicle Watch scheme seems to have attracted drivers who were less at risk, either because of their already relatively high security consciousness, or because of their lower exposure to risk (for example, in terms of their parking or car usage habits). Clearly, as will be discussed later, this difference has implications for the assessment of Vehicle Watch in preventing thefts.

5. Views and Experiences of the Scheme

The 422 Newport car-owners interviewed as part of the street survey were asked a number of questions to elicit their views and feelings about Vehicle Watch. These questions formed the second half of the questionnaire discussed in section 4. (The survey instrument is reproduced in Appendix D.) In addition, numerous informal discussions were supplemented by more structured interviews conducted with twelve police officers from Newport in order to ascertain how they felt about the scheme.

Views of members

Benefits

Only eight of the 199 respondents who had joined Vehicle Watch were not currently displaying their stickers and just one of these had decided to withdraw from the scheme entirely. (It was not possible to determine why this latter individual had chosen to withdraw.) In answer to a direct question about security, 24 percent said that they felt “much more secure” about their car as a result of joining and 46 percent categorised themselves as feeling “a little more secure”.

When respondents were asked, without interviewer prompts, what they saw as the benefits, if any, of being a member of Vehicle Watch, over two-thirds named at least one benefit. The most common first response, given by a quarter of the whole sample, was words to the effect that it gave them “peace of mind”. A further twelve percent of the “respondents saw the main benefit as a greater likelihood of their car being recovered, should it be stolen, and nine percent mentioned the police in some sense “keeping an eye on” their car as an advantage. Although these factors would in turn be expected to promote higher levels of deterrence or detection, surprisingly only seven percent and three percent, respectively, mentioned these outcomes directly as benefits. Finally, only a handful of respondents named financial discounts or free radio marking as benefits of membership.

Improvements

Vehicle Watch members were asked whether the scheme could be improved in any way and a total of 25 percent suggested that it could. Well over half of these (fifteen percent of all members interviewed) suggested that the level of commitment to the scheme exhibited by the police was the area most in need of improvement. In particular, respondents criticised the frequent failure of patrols to stop cars displaying stickers during the night time ‘curfew’. Evidence on the infrequency of police stops also emerged from answers to direct questions in relation to this subject. Of the 199 members interviewed, 110 said that they had used a car displaying Vehicle Watch stickers during the ‘curfew’ hours; 62 of these stated that they had seen a police patrol on at least one such occasion, but only seven had ever been stopped. Other desired improvements covered a range of minor points, concerned mainly with the size or quality of the stickers, or with suggested extensions to the period during which the ‘curfew’ was in operation.

Views of non-members

Knowledge of the scheme

Non-members demonstrated a fair level of knowledge about the existence and operation of the Vehicle Watch scheme. Only twenty of the 223 interviewed had not heard of Vehicle Watch. Among the remaining 203, perceptions of 'what it is for' were broadly accurate; prevention was mentioned much more often than detection. Some respondents also confused its operating principles with those of Neighbourhood Watch, thinking that either the police or neighbours kept a special 'watch' on members' cars. Even so, well over twenty percent mentioned the key feature of police stops during a night-time 'curfew' period without any specific prompting by the interviewers.

Reasons for not joining

Non-members were also asked to state the main reason why they had not joined the scheme. Despite the generally high level of awareness of its existence and of its broad purposes, the reason most frequently given was that they 'did not know enough about it'. This explanation was put forward by almost 30 percent of those who had heard of Vehicle Watch. A further twenty percent had 'not thought about it', sixteen per cent had 'not found time', eight percent said that they had 'not been asked to join' and nine percent cited their working patterns as reasons for not wishing to be stopped by the police. Significantly, only fifteen interviewees (seven percent) expressed clearly negative views and categorised the whole scheme as a 'waste of time'. In other words, the main obstacles to the achievement of higher take up rates appear to be apathy and lack of detailed knowledge about Vehicle Watch, rather than any widespread dislike or distrust of the scheme.

Confirmation of this last point came from the final question put to non-members: "Would you consider joining in the future?". Twenty percent said no, twenty percent were unsure, but a clear majority – 122 of the 203 asked – replied in the affirmative.

Overview of public response

Several of the survey findings echo the positive public responses to Vehicle Watch found by Brown (1992) in an opinion survey covering several locations in Gwent and undertaken by special constables. The current study provided clear evidence that the scheme has a favourable image with the public and makes members feel more secure. As expected, there were differences of perception between members and non-members, but the majority reaction to the scheme was positive among both groups. The scheme also appeared to have the potential to achieve exceptionally high "take up" rates if sufficient publicity is provided to explain how it works and if enrolment is made simple and convenient. On the negative side, some public confidence in the scheme is lost through the apparent failure of police officers to stop and check cars as often as members are led to expect.

The police perspective

In addition to informal interviews, more structured discussions were undertaken with twelve officers based at Newport. Three of these officers were stationed at Bettws estate, the site of the pilot Vehicle Watch scheme. The structured discussions complied with the following topic guide:

- Knowledge of the scheme: including their introduction to the scheme and the extent of further briefings or reminders on the scheme;
- The main advantages and disadvantages of the scheme: including specific questions on their perceptions of its impact upon car crime, offenders and the public;
- The influence of the Vehicle Watch sticker on the likelihood of their stopping a car in the 'curfew' hours;
- Their own willingness to become members of Vehicle Watch and the reasons for this;
- overall reaction to the scheme, particularly in comparison to other crime prevention initiatives of which they had experience.

Bettws officers

The officers based at Bettws were convinced that the scheme had significantly decreased the theft of cars. Moreover, they thought that the use of radio security codes, which were encouraged as part of the Vehicle Watch scheme, decreased the attractiveness of thefts from cars. This, in turn, may also impact on thefts of cars.

It was felt that the scheme had been invaluable for improving police-community relations and the officers suggested that it had provided useful opportunities for the public to engage with their local police in a role other than that of witness to, or victim of, a crime. The officers were keen that the scheme should not be identified too strongly with the police and should instead be seen as a community initiative. (This principle had influenced an earlier decision to avoid the word 'police' on the Vehicle Watch sticker.) Nonetheless, the Bettws officers suggested that some younger drivers may have avoided the scheme because its image lacked "street cred".

Other officers

Informal and structured discussions with officers based elsewhere in Newport revealed a more cautious appraisal. All of the officers interviewed knew the basic structure of the scheme (i.e. the expectation of stopping cars with a Vehicle Watch sticker displayed), but suggested that this would not be true throughout the service. One officer reported a discussion with two colleagues which involved the following

comment “No, we don’t stop Vehicle Watch drivers – they are going to be law abiding citizens”. Such misunderstandings may not be widespread amongst officers, but it was clear that few formal briefings and reminders on Vehicle Watch procedures were given and these were largely limited to information sheets emanating from the Vehicle Watch office.

It was also clear from discussions that competing operational demands on officers (whether from Bettws or Newport Central) meant that stopping Vehicle Watch cars between midnight and 5am was not a high priority. Further, officers would normally expect to stop only a few vehicles during the course of a night shift and the presence of a Vehicle Watch sticker alone would not be a sufficient condition to initiate such a contact. Other factors, such as driving behaviour, age of driver, make and age of car and so on, were more likely to be salient. In addition, three officers noted that the sticker was difficult to distinguish from other stickers from a distance at night. Hence, Vehicle Watch appears to have had little effect on officer behaviour in this respect. The finding is consistent with members’ low reports of being stopped and the view that there should be more police commitment to the scheme. In response to this issue, one police officer observed that it was unrealistic to expect Vehicle Watch stops to take high priority and that the public should not be led to believe that a stop within curfew hours was in any sense inevitable. Finally, the observation was made that, should the scheme prove increasingly successful in terms of membership, the likelihood of Vehicle Watch cars being stopped during curfew hours would decrease still further.

The above factors might be interpreted as suggesting that the Vehicle Watch scheme had not been implemented as fully as it might have been. However, responses also suggested that Vehicle Watch had been implemented in Gwent as far as was realistic given other pressures on resources, particularly upon night time patrols. It should not, therefore, be assumed that more intensive implementation would be routinely viable in other forces. Some police respondents also argued that it was too early to make any claims regarding the success of the scheme. In many ways, it appeared to be like other crime prevention initiatives – much publicity at the beginning, but salience for both officers and potential offenders may have already begun to fade. To counter this, regular publicity was felt to be necessary. In terms of both public involvement and police commitment, the central Newport police respondents argued that a scheme such as Vehicle Watch was much more likely to be effective in a small community where there was a relatively small and stable population of cars. High impact on an urban centre with much through traffic was felt to be far less likely.

6. Summary and Conclusions

The study set out to address four distinct questions relating to Vehicle Watch schemes. The findings in relation to these are summarised below and overall conclusions are presented.

Assessment of effect in key areas

Does Vehicle Watch appear to have any effect upon the over-all level of vehicle theft (including unauthorised taking) in the areas studied?

There was a dip in car theft in Gwent in the first few months after the introduction of Vehicle Watch in September 1991. However, several other police forces also recorded a decline at this time. Moreover, theft rates in Gwent rose steeply in at the beginning of 1992. Hence, nothing conclusive can be drawn from crime figures alone.

Does membership of Vehicle Watch improve an individual's chances of avoiding becoming a victim of vehicle theft in comparison with non-members?

This is apparently a simple question, but reliable data are difficult to collect. A questionnaire based study of car theft during a three month period in the county of Gwent suggested that the proportion committed against Vehicle Watch members was sixteen percent. The study did, however, suffer from a low response rate (44 percent). Allowing that members may be more likely than non-members to respond to the questionnaire, a speculative 'best estimate' of eleven to twelve percent for car theft against Vehicle Watch members was subsequently produced. This compares favourably with an average membership of Vehicle Watch of twenty one percent within Gwent during the three months in question. If the best estimate of victimisation rates was correct, the risk to Vehicle Watch members appears to have been about one half less than to the population at risk as a whole. However, the low response rate to the questionnaire means that this conclusion must be treated with considerable caution.

Does the Vehicle Watch scheme attract individuals who are anyway less vulnerable to vehicle theft? In addition, does membership of the scheme have any impact upon the security behaviour of those who join?

A street survey revealed a number of important differences between the two groups. For example, the Vehicle Watch members were older, they were more likely to garage their cars overnight and during the day they were more likely to leave their car where they could keep an eye on it. Vehicle Watch members also tended to have slightly more security features fitted to their cars, although no firm conclusions can be reached on whether or not this difference existed prior to joining the scheme or results from it. Finally, it is worth noting that relatively few persons who subsequently became members of Vehicle Watch (two percent) reported that their cars had been stolen during the previous four years. In comparison, six percent of those who did not become members had had their cars stolen in the previous four years.

Thus, Vehicle Watch members do differ in a number of ways to non-members and these differences together indicate that the members may be a less vulnerable population both before and after joining.

What do members, non-members and police officers see as the main benefits and the main disadvantages of the scheme?

Vehicle Watch was well received by members and non-members alike. The most common response from Vehicle Watch members was that the scheme made them feel more secure and 55 percent of the non-members indicated that they would consider joining. The main suggestion for improving the scheme was that the police should take more interest in it and should stop cars with Vehicle Watch stickers more regularly. In summary, Vehicle Watch appeared to be a popular scheme which encouraged members' confidence and was welcomed as a sign that the police were active.

Police officers who had experience of the scheme varied in their attitudes towards it. Officers who had been involved in the pilot scheme on the Bettws estate and had witnessed a very high rate of enrolment in their community, with a simultaneous drop in car theft, were enthusiastic supporters. Those officers working out of an urban centre were more cautious, some believing that its importance was likely to wane for a variety of reasons. For example, if publicity were not sustained or if the numbers joining increased appreciably and made policing the scheme less viable.

It was also clear that police could not fulfil the commitment to stop all cars carrying Vehicle Watch stickers which were active during curfew hours. The sticker was at best a contributory factor in a decision on whether to stop a vehicle. Other policing commitments (e.g attending a call to an incident) always took priority and suspicious behaviour (e.g. driving dangerously, age of driver, type of car) tended to be regarded as more important than the presence of a sticker, which was not always easy to see. In summary, police attitudes were relatively cautious and suggested that the scheme was most likely to be effective in clearly defined communities with a high level of vehicle crime.

Overall conclusions

Although no definite statement can be made about the protective benefits of Vehicle Watch membership, the findings do indicate that Vehicle Watch members are less likely than non-members to become victims of car theft. However, how much this is due to membership of the scheme *per se* is less clear, as members – independent of the fact of joining the scheme – constitute a less vulnerable population. The primary advantages of the scheme are likely to be similar to those of Neighbourhood Watch: it makes people feel more secure and is potentially a good avenue for facilitating police/public relations. This, in turn, may have pay-offs in encouraging better security habits. Finally, if the scheme is effective in protecting members' cars, it is likely to have more impact in clearly identifiable local communities rather than relatively open urban areas.

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Appendix A: All recorded offences of theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles for Newport, Gwent, Avon & Somerset, and South Wales

Theft and Unauthorised Taking: September 1990 – August 1991

	Newport	Gwent	Avon & Somerset	South Wales
1990				
September	114	212	1283	1751
October	181	326	1522	1853
November	168	285	1848	1945
December	137	251	1581	1858
1991				
January	122	228	1957	2297
February	108	225	1783	1889
March	139	293	2617	2199
April	127	278	1942	1960
May	141	272	1762	1784
June	103	264	1705	1672
July	169	314	1735	1809
August	179	312	2226	1719
Total	1688	3260	21961	22736

Note: The figures provided are for theft and unauthorised taking and, in addition, the new category of aggravated theft Source: Gwent, Avon & Somerset and South Wales Police Forces.

Theft and Unauthorised Taking: September 1991 – August 1992

	Newport	Gwent	Avon & Somerset	South Wales
1991				
September	168	320	1760	1707
October	149	313	1769	1998
November	123	245	1597	1737
December	90	223	1340	1622
1992				
January	130	269	1127	1916
February	134	294	1589	1984
March	154	304	1597	2051
April	117	299	1752	1928
May	128	284	1670	2035
June	161	338	1411	1771
July	124	292	1586	1714
August	108	274	1657	1822
Total	1586	3455	18855	22285

Note: The figures provided are for theft and unauthorised taking and, in addition, the new category of aggravated theft

Source: Gwent, Avon & Somerset and South Wales Police Forces.

Appendix B. All recorded offences of theft and unauthorised taking of vehicles in England and Wales, September 1990 to June 1992.

	Total offences recorded	12-month moving average Percentage change
1990		
September	41,709	+23.9
October	46,734	+26.9
November	47,216	+26.8
December	44,885	+27.0
1991		
January	49,260	+24.6
February	45,202	+24.2
March	53,815	+25.7
April	51,911	+25.3
May	48,538	+24.1
June	46,518	+21.7
July	46,965	+22.8
August	46,937	+20.3
September	47,422	+15.1
October	51,441	+9.1
November	49,078	+4.7
December	44,814	+0.8
1992		
January	48,562	+1.3
February	47,721	-0.3
March	51,560	-1.7
April	49,116	-5.6
May	44,888	-6.7
June	43,166	-7.5

Source: Home Office, London.

Appendix C: Postal questionnaire concerning victims of car theft

August 1992

Dear Sir/Madam,

INDEPENDENT HOME OFFICE STUDY ON CAR THEFT

We are carrying out an independent study for the Crime Prevention Unit of the Home Office to find out if car registration with a scheme called Vehicle Watch has any impact on car theft.

According to records held by (Gwent Police, you reported the theft of a car between the periods April 1st to June 30th 1992 and we would like to know whether Vehicle Watch stickers were displayed on the car at the time of the theft (see reply slip).

We would stress that we have not had direct access to your name and address but have simply supplied this letter to Gwent Police who have forwarded it to you.

Please return the reply slip attached to this letter and send it back to us in the stamped addressed envelope supplied. The sealed envelopes will be passed directly to the research team. No-one but the independent researchers will have access to your reply. Should you provide us with your name and address, this will be used solely for the purpose stated on the reply slip.

It is really important for us that everyone replies so that we can get as good an evaluation as possible.

Please reply as soon as possible, but if you do not receive this letter for some time because you have been away (for example, on holiday) we would still very much like you to return it to us.

With many thanks for your help,

Yours sincerely,

Dr Terry Honess
Director, Michael and Associates

INDEPENDENT HOME OFFICE STUDY ON CAR THEFT

The answer to the first question is essential, please ignore the other questions if you wish.

WHEN THE CAR WAS STOLEN, WERE VEHICLE WATCH STICKERS DISPLAYED?

YES

NO

(please circle your answer)

ANY COMMENTS ON HOW YOU THINK CAR THEFT COULD BE REDUCED?

.....
.....

If you wish to receive the results of this study – which will be by the end of the year, please give your name, address, and post code:

Name:

Address: Include Post code

.....
.....
.....

Many thanks for considering our request for assistance

Appendix D: Home Office – Car crime survey

INTRO: We are carrying out a short survey for the Home Office on crime prevention. We want to talk to Newport residents who are also car owners. Do you have a few minutes?

CHECK: NEWPORT RESIDENT AND CAR OWNER. IF NOT BOTH, DON'T INTERVIEW.

How many cars do you *own*?

IF MORE THAN ONE CAR, ASK THEM TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN RESPECT OF THE ONE THEY USE MOST.

What is the make, model and year (reg.) of your car?

Make/Model: Year/Reg:/.....

DRIVING HABITS

How often do you use your car?

- 1 — Every day
- 2 — Several times a week
- 3 — Once a week
- 4 — Less than once a week

What time of day do you tend to use your car most?

- 1 — Mainly daytime
- 2 — Mainly evening
- 3 — Mainly night-time

Where do you tend to park your car . . .

...during the day (long periods)? (E.g., whilst in work)

- 1 — Main street
- 2 — Side street
- 3 — Estate parking
- 4 — Carpark not open to public
- 5 — Open public carpark
- 6 — Multi-storey carpark
- 7 — Other:

In *which* street/area/carpark does this tend to be?
ONE ANSWER ONLY

.....

IF 1, 2, 3 OR 4 ONLY: Are you able to “keep an eye” on it?

- 1 — Most of the time
- 2 — Some of the time
- 3 — None of the time

...during the day (short periods)? (E.g., popping down to the shops)

- 1 — Main street
- 2 — Side street
- 3 — Estate parking
- 4 — Carpark not open to public
- 5 — Open public carpark
- 6 — Multi-storey carpark
- 7 — Other:.....

...overnight

- 1 — Main street
- 2 — Side street
- 3 — Estate parking
- 4 — Cat-park not open to public
- 5 — Driveway of house
- 6 — Own garage
- 7 — Cul-de-sac
- 8 — Other:.....

In which street/area/carpark does this tend to be?
ONE ANSWER ONLY

.....

How often do you leave your car unlocked?

- 1 — Often
- 2 — Occasionally
- 3 — Rarely
- 4 — Never

Does anybody else regularly drive your car?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

IF YES: What is the age and sex of other driver(s)?

IF MORE THAN ONE REG. DRIVER, NOTE BELOW AGE AND SEX OF EACH

- 1 — Age Male/Female
- 2 — Age Male/Female

SECURITY FEATURES

Which of the following security features does your car have?

- | | Yes | No | |
|---|-----|----|-----------------------------|
| 1 | — | 2 | Window etching |
| 1 | — | 2 | Krooklock/autolock |
| 1 | — | 2 | Alarm |
| 1 | — | 2 | Stickers (OTHER THAN VW) |
| 1 | — | 2 | Locking wheel nuts |
| 1 | — | 2 | Isolation switch |
| 1 | — | 2 | Other: IF VW, CODE 01 |

INCIDENTS OF CAR THEFT

Have you had your car stolen in Gwent within the last five years?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes: number of times?

IF NO: GO TO NEXT PAGE: *VEHICLE WATCH MEMBERSHIP*

IF MORE THAN ONE THEFT, ASK DETAILS ABOUT MOST RECENT

When was it stolen?monthyear

What at time of day?

- 1 — Daytime (after 5am, before 6pm)
- 2 — Evening (after 6pm, before 12pm)
- 3 — Night (after 12pm, before 5am)
- 4 — Don't know

Where was it stolen from?

- 1 — Main street
- 2 — Side street
- 3 — CarPark not open to public
- 4 — Open public carpark
- 5 — Multi-storey carpark
- 6 — Driveway of house
- 7 — Own garage
- 8 — Other:

What was the make, model and year of the car stolen?

Make/Model:/..... Year/Reg:/.....

Did it have any of the following security features at the time?

- | Yes | No | |
|-----|-----|-----------------------------|
| 1 — | 2 — | Window etching |
| 1 — | 2 — | Krooklock/autolock |
| 1 — | 2 — | Alarm |
| 1 — | 2 — | Stickers (OTHER THAN VW) |
| 1 — | 2 — | Locking wheel nuts |
| 1 — | 2 — | Isolation switch |
| 1 — | 2 — | Other: IF VW. CODE 01 |

VEHICLE WATCH MEMBERSHIP

Are you a member of Vehicle Watch?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

IF NO: GO TO NEXT PAGE: *NON VEHICLE WATCH MEMBERS*

When did you join?monthyear

Is your Vehicle Watch sticker displayed?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

IF NOT: Why not? FREE RESPONSE ONLY

- 1 — Haven't got round to it
- 2 — Lost the sticker
- 3 — Doesn't stick properly
- 4 — Fear of targeted vandalism
- 5 — Feel silly
- 6 — Worried about drink/driving
- 7 — Other:

Have you used your vehicle between 12.00pm and 5.00am since becoming a member of Vehicle Watch?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

IF YES: How often?

- 1 — 1-2 times
- 2 — 3-5 times
- 3 — more than 5 times

How many times, in total, have you seen police officers on patrol (in cars or on foot)?

- 1 — None
- 2 — 1-2 times
- 3 — 3-5 times
- 4 — More than 5 times

How many times have you been stopped by the police under the Vehicle Watch scheme?

- 1 — None
- 2 — Once
- 3 — Twice
- 4 — 3-5 times
- 5 — More than 5 times

REF. EARLIER ANSWER ON CURRENT SECURITY FEATURES

Did you add any of the following security features to your car at same time as or since becoming a member of Vehicle Watch?

- | Yes | No |
|-----|---------------------------------|
| 1 — | 2 — Window etching |
| 1 — | 2 — Krooklock/autolock |
| 1 — | 2 — Alarm |
| 1 — | 2 — Stickers (OTHER THAN VW) |
| 1 — | 2 — Locking wheel nuts |
| 1 — | 2 — Isolation switch |
| 1 — | 2 — Other: IF VW, CODE 01 |

IF YES TO ANY OPTION: Was this *specifically* prompted by your Vehicle Watch membership?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

What, if any, do you feel are the benefits FOR YOU of being a member of Vehicle Watch? FREE RESPONSE ONLY

.....

Does being a member of Vehicle Watch make a difference to how secure you feel about your car?

- 1 — Yes, much more secure
- 2 — Yes, a little more secure
- 3 — No difference
- 4 — Don't know

Do you think the Vehicle Watch scheme can be improved in any way?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

IF YES: How? FREE RESPONSE ONLY

.....

Will you continue to be a member of Vehicle Watch?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

IF NOT: Why not? FREE RESPONSE ONLY

- 1 — Police not interested
- 2 — Fear of targeted vandalism
- 3 — Feel silly
- 4 — Worried about drink/driving
- 5 — Other:

THANK YOU FOR HELPING WITH THIS SURVEY

For our records, would you mind telling me how old you are?

NON VEHICLE-WATCH MEMBERS

Have you heard of the Vehicle Watch scheme?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes

IF NO: THANK YOU FOR HELPING WITH THIS SURVEY

For our records, would you mind telling me how old you are?

IF YES: CONTINUE

What do you think it is for? FREE RESPONSE ONLY

- 1 — Don't know
- 2 — Police to keep a special eye on my car
- 3 — Like Neighbourhood Watch
- 4 — Reduce car theft
- 5 — Catch car thieves
- 6 — Other:

Do you think the Vehicle Watch scheme can be improved in any way?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes
- 3 — Don't know enough about it

IF YES: How? FREE RESPONSE ONLY

.....

Why didn't you join? FREE RESPONSE ONLY

- 1 — Didn't know enough about it
- 2 — Didn't get round to it
- 3 — Thought it was a waste of time
- 4 — Haven't thought about it
- 5 — Other:

Would you consider joining in the future?

- 1 — No
- 2 — Yes
- 3 — don't know

THANK YOU FOR HELPING WITH THIS SURVEY

For our records, would you mind telling me how old you are?

Appendix E. Comparison of parking habits of members and non-members

4A: Where parked for long periods during the day

		non-member	member	Total
1	main street	14	14	28 6.6
2	side street	23	20	43 10.2
3	estate parking	7	4	11 2.6
4	private carpark	57	41	98 23.2
5	open public carpark	65	5	118 28.0
6	multi-storey car	53	47	100 23.7
7	other	3	1	1 0.2
99	not applicable	4	19	23 5.5
		223	199	422

4A: Where parked overnight

		non- member	member	Total
1	main street	7	1	8 1.9
2	side street	46	32	78 18.7
3	estate parking	19	9	28 6.7
4	private carpark	3	5	8 1.9
5	driveway of house	80	72	152 36.4
6	own garage	60	77	137 32.8
7	cul-de-sac	6	1	7 1.7
		221	197	418

[missing data=4]

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