

# **Designing Out Crime**

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# 8 Police car security campaigns

John Burrows and Kevin Heal

## INTRODUCTION

Many police forces meet their responsibility for crime prevention by mounting publicity campaigns designed to inform people about the risk of crime and the steps that can be taken to prevent it. The study described here examines the effectiveness of a publicity campaign designed to encourage car drivers to lock up their vehicles.

Two basic assumptions underlie car security campaigns: first, that drivers who leave their vehicles unlocked invite theft, and second, that by disseminating information about the risk of theft, drivers can be persuaded to take more care to protect their vehicles. If publicity is to continue to play a central role in a bid to prevent crime it is clearly important to consider the validity of these assumptions.

Car security publicity is disseminated from two sources: from the police, and from the Home Office. Campaigns conducted by the police are typically local events, organised on relatively low budgets, but taking considerable advantage of the willingness of local authorities, firms, and news media to disseminate public service advice at little or no cost. With obvious reason, evaluations of police campaigns - mostly carried out by crime prevention officers themselves - have looked at the effect of publicity on levels of reported crime, though sometimes changes in drivers' car-locking behaviour have been monitored. Home Office campaigns, in contrast, are conducted by professional advertising agents at considerably greater cost; the task of evaluation here generally falls to market research organisations. The evaluation of the 1976 Home Office national campaign, unlike those undertaken by the police, was concerned primarily with the impact of publicity on drivers' attitudes and their knowledge of the risk of vehicles theft.

A considerable number of police campaigns are reported to have been successful in reducing autocrime<sup>1</sup>, for example, those in Sunderland (Sunderland Crime Prevention Panel, 1975), Southampton (Home Office, 1974a), Bolton (Home Office 1975a) and the West Midlands (Home Office, 1976a) are said to have reduced vehicle theft by varying degrees. However, in those instances where changes in drivers' locking behaviour have been evaluated as a measure of effectiveness, the evidence is conflicting. A short campaign of intensive publicity in Sheffield failed to raise the number of locked cars (Bright, 1967), whereas campaigns in Nottingham (Home Office, 1974b) and Bath (Home Office, 1975b) are reported to have met some success in achieving this objective.

A central difficulty in attempting to evaluate publicity in terms of its effect on

<sup>1</sup> Autocrime is defined in this report as taking and driving away, and theft from and of vehicles.

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crime arises from the need to predict normal variations in crime during a campaign, so that changes occurring outside this range can be attributed to the police activity in question. Few evaluations of police campaigns recognise the complexity of this problem: as a result, campaigns are conducted without controlling or taking into account extraneous influences on crime. Moreover, autocrime statistics are analysed without reference either to the changing pattern of another property offences in the vicinity, or to the incidence of car crime in comparable non-campaign areas.

Those studies which have investigated the influence of campaigns on drivers' propensity to lock their vehicles when leaving them unattended have similar drawbacks. From the information available, it appears that most police checks are made without any considered decision about either what sampling techniques are to be employed, or what steps are required to ensure comparability between samples. Nor is there evidence regarding the precautions taken to reduce the visibility of those carrying out checks, and so avoid the likelihood that these measure the public response to the checks themselves in preference to the publicity<sup>1</sup>, Bright's Sheffield evaluation, though in other respects a careful study, was based on an uncommonly low level of pre-campaign insecurity (6%)<sup>2</sup>, probably arrived at because in place of a single 'snapshot', security was determined by a large series of conspicuous police checks in the same area. Furthermore, few evaluations encompass a series of checks designed to identify how rapidly car drivers respond to police advice and the duration of this effect.

The results of previous evaluative efforts, therefore, offer no clear indication as to the effectiveness of police advertising campaigns. Similarly, the results of the 1976 national campaign have been subject to various interpretations. There is evidence that this campaign, conducted at a cost of some £250,000, led to an improvement in drivers' attitudes to car locking, and to drivers' knowledge of the risk of car theft (Research Bureau Limited, 1977), but, from the relatively small-scale survey of vehicles carried out, it appears that this desired improvement in attitude was not translated into improved locking behaviour. There is, moreover, no clear evidence that car theft was reduced as a result of the campaign: there was a minor fall in the incidence of offences of theft and unauthorised taking during 1976, but there is no strong evidence to support the view that this should be attributed to the campaign. The fact that some comparable property crimes remained stable in 1976, and that vehicle thefts were higher during the campaign quarter than in the preceding quarters, seems rather to contradict this explanation.

The study reported below seeks to explore the same questions as these previous

<sup>1</sup> Of course the police may use vehicle checks to publicise the extent of vehicle insecurity; reference here is to checks carried out purely for evaluative purposes.

<sup>2</sup> This was certainly lower than any level recorded by campaign evaluators in similar pre-campaign daylight checks: Research Bureau Limited (1977) found 35% of the vehicles they checked insecure in some way, and the police in the Nottingham area showed "an average as high as 37 to 40%", vehicles were left insecure" prior to the campaign in this area (Home Office, 1974b).

evaluative efforts, but under more rigorous research conditions. Its aim was to examine, by means of controlled experiment, the effectiveness of a typical police campaign both in reducing car crime and in improving drivers' locking habits. It was thought necessary to take account of crime statistics as well as levels of security since, even if the latter did not improve, crime levels might have declined as a result of potential offenders being deterred by the attention given to autocrime.

### EXPERIMENTAL CAMPAIGNS

The value of the controlled experiment has been widely discussed by both criminological (e.g. Clarke and Cornish, 1972) and advertising research authorities (e.g. Bloom and Twyman, 1978). The experiment described here shares many of the characteristics, and the difficulties, associated with this type of research, above all the need to control for extraneous variables likely to influence the results obtained; in contrast, however, there has been little need to come to terms with many of the critical issues of design and methodology particular to more complex experiments. Thus, to take an example, while penologists have to consider the variety of aims served by penal treatments, the police aim in mounting security publicity is not so diffuse, the behavioural response of the public quite easily monitored, and in place of the more intractable ethical and practical problems involved in allocating offenders to different treatment - the research has to face the less complicated task of randomly sampling vehicles during checks carried out in the campaign area.

The controlled experiment has, of course, been used a great deal to measure the effect of advertising campaigns (see Caffyn, 1977). It has been pointed out, nonetheless, that it is inappropriate to undertake short-term evaluations in certain circumstances, for such studies are not a reliable means of measuring long-term effects (particularly in the case of campaigns dealing with themes of sustained public concern, such as smoking), or of effects apparent only after a lapse of time (the 'sleeper' effect).

For a number of reasons, these arguments were thought to carry less weight with regard to police campaigns designed to promote car security. Although campaigns of this nature may be an enduring aspect of the crime prevention officer's work, in any one area this matter is only publicised occasionally; the issue, therefore, receives only irregular publicity that is unlikely to produce a gradual change in public attitudes. There appears, moreover, to be little reason why any effects of these campaigns should be delayed; whereas the smoker, when short of money or ill, may have cause to reconsider his initial negative reactions to publicity, the car driver is passed only a simple message, and is likely only to reconsider his initial negative reaction after he or an acquaintance become victims of theft themselves.

The most common charge, however, to be made against publicity experiments of any type is that general implications cannot be drawn from the findings of any one study, for the response of the public is largely dictated by the creative content

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of advertising material and campaign expenditure levels. Although the apparently contradictory results of research on other social persuasion campaigns stand witness to the validity of this assertion, it is held here that in the case of car security campaigns it has less force. Notwithstanding the occasional publicity gimmick produced by the police to highlight the issue, most campaigns conducted by the police vary little either in the media sources used or in the message transmitted, and in the majority of cases forces use the same publicity material provided free by the Home Office. The principal objective of the experiment described here was to evaluate a police campaign conducted along these conventional lines.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign was conducted in Plymouth (population 300,000, approximately) over a five week period between mid-November and mid-December 1977). Although not excessive by the standards of some other cities of comparable size, its level of autocrime was seen by the police to be one of its more pressing problems<sup>1</sup>. Several features of the city made it an excellent site for the experiment: it coincides with a single police division with an active crime prevention department, and possessing an independent radio station together with two daily and two weekly newspapers, each enthusiastic to assist police efforts-it offered a wide range of outlets by which the campaign message could be disseminated.

In order to satisfy the requirements of the sampling design (discussed below), a great deal of the campaign publicity was concentrated within the high-risk areas for autocrime offences. These were identified by an analysis of autocrime in the area carried out before the campaign; the areas selected comprised approximately one third of the city, and included the whole of the city centre; within the selected areas the police distributed posters and handbills. In addition, extensive coverage of the campaign was provided by the press, the local radio station, and television, by which means the campaign message was disseminated well outside the city boundaries. It was assumed that those resident in the central area, subject to the publicity from each of these sources, would be those most aware of the existence of the campaign.

Publicity material from all these sources was devised with a view to gaining maximum impact of the campaign message; it referred to the level of crime in the locality, the high risk points, the types of vehicle at risk, notable instances of car crime recently reported to the police, and to the negligence of many victims. The publicity generated by both the media and the police was considerable: total press coverage for the campaign comprised 109 column inches, much of it headline space, and radio/TV coverage ranged from short mentions in news bulletins to a 'talk-in' programme involving crime preven-

<sup>1</sup> In 1977, 1,035 unauthorised takings and thefts of vehicles, and 973 thefts from vehicles, came to the notice of the police in the city division.

tion officers. A total of 5,000 handbills were distributed (outlets ranging from garages and motorists' spare parts shops to clubs and post offices); over 140 posters were placed at strategic points in central car parks (particularly close to payment meters) and garages; and the 'talking car', a vehicle used by the police to publicise crime prevention advice<sup>1</sup>, toured central areas on five occasions.

The cost of the campaign is difficult to assess. The local media offered extensive editorial and programme support free of charge<sup>2</sup>, on condition that the information was newsworthy. The direct cost of the campaign to the police was therefore nominal, and was restricted primarily to charges made for the printing of posters and handbills. Indirect costs, of police time engaged in making arrangements for publicity, distributing advertising material, or manning the 'talking car', were undoubtedly the principal component of the total cost incurred. Four divisional crime prevention officers were engaged in varying degrees for the duration of the campaign, as was to a lesser extent the time of crime prevention officers and press officers at the police headquarters.

## METHOD OF EVALUATION

Two measures were used to monitor the impact of the campaign: levels of car security, and autocrime statistics. These are discussed in turn.

### Security levels

In order to measure changes in the level of car security, checks were carried out at various stages of the campaign. These were made by four teams comprising one uniformed policeman and one researcher; they were carried out:

- i. on the day preceding the start of the campaign<sup>3</sup>;
- ii. at the close of the second week;
- iii. at the close of the fourth week; and
- iv. at the end of the campaign.

Each check was conducted along the same route in the high risk central area of

<sup>1</sup> The 'talking car' is fitted with most available security devices, and a public address system. Manned by a police officer, it is generally employed in busy shopping or office areas to provide the public with security advice.

<sup>2</sup> This is not always the case in the metropolitan areas primarily because of the increased cost of news space and the fact that other local news is likely to be more sensational. The 1977/78 Metropolitan Police security campaign, for example, incurred a bill of £96,000 (direct cost alone).

<sup>3</sup> Despite careful briefing of the police, two newspapers and the local radio station gave premature notice that the police intended to conduct a campaign. The police were able to prevent further publication, and the amount published amounted to little more than a routine reminder to the public of the dangers of leaving their cars unlocked.

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the city and covered 1,000 cars or non-commercial light vans parked there, an estimated 5% of those in the area<sup>4</sup>.

For a number of reasons - not least that the majority of autocrime offences are carried out under cover of darkness - these checks were conducted in the evening between the hours of 6 and 10 p.m. This reduced the visibility of the police officers carrying out the checks and the impact their activity might have had on drivers<sup>1</sup> behaviour. Each police/researcher team was allocated a fixed route measuring approximately four miles, along which they checked the doors, windows and boots of 250 vehicles. In the absence of detailed local authority plans showing the distribution of vehicles in the evening period, each pair was directed to make a random selection of the vehicles checked. There were two constraints on this selection: a predetermined number of vehicles were to be selected from designated car parks along the route (the capacity of the park dictating the numbers chosen), and each route was divided into five equal sections, from each of which 50 vehicles were to be checked. Teams finding vehicles insecure were directed to record the make, model and registration details of that vehicle, the source of insecurity, and its parking location.

On the third check the teams recorded these details for all the vehicles checked (whether insecure or not). The information gathered enabled the researchers to distinguish the respects in which vehicles left insecure differed from those locked. In addition, by this means it was possible to confirm that the vehicle sample covered a representative cross section of cars in the area.

### **Autocrime statistics**

The crime statistics analysed were principally drawn from the records of offences known to the police. The incidence of autocrime committed in the city division during the time of the campaign was compared with that in the preceding year. The incidence of burglary was then examined as a suitable indicator of the general pattern of crime in the area, and, as a further control, the pattern of autocrime in the campaign division was compared with that in two otherwise similar towns completely removed from the influence of the campaign.

In order to examine the possibility that there was either physical or temporal displacement of autocrime during the campaign period, a detailed analysis of crime complaint forms was necessary. To this end, information was extracted about the physical and temporal distribution of autocrime between September 1976 and February 1977, and compared with similar data extracted for offences committed during the campaign.

<sup>4</sup> There are an estimated 60,000 vehicles registered in the city (Department of Environment statistics); the checks were carried out on weekday evenings in the high risk central area where publicity disseminated by police effort (as distinct from that of the media) was focussed, which comprised approximately one third of the city area. Given the relatively low vehicle ownership in this area, the number of cars owned by residents was probably well below a third of the city total (20,000), but the presence of additional cars whose owners were enjoying central entertainment facilities probably brought the estimated area total close to this figure.

## RESULTS

### **Security levels**

There was no statistically significant change in the level of vehicle security recorded during the campaign. The security check made prior to the start of the campaign shows 19.0% of vehicles to be insecure - a proportion close to that revealed in previous security checks under similar conditions<sup>1</sup> - and checks during and after the campaign revealed levels of insecurity of 20.9%, 21.7% and 19.2%. In 51% of the cases of insecurity discovered, this was caused by an unlocked door, in 10% by an open window, and in 39% by an unlocked boot, or - in the case of estate cars - the tailgate to the vehicle; 17% of the insecure vehicles had more than one source of insecurity. The four checks were carried out under similar cold but dry conditions and the weather is unlikely to have prejudiced the results obtained.

These results suggest that the campaign had no measurable impact on the level of car security, and other data seem to support this inference. No relationship was found between insecurity levels and the parking location of vehicles, though the proximity of police posters in the central car parks would suggest that those parking there would be more likely to be aware of the campaign than other motorists. Furthermore, an analysis (carried out by using records held at Swansea to trace owners) of where the owners of the vehicles lived showed that those living within the campaign area were no more likely to have secured their vehicles than those from outside the city boundaries.

### **Autocrime statistics**

No significant change in the level of autocrime was recorded either during or after the campaign. The total number of offences committed (195) during the campaign weeks represented a 38% increase on that recorded (141) for the corresponding weeks in the previous year; this pattern was also found in the control areas where autocrime increased 32% on the previous year's total. The difference between the campaign area and the two control towns in this respect was not statistically significant. Although the level of autocrime fell during the opening weeks of advertising, this downturn was in progress before the start of the exercise, and was not dissimilar from the pattern of burglary offences recorded at this time.

A substantial part of the general rise in autocrime during the campaign was the result of high level of 'taking' offences<sup>2</sup>, these reached a peak during the final

<sup>1</sup> In 1971, six urban forces carried out security checks in co-operation with 'Drive' magazine. The checks were carried out on Friday evenings in April and - across the forces - revealed a 22% level of insecurity (Automobile Association. 1971). It should be noted that the daytime level of insecurity is - for a variety of reasons- likely to be higher (Research Bureau Limited, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Police records maintain the distinction between the unauthorised taking and theft of vehicles, all offences being recorded in the latter category until such time as the vehicle is recovered. Because other forces make this distinction upon different criteria, and in many cases there is no doubt a failure to amend records to the effect that the vehicle in question has been recovered, these offences were treated as one.

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week of the campaign higher than any other weekly figure recorded during 1977. None of the weekly totals recorded, however, fell outside the range of normal fluctuations that would be expected for this crime.

There is evidence that during the campaign autocrime offences were more likely to be committed under cover of darkness than in daylight. Despite the difficulties of estimating when many offences occur<sup>1</sup>, it is clear that - by comparison with the same weeks in the previous year - there was a statistically significant shift in the temporal distribution of these crimes during the campaign weeks ( $p < 0.001$ ), to the effect that more offences were committed in the early hours of the morning (see Table 8.1).

**Table 8:1**

**Autocrime: time of day at which offences occurred during the 5 campaign weeks and during the same 5 weeks in the previous year**

<i>Time period</i>	<i>Preceding year*</i>	<i>Campaign†</i>
0600-1200	22.1%	7.3%
1200-1800	17.9%	11.2%
1800-2400	35.0%	32.0%
2400-0600	25.0%	49.5%

\* 15 November to 20 December 1976

† 15 November to 20 December 1977

This change in the temporal distribution of crime may be attributed to the effect of the campaign itself, which could have persuaded offenders to act with more caution (cf. the response of car radio thieves to increased police activity reported in Parker, 1974) perhaps by fostering the expectation that the police were directing more attention to this form of criminality.

Alternatively, victims of autocrime aware of the publicity may have preferred to report that their vehicle had been stolen in the early hours of the morning, even if this was not so, rather than suffer the embarrassment of admitting that they had left their cars insecure or with expensive objects on display during the daytime. On the other hand, it is of course possible that the increase in offending during the campaign year led, at least in part, to the observed change in the temporal distribution of autocrime. It is conceivable that the higher proportion of crime committed between the hours of 2400 and 0600 was accounted for, say, by the activities of a gang of youths (possibly from an outlying suburb) who might have begun to frequent the city in the evenings during the year of the campaign.

Other features of car crime seemed unaffected by the campaign. There was no

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this comparison if the police or victim could not identify the exact time of the offence, this was treated as the mid-point between when the victim left the vehicle parked, and returned to discover that an offence had been committed.

evidence of the geographical displacement of offences outside the campaign area, nor did cars parked in different parking locations (such as streets, car parks, waste land etc.) become more or less vulnerable.

### INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

The findings of the present study are largely negative: first, during the campaign studied, police publicity proved to have no effect on drivers' locking behaviour; and second, its effect on autocrime was not to reduce it, but possibly to modify its form'.

It would be simplistic to attribute evidence of the ineffectiveness of the campaign solely to the standard of its publicity. Set against the expenditure levels of larger commercial concerns, the direct costs incurred by the police in the conduct of these campaigns are low; but in this instance there is no reason to believe that by spending more on publicity the police could have achieved better results (though this possibility cannot be entirely ruled out). Small interview surveys<sup>2</sup> were carried out on two occasions during the campaign; both these surveys recorded encouraging levels of public awareness, established at 67% and 71% of all local drivers. This compares extremely favourably with the levels of awareness achieved in the 1976 national campaign (Research Bureau Limited, 1977). Clearly a substantial number of car drivers do not comply with the advice given them by the police. This is generally construed by the police to be a sign of public complacency, but the explanation is probably more complex. This study, with others, provides evidence that not all insecurity arises from driver negligence; indeed, it suggests that drivers take into account a number of considerations when leaving their vehicles unlocked. It seems, for example, that the value of the vehicle driven may affect this judgement: evidence accrued in the experimental campaign shows that older vehicles are more likely to be left open. The perceived risk of theft over different lengths of time is doubtless another influence: several researchers (Bright, 1967; Research Bureau Limited, 1977) have noted that drivers intending to leave their vehicles for long periods are more careful to secure them. Similarly, the increased probability of car windows being left open during hot weather (Research Bureau Limited, 1977) is probably the result of drivers preferring to face the risk of theft rather than the discomfort of entering a hot vehicle.

Underlying these considerations is possibly the driver's judgement of whether locking will reduce the risk of car theft. Attitude research has borne out the view that many drivers, especially the young, are sceptical of the protection afforded

<sup>1</sup> Though it was noted on page 103 that the principal cost of the campaign was that of police manpower, the question of cost-effectiveness has not been closely examined. Nevertheless, the results of this research clearly suggest that little is to be gained from crime prevention officers conducting campaigns of this sort.

<sup>2</sup> These were carried out at random locations in the central shopping area. Having established that the respondent was a driver, the interviewer asked respondents whether they were aware the police were conducting a campaign, to describe the publicity material they had seen or heard (in order to distinguish the current impact from that of previous campaigns) and to state whether or not they lived in the city. Each survey covered 200 drivers, equally grouped by age and sex characteristics.

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by locking up their cars (Research Bureau Limited, 1977). To some extent these drivers are correct in recognising that car locking does not totally remove the risk of theft. Parker's (1974) account of the activities of car radio thieves in Liverpool, for example, suggests that many offenders do not regard conventional locks as any impediment. Several police reports have illustrated this point more forcefully by examining the ways in which those apprehended for theft and unauthorised taking offences gained access to vehicles: for example, Hampshire Constabulary (1977) and Sunderland (Sunderland Crime Prevention Panel, 1975) have demonstrated the widespread use of duplicate keys as a means of gaining access to vehicles.

A more likely explanation for drivers' failure to lock their cars may be that they probably do not share the authorities' view of the seriousness of autocrime. It is likely that most drivers are aware that the risk of having their car stolen is low; even the owners of older vehicles probably appreciate this fact<sup>1</sup>. Many drivers may also believe that the loss of their car will generally constitute only a temporary inconvenience (72% of vehicles stolen during 1977 in the Metropolitan Police District, for example, were retrieved within 30 days), and that if this is not the case the loss will be borne by insurance. To the extent that car - owners view autocrime from this perspective - and fail to consider the costs borne by the wider community in tracing and retrieving lost vehicles, or in paying increased insurance premiums - police appeals are unlikely to succeed.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CRIME PREVENTION

One important point to emerge from the various studies of autocrime is that it is not simply the 'professional'<sup>1</sup> who will take a secure vehicle. Though it is conventional to distinguish the opportunist, or casual, thief from his professional counterpart, it is questionable whether there are many opportunists who will take a car simply because they notice one unlocked. It is probably more useful to distinguish three types of offender; those who will take a particular vehicle whether it is insecure or not (the professional falls in this category), those who will look for insecure vehicles, but break into a car if an unlocked vehicle is not found, and those who steal only unlocked vehicles. Various police reports show that the size of this latter group is often exaggerated; arguably, most autocrime offences are committed by fairly determined individuals who will not be deterred if they fail to find an unlocked vehicle. The fact that most thieves steal a car with a particular aim in mind (most frequently, as a means of transport, cf. McCaghy *et al.*, 1977) would seem to support this view. So also does the fact that some makes of vehicle face an exaggerated risk of theft regardless of whether or not they are

<sup>1</sup> In the area of the experimental campaign, 85% of the theft and unauthorised taking offences recorded between September 1977 and February 1978 were directed at vehicles produced before 1971. If the life expectancy of these vehicles is set aside, and it is assumed that older vehicles throughout the country are equally as vulnerable, then the owners of such vehicles can expect to have their cars stolen once every 18 years (i.e. it can be calculated that during 1977 5.4% of the pre-1971 vehicles registered were subject to theft or unauthorised taking).

locked by their owners. Evidence from this study shows that although vehicles manufactured by Ford are less likely (given the numbers at risk) to be left insecure<sup>1</sup> than those of a number of other manufacturers, they are more likely to be subject to theft than others (see Table 8:2).

**Table 8:2**

**Proportion of vehicles subject to autocrime and proportion of vehicles found insecure, by make**

<i>Manufacturer</i>	<i>Autocrime</i>	<i>Insecurity</i>
Ford	42.0%	20.9%
British Leyland	39.0%	47.0%
Chrysler	6.2%	9.4%
Vauxhall (GM)	5.9%	8.4%
Other British	4.1%	2.4%
Foreign	2.8%	11.9%
	100%	100%

*NB:* For various reasons, the figures in the columns of Table 8:2 are not directly comparable. The figures in the first column refer to all autocrime offences committed in the campaign division (between September 1977 and February 1978). In contrast the insecurity figures, which represent the cumulative total of all vehicles found insecure in the four campaign checks, refer to insecurity in a particular area and at a particular time. While these points cannot be ignored, it is unlikely that they can account for the differences observed in the levels of insecurity from one make of vehicle to the next, particularly since the sample of cars on which the insecurity figures were based was representative of vehicles in the campaign division.

Common models of car appear generally to face exaggerated risks; it may be that these are attractive to thieves (particularly if fitted with comparatively unsophisticated door locks), but also these cars are less likely to attract police attention if stolen. Between September 1977 and February 1978, for example, the Ford Cortina accounted for 19.7% of all thefts in the study area.

If most autocrime offences are committed by fairly determined individuals, there is little prospect that the police can reduce autocrime simply by persuading drivers to lock their vehicles. Those who do comply with police advice are likely to reduce their chances of having their car broken into or stolen<sup>2</sup>. But, given that a comparatively large pool of unprotected vehicles will remain even after the most forceful police campaign, it is likely that offenders will instead turn to these

<sup>1</sup> One explanation for this is that recent models of Ford have been fitted with 'automatic' boot locks (i.e. the catch can only be operated by key).

<sup>2</sup> Baldwin (1974) has shown, from an examination of police crime records in Sheffield, that victims of autocrime offences were more likely to be careless in protecting their property than car drivers in general. Baldwin is, however, likely to have exaggerated the risk taken by those who fail to lock their vehicles. On the one hand his calculations were based on Bright's (1967) finding that 'typical' insecurity in Sheffield was of the order of 6% of vehicles, an improbably low estimate (see Introduction). On the other, his finding that about 34% of autocrime victims had left their vehicles insecure is much higher than the 16% found in similar exercise in Plymouth prior to the campaign. Nonetheless, because many may be unwilling to admit leaving their vehicles insecure, both these figures probably constitute minimum estimates of victim liability.

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more vulnerable targets, and that overall levels of autocrime will probably remain unchanged. The probability that autocrime offences would be displaced in this manner has been argued by Riccio (1974) in the United States, and strong supportive evidence supplied by Mayhew *et al.* (see Chapter 2) who demonstrated that the effect of fitting steering column locks in this country has simply been to displace crime from protected vehicles (now an estimated 71% of the private cars and vans in Great Britain) to those unprotected.

Another drawback is that even in the unlikely event that the police achieved total compliance from the public (thus removing any risk of displacement) car thieves would probably respond by adopting more forceful means of entering vehicles and, again, any significant reduction in autocrime would be unlikely. Given the high proportion of offenders presently using duplicate keys as a means of entry to vehicles, the probability that others would operate in this way seems high. This itself is a problem amenable to technical solution, for more sophisticated door locks, which are not so simple to break, are available at relatively low cost (Birmingham Crime Prevention Panel, 1977). But, without legislative requirement, it would be necessary to gain manufacturers' approval, and whatever the means used, the police would continue to be faced with the task of persuading motorists to use the locking devices fitted to their cars.

One solution to the problem of displacement and the need to ensure public compliance has been the development of 'automatic' locking devices such as the steering column lock. Although not able to prevent offenders breaking into cars, devices of this type have proved an effective means of preventing the unauthorised theft of vehicles fitted with them, and - when all vehicles have been equipped as in West Germany in 1963 (Bundeskriminalamt, 1973)- this benefit has extended to reducing overall levels of unauthorised taking. In addition more sophisticated locking devices such as these do not appear to be so susceptible to changes in offenders' methods of operation, though there have been some claims (e.g. Birmingham Crime Prevention Panel, 1977), as yet unsupported by firm evidence, that the initial impact of the steering column lock has diminished as ways of overcoming them become known<sup>1</sup>. There appear, therefore, to be some grounds for the optimism expressed in official circles that - though to date the level of unauthorised taking offences has not declined, and has instead been sustained by a dwindling pool of older, unprotected vehicles - as these vehicles are scrapped and replaced by vehicles fitted with steering locks so these offences will occur less frequently (cf. Chapter 2).

## SUMMARY

The study reported above examines the efficacy of police crime prevention

<sup>1</sup> If this proves correct, it may become necessary to rely on some of the increasingly sophisticated devices available (like microprocessors) to protect new cars (see Ekblom, 1979) for a discussion of such devices). For the present generation of vehicles, the solution may lie - insofar as 'breaking' is facilitated by lock wear - in including a check of the steering column lock among the requirements of the annual MOT check.

publicity as a means of reducing autocrime. The campaign evaluated did not succeed in persuading a greater proportion of drivers to lock their cars, nor did the campaign effect a reduction in autocrime. It was argued that part of the reason for this public intransigence may be that many drivers do not perceive the risk and the consequences of having a car stolen as that serious.

While the individual driver who locks his car when leaving it unattended may reduce the risk of it being stolen, the conclusion is reached that publicity campaigns in any circumstances are unlikely to result in a noticeable reduction in the level of autocrime. Most autocrime offences are committed, not merely in response to the opportunity offered by an unlocked vehicle, but by more determined offenders. Thus even in the event of a campaign reducing the number of unlocked cars, offenders are likely to counteract this either by directing their attention to those vehicles left unlocked, or by changing their modes of operation.