

Gypsy Cabs in Tønsberg – a Case for Problem Oriented Policing

Johannes Knutsson
National Police Academy
Norway

Knut-Erik Søvik
Vestfold Police District

Summary

Tønsberg, a small Norwegian town of 36,000 inhabitants, had developed a problem involving gypsy cabs operating on the weekends. A failure to solve the problem by means of conventional police methods, in combination with media pressure, motivated the local police to start a POP-project. The project began in the spring of 2003.

Scanning

Four methods of data collection were utilized.

1. Direct observation.
2. Record checks.
3. Interviews with passengers and persons affiliated with gypsy cab drivers.
4. A meeting with the Tønsberg Taxi Association.

In summary, gypsy cab drivers, many with criminal records, had more or less come to dominate the pick up locations that provided the best supply of passengers in the downtown area.

Analysis

Four causal factors associated with the gypsy cab operations could be distinguished.

1. A temporary shortage in the supply of means of transport.
2. A simple means of earning money.
3. The location of pick up areas for legal means of transport.
4. A lack of awareness among customers of the consequences.

Response

The proposed measures were:

1. Blocking off pick up areas used by gypsy cabs.

2. Making buses and taxis more accessible.
3. Introducing stiffer consequences for those caught driving gypsy cabs.
4. Informing suspected gypsy cab drivers about these consequences.
5. Informing the public about the risks involved and about legal alternatives.

Discussions with those actors most closely involved with the problem were initiated in October 2003 and all measures had been implemented by the end of December.

Assessment

The assessment consisted of four elements.

1. A new meeting with the Tønsberg Taxi Association.
2. Renewed observations.
3. Renewed interviews with persons affiliated with gypsy cab drivers.
4. A check of recorded acts of public disorder and assaults.

In summary, there were fewer gypsy cabs operating both less intensively and less obviously by comparison with the situation prior to the introduction of the measures. There were no indications of a feared deterioration in the public order situation.

In conclusion: the measures implemented had contributed to making illegal means of transport less accessible and legal means more accessible, with no unintended negative effects.

Introduction

Society creates opportunities for crime by shaping our different daily routines. Assaults in the wake of weekend entertainment activities is one example. Gypsy cab operations constitute another, recent phenomenon associated with the logistics of entertainment-related activities. One downside of this phenomenon is the victimization of passengers.

This forms the background for the Gypsy Cab POP project carried out in Tønsberg, a small Norwegian town of 36,000 inhabitants. For its size the town has a vibrant night-life, particularly in the summer.

A brief description of downtown Tønsberg

There are 30 licensed premises in the downtown area of Tønsberg, which is characterized by the way it is divided in two by highway 308. Tønsberg Bridge is situated directly to the southwest providing a large number of restaurants, pubs and other places of public entertainment. There are additional licensed premises and a couple of fast food restaurants situated above the highway. Since a large number of people pass back and forth along the highway in a more or less inebriated condition, traffic is rerouted from this part of the city on the nights of the weekend by means of a pair of barriers. See Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

The barriers are controlled by the police, who close off this section of the highway on Friday and Saturday evenings and open it up again on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Some of the area's parking lots are not available for parking at these times. Taxi cabs and buses do however have the use of this temporarily closed section of road.

The problem in Tønsberg prior to the initiation of the POP project

Gypsy cab driving is illegal in Norway. Drivers who get paid for transporting passengers without permission are acting in breach of Paragraph 4 of the Occupational Transport Act. Attempting to do so is also an offense. It is not, however, an offense to make use of such transport.

The problem in Tønsberg consisted of gypsy cabs operating on the weekends. According to the police, the drivers were for the most part non-Norwegians from immigrant camps. The police suspected that their activities were well organized, with a downtown kiosk functioning as a dispatch center. The definition of the problem was vague and mostly based on impressions and rumors.

The police carried out crackdowns as a means of closing down these operations. Since the activities took place at peak times, additional personnel were drafted in. Four crackdowns cost the equivalent of US\$ 62,000.¹ These appeared to have no effect on the problem. This failure, in combination with media pressure, motivated the police to try an alternative strategy, and it was decided to solve the problem using the POP-approach.

A team was organized under the direction of Police Constable Knut-Erik Søvik. Professor Johannes Knutsson from the National Police Academy was asked to function in an advisory

¹ To facilitate for American readers, costs are expressed in US dollars.

capacity. The project began in the spring of 2003 with seminars for all senior officers of the Vestfold Police District, and later on for those of middle rank. In the course of this process, Knutsson conducted on-site visits on a total of four occasions. The scanning phase was carried out in August, analysis in September, the response phase from October to December 2003 and assessment in April and May of 2004. A total of US\$ 15,000 was allocated to administer the project.

Scanning

In order to lay the ground for the subsequent stages of the process, the following questions were formulated:

- Where were the gypsy cab operations carried out from?
- How?
- At what times?
- By whom?
- How many cars were involved?
- What kind of cars?
- How much money was involved?
- How many crimes were committed?

Four methods of data collection were employed.

5. Systematic direct observation was used to establish the number of cars used, from where, how and at what times.
6. Record checks were conducted to collect information about drivers suspected of operating gypsy cabs and their cars, as well as about crimes committed.
7. Information about gypsy cab activities were gathered by means of interviews with passengers and other persons affiliated with gypsy cab drivers.
8. A meeting with the Tønsberg Taxi Association was arranged to provide insights into the legal taxi cab drivers' opinions of gypsy cab driving.

Observations

Nighttime observations were carried out on three weekends. Earlier experiences had indicated the central importance of three specific locations. The observations made from concealed positions revealed that two parking lots to the northwest of the center, as well as a section of a street at the other end of the area were being used as pick up points. The gypsy cabs did not show up until after 0.30 am and their activities continued until 4.00 am, with the most intense period of activity taking place between 3.00 and 3.30. Some drivers left their cars, walked towards the center, and returned with customers before leaving, while others waited in their cars. Many returned on several occasions to pick up new passengers. In some of the cars, another person accompanied the driver in the front seat. The location of the suspected dispatch center was observed particularly intensely. There were no signs that persons in the kiosk made phone calls subsequent to which cars came to pick up passengers.

The observers registered all suspected cars using following criteria:

- The car was parked and the driver was waiting in the car.
- The car was parked and the driver had left to get passengers.
- Passengers had been recruited by a person without a car.
- Passengers came from the kiosk or similar place.
- The car had been observed with passengers in the car.

In all, 52 separate cars were noted on 92 occasions. Clearly the criteria were too inclusive. In order to err on the side of caution, the following more restrictive criteria were then applied for a car to be classified as a gypsy cab: it had to have been observed on at least three or more occasions on the same night, or on at least two weekends, in accordance with the criteria described above. On the basis of this definition, the number of active gypsy cabs in late August was determined to be at least 14; a figure that should be compared to the 50 or so legal cabs usually in operation.

Interviews

Information relating to the names of passengers was obtained from the 42 cases of offenses against the Occupational Transport Act reported between June 2002 and September 2003. Of the 70 persons identified in this way, 47 (67 percent) were interviewed by phone. The passengers had an average age of 25 years. Sixty percent were males. The central findings are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Results from interviewed passengers (N=47)

Themes	
Riding alone	20 %
Availability as reason for ride	93 %
Amount paid	US\$ 15-46
Bad experience	21 %

Most of the passengers had ridden together with others, but one-fifth had traveled alone. For the vast majority, 93 percent, availability constituted the decisive reason for traveling by gypsy cab. Gypsy cabs were so much easier to get hold of. Most had paid between US\$ 15 and 23, with a maximum of US\$ 46 having been paid for a single journey. One-fifth of the passengers had had a bad experience. For some, the price negotiated had increased during the

journey, some had been threatened following arguments with the driver, and some were worried about reckless driving.

On one weekend night persons affiliated with gypsy cab drivers were interviewed. Contacts with respondents were established in the downtown area. The answers may be summarized as follows: an active driver could earn more than US\$ 150 per night. Some had regular jobs and others lived on social welfare. The best time for operating was between one and five o'clock. At most a driver could complete eight tours per night. The drivers often hung around the kiosk, picking up customers. Besides being motivated by economic gain, a few wanted to meet people and to relax. For some it was partly a means of making contact with females. They took advantage of women who had drunk too much and lost control.

Records check

The records check was limited to the same period as that described above and was focused on obtaining information about:

1. Persons registered for illegal taxi driving and their cars.
2. Cars recorded in the observation study and their owners.
3. Serious crimes committed by gypsy cab drivers.

Drivers and cars

A total of 36 individuals had been registered for providing illegal transport. Their nationality is presented in the Table 2.

Table 2. Country of origin of persons sanctioned for illegal transport provision in Tønsberg during the period June 2002 to September 2003. N=36.

Country	Proportion (%)
Iraq	44.4
Norway	13.9
Lithuania	13.9
(former) Yugoslavia	8.3
Iran	5.6
Somalia	2.8
Turkey	2.8
Sudan	2.8
Unknown	5.6
Sum	100.0

Most drivers came from the Middle East and particularly from Iraq. Of the 36 persons identified, 16 (44 percent) had a prior criminal record. Most common were traffic offenses (36 percent), acts of violence (19 percent) and crimes against property (17 percent). Four drivers lacked a driver's license. The majority came from communities near Tønsberg. Only one lived in an immigrant camp.

With the exception of six cars with Lithuanian plates, the cars were registered in Norway. They were on average 16 years old.

The backgrounds of the 14 cars classified as gypsy cabs in the course of the observations were as follows: ten came from outside Norway and four were Norwegian. Iraqis and Iranians dominated among those born abroad. Four had criminal records. Most came from other communities near Tønsberg. One lived in an immigrant camp. All cars had Norwegian plates. The average age of the cars was 15 years. This information corresponds to that obtained via the records check of persons sanctioned for illegal taxi driving.

Crimes committed during gypsy cab journeys

As a means of examining this question, checks were conducted of all complaints relating to assault, robbery and rape reported during the period referred to above.

One case of aggravated assault had taken place in the center of the city following an argument over prices. Two rapes had been committed. In one case the perpetrator was a man accompanying the driver and in the other the driver himself. In both cases, the perpetrator was non-Norwegian. During the period in question a total of six rapes were reported in Tønsberg involving strangers as perpetrators. Two gypsy cab drivers, both with prior criminal records, were reported for having robbed their passengers.

Meeting with the Tønsberg Taxi Cab Association

About 40 taxi cab drivers took part in the meeting. The association had complained to the police on several occasions and to begin with the atmosphere was rather tense.

Gypsy cab activities offended feelings of fairness since the gypsy cab drivers earned more. Regular taxi drivers had to work harder to produce the same net income. Gypsy cab drivers had more or less come to dominate the best pick up locations, with a better supply of passengers. This created the impression that few legal cabs were available.

The theme of acts of violence committed by gypsy cab drivers gave rise to heated feelings and a number of very serious crimes were described that had not been reported to the police.

Analysis

Four causal factors associated with the gypsy cab operations could be distinguished. Factors one, two and four are general, while factor three is specific to Tønsberg.

The four factors are:

1. A temporary shortage in the supply of means of transport.
2. A simple means of earning money.
3. The location of pick up areas for legal means of transport.
4. A lack of awareness among customers of the consequences.

Shortage of supply

Gypsy cab activities are concentrated to a few hours during the night at weekends and are linked to the way the entertainment sector is organized. Discos, bars, pubs and restaurants stop serving alcohol at 3.00 and close at 3.30 am. Within a short period of time, a huge crowd leaves to go home for the purposes of rest or for some other more interesting form of activity. The first factor is thus a temporary and instantaneous shortage of supply in the means of transport.

A simple way of earning money

This situation creates readily available opportunities to make easy money. The cars employed are for the most part old and cheap. Gross earnings may amount to approximately US\$ 150 for a couple of hours work and around US\$ 1,200 a month for those who drive every night on the weekends. During the summer and the Christmas holiday season, opportunities for profit are greater. The expenses involved relate primarily to gas. Since gypsy cab drivers do not pay tax on their earnings, the net income, considering the number of hours actually worked, is fairly high.

According to the information obtained from the customers, the prices varied from US\$ 15 to 23 per trip; prices that hardly differ from those charged by legal taxis. Thus gypsy cab drivers do not compete on price, which leads us on to factor three.

Location of pick up areas

For traffic safety reasons, the bus stand used by the night buses had been located at some distance from the Tønsberg town center. This had caused a reduction in the number of passengers using the night buses. The most important factor, however, was the location of the taxi station, which lay at a considerable distance from the downtown area where the gypsy cabs operated. See Figure 2.

Figure 2 about here.

Clearly, the gypsy cabs were much more accessible than the legal means of transportation.

The customers

It is not an offense to use illegal taxi services. That it might be dangerous to do so is probably not something that the passengers devote a great deal of thought to. They are in fact placing themselves at considerable risk of victimization. This is particularly true for single females, who may get raped. By using gypsy cab services, the passengers are also supporting an illegal activity, which may in the long run undermine the legal alternatives. The fourth factor is thus a lack of awareness as to the consequences of using gypsy cabs.

Response

The measures introduced to solve the problem were chosen to affect the contributory causal factors identified, namely the imbalance in the availability and supply of legal means of transportation by comparison with the illegal alternative, and low thresholds in relation to both the supply and utilization of gypsy cab services.

The proposed measures were:

6. Blocking off pick up areas used by gypsy cabs.
7. Making buses and taxis more accessible.

8. Introducing stiffer consequences for those caught driving gypsy cabs.
9. Informing suspected gypsy cab drivers about these consequences.
10. Informing the public about the risks involved and about legal alternatives.

Discussions were initiated in October 2003 with the following collaborative partners:

- Tønsberg City Council
- The National Road Authority
- The Tønsberg Engineers' Service
- The Tønsberg Taxi Association
- Norway Bus and Nettbus
- Tønsberg Car Parking and Europark
- The Tønsberg Social Welfare and Immigrant Offices.
- Vestfold County Council

Blocking off pick up areas for gypsy cabs

To block the pick up areas used by gypsy cabs, a longer section of the highway had to be closed off. This would then block access to two of the parking lots and the street used by the gypsy cab drivers to pick up passengers. It was also proposed that two parking lots located outside of this area – one already in use and the other a potential location to which gypsy cab drivers could relocate when their former pick up locations were put out of commission – ought also to be closed off during the critical hours. This last location was thus identified as a possible displacement area.

Both the City Council and the Road Authority responded favourably to the proposal involving the extension of the closed-off section of road. The National Road Authority provided US\$ 8,000 to sponsor these new arrangements, and the Tønsberg Engineers' Service contributed by providing manpower and material equivalent to the sum of US\$ 15,000. The companies responsible for the parking lots, Tønsberg Car Parking and Europark, accepted the move to make the lots in question inaccessible during the critical hours.

If these measures were put into effect alone, however, they might be expected to create a worsened situation involving prolonged waiting periods. Furthermore, if more people were to stay longer in the downtown area waiting to get home, this could give rise to an increase in the level of acts of violence and disorder. It was therefore important to make legal means of transportation more accessible.

Making buses and taxis more accessible

Moving the bus stand to a more central location and providing a new taxi stand closer to the downtown area, would make buses and cabs more easily accessible. Cooperation between the different cab companies could also bring about a more efficient use of their collective passenger capacity, shortening queuing times for customers.

It was decided to establish a new taxi stand at Tønsberg square. In order to utilize the total passenger capacity more efficiently, this stand was made available for use not only by local

cabs but also by others. The bus stand was relocated to the closed section of the highway near the kiosk. The concerns about traffic safety were no longer valid. See Figure 3.

Figure 3 about here

Following proposals made by the police, the bus companies also started to provide a night bus service on Friday nights. The Vestfold police force and the bus companies requested that the County Council subsidize this service. The county decided to provide compensation for possible losses up to a sum of US\$ 40,000 for the period from December 2003 until the end of April 2004.

Stiffer consequences for persons caught driving gypsy cabs

The Occupational Transport Act makes it possible for the police to award immediate and tougher sanctions than those previously employed by the Tønsberg police. Besides the ordinary US\$ 1,500 fine, use of the car may be prohibited for three months. It was decided to put this particular regulation into use. Other authorities had not been informed of the gypsy cab drivers' offences, which might involve consequences particularly for the non-Norwegian drivers. It was agreed that information about persons sanctioned for providing illegal taxi services should be passed on to the relevant authorities for further action.

Informing suspected gypsy cab drivers about consequences

Furthermore, a decision was taken to produce informational materials; one for suspected gypsy cab drivers and another for actual and potential customers.

In the leaflets for perpetrators, which were to be handed out to suspected gypsy cab drivers stopped by police officers, the possible consequences of the offence are explained. The leaflet is printed in Norwegian, Arabic, Kurdish and Albanian.

Informing the public about risks and the legal alternatives

A leaflet was also to be handed out to passengers in those suspected gypsy cabs stopped by the police. This leaflet contained information about the risks associated with travelling in gypsy cabs and about the night bus operation as well as phone numbers to legal taxis.

For potential passengers, two types of material were created – posters and small cards. The posters were placed in downtown locations on Friday afternoons and then removed on Monday mornings. These posters presented information about the risks of riding in gypsy cabs and about legal alternatives. The cards, which contained information about the bus and taxi services, were to be handed out by police officers to members of the public in response to queries about how to get home.

The logos of the bus companies, the Tønsberg Taxi Association and the police were printed on all the informational material aimed at customers. This material was financed jointly.

All measures were implemented by December 2003.

Assessment

The assessment consisted of four elements.

1. A new meeting with the Tønsberg Taxi Association.
2. Renewed observations.
3. Renewed interviews with persons affiliated with gypsy cab drivers.
4. A check of recorded offenses.

The meeting with the Tønsberg Taxi Association

Approximately 40 cab drivers and owners participated in a meeting to discuss the new situation. The vast majority claimed that the problem had improved considerably. A few had seen suspect activities at a location outside of the closed-off zone, but agreed that it was hard to know whether it was gypsy cabs or e.g. parents waiting to pick up their youngsters.

Observations

The observations were carried out over the course of two weekends. The aim of the first observation was to detect possible displacement areas and other locations being used by gypsy cab operators. This observation showed that there were a few gypsy cabs still around, although their activities were both much less intense and less obvious than before. These activities were noted at three locations; two northwest of the closed-off area and one on the other side. All three locations were observed during the second observation. See figure 4.

Figure 4 about here

The observations were restricted to the most intense period of activity – i.e. 1.30 to 4.30 am. These observations are not comparable with the pre-intervention observations.² To make them comparable, one weekend from the August observation has been selected and the same time interval is used as in the post-intervention observation. See table below.

² A second wave of post intervention observations will be carried out in August 2004 to examine long term effects over the more intensive summer period.

Table 3. Observations of three pick-up areas, 1.30-4.30 am. One weekend August 2003 (pre-intervention) and one May 2004 (post-intervention).

Period	Friday – Saturday		Saturday-Sunday	
	cars	rides	cars	rides
August 2003	18	28	6	12
May 2004	8	12	16	18

In view of the prior observation as well as information obtained by other means, the result may come as a surprise, with more possible gypsy cabs during the post-intervention Saturday-Sunday observation. It could be “summerbirds” from Lithuania that are trying to establish themselves at one of the spots. This particular spot southeast of the downtown area had earlier been very slow. It could call for an action by the police. Of importance is however the much lower frequency of rides per car. It should be pointed out that some of the observed cars are probably not gypsy cabs, but legitimate persons fetching children or friends.

Interviews with persons affiliated to gypsy cab drivers

There were simply no gypsy cab driver’s affiliates to be found. Interviews with hotel receptionists confirmed the changed situation. Even if some drivers still were active, the activity was not open and blatant as it was before.

The public order situation

One possible unintended negative effect of the intervention might involve an increase in public disorder and violence. As can be seen from Figure 5, there are substantial fluctuations in levels of both disorderly conduct and assaults, but it is difficult to discern any obvious trend.

Figure 5 about here

To check whether there has been an increase following the implementation of the measures, significance tests have been conducted for the periods January to April for the two preceding years, as compared to 2004. See table 4.

Table 4. Average number of assaults and cases of disorderly conduct in downtown area of Tønsberg, January to April 2002, 2003 and 2004.

	2002	2003	2004	Test of sign. 02 vs. 04	Test of sign. 03 vs. 04
Assault	6.75	16.50	12.25	n.s.	n.s.
Disorderly conduct	7.25	9.75	9.75	n.s.	n.s.

n.s. = not significant

Even if some differences may be noted, these are not significant, indicating that the public order situation has not in fact changed.

Conclusion

There are good reasons to believe that the efforts have been effective. The availability of illegal means of transport has decreased significantly while legal means of transport have become more accessible. There are no indications of a feared deterioration in the public order situation. The implementation of the problem-oriented approach has thus successfully helped the local police to reduce the gypsy cab problem in Tønsberg.

Project contact person: Johannes Knutsson
 Position: Professor
 Address: National Police Academy, Pb 5027 Majorstua
 City/State: 0301 Oslo
 Country: Norway
 Phone: + 47 99491255
 Fax: +47 23199901
 E-mail: johannes.knutsson@phs.no

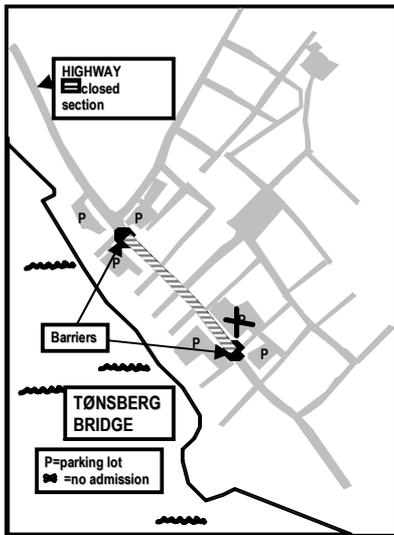


Figure 1. Downtown area of Tønsberg.

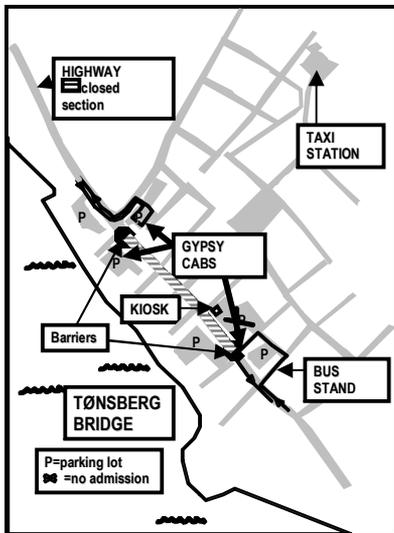


Figure 2. Downtown Tønsberg prior to the introduction of the measures.

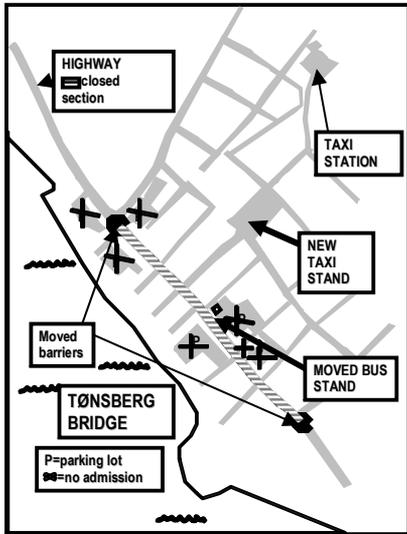


Figure 3. Downtown Tønsberg following implementation of the measures.

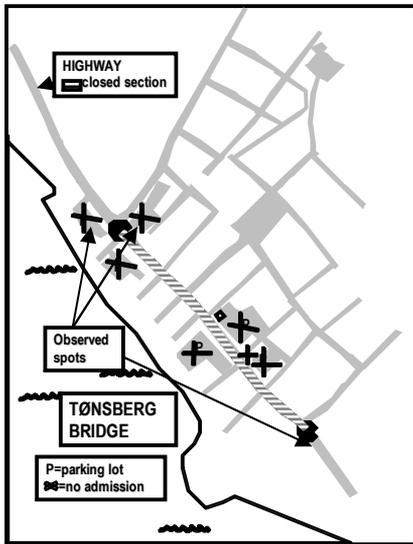


Figure 4. Observed locations.

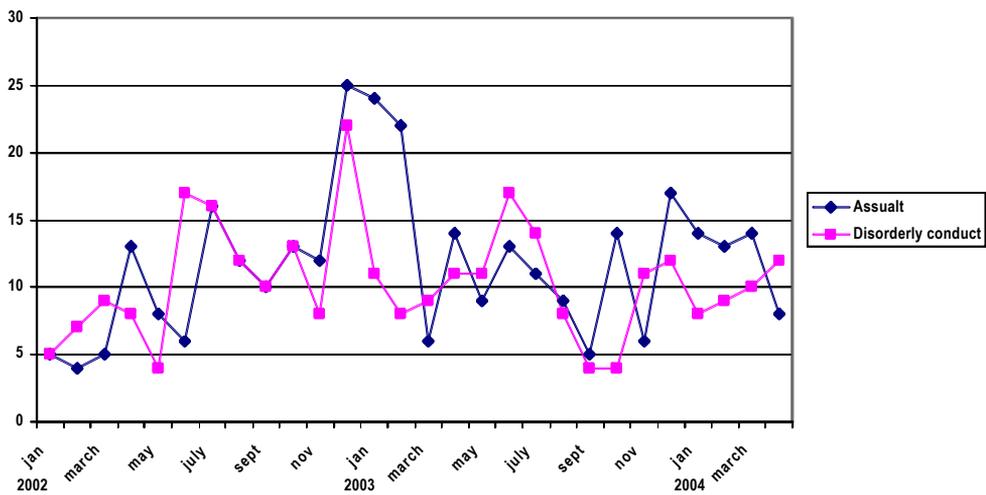


Figure 5. Monthly number of assaults and cases of disorderly conduct reported in the downtown area of Tønsberg, January 2002 to April 2004.