ORANGE COUNTY
SHERIFF'S OFFICE
AUTO TRAP

ABSTRACT:

In September of 1997, the statistical records of the Orange County Sheriffs Office Auto Theft Squad were examined to see how the squad could further impact auto theft. It was determined that not enough time was being spent physically looking for occupied stolen autos and arresting those persons responsible. Stolen autos were and are being used to commit other Felony Crimes such as armed robberies, burglaries, thefts, drug offenses, vehicle stripping, and participating in gang activity.

Our data showed auto thefts fell into several categories such as drug trades, chop shops, and thefts to commit other crimes. The one time "joy riders" were almost nonexistent.

Due to the thefts incorporating more violent activity, each causing significant financial loss to victims and insurance companies, a more proactive approach was created, "AutoTRAP". AutoTRAP's mission is to reduce the effect of auto theft and related offenses to the citizens of Orange County. By using aggressive tactical techniques AutoTRAP has recovered stolen autos and arrested the individuals responsible as well as educated the public on how not to become victims of auto theft.

A high liability area for all Law Enforcement Agencies is vehicle pursuits. AutoTRAP has allowed the Orange County Sheriffs office to recover stolen autos in record numbers without having to pursue the stolen vehicle.

AutoTRAP works by using Detectives in unmarked vehicles equipped with laptop computers seeking out stolen autos. Upon locating an occupied stolen auto, detectives will surveil it in hopes it comes to a natural stop. If this occurs the driver is confronted and arrested upon exiting the vehicle. Oftentimes the detectives engage in a tactical parking technique to stop the vehicle. For this technique, at least three detectives follow the vehicle until such time as one of the undercover police vehicles is in front of the stolen auto. The remaining two detectives follow behind the stolen vehicle. At a natural stop, such as a stop sign or traffic light, the vehicles all come to a halt. The undercover vehicle in front of the stolen vehicle backs up just making contact with the front bumper of the stolen vehicle. Simultaneously the undercover vehicle behind the stolen vehicle pulls forward making contact with the rear bumper of the stolen vehicle. The third undercover vehicle pulls along side the stolen vehicle at a 45 degree angle to the front driver's side wheel of the stolen auto. The vehicle is now "TRAPPED" and the driver/suspect can only exit back toward the second undercover officer. Since the cars involved are all stopped and moving only short distances no damage is done to any of the vehicles.

Since the inception of the AutoTRAP concept the overall productivity of the auto theft unit has increased. A statistical comparison of the two previous years shows a record number of arrests. In 1996 the Auto Theft Squad made 148 arrests, in 1997, they made 204, and in 1998 there was 426 (an over 100% increase).

DESCRIPTION:

In September of 1997, Lieutenant Al Rodrigues, General Assignment Commander for the Orange County Sheriffs Office, had the statistical records of the Auto Theft Squad examined to see how the squad could further impact auto theft. The squad's previous years, 1996 and 1997, statistics were examined. It was determined that not enough time was being spent physically looking for occupied stolen autos and arresting those persons responsible.

Orange County has grown in recent years and continues to do so. Along with it our criminal offenses have continued to grow as well. Auto theft has grown at an alarming rate and has not been reduced in over six years. Approximately 350 stolen autos are reported every month in Orange County. A solution had to be found.

Stolen autos were and are being used to commit other Felony Crimes such as armed robberies, burglaries, thefts, drug offenses, vehicle stripping, and participating in gang activity. Our data, showed auto thefts fell into several categories such as drug trades, chop shops, and thefts to commit other crimes. The one time "joy riders" were almost nonexistent. The data further indicated that the majority of stolen autos recovered were being done by marked patrol units and occurred after the stolen autos had been abandoned and often stripped by the thieves. They were already used in violent crimes or drug offenses, each causing financial loss to victims and insurance companies.

Two main areas of concern were noted during a brainstorming session held by Lieutenant Rodrigues with Auto Theft Detectives. One was the Orange County Sheriffs Office no pursuit policy for stolen autos. Pursuits are a high liability area for all Law Enforcement Agencies as they have the potential to endanger the public, Law Enforcement Officers, and the suspects. In 1996 and 1997, the Orange County Sheriffs Office suffered the loss of two Deputies in separate incidents that both involved fleeing stolen vehicles. The solution to combating the auto theft problem had to incorporate the no pursuit policy as well as provide a means for auto theft detectives to recover stolen autos and arrest the persons responsible. The second problem that was identified was "burning" our unmarked cars for surveillance and ultimately apprehensions by repeatedly using them in high crime areas. The suspects were able to identify our undercover vehicles and in doing so could avoid us as if we were marked patrol units. A solution offered was to get a rental car company to come on board and provide an assortment of vehicles on a regular basis to detectives in order to conceal who they are. That was accomplished when Budget and National Rent A Car companies agreed to work with us to fill that need. Although we assign our detectives unmarked autos having the rental cars available to change their look in high crime areas has proven to be successful.

We began to look at other programs currently used in Law Enforcement. Techniques like P.I.T. (Pursuit Immobilization Technique) and Box-Ins both involved the use of marked patrol vehicles and fleeing suspects. A ramming type move is required while the vehicles are in motion which puts the public, officers, and the suspect at risk.

Devices like "Stop Stix" and "Spike Strips", put officers at risk while trying to deploy

them and is how we lost one of our Deputies. "Tactical Parking" was the most attractive

to us and was being used in some agencies, but with marked patrol vehicles. Without

there being an example for us in the Law Enforcement Community to model ourselves

after we came up with our own technique, AutoTRAP.

AutoTRAP was implemented as a pilot program on September 20,1997, and ran through

October 1997. During that time span, three detectives were selected to step away from

the traditional reactive case investigations to hit the streets of Orange County and ferret

out *occupied* stolen autos.

Using intelligence gathered from known dumping sites, known auto thieves, frequently

traveled corridors, as well as incorporating the use of unmarked vehicles, undercover

attire, sound surveillance techniques, and good police intuition, Detectives Ralph Miller,

Pat Deans, and Carlos Espinosa sought to locate occupied stolen autos.

During that time period the detectives located 23 occupied stolen autos and made 22

arrests. Of the 22 arrests, several resulted in the clearing of associated offenses such as

Armed Bank Robbery, Robbery, and Burglary.   In 1998 AutoTRAP was implemented on

a full time basis. Today the entire Auto Theft Squad incorporates the AutoTRAP

concept.

So how does AutoTRAP work? Detectives, in street attire, driving undercover vehicles equipped with laptop computers capable of running vehicle tags and wanted persons scour the streets of Orange County seeking occupied stolen vehicles. Upon locating one such vehicle a minimum of three detectives surveil the vehicle in hopes it comes to a natural stop. If this occurs the driver is confronted and arrested upon exiting the vehicle. Oftentimes the detectives engage in a tactical parking technique to stop the vehicle. In this stop, our AutoTRAP stop, three detectives follow the vehicle until such time as one of the undercover vehicles is in front of the stolen auto. The remaining two detectives follow behind the stolen vehicle. At a natural stop (this technique is not a box-in technique utilized with moving vehicles) such as a traffic light or stop sign, the vehicles all come to a halt. The undercover vehicle in front of the stolen vehicle backs up just making contact with the front bumper of the stolen vehicle. Simultaneously the undercover vehicle behind the stolen vehicle pulls forward making contact with the rear bumper of the stolen vehicle. The third undercover vehicle pulls along side the stolen vehicle at a 45 degree angle to the front driver's side wheel of the stolen auto. Upon exiting the vehicle the driver can only exit back toward the driver of the second undercover vehicle. Thus the stolen auto is "TRAPPED".

AutoTRAP completed its first full year in 1998. A statistical comparison with the previous two years illustrates the success of the program.

1996
Total Assigned Cases............3611
Cleared by Agency......941.. ..26% of Assigned Cases
Physical Arrests by Auto Theft.. ..148 ...16% of Cleared Cases.. .4% of Total Assigned
Chop Shops........................2

1997
Total Assigned Cases...............3861
Cleared by Agency..........1356...35%   of   Assigned   Cases
Physical Arrests by Auto Theft.... 204…. 15% of Cleared Cases... 5% of Total Assigned
Chop Shops..........................4

1998
Total Assigned Cases...............3984
Cleared by Agency......1237.. .31 % of Assigned Cases
Physical Arrests by Auto Theft...426… .34 % of Cleared Cases...l 1% of Total Assigned
Chop Shops..........................11

Current 1999 UCR (Uniform Crime Report) statistics indicate a 2% decrease in Auto

Theft so far this year. This is the first decrease in Orange County in six (6) years.

No statistics exists for the intangibles that these many felony arrests of suspects in stolen

autos may be responsible for as we cannot account for the crimes that were deterred as a

result of their arrest. However, we do know that the vast majority of the suspects arrested

have lengthy criminal histories and many are career criminals.

Our concern with vehicle pursuits, has not been an issue. By having an adequate number

of detectives in the field to surveil the stolen autos most are followed to a location where

they stop and the suspect is arrested. When necessary the tactical parking technique

is used. Both methods have virtually eliminated pursuits of stolen vehicles. We know

that a marked patrol vehicle behind a stolen auto creates immediate panic in the suspect.

Should that patrol vehicle attempt to stop the stolen auto the suspects often flee. Since

we cannot pursue the suspect may escape or will usually abandon the stolen auto to be

recovered later but seldomly resulting in an arrest.

By using the AutoTRAP concept, the suspect is caught off guard while in the vehicle enabling for better prosecution. By the time the suspect is aware of Law Enforcement's presence he is caught and the vehicle trapped. This is particularly important to victims and insurance companies who often times learn their vehicle was recovered burned or stripped. In many cases the vehicles were damaged by the suspect in an attempt to flee from Law Enforcement. AutoTRAP has resulted in vehicles being recovered in excellent condition, thereby, drastically reducing repair costs to both victims and insurance companies.

The Orange County Sheriffs Office had to amend our training and thinking in order to account for this new way of combating auto theft. The Training Division now allows time for "In Service" training for all sworn personnel which includes an orientation of AutoTRAP. The Auto Theft Squad also created an information package to assist officers with Auto Theft Investigations. By educating our uniformed personnel, a stolen vehicle is not just recovered and towed without an arrest. Field personnel are now being trained to distinguish between an abandoned stolen auto that they should recover and a parked stolen auto that the suspect or suspects are likely to return to. In case of the latter, field personnel are now notifying Auto Theft detectives who respond to "TRAP" the vehicle should it move. The training also directs field personnel, canine, and air support as to what they should be doing while Auto Theft is following an occupied stolen auto. They have been trained to not get directly involved with the stolen vehicle or pay it any attention should they encounter it.

Instead they will parallel the Auto Theft detectives location and be available to establish an immediate perimeter should the suspect driver or any occupants of the stolen vehicle flee after they are "TRAPPED".

Achievements as a result of AutoTRAP:

- Arrests...............426 (an over 100% increase from 1997 and 150% from 1996)

- Grant Obtained totaling $ 150,000.00 (copy of grant attached)

- Training opportunities (informational package attached)

- Neighborhood Watch Programs and Public service announcements to increase awareness.

- Positive working relationship with two major Rental Car Companies (Budget & National)

- Chop Shops investigated and closed.... 11 (compared with 6 total for 1996 and 1997)

- Local and National Media Exposure... local news coverage about the success of our program has provided a forum to educate the public on Auto Theft prevention. In December of 1998, Dateline NBC filmed a documentary featuring AutoTRAP as an innovative means of combating Auto Theft.

- Winner International (manufacturer of "The Club") co-sponsor bi-annual Auto Theft Crime Prevention Rallies

Overall we have adopted a true team concept within Auto Theft and have raised the level of effectiveness, productivity, and service the community can expect from the Orange County Sheriffs Office Auto Theft Squad.

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Auto Trap Accomplishments

- Auto Trap has recognized numerous auto theft rings, and chop shops. Over the past year arrests for auto theft have increased dramatically.

	Recoveries	Arrests	Chop shops
1996	328	148	2
1997	369	204	4
1998	398	426	11