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# OPERATION FREEDOM.

*A Thematic Study of  
Vehicle Crime in the  
Pennine Division of the  
Lancashire Constabulary*

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**SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT**

Operation Freedom is a Divisional POP initiative, which was introduced in response to the high level of car crime in the Pennine Division. Extensive local targeting of known criminals had been taking place in pockets throughout the division both by individual officers and teams within geographic areas. Significant arrests had been made but no real sustainable impact was being made on the crime figures. The division as a whole, has historically not addressed car crime trends and the only real responses to car crime have been local and geographic as it has with other types of crime.

A team was set up to study the problem in depth and respond with a strategy to tackle car crime in the short, medium and long term. The first six weeks were spent on scanning, analysis and cataloguing a series of suggested responses. The team discussed the viability of the proposals, some were retained and used in the activity stage whilst others were rejected. The problem was examined locally, forcewide, nationally and internationally. Crime figures revealed the extent of the problem in the areas mentioned.

As a result of the study it was decided to try a new and innovative tactic in the battle against the car criminal, namely disruption at the point of disposal of stolen cars and property stolen from cars. Work has been done in the past on disrupting the criminal with little effect, the new intention being to break the link between theft and sale. If the Operation could show the criminal that they could not dispose of the property in Pennine Division then hopefully that would have an affect on the crime being committed in the first place. The second stage of the operation ran through the month of April 2000 when the tactics were put into operation by a dedicated team of operational officers, crime prevention officers and other support departments. The media were kept informed to highlight what was being done or going to be done. This had an immediate effect on the crime figures, which began to fall even though nothing was being done operationally. The results of the operation were analysed using crime information and this highlighted a significant decrease in car crime.

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## SCANNING

Pennine Division is the most easterly area of the Lancashire Constabulary. It has boundaries with the West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire and Greater Manchester Police Force areas as well as the Eastern division of Lancashire. It is a mixture of urban and rural areas with large expanses of moorland. Most of the towns in the division are connected by a system of linear main roads, which run from north to south and east to west.

There are three local Council areas operating within the division i.e. Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale. Burnley is the main town and is the site of the Divisional Headquarters. The Burnley council area also covers the town of Padiham. Burnley and Pendle councils have dedicated community safety officers, whilst Rossendale doesn't have any.

In the past, the police response to the escalating numbers of car crimes has been sporadic, only using short-term tactics such as executing warrants, dealing with car criminals in the cells and high visibility policing. Whilst there have been significant decreases in car crime as a result of this type of action the results have been short lived and car crime tends to increase once the particular targeted operation has finished.

Operation Freedom was instigated to combat the continuing high level of car crime in the Division. Each year nationally, one in five car owning households is the victim of car crime and the Home Office puts the cost of all vehicle crime at about £3 billion per year in raised insurance premiums and police time.

The 1997 Home Office figures show that nationally, vehicle crime accounted for 24 percent of all notifiable offences recorded by the police, and was the highest crime area.

Between January and December 1999, 23,412 crimes were reported within the Pennine Division of which vehicle crime accounted for 7,055 or 30 percent; by far the highest crime category.

The intention of Operation Freedom was to put in place a short-term strategy followed by medium and long-term proposals to tackle the problem. The particular offences, which the study looked at, were: -

Stealing from Vehicles (Home Office Class 0450)

Stealing of Vehicles (0480)

Criminal Damage to Motor Vehicles (058C)

## ANALYSIS

In late February 2000 a small team was put together to research car crime, the team consisted of a Sergeant, a Detective Constable, a Field Intelligence Officer, a Crime Prevention Officer and a Crime Analyst. They looked at the full extent of the problem in the division as well as how car crime was being tackled within the geographic areas, forcewide, nationally and internationally. They were looking for ideas and initiatives, which could be easily replicated and continued in the varying geographical areas of the division when Operation Freedom ended. As a result of the research, which took place in February and March, the team compiled a strategy, to be initiated in April 2000. The Home Office were approached and asked to provide details of national good practice and ongoing initiatives to tackle car crime.

Problems were soon highlighted with the first one being the lack of information in the Modus Operandi of crime reports, which was hampering thorough analysis of the reasons for the crime occurring.

Police officers are not required to attend scenes of car crime unless certain circumstances exist. As a result, the majority of people in Pennine division who actually record car crime are officers on the crime desk, communication operatives and the crime desk staff at headquarters. Bad recording procedures by police officers and support staff were identified, with non crime incidents being recorded as criminal offences such as road traffic accidents and wear and tear damage. A new MO system was devised which included the sort of information needed to allow full analysis to take place. It includes such detail as; where in the car property was left on view, whether a garage was available and expiry dates of driving documents. The MO system was taken into use by the crime desks and was published on the Intranet for use by officers in the division.

The next step was to obtain evidence from the victims of crime and in order to achieve that we decided to send Traffic Wardens to every vehicle crime that took place during the period of the study. Some of the traffic wardens in the division have been trained to examine vehicles for fingerprints and have been doing so for some time. The rationale for sending them to every car crime within the study was;

- To obtain evidence. The study has shown that there is a one in three likelihood of evidence being available in attacked cars. This evidence would normally be lost.
- To help with possible reclassification of offences. The initial scanning has outlined that offences are being recorded as vehicle crime when, they are clearly not, such as shop windows being broken and road traffic accidents. The traffic wardens are able to help officers identify which reported crimes need further investigation for possible reclassification.
- Having traffic wardens or officers visit victims of car crime should increase public satisfaction and confidence. Officers would also be able to provide crime prevention advice which could help the victim from being targeted again.
- A further reason for sending the traffic wardens was to improve their capability of lifting fingerprints successfully and obtaining convictions as a result. Since these visits have taken place, the wardens have identified areas where crime prevention methods can be put in place to prevent revictimisation. For example, faulty cameras on a hospital car park need repairing and areas of poor lighting need improvement.

Fingerprints of core nominal targets and others entering the intelligence system as a result of the operation are forwarded to the Fingerprint Bureau on a weekly basis to try to match them to fingerprints lifted by the traffic wardens.

Therefore the next stage was to send the analyst on prison visits to collect evidence of how a criminal thinks and acts when committing car crime. This information could then be used when analysing future crime.

In order to make the study realistic, the team needed information on how a thief operates. Why they target certain vehicles and not others, and what, if anything, will deter them from attacking a vehicle? Intelligence interviews took place with people in custody where, all custodial formalities had taken place. Also, non-custodial voluntary interviews were conducted. As a result, an offender profile was compiled which showed that there are two main types of car criminal in Pennine Division: -

- Thieves who target car parks in the daytime and will break into the car and/or check to see if the boot is insecure.
- Those who will break into cars when it is dark and the cars are parked at or near to the victims home.

On one of the car parks in Burnley town centre it was identified that there were two reasons why vehicles being parked there were being targeted. The first was that the CCTV cameras in use did not

have covers on so that the thief could see the sweep of the camera and time their actions accordingly. The second was that the car park was surrounded by fairly high shrubbery, which acted as a cover for the thief and was also used to hide property after the theft had taken place. In March 2000 a new maintenance agreement was reached with Burnley Borough Council which reduced the height of the shrubs to two feet and since then there has been no reported crime on the car park. Discussion with the criminals has revealed that they are highly unlikely to target an area where a CCTV camera, which has a cover hiding the camera is located.

The study has shown that criminals are less likely to attack vehicles with flashing dashboard lights. The team worked with local businesses to raise sponsorship for crime prevention initiatives such as these devices. Free vehicle etching days have been organised where members of the public can have an identifiable mark etched on the windows of their vehicles. Further bids for sponsorship have been placed with other groups such as CrimeStoppers and the Lancashire Partnership Against Crime. Other initiatives such as Coded Car Scheme and Tamper proof Tax Disc Holders will also form part of the programme.

Tutorials were arranged involving the Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service and the Intelligence Units which members of the team attended. The subjects included burnt out vehicles and new forensic techniques including the swabbing of the interior of vehicles to gain DNA evidence. As well as local tutorials, members of the team visited Bristol to look at Operation Impact, (a long running vehicle crime initiative) and Cambridgeshire where they have a training module for officers which concentrates specifically on car crime.

Trade magazines and newspapers were regularly scanned for intelligence information on known car criminals offering vehicles and vehicle parts for sale. Aerial photographs of the division were obtained to assist in hot spot identification rather than having to look at a map for locations. In the same vein a digital camera was obtained and used to photograph target premises prior to execution of warrants in order to avoid causing possible damage to the wrong premises.

As a result of the research a short term, four-week targeting operation was devised supported by medium and longer-term initiatives. The four-week period was the month of April 2000.

The following figures give a snapshot of the extent of car crime in the division as the research part of the operation started. At this stage there were eight sections in the division, this reduced to six from 1 April as FE (Colne) incorporated FF (Barnoldswick) and FL (Rawtenstall) now takes in FK (Haslingden).

20-28 <sup>h</sup> Feb	FA 49 FB 22 FE 26 FG50 FF 7 FJ 21 FK9 FL15	29 <sup>h</sup> Feb-6 <sup>a</sup> Mar	FA 51 FB 19 FE 19 FG IS FF 3 FJ 9 FK6 FL15	7-13 <sup>01</sup> Mar	FA 30 FB 14 FE 22 FG40 FF 4 FJ 17 FK9 FL8
Total	199		136		144
14-20 <sup>h</sup> Mar 38	FA 40 FB6 FE 18 FG21 FF0 FJ 8 FK 5 FL 6	21-27 <sup>t</sup> Mar	FA 53 FB11 FE 29 FG30 FF 4 FJ 14 FK 5 FL 3	28 <sup>h</sup> Mar 4 <sup>t</sup> April	FA FB12 FE 14 FG19 FF 3 FJ 12 FK 1 FL 6
Total	104		149		105

FA = Burnley	FF = Barnoldswick	FK = Haslingden
FB = Padiham	FG = Nelson	FL = Rawtenstall
FE = Colne	FJ = Bacup	

As can be *seen*, there are no particularly logical patterns emerging although certain factors could possibly be attributed to the changes in the figures, such as a period of wet weather, half term and publicity generated by Operation Freedom. The weekly average figure for car crime over the 6-week period of the research is 139.50 with a high of 199 and a low of 104.

### **RESPONSE**

As a result of the scanning and analysis, it was decided to target the disposal sites of stolen property from vehicle crime. All the information from the offender profile tended to show that an impact could be made if efforts were concentrated on the point of disposal. Both the thief and the handler could be disrupted at the same time by targeted police activity. In the past, attention has been paid to the thief rather than the handler or buyer of stolen goods. The information from the profiles indicated that disruption of the market for stolen goods should be the aim of the Operation to tackle it from a different angle. Indeed as a result of information received from the interviews two new handlers of stolen goods emerged who we did not know about.

Updates were put on the force Intranet and Internet to keep people informed of the direction of the operation and any progress achieved. Presentations on the proposed actions were given to all the Inspectors in the division and each geographic area was asked to provide two officers on temporary secondment to the Operation. Two sergeants were seconded to lead the operational part of the project and a traffic officer was identified to assist with high visibility policing and to co-ordinate the response from that department.

Presentations were also given to operational officers as well as support staff; to increase their knowledge and awareness of the reasoning behind Operation Freedom. Results and feedback sheets were designed for use by operational officers to identify potential problems, which could be dealt with quickly.

The proposed short term four week actions starting on Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> April were as follows: -

- Maximum publicity of the Operation and its intentions through the regional media, including newspapers, radio and teletext. This was for two reasons, firstly to inform the public and secondly to let the criminals know that we were targeting them.
- Execution of Intelligence led warrants based on information collated during the initial stage of the study
- Development of Intelligence gained as a result of the execution of the warrants mentioned.
- Visit all core criminals personally to inform them about the Operation and at the same time warn them that they are being targeted by officers from the team
- Visit all second hand dealers in the division in uniform to heighten the police presence to potential sellers and for intelligence purposes.
- All operational staff were asked to feed into the intelligence system details of all vehicles where the value of the car radio for example far exceeds the value of the vehicle. It is likely that such property will have been stolen.

High visibility stop checks at identified hot spots, both mobile and stationary. These checks would concentrate on taxis which criminals are known to use for transport to and from crime scenes. In particular information relative to tax discs, which are commonly stolen items from vehicles and use of police powers to take the unroadworthy vehicles of known car criminals off the road.

Covert and uniform patrolling of canals as it is now known from the Operation Freedom study that the criminals use the canals to get to vehicles which they then attack and they also hide stolen property along the canal bank.

- A daily map from the analyst showing any hot spots from the previous day's reported crime as well as the modus operandi details.
- High visibility policing at the hot spots identified above.
- A flyer was devised which gave an "in your face" warning to all persons charged with car crime and released on bail. It warned that Operation Freedom officers were watching them and informed them of the consequences should they breach their bail conditions.
- Photographs of known offenders were displayed on posters in the custody office with a request to ask to speak to a police officer if detainees had any information about them which they wished to divulge.

During weeks two and three from Monday 1.0 April until Sunday 23 April the following actions were introduced to support the work from the first week.

- Scrap yards and vehicle dismantlers were visited for intelligence purposes
- Use of the Automatic Number Plate Recognition System as well as Tracker in target areas as a result of activity during the first week
- Covert observations and uniform visits to public houses where it is believed that stolen goods are being sold
- Strict enforcement of bail conditions for all known core criminals as well as those arrested and released on bail during the first week. Presentations were made to the magistrates and CPS to inform them and ensure that applications for remand would be dealt with seriously.
- Maximum use of the media and publicity continues

All victims of car crime during January and February will be revisited with a view to gathering further intelligence. The vehicle criminal profile has shown that if you have a music system stolen from your car, then if you buy a second hand replacement, that is likely to have been stolen as well.

- All van hire companies were visited for leasing intelligence, especially those on the outskirts of the division in other force areas. Intelligence from those forces was used in the analysis.

Week number four was the last week of the short-term strategy. Daily briefings with the press continued with continuing regional press releases to target a larger audience via the Information Unit at Headquarters. Weekly meetings took place amongst the team members to discuss the progress of tactics, new intelligence that needed action and any lessons to be learnt from the previous week's activity.

The following actions took place during week four.

- Houses with garages attached were identified in hot spot areas by uniform officers and cards were passed on to the occupiers urging them to use the garage to park their car in.
- Plain clothes and uniform patrols were stepped up on the canals using dog handlers, mounted and the special constabulary. The helicopter was also used for high visibility policing in hot spot areas and the whole team working in uniform, with marked vehicles also increased the high visibility/stop check function.

- Garage repair shops, rally spare shops, car auctions and car boot sales were visited throughout the duration of the exercise for intelligence and to disrupt the point of disposal.

This stage of the Operation finished on Sunday 31 April 2000.

#### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Special attention had to be paid to the home matches of Burnley F.C. Historically it is known that offenders travel into the town to attack cars when the match is in progress.
2. Target disqualified drivers who are auto crime suspects for maximum disruption and discomfort. This tactic could not be used on this occasion but is worthy of consideration for the future.
3. Mobile CCTV was considered but was not available for use due to it being deployed elsewhere.
4. Multi agency targeting of disposal sites working in partnership with Trading Standards, Customs and Excise, Local Authority, Inland Revenue. The team passed on information to those organisations regarding an illegal moneylender who was exposed as a result of the Operation.
5. Q plate and V5 interrogation should take place locally, for intelligence and to disrupt suspected criminality in relation to the registering of vehicles.
6. Permanent marking of alloy wheels is recommended but the cost can be prohibitive to car owners.
7. A change in the law could be considered to make it an offence to leave a vehicle insecure or with property on view. This can perhaps be achieved, through the Staff Associations and may be put forward as a motion at the next Police Federation Conference in 2001.

#### MEDIUM TERM RESPONSES

- Car model and area specific potential victims have been identified and letters have been sent to them giving them crime prevention advice. We identified that the owners of E-G registered, Vauxhalls and Fords and T registered Citroen Saxo's were most at risk and all the owners of such vehicles received a letter.
- Photographs of convicted offenders are passed to supermarkets to warn their staff, primarily their trolley staff, to be on the lookout for these individuals. The photographs are updated on a regular basis.
- Outside broadcast radio interviews with reformed offenders are arranged with the interviewing highlighting the type of car that they would break, into, why they would attack it and what would deter them.
- Letters are sent to the Automobile Association, Green Flag and the R.A.C. keeping them informed about the operation and asking their staff to be extra vigilant when they are in the division and pass on any suspicions to the police as quickly as possible.
- Visit all victims of burnt-out vehicles for intelligence and to deter criminal activity.
- A major part of the strategy is the use of misinformation to the criminal either by the use of posters or newspaper, radio articles to indicate areas where police activity was taking place. In fact the real activity is taking place in other areas to provide a kind of blanket cover and also to

give the impression that there were more officers dedicated to the operation than the criminal believed.

### LONG TERM RESPONSES

- Free vehicle etching days have been arranged with local windscreen repair firms throughout the division. Theft proof tax disc holders will also be made available to the public free of charge and crime prevention advice will be given to the public by the traffic wardens who have been fingerprinting the cars as well, as crime prevention officers.
- Meetings have been held with the Community Safety Officers from the three local councils in order to discuss and progress the issues of -
  1. Removing " Long Stay " parking sign from towns in the division.
  2. How car crime fits in with the local Crime and Disorder Strategies
  3. Encouraging the development of further Secured Car Parks in the division
  4. The numbering of all parking spaces on car parks to assist analysis of crime
  5. The setting up of Crime Prevention Panels in the division to take new crime prevention initiatives forward using a Partnership approach.
- The use of mobile fingerprint kits by operational officers. They can easily be assembled for use by the scenes of crime department.
- Marking on the roof of vehicle trailers and caravans to make them readily identifiable from the air for use in a campaign similar to vehicle watch.
- Use of Rat Trap vehicles, together with SMART water. Hopefully using a T registered Citroen Saxo.
- Misinformation that Rat Trap vehicles are in use in hot spot areas.
- Clamping and removal of targets vehicles.
- Crime Prevention advice will be given to all purchasers of new and used vehicles in the division at the point of sale. A package has been put together by the Crime Prevention Department and distributed to car dealers.
 

A partnership has been established with the National Trust regarding their car parks in rural areas, which are common sites for attack, by car criminals because of their location. During the four weeks of Freedom there were two public holidays and officers from the team visited the car parks and left crime prevention advice on vulnerable vehicles. This practice will continue.
- Exhibitions will take place in town centres throughout the division using recovered stolen vehicles to emphasise what may happen to a car if crime prevention advice is not followed.
- During such exhibitions local youth organisations (Cubs, Scouts ) will be used to distribute leaflets and other crime prevention documents.

### ASSESSMENT

The divisional management set a target reduction in car crime of 20 per cent for the month of April throughout the whole division based on the forces Best Value Key Performance Indicator. Operation Freedom has proved that the target is achievable. Another of the intentions was to use the operation as a development tool for the operational officers involved and to increase their knowledge and application of Problem Oriented Policing when they returned to their geographic areas.

It was hoped that the operation would have an impact on the reduction of all crime. In March that figure stood at 1,872 crimes whilst in April a figure of 1,693 was achieved. April and May have so far provided an 8 per cent reduction in all crime compared to last year. During the four weeks of the operation 11 stolen vehicles were recovered as well as a large quantity of power tools and car

entertainment systems totalling £56,000. 12 people were arrested and since the conclusion of Operation Freedom, three of those have appeared before the magistrates and been dealt with by them.

During the, month of April 2000 there was a 28.6 per cent reduction in car crime in Pennine Division. Burnley and Padiham both experienced a 50 per cent reduction in car crime for the first recorded time.

The traffic wardens fingerprinted 325 vehicles and one in three of them produced fingerprints, which could be lifted, for analysis. Of that number 28 positive fingerprint identifications have emerged resulting in further arrests.

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