# ILLEGAL PARKING IN DISABLED BAYS: A MEANS OF OFFENDER TARGETING

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## Summary

This paper describes an initiative in Huddersfield that aimed to assess the scope for offender targeting through self-selection. It considers in particular the practice of illegally parking in disabled bays.

Illegal parking in disabled bays is considered as a kind of offender self-selection, the hypothesis being that such parking will disproportionately be a practice of active offenders. An over-simple way of describing the idea on which this paper is based is that people who are the most committed criminals are also the most versatile, and will not willingly be bound by law or convention of any kind. Thus the most versatile criminal is also the person who jumps queues and parks on double yellow lines. Most of those who park on double yellow lines are not versatile criminals, but a sufficiently high proportion may be to justify gathering information which reveals this at the same time as dealing with the initial infraction.

## Offender targeting

The image brought to mind by the notion of offender targeting is one of 'sting' operations in which the police devote special effort to become and remain aware of the location and actions of those believed to be frequent offenders. While targeting of this kind can reduce crime insofar as those targeted are indeed prolific offenders, the approach is liable to two related problems:

- It relies upon accurate knowledge of offending patterns.

- It can degenerate into harassment, which becomes indefensible when directed against those who are not current offenders, and undesirable when it spills over to the relatives of current offenders.

Offender targeting of a more subtle kind takes place when offenders self-select. 'Sting' operations depend on people with a particular criminal need or purpose *presenting themselves* for police action. For example, individuals who have stolen goods to dispose of may present themselves at shops which the police have temporarily established for the purpose of attracting such would-be vendors. Schemes which lead offenders to self-select are, where possible, to be preferred as we can think of offender self-selection as an ideal of offender targeting. Means of partial self-selection should be explored. Actions disproportionately undertaken by prolific offenders provide means of inducing offender self-selection. It is however important to separate actions from conditions. For instance, there may be a higher prevalence of tattoos among prolific offenders, but to direct police attention on the basis of tattoos leads to harassment. It must thus be an action rather than a condition which awakens police interest. Such actions should of themselves justify official attention. It may be that prolific offenders sing loudest at football matches, but loud singing at soccer matches does not (so long as the lyrics are not offensive) justify official attention, and hence should be ineligible as gateways to enforcement.

Two examples of action which may serve as partial self-selection by prolific offenders may be mentioned. The Squeegee merchants of New York undertook unsolicited cleaning of one's car windscreen in traffic jams and at stop lights. While unwelcome, action against such people may be seen to be legitimate but heavy-handed. However, the discovery that a substantial minority of Squeegee merchants also had outstanding warrants for felony offences changes this perception substantially (see Kelling and Coles, 1995). It turns out that active offenders self-select by working as Squeegee merchants (assuming that a substantial minority of citizens of New York do not also have outstanding felony warrants).

The second example concerns repeat victimisation, wherein it now seems clear that those who commit repeated crimes against the same target are more criminal, on a variety of measures, than those who commit one-off offences against a target (Ashton et al.

1998; Everson 1999; Gill and Pease 1998). Thus, additional effort at detection of repeat crimes against the same target will yield more active and prolific offenders, since such people 'self-select' by returning to the same target.

In the case of both Squeegee merchants and repeat victimisation, the behaviour concerned itself justifies police attention. The bonus is that the behaviour typifies more serious offenders. Offender targeting in these instances occurs because a particular type of offender 'volunteers' for detection.

## Disabled parking

The specific case of disabled parking bays came from nothing more substantial than the third author's extreme irritation with able-bodied people who park there. Such spaces are in the UK reserved for vehicles bearing an orange badge indicating disability. It takes a special kind of selfishness to park there illegally. This may lead prolific offenders to 'self-select', and thus allow action against them or their vehicles.

A secondary reason for choosing this topic was that, in the spirit of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, it would help to identify an area within which traffic wardens and police could operate to maximise the crime control potential of both groups.

## The study

This research was undertaken in Huddersfield between 28 July and 24 December 1998. Traffic wardens in the town were invited, whenever they found a car parked in a disabled space and lacking an orange badge, to record certain information about it. This was undertaken by the completion of a pro-forma at the scene. This included status of road fund licence, condition of tyres and registration mark. They were invited to collect similar information in respect of the nearest legally parked car, and to note how easy it would have been for the illegally parked car to have found a legal space nearby, on the assumption that those who park in a disabled bay even when it would have been easy to park elsewhere would be among the most delinquent.

It was hoped that the comparison of illegally and nearest legally parked car would yield a neat design capable of analysis by relevant pair comparisons. However, we clearly did not stress the purpose and importance of gathering information about the comparison cars strongly enough and in the early returns these were often not included. We thus ended up with a sample of illegally parked cars and comparison cars for a sub-group of these. We had 89 illegally parked cars and the same number of cars parked legally close by at the same time. The analysis reported below will be between these matched sets.

A further 27 unmatched illegally parked cars showed levels of relevant variables similar to those yielded by matched illegally parked cars, and there is no reason to suppose that the results are an artefact of the matching process.

Information about the vehicle and its registered keeper[1] were then sought in police records. The wardens were requested to undertake a check on the vehicle on the Police National Computer (PNC) - ideally from the scene and then to follow with a trawl of the West Yorkshire Police Intelligence Systems by a Local Intelligence Officer (LIO). The LIO would be given the PNC print out and the completed pro-forma and the specific information was categorised as follows:

1. Immediate police interest: this was the case when the car was stolen, the registered keeper was wanted, where a car of that make and registration 'did not exist', and so on. This categorisation suggested that police attendance would be required if this information was known at the time.

2. The registered keeper had a criminal record.

3. The car had a history of traffic violations.

4. The car was known or suspected to have been previously used in the commission of crime.

5. The car was currently 'illegal', i.e. the road fund licence was absent, photocopied or had expired, and/or the tyres were defective.

The point of greatest interest centres upon category 1. Did parking in a disabled bay mark out those vehicles which were stolen, driven by wanted people, and so on? This is the group one wants to 'self-select' for targeting. Table 1 compares legally parked cars with those parked in disabled bays in respect of the five categories set out above.

| Table 1: Illegal parking in disabled bays by each category (n = 178) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Illegally Parked (%) | Legally Parked (%) | Significance Level |
| **Immediate police interest** | 21 | 2 | .001 |
| **Criminal record of keeper** | 33 | 3 | .001 |
| **Vehicles' history of traffic violations** | 49 | 11 | .001 |
| **Past use in crime** | 18 | 0 | .001 |
| **Current vehicle illegality** | 11 | 1 | .005 |

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[1] It should be noted that the 'registered keeper' is the person registered as owning the car and not necessarily the person driving at the time.

This therefore shows that:

- One in five of those illegally parked in a disabled space would occasion immediate police interest, contrasted with 2% of legally parked cars.

- One in three keepers of cars illegally parked in a disabled space have a criminal record, contrasted with 2% of legally parked cars.

- Half of those vehicles illegally parked in a disabled space had a history of traffic violations, contrasted with 11% of legally parked cars.

- One in five of those vehicles illegally parked in a disabled space were known or suspected to have been previously used in crime. None of the legally parked cars were.

- One in ten of those vehicles illegally parked in a disabled space were currently in an illegal condition, compared to 1% of the legally parked cars.

Categories 1 and 5 differ from the rest. While categories 2 to 4 suggest that a rich vein of dodginess is being tapped, categories 1 and 5 require or enable action. It would thus be helpful to check how many of the illegally parked cars were in category 1 and/or category 5, since that would reflect the number of cases in which action should be taken. Table 2 presents the relevant data.

| Table 2: Parking in disabled spaces by action required (n = 178) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Illegally Parked (%) | Legally Parked (%) | Significance Level |
| Action required | 25 | 2 | .001 |

Thus some one in four of those vehicles illegally parked in a disabled space were such as to require or justify police action, as contrasted to 2% of the legally parked cars.

It was speculated that parking in a disabled space even when legal parking was readily available might bespeak even greater delinquent tendencies on the part of its driver. Table 3 is the equivalent to Table 2 except that it includes only those parking illegally. It compares those who parked in a disabled bay when no parking alternative was readily available with those who did so despite the availability of legal parking. It will be seen that the result is of borderline statistical significance and in the opposite direction to that speculated. The post-hoc explanation for this might be that people with something to hide about their car will not take the risk of parking in a disabled space and thereby attract attention, but will take the risk when the alternative is having difficulty in parking.

| Table 3: Availability of legal parking space by action required (n = 89) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Legal Parking Available | Legal Parking Difficult | Significance |
| Action required | 22 | 50 | .052 |

Thus when legal parking was difficult, half of cars parked in disabled bays required action. Where it was easy, the proportion was one in five.

Parking in Huddersfield was generally available, and this was reflected in the fact that there were only ten cases where cars were parked in disabled bays when legal parking was difficult. Of these, five justified police action. Because of the small numbers in this group, the most that should be said of this result is that if it can be replicated, the 'hit rate' of illegally parked cars requiring police action is astonishingly high when legal parking in the vicinity is difficult.

## Discussion

The evidence, in line with that on Squeegee merchants, suggests that those who park in spaces for the disabled are self-selected to contain a high proportion of people and vehicles in respect of which immediate action would be taken by the police, were they to know where the vehicle and driver were. These are questions which traffic wardens are in principle often equipped to answer. Making full, real-time checks on those parked in disabled spaces seems a cheap way to target currently active offenders and currently illegal vehicles.

A common reaction to our conduct of this study was wry amusement. Is this just a curiosity or does it have policing implications? It is often said that a great and common sin in policing is for one officer to have in his or her pocket the answer to another officer's problem. It is almost an operational definition of partnership that *solutions* are shared.[2] That has not been happening in the particular context detailed here. Although traffic wardens work out of police stations, the information they come by has not been thought of, or integrated into, a crime reduction framework. The cast of mind which regards this study as amusing is one which is prepared to forgo the contribution to crime detection which gaining real time information by traffic wardens is able to contribute.

The research has had an immediate effect on practice in Huddersfield. The Senior Warden decided to develop intelligence gathering. Having seen the research and appreciated its theoretical origins, he wanted to improve on amount and quality of intelligence passed to the local intelligence office from wardens. Wardens themselves now have a greater variety and more interest in the job. One warden suggested that this has made the job more satisfying. LIOs (local intelligence officers) gave brief

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[2] "Squeegeeing in New York was not eliminated by 'sending a police car' but through collaboration" (Kelling and Coles 1995 p159)

training to wardens on the offender information system over a period of days and from 29.1.99 a record of vehicles which were illegally parked (not just in disabled bays) or not displaying tax discs was kept. A check on the Offender Information System (OIS) is routinely undertaken and if the wardens find anything of interest they complete an information report for the intelligence office. This is done daily. To date they are finding that one in three vehicles which are illegally parked are connected to other offences ranging from unpaid tickets, drugs, assault, vehicle crime, theft and burglary.

Present practice in Huddersfield still falls short of the real-time check which would bring officers immediately to the scene, but it does reflect the developing notion of partnership in generating self-selected groups within which might be found high rates of those whom one wishes to target, i.e. targeting by self-selection.

This paper has been content to set out the scope for paying real-time policing attention to vehicles parked in disabled bays. The benefits in enforcement which should flow from this is a matter for a future paper which must await the refinement of the information sharing described above. If the spirit of the paper is taken up, the next step is to identify other 'self-selection elicitors'. Candidates for consideration include fare evasion, smoking in non-smoking areas and using mobile phones while driving.

## References

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