

ASSESSING THE POLICE USE OF DECOY VEHICLES

Briefing Note

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“The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).”

Background

A decoy (or ‘trap’) vehicle initiative is one tool available to the police to combat vehicle crime. This report was undertaken to assess, primarily, one such initiative that took place in Cleveland Constabulary with the goal of identifying police good practice in the use of this tactic. With a government target of a 30% reduction in vehicle crime by March 2004 it is important for police to know what types of operations work in which situations.

Decoy vehicles are chosen to be similar to those vehicles targeted for theft and are deployed in high vehicle crime locations as ‘bait’ for offenders. They are specially adapted and may be fitted with technical devices which make it possible to trap an intruder inside. Sophisticated technology such as tracking devices, fuel cut-off switches and parts marking may also be used often in conjunction with covert surveillance. Decoy vehicles can be used to target both thefts of and from vehicles.

This report describes the results of a national survey of forces to establish the extent and nature of the use of decoy vehicles and provides an assessment of a decoy initiative undertaken in Cleveland Constabulary using a decoy Ford Transit van. The report concludes with a number of recommendations regarding the use of decoy vehicles at a local level and at a more strategic national level.

Main findings

Police use of decoy vehicles

A telephone survey of forces requested details of the types of vehicles used in decoy operations, the

locations of the operations and the perceived success of the initiatives. Approximately 70% of the forces surveyed either currently used decoy vehicles or had used them previously.

Those forces that have used decoy vehicles have employed a variety of vehicle types, makes and models with varying levels of technology. Forty percent of forces had used more than one type of vehicle with motorcycles being used most frequently. Forces using only one type of vehicle (47%) used cars in 63% of cases. High volume familiar models of cars (e.g. Ford Escorts and Vauxhall Astras) were most frequently employed, no doubt due to the relatively high risk of theft (Car Theft Index 1999). The levels of technology used varied from relying solely on police surveillance to a combination of devices (e.g. tracking devices, locking windows and doors, covert parts marking). It was not possible to say categorically whether the decoy operations surveyed brought about a reduction in vehicle crime, although some forces did report a number of arrests. The organisation and management of decoy vehicles was one reason ascribed to unsuccessful operations together with resource issues or simply the vehicle not being stolen or targeted by thieves.

Issues for consideration

Reasons given by those forces that no longer or had never used decoys included insurance implications, issues of entrapment, civil liberties and criminal liability. These issues have not prevented such initiatives being employed but they should be considered before embarking on such an operation:

- There are *insurance implications* particularly if

injury is inflicted on a third party when the vehicle is stolen as the thief would not be insured. Insurance premiums for this type of operation could therefore be high as insurers usually require prudence to prevent theft not encourage it.

- Forces may be accused of acting as '*agents provocateurs*' either by leaving a vehicle insecure or leaving items on show inside. Such a person incites another to commit a crime that he/she would otherwise not have committed. Entrapment (the result of these actions) is not a defence under English law and evidence obtained in this way may be excluded (although discretion can be used) under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984).
- Vehicle doors that lock automatically preventing an offender escaping could be considered unlawful imprisonment. This breach of *civil liberties* has previously been dismissed on appeal in court (see Dawes v. DPP, 1994), however, it was suggested that police should inform the offender as quickly as possible of his arrest and the grounds for that arrest.
- *Criminal liability* needs to be considered to ensure that the person who stole the decoy vehicle is the person arrested. This is of particular issue when tracking devices are used with little or no surveillance as the vehicle could change hands before the police recover it.

The use of decoy vehicles in Cleveland

Cleveland Constabulary suffered a particularly high number of Ford Transit thefts in 1996 (n=277) coupled with a low recovery rate (36%) which suggested that the vehicles were targeted for professional theft. Stockton-on-Tees suffered over 40% of these thefts. In response, the division undertook a decoy vehicle initiative in 1997 and 1998. Local and national media coverage publicised the initiative between April and July 1998.

The decoy Transit van was successfully deployed in April 1997 resulting in the arrest of both a thief and his receiver. Whilst there were no specific details of other deployments it was reported that surveillance facilitated the arrest of two other gangs of prolific Transit van thieves in March 1998. Over the period studied (August 1995 to December 1998) both vehicle theft and more specifically Transit van theft fell in Stockton and the rest of the force. Transit van theft fell by 60% in Stockton and by 56% across the rest of the force. Total vehicle

theft fell to a lesser extent - 44% in Stockton and 20% across the rest of the force. Short term significant reductions in vehicle and Transit theft were also seen in the quarter following the successful deployment of the decoy van in April 1997 and during the media campaign when the decoy vehicle was not deployed (April to July 1998). The reduction was greater at the core of the operation (i.e. Stockton) than across the rest of the force. No evidence of either immediate or delayed displacement was seen across the divisional boundaries.

The recovery rate of Transit vans increased over the study period. In 1996 the recovery rate was 34% in Stockton and 36% across the rest of the force. By 1998 the rate of recovery had increased to 66% in Stockton and 59% across the rest of the force suggesting a reduction in the propensity of professional theft.

To summarise the Cleveland experience both vehicle crime and more specifically Transit van theft fell in Stockton and across the rest of the force. The onset of both phases of the initiative appeared to yield a reductive effect, however this effect did seem to be time limited.

Points for action

The findings of this report highlight the potential for decoy vehicles as a method of vehicle crime reduction especially when carried out in conjunction with other tactics. A decoy operation should therefore form part of an overarching vehicle crime reduction strategy which incorporates other initiatives tailored to specific problems at the local level. When planning a decoy operation the following recommendations should be considered:

- An effective initiative needs to be focused and targeted. Detailed local level analysis can establish the precise nature of the vehicle crime problem including the types, makes and models of vehicles targeted for theft and the specific hot spots of theft. Decisions can then be made to tailor the decoy operation to the specific problem.
- Decoy vehicles may be suitable for those vehicles targeted by professional thieves. These are often at high risk of theft but not necessarily found in high numbers on the road - the decoy vehicle will be more likely to be targeted by an offender if choice is limited.
- Stockton's initiative showed that the media can act as a deterrent to offenders and have a short term impact on crime levels. Opportunities to bring about a reduction in

crime may therefore be available at very little cost.

- It is important to monitor operations to ensure that they are effective and to allow adjustments to the tactics where necessary. A decoy initiative can use extensive resources and so it is important to establish whether the initiative was cost effective as well as successful in bringing about a reduction in crime. Therefore evaluation should be incorporated as part of general management practice. Records of the operation should be kept and these should include the aim of the operation, times series crime trends and resources involved.

At a national level the following recommendations could be considered:

- Evidence suggests that networks between police forces have already led to the sharing of decoy vehicles. A national database of vehicles available for use could be developed as a means of providing a larger and more varied pool of vehicles. This could reduce the costs for forces in purchasing a suitable vehicle and maintaining its anonymity.
- The code of practice for undercover operations developed by the National Criminal

Intelligence Service (NCIS) in collaboration with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) could be extended to cover not only those officers acting as decoys but also the use of decoy vehicles. Any implications the Human Rights Act 1998 may have on the use of decoy vehicles could also be included.

- National guidelines with advice from legal experts regarding '*agent provocateur*' would reassure officers, highlight more acceptable procedures and avoid some duplication of effort should challenges be mounted in courts around the country.

Other related research papers

PRS Paper 119: *Vehicle Crime Reduction: Turning the corner*

CDP Paper 88: *The Nature and Extent of Light Commercial Vehicle Theft*

CDP Paper 65: *Local Crime Analysis*

Home Office: *Car Theft Index 1999*

Crime Reduction Programme - Guidance Note 1: *Analysis of costs and benefits: guidance for evaluators*

