

The Prevention of Robbery at Building Society Branches

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**CRIME PREVENTION UNIT: PAPER 14
LONDON: HOME OFFICE**

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First published 1988

Crime Prevention Unit Papers

The Home Office Crime Prevention Unit was formed in 1983 to promote preventive action against crime. It has a particular responsibility to disseminate information on crime prevention topics. The object of the present series of occasional papers is to present analysis and research material in a way which should help and inform practitioners whose work can help reduce crime.

ISBN 0 86252 337 0

Foreword

This report considers the nature, extent and means of prevention of robbery at building society branches. It shows that the installation of bullet resistant screens and appropriate staff training can contribute to the failure of robbery, particularly on those occasions when members of the public are absent from the banking hall. The importance of monitoring attacks on premises and of devising measures to increase the element of risk and uncertainty facing the offender are also discussed. The report should prove helpful to the managers of small building societies in particular.

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July 1988*

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Gloria Laycock, Kevin Heal, Sarah Bailey, Pat Mayhew and the staff at the Building Societies Association for their help and advice.

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July 1988

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Introduction

Over the last 20 years building societies have made remarkable inroads into the world of personal finance. By 1986 the 148 building societies in the UK operated some 7,000 branches, their share of the short-term savings market had more than doubled and their assets from the personal sector ranked second amongst UK financial institutions, after the life assurance and pension funds grouping. During this period of growth their branches had become an increasingly attractive target for robbery¹. Management responded to the growing vulnerability of their staff and cash by introducing preventive measures. Their action provided an opportunity to look at environmental management techniques in the context of robbery at building society branches.

The paper falls into four parts. The first three comprise separate studies examining the nature and extent of attacks on branches; the effectiveness of a range of features adopted to reduce robbery, and staff views on how robbery at building society branches might be prevented. The concluding section draws together the main findings of the three studies.

(1) The Theft Act 1968 states that 'a person is guilty of robbery if he steals, and immediately before or at the time of doing so, and in order to do so, he uses force on any person or seeks to put any person in fear of being then and there subjected to force'.

Attacks on Building Society Branches

For the purposes of this study attacks were taken to include:

- * successful robberies on the premises during trading hours;
- * unsuccessful robberies on the premises (i.e. those involving no loss of the branch's assets) during trading hours;
- * robberies (both successful and unsuccessful) at opening or closing time (i.e. incidents in which offenders had broken into the premises overnight to await the arrival of staff unlocking the branch, or in which offenders forced access into the branch as staff were preoccupied with closing procedures);
- * robberies (both successful and unsuccessful) off the premises (i.e. attacks on cash in transit or incidents in which branch staff were forced to return to branches to unlock closed premises); and
- * burglary (i.e. unlawful entry to the branch and theft, not necessarily from its safe or till).

The data for the study were obtained from the Building Societies Association² for 5236 branches, which in 1985 comprised 76% of the total UK building society branch network. The analyses of these records allowed a description of the frequency and rate of attacks in 1985 as well as a more detailed account of robberies of London branches for the period 1981-1985.

Results

In 1985 there was a total of 268 attacks on the sample branches — 5% being attacked in all (see Table 1). Three percent of these branches were successfully robbed from within the premises during trading hours, while 1% were unsuccessfully robbed, and a further 1% were burgled. Only a small number experienced a robbery off their premises and similarly few were robbed at opening or closing time.

By way of comparison, data collected by the Home Office Working Group on Commercial Robbery (1986) showed that in 1985 raids³ occurred at 4.4% of building society branches, 1.6% of High Street Banks, 1.9% of Sub-Post Offices and 3.2% of Crown Post Offices. These data, suggest that building society branches are more vulnerable to attack than other, comparable, cash handling premises.

Table 1 also shows that branches in different parts of the UK have a different risk of being attacked. The risk of being robbed, both successfully and unsuccessfully, is highest in London and in the metropolitan areas of Birmingham, Liverpool and

(2) The Building Societies Association is the trade association for UK budding societies.

(3) As raids were defined as robberies (successful and unsuccessful) and break-ins, the rates presented by the Home Office Working Group Report are not directly comparable with those calculated from this study.

Table 1: Attacks on the assets of building society branches, by number, rate (per hundred premises) and geographical area (1985)

Area:	London		Metropolitan (i.e. Birmingham, Manchester or Liverpool)		Other		Total in UK	
No. of branches:	499		146		4,591		5,236	
Incidents:	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate
Successful robberies on premises during trading hours	63	13	19	13	54	1	140	3
Unsuccessful robberies on premises during trading hours	25	5	4	3	13	<1	40	1
Robberies during opening and closing times: successful and unsuccessful	3	1	1	1	6	<1	8	<1
Robberies off the premises: successful and unsuccessful	9	2	2	1	3	<1	14	<1
Burglaries	3	1	19	13	43	1	65	1
Unclassified: insufficient detail	1	<1	0	0	0	0	1	<1
Total:	104	21	45	31	119	2	268	5

Manchester. Thirteen per cent of branches in London and these metropolitan areas were successfully robbed, whilst in other areas the figure was only 1%. Robberies failed at 5% of branches in London, 3% of branches in metropolitan areas and virtually no branches elsewhere.

The types of attacks on branches also differed geographically. Of the attacks which took place, successful robberies on the premises during trading hours were the most common in London (61% were of this type); the figures were 42% for metropolitan areas and 45% for other areas. However, burglary was relatively uncommon in London compared with other areas.

Since the London branches, as a group, experienced the highest number of robberies (both successful and unsuccessful) on the premises, the remainder of this report focuses on robbery of the assets of building society branches in London.

During 1981-1985, the incidence of successful robberies in the area remained consistently higher than other forms of attack, with an increase of 7% over the period (see Figure 1). Unsuccessful robberies, however, whilst less frequent, more than doubled.

Figure 1: Types of 'attack' (London building society branches, 1981-1985)

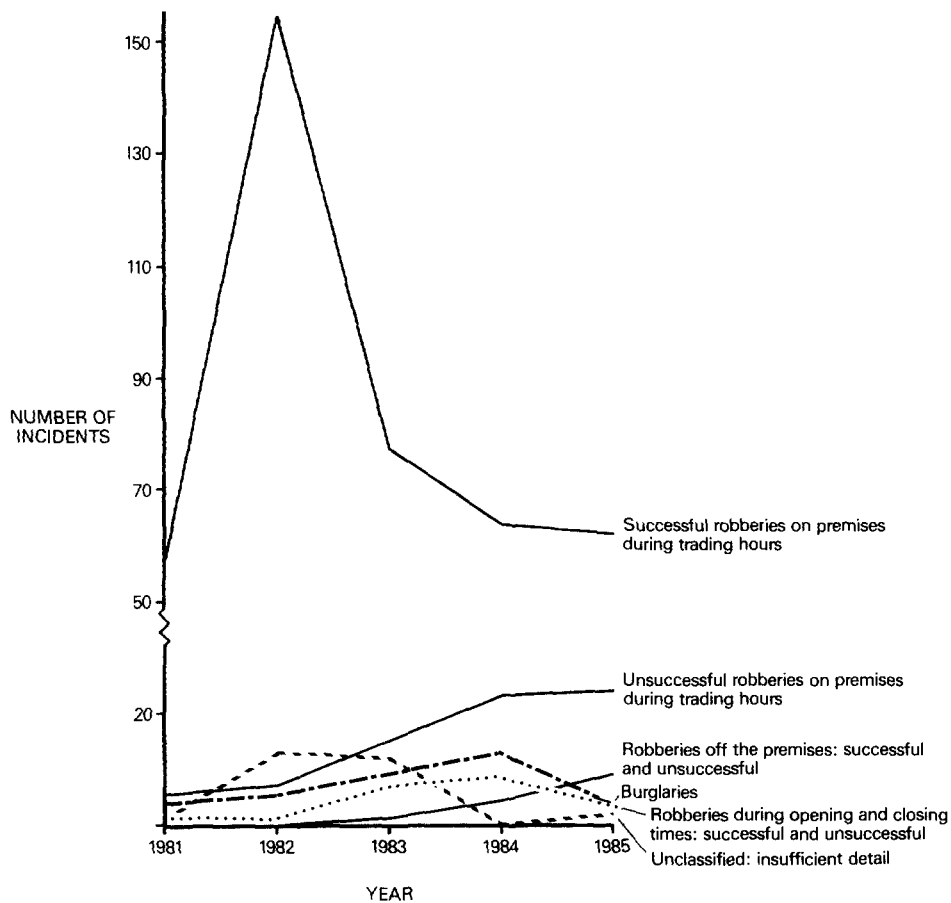


Figure 1 shows a marked peak in robberies in 1982. Discussion with the Building Society Association suggests that the rise up to 1982 may have been due to the substantial increase in investments at that time, which societies advertised widely. The fall-back in the figures in 1983 may have been due to the expansion, in 1982, of the Metropolitan Police's anti-robbery resources, with the inception of a specialised unit to combat the rising number of armed robberies throughout London (Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for the year 1982). The success of this Unit

may well account for the notable reduction in crime in 1983, particularly since nearly a third of the offences committed were cleared up, many attracting 6-10 year sentences (unpublished, Metropolitan Police).

Figure 2 illustrates losses from all robberies of the assets of London building societies, again, over the period 1981-1985. In 1985 the average loss from a *successful* robbery was £2,735. Although in 1985 building society branches were attacked at a higher rate than either High Street Banks or Post Offices, (see page 2) their overall losses were lower (Home Office, 1986). In that year, 6% of building society robberies involved losses of over £10,000, 35% losses of between £1,000-£10,000, 21% losses of less than £1,000 and 29% resulted in no loss.

Figure 2: Losses from robberies (London building society branches, 1981-1985)

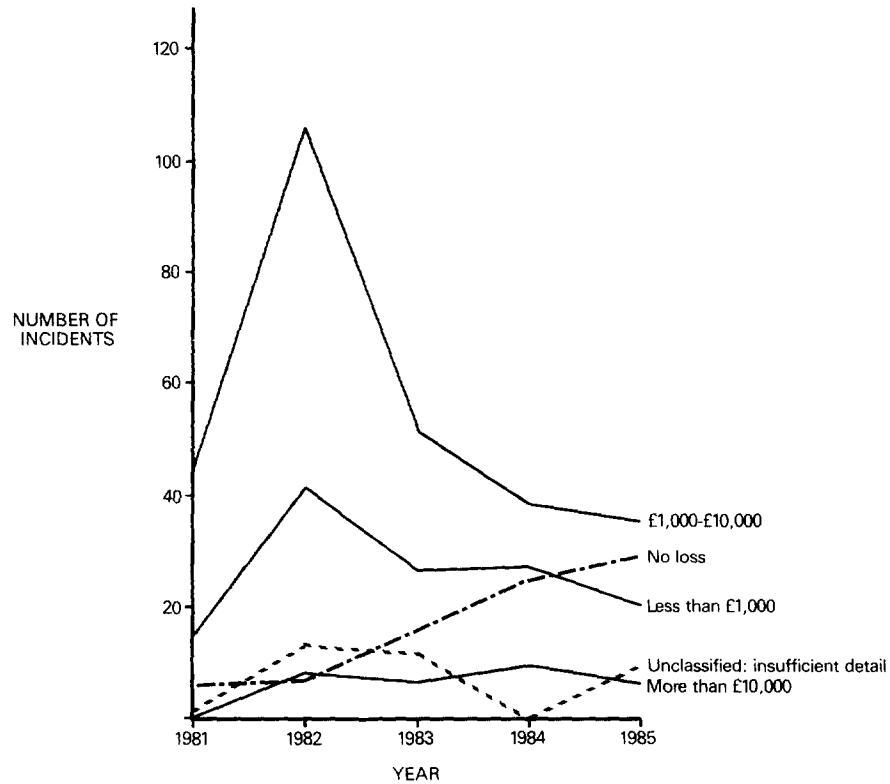


Figure 3 shows the use of arms in all robberies during 1981-1985. In 1985 firearms⁴ were used in 65% of incidents, a figure at the lower end of the range for the United States where studies show the use of guns in commercial robberies to be between 64%

(4) The use of firearms was defined as at least one offender being seen to be armed with a gun or part of a gun.

and 80% (Skogan, 1978). Instances where other types of weapons were used (knives, bars, etc) or where robbers *claimed* to have guns or bombs, comprised 18% of the robberies. No weapons were used in 11% of incidents. The use of firearms increased by 38% over the period. An even larger increase of 81% in the use of firearms in attacks on High Street Banks has been reported for 1983-1985 (Home Office, 1986).

Figure 3: The use of arms (London building society branches, 1981-1985)

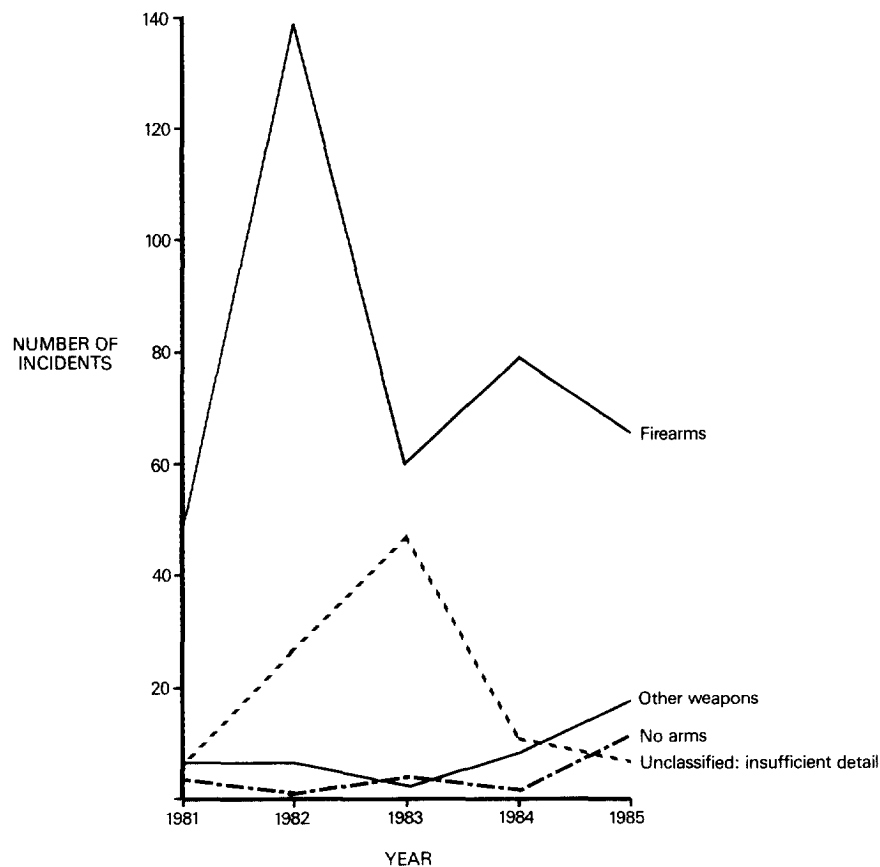


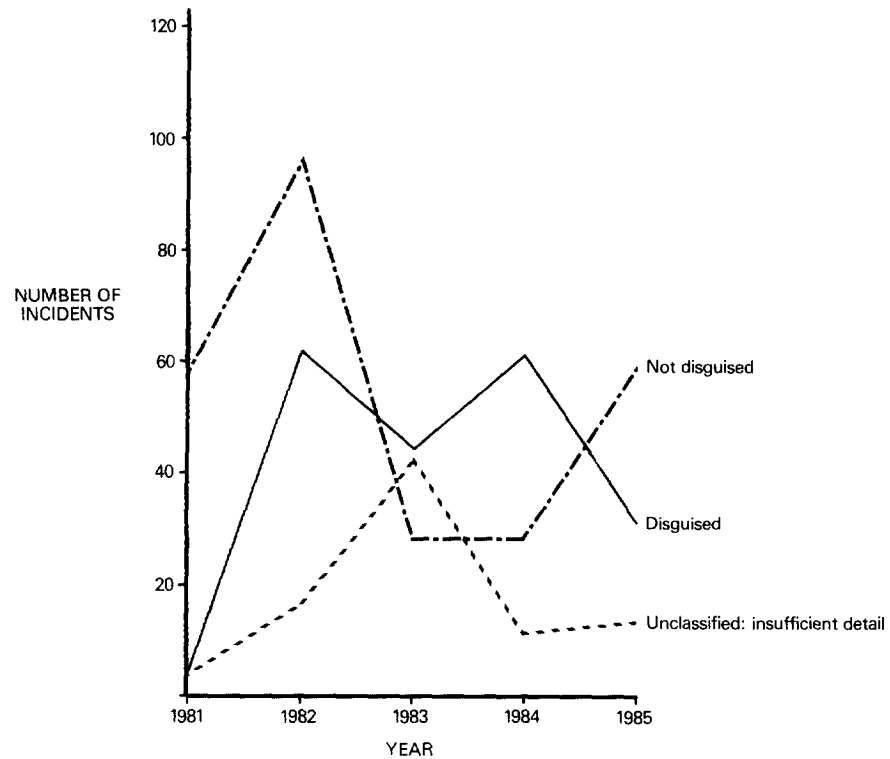
Figure 4 shows the considerable variation in the number of all robbery incidents over the period 1981-1985 in which offenders were disguised.

In 1981 the vast majority of offenders did not adopt disguise. By 1984 this position had been reversed, though in the next year (1985) more robbers (57%) were again undisguised than not⁵. The growth in the use of disguise during 1982-1983 may have

(5) It is difficult to be clear of the position in the years 1982 and 1983 because of the uncharacteristically high number of incidents in 1982 and the extent of missing data in 1983. It would be helpful to ensure reliable records are kept about robbers' use of disguise and arms, since these are prerequisites to the design and implementation of appropriate preventive measures.

been due to the substantial increases in security cameras which societies installed in branches over this period. It is more difficult to account for why offenders started to abandon disguise in 1985.

Figure 4: The use of disguise (London building society branches, 1981-1985)



Summary

The rate and type of attacks on building society branches varies geographically.

Over the last five years, attacks on London's building society branches have:

- * been predominantly successful robberies
- * shown a substantial increase in unsuccessful robberies
- * incurred, typically, losses of between £1,000-£10,000
- * involved firearms in the majority of incidents

The Vulnerability of Branches

The aim of the second study was to explore a little — through looking at a sample of London building society branches — how particular security features might have affected their chances of being the target of a robbery, and once selected, which features may have been associated with the success or failure of the attack. It has to be said that this study is limited in scope. Figures for attacks were collected for only one year and there were resource limitations on the size of the sample of branches which could reasonably be included in the study.

A list of security factors which were thought to protect building society branches are given in Table 2. These comprise elements of the *design* of branches, and *operational features* relating to the way in which the branches are run. Table 2 also shows three *circumstantial* factors which are felt to influence whether a robbery is successfully completed or not. These factors were identified on the basis of discussion with the staff

Table 2: Features considered relevant to branch vulnerability

Design:

security screens
bullet resistant security screens
cameras
alarms
safe(s)
time lock safe(s)
good visibility of tills from street, unobstructed frontage
good visibility of tills from street, corner premises
1-3 cashpoints installed
4-6 cashpoints installed

Operation:

till staff predominantly under 30 years old
till staff predominantly female
more than 5 non-till staff visible from banking hall
1-3 cashpoints operational
4-6 cashpoints operational

Aspects of the attack:

no members of the public in banking hall
offender(s) armed
offender(s) disguised

of the Building Societies Association, security and branch staff from the five largest UK building societies, and members of the Home Office Working Group on Commercial Robbery.

Samples

Three samples of building society branches were selected for this second study from the London branches of the five largest UK building societies⁶. They comprised premises at which, during 1985, there had been a successful robbery (n=20); an attempted robbery (n=20) and no robbery (n=20). Within the building society branch network by far the majority of premises are not robbed and, of those that are robbed, the majority are successfully robbed. Consequently, the number of branches in all which experience an attempted robbery is relatively small. Given the preference to match the three samples by size, this smaller number of attempted robberies determined, and restricted, the sample size of the study to 60 branches. A larger sample could have been studied by examining a longer period on the same basis but the resources for this were not available.

Permission was obtained from three of the five societies to approach branches directly for the necessary data. At these 41 premises, data relating to the variables listed in Table 2 were collected, by observation or from interview. Discussions were also held with a member of the staff who had witnessed an attack on the branch or who had been in post at the branch in the year during the study period (information from these discussions is considered in the third study). The remainder of the data, relating to the 19 premises of the other two building societies, were collected by head office staff. The information they gave covered the variables in Table 2 but necessarily excluded the interview data.

Results

(i) The selection of branches for robbery

Almost all branches were well protected, in terms of design and operational variables listed in Table 2, so that there was little scope for determining whether *differential* security levels made a difference to vulnerability. It is perhaps worth stressing here that it would not be appropriate to draw the conclusion that the target hardening and other factors listed in Table 2 were irrelevant to vulnerability, rather that they are almost certainly very relevant — that it why they have been installed. Without the features it would be reasonable to assume that the risk of robbery in building society branches would be far higher.

(6) For the majority of 1985, five building societies — the Abbey National, Halifax, Leeds Permanent, Nationwide and Woolwich — were largest and accounted for 55% of the building societies' business. The Alliance and Leicester was formed by a merger in October, but statistics for this society were not collected in the study.

(ii) The success of robberies

Two features significantly differentiated between successful and unsuccessful robberies: the nature of the branch's security screens and the presence of members of the public in the banking hall.

All branches in the sample had counter to ceiling security screens at their tills. Whether or not these were bullet resistant made a difference to the success of robberies. Branches protected by bullet resistant (as opposed to ordinary) security screens had significantly more failed robberies ($p < 0.001$). Nineteen out of 26 robberies were unsuccessful in branches with bullet resistant screens as opposed to only 1 out of 14 robberies at branches with 'ordinary' (i.e. non-bullet resistant) screens. No other design or operational feature differentiated between successful and unsuccessful robberies.

The second significant factor was the presence of members of the public at the branch. Significantly more robberies were unsuccessful when there were no members of the public present in the banking hall ($p < 0.05$). Eighteen of the 20 unsuccessful robberies took place in branches where the banking hall was unoccupied at the time of the attack, as against 11 out of 20 successful robberies.

The variables are related in their contribution to the failure of robberies because branch staff are instructed that, in the event of a robbery in which they are protected by bullet resistant screens and there is no risk to members of the public (i.e. there are no customers in the banking hall who could be injured or held hostage), they should simply walk away from the counter. The robbers are then left with no option but to leave the branch, their attack thwarted.

Summary

The majority of branches were well protected in design and operational terms.

Robberies were less likely to be successful if bullet resistant security screens are installed at the branch, members of the public are absent from the banking hall, and staff are trained to walk away from counters.

The Prevention of Robbery

The final study considered staff views on how robberies at building society branches might be prevented. It was felt that the experience of those on the ground, particularly those who had experienced a robbery, might well highlight aspects of preventive strategy which would otherwise be overlooked.

Staff were interviewed in all branches of the building societies from which data were collected by the researcher (see page 9). This gave a total sample of 41 interviews from the London staff of three of the five largest UK building societies. Interviewees were asked whether they felt the design features typically installed at branches (security screens, bullet resistant security screens, cameras, alarms, safes and time locks on safes) afforded protection, introduced vulnerability, or made no difference to the likelihood of successful robbery. But in particular they were asked for suggestions for additional preventive measures.

Results

(i) Security screens

Security screens may be made of reinforced material or be bullet resistant (i.e. 35 mm or more in thickness). With the former, most staff (54%) felt vulnerable because they expected attacks would involve firearms. To the limited extent that these screens were considered to offer protection, it was against incidents involving 'physical' threat from acid, pick axe handles or fists.

A majority of staff (75%) had confidence in bullet resistant screens regarding them as 'very reassuring', 'virtually impregnable' even 'cannon-proof' protection against firearm attacks. Those staff who lacked confidence in the measure did so because (i) they had been inadequately informed as to the screens' effectiveness, (ii) the screens were not 'solid' from counter to ceiling, or (iii) the bullet resistance of the fitting had not been made clear to them. If these limitations were redressed a substantial level of staff confidence in bullet resistant screens could be expected.

(ii) Cameras

Branches may be fitted with cameras which, once activated, take a video recording or repeated still shots (usually of the till points). This study did not differentiate between these; staff were asked simply about the protection afforded by the installation of cameras at branches. The majority (56%) saw cameras primarily as an aid to the apprehension of offenders — either after a robbery had taken place or after a fraud had been committed at the counter. Only 22% of staff felt cameras deterred offenders through fear of being recognised. The report by the Home Office (1986) also points out that the presence of cameras is not a deterrent but notes their role in providing the police with useful evidence to convict offenders. Certainly eye witnesses' descriptions of suspects may be vague and inconsistent in comparison to the explicit detail captured

by camera. The preventive potential of cameras might be increased if there were greater publicity for the fact that they had been installed and about their contribution to identification of offenders.

(iii) Alarms

Branches may be protected by various types of alarms. Alarms may differ in the kinds of attack to which they are sensitive (e.g. intrusions through the perimeter of the premises or raids on the assets of the branch), how they summon help (e.g. silently or by bell), from whom (e.g. directly from the police, via a security company, or using the resources of an adjacent shop), and in how they are activated (e.g. wall buttons throughout the secure cash handling area, foot pedals at tills or punching a code into the tills' computers to notify the society's head office). This study simply asked staff their views about alarms which summon assistance. Given the minimal problem currently posed by burglaries and attacks during the opening and closing of branches, perimeter alarms were excluded from the discussion. As with cameras, the majority of staff (80%) felt alarms were not primarily a deterrent against robberies, but an aid to the immediate or subsequent arrest of offenders. Again their preventive potential might be increased if their existence at branches were publicised and they could be activated more reliably and efficiently.

(iv) Safes

All branches in the sample had at least one safe on their premises, some of which were fitted with time locks which introduce a period of delay before a safe can be opened⁷. The value of safes as a protection against robbery was considered limited by staff since they were to be expected at financial institutions and since cash on the premises tended to be distributed amongst the tills rather than held in the safe during the working day. Although most robberies presently occur during working hours, if the robbery pattern were to shift to opening hour attacks, safes and time locks could become more relevant. Nonetheless, most staff (90%) doubted the protection afforded by time locks. They expressed concern that the measure would simply aggravate offenders who, not knowing whether branch staff were bluffing, might endanger staff and/or customers.

Finally staff were asked for suggestions about how robbery might be prevented. Their views are summarised below as a checklist. It comprises general management strategies and measures to reduce offenders' sense of control over the scene of the crime.

(7) Time delay safes are separate from, and in addition to, the main branch safe. During the day the bulk of the branch's money is held under time delay conditions and only a little is held in the main safe. This practice is intended to deter robbers from demanding entry behind the security screens to access the main safe and, accordingly, to reduce the risk of physical injury to staff. The time lock device itself may also be a deterrent since it increases the time which robbers must spend on the premises to complete a successful robbery, thereby increasing their risk of apprehension.

Checklist

Reduce Offenders' Sense of Control:

1. Heighten offenders' uncertainty about how branch staff (other than those serving at tills) might respond to the attack by reducing sight of them from the banking hall by, for example, the use of partitions or one-way glass.
2. Encourage 'incommunicado tactics' to reduce offenders' ability to communicate, negotiate and take hostages. These include instructing staff to withdraw out of the robbers' view even if there are members of the public in the branch or the installation of fast closing opaque screens at tills.
3. Ensure a quicker response to alarms by connecting them directly to the police station⁸.
4. Introduce 'cashless tills' i.e. automated cash delivery systems to feed cash from a time lock safe in the basement of the branch to its tills. These may be staff-operated or available for public use — i.e. *Automatic teller machines* (ATMs). The installation of ATMs should take account of the recommendations of the Home Office report (1986).

Management Security Strategies:

5. Consider which anti-robbery precautions should be installed at individual branches in the light of robbery risk.
6. Consider which anti-robbery precautions should be publicised at branches⁹. Particular thought might be given to the bullet resistant screens, cameras, alarms and time locks on safes, when installed.
7. Increase full and part-time staffs confidence in and competence with anti-robbery measures through training. Particular attention should be paid to reducing any inability/fear with respect to activating alarm/camera equipment and to increase staff confidence in the effectiveness of bullet resistant screens.
8. Ensure a greater 'presence' of till staff in small branches; employees in such premises feel vulnerable when there are less than three till staff on duty. Recent moves

(8) It is current practice in some cases to channel alarms to the police through a security company or the society's head office. This has arisen because of complaints by the police about the high rate of false alarms. The consequence however, is that this inevitably delays the police response. It would perhaps be preferable to improve alarm design with the aim of reducing false alarms.

(9) There is, of course, a danger that publicising security measures will not deter attacks but will, instead, make offenders take certain measures to overcome the precautions (i.e. using disguise where cameras have been installed or taking hostages where branches are fitted with bullet resistant screens). The suggestion might also conflict with another recommendation from this study that measures be taken to reduce offenders' sense of control over the scene of the crime.

to increase the number of administrative tasks which are conducted at headquarters rather than branch level exacerbates the problem.

9. Introduce monitoring systems to ensure that should displacement occur following a crime prevention scheme, appropriate counter measures can be taken.

Summary

With regard to the features typically installed at branches to prevent robbery, staff:

- * expressed strong confidence in bullet resistant security screens but weaker support for ordinary security screens
- * felt safes and time locks on safes had a less relevant role in preventing robberies during the working day
- * considered cameras and alarms more of an aid to the detection of offenders than the prevention of robbery

Suggestions for how robberies might be prevented included:

- * reducing offenders' sense of control by, for example, introducing uncertainty about the nature and extent of the response from the branch to their attack; reducing their potential to negotiate with branch staff, introducing cashless tills and connecting alarms to the police directly to ensure their faster response.
- * devising management security strategies to cover, for example, which of the currently available anti-robbery measures should be installed and publicised at branches; how staff might use these with confidence and competence and the anticipation and monitoring of displacement.

Discussion

The first study, which examined the nature and extent of attacks on building society branches, showed successful robberies to be the most common form of attack, and unsuccessful robberies, whilst less frequent, to be increasing. It found that branches in London and the metropolitan areas of Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester were at greater risk than those elsewhere. Lastly, it showed the considerable extent to which firearms were used in robberies, as did the Home Office Report on Commercial Robbery (1986).

The second study considered which characteristics affected the branches' vulnerability to successful robbery. Bullet resistant screens and appropriate staff training each contributed to the failure of robbery, while the absence of customers and staff in the banking hall was also found to be important. If bullet resistant screens were installed and there were no members of the public in the banking hall, staff, when appropriately trained, could simply walk away from robbers' demands.

The third study illustrated how building societies management could develop their preventive efforts. Of the tactics considered two are of particular importance: first, the development of an effective monitoring system for robbery incidents and, secondly, the introduction of measures which decrease offenders' sense of control at the scene of the crime.

The possibility must be considered that the introduction of preventive strategies may cause displacement in a number of ways. It might occur, for example, in terms of the location of attacks. One result might be to encourage robbers to attack cash in transit. Walsh (1986) noted the potential for increases in raids on cash carriers and the Home Office (1986) reported that this potential was beginning to be realised. Staff interviewed in this study favoured delegating their responsibility for cash in transit from branch staff to security companies (although this would not solve the displacement problem). Displacement might also take the form of robbers selecting premises with fewer protective measures or a smaller staff presence in the front office. In this case building society agencies¹⁰ and smaller branches would become vulnerable. The Home Office report (1986) recommended that particular attention be paid to security in small branches with few staff in the service area.

Temporal displacement could result in an increase in attacks during the opening and closing of branches. Staff interviewed suggested that this might be prevented if external doors were fitted with computerised time locks. Consideration would obviously have to be given to whether this would present fire risks.

Finally, displacement might take the form of robbers taking hostages; either staff during the opening and closing of branches or customers during the course of the

(10) Building society agencies are businesses, such as estate agents, solicitors and insurance brokers who offer services on behalf of a building society such as the facility for investors to pay in or withdraw money from their account.

robbery. Offenders might consider the former action too risky since it would involve them in negotiations which would increase the possibility of their recognition, and increase the length of time they needed to remain on the premises. To thwart the taking of customers as hostages, building societies might consider introducing automatic cash delivery systems at tills. Under these arrangements an upper limit is set for each cash transaction (say, £200) and the cash is dispensed from a protected safe at a controlled rate. By controlling the rate at which limited sums are dispensed, the time taken for offenders to obtain the amounts of cash demanded is increased. An enquiry of bank premises protected by measures including automatic cash delivery systems, suggested they reassured staff and reduced the risk of robbery (Home Office, 1986). These measures have not yet been adequately evaluated and will need to be kept under review.

Although it is difficult to predict whether displacement will occur as a result of a preventive initiative and, if it does, what form that displacement might take, with appropriate monitoring of robbery incidents the building societies should be able to keep ahead of the problem. Monitoring would provide important detail about changing patterns in branch robbery, with respect to both geographical distribution and modus operandi. It could also assess security issues on which management opinion is currently divided. For example, what would be the effect of an instruction to branch staff to remain incommunicado during the course of an attempted robbery? Monitoring might also be used to provide information on the effect of publicising the anti-robbery precautions at a branch.

There are a number of measures to increase offenders' anxiety, uncertainty and lack of control at the scene of the crime. Installing opaque partitions and one-way glass screens would reduce their visibility of, and communication with, branch staff. This would impair their ability to gauge how staff might retaliate in an attack. It would also reduce their potential to derive power from negotiation or taking hostages. Other means of reducing offenders' sense of control include: developing staff confidence in and competence with anti-robbery measures; improving visibility into the branch from the street, by unobstructed windows or better lighting and, impairing offenders' getaway from the branch (by foot or vehicle, as appropriate). Walsh (1986) notes that anything that can be done to increase the number and variety of unforeseen imponderable interventions complicates matters for robbers and may reduce the chances of their attack being successful. The specific objective of undermining offenders' sense of control seems an under-appreciated facet of environmental management.

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