



Operation Westminster Bridge

Illegal Gambling

Bishop's Ward

Safer Neighbourhood Team

Metropolitan Police Service – London, UK



Summary

Illegal gambling and associated crime and anti-social behaviour on Westminster Bridge

Scanning

The 'cup and ball' game, also known as the 'shell' game, first started around 2,000 years ago. It involves the betting of money on where a ball is concealed under one of three cups. It has evolved into a highly effective scam, involving many people travelling Europe-wide in an organised crime fashion. It has been a localised problem for around a decade on Westminster Bridge. This iconic location connects the UK Parliament and Big Ben with London's Southbank, close to the London Eye.

Analysis

A new policing team took a fresh look at the problem. This involved analysis of both the problem itself, the laws being enforced, the policing tactics being used and the impact on the community and police force. The communities of the area were also consulted, through local forums, and the transient tourist community were already making their voices heard through online media. The key measure of the operation was to reduce calls to the location via the police control room by members of the public. This was the most reliable data identified for activity on the bridge.

Response

Reinvigorated police and partnership work was key to resolving this problem. Fresh ideas brought in key partner agencies, and the problem was tackled from every angle. This involved the use of existing 'Achilles Heel' powers to target offenders through immigration laws, and completely new legislation which was ground-breaking at the time. The project has been recognised with a top pan-London problem solving award.

Assessment

The problem has been all but eradicated in the area, with long-lasting solutions in place to prevent reoccurrence. Calls to the police control room are now negligible. This has reduced the demand on police, allowing other priorities to get the attention they deserve. The targets for the operation surpassed expectation, and built long lasting relationships with other partner agencies. The confidence and satisfaction of the local communities were also improved.

Scanning

The Game

The 'cup and ball', or 'shell' game, is a scam designed to deceive naïve players into believing it is possible to win money by betting on the position of a ball concealed under one of three cups. It began over 2,000 years ago. It has now evolved, and organised groups travel across Europe's main cities deceiving tourists. A small foam ball is used, along with three small metallic cups and a piece of carpet¹. The reality is that the game is unwinnable as the ball is concealed by the game's operator, so tourists lose money².

In order to encourage passers-by to bet on the game, the operator's accomplices gather round and pretend to win. They place money and are successful. Stooges stand next to tourists point out how successful the accomplice is being and encourage tourists to bet.

Surrounding both operator and stooges are wider groups of pick pockets preying on the crowds, and look outs keep a watchful eye for police. The game itself takes place on pavements, which create bottle necks and crowding on the pavements, which allow pick pockets to operate more easily.

The games take place in iconic cities across Europe. In London one of the main areas is Westminster Bridge. This centuries-old bridge connects the UK Parliament and Big Ben with London's Southbank and the London Eye.

The groups move across Europe when they attract police attention or travel for specific high footfall events. People are brought into the country to steal, to operate the game, or act in supporting roles in an organised fashion.

Victims

Victims were identified as predominantly tourists. They are vulnerable through naivety in some cases, and ignorance in others. They are unaware of the illegality of street gambling in the UK, and naïve to the confidence tricksters who run the games. Visitors come to London with a large amount of disposable income, and are defrauded. In some cases, they are also victims of pick pocketing. This can have a direct impact on that single victim, which will mean police and partner agency time would have to be taken up assisting them.

It is also notable that the problem is a frequent bug-bear on social media and tourism websites, including Trip Advisor³. It is an embarrassing truth that victims and passers-by make mention of the scam, with a heavy negative impact on the reputation of the area and London generally when people are researching holiday destinations.

¹ See Appendix – Photo of cups, ball and carpet.

² See Appendix – Photo explanations of the game in action.

³ See Appendix – extracts from online media.

There is a risk to underreporting due to language barriers with international tourists, lack of knowledge of how to report crime in the UK and the fact they are likely to be leaving the UK within a short period of time. They may also feel foolish to have been deceived in such a way. Members of Parliament, and visiting senior police officers from other forces, have raised the issue, exposing the Metropolitan Police Service to reputational risk.

Offenders

The offenders are overwhelmingly Romanian nationals. They are split into 'teams' who conduct the games together each time. They consist of the 'gambler' who operates the games, look outs, 'stooges' who pretend to win, pick pockets and others. They are usually professional groups who travel Europe as a team. The lure is clearly large amounts of cash which are available from the tourists who visit the area. The offenders share accommodation whilst in London, and tend to be transient. Anecdotal evidence suggests the cash is then sent back to their home country, as their lifestyle in London appears to be extremely frugal. This transient lifestyle, and the groups formed, contribute to a trafficking and organised element to the criminality.

Location

London's Southbank is now one of the prime locations for tourists in the capital city of the UK. It contains the London Eye, Royal Festival Hall and other sites of national cultural importance. It also contains St Thomas' Hospital, one of the leading medical establishments in the UK, and across Westminster Bridge lays the Houses of Parliament and the iconic Big Ben. The area has a footfall of millions per year. The fact illegal street gambling was allowed on the bridge linking these areas was a national embarrassment. The Southbank is also an area of renovation and rejuvenation, where a vast of money is being spent to improve the area. The gaming involves and encourages anti-social behaviour and other street crime, which is detrimental to this improvement. The attraction of the area also means the tourist population is transient; therefore it is difficult to use education or advice work directly on the victims to reduce the impact.

Analysis

Community

Initially, the problem was reported anecdotally. The issue was raised with the local Metropolitan Police Service Dedicated Police Officers by the Bishop's Ward Safer Neighbourhood Policing panel, and the Southbank Business Watch group. A new team of officers had recently taken up posts. Two newly appointed Dedicated Ward Officers, along with two newly created posts funded by the Southbank Business Improvement District began work at the same time working jointly. Representatives of both the residential and business communities were therefore concerned about the problem, and the police response. It was identified as a policing priority for both sectors of the community. The residents expressed concerns on behalf of visitors who were deceived, as well as the quality of life impact of large groups of people congregating on a busy thoroughfare for a criminal purpose. The business community was primarily concerned about the detraction from the area, and the gathering of criminal groups targeting their visitors.

Research

To understand the problem in greater depth, the Bishop's Ward Policing Team undertook research. This involved working in partnership with local police officers from Westminster borough. A covert CCTV observation post was established, with necessary authorities in place, to observe and gather evidence and intelligence about the activities of those on the bridge. This enabled the detailed mechanics of the gaming, previously described, to be learned.

A security patrol team funded by the Southbank Business Improvement District, the South Bank Employers' Group team, had daily experience of those involved in the scam and were briefed by the Bishop's team. This combination of expertise gave a good grounding and understanding of the details involved. The shared knowledge of the security patrol team enabled a profile of those who played the game could be established. The patrol team included Eastern European nationals, who had the language skills and cultural knowledge to identify the background of the offenders.

The profile of the victims indicated that South East Asian tourists were more likely to fall victim than others. Their naivety, and lack of awareness around UK gambling laws may have contributed.

The Bishop's team then undertook research using police systems, including the intelligence system, custody records and police call logging system to identify peak times for offences and information about offenders. It identified afternoon to evening times, at the weekend, with peaks around the summer or large events. These peaks were all linked to the largest volume of tourists on Westminster Bridge. Volumes of visitors were the prize for the offenders. They required the cover of crowds using the pavements to conceal their activities, as well as preying on the largest number of victims possible. The bridge itself links two very high footfall areas popular with visitors to London; the area around the UK Parliament and the Southbank.

The police call logging system was identified as the most reliable measure of the activity. This was because custody figures are only generated when police make arrests, which is not always possible.

Arrests were much more likely when an operation was running, so could not be relied upon as an accurate representation of when the gambling was happening, just when police happen to have enough resources in place to respond. Likewise with crime figures, a 'crime' would ordinarily only be generated when an offender is arrested, not when the activity was taking place.

Calls to police peaked at around 70 per month over summer 2015. These calls would be bunched around the peaks at the weekend as previously detailed. On a busy summer weekend, this would lead to a police vehicle and two officers being dispatched to the bridge every hour or so, with little impact on the activity itself, but diverting the officers away from core policing duties.

Police Response

Previously, the police response had been sporadic operations. These operations targeted the illegal gambling itself, from a criminal enforcement perspective only. Breaches of the Gambling Act 2005 are a 'summary only' offence. In the UK, this is a term for low-level offences. They can be time consuming and expensive to administer; requiring as full an investigation as serious offences, yet a much lower potential outcome at court. The cost of prosecuting these offences is disproportionately high, and the police and court time consumed is huge. Prosecutions of this type, namely one offender prosecuted for a single low level offences, did not take into account the aggravating factors of organised crime and the wider impact. The sheer volume of offenders involved in the games also normally out-numbered officers on the operations, they would resume gaming once the operation was over. These operations were also expensive, involving large numbers of officers drafted in from other areas or payment of overtime⁴. It was therefore identified that the police response could also be improved by targeting the offenders in a different manner.

The aim of Operation Westminster Bridge was to improve police response; to improve the efficiency of operations. The key measure of the operation was to reduce calls to the location via the police control room by members of the public. This was the most reliable data identified for activity on the bridge.

⁴ See Appendix – Newspaper article about police operation.

Response

The Bishop's team commenced Operation Westminster Bridge in August 2015. This was a fresh look at the problem, utilising new tactics, centred on partnership working with other agencies to implement a long term solution.

Immigration

Following the identification of the country of origin for the offenders, predominantly Romania, the local police team undertook research on what legislation existed to deal with foreign offenders. This identified a removal power exercisable by Home Office Immigration Officers for European Union nationals who travel in order to commit crime and do not legitimately 'establish' themselves in the UK⁵. A removal notice can be served, and then executed 30 days later, for those not 'settling' themselves in the UK. Common sense therefore set the time frame for each operation as monthly. Over 70 of these notices were served over the course of these operations by locally based Immigration Enforcement Teams.

Dispersals

In order to reduce cost to the public, the Bishop's team identified that a cheaper alternative to arrests were anti-social behaviour dispersals⁶. This allowed officers who would previously have spent the rest of their shift in custody to disperse those indirectly involved, who previously may have been arrested by later not charged under the Gambling Act, to be dispersed from the area rather than brought into custody. A bespoke power, authorised by the Bishop's team inspector, was designed to include Westminster Bridge, and other bridges close by to prevent displacement of the problem. Breach of this would ultimately lead to arrest, but was an effective deterrent infrequently violated by those involved. This was also a vital intelligence gathering tool as it gives the power to demand name and addresses. Dispersals are essentially a temporary banning order prohibiting entry to a specific geographical area. 99 of these dispersals have been used over the course of the operations.

Foreign Offender Checks

The power to demand names and addresses was also vital in another strand of the plan. Foreign offender criminal records checks are ordinarily done just for those in custody. It was discovered, after discussion with Immigration Officer colleagues, that these simple checks can be conducted on people encountered in these circumstances. This meant that the intelligence picture has been

⁵ See Appendix – Immigration Removal Power.

⁶ See Appendix – Dispersal Power.

invaluably improved in the local area, and some serious criminals have been discovered and removed from the country, including a male known for a string of violent armed robberies, a murderer, and a stranger rapist. All of these individuals have now been removed from the UK following checks. It also allows a UK court to take into account a Europe-wide offending pattern for similar offences.

Partnership

- **Home Office Immigration Enforcement:** The primary partners for the operations to begin with were the local Immigration Enforcement Team. On the first operation, they were overwhelmed by the amount of people detained and eligible to be served potential removal notices. They grew to be the single biggest partner agency, usually matching local police officer numbers.
- **Westminster Borough:** As the operation grew, the Bishop's team was supplemented by a dedicated tasking team from Westminster borough who took the operation and grew it to a weekly event. They were established following the results of Operation Westminster Bridge.
- **British Transport Police:** The monthly operations began to include officers from the BTP at Westminster underground station who had experienced links to theft person offences on the underground network and congregation of offenders at Westminster underground station.
- **Local Security:** Security patrol team members from the SPEG team, other local businesses and the Business Crime Reduction Partnership could identify those involved and represent the business community. They also spread the 'good news' about the work being done throughout the local area to key stakeholders.
- **Specials:** Special Constable are volunteer police officers in the United Kingdom. They have the same powers and equipment as regular full-time colleagues, but come in unpaid and to supplement regular teams. Those from Lambeth borough donated their time and effort to bolster the local policing team numbers for the operations, making arrests, searching and detaining those involved.
- **Interpreter Services:** Police officers from across the Met who volunteered their language skills were invaluable to translate at the scene.
- **Romanian Officers from the Organised Crime Command:** Romanian police officers are on an exchange programme with the Metropolitan Police Service's Organised Crime Command. They assist where Romanian offenders are involved. Following an application by the Bishop's policing team, these officers provided a crucial cultural and language link. They also brought knowledge of Eastern European crime patterns and trends.

Media

Permission was sought from Transport for London and Westminster Council for a 'dot matrix' board for the bridge. This displayed messages in four languages identified as part of the victim profile, displaying crime prevention advice. The Chinese embassy was visited by the Bishop's team. We arranged for crime prevention messages to be circulated on Chinese travel websites, and via their official channels. A new Southbank specific police Twitter account was established to supplement the existing Bishop's account. The profile of the area, and the gambling issue, has been raised

significantly with many of the local residential and business communities actively following and responding positively to the publicised actions of the policing team on Twitter. The results of the operations were especially popular, and other 'good news' and crime prevention advice is frequently promoted.

Results

Over a ten month period, Operation Westminster Bridge resulted in the following;

- ***28 arrests - Gambling Act and Immigration Act offences***
- ***99 dispersals - Police Reform Act bespoke anti-social behaviour dispersal***
- ***70 immigration notices served***

Assessment

Results

One of the prime evaluation criteria for the project was to reduce the amount of calls to service for the police in Lambeth. This was to cut the cost of expensive police-only operations, drawing officers from across London and spending of overtime. This also detracted from other police work. The calls fell from a peak in summer 2015 of over 70 per month, to below 10 in a comparable period in summer 2016, and are now in mid-2017 negligible⁷. This reduction is thanks to the enforcement action undertaken by all partner agencies, and the leadership of Operation Westminster Bridge by the Bishop's policing team.

Public Space Protection Order

The arrest and processing of prisoners in volumes still appeared to be quite a high cost to the public purse. The Bishop's team looked for an alternative.

New legislation was recently introduced in the United Kingdom to enable local authorities or councils to apply for a Public Space Protection Order⁸, PSPO. These orders are designed for local authorities to deal with localised issues which may not fall under existing criminal law. Authorised officers, including police officers and council officials, can issue a Fixed Penalty Notice, FPN, for breaches of a PSPO. An FPN is a fine of around £80 to £100, issued on the street, which does not require a person to be taken to a police station or be arrested. The council or local authority are responsible for prosecution if the FPN is not paid.

Lambeth Council obtained a PSPO in relation to 'legal high' drugs and it was one of the first in the country. The Bishop's team approached the council to explore the possibility of a PSPO in relation to the activity on Westminster Bridge. This led to a meeting between Lambeth and Westminster Councils, British Transport Police, City of London Police and the Metropolitan Police Service. A draft PSPO for the behaviours around illegal gambling went to public consultation⁹. This was overwhelmingly supported by the local community, and approved. This would have been impossible without the policing team working in partnership with the local communities to resolve their priorities. The team canvassed support from business leaders, community representatives and a Member of Parliament.

A sustained solution now in place on Westminster Bridge, stemming from a multi-agency intelligence led operation, evolving into a community-supported long term plan. It has led to a huge decrease in the immediate locality, and the PSPO will be in place for years to come to prevent recurrence. This solution has also been shared with other hot spots suffering from similar issues, and the ideas from Operation Westminster Bridge have been shared with other agencies, including the City of London Police. This joined-up approach will prevent displacement of the problem.

⁷ See Appendix – Graph showing reduction in calls for police.

⁸ See Appendix – Public Space Protection Orders.

⁹ See Appendix – Lambeth Council Consultation on PSPO

Contacts

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Key Partners

Home Office Immigration Enforcement

Southbank Employer's Group & Southbank Business Improvement District

Westminster Borough - Metropolitan Police Service

Organised Crime Command - Metropolitan Police Service

Special Constabulary - Metropolitan Police Service

British Transport Police

Community Safety Department – Lambeth Council

Community Safety Department – Westminster Borough

Appendices

1. Photo of cup and ball



2. Photo explanations of the game in action. Credit to Metro Newspaper, UK.



3. Extracts from online media. Credit to Tripadvisor and Virtual Tourist websites.

Forum / United Kingdom / England / London

· 16 November 2013, 23:31
London, United Kingdom · 2,598 forum posts

#9 of 47 · I was surprised to see so many on Westminster Bridge. Last year counted 6 groups + the "traditional" flower sellers!

#4 of 47 · Apparently this is the oldest scam on record. It was around in Ancient Greece and Rome, and it may not have been new then. It's amazing that people are still being fooled by it.

· 16 November 2013, 19:24
London, UK · 1,785 forum posts

#5 of 47 · Also beware pickpockets who will be in the crowd surrounding them. Happens a lot on Westminster Bridge too.

"Cups & Ball SCAM on Westminster Bridge"

 27 Feb 2015

 (2 reviews)

Please be aware of the following scam happening on Westminster Bridge. As you cross on the St Pauls facing side you will see groups of eastern European men and women gathered around someone performing the 3 cups and ball trick. Don't be drawn into it. Whats happening is there is the guy doing the trick and then his accomplice (female usually) who appears to win big money. Its a set up, she always through either signals or the timing of her placing her bet wins and you see him actually awarding her cash. Of course you wont win. Its so organised that they actually have spotters on at least the Abbey end of the bridge (a guy smoking a cigarette) looking out for the police and at the sign of them, they pack up their little mat and run off. Its been going on for months and only plain clothes police will stop it (Boris Johnson please take note). Spend your time looking at the views down river towards the London Eye instead

"A Disgrace"

 22 Aug 2015

 East Sussex (329 reviews)

The previous reviewer has summed it up in a nutshell. As a Brit, I am really ashamed. What must the tourists think of us!

As we were staying in the Premier Inn at County...



"Crowded and silly cup games of chance."

 23 Aug 2015

 Stevenage (202 reviews)

Visited on a very busy Saturday. Westminster bridge was crowded and full of eastern Europeans trying to win money of the tourists will ball and cup games of chance. Why the police don't stop these silly games I don't know?

"Crowded, pickpockets and shell games"

 9 Aug 2015

 (40 reviews)

Such a beautiful bridge turned into a circus. Watch out for pickpockets. Avoid the shell games, I've see tourists losing lots of pounds. Where is the police??

SHELL GAMES

By  on Nov 22, 2011

SHELL GAMES

This warning could apply to anywhere in the world, I seem to see this particular con virtually everywhere we go and can't believe that there are still people who fall for this centuries old con. We happened to see this in broad daylight near Covent Garden on one of our visits and in June 2011 Westminster Bridge had at least five people set up doing this.

The basic equipment is three shells and a round object such as a pea, the con man has his ringer (always shifty looking fellows) pick the winning shell with the pea under it a couple of times, oohs and aahs come from the crowd and then the con man starts taking bets from unsuspecting tourists and taking their money in this sleight of hand.

A third conman is usually posted as a lookout, the game is always ready to travel upon the appearance of local law enforcement.

Another variation on this is three card monte, anytime you see a man with shells or cards on a paper box, feel free to watch from a safe distance but never ever plunk your money down, it's a sucker bet and you are sure to lose.

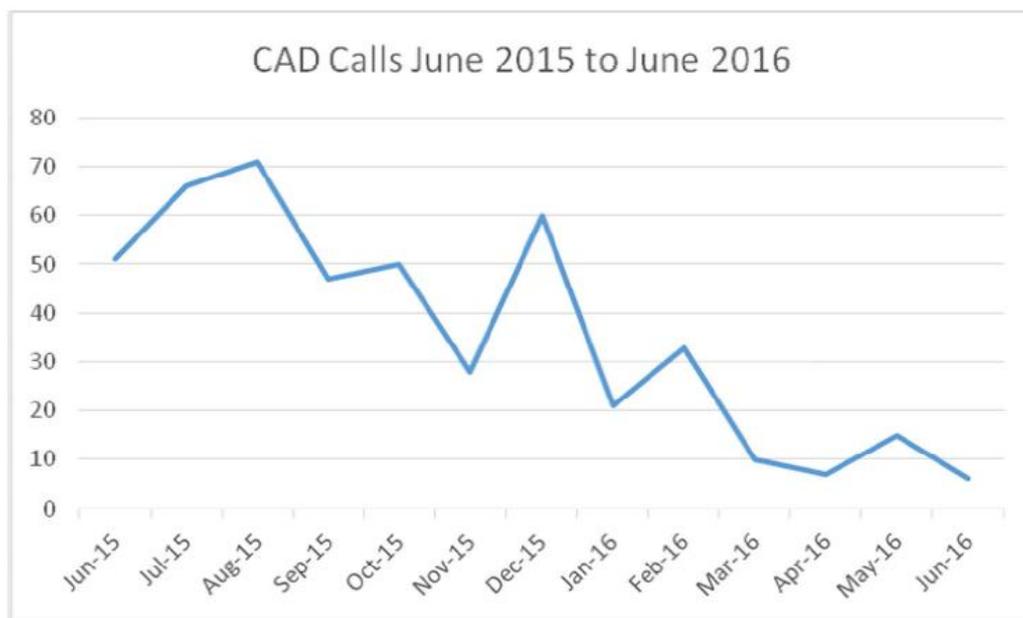
4. Newspaper article about police operation. Credit to Independent Newspaper, UK.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/police-use-big-red-bus-to-look-inconspicuous-7897121.html>

5. Immigration Removal Power.
Section 24 Immigration Act 1971
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/77/section/24>

6. Dispersal Power.
Part 3, Sections 34 and 35 Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/part/3>

7. Graph showing reduction in calls for police.



8. Public Space Protection Orders.
Section 59 Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/part/4/chapter/2/crossheading/public-spaces-protection-orders/enacted>

9. Lambeth Council Public Consultation on Public Space Protection Order
<https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/consultations/public-spaces-protection-order-pspo-for-street-gambling-and-gaming-in-the-southbank>