

THEFTS FROM AUTOMOBILES PREVENTION THROUGH EDUCATION

EDMONTON POLICE SERVICE. ALBERTA, CANADA, 1994

- THE PROBLEM:** Although major crimes such as robbery and automobile theft receive serious police attention, citizens are much more likely to have items stolen from their automobile.
- ANALYSIS:** In 1993, in the City of Edmonton there experienced were 13,078 reports of theft from automobiles. In 1994, there were 2,026 reports of theft from January 1st to March 30th. In the Downtown Division alone 657 incidents were reported in this time period. If a police officer filed a report, 657 times in three months at 15 minutes per report each time, 164 man-hours were spent on a totally preventable crime.
- RESPONSE:** An officer worked with mall security to provide information to parkers and place signs in two parkades joined by a shopping mall and a hotel to warn about thefts from automobiles and request that valuables are not left in vehicles. An educational program was developed utilizing various forms of media to warn the public not to leave valuables in their vehicles. Constables checked parked cars for valuables and disseminated identifying information to volunteers who telephoned the owners and informed them about how it could have been stolen.
- ASSESSMENT:** Since the beginning of the campaign, there have been no reported thefts from automobiles in the two parkades.
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SCANNING

The specific problem addressed in this project was theft from parked cars in the Downtown Division. This is one of those relatively inconsequential but nagging problems that never seems to go away. Huge projects are launched against major crimes like robbery or even theft of automobiles, but the most common crime experienced by normal citizens is a theft from their vehicle. To the victims, it is a serious crime.

ANALYSIS

In 1993, the City of Edmonton there experienced were 13,078 reports of theft from auto. This year there were 2,026 reports of this type from January 1st to March 30th. There were 657

incidents reported in Downtown Division alone in this time period. Many more people likely were victimized by the crime and simply did not make a report. The statistics are improving but a police officer still had to file a report on a crime 657 times in three months. At 15 minutes per report, this represents the expenditure of 164 man-hours on a totally preventable crime.

There is a simple solution to the offence of theft from auto: Do not leave any valuables for a thief to steal. Changing the habits of everyday people prevents this crime. The aim of this project was to increase public awareness that having valuables in the car leads to theft. If you are aware, you will not leave valuables available.

RESPONSE

Constable Storey began his project in April 1994 on his own beat with two parkades joined by a shopping mall and hotel. He worked with mall security to develop an action plan that included mailing information letters to monthly persons and handing them to hourly parkers and hotel guests on check in. Signs were placed in the parkades. All warned about thefts from auto and asked people not to leave valuables in their vehicles.

In June, Constable Storey decided to branch out through the entire division. Together with Constable Knoop, Divisional Crime Prevention Officer, they planned an extensive education campaign. In a five day information blitz:

- 107 fax messages went to businesses about the problem.
- Over 400 Neighbourhood Watch members got a message via their PC Cops computer. The computer's database includes the telephone numbers of all members of Neighbourhood Watch, Block Parents and the Community Police Radio Network (CPRN). The computer auto dials all these numbers and delivers whatever verbal message it was programmed with.
- CPRN volunteers personally spoke with 127 apartment and condo managers. All received letters and cardboard warning signs to post in their parkades about the theft problem.
- Several articles were published in local community and inner city newsletters.
- Radio and TV media were invited to a session where they filmed Cst. Storey locate a car with valuables in the open. He then, on camera, went to the registered owner's apartment and talked to her about the ease with which her valuables could be stolen. The media placed this item as top story that night and included it in the next day's stories.

Several radio stations also aired interviews and prevention tips regularly for two full days.

- Newspapers also covered the story.

The final phase of the project began at the end of June 1994. Patrol constables, time permitting, checked parked cars for obvious valuables. They note the vehicle license number and description, the time, the location of the car, and a description of the contents. This information is passed on to a community station. A volunteer telephones the registered owner and provides information about the property in his/her vehicle and how it could have been stolen. Other crime prevention material will also be made available to the owner. This phase is intended to make the problem of theft from auto personal to individual car owners. If they realize their own property is being surveyed with the intent of theft, they may be more conscientious about locking it out of sight. Moreover it gets the general public talking about the phone calls they get from the police, therefore keeping the issue fresh in their minds.

ASSESSMENT

The initial phase of this project was extremely successful. There have been no reported thefts from auto in the two parkades since the beginning of the campaign. Statistics are as yet unavailable to show any decrease in reported complaints for the second quarter of 1994 for the entire division. The project is, however, noteworthy in its simplicity and its benefit. It is not time consuming for anyone, yet it gets police, apartment and parkade managers, hotel staff, security officers, volunteers and the community working together on a problem, which is solvable. Since everyone has a part to play, everyone takes pride in the results.

Constables Storey and Knoop deserve special recognition for their efforts in getting the community involved.