



**Unlicensed mini cabs operating in Wandsworth,
London.**

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Summary

Clapham Junction and Battersea Rise, SW11, was rife with illegal unlicensed mini cabs touting for business.

Pan London, unlicensed mini cabs who tout for business are linked to numerous sexual assaults on lone vulnerable females. These offences are primarily committed late at night, the victims being women traveling home after frequenting bars or nightclubs, often under the influence of alcohol.

Additionally, the vehicles used to ferry passengers often fall well below recognized safety standards and are uninsured for the purpose of hire and reward.

Taxi touts harass members of the public and obstruct the highway at the busiest transport intersections around Clapham Junction. They also take business from licensed black cabs and legally run private hire companies.

Our response was to research the scale of the problem by gathering intelligence to identify our local repeat offenders and create a baseline. We initiated plain clothes operations in order to arrest and prosecute the main protagonists. Furthermore a separate strategy of increasing the availability of licensed mini cabs and directing customers towards them was put in place, thus denying the touts access to fares and removing the motivating factor, namely money. The implementation of satellite offices was part of this strategy.

We aimed to eliminate the demand for unlicensed cabs with a publicity campaign, which was rolled out to educate the traveling public on the dangers of taking

unregulated transportation. This focused on reaching the maximum number of people through mass text messaging, leaflet drops and street pastor services.

Partnership working with outside agencies has been a cornerstone of our approach allowing us to tackle this problem from a number of different angles. We have utilized the services of Immigration, VOSA, the Cabs Enforcement Team and LTDA (London Taxi Drivers Association), all of whom had a stake in the problem.

We have been diligent to ensure the problem has not merely been displaced and since putting our procedures into practice have gathered intelligence on bars and nightclubs immediately outside our target area.

The problem is such that there are occasional transient offenders who come from other areas to work in the busy Clapham Junction transport hub and still cause a problem, however our original identified repeat offenders are no longer operational.

By focusing on a long term strategy and eliminating regular unlicensed offenders our recent intelligence tells us there has been a dramatic drop of 90% in the Battersea Rise area.

Scanning

Identifying the problem

It was important to understand the problem in order to see the main dangers presented by unlicensed mini cabs. To do this we contacted the Public Carriage Office (PCO) and asked the difference between a legal and illegal mini cab. We were

told that mini cabs have to be pre booked and are not permitted to simply turn up at a venue with the hope of touting a fare.

When a driver touts for business and picks up a fare illegally there is no record of who the driver is, the passenger details or indeed where the fare is supposed to be taken. This amounts to getting into a car with a stranger and leaves a person in a very vulnerable position in respect of being a potential victim of crime. Our investigations revealed the problem was often compounded by the fact that members of the public who avail of unlicensed cabs are often drunk or are merely unaware of the potential dangers.

Figures gleaned from the Safer Transport Intelligence Unit told us that between 200 and 250 cases of sexual assault concerning unlicensed mini cabs are reported across London every year, however it is conservatively estimated that five times that number go unreported. That gives an average total of 1,125 offences per year, approximately 22 every week. This excludes other crime figures, such as robberies and thefts.

Demand

Complaints originated from local bars on Battersea Rise, who were concerned about the safety of their patrons and the influx of unlicensed touts outside their premises at closing time.

Security staff from Stop Shop Security, Clapham Junction, also complained that the amount of touts at the front of the station caused disruption to travelers and presented a genuine risk to health and safety.

Numerous Metropolitan Police crime reports link unlicensed mini cabs to a variety of offences on the traveling public and late night revelers. This was research was based on information gleaned from police databases and Safer Transport Intelligence reports and have been a well documented problem Pan London.

This was compounded by documentation sent in by the London Taxi Drivers Association (LTDA) containing registration marks of offending vehicles and photographs of illegal touts. Local legal mini cab firms (Grand Cars and KVC Taxi's) also expressed concerns that unlicensed mini cabs take their custom and pose an unfair competition to their legitimate businesses.

When and where

We took in to account the complaints we had received but deemed it necessary to conduct our own research into the times and location of the problem. To establish the peak of these offences, police databases (CAD, CRIMINT & CRIS) were scanned over a six month period (October 2009 to March 2010) for evidence of arrests and relevant information reports, which provided us with quantitative data. In addition to the complaints we had received this provided a realistic indication of times/dates.

The Clapham Junction Hub Team gained qualitative data by conducting public surveys around the Clapham Junction and Battersea Rise area (12th March - 09th April 2010, 458 people surveyed), asking if they had been approached by touts and if so when. The questions were as follows;

1. Do you live in or socialize in the Battersea Rise/Clapham Junction area?
2. Do you travel home late at night, if so what time?
3. What venues do you frequent and what time do you usually leave?
4. What is your usual means of transport to and from the area?
5. Have you ever been offered a mini cab, if so where/what time?
6. What day/night does this usually happen?
8. Do you take these cabs, if so why?
9. Would you consider hitch-hiking on your journey?
10. Do you question a cab driver or ever ask for company identification?
11. What potential dangers do you think taking a mini cab could be?

This gave an accurate timescale as to when most activity was occurring, namely Friday and Saturday nights in the early hours when the pubs and nightclubs were emptying.

Police officers conducted plain clothed intelligence operations, spanning one month (April to May 2010). The data from these was collated and a database opened highlighting repeat offenders and detailing the time, dates and scale of the problem.

Baseline

Research identified twelve regular unlicensed mini cabs and drivers in the Battersea Rise and Clapham Junction area. Our observations told us there was average of between four and eight irregular visiting touts also visiting these areas.

Analysis

Clapham Junction's specific problem

We identified the problem as; late at night (between 00:00 - 0400) on Fridays and Saturdays there was an influx of drivers illegally touting for hire in the Battersea Rise and Clapham Junction area. The motivating factor for these drivers was money and the abundance of fares in the busy transport hub, which has a thriving night time economy and houses numerous pubs and nightclubs. Our survey revealed the problem was compounded by the fact that members of the public who employ the touts are often drunk, do not wish to stand in line at a black cab rank or are merely unaware of the potential dangers. There was also a lack of access to legal private hire vehicles in the immediate vicinity.

There are further issues regarding the road worthy condition of the vehicles being used as mini cabs, some of which fall well below recognized safety standards. In addition to this many drivers are not insured for hire and reward. Indeed, checks on regular offender's car registration numbers revealed that many of them were not registered cab drivers, often holding no valid insurance or MOT.

Why were police required?

There were numerous demands for police intervention from the high volume of complaints from independent parties.

The significant amount of touting that our research told us was occurring had a direct impact on legal businesses and as such undermined confidence in the police by people working in the local area. This was enforced by the amount of complaints received from local businesses and legal cab firms.

The stream of vehicles plying for hire around the busy transport hub also caused a constant disruption to traffic and blocked major routes when stopping to harass members of the public.

What could we do?

Our next step was to contact the Cab Enforcement Team (CET), who specializes in offences regarding mini cabs and Hackney carriages. We did this to gain advice on police powers and to learn what we as police officers could use as disposal options for taxi touts and their vehicles. We already understood that we could arrest offenders but wished to find out what other avenues were open to us in relation to not only punishing those found to be breaking the law, but re-directing them to a legal means of working. It was hoped that once put in place a system to direct touts to registered employers would permanently reduce the number of illegal cabs.

Our intention was to cut off demand for unlicensed cabs by means of educating the traveling public in order to reduce the available customer base.

We thus aimed to dismantle the crime triangle by focusing different interventions towards the victims, offenders and location.

Response

Our scanning told us the primary issue regarding taxi touting was that the public were not aware of the potential dangers involved in getting into an illegal mini cab. Victims were often drunk after a night out, which rendered them vulnerable.

There are also a large number of illegal touts in the area, which was a transport hub where people converged late at night after socializing in nearby pubs and clubs. The location also allowed the offenders to easily park up and harass the public with offers of their services.

Victims

The victims are generally late night revelers trying to get home after socializing in the numerous local bars and clubs. These members of the public were being harassed by the touts and transported in substandard, unsafe vehicles, often unaware that the driver was not insured for hire and reward.

Our completed surveys and observations noted that members of the public displayed a lack of understanding regarding the dangers of getting into an illegal cab and it appeared most people felt there was little risk involved. When surveyed 87% of people stated they would not hitch-hike, however only 34% said they would question what they believed to be a taxi when on a night out.

Further victims were identified as legitimate businesses in the locality, Hackney black cabs and registered mini cab firms, suffering loss of revenue from the illegal competition.

Motorists and public transport were disrupted in the area due to touts parking their vehicles in busy thoroughfares whilst attempting to secure fares and negotiating prices.

Offenders

Plain clothed police on intelligence gathering patrols (conducted over four weekends, from March to April 2010) identified twelve regular offenders operating in the area.

Other offenders ranged from registered mini cab drivers who took chances of getting extra fares by soliciting them from the street to transient freelance drivers passing through the locality and chancing their hand.

The motivating factor for the drivers was money and the abundance of fares in the busy transport hub, which houses numerous pubs and nightclubs. The area is popular as a night time destination due to the convenient transport links and large amount of late night bars.

There is an abundance of late night revelers leaving different venues at staggered closing times, from 1200 - 0400. This gives steady revenue for the illegal touts.

Location

Clapham Junction BR station is the busiest rail intersection in the country and as such has a massive transient population of commuters and travelers. The footfall in the area is so large that it is an attractive area to tout for business as an illegal mini cab., as often the demand for transport home outweighs the transport services available, especially at peak times. There is a constant stream of people looking for a

taxi and a limited number of hackney black cabs and reputable mini cab companies to satisfy the demand.

The offence is easily committed, as once a fare is picked up the offender immediately leaves the area and there is no record to confirm where they are going.

There are two hot spots within the area, which are; the front of Clapham Junction BR station and Battersea Rise, where is heavily populated with late night bars. The pattern for the touts was to move from bar to bar on Battersea Rise and solicit patrons of the venues as they came out on to the street. The highway is wide with bus lanes and allows convenience and unrestricted parking of the tout's vehicles when trying to solicit fares.

Assessment

In order to educate the traveling public and cut off the touts financial rewards we initiated a mass text service at Clapham Junction station over a period of three weeks (August 2010). This involved contacting the Met Police technical support department and arranging for a volume paging device to be programmed with a crime prevention message relating to illegal taxi touts. This device automatically sent text messages to mobile phones in a fifty metre radius. Clapham Junction station was chosen because of the large footfall in the area in order to reach the largest possible audience. This medium was chosen due to cost effectiveness and the high percentage of mobile phone users amongst the target audience.

The messages provided clear facts about the dangers of getting into an illegal cab and explained how to book transport from a reputable company.

A leaflet campaign was run in tandem with this initiative and 670 CABWISE leaflets were distributed in and around the locality to our target audience as they began their

night time socializing and were more receptive to the advice. The leaflets provided similar information as the text message service but in greater detail.

While researching other busy areas on our borough, such as Putney town centre we noticed a distinct lack of illegal mini cabs, which we attributed to the presence of satellite offices operating from a number of bars and clubs within the area.

We spoke to local registered mini cab firms (Grand Cars, KVC and Star Move Cars) and reminded the drivers of their obligation to work within the law in regard to soliciting for hire. Thus allowing us to more easily identify and target those working illegally.

We also canvassed these firms with regard to employing further drivers and setting up satellite offices from various local venues. Once in place we hoped to develop this into an avenue where unlicensed touts could be directed in order to become registered and legal. This would allow the unlicensed drivers to continue to work but in a safe and regulated manner, without reducing the transportation options in the area.

Details of the Public Carriage Office were passed to these firms and the application process of setting up a satellite office was explained. Meetings were also arranged with the various local venues who had initially complained about illegal mini cabs and the subject of using their premises as satellite offices was discussed.

Star Move Cars ultimately registered a satellite office in B@1 bar in Battersea Rise.

Regular plain clothed patrols were carried out, resulting in 21 arrests, with 19 charges for the offence of Soliciting for Hire. Officers from the MSC (Specials) were utilized during this phase of the operation since they were relatively unknown to the touts and they were able to gain valuable evidence towards their independent patrol

status program. This was also a very cost effective option since Specials were readily available to work late at night on Friday and Saturday as a no cost option.

Numerous other charges were also brought for such offences as; having no hire and reward insurance, benefit fraud and immigration. 5 cars were seized for having no insurance and many more reported for being in un-roadworthy condition.

Where suitable, advice was given to drivers on how to be re-directed to a registered local company.

Implementations such as satellite offices are easily sustainable and if utilized correctly will not demand regular police attention or further financial investment since they would be self financing and provides a service to displace the illegal touts.

There is also a direct audit trail, which satisfies current legislation and ensures that drivers are traceable and accountable for the fares they transport.

Since establishing a satellite office in B@1 bar illegal touting in the area has reduced by approximately 90%. This has been verified by regular plain clothed intelligence operations and local knowledge from late night venues and proprietor of the cab company. Star Move Cars have an adequate and ready supply of drivers to satisfy demand at peak hours in the Battersea Rise area, which has negated the need for the unlicensed cabs.

There is evidence to suggest that some of the illegal activity has been displaced to Northcote Road, outside The Underdog Bar. There is a black cab taxi rank at this location and the LDTA has been approached to utilize this facility and provide a service at peak times, however this has not been fully capitalized upon at this stage.

B@1 Bar and Star Move Cars have been canvassed in order to ascertain the success of the venture. Both of these parties were original complainants, however

now both have relayed their appreciation and acknowledgement of the reduction of unlicensed mini cabs.

Clapham Junction has also seen a reduction in the identified regular taxi touts witnessed during our initial scanning. Two of the key players, who were deemed to be touting on behalf of a number of drivers at the location, have been arrested and charged and have not been seen in the area since. Indeed, the practice of 'foot soldiers' touting on behalf of others has ceased since the enforcement stage of the operation. There are however a number of transient drivers who continue to appear at infrequent intervals.

Previously the touts would operate between the hours of 0000 and 0400, however since the introduction of the satellite office on Battersea Rise that caters for the bars closing at 0130 to 0200, there has been a dramatic drop in touts in and around Clapham Junction before 0200 as this customer base is being picked up on Battersea Rise.

There is a visible reduction of illegal mini cabs parked at the front of Clapham Junction station, which has been a direct result of the previously identified touts being arrested and charged for the offence. Out of the original 12 identified taxi touts in the area, only 3 have been seen plying for hire in the last 3 months. This data has been established over a period of intelligence gathering operations.

Furthermore, Stop Shop Security has been contacted and have confirmed that they have not seen the regular 'foot soldiers' lingering in the entrance of the station since police involvement. The security staff are fully supportive of the police operation and will direct any late night revelers to a dedicated mini cab telephone within the precinct to order a cab from a legitimate registered company.

Sustainability

Since the correct methods of operating mini cabs have been locally enforced and the remaining touts arrested or directed to more reputable companies, the project now requires minimal police involvement. The area of Battersea Rise has been returned to the local residents, e.g. the initial complainants, and in tandem with a recognized mini cab firm they have willingly taken on the role of governing the introduced problem solving framework. Regular police checks over a three month period (Feb 2011 to date) have confirmed that this initiative has been successful.

Transferability

Illegal mini cabs are a problem experienced in virtually all major towns and cities in Britain but it appears that by utilizing the outlined problem solving procedures it would provide a simple, effective and cost efficient method of combating what is a very widespread issue.

The project has been run on a limited budget and with a low number of officers/resources. This ensures it is not dependant on a large investment and can be rolled out quickly and cheaply where required.

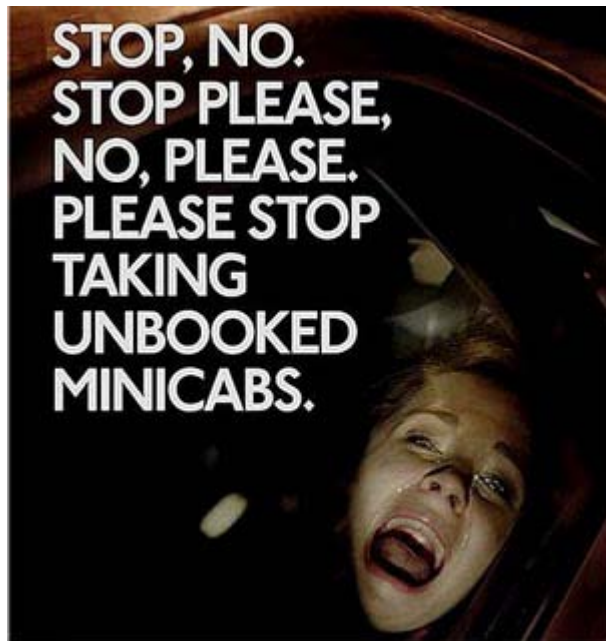
An anticipated uncontrollable factor is the amount of assistance that can be gleaned from outside agencies and although the project can easily thrive with only police involvement, we have found benefits by working in partnership where possible.

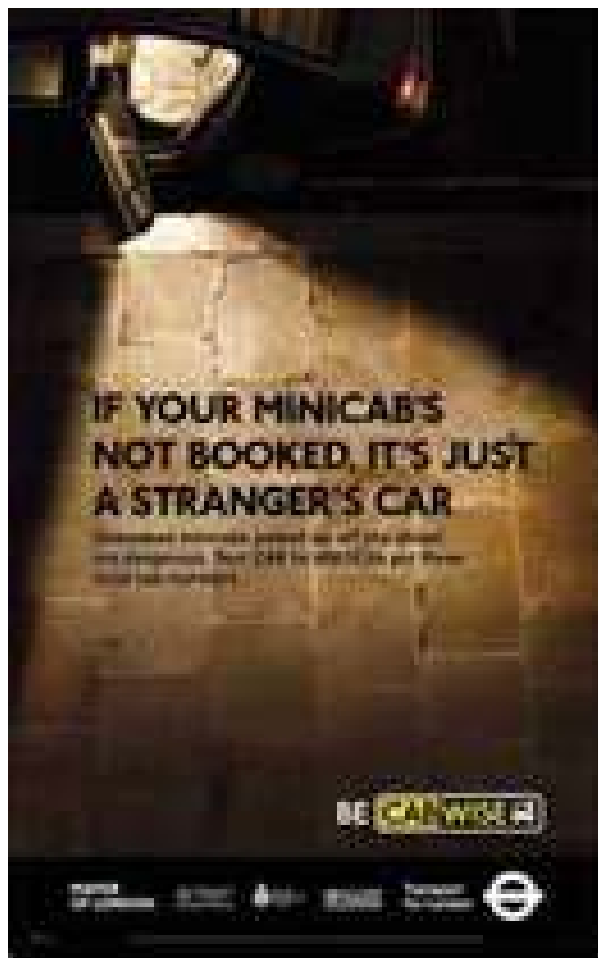
Learning point

At present it has proven difficult to repeat the full success of the Battersea Rise side of the project at Clapham Junction and though a dramatic drop in unlicensed mini cabs has been seen, there are no late night venues in which to install and operate satellite cab offices. Clapham Junction does not have sufficient licensed premises that can accommodate such offices; however it is recognized that a large number of late night revelers converge on Clapham Junction between 0130 and 0430, often congregating around fast food outlets before their onward journey. Indeed, the idea

of working in partnership and installing a satellite office in a fast food restaurant is an idea that has previously overlooked but would now seem to be an obvious solution.


CABWISE Leaflet (education Campaign)





**IF YOUR MINICAB'S
NOT BOOKED, IT'S JUST
A STRANGER'S CAR**

Remember to always check all of the usual
safety messages. Don't pay for drinks or get into
any bad company.

BE **CAR WISE** 

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