

Title: OPERATION SONGSHEET

Force: West Midlands Police

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Operation Songsheet

An initiative to tackle domestic burglary.

Summary

An examination of our database revealed an area on H2 Operational Command Unit (OCU) was suffering extensively from domestic dwelling burglaries. This area of Brownhills, is predominately council properties, intermixed with privately owned dwellings and for this area these crimes were out of character.

- We needed to address and arrest this problem and agreed that we should be proactive rather than reactive. To do this we wanted to enlist the assistance and support of residents after due consideration, agreed upon a property marking exercise.

Various marking methods, such as Smart Water, Leaderdot, Alpha Dot etc were evaluated, but all proved to be too time consuming, to apply, too expensive to purchase, and Officers and individuals may need specialist equipment or knowledge in order to disassemble, mark and subsequently identify property. We required something, quick, cost effective and easy to apply, thus we opted for Ultra Violet pens.

- We advertised via the local media that on a particular Sunday we would visit the target area of Brownhills to mark property. With the assistance of Special Constables, Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinators and officers of Community Services Department, we went from house to house, offering to mark electrical items within. These items were mainly electrical which are easily disposed of, but never realise their true value. We were welcomed with opened arms, even into houses that we knew were occupied by known criminals, drug dealers etc. Having marked the property, the occupants were left Home Office booklets and we placed warning stickers in the front and rear windows of these properties.
- We recorded each house visited in each street, the date visited, including those which we were unable to gain access to, on an information sheet. This information was then entered onto a database. After exactly 4 months we re-examined the number of burglaries in this area and saw there had been an 80% decrease compared to the same period the previous months. Of houses that were burgled in this area, we examined the database to see if it had been property marked, *and if so, what property had been taken. We saw that the majority of houses that were burgled had not being property marked.*

The Project: *Operation Songsheet.*

The main aim of the project was to reduce / arrest domestic burglaries in a predefined area, but as a result of the project, other benefits that weren't considered at the time became available to us once the operation was underway. (explained later).

An area of Brownhills in the Borough of Walsall was suffering from an exceptional increase in domestic burglaries. Brownhills has never been a high crime area, thus the volume of burglaries recorded was unusual. Normal policing methods appeared to have little impact on driving down figures or detecting offenders.

Community Safety Officers, who, through networking, Neighbourhood Watch and crime pattern analysis on their designated beat areas, plus the monitoring of command and control logs identified the problem. There had also been an increase in drug related activities and a link was drawn between the two.

Although attention of the problem was 'flagged up' to Sector leaders, traditional policing methods were having little impact, thus, through community safety officers, a proactive method of addressing this 'crime wave' was sought. It was agreed that to effectively tackle these two problems we needed the support, help and if possible, assistance of the residents in the target area. We felt if we could drive down these two crimes then quality of life and a reduction in the fear of crime would return to the area.

After much discussion it was agreed that a property marking exercise in the target area might be the answer. The problem was, which product to use, how to deliver it, who would help deliver it and how to monitor it. Various marking methods, such as Smart Water, Leaderdot, Alpha Dot etc were evaluated, but all proved to be too time consuming to apply, too expensive to purchase, and Officers and individuals may need specialist equipment or knowledge in order to disassemble, mark and subsequently identify property. We required something, quick, cost effective and easy to apply, thus we opted for Ultra Violet pens.

To kick-start the operation, the OCU Commander agreed to purchase a quantity of UV pens. This initial outlay was to the tune of £800.00 for 5000 pens and the same quantity of A5 envelopes. This was to be the only 'direct' funding made available to us. To deliver the operation, other sources of funding would have to be sought elsewhere. We assembled information packs in relation to property marking. These were in the main, Home Office publications, together with window stickers and letter of introduction from the OCU Commander.

The delivery of the operation needed to be swift and very overt. By doing this, it was felt that this would put undue pressure on offenders and give them little time to react to the operation rather than if it was slow and drawn out. To help achieve this we need an army of helpers to flood the area. We enlisted the assistance of Special Constables, Neighbourhood Watch Coordinators, Residents Associations and a limited number of Operational Officers, remember, funding was limited but the use of operational officers could be seen as a source of indirect' funding. Although on duty, their efforts were redirected elsewhere. Shortly before the day of reckoning, we announced in the local media that we would be visiting the area, and callers would have identification with them, be in uniform or in company with police officers to help prevent bogus caller incidents.

On the day of delivery, armed with property marking packs, we called from house to house, explaining the operation and offering to mark property. The response was varied but always favourable. Most people were surprised that there was no cost associated with the service. We were invited into dwellings, even those of known criminals who did not want to be missed out. Once inside dwellings, due to direct interaction with householders by police officers and their assistants, public relations were very quickly established or re-kindled which opened up many areas of dialog.

It also presented us with the opportunity to offer 'site specific' crime prevention advice to the householder, but the Operation also served as an information and intelligence gathering exercise as many people were aware of, local criminal activity but did not wish to phone or visit the police station. It also allowed us to renew contact with the public and reinforce police public relations. This was the spin off benefit mentioned earlier in the summary.

At the end of the day, details of every dwelling visited, marked or unmarked were entered into a database and we sat back and waited. After exactly four months we examined the number of burglaries in the target area and saw that there had been an 80% decrease compared to the same period the previous months. There was nothing else of significance to suggest the reduction was due to other external influences. Of houses that were burgled in this area, we examined the database to see if they had been property marked, and if so, what property had been taken. We saw that the majority of houses that were burgled had not been property marked. Of houses that had been property marked and burgled, we saw that marked property had been ignored and only items such as cash and jewellery were taken instead.

We revisited the area for a second time in a bid to mark properties that were missed out on the first visit. The response to this was that the occupants, having realised they appeared to be vulnerable, were now only too happy to be included in the Operation, and ensured they were in when we called.

With these encouraging results we repeated the exercise on an adjacent estate that had a similar problem and monitored the recorded crime there. The results of this were identical to the previous exercise. Subsequently we are now marking property across the entire OCU.

This however, became a mammoth undertaking and funding for this was acquired from different sources such as Single Regeneration Budgets, City Challenge, and local sponsorship. Police Community Services has since injected some more monies toward the development of a street sign, which is to be displayed in areas that have had property marked, to help enforce this initiative and to bring an immediate visual display to visiting criminals that property in this area is marked. SRB committees, Neighbourhood Watch schemes, Residents Associations etc, were encouraged to purchase the street signs. The sign is based on the Home Office window sticker to offer uniformity and recognition.

To increase the effectiveness of this operation we dispatched property-marking packs containing the items mentioned earlier, to Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinators, who were requested to mark at least 20 neighbouring properties and return the completed information sheet to our department for database input. They did this with vigour. We entered into negotiations with local Neighbourhood Council Offices, for their officers, when visiting elderly residents, to mark their property. We are exploring the possibility of using other Social Services facilities, such as Community Nurses and Meals on Wheels.

We still continue to enjoy a vast reduction in domestic burglaries in marked areas and we have evidence of displacement as a result of this.

I must admit that there is some initial cost to the Force in terms of manpower and equipment, but the time and effort that is not being spent on investigating and dealing with domestic burglaries is proving to be cost effective. It has also helped improve Police 1 public relations to a level we enjoyed some time ago, and is helping to reduce the fear of crime whilst driving down domestic burglaries. The public have been invited to become involved in a Police led initiative that they can take some degree of control of. This has given many a sense of purpose within the community.

We had a considerable success in getting Neighbourhood Watch to adopt the Operation and property was being marked across the OCU, plus, by using Special Constables we were able to make good use of their time and flood an area on selected days. Sector Officers and Officers on light 1 restricted duties were also tasked at times of need. So we were enjoying considerable success in getting property post coded but we wanted things to happen a little quicker.

So, not wishing to rest on our laurels, we looked at how we could expand and speed up the operation. To this end we turned our interests to focus on newly formed Single Regeneration Budget Committees. Here were a number of selected local residents, elected to represent that area, and who had been allocated a sum of money to spend in that local area, on items to address community safety and comfort.

We attended meetings of these committees and suggested to them they might wish to use part of their funds to purchase U.V. pens for every household in their areas, (plus other items such as personal safety packs, shed alarms etc) and explained to them the benefits of Operation Songsheet. They readily agreed and placed orders for the pens, they also placed orders for a quantity of the lamppost signs we had now produced to accompany the Operation. What we didn't expect was such a huge response and ended up with an order of pens etc to be delivered to 11,000 homes in the SRB areas.

This presented us with somewhat of a headache on how best to deliver these items, and how to ensure that property would be post coded as we needed to keep our database of houses that had taken up the Operation accurate. To achieve this we included a letter of introduction from the OCU Commander with a tear off 'return strip' at the bottom, indicating that the property had been coded. To ensure that property was post coded by the householder, we included a self-addressed envelope back to the Police station. (We felt that if the householder went to the expense of putting a 2nd class stamp .on it and sending it in, they would only do this if they had indeed marked their property!) We also included the 'Coded For Keeps' booklet, window stickers and 'Beat the Burglar Home Office material.

After due deliberation, we approached Royal Mail and invited them into a partnership. They were very helpful in suggesting a range of delivery methods and agreed to help us with a limited sponsorship package.

We then set about labeling and assembling the packs for delivery, and to this end enlisted the help of our volunteer NHW co-ordinators, SRB members and Community Services staff. (If you attempt this, you need lots of patience and loads of space. 11,000 A5 envelopes stuffed with the said items takes up shed full's of room!).

The packs were duly delivered and the self-addressed envelopes began to arrive. Thus the Operation continued to spread. With even more SRB committees being formed in the next phase, we hoped to do the same again. In fact we receive daily phone calls from members of the public asking why they didn't get a pack when their neighbour or friends did.

As we roll the Operation out street by street through an area, we follow up with street signs to give it as higher profile as possible. We have moved on with the operation, and as stated we wanted to get even more 'partners' on board to speed it along.

As the number of domestic burglaries continued to fall, more funding became available from the OCU. Perhaps as a direct result of less man-hours being spent visiting burglaries.

We looked at the community to see who or what had the greatest possibility to reach the largest audience, and came to the conclusion - schools. Hence the next phase was born.

A competition was run with local schools involving children aged 7 - 11 yrs.

We did this by encouraging children to take home property marking kits (UV pens, sponsor forms, Coded for Keeps booklets etc) and to get Aunts, Uncles, Grandparents, neighbours etc to mark property and place *their names* and addresses *as conformation on the sponsorship form*. We borne in mind the *stranger danger message with this, and instructed the children that they must be appropriately supervised when doing this.*

The children returned the forms and there were prizes for, (a) the school with the most returns (certificates and small cash prizes for 1st, 2nd & 3rd) and, (b) the individual child of all the schools involved with the greatest number of returns. (Returns were the total number of individual addresses post coded)

As some schools have a larger number of pupils attending than others, the number of children involved at each school were divided into the number of returns to reflect a percentage take up. The school with the greater percentage won regardless of children volume. The competition was run over a two-week period.

A local branch of Curry's agreed to put up a prize of a 'Play station Dual Shock Console' to the winning child. This helped ensure that all, the children had an incentive to get involved. We have done this on two areas of the Borough with satisfactory results and are looking to do the remaining two areas later.

We have now introduced a system whereby when an officer visits a domestic burglary victim, they give them a property marking pack (carried in volume in Panda's & Response cars) and conducts a security survey for them. The officer also informs appropriate agencies who can assist in providing additional security items either free of charge or at minimal cost. There is a return slip within the pack that is duly filled in by the IP and returned to us to add the address to our database of coded properties. This has been included as a 'checking' system, as we know the officer has delivered the pack, but we still wish to gauge the response by the occupant.

Finally, officers and station counter staff have now got into the habit of checking all stolen property that comes into our possession and have been provided with personal 'pager size' pocket UV lamps for doing the same when out on patrol.

The Operation has been published in the Digest', produced by the Crime Prevention College, and as a result of that, many other Forces have contacted PC Smith, sought information, visited to examine the operation and launched it within their own forces.