

# OPERATION ATLAS

## AN INITIATIVE TO REDUCE VEHICLE CRIME

LANCASHIRE CONSTABULARY, WESTERN DIVISION, ENGLAND, 2001

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### **SUMMARY:**

Western Division encompasses two local authority areas Blackpool Borough (unitary authority) and Fylde. Blackpool is the largest holiday resort in the United Kingdom and a significant regional resource with a national and international profile that attracts large numbers of spending visitors to the region. However it is a town of deep contrasts. The promenade contains the enduring image of Blackpool Tower, Piers and Grande Hotels, yet fifty metres inland there is some of the worst deprivation in the Northwest of England. Several years ago the local authority in order to accommodate large quantities of day trippers converted a disused railway line into vast car parks which were built with little or no thought of vehicle security. The local authority presently operates 32 car parks and this caters for up to 15,000 car parking spaces. When private car parks such as hotels, shops, and small car parks are added the figure is much larger. The town can see influxes of up to 12,000 vehicles on a typical Sunday with annual visitors totalling an estimated 10 to 15 million.

Operation Atlas commenced in October 1998 following ever increasing numbers of vehicle related crime. Three officers from various backgrounds were brought together to form the Operation Atlas team these were a Detective Sergeant a Crime Prevention / Architectural Liaison Officer and an Intelligence Officer. The objectives were to formulate strategies for the short, medium and long term with a view to eventually incorporating them into daily policing activity. The aim of the methodology was to reduce all vehicle related crime in the Western Police division by 30% by the millennium. Autocrime has always featured predominantly in the Blackpool area and this is where the efforts of the operation have been concentrated. Fylde's crimes were monitored and attention was given to hot spot areas when the need arose.

Results of the initiative are promising. When 1998's Autocrime figures are compared to 2000 a reduction of 22% was achieved. Vehicle crime continues to fall monthly and is one of the only categories to have achieved sustainable reductions. Stealing from vehicles fell by 39% (1998 figures compared to 2000) and is the one category that is still reducing in comparison to nearly all other categories of crime. The incidence of stolen cars has reduced by 40% and since the beginning of 1998 vehicle crime in 22 of Blackpool's worst car parks has reduced by 72%.

A variety of interventions were used. Some were old ideas recycled but had proven effective others were innovative but previously untested. The main thrust was one of education for potential victims, police officers, partners and criminals. Targeting of the right offenders at the right times in the right places proved effective.

## SCANNING

In researching vehicle related crimes and formulating strategies that would ultimately lead to reductions as many sources of information as possible were scrutinised. These included the Lancashire Constabulary crime recording system, incident logging, intelligence and custody system as well as data supplied by the Fire Brigade and the Local Authority. All data analysed was taken from a three year time period.

The analysis was done by ourselves and in order to do so we learned new skills in examining the various computer databases. We visited other forces such as Kent and Avon & Somerset who had a proven track record in reducing vehicle crime and came back with examples of best practice. Like the Japanese we then took those ideas and improved or adapted them before implementing them locally.

### Breakdown of vehicle crime

Stealing from motor vehicles accounts for 36% of all car crime. Theft of cars 30% and damage accounting for 25%. It was found that when conducting analysis that no one area could be looked at in isolation because all were interlinked due to the application of the home office counting rules.

## ANALYSIS

### Offender

Over a three year period it was established that several hundred offenders had been detected for vehicle related crimes. Only a small proportion of all offenders had been convicted of more than one offence. This implied that vehicle crime was every criminals hobby and was clearly in the main an opportunist crime. In the main stealing from vehicles and taking cars without consent was a youth crime as can be seen from the charts below.

### Where do the offenders live?

As can be seen from this chart the majority of offenders detected for vehicle related crimes live within the Divisional boundaries.

When abandoned stolen vehicles were analysed this showed a similar picture. The majority turning up locally, confirming that the resident car thieves are the problem.

The offenders were also concentrated in the wards which had the highest incidence of vehicle related crime. This suggests that the offenders do not travel far from home to commit crime.

A frequently asked question was what relationship does drugs have to car crime?

The answer is we really don't know because the systems did not collate such data and so from evidence available we believe that stealing from motor vehicles did involve a link to drug abuse albeit not as great as some other categories of crime i.e. burglary & shop theft. This was corroborated in that very few confidential human intelligence sources gave information relating to car crime and that most informants tended to be drug abusers.

### Victim

Most victims tended to be male, the average age was 51 years with the highest age group being 30 - 36. The retired and unemployed formed the largest groups of victims at around 15%.

Overall 56% of the victims lived in Blackpool and 81% lived within Lancashire. Of those who lived outside the county most came from Scotland, Yorkshire Manchester and Merseyside.

Relating specifically to car parks between 1/1/97 and 31/12/99 Blackpool had 2411 vehicle related crimes. 82% of those victims lived outside the Lancashire boundary.

Day trippers whilst away from home seemed to leave all thoughts of vehicle security behind and concentrated more on enjoying Blackpool. This meant leaving their vehicles like shop windows with property on display, with windows and doors left insecure thereby giving local criminals rich pickings. This posed a particular problem in that the victims were difficult to target with any preventative messages.

Makes and models of vehicles were analysed to establish which were the most likely targets. Vauxhall Astras and Ford Escorts came out at the top of the list however these vehicles are also amongst the highest numbers on the road. The most common age was over 5 years old.

## Location

Initial scanning saw the production of several geo - coded maps which gave hot spots within the Division over a three year period. These showed that the vast majority of vehicle related crimes were being committed within 2 of the five sub divisions namely Blackpool South and Blackpool Central.

From these it was possible then to zoom in on the 2 sub divisions and conduct further analysis. It came as no surprise that in the 2 sub divisions were located the majority of public car parks.

The top three worst wards were and still are:

1. Alexandra Ward, which is a main tourism area, has the largest car parks in the town. Seaside Way open air car parks stretching from South Station car park to Lonsdale Road. On road parking around the Pleasure beach with little natural surveillance and abundance off potential victims.
2. Claremont is one of the most deprived areas of the town and has been receiving Single Regeneration funding for the last seven years. It has the highest concentrations of Houses of multi Occupancy and consequently a similar concentration of resident criminals.

3. The town centre like many others has a number of multi storey and open air car parks. Some of these car parks have had little or no investment for the last 20 years. Again the town centre is a hot spot of bed sits and multi occupancies the majority of properties have no driveways or garages.

## Times

Peak times were at the weekends during late afternoon and evening particularly over the summer season. Bank holidays saw large amounts of vehicle related crime and this had a relationship with the fact that Police numbers tended to be lower, coupled with increased numbers of vehicles entering the area.

A five year period of car crime was analysed to establish consistent annual peaks and troughs. Those dozen peaks were then looked at more closely and it was established that they aligned with public holidays when the town visitor population swelled to capacity and with it large numbers of vehicles. These periods were later to be used to plan operations i.e 'Arrival' for maximum impact on vehicle crime figures.

## Property stolen

Property stolen over three years totaled over £13 million.

The most common items were audio equipment whether it be in car entertainment or personal hi-fi's being left unattended. The theft of cars was the next most common item of which approximately 70% are recovered. Clothing came third and highlighted the fact that crimes could be reduced by raising the public's awareness through a variety of initiatives the main message being one of 'stop leaving property in the car.'

## Stolen vehicles

The Constabularies crime recording system is not accurately recording data relating to abandoned stolen vehicles. This area is still of concern even though a good deal of effort has

been put into making change. However, we can say that between 69% and 87% of stolen cars from Blackpool are abandoned within Lancashire. Up to 80% are abandoned within the Western Division.

Most of the stolen vehicles are abandoned in the same or adjacent hot spot areas that are worst for the thefts of cars in Alexandra Claremont, & Talbot wards.

1 % of vehicles recovered were found with false number plates and 0.2 % were ringers. 8% were burnt out but this is believed to be much higher when comparisons are made to data held by the Fire brigade.

As we tighten the grip on vehicle crime through increased use of forensic examination and the subsequent identification / prosecution of offenders we expect the numbers of burnt out stolen cars to increase. This has been the experience of a number of other Police forces who have been tackling vehicle crime for many years using similar methods i.e. Avon & Somerset, Kent.

## RESPONSES

### Car parks

Due to the major problems highlighted in the towns car parks bringing them up to secure car park status was made a high priority and meetings were held with council managers at varying levels within the organisation. Presentations were made to Blackpool's Town Centre Forum, retail groups, hoteliers and local authority committees i.e. transport strategy group to promote the need for investment in the areas car parks.

In fact anyone that would sit still long enough with a sympathetic ear was addressed. This lobbying approach proved effective with the local authority who responded by offering £100,000 over and above the annual spending to improve security measures. This money was obtained by increasing car parking fees on long stay parking areas only. Unfortunately this

funding could not continue into a second term as the Local Authority had a financial crisis. However security in car parks is now on the political agenda and is being written into the towns strategic transport plans for the future.

An architectural Liaison Police Officer from the Atlas team surveyed each car park to establish what improvements could be made and which were suitable for upgrading to secure car park status.

The car parks were listed in descending order of crime rates. The Atlas team then sat down with car park management and formulated a detailed plan of improvements. These ranged from improved lighting, painting, signage, patrols, fencing and additional CCTY etc.

One example was Bonny Street Car Park (see photographs) This parking area accommodates up to 200 vehicles and is situated alongside the Police Station which in 1998 had 57 vehicle crimes. The car park was poorly lit and at the rear was a soil embankment which led to the larger Central open air car park. This soil embankment was clearly well trodden and used as a rat run for offenders without fear of detection.

In response to the Police survey a short length of palisade security fencing was erected. Almost immediately crimes fell.

Car crime on private car parks is regularly monitored and those identified as having regular patterns of criminal activity are surveyed. The operator is then approached initially by letter, offered crime prevention advice and encouraged to invest in car park security. At this point they are also introduced to the governments Secured Car Park Award Scheme.

Blackpool currently has eight car parks which have attained this standard and it is anticipated more are to follow.

Car park operators were made aware that we were considering 'naming and shaming' the worst car parks for crime publicly through the media. This clearly was a sensitive area and had

we used the tactic, damage to partnership working along with the towns image would probably have occurred. This is still an option but will only be used as a last resort.

Another example was the erection of fencing along South Railway Station and Bond Street car parks Bond Street open-air car park was operated at the time by the Local Authority it had always been a hotspot for car crime. The car park was a wasteland covered in cinders with no lighting and no security.

Thieves attacked vehicles and used the adjoining railway line as an escape route to the larger South Railway station car park to the north

The Pleasure Beach Company at the time were seeking new opportunities to increase their car parking capacity. The Atlas team actively supported and encouraged the hand over of Bond Street car park to the pleasure beach. The reason being that the Pleasure beach Company had embraced the concept of secure car parking and had intimated if they were successful in obtaining this land it would be considered for such an upgrade.

In order to arrive at a solution to what had been a perennial problem the Atlas team brought together in partnership Railtrack and the Local Authority. These agencies had no previous experience of working together and initially progress was difficult. Only by acting as mediators did the Atlas team manage to get the project moved forward. Local councillors were used to apply gentle political pressure and eventually after 12 months of negotiations finances totaling £52,000 were made available. This was used to erect a security fence over several hundred metres on both sides of the railway line. During the construction over 20 bags were found discarded on the railway lines the remnants of previous thefts.

Once this project had been completed the incidence of thefts both on south Station and bond street Car Parks fell dramatically. No longer could youths be seen crossing the railway lines previously used as a rat-

run and residents in the locality felt less vulnerable particularly to burglary.

## Education

Methods of educating the car owner was researched and those that appeared to work best were adopted below are a few innovative ways in which we delivered or are about to deliver information.

## Vulnerable Vehicle Scheme

In response to the problem of people leaving valuables in cars the vulnerable vehicle scheme was implemented. This involved Police Officers, Traffic wardens and members of the local Authority security department spotting cars which had been left in such a condition that they were likely to become a victim of vehicle crime.

The officer would note the cars details on a specific form. A check was carried out on PNC and if the owner resided locally a letter was sent to them pointing out the vulnerability of their vehicle and crime prevention advice.

Over 700 forms were completed in the first year and from this approximately half were identified as locals and these received letters and advice. This scheme was administered solely by the traffic wardens.

The most common theme was people leaving clothing on display in cars. From this specific crime prevention material will be produced concentrating on specific property left in cars. Feedback from people receiving the letter has been positive and it has also served to improve the public satisfaction of the Police service.

## Electronic Message Boards

Under a Home Office Targeted Policing Bid a request for funding was made in relation to two innovative ideas partly aimed at reducing vehicle crime and street violence.

One is to install loudspeakers with town centre CCTV and the second is to install a number of

large LED scrolling message boards on the large car parks leading into the town.

Each message board will be visible from hundreds of metres away and will be programmed remotely from the Police Station with up to 100 different messages. It is intended to give crime prevention advice, details of hot stolen vehicles, witness appeals, etc. This provides a long term cost effective means of getting messages to the public primarily in the larger parking areas where there is little natural surveillance. If successful the number of message boards will be extended to cover all areas where car crime is prevalent. Equipment is in the process of being installed so as yet its impact has not been evaluated.

### Empty Car Card

The empty car card was designed to hand out to the motorist the intention was that the car owner placed the card in a prominent position inside the vehicle after making sure all valuables had been removed. The card acted then as a deterrent to the would be thief.

### Crisis Card

Following a successful campaign by the Ambulance service. The Crisis card was seen as an effective method of delivering an autocrime prevention message to 60,000 homes in the Blackpool and Fylde.

The Crisis card made use of the empty car card concept and included advice on how to make your car more secure. It detailed what to do if involved in an accident and how to go about buying a car without later finding out it was a ringer. Emergency telephone numbers and local retailers meant that the card would hopefully be kept in a handy place in the car.

The card was funded totally from advertising. Delivery was carried out by the Royal Mail and areas delivered to were selected by the Police to maximise impact.

### Media - Autocrime awareness week

For a one week period on a daily basis newsworthy stories are given to the media on vehicle crime related topics. Some is misinformation to put the criminal on guard such as overstating the use of several rat trap type vehicles with numerous arrests. Crime prevention advice. (see press clippings).

### Letters to the criminals

Prior to policing operations letters were hand delivered to addresses of target criminals and the houses on either side. The letter told how persistent offenders were being targeted through surveillance and other techniques without mentioning any individual. The letter included an appeal for information concerning car crime and to this end a crime stoppers card was included.

### Auto crime alert cards

Where a spate of car crime has occurred in a locality neighbouring households are hand delivered an auto alert card. This is a credit card sized publication 'alerting' the householder to the fact that a vehicle crime has occurred nearby. The card includes an appeal for information and gives the crimestoppers number.

### Car park tickets

This year over a 3 month period 1/2 million car park tickets will be dispensed at pay and display meters all over Blackpool which will carry a car crime message. This is hoped to be extended for a further 3 months in order to cover the peak holiday season in the area. This tactic is aimed at trying to educate the day trippers to the town. Funding was provided through partnerships namely the Community Safety Chest, Axa Insurance and Crimestoppers.

### 'NO FEAR' – video/training package for youths

Because the analysis had shown that youths / schoolchildren etc were linked to car crime we

visited Avon & Somerset Police to see how they had tackled the problem. We watched the Impact Roadshow presentation to schoolchildren and decided that a similar scheme could be effective if delivered in Blackpool and Fylde schools. However unlike the Lancashire 'Choices package' which is a county wide project, the know fear project will be targeted at schools highlighted as those within a high vehicle crime area.

Sponsorship was sought from Axa Insurance who donated £4000 for the production of a video which would be used in the delivery of the lessons. Almost two years later the video is about to be finalised and work started on the format of the classroom delivery.

The Blackpool 'No Fear' video includes local live footage of a vehicle pursuit where a young man was knocked down by the stolen car whilst the Police Helicopter hovered above. The film goes on to show an interview with the now handicapped young man and his family. Some horrific accident scenes are shown and the whole approach is to take the glamour out of what is still referred to by the media and members of the public as 'Joy Riding'.

Although instigated by the atlas team the package is a multi - agency initiative and when complete will be delivered by the Youth Offending teams, Youth involvement Police Officers, Probation, Fire Brigade and Community beat officers plus any other agency that can make use of the content to reduce vehicle crime. This is clearly a long-term tactic and its outcomes will not be realised for several years.

## Police Working Practices and Systems

During the scanning and analysis stages it became clear that few vehicles were being examined by scenes of crime officers. Some owners were being asked to drive unroadworthy vehicles into the main police station to have their vehicle examined others lived too far away and just didn't want to bother. The solution was

to train traffic wardens, police officers and enquiry desk staff to examine vehicles for fingerprints, in total 72 were trained and equipment was placed in patrol vehicles.

Another area of concern was how the Police recorded data in relation to vehicle crime. There was no way to analyse the types of car that had been stolen from. The data recorded following the recovery of a stolen vehicle was also poor. Recommendations were made and the Crime recording system has had improvements made facilitating better analysis. Procedures relating to the updating of crime reports relating to abandoned stolen vehicles have also been updated but still require yet more changes before they can be said to be working effectively.

## Offender matrix

When the operation commenced there appeared to be no real scientific approach to selecting the core criminals to be targeted. A computerised system of scoring each nominal was devised which took into account the following:

- Offenders total number of previous convictions.
- Intelligence over the last 3 months.
- A score is given if disqualified.
- A score is given if disqualified.
- A score is given if offences committed on bail.
- A score is given if male aged between 16 to 24.

The matrix initially was labour intensive to keep updated but is now in the process of being written into the corporate IT Intranet. The matrix effectively chose targets who were quickly arrested.

## Making auto crime the focus of all officers

If there is one thing which had an impact on tackling vehicle crime it was raising the autocrime profile with Police Officers. Historically car crime was seen as a 'lesser' crime than other categories and was treated as such.

Presentations were given to all ranks over several months and managers now focus on daily crime figures and have specific targets to achieve at the end of each month.

## Crime stoppers

Every operation that was initiated involved crimestoppers research showed that very little information is received relating to vehicle crime. Car parks had the crimestoppers message stencilled on the walls. It was also stencilled on the walls of police cells, and included on every publication or letter.

1000's of key rings (see front cover) were donated and distributed through local car accessory shops. Large banners were produced and displayed at gateways into the town, high visibility self adhesive signs were used on the sides of Local authority vehicles. As a result of the activity promoting Crimestoppers the Division was presented with a national award.

## Operation Arrival/Advent

In order to deter vehicle crime in the larger car parks high visibility operations were formulated to take place at a time / date which had historically been a peak for car crime. A mobile Police station was located on South Station car park which is also one of the gateways into the town. The station was manned by volunteers and community service offenders supervised by probation officers. Crime prevention material was handed out to everyone using the car parks. Extra staff manned the Local Authorities CCTV room and motorway patrols increased patrols on the motorway leading into the town. The operations involved other partners such as the

AA who parked their vehicles in suitable locations.

## Automated number plate reading systems

ANPR was utilised for several weeks during the early stages of the operation with limited success. A number of mobile systems were purchased by other areas of the Constabulary however we felt mobile units were not that effective in reducing vehicle crime. However a static system encircling the town is believed to be the answer. The system would operate 24 hours a day and be linked directly to the Police control room. Funding is now required to progress this project which would effectively produce a 'ring of steel' around the town providing a quick and effective means of detecting stolen vehicles.

## Partnerships

Partnerships played a role in reducing vehicle crime and these were developed as and when the opportunity arose.

The following are just a few of the partnerships formed over the last 2 years: Local Authority security; AA; CCTV bid; Railtrack; Pleasure beach; Autoglass; Mac Donalds; Axa; Moorland motors; Fire brigade; Crisis Card; Blackpool Victoria Hospital; Blackpool and Fylde College; Crimestoppers; Crime concern.

## ASSESSMENT

This methodology set out to achieve reductions across the board in vehicle crime and succeeded in doing so. It has proven that the reductions were not just short term blips but have consistently achieved month on month reductions.

Operation Atlas in name has now come to an end, but, the problem solving approach used to reduce vehicle crime has now been incorporated into a new department called M.A.P.S. (multi-agency problem solving).



The M.A.P.S. department continues where Atlas left off and using the SARA / PAT models will endeavour to achieve reductions in Burglary, Vehicle Crime and other best value performance indicators.

All the partners have benefited from the reductions in a number of ways:

- The Local authority has seen reduced numbers using the car parks due to the numbers of crimes occurring and this had a knock on effect on spending within the towns tourism areas. Hopefully turning the tide has improved the image of the town to visitors.
- The AA now have access to local authority parking areas which previously they had been barred from.
- The Fire Brigade has seen reduced levels of arson concerned with vehicles.
- The Police have seen resources freed up with over a 1000 less crimes to record, analyse, and investigate.
- Public awareness has been increased giving the 'feel good factor' to both residents and visitors alike.

- Other Policing Divisions have gained best practice by sending representatives on fact finding missions to establish what we had done to reduce vehicle crime. Consequently mirrored operations soon sprang up in other areas of the Constabulary.

In conclusion staff involved in the operation felt that although a good deal of work had been adopted generally into everyday policing, however, without some form of permanent dedication to volume crime ie vehicle crime, burglary. These areas would start to revert back to their original levels. The location of the methodology within the Police station namely alongside the intelligence unit, CID and the crime management unit was crucial to effective communications.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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