

# Ram raiding: the history, incidence and scope for prevention

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## Introduction

Ram raiding (the terms 'ram raid' and 'ram attack' will be used interchangeably) refers to a technique in which commercial burglars drive vehicles, usually stolen cars, into locked/closed entrances, exits or windows of commercial premises, to effect an entry in order to steal stored or displayed goods. Almost any type of premises is a potential target, although those that contain television and video equipment, sports clothing, fashion clothing, jewellery, or cigarettes (usually supermarkets or cash and carry warehouses) are popular targets (Tilbury, 1994).

Obtaining information on ram raids was always destined to be a difficult task. Indeed, much of the criminological research has focused on domestic burglars (see Bennett and Wright, 1985; Maguire, 1982), and even those that have considered commercial burglary (Walsh, 1986; see also Butler earlier in this volume) have tended not to discuss ram raiding. Beck and Willis (1991) did undertake a crime pattern analysis of the burglary histories of several superstores, all of which had experienced a number of ram raids. More recently, the problem was referred to in an ethnographic study of the activities and police responses to the violent and criminal behaviour of delinquent gangs on council estates in the North-East of England (Campbell, 1993): but there has been little other discussion.

Statistical information is also difficult to find. Frequently, whether it be in police records or agency databases, ram raiding is not recorded separately from (commercial) burglary. Thus, the first objective of the present study was to collect as much information as possible in relation to the offence. In particular, emphasis was placed on clarifying the extent of ram raiding and the cost to victims, the effectiveness of security measures and the possible displacement of attacks away from the larger organisations (which can

afford security) to the smaller businesses (which are perhaps less able to afford security devices). In the process other issues emerged, this included the resistance of some local authorities to the use of certain ram raid prevention methods. In addition, it was viewed as important to gain an insight into the type of people who commit the offence.

## **Methodology and data collection**

The ultimate purpose of this study was to provide a profile of the offence of ram raiding as a base for formulating ideas on a crime prevention or security strategy. Given that there has been very little research in this area the first stage aimed to trace the history of the offence. Understanding what has happened in the past can be a useful guide to what will happen in the future.

Stage two involved a search for statistical information. Initially, all police forces were approached in an attempt to obtain official information. Unfortunately, many did not classify the crime separately from commercial burglary, and in practice the data collected were difficult to compare, and at least two forces were doubtful of the accuracy of the information they held. Nevertheless, this stage of the research did provide opportunities for discussion with police officers about the offence, this proved most instructive.

At the same time as approaches to police forces were made, major electrical retailers were also asked to supply details. These were established companies as well as the new retail outlets of the privatised electricity boards in both the high street and in out-of-town retail parks. In the event only three groups provided directly comparable data. One security manager expressed regret that despite having a database the company did not possess the staff to maintain it, and it was thus largely redundant. Another echoed the common police response that ram raids were not recorded separately.

The research would have benefited greatly from ram raid data from independent retailers. Two independent retailing associations were approached, in both cases because they adopted a pro-active approach to crime prevention. One group was unable to co-operate in the study for 'legal reasons', while the other was unable to supply information since its own survey did not address the issue of ram raiding separately.

Some retail groups refused to co-operate in the study and would do no more than acknowledge that ram raiding was of concern to their organisation. One group expressed the view that displacement to other retailers could be viewed as advantageous, and hence saw no benefit in sharing information. One retailer declined to help because of a concern that co-operation in the

study with other retailers would not be reciprocated. Such findings are not unusual, but they illustrate the difficulty of implementing crime prevention measures which depend on inter-agency co-operation.

In the event data were obtained from three retailers on the number of attacks and the financial costs. These data are broadly comparable although methods of calculating stock losses differ between organisations and over time. In addition, it proved possible to compare the effectiveness of particular measures in preventing ram raids at superstores.

The final stage of the project involved interviews with convicted ram raiders in prison. Attempts were made to speak to convicted teenage ram raiders, but unfortunately these could not be arranged during the period of the project. As Walsh (1986) has argued, offenders provide a valuable source of information. Certainly, their accounts help us to understand their motivation, and this is an important criterion in devising crime prevention strategies. All those interviewed were male, and all were serving convictions for commercial burglary and admitted a previous ram raiding offence. Because there were only seven, and because the interviews were conducted in prison, the findings may not be representative. They were never intended to be so: but they provide an additional (if limited) source in attempting to understand the offence.

## **The history of ram raids**

Ram raiding is not a new offence. The roots of such attacks go back to the period before the Second World War. It was in this period that smash-and-grab raids became common. Initially, these involved the use of one car but by the end of the 1930s the use of three or four vehicles was not uncommon and the financial gains could be high (Smithies, 1982). The use of several cars had a purpose: the first could be used to damage the access point, the second for the raid, the third for the getaway, and the fourth to obstruct the police (Gosling, 1959). Laurie Taylor discovered that John McVicar, a former armed robber, had been involved in smash-and-grab raids as the following extract illustrates:

Taylor: What did you do? What was a smash and grab raid?

McVicar: 'We used to do Burlington Arcade. Used to drive straight down there doing windows all the way. We did three or four at a time. We used to take some real liberties. I go down there now and look at the stuff ... and it's amazing to me how it stays in the window and no-one has it away.'

(Taylor, 1984, p.105)

Smash-and-grabbers used to rely on the technological inadequacies of the police. The police cars lacked a two-way system of radio communication and the shortcomings of the telephone system meant that a person reporting a raid had to wait anything from two to nine minutes to reach the police (Hill, 1955). Police officers assisting with this study noted that today some ram raiders use scanners to monitor police activity and hence gain a strategic advantage.

That ram raiding is not a new offence has been observed by others. For example:

Ramming is a phenomenon almost as old as the car itself. In the 1950s ... jewellers shops were the most popular targets. Grappling irons were hooked to the grilles covering the shop front, and attached to the rear of the car, which was driven off at speed.

*(The Guardian, 23 April 1991)*

Yet, very little research has been conducted, and it is hoped that the findings discussed here are instructive.

## **Police statistics**

Many forces reported that they did not classify ram raids separately and were therefore unable to assist with the study, while others did not reply. Much of the information that did emerge related to different time periods, and this makes comparisons difficult. And the ten police forces that did provide data were not necessarily representative of the country. Overall, the data suggest that while 1992 saw an increase in the incidence of attacks, 1993 saw a gradual return to 1991 levels. Indeed, 1993 figures for ram raids are about half those for 1992. What is perhaps most significant about these data is the fact that they are in themselves not very informative. Therefore, they are best assessed alongside those obtained from retailers.

## **Managing ram raids: retail information**

The way information is presently collected and recorded by retailers and the police, limits the extent to which it is possible to create an effective database which would help in devising preventative strategies for ram raiding. Certainly, it is instructive to compare the findings of the three retailers who were able to provide details. All information was drawn from retailers' own crime databases. The retailers were compared in terms of the number of ram attacks they had suffered, the cost of structural damage, and the retail stock losses from ram raids. Finally, the expenditure on security measures

deployed against ram attacks in six superstores from the largest retail chain was compared with the cost of ram raids over a specific period. The data were compared over a four-stage period (chosen because data was available for each one and only these) as shown below.

Period 1	01/07/91 – 31/12/91.
Period 2	01/01/92 – 31/06/92.
Period 3	01/07/92 – 31/12/92.
Period 4	01/01/93 – 31/06/93.

The retail data are reasonably accurate since any damage from a ram raid will presumably require repair, and companies will need a record of stock stolen for administrative (and perhaps insurance) purposes. The retail figures were drawn from three national chains, all of which traded in both high streets and out-of-town retail parks. In this section damage costs and stock losses from ram raids will be considered separately.

#### *Structural damage costs*

The very nature of a ram attack means that the damage caused will be excessive, and the cost of repair will be high. In reality damage costs include the cost of clearing up, and the use of guards (at an average of £80 per night in 1993) while repairs are carried out. However, the figures used in the following two tables refer only to the costs of repairing the physical damage (since only this information was available for all three stores). The figures in brackets refer to the number of ram raids suffered in each period.

**Table 1. The cost of ram raid damage by period**

	Company A	Company B	Company C
Period 1	10,355 (3)	100,701 (24)	22,293 (24)
Period 2	16,953 (7)	40,760 (12)	14,074 (8)
Period 3	13,956 (9)	74,342 (16)	2,304 (4)
Period 4	39,394 (7)	19,016 (9)	not available
Total	80,658 (26)	234,819 (61)	38,671 (36)

In terms of the frequency of attacks these figures suggest a different pattern from that indicated by the police data. Overall, it would seem that ram raids were most common in 1991 (at least for companies B and C) and declined in 1992. It is almost certainly the case that retailers' figures are more accurate than police data.

As can be seen, the costs of structural damage from ram raiding over the period reveal contrasting trends. For company A the figures show not much less than a four-fold increase, while for company B costs at the end of the period are a fifth of what they were at the beginning although the heavy losses incurred in period three suggest a need for caution when interpreting trends. Only company C shows a consistent decline over this period. The total costs of damage from ram raids was a significant problem for company B, but they had more outlets and more ram raids. Therefore, a more helpful way of looking at this data is to view it in terms of the cost of damage per attack.

**Table 2. Average cost of damage per attack by period (£)**

	Company A	Company B	Company C
Period 1	3,452	3,729	928
Period 2	2,421	3,396	1,759
Period 3	1,551	4,646	576
Period 4	5,627	2,112	n/a
Average	3,263	3,471	1,088

Again wide variations can be seen. While the highest average cost of damage per attack was borne by company A in period 4, generally it was company B that suffered the highest losses from damage. However, company B was able to reduce its costs per attack over the period in contrast to company A. Company C clearly suffers much less both in terms of absolute costs and average costs per attack (companies A and B both suffered more frontal attacks where damage tended to be greater). Overall, company B (and on the limited information available company C) could claim notable success in that it reduced the number of ram raids and the level of loss, while company A saw an increase in both. A significant contributory factor here is the fact that attacks to the front of stores caused more damage and were more expensive to repair, and companies A and B suffered more from this type of ram raid. Of course damage costs need to be considered alongside the value of goods stolen during ram raids.

#### *Retail stock losses from ram raids*

In real terms the value of the goods stolen is only part of the total loss: there are also what are called consequential losses. These include the administrative cost of replacing goods, additional transportation costs etc.

These have not been included here, but they should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Retail stock losses from ram raids by period (£)**

	Company A	Company B	Company C
Period 1	2,462 (3)	58,237 (24)	22,260 (24)
Period 2	3,408 (7)	15,075 (12)	7,796 (8)
Period 3	4,538 (9)	27,496 (16)	6,308 (4)
Period 4	3,020 (7)	22,854 (9)	8,550 (7)
Total	13,428 (26)	123,662 (61)	44,914 (43)

Stock losses are considerably lower than the cost of repairing damage for companies A and B. The findings for company C are difficult to compare because data for damage in period 4 (see Table 1) are incomplete. However, it is quite clear that stock losses in periods 1 and 3 for company A were no less than those suffered through damage. Again company B suffered bigger losses overall, although it may take some comfort from the fact that, unlike company A its costs declined over time. Table 4 shows the same data presented in terms of loss per attack.

A different picture emerges. Losses for companies B and C increased over the four periods, albeit only marginally. It is important to consider these findings alongside the fact that overall, the number of ram raids over the period showed a downward trend in companies B and C. This lends support to the view that ram raiding is becoming more determined, with losses increasing even though raids are becoming more infrequent. Losses for company A almost halved, even though the number of raids more than doubled. Thus while company A was the least successful in terms of stopping raids and reducing damage costs, it was the most successful in reducing the amount of goods lost per raid over the period. These findings tell us something about the caution needed in interpreting statistics and the importance of ensuring that ram raiding data are carefully collected and monitored as an aid to security policy.

What this section has not attempted to do is to relate the incidence of ram raiding to the presence of security measures. Unfortunately this information was not available, or where it was, it was incomplete and patchy. However, details of security shutters were available for six superstores, each of which had been ram raided more than three times and had had new shutters fitted. The findings are shown in Table 5. The costs of burglary (which do not

**Table 4. Average retail losses per ram raid by period (£)**

	Company A	Company B	Company C
Period 1	820	2,426	927
Period 2	486	1,256	974
Period 3	504	1,718	1,577
Period 4	431	2,539	1,221

include ram raiding) are shown separately from those of ram raiding (given in brackets).

**Table 5. Shutter installation and burglary/ram raiding costs by superstore**

	Shutter cost	Burglary cost before shutter	Burglary cost after shutter
S/store 1	9847	21,072 (15,327)	168 (0)
S/Store 2	18,310	27,895 (27,895)	0 (0)
S/Store 3	4727	33,231 (22,024)	56,769 (3,039)
S/Store 4	5375	10,009 (10,009)	0 (0)
S/Store 5	3957	12,737 (12,737)	742 (0)
S/Store 6	8496	20,412 (20,412)	0 (0)

From this limited sample, it appears that the installation of high-grade shuttering substantially reduces the ram raid problem. Burglary in general terms would also appear to be reduced, and to an extent that justifies the expenditure on the shutters. Overall, with an average spending of £8,452 per store on shutters, average burglary losses fell from £20,892 to £9,613. Ram attack losses alone were reduced from an average of £18,067 to an average of £507 per store. This represents a saving of £17,560 per store. These savings are made in a period of not less than six months or more than twelve months following the installation of the shutter. Superstore 3 was an exception to the trend. Here, the installation led to the displacement of attacks to the roof of the building, and the store subsequently suffered a burglary where losses exceeded £50,000.

These results are comparable with those from a survey carried out by the Economic Development Unit of the Salford Business Security Grant Scheme (Tilley, 1993). Businesses were asked to list offences committed against them before and after security upgrades. The response was relatively



low (86 replies from 161 recipients of questionnaires), so the results must be interpreted cautiously. Of the 40 businesses in the survey which had installed shutters, 38 had been victimised in the year before the installation. Following the installation of shutters this number was reduced by 43 per cent. Total offences against those 38 businesses victimised prior to installation were also reduced from 265 in the year before installation to 80 in the year following installation, a reduction of 70 per cent. Again, the available data support the view that shutters improve the security of premises, although the experience of superstore 3 suggests that this is not a certainty. The possibility of the displacement of crime to other businesses has not been considered.

In some areas, particularly older market towns, local officials have refused retailers permission to install shutters, on the grounds that security measures are inappropriate for listed buildings and/or that bollards and shutters do not blend in with the local environment. Of course, security measures are sometimes perceived as unattractive and local authorities fear this will discourage business. The following is an extract from a recent internal borough council discussion document on shuttering. The document was obtained in confidence and therefore the borough council name has been omitted:

'X' Valley and 'Y' area committees expressed the view that a more restrictive approach is required. 'X' Valley would prefer a policy that totally precludes the installation of roller shutters in any location whilst 'Y' recommend that shutters should not be allowed in environmentally sensitive areas.

There is evidence to suggest that it is these vulnerable areas in particular which are now experiencing ram attacks. One police area containing a large number of older market towns estimated that of all commercial burglaries, 33 per cent were ram attacks. As well as having restrictive planning regulations these areas are often sparsely policed. Police officers in the North-West of England who provided data indicated that attackers often travelled out of the security-conscious city areas to the softer targets of the suburbs. Police sources and retailers' data show that the satellite towns around many cities suffer a high proportion of attacks (the main roads which lead to these districts are common sites for the location of out-of-town superstores, and provide a further attraction to the ram raiders).

## **Offender interviews**

In all seven convicted ram raiders were interviewed in prison. It needs to be emphasised that the views reported here are not necessarily representative of

all ram raiders, but in the absence of fuller research they offer a useful insight.

*The respondents*

Only one of the ram raiders interviewed was over the age of 30 years. The rest were all in their early twenties. This confirms the traditional view of smash-and-grabs as a young person's form of crime, though one of the respondents said he had committed ram raids with others as old as 40 years. All the respondents were white Europeans.

*Reasons for offending*

All the offenders interviewed said money was the main reason for committing offences. Four said that excitement was an important element in ram raiding for them. All respondents thought commercial burglary was preferential to domestic burglary because it was more lucrative. When asked specifically about why they committed ram raids, all the respondents but one said that they had been influenced by the coverage in the media. The following extract typifies these answers:

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Respondent | All the stuff in the papers and on the news at the time, I thought it seemed a good thing to do. |
| Question   | What about your colleagues?  |
| Respondent | Same.  |

The one interviewee who said that he had not been influenced by the media explained that ram raiding was something that he had engaged in when he was younger, including smash-and-grab raids against jewellery stores. At the time of the interview he was aged 26 and said he had stopped before the press attention began. Excitement was not a factor: ram raiding was merely an easy way of obtaining money. His early involvement was due to an associate who liked driving cars: they agreed to combine driving skills with experience of theft in carrying out ram raids.

Questions were included on drug and alcohol consumption. Three of the offenders said they had taken drugs when they committed their last ram raid. All three were in their early twenties. The variety of drugs taken ranged from speed and crack to cannabis resin. Only one of the respondents claimed to have undertaken the ram raid in order to obtain money specifically to purchase drugs. Only one offender considered himself to be a heavy drinker.

### *The number of people involved*

All the ram raiders interviewed had worked in teams of four or more people, but not in any regular gang. In the last ram raid attacks in which the respondents had been involved, all but the individual aged 30 years had worked with a group of people who were their own age. Though one had worked with people older than himself previously, the 30 year old offender had been working with a gang who were younger.

### *Execution of a ram raid*

Only one of the offenders interviewed said that the attack had been planned, and in this case the planning had been done twelve months in advance. The others reported that they had just driven around in stolen cars on the night they had carried out an attack looking for a suitable premises to attack. The spontaneity of ram raiding was stressed. Two of the offenders had not used vehicles to ram the doors in the characteristic manner. They explained that the most skilful method of using a car in a break-in was to drive the car slowly up to the premises. They then pushed the door open with the corner of the car bumper so as not to smash too much glass. This had at least two advantages: it reduced the noise and it lessened the risk of glass or other materials being found either on their clothing, or in their cars, which could later be used in evidence against them.

The number of cars used varied from two to eight. They were usually high-powered. Range Rovers and pick-up trucks were favoured as ramming vehicles. Interestingly, none of the offenders stated that his personal involvement in ram raids had developed from car theft. This view supports that offered by the Royal Ulster Constabulary:

If one looks at the offenders dealt with for ram raids it is evident they have a history of criminal activity and would have progressed to more serious crime in any event. It would be imprudent to assume that the majority of joyriders progress to ram raids. It should be noted that professional criminal gangs with no history of joyriding have employed these means to commit crime.

(Royal Ulster Constabulary: personal communication)

## **Summary and discussion**

The evidence presented so far confirms that much can be gained from the creation of good databases (see Ekblom, 1988). They provide a sound basis on which to devise security procedures, and then to monitor their effectiveness. The information gained can be a potentially excellent source of criminal intelligence.

The installation of security shutters at superstores appeared to be a worthwhile investment overall. Although security managers were very satisfied with the shutters, a caveat is necessary here. This study did not take into account the possible effects of other changes which may have occurred at the same time as the shutters were installed. For example, there was no attempt to conduct an experiment using a control store (one without shutters) for comparison. In one superstore (number 3), the losses increased, albeit because of a single burglary where goods of a value of £50,000 were stolen. Again, the importance of collecting and continuously monitoring data is underlined.

In addition, no attempt was made to identify the possible displacement effect as ram raiders moved away from superstores to less protected targets, although other data suggest that this was occurring. Indeed, it would seem that ram raiders are being assisted by local regulations which see aesthetics as a higher priority than security. At least some of these areas have witnessed increases in ram raids when overall the trend appears downward. There is a need for careful monitoring of local crime patterns.

The offender interviews offered insights into why people engage in ram raiding. Nearly all the ram raiders were in their early twenties (given that the interviews were conducted in adult prisons teenagers were not included), and they reported that they committed offences with people their own age. The biggest motivating factor was the need for money; excitement was a secondary consideration and irrelevant to some. While some consumed drugs, in only one case was this explicitly cited as a reason for committing the offence. This is an area which merits further research.

Ram raiders reported working in (different) groups of four or more people. For the most part their offences were unplanned: they searched for an easy target. It is perhaps not surprising to find that crime was displaced to less protected premises. It was also interesting to find that the technique of ram raiding required some skill. Again, more research is needed as a basis for formulating better security strategies.

At the same time this study has uncovered some obstacles in the way of those who see inter-agency co-operation as the route to better crime prevention. The police contribution is limited by recording practices which result in ram raiding rarely being recorded separately. Some retailers attach a low priority to collecting data and some are sceptical about the wisdom of sharing their information. Until these issues are recognised and tackled security measures will not achieve their full potential.

Ultimately, effective security is dependent on a complete understanding of the offence. This paper has shown that where information is available it can

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prove very effective in improving policy. At present there is considerable ignorance about the offence of ram raiding. Until this void is filled there will continue to be victims, and increasingly these will be businesses which either cannot afford security or are prevented by officials from implementing it.

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