Policing & Reducing Crime

Briefing Note

VEHICLE CRIME REDUCTION: TURNING THE CORNER

Background

In September 1998, the Prime Minister announced a national target to reduce vehicle crime by 30% over five years. The Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team (VCRAT), a multi-agency group formed by the Home Office in 1998 to oversee vehicle crime work, has been tasked with co-ordinating efforts to achieve the 30% reduction target. One of the first actions of VCRAT was to commission a review of research and statistics relevant to the target.

This report provides findings from that review. It examines international, national and local police force patterns of vehicle crime and highlights some of the key issues that will need to be addressed if the 30% target is to be achieved.

Main findings

Vehicle crime trends

England and Wales are commonly held up as the 'Car Crime Capital of Europe'. The evidence for this, however, is the subject of debate - definitions of a vehicle theft differ across European states. Analysis of European police statistics found that rates of vehicle theft in Denmark and Sweden were higher than in the UK. However, the 1996 International Victimisation Survey, reporting risk of theft of and from cars across 11 countries, shows England and Wales to suffer the highest risk of theft.

In 1997, over 1.1 million vehicle crime offences were reported to the police and estimates from victimisation surveys suggest the true figure may be closer to 2.5 million offences. Approximately a quarter of all recorded crime is vehicle-related and the overall rate was estimated to be 22 recorded vehicle crime offences per 1,000 licensed vehicles. While recorded vehicle crime increased rapidly in the late 1980s / early 1990s, it declined by 28% between 1992 and 1997.

In 1997, over 400,000 vehicles were reported stolen. Estimates suggest that 81% of these were cars, nine percent were motorcycles, nine percent were light commercial vehicles and one percent were heavy goods vehicles. The majority of stolen vehicles, however, were recovered (69%).

Thefts from vehicles accounted for 63% of recorded vehicle crime offences, but are significantly under-reported. The British Crime Survey (BCS) estimates that over 2 million thefts from vehicles occurred in 1997.

In 1997, rates of vehicle crime at the police force level ranged from 5 to 33 per 1,000 head of population. Forces with a low rate of vehicle crime tended to be situated in more rural areas, while high vehicle crime areas tended to contain large conurbations, synonymous with higher levels of crime.

Thefts of cars

The types of car most at risk of theft are older (more than five years old), sportier versions of familiar high volume models. Analysis of the 1997 Car Theft Index showed that just 38 models accounted for 19% of stolen vehicles.

Car security was found to have improved significantly on new models in recent years. Although there is some evidence to show that new security works, the evidence is still weak and further work on both long-term effectiveness and retro-fit security is required.

Inner city areas, council estates and areas with a high level of physical disorder all suffer disproportionately high levels of car crime. Where specific parking locations are concerned, public car parks present a particularly high risk, while domestic garages provide the best protection. Those with a high risk of victimisation of car theft include the young, those on low

incomes, the unemployed and single parents.

Thefts from cars

Items most frequently stolen from cars are external parts (e.g. wheel trims, badges, hubcaps), followed by stereo equipment, bags, briefcases and cameras etc.

Thefts from cars also tend to be focused on the poorest areas (council estates, low-income and multi-ethnic areas are particularly at risk). However, those earning in excess of £30,000 pa were more likely than others to be a victim of a theft from a vehicle.

Points for action

An effective vehicle crime reduction strategy needs a clear understanding of the nature of the problem in order to tailor solutions appropriately. This requires detailed analysis, at both the national and local level, to identify the scope for action against vehicles, locations, victims or offenders. Constant monitoring of the strategy will also be essential so that it can be refined as required, and effective crime reduction methods promoted as examples of good practice.

Specific points for action arising from this report include:

Vehicles

- Focus effort on high risk makes and models and older cars;

- evaluate the effectiveness of security devices and promote those found to be effective;

- improve the protection of older vehicles using retro-fit security devices, but recognising that their risk may also derive from where they are parked, opening up additional areas for action;

- reduce thefts **from** vehicles by putting pressure on manufacturers to improve perimeter security;

- watch out for new problems and modus operandi, and tell the centre so that any national action can be informed by these early warnings of emerging problems;

- develop a greater understanding of how markets for stolen vehicles and components operate;

Locations

- persuade owners of high risk car parks to achieve Secured Car Park status - demonstrating or making public the scale of the problem may help in this;

- encourage car owners with garages to use them, and house builders and designers to provide where possible in-curtilage parking in new developments;

Victim groups

- tailor and target crime prevention information to vulnerable victims, using direct mail to target those who own high risk vehicles, those who live in high risk areas or both;

- prioritise repeat victims for preventative action;

Offender groups

- use motor projects to divert young vehicle crime offenders;

- make more and better use of forensics to detect more vehicle thieves;

- make professional theft more difficult through continued police efforts aimed at such offenders.

Other related PRC papers

CPU Paper 34: *Preventing Car Crime in Car Parks*

CDP Paper 66: *The Nature and Extent of Heavy Goods Vehicles*

CDP Paper 85: *Getting the Grease to the Squeak: Research Lessons for Crime Prevention*

CDP Paper 88: *The Nature and Extent of Light Commercial Vehicle Theft*

CDP Paper 90: *Repeat Vicitimisation: Taking Stock*