

EUCPN Good Practice Description 2003

United Kingdom Project example – Theft of Vehicles

Project title: Luton Autolok Project

Overview

The project was aimed at vehicle owners resident in the Marsh Farm Estate, Luton, who parked their cars on the Marsh Farm open area car parks – and suffered a high rate of *theft of vehicles*. The intervention involved supplying steering-wheel locks for cars at prices affordable for all the residents of the estate. The main organisation involved in carrying out this project was the Wauluds Association of Tenants and Residents. This is an example of *self-mobilisation* – preventive action initiated within the community.

400 locks had been purchased by residents since the initiation of the project in July 2002. The number of vehicle related offences on the estate fell from a peak of 22 in August 2002 to around 4-10 a month soon after. It was estimated that the project led to a reduction of some 23% below the expected level of crime, equivalent to 24 incidents prevented in a year. Attributing the fall in theft of vehicles to the intervention remains tentative, because the evaluation was limited and retrospective.

Project description – the 5Is

1. Intelligence

General context

The Autolok project described in this project outline was located on the Marsh Farm housing estate, on the edge of Luton, a medium sized city 75km to the north of London, with a history of vehicle manufacture. According to the Census 2001, the age group most at risk of offending (15-24 years) comprised 15 per cent of the total population of Luton, slightly higher than the national figure of 12 per cent. The unemployment level in Luton as a whole was just under 5 per cent, comparable to the national figure. In terms of diversity, just under 20 per cent of the population was from an ethnic minority background, with Pakistanis making up just over 10 per cent of the population and both Afro-Caribbean and Bangladeshis accounting for 5 per cent of the population each.

Marsh Farm was built during the 1960s and comprises some 3200 households. It was recently identified as being in one of the most deprived wards in England/Wales, particularly afflicted with problems of overcrowding. In terms of parking it offered both garaged parking lots and open car park facilities. It is vehicles exposed in these that were most at risk of being stolen. Although the open car parks were in a good state of repair, the areas could sometimes be littered with rubbish bags, dumped mattresses, etc.

The crime problem that the project aimed to tackle

Prior to the intervention of the project, vehicle crime had been on a steady increase, peaking during July and August 2002 with 30 thefts of vehicles/taking without owner's consent (a lesser offence in which there is judged to be no intention to keep the vehicle) on Marsh Farm during those months.

Wider crime problems

Other types of offending and anti-social behaviour noted on the estate included drug dealing, abandoned vehicles, criminal damage, arson and domestic burglary. Associated with the high level of deprivation of the area, there were both a high incidence of offending and a significant number of offenders living on the estate. It was suggested that around 80% of the offenders involved in vehicle crime in the car parks of Marsh Farm estate, were from the estate itself. 7 Anti-Social Behaviour Orders had been placed on persistent offenders on the estate in 2003 and a whole 'problem' family had been

evicted from the estate and moved to South Bedfordshire. 5 of these orders were interim orders awaiting consolidation in the courts and one offender had already breached the order.

Significant consequences of the crime problem

Local residents perceived a high risk of becoming a victim of car crime. Those that were victimised obviously had all the usual costs and inconveniences resulting from stolen vehicles – a particular problem for residents on this ‘peripheral’ estate (although there was a bus service connecting with the rest of Luton). The main consequence for the community as a whole of the vehicle crime was that it occupied scarce police time, when there was a perception that other crimes on the estate (drugs, violence, etc) were in greater need of their attention.

Evidence of the crime problem – sources of information and analysis

Bedfordshire Police *recorded crime statistics* identified increasing thefts of vehicles on the estate.

Immediate causes and risk factors¹

Wider environment, Enclosure, Preventers

There were many open parking areas on the estate, with parking bays indicated by painted lines. The sites were not enclosed. The layout of the car parks followed the 1960s ‘Radburn’ style of housing layout (now discredited from a crime perspective), where pedestrians and cars are kept apart. Moreover, many of the open car parks were placed to the side of houses, which meant that no windows overlooked them – so natural surveillance by residents was confined just to those people using the car parks. There were no security guards or systems on site.

Target person or property

Being a ‘deprived’ estate, the residents’ cars tended, unsurprisingly, to be rather old – newer cars parked on the estate tended to come from outside the estate. Evidence from the UK Car Theft Index (<http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/cti2002.htm>) indicates that older models of car are most at risk of theft, whether because they are easy to break into, simply exposed to greater risk (being parked on the street and closer to places where offenders tend to live) or they generate a greater demand for breaking up for spare parts.

Anticipation of risk

The absence of easy surveillance was a major cause. According to the ‘Broken Windows’ theory, the high level of criminal damage and litter may have contributed to offenders’ perception of minimal risk in committing crime in the car parks.

Offender Presence

Many of the vehicle crimes on the estate were judged to have been committed by residents themselves.

Criminality, Lack of resources to avoid crime, Readiness to offend

Offences were mainly thought to be motivated by the excitement achieved through offenders joyriding and irritating the police (implying in turn a lack of affordable/accessible facilities for entertainment, in an environment that was highly ‘deprived’). There were no specific social support provisions for criminals involved in vehicle crime on the estate.

Resources for committing crime

¹ using the Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity – www.crimereduction.gov.uk/learningzone/cco.htm

Vehicle crime on the estate was thought to be fuelled by ‘opportunistic’ criminals rather than professionals, ie with few skills/tools and no systematic or deliberate search strategy.

2. Intervention

Existing intervention measures

There were no explicit interventions against car crime on the estate prior to the Autolok project.

Intervention adopted in the project

Method: *Use of Autolok steering wheel locks on vehicles*

Principles: *Deterrence and discouragement, Restricting resources for offending, Target hardening, Boosting Preventers*

Intervention principle 1 – Deterrence and discouragement

The ‘Autolok’ is designed to be highly visible from the exterior of the car. This would send an immediate message to offenders, before they began to attack it, that an individual protected car was riskier and more effort to steal than a car without the lock fitted.

Wide distribution of application forms to the residents (described below) may also have alerted offenders (most of whom were local) to the greater risk and effort in stealing cars in the area as a whole. Conceivably, this could lead to a kind of diffusion of benefits – in which the offenders avoided committing theft in the entire Marsh Farm estate rather than merely avoiding individual protected cars.

Intervention principle 2 – Restricting resources for offending

A short-term effect of the lock would be to remove the capacity of the vehicle crime offender to use previously learnt methods to remove a car from the car park. In the medium-longer term, it would take time and experience to develop a new method of breaking open the lock within an optimum time period to avoid detection. So far this does not appear to have happened, but the ultimate sustainability of impact is unknown.

Intervention principle 3 – Target hardening

Although gaining entry to the car itself is no more difficult, to then break the Autolok and drive off the car would require more time and possibly more sophisticated crime resources (e.g. toolkits, crowbars, and the skills to use them).

Intervention principle 4 – Boosting preventers

Whether or not individual residents purchased the Autolok, car owners, as crime preventers, would be *alerted* to the issue of car crime on the estate and might partake in other measures which made it harder to steal the car – for example purchasing cars with an automatic immobiliser, or parking (where possible) in less risky locations.

Offenders’ countermoves and reactions

The adoption of Autoloks by some residents of Marsh Farm and not others may have caused displacement of vehicle theft onto nearby cars that did not have the Autolok installed. There was also the possibility of displacement out of the area of the project. To tackle this risk, under the conditions of funding by New Deal, the project was required to offer the locks to those outside the Marsh Farm estate for a reduced price of £28. In practice, this offer was taken up only in a few cases.

3. Implementation

The following section looks at how the methods and principles of the project were converted into actual practice on the ground.

Objectives

The main 'output' objective was to supply locks to secure 1000 vehicles over an eighteen month period starting in August 2002.

Practical details

The locks – The steering wheel locks were half moon clamps, with an arm that rests on the seat of the car. The locks came in a choice of two 'deterrent' colours – bright yellow and silver.

The locks were bought from the manufacturers, Autolok Ltd. at a special price of £25. The reduction in price of the locks was possible because they were retail 'seconds' (ie with slight superficial damage). They were then sold to the residents at a subsidised price of £5. (Normal retail price of £70.00.)

Targeting of the implementation

Target of crime – Legitimately owned 'at risk' vehicles (Secondary)

Crime preventers – All car owners on the Marsh Farm estate (Primary)

Location – The open area car parks (Secondary)

Monitoring, quality assuring and adjustments made to the implementation

At the time of this report few modifications and adjustments had been made to the project, the exception being a focus on residents who own cars of makes and models which the police have identified to be at high risk of being stolen.

Inputs into the project

Funding for the wholesale purchasing of the car locks was from a grant of around £16,000 from the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme (a central government fund), supplemented by the retail purchase payment made by the residents themselves.

Work was carried out on a voluntary basis, consistently supporting residents – involving the full time of a manager and a support worker since just before the main funding from NDC was awarded in July 2002.

Converting plans into action on the ground

- The Wauluds Association of Tenants and Residents (WATAR) applied for the funding. The 30 community groups on Marsh Farm estate were involved in getting the proposal together.
- The WATAR purchased steering locks in batches of 100. Ordering was based on demand from the residents.
- The WATAR sent around letters and application forms alerting the residents/tenants to the project and the reduced purchase cost of the steering locks.
- To obtain the locks Residents were required to supply the £5 purchase price plus show their vehicle registration document, insurance papers and valid MOT certificate (a government test of the physical condition of cars over 3 years old).
- Where these three legal documents could not be provided, information about the owners of these missing documents was fed back to the appropriate authorities by the WATAR. Only 3 minor cases of documents not being in order have been picked up by the system. It is possible that offenders have purposefully not applied, as the need for these three legal documents was clearly stated in the application forms and advertisement of the service.

- The WATAR supplied regular updates on the progress of the project and the reduction in thefts of vehicles that followed – obviously important for motivating residents to purchase and/or continue to use their locks.

Outputs achieved

400 Autolok steering wheel locks had been sold in the project by October 2003. This constituted a year's allocated funding for the project. Only a small percentage of these were taken up by residents from outside the estate – residents outside the Marsh Farm estate appeared to be reticent about having any interactions with the Marsh Farm estate due to its poor local image.

Supporting environment

The principal funding came from the New Deal for Communities programme. The aim of NDC is to tackle multiple deprivation in the most deprived neighbourhoods, bridging the gap between these neighbourhoods and the rest of England. This is carried out by giving the poorest communities the resources to tackle problems in an intensive and co-ordinated way (the 5 key themes tackled are: poor job prospects; high levels of crime; educational under achievement; poor health; and problems with housing and the physical environment). (See <http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/ndcomms.asp>.)

4. Involvement

Partnership

The main organisations involved in this project were:

Wauluds Association of Tenants and Residents (WATAR).

This group were the direct advocates of the tenants and residents of Marsh Farm, involved in the co-ordination of the project – including:

- Obtaining funding with which the project was implemented.
- Negotiating the reduced price of the steering wheel locks with Autolok Ltd.
- Purchasing the steering wheel locks from Autolok Ltd.
- Alerting the residents about the reduced priced locks.
- Regulation and distribution of locks to residents.
- Informing the residents about the progress of the project.

Autolok Ltd.

Suppliers/Retailers of the reduced price steering wheel locks.

Bedfordshire Police

- Sharing information with WATAR about the initial crime problem (identify locations of greatest risk and vehicle brands most at risk) on the estate and data on the monthly thefts of vehicle crime on the estate.
- There are currently no permanent community police in the area – however there are some police who do involve themselves with the community.
- WATAR maintains telephone links with patrol officers, so that they can call them up if residents notice any crimes happening – this allows for a quick response to crime on the estate.

Residents and tenants of Marsh Farm

- Involved in the take up of the locks and increasing vigilance on crime in Marsh farm car parks

Mobilisation of residents to use security measures against vehicle crime

Clarification of the crime prevention tasks implemented

- The identification of a high level of vehicle crime and the possible preventative measures were evaluated by the police and information was passed onto WATAR.

Location of crime preventers

- Location of this group was carried out based on information gathered by WATAR and Bedfordshire Police, who examined the groups most at risk of experiencing vehicle theft.
- This was identified, as those on the Marsh Farm estate who parked in the open area car parks, and later additionally including those who had car brands most at risk of theft.

Alerting the crime preventers

- The residents were *initially informed* of the option of buying a reduced price steering wheel lock through a *letter* sent to each household.
- The residents were *kept informed* of the progress of the project, including the take up of locks by the residents and the resultant changes in experienced vehicle theft.
- Local *newspapers* were used to highlight the rising vehicle crime on the estate and to draw attention to the availability of the locks to residents of Marsh Farm.

Motivating the crime preventers

- Motivating the residents to secure their car, was done mainly through the *reduction of price* of the locks to a level which would be affordable to those on the estate who would normally find them too expensive). *Progress reports* of success probably served to motivate continued use of locks already purchased, and to stimulate further sales.

Empowering the crime preventers

- The distribution of steering wheel locks was aimed at allowing the residents to take extra precaution in securing their cars.

The information about the risk of being a victim of vehicle crime, may also have indirectly increased the responsibility for taking general security precautions when leaving their cars in car parks most at risk.

5. Impact

Provisional results

Output

By October 2003, 400 locks had been sold, almost all to residents of Marsh Farm. There was some observational evidence of adoption of the locks by those who purchased through the project.

Impact evaluation

An independent evaluation of limited scope was conducted by the Home Office for this project description, as described below.

Impact evaluation design

A simple retrospective impact evaluation was done, based on police recorded crime data. This was a nonequivalent control design, using three concentric areas and three time phases. The **areas** were Marsh Farm estate itself, the rest of Luton (excluding Marsh Farm), and the rest of the Bedfordshire

Police force area (excluding Luton). The latter was used to indicate general background falls in vehicle crime, which were then filtered out arithmetically; the rest of Luton was used to indicate any local geographic displacement from Marsh Farm.

The **time phases** were Phase 0 (January 2001-August 2002, before any action was taken), and Phase 1 (September 2002-August 2003, when the Autoloks were on sale).

This evaluation has many limitations. Nevertheless, a *prima facie* pattern of results emerged. However, the patterns of changes in vehicle crime over the 3 phases and 3 areas has not (yet) reached statistical significance ($p = 0.15$, 2-tailed, 4df, for both theft of and theft from vehicles). Given the small, local nature of the intervention, more time is needed to distinguish reliably between the strong random fluctuations and a real fall in crime.

Impact evaluation results

Following the Autolok intervention, there were 23% fewer thefts of vehicles/taking without owner's consent than expected (on the basis of changes in the rest of the Bedfordshire Police area) in Marsh Farm during Phase 1. (This was equivalent to 24 fewer incidents than expected.) During the same period in the rest of Luton these crimes fell by 3% relative to expectation. There was therefore no evidence of displacement. It is felt unlikely that the fall in the rest of Luton resulted from diffusion of benefit from the action in Marsh Farm, given the latter's peripheral location. A conservative estimate of **net impact** of this project would thus use the gross reduction of **23%** / 24 incidents over 12 months in Marsh Farm alone. (Note: other reports of this project, showing greater impact, have not filtered out background changes in this way, and may have used statistics from territories with different boundaries.)

Cause and effect

The pattern of changes in crime in Marsh Farm, rest of Luton and rest of Bedfordshire was consistent with a crime reduction effect attributable to the Autolok intervention. However, as stated above it is not yet a reliable finding and there was no possibility of looking more closely at impact mechanisms.

Sustainability

Sustainability of implementation – One question over the longer-term sustainability of the crime reduction from the Autolok project is that it is dependent on consistent use of the lock. If car owners with the lock do not systematically use the lock each time they leave their cars this may have no lasting impact on car theft. It is quite common for activities such as Neighbourhood Watch to fade away if the perceived crime risk falls. Although it has not yet reached that stage, the Autolok project will need to address this issue.

Sustainability of impact – Initial deterrence and discouragement may produce a short-lived crime reduction effect. Only medium-term evaluation can tell whether the Autoloks are making it sufficiently riskier, more effort and less rewarding for offenders, to have a lasting impact. And in the longer-term, a key question relates to offenders' countermeasures – will they be able to develop methods of defeating the lock? How long might this take?

Replicability of the method

This project should best be treated as a *concept* trial for the provision of security enhancements to cars on a subsidised basis, carefully-targeted on areas of high risk/need, and with an active community association which can be involved in distribution and encouragement of use. Scaling up the action for deployment in a larger number of these areas raises a number of practical considerations (for example additional subsidy would probably have to be found since the supply of 'second quality' locks would be limited). An unresolved question is how necessary to the crime reduction effect was the requirement for car owners to produce proper documentation for the vehicle when purchasing the Autoloks.

Authorship

This report was prepared by Andrew Kent and Paul Ekblom of UK Home Office with assistance from Anthony Gamble, Tenant Resource and Training Centre, Marsh Farm, Luton and Sgt Jon Green, Crime Reduction, Bedfordshire Police.