Targeting the markets for stolen goods – two targeted policing initiative projects

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Introduction

Between 1999 and 2002, two police forces (North Town and South Town) experimented with schemes to reduce rates of burglary and theft by directing multi-agency activity less at the thieves themselves but at the disruption of stolen goods markets. The Home Office funded these Targeted Policing Initiative (TPI) projects. This report examines the lessons to be drawn from their experiences and is intended for practitioners who are considering similar projects. It will also be of interest to those involved in the implementation and evaluation of other crime reduction schemes.

The report gives an overview of the origins and approach of the two projects and uses case studies to highlight particular issues. The later sections of the report consider matters of good practice, looking at the project objectives, the issues surrounding preparation, implementation and the police Basic Command Unit (BCU) infrastructure needed for such projects.

Market reduction projects – a good practice guide

What constitutes best practice in implementing a market reduction project is discussed in more detail in the 'lessons learnt' section. However, the key points to stress are:

Preparation

- It is essential to collate all pre-existing information on local stolen goods markets to inform decisions on which marketplaces to tackle and to continually monitor these local markets as they may change.
- Aims and objectives must be clearly established and complementary.
- Undertake a realistic estimate of technical, research and analytical capacity – has the team the skills and resources necessary to undertake the operational interventions?
- Mechanisms for monitoring outcomes must be developed.
- Market Reduction Approach (MRA) projects must be grafted onto an existing intelligence-led police structure

Infrastructure requirements

- MRA operations depend on multi-agency co-operation and objectives need to be carefully negotiated.
- A steering committee with multi-agency participation will improve collaboration.
- An externally recruited project manager can ensure focus and accountability particularly in externally funded projects.
- A dedicated police operations manager with the necessary tactical skills is vital.
- A dedicated squad of officers is desirable, indeed in the early stages of the project is essential.
- To be successful MRA needs to become part of the partner agencies core business; to encourage this performance indicators will need to be refined.

Home Office Development and Practice Reports draw out from research the messages for practice development, implementation and operation. They are intended as guidance for practitioners in specific fields. The recommendations explain how and why changes could be made, based on the findings from research, which would lead to better practice.

Tactics

- Interventions must be devised to suit local circumstances – one size does not fit all.
- Those involved in projects must think about the balance between the resources needed and the likely outcomes of each intervention they consider.
- Second-hand shop records can provide useful data on stolen property and provide a solid base for multi-agency work.
- Undercover infiltration can produce information which may be difficult to obtain in other ways, but it is resource intensive and carries significant risks.
- Carefully consider how and whether a marketing campaign can contribute to the objectives of the project before spending large amounts on publicity etc.

The Market Reduction Approach

Commercial and residential burglary, theft from the person or shops and auto theft comprise the major part of recorded crime. Traditional techniques of investigation, which concentrate on the original crime scene, are proving less effective when thieves are increasingly knowledgeable about the risks of leaving DNA or other forensic evidence and there are no witnesses.

Intelligence-led policing is one response to these threats and market reduction tactics are a specialised form of intelligence-led policing. Focusing attention on the mechanisms for the disposal of stolen goods, and on the people and places involved in these markets, provides a valuable alternative way of tackling property offenders.

Both projects discussed here aimed to reduce acquisitive crime using the Market Reduction Approach described by Mike Sutton in 1998. This argued that "markets for stolen goods have considerable influence upon decisions to begin and continue stealing". Hence, Sutton suggested that tackling these markets should have an impact on motivation to steal and thus acquisitive crime rates. He identified five types of distribution chain of stolen goods, all of which could be targeted and disrupted –

- from thief to commercial outlet;
- from commercial outlets to consumer;
- from thief to consumer (hawking);
- from thief to network of friends or acquaintances;
- from thief to residential fence.

The MRA projects – background

In neither area did the MRA arise as a local solution to a particularly marked local problem. Rather the MRA was highlighted as an interesting theoretical approach to a hypothesised problem that the Home Office wished to test --- namely that markets for stolen goods must exist as thieves do not use most of what they steal themselves (Sutton 1998, Stevenson et al 2001). The project managers accepted the logic of the approach and set themselves the task of tackling not only these supply chains by intelligence gathering and enforcement, but also the demand chains by challenging the relatively widespread willingness to buy stolen goods and public acceptance of such behaviour. Furthermore, North Town sought to address the link between acquisitive crime, the sale of stolen goods and the sale and use of drugs.

The two projects were very different both in terms of how they operated and the tactics they employed. This is illustrated in the following section where the management structure, the intelligence sources and the tactics employed by the projects will be discussed. Many points have been illustrated with case studies that can be found from page 14 onwards, at the back of this report.

North Town project

Project structure

In North Town the project manager was a local authority employee. The partnership involved the police and the local council, particularly the Trading Standards department. To varying degrees, the Benefits Agency, Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue also participated. There was a Project Board, made up of the police area commander and the Head of Policy Planning from the council, which met once a month. Below this the three multi-agency groups focusing on marketing (raising public awareness), tactical action and intelligence sharing met less regularly.

General focus of project

North Town put great emphasis on the collection and collation of intelligence on the local stolen goods markets and (like South Town) employed intelligence analysts from within police personnel. North Town also employed an experienced academic as a researcher. A focus on market places represented a substantial shift away from the traditional policing priorities. Ensuring this shift took place and that intelligence data were properly recorded and analysed required significant co-ordination.

The development of intelligence on local markets took time. Indeed, the fuller picture of handling networks and connections with other crime was not properly developed until 16 months into the project when a full-time police inspector was appointed as Operations Manager to co-ordinate intelligence gathering and enforcement activity. From that point, there was a team comprising two sergeants and ten constables working on intelligence activity. Starting with a number of discrete operations, numerous links between acquisitive crime operators began to be plotted using network charts.

Consequently, early operational interventions in North Town were not systematically directed towards the various 'marketplaces' identified by Sutton (1998) (see page 2) and in the early days of the project the policing side engaged in relatively ad hoc crackdowns. Early targets were at a low level of the local criminal hierarchy but as work progressed, additional links were established enabling more sophisticated targeting to be developed against individuals on a higher level of organisation.

It may be difficult for an agency to assign resources to a long-term project without a link being made between project activity and its own performance indicators. Indeed, North Town's focus on handling was skewed by the BCU's performance indicators, which related to burglary and other theft. Consequently, the early intelligence work was aimed at outlets dealing in property likely to be stolen in domestic burglary. However, attention was later shifted to the type of property stolen in commercial burglary, (see case study 1 for one example).

North Town strategies were also aimed at marketing opportunities and a longer-term impact, for example, by tackling offender motivation through drug treatment work and at changing public attitudes about the acceptability and perceived risk of handling stolen goods.

The next section details the various tactics employed by the North Town project which include:

- Intelligence gathering –
  - knowledge of second hand markets
  - offender research
  - focusing routine police intelligence
- Marketing and publicity
- Working with drug-using acquisitive offenders.

Sources of intelligence

Second-hand dealers

In North Town local legislation requires second-hand traders to be registered with the local authority and to keep records of their transactions. Knowledge of and compliance with the legislation was limited but once the project was underway registered numbers quadrupled. Information from such records was a useful source of intelligence on what happens to some stolen items. Two technical assistants were employed by the Trading Standards department to encourage registration and undertake compliance inspections (2,036 visits in 18 months). Transaction registers were distributed to more than 200 dealers and over 19,000 entries relating to 9,000 sellers of goods inputted into a database.

Second-hand advertisement press

Prior to MRA being introduced, North Town Trading Standards had already begun developing computer software to scan the second-hand advertisement press. The original objective was to identify repeated advertisements supposedly from private individuals that were in fact from traders seeking to absolve themselves from liability for the quality of goods sold. However, it was realised that the work could also yield intelligence about the possible use of such advertisements by thieves or handlers selling stolen goods. Software development continued throughout the project but had not been fully implemented, as the developers were not able to meet the specification requested. Nevertheless, other evidence suggests that at

least on occasions thieves do dispose of stolen property using this method. As part of the activity described in Case Study 1, the mobile phone numbers used by the main target were passed through the scanner records of second-hand press advertisements. A search of two months' advertisements found the number being used to advertise seven vehicles and three vehicle number plates.

Research with offenders

The project researcher undertook a number of group and individual interviews with adult and young offenders. The aim was to follow an approach similar to that used by Sutton and obtain general information on the operation of local stolen good marketplaces. A written questionnaire was also circulated to young offenders. Early on, there was a general willingness to talk to the researcher but as enforcement activity became more apparent, questions began to be asked by offenders and their suspicion increased. The activity was risk-assessed by the project and discontinued.

One important finding from this work was the idea of a 'hierarchy' of markets. A trusted contact to whom the offender could sell regularly was most prized, whereas second-hand shops were disliked because of the low prices and the belief that their staff were "grasses". Similarly car boot sales were rarely used because of the very low profit margins. (Whilst this runs counter to popular myth about such sales it is borne out by other sources. At one car boot sale the police took details of all 100 or so vehicles attending. None had criminal links. Visual inspections at other occasions suggest that there is no obviously stolen property on sale although counterfeit goods are sold). Pubs were regarded as risky but were used by people who stole to order for customers. Some respondents talked more about exchanging stolen property directly for drugs.[1]

The offenders also spoke of the use of taxis both as transport and as a co-ordination point for thieving activity. The project attempted to evaluate the possible use of taxis by thieves by mapping taxi call outs (which have to be recorded under licensing arrangements) to the times of reported burglaries. This research was foiled by both the wide time span of when burglaries could have taken place, and the sheer number of taxi records.

1. Similar interviews undertaken by the evaluation team with young offenders in South Town echoed the connection between drug transactions and those related to selling stolen property and the use of trusted contacts. Respondents were very aware of the risks of trading to second-hand shops and wouldn't go into jewellers who not only "ripped them off" by paying a fiver for an antique ring but also either trapped you in the door lock, dealt with you very slowly or asked you to come back, so they could call the police.

Shift in focus in routine police sources of intelligence

Police activity routinely provides information on stolen goods. For example:

- Routine intelligence submissions from police officers: the number of intelligence submissions is a Performance Indicator but to encourage further activity the area Operations Manager undertook briefing sessions outlining the needs and focus of the project.
- Custody interviews with arrestees: early on in the project the police undertook to extract information about the marketplaces using custody interviews and informant taskings. This was as a discrete exercise divorced from general intelligence gathering but the long-term results were disappointing.
- Prison visits: many police forces routinely interview convicted offenders in prison to gather intelligence. Those carrying out the interviews should seek to establish how property offenders dispose of stolen goods.
- Informants: information may be gained either by chance comments in the normal process or through specific tasking of informants. The results of this latter approach were disappointing.
- Information from non-police agencies, such as Trading Standards, Benefits Agency and Customs and Excise: although exchange of information did not cause any practical difficulties during the project, there was disquiet among operational officers that there was no nationally-agreed protocol for such activity.
- Surveillance and undercover work: see for example Case Studies 1 and 6.

An example with elements from these various sources is presented in Case Study 3.

Other sources of intelligence included:

- Use of Section 18 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 that allows entry of premises used by arrested offenders after arrest if there are reasonable grounds to expect this may yield further evidence. Such searches might yield shop receipts showing sale of goods which can link a thief to a second hand shop and suggest that the shop might be worth investigating as a regular handler of stolen property. See for example Case Study 4.
- Serious crime investigations can amass a considerable amount of information, some of which, although peripheral to the focus of that investigation, can have value in establishing links and associates in order to provide a clearer picture of organisational networks.

Marketing opportunities

North Town tried a number of strategies in an attempt to engage the public over issues around buying stolen goods. A multi-agency marketing group was established, attended by press or marketing representatives from all partner agencies, together with police Community Safety Officers and operational staff from other agencies. A Crimestoppers representative also attended early meetings. A major aim of the marketing interventions was to encourage the public to supply information about handlers. To this end, all publicity highlighted the Crimestoppers telephone number. A secondary aim was to change public attitudes by emphasising both the moral unacceptability of handling stolen goods as well as the legal risks. The project spent just over £32,000 on marketing-related activity.

Initially a leaflet headed "What is Crimestoppers?" was posted to all households in the area but later campaigns were targeted at specific audiences:

- One poster, for use in pubs, proclaimed *"The Price was Low, the Cost was High"* by a photograph of a woman in a cell having bought a camcorder from a man in a pub. *"Warning: Buy Bent Gear, Get up to 14 years"* was straplined along the bottom.
- Another poster, aimed at younger people, showed a miserable teenager with his head in his hands in a burgled front room with the words *"Peter got a playstation for Christmas. Who's got it now? Buying stolen goods causes misery "* and repeating the *"Warning Buy Bent Gear, Get (up to) 14 years"*. A similar stolen playstation scenario was also used in a radio advert aimed at younger people.
- A further initiative aimed directly at secondary school students was a poster competition. The winning entry showed a hand-drawn picture of two men shaking hands, with the subject of their transaction – a bicycle – in the foreground and a child crying by a shed that has been broken into. Handwritten in child's writing are the words *"Today's bargain. Yesterday's burglary. Don't add to the misery, Say no to stolen goods"*.

Although one caller gave information about someone "who was dealing in someone else's misery" and a number of calls to Crimestoppers helped to identify targets, the overall impact of such campaigns is difficult to judge. Crimestoppers undertook a short survey asking callers how they knew about the organisation – two referred to posters, eight to a leaflet, nine to newspaper articles and four to the radio, but the vast majority had previous knowledge or another source of information.

Working with drug-using acquisitive crime offenders serving short sentences

Through a contract with an addiction treatment service provider North Town project used a Prison Link Worker (PLW) to work with local, drug-using, acquisitive crime offenders who had a custodial sentence of under 12 months, a group not catered for in service provision. Suitable subjects were to be identified either through arrest referral schemes or via prison CARAT (*Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare*) workers.

The aim was for the PLW to build up a relationship with the offenders and, depending on their individual needs, to refer them on release to suitable agencies. These needs would range from a basic requirement for housing, to employment and training, mental health and drug-use treatment and counselling. Thirty clients were referred and assessed by the PLW. Unfortunately, because the local prison was an assessment and allocation establishment, prisoners were rapidly dispersed and it proved difficult to track North Town offenders locally. The total cost of the project was just over £33,000, which included the full-time Prison Link Worker, and a group-work programme and management support over 12 months.

South Town project

Structure

The South Town project was police-led with a succession of police sergeants as the full-time manager. The President of the local Chamber of Commerce sat on an Executive Board with the police Area Commander and a Community Safety representative. This Board and a broader multi-agency group met regularly at the beginning of the project, but these meetings tailed off and none were held in the final months of the evaluation. A case study highlighting the use of such a multi-agency approach is given in Case Study 2.

General focus of the project

Like North Town, the South Town project put great emphasis on the collection and collation of intelligence on the local markets for stolen goods. However, the interventions in South Town showed a more systematic approach to tackling the Sutton market places. Again South Town also sought to take advantage of marketing opportunities to communicate the message about the consequences of buying stolen goods to the general public. The project also addressed the background issue of the recording of stolen and recovered property.

The next section details the following sources of intelligence and the tactics used by the South Town project to tackle different stolen goods 'marketplaces':

- Intelligence gathering –
  - offender interviews
  - survey of local businesses/residents
  - police and local authority survey data
  - focusing routine police intelligence.
- Voluntary second-hand shop registration scheme.
- Voluntary scheme among pub landlords.
- Intelligence and surveillance operations targeted at fencing.
- Marketing and publicity.
- Property marking.

Sources of intelligence

One aspect of South Town, which went beyond the routine sources of police intelligence, was the employment of a market research company on three discrete projects at a total cost of just over £27,000. These consisted of interviewing offenders, a focus group and postal survey of the business community and questionnaire interviews with 227 people at a local shopping centre.

Research with offenders

Nine offenders, identified by the police Prison Liaison Team (PLT), were interviewed in prison. Project and PLT staff devised the questions in consultation with a commissioned psychologist. The answers echoed findings elsewhere. The link between the stolen property market and drugs was constantly reiterated, as was the ease with which goods could be disposed of. Thieves used second-hand shops, mini-markets, cash and carry wholesalers and jewellers but also spoke of fences who they knew (and sometimes feared) who worked from home, in pubs or even in public spaces.

Local business and resident surveys

The business community focus group suggested that stolen goods were frequently offered but such incidents were rarely reported, perhaps because of doubts of the provenance or fear of reprisal.

The residents' survey reflected some of the issues raised in Sutton's work about the willingness of people to buy second-hand goods "from dubious sources" while still acknowledging the link between buying stolen goods and theft. This reinforced the need for public awareness campaigns.

Police and local authority surveys

The police also used their own, force-wide, burglary victim survey and questions included in the local authority "omnibus" survey to identify potential sources of information about stolen goods markets. However, these two surveys provided little useful information. Almost everybody claimed they would tell the police if offered stolen property, many were very bothered about people dealing in stolen property and 90 per cent said they didn't know where stolen property was disposed of. However, in South Town itself, more respondents knew where to get hold of stolen goods and were less likely to tell the police if they thought they were offered stolen goods.

Tackling market places

South Town adopted Sutton's marketplace typology in addressing stolen goods markets. Commercial outlets, hawkers selling directly to strangers at the door or in pubs, and residential fences were identified as those to target.

Commercial outlets

Second-hand shops are the most easily identifiable of Sutton's marketplaces. There are significant numbers of such shops in South Town and intelligence suggested they were used as outlets for stolen goods. Subsequently, stores with a second-hand trade were identified and recruited to the scheme. Shopkeepers had to agree to keep records of all transactions including the date, time and details of the

purchased article, and of the seller, sometimes including a photograph of the seller with the goods.

Initially, patrol officers visited shops as part of their routine duties but subsequently a team of dedicated officers was employed. These officers worked alongside Trading Standards, visiting shops, encouraging compliance and liaising with the staff. This was a productive part of the project, resulting in thirty-five people being charged with theft offences. Please refer to Case Study 5 for further details of the scheme.

Hawking

A voluntary scheme, similar to that used in commercial outlets, was started with pub landlords who were asked to report suspicious selling activity. The scheme received little response. The project had little leverage to ensure landlords would co-operate nor was there any business incentive. While pubs were undoubtedly the sites for hawking, see Case Study 6, there was often little overt activity. Although the deals may be agreed in pubs, the stolen property may often be elsewhere. As one landlord put it, it is difficult *'to police a conversation'*. Nevertheless a number of operations were targeted against pubs and an officer was assigned to this activity for an eight-month period.

A different form of hawking is through the press. In a similar approach to North Town the project conducted a nine-month operation scanning and searching internet versions of the local classified advertisement press for suspiciously repetitive numbers. It was hoped this would identify people who were selling stolen goods. Fifty-two people with convictions or about whom there was criminal intelligence were identified as "repeat advertisers". However, even this group consisted mainly of those who advertised the same goods twice in consecutive weeks and then stopped. Only three cases were ever deemed to merit further enquiries and no results were forthcoming. Therefore, this resource-intensive sustained search programme was discontinued.

Residential fences

Another concerted initiative was targeted at those who dealt in stolen goods from home. Considerable resources were deployed – a project manager, a civilian deputy project manager, a project analyst and two field officers in addition to support provided by core intelligence and operational officers. Existing intelligence sources were used but were focused towards gathering information about residential fences. The council housing benefit unit was also involved in this exercise. The project also tried to collate "lost intelligence" by employing a "Case Reader" to go through case files looking for information which might be relevant to marketplaces but which, not being germane to the main investigation, had been overlooked. Collating and analysing this intelligence led to a number of operations. One, based on surveillance, focused on the study of the suspect's lifestyle. Another rested on a computer-based analysis of a suspect's associates and activities. These operations provided general criteria to identify potential targets and to differentiate business handlers from the occasional or casual buyers of stolen goods.

In a further case, intelligence on handlers' addresses and local crime rates suggested that one particular area contained a cluster or "hotspot of fences". This was targeted by an infiltration project – see Case Study 6.

Marketing opportunities

External

South Town undertook various forms of publicity and employed a public relations (PR) company on a monthly retainer to deal with marketing issues. The project used the following initiatives in an attempt to bring the issues around buying stolen goods to the attention of the general public or to specific target groups:

- promotional press releases detailing project activities and successes
- a website
- road shows
- school visits
- business breakfasts
- property marking for mobile phone owners.

The key message was that the police were doing something about the market for stolen goods and that the public could help, for example, by marking their property.

Later activity had a more targeted audience in mind. A set of three postcards was sent to residents in high crime areas and where residential fences lived reminding them of the profits that such people were making at their expense. One postcard purported to be from a handler on a beach holiday, paid for by his fencing activity. Another card simply asked residents for information.

Near the end of the project three posters reinforcing the risks of dealing in stolen property were distributed to job centres, Department of Social Security offices, sports centres, social clubs and pubs. One showed a picture of a fistful of jewellery changing hands for cash with the banner *"Don't Buy Into Crime. You could face 14 years in prison"* and in smaller print *"Buying stolen goods encourages more theft and burglary. If there's no one to sell to thieves won't steal property in the first place"*.

Knowledge of the project generally appeared reasonably high. A survey conducted by the public relations company suggested that 60 per cent of respondents had heard of the project. The majority of these gave a relevant description of at least part of the project, although most only recalled the property marking element. Anecdotally, many residents met by the evaluation team had heard of the project. However, the regular police survey of burglary victims showed that awareness of police activity related to the project was declining. Those that were aware used relevant key words such as "stolen goods", "boot fairs" and "shops" to describe the activity.

The later shopping centre survey found only a third of respondents were aware of the project, but again this third were also able to supply accurate descriptions of what it involved. Similarly, the research with the business community showed a reasonable level of awareness of the project, particularly amongst certain groups of businesses.

The costs involved were large – South Town spent over £200,000 on marketing related activity, which included the employment of the PR company.

Internal

Strenuous efforts were made by the police to publicise the initiative within the service. As an intelligence-based initiative, it relied on information being provided by staff outside the project team and the long-term aim was always to bring the targeting of handlers into core business. Briefing sessions, articles in internal newsletters, and items on the computer briefing system were all used regularly. From the beginning, senior officers at Police Headquarters strongly supported the project. Indeed, 18 months after the start of the project they rolled it out to all other areas of the force. Although at times the project seemed isolated from the work of the rest of the police area, a survey conducted by the evaluation team near the end of the project revealed a wide awareness and knowledge of its work amongst both police and civilian staff. However crucially, most considered the project and its philosophy to be separate from, and to have little impact on, their own work.

Property marking and recording

South Town recognised that the ability to identify recovered property as stolen was essential. Continual efforts were made to improve the accuracy and detail of descriptions of stolen property taken by call centre staff and attending officers. The project also explored the potential of property marking and sent a marking kit to every household in South Town. Residents were informed that they could assist the police campaign against the stolen goods market by marking their property – with the implication that this would help protect it from theft. This initiative had the dual objective of publicising the project and giving residents the means and motivation to mark their property. Later in the project, disposable cameras were also offered to members of the public, with similar dual aims.

The crime prevention unit provided further opportunities for marking property together with providing security devices at high-risk homes. Patrol cars were fitted with special torches to illuminate property marks on any recovered property. The property marking message was again reinforced in the final poster campaign, which showed a CD player with the project logo, and the words "Hands Off!" and underneath "Mark it. Secure it. Protect your property and deter the thief". There was also a specific property marking drive to get school children to mark their mobile phones.

Short-lived schemes to property mark new goods when they are sold were also implemented at various stages of the project. However, little marked property was ever recovered, although one success was a camera stolen from a student's car, which the thief attempted to sell to a second-hand shop. It was recovered and identified as stolen because of the UV postmark. Overall, there was little evidence that property marking deterred theft. Partly because of this, crime prevention units discovered that the take-up of marking opportunities was slight. The total cost of the exercise was £48,800.

Impact of market reduction tactics

Targeting acquisitive crime offenders

As has been noted, traditional techniques of investigation have proved less and less effective in detecting and reducing crime. The theory of the MRA is that a focus on the methods used to dispose of stolen goods provides a valuable alternative way of tackling property offenders. Increased information about the local stolen goods markets may enable targeting of individuals central to the market structure, with potential for significant impact on criminal networks.

The two projects examined here used these methods and during the course of the projects North Town achieved around 240 arrests and 140 were made in South Town. However many of the arrests were for burglary or theft rather than for handling. Later, as the projects became more successful they were targeting higher-level criminals. As a result there were fewer arrests as many weeks' work could go into one 'quality' arrest.

Impact on property crime

The key but not exclusive question is whether MRA can reduce crime. The evaluation examined figures on monthly-recorded burglary in a dwelling and "burglary other" for 57 months (North Town) and 66 months (South Town) covering periods both before and after the introduction of the MRA. Burglary figures were taken as the category of property crime most likely to show an impact from the initiatives undertaken. The same data for the rest of the force area were also examined as a benchmark.

In South Town there was a significant reduction in average monthly-recorded burglary in a dwelling in the period after the tactics were adopted. However, the force as a whole saw similar reductions making it questionable whether the successes in South Town were attributable simply to the MRA. For other forms of burglary the picture was clearer with a significantly larger fall in average monthly rates in South Town as compared to the force as a whole.

For burglary in a dwelling, North Town shows a similar picture with no evidence of substantially reduced levels compared to the rest of the force. Similarly, there is no evidence of any impact on the "burglary other" figures. There is, however, one point worth noting. If June 2001, the date the Police Operations Manager arrived, is taken as the point at which the project began to function effectively, the following months showed a 9.4 per cent reduction in average recorded figures for burglary in a dwelling compared to 7.1 per cent force-wide. Although weak, this suggests the co-ordination of intelligence gathering may be beginning to have an impact.

It must be emphasised that it is difficult to connect in any causal fashion a market reduction project with fluctuations in *aggregate* acquisitive crime figures. It may be possible to detect impact on marketplaces following a particular operation if the figures are disaggregated by crime type. However, the stolen goods marketplace targeted may be connected with more than one type of acquisitive crime. For example, computers may be stolen from businesses, homes and shops. Therefore disruption of the stolen computer marketplace could impact on figures for "burglary other", domestic burglary and shoplifting and the impact on each may be minimal. To robustly assign impact it would be necessary to look at property crime by "type of property stolen", rather than the way in which property is being stolen, and this level of analysis would require a high level of commitment to evaluating activity.

Lessons learnt: preparation

At the start of this work, neither project had a clear picture of the distribution chains for stolen goods in its area. Before embarking on a market reduction project, it is essential to collate all the information currently available on the markets for stolen goods in the area. Traditional means of discovering and assessing the extent of a local crime problem may not be reliable. For example, the general public does not report handling offences, and crime statistics are of little help as convictions for handling are infrequent and often used in cases where offenders are in possession of stolen goods, but the evidence that they have committed the original theft or burglary is weak. Once the stolen goods markets have been mapped and the local problems to be tackled have been identified, project planning can begin in consultation with all partners.

Identify local problems	Analyse what is getting stolen, where and when (as well as long-term seasonal fluctuations) to identify the nature of the local stolen goods market and provide a focus for intelligence gathering
Investigate disposal routes	Use knowledge of the supply chains to investigate how items are disposed of. Gather information from: ● Other statutory agencies (Trading Standards, Customs and Excise, the Benefits Agency, Housing Benefit, Planning departments) ● Bodies such as taxi companies, traffic wardens, postmen, milkmen, Neighbourhood Watch and shop owners, all of whom can potentially act as the eyes and ears of the community ● Existing intelligence databases ● Police and enforcement officers ● Interviews with offenders
Determine intervention points	Identify and map the potential "marketplaces" to tackle, highlighting potential points of intervention. Where is the structure weakest? At what point would disruption have the most impact?
Establish aims and objectives	The background intelligence gathered should inform the objectives of the project. In consultation with all involved partners, clearly state what the project aims to achieve and ensure that all objectives are complementary.
Consider cross-border links	A distribution chain may be extensive. Links and connections between a project area and adjoining neighbourhoods should be examined. Cross-border working both within and between police forces is essential. This is because any area might export stolen property or import offenders seeking to hawk goods.

Lessons learnt: infrastructure requirements

The first stage of the project is to conduct a resource and skills gap assessment. All agencies need to undertake a realistic estimate of their capacity, to look at their research and analysis base as well as at the skills they need to undertake the operational interventions. If those skills exist, can they be redeployed from current duties for the project? Equipment needs should also be assessed.

Strategic leadership and existing performance indicators	**Challenge** – any market reduction project needs to have the sponsorship and support of the highest management within all participating agencies at a local, area or regional level. A steering group with multi-agency participation can be a good way to foster such collaboration. The work of most police forces and partner agencies is unlikely to include a focus on the stolen goods market. It is a management cliché that 'what gets measured, gets done' but if such projects are undertaken, they must be seen as a shift in focus from the core business of the agencies and reflected in the Performance Indicators of the agencies.
Tactical leadership	The operational elements of a market reduction project must be led by an officer of sufficient rank and experience to co-ordinate activity and act as a focus for the enforcement activity. However, where a project is externally funded, an externally-recruited project manager can be useful to ensure accountability and focus.
Project integrated into policing	The police must be fully integrated into any attempt at implementing an MRA and there should be an acceptance by officers of the strategy.
Dedicated team of officers	There must be a team of officers dedicated to gathering and collating intelligence on stolen goods marketplaces. There must be effective mechanisms for gathering and collating intelligence as well as officers skilled in surveillance work.
Analyse capacity	A market reduction project requires skilled crime analysts. Appropriately skilled analysts can be difficult to find and expensive to employ. For example, North Town initially had to employ experienced police analysts on overtime as analytical support to the project.
Integrated intelligence	The market reduction approach is an intelligence-led tactic. A police force must have adopted an intelligence-led structure at BCU level in order to implement such initiatives successfully. The gathering of information on handling networks is likely to represent a new focus for a BCU intelligence unit -- this requirement should be added to existing intelligence gathering and collation networks. It should not be set up as a separate discrete exercise.
Monitoring outcomes	**Challenge** – assessing the outcomes of a market reduction project is complex as the work impacts upon many types of crime and across many areas. Therefore, methods to monitor a range of outcomes should be developed at the outset of the project and, ideally, tied into the BCU performance indicators.
Data-sharing	It is also important that data exchange protocols are agreed at the local level, using national guidance, setting out clear terms of reference, defining authorised officers, and setting up inspection procedures whereby managerial signatories are held accountable.

Lessons learnt: tactics

Decisions on tactics and interventions

The strategy to be deployed inevitably depends on the nature of the local markets, knowledge of which has to be developed. The choice of interventions will depend on whether the objective is the disruption of the acquisitive crime market as a whole or is more tightly focused. It is a picture constantly liable to change as more information emerges and thieves and fences adjust their behaviour as a result of enforcement activities.

Such strategic choices will also depend on the development of local structures for intelligence gathering and analysis. The police must also assess the likely extent of multi-agency involvement. This involvement should not be taken for granted as a focus on stolen goods will not normally fit into the core business of other agencies. There is a need to negotiate and set shared targets - for example where Customs and Excise are to be involved, the project could include the targeting of "bootlegged" goods; if the partner is Trading Standards, in an extended view of the illicit marketplace counterfeit goods could be targeted.

Specific tactics will need to be decided at a local level and will depend on local circumstances. However a number of general lessons may be drawn from the two projects discussed here.

Second-hand shop record keeping	A voluntary scheme encouraging second-hand shops to keep records of their transactions, or the enforcement of local legislation (where it exists) providing for regulation of the second-hand trade, can provide useful data on stolen property. Many shopkeepers welcome the contact with the agencies and can be a valuable source of local knowledge. Such a scheme provides a solid base for multi-agency work involving the police and Trading Standards, since they are able not only to share targets but collaborative work can be more effective for both.
Infiltration	As shown in Case Study 6, the use of undercover officers can produce detailed knowledge of the mechanisms of the stolen goods markets with encouraging results. It is time-consuming, costly and carries significant risks but it can produce information that may be difficult to obtain in other ways.
Intelligence gathering – handling	**Challenge** – it may be more difficult to collect information about handling than with other areas of crime. This can be linked to the fact that handling is not generally felt to be as serious as many other forms of crime and people may not see the need to report what they regard as harmless or indeed beneficial. It is also more difficult for the police to get thieves to talk about their handlers than to get them to talk about other thieves. Thieves need handlers, whereas other thieves are competition.
Publicity	The campaigns used by both projects were relatively costly and it is impossible to evaluate their effect. However, a single local project attempting to change social attitudes and behaviour in this way is unlikely to be cost-effective. Therefore, projects should look carefully at their objectives before spending large amounts on marketing activity. Care should also be taken to ensure that PR tactics correlate with the aims of other interventions. For example, an aim to disrupt the market by scaring off the offenders by the threat of police action could be in conflict with an aim to arrest offenders in the act through an enforcement operation.
Pubs and cabs – difficulties of intervention	Research and enforcement in both projects emphasised the place of pubs and taxis in stolen goods distribution. But there are considerable difficulties for effective intervention. In pubs, the impact on trade means that landlords are unlikely to be co-operative, surveillance is likely to be difficult, the goods are not necessarily present and, if they are, the hawking could be part of a distribution network which could be more effectively targeted elsewhere.

	There is evidence to suggest that taxis are regularly used for transporting stolen goods (Sutton 1998). The sheer volume of trade makes analysing records too time-consuming a task with little likelihood of a successful outcome.
Car boot sales	Neither project produced any evidence that car boot sales are regularly used to sell stolen goods. This does not necessarily mean this will be the same in other areas but it should be borne in mind that the policing of such events could be resource-intensive and the only impact would be on the periphery of the stolen goods marketplace. However, if the definition of marketplace is widened to counterfeit or bootleg goods, car boot sales can provide a locus for multi-agency work involving the police and Trading Standards.
Property marking	There is little research to suggest that the traditional use of property marking is an effective means to deter thieves from stealing and there is no new evidence from these projects. However, it may be valuable if the project aims to achieve more than simple disruption. Property marking schemes can assist in the investigative stage and provide important evidence for a prosecution. Property marking could be of greater use if sufficient take-up could be developed, perhaps in conjunction with manufacturers or insurers. Long-term efforts can also be made to improve the police recording of stolen items to include serial numbers and identifying features such as scratch marks. The introduction of a crime report form with spaces for such information might encourage its collection. Those attending crime scenes should ask to see paperwork relating to stolen property such as guarantees or manuals, which might show serial numbers. A further problem is that such details tend to be held on local databases and are thus only valuable if the stolen property remains in that area.
Drugs treatment work	Research and enforcement action at both sites reinforced the link between drugs, acquisitive crime and the disposal of stolen goods. Many people involved in these networks use and/or sell drugs. It follows that tackling a user's need to steal (by tackling the need to feed a drug habit) will impact on theft and burglary and consequently on the markets for stolen goods. Incorporating a drug treatment element into any project will encourage multi-agency co-operation with organisations such as drug action teams, if common objectives and tactics can be negotiated and incorporated into core business. North Town incorporated this tactic into the project (see page 7) but, as mentioned, experienced a range of practical problems in addressing local offenders' needs in a nationally-based prison system.

Conclusion

These projects were innovatory being the first attempt in this country, if not in the world, to seek to test systematically, in the context of crime reduction, the theory that demand will affect supply – if thieves are unable to dispose easily of stolen goods, they will turn their attention to other activities and acquisitive crime would decline. Disrupting the marketplace for stolen goods was one way to tackle the increase in property crime. The projects were assisted by the emphasis on intelligence-led policing over the past decade.

Several of the individual tactics used are not new – any experienced police officer will tell you that, when out on the beat, they regularly used to visit second hand-shops for information. But for modern busy and multi-tasked agencies, a focus on the kaleidoscopic shape of the stolen goods marketplaces is a new and potentially fruitful endeavour. It also has risks as resources are invested with no guarantee of any decline in acquisitive crime.

For many reasons, it has proved impossible to demonstrate the impact of these projects on crime rates. For example, it is not possible to isolate handling from other areas, as is shown by the overlap between the illegal drugs market and the stolen goods market. While quantitatively, results may be disappointing, the qualitative outcomes are much more promising, not least in what has been learnt about intelligence gathering and analysis, about the nature of the markets and about multi-agency co-operation. There have been a considerable number and range of promising interventions. If, inevitably, the projects have encountered problems and obstacles, this is the price of ambitious and imaginative objectives.

Case studies

Case Study 1 – Handlers of commercial property

At the end of September 2001, the North Town project focused on reducing commercial burglaries. The custody interview team asked their informants questions about the marketplaces for commercial property type goods. One source told police of the existence of a "safe house" used for the storage of property. Police identified the individual at the centre of this new marketplace as an associate of a "high-level organiser" (HLO). The individual was involved in supplying people dealing from home – residential handlers – with property. He was also supplying offenders with amphetamines, and training them in the arts of commercial burglary including roof entry and alarm dismantling.

Information from other police inquiry records, confirmed by surveillance, proved he regularly met with and undertook specific tasks for the HLO, who appeared to be overseeing operations. The surveillance team saw the target taking property to residential fences. High-value items of the sort stolen in commercial burglaries, such as kitchen equipment, were involved. The group was also implicated in stealing vehicles and ringing (changing the identity of a vehicle). All of this activity was done at various "safe houses". The team would recruit the wife or girlfriend of someone in prison, whose house therefore would not normally be a target for the police, or some other vulnerable woman, and either befriend her, sleep with her or ply her with drugs and intimidate her so that she provided storage facilities for stolen property.

The project was preparing for multiple strikes on these addresses when the main target was arrested in the company of a prolific burglar in a car with false number plates towing a stolen vehicle. Knowing the project's interest, the offenders were handed over to them and the warrants served on the properties. Eleven people were arrested and property seized included vehicles and a number plate-making machine. Seven suspects faced charges of conspiracy to handle £180,000 of stolen property. Identifying the property seized cleared up 42 offences of burglary.

Case Study 2 – Multi-agency enforcement, car parts and planning approval

An early case in South Town targeted an individual who was suspected of long-standing involvement in trading in stolen property, particularly cars and car parts. Intelligence suggested that he used local thieves to steal cars to order. He was also believed to fence property from commercial burglaries and to be involved in selling contraband goods. The council Planning Department suspected him of operating his garage/vehicle stripping business on private property. This enabled a warrant to be executed under the Town and Country Planning Act. Although no stolen property was found, the enforcement officers called in colleagues from Customs and Excise while they were searching the site and they confiscated a car and £3,000 worth of alcohol.

Case Study 3 – Information from the public: "Postman Mike"

Anonymous letters cropped up quite frequently in the North Town project's intelligence gathering process. It is difficult to know whether this was driven by the publicity campaigns or the general awareness in some communities that the police would be interested in this sort of information. In a series of anonymous letters one writer identified a potential target who was dubbed "Postman Mike".

Static surveillance on his house was set up but the tapes identified no one known to police. Although people on the tapes appeared to be acting furtively, and parking their vehicles some distance from the address, this was not enough to justify a warrant. It appeared the letters might be malicious. However, an individual with known high-level criminal links turned up at the house and deliveries of several boxes of property were noted. "Postman Mike" was followed to a garage where he met with a "high-level organiser" and another individual of known criminal standing. A raid at the house that was being observed then resulted in the recovery of thousands of pounds of high quality counterfeit goods. Six people were arrested. All have been charged with trademark offences.

It later transpired that Trading Standards had had information on the target regarding counterfeit goods but had been unable to act because of lack of resources - the total opportunity cost of staff time on this operation was approaching £9,000, and over 450 hours of police time were required from three police units – the project team, traffic, and crime investigators.

Case Study 4 – Identifying targets from a second hand-shop, the cul-de-sac ring

An early target in North Town was a second-hand goods shop, which had been named in reports by several police officers. A receipt from the shop had also been found at a suspect's house. This shop was raided twice. During the first raid, which followed a day's surveillance, 72 items of property were seized, together with the last six months' records. This raid led to 44 individuals being identified as targets on the basis of factors such as the number of transactions, previous convictions, supportive intelligence, whether they lived in a high burglary area and the types of property they brought in. This sifting took two officers working full-time three weeks to complete. During the second raid, (executed under a warrant relating to a conspiracy to handle stolen goods by the shop) further items of property were seized relating to transactions by these 44 targets.

One main target was an individual who had just been released from prison and returned to an area in North Town where "Burglary other" had recently gone up. The target was under surveillance for four days and was seen visiting and transporting goods to and from a number of addresses in a cul-de-sac. During this period the shop workers also reported him as having attempted to sell them a digital camera and camcorder without the appropriate leads. He was also seen buying drugs from a man in a park.

Overall, there were seven arrests and the main target was charged with 33 offences of burglary and received a sentence of 30 months. Two others were charged with handling and one with deception. Two others were cautioned for burglary.

Lengthy enquiries regarding the ownership of property were pursued. One mechanism for this was a Property Viewing day. The police team sought to match recovered property with descriptions of goods stolen in North Town in the previous six months. They invited the victims of these thefts to inspect the seized property.

Case Study 5 – Voluntary second hand-shop scheme

South Town set up a voluntary scheme for local second hand shops, asking them to record details of any property they bought. Transaction books were provided with triplicate copies – one for the project, one for a customer receipt and one for the trader. Instamatic cameras were also provided. Non-participating outlets were also visited to gather information and assess the need for action.

In the beginning of the scheme patrol officers recruited shops into the scheme but subsequently a dedicated team of officers and Trading Standards took on the work. This was a successful part of the project - in ten months one officer seized 64 items of property, 41 of which were identified as stolen and 35 people were charged with theft offences. He also built up relationships with high-risk shops that would call the project about suspicious sellers. Although suspected handlers were identified, no one was charged with handling through this initiative. This was partly due to the inherent difficulties of proving handling charges and partly because of the tensions between immediate and longer-term arrests.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the scheme did have a disruptive impact. Limiting photographing of sellers to the group thought most likely to be thieves, namely young men, was said to result in the thieves sending their girlfriends or even grannies into shops in the early days of the project. Two years into the project offenders were said by intelligence sources to be very aware of its activities and had stopped using second-hand shops.

The evaluation team interviewed traders and found many were genuinely in support of the initiative and welcomed the consistent contact with the police. However, others felt

the scheme just amounted to more bureaucracy and paperwork. A particular complaint was the seizing of property with no compensation and no proof of ownership. Many thought the scheme was misdirected, with stolen goods going elsewhere, and easy to evade. It was said that if dishonest traders did exist, they either refused to join the scheme or did not enter illicit goods on the records. They thought a circulated list of stolen property would suffice for the honest trader.

Trading Standards enjoyed the increased liaison with the police and were able to gain increased knowledge of who was trading in this area and who was therefore subject to consumer protection legislation – in one instance a trader was prosecuted for selling unsafe electrical items and fined £1,000.

The scheme was relatively costly. At full strength, two full-time police officers were employed to recruit commercial outlets and monitor the scheme. An additional set-up cost of £7,500 was also incurred for the purchase of transaction registers, cameras and films.

Case Study 6 – Infiltrating the marketplace and undercover officers

Intelligence on the operations of prolific handlers in one area of South Town led to a decision to use undercover officers to infiltrate and make contacts with fences. To protect the officers, information from the area intelligence unit was fed into the infiltration exercise but not vice versa. Similarly, informants were not asked about the specific people under target for fear of information leaking out. Infiltration of the handling network in isolation proved difficult, as it became apparent that the stolen goods trade was linked to established drugs networks. For this reason, the scope of the operation was extended into the drugs market.

Considerable intelligence was gained. One handler who ran a convenience store regularly bought goods that he could sell in his shop, such as alcohol, cigarettes, confectionery, food and razors. Phone records suggested that he traded excess goods to similar shops. Certain pubs were used extensively for the selling of shoplifted property and contraband. Property appeared to be hawked around by thieves or handlers trying to find a buyer.

Significantly, some of the property sold to the officers had been stolen in London. Analysis of the crime file showed that the seller was not the thief, that other items stolen at the same time were not being hawked (which suggests an alternative marketplace for certain goods), and that only a short time elapsed between the theft in London and the hawking of the goods in the project area.

In this network drug dealers wanted cash and rarely took goods directly in exchange for drugs. Where they did, the trade was restricted to highly desirable goods.

The operation came to an end with the arrest of 47 people in the project area and 12 elsewhere. Thirty-three people were charged with a variety of drugs, firearms and handling offences. Extra funding for this infiltration investigation was £150,000, which included a set-up cost of providing undercover officers with premises and goods to sell. Later cash was needed to buy drugs from targets. The project-funded part of the investigation, which was also match-funded by the police centrally, also received monies from other government funds. Staff costs are not included in this amount.

Authors

This report was prepared by a team from Kent Criminal Justice Centre, University of Kent, comprising Chris Hale, Charlotte Harris, Steve Uglow, Liz Gilling and Ann Netten

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