

ROGERS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Targeting the Market for
Stolen Goods: Putting a
Needle into the Haystack

Judge's Commentary

Officers and agencies wishing to engage problem-oriented policing often worry that they lack the essential resources to be successful at their endeavors. There is a common misconception that successful problem-oriented policing projects require a great deal of support—expert guidance and analysis by professional researchers, funding, and dedicated manpower—much of which is not available to small and mid-sized law enforcement agencies. This project is important for many reasons, one of which is the fact that Rogers County Sheriff's Office had a dramatic impact on a serious community problem with a handful of deputies and limited resources, during a time when all available resources were committed to moving into a new building. The scanning, analysis and assessment phases were done by hand in a department with 16 sworn deputies. Rogers County deputies used creativity and innovation, together with community partnerships, to overcome challenges and successfully resolve a theft problem. This project demonstrates that successful problem-oriented policing can be done with agencies of all sizes when people are willing to think outside of the box and beyond their formal job descriptions.

Summary

The Problem: Trailer theft — theft of general livestock, horse, utility, or flatbed trailers — was a serious problem in the rural community of Rogers County, Oklahoma. In the mid-1990s, trailer theft became a growing and costly problem and was adversely impacting the livelihood and recreation of area residents and business. Field deputies

first noticed a problem when they were plagued with an unusually high number of "trailer theft" calls for service. During the first eight months of 1996, more than 37 trailers were stolen and only three trailers were recovered. Losses per report were as high as \$35,000; with an average loss per report was \$2,500.

Analysis: Three data sources were used to identify the nature and scope of the trailer theft problem: crime reports, site visits and conversations with victims, and a community survey. Deputies examined crime data for time and location patterns, and determined that trailers were stolen during specific times of day from specific locations: the use and size of trailers lead owners to place them in highly accessible, remote locations without sufficient security. Furthermore, they found that stolen trailers were not registered or licensed; decreasing the likelihood of recovery. Rogers County deputies also examined research on theft to place their findings into context and craft a solution.

Response: The Sheriff's Office worked with regional associations, residents and the mass media to implement a strategy to identify property, remove the disposability of stolen property, and to inform likely offenders of these new measures. Marking property with a rice-grain-sized Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) microchip and creating an ownership database enables the monitoring and tracking of property while reducing the market for stolen goods.

Assessment: Trailer theft has been virtually eliminated in Rogers County. During the past two years, only one trailer was stolen. The owner of the stolen trailer had not participated in the Rogers County theft reduction program.

Scanning

As a former frontier town, Rogers County has its share of rodeos and equestrian events, drawing cowboys and girls from across the country. Breed associations, equestrian clubs, civic groups and 4-H clubs are very active in Rogers County. Much of the commerce in this region relies on agriculture or livestock, couple with the heavy involvement in the aforementioned associations, most residents own trailers — general livestock, horse, utility, or flatbed trailers.

In the mid-1990s, trailer theft become a growing and costly problem in the booming rural county. Field deputies first noticed a problem when they were plagued with an unusually high number of "trailer theft" calls for service. During the first eight months of 1996, more than 37 trailers were stolen and only three trailers were recovered. The average loss per report was \$2,500; the highest reported losses were \$35,000 (a result of stolen Hot-Air Ballooning Equipment) and \$29,000 (a result of stolen tractors and matching trailers from a business).

At about the same time, the theft problem came to the attention of community leaders as some key community members were victimized. Residents of Rogers County and members of the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association, Quarter Horse Association, Farm Bureau (Insurance underwriter to many rural areas), and the Cattleman's Association held meetings with community leaders to discuss the great financial and emotional losses incurred by victims of trailer theft. Trailers in Rogers County are used not only to transport various types of farming/construction equipment, cattle and horses, but are also used as means to participate in equestrian and rodeo shows. Theft of a trailer can involve theft of prized tack and horses, personal equipment, and trophies representing years of participation in rodeo competitions.

Analysis

In 1997, a Problem Solving Partnership grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) enabled the Sheriff's Office to analyze the trailer theft crimes more closely. Three data sources were used to identify the nature and scope of the trailer theft problem: crime reports, site visits and conversations with victims, and a community survey.

Crime Reports

Deputies began their analysis with a review of the 1996 and 1997 theft cases. Analysis of the 1996 theft reports indicated that 54 trailers were stolen and/or broken into with no discernable seasonal or monthly patterns. The 1997 theft reports showed a similar pattern of about three to four trailer thefts each month (approximately 42 reports for the year). Examination of the time of day for thefts showed two general trends; thefts of privately owned equipment occurred between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m., while thefts of commercially owned equipment occurred during the early morning hours — midnight to 4 a.m. Few trailers were recovered; this led deputies to hypothesize that the stolen trailers were being repainted and sold at the region's monthly auctions.

Turning to other features of the reported incidents, deputies found that in 95 percent of the cases the theft location was remote and easily accessible via one of the county's four major highways.

Site Visits

Site visits of theft locations and conversations with victims showed that, for convenience, most trailers were parked out of sight from residential dwellings in an open area near the owner's barn or with other farming equipment, in a location close to the edge of the property with access to the road. These parking locations typically offered no means of securing the trailer and little natural surveillance. In each case, few security measures were used; trailers were merely chained and padlocked to the ground or a tree, a

GEOGRAPHY

Rogers County is highly accessible and centrally located in Oklahoma. Travelers can reach most places in Kansas, Missouri or Arkansas (approximately 90 miles) or Texas (about 200 miles) in a few hours by using one of the major highways intersecting Rogers County: the Will Rogers Turnpike (I-44), legendary Highway 66 (a.k.a. Route 66), and state highways 88 and 20.)

security measure defeated with the common bolt cutter. Then, almost anyone with one of the standard trailer hitches could remove the "secured" trailer and be in another state before the theft was reported.

Community Survey

Deputies also randomly surveyed approximately 200 Rogers County residents. This survey provided information about unreported events and degree of community concern about the issue. Deputies learned that citizens were concerned about crime and felt that trailer theft was growing to be a serious problem in Rogers County. While most citizens had not been victims of trailer theft, they were interested in protecting their property in the event a theft occurred.

Putting It All Together

Examination of theft patterns revealed that thieves targeted goods that were: concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable, and disposable (CRAVED). Trailers were easily concealed in the sense that it was extremely difficult to determine legitimate ownership by merely looking at the property; the lack of legislated licensing or registration of trailers led many to believe that once a trailer was stolen, it would be impossible to find at a private sale or auction. Trailers were removable and available because their size and maneuverability; unlike motor vehicles, trailers are generally too large to fit into garages or park in driveways, and they are not easily "locked." Many people resid-

ing in rural counties own trailers in order to transport livestock, equipment, and/or farming goods, thus making them readily available. Trailers and the equipment inside were considered quite valuable and could be quickly sold or used as a trade-in for a cash value of up to \$20,000 at farm auctions, flea markets, or on the black market. The relatively low risk of being caught selling stolen goods at the auction contributes to the disposability of trailers, thereby increasing the lure of this crime (made it more enjoyable).

Following the arguments of Cornish and Clarke⁽²⁰⁰⁰⁾, offenders appeared to be reacting to enticing opportunities where the anticipated rewards of the theft were substantial and the lack of guardianship provided minimal risks or costs. Utilizing the theft reports, site visits a geographic analysis of theft locations, and community surveys, the Rogers County Sheriff's Department concluded that several key factors contributed to the high rate of trailer theft: trailers were high risk property due to their perceived value; parking locations and common security measures offered little protection; and, inability to verify legitimate ownership provided opportune conditions for trailer theft.

Response

Rogers County began their response phase in March of 1998. In order to maximize the community effort in preventing trailer theft, the Rogers County Sheriff's Office partnered with the Cattlemen's Association, Farm Bureau, and the mass media. Deputies employed four prevention approaches specific to theft offenses in their area based on the key findings of the project analysis. The response amounted to putting a needle into the haystack and advertising its presence widely and loudly.

1. **Educate the community.** Sheriff's deputies attended meetings with residents and association members to make the community aware of: the rising larceny rate, the locations where this type of larceny was

most likely to occur, and the ways in which new technological equipment for tracking and monitoring trailers could help prevent the thefts.

2. Offer the installation of a tracking and monitoring microchip into at-risk property for a low fee.

Utilizing the Situational Crime Prevention technique of identifying property, Rogers County held public clinics to permanently identify various types of trailers and equipment. New technologies enabled a rice-grain-sized Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) microchip to be embedded in property and equipment for later monitoring and tracking. The microchip contains a predetermined sequence number that cross-references to a police database showing: an owner's name, address, and phone number; property description and location; and, a photo of the property (an additional field of the database includes information as to whether or not the equipment was reported missing). Microchips were installed into trailers and equipment by a certified National Microchip Horse Registry (NMHR) technician. Along with the microchip installation, property and equipment owners were given cards and warning bumper stickers to identify themselves as registrants in the program.

Sixteen trailers were registered, digitally photographed, microchip tagged, and identified with warning stickers during the spring kick-off clinic. In clinics to follow, 144 trailers were registered and tagged. Property owners were charged \$35.00 for the first microchip installation, \$30.00 for any item after, and \$15.00 for tack equipment (saddle, bridle, etc).

3. Take Polaroid and digital pictures of the trailer and equipment to accompany a police registry.

Not only were a registrant's property and equipment information entered into a new police database, but photos of the trailer and property were also filed. This additional feature of the database

gave officers the ability to place pictures of stolen property and equipment directly onto the Internet after a theft had occurred, permitting information to be quickly dispatched to neighboring law enforcement agencies, auctions, and community members.

4. Notify possible offenders of project.

The Sheriff's Office engaged in an extended media campaign detailing increased risk for offenders and potential buyers. The press releases and promotional advertisements ran for the length of the response, March 1998 to December 1998. One press release ended by stating "if a trailer is found in the possession of person(s) other than the owner(s), without the owners permission, that person(s) will be going to jail." This media campaign involved radio stations, television news stations, and newspapers from all over the state. The mass-media coverage ensured a large portion of the trailer and equipment owners, as well as theft offenders, would become acutely aware of new strategies for theft prevention and detection.

All four responses work together and are critical to the success of the program. Educating the public about theft patterns, installing microchips, publicizing the program, and marking property with warning bumper stickers were intended to make it more difficult to steal and dispose of trailers and stolen property. Consequently, trailers became a less desirable target for offenders. Together the features of this program put potential offenders on notice that stolen property could be easily tracked, while informing the potential buyers of the stolen property that they could no longer surreptitiously purchase stolen property.

Assessment

Since the responses were implemented, Rogers County has experienced a substantial decline in the occurrence of trailer theft. When the response phase first began in 1998, 13 trailer thefts were reported, a reduction of

69 percent from 1997. In subsequent years, trailer theft has been virtually eliminated in Rogers County. During the past two years, only one trailer was stolen, and the owner of that trailer was not a participant in the program. (See Figure 1.)

The long-term success of this project can be calculated into savings of approximately \$300,000 for the citizens of Rogers County and their insurance companies since implementation first began in 1998. This figure does not represent the prevented loss of materials inside the trailers or the personal impact on victims — emotional loss and financial losses in terms of not being able to conduct business.

Community satisfaction with the program is evident in the fact that there is now a waiting list to have the microchips installed. Currently, there is a list of over 100 trailers waiting to be registered and tagged. The huge success of installing the microchips in the trailers has led the Rogers County Sheriff's Office to expand the installation of microchips to tractors, recreational vehicles, and all-terrain vehicles.

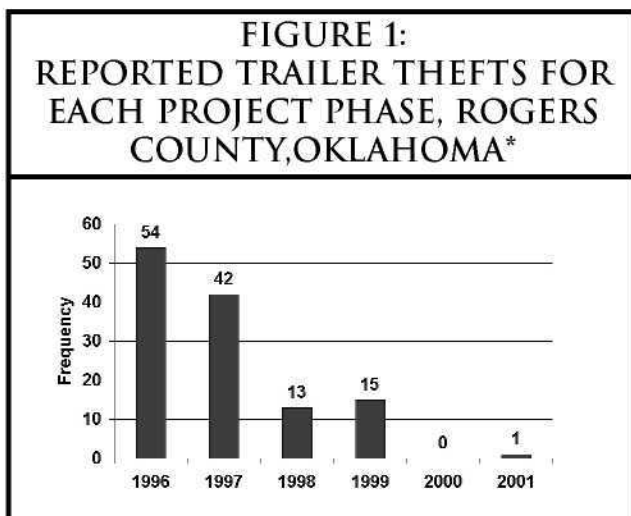
Displacement was an important concern because deputies believed the offenders were local residents seizing upon opportunities. Preliminary investigations show that,

with one exception, the county has not experienced a lasting or significant displacement to other targets since the implementation of this program. During the response phase, offenders began targeting commercially owned trailers at a higher rate than before; 60 percent of thefts during the response phase involved commercially owned property compared to 40 percent prior to the project implementation. However, none of the trailers stolen since the project was implemented had microchips installed. The utilization of the media to put the offenders on notice is credited with reducing the opportunity to commit crime.

The perception from surrounding departments is that Rogers County theft prevention program had no effect on theft rates in their areas; with this said, it is possible that offenders have gone on to commit other types of larceny. After speaking to several surrounding law enforcement agencies, it was determined that the record systems in the area do not enable most agencies to accurately differentiate trailer theft from other vehicle/property theft.

Additional Information

The next steps for the Sheriff's office are to bring the technology to the consumer and increase participation. The Rogers County Sheriff's Department is working towards the purchase of a mobile installation unit. A mobile unit will allow deputies to complete numerous installations at remote locations on equipment that is not easily brought to the station. Furthermore, to encourage even greater community participation, deputies are inviting more insurance companies to offer the community a discount on their policies if their property has a microchip installed. Efforts are also being invested into educating and encouraging the surrounding local and state agencies to become involved in the program. To date, Rogers County is the only law enforcement agency to implement microchip technology for crime prevention.



* The 2001 figure reports the number of thefts from January to October 2001.

The Rogers County Sheriff's Office continues into the 21st Century by maintaining a long-lasting relationship with Destron-Fearing Electronic Identification Microchip Corporation, the maker of the scanner used by Sheriff's deputies. Destron Fearing recently joined with Digital Angel Corporation. This merger allows the technology platform to provide a data delivery system that is the first of its kind, one that wirelessly transmits location data in real time — to find a person, animal or object — anywhere in the world, anytime. Scheduled for release during the fall of 2001, the future uses of this wireless identification technology are only limited by the reader's imagination. The microchip is so small it has the capability to be embedded into a majority of personal and commercial property for use in identification and soon for tracking.