

OPERATION GEMINI

Stolen Vehicle Squad
Major Crime Unit

Lancashire Constabulary

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Operation Gemini - Summary

Scanning

At any given moment in time Lancashire Constabulary, a provincial English Police Force has approximately £13,000,000 of un-recovered stolen vehicles. The picture nationally is vast. Many of these vehicles are of high value and are often stolen from dwelling house burglaries. The problem is identifying these stolen vehicles so they can be recovered.

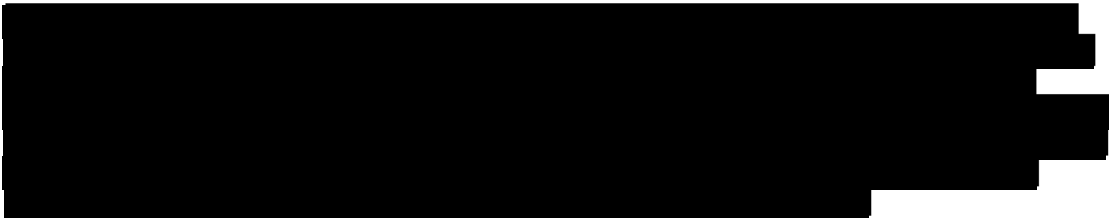
Analysis

Almost all recovered stolen vehicles from dwelling house burglaries in a twelve-month period had been cloned to the identity of an existing matching genuine vehicle. Without specialist knowledge the stolen vehicles could not easily be identified. Once they had been recovered research with our Police National Vehicle Computer (PNC) showed that these vehicles had often been involved in speeding offences. Liaison with the centralised office for speed enforcement (the Central Ticket Office) of the Lancashire Constabulary showed that genuine vehicle owners were receiving notices of intended prosecution for offences they claimed not to have committed. It had proved a difficult and frustrating task for these owners to demonstrate satisfactorily to the staff of the Central Ticket Office that they were not responsible.

Response

A partnership was established between members of the public, the Central Ticket Office and the Lancashire Constabulary Stolen Vehicle Squad.

An agreed protocol was established where on receipt of a complaint the Central Ticket Office would send out a formatted letter asking for the genuine owner to supply pictures of their vehicle.



The genuine owners are contacted and given reassurance that action is being taken, they are provided with safety advice in connection with police stop checks and provided a point of contact in relation to further offences from other police areas.

Assessment

As at 7 May 2004 we have identified 112 vehicles in the Lancashire Constabulary area bearing cloned identities and identified them on Police National Vehicle Computer (PNC).

Of these, 18 vehicles stolen from dwelling house burglaries and 3 from offences of theft from all round the United Kingdom (UK) have been recovered. 12 further vehicles have had identity issues resolved. Identified vehicles have been recovered in 9 different Police Force areas within the UK.

The Association of Chief Police Officers with responsibility for the implementation of the Automated Number Plate Recognition system has identified the operation as good practice. They have directed the National Police Standards Unit to adopt the process for national use as soon as possible.

Scanning and Analysis

The Stolen Vehicle Squad of the Lancashire Constabulary is a specialist team employed in the targeting of criminals operating in vehicle crime involving more than one Police area. We have been in the fortunate position of examining most of the recovered stolen vehicles in the Lancashire area where evidence of identification is needed for court purposes. This has provided us with a unique picture of trends in respect of stolen motor vehicles nationally.

Since 2002 we have seen a growing and now predominant trend of 'cloning'. This is where, having stolen a motor vehicle, the thief/handler hides the vehicle's identity by providing it with the identity of an already existing matching colour, model and aged vehicle. The duplications are now so good that it is almost impossible for a police officer to identify the vehicle in normal policing situations.

The purpose of cloning would appear to be two-fold. Due to the high price of new vehicles a criminal is unlikely to be able to afford a 'good quality, high class' car. By obtaining a vehicle by theft and carrying out the 'cloning', or by purchasing cheaply a 'cloned' car, the criminal is able to afford a better class of vehicle for private use. In normal contact with police officers, they are extremely unlikely to be caught out. Any road traffic offences resulting in summons to court will be directed to an innocent genuine owner.

It would appear the second reason, is to prepare the vehicle for sale to an innocent member of the public. This represents a huge profit to the criminal, and in the current legal climate, presents a very low risk of arrest. If caught, current prison sentences are so low, it is not a deterrent.

Statistics

The British Crime Survey for 2001/2002 reported that 126,000 stolen vehicles were un-recovered. The figures for 2002/2003 reported that although vehicle crime was reduced the number of un-recovered stolen vehicles increased to 130,000. We await the 2003/2004 figures.

The police in the United Kingdom have failed to find **one quarter of a million** vehicles stolen in a 2 year period.

In 2004 the National Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency database held records of 30.5 million registered vehicles.

In 2 years alone, just less than 1% of the entire registered vehicle fleet of the United Kingdom has gone missing.

Observation suggests there are only three disposal options available for the stolen vehicle.

Export

From historic data we are aware that stolen vehicles are exported. Experience shows that these vehicles are from the luxury end of the market such as high-powered sports cars and executive models. Recent operations such as Operation Barton (Greater Manchester Police) have shown that these models head predominantly to the Middle East having been placed in shipping containers exactly as they were stolen.

The perception is that this is a relatively small number. Such a small number of other countries drive on the left as we do in the United Kingdom. This can only mean there is no realistic sales market in a large part of the world.

Salvage for Parts

A large number of these un-recovered vehicles will have been broken up to supply spares into the lucrative salvage industry. However, with tighter recent legislation beginning to impact on the industry (Motor Salvage Operators Regulations 2002), this is perhaps a reducing theme.

There is considerable physical work involved in breaking a vehicle into parts and although the financial returns can be high, there is risk of a paper trail to identify the source of stolen parts on a repaired car. Since the inception of the Vehicle Inspectorate (VOSA) scheme whereby Categorised Salvage is inspected prior to its return to the road, the number of vehicles returning to the road is reduced.

Cloning

The third option is to match the vehicle to an existing vehicle.

All that is needed, is to provide the vehicle with two replacement sticky labels for Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) purposes, a forged Vehicle Registration Form (Ownership Form) and a forged Vehicle Excise Licence (taxation licence). Due to the quality of computer and printer available from High Street Stores, this means that access to either a computer, or someone who can produce the forged labels and documents, would appear to be straightforward for most offenders.

A vehicle that will pass almost any inspection by a police officer or member of the public will be created. A criminal wishing to personally use a 'cloned' car can do so with relative impunity.

Alternatively they can sell it to a member of the public and make a large profit.

Any external check by a potential purchaser as to the integrity of the vehicle with financial credit organisations will pass scrutiny, as the details being checked are those of the donor, not the true vehicle.

For a car to be sold, it is advertised in either a local, regional or national publication using an untraceable cellular mobile phone. By preying on the British public's mistrust of car dealers and the unending greed of the public 'who know a good deal, when they see one' the deal is done. We hear repeatedly of members of the public turning up at Supermarket Car Parks and Motorway Service Areas to meet complete strangers from whom they buy a car for £10,000 to £20,000 in cash!!!

Theft

The growing trend of 'cloning' seems to have mirrored the growing trend of the 'Hook and Cane' burglary, where car keys are 'fished for' using a hook on a cane through a house letter box in the front door. The offence, whether by stealth, or as it appears more recently, a rapid forced entry to a dwelling house in the middle of the night while the occupiers are asleep, to steal the vehicle keys, has occurred as a result of better vehicle security. Government pressure on Car Manufacturers to increase car security and the development of the immobiliser has forced the thief to amend their tactics. The car thief must have the keys to start the car. The offender then makes their escape in the occupiers' vehicle.

Skills

We have seen the amount of finesse used by the offender 'cloning' the vehicle develop. Initially only the number plates were replaced, but we now habitually see vehicles where the windscreen Visible VIN number is replaced, as is the VIN label within the car and even the stamped in chassis number changed to that of its donor. By producing a forged vehicle Registration Document and Vehicle Excise Licence (taxation licence) the 'clone' to all intents and purposes, is the genuine vehicle.

Profits

These vehicles are now being offered for sale via local, regional and national motor publications or in the local evening or free newspaper, at normal retail prices. South Yorkshire Police Intelligence confirmed by Greater Manchester Police Intelligence in 2003 suggested that the thief is paid as little as £500 per vehicle with keys. When the vehicle being stolen from the burglary is consistently of a value over £10,000 and often £20,000, this represents a considerable profit to the criminal.

Seizure and loss

When subsequently highlighted by Police or the National Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency investigation, police officers who attend an address to identify the vehicle as a stolen vehicle, are obliged to seize it and take it from the purchaser. Under current UK case law (R W Jones v National Employees General Insurance Association, Court of Appeal 1987) the vehicle will always be returned to the genuine owner (or the Insurance Company who paid out on the initial theft claim). This leaves the innocent purchaser with a huge financial loss. Because of the circumstances of the purchase there is also little chance of making any sort of financial recovery. A true case of **caveat emptor.(buyer beware)**.

Offenders

We further identified that on the occasion of recovering 'cloned' vehicles from offenders with criminal backgrounds, that the vehicles had been used, whilst in disguise, to commit a number of speeding offences, which had been photographed evidentially on speed cameras.

The notice of intended prosecution issued by the Central Ticket Office of a number of differing Police Forces had of course all been directed to the genuine vehicle owner recorded with the National Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA), who had committed no offence. When speaking to the genuine vehicle owners, it became apparent that they felt extremely aggrieved in the way that the Police dealt with the matter. They had often had great difficulty in getting anyone within the Police to believe that there must be two cars bearing that registration and they had not committed the offence.

Simple research showed that the drivers of the cloned stolen vehicles on those occasions must have known they were driving stolen vehicles. Enquiries showed that consistently they had not attempted to register the vehicle as required with the National Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency, as this would have initiated enquiries about their ownership. Research of the National Vehicle Insurance database attached to the Police National Vehicle Computer (PNC) showed that they had not purchased insurance cover directly relating to a vehicle of that registration.

In a number of cases, the numerous offences suggested that they 'knew' they were not going to suffer the fines, penalty points or subsequent disqualification, as there was no change in the driving standard.

Response

Very few offenders were caught at the scene of the burglary, due in part to the secrecy of the offence in the event of a 'hook and cane' style offence through the letter-box of a locked door. In the event of a forced entry the offence seems to be committed so quickly that there is little opportunity for the offence to be stopped. The thief's only intent is to take the vehicle keys and leave. The nature of both modus operandi leaves little forensic evidence at the scene. The poor detection of offender rates for this type of offence nationally, would appear to bear out the difficulties being experienced by police officers.

The few arrests of offenders made, supported the theory that offences were often carried out by criminals travelling between different Police areas of responsibility. This makes the offender difficult to target. Cross police border surveillance on a target from a different Police Division or Force is resource intensive and not a realistic option at Basic Command Level where resources are stretched and where the offence has to be confronted. When caught, the offender seldom admits anything other than the offence for which they were arrested. This provides no historic information and as a result no capability to profile the offender behaviour.

The thief is in possession of the stolen vehicle for a comparatively short period of time, the time between the point of theft and the delivery into the criminal network. This is the only time when the thief is at a realistic risk of arrest. Contact with police at this stage will usually lead to pursuit scenarios and the ensuing problems. Once the vehicle is disposed of into the criminal network, the risk for the thief is over.

It was agreed by members of the Stolen Vehicle Squad that we would attack the third leg of the problem triangle, not the offence, or the offender, but the vehicle. This was under the belief that we could find a simple way of identifying any vehicle that was in fact a stolen vehicle on a false identity. In doing so we would target the user of the vehicle and make the vehicle an unattractive proposition to possess and so seriously affect the demand and market for the 'cloned' car. By this we would reduce burglary and theft offences of vehicles purely by reducing the demand for the car stolen in the offence. The ability to spot the 'clone' earlier also means we can effect a recovery of the vehicle before it can be sold to an innocent member of the public.

Impact

To provide public satisfaction we needed to impact on three areas.

1. Reduce dwelling house burglaries for motor vehicles
2. Reduce the number of 'cloned' vehicles sold to unsuspecting members of the public thereby reducing the burden of loss.
3. Prosecute offenders for Perverting the Course of Justice in relation to the speeding offences. The effect on innocent members of the public, receiving summons to court for offences they have not committed is not to be understated.

The system developed needed to:

1. Work on a larger scale than traditional Police City/County/Force thinking. It is apparent from recovered stolen vehicles that the criminals have no concept of geographical boundaries and so our own traditional policing boundaries need to be circumnavigated.
2. Be informative. It had to give simple but positive instructions to police officers. The information had to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
3. Link to the new Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology being currently developed and deployed nationally in the UK. As an automated tool, this would carry out the checking of large amounts of innocent vehicles on behalf of officers. The officer need only react in the event of a request for positive action from the machinery, allowing them to go about their normal police duties.
4. Be simple. The system has to be administratively simple to maintain. No extra staff or resources could be found or made available.

Intelligence

The Stolen Vehicle Squad members set out to identify previously unused intelligence sources.

An approach was made to the National Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). The current registration system does locate 'cloned' vehicles at the point an innocent purchaser attempts to register the vehicle in their name. The DVLA system requests police action to examine both vehicles to establish the true vehicle. The stolen vehicle is recovered, but an innocent purchaser will already have been subject to a substantial financial loss by the time the action is requested.

In a large number of the cases we had dealt with, speeding offences had been committed; we began to liaise with the Central Ticket Office. We were able to identify that the Central Ticket Office had received a number of complaints from members of the public who had received notices of intended prosecution for speeding offences stating they were not responsible. Eventually they had convinced the Central Ticket Office by various means to cancel the intended prosecution. Their experiences were not happy ones!

We also noted that the Central Ticket Office cancelled the intended prosecution, but had not at that time, any notion of what to do with the intelligence that there were two vehicles using the same registration. Eventually, the response of the Central Ticket Office was to put an information marker on the Police National Vehicle Computer (PNC) stating the vehicle bearing that registration mark may be 'cloned'. Unfortunately this left any police officer dealing with a vehicle with this registration mark no information with which to work and no clearer as to what was expected of them. This was also a further aggravating factor for the genuine owner who was repeatedly stopped by police. This was presenting a danger of further alienating an innocent member of the public with a genuine vehicle.

Partnerships

It was decided that a partnership needed to be established between the Central Ticket Office, the innocent member of the public whose car had been 'cloned' and the Stolen Vehicle Squad.

A protocol was developed between the Central Ticket Office and the Stolen Vehicle Squad. The Central Ticket Office would be responsible for sending out a prepared formatted letter to the registered owner of the vehicle who had received a notice of intended prosecution and who claimed not to be responsible for the speeding offence. This letter asks the keeper to supply contact phone details and pictures of the front, back and sides of their vehicle. (Speed camera pictures can be forward or rear facing).

On receipt of the photographs from the owner, the Central Ticket Office forward these, together with the speed camera images to the Stolen Vehicle Squad for analysis. In almost every case there is a readily apparent difference to identify that more than one vehicle is in existence.

Engagement

A member of the Stolen Vehicle Squad contacts the innocent owner and asks for their assistance and explains what is proposed. We outline that we intend to use Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology to identify and stop vehicles bearing their registration mark. This however, will stop them as well as the offender, which is why we need to engage the owner to make this a success. We point out that we intend to use the serial number, unique to the Vehicle Excise Licence (taxation licence) in their vehicle, to identify it as being the genuine vehicle. This ensures that the genuine owner when stopped by police is detained only briefly.

Instruction is given to the vehicle owner on what to expect and how to safely deal with an officers' request to stop. This will on occasion include the use of lights and horns. The safety of the genuine owner is paramount. The genuine owner is asked to brief all drivers of the vehicle, of the procedure.

By involving the public in the process, the reaction has been outstanding. The methodology is simple and they understand the concept quickly. When asked to play a part in the recovery of a second vehicle, which is actually a stolen one, the response is engaging and extremely positive. The genuine owner is asked to record our contact details, as they are likely to be in receipt of further notices of intended prosecution from other Police Forces. We act as a contact point and an easy way of resolving more identity disputes for offences they have not committed.

Vehicle Marking

PNC

The Police National Vehicle Computer (PNC) provides only a three- line field for an information marker - which can be attached to target a specific vehicle. We have used this to highlight the Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) code words **STOP/CRIME**, and the information **VEHICLE CLONED**. This has the effect of warning the police officer what they are dealing with. The final part of the information marker provides the officer with a 24hr contact telephone number for the Lancashire Constabulary available from anywhere in the UK and a unique computer reference number to quote to the receiving operator. In the time it takes to make the telephone call and 'open' the computer reference, a police officer will be provided with a verbal action plan in how to deal with the vehicle they have just stopped.

Computer Reference Number

By providing the police officer dealing with the vehicle the Serial Number on the Vehicle Excise Licence (taxation licence) of the genuine vehicle, the officer is immediately aware of whether they are dealing with a genuine vehicle owner or a possible offender. This is significant, as if the number is correct it allows the police officer to adopt an appropriate manner expected by the genuine owner. Furthermore, if the number is incorrect, the police officer is forewarned and can begin to plan to establish the information they need, the evidence to deal with a possible offender.

In the case of the genuine owner, with a few words of reassurance, they can be sent on their way, content that the policing effort to resolve their problem is obviously working.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Levels of evidence

Consistently the evidence levels appear to be:

1. The driver has made no attempt to register the vehicle with the National Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). It is presumed that this is because they would identify themselves by requesting the issue of a registration document to an address.
2. Experience shows there is never a direct insurance policy in place. This is because the insurance databases carry out a check to ensure that there are not repeated policies on vehicles to prevent multiple claims. Most insurance cover is claimed under dubious trade policy or cover under an associate's policy.
3. In almost every case there will be a number of speeding offences. A normal driver on receipt of a number of speeding fines and points from offences would tend to change their driver behaviour. The behaviour in this case continues, as they believe they cannot be identified and be held responsible for the offences.
4. The drivers are seldom able to produce good evidence of cheque or cash withdrawal from banks as they have rarely paid the genuine price for the vehicle in the first place.

This leaves a relatively straightforward interview for any officer to pursue offences of handling stolen goods/attempt to pervert the course of justice, with good levels of evidence available to present to the courts.

Title to vehicle

The earlier quoted United Kingdom case law *R. W. Jones v National Employers General Insurance Association* was reported in the Daily Telegraph on 3rd April 1987 and states:-

"By a majority, the Court of Appeal decided that a subsequent purchaser of a stolen car did not acquire any title to the car, even though the car had passed through several transactions and was bought in good faith without knowledge of the theft."

There is no need for police officers to become involved in protracted legal disputes into property ownership or legal inter-pleader issues. The vehicle in question should be returned to its owner or the insurance company that paid out in any initial theft claim.

Assessment

We began with an experimental database of just 12 vehicles, which we could demonstrate evidentially had been 'cloned'. We recovered two vehicles in a month, which came from domestic burglaries outside of the Lancashire Constabulary Police area. The recoveries were however, made by adjoining police forces.

The database has crept steadily upwards, and now stands at 112 entries (070504) and to date we have recovered 21 stolen vehicles in this manner. We have resolved 12 cases where vehicles are incorrectly marked (point of sale errors). Through the 12 months of operation we have remained at a fairly constant 20% of marked vehicles being recovered. The 21 vehicles have been recovered in 9 different Police areas.

The longest running 'clone' was one recovered 7 months after receiving its Computer marker.

We feel at this stage, with Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) being a new tool and still being introduced to most Police Forces, that this is a significant result and can only improve as availability of automated reading increases.

Problem Solving

We have continually reviewed the process since its inception but have found that after 12 months we seemed to have resolved all the initial problems we encountered. Expiry of Vehicle Excise License (Taxation Licence) was a problem until we asked genuine owners to retain the expired licence in the back of the windscreen holder, to produce to requesting police officers. This reduced any sort of maintenance on our computer records. It also meant no administrative burden, once initially marked.

By linking our information to the Police National Vehicle Computer (PNC), we have taken advantage of an automatic administrative weeding process, which takes place after 12 months. If no positive action to continue is taken by the Stolen Vehicle Squad this will result in the information being automatically removed after 12 months. This means no requirement to annually update records and maintain files. If further offences occur after the 12 months period as the 'cloned' vehicle has not been traced, then the marker can soon be replaced by repeating the system.

Highlights

We find the process so efficient, we use the same system to marker vehicles we have established are cloned from our normal Stolen Vehicle Squad enquiries.

We estimate that our processes from receipt of the genuine owners photographs take 6 - 8 minutes of work to install. That allows us to have the registration mark highlighted for action for 12 months.

On recovery of a 'cloned' stolen vehicle we have all the contact details available and notify the genuine owner without delay. This provides us with the opportunity to thank the genuine owner for their help and tell them that there should be no further trouble. This quality of service is always commended.

Because of the contact system we provide we have been able to speak to all recovering officers and quality control our action plans and canvass opinion on just how clear and concise the information in the action plan provided to the police officer at the roadside was.

Publication

Our greatest challenge has been the publication of our Operation. It cannot unfortunately 'go public' in too much detail as this will impact on results. In time offenders will no doubt find a way to make life difficult. We have identified that we still have the tactical options of arranging the issue of a new Vehicle Excise Licence (taxation licence) or even the re-registration of the genuine vehicle to new registration mark, available to us in the future.

Following presentations, 17 different Police Forces from around the UK are looking to adopt the process. Presentations have been made to the National Vehicle Crime Advisory Group (VCAG) and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) steering group on Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR). The National Police Standards Unit has been directed to drive the Operation forward and ensure the project is adopted as 'best practice' nationally.

The Future

We recognise that once the knowledge that any particular vehicle is 'cloned', then Operation Gemini through Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology can be used to target the 'clone' vehicle.

We have set out to find further currently unused intelligence sources.

We are developing a partnership with the National Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) who receive reports from police officers and traffic wardens about vehicles not displaying Vehicle Excise Licences (taxation licences) when the records held by DVLA clearly show the genuine vehicle is correctly licensed.

A further potential partner is the local city parking director who received complaints from the owners of genuine vehicles in relation to parking violations, which bear a striking similarity to the vehicle owners who state they were not speeding. We are striving to establish a protocol.