

'GATHERING.'

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(an application for the Tilley Award)

'Gathering'

The Problem

As an attractive prosperous County Town, a low unemployment rate, and a generous population Taunton attracted a large number of itinerants and thieves.

Taunton Town centres two beats suffered some 25% - 30% of the Sectors crime. at times some 16% of the district crime.

The Town Centre also attracted some 25% - 30% of incident calls.

Like most Town Centres it suffered a high proportion of Shop theft/deceptions, thefts of and from motor vehicles, and public disorder.

How was the problem defined?

From detailed statistics gathered not only from Police resources but during the Crime and disorder audit it was evident that much of the crime and disorder was linked to Drugs / *alcohol abuse* and a core group of individuals who were addicts. Large scale Heroin abuse could be evidenced not only from Police intelligence and arrests but from the huge numbers of discarded syringes found in Public toilets.

There was no co-ordinated response nor consistency in approach to these problems.

The Response

The Police service alone cannot hope to achieve long-lasting results in combatting drug/alcohol related crime. The situation demanded a partnership approach.

The local council were encouraged to introduce rules governing the behaviour of the individuals responsible. e.g. Licensing of 'buskers' and limitation of numbers of Big Issue sellers.

The Police would ensure that these were adhered to, as well as prioritising the role of foot patrol within the town. To ensure consistency each of the twenty four hour shifts had a dedicated Town centre officer fully briefed as regards the rules and codes laid down as well as the policy regarding minor breaches of the law.

Taunton Retailers Against Crime. an established radio network in the town with its own intelligence system was to be supported by the patrolling officer. The Council car park wardens and CCTV monitoring station were to become part of the set up.

joint initiatives were set up to police a particular problem or form of behaviour. e.g. A partnership with the Off licensees that they would no longer serve known drunks.

The press were to be used to publicise any new initiatives and partnerships and also the success of operations.

The impact of the response

- i. There are no significant numbers of known addicts gathering in the Town centre
2. Crime and disorderly behaviour has been reduced.

'Gathering'

Background:

Taunton is the county town of Somerset and the largest retail centre. There is only a 3% unemployment rate and by other towns' standards Taunton is comparatively wealthy. Like many affluent areas it attracts the 'roofless' and 'itinerant' community with their drug and alcohol abuse problems. These people would converge on the town centre and through their criminal activity and disorderly behaviour they had an enormous effect on both the crime rate and trading figures for retailers in the town. It was the increase in both use and availability of heroine which these people brought with them that was at the root of the problems caused.

Information was forthcoming from the traders themselves as well as the larger community who had been consulted for the Crime and Disorder survey.

Objective:

With the Town centre having some 25% - 30% of the sector crime and similar figures in relation to incident calls something had to be done to alleviate what was a disproportionate effect on Crime statistics and to create a safer and more friendly environment.

Who was consulted and what systems were interrogated:

Consultations with community groups such as Open Door, Taunton Association for the Homeless and the Detached Youth Project revealed that Heroine was indeed in ready supply on the streets. The environmental health department as well as local Takeaways could confirm an increase in the numbers of needles being disposed of within their public toilets. All this was of course supported by intelligence officers at Taunton Police station.

Unfortunately the major users had consistently refused help although counselling services were readily available.

Reformed Heroine addicts who now operate as counsellors were consulted. It was their submission that addicts should be made fully aware that their conduct would not be tolerated and that they should be arrested and dealt with positively at every opportunity. Only then would they seek reform themselves, which is a prerequisite in dealing with any drug addiction.

So what misconduct could be defined and how could we start tackling the resultant problems?

Disorderly behaviour:

Disorderly conduct induced by their alcohol and drug abuse, Street begging, excessive numbers and poor conduct of Big Issue sellers, the conduct and lack of control of their dogs, excessive numbers and poor standard of street entertainers.

Description

Criminal behaviour:

Shop theft and deception, theft from motor vehicles, assaults, Graffiti and minor damage.

Dealing with the problems:

(Legislation required and changes in policing methods)

Disorderly behaviour:

To achieve the desired results I had an obvious partner, that being the Town Centre manager, Jenny Hoyle.

The Town Centre manager was only too well aware of the problems this core group of individuals had brought to the town. With her general objective of bringing prosperity to the town centre it was in both our interests to analyse the problem and to take the necessary positive steps to resolve it.

The Town Centre manager's tasks were to help tackle some of the non-crime problems. There had to be some legislation or other controls introduced.

Through negotiations with the Big Issue office, a Code of Practice for sellers was agreed as well as a limitation and location of sales pitches.

Similarly, Street entertainers or 'Buskers' were to be licensed following an audition and they too subject to a Code of Practice.

Dog fouling and Dogs on leads orders were introduced following negotiations with the Local council and the Dog Wardens.

Graffiti and minor damage would be repaired quickly, materials being supplied by the Town Centre Partnership Panel and the labour by those on community service orders:

An agreement was achieved with local Off Licensees that they would not sell to people with known drug or alcohol problems.

A drinking ban on the streets in the centre of town is to commence shortly.

The police would support all the above legislation in addition to illegal street trading, reporting offenders were necessary.

Criminal behaviour:

T had only one dedicated Town centre officer whose time was soon taken up with shoplifters and meetings of various forums. There was a need to identify individuals on each of the twenty four hour shifts to be dedicated to patrolling the town centre. There was also a need to have at least one additional dedicated beat officer to patrol a beat previously uncovered which included a large part of the retail centre of the town.

With the support of the District Commander both needs were addressed.

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Each of these officers would have in depth knowledge of the active criminals operating in the town centre and of the systems in place to deal positively with disorderly conduct. They would carry the TRAC radio(see below) whilst on patrol during the day and the Pubwatch pager at night.

Historically foot patrol within the service has been largely ignored and seen as being ineffective because of the overemphasis on reactive policing. Eventually I received support to take those nominated individuals under my direct supervision and became responsible for their personal development.

Above all partnerships were needed we could not hope to achieve significant results alone.

Partners in trying to combat the crime and disorder problem.

Partnerships are the most effective way to resolve crime and disorder problems. I was fortunate in having had many years experience as a community beat officer and knew the limitations of trying to tackle some of the more complex issues alone.

Taunton Retailers Against Crime.

There was an already established shop radio-link system within the town (TRAC). There were fourteen users and they held a security meeting once a quarter. It was at the first of these security meetings that I realized the intelligence they had gathered gave them a `hit list' of 13 prolific offenders. No less than ten of these were identified as targets by the Police for other offences . It was obvious that there should be a sharing of the information where applicable and where it could be legally done.

Police had previously joined the Shop radio-link (TRAC) on pre-Christmas anti-theft campaigns. It was also obvious that this should become year round and one radio was purchased by the police with a further two being purchased for them by TRAC.

Car Park Wardens

CCTV was limited to a few car parks and was monitored by the Car Park Wardens themselves. At any one time there are some six or seven wardens patrolling the car parks. I believed it was essential that they were to be included in the fight against the problems identified and should therefore be on the radio-link system. I negotiated with the Local Council and this was achieved.

A large proportion of crime is connected to vehicles, whether it is theft of or from them or crime involving their use to convey thieves and stolen articles to and from the scene. The CCTV monitoring station and the wardens were to become an integral link in the process of both prevention and detection.

Traffic wardens

As members of the Police service carrying police radios and spending large amounts of time on foot observing people as well as cars, being established partners in crime prevention already, I negotiated :the carrying of the TRAC radio by them as a contact in emergencies only. They were keen to be involved.

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Dog Wardens

As a result of the disproportionate number of calls requiring the enforcement of Dog control legislation to the Town Centre and the propensity for violence that the offenders had, the Local Authority Dog wardens were the latest to join the scheme.

Licensees

Whilst not directly connected to thefts and drug dealing during the day, Pub staff could be very useful as further eyes and ears in the Community. As part of the Pubwatch system set-up primarily for night time problems 20 members of the scheme are open during the day and linked via a pager system. One number and all the premises could be alerted.

In addition to the above and as a direct result of the Police supporting the radio-link the number of TRAC users has grown to a current figure of 40 with shops coming to the scheme from the outskirts of the town.

Co-ordinating the response and dealing effectively with the problems:

The idea was to have firmly established systems which could be pursued on a daily basis. These in turn would be supported by periodic operations involving increased numbers of police staff and specialist units such as the District Crime squad and Support groups. The mounted branch, Dog section and Traffic units are also involved.

By far and away the most useful tool to ensure co-ordination and successful operations is the Town radio link (IRAC). Its use has become a key link in any operations executed in the town centre area during the day.

Systems in Place to deal with disorderly conduct.

1. Begging

Previously a warning with photographs taken at the scene was felt to be an efficient first step in dealing with the problem. Unfortunately this actually meant that the individual concerned would receive at least two cautions before being prosecuted. The force policy being to caution on first arrest.

The extent of the problem became so great that a more direct approach was needed. The initial street caution was taken away and when two instances of begging were witnessed then the person concerned would be arrested.

At the station each individual would be given advice regarding counselling services available, where a room might be found for, the night or successive nights, the location of such places as the Big issue office and where cheap meals could be obtained.

Begging was to no longer be ignored.

2. Busking

Busking was closely related to begging in that when police were called to beggars a tin whistle or similar instrument would be produced and the uniformed police officer had little or no evidence of begging. This loophole would be closed.

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Any deviants from the Licensing or Code of Practice would be warned to stop. Failing to do so would possibly contravene not only the Highways Act regarding obstruction but local legislation regarding the playing of instruments or singing within 50' of a building'.

3. Control of Dogs.

Many of those gathering in the town would be accompanied by a dog. In psychological terms they needed the animals as a kind of crutch. In that they at least would look up to and respect their owners. This unfortunately meant that the individual excluded themselves from any accommodation that was provided by the council or housing charity. If they must be present with a dog then the dog would be kept under proper control.

Initially the Dog wardens would be called to deal with offenders, but the patrolling officer would support them. All would be warned once but then reported for subsequent offences. S.25 of PACE giving a power of arrest where applicable

4. Street trading.

This activity was pursued by a few who would make small wooden artifacts or similar items. Where there was no sale begging would take place.

Traders are strictly licensed by the Local authority and supported by the police. Offenders being reported on the first occasion.

Systems in place to deal with criminal activity.

I. Shop theft/deception.

(a) Support of the TRAC system by the patrolling officer, Traffic warden and Car Park Warden.

(b) Sharing of intelligence.

(c) A Monthly newsletter was established including a Convicted 'Rogues Gallery' of photos of persistent offenders

(d) Exclusion Orders from the town of all recidivists on bail pending court appearance and when convicted at Court .

(e) Daily updates regarding Warrants outstanding and bail condition variations given over the TRAC system

The drawbacks:

The extra burden of an additional radio by both the patrolling officer and the Traffic wardens. Perhaps more importantly the additional arrests as a direct result of the shared intelligence. e.g. The evidence required for store detectives to detain a person far exceeds what a police officer needs to detain for a stop and search under s. 1 of PACE. The suspicions of a store detective can be transferred to the officer. In a pre-Christmas campaign, 40% of those stopped and searched in this way were arrested in possession of suspected stolen goods. 85% of those arrested were charged.

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2. Drug dealing and misuse

- (a) Sharing intelligence with Council workers, local landlords and TRAC users to identify places of habitual resort including handlers of stolen property as well as the Drug dealers.
- (b) Regular execution of warrants on premises under the Misuse of Drugs Act
- (c) Ensuring that, in line with force policy, those convicted or cautioned for Drugs offences are given relevant information as to where they can receive help.
- (d) Increasing the number of stop and search on drug users where suspicion allows.

3. Thefts of/from motor vehicles

- (a) Working with the local authority to ensure continued and extended coverage of the car parks in the town centre.
- (b) The provision of photographs of convicted thieves known or suspected to be operating in the car parks to the CCTV monitoring centre and the Wardens themselves.
- (c) Periodic covert operations by police to target high crime areas and catch offenders.
- (d) High profile patrols by the carpark wardens and the police using the vulnerable vehicle forms where appropriate. (Vehicles identified with property on display and the owners written to with crime prevention advice).

The drawbacks:

Although not on the same scale as working with TRAC. More work would be required by the Wardens in checking video footage for suspects where crime was committed, More arrests would again mean further infringements on police time. But what are we here for?

Evidence from arrests and crime investigation showed that Theft/deceptions in shops were largely committed by the same individuals who *were* stealing from cars. The vast proportion of individuals admitting some form of drug addiction, usually heroine.

The Results!

The above systems once established were then supported by operations involving the specialist units as well as district staff. This was no easy option. Everyone involved had to be committed and work hard to achieve results.

I would anxiously await each set of monthly crime statistics, and seek the views of the retailers and other agencies who operated in the town. There were five forums representing different parts of the town that I regularly attended.

Description

August 1998 showed amongst other things thefts from motor vehicles reaching almost epidemic proportions.

From September 1998 to January 1999 the above systems were in place and two four week operations were carried out in October and December involving Support Groups, the mounted branch and the District Crime Unit.

There were large numbers of arrests for drugs offences as well as for thefts and deceptions. Over 90 people were arrested on the town centre beats in December alone. Every person targeted was detained and charged at some time during the operation. Some more than once.

Shop theft remained high and there was also an anticipated increase in recorded crime because of the targetting of reputed thieves for this offence. What was significant and expected was the subsequent fall in stock loss to be recorded at successive stock takes with in the retail sector.(see **appendices 'D'**()).

By January 1999 Crime overall had fallen by some 25% with car crime falling to a low of only 12 thefts (from), compared to 78 in August 1998. (**See appendix 'A'**)

There are very few itinerant addicts living or operating on the streets of Taunton. There are no longer large groups causing a disturbance in the town and incident calls have been drastically reduced. (**see appendices 'B' & 'C'**)

Heroin is in short supply.

One notable example was where a well known drug addict and itinerant type was targeted and it would appear that the final straw was when he was arrested under the provisions of s.25 PACE for not having his dog on a lead. He is now in full-time employment and living back with his parents albeit temporarily.

Finally good news it seems travels fast. The results of our efforts in Taunton have through the internal and external media meant that-I have received enquiries from all other sectors covering retail centres in the Avon and Somerset Force area. To my knowledge they have established systems similar to our own and I hope are just as successful. I have also received enquiries from as far afield as Gloucester, Swindon, Torquay and most recently Dorking in Surrey.

The future

Complacency must not be allowed to creep in. The systems described in this paper remain in place. Progress continues to be made in many areas.

The town's CCTV network will continue to expand with monies already set aside for this financial year.

The TRAC system continues to grow.

More work needs to be done on ensuring the quality of information gleaned and shared with more regular releases of photographs where appropriate.

Perhaps most important of all, police constables are not all convinced of the effectiveness of the process. Many still have ingrained attitudes believing that police officers should not operate alone

Description

or on foot, nor should we support the radiolink system even though the changes in the environment and the crime statistics prove otherwise. Managing these changes will continue to be challenging.

Project contact person:

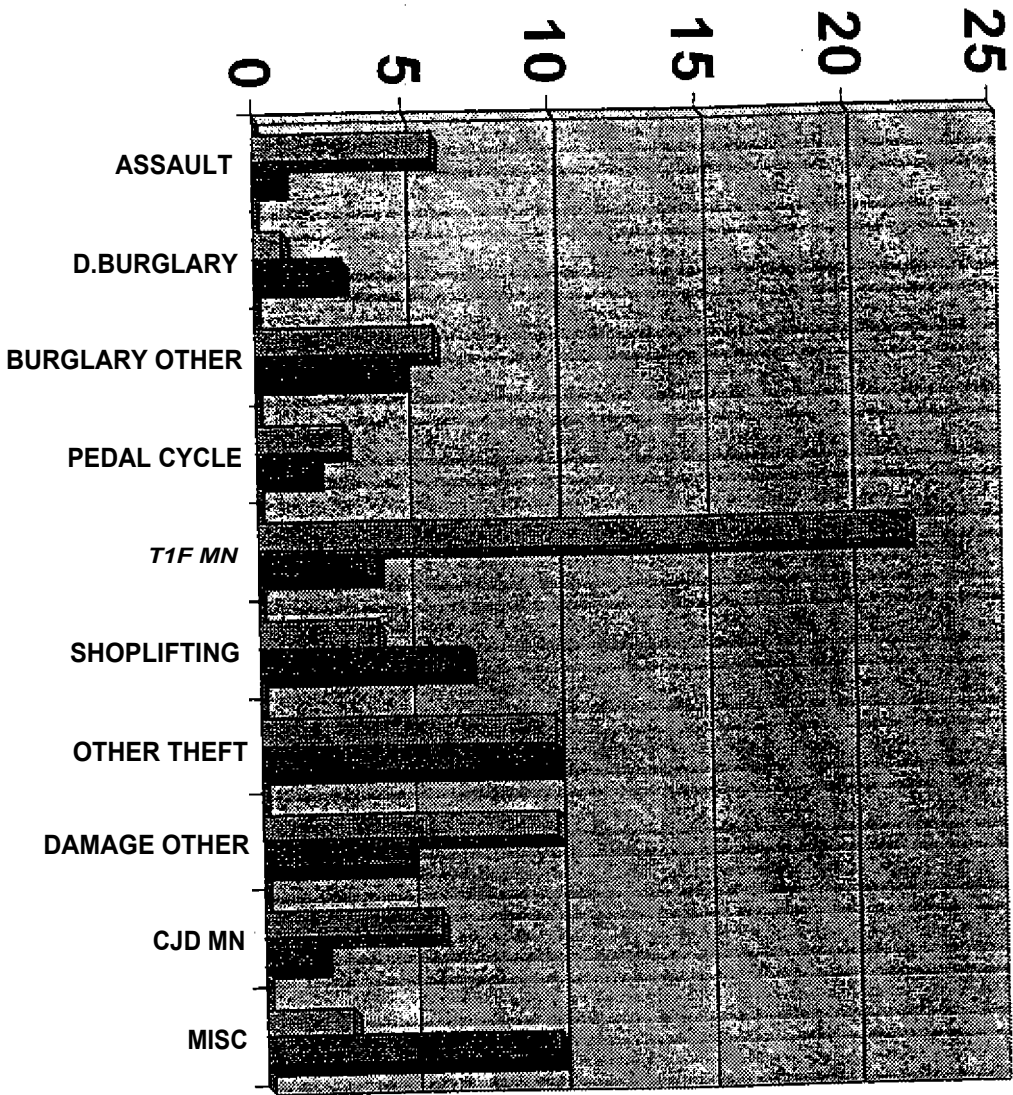
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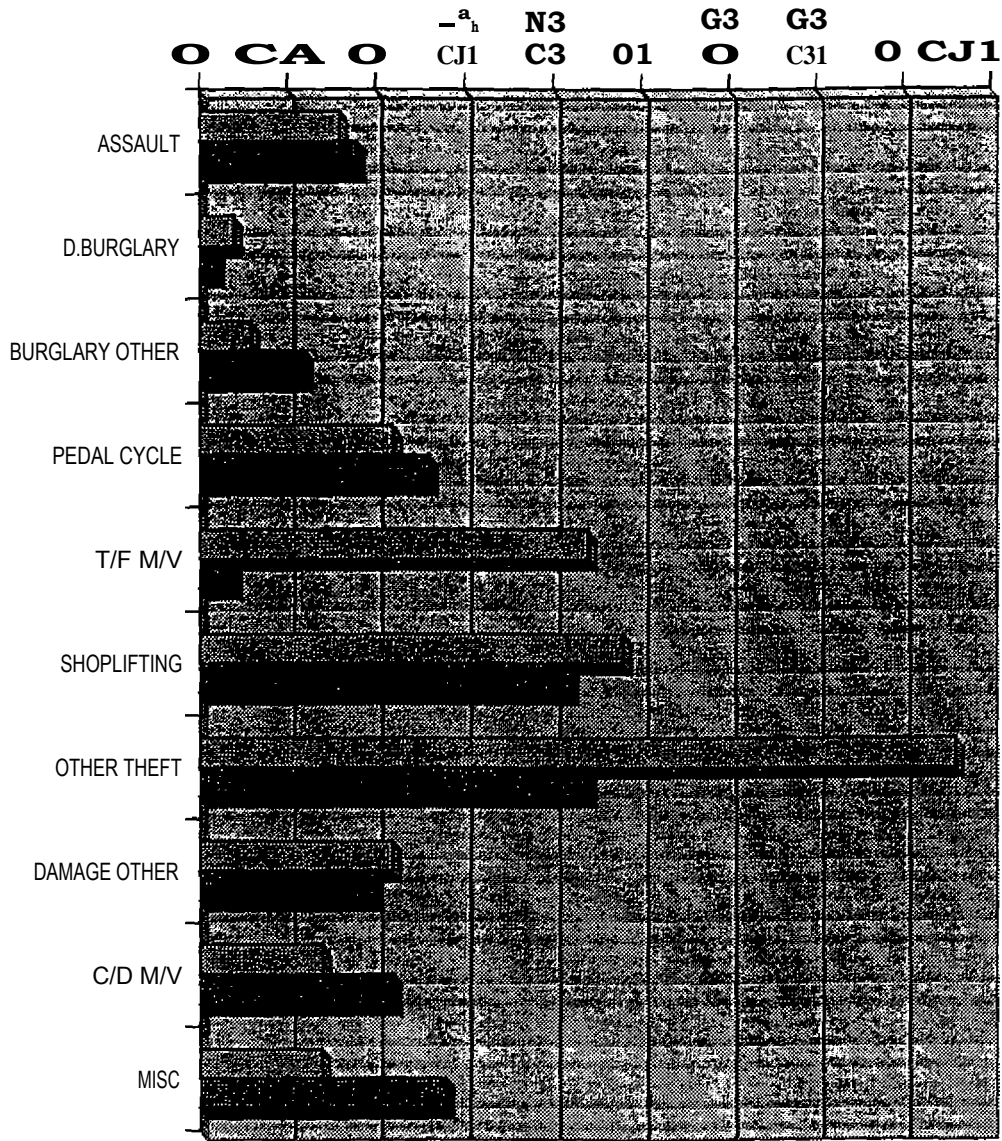
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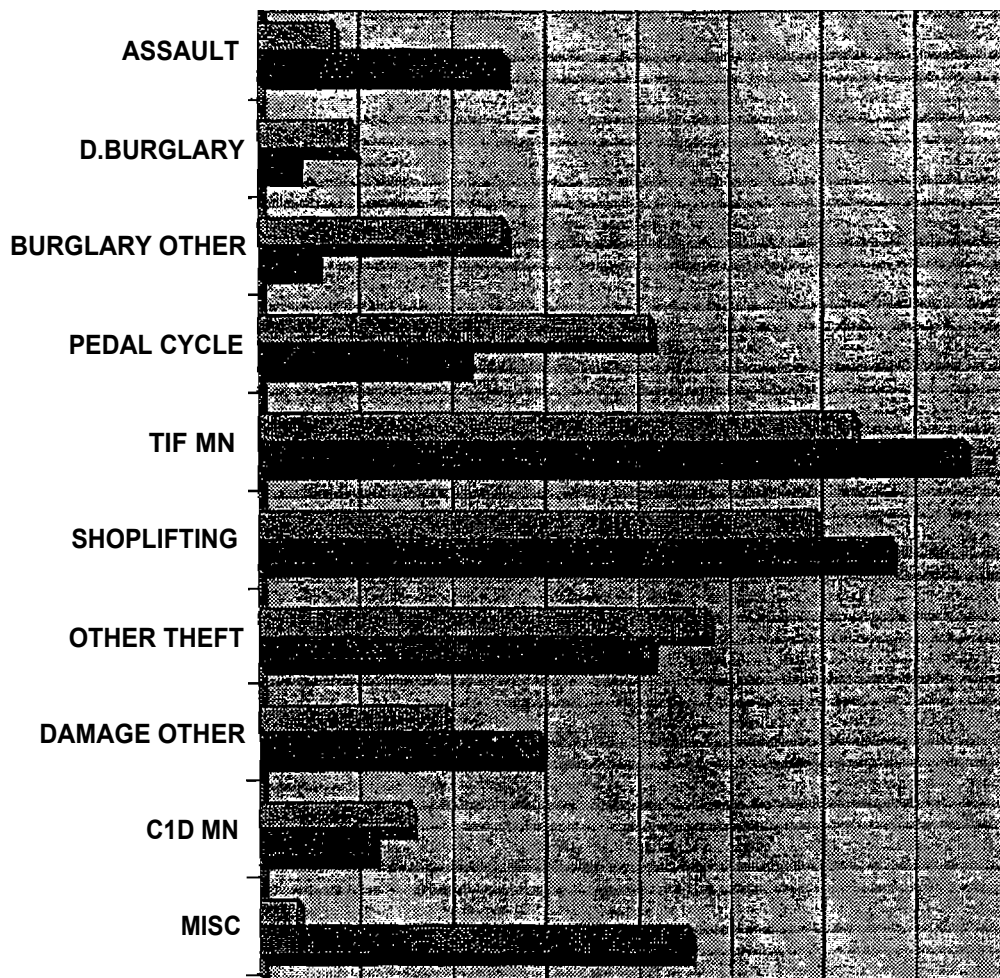
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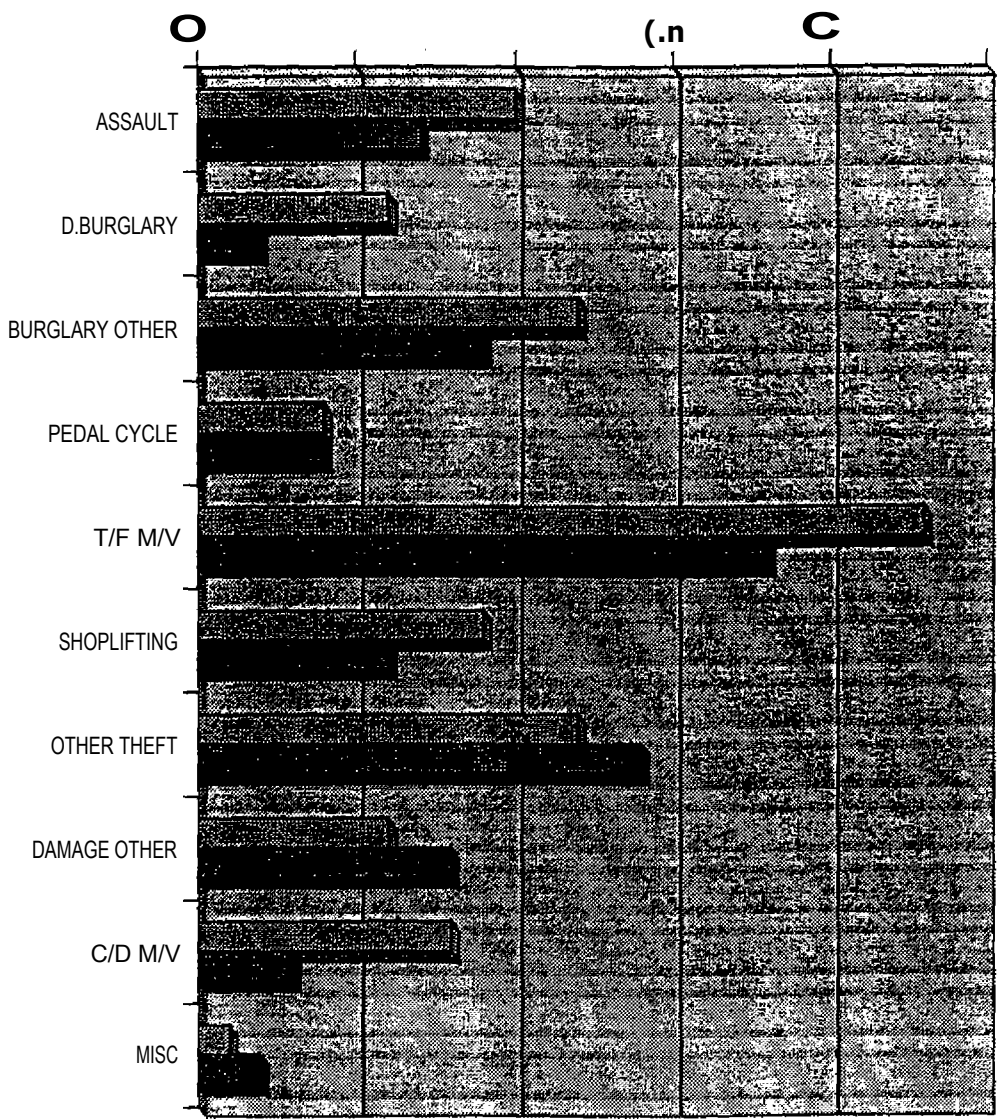
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