



Tilley Awards 2004

**Operation Lightfingers
Retail Theft**

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Summary

Whitehaven is a small market town on the west coast of Cumbria. It has two main shopping streets and an outdoor market area, the market being held each Thursday and Saturday. There are also a number of larger supermarkets situated to the North and South of the town, which are within easy walking distance of the town centre.

In December 2000 the Police at Whitehaven launched their traditional Christmas shoplifting operation.. This operation mainly involved plain-clothes patrols walking the town centre in an attempt to detect those involved in theft from retail premises.

By the end of December 29 arrests had been made for theft, although the police regarded this as a great success, when the operation was evaluated we realized it wasn't as successful as first thought.

Plain-clothes patrols did nothing to reassure the town's retailers, who felt they were being hammered by shoplifters. This resulted in a poor relationship between traders and the police.

Theft was under reported as retailers generally only reported offences when they had caught an offender.

As an initial step to address this, two officers were permanently deployed to the town centre to improve the relationship with traders, encourage the reporting of crime, introduce preventative measures and target persistent offenders. The end of 2001 saw a reduction in theft; coupled with a reduction in the number of detected crimes, as traders began to report all thefts.

By 2002 the reduction in thefts allowed the police to withdraw one of the town centre officers while still maintaining a good working relationship with traders. A firm evidential basis was provided enabling the police to apply for Anti-Social Behaviour Orders against the towns' most persistent offenders. Thefts were reduced, as were detections. Scanning and analysis revealed that thefts were displaced to the supermarkets, the response was adapted to address this and by the end of the year thefts were reduced.

Once again thefts were reduced in 2003, the detection rate also reduced. At its peak in 2001 there were 236 thefts reported by 2003 this was reduced to 171.

Through crime prevention measures, targeting persistent offenders, the use of ASBO and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, a close working relationship has developed between the traders in the town and the police. Reported thefts have been reduced while traders are now more willing to report all theft and not just ones where they catch an offender.

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1. Scanning

Whitehaven

The town is situated on the West Coast of Cumbria and has a main shopping area consisting of two streets King and Lowther. These house a number of smaller retailers, as well as a number of national companies. Within walking distance of the town centre are seven supermarkets situated to the north, south and east of the town.

The town has an open-air market, held each Thursday and Saturday

Christmas Crime Operation.

On the 1 December 2000 the Police at Whitehaven launched Operation Bauble, the traditional policing operation targeting a perceived increase in retail theft during the build up to Christmas. The operation involved plain clothes patrolling of the town centre to 'catch' potential thieves in the act.

This operation ended on the 24 December 2000 and had resulted in the arrest of 29 offenders. Initially this was hailed as a great success, but was it?

To arrest 29 offenders we had let a large number of crimes be committed.

No one knew that the police were patrolling the streets as they were in plain clothes, the first retailers and members of the public would know of a police presence was when a person had been detained and the officers were awaiting the arrival of a van.

Retailers' perspective.

When informing retailers the perceived success of the operation it was apparent that they did not have the same view. Many felt there was a lack of police presence in the town centre. Some felt that the police had little interest in retail theft and therefore they didn't bother to report crime as it happened.

When crime was reported the response on some occasions was poor, retailers had been left with shoplifters detained and the police had not turned up. This left a poor working relationship developing between the towns Chamber of Trade and the police.

Copeland Community Safety Strategy

Whitehaven Town centre is part of Harbour ward within the Copeland Borough Council area. In terms of crime it is the worst ward in the Area due to it being the main shopping centre in the District. Theft, including shoplifting accounted for 71.8% of crimes per 1000 head of population for the ward in comparison to a Copeland average of 11.6%.

2. Analysis

Analysis was carried out using incident logs from the Polis Command and Control system and the Oracle crime system. Statistics were requested from retailers but we found that in all except one case they refused to pass these details, the reason which, was given for this, was that they did not want to reveal the extent of the theft problem.

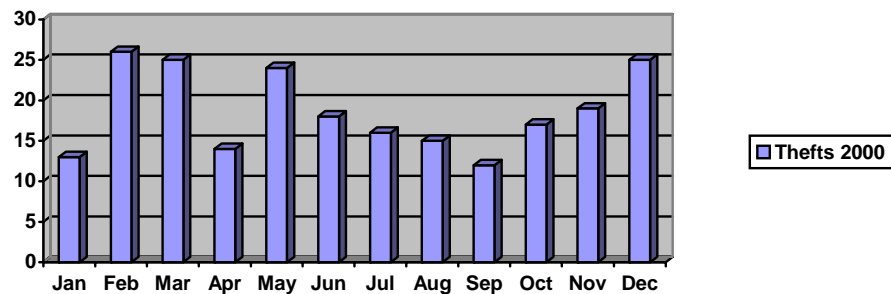
The major retailers within the town admitted that their stock loss was high, although they were unable to differentiate between stock, lost through theft and stock lost through other methods i.e. damaged goods.

One national retailer who unofficially provided details of stock loss claimed to have been losing between £900 and £1000 per month alone in cosmetics and toiletries.

Although retailers were unwilling to release figures they did state that theft was a large problem within the town. They would only report a crime if they had actually caught someone shoplifting. This became more apparent when analysing the Polis and Oracle systems.

When analysing the Oracle crime system, this revealed that of the 198 thefts, which were reported in 2000, 65% of these were shown as 'detected' a monthly breakdown of these crimes is shown below.

When these crimes were matched with the Polis incident logs a further 11% had been reported as a result of an offenders being detained, although the subsequent crime was not detected. This meant that three quarters of the crime was only reported when a person was actually caught.



Analysis of the crime locations revealed that 107 of the crimes reported in the town that year had been committed in seven premises, four were in the town centre these are Boots, Argos, Woolworths and Superdrug. The others, Safeway, Tesco and Aldi are all on the outskirts of town.

When retailers were spoken to they acknowledged that they would only report crime if they had detained someone to hand over to the police, they felt that if they had not detained someone then there was no point in reporting the theft as there was little the police could do. Much of the evidence about the under reporting of crime was notionally provided by retailers.

The majority of shops were in radio contact with each other via a shop watch radio link. This was under used; retailers appeared to be frightened of it! This was due to the fact that no training had been given in its use. The head of the Chamber of Trade insisted on the use of code words and the phonetic alphabet.

Retailers also felt that a small minority of local offenders were committing a majority of the crime, this was a belief which was also held by the police. In both cases it was felt that shoplifting was a quick way of making money to feed drug habits.

As a result of analysis of Polis incident logs nine persistent offenders were identified. Even though these individuals were well known to the police at Whitehaven, effective measures had not been taken to 'police' them effectively.

From some incident logs it was obvious that some officers believed that the criminal attempts act had been repealed! Time and again the same names would appear on logs after retailers reported them attempting to steal goods, but incident logs would be completed as 'no offences disclosed.' No attempt would be made to deal with the offenders.

CCTV covers the two main shopping streets, but this is not permanently monitored. Monitors for the CCTV are linked to Whitehaven Police station.

The working relationship between the retailers and the police was at an all time low, crime was under reported and a small number of offenders were believed to be causing a disproportionate amount of the thefts but weren't being effectively tackled.

3. Objectives

- Reduce the number of thefts.
- Encourage the reporting of theft.
- Target persistent offenders effectively.

4. Response

Town Centre Police Officers

Whitehaven had always had an officer deployed to the town centre, however in the six months prior to April 2001 no such officer had been deployed, this had compounded the fact that the town centre retailers had felt abandoned.

As an initial short-term measure, two officers were designated to patrol the town centre as of the 1 April 2001, they were deployed as high profile patrols, it was accepted that plain clothes patrolling had not worked. The aim of both officers was to work towards the objectives identified through scanning and analysis.

Eventually these officers were also deployed on mountain bikes enabling them to cover more of the town centre than they could on foot patrol.

Retailer training

One of the first things the officers identified when patrolling the town and which was identified in the scanning and analysis was that the retailers were unwilling to use the shop watch radio link.

Training seminars were organised to encourage shopkeepers to use the radio link. The use of code words and the phonetic alphabet was dropped. Retailers were encouraged to use the name of their shop for ease of identification.

Through training it was identified that when the town centre officers were not on duty the police did not respond to calls over the radio system. Radios were purchased allowing them to be monitored by response officers and by counter clerks at Whitehaven.

Counter clerks were given training in the use of the radios, enabling the radios to be constantly monitored by the police. Counter clerks were also trained in the use of CCTV, enabling them to monitor the town when messages were passed over the radio link.

Training also included, crime prevention advice and retailers were also encouraged to report all crime then a true picture could be gained of the theft problem.

Retailers were also issued with incident report sheets enabling them to record the basic details, which were required by the police.

Crime prevention. Target hardening.

Scanning and analysis revealed that over half of the offences committed in 2000 occurred in seven shops. Crime prevention surveys were carried out. It was found that expensive items such as electrical goods were left in boxes at the front of the shops. CCTV was provided but little consideration had been given to which way cameras were pointing.

As a result, retailers removed some stock from displays, leaving empty boxes on display. More expensive items were moved to areas where they could be closely monitored and CCTV within the premises was redirected to give more effective cover of both goods and of potential thieves.

Newsletter

A quarterly newsletter was prepared which was given to all retailers and which outlined details of actions being carried out by the police warned of emerging issues and also offered further crime prevention advice.

Poster Campaigns.

To deter potential shoplifters, the fact that retail theft was being targeted within the town was advertised. This was done by placing A3 sized posters at the entrances to all retail premises within the town.

The posters advertised the fact that operation light fingers, was ongoing and the consequences of being caught shoplifting which included, fines, a police record, prison, a court appearance and all of those came with a free ride to the local police station. This message has appeared on all posters, the theme of the posters has changed to reflect the season.

These seasonal messages have included;

Christmas offer, free to anyone caught shoplifting, free, fines etc

Last minute summer sizzling deals to anyone caught shoplifting, free, fines etc.

Others have included the slogan Caught today/Court tomorrow. This put the message out that shoplifting was being taken seriously and for the persistent offenders if caught the police would attempt to have them remanded in custody.

All posters also stated that covert police patrols operated within the store even though this was not the case.

Media

At the outset the media were used to raise the profile of shoplifting within the town. Large seizures of stolen goods were regularly publicized, along with significant arrests and sentences.

Through the use of the media a positive message was sent out to the retailers.

This message was also used to act as deterrent for those shoplifting within the town.

Targeting persistent offenders

Persistent offenders were known both to the retailers and to the police however they had not been effectively policed and had only ever been tackled when they had been caught.

Whitehaven is a small town and the offenders were well known, both to the retailers and to the police, however they continued to offend. Shoplifting to feed a drug habit was far easier than burglary or car crime. All of the persistent offenders were known drug abusers.

To address the persistent offenders a decision was taken to police them in a more vigorous manner.

This approach included, continued arrest where possible, arresting offenders including the persistent offenders for attempt thefts. This had been highlighted as lacking, in the scanning and analysis.

When possible stop and search powers were used and if non of the aforementioned was possible the officers would confront the known persistent offenders on the streets making them aware that the police were about.

CDRP

The CDRP group, which looked at theft within the area, identified that retail theft within Whitehaven was an ongoing problem and as a result wrote an action plan encompassing Operation Light fingers.

Anti Social Behaviour Orders

Shoplifting is regarded as a victimless crime however, when known offenders entered shops they would enter as a group then split up. Shop staff would have difficulty watching them due to the numbers involved. Shop staff, were intimidated by their presence and were fearful for their safety as the known offenders were all drug abusers.

When these offenders were challenged they could become abusive and on occasions violent. This not only alarmed store staff but would also alarm genuine shoppers.

Using this evidence it was argued that shoplifting wasn't victimless and was anti-social, it was decided to apply for ASBO to be made against the most persistent offenders. Through the proactive targeting of these offenders a firm evidential basis had been provided to justify the applications.

Eventually six orders were granted, running for periods of between three to five years. The extra power given to the police effectively banned these offenders from all town centre shops, except for one hour each day. Each offender has a different hour!!

Acceptable Behaviour Contracts

These contracts were used when the analysis revealed an increase in theft, which was caused by juveniles who were predominantly female.

The contracts were used for first time offenders who hadn't come police attention before. Prosecution through the Youth Offender Team was still carried out. The contracts were used as a deterrent and a reminder to the youths of the consequences of stealing.

Contracts ran for a period of three months, as a reward for not committing further thefts youths were given a free pass to local council amenities, the ultimate decision to hand over this pass rested with the police and parents of the youth.

5. Assessment

The initiatives to address shoplifting in Whitehaven town centre have now been ongoing for almost three years and now form part of the everyday policing of the town centre.

Some of these initiatives have been ongoing since the start of Operation Light fingers, such as the poster campaigns. Others have been implemented in response to continued scanning and analysis, such as the juvenile offenders identified in 2003 and the use of ABC's to address this.

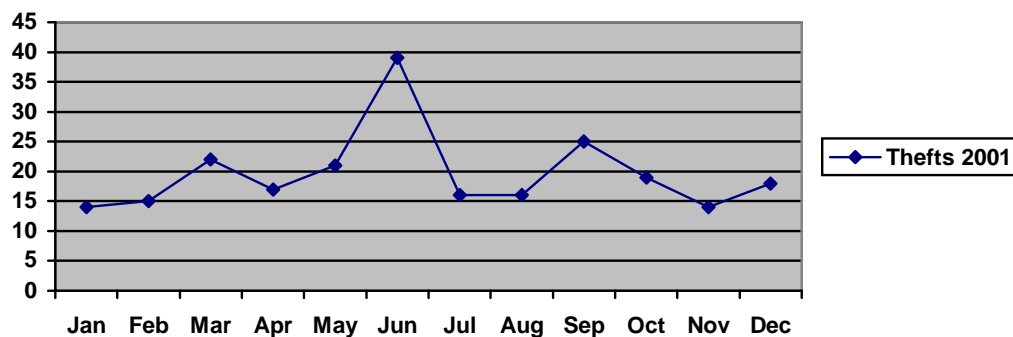
This assessment initially gives a yearly breakdown, since April 2001 and how each element of the response has fitted in as the operation has progressed. An overall assessment of how the response has worked is then given.

The initial response in 2001 saw two police officers working in the town centre to achieve the objectives, which had been set by identifying that we wanted to reduce crime, but also encourage the reporting of it. We anticipated that there would be an initial increase in reported crime. This increase was initially seen in June 2001.

Between June 2001 and September 2001 there were 96 reported thefts, this compares with 61 for the same period in the previous year. The detection rates for theft rose slightly to 67% in this year this could be expected with the increase in offences from 198 offences in 2000 to 236 in 2001

The anticipated increase in crime could be seen when it peaked in June of that year, this continued until September and then a reduction could be seen by the end of the year. This included a reduction of offences in December of that year.

The chart below gives a monthly breakdown of thefts within the town centre, which occurred during 2001.



By the end of the year a better use of the shop watch radio link could be seen by an increase in information being passed over the radio to assist in the apprehension of offenders. The use of code words had been dropped making it easier for all users including the police to identify which shop was speaking.

Premises had been target hardened, through crime prevention measures, with a view to making goods less easy to steal

The newsletter and posters, were well received by retailers who at last could see that the police were taking the initiative to address the problem of shoplifting.

Targeting persistent offenders, especially through the use of stop and search powers was also a factor which contributed to the increase in crime, however the feedback from the offenders indicated that they did not like to be proactively policed.

Although two officers were initially deployed to the town centre in the longer term we knew that this was not sustainable. By the end of the year it was felt that through response and partnership working with retailers, measures had been introduced which would continue to reduce shoplifting. It was therefore decided to remove one officer but leave one permanently in the town centre.

Unfortunately the first time many retailers became aware of this was after it had been done. In hindsight they should have been told at the outset that two officers in the town centre was a short-term measure. This caused a slight set back in the excellent working relationship, which had developed as they felt that once again they were being abandoned.

In 2002 the responses, which had been adopted during the previous year continued albeit with one police officer. Although only one officer now worked in the town centre, retailers could see that the same approach was continuing and therefore the problems caused by removing one officer were easily rectified.

Targeting of persistent offenders continued, it was during this time that the training in the shop watch radios began to produce results. Retailers would sight a suspect and would pass locations between shops so they could be tracked around the town. As the system was monitored by the counter clerks at Whitehaven they were able to track offenders through the town until the police arrived to deal with the suspect.

Information sheets had been issued in 2001 but were withdrawn this year because only one had been used. Retailers didn't feel that they were needed; they couldn't keep them close to hand to use as in the main they were left in offices.

Posters and the media were continually used to advertise the fact that Operation Light fingers, was ongoing. Feedback from source handlers suggested that by the middle of the year it was becoming increasingly difficult to shoplift in Whitehaven.

Continuous scanning and analysis has been a key feature in this operation enabling new responses to be adapted, as new problems have been identified. Training provided by Crime Concern enabled us to take another look at the response and adapt it to meet current needs. This training also confirmed that the response, which had been adapted, was correct.

In June of 2002 it could be seen that crime being committed by the persistent offenders was being displaced to the supermarkets on the outskirts of town.

Woolworths, which is in the town centre reported 44 thefts in 2001, this reduced to 15 in 2002.

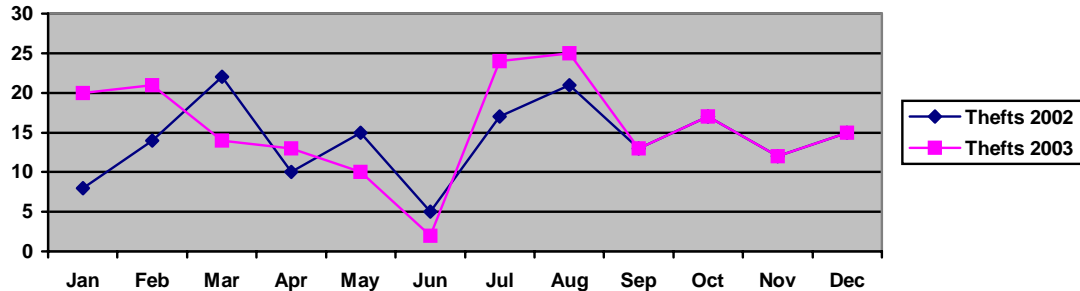
In comparison Tesco, which is on the outskirts of town reported 15 thefts in 2001, this rose to 25 in 2002, as crime was displaced to the outskirts of town. All stores on the outskirts of town saw rises in crime during this year.

By mid 2002 the targeting of persistent offenders provided us with a firm evidential database to apply for Anti Social Behaviour Orders. Eventually six applications were made to Whitehaven Magistrates Court, all orders were granted by March of 2003. The impact that persistent offenders could have on reported crime was significant. In July and August of these year two persistent offenders who were having a brief rest from being in prison, accounted for a significant proportion of the 49 crimes committed during these months.

By the end of the year we had started to go some way to achieving our objectives as crime had started to fall but the detection rate had also started to fall indicating that retailers were beginning to report crime as it happened not just when they caught someone. In all 172 offences were reported this year but the detection rate fell to 59%.

The chart below gives the monthly theft comparison, the increase in July and August 2002 can clearly be seen.

Figures also show thefts in 2003



The operation continued into 2003 with the final ASBO being granted in March of that year. Again saw how one offender could have a disproportionate effect on crime figures as during March one offender accounted for a significant amount of the 22 offences committed.

Also by 2003 Operation Lightfingers had the support of the Area CDRP theft group. Through its action plan partnership working was progressed which eventually led to money being made available to retailers to improve security. Security improvements are still ongoing so no evaluation can be given

With the granting of the ASBO's it could be seen that the displacement to the outskirts of town had been addressed and targeting persistent offenders was having a significant impact on shoplifting throughout the town.

Woolworths crimes were reduced to six in 2003, whereby Tesco's on the outskirts of town was reduced to eleven crimes.

The shop, which gave us the unofficial stock loss figures, was able to say that this had reduced from £900 per month to no more that £200 per month, but still could not differentiate between damaged and stolen goods.

Of the six ASBO's granted, four offenders have not offended since, one has offended once in 12 months and one has offended twice resulting in him being imprisoned. The impact on other persistent offenders has been significant. Offending has either stopped or dramatically reduced as in one offenders words 'we don't want to be Asboed'

Although the ASBO's have worked in reducing crime in Whitehaven there has been some displacement of crime to other towns in the area. This displacement has not seen those offenders committing the same amount of crime as they were committing in Whitehaven.

By the middle of the year we were in line to have a significant reduction in crime however scanning and analysis then identified the juvenile crime wave.

In July of 2003 we saw an increase in crime committed by juveniles, especially females, this would involve the theft of low value toiletries, it was here we began to become victims of our own success, prior to 2001 retailers would not have reported low value thefts now they did so we saw an increase in crime.

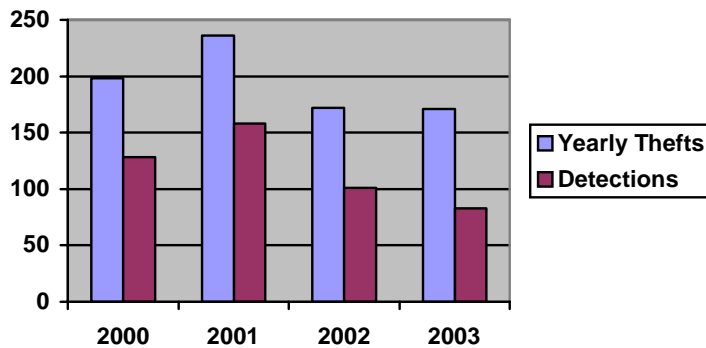
Acceptable Behaviour Contracts were offered to first time offenders, seven were issued. The ABC ran for three months, those who had not come to police attention were offered a free pass to local Council leisure facilities. The final decision rested with parents. Only two passes were issued but the publicity this received backfired on us, as the headline on the front of the local newspaper read 'FREE PASSES FOR THIEVES' By the end of October offences had once again been reduced and the juvenile problem was addressed.

In 2003 there were 171 offences committed with a detection rate of 48%. This gave a good indication that we were now getting a true picture of shoplifting. This was even more evident when the juvenile shoplifters were reported.

The objectives identified, have been continuously addressed. A reduction in crime has been achieved each year, although monthly crime has fluctuated throughout the year.

The reduction in detections provides evidence that retailers are now reporting crime as it happens, not just when they catch someone. This is evidenced through the reporting of the theft of low value cosmetics in 2003. The retailer who reported this crime admitted that prior to 2001 this would not have happened

The chart below compares yearly crime and a drop in detections of crime



Shoplifting is hard to eradicate due to offenders who commit 'one off' offences, however through the response this type of offender, along with persistent offenders, have been tackled in an effective manner. This is seen through the yearly reduction in thefts.

The greatest critic of the police was the head of the Chamber of Trade who would take every opportunity to portray the police in a negative light, in some instances this was justified! His latest comment 'it's very quiet.'

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