Tilley Award 2005

Application form

The following form must be competed in full. Failure to do so will result in disqualification from the competition.

Please send competed application forms to Tricia Perkins at patricia.perkins@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

All entries must be received by noon on the 29 April 2005. Entries received after that date will not be accepted under any circumstances. Any queries on the application process should be directed to Tricia Perkins on 0207 035 0262.

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1. Details of application

Title of the project :
Operation Gemini

Name of force/agency/CDRP:
Lancashire Constabulary

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Position and rank of endorsing senior representatives(s)
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2. Summary of application

Scanning

Since January 2000 over 8,000 motor vehicles stolen in the Lancashire Constabulary area and have not been recovered. The picture nationally is vast.   The British Crime Survey figures for the 2 year period 2002 - 2004 estimate 256,000 stolen vehicles outstanding. Although Theft of Vehicle is a decreasing trend, no account is given to other offences such as Burglary and Robbery where the vehicle is the target. Increased security and immobilisers are preventing the old style offence of theft.

Analysis

As a Stolen Vehicle Squad (SVS) almost every recovered stolen vehicle we examined from dwelling house burglaries in a two-year period had been cloned to the identity of an existing genuine vehicle. Without specialist knowledge most of these vehicles would not have been located by conventional policing methods.   Research with the Police National Computer (PNC) showed that the recovered vehicles had often been involved in speeding offences recorded at Central Ticket Offices (CTO) all round the Country.   Liaison with several of the CTOs showed that genuine vehicle keepers were receiving fixed penalty notices for offences they had not committed. It proved very difficult and frustrating for these innocent people to demonstrate to the CTOs that they were not responsible.

Response

Each case needed to be dealt with as a partnership between the innocent Genuine Keeper, the CTO and the SVS. An agreed protocol was established, where, on receipt of a disputed offence the CTO sent out a letter asking for the genuine owners co-operation and requests the supply of pictures of the genuine vehicle.
These images, together with the Safety Camera images are forwarded by the CTO to the SVS for analysis. Where clear distinctions are found, the genuine owner is contacted and involved in the scheme.   The genuine vehicle is then marked on PNC using the Excise Licence Serial Number as the identity feature . This makes the information available for interception by ANPR.

Assessment

As at March 2005 in 14 different Force areas we have recovered 42 stolen vehicles, 38 of which were stolen in burglary offences.   The recoveries have been effected at all times of the day and night.   We have driven the idea forward and two forces amended their systems to Op Gemini idea.   7 other forces are in the early stages of implementation.

3. Description of project

Objectives of the project

Our initial approach to the problem was one of breaking the problem triangle. Standard Policing tactics was to tackle the burglary problem involving theft of vehicles through the target hardening of property or to attack the offenders (examples: publicity about hook and cane burglary offences for theft of vehicle keys from home addresses and direct offender targeting as demonstrated by Op Hanoi initiatives in West Yorkshire). As specialist vehicle examiners we felt that we could devise an approach that would target the vehicle once stolen and make it a less wanted or a risky commodity, thereby impacting on domestic burglary offences via a third route.

Having seen the trend of 'cloning' close up in the recovered stolen vehicles we worked with daily, our investigations with PNC showed that a lot of the cloned vehicles were being captured in Road Safety Cameras. It was obvious that the thief or handler, with knowledge that the car was on false plates was less concerned in conforming to Road Traffic Legislation in any way, as any penalty would be directed to an innocent third party. However, to capture this driver in an unregistered, untaxed, uninsured vehicle, whilst committing numerous offences, which no genuine driver would commit, provided ample evidence for prosecution. These prosecutions would become the deterrent to 'owning a clone'

Our enquiries into this aspect revealed a whole new problem. This identified a new victim, one who was law abiding and yet was often receiving multiple Notices of Intended Prosecution for offences that could lead to disqualification from driving, that they were entirely innocent of. The Police had no way of dealing with this and when spoken to, the victims, recount the problems they had in convincing people in authority they were innocent (example: attached letter of victim).

Any method of stopping a duplicate vehicle was by necessity going to involve the three parties at an early stage. The innocent Vehicle Keeper, who received Notices of Intended Prosecution, the CTO who had to resolve identification issues and the SVS who wanted to reduce burglary where cars were stolen and recover stolen vehicles.

We set off with 3 clear objectives:

Target Burglary offences where cars were stolen by identifying and recovering the property

Provide support to innocent victims who received Notices of Intended Prosecution

Target the drivers of cloned cars

Definition of the problem:

The problem of Burglary offences and in more recent times Robbery for motor vehicles originates unfortunately from the success story in the increase in car security and the immobiliser. As the fleet of cars that can be stolen without the key diminishes the number of thefts has reduced. The need of the ignition key to take a car has forced the offender into a higher level of offending. This had led to part of the vehicle theft figures actually being hidden within the burglary and more recently the robbery statistics.

The information we had initially gathered was in response to our own Force area. Our research outside of our area was hampered, as initially, in all Force areas a burglary offence involving the targeting and subsequent theft of a high value vehicle was not readily researchable. The gathering of statistics from a multitude of forces is difficult to achieve at grass roots level.

The reason for wanting other force information, was that we consistently saw that the recovered vehicle was from an offence in another Force area. This suggested that the vehicles were being re-identified by organised crime gangs who through contacts were moving the vehicles regionally. We frequently identified vehicles as being stolen from other forces immediately around us, and occasionally further a field.

The balance of offences where the vehicle is the target are produced for the three forces willing to provide statistics (Appendix A) This would appear to show that 10% of stolen vehicles are masked from the statistics because they are designated as other offences.

The problem of creating a picture of 'how many clones are out there' is difficult. It is something that the criminal does not want us, an organisation, to see . A breakdown of the information from Forces who were willing to participate is at Appendix B

There is a wide range in statistical recording. This is because as yet, there is no formalisation of information or standards, but in summary the 13 Forces who took part have since Jan 2004 have identified 1,528 'cloned' vehicles and have recovered 167 stolen vehicles as a result. of the Op Gemini marking system. This however pails into insignificance when you consider that, in the same period, the Transport for London Congestion Charging statistics show that 11,452 vehicles have on 3 or more occasions entered the Congestion Zone and been assessed as having either a false, part or foreign registration which cannot be traced. The Transport for London Executive has made a decision not to pursue any enquiries in relation to these vehicles.

It should be remembered that these are merely the vehicles that have triggered Safety Cameras. The reader should bear in mind their own driving standard and frequency of offending. If a driver is determined to go unnoticed, there is no way of being able to calculate just how many 'clones' are out there on the road.

The advent of ANPR and Police use of PNC has meant that a vehicle once stolen cannot remain on the original registration. By adopting the identity of a second vehicle it bypasses current police operating methods and is designed by the criminal to prevent any sort of enquiry being made.   During the day genuine registered keepers are at work and unavailable to any sort of enquiry system and at night asleep. The criminals depend on us being unwilling to check out owner details during the night, when we are unlikely to be willing to wake someone up.

In 2003, our SVS identified £2.3m of stolen vehicles, almost all on false identities, mostly new cars, without about half stolen from burglary offences.

In 2004 we identified £2.6m of stolen vehicles. We believe we only had two 'old style' ringers in the year.   All of these vehicles recovered vehicles are 'cloned' and from outside our Force area.

Research of recovery information for Lancashire has shown that the cars stolen in burglary offences in Lancashire predominantly turn up in Merseyside, Cheshire or Northumbria.   Cars subject of old style vehicle theft are recovered locally and quickly, as they are the abandoned with no identity features changed. Cars subject of burglary offences would appear to be a part of organised crime, as they have been deliberately targeted for their use and value.

Intelligence

Early intelligence showed that burglars were paid about £500 for a car stolen with keys (West Yorkshire Intelligence 2003) An attractive proposition for the burglar, who hands a car over 30 minutes after theft. He has cash in his pocket and no risk from being caught with the property. Most burglary offences for vehicles are night-time, the owner not even being aware the vehicle has gone before the burglar has disposed of the property.

Recent Lancashire Intelligence shows a man buying a stolen 2003 Registered M3 Series BMW from a burglary for £750. After 3 or 4 months he returned it to the burglars and got a 2004 registered 5 series BMW from a burglary for £500, effectively part exchanging it.

Level 2 Crime

We identified that Op Gemini needs to be adopted country wide as the recovery method though simple and very effective, depends on all UK Forces taking part.   This is due to the movement between different Forces within Regions and in some cases all round the country.

Because of the purpose vehicles are put to, a 'clone' can, once marked for interception on PNC, be identified and recovered anywhere in the country.

This is truly a Level 2 problem.

Involvement

The initial problem was that of the Road Safety Partnership whose CTO had a Safety Camera image of the offending vehicle.   When an innocent Genuine Keeper complains that it was not them, the CTO has a responsibility to investigate.

The Genuine Keeper has to be involved, by supplying photographs of the genuine vehicle to be compared with the image from the Safety camera.

The SVS knowledge is used to find sufficient inconsistencies to acknowledge that two vehicles exist bearing the same registration.

We then needed to provide a method of unique identification to the genuine vehicle, which the 'clone' could not obtain.   The vehicle Excise Licence details are unique.

Then with the innocent keepers involvement, any vehicle bearing that registration could be stopped by bringing it to the attention of any ANPR unit in the country or any police officer carrying out a PNC check.

Response to the problem

The first step: was to produce a system where the vehicle that had been duplicated, could be flagged for action by police officers on the street.

We found that the PNC system of confirmed information marking which can be designated to specific registrations, which in the Lancashire area is valid for 12 months, was a suitable too. Its restriction was that the information field was small.

The second step: was to provide the officer with an easily identifiable unique piece of information, which clearly showed which vehicle was genuine and which was the false one.

For this we decided that we could rely upon the Serial Number of the Vehicle Excise Licence. The VEL is unique to each vehicle. In the event that the VEL expired before the other vehicle was traced, we merely asked the keeper to retain it in the back of the holder for production to any police officer as the proof.

The third step: was involvement and safety of the innocent keeper.

When obtaining the details of the genuine VEL, we brief each genuine keeper as to the requirements of safety when being stopped by police vehicles. This can occur using blue lights and two-tone horns. Also how to respond to the officer and what information the officer needs. If unsure, this can be done by the keeper without alighting from their vehicle by merely indicating to the VEL.   In our experience they like being fully involved in the process.

The fourth step: was to provide the officer some guidance on what needed to be done evidentially to deal with the matter. This information needed to be relayed to the officer at the time he was dealing with either vehicle, no matter what day or time it was.

This we did by placing in the PNC information that the officer received, a 24hr phone number and a reference. When the officer contacted the number and provided the reference, the officer is provided with a full action plan to conform to. Thus guiding the officer through the problem.

The fifth step: was to be able to gather information to quantify research such as this.

The sixth step: of the action plan provides the officer with contact details contact us to appraise us of what has occurred, so that we can draw statistics from that information.

The last step: was to act as a contact point for the aggrieved innocent owner.

 We provide each one with our contact details. In the event of further NIP for offences from any force they contact us and we help resolve the matter. When the duplicate vehicle is recovered they are contacted and fully briefed as to what has occurred.

Time and Resources

This was in effect a part time project for us. Once refined, we found that from point of acknowledgement that two vehicles existed, we could make all contacts, gather all information and place markers and have our system in place and effective for 1 year, with about 15 minutes work per 'clone'.

We set out to make the system as least labour intensive as possible. In the event of recovery the information marker is removed. If after 12 months there is no recovery, then the information marker drops off PNC unless we take positive action. The system self- administers. (The longest period from PNC marking to recovery of a stolen vehicle is 8 months)

We found that we were taking action on approximately 10 positive 'clones' a month. This had no impact on our day-to-day work, the workload was shared, by the three people involved in the initiative.

Partnership

The CTO now produce prepared letters in response to persons claiming that the vehicle cannot be theirs and they are not responsible for the offence. The letter outlines an investigation is to be conducted and requests copies of photographs of the front, back and sides of their vehicle. (Safety cameras can take both front and rear images and extra photos assist identification issues for SVS).

This is considered much more professional and not as confrontational as previous methods.   Innocent owners are only too willing to comply with the investigation.

We have no records of how many people this deters from making false claims, as the NIP is suspended for 28 days to allow investigation, if no further correspondence is received the prosecution is automatically re- instated.

At the time of writing we have identified 197 'clones' and have on 3 occasions been required to point out that the car in the Safety Camera image is the genuine vehicle. When informed the SVS were investigating 2 immediately responded correctly to the NIP.   The third, a 70 year old male with a long convictions history was charged with attempting to pervert the course of justice. He pleaded guilty to obstruction at a local magistrates court and was fined over £700.

SARA

We regularly revisited the model, often in a response to an event to see how we can improve or amend the model.

1. In one case a genuine car was seized when the VEL serial number was wrong. The owner had renewed it and as requested had retained the old one in the back of the holder. The problem was the vehicle was unattended and causing an obstruction. The police officer in the case followed the instructions.

As a result we amended the format of the action plan to include that if unattended, the officer should consider that as they are given the VEL Serial number and expiry date that a new VEL would be 6 or 12 months from the date of the original and to take a more considered decision.

2.   Due to time delay problems in answering a telephone, we arranged for a dedicated   24hr line to be available and moved to our most statistically efficient Communications Room for call handling.

3.   After two test cases we are now beginning a liaison with a Centralised Local Government Car Parking Scheme. Traffic Wardens note VEL serial numbers when 'booking' offending vehicles. The same principle applies, once the 'clone' of the vehicle is identified then the marking, liaison and action can be identical. In some ways this is easier as the VEL details obtained are the filter as to whether the vehicle is the genuine or not. The same criminality test applies. If the offender knows the car is stolen and 'cloned' they are less concerned about committing offences. It is also noted that in parking terms, often a pattern of where a stolen 'cloned' vehicle can be found is established.

4.   A worrying trend over the last year has been the sale of large numbers of these cars through local and national publications.   Victims are being deprived of large amounts of cash, upwards of £8,000 to £15,000. A quandary exists. A seller is unwilling to accept a cheque and release the car to an unknown person as if the cheque bounces they have lost the car.   The Buyer is unwilling to pay by cheque and not get the car until the cheque clears, as they think the seller may take the money and run. This leaves cash as the only option. In the case of a 'clone' there is no check that the normal person buying a car can do, that will identify a 'clone'. These individuals do not buy cars often enough to be able to identify forged documents. Any check that they do carryout, is on a vehicle owned by a third party.   This check will stand scrutiny, as the identity has been chosen so that it does stand scrutiny.   The vehicle when identified must be recovered and the purchaser loses out. (Stated Case: National Employees Mutual General Insurance Association Ltd v Jones (1988) 2 All ER 425) Very few households can afford to lose that sort of money and the impact of the crime can effects for years to come. These crimes are recorded merely as deceptions for the sum paid for the car. With Deception not figuring in any Force Strategy they are poorly recorded and seldom investigated properly. The resource implications are huge for this offence. Stolen in one Force, the vehicle identity changed in another, sold in another Force area by a purchaser who lives in yet another Force area.

5.   A number of offences are committed now where the vehicle is stolen, as per the   Theft of Vehicle definition, by early morning theft in icy periods when car owners leave their car on their drives, engines running, keys in the ignition to defrost windscreens. A similar offence occurs outside such places as newsagents where drivers leave their vehicles running while they 'pop in' for a paper.   These are merely variations of crime, as the purpose is still to obtain a vehicle and the keys are a necessary part of the theft. In these type of offences Insurance Companies refuse to pay out.

Evaluation

The Lancashire use of the Op Gemini model has identified 197 'cloned' vehicles since it began in may 2003.

Of these, 42 have been recovered and been found to be stolen vehicles 38 of which were from Burglary Offences.   All the way through the project the number of recovered stolen vehicles to the number of marked clones has been constant at 20% throughout.

A further 20 vehicles have been recovered bearing false identities.   Some of these can be seen to be garage errors in respect of fleet purchases.   A 10% rate.

To date we have allowed 33 vehicles markers to lapse after no action in 1 year. (The criminal it should be remembered can alter the false identity whenever they like) As a percentage, 15% of marked vehicles came to nothing, No ANPR hits, no other positive police action.   (Presumably this figure should improve as ANPR systems become more prevalent)

We currently have 122 vehicles marked for recovery.

Level 2 issues

Vehicles marked on PNC for Op Gemini by the Lancashire Constabulary have led to vehicles being recovered in 14 Force areas.   Some are local but Forces of note include;

Devon and Cornwall when a previously convicted Lancashire car thief was intercepted when he went on his holidays with the family caravan on the back.

North Yorkshire when the driver was found to be the person wanted for the Domestic Burglary offence committed some months earlier.

A Van recovered in West Mercia had been stolen in West Midlands. However passing through Lancashire had been the offenders mistake, the circulation using Op Gemini was what caught him.