

# THE 'ROAD TO NOWHERE': THE EVIDENCE FOR TRAVELLING CRIMINALS

## Briefing Note 4/00

Home Office Research Study No. 207  
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September 2000

### Introduction

It is often assumed that because travel has become much easier in the contemporary period then offenders must be taking advantage of this and travelling further to commit their crimes. There is a widely held view within police forces, especially rural and urban fringe ones, that a considerable amount of high volume crime is committed by travelling, often urban offenders.

### Research Methods

This study examined the extent to which this was true by analysing offenders' travel-to-crime patterns. Police recorded crime data for the city of Sheffield were used, together with recorded crime data covering the North Yorkshire police force area. Both sets of data were geocoded by where the offence occurred and by the home address of the offender using the MapInfo Geographical Information System. Records from the Police National Computer (PNC) were also used to study the travel-to-crime patterns of offenders who lived in Sheffield but who were arrested outside the city boundaries. Finally, a sample of cases (between June and December 1997) held on the Forensic Science Service DNA database were analysed where two stains or DNA were collected for the same offender but where the samples came from different police stations, indicating some degree of offender mobility. The police data was supplemented with interviews with 70 convicted burglars and TWOCers (those convicted of Taking Without the Owner's Consent), conducted to understand why offenders travelled to crime in the way shown by the police data.

### Research Findings

The recorded crime data revealed that in the city of Sheffield the average journey from home to place of offence for domestic burglary was 1.88 miles. For TWOC, the average travel-to-crime distance was 2.36 miles. There is some indication that distances travelled to commit crime

may have increased in the last three decades (see Table 1), although the consistent finding is that such journeys are still typically short. Where longer journeys are made, they tend to be to areas which have a close connection to the offender's own residential area, such as leisure or holiday locations.

**Table 1**

**Travel-to-crime distances in Sheffield, 1996 and 1995**

Distance	Breaking and Burglary %		TWOC and Taking and Driving Away %	
	1966	1995	1966	1995
Less than 1 mile	54	41	45	27
1 – 1.9 miles	20	20	18	24
2 – 2.9 miles	11	17	14	18
3+ miles	14	22	23	31

In examining travel-to-crime patterns within small residential areas in Sheffield, it becomes clear that it is as important to study victim's travel-to-crime in affluent areas as it is to look at offender's travel-to-crime patterns. This is because in some of the main high status areas in Sheffield, almost half of victimisations take place outside the area of residence. Residents of such areas are more likely to be victims of car crime which occurs in other parts of the city. Conversely, in the low status areas of Sheffield, around 90% of victimisations occur within the area of residence which is characterised by a high offender and high offence rate. Hence, offenders travel short distances to commit property crime, particularly burglary.

To investigate offender movements in non-city areas, recorded crime data for the North Yorkshire police force area was analysed. This covered a mixture of medium and small towns together with rural areas. As Table 2 shows, offending by York-based offenders is even more geographically localised than offending within Sheffield.

A rural area of North Yorkshire (Hambleton), with a very

**Table 2**

**Origin of known offenders in North Yorkshire**

Origin of offenders	% Burglary			% TWOC		
	York	Hambleton	Sheffield	York	Hambleton	Sheffield
Within LA district	90	62	97	84	37	95
Within County	5	1	2	4	-	3
Outside County	5	37	1	12	63	2
Mean Distance (miles)	0.98	1.68	1.80	0.99	2.27	2.32
<b>Total</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>3314</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>1735</b>

low crime rate, has a very different pattern, especially with regard to TWOC. Offenders from outside the district are much more important, but in the context of relatively few offences in absolute terms.

Hambleton's northern boundary abuts part of the southern boundary of Cleveland and the vast majority of the offenders are from nearby higher crime areas to the north. The rural areas attract people from the neighbouring urban areas for broadly leisure and recreational reasons, some of whom then either get to know the area for possible offending or coincidentally offend whilst there.

The extent of offender movement shown in the DNA database also found that the majority of cases involved offender movement within the force boundary. As Table 3 indicates, half were within the same BCU.

**Table 3**

**DNA matches by extent of offender movement**

DNA Matches	(%)	(n)
Within Force (No Movement - same BCU)	50	(7706)
Within Force (Movement - different BCU)	36	(5534)
Adjoining Force	7	(1144)
Non-Adjoining Force	7	(1067)
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,451</b>	

The offender interviews also confirmed that short distances are travelled by offenders to offend. More importantly, it was possible to compare the information provided by offenders in interview and the Sheffield recorded crime data. This showed that the short distances travelled to offend, as indicated by the police data are an overestimate. This is because the analysis of police data was based on the recorded home address of the offender, whereas the interview data was based on the address where the offender slept the night before the offence was committed, which was often a girlfriend's or friend's house. For example, the travel-to-crime distance for burglary offences committed within Sheffield was 1.8 miles according to the police data, but only 1.6 miles according to information directly provided by offenders during

interview. For TWOC, the distances were 2.4 miles and 2.1 miles respectively.

The research also found that most travel associated with crime was not primarily driven by plans to offend. Offending appeared to be much more dependent upon opportunities presenting themselves during normal routines, rather than as a result of instrumental, long-range search patterns.

**Points for action**

The evidence for short distances travelled by offenders to commit volume crime came from multiple sources in this research study. That said, the general patterns could all be identified from police recorded crime data. This is important because police recorded crime data is already available for the whole country and does not require the additional cost and difficulty of interviewing offenders.

- Crime pattern analysts should consider producing crime travel footprints which show how far, and in what direction, on average, offenders travel to offend in any given residential area, and victims who live in the area travel before they are victimised.
- These maps are straightforward to produce using geocoded crime data, and could be used in policing plans and audits compiled by crime and disorder partnerships.
- Such crime travel footprints can be used to determine the kind of crime management that would be necessary to reduce victimisation. For example, where offenders are coming from outside the area, then methods for monitoring the actions of outsiders (such as Neighbourhood or Cocoon Watch) might be appropriate.
- In areas with high offender and offence rates, a mapping of concentrated and repeat victimisation ought to be the basis for protective responses.
- Further research is needed on the travel-to-crime patterns of certain 'professional' offenders to see whether their journeys are also short. Country house burglaries and the theft of valuable cars other than for joyriding could be starting points for such research.

*"The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy)."*

*Copies of the full report are available from: Home Office, CDU(RDS), Room 201, 50 Queens Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AT. Facsimile no. 020 7222 0211*

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