

Spotting the behavioural signs of predatory offending in the night-time economy

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Long read: A proactive policing strategy in the night-time economy of Thames Valley Police

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Predatory behaviour exhibited by men towards women in public spaces is often dismissed as mere 'street harassment' (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2021). This term, seemingly benign, can obscure the precursor signs of more sinister crimes, including sexual assault and rape.

This article discusses findings from a proactive policing strategy in the night-time economy (NTE) of Thames Valley Police (TVP), emphasising the need to upskill police officers in proactive tactics and bystanders in recognising predatory behaviours amounting to street harassment.

Background and context

In 2019, 42% of violent and serious sexual assaults in the city of Oxford were linked to the NTE. Reports of stranger rapes and a series of sexually motivated creeper burglaries involving an offender known as 'The Prowler' raised real concerns. It was unknown whether the rise in stranger rapes and the creeper burglar series were connected. The Prowler was suspected of identifying his victims in the NTE and stalking them as they walked home. The common factor with each victim profile was their route home.

Our response involved deploying plain-clothes and uniformed officers along the route to identify and intercept The Prowler. With only a vague description to go on, we looked for men who were displaying stalking behaviours. The observations were startling. Numerous men were seen to be converging in the public spaces of the NTE, acting in a predatory way towards women. The predatory behaviours ranged from loitering and aggressive persistence to stalking, harassing, making sexualised comments and unwanted sexual attention.

Each person was engaged with by uniformed police and their activity interrupted. This led to the arrest of The Prowler (subsequently convicted of his crimes) and the revelation that nearly half of the individuals stopped (19 out of 41) were known to police for sexual offences.

A notable reduction in sexual assaults (48%) linked to the NTE during our patrols and the capture of The Prowler was deemed a success by TVP leaders. It was decided to broaden the scope of the operation across each of the four main NTE areas in TVP. This was named Project Vigilant.

Additionally, the Serious Crime Analysis Section (SCAS), which advises on modus operandi (MO) of offenders, taught us that two-thirds of stranger rapes start with seemingly benign interactions known as 'behavioural try-outs'. These interactions allow offenders to assess the vulnerability of potential victims and the presence of guardians, such as police or friends. Offenders use these moments to decide whether the rewards of their actions outweigh the risks involved.

During the initial operation, we observed 'try-outs' where suspects pretended to innocently loiter in the NTE, often standing alone and not entering venues. They used dark doorways or bus stops as staging grounds, watching and following women, sometimes engaging them in conversation. This behaviour typically targeted individuals perceived as vulnerable.

Literature review

TVP's approach to proactively policing the NTE to tackle sexual violence fills a gap in existing research. By synthesising insights from different studies through 'theory knitting' (Kalmer and Sternberg, 1988), our programme builds on our knowledge about the predatory nature of sex offenders (Lisak, 1989; Lisak and Miller, 2002; Rossmo, 2000; Beauregard and others, 2007) with core criminological theories, 'rational choice theory' and 'routine activities theory'. These provide context around the environmental factors that facilitate street harassment.

Rational choice theory (Clarke and Felson, 1993) suggests that offenders evaluate risks and rewards before engaging in predatory behaviour. Although factors such as alcohol and substance abuse are often thought to influence such behaviours (Beauregard and Leclerc, 2007), our findings may challenge this assumption, particularly in the context of street harassment.

Routine activities theory outlines three prerequisites for crime: a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a capable guardian (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson, 2016). However, our observations of predatory offences occurring in the presence of 'capable guardians' prompt a re-evaluation of what 'capable' truly means in these settings.

Data and methodology

The study describes 532 instances of predatory behaviour in the four main NTEs of TVP: Milton Keynes, Oxford, Reading and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM). Each have unique characteristics but share several key factors in their NTE, such as peak NTE weekends, month-ends and bank holidays, influenced by the presence of active university campuses.

Milton Keynes offers distinct policing challenges, with areas such as The Hub and the Theatre District. Oxford's vibrant NTE thrives with a mix of students and tourists. RBWM, being close to London, attracts out of towners and Reading, with its bustling town centre and the contrasting Oxford Road, both attract diverse populations. These commonalities are crucial in understanding the NTE dynamics, despite the physical and social contrasts that define each location.

Each NTE operates under the guidance of a locally based operational lead. Patrols across the different NTEs are not uniformly scheduled. Instead, they are tailored based on the unique needs and demands of each area. For this study, the NTE consists of the public spaces near to bars and venues. This includes late night eateries, taxi ranks and bus depots, covering the hours of 20:00 to 04:00. It is important to note that the operational scope of Project Vigilant does not include the inside of venues, clubs or pubs for reasons explained in the recommendations.

The primary data source for the study derives from standardised debrief forms spanning May 2021 to September 2023. The forms are used to document all 'stop and accounts'. The form, not dissimilar to a stop and search form, provides a structured framework for officers, guiding them through the process of recording details from these interactions. Key elements on the form include the perpetrator's personal details, aiding officers in identity verification, behavioural risk factors and the suspect's account of their behaviour. The form forms the basis of a risk prioritisation matrix, which is used to build a risk profile of each person stopped.

Data pre-COVID (May 2019 to February 2020) was used to assess the efficacy of the initial proactive operation to catch The Prowler and develop it for wider implementation but was excluded from the main study. The impact of COVID restrictions on the reopening of the NTE is largely unknown. Data to ascertain the number of people going out before lockdown and post-lockdown was inconsistent and unavailable when the study began.

The risk prioritisation matrix and a selection of vignettes from each risk category were introduced to the study to illustrate the issues at hand. However, this article will focus specifically on the data

around predatory offending in the NTE, including identified behaviours, MO and relationship to the victim.

Limitations

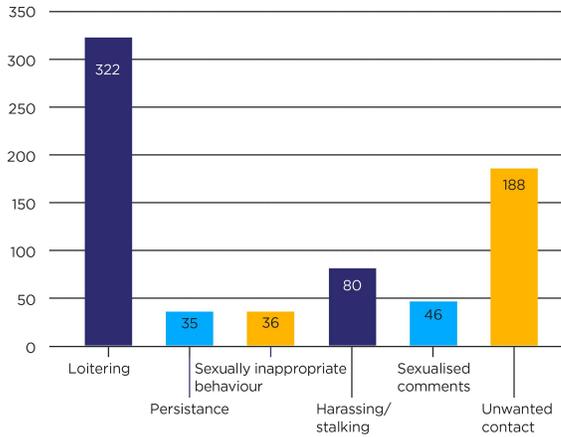
One of the key limitations in the data is the method by which it is recorded. In every case, it is police-recorded data based on police observations. Aside from the glaringly obvious potential for bias, it has been reported that police-recorded crime data is not considered reliable (Office for National Statistics, 2023). To address this and mitigate a claim of bias, the debrief form was devised to ensure officers followed strict protocols for obtaining pertinent details by recording the circumstances that led to the stop and account conversation.

All 200 officers involved in the study completed criminal behavioural detection training before deploying on a dedicated Project Vigilant patrol. The training blended theory and practice in the live NTE for authenticity and covered the strict operational protocols they needed to follow. Despite these measures, it is accepted that this cannot entirely mitigate bias.

Findings

There is no correlation with university term times and the identification of predatory suspects. They correlate with weekends, the end of the month, bank holidays and large events. There is a predominance of predatory behaviours among men aged 24 to 34.

Loitering was the most observed behaviour, often associated with unwanted attention and sexualised comments. Fewer than 10% of stops were influenced by external factors such as alcohol or drugs, emphasising the calculated nature of suspects' actions.



This study sheds light on the common traits and MO that exist between those identified as part of this study and those of predatory offenders. Within both categories of offenders/suspects, common factors include being adept at identifying vulnerability; planning attacks; using coercion and manipulation; and using alcohol to render victims more vulnerable.

As shown in the table below, among the 329/532 instances of observed street harassment in which a discernible victim was identified, the category of ‘stranger’ constituted the predominant relationship, comprising 53% of the dataset. In contrast, victims with a prior acquaintance to the perpetrator accounted for the remaining 15% of the recorded instances.

| Types of relationship | Count of relationship | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Acquaintance | 12 | 2% |
| Colleague | 1 | 1% |
| Ex-partner | 1 | 1% |
| Family | 3 | 1% |
| Friend | 19 | 4% |
| Partner | 13 | 2% |

| Types of relationship | Count of relationship | Percentage |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Stranger | 280 | 53% |
| N/A (equates to no victim) | 203 | 38% |
| Total | 532 | 100% |

Shockingly, in 65% of scenarios where we approached a suspected predatory male in the company of a female, once she had been separated from him, she expressed fear and an unwillingness to accompany him. Our interventions revealed the importance of disrupting these interactions.

Suspects who travelled from outside of TVP formed 34% of the overall dataset. Of those, 69% were known to police for sexual offences. Crossover offending was prevalent in 45% of the dataset. Crossover means to understand the tendency of sex offenders to switch from one crime type to another (Kleban and others, 2013). However, for this study it was important to understand previous offences across a broad range of crimes and the context of those when risk managing suspects stopped for predatory offending. This is because previous offending may be relevant and show a pattern of predatory behaviour.

The data presented in the table below reveals that 378/532 (71%) of the individuals stopped during Vigilant patrols had an associated Police National Computer (PNC) identification number. While this does not necessarily equate to a conviction for an offence, it forms part of the risk assessment. Of the 378 of those with a PNC ID, 185/532 (35%) had a recorded history of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

| PNC ID 378/532 (71%) | Number of perpetrators with PNC ID | Percentage of overall sample of 532 |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Links to VAWG | 185/378 | 35% |
| Links to other offending | 193/378 | 36% |

This review considers the patterns of behaviour, whether it is a repeat of previous behaviour or escalation to an offence. A total of 472/534 (88%) individuals were stopped once during Vigilant patrols. There were 44/534 (8%) records of individuals stopped twice. There were 6/534 (1%) individuals stopped three times and 12/534 (2%) stopped on four occasions. The timescales for returns to the NTE range from two weeks from the initial point of contact with police to eight months.

Discussion

Predatory behaviours often go unchallenged in the NTE. A critical outcome of this study is the need for joint training initiatives with stakeholders in the NTE to ensure a comprehensive response to predatory behaviours. Officers in Project Vigilant patrols do not enter venues or private spaces. The reasons are threefold – governance, training and safety. Should officers not in uniform enter a venue or private space (covertly), that falls under the remit of targeted activity, therefore requiring separate governance of authority and appropriately trained officers.

Another impact of this is that venue management could absolve themselves of all responsibility for security inside their own venues should it come to light that police were inside. This provides a compelling argument to initiate joint training and operational initiatives with venues to create safer spaces.

Joint initiatives will enable the development of consistency in respect of data collection. Multiple datasets present challenges when conceptualising issues such as street harassment. UK policing should address this to develop robust strategies in support of preventing sexual violence. Many suspects travel across the UK and are known offenders, so intelligence sharing should be better and more streamlined.

In the context of the NTE, building stronger partnerships is essential for a collaborative approach to combat street harassment. TVP has introduced bystander training to facilitate closer cooperation between licensing teams and venues, bridging the gap between private and public spaces in the NTE.

TVP's Strategic Independent Advisory Group (SIAG) supports the principles of Project Vigilant and provides its perspective at strategic VAWG meetings. Project Vigilant is an integral part of the VAWG strategy, falling under both the 'safer spaces' and 'relentless pursuit of perpetrators' pillars,

with performance measures incorporated into the management plan. The development of technology, including facial recognition and the TVP violence reduction unit (VRU) hotspot dashboard, aims to bolster the initiative's effectiveness.

Project Vigilant is embedded across the whole of TVP. Criminal behavioural detection training will be delivered to the entire frontline workforce (3,000) and CCTV operators. Other forces have collaborated with TVP to adopt this tactic. Wiltshire Police, Hertfordshire Constabulary, the Metropolitan Police Service and Leicestershire Police have adopted the name Project Vigilant. Other forces have sought to use our training package but have used a local name. It is reassuring that most forces in the UK are committed to tackling this issue together.

The study underscores the importance of continuous learning for policing, as well as bystander empowerment in creating safer public spaces.

- This article was peer reviewed by DS Adam Turton, Staffordshire Police

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