

Operation Handle – a strategic approach to vehicle-related crime prevention

Targeting vehicle-related offences by strategically deploying police officers to small geographic areas with high incidence of thefts from motor vehicles (TFMV).

First published

18 October 2024

Key details

Focus	Prevention
Topic	Community engagement Crime prevention Diversity and inclusion Neighbourhood crime Operational policing
Organisation	Devon and Cornwall Police
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Region	South West
Partners	Police
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	February 2024
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Adults Communities Families General public
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Aim

Operation Handle aims to:

- reduce vehicle related crime
- raise awareness within the local community about vehicle security
- provide crime prevention advice to community members

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Handle are to:

- reduce the number of recorded crimes related to TFMV
- enhance security measures to protect the registered keeper

Description

The intervention was introduced in response to a local neighbourhood officer identifying a high volume of thefts from motor vehicles within their community. This issue, coupled with an increased sense of unease among local residents, necessitated a proactive response.

Police officers strategically visit targeted areas which have been affected by vehicle related offences, identified based on force-level crime statistics. These targeted areas are typically small geographic locations that two officers can cover in 1-2 hours on foot.

Officers are briefed about the initiative at the start of their shift. During patrols, officers check car door handles for insecurity and valuables left on display. To ensure visibility, especially at night,

they wear high visibility clothing. When inspecting vehicles, officers use gloves to preserve any evidence from live incidents involving offenders or suspected vehicle interference.

If a vehicle is found insecure or valuables are visible, officers conduct a Police National Computer (PNC) check via handheld devices to identify the registered keeper. They then offer tailored crime prevention advice and distribute target hardening leaflets on securing vehicles and valuables. Additionally, officers may provide other crime prevention information, such as signing residents up for Neighbourhood Watch schemes (NWS) and community messaging schemes (CMS).

Each address visited receives an explanatory letter outlining the purpose of the visit. The design of the leaflets and letters has been considered to optimise accessibility across the public. Officers also collect information using Microsoft Forms on their handheld devices, recording vehicle registrations, items left on display, and street addresses related to insecure vehicles.

Importantly, the initiative leverages existing local and neighbourhood policing teams, as well as the special constabulary. It operates without incurring additional training or cost implications beyond police time, making it a sustainable and community-oriented approach to crime prevention.

Overall impact

Community response:

- The proactive crime prevention approach received positive feedback from the community. Residents appreciated the efforts to enhance safety and security.
- Community members felt reassured by the visible police presence during the operation.

Officer satisfaction:

- Police officers reported increased job satisfaction while participating in proactive efforts.
- Engaging in crime prevention activities allowed officers to feel more connected to their duty and the community they serve.

Insecure vehicles:

- Anecdotal evidence highlighted a concerning trend that multiple vehicles were left insecure during the operation. The most recent operation of four hours identified 47 vehicles left insecure and 53 items on display.
- Addressing this issue is crucial to prevent opportunistic thefts and protect residents' property.

Community engagement:

- Beyond the immediate goals of crime prevention, the operation fostered community engagement.
- Interactions between officers and residents created opportunities for dialogue, trust-building, and collaboration.

Learning

- Consider focusing on areas with high crime rates related to motor vehicles and where police demand is significant.
- Problem-solving approaches, directed patrols, and crackdowns can yield positive results with an emphasis on community relations and engagement.
- Encourage officers to engage directly with community members by visiting their homes. This personal approach can foster trust and allow for tailored advice on crime prevention.
- By initiating conversations at residents' doors, officers can address concerns, answer questions, and provide relevant guidance.
- Leverage these interactions for intelligence gathering; officers can learn about local issues, patterns, and community dynamics.
- Collecting information from residents can enhance situational awareness and inform targeted crime prevention efforts.
- Utilise social media to showcase proactive policing efforts. Highlight officers' activities and information deployment.

- Think beyond short-term interventions. Consider sustained efforts over time such as encouraging participation in neighbourhood watch programmes and community messaging alert schemes.
- Special constables can supplement regular staffing levels.
- Forces aiming to adopt or expand a similar intervention must account for the associated costs, including the time spent by officers and the expenses incurred in printing leaflets and letters.
- It is advisable for forces to establish review procedures for all produced materials, such as letters, leaflets, and other documentation.
- Forces are encouraged to develop contingency strategies to ensure operational continuity in the event of IT system failures.

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