

Operation Culprit – reducing throwover offences in prisons

Operation Culprit aims to reduce the number of throwover offences involving contraband being thrown over prison walls at His Majesty’s Prison (HMP) Lewes.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Investigation
Organisation	Sussex Police
Contact	Dan Thomson
Email address	daniel.thomson@sussex.police.uk
Partners	Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services)
Stage of implementation	The practice is no longer being implemented.
Start date	January 2023
Completion date	June 2024
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Offenders
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Aim

Operation Culprit aims to:

- improve the tactical enforcement unit (TEU) response to throwover offences, including the investigation of offenders
- improve coordination between the prison service and the police
- deter potential offenders from committing throwover offences

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Culprit are to:

- reduce the number of throwover offences taking place
- reduce the number of throwover offences filed under “no further lines of inquiry”
- increase the number of offenders charged for throwover offences

Description

Operation Culprit was established at the beginning of 2023 as a result of interactions between prison officers at HMP Lewes, and police officers from the East Sussex Tactical Enforcement Unit (TEU) of Sussex Police. In these early discussions, it was recognised that HMP Lewes was suffering from a considerable number of what are known as ‘throwover’ offences. These are offences of conveying prohibited articles into a prison (contrary to Sections 40B and 40C of the Prison Act 1952), by throwing such articles over the prison walls.

Due to the high value placed on illicit items in prison, even medium-sized packages can contain items worth tens of thousands of pounds, typically:

- controlled drugs
- tobacco

- mobile phones
- sometimes weapons

The exchange of controlled drugs within prisons fuels a culture of criminality, debt, and intimidation, and increases levels of violence both between prisoners and against prison staff. Mobile phones further the activities of organised crime groups (OCGs) both inside and outside prison walls and can allow those convicted of offences such as domestic abuse and stalking to continue intimidation towards their victims.

It was recognised early on that such offences were being investigated in isolation of each other by Sussex Police, rather than as a linked series of offences by OCGs.

Early stages

In the early stages of Operation Culprit, work was done to improve the process of offence reporting from HMP Lewes to Sussex Police. The reporting form used by the prison was refreshed and updated, allowing more specific data to be gathered by Sussex Police on the precise times and locations of 'throwover' offences.

Guidance to Sussex Police contact handlers was updated, and in combination with the improved reporting form, this reduced the number of offences which were incorrectly filed by the control room as having 'no lines of enquiry'. In fact, since the introduction of the new form, no reports of throwovers from HMP Lewes have been immediately filed; all have been passed to a criminal investigations department (CID) officer for further investigation.

Additionally, a process was instigated whereby the Lewes neighbourhood policing team (NPT) now makes regular collections of seized exhibits from HMP Lewes. Prior to this process, individual investigators from Sussex Police were making trips from Eastbourne to Lewes to collect exhibits related only to their own investigations; this was clearly a misuse of time and effort. This new process appears to be working well and will have reduced investigation timelines.

Alongside these simple administrative measures, the real focus of Operation Culprit was to identify, arrest and prosecute those responsible for these significant offences, using both proactive and reactive means. The TEU, working closely with HMP Lewes' security department, has made sure to pursue all lines of inquiry in throwover cases, which may have previously been overlooked by regular investigators. Additionally, a new proactive strand of work has been launched, with plain

clothed officers conducting patrols around the boundary of the prison.

Overall impact

At the beginning of Operation Culprit, HMP Lewes was suffering from throwover offences. On average, there were five to seven reports of packages being recovered each month, with a peak of eight reports for two months in 2023. Since then, the picture has changed, with only five reports of offences in total over a four-month period (February-May 2024). Due to the success of the operation and reduced capacity within the TEU, Operation Culprit was paused in June 2024. Since then, offences have risen again but have not returned to their previous levels, suggesting Operation Culprit has had a positive long-term impact.

Several arrests have been made as a result of the co-ordinated work Operation Culprit has facilitated. On the proactive side, the improved data collection from the reporting forms, and the TEU's close working relationship with the security department, allowed plain clothed deployments to take place to best effect. This has led to two incidents where individuals spotted committing throwover offences were arrested. On the reactive side, forensic submissions of throwover packages were pursued by TEU, and assistance was provided to CID with the arrests of these suspects and searches of their property. This work has led to the arrest of three individuals who had either committed or helped facilitate throwover offences.

HMP Lewes has provided positive feedback regarding Operation Culprit; they are pleased with the reduction in offences and the success the TEU has had with prosecuting offenders. Additionally, they have supplied anecdotal evidence suggesting the prevalence of contraband in the prison has reduced.

Learning

Prior to Operation Culprit, the process in place for the prison service reporting and investigating throwover offences was limited in Sussex. The level of information supplied by the prison service was poor due to the forms used, which hindered analysis. For example, the incident location was recorded as 'HMP Lewes' rather than the specific geographical location of where the items were thrown/found. When rectified, it became much clearer where the key throwover locations were, allowing the TEU to target offenders on the boundary.

Operatives in the police control room taking reports from the prison service were not sighted on the threat/harm/risk of contraband supply into the prison, were not well-versed on the prison service's role, and were unaware of the possibility of forensic recovery from packages leading to suspect identification. As a result, they would often close incidents by an investigator, as 'not in the public interest', 'no lines of enquiry', or 'Prison Service will investigate this themselves', without them being reviewed by a police investigator.

The close working relationship developed between TEU and HMP Lewes security department was found to be key to success. Personal relationships allowed a strong collaborative effort and ease of communication.

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