

HOME OFFICE

Reducing Vehicle Crime

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SUMMARY



1 The British Crime Survey 2003-04 estimated there were 2.1 million thefts of vehicles and from vehicles (including attempted thefts).¹ Vehicle crime causes distress and inconvenience for the owner. In a significant minority of cases such crimes can also endanger life: the Police recorded 12,000 incidents of aggravated vehicle taking and 63 deaths due to vehicle crime. The Home Office set a target in 1999 to reduce thefts of and from vehicles by 30 per cent over five years and this report examines progress in meeting that target.²

2 In order to deliver the target, the Home Office established a Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team comprised of representatives from the motor industry, academia, Police, public servants in local and central Government (including the Home Office) and published its strategy in 1999. The Team has taken an active role in overseeing implementation of the strategy. The Vehicle Crime Reduction Section and the Police Standards Unit within the Home Office are responsible for developing policy, ensuring initiatives are implemented, providing advice and guidance and monitoring Police performance. The Home Office has also provided Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and other local bodies with £927 million since 1999 to fund projects to reduce crime, of which a proportion is to combat vehicle crime.

3 Home Office expenditure on reducing vehicle crime is a relatively small proportion of the £5.5 billion dedicated to delivering Home Office Aim 1 – a reduction in crime and fear of crime. The large numbers of vehicle crimes, however, means the cost of such crimes to society are considerable. The insurance industry paid out £564 million for motor theft claims in 2003. A research project commissioned by the Home Office estimates the total cost of thefts of and from vehicles amounts to some £1.9 billion in 2003-04, and attempted thefts a further £0.2 billion.³

The Home Office has been successful in reducing thefts of and from vehicles

4 The Home Office is on track to meet its target which is a significant achievement. Based on figures from the British Crime Survey 2003-04, the number of thefts of and from vehicles (including attempts) has reduced by 30 per cent since 1999. The Home Office, in conjunction with the motor industry, Police and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have contributed to this decrease, although some of the reduction in vehicle crime is also likely to be due to other factors, such as economic growth and falling unemployment. The Home Office, in conjunction with

¹ The British Crime Survey is regarded by the Home Office as the most authoritative source for assessing crime levels as it measures people's direct experiences of crime and is not affected by reporting or recording changes. The number of crimes recorded by the Police is dependent on the crime coming to the attention of the Police and whether the incident should be recorded as a recordable offence within the categories laid down by the Home Office. The Home Office counting rules were revised in 1998 to incorporate a wider range of offences and further updated in April 2002 to incorporate the National Crime Recording Standard. The introduction of the standard has meant crimes are recorded if the victim perceives an offence to have been committed rather than when the Police satisfy themselves that a crime has occurred.

² The target focussed on thefts of and from vehicles and did not include vehicle vandalism. The Home Office confirmed that vehicle vandalism is addressed by other initiatives such as wider use of Closed Circuit Television Cameras, better street lighting and the introduction of Police Community Support Officers.

³ Costs are based on 1999 estimates of unit costs in the Home Office Research Paper 217 'The economic and social costs of crime' 2000, and numbers of crimes come from the British Crime Survey 2003-04.

other organisations has instigated a number of initiatives which have contributed to the reduction (see Figure 1) and our assessment of progress indicates that the initiatives should lead to further reductions.

5 Improvements in vehicle security are likely to be a main reason for the reduction in thefts of vehicles and the Home Office has worked consistently and effectively

with the motor industry to bring about such changes. The European Union requirement for all new cars to be fitted with an electronic immobiliser has made it more difficult for criminals to steal a car without keys. The Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team has also proved effective in bringing together different organisations to tackle a difficult problem and the approach could be adopted for other policy initiatives.

1 Initiatives to reduce thefts of and from vehicles

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| 1 Improved vehicle security. The Home Office has worked with the motor industry to bring about improvements in new cars. | Good progress. The improvements are likely to be one of the main reasons for the reduction in thefts of vehicles. |
| 2 Better enforcement by spreading good Policing practices. The Home Office has worked with Police Forces to improve the detection and prosecution of offenders. | Steady progress. Police detection rates for vehicle crime remain low compared to other offences. However, the introduction of Automatic Number Plate Recognition systems could lead to significant improvements. |
| 3 Making a safer environment by improving car parking security. | Slower progress. The Home Office has worked with the Police and car park operators to improve security, including providing funding of £106 million over four years through the Capital Modernisation Fund to install Closed Circuit Television Cameras in 1,222 car parks. Not enough car park operators belong to the Safer Parking Scheme, although numbers have begun to increase in 2004. |
| 4 Improving the information available on vehicles so the Police are better equipped to tackle vehicle crime. The Police rely on data from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency when they stop motorists, but the data can be inaccurate. | Slower progress. Maintaining fully up to date data on every vehicle is difficult as people do not always notify the Agency when they move house. A survey by the Agency in 2003 established that approximately 90 per cent of vehicle records and 82 per cent of driving licences were sufficiently accurate to enable the Police to trace the relevant person. Although a subsequent survey in 2004 established that only 68 per cent of vehicle records and 70 per cent of driver records were fully accurate (similar to the percentages estimated by the National Audit Office in 1993), in many cases the errors were relatively minor. The Agency reports the introduction of continuous registration from January 2004 has led to a 20 per cent increase in the number of motorists notifying them when they have disposed of their vehicle and this, together with other initiatives, should mean the database is more up to date. |
| 5 Better regulation of the salvage industry and targeting of criminals. The Home Office funded the National Criminal Intelligence Service to undertake three projects to help tackle organised criminal gangs and to make it more difficult for offenders to benefit from vehicle crime. | The Home Office and Department for Transport have introduced legislative change to tackle criminal activity in the motor salvage industry, but further progress is required. Loopholes in the regulations on number plates mean criminals could still purchase plates from unregistered suppliers in Northern Ireland and Scotland, although the Road Safety Bill currently before Parliament will extend the regulations to the whole of the United Kingdom. The Department for Transport has introduced a Vehicle Identity Check scheme to deter criminals from using the identities of written-off vehicles to sell on stolen cars. In addition, the Home Office has introduced a requirement for Local Authorities to maintain a register of motor salvage operators in their area. The Home Office recognised that implementation was key and commissioned MORI to undertake a survey to measure progress. Over half of the 200 local authorities surveyed had either not yet set up a register of salvage operators or did not have any operators on its register. The Home Office funded projects to help tackle organised vehicle crime showed only limited progress over the period 2001-02, although the National Criminal Intelligence Service confirmed that changes were made in 2002 and afterwards with the aim of assessing the scale and nature of organised vehicle crime, better identifying the most serious organised criminals and producing timely intelligence reports that the Police could act on. |
| 6 Raising motorists' awareness of the risks of vehicle crime through communications and publicity. | Good progress. The Home Office has run a number of publicity campaigns to raise awareness. The campaigns are very likely to have contributed to the reduction in thefts of and from vehicles. |

Source: National Audit Office

There remains scope to achieve further reductions

6 Notwithstanding the significant achievement of the last few years, numbers of vehicle related crimes remain high and other challenges need to be addressed to reduce such crimes further. The Police sometimes find it difficult to engage local organisations to tackle the problem. Although the position is improving, too few car parks provide a sufficiently secure environment for motorists to leave their car safely. Local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have sometimes ‘reinvented the wheel’ by not using lessons learned elsewhere. Although the Home Office provides Partnerships with good practice advice, this could be improved by making it more up to date and user-friendly. Home Office Regional Office Directors need to make sure the advice from the Police Standards Unit, Crime Reduction Centre and the Home Office is taken into account when funding future Partnership projects to reduce vehicle crime.

7 Some models of car remain easier to break into and only a relatively small proportion of vehicle crimes are cleared up by the Police. Further improvements could be achieved if the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency database were more accurate, statutory regulation of number plate suppliers were extended to Scotland and Northern Ireland and the Local Authorities and Police implemented and enforced the statutory regulation of the motor salvage industry more consistently.

Our main findings in more detail

The Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team has proved a useful method of working with the motor industry and other organisations to make vehicles more difficult to steal

8 Manufacturers have a key role in reducing the number of thefts of vehicles. Most of the manufacturers we interviewed recognised that the Home Office and the vehicle insurance industry had liaised closely to encourage improvements in vehicle security. The broad consensus amongst the manufacturers we interviewed is that they are doing all they can to improve vehicle security and are reliant on technological advances for further progress. Thatcham security assessments show there continue to be variations in the relative security of each model of car, which suggests further improvements can be made.

More criminals could be deterred from breaking into vehicles if the Home Office encouraged local organisations to work together more effectively

9 Tackling vehicle crime requires collaboration between a range of local organisations, including the Police and local authorities and other public bodies working together in the forum of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, car park operators and voluntary and community organisations. Crime reduction projects run by Partnerships have sometimes ‘reinvented the wheel’ by not using lessons learned elsewhere.

10 Approximately 20 per cent of thefts of and from vehicles in 2003-04 were from car parks. Whilst 25 per cent of the Police Basic Command Units surveyed by the National Audit Office described the involvement of car park operators in tackling crime in their area as ‘high’, 32 per cent considered their involvement to be ‘low’. Of the 30 car park operators we interviewed, 14 were not participating in local area initiatives to reduce vehicle crime. The Police (in association with the British Parking Association, and with £965,000 of funding from the Home Office since 2001) developed a Secured Car Park Scheme to improve safety and security for motorists. The ACPO Secured Car Park Joint Steering Group, which included Home Office representatives as well as Police and industry representatives, set a target to have 2,000 car parks in the Secured Car Park Scheme by March 2000. The target was referred to in the vehicle crime strategy developed by the Team. But only 1,350 car parks in England and Wales were involved by March 2004 and there were only 132 secured car parks available in hospitals and just 125 at railway stations. Our interviews established the main reasons why operators had not participated included ignorance of the scheme and a concern that the cost of structural changes required would outweigh the benefits.

11 The scheme was revised in 2004 to reduce the administrative burden on car park operators. The introduction of the Safer Parking Scheme in October 2004 has led to an increase in numbers. The scheme organisers reported that there were 1,633 Award holders by December 2004 and a further 163 car parks were due to be assessed or the associated operator had expressed an interest in applying for the Award. The scheme organisers confirmed that all of the major national car park operators and most train operators either belonged or were seeking to belong to the revised scheme. The Home Office has confirmed it has put the industry on notice that it will review, in April 2005, the progress made by car park operators in reducing crime and all options, including legislative change, will be considered.

Further reductions in vehicle crime are partly dependent on the Police increasing the proportion of cases they are able to clear up

12 Whilst it is clearly better to prevent a crime occurring rather than to detect a crime once it has taken place, the risk of detection can deter someone from attempting to commit a crime. Although the overall level of vehicle crime has reduced by 30 per cent according to British Crime Survey figures, the vehicle crime detection rate (which refers to the proportion of offences that result in an offender being fined, cautioned, charged, summoned or no further action being taken) is low. Only six per cent of thefts from vehicles and 13 per cent of thefts of vehicles were resolved in 2003-04, compared to an average of 23.5 per cent for all crimes recorded by the Police.

13 The Automatic Number Plate Recognition system is a relatively new approach to tackling vehicle crime and offers considerable scope to improve detection rates. The technology can be deployed on a road to photograph passing vehicles, process images of the vehicle number plates, and to alert Police Officers almost immediately of those vehicles that should be stopped so the driver can be questioned. The results of a pilot in 23 Police Forces suggest the technology has been successful. The Police stopped 180,543 vehicles during the 13 month pilot and made 13,499 arrests. However, the number of arrests as a proportion of Police time spent on the initiative varied considerably. The variations were partly due to the time required to set up the equipment in more remote locations and also because some forces had been able to deploy resources more effectively as a result of more up front work to identify crime hotspots.

14 The Automatic Number Plate Recognition system and other Police initiatives rely, in part, on data from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to verify the details of each driver and vehicle stopped. The Agency estimates that there are probably 950,000 vehicles on the road in the United Kingdom for which they do not have up to date data and which have been unlicensed for more than three months. A survey commissioned by the Agency in 2003 estimated that approximately 90 per cent of vehicle records were sufficiently accurate for the Police to trace the registered keeper. A significant minority of vehicle records do contain one or more inaccuracies, however, although many are relatively minor in nature. A survey in 2004 established that 32 per cent of vehicle records contained an inaccuracy: similar to the percentage when the Committee of Public Accounts last examined the accuracy of the data in June 1994.

15 The Police Standards Unit within the Home Office has provided Police Commanders with guidance on tackling vehicle crime which, although the advice pre-dates the pilot of the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system, has proved useful. Around half of the initiatives have been reviewed. However, the guidance could be more user-friendly and one approach would be to structure it around the five key questions we identified – see [Figure 2](#).

16 Reducing thefts of and from vehicles also depends on tackling organised criminal gangs. The British Crime Survey has estimated that 47 per cent of stolen cars and light vans were not recovered. The Home Office take this as an approximate measure of the extent of organised vehicle crime, with the vehicles being re-sold under different identities, stripped for parts or exported. A Home Office evaluation of three projects (covering the period 2001-02) to tackle the problem found that the initiatives could have been more successful if the Police had given a higher priority to organised vehicle crime by providing more timely information to the National Criminal Intelligence Service and acting more promptly on the information received. Similarly, the Police expressed some reservations and the National Criminal Intelligence Service confirmed that changes were made in 2002 and afterwards with the aim of assessing the scale and nature of organised vehicle crime, better identifying the most serious organised criminals and producing timely intelligence reports that the Police could act on.

Further progress is required to make it more difficult for criminals to benefit from stealing vehicles

17 It remains too easy for criminals to disguise the identity of a stolen vehicle. All number plate suppliers and motor salvage operators in England and Wales must now be registered, but gaps remain. Number plates can still be bought from unregistered suppliers in Northern Ireland and Scotland, although the Department for Transport confirmed the Road Safety Bill currently before Parliament contains powers to extend the register to these countries. Regulations, which came into force in October 2002, required every local authority to establish a register of motor salvage operators from October 2002 so the Police could inspect registered premises and take action against motor salvage operators who were trading whilst unregistered. The Home Office introduced the legislation to tackle criminal activity in the motor salvage industry. The department recognised that implementation was key and commissioned MORI to undertake a survey to measure progress. The survey of 200 Local Authorities with

high levels of vehicle crime established that by June 2004, 26 per cent had not yet set up a register of motor salvage operators. And 42 per cent of the Authorities with a register had not received any registration applications from local motor salvage operators. The Home Office confirmed it has written to its Regional Directors to ask them to press Local Authorities to fulfil their obligations. The Home Office has also developed guidance for Police, Local Authorities and the motor salvage industry on the regulations, which is available on its website (www.crimereduction.gov.uk).

2 Guidance to the Police could be structured around five key questions

- What is the profile of crime in the area?
- What actions would be most effective to tackle problem locations, victims and offenders?
- How should available resources be prioritised to achieve the biggest impact on vehicle crime?
- Can local partner agencies help me with delivering initiatives?
- How will I monitor the impact of the initiatives undertaken?

Source: National Audit Office

18 The introduction of the Vehicle Identity Check scheme in April 2003 has sought to deter criminals from selling stolen cars with a false record. Inspectors check the Vehicle Identity Number of a car that has been written-off and then repaired to confirm, so far as possible, that the details are the same as those on the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency vehicle register and also check that there is clear evidence that the vehicle has been repaired to correct the damage noted in the insurer's report. The Department for Transport believe the scheme has contributed to the reduction in the number of car thefts and regard it as very successful, although the British Vehicle Salvage Federation has questioned the merits of the scheme. As the scheme

acts as a deterrent to criminals using the identity of salvaged vehicles to sell on stolen vehicles, it is difficult to obtain clear evidence on the extent to which car 'ringing' has reduced. However, Department for Transport analysis of British Crime Survey estimates shows that thefts of vehicles reduced from 278,000 in the British Crime Survey 2002-03 before the Vehicle Identity Check Scheme was implemented in April 2003 to 241,000 in the British Crime Survey 2003-04 (a reduction of 13 per cent).⁴ The Association of Chief Police Officers has also confirmed that it believes the scheme is likely to have a significant impact on vehicle crime.

Raising public awareness of vehicle crime is key to reducing thefts from vehicles

19 Motorists and vehicle owners can reduce the risk of someone breaking into their vehicle by keeping it secure and not leaving valuables and property in view. The Home Office funded a major public information campaign on this issue between 2000 and 2004 at a cost of £26 million. The Home Office confirmed that vehicle crime prevention is also an important strand of the £7.1 million Home Office acquisitive crime prevention campaign running in 2004-05. Analysis of areas where the advertising ran showed a fall in both thefts of and thefts from vehicles of two to three per cent and one to two per cent respectively per hundred television ratings bought (a television rating is a unit expressing the size of the audience watching that specific advert). There is also evidence from the Reducing Burglary Initiative⁵ that locally run publicity campaigns can reduce offending when aimed at offenders themselves and our examination of Operation Cobra in Portsmouth suggests that local communications campaigns combined with police operations can achieve results. Local public awareness campaigns were closely co-ordinated with other initiatives to target potential victims and to discourage prolific offenders from committing further offences.

⁴ The British Crime Survey is a household survey of people's experience of crime and it defines "vehicle" as a car, van, motorcycle, scooter or moped which is either owned or regularly used by anyone in the household.

⁵ Reducing Burglary Initiative: the Role of Publicity in Crime Prevention, 2003 Home Office Research Findings 213.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- i** Regional Home Office Directors should draw on the guidance and advice available on vehicle crime to assure themselves that vehicle crime reduction projects proposed by Partnerships are well thought through and are cost effective.
- ii** The Home Office should further encourage all hospitals, railway companies and Local Authorities to participate in the Safer Parking Scheme. The Home Office should demonstrate the benefits of the scheme to the relevant central government departments to encourage them to set targets for implementation.
- iii** The Police Standards Unit should summarise existing guidance, including advice on how to use the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system, into a more readily usable format for Police Commanders.
- iv** The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency should improve the accuracy of its vehicle and driver databases. The Agency should explore the possibility of obtaining up to date names and addresses from the electoral register or private sector businesses so that it could write to drivers and vehicle keepers to update records.
- v** The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency should, as a matter of priority, seek to close the loop-hole that can allow criminals to purchase number plates from unregistered suppliers in Northern Ireland and Scotland.



- vi The Home Office should remind Local Authorities of their obligations to set up a register of Motor Salvage Operators.
- vii The Home Office should explore further how, as well as having a national dimension, future public information campaigns on vehicle crime should be more targeted towards local concerns and co-ordinated with other local initiatives run by the Police and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships.
- viii The Home Office should use its crime reduction grants to encourage Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and the Police to use local media to highlight crime reduction initiatives, for example, the relative safety of different places to park a vehicle which might also provide an incentive for car park operators to take action to make their car parks more secure.
- ix Local public information campaigns would be an opportunity for the Home Office to raise public awareness of the security assessments available for each make and model of car.