

Making an 'IMPACT' on Car Crime in West Belfast

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Summary This article describes the Inclusive Model of Partnership Against Car Theft (IMPACT), an interagency initiative which brings together partners from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors in a unique attempt to contribute to the reduction of car crime in West Belfast.

Keywords Car Crime, partnership, strategy, public protection, intervention, diversion, prevention, empathy.

Background

Car theft is not unique to Northern Ireland, Belfast or indeed any particular area within Belfast. Its harmful effects are felt and shared right across Northern Ireland and further afield. As car owners, road users, pedestrians, taxpayers and citizens we are all susceptible to the adverse and costly affects of this particular crime. Some communities however bear a heavier burden than others. This burden is evident in the multiple human tragedies measured by death and serious personal injury as well as the destruction of private property by way of thousands of motor vehicles each year. Add to this the enduring widespread community suffering that diminishes 'quality of life' issues such as being unable to sleep at night due to the fear and noise of speeding vehicles or having unsightly, burning hulks of cars littering the local landscape and we begin to see the scope of the problem. Such a burden is unquestionably evident in the greater West Belfast community, where statistically, a disproportionate level of stolen car 'activity' happens. Whilst car crime is a significant problem in West Belfast the number of young people involved in this type of crime are very small relative to the total population of young people living in the area.

Quantifying the problem;

In terms of the scale of the problem in West Belfast, in 2000 to 2002 alone, there were 1,653 car crimes¹ in West Belfast. The latest available validated figures for cars recovered in West Belfast relate to 2000 – 2001, the figure was 3,119 and the number of arrests for car crime was 178. The financial cost of this (estimated on the 2000 – 2001 data) is approximately £14,971,200². Over this past 25 years at least 43 people within Northern Ireland have lost their lives as a direct result of car theft activity. The link to West Belfast is that the majority of those who have lost their lives were from West Belfast or else the drivers of the vehicles were from that area.

At a Northern Ireland wide level, the scale of the problem is enormous – "a conservative estimate for the cost to society in Northern Ireland by those involved in car crime is £80m per year"³.

The gravity of the problem in West Belfast was further underlined by the responses, IMPACT's independent evaluators, Research Evaluation Services, received in response to a telephone survey⁴ of IMPACT stakeholders (n=140). The survey indicated peoples' fear of the problem and found that:

- 96% (of respondents) rated the car crime problem in West Belfast as a serious or very serious problem.
- Almost two thirds (65%) said that they believed that car crime was more of a problem in 2003 or somewhat more of a problem now than it had been five years ago.
- Over two thirds (67%) indicated that the nature of car crime had changed. The supporting comments suggested that car crime had become more sophisticated (e.g. creeper burglaries),

and that car crime is now associated with higher levels of aggression, violence and deaths than before and that younger people including more girls, are now becoming involved.

Working in Partnership;

West Belfast has endured high levels of car crime activity for many years. Various initiatives have endeavoured to tackle the issue to varying degrees of success. Many such initiatives have involved the statutory sector working in partnership with the community in an effort to divert young offenders from car crime. The most recent project to be set up in an effort to tackle car crime was established in 2001. Prior to that the level of car crime activity had increased and the community sector within the area demanded that the statutory agencies address the issue. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland, (PBNI), an agency with a long track record of working in partnership with local communities across Northern Ireland in seeking to address issues relating to offending behaviour and crime reduction, responded to this challenge.

PBNI convened a series of meetings to which representatives from a number of key statutory agencies were invited. This group of individuals went on to become the project development group and was comprised of partners from Health and Social Services, Education and the Criminal Justice sectors. They, together with local community sector representatives and in consultation with representatives from the police began to lay the foundations for what would become the Inclusive Model of Partnership Against Car Theft (IMPACT) Project. Additional financial support to launch, maintain and evaluate the project was secured from the Northern Ireland Office.

At the outset of the IMPACT Project two fundamental and guiding tenets were agreed by all the participating agencies and partners as prerequisites in any serious attempt to build solutions to the problem of car crime. It was necessary firstly, to secure a multi-agency response bringing together a range of multi-disciplinary skills and resources to focus on the problem. Secondly, it was deemed critical that local community representatives enter into a partnership with the statutory sector agencies in managing the resources and direction of the project. The IMPACT project began to build up a staff team in June 2001. The full compliment of staff were not in post until November 2001. The full time, dedicated staff team was made up of a Probation Officer, Juvenile Justice Worker, Youth Worker, Social Worker, three Project workers, Project Administrator and an Operational Manager. In addition to the full time staff, a part-time project Co Ordinator was appointed and tasked to liaise with the Police Service for Northern Ireland and to service the complex management structures agreed, in addition to core project tasks and duties.

A Strategic Solution Focussed Approach;

The direction of the work undertaken by the project has been influenced by both 'offender literature studies and practice' and by previous local projects that dealt with the issue. After careful consideration it was

¹This includes, thefts, attempted thefts, unauthorised takings and attempted unauthorised takings and vehicle tampering/interference.

²This is based on a Home Office average figure of £4,800 per stolen car i.e. (£4,800 x 3119) = £14,971,200. This is likely to be a grossly conservative estimate.

³Source: Letter from Superintendent Gerald Blaise Murray, PSNI Operations Manager (Lisburn District Command Unit) to Andersonstown News, printed 31 May 2003.

⁴In May 2003, RES conducted a telephone survey of 140 stakeholders of the IMPACT project. The focus was on getting views from those who had direct experience of the project's work i.e. the young people, parents, community influences, teachers and youth workers. Almost half of the sample (44%) was made up of young people who had taken part in the IMPACT programmes and their parents/carers. Throughout our report, we refer to the "telephone survey". This is intended to mean the survey carried out by RES in May 2003 unless otherwise specified. The level rose by 21% between the Baseline Year and Year 1.

agreed that the IMPACT project would adopt a 'strategic approach' and that it would channel its efforts at three broad levels targeting both those involved in and those vulnerable to becoming involved in this type of offending behaviour. This entails;

- Preventative work with those 'vulnerable' to becoming involved in such behaviour,
- Diversionary work with those on the 'margins' of this behaviour, and
- Interventionist work with those 'actively' engaged in car crime.

Prevention...

- Developed a preventative awareness programme for delivery in primary and secondary schools and youth clubs. These are key packages which can and will be used by others working in this field.
- Delivered the preventative awareness programme in schools and youth clubs, with very high levels of completion:
 - 15 local schools. This involved 128 classes and over 2,500 pupils – 95% completion rate.
 - 29 local youth clubs. This involved 33 programmes involving 340 young people overall – 91% completion rate.

Diversion...

- Delivered 8 diversionary programmes – 79 participants. These programmes have achieved excellent completion rates (86%).
- Delivered 6 community programmes in response to local community consultation – involving 42 young people overall (65%).

Intervention...

- Delivered 18 Car Crime programmes in Hydebank Young Offenders Centre and Lisnevin and more recently Rathgael Northern Ireland Juvenile Justice Centre for Northern Ireland. A total of 132 young people commenced these programmes and there was a high completion rate (74% on average).
- Carried out 5 statutory juvenile programmes involving 15 young people overall (65% completion rate).
- Carried out 4 statutory adult group programmes involving 22 individuals overall (59% completion rate).
- Recruited, trained and deployed 5 mentors from within the local community.

The 'What Works' philosophy applies to all three areas of work and two central points are emphasised in working with young people, firstly creating an awareness and empathy for victims and secondly, exploring the consequences of behaviour for both those involved in car crime and for the wider community. In practice, this means working in environments ranging from young offender centres, youth centres, probation offices, primary and post-primary schools to community-based premises and street locations in detached methods of work.

What has IMPACT Achieved?

The baseline year was the 2001/2002 financial year. IMPACT became operational in October 2001. Since the baseline year, there has been an overall decline in the level of unauthorised takings by 92% (up

to the end of March 2004). Unauthorised takings is the specific type of car crime which IMPACT was set up to address.

The decline in the level of unauthorised takings is significant, but IMPACT cannot take sole credit for such a marked reduction. Indeed it is impossible to apportion credit to any one of a number of agencies. A number of key organisations / initiatives which have an interest in dealing with car crime have operated in West Belfast during the following times;

- Police Service for Northern Ireland – Auto Crime Team (ACT) – Operational since July 2002.
- Families Bereaved Through Car Crime – Operational since March 2002.
- Operation Clean Up – Operational between March and June 2002 and March 2003.

There may be other factors which are beyond the scope of this article which have contributed to this dramatic decline in car crime. Whilst it might not be feasible to discern empirically the contribution of one player from another the author suggests that it is reasonable for IMPACT to take credit for having made a credible contribution to the reduction. The 92% decline in unauthorised takings significantly exceeds the Northern Ireland Office target of 10% as agreed with the Northern Ireland Office at the outset of the project. The decline in cars recovered, currently 47%, appears to be moving in a similar⁵ direction.

The Second Phase;

The IMPACT project is presently at a critical stage. Three interim evaluations have been completed in relation to the project to date all of which have evidenced considerable achievement, particularly in relation to the final strategic objective which tracks the number of cars stolen from within West Belfast and stolen cars recovered within the area. Research Evaluation Services are currently in the process of completing the final evaluation which will report on the work of the project up to the end of March 2004.

IMPACT has continued in a revised guise beyond the end of March 2004. The Northern Ireland Office have agreed to fund the project for a further two year period with a view to mainstreaming the project thereafter. Most, but not all of the seconding agencies have further committed to second staff to the project and we are currently in the process of agreeing a set of revised strategic objectives. The project has also recently received public recognition in the form of 'The Aisling Award' for community safety and in particular the work undertaken on behalf of the project by the mentors. Several weeks later the project received an International Community Justice Award in the 'Public Protection' section at the 2004 National Probation Conference in London.

The IMPACT project remains committed to working across a range of sectors and in equal partnership with local communities in building solutions to the problem of car theft. We remain committed to the notions of shared arrangements, collaboration and partnership. We have demonstrated over the life time of the project that together with determination, resolve, mutual understanding and prolonged effort, the problem of car theft can be prevented and reduced. The IMPACT project remains committed to working for the realisation of that goal.

References;

Eileen Beamish, Senior Consultant, Research Evaluation Services; Synopsis of Evaluation of IMPACT (draft), June 2004.

¹The level rose by 21% between the Baseline Year and Year 1.

Eileen Beamish, Senior Consultant, Research Evaluation Services; Interim Evaluation – Draft Final Report, (1st October 2001 – 31st March 2004), June 2004.

RESTEL Telephone Survey, conducted on behalf of RES, in May 2003; Appendix to RES Evaluation.

Figures 1, 2 and 3; taken from IMPACT Evaluation Report.

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