

When money talks...

Some criminals may pretend that they run legitimate businesses but, as John Dean discovered, their desire for a lavish lifestyle can often betray them.

They're the most frustrating of criminals, the villains who hide behind a veneer of respectability and enjoy lavish lifestyles far beyond their means.

However, legislation designed to seize their assets is beginning to bite hard and now Cleveland Police has appealed directly to the public to support its efforts to bring down local Mr Bigs.

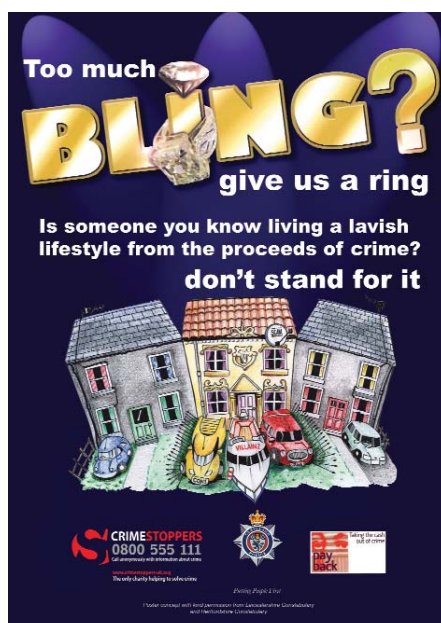
The *Too Much Bling? Give us a Ring* campaign, based on an initiative first launched in Leicestershire, aims to attract calls from people who may suspect that a neighbour or acquaintance is earning money from crime.

Underpinning the initiative is the Proceeds of Crime Act, which came into effect in 2003 and provides police with a way to pursue known criminals through the courts to seize their assets, regardless of whether or not they have been convicted of an offence.

Cleveland Police had already been using the legislation before launching its latest campaign; its evidence had led to confiscation orders for £3m being imposed on criminals since April 2005. In the latest campaign, members of the public are being encouraged to inform on people they know through the confidential Crimestoppers hotline.

Detective Inspector Bill Matthews, Head of the Force's Economic Crime Unit, said that they received a dozen 'worthwhile' calls in the first month.

He said: "People know people in their neighbourhood who live 'the life of Reilly', drive a fancy car and flash their cash yet do not have any discernible



“It is important for people to know that this is not only targeted at the stereotypical ‘Mr Big’ criminal and drug dealer, but is equally effective against criminals like the car thieves, burglars and street robbers who blight our local communities.”

income. These people are not the type to save their money for a rainy day, they will spend it.

“Virtually every estate in this force area, and indeed the country, houses people who fit this profile and the decent law-abiding residents of those estates know who these people are. Little undermines public confidence in the judicial system more than the perception that criminals can finance

lavish lifestyles through dishonest activities without fear of retribution or reparation.”

Each of the dozen reported cases is now being investigated with the possibility that, in time, prosecutions or seizure actions will be taken. “Some of them were known to us, some were new names,” said DI Matthews. “You get criminals who are just below level 2 who sometimes fall off the radar.”

Although the high profile cases have tended to be connected to the drugs trade, he points out that the legislation covers all sorts of offences.

“It is important for people to know that this is not only targeted at the stereotypical ‘Mr Big’ criminal and drug dealer, but is equally effective against criminals like the car thieves, burglars and street robbers who blight our local communities.

“Taking away profits at a relatively early point in their criminal careers can help to prevent them having the means to climb the criminal ladder.

“We have already had many successes with more than £2.6m worth of confiscation orders being imposed against local criminals in the last two financial years and more than £700,000 in orders in the current financial year to date. This is all money that is no longer in the hands of criminals, nor being used to fund further crime. Our over-arching philosophy is that no-one should benefit from their criminality.”

Detective Inspector Dave Lamplough, formerly of the force's Organised Crime Unit and now with Middlesbrough CID, added: “The message is that they are not untouchable.”



From lap of luxury to life out of a suitcase

Andrew John Pickering is the kind of man that the Bling campaign is aimed at, and in his case, Cleveland Police officers recovered more than £600,000 of assets, including houses and cars.

His case pre-dates the launch of the Bling campaign by four years but, by coincidence, came to fruition as the initiative was going public.

Previous force successes tended to be linked to confiscation orders against convicted criminals, but Pickering was different. His case dates back to his appearance at Teesside Crown Court in February 2004, when he was acquitted of Class A drugs charges.

Cleveland Police's Organised Crime Unit, working with the Assets Recovery Agency in London, felt he had earned money through crime and compiled enough evidence to bring a civil action, the first time they had been successful using that approach under the Proceeds of Crime Act.

In February this year Pickering's case went before the Royal Courts of Justice in London, where an order to recover a substantial amount of his wealth was made by presiding Judge Mr Justice Coulson.

What had raised police suspicions was that, although an ice cream man and car dealer, 38-year-old Pickering not only had an executive-style home in

Nunthorpe Gardens, Middlesbrough, but two other properties in central Middlesbrough. Police did not believe he could have sustained that through anything other than crime.

He lost the properties as well as the contents of his home. He also lost £30,000 following the sale of a BMW M3 Coupe, which was seized during the investigation, and jewellery and money was taken out of his bank account.

Detective Chief Superintendent Mark Braithwaite, Head of Crime for Cleveland Police, said: "Pickering carried out his activities under the guise of a respectable businessman. However, the court was satisfied that the wealth he amassed could only have been acquired through illegal means.

"The lifestyle Pickering led was typical of the type of person the Bling campaign is aimed at. He drove high-powered cars, furnished his home with expensive items and effectively lived in the lap of luxury in an affluent area. Yet his legal income did not support this lifestyle."

Detective Inspector Dave Lamplough, part of the team involved in the case, said that Pickering argued that he was a genuine

businessman. He said: "You do get people who almost think they have become legitimised. In the case of Pickering, we were able to prove that he sold cars at a loss and yet he had amassed his wealth."

For DI Lamplough, an attractive part of the Proceeds of Crime Act is that it acknowledges that although criminals may be trading legitimately, action can be taken if police prove that those businesses were started using illegally earned money.

He said: "You may have someone who says they have a legitimate business, but you may be able to ask them where the money for that first car came from?" DI Lamplough believes that hitting criminals in the pocket hurts them hard: "It can cause them damage. In the case of Pickering, the judge ordered that the house contents be taken. He literally lost the shirt off his back. All he had left was what was in the suitcase he had with him."

