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Feature

# Crystal clear

It was an initiative that sought the ideal scenario for police - predicting crime before it happens. John Dean reports on Operation Crystal which cut burglaries by focusing on future targets.



Operation Crystal in Stockton, part of Cleveland Police's area, made use of research which helps officers better target their resources against burglary by predicting which properties are most vulnerable to becoming targets of the future. Unlike many anti-crime initiatives, Operation Crystal was not a response to spiralling rates of offending.

However, the force felt that things had become a little stale, that the community was not being as responsive as it could be to crime prevention messages, which carried with it a heightened risk of rising burglary rates, threatening all the good work that had been done.

Operation Crystal is headed by Det Ch Insp Darren Best, the crime manager for Stockton, together with Det Sgt Steve Jermy, civilian crime analyst Mark Taylor, crime prevention officer Eddie Lincoln and Insp Tariq Ali. The officers are all based at Stockton police station.

Det Ch Insp Best said: "We had already had successes against burglars and had brought the rate of breaks-ins down to the lowest on record for the Stockton district but what we were looking for was a way of refreshing the crime prevention message."

Previously, the force tended to educate the public through media campaigns and sending out generic leaflets warning about the likes of walk-in burglaries and insecure windows. The Stockton team sought ways of better targeting the approach and turned to research by Kate J Bowers, Shane D Johnson and Ken Pease, being promoted by the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science at London University.

Their research confirmed that burglars were creatures of habit and that properties within 400 metres of a burgled household were at a 'significantly elevated risk of victimisation for up to two months after the initial event.'

"We felt that we needed to get ahead of the game, to do some work to prevent the burglaries in our area, and the research fitted into our thinking," Det Ch Insp Best explains.

Officers were already having successes when targeting known burglars but the research allowed them to better predict where the criminals would strike next. During the month-long pilot project on Stockton's Mount Pleasant housing estate, a number of arrests were made, including one key target. Mr Taylor, crime analyst, said: "The research



Det Sgt Steve Jermy: Operation Crystal 'reassured' public



Mark Taylor, crime analyst: research identifies hotspots

promoted through the Jill Dando Institute was about identifying hotspots and linking them to offenders. We identified clusters of break-ins and by taking the premise that properties within 400 metres were at a heightened risk for up to two months we could target our resources but not on a reactive basis. It was about predicting crime.”

However, there was more to the operation than simply making arrests. By predicting which properties were most likely to be burgled and when, the force could print leaflets tailored specifically to those households.

No longer did householders receive generic leaflets but were instead given publications that explained exactly what type of crime was happening in their area and warned them that they were at risk.

Police officers also visited hundreds of houses on the estate during the month, talked to three hundred people to convey the crime prevention message and provided high profile patrols.

Although crime dropped in the area (see fact file), Det Sgt Jermy said there was another major benefit. “The knock-on effect was that we reassured the public. Residents felt safer and we found that it helped the sense of community. For us, Crystal was about keeping the pressure on the criminals and letting the public know that we were keeping the pressure on. “We wanted people to know that we were targeting known burglars and that we were knocking on their doors. We were highly visible about that and what happened was that more community intelligence came. “It is important to us that when people from that area come forward with information, they see us acting quickly on it.”

The success of Operation Crystal prompted the team to move on to their next target, Stockton town centre. This was a tougher challenge because the Mount Pleasant community is settled whereas much of



Det Ch Insp Darren Best: we wanted to ‘get ahead of the game’

the town centre is occupied by a transient population living in bedsits.

Nevertheless, during the two-month operation officers spoke to more than 700 people and there was a 20 percent drop in burglaries. Now, the team is planning to use the same strategy in another area, buoyed by the success of the past five months.

Det Ch Insp Best said: “If you had said 12-18 months ago that we would have burglaries down to less than 100 in a month in our district, we would not have believed it. Crystal shows what can be achieved and we had a target of reducing burglaries to less than 100 across the district. We hit an average of 85 and now the target is 50. There was a time when the district would have had 300 break-ins a month.”

The team is confident that it can continue the progress, including targeting known burglars when they are released from prison sentences because just one prolific offender can seriously impact the figures when the number of offences are low.

“Underpinning everything we do is proactive policing. The value of Crystal is shown by the fact that there was just the one break-in on Mount

Pleasant between May and August,” says Det Ch Insp Best.

Such has been the success of the venture that officers from other police forces and councils have approached the Operation Crystal team to see if its methods can be transplanted to their areas.

Det Sgt Jermy said: “One of the knock-on effects is that by targeting burglary we have seen that other forms of crime have reduced as well. It is about taking the streets back. One victim is still too many but we have been reducing crime since Crystal began. One concern we had was that by running an operation in one area, we would be displacing the crime to another area but we have found no evidence that that has been happening.”

#### FACT FILE

##### During Operation Crystal in Mount Pleasant in May:

- Burglaries were down 83 percent (and between May and August there was just one burglary on the estate);
- Criminal damage was down 70 percent;
- Anti-social behaviour fell by 32 percent;
- There was an overall crime fall of 67 percent on the Mount Pleasant estate;
- During Operation Crystal in the town centre over two months, burglary was down 20 percent;
- Overall, the district has witnessed a fall in burglary rates, from 300 a month to well under 100: indeed, in August there were just 69. The team’s target is now 50