

CASE STUDY: AUTO THEFTS ON BEAT 306 IN THE CITY OF VISTA

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SCANNING

Beat 306 is located in the Northern half of the City of Vista. The beat is bordered by North Santa Fe Avenue to East Bobier Drive, East Bobier Drive to East Vista Way, and East Vista Way west to North Santa Fe Avenue. The beat is only about eight tenths of a square mile in size with a population of about 9000 residents, which is predominately Hispanic. The majority of beat 306 is residential and is one of the older areas of the city. This area consists of mostly lower income families, and a large number of the residences have been neglected. Historically, lower income neighborhoods, such as the beat 306 area, have been characterized as high crime area as compared to other more affluent communities.

The beat 306 area has a reputation of high crime incidents which included auto thefts. This reputation was supported by statistical surveys, through a multitude of crime analyses, for having the highest incidents of auto thefts for all of the Sheriff's jurisdictions. During the nine months preceding the opening of the project, the city average for auto thefts was 29.9 thefts on each of the 17 beats in the city. Beat 306 had 89 auto thefts during the same period, or 307 percent above the city-wide average.

Perceptions of the citizens and law enforcement personnel were consistent with the actual crime analysis results. In April 1995, there was a dramatic increase in auto thefts on beat 306. During that month, seventeen auto thefts occurred. This trend continued for several months until the Neighborhood Policing Team began utilizing some problem solving tactics in the area.

It was determined that most of the auto thefts were crimes of opportunity. A review of the auto thefts revealed that Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays were days in which most of the vehicles were stolen. Furthermore, a noticeable increase in auto thefts occurred at sunset and decreased during early morning hours. Although an analysis of the thefts was unable to determine any particular model vehicle as more desirable than others, the most common vehicle reported stolen were two door sedans manufactured in the late 1970's to the late 1980's.

A further review of the crime reports showed the majority of the vehicles were secured when they were taken, but lacked any type of anti-theft device. Deputies concluded that vehicles stolen were targets of opportunity and began to track trend and identify areas where this type of opportunity existed.

Additional crime analysis of case closures revealed that the majority of stolen vehicles were recovered very rapidly, usually in one or two days. It was not uncommon to find during a one month period, more stolen vehicles were recovered within beat 306 than had been taken from the area. Vehicles were being stolen from other areas of the city or other jurisdictions and left in the beat 306 area. Several recovered vehicles came from neighboring cities such as Oceanside, San Marcos and Escondido. They were also taken from surrounding beats within the City of Vista, which were just a few miles away. In a majority of the stolen vehicles cases, the only damage the vehicles sustained was the theft of stereo equipment and the initial entry into the vehicle.

ANALYSIS

During the ANALYSIS phase numerous options were discussed to combat the increase in auto thefts. While this particular crime may not be totally eradicated there are several tactics which could reduce the likelihood of theft. Crime analysis statistics were an important source of information. They supplied most of the information needed to design a specific plan of action. Statistics assisted in determining the location, times, and types of vehicles that were being stolen. Statistics also revealed apartment complexes were favorite areas for criminals due to the large selection of vehicles. Crime reports supplied helpful information regarding the "M.O." (Motus Operandi) of the suspect. The crime reports gave additional M.O. information by the location of where the vehicles were recovered, and evidence left at the scene.

RESPONSE

Of all the tactics implemented during the RESPONSE phase, the most effective action taken was to educate the public to be responsible for the security of their vehicles and property. An auto theft advisement letter was written in English and Spanish. The letter contained basic crime prevention information which helped them make their vehicles less likely to be burglarized or stolen. Some of the crime prevention suggestions were as simple as; lock the vehicle doors and roll up the windows, use any type of anti-theft device, don't leave valuable property in the vehicle or in plain sight, park the vehicle in a well lighted area, etc. The Neighborhood Policing Team canvassed the entire beat 306 area and left this advisement letter at every residence.

A separate advisement letter was written specifically for the patrol deputies. This letter was to be left on vehicles which a deputy believed had a higher probability of being burglarized or stolen. This letter was similar to the previously mentioned

advisement letter. The letter gave the vehicle owner some basic advice on how to make a vehicle less appealing to a criminal. These letters made the public more aware of the auto theft problem, changing their habits and displacing auto theft suspects to other areas.

Crime prevention meetings played an important role in disseminating information regarding proper vehicle security. The advisement letters were made available to all participants and the problem was discussed during neighborhood watch meetings.

Since apartments were a prime target of auto theft suspect(s), the apartment managers, owners, and tenants were instructed how they could help reduce the thefts. ~~Some complexes added security wire around the complex perimeter along with security gates and additional lighting.~~ These simple but effective improvements decreased the amount of vehicle thefts in the beat 306 area.

The Neighborhood Policing Team requested assistance from the Regional Auto Theft Task force (R.A.T.T.) to provide line-up training to all shift briefings. The training consisted of a handout explaining when R.A.T.T. should be contacted and how they could assist in an investigation. A video tape was shown demonstrating how easy it is for a criminal to steal a vehicle. The video tape helped deputies when they investigated auto thefts, to determine a particular M.O. of an auto theft suspect. The deputies also received instruction regarding Vehicle Identification Number (V.I.N.) switches and how to recognize a possible "Chop Shop" operation. In addition, R.A.T.T. offered their services for call-outs and follow-up investigations to the patrol deputies.

A decoy patrol car was obtained, which could be used to give the appearance of a police presence in neighborhoods with the highest incidents of auto thefts. The unoccupied vehicle did not require additional deputies, but instead gave deputies the ability to patrol other areas of the city.

Recidivism by auto theft criminals played a part in the increase of auto thefts as discovered by checking criminal histories on more recently arrested suspects. These checks revealed that the majority of previous auto theft arrests had been reduced to misdemeanor charges. The probation and parole departments supplied the names and addresses of individuals who had a prior history of auto thefts in Vista. Utilizing the lists, the Neighborhood Policing Team was able to determine if these individuals were still living in or around the area. Surveillance was conducted and the subjects were told they were being watched, in the hopes to deter them from any criminal activity. Some of these individuals were arrested as a result of other unrelated criminal activity such as drugs, assaults, petty/grand theft, etc. Some were arrested for auto theft.

EVALUATION

During the **ASSESSMENT** phase, there was a noticeable decrease as indicated by crime statistics. At the end of 1995, crime statistics revealed a continued gradual decrease in auto thefts on beat 306. For the months of January and February 1996 there were only three vehicles stolen per month in the 306 beat area. This was a dramatic decrease from the 17 stolen vehicles in a one month time period when the project was initially opened. These numbers have continued through June of 1996, with only a few thefts occurring each month.

During the nine months after the project began, the city average for auto thefts was ~~22~~ auto thefts on each of the ~~17~~ beats in the city. Beat 306 had 42 auto thefts during the same period. This represents a decrease of 53 percent in auto thefts on beat 306 when compared to the nine months preceding the project. While there are still some thefts occurring, the problem has been drastically reduced.

While working this project, we found public education to be more effective than direct enforcement. There are those who still make this a crime of opportunity by not utilizing basic common sense and vehicle security measures. Continued public education should definitely have an impact in keeping thefts to a minimum. Routine education and contact with the public have ensured that this problem has not re-surfaced.

Due to the decrease in auto thefts, patrol deputies were able to spend more time and resources elsewhere. The decrease was also valuable for other Sheriff's Department personnel. The reduced thefts freed up time for evidence technicians and records personnel who process each stolen and/or recovered stolen vehicle. The auto theft problems will also be a topic of discussion at future Community Forums and neighborhood watch meetings.

PHILOSOPHY AND ORGANIZATION

This problem solving effort was initiated at the team level. The Neighborhood Policing Team that was recently activated in the City of Vista developed and implemented this project. Members of the team, which consisted of a sergeant, four deputies, and a clerk received problem-solving and team-building training from numerous sources. No additional incentives were provided to the staff involved in this project.

Resources for this project were developed through other agencies that have experienced similar problems. Resources were also developed through the National Crime Insurance Bureau.