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Caught in the Act! How One Police Agency Is Apprehending the Hard-to-Catch Property Thief with Electronic Stakeouts

By Travis Martinez, Lieutenant, Redlands, California, Police Department

Two men pull into the fitness center parking lot. Unlike most people there, they are not looking to improve their physical health and well-being, but to prey upon trusting individuals who are trying to fit in a quick workout after a long day at work. The vultures have gloves on their hands and porcelain chips in their pockets. The license plate of their vehicle is covered by a paper dealership plate, making it more difficult for police to identify them should a witness happen to see the crime they are about to commit. They slowly scour the parking lot looking for vehicles that contain items they can easily steal to fuel their criminal lifestyle. As they drive by a row of cars, they spot a target worthy of a closer look.

A Toyota Matrix with a shopping bag on the dashboard is parked in a space hidden from view through the gym windows. The driver positions his vehicle directly next to the Matrix, and the passenger exits to obtain a closer look. As the passenger inspects the Matrix, he sees a blanket on the front seat that appears to cover a laptop computer. He can even see a small strap of what he suspects to be a woman's purse protruding out of a portion of the blanket. In his mind, he pictures using the credit cards to replenish the empty fuel tank in his car and then examining the laptop for any personal data that he can use to commit identity theft. After retrieving personal data and any other valuable information on the computer, he and his partner will no doubt be able to trade it for heroin or methamphetamine.

With the skill of a seasoned burglar, the bandit reaches into his pocket, grabs a small spark plug porcelain chip, and hurls it at the front passenger window causing the glass to shatter into a million pieces. He quickly reaches into the vehicle, tosses the blanket aside, and smiles as he reveals a laptop computer lying on the passenger seat next to a high-priced designer purse containing a wallet and credit cards. He grabs the items and flees to the getaway car to show his partner the fruits of their labor. They speed out of the fitness center parking lot and begin to plan how they can best maximize their use of the credit cards before the victim has the time to cancel them.

An Innovative Solution

This scenario plays out daily in communities across the United States, including suburban cities like Redlands, California. In the spring of 2011, Redlands experienced a high number of vehicle burglaries weekly at a local fitness center parking lot. Redlands is known for its low crime rates, proactive community policing efforts, and innovative use of technology to address crime, including more than 130 surveillance cameras strategically placed around the city and actively monitored by police. Despite its use of technology, the Redlands Police Department (RPD) was having a difficult time preventing and solving property crimes such as vehicle burglaries and metal thefts. Unless a witness observed the crime, or the suspect failed to wear gloves, the chances of apprehending the suspect were minimal. The RPD needed a strategy to reduce the property crime rate and instill confidence in the community that RPD was addressing the theft problem.

The Community Policing Bureau (CPB) researched strategies to apprehend those criminals that targeted victims in Redlands. Officers employed a two-pronged approach intended to reduce property crime: educating the community and collaborating with businesses to apprehend criminals. In the past, RPD's approach was to identify a location that may be targeted and deploy a team of five officers to conduct surveillance. This approach was time consuming, costly, and produced minimal results. In today's fiscal environment, RPD needed a lower-cost, higher-result method to apprehend criminals. This was perhaps best described by former RPD Chief of Police and current President of the Police Foundation James Bueerman, who said, "As the recession became increasingly problematic for the RPD, our need to leverage research, partnerships, volunteers, and technology in thoughtful ways became quite apparent."¹ After conducting a simple Internet search, the CPB contacted a Law Enforcement Division representative from 3SI Security Systems, a company that manufactures GPS tracking devices designed to protect cash at financial institutions.

After discussing the project with the Law Enforcement Division of the company, RPD obtained a device to conduct a pilot project on the tracking device's potential as a tool to address property crime. The CPB installed the GPS device in a laptop computer belonging to the department. RPD obtained an undercover vehicle from a car dealership and secured an agreement with an automobile window repair business to replace any broken window at a discounted price. RPD then obtained permission from the local fitness center to deploy the vehicle in its parking lot. RPD placed the locked vehicle in the parking lot with the laptop computer on the front passenger seat at 7:00 a.m. By 8:00 a.m., the tracker activated, indicating that the computer had been moved. On-duty patrol officers tracked the device to a gas station approximately three miles away within 10 minutes and took two people into custody for vehicle burglary. This outcome was accomplished without the need to deploy any extra personnel.



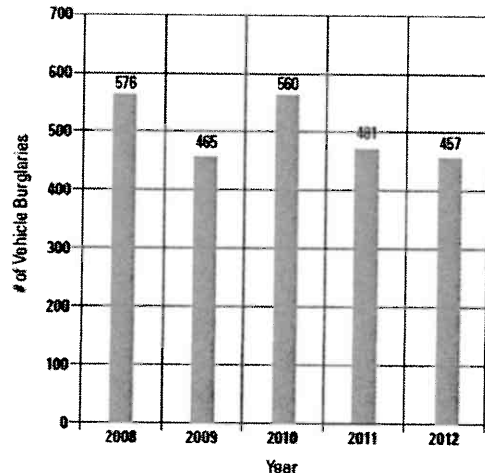
After the initial deployment demonstrated the technology could be used to combat vehicle burglary, the CPB expanded its use to address other property crimes. Using asset forfeiture money, RPD purchased 21 tracking devices at a cost of only \$450 each with a \$30 monthly cell phone service, mapping capabilities, and 24/7 technical support fee per device. Utilizing current crime analysis and predictive policing practices, RPD deployed the devices at various businesses in Redlands that were frequently robbed. As the program expanded, RPD became even more resourceful and deployed other devices in undercover bait cars, which are moved around the city by citizen volunteers and police explorers to address vehicle burglary problems as they arise. The other devices were deployed as needed to address various theft problems in the community.

Program Results

During a 22-month time period, the GPS tracker program facilitated the apprehension of 44 felony suspects, including 24 vehicle burglars, 2 robbery suspects, 2 commercial burglars (one responsible for over 25 commercial burglaries at a pharmacy chain located in the Inland Empire), 1 suspect responsible for stealing more than 20 bicycles at a local university, 9 different metal theft suspects, and 6 construction site burglars.

Redlands began deploying the GPS devices in this program in January 2011. A comparative analysis indicated a 14 percent decrease in the number of reported vehicle burglaries in 2011 as compared to 2010, with an added 5 percent decrease from 2011 to 2012. Vehicle burglary experienced an overall 18.4 percent decrease from 2010 to 2012 (see Table 1). These numbers are more impressive when one considers the national property crime rate, which includes vehicle burglary and thefts from vehicle, increased 11 percent between 2010 and 2011.²

Table 1: RPD Vehicle Burglaries 2008–2012



Although it is sometimes difficult to identify specific reasons for the increases and decreases in the crime rate, the deployment of the GPS tracking devices in Redlands was the singular substantive change in the target locations and police efforts to combat these crimes. As word spreads in the criminal community that Redlands is attaching trackers to all sorts of property and then placing the property in targets that are likely to be robbed or burglarized, criminals' willingness to commit these crimes should lessen. In addition, if RPD were not able to apprehend those subjects bent on committing such crimes, the suspects would likely continue offending, thereby driving the crime rate up even more.

In an interview discussing the effectiveness of the GPS trackers, Redlands Police Chief Mark A. Garcia states,

Trackers allow the department to gain instant knowledge of crimes occurring when a tracker is deployed. This allows officers to receive information quickly on a smart device without reliance on often delayed information reported by victims. Tracker deployments are limited only by the imagination of the officers deploying them. We have found trackers to be an extraordinary tool in arresting suspects who have committed crimes, most of whom we would never catch absent this technology.³

From the beginning, RPD has attempted to spread the word of the GPS tracking system by partnering with community stakeholders such as the Redlands Chamber of Commerce. In addition, patrol officers identify crime trends and arrange for the deployment of a GPS tracker to address them. The police department has demonstrated such tremendous success with this program that more and more business owners are contacting them with requests to participate.

RPD is consistently striving to be proactive in addressing criminal issues and willing to collaborate with the community to solve these issues. Addressing quality-of-life issues is always paramount to a safe community. To this end, the police became even more resourceful in their deployment of the trackers. One device was deployed at a business that sells concrete fabrication products. The owner had been the victim of several thefts over a two-month period, both at the Redlands site and other locations he operates throughout the region. The manager of the business truly appreciated the technology and RPD's proactive efforts and willingness to solve the problem. There are many other examples, and RPD was obtaining quick, solid results.

For example, several tenants of a housing complex had bicycles stolen from the patios and balconies of the apartments during the night. An alert patrol investigator recognized the crime trend and arranged for the deployment of a bait bike on the apartment manager's patio. After only six days, the tracker activated in the middle of the night and a career criminal was apprehended with the stolen bicycle within five minutes of the initial activation. Yet another example focuses on the theft of copper grounding cables at Southern California Edison Substations. Thieves were targeting the copper cables causing thousands of dollars in damage. A tracker was placed in a roll of copper wire located in a locked fenced area at the Redlands Substation, and the police patiently waited and went on with other business at hand. Within two weeks, thieves broke into the complex and stole several copper grounding cables, including the roll of copper wire containing the GPS tracker. Responding officers established a perimeter and conducted a traffic stop of a vehicle leaving the substation area. Officers ultimately arrested two subjects after recovering property stolen from the substation. The substation has not been targeted since the arrests even though substations in neighboring cities have been targeted.

Jerry Uhler, Southern California Regional Special Agent for Southern California Edison, made the following comment,

Unlawful entries and copper thefts at the Redlands Substation was costing Southern California Edison well in excess of \$30,000 in damage and replacement costs, not to mention the loss of power to the community. Since the arrest of an individual, made possible by the deployment of a GPS tracking device, there have been no criminal entries into the Redlands Substation.⁴

RPD has also discovered that employees of businesses that deploy the trackers feel safer while at work. Employees have commented that if they are the victim of a robbery, they no longer have to worry about taking actions to help the police apprehend the suspect. The same goes for citizens who are willing to let the police department use the tracking system at their residences. For example, one resident had been the victim of a residential burglary twice in one month. The CPB deployed the tracker in a laptop computer and placed the computer at the residence. The resident stated that he had peace of mind when he was at work and did not worry about his house being broken into. Although the tracker was only deployed for one month at the residence and no arrest was made, the homeowner was very pleased and appreciative of RPD's attempt to apprehend the suspect.

The case involving the residential burglary led to the creation of the "While You're Away Program" at RPD. Due to a 16 percent increase in residential burglaries involving residents who were away on vacation, the CPB looked at how the existing GPS technology could be used to help protect homes of vacationing residents. Beginning in September 2013, Redlands residents who were planning a trip away could come to the RPD and pick up a laptop computer with one of these unique GPS tracking devices embedded in it. If the resident wanted to protect another item such as his flat screen television, he could simply pick up a soft pouch containing the device and attach it to his television. Residents complete an application through the RPD website to be considered for the program. Several residents who have taken advantage of the free program have commented on how the devices gave them peace of mind while they were away on vacation.

With the success of the GPS tracking program at RPD (81 arrests as of November 2013), eight surrounding police agencies have purchased the same type of device and began conducting their own electronic stakeouts. RPD has demonstrated the concept to these agencies and emphasized how the program allows agencies to apprehend those responsible for crime in a very cost-effective manner. Criminals have no geographical boundaries. On one occasion, a vehicle burglar apprehended using the GPS tracker was found to be driving a stolen car from a neighboring city. The car contained stolen property from other vehicle burglaries throughout the region. Another example took place on June 17, 2013, when an armed robbery occurred at a gas station in Redlands. An alert clerk made sure she gave the suspect the cash pack containing the tracker along with the other stolen currency. Within minutes, responding officers had the subject in custody and connected him to a string of at least eight other robberies in the Inland Empire.

Research conducted as part of a POST Command College project found that 38 of the first 44 suspects arrested were adults. Each person arrested had a criminal record with the exception of one female who was accompanied by her career criminal boyfriend at the time of the crime. The 38 adults had been previously arrested a total of 561 times for an average of 14.2 arrests per individual. Of the 38 people arrested, 34 percent were on some form of supervised early release. Six of the subjects had stolen property in their possession from other thefts, and fourteen of the subjects had warrants out for their arrest.⁵ These numbers demonstrate that RPD's arrests not only solved current crimes, but likely prevented numerous others by taking recidivists who drive crime rates up off the streets.

Innovative projects such as the GPS trackers have been solid force multipliers for RPD and can serve as examples for other police agencies. At a time when many police agencies have been forced to cutback on proactive measures such as police surveillance, RPD has figured out a way to conduct 24/7 surveillance at a cost of about \$1 a day. As other agencies search for new and innovative ways to protect the community and preserve quality-of-life issues, the use of the GPS tracking devices will no doubt spread throughout the law enforcement community. As a result, RPD will begin hosting a POST-approved training course in which attendees can learn how to legally deploy GPS tracking devices to address crime trends in their communities.

The residents of Redlands can be assured their police department is on the cutting edge and providing innovative policing to their community. RPD is creating a paradigm shift in how modern policing practices can address emerging crime trends. The results speak for themselves: 81 arrests of career criminals in 35 months. Thieves beware—the next time you steal, you may literally be "caught in the act" ♦

Notes:

¹James Bueerman, email interview, July 4, 2013.

²Jennifer Truman and Michael Planty, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2011*, U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (October 2012), 4. <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv11.pdf> (accessed November 26, 2013).

³Mark A. Garcia, email interview, June 25, 2013.

⁴Jerry Uhler, email interview, June 26, 2013.

⁵Travis Martinez, "Caught in the Act! How One Police Agency Is Apprehending the Hard-to-Catch Property Thief with Electronic Stakeouts," summary of findings POST Command College FUTURES Study Project, May 2013.

The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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