



Forty Years of Forensic Investigation - The Product Life Cycle of Crime



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Abbreviations: SOCO: Scenes of Crime Officer; VCRs: Video recorders; ANPR: Automatic Number Plate Reader cameras; HMIC: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies

Short Communication

October of 2017 marks forty years of my involvement in forensic investigation, twenty six as a CSI, originally called a Scenes of Crime Officer (SOCO) in Glasgow, Scotland and moving up the management ladder in three forces in England. Despite being called an officer, I was always a civilian. Medically retired, having spent seventeen of those years managing the forensic investigation of major incidents and a staff of over 100, I became a university lecturer, consultant to police forces and government forensic laboratories worldwide. With my landmark anniversary rapidly approaching, I have taken stock of the changes I have seen in crime and investigation.

Whilst with one police force, two decades ago, I was given the opportunity and funding to study for a university diploma in management studies. There we were taught that even crime has a product life cycle. Tasked with establishing what that was, was totally enlightening. Twenty years ago it was theft of car radios. Local thieves were stealing them and fencing them at a local car spares shop. The owner had apparently shipped a container load of them to the Indian subcontinent where they were fitted with new crystals. Unfortunately for the thieves, they stole so many that the market price for the goods dropped to ten percent of the original price they were receiving. Twenty years on and technology has totally changed the face of crime, reducing the availability of readily stolen goods and in the process sweeping away a golden era in forensic investigation.

Burglary and Vehicle Crime

In the 1970s, in the United Kingdom, colour televisions were the item of choice for burglars. At that time, they were the size and weight of a domestic refrigerator, requiring at least two to

lift them and a car, usually stolen, to carry them off. Investigators know that more than one criminal doubles their chances of someone informing on the others involved and the number of people capable of leaving evidence at scenes and in vehicles. Happy days for CSIs. In the early 1980s, as the shop prices of televisions dropped, Video recorders (VCRs) became the popular choice. Both cost about a month's pay and most were rented. A VCR was a lot smaller than a TV and one person could put it in carry bag and walk away. Multiple offender break-ins consequently reduced considerably.

Nowadays, TVs are much less expensive so it isn't worth risking your liberty or life for something that costs about a week's pay. VCRs are a thing of the past and DVD recorders and players didn't last long as most people now download movies from various providers. As a result, burglary offences have dropped by around 50% and more. Car radios were easily stolen, as up to 10 years ago as they were a box that clipped in to the centre of the dashboard. Getting to them was easy as most cars could be opened and the ignition turned with the blade of a pair of small scissors. Now you have to overcome sophisticated alarms and digital locks then remove the entire dashboard, by which time half the police in town are next to you.

In the UK, automatic number plate reader cameras (ANPR) and tracking devices have denied criminals the use of the roads as the systems catch those vehicles.

Robbery Offences

Since the introduction of money, criminals have committed robbery and up until the majority of people received transfer of wages to their bank account, wages clerks, offices and cash in

transit (security) vans were regular targets for violent criminals and led to the formation of Scotland Yard's famous "Flying Squad" in 1919. These teams of hard-nosed detectives still tackle organized crime in the capital.

In addition to the practice of paying employees directly into their bank accounts, money is now transferred electronically and there is little need for large cash transfers. The introduction of debit cards reduced the amount of cash at supermarkets and department stores. Up until a few years ago, the last trading day before Christmas and Easter could easily see armed hold-ups on the stores and the cash in transit vans collecting the takings. Politicians of all hues tell everyone that crime has reduced due to their criminal justice policies, when the facts listed above have had more effect than anything politicians can do.

True to form, the 2010 coalition government in London, with an eye to retaining or gaining votes, introduced an austerity budget. By trying to show they were tough on spending, they ignored the fact that visible crime had reduced drastically. People complained about service cuts, when in reality the number of staff needed was around half of that needed ten years prior. The politicians also ignored the need to invest in digital crime investigation and in doing so dropped back in their ability to detect cybercrime, which now accounts for around two thirds of crime. In the county where the university I work at is located, digital crime has increased by just fewer than 500% this year but the staffing levels for those units have at best remained static.

For far too long, forensic laboratories and police forensic support units, possibly because of not understanding what it was, viewed digital investigation as a minor peripheral of

forensics. One police forensic support manager did not want digital investigation as part of their unit. Criminals and police have always tried to keep one step ahead of each other but the digital age has seen criminals steal the car keys and speed off into the distance. The forces of justice need to catch up.

Just over twenty years ago, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies (HMIC) for England and Wales published a report recommending all police forces co-locate their detectives and CSIs in the various basic command units or precincts in the force. Unfortunately the ideas were about ten years out of date then. Many forces were already operating the model with success but things began to change. Procurement and IT departments can often put barriers in the way of progress with rules designed to make their jobs comfortable. Remind those in authority that the purpose of their law enforcement agency is not to provide risk averse purchasing and digital systems. It exists to catch criminals and whether on the street or in the back office functions that can sometimes mean stepping outside your comfort zone.

Whilst there is sex, drugs and rock and roll, there will always be a need for traditional wet bench forensics and crime scene investigation units but neither area should ignore the changing technologies. To do so will result in their existence being called into question and possibly terminated. My advice is, always maintain an overview of your unit's workload and crime trends. As personnel retire or move on, don't simply replace them but examine if the post is still needed and is there another area, such as digital crime, that needs expansion. Forensic support units need to stay ahead of the curve and drive the agenda. Relying on politicians and civil servants will frustrate your efforts to be a successful crime detection tool.



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