Mobile-enabled Mobile Phone Snatches:
A tale from two London boroughs

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Abstract

This research utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the rapid growth of moped enabled mobile phone snatches across two boroughs in London, UK. It demonstrates how the availability of suitable victims and the roads system influences moped enabled mobile phone snatches. The research suggests a number of crime reduction initiatives which could be adopted by law enforcement agencies and should be studied further as to their impact and long term effectiveness. The research concludes that there is not a single solution to this rapid growth in moped enabled mobile phone theft.

Keywords: *Moped, mobile phone, snatch, London*

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Introduction

The Office for National Statistics (2017) suggested that the recent increases in recorded robberies and snatch thefts are disproportionally linked to the larger urban areas, such as London. Over the 12 months from April 2014 to March 2015, The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) reported the theft of almost 10,000 motorcycles, mopeds and scooters, with an estimated value of more than £28 million. Many of these vehicles were stolen in order to commit other crimes (Metropolitan Police Service, 2015). Topping (2017) reported that moped enabled crimes have almost trebled in the 12 months to November 2017, reaching over 23,500 offences. Rudgard (2017) identified a continued increase in the use of mopeds, motorcycles and scooters in 'snatch' related offences. This research utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods to identify the similarities and differences in the choice of locations for moped enabled mobile phone snatches across two London policing boroughs and makes recommendations relating to initiatives which could be utilised to assist in the reduction of the rapid growth of such offences.

Review of the literature

Gale and Coupe (2005) identified how street robberies are predominantly an urban-based crime. In London, the Metropolitan Police Service (2018a) have described the growth in moped enabled theft as a concern, stating that these vehicles are often subsequently used in the snatching of mobile phones from members of the public. Tompson (2012) detailed how the modus operandi for the theft of a mobile phone in a snatch offence usually involves an offender using a moped with a pillion passenger travelling around an area in search of victims who will be low risk to the offenders, such as those individuals distracted whilst talking on their mobile phones. The offenders on their moped will then usually approach the victim from behind, this allows them to make the best use of the phone user's distraction, then the victim will have their mobile phone snatched from their hands before the offenders escape at speed on their moped whilst the victim is both surprised and disorientated by the sudden sequence of events. The phones are often then sold on illegally and swiftly a number of times before being exported, after which it becomes harder to trace them. For the police to pursue a moped at speed is a high-risk strategy for the public, the police officer and the riders. Often riders will cover their face to hide from CCTV but not wear a helmet in an attempt to further dissuade officers from pursuit in case of injury resulting from an accident. As the College of Policing (2018) highlighted, due to their lack of protection afforded by the vehicle, riders of motorcycles in any pursuit situation are very vulnerable.

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London is not the only city in the United Kingdom or across Europe experiencing moped and motorcycle enabled crimes. This means of committing offences is particularly prevalent where highly desirable goods, such as mobile phones, are stolen. For example, Butler and Rucki (2017) reported the use of mopeds in Manchester city centre involving the snatching of mobile phones, Farrell (2015) highlighted robberies in the Netherlands involving the theft of mobile phones using motorcycles. More generally, Europol (2014) co-ordinated a day of action across eight European countries against individuals and organised crime groups dealing with stolen mobile phones. This operation resulted in over 200 arrests and the seizure of just over 2,400 mobile phones.

In order to tackle the problem, Farrell (2015) stated that, because the problem of mobile phone theft is international and widespread, government intervention and international coordination is imperative to ensure effective crime prevention methods to reduce such thefts. For example, Farrell suggested targeting those who deal in stolen mobile phones with police resources and the international blacklisting of stolen mobiles using each phone's unique serial number to in effect block its use across networks, such a collaboration would render any stolen mobile phone useless both domestically and internationally. As a result the mobile phone would become less desirable to potential thieves, by rendering it useless once it is out of the hands of the registered keeper.

This approach is obviously situated as part of the local analysis and problem solving. Routine activity theory, first evolved by Cohen and Felson (1979), focused attention on the circumstances of the crime rather than the offender. It is often used to research and propose solutions to trends in crime, such as street robberies. The routine activity theory requires a motivated offender with the intention and willingness to commit a crime, a suitable victim or target, along with the lack of presence of an effective guardian, all of which come together at a single point in time. Deakin et al., (2007) suggests how the physical presence of police officers along with an increased use of surveillance technology can deter some offenders from committing crimes

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has moved to address the rising trend in both moped and mobile phone theft by establishing crime prevention campaigns focused towards securing possible target vehicles and raising awareness amongst potential victims of the risk of mobile phone theft in crime 'hotspot' areas. Gale and Coupe (2005) identified how street robberies can often occur near transport links or near the victim's home. Research studies have shown how targeting crime hot spots with police resource can have a direct, if often short-term, impact on reducing rates of crime whilst also diffusing crime in adjacent areas (Ariel et al., 2016; Braga et al., 2012). Operation Attrition, launched in June 2016, is an MPS crime reduction initiative to raise awareness in relation to mopeds being used in snatch crimes, with targeted social media posts, adverts at London Underground stations, advice from officers and leafleting (Metropolitan Police, 2016).

Victims in such offences are not necessarily selected at random; as those committing the offences follow a specific decision-making process regarding who will be their victim (Deakin, et al., 2007). This supports the analysis of victim profiles carried out by the Metropolitan Police, which details how those using mopeds to commit crime, target those people who are holding mobile phones, oblivious to their surroundings, and near a road which allows them to mount the pavement on a moped and drive at the victim (Metropolitan Police Service, 2018(a)). As well as the obvious financial and policing implications of such a snatch of a mobile phone, the physical and psychological effects of a robbery in the street on a victim should not be underestimated (Gale and Coupe, 2005).

Methodology

This research sought to examine moped enabled crimes in two of the London's boroughs as well as how the MPS is responding to the problem. A blend of quantitative and qualitative data was collected, collated, compared and contrasted in an evidence based approach to identify and compliment findings in relation to the similarities and differences of moped enabled mobile phone snatch locations across two of London's 32 boroughs.

The boroughs, selected through convenience sampling, are both north of the River Thames. The two boroughs are similar in that they have high-density residential populations, great diversity, social deprivation and poverty. In one borough data mining provided quantitative information on recorded offences taken from a police Crime Reporting Information System (CRIS). This information was collected and mapped in order to establish the number and locations of moped enabled mobile phone snatches over a period of 12 months ending in February 2018. Volumes were also compared to the previous 12 months.

Conducting research on the CRIS system is the most reliable way to extract quantitative data. Data on the CRIS adheres to the standardised National Crime Recording Standards (NCRS) and Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR) (Metropolitan Police Service, 2018b). These rules promote consistency between forces when recording crimes. Therefore, each reported incident of a moped enabled mobile phone snatch in the borough is accurately recorded by the police on CRIS, with resultant emerging crime trends being revealed quite quickly. Using CRIS as a data collection method does not however take into account any unreported offences and their associated locations, the non-reporting of which may impact upon the outcomes of any data analysis.

In the second borough, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with eight police response officers from across the four shifts within the borough. These of-

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ficers had a range of policing experience, but were all qualified for independent police patrol. As the first officers attending such incidents, the qualitative data collected from these response officers assisted in identifying incident 'hotspots' for moped enabled mobile phone snatches and the reasons why those interviewed felt these locations were selected by the offenders. Then, as an intervention, thirteen police officers, with a range of policing experience from newly appointed officers to those with many years of experience, were deployed in uniform around one of the identified hotspots, an underground station. The officers were deployed for a period of sixty minutes to interact and advise the general public by providing crime prevention advice based around the Metropolitan Police's corporate campaign in relation to mobile phone theft. This included the officers handing out leaflets, talking to the public and reassuring them. The number of interactions with the public and the number of mobile phones put away out of sight either in pockets or bags were individually recorded by the officers.

Findings and discussion

Snatch offences recorded on CRIS in the first borough occurred in clustered 'hotspots'. The data analysed from the London borough in question revealed that in the 12 months ending in February 2018 there were 1,334 reported incidents of thefts/robberies where a moped was used, of these 62% (830 offences) involved the theft, or snatch, of a mobile phone, this is slightly over an 85% increase from those (447 offences) recorded of mobile phone snatches over the same period in the previous year. The theft of mobile phones was by far the most common item stolen in the moped enabled snatches across both years. Within the borough, such an increase of over 85% on the previous year's moped enabled snatches of mobile phones, equated to an average of 2.27 reported incidents and the police responding to each 24 hour period.

However, the data showed that these snatches did not occur solely around transport hubs, instead being far more widespread. Tomson (2012) identified how the specific uses of land may also attract and bring together offenders with their potential victims, such as the development of fast food outlets, shops and bars. The clusters of snatches from the research in this borough were mostly on main roads and easily accessible residential roads. It could be inferred from this, that these crimes are occurring where there is more likely to be heavier footfall and, therefore, more potential victims, and where there can be easy escape on the mopeds via the faster main roads.

The semi-structured qualitative interviews with police officers in the second borough, identified how they tended to respond to clusters of reported snatch offences around a specific transport hub, a London underground station. The underground does not always have signal for mobile phone coverage and so calls and texts cannot always be

taken or made underground. This means that when someone leaves a tube station, they will often take their mobile phone out of their pocket or bag at street level so that they can check for messages or access maps for directions. This may therefore be one of the reasons why the offenders committing crimes in this particular borough tend to target streets next to the underground station, as there are many potential victims holding mobile phones who may already be both distracted and disorientated. Tomson (2012) also suggested such transport hubs provide the opportunity for offenders to hang around unnoticed within the crowds. The police officers interviewed within the research also identified how the underground station is bordered by numerous streets which provide easy escape routes for potential offenders and the station itself is located on a fast road with lots of traffic, allowing offenders on mopeds to quickly escape into the flow of traffic or down a side street without being pursued.

Fennelly and Crowe (2013) identified the importance of thoughtful street design in the prevention of crime, so called crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED). This application of crime reduction methods is designed to assist the prevention of crimes, including robbery, and suggests taking measures to reduce crime through the manipulation of the physical environment. Such approaches could include options such as metal barriers, or even bollards, along pavements in areas of high footfall which may prevent mopeds from being able to ride onto pavements to commit 'snatch' offences, thus assisting in their prevention.

One of the key elements relating to the snatching of a mobile phone in both boroughs appears to be that the victim is holding their mobile phone in their hand and therefore on display to potential offenders who may be watching nearby. This type of snatch crime, where mobile phones are stolen, are therefore far less likely to occur if the potential victim has put their mobile phone away removing the temptation of the desirable goods to be stolen. Enabling the ideas from previous research (Braga et al., 2012; Deakin et al., 2007), thirteen police officers were deployed for an hour in the second borough during daylight hours around one of the identified crime 'hotspot' the underground station. During this limited period of deployment the officers recorded 314 interactions with commuters providing crime prevention advice with 189 of those members of the public (over 60%) putting away their mobile phones out of sight following the police interactions. The immediate impact of this intervention was high, however, the resource implications of such interventions as an ongoing means of crime reduction are also high. Ariel et al., (2016) identified how the police presence at crime hotspots does not have to be uniformed police officers but could be frequent visits by uniformed police community support officers (PCSO's) who have limited powers of arrest but would have the same effect. Whichever physical policing resource is used, their presence as guardians, impacts on the reduction of snatch crimes at the least over the period of deployment or visit.

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Going beyond crime reduction approaches supported by routine activity theory, further research into offenders and their motives themselves may also lead to a greater understanding of the reasons which lead to moped enabled mobile phone snatches. The term 'snatches' tends to suggest there is little or no violence involved, but this is not always the case, with incidents involving violence, including a police officer being threatened with a knife by an offender on a moped enabled crime attempting to effect an escape (Dearden, 2017).

As an additional crime prevention initiative, Europol (2014) also continues to encourage mobile phone users to activate GPS enabled tracking applications within their mobile devices in case of their theft, as this may assist in the eventual phone's recovery.

Conclusion and recommendations

This research provides quantitative evidence in relation to the rapid growth of moped enabled snatches of mobile phones within a London borough. Using both quantitative and qualitative research, it has evidenced how the footfall, general public awareness and the transport system, specifically the road network, influence moped enabled mobile phone snatches. It has also demonstrated how using police officers (or potentially other uniformed police staff) as guardians, who interact with the public informing them of the possibility of mobile phone 'snatch' thefts, appears to affect a significant number of people, who as a result put away their mobile phones and therefore reduce the opportunity for the theft of their phone through a snatch. This of course is an expensive use of resources and only had an impact at that one moment in time around the specific hotspot.

It is possible that adopting some of the ideas presented by CPTED, particularly in relation to the physical roads environment, may in effect assist in the designing out of the apparent ease by which these moped enabled crimes can be committed.

The research has also identified the importance of further in depth studies required into the motivations of offenders, identifying why they commit such offences along with the sustained effect of a physical uniformed police intervention. Further research into the suggestion of making the mobile phone itself less desirable as a commodity to steal (Farrell, 2015) may also lead to a more effective solutions.

In reality, there is no one solution to this rapid growth in crime and the associated requirement to increase the prevention of moped enabled mobile phone snatches.

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