

Casey Building Site Crime Prevention Project

Evaluation Summary Report

crime prevention victoria

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Introduction

Background

Between August 2001 and July 2002, the City of Casey undertook a building site crime reduction project funded by Crime Prevention Victoria (CPV) through the Safer Communities Program. The Casey Building Site Crime Prevention Program was designed to:

- identify and analyse crimes that occur on residential building sites in the City of Casey;
- develop and implement strategies to minimise and prevent such offences; and
- enhance communication between key stakeholders.

*"Building site theft is out of control."
- Site Manager*

Other aims also included achieving an increase in responsibility for, and 'ownership' of, the building sites and increasing the incidence in the reporting of site theft. At the conclusion of the project, information collected during the period was to be disseminated to interested parties.

The two trial building sites, Lynbrook and King's Park Estates in Casey, were selected on the basis that both were built from 'slab' and could therefore be observed from the beginning to the conclusion of the project.

Project Outcomes

Several project outcomes were achieved as part of the building site project, including:

- Distribution of a theft and vandalism survey has been as a form of continuing data collection;
- Development of an awareness poster which warns against building site theft and emphasises the importance of reporting incidents to the

police 000 number;

- other information was disseminated to key stakeholders, including an extensive information pack on how to minimise the risk of building site theft;
- open letters including a list of "Suspicious Activity Guidelines" sent to all residents living near these developments, advising them of the initiative and encouraging them to report any building site incidents to the police;
- extensive liaison between the council and key stakeholders such as construction and insurance companies;
- changed local laws that require that street lighting be activated on local building sites from the commencement of construction; and
- extensive local media coverage which introduced the issue of building site theft to a wider audience.

Methodology and Findings

Methodology

The site managers selected for interview were those who were involved with residential construction on the two trial sites at the King's Park and Lynbrook Estates. Of the original 24 site managers who were involved in the project on the Lynbrook Estate, only 14 (58%) agreed to be interviewed, the remainder failed to attend the interview meeting or did not return Crime Prevention Victoria's phone calls.

There was only one construction site manager/developer on the King's Park estate, who agreed to be interviewed. As it would be possible to directly attribute these responses to one individual, thereby breaching his anonymity, this site manager's views were included with those of the 14 respondents from the Lynbrook estate, providing a total of 15 respondents.

Findings

All respondents had experienced a theft in the past year. Most believed that theft by members of the construction industry was common, with all but one builder indicating that building site theft was "out of control". In keeping with this view, all but one of the site managers interviewed thought that building site theft was an increasing problem, due to the rising cost of materials and equipment, which invariably resulted in higher insurance premiums. While half the respondents believed that the issue of building site theft could be handled within the industry, it was significant that:

- few respondents believe that this is likely due to an entrenched reluctance among members of the industry to become involved in tackling the crime; and
- all site managers agreed that they had not done everything in their control to minimise the problem.

Four site managers attributed their reluctance to implement effective crime prevention strategies to reduce the incidence of building site theft to the lack of direct cost implications of building site theft to themselves. These site managers indicated that costs incurred as a result of building site theft and/or vandalism were simply passed on to the consumer and/or claimed through insurance (all companies are insured against theft from building sites), even though the latter option has a cost implication in terms of increasing premiums.

Two site managers indicated that their disinclination

... "Building site theft is more of an irritation to us than a crime."

- Site Manager

to instigate crime prevention strategies was due to difficulties in implementing effective theft reduction initiatives, while three site managers indicated that they had already done everything that was economically viable and cost effective to reduce thefts and any subsequent thefts had to be "lived with".

All the respondents indicated that thefts or incidents of vandalism costing more than \$500 were reported to the local police. Some thefts that were under this amount were also reported to police, but the majority were not, as the insurance excess for building site theft applies to claims under \$500.

Knowledge of the Casey Building Site Crime Prevention Program

All respondents indicated that they had heard of the Casey Building Site Crime Prevention Program and all had received an information pack.

All site managers indicated that they considered themselves to be involved in the project, even if this view was based simply on their receipt of the information pack. About half of the respondents became "involved" in the program from its commencement in December 2001 and the other half in late January to early February 2002. The information pack was thought to be informative, practical and very useful by nine respondents. The other six had not looked at the pack.

Responses to the survey

While every one of the site managers received an information pack which included a number of copies of the survey:

- no responses at all were received from 24 site managers on the Lynbrook, while
- three surveys were returned from the site manager at King's Park.

When asked why they had not returned a survey, the reasons given by the respondents included:

- time constraints (seven);
- no reported theft to a value above \$500 was experienced by the site managers on the two sites for the duration of the Casey project (four); and
- lack of interest (three).

All of the respondents agreed, however, that the survey was well-targeted and covered all relevant and important aspects of building site theft.

One site manager suggested that the way to ensure a better response rate to the survey in the future was to distribute the survey to sub-contractors as well as to site managers.

Site posters

An integral part of the building site theft strategy was the development of signage installed at key points on each of the two estates. The signs exhorted the public to report a building site theft by dialling 000.

All site managers agreed that the posters looked good and that the message was very clear and that the signage would act as a good deterrent to would-be thieves external to the site. However, only one incident of building site theft was actually witnessed by a site manager and he rang the local police station not 000, enabling the thief to escape.

"The posters look great—it would make anyone think twice about committing theft."

- Site Manager

Findings continued...

Behavioural change as a result of the Casey project
Prior to the commencement of the project, most site managers already had a number of building site theft prevention strategies in place, including:

- structured delivery schedules to minimise the amount of time building materials are left on site;
- security patrols;
- spraying materials with the building company logo; and
- the placement of stickers on the building site warning that the company's goods were marked (even though they were not).

Most respondents (10) claimed to have changed their practices since the commencement of the Casey program. Six of the site managers claimed that they were more aware of people on building sites as well as the location of their materials on site. Two companies began marking their materials and placing stickers on their goods as a result of the Casey program. All site managers indicated that they would consider adopting other suggested strategies. Some of their proposed strategies included the installation of more fencing and gates on individual sites and more on-site surveillance (based on the observation that there is less theft on estates where residents have moved in).

" Since the program started, we have begun marking our lumber with a stencil of the company name."

- Site Manager

All but two site managers said that they would be more likely to report theft in future, although the majority (nine) conceded that they would only report thefts of goods valued at over \$500.

Cost of crime prevention projects

Site managers were quite divided over whether further outlays to prevent theft would interfere with their businesses efficiency or outlays. Four believed it would not affect profitability, while another four indicated that the extent of the crime prevention strategies they implemented would depend on the cost of the strategy (e.g. temporary fencing was considered by some respondents to be prohibitively expensive, especially on larger sites). Another two believed that crime prevention strategies were inherently cost-effective considering the amount (and cost) of materials that were stolen in a given year, and were thus worth implementing at any reasonable cost.

Responsibility for tackling building site theft

All respondents believed that the responsibility for building site theft was primarily theirs, although some (nine) respondents believed that the only way to ensure that building site theft was successfully tackled would be to ensure an integrated response from key stakeholders, including councils, insurance companies and Victoria Police in addition to themselves.

"The information pack has provided me with some good advice on how to prevent theft on my sites"

- Site Manager

Evaluation Issues

Method of Evaluation

Crime Prevention Victoria would have preferred to undertake a comprehensive impact evaluation of the Casey Building Site Crime Prevention project, using such evaluative tools as a longitudinal study to determine long-term perceptions of site managers and residents to determine:

- whether substantive safety measures had been implemented on sites post program implementation;
- if building site theft had fallen on the constructions sites; and
- whether there had been any displacement of activity to adjacent geographical areas.

However, a number of issues related to the survey precluded a comprehensive impact evaluation, including:

- the project's small scope and short time lines;
- the lack of base-line data;
- the council's simultaneous implementation of data gathering and crime prevention strategies; and
- the council's concurrent implementation of a number of crime prevention strategies making it difficult to distinguish the effectiveness of each individually.

Crime Prevention Victoria attempted to develop its own base-line data set in the absence of police data. It was proposed that the number of incidents of building site theft and/or vandalism occurring in the City of Casey in 2000/2001 be sought from insurance companies via the Housing Industry of Australia. This figure could then be divided by the number of housing applications approved during this period. This would provide a rough estimation of the rate of building site theft/vandalism in 2000/2001.

This figure could then be compared to the same calculation for the period following the

Evaluation Issues continued...

Implementation of the building site crime reduction project. However, despite numerous attempts by the evaluators to secure the number of insurance claims for building site theft/vandalism were not made available.

As a result, an intermediate evaluation was undertaken, which involved:

- a process evaluation;
- an examination of output measures where available; and
- an assessment of the impact of the project, including changes in the operating behaviour of builders and the council.

The evaluators were unable to ascertain whether any changes had occurred in recorded building site theft offences, given the lack of base-line data and the poor response to the surveys. Instead, a qualitative analysis was undertaken to ascertain the perceptions of building representatives and surrounding residents about the project (i.e. whether it raised awareness of the issue, changed behaviours, etc.).

Replicability of the Project

This project is one which lends itself to implementation in other local government areas with "greenfields" development or large-scale redevelopment sites.

Numerous project elements can be replicated. For example:

- other municipalities can amend their by-laws to provide for street lighting to be activated at the time that the first slab of a construction site is poured;
- councils and building companies can work with local media sources to promote the initiative and thereby raise awareness of the problem with residents, builders and tradesmen;
- local police can provide support to the infrastructure committee and activities of the council; and
- applications can be made to Crime Prevention Victoria for use of the signage copyrighted by the City of Casey.

These project elements need not be restricted to major building sites, but may also be replicated to a lesser degree on smaller developments. For example, small posters (A4 and A3) can be attached to fencing around sites containing a single dwelling.

Overall Project Limitations

While the project focused extensively on crime prevention measures to reduce opportunistic building site theft and vandalism, the project did not adequately address the issue of professional theft. Measures to reduce opportunistic theft can have an impact on levels of professional theft (e.g. situational prevention measures such as improved lighting and surveillance), however, this would be unlikely to deter professional thieves to any great degree.

The survey of the building site managers revealed that the vast majority of those interviewed believed that a proportion of vandalism and theft is committed by members of the construction industry working on site, working on adjacent sites or in other areas.

In addition, it has been estimated that the more costly thefts are those perpetrated by professional thieves who target specific goods and materials. For example, during the Casey project, a theft of seven left-handed doors was reported.

The project may have benefited from formal liaison with union representatives to determine their members' perspective of the extent of professional theft and whether there were any additional opportunities to address this issue. It should be noted that union membership is much more prevalent on large building sites.

Other Outcomes: Partnerships

A particularly positive aspect of the project was the consistent representation of police at the Reference Group meetings and their involvement in the development of the project. Victoria Police also supported the initiative with offers of additional police patrols.

The benefits of the project have also been widely communicated throughout the Victoria Police and other police organisations, resulting in interest being expressed by officers from wide-ranging areas experiencing a housing boom, such as Monash (where Waverley Park is being redeveloped into a housing estate) and as far away as New South Wales.

In addition, Crime Prevention Victoria is disseminating information about the building site crime prevention program to Local Safety Committees.

Recommendations

Data Collection

It is proposed that a specific category of "building site theft" be included on police reports, to enable statistics to be collected for this offence. These data can be utilised to measure the incidence and effectiveness of crime prevention projects targeting building site theft. This recommendation has been considered by the Victorian Burglary Reduction Council, which is chaired by Victoria Police.

Research

Further research is needed into potential crime prevention strategies specifically targeted at the reduction of theft on residential building sites. The inclusion of a specific category of building site theft on police reports will enable the generation of baseline data to assist researchers in investigating the underlying causes and associated costs of this crime.

On-Site Crime Prevention

Better co-ordination of delivery times could further be improved, so that materials are not left unattended for long periods of time.

Security on sites could be enforced through added provisions in local building codes. For example, fines for cluttered sites and/or increased insurance premiums for sites that are unsecured and thus more at risk from theft should be considered.

Options For The Construction Industry

In order to discourage the commission of crimes by members of the construction industry, steps could be taken to:

- revoke the licences of 'problem' builders when they have been found guilty of building site theft and/or vandalism; and
- deregister 'problem' builders from professional organisations, such as the Housing Industry Association and the Master Builders' Association. A clear definition as to what constitutes a 'problem' builder must also be developed and widely disseminated.

Employers should also conduct background checks to ensure that potential employees/sub-contractors are appropriately registered. Names of deregistered builders (and their length of deregistration) would be included in the list of 'problem' builders.

Insurance Options

As previously identified in this report, many builders elect not to report incidents of theft and vandalism if the value of equipment stolen or property damaged is lower than the insurance excess. It would be advisable to review the level of the insurance excess to determine whether a reduction may be warranted to encourage increased reporting of incidents to police and insurance companies.

**Crime Prevention Victoria
is committed to
identifying and promoting
effective practice in crime
prevention**



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