

San Diego Police Department Northern Division

Nomination
for the
Herman Goldstein Excellence
in
Problem Solving
Award

submitted by: Detective Julie Adams

San Diego Police Department
Northern Division
4275 Eastgate Mall Drive
San Diego, Ca. 92037

SUMMARY

The Construction Site Theft Series

Scanning

In August, 1998, the Northern Division of the San Diego Police Department opened a POP project in the Carmel Valley area regarding construction site burglaries. Detective Adams had received a numerous amount of reports involving thefts which had occurred at construction sites and residential homes under remodeling. All items listed as stolen property pertained to construction materials, equipment, home appliances and fixtures.

Analysis

Detective Adams obtained statistics from the Crime Analysis Unit identifying the dates, times, day of the week, location, victim, property stolen, target area, evidence recovered and beat. There was no set pattern to the burglaries. Detective Adams formed a team consisting of patrol officers, investigators working the 130's Service Area, construction workers and community members. The team brought together different groups to devise a plan to attack the problem.

The suspect(s) were unknown. The victims were multiple and varied from large construction sites to Sub-contractors and independent workers, the only common denominator was construction related materials. The locations were spread throughout the 130 Service Area, concentrating mainly on Beat 135, the Carmel

Valley area which is a very large area with numerous construction locations. The team decided to approach this problem by hardening the target instead of trying to remove a part of the triangle.

Response

After an assessment of the problem was made it was evident that the team could not remove a part of the triangle. Detective Adams and Detective Johns educated the construction workers on securing and labeling their property. They attended several meetings with Pardee Construction foremen, while officers contacted the foremen on other construction sites to teach them and their employees how to record suspicious persons and/or vehicles at the job sites.

The arrests that were made relating to construction thefts, were later identified as construction site employees, narcotics violators, and criminals with prior burglary convictions. However no suspect group or organized entity was identified.

Assessment

In January 1999 an assessment of the project was made. The assessment revealed that since October 1998, thefts and burglaries in the impact area had dropped to two per month, with no reported thefts in January 1999. (see graph)

The team surveyed the construction site foremen and found guidelines had been implemented for employees to properly mark the equipment. A better method was devised of tracking construction materials delivered to the sites. The implementation of the Migrant Liaison Officer position oversaw the migrant camps and monitored their activity.

INTRODUCTION

The Carmel Valley area of San Diego, California is a rural area, consisting of residential and commercial properties. The area also contains several agricultural farms, equestrian trails and plant nurseries. The 130's Service Area also includes the communities of La Jolla, Del Mar Heights, and Torrey Pines. Since October 1997, this entire area has suffered a total of seventy-six construction site burglaries and/or thefts. The total value loss exceeds three hundred thousand dollars.

The majority of these burglaries/thefts have occurred in the Carmel Valley area on Beat 135. There is no set pattern to the burglaries. The days and times vary as well as the items that are being taken and the locations. This problem is also occurring county-wide.

On April 17, 1998, Detective Julie Adams and Detective Lou Johns of the Northern Division initiated a meeting between several law enforcement agencies to discuss this problem and to gain information on possible solutions. The construction thefts had become a county-wide problem. In attendance were officers of the San Diego Police Department's Northern Division, Northeastern Division, and Special

Investigations Unit. Members of the Jurisdictional Unified Drug and Gang Enforcement unit, Probation Department, State Parole, Chula Vista Police Department, Carlsbad Police Department, Escondido Police Department, and San Diego County Sheriffs Office.

The purpose of this meeting was to share known information with other law enforcement agencies and departments. The meeting was also designed to identify contact persons within each agency since the problem was in fact a county wide problem. The meeting evolved into a suspect focused meeting wherein a strategy was developed to focus on known suspects.

The Crime Analysis unit and officers compiled a data base of possible burglary suspects. From this information, a tactical action plan was devised and a surveillance operation was conducted on several possible suspects. This operation did not result in any arrest and no leads were developed. It was recognized that focusing only on suspects was not the best utilization of staffing, resources and was not solving the problem. It was decided to move in the direction of hardening the targets.

On August 12, 1998, another meeting was held at the Northern Division Station to discuss the problem and community concerns regarding these burglaries. It was decided to narrow the focus of the team to a specific area due to limited staffing resources and lack of a clear commitment from other law enforcement agencies. A team was formed to combat the problem. The team consisted of Patrol and Investigations working all three watches in the 130's Service Areas.

SCANNING

The La Jolla, De! Mar and Carmel Valley communities have experienced numerous construction site burglaries. The burglaries varied from residential construction sites to commercial construction sites as well as homes under remodeling. The victims varied from large construction companies and sub-contractors to individual workers on the sites. Due to the extensive amount of new construction sites and remodeling of numerous homes in the La Jolla area, the construction workers and the property owners were concerned about the amount of thefts and how they could be reduced.

One of the concerns the community and construction workers had, was the concentration of migrant workers in the area. There was a belief by both residents

and construction workers that the migrant workers might be involved in the thefts. A survey of the area determined there were in fact a large number of migrant camps surrounding the construction sites and undeveloped lands.

ANALYSIS

Detective Adams contacted the Crime Analysis Unit and obtained statistics from October, 1997, through September, 1998, for the 130's Service Area. Crime Analysis compiled a monthly report showing the burglaries that occurred during that particular month.

The report detailing the thefts included: The dates, times, and days of the week when the thefts occurred. The location of each incident was listed, including the beats. The report also specified whether the victim was a construction company or an individual construction worker. The stolen property included construction equipment, tools, appliances, and fixtures. The report also described the target area in each case, (entire house, the garage, storage area, lot). Recovered evidence was listed, as were any cases that had viable leads.

This report was an attempt to find a common denominator between any of the incidents to establish a pattern. A request was also made for a map of the 130's Service Area to plot the individual burglary locations to narrow down a possible pattern or target area. It was discovered that most of the burglaries occurred in the Carmel Valley area. The loss in these burglaries included electrical appliances, bathroom fixtures, kitchen and bathroom cabinets, lumber that was left on pallets, personal tools of the construction workers, and construction equipment such as air compressors and forklifts. In the La Jolla area, the majority of items taken were Bobcats and heavy equipment such as skip loaders and pallet jacks.

After reviewing the statistics received from Crime Analysis and plotting the crime locations on the map it was determined that there was no set pattern. The burglaries were occurring randomly throughout the entire Service Area. However, the burglaries always occurred after work hours when no workers were present. Some of the burglaries occurred when a floating security guard was checking other areas or job sites. A few of the construction locations were burglarized more than one time.

The items stolen were not items that could be disposed of in an easy manner or sold at a pawn shop. The items could be utilized to construct or upgrade a home.

During the phases of building, items were stolen in a similar order as if someone was building a new home. As a result of the above, it was decided to pursue the problem by target hardening.

RESPONSE

Although the thefts occurred county-wide, the goal of the operation was to reduce the number of burglaries in the Carmel Valley area. The response was focused on Beat 135 because the law enforcement resources were limited, and the problem was not the same priority with other departments in other areas.

A survey sheet was developed to gather information on each construction site in the Carmel Valley area. The information gathered included the following: the address and size of the job sites; the expected completion date for the project; a business address and telephone numbers for the general contractors, site foremen, sub-contractors, and foreman; any type of security on site, such as a security guard, alarm, or guard dog; and the best point for a surveillance if needed.

Patrol officers went to the respective locations and collected the appropriate information as well as maps of the job sites and future job sites. Establishing these

contacts gave the construction industry as well as the law enforcement personnel a contact person for future concerns.

The next step was to educate the construction employees regarding job site security. The team believed the employees themselves offered the best chance to reduce these crimes. Each construction company had a monthly meeting with their site foremen to discuss problems and progress on each respective job site.

Detective Adams and Detective Johns attended these monthly meetings to educate the owners and foremen on securing their job sites and equipment. They also discussed how to properly mark their tools and equipment so it could be easily identified.

The Detectives discussed having a security guard/roving patrol and how the presence of on-site security could deter suspects. Security guards could act as a witness and record any vehicle license plates, as well as provide descriptions of persons loitering on the premises and any suspicious activities. The importance of marking/labeling equipment/tools was emphasized. The foremen and workers were educated on how it makes it harder for suspects to dispose of marked property and how it makes it easier for the police to return marked property to the rightful owner. They were taught how to record suspicious persons and/or vehicles

observed at the job sites. This training assisted the employees in securing the job site and construction materials. The education emphasized working as a team to make it harder for the suspects to commit these crimes.

One problem with this response was that a majority of victims were the sub-contractors and individual workers and not the larger construction companies. Because the larger companies were not the direct victims, they did not want to put out the extra expense to obtain some type of security such as a security guard, alarm, or fence. This made it more difficult to achieve 100 percent participation.

Officers contacted insurance companies to inquire about requirements for reimbursement. Insurance companies were unwilling to require that tools and equipment be marked or labeled in order to process a claim. Insurance companies would continue to reimburse their clients without requiring the labeling of items or proper securing of these items.

Officers were updated on a routine basis concerning any additional burglaries, property losses, and any evidence or suspect information that was obtained. Other divisions within the San Diego Police Department and adjoining law enforcement agencies were contacted to share information regarding the construction site thefts.

Our response also included enlisting the assistance of Community Relations Officers. The Community Relations Officers act as a liaison with the community and work at a satellite office within the community, giving residents a direct contact person for any concerns. The Community Relations Officers were utilized to make community presentations in the neighborhoods adjacent to the construction sites. Their purpose was to make the residents aware of the problems and enlist their assistance in locating possible witnesses and suspects.

In an effort to address the community's concerns regarding the migrants in the area, Detective Adams and Detective Johns met with the Migrant Liaison Officers working the Northeastern Division area regarding migrant camps in the Carmel Valley area. The detectives went with the Migrant Officers into the hills surrounding the construction sites and undeveloped lands in Carmel Valley. They located several large migrant camps. These camps were made of plywood and other construction materials. However, none of the plywood and construction materials were linked to any specific theft.

Detective Adams consulted with the owners of the land where the camps were located, the council members for the area, and her supervisors about the best way to handle and approach this problem. Detective Adams requested a Migrant

Liaison Officer position be implemented. She prepared a mission statement and listed goals and objectives for the position. Her recommendation was approved and a Migrant Liaison Officer was created at Northern Division and staffed accordingly. This officer assisted with conducting checks of the migrant camps for any possible stolen construction site equipment/properties.

An attempt was made to locate heavy construction equipment reported stolen from the job sites. Detective Johns contacted the California Highway Patrol and the United States Customs Service at the border crossing to check for all trucks crossing the southern border into Mexico or the northern checkpoints. Detective Johns maintained contact with the Construction Industry Crime Prevention Program relating to thefts of heavy equipment. No leads or additional information was ever developed in this area.

Officers also checked the, classified ads in the newspaper and the San Diego Reader, a local community paper. The purpose was to locate construction equipment for sale matching the description of items reported stolen from the crime cases. No leads or additional information was ever developed in this area.

ASSESSMENT

After the project was completed, the Northern Division surveyed the construction site foremen and found they had implemented guidelines for employees to properly mark the equipment, and had devised a better method of tracking construction materials delivered to the sites.

Per Crime Analysis, between October, 1997, and January, 1999, there were seventy-six construction site related burglaries in the 130's Service Area. Since November, 1998, there has been only one construction site related theft in the Carmel Valley area. This drastic reduction is a result of the education of the construction workers, the involvement of the local, adjacent community members, and the creation of the Migrant Liaison Officer.

We are continuing to monitor incoming crime cases for thefts from construction related sites. If construction site burglaries begin to reoccur, this plan will act as a guide to other officers to effectively address similar cases. These steps successfully reduced this theft problem and provided the construction employees and the community with the necessary tools to make their community a safer place to live.

The Construction Site Theft Series

October 1997 through January 1999

