

SBC COMMUNITY SAFETY TEAM

First Time Offender Research Report

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Report for the First Time Offender Research carried out by Durham University alongside Stockton Borough Council's Community Safety Team, Cleveland Police and Durham Tees Valley Probation service.

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1. Introduction

The aim of the First Time Offender Research project is to explore the reasons behind those committing offences for the first time, focussing solely on acquisitive crime (burglary, theft, vehicle crime and robbery).

The research undertaken involved sending a questionnaire to those who had been arrested for an offence for the first time within a 12 month period and had either been charged or received a caution. The questionnaire was designed to ask them about their experience and background. The questionnaire was included in an information pack that contained an informative letter about the research along with a leaflet relating to local support services that are available around Stockton.

The questionnaire was designed by a Researcher at Durham University. The questionnaire had five sections for participants to complete. The first was *'About You'* which asked the participant various questions about themselves and their personality. The second section asks the participant *'About Your Family / Neighbourhood'*. Questions within this section ask about the participant's family, such as whom the participant's family is and how relationships between them and their family members may have affected their offending behaviour. The questionnaire goes onto ask the participant about their neighbourhood, questioning the participants' perception of their neighbourhood.

The next section of the questionnaire is *'About Your Contact with the Law'*, which specifically asks about the first offence that the person was reported, charged or received a caution for.

Following this the participant is required to answer questions *'About Work and Finances'*. This section asks participants about their current financial situation and about any change that has occurred over the last two years. It requires participants to consider how their work and financial situation might influence their behaviour and how it may have had an impact upon their behaviour when they committed the offence in question.

The final section of the questionnaire is *'About Your Health and About Drugs and Alcohol'*. This section asks the participant about both their historical use of drugs and their current use. It also requires the participant to self assess how serious their use of drugs and/or alcohol is in their opinion.

At the end of the questionnaire is the opportunity for participants to voice any other personal concerns they may have about themselves that was not highlighted within the questionnaire. It gives the opportunity for participants to provide the Durham University researchers with feedback about the questionnaire which in turn could help to develop the questionnaire should it be used again.

2. Who is Involved

The principle investigator of the research was Dr. Luna Centifanti, a lecturer within the Psychology Department at Durham University. Dr. Centifanti also had assistance from two Undergraduate Students from a forensic programme at the University of Toronto, Mississauga. The research project was facilitated primarily by Cleveland Police, Stockton Council's Community Safety Team and Durham Tees Valley Probation Service. There are also a number of local support services included within the leaflet, who have supported the research.

3. Time Frame

Work on the research project began in February 2013. Regular meetings were held between Police, Stockton Borough Council's Community Safety Team and Durham Tees Valley Probation service. It was established through meetings that participants would need to have offended for the first time within the previous year, and it would be important to clearly explain the purpose of the research. It was also decided that a leaflet was to be included to inform participants of local support services that exist throughout Stockton and are accessible should they be required to assist in reducing the participants' further offending behaviour, or to assist in improving their quality of living. Local support services were contacted and informed about the project and permission was granted by a number of services to be used within the leaflet. The letters were sent out on 12th July 2013 informing those people about the research and about the leaflet and advised them to respond by returning their completed questionnaire by Monday 12th August 2013.

4. Overall aim / objectives

The aim of this research project was to identify common factors influencing offending behaviour, between people who have offended for the first time within the last year.

The level of crime relating to shoplifting offences has steadily risen since the beginning of 2011. Between April 2012 and January 2013 there were 1181 shoplifting offences, which averages out at 3.85 shoplifting offences per day. Shoplifting during this time period equated to 24.4% of all acquisitive crime offences. Stockton has a higher shoplifting rate than all its neighbouring local authorities. Out of the list of 48 people who were sent out questionnaires, 30 of those offences related to shoplifting as either a 'theft from a shop' or an 'attempt theft from a shop'.

The majority of responses received were therefore likely to be from those linked to offences relating to shoplifting. The results of the analysis by the Durham University Researcher would then identify themes and patterns between offenders of shoplifting; through various aspects of their lives assisting agencies in identifying causes behind this type of offending and enable those agencies to put measures into place to deter this behaviour.

5. Makeup of Participants

Overall 48 packs were sent out, from a list of 56 people. Some of the potential participants had to be discarded due to them now living in other areas of the UK or

different countries or for not having a known address. Three of the packs were returned to SSP due to the participant having moved addresses.

Of the 45 packs that were sent out, and not returned to us for change of addresses, there were 20 female participants and 25 male participants. The ages of those people ranged between 18 and 63 years old. Of those aged between 18 – 25, there was 17 participants. Aged between 26-35, there were 12 participants. From age 36 to 45 there was 6. Finally aged 46 upwards there was 10 participants.

The study focussed on first time offenders who have been reported, charged or cautioned for their offence. Out of the 45 people 10 were reported, 18 were charged, and 17 were cautioned with an offence for the first time within the last year.

Over half of the 45 committed offences related to shoplifting, with 29 offences being *'theft from a shop'*, and 1 offence being *'attempt theft from shop'*.

There was 1 *'theft from the person of another'*, 4 *'theft – other – including theft by finding'*, 2 *'aggravated vehicle taking - (initial taker) and vehicle damage under £5000'*, 2 *'burglary dwelling - with intent to steal'*, 2 *'burglary other than dwelling with intent to steal'*, 1 *'theft by employee'*, and finally 3 *'fraud by false representation - Fraud Act 2006'*.

6. Future Use

The Questionnaire asks participants about numerous aspects of their life, including work and financial situation, family and neighbourhood, as well as their mental and physical health, and their drug and alcohol use. This enables the researchers to gain a psychological profile for each respondent. The results of which could be beneficial from an SSP point of view as it can provide information about how support services could be developed within the Stockton Borough to target any problem areas that are raised from the profiling stage. Unfortunately the number of responses has been unsuccessful, only receiving one completed questionnaire. Further use of this particular piece of research would not be possible for analysis.

However, a further development that may come out of this project could be the distribution of the leaflet within various venues and organisations who deal with offenders. The leaflet could be distributed to support services that currently work with offenders but may require further support from other agencies and organisations.

It could be distributed to services who work with families of offenders. Another place it could be distributed is throughout custody suites for offenders to take on leaving custody. Meaning it would be available for those who are not just offending for the first time, but may have done so numerous times. This will raise the awareness of those offending; about support services that exist within their local area and may encourage them and assist in the first step to gaining access to any support that they require to prevent them from reoffending in the future.

At the last SSP meeting a discussion also took place exploring the potential for offenders to be referred to a welfare rights officer to see if they were receiving the correct support in relation to benefits and allowances.

7. Conclusion / Recommendations

Unfortunately, due to the low response rate it is impossible to analyse any results from the research. However below are a number of recommendations and changes that could be made should this type of research ever be carried out in the future.

Firstly, should this research be repeated in future it may be worth considering the possibility of sending out letters, before sending all the information packs, inviting people to take part in the research and providing them with the opportunity to give permission for the Police to pass on their address details and details of their previous offences to the SSP. This means that those carrying out the research will know what the likely response rate will be; allowing them to make the decision whether or not the research will be worth carrying out.

Secondly it may be worth considering expanding the list of potential participants to include crimes that are non-acquisitive or to expand the area from which potential participants are chosen from.

In conclusion taking this research at this point any further forward is not possible, future use of such research would require changes to be made. However, future use and development of the information leaflet could be done carried out and its distribution used in a variety of locations and by numerous services and agencies.