RURAL CAR PARK CRIME

PARKING PRACTICE NOTES
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BRITISH PARKING ASSOCIATION
RURAL CAR PARK CRIME

Thefts from vehicles left at rural beauty spots and places of interest generate particular annoyance and inconvenience for victims. The offences also impact on crime figures and police performance. Many rural car parks throughout the United Kingdom have experienced spates of car crime at one time or another.

Victims are often tourists and visitors who arrive without a perception of crime at such pleasant locations. Fine weather, enjoyable countryside and a holiday atmosphere combine to reduce the precautions visitors would usually take. The high incidence of valuables, especially bankcards, phones, cash, handbags and cameras, left on display bear witness to the absence of crime awareness.

Criminals have the advantage of knowing that vehicles left at these locations often present an easy target. Owners will frequently leave cars for many hours as they undertake lengthy walks or other pursuits.
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CONSTRANTS

This Parking Practice Note addresses crime in rural car parks by applying both the principles of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) and more traditional methods. It must be accepted though that an absence of a power supply and the need to respect rural aesthetics render it difficult to apply the principles applied to urban situations. However, we aim to demonstrate how cost effective practical measures can be applied to reduce car crime. The obligation to respect planning constraints and to balance measures for sensitive areas that include National Trust, Forestry Commission and areas of outstanding natural beauty is acknowledged.

BOUNDARY TREATMENT

Boundary treatment should not obscure natural surveillance from passing vehicular and pedestrian traffic. The typical fencing or walled car park perimeters associated with urban car parks are unlikely to be an appropriate or useful solution for rural facilities. It is necessary though to clearly define the extent of the authorised parking area. Earth mounds are frequently used to both mark the boundary and deter vehicles from straying onto surrounding land. Mounds are very helpful from a crime prevention view as they control entry and exit routes. Potential criminals, almost always in vehicles, are limited to using specific designated routes. It is well recognised that crime is reduced if thieves have to pass back through the route by which they arrive. It is sensible then to reduce access and egress points to the minimum number that still offers convenient use.

BARRIERS

Height barriers are often important to control unauthorised use of rural car parks by caravans. This must be weighed against ease of access for official vehicles and vendors vans. Some locations have become popular with car thieves as sites to abandon and set fire to stolen cars. In these circumstances a low lockable barrier for night use is an option.

VISIBILITY FROM ROAD

Authorities should be dissuaded from locating car parks where they are completely hidden from public view. Sunken car parks located in depressions or so distant from the road to prevent natural surveillance are likely to encourage crime. At such locations, efforts to introduce another form of surveillance, such as visiting rangers or an ice cream vendor should be encouraged.

LIGHTING

Whilst lighting should always be considered it is rarely an option nor is it desirable unless the car park has regular legitimate night time usage. That said, all options should be site specific and the use of solar/wind powered lighting is a creditable option that may be preferred by some local authorities. Almost all thefts from vehicles occur during daylight hours. When lighting is appropriate, vandal resistant units are essential. The majority of unlit car parks empty just prior to dusk this means less vehicles are left and fewer people around to deter/detect criminal activity.
NATURAL SURVEILLANCE

The degree of natural surveillance that a car park enjoys will directly influence susceptibility to crime. It is often possible to improve surveillance by the sensible management of the tree canopy and the height of shrubbery. Ideally a vision gap between bushes to a maximum height of one metre and tree branches no lower than two metres should be maintained.

If picnic benches are provided they should be placed relatively close to parking areas. Visitors may choose to face away from cars but their presence will still provide a deterrent.

CAPABLE GUARDIANS

The introduction of a capable guardian is the most positive of all disincentives to commit crime. In crime ‘hot-spots’ a staff member selling tickets to visitors will eliminate or at least dramatically reduce crime. Where this is impractical a number of alternative options are often possible. A tourist information centre or even a ticket hut will offer a worthwhile deterrent.

An ice cream vendor or other food outlet will provide a good deterrent and may provide a possible source of income to the car park operator. The location of the vendor’s vehicle should maximise discouragement to commit crime.

Other crime prevention initiatives could include the local Neighborhood Watch group having a table or crime prevention trailer and offering security advice handing out leaflets in the car park. The siting of a local windscreen repair service operating from a vehicle and repairing minor damage to windscreens.

The ACPO initiative CSAS -Community Safety Accreditation Scheme and the use of accredited persons to work in partnership with the police. Having accredited rangers to carryout patrols of rural areas has had positive results in Maldon, Essex.

If possible, advertise a mobile telephone number by which a ranger or other official may be contacted. The provision of fresh looking information leaflets and display boards offer a cared for and frequented atmosphere. A policy to speedily repair damage and faults will avoid a neglected and uncared for impression.

Steering pedestrians around the edge of the car park can encourage additional pedestrian traffic. If on a bus route it may be possible to have the stop within the car park. This has been achieved at Ditchling Beacon.
SIGNS

Signs offer a number of crime prevention opportunities at rural car park locations. Firstly the clear identification of a beauty spot will permit accurate crime recording and the ready identification of crime ‘hot spots.’ Additionally, crime prevention messages sensitive to local needs should be displayed. A reminder not to leave valuables and to lock vehicles should be the minimum message. At other locations more pointed messages such as the Home Office poster ‘THIEVES OPERATE IN THIS AREA’ are more likely to convey the right signal to visitors.

A reluctance to display any crime prevention message is often expressed by authorities responsible for beauty spot car parks. The reason given being that the wrong image is created by the suggestion of crime. By the use of persuasion it is usually possible to arrange for a warning to be displayed. The lack of any warning resulting in higher crime inevitably leads to greater public dissatisfaction in the long term.

CASH COLLECTION

Where a parking charge is levied, particular care is necessary not to introduce unnecessary risks. Collection boxes should be sited where they are difficult to ram with a vehicle. They should be frequently emptied and signed to this effect.

POLICE INITIATIVES

Whilst it is obviously not possible to provide a police officer in all vulnerable car parks much can be done by police to provide a powerful deterrent to crime. A police presence offers the ultimate deterrent and there is evidence to indicate that police initiatives are very worthwhile.

A long running Sussex initiative in Lewes District in connection with rural car crime is ‘Operation Greenpark’.

Police officers, supported by volunteer cadets and special constables, undertake regular visits to locations known to suffer from criminal activity. Advice packs are used to warn motorists not to leave valuables on display or in their cars.

Horsham Crime Prevention Panel undertakes visits to beauty spot car parks on bank holidays throughout spring, summer and autumn to undertake a car park watch. The scheme offers a physical presence and leaflet distribution. Under the banner ‘On display - easy prey’ the owner of a car seen to have unattended property is sent an advisory letter.

Consideration should be given to the Cleaner Neighbourhoods and Environments Act 2005 in relation to leaflet distribution (placing leaflets on motor vehicle windscreens) as this could be a littering offence. Permission from the local authority or land owner should be sought before the initiative commences.

Sussex Police West Downs Division has responded to beauty spot car park crime by encouraging Neighbourhood Watch members to volunteer and provide a presence at known crime ‘hot-spots’. Index numbers of visiting cars are recorded by co-ordinators in a non-confrontational manner.
The collated information indicates that known thieves visit many car parks on a single day without a crime occurring. The scheme, code named Operation Grouse, and initiated in 1998 has seen offences reduced by 65%.

Cross border communication has been much improved between Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire in the Midhurst and Petworth area by linking Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinators from the different police areas. This system has allowed an improved flow of information irrespective of police staff and policy changes.

CONCLUSION

The diverse character of car parks requires a site-specific approach adapted for each individual situation. Not all of the suggested measures can be implemented at each site. Careful consideration and liaison with those responsible for managing the parking areas will always allow for improvements to be made. On occasions a novel solution may present itself. Although not yet implemented, the proposal of a CCTV scheme informally monitored from the village pub appeals as one excellent community response to a local crime problem. CCTV systems have their limitations due to the lack of power and light in rural areas. Where crime is a problem rapid deployment mobile CCTV cameras may be available from the local police on a short term basis, another is wireless systems. For CCTV read the PPN-CCTV.

Partnerships will enable work to be undertaken to reduce crime at beauty spots and other rural locations. Additional or specific advice can be obtained free of charge from your local policing team or crime reduction advisor/officer. Details are available from your local police web sites.

Crime Prevention Design Advisers (CPDA) or Architectural Liaison Officers (ALO) should be consulted when designing a new parking facility. Their details can be obtained from local police web sites or www.securedbydesign.com
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