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CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS

BY MEANS OF PROJECTS

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*Summary of the report
'Projectmatig rechercheren'*

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Criminal Investigation by means of projects

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1. Introduction

In 1979 the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice launched a national research which involves a number of studies into the effects of new methods, introduced by the police to combat crime, especially petty crime(1).

One of the studies covered the activities in the burglary project conducted by the criminal investigation department of the Utrecht municipal police.

Utrecht, a city of 240.000 inhabitants geographically located at the centre of the country, has a municipal police force of about 850 employees (sworn plus civilian). Since 1976 the Utrecht police force has been discussing the functions of the police. As an outcome of these discussions a process of internal changes will be started. The uniformed police will get a broader task; not only maintaining order and providing assistance, but also crime detection and crime prevention and traffic-supervision and regulation. The criminal investigation department will be organized into specialized units.

As a part of these changes a number of studies were set up, especially the criminal investigation department. These studies covered such aspects as workload, case management and clearance rates for various categories of crimes. The low clearance rates for burglary and theft led to a project being set up, the aim being to increase the clearance rates by devoting special attention to this area.

This project was started at december 1978.

This article presents an account of the reasons for starting the project and of the features of its organization. The results of the study will be discussed in relation to the aims of the burglary project (2).

2. Features of the burglary project

The results of internal studies by the Utrecht police force and previous experiences with projects had pointed to the importance of management and coordination in criminal investigation. It was decided to set up a team of detectives who would be excused from "normal" duties to take special responsibility for clearing cases of burglary and theft. The attempt to achieve better control and coordination is one of the main features of the project; the others are:

- a. availability of information and time in order to conduct investigation;
 - b. presence of a project coordinator;
 - c. administrative support and processing;
 - d. working conditions;
 - e. involvement of the patrol branch.
- a. The main difference between the methods used by the criminal investigation department and those of the project team are that the latter starts the investigations with information available on possible offenders and on related cases of burglary and theft; the team do not tackle every single case as it is reported. More time for investigation is available because the project is excused from "normal duties".
 - b. A project coordinator is responsible for the day-to-day supervision of activities; he has a general overview of the cases being dealt with under the project and distributes the work among the detectives in the team. It is important that each member knows what the others are doing. Information is exchanged in a meeting to be held at the start of each day. In contrast to the situation in the criminal investigation department, a detective in the project team cannot decide on his own to the same extent whether he will tackle or continue investigating a particular case. The project coordinator allocates a certain case to him and inquires regularly (virtually daily) into the progress being made.
 - c. The project builds to a considerable degree on the available information, to which all members of the project must have access. Two systems

have been set up for this purpose: one files details of all cases as they are reported (the case file) and the other record details of possible suspects (the persons file). Information, including that from the Criminal Intelligence, is filed as it comes in to form a sort of data bank on burglary and theft.

An administrative assistant is employed under the project to keep the files up to date.

The way in which solved cases are dealt with has also been adapted. Suspects' statements are recorded in draft on a standard form so that they do not have to be typed out several times. The official report is then drawn up in a more or less standardized fashion.

- d. Unlike the criminal investigation department, the project team works a normal working day. Thus greater regularity has been introduced into the service, although it is possible in the course of an investigation into a case to make overtime in the evenings or on the weekends. As the project concentrates on burglary and theft, other offences will normally be dealt with only if they come to light when a suspect is being questioned.
- e. The role of the patrol branch in detective matters was limited in the past (in Utrecht and other forces). Efforts were made in Utrecht to involve the patrol branch gradually in criminal investigation by allowing it, for instance, to detect petty crimes.

In view of the proposed changes of the police force the patrol branch will probably be confronted with crime and crime detection more frequently in the future. This means that patrol officers should also have experienced detective work. It was argued that participation of the patrol branch in the project could therefore have a dual effect: less pressure on the criminal investigation department and a training ground for patrol officers. Consequently both detectives and patrolmen have participated in the project from the start.

There have been changes in the way in which the patrolmen participated in the project. At first, different patrol officers took part in the project every week. They were then given a special task such as watching

premises or following certain persons. They also operated from the stationhouses. This arrangement soon proved unsatisfactory because the patrol officers did not feel sufficiently involved in the project. Another form of participation was therefore adopted; patrol officers were involved in the project for two weeks as a rule and were based at the central station. Each was made responsible, together with a detective, or another patrol officer, for a particular case. Once the project had been operating for some time it was not unusual for a patrol officer to join the project through an "own" case. He was then given the opportunity to deal with a case, which he had encountered in the course of his patrol duties, under the project. He was excused from patrol work during this period.

In general the project team consisted of four to five detectives (10% of the capacity of the criminal investigation department) and six to eight patrol officers (2% of the capacity).

3. Aims of the burglary project.

The main purpose of the project was to achieve better management of criminal investigations: better coordination and distribution of the work should result in increased clearance rates for burglary and theft.

The project had three main aims:

1. to increase the clearance rates for burglary and theft;
2. to operate more efficiently; i.e. to achieve better results with relatively less manpower;
3. to counter groups of offenders, who operate on a regional or national basis as well as in the city of Utrecht.

The secondary aims of the project included an increase in the clearance rates for other offences, the arrest of receivers of stolen goods and drugsdealers, greater job-satisfaction and greater involvement of the patrol branch in criminal investigations.

4. Study

The R.D.C. studied the results achieved by the burglary project in its first six months, in order to discover to what extent the project had

achieved the above three main aims in particular. The study also covered possible side-effects of the project but they were not explicitly evaluated. The study used data on reported crimes from police files and official records in 1978 (a period of a year before the start of the project) and in the first half of 1979 (after the start of the project). Data on offenders were gathered from the records of the General Documentation of the Ministry of Justice; and information on the workload came from the case agenda of the project. Interviews with members of the project revealed data on job satisfaction and job involvement.

5. Results

The study revealed that the burglary project had contributed to a considerable increase in the clearance rate for burglary in comparison to previous years. In 1977 and 1978 respectively 17.1% and 17.4% of the recorded cases of burglary were solved. By the end of September 1979, 24.6% (403 out of 1637) of the cases of burglary recorded in the first half of the year - the start of the project - had been solved; this represented an increase of 40% over 1978. The solution of more than half of the cases was attributable to the project. The percentage of thefts solved in the first half of 1979 remained more or less the same as in the two previous years and was about 11% (119 out of 1071). By far the majority of these cases were solved by the project team.

The study did not investigate whether the existence of the project had a negative or positive effect on the clearance rate for other offences. In view of the fact that the project solved not only cases of burglary and theft, but many other offences too, it may be concluded that it is unlikely to have led to a decrease in the clearance rate for other crimes. Two thirds of the offences solved by the project were not cases of burglary. Acts of aggression such as assault and robbery were included too.

Moreover, the positive effect on the detection of burglaries and other crimes is greater than can be deduced simply from the clearance rates, since this figure does not cover those cases which were not reported to the police. In 1979 the number of unreported cases solved was re-

lately much higher than in the previous year (about 26% in 1979 compared to about 6% in 1978).

Attempts were made to discover whether the cases which were solved under the project differed from those solved in 1978. Data from the official reports revealed that differences were the presence of clues at the time the case was reported and the number of offenders being caught in the act. There was relatively more often a lack of clues in the cases solved under the project (65% in 1978 as compared to 86% under the project) and there was only a very limited number of cases where the offenders were caught in the act (16% in 1978 compared to 2% under the project).

The second aim of the project also seems to have been achieved. Although only rough figures are available for the average time spent on a case, it is fair to say that on average less time was spent in solving a case under the project than was to be expected from previous studies (3) and from internal estimates made by the Utrecht police (4).

Moreover, the number of days between the date when the offence was reported and the date on which the case was solved (i.e. the date the official report was signed by the offender) was shorter under the project. This may be of importance to both the offender and the victim; the offender knows where he stands as soon as possible and the victim sees that the police has worked on the case with success.

The third aim of the project was related to the persons who would be arrested. It could not be concluded from the research data that the project led to the arrest of persons who were involved in crimes on a greater scale i.e. in an organized form.

An explanation for this could be the flexible set-up of the project. At the outset the principal aim was to solve cases of burglary. However, fairly soon after the project got under way persons were arrested who were suspected of all kinds of other offences, so that the project also began to deal with shoplifting, theft from cars, assault, robbery, etc. It would have been unreasonable to suppose that the members of the project should leave these cases in the meantime since they were not cases of burglary. Because of this flexible attitude towards cases which reached the project, the field of activity expanded to cover all sorts

of petty crime.

The expansion was partly the result of the discussions held within the police force - and which are still in progress - on the functions of the police and the priorities within the whole range of police activities. In view of the emphasis that was to be placed on combatting petty crime, the burglary project was considered as a type of cooperation between the criminal investigation department and the patrol branch. The latter would then be able to acquire the necessary knowledge and experience so that it could later carry out detective work independently as an integral part of the police task.

Although the third aim was not achieved, the study did reveal that two types of offenders were arrested under the project: the first type (over 50% of those arrested) had previously been convicted for three or more offences against property; the second type (almost 30% of those arrested) had no previous convictions. A relatively large number of the latter type were young persons who had broken into public buildings and committed burglaries in canteens and sports centres in peer groups.

However, in addition to these peer groups, there were relatively more persons charged compared to the previous year who had committed a large number of offences on their own. They included a relatively large number of drug-users. These results supported the suspected connection between drug use and petty crime, which was one of the reasons for setting up the project. Compared to 1978, more people were arrested through the project whom the police knew to be drug-users (mostly hard drugs); 21% in 1978 and 44% in 1979. These figures become 43% and 71% respectively when drug use is related to the number of cases solved. They were mainly cases of burglary in private homes, thefts from cars and shop-lifting. An important secondary aim of the project was to arrest drugs-dealers and receivers. The point of this was to prevent potential offenders from turning to crime and to keep the damages suffered by the victim to a minimum by returning the stolen goods. A total of 80 cases in which receiving was involved were solved under the project. In 58 cases both the name of the offender and of the receiver of the stolen goods

was known to the police; in 22 cases the receivers' name only was known. Besides a large number of offenders who were using and dealing drugs, nine cases of trafficking in drugs were dealt with.

6. The experiences of the members of the project team

The aim of the project was to achieve better results in solving cases of burglary and theft by means of a new form of organization. If a new type of organization is to remain successful it is important that it should have the support of those who participate in it. In deciding whether the burglary project should be made more permanent, the experiences of those involved should therefore be taken into account together with the quantitative results. A number of the detectives and patrol officers who participated in the project were therefore interviewed.

The detectives were questioned about the differences between the "normal" method of working and that of the project and also about the method they preferred. The questions were related to the five characteristics mentioned earlier, i.e. management of the workload, degree of independence, cooperation with others, tracing and questioning suspects, administrative support, and working conditions.

The participation of the patrol officers could be seen partly as an increase in the capacity of the criminal investigation department. However, this was not the only objective; their participating was also with the aim of gaining experience of criminal investigation which could be incorporated in their patrol duties. The patrol officers were therefore asked about their experiences of criminal investigation, about the supervision they had received in the course of the work and on the possibilities of putting this experience into practice in the patrol branch.

Both the detectives and the patrol officers found participation in the project beneficial but not simply from the point of view of work management, working conditions and job-satisfaction.

The detectives were of the opinion that working with information systems such as the persons and case files, the daily meetings and, the presence of a project coordinator, made it possible to manage and coordinate the enormous quantity of work.

Under the project each detective could concentrate on the case assigned to him by the project coordinator which was not the case when working for the criminal investigation department.

The loss of independence was not considered a disadvantage even though preference was generally given to working independently; this applied in particular to the more experienced detectives. Nor was there objection to the continual supervision by the project coordinator. This was considered necessary if the work was to be distributed fairly and to minimize the chances of being distracted by side-issues.

The detectives felt that no problems of cooperation arose from the fact that patrol officers were also included in the project. It took time to supervise the latter but in the criminal investigation department the supervision of trainees or recruits was not unusual, though it happened less often. There was no fixed division of tasks among detectives and patrol men; it was usually decided on an ad hoc basis, the questioning of suspects and the drawing up of official reports often being done by the detectives because of the patrol officers' lack of experience in this respect.

Apart from the greater control of the workload, the detectives considered the principal advantages of the burglary project to be the greater amount of time to work on a case and the administrative support. Since they had been excused from the routine activities they had more time to work on a case and, moreover, the greater time allowed to hold suspects in police detention (on a custody order issued by the public prosecutor) gave the police more scope than when suspects were simply detained for questioning.

Better use could be made of the information available in the persons- and case files during questioning. More attention could also be paid to the suspect, the situation in which he had landed himself and the circumstances which had led him to commit the crime. Because of the greater amount of time devoted to questioning the suspect, more cases often came to light. These could be noted fairly quickly because of

the special format of the official report; so it was not very time-consuming.

The few points of criticism expressed by the detectives related to the motivation to participate. By placing the emphasis on burglary and theft, the work became one-sided and boring after a while. Some also felt that specialist detective experience was called upon too little. The work of the burglary project often began by questioning a suspect; there was in fact no investigative work. Another point was the regular working hours; most detectives preferred irregular shift work to fixed hours, mostly for personal reasons.

The patrol officers also found their experiences favourable or highly favourable. By participating in the burglary project most of them had gained a considerable amount of experience in criminal investigation. The officers praised the way in which they were supervised by the project coordinator and the detectives; partly because they were not given strictly defined tasks but had scope to carry out certain activities independently including the questioning of suspects and the drawing up of official reports. They also considered supervision necessary, especially in the first few days of joining the project, in order to become acquainted with the organization and the methods of working.

They felt that they had gained experience of many different fields, the most important being the questioning of suspects, the drawing up of official reports and the method of dealing with suspects. Not only was more time and information available, they had also learned how to begin questioning and how information had to be introduced at the right time. They discovered that drawing up an official report on a crime was different to drawing up one on an infringement of traffic regulations or some other minor offence. They also put themselves more in the place of the suspect, asking themselves what kind of a person it was and why he might have committed the offence.

Although they were now prepared to carry out detective work in the patrol branch, most patrol officers saw little scope for a practical application

of what they had learned. They did consider that they had gained more self-confidence and would certainly not shrink from tackling a case themselves if the occasion arose.

Thanks to their participation in the project they now knew how to contact the criminal investigation department or other branches in the force for assistance if necessary.

The patrol branch criticized the way in which they became involved in the project and the duration of their participation. They too pointed to the danger of one-sidedness and boredom and suggested that in order to prevent this, participation should be on a voluntary basis or with a view to solving a case of one's own. This would increase motivation. They considered two weeks rather too short to gain experience and would have preferred a longer period, say a month. The patrol officers also preferred irregular shift work to the fixed hours of the project, here also as with the detectives, for personal reasons.

7. Conclusions

The results of the study show that the project largely succeeded in achieving its aims. The question arises as to whether the results achieved may be specifically ascribed to the project and whether they are due to any particular aspects.

The approach to a project such as the burglary project can be seen as a sort of strike force, a special unit of detectives and/or patrol officers set up to tackle a particular problem. The members of such a unit are excused from normal duties in order to work more efficiently. As far as we know, few studies have been made on the effects of strike forces. An American study by the Rand Corporation into the effectiveness of criminal investigation departments (The Criminal Investigation Process, 1975) (5) discusses two strike forces in detail, a robbery unit and a burglary unit.

Both were successful but the authors of the Rand-report did raise a few questions in this respect.

They wondered what specific contribution had been made by the strike force. In their opinion this is difficult to determine, since the best detectives are often placed in the strike force. In addition they have more time since they are excused from routine work. They are also usually better equipped. In their opinion it is possible that cases which would otherwise be tackled by the criminal investigation department or patrol branches are given to the strike force.

The Rand Corporation's report concluded that it is possible to tackle problems by means of strike forces but care must be taken not to relapse after a successful initial period but to continue striving towards the set goal and not to assign all sorts of other tasks to the strike force as well.

The Utrecht project had a number of the characteristics of a strike force; a special unit, specially set up to tackle a certain problem; the members excused from normal duties; certain facilities such as administrative support. In addition it was a continuation of the type of investigation method recommended in the Rand study: the importance of coordination and management and the importance of processing and filing the information which reaches the police.

To what extent do the questions raised by the Rand report apply to the burglary project?

It may be assumed that the additional manpower and the greater amount of time made available for criminal investigation on certain offences will result in more of these cases being solved. In this sense the achievement of the aims of increasing the clearance rate and efficiency more or less follows automatically from the form of organization.

It transpired from the interviews with the members of the project, especially the detectives, that the amount of time available for criminal investigation differed significantly from the situation in the criminal investigation department. The study did not investigate whether the work of the criminal investigation department or the patrol branch was affected by the fact that some of their staff were released for work on

the project. This was because there was a degree of flexibility; when necessary, detectives and patrol men were returned to their branches and the burglary project continued at a slower pace. However, it is possible that the emphasis on petty crime and the use of additional manpower to combat it were at the expense of the detection of serious crime and maintenance of law and order.

It was definitely not the case that only the detectives and patrol officers with the most experience were assigned to the burglary project. Both detectives with little and those with considerable experience participated in the project. As far as the patrol officers were concerned, a large number of them had only been in the police force for a few years. The composition of the project team also changed regularly. The technical facilities available to the project were neither better nor worse than those available to the criminal investigation department, but the project did have its own administrative assistant.

The comment made in the Rand Corporation's report that a strike force takes over some of the work from the criminal investigation department or the patrol branch probably applies to the burglary project with respect to thefts but not with respect to burglaries.

Moreover, patrol officers were given the opportunity to solve their own cases under the project.

In our view, it was not simply because of the extra manpower and time that the burglary project succeeded in solving burglaries and other offences. An important feature of the project was the coordinator who was responsible for dividing the work, managing the workload and overseeing the progress made on the various cases. Another feature was the arranging of information in the persons and case files, so that the information available in the police force could be used as effectively as possible. In our opinion these two features in particular are important for increasing the efficiency of criminal investigation.

8. Discussion and recommendations

To conclude we should like to discuss a number of points which are not only relevant to the Utrecht project but which could also be of relevance to other police forces if they should decide to carry out criminal investigation on the basis of projects.

The burglary project looked for a number of ways of making more efficient use of the time available by, for instance, filing information systematically, using draft statements and by administrative support for non-detective work.

A relatively large number of persons who had committed numerous offences were arrested under the project. The questioning of these people, but particularly drawing up all the statements, looking for the records of the offences afterwards and drawing up the lengthy official reports are extremely time-consuming.

Maintaining or bringing about a good relationship between the police and public and strengthening the feelings of safety and security of the public definitely makes it important that the public or the victim will see that the police is fulfilling its crime-detection role, and that as many cases as possible are solved. The question arises as to what is more important at a given moment: continuing questioning a suspect in the hope that he will admit more offences or stopping the questioning, even if there are grounds for believing that the suspect has probably committed more offences than he has admitted to, in order to arrest and question other suspects. It is conceivable that the average amount of time required to solve a case would be reduced even more if the latter approach were adopted. Moreover, from the point of view of prevention it is probably better to charge more people than solve more cases.

Consideration could also be given as to whether time would be saved by making a choice in the offences to be included in the summons and those to be added to the official report in the form of an appendix, after consulting the public prosecutor on the offender's character and the offences committed. It is possible that this would

not only save the time of investigation when drawing up the official report but would also simplify the administrative procedure.

A police force wishing to introduce a burglary project should bear a few particular points in mind. A project entails first and foremost that additional manpower is used for activities which were previously dealt with on a less intensive scale. The extra manpower will have to come from somewhere in the police force and this could be done by expressly involving the patrol branch in detective activities. The patrol branch could be included in a project or - a more radical step - criminal investigation could be introduced into the range of tasks of the patrol branch. This is a considerably more involved step than the temporary assignment of a few policemen to a project being carried out by the criminal investigation department, and its consequences for the entire police force will have to be examined (6).

If the police are to devote more attention to the detection of petty crime, less attention may be devoted to other activities (such as the detection of serious crime or order maintenance). However, these tasks will still have to be carried out in the interests of the public. The Utrecht police force therefore does not consider a project aimed at detecting petty crime as a definitive choice for a method of conducting criminal investigations. Such a project is seen as an intermediate step, a transition to the extended functions of the patrol branch. Patrolmen are given the opportunity of gaining the necessary detective experience. They could then tackle petty crime within the patrol branch itself in future so that the criminal investigation department could concentrate on more serious crimes.

The interviews with the patrol officers in Utrecht clearly revealed that by participating in the burglary project they had gained experience of detective work which up till then had been lacking and that they had gained the confidence to carry out detective work themselves if the occasion arose.

The question remains whether the success of the burglary project should lead to the conclusion that criminal investigation should be done as much as possible in the form of projects. There would seem to be a danger that carrying out detective work in the form of projects for all sorts of petty and serious crime would lead to small independent groups of detectives being formed with the subsequent danger that it would become difficult to manage and coordinate the police force. It could therefore be decided to use project for petty crime as a training ground for the patrol branch and then to reserve the project approach for the more serious crimes which would continue to be dealt by the criminal investigation department.

Setting priorities in criminal investigation will entail searching for ways of achieving these priorities as well as possible. In Utrecht an important aspect of the success of the burglary project was the fact that the information available in the policefiles was used more frequently when questioning suspects. The information also often made it possible to detain a suspect for further questioning.

Owing to a lack of time and information, suspects were rarely detained in the criminal investigation department but released after brief questioning. On the other hand virtually every suspect arrested under the burglary project was detained under an order from the public prosecutor.

A police force considering setting up a project along the lines of the burglary project should also pay attention to the duration of participation. In order to ensure the best possible motivation, the duration of the participation of detectives should be kept to a certain maximum, say about two months.

On the other hand the patrol officers should be assigned to the project for a certain minimum period, say two weeks. The interviews with the members of the Utrecht patrol branch revealed that there would be greater motivation to join the project if it were done on a voluntary basis or with a view to solving one's own cases.

A separate issue is the relationship between crime and drug use, which was particularly highlighted in the burglary project.

The results of the Utrecht study indicate that a police force which intends to devote extra attention to petty crime will have to be prepared for the fact that persons will be arrested who have never in trouble with the police before, including a large number of persons who have turned to crime partly because of drug use. This could entail leaving scope for some kind of assistance for drug users when planning a project; for instance early intervention from rehabilitation agencies (7), or giving suspects the opportunity to consult a lawyer. It is doubtful whether intervention of this kind is sufficient; it might be better to look for other types of assistance such as including a social worker in the project team. On the other hand it would seem desirable for the police to take on the function of spotting where help is needed especially where first offenders and drug addicts are concerned.

NOTES

1. The Studiecommissie Normering Recherchewerkzaamheden (Study Group on the Standardization of Criminal Investigation Activities) brought out a report in April 1970 entitled "Rapport inzake normering van recherchewerkzaamheden ter vaststelling van de recherchesterkte" (Report on the Standardization of Criminal Investigation Activities with a view of Determining Manpower).
2. This article is a summary of E.G.M. Nuijten-Edelbroek and J.B. ter Horst "Projectmatig Recherchen" (Criminal Investigation by Means of Projects), Research and Documentation Centre, Ministry of Justice, The Hague, March 1980.
3. A detailed discussion of this research project is given in the RDC report "Experimenten Opsporings- en Verbaliserings- beleid: achtergrond, doelstellingen en opzet van de experimenten" (Experiments in Policy on Tracing and Investigating Offenders: background, aims and organization), Research and Documentation Centre, Ministry of Justice, The Hague January 1980.
4. These internal estimates are stated in the "NOR, le rapport" (First NOR report) by the Utrecht municipal police, spring 1979. The NOR is an internal working party of the Utrecht municipal police.
5. Peter W. Greenwood, Joan Peterselia, Jan M. Chaiken and Linda Prusoff, "The Criminal Investigation Process", Rand Corporation, 1975.
6. The changes planned in the Utrecht police force are along these lines.
7. In the Netherlands rehabilitation (probation and parole) agencies can provide early assistance for suspects kept in police detention. This means that the agency intervenes at an early stage in the proceedings and contacts suspects to see whether they are in need of help. The term early intervention is used to denote this work of the rehabilitation agencies.
See also E.G.M. Nuijten-Edelbroek and L.T.M. Tigges, "Early Intervention by a Probation Agency: A Netherlands Experiment", The Howard Journal, vol XX 1980, pp 42-51

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