

## ***Radio Links Article***

### **“Radio Links: a case study of a cost effective approach to crime and disorder”**

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This paper will discuss the national debate surrounding crime reduction, police patrol and public reassurance within the context of radio links. It will relate the story of the development of three such systems, primarily within the West Midlands Police area and review the research into their effectiveness. This paper will argue that notwithstanding the limited available research, the extent of current public participation and interest in radio links merits their more detailed consideration by academics and security practitioners. It will also be argued that the search for the means to reassure the public through funding the provision of an alternative ‘policing presence’ is fundamentally flawed. The reduction of crime and disorder should begin with the creation of safer communities through ‘participative reassurance’ and not be considered achievable solely through the provision of ‘symbolic reassurance’ by the police, the security industry or local authorities. It will conclude by considering the situation of a local authority or police force seeking to meet their statutory obligation to reduce crime and disorder under the terms of Section 5 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. 2

#### **Retail Radio Link**

This case study of radio links begins with an incident during the autumn of 1991, when a violent thief travelled from Birmingham to Wolverhampton and stole clothing from a store. The thief, confronted by the store detective assaulted him and ran off. He was pursued by the store detective, who was by now on his own and operating without the knowledge of any of his colleagues, other retail security staff or the police. The thief was eventually cornered on a bus and as a result of telephone calls from local shops and a message from the bus company the police were informed and following a further violent struggle the thief was overpowered and arrested.

The inability of the store detective to communicate with anyone was in stark contrast to the police officers, for should a similar incident have occurred involving the police they would have used their personal radio to summon help. It was clear that there was no reason for retailers not to enjoy such similar benefits. Following representations by the police, funding was secured by the Wolverhampton Chamber of Commerce from the Home Office Safer Cities Project to purchase a radio base station and aerial. Individual stores purchased their own radios with the system, entitled ‘Retail Radio Link’, being launched by the then Chief Constable of the West Midlands Police in December 1992. A ‘Radio Link’ has been defined as, *‘a radio communication system linking members together, ideally with the police’*. 3

Initially the system was used exclusively to tackle incidents of intimidation of retail staff by thieves and their associates. It quickly became obvious that the ability to forewarn retail staff and security personnel of the exact location and description of thieves in the town centre, was a major factor in achieving joint staff and police responses to disrupt any criminal activity.

The Christmas trading period of 1992 also led to an unforeseen expansion in the use of the retail radio. A number of lost children were being quickly found and reunited with their parents. The full impact of the use of retail radio for this purpose was not appreciated until 1993 with the tragic case of Jamie Bulger. By the early part of 1993 the benefits of retail radio were being widely publicised, with Coventry then Birmingham introducing the same system. In the Metropolitan Police area some of the earliest schemes were introduced in Ilford, Croydon and Woolwich. It was reported in December 1994 that in Ilford one major store, over a three month period, had saved over £10,000 per week, after having purchased one radio at a cost of £300. 4.

In Wolverhampton retail radio continued to develop and a number of interesting features became evident. The reporting of crime incidents became more professional both through participants increased familiarity with the system and post incident debriefing by the police. This increased professionalism saw stores calling for the support of other security staff, CCTV systems and police in affecting arrests or deterring criminals. An additional benefit was that retail staff gained precise intelligence about thieves their clothing on that day and with whom they were associating. This intelligence led to a most useful interface between CCTV and radio link with the ability to monitor thieves' activities and co-ordinate arrests following surveillance. The relationship between CCTV and retail radio was explored in a Home Office report published in 1994. The report whilst identifying the benefits through sharing information between retailers and the police and alerting CCTV operators to incidents, also reported upon the '*great co-operation and team spirit that a radio link system can create*'. 5.

It became apparent that the participants in the radio link, retail staff, security personnel and police officers, were finding uses for the system beyond those for which it was originally conceived. This was most vividly illustrated in April 1993, when the day before the terrorist attack at Bishopsgate, London a coded bomb warning was received in Wolverhampton. The radio link provided the police with the ability to immediately forewarn large numbers of stores, the two shopping centres and the majority of retail security personnel about the risk they faced. The police gave precise details of the nature of the threat, its exact location and the time limit within which the evacuation had to be achieved.

The, small number of police officers within the town were assisted by security personnel, public address systems and staff with retail radio. These resources, co-ordinated by the police, evacuated the town centre within thirty minutes. Eventually the town centre was declared safe with the recovery phase again being organised by the radio link. Managers and security staff were called to the cordons and escorted to their stores by police search teams. The total evacuation of the town centre was achieved without loss or injury.

There has been some research conducted into the development and effectiveness of retail radio primarily centred around the effect of the system upon users. The most in depth study of an individual system was undertaken in 1995 by Leicester University, Centre for the Study of Public Order, (CSPO) on behalf of The Burton Group PLC. 6.

The general staff perceptions were very positive with the major benefits being identified as, enhanced information exchange between participants and direct access to the police with some 60% of staff reporting being less concerned about crime. This finding is particularly important not only because it is a feature reported by radio users across the differing systems but also because of the reported link between fear of crime and its adverse effect on health. 7.

The CSPO survey included interviews with six 'City Centre Unit' police officers which also found they were very positive about the scheme. The advantages identified by the police officers were: increased co-operation and information exchange between the police and retailers; more arrests and recovering more stolen property; reduction in fear of crime and response times to incidents, with the system acting as a good deterrent. The officers also identified a number of disadvantages which were: having to carry another radio, (their own police radio and the retail radio); retailers assuming the police were only there to deal with their problems and retailers misusing the system by not using the telephone to summons a police officer. In addition, officers identified retailers not following radio procedures and their becoming '*too accessible*' (authors emphasis) as problematic. The executive summary of the report identified the radio as being a '*reassuring symbol*' within the store reducing fear of crime amongst staff with retail radio representing a '*beneficial and low cost addition to store security*'. 8.

The staff perceptions of the role of CCTV and retail radio was again subject of a study in 1995 by Leicester University's Centre for the Study of Public Order, on behalf of Next Retail Ltd. This study made a comparison between staff perceptions of personal safety between users and non users of retail radio. It found that whereas 57% of non users believed the radio link would increase their perception of safety, in reality 91% of participants reported an actual rise in staff feelings of well being. The grounds given for this were cited as being a direct link and back up from the police in particular. It noted that as '*Next, who employ a large proportion of women, the safety aspect must be of paramount importance*', with all stores with retail radio being positive in their responses. It was again highlighted that the ready flow of intelligence on criminals was considered to be of particular benefit, with one respondent being quoted as saying;

*'we get to know who the known groups are now and we prevent them from entering the store. It has reduced crime.'* 9.

Consideration of the research reveals that retail radio increases staff's awareness of crime, even to the extent of identifying groups or individual criminals within the vicinity of a store. It would be logical to conclude that this would increase staff's fear of crime. However, use of a radio link appears to increase their willingness to tackle crime, even to the extent of preventing criminals entering the store. This appears to be one of the more significant benefits to retailers, security staff and police working together through using two-way communication. The rapid expansion of retail radio led to consideration of the management, operation and future development of this and other radio communication systems, by those police officers involved in radio links.

As a result of these concerns and deliberations an application was submitted to the Home Office Police Research Group for funding to research the concept of radio links from a police perspective. The application was successful and in 1994 officers visited a number of towns and cities and interviewed both retailers and police radio link users. The research identified similar results to the two CSPO studies for example 48% of staff reported a reduction in their fear of crime. 10. Perhaps one of the most significant discoveries of the research was that retail radio links had existed since 1980 in Great Yarmouth and Norwich and had remained as valid and successful in 1994 as the day they were launched.

The difference between the longevity of radio links and the short-lived pager systems was considered. Although no specific research has been conducted to test the effectiveness of paging systems as against retail radio it is thought that the obvious difference between the two systems is that radios allow two way communications. This fundamental advantage of radios over pagers, especially in cases of personal violence, is considered to be the main reason as to why radio links have replaced paging systems in town centres.

The report included the results of two small studies undertaken in Wolverhampton by the Home Office Safer Cities Project and the Town Centre Association. These showed that some 68% of retailers reported a reduction in stock losses following introduction of the retail radio. In addition 44% of staff reported a reduction in their fear of crime; with one store reporting a 23% reduction in stock loss equating to a saving of £60,000 per annum. This was achieved through the purchase of two radios at a cost of £700, which are still working some six years later. The cost of an average retail radio is less than £400 with the base station and aerial costing about £3,000.

A recent study of a retail radio link in Swindon, Wiltshire concerned an examination of the management of the system and the retailer's perspective of such issues as police involvement and its cost effectiveness. The study also sought to explore any differences between large and small retailers opinions of retail radio within the town centre. The study concluded that there were two main areas of concern about the operation and management of the system. The first was that with there being no police involvement nor support for the system it wasn't fully effective and lacked credibility. The extent of retailers feeling about the lack of police involvement can best be summarised by an anonymous retailer who stated, "*We're doing the police force's dirty work for them*". The second major area of concern was about the effectiveness of management 'control' of the system. More specifically these concerned the lack of information from the committee to the radio link participants about such basic issues as the objectives of the system and the identity of other's, particularly new members. It was reported that there was an apparent reliance of smaller retailers, in the absence of police involvement, on the larger stores security staff providing them with a free service, indeed it could be argued the major stores were 'policing' the town centre. 11.

## **Community Radio Link**

The close involvement of the local authority, especially the Emergency Planning Officer, in the evacuation of Wolverhampton town centre led to a steady increase in the number of council staff, within the town centre who held retail radios. At the same time police officers in Coventry City Centre began to be approached by a number of non retailers such as the Cathedral and University staff, asking to be allowed to join retail radio. Discussions between the police in Wolverhampton and Coventry about these issues confirmed the need for a separate radio link, which could be used by public and voluntary sector employees across a wider area, such as a Borough or County. This second system was named 'Community Radio Link' to reflect the nature of its membership.

Two main difficulties immediately became apparent, firstly who was going to assume responsibility for monitoring this 24 hour system and secondly how would it be interfaced with the police? In Wolverhampton the solution to both problems was found in locating the monitoring facility for the community radio within the council's central control room operated by the housing department. This room operated 24 hours a day, staffed by experienced personnel, who were used to monitoring similar communications systems, responding to calls for help and dealing with the public and emergency services. The local police control room provided emergency contact telephone numbers and agreed to have both a retail and community radio thus creating additional links with the local authority. In Wolverhampton, the cost of the individual radios is in the region of £400 with the control room and infrastructure equipment costing less than £10,000.

The technology utilised in the control room and individual radios was significantly more advanced than the retail radio. The community radios have an individual code or identity and personal attack buttons. This is a facility where the radios can activate an alarm alert in the control room which identifies to the operator which participant is in need of help. They also have a 'live mike' facility where the radio microphone remain open for a few seconds after the activation of the personal attack facility even if the transmit button is not depressed. This allows the control room to hear what is being said or what is happening at the time of an alarm activation. This facility acts to confirm or verify a personal attack activation. The individual radios can be pre-programmed to prevent any audible tones being generated at the time of an alarm activation. This is an important feature as in the case of personal attack or a hostage situation such audible tones could escalate the offender's response.

The community radio link also has a telephone interconnect facility. This is operated through the control room, to maintain the systems integrity and prevent abuses, and allows a telephone caller to communicate with an individual or group of radios. Telephone interconnect also allows for individual radios, again through the control room, to link back to a telephone line. The radios also have the ability to select from a large menu of functions, a number of predetermined messages, which are sent in short bursts of data, for example the radio users can book on or off the system.

Community radio is based upon a computer controlled management system with a recording device known as a 'voice logger'. These facilities mean that the computer records each radio activation, such as the user's identity, the data message sent and provides a time date stamp. The 'voice logger' records every conversation made both by radio and telephone. This voice activated facility provides safeguards for both the radio users and control room staff. Another most significant feature of the computer is its ability to monitor 'lone workers'. This is achieved by the control room staff identifying an individual radio, a group of radios or all the radios on the network and programming the computer to 'listen out' for them. If the radios, which have been selected, are not operated during the selected time, from five minutes to three hours, the system initiates an alarm activation. An example of this could be where a doctor is due to visit an unstable and violent patient. He or she could inform the control room staff of the address they are visiting, the nature of the risk and request five minute lone worker checks. If during the doctor's visit the radio is not operated the alarm is activated and a response is initiated by the control room as agreed with the doctor prior to the visit. The implications for compliance with the provisions of health and safety and lone worker regulations are apparent.

### **Business Radio Link**

The involvement of a large number of security personnel in retail radio and the absence of any similar system to assist other commercial and business users led to consideration of a third radio link. This was aimed at reducing incidents of commercial and industrial crime whilst offering the opportunity of creating a unique operational link between the police and security industry. This system known as 'Business Radio Link' also faced the same problems of monitoring and interface with the police.

The Home Office Safer Cities Project in Wolverhampton was again involved in these early discussions and was able to secure seed funding for a pilot system to operate across the Black Country of the West Midlands. The major shopping centre in Wolverhampton, at that time, employed contract staff from Group 4 who were actively involved in the retail radio. Through their discussions with a senior representative from Group 4 showed an active level of interest in developing the project. It was decided that to co-ordinate the project and provide the requisite level of representation the British Security Industry Association would be approached to manage the project. Following meetings with the then membership liaison manager, additional funding was secured from within the security industry and a series of presentations by the police were made to interested parties.

A BSIA member company, Burns Security, whose Midlands control room was based in the Black Country, agreed to allow the independent business radio to be located in a separate office in their building. A further grant of money was secured from the Department of the Environment and the project was launched in January 1995 by the then Home Office Minister of State, Mr David Maclean.

The original concept was based upon the local police divisional control rooms having a 'desk top' radio networked to the business radio control room allowing them to both receive messages, especially radio alarm activation's and disseminate information. It was envisaged that in the same way as retail radio operates, the police would be able to receive and pass to the security personnel and other radio users, information about crimes in the Black Country. For business radio it was envisaged that the members, such as petrol stations, could in turn report sightings of vehicles and other incidents immediately to the local police stations. The business radio control room would act as a filter between participants and the police, prioritising calls and referring to the police the best available witness to any incident.

The project enjoyed considerable interest from a wide variety of potential participants such as; out of town retailers; security companies; vending machine companies; petrol retailers and financial institutions. Unfortunately for a variety of commercial reasons the level of interest wasn't translated into the purchase of radios, with the system being forced to close through lack of funding. The last manager of business radio, Mr Mike Olds, speaking in February 1996, attributed the schemes failure to, the absence of a full time sales person, the cost of radios and subscription. In addition he spoke about the, "*lack of a coherent marketing strategy and adequate resources.*" 12.

### **Community Action Tackling Crime & Harassment (CATCH)**

The final radio link to be discussed is *Community Action Tackling Crime & Harassment*, (CATCH). This system utilises very simple back to back radios and is currently operating on three housing estates in West Bromwich. 13. In May 1998 the Lyng Lane Tenants and Residents Association, council housing department and local shopkeepers joined with the local police to develop CATCH.

The Tenants Association through funding from the West Midlands Police Authority, Sandwell Council and local shopkeepers purchased a number of radios, with further radios being donated by local shopping centres. The system allows residents to rapidly disseminate information about crime and disorder on the estate and seek an early police response to any incidents. The network is able to tackle the fear of crime through raising the confidence of participants who are able to identify any offenders, conceivably their neighbours. This 'participative reassurance' will be contrasted later with the 'symbolic reassurance' provided through provision of uniformed patrol.

The individual radios cost around £120 and for an average of £3,000 sufficient radios can be purchased to begin a CATCH scheme across a whole housing estate. It is planned that other residential areas across West Bromwich will be networked through CATCH thus enabling patrolling police officers to directly communicate with residents and communities with communities. This is an important development especially when used to tackle travelling thieves such as the 'bogus official' offenders who target the elderly.

In addition the implications for police foot patrols and public reassurance is that one officer, through effective communication, can reassure people across a large geographical area. The residents don't need to physically see the one officer, in essence through the 'audible presence' of the officer he or she is present in their own homes. Should an incident occur the network of radio users will be able to direct and target the officer's patrol to effect arrests or disrupt criminal or anti-social behaviour. In line with 'thinking' about the theoretical basis of radio links the importance for 'police discretionary patrol' and social exclusion is yet to be determined but as the number of CATCH schemes expand the potential for community direction of policing activity especially targeting anti-social or sub-criminal behaviour will increase. 14. It is perhaps possible to reconsider the debate amongst academics and practitioners about how to, *'motivate individuals to engage in practices of citizenship and thus community building'*. This may be achieved by radio links without fear of the *'significant tensions...about what sort of institutional arrangements might enable the realisation of such an inclusive and vibrant civil society'*. 15.

## **Conclusion**

The central submission of this paper is that the national debate about crime reduction, public reassurance and police patrol should be reconsidered in light of the introduction of radio links. The speech by Ian Blair, the Chief Constable of Surrey, on the 16 July 1998 to the Association of Chief Police Officers, (ACPO) conference, triggered significant interest and was widely reported. 16. A key feature of the speech was that the police should accept that they are not abandoning a monopoly of patrol but admit they haven't had one for years. The issue appears to be this, the public 'requires' the presence of an uniformed individual to patrol their neighbourhood, to reduce incidents of crime and disorder whilst acting as a highly visible 'authority' figure thus achieving public reassurance.

The central difficulty for the police is that they are unable to maintain the levels of resources, particularly foot patrol officers, to satisfy the expectations of the public and themselves. Within this 'vacuum' of expectation against reality various proposals are being considered, including those from the Prime Minister for local authorities to create uniformed security patrols or *'super caretakers'*. 17.

This debate however is flawed for it appears to be based upon the argument that the only means available to reduce the public's fear of crime is through the 'symbolic reassurance' provided by an individual in uniform. The research, which highlights the reduction in fear of crime amongst radio link participants, is of particular importance in that it points to the greater value of 'participative reassurance'. In addition the same arguments that propose the creation of lower paid *'auxiliary patrol officers'* by the police or the employment of similar uniformed individuals by the local council is considered to be economically flawed. 18. Any such staff would still have to be paid several thousands of pounds per year, which could perhaps be used to finance CATCH schemes.

This paper argues therefore that the implications of the Crime and Disorder Act and governments 'Best Value' initiative for the police and local authorities are clear. Not only are they obliged by statute to reduce the levels of crime and disorder but achieve these in as cost effective a manner as possible. The central submission therefore is that reassurance and crime and disorder reduction can be achieved through the introduction of a CATCH scheme or other radio link. Only after communities are safe and less fearful would it be appropriate to assess the need for alternatives to the public police. As proposed by the Police Federation and ACPO the challenge for the public police is to maintain the central role of the constable in managing this process.

It is important to determine the 'location' of radio links within current criminological theory. Consideration of the previously described systems will prompt association with a number of established theories, for example a retail radio link can easily be understood within the context of situational crime prevention, for example increased surveillance. It may also be thought of as achieving an actual if 'virtual' defensible space throughout the town centre. Again in the field of social crime prevention or 'communitarianism' there exist elements of compatibility when thinking about radio links. In many regards radio links appear to find some association with a number of established criminological or crime prevention theories but in turn not 'quite fit' as they seem to add value to a number of them. There is naturally an early sense of radio links having to find their 'theoretical feet' but what is however thought appropriate at this time is to accept that radio links appear to be achieving beneficial results, in terms of reducing the costs and fear of crime.

There is however, no real understanding of how these effects have been achieved nor why they appear to enjoy such public support. This is clearly an area ripe for additional and detailed research, which would assist in answering the above dilemmas. In conclusion the widespread use of radio links by a variety of participants, from shop assistants, teachers to residents of housing estates is a reality. The integration of such schemes can easily be achieved at little real cost when compared to the financial and personal burden of crime. The total package of radio links represents a significant commercial opportunity for the communications and security industry, which is waiting to be explored. When the value of both being and feeling safer is compared to the £120 cost of a radio, the rise and rise of radio links is confidently predicted.

## **References.**

1. Martin Wright is a police inspector based in West Bromwich, West Midlands, who is involved in developing 'Radio Links' and has undertaken research on behalf of the Home Office Police Research Group. He holds a Bachelor of Laws Degree and has recently completed a MSc in Security Management and Information Technology, sponsored by a Bramshill Fellowship and a scholarship by the International Security Management Association. The Association of British Insurers has recently granted Martin a doctoral scholarship the to undertake further research into 'Radio Links'. Martin can be contacted on: +44 [0]121-626-9010 or E-Mail 'catch-community radio@radiolinks2.freemove.co.uk'

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