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Those who do big bad things also usually do little bad things: Identifying active serious offenders using offender self-selection

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally the identification and apprehension of active serious offenders has relied on information from the public, the targeting of 'known' offenders and current knowledge of offending patterns. More recently, the method of offender self-selection has been offered as an additional identification tool, where certain minor infractions have been found to be 'triggers' for uncovering serious criminality — self-selection because the individual has broken a law in the first place. This paper details a police operation — 'Operation Visitor' (focused on visitors to a young offenders' institute, to explore whether minor offences committed (either whilst at, or en route to

the institution) can be used as trigger offences to indicate serious criminality. One-third of visitors caught offending had criminal histories, several considered serious active offenders.

INTRODUCTION — OFFENDER SELF-SELECTION AND 'OPERATION VISITOR'

Traditionally the identification and apprehension of serious offenders has relied upon: information from the public; or the targeting of those already known (the 'usual suspects'); or by obtaining accurate intelligence of offending patterns which can be matched to the facts of individual cases. Although the logic of these approaches is indisputable and is not contested, serious criminals are often apprehended because they are detected in the commission of a lesser offence, and something has led an alert police officer to ask questions and make checks which reveal the bigger picture. Famous historical examples include the 'Yorkshire Ripper', uncovered because he drove a car with false number plates, and the notorious American serial killer, 'Son of Sam', identified because he parked illegally next to a fire hydrant. This paper discusses

how we can make better use of a major–minor offending link to uncover serious offending and the part serious offenders can play in their own identification.

Much of the literature on ‘criminal careers’ (eg Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visser, 1986, Svensson, 2002) lends support to the view that serious offenders are often crime versatile, committing an array of different crimes, including minor as well as serious offences. People who do big bad things, will not cavil at doing little bad things. Little bad things are often easier to identify than ‘big’ (serious) offences, which usually are infrequent and isolated events.

By committing minor offences serious offenders ‘offer themselves up’ for legitimate police interest. In other words, they ‘self-select’, allowing further scrutiny of their background, associates and activities, which may reveal their involvement in more serious offending. Such police scrutiny is legitimate because the individual has been caught breaking the law in the first place, reducing grounds for allegations of harassment. The simplicity of offender self-selection is that offenders ‘volunteer’ for police attention. The difficulty is identifying those minor offences which serve as the best indicators of more serious offending. Although still in its infancy, research in this area has identified several possible minor ‘trigger offences’ that can help with the identification of serious criminals.

In a study of illegal parking in disabled bays it was found that one in five of those relatively minor law-breakers had outstanding warrants for the arrest of the vehicle’s registered keeper, or other characteristics which would have excited immediate police attention (Chenery, Henshaw, & Pease, 1999). A study of serious traffic offenders found that those committing offences repeatedly, were also the most likely to commit mainstream crime, with drink drivers twice as likely to possess a

criminal record as the average member of the public (Rose, 2000). Indications are that using specific road traffic offences as triggers for increased police attention/investigation often pays off in the identification of more serious offending (see also Wellsmith & Guille, 2005). This is not surprising when one considers that most drivers are not criminals, but most criminals are drivers (West Midlands Traffic Division, 1997).

A recent study examining the relationship between shop theft and burglary found 88 per cent of prolific burglars admitted to committing shop theft, with more than 50 per cent doing it every day. The author suggests that shop thieves would be treated more fittingly as ‘burglars on their day off’, rather than just as ‘shoplifters’ (Schneider, 2005). Shop theft is easier to detect and so the message is simple: catch more shoplifters and you will catch more burglars.

Although at present few in number, these studies lend support to the minor–major offence relationship and increase the importance of identifying which minor offences serve as the most reliable trigger offences to indicate the possible presence of more serious criminality.

This paper details ‘Operation Visitor’, which explores how the propensity for serious offenders to commit minor crimes offers the police, and inexperienced officers in particular, the opportunity to have a major impact on their identification and apprehension, by employing ‘offender self-selection’ (eg see Roach, 2004). Focus is on the issue of offender self-selection and how it can be used, rather than on any specific ‘good practice’ example or project.

Operation Visitor had several hypotheses:

- That a significant proportion of visitors would have recorded offence histories (some indicating offender versatility)
- That a significant number of visitors would offend — either en route to or

whilst at the Young Offenders' Institute (YOI)

- That a significant percentage of those caught offending during the operations would have offending histories and/or were active offenders.

Therefore, if these hypotheses are supported, Operation Visitor would further distinguish (or add support to) minor offences which uncover serious offenders — thus moving on the self-selection agenda. The method, findings and discussion of Operation Visitor and its contribution to offender self-selection now follow.

METHOD

The research aimed to explore further the offender self-selection hypothesis by focusing on visitors to a young offenders' institute (hereafter YOI) in Lancashire. Local police officers long suspected that many visitors to the YOI had criminal records, were active offenders and were committing various crimes either en route (eg car theft and motoring offences) or at the YOI (eg importing drugs for inmates). Of particular interest was whether visitors caught offending during the operation for seemingly minor crimes had histories of more serious offending, thus facilitating an identification of which 'minors' could be trigger offences. Visitors to the YOI self-selected in the sense that by visiting a penal institution they were accepting prison security procedures and police interest, particularly with regard to S. 8 of the Prison Act 1952 stating the right to search anyone entering prison premises (space precludes a full discussion of the legal conditions here; please contact author for explicit details).

Operation Visitor sweeps were conducted randomly once a month during official visiting time, by a team of local police officers. All persons during this three-hour period were stopped on the only approach and

searched. As many names as was practically possible were entered on the Police National Computer and also the Lancashire Constabulary intelligence system (Sleuth) simultaneously, with matches noted. All visitor vehicles were subject to an Automatic Number Plate Recognition System (ANPR) and an inspection by road traffic officers looking for illegal defects.

Although a covert police operation, ethical concerns were minimised as far as possible:

- Visitors anticipated being searched and having to produce necessary documentation as a condition of entry to the prison
- Although vehicle checks were unanticipated, all visitor vehicles were checked without discrimination
- All checks (eg PNC) were conducted by police officers/staff
- All visitors were anonymised for quantitative analysis
- All further background checks of offending visitors were conducted by police officers
- Confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research.

RESULTS

1. Visitors and their vehicles

The 12-month period saw 10 individual operations carried out, culminating in a total search of some 617 visitors and 210 vehicles. Visitor numbers varied little across operations (see Appendix 1).

The mean age of visitors was 33.8 years (standard deviation of 14.5 years with an age range of 14 to 81 years). Visitors aged 14–20 years comprised the largest percentage (28 per cent). (Visitors under 14 years were not included in the study as most were not subject to search).

An analysis of visitor drivers according to age showed that 78 per cent were aged

Table 1: Visitor transport and gender

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Visitors	223	344	617
Drivers	137	73	210
Passengers	116	246	362
Bus Passengers	16	17	33
Pedestrians	4	8	12

31+ years, where 57 per cent of passengers and 63 per cent of bus passengers were found to be aged 17–30 years ($\chi^2 = 70.67$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.001$). Table 1 above details the visitor transport by gender and indicates that although there were more female visitors to the YOI, the ratio of male to female drivers was 2:1.

Visitor demography appeared even across all 10 operations and consistent with official YOI figures for the previous year.

2. Total offences by visitors

The number of visitors and vehicles searched across all 10 operations was found to be relatively uniform, with a mean of 61.7 visitors and 21 vehicles searched per operation (see Table 2 below). The operations

detected a high number of visitors committing offences (offending visitors). In total 58 offences were detected, equating to a ratio of approximately 1 in 10 visitors found committing a prosecutable offence — 25 of which necessitated an arrest (see Table 2 below).

3. Types of offences committed by visitors

A full breakdown of the 58 detected offences according to operation number and type can be seen in Appendix 2 — in sum the findings were:

- Almost a third of offences were drugs-related (17 out of 58), giving a ratio of 1 drug offence to every 36 visitors. All instances were for possession with intent to supply ‘class C’ drugs to inmates (ie cannabis). Those found with amounts small enough to be considered for ‘personal use’ were cautioned, or simply had the drugs confiscated. In sum, two out of every three arrests during Operation Visitor were for drugs possession with intent to supply.
- Motoring and road traffic offences (commonly termed ‘process’ offences)

Table 2: A table showing the dates, visitors stopped and the total number of offences identified during Operation Visitor

<i>Operation Number</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number of vehicles stopped</i>	<i>Number of visitors searched</i>	<i>Prosecutable offences detected</i>	<i>Number of arrests</i>
1	26/04/04	23	61	17	11
2	04/05/04	15	43	2	0
3	13/05/04	21	60	7	2 (plus caution)
4	04/06/04	18	57	7	2
5	30/09/04	25	76	3	1
6	28/10/04	24	75	12	5
7	11/01/05	20	58	4	1 (plus caution)
8	13/01/05	26	57	2	0
9	03/03/05	22	60	3	3
10	17/03/05	16	70	1	0
Total		210	617	58	25

accounted for over 58 per cent of offences committed by visitors. These included:

- 2 Visitors *Driving whilst disqualified*
- 16 *Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN)*, for example not having valid motor insurance or vehicle tax
- 11 *Vehicle Defect Rectification Notices (VDR)* for vehicles with minor defects
- 5 *vehicle prohibition notices (Pg9)* where vehicles are confiscated on the spot because they are deemed un-roadworthy.

The remainder ('other' category) comprised a remaining seven offences — visitors were arrested for the following:

- 3 arrested for the suspected theft of a credit card found whilst the vehicle was searched
- 4 visitors were wanted on warrant by another police force (2 for auto-theft, 1 for theft and 1 unknown) and were duly arrested.

4. Visitor offenders

As a result of visitor recording problems the complete details of 45 visitors found offending were recorded from a total of 58 offences. The major attraction of self-selection is its focus on the actions of individuals (ie the breaking of a specific law) rather than on discriminatory variables such as race and gender. Therefore, only a rudimentary analysis of offending visitors across the variables of age, gender and mode of transport is presented here (further details available from author).

Age

The mean age of visitors found offending was 31.6 years (standard deviation 10.9 with a range of 17–55 years). Analysis of visitor age and whether an offence was committed identifies an age distinction, with a majority of offences perpetrated by visitors 21–30 and 41–50 years, but this did not prove

statistically significant. However, when the age bands were collapsed further into two groups (17–30 years and 31+ years), findings were more acute, with 74 per cent of drug offences perpetrated by those aged 17–30 years and 71 per cent of motor/road traffic offences perpetrated by those aged 31+ years. This association was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.39$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.004$).

It was perhaps not overly surprising that it was the 41–50 years age group of drivers who were found committing the majority of process offences, No statistically significant relationship was found between age and PNC marker (discussed below).

Gender

A statistically significant relationship was found between visitor gender and the commission of an offence — male visitors committing two-thirds of all offences ($\chi^2 = 9.38$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.002$). For visitors overall this represents an offending ratio of 1:9 males but only 1:25 females.

A statistically significant relationship was also found between visitor gender and PNC marker, with over two-thirds of those with a discernible PNC marker being male ($\chi^2 = 9.25$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.002$). However, a statistically significant relationship was not found between gender and offence type, indicating that female visitors — although committing fewer offences than their male counterparts proportionally — committed the same mix of offences, namely motoring and drugs.

Visitor transport

As can be seen from Table 3 on the following page, drivers committed two-thirds of all the offences, with the remaining third by passengers. Curiously, none of the 33 bus passengers was found to have committed an offence. A brief summary of offending visitor transport follows:

Drivers — visitor drivers committed significantly more motoring offences than any

Table 3: Visitor transport and offences committed

<i>Visitors</i>	<i>Drugs</i>	<i>Motoring</i>	<i>Warrant</i>	<i>Theft</i>	<i>Total</i>
Drivers	4	33	1	1	39
Passengers	13	0	3	2	18
Pedestrians	1	0	0	0	1
Bus	0	0	0	0	0
	18	33	4	3	58

other offence type — 85 per cent of all offences by drivers were driving offences. With respect to the total number of visitor drivers, the ratio of offending to non-offending drivers was 1:5. The ratio of visitor drivers committing solely a motoring offence (as defined previously) as opposed to those not committing an offence was approximately 1:6. This is thought to be considerably higher than would be found amongst the general population. A recent study by the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Sciences (2004) estimated that the ratio of illegal to legal cars on the road was 1:20, but this does not take account of all driving offences, concentrating more specifically on road-tax and motoring insurance infractions. Nevertheless, the high number of driving offences found as a result of Operation Visitor suggests a higher prevalence rate for prison visitors than the general populace. There were no drivers found to be travelling in stolen cars.

Passengers — mainly travelling with visitor drivers, but extended to include also those travelling by taxi. As can be seen from Table 3 above, passengers were responsible for committing a vast majority of drug offences, indeed over 70 per cent of passenger offences were for ‘drugs possession with intent to supply’. Three visitor passengers were wanted on warrant by another police force and a further two more were arrested on suspicion of the theft of a credit card. In terms of all visitor passengers, the

ratio of those committing an offence as opposed to those not, was approximately 1:20. The number of those committing a drug offence was approximately 1:28 visitors.

Of course, comparison of offending visitor drivers and passengers must discount the latter from motoring offences. However, drug offence ratios for these two groups are comparable with the ratio of those passengers committing a drug offence as opposed to those not, found to be twice as high as for drivers (1:28 and 1:52 respectively).

Bus passengers — as noted, no bus passengers were found committing an offence (all were subject to the same search procedures as drivers and their passengers). This is curious, when 63 per cent of those traveling by bus were aged 14–30 years, the biggest offending age group found for drugs offences during Operation Visitor.

Pedestrians — from a total of 12, only one pedestrian was found offending — a 20-year-old male, caught in possession of cannabis.

5. Visitor offending histories and current offending

Where practical, visitor names, addresses and vehicles were checked on the Police National Computer (PNC). Although, where a visitor had a historic marker on the PNC it did not necessarily imply that they were criminally active, it was felt that this gave an overall indication of the type of offence histories which visitors had, which could then be matched to offences detected by Operation Visitor — testing the major–minor offending link. It was anticipated that checks would identify active, prolific and serious offender visitors (eg four had warrants out for their arrest!). As many visitors as was practically possible were PNC checked — a total of 63 per cent. Of those, 62 per cent produced a definite result where the visitor clearly either had a PNC

marker or not (the remaining 38 per cent of visitors were either not checked for practical complications (eg a 'log jam' of requests at the control centre) or a PNC search returned an ambiguous result).

Although only 62 per cent of visitors produced a definite PNC check result, 26 per cent of those were found to have a marker for a previous offence and 36 per cent were 'unknown' (not on record). This equates to a ratio of one in every two-and-a-half visitors having a PNC marker (criminal record). Either way this finding provides empirical support for the hypothesis that offenders — or at least previous offenders — often visit prisoners. It needs reiterating that of course because a visitor has committed a previous offence — recorded on the PNC (ie they have a record), does not make them 'criminally active', as this would be unfair to those that have either put their offending ways behind them, or have only ever committed one offence.

Of those found committing offences during Operation Visitor, 30 per cent were found to have markers on the PNC, which proved statistically significant when compared with non-offending visitors ($\chi^2 = 11.258$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.04$) suggesting that a significant number of visitors caught offending during the operations, had a history of offending — however distant. Although this finding that a significant number (30 per cent) of visitors caught offending during Operation Visitor had offending histories is important, it does not tell us if these individuals were still criminally active, serious offenders. The next section looks more specifically at how we might utilise this finding in order to identify serious offenders, from such relatively minor infractions, such as motoring 'process' offences and class C drugs possession.

Although only 45 per cent of visitors were male, a cross-tabulation of visitor gender and whether or not known to the PNC, shows that significantly more male

visitors were known for previous offences than females ($\chi^2 = 13.681$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.01$). Visitor age and whether known on the PNC or not, did not prove a statistically significant relationship.

6. Visitor offenders: Identifying the serious and active, from minor offences

Versatility of offending

Although offender self-selection is about the 'here and now', that is, the action of an individual law-breaker (eg illegal parking), it was felt that to test the hypothesis further — that trigger offences could uncover serious offending — that a spotlight be put on offending visitors. An analytical focus was placed on trying to identify the offending histories of visitor offenders (full details were known for 45 out of a total of 58 visitors). The findings show that 15 were known to the PNC for previous offences, that is, 15 visitor offenders were found to have a known offending history. Further research into the background of these follows:

The 15 visitor offenders with an offending history committed the following offences at the YOI:

- 2 were found driving whilst disqualified (a serious offence in itself)
- 6 committed a drugs offence (intent to supply)
- 4 committed a motor/road traffic offence
- 3 were wanted on warrant by another police force.

The three visitors wanted on warrant by other police forces, six committing drug offences and two disqualified drivers offer clear support for a hypothesis that offenders visit offenders. All can be classed as 'active' offenders — two for a string of car-theft offences) whose whereabouts had been unknown to police.

When taken as a group, the 15 visitor offenders were found to have varied offence histories, providing evidence to support a versatile offender hypothesis:

- 2 had committed previous drugs offences
- 4 had committed offences which included violence
- 2 had committed theft
- 4 had committed a wide array of offences (eg theft, TOMV but not violence)
- 1 had committed criminal damage
- 2 had stolen a motor vehicle.

Frequency of offending

For this group of offending visitors it was found that:

- 5 had a PNC record of one or two previous offences
- 2 had a PNC record of three or four offences
- 6 had a PNC record of more than five previous offences (for the two remaining visitor offender the number of previous offences was unclear).

In total, 64 per cent of this group had committed three or more previous known offences, with nearly 50 per cent found to have committed five or more prior offences. Further analysis was conducted to determine if any could be labelled ‘serious’ and/or ‘active’ offenders — a principal objective of the study.

In order to determine the extent to which this group of visitor offenders could be classed as active and/or serious, details of all 15 individuals’ offending were searched using the Lancashire Constabulary ‘Sleuth’ database, which incorporates criminal intelligence as well as known offences. Analysis was conducted alongside a senior officer, who added his knowledge of any the cohort. They were assessed as being either: criminally ‘active’, ‘inactive’ or ‘unknown’.

To be classed as active a visitor offender had to have committed an offence within the last 18 months, or intelligence to suggest they might have (our definition). The following was found:

- 7 (almost 50 per cent) were considered active offenders
- 5 (33 per cent) were considered inactive (ie had desisted from crime for some reason including incarceration).
- For 3 (20 per cent) it was not possible to class them as either of the above due to a lack of current intelligence).

It was found that 35 per cent ($n = 5$) of this group were well-known offenders, having committed a number of previous offences, including violence. Additionally, the senior officer who assisted with analysis knew all five names instantly. Furthermore, two showed as ‘Prolific or Priority Offenders’ (a recent Home Office policy initiative that police and partners target those offenders causing most harm in their local community) — subject to intensive scrutiny by police and other agencies — such as probation. One received a three-year custodial sentence for burglary and drugs offences — arrested via Operation Visitor for possession with intent to supply drugs. The other was driving whilst disqualified.

Another important research aim was whether any specific visitor offences could serve as offender self-selection ‘triggers’ — those warranting further police attention — for identifying active, serious, offenders. As discussed above, 15 visitor offenders showed on the PNC (and/or Sleuth). A cross-tabulation analysis comprising the types of offences detected by Operation Visitor and visitor offence histories did not prove statistically significant, probably due to the relatively small numbers involved, but some visitor offences did show potential for

future offender self-selection research. For example, six of those visitors who committed a drugs offence had committed drugs and/or serious offences (including violence) in the past, five of whom were classed as 'active' offenders by police. Further research is required to determine just how reliable a self-selection trigger drugs possession could be in identifying serious (and prolific) offenders because, during Operation Visitor, this was also found to be a common first offence, particularly with younger visitors. One must also bear in mind that only class C drugs possession was detected in Operation Visitor and class A possession might be a more robust indicator of any additional serious criminality. Recent research focusing on DNA and criminal histories found that those who had committed violent crimes (including murder) quite often had committed previous drug offences (Townsend, Smith, & Pease, in press). The use of the offence of drugs possession with intent to supply as a self-selection trigger therefore should be regarded as promising, but requires further research to establish utility and robustness.

Akin to the above finding, specific motor/road traffic offences as self-selection triggers for identifying serious offenders did not prove statistically significant, again probably due to the sample size. However, several offence types did show some promise. First, for example, two visitors issued with a Fixed Penalty Notice were found to have offending histories — one individual for a plethora of what could be considered serious crimes — which supports the findings of recent research on FPNs and concurrent criminality (Wellsmith & Guille, 2005). Second, two visitor offenders issued with Vehicle Defect Rectification Notices (VDR) were also found to have offending histories — one being a known 'active' burglar. Lastly, one visitor arrested for driving whilst disqualified had committed this

same offence three times in the past, suggesting that perhaps a significant number of those committing this offence are inclined to do so persistently, as was found in a previous study of traffic offending (Rose, 2000).

Perhaps most importantly, Operation Visitor identified how police use HO/RT1s currently and how — if used in a more systematic, targeted way — they could be the most promising self-selection tool for identifying active serious offenders so far. First a brief explanation of what a HO/RT1 is.

Police officers are permitted to order drivers to stop if they suspect an offence is being committed (eg a faulty brake light, cracked number plate, etc.). After being stopped police are entitled to see the driver's documents (eg driver's licence, MOT, etc.); if these are not to hand, police can issue the driver with a Home Office Road Traffic 1 (HO/RT1). The driver of the vehicle is then legally compelled to present his or her driving licence, Ministry of Transport certificate (MOT), insurance details and vehicle ownership documents at a convenient police station, within a 28-day period. To not do so, or to only partly produce (ie produce some but not all the required documents) is a prosecutable offence. HO/RT1s should therefore be considered a useful police tool with which to establish the identification of illegal from legal motorists. However, from concurrent research, the author has found that the 'real' use of HO/RT1s by the police is far from clear.

In total, 134 (64 per cent) of visitor drivers during Operation Visitor were issued with a notice HO/RT1. They had been unable to produce the relevant documentation during an operation and a PNC check had not identified a recorded offence (eg not possessing a valid motor insurance). If the PNC had, for example, identified them as driving without vehicle tax or insurance, the probable outcome would have been a

Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN). Without discrimination, all drivers who could not provide the appropriate documentation were issued with HO/RT1s.

A sample of 44 drivers issued with HO/RT1s during operations five and six was taken in order to establish whether an identifiable relationship between HO/RT1 disposal and offending history existed. The hypothesis was that those drivers not complying with HO/RT1 conditions (ie they did not present all the required documents within 28 days) would be those possibly with something to hide (eg actively engaged in crime, possibly of a serious nature, or had given a false name). The findings were as follows:

- In total, 75 per cent ($n = 33$) of visitors complied fully with HO/RT1 requirements, producing all necessary documentation within the allotted time period.
- However, of the remaining 25 per cent ($n = 11$)
 - 6 ‘part-produced’ (ie produced some but not all the required documents)
 - 5 did not comply at all (‘no-shows’)
 - In sum, all 11 (25 per cent of all drivers in the sample) committed a prosecutable offence.

Emphasis was placed on whether HO/RT1 non-compliance indicated further criminality, by focusing on the offending histories of this group of 11 drivers. One driver who had not complied at all with the HO/RT1 was identified as a known offender, with a string of convictions for disqualified driving and theft which had led to custodial sentences — as recently as the month prior. The other 10 ‘non-compliant’ drivers were not found on the PNC, but nevertheless the 1:11 ‘hit rate’ should not be underestimated as a potential self-selection trigger. This is especially the case, when concurrent research (with a larger sample size) has found that as many as 55 per cent

of HO/RT1s issued are not fully complied with, with little being done to identify these offenders, some of whom will be active serious offenders. Such initial findings have led to the development of a dedicated study of HO/RT1 use and its potential in identifying serious active offenders (Roach 2007, in press).

DISCUSSION

First and foremost, Operation Visitor led to the detection of 58 offences committed by YOI visitors, leading to 25 arrests. This in itself has been considered a success, worthy of continuation beyond the research period. Indeed, significant crime prevention effects may be had if knowledge of the operations (but not their dates) is widely publicised.

Second, from a research perspective, Operation Visitor has provided empirical support to what was previously just a notion, that offenders visit offenders (or at least that a significant number of prison visitors themselves have offending histories).

Third, with regard to the idea of offender versatility findings support the hypothesis that serious offenders also commit more minor offences — motoring ones in particular — and that these might be used to uncover them as more serious offenders. Four visitors were wanted on warrant at the time of the operations, their whereabouts otherwise unknown.

Fourth, the ratio of visitors flagged as having offending histories (via the PNC), compared with those not, was found to be 1:10, higher we believe than would be found in the wider populace and therefore supporting our premise that this would be a fertile group with which to learn more about offending patterns. In particular, an extremely high ratio of 1:6 visitor drivers was found committing a driving/motoring offence when compared to estimates of the general population. Drivers were found to

commit mainly process offences, very few were found in possession of drugs. A significant majority of process offences (71 per cent) were committed by male drivers aged 31+ years, consistent with previous research on traffic offences (eg see Rose, 2000)

Fifth, with regard to contribution to the offender self-selection literature, the Operation Visitor research identifies several minor infractions which show potential as triggers and worthy of additional research. As discussed, 15 visitors who committed a prosecutable offence detected during Operation Visitor had offending histories — some more distant than others. It was found that nearly 30 per cent of this group had committed offences of violence and 18 per cent had committed drugs offences in the past, but most had a varied offence list to some degree. Analysis of frequency of offending for this group — based on offending histories — found that 50 per cent had committed five or more past offences and two were identified as ‘prolific and priority offenders’.

Also, as discussed, the Operation Visitor research identifies the potential for HO/RT1s to be used more extensively as a self-selection tool for uncovering active serious offenders. If, as concurrent research has found, a significant number of individuals do not comply with HO/RT1 requirements when issued, then the questions to be begged are ‘why?’ and ‘what is currently done about it?’. Our brief exploration leads us to answer the former that it is very possible that those individuals concerned have something to hide (maybe of a serious criminal nature) and the latter question simply to our knowledge ‘not a lot’. Our findings from Operation Visitor, however brief, have ignited our interest in further exploring the potential use of HO/RT1s to identify active serious offenders.

At this juncture consideration must be given to some of the perceived limitations of the Operation Visitor research, namely

that it represents a relatively small study of visitors to *only* one penal institution in England. This is a fair point and it is hoped that further research can be conducted which incorporates a greater number of diverse penal institutions.

However, the aim of this research was not to examine the behaviour of prison visitors *per se* — based on the hypothesis that prison visitors were more likely to be past/active offenders — it was to identify those minor offences which more serious offenders are likely to commit. As such, prison visitors were seen as fertile ground on which advancement of self-selection could grow. In this respect, the study has been a success, but larger-scale studies are needed, accepted.

With regard to the wider topic of offender self-selection acknowledgement must be given that many experienced and astute police officers already have an intuitive sense of the potential of offender self-selection. However, our argument is as follows:

1. The minor offences which are chosen to trigger special attention should be based on research establishing the extent and nature of links with more serious offending. This removes subjectivity from the enforcement process.
2. A process should be established whereby the intuitions of police officers are made external and available, and tested against the evidence.

In short, offender self-selection is not about rediscovering one aspect of the craft of policing. It is about evidencing and quantifying links between offences of which some experienced officers have a sense, and discarding those police intuitions which are unfounded.

Finally, below are listed several key findings (in no particular order) drawn from

Operation Visitor and the review of the offender self-selection literature to date:

1. **More research investigating the major–minor offence link**

There are zillions of potential minor offences which could act as markers for serious offender identification. Vigorous research is needed to discover the most reliable and robust.

2. **Do not underestimate the significance of minor offences**

Evidence is still growing in support of serious offenders displaying crime versatility, especially with regard to committing both serious and minor infractions of the law. By committing minor offences serious offenders are self-selecting for increased police attention, which can be used to uncover more serious criminality. After all, Dick Turpin was identified by prison guards reading his mail after he had been arrested for stealing a horse, not for highway robbery or murder for which he was hanged.

3. **It needs to be as painless as possible**

An important learning point is that any such indicator offence needs to be both of minimal inconvenience and justifiable to the public. Generally people do not object to obtrusive measures such as being searched at a prison, provided they understand clearly the reasons for it. Offender self-selection is about identifying those minor offences which best indicate that more serious offending might be present, whilst remembering that most minor offences will be committed by minor offenders. The best trigger offences will be the least obtrusive, as with the disabled bays study where the illegal parkers were not aware they were the subject of increased interest. Using mobile phones while driving and not wearing seat belts are triggers where advice given to those

who are not involved in crime is in any case in the driver's best interests. The beauty of this approach is that it does not seek to identify via discriminatory practice, such as offender profiling, it is focused instead on actions (ie the breaking of a law).

4. **Give officers as much know-how as possible**

Most front-line officers have less than five years' experience in the service. When the significant number of recent recruits to the extended police family are added, the urgent need to provide as much know-how as possible becomes apparent. As offender self-selection knowledge grows it provides much needed know-how for the inexperienced. For example, if a list of minor offences that warrant increased perpetrator scrutiny can be given, this would have big implications (eg for the application of police resources). The illegal parking in disabled bays study (Chenery *et al.*, 1999) suggests a need for a closer working relationship between police and traffic wardens in order to identify 'wanted' and serious offenders more effectively. It is worth recalling that the Madrid car bombers were stopped for a traffic infraction while the bomb remained undetected in the car boot. Self-selection can save lives too.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: A table showing Operation Visitor dates and the number of visitors and vehicles searched

Operation Number	Date	Day	Number of vehicles stopped	Number of visitors searched
1	26/04/04	Monday	21	63
2	04/05/04	Tuesday	14	43
3	13/05/04	Thursday	26	76
4	04/06/04	Friday	18	54
5	30/09/04	Thursday	26	76
6	28/10/04	Thursday	27	69
7	11/01/05	Tuesday	16	62
8	13/01/05	Thursday	22	56
9	03/03/05	Thursday	22	62
10	19/03/05	Thursday	18	56
Total			210	617

Appendix 2: A breakdown of all offences detected during Operation Visitor

Operation Number	Drugs	Fixed Penalty Notices	Vehicle Defect Rectification Notices	Prohibition Orders (Pg9)	Others	Total number of offences	HO/RT1 issue
1	10	3	2	1	1 × driving disqual	17	6
2	0	0	1	1	0	2	9
3	2	2	1	1	1 × driving disqual	7	12
4	0	1	4	0	2 × warrant	7	14
5	1	2	0	0	0	3	25
6	1	3	2	2	1 × warrant 3 × theft	12	23
7	0	3	0	0	1 × warrant	4	9
8	0	2	0	0	0	2	17
9	3	0	0	0	0	3	14
10	0	0	1	0	0	1	5
Total	17	16	11	5	9	58	134

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