

Targeted social media to reduce serious crime

Using social media in micro hot spots to reduce serious crime and engage with the public, particularly those under the age of 25.

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Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Prevention
Topic	Crime prevention Drugs and alcohol Neighbourhood crime Violence against women and girls Violence (other) Vulnerability and safeguarding
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Region	North East

Key details

Partners	Police Business and commerce Community safety partnership Local authority Private sector
Stage of practice	The practice is at a pilot stage.
Start date	September 2022
Completion date	March 2023
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people Offenders Victims

Aim

This initiative is part of a wider piece of work called Project Spotlight. Project Spotlight is a combination of several initiatives to tackle serious violence, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and knife crime within the night-time economy (NTE).

One of the aims of Project Spotlight was to develop the use of targeted engagement via social media with young people in specific areas (postcode level). This uses the same methodology and principles that companies use in social media advertising to target individuals to buy goods and services.

The aim of this initiative was to create a deterrence effect using three types of messaging to:

- raise awareness of additional police patrols and community focus in the area
- create a deterrence effect by a digital means rather than a physical police patrol

- get young people to speak up and report information within the targeted area
- use a positive or nudge message to get people in the targeted area to think about their actions

Intended outcome

This initiative intends to:

- increase the reach and engagement with young people within targeted areas
- reduce crime and incidents within targeted areas
- increase the cost effectiveness in the use of deterrence methodology of hot spot policing
- reduce demands on police resources
- increasing the information, intelligence and reporting of crime by encouraging young people to speak up and report crime within targeted areas

Description

The use of social media was a direct response to lack of inclusion, trust and engagement of young people in the identified hot spots with police or partners.

Diversity, equality and inclusion were a significant consideration in the imagery and messaging that was used. Digital marketing experts were employed to support the development of messaging and concepts. The process was developed with the violence reduction unit's independent advisory group and a wide range of partners to support diversity, equality and inclusion.

The wider aims were to build trust, engagement and visibility with marginalised groups who would not normally engage with the police and partners via traditional means.

The social media content also focused on building a psychological feeling of safety in the locations by:

- informing people that they are patrolled by uniform and non-uniformed officers
- making the spaces an unpredictable and hostile environment for offenders

This aimed to create a deterrence effect.

In order to target the right people, in the right place and at the right time, paid-for sponsored social media messaging was used. Market research for the three micro hot spots in Leeds city centre and

the target age revealed that TikTok and Snapchat were the best platforms to achieve this.

A micro-site (www.project-spotlight.co.uk) was developed, so the social media content could be linked to a website with more information and links for police reporting and Crimestoppers. The original cost of the website, three campaigns and running the social media was £15,000.

The targeted social media involved designing content that:

- did not overtly look like police messaging. This was a direct result of the feedback West Yorkshire Police received from their target group, young people in the NTE. The digital marketing company stated that these people do not generally engage with overtly police social media messaging – it was to create a ‘hook’ to draw their attention
- would engage 16- to 30-year-olds while in the NTE, with TikTok and Snapchat being selected as the main platforms
- would be effective on social media. Young people do not generally look at static imagery, so all the content was turned into five- to nine-second GIFs based around four themes – behaviour, violence, drugs and knife crime

The third promotion campaign was used in place of digital and physical posters. This content included photos of the actual locations where the activity was focused.

Targeted social media is part of a three-pronged approach to:

1. get people to speak up and report crimes and behaviours that were suspicious or of concern
2. use persuasion to get people to change their behaviour – ‘your choice’
3. create a deterrence effect as used in hot spot policing via digital means

Once the infrastructure was in place (this took about six weeks), the targeted social media began in postcodes that covered the hot spots. The messaging was active to match the identified periods of demand (indicated by data) to increase effectiveness.

The targeted social media ran for three months but was only active on certain days and at certain times. The social media was made only visible to people aged between 16 to 30 in the targeted postcodes during the set time period. The social media platforms used age data and location services to target the audience. It had 2,798,412 total impressions between January and March 2023. This was 2,798,412 impressions directly to 16–30-year-olds via TikTok or Snapchat that

entered Project Spotlight hot spots. There were 18,322 clicks through to the micro-site from accessing the campaign assets and visiting the site directly. This was achieved for a cost of £4,000.

Early indications suggest it costs £1.50 per 1,000 people to see the messages through the campaigns, and £0.66 for one person to engage with the content. This is significantly more than any traditional engagement method and is delivered directly to those West Yorkshire Police are trying to influence. The most engaged campaign was those relating to 'your choice', which was aimed at changing behaviour. There are no staff costs or staff involved in this – once the content had been developed it was run by the digital marketing company.

Evaluation

An evaluation is being conducted in partnership with academics at the University of Huddersfield, who are evaluating the whole of Project Spotlight including targeted social media. The evaluation involves:

- crime data captured, including control data (however, it is not currently known if there will be enough data to determine if findings were statistically significant)
- focus groups with officers
- interviews with officers
- interviews with partners and businesses
- the possibility of a survey on the public

Overall impact

The overall impact of Project Spotlight has been notable. West Yorkshire Police has identified reductions in total crime (35%) and serious violent crime (39%) in the three hot spot areas. There was also a reduction in the crime harm score (39%), meaning that the severity of those crimes remaining was also reducing. The three control hot spots that had no additional treatment during the same period witnessed a 66% increase in serious violent crime and 75% increase in total crime.

The reductions appear significant, especially when taken into consideration the control areas increase. However, there is not enough data yet to say if it is statistically significant or not and whether there is any displacement.

The social media impact was significant. There were over 18,300 interactions with the content that was only delivered to West Yorkshire Police's target audience, which therefore reached the right people.

The initiative was significantly welcomed by partners and businesses, who noticed an improvement in the environment and a reduction in crime.

Learning

- Understanding the target audience's digital behaviour using digital marketing experts was highly important.
- Running Project Spotlight and the social media at the same time has been difficult to separate which element has had the most impact on reducing crime. Therefore, this year West Yorkshire Police are running a randomised control trial in the use of social media as a digital patrol rather than a traditional hot spot patrol, to understand if a digital patrol can have the same or greater impact than a physical one.
- West Yorkshire Police has considered using this tactic around repeat domestic abuse victims and perpetrators, people missing from home and at large events.
- There was significant resistance and barriers from traditional corporate communications due to concerns around the use of social media such as TikTok. However, by hosting off the normal police networks this has never become an issue.

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Tags

Violence against women and girls Hot spots policing