

Digital capabilities in stalking-related cases (Operation Atlas)

Using digital processing software to increase the speed and efficiency of stalking and stalking-related investigations.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Stalking and harassment Digital, data and analytics Investigation
Organisation	Metropolitan Police Service
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Key details

Region	London
Partners	Police Community safety partnership Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Government department Health services Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	October 2022
Completion date	April 2023
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities Families General public Offenders Victims

Aim

- To increase investigating officers' and supervisors' awareness of digital lines of enquiry in reactive investigation.

- To effect a change in reactive investigation practices which moves away from bailing suspects to facilitate digital lines of enquiry.
- To increase capacity to complete digital enquiries in-custody, to the benefit of risk management, victim care and preventing suspects remaining under investigation for lengthy periods.
- To provide objective digital evidence of stalking and stalking-related offences, with a particular focus on digital evidence of a suspect's location during an investigation. This reduces the burden on victims to prove an offence took place.

Equality impact assessment

All crimes accepted into Operation Atlas (Op Atlas) are screened objectively on the basis of their digital footprint. The screening process considers the presence of digital lines of enquiry across victim, suspect and relevant third parties. A retrospective analysis of equality impact for cases progressed has yet to be completed.

Intended outcome

The following outcomes were anticipated when conducting the Op Atlas pilot:

- A reduction in days taken to investigate (in the pre-Atlas sample, case resolution took an average of 137 days).
- An increase in charge rate leading to a reduction of 'no further action' rate (in the pre Op Atlas sample the charge rate was 12% and the 'no further action' rate was 88%).

Description

Op Atlas was designed to embed specialist policing capabilities into the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) response to public protection, with a specific focus on stalking and stalking-related incidents.

It sought to address a perennial issue in reactive investigations – investigators needing to obtain, rationalise and present huge volumes of digital data to support case disposal decisions.

The underlying principle which informed its development was that the explosion of smart devices and digital data in the twenty first century has made processing data an indispensable skill for front line investigators. It was recognised that if police can reduce the time taken to present that data in

an evidential format, the safeguarding benefits are significant.

The Op Atlas methodology can be usefully explained with the 'TREE' mnemonic:

- triage
- retrieve
- evaluate
- evidence

Triage

- Officers subject incoming crimes, people in prison and open investigations to a digital triage to determine acceptance by Op Atlas. This involves considering whether there are digital lines of enquiry across the victim, suspect and any relevant third parties.
- Crimes should be subjected to regular digital triage, recognising that lines of enquiry may emerge in the course of an investigation.
- Where an officer of the rank of detective sergeant deems the threshold is met, a form is submitted to the Op Atlas team who review the case and accept or reject the tasking.
- Cases are divided into in-custody and out-of-custody referrals. Where a case is referred in-custody, tasking of the Op Atlas team is prioritised to give investigators the best chance of achieving case disposal within the custody time limit. Out-of-custody cases have an agreed deadline of 28 days from referral.

Retrieve

- Op Atlas officers will have agreed a digital investigation strategy for the case. They will request data through relevant processes. It is observed that officers on the team become more proficient at requesting data, further reducing investigation time.
- Op Atlas officers will task additional enquiries to supplement digital evidence as required.

Evaluate

- Op Atlas officers are trained to process the relevant digital data through high end software which helps officers make sense of the data.
- Officers will use their findings to quickly inform investigating officers on any lines of enquiry identified and inform in-custody progression of a case.

- Officers will form a view on what the digital data, or combination of multiple data sources, can offer an investigation, whether it proves or disproves the original allegation.

Evidence

- An Op Atlas officer will move reports from the software into a witness statement. They are trained to provide commentary on what the data can and cannot prove.
- The witness statement is provided to investigators for use in interview and case file submission to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).
- For in-custody investigations the aim is to provide the witness statement prior to suspect interview, or, if not possible, prior to submission to CPS. Where this has not been possible the aim is to provide the witness statement within a 28 day period.

Staffing

- During the pilot a team of one detective sergeant and nine constables progressed cases in addition to their core role. That dual functionality limited the number of Op Atlas cases they could progress.
- Op Atlas has been implemented in East Area Basic Command Unit (BCU) following the success of the pilot. The successor team deals exclusively with Op Atlas cases. It comprises one detective sergeant and four constables. In the period of June 2023 to January 2024 the team progressed 212 cases, showing the increased capacity of having a dedicated resource for the methodology.

Evaluation

The evaluation led by the MPS has now been completed. See [Operation Atlas: Delivering digital capabilities in Public Protection](#).

Pilot

- The Op Atlas pilot was evaluated by way of a trial process. Relevant software and training was procured, and the team and wider operational teams briefed on the methodology, The pilot launched in November 2022.
- Cases and outcomes were recorded through to March 2023, at which point the pilot ended. This generated 44 cases progressed through Op Atlas. 100 stalking offences were drawn from a pre-pilot sample on the same BCU (East Area, MPS). The key outcomes of charge rate, no further

action rate and days taken to investigate from reporting to outcome were compared between the two samples.

Post-pilot implementation at East Area

Following the pilot Op Atlas was implemented as a dedicated team to support the East Area Public Protection department. This launched in June 2023 following the review period for the pilot (April to June 2023).

The following are recorded for all cases accepted into Op Atlas,:

- days taken to investigate
- the case disposal
- whether an early guilty plea is entered
- whether the case results in a conviction or acquittal

This is a more comprehensive and ambitious data set to collect than in the pilot phase. It will take time for results to materialise. It is planned to conduct a review at the one year mark. Results will be analysed from June 2024, and will likely be ready from July 2024 at the earliest.

It is likely that the methodology of taking a comparable number of cases from before the Op Atlas pilot (pre November 2022) will be revisited to compare outcomes.

According to the evaluation, the intervention appears to have an overall positive impact. The evaluation also found:

1. A reduction in days taken to investigate. In the pre Op Atlas sample case resolution took an average of 137 days. In the Op Atlas pilot sample it took 31 days. This shows a reduction of 106 investigation days saved on average.
2. An increase in charge rate and reduction of no further action rate. Pre Op Atlas 12% of stalking cases were charged. This is comparable with the MPS sanctioned detection rate of 11.9% for all stalking offences in a rolling 12 month period between April 2022 and March 2023. Stalking cases progressed through Op Atlas achieved a charge rate of 59%.

Although the sample size for Operation Atlas is small, this data shows that the no further action (NFA) rate more than halved, going from 88% pre-pilot to 41% during the pilot.

Overall impact

Operation Atlas has now been rolled out to eight of the twelve and are continuing to build towards teams in the remaining four.

Since June 2023:

- 1,215 cases of domestic abuse, stalking, rape and serious sexual offending and child abuse have been progressed
- 58% of cases have resulted in charges
- 42% of cases resulted in no further action
- contributed to the conviction of 90 offenders
- 31% of cases were acquitted at trial
- 58% of cases entered a guilty plea
- on average the number of days to reach an outcome (charged or no further action) was 6.8.5 days

Operation Atlas has delivered the following results for cases progressed.

- Improved victim care through reduced days taken to investigate.
- Reduction in risk through quicker case disposal (unquantifiable).
- Increase in suspects charged with offending.
- Increasing the 'digital IQ' of investigating officers and supervisors, ensuring that exploring and monopolising on digital lines of enquiry become a core element of reactive investigation in public protection cases. Normalising this approach is thought to be critical to future-proofing investigation, given the prevalence of digital devices and footprint in the lives of victims and suspects.
- A number of media initiatives have followed the success of the pilot, especially during 16 days of action and National Stalking Awareness Week. Being able to demonstrate how the police are modernising their response to domestic abuse and stalking can positively impact public confidence. It can have a deterrent effect on perpetrators by showing the police are adopting more effective methodologies to charge stalkers, albeit this effect is difficult to demonstrate.

Multiple police services across England and Wales are interested in developing the methodology in their own service. Whilst a pilot outside of the MPS is yet to launch, MPS is committed to supporting other services to adapt Op Atlas to their specific needs.

Shortly after the launch of the pilot the MPS highlighted the [case of R vs Hussain](#), concerning a stalking case with an extensive digital data footprint. The victim in the case, talking about victims with low confidence in the police response to stalking and domestic abuse, said:

They should never give up on reporting it because, I've come a long way and that is because of the police. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here today.

Police Constable Trevor Nock of East Area Public Protection said:

I was so impressed with several members of the Op Atlas team. Whilst the suspect was in custody on both occasions, Op Atlas were so quick and efficient in submitting the ... applications and providing the accompanying evidential statements. It was great to have that support and the data obtained.

This practice example has been submitted as part of the His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) and College of Policing investigation into the national stalking consortium's super-complaint against the police response to stalking.

Learning

- Ensuring all incoming offences are subjected to digital triage required extensive briefing and compliance checks to ensure it was being completed as a supervisory action. If a digital solution is available to make this process mandatory that would be preferable.
- When considering the success or failure of this intervention it was necessary to look at the cohort of cases once all outcomes were obtained. This is distinct from how a force will analyse its rolling sanctioned detection rate. This meant success was only analysed once the pilot had concluded. Likewise, analysis from the first 12 months of the implemented Op Atlas team will focus on months with outcomes on all cases.
- When discussing this intervention with other forces, the use of police officers to produce the witness statement may be a better fit for the MPS than others. On one hand, using operational police officers to gather the evidence and compile the witness statement ensures lines of enquiry are developed with the officer in case. However, in a force with a smaller officer and case footprint it could be that analysts are able to service demand. This has yet to be properly explored.

- The success of this methodology relies upon the supervising detective sergeant and Op Atlas officers being inquisitive about what digital lines of enquiry exist. The initial investigation and report may not have covered them in sufficient depth to make a proper assessment. Most people will leave a digital footprint which can generate lines of enquiry, so it is crucial that the officers in an Op Atlas team are trained and conversant in all available types of digital evidence.
- It is important that officers using this methodology are not wholly led by the victim account. In stalking cases, victims may not know the full extent of a perpetrator's stalking, which is where digital enquiries can provide a broader overview. The victim's account can and should guide the digital investigation, but it is important to be offender focused and look to explore offending broadly.
- It is important to implement Operation Atlas when identifying and locating unknown suspects in cases of rape involving a stranger.
- It is important to think nationally when approaching the offending behaviours of stalking suspects.

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