

Working in surveillance

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Spotlight on a role: Surveillance officer

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I have been an officer with British Transport Police (BTP) for 23 years and a dedicated surveillance officer for 17 years. BTP's surveillance capacity works across England, Scotland and Wales and we now work more with our partners in the covert policing world. Working on the BTP team means we can find ourselves anywhere in the three countries, so it is important that we try to recruit officers into the team who reflect the diverse communities we police.

Surveillance is defined as the close observation of a person or persons suspected of criminal behaviour. Using a range of tactics available, we gather intelligence and evidence about suspects to assist investigating teams, and support successful prosecutions.

In BTP we have a dedicated surveillance unit which means the surveillance operatives do not investigate the crimes, but we certainly have a crucial role in the investigation. We work alongside investigation teams such as major crime, serious organised crime, sexual offence teams or other teams, to provide specialist surveillance capability. We also often assist other force surveillance teams on cross-border cases or operations that require more than one team.

We're often asked about what some of the cases we work on have to do with the railway. The subjects that we follow don't necessarily use the railway to commit their crime, but some often travel by train. The key for us is whether the offending impacts on the railway network. For my team to be tasked to assist with filling gaps in intelligence and evidence, there must be some link with the railway.

An example of this would be county lines-related crime, where the subject may also be vulnerable, or have been exploited by a drug gang. In more recent times we have been heavily involved in offences of violence against women and girls on trains and tubes. We also work closely with our sexual offences team to conduct surveillance on individuals using the rail network to commit sexual offences or who might be in breach of orders they are subject of.

To join our team, officers are required to complete a robust, national process. This includes pre-selection, advanced driver training and attendance on a pass/fail course with assessment against national standards. On completion of the process, successful candidates become licensed surveillance operatives. The feeling of achievement after completion is brilliant, and then the learning really starts.

The nature of the role demands flexibility. There can be times when we don't know what we are doing from one day to the next or the deployment we are told we are on changes at short notice. The hours can be long too so planning for times to get home can be uncertain, but we can, and do accommodate flexible working. We are reliant on intelligence and react to what the subject is doing.

It takes a lot of motivation to become a surveillance officer but it is the most rewarding job in policing. I always wanted to work in a policing specialism. When I was given the opportunity to have an attachment with the BTP surveillance team all those years ago, and then join full time, I knew there was nothing else I wanted to do.

- This article was peer reviewed by PS Jerry Petts, Metropolitan Police Service.

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