Serendipitous Crime Prevention: Success in the Private Sector

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A serendipitous event is a fortunate by-product of some other activity. Therefore, serendipitous crime prevention occurs when actions that are primarily directed towards one area of crime prevention result in reductions in other areas of crime.

This was the case with the problems of vandalism of, and theft from, public payphones around Australia. In making the payphone business a more successful enterprise, the incidence of crime against payphones has been reduced. However, no reliable statistics are available to support this claim, as the actual frequency of payphone vandalism and theft cannot be accurately recorded. In part, this is because a damaged public payphone may not necessarily be classified as vandalised by the technician who attends and repairs it. Data relating to the prevalence of these offences, therefore, are incomplete, spasmodic and localised.

Notwithstanding the lack of statistics, the costs to Telecom Australia of repairing damaged public payphones (which are generally situated in public places in custom-built glass and aluminium cabinets) have been reduced in the past four years from about A$18 million to around an annual A$7 million in 1991. While this is not a direct measure of crime, this reduction in costs certainly reflects the prevalence of the offences. As both the number of public payphones and the cost of labour (to repair them) have increased over the last four years, the decrease in repair costs do reflect a decrease in offending against public payphones.

Defining the Offence

An essential part of assessing a crime prevention measure is to obtain data on the particular crime problem that is being addressed. This data should be gathered from all sources and include close local scrutiny and research so that
all features of the offence can be appreciated (Ekblom 1988). In Telecom Australia’s case, some damage to public payphones may not result from criminal activity. A similar situation was revealed by Gladstone’s (1978) research into school vandalism where the damage in half of the schools under review was found to be accidental rather than criminal.

Public payphone damage can be conveniently grouped into the following four categories:

- **Incidental damage** occurs in conjunction with some criminal attack on the public payphone, most commonly the theft or attempted theft of the coin box or coin. Cohen (1973) calls this ‘acquisitive vandalism’, but that phrase does not reflect the fact that damage occurs in conjunction with another crime rather than it being the sole intention of the offender.

It is important, especially when considering the prevention of vandalism, that the reason behind the property damage is acknowledged. Concentrating on vandalism rather than theft, confuses the issue. This occurred whilst a Sydney Magistrate claimed in 1986 that public payphone vandalism was ‘an organised crime costing the community millions of dollars a year’ (Fitzgibbon 1986). Those comments were actually made when sentencing an offender who was found guilty of thirty-four charges of stealing cash and thirty-five charges of damaging or interfering with public payphones. It was indicated to the court that the cost of repair to the relevant telephones was $21,000-expensive vandalism to be sure, but not the offender’s prime motive. The offender’s main aim was theft, and the damage created was incidental.

Not all thefts of cash from public payphones involve damage. In the past, employees of Telecom Australia have been prosecuted for such offences. Physical measures, including key-traps and rekeying coin box access, have further prevented such thefts which have generally involved little damage.

However, thefts committed by the public do invariably cause damage. Interviews with youths from a high crime area in Britain revealed that most were aware of techniques used to steal coins from public payphones. Giller (1988, p. 12) reports for those youths that ‘theft was the most common cited motivation for damage to public payphones’; that is, even though the damage to the public payphone was deliberately inflicted, the purpose of the damage was to enable theft.

- **Malicious damage** occurs where an offender deliberately damages a public payphone. Markus (1984) draws attention to the important distinction between damage to the cabinet (including window breakage, graffiti, amateur bomb attacks) and damage to the telephone instrument itself (including smashed handsets and damaged dials). This category includes a variety of dissimilar events. For example, the small shop owner who regularly cut the
handset cords on the two public payphones outside his shop to increase the use of
the coin-operated phone he had installed for his customers’ use, and the youths
who kicked in a phone box ‘just for fun’.

British Telecom research indicates that their public payphone vandalism problem
falls mainly under this heading. Their major study shows that while ten to twelve-
year-old vandals are simply destructive, different motives hold for older youths.
In particular, they say, teenage vandals were ‘rebellious, creating problems at
home and were anti-everything’. Their vandalism ‘coincided with puberty, and the
telephone was often the victim of anger and of frustrations that could not be
expressed anywhere else’ (British Telecom 1988, p. 13).

• Frustration-related damage occurs when a public payphone user inflicts
spontaneous damage on it following a technical difficulty that prohibited a call
being made or concluded, an unsatisfactory personal call, or an unrelated matter.
A recent example of an unrelated matter is the eighteen-year-old youth who
kicked in the glass panels of a phone box because he was angry when a drunken
elderly man jumped the taxi queue and hit him with a newspaper (the youth was
fined $360).

• Accidental damage occurs as a result of carelessness or mishap, most frequently
involving a motor vehicle. Each month, thirty-five street-located public
payphones in Australia are knocked over by motor vehicles, the vast majority
being pushed off their concrete bases as a result of cars parking or performing U-
turns.

It is exceedingly difficult to apportion either the financial cost or numbers of
incidents of damage to public payphones across these categories. Indeed, the basis for all
statistical data on public payphone damage is the technicians’ reports completed after
they attend a public payphone reported as out of order. Faced with a physically-damaged
public payphone, and without any specific guidance about classification, a technician
may define a broken window as accidental, malicious, or frustration-related, depending
on his or her subjective assessment, diligence or imagination. However, it appears that
many of Telecom Australia’s current problems are theft-related and, therefore, can best be
described as incidental damage.

As Wilson (1990) points out, the lack of reliable statistics presents real problems
in evaluating possible explanations for reduced vandalism to public payphones. More
seriously, the inability to distinguish between non-criminal (accidental) damage and
criminal (malicious or incidental) damage complicates any analysis because the costs of
repairing all damages are grouped together. Installing guard rails around public
payphones in shopping centre parking lots may reduce future costs of repair but cannot be
said to prevent crime. Nor can that sort of action explain more than part of the costs of
repairing damage to public payphones.
Telecom Australia’s Response

The major explanation for the marked decrease in the costs of vandalism and damage to public payphones is that the management of Telecom Australia’s business has changed. In 1987, management consultants pointed out that around sixteen separate sections of Telecom Australia were actually involved in public payphone management. This diversity of interest and lack of focal supervision were resolved with the establishment of the Payphone Division in mid-1988. The Payphone Division’s enthusiastic and professional approach to improving public payphone serviceability, loss elimination and the promotion of public payphone use is the main explanation for reduced vandalism in the public payphone area.

It is important to note that the management change was not introduced as a crime prevention measure to reduce vandalism, rather, it was introduced to improve performance in the public payphone area. Part of getting public payphones operational involved tackling vandalism and damage. The new management adopted considered, direct, and commonsense responses to the existing problems, including crime. These resources mirror the commonsense approaches that have been developed to reduce crimes associated with, for instance, sales tax avoidance and theft in hospitals (Smith & Burrows 1986). Additionally, the change in management responsibility cannot be simply described as a ‘multifaceted campaign designed to reduce telephone vandalism’ (Wilson 1990, p. 149). The action taken by the new management did include positive action to address vandalism to the public payphone system, but its major thrust was directed at getting telephones operational and enhancing Telecom Australia’s business activities.

New Management Approaches

The particular activities which were implemented, and which have helped reduce the costs of repairing damaged (including vandalised) public payphones, are listed by reference to the seminal work of Clarke, which suggested that vandalism against public property merited specific measures to directly protect it (1978, pp. 71-4). The five measures he suggested that are relevant to public payphones are as follows.

Target hardening

A great many protective physical measures have been introduced over the last few years, particularly in response to malicious and incidental damage. Target hardening to reduce malicious damage to public payphones has included:

- replacement of the bottom glass sections of full public payphones cabinets with steel mesh;
- the removal of doors, traditionally a major target for vandalism, where weather conditions do not require doors;
- design of new, improved half-cabinets comprising a low-maintenance stainless steel and glass upper structure supported on a single pole; and
- strengthened handsets and stainless steel cords and redesigned dials.
Physical target hardening to reduce thefts of coins, and their associated incidental damage, include:

- the strengthening of the coin box and its security through development of the Kirk Safe, Barker Link, and wave door;
- modified coin refund chutes that are hard to block; and
- new metal coinheads that restrict direct access to the coin-race and make it difficult for thieves to block the race and recover trapped coins at a later time.

There is absolutely no doubt that the introduction of these physical changes has led to a reduction in vandalism and coin theft, as Wilson (1990) has pointed out. The Kirk Safe was developed in 1985 by Telecom artisans following a rash of oxyacetylene and other attacks on the locking mechanisms protecting the public payphone coin box, particularly in the state of New South Wales. The inventors of the Kirk Safe were rewarded for their innovation with an award of $15,000 from Telecom’s Staff Suggestions Board, and it was installed in New South Wales, particularly where coin box attacks and incidental damage had occurred. In Victoria, where organised attacks on public payphones had not been a problem, Kirk Safes were not widely installed. That fact did not escape the attention of New South Wales coin thieves who, in a classic example of displacement, crossed the border and plied their trade in Victoria. By the end of May 1986, nine offenders were apprehended in Victoria as a result of formal surveillance. Six were found guilty of 353 attacks on public payphones and sentenced to prison.

The Kirk Safe is not cheap, and there were many public payphones in Victoria that were without it during 1987. The middle of that year saw the arrest, after formal surveillance, of another gang of five who were convicted of 138 counts of theft and 138 counts of malicious damage. Three of those offenders admitted having learned how to steal the coin boxes while they had been serving time in prison. Thereafter, the vast majority of coin boxes in Victoria were target hardened, but not with Kirk Safes. Instead, the Victorians devised a much cheaper measure—welding a piece of hardened angle iron over that part of the steel door that protected the locking mechanism. This also won an award from Telecom’s Staff Suggestions Board and was successful insofar as the next gang of offenders, apprehended in April 1988 following formal surveillance, had only tackled public payphones not having the angle iron attachment.

South Australia had not suffered the level of organised thefts as Victoria but readied itself in early 1988 by starting to install its own local response—the wave door, originally developed in Western Australia. The wave door also further protected the coin box locking mechanism from attack, but at only
one-tenth of the cost of the Kirk Safe, and was, therefore, preferred. A marked upsurge of coin box thefts, possibly displaced from the eastern states, helped speed up the replacement of the standard and often compromised coin box doors with wave doors. By late 1988, wave doors had been installed across the state.

All this clearly illustrates that physical target hardening reduced incidental damage to public payphones in Australia over the period between 1986 and 1988. However, it also indicates that the various regions were independently tackling the problem at their own pace: no coordinated approach or formal campaign was responsible for these activities.

The subsequent coordinated management approach has built upon these physical responses with introduction of the Phonecard, which designs out opportunity rather than actually target hardening. This prepayment card—which allows use of a public payphone without the need for coin—has now been introduced in Australia. Obviously, coinless public payphones will considerably reduce the prevalence of incidental damage. But they may also impact upon other vandalism. Scotland provides a good example: In 1987 vandalism of the public payphones on one Glasgow housing estate reached the point ‘where it became difficult for British Telecom, to maintain a service’. After overcoming resistance, and with a considered publicity and education program on the estate, the phones were converted to phonecard operation. In the following two months not one of the phones was damaged (Great Britain 1988, p. 48).

**Formal surveillance**

Telecom Australia, using its own security staff, has achieved some modest but considerable success through formal surveillance of high-risk telephone boxes. For example, in late 1984, public payphone box-thefts were running at around 400 per month in the Sydney metropolitan area. This led to a special public payphone surveillance team being established and, over the next twelve months, the theft rate fell to about 50 per month.

Surveillance, of course, is a most expensive exercise and is viable only where major and persistent episodes of incidental damage occur. Electronic surveillance has been used but was found to be of modest success when costs were taken into account. The best-and Telecom Australia’s continuing approach to surveillance is to use it where major problems arise.

**Natural surveillance**

Natural surveillance is a variation of defensible space. Very simply, if a telephone cabinet is situated in a busy public place or is otherwise observable, for instance from adjacent buildings, then it is provided with natural surveillance (see Mayhew, Clarke, Hough & Winchester 1980). Moran and Dolphin’s (1986) study of the characteristics of public payphone locations in Dublin did not find that features such as levels of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, accessibility and local vandalism could be used to identify locations that suffered greater damage. Nevertheless, by removing or relocating many public payphones that were situated in dark or quiet places, Telecom Australia has effectively increased the percentage of public payphones that are provided with some sort of natural surveillance.
Through keeping cabinet lighting operational, natural surveillance has increased for Australia's public payphones. Lighting is provided to make public payphones identifiable from 400 metres away and to assist with operation of the phone. However, a working light inside the cabinet also reduces the soiling of public payphone cabinets and seems to lead to greater usage as well as increased visibility of the phone user to the passer-by. All of this leads to additional natural surveillance.

**Employee surveillance**

Surveillance by employees in the normal course of their work has long been observed to reduce damage in the workplace. Caretakers, doormen, bus conductors, shop assistants, bartenders and many others all play this role (Mackay 1988, p. 89). It is not surprising that increased attention from Telecom Australia technicians, cleaners and coin collectors have also contributed to the decrease in public payphone vandalism that has occurred in recent years.

Fortnightly cleaning of public payphones is now the national standard (although some remote and country locations are cleaned less frequently). A system has been introduced so that cleaners dial a special telephone number and report not only that they have cleaned a particular public payphone, but also any maintenance work that is required.

Telecom Australia now undertakes the majority of coin collecting from public payphones, having terminated arrangements with Australia Post. This has led to more frequent clearances of coin (itself a problem in the past in that a full coin box renders a public payphone inoperable). It has also led to a further presence at the public payphone, another avenue through which damage is noted and a less attractive theft target as coin boxes contain less cash.

In some areas, Telecom Australia has actually used their own stickers to address vandalism problems. One sticker with relevant graphics reads, ‘this public payphone could save your life’, and it is plainly intended to deflect offenders. Its effect is not easily measured, and its use is also not wide enough for its effect to be reflected in general statistics.

**Rapid repair**

There is absolutely no doubt that public property that is well-maintained and obviously well-cared for is far less likely to be damaged. What is also important is that, when damage is noted it is quickly repaired. In order to achieve rapid repairs, specialist public payphone technicians have been introduced to act promptly on the problems reported from any source.

A further innovation is the public payphone monitoring system whereby a mechanism will report direct to a central computer when the coin box is almost full, the handset has been removed, or the phone has not been used for two days. While still under trial, this system when fully-operational will provide another valuable source of information for technicians to ensure that public payphones are kept operational.

Employee surveillance and rapid repair directly reflect the new management approach of Telecom Australia to the public payphone business.
Again, they were not introduced specifically as crime prevention measures but they have plainly had their own impact upon vandalism.

The value of each of the last three approaches has been documented in literature. For instance, Mayhew et al. (1980) showed that ‘supervised’ public payphones in cinemas, cafes, laundromats and so on were less likely to be damaged, whilst Wilson and Kelling (1982) indicated that vandalism was more likely where property showed signs of being uncared for.

**Public Activity**

Apart from the above five measures that have all been implemented within Telecom Australia, a number of initiatives directly involving the public has also been introduced, and these need to be seen in light of Telecom Australia’s considerable public exposure. Media coverage and advertising ensure Telecom Australia is almost constantly in the public eye. In the public payphone area, a recent campaign has publicised the fact that ‘Nine Out of Ten’ public payphones are now operational. The public are thus made aware that public payphones are now being maintained effectively and being cared for, and the public are also being encouraged to make greater use of them.

A public payphone that is used more might be expected to suffer more damage (reflecting constant wear and tear) or less damage (because they are a valued and highly utilised community resource). Existing (British) research on this topic is equivocal. Mawby’s (1977) study found that telephone kiosks for which takings were highest were the most heavily vandalised. A more extensive study by Mayhew et al. (1980) found no such strong relationship, and Markus (1984) asserts that ‘the heavily used kiosk suffers relatively little’. No relevant Australian data exists, so the effect of any marketing publicity on damage or vandalism cannot be stated. Nevertheless, even seemingly neutral public activities could have some effect on vandalism.

A specific public activity that directly addresses vandalism is the Adopt-A-Phone program that aims to re-establish the public payphone as a community resource and encourage community members to assist in caring for it. The program is mostly aimed at school children, although some Neighbourhood Watch groups have also taken to overseeing their local public payphones. In the formal program, the children design and paint a motif on the public payphone cabinet, clean it, and regularly check its condition. This program has been most successful, with maintenance calls and costs being reduced noticeably since its introduction. One of the best examples is provided by the Driver High School in the Northern Territory where the program was first introduced. The public payphone adopted by students at that school had needed over 100 maintenance calls per month prior to its ‘adoption’ by the students. It has since averaged less than ten maintenance calls per month during the two years the program has operated. In that time, there has only been four acts of vandalism.

The Adopt-A-Phone program was implemented at the same time that target hardening was taking place through installation of wave doors and Kirk Safes. Wilson provides statistics relating to the target hardening exercise in the region (Wilson 1990, p. 152), and while he is correct in saying that those ‘measures were clearly effective’, it must be noted that the Adopt-A-Phone
program was introduced at the same time with the same primary objective (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter Ending</th>
<th>Recorded Incidents of Vandalism</th>
<th>Notable Developments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1987</td>
<td>1,373</td>
<td>Region’s public payphones virtually ‘unprotected’ despite Eastern States problems and target hardening activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1987</td>
<td>1,821</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1988</td>
<td>3,459</td>
<td>Marked upsurge in coin box thefts and incidental damage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1988</td>
<td>5,666</td>
<td>Gradual introduction of target hardening with wave doors, Kirk Safes, and modified coin heads.</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 1988</td>
<td>5,062</td>
<td>Payphones Division established to manage Telecom Australia’s public payphone business. New policies for maintenance, cleaning and coin collection developed. Adopt-A-Phone program commenced in the Northern Territory. After reductions in damage to telephones ‘adopted’ by local schools, program extended to South Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1988</td>
<td>2,775</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1989</td>
<td>1,167</td>
<td>On-site media conferences to publicise vandalism problem. TV crews film repair teams at work. (Two thieves arrested the following week after information from public).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1989</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>All public payphones in South Australia now target hardened, mostly with wave doors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1989</td>
<td>1,009</td>
<td>More media publicity. Eight citizens publicly presented total A$1,500 in rewards for information leading to apprehension of offenders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1989</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1990</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1990</td>
<td>1,106</td>
<td>Phonecard introduced, majority of public payphones converted for its use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1990</td>
<td>1,112</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1990</td>
<td>1,360</td>
<td>New more accurate statistical reporting of incidents introduced in October 1990.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1991</td>
<td>1,560</td>
<td>--</td>
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Some effort has been put into the introduction of educational materials especially prepared for primary schools. These materials emphasise the ways in which telephones, and public payphones in particular, are essential and valuable to the community. Any impact that such material would have on a vandalism problem would not be expected to be instant. Rather, by emphasising the community ownership of public payphones, the impact should be noticed in the long term.

More organised attempts have been made to encourage the public to report any malfunctioning public payphones through the 1100 number. This has involved public pleas through the media and the distribution of pamphlets. Again, this action itself does not lead to a direct attack on the problem, but rather serves the purpose of allowing rapid repair.

Financial rewards are available for presentation to members of the public who help identify offenders who have damaged public payphones. Although this is not widely publicised as a matter of course, the possibility of a reward is often mentioned by Telecom Australia representatives in media interviews and similar circumstances. It would be wrong to attribute any great impact to the granting of rewards, but it does alert the public to the problem in another way. Indeed, all media coverage of Telecom Australia’s problems, and vandalism in general, sensitises the public to the offence. Public awareness further complicates any analysis as this awareness could help reduce vandalism by condemning it or increase it by encouraging copycat incidents.

All of the activities discussed in this paper contributed in some way to the reduction of public payphone vandalism in Australia. Table 1 uses the reasonably reliable statistics of vandalism for the South Australia/Northern Territory Region of Telecom Australia to illustrate this point. Although the number of incidents shows a decrease from late 1988, the separate contribution of relevant activities listed in Table 1 cannot be established.

Conclusions
Evaluation of crime prevention measures is bedevilled by the multiplicity and interplay of factors that could influence the prevalence of the crime under question. Retrospective evaluation provides an opportunity for, and should incorporate, discussion of all such factors. It has been shown that the major relevant factor was the new, concentrated, professional approach to public payphone management that was adopted by Telecom Australia in creating the Payphones Division. This move unequivocally established the ‘owner’ of the crime problem.

The professional approach involved physical target hardening and changing the payphone’s physical environment. However, caring for the facilities has probably produced the more substantial and lasting result. Despite the improvement, Telecom Australia still has a problem with vandalism, and thefts from public payphone coin boxes continue to be a sizeable problem. Addressing those problems from a crime prevention perspective requires the collection of accurate and specific data on the ‘victimisation’ of public payphones. The new management team is collecting such data, and, hopefully, some prospective evaluation of preventive approaches may be possible in the future.

The reduction of costs in repairing damage to public payphones has been considerable: the Payphone Division itself put the problem in perspective. As a result of
the initiatives outlined in this paper, the Payphone Division says that in some areas ‘a public payphone which may have been damaged every day now lasts unscathed for at least nine days’. It would be excellent if this rate of improvement could be maintained.

References


