

# **EXPERIENCE OF CRIME AND WITNESS INTIMIDATION IN BRECKFIELD**

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## INTRODUCTION

Witness intimidation can have devastating effects on the physical and psychological well being of victims and their families. It can also prevent individuals from reporting crime and cause statement retraction once people are involved in the criminal justice process. Research shows that witness intimidation occurs in nearly one in ten reported crimes<sup>1</sup>. However, only half of all crimes are reported to the police<sup>2</sup>, and this drops to only a third of those involving intimidated witnesses<sup>1</sup>.

The Office for Criminal Justice Reform is delivering a national work programme to reduce witness intimidation and encourage witnesses to report crimes and give evidence. A key element of this programme is the development and implementation of the Breckfield Making WAVES project. Making WAVES aims to support the police and other agencies in Breckfield to work effectively to identify and support intimidated witnesses. A dedicated project officer has been employed to facilitate witnesses' progress through the criminal justice system. In addition, training is being provided to local agencies to help them identify intimidated witnesses and provide appropriate responses.

As part of a wider evaluation of Making WAVES, the Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University has been commissioned to carry out an assessment of the extent and impact of crime and witness intimidation in Breckfield. This involved a community crime survey being undertaken with Breckfield residents (n=97) and a focus group being conducted with five residents from Breckfield to explore the impact of crime and witness intimidation in Breckfield and reasons that prevent witnesses from reporting such crime and intimidation. This report summarises the findings of the survey and focus group and discusses their implications. The Making WAVES project is a year long initiative, the impact of which will be fully assessed by the Centre for Public Health and the final evaluation report produced in Summer 2008.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Safety, fear of crime and extent of crime

- Nearly seven in ten (68%) participants felt very or fairly safe in Breckfield during the daytime, compared with 24% during the evening. Correspondingly, three quarters (77%) of participants felt that the extent of crime occurring during the evening was very or fairly high, compared with 54% during the daytime.
- Anti-social behaviour, violent crime, burglary, harassment, car theft and mugging were highlighted as being particularly prevalent in Breckfield and subsequently caused the most concern for residents.

Findings from the focus group suggest that Breckfield has deteriorated into an area of high crime and anti-social behaviour. Whilst gangs, drug dealers and particular problem families were highlighted as causing a large proportion of crime within the area, anti-social behaviour was typically associated with youths, occurring mainly at night and linked to alcohol and drug use. The high frequency and visibility of crime in Breckfield have increased residents' fears of being victims of crime.

Typically, offenders are known within the community; residents highlighted that criminals in the area often openly state their criminality, expressing that they will not be caught and portraying no fear of being convicted. Vandalism of public spaces by youths was also highlighted as a particular issue and it was apparent that such behaviour was negatively impacting on the health and well being of local residents. For example, whilst it was highlighted that older, as well as younger, residents would not visit the park when gangs of youths were loitering there, the destruction of the park by youths meant that they could not visit it at other times either.

### Experience of crime and witness intimidation

- Three quarters (75%) of participants stated that they had witnessed a crime (that they were not the victim of) in Breckfield; two thirds (65%) of whom had witnessed this crime in the past six months.
- Of those who had witnessed a crime during the past six months, 86% had witnessed anti-social behaviour.
- Over half (58%) of participants had personally been a victim of crime in Breckfield, and 37% stated that this had occurred during the past six months.
- Of those participants who had been a victim of crime during the past six months, the majority had been a victim of property damage (67%) or anti-social behaviour (63%).
- Seven in ten (70%) participants who had experienced a crime during the past six months had been intimidated following the crime and over six in ten (65%) stated that a family member(s) had also been intimidated.
- Of those who had witnessed a crime during the past six months, 54% had been intimidated following the crime and nearly half (49%) stated that a family member(s) had also been intimidated.
- The main types of intimidation reported involved verbal abuse, property damage and threats.
- Intimidation was primarily perpetrated directly by the offender and was typically face-to-face.
- Both victims and witnesses felt that they were being intimidated primarily because the offender was malicious and to deter them from reporting crimes and giving evidence.

Whilst both crime and intimidation will have immediate effects on a witness, wider and longer term effects were highlighted during the focus group. Extensive community-wide intimidation and fear of reprisals if crime is reported were felt to have been created by the visible extent of crime and witness intimidation in the area. Whilst it was highlighted that witness intimidation can prevent crimes being reported and subsequently allow crime and intimidation to flourish, further effects can be placed on witnesses' health and well-being. It was highlighted that intimidation can lead to residents being isolated, often fearing leaving their home or visiting areas associated with crime and intimidation. Financial impacts were also being placed on local residents, for example, through vandalism and property damage.

## Perceptions of local police and Police Community Support Officers working in Breckfield

- Around half of participants felt that the police were approachable (55%), helpful (53%), trustworthy (50%) and understanding (48%). However, only a third (32%) thought that they were responsive to crime.
- Perceptions of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) were lower. Around four in ten participants stated that they felt they were trustworthy (44%), helpful (41%) and approachable (39%). Less than a third thought that they were understanding (32%) or responsive to crime (27%).

Residents expressed a number of issues with local police and PCSOs that they believed have contributed to a decrease in community confidence in the criminal justice system. In particular, it was felt that when residents of Breckfield report crime to the police or other agencies, they are given little feedback on what had been done about the issue, and see very little response or change within the area. There was also a belief that residents deserved increased police presence. It was felt that the police only patrol during quiet times when young people, who were viewed as perpetrating a large proportion of crime in Breckfield, were attending school. Although PCSOs were identified as an active and visible arm of the police within Breckfield, residents stressed that the limited power PCSOs have means that their effectiveness is often restricted. They felt that offenders are more fearful of operational police officers and that consequently such officers should be patrolling the area.

### Reporting of crime and witness intimidation

- Only one in ten (10%) participants thought that more than half of all crimes occurring in Breckfield were reported to the police; 49% thought that less than half were reported.
- Key reasons that participants believed prevented the reporting of crimes included: fear of revenge attacks and intimidation (87%); perceptions that the authorities will not do anything (68%); not wanting to be called a 'grass' (informant) (61%); believing that there is a lack of witness support (49%); and having had a bad experience of reporting in the past (30%).
- Despite this, 60% of participants stated that they would report a crime they witnessed to the police, 28% were undecided whilst 12% would not report it.
- Half (52%) also stated that they would inform another agency. Key agencies that participants would report crimes to included: Crimestoppers (64%), the local council (40%), and Breckfield Community Centre (34%). Of those who would not inform the police, but would report to another agency, 67% stated that they would inform Crimestoppers, 40% Breckfield Community Centre, 33% neighbourhood wardens and 27% their local housing association.
- Of those participants who had been victims of crime during the past six months, only half (52%) of incidents had been reported to the police.
- Of those participants who had witnessed a crime during the past six months, only 40% were aware that the

incident had been reported to the police; 31% were unsure.

- For participants who had themselves experienced or witnessed a crime, the perception that the authorities would not do anything was the key reason for not reporting this to the police.
- Analyses indicated that participants who stated they would report a crime to the police were significantly more likely to perceive the police as helpful and understanding. Furthermore, they were more likely to perceive local PCSOs as trustworthy, understanding, approachable, helpful and responsive to crime.
- Overall, only 44% of intimidation experienced by victims and witnesses of crime was reported to any agency.
- Where intimidation was reported, this was mainly to police (90%); in a third (30%) of cases it was also reported to Breckfield Community Centre, Crimestoppers or the local housing association, and in a fifth (20%) it was also reported to Victim Support or local neighbourhood wardens.

Participants highlighted a range of issues regarding local services which they felt hindered the support and advice intimidated witnesses could access, and also the level of reporting of both crime and intimidation in the area. Communication between agencies themselves and between agencies, witnesses and the community in general, was highlighted as the key barrier. Residents who had themselves reported crime and/or intimidation to the police or other agencies, highlighted that they were provided with little feedback on what those agencies could or would do in response, and felt that this was a common occurrence amongst all agencies across Breckfield. Subsequently, the perceived lack of response and support from local agencies, coupled with the fear and/or experience of reprisals and intimidation, was identified as a huge deterrent to reporting crimes.

### Improving the Breckfield area

Participants of both the survey and focus group suggested a number of ways in which local agencies could work to reduce crime and witness intimidation in Breckfield. These included:

- Providing youths with alternative (outdoor) activities outside of school hours that would divert them from perpetrating anti-social behaviour in the area.
- Increasing the number of operational police officers patrolling the area at peak times (evening/night) and locations (Grizedale Estate, Thirlmere Road and Park).
- Ensuring police are accessible to the community through the use of a neighbourhood police depot.
- Improving communication between local support agencies and the community so that they are aware of: who they can report incidents to; the support that is available to them; what response they can expect to receive from agencies; and what agencies are currently doing to reduce crime and witness intimidation.
- Ensuring that information provided by witnesses is kept confidential; there is currently a perception that information given to some local agencies (particularly Victim Support) or police is not kept confidential and

consequently, the community has lost trust in these services and are reluctant to report crimes to them.

- Working with local landlords and housing associations to ensure all new tenants are vetted appropriately and to similar standards.

Whilst these suggestions were targeted at agencies, comments made by both survey participants and those attending the focus group suggested that the community themselves are willing to support agencies in improving the area. For example, focus group participants regularly attend a Citysafe meeting that has been set up to bring the community and local agencies together.

## CONCLUSION

Breckfield is an area which is experiencing intense crime and witness intimidation. Fear of reprisals and being labelled a 'grass' are seriously impeding residents from reporting crimes, and in some cases making their lives unbearable. Agencies working in the area to prevent crime, increase reporting and support witnesses need to highlight the work they are doing to increase community awareness of their efforts and improve community confidence. This in turn may improve perceptions of safety within the community, increase the reporting of crimes and reduce witness intimidation. Improving communication between agencies is paramount and work being carried out through the Making WAVES project is already helping to alleviate some of these issues through the provision of an anonymous crime reporting focal point. This acts as a link between the community and local agencies, whilst offering support to witnesses throughout the witness pathway. With continued efforts, the Making WAVES project should make a valuable contribution to the Breckfield area. The following section provides a list of key recommendations for local agencies to encourage witnesses to report crimes and provide evidence. These recommendations are not conclusive and should be viewed in light of work already in progress across the Breckfield area to reduce witness intimidation and improve services.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Local support and criminal justice agencies should work together to develop an information pack for intimidated witnesses that provides details of available support and advice on reducing and reporting crime and intimidation. Furthermore, the pack should highlight the range of options for witnesses to report incidents (i.e. PCSOs, police, Crimestoppers, Making WAVES project, local housing association) and what they can expect each agency to do in response. Development of these packs will also provide a reference tool for local agencies to refer witnesses to relevant support.
2. Limited feedback from agencies on what they are doing, or intend to do, to prevent crime and support witnesses is a key barrier to reporting crime and witness intimidation in Breckfield. Local support and criminal justice agencies should regularly promote the work they are doing to reduce crime and intimidation and support witnesses. All agencies carrying out activities should ensure their efforts are made visible to the public as they are being carried out, whilst also highlighting these efforts in relevant media, such as a

community newsletter, which would allow a more targeted approach to communicating with local residents.

3. All agencies should ensure that they provide specific feedback to all intimidated witnesses on what they have done or intend to do about reported incidents.
4. Although PCSOs regularly patrol the Breckfield area, residents felt that their presence did little to prevent crime or increase community safety, and did not feel confident in reporting crimes to them. Merseyside Police should consider reallocation of resources across the city to allow an increased operational police presence in the Breckfield area, where crime and witness intimidation are currently causing huge problems for the area.
5. Findings suggest that a large proportion of crime and witness intimidation in Breckfield occurs at night, yet residents felt that limited patrols were made by the police and PCSOs during this time. An increased police presence during these times would not only provide a deterrent for offenders, but also increase perceptions of safety within the community. Whilst this may not be possible all of the time, efforts should be made to ensure the police are accessible to residents, for example, via a dedicated local police depot or telephone number for a local police officer/PCSO.
6. In Breckfield anti-social behaviour, perpetrated by youths, is causing huge problems for local residents. Increased efforts should be made to try to engage local young people in alternative and structured activities outside of school hours and support parents in monitoring and managing their children's behaviour.
7. The police, local licensing departments and other agencies should develop a campaign to reduce underage drinking amongst youths in Breckfield.
8. The Making WAVES project would seem to provide a vital link between the Breckfield community and local support and criminal justice agencies, whilst also offering support to witnesses throughout the witness pathway. Local agencies should continue to work with staff from the Making WAVES project to ensure that this resource is used to its full capacity.

## REFERENCES

1. Tarling, R., Dowds, L. and Budd, T. (2000). Victim and witness intimidation: key findings from the BCS. Home Office: London.
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