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797

'Creatures of habit'

New science-based approach keeps close tabs on high-risk sex offenders

By Richard Vieira

In British Columbia alone, there are currently 1,280 violent or high-risk offenders who have or will be returned to the community after serving time. And a staggering 97 per cent of them—all of them male—are sex offenders. But a new team based out of the province's Lower Mainland is working to prevent the most dangerous of these offenders from striking again.

The Integrated Sexual Predator Observation Team, or ISPOT, is a full-time, 10-person mobile surveillance unit—comprised of officers from both the RCMP and municipal police agencies across the province—that monitors the day-to-day activities of sex offenders. Should an offender breach one or any number of his parole or probation conditions and appear to be on the verge of re-offending, the team will step in and make an arrest.

"These guys are creatures of habit, so the behaviour they've demonstrated previously in their lives makes it a reliable indicator of future behaviour," explains S/Sgt Scot Filer of the province's RCMP Behavioural Sciences Group (BSG), which developed the ISPOT concept.

The ISPOT is a new scientific approach to tracking and policing high-risk sex offenders. The process begins by determining which of those 97 per cent are the most dangerous. The team uses a measurement system that ranks each offender based on risk factors such as number of victims and the age when he first committed violence. The ranking system also takes into account what are called destabilizing influences, which include drugs, alcohol, pornography or simply having access to children.

Each offender is given a score—the higher the score, the more dangerous the offender. The ISPOT team then selects the top 30 per cent as their targets and begins developing intelligence files on them. But the team won't initiate surveillance of a target unless he shows signs of re-offending.

"We have to know that not only are these people dangerous but they're in a place in their lives—in their crime cycle—that is moving them in a behavioural way to another victim," says Sgt Matt Logan, a psychologist with the BSG.

In addition to target selection, ISPOT personnel are trained to do everything from the surveillance and interrogation of the offender to witness interviews, follow-up investigations and submitting court briefs supporting their findings.

"When we present a Crown report to the court, we'll also be backing it up with crime cycle information," says Logan. "We want to show the court that this wasn't a guy that came home late

for supper or went AWOL to visit his grandmother."

And while ISPOT team members are being trained to detect when an offender is returning to his distinct crime cycle, parole and probation officers from both the B.C. Corrections Branch and the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) will observe and report warning signs to the ISPOT team.

"For one guy, it may be a loss of a relationship . . . for another person it might be the beginning of a cycle back into alcohol or drugs," says Logan. "He could be missing meetings or he has been seen frequenting bars—all those are detectable for the probation or parole officer."

The partnership with corrections agencies also allows for more thorough monitoring of sex offenders.

"Working with police will provide opportunities for increased communication and cooperation," says Shelly Pylypiak, a CSC liaison working within the BSG. "ISPOT members will provide CSC with additional information on offender activities in the community and CSC will be able to provide the police with insight into an offender's crime cycle—this combined knowledge is a positive step toward enhancing public safety."

In addition to the scientific methods used to determine targets, the team is using the investigative technique of geographic profiling combined with geographical information systems technology to electronically map out any locations associated with its targets.

The full-time unit is the culmination of three short-term pilot projects ranging from four weeks to three months. While the focus was on whether or not offenders breached their release conditions, the team's success stressed the need for a dedicated, full-time unit. During the first project alone, the team followed 12 people and arrested seven of them on offences ranging from breach of probation to sexual assault and possession of child pornography.

"It was clear that in a majority of the cases these guys breached their conditions almost daily," says Filer.

Although the ISPOT will be physically located in the Lower Mainland, it will have a provincial responsibility. Depending of the priority of the target, the team will accept requests for service from other police departments and RCMP detachments throughout B.C. And because team members become essentially subject matter experts, the ISPOT's reach will extend even further.

"When [team members] return to the jurisdiction from where they came we are injecting back into that detachment a level of expertise that it didn't have before," Filer says.