RESEARCH REPORT

The Motivations of Motor Vehicle Theft Offenders

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper investigates offender motivation for stealing motor vehicles. The paper features two separate sections, a literature review and a series of offender interviews, both of which investigate reasons for offenders first becoming involved in motor vehicle theft, for maintaining their involvement, and ultimately ceasing their offending.

Part One – Literature Review

- Although there is a shortage of literature investigating offender motivation for committing motor vehicle theft, some themes can be identified in that which is available.

- Motor vehicle theft is associated with social deprivation, characterised by low income, low levels of education and high rates of unemployment.

- Many offenders commence stealing cars at a young age (in the mid teen years) for reasons which include a desire for excitement, alleviation of boredom, or to gain status and recognition amongst their peers.

- 'Joyriding' is widely cited in the literature as the major motive behind motor vehicle theft, with some of this literature suggesting there is a 'dependency' component to this behaviour.

- For most offenders, motor vehicle theft quickly becomes a money-making practice where offenders begin to steal to maintain a lifestyle beyond that which they could otherwise afford. This helps to maintain the offending lifestyle.

- Although little is known about why offenders stop stealing cars, it seems that those who do stop do so because they feel they have 'outgrown' the behaviour, or moved on into a more adult and responsible lifestyle.

Part Two – Offender Interviews

- Forty-two male motor vehicle theft offenders aged between 15 and 27 years were interviewed about their offending histories and their motivations for committing motor vehicle theft. Most were from a low socio-economic background and demonstrated low levels of engagement with education and/or paid employment.

- The respondents were aged between 10 and 19 years when they commenced offending, and cited reasons such as peer influence (33%), wanting to drive (28%), and boredom (24%). Many commenced offending while in the presence of friends or relatives who were already involved in the crime.

- Although most respondents reported heavy substance use, this did not appear to be strongly linked with motor vehicle theft.

- Most offenders reported quickly improving their skills in stealing cars, and soon moved on from stealing to alleviate boredom to stealing for profit. This included on-selling either vehicle parts or whole cars, and using cars in the commission of other crimes such as ram-raids and burglaries.

- Consistent with the literature, most offenders reported that their cessation of stealing cars was associated with getting older and beginning to take on more adult responsibilities.

- Most offenders stated that they felt that earlier intervention and assistance could have halted the progression of their offending 'careers', if not preventing them from starting in the first place.

Conclusions

Although joyriding is frequently cited in the literature as the primary motivation behind motor vehicle theft, this was not strongly reflected in the responses from those interviewed. Commencement of offending was however, largely associated with a general aimlessness and desire to fit in with peers. It was not generally associated with financial gain, although this was an important factor in subsequently maintaining offending. The link between general social deprivation and stealing cars identified in the literature was reflected in the interviews in a number of different ways. Interview responses also supported the findings from previous studies in terms of cessation of offending, which seems largely associated with a 'growing out' of the offending lifestyle. Most offenders reported that earlier intervention would have served as a deterrent to crime.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Understanding motor vehicle theft requires consideration of not only theft targets and their protection, but also of the characteristics of offenders, the situational elements and circumstances surrounding motor vehicle theft, and the deterrent impact of crime prevention strategies. Information such as this could usefully inform crime prevention strategies and rehabilitation targets. To this end, the current report includes two sections investigating motor vehicle theft from the perspective of the offender. Both sections investigate offender motivations to commence, continue and ultimately stop stealing cars. The first section is a review of the available literature and the second section is based on a series of interviews with past and current motor vehicle theft offenders.

PART ONE - LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

It has been argued that motor vehicle theft offenders can be segmented into two distinct categories that distinguish between those who steal for financial gain and those who steal for temporary theft (Kellett & Gross, 2006), although a small proportion of offenders are likely to cross this divide. Research investigating the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of this offending population (e.g., Farrington, 1996; Light, Nee & Ingham, 1993; Slobodian & Browne, 1997, 2001) has revealed that a large proportion are male, young (15 – 16 years), and live in environments characterized by deprivation including economically depressed neighbourhoods, poor/absent leisure facilities, high rates of school drop-outs or truancy, low levels of educational attainment, and high unemployment. Farrington's review suggested that additional risk factors include absent fathers and poor child-rearing methods, harsh or erratic parental discipline, rejection, and abuse. He also found a pattern of personality traits including impulsivity, hyperactivity, and restlessness – all of which are consistently shown to be strongly associated with an inability to foresee the consequences of offending behaviour. In their investigations into car crime, the British Standing Committee on Crime Prevention (1988) noted that "a common factor among car thieves is their self-interests and lack of concern for their victim" (p.11). However, given that not everyone who experiences socio-economic hardship goes on to commit crime, and that not all young people who display impulsivity or hyperactivity also engage in delinquent or criminal behaviour, it raises a question about the motivation for or aetiology of car crime.

Motivation for Car Crime

While considerable attention has been paid to the identification of factors associated with crime generally and car crime more specifically, this information provides little by way of explaining what motivates the individual to take up a "career" in crime. Studies have revealed that young males are motivated to commit

car crimes for a broad range of reasons including a desire for excitement, to alleviate boredom, and to gain status and recognition amongst their peers. There is also an argument that excessive levels of car theft are comparable to adolescent infatuation or obsession (see Light et al., 1993; McMurran, 1997), although this infatuation is thought to diminish as the young person enters adulthood, resettles into the community and assumes the responsibilities of adulthood. For a minority, car crime continues into adulthood when it is more strongly associated with activities that bring financial gain (e.g., selling stolen cars, stripping and selling parts, supplying second-hand components to scrap-yards; Slobodian & Browne, 2001) or using stolen cars in the commission of other offences (e.g., burglary, ram-raiding).

While attempts have been made to develop motivational typologies of car theft (e.g. Challinger, 1987; Clarke & Harris, 1992; McCaghy, Giodano & Henson, 1977), such an approach has been criticized on the basis that it implies exclusivity and stability. For example, Copes (2003) has argued that typologies are based on the idea that offenders in one group are qualitatively different from those in another. Based on his qualitative investigation of criminal decision-making (i.e., motivation to commit car theft, target selection process, perceived risks and rewards of participating in the theft, and techniques and rewards to accomplish the task), he concluded that not only are motivational categories not mutually exclusive, but that it is common for car thieves to have multiple motivations over their careers and even for a single theft. In this sense, typologies may actually obscure the nature of the underlying motivation for car theft rather than illuminate it. A more fruitful approach to understanding motivation is, therefore, to consider motivation at the various stages of the offending behaviour; that is, examine what motivates the offender to first engage in the crime, what might keep them involved in the offending behaviour, and what motivates them to stop.

Joyriding

Perhaps the most frequently cited explanation for young people stealing cars is the notion of joyriding. Joyriding is the term used to describe "the stealing of a vehicle (usually a car) for the fun of driving it" (Kellett & Gross, 2006, p.40). It typically involves "performance driving" where cars are driven at high speed and "in as dangerous a manner as possible [which is] only organized to the extent that it is often undertaken by adolescent males either to impress adolescent females or as a mark of a 'dare' which expresses courage in the presence of other adolescents" (Stanley, 1995, p.102). Joyriders have been assigned the somewhat dubious label of "expert show-offs" who engage in "dangerous stunts such as handbrake turns and rollovers" (McCulloch, Schmidt & Lockhart, 1990, p.11).

Joyriding is, therefore, not only illegal but a potentially dangerous activity with associated risks that range from public shame to serious injury or death (Kellett & Gross, 2006). Yet despite repeated threats to the joyrider's well-being, many continue to engage in this risky behaviour. Why? Various investigations suggest that it serves a status function amongst peers, whereby the acquisition and display of particular skills have a hierarchical importance, with those who succeed receiving "appropriate" kudos for their endeavours (Briggs, 1992; Light et al., 1993). More recent qualitative investigations have suggested that joyriding is a response to a "crisis of masculinity" in neighbourhoods negatively affected by socio-economic re-structuring. According to Stephen and Squires (2003), young men, with no other means of obtaining more conventional forms of status and "self-respect", are said to seek fulfillment through the manufacture of excitement, and joyriding becomes an expression of power and control of public places.

The persistence with which joyriding is undertaken has led some to argue that the behaviour has an "addictive" potential (see Kilpatrick, 1997; McMurran, 1997), with elements of dependency similar to those found in substance abuse, pathological gambling or impulse-control disorders. Such an approach is hardly surprising, given that joyriding is often a repeated offence, with perpetrators claiming an inability to refrain from further identical offences (McBride, 2000). Kilpatrick's (1997) study of 15 juvenile offenders (aged 14-17 years) in Northern Ireland was one of the first to adopt a clinical definition of the offence. Using a semi-structured interview format, several common characteristics of addiction in the young joyrider's experiences were identified that were consistent with certain psychological features of dependence.[1] There was evidence, for example, of tolerance with interviewees stating the rate at which they stole cars increased exponentially as they became more expert at stealing them. Participants also reported symptoms similar to withdrawal upon discontinuation of joyriding (e.g., feeling down or awful) and reported great difficulty in giving up the activity. Finally, there was evidence of a persistence to continue joyriding despite harmful consequences and evidence of "craving" with half the sample giving clear indications of daydreams (which could be considered an indicator of withdrawal/craving phenomena).

More recently, Kellett and Gross (2006) conducted interviews with 50 young motor vehicle theft offenders (15- 21 years) serving custodial sentences in England and Northern Ireland, in order to elicit a sequential account of their joyriding "careers", and found that seven previously identified dependency criteria could all occur within the context of the accounts of joyriding behaviour given by the respondents. The authors were able to conclude that it is possible that some individuals may indeed become addicted to joyriding and that this has implications for the management and treatment of offenders.

Retribution

Often offenders steal the property of others as a form of social control. Consequently, what may seem as an unprovoked theft is really a response to the perceived misconduct of the victim (Black, 1998). Wrongs can vary from the personal and filial, to the social and sub cultural (Jacobs, Topalli & Wright, 2003). Where retribution is the offender's primary motive, they may exact revenge or retribution on those who, in their opinion, deserve it. The car thief is driven by "moralistic concerns" (Jacobs, 2000, p.33) in the face of being disrespected or unfairly treated by the victim (Copes, 2003). For others, retribution is a secondary motive: In the search for a suitable target, the offender steals from those he or she believes probably did not obtain wealth by legitimate means (Jacobs et al., 2003).

Symbolic Importance

Car ownership can project a sense of power, prestige, and status, particularly in many urban subcultures (Bright, 1998). The display of material items shows that the owner is "someone who has overcome – if only temporarily- the financial difficulties faced by others on the street corner" (Wright & Decker, 1997, p.40). According to Copes (2003), access to a car allows the owner to literally cruise past the poverty and despair of the streets in which they typically reside. The successful car thief can spend exorbitant amounts of money on clothing and other luxury items in an attempt to "keep up appearances" and by spending money conspicuously, offenders can show others that they are "members of the aristocracy of the streets" (Wright & Decker, 1997, p.40).

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[1] A dependency syndrome is characterised by subjective compulsion, loss of control, desire or efforts to control use, salience and persistence despite harm, relapse after abstinence, tolerance, and withdrawal symptoms.

Cultural Issues

An important consideration in an Australian context is the involvement of Indigenous offenders in motor vehicle crimes. While a small amount of research has been conducted that explores the nature of car crime in the general population, there is a dearth of literature that considers it from an Indigenous perspective. This is somewhat surprising given the heavy involvement of Indigenous youth in this offending behaviour (Dawes, 2002). In one of the few studies undertaken with this offending population, Dawes considered the joyriding phenomenon and attempted to explain the motivations underpinning this crime from the perspective of Indigenous youth. The study involved qualitative interviews with thirty young Indigenous males (aged between 15 and 22 years) who were deemed representative of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island youth from urban, rural, and remote communities.

In looking at causal factors, Dawes noted that peers played a central role in terms of both the introduction to, and continuation of, car theft and joyriding behaviour. A structure was shown to exist amongst peers whereby the novice joyrider could, with the acquisition of new "skills" (e.g., driving at high speeds), advance their status within the group to become leader of a joyriding "crew". This status was considered important by a group who are often excluded from other social domains, such as school and the job market. Respondents also reported having no remorse for their victims and thought little of the inherent dangers associated with high speed driving - even while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol (just over one third knew someone who had died as a result of joyriding and 59% indicated they were instrumental in that death). Dawes pointed out the futility of custodial sentences for joyriders as "[d]etention is often interpreted as a logical step in the rites of passage to manhood for many Indigenous and working-class youth" (p.204). When asked for alternative responses, the majority indicated a need for education programs that focus on the inherent danger of the activity and its legal and practical consequences. In conclusion, Dawes noted that for many young Indigenous youth, joyriding was a form of resistance to their economic and social marginalization; that it offered young people a context within which they could develop an identity and gain a sense of belonging "through a perception of group solidarity" (p. 207).

Motivation to Continue Offending

The key joyriding studies show that the motivation for car theft shifts from the initial thrill element, may involve an addictive component, and, finally, becomes a more money-orientated practice. In addition to financial gain, the identity of many car thieves is closely tied to their offending behaviours. Based on their findings, Stephen and Squires (2003) concluded that the car thief acquires status via group support for their activities while at the same time, develops a sense of belonging in a consumer society that previously marginalized them. The more resourceful and less hostile the offender's environment, the more likely illegal innovations will be directed towards increasing the unitary or cumulative payoff of their offending behaviours (Tremblay, Talon & Hurley, 2001). This is particularly so when investing heavily in a lifestyle that encourages the hedonistic pursuit of sensory stimulation, lack of future orientation, and neglect of responsibility (Fleisher, 1995). The car thief can become "locked into" a system of behaviour in which the cash-intensive activities promoted by the street culture to which they belong continually threatens to exhaust the financial resources required to sustain them. This, in turn, promotes further offending (Wright & Decker, 1994, 1997). Faced with eroding legitimate resources, the high cost of the lifestyle makes criminal behaviour all the more enticing. In this culture of "car capital", emergent opportunities often determine when, where and how frequently offences occur, with the ever-present financial inducement always at the fore (Jacobs, Topalli & Wright, 2003). Copes (2003) has noted that offenders whose criminal

lifestyle leads them to spend with seeming abandon do so, in part, because money acquired illegally holds less intrinsic value than income earned through hard work.

Motivation to Stop Offending

Little is known about why offenders stop stealing cars. For many, particularly low frequency offenders, cessation is simply a normative response whereby they "age out" or desist from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001). This may be in response to protective factors that hasten the process (e.g., appropriate employment, a "good" marriage; Horney, Osgood & Marshall, 1995; Laub, Nagin & Sampson, 1998). For the majority of older offenders, it would seem that age-related responsibilities exert the strongest influence of progressive withdrawal from car theft (Stephen & Squires, 2003).

Although a full evaluation of the effectiveness of various interventions is beyond the scope of this review, there is limited evidence to suggest that some programs, such as motor vehicle-based intervention programs, can be effective in diverting young people away from an offending lifestyle (e.g. Wilkinson, 1997).

Summary

Although there is a general lack of literature about the motivations of motor vehicle theft offenders, this review indicates that motivations are likely to be many and varied, and also change throughout the career of an offender. It would seem that although many offenders commence stealing cars as a juvenile to impress friends and/or fit into a social group, continuing to offend may be fueled by a 'dependence' on the thrills of joyriding, or by financial pressures associated with maintaining a certain lifestyle to which an offender has become accustomed. Although very little is known about what motivates an offender to cease offending, it would seem that for those who do stop, age-related responsibilities and/or protective factors have an important role to play.

PART TWO - OFFENDER INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

As outlined in the previous section, there are many different motivations for committing vehicle theft, and these motivations can change for individuals throughout their offending "career". Motivations for commencing offending appear to be different to the motivations to continue offending, and can differ among individuals. In order to add to the existing body of literature and explore the issues within a local context, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore some South Australian offenders' experience of car theft, particularly with respect to:

- Understanding how car crime starts, develops and stops;
- The motivation behind car theft (to provide a basis for developing theory and formulating intervention/prevention strategies);
- Whether a differentiation exists between offender and theft types;
- Opportunities available for car theft;
- Alcohol and drug use (to help determine whether thefts are impulsive act or used to commit other crimes that facilitate drug use);
- Whether offenders understand the consequences of their action (which can inform intervention);
- Target cars (to inform prevention strategies); and
- Perception of severity of offence (to inform intervention).

METHOD

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with 42 male offenders (aged between 15 and 27) who were or had been involved in car theft. Forty one offenders had at least one criminal conviction for theft or illegal use of a motor vehicle. Participation was voluntary, and participants came from two groups: one group (N = 25) were involved in a juvenile diversionary program designed to deter young offenders from car crime; the other group (N = 17) were inmates serving custodial sentences in a medium security prison. None of the participants identified themselves as Indigenous. In order to avoid the inconsistencies frequently associated with self-report questionnaires, the interviews were designed to address specific topics while allowing the interviewees the opportunity to expand upon issues and introduce topics relevant to them. The interviews were conducted between May and October 2006 following approval from the requisite Human Research Ethics Committees.

FINDINGS

The findings presented below have been grouped into car crime biography, social background factors, and three stages in the career of a car thief (initial involvement, career development, and issues concerning giving up car crime).

Car Crime Biography

Age first involved

Almost half the sample (N=20) reported they were either 14 or 15 years of age when they first started taking cars. Figure 1 shows that amongst the respondents interviewed, 14 was the most common age to commence stealing cars. One respondent indicated that they were ten years old, while three did not steal cars until their late teens (18 and 19 years of age). Given the age at which most started their car crime careers, the majority were not licensed when first driving on the roads. Several respondents indicated they had not yet obtained a driving license.

Figure 1.   Age of first involvement in motor vehicle theft
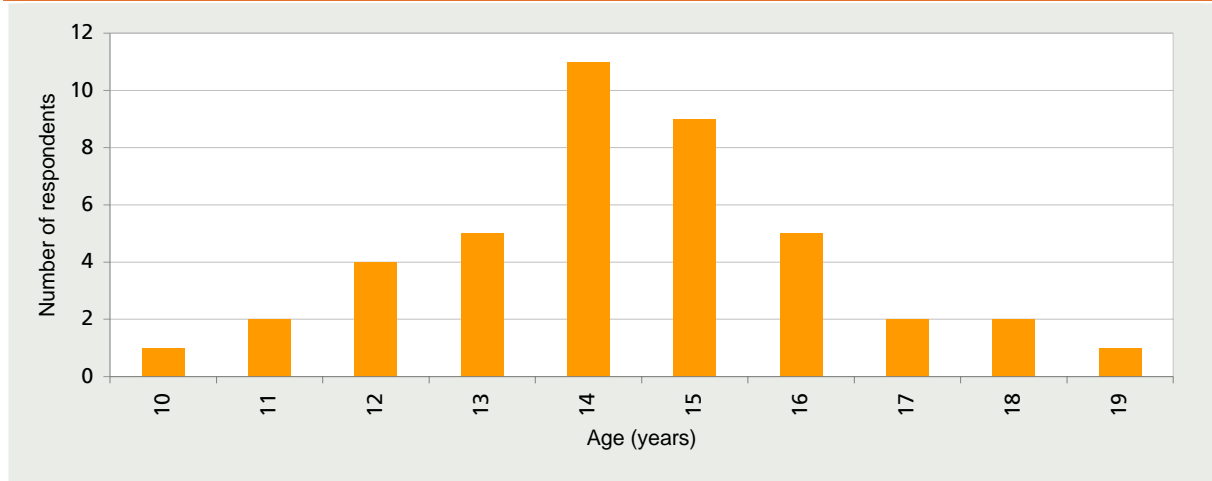
Frequency of Offending

Almost three-quarters of the sample stated that when their offending behaviour was most active, they stole between three and five cars per week. For the remainder, the thefts were either less frequent or at a lower volume; in fact, one respondent indicated he had committed only three offences in total.

Current Involvement in Car Crime

At the time interviews were conducted, approximately 90% of respondents (N=38) indicated they were no longer involved in car crime (although this may have been socially desirable responding). The shortest length of time since the last offence was one month and the longest four years:

> *"It's just stupid, ya know ... ya young and stupid and don't think about it but no more ... I ain't stealin' no more cars".*

Social Background

There is ample evidence highlighting the importance of looking at the social background of offenders. For example, factors such as inadequate schooling, unemployment, and social deprivation have been identified as contributing factors. It should be noted, however, that as the sample mostly came from a lower socio-economic group, the data presented here reflects that bias.

School and Work

There was a high level of similarity amongst the cohort with respect to their interactions with the educational system. The highest level of educational attainment was Year 10, which only twelve respondents completed. Of the remainder, 17 had completed Year 9, ten had completed Year 8 and the remaining five had left school prior to the completion of Year 7. All respondents admitted to attending school only infrequently, stating their belief that it was a waste of time. The majority of responses about the most redeeming feature of school mentioned spending time with friends:

> *"... me and me mates ... we just kinda hung out all the time ..."*
> *" ... the only good thing was me mates .. we had a laugh"*

For some, time spent with peers at school served a social function that was not available within their family environment:

> *"yeah, hanging out with me mates ... it was shit at home ... me parents were always drunk"*

For almost half the respondents, the decision to leave school was made by the school authorities:

> *"I just didn't fit in ... always fightin' and stuff"*
>
> *"I got asked to leave ... the teachers just didn't like me"*
>
> *"I went crazy once and just started punching everyone ... then they wouldn't let me back
> into mainstream [school]"*

Not surprisingly, academic work – particularly the sciences – was considered the least likable aspect of school:

> *"I hated maths and stuff ... but I liked to draw ... do art and stuff"*

Two thirds of the cohort had completed some form of post-secondary training (e.g., fork lift driving certificate) either through TAFE or some other form of adult learning.

Only one-third of the sample had ever been engaged in full-time employment. While this generally involved unskilled or semi-skilled work, two respondents had commenced apprenticeships in the preceding six months. Interestingly, neither apprenticeship involved motor vehicles or any ancillary motor pursuit (one respondent was an apprentice butcher and the other an apprentice fitter and turner). Although a small percentage of respondents (N = 5) had never been employed, the remainder of the cohort had worked intermittently in unskilled jobs, some of which were directly linked to the car industry (e.g., car detailing). One respondent had never been employed and was, at the time of interview, the sole carer for his 3-year old daughter. The vast majority of those who were unemployed stated they would like full-time employment, but only half indicated they were actively seeking employment at the time of interview (or, indeed, indicated any firm intention of looking for work). It is interesting to note that three respondents admitted they would not necessarily stop stealing cars should they gain employment:

> *"... you spend the money [you earn] and then you need more so you can keep livin' like ya
> did ... so you gotta go out and steal another car to get more … more .. it's quicker than
> workin' for it .."*

In contrast, almost two-thirds suggested that obtaining a job would be an important step in bringing their offending behaviour to an end.

Initial Involvement in Car Crime

With whom did car thieves first become involved?

Approximately two thirds of the sample reported that they had first become involved in car theft while in the company of peers or family members (siblings or cousins):

> *"My older brother ... he had been stealin' cars for ages ... drivin' 'em around and stuff ... I
> started hangin' out with his mates when I was 12. I don't know why ... just bored I guess."*

The remainder of the sample stated they were alone when they first stole a car and had never been part of a group:.

> *"Nah, only on me own. Just walked up to a car one day. Took out a pair of scissors and
> just opened the door, got in, jammed the scissors in the lock and drove off. Always on me
> own. Safer that way."*

Apprenticeship

For those who started in the company of others, the majority served what could be described as an "apprenticeship". The older youths showed them how to break into the car, how to disable immobilisers and, in some cases, taught the offender how to drive. However, the novice role did not last long, with most moving quickly from accomplice to perpetrator within months of the first incident. In some instances, members of the group would take turns driving:

"My mates used to drive at first, but then once I got the hang of it, I drove too. We'd drive around and take turns ... drive until we ran out of juice or the cops started chasing us.."

"[I started driving] a couple of days after ... once you know what you are doing ... just one and it was easy so you do it again..."

Planning Car Crime

In the early stages of their criminal careers, the majority of respondents (78%) said the thefts were not well-planned. For these offenders, the decision to take a car was made within two hours of the car being stolen. This was generally the case for those offenders who engaged in car crime in the company of others. While the crimes were unplanned on the first few occasions for those whose car crime was an individual pursuit, it quickly became a more planned exercise that targeted specific areas and car types.

Substance Use

While all offenders reported heavy substance use, only five reported that the theft was a direct result of being too intoxicated to think clearly. For the majority of offenders, drugs and alcohol were part of a lifestyle distinguished by a lack of purpose. In fact, several respondents indicated that they believed it irresponsible to drive while drinking or under the influence of illicit substances, while some suggested it hindered their driving skills:

"Ya need to get away from the cops and ya can't outsmart 'em if you're wrecked or drunk"

Type of vehicle stolen

All respondents indicated they were or had been involved in car theft (one reported that he had never actually been charged with this offence), rather than theft of other vehicles (e.g., motor bikes). While a small percentage of respondents indicated they stole a range of cars (there was a strong preference for Holden cars, in particular Holden Commodores.

"I'd [take] Mercedes, Porsches, Beemers ... you name it"

"Commodores ... VNs usually VNs ... they're the best to just cruise around in ... but if you just wanted to get home or something then anything easy to get into"

Breaking into Cars

The tools usually carried were a screwdriver or scissors, which are used to open a car door by inserting the tool into the car lock and twisting. This method is so effective, all respondents stated they could "pop" a lock, start a car and drive away in under a minute.

"Most cars you can open with just a pair of scissors. You hid them in your hand, walk up like you own the car and pop the lock. It just looks like you put a key in the lock."

All offenders were unperturbed by steering locks, but approximately half the offenders surveyed said that immobilisers could be problematic:

"Alarms or locks do nothin' ... you can stop an alarm just by whackin' the screwdriver into the left front headlight. Stops it dead."

"It's hard to get good [stopping immobilisers] ... it can take a lot of time ... but once you got it, it's easy"

Disposal of Cars

In the initial stages of their criminal careers, the majority of offenders simply abandoned the cars they stole, the exception being those who stole cars alone (typically for financial gain). Just over one half of these respondents stated they would simply drive until the fuel ran out and then abandon the car somewhere nearby. This group stated that, at this stage, they did not strip the cars although they would remove any articles of value from the car prior to dumping it.

"Nah, we wouldn't trash it, just drive the guts out of it and leave it somewhere close so we didn't have to walk far."

"Drive around town, makin' like it was yours. Not fast. That's when the cops look at you. And then take anything out that was easy to carry and easy to cash up."

Three members of the sample did report they destroyed the cars once they had finished with them. This act of vandalism was also seen as exciting.

"... drive it out on the way up to the hills .. pull everything out and then burn it ... you should see the fire ... great"

"sometimes things would go off and we'd like ... like smash it up ... break all the windows and stuff and rip doors off ... "

Motives Surrounding Initial Offending

When asked what they thought the main reason for first getting involved in car crime was, the most frequently mentioned responses were: Peer influence (33%), wanting to drive (28%), and boredom (24%). Follow-up questioning was undertaken to explore each of these issues further.

Peer Influence

One third of the sample cited peer influence as the primary reason for getting involved in car crime. As the discussion progressed, it became apparent this was a gradual process, rather than being the result of direct pressure. There was, nonetheless, a desire to fit in and be accepted by the group:

"it just seemed like a good idea at the time ... everyone else was doing it and I didn't see the harm"

"I guess there was some ... yeah a bit of fitting in with the others ... just to have a laugh ..."

"It's hard sometimes ... you can't go home and ya mates, well, you can at least hang around with them. So you join in with what they're doing so you don't have to go home and see the shit that's there."

Wanting to Drive

Despite current thinking that this is the main reason young people get involved in car crime, less than one-third of respondents saw this as the initial reason for their involvement. Those who did see this as an important motivator tended to be younger – too young to obtain a license – and saw driving as an example of "grown-up" behaviour:

"It was so cool [driving around]. We'd put telephone books on the seat to see over the steering wheel. You'd just drive around and stare at other drivers just to see the look on their faces when they realised how old you were."

"I just wanted to drive ... I like cars ... liked playing around with them and stuff and couldn't drive because I was too young."

For this group, the driving experience was more important and hence influenced the type of cars stolen (e.g., performance cars) and was usually associated with high speed driving to test their driving skills. The type of car they stole was thus seen as a status symbol:

"You just drove around where you knew your friends would be, watchin' out for them ... so they could see what you scored"

Boredom

As was the case for simply wanting to drive, those who cited boredom as the main reason for starting car crime were in the younger age bracket. Respondents surveyed grew up and still lived in economically deprived areas with few or no legitimate leisure facilities available to them (or where these were available, they were beyond their means):

"It was a high at the start ... you could feel excited wondering if you would get caught."

"There was nothin' to do ... nothin' ... we'd just walk around bored shitless and have no money for nothin'. The cars were free. We'd drive out Port Road and see how fast we could go ... run all the red lights ... it's a buzz."

Career Progression

As noted above, the majority of young offenders surveyed had been involved in car crime (as well as other crime) for a considerable period of time when interviewed for this study. While the motivation may have initially been to impress or engage with peers or to seek excitement, this quickly changed as the offenders became more aware of the currency of car crime. Asked about their continued involvement, 86% of respondents stated that some form of financial reward was the primary motivation.

Changes in Skills

All respondents stated their skills had improved over time, even those who had stolen cars less frequently. A substantial proportion (83%) also felt their behaviour when stealing a car contributed to their improved abilities to go undetected:

"The first time, we broke a window. It was a mess and it's suspicious. First thing a cop is gonna do is pull ya over if the window's broken. So now we just walk up, walk up like ya own it, pop the lock with a screwdriver and make like it's your car. Easy. Just too easy."

Commission of Other Offences

The most frequently cited use of stolen cars once offenders had reached what was ostensibly their "mid" career phase (71%) was for use in the commission of other offences (e.g., ram-raids, break and enters). For these offenders, the financial rewards associated with the other criminal activities far outweighed the risk of detection for car theft. There was also a great deal more planning involved, with a need to have two cars available in the case of ram-raids because of damage to the car used in the theft. This particular crime appears to incorporate the element of excitement experienced in the early part of their career coupled with the potential to earn income.

"I never stole cars just to drive around. Stupid that. Nah. Just stole them so we could do a robbery. Just drive it straight through the front. But we needed to be more organised and have two cars. We'd drive one to the robbery and have another one parked so we could dump the robbery car."

Professional Car Crime

None of the sample reported stealing cars for "professional" thief gangs, although several respondents (N = 3) indicated that they sold cars on themselves (to people known to them who deal in stolen cars). The most common "professional" activity was the stripping down of cars to sell parts for cash. Around two thirds of the sample stated that this activity eventually became the prime motivation for their offending behaviour. This was seen as a legitimate economic activity, often supplementing their income:

"Living on the dole, it's not much. I got a kid and I want her to have stuff – not go without. Ya know what I mean? So the stealin' a car makes it better for her"

"Ya can't live off what you get on the dole. Pay rent and other stuff. So if bills come in, ya can get a car ... sell the tires and stuff and ya pay the bills"

For some (N = 3), the money gleaned from car theft was predominantly used to purchase drugs. In each case, the offender had always worked alone, had never taken a car simply for the pleasure of driving, but had been motivated by the need to obtain money on a regular basis.

Consequence of Car Theft

Empathy for Victims
Almost three quarters of the respondents interviewed said that, in the initial stages of their offending, they thought little about their victims and how the offence would affect them. As their career progressed, more than half indicated some "code" whereby they would not take a car if there was a baby seat present or a disabled sticker on the window.

> "Nah, never [take a car] if there's a baby seat. What if the kid got sick and had to go to the hospital."

> "I always look in the back to see if there's a car seat or kids toys. Once we got a car and there was a wheelchair in the boot. I felt real bad about that"

Consequences for the Offender
Given the high degree of impulsivity associated with car theft, particularly where very young offenders are concerned, it is not surprising that many respondents did not consider the consequences of their actions until after the commission of the crime. Even well into their car crime careers, a substantial number of offenders (N=26) said they did not think about their actions beforehand, even though many of this group engaged in a great deal more planning of the offence.

High Speed Chases
Five of the respondents interviewed had been involved in high speed chases with police, and in all but one case, this happened with alarming regularity. For three of the five, at least one chase had ended after an accident. Two respondents had never been caught (and one of these had not, in fact, ever been charged with a motor vehicle theft despite having a four-year history of chronic offending). Only one respondent had been involved in a high speed chase that resulted in a death, an experience that subsequently ended his involvement in car crime:

> "We were speeding ... real fast like ... and the cops, they wouldn't give up ... just wouldn't stop and they kept at us. I thought we were out and then we just lost control of the car. It was crazy. When it all stopped me mate ... he was covered in blood and just lyin' there, not movin' ... I just knew he was dead. My girlfriend's brother. She doesn't blame me but I felt bad ... real bad ... I haven't stolen a car since."

The majority of the sample was ambivalent in terms of the police involvement in high speed chases:

> "They got a job to do. Ya know they are gonna keep going but only to a point. Most of them back off now so you know you are safe."

A small minority were of the view that the police were irresponsible when engaging in high speed chases:

> "The cops man ... they think they're on the race track ... know what I mean ... cops just shouldn't chase ya ... it just makes it worse and they know it. But they don't care coz they got a point to prove ... that they can outgun you"

One respondent admitted that he and his peers deliberately goaded the police into chasing them:

> "We'd go the car park across [from] the cop station and do burnouts and yell at the cops and wait until they came out and we'd speed off. They had to chase us then."

Giving Up Car Crime

Finally, respondents were asked if they had given up crime and if they had, what had promoted this decision. For those who had given up longer than a year (N=30), the main reasons cited were maturity and responsibility (N=9), that they had grown out of it (N=7), or that they had become a parent (N=7). As noted above, one offender desisted following the death of a friend in an accident. There was a general sense amongst this group that things had run a natural course; that car theft was an adolescent activity

and they did not want to or need to engage in risky behaviour any more. For some offenders, desistance was a consequence of incarceration (and thus desistance had not been a conscious decision on their part). All respondents in the sample said they believed their car crime history (and criminal history in general) would have been less problematic if they had received some help. Several mentioned a sense of abandonment on the part of the "system", which they perceived as having failed them:

> *"I was supposed to be a ward [of the State] and the Trustees pay for stuff. But they didn't care. I went in and asked them to place me [with a foster home] when I was 12 and no-one did nothin'. I ended up on the streets. I had no money ... no home ... and no-one cared. I stole cars for money. You have to have an address to get the dole ... so I got no money. Ya gotta live."*

Many of the respondents stated that earlier intervention would have served as a deterrent from crime. While this is said in hindsight, it nonetheless highlights the importance of offering the appropriate services to high risk offenders.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to consider car theft from the perspective of those involved in the crime as perpetrators. This involved a consideration of motivations for the initial involvement in car crime, of factors that sustained that involvement, and an exploration of the reasons for desisting from car crime. As a general observation, the sample exhibited many of the risk factors identified in the literature which have been strongly linked to delinquent behavior and, if left unchecked, a cycle of offending behaviour.

Initial involvement in car crime was more strongly associated with factors such as status conferral (a right of passage amongst peers) and as a means of alleviating the boredom associated with economic deprivation. While some respondents stated that they had become involved in car theft simply for the pleasure of driving, there was not the heavy emphasis on joyriding that one might expect given the attention paid to this particular activity. There is, however, an important caveat that needs to be mentioned: none of the sample was identified as Indigenous. It is highly probable that the motivations of this group of car thieves will differ to that of their non-Indigenous counterparts. There is sufficient evidence (see Dawes, 2002) to suggest that Indigenous offenders display a proclivity for joyriding and, moreover, that being detained by the police actually enhances one's status within the peer group.

As the offending behaviour becomes more established, it would seem that motivation to continue shifts from "play" to "work". The vast majority of respondents indicated that cars are used either in the commission of other offences (e.g., ram-raids) or to on-sell (either in part or whole), to supplement the offender's income. Again, given the depressed economic conditions in which most respondents lived, car theft was perceived as a genuine avenue of "employment". Finally, the decision to stop offending is consistent with literature that posits an ageing out process for crime. As young offenders take on adult responsibilities (enter into adult relationships, have children), there is a shift towards a more socially normative lifestyle. For others, desistance followed an appraisal of the long-term consequences of imprisonment (which does, of course, fit with the retributive philosophy that underpins sentencing in some jurisdictions). There was, however, support for early intervention. Although said in hindsight, considerable weight should be given to the comment as it comes direct from those involved in the crime.

To date, most of the theft reduction efforts in Australia have focused on vehicle security and educating the public about safe practices. This will, of course, have an impact on offending behavior simply because cars become more difficult to steal. But secure practices cannot solve the problem entirely. Many of the offenders in this study pointed out the ease with which security devices can be overcome. The offenders themselves make the argument for intervention. However, any intervention offered within a forensic context needs to be based on best practice principles that incorporate empirical evidence of what works in offender rehabilitation.

CONCLUSIONS

Both sections of this report highlight the different motivations to steal motor vehicles. Findings from the offender interviews were largely consistent with those from the literature review. Contrary to popular opinion, the vast majority of car thieves do not engage in this activity for the purposes of joyriding or simply because they have a fascination with cars: It would seem that while driving is an activity enjoyed by many who steal cars, the function of car theft quickly moves beyond enjoyment to one of economic imperatives. According to the perpetrators of car theft, early intervention would have been a helpful diversionary measure early in their offending cycle. While such a claim may, to a large extent, represent a hindsight bias, it is nonetheless important to consider what the offenders themselves say in term of rehabilitation. It also speaks to the potential success of such an approach.

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