

# CAR THEFT IN BELFAST

## The importance of strategic research

Car theft has become an international phenomenon plaguing most Western cities. But in Northern Ireland, particularly Belfast, it has gained a very high level of public and media attention.

This is mainly due to a number of highly publicised incidents, in which young 'joy-riders' have been shot and killed or seriously injured in incidents involving the security forces. This can happen when the drivers try to burst through vehicle checkpoints. Similarly there has been much international publicity about the barbaric practice of 'kneecapping' or severely beating young people suspected of car theft. These are carried out by terrorist organisations under the guise that they are enforcing law and order.

### Incidence of car theft

In recent years the problem of car theft has not abated. In 1992 peak figures were recorded with an increase of around 8.5 per cent over the previous year (see Table 1). Of a total of 9,175 vehicles stolen in 1992 over 7,000 were stolen in Belfast. Ninety per cent were recovered but many were completely or extensively damaged. It is a problem which is persistent and one which needs urgent attention. It poses many questions, and while in Northern Ireland it has a special complexity because of its connection with the terrorist situation, the questions are likely to be relevant to most British cities.

### The need for empirical evidence

In spite of the high public profile we know remarkably little about joy-riding based on hard empirical evidence. We know that most perpetrators are young

males in their late teens; we know that the problem in Belfast is very localised both in the geographic residence of the thieves and in the 'hot spots' where cars are stolen; we know the most popular makes and models which attract the thieves; but there is a great deal which we do not know or for which we have to rely on hearsay information.

### The importance of knowing about prevalence

Perhaps the most important question we must answer concerns the prevalence of car thieves in the community. It is popularly believed that a 'hard core' of offenders is responsible for a very great number of the thefts. It is difficult to get a reliable estimate of numbers in this 'hard core' and the number of cars which they have stolen. Police and other professionals have spoken about figures ranging between 30 and 100 multiple and persistent offenders operating in Belfast at any given time. Yet it is vitally important to have an accurate estimate for what is known as the 'prevalence' rate for this particular crime.

For example, if car theft is engaged in by a large number of people, each stealing a small number of cars on an irregular basis, then prevention could best be achieved by making all cars harder to steal. If, on the other hand, it can be demonstrated that a relatively small number of offenders account for a very large number of the cars stolen then reliance on criminal justice methods is likely to be most effective.

The problem is that it is difficult to obtain an accurate estimate of prevalence. It is possible to look at the number of young people formally arrested and/or charged with car theft and to express this as a percentage of the total number of young people within a particular age range (eg 14-21 years) in a specific

**"This phenomenon, very inappropriately referred to as 'joy-riding', is most prevalent in West Belfast, with death or injury a likely consequence for those involved. Sadly, for those resident in the area, such activity undermines their quality of life and heightens their risk of physical injury. During the year, 81 police officers were injured some very seriously, whilst attempting to stop stolen vehicles and arrest the culprits".**

**Sir Hugh Annesley, Chief Constable, RUC. Source: Foreword. Chief Constable's Annual Report 1992**

geographic area. A problem with this approach is that it misses an unspecified number of young people who engage in car theft but who never have been formally apprehended. This could amount to a very significant number. For example, Wright et al (1991) in conducting an ethnographical study with active residential burglars in St Louis, Missouri, discovered that in a sample of 105 currently-active offenders more than a quarter (28 per cent) claimed never to have been arrested for any offence. More importantly 42 per cent had no arrests for burglary and another 33 per cent had arrests but were not convicted for the offence. Thus 75 per cent of their sample would not have been included had an estimate of prevalence using official statistics been made.

These findings have immense implications for estimating prevalence of car theft offenders. Clearly some form of ethnographic or self-report study is necessary. This would estimate both the total number of young people in a given area who engage in car theft and the number who had not yet been convicted. The nearest we have had to this sort of study is the International Self-Report Study led by the Dutch Ministry of Justice. The Northern Ireland end of the study has been carried out by CIRAC

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**TABLE 1**  
**Number of Vehicles Recorded Stolen or Unauthorised Taken in Northern Ireland**

Year	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Number Stolen	7272	6386	7042	8455	9175
Percentage of total registered	1.45	1.24	1.30	1.51	N.K.

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and funded by the Northern Ireland Office (results of the pilot study are reported in this issue of Criminal Justice Matters). Preliminary findings from the main study (McQuoid 1993) have recently been reported.

## Findings from the International Self-Report Study

These have contained most interesting results concerning car theft. Out of a sample of 883 respondents (aged 14-21 years) contacted on a random basis in Belfast, 14 reported having stolen a car in the last year. This represents 1.6 per cent of respondents. Thirteen were male and one female. Fifty per cent were in 18-19 years age range. The distribution of offending was most interesting (see Table 2). Eight could be described as casual offenders - having stolen 1-2 cars in the past year. Four could be classified as moderate having stolen between 3-10 vehicles in the previous 12 months. Most importantly, two could be described as persistently having stolen between 11-50 vehicles. In fact one estimated that he had stolen 50 cars while the other confessed to 20 thefts. This means that these two persons between them stole 70 (68 per cent) of 103 vehicle thefts confessed to by the sample!

While there are dangers in generalising from such a small number of self-reports of vehicle theft in the sample to the population of 14-21 year olds in Belfast, it is instructive to do so. If we make a population estimate we find that 63 persons could be responsible for

**TABLE 2**  
**The Self-Reporting of Car Theft in a Belfast Sample of Young People (14-21 years)**

Number of thefts in past year	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-50
Number of people	869	8	3	1	2
Percentage	98.4	0.9	0.3	0.1	0.2

4,760 vehicle thefts in Belfast! This figure is staggering and has clear policy implications. Even allowing for a relatively large margin of error it is likely that somewhere between 30 and 90 young people are responsible for between 4,000 and 6,000 vehicle thefts in Belfast. Clearly we must focus on identifying and deterring this group of young people if we are to make a significant impact on car theft.

Could it be that a substantial number of young people remain undetected for car theft and only the least successful are convicted? To answer this question we need to engage in an ethnographical study similar to that described by Wright et al (1991).

## Strategic Research

Numerous other questions need to be asked which will require careful empirical study, often using longitudinal methods. These include questions on the onset, duration and termination of criminal careers for car thieves. The

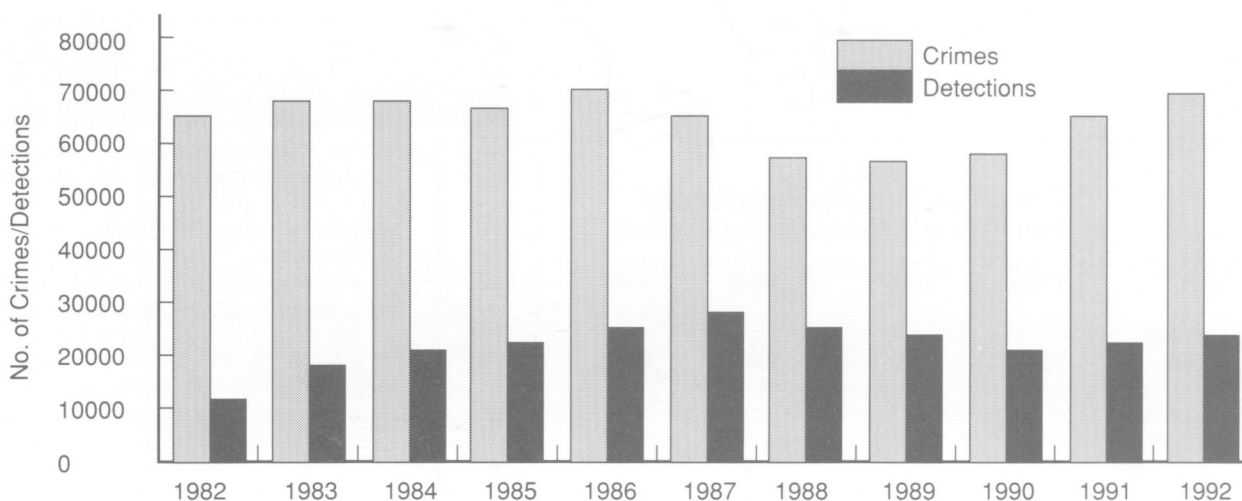
identification of critical times for intervention, the use of consecutive sentencing for multiple offenders, the evaluation of auto-schemes and the effectiveness of preventative educational schemes in schools, are all areas which need to be investigated. Currently we can only make informed guesses about the efficacy of such approaches. We need a strategic research programme if we are to impact on car theft

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## References

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## NOTIFIABLE OFFENCES RECORDED AND DETECTED 1982-92



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