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# Car Crime and Offending Behaviour: Ex-Offender Perspectives

*Dr Tina G. Patel is a Lecturer in Criminology, at the Centre for Social Research, University of Salford.*

## Introduction

**This paper reports on some of the findings of a study undertaken within a vulnerable residential area of an inner-city in the north-west of England. As a location, it has been marked as vulnerable due to its abnormally high crime rate. As such, it continues to attract police and local authority concern, who commissioned research<sup>1</sup> to examine the motivations, opportunities of, and technical knowledge for undertaking one of its common crimes in the locale, that is theft from or of a motor vehicle (TMV). In using qualitative research methods with a sample of ex-offenders<sup>2</sup>, victims of theft, and, users of the stolen goods market, several key factors were identified as relevant in the undertaking and consequences of TMV. Here, the role of the built environment in terms of urban disorganisation, the lack of community cohesion between the varying residential groups, problematic police-community relationships and attitudes, and the marked income inequalities within such a residential population, were all highlighted as significant. These factors intertwined with one another to create a space where the occurrence of a particular type of crime was viewed as necessary and for some, an acceptable response to their State allocated position of neglect and marginalisation<sup>3</sup>. In reporting on the findings of some of this data, this paper discusses the reasons presented by ex-offenders (n=18) for their taking part in the offence of TMV, and their assessments of offender punishment and rehabilitation support services. To do so, the paper uses direct narratives from ex-offenders to offer a criminological commentary on why TMV occurs and the assessment that those**

**who undertake this crime, make of support services, and the impact that this is likely to have on re-offending rates.**

## A Background

Areas such as the sample site are often viewed as unattractive<sup>4</sup>. Not only are they geographically and socially marginalised, and perceived as places to be best avoided, but also suffer from negative labels (i.e. high crime, poor education, high levels of unemployment and welfare recipients believed to be found there) which go on to impact on local residents. The study's sample site is often viewed as having such characteristics. It is argued that incidence of poverty, and of the many forms of associated multiple deprivation, is highly correlated with the propensity of residents to engage in crime (TMV). This echoes the notion of a 'criminal underclass', a concept which I argue is highly problematic and has been criticised not least for 'blaming the poor', suggesting that they have problematic morals<sup>5</sup> and ignoring wider structures and the complex power relations that exist in society. An alternative conception sees the source of this section of society, to lie not in their supposed problematic morality, but rather as a response to adverse social and economic circumstances, as well as a response to the physical decay of the environment and the social deprivation that its inhabitants face. This means that particular types of crimes such as TMV, may occur. This is especially so if there is a ready availability of targets in the locale — as was the case in the sample site. Research undertaken by Spencer<sup>6</sup> notes that in such areas, networks exist which not only support TMV, but encourage it — for instance, offenders not only have a ready market where goods can easily be passed on for a profit, but are also often given 'orders' for particular items.

1. The author would like to acknowledge co-members of the research team of the original project on which this paper is based. They are: Mr Jerry Coulton; Dr Alex Dennis; Mr William Jackson; Mr Robert Jeffery; and, Professor Greg Smith – all based at Centre for Social Research, University of Salford.
2. Respondents discussing participation in TMV, had been recruited via parole officers and specialist programmes assisting in rehabilitation. In addition, a condition of research participation was that respondents would not be at the time of interviewing actively engaged in crimes. Although it was suspected that some respondents may still have been criminally active (suggested not least by comments made in the interviews), they are referred to as ex-offenders because this is the status they gave themselves at the start of the research.
3. This is discussed elsewhere in publications authored by members of the research team.
4. Clark, A. (2009) 'Moving Through Deprived Neighbourhoods', *Population, Space and Place*, 15: 523-533.
5. Croall, H. (1998) *Crime and Society in Britain*. Harlow, Pearson Longman p.108.
6. Spencer, E. (1992) *Car Crime and Young People on a Sunderland Housing Estate*. Crime Prevention Unit Paper 40. London, Home Office.

Light et al.<sup>7</sup> and Spencer<sup>8</sup> found that most of their sample became involved in car crime during their teenage years, with a large proportion being committed by young males<sup>9</sup>. Many had been taught the basic skills of breaking into vehicles at an early age, either by peers, older siblings, other offenders or people from the local neighbourhood. Some of Spencer's sample cited excitement, boredom and reputation boosting as a motivation for some types of TMV — in particular the type often described as 'joyriding', where a vehicle is stolen and driven at speed, and then either abandoned or destroyed, usually by being set on fire. This is supported by Cooper<sup>10</sup>, who notes that joyriding is a significant factor for involvement in TMV related offences, enhanced by the fact that often for its subjects there are no other legitimate opportunities accessible to them that allows the achievement of a similar level of excitement and status. Research also highlights how TMV offenders often see stealing from cars as a way to make money<sup>11</sup>. Indeed for some it is 'an essential source of income'<sup>12</sup>, as well as means of accessing 'extras', that is entertainment, clothes, drink and drugs<sup>13</sup>. Although most saw such crimes (in particular TMV) to be wrong, few saw it to be a serious offence with little stigma attachment, but instead was something that boosted status and respect<sup>14</sup>.

The literature on TMV and 'getting caught' indicates that many offences occur before the individual is caught — if they are at all. Although some consider what would happen if they are caught by the police, this does not act as deterrence for offending behaviour. Indeed, despite actually being caught, going to court, or being punished (i.e. fined, penalty points, conditional discharge, probation, community service, or being

given a custodial sentence), only a small proportion of the offenders in Light et al.'s<sup>15</sup> study stated this led to desistence of TMV and related offending behaviour. Similarly, offenders in Spencer's<sup>16</sup> study admitted that they had in fact continued to re-offend after being caught, indicating that allocated punishments were ineffective, and have a limited scope in reducing offending and re-offending rates<sup>17</sup>. Rather, Light et al. found that the reasons that their sample of ex-offenders gave for desistence of TMV included maturity (i.e. growing out of it) and responsibility (i.e. a new girlfriend or becoming a father).

## The Study

The reported study's sample site<sup>18</sup> is located in an inner-city area of north-west England, immediately adjacent to both the regional centre and a University campus. The neighbourhood contains what UK government statisticians call 'lower layer Super Output Areas' (corresponding to a population of approximately 1,500) that are within the 3-7 per cent most deprived nationally and is surrounded by Super Output Areas that are within the 3 per cent most deprived areas nationally. In terms of recorded major crime (i.e. burglary, theft,

criminal damage and violence), the site can be subdivided into three 'zones', which, moving West to East, are in the worst 3-7 per cent, 7-10 per cent, and 3 per cent of neighbourhoods in England and Wales<sup>19</sup>. Historically, the city, and especially its inner-city communities, has suffered some of the worst consequences of de-industrialisation, and resulting high levels of un- and under-employment. These inner-city neighbourhoods have been characterised by some as 'classic' high crime areas, containing populations which, for a variety of reasons, are unwilling to

Many had been taught the basic skills of breaking into vehicles at an early age, either by peers, older siblings, other offenders or people from the local neighbourhood.

7. Light, R.; Nee, C.; and, Ingham, H. (1993) *Car Theft: The Offender's Perspective*. London, Home Office Research and Planning Unit

8. Spencer (1992) see n.6.

9. Ibid.

10. Cooper, B. (1989) *The Management and Prevention of Juvenile Crime Problems*. Crime Prevention Unit Paper 20. London, Home Office.

11. Ibid.

12. Light et al (1993) see n.7 p. 32.

13. Spencer (1992) see n.6.

14. Light et al (1993) see n. 7 p. 69.

15. Ibid.

16. Spencer (1992) see n.6.

17. Light et al (1993) see n. 7.

18. The sample site, research participants and funding body have not been identified in order to adhere to previously agreed confidentiality and anonymity.

19. See English Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2007.

cooperate with the police, and where those who do face systematic intimidation<sup>20</sup>. A further issue is the transient nature of residence for many of those living in inner-city neighbourhoods, which may dissuade individuals from full participation in community life<sup>21</sup> — including participation in crime-reduction strategies and community development projects. The sample site is part of a Ward that has higher than average annual residential turnover, with rates more than half as high again as the city's average. The City Council, its Central Urban Regeneration Company, and strategic partners (including the local police force) are currently targeting the city and especially the sample neighbourhood for redevelopment, part of this includes a focus for the crime prevention authorities on the offence of TMV. The frequency of TMV in the study's sample site is an average of 34 per calendar month. In comparison, the figure for the other areas in the city is lower at 19 per calendar month<sup>22</sup>.

Crime (TMV) in the sample site shares common characteristics with crime in many other inner-city neighbourhoods. Here, the built environment, community relationships, and wider relationships with the police, as well as income inequalities are all marked as significant. Several key factors though are identified as relevant in the undertaking of TMV, which when intertwined with one another create a space where 'urban management strategies' headed by partnerships between powerful groups, local agencies and criminal justice organisations under rouge of 'broken windows' thesis, are 'refashioning the look and feel of city space'<sup>23</sup>. This involves practices of control and regulation which can be better understood as 'socio-spatial ordering practices'<sup>24</sup>. This was an issue in the reported study, illustrated when one ex-offender spoke about the contrasts between the 'older' and 'redeveloped' areas in the locale:

*Check the houses what we're living in, do you understand what I'm saying?...what the Council'll do...is they stick all people like us in one area, right...it's all single mums, or its all*

*criminals, do you know what I mean, they throw us all in one area.*

This broader social deprivation is understood to lead to criminal behaviour, as one ex-offender stated:

*I learned how to break into cars in the neighbourhood while growing up. You see other people doing and you do it. People start robbing from cars at age thirteen. I was more likely to get caught when I was younger. You learn what to do, not to get caught.*

A consequence of which is a cycle of criminality across generations. For example, research field notes detailed the experiences of one ex-offender:

*[Ex-offender] says everyone he grew up around was a grafter [criminal], and that his dad has been in prison all his life. He refers to his young son, who is playing sports downstairs: 'He's probably going to grow up the same way as exactly what I've done. What can I say to him, how can I punish him for what I've done? I can't do that, 'cause that's*

*what my dad's done to me'. He says that when he tries to tell his son not to fuck about in school his son answers back 'well you can't read and write'. This ex-offender couldn't read the consent form, and made a mark in place of a signature. He was thrown out of school and attended a remedial centre.*

The social deprivation is reproduced and reinforced by activities of some of the area's residents, as one ex-offender noted:

*When we see a girl that moves onto our estate, young girl, two kids, we automatically think 'party house', fucking 'party house'!*

Individuals are therefore given few reasons to be personally ambitious, or to believe that their situation

20. See Walklate, S. (1998) 'Crime and Community: Fear or Trust?' *British Journal of Sociology*, 49(4): 550-569.

21. Walklate, S. (1997) *Understanding Criminology: Current Theoretical Debates*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

22. Figures calculated from local police published crime statistics.

23. Coleman, R. (2007) 'Surveillance in the City': Primary Definition and Urban Spatial Order', pages 231-244 in S.P. Hier and J. Greenberg (eds.), *The Surveillance Studies Reader*, Berkshire, Maidenhead / Open University p. 231.

24. *Ibid* p.232.

can be improved, as one ex-offender noted when talking about the 'young grafters' in the locale and their future prospects:

*Well what is there for them? Y'know what I mean? I mean for some of them it might be a life of crime. They [local council and government] don't seem to push kids towards Youth Training Schemes anymore. How you supposed to live, you can't ask your mum for a tenner every day can you? Well, for one you don't want to, and no-one's giving them anything so what do they do. They have to go out and earn it, y'know, grafting.*

In such instances, crime is often considered one of the only avenues to which everyday items needed for survival, as well as more desirable items, that is mobile phones, games consoles, designer clothing, etc., can be obtained. Thus criminal behaviour, especially those associated with TMV are common in areas such as the study site<sup>25</sup>, as they allow money to be earned, in a short amount of time, and with a low likelihood of being caught — largely because of the availability of targets, the urban layout which allowed for crimes to be carried out<sup>26</sup>, and a ready market on which stolen goods could be passed on:

*I'd get ten of them [car radios], and then phone a guy who would come and meet me, wherever I was, and take them off my hands. I was doing this...three or four times a day...I was making two or three hundred quid in a matter of half an hour...And I'd do that all day. And then when I finally got arrested for it, it was near enough a thousand cars.*

The ease of which ex-offenders could sell items on acted as a motivation for undertaking TMV:

*There's a market for anything, people want things, and if there's an opportunity, you wouldn't just walk past it. It's easy to get rid of stolen goods. I don't care how honest anyone says they are, especially if they're thinking about buying something, and somebody comes in and offers it them at a quarter of the price, if it's in good condition, they'll buy it.*

Another said: *'It takes ten minutes to get rid of any knocked-off gear'.*

Another ex-offender stated:

*We'll go grafting, yeah? Say we go grafting for a laptop, we're not going to go and hope we sell it; we've already got a buyer for the laptop, we've already got someone whose going to buy that and sell it on to make himself a profit.*

Where there are views about their positions allocated position of social and financial inequality, undertaking TMV is a straightforward matter to justify:

*Everyone in council houses are just going to target the more affluent groups moving into [area]. They've got this, they've got that, we've got nothing.*

In addition though, TMV was often viewed as necessary in order to financially survive, or to support an alcohol and/or drug dependency. This is illustrated by ex-offender comments about the widespread and common use of drugs and alcohol, which then acts as a motivator for criminality:

*Young kids are grafting to support cannabis habits. You hear the young ones saying 'I need a bud, I need a bud'.*

Another ex-offender stated:

*When you're on smack you need to have more. The days would pass quickly when you have heroin, but very slow when you don't. I'd steal things, and accept lower prices, when I knew I could get a higher price later in the day, because I couldn't wait to get my next fix.*

One ex-offender said:

*Basically, the weed makes you...if I didn't have a weed I'd be sat here like [looks slumped at the table], morbid, depressed, paranoid, for me to have a weed would put me back to my normal self that I know, do you know what I mean?*

25. Due to availability, access and reduced costs, the study site was being used as an over-flow car park for visitors to the adjoining city centre, as well as for employees, new residents (living in the newly built luxury apartments in the redeveloped areas of the sample site) and students studying on campus in the study site locale. This meant that there was a constant availability of cars, many of which often contained valuable items, i.e. laptops, mobile phones, money, etc.  
26. The urban layout of the study site contained a number of narrow passages and hidden pathways which were used by ex-offenders to undertake TMV, evade detection and escape from patrolling police cars.

More well-established and professional criminals were considered being able to use ex-offenders' substance dependency to their own ends, as some ex-offenders noted:

*People get made to rob, that they get bullied into it...if you're in debt with someone. If you are selling drugs for someone, you have to give them the 'gross sales' everyday and they will give you back a 'wage' on a Friday. But if you get busted, then the value of any drugs seized will be owed to the main supplier...you then have to work for free', and: 'If you owe a dealer money then he will get you to go out grafting for him. The debt works itself off very slow, it doesn't work itself off like it's supposed to.'*

For some, TMV was viewed as an inevitable and acceptable response to their State allocated position of victimisation — a result of which was that they experienced psychological abuse, physical neglect and social marginalisation, indicated in their discussions about their frustration born from a lack of opportunities and access to resources:

*There is nothing in north [of the city], like cinemas, restaurants, compared to south [of the city]. So you can see why the young people are so bored. So I'm not surprised they look for their own fun. When I was young, I had friends who did this sort of stuff, stealing and joyriding out of boredom.*

Another ex-offender said:

*So for us, it was just basically, we'll go out on a Friday night, we'll get beer'd up, we'll go and rob a car.*

These feelings of victimisation were particularly enhanced when ex-offenders located their positions in relation to the perceived advantaged ones that they saw new incomers in the locale (i.e. students and young professionals located in luxury developments) were being 'given' by the university, council and Central Urban Regeneration Company:

*Look at these estates now, round [estate], they're all fucking top houses, but try and get me one!'*

These new groups were considered by ex-offenders to be 'rats...looking down on you', a view which helped to justify offending behaviour.

The ex-offenders' disappointment at limited access to resources was also evident in their views about parole and post-conviction associated support services that they had been required to join or had themselves requested help from:

*The court told me that seeing as I was mad on cars, why don't you get an education, right, sweet, so probation have now paid for me to go panel beating, spraying cars, rebuilding engines, I can do anything you want me to do with your car...but, nobody'll employ me, because all I've ever been done for is pinching cars, so I'm saying now you bastards knew I'd fail.*

Another ex-offender said:

*I've never been jail. At my last court appearance the judge referred me to an alcohol rehabilitation course and a drug rehabilitation course. I thought this was a good idea, until I went to the drug rehab course. The guy spoke to me for like five minutes about everything I already know about drugs, right...They didn't send me no more interviews or 'owt like that, so I'm back on the drugs again, I'm back drinking again. They don't help you get a job, they just forget about you.*

This tells us that essentially, the core reasons for needing to commit TMV, that is financial survival and substance dependency, had not been resolved, which left ex-offenders again in a position where they would need to re-offend.

However, TMV did not always feature in long-term or re-offending patterns. This is because TMV is not considered a full-time, long-term practice for the sampled 'grafters'. Rather, it is something delimited by age and by needs. One ex-offender, for instance, talked about it being something he did from his mid-teens. He had more or less given up (except where a particularly good opportunity arose) by his early twenties, instead concentrating on burglary and other more 'serious' crimes. His stated rationale for this change was that TMV requires repeated 'outings' each day for little reward, in comparison to other crimes. Thus by moving into more lucrative activities he could work fewer hours for greater rewards:

*The best are £200,000 houses on the new estates because they have everything in their bedroom draws...I've found large sums of money.*

Although this brought with it higher risks, the needs and rewards outweighed the perceived dangers. Therefore, stealing cars is seen as a temporary phase, but only in the sense that it is considered to be a bridge to more serious offences, such as stealing cars to use in a ram-raid or as a escape vehicle in a bank robbery:

*...organised crime where they're going to do a bank robbery, they'll pinch a car, hide it away for a while, put 'double-plates' on it, and that car'll go off to do a bigger job.*

It is worth noting though that in terms of motivation, prison and probation, some respondents had positive experiences of criminal justice institutions. For example, research fieldnotes detail the case of one ex-offender who had split up with his girlfriend and notified the probation service of a change in circumstances, in that he was now homeless. He looked at a couple of hostels but decided rather to stay on the sofa of 'a mate'. He said after this probation services found him a flat and £550 to move in with. He said he enjoyed his time with probation because he *'wouldn't have got that [flat] without 'em'*, adding that *'sometimes you've got to be in trouble to get help.'*

### **Conclusion**

Some key themes emerged from the reported study, regarding the motivations, and the possibilities for, reducing TMV and associated crime. Here, the motivation and rationale for criminal activities is to earn a relatively small amount of money in short amount of time, with a low likelihood of being caught and an expected ease of selling items on, some of which were being stolen to order. This was especially important given the limited opportunities by which the same could be accessed through more legitimate means, that

is employment. Significant here is urban disorganisation and geographical neglect. The sample site is subject to an urban redevelopment programme, which is perceived by ex-offenders to be to blame for the neglect that existing residents experienced, not least because re-development projects were concentrating inward investment for affluent outsiders, resulting in inadequate services and facilities for more established residents. In addition, because of the location of the sample site, and its closeness to neighbouring sites of interest and attractions, it was also being used as a site for alternative and cheaper car parking. These sites are attractive to offenders, not only because they provided a ready source of targets, but also due to their location (which offered accessible escape routes) and lack of onsite patrol or CCTV coverage. Although TMV is not a full-time, long-term job for 'grafters', most are more likely to move on to others 'serious' crimes, as this brings the benefits of making the same or more money, with less outings. Few reported 'getting caught' or being punished as deterrence for participation in TMV or other crime. Rather, ex-offenders suggested that the provision of meaningful resources and support facilities would be of more use in attempts to reduce re-offending. This could be offered via increased financial investment and improvements in existing arrangements for ex-offenders, such as more staff leading project as to allow for a greater intake of service users; multi-agency co-operation with groups such as NACRO; and, greater financial investment in ex-offender Back to Work Schemes. In addition, further specialisation of free counselling services for those with alcohol and/or drug abuse problems would also be of benefit, given that many undertake TMV to support substance abuse. Like many crime prevention initiatives though, these recommendations are tentative and will require further discussion and exploration via additional research into criminal activity associated with TMV.