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Document #: **640927**

Title: **Motor Vehicle Theft: A Relationship to Other Crimes**
Author: **Robert D. Force**
Attributed: **The Police Chief**
Location: **USA**
Population: **318000000**
Sworn:
Last Updated: **07/19/2016**

Supplemental Resource(s):

A. Figure 1 (jpg)   B. Figure 2 (jpg)

www.theiacp.org (web)

Summary:

Law enforcement agencies are constantly challenged with negotiating a variety of pressing issues while striving to maintain high ethical, moral, legal, and professional standards. Of utmost importance is the principle to protect the public from harm. Many agencies have experienced competing calls for service that have driven prioritization to threats to life and safety, thus reducing attention to property crimes, including auto theft.

Document Text:

The Police Chief
July 2016

Motor Vehicle Theft: A Relationship to Other Crimes

Robert D. Force, Director, Colorado Auto Theft Prevention Authority

Law enforcement agencies are constantly challenged with negotiating a variety of pressing issues while striving to maintain high ethical, moral, legal, and professional standards. Of utmost importance is the principle to protect the public from harm. Many agencies have experienced competing calls for service that have driven prioritization to threats to life and safety, thus reducing attention to property crimes, including auto theft. Additionally, economic stressors and public concern priorities have pressured many law enforcement agencies to generalize investigative services, which makes officers' developing the level of expertise, legacy knowledge, and specialization needed to fully combat auto thefts and related criminal activities a challenge.

With these challenges in mind, an officer's initial thought of auto theft may normally, if erroneously, be that "it's just a property crime," whereby the owner's economic loss may be recuperated or lessened by an insurance claim. However, auto theft is often related to a mode of transportation and a mechanism to commit other crimes, including violent crimes. This has been the case since the first known bank robbery using a motor car in the United States, which occurred in California on August 19, 1909. The following account of it was published in a Rich Hill, Montana, newspaper, The Tribune:

Driving up to the Valley bank of Santa Clara in a hired automobile two youths covered Cashier Birge and his assistants with shot guns backed them against the wall and, after securing $7,000, fled in the machine.

Seven miles away, after they had been chased by police and a posse of citizens also in automobiles, the youthful bandits were captured. The chauffeur of their car having purposely caused a breakdown, thus compelling the

robbers to take to their heels. The money was recovered and the youths were put in jail.[1]

Moving forward to modern times, in 2014, an estimated 689,527 motor vehicle thefts occurred in the United States, for an economic loss totaling more than $4.5 billion. However, often, a motor vehicle theft event (including the report of a stolen vehicle to when it is recovered) is perceived as a low-priority call for service due to the historical classification of a motor vehicle theft as a property crime. The low prioritization of auto theft often impacts law enforcement's capabilities to prevent, identify, investigate, and interdict auto theft offenders for the theft or their involvement with other criminal events.

Historical Context of Auto Theft

Auto theft is often viewed with the historical perception that it is primarily a property crime. Historically, auto theft victims were expected to turn to their insurance agencies for recovery of the property loss, as the effort to expend law enforcement personnel and resources on a vehicle theft event did not have a high value of return. Offenders were often low-level, opportunistic offenders with minimal histories of criminal activity. There were occasional cases in which the vehicle theft was connected to large-scale, complex, violent crime investigations, but it seemed that these cases were few and far between. However, history also shows some vehicle thefts connected to notorious criminal cases, such as the myriad of crimes committed by Charles Manson and the Manson family, or, perhaps, the most famous getaway car, a gray 1934 Ford V-8, stolen by Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker and used on a multi-state, 2,500-mile crime spree (leaving nine corpses) before their luck ran out at a roadblock in Louisiana.[2]

During the 1980s, the high incidence of auto theft gained attention and U.S. federal laws were passed in an effort to reduce auto theft. In 1984, the U.S. Congress passed the Motor Vehicle Theft Law Enforcement Act in order to facilitate the tracing and recovery of stolen motor vehicles and parts from stolen vehicles.[3] As a result of the 1984 act, manufacturers of designated high-theft passenger car lines were required by the U.S. Department of Transportation to mark the vehicle identification number (VIN) on the engine, transmission, and 12 major vehicle body parts. The marking of vehicle parts serves a dual purpose: marked vehicles or parts make it easier for law enforcement to identify stolen vehicles or parts -- and the markings deter professional auto thieves because "they will have difficulty in marketing stolen marked parts and are more likely to get caught if they steal cars with marked parts." The manufacturers of those car lines designated as high-theft began the practice of parts marking with the model year 1987.[4]

Despite these steps, motor vehicle theft continued to be a large problem in the early 1990s. By 1990, thefts had increased to 1,270,000 from 830,000 in 1984, leading to the enactment of the Anti Car Theft Act of 1992.[5] The 1992 act enhanced federal penalties for auto thefts; authorized a grant program to help law enforcement agencies concerned with auto theft; implemented improved motor vehicle titling, registration, and salvage processes; expanded the Theft Prevention Standard (parts marking requirement) to more car lines and vehicle types; established rules regarding salvage or junk vehicles; and permitted random customs inspections. In addition, the legislation required that a stolen parts information system be maintained by the U.S. attorney general, and dealing in stolen marked parts became a federal crime.[6] During the 1990s, several U.S. states also began implementing auto theft prevention authorities and centralizing education, prevention, enforcement, training, and prosecutions of auto theft, as have some Canadian provinces and Australian states.[7]

As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, vehicle theft rates were almost twice as high in the 1990s than in 2014. Many of the pre-2000 vehicles were easy targets for theft as the lock and ignition systems were easily overcome. Many of the low-level, opportunistic offenders were thwarted as technological theft prevention advances were implemented by manufacturers and law enforcement became more attentive to vehicle theft.[Editor's Note: Click on the links above to view Figures 1 and 2.]

According to the National Crime Information Bureau's Hot Wheels 2014, about 60 percent of the top 10 vehicle make and model thefts are vehicles from 1989 through 1999.[8] There are still many of the older pre-2000 vehicles on the road today that are preyed upon by opportunistic thieves. However, casual car theft, such as that committed by joyriding juveniles, still exists, but it has become a lesser part of the auto theft problem. Increasingly, car theft is a sophisticated criminal enterprise that involves title fraud, vehicle identification cloning, and stripping cars for parts in "chop shops." The selling of stolen vehicles and their parts on both the domestic and international black markets is a profitable business.[9]

Auto Theft Connection to Other Crimes

In today's environment, motor vehicle theft is typically not an isolated property crime, but rather a crime associated with numerous victims and the commission of other crimes.

INTERPOL recognizes the complex environment in which motor vehicle theft is a highly organized criminal activity affecting all regions of the world, with clear links to organized crime and terrorism. Vehicles are not only stolen for their own sake, but they are also trafficked to finance other crimes -- such as terrorism in which they can be used as bomb carriers -- or in the perpetration of other crimes.

The INTERPOL Stolen Motor Vehicle (SMV) database is a vital tool in the fight against international vehicle theft and trafficking. The SMV allows INTERPOL member countries to run a check against a suspicious vehicle and find out instantly whether it has been reported as stolen. An international database of this nature is crucial as vehicles are often trafficked across national borders, sometimes ending up thousands of miles away from the location from which they were stolen. In 2015, around 123,000 motor vehicles worldwide were identified as stolen in the SMV database.[10]

Law enforcement's reports and investigations of auto theft should take the ability of the offender(s) to use the stolen vehicle in transitioning to other crimes into consideration, as offenders may use the stolen vehicle to preempt, complete, or otherwise conduct organized white collar crime or other crimes against persons (e.g., bank robberies, burglaries, drug trafficking, human trafficking). It is commonplace to see the theft of a motor vehicle connected to a violent crime such as car-jacking, robbery, shooting, home invasion, and so forth. These violent events also lead to increased hazards for responding officers and the public when they involve vehicles due to the dangers caused by offenders driving recklessly when going to or attempting escape from violent crime scenes. These hazards can escalate to vehicle pursuits or dangerous confrontations with officers, resulting in shootings or loss of life.

The crime of auto theft often provides a mode of transportation or mechanism to further other crime, including violent crime and organized crime, as demonstrated by the following examples.

* In a six-month period (January 2015-July 2015), the Denver Metropolitan Area experienced 46 bank robberies; 48 percent (22) of these robberies are known to involve the use of a stolen vehicle.[11]

* During a two-year period (2013-2014), a Colorado crime ring, involving 16 known suspects, used 24 known stolen vehicles to commit at least 125 other crimes, including credit card fraud, theft, narcotics trafficking, and burglary. These crimes impacted more than 58 victims and involved 16 jurisdictions. The known offenders' ages ranged from 20 to 62 years old.[12]

* During the takedown of a major international auto theft and drug trafficking ring with ties to the Sinaloa drug cartel in 2014, 22 people were arrested in New Mexico. The case involved a large-scale car theft scheme that involved shipping stolen luxury vehicles from New Mexico to Mexico in exchange for methamphetamine and heroin. "During the takedown, agents and officers seized seven firearms, including a sawed-off shotgun and a stolen weapon, as well as various amounts of methamphetamine, heroin, and cocaine."[13]

* In October 2015, 21 people were charged by the New Jersey attorney general following the takedown of a major international carjacking and stolen car trafficking ring. The ring stole luxury cars in New York and New Jersey and shipped them to West Africa and other places where they could be resold. Three members of the ring remain at large. The 16-month investigation by 17 federal, state, and local agencies led to the recovery of 90 stolen cars worth more than $4 million.[14]

Current Auto Theft Reduction Efforts

Since 2010, auto theft reduction efforts have been at an all-time low -- even though it is now commonplace to see auto thefts associated with violent crimes, pattern criminal activities, and organized crime. Law enforcement efforts to reduce auto thefts must address the lucrative business of criminal organizations that would rival most of the successful legitimate businesses in the United States. Criminal enterprising associated with auto theft has provided an enormous profit that provides the means to perform sophisticated illegitimate business schemes such as gangs, cartels, organized crime, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. The modern auto theft offender is often associated with a plethora of violent crimes, including robberies, home invasions, burglaries, fraud, assaults, batteries, and endangerment -- all of which pose a severe threat to law enforcement and the public. Arguably, these criminal behaviors have always been engaged with the crime of auto theft; however, they appear to be more common as low-level criminals have been thwarted by previous enforcement efforts, legislation, and manufacturers' enhanced systems.

Colorado Auto Theft Study

In November 2015, the Colorado Auto Theft Prevention Authority facilitated a study with the Colorado Auto Theft Intelligence Coordination Center to determine the relationship of auto theft to other crimes.[15] The motivation behind this study was to determine the role of auto theft and the criminals who perpetrate it in the furtherance of other criminal acts. As previously stated, the common mind-set views auto theft as solely a property crime, with many victims being compensated for their losses through their respective automobile insurance policies. Although most law enforcement agencies recognize that there is an economic impact associated with auto theft occurrences, when compared to crimes against persons and other violent crimes, this impact is viewed as minimal. Ultimately, this can result in the law enforcement community prioritizing their efforts on the prevention and investigation of higher-profile crimes with a clear, direct public safety nexus and increased economic impact. The goal of this initial study was to determine if and to what level the crime of auto theft is involved in these higher-priority crimes.

There were challenges in the collection of the data needed to determine this association. The lack of uniform and standardized data collection and disparate record management systems limited the amount of viable data available for use in this study. Despite these challenges, this study was able to identify several reliable data sources and, through the analysis of these data, was able to convey that the crime of auto theft is commonly associated with a vast array of other crimes.[16] The study produced the following findings:

* In total, there were 22,763 motor vehicle thefts in Colorado from January 1, 2013, to December 31, 2014. Approximately 10 percent (2,392) of these thefts resulted in felony charges being filed within the Colorado court system. Of these filings, 97 percent of those charged with motor vehicle theft were also charged with additional crimes.

* Auto theft offenders were identified with such associated crimes as arson, drug trafficking, controlled substance violations, kidnapping, financial fraud, burglary, robbery, weapons violations, and criminal mischief (e.g., carjacking, assault, and battery).

* A majority of auto theft offenders have multiple charges for other crimes. These other crimes include robbery, burglary, assault, drug abuse, menacing, escape, fraud, forgery, and disturbance of public peace. Many of the auto theft offenders are believed to be recidivists, and, as such, many of them may be expected to be actively involved in other hierarchical crimes.[17]

These findings emphasize that those who perpetrate the crime of auto theft also have the propensity to commit other crimes -- including crimes that have a higher priority within the law enforcement community than auto theft. At this time, the role of auto theft in the furtherance of these crimes cannot be determined with a high statistical level of confidence due to the limited data available for study. However, through interviews with investigators and analyses of filed cases, it can be inferred that many thefts of motor vehicles are motivated by the ambition to commit another crimes involving persons, drugs, or other property.

Technological advances have also impacted the effect of vehicle theft and vehicle crimes. These advancements have been leveraged by the criminal element in the use of the Internet, cellphones, computer technology, and cyber technology. Stolen vehicles can be transacted; vehicle and title fraud, identity theft, and scams can be performed; and cyber technology can be leveraged to commit vehicle crimes (e.g., odometer roll-back). In essence, it seems that today's vehicle thief has a higher level of sophistication and intelligence than those thieves encountered pre-2000s. Technological advances have afforded current vehicle thieves the ability to surpass geographical boundaries and access criminal networks on a global level -- and do so with minimal intervention by law enforcement. Compounding the difficulty to interdict these multifaceted criminal ventures is their use of Internet services to capitalize on selling stolen vehicles or their parts, with minimal fear of being caught.

Conclusion

States and agencies deploying auto theft task forces have a strong documented history demonstrating that auto theft is a transformational crime associated with a wide array of criminal activities, as discussed herein. Those in the field of auto theft prevention understand this issue, such as the International Association of Auto Theft Investigators, auto theft prevention authorities, and the IACP Vehicle Crimes Committee. However, there are law enforcement administrators and prosecutors who still consider auto theft as a victimless, nonviolent property crime.

The Colorado Auto Theft Prevention Authority's study determined that motor vehicle theft is not an isolated property crime, but rather a crime incurring numerous victims and motivated by the furtherance of other "higher-priority" crimes. As pointed out in The Colorado Auto Theft Annual Report-2012,"In many cases, the crime of auto theft is considered a transitional crime as offenders use the crime of auto theft to preempt, complete, or

otherwise conduct organized white collar crime and/or other crimes against persons (e.g., bank robberies, burglaries, drug trafficking, and human trafficking)."[18]

Law enforcement executives should be encouraged to elevate the prioritization of vehicle theft events (report incident to the recovery incident) in order to

* increase forensic evidence collection (e.g., DNA, fingerprints, and hair) that can be used to identify and substantiate individuals who may be involved with other crimes;

* increase the ability of law enforcement and prosecutors to establish the criminal predicates of offenders engaged in a pattern or series of criminal behavior beyond property crime; and

* elevate intelligence and information gathering to associate criminal enterprises engaged in pattern or organized crimes such as home invasions, burglaries, robberies, drug cartels, identity theft, homicide, and arson.

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ABOUT THE IACP VEHICLE CRIMES COMMITTEE

The IACP Vehicle Crimes Committee studies, considers, and determines the various methods and means by which vehicle crimes are committed, including the make and type of vehicles most commonly stolen; surveys, investigates, and evaluates the techniques and methods employed by the police and other agencies in solving and reducing the incidence of vehicle crimes cases; and reports to the IACP for the dissemination to all interested agencies all pertinent information and recommendations that will reduce the incidence of this major crime.

Notes:

1 Library of Congress, "The Rich Hill Tribune, August 19, 1909," Image 6, Chronicling America, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90061663/1909-08-19/ (accessed May 24, 2016).

2 "In the beginning of each respective investigation, the inter-agency communication was lacking. Because of this, the murder investigations led to separate dead ends. Luckily, the continuing criminal activity in the Manson family aided police authorities in apprehending more than a dozen individuals. While the Manson family was in Death Valley digging into the ground for the 'Bottomless Pit,' they burned machinery belonging to the Death Valley National Monument. Burning the machinery led to the raiding of the Death Valley ranches by police authorities. During the raid, police found multiple stolen vehicles and made multiple arrests." Crime Museum, "Charles Manson and the Manson Family," Crime Library, http://www.crimemuseum.org/crime-library/charles-manson-and-the-manson-family (accessed May 24, 2016).

3 Motor Vehicle Theft Law Enforcement Act of 1984, Pub. L. 98-547 (1984).

4 Federal Motor Vehicle Theft Prevention Standard, 49 CFR 541; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Auto Theft and Recovery: Effects of the Anti Car Theft Act of 1992 and the Motor Vehicle Theft Law Enforcement Act of 1984, July 1998, http://www.nhtsa.gov/cars/rules/regrev/evaluate/808761.html (accessed May 24, 2016).

5 NHTSA, Auto Theft and Recovery; Anti Car Theft Act of 1992, Pub. L. 102-519 (1992).

6 Ibid.

7 International Association of Auto Theft Investigators, Auto Theft Prevention Authorities, "Combat Auto Theft," http://combatautotheft.org/Home_Page.html (accessed May 24, 2016).

8 Of the reported 233,140 top 10 vehicle thefts in each state, 136,410 were model years prior to 2000. National Insurance Crime Bureau, "2014 Top 10 Vehicle Make/Model Thefts," Hot Wheels 2014, https://www.nicb.org/newsroom/nicb_campaigns/hot%E2%80%93wheels/hot-wheels-2014 (accessed May 24, 2016).

9 Donna Lyons and Anne Teigen, Auto Theft Prevention (Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2008), 5, https://www.ncsl.org/print/cj/autotheftreport.pdf (accessed May 24, 2016).

10 Interpol, "Vehicle Crimes," http://www.interpol.int/Crime-areas/Vehicle-crime/Vehicle-crime (accessed May 24, 2016).

11 Mike Becker, Denver Metropolitan Auto Theft Team Report to the Colorado Automobile Theft Prevention Authority (2016).

12 Ibid.

13 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), "22 Arrested in New Mexico for Operating International Car Theft Ring Connected to Sinaloa Drug Cartel," news release, June 25, 2014, http://www.ice.gov/news/releases /22-arrested-new-mexico-operating-international-car-theft-ring-connected-sinaloa-drug (accessed May 24, 2016).

14 ICE, "21 Charged in $4 Million Takedown of International Car Theft Ring," news release, October 28, 2015), https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/21-charged-4-million-takedown-international-car-theft-ring#wcm-survey-target-id (accessed May 24, 2016).

15 The Colorado Auto Theft Intelligence Coordination Center (ATICC) is housed in the Colorado Information Analysis Center (CIAC) and purposed to collect, centralize, analyze, and disseminate law enforcement information on the incidence of statewide auto theft. Scott Casey, Auto Theft and Its Connection and Role in the Furtherance in Other Crimes -- Colorado Case Studies 2013-2015, report to the Colorado Automobile Theft Prevention Authority (Colorado Auto Theft Intelligence Coordination Center, 2015).

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Colorado Auto Theft Intelligence Coordination Center, Colorado Auto Theft Annual Report-2012 (2013), 2, http://lockdownyourcar.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/2012-ATICC-Annual-Report-020712.pdf (accessed May 25, 2016).
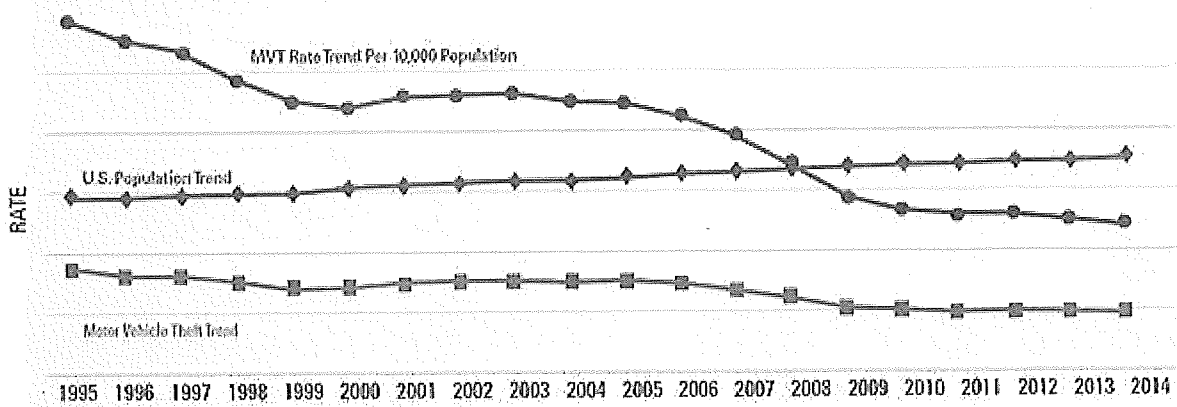
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Figure 1: U.S. Motor Vehicle Theft	1995–2014		
Year	Population[†]	Thefts	Rate[‡]
1995	262,803,276	1,472,441	560.3
1996	265,228,572	1,394,238	525.7
1997	267,783,607	1,354,189	505.7
1998	270,248,003	1,242,781	459.9
1999	272,690,813	1,152,075	422.5
2000	281,421,906	1,160,002	412.2
2001	285,317,559	1,228,391	430.5
2002	287,973,924	1,246,646	432.9
2003	290,788,976	1,261,226	433.7
2004	293,656,842	1,237,851	421.5
2005	296,507,061	1,235,859	416.8
2006	299,398,484	1,198,245	400.2
2007	301,621,157	1,100,472	364.9
2008	304,059,724	959,059	315.4
2009	307,006,550	795,652	259.2
2010	309,330,219	739,565	239.1
2011	311,587,816	716,508	230.0
2012	313,873,685	723,186	230.4
2013[§]	316,497,531	700,288	221.3
2014	318,857,056	689,527	216.2

Figure 2: U.S. Motor Vehicle Theft Rates | 1995–2014

MVT Rate Trend Per 10,000 Population

U.S. Population Trend

Motor Vehicle Theft Trend

RATE

1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014

Source: FBI UCR Crime in the United States