Insights into Contemporary Young Offender Behaviour in Victoria

"*A dark road of growing up*"

Report prepared for the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council

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Informing Australia on vehicle crime.

National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council

Report outline

Abstract   This report presents the findings from the first qualitative study of a sample of 15 Victorian young people who were serving a custodial sentence in a youth justice facility for violent motor vehicle offence/s. The research aims to understand young people's backgrounds and motivations for engaging in violent motor vehicle theft. The paper discusses implications for youth policing, youth services, education and mental health and provides participants' perspectives on interventions to assist in preventing other young people engaging in crime

Summary

Youth crime in Victoria has received unprecedented public and media attention in recent years. Central to this concern is the rise in young people engaging in violent motor vehicle crime. This rise resulted in several amendments to the *Crimes Act 1958* in December 2016, which saw the creation of home invasion and carjacking offences.

This report presents the findings from the first qualitative study of a sample of 15 Victorian young people who were serving a custodial sentence in a youth justice facility for violent motor vehicle offence/s. The research aims were to understand young people's backgrounds and motivations for engaging in violent motor vehicle theft. Participants' perspectives on interventions that may have prevented them or others from engaging in violent motor vehicle theft were also sought.

The findings of this project will aid in the development of crime prevention strategies that promote community safety, reduce motor vehicle theft crimes and support efforts to rehabilitate young people involved with the justice system.

Key findings

Background

- Participants' descriptions of childhood and growing up included several established criminogenic risk factors, including family violence, involvement in child protection services, witnessing family members using illicit substances and intergenerational offending, homelessness, and problematic school experiences.

- Participants reported a low level of help seeking.

- All participants reported first experiencing behavioural issues and school disengagement in primary school, and many reported difficulties regulating anger.

- All had experienced being suspended and expelled, which strongly aligned with the 'school to prison pipeline' phenomenon. Many participants reported being adversely impacted by school exclusion, in that they formed closer connections to an offending peer group, experienced boredom and increased their offending behaviour and substance use.

Motivation for motor vehicle offending

- Early-trajectory car theft was reported as being motivated by a need to find accommodation (and sleeping in the stolen car), for recreation purposes, and/or boredom alleviation.

- Later-trajectory car theft was reported as being associated with gaining access to illicit substances due to substance addiction and dependence issues.

Motivation for violent motor vehicle offending

- Violent motor vehicle theft was associated with severe level substance use and dependence.

- Improvements in anti-theft immobilisation technology was associated with using more extreme motor vehicle theft methods to gain access to a car quickly.

- Quickly stealing a car to obtain substances or to avoid police detection were primary motivators, and violence was used when participants felt blocked by the victim in achieving their goal.

- When reflecting on past violent motor vehicle theft, no participants reported being motivated by an intention to cause physical harm.

Implications

- A multi-sector, trauma-informed, harm-minimisation, and health/mental health approach should be the framework that governs youth policing, youth services, and education for marginalised youth.

- Behavioural issues in children living in extreme disadvantage should be reframed as signals for targeted educational and psychosocial support from an integrated service system.

- Being removed from school via suspension or expulsion in order to spend time at 'home' should never be an option. Regardless of the circumstances, providing opportunities to occupy and engage young people in education, training, and employment throughout their school-age years is crucial.

- Provision of targeted psychological support for young people with emerging substance use issues is essential.

- Rethink the design of youth residential care by aiming to develop strong positive peer connections for young people in out-of-home care. Avoid grouping young people with risk taking and offending behaviours together.

- Ensuring youth custodial settings are trauma-informed and custodial staff are trained in adolescent development and youth mental health is essential. As is expertise in improving social and emotional regulation skills in young people in custodial settings, and the application of trauma-informed methods for anger management and de-escalation.

Participants also provided a range of useful ideas for interventions that may prevent other young people from engaging in crime.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

Associate Professor Monica Thielking graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Youth Affairs) in 1995, and a Doctor of Psychology in 2006. Monica has led several research and evaluation projects for the education, community and justice sectors, which specifically deal with strengthening service integration and collaboration, and improving outcomes for young people with a history of social exclusion, disadvantage, homelessness and trauma. Monica currently holds the position as Deputy Chair of the Department of Psychological Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology.

Dr Rana Abou-Sinna was awarded a Doctor of Psychology (Clinical and Forensic Psychology) in 2016. Rana conducted her doctoral research project with up to 70 young people remanded and sentenced in a Victorian youth custodial setting, titled: *What's it like on the inside? The impact of the self-concept on the educational engagement and delinquency of young incarcerated offenders*. In addition to research, Rana works as Clinical and Forensic Psychologist with young people involved with the youth justice system, providing individual and group-based interventions that aim to reduce their risk of re-offending.

About the report

Young people who were interviewed for this study revealed 'growing up' experiences that can only be described as highly complex and deeply traumatic. Whilst all names, places and identifiers have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants, the essence of their stories have remained. Some quotations, particularly those that relate to background experiences may be potentially upsetting for the reader. The opportunity to have their genuine life stories considered by senior leaders within the youth justice system was a motivating factor for young people participating in this study.

Contents

1. Contemporary youth motor vehicle offending in Victoria

Across Australia, 54,189 vehicles were stolen in the twelve months ending March 2019. Over the same time-period in Victoria, 9,402 passenger/light commercial vehicle thefts were classified as short-term thefts and 3,340 were classified as profit motivated thefts. There were 60 vehicle theft-related fatalities across Australia since 2013, with half of those deaths being young people aged between 10 and 21. Most resulted from a combination of excess speed, drugs and alcohol. Five deaths were associated with an active police pursuit[i]. In the past two decades several studies have been published that explore auto theft from the perspectives of the offender. As a result, the following motivations have been documented:

Recreational use: driven by a desire for excitement, entertainment, fun, power, recognition, sex, to prove manhood, to gain status among peers and for a challenge.
Short term transportation: a car is used as transportation from one point to another. In these situations an individual succumbs to situational pressures and acts out of a self-defined necessity for immediate transportation (e.g., escape crime scene or police apprehension).
Commission of another crime: vehicles are stolen for use in the commission of another crime.
Personal use: to keep and use the car indefinitely.
Profit motivated theft: vehicles are stolen for profit (e.g., car-stripping, sale of parts, resale, and fraudulent insurance claims).

Limited research has specifically examined the motivations underlying youth violent motor vehicle crime. It has been suggested that due to improvements in anti-theft immobilisation technology, the ability to steal modern unoccupied parked cars has become increasingly difficult. As a result, more violent methods are being used to steal cars, such as carjacking and residential aggravated burglary to obtain car keys.

Motivations for stealing cars has also been shown to change as a young person gets older and/or moves from being a 'novice' to a more 'professional' expert offender. Novice offenders are typically younger in age and their motivations for motor vehicle theft are largely recreational (e.g., thrill seeking, power seeking and the alleviation of boredom). In contrast a 'professional' motor vehicle offender's motivation is more controlled and rational, where the primary motivator is usually to obtain money[ii].

1.1 Prevalence of youth motor vehicle theft in Victoria

To understand the current prevalence of violent and non-violent youth motor vehicle theft offending in Victoria, the authors commissioned the Crime Statistics Agency to supply data for the three most recent reporting periods, from April 2016 to March 2019.

Tabulated data related to counts of alleged offenders for driving causing death, dangerous driving, motor vehicle theft, and steal from a motor vehicle can be viewed in Appendix A: Count of Alleged Offender Incidents Where Principal Offence Within an Incident is Driving Causing Death, Dangerous Driving, Motor Vehicle Theft and Steal from a Motor Vehicle: April 2016 to March 2019.

It is important to clarify that this data is a person-based count of alleged offenders, and a person can be counted more than once if they have allegedly committed more than one incident. Furthermore, the count is considered in relation to the principal (most serious) offence committed within an incident. For example, in relation to the crime 'driving causing death', Appendix A reveals that between April 2018 and March 2019 there were no young people in the 10-17 year old age group where the principal or most serious crime in an alleged unlawful incident was driving causing death.

Tabulated prevalence data related to carjacking, home invasion, and residential aggravated burglary where a property item key (unspecified) was recorded as stolen can be viewed in Appendix B: Counts of Alleged Offenders Associated with Carjacking, Home Invasion, and Residential Aggravated Burglary Where a Property Item Key (Unspecified) was Recorded as Stolen: April 2016 to March 2019. Apart from offence types, the key difference to data in the table presented in Appendix A is that this data is obtained by using offence types as the basis of recording (as these are specific crimes within broader categories) and these are then linked to an offender database to determine the count of alleged offenders (where police have identified an offender). Again, alleged offenders are counted for each incident they have been involved in, so individual offenders may appear more than once in the offence-type category.

Key findings, from the past three twelve-month periods: 2016/17 and 2017/18 and 2018/19, for Victorian young people aged 10-17 and 18-25 are presented below.

1.2 Motor vehicle theft

When comparing 2018/19 with 2016/17 alleged motor vehicle theft principal offence data, there has been a 43.9 per cent decrease (913 compared to 1,629) in the count of alleged 10-17 year old offenders, and a 27.3 per cent decrease (1,850 compared to 2,544) in the count of alleged 18-25 year old offenders over the past three years. This contrasts with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, which counts the number of young people with an offence rather than an incident. ABS data reveals that from the years 2016/17 to 2017/18 the number of young people across Australia aged 10–17 with principal theft of motor vehicle offences slightly increased by 1.4 per cent, from 1,116 to 1,169, with offender rates rising from 48.1 to 49.5 per 100,000 persons[iii]. See Figure 1. Count of Alleged Offenders for Principle Motor Vehicle Theft Incidents by Age Group and Year.

Figure 1: Count of alleged offenders for principle motor vehicle theft incidents by age group and year
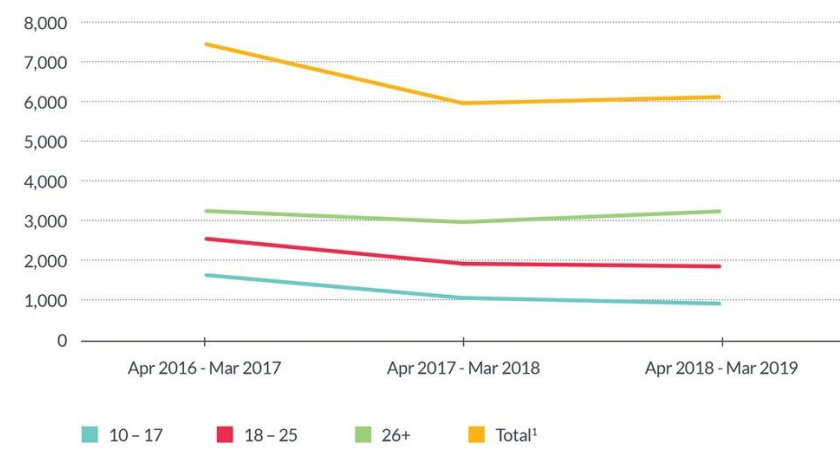
1.3 Steal from a motor vehicle

When comparing 2018/19 with 2016/17 alleged steal from a motor vehicle principal offence data, there has been a 44.2 per cent decrease (640 compared to 1,146) in the count of 10-17 year old alleged offenders, and a 28.8 per cent decrease (1,394 compared to 1,957) in the count of 18-25 year old alleged offenders over the past three years. See Figure 2. Count of Alleged Offenders for Steal from a Motor Vehicle Incidents by Age Group and Year.

Figure 2: Count of alleged offenders for steal from a motor vehicle incidents by age group and year
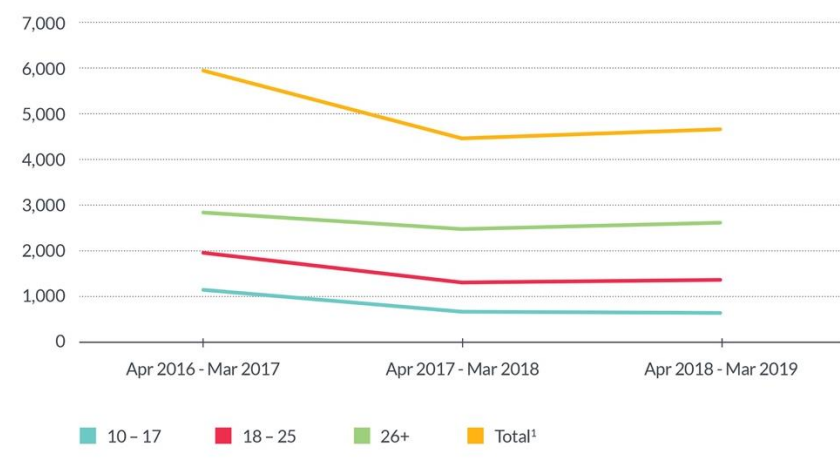
1.4 Residential aggravated burglary

When comparing 2018/19 with 2016/17 data, there has been a 57 per cent decrease in the count of alleged offenders aged 10-17 who were associated with a residential aggravated burglary offence in the past three years (302 compared to 703), and a 5.4 per cent increase in the count of alleged offenders aged 18-25 who were associated with an aggravated burglary offence over the past three years (550 compared to 522 incidents). This 5.4 per cent increase accounts for a slight dip in offender counts in 2017/18. However, when comparing 2017/18 and 2018/19 counts of alleged offenders who were associated with an aggravated burglary offence in this age group, a 21.2 per cent increase is revealed over the past two years (550 compared to 454) See Figure 3. Count of Alleged Offenders Associated with Residential Aggravated Burglary Incidents by Age Group and Year.

Figure 3: Count of alleged offenders associated with residential aggravated burglary incidents by age group and year
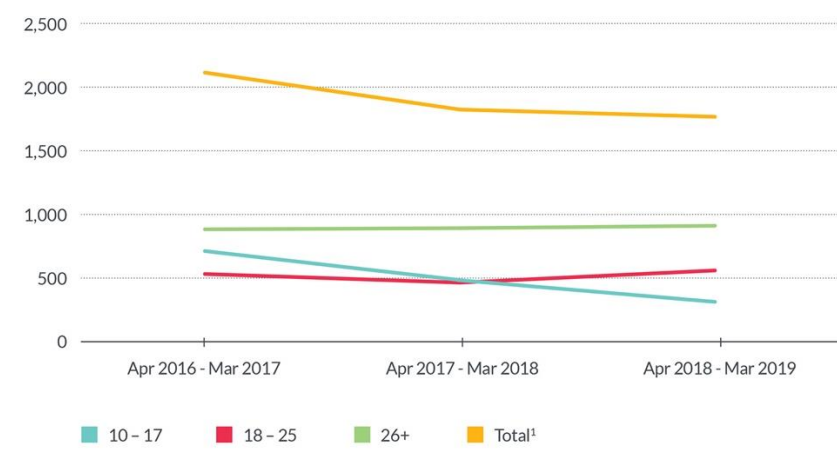
1.5 Carjacking

As carjacking offence codes only came into effect in December 2016, it is only useful to compare Crime Statistics Agency data recorded for the 2018/19 and 2018/17 collection periods. As such, there was a 6.1 per cent decrease in the count of alleged offenders aged 10-17 who were associated with an alleged carjacking offence (66 compared to 6); and a 24.1 per cent increase in the count of alleged offenders aged 18-25 who were associated with an alleged carjacking offence over the 2017/18 and 2018/19 time periods (58 compared to 72).

Interestingly, when comparing the 2017/18 and 2018/19 counts of alleged offenders aged 26+ who were associated with a carjacking offence, there was a 41.2 per cent increase in the past two years. Between April 2018 and March 2019, there was 25 per cent more alleged offenders aged 26+ associated with a carjacking offence than counts of alleged offenders in the 18-25-year-old age bracket (96 compared to 72); and 45.4 per cent more than counts of alleged offenders aged 26+ than the 10-17-year-old age bracket (96 compared to 62). Put another way, the proportion of young people represented in the total count of 423 alleged offenders associated with a carjacking offence over the last two years, was 30.3 per cent for young people aged 10-17 years and 30.7 per cent for young people aged 18-25 years. The proportion of adults aged 26+ represented 38.8 per cent of the total count of alleged carjacking offenders. Keep in mind, that over the two-year period, some young people may have re-offended (and the count is for each incident a young person is involved in). Some young people may have also moved from one age bracket to another over the two time periods. See Figure 4. Count of Alleged Offenders Associated with Carjacking Incidents by Age Group and Year.

Figure 4: Count of alleged offenders associated with carjacking incidents by age group and year
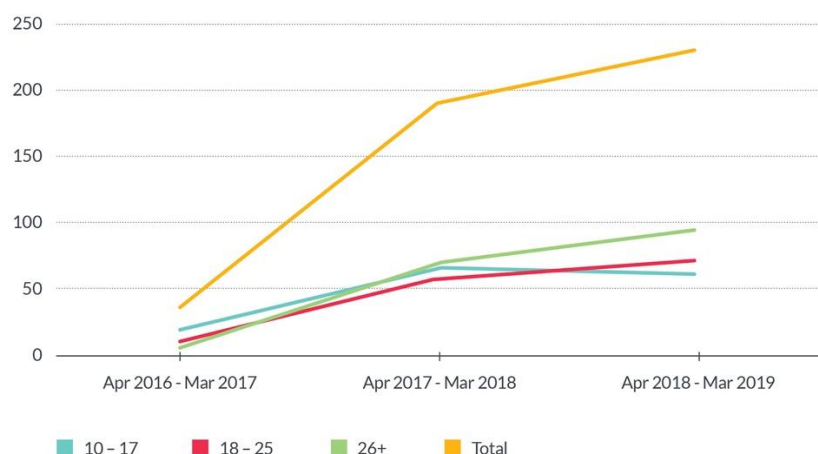
1.6 Home invasion

Like carjacking offences, home invasion offence codes also only came into effect in December 2016, therefore only counts of alleged offenders associated with a home invasion offence over the last two years will be compared. When comparing 2017/18 and 2018/19 data, there has been a 47.5 per cent decrease in the count of alleged offenders aged 10-17 who were associated with a home invasion offence in the past two years (59 compared to 31); and three times as many 18-25 year-old young people (30 compared to 82) in the past two years.

Between April 2017 and March 2018, there were more counts of alleged offenders aged 10-17 associated with a home invasion offence (N=59) than those in the 18-25 year old age bracket (N=30); and those in the 26+ age bracket (N=23). However, between April 2018 and March 2019, most counts of alleged offenders associated with a home invasion offence were for young people aged 18-25 (N=82), compared to 31 alleged offenders in the 10-17 year old age bracket; and 37 alleged offenders in the 26+ age bracket. It would be useful to explore how many of the young people in the 2018/19 cohort had graduated in age from the 10-17-year-old age bracket in 2017/18 and were repeat offenders. See Figure 5. Count of Alleged Offenders Associated with Home Invasion Incidents by Age Group and Year.

Figure 5: Count of alleged offenders associated with home invasion incidents by age group and year
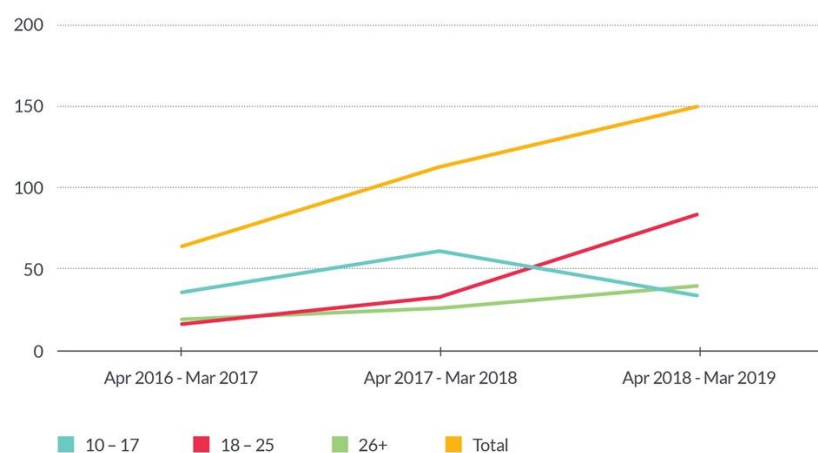
1.7 Residential aggravated burglary where a property item 'key (type unspecified)' was recorded as stolen

The following data from the Crime Statistics Agency reports age specific data for the count of alleged offenders associated with a residential aggravated burglary where a property item key was recorded as stolen. It is important to note that key type is unspecified and may not necessarily be a car key.

In all three recorded time periods (2016/17; 2017/18; and 2018/19), the 10-17 year old age bracket contained the highest count of alleged offenders associated with this offence type. When comparing the 2018/19 with 2016/17 time periods, there has been a 50.4 per cent decrease (59 compared to 119) in counts of young people aged 10-17 who were associated with a residential aggravated burglary where a property item key was recorded as stolen. See Figure 6. Count of Alleged Offenders Associated with Residential Aggravated Burglary (Property Item Key Stolen) Incidents by Age Group and Year.

Figure 6: Count of alleged offenders associated with residential aggravated burglary (property item key stolen) incidents by age group and year
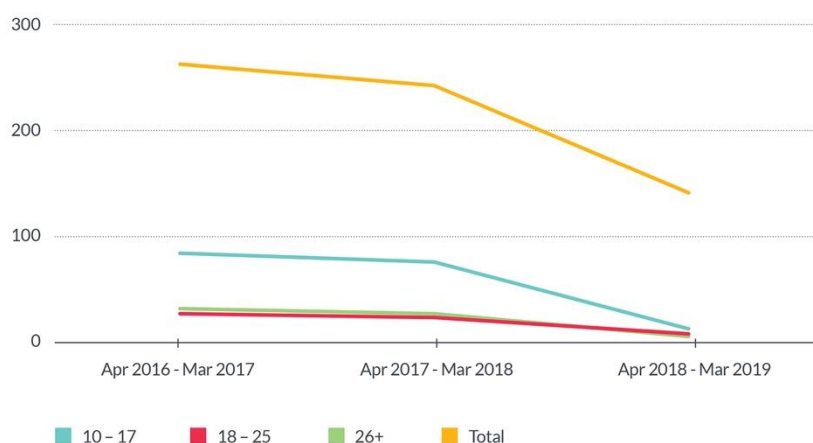

2. Reoffending and recidivism among Victorian young offenders

Reoffending and recidivism among young people involved in the youth justice system is high. An analysis of Victorian Children's Court Clinic data from 2008-2009 by the Sentencing Advisory Council (SAC)[iv] revealed that 61 per cent of the 5,385 young people who were sentenced in this time period reoffended within six years. SAC also found that compared to adults, the likelihood of reoffending is higher for young people. Forty-four per cent reoffended more than once, and fifteen per cent reoffended on five or more occasions. The most common type of reoffending was a road safety offence (36 per cent), followed by an offence against the person (34 per cent), and a theft/deception offence (33 per cent). The younger an adolescent was at the age of first offence the more likely they were to reoffend. In fact, the reoffending rate of young people who were first sentenced at age 10–12 was 86 per cent, which was more than double the rate of those who were first sentenced at ages 19–20 (33 per cent). Three-quarters of young people who were first sentenced aged 10–12 continued offending into the adult criminal jurisdiction.

A 2016 study by the Crime Statistics Agency, which examined Victoria Police data on the patterns of alleged offending over an eight-year period for 11,547 young people between the ages of 10 and 17 found four trajectory groups: low, adolescent limited, late developing and high, with the latter three groups being statistically more likely to be male, to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and to live in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas at the commencement of their offending record. While the high group comprised just 1.6 per cent of the sample, it was responsible for a disproportionately high proportion of offences (23.6 per cent), had a very large proportion of the most serious offences, and over 90 per cent had at least one crime against the person recorded over the eight-year analysis period. Conversely, the low group comprised 89 per cent of the sample but was responsible for a disproportionately low proportion of offences (37.5 per cent)[v].

3. Economic cost of youth offending

Across Australia, the total recurrent expenditure on detention-based supervision, community-based supervision and group conferencing for 10-17-year-old young people was $842.4 million in 2017-18, with detention-based supervision accounting for most of this expenditure (60.4 per cent, or $509.1 million)[vi]. A recent study found that

high justice costs for youth were significantly associated with having a diagnosed mental health condition, homelessness and rough sleeping, high-risk of dependence on one or more drugs or alcohol, identifying as Indigenous, and a history of out-of-home care before the age of 18[vii]. From an economic perspective, any effort to improve youth outcomes and reduce the need for youth detention can be considered a good investment.

4. Adolescence and anti-social behaviour

Adolescence is a period spanning between 10-24 years[viii] and is characterised by increased risk taking, reliance on the peer group, individuation and identity development. It is also a time when anti-social behaviour is known to increase. Antisocial behaviour incorporates a range of behaviours that range in severity, from minor offensive to harmful acts, to more serious criminal offending[ix].

While there is no one risk factor responsible for antisocial behaviour in young people[x], research on this topic reveals that the combined impact of several risk factors makes some young people more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour than others[xi]. The following table, published by the Australian Institute of Criminology,[xii] is a useful summary of previous research exploring risk and protective factors associated with antisocial behaviour in young people.

Table 1. Risk and protective factors for antisocial behaviour*

Context	Risk factors	Protective factors
Individual	• Prenatal and postnatal difficulties • Antisocial personality: including impulsiveness, belief system and attitudes which favour deviancy, restlessness, risk-taking, aggressive behaviour • Early signs of antisocial behaviour, including displays of aggression • Alcohol and drug use	• Social competence and good social skills • Attachment to family • Problem solving skills and good coping style • Internal locus of control • Moral beliefs and values
Family	• Parental criminality • Poor family management practices (i.e., lack of supervision, harsh/inconsistent discipline) • High levels of family conflict • Lack of parental involvement (neglect, low parental warmth) • Economic stressors	• Supportive, caring parents • Family harmony • Responsibility for chores or required helpfulness • Secure and stable family • Small family size • Strong family norms and morality
School	• Academic failure • Truancy and low commitment to schooling • Frequent school changes • Expulsion or suspension from school • Bullying	• Positive school climate • School achievement • Responsibility and required helpfulness • Sense of belonging and bonding • Opportunities for success at school and recognition of achievement • School norms around violence
Peers	• Poor social ties (few social activities, low popularity) • Mixing with delinquent siblings and peers • Gang membership • Peer rejection	• Pro-social peer group • Friends and peers with positive moral beliefs and attitudes • Participates in social activities or sporting events
Community or neighbourhood	• Low socioeconomic areas • Community disorganisation • Availability of firearms and drugs • Exposure to violence and crime within the community • Urban area • Media portrayal of violence • Lack of support services • Social or cultural discrimination	• Access to support services • Community networking • Attachment to community • Participation in church or other community group • Community and cultural norms against violence • Strong cultural and ethnic pride

Source: Bor, McGee & Fagan 2004; Homel et al 1999; Morris, Sallybanks & Willis 2003; Vassallo et al 2002

5. The research: Backgrounds, motivations and interventions

The aim of the research study was to seek insight into contemporary motor vehicle offending among Victorian youth, with a focus on violent motor vehicle theft.

A semi-structured interview approach, utilising the 'Life Story' methodology[xiii], was employed for this study. This is a form of narrative inquiry and has been shown to be an effective method for eliciting deep reflection from marginalised young people who may have had disrupted forms of education and find survey research difficult[xiv]. Records related to participants' past offending behaviour were also obtained from the Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) and the Traffic Incidence System (TIS) databases at Victoria Police. Ethical approval was obtained from Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Justice and Community Safety Justice Human Research Ethics Committee. Victoria Police Research Coordinating Committee approval was also obtained.

The participants were fifteen young people aged 15 – 21. All were referred to the study as they met the inclusion criteria of serving a custodial sentence in a Victorian youth justice center for violent motor vehicle theft. All participants were male. Two were aged 15, two were aged 17, four were aged 18, three were aged 19, two were aged 20 and two were aged 21 at the time of the interview.

A noted pattern was that young people's first contacts with police were typically for theft offences, which then progressed to violent offending and motor vehicle theft. A total of 733 arrests, 9 cautions and 178 summons applied/issued were recorded for the 15 participants. The three highest types of recorded arrests in the sample were for theft of a motor vehicle (N=133); violent offences (N=121); and theft from a motor vehicle (N= 90). Five young people in the sample had a recorded carjacking offence. Four young people had a recorded aggravated burglary offence and theft of a vehicle offence occurring on the same day. However, it is important to note that the two offences may be unrelated and that the car may be stolen prior to the aggravated burglary. Fourteen participants had at least one recorded violent offence (which may or may not have involved a theft of a motor vehicle). The number of recorded violent offences per participant ranged from 0 – 34 (average = 11.43). Nine participants had at least one recorded drug offence. Thirteen participants had at least one recorded property offence.

Where participant quotes have been included in the results, all identifiers have been removed or modified to protect research participants' right to anonymity. Participants' names have been replaced with a code.

6. Participants' backgrounds

6.1 Family violence

High levels of family violence, mostly perpetrated by the father or step-father, was reported by the majority of participants. Descriptions sometimes included significant victim injuries that were witnessed or experienced by participants. Evidence of post-traumatic stress symptoms were evident in the way some young people described their sleep and wellbeing. When asked to describe his childhood, Participant E responded: *"I heard my mum and dad fight a lot…a lot of family violence and it's still in my head. I can still hear it"*. When his mother was not home, the violence would turn to him: *"If mum wasn't around and he was angry, he would start yelling and all that at me"*. This conflict eventually prompted Participant E's entry into homelessness:

Participant E: I had a big fight with my dad and it's just – I didn't want to hurt him - so I just packed my stuff, like just a couple of bags – no, it was just a backpack of clothes. And then I just walked to one of my mates' places and asked, "can I stay with you?" Until I would get a phone call from my dad. And that could end up lasting two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, a month, depends on the mood he's in.

Another participant described particularly extreme levels of violence towards his mother and himself, inflicted first by his dad and then later by his stepfather:

Participant A : Me and my little brother we used to sit there and watch him bash my mum to the point where you know if me and my little brother didn't run in the room you know and start yelling and stuff he would have killed my mum, I watched my mum turning blue and my dad jump on her head while she was laying down you know. Yeah its [expletive] up I had to call ambulances for my mum that many times.

The same participant describes how, as he became older, he began retaliating and defending himself against his step-father, which led him to use violence to solve problems in his own life. Similarly, Participant O, who had recorded charges for violent offences, theft of and from motor vehicles, also spoke about 'standing up' to his dad once he became a teenager. Exposure to violence in childhood and the use of violence to deal with conflict was a theme that permeated all interviews:

Interviewer: What would happen when you did something wrong?

Participant O: When I was growing up in primary school, and kinder, he would belt me and stuff and then once I hit teenage years I stood up to him and he never touched me again.

6.2 Involvement in child protection

All participants reported various degrees of prior contact with child protection services.

Three young people spoke in detail about their experiences of being under the care of child protection. A theme in their background was having to deal with the transience and uncertainty of moving back and forth between home, kinship care, foster care and residential care. Participant A captures the uncertainty and powerlessness of being a child in this situation well:

Participant A: Like my home I always had randoms coming in to my home, like living in and out of DHS care, you know getting moved, you get comfortable in a resi house, just get to know everyone in there and bang you get told you're moving the next day to a different house, it was the worst thing ever - you didn't have a home to call yours.

This constant shifting around involved severe disruptions to education for all of the young people who spoke about this experience. Being taken from the family home and placed in residential care also introduced them to other young people who had similar backgrounds and who were also offending:

Participant A: …and they put me in resi and then in resi I started like hanging out with other people, and yeah got into my first stolen car and yeah it was alright, and I jumped behind the wheel of the car…

Participant K revealed that when he was in foster care, the abuse that he had experienced at home was repeated, and how his move to residential care marked the start of his substance use and motor vehicle offending. He discussed how he began stealing cars in order to commit other crimes to fund his substance use. This was a common experience for young people who reported being substance addicted. Stealing cars to either sell or to commit other crimes was spoken about as a means to an end, which was access to illicit substances.

Participant K: "When I was two, I went in – my mum – I got taken off my mum and got put in foster care and then I got moved around a lot, 'cause I was a troubled and angry kid.

Interviewer: So how old were you when you were moved around?

Participant K: From two 'til – I got put in resi at 10, so we still moved around a lot and a couple of homestays just [expletive] – they didn't like me so they used to bash me and…whatever else and all that kind of stuff. And then I went to resi I was doing drugs, I was doing drinking and I needed money to get drugs.

Interviewer: What sort of drugs?

Participant K: Ice and weed and stuff and then – so, you need money so you have to do crime, and stealing cars is the first crime everyone – most people I know have done. So, you start off just trying break into them and stuff. And then once you get a car, you drove around, like, when I was younger, I used to just drive around and steal more [expletive].

6.3 Low help seeking

Young people reported that they worried about family members getting into trouble by authorities if issues occurring in the home became known to support services, especially because crime and abuse was a common feature of family life. Little evidence of help-seeking was apparent in the sample. At school, most young people reported a struggle to reach out for help:

Interviewer: So, in your primary school, how was that for you?

Participant K: It was rough and I didn't want – I never really liked school. I just want to skip that.

Interviewer: Did you find it easy to learn or not?

Participant K: No. I can't – I don't know how to write and stuff, read properly back then 'cause I didn't like doing it.

Interviewer: And did you have help?

Participant K: I don't – I didn't like asking for help so I never really said anything.

The following excerpt from Participant H's interview reveals that not knowing what would happen to him and his family if problems are disclosed to professionals was a key reason for not seeking help:

Participant H: I never really spoke about it 'cause I didn't wanna get my dad to get in trouble for it and that was one of the main things why I never spoke about being abused as a child, as a kid, because at the end of the day, he's my dad and without my dad, what would my mum do? So, I thought of the bigger picture instead of being selfish.

Interviewer: You were protecting your family?

Participant H: Yeah, in a sense, but – I don't know. Maybe I could have spoken to someone but done it in a way where it doesn't get my dad in trouble. But I didn't know how to do that then. I've heard of other kids – where their parents are abusing them and stuff, and then DHS and stuff takes them away from their parents, and then their siblings, and it just splits their families. So, I didn't want that to happen. So, I kind of just copped it on my chin.

6.4 Witnessing family members using illicit substances

Witnessing substance use by family members was another theme in background stories. For example, when Participant B summarised the story of his life, his dad's heroin addiction was a prominent feature:

Participant B: Started running away from primary school. Just stopped going to primary school and started playing Playstation and then when I hit high school I went to high school for a bit I just get into punch ons and that. And then I dropped out of that and I started stealing cars and getting on drugs. I've never really had anyone to look up to because my dad was never there he was always on heroin and [other drugs]. Yeah so I don't know I talk to him now and then but he's a bad influence I guess it's always been my mum there she's good. I don't remember much but. Just hit the drugs and that real hard.

A disturbing finding was that some young people spoke about trusted adults in their life who initiated their substance use by introducing illicit substances to them, or as Participant O describes, re-introduced them to illicit substances after being released from a youth justice facility:

Participant O: I got out of [juvenile justice facility] and I went to my mum's house, I got parole there, and it was the worst mistake of my life you know, being locked up for about [number of months removed] and then going out and the drugs were already there you know, anything I wanted was there, so it was pretty...you know... yeah...pretty bad.

6.5 Witnessing intergenerational offending

Another pervasive theme was of being enmeshed in a culture of offending within their immediate family, extended family, community and/or peer groups. For example, Participant G who has a recorded history of carjacking offences, spoke about the shared mutual experience of 'going to jail' in his family:

Participant G: Yeah. Two out of three of them have been to jail. I'm still going in and out of jail. My brother just got out of jail. My whole family just – I guess, is in and out of jail.

Witnessing family members participating in offending behaviour was another strong theme. Participant A who has recorded charges for violent offences and theft of a motor vehicle, explained how he first 'got into stealing cars':

Participant A: I guess it probably started when I was ten years old. No, I was probably about eight years old when I stole my first car with my brother and my cousin. We were all pretty young. My brother was 10. My cousin was 13. We stole our first car.

Participant G spoke about living in extreme disadvantage due to his parents' substance use. From an eight-year-old child's perspective, witnessing a relative driving a stolen vehicle and receiving money from crime, meant his relative's children had things that Participant G did not, and was viewed by him as a solution to mitigating the effects of poverty:

Participant G: I'd be young and I'd see my [relative] pull up in a nice, new car, this and that, every three or four days. How does he afford that when us kids are living like [expletive]? They're stealing their own cars and they're doing that. They're in and out of jail. It just seemed like my cousins always had everything they wanted…because they were stealing it, they were thieving it, they were doing the same stuff - but they had everything they wanted. So, well, why do they have this and I don't have anything I want?

6.6 Homelessness and the lack of safe and secure accommodation

As described earlier, nearly all participants spoke about a home life in which family violence, conflict and/or physical abuse was a common experience. This aligns with previous research, which has shown that there is a significant link between family violence and youth homelessness, with more severe levels of family violence related to earlier experiences of youth homelessness[xv]:

Participant H: "I've had heaps of times where me and my dad have fought each other and stuff like that. It'll be either I come home drug-affected or he'll be drunk. Sometimes it will be my fault, sometimes it will be his fault, but it was just – the environment was – I didn't feel as if it was safe. It wasn't home. You expect a home environment to be safe and somewhere you can come back to, but at that point in my life, I felt like that wasn't home, it wasn't somewhere I could go back to."

For a number of psychosocial reasons, youth homelessness, offending and substance use are also closely connected. Participant H spoke about how finding accommodation as a couch-surfer was contingent on partaking in illicit substance use at the house where accommodation was sought:

Interviewer: So, a lot of teenagers, when they first leave home, they stay at different friends' houses. Did you do that as well?

Participant H: I kind of did it, but it wasn't a friend's house or anything. It was just places where you could just do drugs. So, I wouldn't really call it somewhere safe to stay either.

Interviewer: So, the purpose of staying there was to do the drugs?

Participant H: No. I couldn't stay there unless I had drugs.

6.7 Problematic school experiences

The highest reported levels of education in the sample ranged from Year 6 to Year 8. The overarching themes in relation to school were learning difficulties, behavioural issues, leaving school early and strengthening ties with an anti-social peer group.

Learning difficulties

All but one of the young people in the sample described their experience of learning as being extremely difficult. It was also evident that most did not having the social and emotional skills required to form healthy relationships with teachers and peers. For the most part, these difficulties began early in primary school. Participant B, who had a recorded history of carjacking offence/s, and reported an ADHD diagnosis, linked his struggle with learning to the school environment not being a good fit with his needs:

Participant B: I don't know, I just had trouble learning and that. When I'm around heaps of people. Yeah. So maybe the environment wasn't helpful for you to learn.

Participant N, who also reported an ADHD diagnosis, spoke about feeling embarrassed when he was placed in a separate classroom so that he would not distract others. He also spoke about a solution for this situation, which was to help other young people who experienced similar issues to gain employment instead of having to go to school:

Participant N: Every second week I'm – I think it was Friday morning, my mum and dad would have to come to school and have a meeting with a few teachers and I have to sit in a room because my behaviour was distracting the kids. They're trying to get me on a plan so I don't distract the kids.

Interviewer: What was that like, sitting in that room and having that happen? Having your parents come every second week, what was that like for you?

Participant N: It was embarrassing. I tried to get them to stop but they didn't stop. I got suspended 17 times 'cause I can't sit down. I can't sit there.

Interviewer: So what do you think needed to happen that would have been more helpful for you? Say you were a teacher in that school and you had a kid that was like you?

Participant N: I don't know. It's hard 'cause it's like 50 kids in the classroom in my high school...I'd help them to get out and work.

6.8 Leaving school and strengthening ties with an anti-social peer group

Many young people in the sample spoke about suspension or expulsion as initially being treated like a reward, but at a more deeper level, there was a sense of shame and hopelessness associated with no longer being allowed to return to their school. This appeared to have a strong negative psychological impact. The experience was also demonstrative of the 'school to prison pipeline' phenomenon[xvi], which purports that young people who are frequently suspended are also more at risk of participating in antisocial and violent behaviour, which leads to incarceration:

Participant H: Year seven and year eight was all right, but when I got to year nine, I was introduced into drugs and stuff like that. So, I started off with just cannabis and stuff like that in year nine and then slowly I started going to different other drugs like acid, cocaine, all that stuff. And then when I hit year ten, I got expelled from high school from selling cannabis at school. And during all that and during that whole time, my dad was pretty – my dad was an alcoholic and was pretty abusive, so I used to get hit and all that all the time. So, I started rebelling against my dad because of that and because of the way he treated me, so I stopped listening to him and after I dropped out of school - basically 'cause I was kicked out - I started getting into trouble for just driving offences and stuff like that, but it wasn't stealing cars or anything yet.

Interviewer: When you got kicked out, what year were you in?

Participant H: Probably like the end of year eight, year nine.

Interviewer: It's young to be kicked out of school. So, what do you think the school could have done differently?

Participant H: Well, instead of expelling me for selling cannabis or whatever, they could have given me another chance and that would have been the big thing. My life would be completely different now if I had stayed in school. I reckon if I didn't get expelled from that school, I would have still finished year 12 and I don't think my drug habit and stuff would have been that bad. I would have still done drugs for fun, but it wouldn't be a thing where I had to depend on to survive.

Interviewer: So, you reckon that was the point where everything kind of changed for you?

Participant H: Yeah. When I got expelled from high school.

Interviewer: So, being kicked out, what do you reckon the main feelings were when that happened for you?

Participant H: I felt ashamed. I felt mad. I felt that I wasn't good enough for school and stuff like that.

Interestingly, at the end of the interview, Participant H spoke again about the significance and impact of being expelled from school on both his and other young people's offending trajectories:

Interviewer: Thank you because I feel like I understand it better. So, that's it for the interview. Is there anything else that you want to say or add?

Interviewee: No, that's about it. That's my view of why I stole cars.

Interviewer: So that was really interesting, and I reckon you've got a lot of really good ideas as well about the way things should be, and particularly around schools and giving kids second chances.

Participant H: Yeah. That's really big for me. Most of the time you could see kids – they went to school, and they didn't like it but they tried, but they still got kicked out and stuff like that, and once they get kicked out of school, that's the trigger, that's it. There's nothing else. They just give up on life and that starts a downward spiral and that – probably six out of ten people that you asked [in these interviews], got kicked out of school, and that's when their life went [expletive] …when I got kicked out of high school, I didn't want to integrate into a new high school and [be asked] "why did you get kicked out?" and all these questions that you'd be asked and to have to make new friends and stuff like that.

Growing up with significantly more risk factors than protective factors means that emotional dysregulation and behavioural issues in childhood may be indicators of trauma and social exclusion. The need for high quality school-based intervention is critical. Participant K, who has recorded charges for violent offence/s, theft from and of a motor vehicle, shared a similar sentiment around needing to understand why a young person is acting out rather than expelling him or her:

Participant K: You need someone – when you're young, you need someone you can trust, like you can put – or otherwise you end up [expletive] up. You need someone that helps you through whatever you're going through.

Interviewer: And where's the best – if they don't – if they haven't got their own family, where is the best place for that to happen?

Participant K: Teachers. Some teachers – teachers are supposed to be there. They're supposed to teach us…. but help us as well, not just – you know?

6.9 Problems regulating anger

Emotional regulation problems, particularly anger, was a strong theme. Participant I, who had the highest number of recorded criminal offences in the sample (N=146), including a recorded carjacking offence, spoke animatedly and in detail about how he experienced anger in his body. Interestingly, Participant I attributed his methamphetamine use and age to his lack of skills relating to being able to regulate anger. His description of the intensity of his anger follows:

Participant I: It's just [makes a sound of explosion and using his hand to replicate his heart beating quickly]

Interviewer: Like your heart is beating?

Participant I: Like your heart is beating. It feels like your heart makes your heat - you know what I mean? …It makes my arm heat up and I'm like "boom!" [makes another loud sound of an explosion and uses his hand to indicate punching someone repeatedly] …I black out and then, like your eyes roll back, and there's, you know, you can't even see them. You're just feeling heat in them but you can't see them, if you know what I mean?

Interviewer: So why do think that, at your age of 15, that you experience anger like that?

Participant I: Ice.

Interviewer: So even though you're not having ice in here, that's caused that level of feeling you reckon?

Participant I: Yeah, because I'm so angry. It's just like now - I mean I'm still young, I'm still growing up and that - I don't know how else to control that.

7. Young people's motivations for motor vehicle theft

Various methods were reported for stealing cars, with some methods reported by young people across the sample and regardless of age, while other methods, like test driving a car for sale and not returning the car to the owner or buying stolen cars with drugs or from money from drug trafficking offences, were only reported by older youth in the sample. A common theme in young people's descriptions of motor vehicle theft was the presence of peers who co-participated in the crime. Figure 7 provides an overview of methods reported by young people.

Figure 7. Common methods for stealing cars

Motor vehicle theft specifically reported by participants aged 18-21	Test drive car for sale on online goods exchange	Buy stolen car (by providing drugs or from money from drug trafficking)
	"You wait 'til it's daytime go on Gumtree and look for a nice car... I started kind of like making people think that I'd buy their car. Get them to meet up and test drive the car and then not come back."	"I bought a few stolen cars, the nice ones and I drove around like their mine I pull up the car wash, wash it and vacuum it, you go to the shops, you park at the shops."

Motor vehicle theft-non-age specific (ages ranged from 15-21)	Steal a car with peers	"Well I'd go out on the streets with them, and search for cars and stuff, and they'd wait somewhere, I'd go out and get the car and come pick them up."
	Steal car that has keys left in the glovebox or other storage compartment.	"Most people don't realise that cars always have spare keys and they don't take their spare keys out of the car and you just happen to find one."
	Steal a car left running	"But if the car is running and then there's no one there, that's the kind of thing I will do to take it."
	Break the barrel or start a car with scissors (older pre-2001 model cars targeted)	"Find an older car that is in a good place, just break the barrel and take off. " "Well, you can start cars real easy. Certain cars, you can just start with scissors."
	Burglary for keys	"We just keep walking until we found a car with the keys in them or rob a house, get the keys from the house and take the car."
	Carjacking	"...cause he wanted a car because it was a nice car. He didn't want to hurt no one, he just wanted the car and he didn't hurt them because he just wanted the car."
	Home invasion for keys	"Yeah. I guess I could say if you want a car bad enough, they're gonna get it, regardless of what it takes."

The motivations for motor vehicle theft coincided with previous research on this topic, including recreational use, short term transportation, commission of another crime, personal use and profit motivated theft. A range of motivations were discussed, and these can be viewed at Figure 8. The motivations that had the greatest prominence in this study included:

- stealing a car for accommodation purposes

- stealing a car for recreation purposes

- stealing a car for boredom alleviation purposes

- stealing a car to gain access to illicit substances

Two features remained constant, regardless of where a young person was on the continuum:

- connection with an offending peer group; and

- developing an identity linked to an offending reputation.

Although not a motivation for stealing cars, another theme that permeated nearly all the interviews, was an immense love of and interest in cars:

Participant A: It's my girlfriend...I love it. I love my car. Like when I get cars I full on take them to the carwash, vacuum them, wash them daily, don't let them run low on fuel, treat them good.

Figure 8. Youth Motor Vehicle Theft Motivation Wheel

HIGH SEVERITY SUBSTANCE USE

High risk of violent motor vehicle theft

High exposure to drug traffickers

Identity linked to offending reputation

Connection with offending peer group

Sense of belonging

Carjacking

Aggravated burglary

Parts

Non-violent residential, on street or at business

Motor Vehicle Theft

11 Exchange for drugs
12 Transport to traffic drugs
10 Transport to escape police
13 Incarceration, extreme hopelessness
1 Accommodation
9 Profit motivated
2 Power
8 Sell and dismantle for parts
3 Recreation
4 Achievement and mastery
5 Alleviate boredom
6 Transport
7 Transport to commit crimes

LOW SEVERITY SUBSTANCE USE

LOW SEVERITY SUBSTANCE USE – PARTICIPANT QUOTES	
1 Accommodation	"When I first stole a car, it was – well, my friend was already homeless and my parents kicked me out, so I decided to stay with him and he kind of just – I followed him for a couple of days and stuff and seeing how he did it by himself and he was telling me he steals cars and stuff to sleep in and to use and all that stuff."
2 Power	"I love stealing cars and getting into police chases. As soon as you see flashing lights behind you it's like, your foot goes down and you're just like trying to outdrive the police you know. It's fun… I love losing traction, I just love drifting."
3 Recreation	"At first it was just like really freedom, but then it kind of turned into something to do for fun, like other people go roller skating, go to the movies or something, and I did cars because it was fun."
4 Achievement and mastery	"So I knew everything about cars, every nook and cranny in a car and the engines – I knew how to fix a car, like if I broke down in a car that I stole, I'd know how to fix it."
5 Alleviate boredom	"You're bored. Your friends are out on crack, stealing cars, doing this, doing that, and you're sitting at home bored as."
6 Transport	"I get angry that I've got to travel so far, and then travel so far back. So if I get a car there's no struggle."
7 Transport to commit crimes	"A car is the means to an end. So, now, if I had a car, I wouldn't just have a car. I'd have a car to do something else with it, rob a store or like steal from houses… that's the tool to every other crime in my book. 90% of other crimes use stolen cars."

8 Sell and dismantle for parts	"I was looking for drugs, money and stuff like that you know, things that I'd be able to sell… found the car keys and you know, saw the [car] symbol on there and let's go… I opened up the shed and it was a [car-type] and I was like, I could strip this down I could sell it for parts you know."
9 Profit motivated	"Selling stolen cars as well… like a lot of people want cars. They use them for other crimes and these stolen cars to go do a robbery, use stolen cars to ram raid."

HIGH SEVERITY SUBSTANCE USE – PARTICIPANT QUOTES	
10 Transport to escape police	"There was a couple of police pursuits, like I said, I would kill myself, kill someone just to get away. I actually didn't think about the later consequence."
11 Exchange for drugs	"Sometimes I would have drugs and people would sell me stolen cars and I would give them drugs for their cars and it's just like a little market where you swap and give things… and then it changed after a while – became me selling drugs for people to sell their car – I was giving people drugs for the car."
12 Transport to traffic drugs	"I would steal cars for a way to get around 'cause ice is an expensive habit, a really expensive habit. And the only way I could obtain that habit was to sell drugs and you can't sell drugs without a car. So, I'd steal cars, drive around selling crack so I can smoke crack."
13 Incarceration, extreme hopelessness	"I just decided that I could not do this anymore so I went and stole someone's car and purposefully [commit violent act]. I had a mental break down."

The Youth Motor Vehicle Theft Motivation Wheel demonstrates the reported relationship between severity of substance addiction and severity of motor vehicle theft. Young people reported that motivations for motor vehicle theft changed according to the level and severity of their substance use, which usually overlapped with the length of time they had been outside of a structured school environment following suspension or expulsion.

Another finding was that a small number of young people reported that violent motor vehicle theft was associated with a personal breakdown and a strong desire to be incarcerated in order to escape a hopeless situation. This too was associated with substance addiction and a feeling of life 'spinning out of control'.

The four strongest themes: (1) stealing a car for accommodation purposes; (2) stealing a car for recreation purposes; (3); stealing a car for boredom alleviation purposes; and (3) stealing a car to gain access to illicit substances are explained in more detail.

7.1 The relationship between motor vehicle theft and homelessness

An unexpected and new finding was the relationship between stealing cars and the experience of homelessness, especially when young people were early in their offending trajectory. Young people considered a stolen car as a place of safety, warmth and shelter. It was also a secure place to store their belongings. Stealing a car prevented them from having to sleep rough, which was considered more dangerous than the act of stealing. Participants H and G describes this phenomenon clearly:

Participant H: Yeah. So, that was weird. I thought like you'd break into some place and sleep in it and stuff like that, but then at the end of the day, if you think about it, if you're homeless and you're in the situation that I was in what more could you want? You have a car. It has heating. It has everything. You're safe. No one's gonna come and just wake you up and pull you out. If you're sleeping – 'cause I've been caught sleeping in schools and stuff like that before…so, in a way, a car to me was like a safe haven, that it was somewhere I could stay and feel safe and it was – I could get away if I needed to. If anything, I would have somewhere to stay. So, that was – 'cause I didn't wanna sleep on the streets and all that stuff. I knew I could get a car and that would be easy, but it was worth the consequences in my eyes at that time. I'd rather get caught in a car than just be sleeping on the street.

And:

Participant G: Well, me and my best mate done it at the same time – best mate from primary school – and we sort of just slept in and out of cars, at friend's houses and that, from age of 11 'til about 15. That's pretty much how it started, I guess…we had nowhere to stay.

7.2 Motor vehicle theft for recreational purposes

Especially in early offending, young people spoke about the sense of fun, thrill and adrenalin rush they got from stealing cars. The 'fun' of stealing cars appeared to demonstrate a dangerous and anti-social alternative to normal adolescent peer-bonding, risk-taking and rites of passage types of behaviour:

Participant H: boys would just steal fast cars and stuff like that, race each other. To them, it's like a sport. You steal – you get a new car, you got adrenaline rush, you get chased by the police – it's just fun. It's all fun and games for them until something happens, until they crash or something.

7.3 Motor vehicle theft for boredom alleviation purposes

A noteworthy finding was that many young people spoke about the impact of non-school-attendance, suspensions, and expulsions as signifying their entry into severe levels of illicit substance use, risk-taking and offending. Leaving school also meant establishing a stronger level of connection with an anti-social peer group. However, many also spoke about the boredom of not having a daily routine and that their early motor vehicle theft offending was instigated by a desire to alleviate boredom.

Interviewer: how much does boredom play a role in it?

Participant K: It's big – when you've got nothing to do, it's late, may as well go out.

7.4 The relationship between participants' illicit substance use and violent motor vehicle theft

All young people connected their illicit substance use (particularly ice) to serious and violent motor vehicle theft. Violent motor vehicle theft typically occurred later in their offending trajectory.

An important finding was that no young person, regardless of offending background revealed an intention to commit violence prior to stealing a car. For the most part, the intention to steal a car was motivated by having quick access to transport for two main reasons: 1) to escape from police or avoid police detection; and/or 2) to use the car to gain access to drugs due to substance dependence. Once in the moment of the offence (where a victim was present), participants described an intense desire to escape quickly with the vehicle to avoid being caught by police. If this escape was blocked, which was reported by participants as the victim resisting in some way, violence was used. Overall, the results revealed that violent motor vehicle theft was very much 'fuelled' by the young person's substance use and associated behaviours related to the use and procurement of drugs.

During the act of violence, participants described experiencing a combination of needing to protect themselves and/or feeling intense panic. When substance affected, some young people also described disconnecting from actual events:

Participant B: There was nothing up here, nothing there was no emotion, no anger, no...when you're using drugs, ice and heroin, you're shoving everything into your body after such a distressing event in your life... there was no thinking, there was no empathy, there was no...'cause the brain...there was nothing you know, just a cloud.

Figure 9 demonstrates the sequence of events that reportedly lead to violent motor vehicle theft.

Figure 9. Violent motor vehicle theft route

INTENTION
To steal a car

FUELLED BY SUBSTANCE USE
"The drugs have their own – it's meth and when you're on ice, you can't sit still – so that's why you have to get a fast car, do fast things."

MOTIVATION: Immediate transport
"It's a lot harder these days to steal cars the way it used to... I guess I could say if you want a car bad enough, they're gonna get it, regardless of what it takes."

(A) **To escape police pursuit or detection**
"Some people do it for drugs. Some people do it 'cause the police are after them."

(B) **To sell or exchange or use in other crimes to access drugs**
"I got addicted straight away and we were stealing cars, selling them for ice and [other things]"

INTENTION
To get away quicky

"Just do what I have to, to get out, really. So, if that involved hurting someone, I'll have to."

QUICK GETAWAY IS BLOCKED BY VICTIM
"He was trying to stop me... there was no way he was gonna stop me."

"We know that if they wake up, you either run or you fight."

"I want to get something and someone gets in my way, you will get hurt... I don't want to get caught during a crime."

"I didn't get scared, he was in front of me so I [commit violent act]."

EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

(A) **Panic**
"I went into the house and the man woke up and he tried to get me and I hit him. And then [violent offence], it wasn't planned at all. It was just a dumb crime."

(B) **Self protection**
"Sometimes people have grabbed me and I've ran, sometimes people have grabbed me and I've bashed 'em."

VIOLENCE
"If they're violent that's just – it's like a snake, if you hype up a snake, they will just bite you, you know what I mean? It's like us. I would just say just give it, just give it. What they demand, just give it, because then you won't get hurt."

7.5 Evidence of more expert drug-trafficking offender inducing younger less experienced young people to offend

Whilst more research is required to better understand this issue, there were emerging, but important signs within the data, which revealed more expert adult offenders were profiting from drug-trafficking crimes by commissioning less experienced and novice young people to engage in motor-vehicle theft and other crimes.

For example, one older participant (aged over 18), with a recorded carjacking offence and who had a combined total of 82 recorded offences, reported that in order to avoid criminal prosecution, they commissioned younger people to engage in crimes on their behalf:

Participant F: And you come to jail, you meet other people exactly the same as you. They give you new ideas on how to make money, and you get out and work for a week and you get paid 300 dollars when I can go make two, three grand in a night selling drugs. It seems unrealistic working…So, there's no real incentive to stop. I don't really wanna be doing two years over one aggravated burglary when I can pay some little young [expletive] to go steal it for me, and then I'll pay – give them drugs for it, and then, I'll get it for nothing pretty much

Although an emerging finding, this behaviour appeared to be initiated by supplying novice offending young people with illicit substances or money in return for a stolen car:

Participant F: I just buy stolen cars now 'cause if you steal a car ..buy them off people I know, associates, people that come buy crack off me, that I sell crack to and that, they come to me like – they pull up in a nice car and they'd be like, " you wanna buy it?" Why not? Cheap, cost me nothing. Why not?

This same young person also spoke about being in the same situation himself, of being 'commissioned' by adults to offend, but also feeling taken care of by older more expert drug trafficking offenders, perhaps due to a need for a 'parent' figure in his life:

Participant F: They (drug traffickers) don't even want money for it (drugs). I don't even have to pay for it anymore. I just get it given to me 'cause they don't want me going out stealing for it. I'll make money by selling it instead of robbing stuff, stealing stuff, and keeps me out of jail longer, I guess. Most of them don't like the fact that I go to jail all the time.

Another young person (aged less than 18 years), with a recorded carjacking offence and a total of 146 recorded offences, shared similar sentiments, in relation to the powerful influence that being with older offenders has on his self-esteem and offending choices:

Participant I: When I do crime, I think afterwards should I take the car back? But like I don't 'cause I'm always peer pressured.

Interviewer: Can you talk a bit more about that?

Participant I: When you're with older - I like listening to older people, 'cause I think it's cool.

8. Summary of findings

Little evidence of protective factors and strong confirmation of criminogenic risk factors were evident in young people's descriptions of childhood experiences growing up.

Descriptions of participants' families revealed complex intergenerational disadvantage, involvement in the justice system and high levels of family violence and trauma. Many participants reported a previous diagnosis of ADHD and problems regulating anger, behavioural problems, learning difficulties, and frequently getting into trouble at school.

Being placed in residential care and frequent suspensions and/or expulsion in early adolescence often had the negative effect of immersing young people into an offending peer group, contributing to a feeling of boredom and being introduced to illicit substances.

A new insight was the link between early-trajectory stealing cars and homelessness. Along with stealing a car for recreation and boredom alleviation purposes, stealing a car for accommodation purposes also appeared to

be an early motivator. An interesting statement by participant H, shows how he was balancing the needs of community safety and the role of police in maintaining public safety with his own safety needs, which in his experience, was having a car to sleep in:

Participant H: I thought that they're (police) just there to get you. But at the end of the day, that's why we have them. That's their job to keep the community safe and what I was doing wasn't keeping the community safe, even though it might have been keeping me safe, but the community wasn't safe

Related to the need to provide young people with safe and secure accommodation, a small number of participants also viewed youth detention as a 'safe haven', or at least safer than their lives outside in the community. Evidence of at least two young people in the sample engaging in violent motor vehicle theft to be incarcerated in youth custodial centre was an unexpected finding and requires further exploration.

The findings also revealed a strong relationship between violence, motor vehicle theft and substance dependence.

Rather than an intention to engage in violence being a motivating factor, access to a car to obtain illicit substances was often the primary goal. More dangerous and forceful methods were being employed to quickly steal cars, like carjacking or aggravated burglary, due to improved anti-theft technology. Violence was reported as being used in reaction to feeling blocked in achieving their primary aims to steal a car quickly, to get away as fast as possible, avoid getting caught and to have access to illicit substances for their own use. This often occurred while affected by a high amount of substance use.

9. Implications

Extreme methods to steal cars, like carjacking, aggravated burglary, and other high risk-taking driving behaviours are dangerous. These offences have resulted in serious lifelong physical and psychological injuries to innocent victims and even deaths. . While not shared in this report, young people's descriptions of the injuries inflicted upon victims of their own violent motor vehicle theft and/or dangerous driving, were severe.

On the other hand, sensationalist reporting of the 'youth crime wave' has been found to contribute to an unhelpful and destructive narrative about young people from marginalised backgrounds as being particularly violent and unpredictable. This increases community fear and creates mistrust in our institutions who are tasked with the job to protect the public. It also serves to further marginalise young people who may feel they are not fully accepted by mainstream society[xvii].

The research findings from this study reinforce the need for multi-agency targeted interventions that address the precursors to offending before they give rise to severe and dangerous offending behaviours.

It was evident that young people in the sample experienced a range of multi-domain issues from an early age (i.e., education, mental health, child protection, justice). Critical points where systemic invention could occur were revealed within the young people's life stories. Young people also described turning points which played a pivotal role in the escalation of their offending and substance use. These points were specifically centred within the child protection and education systems. There is an urgent need for clever, consistent and coordinated service provision for these children from an early age and throughout the person's life cycle, i.e., with their parents, at primary school, at high school, once identified by police for small offences, once identified as disengaged from education, and once becoming parents themselves.

9.1 Occupying young people in education, training and employment

Schools require specialised support to effectively teach children from marginalised backgrounds, to keep such students engaged in education and/or training and to stop the flow of youth entering an anti-social network.

Additionally, behavioural issues need to be recognised as an indicator of substantial social/familial/mental health issues rather than a signifier of a young person's lack of interest in school. The findings supported previous research that showed multiple suspensions and expulsions only result in further marginalising vulnerable youth by putting them at an increased risk of offending[xviii.]

In cases where young people cannot or do not want to remain at school, viable alternative pathways are needed that occupy and engage young people full-time, provide them with positive peer relationships and role models, and provide them with the skills required for getting a job.

All young people reported a strong emotional attachment to cars and advanced knowledge about the mechanics of cars. This strength should be utilised when designing programs that will engage them to persevere with school, training and/or employment and to prevent what is now known as the 'school to prison pipeline'.

9.2 Targeted support for children and young people with emerging substance use issues

A multi-systemic and somewhat radical rethinking of methods employed to deal with children and young people with emerging substance use issues is essential. The need to implement programs for young people to seek support in the spaces that they occupy is also apparent from the findings of this study. Whilst not without its challenges, a multi-sector, trauma-informed, harm-minimisation and health/mental health approach should be the framework that governs youth policing, youth services and education. All sectors that support such young people should work together with the shared vision of keeping children and young people with emerging substance use issues safe and at school and away from offending peer groups. It is important that they are connected with services and provided with access to high quality mental health support.

9.3 Rethinking the design of youth residential care and developing strong positive peer connections

Stealing cars with peers was commonly reported by participants. A strong theme related to this was the impact of being placed in residential care, only to be surrounded by other young people who were further along the offending trajectory.

Developing connections with delinquent peers is a well-known and powerful criminogenic risk factor. The impact of this immersion in an offending peer group cannot be underestimated and should be avoided in efforts to prevent young people from engaging in motor vehicle theft. A rethink of the design of youth residential care and creating genuine opportunities for the development of positive peer relationships should be included in efforts designed to prevent youth motor vehicle offending.
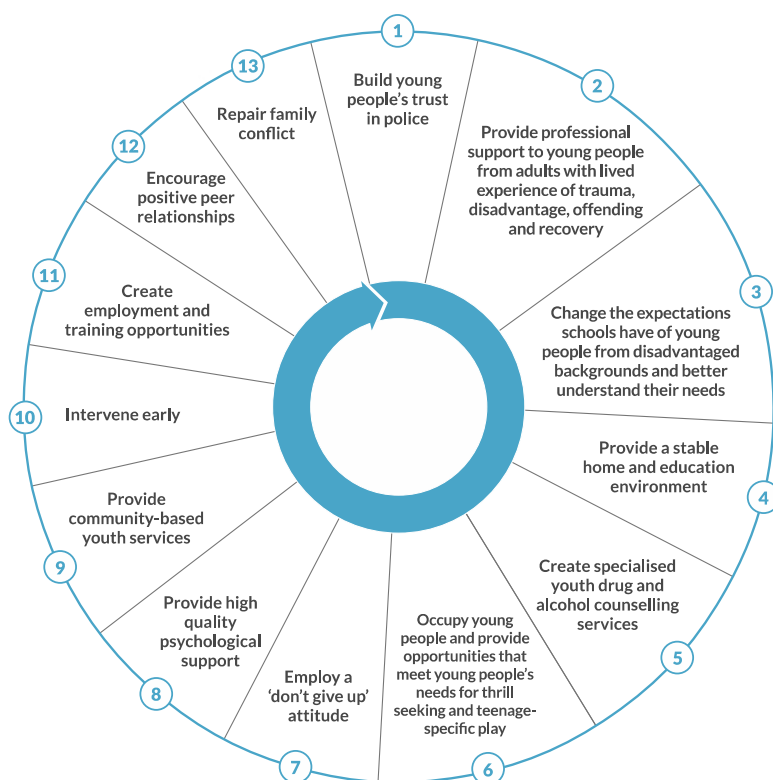
9.4 Trauma-informed youth custodial settings, including training in adolescent development, mental health and emotional regulation and anger de-escalation skills

Support programs with qualified staff who understand young people's backgrounds and needs are vital for young people with a history of violent motor vehicle theft and who are serving a custodial sentence in the youth justice system. Training in adolescent development and understanding the impact that trauma and substance use have on a young person's decision-making and wellbeing are essential. The research reveals that these young people have been exposed to extreme levels of violence from birth. The ability to coach young people to develop calm and effective anger de-escalation and emotional regulation techniques are important skills for the youth justice worker to carry out in their daily roles. Provision of strength-based educational programs in custodial settings that seek to bridge the gaps in learning that young people have experienced throughout their lives is also important for their futures. The development of strong links with post-release services, especially employment and training, accommodation, mental health and drug and alcohol support is necessary to reduce current rates of recidivism.

10. Participants' intervention ideas

Finally, young people participating in the study were asked: "If you were able to design a system for other young people who had a similar background to yourself, what would you do to ensure young people don't steal cars and offend?" Their insightful answers (presented at Figure 10) provide useful ideas for government, industry and community leaders deeply invested in the creation of programs and interventions that: (1) seek to ensure vulnerable young people's futures are positive; and (2) prevent young people from entering the criminal justice system.

Figure 10. Participants' ideas for interventions that may prevent young people engaging in crime

1 Build young people's trust in police

2 Provide professional support to young people from adults with lived experience of trauma, disadvantage, offending and recovery

3 Change the expectations schools have of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and better understand their needs

4 Provide a stable home and education environment

5 Create specialised youth drug and alcohol counselling services

6 Occupy young people and provide opportunities that meet young people's needs for thrill seeking and teenage-specific play

7 Employ a 'don't give up' attitude

8 Provide high quality psychological support

9 Provide community-based youth services

10 Intervene early

11 Create employment and training opportunities

12 Encourage positive peer relationships

13 Repair family conflict

PARTICIPANTS' IDEAS FOR INTERVENTIONS THAT MAY PREVENT YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGING IN CRIME

1 Build young people's trust in police

"I never understood that. I thought that they're (police) just there to get you. But at the end of the day, that's why we have them. That's their job to keep the community safe and what I was doing anyways wasn't keeping the community safe, even though it might have been keeping me safe, but the community wasn't safe."

2 Provide professional support to young people from adults with lived experience of trauma, disadvantage, offending and recovery

"Keep an eye on kids that are in my situation you know, that are going down that path, and having experienced staff, noticing what happened to lead them to crime and drugs, to pick that out to other young people you know to tell them this is what happened to me when I did this. These are the little steps that you take to get to jail and this is the way I did it and this is how I want to prevent it from happening to other young people. Because having staff that's experienced in a dark road of growing up it's key to motivating and teaching other young people. Cause you can relate and when you can relate to another human being it's an automatic connection. If someone's saying that they're experienced and they're telling me things… for me, I can sense that they're lying straight away do you know what I mean? As long as they know, when you're truthful the connection's there already. Whether you want the connection or not it's there, cause you're truthful with one another, so as long there's experienced staff then they should be alright."

3 Change the expectations schools have of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and better understand their needs

"It's like that Albert Einstein saying where it's like you can't expect a goldfish to climb a tree – like a goldfish and monkey to climb a tree and grade them like the same. It's not like that… In schools, just society. Everyone's expected to be one kind of certain person. Basically, I'm saying that there needs to be a program where – which is run by people who understand that everyone has different needs, and they need to be treated differently. They need a different kind of help. Does that make sense?"

4 Provide a stable home and education environment

"If a kid has stable accommodation, you know, with like discipline, if you have them two – bang!... and an education… like bang! If you've got them three… bang! You're doing good for yourself. You can ask most of the boys in here."

5 Create specialised youth drug and alcohol counselling services

"It all comes to the drugs and that… get them to drug and alcohol counselling and that."

6 Occupy young people and provide opportunities that meet young people's needs for thrill seeking and teenage-specific play

"I like go karts… the adrenaline. It all adds up to adrenaline, I guess."

7 Employ a 'don't give up' attitude

"Don't – if there's a kid that's lashing out don't get rid of him, help him. That's what starts this, it's when they lash out and they start being angry, hitting people."

8 Provide high quality psychological support

"You need someone – when you're young, you need someone you can trust – or otherwise you end up [expletive] up. You need someone that helps you through whatever you're going through."

9 Provide community-based youth services

"Probably have a community hub like a place where people can go, to just have a bit of freedom and relief from their problems and have support there of being able to talk to other people."

10 Intervene early

"I don't know, as soon you start seeing them struggling at school or everyday life you know, you see random shit, you gotta act on it straight away. That's the problem with me like you know, people are only acting on why I am offending now. No one else has tried to do anything for me."

11 Create employment and training opportunities

"Like get them a job and – I don't know. I've never had a job. They just make you do community work and they set you up to fail, and they want you to come back to jail… I just wanna get out and work. It's not worth it. I hate being in a cell."

12 Encourage positive peer relationships

"I don't know. Just having real mates, I guess. Mates that aren't gonna drag you down… Go out and do active stuff, not steal cars and that. Like fishing, motorbike riding, or something."

13 Repair family conflict

"The last time I got out, my workers and stuff spoke to my parents and basically told them what I went through and my parents didn't know that, so they kind of understood and now they support me and they help me."

Appendix A:

Count of Alleged Offender Incidents Where Principal Offence Within an Incident is Driving Causing Death, Dangerous Driving, Motor Vehicle Theft and Steal from a Motor Vehicle: April 2016 to March 2019

Offence Group	Age Group	Apr 2016 - Mar 2017	Apr 2017 - Mar 2018	Apr 2018 - Mar 2019
Driving causing death	10-17	≤ 3	≤ 3	0
	18-25	12	14	26
	26+	42	53	58
	Total[1]	**57**	**72**	**89**
Dangerous driving	10-17	55	34	38
	18-25	186	210	251
	26+	226	313	339
	Total[1]	**468**	**559**	**630**
Residential aggravated burglary	10-17	703	474	302
	18-25	522	454	550
	26+	875	884	903
	Total[1]	**2,113**	**1,821**	**1,764**
Motor vehicle theft	10-17	1,629	1,055	913
	18-25	2,544	1,917	1,850
	26+	3,244	2,965	3,235
	Total[1]	**7,444**	**5,959**	**6,018**
Steal from a motor vehicle	10-17	1,146	667	640
	18-25	1,957	1,307	1,394
	26+	2,839	2,477	2,616
	Total[1]	**5,947**	**4,463**	**4,662**

1 Includes alleged offender incidents with an unknown age as recorded by Victoria Police.

Appendix B:

Counts of Alleged Offenders Associated with Carjacking, Home Invasion, and Residential Aggravated Burglary Where a Property Item Key (Unspecified) was Recorded as Stolen: April 2016 to March 2019

Offence Group	Age Group	Apr 2016 - Mar 2017	Apr 2017 - Mar 2018	Apr 2018 - Mar 2019
Carjacking,[3]	10-17	18	66	62
	18-25	12	58	72
	26+	6	68	96
	Total[1]	**36**	**192**	**231**
Home invasion [4,5,6]	10-17	33	59	31
	18-25	13	30	82
	26+	16	23	37
	Total[1]	**62**	**112**	**150**
Residential aggravated burglary where a property item 'key' (unspecified) was recorded as stolen[7]	10-17	119	112	59
	18-25	71	68	55
	26+	75	71	53
	Total[1]	**269**	**252**	**167**

1 Includes alleged offender incidents with an unknown age as recorded by Victoria Police.

2 Carjacking offence codes came into effect in December 2016.

3 Carjacking offences includes offence codes: 211F; 211G; 211H; 211K; 211L; 211M; and 212G.

4 The following offence codes came into effect December 2016 - 310AC, 310AM, 310AN, 310AO, 310AV, 310AW, 310X, 310Y and 310Z.

5 Home invasion offences includes offence codes: 310AC; 310AM; 310AN; 310AO; 310AV; 310AW; 310X; 310Y; 310Z.

6 Home invasion was also included in the data analysis, as in recent years there has been a demonstrated link between both the use of stolen cars in home invasions, and home invasions resulting in the stealing of a car.

7 Aggravated burglary where a property item key was recorded as stolen statistics need to be treated with caution, as the key-type is not recorded, that is, the key may or may not be a key for a motor vehicle.

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