



National Audit Office

# Theft from Motor Vehicles – Identifying Potential Offenders

A good practice guide



Produced in partnership with



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# About this guide

This guide, which was commissioned by the National Audit Office following its report on *Reducing Vehicle Crime*<sup>1</sup>, provides an analysis of the characteristics of offenders who engage in thefts from motor vehicles (TFMV). It suggests a number of strategies for identifying potential offenders and helping to prevent them becoming offenders. The strategies focus on generic social crime prevention measures for non-offenders who might be at risk in future, through to specific, targeted interventions for known offenders.

The guide is primarily designed for Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) to help them minimise the risk of people becoming offenders, and to use when considering measures that can be taken to address this kind of offending, which accounts for a significant proportion of total crime in most areas.

# Introduction



1. This guide, which was prepared by an independent social research company, Evidence Led Solutions, examines ways of addressing thefts from vehicles by focusing on the offender. This should be viewed in the wider context of problem solving in which the solution to this particular problem may take into account the **targets** of theft (the vehicles and their contents), the **locations** in which vehicles are parked, and the potential **victims** of theft, as well as the **offender**. The location / victim / offender approach is often known as the Problem Analysis Triangle.<sup>2</sup>

2. This paper focuses on the offender because it is the least understood side of the problem analysis triangle for tackling thefts from motor vehicles.

3. The key to minimising the risk of people becoming offenders is to understand the nature of the offenders and to develop interventions that help to influence the likelihood of those people becoming involved in this type of crime. The guide is divided into seven main sections:

- The nature and extent of thefts from motor vehicles
- The characteristics of theft from motor vehicle offenders
- Identifying ways to target offenders
- Preventing individuals from starting TFMV
- Preventing offenders from continuing to commit TFMV
- Combining interventions
- Possible interventions

## The nature and extent of thefts from motor vehicles

4. According to the British Crime Survey (BCS<sup>3</sup>), there were 1.1 million thefts from motor vehicles based on interviews in the year to March 2006, representing 10 per cent of all BCS crime. It is estimated that only 45 per cent of these were reported to the police. In recent years, there has been a steady decline in thefts from motor vehicles, with a 49 per cent reduction since 1997.

5. The 2005/06 BCS showed that those living in private rented accommodation, living in a flat or terraced house, in an area of high perceived physical disorder, those without children and where someone aged 16-34 headed the household were at the highest risk of being a victim of theft from a motor vehicle.

6. Theft from motor vehicles in England and Wales were estimated to have cost over £943 million in 2005/06<sup>4</sup>.



## The characteristics of theft from vehicle offenders

7. There are relatively few studies that specifically examine the characteristics of those who engage in thefts from motor vehicles (TFMV). From that which is available <sup>5,6,7</sup> the following characteristics can be gleaned:

- Offenders tend to be male.
- The average age of onset of TFMV is 12-14 years.
- The peak age of thefts from outside a vehicle is 12-15 years and 14-19 years for thefts from inside a vehicle.<sup>5</sup>
- 2 per cent of males aged 10 to 25 have committed TFMV from outside a vehicle (i.e. have stolen exterior fittings) in the previous year, compared to 1 per cent of females.<sup>5</sup>
- Less than 1 per cent of both males and females aged 10 to 25 committed TFMV from inside a vehicle (i.e. have stolen items from inside the vehicle) in the previous year.<sup>5</sup>
- Almost two thirds of thefts of and from motor vehicle offences are committed with co-offenders. These are generally friends from the same age and ethnic group.
- Three quarters of those convicted of either a theft of or theft from offence will also have previously received a conviction for another mainstream type of offence.<sup>6</sup>
- Two thirds of offenders say they commit such offences because they are bored, for the buzz, or to show off to friends.

8. TFMV offenders tend to be generalists rather than specialists, partially due to TFMV being relatively easy to commit. As a result, there is often a relatively large pool of offenders who engage in TFMV in any area. The early onset of offending (which is a predictor of longer criminal careers) and the fact that these types of offenders tend to be generalists rather than specialists, would suggest that one can apply the general predictive factors relevant to serious / prolific offending.<sup>7</sup> Predictive factors which should help to identify the kind of individuals with whom agencies should be working are:

- Being male
- Associating with an offending peer group
- Lack of parental supervision
- High truancy rates / school exclusion

- Poor school performance
- Few or no educational qualifications
- Drug use escalating with age
- Involvement in anti-social behaviour at an early age
- Low family socio-economic status
- Signs of aggression in early teen years.

9. These findings suggest that the most cost-effective approach to minimising the amount of TFMV is to target preventative measures at young people. However, it is important to also target offenders that are known to be engaging in TFMV offences. This suggests that a range of different approaches is required to target offenders depending on the scale of the offending.

## Identifying ways to target offenders

10. A starting point for considering ways to target offenders engaging in TFMV is to differentiate between those that commit low level TFMV and those that have yet to start to commit such offences, from those that are already heavily involved in such offending, or whom are at risk of escalating their levels of such offending.

11. Those that are offending at a low level, or who have yet to commence an offending career will be more numerous than those that are experienced offenders. Indeed, the experienced offenders are likely to represent a relatively small group, but are also likely to account for a disproportionately high number of TFMV offences. The nature of the intervention needs to vary according to the level of offender one is dealing with. For low level offenders / those at risk of offending in future,

interventions should be aimed at preventing offending in general, rather than focusing specifically on TFMV. This is because of the difficulty in identifying individuals who are likely to go on to a career in TFMV and because offenders will initially commit offences of a general nature, rather than specialising on a particular kind of offence.

12. For more experienced and prolific offenders, it is possible to be more specific in the types of interventions, targeting known TFMV offenders with a view to finding ways to make them desist from offending.





## Preventing individuals from starting TFMV

13. For individuals that have yet to commence an offending career, but who are at risk of offending, CDRPs should focus on generic social crime prevention activities that aim to divert individuals from becoming involved in criminality or to provide the tools / support to enable them to take alternative, legitimate life paths. The table on page 16 provides examples of relevant interventions.

14. Programmes that address multiple risk factors in multiple domains (i.e. school / community environment) tend to be the most effective approach.<sup>8</sup> However, the effectiveness of these interventions tends to be limited as they incorporate many recipients who are not at risk of offending and the 'dosage' of intervention tends to be weak.

15. Individual risk factors are not necessarily strong predictors of criminality. Agencies will be more effective if they work together to identify those people with multiple risk factors needing closer supervision. To target low-level TFMV offenders, CDRPs should be encouraging local agencies to coordinate actions to prevent future criminality:

- Schools should identify individuals showing signs of poor performance, truancy and exclusion, providing additional support to those with poor attainment. They will also work to reduce truancy and reintegrate those excluded.

- Police, schools and health authorities should identify individuals who show signs of experimenting in drugs, seeking to educate them about the risks of drug use and providing treatment services where necessary.
  - Youth workers and police should identify individuals that are associating with known offenders. They should provide education regarding the consequences of offending behaviour.
  - Police, health authorities and social services should identify families with poor parental supervision and provide support / education to parents.
  - Police and local authorities should identify individuals engaging in anti social behaviour and low-level deviant behaviour. They should seek to educate and deter them from further, more serious, offending behaviour.
16. CDRPs need to promote agencies that can help young people, and should make those agencies aware of referral routes. Examples of interventions to target low level offenders are presented in the table on page 16.

## Preventing offenders from continuing to commit TFMV

17. When dealing with offenders that are known to be active in committing TFMV, it is possible to be more specific in who is targeted, based on current and previous offending.

18. Where this group is to be targeted with enforcement activity, CDRPs should seek to implement measures that increase both the actual and the perceived risk of detection. The actual risk of detection can be increased, for example, through the use of decoy vehicles, which can be used to catch the offender in the act of stealing from a vehicle. Their success, however, depends on the availability of appropriate vehicles and resources to provide the necessary surveillance. Similar tactics can be used to tackle the rising trend in thefts of Satellite Navigation systems by fitting decoy systems with tracking devices.

### Good practice examples Use of decoys

**Cleveland police** successfully used a decoy Transit van at a time when there was a high level of thefts from such vehicles. Use of the vehicle and a supporting media campaign reduced crime for some time

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/prgpdfs/prs137.pdf>

**Merseyside police** is one of a number of forces which have used vehicles fitted with broadband CCTV to record attempted thefts of SatNav systems. The systems were marked with “Smartwater dye” enabling their whereabouts to be tracked.

<http://www.merseyside.police.uk/html/wirral/initiatives/general/12-12-pantha.htm>

19. Research has shown that increasing the media coverage of enforcement activity can increase the perceived risk of detection among vehicle crime offenders. Such coverage can be more effective than media coverage that extols the importance of crime prevention activity.<sup>9</sup>

20. CDRPs should also explore other forms of promotion that increase the perceived risk of detection. These include:

- direct mailings to TFMV offenders warning them of police enforcement activity focused on them
- direct contact with offenders to warn them of the risks they face in continuing to offend.

21. Enforcement activity should not be seen as the only method for tackling this group of offenders, as custodial sentences for this type of crime are likely to be short. This means that the effect of incarceration on levels of TFMV is likely to be short-lived. CDRPs should remind police that detection provides the opportunity to ensure that offenders get access to the Drugs Intervention Programme for those with drug problems and access to probation offender behaviour programmes.

## Combining interventions

22. Attempts to tackle TFMV often involve a combination of interventions. Broadly interventions have centred on prevention and detection. Prevention aims to either increase the perceived risk of detection, thereby changing the cost-benefit assessment associated with committing crime, or to tackle risk factors that reduce their propensity / motivation to offend. Detection aims to increase the actual risks of detection through enforcement action, thereby increasing the potential for criminal justice sanctions. Approaches that combine both methods can help to address offending from multiple perspectives. The table on page 16 provides examples of possible interventions.

### Good practice examples Combining detection and prevention

**South Yorkshire Police** has tackled TFMV as part of a general crime prevention and targeting operation. By actively targeting offenders and handlers of stolen goods, they sought to deter offenders by cutting off the routes to sell goods and to increase detections by seizing stolen goods. 'Trap cars' were also used. When these cars were broken into, remote monitoring equipment was activated which police officers watched and gathered evidence.

<http://www.southyorks.police.uk/impact/news.php?id=145>

The **Metropolitan Police** delivered widespread high profile media campaigns to raise community awareness of TFMV. Further, they spent time checking for insecure vehicles and delivered targeted advice to the owners. This was tied into active targeting of known offenders and arrests of outstanding TFMV suspects.

[http://cms.met.police.uk/met/boroughs/harrow/04how\\_are\\_we\\_doing/news/news\\_items\\_for\\_2006/tackling\\_vehicle\\_crime\\_in\\_harrow](http://cms.met.police.uk/met/boroughs/harrow/04how_are_we_doing/news/news_items_for_2006/tackling_vehicle_crime_in_harrow)

**Warwickshire Constabulary** targeted known offenders and spent time raising public awareness of the risks of TFMV. They also encouraged the public to report suspiciously low priced goods for sale, including Sat-Navs and CD players.

<http://onlinenews.warwickshire.police.uk/releases/20061010OperationRomsey>

**Hampshire Constabulary** targeted known offenders, worked to design out crime in the planning process, introduced neighbourhood wardens to hotspot areas and undertook youth crime prevention work.

[http://www.hampshire.police.uk/NR/rdonlyres/FDFC5C85-225F-466C-8001-715FCA4AC416/0/op\\_cobra.pdf](http://www.hampshire.police.uk/NR/rdonlyres/FDFC5C85-225F-466C-8001-715FCA4AC416/0/op_cobra.pdf)

## Possible interventions

The table below outlines possible interventions that might be used to tackle different types of offender.

Intervention	Mechanism of change	Aimed at	Agencies involved
Youth clubs	Diversion - alternative legitimate activity	Those at risk of offending in future	Youth Services, Schools, Voluntary Sector
Youth outreach	Engaging young people to access services	Those at risk of offending and low level offenders	Youth Services
After school clubs	Diversion - alternative legitimate activity	Those at risk of offending in future	Schools, Voluntary Sector
Holiday play scheme	Diversion - alternative legitimate activity	Those at risk of offending in future	Youth Services, Voluntary Sector
Youth Inclusion and Support Panels	Supports families and young people at risk	Low level offenders	Police, Social Services, Youth Offending Teams
Connexions personal advisers	One-to-one support for vulnerable young people	Low level offenders	Connexions



Intervention	Mechanism of change	Aimed at	Agencies involved
Mentoring schemes for young people	Providing support and encouragement for young people	Low level offenders	Youth Services, Schools, Voluntary Sector
Restorative Justice	Victim-offender mediation to challenge offending	Low level offenders	Police, Youth Offending Teams
Decoy vehicles	Detect offenders by catching them in act	Experienced offenders	Police, Media, Drugs Interventions Programme, Probation
Trackable 'hot products'	Items left on display with satellite tracking to locate thief	Experienced offenders	Police, Media, Drugs Interventions Programme, Probation
Police patrols	Deterrent effect of offender immediately committing crime	Low level offenders and experienced offenders	Police, Neighbourhood Wardens

## Endnotes

- 1 Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 183, Session 2004-05, January 2005.
- 2 See: <http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/learningzone/rat.htm>
- 3 The British Crime Survey is a sample survey of approx. 47,000 households conducted annually. This provides a self-reported measure of victimisation, which is used to estimate the total level of crime nationally – both that reported to the police and that which is unreported.
- 4 1.1 million offences multiplied by £858 – this being the average cost of a theft from motor vehicle presented in Dubourg, R. and Hamed, J (2005) Estimates of the economic and social costs of crime in England and Wales: Costs of crime against individuals and households, 2003/04 Online report 30/05. London: Home Office.
- 5 Wilson D, Sharp C and Patterson A, (2006), Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2005 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey Home Office Statistical Bulletin 17/06.
- 6 Rose G, (2000) The Criminal Histories of Serious Traffic Offenders Home Office Research Study 206.
- 7 These are based on findings reported in three studies:
  - a) Lipsey M and Derzon J (1998) 'Predictors of Violent or Serious Delinquency in Adolescence and Early Adulthood' in Loeber and Farrington (eds) Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders.
  - b) Flood Page C, Campbell S, Harrington V and Miller J (2000) Youth Crime: Findings from the 1998/1999 Youth Lifestyles Survey Home Office Research Study 209 London: Home Office.
  - c) Budd T, Sharp C and Mayhew P, (2005), Offending in England and Wales: First results from the 2003 Crime and Justice Survey (2005): Home Office Research Study 275 London: Home Office.
- 8 Catalano R, Arthur M, Hawkins J, Berglund L and Olson J, (1998), 'Comprehensive Community- and School-Based Interventions to Prevent Antisocial Behaviour' in Loeber and Farrington (eds) Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders.
- 9 See Barthe, E. (2004) 'Publicity and Car Crime Prevention' in M. Maxwell and R.V. Clarke (ed) Understanding and prevention car theft. Crime Prevention Studies, Vol 17. Cullompton, Willan Publishing.

## Acknowledgements

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## Feedback

Please let us know whether or not you have found this guide helpful. You can let us have your thoughts via our website – [www.nao.org.uk/vehiclecrimeoffenders](http://www.nao.org.uk/vehiclecrimeoffenders)

If you have any queries about this leaflet, or wish to discuss our work further please contact:

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