

# **THE CULTURE OF JOYRIDING IN QUEENSLAND: THE OFFENDERS PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There has been increased public concern about the increase in car theft in Australia. A high proportion of cars is stolen by young people in order to joyride (stealing cars for short-term transport or for non-utilitarian purposes). This paper is based on the outcomes of a two-year qualitative research study that examined the motivations of youth as to why they became involved in the culture of joyriding behaviour. The outcomes of this project highlight a number of diverse factors across race, class and gender lines. The paper concludes with a series of intervention strategies for reducing joyriding behaviour based on an integrated education programme and the introduction of motor projects.

## **INTRODUCTION**

On an average one car is stolen every four minutes in Australia costing insurance companies an estimated \$ 1 billion annually. In Queensland alone 18 577 cars were stolen in 1998-1999 (QPS Statistical Review, 1998/99). In addition, the outcomes of car theft sometimes ends in the injury or death of the perpetrators or innocent bystanders. One area of public concern is when young people steal cars for the express purpose of joyriding. In gaining an understanding of the youth's participation in "joyriding" it is important to consider the characteristics of this offence and where it fits under the general rubric of the crime of car theft. In a paper addressing the problem of car theft in New South Wales Mukherjee (1987) constructed three categories in terms of the orientations of car thieves. They were; recreational, transport and money making. The main characteristics of recreational users included non-utilitarian (fun), status seeking and challenge meeting. For the purposes of transport, perpetrators used stolen cars for short-term temporary travel, extended personal use and use for commission of another crime (such as robbery). At the other end of the continuum the major motivation was for money making. This category consisted of amateur car strippers, professional sale of parts, professional re-sale of vehicles ("reborns") and for use in fraudulent insurance claims (organised thefts). Hence when considering the categorisation of car theft, joyriding can be seen as a recreational activity where youth steal cars for short term transportation purposes.

## **THE RESEARCH STUDY**

To address the dearth of research in this form of car crime, a two year qualitative study focused on the factors as to what motivates young people to steal cars for the express purpose of joyriding in Queensland. The project consisted of gaining the perceptions of young offenders in detention who had a history of car theft offences. Interviews were conducted in six detention facilities in Queensland. A total of 30 youth aged between 13- 22 years of age participated in semi-structured interviews of approximately 30-45 minutes duration. The responses of the cohort were used to develop intervention strategies to discourage young people's participation in joyriding behaviour.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF OFFENDERS WHO JOYRIDE**

This research locates joyriding not as an isolated practice, but contingent on the biographies of young people in terms of factors such as race, gender, and class. In addition other indicators such as the types of interactions youth have with their peers, their level of educational attainment, their access to public spaces as well as the impact of media images need to be considered if we are to achieve any deeper level of what is predominantly a youth related crime.

## **Background Factors**

When considering these motivations it is important to give primary consideration to the social and economic background of this cohort. Accordingly, joyriding cannot be viewed as an isolated activity in its own right but needs to be understood as being *relational* and contingent to other areas of these young people's lives. It is clear that in almost all cases these young people came from low socio-economic

backgrounds with their parents or older siblings having either no employment or employment in low skilled occupations. The lack of employment opportunities was magnified in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where intergenerational unemployment was more the rule than the exception. The high incidence of unemployment within families also impacted on the future aspirations of the young people. Without role models the young people in this study did not aspire to the traditional pathways of success by obtaining educational qualifications in order to obtain full-time employment. Accordingly, the majority of youth disengaged from education towards the end of primary school with fewer going on to complete year ten at secondary level.

An additional background factor for understanding youth's involvement in joyriding behaviour is based on their geographic situation with relation to access to public transport and public space. Young people who live in rural locations are more likely to encounter a lack of adequate public transport facilities and at the same time may not have the economic means to purchase their own vehicle. Rural and urban youth are therefore more likely to use the street for specific purposes. Male working class and Indigenous youth who have limited access to employment opportunities are more likely to congregate in public places because they have limited financial resources and use the street in order to meet friends or pass the time. However there is a public perception that large groups of young people in public places pose a threat to the safety of other citizens. As a result there have been attempts by authorities to "cleanse" public spaces such as malls and other commercial sites of young people (White, 1990). The gradual exclusion of youth from these sites coupled with inadequate public transport facilities has resulted in the further marginalisation and disempowerment of many young people.

This research posits that marginalised young people steal cars as a response to the process of exclusion from public spaces. The responses of young people who have been charged with joyriding offences clearly indicate that stealing cars offers them the opportunity to move from one space to another. Accordingly cars provide them with opportunities to interact with friends without the threat of surveillance and allows them a high degree of individual autonomy and freedom that is often denied to them in other situations (Reser, 1980).

### **The Culture of Joyriding**

For young joyriders the peer group is central in providing the catalyst for their introduction and continuation to car theft and joyriding behaviour. By comparison a small minority of youth indicated that they stole cars on their own without the assistance of others. The peer group therefore provides a structure for the advancement in status for younger joyriders to learn the skills of car theft and to graduate to the status of leader of a joyriding crew. It also serves as a means of young working class youth finding an identity in one area as a result of their exclusion from other areas such as school and the job market.

An individual's status within the group is enhanced by his/hers ability to drive at high speeds, perform various driving feats which may be bound up with other feats of machismo in proving one is "a man". The possession of a stolen car for some youth appears to serve as a marker for the transition to manhood and may replace traditional forms of transitory rites as experienced in Aboriginal culture (Atkinson, 1993; Dawes, 1998). It appears that getting behind the wheel of a car allows many young men to feel grander, more powerful and produces feelings of invincibility among young joyriders. Driving at high speeds in a stolen car may be interpreted as a form of working class resistance to forms of regulation and social control for at least a short period of time.

Identity formation through car theft culture is supported and celebrated through various forms of the mass media. Car advertising can be interpreted as "unabashedly celebrating danger, irresponsibility and excitement" (Campbell, 1993:263). Current television advertisements for the new model Holden Commodore show the car flying through the wide-open spaces of outback Australia over red dirt tracks and across rivers. This is Marlboro country which gives an image of freedom away from the constraints of city life that can be accessed by the power surge of a v-6 engine. Car culture is central in the image of African-American gangsta rappers such as Tupac Shakur and Ezy-E. This image

was borrowed by some of the Indigenous joyriding crews is portrayed joyriding culture is These feelings are fuelled by the mass media and advertising that play into the fantasies of young joyriders who use cars as a means of escape from the boredom and predicability of their everyday lives.

### **Female Joyriders**

By comparison joyriding serves quite different outcomes for young females. While the majority of young females had an affinity with car culture, they committed car crimes to escape the constraints of their gendered prescribed roles that consisted of domestic work within the home (Ogilvie, 1996). The formation of all female car crews could be read as a form of resistance to the male dominated practice of car theft within the joyriding culture. Similarly, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth joyriding can be interpreted as a form of resistance and empowerment to their economic and social oppression since colonisation. These youth are aware that they are ever unlikely to be able to purchase an automobile and the remedy to this situation is to steal a car as a temporary means of escape from their social and economic dislocation.

### **Effects of Deterrence on Joyriding Behaviour**

Despite harsher penalties for car theft, recidivism among joyriders remains unacceptably high. Many of the youth stated that being detained had little effect on their desire to steal cars. The majority of offenders stated that they rarely thought about the owners of the cars and there is evidence to suggest that car theft is often an unpremeditated activity. However most of the research subjects stated that the best locations to steal cars were in parking lots, outside train stations or in some cases at the home of unwary victims. At the same time there was a preference for Australian made vehicles such as early model Commodores and Ford Falcons being the preferred targets for car thieves.

Few of the respondents reported feeling any remorse for their victims. Nor did they think about the inherent dangers of driving cars at high speeds while under the influence of drugs and alcohol. It is clear that the present system of providing offenders with custodial sentences detaining young offenders does little to quell their desire to steal cars. Detention is often interpreted as a logical step in the rites-of-passage to manhood for many youth. Additionally detention facilities are perceived as a safe haven for meeting peers, returning to the education system and providing a respite for the uncertainty and risk associated with surviving on the street. Accordingly it can be argued that the judicial system does little to deter young people from joyriding and that alternative solutions to the problem need to be considered.

Joyriding therefore should be analysed as a fluid culture with a changing membership where individuals live out a selected or temporal role before relocating to an alternative site and assuming a different identity. This was evident in the high number of youth who stated they had now “grown out” of car crime and were now focused on other areas such as sport or relationships with their family or girlfriends.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS/ INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING JOYRIDING**

In the final round of interviews each respondent was asked about ways to prevent younger peers from becoming involved in the culture of joyriding. It can be argued that incarcerating young joyriders appears to have little deterrent affect on their desire to go on stealing cars. Few offenders perceived that it was wrong to steal cars and that there was little social stigma attached to being caught and charged for car related crimes. On the contrary, the data suggests that stealing cars can be a way of obtaining increased status and respect among young people’s peer groups. Hence it can be argued that interventionist strategies are required to deter youth from offending at an early age before they become involved in more advanced forms of car crime.

### ***Education Programme***

Alternative strategies need to be considered for reducing the motivations for stealing cars among young offenders. Central to this is the provision of an education programme to highlight the serious nature of car crime offences. Such an education programme should include mundane details of the harm suffered by the victims of car crime as well as evidence of the some times shocking outcomes involving stolen cars. The education programme may take various forms ranging from interactive computer packages and the use of messages promoted through the media similar to campaigns aimed at reducing speeding and drink driving. An additional feature of the programme may consist of integrated writing and drama activities that explore young people's perceptions about joyriding while at the same time exploring the repercussions of this type of behaviour.

In this sense an education package would serve as one part of an intervention strategy that would be available to all students in Queensland schools and TAFE colleges. The requirement for early diversionary strategies such as an education programme is significant considering these research findings that highlight the group nature of car theft with the influence of peers in starting off on a car crime career, and the young age of young people's first involvement in this type of crime.

### ***The Social- Economic and Ethnic Background of Offenders***

This research paints a grim but familiar backdrop against which much young offending occurs. Unlike other youth that come from higher social and economic backgrounds the respondents in this study found there were few legitimate opportunities for excitement and financial gain to match the pay-offs from car-crime. On the other hand measures to prevent criminal involvement at a young age were weak. The strong contrast between the offenders skill and daring involved in joyriding compared to their disengagement in other areas of their lives needs to be more fully understood and should be central to any offender based policy initiatives. This leads one to conclude that car crime may be prevented in terms of the provision of alternative education programmes, increased employment prospects, an increase in facilities for young people across all suburbs and communities (perhaps through an increase in expenditure in programmes like urban renewal) and affordable forms of public transport.

### ***Offender Based Strategies***

This research clearly illustrates that that a primary motivation for car theft among young people is bound up in the potent mix of excitement and status enhancement through peer group involvement. By comparison with other types of crimes associated with youth such as break and entering, joyriding is perceived as ultimately more thrilling in terms of psychological payoffs. It is clear that the majority of offenders have always had an interest in cars from an early age and have driven cars well before the legal driving age.

The challenge here is for policy makers at all levels of government to provide offender based strategies to find a legal alternative to car theft which both provides young offenders (and those at risk of offending) with comparable excitement and interest as experienced through joyriding. One such initiative may be through the provision of "motor projects" similar to what has been trialed in the United Kingdom. These projects involve a combination of teaching young people to drive, the acquisition of skills to obtain a drivers license and a car maintenance programme. These elements could be combined with an education programme as described previously incorporating messages about the risks of car theft, the impact on victims and the consequences for those apprehended for this type of crime.

A further major element could include the opportunity for youth to legally engage in forms of off road drag racing where young people could test their driving skills against each other without the threat of harm to members of the public.

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