

Motor Vehicle Theft: The Offender, Environment, and Community

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According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports of 2008, there was an approximate occurrence of 956,846 motor vehicles thefts across the country; a rate of 314.7 motor vehicle thefts per 100,000 inhabitants. Motor vehicle thefts represent a significant portion of Part 1 crimes along side with larcenies, burglaries, and robberies. Part 1 crimes are categorized in the acts of murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, larcenies, motor vehicle thefts, and in some cases, arson. Compared with the estimated number of 1.1 million motor vehicle thefts in 2007 and 1.2 million motor vehicle thefts in 2006, the trend of motor vehicle theft has decreased significantly by each year. There are many factors that played a role in decreasing the occurrence of motor vehicle theft; however, continuously observing the patterns and factors that contribute to the occurrence of motor vehicle theft is still essential. The factors that should be heavily examined are the environmental aspects and the offender; as both features correlate with one another for the effective crime to occur.

## Crime Prevention through Environmental Design

The environment of which a motor vehicle theft occurs in is essential for that crime to be successful or unsuccessful. Crime prevention through environmental design, better known as CPTED, is defined as the prevention of motor vehicle theft by manipulating the environment. The belief behind CPTED is that, "the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear and incidence of crime, and an improvement in the quality of life" (Cozens, Saville, & Hillier, pg ,2005). CPTED focuses on some main components to prevent crime by intervention and manipulation of environment. These components are territoriality,

natural surveillance, access control, image/management, activity support and target hardening.

According to Cozens, Saville, & Hillier (2005), “Territoriality is a design concept directed at reinforcing notions of proprietary concern and a ‘sense of ownership’ in legitimate users of space thereby reducing opportunities for offending by discouraging illegitimate users.” (pg). In correlation in decreasing the chance of a motor vehicle theft, environmental factors such as parking in a driveway or garage presents a mere image of territoriality; whereas in public areas such as parking lots and street parking may prove disadvantageous in prevention. Access control is another component that may provide some territoriality. It is a concept that is developed to reduce or deny access of the suitable target from the offender. Examples of access control are fencing, garage doors, door locks, and steering wheel locks; all essential factors that decrease the chance of motor vehicle theft. Other concepts for restricting access control are ticket entry to a parking facility, shutting down access during unattended hours, and requiring personal ID cards to access a certain facility.

Another effective component in CPTED is natural surveillance because, “If offenders perceive that they can be observed (even if they are not), they may be less likely to offend, given the increased potential for intervention, apprehension and prosecution” (Cozens, Saville, & Hillier, pg, 2005). Natural surveillance may range from increasing cameras and windows to cutting down shrubs and trees that may provide concealment of crime for offenders. Lighting is another significant natural surveillance source that plays a huge impact in decreasing crime, especially motor vehicle thefts and

break-ins in public areas. According to Smith, a difficult issue concerning with lightings is that parked cars provide cover and obstruct the distribution of

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lighting” (pg, 1996). Since multi-level parking facilities are a better preference than single-level parking lots, the cons of addressing crime outweighs the pros of fitting more vehicles. Like apartment complexes with clusters of people in poverty, a multi-level parking garage is a cluster of cars providing additional reasons and option of targets. Openness or area should be encourages while shear walls and columns should be reduced or avoided for better natural surveillance.

The fourth component is image/management which reveals the image of the environment that attracts or deduces crimes. An example of a poor image/management surrounding would be a parking area filled with broken glass bottles, graffiti, and debris. An environment with poor maintenance provides a sense of permission for the offender to commit a crime; whereas, good maintenance of an area may provide an image of territoriality and security. Signs and graphics are other influential image/management components; good placement of signs and graphics in facilities allow quick entrance/exit while providing a sense of awareness.

There are also other aspects in CPTED that identify the relationship between opportunities of crime and the environment, such as activity support. Activity support examines the design of an environment to encourage the intended purpose of that specific area. For example, basketball courts and food stands near parking lots are in the vicinity to reduce the idea of isolation of parking spaces. Activity support seeks to displace possible unsafe or illegitimate activities, increase natural surveillance, and

populate the area with the intended legitimate activity. Noted by Smith (1996), security personnel are one of the best sources of

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crime prevention due to the sheer fact that they are uniformed officers who can patrol the area and respond to irregular activities using judgment and supervision. In correlation with environmental factors that contribute to opportunities in motor vehicle thefts, spatial analysis of criminal behavior and effort in these areas should also be carefully examined.

#### Spatial Analysis of Criminal Behavior and Effort

Understanding the offender's behavior and decision-making process is a tradition criminologist study that is valuable in creating a crime displacement/deterrence strategy. One such theory is the rational choice theory which is a presumption that "There is a decision process in which the offender calculates the risks, costs, and benefits of committing particular crime in a particular time and place" (Potchak, McGloin, & Zgoba, pg, 2002). An offender's rational perspective to commit a crime is to exercise the least amount of effort for a large amount of rewards in a low risk environment. Another hypothesis within the rational choice theory reveals that opportunity in crime exists when the suitable target is detected, a motivated offender is present, and the lack of a capable guardian; high rewards of the target, low effort for the offenders, and low risks of detection in criminal event. In addition to the rational choice theory, the situational crime prevention theory is another theory that addresses the issue of effort in criminal behavior. According to Potchak et al.(2002), "Situational crime prevention theory proposed four strategies of crime prevention (a) increasing perceived risks, (b) reducing anticipated rewards, (c) removing excuses, and (d) increasing perceived effort" (pg).

“Most car thieves would agree that forcefully taking a vehicle from someone is more dangerous than stealing them through non-confrontational means’ (Copes & Cherbonneau, pg ,

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2006). Thus, there are more motor vehicle thefts through unattended vehicles than carjacking where the risks and efforts outweigh the rewards.

Motor vehicle thieves can be categorized by their approach and characteristics in achieving the crimes; there are alert opportunists and active searchers. “Alert opportunists revealed that they select their targets while on their daily course of activities, an easy opportunity emerged and they seized it” (Cope & Cherbonneau, pg, 2006). Some offenders have described the urge of stealing the vehicle as irresistible due to rational choice theory. The words of a motor vehicle thief from Copes and Cherbonneau (2006) article are:

It is not that I set my mind before I seen the bike, “O.K., today I’m going to steal a motorcycle.” It was the fact that the dude was stupid enough to leave the key in the motorcycle. Right there all the way at the end of a driveway. Down an old road. It’s an old abandoned highway. He wanted someone to steal it (pg).

The enticing opportunity of a motor vehicle theft in this incident is the effort to obtain the keys to the vehicle without search for it: however, there are other types of motor vehicle thieves who actively search for suitable targets.

Unlike alert opportunists, the active searcher’s intention was not to merely seize the moment but to set forth a pursuit for vulnerable vehicles (Cope and Cherbonneau, pg, 2006). In comparison with the alert opportunists, the offender seeks for opportunity such as vehicles with keys or unlocked doors, therefore exerting little force. Keys don’t

necessarily have to be in the vehicle they're targeting; they may commit a residential burglary to obtain the keys. Some of the offender's target of environment focuses on nice suburban homes with potential victims

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who leave their vehicles unlocked. Others believe that their primary targets may middle-class areas where there may be lower risk and easier escape routes. The time interval in which these thieves would appear is holidays where cluster of vehicles are lined up at a home or a parking facility. Other locations that would attract these thieves are tourist locations where tourists may be careless and bars where many customers leave the night drunk. Active searchers and alert opportunists concentrate their intentions of motor vehicle thefts on unattended vehicles, whereas carjackers who forces the victim out of the occupied vehicle are the ones that people fear the most.

Carjacking is a rare occurrence as confrontation with another individual often requires large amounts of force which usually results in violence. Violence in a minor crime such as theft lengthens the punishment of incarceration if caught and the crime of larceny evolves into robbery. However, many criminals became increasingly desperate as technology and security in vehicles is enhanced. Luxurious vehicles often contain security systems that limit the offender's ability to learn or to execute a motor vehicle theft. Copes and Chebonneau (2006) also reveals that once the auto thief realizes as time increases at a scene of a theft, law enforcement will be summon; thus, modifying the behavior of thieving into carjacking (pg). "Since he did not know how to steal a car without a key and he believed there was little time to actively search or wait for someone to let their guard down, he carjacked the first person he saw" (Copes & Cherbonneau, pg, 2006). As carjacking is one method of motor vehicle theft with the

most risk from an offender's perspective, others may prefer to use their extensive effort through manipulation rather than force.

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Manipulation is a skill set most favorable by cons and fraudsters due to their ability to deceive the victim. According to Copes and Cherbonneau (2006), "The key to being successful at auto theft for these offenders is their ability to control the interaction between themselves and their victims" (pg). Criminals who use manipulation as their strategy go through great lengths in completing their objectives. In many incidents, offenders will strive to look legitimate and honest; an example would be walking around a dealership wearing a suit and acting as salesman looking for a customer to trade in their vehicle. Other instances including dressing up as a valet parker at a hotel or parking lot or posing as customer who desires to test drive a vehicle that is for sale. There are other methods that involve manipulation through friendship; where the offender will offer to drive the victim to a certain area. For example, instances at a bar where the victim is intoxicated and requires another individual to drive. Manipulation ranges from multiple activities such as duplicating a key from clay, convincing the victim for permission to drive, renting out a vehicle with false identification, and swapping of the keys. Out of all the other methods in motor vehicle theft, manipulation is the most covertly used strategy in illegally obtaining a vehicle. Nevertheless, a small amount of manipulation is carried out by an offender during and after a motor vehicle theft. Studies also show that auto thieves manipulate law enforcement and other authorities by producing a normal image or an average drive after they've stolen a vehicle.

Concealing damage, restrained driving, maintaining composure, and manipulating appearances are the most common methods of motor vehicle theft



behavior after illegally obtaining a vehicle. Concealing damages focuses on normalizing the vehicle's appearance after

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the crime. "After tampering with ignitions, some offenders insert a fake key into the ignition, while others simply replace the switch altogether. Steering column damage is more noticeable to onlookers, so more offenders place small towels or other concealments over the casing or any broken component" (Cherbonneau & Copes, pg, 2006). One area of difficult normalization of a vehicle is broken windows, especially when the sound of breaking a window attracts attention of potential witnesses. Broken windows occur mostly in motor vehicle burglaries, but as far as motor vehicle thefts, a broken window is a giveaway which allows police officers to easily detect the offender.

Maintaining composure and manipulating appearances are techniques where the offender will seek to blend in with the setting as ordinary drivers to avoid suspicion. Dressing conventionally allows the offender to avoid a criminal impression in public; however, when detected as a suspect, offenders will often resort to maintaining normal emotions rather than abrupt and bizarre anxieties- all which police officers are trained to detect. Many offenders struggle at maintaining composure while few are capable of holding out. Although those who struggle with maintaining composure are detected, they are often hasty to flee; thus leading to high speed chases and reckless pursuits (Hence, restrain driving is a method of maintaining composure). Compared to the broken window example from concealment of damage, most car thieves who seek joy-riding often exhibit reckless driving which attracts a lot of attention from authorities and citizens. Excluding car thieves who are joyride seekers, other motor vehicle thieves focus their ability to drive their vehicle as if they were the owners on any ordinary day.

Environmental factors and offender's behavior are significant contributions to crime. Nevertheless, there are other causes of crime such as motor vehicle thefts involving the community and its status. As environment influences offender's behavior and offender's perspective affects the result of a crime, community status such as poverty and stability shapes the form of the environment.

#### Community Structure and Stability

To identify the correlation between criminal behavior, environment, and social status, one must observe the structural changes to poverty and area that has increase diversity. According to Walsh and Taylor, motor vehicle theft rates were greater in regions with increased racial and ethnic diversity (2007). As diversity of ethnic groups are an impact and significant predictor of crime, people often characterize diversity and minorities as causes of crime. There are many aspects in which community structure influences crime through imitation and provocation. When minorities are clustered into a living environment with little space with unknown territorial neighbors, provocation will most likely occur; thus, leading to crime and retribution. However, when minorities are kept in a clustered environment with many known neighbors, imitation of crime may also occur. If one close relative or a well-known individual escaped from committing a motor vehicle theft, others may imitate that crime after seeing the succession of obtaining a reward without punishment or consequence. Another aspect that can be examined is the clusters of cheap vehicles that are easy to access in a poverty-level community. Many vehicles in a poor neighborhood are unlikely to be luxurious; however, these

vehicles may be inexpensive while containing weak security systems; allowing low-level thieves

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to access these vehicles. There are vast amounts of factors that correlate community status and racial diversity to crime; yet, these are some examples of how low-level community regions may provide the sufficient setting or behavior for an offender to commit a motor vehicle theft.

The offender, environment, and community are imperative in causes of crime such as motor vehicle theft. To comprehend and analyze the broader picture of crimes, theories such as CPTED, rational choice theory, situation crime prevention theory, offender's behavior in crime, and community status affects should be closely examined to prove the effectively reduce rates of motor vehicle thefts. As motor vehicle theft rates are decreasing per year, it should be kept in mind that these factors are essential in that reduction. The continuation of enforcing CPTED and evaluating offender's perspective are useful in further reducing motor vehicle thefts yearly.

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