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Preventing Auto Theft

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

From 2003 to 2008, Winnipeg had the highest rates of vehicle theft in North America. Not only was this a costly problem – losses were about \$40 million a year – but the recklessness of Winnipeg's youthful car thieves also endangered citizens. Initial efforts by the Manitoba Auto Theft Task Force beginning in 2001 had temporary success, but rates continued to climb in 2003. By 2006, the auto theft rate in Winnipeg was 67% higher than that of the next highest Canadian city and almost 4 times the national average.

The Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy (WATSS) was created in response to this problem. This comprehensive strategy involves partnerships between the Winnipeg Police Service, Manitoba Justice, and Manitoba Public Insurance. WATSS is an evidence-based strategy that works by classifying offenders by risk level and responding accordingly by monitoring youth on conditions of release in the community; youth programming; and education. It also requires mandatory electronic immobilizers for the highest-risk vehicles.

STUDY AIMS

Component 1: To help develop the prevention program, a review of the evidence on auto theft programming was conducted (Linden and Chaturvedi, 2005).

Component 2: Interviews were conducted with 43 chronic auto theft offenders (Anderson and Linden, 2014). This study was intended to answer these questions: Who are the auto thieves? What are their patterns of offending? What was the aim of vehicle theft (joyriding, organized crime, profit)? What are the best solutions to the problem?

Component 3: Evaluated the degree to which WATSS has reduced auto theft in Winnipeg.

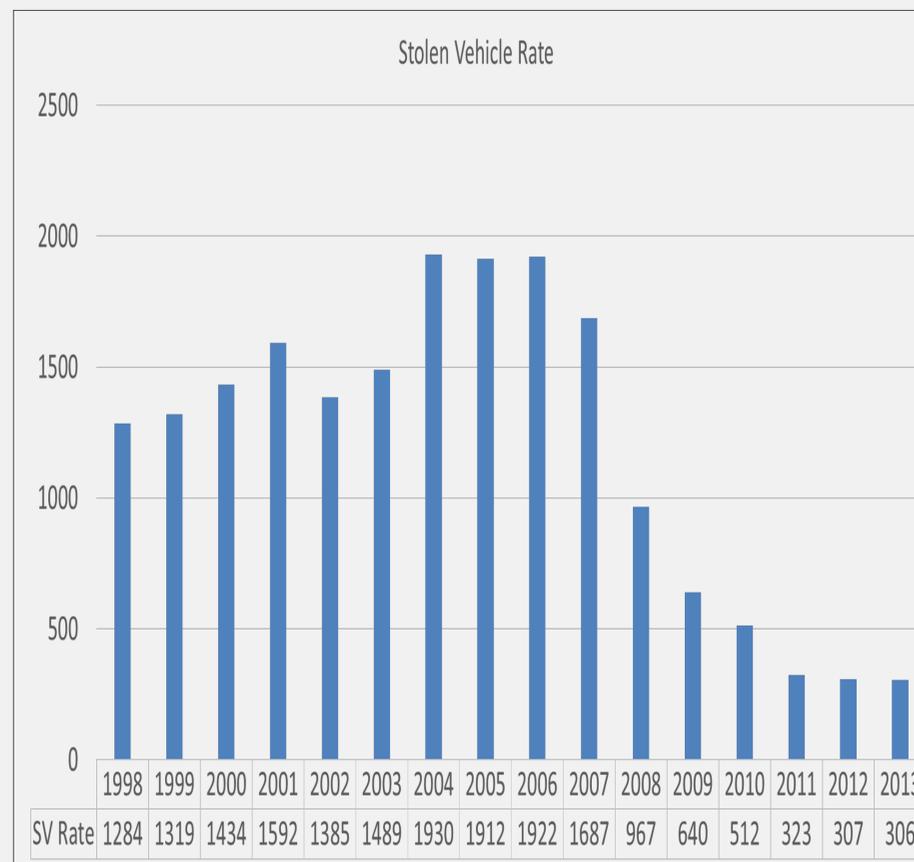
METHODS

Several methods were used to address why auto theft occurred in Winnipeg and how best to prevent it. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Police statistics and Manitoba Public Insurance data were used, along with interviews with justice officials and young offenders. A literature review identified existing, successful programs, including an exemplary program implemented by the Regina Police Service. Research funding provided by the AUTO21 Network of Centres of Excellence facilitated this research.

RESULTS

The study found that most auto theft offenders did poorly in school, many grew up in single-parent families with family members who also offended, and many had high rates of alcohol and drug use. Importantly, many respondents reported gang associations and high peer pressure to continue stealing cars; many stole cars for thrills. Finally, statistics indicated that over ninety percent of stolen vehicles (mostly older, highly-vulnerable Chrysler vehicles) were found within 24 hours, suggesting theft was largely for joyriding.

Based on this information, WATSS was initially implemented in September 2005 focusing on supervision of high-risk youth. Rates declined slightly but climbed again in 2006. In response, in 2006 a higher level of enforcement and community supervision was achieved by adding five members to the police Stolen Auto Unit. Electronic immobilizers were also made mandatory for the 100,000 most at-risk vehicles. As a result auto theft declined by 12% in 2007, 43% in 2008, and 34% in 2009. Between 2006 and 2011, rates dropped by 83% in Winnipeg compared with a national decline of 51%.



DISCUSSION

WATSS is a continuing program involving the Winnipeg Police Service and its partners. The core elements of WATSS are: a focus on high-risk offenders; partnerships with probation services and prosecutors; a link between district platoons and the specialized Stolen Auto Unit; a social development component run by probation services and community partners; and partnership with Manitoba Public Insurance. Following the program's success, many of its principles have been incorporated in other evidence-based policing strategies including a gang violence reduction program, a Smart Policing Initiative, and a community mobilization program. WATSS received the Quality Policing Award from the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In partnership with other parts of the justice system and with community organizations, the Winnipeg Police Service and Manitoba Justice implemented a focused deterrence program targeting the highest risk auto theft offenders. Manitoba Public Insurance established a mandatory immobilizer program, and probation services and community agencies provided intensive programming for the high risk youth in the program. Using these evidence-based tactics, WATSS helped reduce auto thefts (and attempts) in Winnipeg from nearly 14,000 per year to just over 2000 per year. The strategy focused on certainty, not severity, and harsher penalties were not part of the initiative.

REFERENCES

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