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## Juristat Article

# Motor Vehicle Theft in Canada, 2007

by Mia Dauvergne

December 2008  
Vol. 28, no. 10



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# Motor Vehicle Theft in Canada, 2007

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## Symbols

- . not available for any reference period
- .. not available for a specific reference period
- ... not applicable
- 0 true zero or a value rounded to zero
- 0<sup>s</sup> value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
- <sup>p</sup> preliminary
- <sup>r</sup> revised
- x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
- <sup>E</sup> use with caution
- F too unreliable to be published

## Motor vehicle theft in Canada, 2007: Highlights

- Continuing the general downward trend that began in 1997, the rate of motor vehicle theft reported by Canadian police services fell 9% in 2007, the fourth consecutive annual decline.
- Despite recent decreases, motor vehicle theft remains one of the highest-volume offences in Canada. In 2007, police reported approximately 146,000 motor vehicle thefts, an average of about 400 stolen vehicles per day.
- Rates of motor vehicle theft are generally higher in western and northern Canada than in the eastern part of the country. In 2007, Manitoba's motor vehicle theft rate fell 10% but remained the highest in the country. The vast majority of Manitoba's motor vehicle thefts occur in Winnipeg.
- Young people commit a disproportionate amount of motor vehicle theft. In 2007, the rate of vehicle theft was highest among 15 to 18-year olds and gradually declined with increasing age.
- The lowest rate of recovered stolen vehicles was in Montréal, an indicator of the possible involvement of organized crime operations.
- In 2007, most vehicles were stolen from public places, such as parking lots or the street. In addition, about one-third of motor vehicles were taken from a private residence.

## Motor vehicle theft in Canada, 2007

by Mia Dauvergne

Motor vehicle theft is a crime that affects many Canadians, both directly and indirectly. The financial cost to consumers, police, insurance companies and governments has been estimated by the Insurance Bureau of Canada at more than \$1 billion annually. Stolen vehicles that become involved in police chases or reckless driving can cause injury or death to innocent bystanders. According to the Insurance Bureau of Canada, each year approximately 40 people die and another 65 are injured as a result of motor vehicle thefts (ICBC, n.d.).

In Canada, there are two surveys that collect nationally representative data on motor vehicle thefts. One is the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey,<sup>1</sup> which gathers information on all motor vehicle thefts that are reported to, and substantiated by, police services. The other is the General Social Survey (GSS), which collects information from Canadians who self-report criminal victimizations. The focus of this article is on incidents of police-reported motor vehicle theft from the UCR Survey.

Police-reported motor vehicle thefts are incidents in which a land-based motorized vehicle is taken, or attempted to be taken, without the owner's authorization<sup>2</sup> It includes incidents in which the perpetrator has the intent to steal a vehicle but is unsuccessful in doing so (herein referred to as "attempted" motor vehicle thefts) as well as completed incidents.

The number of police-reported motor vehicle thefts may under-estimate the actual number of motor vehicle thefts in Canada, as not all incidents come to the attention of police. The GSS on Victimization, last conducted in 2004, found that about 7 in 10 motor vehicle thefts were reported to police, although this figure climbed to 89% when losses totalled \$1,000 or more.

### Motor vehicle theft one of the most frequent offences in Canada

Motor vehicle theft is one of the most frequent police-reported offences in Canada, behind only theft under \$5,000, mischief, break and enter and common assault. In 2007, police reported approximately 146,000 motor vehicle thefts (Table 1), an average of about 400 stolen vehicles per day. More than half (54%) were cars; another 35% were trucks, vans or SUVs; 4% were motorcycles and the remaining 8% were other types of vehicles. In addition, there were about 2,500 motor vehicles that were stolen during the commission of another, more serious, offence.

Motor vehicle theft is one of the least likely crimes to be solved by police. Of all vehicle thefts in 2007, only 11% resulted in an accused person being identified by police. In comparison, 22% of all other property-related offences were solved by police.

### Motor vehicle theft decreasing since mid-1990s

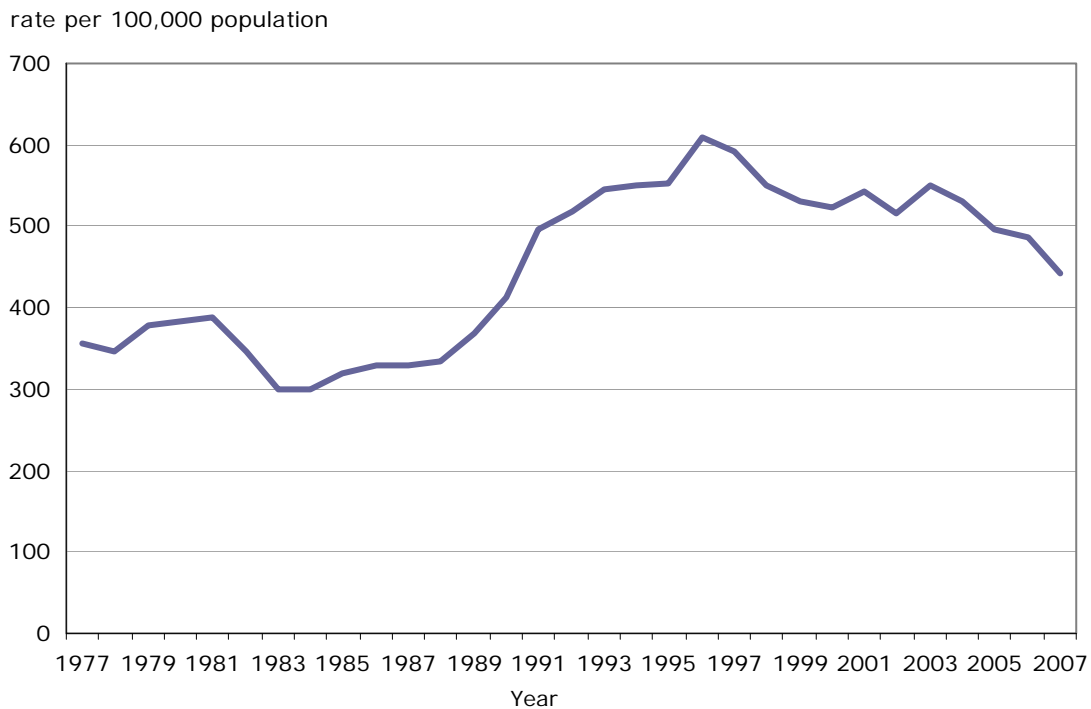
Unlike most other police-reported crimes which peaked in the early 1990s, motor vehicle theft reached its highest point in 1996. Since then, the rate has gradually decreased, including a 9% decline from 2006 to 2007; however, it continues to remain well above the levels seen decades earlier (Chart 1).

Information from the General Social Survey shows that the proportion of motor vehicle thefts reported to police remained stable between 1999 and 2004. As such, the decline in police-reported motor vehicle thefts over this period appears to be an actual decrease, rather than a change in reporting practices.

1. There are two versions of the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey: Aggregate and Incident-based. The Aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey reflects data reported by police services covering virtually 100% of the population of Canada. The Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR2) captures detailed information on individual criminal incidents reported to selected police services, including characteristics of incidents, victims and accused persons. In 2007, coverage of the UCR2 Survey incident counts represented approximately 94% of the population of Canada, while coverage for victims and accused persons counts represented approximately 90%. Incident-based UCR2 coverage was at least 97% in all provinces and territories except British Columbia (59%). For the purposes of this report, all analyses are based upon data from the Aggregate UCR Survey other than attempted and completed motor vehicle thefts, recovery status and location of the incident which are based upon data from the Incident-based UCR2 Survey.

2. Land-based motorized vehicles include cars, trucks, vans, sport utility vehicles (SUVs), motorcycles, buses, construction or agricultural machinery, all-terrain vehicles or snowmobiles.

Chart 1  
Police-reported motor vehicle thefts in Canada, 1977 to 2007



**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

Counts for all types of crime include both "attempted" and "completed" incidents. However, the proportion of attempted incidents is higher for motor vehicle thefts than for most other offences. Attempted motor vehicle thefts include, for example, incidents in which there is evidence of tampering with the vehicle's ignition or security mechanism but the vehicle is not actually stolen. In 2007, 14% of all motor vehicle thefts were classified by police as attempted compared to 2% of all other *Criminal Code* offences.

A closer look at the past five years among a sub-set of police services shows that the proportion of attempted motor vehicle thefts has risen slightly.<sup>3</sup> In other words, police are reporting a decline in the overall incidence of motor vehicle theft in Canada as well as a decline in the proportion of vehicles that are successfully taken.

Some of the recent decrease in police-reported motor vehicle theft may be due to the implementation of specialized policies and programs by many police services, insurance companies and governments. For example, police in Regina and Winnipeg have developed comprehensive prevention strategies that specifically target youth (Regina Police Service, 2004; Linden and Munn-Venn, 2008). Other police services, including those in Vancouver and the surrounding area, have operated the Bait Car Program which uses police-owned decoy vehicles that, if stolen, can be monitored through surveillance and GPS tracking (Baitcar.com). Another initiative in British Columbia, called Project No Free Ride, recovers the financial costs associated with auto theft through civil litigation of persons responsible (ICBC, 2006).

Auto insurance companies in several provinces are also working towards reducing motor vehicle theft. Some companies now offer financial incentives to customers who have an immobilizer or another anti-theft device installed in their vehicle (IBC, n.d.). An electronic immobilizer is a security device that automatically engages when the vehicle is turned off. It interrupts the power supply to three vital circuits: the starter, the ignition and the fuel pump, and only when the correctly coded key is used are the circuits re-enabled. In 2006, Manitoba Public Insurance went one step further and now requires all "most-at-risk" vehicles to be equipped with an

3. Information is based upon a non-representative sample of 127 police services who have consistently reported to the Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey since 2003. In 2007, these data represented 68% of the population of Canada.



approved immobilizer before vehicle registration and on-road coverage can be renewed by owners (MPI, n.d.). Research by Transport Canada suggests that immobilizers are effective in reducing the incidence of auto theft, particularly among youth (Transport Canada, 2007). None of the top-10 most frequently stolen vehicles in Canada for 2007 were equipped with immobilizers that met national standards (see Text Box 1).

Both federal and provincial governments have responded to the issue of motor vehicle theft. On September 1, 2007, a new federal regulation took effect requiring Canadian automobile manufacturers to equip all new cars, vans, light trucks and SUVs with an electronic immobilizer (Transport Canada, 2007). Most provinces have established task forces that work in partnership with police and auto insurance companies to combat motor vehicle theft, particularly in relation to organized crime operations as well as youth offending.

#### Text box 1

##### Ten most commonly stolen vehicles in 2007

Some vehicles are more prone to theft than others. Each year, the Insurance Bureau of Canada publishes a "top-10" list of vehicles most frequently stolen throughout the course of the year. For the third year in a row, the Honda Civic SiR 2-door ranked highest. At the time of initial sale, none of the vehicles listed below were equipped with electronic immobilizers that met Canadian national standards.

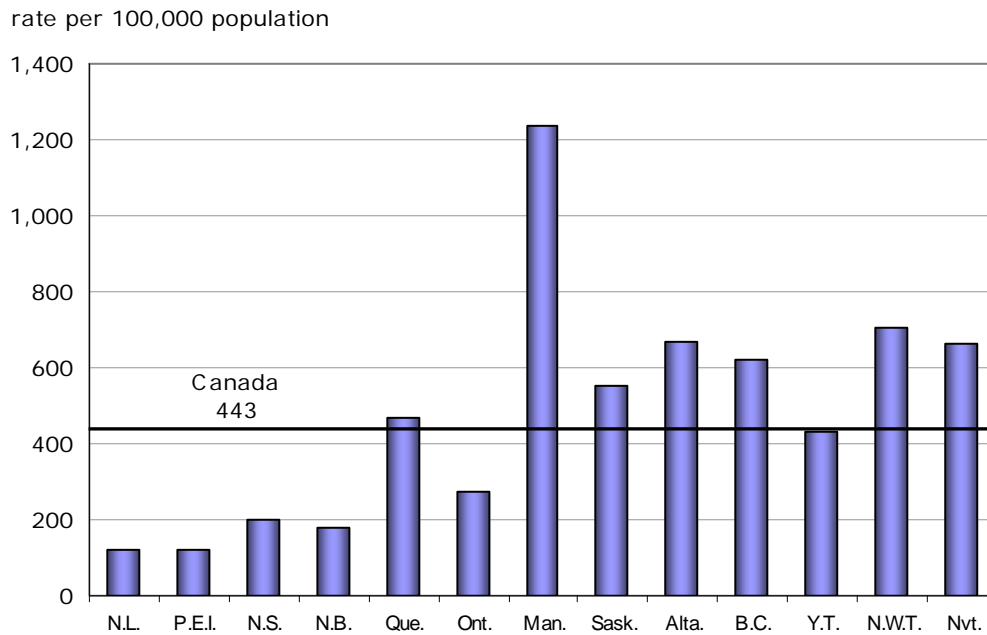
1. 1999 Honda Civic SiR 2-door
2. 2000 Honda Civic SiR 2-door
3. 2004 Subaru Impreza WRX/WRX STi 4-door AWD
4. 1999 Acura Integra 2-door
5. 1994 Dodge/Plymouth Grand Caravan/Voyager
6. 1994 Dodge/Plymouth Grand Caravan/Voyager AWD
7. 1994 Dodge/Plymouth Caravan/Voyager
8. 1998 Acura Integra 2-door
9. 2000 Audi TT Quattro 2-door Coupe
10. 1994 Dodge/Plymouth Shadow/Sundance 2-door Hatchback

**Source:** Insurance Bureau of Canada, 2007.

## Manitoba reports highest rate of motor vehicle theft for 11<sup>th</sup> straight year

In contrast to Canada as a whole, Manitoba's rate of police-reported motor vehicle theft gradually climbed until 2004. Since then, vehicle theft rates in Manitoba have declined in two of the past three years, including a 10% drop in 2007. However, the province's 2007 rate remained the highest in the country (Chart 2) for the 11<sup>th</sup> straight year and was 24% higher than a decade ago (Table 1). Manitoba's rate is driven by Winnipeg which, in 2007, accounted for about two-thirds of the province's population but 86% of its motor vehicle thefts.

Chart 2  
Police-reported motor vehicle thefts by province and territory, 2007



**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

High rates of motor vehicle theft in Winnipeg are not new – Winnipeg's rate has either been the highest or among the highest in Canada for the past 15 years. Although Winnipeg's 2007 rate fell 11% from the previous year, it was 71% greater than Abbotsford's, the city with the second highest rate (Chart 3). Winnipeg was one of only four CMAs to report a higher rate than 10 years ago, although the increase in Edmonton was greater over the same time period (Table 2).

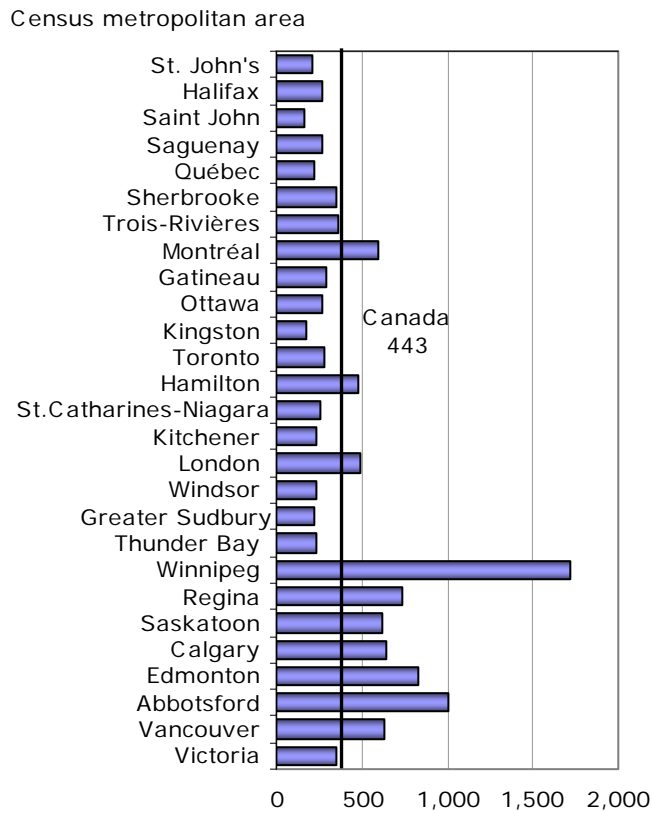
Some research has suggested that the high incidence of motor vehicle theft in Winnipeg stems from a well-established youth culture that regards auto theft as a form of recreation, commonly known as "joy-riding" (Linden and Munn-Venn, 2008). In 2007, half of all solved motor vehicle thefts in Winnipeg involved young people aged 15 to 18 years, compared to less than one-third for the rest of Canada.

In Winnipeg, and consequently Manitoba, the proportion of police-reported motor vehicle thefts that are attempted (and not completed) is much higher than elsewhere in the country. However, even when examining only completed incidents, the 2007 rate of vehicle theft was highest in Winnipeg, although the rate was much closer to those reported in other CMAs (Table 2).

In 2007, the Winnipeg Police Service saw a 33% decrease in the number of completed vehicle thefts and a 32% increase in attempted thefts. This may have been partially due to concerted efforts by the province to target auto theft in Winnipeg. In 2005, Manitoba's Auto Theft Task Force established the Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy which focuses on three key areas: supervision of high-rate offenders, installation of electronic immobilizers in at-risk vehicles and working with young people and their families to reduce the number of new offenders (Linden and Munn-Venn, 2008).

High rates of auto theft are not limited to Manitoba, or more specifically, to Winnipeg. As with police-reported crime in general, motor vehicle theft rates tend to be higher in western and northern Canada than in the east. While the rates in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Alberta and British Columbia were approximately half that in Manitoba, they were still about five times higher than those in Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island (Chart 2). Canada's census metropolitan areas (CMAs) show a similar geographical pattern (Chart 3), with Saint John reporting the lowest rate for the fourth year in a row.

Chart 3  
Police-reported motor vehicle thefts by census metropolitan area, 2007



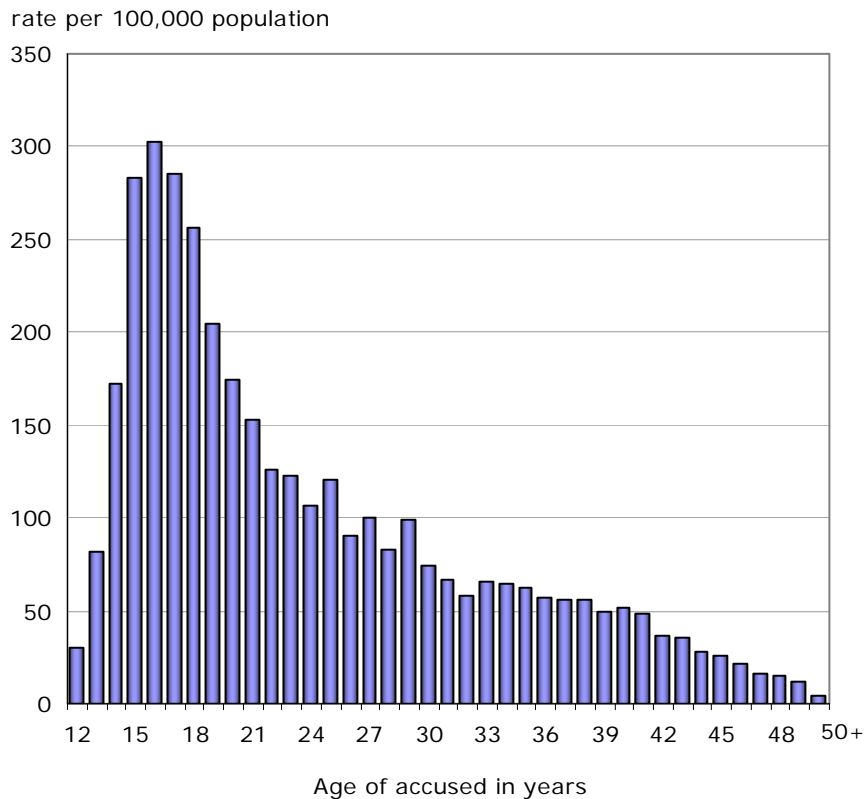
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

### Motor vehicle theft rates highest among 15 to 18-year-olds

Similar to other property-related offences such as break and enter or mischief, motor vehicle theft is a crime often associated with youth (Dhami, 2008). In a pilot study of young auto theft offenders, "joy-riding", transportation and thrill-seeking were found to be the primary motivations for youth who steal vehicles (Anderson and Linden, 2002).

In 2007, police identified about 16,000 persons accused of motor vehicle theft in Canada. The rate was highest among 15 to 18-year olds and gradually tapered with increasing age (Chart 4). Accused persons 15 to 18 years of age accounted for 3 in 10 solved vehicle thefts.

Chart 4  
Persons accused of motor vehicle theft, 2007



**Note:** Excludes accused persons under the age of 12 years and those whose age was reported by police as unknown.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

### Motor vehicle theft and organized crime

Another prime motivation for stealing vehicles is for profit (CISC, 2005). Some stolen vehicles are loaded onto shipping containers and exported to foreign countries for re-sale. Others are sold locally using false identification numbers (VINs), or sent to "chop shops" to be dismantled and sold for parts. These types of motor vehicle thefts tend to require larger criminal networks and are therefore more often associated with organized crime operations (CISC, 2005).

The extent to which organized crime groups are responsible for motor vehicle theft is difficult to measure. The Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) as well as Public Safety Canada suggest that the proportion of non-recovered vehicles can be used as an indication of the degree of organized crime involvement (CISC, 2005; Porteous, 1998). This is because vehicles that are stolen for re-sale purposes are not usually recovered by police whereas vehicles used for "joy-riding" or as a temporary means of transportation are typically abandoned and later found (Porteous, 1998). This proxy measure of organized crime involvement has been accepted and utilized by researchers since the early 1990s (Clarke and Harris, 1992; Tremblay et al., 1994; Wallace, 2004).

In 2007, about 4 in 10 stolen vehicles were not recovered by police, suggesting that a substantial proportion of motor vehicle thefts are related to organized crime. According to the CISC, organized crime groups involved in vehicle-related crime operate primarily out of Montréal and Toronto (CISC, 2008). Montréal not only reported the highest number of motor vehicle thefts in the country, but this city also had the lowest recovery rate. Toronto recorded the second highest number of motor vehicle thefts, but a recovery rate that was closer to the national average. In Winnipeg, where "joy-riding" is known to be prevalent, the large majority (82%) of stolen motor vehicles were recovered by police (Table 2).

## One-third of vehicles stolen from private property

In 2007, most stolen vehicles were taken from public areas such as parking lots (32%), the street or other open area (24%), commercial establishments (e.g. shopping centres) (9%), or public institutions (e.g. schools) (2%). About one-third of stolen vehicles were taken from the relative security of a person's private property, usually late at night or in the daytime during regular work hours.

Relatively few vehicles were stolen from car dealerships or rental agencies (1%). These vehicles tend to be newer models that are usually equipped with immobilizers or other anti-theft devices and, hence, more difficult to steal. As a result, a new scheme has emerged, usually in connection with an organized crime operation, in which offenders "lease" vehicles and never return them (Egan, 2008).

## Summary

Motor vehicles are typically stolen for one of two reasons: "joy-riding" or for profit. "Joy-riding" is usually associated with youth who steal cars as a form of recreation whereas vehicles stolen for profit are more often the result of organized crime operations. Police-reported statistics indicate that motor vehicle theft has been generally declining since the mid-1990s, although the rate in Manitoba continues to be well above the rest of Canada. Part of the overall decrease may be attributed to auto theft prevention programs that target youth as well as the increased use of electronic immobilizers.

## Data tables

Table 1  
Police-reported motor vehicle thefts, by province and territory, 2007

Province and territory	Total motor vehicle thefts <sup>1</sup>			Completed motor vehicle thefts <sup>2</sup>		
	number	rate <sup>3</sup>	percent change in rate 1997 to 2007	percent of total	rate <sup>3</sup>	percent recovered <sup>4</sup>
Newfoundland and Labrador	606	119.7	30.3	93.7	111.2	77.6
Prince Edward Island	167	120.5	-38.1	99.4	119.7	77.1
Nova Scotia	1,875	200.7	-27.8	88.5	170.1	69.2
New Brunswick	1,343	179.1	-11.7	96.0	170.6	61.6
Quebec	36,216	470.3	-30.6	85.2	401.0	33.6
Ontario	34,737	271.3	-45.5	91.8	245.7	68.5
Manitoba	14,671	1,236.3	24.3	55.3	700.7	81.4
Saskatchewan	5,526	554.3	-19.4	87.9	482.0	81.4
Alberta	23,248	669.2	22.8	92.8	621.9	75.5
British Columbia <sup>5</sup>	27,112	619.0	-25.2	87.5	481.7	81.6
Yukon	134	432.4	-35.8	97.0	419.5	82.3
Northwest Territories <sup>6</sup>	300	703.6	27.1	97.6	680.2	90.3
Nunavut <sup>7</sup>	207	665.3	5.6	98.5	652.5	94.6
<b>Canada</b>	<b>146,142</b>	<b>443.2</b>	<b>-25.2</b>	<b>85.6</b>	<b>364.5</b>	<b>63.6</b>

1. Information on total motor vehicle thefts is derived from the Aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey and reflect data reported by police services covering virtually 100% of the population of Canada. Includes both attempted and completed motor vehicle thefts.

2. Information on completed motor vehicle thefts is derived from the Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey and reflects data reported by a sub-set of police services covering 94% of the population of Canada.

3. Rates are calculated per 100,000 population. Population estimates are from Statistics Canada, Demography Division.

4. Information on the percentage of recovered motor vehicles has been reported directly by some police services. In most cases, however, information has been derived from the Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey.

5. Information on completed motor vehicle thefts in British Columbia reflects data from police services covering 59% of the population of the province.

6. Includes Nunavut prior to 1999. As such, the percent change in the rate is calculated from 1999 to 2007.

7. Nunavut became a territory in 1999. As such, the percent change in the rate is calculated from 1999 to 2007.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

Table 2  
Police-reported motor vehicle thefts, by census metropolitan area, 2007

Census metropolitan area <sup>1, 2, 3</sup>	Total motor vehicle thefts <sup>4</sup>			Completed motor vehicle thefts <sup>5</sup>		
	number	rate <sup>6</sup>	percent change in rate 1997 to 2007	percent of total	rate <sup>6</sup>	percent recovered <sup>7</sup>
Winnipeg	12,548	1,714.1	25.1	50.2	870.5	81.6
Abbotsford <sup>8</sup>	1,693	1,001.3	-3.3	85.0	841.0	74.1
Edmonton	9,120	832.1	57.1	87.4	726.8	70.0
Regina	1,495	734.8	-50.0	76.7	563.3	75.3
Calgary	7,318	638.6	-15.4	95.6	607.6	86.0
Vancouver <sup>9</sup>	14,411	630.3	-43.8	87.4	478.8	84.1
Saskatoon	1,541	615.7	-1.7	85.3	526.9	80.8
Montréal	22,403	600.6	-38.6	84.4	507.1	30.9
London	2,331	489.0	-31.4	80.5	371.1	72.9
Hamilton <sup>10</sup>	3,400	480.7	-50.8	97.6	550.1	82.1
Trois-Rivières	533	363.2	-31.9	81.4	295.4	43.6
Victoria	1,204	355.4	-6.0	93.4	329.4	83.0
Sherbrooke	524	349.6	-52.5	87.5	302.9	43.3
Gatineau	860	293.8	-16.9	90.1	263.7	53.4
Toronto <sup>10</sup>	15,392	279.3	-39.9	96.1	274.1	67.2
Halifax	1,035	268.5	-45.7	82.0	216.9	66.8
Saguenay	384	265.0	-53.9	93.9	245.6	34.9
Ottawa	2,353	264.4	-65.2	88.2	232.7	62.5
St. Catharines-Niagara	1,100	253.5	-51.5	91.3	229.5	72.7
Kitchener	1,186	238.9	-48.6	78.8	188.2	76.7
Thunder Bay	286	233.4	-37.7	88.1	205.6	82.1
Windsor	769	231.1	-29.3	79.8	200.6	76.1
Greater Sudbury	367	225.9	-71.6	84.7	191.5	82.6
Québec	1,585	216.4	-47.4	90.5	196.0	55.1
St. John's	383	209.7	56.4	90.5	187.8	78.5
Kingston <sup>8</sup>	269	176.0	-51.5	100.0	170.1	53.6
Saint John	170	167.6	8.6	97.0	159.7	71.0
<b>Canada</b>	<b>146,142</b>	<b>443.2</b>	<b>-25.2</b>	<b>85.6</b>	<b>364.5</b>	<b>63.6</b>

1. A census metropolitan area (CMA) refers to a large urban core (at least 100,000 population) combined with adjacent urban and rural areas that have a high degree of economic and social integration. A CMA typically comprises more than one police service.

2. CMA populations have been adjusted to follow policing boundaries. For completed motor vehicle thefts, boundaries have been further adjusted to include only those police services reporting to the UCR2 Survey.

3. The CMA of Oshawa is excluded from this table due to the incongruity between the police service jurisdictional boundaries and the CMA boundaries.

4. Information on total motor vehicle thefts is derived from the Aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey and reflects data reported by police services covering virtually 100% of the population of Canada. Includes both attempted and completed motor vehicle thefts.

5. Information on completed motor vehicle thefts is derived from the Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey and reflects data reported by a sub-set of police services covering 94% of the population of Canada.

6. Rates are calculated per 100,000 population. Population estimates are from Statistics Canada, Demography Division.

7. Information on the percentage of recovered motor vehicles has been reported directly by some police services. In most cases, however, information has been derived from the Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey.

8. Abbotsford and Kingston became CMAs in 2001. As such, the percent change in the rate is calculated from 2001 to 2007.

9. Information on completed motor vehicle thefts in Vancouver represent data from police services covering 80% of the population of the CMA.

10. Information on completed motor vehicle thefts excludes data from the Halton Regional Police Service and the Durham Regional Police Service due to the incongruity between the police service jurisdictional boundaries and the CMA boundaries.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

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