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VEHICLE RELATED THEFTS: PRACTICE MESSAGES FROM THE BRITISH CRIME SURVEY

Briefing Note 6/01

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Summary

This briefing note sets out to provide a national overview of vehicle related theft, gleaned from the British Crime Survey (BCS). It seeks to provide a national benchmark against which local police forces and crime reduction partnerships can compare local data, to provide a basis on which to respond to the particularities of a local picture. Much of the statistical information in this note was contained in the main report on the 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS - see Kershaw et al. (2000)), but here more explicit links are made between BCS results and implications for local crime reduction practice. Analogous notes on burglary (Budd, 2001) and violence (Mattinson, 2001) have also been published.

Results in this note present a picture of reducing thefts and opportunities for further reduction. Vehicle-related thefts have consistently accounted for over a fifth of crimes measured by the BCS throughout the 1990s. The levels have fallen by around 30% since their peak in 1993, BCS estimates indicate that there were just under 3 million vehicle related thefts in 1999. They cover three categories of theft:

- Thefts of vehicles
- Thefts from vehicles (including thefts of property left inside vehicles and vehicle components)
- Attempted thefts of or from a vehicle. Attempted thefts of and from vehicles are considered together as it is often unclear whether the offender was targeting the vehicle, or property/vehicle components.

This briefing note examines the following:

Who is at most risk of suffering vehicle theft?

Levels of vehicle security.

How did offenders get into or try to get into vehicles?

What was stolen?

Which cars are most likely to be stolen? (based on information from the Car Theft Index)

Recovery rates for stolen vehicles.

Were incidents reported to the police and insurers?

Implications for crime reductive practice are spelled out. These include focusing effort on groups with high risk, including those with prior offences suffered. Also advocated is extra attention on the safety of vehicles parked at or near the victim's home, where most vehicle crime occurs.

The note does not discuss incidents involving commercial vehicles, as these are outside the scope of the BCS¹. A more extensive analysis of vehicle-related thefts is contained in Section 5 of the main report on the 2000 British Crime Survey (Kershaw et al., 2000). The findings here are supplemented by results from earlier sweeps of the BCS and the Car Theft Index (Home Office, 2000).

Background

The 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS) is a survey of 19,411 adults aged 16 or over in England and Wales. Approximately 15,000 were in vehicle owning households. BCS respondents were asked about their experiences of victimisation during the calendar year 1999. Victims were asked a series of follow up questions about the circumstances of the incident, including its location and timing, how the offender/s got into the vehicle, what was stolen, were stolen vehicles recovered and what was damaged. In addition, one of the 2000 BCS follow up sections asked respondents (not just victims) about the security devices that they use on their vehicle.

The Government's Public Service Agreement target is to reduce vehicle crime (thefts of and from vehicles) by 30% by March 2004 compared to a baseline of 1998/99. The Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team (VCRAT), comprising representatives from government, the police, the motor and insurance industries and motorists, has developed a strategy to meet this target

¹ The BCS definition of vehicles includes cars, light vans, motorcycles, motorscooters, and mopeds either owned or regularly used by anyone in the respondent's household, **including company cars**. Vehicles used solely for business purposes such as lorries, works vans, or hire cars are excluded from the survey.

(VCRAT, 1999). VCRAT continue to monitor progress against that strategy and to develop new initiatives. Recent developments include the Association of Chief Police Officers' (ACPO) secured car park scheme. Automobile Association audits indicate that 'car parks in the scheme have on average seen a 70% reduction in recorded crime' (Sallybanks and Brown, 1999).

Trends in vehicle related theft

Table 1 shows that all types of vehicle theft are continuing to decline. Findings from the Car Theft Index also suggest that around 370,000 cars were stolen in Great Britain in 1999, down from 390,000 in 1998. BCS figures suggest that the nature of vehicle theft has also changed overtime. In 1981, attempts accounted for only 10% of incidents. By 1995, this figure had reached 30%, before falling back slightly in 1997 and 1999. The most likely interpretation of this is that improved security has made completed theft less easy, with improved vehicle security at first hampering thieves and then having a positive deterrent effect. There are two key points that arise from these figures:

- As the BCS includes incidents that are not reported to the police, the number of vehicle-related thefts is

higher than police recorded crime figures. It is also apparent that certain types of incidents are far more likely to be reported than others. As such, recorded figures can only reveal part of the picture about the nature and extent of vehicle crime.

- However, the consistent falls in vehicle-related theft identified by the BCS and police recorded crime figures since the mid-1990s indicates that policing strategies, improved vehicle security and other crime prevention measures are succeeding, and having a considerable impact on vehicle crime. This decline is consistent with, but more marked than, the general fall in the levels of property crime, a pattern confirmed by recorded crime statistics and international comparisons.

Vehicle vandalism also accounts for a significant proportion of BCS crime, and there is sometimes an ambiguity in the victim's mind over whether an incident was a case of vandalism or attempted theft. Whilst this document is primarily concerned with vehicle related thefts, it is worth noting that incidents of vehicle vandalism have also declined, having peaked in the mid-1990s.

Table 1: BCS Vehicle related theft estimates (thousands), 1981 and 1991 to 1999

	1981	1991	1993	1995	1997	1999	% change 1981 to 1999	% change 1993 to 1999	% change 1997 to 1999
All vehicle thefts	1,752	3,825	4,344	4,318	3,461	2,956	69	-32	-15
Theft from vehicle	1,287	2,412	2,564	2,525	2,150	1,811	41	-29	-16
Theft of vehicles(2)	286	519	544	501	373	333	17	-39	-11
Attempts of & from	179	894	1,237	1,292	937	812	353	-34	-13
Vehicle vandalism(2)	1,559	1,677	1,801	1,853	1,605	1,576	1	-15	-2
All BCS offences	11,046	15,125	18,559	19,161	16,371	14,716	33	-23	-10

Notes:

- Source: 2000 BCS.
- BCS thefts of vehicles are not directly comparable with Car Theft Index figures, due to their differing coverage.
- The BCS also asks about incidents of vehicle vandalism, which are included in the table for information only.

Table 2: Vehicle security precautions (1992, 1996 and 2000 BCS)

Percentages	1992	1996	2000
Car alarm	23	38	49
Central locking	35	50	67
Immobiliser	23	46	62
Electronic	n/a	n/a	43
Mechanical	n/a	n/a	39
Audio security ²	n/a	n/a	72
Removable stereo	n/a	n/a	41
Security pin number	n/a	n/a	53

Notes:

- Source: 1992, 1996 and 2000 BCS.
- Respondents could have more than one security measure.
- Newer vehicles are more likely to have higher levels of security. Widespread fitting of electronic immobilisers began in 1992 and was made compulsory for new cars by EU law in 1998 (Source: VCRAT).

Vehicle security improvements

In several sweeps of the BCS, respondents have been asked if their vehicles had a number of security devices. Table 2 shows the increasing use of alarms and central locking and the extent to which more recent security innovations such as electronic immobilisers and removable/security coded stereos are fitted. Around 90% of respondents also said that they rarely or never left their vehicle unlocked when it was unattended.

While the picture invites satisfaction, the levels of protection are far from complete, with (for example) only 62% of respondents claiming to have immobilisers in their vehicle. There thus remains much to do in achieving security levels where an offender will assume the existence of protection in every vehicle targeted. The BCS has not collected information on the age of stolen vehicles and older vehicles will tend to be less secure (vehicle age is now being asked for in the 2001 BCS).

Reporting

Around half of all incidents are reported to the police, although this figure conceals a great deal of variation across offence categories:

- Almost all (95%) thefts of vehicles are reported. These typically involved substantial financial loss to the victim (averaging around £2,300 for the vehicle alone according to BCS findings).
- Only 47% of thefts from vehicles and 39% of attempted thefts are reported.
- Less than one in four (24%) incidents of vehicle vandalism incidents are reported.
- Whilst individuals who lost their vehicles were almost certain to report their loss for insurance purposes, many victims of thefts from vehicles and

attempted thefts were deterred by a combination of comparatively small losses, inconvenience, and the insurance related issues of policy excesses and potential losses of no claims discounts.

The key pointer here is that police and insurance industry figures provide a good indicator of high value thefts, but they do not reflect the number of other low value incidents of thefts that go unreported.

Risks of vehicle related theft and repeat victimisation

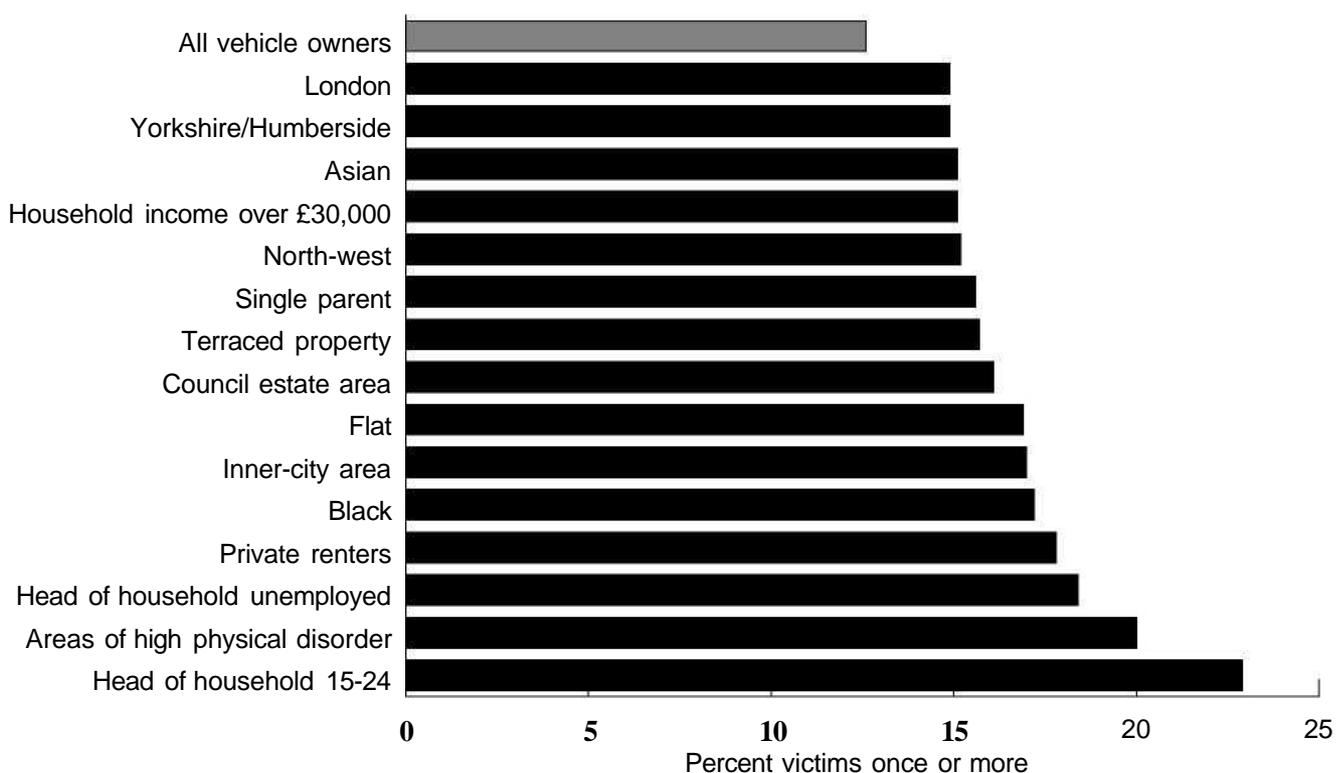
On average, 12.6% of vehicle-owning households were victims at least once in 1999. 8.1% experienced thefts from their vehicles and 3.7% attempted thefts. Less than 2% of owners had a vehicle stolen. Those who suffered more than one vehicle-related theft in a year (including attempts) account for 46% of such thefts.² As with other kinds of crime, risks vary considerably by demographic and residential characteristics, even though incidents do not always occur near the home. A number of households and areas have higher than average risks of vehicle related thefts (Figure 1).

These are household types which the prudent crime reduction partnership may wish to prioritise in local analysis and prevention initiatives. The higher than average risk for those with high household income should caution against equating victimisation risk with social deprivation.

Some victims experienced more than one incident. 76% of victims of vehicle related thefts suffered a single incident in 1999, but 17% were targeted twice, and a

² Repeat victims of theft of a vehicle account for 16% theft of vehicles, the analogous percentage for theft from vehicles is 30% (attempted thefts cannot be included in these figures as attempted thefts of and from vehicle cannot be clearly distinguished).

Figure 1: Households most at risk of vehicle related theft in 1999



further 7% targeted three times or more during the same year. Put another way, just under one in four victims suffered more than one repeat victimisation during the same calendar year. Thus the scope for preventing crime by preventing repeats is substantial. Repeat victimisation was more common for thefts from vehicles and attempted thefts, although 8% of victims of thefts of vehicles were repeat victims. The implications of this for crime reduction are twofold. First, it would be profitable for police personnel to whom crimes are made known, to ask about earlier incidents suffered, whether or not reported to the police. Second, attention in the wake of an offence combines both victim support and potential crime prevention. An incidental benefit of making these changes will be to provide a greater chance of identifying those who report vehicle crime fraudulently. The more attention police pay to vehicle thefts after an offence, the less indifferent to such crime will its perpetrators judge the police to be. It may be that those who repeatedly report thefts of vehicles should be subject to a more rigorous examination of vehicle documentation, and more checks against the Motor Insurance Anti-Fraud and Theft Register (MIAFTR).

Which cars are most at risk?

The CarTheft Index provides detailed information about the theft risk for cars.

- Overall, the theft rate for cars was 14 per thousand registered, or one car stolen for every 71 on the road. However, there is considerable variation by age and model of vehicle.
- Older vehicles, registered between 12 and 14 years ago are at most risk of being stolen, with a theft rate of 27 cars per thousand registered. Vehicles registered since 1996 have a theft rate of less than 5 per thousand registered.

Light et al. (1993) examined offenders' preferred target vehicles - older cars, familiar cars (common in the offenders' home area), and performance cars. The risks of theft for different types of vehicle can also change overtime, as offenders "catch up with new technologies, or when particular makes of car become more desirable, or when there is a demand for second hand parts from older vehicles" (Home Office, 2000).

The categories at most risk of theft were small saloons (16 thefts per thousand), followed by medium saloons and minis/superminis (14 thefts per thousand). By contrast, people carriers were least likely to be stolen, with only 4 thefts per thousand. Models within the highest theft risk group (more than 21 thefts per thousand cars) account for 22% of all vehicles on the roads in Great Britain. Table 3 shows list of the car models at highest risk of theft in 1999.

Links between most at risk owners and vehicles

A key question is whether the characteristics of the owner or the vehicle determine the chances of victimisation. The increased theft risk for older vehicles could be due to the higher levels of security on newer vehicles, but could also be affected by the probability that some of the risk factors for owners and vehicles may be related. For example, younger car owners may drive performance cars, whilst those on low incomes may be more likely to live close to offenders and drive older cars.

In inner city areas, one in four owners living in flats/bedsits suffered a vehicle-related theft incident in 1999. This level of risk is far higher than for flat dwellers in other urban and rural areas, and double the average risk of victimisation. Inner city flat dwellers may be at high risk because:

- Inner city areas are associated with higher risk levels, and concentrations of offenders
- Flat dwellers are less likely to have secure parking spaces.

1988 BCS data was used to explore the determinants of risk more closely. Mayhew, et al. (1993) found each of the following to be the important in its own right (i.e. independent of any inter-relation with other risk factors):

- Living in an inner city area.
- 'Higher income' and 'being consumerists' (probably as a result of owning more desirable and better equipped cars that were more attractive to thieves).
- Flats and terraced houses less likely to have garages.

Table 3: Vehicles at most risk of theft

Make	Model	Variant	Year	Theft rate*	No. stolen
Nissan/Datsun	Laurel/Skyline	All	Pre 1985	109	169
Porsche	911	All	1988-1990	99	51
Vauxhall	Astra Mk2	GTE	1985-1987	93	866
Ford	Orion	Other	1988-1990	92	775
Porsche	911	All	1997-1999	92	60
Rover	Metro	Other	1988-1990	91	2,086
Vauxhall	Astra Mk2	L	1985-1987	87	4,114
Austin/Morris	Metro	MG	1985-1987	86	1,047
Vauxhall	Astra Mk2	SR, SRi	1985-1987	82	412
Vauxhall	Astra Mk2	SX	1991-1993	79	123
Vauxhall	Cavalier	LXI	1988-1990	79	186

Note:

1. Source: CarTheft Index 2000.

- Street parking at night. Those who park in vulnerable places at night (including streets near the home, other streets, and estate car parks).

A number of the risk factors identified by Mayhew et al. (1993) are reflected either directly or indirectly in Figure 1 or elsewhere in this paper. This suggests a degree of continuity in determining what makes victimisation more likely. It also highlights the importance of targeted policing on localised vehicle crime hotspots. It also suggests that crime prevention and awareness campaigns about vehicle crime should be maintained, and intensified amongst key sections of the population in the high-risk groups identified.

The when and where of vehicle theft

In 1999, 28% of BCS incidents occurred at the weekend, indicating that there is little difference between the risk of thefts between weekdays and the weekend. There is little variation across the theft categories. As expected, BCS 2000 found that most

incidents (75%) happened either during the evening (between 6pm and midnight) or at night (midnight to 6 am). Again, there is little variation across different categories of theft. The finding that most incidents occurred at night also has a bearing on the location of incidents, which is discussed below.

Where incidents happened

- 64% of incidents happened in the vicinity of victims' homes, including 36% on the street outside the home and another 26% in semi-private parking areas such as drives. 17% of incidents took place in public car parks and 5% in work car parks.
- However, as cars are more likely to be parked in the vicinity of the home during the evening/night, which is the peak time for vehicle related thefts, it is unsurprising that more incidents take place there. 40% of 'daytime' thefts took place in public car parks (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Location of vehicle related thefts by daylight

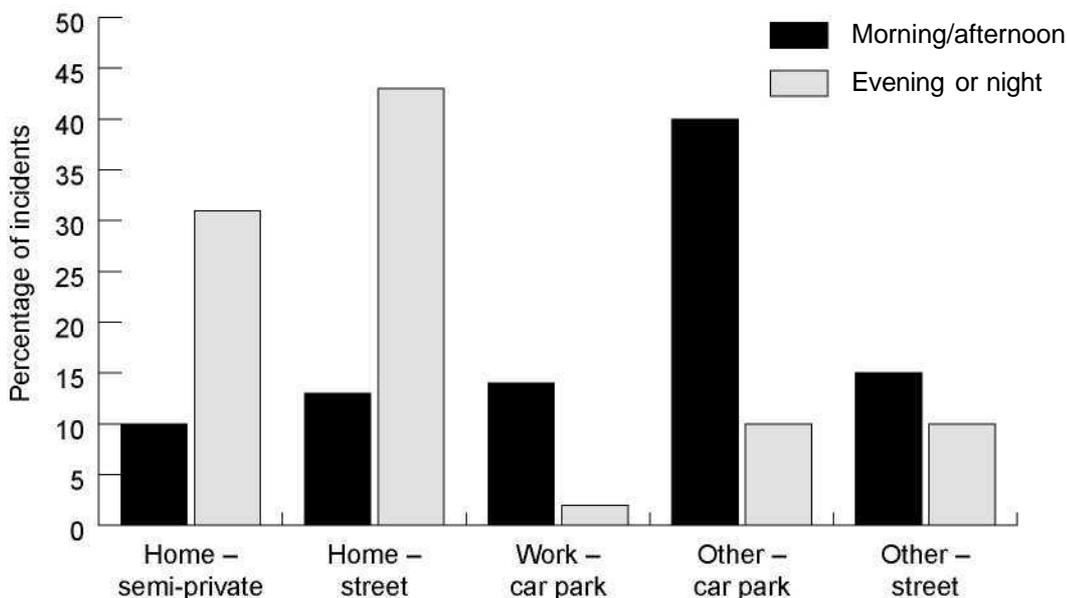
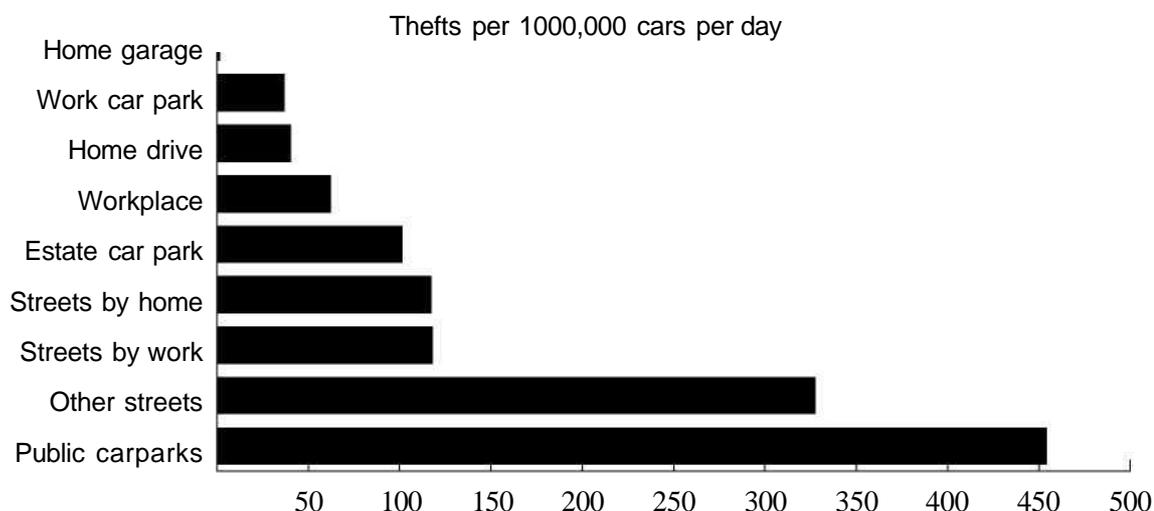


Figure 3: Risks of vehicle related thefts in different places



Note:
1. Source: 1994 BCS

Clarke and Mayhew (1996) analysed measures of parking exposure, which took into account that cars were parked in different places for different periods of time. The results in Figure 3 show that cars parked in public car parks were at much higher risk than in other locations (two hundred times more likely than cars in garages, four times more likely than in streets outside home or work, and 40% more likely than cars parked in other streets).

Understanding this pattern is important for the police and crime reduction partnerships in shaping a vehicle crime reduction policy. It means that as well as addressing high risk locations such as car parks, preventative effort should also be focussed on improved vehicle security around the home where more vehicle crime occurs.

Mode of entry

Figure 4 shows methods of entry for thefts of and from vehicles - the use of other methods was higher than in the 1998 BCS, presumably due to offenders having to overcome improved security measures. Key points about the main methods used to get into vehicles are noted below:

- Forcing the doorlock, or smashing a window, - both used in 41% of vehicle thefts. Forced doorlocks is more associated with thefts of vehicles than thefts from; the opposite being true for smashed windows.
- Unlocked doors and offenders using keys accounted for over 10% of all incidents, the majority of these being thefts from vehicles.
- Offenders tried to force doorlocks in 68% of attempted thefts, and tried to smash windows in 17% of attempts. The relatively high percentage for forced doorlocks indicates that many attempted thefts may well be attempts to steal vehicles.

The use of force invites consideration of alarms, whether sounding or silent. The possibility of alarms which alert people in their home about events surrounding their car outside is at least worth exploring. Such alarms have been advocated for some years by Prof. Ron Clarke of Rutgers University, New Jersey.

What was stolen?

A breakdown of items stolen in thefts from vehicles is shown in Table 4. The most significant indicator is that offenders appear to be increasingly targeting items left in cars that can be easily removed, rather than fixed equipment such as car parts and stereo equipment. Valuables (including money, cheques, credit cards, wallets and documents) were stolen in 16% of incidents.

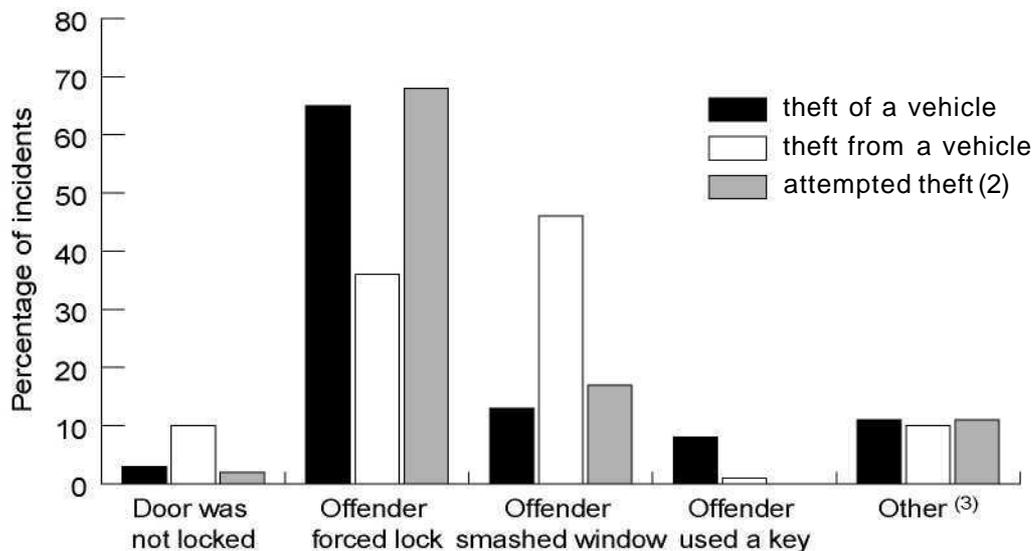
Table 4: Items stolen in thefts from vehicles

Item stolen	Thefts from vehicle	
	1998	2000
Car parts	46	37
Valuables	13	16
Car radio	28	23
Other	15	23
Tools	6	8
Telephone	5	4
Fuel	5	3
Electrical equipment	1	2
Bicycle	0	<1
Camera	1	1

Notes:

- Source 1998 and 2000 BCS.
- The valuables category includes luggage, purses/wallets, cash, cheque books, credit cards, clothes and documents. Electrical equipment includes television, video and computer equipment. The other category consists of goods not elsewhere classified.

Figure 4: Methods of entry used in vehicle related thefts



- Notes:
- Source: 2000 BCS
 - For incidents of attempted theft, victims were asked how the offender tried to get into their vehicle.
 - Other methods of entry used included cutting through fuel lines and breaking off petrol caps, cutting through the soft tops of convertibles, jemmmying doors open, prising out windscreens, by-passing central locking and alarms, and getting access to the car via the boot. A number of incidents mentioned security devices that were either defective, not activated, or absent (such as insecure passenger doors, boot lids, or fuel caps).

- Car parts (37% of incidents) and car radios (23%) were still the most commonly stolen items, although they appear to be becoming less popular.
- The theft of goods such as tools, telephones, fuel and other (unspecified) goods has become a little more popular.
- These changes in offenders' behaviour may be related to vehicle security improvements.

Analysis of what was stolen reveals some surprises, of which one will be briefly discussed. This is the high prevalence of theft of vehicle parts in 1998 and 2000 Surveys, contrasting with earlier sweeps of the BCS. Sallybanks and Thomas (2000) have noted the growth of theft of external parts as an emerging sub-problem within a generally declining crime type. They note the existence of expensive accessories and the increasing cost of vehicle parts relative to the cost of new vehicles. Marking systems and enforcement action against parts dealers undertaken jointly by police and trading standards departments are among obvious responses to this emerging problem.

Recovery of stolen vehicles

Rates of recovery of stolen vehicles provide some indication of how many thefts are likely to be at the more professional end of the scale (see Webb and Laycock, 1992 and Sallybanks and Brown, 1999). In cases where the intention is to use the vehicle temporarily for casual use - sometimes known as 'joyriding' or 'twocing' (taking without consent) - the vehicle is usually recovered after the offender has abandoned it. Where cars are targeted for permanent removal, either to be used, ringed³, or stripped and sold as parts, recovery is less likely.

The current BCS indicates that 58% of vehicles stolen in 1999 were recovered, a lower proportion than in 1997 (63%) and 1995 (61%), and much lower than in 1991 and 1993 when recovery figures were in excess of 70%. Overall, the picture from the BCS and police figures, suggest that opportunist vehicle thieves are operating less frequently than at the beginning of the 1990s. This may be a reflection of improved security and other car theft initiatives, although reduced motivation on the part of offenders may also play a part.

The pattern of vehicle theft outlined above is also reflected in the condition of vehicles when recovered. 31% were damaged beyond repair, and another 24% suffered extensive damage, indicating that casual rather than professional car thieves would have been responsible for most of these thefts.

The decline in recovery rates may reflect either a relative increase in professional theft or fraud by the purported victim ('give-ups'). The BCS is clearly unsuitable for estimating give-ups.

Practice pointers for local action

Local analysis building on BCS data are always helpful. As for the national picture which should inform crime reduction efforts, BCS data shows a declining vehicle crime problem, albeit one in which sub-problems such as the theft of vehicle parts and the non-recovery of

stolen vehicles loom larger than before. The data show increasing levels of vehicle security, which nonetheless fall well below complete protection and leave much scope for local action in uprating security levels.

The data allow those groups at high risk of vehicle crime to be identified. These include households with high income, showing that vehicle crime risk cannot be reduced to area levels of social deprivation. Defensible vehicle crime reduction initiatives cannot forgo attention to these identified high risk groups. Prior victims are one group in respect of which the police already possess much data, and repeat victimisation is an important factor generating levels of vehicle related crime.

Although risk per hour is lower when a vehicle is parked outside one's home, the longer periods that it is parked there for mean that the bulk of the vehicle theft problem involves vehicles parked at or near one's home. This fact has been too often overlooked in framing preventive effort.

The problem of car park security is well documented, and VCRAT and ACPO have identified measures to improve industry standards in this area. However, since local problems may be distinctive, local data, where available, should be used, to identify the nature of the vehicle theft problem. The main pointer for action, concerns reinforcing of the message to vehicle owners about the basic measures they can take to reduce their risks of victimisation. Several key BCS findings are noted below:

- Four in ten BCS daytime incidents occurred in car parks. In many instances it will not be possible for motorists to park on the street as traffic policing encourages the use of car parks. Pressure could be put on the responsible authorities to improve car park security, whilst owners should be encouraged to use secured car parks wherever possible.
- Four in ten evening/night-time incidents took place in streets near the home. Vehicle owners should be able to reduce their chance of victimisation by changing their parking behaviour, by using their garage, if they have one, or avoiding badly lit street parking areas.
- In 10% of theft related incidents, car doors had been left unlocked, giving the offender instant access to the vehicle. The fact that one in ten theft incidents involved unlocked cars points to the continuing need to reinforce the message to vehicle owners about the need to lock vehicles when they are left unattended even for a short time. The Home Office has recently run a communications campaign focussing on the risks on leaving cars unlocked and/or leaving personal belongings or other items exposed, which should have some effect on vehicle owners' behaviour.
- The percentage of thefts from vehicles where car parts and car stereo equipment were stolen is lower than 1998, partly as a result of increased security levels. However, a significant proportion of

³ Ringing - the process whereby a vehicle is given a false identity (usually taken from a scrap car) by removing the VIN (Vehicle Identification Number), and fitting false number plates. VCRAT have identified better regulation of the salvage industry, and improved co-operation with the insurance industry as a key step towards preventing written off vehicles' identities being used to disguise stolen cars.

incidents involved thefts of valuables, telephones and tools, possibly indicating that offenders are targeting different goods.

information on partnership approaches, good practice, tackling local problems and funding sources. This can be accessed at

Further guidance on reducing vehicle crime is available from the Vehicle Crime Toolkit - a web-based source of

www.crimereduction.gov.uk/toolkits.htm.

The British Crime Survey

The British Crime Survey (BCS) measures crime against people living in private households in England and Wales. It has been conducted by the Home Office eight times since 1982 - the most recent sweeps being in 1998 and 2000. Each sweep measured crime in the previous year. From 2001, the BCS is moving to an annual cycle. The 2001 BCS is now at the fieldwork stage.

The BCS and recorded vehicle crime figures have different coverage are calculated by different methods (for instance the BCS excludes commercial vehicles). As such, the overall BCS and recorded vehicle crime figures are not directly comparable. However, a like with like comparison is made in Kershaw et al. (2000), Sections 2 and 3, having adjusted for the number of recorded offences that were attempts, or committed against commercial vehicles.

Further details about the BCS are available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/bcs1.html>.

The Car Theft Index

The Car Theft Index 2000, published by the Home Office in December 2000, is based on Police and DVLA records and estimates the risk of theft per thousand vehicles on the road for each make and model of car in Great Britain in 1999, by year of registration. The models are then banded into the following groups:

Red Highest risk (more than 21 cars in every 1,000 on the road stolen).

AmberMedium risk (between 4 and 21 cars in every 1,000 on the road stolen).

Green Lower risk (up to cars in every 1,000 on the road stolen).

The Crime Reduction Programme - The Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team (VCRAT) was established in September 1998 to develop and implement a strategy to meet the government's Public Service Agreement target to reduce vehicle crime by 30% by March 2004 (based on 1998/99 vehicle crime figures).

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