

IMMOBILIZERS AND AUTO THEFT: WINNIPEG'S AUTO THEFT SUPPRESSION
STRATEGY

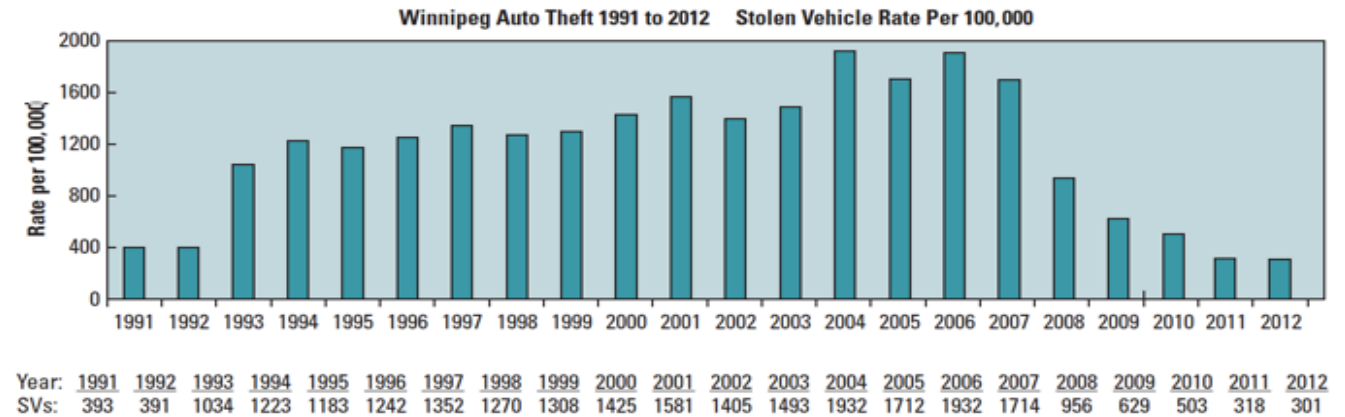
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Winnipeg, Manitoba is a Canadian city of nearly 700,000 people. Like most cities in Western Canada, crime rates are typically higher than the national average – though low compared with most cities in the United States. However, from 2003 to 2008, Winnipeg had North America’s highest rate of vehicle theft. In 2004 and 2006, when auto theft rates peaked, Winnipeg had Canada’s 4th highest crime rate and a motor vehicle theft rate that was 4 times the national average. Nearly 1 in every 5 Criminal Code offenses in Winnipeg in 2006 was a vehicle theft. The 2006 vehicle theft rate was 67 percent higher than the next highest Canadian city.

The auto theft problem began in 1993 when the number of vehicles stolen in Winnipeg nearly tripled. Rates continued rising until they reached 1,932 per 100,000 population (Figure 1) in 2004. After a slight decline in 2005, they rose again in 2006. These thefts were costly. The danger to Winnipeg residents was also a major concern because of the recklessness of the auto thieves. In 2007, two people were killed by drivers of stolen vehicles and in one highly-publicized case, an early morning jogger was seriously injured after being deliberately run down by a youth driving a stolen car. In one 16-month period in 2007/08, 8 drivers deliberately tried to run down police officers with stolen vehicles. Vehicle thieves also frequently attempted to ram police cars. Some youth engaged in other dangerous behaviour such as jamming down vehicle accelerators and launching driverless vehicles down city streets and into parking garages.

Figure 1

Winnipeg Auto Theft Rates 1991 – 2012



Most Winnipeg residents had either been directly victimized by auto theft or knew someone who had been victimized, and personal accounts and media reports made it clear that the public felt vehicle theft was a major problem.

In 2001, the province had established the Manitoba Auto Theft Task Force made up of representatives from Manitoba Justice, Manitoba Public Insurance (MPI)¹, Winnipeg Police Service (WPS), Royal Canadian Mounted Police, prosecutions, and the University of Manitoba. Their initial efforts involved measures such as bait cars, fingerprinting all recovered stolen vehicles, and restricting licensing for drivers convicted of vehicle theft. These early efforts met with some success and rates fell 12 percent in 2002. However, rates soon resumed their upward climb as these measures were not sufficient to deal with Winnipeg's highly-motivated vehicle thieves. During the last quarter of 2004, the problem was spiralling out of control and in November of that year reached an annualized rate of over 3,000/100,000. At this point, the Task Force developed a plan for the Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy.

Analysis of the Problem

Why did auto theft rates rise so dramatically in Winnipeg and why did they remain high for so long? The answer is that auto theft became an important part of youth culture in parts of the city. Virtually all the stolen vehicles are used for joyriding or as temporary transportation and are eventually recovered. A small number of high-end stolen vehicles are sold and there have been small-scale chop shops, but the primary motivation for stealing cars is excitement, not money. For almost a decade, the favourite targets were Chrysler products, particularly minivans, manufactured in the early 1990s, which were particularly easy to steal.

A study, which included interviews with young offenders, found that they stole cars for excitement and to show off for their peers and that they were very committed to continuing to steal cars (Linden and Anderson, 2014). The backgrounds of the youth were similar to those of other serious delinquents. They lived in single-parent families and over half had run away from home at least once. There was a high rate of criminal involvement among immediate family members. Respondents did poorly in school and had high rates of truancy, suspension, and expulsion.

The youth began stealing cars at a very young age. Some 10 year-olds were prolific offenders and the average age of first involvement was 12. Many were involved in a broad range of offenses and had high rates of alcohol and drug use.

Clearance rates were very low – around 10 percent – showing that conventional policing solutions to the problem were ineffective.

The Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy

¹ Manitoba has a provincial auto insurance company that insures all vehicles in the province.

In response to this problem, the Auto Theft Task Force developed a multi-faceted crime reduction program which had 3 components:

- 1) *Intensive supervision of offenders.* Because serious offenders (typically 100-150 youth throughout the program) were typically under release conditions such as curfews, the youth justice system had some ability to control their behaviour. With funding support from Manitoba Public Insurance, extra staff were hired by Manitoba Justice to enforce these release conditions. Youth were contacted in person every day by probation officers or police and contacted by phone every three hours. Youth who violated their conditions of release were apprehended by the police and many were held in custody for relatively short periods of time for their breaches.
- 2) *Dealing with underlying risk factors among the youth.* Probation officers focused much of their attention on working with youth and their families and schools to help them to get their lives back on track. There were a number of support programs established with community partners such as the Winnipeg School Division and Big Brothers and Big Sisters.
- 3) *Electronic immobilizers.* Manitoba Public Insurance funded two immobilizer programs. The first made free immobilizers available for the most at-risk vehicles. This program resulted in the installation of 63,000 immobilizers. However, while the program protected those vehicles, the number was not sufficient to avoid displacement to non-protected vehicles and it had little impact on theft rates. Therefore in 2007, the Manitoba government made immobilizers compulsory for the 50,000 most at-risk vehicles and these installations were completed in September, 2008. After these immobilizers had been installed, offenders learned to steal other types of vehicles, notably those with GM Passlock II immobilizers. This led to a second list of the 50,000 most at-risk vehicles and these installations were completed in September, 2009. There did not appear to be any further displacement to other vehicle types.

As a result of lobbying by a number of groups, including auto theft investigators associations and the Manitoba Auto Theft Task Force, the Canadian government passed legislation requiring all new vehicles sold in Canada after September, 2007 to have high-quality immobilizers installed, so there was no need to extend the program to cover additional vehicles.

Results: Did the Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy Reduce Vehicle Theft?

The reductions following the implementation of the program were significant. From 2006 to 2011 the overall reduction in auto theft was 83.5 percent. The yearly reductions were:

2006- 2007	11.3 percent
2007-2008	44.2 percent
2008-2009	34.2 percent
2009-2010	20.0 percent

2010-2011

36.8 percent

Following these declines, the vehicle theft rate in Winnipeg has remained relatively stable since that time.

These reductions in vehicle theft can likely be attributed to the prevention programs implemented in Winnipeg. The decline in rates was far greater than the decline nationally and was far greater than the decline in any other Canadian city. The initial declines can be attributed to the impact of the intensive supervision of high-rate offenders, but the mandatory immobilizer program substantially accelerated this decline.

The program resulted in very significant savings. The program cost about \$52 million most of which was for the immobilizer program. Manitoba Public Insurance calculated that the savings up to spring 2010 were \$90 million and that savings would continue to accrue after that date. Conservatively, then, the savings to vehicle owners in Winnipeg were at least \$2 for every \$1 invested. And even more importantly fewer people were killed and injured by drivers of stolen vehicles and far fewer car owners were inconvenienced by having their vehicles stolen.

Finally, since government had made immobilizer installation mandatory for high-risk vehicles, there could have been a significant negative public response if there had been a significant number of immobilizer failures. Because of a very rigorous quality control program, there were few problems with the immobilizer program. None of the immobilizers was defeated by an auto thief and there was a very low rate of immobilizers failing to function properly.

Did the Program Result in Displacement?

There were concerns that reducing vehicle theft would lead to an increase in carjackings and in crimes such as burglary and robbery. However, there have been few carjackings in Winnipeg (between 30 and 50 per year) and rates of burglary, robbery, and theft from auto declined between 2006 and 2009. Thus, the evidence suggests a diffusion of benefits rather than displacement to other offenses. This is likely because the intensive supervision by police and probation has helped the high-risk youth stay out of trouble and because the work of probation staff has helped some to change their behaviour.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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