



THE WINNIPEG AUTO THEFT SUPPRESSION STRATEGY

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THE WINNIPEG AUTO THEFT SUPPRESSION STRATEGY (WATSS)

ABSTRACT

Project Selection: From 2003 to 2008, Winnipeg had North America's highest rates of vehicle theft. Rates peaked at 1932/100,000 in 2004 and again in 2006. The cost of stolen vehicles was nearly \$40 million/year, but the danger to residents was an even greater concern because of the recklessness of the auto thieves. The Manitoba Auto Theft Task Force had tried several tactics to address the problem since 2001, but despite some temporary successes rates continued to climb. In response to this problem, WATSS was planned in 2005 and fully implemented in 2006.

Analysis Techniques: Crime analysis was at the core of the vehicle theft prevention strategy. Data sources included police statistics, insurance company statistics, police files, court files, interviews with police and justice officials, and interviews with young offenders. The analysis gave a detailed picture of the patterns, causes, and consequences of vehicle theft in Winnipeg. Most thefts were committed by young offenders and virtually all the vehicles were stolen for joyriding. Vehicle theft was an important part of the youth culture in some inner-city neighbourhoods. Certain makes and models, particularly older Chrysler vehicles, were extremely vulnerable to theft.

Solutions: The Manitoba Auto Theft Task Force developed the Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy (WATSS). WATSS is a comprehensive strategy that involves several partners including the Winnipeg Police Service, Manitoba Justice (including youth probation and Crown prosecutors), and Manitoba Public Insurance. The Strategy has three components: a tiered approach to at-risk youth with intensive community supervision of high-risk youth; a program requiring compulsory vehicle immobilizers for the most at-risk vehicles; and youth programming addressing the underlying causes of vehicle theft.

Results: A first version of WATSS, which focused mainly on supervision of high-risk youth, was implemented in September, 2005. Initially the strategy was successful and vehicle thefts dropped by 16 percent in 2005. However, in the first quarter of 2006 rates rose by 26 percent. The strategy was revisited and additional components were added. These included mandatory immobilizers for the most at-risk vehicles and enhancing community supervision and enforcement by adding 5 members to the police Stolen Auto Unit. Many of the specific tactics used by the strategy were also refined. The augmented strategy has been very successful. Thefts declined by 29 percent in 2007, 42 percent in 2008, and 34 percent in 2009. Rates as of April 22, 2010 were 73 percent lower than in 2006 and if we consider only completed thefts, rates have dropped by 80 percent. Savings attributed to the program are estimated to be over \$30 million/year.

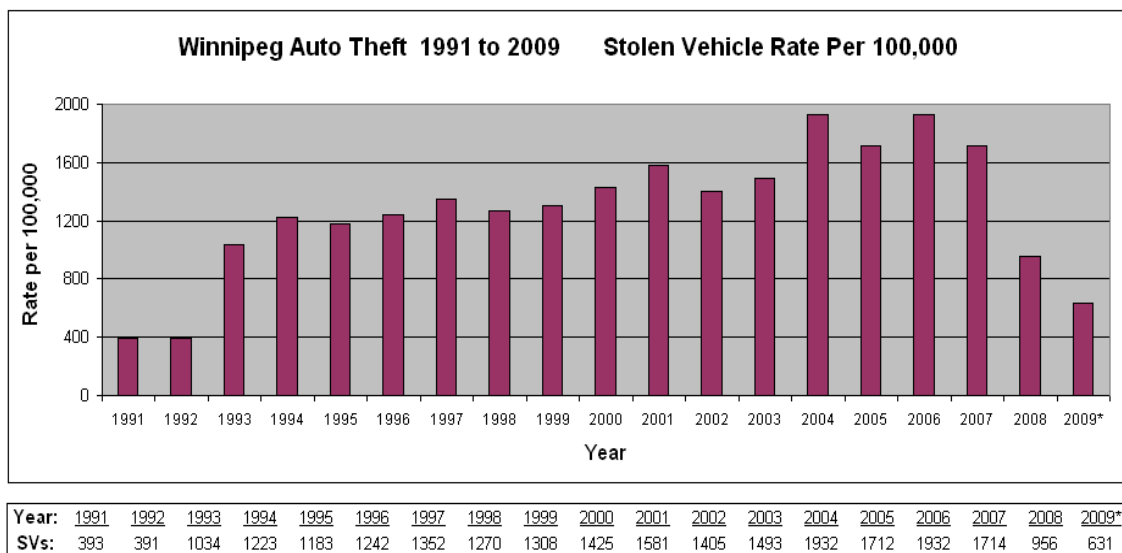
Institutionalization: WATSS is a continuing program within the Winnipeg Police Service and its partners. Because of the program's success, many of its innovations have been incorporated in a new gang violence initiative. These elements include: a focus on high-risk offenders; partnerships with probation services and prosecutors; a link between district platoons and a specialized unit, and a social development component run by probation services and community partners.

PROJECT SELECTION: WINNIPEG HAD THE HIGHEST RATE OF AUTO THEFT IN NORTH AMERICA FROM 2003 TO 2008

Winnipeg, Manitoba is Canada's 8th largest city, with a population of nearly 700,000 people. From 2003 to 2008, Winnipeg had North America's highest rates of motor 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 very 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 - 2009



Source: 1991 – 1994: Winnipeg Police Service, Annual Report data
 1995 – 2008: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada
 2009: Projection based on Winnipeg Police uniform crime reporting data

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 (WATSS).

ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES: THE VEHICLE THEFT PROBLEM IN WINNIPEG

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 manufactured in the early 1990s, which were particularly easy to steal. 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.

Offense Patterns

Most vehicle thefts are reported so we know a great deal about theft targets and about geographic patterns. Vehicles are stolen from all parts of Winnipeg, though theft rates are higher in the core area. While there were some fluctuations, there were no important monthly or day of week patterns. About 95 percent of all stolen cars are recovered, so they not being sold or chopped. Only about 10 percent of thefts resulted in arrests.

Certain types of vehicles were targeted, particularly older Chrysler products. These vehicles were very easy to steal and had high theft risk rates. The ease with which these vehicles could be stolen by children as young as 10 years of age shows the role that target vulnerability played in the rise of the auto theft culture and was an issue that had to be addressed if we were to significantly reduce auto theft rates. Young offenders were involved in most vehicle thefts.

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

Offender Patterns

While we had good documentation of the offense patterns, we also needed to learn more about the offenders. Why were some young people so attracted to auto theft²?

University researchers conducted a study in which 43 incarcerated young auto thieves were interviewed. The main findings were:

- Most lived in single-parent families. 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. They were 2-3 years below expected grade levels, and had high rates of truancy, suspension and expulsion.
- Average age of first involvement was 12 and the average age when they began stealing cars themselves was 13.
- Respondents were involved in a range of offenses in addition to vehicle theft. They had high rates of alcohol and drug use and enjoyed a thrill-seeking lifestyle.
- Most did little planning and seemed willing to steal cars any place and any time. They used the vehicles for joyriding and for short-term transportation and usually just abandoned the vehicles. Many would try to steal several vehicles in a day.
- Peers were important. Many respondents reported gang associations. Virtually all had friends who stole cars, most reported peer pressure to steal cars, and they obtained status from stealing cars. This supports the conclusion that there is an extensive adolescent car theft culture in some parts of Winnipeg.
- Some targets were clearly more attractive than others. There was a strong preference for stealing older Chrysler vehicles.
- Most respondents were not concerned about the consequences and any fear they had was not sufficient to overcome the thrill of stealing cars or the peer pressure.

In addition to this formal study, police officers also spent many hours interviewing apprehended youth in order to gain a more detailed understanding of the problem.

Review of Effective Programs

The planning team conducted a detailed review of the evidence on vehicle theft prevention. The review concluded that electronic vehicle immobilizers were effective and found that some youth programs had potential. We also learned that the Regina Police Service had a successful intensive supervision program for young offenders on conditional release. Task Force members visited Regina to learn about this program.

² The question might also have been worded as: “Why was auto theft so attractive to young people that some would go out in -30 C weather to spend the day stealing and abandoning 5 cars?”

Analysis Summary

Our problem analysis told us a great deal about Winnipeg's vehicle theft problem:

- Rates were extremely high and youth were involved in most of the thefts.
- About 95 percent of stolen autos were recovered, most within 24 hours and most were inexpensive older vehicles. This indicated that the problem was joyriding, not theft for profit.
- Clearance rates were around 10 percent, indicating that conventional investigative and enforcement tactics were not effective. Analysis of court statistics showed that sentences for vehicle theft were typically very light, again suggesting that conventional youth justice measures would not alleviate the problem.
- The Most At-Risk Vehicle list included extremely vulnerable vehicles, particularly Chrysler minivans built in the early 1990s that had a yearly risk rate as high as 1 in 6.
- Some neighbourhoods had higher rates, but the pattern of thefts was city-wide.
- Auto theft was part of the youth culture in some Winnipeg neighbourhoods. This conclusion was based on interviews with young offenders, and was reinforced by interviews with police, probation officers, and prosecutors.
- A scan indicated that intensive community supervision of high-risk offenders, some types of electronic immobilizers, and some youth programs had been successful in reducing vehicle theft in other jurisdictions.

SOLUTIONS: THE WINNIPEG AUTO THEFT SUPPRESSION STRATEGY

A Tiered Approach to Countering Auto Theft

The Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy (WATSS) has three components. The first provides different levels of programming and intervention for youth at different levels of risk for vehicle theft involvement. Program staff reviewed files on all young offenders involved in vehicle theft and classified them into Levels 2, 3, and 4. Level 1 youth were not identified individually but programming was delivered in neighbourhoods with high levels of involvement in vehicle theft. The actions to be taken at each level included:

Level 1: Youth-at-Risk

- Public education, prevention and intervention
- Parents, care-givers and teachers involved
- Support from schools, police school resource officers, and youth service agencies

Level 2: Early Involved

- Prevention and diversion
- Manitoba Justice's "Turnabout" intervention and referral program for youth under 12 years (who cannot be charged criminally, under Canadian law)
- Alternative measures as appropriate

Level 3: Repeaters

- Enhanced case management and supervision by youth corrections
- Youth and family involvement
- Increased offender programming directed at auto theft

Level 4: Very High-Risk to Re-offend

- Daily in-person contact with probation officer, seven days a week
- Other contact (telephone) every three hours
- Absolute curfew enforced
- Intensive programming with families and schools
- Zero tolerance for non-compliance
- Prosecutor to advocate for custody (pre-trial/sentence)

Program Components

1. Intensive Supervision – Level 3 and Level 4 offenders were typically in the community under conditions of release such as curfews. WATSS provided intensive supervision to enforce these 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 so they did not have the opportunity to reoffend. Initially, there were about 200 level 3 and 4 offenders, so additional staff were required. Fourteen specialized youth corrections staff were hired to form a new Auto Theft Unit. Their role is to ensure that all release conditions are met and to work with the highest-risk youth and their families to help reduce their criminal involvement. The police Stolen Auto Unit works very closely with the probation staff to provide intensive supervision for high-risk youth.

2. Electronic Immobilizers - The second component of the program involved installing electronic immobilizers in high-risk vehicles. Electronic immobilizers disable a vehicle's starter, ignition, and fuel systems unless a coded transponder is used. Research in several countries, including Australia, showed that immobilizers were effective in reducing auto theft. MPI provided free immobilizers to owners of the most at-risk vehicles. This program resulted in 63,000 vehicles having immobilizers installed. As noted below, this number was not enough to avoid displacement so immobilizers were later made compulsory for high-risk vehicles.

3. Dealing with Underlying Causes - The third component of the Strategy involved addressing the social causes of auto theft by working with young people and their families to try to reduce the number of young people who find auto theft an appealing form of recreation. Much of this work is done by youth probation staff. Support programs for high-risk offenders and their families are run with community partners including the Winnipeg School Division, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and New Directions for Children, Youth, Adults and Families. The goals are to move current offenders away from auto theft and to end the flow of new recruits to this dangerous and costly pastime.

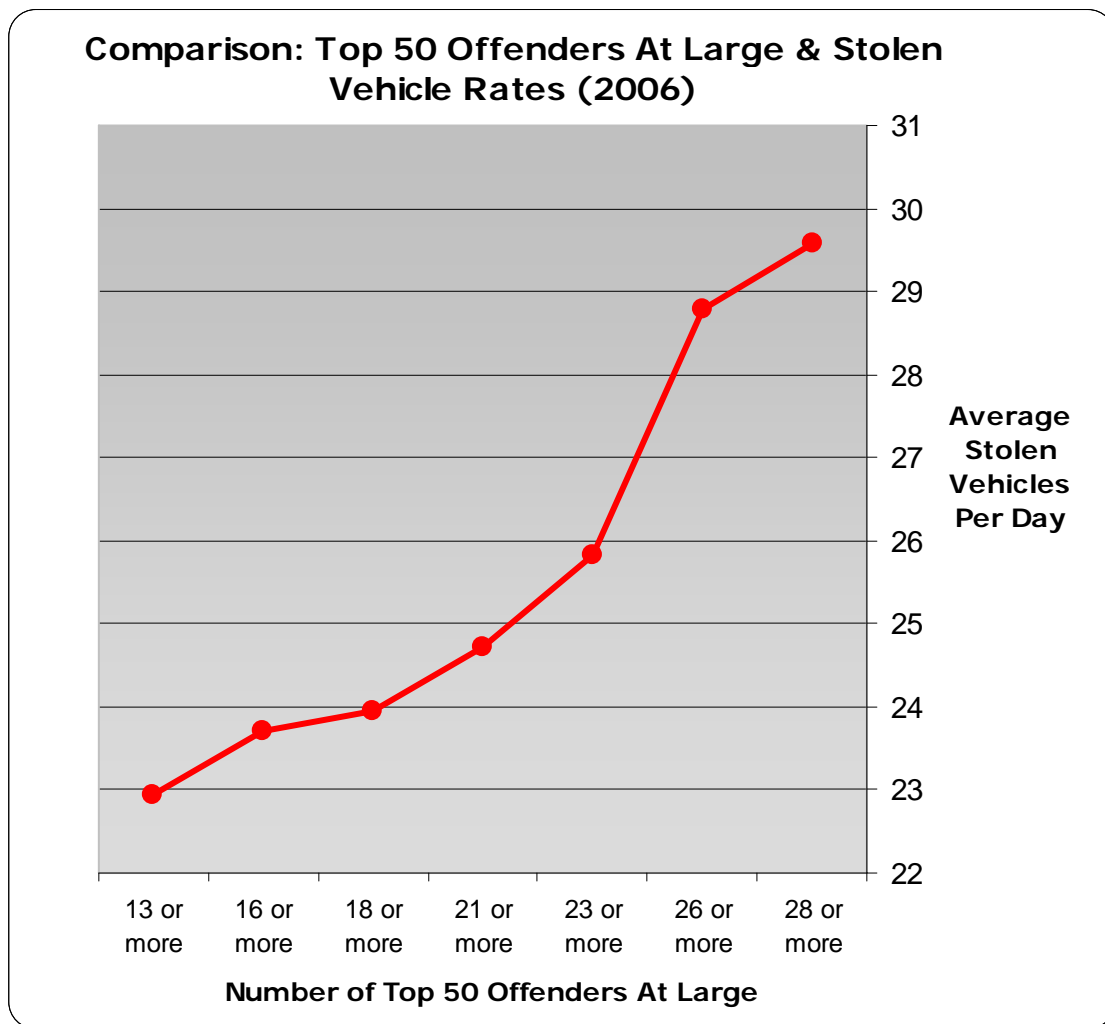
Objective

The objective of WATSS was to reduce vehicle theft by 20 percent over a 2-year period. This was a relatively modest target, but since our previous successes had been only temporary, we felt it was a realistic goal.

Re-Analysis: Responding to Another Increase in Vehicle Theft Rates

WATSS was initially successful. Theft rates declined by just 8 percent between January and August, 2005, but by 27 percent from the beginning of WATSS in September, 2005 to December, 2005. However, an increase of 26 percent in the first quarter of 2006 indicated more changes were required. A major change to the program resulted from work done by a supervisor in the WPS Stolen Auto Unit who correlated the number of the top 50 offenders who were in the community each day and the number of cars stolen on that day (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Relationship Between Number of Top 50 Offenders in the Community and Stolen Vehicle Rates



This analysis clearly showed that the more of these high-risk youth who were on the street each day, the more cars that were stolen. Other crime analysis supported this conclusion. For example, the police knew that certain young offenders preferred particular models of vehicles, and when they were in custody or under effective supervision in the community thefts of these particular types of vehicles dropped significantly. These findings highlighted the need for improving the offender-oriented approach used in the intensive supervision program.

The Auto Theft Task Force reports directly to the Minister of Justice, so a briefing was arranged at which the police supervisor was able to present his findings personally to the Minister. The Task Force proposed adding more police officers to improve community supervision. As a result, the Department of Justice funded 5 more positions for the WPS Stolen Auto Unit allowing them to provide round the clock shift coverage. The police also shifted more of their resources to dealing with high-risk offenders rather than investigating vehicle thefts.

Another weakness of the initial version of WATSS was that the voluntary immobilizer program did not have sufficient penetration to avoid displacement. If would-be thieves could not start the first Dodge Caravan they encountered because it had an immobilizer, it was easy to find a similar vehicle without one. Thus, the Manitoba government passed legislation in September, 2007 making it compulsory for the 50,000 most at-risk vehicles to have immobilizers before they could be registered or reregistered. The list included all vehicles with odds of up to 1 in 100 to be stolen in a year. All immobilizer installation costs were paid by Manitoba Public Insurance.

This mandatory program was phased in over 12 months. However, crime analysts noted that as favourite targets were protected, offenders began to target other vehicles, particularly those equipped with the General Motors Passlock II immobilizer. While these GM immobilizers do offer some security, several experienced offenders had learned how to defeat them and passed this knowledge on to their peers. Consequently, when installations of the first list were completed in September, 2008, a second list of most at-risk vehicles was established. This list involved another 50,000 vehicles. Immobilizer installations in these vehicles were completed September, 2009. There is no new evidence of serious displacement to other types of vehicles. Because the remaining vehicles include a diverse range of makes and models (typically low-volume models), it is unlikely that offenders will develop enough expertise in stealing them to significantly affect theft rates. All new vehicles sold in Canada after September, 2007 were required to have effective immobilizers installed.

Coordination

This comprehensive strategy requires a high level of coordination. This coordination begins with the Auto Theft Task Force that oversees all elements of the Strategy. It is comprised of senior representatives from the Winnipeg Police Service, Manitoba Justice, and Manitoba Public Insurance. Below the Task Force are Working Groups for each of the 4 levels of youth. The most important is the Level 4 group which meets weekly and

which is made up of representatives from the WPS, youth corrections, prosecutions, and MPI. The Working Groups develop policies and procedures and ensure that the system works as seamlessly as possible. For example, one early problem was that for legal and administrative reasons it was difficult to ensure that early-involved offenders were placed into vehicle theft prevention programs. The police, prosecutions, and corrections all changed their procedures and established a central referral point to speed up case processing and to get these youth into programs as quickly as possible. Front-line staff from the different agencies work together on a daily basis as a team and have eliminated many of the normal organizational boundaries. This effective coordination means that offenders are often arrested within hours of being breached for violating release conditions³. This results in non-compliant high risk offenders being taken off the streets as quickly as possible. This teamwork has been a key to the Strategy's success.

The prosecutor's office also works closely with the other Strategy participants. Two vehicle theft prosecutors take great effort to carefully prepare cases and to inform judges about the seriousness of vehicle theft and the continued involvement of chronic offenders.

There is also a high degree of coordination within the Winnipeg Police Service. The department's Executive augmented the work of the Stolen Auto Unit by starting the Platoon Representative program. Each platoon in the five uniform divisions has one or two designated reps who receive specialized training and who work with the Stolen Auto Unit on vehicle theft within their districts. This program has been a key element in the Strategy as the reps provide their platoons with information about current offenders, hotspots, and other intelligence. They also pass on intelligence from their platoon members to the Stolen Auto Unit.

Implementation Issues

Many potentially successful crime reduction initiatives have failed because of implementation problems. WATSS used several measures to ensure the Strategy was implemented as planned.

Leadership - Strong leadership was in place at all levels. Frequent meetings and open discussion ensured that everyone knew about the Strategy and worked together to implement it. Turnover of personnel was kept to a minimum to ensure continuity.

Accountability - Because of their role as a major funder, MPI developed a business plan that specified practices such as the number of contacts made with individuals under supervision, and mandated 3 external evaluations during the first 2 years of the Strategy. The Task Force and working group structures facilitate accountability. Most issues are raised and resolved at the Task Force or at the working group level.

Communications - Internal communication was a priority. Changes in the program were quickly disseminated and the Task Force and working groups enabled constant input from the people working at the street level. Bottom-up and top-down communication led to many important changes in the program.

³ Arrests made by members of the WPS Stolen Auto Unit increased from 180 in 2005 to 424 in 2008.

ASSESSMENT: DID WATSS REDUCE VEHICLE THEFT?

Several times over the past decade, Winnipeg had reductions in vehicle theft that were not sustained. However, the reductions since 2006 have been significant. Between January, 2007 and April, 2010 vehicle theft rates dropped by 73 percent. If we consider only completed thefts (rather than including attempts), the reduction from 2007 to April 2010 has been 80 percent. These reductions are far greater than for any other Canadian city or other Manitoba communities. There were also significant financial benefits. The total investment (mostly for the immobilizer program) was about \$52 million. Savings to date are about \$90 million and Manitoba Public Insurance forecasts ongoing savings of at least \$30 million per year based on a theft rate close to the current level⁴.

Displacement or Diffusion of Benefits?

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.

Webber Seavey Award Goals

The final section will briefly describe how the WATSS program has addressed the Webber Seavey award goals.

Continual Improvement of Services to the Community - Auto theft was a major concern in Winnipeg. It was a major focus of the media and a regular topic in the provincial legislature. The WATSS program has had a major impact on community safety and the reduction in auto thefts represents a reduction of 16 percent in the city's overall crime rate. This reduction is the major reason why Winnipeg's crime rate dropped from the 4th highest in Canada in 2006 to the 8th highest in 2008⁵. The program has been modified several times and is continually reviewed.

Strengthening of Police Relations and Promotion of Community Participation - The program allowed the police to work with many different segments of the community. For example, school resource officers (who are WPS members) worked with teachers and students to deliver school based programs. In addition, many different community agencies have been involved in delivering services to youth at different risk levels.

⁴ Spending was estimated to the end of FY 2008/09. The average cost per theft is \$3920 and for attempts \$1651. MPI's actuary has forecast annual savings increasing to \$37.4 million in 2011.

⁵ Statistics Canada crime rate figures for 2009 will not be released until July, 2010.

Effective Use of Resources - Much of the WATSS strategy, including the personnel in the Stolen Auto Unit, has been funded by Manitoba Public Insurance and by the provincial government. The success of the Strategy has ensured continued funding. The decision to concentrate police resources on high-risk offenders has been cost-effective.

Enhancement of Communications Within and Cooperation Among Agencies - An important achievement of WATSS has been the cooperation between police, probation personnel, and prosecutors. Many of the police officers who have worked on WATSS have said that one of the things they most enjoyed about the assignment was that they finally got a chance to see the justice system working as a true 'system'. One example of this is a communication protocol that allowed breaches identified by probation officers to be communicated to the Stolen Auto Unit immediately following the breach. Another innovation has been the use of platoon representatives linked to the Stolen Auto Unit. Every shift of patrol officers in every district of the city includes a platoon representative with auto theft expertise. This has proven to be a very effective way of breaking down the barriers that sometimes exist between regular patrol officers and specialized units such as the Stolen Auto Unit.

Development of Creative and Innovative Approaches that Promote Quality and Excellence in Law Enforcement - WATSS has several innovative features. First, the intensive supervision component demonstrates the success of the individualized deterrence strategy that was used so successfully in the Boston Gun Project⁶. Concentrating resources on individual high-risk offenders is one of the most promising new crime reduction strategies and potentially can be applied to many other offences. Second, WATSS demonstrates the potential of comprehensive crime reduction strategies that combine several types of intervention focused on a particular crime problem. WATSS combined police action with situational prevention (immobilizers) and crime prevention through social development (youth programs dealing with underlying causes). Third, a major success of WATSS involved the ability of people from different parts of the justice system and from different units within the Winnipeg Police Service to work together. While issues did arise, there was a commitment from senior leaders from the WPS and other agencies to resolve these quickly. The Winnipeg Police Service is now building on the success of WATSS by applying a similar strategy to the city's gang violence problem in their new Gang Response and Suppression Program (GRASP).

CONCLUSION

The Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy highlights the value of taking a disciplined, problem-oriented approach to crime reduction. Reducing vehicle theft in Winnipeg was difficult because of the strength of the auto theft culture among many Winnipeg youth, and our efforts suffered numerous setbacks. However, continued refinements of the program enabled us to ultimately achieve very significant reductions in vehicle theft. The program is continuing, so the reductions should continue in the future.

⁶ Patterson, David M. 2009. *Deterrence and Crime Prevention*. New York: Routledge.

