

# **Journal of Australasian Road Safety**

## **Conclusion (Reprint)**

The findings of this paper indicate that stolen vehicles play a small but by no means insignificant role in the number of crashes on our roads each year. Over the 12-year period in the study 1.5% of road crashes involved a stolen vehicle resulting in 835 casualties, of which, 24 were fatal. While the proportion of stolen vehicles involved in road crashes is small it is worth noting that the problem remains despite the significant decline in vehicle theft that has occurred since 2000. One in every 28 vehicles stolen in 2006, crashed.

There were a number of characteristics which distinguished stolen vehicle crashes from road crashes generally. Stolen vehicles were more likely to involve property only damage, in part because of the time of day in which the crashes occurred. Seven-in-ten crashes involving stolen vehicles occurred at night in complete contrast to road crashes not involving stolen vehicles. Lighter traffic and fewer pedestrians on the road at night along with fewer occupants in the stolen vehicle may partly explain the lower casualty rate found in crashes involving vehicle theft. A possible reporting bias may also be a factor with offenders less likely to remain at the scene of a crash for assistance due to the criminal component of the crash.

In nearly all cases, the stolen vehicle was considered at fault in the crash. Where this was the case, inattention was the most common cause of the crash (64.0%). Of concern is the finding that stolen vehicle crashes were significantly more likely to be caused by excessive speed and dangerous driving (each accounting for approximately 9% of crashes) than crashes not involving stolen vehicles (accounting for <1%). Stolen vehicles involved in crashes were most likely to be manufactured during the 1980s with this decade accounting for nearly half of crashes despite making up less than one-fifth of the registered fleet. The over-representation of this age group of vehicles raises questions about safety. These aging vehicles are less likely to be as robust as newer vehicles that must comply with increasingly strict safety standards and many of which now feature crumple zones, anti-lock brakes and airbags. With a significant proportion of these older vehicles being involved in collisions the potential for injury is considerable.

Related to vehicle age is the finding that three-quarters of the stolen passenger/light commercial vehicles which crashed did not have an immobiliser, making it very easy for thieves to steal these vehicles. As with stolen vehicles generally, older non-immobilised vehicles are most popular among joy-riders because of the lack of security features in the vehicles. The estimated cost of property damage in crashes involving vehicle theft in 2006 was \$2 million with an average cost of \$7,330 per crash. A rough approximation of the additional costs associated with stolen vehicle crashes was calculated based on a cost estimate of road crashes in 2004 [6] and the proportion of crashes that involved a stolen

vehicle. Taking into account the human, vehicle and general costs, crashes involving stolen vehicles equate to roughly \$17 million per year.

With regard to future research, it would be useful to identify the characteristics of occupants of stolen vehicles to provide additional insight and better inform policies developed to tackle the issue. In the current study, age and sex indicators were not available for the majority of these records and it is assumed that this is because the offender(s) fled the scene of a crash. Similar studies on stolen vehicle crashes have revealed that the majority of the offenders are young males [1,2] and apprehensions data from South Australia on motor vehicle theft support these findings [8]. While these statistics do not represent all car thieves (only the ones who were caught) they do contribute to our understanding of this group of offenders, and suggest that targeting young males may be helpful in preventing stolen vehicle crashes. There are many risks associated with vehicle crime, particularly with young, inexperienced drivers behind the wheel of powerful vehicles, so it would be very useful to know if this inexperience is a factor in crashes involving stolen vehicles.

Finally, although police pursuits are at times mentioned by the media in association with stolen vehicle crashes, it was not possible in the current study to determine how many of the crashes involving stolen vehicles were related to high-speed pursuits by police. Two crashes from the first six months of 2007 each involved a fatality that occurred moments after a police pursuit was terminated and between 1995 and 2005, 9 people died in South Australia as a result of a motor vehicle pursuit [10]. While there can be no doubt that some police pursuits involve stolen vehicles, without data relating to stolen vehicle crashes in particular, it is not possible to determine whether or not such pursuits are in fact an issue of concern in this context.