

WHY THE INTEGRATED MUNICIPAL PROVINCIAL AUTO CRIME TEAM (IMPACT)



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Since 2003, auto theft has decreased substantially across Canada (Wallace, 2003; Dauvergne and Turner, 2010). In fact, auto theft has had the largest rate of decline in police-reported crime trends with a decrease of 17,000 auto thefts from 2008 to 2009 (Dauvergne and Turner, 2010). Still, over the past decade, British Columbia, and in particular the city of Surrey, was listed among the jurisdictions with the highest auto theft rates in the country (Wallace, 2003). Specifically, in British Columbia, approximately 40,000 vehicles were stolen in 2003, mostly from the Greater Vancouver area (IMPACT, no date b). However, between 2003 and 2009, the number of vehicles stolen in British Columbia decreased by 55%, a decrease mainly attributed to the targeting of chronic offenders, the courts awarding harsher sentences to convicted auto thieves, and more auto theft prevention tactics employed by the makers and users of motor vehicles (IMPACT, no date c).

One of the main policing strategies to prevent and respond to auto theft in British Columbia has been IMPACT, or the Integrated Municipal Provincial Auto Crime Team. Specialized police auto theft investigators from municipal police departments and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) throughout the province staff the unit. Two main initiatives of relevance to this discussion are (1) the Bait Car program which uses police owned vehicles left in high theft areas as decoys to be stolen by auto thieves and (2) a specialized Enforcement team to target known auto thieves. However, even with the recent successes of police, technological advances to combat auto theft, such as the increasing installation of immobilizers, and the substantial general reductions in auto theft worldwide, there still remains the need for police and academics to understand the motivations behind auto theft and the characteristics of auto thieves.

There is debate in the research literature about who commits auto theft and for what reasons. One perspective holds that auto theft in British Columbia is commonly committed by joyriding youth aged 12 to 17 years old (Fleming et al., 1994; Wallace, 2003; Fleming, Brantingham, & Brantingham, 1994). Other researchers contend that auto theft in British Columbia is overwhelmingly committed by adult males with lengthy criminal histories for the purposes of reselling or exporting the stolen cars, using the cars in the commission of another crime, or for transportation purposes (Garis et al., 2007; Zapotichny, 2003; McCormick, Plecas, & Cohen, 2008; Wallace, 2003; IMPACT, no date b). One study examining auto theft and vehicle recovery in British Columbia identified transportation as a leading cause of auto theft in the Fraser Valley (McCormick, Plecas, & Cohen, 2007). Considering this more recent academic research and the various pronouncements of law enforcement agencies throughout the province, it appears that auto theft in British Columbia is much more likely to be committed by seasoned criminals stealing vehicles for transportation or crime commission.

These findings are important because auto theft rates are likely to continue to decline due to technological advances, but will eventually level off to the point that this offence is committed almost exclusively by offenders to facilitate the commission of other offences, for organized crime, or for transportation. Given this, the role of police initiatives, such as IMPACT, are extremely important in both reducing the success of seasoned or known to police auto thieves and to deter the more 'casual' auto thief. However, this assumption only holds if IMPACT has a measurable effect on the overall auto theft rate by effectively targeting chronic or prolific auto thieves.

To assess these assumptions, the authors analyzed data associated to all 260 Bait Car and 450 Enforcement arrests by IMPACT between 2005 and 2008 and compared these cases to a random sample

of 75 RCMP auto theft arrests in British Columbia per year over the same time period (n = 300). As demonstrated in Table 1, the demographic profiles and criminal history of auto thieves arrested by IMPACT initiatives were essentially the same as those arrested by regular police activity. Regardless of the method by which an offender was identified and arrested, the typical auto thief tended to be an adult male (approximately 80% of the time) with a lengthy criminal record (approximately 9 years). Moreover, at least half of auto thieves could be classified as repeat, if not chronic, offenders. This finding suggests that, unlike the claim of some researchers that auto theft remains the domain of young joyriders, the typical auto thief in British Columbia is an adult with a long history of diverse criminality.

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF AUTO THIEVES ARRESTED BY IMPACT INITIATIVES COMPARED TO REGULAR POLICE ACTIVITY

Characteristics	Bait Car (n = 260)	Enforcement (n = 450)	Other (n = 288)
% Male	82%	80%	79%
% Youth (12-17)	19%	7%	-
Average Age	32	30	-
% with a Criminal Record	47%	50%	43%
% Prolific Offenders	30%	35%	27%
% Super Prolific	12%	12%	11%
Average Length of Criminal Record in Years	9	9	11
Average # Prior Convictions*	20	19	19
Average # Property Offences*	10	10	9
Average # Violent Offences*	2	2	2
Average # Non-Compliance Offences*	4	3	3
Average # Years in Prison*	2.8	2.5	2.6
Average # Sentence Dates*	10	10	10

**Based on offenders with criminal records*

Although it seems that auto thieves arrested through IMPACT initiatives were not very different from those arrested by regular police activity, the response by the courts appeared to be stronger in cases involving an offender arrested by IMPACT. As demonstrated in Table 2, upon conviction, a slightly larger proportion of auto thieves arrested by an IMPACT initiative received a custody sentence than those arrested through regular police activity. Moreover, offenders arrested by IMPACT were awarded longer custody sentences. Of note, as mentioned above, the Enforcement initiative targets well-known auto thieves which likely explains why offenders arrested through this initiative received the longest average sentences when compared to those arrested by the Bait Car initiative or regular police activity.

TABLE 2: LIKELIHOOD AND LENGTH OF PRISON SENTENCES FOR AUTO THIEVES CONVICTED BY IMPACT INITIATIVES COMPARED TO REGULAR POLICE ACTIVITY

Initiative	Likelihood of Prison Sentence	Length of Average Prison Sentence
Enforcement	81%	8.4 months
Bait Car	84%	6.0 months
Regular Police Activity	73%	3.6 months

These analyses lead to several conclusions about IMPACT. Auto thieves arrested through IMPACT initiatives do not differ in any meaningful way from those arrested by regular police activity. In fact, the

offenders arrested by IMPACT were representative of the larger group of known auto thieves in British Columbia. However, despite these similarities, those arrested by IMPACT and convicted were more likely to receive custody sentences and for longer lengths of time than those arrested through regular police activity. This suggests that being arrested by IMPACT can result in a more meaningful consequence for convicted offenders that might also result in a greater deterrent effect for them and others considering auto theft. The benefit of IMPACT's success is likely a continued reduction in auto theft rates in British Columbia. As mentioned above, as one of the main reasons for engaging in auto theft is to facilitate the commission of other offences, IMPACT also has the ability to reduce the rates of general criminal activity as well by arresting British Columbia's most chronic and prolific auto thieves.

In effect, police initiatives, such as IMPACT, appear to address multiple crime reduction objectives. Not only do these types of programs have the ability to reduce auto theft rates by arresting and deterring those individuals most commonly involved in this type of offence, but they can also reduce general crime rates as the typical auto thief in British Columbia is an adult chronic offender. Given the criminal diversity of these offenders, successfully catching, arresting, prosecuting, and convicting these auto thieves will likely result in a crime rate reduction in a number of offence categories in British Columbia.

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