CRIME
AND JUSTICE
STATISTICS

BUREAU BRIEF

The increase in motor vehicle theft in NSW up to March 2023

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SUMMARY

Over the past two decades, there has been a long-term decline in motor vehicle theft. Stolen vehicle numbers reached an historic low in September 2021 following two COVID-19 lockdowns, steadily increasing since then. In March 2023 the number of vehicles stolen in NSW was higher than any month in the previous six years and increased 21.3% year-on-year. This paper considers the increase in motor vehicle theft up to March 2023 focusing on where the increase is most pronounced, which vehicles are affected, and who appears to be responsible.

Key features of the recent increase in incidents of motor vehicle theft include:

- The increase in vehicle theft is not uniform across NSW. In a number of regional locations vehicle theft has shown strong growth and is now much higher than at any point in previous five years. This applies to New England and North-West, Richmond-Tweed, Far West and Orana, Mid North Coast, and Central West. In New England and North West, for instance, vehicle theft was 67% higher in the year to March 2023 compared with five years earlier and the number of vehicles stolen in March 2023 (n=91) was the highest since records began in 1995.

- This contrasts with the pattern of vehicle theft in other parts of NSW, particularly Greater Sydney, where the volume of vehicles stolen still remains lower than prior to the pandemic. In these locations, increases seem to simply reflect recovery from the COVID-related crime fall.

- Vehicles stolen in Regional NSW are more likely to be recovered than vehicles stolen in Greater Sydney. This suggests motor vehicle theft in regional locations may be more likely to be conducted opportunistically for joyriding and transport purposes.

- Young people appear to be responsible for the increase in vehicle theft in Regional NSW with a 179% increase in legal actions against this group over the five years to March 2023. A significant, but smaller increase in young people proceeded against in Greater Sydney was also observed (up 52%).

- Theft patterns vary by vehicle make and year of manufacture. In the year to March 2023:

  ◊ The most frequently stolen vehicles were manufactured by Toyota, Holden, and Ford, all of which are very common vehicles.

  ◊ The vehicle makes with the highest rate of theft were Holdens, Jeeps, and Land Rovers.

  ◊ Common vehicle makes with the largest percentage increase in theft in the five years to March 2023 were Kias, Jeeps, Isuzus, Land Rovers, and Volkswagens.

  ◊ Older vehicles are much more susceptible to theft than recent models.

- The recent increase in vehicle theft is at least partially a bounce-back from the COVID-driven crime declines of 2020 and 2021 as pandemic restrictions eased. Another factor, however, particularly in certain regional communities, may be associated with reports of social media posts encouraging vehicle theft on the platform TikTok.

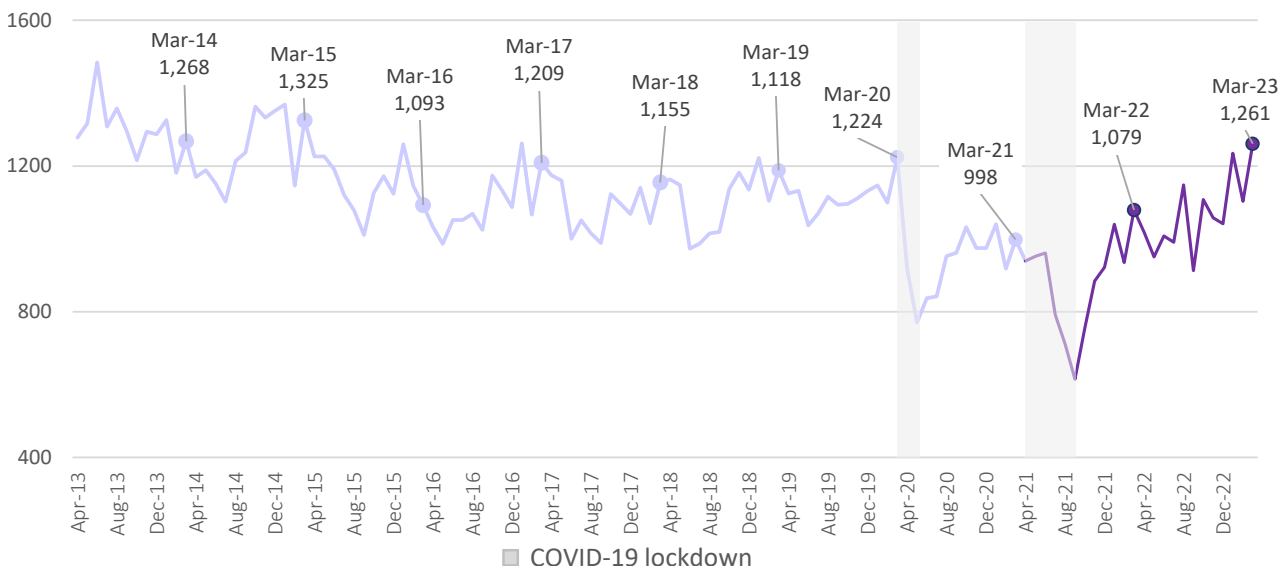**KEYWORDS**   Motor vehicle theft

INTRODUCTION

As with many other property crimes, the incidence of motor vehicle theft fell dramatically in the first two decades of this century. In 2022 the rate of motor vehicle theft in NSW was a staggering 80% lower than in 2001; volumetrically, 12,274 vehicles were stolen in 2022, which is 41,458 fewer than in 2001. On top of the steady long-term decline up to 2018, motor vehicle theft volumes fell further in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID 19 pandemic reaching an historic low in the month of September 2021 when just 615 vehicles were stolen in NSW.

Since September 2021, however, some crimes which fell during the pandemic have started to recover. In particular, Motor Vehicle Theft and Retail Theft have shown the fastest increases (BOCSAR, 2023). Latest data shows that motor vehicle theft increased 21.3% year on year to March 2023. In March 2023 the number of vehicles stolen in NSW was greater than in any month since January 2017.
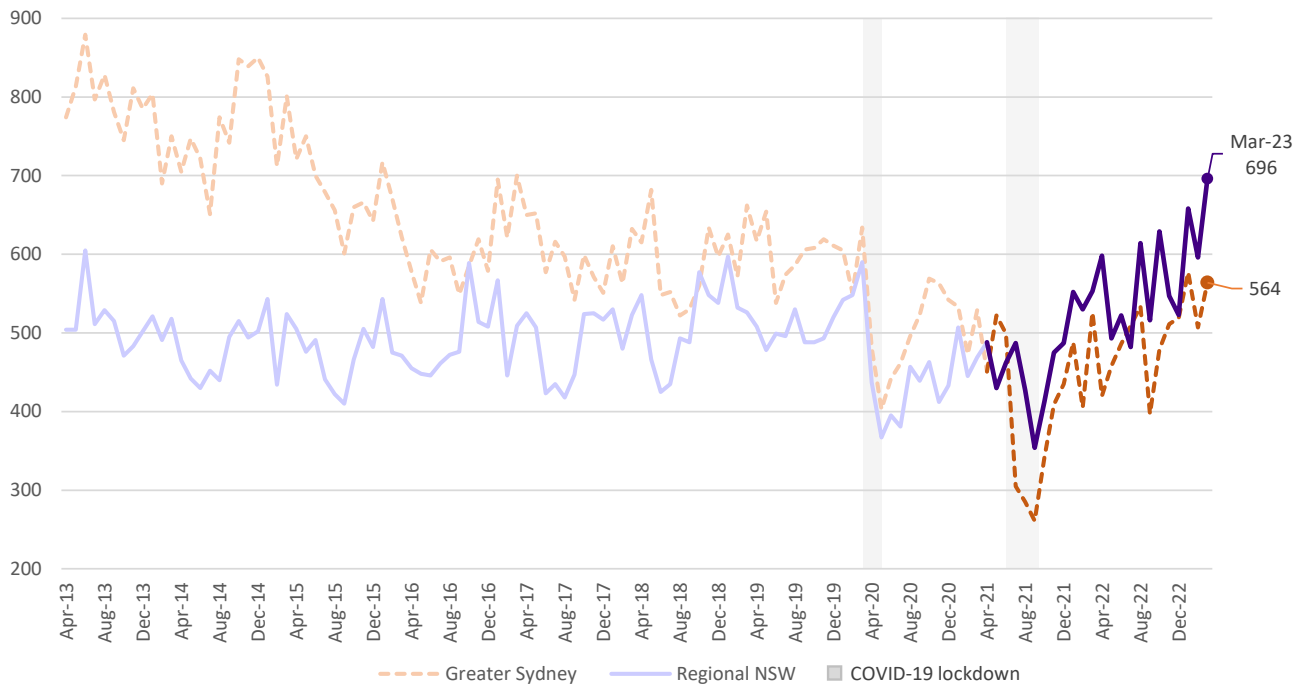
Figure 1 shows the monthly number of stolen vehicles recorded by NSW Police in the ten years to March 2023. The pale purple line shows the tail-end of the long-term decline in vehicle theft from 2013 to 2018. Additional sharp declines in motor vehicle theft can be seen at March 2020 and August 2021, coinciding with the first and second COVID-19 lockdowns in NSW. Since September 2021, however, motor vehicle theft incidents have been steadily increasing – this is reflected by the dark purple line. The number of vehicles stolen in the 12 months to March 2023 (n=12,836) was roughly on par with the year prior to the pandemic (13,383 in the 12 months to March 2020). This increase aligns closely with the relaxation of COVID-19 mobility restrictions and the end of the pandemic. Accordingly, the simplest explanation for the increase in vehicles stolen in the two years to March 2023 is that it simply reflects a return to pre-pandemic behaviour and crime levels as the factors that depressed crime during the COVID-19 emergency (such as lockdowns and mobility restrictions) no longer apply.

Figure 1.   **Recorded incidents of motor vehicle theft in NSW, April 2013 to March 2023**

It is only once we look at how these trends differ between regions, that we can see these aggregate trends mask a concerning increase in vehicle theft in regional areas. Figure 2 shows that vehicle theft in Regional NSW has increased to such an extent in the two years to March 2023, that the number of cars stolen now well exceeds 'pre-pandemic' levels. Discussed more in the next section, this suggests that the upward trend in vehicle theft in Regional NSW may be much more than just 'recovery'.

Figure 2. **Recorded incidents of motor vehicle theft in Regional NSW and Greater Sydney, April 2013 to March 2023**

Where is motor vehicle theft increasing?

While at the NSW level, the number of motor vehicle thefts in early 2023 is similar to pre-pandemic levels, the increase has been much stronger in Regional NSW. Table 1 presents a regional view of the trends in the number of vehicles recorded as stolen over the past five years. The first observation we can make is that a number of locations have had such a significant increase in motor vehicle theft in the past five years that the number of vehicle thefts in the year to March 2023 are now well above pre-pandemic levels. These locations are New England and North-West (up 67.2% in the five years to March 2023 or 274 additional incidents), Richmond-Tweed (up 34.5% or 166 additional incidents), Far West and Orana (up 31.2% or 135 additional incidents), Mid North Coast (up 21.1% or 97 additional incidents), and Central West (up 15.5% or 68 additional incidents).

Figure 3 shows the scale of the increase in these locations. In New England and North-West, where the largest increase was observed, the number of motor vehicle thefts recorded in March 2023 (n=91) was the highest monthly number on record.

From Table 1 we can also see there are a number of additional regions where, although not a strictly statistically significant upward trend, the number of vehicles stolen in the year to March 2023 exceeds the number stolen in the year to March 2019 by some margin; these are Coffs Harbour-Grafton (up 69 incidents), Murray (up 28 incidents), and Newcastle and Lake Macquarie (up 23 incidents).
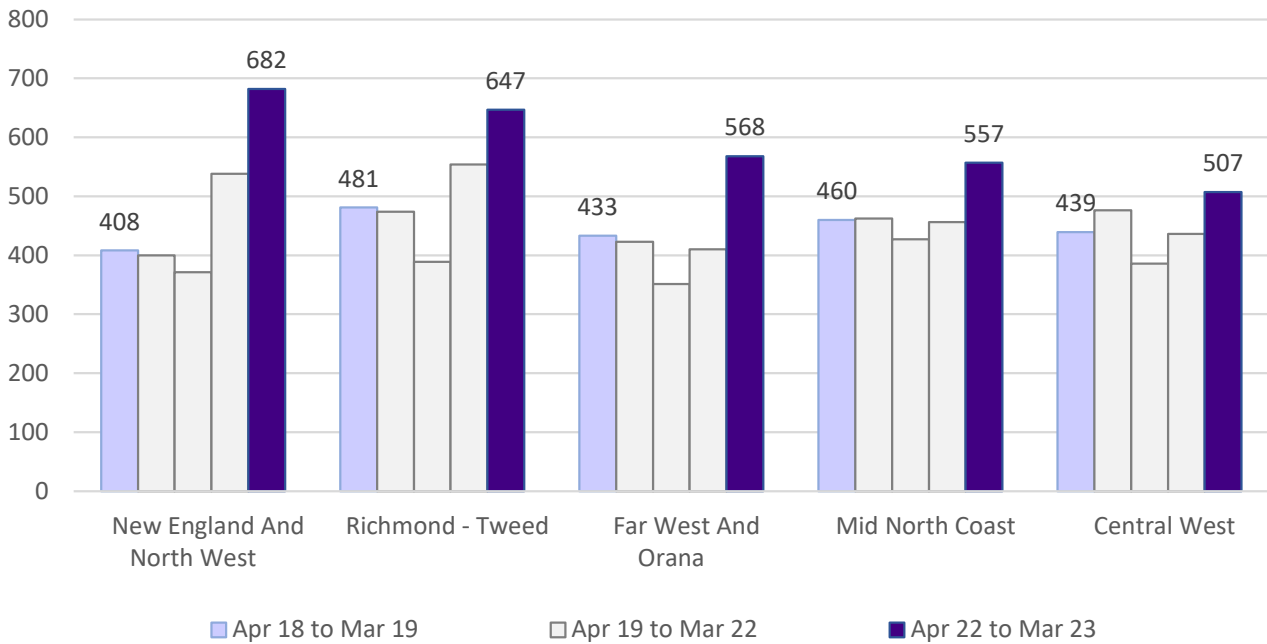
Notably, all areas where vehicle theft is now considerably higher than five years ago are in Regional NSW. These patterns are in stark contrast to vehicle theft in Sydney. While some parts of Sydney have seen a recent increase in vehicle theft in the in the two-years to March 2023, the volume of vehicle theft is still at or well below pre-pandemic levels. This suggests that the rise in vehicle theft in some regions is being driven by something other than a simple return to pre-pandemic crime rates.

Table 1. Recorded incidents of motor vehicle theft by statistical region, April 2018 to March 2023

Statistical Area of NSW	Apr 18 to Mar 19	Apr 19 to Mar 20	Apr 20 to Mar 21	Apr 21 to Mar 22	Apr 22 to Mar 23	2-year % change	5-year % change	5-year volume change
Total NSW	13,273	13,383	11,221	10,586	12,836	21.3%	ns	-437
Regional NSW	6,173	6,180	5,205	5,658	6,874	21.5%	ns	701
New England And North West	408	400	371	538	682	26.8%	67.2%	274
Richmond - Tweed	481	474	389	554	647	ns	34.5%	166
Far West And Orana	433	423	351	410	568	38.5%	31.2%	135
Mid North Coast	460	462	427	456	557	ns	21.1%	97
Coffs Harbour - Grafton	308	321	244	332	377	ns	ns	69
Central West	439	476	386	436	507	16.3%	15.5%	68
Murray	250	359	223	279	278	ns	ns	28
Newcastle And Lake Macquarie	1,123	1,069	930	882	1146	29.9%	ns	23
Hunter Valley Exc Newcastle	753	795	663	574	752	31.0%	ns	-1
Southern Highlands And Shoalhaven	190	209	170	146	183	ns	ns	-7
Capital Region	323	292	268	291	306	ns	ns	-17
Riverina	425	341	292	312	399	ns	ns	-26
Illawarra	580	559	491	448	472	ns	-18.6%	-108
Greater Sydney	7,099	7,203	6,015	4,928	5,961	21.0%	-16.0%	-1,138
Parramatta	820	952	818	682	829	21.6%	ns	9
Inner West	312	329	281	226	316	39.8%	ns	4
Ryde	137	146	94	78	134	71.8%	-57.0%	-3
North Sydney And Hornsby	227	222	193	194	209	ns	ns	-18
Baulkham Hills And Hawkesbury	195	204	195	113	174	ns	ns	-21
Eastern Suburbs	340	274	239	244	306	ns	ns	-34
Northern Beaches	213	198	188	162	166	ns	-22.1%	-47
Outer South West	407	437	390	325	346	ns	-15.0%	-61
Sutherland	194	190	152	122	123	ns	-36.6%	-71
Blacktown	798	673	579	582	693	ns	ns	-105
Outer West And Blue Mountains	591	572	509	410	478	16.6%	-19.1%	-113
South West	742	904	668	523	614	17.4%	-17.3%	-128
Inner South West	827	917	814	550	689	25.3%	-16.7%	-138
City And Inner South	592	471	383	326	439	34.7%	-25.8%	-153
Central Coast	704	714	512	391	445	13.8%	-36.8%	-259

* ns = not significant

Figure 3.   Recorded incidents of vehicle theft in regions with a significant increase, April 2018 to March 2023

How many stolen vehicles are recovered?

An important difference between vehicle theft in Regional NSW versus Greater Sydney is the considerable discrepancy in the rate at which stolen vehicles are reported as 'recovered' by NSW Police[1]. According to the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council, recovered stolen vehicles generally indicate short term or opportunistic thefts for the purposes of crime, joyriding, or transport. By contrast, stolen vehicles not recovered more likely reflect an organised offence motivated by an intention to convert the car to profit either as a whole vehicle or separated parts (NMVTRC, 2021).

Table 2 shows the Local Government Areas with the 10 highest and lowest recovery rates.

In the 12 months to March 2023, two-thirds of stolen motor vehicles were recovered (n=8,461; 66.2%) according to NSW Police. Recovery rates of stolen vehicles, however, are far from uniform across NSW. Table 2 shows that locations with the highest recovery rates were mostly in Regional NSW. By contrast, many of the regions with low stolen vehicle recovery rates were in Greater Sydney.

Taken together, this information suggests that regional vehicle theft is more likely to be opportunistic for the purpose of joyriding and transport.

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1   Note a motor vehicle can be recovered in a driveable condition, or it can be recovered with parts missing or other significant damage sustained.

Table 2. Number of stolen motor vehicle incidents by whether the vehicle was recovered or not and LGA of incident^, March 2022 to April 2023 – 10 highest and lowest recovery rates
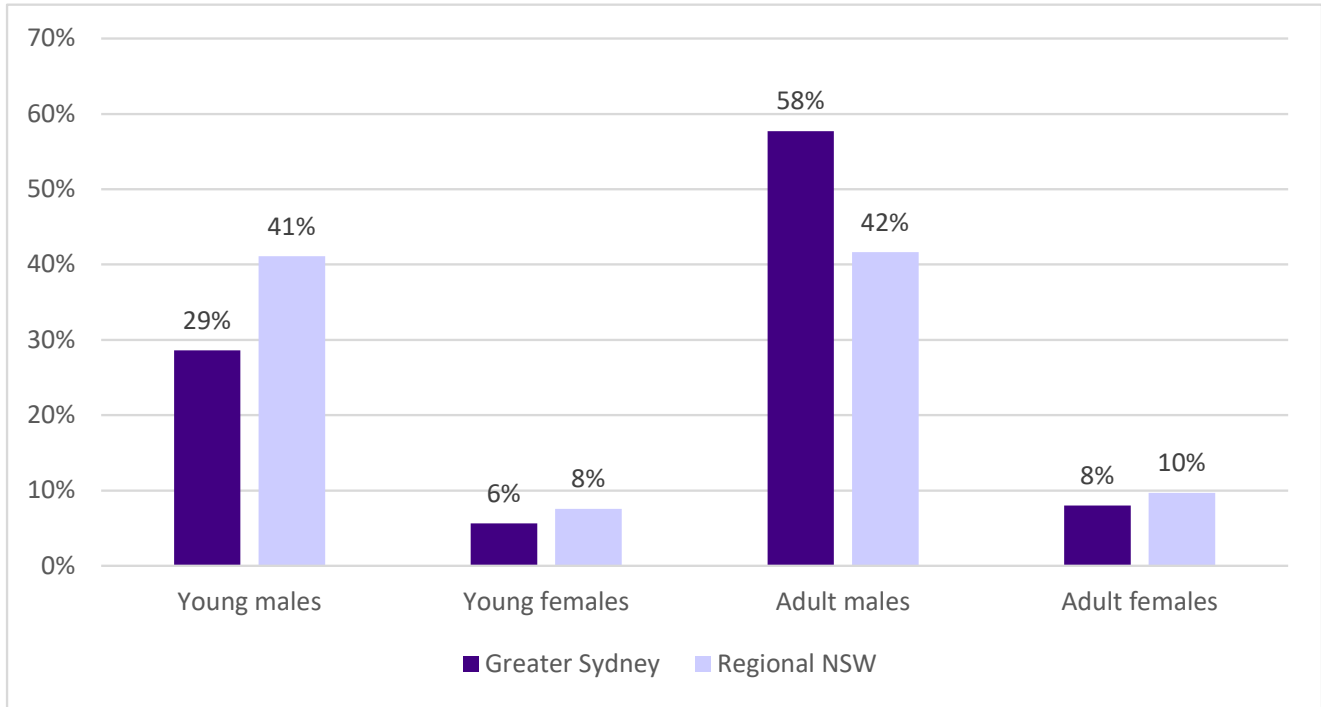
LGA of incident	Region	Recovered (number)	Not recovered (number)	Recovered (%)	Total stolen
Total NSW		**8,461**	**4,329**	**66.2**	**12,790**
Highest 10					
Armidale Regional	Regional NSW	80	2	97.6	82
Inverell	Regional NSW	71	6	92.2	77
Tamworth Regional	Regional NSW	174	20	89.7	194
Orange	Regional NSW	130	16	89	146
Narrabri	Regional NSW	45	6	88.2	51
Dubbo Regional	Regional NSW	252	40	86.3	292
Moree Plains	Regional NSW	116	19	85.9	135
Gunnedah	Regional NSW	66	12	84.6	78
Wagga Wagga	Regional NSW	168	33	83.6	201
Woollahra	Greater Sydney	46	11	80.7	57
Lowest 10					
Camden	Greater Sydney	36	29	55.4	65
Georges River	Greater Sydney	60	53	53.1	113
Cessnock	Regional NSW	144	136	51.4	280
Fairfield	Greater Sydney	125	122	50.6	247
Cumberland	Greater Sydney	187	193	49.2	380
Hornsby	Greater Sydney	28	31	47.5	59
Canterbury-Bankstown	Greater Sydney	234	273	46.2	507
Tweed	Regional NSW	98	121	44.7	219
Queanbeyan-Palerang	Regional NSW	44	61	41.9	105
Hawkesbury	Greater Sydney	29	49	37.2	78

^ Only LGAs with at least 50 recorded motor vehicle theft incidents were included in this analysis

Who is committing motor vehicle theft?

We now turn our attention to who NSW Police apprehend for motor vehicle theft and whether that differs between Regional NSW and Greater Sydney. Figure 4 shows the age and gender of persons of interest proceeded against by NSW Police for vehicle theft in the year to March 2023 by location.

Figure 4.   **Age and gender of persons of interest proceeded against for motor vehicle theft by region - April 22 to March 23**
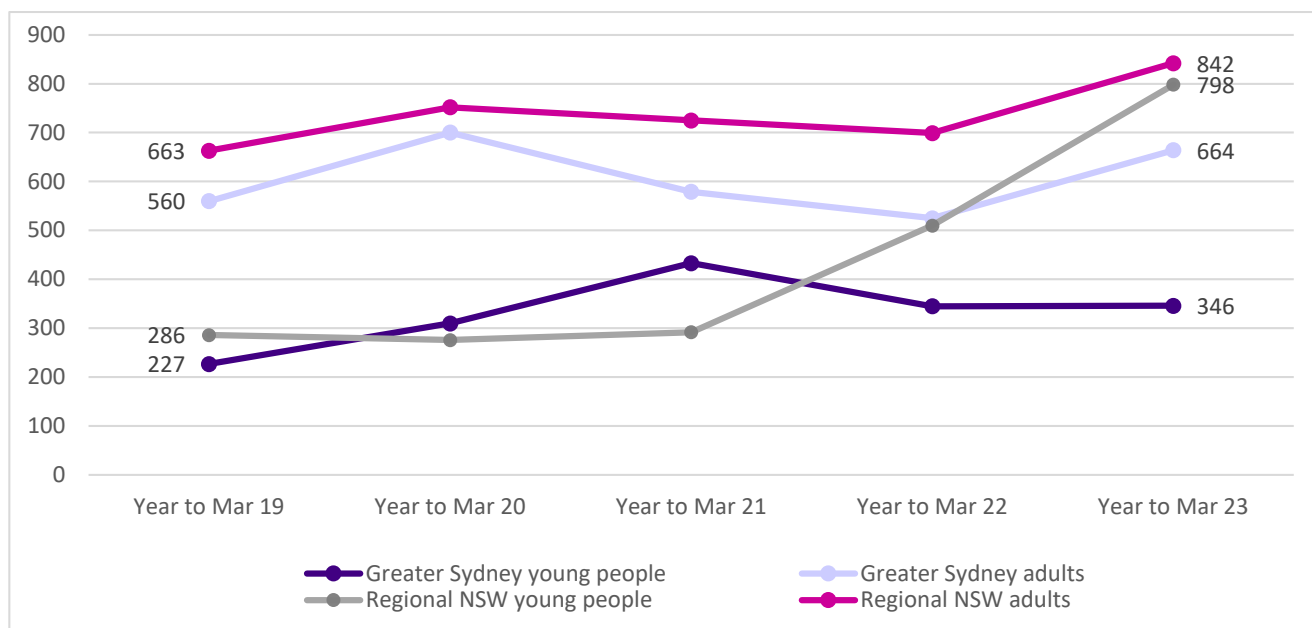

Notable features of Figure 4 include:

- In both Regional NSW and Greater Sydney vehicle theft offenders are overwhelmingly male (87% in Greater Sydney and 83% in Regional NSW).
- Vehicle theft in Regional NSW is more likely to be committed by a young person than in Sydney (at least according to people legally proceeded against for the offence). In Regional NSW half the people proceeded against for vehicle theft in the year to March 2023 were aged under 18, whereas in Greater Sydney it was only a third.

Above we saw how vehicle theft has increased over the past five years, particularly in Regional NSW. Figure 5 helps shine light on which population group appears to be responsible for the increase by showing trends in persons of interest proceeded against for motor vehicle theft by age and region in the five years to March 2023.

The population group with the largest increase in legal actions is clearly young people in Regional NSW (up 179% from the year to March 2019 to the year to March 2023) followed by young people in Greater Sydney (up 52%). In fact, the increase in legal actions against young people for vehicle theft in Regional NSW accounts for 56% of the total increase in legal actions in the last five years.

Figure 5. **Trends in persons of interest proceeded against for motor vehicle theft by age and location - April 22 to March 23**

Which vehicles are being stolen?

Table 3 shows the frequency of vehicle theft across the 18 most stolen makes of vehicle. The vehicle makes in the table account for 91 percent of vehicles stolen in the year to March 2023. Indeed, just three manufacturers (Toyota, Holden, and Ford), account for 38 per cent of stolen vehicles in that period.

Table 3. Number of vehicles recorded stolen by NSW Police by make of vehicle[a], April 2018 to March 2023

Make of motor vehicle	Number of stolen vehicles					5-year volume change	5-year % change	Number registered at March 2023	Ratio to NSW of motor vehicles stolen per 100,000 registered vehicles
	Apr 18 to Mar 19	Apr 19 to Mar 20	Apr 20 to Mar 21	Apr 21 to Mar 22	Apr 22 to Mar 23				
Toyota	2,112	2,372	1,936	1,837	2,193	81	3.8%	1,330,538	1.0
Holden	1,693	1,579	1,273	1,101	1,307	-386	-22.8%	467,879	1.8
Ford	985	922	771	793	838	-147	-14.9%	466,949	1.1
Mazda	613	600	536	567	713	100	16.3%	517,830	0.9
Mitsubishi	614	620	514	508	659	45	7.3%	341,684	1.2
Nissan	701	744	596	510	651	-50	-7.1%	304,757	1.3
Hyundai	466	434	359	367	500	34	7.3%	374,061	0.8
Subaru	457	368	300	305	364	-93	-20.4%	263,809	0.9
Volkswagen	249	264	244	250	342	93	37.3%	233,673	0.9
Mercedes	246	231	200	223	306	60	24.4%	176,357	1.1
Honda	291	252	238	230	282	-9	-3.1%	273,435	0.7
BMW	229	208	219	224	274	45	19.7%	141,618	1.2
KIA	140	158	184	175	262	122	87.1%	195,579	0.8
Audi	168	160	179	157	220	52	31.0%	95,533	1.5
Isuzu	126	144	127	118	190	64	50.8%	131,497	0.9
Suzuki	138	125	96	106	134	-4	-2.9%	116,650	0.7
Jeep	69	91	81	68	113	44	63.8%	42,104	1.7
Land Rover	62	86	63	94	106	44	71.0%	43,176	1.5
Total	11,498	11,584	9,702	9,338	11,371	-127	-1.1%	7,173,068	1.0

[a] Only makes with at least 100 vehicles stolen in the year to March 2023 are shown

Vehicle makes showing the largest percentage increase in thefts, however, were not those that are most frequently stolen. The vehicle makes showing the biggest percentage change in stolen vehicle numbers over the five years to March 2023 were Kia (up 87.1% or 122 additional vehicles stolen), Jeep (up 63.8% or 44 additional thefts), Land Rover (up 71.0% or 44 additional thefts), Isuzu (up 50.8% or 64 additional thefts) and Volkswagen (up 37.3% or 93 additional vehicles).

An additional feature of Table 2 is an indication of the rate at which different vehicle makes are stolen relative to their popularity. Using Transport NSW data on the number of current vehicle registrations by make, we calculated the rate of vehicles stolen per 100,000 registered vehicles (as at March 2023) for each popular make (Transport for NSW, 2023). By comparing the rate of theft for each make with the average risk of theft across all registered vehicles we can see which makes are more likely to be stolen compared to the average. In the year to March 2023 vehicles with the highest risk of theft were manufactured by Holden (80% higher risk of being stolen than average), Jeep (70% higher than average), Land Rover (50% higher than average), and Audi (50% higher than average). Popular vehicle makes with low rates of theft were Honda and Suzuki.

This information shows vehicle theft from a few perspectives. Firstly, volumetrically, the most popular vehicles are also the most stolen vehicles (Toyota, Holden, and Ford). However, the vehicle models with the highest rates of theft, relative to their number in the community are Holdens, Jeeps, Land Rovers, and Audis. Finally, the vehicle makes showing the biggest percentage change in theft numbers of the last five years are Kias, Jeeps, Land Rovers, Isuzus, and Volkswagens.

Another consideration is the age of vehicles being stolen. Table 4 shows the number of vehicles stolen in the year to March 2023 by the vehicle age, the number of registrations by age of vehicle and the rate of theft. It is clear that older vehicles are more susceptible to theft than recent models. Vehicles manufactured pre-2011 are stolen almost twice as often as vehicles manufactured between 2011 and 2020 (203.9 per 100,000 registered vehicles compared to 131.8 per 100,000 registered vehicles).

Table 4. Number of vehicles recorded stolen by NSW Police by year of manufacture^,
April 2018 to March 2023

	Year of manufacture		
	Pre- 2011	Between 2011 and 2020	From 2021 Onwards
Vehicle Theft Apr 2022 – Mar 2023	5,496	4,801	813
Number of Vehicle Registration as at March 2023	2,694,795	3,641,665	836,608
Rate per 100,000 vehicle registrations	203.9	131.8	97.2

^Excludes a small number of vehicles where year of manufacture was not recorded.

CONCLUSION

There has been a long-term decline in motor vehicle theft over the past two decades with the number of vehicles stolen in NSW reaching historical lows during the two COVID-19 lockdowns. However, since September 2021 motor vehicle theft has been steadily increasing such that the number of vehicles stolen in March 2023 was higher than any month in the past six years.

This paper looked at trends in the increase in motor vehicle theft and found:

- A small number of regional areas (New England and North-West, Richmond-Tweed, Far West and Orana, Mid North Coast, and Central West) reported significantly more motor vehicle thefts in the year to March 2023 than in the pre-pandemic year to March 2019.
- In other locations the increase in motor vehicle thefts from September 2021 simply reflects a recovery from the COVID-related crime falls and return to pre-pandemic levels of vehicle theft. This is particularly the case in Sydney.
- Regional areas generally show higher stolen vehicle recovery rates than Greater Sydney suggesting that opportunistic vehicle theft for joyriding and transport purposes is more common in regional locations.
- Young people appear to be behind much of the increase in vehicle theft in Regional NSW, with a 179% increase in legal actions against young people from the year to March 2019 to the year to March 2023. A significant, but smaller increase in young people proceeded against in Greater Sydney was also observed (up 52%).
- Risk of theft varies by vehicle make and year of manufacture:
  - Vehicles manufactured by Holden, Jeep, Land Rover, and Audi had the highest risk of theft per 100,000 registered vehicles in the year to March 2023.
  - Vehicles manufactured pre-2011 reported a rate of theft almost twice that of vehicles manufactured between 2011 and 2020.
  - Vehicles manufactured by Kia, Jeep, Land Rover and Volkswagen showed the biggest percentage increase in stolen vehicle numbers over the five years to March 2023.

As we have noted, the increase in vehicle theft in Greater Sydney since September 2023 appears to reflect a return to pre-pandemic crime rates. However, in some regional locations, vehicle theft is now much higher than at any point in the past five years suggesting that other influences might be at play.

A possible reason for the increase in vehicle theft (suggested in media reports and police commentary) is that trending posts on the social media platform TikTok have been encouraging young people to steal cars. In October 2022 a Daily Telegraph story 'NSW kids stealing cars, filming joyrides in high-risk TikTok trend' quoted the NSW Police Commissioner Karen Webb as being aware of, and concerned about, this trend (The Daily Telegraph, 2022a). As an example, a recent video uploaded on Tiktok[2] with hashtags #creepingwhileyouresleeping; #lockitorloseit; #pursuit appears to show young people joyriding at speeds of up to 200km per hour in Dubbo NSW. In the first two days of posting, this clip received 2,000 views. Most posts of this type appear to have been removed by the social media platform TikTok making it hard to gauge the scale of this type of media and to what extent it is motivating the increase in vehicle theft, especially in Regional NSW (The Daily Telegraph, 2022b). Another potential means by which social media could influence vehicle theft is via promoting hashtags such as #KiaChallenge. In May 2023, a $US200 million class-action lawsuit brought against Kia and Hyundai was settled after videos appeared on TikTok and other social media channels showing how to steal cars that had been manufactured without push-button ignitions and immobilising anti-theft devices (ABC News, 2023). Unfortunately, available social media metrics don't not allow for the impact of social media on these trends to be definitely measured.

The increase in recorded thefts of motor vehicles, particularly in Regional NSW and among young people, will continue to be closely monitored.

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2   https://www.tiktok.com/@28gangshit30

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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