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Malicious Damage to Property Offences in New South Wales

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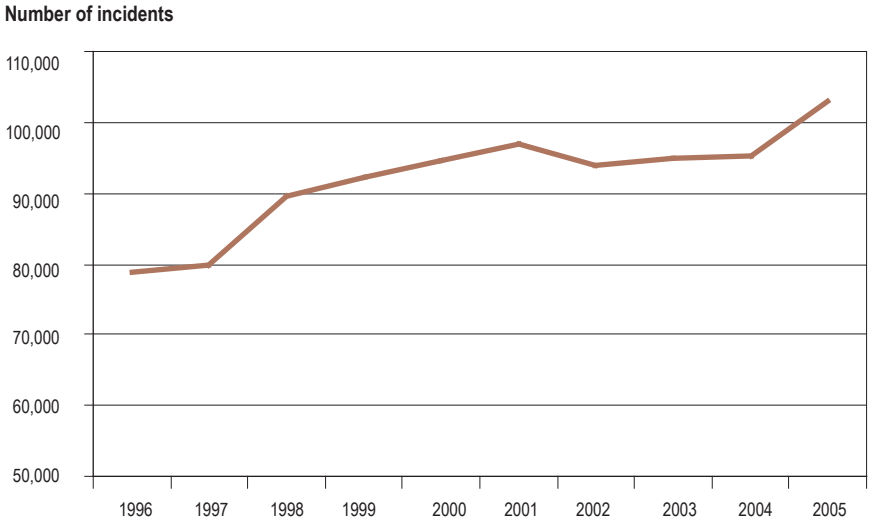
In the 24 months to December 2005 recorded incidents of malicious damage to property increased by eight per cent in NSW. This bulletin provides information about the nature of malicious damage to property incidents through a detailed analysis of police database records and narratives of incidents occurring in 2005. These data reveal that the most frequent targets of malicious damage are private dwellings, private vehicles and commercial buildings, and the most common features damaged at these locations are windows. One in ten malicious damage incidents involve graffiti, and in these cases schools and commercial buildings were often the target. Incidents of malicious damage where police were able to identify an offender typically involve young male offenders and often take place in the evening and on weekends. The median cost of police recorded malicious damage incidents as estimated by the victim is $300.

INTRODUCTION

The offence of malicious damage to property is one of considerable public concern. Recorded crime statistics for New South Wales (NSW) place malicious damage as the second most frequently reported category of criminal offence after traffic violations, with 102,816 incidents reported to police in 2005 (Moffatt, Goh & Poynton 2006). Furthermore NSW Police records indicate that reported incidents of malicious damage have increased over recent years (see Figure 1). Between January 2004 and December 2005 there was a significant upward trend in reports of malicious damage in NSW, with the number of recorded incidents increasing by eight per cent over this 24-month period (Moffatt et al. 2006). In fact, malicious damage was the only offence category to record a rise in incidence over this 24-month period in NSW.[1]

Figure 1: Recorded incidents of malicious damage to property, NSW, 1996 to 2005



Recent NSW surveys of public perceptions of crime consistently show high levels of public concern regarding malicious damage offences. These data reveal that more than one in four (26.4%) NSW residents perceive that vandalism/ graffiti/property damage is a problem in their neighbourhood (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006).

The offence of malicious damage to property involves the destruction or defacement of public, commercial and private property. It is often referred to as vandalism, and also includes acts of graffiti. The criminal element of malice is defined in s. 5 of the *NSW Crimes Act 1900*, as an intention to cause the damage, or reckless indifference to whether an action would result in the damage. Section 195 of the Crimes Act prescribes a maximum penalty of

five years imprisonment for malicious damage and a maximum of ten years imprisonment if the damage is caused by fire or explosion.

Malicious damage incidents are associated with a variety of costs to the community. It has been estimated that in Australia, the average cost (including tangible and intangible losses) of a single incident of property damage is as high as $700 (Mayhew 2003). Since malicious damage mostly occurs against private vehicles and residential buildings (Bonney 1992; Monteil & Musitelli 1995) the cost of this offence is most likely to be borne by private citizens. It has also been argued that the occurrence of malicious damage incidents within a neighbourhood can lead to greater fear of crime experienced by local residents (Grabosky 1995) and may encourage offenders to commit further crimes in the area (Skogen 1990; Wilson & Kelling 1982).

The observed increase in reported rates of malicious damage to property in recent years in NSW, combined with the high cost of this crime to the community, highlight the importance of improving our understanding of the nature of this criminal behaviour. The purpose of this bulletin is to provide detailed information on malicious damage incidents occurring in NSW in 2005.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Data from the NSW Police's Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) were used to examine malicious damage to property incidents reported to police in 2005. COPS is the primary source of data for recorded crime in NSW. When a criminal event is reported to or detected by police, information about the event is entered directly into COPS. One method of entering information into COPS involves using standard codes to describe different aspects of the offence, such as where the incident occurred, the time the incident commenced and finished, and whether or not a weapon was involved in the crime. The COPS system also includes a narrative section for each event that police use to provide a more detailed account of the offence; this can include information about the physical setting in which the offence occurred, the circumstances leading up to the event and who reported the crime. Unlike the standard COPS codes, these police narratives are rarely subjected to analysis because they are not presented in a coded statistical format. This study uses the police narratives to supplement the standard recorded crime data and in doing so, provides a more comprehensive analysis of malicious damage incidents recorded by police.

In the first step of this analysis, standard, coded information was extracted from COPS for all malicious damage to property incidents recorded by NSW Police between 1 January and 31 December 2005. This comprised a total of 102,816 incidents. The second step involved extracting a random sample of 500 malicious damage narratives, identified from the 2005 dataset, for further analysis. The characteristics of these narratives were coded according to a matrix devised for the project.[2]

It should be noted that not all malicious damage incidents are reported to police (Bonney 1992; Geason & Wilson 1990). Bonney (1992) suggests that there is a relatively low reporting rate for malicious damage offences because of (a) the disincentives contained within insurance policies for reporting minor damage costs, (b) the low expectation that offenders will be caught and (c) the view held by

Table 1: Recorded incidents of malicious damage to property by region, 2004 to 2005

	2004		*2005*	
Statistical Division/ Statistical Subdivision	***Number of incidents***	***Rate per 100,000***	***Number of incidents***	***Rate per 100,000***
Sydney	52,873	1,249.3	57,030	1,347.6
Inner Sydney	6,194	1,993.0	6,361	2,046.7
Eastern Suburbs	2,888	1,195.3	3,187	1,319.0
St George-Sutherland	4,504	1,022.5	5,059	1,148.5
Canterbury-Bankstown	3,372	1,086.1	3,501	1,127.6
Fairfield-Liverpool	3,978	1,118.8	3,981	1,119.6
Outer South Western Sydney	4,513	1,873.2	4,982	2,067.9
Inner Western Sydney	1,677	994.5	1,865	1,106.0
Central Western Sydney	3,589	1,176.4	3,822	1,252.8
Outer Western Sydney	4,587	1,441.7	5,416	1,702.3
Blacktown	4,333	1,555.7	4,846	1,739.8
Lower Northern Sydney	2,785	931.4	2,694	900.9
Central Northern Sydney	2,844	671.4	3,550	838.0
Northern Beaches	2,032	866.2	2,155	918.6
Gosford-Wyong	5,577	1,830.9	5,611	1,842.1
Hunter	9,273	1,534.7	10,622	1,757.9
Illawarra	6,517	1,588.9	7,024	1,712.6
Richmond-Tweed	2,859	1,277.1	3,160	1,411.5
Mid-North Coast	4,596	1,574.7	4,834	1,656.2
Northern	3,625	2,023.8	3,910	2,182.9
North Western	3,241	2,729.7	3,400	2,863.6
Central West	3,498	1,951.7	3,527	1,967.8
South Eastern	3,196	1,593.8	3,458	1,724.4
Murrumbidgee	2,873	1,876.0	3,034	1,981.2
Murray	1,877	1,637.2	2,052	1,789.9
Far West	581	2,452.9	660	2,786.5
NSW Total*	**95,123**	**1,413.1**	**102,816**	**1,527.4**

** Includes incidents occuring in custodial institutions.*

many victims that this crime is not a serious offence. In light of these factors, police recorded crime data may only be representative of incidents that involve serious or costly damage to property, or where the victim had some idea as to the identity of the offender.

This study only considers malicious damage incidents reported to police. This is despite there being other possible data sources, such as local councils, which might keep localised information on unreported malicious damage incidents. It was determined that this study would focus solely on police records because these were easily available and offer a centrally maintained data source collected with relative uniformity across the State. Since we are only considering incidents reported to police, it is likely that particular types of malicious damage offences, such as graffiti, are underrepresented. It is probable that serious matters are more often reported to police. Similarly, some locations, such as schools or hospitals, may have a policy of reporting all incidents to police and will occur disproportionately more in police records. For these reasons, care should be taken when interpreting the statistics reported in this bulletin.

MALICIOUS DAMAGE TO PROPERTY INCIDENTS

WHERE DID THE INCIDENTS OCCUR?

Table 1 shows the number and rate of malicious damage incidents for each NSW Statistical Division (SD) and each Sydney Statistical Subdivision (SSD) for 2004 and 2005. Analysis of the 102,816 malicious damage incidents recorded by police showed that malicious damage was more prevalent in regional NSW than Sydney. In 2005, every SD outside of the Sydney area (with the exception of Richmond-Tweed) recorded rates higher than the State average. The highest per capita rates in the State were in the North Western, Far West and Northern SDs.

In the 24 months to December 2005 the incidence of malicious damage increased significantly in Sydney, Hunter, Illawarra, Richmond-Tweed and Northern SDs.[3]

Within Sydney, the regions with the highest recorded rates of malicious damage were Outer South Western Sydney, Inner Sydney and Gosford-Wyong SSDs. Eight of the 14 Sydney Statistical Subdivisions also showed statistically significant upward trends in the 24 months to December 2005: Eastern Suburbs, St George-Sutherland, Outer South Western Sydney, Inner Western Sydney, Central Western Sydney, Outer Western Sydney, Blacktown and Central Northern Sydney.

The Local Government Areas (LGAs) with the highest rates of malicious damage to property in NSW in 2005 were Bourke, Walgett, Moree Plains, Warren and Dubbo. The seven top LGAs were outside the Sydney metropolitan region and all recorded much higher rates than NSW as a whole. Appendix 1 shows the rankings for all NSW LGAs (excluding those with a population less than 3,000).

WHAT PROPERTY WAS DAMAGED?

Analysis of all incidents recorded in COPS

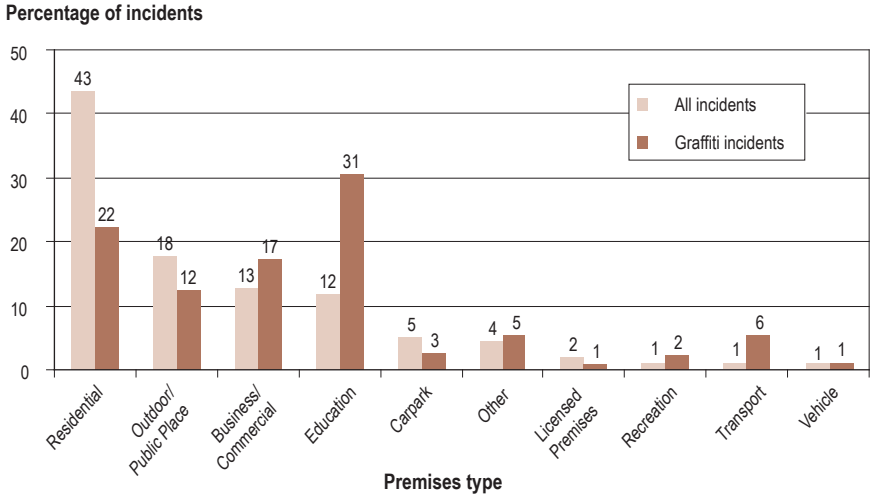
Figure 2 shows the proportion of all incidents of malicious damage to property, and the subset that was graffiti, by the premises type where the incident was reported to have occurred. This figure includes all incidents recorded by police in 2005. As seen here, the most frequent location for malicious damage to occur was residential premises (43.4%), followed by outdoor or public places (17.8%) and business or commercial premises (12.7%). Nine per cent of all malicious damage incidents recorded by police were described as graffiti. Graffiti reported to police most commonly occurred in education premises (30.5% of graffiti incidents), residential premises (22.2% of graffiti incidents) and business or commercial premises (17.3% of graffiti incidents).

Only 546 incidents (0.5%) were recorded as taking place on premises type 'vehicle'. On the surface, this might appear to contradict previous research showing that private vehicles are often the targets of malicious damage incidents (Bonney 1992; Monteil & Musitelli 1995). However, the premises type relates to the location of the incident rather than the target object, and hence the number of premises type coded as 'vehicle' does not necessarily reflect the number of vehicles reported damaged. Analysis of the COPS narratives was able to show the type of property which is typically the target of malicious damage.

Supplementary analysis of narratives

Table 2 shows the targets of malicious damage incidents as evident from analysis of the 500 COPS narratives. These data are shown for all malicious

Figure 2: Percentage of recorded incidents of malicious damage to property by premises type, all incidents and graffiti, NSW, 2005



damage to property incidents, as well as for those involving graffiti-related damage. The most common targets of malicious damage were private dwellings (29.0% of all cases), including houses, blocks of units, and surrounding private property. Other frequent targets included private vehicles, which comprised 27 per cent of all targets, and commercial buildings such as shops and offices, which comprised 18 per cent of targets. A smaller proportion of incidents targeted schools, public buildings and facilities, commercial and public vehicles and other types of property.

The narrative analysis suggests that most incidents recorded by police as occurring outdoors or in a public place in fact involved damage to motor vehicles.

Table 2: Targets in a sample of malicious damage to property incidents, 2005

Target identified from narrative	*All malicious damage incidents*		*Graffiti incidents*	
	Number	*%*	*Number*	*%*
Private dwelling	145	29.0	7	13.5
Private vehicle	135	27.0	4	7.7
Commercial building	92	18.4	15	28.8
School	42	8.4	12	23.0
Commercial vehicle	20	4.0	3	5.8
Commercial / public dwelling	20	4.0	2	3.8
Public building	12	2.4	1	1.9
Public vehicle	8	1.6	3	5.8
Public facility / outdoor place	5	1.0	2	3.8
Unknown[4]	21	4.2	3	5.8
Total	**500**	**100.0**	**52**	**100.0**

WHEN DID THE DAMAGE OCCUR?

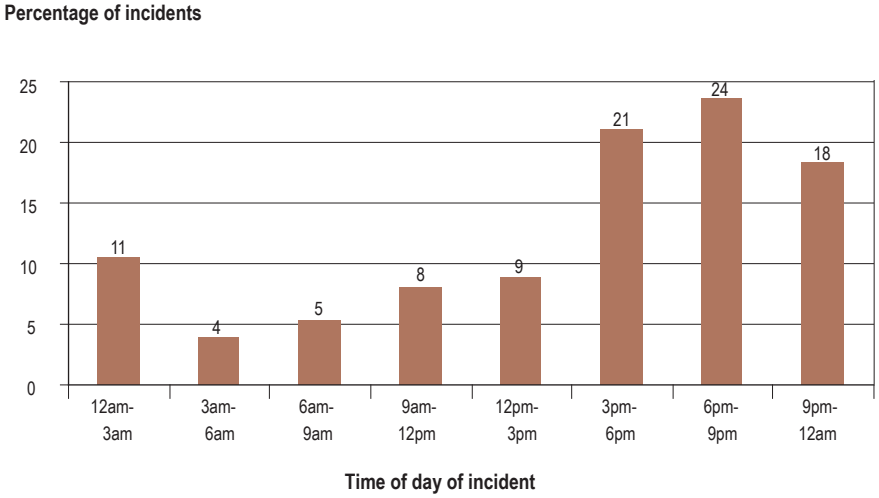
Analysis of all incidents recorded in COPS

Figures 3 and 4 show the total number of malicious damage to property incidents recorded in 2005 by police, by the time of day and day of week the incident was reported to have commenced.

Figure 3 reveals that the most frequent time for malicious damage to occur was between 3pm and midnight, with almost two-thirds of incidents reportedly occurring during this period. The peak three-hour period was between 6pm and 9pm, when 24 per cent of malicious damage incidents were reported to have occurred, followed by 3pm to 6pm, when a further 21 per cent of incidents reportedly occurred.

From Figure 4 it can be seen that malicious damage incidents were most likely to occur on a Friday (22.0% of incidents) or a Saturday (19.2%). Overall, more than half (54.6%) of all malicious damage to property incidents occurred on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Figure 3: Recorded incidents of malicious damage to property by time of day, NSW, 2005

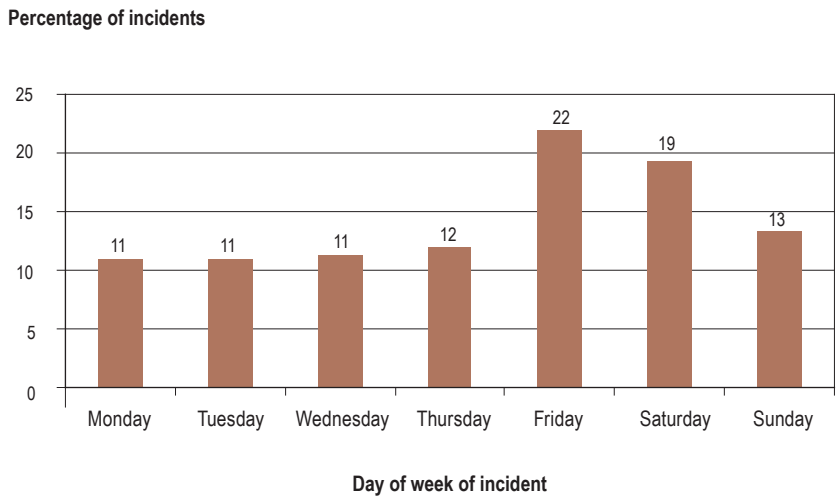


Supplementary analysis of narratives

The narrative reports for time and day were similar in many respects to the patterns observed for all malicious damage incidents recorded on COPS. The peak known time for malicious damage incidents recorded in the narratives was between 3pm and midnight. The most frequent three-hour periods being 9pm to midnight (10.4%) and 6pm to 9pm (10.2%). Malicious damage was also more likely to occur on Saturdays (11.6%) and Fridays (9.8%).

However, the narrative analysis also revealed that the actual time at which malicious damage incidents occur is often uncertain. For example, the most frequent time reported in the narratives was 'sometime overnight'. That is, the victim reported that the offence occurred sometime between 5pm and 9am (37.6% of narratives). Similarly, in many cases the exact day that the incident occurred could not be identified from the narratives. Instead malicious damage incidents were frequently reported to have occurred 'over the weekend' (22.2%) or 'over more than one weekday' (14.0%). As will be seen in a later section of this bulletin, the uncertainty surrounding the timing of these offences is likely to be due to the fact that malicious damage offences often are not witnessed. Consequently the

Figure 4: Recorded incidents of malicious damage to property by day of week, NSW, 2005



start time recorded in COPS would more likely reflect the last time the property was observed undamaged rather than the actual time the incident occurred.

WHAT DID THE DAMAGE COST?

Analysis of all malicious damage to property incidents recorded in COPS in 2005 revealed that the cost of malicious damage incidents, as estimated by victims, ranged between $1 and $3,000,150 with a median value of $300. One third of victims reported that the cost of the damage was less than $100. Only 13 per cent of victims reported that the cost of the damage was $1,000 or more.[5] It should be noted that the cost of the damage was only recorded in one-third of malicious damage incidents. This prevented a similar analysis being undertaken from the narratives. It also means that caution is warranted when interpreting the significance of these cost figures given that they may not be representative of all incidents reported to police.

WHO REPORTED THE DAMAGE?

The person who reported the incident to police is not routinely coded in COPS. However this information could be established from the details recorded by police in the narratives. Analysis showed that the victims or owners of the damaged property were most frequently the ones who reported the offence to police (47% of the sampled narratives). Employees of organisations that were victims of malicious damage reported a further 21 per cent of incidents and a bystander or witness to the offence was the source of 11 per cent of reports. Only, five per cent of all recorded malicious damage incidents were detected by police.

Malicious damage to property tends not to be a public or conspicuous act and as such incidents are rarely witnessed. This observation is supported by findings from the narratives analysis, which indicated that in the majority of cases (61.6%) the malicious damage had not been seen or heard but was discovered and subsequently reported sometime after the incident had occurred.

AGE AND GENDER OF OFFENDERS

Analysis of all incidents recorded in COPS

A total of 33,999 persons of interest were identified in connection to malicious damage incidents in 2005. A person of interest is someone who the police suspect of being involved in an offence, regardless of whether they are formally charged for the offence. More than one person of interest can be identified in relation to a single incident. The number of alleged offenders identified by police in relation to malicious damage to property offences accounted for less than one-third of incidents reported in 2005. Considering that in many cases more than one offender may have been involved in a single event, this suggests that in the majority of cases police did not know the offender. This is further supported by the low clear up rate for malicious damage to property. Of incidents reported in 2004, only 10.4 per cent had legal proceedings commenced within 90 days (Moffat et al. 2006). The low identification rate for alleged offenders is consistent with the fact that malicious damage incidents are rarely witnessed.

The age and gender of alleged offenders identified by police as being involved in malicious damage offences is shown in Figure 5.[6] As seen here the majority of persons identified by police in relation to these offences were male. Only 21 per cent of persons of interest were female. Over one-third (35.3%) of alleged offenders were under the age of 18, while just 11.3 per cent of alleged offenders were aged 40 years or older. The fact that many alleged offenders were under the age of 18 corresponds with findings that malicious damage incidents frequently occur between 3pm and 6pm, which is after school ends. These results are consistent with other research suggesting that malicious damage to property is typically carried out by young people (Monteil & Musitelli, 1995). However, as Fitzgerald (2000) and Williams and Poynton (2006) note, it is difficult to determine how representative this group is of the broader offender population involved in malicious damage. It is possible that a greater number of young people come to the attention of police for malicious damage offences not because they offend more frequently but because they are less experienced or more visible to police.

Supplementary analysis of narratives

Consistent with the analysis of all malicious damage incidents recorded on COPS, the narrative analysis found that 73 per cent of police reports identified no person of interest. In 20.6 per cent

Figure 5: Age and gender of alleged offenders in recorded incidents of malicious damage to property, NSW, 2005

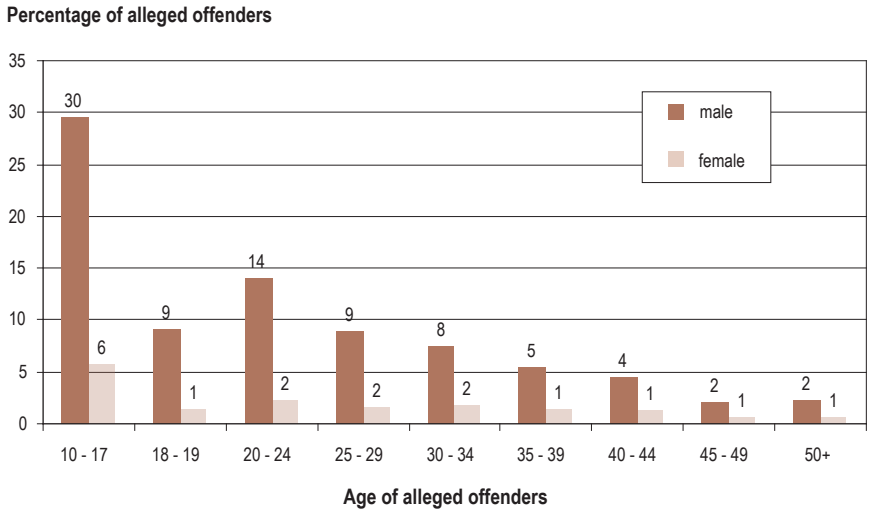
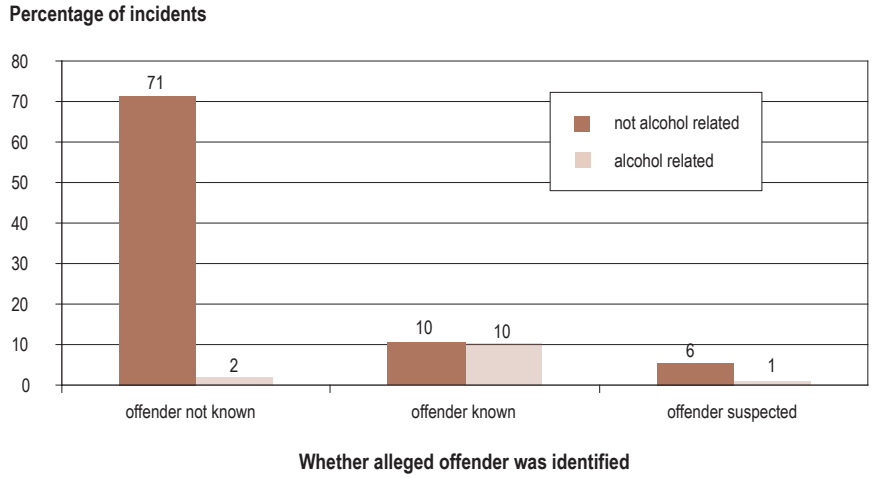


Figure 6: Incidents of malicious damage to property flagged as alcohol related by whether or not alleged offender was identified by police from narrative sample, 2005



of incidents a person of interest was suspected by police, while in a further six per cent of incidents the victim suggested a possible offender but police reported that there was insufficient evidence for the person to be considered a suspect. Of the 135 malicious damage incidents where a person of interest was recorded, the majority (62.2%) involved people who were known to the victim.

The sampled narratives included 65 reports indicating that police had taken action against a person of interest. Of these 65 incidents, court attendance notices were issued in 66 per cent of cases and in 29 per cent of cases a formal caution or warning was given. In the remaining six per cent of incidents police reported that the person of interest was arrested but was not proceeded against. Overall, these results suggest that police commenced action against a suspected offender in only 13 per cent of malicious damage incidents. This low prosecution rate stems from the fact that police could not identify the alleged offender in the majority of incidents sampled for the narratives analysis.

ASSOCIATED FACTORS

The COPS recording system allows police to flag incidents if they suspect that certain factors were involved in the commission of the offence. For example, the police can flag a malicious damage offence as being related to graffiti, domestic violence or alcohol use. The next section examines the extent to which alcohol and graffiti were factors in malicious damage to property offences, as recorded by police in the COPS narratives. Domestic violence is not examined here given that just six per cent of malicious damage incidents were flagged as domestic-violence related. It is also possible that some malicious damage to property incidents arise from attempted break-ins. The extent to which this applies to malicious damage offences in NSW is also considered in this next section of the bulletin.

ALCOHOL INVOLVEMENT IN MALICIOUS DAMAGE

Alcohol was flagged as an associated factor in just 13 per cent of the sampled police narratives. However, the proportion of malicious damage incidents involving alcohol is probably much higher than this figure suggests. Figure 6 shows that generally only incidents with an identified person of interest contain information on whether the incident is alcohol related. Most of the sampled narratives did not have any information about the offender(s) involved in the incident, and accordingly, few of these incidents were recorded as being alcohol related. In malicious damage incidents where the offender was known, however, almost half (49.5%) were flagged as alcohol-related.

The most frequent targets of alcohol-related malicious damage were private dwellings, with over one-third of incidents flagged as alcohol-related reportedly occurring at this location. Commercial buildings were the next most frequent target, with 25.4 per cent of alcohol-

related incidents recorded at this location. Not surprisingly, the majority of incidents flagged as alcohol-related (64.4% of incidents) occurred over the weekend. This is when people are most likely to have leisure time to engage in activities that involve consuming large amounts of alcohol at their residence or at hotels and clubs (Briscoe & Donnelly 2001).

DAMAGE ARISING FROM GRAFFITI

Only a small proportion of all malicious damage incidents sampled for the narrative analysis were flagged as involving graffiti (7.8%). However, given that increases in graffiti-related offences accounted for almost one-third of the overall rise in malicious damage offences in NSW between 2004 and 2005 (Williams & Poynton 2006), further examination of these incident types was warranted.

Analysis of the sampled narratives indicated that many incidents flagged as involving graffiti consisted of 'tagging' by graffiti writers. A smaller proportion of malicious damage offences (which were not flagged by police as graffiti-related) involved the scribbling of profanities or meaningless words on property. If these latter cases are also classified as graffiti, the proportion of malicious damage offences that are graffiti-related increases to 10.4 per cent.

From an examination of the premises types where graffiti occurred, it is apparent that graffiti damage is more evenly distributed across different targets than other types of malicious damage and generally was not aimed at private vehicles and dwellings (see Table 2). The most common targets of graffiti damage were commercial buildings (28.8%) and schools (23.1%). It is possible, however, that variations in the incidence of graffiti across different locations may reflect differences in reporting behaviour by owners rather than differences in the incidence of these offences (Williams & Poynton 2006).[7] Similar to malicious damage incidents in general, the majority of graffiti offences may not be reported to police, therefore trends may be more indicative of factors such as insurance policies and damage response procedures across target types rather than actual patterns of offending.

DAMAGE ASSOCIATED WITH ATTEMPTED BREAK-INS

In about five per cent of sampled incidents police reported that damage was clearly related to an attempt to force entry into the property. In addition, for a further 18.6 per cent of sampled incidents, police could not rule out forced entry as a possible cause of the damage. Cases where forced entry could not be ruled out typically involved the smashing of windows or breaking of doors. While this type of damage allows a point of entry into the property and as such could have involved an attempted forced entry, the smashing of windows and doors was also frequently recorded in other malicious damage incidents that were clearly not related to forced entry attempts. Therefore these unconfirmed 'attempted break-ins' were more likely to be simple cases of malicious damage. Of the attempts at forced entry that could be confirmed, the most frequent targets were private dwellings (30.4%) and private vehicles (26.1%).

COMMON MALICIOUS DAMAGE TARGETS

We will now look more closely at detailed characteristics provided by the sample of COPS narratives regarding the three most frequent targets of malicious damage reported to police. These were private dwellings, private vehicles and commercial buildings.

PRIVATE DWELLINGS

Features Damaged

Malicious damage incidents occurring at private dwellings, such as houses and blocks of units, typically involved malicious damage that was directed toward the dwelling itself (64.1% of incidents). Other frequent targets within private dwellings included the yard area (21.4% of incidents), perimeter fences (9.7%) and garages (2.8%). Figure 7 shows which features of the private dwellings were damaged. Damage targeted toward windows accounted for 34.5 per cent of incidents occurring at private dwellings. Other frequently damaged features of private dwellings included doors (12.4%) and letterboxes (12.4%).[8]

Tools Used

In about half of the malicious damage incidents that targeted private dwellings police could not identify the weapon or tool used to inflict the damage. In many of these cases the police indicated that the implement used could have been a bodily action (e.g. kicking or punching) or alternatively, a small projectile (e.g. rock or stone). However the use of these tools could not be confirmed because the event had not been witnessed.

Of the tools that were confirmed as being involved in damage to private dwellings, the most frequent categories were bodily actions (20.7%), rocks or bricks (11.7%) and the throwing of eggs (9.7%). Other implements used included graffiti materials such as paint and texta, wooden bats, metal bars, vehicles, bottles and sledgehammers. In five per cent of incidents fire or explosives were used, usually in cases where letterboxes had been damaged.

Associated Factors

In five per cent of incidents involving malicious damage to private dwellings, the motive was reported as an attempted forced entry. More than half of these forced entry reports (57%) also recorded an actual theft from the dwelling. Domestic violence was flagged as related to malicious damage in 17.2 per cent of incidents occurring at private dwellings, a rate that is much higher than was found for malicious damage incidents targeting other types of premises. However, for the vast majority of malicious damage incidents occurring at private dwellings the motive for the offence was unknown to police.

The involvement of alcohol was flagged in 16.6 per cent of sampled cases of malicious damage at private dwellings. This too is a higher proportion than observed for other targets of malicious damage to property.

PRIVATE VEHICLES

Features Damaged

Figure 8 shows that in 35.6 per cent of malicious damage incidents targeting vehicles the primary damaged feature

Figure 7: Incidents of malicious damage to property against private dwellings by damaged feature, from narrative sample, 2005

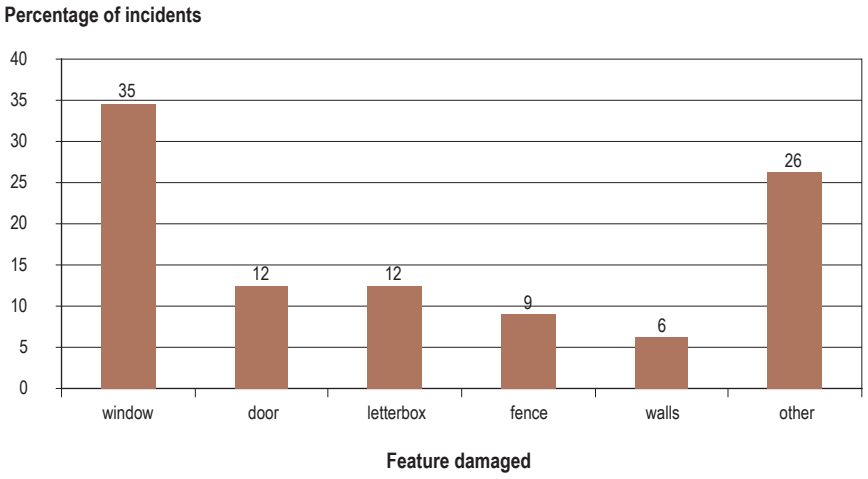
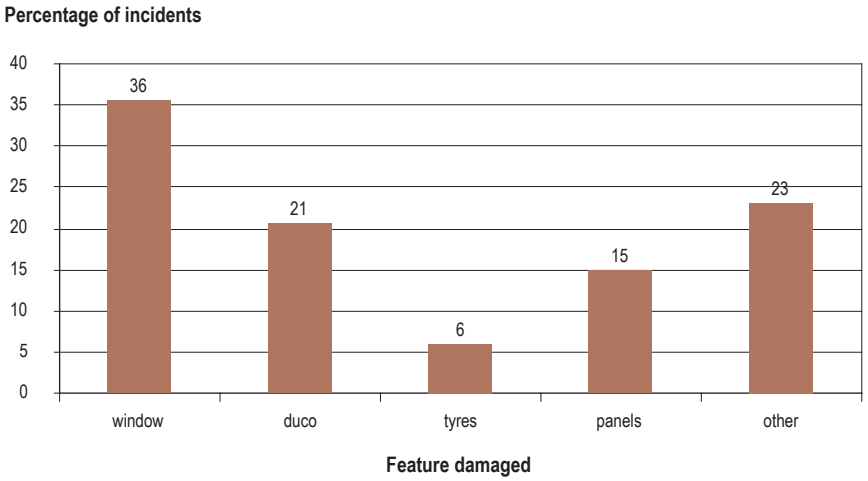


Figure 8: Incidents of malicious damage to property against private vehicles by damaged feature, from narrative sample, 2005



of the vehicle was its windows. Other frequently damaged features included the duco of the vehicle (20.7% of cases) and damage to panels of the vehicle (14.8%).

Tools Used

In cases where the tool or weapon used to damage private vehicles was known, the most common implements used were bodily actions (13.4% of incidents). The next most frequent tool used was bricks and rocks (11.1%), followed by knives (3.7%) and eggs (3.7%). The duco or windows of the vehicle had been scratched in a further 17.0 per cent of sampled narratives. This indicates not only that deliberate vandalism of vehicles by scratching is a frequent form of malicious damage, but also that in many cases the unknown implement(s) used to cause damage to vehicles may have consisted of scratching tools, such as keys or knives.

Associated Factors

Of narratives involving malicious damage to private vehicles, four per cent were related to an attempted forced entry and one-third of these cases recorded a theft from the vehicle. Only four per cent of malicious damage incidents targeting private vehicles were flagged as related to domestic violence and alcohol was flagged as being related to seven per cent of incidents. Again motive could not be determined for most malicious damage incidents targeting private vehicles.

COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

Features Damaged

Narrative reports of malicious damage incidents occurring at commercial premises indicated that these types of offences typically targeted retail stores (56.5%), office blocks (15.2%) and licensed premises (8.7%). Windows were the primary damaged feature in over half (53.3%) of these incidents and were the most frequently damaged feature of commercial buildings (see Figure 9). The external paint finish of buildings (13.0%) and doors (8.7%) were also features of commercial buildings that were damaged in a small proportion of cases.

Tools Used

In incidents where the method of damage was recorded, damage caused by bodily actions was most common, reported in 26.1 per cent of incidents at commercial premises. Other frequently used tools and weapons were consistent with the targeted features of commercial buildings. Fourteen per cent of incidents involved paint and texta materials used to deface walls and create graffiti and 13.0 per cent involved the use of projectiles such as bricks and rocks.

Associated Features

Considering that commercial buildings often contain products that may be seen as a desirable or profitable target of theft, it is surprising that malicious damage to commercial buildings involved rates of forced entry and theft that were similar to the average across all target types. Malicious damage incidents were related to obvious attempts at forced entry in four per cent of incidents. Half of the incidents where forced entry was confirmed resulted in a theft from the building. No

malicious damage incidents targeting commercial buildings were flagged as being related to domestic violence.

The involvement of alcohol was flagged in 17.4 per cent of malicious damage cases targeting commercial buildings, which is higher than malicious damage incidents occurring at other locations. This is due to licensed premises being classified as a commercial building.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Malicious damage to property is a very common offence in NSW. In 2005, 102,816 incidents of malicious damage were reported. This represented an increase of eight per cent on the previous year (Moffatt et al. 2006). Analysis of COPS database records and police narratives revealed that the most frequent targets of malicious damage were private dwellings, private vehicles and commercial buildings. The most common features damaged at these locations were windows. One in ten malicious damage incidents involved graffiti and in these cases schools and commercial buildings were often the target. Where recorded by police, the median cost of malicious damage incidents was $300 (though cost information was not available for a large proportion of incidents).

Malicious damage was rarely witnessed as it occurred. As such, in many cases the exact timing of incidents, methods of inflicting damage and characteristics of the offence (such as offender motivation, offender relationship to the victim and the involvement of alcohol) were not available in police reports. Incidents of malicious damage where police were able to identify an offender, typically involved young male offenders and often took place in the evening and on weekends. It is uncertain, however, whether the high number of young people involved in malicious damage incidents indicates that they offend more frequently than other age groups or that they are more visible to police or less experienced offenders and thus more likely to be identified (Williams & Poynton 2006).

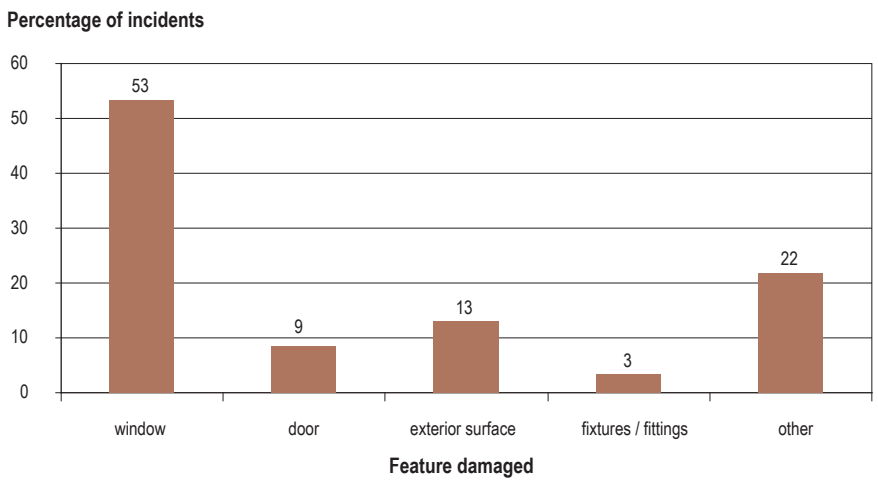
Alcohol was indicated in 13 per cent of the sampled incident narratives. This finding is inconsistent with the results from previous research showing that malicious damage to property is more prevalent in areas with increased alcohol sales (Stevenson 1996) and residents who live closer to liquor outlets report more problems with malicious damage (Donnelly, Poynton, Weatherburn, Bamford & Nottage 2006). However, it is likely that the actual rate of alcohol involvement in malicious damage incidents is much higher than our figures indicate and that the low rate reported here is due to the fact that information regarding the offender is often not available in police reports. This explanation is supported by the fact that in cases where police identified an alleged offender, half of the incidents sampled in the narrative analysis were flagged as alcohol-related.

Given that malicious damage is infrequently witnessed, it is not surprising that police took action against an alleged offender in only a small proportion of these incidents. Our results show that in just 13 per cent of the sampled narratives police commenced legal proceedings against a person of interest. This is consistent with criminal court statistics, which show that only 9,274 people appeared before the courts in 2005 for malicious damage offences (including malicious damage by fire or explosion and graffiti) and were charged with 10,450 counts of these offences. Of these 9,274 persons charged, 7,745 (83.5%) were convicted of at least one offence (unpublished data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2006). With 102,816 incidents recorded by police in 2005, these data suggest that about eight per cent of malicious damage incidents ultimately result in conviction of an offender.

It is also probable that many more people who commit malicious damage avoid prosecution because only a small proportion of incidents are reported to police. Factors such as insurance premiums discouraging small claims, lack of knowledge regarding the offender and views of the offence as trivial may contribute to low reporting rates for this offence (Bonney 1992). As such, it should be remembered that the findings reported in this bulletin only reflect incidents of malicious damage reported to police which are quite likely not representative of all malicious damage incidents occurring in NSW.

A further limitation of the current study is that we could not examine factors that potentially contributed to the recent rise in the recorded incidence of malicious damage offences in NSW. The increase may be attributable to an actual rise in offending behaviour or it may reflect recent changes in the detection or the reporting of offences. However, the current study shows that the police detection rate for this offence is very low. Thus, the recent increased recorded incidence of malicious damage incidents in NSW is probably not related to changes in police strategies targeting these offences.

Figure 9: Incidents of malicious damage to property against commercial buildings by damaged feature, from narrative sample, 2005



Given the high prevalence of malicious damage incidents and the low probability of being detected and prosecuted, it is unlikely that imposing more severe penalties would serve as a deterrent for many offenders. Instead, the literature suggests that malicious damage would be best addressed by improving prevention methods within the community. These measures could include structural designs that reduce opportunities to commit malicious damage, such as improved lighting and greater opportunities for natural surveillance (LeGrange 1999; Geason & Wilson 1990), or physical barriers that prevent the defacing of walls and fences, such as protective coatings/material or vegetation. Initiatives focussed towards increasing awareness of malicious damage offences within the local area may also serve to reduce opportunities for offenders. Another important preventative measure involves rapid restoration of the damage caused. It has been suggested that evidence of malicious damage motivates people to fear and consequently avoid an area, which in turn provides greater opportunities for offenders to commit further malicious damage (Grabosky 1995; Skogen 1990). As such, rapid restoration of damage may serve to further discourage opportunistic offending by increasing patronage of the area. Rapid restoration may also have a beneficial effect in reducing the incidence of offending by diminishing the perceived benefits associated with the crime (such as prolonged display of graffiti).

NOTES

1. Note that data released just prior to the publication of this bulletin showed that in the 24 months to June 2006 the recorded incidence of malicious damage to property in NSW was stable.
2. Coding of COPS narratives was subjected to testing for inter-rater reliability using kappa scores. A kappa statistic indicates how much two raters agree beyond the level of agreement expected by chance alone. The kappa scores calculated for the current study indicated that the level of inter-rater agreement for the codes used in the narratives analysis was generally high, with scores ranging between 0.744 and 0.922.
3. The trend test used was Kendall's rank-order correlation test. A two-tailed test was used to determine whether there had been an increasing or decreasing trend in the recorded numbers of malicious damage incidents over the most recent 24-month period prior to December 2005.
4. Most 'unknown' targets were buildings where ownership was uncertain between commercial and public organisations.
5. The costs reported here are based on the estimated cost of 30,097 incidents where this value was recorded. Both the incident cost and the object cost can be recorded in COPS (it is possible for one incident to involve more than one object being damaged). However, in most cases of malicious damage either the incident cost was recorded or the object cost was recorded, but not both. Here we have only considered incidents with an incident cost. Analysis of a further 32,541 incidents where an object value had been recorded revealed that estimating the median cost using this field gave only a slightly lower figure than using incident cost (median = $200; range $1 to $100,000).
6. These data exclude 7,021 (of 33,999) cases where the gender and/or age of the person of interest were recorded in COPS as 'unknown'.
7. Williams and Poynton (2006) suggest that locations such as schools and businesses may be more motivated to report graffiti incidents to police because of organisational and insurance policies, whereas private victims of graffiti may be less inclined to get the police involved.
8. Where more than one feature was damaged, the area of damage coded for this analysis was the area most damaged. Where this could not be determined the feature was labelled as 'other'.

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APPENDIX 1

Table A1: Police recorded malicious damage to property incidents by Local Government Area, 2005

Rank	LGA	Number	Rate per 100,000	Rank	LGA	Number	Rate per 100,000
1	Bourke	352	8970.4	41	Gunnedah	231	1880.0
2	Walgett	381	4706.0	42	Wyong	2651	1870.0
3	Moree Plains	563	3512.8	43	Parkes	279	1855.8
4	Warren	109	3321.1	44	Greater Queanbeyan	674	1855.2
5	Dubbo	1225	3134.8	45	Snowy River	135	1843.8
6	Narrandera	188	2851.1	46	Mudgee	339	1840.3
7	Wellington	242	2791.9	47	Young	220	1839.9
8	Sydney	3989	2726.6	48	Rylstone	70	1832.0
9	Tamworth	988	2650.8	49	Gosford	2960	1817.7
10	Orange	955	2543.5	50	Clarence Valley	892	1804.9
11	Gilgandra	119	2541.6	51	Blue Mountains	1385	1798.4
12	Coonamble	119	2516.9	52	Wollongong	3440	1795.8
13	Broken Hill	511	2500.0	53	Shoalhaven	1619	1764.3
14	Campbelltown	3672	2448.6	54	Eurobodalla	630	1754.8
15	Tenterfield	165	2431.8	55	Temora	110	1747.4
16	Inverell	382	2428.6	56	Cessnock	839	1742.7
17	Albury	1088	2423.9	57	Blacktown	4846	1739.8
18	Newcastle	3489	2395.7	58	Penrith	3066	1726.8
19	Kempsey	664	2361.8	59	Tumut	196	1722.0
20	Wagga Wagga	1333	2316.0	60	Cowra	226	1719.0
21	Greater Argyle	621	2299.7	61	Yass Valley	215	1713.3
22	Armidale Dumaresq	544	2211.7	62	Great Lakes	574	1679.0
23	Lithgow	447	2173.7	63	Hume	132	1616.5
24	Wentworth	155	2142.1	64	Cootamundra	122	1606.1
25	Lachlan	159	2139.7	65	Carrathool	53	1602.2
26	Forbes	212	2125.5	66	Lismore	690	1596.2
27	Glen Innes	126	2119.4	67	Bega Valley	509	1592.9
28	Leeton	254	2111.7	68	Maitland	953	1589.7
29	Griffith	522	2095.6	69	Parry	203	1585.1
30	Narrabri	297	2085.8	70	Wingecarribee	698	1575.2
31	Cobar	101	2012.0	71	Blayney	105	1570.0
32	Evans	107	1997.8	72	Oberon	80	1566.8
33	Richmond Valley	414	1986.8	73	Lake Macquarie	2961	1565.0
34	Narromine	139	1980.1	74	Kiama	311	1541.4
35	Guyra	87	1959.0	75	Wollondilly	624	1534.6
36	Corowa	168	1954.4	76	Shellharbour	956	1533.6
37	Bathurst	604	1913.6	77	Hawkesbury	965	1517.3
38	Muswellbrook	290	1908.5	78	Greater Taree	704	1514.8
39	Bogan	59	1889.8	79	Cooma-Monaro	148	1514.4
40	Coffs Harbour	1253	1883.4	80	Port Stephens	942	1508.5

Table A1: Police recorded malicious damage to property incidents by Local Government Area, 2005 - (continued)

Rank	LGA	Number	Rate per 100,000	Rank	LGA	Number	Rate per 100,000
81	Botany Bay	557	1497.6	121	Strathfield	328	1053.7
82	Uralla	90	1490.1	122	Canada Bay	673	1017.4
83	Leichhardt	760	1477.7	123	Wakool	49	1013.0
84	Deniliquin	121	1473.1	124	Willoughby	642	1004.6
85	Nambucca	271	1462.9	125	Pittwater	569	999.1
86	Byron	447	1454.9	126	Upper Lachlan	76	997.2
87	Gloucester	71	1448.4	127	Coolamon	40	973.0
88	Ballina	569	1438.8	128	Kogarah	530	963.4
89	Singleton	307	1401.0	129	Scone	93	947.1
90	Waverley	866	1394.6	130	Canterbury	1269	939.7
91	Marrickville	1055	1390.5	131	Rockdale	888	934.4
92	Junee	81	1375.9	132	Mosman	264	928.9
93	Camden	686	1363.8	133	Fairfield	1743	928.7
94	Liverpool	2238	1333.1	134	Baulkham Hills	1413	895.1
95	Palerang	150	1324.5	135	Coolah	33	851.2
96	Hastings	912	1307.8	136	Hornsby	1308	833.5
97	Randwick	1641	1297.9	137	Berrigan	68	830.5
98	Manilla	42	1290.7	138	Gundagai	31	823.8
99	Sutherland Shire	2764	1286.9	139	Warringah	1142	823.7
100	Woollahra	680	1280.7	140	Ryde	775	777.6
101	Cabonne	161	1275.1	141	Ku-ring-gai	829	761.7
102	Auburn	799	1272.4	142	Lane Cove	246	760.6
103	Bankstown	2232	1272.3	143	Quirindi	35	710.2
104	Parramatta	1922	1272.2	144	Yallaroi	22	701.3
105	Hay	45	1268.0	145	Harden	26	689.5
106	Ashfield	509	1264.3	146	Lockhart	24	680.3
107	Kyogle	121	1256.8	147	Dungog	54	644.5
108	Weddin	47	1229.4	148	Hunter's Hill	88	632.6
109	Coonabarabran	82	1228.8	149	Walcha	17	521.3
110	Holroyd	1101	1207.1				
111	Culcairn	48	1194.9				
112	Murray	77	1166.0				
113	Hurstville	877	1159.4				
114	Tweed	919	1150.0				
115	Bland	75	1144.7				
116	Burwood	355	1142.0				
117	Manly	444	1138.8				
118	North Sydney	679	1117.0				
119	Bellingen	137	1077.0				
120	Tumbarumba	39	1076.5				

Note: *Rates are not calculated for Local Government Areas with populations less than 3,000.*

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