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Motor Vehicle Theft in N.S.W.

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The purpose of this bulletin is to outline what is known about the crime of motor vehicle theft in N.S.W from official statistics and the small amount of research that has been carried out on the subject. The first section presents statistics on the number of motor vehicles reported stolen in N.S.W. over the years 1964-1978. The second section outlines what is known about the victims of car theft and the third section gives information on offenders who appear before the courts and the type of sentences they receive.

The information presented here has been collected from a number of sources and in particular we would like to acknowledge the assistance of the N.S.W. Police Dept, the Dept of Motor Transport and the N.R.M.A.

Readers who are interested in a comparison of vehicle theft rates between N.S.W. and other states are referred to a publication by D. Biles (1975) entitled Car Stealing in Australia: Facts and Figures published by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

The offence category of motor vehicle theft as used in this bulletin refers to all offences of larceny of motor vehicles, unlawful or unauthorised use of, or use without consent of motor vehicles, including riding in a known stolen conveyance.

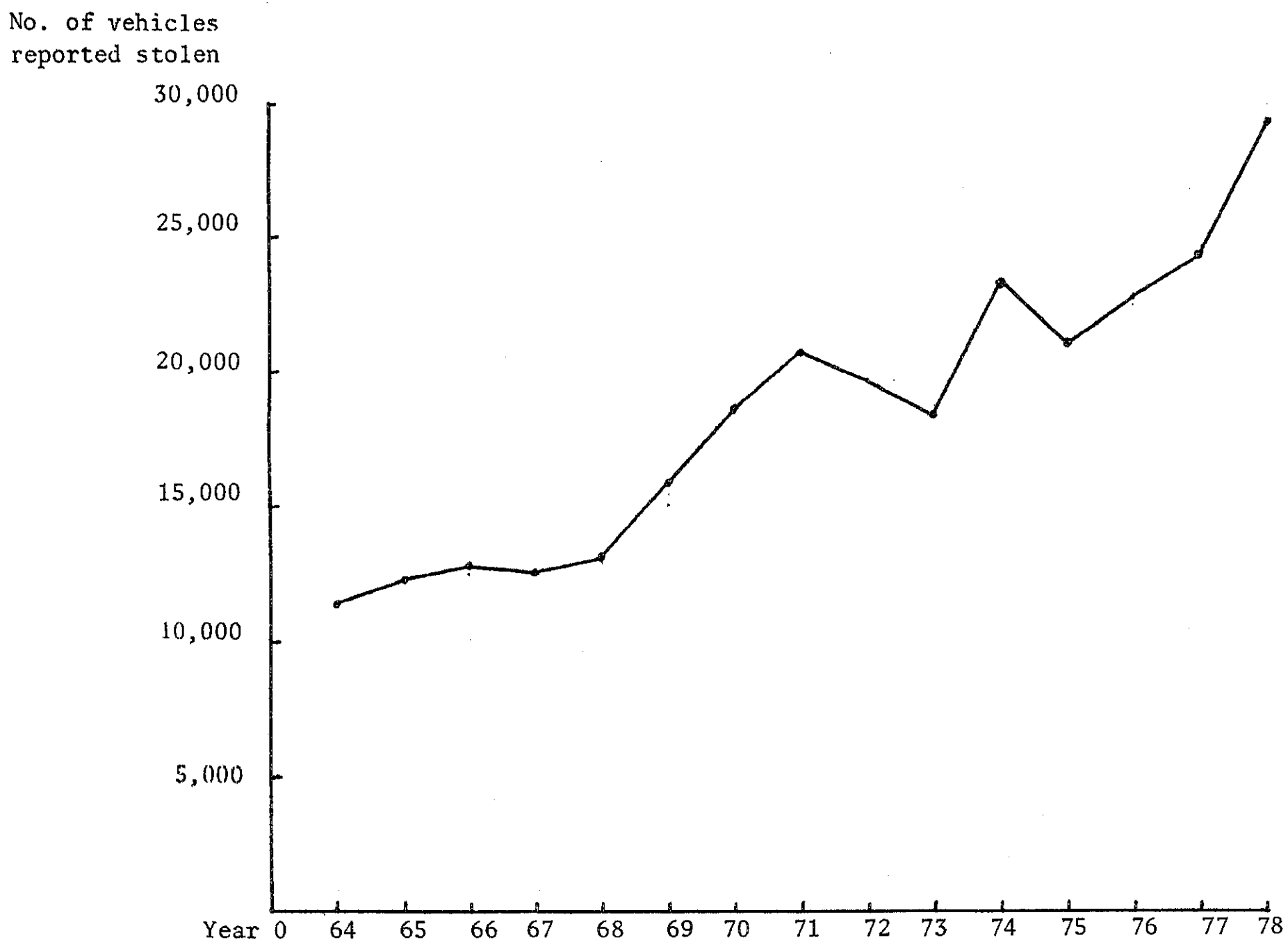
#### Trends in Motor Vehicle Theft 1964-1978.

The figures in the following tables citing the number of motor vehicles reported stolen refers to the number of accepted incidents reported or becoming known to the police in N.S.W. Crimes reported to the police are generally the most commonly available statistics to show the extent of crime in the community. However, these often understate the extent of crime as many incidents are never reported. A survey of crime victims by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1975) has shown that motor vehicle theft is the offence most likely to be reported to the police, with 90% of victims surveyed indicating that the police were notified. This is probably because a large proportion of vehicles are insured and police must be notified before a

claim can be made. Thus police reports on motor vehicle theft are probably among the most accurate statistics on a crime available.

The total number of vehicles reported stolen for each year from 1964 to 1978 is shown graphically in Figure 1 while the precise figures are given in Table 1. The graph indicates that the total number of vehicles reported stolen has nearly trebled over the 15 year period, from 11,512 in 1964 to 29,323 in 1978, the years 1972, 1973 and 1975 being the only times when the number decreased from the previous year. The most dramatic increase evident is from 1977 to 1978 with an increase of nearly 6,000 vehicles, representing a 23% increase from 1977.

Fig 1. Total number of vehicles reported stolen, N.S.W. 1964-1978.



It would be misleading, however, to assume from this data that car theft is increasing dramatically without taking into consideration increases in population and the number of motor vehicles on the road. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the number of vehicles stolen per 1,000 population and the number stolen per 1,000 motor vehicles on register, respectively, for the years 1964-1978. The precise figures are shown in Table 1.

From Figure 2 it can be seen that the increase in vehicle theft has been greater than the population increase. Over the fifteen year period the increase has been from 2.78 vehicles stolen per 1000 population in 1964 to 5.85 in 1978. There is little variation in the rate from 1964 to 1968 but from 1969 to 1978 the rate has increased steadily, with the exceptions of 1972, 1973 and 1975. Overall, it is in fact an increase of approximately 6% per year above the population increase.

Fig 2. Number of motor vehicles reported stolen per 1,000 population, N.S.W., 1964-1978.

No. of motor vehicles stolen per 1000 population

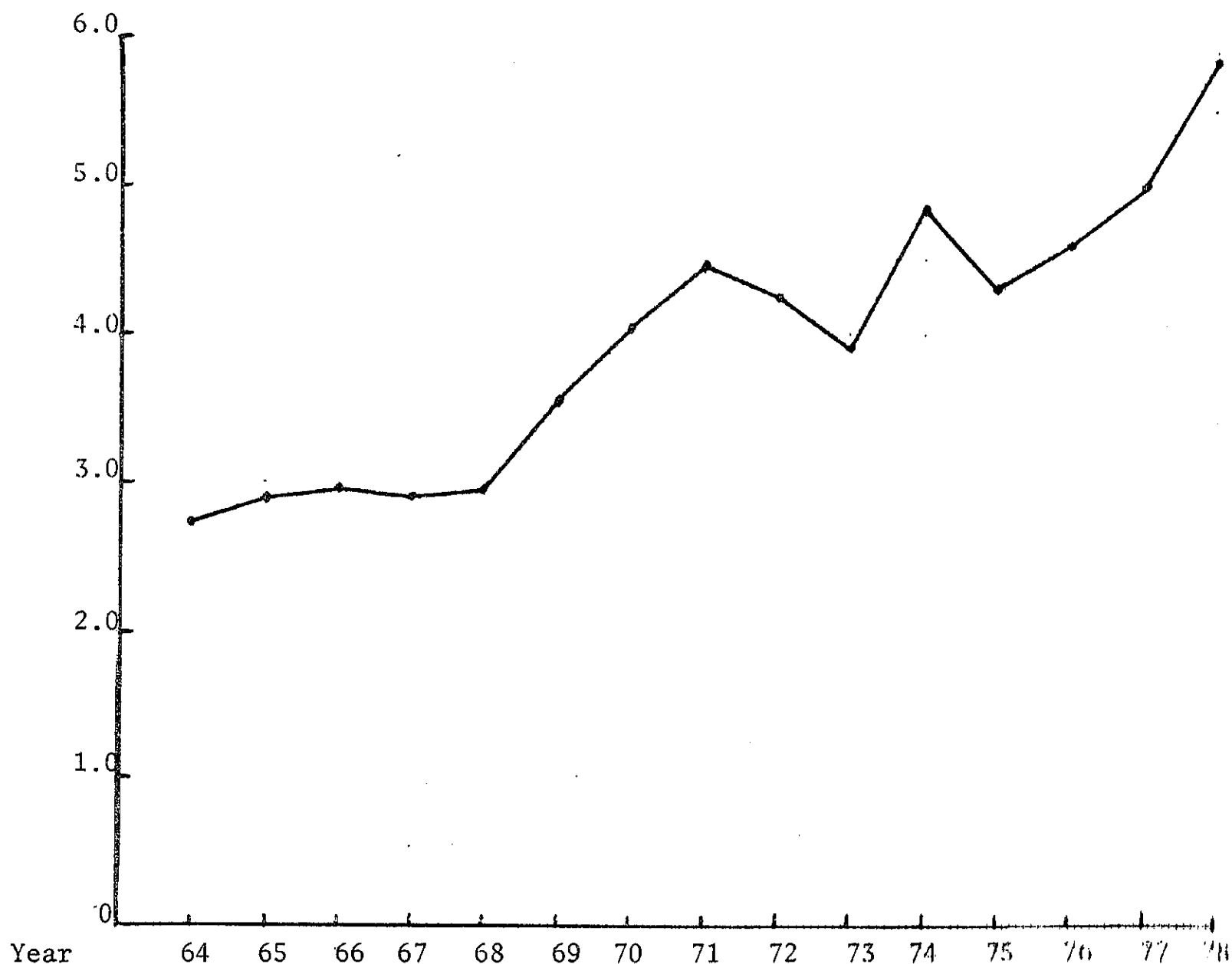


Figure 3 also indicates an increase in motor vehicle theft, per 1000 vehicles on register. However, the increase is not as dramatic as for Figure 2. The number of vehicles stolen per 1,000 vehicles on register has increased from 9.51 vehicles per 1000 in 1964 to 12.27 per 1000 in 1978 - an increase of approximately 2.5% per year above the increase in motor vehicle registrations. The increase is not at all regular, with increases in car ownership rates outstripping increases in vehicle theft rates from 1964 to 1968 before theft rates increased in a fluctuating manner from 1969 to the present. Overall the graph does suggest that as rates of car ownership increase so does the number of motor vehicles stolen.

Fig. 3 No. of Motor vehicles reported stolen per 1,000 motor vehicles on register, N.S.W., 1964-1978.

No. of vehicles stolen per 1000 motor vehicles on register

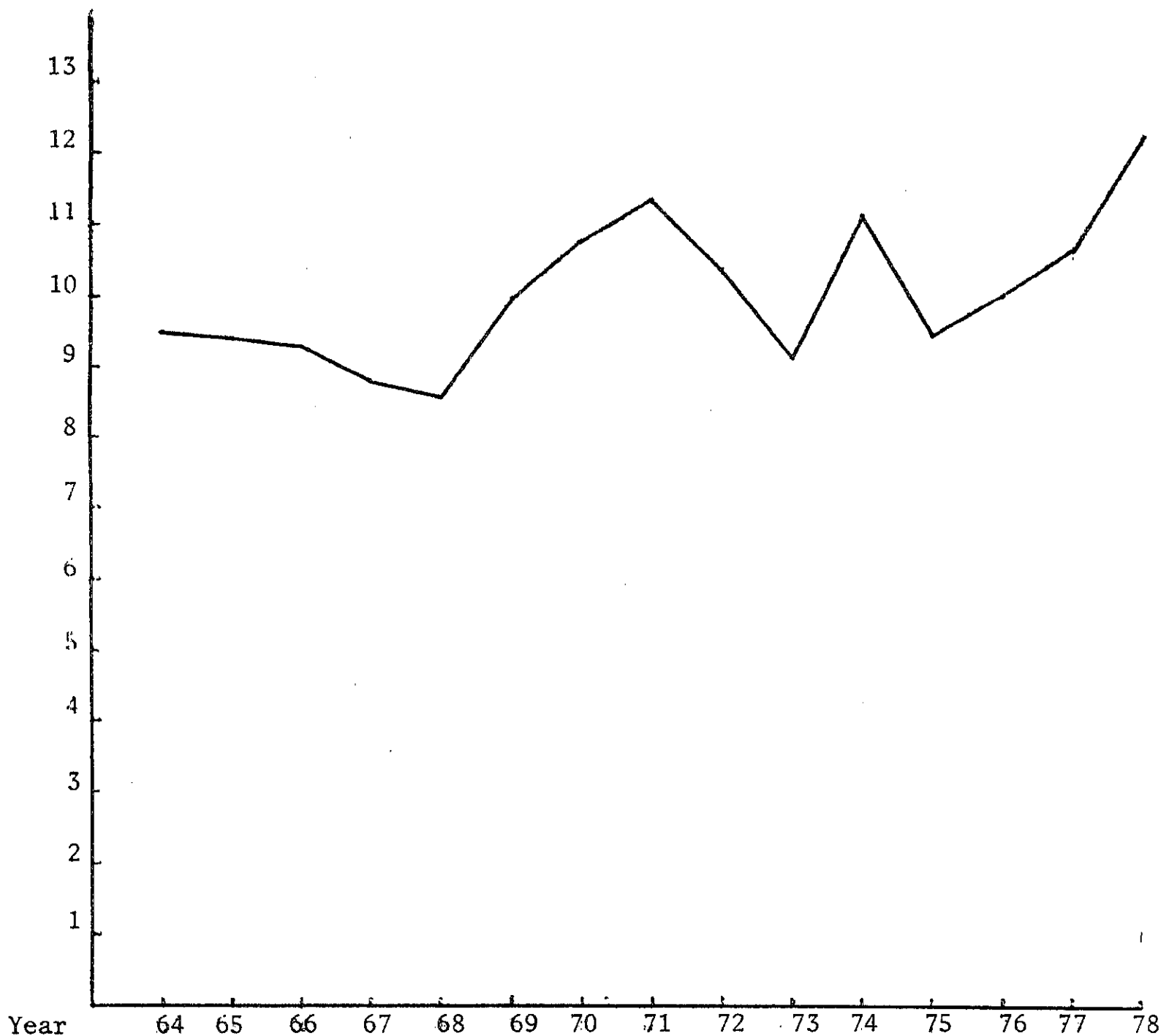


Table 1. Motor Vehicle Theft Rates, N.S.W., 1964-1978.

Year	Est Popn (1000) <sup>1</sup>	No. M/V on register (1000) <sup>2</sup>	No. M/V on register per 1000 popn	Total No. M/V reported stolen # <sup>3</sup>	No. M/v reported stolen per 1000 popn	No. M/V stolen per 1000 M/V on register
1964	4,142	1,210	292	11,512	2.78	9.51
1965	4,211	1,296	308	12,214	2.90	9.42
1966	4,273	1,357	318	12,678	2.97	9.34
1967	4,326	1,426	330	12,558	2.90	8.81
1968	4,401	1,518	345	13,008	2.96	8.57
1969	4,491	1,606	358	16,082	3.58	10.01
1970	4,574	1,712	374	18,464	4.04	10.79
1971	4,651	1,818	391	20,756	4.46	11.42
1972	4,696	1,909	407	19,895	4.24	10.42
1973	4,738	2,009	424	18,392	3.88	9.15
1974	4,839	2,098	434	23,426	4.84	11.17
1975	4,884	2,204	451	20,970	4.29	9.51
1976	4,914	2,251	458	22,661	4.61	10.07
1977	4,957	2,309	466	24,664	4.98	10.68
1978	5,011	2,389	477	29,323	5.85	12.27

1 figures from ABS

2 figures from Dept Motor Transport Traffic Accident Research Unit at 30th June.

3 figures from N.S.W. Police Department.

The Victims of Vehicle Theft.

Table 2 shows the number of vehicles stolen, those recovered by police and the number of charges laid for the years 1973 to 1978. Approximately 80% of vehicles reported stolen are recovered by police, although this does not in any way refer to the condition they were in when found. The number of charges laid as a percentage of total reported thefts has ranged from 17.4% in 1973 to 9.7% in 1978. The reason for this decrease in the clear up rate is probably explained by the large increases in vehicles stolen without corresponding increases in the size of the police force.

Table 2. No. of Motor Vehicles reported stolen, recovered, and persons charged, N.S.W. 1973-1978.

Year	No. of vehicles reported stolen	No. of vehicles recovered	% of vehicles recovered	No. Charged	% Charged
1973	18,392	15,042	81.8%	3,192	17.4%
1974	23,426	18,730	80.0%	2,863	12.2%
1975	20,970	16,732	79.8%	2,814	13.4%
1976	22,661	18,118	80.0%	2,944	13.0%
1977	24,664	20,565	83.4%	2,634	10.7%
1978	29,323	23,984	81.8%	2,833	9.7%

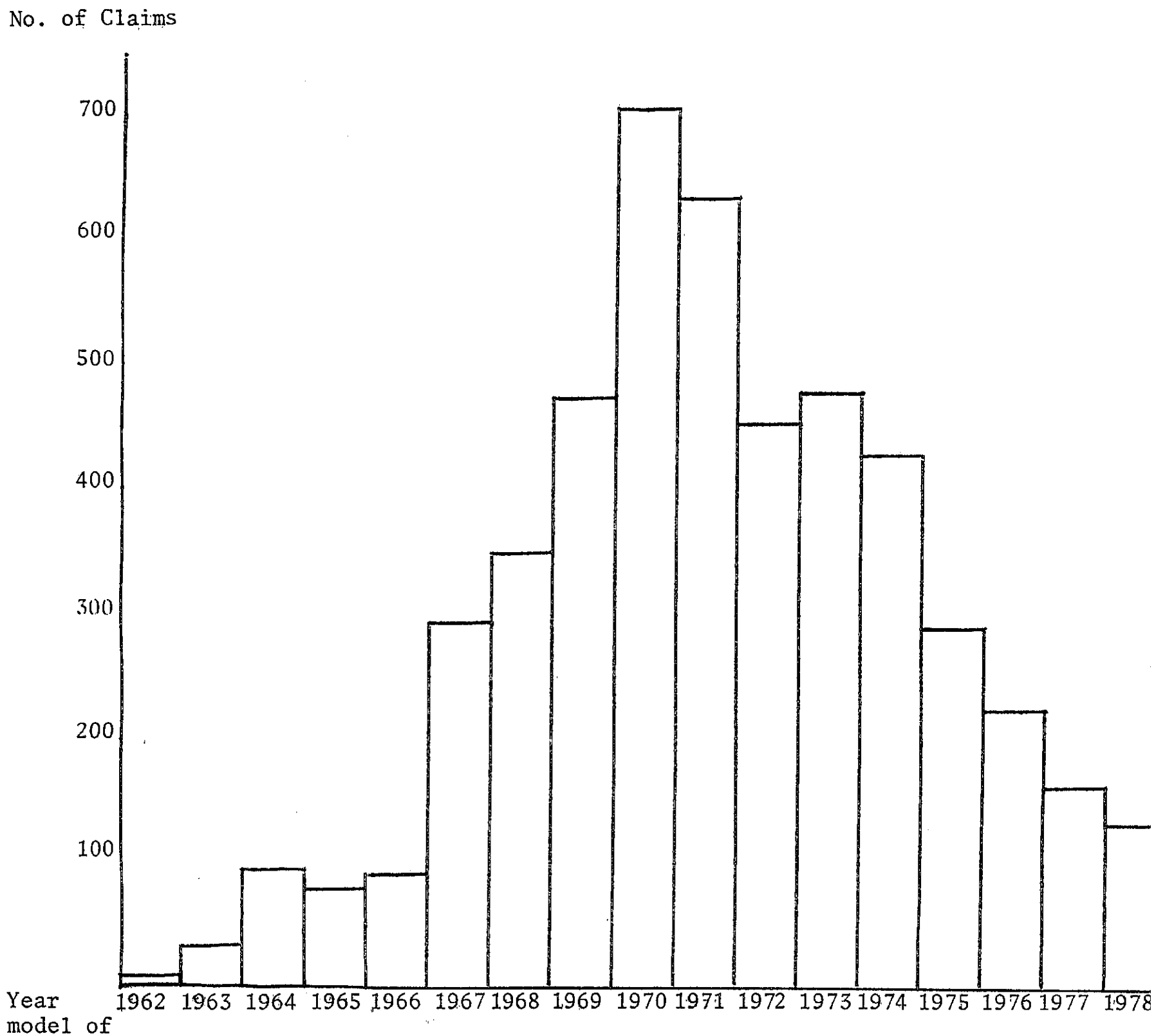
What else is known about the victims of vehicle theft comes basically from three sources; a study by D. Biles (1974), an ABS General Social Survey of Crime Victims and some information supplied by the N.R.M.A. in N.S.W., one of the largest vehicle insurers in the state. From these sources we can piece together some characteristics of vehicle theft victims.

Model and Make of vehicles stolen.

A study by Biles (1974) which used as a sample 10% of all motor vehicles reported stolen in Victoria over a twelve month period, July 1st 1971 to June 30th 1972, found that the most common year of manufacture of stolen vehicles was 1964. That is the vehicles were 7 to 8 yrs old, and 55% of vehicles stolen in this sample were over 7 years old. (Biles, 1974, p 101).

Information supplied by the N.R.M.A. in N.S.W. to the Bureau of Crime Statistics indicates that this pattern still applies in N.S.W. in 1979, as is illustrated in Figure 4. The most common year model of insurance claims was 1970 and 56% of vehicles stolen in this sample were over seven years old.

Fig. 4. Year model of stolen vehicles from claims lodged with the N.R.M.A., N.S.W., in 1979.





The reasons put forward by Biles (1974, p103) for the high percentage of older vehicles stolen are as follows:-

1. - There are more older vehicles on the road than newer ones;
2. - Older vehicles are stolen for the purposes of obtaining spare parts;
3. - Older vehicles may be "easier" to start without ignition keys;
4. - Older cars may not have automatic ignition locks which impede theft;
5. - Owners of older vehicles may not take as much care in locking their vehicles as owners of newer vehicles.

It is difficult to assess the merits of these hypotheses, however, information from the last Motor Vehicle Census carried out by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1976 indicates that only 38.4% of vehicles on register were over 7 yrs old yet as we have seen they represent over 50% of vehicles stolen. It would thus seem that we can discount Biles' first hypotheses.

Other relevant information bears indirectly on Biles' last hypothesis, that owners of older vehicles may not take as much care locking their vehicles. The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research has conducted a survey of Children's Courts in N.S.W. sampling 1086 cases, of which 112 were for vehicle theft. In these cases information was collected, where available, on the method of entry and starting the vehicle. The results of this are shown in Table 3. It is important to consider that although juveniles are responsible for a large percentage of vehicle theft (see p 13) it may be that they are more likely to be caught than "professionals", and hence the data may reflect only the methods of "amateurs". However, the data does indicate that 65% of vehicles stolen in the sample were not locked and that many (40%) had the key in the car.

Table 4. Means of Vehicle Theft. \*

	No.	%
Vehicle unlocked, no key in car	30	26.8
Vehicle unlocked, key in car	43	38.4
Vehicle locked, key in car	2	1.8
Vehicle locked, key not in car	11	9.8
Other	19	17.0
Unknown/not stated	7	6.2
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Total	112	100.0

\* Data from Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research  
Childrens Court study soon to be published.

#### Vehicle Make.

Information on the make of vehicles stolen reported to the N.R.M.A. in 1979 is shown in Table 5. The two most common makes stolen are Holden (47.5%) and Ford (19.1%). Information from the last Australian Bureau of Statistics Motor Vehicle Census (1976) indicates that the number of Holdens and Fords on register as a percentage of total vehicles is 28.1% and 18.2% respectively, indicating that Holdens are greatly over represented among vehicles stolen in the N.R.M.A. data, while the number of Fords and other makes stolen is what would be expected from the number of vehicles on the road.

Table 5. Make of Motor Vehicles reported stolen to the  
N.R.M.A., N.S.W., 1979.

Make	% of claims	% of vehicles on register 1976 census
Austin	0.6	1.5
Chrysler	9.6	8.3
Datsun	3.6	5.5
Dodge	0.4	0.9
Fiat	0.6	0.7
Ford	19.1	18.2
Hillman	0.8	1.1
Holden	47.5	28.1
Honda	0.3	2.4
Landrover	0.2	0.5
Leyland	0.7	1.3
Mazda	2.3	3.2
Mercedes	0.3	0.7
MG	0.5	0.2
Morris	2.9	4.0
Renault	0.4	0.8
Suzuki	0.4	0.8
Toyota	3.4	7.0
Volkswagen	3.8	4.6
"Other"	2.6	10.2
Total	100.0	100.0

Time and Location of vehicle theft.

Data on the location of motor vehicles when stolen was collected by both Biles (1974) and the ABS Victim Survey (1975) which sampled 10,500 persons throughout Australia asking whether they had been the victim of a crime in the past twelve months. The results of both studies are shown in Table 6 and clearly both concur that the majority of vehicles are stolen from the street, when one combines both thefts from car parks and streets the figure approaches 80% of all thefts.

Table 6 Location of vehicle at time of theft.

Location at time of theft	Biles' Study %	ABS Victim Survey %
Private Premises	23.6	21.8
Street	56.8	58.7
Carpark	19.6	14.0
Other	-	5.5
Total	100.0	100.0

The ABS Victim Survey (1975, p 25,35) also indicated that approximately 85% of vehicle thefts occurred in cities with populations in excess of 500,000 people, clearly making vehicle theft an urban crime, and that vehicles were 4 times as likely to be stolen during the night as during the day. Biles (1974, p 105) found that 42% of thefts occurred on a Friday or Saturday night.

Vehicle Theft - the offender

The best source of information on vehicle theft offenders comes from court appearances. It should be kept in mind, however, that the clear up rate for vehicle theft is only about 10% and it is possible that the offenders who appear in court are not representative of all offenders. In particular it is possible that 'amateurs' or 'joy riders' are over represented.

Statistics on persons under 18 yrs of age appearing in N.S.W. Childrens Courts are collected by the Dept of Youth and Community Services. These are published on a financial year basis while statistics on appearances in courts of Petty Sessions and the Higher Courts are collected on an annual basis making comparisons between the courts difficult. A computing exercise was undertaken using data on juvenile court appearances for the financial years 1975/76, 1976/77 to obtain compatible data on a calendar year basis. Although somewhat dated it is not expected to differ significantly from present trends.

As is shown in Table 7 there were 2,562 appearances for vehicle theft in courts in N.S.W. in 1976, of which 60.6% were heard in Children's Courts, 25.4% in Courts of Petty Sessions and 14% in the Higher Courts. Obviously, the majority of detected vehicle thefts are committed by juveniles, i.e. under 18 yrs of age.

Table 8 shows the age and sex breakdown for offenders in all three court jurisdictions and indicates that 90% of those appearing were under 25 yrs of age, with 56% aged from 15 to 18 years. Only 102 (4.0%) of all appearances were by females.

Table 7 Appearances for vehicle Theft in N.S.W. Courts, 1976.

Court	No.	%
Childrens Courts	1552	60.6
Petty Sessions	650	25.4
Higher Courts	360	14.0
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Total	2562	100.0

Table 8 Age and sex of persons appearing for vehicle theft in N.S.W. Courts, 1976.

Age	Male		Female		Total.	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Under 11	2	0.1	0	0	2	0.1
11 - 12	23	1.0	0	0	23	0.9
13 - 14	295	12.0	18	17.6	313	12.2
15 - 16	788	32.0	42	41.2	830	32.4
17 - 18	588	23.9	18	17.7	606	23.7
19 - 20	290	11.8	7	6.9	297	11.6
21 - 22	143	5.8	3	2.9	146	5.7
23 - 24	78	3.2	5	4.9	83	3.2
25 - 29	134	5.4	4	3.9	138	5.4
30 - 34	49	2.0	1	1.0	50	2.0
35 - 39	20	0.8	0	0	20	0.8
40 - 49	24	1.0	0	0	24	0.9
50 - 59	8	0.3	0	0	8	0.3
60 plus	3	0.1	0	0	3	0.1
Unknown	15	0.6	4	3.9	19	0.7
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Total	2460	100.0	102	100.0	2562	100.0

Court Action.

The action taken by the courts against offenders is presented in Table 9. As different sentencing options are available in dealing with juvenile offenders and the maximum prison sentence that can be handed down in a Court of Petty Sessions is 2 yrs the possible outcomes are not strictly comparable between the three court jurisdictions. However, the table indicates that the most common outcome overall was a Recognizance with or without probation, 33.8% of all those appearing receiving this outcome. 25% of all offenders received a custodial sentence, either imprisonment or a juvenile institution and 12.8% were fined, while 4.2% were found not guilty and 8.4% received a S556A or S83C outcome in which no conviction is recorded.

As would be expected imprisonment was a more likely outcome in the Higher Courts dealing with more serious offences, 49.4% of those appearing being imprisoned compared to 23.5% in Courts of Petty Sessions. Similarly, sentences were longer in the Higher Courts, 29.4% receiving sentences in excess of 2 yrs imprisonment.

In the Childrens Court 13 cases (0.8%) received prison sentences and 18.8% were committed to a juvenile institution, and whereas 25.5% of offenders were fined in Courts of Petty Sessions only 10.4% of juveniles were, 7.7% receiving suspended sentences and 12.3% S83c dismissals. The use of fines in Childrens Court, being restricted by juveniles lower incomes, if any.

Table 9 Court Action for vehicle theft appearances in N.S.W. Courts  
1976.

Court Action	Childrens Courts		Petty Sessions		Higher Courts		Total.	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Not Guilty	53	3.4	43	6.6	11	3.1	107	4.2
Withdrawn/ dismissed	66	4.3	78	12.0	26	7.2	170	6.6
S556A/S83*	191	12.3	24	3.7	-	-	215	8.4
Admonished								
Discharged*	48	3.1	-	-	-	-	48	1.9
Recognizance w/without								
Probation/Fine	560	36.1	165	25.4	142	39.4	867	33.8
Fine	161	10.4	166	25.5	-	-	327	12.8
Suspended								
Sentence*	119	7.7	-	-	-	-	119	4.6
Committed to Care*	14	0.9	-	-	-	-	14	0.6
Juvenile Institution*	292	18.8	-	-	1	0.3	293	11.4
Periodic detention	-	-	3	0.5	2	0.6	5	0.2
Imprisonment - up to 6 mths	13	0.8	58	8.9	12	3.3	83	3.2
6 mths to 1 yr	-	-	57	8.8	-	-	57	2.2
1 yr to 2 yrs	-	-	38	5.8	60	16.7	98	3.8
2 yrs to 3 yrs	-	-	-	-	60	16.7	60	2.3
3 yrs plus	-	-	-	-	46	12.7	46	1.8
Other	35	2.2	18	2.8	-	-	53	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1552</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>650</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2562</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* Sentencing options available in Childrens Court.



Conclusions.

The material presented in this bulletin may be summarised as follows:-

1. Vehicle theft in N.S.W. has increased consistently over the past 15 years. However, when the number of motor vehicles registered per 1000 population is considered the increase is not as dramatic, averaging 2.5% per year over the past 15 years;
2. The most likely vehicle make to be stolen is a Holden, commonly over seven years old. It will probably be stolen from the street or a car park and if evidence from a limited number of cases studied is any guide the vehicle will not be locked.
3. Court Statistics indicate that 90% of vehicle theft offenders are under 25 yrs of age and that 56% are between 15 and 18 yrs of age. The most likely outcome for this offence is a recognizance with or without probation followed by a custodial sentence.

This bulletin has not addressed itself to why vehicles are stolen but the large involvement of juveniles suggests that the role of vehicles as a status symbol in our society must be a contributing factor. As this is unlikely to change it would seem that the most effective preventative measure would be improved locking devices, particularly automatic ignition or steering locks, as it would appear that many people leave doors or windows unsecured.

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