REDUCING CAR THEFT: HOW LOW CAN WE GO?

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INTRODUCTION

A successful recent example of the Streetwize approach is the comic entitled ‘Spur of the Moment’. Funded by the NRMA group of companies, this comic follows the misadventures of 19 year old Johnno and his mate 17 year old Nathan who steal a car for a ‘joyride’ and pick up two of their friends: 16 year olds Lauren and Nadia. The ‘joy-ride’ ends in tragic circumstances for the young people and illustrates how a decision made on the ‘spur of the moment’ can have lasting consequences.

The fact that Streetwize has built up a strong reputation as an accurate and non-judgmental resource amongst ‘hard to reach’ young people is well known in the community sector (these views are also supported by numerous evaluations carried out on Streetwize materials).

The successful 1999 comic ‘Revved Up’ aimed at young car buyers and funded by the NRMA and the NSW Department of Fair Trading demonstrated that the Streetwize approach works well for the purposes of broader community education.

Given this background, it was with a high degree of confidence that the NRMA group of companies through national community relations manager Margaret Miller approached Streetwize to tackle the issue of juvenile vehicle theft. Juvenile car offenders have traditionally been seen as a ‘hard to reach’ group of young people. Streetwize was seen as an appropriate avenue through which to reach such individuals.

DISCUSSION

1. Setting the scene

The young person and vehicle theft project began with a brainstorm meeting at the Streetwize offices in Redfern attended by representatives from the NRMA, NSW Police, community legal centres, youth centres, local government and the NMVTRC. The key issues raised were:

- The perspective the comic would take (i.e. the victim’s perspective, the perpetrator’s perspective or both?)
• The target audience the comic would address?
• The need to show the consequences of stealing a vehicle (i.e. court action, injury or death.)
• Voluntary passengers in stolen vehicles are also offenders.
• Vehicle theft is a potential pathway to future re-offending.
• Stolen vehicles are sometimes used to commit other thefts/crimes.
• Vehicles are also stolen for parts or for insurance claims
• Young people need to take responsibility for the consequences of committing vehicle theft.
• Need to explore reasons why young people may commit vehicle theft (i.e. as a consequence of boredom and lack of public space, access to transportation etc.)
• Vehicle theft hierarchy, i.e. thieves often begin with stealing Excel vehicles and move on to V8s later down the line.

2 Research with young people

Having identified these issues Streetwize conducted a series of consultations with young people on the mid north coast of NSW (Taree area) and in the Sydney metropolitan area. A range of other services, including Street Legal in SA, provided input into the program at this stage.

Who and why?

The research indicated that a wide range of young people commit vehicle theft in rural and metropolitan areas, being as young as 10 years of age, and the majority being male. Whilst certain community’s such as the indigenous community at Purfleet near Taree have a particularly high profile in terms of this offence, offenders come from a wide range of backgrounds.

Many motivations for vehicle theft were identified, with some young children learning to drive in stolen vehicles whilst other have an intense interest in vehicles generally. Another reason was having ‘nothing better to do’ therefore stealing to siphon the petrol. One young person made the statement that they started as a 10 year old sitting on phonebooks because they couldn’t reach the steering wheel. (HBT)

Comments include:

‘Mostly, it’s young people who haven’t got cars but are really into it. I grew up around cars in Broadmeadows.’ (Kingsford)

‘Kids from 15 up they learn to drive by stealing cars.’ (Belmore)

‘Girls are into it too, if they’re desperate to get somewhere in a hurry, for drugs etc’. (Belmore)
‘The black fellas into it are mostly kids. They go bush bashing and then dump em up behind the mish. Cops are too scared to chase em in case of a crash.’ (My Place, Taree)

Asked why they do it, the major reason given was for the thrill of it.

‘Young people just do it for kicks. There is nothing to do in this town. Usually you just drive around the town and out into the country side. The only things to do around here are drink, take speed, party round rivers, steal cars and root’. (My Place, Taree)

‘It’s really just the thrill of driving around that gets you into it. The adrenaline rush of pinching something and getting away with it’. (Kingsford)

‘It’s like an adrenaline rush, just faggin’ around’. (HBT, Parramatta)

‘However, it also came out that some of these young people also saw stealing cars as a good way to get around’.

‘Some cars are stolen for transportation’. (HBT, Parramatta)

‘Most of them are idiots they just do it for joyriding but some of them really need the car to score drugs’. (Belmore)

‘Some times if you want to go down to the beach or further down the coast you might steal a car if the bus is a hassle’. (My Place, Taree)

‘We’ll steal a car and head off to Forster or Old Bar for a swim, boogie board/body boarding, have some drink etc. You dump that car and then steal another one to get home’. (Purfleet)

Deterrence

In discussions with young people who had become involved in car theft it quite quickly became apparent, in terms of deterrence, that many of the issues raised at the brainstorm meeting were of little concern.

Young offenders appeared to exhibit little empathy for victims. Comments in this regard included:

‘When I was into stealing cars I wouldn’t have given a shit - I’d have just gone out and stolen another one. As far as this proving a deterrent I’d doubt it’. (Kingsford)

The young people interviewed further appeared unconcerned about not being able to secure employment or drivers licenses in the future. One particular comments made was:

‘It’s really just part of a wider problem. There’s little kids going hungry, they don’t even see a future for themselves, in one group of 13 year olds we had
here 4 out of 7 answered "death" when we asked them what they thought about the future'. (Koori Youth Network, Taree)

The prospect of juvenile detention seemed a minor concern to some of the young offenders. One comment that stood out was:

'Many of the kids see Worimai (Newcastle JJ) as a safe place and a place to get a feed and a warm bed'. (Koori Youth Network, Taree)

Cut to the chase

In writing the draft story it was therefore necessary to get across some form of deterrence that would make a real impact on these young people. It appeared on the basis of the conducted interviews that the only way to deter such young people was to have the story characters experience traumatic consequences as a result of their actions.

In short they needed to get locked up (in adult jail) or see a friend get seriously hurt or killed.

I stole a car with my boyfriend once. We were on speed and we saw a VN Commodore outside a pub. We were really charging and my boyfriend can get into a Commodore in 30 seconds. It was a blast we cruised round town and then he dropped me back at Wingham. I was shit scared later though. I thought what if someone saw us and dobbed us in. I know a lot of real bitches round this area. If they had it in for you or were jealous of your boy they'd do it, no worries. Haven't stolen since then, too paranoid of getting busted. I don't want to go to a juvvie or anything. I just want to party. (My Place, Taree)

Only thing that will stop em is if their friends get into a car accident or majorly get put in jail. (Belmore)

I was in for 2 years for car theft, prison really put me off doing it again (Kingsford)

Getting busted or hurt. This friend of mine got killed he was in the DFC gang all they did was steal WRX's and do rorts. One time they did a ramraid and clipped a car and went into a pole - they all died. (Belmore)

Accidents and getting busted. I know a guy who stole a Eunos and got bumped by the coppers in a chase and went off the road and nearly straight thru a house. That put him off. (HBT)

At times it's scary when the cops are chasing and you lose control. (Purfleet)

Only way they'll learn their lesson is when they get sent down. Can't do nothing else with them. (Purfleet)
Soon as you turn 18 you should stop when you get into big jail you’ll get on drugs, get Hep B etc from tattoos - yeah they only use one needle for 4 or 5 jails. Yeah sharing needles fuck that. (Purfleet)

Three young men died in a smash with a bus (not in a stolen car) just before Christmas and this really rocked the community and stopped the young fellas in their tracks for a bit. But before long they were back to their old ways. (Koori Youth Network, Taree)

The draft comic

In the draft comic the action was as follows:

A quiet evening in an outer suburban area. Johnno and Wes are walking along bored, looking for something to do. They spot a VN Commodore in the pub car park, on a Spur of the Moment whim they break in and decide to go for a spin.

Johnno suggests that they go and pick up his girlfriend Lauren, they cruise out of town and pick up Lauren and her friend Nadia who is with her. They head further out of town along the highway doing a few risky driving tricks along the way.

Heading back into town they drive past a police car, the police give them a funny look and they get scared and speed off. The police give chase and in the ensuing chase they lose control of the car and leave the road and hit a pole/tree. Nadia is seriously hurt, the rest are OK.

Police and ambulances arrive at the crash scene. Nadia is taken off in the ambulance and the rest are taken off the police station. At the police station it becomes very full on, police, parents etc. Johnno is taken to the adult remand section because he is 18. The others are released to their parents care and disapproval.

Fast forward to a few weeks later.

Lauren and Wes are on their way to visit Nadia in the hospital. During their walk they discuss their upcoming court case and what will happen to them (at this point we will have text to clarify some of the legal/criminal issues and that stealing a car will lead you liable for any damage to property and make it difficult to gain license or insurance in the future) and Johnno who will probably end up in the big house because of his prior record.

They get to the hospital and arrive at Nadia’s ward to be confronted by a scene of despair, her parents and extended family are in tears etc. they look at each other in shock.
3 Feedback from young people

After the draft comic was completed we then embarked on the second phase of consultations to see if it was effective in getting the key messages across to the target audience. A series of consultations were held with young people in the Illawarra region and the Sydney metropolitan area. We also received a range of feedback from services and from some additional young people, including from organisations in SA and Victoria.

In general the draft comic was deemed to be quite realistic as these comments indicate:

In fact, the actual story described in the comic has happened to one young person known by the service. We've also had cases of brain damage to drivers and passengers." (Street Legal, SA)

"It’s the sort of stuff that happens in everyday life, it’s the sort of things that teenagers do today." (Holroyd)

Most young people were able to ascertain the key messages in the comic. "It’s really good, it shows that there can be bad outcomes to car stealing it’s not just all joyriding." (Eastlakes)

"If you publish this people will realise it’s not a good thing to do. You should put it in NRMA offices and youth centres." (Holroyd)

"The message is pretty clear without nagging and being too moralistic, don’t steal cars." (Port Kembla).

A good thing about the comic is that it shows the consequences . Nadia’s dead, I liked the ending. (Randwick)

Young people were also keen to comment in great detail on aspects of the car theft, the type of car stolen and so forth. As noted by Thea Carbines, a researcher with the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council who accompanied Streetwize for part of the feedback:

The interview with ‘Brendan’, a former car thief was particularly useful. There was a strong sense that vehicle theft was closely tied to affirming masculinity, a “boyly image” and being seen as popular within one’s peer group - "you have to have a nice VN to pick up chicks".

There was little respect for the stolen vehicle "Crank up the music, if its not yours, blow it up" although interestingly ‘Brendan’ had very strong safety concerns "if you’re gonna start a car at least wear a seatbelt" and "tell car thieves not to speed". ‘Brendan’ confirmed the link between stealing vehicles to commit a crime stating "you soon learn that you need a car to get all the tellies (televisions)" when committing a break and enter? ‘You can’t steal tellies on a skateboard.’
At the conclusion of the feedback stage there were a few recommendations for minor changes to characters and the car chase and to some aspects of the legal information but generally the comic stayed pretty intact. The original research indicated the correct approach to reach the target audience.

CONCLUSION

Reducing the rate of juvenile car theft is a worthy and of course difficult mission. The speaker is by no means an expert in this field, however the strength of the Streetwize method is that given the support of experts such as the NRMA, Break Even, Street Legal, the NMVTRC and the Police, we were able deliver a credible educational resource through our ability to reach young people.

If you have any comments or questions at all about the Streetwize process and in particular about ‘Spur of the moment’ I’d be happy to try and answer them. We are also conducting an evaluation of the comic so if you could complete the form enclosed with the comic and mail/fax or email your responses to me it would be greatly appreciated.