



No.86

# Preventing Car Theft in Australia: “Golden Opportunity” for Partnerships

**Philip Hill**

*In the last ten years there have been numerous attempts to generate a nationally coordinated response to car theft. A failure to achieve national coordination has been identified as one of the factors contributing to Australia's high rate of car theft, which is second only to the UK among major western countries. A comprehensive approach has failed to emerge due to differing industry perspectives, conflicting economic interests, and patchy government support for required strategies.*

*The Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Plan — Final Report of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Task Force (The Report) was released in November 1997. The Report proposes an industry-agreed national strategy to prevent car theft, which aims to surmount the barriers which have previously blocked the development of a comprehensive plan. Detective Senior Sergeant Ray Carroll from Victoria Police and Philip Hill, from the Victorian Department of Justice, prepared the Final Report on behalf of the Task Force, Chaired by Leon Daphne, Managing Director of Nissan Australia. Drawing on the report, Philip Hill discusses national information exchange, registration procedures, juvenile vehicle theft prevention, vehicle identifiers, and vehicle security improvements.*

**Adam Graycar**  
**Director**

**T**he National Motor Vehicle Theft Task Force arose from increasing concerns regarding a lack of national coordination of motor vehicle theft prevention effort. Task Force membership includes senior representatives drawn from the motor vehicle and insurance industries, the police and registration and other government authorities, who were appointed from all Australian States and key national industry bodies.

Over 122 000 vehicles were stolen in Australia in 1996, representing a 9.3 per cent increase since 1993 (ABS 1997), at a rate of 11.1 vehicles for every 1000 registered vehicles, victimising more than 6 in every 10 000 Australians. These rates place Australia in second place behind the UK in car theft victimisation rates. The United States has a significantly lower theft rate than Australia. The most recent estimate places the cost to insurance companies in the vicinity of \$650 million per year, which is returned to the community in higher insurance costs.

From its earliest deliberations the Task Force determined to apply a practical and outcome oriented approach to address its Terms of Reference by producing a comprehensive national strategy to reduce and prevent car theft. With this central challenge in mind, the proposed strategy provides a basis for a

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Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9200

Fax: 02 6260 9201

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coordinated approach which relies on a strong commitment to partnerships from all key stakeholders, and an independent, accountable mechanism to steer implementation.

The consultation process reflected the need to accommodate the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders in order to generate consensus and support. A particular objective was to produce recommendations that provide a practical and feasible foundation for a national solution, while being sensitive to the different issues facing individual States and Territories. This objective was fulfilled through extensive consultation with state based reference groups.

The Report includes an implementation strategy which centres on the establishment of a National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council while the recommendations provide a broad range of motor vehicle theft prevention strategies, and possible key result areas.

This paper will discuss the proposed implementation of the key national priorities in preventing car theft. The issues and challenges which need to be considered when attempting to engage governments, the private sector and the local community will also be discussed. Highlighted points which appear on each page of this paper are all taken from the Report.

### The Approach

In order to generate a feasible, cost-effective plan the Task Force adopted a rigorous and practical approach to the challenge: first, it had to:

- (a) identify all the interests at stake;
- (b) quickly surmise and learn

## Some Aspects of Car Theft

- over 122 000 vehicles stolen in 1996
- Australia continues to have the second highest theft rate behind the UK among developed nations
- older cars are more likely to be stolen, whilst newer cars are more likely to be broken into
- \$650 million cost to insurers - over \$1 billion total cost to the community
- young males aged 14-20 make up the majority of apprehended offenders
- car theft in early adolescence appears to be a key indicator of an escalation in offending behaviour through adolescence
- car theft is a common juvenile offence; however, a large number of those car theft offences are committed by a small number of young people

- from the history of National car theft prevention effort;
- (c) analyse the Australian car theft problem afresh;
  - (d) devise a comprehensive national framework, focussed on delivering cost-effective outcomes; and,
  - (e) engage in brokering activities with all stakeholders to shape an agreed approach.

Task Force research uncovered a great number of insights into car theft, which informed a “systems approach” to the design of a cost-effective strategy to reduce and prevent car theft. This approach was based on detailed analysis of how different aspects of the car theft problem require different strategies. Considerable emphasis was placed on defining the precise objectives and outcomes of potential strategies so that

efficiency and effectiveness could be maximised in implementing the overall plan. This rigorous, outcome-oriented style should be the basis of any attempt to generate effective crime prevention programs and strategies. The availability of sophisticated data and research is very important to the success of such an approach.

Most importantly, the Task Force looked at the key distinctions in car theft prevention, between methods to address opportunistic theft (including joyriding) as opposed to the different kinds of professional theft (including parts-stripping and re-birthing).

The Task Force estimate that 75 per cent of car theft is opportunistic, and 25 per cent professional. This finding was based on two available statistics: the rate of recovery of stolen

## National Information Exchange

- implementation of the National Exchange of Vehicle and Driver Information System (NEVDIS)
- the enactment of legislation in each State and Territory to support a wrecks register of written off vehicles
- the partial implementation of the National Vehicles of Interest (NVOI) system proposed by the National Exchange of Police Information agency (NEPI)
- improving and maintaining the integrity of the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) database

vehicles (see Figure 1) and the number of recovered vehicles which are found stripped of parts.

### A National Strategy

#### National Information Exchange

The existence of State borders in a federal system which has no national motor vehicle registration system facilitates the theft and resale of cars. Therefore, real-time exchange of stolen vehicle information is required, coupled with improved vehicle inspection protocols and proper identity checks on those registering vehicles.

#### Component Identification

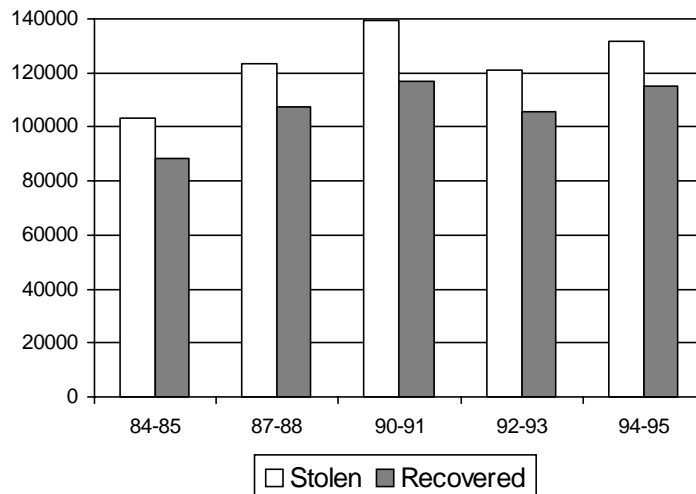
The potential of component identification strategies has been discussed within the automotive industry for some time. The spare parts sector of the industry has been calling for component labelling to deter theft and assist in the detection of stolen vehicle components for some years. The automotive manufacturing sector has maintained that the cost-effective case for component labelling has not been established. This is correct. The entire industry has, however, agreed that once cars are harder to re-birth, there will be an increase in stolen parts trade.

#### Vehicle Identifiers

The Task Force formed the view that improving vehicle identification methods and technology must be achieved to address professional theft activities. Currently, it is not a difficult task to change the identity of vehicles.

The Federal Office of Road Safety, however, does not recognise that compliance labels, required to be fitted to all Australian vehicles, have any purpose beyond signifying that a vehicle complies with safety

Figure 1: Reported Stolen and Recovered Vehicles in Australia, 1984-95



Note: Figures for 1988-89 and 1989-90 were not available.  
Data Source: Higgins 1997, p.3.

standards at the point of first registration. It should be recognised that compliance plates perform a vital function as a primary vehicle identifier over the entire history of a particular vehicle. A vehicle without compliance plates is suspect, and therefore worth considerably less than vehicles with compliance plates. Despite the ease by which cars can currently be re-birthed through tampering with vehicle identifiers, it is not an offence to remove or tamper with compliance plates in most Australian States.

#### Vehicle Security Improvements

Improving vehicle security was another contentious issue, and achieving consensus on the need for immobilisers in all new cars is a major achievement of the Task Force, and involved significant

compromise on behalf of the automotive industry.

#### Registration Procedures

The need for consistent, national protocols and standards in the client service activities of registration authorities is critical for all other initiatives to be effective in addressing organised motor vehicle theft.

#### Juvenile Vehicle Theft Prevention

All the initiatives described above focus on deterring organised offenders, and on making vehicles easier to detect after a theft has occurred. However, around 75 per cent of car theft is opportunistic (motivated by a desire to use the vehicle, not sell it) and will not necessarily be addressed by initiatives which focus on preventing organised motor vehicle theft. Whilst vehicle

## Component Identification

- more detailed research is required to identify levels of trade in stolen parts, and the likely impact of other vehicle theft reduction strategies on trade in stolen parts
- the mandatory, and/or voluntary installation of component identification has not been recommended at this time
- following more detailed research, component identification systems may be viable, once other vehicle theft strategies have been implemented

## Vehicle Identifiers

- the introduction of self-voiding compliance labels that cannot be removed from one vehicle and re-applied to another
- the reduction of transcription errors associated with Vehicle Identification Numbers by incorporating bar codes into vehicle identification material
- the creation of a criminal offence to unlawfully remove, tamper with, destroy or otherwise obliterate a compliance label

security can be improved to make cars harder to steal for the average offender, an exclusive focus on vehicle security may simply cause a displacement to more vulnerable cars and victims, without producing any net reduction in opportunistic car theft.

The majority of apprehended offenders are aged 14 to 20-years-old, and male (Victoria Police 1996/97). Of course, this statistic may say as much about the visibility of this group of offenders as the actual prevalence of young males as car theft offenders. In explaining an emphasis on juvenile crime prevention, it should be noted that to address the causes of crime “upstream”, a focus on young people is critical.

Preventing car theft in young people does not require a specific focus on car theft. Just as preventing burglary behaviour in young people is not achieved by “burglary prevention programs”, car theft offending behaviour is also addressed by a range of programs which focus on addressing anti-social behaviour generally, and on diverting young people towards a more positive lifestyle. Put simply, the major

challenges in preventing car theft in young people are mostly the same as for preventing crime in young people generally.

Another research finding which guided the Task Force was that among young offenders in custody, the great majority of car thefts are committed by a small minority of offenders (Salmelainen 1995). These young people may also have had some involvement in professional theft networks. So whilst many young offenders are involved in a few car thefts, only a small number are involved in stealing a lot of cars.

The other two aspects which have focussed the challenge of generating partnerships to prevent juvenile crime are that:

- an absence of a cohesive, nationally coordinated strategy has ensured that juvenile crime prevention, (and all other crime prevention programs for that matter) remain, short-term, reliant on grant funding, and often ineffective; and that
- whilst focussing specifically on preventing car theft in young people and establishing specific partnerships for that purpose may be seen by

some as “overdoing a single crime issue”, it must be recognised that: (a) juvenile programs should not necessarily focus specifically on car theft; and (b) the goal of car theft prevention provides an effective argument to obtain private sector support for juvenile crime prevention more generally, as was discovered in the Task Force consultation processes.

### Implementation of the Strategy

Four key aspects of the implementation plan are listed below:

- a five-year implementation plan, in three stages, overseen by the proposed National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council, comprising membership of key government, insurance and automotive industry representatives;
- the proposed council would be assisted by a small secretariat, and would be given a mandate from both government and the automotive and insurance industries to negotiate the implementation of agreed Task Force recommendations. It will not be an operational council, but will engage in facilitation, negotiation and monitoring activities, accountable to both government and industry;
- the insurance industry has offered a significant contribution towards the running expenses of the proposed council, on a cost-shared basis with government;
- recommendations of the Task Force form the basis for further negotiation with all stakeholders — in partnership.

## Vehicle Security Improvements

- the installation of engine immobiliser technology on all new vehicles
- insurance policy incentives to encourage the installation of engine immobilisers on the existing fleet
- insurance incentive programs to foster the development of emerging vehicle security technologies

*Why do we need a national approach?*

A national approach is required because the very nature of car theft involves a great deal of mobility, and a classic modus-operandi of organised theft activities involves transporting stolen cars interstate, to evade administrative detection when vehicles are re-birthed. Other arguments for a nationally coordinated approach are that:

- organised car theft networks will simply transfer their activities to more vulnerable areas of Australia if implementation is inconsistent among States and Territories;
- the overall impact of the plan is expected to be more than the sum of individual strategies;
- a national approach will generate the necessary momentum and profile on the issue to ensure that preventing motor vehicle theft can become a core responsibility of key government and private sector bodies;
- key components of the plan are based on hard-won consensus which was negotiated through Task Force processes, whereby key stakeholders have compromised their individual interests in recognition of the added benefits of a comprehensive, integrated plan. Without a comprehensive plan, the insurance industry has indicated it will re-consider its funding contribution.

*Why has a national approach not been implemented before?*

The reasons why a nationally coordinated approach has not been successfully implemented in the past are complex. The reasons recognised by the Task Force include:

## Registration Procedures

- agreed national standards and protocols for vehicle inspections
  - agreed national protocols for the re-identification of legitimately damaged vehicles
  - national proof of registered owner identity requirements.
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- car theft prevention strategies focussed on security devices and enhanced information exchange are technically complex, and the required development of vehicle and driver information systems has only more recently commenced;
  - there are residual competing interests, between industry sectors and between government agencies which do not embrace crime prevention as a core responsibility;
  - absence of an independent facilitator to negotiate the conflicting interests of the government, the automotive industry and the insurance industry;
  - most car theft is opportunistic, and can only be prevented by addressing the causes of crime in local communities, requiring a more comprehensive approach to achieve desired outcomes. Whole of government approaches to crime prevention, and the potential to generate crime prevention partnerships have only arisen recently, allowing the Task Force to argue that a truly comprehensive approach, including addressing opportunistic theft can now be generated;
  - a comprehensive cost effective, strategy with clear goals and an evaluation framework, funded by a significant financial partnership between government and the insurance and automotive industries has not emerged from previous projects;
  - unfortunately, but most importantly there have been political delays and barriers, which remain the major challenge to implementing the current proposals of the Task Force.

*Mainstreaming crime prevention*

Developing a sustainable, nationally coordinated strategy to prevent car theft requires the vision and the primary messages associated with the plan to be of mainstream appeal. The Task Force identified a number of required elements for generating high profile, mainstream support from government, industry and the community:

- a leadership body to articulate the vision, broad

## Juvenile Vehicle Theft Prevention

- evidence suggests that motor vehicle theft offending in early adolescents is a key indicator of serious escalation in offending through adolescence
- an absence of a cohesive nationally coordinated strategy ensures that juvenile crime prevention programs remain short-term, reliant on grant funding, and often ineffective
- implementing a high profile juvenile motor vehicle theft strategy provides an opportunity to obtain significant private sector support for preventing juvenile crime more generally

- goals and monitor progress of an overall strategy;
- vertically and laterally integrated policies and operational plans, reflecting management and operational partnerships at national, state-wide, and local levels;
- a clearly articulated strategy and evaluation framework, based on sound technical assessments;
- independent, high profile patrons and sponsors of both the entire process, and specific initiatives to ensure popular, mainstream support.

The Report was launched in November 1997 and is currently being considered by the Commonwealth and by all State and Territory Governments. In calling for support for its strategy, the Report emphasises that continuing compromise and negotiation is required between all government and industry stakeholders throughout the implementation of the plan. Compromise and negotiation are the cornerstones of enduring partnerships and should not be treated cynically when consid-

ering the unprecedented funding currently being offered by the insurance industry. The significance of the commitment of government, business and manufacturing industries to work together to ensure the effectiveness of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council is an important juncture in the development of national, effective partnerships to prevent crime. It is in everyone's interest to ensure the burgeoning \$650 million a year motor vehicle theft industry is not allowed to continue.

**Note:**

For further information, or copies of the Report of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Task Force contact the Victorian Department of Justice, GPO Box 4356QQ, Melbourne, Vic 3001, (03) 9651 6933, psdd@vdoj.vic.gov.au

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## Has this been attempted before?

### Previous National Initiatives to Prevent Motor Vehicle Theft

- May 1987** NRMA/AIC National Seminar on Motor Vehicle Theft.
- Nov 1987** Australian Automobile Association Symposium on Motor Vehicle Theft.
- Mar 1989** NSW Organised Motor Vehicle Theft Task Force.
- Aug 1989** National Stolen Vehicle Register commissioned by the National Exchange of Police Information.
- Sept 1989** Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence report into organised motor vehicle theft.
- Sept 1990** Australian Police Ministers' Council working party on motor vehicle theft established.
- Mar 1991** Organised Motor Vehicle Theft Task Force Implementation Committee established.
- May 1992** Final Report of the Organised Motor Vehicle Theft Task Force presented to the Australian Police Ministers' Council.
- May 1992** Draft Australian Design Rule (No. 61) on Component Labelling released for public comment.
- July 1992** National Motor Vehicle Theft Forum, Sydney.
- Mar 1995** Commonwealth Industry Commission Report - Vehicle and Recreational Marine Craft Repair and Insurance Industries.
- Aug 1996** National Best Practice Workshop, Auto Theft Officers in Charge - Brisbane.

Philip Hill was a member of the Secretariat of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Task Force, and is Senior Policy and Projects Officer, Department of Justice, Victoria



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:  
Dr Adam Graycar, Director  
Australian Institute of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

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