

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Auto Theft in Nevada, 1994-2008

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Motor vehicle theft involves the unlawful theft or attempted theft of a self-propelled vehicle that runs on land surfaces and not on rails (FBI, 2008). Nationally, nearly 1 million motor vehicles were stolen in 2008, totaling over \$6 billion in losses (FBI, 2008).

Efforts to control motor vehicle theft have primarily focused on making it more difficult to steal vehicles (e.g., by installing car alarms, ignition “kill switches”, and GPS tracking systems), redesigning physical spaces where vehicles are located (e.g., better lighting, security checkpoints), and increasing the number of law enforcement programs designed to catch these offenders (Miethe, McCorkle, & Listwan, 2006).

This state data brief describes the patterns of motor vehicle theft in Nevada and compares them to national trends. It examines the prevalence of motor vehicle thefts over time, the different types of motor vehicle theft and their characteristics, and the profile of persons arrested for this crime. This report also describes motor vehicle anti-theft strategies that have been enacted by law enforcement in Nevada. Limitations of the data used in this report are also discussed.

The Prevalence of Motor Vehicle Theft

Although the general trend is downward, since 1994, the national rate of motor vehicle theft has remained relatively stable (see Figure 1) (FBI, 2008). Relative to the national trend, the trend in Nevada’s rate of motor vehicle theft is more volatile, steadily increasing between 1999 through 2005, but decreasing significantly over the past three years.

Despite the recent decline, in 2008, Nevada’s rate exceeds the national average (581 versus 315 per 100,000 population). This rate represents a total of 15,904 motor vehicle thefts known to the police in

HIGHLIGHTS

- In Nevada, during 2008, about 16,000 motor vehicles were stolen.
- Since 1994, the Nevada motor vehicle theft rate has been far above the national average.
- The most frequently stolen vehicles in Nevada are older model, popular automobiles such as the 1992 Honda Accord and 1990 Toyota Camry.
- About 7% of motor vehicle thefts known to police in Nevada are cleared by arrest.
- Most individuals arrested for motor vehicle theft are men over the age of 18.
- Although the number of auto thefts in Nevada was higher than the national figure in 2008, the average loss associated with each theft was lower than the national average.

Nevada in 2008. In Nevada, the city of Las Vegas has consistently been listed in the top 10 cities a “hot spots” for these crimes. It topped the national list of cities with high rates of vehicle theft in 2006, placed second in 2007, and dropped to 7th on this list in 2008 (NICB, 2009).

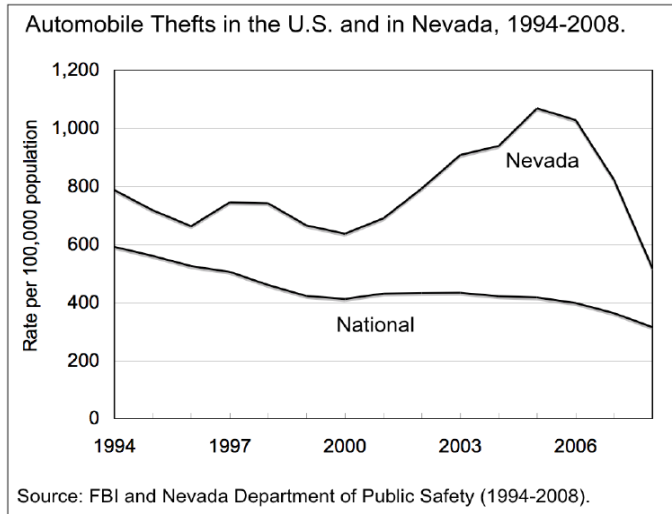
Characteristics of Motor Vehicle Theft in Nevada

Police classify motor vehicle thefts into one of three vehicle-type categories: (1) autos, (2) trucks and buses, and (3) other vehicles (e.g. scooters, all-terrain vehicles, and snowmobiles). Nationally, the vast majority of motor vehicle thefts involve automobiles (72%) followed by trucks and buses (18%), and

other” vehicles (10%) (FBI, 2008). In Nevada, 75% of all motor vehicle thefts involve an automobile (Table 1).

In 2008, nationwide, the average loss associated with each motor vehicle theft was \$6,751. In Nevada, this figure was significantly lower: \$4,365 for each theft.

Compared to national figures, a greater percentage of stolen vehicles are recovered in Nevada. Specifically, Nevada’s stolen vehicle recovery rate is 70%, whereas the national average is 57%.



Each year, the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB) compiles a list of the most frequently stolen vehicles. As shown in Table 2, many of the vehicles targeted for theft are not the newest or most expensive. Instead, they are often the most popular vehicles in the market and the easiest to

illegally sell and export. The theft of older vehicles is also common because parts for such models are increasingly difficult to find, making them more valuable on the black market (NICB, 2008).

Motivation for Motor Vehicle Theft

Research suggests there are four common reasons why people steal motor vehicles: (1) transportation, (2) joyriding and other “cheap thrills” for juveniles, (3) commercial theft and resale, and (4) theft for commission of other criminal acts. These reasons involve both expressive and instrumental motives (Miethe, 2010).

Instrumental motives are especially present when vehicles are taken for the desire to benefit financially from the theft. Joyriders are typically young, minority males that are driven by a desire to impress peers or co-offenders, typically taking advantage of physical opportunity for theft (i.e., cars that have keys left in the ignition) due to their lack of technical skill. These joyriders often temporarily use vehicles for transportation before abandoning them (Miethe, 2010).

In contrast, financially motivated offenders use car theft as a means for financial benefit (either through selling parts or insurance fraud) or during the commission or another criminal act, such as a robbery or carjacking (Miethe, 2010).

Table 1. Characteristics of motor vehicle thefts in Nevada and nationally, 2008.

Characteristics	National	Nevada
Total stolen	956,846	15,904
Type of vehicle		
Automobiles	72%	75%
Trucks and buses	18%	19%
Other vehicles	10%	6%
Recovery rate	57%	70%
Monetary loss		
Total	\$6.4B	\$69.4M
Average	\$6,751	\$4,365 *

Source: FBI (2008) and Nevada Department of Public Safety (2008).

*Calculated by dividing the estimated state-wide loss by the number of thefts.

Table 2. Top 10 make, model, and year of vehicles stolen in Nevada.

Rank	Vehicle	Year
1	Honda Accord	1992
2	Honda Civic	1995
3	Toyota Camry	1990
4	Dodge Ram Pickup	2005
5	Nissan Sentra	1994
6	Nissan Altima	2006
7	Ford F150 Pickup	2006
8	Saturn SI	1994
9	Acura Integra	1995
10	Chevrolet Extended Cab Pickup	2001

Source: National Insurance Crime Bureau, 2008.

Factors associated with “target selection” also play an important role in motor vehicle thefts. Car thieves typically take three things into consideration when selecting a vehicle: (1) convenience and familiarity (e.g. readily available vehicles and targeting particular vehicles), (2) signs of occupancy and guardianship (vehicles that have someone in them and are securely protected are less attractive targets), and (3) expected yield and attractiveness (the greater the financial return expected, the greater the risk of its theft) (Miethe, 2010).

Arrest Characteristics for Motor Vehicle Theft

Nationally, about 12% of motor vehicle thefts result in an arrest (FBI, 2008) (Table 3). The clearance rate for motor vehicle theft is comparable to other property crimes (e.g., burglary and larceny), but is much lower than the clearance rate for violent offenses.

Nationally, the typical individual arrested for auto theft in 2008 was male (83%) and over 18 years of age (75%). The typical arrestee is White, although Blacks are overrepresented for auto theft relative to their distribution in the U.S. population.

The demographic profile of Nevada’s arrestees differs slightly from the national pattern. Nevada’s clearance rate for motor vehicle theft is slightly lower than the national average (7% versus 12%), but the proportion of Nevada’s arrestees for this crime is similar to the national pattern for age (77% are 18 or older). However, Nevada has a slightly higher percentage of female arestees (29% versus 17%) and a lower percentage of male arrestees (71% versus 83%).

Table 3. Characteristics motor vehicle theft arrestees, 2008.

Arrestee Characteristics	National	Nevada
Total Arrests	75,135	1,122
Gender		
Male	83%	71%
Female	17%	29%
Age		
< 18	25%	23%
> 18	75%	77%
Race		
White	60%	--
Black	38%	--
Asian or Pacific Islander	1%	--
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	--
Clearance rate	12%	7%

Source: FBI (2008) and Nevada Department of Public Safety (2008).
 -- Data not available for state of Nevada.

Prevention Programs in Nevada

In response to the rise in motor vehicle theft in Nevada, law enforcement has increasingly targeted offenders. For example, in 1999, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) instituted VIPER (Vehicle Investigations Project for Enforcement and Recovery), a task-force dedicated to motor vehicle theft within its property crime unit.

VIPER focused on anti-theft operations (e.g., placing decoy vehicles) and combating chop shops (see LVMPD.com). Similarly, in 2003 LVMPD began participating in a nation-wide campaign known as Watch Your Car (WYC), in which cars displaying a WYC decal are subject to stops by law enforcement between the hours of 1am and 3am.

VIN Etching (i.e. etching the owner’s VIN number into different parts of the car) has also been promoted. While sound scientific evidence is not currently available to document the effectiveness of these particular programs (see Curtin et al., 2005), these efforts are based on the principles of situational crime prevention that have been shown to reduce the opportunities and increased the costs for offenders who engage in other types of property crime (Clarke, 1997).

Data Sources and Limitations

Data for this report were obtained from three sources: the Nevada Department of Public Safety’s Crime and Justice in Nevada reports, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, and the National Insurance Crime Bureau’s Hot Car Report.

Although these sources provide comprehensive data on motor vehicle thefts known to the police, they have limitations. First, motor vehicle thefts that are not reported to the police are excluded from these data sources. Second, jurisdictional differences in how motor vehicle thefts are recorded and reported affect the validity and reliability of these data as accurate measures of the nature and prevalence of motor vehicle theft. Third, given that only a small proportion of motor vehicle thefts are cleared by an arrest, the profile of those arrested is probably not an accurate portrayal of the characteristics of all motor vehicle thieves.

Due to these limitations, some caution should be exercised in interpreting estimates of the nature and prevalence of motor vehicle theft and its characteristics that are provided in this study.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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