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"They are kids, they're making bad choices, but they are not bad kids": motivations and deterrents for joyriding amongst Australian youth

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ABSTRACT

Car theft and joyriding are becoming increasingly common in regional areas of Australia. Whilst the consequences of these actions can be fatal, surprisingly little is known about the motivations for young people who engage in these behaviours. This exploratory study draws from 17 in-depth interviews that were conducted as part of a pilot intervention program aimed at adolescents either already engaged or susceptible to car theft and joyriding behaviours. The findings suggest that joyriding predominately attracts disenfranchised youth who lack opportunities for education, employment, and leisure. For these adolescents, joyriding emerges to counterbalance disadvantage and alleviate the monotony in their lives. Interviewees also provide suggestions for deterring joyriding, such as providing young people with occupational opportunities that allow them to serve as role models to themselves and others and adrenaline-based activities to replace the thrills of joyriding.

Introduction

Joyriding is the theft and use of cars for recreational driving (Kellett & Gross, 2006). In Australia, and other anglophone countries, it is a common and sometimes increasing criminal activity (Dawes, 2002; Kellett & Gross, 2006; Rush et al., 2006). For example, there were 55,037 victims of motor vehicle theft recorded in Australia in 2022, an increase of 11% (or additional 5,302 victims) from the previous year (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023). Further, following long-term declines in motor vehicle theft over the last two decades, the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research [BOCSAR] (2023) reported a resurgence in motor vehicle thefts. Research by Cook (2023) suggests that young male offenders are responsible for this surge, particularly for cars stolen in regional[1] areas of Australia. In regional New South Wales, for example, legal actions against young people for vehicle thefts increased by 179% between March 2019 and March 2023 (Cook, 2023).

Advances in car security technology, including the use of target hardening measures like engine immobilizers, have been touted as a key method of reducing vehicle theft, with some demonstrated success (Brown, 2015). However, many offenders now target older vehicles that are not equipped with target-hardening measures (Cook, 2023) or unlawfully enter homes to steal car keys (Copes & Cherbonneau, 2006). Indeed, alongside increasing rates of motor vehicle theft, rates of unlawful entry with intent (i.e. burglary) also increased in Australia by 9% between 2021 and 2022 (ABS, 2023).

These issues are not unique to Australia, with concerns about car theft and joyriding also apparent in the United Kingdom (Kellett & Gross, 2006; Rush et al., 2006) and North America (Anderson &

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Linden, 2014; Drozda, 2006). Theft and damage to a motor vehicle can result in significant costs and losses per year in terms of damaged and lost property and can lead to higher insurance premiums for members of the public (Drozda, 2006). Further, these activities carry serious risks for both offenders and the broader community, with detrimental outcomes including serious traffic accidents, high-speed police pursuits, and the death of joyriders or innocent community members (McDonagh et al., 2002; Rush et al., 2006). Because of the seriousness of these behaviours and their impact on the community, there have been unsuccessful attempts to re-label joyriders using less glorifying labels, such as 'death drivers' (O'Connell, 2006). Yet, the motivations and deterrents for joyriding remain a largely under-researched area, particularly in recent years.

Who engages in joyriding?

Research suggests that joyriding almost exclusively involves young male adolescents, around the ages of 13–15 (Anderson & Linden, 2014; Dawes, 2002; Dhami, 2008). Savage (2019) argues more recently that young females may increasingly be engaging in these behaviours, reporting that female youth in Canada are overrepresented in motor vehicle theft offences. Joyriders often come from single-parent families and lower socio-economic backgrounds (Anderson & Linden, 2014; Dawes, 2002). They are often unemployed and disengaged from education, lagging behind their peers, and frequently reporting school suspensions or expulsions (Anderson & Linden, 2014; O'Connor & Kelly, 2006). Importantly, disengagement or exclusion from school can lead young people to experience increased boredom and substance use and form closer connections to offending peer groups (Thielking et al., 2020).

Joyriders often engage in other forms of criminal offending, including break-and-enter offences, breaching supervision orders, robbery, and assault, and have friends or family members who are also involved in criminal activities (Anderson & Linden, 2014). They often consume alcohol and/or drugs (Anderson & Linden, 2014) and receive less parental supervision and discipline compared to other young people (Dhami, 2008). Significantly, recent Australian research revealed that children who traverse both the child welfare and youth justice systems and have any type of neurodisability are at heightened risk – more than double – of facing motor vehicle theft charges (Baidawi & Piquero, 2021). The term 'neurodisability' includes forms of intellectual disability, learning, and communication disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Baidawi & Piquero, 2021).

Motivations for car theft and joyriding

Research provides several explanations for young people's participation in car theft and joyriding. Anderson and Linden's (2014) study of Canadian joyriders revealed the most common reasons given for stealing cars were to joyride (93%), provide basic transportation (87%), and for 'the thrill of it' (84%). That study also highlighted the importance of peer group influence on young joyriders, with nearly two-thirds of participants reporting being pressured by friends to steal cars. Informal contests amongst peers also served as motivators for young people to engage in car theft, with 54% of participants saying they had competed in contests to see who could steal the most cars in a single night (Anderson & Linden, 2014). These findings align with other research highlighting how peer approval is a 'highly salient reward that appears to act as a catalyst for adolescents' propensity for risk taking' (Centifanti et al., 2016, p. 207).

Further, car theft and joyriding can afford young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a sense of control and an opportunity to display their abilities to their peers (Anderson & Linden, 2014). Stealing a car and performing dangerous stunts can elevate a young person's status within their social group (Anderson & Linden, 2014; Kellett & Gross, 2006), leading to excitement and an enhanced sense of self-esteem (Light et al., 1993). As O'Connor and Kelly (2006, p. 255) argue, participation in car culture provides young males an opportunity to 'demonstrate their knowledge,

to stand out, be unique, and feel that they have met societal definitions of masculinity'. For marginalized individuals who are often denied legal access to cars, driving stolen cars can provide the opportunity to participate in car culture and experience the perceived benefits of increased social status, power, and excitement (O'Connor & Kelly, 2006).

Drozda's (2006) study offers a different perspective, suggesting that car theft can be examined as a leisurely activity rather than solely a criminal act. His research revealed that the choice of car theft provides young people with a casual leisure activity that offers immediate gratification, feelings of pleasure, and a 'thrilling and risky venture' that effectively combats feelings of boredom (Drozda, 2006, p. 126). The enjoyment derived from car theft and joyriding varied amongst the young people in that study, with some motivated by a passion for driving and cars, while others found pleasure in the specifically criminal aspects of the activity.

Researchers also recognize that car theft and joyriding can operate as a form of edgework (e.g. Anderson & Linden, 2014; Drozda, 2006). First coined by Lyng (2004), edgework refers to a person's voluntary participation in high-risk leisure activities that involve a constant and very real threat of injury or death. A person is said to participate in such activities irrespective of the danger because they perceive the risks as being within their control and reason that only those individuals who do not know what they are doing are likely to be in danger (Lyng, 2004). For individuals who lack an opportunity to engage in lawful edgework activities, such thrills may be gained through involvement in illegal activities, such as car theft and joyriding (Anderson & Linden, 2014). These behaviours may allow a young person to break free from the monotonous or mundane realities of their everyday life (Anderson & Linden, 2014) and escape from the social conditions that offer few opportunities for personal growth or development (Lyng, 2005).

Research by Ó Cadhla (2001) highlights how car theft and joyriding provide a means for young people to provoke and incite the police. Unlike many other forms of criminal offending, joyriding is often 'done openly and conspicuously. It appears to be purposefully designed to attract and then defy the police' (Ó Cadhla, 2001, p. 91). By engaging in these behaviours and doing so in a way that is likely to attract police attention, young people may use joyriding as a form of resistance to police intervention (Rush et al., 2006). This coincides with Atkinson's (1993) argument that provoking police into high-speed car chases may allow Australian First Nations youth to experience a brief sense of power amid an oppressive social and political system that favours the dominant white majority. Dawes (2002) agrees, finding that for many First Nations Australian youth, car theft and joyriding operate as a form of resistance to social and economic marginalization. He observed, 'Joyriding culture may be seen as one area where Indigenous youth can construct their identity through participation with their peers and obtain a sense of belonging through a perception of group solidarity' (Dawes, 2002, p. 207).

Factors that may deter young people from joyriding

Less is known about the potential factors that may deter young people from engaging in car theft and joyriding. McDonagh et al. (2002) examined factors that encouraged and discouraged joyriding amongst high-school students in Brisbane, Queensland. The authors reported that the most effective legal deterrents to joyriding were punitive criminal sanctions, such as arrest and sentencing, and/or detrimental non-legal sanctions, such as injury or death. Conversely, factors that were likely to facilitate joyriding included using neutralizing techniques such as contrasting joyriding with other serious crimes and shifting blame to the victim. Importantly, only a small proportion of the survey participants said they had been the driver (4.4%) or passenger (10%) in a car that had been used for joyriding (McDonagh et al., 2002).

Those findings conflict with Anderson and Linden's (2014) study of 43 Canadian youth who had records for auto theft. In that study, young people reported being unafraid of the consequences of stealing cars and thus, not easily deterred from these behaviours. Concerningly, many of the young people in that study also reported that any attempts to prevent them from stealing cars would likely

backfire as it would simply provide additional motivation and a greater challenge to engage in car theft. Research by Kellett and Gross (2006) highlighted that even individuals who had a persistent desire to stop joyriding would often face great difficulty in abstaining, often because of the addictive nature of these behaviours and inability to replace the adrenaline rush. As Drozda (2006, p. 122) explained, 'the love for the drive can be an intoxicating call for some juveniles who do not possess their own driver's licence or do not have access to their own vehicle'.

Earlier research by Light et al. (1993) noted that for individuals who no longer engaged in car theft and joyriding, reasons for desistance included becoming more mature and responsible, simply growing out of this behaviour, settling down or getting a job, and the positive influence of romantic partners or becoming a parent. This reflects the importance of maturation, whereby the need for excitement and being drawn to dangerous and risky activities is likely to decline with age (Light et al., 1993). Importantly, only a minority of individuals in that study noted that the threat of punishment, specifically going to prison, had been a deterring factor leading to discontinuation from these behaviours. Similarly, a small number of participants also noted that the experience of being in a car accident had contributed to their desistance (Light et al., 1993).

It is unclear whether such reasons remain relevant today, especially given changes in society, youth culture, the demographics of joyriders, the introduction of social media, and recent cost-of-living crises. Therefore, the aim of this study is to provide insights into why young people, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds, may engage in car theft and joyriding and further, what factors may act as effective deterrents to stopping these behaviours.

Methods

The data for this exploratory study come from in-depth interviews that were conducted as part of a pilot intervention program that was designed for young people who had been identified as engaging in car theft and joyriding or being at risk of doing so. The program was delivered in Townsville, a small regional city in the state of Queensland, Australia and had a focus on Australian First Nations youth. Townsville has a relatively high First Nations population and is considered a low socio-economic region, experiencing relative disadvantage in terms of low income and education levels, high rates of unemployment, and single-parent families (.idcommunity, 2021).

Between 2021 and 2022, Queensland experienced the largest increase in rates of motor vehicle theft of all Australian states and territories (ABS, 2023). Townsville, in particular, has faced an unprecedented surge in car theft and related activities. Between May 2022 and May 2023, there were 1,378 recorded unlawful use of a motor vehicle offences in the Townsville region, representing a 129% increase compared to the previous year (Queensland Police Service, 2023). Further, data from the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council (2021) revealed that Townsville experienced a theft rate of 4.14 per 1,000 population, ranking it fourth highest among local government areas in Australia for motor vehicle thefts.

We conducted a total of 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Of these, 11 interviews were with seven young people who participated in the pilot program. Seven participant interviews were held on the first day of the program, while four interviews were conducted as exit interviews, either at the last program session or roughly one or two weeks later. These young people were all male and aged between 13 and 16 years. The young participants were referred to the intervention program by youth justice organizations, community health initiatives, and 'flexible' schools designed for young people who did not thrive in traditional educational environments. We also interviewed six stake-holders who had the opportunity to interact with the young people during the program sessions, including a young participant's caseworker, volunteers from the religious organization that hosted the program's educational sessions, a teacher who knew several of the young people, and a youth justice representative.

All interviews were conducted individually and by members of the research team, who were not known to participants prior to the program's commencement. Most interviews were

conducted in person during the program but in an area away from others to afford interviewees the privacy to speak freely. Some stakeholder interviews were conducted online via Zoom, as well as two of the participants' exit interviews. In recognition that the young male participants were particularly vulnerable by virtue of their social, economic, and educational circumstances, together with varying degrees of contact with the criminal justice system, we adopted an interviewing approach that emphasized principles of connectivity, humanness, and empathy (Shafi, 2020). This involved establishing trust and rapport with the young people by, for example, showing understanding of the young person's perspective and experiences without judgement (Shafi, 2020).

However, we recognize that social desirability bias may have affected participants' responses and, further, that the timing of the interviews may have influenced levels of social desirability bias. For example, participants interviewed at the outset of the program may not have trusted the interviewee and, therefore, under-reported socially or personally sensitive issues (such as joyriding). Participants responding to exit interview questions may have responded more truthfully given the trust built between researcher and participant at that later stage, or conversely, less truthfully given they may have wished to appease researchers. Yet research demonstrates that social desirability bias is not as prevalent as previously believed, especially when participants are afforded anonymity and privacy in their responses (Grimm, 2010). As such, all participants were consistently reassured (verbally and in writing) that their responses were confidential and de-identifiable.

Interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions, including whether and why the young person had participated in car theft and joyriding, the circumstances around their involvement, and in some cases, desistance. We also asked the young people and stakeholders their views on why young people may engage in these behaviours and factors that may deter young people from such activities. Participant interviews lasted, on average, for 14 min, while stakeholder interviews were, on average, 22 min. These interviews produced 133 pages of qualitative data. In accordance with Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee approval (2022–2756HI), all interviews were entirely voluntary, audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed.

It is important to acknowledge that this research and its findings draw from a small sample of participants and, as such, are best characterized as exploratory in nature. Despite this, as Crouch and McKenzie (2006) recognize, having a small sample size helps to facilitate the researcher's close association with participants and, thus, is how exploratory studies are best undertaken. Further, given that youth offenders are a hard-to-reach population that often do not wish to engage in research, the insights offered by this small group of young males remain valuable (Curtis, 2013).

We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of the interview data using NVivo software. Thematic analysis is a process of organizing qualitative data into explicit codes or themes (Boyatzis, 1998) which help to describe the phenomenon under study (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Themes are identified through a 'careful reading and re-reading of the data' (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258) and become the categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In the findings below, we draw from the interview data to highlight key themes with respect to young people's motivations for participating in car theft and joyriding and factors that may promote desistance. Where participant quotes have been included, all identifiers have been removed or modified to protect research participants' right to anonymity. The names of the young participants in the program have been replaced with pseudonyms. A numbered identification system has been adopted to refer to stakeholders who were interviewed for this research (e.g. S1).

Findings

Our findings are organized with respect to four key themes. We begin with a discussion of the young people's understanding of and prior personal involvement in car theft and joyriding. We then explore the possible role of drugs and/or alcohol in contributing to young people's engagement

in these activities. The third theme explores the views of both young people and other stakeholders on why Australian youth may be attracted to risky behaviours like car theft and joyriding. Finally, we discuss factors that may deter young people from engaging in these behaviours.

Understanding of and involvement in joyriding

Participants were asked what their understanding of 'joyriding' was. All of the young people had heard of this term, but gave various descriptions of it, including:

> Joyriding is pretty much stealing cars, go and have fun in it, do whatever you want in it, thrash it, crash it, pull it apart. (Daniel)

> Taking cars. Taking them for a spin. (Michael)

> Driving in a stolen car. (Robbie)

Only one participant lacked an understanding of this term, confusing joyriding with an enjoyable drive that one might take with family members. When asked if they had previously engaged in car theft and/or joyriding, most of the young people confirmed they had joyridden, either as the driver and/or passenger. Except for one young person who indicated that they had an ongoing involvement in car theft and joyriding, most explained that they were not currently involved in these activities. One participant explained, 'I don't jump in cars anymore. Yes, I don't go walking around the streets at night-time' (David), while another said, 'I don't do it anymore, but I used to be really bad' (Brendon). A third young person explained they had engaged in joyriding 'a lot', saying, 'I've been the driver. I've drove lots and lots … Yes, but I stopped now. I don't do that. It's just slack' (Robbie). Another young person noted that they had 'watched people steal cars, but I've never done it. I've never participated in any of it' (Michael). They were not sure, however, whether they might participate in the future, noting, 'It's not really like, I won't do it. It's just I haven't done it yet. But I don't think I'd do it too'.

Interestingly, the one young person who indicated their ongoing involvement in joyriding did not view that behaviour favourably, referring to themselves as 'just a little car thief' and noting:

> I would say, it's not a good life. It's not a good life to be in and sometimes you don't got a choice, and sometimes you do got a choice, and it's just really the way you want to go about life. (Daniel)

When asked to describe how they first became involved in joyriding, the young people offered several explanations. Firstly, some noted they had been influenced by their peers. This is consistent with previous research, including by Anderson and Linden (2014), where three-quarters of young offenders noted it was their friends who had initiated them into stealing cars. Daniel reflected that he had 'followed the wrong person and then that person brought me into shit that I don't want to do'. For him, hanging out with 'the wrong crowd' ultimately culminated in his involvement in stealing cars:

> I was going to [public high school] and I was hanging around the wrong crowd at the time. And then I started going to their house a bit more with two of my mates, and then we started doing things, and that … led us to doing things in the night, and it just led to joyriding.

A second young person described how at the age of 12 they had begun to socialize with an older peer group of 16-year-olds. They explained they had started joyriding because of the combination of peer influence, feelings of boredom, and the enjoyment they gained from driving: 'I was just bored, just used to do it a lot. I just liked it, driving around' (Robbie). Consistent with previous research, all the young people who said they had joyridden described partaking in this activity with their peer group (Thielking et al., 2020).

Reflecting on what Copes and Cherbonneau (2006, p. 920) describe as 'alert opportunism', another young person described how they had not set out to steal a car, but when an opportunity

had emerged, they had seized upon it. Brendon explained how he had initially been looking for money and other items to steal from cars when he had come across a car key that had been left in a vehicle. Given the low-risk and easy opportunity that had presented itself, he said he decided to take the car to drive for 'a little bit of fun'. Such opportunities, he explained, were likely to arise when young people were hanging out on the streets, particularly when similarly minded peers joined them:

> It's just something to do. When you're out there, and you're a kid on the streets, and you have mates that are doing that stuff you just want to have fun with them. It's like the root of the evil, is your friends. (Brendon)

Role of drugs and/or alcohol

Previous research has reported conflicting findings with respect to the role that drugs and/or alcohol may play in young people's engagement in joyriding. Some research (e.g. Dawes, 2002; Kellett & Gross, 2006) indicates that drugs and/or alcohol may make young people more likely to engage in risky driving behaviours or be used to increase the intensity and experience of joyriding. Other research, though, reports that drugs and/or alcohol often do not necessitate auto theft amongst young car thieves (Dhami, 2008).

Consistent with Dhami's (2008) findings, the young people in this study typically reported that they were not under the influence of drugs or alcohol while partaking in joyriding. For example, when asked whether joyriding was an activity where they would drink or take drugs before doing, Robbie replied, 'No, just sober'. Daniel, who admitted to frequently engaging in joyriding, also denied that drugs or alcohol were linked to his behaviour: 'No, I don't really drink. I don't like drinking because my stepfather when he used to drink, he used to get violent to my mum and I just don't really like drinking'.

Brendon noted that he engaged in car theft while high from smoking marijuana 'a couple of times'. However, he said he did not ever combine alcohol and driving. Another participant (who said they had not ever participated in joyriding) suggested that while young people may not engage in drugs or alcohol, his understanding was that 'they do vaping. I don't know if they sniff petrol, and I don't know if they sniff Rexona [solvent] and that' (Tyson).

Importantly, while the young people said they did not usually use drugs or alcohol when joyriding, some explained that the adrenaline rush they experienced while stealing cars and driving them produced a similar positive feeling. As one young person explained, 'It's like the adrenaline is pretty much like a drug to you because when you get that adrenaline pumping, you're like pumping, pumping when you go. That's what keeps making you come back. That's what you want every time' (Daniel). Part of the thrill, he explained, was 'the adrenaline rush by the cops chasing you, and you're in the car over the speed limit, doing 100 kilometres over the speed limit . . . and there's a cop behind you chasing you, trying to get you'.

Daniel's description here reflects a hybrid of observations from previous researchers that joyriding and dangerous driving can be a deliberate attempt by young people to attract and then defy police attention (Ó Cadhla, 2001) and further perpetuate edgework (Lyng, 2004). Using a high-speed, risky, and thrill-seeking game of 'cat and mouse', joyriders may see this as a form of retaliation for previous negative interactions they have had with police (Ó Cadhla, 2001) or as an opportunity to show off their driving skills and ability to evade police (Light et al., 1993).

Young people's motivations for engaging in joyriding

We also asked the young people (and stakeholders) why they thought young people may engage in car theft and joyriding. Several interviewees reflected that in regional cities, like Townsville, there were often few options to engage youth and this could lead to delinquent and criminal behaviours. As Stakeholder 2 pointed out, 'There's not a great deal for kids to do in

Townsville, and what there is, often kids don't know about'. Stakeholder 6 expressed a similar sentiment, noting 'Particularly in Townsville there's a lack of engagement. It could be boredom'. The young people agreed, noting they thought youth 'just want to do it for fun' (Tyson) or were wanting to experience the feeling of driving (Brendon). This reasoning coincides with previous research by Anderson and Linden (2014), which revealed that one of the strongest motivating factors reported by young joyriders in Canada was the feelings of excitement and adrenaline associated with driving a stolen car. The findings also reflect Light et al.'s (1993) study of 100 car thieves in England and Wales, who described the strong degree of personal pay-off they received from joyriding in terms of excitement.

Also reflecting the findings of Light et al.'s (1993) study, two young people also pointed to the increased social status that joyriding behaviours can provide, noting they felt these behaviours provided an opportunity for young people to 'show off' (Jamie) or 'brag to their friends' (Brendon). Researchers have suggested that the rise in popularity of social media formats like TikTok may contribute to the popularity of these behaviours amongst young people, particularly in regional communities where there have been reports of trending social media posts encouraging young people to steal cars and film their joyrides (Cook, 2023). Somewhat surprisingly, only one of the young participants, Brendon, brought up the issue of social media and how it may contribute to young people's engagement in joyriding. With respect to this issue, he explained, ' . . . what they do is they go around in these cars and then they start posting to social media and then they think they're cool'.

Interviewees were uncertain as to whether there existed a culture of joyriding amongst youth in Townsville. Daniel, who described having an extensive history of car theft and joyriding, did not believe there was a youth culture that promoted these behaviours, but rather, merely groups of bored young people who were looking for something to do:

> I wouldn't say a culture. I'd just say, not a gang, but just a group of young juveniles that are bored at home. They've got nothing to do. They just hang around with their mates and then their mates get bored. And then they're like, 'oh, let's go steal a car'. (Daniel)

Stakeholder 1 also agreed that peer influence was an important factor in shaping young's people behaviour. However, unlike Daniel, they felt that a culture of joyriding perhaps did exist, reasoning that 'it does seem like a culture if there's a sense of belonging in it'. Interviewees also recognized that a young person's social environment, including their living conditions and home life, was likely to play a part in why young people engaged in car theft and joyriding. While Daniel had earlier explained that feelings of boredom were likely to contribute to young people's engagement in joyriding, he went on to urge people to think beyond simplistic explanations about 'bored' youth and instead to think about the difficult home life faced by many young people who engage in delinquent or criminal behaviours: 'They've got nothing. And maybe if they don't go to school, they've got nothing to do during the daytime or the night-time'.

Others agreed that it was important to take a more holistic view of young people and their circumstances when reflecting on the causes of this problem. Stakeholder 5, for example, said:

> I think that there's a need to escape something. And I feel like whether that be their home environment that isn't the greatest, or school, or even just their own mindset, and their world around them. Hearing some of their stories, I don't think any young person should be dealing with some of the things that they're dealing with. And so, I feel like in many ways, it's a need to escape or just act out, in order to remove themselves from a situation.

Several interviewees noted that it was likely a combination of several factors that motivated young people to steal cars and joyride. Further, and importantly, as several stakeholders pointed out, social disadvantage and/or exclusion could lead to a young person's lack of identity or lost connection to the community:

> There's a lost connection to [young people] feeling like their actions have consequences in the larger community, and their understanding and connection that they can negatively affect their web of communities here as well. (S6)

Negative media representations of youth offenders only served to perpetuate these issues, according to Stakeholder 2. They described how youth offending has emerged as an issue attracting substantial media attention in recent years, both in traditional media forms and social media, like Facebook. The result, they said, is that 'the kids that are engaged in this behaviour have just been painted in just a terrible light. At the end of the day, they are kids, they're making some bad choices, but they are not bad kids' (S2).

Strategies for deterring joyriding

Interviewees also described possible ways of deterring young people from engaging in activities like car theft and joyriding. Potential strategies ranged from engaging young people in adrenaline-based activities and improving their employment prospects to harsher criminal justice responses. Interviewees also commented on approaches they felt were unlikely to reduce this issue.

The young people were mostly dismissive of the idea that the thought of getting in trouble with their parents or police would deter young people from joyriding. As Michael explained, 'Most of their parents won't care where they are. So, no, parents don't care'. Tyson agreed, noting it was unlikely that a young person's parents would even be aware they were engaging in these activities. Participants were also unconvinced that young people would be deterred through fear of apprehension by police. For Michael, this was linked to his experience of seeing these behaviours go unpunished: 'I know people that have stolen many cars and they still haven't been caught'. Tyson agreed in part, noting that while he thought young people may be fearful of police, they may simultaneously perceive the police as not being very effective with respect to stopping joyriding. A stronger deterrent, he felt, was the risk of a young person stealing the 'wrong car', for example, from a First Nations Elder in the community. The repercussion in that case, he thought, was '[the victim's] family will come after them with their big cars'. From Jamie's perspective, young people were unlikely to listen to anyone who tried to warn them off these behaviours and would continue regardless.

For Daniel, the idea that he may be seriously injured or die while joyriding was something he worried about. He described being concerned about the impact his death would have on his mother, saying 'you know there's a saying, no parent wants to bury their kids and the kids [have] got to bury their parents? And I feel that same way'. However, he also explained that thoughts like these were typically fleeting: 'I think about it for a couple of minutes and then it would just go out of my head, because I'm either too worried or too focused in the car driving or in the backseat having a fun time, you know'.

Previous research suggests that young people who participate in auto-related crimes often do not have close relationships with pro-social friends or family members (Thielking & Pfeifer, 2016). However, young offenders may find motivation for desistance by envisioning themselves as a role model (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005). The idea of wanting to be a good role model for his younger siblings was discussed by Daniel. However, he was able to largely dismiss his responsibility as a potential role model because his brothers and sisters did not live with him.

Instead, the possibility of strengthening his bonds to society and becoming his own role model through lawful employment appeared the strongest motivating factor for Daniel to stop joyriding. As he explained, though, the possibility of him getting a job appeared unlikely because he had been disengaged from school for a long time: 'If I had a job, then that's something for me to look up to as well. I can be my own role model. . . . Then I can try and change my life and try and do better for my little sisters, but it's just a bit hard without my schooling and everything'.

Other interviewees agreed that the best way to reduce issues of car theft and joyriding was to engage young people in adrenaline-based activities. Robbie, who said he no longer participated in joyriding, explained that he and his friends had replaced the enjoyment of joyriding with dirt biking: 'I've had [a dirt bike] for ages, but one got sold when I started doing naughty shit. So, my dad bought me a new one. And then [friend] got one and [friend] got one. So, we just all ride around'. Engaging in this activity as a group had kept Robbie and his friends out of trouble. As he explained, 'we all stopped. If there's two of us stopped [joyriding] and one still does it, there's no point'.

Stakeholder 3 agreed that it was important to attempt to replicate the adrenaline rush that a young person receives through joyriding. In their view, this would help youth to realize that there are lawful ways of experiencing adrenaline highs. They remained unsure, however, whether lawful recreational activities would be sufficient to provide the necessary thrill for risk-seeking youth: 'Because it's also the thrill of planning the break-in, knowing when to go and get this, knowing when to do that. Sneaking around and pulling this off is the adrenaline hit that they're getting'. This finding resonates with Anderson and Linden (2014) who argue that providing adolescents with legitimate forms of edgework may not supersede the unique thrills associated with car theft and joyriding.

Other suggestions included the use of technology, like car immobilizers, to deter would-be car thieves: 'When you steal someone's car, it can just turn it off whenever. That would be like . . . you couldn't steal a car if that was in there. You wouldn't steal it' (Robbie). Surprisingly, one young person (Brendon) even suggested harsher criminal justice responses to youth offenders, namely putting them on curfew or youth justice programs. This, he felt, would provide 'No more slap on the wrist. If they want to be like adults you've got to treat them like adults'.

Others disagreed with the idea of harsher criminal justice responses or increased spending on infrastructure for youth offenders. In Stakeholder 2's view, investment needed to be made into 'redirection, diversionary services', including ones that supported and engaged young people who were found to be on the streets at night-time. Stakeholders 3 and 4 also called for more holistic responses that would assist young people and their families and provide a sense of identity and purpose in the community:

> We need to be working in a holistic way to help mum, dad, whatever family is still suffering from their own traumas to actually have that self-determination back within their family. (S3)

> If [joyriding] stems from them not having anything else to do, then giving them more purpose, I think [will help]. If that's even purpose in the community, or at home and in the community, where they feel at home and feel like they belong. (S4)

Discussion and conclusion

These research findings provide important insights into the potential motivations and deterrents for joyriding behaviours amongst young people in a regional city in Australia. While the sample size was admittedly very small and lacks generalization, the findings add to the scant body of literature regarding joyriding behaviours amongst disenfranchised youth.

Halsey (2008, p. 106) argues that cars are 'objects of desire and demand'. They are pervasive objects in the built environment that dominate the landscape and soundscape and have cultural significance regarding production and consumption. Yet it is unlikely that any of the young participants in this study will ever be legitimate car owners. Most of the participants in this study identified as First Nations Australians, who live in families from lower socio-economic backgrounds that lack engagement with employment or mainstream educational opportunities. First Nations Australians have been labelled 'immobile' given the difficulties they often face accessing the licencing system due to complications acquiring supervising drivers, registered vehicles, and the costs of fuel and the licencing test itself (Cullen et al., 2016; Masterton et al., 2023). On a socio-

political level, car theft and joyriding can be seen to be an act of resistance to such alienation where fair access to the consumer market is often denied for young, disadvantaged people (Halsey, 2008).

On an individual level, car theft and joyriding can be described as a form of edgework where participants engage in dangerous, thrill-seeking behaviours that become addictive (Halsey, 2008). Certainly, our findings show how feelings of boredom and a lack of opportunity to engage in exciting, but lawful, activities amongst young people were likely facilitating factors for engaging in joyriding. Whilst this finding alone is not a novel contribution to the literature, our findings suggest that the added complexity and risk associated with breaking into dwellings to steal car keys for joyriding amplifies the level of edgework involved. Few researchers have explored this issue, especially since modern immobilizer technologies have relatively recently prevented 'hot-wiring' and inadvertently encouraged joyriders to break into homes to steal car keys (Brown, 2015).

This extra level of offending (and consequential victimization) arguably increases the edgework and 'adrenaline buzz' associated with joyriding. Our study suggests that the influence of drugs and/or alcohol does not play a prominent role in leading young people to engage in car theft or joyriding. Rather, the adrenaline rush of breaking into homes, car theft, joyriding, and evading police capture provides a more potent drug that entices such behaviour. These findings correspond with previous research suggesting that youth are more enticed by the adrenaline high of the car theft (exacerbated by the added complexity of breaking into dwellings to steal car keys) and the high-speed pursuit with the police, than they are with consuming drugs and/or alcohol (Anderson & Linden, 2014; Dhami, 2008; Ó Cadhla, 2001).

Edgework alone cannot fully explain the motivations for joyriding, especially since joyriding is a phenomenon largely confined to specific, marginalized demographics. Young offenders are more likely to associate themselves with other likeminded peers who are equally disadvantaged and disenfranchised, thus inspiring co-produced and peer-assisted offending (Barry, 2010). Several of our participants spoke of being influenced by their peers as drivers or passengers of joyriding. Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association posits that affiliation with offending peers perpetuates offending behaviours amongst young people via encouragement and role modelling of deviant attitudes and behaviours. This tenet of social learning theory can explain why joyriding is prevalent amongst disadvantaged male groups, whereby delinquency is the result of peer-to-peer attitude transference (Watts & McNulty, 2014).

For this reason, it is surprising that only one of our participants spoke of the influence social media has on joyriding behaviours. Cook (2023) argues that the rise in joyriding could be due to the rise of social media, where joyriders can seek approval and 'kudos' from their peers while live streaming their joyride over social media platforms. Certainly, recent media headlines are often dominated by commodifiable content of 'unruly' young people live-streaming themselves joyriding stolen cars (Talintyre, 2023). Given the relatively recent inception of social media, further evaluation is required to understand its influence on joyriding behaviours.

Addressing joyriding behaviours is difficult, especially since some participants argued that replacing these adrenaline highs with more responsible activities seems unlikely. Like many regional cities and towns across Australia, Townsville is experiencing a surge in youth crime and auto theft-related offences which has grown in tandem with increasing dissatisfaction amongst local residents demanding tougher responses to address this issue (Smith, 2018). As such, popular punitivism in relation to addressing youth offending has risen in social, media, and political discourses, thus influencing policy changes amongst Australian governments (Smee, 2023). The Queensland Government, for example, has recently announced 'even tougher' responses to youth offending (Queensland Government, 2023). Yet 'a tough on crime' response to joyriding and youth justice more broadly is likely to fail given high recidivism data stating more than half of Australian youth reoffend within a year of receiving detention, probation, bail, or parole (Smee, 2023). Greater punitive responses to auto-related offences involving young people are likely to further drive disenfranchisement in disadvantaged regional communities and further perpetuate systemic social and economic forces that drive crime and disorder (Vitale, 2017). Whilst one young person in our sample stated that

they believed tougher responses to joyriding would act as a possible deterrent, the majority argued for more therapeutic and non-legal responses to address the issue.

Although the use of technology, like car immobilizers, can provide a tangible deterrent to car theft, it does not address the underlying reasons why disadvantaged youth may feel the need to engage in adrenaline-fuelled, edgework offences like joyriding. While effective responses to stemming joyriding behaviours remain contestable, research suggests that engaging young people in employment or leisurely opportunities might provide a way forward (Dawes, 2002). Dawes (2002) argues that providing young First Nation Australians with occupational connections is especially important in regional and rural contexts where young people are further marginalized due to the lack of employment, education, and leisure opportunities. Employment prospects provide an invaluable source of revenue for young people to legitimately access leisurely activities and the consumer market more broadly and also connect young people with prosocial peers who can act as positive role models (Goshe, 2019; Walsh & Fitzgerald, 2022). Forming connections with prosocial peers is especially important given young participants in this sample described how many joyriders lack adequate parental supervision, live in dysfunctional families, and affiliate with like-minded delinquent peers, which concurs with previous research (Thielking et al., 2020). In turn, young offenders may find motivation for desistance by envisioning themselves as a role model (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005), with perceptions of being a role model shown to operate as a strong form of social control that can prevent reoffending (Carlsson, 2013).

Arguably a holistic approach is required to counteract the act of joyriding in disadvantaged communities that includes access to the job market, prosocial peers, lawful adrenaline-based activities, and a shift away from punitive responses that will only further criminalize and disenfranchise young people. Youth justice policies and directions for further research regarding joyriding should be shaped by community partnership interventions that encompass access to all these deterring factors, especially since evidence often suggests that comprehensive community-based partnerships offer the best hope for change (Anderson & Linden, 2014).

Note

1. A 'regional area' is a socio-geographical definition used in Australia to describe populated regions outside of major/metropolitan cities (Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, Perth).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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