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**CARS AND KIDS: A SELF-REPORT STUDY OF JUVENILE
AUTO THEFT AND TRAFFIC VIOLATIONS***

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ABSTRACT

Although automobiles play an important part in adolescent life, juvenile misuse of cars has been understudied by sociologists. The favored group and the disadvantaged group perspectives have been proposed as descriptions of and tentative explanations for the presumed patterns of auto theft and to a lesser degree of traffic offenses. Using self-report data from Atlanta, this study found that neither approach was well supported. Contrary to previous research, auto theft is not a "pure" delinquency specialty. Auto thieves and traffic offenders were likely to be involved in other delinquent activities as well. Further, gang members were more likely to be auto misusers than youth who did not belong to a gang. While auto misuse is not a unique pattern of delinquency, on both empirical and theoretical levels, an explanation of the situated dynamics of auto misuse and not merely the correlates of auto misusers seems to be warranted.

The automobile is a social institution that has an enormous impact on adolescent behavior. Over half of the American teenagers of age have driver's licenses and 40 percent of those aged seventeen report owning a car (Goldberg, 1969). Driving adolescents in California report spending 20 percent of their cash on cars (Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, 1967). Adolescents use cars to commute to school and work and for recreational activities such as going to the movies and to athletic contests, cruising, dragging, picking up members of the opposite sex, drinking and sex (Schuman *et al.*, 1967; Goldberg, 1969; Bauman, 1978). Cars are status symbols which affect driving, helping and deference behavior (Solomon and Herman, 1977). The symbolic and economic value of the automobile is reflected in the fact that auto theft is clearly the property offense most likely to be reported to authorities (U.S. Department of Justice, 1975).

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The consequences of juvenile misuse of cars is staggering. As insurance companies are aware, the fatality rate for teenage drivers in England and the United States is double that of any other age group even when controlled by the number of miles driven (Munden, 1972). In 1976 over 8,000 teenagers were killed and 40,000 more were permanently disabled in the United States as a result of driving after drinking (National Safety Council, 1976). Besides accounting for considerable loss of life and limb, juveniles are active car thieves. In 1978, 51 percent of all persons arrested for the 991,611 motor vehicle thefts reported to law enforcement agencies in the United States were under 18 years of age (U.S. Department of Justice, 1979).

Since the symbolic value and use of the automobile is so central to American adolescent life styles, it seems surprising that juvenile use of cars has not received more *sociological* attention.¹ There are innumerable studies of delinquency but very little research or discussion of juvenile traffic offenses, auto theft, or traffic courts. Delinquency textbooks rarely mention or cover these topics, e.g., Empey (1978) and Haskell and Yablonsky (1978). Furthermore, most of the research on juvenile use of autos is descriptive and not analytical. The studies that do exist are dated, focus on auto theft and are based predominantly on official statistics (Wattenberg and Balistreri, 1952; Schepes, 1961).

In this paper we examine the favored group and the disadvantaged group approaches for understanding juvenile auto delinquency. These two approaches provide both *descriptions* of empirical patterns of juvenile auto theft and to a lesser extent auto misuse and tentative *explanations* for such presumed patterns. Further, we relate auto delinquency to other delinquent activities in order to test Schepes (1961) notion of "pure" auto theft. Finally, we discuss the ability of status characteristics to explain juvenile auto delinquency.

Favored Group Delinquency

The favored group tradition is based on Wattenberg and Balistreri's (1952) finding that juveniles arrested for car theft tended to be white, middle-class youth, a "favored group". However, they neither fully explained how nor why this pattern of juvenile auto theft emerged. In a recent textbook on delinquency, Sanders (1976:92-95) suggests a possible explanation of the "favored group" pattern of juvenile auto theft. According to Sanders, the early development of car consciousness among suburban youth accounts for the favored group pattern of auto theft. The value of a car for transportation in a dispersed community and the ability to drive is learned early among suburban youth. Automobile theft is for "kicks" and therefore tends to take the form of joy riding.² Suburban youth, of course, are likely to be white, middle-class adolescents.

In the congested inner city, Sanders argues by contrast, cars are often not a practical means of transportation. Public transportation is also more readily available than in the suburbs. Furthermore, many inner city youth, particularly the poor, only learn to drive later in life if at all. While inner city youth may admire those who can afford big cars, the cars themselves are primarily a status symbol of what money can buy. According to Sanders, then, these reasons explain why most

juvenile car theft consists of joy riding for kicks by predominantly white, suburban, middle-class youth.

Although Sanders' favored group explanation does not specifically mention traffic offenses such as driving recklessly or without a license, his argument seems to indicate that white, suburban middle-class youths should also be the most involved in traffic offenses. By inference, the influence of car consciousness and easy access to cars among suburban youth should also account for traffic offenses being a favored group activity.

Some previous research supports the favored group perspective. Schepes (1961) found that juvenile auto thieves were older, brighter, from a higher socioeconomic status and more likely to be white than other delinquents. Chilton (1967) found that black youth in Indianapolis were less likely to be involved in car theft than were white youth. Browning's (1954) research in Los Angeles and McGrath's (1967) work in Newark also indicated that juvenile auto thieves tended to be white and middle-class.

Disadvantaged Group Perspective

A recent study seriously questions the favored group tradition (McCaghy, Girodano and Henson, 1977). Using questionnaires filled out by police at the time of arrest for auto theft and official police records on stolen cars, McCaghy and his colleagues found that black youth were overrepresented among those adolescents arrested for auto theft. While 45 percent of the youths arrested for auto theft were black, only 14 percent of the Toledo population was black. Furthermore, two-thirds of all juvenile auto thieves resided in lower income census tracts. Additional official data from four Virginia cities corroborated their findings.

Other research also casts some doubt on the favored group pattern. Wolfgang, Figlio and Sellin (1972:68-70) observed in their Philadelphia cohort study that black youth had almost twice as high arrest rates for auto theft as did white youth. In addition, Nye, Short and Olson (1958) found through self-report data that lower class boys were more involved in car theft and joy-riding than were boys from other social classes. Based on these studies which question the favored group tradition, a disadvantaged group perspective has been proposed to explain patterns of juvenile auto misuse.

Schwartz and Puntil (n.d.:54-56) provide what might be called a disadvantaged group approach based on Merton's (1957) theory of anomie. Schwartz and Puntil argue that cars are important to all youth for transportation and particularly for status. Therefore, car theft is a way in which lower class, often black youth who do not have easy, legitimate access to automobiles can gratify their desires for transportation and status. Middle and upper class youth will be less likely to steal cars because they already have access to them. Instead, according to Schwartz and Puntil, easy access to cars and the great dependence on them for transportation in the suburbs explain why middle-class youth can be expected to drive without a license and drive recklessly more often than lower-class youth.³

The disadvantaged group perspective, though, is not well supported by Schwartz and Puntil's analysis of their statewide self-report data from Illinois. They found no consistent social class differences in traffic violations such as driving recklessly or without a license or in auto delinquencies such as theft or stripping. Blacks were more involved in joy-riding and stripping than were whites, but the differences were small.⁴ Aker's (1964) self-report delinquency study also found no relationship between social class and driving without a license or car theft. However, Schwartz and Puntil did find that the size of the youth's community had an impact on their driving recklessly or without a license. Adolescents living in Chicago were least likely to have driven without a license or to have driven recklessly. This finding supports their hypothesis. Thus these two presumed patterns of juvenile auto theft and delinquency and their associated tentative explanations are only partially supported by the data.

The conflicting results of these studies in part could be explained by their different methodological approaches. Much of the research done on juvenile auto misuse has used official records and arrest statistics. Yet only 15 percent of 1978 auto thefts were cleared through arrests (U.S. Department of Justice, 1979). Using arrests for auto theft as a dependent variable may bias the results in unknown ways (Kitsuse and Cicourel, 1963). Research based on official data generally shows that blacks and lower class youth are overrepresented in delinquent behavior. On the other hand, self-report studies typically indicate that race and class have less impact on crime and delinquency than is suggested by research based on official records (Hirschi and Hindelang, 1977; Hindelang, 1978; Tittle and Villemez, 1977; Tittle, Villemez and Smith, 1978). Hindelang, Hirschi and Weis' (1979) recent contention that self-report studies and those based on official data do not show different correlates of delinquency suggests to us that a more careful analysis of the patterns of auto theft and misuse are needed. In this study we use self-report data measuring traffic offenses and auto theft on a large sample of adolescents from a major metropolitan area to test both the favored group and disadvantaged group pattern of juvenile auto misuse. We recognize that while self-report data contain certain measurement problems, they are probably a better measure of actual juvenile auto misuse than the grossly incomplete official statistics.

Methods

In 1970 a stratified random sample of 1,410 tenth grade students in six Atlanta-area high schools completed a lengthy questionnaire concerning adolescent behavior. More than 98 per cent (1,383) of the questionnaires were usable. Along with background questions about socioeconomic position, race and sex, students were asked to answer a self-report checklist of traffic offenses, status offenses and delinquent behaviors. Among that checklist were three questions concerning traffic offenses and auto delinquency. The students were asked to state how often they had ever driven a car without a license, driven a car too fast or too recklessly, and

taken a car without the owner's permission. Answers could range from "frequently" to "sometimes" to "seldom" or "never" (coded 4 to 1). The operational definition of auto theft used in this study closely approximates the Justice Department's definition of motor vehicle theft "as the theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle" (U.S. Department of Justice, 1979:32).

Because both the favored group and the disadvantaged group perspectives emphasize the importance of living in the suburbs, we dichotomized the schools from which the tenth grade sample was taken. The youths attended either suburban schools (coded 1) or city schools (coded 2). Not too surprisingly, tenth grade students who attended suburban schools were more likely than those who attended city schools to be white (96.5 versus 29.2 percent) and belonged to families with higher socioeconomic standing.

Socioeconomic position was measured by a Bogue (1969) socioeconomic achievement index based on the occupation and education of the head of the household. The higher the score, the higher the family's socioeconomic position.

In the questionnaire, the students also indicated whether they belonged to a gang or not. Fourteen percent (N = 193) indicated that they did. Gang membership was included as a variable because it crosses all social class groups (Erickson, 1973) and is related to many types of delinquent behavior (Short, 1974) that may be enacted by groups of adolescents riding around in cars (Hirschi, 1969: 194-195, 217-218). The variable gang membership was also included in the following analyses because Wattenberg and Balistrieri (1952) suggest that juvenile car thieves are more likely to belong to gangs than are youth who commit other delinquent acts. In this study gang refers to a group of adolescent peers who generally reside in the same neighborhood, attend the same school if they are not dropouts, have a name and commonly shared symbols for the group, a socialization and admission process, established role patterns, shared expectations, known leaders, and define themselves as belonging to a gang. This definition fits well with Haskell and Yablonsky's (1978:171-208) classification of social, delinquent and violent gangs. Gang members did not differ significantly from non-gang members in their race, school, or class background. However, as expected from previous work (Empey, 1978:248-281), males comprised 68.6 percent of the gangs but only 44.9 percent of the entire sample. Other sample characteristics are discussed more extensively elsewhere (Higgins and Albrecht, 1977; Higgins, Albrecht and Albrecht, 1977).

Results

Table 1 presents the zero-order correlations among five theoretically selected characteristics of juveniles and their involvement in traffic offenses and auto theft. The five characteristics were selected based on previous research on juvenile misuse of cars as well as on the debate between the favored group and disadvantaged group approaches. All five characteristics: race, sex, socioeconomic achievement, school, and gang membership initially are related to driving without a license, reckless driving and auto theft. White youth are more involved than black teenagers and

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males more than females in auto misuse and theft. The higher the social class of youth, the more involved they are in auto misuse and theft. Teenagers attending suburban schools are more involved than those attending inner city schools. Finally, gang members are more heavily involved in traffic offenses and auto theft than are youth who do not belong to a gang.

Table 1
Correlations Among Traffic Violations, Auto Theft and Selected Characteristics of Juveniles

	Driving without a License	Reckless Driving	Auto Theft	Race	Sex	SEA	School
Reckless driving	.43*						
Auto theft	.31*	.31*					
Race	-.17*	-.46*	-.13*				
Sex	.18*	.22*	.10*	-.04			
SEA	-.10*	-.26*	-.06*	.42*	.01		
School	.15*	.46*	.17*	-.64*	.01	-.53*	
Gang	.21*	.14*	.17*	-.04	.17*	-.00	.05

* These zero order correlation coefficients are significant $p < .05$, two-tailed test.

Although all five characteristics of the juveniles are related to the traffic offenses and auto theft, the magnitude of the correlations and their patterns should make one cautious about the explanatory power of either the favored group or disadvantaged group perspectives. Only for reckless driving are some of the correlations moderate in size. Further, class (SEA), which in both perspectives is a major feature of the presumed pattern of auto delinquency and an important explanatory variable, is highly correlated with both race and school. Consequently, it may have no explanatory value independent of its relationship to race and school. Therefore, the three auto delinquencies were regressed on the five characteristics of juveniles included in Table 1. The results are in Table 2.

Table 2 presents both the total variance explained in the traffic offenses and auto theft by the five selected characteristics as well as the portion of each variance explained which can be uniquely attributed to each of the characteristics. The unique contribution of a variable is calculated by allowing the other explanatory variables to enter the regression equation first. The additional variance accounted for by the last explanatory variable is its unique contribution to the explanation of the dependent variable. The sum of the uniques equals the total variance explained only when the explanatory variables are statistically independent of one another.

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Table 2
Unique Variance Explained by Selected Characteristics of Juveniles for Traffic offenses and Auto Theft

	Driving without a License	Reckless Driving	Auto Theft
Race	.01*	.04*	.00
Sex	.02*	.03*	.00
SEA	.00	.00	.00
School	.00	.04*	.01*
Gang	.03*	.01*	.03*
Total R ²	.10*	.30*	.07*

*Coefficient significant at $p < .05$

Table 2 indicates that neither the favored group nor the disadvantaged group perspective has much explanatory power. Only for reckless driving is the total variance explained moderately large. Both perspectives are primarily oriented toward describing and explaining auto theft but neither one does very well. While in Table 1, social class was related to auto theft in the direction suggested by the favored group perspective, it does not uniquely contribute to the explanation of reckless driving or driving without a license. The major explanatory variable of both perspectives receives relatively little support.

Further, neither race nor school has much of an effect on traffic offenses or auto theft. In Table 1, both were related to auto theft as predicted by the favored group approach: white youths in the suburbs were most involved. Yet the correlations were small and as Table 2 indicates, neither uniquely contributes to the explained variance of auto theft. Race and school have their greatest, though limited, impact on reckless driving. Yet neither the dependent variable reckless driving nor driving without a license can provide a crucial test for deciding between the favored and the disadvantaged group approaches. The competing perspectives both indicate that white, middle-class suburban adolescents should be the most involved in reckless driving and driving without a license. They are, but to a limited degree. Table 2 clearly indicates the inadequacy of both the favored group and the disadvantaged group approaches to explain auto misuse among juveniles.

Having tested the adequacy of the favored group and disadvantaged group perspectives, let us now return to the association between gang membership and misuse of cars established in Table 1. According to Wattenberg and Balistreri (1952) juvenile car thieves generally are more likely to belong to gangs than are youth who commit other delinquent acts. Our findings partially support Wattenberg and Balistreri. Gang members comprised 35 percent of those who reported stealing cars. This percentage of gang members engaged in auto theft was higher

than for all other traffic offenses, status offenses, and delinquent activities with the exception of drug offenses. Gang members constituted 36 percent of those using narcotics, 38 percent of those selling narcotics, and 50 percent of those sniffing glue. We emphasize, though, that not all car thieves belong to gangs nor do all gang members steal cars.

The data in Table 1 indicate that youth involved in a traffic offense also are likely to be involved in auto theft. Auto offenses are moderately intercorrelated. The data in Table 3 show that juvenile traffic offenders and car thieves are likely to be involved in other delinquent behaviors as well. The correlations between auto misuse and other self-reported problem behaviors range from a modest .07 to a moderate .47. The strongest relationships generally occur between reckless driving and buying (.42) and drinking (.47) alcoholic beverages. No doubt this activity is frequently concurrent for many teenagers, though our data cannot directly address that issue. Driving a car without a license and auto theft also are moderately correlated with drinking behavior.

Table 3
Correlations Between Traffic Violations, Auto
Delinquency and Other Delinquency Behaviors

	Driving Without a License	Reckless Driving	Auto Theft
Skipped school	.32	.23	.21
Carried a knife, razor, etc.	.23	.20	.18
Ran away from home	.17	.20	.24
Taken things worth over \$10	.25	.24	.31
Used force to get money from someone	.13	.09	.16
Fights	.22	.21	.15
Bought alcoholic beverages	.31	.42	.32
Drank alcoholic beverages	.41	.47	.29
Sold narcotics	.15	.17	.20
Used narcotics	.19	.19	.17
Sniffed glue	.11	.07	.19
Destroyed property worth over \$10	.23	.33	.26
Hard to handle at home	.21	.34	.16
Came home later than midnight	.32	.41	.22

All zero order correlation coefficients are significant $p < .01$, two-tailed test.

Not only is auto misuse related to other problem behaviors, but the notion of a "pure" car theft among juveniles (Schepes, 1961) is not supported by our self-report data. All adolescents who were involved in car theft, even if it was only "seldomly," reported also being involved in other problem behavior besides auto theft. The same general pattern holds for those who report driving recklessly. Even juveniles who report driving without a license are likely to commit other traffic, status or delinquent offenses. Only 15 adolescents out of the 869 (less than two percent) who admitted to ever driving without a license stated that they had not engaged in other problematic behavior. "Pure" car thieves may exist in official juvenile court and police records but they do not exist in terms of self-reported behaviors. Specialization in delinquency may be present but juvenile car thieves do not restrict their offenses to that single delinquent activity. These results generally are consistent with the recent work of Bursik (1980) who concludes that the evidence for specialization in juvenile offenses is only partially supportive or unclear.

Summary and Conclusion

Our research suggests that neither the favored group tradition nor the disadvantaged group approach is a useful description of or explanation for the presumed patterns of juvenile auto theft and misuse. Social class, the key feature of both perspectives as regards auto theft, has no significant explanatory power. While both perspectives point to white, suburban, middle-class juveniles as the youth most heavily involved in traffic offenses, this is only partially the case. White suburban youth are more involved in reckless driving than other teenagers, but are only minimally more likely to drive without a license. In neither case does social class have much impact. It is perhaps in terms of reckless driving that explanations which consider the greater availability of cars for suburban youth and the less congested nature of suburban streets and highways have their greatest utility.

Our self-report study of juvenile traffic offenses and auto theft further indicates that males are more involved in auto misuse than females. In addition, gang membership is moderately related to auto misuse. However, gang membership does not account for all juvenile auto theft.

As in previous research (Hirschi, 1969:194-196, 217-218), traffic offenses and auto theft are related to other adolescent problem behaviors. In this context, one could suggest that auto delinquency does not need special attention since it seems to be part of a general behavioral system of delinquency. Certainly, involvement in auto misuse does not constitute a completely unique pattern of delinquency. However, because auto misuse was only minimally to moderately related to other delinquent behaviors, it does bear further specific attention. Moreover, such reasoning would imply that research aimed at understanding involvement in any particular delinquent behavior is unnecessary because involvement in most delinquent behaviors tend to intercorrelated.

On empirical and theoretical levels, research must move beyond merely trying to determine the status characteristics of juvenile traffic offenders and car thieves. An examination of the dynamics of juvenile auto misuse, rather than the correlates

of auto misuse is more sensitive to the behavior under study. Social class, which has historically been a major explanatory variable in etiological theories of crime and delinquency, is now being recognized as having limited utility (Tittle, Vilemez and Smith, 1978). Such is the case for juvenile auto theft. Even sex, race, and residence (i.e., school in this study) have minimal impact on auto misuse. Clearly, the process of becoming involved in auto misuse is a complicated one. Further, it is likely to be a process where juveniles play different roles in the delinquent activity. For example, a boy may steal a car to impress his girl friend who goes along for a ride without knowing that the car is stolen. Thus an examination of the situated transaction of auto theft and misuse, much as Luckenbill (1977) has conducted for criminal homicide, might be fruitful. Here, is where a detailed investigation of Sanders' ideas of "kicks" might be appropriate. Moreover, the symbolic meaning and function of automobiles is unlikely to vary merely by status characteristics. Rather, they will also vary due to the influence of significant others such as parents or peers and the definition of the situation. Consequently, a differential association or social learning approach would seem useful under the circumstances (Sutherland and Cressey, 1978: 80-98; Akers *et al.*, 1979). Future research in juvenile auto misuse will be most sensitive to the complex behaviors observed if the dynamics of the situation and not merely the status characteristics of the offender are examined.

FOOTNOTES

¹The majority of the studies discussed above are not sociological in approach. Instead, they and others come from the transportation, urban, life, juvenile justice and psychology literature. Even within the sociological literature, the study by Schwartz and Puntil (n.d.) to be discussed later is unpublished. Few sociological studies have directly focused on juvenile auto theft and misuse.

²Most juvenile auto thefts have been thought to involve joy riding and not the stealing of a car for use in committing another crime, stripping, scrapping or selling (U.S. government, Activities of Interagency Committee on Auto Theft Prevention, 1976:3-11). However, this assumption has not been well tested and in fact may not be true (Schwartz and Puntil, n.d.: 47-57). These cars stolen by adolescents for joy riding usually involve little permanent property loss because they have a higher recovery rate than the cars taken for other purposes. For this reason, there is a legal distinction between joy riding and car theft. The difference is intention to keep. Yet, in juvenile courts both types often are classified under auto theft. Sometimes joy riding is classified as unlawful use of a car.

³In this context, McCaghy and his colleagues (1977) suggest that the increase in numbers of two- and three-car families has a negative effect on adolescent auto theft among suburban, middle-class youth.

⁴Again, methodological problems should be noted in these studies on traffic offenses and auto delinquency. Reiss and Rhodes (1961) found that the probability of being officially classified a traffic-only violator (drag racing, speeding, reckless driving and violation of registration and driver's license laws) was greater for white collar than blue collar boys. This seems to support the argument by Schwartz and Puntil of a differential class involvement in traffic offenses. However, Reiss and Rhodes argued that the difference was primarily due to a measurement problem by which traffic offenses were included among other more serious offenses for blue collar boys.

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