

**CAR CRIME AND YOUNG PEOPLE ON  
A SUNDERLAND HOUSING ESTATE**

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### **Police Research Group: Crime Prevention Unit Series**

The Home Office Police Research Group (PRG) was formed in 1992 to carry out and manage research relevant to the work of the police service and Home Office Policy Divisions. One of the major police department divisions which acts as customer for the PRG is the Home Office Crime Prevention Unit which was formed in 1983 to promote preventive action against crime. It has a particular responsibility to disseminate information on crime prevention topics.

The object of the present series of occasional papers is to present research material in a way which should help and inform practitioners, including the police, whose work can help reduce crime.

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## Foreword

This report is a further contribution to Car Crime Prevention Year and the debate and activity which it has stimulated. The work was commissioned through the Sunderland Safer Cities Project and provides a fascinating account of the involvement of young people in car crime on the Pennywell estate in Sunderland. It describes car-related offending on the estate and considers the motivation of the young people involved.

What comes across clearly is the intractability of this particular type of offending and the enormous challenge we all face in bringing it under control. The local police are beginning to make inroads into the problem, as the postscript to the report illustrates, but there is still a long way to go.

I M BURNS  
*Deputy Under Secretary of State*  
*Home Office*  
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Eileen Spencer  
May 1992

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# **1. Introduction**

## **Motor vehicle crime in Northumbria**

Motor vehicle crime is a national problem, and one that seems to be escalating at an alarming rate. Webb and Laycock (1992) provide a useful description of how the problems of theft of and from vehicles have developed in England and Wales over the past fifty years.

Motor vehicle crime is a particular problem in the Northumbria police region, which covers Northumberland and Tyne & Wear. Motor vehicle crimes in this region totalled 62,452 in 1990, compared with 54,608 in 1989 – an annual increase of 14.4%. This represents a risk factor of 36 crimes per 1,000 of the population compared to the national average of 25 crimes per 1,000 of the population in 1990 (Webb & Laycock, 1992). The latest Home Office figures available are those for 1991 and these show that motor vehicle crime has risen again to 63,074 crimes in the Northumbria police region.

The scale of the problem in Northumbria is also revealed by the Insurance Service Autocrime Survey (1989). The survey produced a regional league table in which the Northumbria police region ranked third for car theft and was the highest risk area for theft from a motor vehicle.

## **Juveniles and motor vehicle crime**

The report of the Working Group on Car Crime (Home Office, 1988) shows that a very large proportion of motor vehicle crime is committed by young males. Between 1985 and 1987, 71% of those apprehended for offences of theft or unauthorised taking of a motor vehicle were under 21 years and 98% of all motor vehicle crime offenders were male. West & Farrington (1977) have shown that the peak age for stealing motor vehicles is 17-21 years. However, it is also clear that involvement in motor vehicle crime can begin at an early age. Cooper (1989) found boys as young as 11 years old involved in car crime. In 1990, over one third of those cautioned or found guilty of motor vehicle crime in England & Wales were in the 10-16 years age bracket. In Sunderland in 1989, 30% and 34% of offenders apprehended for theft of and from vehicles respectively were aged 10-17 years.

## **'Joyriding'**

There is evidence that juveniles are more involved in some forms of motor vehicle crime than others. The illegal taking of a motor vehicle is recorded largely in two forms - theft of a motor vehicle and taking without the owner's consent (twoc). The latter offence is distinguished from theft of a vehicle in that the vehicle is recovered within a specified period, currently 30 days after being reported stolen. The offence of

taking a vehicle without the owner's consent was introduced to deal with cases where there was no intention to deprive the owner of the vehicle permanently, and so an offence of theft could not be established (see Webb & Laycock, 1992).

Motor vehicles may be 'borrowed' for many reasons, but the one which has received most dramatic coverage in the press is so-called 'joyriding' (also known as 'twocking' because of the legal classification of the offence). It is this form of motor vehicle crime that is thought to involve mostly juveniles, and the evidence presented below supports this view.

**Table 1. Age of offenders found guilty of theft of a motor vehicle and taking a vehicle without owner's consent in England & Wales, 1989.**

	10-16	17-20	21 and over	
Theft of motor vehicle	17%	41%	42%	1 00%
Taking without consent	27%	48%	25%	100%

Source: Home Office Research & Statistics Division

Clearly, when compared to theft of motor vehicles, a much higher proportion of those found guilty of taking without the owner's consent are juveniles. This is supported by data from the Northumbria region which show remarkably similar figures. Juveniles in table 2 below are defined as those between 10-17 years old.

**Table 2. Age of offenders proceeded against at magistrates' courts in Northumbria police region, 1989.**

	Juveniles	Adults	
Theft of motor vehicle	15%	85%	100%
Taking without consent	27%	73%	1 00%
Theft from motor vehicle	19%	81%	100%

Source: Northumbria Police

A number of research studies suggest reasons why young people become so involved in 'joyriding'. Substantial work has been conducted by Extern, a crime prevention unit based in Belfast (McCullough, Schmidt, and Lockhart 1990). Extern has a long history of working with motor vehicle offenders in Northern Ireland. The complexities of the Northern Ireland situation make comparisons with other British towns and cities difficult. Nevertheless, some aspects seem particularly useful in providing insight into this problem.

It is the persistence of offending in Northern Ireland that is so remarkable. Not only has the justice system failed to have any effect, but the paramilitary organisations have used the most brutal forms of punishment to try to stamp it out. Beatings, broken limbs and gunshot wounds have been inflicted, kneecapping being a common punishment for persistent offenders. As soon as they were able, however, the same youths continued to offend.

The Extern group, like the police, accept that the term 'joyriding' does represent a form of 'common theft', but argue that "the use of the term 'joyriding', the stealing of cars for pleasure rather than profit, brings us much closer to understanding the persistence of this activity despite all efforts to eradicate it". According to the Extern report, motor vehicle offenders are typically young people who come from socially deprived backgrounds, live in urban areas where the population is overwhelmingly working class, and poverty and unemployment are high. The majority of offenders have no formal qualifications and little, if any, experience of employment. In this context, fun, excitement and the opportunity to show off are important motivators.

A number of other researchers have described a wide range of motivations to 'joyriding': to have a good time, striving for status and recognition (Srodbeck & Short, 1964), and identity (Kilpatrick, 1988). According to Kilpatrick, 'joyriding', and the treatment of the offender by the community and authority serve to confer identity on the youth. Another study also suggested that a powerful reason for juveniles becoming involved in motor vehicle crime was to achieve status within peer groups, because the opportunities to achieve similar levels of status and excitement did not exist legitimately (Cooper, 1989).

The symbolism of the motor car cannot be ignored as a contributory factor to motor vehicle crime (McCaghy, Giordano and Henson, 1977). This symbolism is reinforced by the media, who glamourise the motor car and all it is supposed to stand for. McCaghy et al state that as far as 'joyriding' is concerned "the car is stolen not for what it does but for what it means".

Other studies have suggested a range of motivations for the short-term stealing of cars. Janet Foster (1990) has stated that several themes recurred in the boys' explanations of why they had become involved in car theft. The influence of peers, the desire to drive, and boredom were all important. McCaghy et al (1977) and more recently Clarke (1991) have produced classifications of types of vehicle theft. These include for fun or recreation, for temporary personal use as transportation, for commission of another crime, and for profit.

A Manchester study (Cooper, 1989) showed that "to make money" was the most common reason given as to why juveniles break into vehicles, with joyriding and boredom being the next most common responses. Parker (1974) also found that the boys in his research emphasised different reasons for motor vehicle offending, but the

most commonly expressed reason was money. The 'cats-eye business' (stealing car radios) brought economic gains to which they became accustomed, and which maintained their offending.

### **This report**

This report presents the results of a study originally conducted for a Safer Cities project in Sunderland. There were three elements to the research:

- to describe the motor vehicle problem in Pennywell, a public housing estate in Sunderland;

- to survey young people in Penny well, to gain an understanding of their attitudes towards motor vehicle crime; and

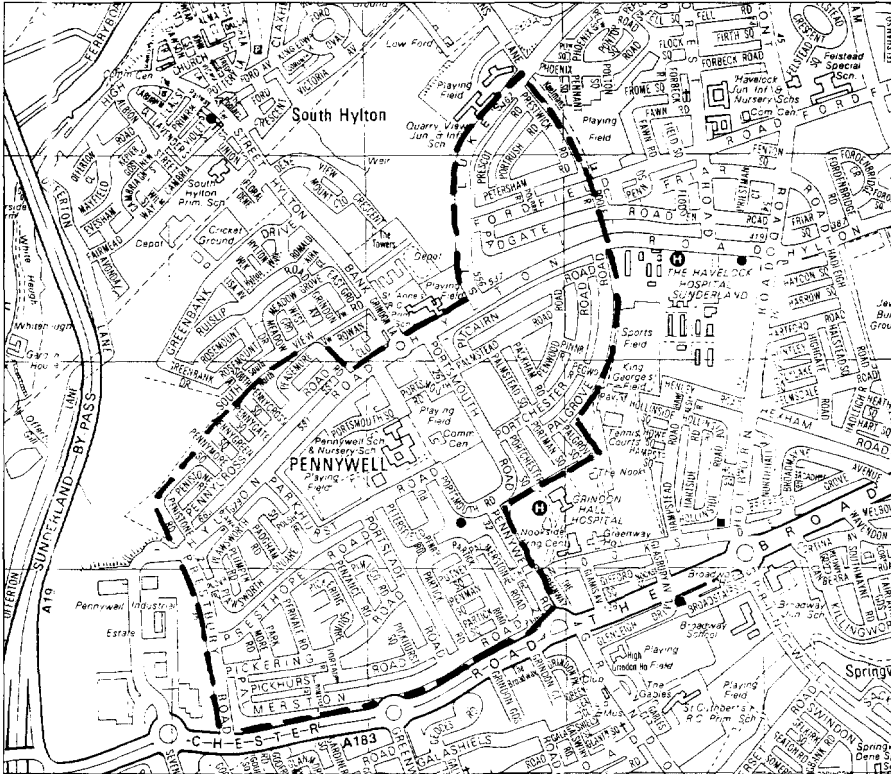
- to interview male motor vehicle offenders between the ages of 10 to 22 who live in Pennywell, in an attempt to understand the motives for their offending.

It was hoped that such an approach would help in understanding the nature of motor vehicle crime, and consequently aid in finding solutions to local problems.

## 2. The Pennywell Estate

Pennywell is the second largest local authority housing estate in the borough of Sunderland. The estate was constructed between 1949 and 1953 and consists mostly of traditional-style semi-detached houses. Figure 1 shows the layout of the estate.

Figure 1. Layout of the Pennywell Estate © Crown Copyright 1992



There are 2,847 houses on the estate. 327 (11%) of these are now owner-occupied. The estate has a total population of 10,709, 28% of whom are under the age of 18. The estate suffers from a number of social, economic and environmental problems. There is:

- an above average level of overcrowding;
- a high proportion of single parent families;
- a high intervention rate in the area by social services, especially regarding supervision orders and children in care;
- high unemployment, with an average rate of 18.3% of the potential working population of Pennywell unemployed.

A survey conducted by the Sunderland Safer Cities project in 1990 revealed that residents of the estate were concerned about crime, vandalism, and rubbish in the area.

**Motor vehicle crime on the estate**

Motor vehicle ownership on the Pennywell estate is very low. The 1981 census revealed that 75% of households did not have a car. A survey conducted by a Safer Cities project in 1990 shows that the pattern has remained much the same. 69% of respondents reported having no motor transport of any kind, 2% had a motorcycle and 29% possessed a car. Table 3 shows the incidence of motor vehicle crime on the estate in 1990.

**Table 3. Motor vehicle crime on the Pennywell estate, 1990**

	Number	Number per 1,000 h/holds
Theft of motor vehicle/taking without consent	66	23
Theft from a motor vehicle	116	41

Source: Northumbria Police

The crime rates per 1,000 households are similar to those found by other research in housing areas suffering from high levels of motor vehicle crime (eg Poyner & Webb, 1991). When the low car ownership on Pennywell is also taken into account, the problem becomes much more acute. Webb and Laycock (1992) estimate 20 thefts of vehicles and 34 thefts from vehicles per 1,000 vehicles on the road in England and Wales in 1990. If only 30% of Pennywell households possess a vehicle, the crime rates per 1,000 vehicles on the estate will be much higher than those shown per 1,000 households in table 3, and consequently much higher than the national rate.

The Safer Cities project survey asked car owners about their fear of car crime on the estate. 63% said they were worried to some extent about having something stolen from their vehicle. Theft of their vehicle was a greater concern to owners than theft from their vehicle, but fears of both were high. The problem of cars racing around the estate was commented on by a significant number of residents.

**Motor vehicle offenders in Pennywell**

Considerable difficulty was experienced in trying to establish the extent of residents' involvement in motor vehicle crime, since access to crime reports was not available to the researcher. Probation referrals provided some figures, but only for taking without consent. Theft of a motor vehicle in these statistics is included under the general term

'theft', which covers any sort of theft, eg shoplifting. In 1989, there were 11 probation referrals for taking without consent from the Pennywell estate. These include referrals from the age of 16. If an offender is responsible for a number of car thefts, he will only be recorded once.

A further source of information was Northumbria police force's Criminal Intelligence System. This system records details of offenders aged 10 and upwards who have had details taken by the police and have been cautioned or convicted of motor vehicle crime in the last two years. This system shows offences of taking without consent and theft of motor vehicles separately. However, it is possible that one offender may be counted for both taking without consent and theft, so the system may overestimate the total number of active motor vehicle offenders. The following table shows the number of offenders in Pennywell listed on this system as of September, 1990.

**Table 4. Number of people living in Pennywell cautioned or convicted for motor vehicle crime, Sept 1988 – Sept 1990**

	Number of offenders
Taking without consent	293
Theft of motor vehicle	29
Theft from motor vehicle	130

Source: Northumbria Police Criminal Intelligence System

The figures shown in table 4 suggest that a relatively high proportion of Pennywell's population is involved in motor vehicle crime, particularly taking without consent. The 293 offenders shown in table 4 represent 2.7% of the population of Pennywell. In 1989, 41,552 people were found guilty of taking without consent in England & Wales, representing 0.08% of the population.

The number of motor vehicle offenders shown in table 4 is vastly in excess of the number of motor vehicle crimes reported to the police shown in table 3. It would appear that many offenders commit their crimes, particularly taking vehicles, off the estate. There is some support for this from interviews with offenders, described later in this report.

### **3. The school survey**

The school survey was compiled as a self report questionnaire, to be given to juveniles residing in Pennywell. It was decided that the most useful way to reach a sample of the young male population of pennywell was through a local comprehensive school.

One morning, 86 boys, aged 10 to 16 years (average age = 13 years) and living in Pennywell, gathered in the school hall and completed the questionnaire in school time. The boys were assured that the form they were filling in was anonymous, so they would not feel at risk when completing it.

Most of the questions merely required a response by ticking the appropriate answer. Some, however, were more open ended and required the person to respond in their own way. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in the appendix to this report.

#### **Extent of involvement in motor vehicle crime**

##### *Stealing or stealing property from a car*

The youths were asked whether they had stolen property from a vehicle or stolen a vehicle themselves. 79 youths responded to this question. 16% (13 youths) admitted that they had stolen property from a car, and 14% (11 youths) admitted that they had stolen a car. Of these, 5 youths said that they had committed both types of offence, so 24% (19 youths) of this sample said they had either stolen a car or property from a car.

15 boys said that they had been caught by the police for motor vehicle offences. As a consequence, 10 of these youths had been cautioned, one was sent to court and another was reprimanded (2 did not say what happened to them).

##### *Being present when a car was stolen or broken into*

32% of the sample (27 youths) said they had been with someone who had stolen property from a car, and 24% had been with someone who had stolen a car. These youths were asked how old they were when this first happened. 45% said that the person or people they were with were older than them at the time of the offence, 38% said that some were older, some younger, and some said the same age as themselves. None said that all the people they had been with were all younger than themselves.

##### *Contact with motor vehicle offenders*

52% of this group of schoolboys said they knew someone who had stolen property from a car, or stolen a car. An age breakdown is displayed in figure 2.

Figure 2. The percentage of each age group knowing boys involved in motor vehicle crime

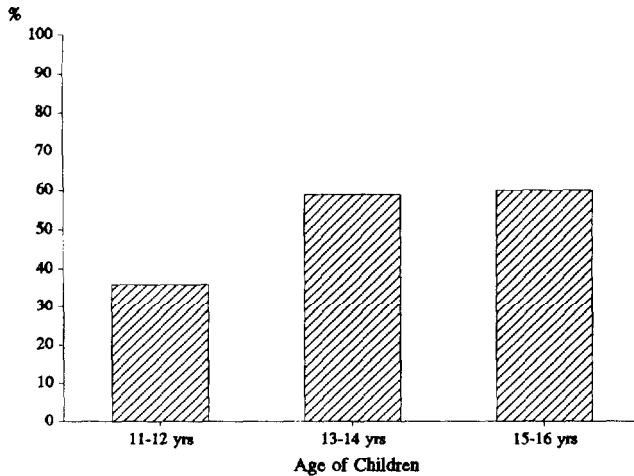


Figure 2 shows that just over one third of 11 and 12 year olds knew someone involved in motor vehicle crime. This proportion was higher for older boys, with well over half of those responding knowing someone who had stolen or stolen from a car.

#### Perceptions of motor vehicle crime

The survey asked a wide variety of questions on the youths' perceptions of motor vehicle crime.

14% (12 youths) of this group did not think it was wrong to steal a motor vehicle or steal from it. Only four went on to say why they thought this, saying that there was nothing else to do, that it was fun, or that money could be made.

80% of the group believed that the main reason boys stole property such as radio cassettes from cars was to make money. The main reasons why boys stole cars was "for the excitement" (19%), "to impress their friends" (18%), "to wreck them" (14%) and "because they are bored" (13%).

The boys who stole cars were thought usually to go for sporty fast cars (25%), but they also went after cars that could be stripped of parts to sell and cars that could be sold on (25%). Only 1% thought that this type of offending was carried out alone, with 80% of the group saying that they usually stole cars with a group of friends. It was a group activity that occurred at any time, but in the evening after school was considered to be popular (32%). The youths were asked if they knew of any local places where vehicles tended to get stolen from. They suggested a range of local sites. The majority felt that car parks anywhere were likely targets.

The boys were also asked about motor vehicle offenders getting caught and about injury resulting from driving stolen cars, to assess their views of the risks involved in car crime. Table 5 shows what they thought about the chances of being arrested.

**Table 5. Schoolchildren's perception of the chances of being caught for car crime**

Do you think that the boys stealing cars or stealing property from cars?	
Get caught	3%
Sometimes get caught	52%
Do not get caught	1%
Don't know	3%

1. Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding

Over half of this group thought there was at least some risk of being caught by the police, and a large proportion could not make this judgement. Only a minority thought that boys involved in car crime got away with it.

Table 6 shows this group's knowledge of injury associated with car crime.

**Table 6. Schoolchildren's perception of the risk of injury resulting from stealing a car**

Do you know any boys who as a result of stealing a motor car?	
Have injured themselves	17%
Have injured their passengers	5%
Have injured other people	9%
Don't know	69%

Most of this group did not know of any injury being caused as a result of anyone they knew taking a car. However, 30% did know someone who had suffered or inflicted injury as a result of stealing a car. The finding from both tables 5 and 6 seems to be that for many of these boys car crime was not without its risks.

### **Suggested solutions**

What would help stop boys from first becoming involved in motor vehicle crime? Only 49 of the 86 youths answered this question. 45% (22 youths) said that more activities provided for young people would help. A number of other suggestions were made, including "blow up Pennywell".

## 4. The youth club interviews

Nine young people aged from 10 to 15 years attending the youth club at Pennywell Neighbourhood Centre took part in this group interview which was taped and later transcribed. The interview lasted for one hour and the youth worker who worked with these children was present throughout.

It was clear from this discussion that these youths were very aware that a great many people were involved in motor vehicle crime on their estate. They admitted that they “nearly get knocked over when they bomb around the street”, and that they “see a lot of lads driving towoked cars”. None of the group actually admitted taking property from cars or taking cars themselves, hut they knew “friends of friends” who were involved.

When asked the reason why they thought people started doing it, they said “for something to do”, “because they are bored”, and “to make some money”, or to “show off”. Money was made by selling the cassettes and radios from the cars stolen. This was regarded as a secondary motive, with the main one being to drive around with their friends and show off. This was also revealed in the responses to the question about what cars were preferred: “Well they don’t go for Reliant Robins, unless its got a good cassette in”, “They go for fast cars like Astra’s”.

The group was asked how they thought youths first got involved in taking cars and how old they generally were when they first started. They said that some children started as young as nine, and they became involved because they watched the older ones doing it. They began by being lookouts for the older ones, and jumped in the back of cars when they had “got them away”. They learned to drive from their friends, and were usually about 14 or 15 years old when they were driving and “bombing around the streets”.

When asked whether they thought these youths who took cars got caught, or if they knew anyone who had been caught, there was a unanimous “No”. The group also thought that getting caught would not stop them doing it. This is rather different from the finding from the general school survey, and may reflect greater experience and involvement in motor vehicle crime.

The group was asked whether these boys were dangerous driving around, and whether they thought about injuring themselves or others when they stole cars. The general view was that the police make them crash by chasing them. It was suggested that the police should follow them from a distance to avoid this.

One 11 year old member of the group did admit to having been in a stolen car, but it had been dumped in the field at Pennywell and stripped of parts and burnt out before he played in it. The group members were asked if many cars were abandoned in Pennywell. They said that cars were dumped in fields when they ran out of petrol.

The discussion then shifted to what activities were available for the young people of Pennywell. The group was asked what else they did apart from coming to the Pennywell Neighbourhood youth club on a Tuesday evening. "We just sit about on the corner most of the time, or hang around the Hylton Road Shops". The older boys tended to hang around Portsmouth Road shops where there was "more action", they claimed. Was there nothing else they could do in the evening? "Well, there's a youthy at the top in the Community Centre but that's just on a Monday, Tuesday and Saturday night". The other days, according to these youngsters, "are boring, we just sit outside every night".

Some of the group did go to the Community Centre youth club where they said there was pool, badminton, table tennis and trampolining, and it was "great". Others thought it was "crap". This club is open to 11-21 year olds, but only a few of the older youths actually went to the Community Centre, preferring to go to the pub.

These youths thought that there should be a youth club on every night of the week to keep them off the streets. The nights when they were not at a youth club they were bored. But when asked whether providing something for the young people of Pennywell to do every night would stop them from getting involved in car crime, they thought not.

When asked what would stop youngsters from becoming involved in car crime, almost all thought the answer was an open air field or track with old cars or go carts that youngsters could drive around legally. Most of the youths were interested in driving, and this way they could do it without stealing cars. As one 13 year old youth commented:

"If ye haven't got a car and you are desperate to drive how can you do it? If ye get caught when you pinch a car it means knocking you back more years 'cause every time you're caught you get points on ye licence, even though ye haven't got one. So you're chances of being able to drive on the road legally goes down and down".

## **5. The offender interviews**

A total of 17 motor vehicle offenders who resided in Pennywell were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 13 to 19 years (average age was 16 years) and they had all been cautioned or convicted for a motor vehicle offence.

Access to local offenders was gained via the Probation Service and Social Services. Two of the interviews were carried out at Pennywell Probation Centre, the rest at Pennywell Neighbourhood Centre. Each offender was reassured that the information they gave during the interview was entirely confidential. Each interview lasted about one and a half hours, was taped and later transcribed verbatim.

The youths were extremely frank when providing accounts of their offending behaviour, and were encouraged to talk freely. There is, of course, no way of knowing how truthful these accounts were but past research has indicated that the information obtained from such situations can generally be accepted as reliable (West & Farrington, 1977).

### **Attitudes towards school**

Seven youths were of school age, but six of them admitted to hardly attending at all, saying that they thought it a waste of time. They often went in to school for their attendance mark, but then came out. When asked what they did when they did not go to school, the most frequent answer was "cassetting" (stealing radio cassettes from cars).

The older youths that had left school expressed the same feelings. They had been glad to leave school. Only one youth was on a Training Scheme, the remaining 9 were unemployed.

Rees, who was 17 years old, admitted that he had been expelled from school when he was 14 for "being disruptive". At the time of his expulsion he was heavily involved in theft from vehicles, and had been arrested for this on a number of occasions. He was 16 years old when he stole a car for the first time, and has now become a persistent offender. At the time of the interview, Rees had just completed a six month sentence at a Detention Centre.

### **First involvement in car crime**

Without exception, these offenders said they became involved in motor vehicle crime because their friends or their brothers were already involved. For example:

"All the young kids all over Pennywell and Ford estate were doing it. Everyone used to meet at the Hylton Road shops and break up into gangs. I was thirteen then, that's when it started. The older lads like cars and they just started

pinching them, and their younger brothers would go with them, and take their mates too.” (Age 17)

“My brother had already been pinching cars and he got put away. I started going around with his mates, and started doing it too. I was sixteen. I was good like at school and everything, then I just went daft – don’t know why.” (Age 19)

Two of the younger boys that were interviewed, aged 14 and 15 years, said that they had started by stealing property from cars when they were 11 years old. Another said that he started by pinching badges and wheel trims, then progressed to opening the car door, running away to make sure it was clear, then running back to steal the radio cassette and anything else that he could get. The same boy said that he first became involved in stealing cars when he was 12. Older boys, about two years older, took him with them when they stole cars and he learned to drive.

The youths all said that when they were younger they went with older youths to commit offences and served what could be termed an ‘apprenticeship’. The older youths taught them how to get into cars, start the engines and drive them. The young offender acted as a ‘look out’ and rode as a passenger in the stolen vehicle initially, but the techniques and skills were soon transmitted to the younger youths who then went off and committed offences themselves.

“Everybody’s doing it now – they pinch cars in the dinner hour now from school – some of them are canny drivers.” (Age 15)

The older offenders were questioned about the involvement of younger boys in their criminal activities.

“There used to be little kids always asking if they could go with you when you were going to twoc a car. We used to show them how to do things and that, and they would jump in the car. After a bit it got out of hand, there would be about eight kids in a five seater car, and that was just stupid.” (Age 18)

The older youths that were already involved in car crime impressed the younger ones. They were what could be called ‘local heroes’ and the younger boys looked up to them.

“When I first started hanging around the shops the older lads looked really good when they were blasting about in the cars they’d nicked. We used to think they were great. They would do hand break turns and every thing.” (Age 16)

### **Planning car crime**

The offenders said that they always planned to go out and steal cars or property from cars but if an opportunity presented itself by chance, such as goods left visible in an open car, then all the youths claimed that they would steal the goods there and then. Usually though the decision to offend was planned and it involved taking the

necessary tools. Sometimes they would see a particular model of car they were interested in and go back for it at a later date.

### **Getting into cars**

The tool that was usually carried was a screwdriver, which was used to open a car door by inserting it into the car lock and twisting. Ten youths said that they always took just a screwdriver. "Quicker than a key" according to one of the offenders, aged 17. One youth said he used to use scaffolding bars but now he uses wrenches to break the steering lock and get the car away. The youths were very informed and skilled in the methods of entering and stealing a vehicle. 15 out of the 17 respondents claimed that they could open a car door and drive it away in a matter of seconds. Fords and Vauxhalls were popular because they were "easier to get into and get away".

"If it's an Astra say, you just walk up to it put a screwdriver straight in the lock, move it from side to side, and it just pops open. You just snap the steering lock, pull the casing off and just drive away. I can get in a car in about three seconds."  
(Age 18)

"You can get into any car with a tool slide, you just screw it into the ignition, tighten it and pull it out. I'm making one at the moment." (Age 15)

One youth said that he did not take Mercedes or Jaguars but this was not because he did not want to, but because he did not have the proper tools.

### **Preferred cars**

All stated that they were not just after any car, but sporty fast cars. The models most quoted were the Ford XR3s, Cosworths, 4 x 4s, and Astra GTEs.

"Austins are easy too. I used to always go for them 'cause we just scuffed the Austins [snapped the steering lock], but I go for the faster cars now." (age 16)

One youth said that he or his friends never went for Ladas or Skodas because they were too slow. "Wouldn't be seen dead in anything like that". These cars were generally portrayed as being low status models.

### **When and how often are cars stolen or broken into?**

The offenders were asked how often they stole cars or property from cars, and whether they carried out these offences on any particular day of the week or time of the day. Their responses indicate no general pattern, but reveal a range of factors influencing their individual behaviour:

"Any night when there's nothing going on, like tonight. We meet our mates at Ford [neighbouring local housing estate], there are clubs, car parks, the General

Hospital and the streets around the hospital, loads of cars we can nick there.” (Age 17)

“During the day from morning till almost 6 o’clock, because I go out with my girlfriend at night.” (Age 18)

“All the time, night, day, on Saturdays, and during the school holidays. When we are on holiday from school we go twoocking every day.” (Age 14)

“During the day because I don’t like driving at night.” (Age 16)

“It just depends - if John’s with us, he generally takes about 5 [cars], but if he isn’t we only take one ‘cause the rest of my mates don’t drive, they are only learning.” (Age 15)

#### **Where are cars stolen from or broken into?**

Only the younger youths seemed to steal cars or property from cars parked in their own neighbourhood. Most of the more experienced offenders kept out of Pennywell. They were known in the neighbourhood, had reputations, and “it was better to go where nobody knew your face so that they would not grass on you”.

There was no specific area that was popular amongst these older youths. Only two said that they often committed offences in Sunderland town centre. Some of the town centre car parks had video cameras now which most offenders said deterred them. Mot said they preferred to take cars from local private housing areas. Some of the youths travelled great distances, for example to Harrogate, Blackpool, Scarborough, Leeds or London, and claimed never to commit any offences in Sunderland. This was usually to get a specific type of car to sell. Three youths admitted to having sold complete cars to someone who had asked them to acquire one for them.

#### **Abandoning stolen cars**

The majority of these offenders said they just drove the car around for fun then abandoned it, parking it somewhere for the police to find.

“Just park it up in Grindon, Ford or Pennywell somewhere close to home.”

“Don’t vandalise it or nothing, just strip it sometimes and take the radio cassette or anything else that might be in it. ”

The 18 year old youth said he had vandalised a car once because it had his fingerprints all over it. He had used it to “do a job” so he set fire to it by pouring petrol over the seals and placing lighted paper underneath. Another youth who was only 14 said : “The other day we nicked a Cavalier, I was only a passenger. Then they burnt it out at the ‘Adventure’ [playground]. They put a lighted cloth in the petrol tank. Its a laugh.”

### **Selling stolen cars and parts**

The interviews revealed a network in Pennywell that not only supports but encourages car crime. All of the offenders stated that they could easily sell a stolen radio cassette player. Sometimes they could get “three or four good cassettes a night” and they were usually paid from £15.00 to £30.00 for each of them.

“We can easily get shot of stuff, like radios, cassettes, seats, wheels anything, ‘cause we know blokes in Pennywell who buy them from us.”

As well as being able to sell what they steal easily, one youth said that they are also given ‘orders’.

“People are always coming and asking us to get radio cassettes for them – loads of people ask us. They drive around Portsmouth Road shops and stop and ask us if we have any. If we haven’t got what they want we will get it for them, a Blaupunkt, or a Phillips, things like that.”

One youth said that it was difficult when someone asked him to get specific parts, because he had to go around searching for the right model of car. He thought it was much easier to steal parts that he knew he could get rid of easily, such as a set of wheels for an XR3. He said the whole set would make him £100 from a contact he had in Pennywell.

Another offender claimed that he had been asked to obtain a particular model of car – a new Ford Orion diesel. He found one in Harrogate, stole it and brought it back to Pennywell where he sold it for £250. When questioned, he said that it was not easy to sell a complete car – “only do it when someone asks for a particular type”.

It became clear from these interviews that the people who paid these youths for the stolen car parts or radio cassettes were older men who lived in the community and who could sell the property, presumably making a profit themselves.

### **Dangerous driving**

The offenders were asked whether they had been involved in any car crashes, and if they or anyone else had been injured as a result of stealing a vehicle. Three youths gave graphic descriptions of crashes they had been involved in, and four of the younger ones knew offenders who had been injured.

One young man, aged 16, claimed that he was driving down the road “at about a ton” when another car pulled out, and he went out of control and spun completely over. He said he was unhurt “apart from a hit of a headache”. Another youth had been a passenger in a car that had crashed during a police chase, badly injuring his friend. The oldest youth that was interviewed said he had crashed a number of times,

knocking over and injuring a policeman in one accident. He also said that his elder brother had lost control of a stolen a car and hit a woman and her two year old child. The child was in intensive care for a considerable time but the offender said that he believed she was alright now. This incident he said had made him worry about injuring other people, but he never worried about injuring himself when he drove around in stolen cars.

All the youths seemed to be aware of the dangers involved, a number of them related incidents that had been reported by the press in which pedestrians and other innocent road users had been killed or injured locally. However, these experiences did not seem to worry them or put them off. This seemed to be because they associated such risks with people who drove badly, and they all rated themselves highly as drivers:

“But Shaun, he’s stupid. He got caught in an Astra the other day and he drove like a madman. He went shooting up the road, just missed a bairn in a buggy, then came shooting round the corner, and just missed another woman and a bairn, then went straight into the back of an Escort and crashed. We all call him maniac man.”

Shaun is aged 15 and is the cousin of the youth who related this incident.

All the youths that claimed they could drive considered themselves to be good drivers. Two offenders said that they actually tested their driving ability with those of the police by encouraging police chases. One said he “pulls up next to them at traffic lights, revs the engine up, then shoots off in front of them”. He boasted that he always got away from the police, which seemed to prove to him that he was a better driver. However, it is possible that the police allowed him to get away because of the threat the situation posed for the general public.

The remainder of those interviewed were concerned when the police followed them and said that they drove very carefully in areas where police might see them. If a police car followed, then five of the offenders said they would put their foot on the accelerator so that they could get far enough ahead to jump out of the car and run away.

### **Getting caught**

All the youths interviewed had been caught by the police on more than one occasion, and they had all been cautioned or convicted for stealing property from a vehicle or stealing a vehicle. Many of the younger youths that had been to court for stealing cars had been fined, given penalty points, or disqualified from driving. Some of them had gathered quite a number of penalty points and their periods of disqualification had been increased. John was 15 when he was fined and given 8 penalty points, and Darren also aged 15 had been banned from driving for six months. In spite of this, these youths admitted that they continued to offend. Such punishments are designed to be effective when the offender is old enough to obtain a legal driving licence – they did not seem to mean much to the youths who had been given them.

Eight of these 17 offenders had received one or more custodial sentences. One such youth was Bobby, who at 19 was the eldest of those interviewed. When he was asked how many times he had been caught for stealing cars he replied:

“Loads of times. I’ve had cautions and seven sentences, just ‘got out’ not long ago, after serving six months, always get six months, all the time.”

Mick, aged 18, said he had been caught about ten times:

“Never had a caution – had probation, intermediate treatment, community service, detention, the lot.”

Wayne had three detention sentences, and had been to Hatfield Detention Centre once and Deerbolt Detention Centre twice.

Despite these punishments, the youths remained undeterred. The following convey their attitudes towards being caught in the future:

“See, you might worry about getting caught, and you might want to stop, but then your mates just come up and say to go for a car. They make you do it.” (Age 15)

“All my mates have been caught too, but we enjoy it and when you’re skint you can go out and make money.” (Age 17)

“That’s why we nick fast cars – so the coppers can’t catch us.” (Age 16)

One youth aged 18 said that his girlfriend did not want him to be involved any more, so he was trying to resist pressure from his friends to go out and take cars. It was not really the risk of getting caught that was making him reassess the situation, but the risk of losing his girlfriend. This same offender said that even though he wanted to “give it up” it would be difficult because it had become “like an addiction with me”. The following section deals with the motivating factors in greater depth.

### **Changing motivations**

Interviewing youths of different ages, and listening to their offending histories, it became clear that the prime motivation for stealing a car or property from a car changes for many offenders as they get older.

Initially, the search for excitement, kicks, thrills and adventure plays a major part in the youths’ involvement, and for the younger ones learning to drive and driving were powerful motivators. When the techniques of getting into a vehicle and starting the engine were learned from older offenders, they could then take cars with their own friends and drive around. One youth, however, claimed that he was more interested in learning how to get into cars and start the engine than in driving.

For most, the driving experience was important, and this influenced their choice of car to steal – fast, sporty models. These could then be driven fast on fast roads, or with more skill on bending country roads. Drivers were often encouraged by their friends to drive much faster than they themselves would have liked. Most of them claim to have driven at speeds well over the speed limit in built up areas, and at speeds well over a hundred miles per hour on the clear roads.

Improving their image and prestige amongst their peers was very important for these youths, and strongly influenced their behaviour once they had learned to take and drive cars.

“I like the better cars, and the fast cars, so that we can drive about in them and see how fast we can go in them. And it looks smart driving about in them doesn't it? And we can show the lads that we are better than them.”

According to David (age 18), the type of car being driven was “a sort of status symbol”. This point came out clearly in all the interviews, and there was competition all the time amongst the youths of Pennywell and between youths on neighbouring housing estates as to who could get the best cars.

“When you get a good car you come back and drive around the shops at Portsmouth Road. Everyone does it they come back and rev up the engines and wave at all the lads.”

Another youth claimed that they would:

“... show off to those at Ford [neighbouring housing estate] go over and shout out of the windows and that and the Ford lads would come over to Pennywell shops [Portsmouth Road] and show us what they had nicked. We used to pinch really fast cars, suped up ones; the better the car you got the more you could show off to your mates like.”

One youth aged 17 said that he met about twelve of his friends there almost every night. They usually split up into four groups and went off to steal cars. Each group regularly got a car and they had races on the motorways or at Lumley, which again displays the competitive element in the behaviour.

All of the youths that were interviewed stated that they had stolen property from the vehicles they had taken. Without exception they said that they always stripped the radio cassette from the car if it was of reasonable quality so that they could sell it and make some money. These economic rewards did not seem to be the prime motivating factor for the younger or the less experienced offender, but they did serve as an added incentive.

“We go all over in the cars we nick, we don’t stay in Sunderland. We go to Washington, Seaham, Durham. What we do is we pinch a car to get there, dump it, pinch another and go on like that. We make sure we get the cassettes and anything else from them before we dump it though.” (Age 16)

As they got older and more experienced, however, the motives for offending gradually began to change for many offenders. Excitement and exhilaration might still be experienced by the actual theft of a car and in the driving of it, but the main interest became the money that could be made from selling or stripping it.

Nine of the ten offenders who had left school were unemployed and car crime had become an important, if not the primary, source of income for many of them. Six of these older offenders said that money was now the main reason they stole vehicles, and four of these said they committed offences only when they needed money. The following extract from an interview with David, aged 18, provides a typical account of the attitudes and reasoning behind the behaviour of the persistent offender.

“And then it seemed it was a waste of time just pinching cars, ‘cause what are you gonna do with them? So we thought we would strip them, take them to bits, and all that. It just went from there, and we would pinch cars and sell them too. It’s my way of life now. If I didn’t get the money from it I wouldn’t be able to live. Been getting money from it since I was at school, in third year at comp. I was walking around with £200 in my pocket.” (Age 18)

David admitted that he continued to offend because he needed the money, and there was nothing else to do. Another youth also said that “My family get sick of me getting locked up, but it doesn’t bother me - I just want the money”. When asked what they needed the money for, it was not really to provide for necessities but for ‘extras’ – entertainment, clothes, drink and drugs.

“Well it’s easy come, easy go money, you know what I mean. Sometimes on a good night I can get two hundred quid a night. I’ve got two bank accounts now.” (Age 18)

“Always spend it on daft things, don’t really know but you feel better when you have money in your pocket to spend.” (Age 17)

Two youths admitted to buying drugs and alcohol with the money they made from stripping cars. When one of the youths was asked how much he paid for the drugs he replied:

“It costs seven quid and doesn’t last long, that’s why we pinch cars – for pot and drink.” (Age 15)

The other youth was asked about his drug taking and he said that the only money he received legitimately was two pounds pocket money from his mother. He went on:

“But you can spend twenty quid a night on drink. I spent a hundred and eighty quid one night on drugs, speed, and acid and that, as well as bottles [Alcohol]. We all planned to have a party from 9 o’clock at night till twelve the next day, so we stripped a car.” (Age 15).

The association between motor vehicles and money also emerges in the offenders’ use of stolen cars for other crime. All of the four youths aged 18 and over said they had committed burglary from houses, and broken into shops and factories and that they had stolen cars to commit these crimes. One youth who was 18 said that he went round houses stealing video recorders, and had also “done a job” a couple of months before at one of the factories on Pennywell Industrial Estate. Another youth said that he rammed the metal shutters of shops and stole property from them.

“Well when I first started it was just for joyriding, for the thrill of driving, just to try out the cars. But now I take them for shop burglaries and stuff now.” (Age 19)

### **The future**

The apparent ease with which many cars and their parts or contents can be stolen, together with ready access to a market for these goods makes it hard for older youths who have left school and are now unemployed to break away from car crime. It was felt that it was the younger children in the area who could be helped most, possibly by providing leisure facilities to divert them from car crime. One offender summed up the situation in the following way:

“It’s really the younger kids that can be stopped. I get really angry, if I see them I drag them out of the car and give them a crack. There are some really little kids at it now, about 10, just getting started. For the ones that are already doing it, it is a waste of time, because that’s what I was like man, too far into it. Once you get into it, it’s a waste of time anybody trying to do anything to make you stop.”

## **6. Summary**

This research has revealed a number of important, and perhaps alarming aspects of young people's involvement in car crime. The school survey found that over half of the 11-16 year olds in the sample knew others who were involved in car crime. This is particularly significant in view of the findings from offender interviews, that first involvement in car crime is usually through contact with more experienced offenders. Indeed, the school survey found that 32% of the sample had been present when property had been stolen from a car.

The interviews with known offenders showed how a career in car crime could evolve from just being something exciting to do, to financial dependence on the sale of stolen cars or car parts.

First involvement in car crime can begin as young as 10 years old. Initially, the younger boys might act as lookouts, and be passengers in stolen cars. In this way the skills and techniques required were learned from the more experienced offenders. Young people are very concerned with status. The older offenders impressed the younger boys in Pennywell, and acted as role models providing the means by which the younger youths could also achieve status in their own peer groups. Concern for achieving status influenced their choice of car to steal which they claimed was always the fast sporty models. Many stolen cars were driven around local housing estates at high speeds, especially when they have managed to steal a particularly high status model of car. This was a way of "proving themselves" to their peers. Peer pressure often encouraged the youths to be more daring in their exploits than they would otherwise have been, for example driving faster than they wished. In this way youngsters were 'sucked in' to what appears to be accepted by these youths as 'normal' behaviour for the young males in Pennywell.

Cars also provided the opportunity to make money and the financial rewards from selling stolen cars or parts sustained car crime activity when the initial thrill and sense of adventure had waned. For the majority of these youths stealing cars had progressed to being primarily profit motivated and they had come to rely on the money that their offending behaviour provided. There appeared to be a thriving local black market in cars and car parts. Without exception, all the offenders had 'contacts' in Pennywell who would buy what they had to sell. As well as this, people in cars would ask the youths to steal specific makes of radio cassette, or car parts for them. Clearly, the ease with which stolen property could be sold encouraged and sustained the offenders' criminal activity.

### **Implications for preventive action**

The majority of offenders suggested that the availability of more leisure facilities in the area might have prevented them from getting involved in car crime in the first place. They stressed the importance of targeting young boys aged around 10 years who

were not yet involved in car crime but were in imminent risk of becoming so. They recognised that, once involved in car crime it would be very difficult to divert offenders away from it, especially if offenders have grown to depend on the financial rewards. This supports the view of the Working Group on Car Crime (Home Office, 1988) who stated in their report that “by the age of 16 many young people are already caught in the car crime spiral, by which time it is more difficult to divert them”.

Clearly, car crime fulfils some very fundamental needs of young people, in the first instance for excitement and status, then progressing to the need for money. Any strategy designed to divert offenders away from car crime towards more law abiding activity must compete with these powerful attractions. For young boys, it must provide excitement and the possibility of achieving status in the eyes of their peers. This is at least a realistic objective for such projects. However, they are unlikely to be the most effective way of dealing with the financial attractions of car crime. In this respect, the local market for stolen cars and spare parts would seem to be a more appropriate target, by removing it or at least frustrating it so that it was more difficult to dispose of stolen goods. This suggests a more conventional policing strategy.

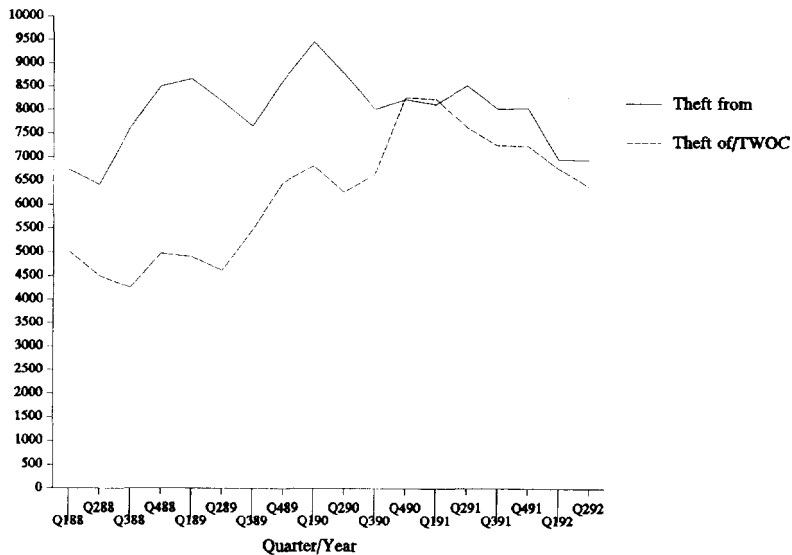
The need to ‘show off’ stolen cars and driving ability is also an important behavioural aspect of car crime which suggests another preventive approach. Introducing changes to the local roads might make it difficult to drive cars in this way and so remove another attraction. For example, eliminating long straights would prevent the build up of car speed and reduce the drama of hand brake turns.

The complex nature of car crime suggests that the most effective preventive approach is to target a number of different aspects of the problem. The findings from this research indicate the need for offender oriented measures – diversionary activities aimed at the very young; for situational measures to frustrate displays of daring driving and for the police to remove the black market for stolen goods.

## 7. Postscript to research

The findings presented in this paper are based on research that was carried out between June and December 1990. Since then the situation has changed and there is evidence to suggest that the vehicle crime rate for the Northumbria Police Region has gradually fallen, especially for theft of vehicles (see figure 3). Furthermore the rate for theft of vehicles actually peaked in the fourth quarter of 1990 during which time the research was actually being carried out.

Figure 3. Vehicle crime in the Northumbria police region, 1988-1992



Source: Northumbria Police

Very recent figures obtained from the Northumbria Police show that vehicle crime for the Sunderland division for the first six months of 1992 decreased when compared to the first six months of 1991 (4.6% for theft of vehicles and 8.9% for theft from vehicles); similar figures for the Pennywell estate show an even greater decrease (27.5% for theft of and 9.2% for theft from vehicles).

The reasons for these apparent decreases could only be discovered through a detailed study. However they may well be due to the various initiatives that have been launched by the police and other agencies within this period. In November 1991 Northumbria Police applied for, and were later awarded, additional funds from the Urban Crime Fund Initiative. Some of this money has been used to provide an officer to work full time in the Pennywell Comprehensive School. The police are also

involved with other agencies within the area in deploying Community Youth Workers who endeavour to divert potential offenders away from such activities. These initiatives are in line with the recommendations of this report in recognising the need for offender oriented measures and diversionary activities aimed at the very young.

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THIS QUESTIONNAIRE IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY TO INVESTIGATE CRIME PREVENTION.

THERE IS NO NEED TO WRITE YOUR NAME ON THIS FORM SO NO ONE WILL KNOW WHO HAS ANSWERED THESE QUESTIONS.

PLEASE DO NOT MENTION THE NAME OF ANY OTHER PERSON IN YOUR ANSWERS.

PLEASE ANSWER AS MANY QUESTIONS AS YOU CAN AND MOST IMPORTANTLY PLEASE ANSWER THE QUESTIONS HONESTLY.

THE INFORMATION YOU GIVE WILL BE CONFIDENTIAL, AND IT IS PURELY FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES.

1. How old are you?                      yrs.
  
2. Do you live on Pennywell Housing Estate? (Answer yes or no)
  
3. Who do you live with? (please tick)
  - (a) Mother
  - (b) Father
  - (c) Brother/brothers
  - (d) Sister/sisters
  - (e) Grandparents
  - (f) Others (Please state)
  
4. Are the people you live with working, or are they unemployed? (Please say on line below whether your father, mother, etc are in work or not).
  
5. What do you do in your spare time?
  
6. Where do you go to meet friends?
  
7. Do you belong to any clubs? (please tick any of the following)
  - (a) No
  - (b) Youth club
  - (c) Sports club
  - (d) scouts
  - (e) Boys Club
  - (f) Any other club (What sort of club)

8. Are there any particular activities which you would like to do but can't?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No

If you have answered 'Yes', what is it?

Why can't you do the activity? Is it because it is: (Please tick reason)

- (a) Too expensive
- (b) Too far to travel
- (c) No transport
- (d) Not old enough
- (e) Your friends won't go
- (f) Your parents won't allow you

9. What kind of leisure activities, clubs or anything else do you think could be set up in Pennywell that you and your friends would go to that are not already provided?

10. Do you like school?

- (a) Yes
- (b) It's OK
- (c) No

If you answered 'No' why don't you like it?

11. Some boys at your school sometimes play truant from school, which means that they don't go to school when they are supposed to. Have you ever played truant?

- (a) Yes
- (h) No

IF YOU HAVE ANSWERED 'YES', PLEASE COMPLETE THE NEXT QUESTION.

IF YOU ANSWERED 'NO' PLEASE IGNORE IT AND GO ON TO QUESTION 13.

12. How often do you play truant?

- (a) Less than once a month
- (b) About once a month
- (c) More than once a month
- (d) Once a week
- (e) More than once a week

When you play truant, do you do it

- (a) With friends
- (b) On your own
- (c) Sometimes on your own, sometimes with friends

When you do play truant what do you do with your time?

13. Whose opinions do you value most?

- (a) Your teachers
- (b) Your parents
- (c) Your friends
- (d) Others (please say who)

14. Some boys in Pennywell do things which are against the law, such as stealing property from motor cars and stealing cars and driving them. Do you know any boys that do these things? (Please tick yes or no).

- (a) Yes
- (h) No

15. Do you think it wrong to:

- |                                      |     |    |
|--------------------------------------|-----|----|
| (a) Steal property from a motor car? | Yes | No |
| (b) Steal a motor car                | Yes | No |

Why?

16. Why do you think some boys take motor cars without the owners consent? (Please tick any of the following reasons. You can tick more than one.)

- (a) For the excitement
- (b) To impress their friends
- (c) So that they can drive
- (d) Because they are bored
- (e) To get somewhere
- (f) To sell them
- (g) So they can strip them of parts
- (h) To commit another crime
- (i) To wreck them

17. What sort of cars do you think they go for?

- (a) Any car that is easy to get into
- (b) A flashy expensive car
- (c) A sporty, fast car
- (d) Cars that are wanted for parts
- (e) A car that can be sold to someone



IF YOU ANSWERED 'YES' TO EITHER OF THE LAST QUESTIONS COULD YOU PLEASE ANSWER THE NEXT QUESTION. IF YOU ANSWERED 'NO' THEN PLEASE MISS IT OUT.

25. How old were you when you were first with some other person, or people who:

- (a) Stole property from someone's car?                      years old
  - (b) Took a motor car without permission?                      years old
- How old was the person or people you were with?

- (a) Same age as you
- (b) Younger than you
- (c) Older than you
- (d) Some older, some younger, some the same age

26. Have you ever stolen property yourself from someone's car?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No

27 Have you ever taken a car without the owners permission?

- (a) No
- (b) Yes

If you have answered 'yes' approximately how many cars do you think you have taken altogether?

Have you been caught by the police?

- (a) No
- (b) Yes

What happened to you as a result of being caught?

28. What do you think would help stop boys from first becoming involved in stealing cars or from cars? Please can you give any suggestions.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR ANSWERING THESE QUESTIONS

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