

A motor vehicle theft is defined as “the theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle. . . . A motor vehicle is a self-propelled vehicle that runs on land surfaces and not on rails.”<sup>44</sup> Examples of motor vehicles include sport utility vehicles, automobiles, trucks, buses, motorcycles, motor scooters, all-terrain vehicles, and snowmobiles. They do not, however, include farm equipment, bulldozers, airplanes, construction equipment, or watercraft. In 2014, about 689,527 motor vehicle thefts were reported in the United States. In that time, more than \$4.5 billion was lost as a result of motor vehicle thefts; the average dollar loss per stolen vehicle was \$6,537.

Slightly over 74% of all motor vehicle thefts were automobiles. According to the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB), the Honda Accord is stolen more often than any other car in the United States. This is followed by the Honda Civic, Ford pickup (full size), Chevrolet pickup (full size), Toyota Camry, Dodge Ram pickup (full size), Dodge Caravan, Nissan Altima, Acura Integra, and Nissan Maxima.<sup>45</sup> Further, the NICB noted that one should also consider vehicle theft fraud. In the past, vehicle thieves were focused on stealing cars and trucks the “old-fashioned way,” such as by forced entry and circumventing ignitions. Today, there are new scams for stealing vehicles that involve fraud:

- **Owner give-ups:** The vehicle owner lies about the theft of the vehicle and then orchestrates its destruction to collect insurance money. He or she claims the vehicle was stolen, but then it is found burned or heavily damaged in a secluded area, submerged in a lake, or, in extreme cases, buried underground.
- **Thirty-day specials:** Owners whose vehicles need extensive repairs sometimes perpetrate the 30-day special

scam. They will report the vehicle stolen and hide it for 30 days—just long enough for the insurance company to settle the claim. Once the claim is paid, the vehicle is often found abandoned.

- **Export fraud:** After securing a bank loan for a new vehicle, an owner obtains an insurance policy for it. The owner reports the vehicle stolen to a U.S. law enforcement agency but, in reality, has illegally shipped it overseas to be sold on the black market. The owner then collects on the insurance policy as well as any illegal profits earned through overseas conspirators who sell the vehicle.
- **Phantom vehicles:** An individual creates a phony title or registration to secure insurance on a nonexistent vehicle. The insured then reports the vehicle stolen before filing a fraudulent insurance claim. Often, antique or luxury vehicles are used in this scam, since these valuable vehicles produce larger insurance settlements.<sup>46</sup>

One interesting approach to addressing the problem of motor vehicle thefts, which has been popularized by the media, is the use of bait cars. The Los Angeles Police Department defines the use of a bait car as “an undercover operation where [they] bring in a plain motor vehicle and load it with desirable goods (iPod, GPS, cigarettes, etc.) and hope someone breaks into the car as [they] are watching.”<sup>47</sup> On June 25, 2012, police in Albuquerque, New Mexico, were quite surprised when one of their bait cars was stolen by an 11-year-old boy. This boy wanted to take the car for a joy ride; on the way, he also decided to pick up two of his 10-year-old friends. A video camera had been placed in the bait car. In the video, the boy can be heard

bragging to his friends about his driving skills. For instance, while turning up the radio to enjoy the music as he drives, the boy says, “I’m a good driver, huh?” During their joy ride, apparently one of the boys spotted a police officer; one of the boys said, “Quiet,” while the other said, “Slow down.”<sup>48</sup>

After reading about this youth, one might ask, “Why would he do that?” Some of you might consider that his 10-year-old peers somehow influenced his behavior, especially since it seems he wanted them to be a part of his criminal adventure. Others may argue that these boys lacked some form of adult supervision resulting from a dysfunctional family environment. Another possible explanation is that these boys lacked self-control, that they were thrill seekers who knew this was wrong, especially given their reaction when spotting the police. When we read about this type of behavior in a newspaper or hear about it on the news and ask, “Why would someone do that?” we are trying to find some kind of explanation. This is what theory attempts to do but in a more rigorous, scientific manner. Throughout this text, as we discuss various theories, we attempt to apply key points of those theories to either a real or hypothetical situation in boxes labeled “Applying Theories to Crime.” For each of these special boxes, we begin with a brief discussion of a particular crime, such as motor vehicle theft, robbery, or murder. Subsequently, we apply the relevant theory or theories in that chapter to that particular crime. With this approach, you will obtain general information about particular offenses as well as apply key features of various theories to those crimes.

### THINK ABOUT IT:

1. What kind of influence did peers have on this 11-year-old’s behavior?
2. Do you think the lack of adult supervision could explain his behavior?