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**TIME TO RIDE: YOUTH AND THE CULTURE OF  
JOYRIDING IN RURAL QUEENSLAND**

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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak to you about one of my research interests in the area of youth studies. As a sociologist I feel it is important to be involved in debates about how we as a community perceive young people, often, in quite contradictory ways. One of these views consists of perceiving youth as the instigators of crime and as a threat to the social cohesion of society. This view of course is exacerbated by the amount of media coverage that concentrates on youth as the protagonists of crime which in turn is often supported by our politicians who publicly support tougher laws for young offences committed by young people.

However it can be argued that there is a need to view crimes committed by young people in a more objective way in order to locate the individual and the crime within the social context of growing up in the rapidly changing landscape of contemporary Australia. It is for this reason that I would like to share with you the outcomes of a two year research project that focused on the factors as to what motivates young people to steal cars for the express purpose of joyriding in Queensland. The project was funded by the Road Accident Prevention Fund and consisted of gaining the perceptions of young offenders in detention who had a history of car theft offences. As such this is the first project of its kind in Australia that has attempted to gain the offender's perspective for their involvement in this kind of crime. At the same time this research locates joyriding not as an isolated practice, but contingent on the biographies of young people in terms of factors such as race, gender, and class. In addition other indicators such as the types of interactions youth have with their peers, their level of educational attainment, their access to public spaces as well as the impact of media images need to be considered if we are to achieve any deeper level of what is predominantly a youth related crime.

Prior to that it is important to consider some of the reasons for society's continuing infatuation and connectedness with automobiles.

### **Our Continuing Love Affair with Automobiles**

Over the last twenty years considerable attention has turned to the relationships between individuals and automobiles. On one hand environmentalists have warned of the costs of maintaining cars in terms of the quantity of contaminants into the atmosphere with resultant side effects including increases in dust fall, extensive crop and forest damage and the multiple effects of photochemical smog and acid rain. In addition the personal costs of operating a car have included respiratory illnesses, chronic performance decrements, general stresses and direct accident mortality. During the 1998-1999 Christmas- New Year holiday period alone seventy-seven (77) Australians died as a result of automobile accidents despite increased police surveillance and greater financial sanctions of drivers who deviated from the road rules. (Queensland Transport Department, 2000).

Despite these well-documented costs to the individual and the environment the individuals intimate relationship with automobiles has increased due to a number of perceived functions that cars serve in western society. Reser (1980) suggested that the most obvious advantage of owning a car is due the convenience of transport it affords the owner for work and leisure. For individuals living in suburban locations cars are necessary in providing their owners with relatively easy access to their places of employment which may be some distance for their place of residence. A second major function served by the automobile is the perceived and perhaps relative freedom it affords the owner. Reser states; "A private car allows an individual or family to leave the confines of a city or suburbia for an afternoon or weekend" (p.281). Furthermore, the automobile carries the connotation of an escape machine which promises to carry the driver away from the predicability of everyday life to more exciting and exotic locations. The preponderance of "Road Movies" such as the Mad Max movies, Bonnie and Clyde and Thelma and Louise have evoked a romanticised view of the individual escaping from the constraints of daily life.

From a psychological view automobiles hold high symbolic value as an extension of the self. The type of car an individual drives reflects their economic position and carries; “implicit sexual connotations of power, virility and grace” (Reser, 1980: 281). Frequent references in the literature and in advertising attempt to exploit sexual themes and promote an image of increased sexual possibilities through the ownership of particular types of cars. For young people obtaining a driver’s license is integral to their transition to adult hood. The ownership of a car broadens the psychological and physical freedoms of youth both in terms of their travel and personal privacy.

Finally, it has been suggested that the automobile serves an integral function in allowing the individual to have some control over their environment. Reser comments, “What is suggested in the present analysis is that one’s car may provide for the last vestige of perceived control which one exercises over an increasingly uncontrollable environment “ (p.283). As such cars through their immediacy and responsiveness give an impression of allowing individuals personal power and is seen as an essential component of each individual’s persona.

### **Youth and Joyriding**

If these observations are to be believed it is apparent that the symbolism of owning a car in terms of its practical and psychological attributes are of paramount importance to the majority of people in today’s society. Additionally the stated functions of owning a car may be important in terms of the motivations of young people who become involved in the practice of car theft. For as Clarke (1985) concluded; “Cars have transformed our cities and houses, changed our courtship patterns, enlarged our egos as well as provided a unique mix of physiological arousal, mental concentration and risk taking among countless drivers” (p.307). However they have also attracted a variety of predators such as professional car thieves and fraudsters (Clarke, 1985) as well as occupational or white-collar offenders . Additionally car theft has also attracted young people for the express purpose of what is commonly known as “joyriding”.

In gaining an understanding of the phenomena of youth’s participation in “joyriding” it is important to consider the characteristics of this offence and where it fits under the general rubric of the crime of car theft. In a paper addressing the problem of car theft in New South Wales Mukherjee (1987) constructed three categories in terms of the orientations of car thieves. They were; recreational, transport and money making. The main characteristics of recreational users included non-utilitarian (fun), status seeking and challenge meeting. For the purposes of transport, perpetrators used stolen cars for short - term temporary travel, extended personal use and use for commission of another crime (such as robbery). At the other end of the continuum the major motivation was for money making. This category consisted of amateur car strippers, professional sale of parts, professional re-sale of vehicles (“reborns”) and for use in fraudulent insurance claims (organised thefts). Hence when considering the categorisation of car theft, joyriding can be seen as a recreational activity where youth steal cars for short-term transportation purposes (Walker, 1998).

There has been increased media attention describing cases of joyriding by youth in most Australia states. Media reports have concentrated on the social impact of car theft on the community in terms of the material cost to individuals and insurance companies (Mukherjee, 1987). Additionally much attention has focused on the personal costs of car theft in terms of the often tragic outcomes of high speed car chases when young car thieves are pursued by police, often resulting in the death of young perpetrators and/or injury or death to innocent bystanders. For example Lorman (1997) investigated the impact on the local community when a mother and her son were killed in a head on collision with a car driven by youths as they were being pursued by Western Australian police. Similarly in a study of the

relationships between Aboriginal youth and police in Western Australia Atkinson (1993) observed; “There is much concern in Western Australia about Aboriginal youth involvement in motor vehicle theft; tragic accidents and fatalities which sometimes ensure, and high speed police pursuits of offenders” (p.15).

Statistical data indicates that car theft by young people has increased in Queensland over the last 10 years. This is despite concerted campaigns aimed at reducing this type of crime. Hence in addition to gaining the perceptions of young people who joyride a major aim of this research is to explore alternative strategies that may reduce the level of joyriding behaviour. The major outcomes of this qualitative study will now be discussed.

### **Perceptions of Offenders Who Joyride**

The perceptions of the youth interviewed in this research project reveal a number of distinct factors for their involvement in joyriding. When considering these motivations it is important to give primary consideration to the social and economic background of this cohort. Accordingly, joyriding cannot be viewed as an isolated activity in its own right but needs to be understood as being *relational* and contingent to other areas of these young people’s lives. It is clear that in almost all cases these young people came from low socio-economic backgrounds with their parents or older siblings having either no employment or employment in low skilled occupations. The lack of employment opportunities was magnified in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where intergenerational unemployment was more the rule than the exception. The high incidence of unemployment within families also impacted on the future aspirations of the young people. Without role models the young people in this study did not aspire to the traditional pathways of success by obtaining educational qualifications in order to obtain full-time employment. Accordingly, the majority of youth disengaged from education towards the end of primary school with fewer going on to complete year ten at secondary level.

An additional background factor for understanding youth’s involvement in joyriding behaviour is based on their geographic situation with relation to access to public transport and public space. Young people who live in rural locations are more likely to encounter a lack of adequate public transport facilities and at the same time may not have the economic means to purchase their own vehicle. Rural and urban youth are therefore more likely to use the street for specific purposes. Male working class and Indigenous youth who have limited access to employment opportunities are more likely to congregate in public places because they have limited financial resources and use the street in order to meet friends or pass the time (Dawes, 1999). However there is a public perception that large groups of young people in public places pose a threat to the safety of other citizens. As a result there have been attempts by authorities to “cleanse” public spaces such as malls and other commercial sites of young people (White, 1990). The gradual exclusion of youth from these sites coupled with inadequate public transport facilities has resulted in the further marginalisation and disempowerment of many young people.

This research posits that marginalised young people steal cars as a response to the process of exclusion from public spaces. The responses of young people who have been charged with joyriding offences clearly indicate that stealing cars offers them the opportunity to move from one space to another. Accordingly cars provide them with opportunities to interact with friends without the threat of surveillance and allows them a high degree of individual autonomy and freedom that is often denied to them in other situations (Reser, 1980).

Joyriding should be viewed as one stage in a continuum of car theft. Stealing cars for short-term transport purposes or as a form of escape is quite distinct from the far end of the continuum that involves stripping the parts from cars and remodelling vehicles to sell on the black market. The majority of joyriders are comparatively young (13-15 years of age) and either desist from car theft or go onto commit either crimes that require the use of a stolen car such as break and entering or ramraids.

Joyriding therefore should be analysed as a fluid culture with a changing membership where individuals live out a selected role, temporal role or identity before relocating to an alternative site and assuming a different identity. This was evident in the high number of youth who stated they had now “grown out” of car crime and were now focused on other areas such as sport or relationships with their family or girlfriends.

For young joyriders the peer group is central in providing the catalyst for their introduction and continuation to car theft and joyriding behaviour. By comparison a small minority of youth indicated that they stole cars on their own without the assistance of others. The peer group therefore provides a structure for the advancement in status for younger joyriders to learn the skills of car theft and to graduate to the status of leader of a joyriding crew. It also serves as a means of young working class youth finding an identity in one area as a result of their exclusion from other areas such as school and the job market. An individual's status within the group is enhanced by his/hers ability to drive at high speeds, perform various driving feats which may be bound up with other feats of machismo in proving one is “a man”. The possession of a stolen car for some youth appears to serve as a marker for the transition to manhood and may replace traditional forms of transitory rites as experienced in Aboriginal culture (Atkinson, 1991). It appears that getting behind the wheel of a car allows many young men to feel grander, more powerful and produces feelings of invincibility among young joyriders. Driving at high speeds in a stolen car may be interpreted as a form of working class resistance to forms of regulation and social control for at least a short period of time.

Identity formation through car theft culture is supported and celebrated through various forms of the mass media. Car advertising can be interpreted as “unabashedly celebrating danger, irresponsibility and excitement” (Campbell, 1993:263). Current television advertisements for the new model Holden Commodore show the car flying through the wide open spaces of outback Australia over red dirt tracks and across rivers. This is Marlboro country which gives an image of freedom away from the constraints of city life that can be accessed by the power surge of a v-6 engine. Car culture is central in the image of African-American gangsta rappers such as Tupac Shakur and Ezy-E. This image was borrowed by some of the Indigenous joyriding crews is portrayed joyriding culture is These feelings are fuelled by the mass media and advertising that play into the fantasies of young joyriders who use cars as a means of escape from the boredom and predicability of their everyday lives.

By comparison joyriding serves quite different outcomes for young females. While the majority of young females had an affinity with car culture, they committed car crimes to escape the constraints of their gendered prescribed roles that consisted of domestic work within the home. The formation of all female car crews could be read as a form of resistance to the male dominated practice of car theft within the joyriding culture. Similarly, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth joyriding can be interpreted as a form of resistance and empowerment to their economic and social oppression since colonisation. These youth are aware that they are ever unlikely to be able to purchase an automobile and the remedy to this situation is to steal a car as a temporary means of escape from their social and economic dislocation.

Despite harsher penalties for car theft recidivism among joyriders remains unacceptably high. Many of the youth stated that being detained had little effect on their desire to steal cars. The majority of multiple offenders stated that they rarely thought about the owners of the cars and there is evidence to suggest that car theft is often an unpremeditated activity. However most of the research subjects stated that the best locations to steal cars were in parking lots, outside train stations or in some cases at the home of unwary victims. At the same time there was a preference for Australian made vehicles such as early model Commodores and Ford Falcons being the preferred targets for car thieves.

Few of the respondents reported feeling any remorse for their victims. Nor did they think about the inherent dangers of driving cars at high speeds while under the influence of drugs and alcohol. It is clear that the present system of providing offenders with custodial sentences detaining young offenders does little to quell their desire to steal cars. Detention is often interpreted as a logical step in the rites-of -passage to manhood for many youth. Additionally detention facilities are perceived as a safe haven for meeting peers, returning to the education system and providing a respite for the uncertainty and risk associated with surviving on the street. Accordingly it can be argued that the judicial system does little to deter young people from joyriding and that alternative solutions to the problem need to be considered.

### **Strategies for Countering Car Crime**

Finally I would like to consider some possible strategies for reducing joyriding among young people. In my final round of interviews I asked each respondent to tell me of any ways that may prevent younger peers from becoming involved in the culture of joyriding. Accordingly two aspects of the response to car crime will be considered; first, preventative measures aimed at reducing the opportunity for car crime are referred here as situational prevention. These factors are relatively well known and include the following measures that drivers can take to reduce the chances of their cars being stolen:

- a. Parking cars in well lit locations, preferably in secured conditions
- b. ensuring the car is locked and valuables are not visible
- c. use of immobilisers, car alarms
- d. vehicle watch stickers ( as in the United Kingdom)
- e. wheel locks

The second consideration consists of intervention strategies aimed at reducing young people's motivation to offend or re offend.

### **Intervention Strategies**

I have already stated that providing custodial sentences for car crime offences appears to have little deterrent affect on young offenders. At the same time few offenders perceived that stealing cars was not a serious offence and that there was little social stigma attached to being caught and charged for car related crimes. On the contrary, the data suggests that stealing cars can be a way of obtaining increased status and respect among young people's peer groups. In the case of some Indigenous youth it could be argued that car serves as a logical rites-of-passage to adulthood that is denied to them in other spheres of their lives. Hence it can be argued that interventionist strategies are required to deter youth from offending at an early age before they progress to the other end of the car crime continuum.

## **Education Programme**

There is a requirement therefore to consider alternative strategies for reducing the motivations for stealing cars among young offenders. This research strongly recommends that a concentrated effort be made to construct and disseminate an education programme to highlight the serious nature of car crime offences. Such an education programme should include mundane details of the harm suffered by the victims of car crime as well as evidence of the some times shocking outcomes involving stolen cars. The education programme may take various forms ranging from interactive computer packages and the use of messages promoted through the media similar to campaigns aimed at reducing speeding and drink driving. An additional feature of the programme may consist of integrated writing and drama activities that explore young people's perceptions about joyriding while at the same time exploring the repercussions of this type of behaviour.

In this sense an education package would serve as one part of an intervention strategy that would be available to all students in Queensland schools and TAFE colleges. The requirement for early diversionary strategies such as an education programme is significant considering these research findings that highlight the group nature of car theft with the influence of peers in starting off on a car crime career, and the young age of young people's first involvement in this type of crime.

## **The Social- Economic and Ethnic Background of Offenders**

This research paints a grim but familiar backdrop against which much young offending occurs: The majority of young people interviewed came from one parent families, possessed low levels of family employment, experienced high truancy rates, low educational attainment and stated that their area suffered from a lack of leisure and transport facilities. Many Indigenous and some working class youth were further marginalised due to living in remote and rural locations that provided even less opportunities for employment, further education and leisure facilities.

Unlike other youth who come from higher social and economic backgrounds the respondents in this study found there were few legitimate opportunities for excitement and financial gain to match the pay-offs from car-crime. On the other hand measures to prevent criminal involvement at a young age were weak. The strong contrast between the offenders skill and daring involved in joyriding compared to their disengagement in other areas of their lives needs to be more fully understood and should be central to any offender based policy initiatives. This leads one to conclude that car crime may be prevented in terms of the provision of alternative education programmes, increased employment prospects, an increase in facilities for young people across all suburbs and communities (perhaps through an increase in expenditure in programmes like urban renewal) and affordable forms of public transport.

## **Offender Based Strategies**

This research clearly illustrates that that a primary motivation for car theft among young people is bound up in the potent mix of excitement and status enhancement through peer group involvement. By comparison with other types of crimes associated with youth such as break and entering, joyriding is perceived as ultimately more thrilling in terms of psychological pay-offs. It is clear that the majority of offenders have always had an interest in cars from an early age and have driven cars well before the legal driving age.

The challenge here is for policy makers at all levels of government to provide offender based strategies to find a legal alternative to car theft which both provides young offenders (and those at risk of offending) with comparable excitement and interest as experienced through joyriding. One such initiative may be through the provision of “motor projects” similar to what has been trialed in the United Kingdom. These projects involve a combination of teaching young people to drive the acquisition of skills to obtain a drivers license and a car maintenance programme. These elements could be combined with an education programme as described previously incorporating messages about the risks of car theft, the impact on victims and the consequences for those apprehended for this type of crime.

A further major element could include the opportunity for youth to legally engage in forms of off road drag racing where young people could test their driving skills against each other without the threat of harm to members of the public.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, there is little evidence to suggest that joyriding among young people will not reduce in the future. It is therefore in societies best interests to listen to what young people say and to negotiate with them in order to allow them to claim a genuine stake in contributing to the evolvement of their cities, towns and communities. The reduction of youth crimes such as “joyriding” and other types of crimes hinge on professionals such as you to convince law-makers and politicians to bite the bullet and initiate creative strategies to prevent young people’s disaffection and marginalisation from mainstream society. These may take the form of intervention strategies that ensure young people do not become involved in the spiral of car related and forms of other crime. For if we are really serious about what we do we need to challenge existing structures and ways of thinking if we are really genuine about allowing young people a chance to reclaim their space and place in society.



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