Car Crime: A Young Man's Game

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Summary: Car crime amongst young people has been a recurring feature in the Irish criminal justice system. Over the decades, its prominence, patterns and characteristics have changed. This article is based on a research study that aimed to explore the impact that social disadvantage, the lure of risk-taking, and masculine culture have on the involvement of young people in this activity; it was undertaken with a view to informing criminal justice policy responses. The research was completed as part of a Masters in Criminology programme. Drawing from interviews with eight young people aged 18–21 years, the article explores the reasons why young people get involved in car crime. It examines how structural inequalities affect life opportunities, social solidarity, and attitudes towards crime. It considers the impact of age on the ability to progress beyond a life of offending, taking relationships and employment into account. It also considers the impact that masculine culture has on enforcing male stereotypes of machismo and skill, and its effect on offending behaviour. These factors are considered against the backdrop of risk-taking and the opportunities to build a new identity, within a subculture that is anti-authority and applauds the courage of defiance. It then progresses to explore what supports the processes of desistance, considering the impact of the driving ban, its possible contribution towards a nothing-to-lose attitude and the opportunity to drive legally. It is envisaged that this paper will add to the debate that needs to be held on all the factors linked to car crime – danger and death, imprisonment and the criminalisation of young people, and the type of interventions used to divert young people away from these activities.
Keywords: Car crime, dangerous driving, young people, desistance, driving ban, masculinity, social inequality.

Introduction

Crime involving cars and young people is not a new phenomenon. However, how it manifests itself changes in accordance with developments in modern life. In recent years, Ireland experienced a joyriding culture and a so-called 'boy racer' scene. With modern technology making online platforms for buying second-hand cars more accessible, we now see, as well as joyriding,

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young people buying cars relatively cheaply, with the express purpose of driving them for an extended period of time. This activity often results in the criminalisation of young people, their exclusion from legal driving and, in extreme cases, imprisonment, trauma and death. National headlines demonstrate the potential horrors of this engagement: 'Teen who knocked down boy with car bought for €100 is sentenced' (Roche, 2019); 'Dublin teenager arrested on suspicion of causing the death of Deliveroo rider Thiago Cortes' (Lally, 2020); 'Teenage motorist jailed for driving without insurance for ninth time' (Haylin, 2021). Anecdotally from a practitioner perspective, it seems that cases like these are becoming increasingly common. Frequently, youth workers and Probation Officers are dealing with the devastating impact this behaviour can have on the young people involved and the wider impact on the victims of this crime. This raises a question as to whether the standard driving-violation laws are sufficient in deterring young people from problematic driving practices or whether more work is required to determine what draws young people towards this behaviour and to discover the most effective ways of supporting their safe exit from it.

As well as exploring the reasons why young people get involved in car crime, the article aims to contribute to the aspirations detailed in the Irish *Youth Justice Strategy*, which states that young people should be diverted from the formal youth justice system with due regard for communities and society's welfare in general (Department of Justice, 2021, p. 7).

Inequality, social solidarity, masculinity and risk-taking

The reasons why people get involved in crime are multi-layered, complex, and can be a source of contention within criminology. Piquero *et al.* (2002) suggest that the debate is divided into two categories – personal choices and societal factors. Those who favour the first attribute deviant acts to variations in self-control and available opportunities. Other scholars suggest that crime can be better understood by looking at informal social controls such as family, education, and employment (Piquero *et al.*, 2002, p. 138). In line with this, desistance from crime can also be multi-layered. Healy (2017, p. 5) suggests that involvement in crime does not just simply abruptly stop but instead usually consists of a 'gradual reduction in the frequency, severity and versatility of offending'.

Considering crime in general, arrest rates, for both violent and non-violent crime, peak in the early twenties, which means that emerging adulthood

(16–24) is a unique period to study criminal behaviour influences. Salvatore (2017) suggests that sensation-seeking and violent offences decline as people progress out of emerging adulthood, in the main due to stronger social bonds with more stable actors such as partners and influential colleagues. However, while in the midst of this period, offending behaviour can increase as these young people continue to be influenced by anti-social peers, the loss of employment or a significant relationship. Some are stuck in a transition period at the end of school life but before progression to the responsibilities of adulthood. However, while all young people go through a period of emerging adulthood, certainly not all go on to commit a crime. When researching the factors that influence crime, it is necessary to explore the structural and social context in which these behaviours exist.

Social solidarity is mostly about shared commitments to social practices. Wilde (2007, p. 171) defines this concept as 'the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility among members of a group which promotes mutual support'. Johnson *et al.* (2017) suggest that any society where there is a lack of, or limitations to, reciprocal sympathy and responsibility amongst its members will experience crime and deviance flourishing. Graham and White (2007, p. 33) construct a link between masculinity and car culture. They argue that for some young, isolated working-class men, car culture and certain driving behaviours provide a sense of control. They argue that car crime can provide a sense of belonging and acceptance for young men who may be experiencing exclusion from other arenas, such as education and any form of employment, and from positive social and recreational outlets. It is in this world that they derive their social solidarity. They develop a connection with other peers involved in this activity also. Allen and Brown (2008) argue that for those engaged in such activity, the risk that comes with car crime is less significant than the positives gained from peer acceptance and status. Their hypothesis suggests that withdrawing from risk-taking behaviour such as illegal driving may present a perceived social threat – damage to peer relationships and peer status can present as a far bigger threat than the threat of any potential legal sanction (Allen and Brown, 2008, p. 2).

In Ireland today, we continue to have an unequal society structured along class lines. This division is apparent when it comes to the criminal justice system. O'Donnell (2007) states that prisoners are 23 times more likely to come from (and return to) a seriously deprived area than from less deprived areas. Reports conducted by the Irish Penal Reform Trust (2020) have found that most Irish prisoners have never sat a state exam, and over half left school

before the age of 15. Also, over 70 per cent of prisoners were unemployed on committal to prison. Healy (2020, p. 80) suggests that a substantial minority of the population experience poverty, indicating the presence of entrenched structural barriers to wealth acquisition and life opportunity. Some young people engaging in car crime are experiencing this form of social exclusion and lack of social solidarity, feeling less connected to their communities, and instead finding a form of connection through criminal behaviour.

To get a deeper understanding of what attracts young people to car crime, we must also consider the personal reasons that influence this behaviour, as not all young people from socially deprived areas engage in this activity. Jack Katz (1988) adopted a phenomenological approach to explaining people's reasons for being involved in crime. He argued that participants are seduced by crime because it provides experiences and a thrill that allows them to transcend the realities of their daily lives, and that the opportunity to do this is far more influential than some of the structural factors suggested by causation theories of crime (Anderson and Linden, 2014, p. 242). However, when we consider this alongside the structural inequalities that these young people face, we see a stronger attraction emerging. Such activities are fun and exciting and provide a means to escape from social conditions that Anderson and Linden (2014, p. 243) argue have stunted their identities and offered few opportunities for personal transformation and character development. It is through engaging in these high-risk activities that these young people take control of their lives, and the activities allow them the opportunity to build an identity woven around rule-breaking on their terms.

Lumsden introduces the concept that not all risk is bad, highlighting that it can be a source of education within youth culture. Risk can involve learning about oneself, learning about fears and limitations, and finding an outlet to dare to overcomes one's limitations (Lumsden, 2013, p. 273). When young people are experiencing inequality, instability and limitations, engaging in high-risk behaviour can seem an essential means to overcoming the feelings of nihilism. Engaging in car crime, Lumsden argues, is particularly emblematic of their transition from the monotony of an unfulfilled life to the metaphorical promise of the open road (Lumsden, 2013, p. 274).

Graham and White (2007) suggest that car crime is predominantly a male-dominated behaviour, and the idealised male sex role is to be tough, competitive and emotionally inexpressive. Therefore, they argue that offending behaviour concerning cars can be a way of acting out what they believe it means to be a man (Graham and White, 2007, p. 32). Macho

behaviours, such as theft, speeding, skilful driving and being undaunted by authority and the law, support the constructed idea that males should be strong, brave and free. These behaviours may be reinforced by male role models in earlier life. Arguably, this car culture offers young working-class men the opportunity to build a masculine identity and a sense of dignity and self-worth when other approved sources of masculine dignity are unavailable due to high youth unemployment. Despite economic and social weakness, displaying a masculine identity can provide a form of power. As in the case of car crime, it can be the means to put into action and cement rebellion against authorities (Graham and White, 2007. p. 32).

Desistance

It is important also to look at the factors that can create a space for desistance to occur. As with most crime, a process of desistance – rather than an abrupt cessation – is common in car crime. Maruna (2001, p. 26) suggests that desistance could be productively defined as, 'the long-term abstinence from crime amongst individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending'. Giordano *et al.* (as cited in Halsey and Deegan, 2015, p. 20) argue that desistance is not just a static act but is more about the process of a 'provisional and sometimes confounding movement towards accessing social supports or hooks for change'. Research on desistance from car crime suggests that when education and training are used to address the problem, better outcomes can be achieved.

International research indicates that applying preventative and educational responses to juvenile car crime can bring about better outcomes than punitive approaches achieve. Research from Keating and Halpern-Felsher (2008) suggests that while teens are generally successful at acquiring necessary driving skills, translating these skills into safe and responsible driving requires interventions and policies that respond to the multiple and competing demands of the developmental and environmental situations of young people (Keating and Halpern-Felsher, 2008, p. 272). Similarly, research into the Reality Intensive Driver Education (RIDE) programme in the USA shows that national penalty-based strategies have not improved the safety of teenage driving. The teen RIDE programme is a court-imposed driving educational programme for teenagers convicted of driving offences. It applies a trauma-informed educational approach to supporting young people to understand the possible consequences of their dangerous driving, but also

to configure why they are attracted to this, e.g. peer pressure, risk-taking or economic restrictions to legal driving. Their parents can also participate on a voluntary basis. The young people do not lose the right to drive but instead are offered the opportunity to learn to drive safely. The recidivism rate for teen RIDE participants six months after the course is 6 per cent with 0 per cent reoffending more than once. In the same jurisdiction, the rate for those who do not participate is 56 per cent within six months and 14 per cent more than once (Manno *et al.*, 2012, p. 267).

In Ireland, there are no similar court-imposed programmes as an alternative to the driving ban. While some community-based organisations provide education programmes, participants are already subject to disqualification. In the court system, the same repercussions exist for young people as for adults. These include mandatory disqualification from driving for drink or drug driving and for dangerous driving. Young people often receive driving bans before ever possessing a licence and sometimes before even being old enough to drive legally. They lose the opportunity to correct a behaviour for a minimum of two years but sometimes many more. If the process of desistance is better achieved through the provision of social hooks for change, the criminal justice system in Ireland may need to look abroad in order to develop a more rounded and effective response to juvenile car crime.

Methodology

Semi-structured individual interviews were adopted as the method for this paper. This was done to draw out the subjective experiences from the young people who were directly involved in car crime. The questions in the interview explored the demographics of the participants' backgrounds and their involvement in the criminal justice system. They also prompted a discussion into the impact of this crime on their lives and on their views about what might have supported them to desist from offending. The following criteria were applied in the selection of the participants:

- Aged between 18 and 21, in emerging adulthood
- Had at least one criminal conviction for car crime relating to dangerous driving, with the maximum being 50
- Had no licence and no insurance
- Were involved in more than three self-reported incidents of such car crime, whether convicted or not.

Adherence to these criteria ensured that the study was conducted with those involved at a prolific level rather than engaging once and then withdrawing. Eight young people participated and were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Of the eight participating young people, all but two had experienced a period of a court-imposed driving ban, ranging from two years to nine years in total. Two had spent time in prison or detention because of car crime, and just one had recovered their licence. All were from socially and economically disadvantaged areas of Dublin city – orange or red areas on the social deprivation maps – and seven of the eight were still currently involved in youth justice interventions due to this behaviour. Five of the eight were currently on probation supervision, and two had previously been on it.

Table 1: *Participant Information*

Pseudonym of Young Person	*Age*	*No. of Driving Convictions*	*Probation on Supervision*	*Location**	*Length of Driving Ban*	*Detention Period*	*Convictions for Other Crimes*
Conor	21	22	Yes	Suburban	9 years	Yes	Yes
William	21	8	No	Suburban	0 years	No	Yes
John	18	50	Yes	Inner city	4 years	Yes	Yes
Lee	18	2	Yes	Suburban	2 years	No	Yes
Joe	20	16	Yes	Suburban	2 years	Yes	Yes
Pierce	21	27	Yes	Inner city	2 years	Yes	Yes
Karl	18	2	No	Suburban	0 years	No	No
Aaron	20	4	No	Suburban	2 years	No	Yes

*Inner City: within the Dublin Central constituency. Suburban: within the Dublin South Central constituency.

The implications of the author's professional role being in the juvenile justice sphere was given significant consideration as part of ethical approval which was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin). To facilitate voluntary participation, there were open and honest exchanges regarding the aims, purpose and approach of the study, with emphasis on the benefits of collaboration and dialogue. Their

involvement in the youth justice programme and the Probation Service meant that they had an understanding of data regulations, the importance of voluntary consent and consent issues and the safeguarding of personal information. All participants were made aware of their choice to withdraw from the research, without repercussions.

Interviewing young people referred to the criminal justice system for car offences ensured access to first-hand perspectives and experiences; however, there are still some limitations to this research. The representativeness of the study was limited, with interviewees derived solely from urban-based males living in disadvantaged communities. Hence, the findings may not be transferrable to other jurisdictions or represent the experiences of rural or small-town young people or those who have experienced a more privileged life, or, indeed, females.

Findings and discussion

The research produced a rich, multi-layered resource of data and thought-provoking responses. All the young people exist in an environment where arrests, imprisonment, poverty and deprivation are the norm rather than the exception. Participants brought a sense of willingness but also nervousness to discussing their stories. One participant, Joe, referred to the fact that all previous interviews in which he had participated had been anything but voluntary, and usually involved handcuffs. Such nervousness and discomfort suggests that this process is a new and unusual experience for these young men who are still experiencing periods of offending and desistance and have not yet reached a place of reflective feedback.

The criminal justice experiences

A significant recurring theme throughout the interviews was the lack of knowledge each participant had around their offending rates, convictions and punishments. Only one participant knew definitively when their driving ban was due to expire. Four of the eight were entirely unsure of how long they had left to serve. A significant majority could not tell how frequently they had been arrested, and six were unsure of how many convictions they had and of what precisely they had been convicted. Of the four participants who had served time in detention, all knew that their driving history had contributed to their sentence but were unsure of the extent. Although the participants were the primary actors, accountability for their situations seemed to lie

elsewhere, some suggesting that they did not need to know because their solicitors, mother or youth worker knew. Instead, they presented more on the outside looking in rather than the centrepiece.

Some accounts seemed contradictory, and some participants seemed prone to exaggeration. Repeatedly, participants said that they were no longer driving and then immediately recounted a recent instance where they had actually driven illegally. Lee told how he had ceased driving completely, only to be witnessed driving two days later. William, while saying he didn't drive anymore, nevertheless was planning his next vehicle purchase. Such inconsistencies or examples of exaggeration were less likely about obfuscation but more a reflection of the person the participants wanted to be and how they saw themselves. For example, the participants who were still heavily involved in car crime and had long periods left to serve on their driving bans spoke confidently about their involvement. Those in the more advanced stages of desistance highlighted the law-abiding elements rather than the offending behaviour, and seemed to welcome positive affirmation. This seemed to support Anderson and Linden's assertion that illegal driving for a time can provide those involved with an opportunity to build an identity woven around rule-breaking on their terms (Anderson and Linden, 2014, p. 32). However, as demonstrated by Evers, a young person involved in offending is not tied to this behaviour but may have the capacity to choose to refrain or let someone else take the lead; their entire identity may not come to be framed by this one singular narrative (Green, 2020, p. 23). In this situation, the involvement and link to cars is still part of their identity but the nature of engagement has changed.

How participants spoke about their involvement with cars is also an indication of how they perceive the act – not as a crime but as a normal part of life. At times, the participants were surprised or defensive at the suggestion that the behaviour was a crime. John, a prolific driver who said it was a huge part of his life growing up, was more dismissive:

> 'Nah, it's not crime; it was fun. It was fun to me.' (John, 19)

Karl – someone who is relatively new and inexperienced and was occasionally exposed to it growing up – was able to remove himself from the more serious elements of the crime:

> 'I don't rob the car, though; it is still a crime, but I don't rob it. I get in it after it's robbed.' (Karl, 18)

Another put the responsibility back onto society and law and order itself:

> 'You'd just try pretending that you were a bit older than you are, and some gardaí weren't too pushed on it; they didn't care, so why would we?' (Aaron, 20)

Pierce portrayed it very bluntly:

> 'It was normal. I'm sure everyone seen that, you get me? It's part of our world in the flats.' (Pierce, 20)

They also talked quite casually about crime in general – how the prison sentences that both their friends and family had served were normal. The interview was an opportunity to put their best self forward and display a maturing and positive change. In their world, any reduction or improvement in behaviour is quite sweeping change when the offending levels of these young people are considered.

The impact of structural inequalities

All of the participants in the research reported seeing joyriding and car theft regularly in the communities in which they grew up:

> 'I couldn't even tell you what age; I don't remember not seeing it, like from a baby.' (Pierce, 20)

All participants deemed this to be an exciting and an engaging activity that they wished to be a part of:

> 'Well, I'm not gonna sit here and say, "Ah, I thought it's bad"; I loved it, and I was very attracted to it, and I couldn't wait to start.' (Joe, 20)

None of the participants were in full-time employment or education, with only two being registered on a part-time training course. All received social welfare. None of the young people had completed school, with only four of the eight reaching Junior Cert level. None of the participants engaged in any formal recreational outlets. The findings suggest that there are connections to the level of social exclusion and the rate of offending. Those who complete only primary-school education are those most likely to serve periods in

detention. The participants who were in some formal trainings were on a lower level and downward trajectory of offending.

All but one respondent reported their love for driving cars. Karl's experience with cars was limited and he was not a leader but influenced by more experienced peers. The more exposure to driving, the greater the association with a range of positive feelings. The feelings of acceptance and belonging with the older crowd were consistent:

> 'It was an older crowd, getting cars and rallying them. It felt good because everybody else was doing it and now I was.' (Lee, 18)

> 'I didn't want to be better than the boys; I just wanted the boys to think I was one of them,' (Pierce, 20)

The joy and pleasure derived from being behind the wheel was also repeatedly discussed:

> 'It's good – you feel good; you're more confident in yourself as well. People are looking at you: I can do something that they can't do.' (Aaron, 20)

> 'Ah, it's the best feeling in the world. You just don't feel better – you just feel on top of the world, invincible.' (Joe, 20)

> 'I wasn't good at much, but I was good at this.' (John, 19)

All the young people constantly described themselves in a collective manner throughout the interviews, with specific reference to 'we' and 'the boys'. Their experiences suggested a social outlet. It was an activity where they had risen to the top – they could speed, perform, and often out-drive An Garda Síochána. They noted how much they could excel at this activity, whereas they had not managed this in more traditional routes, such as education. Belonging to a group from which they can derive social solidarity seemed very important to the young people. Nobody 'rats', they drive together, they rob together, they buy the cars together and, on some occasions, even go to court and 'do time' together. They are accepted and celebrated in this community:

> 'I do it with the boys, 'cos they're risking it too; if you're caught, you're both f…. I did time for it with me mate, and the other boys minded our cars when we were in.' (Conor, 21)

Another prominent topic was the relationship between cars and economic status. The participants who were involved in car-based offending most often, transitioned from stealing the cars to a desire for legal ownership. Being the legal owner of the cars brought with it an economic status. The cars become a symbol of their wealth and their progression:

> 'Depending on the car, I've often paid up to three or four grand; it's worth it.' (John, 19)

> 'Now when I buy a car, you know, I don't just jump in the car and want to take off fast. It's my car; I look after it,' (Aaron, 20)

All participants talked about getting to new places; the car can be a protective shield from the judgment they may otherwise face when accents or clothing are visible. They leave their small communities and go to the mountains or the beach or more affluent parts of the city they wouldn't ordinarily frequent. People recognise the value of the car and so the young people feel on a par with society, and included:

> 'I'd probably go and get a bite to eat, fill up the car, go on a spin, maybe go up the mountains – up around Sally Gap or something – park the car, walk up towards the Hellfire Club. To me it's just about having good days – go fishing, flake out – having the freedom to just go. The only reason I don't do that now is 'cos it's too much money.' (William, 21)

Driving legally is an expensive business: lessons, car tax and insurance all come at a cost.

> 'Like, I'm not saying we're poor or anything, but we don't have a spare ten grand just sitting there for insurance, so we'll do it our own way.' (William, 21)

Masculinity and the power dynamic

Masculinity and the power dynamic have close ties to car culture. Graham and White (2007, p. 32) suggest that the idealised male sex role is to be tough, competitive and emotionally inexpressive, and that offending behaviour as it relates to cars can be a way of acting out what it means to be

a man. All eight participants demonstrated ways in which masculine culture has impacted on them. They constantly referred to 'the boys' throughout their interviews. These may be the boys with whom they steal, buy and drive cars, or it may just be the boys who watch and cheer them on. All were shown how to drive by older men, and all reported only ever having been in a chase with male gardaí. Graham and White (2007, p. 32) suggest that macho car-related behaviours, such as theft, speeding, skilful driving, and being unphased by authority and the law rarely include the involvement of women, as women are simply not viewed as having these traits. The participants in this study all gave little attention to females when it came to driving. They all responded with ideas that women simply could not handle this:

> 'No, no! They don't do anything; they just sit in the back seat,' (Joe, 20)

Despite the dangers of their activity, their masculine identity can provide a form of power. This was powerfully demonstrated when the young people talked about their experiences with An Garda Síochána. The participants clearly exhibited an energy when they spoke about getting away from gardaí undetected, out-driving them in a chase and, in some cases, going head-to-head with gardaí:

> 'I have been in hundreds of chases. I've only been caught five or six times. I'm just too good at it,' (John, 19)

For all these young men, being in a car makes them feel tough, brave, and sometimes powerful – all characteristics closely connected to masculine culture.

The thrill of the risk

From both the verbal responses and participant observation, the enticement of the thrill was obvious. All the young people became energised when speaking about the speed, the chase, and getting away. Those who struggled to articulate their answers used hand movement, engine noises, and had a brightness and openness when describing how it felt to be behind the wheel; a smile set on all their faces while talking through this stage of the interview. All spoke of adrenalin rushes and butterflies in their stomach. Joe spoke about it being the best feeling in the world:

> 'You get the butterflies – I get that feeling – there's no better feeling than the feeling you get when the blues come behind. You get this feeling that only joyriders will know. And it's just a mad feeling.' (Joe, 20)

The thrill of the risk, while very strong for all the young people when they first started, does not stay this way constantly. With age and experience, the effect of the thrill had dwindled, and some, despite still being engaged in illegal driving, were trying to avoid that world. Some had seen the worst consequences, with participants referring to friends who had died, been disfigured, or were doing prison stints. Those who were at risk of a period of imprisonment spoke of trying to curtail their driving and the wish to drive without risk and danger:

> 'Like, I wouldn't be, like, ah well, I'm deadly this and that anymore, because I know people who were unreal drivers, and they are dead now.' (William, 21)

> 'I've friends who have been through this who now drive legitimately; they're telling me it's not worth it. It's better to be able to drive and have nothing to worry about. I want to be in their seat.' (Joe, 20)

These experiences suggest that while the thrill was a hugely motivating factor in the early stages, these feelings change; all but one participant said that if they could drive clean and legally, they would be happy to do so.

The driving ban

A key factor explored in the paper was whether employment and relationships promoted desistance in young people involved in car crime. Seven of the eight participants expressed a desire to completely stop engaging in illegal car-related activity. Just one said that he would continue to engage indefinitely. All but one of the young people saw their involvement in using cars as significantly different from when it first began. Growing up and having something to protect and live for was repeatedly expressed as the explanation for why their involvement had changed:

> 'Now I have a meaning to actually do it; maybe you have something to do – you have a job to do or whatever; maybe you just want to go see your girlfriend.' (Lee, 18)

> 'I reckon since I've been in a relationship everything has been different – like, my time is more precious to me.' (Joe, 20)

However, while the impact of relationships and getting older is strong, and they certainly support a pathway towards desistance, they are not for this group the primary reason for the change. Emerging more strongly as an influence to stopping driving and changing behaviours was the prospect of driving legally soon. The participants who were approaching the end of the 'ban' period certainly appeared more willing to change and improve their behaviour. The two young people who still had significant periods left to serve strongly expressed 'no hope' and 'no point' opinions.

> 'I have a driving ban now so I'm not able to get my licence, even if I wanted to, you get me? So, what's another car going to do to me? Nothing to lose.' (Joe, 20)

Those who could see the end of their ban approaching were much more committed to changing the behaviour:

> 'I'm hoping to have my own car and my licence real soon, I'll still like cars but I'll be able to do it legally.' (Lee, 18)

Lee, who had only a few weeks left to serve, commented that it was worth sticking to the rules for now:

> ''cos when I got the ban it was nothing more to lose – I'm going to keep driving. And now trying to get a licence sorted so I can do it properly.' (Lee, 18)

None of the participants believed that the imposition of the ban had impacted on their behaviour. They felt that they were too young to consider its implications, were not capable of considering long-term consequences, and they also felt that they had nothing left to lose:

> 'Yeah. I became more careless. I didn't care. I didn't care more than I ever did care. Because I had nothing to lose.' (John, 19)

Even the imposition of a period of detention did not appear to impact upon their behaviour:

> 'It all happened all over again, straight back into it. I was just waiting to get out.' (Conor, 21)

Seven of the eight participants alluded to the fact that they were kids and did not consider or understand what was happening. Overall, the most significant factors for behavioural change were a combination of access to legal driving and having something in their lives that they valued, as opposed to the imposition of a driving ban or court proceedings.

Learning for practitioners

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that there is not just one cause or one solution for tackling the issue of car crime amongst young people. However, there is scope to look at how we manage the situation and respond more effectively. A key finding worthy of more exploration is the driving-ban issue and its apparently questionable effectiveness in reducing illegal driving. For the young people, a lengthy ban appears to cement their exclusion, thereby ensuring that they have nothing left to lose. The possibility of exploring more effective youth-orientated responses is therefore worthy of consideration. Driving programmes exist in Europe and the USA that promote education, responsibility, and access to legitimate driving, to tackle some of the problems. The Department of Justice has recently launched a scrambler intervention initiative to tackle the problem of scramblers in city locations. Financial assistance will be available to projects in local communities most affected by the problem, and will offer training in vehicle handling, repair and maintenance. It will also include second-chance education, personal development, and mentoring for young people who are interested in using these vehicles for sport and recreational purposes. This is a positive start, and its impact and outcomes should be closely monitored. However, with car crime resulting in death and the criminalisation of young people, a more systematic long-term, cross-country initiative is needed to tackle the problem.

The Children's Act, 2001 facilitates diversionary and age-appropriate responses to young people's offending. There is scope to give the courts and state services more tools to respond proactively to this problem. Probation supervision orders could be used to require and support attendance at motor projects. Cautions could be deployed in conjunction with a recommendation to attend such a motor project. Youth justice projects could be supported to take a proactive approach, access training and tests, and provide lessons and

educational awareness. While establishing these motor projects may be challenging at first, with the risk of being perceived as rewarding bad behaviour, the evidence does indicate that they offer an effective alternative to punitive responses, with both an increase in community safety and savings to the exchequer. Building on our existing knowledge base, we should further examine best practice across other jurisdictions in order to devise and implement more targeted and effective responses to address the harm of this continuing problem.

Conclusion

There is no one specific reason why young people engage in car crime, but rather there is a combination of factors that come together to create the conditions for car-based offending. The respondents in this study had each offended at a prolific rate and had been affected by structural inequalities. They had experienced entrapment in the gap of emerging adulthood and had been moulded by cultural masculinity. They had been tempted by the thrill of the risk and the opportunity to form an influential identity. The driving ban, therefore, was regarded as having little or no influence on changing behaviour until the ban was almost complete, and neither court sanctions nor detention periods seemed to engender behavioural change. This research shows that these young people essentially wanted to drive as any young person might, but the impact of criminal justice responses to their offending, and the structural factors that interacted with this, made such ambitions difficult to achieve. A national and sustained response is now required, one that adopts an education-based proactive approach, with leadership and collaboration from Government level down.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Paddy Dolan, Research Supervisor at Technological University Dublin, for his guidance and support.

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