

# INFORMATION BULLETIN

MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT IN  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA -  
A PROFILE OF JUVENILE  
OFFENDERS

JULY 2005

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**CARS**   
*comprehensive auto-theft research system*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
BACKGROUND	5
CURRENT STUDY	7
<b>DATA AND METHODS</b>	<b>7</b>
LIMITATIONS	8
<b>FINDINGS</b>	<b>9</b>
SECTION ONE - A comparison of juveniles with and without a motor vehicle theft event	9
SECTION TWO - A profile of juveniles with two or more motor vehicle theft events	16
SECTION THREE - A comparison of five types of juvenile offenders	19
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>26</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

### FIGURES

Figure 1.	South Australia - Flowchart of 1985 birth cohort	9
Figure 2.	South Australia - Age of juveniles offenders in the 1985 cohort at the time of their first event by type of event	10
Figure 3.	South Australia - Age of juvenile MVT offenders at the time of their first event and first MVT event	10
Figure 4.	South Australia - Age of MVT recidivists at first event	16
Figure 5.	South Australia - Number of subsequent MVT events for MVT recidivists	17
Figure 6.	South Australia - Age at first event by type of offender	19
Figure 7.	South Australia - Indigenous status by type of offender	20

### TABLES

Table 1.	South Australia - Number of events recorded by sex and type of event	11
Table 2.	South Australia - Indigenous status of juvenile offenders by type of event	11
Table 3.	South Australia - Age of juvenile offenders at first event by Indigenous status and type of event	12
Table 4.	South Australia - Number of events recorded by Indigenous status and type of event	12
Table 5.	South Australia - Major charge at first event by type of event	13
Table 6.	South Australia - Total number of serious events recorded by type of event	14
Table 7.	South Australia - Number of events recorded before and after the MVT event	15
Table 8.	South Australia - Number of serious events recorded before and after the MVT event	15
Table 9.	South Australia - Sex and Indigenous status of MVT recidivists	16
Table 10.	South Australia - Major charge at first event for MVT recidivists	17
Table 11.	South Australia - Number of events recorded before and after the first MVT event	18
Table 12.	South Australia - Sex by offender type	20
Table 13.	South Australia - Severity of first event by type of offender	21
Table 14.	South Australia - Number of events recorded by recidivist group	22
Table 15.	South Australia - Total number of events recorded by each recidivist group by major charge	23

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite enjoying substantial reductions in motor vehicle theft in recent years, Australia still has one of the highest rankings for vehicle theft in the world. In contrast to the success noted in other states, South Australia's theft ranking has deteriorated over time and it now has the highest ranking for motor vehicle theft in the country.

Research in South Australia has indicated that on an annual basis juveniles account for approximately 40% of apprehensions for motor vehicle theft. To investigate the nature of this seemingly high level of involvement of young people in vehicle theft, this study focused on a cohort of individuals, born in 1985, who came into contact with the criminal justice system by way of an apprehension as a juvenile.

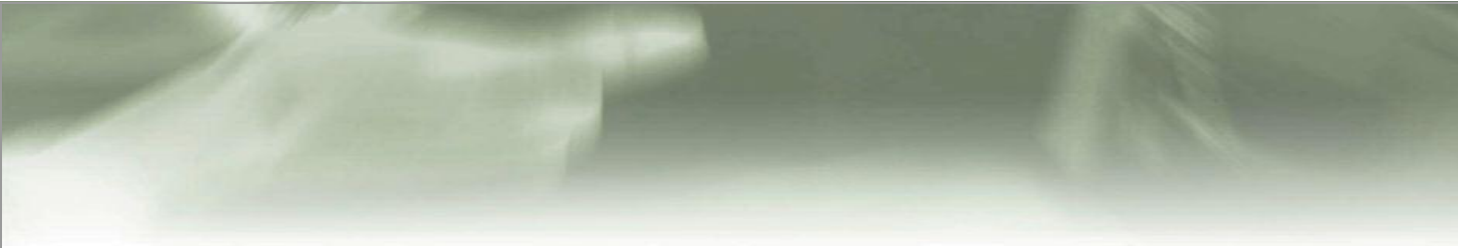
Of the individuals born in 1985, approximately 16 out of every 100 were apprehended for at least one criminal event as a juvenile. Of those, 13% recorded an event that involved a motor vehicle theft charge. As with most studies on juvenile offending, the majority of the apprehended cohort recorded only one event during their juvenile years but for those with a motor vehicle theft event, 91% recorded further contact with the criminal justice system.

A number of characteristics distinguished juveniles with a motor vehicle theft event from those apprehended for other types of criminal events. The average age at which the motor vehicle theft offenders recorded their first event was younger (14 years) compared to other offenders, with around one-fifth recording their first event by age 12 (compared to 9% for the other offenders). On average, the first motor vehicle theft event occurred one year later.

Juvenile motor vehicle theft offenders were nearly three times more likely than other offenders to be identified by police as Aboriginal. Approximately 18% of those with a vehicle theft event were identified as Aboriginal compared to 6% for non-vehicle theft offenders. For those with multiple vehicle theft events, the proportion involving Aboriginals rose to 32%. With Aboriginals comprising less than 3 per cent of the population aged 10 to 17, this finding needs to be considered when developing prevention and rehabilitation strategies.

It is commonly thought that offenders who start their offending by committing motor vehicle theft offences are more likely to develop into career criminals and in particular, progress to more serious offending behaviour over time. The results of this study do not support this assertion. Instead, it found that the majority of those charged with at least one motor vehicle theft event recorded a more serious event prior to their first vehicle theft event. For those with multiple vehicle theft events, the proportion with a prior, more serious event was even greater. However, while motor vehicle theft may not have been a gateway to more serious offending behaviour, most of the juveniles with multiple vehicle theft events continued to be apprehended for events at the same or higher level of seriousness after their first motor vehicle theft event.

Time between events was a further distinguishing characteristic, with young motor vehicle theft offenders recording an average of 34 weeks between their first and second event compared to 49 weeks for those who did not record a motor vehicle theft event as a juvenile. For those with multiple vehicle theft events, the average number of weeks between the first and second event dropped to 27.



With motor vehicle theft offenders beginning their criminal career at an early age and recording less time between events compared to other offenders, it is not surprising that they recorded a higher number of events during their juvenile years. These findings suggest that any intervention that is targeted towards these offenders is likely to reduce the number of repeat offenders and lessen the burden on the community and the criminal justice system. However, programs which take into account the particular characteristics of juvenile vehicle theft offenders are likely to be the most effective in steering young offenders away from a criminal career and reducing the incidence of vehicle theft.

## INTRODUCTION

This report analyses criminal events data on individuals born in 1985 who were apprehended by police in South Australia as a juvenile. A criminal event is defined as the combination of charges listed on a police apprehension report that occurred on the same day. If an apprehension report contained more than one criminal event, each event was counted separately. An individual was classified as a motor vehicle theft offender if either 'theft of a motor vehicle' (for the purpose of profit) or 'illegal use of a motor vehicle' was listed as a charge on any apprehension report recorded for that youth.

The study includes an analysis of the entire juvenile apprehension history of the participants for the purpose of examining criminal career pathways and gaining a better understanding of juvenile motor vehicle theft offenders. The research aims to build on the current knowledge of motor vehicle theft offenders and provide criminal justice stakeholders with some insights that could enhance current programs and assist in the development of new prevention initiatives.

## BACKGROUND

Research on the characteristics of motor vehicle theft (MVT) offenders is vital when we consider the enormous problem posed by motor vehicle theft in Australia. MVT is estimated to cost the community around \$880 million each year (Mayhew, 2003) and besides the substantial economic burden, it can cause considerable distress and inconvenience to the victims. Australia has one of the highest rates of vehicle theft in the developed world, making it a serious issue for governments, justice agencies, the insurance industry and community alike. During 2003, 475 vehicles were stolen in Australia for every 100,000 people compared to 433 for the United States (Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2003).

Moreover, within Australia, South Australian MVT figures are comparatively high. According to figures released by the Comprehensive Auto-theft Research System (CARS) Project<sup>1</sup>, over the past five years South Australia's theft ranking has gradually worsened and it now has the highest rating for MVT in the country, with approximately 8.5 vehicles stolen per 1,000 registered vehicles, compared to the national average of 6.1 vehicles.

The CARS Project also collates information on the characteristics of vehicle theft offenders in South Australia. Its 2003/2004 financial year report revealed that there were a total of 1,373 police apprehensions<sup>2</sup> in South Australia for MVT involving 1,122 unique offenders (National CARS Project Annual Report, 2003/2004).

Juveniles (aged 10 to 17 years) accounted for 38% of these 1,373 apprehensions for MVT, although figures provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that only 11% of the population in South Australia are aged between 10 and 17. Of these apprehensions, 92% involved males and 8% were female. However, it should be noted that while 38% of MVT apprehensions involved a juvenile offender, this does not indicate that juveniles represent 38% of all offenders. It is likely that due to the type of crime being committed and the age and skill of the offender, juveniles are more easily detected by police.

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<sup>1</sup> CARS is funded by the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council to produce statistics on vehicle theft in Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Apprehensions refer to allegations only and may not result in a proven offence.

As with other research (Doherty 2002; Walker and McDonald 1995), Indigenous persons comprised a disproportionate number of all juvenile apprehensions for MVT in 2003/04. Where Indigenous status<sup>3</sup> was recorded by police, 30% were identified as Indigenous. Of these Indigenous apprehensions, 91% involved males while 9% were female. As a proportion of the population aged 10 to 17, Indigenous youth comprise less than 3 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

Various literature on juvenile offending indicates that the majority of juveniles who come into contact with the justice system will do so only once, while a small proportion of juvenile offenders are responsible for a large percentage of offences. For example, a New South Wales study by Cain (1996) examined the proven court appearances of juvenile offenders who began and ended their juvenile careers between 1986 and 1994. The study revealed that, while approximately 70% of juvenile offenders had only one proven appearance in the Children's Court, 9% were responsible for 31% of all proven appearances and 1.6% were responsible for nearly ten percent (9.5%) of proven appearances. In reference to the latter statistic, this equated to 853 juvenile recidivists who were responsible for 8,657 proven criminal appearances during the nine-year period of the study.

While it is clear that only a minority of juvenile offenders become repeat offenders, it is less clear what determines recidivist behaviour. The statistics on juvenile MVT offenders in South Australia for 2003/04 (National CARS Project Annual Report) show that over one-quarter (29%) of the juveniles apprehended for MVT during that financial year had at least one prior court conviction, while the average number of prior convictions for these offenders was nine. Furthermore, 64% of the prior convictions were for MVT. This suggests that MVT is associated with a high rate of offending for a particular group of juvenile offenders, a premise which Cain's study (1996) supports. He found that juveniles who initially engage in MVT, break and enter, non-grievous assault or robbery were more likely to re-offend than juveniles who initially engaged in other offences.

Given the above findings, another purpose of this study is to examine whether the commonly held belief that MVT is a gateway to the development of a criminal career and in particular, to more serious offending behaviour, is true for the juvenile population, who have been shown to comprise a significant proportion of apprehensions for MVT. Of particular interest to this study is the group of persistent offenders.

Support in the literature for a graduation of juvenile offending is not straightforward. Evidence suggests that juveniles tend to persist and specialise during the course of their careers, especially violent and motor vehicle offenders (Carcach and Leverett, 1999), and that particular recidivist offenders show an escalation in their offending behaviour (Cain, 1993). Using a 'seriousness of offence' index and comparing first and latest proven offence, Cain found that 57.0% of juvenile offenders had progressed from non-violent and property offences to violent crimes. However, a subsequent study by Cain (1996) found less support. In the later research Cain compared the first proven offence with the most serious (for those with three or more proven appearances) and found that only 39.3% of the juveniles last appeared in Court for a more serious offence than their first. Of the percentage whose offending escalated, one-quarter had progressed from a non-violent first offence to a most serious, later offence involving violence.

In contrast, Carcach and Leverett (1999), in their study on specialisation, found a declining trend in offence seriousness for juvenile offenders in NSW. In all except violent offences, the probability of

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<sup>3</sup> Indigenous status is based on the police officer's assessment of the offender's physical appearance at the time of apprehension.

juveniles moving to a less serious offence was greater than that of moving in the other direction. With violent offences however, they found a greater probability that juveniles would appear in court for a violent offence after a prior appearance for any other offence than vice-versa. They surmised that given a recidivist career path, over time their probability of committing a violent crime grows.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

The majority of research on juvenile offending has not looked specifically at juvenile MVT offenders despite the existence of a number of intervention programs for this population of offenders. The present study will examine the demographic and offence profiles of juveniles from the 1985 birth cohort who recorded at least one criminal event involving MVT. The study will compare these offenders to other juvenile offenders in the cohort and investigate whether differences in offending behaviour are associated with the juveniles' prior criminal history. The study seeks to explore the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of juvenile MVT offenders?
2. What is the criminal history profile of juvenile MVT offenders?
3. What characteristics distinguish those with multiple MVT events from those who only recorded one MVT event as a juvenile?
4. Do juvenile MVT offenders graduate to more serious offences?

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The study is based on a cohort of unique offenders born in 1985 who have been apprehended by police in SA for at least one MVT offence committed as a juvenile. The data are based on apprehensions recorded in the South Australian Police Incident Management System and includes the entire number of criminal events each participant recorded as a juvenile<sup>4</sup>. For the 1985 cohort this involves analysis of all recorded events that occurred between 1995 (age 10) and 2002 (age 17). Events that were committed as an adult are not included in the study.

A participant is classified as having allegedly committed a MVT offence if the charge listed on any of the apprehension reports recorded for that youth involved either 'theft of a motor vehicle' (for the purpose of profit) or 'illegal use of a motor vehicle'. For the purpose of this study, 'theft of motor vehicle parts or contents' is not considered a MVT offence.

Seriousness of offending is calculated based on the major charge listed on the criminal event. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Offence Index (NOI) is then used to determine the seriousness of the major charge. The NOI ranks the severity of an offence on a scale from 1-159 and for the purpose of this study the scale is broken up into three categories: serious, moderate and minor (MVT falls into the moderate category).

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<sup>4</sup> Age at event is not necessarily the same as age at the time of apprehension for the event.



This paper includes an analysis of the involvement of Indigenous youth in MVT. The Indigenous status recorded on the apprehension report is based on the police officer's assessment of the offender's physical appearance at the time of apprehension. In 10.8% of cases the Indigenous status of those from the 1985 cohort who were apprehended between 1995 and 2002 was unknown. Other studies by OCSAR indicate that a large number of the 'unknown' individuals are likely to be non-Indigenous. For this reason, this study has combined the unknown individuals with the non-Indigenous. This may mean that the proportion of Indigenous youth who were apprehended will be slightly under-estimated.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There were a number of limitations to this study.

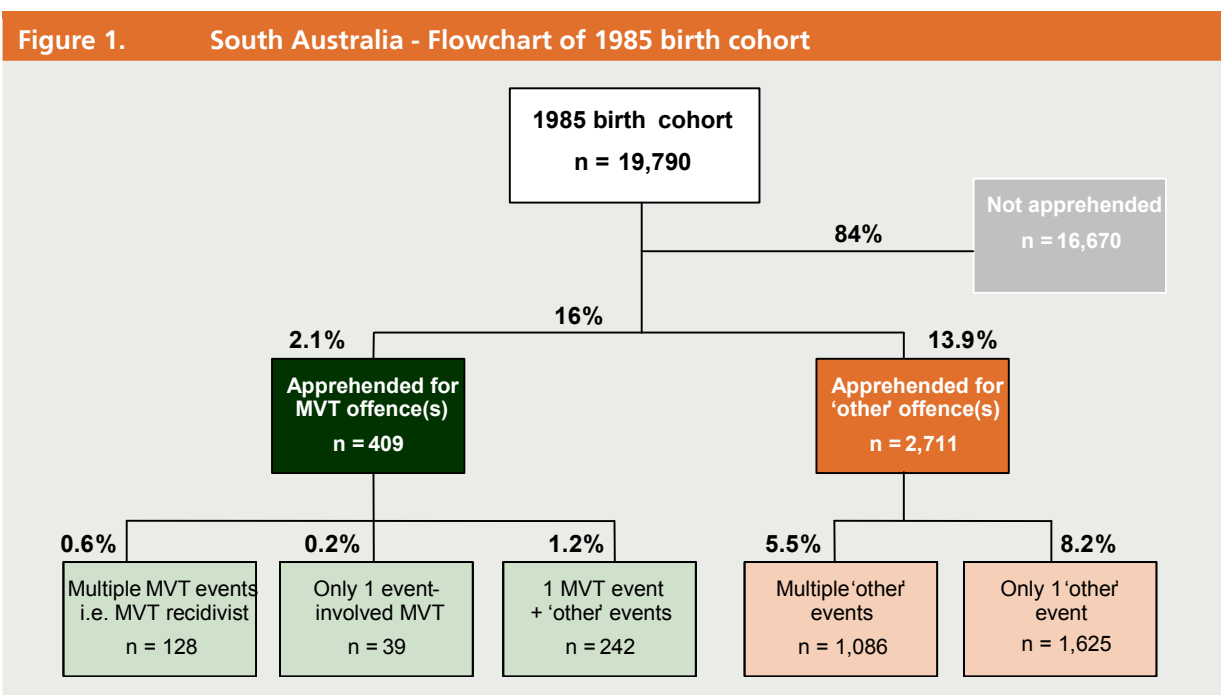
1. This study is based on apprehensions data supplied by police. It cannot provide a conclusive indicator of criminal activity as not all offences come to the attention of the police or are cleared by way of an apprehension. Furthermore, apprehensions refer to allegations only and may not result in a proven offence.
2. This study only had access to South Australian data. Hence, if an offender has a considerable criminal history in another state but has only been apprehended once in South Australia, (s)he will be recorded as having one apprehension only. Likewise, an offender who relocates and is apprehended interstate may be recorded as having stopped offending if no further apprehensions are recorded in South Australia.
3. It is not known how many participants spent time in detention as a juvenile, nor how long they were incarcerated for. Therefore there may be differences in the amount of time available for participants to re-offend during the period.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the study are presented in three main sections. The first section provides an overview of those juveniles in the cohort who recorded at least one MVT event. Comparisons are made between these offenders and those who recorded any event as a juvenile other than a MVT. Section Two profiles all juveniles who recorded two or more MVT events. This group of offenders is referred to as MVT recidivists. Section Three provides a five way comparison between the MVT recidivists, those with only one MVT event, those with multiple non-MVT events, those with only one non-MVT event, and those with only one MVT event plus one or more non-MVT events.

### SECTION ONE - A comparison of juveniles with and without a motor vehicle theft event

A total of 3,120 individuals born in 1985 recorded one or more criminal events as a juvenile. Based on the 19,790 births recorded in South Australia by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1985, approximately 16 out of every 100 individuals in this cohort recorded at least one criminal event as a juvenile. Of the 3,120 young offenders, 13.1% (409) had at least one event that involved a charge of MVT. Figure 1 outlines the various groups that the cohort fell into as a result of their offending behaviour.



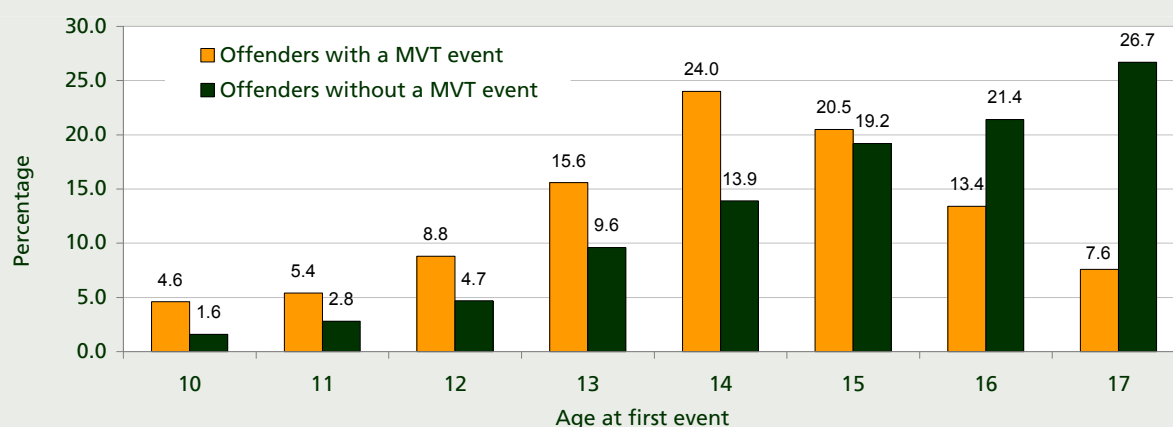
#### Age at first event

For the 409 juvenile offenders who recorded a MVT event, the average age at first event was 14.0 years compared to 15.1 years for those who recorded any other event. Figure 2 shows the age breakdown of the two groups at the time of their first event. There is a clear difference in the age profile of the two groups. As shown, those juveniles who recorded a MVT event began their criminal careers comparatively early. A total of 18.8% recorded their first event (involving any offence) by the age of 12 with a gradual

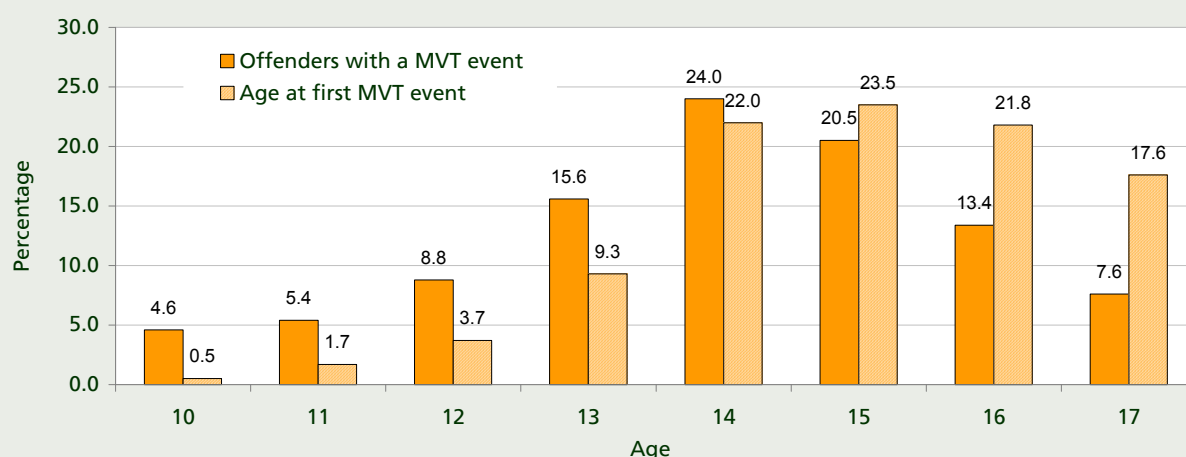
increase in the proportion apprehended up to age 14, which was the peak age at first event (24.0%). From there, the proportion apprehended shows a steady decline, with only 7.6% recording their first event at 17 years of age. In contrast, for those in the cohort who did not record a MVT event as a juvenile, the graph shows that only a small number recorded their first event by age 12 (9.1%) while the peak age at which these offenders recorded their first event was 17 (26.7%).

Figure 3 shows the age of the MVT offenders at the time of their first event and first MVT event<sup>5</sup>. On average, the first MVT event occurred at 15.0 years of age, one year after the average age of their first formal contact with the criminal justice system. In other words, the MVT event occurred further on in their criminal careers.

**Figure 2. South Australia - Age of juvenile offenders in the 1985 cohort at the time of their first event by type of event**



**Figure 3. South Australia - Age of juvenile MVT offenders at the time of their first event and first MVT event**



<sup>5</sup> The first MVT event is not necessarily the first recorded event as a juvenile.

### Number of events by gender

The majority of offenders in the 1985 cohort were male with a slightly larger proportion noted for the juveniles with a MVT event compared to those without one (80.7% compared to 74.5%). Table 1 shows the number of events recorded for both groups by sex. The majority of both the males and females without a MVT event only recorded one or two events during their juvenile years (74.2% and 84.1% respectively). The pattern was quite different for those with a MVT event with these juveniles recording a much greater number of events. Only 34.2% of females and 23.0% of males with a MVT event recorded one or two events as a juvenile, with 22.8% of females and 33.9% of males recording 10 or more events.

**Table 1. South Australia - Number of events recorded by sex and type of event**

Number of Events	Group with no MVT events				Group with a MVT event			
	Female		Male		Female		Male	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1 to 2	581	84.1	1499	74.2	27	34.2	76	23.0
3 to 5	76	11.0	364	18.0	27	34.2	86	26.1
6 to 9	17	2.5	106	5.2	7	8.9	56	17.0
10 or more	17	2.5	51	2.5	18	22.8	112	33.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>691</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2,020</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Mean age at first event	14.9		15.1		14.1		14.0	
Mean age at first MVT event	-		-		14.8		15.0	

### Indigenous status

Juveniles with a MVT event were nearly three times more likely to be identified by police as Indigenous. A total of 17.6% of the juveniles with a MVT event were identified as Indigenous compared to 6.3% for juveniles with no MVT event. Numerous studies (eg, Cain, 1996; Walker and McDonald, 1995 & Doherty, 2002) have highlighted the over-representation of Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system. The above result concurs with their finding and suggests that the problem is exacerbated for MVT offenders.

**Table 2. South Australia - Indigenous status of juvenile offenders by type of event**

Indigenous Status	Group with no MVT events		Group with a MVT event		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Non-Indigenous	2,539	93.7	337	82.4	2876	92.2
Indigenous	172	6.3	72	17.6	244	7.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,711</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>3120</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The Non-Indigenous category includes 337 individuals whose Indigenous status was unknown.

Indigenous offenders in both groups began their criminal careers at a much younger age than their non-Indigenous counterparts although the difference was more pronounced amongst those who recorded a MVT event. As shown in Table 3, nearly one in five (18.1%) Indigenous MVT offenders recorded their first event at age 10 compared to only 1.8% for non-Indigenous MVT offenders. By age 13, roughly half (51.4%) of the Indigenous offenders in the MVT group had recorded their first event compared to 30.9% of non-Indigenous offenders in the MVT group. Of those without a MVT event, 40.1% of Indigenous offenders and 17.3% of non-Indigenous offenders recorded their first event by age 13.

**Table 3. South Australia - Age of juvenile offenders at first event by Indigenous status and type of event**

Age at first Event	Group with no MVT events				Group with a MVT event			
	Non-Indigenous		Indigenous		Non-Indigenous		Indigenous	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
10	32	1.3	11	6.4	6	1.8	13	18.1
11	61	2.4	16	9.3	17	5.0	5	6.9
12	110	4.3	17	9.9	28	8.3	8	11.1
13	236	9.3	25	14.5	53	15.7	11	15.3
14	350	13.8	28	16.3	78	23.1	20	27.8
15	492	19.4	29	16.9	76	22.6	8	11.1
16	562	22.1	18	10.5	52	15.4	3	4.2
17	696	27.4	28	16.3	27	8.0	4	5.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,539</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The Non-Indigenous category includes 337 individuals where Indigenous status was unknown.

The number of events differed markedly both within and between the two groups according to Indigenous status. Just over half of the Indigenous offenders (52.8%) and one-quarter of the non-Indigenous offenders (27.3%) who recorded a MVT event recorded 10 or more events as a juvenile. In comparison, of those who did not record a MVT event, only 9.3% of Indigenous offenders and 2.0% of non-Indigenous offenders recorded 10 or more events during their juvenile years.

**Table 4. South Australia - Number of events recorded by Indigenous status and type of event**

Number of Events	Group with no MVT events				Group with a MVT event			
	Non-Indigenous		Indigenous		Non-Indigenous		Indigenous	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1 to 2	1,979	77.9	101	58.7	95	28.2	8	11.1
3 to 5	401	15.8	39	22.7	95	28.2	18	25.0
6 to 9	107	4.2	16	9.3	55	16.3	8	11.1
10 or more	52	2.0	16	9.3	92	27.3	38	52.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,539</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The Non-Indigenous category includes 337 individuals whose Indigenous status was unknown.

#### Most serious offence at first event

Table 5 outlines the major or most serious charge recorded by the juveniles at the time of their first event. For the 409 offenders with a MVT event, not surprisingly the most frequently listed major charge at their first event was 'theft and related offences', accounting for 52.3% of offenders. This included 35.3% who were charged with MVT and 8.8% who were charged with theft from retail premises. For those without a MVT event, 'theft and related offences' was also the most common offence type but accounted for only 21.0% of offenders, including 10.0% who were charged with theft from retail premises.

**Table 5. South Australia - Major charge at first event by type of event**

Australian Standard Offence Classification (ASOC)	Group without MVT event		Group with a MVT event		
	Number	%	Number	%	% excl MV offence
Homicide and related offences	1	0.0	1	0.2	0.4
Acts intended to cause injury	298	11.0	26	6.4	9.8
Sexual assault and related offences	41	1.5	2	0.5	0.8
Dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons	239	8.8	0	0.0	0.0
Abduction and related offences	2	0.1	0	0.0	0.0
Robbery, extortion and related offences	28	1.0	8	2.0	3.0
Unlawful entry with intent/burglary, break and enter/ serious criminal trespass	250	9.2	49	12.0	18.5
Theft and related offences:	570	21.0	214	52.3	26.4
- <i>theft of a motor vehicle</i>	0	0.0	8	2.0	-
- <i>illegal use of a motor vehicle</i>	0	0.0	136	33.3	-
- <i>theft of motor vehicle parts or contents</i>	55	2.0	5	1.2	1.9
- <i>theft from a person (excluding by force)</i>	3	0.1	0	0.0	0.0
- <i>theft from retail premises</i>	272	10.0	36	8.8	13.6
- <i>theft (except MV) not elsewhere classified</i>	153	5.6	23	5.6	8.7
- <i>receiving or handling proceeds of crime</i>	83	3.1	6	1.5	2.3
- <i>illegal use of property (except motor vehicles)</i>	4	0.1	0	0.0	0.0
Deception and related offences	35	1.3	1	0.2	0.4
Illicit drug offences	150	5.5	11	2.7	4.2
Weapons and explosives offences	50	1.8	9	2.2	3.4
Property damage and environmental pollution	394	14.5	55	13.4	20.8
Public order offences	275	10.1	14	3.4	5.3
Road traffic and motor vehicle regulatory offence	278	10.3	11	2.7	4.2
Offences against justice procedures, government security and government operations	67	2.5	5	1.2	1.9
Miscellaneous offences	33	1.2	3	0.7	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,711</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>265</b>

The offences shown in italics add up to the total for the offence category, 'Theft and related offences'.

#### Most serious offence during their entire juvenile career

This section focuses on the most serious offence charged against the individual during the entire course of his/her juvenile offending career. For the purposes of this analysis, rather than considering the type of offence involved, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Offence Index was used to group offence types into various categories of seriousness. The NOI provides a ranking of the seriousness of an offence, with severity based on a scale from 1-159. For the purpose of this study the scale was broken up into three categories; 'serious'<sup>6</sup>, 'moderate' and 'minor' (MVT falls into the moderate category). As shown in Table 6, three-fifths (59.9%) of offenders without a MVT event did not record a 'serious' event during their juvenile career, while 34.5% recorded only one or two 'serious' events. Of those with a MVT event, one-third (34.0%) did not record a 'serious' event, 31.8% recorded one or two and 17.4% recorded between three and five 'serious' events. The remaining 16.9% recorded six or more 'serious' events as a juvenile.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of charges which fall into the serious category include sexual offences, threatening behaviour, dealing/manufacturing illicit drugs, serious assaults and murder.

<b>Table 6. South Australia - Total number of serious events recorded by type of event</b>				
Number of serious Events	Group with no MVT events		Group with a MVT event	
	Number	%	Number	%
0	1,625	59.9	139	34.0
1 to 2	935	34.5	130	31.8
3 to 5	122	4.5	71	17.4
6 to 9	20	0.7	37	9.0
10 or more	9	0.3	32	7.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,711</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Average	1		3	

For the 250 juveniles who recorded at least one ‘other’ event prior to their first MVT event, approximately two-thirds (64.4%) recorded a ‘serious’ event prior to their MVT event. This does not support the commonly held belief that MVT is a gateway to more serious offending behaviour.

Analysis of the seriousness of subsequent events revealed that a total of 327 juveniles recorded an event after their first MVT event and of these, 62.7% recorded a ‘serious’ event.

Table 7 looks solely at the juveniles who recorded a MVT event and outlines the number of events recorded before and after their first MVT event. The darker shading highlights the number of juveniles who either did not record another event after the MVT event or recorded fewer events after the MVT event than before. The unshaded section indicates the number of juveniles who either did not record any events before or after the MVT event or recorded the same number of events before and after the MVT event. The lighter shading highlights those juveniles who recorded a larger number of events after the MVT event.

One in five (82 of the 409 juveniles with a MVT event) did not record another event after their first MVT event while 10.5% (43) of the juveniles recorded fewer events and 13.9% (57) recorded the same number of events before and after. In contrast, over half (55.5%) recorded more events after the initial MVT event.

<b>Table 7. South Australia - Number of events recorded before and after the MVT event</b>									
Number of events prior to first MVT event	Number of events after the first MVT event								Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7+	
0	39	44	26	11	9	5	3	22	159
1	20	13	9	6	6	4	4	16	78
2	10	10	12	5	0	1	1	17	56
3	4	1	4	3	5	1	0	9	27
4	2	0	0	1	4	0	1	10	18
5	2	3	0	2	2	0	0	7	16
6	2	1	1	1	1	0	0	5	11
7+	3	0	4	4	3	2	3	25	44
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>409</b>

With regard to the number of serious events recorded by the MVT offenders, Table 8 shows that over one-third (152 of the 409 with a MVT event) did not record a serious event either before or after their first MVT event and 18.6% (76) recorded either no or fewer serious events after their first MVT offence. In contrast, 7.8% (32) recorded the same number of serious events before and after, and over one-third (36.4%) recorded a greater number of serious events after the initial MVT event.

<b>Table 8. South Australia - Number of serious events recorded before and after the MVT event</b>							
Number of serious events prior to first MVT event	Number of serious events after the first MVT event						Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5+	
0	152	47	12	11	7	19	248
1	36	17	11	2	5	15	86
2	8	8	4	6	1	8	35
3	3	3	3	2	0	2	13
4	1	1	2	2	1	3	10
5+	4	2	2	0	1	8	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>409</b>

#### Time between offending events

The final distinction between the MVT and non-MVT offenders relates to the time between events. Of those who recorded more than one event during their juvenile years, the offenders with a MVT event had an average of 241 days (34 weeks) between their first and second event compared to 343 days (49 weeks) for those without a MVT event.



**SECTION TWO - A profile of juveniles with two or more motor vehicle theft events**

This section describes the characteristics of juveniles with two or more events involving MVT. Of the 409 offenders who recorded a MVT event, 128 (31.3%) recorded two or more MVT events and this group is referred to as MVT recidivists. The data indicate that the MVT recidivists were predominantly male (83.6%) and approximately one-third (32.0%) were identified by police as Indigenous.

**Table 9. South Australia - Sex and Indigenous status of MVT recidivists**

Sex	Non-Indigenous		Indigenous		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Female	12	13.8	9	22.0	21	16.4
Male	75	86.2	32	78.0	107	83.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100.0</b>

MVT recidivists tend to come into contact with the criminal justice system at a young age. Over half (53.1%) had recorded their first event by the age of 13 and 79.7% by age 14. The age at first MVT event shows a similar but slightly delayed pattern, although the peak age recorded for both first event and first MVT event was 14 years (26.6%).

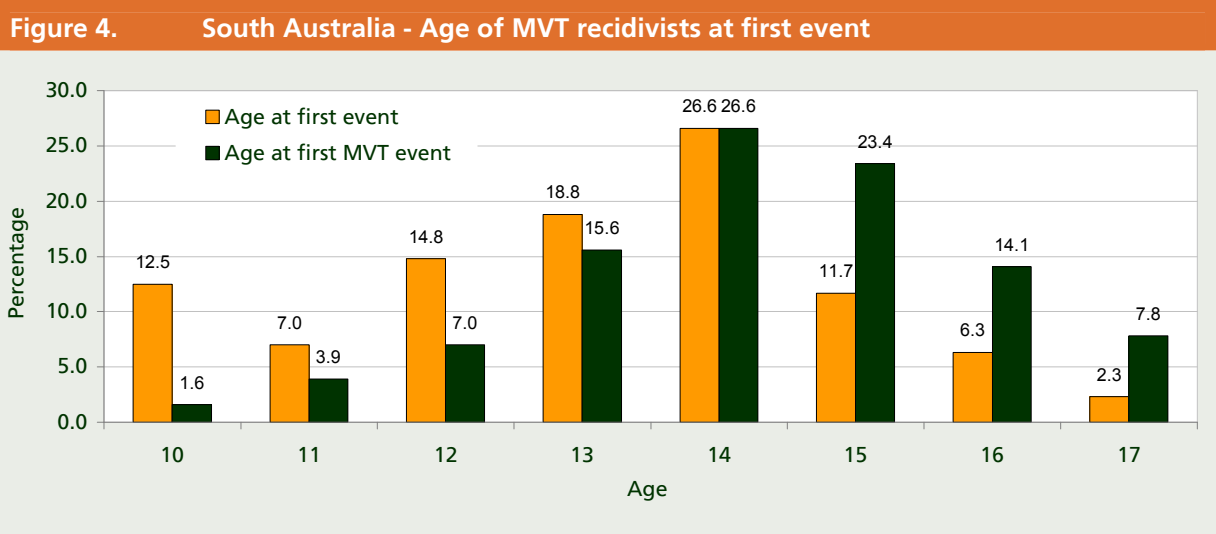
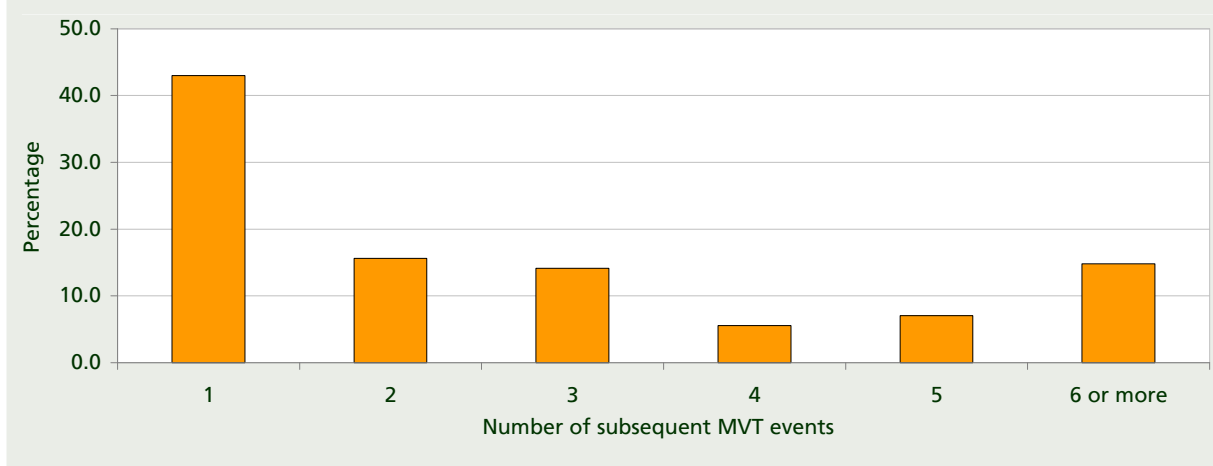


Figure 5 outlines the number of subsequent MVT events recorded by the recidivists. Of the 128 recidivist MVT offenders, 43.0% recorded one subsequent MVT event, 15.6% recorded two subsequent MVT events and 21.9% (or 28 individuals) recorded five or more subsequent MVT events.

**Figure 5. South Australia - Number of subsequent MVT events for MVT recidivists**



Once again, for the MVT recidivists the offence most frequently listed as the major charge on the their first apprehension report was ‘theft and related offences’, accounting for 47.7% of offenders. The 47.7% was primarily made up of the following offences; illegal use of a motor vehicle (26.6%), theft from retail premises (9.4%) and theft not elsewhere classified (8.6%). The next most common major charge at first apprehension was ‘property damage and environmental pollution’ (18.8%) followed by ‘break and enter/serious criminal trespass’ (12.5%).

**Table 10. South Australia - Major charge at first event for MVT recidivists**

Australian Standard Offence Classification (ASOC)	Number	%
Acts intended to cause injury	8	6.3
Robbery, extortion and related offences	3	2.3
Unlawful entry with intent/burglary, break and enter/ serious criminal trespass	16	12.5
Theft and related offences:	61	47.7
- <i>theft of motor vehicle parts or contents</i>	4	3.1
- <i>illegal use of a motor vehicle</i>	34	26.6
- <i>theft from retail premises</i>	12	9.4
- <i>theft (except motor vehicle) not elsewhere classified</i>	11	8.6
Illicit drug offences	4	3.1
Weapons and explosives offences	2	1.6
Property damage and environmental pollution	24	18.8
Public order offences	2	1.6
Road traffic and motor vehicle regulatory offences	4	3.1
Offences against justice procedures, government security and government operations	3	2.3
Miscellaneous offences	1	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The offences shown in italics add up to the total for the offence category, ‘Theft and related offences’.

Less than one-third (30.5% or 39) of the MVT recidivists had a MVT event recorded as their first event. The majority (89) recorded a prior event which did not involve a MVT charge. Of these, 71.9% recorded a more serious event prior to their first MVT event. Likewise, in relation to subsequent offending behaviour, around three-quarters (78.1%) of the MVT recidivists recorded a serious event after their first MVT event.

Table 11 shows the number of events recorded by the MVT recidivists before and after their first MVT event. The darker shading highlights the number of juveniles who recorded fewer events after their first MVT event than before. The unshaded section indicates the number of juveniles who recorded the same number of events before and after their first MVT event and the lighter shading highlights those juveniles who recorded a larger number of events after their first MVT event.

A total of 7.8% (10 of the 128 MVT recidivists) recorded fewer events after their first MVT event. Less than one in six (15.6% or 20 juveniles) recorded the same number of events before and after the first MVT event, and 76.6% (98) recorded a greater number of events after the first MVT event.

<b>Table 11. South Australia - Number of events recorded before and after the first MVT event</b>								
Number of events prior to the first MVT event	Number of events after the first MVT event							Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7+	
0	5	6	2	4	2	3	17	39
1	0	0	0	1	1	1	12	15
2	2	2	2	0	1	1	13	21
3	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	12
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	7
5	0	0	0	1	0	0	6	7
6	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
7+	0	1	3	0	1	1	17	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>128</b>

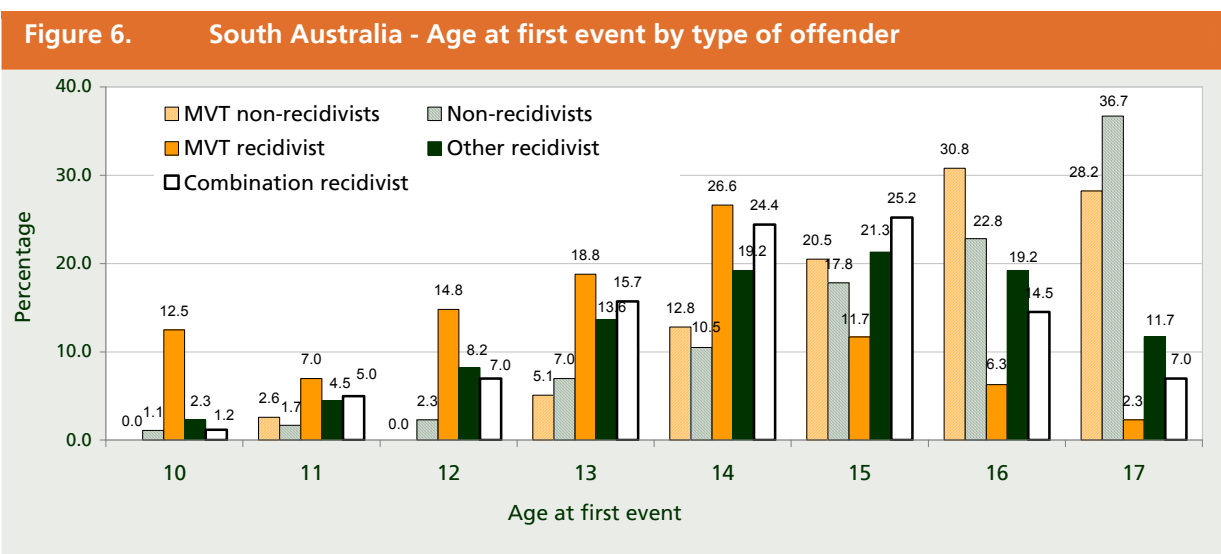
### SECTION THREE - A comparison of five types of juvenile offenders

This section compares five types of offenders in the 1985 cohort. The first two groups are classed as non-recidivists and the remaining three groups are classed as recidivists. They are as follows;

- 1) Non-recidivists - Juveniles who recorded one non-MVT event only (1,625 individuals);
- 2) MVT non-recidivists<sup>7</sup> - Juveniles who recorded one event only, which involved a MVT charge (39 individuals);
- 3) MVT recidivists - Juveniles who recorded two or more MVT events, as discussed in Section Two (128 individuals);
- 4) Other recidivists - Juveniles who recorded two or more non-MVT events (1,086 individuals)
- 5) Combination recidivists - Juveniles who recorded one MVT event and one or more non-MVT events (242 individuals).

The average age of the two non-recidivist groups at the time of their first event was higher than the recidivist groups, with MVT recidivists recording a particularly low mean age. The average age of the two non-recidivists groups at first event was 15.5 years while in contrast, the average age for the MVT recidivists was 13.1 years, 14.4 years for the Other recidivists and 14.3 years for the Combination recidivists.

Figure 6 shows the age at first event for the five types of offenders. The age distribution of the MVT recidivists indicates that this group recorded their first event at the earliest age, with the peak of the age curve occurring at 14 years (26.6%). By age 13, over half (53.1%) had recorded their first event. Both the Other and Combination recidivists show a similar age distribution, but with a later onset. The peak age for these two groups was 15 years (21.3% and 25.2% respectively), while a total of 28.6% and 28.9% had recorded their first event by age 13. The 39 MVT non-recidivists recorded their first event at an even later stage, with the peak occurring at 16 years (30.8%) while only three had recorded an event by the age of 13. Non-recidivists show a completely different trend from the previous three groups, with the age distribution showing a gradual upward trend and a strong peak at 17 years (36.7%). By age 13, only 12.1% in this group had recorded an event.

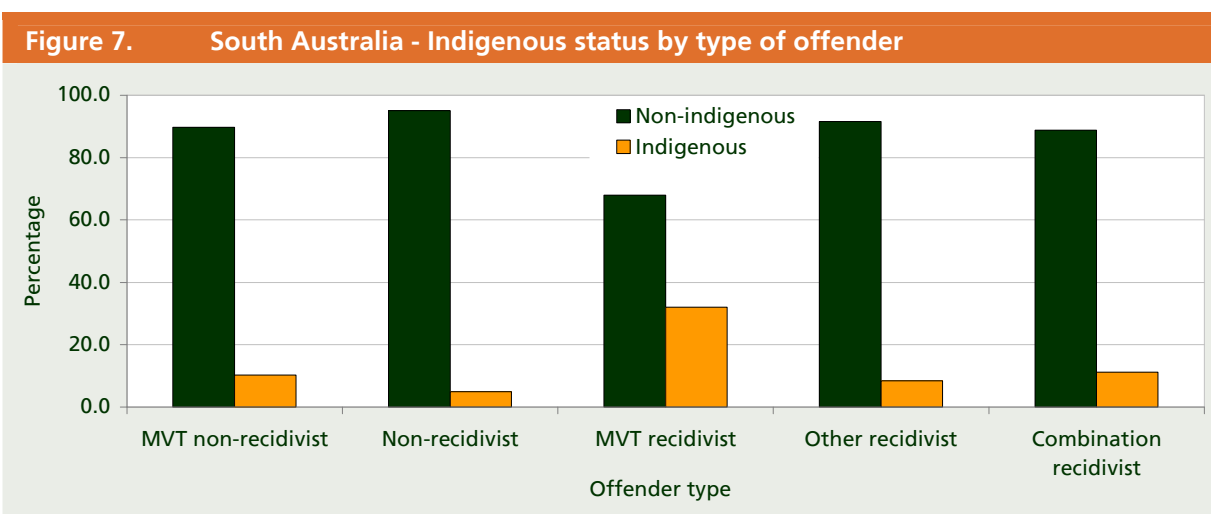


<sup>7</sup> The numbers in this group are small. Hence analyses should be interpreted with caution.

The majority of the offenders in each group were male, with the recidivist groups recording the highest proportion of males. Of the MVT, Other and Combination recidivists, 83.6%, 79.8% and 80.6% were male compared to 71.8% in the MVT non-recidivist group and 71.0% in the Non-recidivist group.

Sex	MVT non-recidivist		Non-recidivist		MVT recidivist		Other recidivist		Combination recidivist	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Female	11	28.2	472	29.0	21	16.4	219	20.2	47	19.4
Male	28	71.8	1,153	71.0	107	83.6	867	79.8	195	80.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,625</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,086</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>100.0</b>

In Section Two it was stated that approximately one-third of MVT recidivists were identified by police as Indigenous. None of the other four offending groups recorded such a strong proportion of Indigenous offenders. Figure 7 shows that 32.0% of the MVT recidivists were identified as Indigenous, compared to 8.5% of Other recidivists, 11.2% of Combination recidivists, 10.3% of MVT non-recidivists and 4.9% of Non-recidivists.



The non-Indigenous category includes 337 individuals whose Indigenous status was unknown.

Table 13 outlines the proportion of juveniles in the five offence groups whose first event involved a minor, moderate or serious offence as the major charge. The results showed that:

- Of the MVT non-recidivists, most (89.7%) recorded a 'moderate' first event which is not surprising given that MVT falls into the 'moderate' category and these offenders recorded only one event which involved a MVT offence. This means that, for the remaining four MVT non-recidivists while their first 'event' involved a MVT, it was not the most serious charge for that event.
- For 39.9% of Non-recidivists, the first event involved a 'minor' offence as the major charge, while 34.5% involved a 'moderate' offence and the remaining 25.6% involved a 'serious' offence.

- In contrast, the MVT recidivists recorded a much larger proportion of 'moderate' first events. Around half had a first event which involved a 'moderate' offence, 18.8% involved a 'minor' offence and the remaining 28.9% recorded a 'serious' first event.
- Combination recidivists recorded similar findings to the MVT recidivists group with approximately half (49.2%) recording a 'moderate' first event and over one-quarter (29.3%) recording a 'serious' first event.
- The proportion of 'minor', 'moderate' and 'serious' first events for the Other recidivist group was more evenly spread, with this group recording the highest percentage of 'serious' first events of the four groups (33.8%).

**Table 13. South Australia - Severity of first event by type of offender**

Severity of First event	MVT non-recidivist		Non-recidivist		MVT recidivist		Other recidivist		Combination recidivist	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Minor	0	0.0	648	39.9	24	18.8	337	31.0	52	21.5
Moderate	35	89.7	561	34.5	67	52.3	382	35.2	119	49.2
Serious	4	10.3	416	25.6	37	28.9	367	33.8	71	29.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,625</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1086</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Recidivist offenders

The following tables provide a comparison of the three recidivist groups of MVT recidivists, Other recidivists and Combination recidivists.

One of the most striking differences between these three groups relates to the number of events recorded. As the number of events increases so does the proportion of MVT recidivists. The Other recidivists show the opposite trend. Table 14 shows that approximately two in five (41.9%) of the Other recidivists recorded only two events as a juvenile while only 17.6% recorded more than five events. On the other hand, approximately 83.6% of the MVT recidivists recorded more than five events while 21.9% recorded 30 or more events as a juvenile. The Combination recidivists recorded similar findings to the Other recidivists although a lower proportion (24.4%) recorded only two events as a juvenile (24.4% compared to 41.9% of Other recidivists) and a higher proportion recorded more than five events (35.5% compared to 17.6%).

One possible explanation for the clear difference between the MVT recidivists and the two remaining recidivist groups may relate to the police practice of targeting known MVT offenders. It should also be noted that the MVT recidivists began offending at an earlier age compared to the Other and Combination recidivists, giving them a greater period of time in which to re-offend.

**Table 14. South Australia - Number of events recorded by recidivist group**

Number Of events	MVT recidivist		Other recidivist		One MVT and other(s)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
2	5	3.9	455	41.9	59	24.4
3	6	4.7	210	19.3	43	17.8
4 to 5	10	7.8	230	21.2	54	22.3
6 to 9	17	13.3	123	11.3	46	19.0
10 to 14	22	17.2	40	3.7	17	7.0
15 to 19	17	13.3	12	1.1	10	4.1
20 to 29	23	18.0	12	1.1	11	4.5
30 or more	28	21.9	4	0.4	2	0.8
<i>Mean</i>	<i>20</i>		<i>4</i>		<i>6</i>	
<i>Median</i>	<i>16</i>		<i>3</i>		<i>4</i>	
<b>Total</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,086</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>100.0</b>

For all three recidivist groups there was a relationship between age and extent of offending behaviour. The MVT recidivists recorded a significant, negative correlation between the number of events recorded as a juvenile and both age at first event ( $r = -0.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and age at first MVT event ( $r = -0.49$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The Combination and Other recidivists recorded weaker, but still significant, negative correlations ( $r = -0.41$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $r = -0.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between age at first event and the total number of events recorded. Again, this finding is to be expected, given that the earlier the age of onset the longer the young person has in which to offend.

With regard to time between events, age at first event was not predictive of the time between the first and second event for the MVT and Combination recidivists. The Other recidivists showed a weak association ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between age at first event and length of time between first and second events.

The major charge for each event recorded over the recidivists' entire juvenile careers is outlined in Table 15. As expected, the most common major charge for the MVT recidivists was 'theft and related offences', accounting for one-third of all events. Within this category, half (432 out of 853) involved illegal use of a motor vehicle, 15.4% involved theft from retail premises and a further 14.0% involved other forms of theft not elsewhere classified. The next most common major charge for the MVT recidivists was 'break and enter/serious criminal trespass' (14.1%) followed by 'offences against justice procedures, government security and government operations' (12.7%).

The Combination recidivists recorded quite similar findings to the MVT recidivists with 'theft and related offences' also accounting for one-third (33.7%) of all events followed by 'break and enter/serious criminal trespass' (10.7%), 'property damage and environmental pollution' (9.8%) and 'acts intended to cause injury' (9.7%).

The Other recidivists showed a much greater spread across the 16 offence categories, although 'theft and related offences' was still the most common major charge, accounting for 20.2% of events. Within this category, two in five (42.3%) were apprehended for theft from retail premises and a further 26.0% for other forms of theft not elsewhere classified. Receiving or handling proceeds of crime accounted for a further 18.4% of events. The second most frequent major charge for the Other recidivists was 'property

damage and environmental pollution' (14.8%) followed by 'acts intended to cause injury' (11.8%), 'break and enter/serious criminal trespass' and 'public order offences' (10.7% each).

**Table 15. South Australia - Total number of events recorded by each recidivist group by major charge**

Australian Standard Offence Classification (ASOC)	MVT recidivists		Other recidivists		Combination recidivists	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Homicide and related offences	1	0.0	6	0.1	1	0.1
Acts intended to cause injury	210	8.2	530	11.8	148	9.7
Sexual assault and related offences	12	0.5	42	0.9	7	0.5
Dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons	36	1.4	223	4.9	40	2.6
Abduction and related offences	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	0.2
Robbery, extortion and related offences	66	2.6	75	1.7	30	2.0
Unlawful entry with intent/burglary, break and enter/ serious criminal trespass	361	14.1	480	10.7	164	10.7
Theft and related offences:	853	33.3	912	20.2	517	33.7
- <i>theft of a motor vehicle</i>	24	0.9	0	0.0	5	0.3
- <i>illegal use of a motor vehicle</i>	432	16.9	0	0.0	214	14.0
- <i>theft of motor vehicle parts or contents</i>	46	1.8	112	2.5	38	2.5
- <i>theft from a person (excluding by force)</i>	6	0.2	6	0.1	1	0.1
- <i>theft from retail premises</i>	131	5.1	386	8.6	115	7.5
- <i>theft (except motor vehicle) not elsewhere classified</i>	119	4.7	237	5.3	88	5.7
- <i>receiving or handling proceeds of crime</i>	93	3.6	168	3.7	55	3.6
- <i>illegal use of property (except motor vehicles)</i>	2	0.1	3	0.1	1	0.1
Deception and related offences	11	0.4	54	1.2	9	0.6
Illicit drug offences	76	3.0	200	4.4	57	3.7
Weapons and explosives offences	71	2.8	92	2.0	32	2.1
Property damage and environmental pollution	252	9.8	668	14.8	150	9.8
Public order offences	132	5.2	480	10.7	115	7.5
Road traffic and motor vehicle regulatory offences	135	5.3	409	9.1	109	7.1
Offences against justice procedures, government security and government operations	325	12.7	277	6.1	139	9.1
Miscellaneous offences	18	0.7	58	1.3	12	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,559</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>4,506</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,533</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The offences shown in italics add up to the total for the offence category, 'Theft and related offences'.



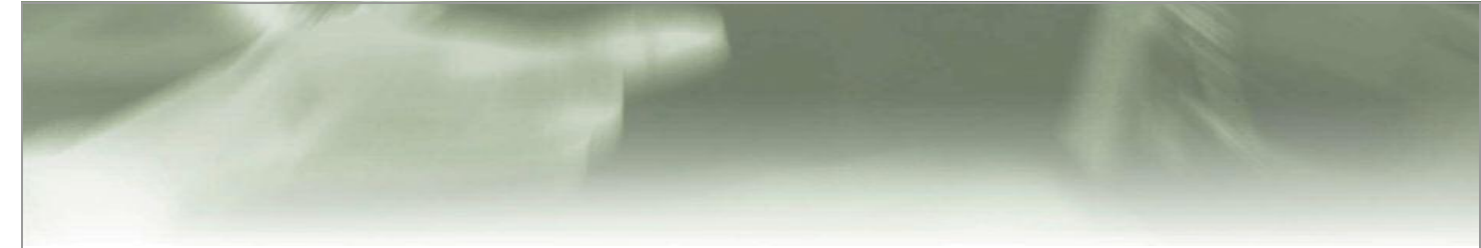
## DISCUSSION

Juvenile offenders account for around four out of every ten vehicle theft related apprehensions in South Australia and it is clear that any intervention needs to address this population in order to successfully reduce the incidence of MVT. The results of this study indicate that juvenile MVT offenders from the 1985 cohort have a number of distinguishing characteristics that provides useful information about their offending behaviour. These insights could be used to plan effective intervention strategies to reduce juvenile involvement in the criminal justice system and reduce the incidence of MVT.

As with most studies on juvenile offending, a disproportionate number of events from the 1985 cohort involved male offenders. In particular, males accounted for over 80% of the MVT recidivists. Likewise, a key finding reinforced throughout the study was that MVT offenders, particularly the recidivists, began their criminal careers at an early age. Cain's (1996) research in the area of juvenile offending found that age can predict subsequent offending behaviour and that the younger a person is at the time of his or her first proven appearance, the greater the likelihood of re-offending as a juvenile. As Cain noted, this finding can be predominantly explained by the increased length of time available for younger offenders to re-offend. For the MVT population, age at first event was related to the number of events recorded as a juvenile.

The age findings of this study has noteworthy implications for current policy. The fact that MVT offenders were relatively young at the time of their first event raises questions about the way MVT intervention programs are applied. Diversionary programs operating in Australia such as Handbrake Turn, Street Legal and U-Turn, aim to steer young offenders' interest in cars into pathways that provide vocational training, education and life skills and away from recidivist behaviour. Intervention is targeted towards repeat offenders in the age bracket of 15 to 20. However, the current study found that 53% of MVT recidivists were aged 10 to 13 years at the time of their first event. It may be that by the time some of these younger recidivist offenders reach 15 years of age, their offending behaviour may have become firmly entrenched, making it difficult to intervene by that stage. While the existing intervention programs mentioned above have proven to be beneficial (West & Miller, 2001), alternative programs aimed at younger MVT offenders may complement and further improve the value of these programs for juveniles and help to further reduce repeat contact with the criminal justice system.

Another important finding of the current study was that a substantial proportion of juvenile MVT offenders were Indigenous. Juveniles with a MVT apprehension were nearly three times more likely to be identified by police as Indigenous and one-third of MVT recidivists were Indigenous. As a proportion of the population aged 10 to 17, Indigenous youth comprise less than 3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001), which highlights the significance of this finding. It is well documented that there is an over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system (Doherty, 2002) and this study shows that for juvenile motor vehicle theft offenders this holds true. Clearly, an implication of this finding is that intervention programs need to include a particular focus on Indigenous youth to address this imbalance. It may also be necessary to extend these programs outside of the metropolitan area to provide all offenders with access to these services.



The results of this study do not support the assertion that motor vehicle thieves are more likely to graduate to more serious offences. The majority of the MVT offenders had been apprehended for other types of offences prior to the MVT event and approximately two-thirds (64%) of these offenders had already recorded a 'serious' event. Of the MVT recidivists, the number with a prior, more serious event was even more pronounced (72%). While the data do not support the belief that MVT is a gateway to more serious offending behaviour, the overwhelming majority of the MVT recidivists continued to record events at a high level of seriousness after their first MVT event. It seems that MVT offenders do not graduate to more serious crime after the first MVT event but instead incorporate MVT into their repertoire along the way.

Lastly, the large number of events recorded by the MVT offenders described in the study demonstrates the importance of attempting to reduce the number of juveniles committing motor vehicle offences. This group of offenders recorded a large number of events at a high frequency which suggests that any reduction in this pool of offenders will have a useful impact on the overall crime rate in South Australia. Given this likelihood, key stakeholders in the area of criminal justice should see the problem as a chance to influence juvenile crime rates in a cost-effective manner. Programs that incorporate the distinguishing characteristics of MVT offenders are more likely to successfully divert these young offenders away from a criminal career and reduce the incidence and cost of vehicle theft.

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