

# Research Spotlight

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**Topic**  
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**Arizona Auto Theft Study**

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## **Findings:**

- By using research to focus action, Arizona has begun to reduce its auto theft rate, which has been the highest in the nation.
- Motor vehicle theft needs to be addressed for several reasons: it is a gateway crime leading to more serious crimes; it abets other crimes (e.g., smuggling); and it generates economic loss of more than \$377 million a year in Arizona alone.
- Most auto thefts in Arizona are the result of the keys being left in the car.
- Thieves prefer to steal cars from large parking lots at night.
- Master or “jiggle” keys and breaking the steering column are also used to steal cars.
- The state’s proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border has contributed significantly to the theft of vehicles. SUVs and large pickup trucks are especially targeted for use in smuggling narcotics or people.
- The majority of thieves in Arizona are white males ages 15 to 29. A substantial majority of those jailed for auto theft appear to be substance abusers; almost one in four are suspected gang members.
- Three percent of youth in grades 8, 10, and 12 admitted having stolen a vehicle in a 2002 survey. Two-thirds were male. Nearly one in four claimed gang membership. Arizona’s programming against auto theft seems to have helped turn the tide. The “Watch Your Car” program and the “bait car” strategy were cited frequently by both law enforcement officers and offenders as being deterrents.
- The Arizona Vehicle Theft Task Force, a multi-jurisdictional body, was praised for its role in identifying and coordinating prevention and intervention efforts.

## **Implications:**

- Research and analysis can help identify specific characteristics of targets of crimes (the autos); high-risk locations and actions that attract thieves; and the characteristics common to the thieves. This suggests greater reliance on state and other statistical analysis centers for help in prevention.
- Public education (e.g., about not leaving keys in cars) is a major component of auto theft prevention. Every generation of new drivers needs to be taught these prevention strategies, and reminders can help drivers who have forgotten.
- Adopting or adapting both national strategies (the “Watch Your Car” program) and such locally developed successful strategies as bait cars can be an effective means of auto theft prevention.

**Source:** Statistical Analysis Center, Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, at <http://azcjc.gov/pubs/home/AutoTheftRept05262004.pdf>