

# CHICAGO POLICE RECOVER LESS THAN 20% OF CARJACKED VEHICLES

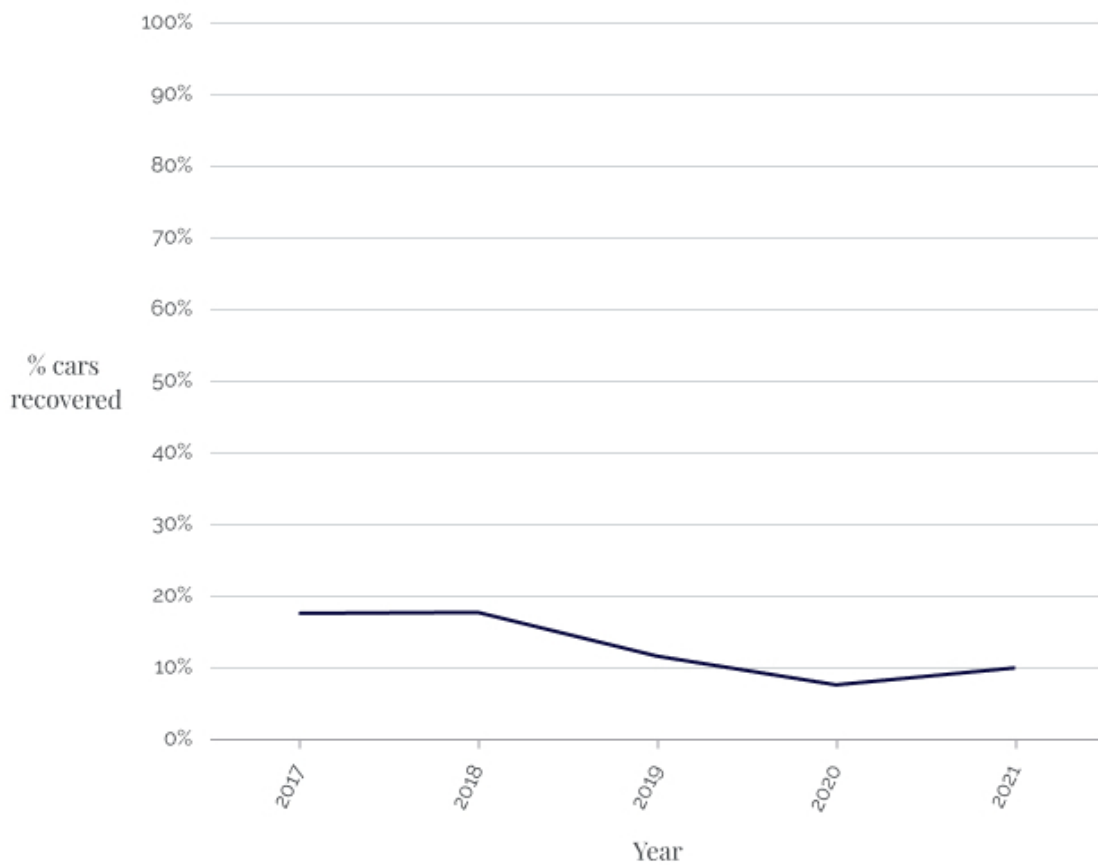
*A Report by the UChicago Justice Project*

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Chicago’s carjacking increase has weighed heavily on the minds of the public and elected officials with explanations ranging from youth seeking joyrides (Byrne 2021) to violent video games (Rockett 2021). Evidence for the city’s “youth joy riding” hypothesis, however, has been very weak especially as only 15% of carjacking incidents in 2020 resulted in an arrest (Dukmasova 2021). The city knows very little about the characteristics of most carjacking offenders. One key piece of information that would shed more light on carjacking is the percentage of carjacked vehicles that are recovered. If youth joyrides have, in fact, been driving the carjacking spike, then one would expect most cars to be recovered as the point of a joyride is to drive the car and not sell it. Multiple Alderpeople at city council hearings and journalists at press conferences have asked CPD for this information with no response.

Through a Freedom of Information Act request to the Chicago Police Department, we requested and received these data for 2017-2022. The data are available for download [here](#). Below are our major findings. Figure 1 shows that, since 2017, approximately less than 20% of carjacked vehicles in Chicago are recovered by the Chicago Police Department. Figure 1 also indicates that as the pandemic hit Chicago, the police department has been recovering even fewer of carjacked vehicles.

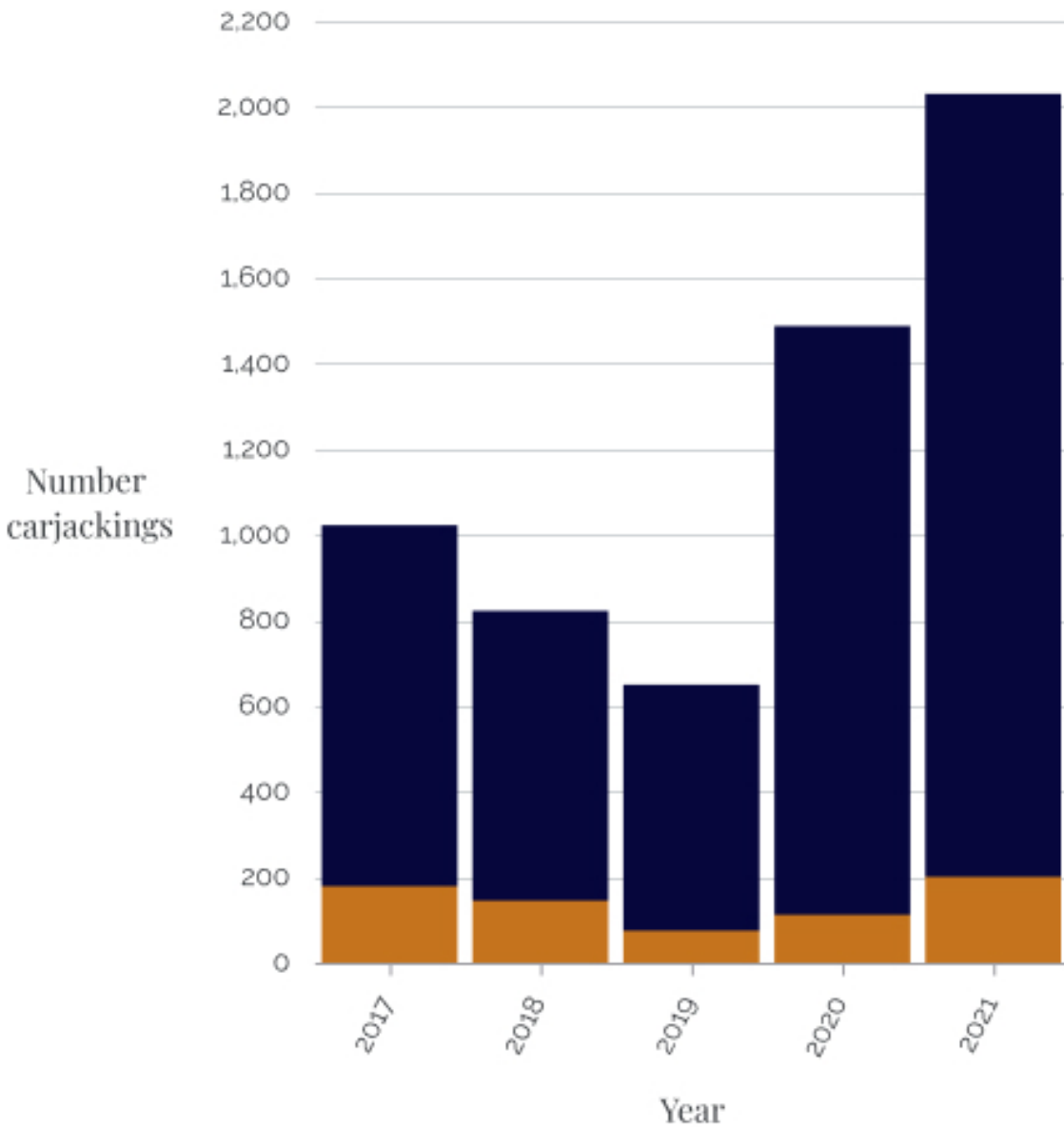
Figure 1: less than 20% of carjacked cars in Chicago are recovered each year



Source: Chicago Police Department data, recieved by FOIA request

Figure 2 shows the total number of recovered and non-recovered carjacked vehicles.

Figure 2: proportion of cars recovered has decreased as number of carjackings have increased

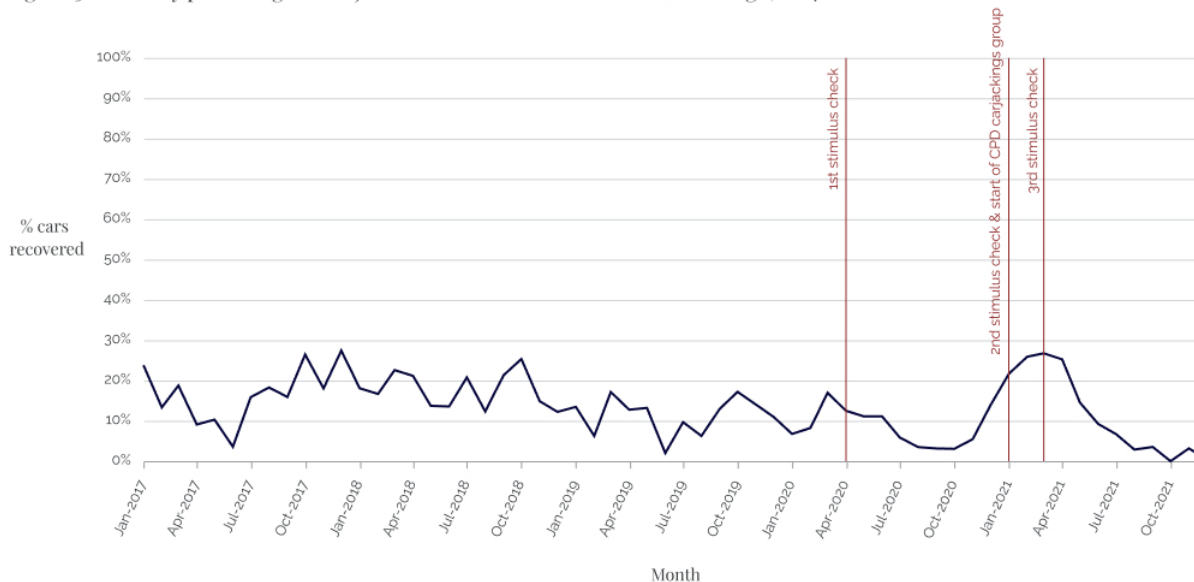


Source: Chicago Police Department data, recieved by FOIA request

If the majority of carjacking incidents are cases of youth seeking joyrides, these data indicate that something more is happening. Either these cars are being sold for profit, or carjacking offenders are really good at hiding vehicles after their joyride. Figure 3 is a time series graph that attempts to test alternative explanations for changes in carjacking from 2017-2021. One hypothesis put

forward by the Chicago Police Department has been that its carjacking taskforce contributed to a decline in carjackings. Another hypothesis is that the stimulus checks dispersed through the COVID relief bill may have reduced economic incentives for carjacking. Figure 3 illustrates no evidence to support either of these alternative explanations, as the timing of the stimulus checks and implementation of the carjacking task force had no visible impact on carjacking trends.

Figure 3: monthly percentage of carjacked cars that were recovered in Chicago, 2017-2021



Source: Chicago Police Department data, received by FOIA request

These findings are important for several reasons. The percent of recovered vehicles can shed light on the scale at which carjacking may be motivated by economics. As a panel on carjacking organized by Senator Dick Durbin made clear, carjacking is linked to the informal economy and fueled (in part) by the soaring price of used cars brought on by COVID-19 related supply chain issues (Vinicky 2022). Cars are not only stripped for parts and sold, they are also sold out of state. More information is needed to shed light on what is happening to the cars that are not getting recovered.

It is worth noting a few limitations of our analysis.<sup>1</sup> Just because only 20% of carjacked vehicles are recovered, does not mean that all of those cars have been sold in the informal economy. Some may have been abandoned and never found. Others may be sitting on an impound lot. The best source of information to clarify these issues would be car insurance companies whose claims data can bring greater clarity on what happened to each of these vehicles. Our efforts to reach out to Chicago’s largest private car insurance providers for these data have gone without

<sup>1</sup> Note, these data are from Chicago Police Department, and reflect a different dataset from the one used by Cook County Sheriff’s office. In an email exchange with the Cook County Sheriff’s office, Roe Conn stated that in the Cook County Sheriff carjackings data, “For 2021, there were 162 actual vehicles hijacked in the county of which 122 (75%) were recovered.”. This is contrasted with the greater than 2000 carjackings recorded by CPD in 2021. See this [report](#) from CBS News.

response. Despite these limitations, the fact that only 20% of carjacked vehicles are recovered raises very important questions that city leaders and the police department need to answer.

First, these data on recovered vehicles were not available to the public on the Chicago Data Portal, and it remains unclear why the Chicago Police Department refrained from providing this important information to the public. Was the city and police department intent on framing carjacking as a youth joy-riding problem before even looking at the data? Typically, police representatives claim that certain kinds of crime data cannot be posted publicly due to concerns over the privacy of crime victims. The data we acquired through a FOIA, however, do not contain sensitive personal information that could identify an individual victim. Concerns over privacy were not relevant in this case.

Second, the findings from this report illuminate the need for better public safety data systems that enable faster public access and scientific exchange on timely problems like carjacking. It should not take a FOIA request and over a year's worth of time to get an answer to a simple question about carjacking posed by city council members, journalists, and academic researchers. It should also be concerning to anyone who values sound public policy, scientific rigor, and academic freedom that so few of the Chicago area research labs actively collaborating with the police department were willing to question the Chicago Police Department's deeply flawed conclusions about the carjacking problem. Elsewhere, the UChicago Justice Project has written on the constraints and biases created when researchers sign proprietary data agreements with police departments (Vargas 2020; Vargas et al. 2022).

Finally, it's noteworthy that many of the flawed analyses of carjacking have called for increased investment in youth programming. Two things can be true simultaneously: 1) the city and state should invest more heavily in resources for youth, and 2) youth interventions may not reduce carjacking or the size of local informal economies. The findings from this report should not be interpreted as a call to divest from youth programming. Rather, the aim is to get stakeholders to recognize the flawed ways our city shares data about public safety and pursue alternatives that don't rely on police departments and their chosen data analysts as gatekeepers. It is imperative that the city, state, and philanthropy invest more heavily in independent, non-partisan, watchdog groups to ask the right questions and get the facts right about public safety.

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