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# FACT SHEET: UNDERSTANDING YOUTH CAR THEFTS

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## UNDERSTANDING JUVENILE CAR THEFTS - A NATIONAL ISSUE\*

Car thefts are a national issue. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, cities and towns across the country have seen an uptick in car thefts and break-ins. Cities such as New York City saw a 53% increase in car thefts in April 2020 compared to April 2019, and Seattle reported a 24% increase during peak COVID-19 shutdowns. The National Insurance Crime Bureau reported a 56% increase nationally in vehicle thefts with keys or fobs in the vehicle. Unlike many areas of the country, Connecticut has generally seen a substantial decline in car thefts over the last decade, including a 20% decline in 2019 from the previous year. There was also a 77% reduction in car thefts in Connecticut from its peak year in 1991 to record lows in 2019.

Despite the increase in car thefts, the data confirms that the rate of motor vehicle thefts (MVTs) in Connecticut continues to remain lower than the MVT rate at the national level and **the increase in car thefts can be directly tied to the COVID-19 pandemic**. Additionally, the data confirms that this issue is not exclusive to the young people in our state. In both 2019 and 2020, the percentage of individuals arrested for MVT who were under 18 was ~36%. The majority of thefts in both years were committed by individuals over the age of 18.

## WHEN DOES A CAR THEFT LEAD TO DETENTION?

In most cases, a young person is released to their parent's custody at the time of arrest with a summons to appear in court. As part of the court process, in most cases, the youth is assessed by probation and, if appropriate, placed on supervision if adjudicated for the offense and required to attend programs and services. In some cases, the young person is sent to juvenile detention on or after the first court hearing or transferred to the adult system. Current law also allows the court to incarcerate youth in a juvenile detention center at the time of arrest (or later) if the child poses a risk to public safety or there's a need to hold the child for failure to respond to court process.

## INCARCERATING YOUTH IN THE ADULT SYSTEM

If the charges against a child are particularly serious, a hearing can be held to transfer that case to the adult court. For children aged 15 to 17, the juvenile court is required to transfer very serious offenses to the adult docket, and has discretion to transfer less serious offenses. It is important to note that the majority of transferred youth in Connecticut are Black. A persistent concern in this state, the CT Department of Corrections prison housing youth charged as adults, Manson Youth Institution, is currently under federal investigation for civil rights violations.

## INCARCERATING YOUTH IN THE ADULT SYSTEM

We have seen time and again that detaining and incarcerating young people is ineffective at reducing youth crime. **While community concerns about crime are very important and should drive collective urgency regarding effective solutions, data does not support the claim that historical changes to our juvenile justice laws are causing an increase in auto thefts or car break-ins, particularly as most juvenile crime has steadily decreased in Connecticut, and car thefts are a national phenomenon.** Public dollars should invest in programs (existing and new) that have proven to be effective in Connecticut and other jurisdictions.

\*Data from the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU)

## INCARCERATING YOUTH IS NOT AN EFFECTIVE SOLUTION TO CAR THEFTS

- **Locking up youth is typically costly and ineffective.** Data shows that youth who are detained or incarcerated may be more likely to reoffend than their peers who aren't, meaning that using detention and incarceration can have the opposite effect that people are hoping for. According to the Judicial Branch of CT, Court Support Services Division, detention costs about \$800 per child per day. [In 2018, the average length of a stay in detention was 14 days](#) - that's \$11,200 spent each time we put a child in juvenile detention. [In 2021 the average length of a stay in detention was 23 days](#) - if the amount per day is the same, that's almost \$20,000 spent each time we put a child in juvenile detention.
- **Youth who receive long-term developmental services have lower rates of recidivism.** Those youth who enter the youth justice system for low level offenses often recidivate with higher offenses.
- **Locking up youth in adult prison does not address root issues.** According to a [recent state audit](#), the overwhelming majority of transferred boys, and all of the transferred girls, in the adult system during 2019 lived in families previously investigated for child abuse or neglect, often multiple times. The audit found that most boys in the system completed few or no programs while incarcerated. Young people will most likely be unable to change behaviors until their root issues are addressed and taken care of.
- **Our current system disproportionately harms Black and Brown youth.** Connecticut incarcerates youth of color at significantly higher rates than it does white youth.\*

\*Note: An additional fact sheet is forthcoming with statistics on race and ethnicity as it corresponds to detention and incarceration in Connecticut

## EFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO REDUCE CAR THEFTS

Stakeholders agree that children engaged in repeat car thefts are a very small number of youth. There are opportunities to enhance our current response of services and accountability to address their needs and hold youth accountable.

- **Strengthen investment in CT's car theft diversion program.** In 2019, the Connecticut Legislature passed PA 19-110, which created a program designed to deal specifically with motor vehicle theft by young people. The Act allows the court to suspend delinquency proceedings for up to 6 months to allow the child to participate in services aimed at addressing their needs and risks - factors that often contribute to the child committing the offense in the first place. If the child satisfactorily completes the services and complies with probation/court orders, the charge(s) can be dismissed. Per CSSD data, as of mid-December, 2020, approximately 60 kids had participated in the program and of those completing the program, more than 75% have had no subsequent arrest.
- **Invest dollars in programs that have proven track records with high need youth.** While Connecticut's juvenile justice system includes a variety of programs, it has struggled to create individualized service/supervision plans for higher need youth. We have not yet invested in or implemented programs that have proven effective with high risk youth in other states. Examples include Individualized Wrap/Supervision Programs, [Cure Violence](#), [Credible Messengers](#), (and [Credible Messengers Justice Center](#)) [Youth Advocate Programs](#), among others. We can reverse this trend now.
- **Invest in the youth of Connecticut.** No one reform will be able to fully address the many inequities present in our current system, but our state must move with urgency to invest in the futures of minority youth and historically underserved communities by beginning to address those injustices. Our systems must shift in how we prioritize the well-being of our young people, how we address normal adolescent misbehavior, and how we tackle the root causes of youth criminalization. Through our [#InvestInMeCT](#) campaign we seek to reduce the number of system-involved youth by addressing the root causes of youth criminalization.

## **YOUTH JUSTICE REFORMS**

The same juvenile justice reforms that people say are contributing to the increase in MVTs in 2020 were in place in 2019, when we had the lowest MVT rate since we started recording this data.

[There is no evidence that CT's "raise the age" law caused an increase in motor vehicle theft.](#) Raise the age (that young people can be charged as adults) went into effect in 2010 for 16 year olds and 2012 for 17 year olds. Property crimes were down in the 10-year period which included years prior to reforms and after reforms. On average, Connecticut's motor vehicle theft rate decreased after reforms.

### **When we talk about youth crime, how many kids are we talking about?**

- According to the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP) in 2020 there were 69,064 arrests in Connecticut. Of those, 3,833 (5.5% of all arrests) were under the age of 18 and 65,231 (94.5% of all arrests) were over the age of 18. Please note that if the same person was arrested more than once, they would show up in the system multiple times.

### **When we talk about car theft, how many kids are we talking about?**

- According to DESPP, there were approximately 8,400 motor vehicle thefts in 2020. Of those, police made an arrest in 671 cases (7.9% clearance rate). Of those arrested, there were 247 under the age of 18 (37% of all arrests) and 424 were over the age of 18 (63% of all arrests).
- In 2019, when we had the fewest number of car thefts ever recorded in Connecticut, police made an arrest in 656 cases. Of those arrested, there were 239 under the age of 18 (36% of all arrests) and 417 over the age of 18 (64% of all arrests). In other words, young people made up the same share of those arrested for motor vehicle theft in 2019 and 2020.

## **SUBURBAN & URBAN CONNECTICUT**

- Urban areas are no longer the epicenter of the auto theft problem. Instead, this issue is shifting to more suburban areas where the opportunity to commit these offenses is greater. Opportunity has increased in suburban areas over the last 10 years due to a greater saturation of keyless fob vehicle technology and owners leaving cars unlocked with the keys inside. Nationally, there has been a 93% increase in motor vehicle theft since 2013 with keys left inside.