



FACT SHEET: UNDERSTANDING JUVENILE CAR THEFTS

UNDERSTANDING JUVENILE CAR THEFTS - A NATIONAL ISSUE

Cities and towns in Connecticut and across the country are seeing an uptick in car thefts and break-ins during 2020. Certain cities outside Connecticut are experiencing significant increases: 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 shut downs. The National Insurance Crime Bureau reported there has been 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, (Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy/CCSU), and there is promising evidence that the state's new car theft diversion program is effective for participating youth.

While Connecticut's 2020 crime data is still being analyzed, including whether most car thefts are committed by adults or young people, some community members have raised concerns about whether our state's juvenile justice system is adequately addressing offenses by children, particularly those children seen as repeat offenders. Prolonged school and court closures, along with the lack of in-person services for many children are also contributing to current concerns about activity and mental health of young people.

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. However, if the police believe the child is a risk to public safety, they can ask a judge for an order to detain the child immediately (see below). 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.

After any arrest (including car thefts), the police can go to the court and ask the judge for an order to detain. Youth are sent to detention in Connecticut when:

- There is probable cause that the young person committed the offense and is considered a risk to public safety. This includes a look at the history of offenses
- The young person is considered to be a risk not to appear in court or fails to follow court orders
- The young person needs to be held for a different jurisdiction

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 and the CT Department of Corrections prison housing young men charged as adults, Manson Youth Institution, is currently under federal investigation for civil rights violations.

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 2020 the average length of a stay in detention was 25 days](#) - if the amount per day is the same, that's \$20,000 spent each time we put a child in juvenile detention.
- **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.

COST 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.
- **Return children to school and services as safely and quickly as possible.** It is vital that we ensure schools and community providers have the support and resources to safely return children to school and services as soon as possible. Variations in school district and community approaches to schooling and services during COVID-19 may exacerbate problems for high need youth.

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 effective in Connecticut and other jurisdictions.