

Research News

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Applying the brakes on auto theft

BY SEAN MOORE
Research Promotion

Since 2003, researchers at nine Canadian universities have been studying motor vehicle theft and, suitably, the researcher coordinating the project resides here, in the car theft capital of North America.

"The problem is the youth culture here," Sociologist Rick Linden said. "Auto theft has become such a deep-seated part of this culture that it's not an easy problem to eliminate."

It wasn't always like this, though.

In the early 1990s, auto theft numbers were respectably low, at fewer than 2,000 a year. But by the mid-90s the number jumped to 8,000 a year, and in 2004 – the worst year on record – roughly 9,000 cars were stolen.

"Today's problem," Linden said, "is still enormous."

In the national research project, which has been funded by the AUTO21 Network of Centres of Excellence, researchers have been interviewing youths convicted of auto theft to learn why they stole cars – information that could guide new programs to prevent them and others from doing it.

In simplified terms, Linden said, Winnipeg cars are stolen for two reasons. The first is culture – stealing cars provides excitement, recreation, a mode of transportation, and in some instances, clique acceptance.

The second reason is the vulnerability of the targets – many cars in Winnipeg are of the easy-to-take variety.

The latter problem is being tackled by Manitoba Public Insurance's electronic immobilizer program that has equipped over 75,000 cars to date, and is now mandatory for Manitoba's most at-risk vehicles.

Rick Linden
Department of Sociology

To be sure, cars with immobilizers have been stolen, not because the equipment was defeated, but because the keys were left in the car. Linden plans to follow up on these anecdotal tales to learn more about this apparent negligence.

Youth culture, however, is the biggest impetus to car theft, and it is difficult to change. Linden said it took a series of successes and failures to develop the newest, seemingly effective, strategy.

"I was surprised at how extensive



Submitted photo

Rick Linden, sociology, is heading a national study examining car theft.

this was in certain parts of Winnipeg," he said. "Normally you think it's a fad and that kids will get over it. Still, we tried a whole bunch of different measures and the rates started to go down so we thought, 'OK, we're on the right track.' But the rates popped up again, and it became apparent that we would need a massive initiative to counter it."

Linden co-chairs the Manitoba Auto Theft Task Force, a government advisory group. Thanks to their work and research involving partners like Manitoba Public Insurance, the Winnipeg Police Service and Manitoba Corrections, things are looking up.

"We've taken a very comprehensive approach," he said.

Their tactics are numerous. For starters, at-risk children who have not stolen vehicles are being taught about the dangers of stealing cars. In the meantime, probation officers work with offenders' parents and teachers to identify and address personal issues.

What's more, convicted youths are made to attend workshops and, borrowing an idea from Regina, police and probation officers are enforcing curfews on offenders. Also, after-school programs are being set up to provide legitimate forms of recreation.

"Locking offenders up doesn't really stop them. It stops them while they're locked up, but when they return to the street they're back at it. That's why we have to take this multi-faceted approach."

So far this year, auto theft is down over 25 per cent in Winnipeg compared with 2006.

A healthy lifestyle - do you have one?

BY SEAN MOORE
Research Promotion

It can be hard to resist the temptations of being lazy, and eating fat and sugar, but you can, and if you want to sustain a healthy lifestyle, you must.

That's the message physical therapy professor Dean Kriellaars will share when he speaks at *Get to Know Research at Your University* on Nov. 28 (details below).

Kriellaars said there are two well-known aspects of a healthy lifestyle that have been recognized since the time of the Ancient Greeks: eat well and exercise often.

But somehow, over the last few decades, the western world has allowed this maxim to slowly erode. So now, the pernicious thinking goes, if you're not obese or overweight, you're healthy.

"It's not obesity that's the issue," Kriellaars said, "and that's what everyone looks at. The question is, 'how did you get fat?'"

There are many answers. For starters, dinner plates have surreptitiously expanded over the years, and portions followed suit. But more importantly, exercise, if it were an animal, has become endangered.

Kriellaars has conducted numerous studies looking into previously ignored areas of healthy living. He has

outfitted rural and urban children with pedometers (to measure steps) and accelerometers (to measure movement intensity) for upwards of 16 weeks. What he found, time and time again, is that children are dangerously inactive during the week. And on weekends, when leisure time is plentiful, they move even less than their paltry weekday average of 10,000 steps a day.

Children, Kriellaars found, need about 15,000 steps a day to keep adipose at bay and maintain bones and muscles. But 10,000 steps is a fine minimum for adults.

In a study about to be published in the journal *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, Kriellaars examined the amount of time various elementary students spent exercising and compared that to their Body Mass Index (BMI), a measure of a person's body fat indicated by the person's weight relative to height.

No child who was active for 90 minutes or more each day was obese.

"Does that show exercise prevents obesity? I'd say so."

Other numbers tell other tales. For example, 38 per cent of children that spent less than 60 minutes a day had good BMI.

"Sure, they're not fat – yet," said Kriellaars. "But that also means their



Photo by Wayne Foster

Dean Kriellaars, physiotherapy, has been conducting research on what constitutes a healthy lifestyle.

bones, heart, lungs, and muscle development wouldn't be good, so they're not healthy."

Kriellaars calls them PARK kids – physically at-risk kids – and they are the ones prevention efforts are now homing in on.

Kriellaars has become a leading expert in the field of healthy living. Indeed, he also works for Manitoba's Minister of Healthy Living, and he has collected unique data in a variety of

exercise-related areas.

He will speak about his work in his presentation, "A healthy lifestyle – I didn't know I didn't have one!" as part of the *Get to Know Research at Your University* speaker series. It takes place at 7 p.m. on November 28 in the Smartpark boardroom, located at 135 Innovation Drive. Admission is free and all are welcome. For more information please call 474-9020.

Bringing Research To Life

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Comments, submissions and event listings to:
stefaniu@ms.umanitoba.ca
Phone: (204) 474-9020 Fax (204) 261-3475