

**Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparity
in the Criminal Justice System
Statement on Motor Vehicle Thefts
and Juvenile Justice Policies**

*Hon. Lubbie Harper, Jr.
Chair*

There has been much talk as of late about who or what is to blame for the uptick in car thefts, and other property crimes, across the state. The newly enacted Police Accountability bill, a little over a decade old Raise the Age law, other reforms to the juvenile justice system have been targeted by some as root causes of the increase in motor vehicle thefts (MVT). While it is fair to acknowledge this increase between 2019 and 2020, doing so void of any contextual information and scapegoating youth as the predominant perpetrators of these crimes is inadequate and misleading. *The State of Connecticut Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparity in the Criminal Justice System* strongly opposes the misrepresentation of the issue and the narrow frame with which this issue is being presented.

The criminal justice system is the only system within which the state can rescind one's liberty and freedom, it can also impose other serious and life-altering consequences. Therefore, we must all accept the great responsibility for generating and broadcasting an accurate and contextual understanding of criminal justice-related issues. The responsibility is no greater than when the individuals targeted in criminal justice discussions are children. Therefore, the commission wants to first point out the facts regarding this matter.

Connecticut recorded its lowest number of motor vehicle thefts in the history of collecting such data in 2019, indicating a 77% reduction from its peak in 1991. The uptick we experienced in 2020 followed both national and international trends that started at the beginning of the pandemic. However, Connecticut's rate remained below the national rate and followed an unprecedented decrease between 2018 and 2019. According to data made publicly available by the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection, CT began to experience an increase in MVT in April 2020, mirroring the time COVID-19 impacted the state. Those impacts included a halt to in-person schooling, social, leisure, structured activities, and other educational programs for juveniles. Prior to these significant societal disruptions, MVT during the first two months of 2020 continued to follow the historic low trend rates of 2019. A 2020 report published by the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB) noted "considerations such as the pandemic, economic downturn, loss of juvenile outreach programs, and public safety budgetary and resource limitations are likely contributing factors."

The conversation in Connecticut has been centered around two reforms efforts. According to researchers at the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy at UConn, there is no evidence to

substantiate the claim that CT's decades old Raise the Age law nor the Police Accountability bill was the driving factor to the increase in MVT. In fact, the data show that the MVT rate *decreased* after the Raise the Age law took effect. Those same juvenile justice reforms that some profess are driving factors for the recent increase in thefts were in place in 2019, when CT had its lowest number of thefts in decades. Moreover, it has historically been challenging to fully understand who is committing these offenses since arrests are rare. In 2020 only 7% of MVT cases resulted in an arrest which is comparable to the arrest rate for previous years. Of those arrested, only 35% were under the age of 18. Although law enforcement professionals do their best to solve these crimes, they are challenging crimes to solve. The low arrest rate seems to indicate that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem.

Some have argued for harsher penalties for offenders as a deterrent to this crime. Connecticut does not need to look far to determine if harsher penalties would be an effective tool for reducing crime. Throughout the 1990s, when arguably Connecticut had a "tough on crime" approach and arrested far more juveniles, there was an average of 19,000 motor vehicle thefts each year. This is a far cry from the 8,400 thefts that occurred in 2020.

The public discourse in recent months has also focused on the recent police reforms made in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. While the impact of those reforms will need to be evaluated in the years ahead, the increase in MVTs began well before such a bill was even contemplated. Additionally, while Connecticut implemented police reform policies during the summer of 2020, states like Missouri passed much different legislation, and yet they experienced a similar increase in motor vehicle thefts. Missouri passed a "law enforcement bill of rights," which provides officers with additional special legal protections and closes files to police misconduct. According to the NICB, Missouri had the fourth-highest auto theft rate in the country in 2020.

We believe it would be harmful to undo juvenile justice reform that, according to the data, had a significantly positive effect on reducing juvenile crime in the last decade.

If we truly want to get at the root causes and solve the MVT issue in CT, then we must be honest about the issues at hand – the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is harming health, social, material well-being, and mental health for all in our community, including our children.

Policymakers should focus on continuing to address the impact of COVID-19 on youth and children involved in criminal activity. They should acknowledge the connection between the impact on social engagement, general well-being, documented increase in domestic violence, and the increase in child mental health issues since COVID-19. There has been a bipartisan outpouring of empathy and concern for children struggling with mental health issues because of the pandemic. Our political leaders must acknowledge that these children are children, and they are one and the same. The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on youth, we must support them through programming efforts and rehabilitation.

Advocating for punitive policy in response to a highly sensationalized narrative threatens to return the state to a "tough on crime" mentality that is rooted in fear and bias and disproportionately impacts Black and Brown members of our communities. The emotional nature of the rhetoric being used is not only dangerous because of the anger and fear it provokes but

also because it distracts attention away from finding and implementing evidence-based solutions to the MVT problems – investing in rehabilitative services and programs and reminding folks to take preventative actions like not leaving their keys in their car or their key fobs too close to their vehicle (according to NICB since 2013 there has been a 93% increase in MVT due to keys being left inside the vehicle).

Importantly, we cannot ignore the fact that racially minoritized communities bore the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of health outcomes, housing, employment, and being twice as likely to contract COVID-19. We can think of no worse time to push for policies that would inflict disproportionate harm on racially minoritized communities most affected and still reeling from the effects of this virus.

As an organization charged with seeking to eliminate the racial and ethnic disparity in our state's criminal justice system, it would be remiss of us to overlook the racially charged undertones embedded in the politicization of this issue across the state. This commission has worked diligently to mitigate the influence and impact of implicit biases in our state's justice system—through training and conferences wherein members of state and local law enforcement, public defenders, prosecutors, and other community leaders come together to learn about how these biases affect our behavior. The current public dialogue around this issue is directly undermining this important work.

It is overwhelmingly clear from the data that the 2020 increase in auto thefts is directly correlated to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our hope is to steer attention and investment towards supporting the evidence-based solutions proven to be effective at lowering the MVTs rates and keeping *all* our communities safe.