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# Establishing Connections: Gender, Motor Vehicle Theft, and Disposal Networks

Christopher W. Mullins

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [mullinsc@siu.edu](mailto:mullinsc@siu.edu)

Michael Cherbonneau

*University of Missouri – Saint Louis*

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**Christopher W. Mullins**  
**Southern Illinois University Carbondale**

**Michael Cherbonneau**  
**University of Missouri – Saint Louis**

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Direct all correspondence to Christopher W. Mullins, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 4226 Faner Hall Mail code 4504 Southern Illinois University, Carbondale IL 62901.  
[mullinsc@siu.edu](mailto:mullinsc@siu.edu)

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## **ABSTRACT**

As with most other serious street crimes, motor vehicle theft is a male-dominated offense. Yet, women do engage in motor vehicle theft, albeit at a reduced rate of participation. Here we examine the gendered nature of motor vehicle theft through direct comparison of qualitative data obtained from 35 juvenile and adult men and women actively involved auto theft in St. Louis, Missouri. By tracing similarities and differences between men's and women's pathways of initial involvement, enactment strategies, and post-theft acts, we provide a contextual analysis of offender's perceptions and behavior. Such an approach allows a more precise discussion on gender's influence (or lack of) on motor vehicle theft. Analysis shows that initiation into auto theft and property disposal networks are governed by male gatekeepers, and this leads to some key similarities in techniques between men and women. The ways in which women negotiate male-dominated networks is also discussed with particular emphasis on the innovative strategies they draw upon to accomplish their crimes within these landscapes and when opportunities are constrained by male gatekeepers.

**Keywords: Motor Vehicle Theft, Gender, Social Networks, Property Crime**

The past 15 years has witnessed the emergence of a rich body of literature devoted to understanding how gender structures the accomplishment of specific crimes. The preminent research in this vein uncovers gender similarities and differences through direct comparison of

male and female accounts of their participation in street crime (Miller 2002). The general consensus within comparative work on gender is that while some overlap in men's and women's experiences with street crime exist—for example motives and (to a lesser extent) enactment strategies—there is also significant divergence—for example pathways into crime, initiation experiences, criminal network ties, and so-called “hypothetical desistance” (Brookman et al. 2007; Mullins and Wright 2003; Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004; Miller 1998).

The list of crimes examined to come to these conclusions include male and female gang members (Campbell 1993; Miller 2001), residential burglars (Decker et al. 1993; Mullins and Wright 2003), strong-arm and armed robbers (Brookman et al. 2007; Campbell 1993; Miller 1998), and persons involved in retaliatory and assaultive violence (Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004). Noticeably absent from these gendered comparisons of specific crimes is motor vehicle theft. This is surprising given that “[c]ars have long served as objects for men to position themselves in terms of masculinity, enabling an elaborated performance of the masculine” (Best 2006: 89). In fact the masculine nature of car culture in general and car theft in particular is assumed to be masculine in nature. Yet, women *do* steal cars as well. An understanding of auto theft participation by females can contribute to existing debates about their role in common street crime and the ways in which they negotiate the many layers of male-dominated space within the criminal underworld. It can also shine light on various interactional dynamics that shape motor vehicle theft experiences.

In the pages that follow, we examine the gendered nature of motor vehicle theft through direct comparison of qualitative data obtained from 35 individuals actively involved in auto theft in St. Louis, Missouri. By tracing similarities and differences between men's and women's pathways of initial involvement, enactment procedures, and methods for selling stolen vehicles

and vehicle parts, we provide a contextual analysis of offender's perceptions and behavior. Such an approach allows for a more precise discussion on gender's influence (or lack of) on motor vehicle theft.

## **CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT**

Motor vehicle theft is a serious property crime that accounted for 11% of all property offense reported, with nearly 1.1 million stolen vehicles—one out of every 232 registered nationwide—reported stolen in 2007 (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] 2008, Federal Highway Administration 2008). Like most other serious crimes, it is also profoundly gendered in its commission. Among the 12.6% of auto thefts cleared by arrest in 2007, the ratio of male to female arrestees was 4.6 to 1 (FBI 2008). While imprecise, the gendered division of motor vehicle theft in measures of apprehended individuals is corroborated by other data sources such as “Monitoring the Future” (see Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2003: Table 3.44) and also seems to hold in other industrialized nations (Graham and Bowling 1995: Tables C1, C2; Henderson 1994; O'Connor and Kelly 2006; Roe and Ashe 2008: Table 2.1; Walker, Butland, and Connell 2000; Yates 2003/4). Despite its commonality, motor vehicle theft is less studied than other property offenses (Clarke and Harris 1992). This pattern of neglect has begun to change owing to the score or so of studies published within the past two decades that explore the offense in detail and at varying units of analysis (Cherbonneau and Wright 2009). Yet, the majority deal directly with offender perceptions, mostly examining offenders from outside the United States (e.g., Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom). Further, the offender-based literature is dominated by male perspectives (e.g., Copes 2003a, 2003b).

To date, most work on gender and car theft has focused on the ubiquitous use of stolen cars by young men for so-called “joyriding,” attributing these actions to masculinity enactment

(Henderson 1994; Walker et al. 2000; Williams 2005). Due to this assumption of masculinity, little prior research has directly compared male and female experiences. To date, only one study situates men and women's experiences in motor vehicle theft within the purview of gender. Drawing from interviews with 17 young people (five women and 12 men) under correctional supervision in Eastern Ontario, O'Connor and Kelly (2006: 263) explored the relationship between gender and car stealing, concluding that "[t]he most salient point to understand about young people's participation in auto theft is that it involves an intersection of masculinities, femininities and car culture."

While insightful, O'Connor and Kelly (2006) treated motor vehicle theft as a gendered crime in its own right and framed male and female accounts around the symbolic meanings of car culture and thus did not demonstrate conclusively the impact of gender on auto theft participation. In accordance with a majority of offender-based research on auto theft (Kilpatrick 1997), the O'Connor and Kelly sample was based on young offenders recruited through criminal justice channels in Canada and their responses may not be representative of currently active offenders elsewhere. The youthfulness of their sample is also problematic as perceptions and decision-making of auto thieves have been linked to age and experience (Light, Nee, and Ingham 1993; Slobodian and Browne 1997; Spencer 1992; Stephen and Squires 2003).

Like burglary, auto theft appears to be a "social crime" (see Mullins and Wright 2003); or at least begins as such; few thieves begin careers stealing cars on their own (Dawes 2002; Kilpatrick 1997; Light et al. 1993; Spencer 1992; Stephen and Squires 2003). Instead, initiation into auto theft is facilitated through interaction with neighborhood peers, usually older and more experienced males. Novices learn from these "technical advisors" (Fleming, Brantingham, and Brantingham, 1994) the skill-set needed to steal cars through a role best described as an

“apprenticeship” (Light et al. 1993; Spencer 1992). Group status is stratified by skill (but see Stephen and Squires 2003). Initially, novices typically are relegated to the role of “lookout” and passenger, although in many cases thieves move quickly from apprentices to co-offenders (Light et al. 1993; Fleming 2003). Those who persist may eventually offend independently or form their own crews. Dawes (2002: 203) summed it up best stating “the peer group is central in providing the catalyst for [young offenders] introduction and continuation to car theft and joyriding behavior. . . . [It] provides a structure for the advancement in status for young joyriders to learn the skills of car theft and to graduate to the status of leader of a joyriding crew.”

As car theft and disposal are group activities lodged within social networks, the nature and composition of those networks will influence car thieves lived experiences. The “graduation” Dawes (2002) speaks of will be mediated by the nature of the networks individuals have exposure to and experiences within. Underworld street networks are male dominated with gatekeepers drawing upon rigid, sexist assumptions about the personalities and abilities of women vis-à-vis criminal action. Thus, women often have difficulty gaining access to street-based criminal networks (Messerschmidt 1997; Steffensmeier 1983; Steffensmeier and Terry 1986). Where women have gained access to these networks, it is often through male relatives or romantic partners who can vouch for their skills and steadfastness (Mullins and Wright 2003). Thus, these “apprenticeship” experiences should have a situational gendered element to them.

Little is known about tactics and the network experiences of female car thieves and even less is known about potential interactions of gender with these actions. Recent comparative work has demonstrated that motivation and sometimes enactment strategies can be more similar than different among male and female offenders (Miller 1998; Mullins and Wright 2003; Mullins et al. 2004). And while convergence is as important as divergence in establishing the extent that

any given behavior is strongly gendered, Miller (2002) cautions about the over application of a gendered lens in qualitative analysis as well as reinforcing the need to carefully contextualize social actors' perceptions within both broader and narrower environments. Even though aggregate data suggest that there are clear gender differences in offense participation (which appears to be the case with auto theft), careful exploration of perceptions and experiences of both men and women involved in diverse forms of crime are needed. This idea is the starting point of the analyses presented here. Our goal is to examine female auto thieves' perceptions of their offending and in an explicitly comparative fashion by directly comparing women's accounts with those of men involved in motor vehicle theft.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

Data for this study were derived from open-ended qualitative interviews with active auto thieves recruited from the streets of St. Louis, Missouri. The St. Louis Metropolitan Area (which extends into Illinois) has a population of just over 2.8 million, but St. Louis City itself is much smaller, having only about 354,000 residents. St. Louis City is beset by high rates of criminal offending. St. Louis is a prototypical "rust belt" city, suffering from rapid deindustrialization and corresponding population decline, which began in the 1950s and continues apace. Many of those with sufficient capital to flee the city have done so, often to nearby suburban counties (Laslo, 2004), taking much of the tax base with them.<sup>1</sup> Decades of exodus have left the city with a large "urban underclass" (Wilson, 1987). St. Louis outpaces most of its urban peers in rates of virtually all forms of serious crime (Decker, Rojek, and Baumer, 2004; Rosenfeld and Decker, 1996) and, very recently, in auto theft. In 2006, for instance, the motor vehicle theft rate stood at over six times the national average (FBI, 2007). What is more, of the 95 largest cities in the United States, St. Louis ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in auto theft in 2003—nearly 30% higher than the auto theft

rate of second-ranked Detroit (Rosenfeld and Fornango, 2004). The sheer number of auto theft offenses and offenders in St. Louis makes it an excellent site for a field-based study of auto theft.

We recruited and interviewed 35 active auto thieves. Thirty of the interviews were conducted during 2006. The remaining five were done the following year to clarify and amplify empirical issues raised by the earlier interviews. Potential interviewees were identified by a specially trained project fieldworker—a streetwise African-American male with a strong reputation for integrity in St. Louis’ criminal underworld. The fieldworker began by approaching personal acquaintances involved in auto theft. He then built on these initial contacts through referrals from the auto thieves themselves. To enhance cooperation, interviewees were paid \$50 for their participation. Although this is a fairly modest sum, it is symbolically important to street offenders; doing something for nothing is sacrilege to members of the criminal underworld (Wright and Decker, 1994, 1997; Jacobs and Wright, 2006).

In order to be eligible for our study, potential interviewees had to: (1) have committed at least one auto theft in the month prior to being interviewed; (2) have done five or more auto thefts in their lives; and (3) consider themselves to be actively involved in auto theft. Most of the offenders interviewed met all three criteria, but a few did not. Given these criteria, we made every effort to recruit both males and females of varying ages (16 years and over). We base this on literature that suggests perceptions and decision-making of auto thieves vary according to age, gender, and experience (e.g., Light et al. 1993; O’Connor and Kelly 2006; Slobodian and Browne 1997; Spencer 1992).

The auto thieves ranged in age from 17 to 49, with a mean age of 27 years. Twenty-seven were male and eight were female. All of the respondents were African-American (see appendix A). The sample, on average, had completed 11 years of education, with two entering the 12<sup>th</sup>

grade at the time of the interview. Twelve of our subjects were high school dropouts, typically leaving school by the tenth grade while the majority had at least a high school education, with 15 who completed high school or a GED and another six who completed a vocational program or some college. Only eight of our subjects held a legitimate job at the time of the interview despite the high number with high school or higher education. Although some respondents said they were actively looking for work, most were committed to an admixture of illegal endeavors for their main source of income with drug sales and auto theft the most common mentioned activities toward this end. The average age at which respondents committed their first auto theft was 15, though many had been in or around stolen cars prior to this.

Respondents were located through snowball sampling, a chain referral method intended for sampling hidden populations (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Wright and Stein 2004). Locating active street criminals in this way begins invariably with a gatekeeper; usually, one or more key informants with ties to categorically relevant populations (Glassner and Carpenter 1985). The gatekeeper for this project was a street-based fieldworker: an African-American male in his late twenties. Though in the desistance stage of his criminal career, he is by all accounts a revered member of the local criminal underworld and maintains ties to all manner of miscreants. His résumé of fieldwork with researchers from the St. Louis area evidences his ability to locate and recruit individuals immersed in urban street culture and various forms of street crime (e.g., Jacobs, with Wright 2000; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Rosenfeld, Jacobs, and Wright 2003; Topalli and Wright 2004; Topalli, Wright, and Fornango 2002). At the time he was introduced to us, he was well informed of the prospects and pitfalls associated with identifying potential respondents, verifying their eligibility, and encouraging their cooperation.

The fieldworker initiated the recruitment process by approaching individuals in his immediate network he knew to be involved in auto theft and asked them to share their knowledge and experiences during an in-depth interview. He explained our research objectives and informed prospects in the field that the interview was confidential, no legally identifiable information would be sought, and most assuredly, law enforcement was in no way involved in the research. To provide encouragement for participation, those who consented to the interview were paid \$50. To expand the sample into new networks (or because eligible participants could no longer be culled from the initial pool of active auto thieves), the recruiter capitalized on referrals provided by the initial source of recruits who serve as “sampling seeds” (see Heckathorn 1997; Wang et al. 2005). Since the recruiter began with individuals from his immediate network, the first twenty or so tended to look like him: between the age of 20 and 30, African-American, and male (see Appendix A). As sampling progressed and responses became redundant, we instructed the fieldworker to focus recruitment and sampling at groups that were underrepresented theretofore, namely female auto thieves. From that point forward, women were sought until no additional recruits could be found; the fieldworker was also paid a monetary fee for each successful recruitment.

As reported elsewhere, payment is symbolically important to street offenders and recruiters alike for the very fact that such individuals live in a world where “time is money and nobody ever does anything for nothing” (Jacobs and Wright 2006:12). Accordingly, many previous researchers have paid active offenders for their cooperation (see, e.g., Cromwell and Olson 2004; Jacobs 1996; Rengert and Wasilchick 1989), using sums ranging from as low as \$20 to well over \$100, depending on the time involved and the nature of the information being sought. Whether paying participants affected the data we obtained is difficult to determine with

great precision. If some were able to deceive us thereby participating in the interview merely for the money but otherwise lacked the requisite experiences, the accounts they provided should differ substantially from those interviewees with real auto theft experience. Although we do not believe this to be the case, none of the narratives appears unauthentic. It is also possible that some offenders provided accounts of thefts they had witnessed or heard about rather than participated directly themselves. To the extent that this occurred, the information analyzed here would be very similar and thus, would not question the overall validity of our findings. Lastly, it is always possible that interviewees exaggerated the number of thefts they participated in or misrepresented when they occurred. As these elements are of no empirical interest here, our findings are unaffected by this potential bias.

The precise relationship of this sample to larger populations of theoretical and substantive interest is unknown and unknowable because a sampling frame for auto thieves' representation in the general population does not exist (Glassner and Carpenter 1985). Nevertheless, it clearly over-represents African-Americans. This reflects the fact that the criminal underworld in St. Louis is strongly segregated along racial lines as black and white offenders display a marked tendency to "stick to their own kind" (Wright and Decker 1997). Thus, the fact that our fieldworker was African-American meant that he had little or no opportunity to recruit white offenders—he simply did not know any. In any case, over 80 percent of those arrested for auto theft in St. Louis City and County in 2006—the period during which most of our fieldwork was carried out—were African-American (Missouri Uniform Crime Reporting Program 2009).

Due to the nature of non-probabilistic sampling and "snowball" and chain-referral methods in particular, it is possible that many of the women we located were from one established streetlife network. Recognizing this, we cannot make broad generalizations of our

findings beyond the data itself. An immutable limitation of our study is however, its sample size—particularly in the number female participants. The issue of appropriate sample size, especially as it relates to the ability to achieve data saturation, has been long debated in qualitative research. Previous researchers have offered suggestions that range from samples as low as six to upwards of 100 respondents, depending on the methods being used, degree of sample heterogeneity, and the objectives of the research (Kuzel 1999; Morse 1994; Sandelowski 1995). The only study to go beyond such “rules of thumb” about sample size is the recent “soft” experimental work of Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) who explored the degree of data saturation in semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 60 women in two West African countries. They found that nearly all major codes and their core meaning were established within the first 12 interviews and these codes had the greatest thematic prevalence throughout the data and even across study sites. Thus, most major themes in qualitative interviewing tend to be uncovered and saturated early during data collection, especially the types of meta-themes we examine here. Additionally, many recent qualitative investigations to appear in top-tier journals and also directly compare male and female accounts have relied on similarly small samples of women. For example, O’Connor and Kelly (2006) interviewed five women, Mullins and Wright (2003) eighteen, Miller (1998) fourteen, and Mullins et al. (2004) twelve. Thus, our sample of eight females falls within the range of recent work. They also resemble local arrest patterns—11 to 15% of those arrested for auto theft in St. Louis City and St. Louis County in 2006 were female (Missouri Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2009). Where female offenders are rare, it will always be difficult to sample them. Would our study data be richer with the addition of four or more women? Undoubtedly yes. Would the key themes we uncover change? According to Guest et al. (2006), it would be highly unlikely. Thus, with the experimental work of Guest and

co-authors in mind, we are confident in the validity of the information we uncovered in the female narratives.

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in a private room. Open-ended questions and related probes focused on the circumstances of interviewees' initial involvement in motor vehicle theft and detailed descriptions of their most recent theft(s), including their thoughts and actions before, during, and after such crimes. Other topics we addressed included respondents' lifestyle, motivations to commit auto theft, the target selection process and enactment strategies, methods used to dispose of stolen property, perceived risks and rewards of participating in motor vehicle theft, and perspectives on and interactions with opposite sex offenders. The interviews began with a specific set of questions, but turned more conversational as the interview progressed, thereby giving respondents significant freedom to digress.

Interviews on average lasted 70 minutes. All that was said was digitally recorded with the respondent's permission (all granted us permission to record) and three transcriptionists were hired to create a near-verbatim textual account of the interview. The thirty-five transcripts were proofread against the audio by the primary interviewer to minimize error associated with so-called "transcriptionist effects" (see MacLean, Meyer, and Estable 2004). This ensured the accurate and consistent textual documentation of each conversation, especially with regard to auto theft-related terminology, technical jargon, local landmark and ecological descriptions, and street slang. To protect their anonymity and confidentiality, the interviewees were asked to provide us with only an alias (typically a "street" or nickname).

### **INITIATION INTO AUTO THEFT**

Acquiring the necessary skills to commit a crime begins with the process of being exposed to the crime itself. Almost invariably, the men and women we interviewed were initially

exposed to auto theft within the context of joyriding. Everyone mentioned riding in stolen cars in their early teens, and doing so with some frequency. Simply, the neighborhoods they grew up in were flush with opportunities to observe and interact with individuals bearing both the requisite attitudes and knowledge to initiate an individual into motor vehicle theft.

As with other street crime, auto theft requires a basic set of skills. An individual's introduction to stealing cars coincides with their acquiring this necessary technical expertise. While brute force can be used to gain entry into the vehicle, some dexterity and basic technical skills are required to defeat the vehicle's ignition. Complex knowledge is not compulsory, although a familiarity with certain vehicle parts and their operation is essential. As expected, almost everyone in our sample—32 out of 35 respondents—discussed a period of learning how to steal a car; particularly “breaking down” the steering wheel column and/or tampering with ignitions. Thirty-one of the 32 thieves who were coached by others received instruction from neighborhood peers or family members whose source of criminal tutelage was likewise acquired from others in a social context.

Asked how they became involved in auto theft, Goldie's comments were typical regardless of gender: “Well hanging out with [a] couple older guys, you know, they showed me the ropes. . . . [W]hat cars to target and what cars you can't steal...that's how I got into it. . . . Just hanging with older guys, they showed me.” About half of the sample—both men and women—discussed being taken along on their first theft as a lookout while an older co-offender would physically steal the car. Typically, this role was taken for a few weeks or months before the initiate would be the one responsible for most of the “theft work.” Some of the men and women traced a majority of their learning to the time spent riding in cars stolen by peers and observed them start and stop vehicles until they figured out how to replicate the basic procedure.

For others, the learning experiences were more structured. Offenders were shown how to effect entry and bypass the ignition, but also informed of the types of cars to target, those that require different techniques, how to check for alarms, and presuppositions about the efforts by police to recover stolen vehicles such as search patterns, “hot sheets,” and the length of time in which vehicles can be “safely” displayed in public. Formal learning was common among those who began as lookouts and was especially the case among those affiliated with tight-knit crews. J’s initiation into “vehicle-taking” was typical among predominantly male crews:

When I was doing it my first time it was one person with me . . . He made sure I did it right and shit . . . You got to do it real quick so he made sure I get it done and shit. . . . It was sort of like an initiation type of thing...once you steal your first car, you know they ain’t worried about you stealing your second ‘cause... you know how to do it and shit. So, I knew they knew I knew how to do it so that was like my initiation.

Once the basic proficiencies of car stealing were honed, men and women alike tended to pass on this knowledge. One such person was Killa who, at the time of the interview, was serving as “technical advisor” (Fleming et al. 1994) to younger males in his neighborhood:

Killa: I’m like switching roles from learning to now teaching.

Interviewer: Are they the lookout or do they have a more hands-on role during the theft?

Killa: Yeah, they’ll lookout. Some lookout, some know how to break it down, some know how to just do it all themselves. It’s all in how they learn. . . . You gotta learn from someone, yeah, it’s a cycle. . . . It’s not that easy. . . . It takes a little finesse.

Comparing experiences reported by the men and women at the time of their first direct participation<sup>2</sup> in taking a vehicle produced some noteworthy themes related to the onset of offending and tutelage. All of the men began offending in sexually homogeneous groups.

Overwhelmingly, they were initiated by same sex-peers or same-sex members of their family (again, with one exception). Twenty-six of the 27 males also discussed being taught by other men, either a peer (n=22) or family member (n=4). In all likelihood, this is a reflection of two general social facts. First, criminal networks are largely male in nature. Second, these experiences typically occur in late adolescence—a period where interactional networks display strong gender segregation (especially where illicit activity is a prominent component of the network).

In contrast to the men, direct auto theft participation by women occurred in the company of opposite sex peers. Four of the women first offended within mix-sex groups (Lavanda, Lil' Bunny, Lil' Bit, and The Beast), Jewells Santana was the only women in an otherwise all-male group. Two of the women first offended with a single partner, not in a large group; one was with her brother (Tonya James) and one a romantic partner (Jasmine King). Even Chocolate, the only female to commit her first theft solely in the company of women, admitted “Someone did teach us how to do it because on another incident a guy was with us and showed us how to do it.” The following exchange between Lil' Bit illustrates how, even for a woman who currently worked with a group of women, and was initiated by a mixed-sex group, the technical knowledge necessary to take a car without the proper keys was tied to her interactions with a man.

Interviewer: . . .these women you got involved with. At first, were you just jumping in cars and driving off in them?

Lil' Bit: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is that because you guys [female friends] didn't know how to steal them?

Lil' Bit: Basically, yeah.

Interviewer: Did these other girls you were hanging with, did they know how?

Lil' Bit: No.

Interviewer: And how did you guys eventually learn how to break down a car?

Lil' Bit: A boy showed me that used to go steal cars. . . . He was older than me. . . . At first I just used to ride around with them in stolen cars and then I got tired of just riding around [with] boys so I asked him and he told me. Well he showed me and then he told me.

Thus, even though her current preference was for working with women, Lil' Bit needed to draw on masculine expertise to acquire the needed technical skills to successfully engaged in motor vehicle theft.

Early experiences riding in stolen cars were ubiquitous in the interviews for both men and women. Thus, the opportunity to observe an experienced thief at work, as well as have the fundamental techniques explained was a fairly universal experience. The contextual nature of joyriding and car theft then produced a situation where women did not experience the same sort of gendered barriers to initiation seen with other crimes (i.e., burglary, see Decker et al. 1993; Mullins and Wright 2003). Some of our female interviewees then circulated these skills, learnt from men, within female networks; in very much the same way that many men did or were currently doing (such as in the case of Killa depicted above) among themselves.

## ENACTMENT

Unless one purposely targets idling vehicles unattended or otherwise obtains the proper keys, defeating door locks and vehicle ignitions requires a degree of mechanical expertise that surpasses commonsense (Copes and Cherbonneau 2006). The modal enactment method in the sample—discussed equally by men and women—was using a flathead screwdriver to pry off the ignition covering around the keyhole to expose the ignition switch<sup>3</sup>. To start the vehicle, one

simply inserts the screwdriver into the exposed ignition and turns clockwise. This constitutes the basics of what men and women learned during their initiation experiences<sup>4</sup>.

Although a growing number of newer (and most high-end) cars have built-in safeguards to limit ignition tampering, all 27 males and five of the females described using this approach (or a variant of the general script) in a recent theft. However, some of the discourse from these five women suggests that even though they learned how to bypass keyed ignitions from someone else (as discussed previously, typically a male), their knowledge of what was working or why was comparatively limited. For example, Jasmine King recounted her most recent theft of an unlocked Ford Taurus this way:

I got in there and I had a screwdriver and I took the screwdriver and stuck it in the—you know where the ignition thing go. . . . Once I stuck it in there...some wires fell down and I just messed with the wire. I never know which wire it is—I guess I just be that nervous—...It be about four or five wires—different wires. . . . I cut all of them at the same time, you know, and then after I cut them I just be flicking them together to see which ones work to start it.

Seldom did the men we interview describe this sort of fumbling guesswork in their thefts.<sup>5</sup> Even when asked about general auto theft techniques or prodded about specific enactment strategies, men were able to articulate a more convincing account of their aptitude. Young G's explanation of how to steal a 2000 Dodge Intrepid illustrates this distinction:

First, you got to get the flathead head in the ignition. Once you get the flathead up in the ignition, you hit it a couple of times before you can get it kind of one-way....it's gonna be loose....you put [the screwdriver] on the other side. Bang it in some more [to] get it loose on that side....where you can just stick your hand in it and pull it [ignition cover]

out. Once you do that. . . . you stick the flathead up in . . . where the key ignition was . . . and start it up.

While tampering vehicle ignitions was the modal method discussed for starting a standstill engine, both males and females went after targets that required less effort to obtain. These offenders seized vehicles left idling and unattended by careless owners thereby eschewing technical effort in favor of patient observation. Jewels Santana, who accomplished her most recent auto theft using this method, explained the general technique:

I see somebody leave their car running or something with the keys in it . . . . I might hop in and just drive off . . . . That's just how easy it is. Just wait until somebody park their car, they'll leave the A/C on or something, run in the store real quick or pay for their gas or something. Just hop in the car and leave.

Taking advantage of momentarily unattended vehicles is an especially common practice when the spontaneity and late night partying of streetlife participation leaves offenders stranded far from home with no means of getting back (Copes 2003; Copes and Cherbonneau 2006). In such situations offenders often lack proper tools to enter vehicles and manipulate ignitions. Poorly equipped for the task at hand, targeting vehicles left running emerges as the “most proximate and performable” (Lofland 1969: 61) way to overcome their current predicaments (c.f., Wright and Decker, 1994: 200). Poo#2's description of his stealing a Monte Carlo for transportation after he was stranded at a party, was exemplary of the circumstances underpinning this style of enactment: “I went there, they all [my ride] got drunk and left, and I got drunk and dozed off. . . I don't feel much like staying at other people's houses that I ain't comfortable, you know so I jumped up, got up. It was hopeless and I was looking for anything.” Poo#2 proceeded to walk to a nearby familiar gas station where “there's a lot of dudes be going to that filling

station, getting out of their cars and going in there to talk” and simply waited until somebody let down their guard. In his words:

Dude was at the gas station in a Monte Carlo . . . he’s putting gas in there and I just jumped in the shit and drive off. . . . I just needed a ride home. . . . with a young dude in a Monte Carlo, easiest thing in the world. Like taking candy from a baby.

The presentation of “found” opportunities (see Copes and Cherbonneau 2006) does more than pique the “larceny sense” (Sutherland 1937) of the casual observer but, as Poo#2 made clear, are tailor-made for would-be thieves seeking to reverse immediate situational misfortunes. The important contrast between men and women who exploited found opportunities is that men were more likely to do so because of some situational (dis)advantage whereas women were more likely to actively seek them out over more outwardly difficult targets requiring “mechanical” means of enactment.

While pulling away in unattended vehicles is, in some respects, riskier than stealing unoccupied cars (as the owner is almost always assumed to be nearby and also immediately report the theft to authorities), it nevertheless constitutes a form of theft that requires less technical knowledge. The Beast highlighted how a lack of mechanical finesse could steer one toward different enactment styles. After explaining that she knew how to break down ignitions from working with a male friend, she went on to say that when they were working together she always deferred the task of breaking down targets to him as “he knows more than me,” and admitted that doing it on her own took “about forty-five minutes to an hour.” In a similar vein, Lil’ Bit said, “We knew how to break them down but sometimes we don’t want to. . . . Breaking it down will take a little longer than just pulling off.”

While both men and women either sought out or took advantage of opportunities created by careless car owners, five females (Chocolate; Lavanda; Lil' Bit; Lil' Bunny; The Beast) reported stealing vehicles in ways that men did not. Although the exact techniques varied from one theft to the next, the common thread among enactment procedures described by men was that face-to-face interaction with victims was always avoided thereby keeping intact the stealth-like quality of the offense (see Donahue et al. 1994). Women, on the other hand, described thefts in which prior interaction with the victim was an important ruse toward accomplishing the theft. Not surprisingly, men were the targets in all such thefts. Chocolate conned men into leaving their vehicles overnight at a confederate's automotive garage and would return later to steal the vehicle. If confronted by the owner, she claimed ignorance. Chocolate explained the hustle she did "a lot of times" this way:

You leave the car with me so I can tint it up and dazz[le] it up for you . . . at an auto tint place. . . . I get the word of mouth out. Like a lotta little dudes I know that got nice cars and they're ballin' now. . . . I be bringing by the cars that we had stole [and fixed up at the auto shop] and I let them look at the cars that we got, the spokes, the rims, and the tint all looking good and they like be like, "Damn whose motherfucking car is that?" I'll be like, "It's mine, I just bought it"; kind of flo-show. "Where'd you get all that shit from?" "[I got it] at such and such place. Come down and leave your car...when you get it back it will look like this." They be like "They be doing that shit?" I was just like "Well then leave it" and shit like that. So they leave it and I'd steal their car and shit and don't fuck with them no more and acting like I don't be knowing what happened.

Chocolate further explained that it is an easy scam for females to pull “versus [males] just go out, pick a person and say ‘Yeah you, come over here.’ You know a dude gonna talk to a girl long. If she got ass and titties they gonna talk. There’s a lot of males around that want it.”

Three females—Lil’ Bit, Lil’ Bunny, and The Beast—stole vehicles from unknown men who approached them in public settings as they went about their day-to-day activities and solicited their company. Lil’ Bunny described one such instance while waiting at a bus stop:

Lil’ Bunny: Like this one man, wanted to take me for a ride and shit. Wanted to go get some drinks. . . . I just met him waiting on the bus stop. He riding up, “Where you going little mama?” “Over my friend house.” “You wanna go get some drinks?” “Yeah.” . . . [I get in his car and he asked] “What you drinking?” “Absolut and cranberry, you hear me?” He get out the car, leave his keys in the car, I’m gone. I don’t want to be with you. You only want one thing: you want to fuck so I’m gone...

Interviewer: So you kind of set him up?

Lil’ Bunny: He set himself up. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Do you usually do it that way?

Lil’ Bunny: Yeah, especially if I ain’t stealing them [by breaking down the ignition]. I don’t know you. Why am I trying to drink with you? You doing things to me. So I use your ride, I’m gone. . . . I don’t know you. You think I’m fixing to drink with you? Hell nah, my pussy ain’t free either [laughing].

Chocolate and Lavanda also described situations where they intentionally targeted specific men so that they could create an opportunity to make off with their vehicles. As with Maher’s street level sex workers (1997), the women interviewed here exploited a typical male blind spot—

seeing women as little else than sex objects—to accomplish an offense (see also Contreras 2009, Miller 1998; Mullins and Wright 2003).

All in all, most offenders used a narrow range of techniques to steal cars, which they learned from others during their initiation experiences. Of course, a patient thief could steal a car without these skills, though there is a tradeoff in the level of risk incurred while doing so. For example, the women who setup or otherwise took advantage of men entered into more provocative and dangerous situations. While rare, it is telling that the most recent auto thefts described by half of the females we interviewed were accomplished by enactment methods that resulted in obtaining the proper keys. In essence, women's lack of technical expertise led to what appears to be riskier forms of enactment.

### **DISPOSAL**

Nearly all of our interviewees discussed having some relationship or connection to a chop shop of some sort where they would dispose of a stolen car and get paid. Many of these locales were repair garages that did a side-business in buying stolen cars to strip down for parts. Interviewees also discussed selling parts to friends, family members or people on the streets as well. However, in most of these cases, car thieves seemed to take the most valuable portable accessories off the car before taking it to the shop (i.e., radios, speakers, rims).

Three women specifically mentioned that they did not know of a chop shop or garage. Lil' Bunny simply drove the car for recreational use and then abandoned it when she thought it might be on the police "hot sheet" (Topalli and Wright 2004). Likewise, Lil' Bit drove vehicles for a couple of days but then "after I'm through with the car . . . I sell whatever in the car that could be sold." Asked why she did not sell to chop shops Lil' Bit replied, "I don't know where no chop shop at. I don't know where no one at. I know they say there's one on the East Side but I

never been to it so I don't know where it's at." The third, Tonya James, had a longer history of car theft (compared to Lil' Bunny and Lil' Bit) and used chop shops earlier in her career. When asked about her current use of them she replied, "I don't know any chop shops . . . they [the police] caught up with them and they're closed down, that was seven or eight years ago. But man, I don't know none today . . . I wish I did." With no connections, she stripped valuable accessories off of the cars she stole to sell on the streets (see below). No men specifically mentioned not knowing a chop shop as a personal barrier to disposal, in fact most discussed how essential it was to have those connections.

Men, however, were likely to dismantle stolen vehicles themselves and sell off specific parts of high value (or those easily sold) on the streets. Only one female mentioned this tactic. In these street disposal approaches, men mentioned specific orders from associates, simply knowing people or generally trying to sell parts on the streets. JD explained how he sold parts on the street. "You see a person in a real car you can ask 'em, you know, 'I can get you such and such' . . . you gotta ask people. You won't tell him [how] you get it, but you know, [tell them that] 'I can get it' . . . . If I feel like I can't trust you, why ask you? If I feel like it's a problem, I'm not gonna say nothing to you . . . I approach people I know." Only one female, Lil' Bit, adopted this disposal technique. Recall, she was one of the females who did not know of any locally run chop shops. Without knowledge of this common outlet, she resorted to selling on the streets but in a somewhat different approach than JD. Whereas he sought out potential buyers directly, Lil' Bit informed others about the property she had available who, for the promise of a "finder's fee," helped her locate interested buyers. Asked how she finds people that buy stolen goods to, Lil' Bit said:

I mean 'cause people tell. Like some of the dudes, that's their white [crack-cocaine].

They know that I got some parts and they'll tell who[ever], they'll just go around. If they see somebody they know that like rims and stuff like that then they ask them do they wanna buy a radio, rims or whatever, and if they do they'll come and tell me. They'll bring the person who want to buy it to me and I give them a little money for, you know what I'm saying, bringing them to me. . . . I give them like \$30 [on a \$100 sale].

It is here that social networks were of utmost importance. In order to be successful, people need to know where chop shops were and how to approach the operators. They needed to know who would buy stolen auto parts and how best to deal them on their own. This knowledge was typically acquired through other, often more experienced, criminal associates. Young G described how he gained entry into these networks:

I know the owner [through my brother]. . . . My brother was actually the one that . . . will take the car to the shop and I will just come along 'cause he knew the owner well, better than everybody else [in our crew] so that's why he was the ringleader 'cause all the money, you know what I'm saying, to get the money in the first place it would have to go through him so that's why he would get paid the most money. 'Cause without him we wouldn't even be getting paid no ways. . . . [The owner] know my brother since birth so he got a lot of trust in him. That's really what it's all about, trust.

Jasmine King described having to develop this trust over time. "They [the men who ran the chop shop] was cool because they knew who I was. They knew I wasn't no snitch. They knew I wasn't trying to get them in trouble or nothing. They knew I was just wanting some money." She went on to explain that at first, she was introduced to the chop shop through her boyfriend at the time, once connected she explained that "I got cool with them and they got to trust you." However, she

did reveal that once on her own (having since split-up with her boyfriend), the shop owner paid her appreciably less than he did her boyfriend, as illustrated in the following exchange:

Interviewer: How much did the guy [boyfriend] get that you used to work with?

Jasmine King: He was getting more.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Jasmine King: I don't know maybe he was better at it than I was, I don't know. Maybe he didn't have to break 'em down like I did, but I done seen him drive the cars before with a screwdriver in it, you know what I'm saying, so I don't know. I don't know. . . . I have said something to him [chop shop contact] before like "Come on now, you know it's worth more than that. You're gonna get more." . . . [And he says,] "That's the best I can do right now."

Interviewer: Do you have access to any other people like that where you could sell cars?

Jasmine King: No. He the only person I know.

Interviewer: Do you think he knows that?

Jasmine King: Yeah.

Without these contacts the ability to profit from auto theft was significantly curtailed. The next profitable source for those who lack access to these higher outlets was to sell vehicle parts and accessories on the streets. Recall, how Tonya James was forced to sell on the streets since she did not know of any chop shops that were currently operating. Yet, even those who sold parts on the street relied upon social networks to either move parts or become aware of customers. The following exchange with Chocolate emphasized the importance of informal network connections:

Interviewer: It seems you got your people setup pretty much—you got your girls . . . and you got people you know you can sell the stuff to.

Chocolate: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer: Do you ever try to look for more connections?

Chocolate: I got more connections now I just ain't gonna fixing to reveal them. They all good.

Interviewer: But are you always out looking for connections?

Chocolate: Yeah, always looking for something different. If you find something different you find more money.

We should also note that Chocolate was not dependent on these networks to make car theft profitable; her Uncle owned a garage giving her ready access to a disposal source.

Westside provided a rich description of exactly how these networks can work and how trust is central to their functioning. He described his current involvement in the world of car theft in St. Louis as:

an overseer. Me personally, . . . I oversee it now: “Handle that. Get that. We take this.”. . . I mean I got the connect[ion to the chop shop]. [If] the youngsters want to eat how we wanted to eat, they know if they get this certain type of car, they know they can get a certain amount of dollar from it so they get it, come to me and I take ‘em to where they need to go. . . . I take them to my dude. . . . He sees what he can salvage from them, see if he can strip it down, see what else he . . . can do. Like if this car has rims on it, he’ll strip it down and pull all the accessories out, TVs, whatever the case and just strip it for salvage. . . . Yeah, that’s what we do pretty much. . . . we’ve been working together for damn near seven years, eight years damn near. . . .

Interviewer: I was wondering what's to stop him from . . . [interrupted by Westside]?

Westside: From my little partners going to him? Because nah, we don't do it like that. . . it's in stone that my guy don't trust nobody but me. For all he know, these little cats could be bringing them folks up in here with them because they get caught up on the jam....You're in a situation where you feel like they probably don't know how to hold they own. You put them in an interrogation room, goddamn they singing and telling every motherfucking thing that need not be told. . . . I remember my dude ain't want to fuck with me back in the day because I was a, you know, he had to just see how I moved. You know what I mean? And you can tell, you can tell who's real and who ain't— pressure bust pipes and bitches too!

Trust is central in establishing connections for criminal disposal of goods, yet these informal social connections in the criminal underworld are often gate-kept by men. This has strong consequences for women's ability to make and maintain these relationships. Steffensmeier (1983) and Steffensmeier and Terry (1986) identified men's negative attitudes toward women as a key barrier to women's inclusion in offending and disposal networks (see also Maher 1997; Mullins and Wright 2003). Compared to prior work on the topic, we found much more diversity within men's attitudes towards women in the data.

Over half of the men asked said they did not know any women car thieves, and moreover would not work with them if they did. Typically, they provided a stereotypical explanation that crime in general, and car theft in particular, was a male activity and that women were "too soft" to be successful criminals. For example Young G dismissed female offenders by saying that "little chicks just be scared . . . they just too girly to do something like that . . . they just don't got what it takes for real." Others suggested that women could not stand up to police questioning and

would thus snitch. Killa straightforwardly said, “they [women] can just be broken easily.” Thus, if a female associate were caught, she would reveal everything to the police. E#2 agreed saying that women “they’ll do a switch on you . . . put police in front of them, man, it’s over. Yeah, they’ll cry.”

Others discussed the issue in a more pragmatic fashion. These men did not deny the abilities of women to engage in criminal behavior, but thought that women did not have the exact skill set needed for car theft. J discussed refusing to teach one of his female peers how to steal cars, emphasizing that “I ain’t got the time . . . they [women] don’t learn so fast.” End Dog made a similar statement, explaining he had worked with a women on a theft once but “she moved too slow, so no, she was way slow, slower than normal . . . too slow for me. Not going to get caught.” Poo#2 combined these themes, saying, “It’s a man thing . . . It’s just not appropriate to take a woman with you to do something like that. . . . It’s not safe . . . it’s a dangerous risk . . . she can’t run as fast as you can. If you have to ask her to outrun the police she’s gonna get caught and nine times out of ten she’s gonna tell who you is.”

Of those who *knew* female car thieves, all but one said they had no problem working with women. Capone, who had previously worked with Chocolate insisted that:

Capone: The women I mess with ain’t gonna tell—they solid. Just like her [Chocolate]<sup>6</sup> she’s solid.

Interviewer: Do you ever work with her [Chocolate]?

Capone: Couple times. She’s cool. She’s cool.

T-Raw said, “I’ve worked with some women [who] know more shit than men. A lot of the women stronger than men you know what I’m saying . . . a lot of the women they some soldiers, gotta give it to ‘em.”

This degree of open-mindedness was not just limited to men who had worked with women. Asked if a female could have joined the all male crew that introduced him to auto theft, Tye said, “Yeah, if she wanted to get down, it was up to her. It’s her decision. . . . A female never tried to get with us... but I’ve heard of females that...do get down, that’s real smooth with it.” Thus, there is limited support within criminal networks for working with women and it is no doubt through these pathways that the women we interviewed gained access to offender and disposal networks.

Taken as a whole, our examination of the data has uncovered several core themes of gender-neutral and gender-specific perspectives and experiences. In general, the motivation and enactment techniques of men and women were very similar. Where women had access to vehicle or parts disposal networks, their experiences tended to be very similar to men’s. In the context of the types of groups responsible for offenders’ initiation into auto theft and subsequently, their access to networks, (especially for disposal) strong gender differences emerged.

## **DISCUSSION**

Throughout our analysis we have relied on a tried and true method for exploring both the divergences and convergences in the perspectives and experiences of men and women involved in street crime (see Miller and Mullins 2006). Car theft requires slightly more specialized knowledge to enact than most other street crimes. This information is typically disseminated and acquired in social networks. Car theft also requires knowledge of underground disposal networks to be profitable (though, unlike other forms of theft, there is a utilitarian value to a car in and of itself). Prior work has suggested that women have a social capital disadvantage due to sexist attitudes held by the male gatekeepers of these networks (Messerschmidt 1997; Mullins and Wright 2003; Steffensmeier 1983; Steffensmeier and Terry 1986). Here we found that this is

indeed the case on the streets of St. Louis. Almost universally, individuals learned the basic techniques of car theft and were initiated into social networks that facilitated disposal through male peers or family members. However, unlike prior work, we did find a larger subset of males who were tolerant of women offenders as long as their expertise was similar to males.

Thus, for our male interviewees, their introduction to auto theft occurred within gender-homogenous networks and interaction experiences. The females, however, experienced initiation and socialization into auto theft and disposal networks typically through opposite sex interactions. While men and women did not describe radical differences in the content of what was learned or how they were treated by others, such initiatory experiences did have gendered ramifications later in the offenders' car theft careers.

As with Mullins and Wright's (2003) work on residential burglary, we found few differences in offense enactment. This is, in all likelihood, a function of the fact that there are only so many ways to take control of a car to steal it. As with most tasks, once an effective technique is found for completion, it is repeated. Auto theft seems to be no different. Men and women alike described the tactic of popping out the ignition and using a screwdriver to start the vehicle. They mentioned learning this technique from others and replicating it due to ease and functionality. As an interesting area of departure, women were the only ones who described specifically seeking out a vehicle left running. Men did rely on these methods, however, they did so situationally (i.e., they were stranded and/or lacked the necessary tools) or opportunistically (i.e., chanced upon a vehicle left running and perceived opportunity too enticing to pass up). It is worth noting that the same females who relied on these techniques most often were also the least integrated into criminal networks. They were the women who mentioned not knowing chop shops and generally not having access into male dominated networks, thus their primary use of

stolen vehicles was either expressive (i.e., joyriding) or utilitarian (i.e., using them for personal transport)—any profits were serendipitous (i.e., found money or drugs while rummaging a vehicles' interior) or by chance (i.e., a member of their neighborhood network inquired about, and offered a small sum for, a vehicle stolen for some other purpose). Their lived gendered experiences narrowed the disposal options available and thus constrained opportunities. As we explored previously, this in turn, influenced disposal patterns and women's ability to profit from motor vehicle theft, and profit well.

As with many other studies on streetlife, we also found women taking advantage of men's sexual objectification of them to enact a crime, in this case car theft (see Contreras 2009; Maher 1997; Miller 1998; Mullins and Wright 2003). This well confirmed aspect of offender agency highlights how power relationships shape situational interactional contexts forcing social actors to modify behaviors and adopt innovative interactional strategies for goal accomplishment. Five of our eight female interviewees drew upon this tactic on occasion; it was not resorted to only when the offender lacked other options. As explored previously, those females who had little technical expertise with breaking steering columns down tended to target vehicles left running at convenience stores and gas stations. A general lack of technical expertise lead women to engage in riskier thefts, which also tended to produce less gain.

The issue of similarities and differences are not a zero-sum experience. Women's experiences here were varied. Some were deeply embedded in criminal networks; their interactional experiences provided opportunities to get to be known and trusted by male gatekeepers in the Saint Louis underworld. Once established, they were able to engage in and profit from motor vehicle theft, thus their experiences, techniques and knowledge overlapped strongly with the men who were interviewed. Two of the women described past exposure to

these networks. While some avenues of profitability were no longer open to them as these earlier connections had since dried-up, they still drew upon the skills acquired while attached to active criminal networks. Two of the female's interviewed here had no real access to active crime groups; their techniques of commission and disposal reflected this dual lack of technical and social capital, as did their use of the vehicle once stolen (i.e., utilitarian usage versus selling for profit). Further, two others only had access to disposal networks through males. As a group, women's experiences were far more diverse in nature than men's experiences. We conclude that this is a product, in part, of what social ties and connections they were able to establish and maintain throughout their criminal careers.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has examined the convergences and divergences of men's and women's experiences in motor vehicle theft, adding to the qualitative literature on streetlife subculture, street crime and the experiences of gender within each, and at the intersection of, both domains. As other recent work has shown (Brookman et al. 2007; Miller 1998, 2002; Mullins and Wright 2003; Mullins et al. 2004), men and women share many motivational drives and enactment techniques for committing crime. Such findings speak directly to broader theorizations of crime that either postulate gender-specific motivations for criminal involvement or suggest that there is a more universal criminal experiences. In terms of initiation into car crimes, our data here highlight the generally criminogenic nature of certain neighborhood situations and experiences and show it influencing both women and men in similar fashion (at least the women interviewed in this project).

Yet, despite similarities of early crime experiences, our findings support prior work that establishes a strong set of misogynistic attitudes toward women that shapes female experiences

with offending and within offender networks (and more generally of life lived within neighborhoods inhabited by offenders—see Miller 2008). We do not doubt these attitudes preclude some women from getting involved at all in criminal activities (thus contributing to the wide gender gap in motor vehicle theft), those women who do become involved are frequently presented with negative social stimuli that pushes some towards (if not out right into) criminal desistence. Yet, unlike other work, our findings highlight some diversity of men’s opinion of female peers, with a minority judging potential women co-offenders by skill set and not by sex category. This is an area which requires more investigation. Much of the early (and even recent) work establishing pervasive misogyny on the streets is grounded in data which is older (i.e., Mullins and Wright’s 2003 data were collected in 1989 and 1990). There is no reason to believe that attitudes in streetlife social networks remain static over time. They should exhibit the same dynamic characteristics that mainstream norms do. Thus, to a small degree, attitudes toward female offenders may be changing. More work is needed to explore how individuals respond to initially negative experiences with these gendered barriers then decide to either seek entry into networks anyway or who decide to either forgo crime in general or crimes with gatekeepers (i.e., burglary, drug selling and auto theft).

An immutable limitation of the data presented here is undoubtedly sample size; particularly in the number female participants. Moreover, due to the nature of nonprobabilistic sampling using “snowball” and chain-referral methods (see cite), we gained the views of a number of women within one established streetlife network. We cannot make broad generalizations of our findings here beyond the data itself. Be that as it may, the current findings confirm themes and experiences reported in other criminological research using qualitative methods—be they gender specific or mixed-gender offender-based examinations of street crime

in general. Further, Guest et al. (2006) establishes experimentally that most major themes in qualitative interviewing tend to be uncovered and saturated early during data collection—especially with regard to the types of meta-themes dealt with here. With the experimental work of Guest and co-authors (2006) in mind, we are confident in the validity of the information we uncovered in the female narratives. Hopefully more work on female experiences in crime in general and car crime specifically will provide further insight into our findings.

Our uncovering of a high diversity of female experiences within criminal social networks contributes to the current debates within feminist criminology concerning the divergence and convergence of male and female experiences of streetlife. As described by both male and female interviewees, in some social groups femininity is not necessarily the barrier to entry and cooperation that some work has suggested. However, women are still not universally respected on the streets and there is still a strong culture of misogyny held and perpetuated by criminally involved men of all ages (Miller 1998; Miller and Mullins 2006; Mullins 2006). As discussed, such negative perceptions and experiences were prominent in the data explored here. Our understanding of the conditional nature of these attitudes and what factors shape men's attitudes toward women in criminal social networks would benefit from a closer look at these variant contexts and experiences.

Such contexts and experiences are of the utmost importance to understand as criminology continues to explore both the prominent gender gap in offending and the manner in which experiences within criminal networks influence criminal career trajectory. Opportunity structures on the streets clearly frame both of these issues. Offender decision making is situated within the context of streetlife social networks. If and how gender shapes such networks will feedback into decision making events. Gendered perceptions, knowledge and opportunities will shape if, and if

so how, individuals offend. Such forces will also effect how offenders negotiate post-offense actions, especially transforming ill-gotten goods into money or other desired goods. Hopefully future research will continue to explore how gender at the macro and meso levels intersects with micro-level offending decisions and actions.

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**Appendix A. Study Participants ( $N = 35$ )**

<b>Interview Number</b>	<b>Alias</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Age at First Auto Theft</b>
01	BB	Male	25	14
02	JD	Male	25	16
03	Goldie	Male	30	13
04	E #1	Male	40	13
05	Chocolate	Female	31	---
06	Capone	Male	25	15
07	Baldy	Male	31	17
08	Juice	Male	29	11
09	Quick	Male	17	13
10	Red Dog	Male	20	16
11	E #2	Male	32	17
12	T-Raw	Male	26	15
13	ML	Male	49	17
14	D-Cuz	Male	33	13
15	Tye	Male	27	18
16	J	Male	18	17
17	Westside	Male	25	13
18	Poo #1	Male	20	15
19	Young G	Male	17	14
20	Lil' Bit	Female	19	14
21	Eric	Male	29	15
22	Mr. Blackwell	Male	42	16
23	Killa	Male	18	15
24	Jewells Santana	Female	21	16
25	End Dog	Male	19	15
26	Jasmine King	Female	21	18
27	Tonya James	Female	30	13
28	Lil' Bunny	Female	21	14
29	The Beast	Female	18	17
30	Poo #2	Male	33	14
31	Rock	Male	28	14
32	Will	Male	33	16
33	Lavanda	Female	26	15
34	Chris	Male	27	13
35	Reddy-Red	Male	31	15

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas many metropolitan city centers have subsisted through mass urban uprooting, St. Louis is one of three U.S. cities (outside of Virginia) designated as an “independent city” by means of which the metropolitan city core is politically autonomous from its contiguous counties (Jones, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> By direct participation, we mean the first time where the interviewee took an active role in the stealing of a car. This includes being a lookout. Due to the wide exposure of our interviews to stolen cars before they began to steal cars themselves, we found it necessary to make this distinction.

<sup>3</sup> While the exact technique varies from one vehicle make to the next, this one reportedly worked well on newer vehicle makes (and models) including, among others, Chrysler-Dodge (Charger; Intrepid; Neon; Stratus), Chrysler-Plymouth (Sebring) General Motors-Buick (LeSabre; Regal), and General Motors-Pontiac (Grand Am; Bonneville; Sunfire). For older vehicles manufactured in the 1980s and early to mid-1990s (General Motors-Chevrolet: Caprice, Blazer/Suburban, Malibu, Monte Carlo; General Motors-Buick: Regal, Riviera; General Motors-Oldsmobile: Cutlass; General Motors-Pontiac: Grand Prix), thieves took advantage of their weak tilt-steering column design which when broken, provided access to the ignition switch which could be easily manipulated by pulling a lever or “horseshoe” and then depressing a coiled spring screw to startup the engine.

<sup>4</sup> Car thieves do engage in a semi-rational process of target selection. When assessing prospective targets, offenders’ primary perceptual filter at work concerns its “stealability” (i.e., one that they can take successfully based on their ability and available on-hand hardware). This filter is grounded in their personal perception of their own skills. As we examine here, those skill-sets are gendered and thus the target selection process drawn upon by our informants is gendered as well.

<sup>5</sup> This could easily be an artifact of the interview process. Due to the general demands of hegemonic masculinity, the men may have felt a need to present a veneer of competency. Especially when being interviewed by a male, they no doubt carefully constructed their presentation of self. Women would experience less social pressure to do so, especially in a realm typically viewed as masculine (see Mullins 2006 for more discussion of masculine self-presentation in interview situations).

<sup>6</sup> Capone was interviewed on the same day and immediately after Chocolate who, at the time of Capone’s interview, was waiting with the recruiter outside the interview room. Capone also described working with his 19-year-old niece “a couple of times” owing to the fact that she was a competent auto thief. He was also proud to report that much like himself, “she hood. She be high-speeding [eluding police] and everything—she get away.”