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The Perceptions of Law Enforcement Officers in Combating Carjacking and Auto Theft During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Daniel L. Gray
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Walden University
2024

Abstract

The Perceptions of Law Enforcement Officers in Combating Carjacking and Auto Theft

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

Daniel L. Gray

MPhil, Walden University, 2022

MA, Southern University at New Orleans 2020

BS, Southern University at New Orleans, 2018

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Criminal Justice

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore law enforcement officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic in the southeast region of Louisiana. The framework selected to guide the study was the crime pattern theory by Brangtingham and Brangtinham. Using the purposive sampling method and snowballing sampling method, 10 active law enforcement officers were recruited from agencies across the Southeast region of Louisiana until data saturation occurred. The research questions focused on perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic and strategies used and preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via the Zoom teleconferencing platform and the interviews were hand coded and transcribed via thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed 5 main themes and 15 subthemes. First, there were behavioral shifts in society that law enforcement needed to be aware to combat carjacking and auto theft effectively. Second, change in crime patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, the need for proactive patrol strategies. Fourth, the improvement of reactive strategies, and finally, budget issues and needs. This study's positive social change implications include providing information to law enforcement agencies and to have an effective guard against carjacking and auto theft crimes in future times of crisis and uncertainty. In addition, comprehending law enforcement officer perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Dedication

I would like to take this time to dedicate my study to my late mother, Madelyn Mahoney Gray and my late Father, Louis Gray Jr. When you all passed away it was the hardest situation I had to go through. I wrote this dissertation in memory of you both. Mom, you always told me “Daniel, you can go as high as you want to go”. I miss you both dearly. I found the inner strength to complete my dissertation because I knew you both were with me in spirit. I wanted to thank my beautiful wife Lequincia Ducro-Gray for sticking with me and encouraging me to continue when I wanted to drop out you a continued source of strength and enthusiasm. I love you so much. I Thank God for you being a great mate. I appreciate everything you do. To my brothers Charles, Damian, Christian, thank you for pushing and challenging me throughout the entire dissertation process it is what kept me inspired and encouraged.

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First, I wanted to thank God for his grace and mercy because with God all things are possible to them that believe. God is the source of my strength and if it had not been for the lord on my side, I don't know where I would be. He keeps on doing great things in my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Carjacking and auto theft have broad motivational landscapes. Jacobs and Cherbonneau (2023) described how individuals target and steal motor vehicles while waiting for opportunities to harm their victims. The United States and the world encountered an unknown virus, COVID-19, forever stained how life once was. During this time more people became infected with the disease. While COVID-19 continued to spiral out of control, immediate intervention was deemed necessary to help restrain the spread of the virus (Wortham, 2020).

Miller and Blumstein (2020) stated that law enforcement agencies faced officer shortages, access to personal protective equipment, and access to COVID-19 testing. While more and more officers contracted COVID-19, there were difficulties responding effectively to vehicle break-ins and theft (Miller & Blumstein, 2020). During the coronavirus pandemic, law enforcement agencies' preparedness for dealing with the sudden change in operations was strained as officers and police administration found themselves in a difficult situation investigating carjacking and auto theft incidents (Jennings & Perez, 2020). Law enforcement continues to be in a vulnerable position due to staff shortages, budgetary constraints, and recruitment and retainment issues because of COVID-19 (Jennings & Perez, 2020).

As a result of the pandemic, local, state, and federal agencies battled carjacking and auto theft due to COVID-19, staff shortages, budgetary constraints, and recruitment and retention issues (Jennings & Perez, 2020). Due to insufficient guidance from law

enforcement's federal partners, law enforcement organizations continue working to find a working strategy to address the problem of carjacking and auto theft incidents, in addition, repressive, investigative, and preventive measures had be taken to combat acts of stealing cars. While car theft persists, law enforcement officers and administration continue to explore better ways to apprehend individuals who continue to steal motor vehicles. Chapter 1 provides the study's background, purpose statement, and research questions. It also included the study's framework, nature of research, key terms, delimitations, assumptions, scope, limitations, and significance.

Background

The COVID-19 outbreak, including divergences in crime patterns, has caused significant alterations in daily routines. As a result of the disease's economic and social stress, some crimes like burglary declined and, in turn, reduced, while crimes like carjacking and auto theft increased. According to Ashby (2021), using automobiles less frequently may not have contributed to this increase, which gave thieves a cover to steal cars without being noticed. This suggested that the economic and social stress caused by the pandemic had shifted the focus of criminal activity within and more people staying home; it is assumed carjacking and auto theft would increase. This gave criminals more opportunities to commit more serious and profitable crimes such as carjacking and auto theft.

The increase in car thefts incidents during the corona virus pandemic has made these crimes a priority for law enforcement. Law enforcement institutions must find effective and efficient ways of preventing carjackings and auto thefts since more

individuals are on the road today than when there were stay at home restrictions. To understand officers' perceptions, it was necessary to explore how law enforcement responded to carjacking and auto theft crimes. When called upon, typically law enforcement was the first to respond on the scene and investigate. This study sought to uncover how law enforcement officers dealt with carjacking and auto theft issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research may open new study opportunities for law enforcement agencies in the fight against car thefts. Researchers have not explored the study this way, and the phenomenon that was explored is the COVID-19 pandemic. I sought to comprehend law enforcement's perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the pandemic and how the disease wreaked havoc within Louisiana, the US, and the world.

Problem Statement

It is not known the issues surrounding the crimes of, carjacking and auto theft, in the time of the pandemic and law enforcement officers' perceptions in mitigating these crimes in the southeast region of Louisiana. The general problem is that due to COVID-19, many law enforcement agencies experienced a staff shortage of officers, budget shortfalls, and problems with recruitment and retention. Officers faced COVID-19 multivariate factors that potentially blinded their perceptions of the crimes and their readiness to respond to the crime (Abrahams, 2022). According to Pelington (2023), while carjacking and auto theft persist, communities suffer significant economic losses and a diminished quality of life. There were 268 vehicle theft cases for every 100,000 people in 2021, equating to over 932,000 thefts (Pelington, 2023).

Carjacking and auto theft are criminal activities that have increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic began (Macit, 2021). It is essential to understand the perception of law enforcement officers about these crimes, as well as the challenges, staff shortages, budget shortfalls, and changes they have made to combat them. Law enforcement agencies should focus on problem-solving approaches to combating carjacking (Jennings & Perez, 2020). There is little knowledge of the perceptions of law enforcement on this crime. Literature depicts a gap in seeking to understand the perceptions of law enforcement in combating carjacking and auto theft during the pandemic. There are scant peer-reviewed studies about officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research will help law enforcement agencies prepare to fight carjacking and auto theft and future crises as they arise.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study explores law enforcement officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic in the southeast region of Louisiana. This study aimed to open further research opportunities about combating carjacking and auto theft. The study has the potential to benefit other law enforcement institutions by utilizing the information presented in this study to aid and assist with strategies for future crises as they may occur. The study's findings may assist stakeholders in updating policies and decisions regarding carjacking and auto theft incidents.

The data collection for the study was centered around law enforcement officers and agencies from the southeast region of Louisiana. The study's goal was to explore law enforcement officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges law enforcement officers faced in responding to and investigating carjacking auto theft during an unprecedented time. The outcome is that I was able to discover law enforcement strategies to combat carjacking and auto theft to understand the incidents better. In addition, utilizing the strategies to advise other law enforcement agencies to be adequately prepared for future pandemics.

Research Questions

I examined three research questions to comprehend further law enforcement officers' role in combating carjacking and auto theft during COVID-19.

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 2: What strategies were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 3: How do law enforcement officers describe their agencies' preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected for this research was Brantingham and Brantingham's (1993) crime pattern theory. The crime pattern hypothesis was introduced by Brantingham and Brantingham in 1993. Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) believed offenders were likelier to perpetrate offenses in familiar locations (Menting et

al., 2020). For the study, this theory helped explore law enforcement's perceptions of carjacking and auto theft crimes during the recent pandemic. The Brantinghams believed in two core principles. First, crime was motivated by suitable targets within time and space (Newton & Felson, 2015). Second, the offender's movement is structured (Newton & Felson, 2015).

The crime pattern theory also focuses on how, without planning or opportunity, the daily activity of crime is not random (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). It helps to correlate law enforcement officers' perceptions while offenders are scheming patterned movements designed to thwart their chance of getting caught. While in a certain space, the offenders take advantage of this, thus committing carjacking and auto theft crimes (Eck & Weisburd, 2015).

The lack of attention toward carjacking and auto theft by law enforcement only enabled and emboldened criminals to steal more motor vehicles. Therefore, this research stems from the crime pattern theory by (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). When applied to this research, this theory will help to explore law enforcement's ' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nature of Study

The design of this study was qualitative. The perceptions of law enforcement officers were analyzed via semi structured interviews and the social phenomenon was the COVID-19 pandemic. Nassaii (2020) stated that qualitative studies focus on non-numerical data. Qualitative research helps researchers to gain insight by exploring and

understanding. The study focused on real-life experiences and situations and analyzed law enforcement officer perceptions.

According to Nassai (2020), qualitative studies can be associated with research that seeks to examine data that is not numerical. It has never been investigated or researched (Nassai, 2020). Busetto et al. (2020) noted that qualitative research explores a phenomenon that attempts to contextualize perspectives as they appear. This approach is often selected because it is not a methodological choice, but rather what is expected to be explored.

I explored the perceptions of law enforcement officers' law in combating carjacking and auto theft. I investigated the preparedness of law enforcement agencies, and the strategies used to deter carjackers from stealing individuals' motor vehicles. Each research question generated had the new phenomenon associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions were used to gather data for the research. Utilizing law enforcement as participants revealed and demonstrated strategies that officers can suggest for combatting carjacking and auto theft during an unprecedented time in our country and our world's history. The data collected for the study may further engage law enforcement officers from the southeast region of Louisiana. Data for the study was collected via semi-structured and open-ended interview questions to further engage law enforcement officers from the southeast region of Louisiana.

Definitions

Auto theft: Car theft is a crime that entails the illegal taking of a vehicle without the owner's permission (US Department of Justice, 2021).

Carjacking: A form of robbery in which an individual uses force or threat (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023).

Combat: To actively engage, fight, and do battle against or oppose (Henriksen, 2007).

Community Policing: A form of policing in which peace officers and community members work together to solve crime and social disorder to effectively improve the quality of life within the community (Ziembo-Vogl & Woods, 1996).

COVID-19 pandemic: An infectious disease brought about by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Suryasa et al., 2021).

Kidnapping: An act of forcefully holding and carrying away a person who is confined to a specific area (Toggia, 2014).

Law enforcement: Personnel who deter crime and maintain social order (McElreath et al., 2013).

Motor Vehicle: A vehicle designed to travel on the ground, including highways, bridges, and roads (Small & Van Dender, 2007).

Perceptions: The way the brain organizes and interprets information from the environment (n.d.)

Proactive Policing: A preventive police strategy to enforce violations related to systematic and aggressive methods of deterring major crimes (Sullivan & O’Keeffe, 2017).

Assumptions

This study involved three primary assumptions. Assuming the data from the interviews were accurate. The participants for the study did not present erroneous information or conceal the prevalence of information geared towards the study. I assumed that officers selected for the study had prior experiences and knowledge of the subject. The officers' perceptions regarding combating the crimes allowed for a more in-depth understanding. The assumptions were integral to the qualitative study to better understand the issue.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations are how researchers set the boundaries and limits to achieve the study’s objectives and goal, so the study would not be impossible. (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). There were 12 semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions conducted with law enforcement officer participants as part of this qualitative study. The research scope focused on officers to open their views and understand each participant's perspective. The officers selected to participate in the study were from various departments across the southeast region of Louisiana. I examined how police perspectives were used to prevent carjackings and vehicle thefts during the pandemic. I used a qualitative research method to evaluate law enforcement's effectiveness in combating carjacking and auto theft, particularly as witnessed during the coronavirus pandemic. The

literature review concentrated on peer-reviewed articles, scholarly works, policy studies, and other pertinent sources that discuss how COVID-19 affected auto theft and carjacking frequency and prevention. Other law enforcement agencies and police officers in other cities and states may find the research useful in comparing their implemented strategies.

Limitations

When researching the topic, several potential limitations may need to be addressed. For example, if the study is focused on a particular jurisdiction or location, there might not be easy access to pertinent material. This might impact how thorough the analysis and literature review is. The validity of the current literature may be in doubt. The accuracy and validity of the conclusions could be impacted by the possibility that they are biased, out-of-date, or based on little information (Akanle et al., 2020). While using open-ended questions, the quality of the research created a limitation in the responses provided as they are the aspects and credibility of the research study (Akanle et al., 2020).

Another limitation of the study is to ensure that honesty is contingent upon participant responses. The participants selected remained anonymous and participants information was protected. Participants were instructed to keep their information confidential from their peers. The participants for the study were interviewed at different times. The enormous amount of information gathered from the literature review may also make conducting a thematic analysis of the literature challenging. Consequently, the breadth of the literature study and the volume of data examined can constrain the theme

analysis. As such, a systematic technique could be adopted to guarantee the authenticity and thoroughness of the literature review.

Significance of Study

Police officers are called upon when carjacking and auto theft have occurred. Still, officers have not been interested in carjacking and auto theft because they believe it falls upon state and local partners (Miller & Blumstein, 2020). Local law enforcement swept the crimes under the rug and did not focus on carjacking and auto theft; as a result, more motor vehicles were stolen. While law enforcement failed to respond during the COVID-19 pandemic, the motor vehicle thieves crossed over into other jurisdictions, making it difficult for local law enforcement to apprehend them. While the individuals crossed into other jurisdictions, the FBI and specialized task force units were called to assist (Miller & Blumstein, 2020).

The research study contributed to the reserved amount of literature and filled the literature gap. Furthermore, the current study disclosed the limitations influencing law enforcement perceptions. In addition, the study's outcomes informed commendatory social change by allowing law enforcement stakeholders, elected officials, and community leaders to examine the essential elements of integrating law enforcement in the fight against carjacking and auto theft. Law enforcement can implement strategies to respond to carjacking. The study findings may help inform agencies about improving carjacking and auto theft response levels. The findings of this study may initiate positive social restructuring by creating a better understanding of carjacking and auto thefts and how law enforcement can suppress the rising rates of these heinous crimes committed.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a challenge for law enforcement. The pandemic forever changed the way law enforcement operated. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, two crimes saw an uptick: carjacking and auto theft. Law enforcement saw increased calls to investigate who had broken into motor vehicles and stolen them. As a result of the restrictive lockdowns mandated by the federal government, more and more people were at home, giving way for carjackers to steal more and more motor vehicles at an alarming rate. This study examined law enforcement's perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. I explored the officers' perceptions through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions. The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore law enforcement officers' perceptions of combating carjacking and auto theft during an unprecedented time our country and world have ever witnessed. The research used the crime pattern theory as the theoretical framework that encompassed the qualitative methodology.

This chapter summarizes the chosen research topic and states the study's goals and the research questions. In addition, Chapter 1 depicts the theoretical frameworks and approaches that were used in this research. I investigated how police officers view the pandemic's impact on carjacking and auto theft. In this qualitative study, the pertinent literature was examined. I aimed to gain insight into the strategies law enforcers have adopted to combat carjacking and auto theft during the pandemic and understand the effectiveness of these strategies from their perspective. For this research, a qualitative research method was implemented to examine the influence of the COVID-19 virus on

carjacking and auto theft. With the help of this study, law enforcement agencies may understand the difficulties of resolving these crimes at this uncertain time. This will enable law enforcement to create more effective regulations and procedures to prevent them from occurring during future pandemics.

Chapter 2 delineates the study's theoretical framework and crime pattern theory while analyzing and synthesizing the current literature. A synthesis and analysis of the study's theoretical framework, crime pattern theory (CPT), explains the dynamics and consequences of carjacking and auto theft. In addition, it indicated that crime was concentrated in certain areas and times and that crime patterns were influenced by their environment. Additionally, this study reviewed the factors that impact law enforcement officers' perceptions of carjacking and auto theft during the coronavirus pandemic. A history of carjacking and auto theft was presented in the literature review, which explored social matters that affect law enforcement officers, the agencies they represent, and the public as they seek to raise awareness of the issue of carjacking and auto theft during unprecedented globalization

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Carjacking can be defined as an opportunistic event in which criminals target vulnerable individuals and steal their motor vehicles (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). As carjacking and auto theft have emerged as crimes that have not been researched, COVID-19 has changed how law enforcement responds. There is little to no research regarding officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft (McDonald & Balkin, 2020). However, the literature review presented key terms associated with carjacking, auto theft, law enforcement, and COVID-19. I aimed to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combatting carjacking during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Carjacking and auto theft are two crimes that have yielded little attention. Amid COVID-19's increasing worldwide, law enforcement agencies were in a state of emergency, just like other cities in the country. Law enforcement agencies were tasked with developing effective and innovative strategies to combat the deadly disease (Ratcliffe & Rengifo, 2021). While many people were forced to be in their homes, this gave way for offenders to strike. While all levels of governments placed a restrictive hold on all movements to contain and mitigate the spread of COVID-19, law enforcement was put in a position to serve as first responders and enforce the new safety measures that were enacted by the federal government (Maskály et al., 2021). The new safety measures put a strain on law enforcement because many officers did not agree with the new laws, and as a result, many officers departed their posts. This left an undeniable strain on law

enforcement and the ability to respond to individuals seeking out law enforcement for assistance, mainly the carjacking and auto theft of motor vehicles.

Simon (2022) noted that in January 2020, when the Trump administration declared COVID-19 a pandemic, this shocked law enforcement agencies. Some studies have been published related to COVID-19, but none explain law enforcement officers' perceptions in combating two crimes synonymous with each other: carjacking and auto theft (Simon, 2022). When the federal government announced that there would be restrictive lockdowns, law enforcement was put in a vicarious predicament. The relevant data for the study explored what perceptions were associated with effectively responding to carjacking and auto theft calls. Law enforcement agency leaders had to change their policies regarding how they would respond to the calls from victims of carjacking and auto theft. Despite the significant changes, research has not been conducted to understand better how COVID-19 impacted carjacking and auto theft crimes.

While the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc within our country, the carjacking and auto theft rate increased by 29 percent (Fromm, 2023). While carjacking and auto theft continued to surge, there were unexpected situations within law enforcement agencies to respond to the increased calls for service (Simon, 2022). Many law enforcement agencies began to lose patrol officers at an alarming rate which crippled response times for the calls for service (Simon, 2022). Criminals seized this opportunity, encouraging the criminals to continue and carry out these opportunistic acts of carjacking people and stealing motor vehicles. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique challenge for law enforcement agencies as they face staff shortages and budget shortfalls.

According to Nielson et al. (2022), carjacking and auto theft crimes were increasingly reported during the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting quick response times (Nielson et al., 2022). While law enforcement struggled with response times, law enforcement was also heavily exposed to the COVID-19 virus because they were front-line workers having to respond to calls for service.

The literature review included strategies law enforcement used to combat carjacking and auto theft, relevant information on the efficacy of current tactics, and gaps in the body of knowledge. It also offered suggestions for future studies to fill these gaps. Chapter 2 analyzed the study framework: crime pattern theory, as discussed by Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) and the review of literature entailed COVID-19's influence on crime, perceptions of the officers, policing and crime during COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Search Strategy

For the focus of this literature review and search for related material, there were peer-reviewed research articles and journals that will provide the historical significance of carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the peer reviewed articles for the study were gathered from Google Scholar, the Walden Library, Science Direct, Ulrich's Almanac, Sage Journals, Sage Knowledge, and JSTOR. While searching for articles, these keywords were used: *law enforcement, perceptions, officer, COVID-19, carjacking, auto theft, criminal justice, crime, perception, and pandemic*. The information mentioned above may assist in finding the information that would help better understand the study.

Theoretical Framework

The crime pattern theory, originally designed by Branningham and Branningham (1993) addressed crime patterns that may be attractive to criminals during the daytime or the nighttime (Van Sleeuwen et al., 2021). According to Van Sleeuwen et al. (2021), carjacking and auto theft are crimes based on opportunity. Offenders targeted people who were not paying attention to their surroundings, thus allowing for carjacking to occur.

The crime pattern theory acknowledges that offenders usually seek escape routes while attempting to commit carjacking and auto theft. According to Van Sleeuwen et al. (2021), there may be places during the day that are attractive for crime but not conducive to nighttime. It is not uncommon for neighborhoods to have people at home at night and in the evenings but empty during the day. According to Van Sleeuwen et al., also stated criminals commit crimes typically in attractive places. Criminals use this knowledge to determine the best time to commit carjackings and auto thefts. Van Sleeuwen et al. stated in some cities, car theft is highest between 5:00 PM and 11:00 PM when people come home from work, but few people are on the streets (Van Sleeuwen et al., 2021). Carjackers are considered unpredictable and can strike at any time, but they usually wait until the most opportunistic time.

Van Sleeuwen et al. (2021) noted carjackers develop knowledge of each cased area and develop hot spot locations where carjacking is more likely to occur. By learning where the most people were at a certain time, the carjackers attempt to determine who they will target next. Most carjackers and auto thieves will attack during the most popular time of the day when people are most likely to be out and about. They often choose

parking lots, gas stations, and other heavily populated areas. Criminals typically target lone drivers and those who appear distracted or unaware of their surroundings. For instance, criminals may target drivers by checking their phones or fumbling with their keys as they enter their cars. This is because criminals seek an opportunity to commit a crime quickly and without resistance. They know that if the target is distracted or alone, they are less likely to put up a fight. They also know that in busy areas, there are more potential targets and less chance of anyone noticing if they act quickly and quietly. The carjackers then take mental notes to determine a pattern on when the most opportunistic moment is to strike and steal a motor vehicle.

The crime pattern theory explains how offenders commit carjacking and auto thefts through awareness coupled with attractive targets (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). The relationship between the crime pattern theory and carjacking and auto theft is mediated through opportunity and spatial awareness, thus examining the correlation of officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 outbreak.

While seeking to understand how police officers describe their respective agencies' preparedness, law enforcement agencies also sought to find out what strategies were used to combat carjacking and auto theft and to be able to explore law enforcement officers' perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crime pattern theory describes how carjackers use target space, spatial awareness, and opportunity to target their victims while developing a specific pattern (Van Sleeuwen et al., 2021).

Another component of the crime pattern theory is nodes. According to Felson and Clarke (1998), nodes are people's travel destinations (Felson & Clarke, 1998). For example, a bar may have a lot of crime on the outside instead of the inside. Regarding the crime pattern theory, nodes carry a sense of movement and more opportunities for crimes to be committed. In addition, nodes can identify how individuals engage with the environment, which produces more opportunities for carjacking and auto theft.

Carjackers usually search for crime targets by casing individuals' activities. The crime pattern theory uses the daily geographic rhythm of crime based on individuals' movements. Another component of the crime pattern theory is the edges, which delineate the boundaries of where individuals cohabit, work, and seek entertainment daily. According to Felson and Clarke (1998), criminal activity will likely occur on the edges. For example, racial discrimination, robberies with or without weapons, and individuals committing shoplifting from stores. Criminals often come together at the edges because they do not know each other well. This can increase the risk of criminal activities as criminals work together and become more organized (Agnew, 2001). This can lead to an increased criminal activity such as drug dealing, gang activity, and organized crime. Brantingham's crime pattern theory was sought out for this study because it helped explore officers' participation. Because of staff shortages and budget shortfalls, law enforcement has faced addressing these challenges, can help curb the rising carjacking and auto theft rates while seeking to understand officer perceptions.

Through the crime pattern theory, it is possible to link the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts to the opportunities that were leading to the increasing crime rates. The

theory made it possible to understand how the instances of carjacking and auto thefts increased drastically during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the introduction of certain guidelines that affected the operations of people and some of these adjustments created opportunities for criminals to execute carjackings and auto thefts. With the study sought to understand the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto thefts, it is important to keenly consider the environment in which the crimes took place and therefore, appropriately explain the perspective of the officers. The crime pattern theory can, therefore, help to understand the perspective of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the semi-structured interviews, it was clear that crime patterns had significantly changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the COVID-19 restrictions, there were certain opportunities that were created to have different people engage in crime. For example, the participants reported that more teenagers were engaged in carjackings and auto thefts. During the pandemic, there were stringent restrictions on the movement of people as well as their interactions. Schools were also closed, meaning that most students just stayed home without anything to do and were idle minded. Ordinarily juveniles are used to interacting with each other and therefore, most of the juveniles' desire to go to parties or visit their friends. While they lacked public means to visit their friends, there was an opportunity to use cars that were laying idle either in their compound or their neighbor's parking lot. The COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the increase of crime in various ways.

The crime pattern theory explains how crime is conducted by pointing out the offender's activity space. The theory clearly makes a link between various factors within the activity. Through the crime pattern theory, it was possible to understand the responses of the participants regarding the strategies they used to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants confirmed that their responses were based on the changes in crime patterns. The crime pattern theory helps one understand the reaction of law enforcement officers based on the changes in environmental factors (Brantingham & Brantingham, 2021).

The activity space of the general community has significantly changed thus creating new opportunities for crime. Such opportunities came when cars were left idle in compounds unlike when they would be mostly on the move or in more secure spaces. Such cases would become opportune moments for offenders to steal cars in stationary state within homes or other places that they would easily access. On the other hand, carjackers found opportunities where only a few cars were on the road, making it easy for them to attack vehicles and take off with them. Carjackers would take advantage of stopovers such as traffic lights, gas stations and parking lots of grocery shops. Through the Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) crime pattern theory, it was possible to understand the movements of the criminals and therefore come up with a possible solution to combat the crime. Law enforcement in turn worked to be two to three steps ahead of the individuals who were committing carjacking and auto theft crimes.

The Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) crime pattern theory supports that crime does not happen by chance but happens through planning and execution especially

when they align with opportunity. I sought to explain the relationship between opportunity and plan. I sought to explain various factors within the crime space that made it possible for criminals to execute the crime and how the same would be used to combat crime. For example, officers reported that there were many opportunities presented by the fact that people were mostly staying home. Understanding knowledge of crime patterns is, therefore, an important aspect in understanding how crime is combated. Law enforcement agencies used the knowledge of crime patterns to counter criminal activities by ensuring they reduced the opportunities for crime. Using this knowledge, law enforcement officers would conduct public awareness of what was happening thus exposing the strategies of the criminals. For example, law enforcement officers would inform the public of the hotspots where vehicles were being stolen and ways in which vehicles were being stolen. Thus, reducing the opportunities for criminals to execute their plans.

Considering that the Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) crime pattern theory majors on the aspect of crime space, the study acknowledged that success in combating carjacking and auto theft, where it involved serious analysis of the environment to determine the way forward. The officers reported that they had an array of strategies based on the factors of the different places. For instance, in places where the crime patterns were significantly characterized by juvenile offenders, law enforcement agencies sought to involve parents to help contain their juvenile children. Parents would be engaged through public awareness programs where they would be enlightened on the possible involvement of their children in crime and ways, they would be able to establish

this. The crime pattern theory sufficiently explains the reasons for various crimes and thus makes it easy to deal with these crimes.

With relation to the research study, the crime pattern theory has been applied previously to Geographic Information System (GIS) to the thefts of motor vehicles (Hiropoulos & Porter, 2014). The study on applying the GIS to the crime pattern theory explained how environmental influences contributed to mapping locations where carjackers are more likely to strike. The study on applying GIS to the thefts of motor vehicles revealed that a hot spot area is more likely to be a bedrock for criminal activity. The crime pattern theory is mostly associated with large areas where carjackers seem to target more as there is less police presence. By applying the crime pattern theory and using the GIS motor vehicle thefts began to decrease. Integrating GIS into dealing with carjacking could have helped decrease the rising rates of carjacking and auto theft.

The crime pattern theory is linked to the GIS as a visual aid to locate where carjacking and auto theft have occurred the most. The crime pattern theory is associated with three main concepts: nodes, paths, and edges (Hiropoulos & Porter, 2014). These concepts help further explain criminal activity, carjacking, and auto theft. The crime pattern theory associated with combating carjacking during the COVID-19 pandemic was used to explore officer perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during a chaotic time in the US and the rest of the world.. The crime pattern theory is based on how crimes do not occur randomly without notice. Carjacking and auto theft can happen quickly, whereas auto theft can occur when an individual is distracted (Felson et al., 2022). When allowed to strike, motor vehicle thieves played chess with law enforcement.

The spatial patterns spread from city to city, making it strenuous for law enforcement to apprehend carjackers. While attempting to respond to citizens' calls for service, it became a challenge because more citizens were carjacked. Examining law enforcement's perceptions for the study is essential because they explained how law enforcement operations were disrupted because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Historical Background of Carjacking and Auto Theft

During the early 1900s, infamous criminals like Bonnie and Clyde rampaged through the United States, stealing vehicles (Holden, 2023). They both were canvassing various areas, looking for prime opportunities for entertainment as the country was creating interstate travel as a means of transportation from city to city. This was how Bonnie and Clyde enjoyed themselves, but most importantly, they were on a spree, never to get caught. Bonnie and Clyde were notorious for carjacking, which is the theft of a vehicle from the owner or driver by force or threat of force. They would drive in stolen cars and rob banks, stores, and gas stations.

According to Dixon and Farrell (2020), many victims of auto theft are left without transportation, are financially burdened, and feel violated because of the crime. The carjacking victims may encounter confrontation with the perpetrators, terrifying, injuring, and even killing them. In addition to harming innocent citizens, this crime negatively impacts legitimate businesses, insurance companies, and governments. Auto theft costs over \$6 billion annually in the US alone, making it one of the most expensive crimes (Dixon & Farrell, 2020).

Chun and Sun (2020) noted that unsuspecting clients lose business when organized crime groups sell similar but cheaper vehicles. Developing more sophisticated and reliable anti-theft systems must be a priority for vehicle manufacturers. A lot of theft in the auto insurance industry decreases production and increases premiums. Police departments handle a high volume of reported stolen vehicles, increasing their already overburdened caseloads.

COVID-19 's Impact on Crime

The COVID-19 virus tremendously impacted social and economic activities on a global scale. The pandemic's influence on crime rates has been disputed among scholars and is among the important facets of the disease's effects. Halford et al. (2020a) noted lockdown effects in the UK, which also caused social isolation for many people. The study discovered a considerable drop in overall crime rates during the initial lockout, particularly in residential robbery and burglary cases. The study also discovered that crime had a high mobility elasticity, meaning that if social segregation and lockdown measures were relaxed or lifted, crime rates might rise.

A similar study was conducted by Halford et al. (2020b) and Halford et al. (2020a). There was a considerable drop in overall crime rates over the initial lockdown, particularly in house burglary and vehicle theft incidents. Halford et al. (2020b) also discovered decreased drug and violent crimes throughout the same time frame. Halford et al. also discovered that crime had a high mobility elasticity, meaning that if social segregation and lockdown measures were relaxed or lifted, crime rates might rise.

Perez-Vincent et al. (2021) studied COVID-19's impact on crime rates in Buenos Aires, Argentina. According to the report, a considerable drop in overall crime rates was observed during the initial lockdown. The survey did note an uptick in robberies, particularly those involving food delivery personnel. According to the report, the increased police presence and use of lockdown procedures may have contributed to the decline in crime rates.

Sorita (2020) examined the corona virus's impact on business burglaries and vehicle thefts within the United States. Sorita discovered an upsurge in vehicle thefts and business burglaries during the pandemic, particularly in metropolitan regions. According to Sorita, the increase in business burglaries is due to business closures and decreased foot traffic, which make targets more prone to theft. This linked the rise in car thefts to decreased police presence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perez-Vincent et al. (2021) and Halford et al. (2020a, 2020b), implementing lockdown procedures and enhanced police visibility may have contributed to a decline in crime. Sorita (2020) blamed the closure of enterprises and decreased police presence caused by COVID-19 for the rise in business burglaries and vehicle thefts. Crime's high mobility and elasticity suggest that crime rates could rise once social segregation and lockdown measures get relaxed or lifted. This finding was reflected by all the publications reviewed. This conclusion stressed the importance of ongoing crime rate monitoring and the development of suitable countermeasures to avoid increasing crime rates as social and economic activity picks up.

Rosenfeld and Lopez (2020) explored the pandemic's effects and social unrest on crime across U.S. cities. Rosenfeld and Lopez claimed that crime flourished because the pandemic upended cities' social and economic foundations. The pandemic caused higher rates of unemployment, social isolation, and psychological stress, all of which fueled an uptick in some criminal activity, including domestic violence and property crime. The writers also pointed out increased killings due to the societal turmoil that followed George Floyd's murder in many domestic cities.

Rosenfeld and Lopez (2020) stated that depending on the city and the crime type, the pandemic had variable effects on crime rates. Property crime is noted to have reduced in some cities while rising in others (Rosenfeld & Lopez, 2020). Rosenfeld and Lopez made the case that these discrepancies could be related to variances in the pandemic's impact on the intensity of the police response to the unrest.

The articles in this section showed contradictory conclusions about COVID-19's effect on crime rates. Although there was a decline in overall crime rates over the initial lockdown, the studies' conclusions about individual sorts of crimes varied. The research also identified several additional factors, such as police presence, business closures, and decreased foot traffic, contributing to increased crime rates. The high mobility and elasticity of crime found in all the research emphasizes the necessity of ongoing surveillance and the adoption of effective countermeasures to avoid a spike in crime rates as social and economic activity picks back up.

How COVID-19 Affected Law Enforcement

Rosenfeld and Lopez (2020) and Meško (2021) explored how the COVID-19 outbreak affected policing and law enforcement. The author examined the difficulties faced by police during the pandemic, including the necessity to balance preserving civil liberties and public health concerns. The authors analyzed how technology was used in pandemic policing, including contact tracing and surveillance methods. Pre-existing policing discrepancies, like racial differences in enforcement and force utilization, have been revealed during the pandemic. To improve confidence and collaboration between law enforcement and the community, the article calls for a review of policing procedures considering the pandemic. Rosenfeld and Lopez offered a critical assessment of coronavirus' effects on policing and raised significant issues regarding the direction of law enforcement.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement institutions experienced staff shortages and budget shortfalls during the coronavirus outbreak (Robertson, 2022). The research also emphasized the necessity for law enforcement institutions to change their procedures to safeguard the security of their personnel and the public. Examples included introducing remote work and utilizing personal protection equipment (PPE).

Bradley (2021) explored the pandemic's impact on the legal system in the United States. The pandemic brought about serious difficulties for law enforcement agencies, including cuts to financing, modifications to officer training, and increased stress and burnout among officers. Bradley also mentioned how the COVID-19 pandemic had altered the character of police work, with officers now emphasizing upholding public

health regulations and responding to associated service requests. Bradley asserted that police officers prioritize community engagement coupled with collaboration during the pandemic to maintain public trust and confidence. He also stressed the importance of prioritizing officers' well-being and mental health within police departments to meet the challenges related to the pandemic.

Conversely, Ivković and Maskaly (2022) analyzed how the pandemic negatively impacted the criminal justice legal system. Ivković and Maskaly contended that the pandemic has worsened pre-existing criminal legal system problems, like racial inequities and an excessive emphasis on incarceration. Ivković and Maskaly also examined the difficulties encountered by law enforcement agencies, including the need to balance public safety and social segregation policies and the resource demands from the effects of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic caused changes in the scope and type of police work, with officers spending more time upholding public health regulations and responding to associated service requests. Ivković and Maskaly also pointed out that while some crimes, like burglary and theft, had decreased due to the pandemic, others, including domestic abuse and cybercrime, had increased. In addition, Halford (2022) highlighted the challenges police departments face in maintaining officer and community safety, such as the need for PPE and adapting policing practices to comply with social distancing guidelines.

Stogner et al. (2020) noted that law enforcement agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic faced profound upheaval that caused a shift in policing forever. During this time, many departments around the country were losing officers rapidly, leaving hardly

any to respond to calls for services. Around the country, many departments were losing officers, and there were not any officers to respond to calls for service. Citizens were left stranded, perplexed, confused, and questioned where was law enforcement and why was it taking so long to respond.

While this chaos and confusion occurred, law enforcement officers worked with local, state, and federal partners to enforce the COVID-19 lockdown, mask-wearing, mask mandates, and social distancing. Officers still had to maintain law and order, protecting, serving, and putting their lives on the line daily. This took a toll on the officers as they did not know if they would go home. This impacted law enforcement because as the country progressed through the pandemic, more and more officers left their posts, leaving an unforeseen and unfortunate burden upon the agencies to replace the former officers.

As a result of the pandemic's disruption of social and economic systems, criminality has increased, and the extent of police activity has changed drastically (Halford, 2022). The pandemic forced law enforcement organizations to revise their tactics to uphold public safety while safeguarding the well-being of both police and members of the public. Halford (2020) asserted that law enforcement agencies should have prioritized community engagement, collaboration, and innovation during the pandemic to maintain public trust and confidence. They stress the significance of safeguarding human rights and advancing the law throughout the pandemic, particularly considering lockdowns and other emergency measures (Halford, 2022).

Impact of COVID-19 on Carjacking and Auto-Theft

Auto theft was projected to hit an all-time high post-pandemic (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). The pandemic caused a drop in vehicle usage and upkeep, increasing the risk of car theft. Jacobs and Cherbonneau also claimed that more people were turning to car theft to make money due to the pandemic's impact on the economy. Auto thefts increased in many major American cities, including Chicago (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). In Chicago, carjacking incidents significantly increased since 2020, reaching a record high of 1,362 incidents in 2021. Similarly, auto thefts and carjackings in major US cities spiked in recent years, with some cities reporting a significant increase in carjackings (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023).

Carjacking and auto theft incidents significantly increased worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some variables that contributed to this rise in crime include the recession, the release of inmates, the absence of secure parking spaces, and the proliferation of keyless entry systems. Carjackers and criminals could operate more freely due to the rise in remote working, which decreased routine enforcement and driver complacency. To prevent carjacking and auto theft, the research section emphasized the need for stronger security measures, regular policing, and awareness programs.

Law Enforcement Perceptions and COVID-19

COVID-19 caused changes and challenges in almost all aspects of life, including law enforcement. This meant that police and law enforcement had to enforce regulations and measures to prevent its spread. However, their effectiveness in carrying out these tasks was the subdelegated public.

There was a diverse perceptions pool regarding the effectiveness of policing during the pandemic. First, according to Ghaemmaghmi et al. (2021), perceptions about how well the police handled the pandemic are divided among the general population. While some participants expressed satisfaction with how the police handled the outbreak, others expressed dissatisfaction, citing instances of excessive force and a sense of unease. Ineffective policing was linked to elements including a lack of openness, the abuse of authority, and overuse of force. Ghaemmaghmi et al. also investigated citizens' perceptions of satisfactory and unsatisfactory law enforcement during the coronavirus. The study discovered that communication, justice, accountability, and respect for human rights impacted the public's view of adequate police. The research also recommended boosting accountability and respect for human rights, community policing, and communication and transparency improvements.

The participants' perceptions of the legitimacy of the police differed according to their sociodemographic features, with younger participants, members of racial or ethnic minorities, and residents of underprivileged areas expressing less faith in the police's abilities. The study also emphasizes the value of police officers' communication abilities, with good communication being a crucial element in raising public perceptions of the legitimacy of the police. Both Charman et al. (2022) and Ghaemmaghmi et al. (2021) discovered that elements including communication, justice, trust, and transparency impact the legitimacy of the police force. Both reports also recommended actions, including enhancing communication, encouraging trust and transparency, and customizing services to satisfy the needs of various communities.

According to Perry et al. (2022), the pandemic-related acts of the police may have left a lasting impression on citizens' perception of the police. Perry et al. discovered that those who had unpleasant interactions with police during the pandemic were more likely to feel the same way about them in the “new normal.”. This demonstrates how crucial the police’s response to the coronavirus was in determining how the people would later perceive the police. Perry et al. discovered that while the public appreciated the police’s efforts to uphold COVID-19 laws, this did not necessarily translate into a more positive attitude toward the police. Charman et al. (2022), Ghaemmaghmi et al. (2021), and Perry et al. (2022) all highlighted the necessity for the police to use a community-oriented approach to policing during and after the pandemic.

These studies collectively demonstrated that the public’s impressions of enforcement during the COVID-19 outbreak are nuanced and complex. Some public members praised the police for their attempts to enforce COVID-19 laws, but others voiced their concerns about police brutality, violations of human rights, and impunity. Because diverse communities have distinct requirements and expectations, law enforcers must comprehend those demands and use a community-oriented strategy to police. Most analyzed research had certain geographical restrictions, making it difficult to extrapolate the results to other contexts. The varying start and end dates make it difficult to compare their results directly. Despite this, the studies render valuable insights into how the public saw policing over the pandemic period and emphasize the significance of fostering legitimacy and confidence between the public and the police.

The research examined in this literature overview demonstrates how complicated and nuanced the public's impressions of policing were during the COVID-19 outbreak. The studies help to illustrate the degree of trust the public warrants in cooperation with law enforcement, the use of a community-oriented strategy for policing, and the clarity and consistency of the police's messaging all influence how the public perceives the police. As such, policymakers and law enforcement organizations should consider these elements in the future as they work to uphold COVID-19 legislation and foster public confidence in the legitimacy of the police.

Prevalence of Carjacking and Auto-Theft in the United States

Carjacking and auto theft cases recently increased nationwide in key cities (Jacobs & Charbonneau, 2023). Chicago saw an 83% spike in carjackings in 2021 compared to 2020. Similarly, these offenses increased by 39% in Los Angeles and 23% in New York City (Jacobs & Charbonneau, 2023). Auto theft tendencies spurred law enforcement agencies to take action to slow their proliferation.

Jurado and Genis Cuevas (2023) highlighted the reasons behind the rise in carjacking. These include a shortage of available rental automobiles, a rise in ride-hailing services' popularity, and an increased number of people using their vehicles for delivery services during the COVID-19 pandemic-imposed restrictions like social distancing and quarantine.

While addressing carjacking, Krasang (2021) noted that during the pandemic, carjackings significantly increased in several significant American cities. Chicago witnessed a 133% rise in carjackings in 2021 compared to the previous year. Carjacking

is a violent crime with major repercussions for victims. Drivers should exercise caution, avoid using their phones or leaving their keys in the ignition, and only park in well-lit places (Sil et al., 2021).

Criminal Justice System's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The criminal legal system is just one of the many areas of life that COVID-19 has significantly impacted on. Due to the ongoing problems that continue to persist, law enforcement organizations have had to adjust and create fresh approaches to problems like carjacking and auto theft. The literature review explored how police officers saw the pandemic's impact on carjacking and auto theft.

Miller and Blumstein (2020) analyzed the pandemic's influence on crime and criminal justice. They identified several pandemic effects, including increased likelihood of carjacking and auto theft, modifications to crime trends, and disruptions to the justice department. Future research is essential to understand how the pandemic will affect crime and the criminal justice system in the long run and to develop mitigation measures (Miller & Blumstein, 2020).

The scope of Miller and Blumstein's (2020) article was limited to the outbreak of crime rates that occurred at a rapid rate and criminal justice system responses to COVID-19. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the criminal legal system call for system reform studies. Adjustments needed to be made to policing and court procedures because of the pandemic (Miller & Blumstein, 2020). Within the legal system, an emphasis has been placed on crime rates, which could have long-term repercussions for criminal justice

policy. The authors urged further research to understand these changes' effects and guide future policy decisions.

Boman and Gallupe (2020) and Miller and Blumstein (2020) provided solutions for dealing with the pandemic's effects on the justice system. Miller contended that additional study was required to formulate the ideal ways to address the pandemic's effects on crime rates and the functioning of the criminal legal system. This research concentrated on determining the best practices for upcoming policy decisions and gauging the success of the adjustments made in reaction to the pandemic (Miller & Blumstein, 2020).

Miller and Blumstein (2020) also encountered substantial difficulties responding to carjacking and auto theft. However, various practical strategies that could assist agencies in overcoming these difficulties and defending the public were found. For example, data-driven policing techniques analyze crime data to find trends and patterns that might guide more effective and efficient policing strategies. Krasang (2021) noted that law enforcement successfully deployed this strategy to address various pandemic-related crimes, such as carjacking and auto theft. Agencies used data to track stolen cars, find prospective culprits, or identify high-risk regions for similar crimes and allocate resources appropriately. Miller and Blumstein (2020) have also stressed the significance of data-driven research in determining effective remedies and comprehending the pandemic's effects on crime and criminal justice more generally.

Preventive Measures Against Carjacking and Auto Theft

Carjacking and auto theft are significant problems that can cause financial losses and jeopardize people's safety. Numerous preventive measures have been suggested and implemented to mitigate these crimes. This study of the literature looked at current findings about defenses against auto theft and carjacking. In addition, the studies by Anderson et al. (2021) and Migacz et al. (2021) described ways to prevent carjacking, but with different approaches. Migacz et al. offered advice on how to avoid carjacking and a summary of the crime and how common it was, while Anderson et al. focused on how technology can prevent crime, particularly carjacking.

Subsequently, as it expedites the restitution of the seized vehicle and serves as a deterrent, GPS tracking is an exceptionally efficient technique in carjacking prevention. Potential carjackers may be discouraged from trying to steal a car by learning that it has a GPS tracking system installed. A National Insurance Crime Bureau study found that cars with GPS monitoring devices are less likely to be stolen, unlike those without them. Alarms can be an effective deterrent as they draw attention to the vehicle and alert bystanders to potential criminal activity (Joo et al., 2020). A carjacker may become alarmed by the sound of an alarm and give up trying to steal the car.

Role of Technology in Preventing Carjacking and Auto Theft

Technology can significantly reduce crimes like auto theft and carjacking (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). Real-time monitoring and analysis of crime data is one potential benefit of using technology in dealing with carjacking and auto thefts. To increase police presence in high-risk regions and discourage potential criminals, law enforcement

organizations can examine crime patterns using cutting-edge technology like predictive analytics (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). To swiftly identify stolen vehicles and notify the authorities, some towns have implemented license plate recognition technology, which mechanically reads and records license plate data.

Surveillance equipment called license plate recognition (LPR) automatically reads and records license plate numbers (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). Law enforcement has been able to identify stolen automobiles, track down wanted individuals, and enforce parking restrictions using this technology, among other things. It has been demonstrated that using LPR license plate recognition technology can help stop crimes like carjacking and auto theft. Technology for detecting license plates is commonly employed in private security and law enforcement systems. The device recognizes and reads license plates using cameras and algorithms. The process by which license plate recognition technology operates is to capture an automobile's license plate and then analyze the image using algorithms (Vaiyapuri et al., 2021). The algorithms scan the license plate for specific characters and patterns and then use those patterns to determine the license plate number. Once the license plate number has been located, it can be cross-referenced with a database to see whether the car has ever been reported stolen or otherwise connected to criminal activity.

Real-time monitoring and analysis of crime data are benefits of license plate recognition technology. This can aid in the detection and prevention of auto theft and carjacking. License plate recognition systems may be employed to observe traffic and readily recognize stolen automobiles or vehicles linked to criminal activities, as

mentioned by Öztürk and Zen (2012), technology may also be used to follow the movements of automobiles in real time to respond more quickly to carjacking or auto theft. Early threat detection is another benefit of license plate recognition technology.

Jacobs and Cherbonneau (2023) noted license plate character recognition accuracy has significantly increased due to employing algorithms based on deep learning in license plate recognition systems. The system can better recognize and indicate potential dangers in real-time. Early danger identification can aid in averting carjacking and auto theft before they happen (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023).

The ability to react quickly is another benefit of license plate recognition technology and early threat detection. Law enforcement personnel can be alerted immediately when a stolen car is found utilizing LPR technology (Vaiyapuri et al., 2021). This could lessen the likelihood of the vehicle being used in a crime or sustaining further damage. The technique for reading license plates can also have certain drawbacks. Technology's dependence on crisp photographs of license plates is one of its drawbacks. The device may struggle to correctly recognize license plates due to poor illumination, fuzzy photos, and other issues.

Parvin et al. (2021), the landscape of technology has changed. This has paved the way for new criminals, offenders, victims, and opportunities. License plate detection has been integral to identifying criminals who choose to carjack. The Intelligent Transport System (ITS) has been useful in identifying how many vehicles are on the road. With the rise of carjacking and auto theft, there have been missing motor vehicles that have been stolen by force or when a citizen is distracted. With the new technology, law enforcement

can track stolen vehicles and arrest the perpetrators. Khan et al. (2021) asserted that license plate readers have been focused on the motor vehicle's image. There has been a lot of demand and discussion based on law enforcement utilizing license plate readers (Khan et al., 2021).

Strategies Utilized by Carjackers and Auto Thieves During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional challenges for law enforcement organizations and individuals in preventing and combating carjacking and auto theft, which have been pervasive for many years. In this literature review, I examined the common strategies utilized by carjackers and auto thieves during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jacobs and Cherbonneau (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of carjacking, examining the crime's scope, structure, process, and prevention. Carjacking is a crime of chance involving aggression, dread, or intimidation to take a motor vehicle. Carjackers have employed various tactics throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including arranging accidents, posing as law enforcement officials, and creating distractions. The authors advise situational crime deterrence, public awareness initiatives, and law enforcement tactics like hot-spot policing to stop carjacking.

Jacobs and Cherbonneau (2023) also investigated the procedural knowledge and perception required for carjacking. Carjacking is a highly skilled offense that requires procedural and perceptual talent (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). Perceptual competence relates to the capacity to discern vulnerable targets and opportunities, whereas procedural expertise involves the ability to carry out crime quickly and efficiently. Carjackers

continued using their perceptual and procedural skills during the pandemic and modified their tactics to fit the situation. For instance, they targeted delivery personnel, like Door Dash and Uber Eats delivery drivers, who left their cars running while making deliveries.

Jacobs and Charbonneau (2023) provided helpful advice for avoiding carjacking during the COVID-19 pandemic. They do not, however, go into detail on the exact tactics employed by carjackers in their analysis. The two studies thus complement one another and offer a thorough analysis of carjacking and auto theft throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Jacobs & Charbonneau, 2023).

Auto thieves and carjackers modified their tactics to the brand-new environment the COVID-19 pandemic created. Criminals continued to use their skills in perception and procedure, but they also created new tactics like preying on delivery drivers and utilizing decoys. Law enforcement organizations and the public must be aware of these tactics and take the necessary precautions to protect themselves from carjacking and auto theft.

The material reviewed advises on preventing carjackings and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasizes the significance of comprehending the abilities and methods utilized by these criminals. To effectively prevent and combat these crimes, law enforcement organizations and citizens must be informed of how carjackers and auto thieves have modified their tactics in an assertive effort against COVID-19. This will offer a helpful framework for creating prevention and response plans to battle carjacking and auto theft during the pandemic more effectively.

Robertson (2022) examined teenagers who were committing carjackings and auto thefts. Robertson analyzed the rise in carjackings in several significant cities and referenced experts who opined that the COVID-19 pandemic had given carjackers opportunities because of the surge in remote employment and the drop in vehicle traffic. In addition, Robertson pointed out that most teen carjackers target luxury vehicles, and some thefts have led to violent crimes and encounters. When comparing these articles, all three authors agree that car thefts and carjackings increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Arango and Fortin (2023) used law enforcement officers and specialists to support their arguments, while Gorzelany (2021) used National Insurance Crime Bureau statistics. While all three authors concurred on the general trend of rising auto thefts and carjackings, their specific areas of concentration were different.

The Kia Challenge and the brazenness of auto thieves during the COVID-19 pandemic are the main topics of Arango and Fortin's (2023) analysis. Gorzelany (2021) focused on the areas where auto thefts have increased, and the technological techniques used by auto thieves. According to all three authors, the COVID-19 pandemic has given auto thieves and carjackers new possibilities because of the impact on the economy, the decline in traffic, and the rise in remote employment. To effectively prevent and respond to auto thefts and carjackings during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, policymakers and law enforcement officials need to understand the numerous variables behind this rise in these crimes.

Some thieves are exceptionally skilled at removing items from cars, like airbags and catalytic converters. Gorzelany (2021) described how a thief was recently

apprehended for having 13 catalytic converters during a traffic stop. In contrast, Robertson (2022) outlined the causes of the rise in carjacking and auto theft in 2020. According to Robertson, push-button ignitions, for instance, made it simpler to start cars without needing keys. The difficulties in the supply chain caused the price of used vehicles to rise as thousands faced financial hardship. The COVID-19 pandemic brought in many delivery employees who frequently made stops in unfamiliar neighborhoods, making them prime targets for carjacking and auto theft (Robertson, 2022).

Major Causes of the Rise in Carjacking and Auto Theft

Headworth (2023) noted that carjacking and auto theft were a major problem at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. To slow down rising carjacking and auto theft rates, the Anti-Car Theft Act 1992 was signed into law and penalized individuals who decided to run chop shops (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). Valuable parts from stolen cars were disassembled for sale on the black market. The Anti-Car Theft Act of 1992 also helped keep vehicle information and allowed interstate information sharing (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2023). The components would either be sold to car owners looking for less expensive parts or used to fix more stolen vehicles. The COVID-19 pandemic-related carjacking spree appears to have been sparked by crude crime rings. To start the vehicle without a key, auto thieves would break into the car and use a variety of instruments to bypass the ignition. This technique was widely used because older vehicles lacked the sophisticated anti-theft systems standard in modern cars (United States Department of Justice, 2014).

Babu et al. (2020) claimed that newly produced automobiles were fitted with engine mobilizers, which could only be unlocked by microchips in critical fobs, leading to a drop in vehicle theft. Farrell and Tilley (2020) emphasized how these drivers made their cars apparent targets for thieves since they could drive away without critical fobs. As a result, technology like the key fob, which was once developed to end auto theft, is now being used against the people it is meant to protect. This analyzed many facets of crime and criminal situations in their research, covering the rise in car thefts in a specific area.

Hodgkinson and Andresen (2020) noted the COVID-19 pandemic caused a considerable decline in criminal events. This is because fewer individuals were leaving their homes due to the pandemic, which reduced the social chances for illegal activity. Hodgkinson and Andresen stated that not all crime categories experienced the same changes in the incidence of criminal episodes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, there have been contributions to social variables that have influenced this type of criminal behavior.

Meyer et al. (2022) examined major changes in crime rates during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to December 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, auto theft saw a significant rise during the latter part of 2020, which was fueled by summer protests and shootings involving law enforcement and unarmed African American males. The increase in carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more motor vehicles sitting idle in front of homes, businesses, and churches (Meyer et al., 2022). With an opportunity to strike, carjackers took advantage of the lockdowns

mandated by the local, state, and federal governments. Carjackers, mainly juveniles, targeted vehicles to find things of value. While people remained at home, juveniles crowded neighborhoods, hotwired cars, and broke their windows; even law enforcement vehicles were broken into during this chaotic and uncertain time.

Summary and Conclusion

Carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic have challenged law enforcement (Jennings & Perez, 2020). While law enforcement agencies worldwide continue to address carjacking and auto theft, there should be responsible and effective strategies to combat both crimes. Officer perceptions can be influenced to effect the necessary change to address carjacking and auto theft. Law enforcement agencies around the world continue to address carjacking and auto theft. In addition, law enforcement agencies can provide effective strategies for fighting crimes and officer perceptions can be influenced to achieve the necessary changes. Officers can do this by distributing officers with the necessary training and resources to understand these crimes better and address them. Law enforcement can work with community members to promote public safety initiatives such as vehicle safety and security measures.

Law enforcement agencies adopted new strategies in the fight against carjacking and auto theft. Law enforcement officers used the strategies adopted to respond to carjacking and auto theft effectively. The local, state, and federal partners must address the staff shortages and budget shortfalls. While law enforcement officers continue to combat carjacking and auto theft, the study was explored this way because there has been little to no research about this study (McDonald & Balkin, 2020). The present study filled

at least one of the gaps in the literature by exploring officer perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is not known how law enforcement combated two heinous crimes: carjacking and auto theft. Law enforcement agencies may not have effective and innovative strategies that were in place during the pandemic. However, this research can effectively analyze how to combat carjacking and auto theft. Therefore, law enforcement agencies should seek out these strategies to be readily available and prepared for future pandemics that may arise in the future.

Chapter 2 presented various studies on how law enforcement responds to carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crime pattern theory was the framework for the study to explore officer perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 3 of the study included the methodology, research design, data collection method, ethical considerations, participant selection, rationale, instrumentation, and data analysis. These sections investigated the problem and how I comprised the data for the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Researchers have stated there is limited research regarding law enforcement's perceptions in the fight against two crimes, carjacking and auto theft (Jennings & Perez, 2020). Using the qualitative approach to examine the phenomenon, the facts underlined this investigation to understand the perceptions of each law enforcement officer during this uncertain and unprecedented time in the United States and our world. The chapter discussed the research design and questions guiding the study. In addition, the chapter discussed the rationale underpinning the qualitative methodology. The chapter also examined and outlined how the study addressed the trustworthiness of the collected data from each participant. In the chapter's concluding section, I explained the ethical considerations, role of researcher, the participant selection criteria, and data collection and analysis.

Research Design and Rationale

This qualitative research was optimally suited for this study because I explored the new phenomenon of COVID-19 while exploring officers' perceptions when combating carjacking and auto theft. The research questions in the study focused on exploring the phenomenon of interest, the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were gathered based on the research questions to better comprehend officers' perceptions. To answer the study questions, I examined COVID-19 from law enforcement's point of view regarding combating carjacking and auto theft. This qualitative study was best suited because it delved into the officers' perceptions, opinions, and experiences combating two crimes

that have surged since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars consider the qualitative approach because they give accounts and attach to each participant's experience (Rashid et al., 2019). Whereas quantitative studies focus heavily on numbers and statistics, this approach suited a study built around the meanings that yielded greater insight, helping I comprised three overarching research questions.

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during COVID-19?

RQ 2: What strategies were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 3: How do law enforcement officers describe their agencies' preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

I used the purposive sampling strategy with 10 participants until data saturation occurred. I also used the snowball sampling strategy to find law enforcement officers who wanted to participate in the study. I utilized 12 semi-structured interview questions to investigate officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft. Semi-structured questions are best suited for this study because they can be yes or no responses while attempting to understand better the officers' responses to interview questions. According to Horton et al. (2004), semi-structured interviews are most efficient when they are designed and developed while selecting and interviewing the participants in the study. According to Bolderston (2012), conducting one-on-one interviews enables a protocol designed for the interview and interviewees to follow and to utilize active listening to the interviewees.

According to Yazan (2015), qualitative studies focus on the real-life context while exploring the boundaries underpinning the phenomenon of interest. The qualitative approach analyzed officers' real-life perceptions based on combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative research method is most useful because research was utilized at multiple avenues to explore the phenomenon (Rajojevich et al., 2012). The mixed methods approach was considered for this research since it would have examined multiple lenses of the data collection. The research problem's complexity can be addressed using qualitative and quantitative research methods.

According to Halcomb (2019), mixed methods refer to integrating qualitative and quantitative elements into one study. By only seeking 12 participants for the study, the mixed methods approach would not suffice because of the limited number of participants and would produce large amounts of outputs (Halcomb, 2019). The amount of time that is required for the integration of both methods would be time-consuming. A qualitative study was then conducted to examine the research questions and align the questions with the phenomenon of COVID-19. According to Baskarada (2014), a qualitative study is utilized to examine the study of a single exploration while understanding the larger class over a period. A qualitative method is best used when I can gain insight into a phenomenon of interest. A holistic approach to research can be administered while attempting to understand the situation being addressed (Baskarada, 2014).

Role of Researcher

Data were collected from law enforcement officers from the southeast region of Louisiana. In addition, I explored how staff shortages among officers and budget

shortfalls affected how they responded to and investigated carjacking and auto theft. The role consisted of allowing the participants to share their feelings. Participants also responded to the interview questions via Zoom, which helped guide the interview sessions. I did not suggest feelings or words to participants that could harm the study. Each participant answered the interview questions freely. Before the interview, all participants were informed of the study's scope and purpose. They were informed of their prerogatives as research participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of participant responses will always be ensured. Polkinghorne (2005) noted that for the specific study, it was vital to gather all the data via the interview questions because this is a part of the data collection for the study to suffice.

I gathered data based on semi-structured interviews alongside open-ended questions. I also gathered data from the law enforcers selected for the study and explored what perceptions and personal beliefs were used to combat carjacking and auto theft during the pandemic. I analyzed and interpreted the data collected, which are included in the study's remaining chapter. I guaranteed that the research was conducted ethically and morally.

At the same time, I used credible and reliable sources of information that were published for further research opportunities. The participants selected for the study were asked 12 semi-structured open-ended questions about their perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. An interview protocol and outline were provided so that the interview could flow better. According to Rabionet (2011), by using an interview format, it can provide an opening statement that

immediately engages the interviewee. I provided additional questions to probe the interviewee for more information that is not readily available from the interviewee. During the interviews, I informed each participant of the interview protocol to help ensure participant confidentiality.

Law enforcement officers examined how the rise in carjacking and auto theft affected how law enforcement responds to these crimes. These opinions from the participants may vary based on situations, jurisdictions, and cultural contexts. A final consideration should be given to the validity of the criminological theories. Based on the crime pattern theory, the study examined crime patterns. Scholars and practitioners may contest the accuracy and applicability of this theory, so it's vital to understand its openness to discussion and criticism.

Methodology

This section includes information presented to help participants comprehend the COVID-19 phenomenon better. It also includes participant selection, data collection, instruments, and analysis. It addressed the limited, but reserved literature on law enforcement officers' perceptions during the pandemic.

Participant Selection Logic

The sample size for the research consisted of 10 law enforcement officers from the Southeast region of Louisiana. I used the purposive sample strategy and snowball sampling method. According to Guarte and Barrios (2006), purposive sampling delineates random participant selection within the population segment by sharing targeted characteristics. The targeted characteristic for the study was COVID-19. There has been

little research about carjacking and auto theft and how law enforcement agencies combated those two crimes. The second strategy that was used to recruit participants was the snowball sampling method. According to Parker et al. (2019), in qualitative research, snowball sampling, other participants who have acceded to participate can recruit others. This occurred until data saturation. The snowball sampling method was used to facilitate the recruitment of participants. When recruiting participants from the southeast region of Louisiana, social media platforms were accessed to recruit participants. According to Naderifar et al. (2017), snowball sampling is a method of sampling when the participants aren't easily accessible. While using social media to recruit law enforcement officers from other agencies within the southeast region of Louisiana, it acknowledged and allowed further insight into the phenomenon of interest. Purposive sampling can identify participants for the study as they will contribute to the study's data (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The recruitment information was sent to law enforcement groups on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn in Louisiana's southeast region. The surveys for participation were posted on each platform geared towards recruiting approximately 10 law enforcement officers or until data saturation occurs. The surveys were posted in Facebook Messenger and Instagram Messengers. Upon completion of the surveys, a copy was emailed to each law enforcement officer who has expressed an active interest in participating in the study and informed consent to participate.

Parker et al. (2016) noted snowball sampling examines a small number of individuals who potentially meet criteria for a study to be conducted, and it is applicable

to seek out participants who fit the criteria for the study. In this study, law enforcement officers selected must have at least five years of experience with their respected departments from the southeast region of Louisiana. Participation in the research study was encouraged through respected law enforcement agencies in the southeast region of Louisiana. Law enforcement's contribution to the study has showed how to effectively combat carjacking and auto theft efficiently.

Instrumentation

For this qualitative study, data was collected via semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions, which was used as instruments. According to Kallio et al. (2016), developing semi-structured interviews from a qualitative perspective can contribute to trustworthiness, and the study results can be more plausible or credible. I selected the instrument to gain valuable insight into law enforcement officers' perceptions and further delve into COVID-19. The crime pattern theory was selected to frame the research questions by exploring the perceptions of law enforcement officers, agency preparedness, and strategies to combat carjacking and auto theft. For this qualitative study, the interview questions stemmed from the research questions.

Three subject matter experts with experience in law enforcement and prior knowledge of criminal justice examined the interview questions to gain further insight into the research interview questions. They provided valuable feedback to avoid potential bias. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results from the research study provided information to law enforcement agencies regarding officer

perceptions of auto theft and carjacking during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected from this study can potentially provide valuable information to law enforcement agencies in future crises.

Procedure for Recruitment, Participant, and Data Collection

For the quality of the study, semi-structured and open-ended questions were selected as a tool for the interviews to take place via Zoom in a quiet place like the Orleans parish library or the Jefferson parish library. According to Kallio et al. (2016), semi-structured interviews involve determining scope and purpose while attempting to develop prepared questions to help guide the study. I used this method to gather data effectively because some law enforcement officers from the southeast region of Louisiana had to get approval from their respective departments to participate in the study. The study was introduced to potential participants by emailing who meet the criteria of at least five years of law enforcement experience for participant selection.

While using the data collection tool, I used questions to explore the gaps in the literature that identified unexplored research areas like the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, each participant selected for the study was asked approximately 12 questions to understand better the issue. Approval was gained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and information flyers were distributed to interested law enforcement agencies and officers from the southeast Louisiana region. Social media platforms aided in finding more participants for the study.

Using a social media platform to recruit law enforcement officers, I joined various law enforcement groups and posted flyers to recruit the participants for the study. I

selected this approach to delve into COVID-19 and gain insight into officers' perceptions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted through the teleconferencing software Zoom. The interviews were transcribed using the transcription software Rev.com. I manually transcribed and coded all audio via manual coding and the audios were reviewed repeatedly to ensure proper accuracy. According to Guest et al. (2012) thematic analysis refers to identifying themes within the data. After this has been identified, codes are developed and produced to link the raw data for later analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Thematic analysis was used to code the information presented by the participants. Using this method, I understood the perceptions of the participants.

During the interviews, I took notes to better understand officers' perceptions of combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were approximately 23 minutes and 18 seconds during the data collection. The Zoom interviews were conducted in a quiet place like the Orleans Parish Library or Jefferson Parish Library. Upon conclusion of each interview, I debriefed the participants. Gardner (2013) noted that debriefing discusses what can be done to make sense of what happened during an event and what are some things that can be done differently. The law enforcement officer participants were informed on how and where presented information was utilized and stored.

During the informed consent process, the documents were kept confidential, including the potential risks of the study, the study's purpose, their rights, and the benefits associated with the study. The data collected remained with the transcription services Zoom, and the application was placed on lock so no one will have access to it; I

am the only person with access to it. When the audio was transcribed, I converted the information to a PDF file and stored it on a flash drive to be stored away for five years as an added layer of protection for the information.

Data Analysis Plan

Developing a framework conducive to the study's valid findings may not be as effective as strategies geared toward theory development, but rather an easy way to derive findings based upon the context and evaluation of questions (Thomas, 2006). Basit (2003) argued that data analysis incorporates a procedure to organize categories into a framework or a model. The framework can convey key themes within the study. I will utilize thematic analysis. Lochmiller (2021) stated that thematic analysis can be utilized when developing coding. When using thematic analysis, identified the patterns occurring (Lochmiller, 2021). As I identified the patterns within the data, I sorted out the different experiences and perspectives of the participants from the data. The patterns in thematic analysis illustrated the present themes that were categorized into codes. Coding is a step taken during data analysis to organize textual data effectively (Basit, 2003). I coded the information through the data acquired from the law enforcement officers and proffered an in-depth opportunity to explore officers' experiences when combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The semi-structured open-ended questions were recorded via Zoom per the participants' permission, and the interviews were transcribed. The data in the study were the interview transcripts. The data gathered was used to back up the research question after the analysis. The interview transcriptions were stored via laptop computer and were

secured with a flash drive. No one has access to the transcriptions except me. This information will be saved on the computer for 5 years, after which I would permanently delete the data from the flash drive file.

During the data analysis, I strived to identify and organize each term and code that can be grouped. Although the qualitative data software tool was selected to quickly gather quick and accurate transcriptions, I decided to manually code the information to delve into the information just a bit more. While doing so I was able to see patterns emerging and was able to identify common themes and subthemes. The law enforcement officers' responses to the semi-structured questions allowed the coding analysis to take shape. The codes were analyzed through thematic analysis to deduce themes. Thematic analysis is best suited for the study while deducing themes in the data related to the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies given by law enforcement officers helped address the highlighted research questions for the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is paramount in a qualitative study to ensure the accuracy of the study's findings (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). In the case of this study, all four components of trustworthiness were carefully considered to provide high levels of accuracy. Researchers attempt to utilize and establish the necessary procedures and protocols to guarantee the study's trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016). Firstly, on the credibility issue, the study sought to ensure that all the data collected is accurate and appropriate for the study at hand. All the questions that were asked in interviews will

seek to bring out a clear understanding of law enforcement officers' perceptions regarding the concept of carjacking and auto theft.

The interview questions only directed and addressed issues within the confines of the topic of carjacking and auto thefts and related issues. The interviewer sought to ensure that the participants did not deviate from the topic. When the participants answered semi-structured questions, the interviewer ensured they only gave information directly related to the issue. I also ensured that the participants stuck to the topic by using very clear and simple language while asking the questions and giving explanations where required. I ensured that all data collected is appropriate, ensuring simpler analysis. Other strategies to ensure credibility involved data triangulation and participant validation. The study ensured that only law enforcement officers participated, even if the interviews were conducted virtually.

I sought to ensure that all the findings from the study can be applied in other situations, thus ensuring transferability. A study must contribute to the general wealth of literature in the field it seeks to explore (Candela, 2019). The data to be collected in this study was not isolated from this study, but the data was generalized to other situations of similar contexts. Questions that were asked in the interviews facilitated the collection of data that can be applied to important decision-making considerations, especially within the law enforcement sector. Such questions regarded law enforcement officers' perceptions of various issues, such as their working environment, preparedness, and leadership effectiveness within their organizations. Such data were important in concluding the general perceptions of law enforcement officers within similar areas. The

study sought to present a broad description of the officer's perceptions to ensure that all the study findings can be easily transferred to other situations of similar contexts.

I sought to ensure dependability by clearly describing its procedures in many measures. Dependability delineates the level of reliability of the findings, making it an important aspect of trustworthiness (Candela, 2019). I sought to carefully follow the stipulated methodology and demonstrate that all procedures were followed. All data that were collected must be within the context of procedures outlined in the methodology section. All methods were carefully selected to ensure that they facilitate adequate and accurate information that helps answer the research questions. The presentation of all the data that were collected and analyzed was done in line with the guidelines of an academic study. The study was subjected to all available scrutiny within the university and external review from the IRB. Using the various committees instituted by the university, the study went through various checks to ensure that it has presented reliable information.

Finally, I sought to ensure that the findings that were presented are not biased or influenced in any way. I ensured high levels of confirmability. In all interactions with the law enforcement officers who were the study participants, the interview ensured that none of the questions asked were coerced to the participants to answer questions in a particular way. The questions were objective enough to ensure the data is collected appropriately. In this case, the interview questions sought to understand the participants' perceptions, and therefore, the interviewer must ensure that their perspective is projected in the outcome. Data were thoroughly examined throughout the collection process and during analysis.

The data collected were rechecked to ensure consistency between the data and analysis. Research bias is often introduced during analysis, especially in methods such as thematic analysis (Connelly, 2016). I ensured no researcher bias by checking and rechecking raw data after analysis. This method maintained a clear coding schema throughout the study. Other methods that have been noted to be effective and applied appropriately in this study are triangulation and member checking to confront possible personal bias (Nowell et al., 2017). The study applies multiple strategies to ensure confirmability and all the other aspects of trustworthiness.

Ethical Procedures

Walden University's IRB protects individuals who participate in research studies. The IRB gave the green light for this study to be conducted. The IRB also ensured that the data collected do not violate the privacy or confidentiality of the participants who acceded to engage in the study. Ethical consideration is essential to ensure the study's credibility. During the interviews, the participants were not threatened to participate in the study nor given anything in exchange, as all data and information was confidential. If any questions arose, the participants received emails with information, like a phone number. Informed consent was sent out to protect participants to inform the participants of the research and what their participation will entail.

Bhutta (2004) noted that informed consent in research is an ethical regulation, and ethical conduct should be used. I ensured that personal beliefs and perceptions would not influence the study. I treated all participants justly, allowing for free expression, respect, and dignity. When conducting a qualitative study, participants' information was protected

by measures so that the data collected can only be available to myself. Some ethical issues and concerns can arise, such as anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. Within this qualitative study, officer perceptions were expressed and examined.

Any data collected from the participants was always protected and remained confidential and anonymous. If this does not occur, it could reveal the participants' identities. I advised each participant that participation is voluntary and that they can participate in the study. Contact information was provided before I collected the data, including an option to request further information. The data obtained was secured on the computer and was protected by a PDF file that was placed on a flash drive. The goal was to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, the study posed no risks to any of the participants.

Summary

Carjacking and Auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic continue to present a challenge for law enforcement agencies nationwide. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore those perceptions by the officers to determine effective and innovative strategies for carjacking and auto theft rising rates that can be curbed. The study aimed to identify what measures must be implemented for law enforcement worldwide to be prepared for future crises. The data collected from the study was based on the teleconferencing software platform Zoom. Officers with veteran experience of five years were encouraged to participate in the study. 12 semi-structured interview questions guided the research, and the participants followed. I conducted interviews for

approximately 23 minutes and 18 seconds. Chapter 3 examined the study's goals and objectives and strategies for achieving them.

Chapter 3 also included the study rationale, researcher's role, and methodology suited for the study that tested the three research questions. The data collection methods were discussed, as well as the selection methods that were used to recruit 10 law enforcement officers from the southeast region of Louisiana until data saturation occurred. The chapter discussed the trustworthiness issues and the study's ethical considerations. Chapter 4 reported the research findings based on the analysis collected from the data. Chapter 4 also contains the data analysis comprised of the three research questions as well as the themes and subthemes.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected focused on law enforcement officers from the southeast region of Louisiana. There were three research questions that guided the study:

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What strategies were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 3: How do law enforcement officers describe their agencies preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

I explored law enforcement officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study focused on the perceptions of ten law enforcement officers from various police departments around the southeast region of Louisiana. The three research questions addressed and explored how law enforcement officers describe their perceptions to effectively respond to carjacking and auto theft under unforeseen circumstances and times of crisis. What challenges their respected agencies faced because of crippling budget restraints, recruitment and retainment issues, and staff shortages. There is a gap in the literature about law enforcement officers' perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the study to suffice, the data were collected via semi-structured

interview questions comprising 12 interview questions. These interview questions helped to further delve into law enforcement officer perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 4 described the demographics, procedures for data collection for the study, the procedures for data analysis, the study's trustworthiness, and the study's results.

Setting

I conducted semi-structured interview questions via teleconferencing software Zoom at the convenience of my business home office. The interviewees participated in the study via private locations, but some participated while on duty. There were no outside individuals present at the time of the interviews. I sent interview dates and times to the participants via Facebook, which contained the Zoom information needed to log into the interview. Once the interviews began, the officers read the consent form, which was sent via email. They each responded, "I agree to participate in the study." All the interviews commenced, and each participant offered their perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Demographics

The participants for the study were split; six officers were Caucasian, and four were African American, all of whom were male. The participants' age ranged from 21-70, coupled with at least 5 years of law enforcement experience. The participants ranged from Lieutenant, Detective, School resource officer, Bailiff, and patrol officers. Two officers stated they worked in corrections during the COVID-19 pandemic, so they could

only speak about what they viewed or heard. Table 1 describes the demographics of each participant, race and ethnicity, years of service, employment status and rank.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participants	Race and Ethnicity	Years of Service	Employment Status	Rank
PO 1	White	28 years	Full Time	Lt.
PO 2	White	8 years	Full Time	Detective
PO 3	White	34 years	Part Time	Officer
PO 4	African American	40 years	Full Time	Officer
PO 5	White	5 years	Full Time	Officer
PO 6	African American	13 years	Full Time	Detective
PO 7	White	8 years	Full Time	Bailiff
PO 8	White	6 years	Full Time	Detective
PO 9	African American	14 years	Full Time	Officer
PO 10	African American	25 years	Full Time	Officer

Data Collection

Upon receiving Walden University IRB approval (05-21-24-1046193) I began the recruitment process for the study and then began posting flyers on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. I contacted several law enforcement groups were contacted on each social media platform to find potential law enforcement officers from the southeast region of Louisiana. For confidentiality to suffice, I advised each participant that a pseudonym would be created to mask their identity and to protect it. According to Lahman et al. (2023) the practice and standard to protect research participants' names is the usage of pseudonyms. In qualitative research, this is a method to ensure confidentiality for the individuals who are participating in the research study. Pseudonyms protect the real names of the research participants (Lahman et al., 2023). I assigned each participant a

pseudonym. PO1 (Police Officer #1)- PO10 (Police Officer #10). The pseudonyms were assigned based on when the semi-structured interview was scheduled and completed. The communication with each potential participant was via email, Instagram messenger, and Facebook Messenger. Officers who did not meet the inclusion criteria were notified via email and advised that they did not meet the eligibility criteria for the study. Hence, they stated, "I understand". I advised, "Thank you for wanting to participate in the study." One side note: two of the officers who wanted to participate had no experience responding to carjacking and auto theft because they were correctional officers at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 10 law enforcement officers who met the inclusion criteria of at least five years of experience were sent electronic copies of the consent form via Facebook Messenger.

The officers also received an email requesting their consent to participate. The consent form sent to the participants contained all the information regarding the study so that the participants would make an informed decision. After reading the email, the participants were expected to reply with "I consent" to indicate that they had read and understood everything required and how the findings would be used. The participants were also asked to select a favorable time for the interview. Once the calendar was all set, they were sent a link to the virtual meeting on Zoom. On the day of the interview, a reminder was sent to each participant, a link to the virtual meeting, and a description of how they would access it to ensure they all showed up. All 10 participants responded positively to the reminders and were reassured of their interest in participating. The study

reached data saturation by the tenth participant; therefore, there was no need to contact more people to participate.

Interviews were scheduled for an hour each, although most lasted half that time. Each interview was conducted on Zoom, and each participant was interviewed simultaneously. Before the interview, each participant would be requested to go to a place where they could comfortably answer the questions. Also, the participants were supposed to identify a quiet place to ensure that their responses were audible enough and that the recording was clear. The procedure for data collection was the same for all the participants to ensure that the data collected could be subjected to the same analysis process. The procedures outlined in Chapter 3 were followed strictly. Before concluding, the participants were promised to receive a copy of their transcripts via email. After they received their transcripts, all 10 participants were satisfied with their responses and did not want to make edits.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for the study was guided by three research questions: (a) What the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?, (b) What strategies were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?, and (c) How do law enforcement officers describe their agencies preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic? Upon completing the interview transcripts, I manually coded the information from each participant. The study adopted thematic

analysis, especially because of the nature of the study. The study also followed the six iterative steps of data analysis to ensure that the study arrives at the best possible results.

In the first step, I listened to the recordings several times to ensure they are clear, and all the information needed is available. The recordings were transcribed at this point so that the information provided by the participants was even more plain for analysis. The autogenerated transcripts were then compared with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Portions that were unclear in the transcripts were edited to match what the participants said. While doing this, it was easy to fully understand the data by being more familiar with it. From the first step, I could identify similarities between the participants and the variations therein.

In Step 2, applicable codes for the data were created to make it simpler to analyze. The data in the study was manually coded to better understand the study's outcome better. The transcripts were coded using Microsoft Word's review mark features. All the data codes appeared on the side of the document, making it easy to use later. The codes were later listed in a separate document to make it easy to continue the analysis. The third step included checking for similarities after all the codes were cut into a separate document. The codes that had similarities were grouped to allow the formation of themes.

The fourth step of this process involved the careful creation of themes. Combined codes were named as themes. As the themes developed, certain patterns were noticed, some similar. Some of the themes would be combined with those that had similarities to ensure the simplification of the data. The overarching themes were better to deal with, especially because they were properly organized into subthemes. Similar initial themes

would form subthemes under an umbrella theme. The fifth step involved determining the relationship between the themes and the research question. A research study aims to ensure that it answers all the research questions. It is important to link each theme with a research question. It may be unsuccessful if a study fails to answer all research questions.

The final step of this stage involved creating a final report outlining the findings' details. In this phase, one must ensure that all data is presented clearly and organized, making it possible to synthesize reasonable conclusions. The final stage is, therefore, about the study's findings and stating how the study results were attained. In this case, the study's results were obtained from interviews with the law enforcement officers.

The data analysis eventually arrived at 5 main themes and 15 subthemes. The main themes identified included Theme 1: There were behavioral shifts in society that law enforcement officers needed to be aware of to combat carjacking and auto thefts effectively, Subtheme 1A: Social Stress, Subtheme 1B: Change in Lifestyles, and Subtheme 1C: Challenges in communication. Theme 2 was Change of Crime Patterns during the COVID-19 Pandemic, (2A), Juvenile Involvement in Carjacking and Auto Thefts, (2B), New Techniques of Conducting Crime. Theme 3, The need for proactive patrol strategies, subthemes (3A) Patrol Increase, (3B), Traffic Stops, (3C) Public Awareness, Theme 4 The Improvement of Reactive Strategies, (4A), Intelligence Based Approach, (4B), Increased Use of Modern Technology, 4C, Interagency Cooperation, 4D Formation of Special Units to Deal with Carjacking and Auto Thefts. Theme 5 was on Budget issues and needs, (5A) Increased Technology Use, (5B), Funds for Public Awareness Projects, (5C) Staffing Shortages. While there were varied responses to

various interview questions, these five themes appeared predominantly in almost all interviews. The interview questions, therefore, made it possible to understand the perceptions of law enforcement officers on the crimes of carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The officers communicated how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their work concerning these crimes. Table 2 depicts the themes and subthemes that materialized from the data analysis process. The codes were manually captured, and the themes emerged from the codes. Each theme was categorized as (Theme 1 through 5) and the subthemes corresponded to each theme. The subthemes capture the different perceptions that individual participants raised but within certain major themes. Table 2 below presents the themes and subthemes below them.

Table 2*Themes and Subthemes*

*	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5
Themes	There were behavioral shifts in society that law enforcement officers needed to be aware of to combat carjacking and auto thefts effectively	Change of crime patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic	The need for Proactive patrol Strategies	The Improvement of Reactive Strategies	Budget issues and needs
Subthemes	Subtheme 1A Social Stress	Subtheme 2A Juvenile involvement in carjacking and auto theft	Subtheme 3A Patrol increase	Subtheme 4A Intelligence based approach	Subtheme 5A Increased Technology use
	Subtheme 1B Changes in lifestyles	Subtheme 2B New techniques of conducting crime	Subtheme 3B Traffic Stops	Subtheme 4B Increased use of modern technology	Subtheme 5B Funds for public awareness projects
	Subtheme 1C Changes in Communication		Subtheme 3C Public Awareness	Subtheme 4C Interagency cooperation Subtheme 4D Formation of special units to deal with carjacking and auto thefts	Subtheme 5C Staffing shortages

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Considering that the study was conducted using qualitative methods, it was important to carry out specific steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. In this case, the study applied various techniques to increase all the aspects of trustworthiness, as demonstrated below.

Credibility

Credibility denotes the level at which a study's findings are accurate. Therefore, the findings of a study must present a true representation of the issue being studied. In this case, the study sought to understand the perspectives of law enforcement officers on carjacking and auto theft. In this study, one of the strategies applied to increase accuracy was acknowledging any possible biases and then working to reduce them. In this quest, semi-structured interviews were adopted to ensure that the main goal prevailed in the cause of the conversations. Although there were a few follow-up questions, I sought clarification on, all leading questions were already predetermined. After the interviews, I ensured that the transcripts reflected the participants' views. During coding and thematic analysis, constant reference to the transcripts was made to ensure that the participants' views prevailed even after analysis.

Transferability

Although it may not be possible to duplicate this study since the context for other qualitative variables may be different, it is important to acknowledge that this study may act as an important guideline in future studies. The study uses appropriate methods that make it possible to generalize certain findings that would form important pillars in the

development of future studies or even theories. The study also incorporates participants from the various police departments across the southeast region of Louisiana. As a way of showing transferability, I clearly describe the recruitment process including the number of participants and criteria for inclusion. I also used semi-structured interview questions thus ensuring that they were standardized throughout the interview.

Dependability

Dependability is the aspect that shows the extent to which the results of a study can be trusted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). In this case, dependability was assured by ensuring the study followed all the protocols outlined in Chapter 3. While the questions were semi-structured, the interviewer ensured that similar leading questions were asked to ensure that all the participants were asked the same questions. Although a few questions were introduced, this was done when seeking clarification about issues that arose as the participants gave their responses. I also accurately followed the analysis process as documented to ensure no personal bias was introduced. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research activities to ensure that the study remained on the stipulated methods, from data collection to analysis and presentation.

Confirmability

To promote confirmability, the study sought to ensure the documentation of all the processes throughout the study. For instance, all the interviews were recorded on audio and later transcribed into text. In all interactions with the law enforcement officers, I ensured that none of the questions asked were coerced towards the participants to answer questions in any particular way. The questions were objective to ensure the data

was collected appropriately. In this case, the interview questions sought to understand the participants' perceptions and ensure that their perspective was projected in the outcome.

Data was thoroughly examined throughout the collection process and during analysis. The data collected were rechecked to ensure consistency between the data and analysis. Research bias is often introduced during analysis, especially in methods such as thematic analysis (Connelly, 2016). The text was encoded and organized into themes, making it easier to understand how the data was gathered and analyzed. I ensured that there was no researcher bias by checking and rechecking raw data after analysis. This method maintained a clear coding schema throughout the study. Other methods that were done to increase an effective process and the study were appropriately conducted, triangulation and member checking, to confront possible personal bias (Nowell et al., 2017). The study applies multiple strategies to ensure confirmability and all the other aspects of trustworthiness.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the study to suffice, data were collected via 12 semi structured interview questions. The interview questions were audio recorded via teleconferencing software Zoom. To participate in the study, participants had at least 5 years of law enforcement experience within the southeast region of Louisiana. While the interviews were scheduled for about an hour, they lasted an average of 23 minutes and 18 seconds. The three research questions were organized by themes and subthemes. The results associated with the first

research question suggested that there were changes in public behavior. In the second research question, two main themes emerged. First, the improvement of proactive patrol strategies and reactive strategies. These strategies were needed to combat carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicated that there was a need to utilize strategies to deter criminal activities. In Research Question 3, one theme emerged about budget needs. It suggested that law enforcement agencies were confronted with new challenges and there was a need to allocate more funding to combat the crime of carjacking and auto theft. The participants suggested that hiring more officers was a challenge. There was an unprecedented number of officers leaving which made it difficult to hire more.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Throughout the interviews it was notable that the pandemic had changed the way that law enforcement officers perceived the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts. The officers indicated that it was inevitable to change perspectives about the subject matter considering all the changes that were taking place. Most of them noted significant changes in areas of behavioral changes with the public as well as change in crime patterns as enumerated in the themes below.

Theme 1: There Were Behavioral Shifts in Society That Law Enforcement Officers Needed to be Aware of to Combat Carjacking and Auto Thefts Effectively

Participants pointed out that during the pandemic, people's behavior changed significantly. People were living with a lot of uncertainties that created anxiety, which

affected people's behavior drastically. For instance, people were confused at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and lacked sufficient information about the disease. They supported the idea that various people reacted differently to the information that was available to them. While some decided to lock themselves up completely in fear, others did not take the restrictions seriously. For instance, some teenagers felt they still needed to go out to house parties and other similar activities. Some engaged in criminal activities, considering they were out of school and had more time. Police Officer 2 suggested that such people would take advantage of others who had issues with anxiety and stayed mostly indoors. People's behavior also affected how people interacted with each other; therefore, there was the possibility of community interactions to help each other during theft or suspected theft. In some areas, people did not interact as much, which made it difficult to know what was happening in the neighbors' backyards or garages. Police Officer 2 felt that people overreacted to the issue of carjacking because of the social issues that were happening at the time.

Police Officer 2 noted:

When the media was pushing you know, these carjackings and stuff like that and showing them on TV for people to see, especially like certain high high-profile cases. I feel like the public's perception changed quickly, and everyone was concerned about carjackings. And they still are like, I would say, you still see, people talk about carjackings often, even though they've dramatically decreased.

Subtheme 1A: Social Stress

Most officers indicated that social stress was a significant factor that law enforcement officers needed to be aware of, as they dealt with all crimes during the pandemic. Social stress affected the way people interacted, even with the police officers. Therefore, as indicated by many of the police officers, it was not easy to deal with crimes such as carjacking, considering that some of the public members were not willing to cooperate with law enforcement. The situation heightened other underlying issues, such as racism, making it difficult for officers to serve the people. Police Officer 5 noted “especially if it's a Black community, and a white officer responding. They would refuse to talk to or give us information.”

In some cases, many police officers stated that some people could not be useful in the investigation because of increased levels of social stress in the communities. They continued that in some cases, some of the members of the public were unable to report crime effectively because of mental instabilities that were taken advantage of by criminals. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety disorders, which made it difficult to help some individuals. In many cases, some would raise false alarms to law enforcement officers so that the police were no longer sure when it was a real or false alarm. The situation worsened when law enforcement officers increased awareness of car theft issues. People with psychological instabilities became more insecure and would more often raise false alarms with police officers. Police needed to assess a situation each time a call came in to ensure that it was a real case of carjacking or auto theft.

Subtheme 1B: Change in Lifestyles

Most officers noted that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed many people's lives. With long periods of stay-at-home restrictions, people no longer had the lives they used to live before. Teenagers who were used to school life were no longer in school, and so did their counterparts from colleges and universities. Police Officer 5 noted, during COVID, teenagers did not want to stay indoors; they came out, and some of them engaged in carjacking.”

According to Police Officer 5, “young people have a lot of free time, most of which they spend on leisure activities such as social media and watching movies.” Movies and social media had some influence that could have pushed young people into criminal activities. Law enforcement officers established that young people would endure peer pressure from social media to engage in activities requiring them to steal cars. For instance, Police Officer 9 indicated that some teenagers would steal a car in their neighborhood to attend a house party elsewhere and then dump it after use.

Conversely, organized crime was necessitated by the loss of jobs and sources of income. With the COVID-19 pandemic, many people lost their jobs and sources of income due to the restrictions that came with the pandemic. Some of these people included illegal immigrants and other low-income earners who were working in menial jobs such as servers and bar attendants. When they lost their incomes, most struggled to pay rent and meet most of their daily needs. Given an opportunity, some of them joined organized criminal groups either to directly participate or even assist in conducting crimes such as carjacking and auto thefts. With this realization, Police Officer 4 noted

that police knew which people were more vulnerable to getting into crime in times of crisis, thus making investigations easier. Officers must acknowledge changes in lifestyle patterns and the possible influence of the same on criminal patterns. Such observations enabled law enforcement agencies to investigate and combat criminal activities properly.

Subtheme 1C: Challenges in Communication

The officers noted that the COVID-19 pandemic came about with restrictions on physical interactions, which challenged communication. Direct interaction between law enforcement officers and the public became challenging, thus making it difficult to deal with crime. For instance, reporting crime was primarily over the phone, unlike before when some people physically took themselves to the police station to report a crime. At the height of the pandemic, people called police officers and gave all the details about the crime over the phone. Investigations did physical meetings to follow up on the matter. While this strategy was still effective, some officers felt that one on one interactions with victims would have provided more details about the crime that would have made assisting and dealing with the crime more easily. Communication challenges contributed to the challenges of dealing with carjacking and auto thefts. Police Officer 4 noted, “There have been times where you can go out and see subjects walking up and down streets 2, 3, 4, o'clock in the morning you can stop and speak with them and see what's going on but nowadays you can't do that anymore.” PO 4 also noted that “communication had changed drastically during that time.”

Theme 2: Change of Crime Patterns During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Law enforcement officers would not use old techniques to deal with criminal activities such as carjacking and auto theft during the pandemic. It was important to appreciate the changes the pandemic had brought, which also caused criminals to change their operations. For instance, in the height of the pandemic, carjacking and auto theft were not a crime primarily for hardened criminals like it has been over the years; teenagers and young people were being involved for various reasons, as noted by Police Officer 2 stated, “you know, a lot of the carjackings that were done were by, like, I would say, by teenagers, right?”

The officers had knowledge that vehicles would be stolen differently. The young people had developed more cunning ways of engaging in criminal activities without raising their alarm. Some methods included using technology to break into cars or start them. The motive for carjacking and auto thefts during the pandemic was also considerably different as compared to before. For example, some teenagers would steal a car for a party because public transport was not operating. The subthemes below discuss some of these changes in detail as described by the participants.

Subtheme 2A: Juvenile Involvement in Carjacking and Auto Thefts

The participants indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a rise in the involvement of teenagers in carjackings and auto thefts. During this period schools were closed, and guidelines were set in place encouraging people to stay at home. Unfortunately, teenagers were used to spending time together, they had nothing to do and some of them ended up directing that energy to the wrong things. In this period of

confusion and social stress, some parents lost touch with their teenage children thus making it impossible for them to know what their children were engaging in. Parents did not realize when their children were getting into criminal activities to the extent of big crimes such as carjacking. The pandemic offered many opportunities for teenagers to engage in criminal activities not just because of time. Some of the other reasons included radicalization using media as well as peer pressure. Police Officer 1 stated “we have seen offenders becoming younger and younger.” Police Officer 9 also noted, “it goes both ways both juvenile and adult, but mostly juvenile.”

Teenagers had various motives for engaging in criminal activities. Many of them engaged in criminal activities just for the sake of pleasure and prestige because of peer pressure. In such cases cars ended up being dumped in other places after they were used. Some vehicles would even be left intact without being vandalized. In other cases, teenagers would end up finding themselves as part of organized criminal gangs. Such teenagers would either be targeted by hardened criminals for recruitment or would willfully join these organizations since they needed to belong somewhere. Hardened criminals knew that using teenagers would give them an easy time with law enforcers because teenagers may not be easily suspected. Teenagers would be involved either directly in the crime or to collect information about car owners, and thus assisting the criminals successfully conduct the crime.

Subtheme 2B: New Techniques of Conducting Crime

The interviewed officers indicated that a lot has changed over the years regarding how crime was conducted as criminals try to evade law enforcement officers. In a period

marred with other challenges, criminals were sure to incorporate new techniques to prevent police and car owners from catching up with them in carjacking activities. For instance, many criminals engaging in carjacking and auto thefts went to another level to incorporate technology into their thefts. Officers indicated that some criminals would use USB drives to start the vehicles, as described by Police Officer 6. “Young people were getting ideas on TikTok that were just going haywire and showing these young people how to get into cars with a USB port to start these cars up.”

The technology would be utilized in cars with electronic control modules, a system that controls all the car's components, from the engine to the powertrain. In this case, the criminals would not need a key to start the vehicle, and provided they could enter the car, they would comfortably start it as though they were the rightful owners.

Traditionally, most criminals used manual techniques to break into their target vehicles. Still, if the vehicles had alarms, it would be easy for car owners to hear them and respond immediately. In recent years, more criminals have devised new strategies to open locked vehicles without having the alarms go off. In such cases, it would be possible for criminals to break into cars without being noticed, even when cars are parked very near the house or office. Other changed techniques include conniving with repair shops to tamper with cars' security features, thus enabling them to access the cars and successfully start them during the theft. In such cases, criminals would target a specific vehicle and plot to trail it before executing their plan.

RQ2: What strategies were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Most officers acknowledged that their agencies had to reconsider the strategies that they were using in combating carjackings and auto thefts. It was important to reconsider these strategies considering all the challenges that the pandemic introduced. Cases of carjacking and auto theft have increased therefore, demanding better strategies of dealing with the problem. The themes below represent the information presented by the participants regarding the need for proactive and reactive patrol strategies in combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 3: The Need for Proactive Patrol Strategies

With the many changes that came about with the pandemic, criminal activities also took a different turn, thus necessitating the need to rethink strategies for combating criminal activities. In this case, carjacking and auto thefts were significantly changed, and more proactive strategies were needed to deal with them. In the past, most of the time, law enforcement officers reactively dealt with this issue. However, during the pandemic, carjackings and auto thefts went up at some point, thus necessitating proactive strategies in dealing with this kind of crime. Proactive strategies meant that officers had to be more alert during the pandemic to help prevent car thefts. The participants supported the idea that the pandemic shifted their focus from mostly reactive measures to protective strategies to ensure they reduce the spiking rates of carjacking and auto thefts. For instance, this is what one of the participants, Police Officer 10, had to say about proactive control, “We have taken some precautionary measures or proactive control, including community policing and just engaging the public to learn who is who; that's generally how we approach.” While Police Officer 8 also discussed the issue of proactive strategies

in more detail by discussing specific strategies implemented in combating carjacking and auto thefts saying:

We dedicated a unit that was mainly a proactive warrant unit that was supposed to do all that they could to deal with carjacking and auto thefts through preventive strategies. The unit would also help recover stolen vehicles because they would watch to know where stolen cars are taken. My department was a little bit more proactive than they do for most other things. We are a very reactive department these days. We went back to an older method of being proactive to combat the specific crime.

Subtheme 3A: Patrol Increase

People reacted differently to the pandemic and its initial restrictions. In a time when students were not going to school, and parents were not going to work, the officers reported there were places where more people were on the streets while other places people primarily spent their time indoors. Both situations provided unique opportunities for carjacking and auto theft. In some cases, if many people are on the streets, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between criminals and ordinary people. On the other hand, in cases where people were mostly indoors, criminals had time to do what they wanted in people's backyards, parking lots, and garages. For example, when students were not going to school, and most were just at home, some got opportunities to explore things they ordinarily could not have done. For example, some would desire to go places their parents did not want them to. Teenagers would, therefore, at times gang up and be

involved in crimes such as carjackings because they had a desire to do something else with the car.

In such cases, Police Officer 7 stated that “increased patrol rounds were useful in dealing with those situations. In situations where police officers may not be sure who may intend to commit a crime, it was necessary to be more vigilant rather than reactive. Law enforcement would, therefore, conduct more patrols not just during the night but also during the day, as supported by officers such as Police Officer 7 saying, “Increasing patrols in certain areas where the carjackings were happening. And making sure that you know there was an increased presence of the sheriff’s office and other police departments.”

The officers noted that previously, most of the carjackings and auto thefts that were reported would be at night. However, during the pandemic, crime patterns changed and occurred during the day. In this case, it was important to have more patrols and in a random way. Law enforcement officers realized that scheduled interviews were ineffective because criminals would keep track of patrol hours and conduct their criminal activities during other hours. Law enforcement officers would need to organize themselves into groups that would conduct random patrols in residential areas to prevent criminal activities. By conducting random patrols, the criminals cannot keep track of police hours, and therefore, most of them, being inexperienced criminals, would fear engaging in car thefts, which worked to reduce these crimes. Police Officer 5 also noted that officers used canine patrols to improve their effectiveness.

Subtheme 3B: Traffic Stops

In addition to doing increased random patrols, most officers, including Police Officer 5, supported that law enforcement conduct traffic that was needed to stop and combat carjacking. Traffic stops were carried out using various strategies to ensure their efficacy. In one of the strategies, police would erect barriers in various locations where they would check the occupants of a car and request a driver's license and registration. In so doing, criminals would not drive stolen cars freely on the streets. Police Officer 6 said that the method was especially effective in dealing with teenagers who stole cars, used them for mischievous activities, and then dumped them. Most of the teenagers who were caught driving stolen vehicles were mostly arrested at traffic stops. Another strategy was using random traffic stops where police officers would stop cars randomly to check registration and other requirements. In many cases, traffic stops would only be made for suspects who law enforcement officers were investigating. Hard criminals would be tracked down and stopped, when necessary, as indicated by Police Officer 5, stated, "Nine detectives would be the 1st ones to initiate traffic stop detectives, and narcotics were set up as would pose as various people, husbands, wives in a vehicle to see which area would have the most carjacking rates."

Subtheme 3C: Public Awareness

Police Officer 6 denoted that the most significant proactive measure most agencies use was conducting public awareness. The awareness programs involved sensitizing the public to the crimes that were taking place. For instance, many law enforcement agencies hold small meetings in town halls to sensitize the public to various

ways to prevent this type of crime. The officers recalled that conducting physical meetings at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging. In such cases, some agencies ran television advertisements and campaigns to ensure that the public was aware of surges in criminal activities. Some guidelines the agencies would give would help the public to deal with carjacking and auto thefts, thus collectively reducing these crimes. For example, some of the reminders on the television were guidelines for preventing auto thefts, such as ensuring that cars were fitted with alarms and that cars were locked. Windows rolled up, ensuring that vehicles were kept in safe places as much as possible. Police Officer 6 described the many awareness projects stating, “We had billboards put out and we had commercials being run. We actually started getting local celebrities like full NFL players and basketball players to start getting into this initiative because we found that many people would leave their cars unlocked.”

Many people responded positively to this strategy, and the auto theft rate was reduced. For example, an officer reported that many people leaving their vehicles outside and having indoor garages started parking their cars indoors.

Other awareness programs implemented, as narrated by the participants, included using social media platforms to provide information on the issue, as indicated by almost all. In other cases, details or even photos of stolen vehicles would be shared so that the public would help try to trace them by sharing any information they had about them. Law enforcement also sought to inform parents about the involvement of their teenagers in crimes of carjacking and auto theft. Parents would be informed of the possibility of their teenage children being involved in crime if they spent a lot of time away from home

when not in school. Parents would help check out their teenage children's whereabouts to ensure they were not involved in criminal activities, thus helping to collectively deal with the crime problem, as explained by Police Officer 9 saying that law enforcement agencies would also sensitize residents more specifically by letting them know of criminal hotspots and places where they would be in danger. This helped the residents to be proactive by avoiding unsafe routes.

Theme 4: The Improvement of Reactive Patrol Strategies

With all the changes that have occurred in crime patterns, the officers appreciate that it was important that law enforcement agencies also improved their strategies for dealing with crime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the criminals involved in carjacking developed new strategies to steal cars without being easily noticed. Law enforcement needed to rethink old methods of dealing with carjackers and auto thieves. For example, many times, law enforcement officers would have to wait for the tip-off from car owners after the alarm of their cars went off, and they would try to trail the car or the criminals after an incident. However, during the pandemic, some of the techniques the criminals used were rather more seamless, and in most cases, car owners would realize that their cars were stolen much later. In such cases, retrieving such cars had to be more investigative. Law enforcement agencies, therefore, had to adopt more sophisticated investigative strategies to deal with the problem holistically.

Subtheme 4A: Intelligence Based Approach

For law enforcement agencies to successfully deal with carjacking and auto thefts during the pandemic, most participants noted that employing an intelligence-based

approach to catch up with criminals using technologically advanced approaches was important. In this case, in reacting to one crime, law enforcement must focus on retrieving the lost vehicle and dealing with the carjacking and auto theft issues at large. By trailing one lost vehicle, law enforcement officers would seek to uncover as much information as possible regarding these crimes, supported by Police Officer4. In many cases, it involved understanding the techniques that criminals were using. Also, law enforcement officers wanted to uncover all the entities involved in the criminal activities. For instance, once cars were stolen, where they were taken and how criminals avoided being caught or the cars being retrieved?

In some cases, I uncovered those police officers sometimes knew the location of a stolen vehicle. Still, they would not intercept it immediately to uncover more information about the criminal activities. Some key information law enforcement officers wanted to know was whether different instances of carjacking and auto thefts were related to whether criminals were operating in gangs. In cases where these crimes were being conducted mostly by organized gangs, officers would embark on a journey to understand the organization and operations of these gangs. Some information they sought was on leadership and places they operated from. By so doing, it would become easier to deal with crime on a larger scale than when officers investigated isolated cases.

Some officers pointed out that in the quest to handle carjacking and auto thefts in an intelligence-based way, law enforcement officers would use various strategies to collect information to stay ahead of criminals. For example, officers would prioritize following trends through social media to establish crime trends, especially among

juvenile offenders. In some cases, officers would establish places where young people would likely go with stolen vehicles and where they would leave them after use. Officers must use more sophisticated investigative strategies for hardened criminals and gangs to uncover their trends and eventually deal with them. One of the extreme investigative strategies that law enforcement officers use was playing victim, where they strategically placed certain vehicles in vulnerable places to trap carjackers or auto thieves so that they can use these vehicles for further investigation. Some of the intelligence acquired included the criminals' backgrounds, thus making it possible to analyze their networks and deal with the problem more holistically. For example, Police Officer 8 thought this was one of the best strategies to help deal with the carjacking issue sharing:

The best way to stop the rise of crime is through an intelligence-based approach which involves a lot of watching houses, watching people following putting trackers on vehicles, the umbrella of not just who's committing the crime, but who their network is they are all connected.

Subtheme 4B: Increased Use of Modern Technology

Police Officer 3 supported technology that came in handy in proactive and reactive strategies. For instance, when people did not want much interaction due to the spread of the coronavirus, law enforcement had to devise strategies to interact with the public without coming into contact directly. Considering the many restrictions in different parts of the country, law enforcement officers would not freely interact with the public, making it challenging to obtain certain information they would ordinarily get from the public. Normally, law enforcement agencies depend partially on informers to get

information on suspicious activities or people. Once reported, law enforcement officers would engage one-on-one with informers and ask questions to help them gain important details about suspected criminal activities.

Interactions took a different turn during the pandemic, with most communication done over the phone and online. Officers noted that the phone calls did not offer sufficient information to assist the investigation. There was a need to include other modern technologies to improve communication quality. For instance, interviews were sometimes done over video platforms such as Zoom or even social media platforms to ensure that informers got a personalized feel, encouraging them to share information more freely, as detailed by Police Officer 7 saying:

We have a very good social media team. So, they worked, went to all the social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram and all those kinds of things, and they went, and they advised the population to, you know. Make sure that your car doors are locked. They also would increase roles in certain areas that were high crime or had a high potential for carjackings and things like that.

It was important to check out how to collect information from people who wanted to protect their privacy. In this case, it was important to use systems that would allow anonymous reporting yet allow accurate information to be relayed. Several law enforcement agencies had systems that would allow the public to interact with law enforcement anonymously, thus making it possible to report suspicious people and activities. Other technologies involved include using GPS trackers to find vehicles, as

indicated by Police Officer 8 sharing that “they would use those same tools to find these carjackers, such as GPS trackers, to find a car that was stolen in a carjacking.”

Subtheme 4C: Interagency Cooperation

Considering that the pandemic presented new challenges to law enforcement agencies in dealing with crime, they needed to embrace other complex techniques of dealing with crime. One of the ways to help agencies deal with the challenge of carjacking and auto thefts more comprehensively was through fostering interagency cooperation. Through such cooperation, it was possible to have intelligence exchanged between different agencies, thus making it possible to conduct operations that would effectively deal with criminal activities. For example, with limited resources during the pandemic, interagency cooperation would help agencies access limited internal resources. For instance, where higher technology was required, and the agencies involved could not buy, partnering with other organizations with this technology would be considered. Agencies would partner with others to use resources, especially to facilitate their new crime prevention approaches, such as the intelligence-based approach, as indicated by Police Officer 2 who shared, “because the newest department has a significant manpower issue. They called in members from the Louisiana state police, and they called in members from Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF).”

Organizations would also partner with other agencies where investigations would lead to other jurisdictions. For example, agencies often would realize criminals operate in a cross-border scope. In such cases, some criminal gangs were operating across borders where they were, in most cases, stealing cars and selling them in another state. In other

cases, criminals steal vehicles, and after they realize that law enforcement agencies were trailing them, they escape to neighboring states where they would, unfortunately, continue their criminal activities. After establishing the linkage of criminal activities between various jurisdictions, law enforcement agencies would engage the necessary agencies to ensure that the criminals were stopped, or criminal activities curtailed.

Subtheme 4D: Formation of Special Units to Deal With Carjacking and Auto Thefts

Officers noted that the rise of carjackings and auto thefts meant that law enforcement agencies had more work to deal with. At the same time, other emergencies that arose during the pandemic required the attention of law enforcement officers. In this case, it meant that it would not be very effective to have the general law enforcement force deal with carjackings. Some agencies set up special units for carjackings and auto thefts. However, not all agencies appreciated this strategy, which officers felt would have been most effective. Considering the increase in carjackings during the pandemic, some officers felt that the most effective way of dealing with the problem was to have units dedicated to dealing with this issue. The units would be responsible for gathering intel on issues related to carjackings and auto thefts.

Considering that special groups would spend more time investigating the matter, it would be easy for them to deal with the issues surrounding carjacking because they would have mastery of this matter. Special groups would analyze the crime patterns and people involved, thus giving them an advantage in dealing with the crime. Having a team dedicated to dealing with carjacking would make it easy to ensure rapid response. General law enforcement units would sometimes be overwhelmed by other calls of duty

and, therefore, would take longer to respond to crime scenes, thus reducing the chances of arresting criminals on-site. However, dedicated teams would be on alert and, therefore, respond more promptly to calls of carjacking, making it easy to catch up with carjackers. Officers, therefore, felt it was important to have a dedicated team to deal with the crisis.

Most officers pointed out this strategy was the most effective in promoting law enforcement agencies' preparedness to deal with carjacking and auto thefts during the pandemic. Police Officer 8 supported dedicating a unit to deal with carjacking worked very effectively saying that “we dedicated a unit that was mainly a proactive warrant unit and kind of turned them into doing what they would do to find wanted subjects.”

RQ 3: How do law enforcement officers describe their agencies preparedness in combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Although all the officers agreed that there was a need for the reconsideration of strategies for combating carjacking and auto thefts, most of them indicated that the level of preparedness was not sufficient. The participants pointed out that considering that the pandemic was unprecedented, there lacked sufficient preparation for the same. Most of the responses in this area were in line with budget limitations in the quest to improve strategies or even introduce new ones.

Theme 5: Budget Issues and Needs

Participants noted that the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, so budget projections had not factored in such a crisis. Therefore, as law enforcement sought to introduce new strategies to deal with criminal activities such as carjacking, which was rising during the pandemic, the budget factor significantly limited how much they could

do. Even when an agency sought to introduce a new strategy to combat carjacking and auto theft, the officers recalled that sometimes it would take longer to implement because of budget constraints, and facilities had to wait to release finances from the relevant authority. Often, this would take longer, affecting the strategies' efficiency. Many law enforcement agencies had to do a little more than they would have done before the pandemic, yet they had the same number of resources that they had used before. Attempts to have more resources available to make it easy to combat all the challenges presented by the pandemic were usually slow and, in some cases, even futile. The subthemes below will discuss various areas affected by budget constraints in seeking to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the pandemic effectively.

Subtheme 5A: Increased Technology Use

With increased crime, one of the best ways to catch up with criminals is to increase the use of technology to help combat crime. There was a need to allocate more resources to implement technological strategies to deal with carjacking and auto thefts. For example, with increased crime levels, police could not afford to respond to crime scenes on time in every corner. Technology would come in to deal with the challenges and thus reduce incidences of crime. On issues of carjacking and auto thefts, one of the easiest ways was to increase camera surveillance on the streets where there would be fewer officers handling a larger area, as indicated by Police Officer 3 “traffic cameras were introduced to cover a wide area” By increasing the area with surveillance camera coverage, it would be possible to follow a stolen vehicle from the crime scene to where the car was taken. With technology, it would be easy to investigate and retrieve stolen

vehicles. Cameras made it possible to observe crime patterns involved in carjacking, thus making it easy to combat. For instance, an agency would observe crime patterns to establish if the criminals are organized gangs or just individuals learning about the crime, such as exploring teenagers. Police Officer 3 also noted that “the cameras that came up was where crime most likely occurred, and we could track the vehicles in the areas where they were going.”

The participants pointed out that agencies realized the need to buy technological equipment to enable them to work even where people would be challenged to go in person. Law enforcement agencies would use technologies such as drone cameras to trail carjacked vehicles to see their destination in the quest for assisting investigations. Once the destination of stolen vehicles was established, dealing with the whole crime system would be easier, therefore dealing with the problem more effectively. Other officers were dedicated to following up with criminals online to establish links between different people who were suspects in criminal activities such as carjacking and auto thefts. There was a need to invest in proper equipment and adequate training so officers could use the new equipment the agencies were buying. Crime patterns were changing significantly and taking a technological shift, thus needing officers to be adequately equipped with technology to combat these crimes.

In the quest to increase the use of modern technology in dealing with the challenges of the pandemic, most officers recount that there were many challenges in allocating finances to the many strategies that had come up. Integrating modern technology, such as drones, is expensive; therefore, many agencies could not deploy

enough resources to deal with the crisis. There is a lack of resources to train the officers on using technology to deal with some of the prevalent issues at the time. Many officers lamented that funds must be set aside to deal with such a crisis by providing the necessary equipment and appropriate training.

Subtheme 5B: Funds for Public Awareness Projects

Several crimes increased during the pandemic, including carjacking and auto theft. Law enforcement agencies had to increase their awareness to combat these challenges. In such a case, more funds were required to facilitate these projects adequately. For example, when car thefts were on the rise, some agencies ran ads on television that sensitized the public on methods criminals were using to steal cars. The ads would also communicate the preventive measures that the members of the public would take to combat carjacking. Officer Police Officer 6 described the many projects that were put in place saying, “we had billboards put out. We had commercials being run. We started getting local celebrities like full NFL players and basketball players to start getting into this initiative because we found that a lot of people would leave their cars unlocked.”

The strategy was very effective, and most people who saw these commercials became more cautious by ensuring that their cars were locked even when parked at home, which improved the outcome. However, most agencies would not keep up with the budgets of these commercials, and some had to pay celebrities to influence public members on the subject matter. In other cases, physical meetings also had a cost implication, sometimes straining the allocated budget of an agency’s operations. Officers

felt that in the future, more allocations should be issued for public awareness to deal with crises effectively. While Police Officer 6 noted, “we did civic meetings just going around to different neighborhoods just to get this word out. It was effective, but at the same time, it took effort and resources.”

Subtheme 5C: Staffing Shortages

Some officers, such as Police Officer 2 indicated that increased crime rates meant more staff were required to be deployed in different departments to combat crimes such as carjacking and auto theft. Unfortunately, this was not easy for law enforcement agencies; hiring is a long process that requires a lot of money. Hiring more people would require that they undergo training first, which is not just time-consuming but also expensive. Agencies required more staff to do patrols, and traffic stops and technicians to help with investigations. Unfortunately, hiring and training them was straining most agencies' budgets, considering they already had more new strategies. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 disease also affected law enforcement officers. Some of them died, some were critically ill, and others could not work due to age vulnerability. Law enforcement agencies must hire new, young, skilled people to keep up with the crime trends. Police Officer 2 noted, “because the newest department had a significant workforce issue. They called in members from the State police.”

The COVID-19 situation was not well prepared; therefore, there was sufficient funds to recruit enough personnel to handle the issue. Officers felt the need to have sufficient allocations in the future to allow recruitment and collaboration with the necessary people to facilitate success in dealing with crimes such as carjacking and auto

thefts in times of crisis. Law enforcement needed to do more patrols and traffic stops, yet with the same number of employees or even fewer, as Police Officer 5 noted that officers had to work longer hours to compensate for this. “The Terrebonne parish sheriff's office instituted more patrols and frequent overtime rates, so they would have officers working on days off out there patrolling.”

Summary

Chapter 4 opened with a discussion of the process used to collect data for this qualitative study. This section reviewed the interview setting, all procedures involved in data collection, and the participants' demographic data. The analysis section followed with a presentation of the collected data analysis process. The chapter also presented detailed evidence of how trustworthiness issues were assured during the presentation of the results of this study. The results were presented in a tabular format and then discussed in detail as organized in themes and subthemes.

I aimed to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 law enforcement officers so that the study's research questions would be sufficiently answered. When the data from the interviews were analyzed, five themes emerged and 15 subthemes. The emerging themes included improved proactive control measures, public behavioral shifts, changes in crime patterns, budget issues, and improving proactive and reactive strategies for dealing with carjacking and auto thefts. The themes and subthemes worked to answer the research questions. Each research question was further explored by the emerging themes and subthemes.

Chapter 5 restated the purpose of this study and the nature of the study, followed by a discussion of why the study was conducted. The chapter provided an interpretation of the study findings. Chapter 5 discussed the limitations of the study, the recommendations, and the implications of this study to the field and future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative study approached was done using open-ended questions assisted in obtaining the objective for the study in exploring law enforcement officers with 5 years plus experience from the Southeast region of Louisiana. Data analysis focused on the perceptions of law enforcement and how the current rise in carjacking and auto theft increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants included 10 police officers with five years of experience. The interviews were semi structured around three research questions

RQ1: What were the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What strategies were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: How do law enforcement officers describe their agencies' preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The results indicated five main themes which were grouped together and coded in an effort to respectively answer the research questions which were a driving force for the study; (a) There were behavioral shifts in society that law enforcement officers needed to be aware to combat carjacking and auto theft effectively, (b) change of crime patterns

during the COVID-19 pandemic, (c) the need for proactive patrol strategies, (d) the improvement of reactive patrol strategies, and (e) budget issues and needs.

The current study's findings confirmed research regarding law enforcement officer perceptions in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Fromm (2023) indicated that carjacking and auto theft rate had increased by 29%. It is important to understand how officers view the ramifications of COVID-19 and how it changed law enforcement forever. Law enforcement officers recognized the need to be better to respond to carjacking and auto theft. Like, Maskály et al. (2021), who noted that new safety measures had to be enforced and enacted by the federal government. Therefore, when crisis and uncertainty, and future pandemics arise, law enforcement agencies are better suited to handle unforeseen situations.

However, further finding revealed that there was an unsettling trend during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were high levels of carjacks and auto theft. According to Van Sleuwen et al. (2021), who stated in some cities, car theft was the highest between 5:00 PM and 11:00 PM when people came home from work, because few people were on the streets. Findings also revealed that if strategies were used to deter carjackings and auto theft, such as conducting public awareness of what was happening thus exposing the strategies of the criminals and using GIS to alert to the thefts of motor vehicles (Hiropoulos & Porter, 2014).

The discussion is based upon the three research questions that guided the study. The first research question explored the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic, The second

research question offered what strategies were used by law enforcement of combat carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic and the third research question explored how officers described their agency preparedness during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I provide the interpretations of findings, limitations for the study, recommendations for future research that was comprised from the data analysis and the chapter ends with the conclusion of the study. In this section, I correlated the findings from the study with some of the literature from chapter 2. Each of the themes that emerged in this question is discussed in relation to literature as well as the research questions.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this subsection, the themes are discussed in relations to the literature on how law enforcement officers were able to address the rise of carjacking and auto theft during the COVID 19 pandemic era. The discussion is based on the research questions that guided the study. The first research questions explored the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two main themes resulted from this research questions; behavioral shifts in society and change of crime patterns. While the second research question focused on strategies that were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in two main themes, the need for proactive patrol strategies and (b) improvement of reactive patrol strategies. While the third research questions explored law enforcement officers' description of agencies' preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The

findings will reflect on the participants' perceptions, the interpretation of the literature and the theoretical framework on the crime pattern theory.

For combating carjacking and auto theft question 1 explored behavioral shifts in society this resulted in the main theme on behavioral shifts. There were behavioral shifts in society that law enforcement officers needed to be aware to combat carjacking and auto theft effectively. Participant perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto thefts. Firstly, officers noted that they had realized changes in public behavior which was presenting special challenges to combat carjacking and auto thefts. Secondly, the officers noted changes in crime patterns that necessitated reconsideration of strategies of dealing with the issue of carjacking and auto theft. Therefore, Theme 1 interpretation of the findings in context of the literature review confirms studies had indicated that there was drastic behavior in the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought about restrictions that changed the way people interact and led their daily lives (Nacim, 2021). Many factors around the change of behavior contributed to the increased rate of crimes of carjacking and auto thefts as reported by the participants. Some of the key areas of behavioral change included the change in lifestyles from busy daily activities such as 9 to 5 jobs and school to staying at home. Other situations included the increase of stress and anxiety as well as changed interactions and communication. These situations collectively either contributed to the rise of crime rates or made it difficult for officers to effectively deal with crime.

There were high levels of uncertainty during the pandemic, loss of jobs and unpredictable health outcomes. Consequently, many people were subjected to extreme

stress and anxiety that changed the way they behaved (Nacim, 2021). For instance, the participants noted that while public awareness was meant to help increase vigilance in looking out for criminals and thus preventing carjacking and auto thefts, in some cases the information would be interpreted differently by various people based on their mental state. Officers reported that some people would more often call with fears of carjacking or auto theft but on response law enforcement officers would find that it was false alarm. Such false alarms would be given by people who had become anxious over time because of COVID-19 related factors doubled up with the constant awareness programs of auto thefts. In such cases, it became difficult to establish when the alarms that officers were receiving were real or false.

Following up on suspects was not easy because some of the tip-offs that agencies would receive ended up being false or exaggerated information. Increased social stress made it difficult for law enforcement officers to effectively respond to real crime issues in some cases (Trafford, 2024). Anxiety and stress in many cases can be a challenge especially when collecting intel on certain crimes. The problem of anxiety and social stress has over time been more predominant with senior citizens, but it was significantly augmented during the pandemic.

Lifestyles significantly changed during the pandemic. Participants of the study indicated that the way people lived offered different challenges regarding carjacking and auto thefts. For example, teenagers were no longer attending school as they previously did, which made most of them idle. There is an old saying “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.” Most of the teenagers spent time online and this is where the teenagers

experimented with some of the things they saw online. Some of them ended up in crime, especially auto thefts. Some of the videos they watched online provided information on how they would execute the crime thus inciting them to conduct the crime. Some of the areas did not have public transport in operation during this period, therefore, teenagers who felt the need moved from point to point. Criminals' activities are significantly supported by the fact that there is a motive to double up with the availability of an opportunity (Trafford, 2024). In this case, many teenagers felt confined by the COVID-19 regulations and felt the need to go out to parties, or just to meet friends (McKinlay et al., 2021).

When the same teenagers were incited by social media platforms like (TikTok), most cars were left home, and teenagers got opportunities to engage in crime. Teenagers were therefore more informed and with more opportunities, making it possible for them to engage in crime more readily. Also, teenagers more often had a challenge with peer pressure and therefore, when more of them were at home, Law enforcement officers faced more challenges dealing with crime considering there were more people at home than there were previously, making it difficult to manage the crowds (Hardyns et al., 2022).

As the public got subjected to different restrictions warranted by the COVID-19 pandemic, communication was also significantly affected (Trafford, 2024). For instance, the participants reported that with the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the local, state, and federal governments people would not interact freely with law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers should gather information from their interactions not just

through verbal conversation, but through nonverbal cues during the interactions (Thielgen & Schade, 2023).

When the pandemic began some people were extremely cautious and therefore, would not want one-on-one interactions with police officers. Even in instances where police officers would come to investigate crimes on site, people being investigated would keep social distance at least 6 feet as recommended by the Centers for Disease and Control (CDC) and wear protective masks. It was not easy for officers to read non-verbal cues that offer important intel on carjacking or auto theft cases. Studies show law enforcement officers were challenged in investigating suspects through interviews during the pandemic. Most intel would be collected online or through phone calls.

The findings in context of the theoretical framework this confirms that many of the participants agreed that there was an increase in crime (Van Sleuwen et al., 2021). As the COVID-19 created panic, chaos, and a lockdown within the local, national, and world, the crime rate did not decrease but increased. As the theory on crime patterns highlighted that there may be an attraction to high criminal activities during unusual circumstances as the COVID-19 (Van Sleuwen et al., 2021).

In the case of the high level of carjacking around the pandemic era, one participant felt that people overreacted to the issue of carjacking because of the social issues that were happening at the time. The behavioral shifts on carjacking and auto theft, the framework on crime pattern brought awareness of such acts that created attractive targets (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993).

Change of Crime Patterns

The second main theme that resulted from Research Question 1 as mentioned; change of crime patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic this confirms criminal patterns that changed significantly during the pandemic as reported by most of the participants of the study. Law enforcement agencies would not fail to acknowledge the changes in criminal patterns and the role it had in strategies of combating crime. For instance, criminals were using new techniques to commit crimes which law enforcement officials were mostly unaware about. One of the examples given by the participant is a new way to start vehicles during theft using USB drives with software that could override vehicles' security systems. Before law enforcement agencies realized the use of this strategy, they could not understand how vehicles would be stolen without keys and without having to dismantle the ignition system of the car. It was important for law enforcement agencies to uncover these new patterns so that they could advise the public appropriately (Hardyns et al., 2022).

However, the findings in the context of the literature review confirm that studies have shown that change of crime patterns can hinder effective prevention of crime because as criminals change patterns and strategies, they momentarily leave law enforcement behind, and they were able to commit more crime without being caught. Another pattern that seemed to have come up was the increase of juvenile carjacking and auto theft. Ordinarily cars were stolen by hardened criminals who steal motor vehicles with the motive to sell them or use them in other crimes. However, with the change of

lifestyle during the COVID-19 pandemic, more people including juveniles were involved in criminal activities.

The officers needed to understand the demographic of the people involved in crime to ensure that they would be able to deal with the problem more effectively. For instance, by understanding that some of the offenders were juveniles, it would be possible to predict where they would take the car especially after establishing the motive of the crime. Also, by establishing the demographics of the offenders, it was possible to come up with prevention strategies that were specific to the target demographic group (Hardyns et al., 2022). For instance, where juvenile offenders were involved, it was possible to combat them by involving their parents. During public engagements and awareness programs law enforcement officers would engage parents in the need to check on their juvenile children and what they were up to in their free time. The parents would be briefed on the information that sought to ensure they could assist law enforcement agencies to prevent their children from engaging in carjacking and auto thefts. Participants reported that through the engagement of parents, teenagers' engagement in carjacking and auto theft went significantly low.

The findings in the context of the theoretical framework confirm that regarding change of crime patterns, findings of Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) noted that there was a relationship between the crime pattern theory and carjacking and auto theft that was mediated through opportunity and spatial awareness. This was agreed by some participants who shared their perceptions on combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, findings supported Felson and Clarke (1998),

criminal activity which indicated that crimes are likely to occur on the edges of a society in a high level of uncertainty. COVID-19 created a high level of crime that created an unusually high level of law enforcement awareness on combating crimes such as carjacking and theft among youths.

The second research question explored strategies that were used by law enforcement agencies to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two main themes emerged from this research question. (a) the need for proactive patrol strategies and (b) improvement of reactive patrol strategies. While there were many strategies that were incorporated in combating carjacking and auto thefts, they were mainly categorized into two proactive and reactive strategies. This section seeks to link these findings with literature and the conceptual framework to better understand them. The need for proactive patrol strategies confirms the findings that in many cases, crises arose because people were not prepared to deal with certain unprecedented situations. In the quest to deal with certain situations of crisis, it was important to employ proactive measures that involve going ahead of the problem to prevent negative outcomes (Ayling, 2021). Many of the participants agreed that there was a need to increase proactive patrol strategies.

The findings in the context of the literature review confirms from this main theme that in the case of carjackings and auto thefts during the pandemic, there was a significant increase that was caused by several factors that worked together (Fromm, 2023). Various factors had collectively led to the increase of the crimes of carjacking and auto theft as facilitated by Covid-19. Law enforcement agencies, therefore, would not continue with

operations as they did before the pandemic. It was important to incorporate new strategies or emphasize certain strategies that seemed to work better during this time. It was important that law enforcement agencies strategies on how to counter the factors that led to the increase of carjacking by proactive measures thus reducing the crimes (Ratcliffe & Rengifo, 2021; Maskály et al., 2021).

Firstly, agencies increased patrols and traffic stops. Through this strategy, it was possible for agencies to remain in control of the streets, especially where criminal activities were heightened during the pandemic. Through increased patrols, it was possible to obtain real-time intelligence on what was happening in the streets, therefore, enabling the agencies to always stay ahead of criminals. Patrol has always been an effective strategy of reducing crimes over the years. Through patrols law enforcement agencies sometimes manage to arrest criminals in the act. Law enforcement patrol involved searching out people engaging in criminal activities literally (Ayling, 2021). The strategy is particularly effective in a proactive way because it acts in prevention. When law enforcement officers go around the streets and inside estates, it was possible to observe suspicious activities and act proactively to prevent crime. On the other hand, criminals were hindered from participating in crime the moment they realized that an area was frequently patrolled because they had a feeling that they were being watched. In the case of carjackings and auto thefts, patrols worked well to prevent and thus ultimately reduce them.

Traffic stops work hand in hand with patrols as a proactive measure in reducing crime. Through traffic stops, police officers can watch out for suspicious activities and

thereby point out suspects. For instance, in dealing with carjacking, police officers would stop cars that they had reasonable suspicion, to believe were stolen either by setting up roadblocks or by signaling the vehicles to stop. If the vehicle failed to stop, the police would chase it until they caught up with the suspects.

Traffic stops in most cases were used when law enforcement officers want to confirm details such as registration and license. The strategy was especially effective with the carjacking crisis during the pandemic considering that it involved many juvenile offenders. Most of them would be easily caught in traffic stops since they lacked driver's license, and they lacked explanations about the owners of the cars they were driving. Traffic stops have over the years been considered an effective way of dealing with traffic offenses which also proactively assisted in dealing with carjacking during the pandemic (Hibbitt & Shaw, 2023). The strategy was also quite effective even through roadblocks since there were fewer vehicles on the roads at the height of the pandemic. Therefore, the study acknowledged that traffic stops were an effective strategy when dealing with traffic related crimes such as carjacking and auto theft.

It is also worth noting that in the quest to adopt proactive strategies that lead to effective prevention of crime, the public must be involved. Studies have indicated that for crime to be adequately prevented, the public have a bigger role than law enforcement officers (Hibbitt & Shaw, 2023). The study found out that most agencies introduced public awareness strategies to inform the public not only of what was happening but also how they can participate to help deal with the problem. In this case, many law enforcement agencies were sharing information on how citizens would protect

themselves from carjacking and auto thefts. The strategy was effective since law enforcement agencies would share some of the intel, they had gathered on how the crimes were taking place and therefore, frustrating the efforts of the criminals. Some of such information included ensuring that cars were locked, parking them closer or even in indoor garages where possible to bar criminals from accessing them.

The study's findings showed that law enforcement would utilize all possible mediums to reach the public with all the necessary information. With such a strategy, crime rates were bound to drop drastically. Studies over time have shown that one of the best ways to stop a crime was by exposing how the crime was carried out (Hibbitt & Shaw, 2023). In the case of carjacking and auto thefts, agencies went to the extent of putting up commercials on televisions using celebrities thus ensuring that the information reached as many people as possible. In some cases, the participants indicated that meetings were held in town halls and one on one information shared during patrols and traffic stops. With information shared widely, everybody was on high alert making it very difficult for criminals to operate. Criminals took advantage of the ignorance of others and therefore, lacked information had been identified as one of the factors that enable criminals to thrive. When information was shared widely, opportunities for criminal activities were significantly lowered and therefore ultimately dealing with the problem of carjacking and auto thefts.

Through public awareness, it was possible to gather more intelligence on criminal activities and therefore, made it possible to deal with crime (Ayling, 2021). During the pandemic, the participants indicated that they would engage with the public and share the

intel they had on crime patterns that had been formed during the pandemic with the aim of getting more information. As the public became aware of what was happening around them, they would more frequently report suspicious activities thus making it possible for law enforcement agencies to act more proactively. Issues that residents would ordinarily ignore became of great concern to them and they would often call in law enforcement to investigate certain situations or individuals thus making it easy to uncover the crime.

The public was also informed of certain wanted criminals which made it difficult for them to continue living among communities. Exposing wanted criminals has always been used to easily catch notorious criminals who had either been caught on camera severally or were reported and still on the run. Using these strategies, law enforcement agencies effectively incorporated the public in policing thus making it easier for them to reduce carjacking and auto thefts.

While the findings in the context of the theoretical framework confirm that the need for proactive patrol strategies was identified by all the participants; and was critical to crime control because there were crime patterns that showed offenders committed an increase in carjacking and auto thefts (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). As a result of the crime pattern theory, carjacking and auto theft were mediated by opportunity, and law enforcement officers were vital in combating and controlling carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 outbreak. While law enforcement officers attempted to keep these crimes under control, the crime pattern theory helps one understand the reaction of law enforcement officers based on the changes in environmental factors (Brantingham & Brantingham, 2021).

Improvement of Reactive Patrol Strategies

However, improvement of reactive patrol strategies depicted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a sharp increase in the rate of carjacking and auto theft, it caused the improvement of reactive strategies which included the incorporation of new strategies (Trafford, 2024). For example, participants reported the increased use of technology to track down criminals and retrieve stolen vehicles. The improvement was warranted by the increased use of technology by criminals to make their movements more effective. The police, therefore, also had to raise their bar on the use of technology to catch up and stay ahead of the criminals. In this quest, most law enforcement agencies invested in technological knowledge in terms of using online tools such as GPS and Onstar navigation systems to locate stolen vehicles or trail them to investigate the criminal chain. Technology was also significantly used to engage with the public in a time when physical engagements were limited. Some of the agencies had developed platforms where they would receive real-time updates on the happenings within estates to ensure that they would respond in a timely manner any time they were required.

This main theme findings in the context of the literature review confirms that in the quest to better deal with carjackers and auto thieves who were using different techniques to attempt to counteract law enforcement, the participants reported that it was important to reconsider old strategies of dealing with crime. Participants indicated that it was essential that the approach be more intelligence-based oriented to ensure success in dealing with and apprehending criminals. Such techniques included the use of technology to gather information which would deal with crime in a more holistic manner. The

intelligence-based approach was more effective in dealing with crime in that it did not only focus on solving one problem, but through intel one that saw gaps in the security systems and were able to conclusively solve the major issue at hand (Bragias et al., 2021). Other strategies of gathering intelligence that were applied included public engagement both individually and through social media platforms.

During the engagement sessions, the agencies would take advantage of ensuring they collected sufficient information that would help the agencies develop effective strategies in tackling carjackers. Agencies would, therefore, have reviewed sessions after engagement with the public to synthesize information that had been offered and consequently planned the way to deal with criminal activities. The patrols and traffic stop that were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic were mostly intelligence informed. The police would organize patrols, and traffic stops where they had tips from the public on possible hotspots where criminal activity was likely to occur.

The agencies also achieved effectiveness in reactive strategies by embracing collaboration. Through inter-agency collaboration it was possible for the agencies to maximize resources that they so needed dearly but were not available. Agencies would, therefore, collaborate to ensure that they would use resources from their sister agencies. The most effective strategies of achieving success in combating criminal activities were through interagency collaboration. Different agencies have varied strengths in which many cases can complement each other to produce the required strength (Bragias et al., 2021). Through collaboration it would be possible to utilize specialized units such as technology and joint task forces. Considering that not every agency was able to form a

special functional unit due to limitation of resources, it is important to promote interagency collaboration. Special units were essential in that they offer some level of expertise which may be the required skill to solve a crime. Combating carjacking and auto crimes were easier with interagency collaboration as well as formation of joint task forces.

While the findings in the context of the theoretical framework confirm that reactive patrol strategies can improve the methods in which crime can be addressed. For example, there must be consideration of Brantingham & Brantingham (1993) crime pattern theory on the aspect of crime space that acknowledged success in combating carjacking and auto theft, when it involved serious analysis of the environment to determine the way forward. Law enforcement officers' concentration on combating high level of carjacking and auto theft can create specific patrol strategies that will increase safety for car owner as findings of Brantingham & Brantingham (1993) indicated that crime patterns does not happen by chance but happens through planning and execution. Participants shared that strategies were effective when implementing them to combat the high level of carjacking and auto theft in the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Budget Issues and Needs

Research question three explored law enforcement officers describing their agencies' preparedness to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under this research question, there only emerged one theme budget issues and needs, although there was a combination of various codes that narrow down to the issue of budget needs. Budget needs affected the preparedness of agencies in dealing with

crises considering that all new strategies require extra funding. This section showed how the issue of budget needs significantly affects the issue of preparedness of agencies in dealing with crime.

In a time of crisis, the budget has a significant role to play in determining the success of dealing with the issue at hand (Di Ronco, 2023). In many cases, there was deployment of more resources to ensure that all the measures needed to be taken adequately care and provided for. In a time that more crime was being recorded, especially carjackings and auto theft, more resources had to be put in place to help deal with the problem. For instance, with more criminal activities happening there were more officers on patrol, responding to suspected crimes, performing traffic stops, as well as investigating criminal activities. Participants indicated that there needed to be an allocation of more officers on duty which in some cases meant that officers would be required to work mandatory overtime. With officers working overtime, there needed to be extra budget allocated for that time they were working, which most participants reported that it was not always available (Di Ronco, 2023). Hiring new staff was not possible within a short time considering that law enforcement training takes time. Therefore, law enforcement agencies had only two options either: First, to have their staff work overtime and second, to collaborate with other agencies to ensure that gaps are filled. The participants reported that budget issues were hindering the utilization of human resources to the capacity to ensure that the problem was resolved.

This findings in the context of the literature review confirm that in the quest to deal with carjacking and auto theft, officers reported that most departments realized the

need to increase the use of technology. Considering that human interaction was significantly limited during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was important to invest in technological ways of dealing with the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts. Most of the technological advancements were expensive, making it difficult for most agencies to maximize technology to deal with carjacking and auto thefts. Studies have shown that underfunding is a significant challenge that limits the efforts of law enforcement agencies in effectively dealing with crime (Di Ronco, 2023).

The most significant challenge in the budget was that most agencies had already received their budgetary allocations that did not precede the occurrence of crisis. In such a case, it was so difficult to have an increase in any extra expenses since the funds were not available. Ideally, having more funds allocated to the agencies was a possibility, but it also took a long time while the crimes were occurring at an unprecedented rate. The departments needed immediate action, but funds would not come in as fast as they would have wanted. It was therefore quite challenging to implement some of the technological projects they had, especially within the time that they were requested and required.

Participants also indicated that law enforcement agencies were strained on budget as they conducted public awareness projects. The public awareness projects would entail putting up commercials on television programs to inform the public on the issues regarding carjacking and auto thefts. The commercials would be quite expensive, especially where it entailed the use of celebrities to endorse the message. However, considering that public awareness is one of the most effective strategies in the prevention of crime, most agencies did not hesitate to engage the resources they had in awareness

projects. Through public awareness, law enforcement agencies can achieve not only the prevention of crime, but also the community was able to sufficiently participate in policing activities (Trafford, 2024).

When the public was informed of the trends of criminal activities, they can look out for suspicious characters and activity and report it. Through public engagement, law enforcement agencies can collect sufficient intel to deal with crime. Through the funding of public awareness projects, agencies were sure that it would have become successful in dealing with and responding to carjackings and auto thefts. Funds for public engagement were considerably low compared to other projects such as laying down technological infrastructure for dealing with carjacking. Most of the agencies therefore, in one way or another, engaged in a public awareness project.

While in the context of the theoretical framework this confirms that participants discussed budget issues and needs when carjacking and auto theft were high during the pandemic era. As the theory on crime patterns acknowledges that offenders usually seek escape routes there may be places during the day that were attractive for crime (Van Sleeuwen et al.,2021). More resources had to be considered and creating a budget for law enforcement officers was vital to combat high levels of carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. As findings indicated by the Brantinghams who believed in two core principles. First, crime was motivated by suitable targets within time and space (Newton & Felson, 2015). Second, the offender's movement was structured. Budget issues needed to be adopted to create a mechanism in which officers can effectively do their job in protecting the public against high carjacking and auto theft.

Limitations of Study

In the process of conducting the study, many challenges were encountered, some of them were foreseen and several were unprecedented. Firstly, there was considerable difficulty in recruiting participants. Notably, it was not easy recruiting the number of participants that the study was targeting. For instance, the study initially targeted 12 participants, but I only managed to acquire 10 participants. Many potential participants did not show interest considering some saw it as a waste of their time. Others stated they could not participate due to departmental policy when requesting to be interviewed. In addition, some participants had scheduling conflicts and were unable to participate in the study as originally planned. While there was a surge in carjackings and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic, not all officers were involved in combating these crimes. Therefore, identifying officers that were directly involved in combating carjackings, and auto thefts was not an easy task.

Secondly, there was a lack of sufficient literature to support the study. Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic was considerably a recent occurrence, factors around it had not yet been sufficiently studied, examined, and documented. It was not easy to get all the literature that supports the topic, especially on issues such as carjacking and auto theft. While carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic increased significantly, very few empirical studies have been conducted over this issue. Consequently, the literature review of this study was quite intensive with searches that also did not bear as much outcome as desired. Much of the literature that was used for the study was not directly related to the topic and therefore, more academic studies had to be

gathered to ensure that all the required information was acquired. However, through the use of other crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the right search of key words and sites, the study was able to attain all the required information.

The other limitation was on time management, especially during interviews. Most of the participants did not have a lot of time for the interviews and therefore, I had to ensure that all the required information was collected within the available time. While all the participants were aware that the interview was going to last an hour, most of them seemed to be in a hurry. I ensured that the time was properly managed to gather as much information as possible within the allotted time frame. It was essential that the participants were provided with quality interviewing skills for their time. It was also important to manage time after the collection of data to ensure that the analysis, writing, and presentation was done within the timelines provided.

On implementation, the interviews were done online through the zoom platform which was sometimes limited to the interaction. Through one-on-one face to face interactions, it was possible to create an environment that was less formal thus making the conversation more fruitful. Nevertheless, the zoom conversations were still productive with most of the questions adequately answered by the participants. However, in a few cases, there were interruptions because some of the participants were not in a very conducive area, and it caused connectivity issues. Therefore, by doing physical meetings it would have been possible to choose a location that was conducive for the interview.

Recommendations

While the issue of carjacking and auto theft have been significantly studied in the past, it is evident that the issue has not yet been sufficiently studied considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study recommends that there be more specific studies that delve into the correlation between various factors that happened during the pandemic and the crimes of auto theft and carjacking. For example, the issue of the involvement of juvenile offenders was outstanding throughout the interviews with various participants. I recommend that further study be conducted on the involvement of teenagers into crime, especially crimes like carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through such studies it would be possible to fully understand the role that teenagers played in the increased criminals' rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other factors that could be studied include issues such as other demographics that could have informed the patterns of crime such as race and social status. Future studies can compare which areas were mostly affected by the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts and determine the factors that could have contributed to the increase in these crimes.

While the study was able to recruit 10 participants who provided information that helped understand the issue at hand in a better way. However, it was notable that with each of the participants coming in, they would provide some new information. The study would therefore recommend that in future studies around the issue of carjacking and auto theft, it would be important to involve more participants to gain as much insight as possible into the crime. In addition to having more participants, a quantitative study could be conducted with more participants. Through the involvement of more participants, it is

possible to gather more ideas on the perspective of officers which can provide a more solid foundation of information that can be used even to inform policy that can help deal with issues carjacking and auto thefts.

Future researchers may recommend the use of a quantitative study of carjacking victims as participants in gathering information about the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts. While this study was quite successful in gathering information on the perspective of law enforcement officers on combating carjacking and auto thefts, there is still more information that would help in dealing with the problem that would be gained by including other participants. Future studies could include individuals who have interacted directly with the carjackers or have been victims of auto thefts and are in a good position to provide information on their experiences about the incident, criminals, and the setting of the crime. Such information would be important in understanding the possible ways of combating the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts. Also, through collecting information from victims one would be able to know how the crimes would happen in terms of issues like the level of violence that was involved and the organization of the criminals that were involved. It is therefore possible to understand the crime patterns better. Through surveys and questionnaires provided by the victims, it is possible to know if the crimes were mostly perpetrated by gangs or individuals.

Other factors that can be studied to help understand the issue on carjacking and auto theft is the chain in which stolen vehicles go through. With law enforcement officers', it is possible to gather information regarding how stolen vehicles are handled from the point they leave the hands of their owners. Law enforcement officers that have

been involved in investigating carjacking cases can provide information on issues of how the cars that are stolen are used. In case some of the vehicles end up being sold, it is important to understand how they end up back in the market. Such a study would be an important piece of literature that can be used to inform future policies on dealing with crime. Future qualitative studies could also examine how vehicles equipped with OnStar can help assist law enforcement when attempting to locate stolen vehicles. Studying the chain that these vehicles go through would also help law enforcement officers to develop strategies of combating the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts. As a proactive measure, law enforcement officers can deal with illegal markets for stolen cars which would reduce carjacking and auto thefts. Lastly, future research should seek to interview female law enforcement officers. Initially, 5 female officers agreed to participate, but decided not to participate. Female law enforcement officers could offer insight as well into combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations for future research would also include having participants interviewed in a face-to-face environment due to internet interruptions and the interviews being lost.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers in combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study therefore had significant implications on different factors of the issue being studied. I sought to impact areas such as law enforcement agencies, individual law enforcement officers, car owners, parents, teenagers and the public at large.

Law Enforcement Agencies

The study has many potential implications on the law enforcement agencies and how they are likely to deal with the crimes of carjacking and auto thefts. The study provides information on the experiences of different officers regarding their perspective on combating carjacking and auto theft during the pandemic. Therefore, through these experiences it is possible to develop strategies that are guided by information to ensure that the crimes of carjacking are adequately dealt with. For example, through this study it is possible to come up with more effective proactive strategies to combat carjacking and auto thefts. Law enforcement agencies can also make more informed decisions on how to allocate duties to officers based on proper understanding of the perspective of officers that were directly involved in combating carjacking and auto theft.

Individual Law Enforcement Officers' Level

At an individual level, officers who would be exposed to the information given in this study was in many ways be better equipped to deal with crime such as carjacking and auto theft in times of crisis. Through this study, it was evident that in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic new proactive measures had to be introduced to effectively handle crime. For instance, while officers would ordinarily deal with car theft cases reactively, they changed to include random traffic stops to check registration and license plates to ensure ownership of the cars. Through this study, officers gave insight on how to deal with criminal issues in times of crisis thus ensuring success.

Parenting

Parents were also significantly impacted by this study. Through all the interviews that were conducted, it was clear that juvenile offenders played an important role in the increase of carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the quest to effectively deal with crime in such times, parents have a significant role that entails engaging with their children to provide guidance against crime. The information provided in this study forms an important foundation towards the promotion of parental involvement in dealing with juvenile crime. The study supports that one of the strategies that was effective was informing parents on the involvement of their children in crimes of carjacking and auto thefts where parents would then look out on their children to ensure that they do not engage in crime.

The Public

Through this study, it was clear that the strategy of public engagement was most effective in helping to combat carjacking and auto thefts during the pandemic. Therefore, moving forward, how the public views an issue, especially in times of crisis is considered an important aspect. For example, in the case of a crime rate increase, it will insinuate that criminals are taking advantage of the ignorance of the public. If the members of the public are well informed, the crime rates will go down. Therefore, through the information offered in this study, there was a desire for all agencies to keep the public informed thus helping to close gaps that criminals take advantage of. Similarly, members of the public will also desire to keep each other on their toes by informing each other of all necessary information to keep a safe society.

Legislation

The study has a great significant potential impact on policy making, especially on issues of combating carjacking and auto theft. Through insight provided in this study, it is possible to develop policies that seek to promote strategies such as public awareness or issues such as improvement of law enforcement agencies to allow the implementation of strategies that will all officers to deal with the challenge effectively.

For instance, information provided in this study can facilitate the provision of more resources to agencies to help combat acts of carjacking and auto theft. The study provides information indicating how lack of sufficient funds affected the efforts of agencies to effectively deal with auto thefts and carjacking. Legislation can also be developed and implemented to effectively inform people on how to deal with staff shortages in times of crisis. It is also important to develop a legal framework by which inter-agency collaboration can be guided. In such a framework, agencies can be guided on when and how to collaborate during times of crisis. The study can be used to influence key policies thus leading to success in dealing with carjacking and auto thefts.

Implications on Theory and Research

The study has a significant impact on theory and research. The study is significantly founded on the crime pattern theory that supports that crime is not random, but it happens with planning and the availability of opportunities. Through this study, it is possible to understand how patterns of crime change with global crises such as pandemics. The study supports that crime patterns changed significantly when a global pandemic hit the world. The study also acknowledges that only specific crimes changed

or increased during the pandemic. This study can form a strong basis for further study between the relationship between specific crimes and global crisis. Through such a study, it is possible to understand how crime is affected by the global crisis and significant changes in public behavior.

Conclusion

I sought to explore and explain the perspectives of law enforcement officers on combating carjacking and auto thefts during the pandemic. While there were many studies in the past regarding the issue of carjacking and auto theft, there were very few studies that had been developed after the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a gap in literature linking the increase in carjackings and auto thefts to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the study, there lacked enough literature to back up the study. I sought to ensure that through its findings, the gap in literature was adequately bridged. Through the study one can now fully understand the perspective of law enforcement officers by acknowledging the changes that were present during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the challenges law enforcement experienced while seeking to combat crimes of carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I utilized a qualitative approach where all the data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted online using teleconferencing software zoom where they were audio recorded and later manually transcribed. The data collected were later analyzed through a thematic analysis strategy. In this analysis, all the collected data was assigned codes that were later organized into common themes. The collected

data were well organized with the three research questions and five main themes which had 15 subthemes under them.

The main themes included the perceptions of the law enforcement officers on issues of combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes included proactive control measures for combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The proactive control measures had subthemes such as increased patrol and traffic stops as public awareness which included parental classes.

The first theme, there were behavioral shifts in society that law enforcement officers needed to be aware of to combat carjacking and auto thefts effectively. The subthemes under this theme included social stress, changes in lifestyle and challenges in communications. The second theme was the change of crime patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. The subthemes under these themes included social stress and anxiety in the public, change of lifestyle due to COVID-19 restrictions, and challenges in communication during the pandemic. The third theme was the need for proactive patrol strategies that had subthemes such as Patrol increase, Traffic stops, and Public Awareness. The fourth theme was The Improvement of Reactive Strategies where the subthemes were Intelligence based approach, Increased based approach, Increased use of modern technology, and Interagency cooperation. The final theme was budget issues and needs. The subthemes in the last theme included Increased technology use, Funds for public awareness projects, and Staffing shortages.

The study was grounded in the crime pattern theory which supports that crime is not random but planned or opportunistic. Therefore, through the theory, it was possible to

explain how the increase of carjacking and auto thefts came about. Through this theoretical lens the study was able to effectively explore and present the perspective of law enforcement officers on combating carjacking and auto thefts during the pandemic. The study presented significant recommendations that can change the way crime is dealt with, especially carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study have implications on the perspective of individual law enforcement officers, agencies, legislators as well as the public in combating carjacking and auto thefts during the COVID-19 pandemic and future times of crisis and uncertainty in our nation and our world.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Tell me a bit about your background and experience in the law enforcement field. How long have you worked in the law enforcement field. What is your rank?
2. Can you describe any strategies introduced to combat the rising problem of carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Can you provide a detailed example of a specific strategy or initiative that your agency implemented to successfully combat carjacking or auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. Can you highlight notable changes in operations in combating carjacking and auto theft to address the new challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Can you describe the steps your agency took to combat carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. Tell me about your experience responding to carjacking and auto theft incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic.
7. What is the most unique challenge that you faced in combating carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic?
8. As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, did you notice any shifts in public behavior or criminal patterns related to carjacking and auto theft? How did these observations contribute to your changing perceptions, and were there any particular moments that stood out to you?

9. How do you feel COVID-19 impacted your workload?
10. Were there any instances where a particular strategy for approach yielded noteworthy results in reducing carjacking and auto theft incidents? Can you walk me through the steps taken and the outcomes achieved as a result of implementing that particular strategy.
11. In your experience, have there been successful community-based approaches in preventing carjacking and auto theft incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Can you describe any specific program or outreach efforts that have strengthened ties between law enforcement and the community, contributing to a safer environment?
12. Have there been any new policies implemented within your law enforcement agency specifically aimed at enhancing preparedness for carjacking and auto theft during the COVID-19 pandemic? Could you provide details on these policies and how they contribute to the overall preparedness of the agency in addressing these challenges?