

State of New York  
Department of Correctional Services

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**URBAN CARJACKERS**

**A Fifteen Year Study of Carjackers Committed  
from New York City and Erie County, New York**

**1985 - 1999**

198846



George E. Pataki  
Governor



Glenn S. Goord  
Commissioner

198846

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New York City and Erie County, New York**

**1985-1999**

## HIGHLIGHTS

In light of continuing public interest in carjacking, the New York State Department of Correctional Services undertook a detailed review of its records to learn the characteristics of carjackers and their crimes. The report examines 881 offenders committed to the Department from New York City or Erie County, New York (location of Buffalo, NY) over the period 1985-1999 who forcibly stole a motor vehicle as part of their commitment crime.

**Table 1: Summary of Findings**

Characteristics	Category	Percent of all Carjackers
<b>A. Crime Characteristics</b>		
Weapon	Firearm	67%
	Sharp Instrument	18%
Accomplices	Acted Alone	50%
Injury	Injured Victim	22%
Acquaintance with Victim	Robbed Stranger	99%
Other Property Taken	Other Valuables Taken	43%
<b>B. Offender Characteristics</b>		
Gender	Male	97%
Age at Time of Offense	Percent Under 21	27%
	Mean Age	(25.3 yrs.)
Race/Ethnic Status	White	11%
	African American	53%
	Hispanic	34%
Prior Record	Prior Jail or Prison	46%
Second Felony Offender Status	Second Felony Offender	43%
Total Carjack Offenders		881

# INTRODUCTION

## **Purpose of the Report**

This is the second report that the New York State Department of Correctional Services has done on forcible motor vehicle thefts. As with the earlier study (DOCS, 1995), it is intended to address questions of interest to the public and policymakers about characteristics of the crime of forcible motor vehicle theft and of individuals committed to State prison for forcible motor vehicle theft.

Forcible motor vehicle theft, "carjacking" as it is popularly known, is a form of robbery, yet lacks a distinct legal definition. (Since it is not broken out in the Federal Uniform Crime Report or in data reported by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, studying the incidence of carjacking is difficult.) However, public interest in carjacking is high, especially in large metropolitan areas where public concern has been evidenced by increased news media coverage of this crime.

Despite this interest, there is relatively little data about the characteristics of carjackers and their offense. Some reports have been issued. For example, the Maryland Statewide Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program since 1992 has published an annual series of reports on carjacking based on data compiled by local police departments. One notable study is a recent federal survey based on National Crime Victimization Survey data (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999) prepared by Patsy Klaus.

## **Organization of the Report**

This report, which expands on the material presented in the 1995 study done by the Department, is organized into four brief sections. The first discusses how a population of carjackers was identified and how data about that population were collected.

The second section describes characteristics of the carjacking crimes committed by these offenders. Where possible, data on the offenses are compared with the prior DOCS study (DOCS, 1995), federal studies (BJS, 1994; BJS, 1999) and other national data (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1998).

The third section presents background characteristics of the carjackers, comparing them with other study data and to data on Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> and Grand Larceny (auto) commitments from 1985 to 1999. A fourth section also presents data on women carjackers, in comparison to women robbers and women grand larcenists (auto). To date, there has been very little discussion of female carjackers in the literature.

## SECTION 1

### Research Methods

In an attempt to remain consistent with previously published documents, this study defines carjackers as “persons who by force or threat of force take a motor vehicle.” (See NYSDOCS[1995], USDOJ, BJS[1999]). As in the 1999 (BJS) research, the Department chose not to include carjackers whose controlling crime was murder or rape. (However, there are some carjackers who are incarcerated for these more serious offenses.) On the other hand, the Department does not exclude from the carjackers definition, individuals who took property from a person with whom they were previously acquainted.

Because there is no distinct legal definition in New York State, the most reliable way to determine from New York State records if a person is a carjacker is to apply the above definition to the crime narrative contained on electronically maintained records.

For the present study, a population of new commitments whose most serious crime was Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> and Attempted Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> was selected from among cases committed during the period January 1, 1985- December 31, 1999 inclusive. Only cases committed from New York City and Erie County were selected (see Appendix, Table 1) because the Department’s 1995 study as well as the federal study by Klaus (1999) showed that carjacking is overwhelmingly an urban crime.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, to make the task of identifying instances of carjacking more manageable, only the crime narrative of individuals committed from New York City (comprised of Queens, Kings, New York, Bronx and Richmond Counties) and Erie County (which contains the city of Buffalo, the next largest city in New York State after New York City) were screened.

Once the appropriate population was selected, it was possible to create a special data file containing crime narrative information with the assistance of the Division of Management Information Services. By means of a content analysis, 881 carjackers were identified out of 18,651 Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> and Attempted Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> new commitments. Data on these 881 cases are reported in this study.

## SECTION 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF CARJACKING

### Number of Carjackers

A total of 881 carjackers were identified in the special sample file of Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> and attempted Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> cases from New York City and Erie County. Most (98% or 864) of these carjackers were committed from the five counties of New York City (see Appendix, Table 2).

### Gender

Ninety-seven percent (N=854) of the carjackers were males and 3% (N=27) were females. The findings from the current study are consistent with the findings of the federal study (BJS, 1999) which also found that 97% of carjackings were committed by males exclusively. Another 3% were committed by female or by male and female offenders together.

Carjackers, other robbers, offenders convicted of Grand Larceny (Auto) did not differ in percentage of male offenders and female offenders in the study period: all three groups were between 97% and 98% male offenders.

### Weapon

Two-thirds (67%; N=589) of the 881 carjackers used a firearm, typically a handgun, though other firearms, such as a rifle and sawed off shotgun were also used. These results are consistent with earlier Department research (DOCS, 1995) which found that 49 out of 74 (66%) carjackers used a gun.

Eighteen percent of the carjackers used a knife or other sharp instrument to commit their crimes. Three percent displayed a blunt instrument. No weapon was used in 12% of the cases (see Figure 1).

Klaus reported that 47% of carjacking incidents identified in the National Crime Victimization survey for the period 1992-1996 involved use of a firearm. A firearm was used by the assailant in 72% of the completed carjackings and 22% of all "attempted carjackings."

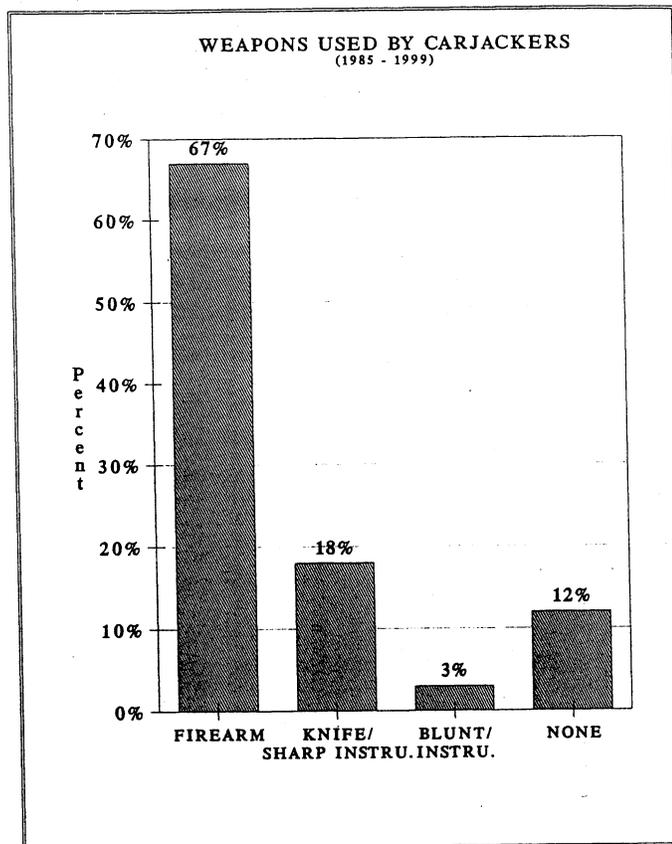
**TABLE 2**  
**Firearm use by Carjackers**

Firearm Used	Period of Commitment			<b>TOTAL</b>
	1985-1989	1990-1994	1995-1999	
Yes	59% (165)	74% (281)	64% (143)	<b>(67%) 589</b>
No	41% (115)	26% (97)	36% (80)	<b>(33%) 292</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>881</b>

Police data reported in Maryland (1998:6) suggest that firearms are indeed the weapon of choice in carjackings in Maryland. They found that "Carjackings in which firearms were used accounted for 58.3 percent or 297 offenses" in 1998.

Table 2 shows that firearms use in carjackings were more likely to occur in the period 1990-1994 than in either of the other periods. About three quarters (74%) of inmates committed from 1990-1994 used firearms during their carjackings compared to 59% in the period 1985-1989 and 64% in the period 1995-1999.

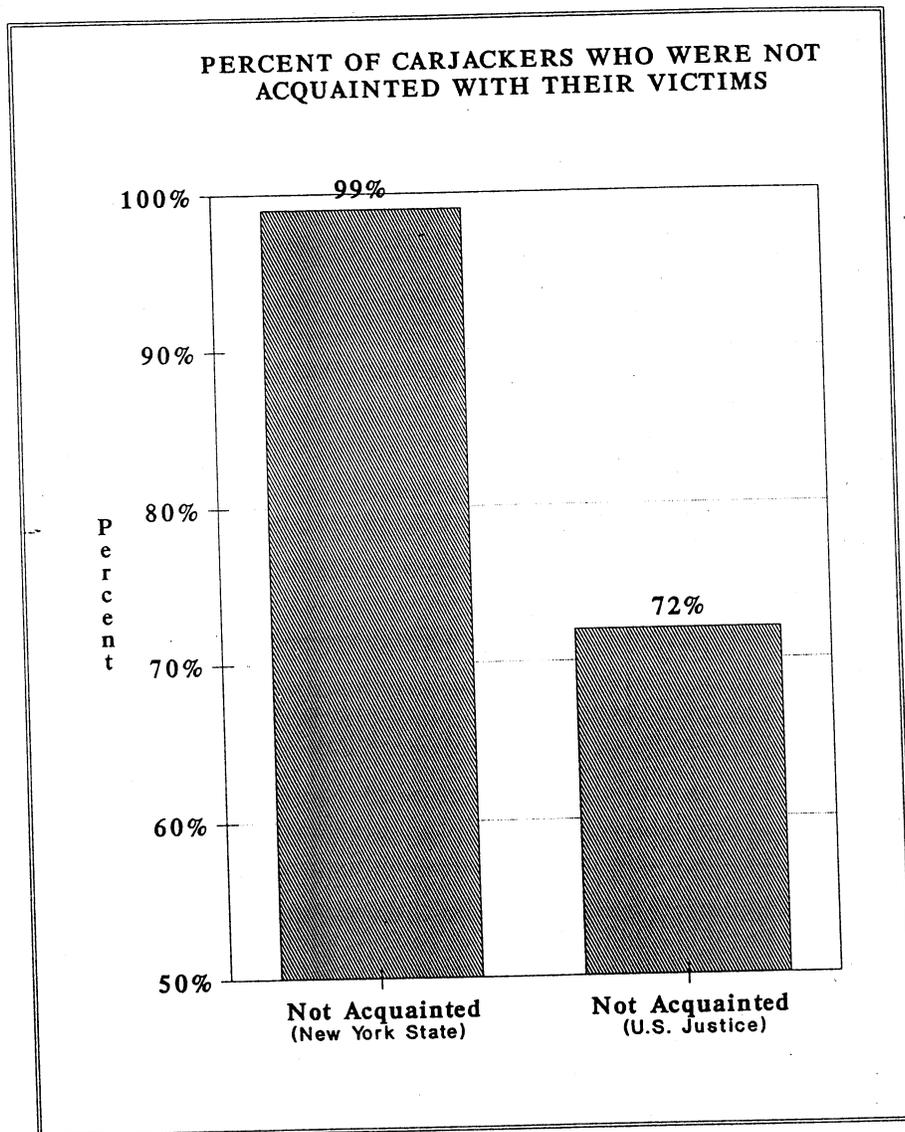
**Figure 1**



## Crimes Against Strangers

Carjackers overwhelmingly stole motor vehicles from strangers. Ninety-nine percent (N=876) of the carjackers committed their offense against strangers. This figure is much higher than suggested by national surveys of victims (see Figure 2). According to National Crime Victimization Survey data from 1992 to 1996, only 72% of the carjackings were committed by strangers (BJS, 1999:4).

**Figure 2**



## Property Taken

Overall, forty-three percent (N=383) of the carjackers in the study took money and/or other valuables in addition to the motor vehicles.

Table 3 shows that the likelihood of other valuables being taken during a carjacking declined over time. In 1985-1989, 64% of carjackers committed in that period took other valuables whereas from 1990-1994, 35% took other valuables and from 1995-1999, 31% did.

**TABLE 3**  
**Valuables Other than Motor Vehicles Taken by Carjackers**  
**1985 – 1999**

	1985-89	1990-94	1995-99	Total
Yes	64% (180)	35% (134)	31% (69)	43% (383)
No	36% (100)	65% (244)	69% (154)	57% (498)
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>881</b>

## Injury

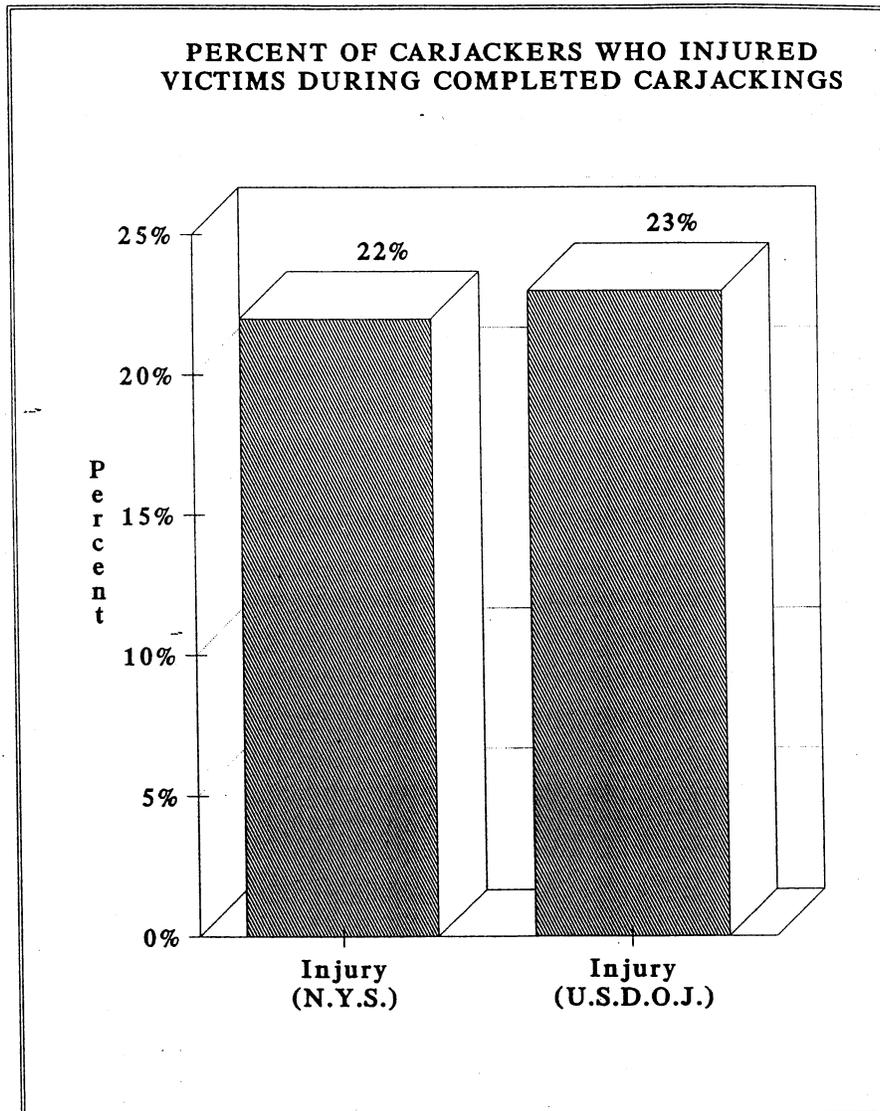
Twenty-two percent (N=196) of the assailants in the carjacker study group injured their victims in the course of the carjacking (see Figure 3). These results are consistent with national data. The federal study (BJS, 1999) reported that victims were injured in 16 percent of attempted carjackings and 23 percent of the completed carjackings. Their results suggest that carjack victims are injured in proportions similar to those of other robbery victims. Of 564,590 "completed" robberies in 1997, 155,940 (28%) involved an injury to a victim who was a stranger to the assailant. (See 1998 Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, Table 3.13, p. 179.)

The likelihood of a carjacker injuring the victim(s) appears to have declined over time. Table 4 shows that 31% of the carjackers committed from 1985-1989 injured their victims in the course of the carjacking. However, in the period 1990-1999, only 18% of the carjackers injured their victims.

**TABLE 4**  
**Injury by Period of Commitment**

Injured Victim	1985-89	1990-94	1995-99	Total
Yes	31% (87)	18% (69)	18% (40)	22% (196)
No	69% (193)	82% (309)	82% (183)	78% (685)
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>881</b>

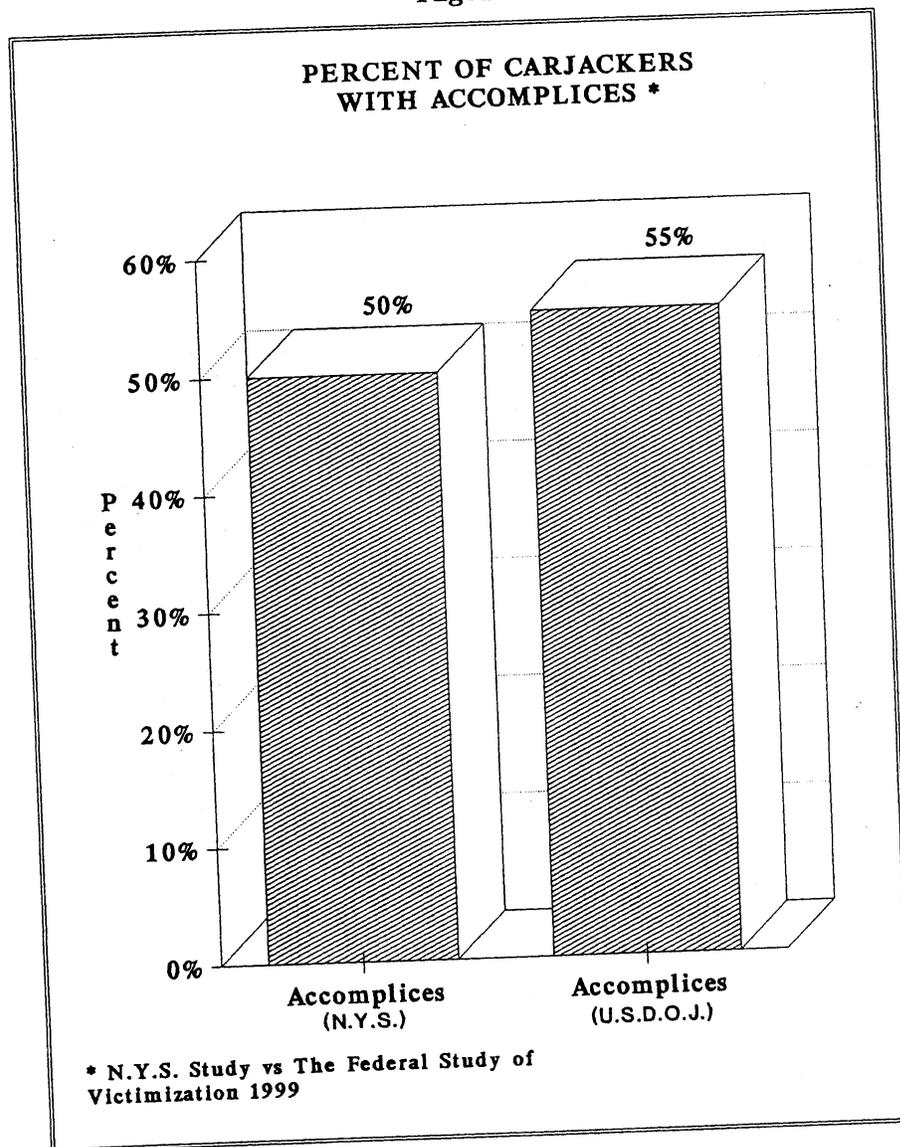
**Figure 3**



## Accomplices

Half (N=441) of the carjackers acted in concert with other perpetrators. Similarly the federal study found that 55% percent of all completed or attempted carjackings were committed by groups of two or more offenders (see Figure 4). Male carjackers were less likely (50%) than female carjackers (69%) to have had accomplices. However, the number of female carjackers (N=29) identified in the population is rather small.

Figure 4



## **SECTION 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF CARJACKERS COMPARED TO OTHER ROBBERS AND AUTO LARCENISTS**

### **Background**

In this section, carjackers are compared with other Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> new commitments and Grand Larceny (auto) new commitments.

Even though carjackers in the study population were overwhelmingly men, there were some women offenders who participated in carjacking offenses. Comparative data on women carjackers, women convicted of Grand Larceny (auto) and women robbers are presented below (see pages 16 and 17).

To improve comparability, all the cases were drawn from the population of new commitments 1985 through 1999 committed from New York City or Erie County, New York.

### **Age at Crime Date**

At the time of their offense, the carjackers (average age 25.2 years) were approximately eight months older than the other Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> new commitments (average age 24.6 years). However, both groups were about five years younger on average than Grand Larceny (auto) new commitments (average age 30.0 years).

**TABLE 5:**  
**Type of offender by Age at Crime Date**

<b>Age at Crime Date</b>	<b>Carjackers</b>	<b>Robbers</b>	<b>Grand Larceny (Auto)</b>
Under 21 years	27% (235)	29% (5,168)	14% (186)
21 – 24 years	25% (225)	26% (4,693)	17% (231)
25 – 29 years	22% (193)	22% (3,879)	28% (369)
30 – 34 years	16% (138)	13% (2,266)	21% (282)
35 – 39 years	5% (48)	6% (1,087)	12% (160)
40 and over	5% (42)	4% (667)	8% (110)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>(881)</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>(17,760)*</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>1,338</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>25.3 years</b>	<b>24.6 years</b>	<b>30 years</b>

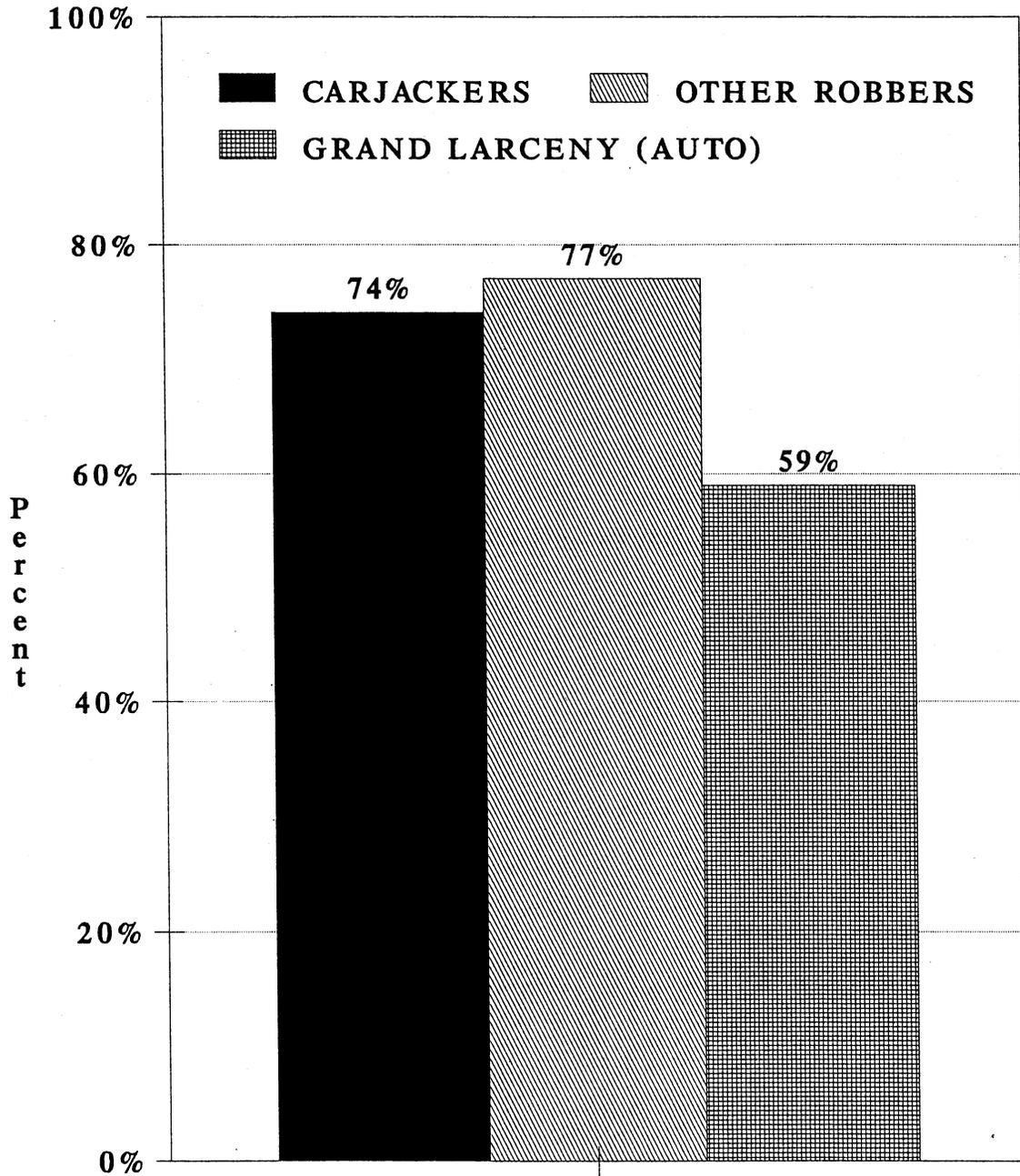
\*Data on age was missing for 10 robbers.

Table 5 shows that 52% of carjackers and 55% of robbers were under 25 at the time of their offense; however, only 31% of grand larcenists (auto) were under 25 at the time of their offense. Clearly the grand larcenists (auto) are older offenders than either robbers or carjackers whose age distributions are quite similar to each other.

The results of this analysis seem consistent with other research. A federal study on carjackers (BJS, 1994) shows that “victims perceived carjackers to be generally less than thirty years old.” Furthermore, the federal study reports that “offenders between the ages 21 and 29 committed about half of all completed carjackings” and that offenders 18-20 years of age committed an additional 12% of completed carjackings. Our findings show 47% of the offenders between 21 and 29 with an additional 27% between 16 and 20.

Figure 5

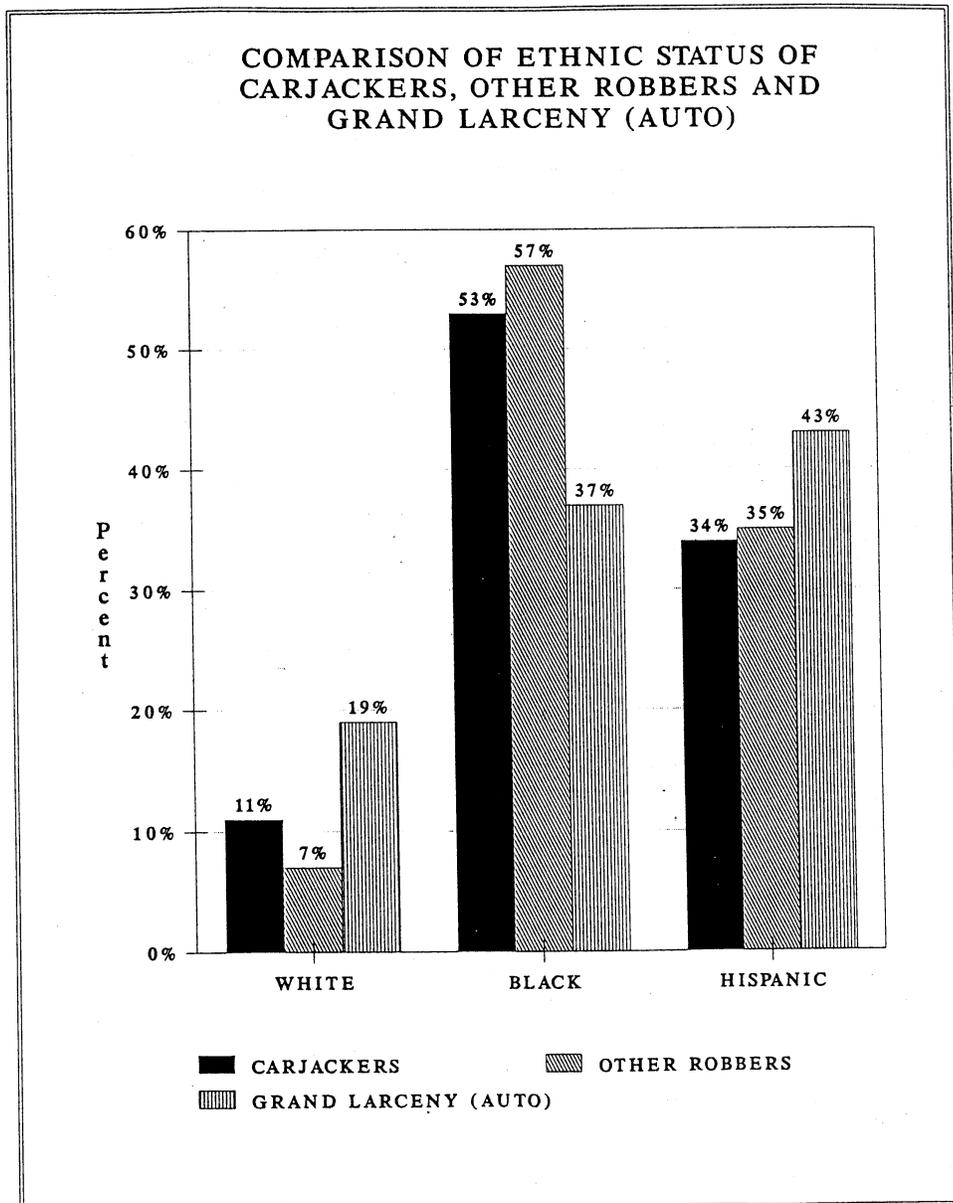
PERCENT UNDER 30 YEARS OF AGE AT TIME OF  
CRIME OF COMMITMENT AMONG CARJACKERS,  
OTHER ROBBERS AND GRAND LARCENY (AUTO)



## Race/Ethnic Status

Fifty-three percent of the carjackers were Black; 34% were Hispanic; and 11% were White. These percentages are roughly similar to those of other Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> cases among new commitments from New York City and Erie County during the study period (see Figure 6). These percentages are also generally consistent with the race/ethnic status data on carjackers reported in the BJS study (1999). In that study Whites were said to be 19% of the carjackers, Blacks 58%, and the balance were "Other" (including "mixed race"). (Note that in the federal study Hispanic offenders are classified as one of the three races—White, Black, or "Other".)

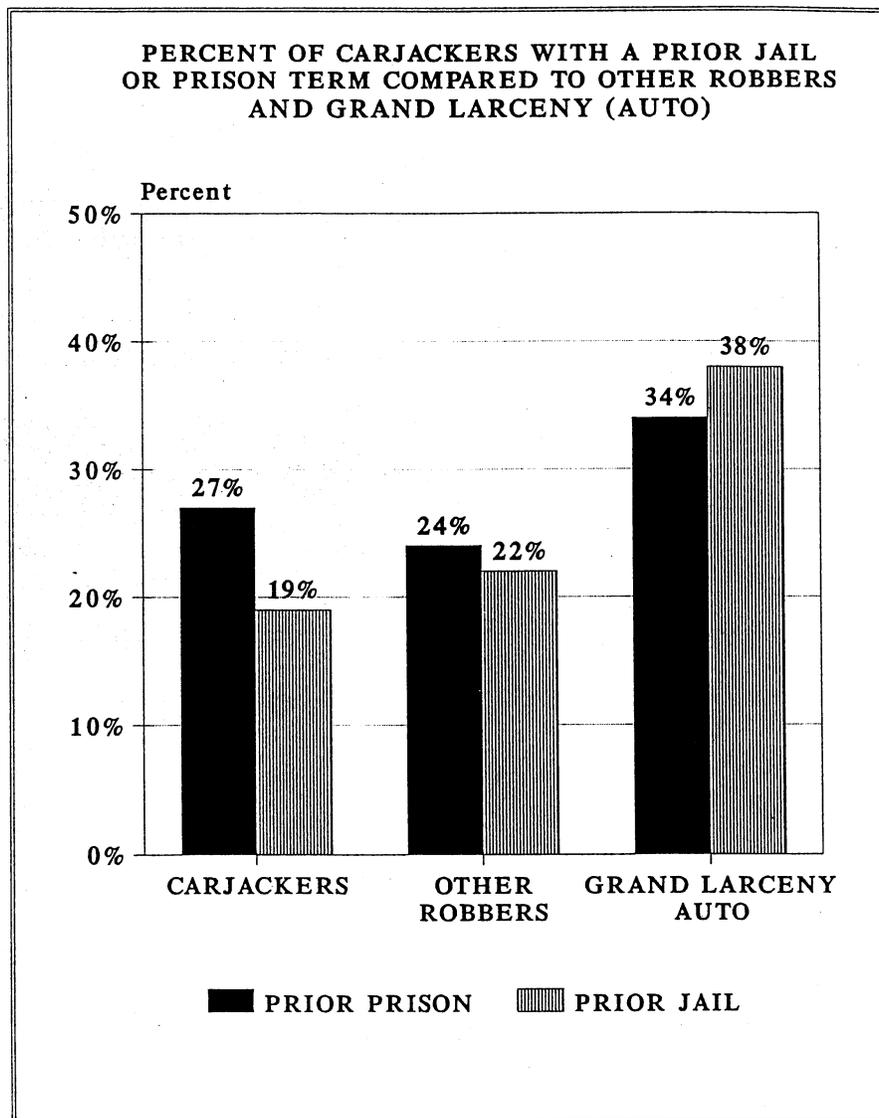
Figure 6



### Prior Criminal Record

Nearly half of the carjackers (46%) and other robbers (46%) had served prior jail or prison terms. This compares to 72% of the automobile grand larcenists who had served either a previous jail or prison term (see Figure 7 and Appendix Table 3).

Figure 7



## Second Felony Offenders Status

Fifty-seven percent of the carjackers compared to 59% of other Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> offenders were sentenced as First Felony offenders. However, only 22% of the Grand Larceny (auto) cases were sentenced as a First Felony Offender (see Table 6 and Figure 8), the remaining 78% were sentenced as a Second Felony Offender. Again, carjackers are similar to Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> offenders in the proportion sentenced as second felons, and they differ from Grand Larceny (auto) offenders.

**TABLE 6:  
Second Felony Offender Status by Type of Offender**

	Carjacker		Robbery <sup>a</sup>		Grand Larceny (Auto)	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
First Felony	57%	499	59%	10,449	22%	298
Second Felony	43%	382	41%	7,312	78%	1,040
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>881</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>17,761</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1,338</b>

<sup>a</sup> Data on second felony status for nine cases are missing.

## Drug and Alcohol Use

Carjackers reported using drugs (43%) less than grand larcenists (55%) but about as much as the other robbers (see Table 7). There were no statistically significant differences between carjackers (22%) and the other offenders (21% and 24%) in the proportion who were alcoholic or had suggestive abuse [13% for carjackers versus 15% for Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> or Grand Larceny (auto)], as measured by the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test.

**Table 7: Crime by Drug and Alcohol Use (Total Population)<sup>a</sup>**

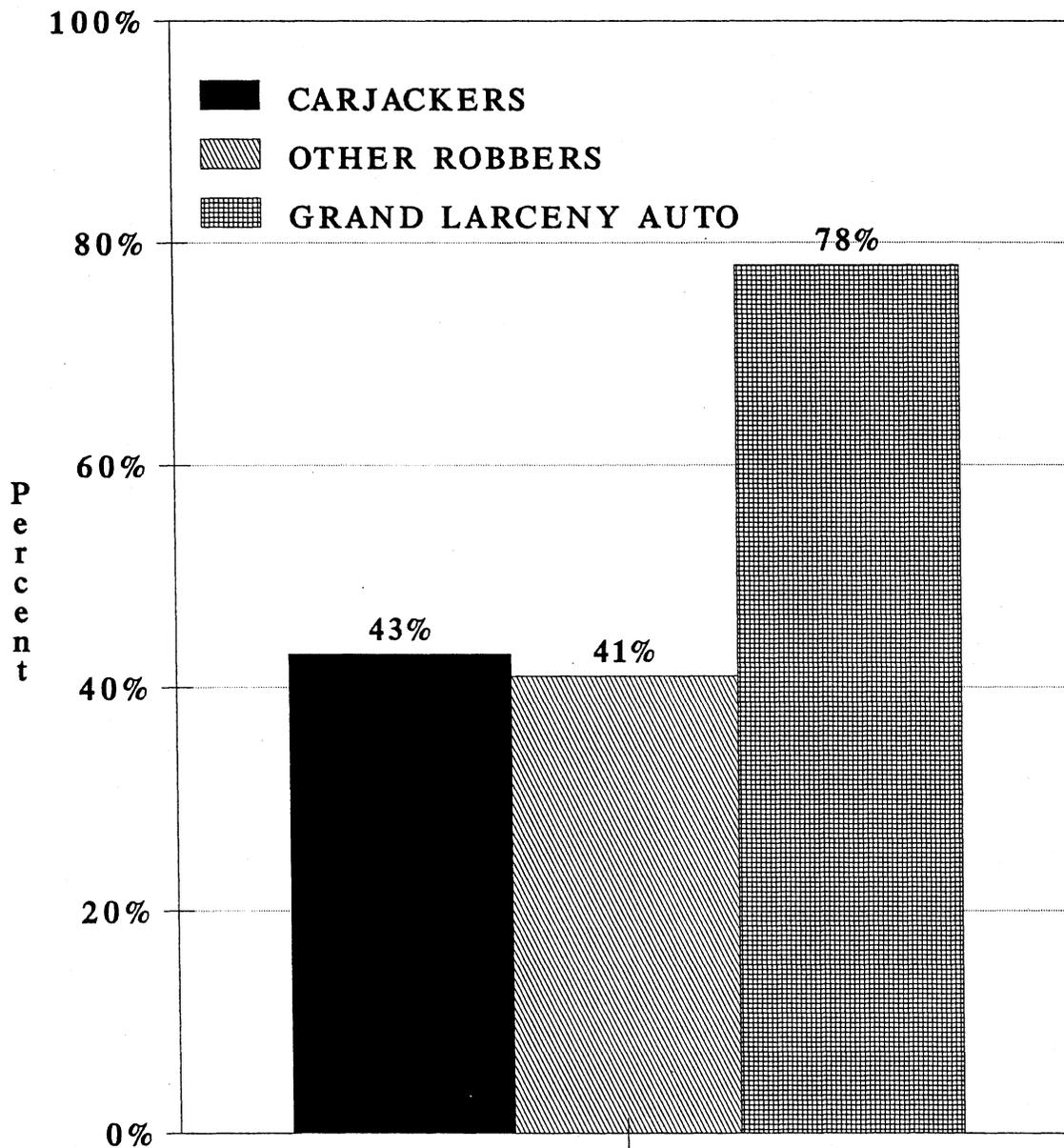
	Carjack		Robbery		Grand Larceny (Auto)	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
A. Used Drugs <sup>a</sup>	43%	375	47%	8,320	55%	732
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>881</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>17,761</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1,338</b>
B. Alcoholic <sup>b</sup>	22%	170	21%	3,002	24%	266
Suggestive Abuse	13%	104	15%	2,248	15%	168
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>770</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>14,912</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1,103</b>

<sup>a</sup> Data on drug use are missing for nine robbery cases.

<sup>b</sup> Data are missing on 111 carjackers, 2,858 robbers, and 235 grand larcenists.

Figure 8

**PERCENT OF SECOND FELONY OFFENDERS  
AMONG CARJACKERS, OTHER ROBBERS  
AND GRAND LARCENY (AUTO)**



## SECTION 4: FEMALE CARJACKERS

### Introduction

This study found that there were a small number of women (N=27) robbers whose crime of commitment was a carjacking. It was decided in light of the limited number of such women offenders not to compare them to men but nevertheless to report the data on these women offenders separately.

### Age of Women at Crime Date

At the time of their crime, women carjackers were on average 27.0 years old. Other women robbers were 26.9 years old and women grand larcenists (auto) were 31.0 years old. As in the case of the overall study population, women carjackers and women robbers were fairly close in age, while women grand larcenists (auto) were approximately four years older.

### Race/Ethnic Status of Women

The 27 women carjackers included 7 who were White (26%), 8 who were African American (30%) and 12 who were Hispanic (43%).

Women robbers (N=462) included 52 who were White (11%), 226 who were African American (49%) and 179 who were Hispanic (39%). Five women robbers were of unknown or other ethnicity.

Women grand larcenists (auto) (N=21) included 6 who were White (29%), 6 who were Black (29%) and 9 who were Hispanic (43%). Although the numbers are small, it is interesting to see that women carjackers were more like women grand larcenists (auto) in their ethnic breakdown than like other women robbers. The ethnic distribution for women convicted of Robbery 1<sup>st</sup> more closely resembles the ethnic breakdown of men convicted of robbery.

**Second Felony Offender Status of Women**

Two of the women carjackers (7%) were sentenced as Second Felony Offenders compared to 13 (62%) of the Grand Larceny (auto) offenders. Twenty-three percent (N=108) of the women robbers were sentenced as Second Felony Offenders.

**TABLE 8:  
Second Felony Offender Status by Type of Offender (Women Only)**

	Carjacker		Robbery		Grand Larcenists (Auto)	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
First Felony	93%	25	77%	354	38%	8
Second Felony	7%	2	23%	108	62%	13
Total	100%	27	100%	462	100%	21

### Drug and Alcohol Use Among Women Carjackers

There were no substantial differences among women committed for carjacking, robbery, and Grand Larceny (Auto) in their drug use patterns.

Women carjackers had the highest rates of alcoholism (37%) and suggestive abuse (30%) of any of the three groups of women offenders, exceeding the rate of robbers (28% and 26%, respectively) and far exceeding the rates of grand larcenists (17% and 17%). However, given the small numbers of women carjackers and grand larcenists, these results on drug and alcohol abuse in women must be treated with caution.

**Table 9: Crime by Drug and Alcohol Use (Women)**

	Carjack		Robbery		Grand Larceny	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
A. Used Drugs	52%	14	49%	226	48%	10
Did Not Use Drugs	48%	13	51%	236	52%	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>21</b>
B. Alcoholic	37%	10	28%	104	17%	3
Suggestive Abuse	30%	8	26%	97	17%	3
Not Alcoholic	33%	9	46%	261	66%	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>21</b>

No alcoholism information was available on 3 women carjackers, 88 women robbers and 3 women grand larcenists.

## CONCLUSION

Carjacking is overwhelmingly a stranger-to-stranger crime. Virtually all of the carjackers (99%) admitted to DOCS between 1985 and 1999 were unacquainted with their victims beforehand.

About two-thirds (67%) displayed a gun of some sort during the commission of the crime.

Carjackers often (43%) took other valuables (e.g. cash, jewelry) in addition to a motor vehicle from their victims. In a quarter of the crimes that resulted in prison sentences, the carjackers injured their victim(s) in commission of the offense.

Carjackers were three years younger, on average, than Grand Larcenists (auto) (25.3 years versus 28.4 years).

The data also show that carjackers in the study population had relatively extensive adult criminal records even before committing the instant carjacking offense. Almost half (46%) had served either a prior prison (27%) or a prior jail (19%) term. Over forty percent (43%) were sentenced as Second Felony Offenders.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the federal study, Klaus (1999:2) reported that, "Urban residents were more likely to experience carjacking than suburban or rural residents." "Annual average rates of attempted or completed carjackings per 10,000 persons during 1992-1996 were 4 per 10,000 in urban areas; 2.4 per 10,000 in Suburban areas and 0.7 per 10,000 in Rural areas." Maryland (1998) reported that the highly urbanized counties of Baltimore, Baltimore City, Montgomery and Prince George's together accounted for well over 90% of all carjackings in that State from 1994 through 1998. Thus in 1998, of 784 carjackings, 744 (95%) were reported in those four counties. Similar results were found in 1995, 1996 and 1997. Even when overall carjackings declined in 1998 from 1997 levels, those four counties contributed the vast majority reporting 476 (94%) out of 509 carjackings.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Crime of Commitment by Year**

Year of Commitment	Crime of Commitment Robbery 1 <sup>st</sup> and Attempt Robbery 1 <sup>st</sup>		Carjacking		Grand Larceny (auto)	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
1985	1,293	7.3%	62	6.9%	54	4.0%
1986	1,461	8.2%	65	7.3%	73	5.5%
1987	1,271	7.2%	53	5.9%	34	2.5%
1988	1,057	5.9%	54	6.0%	17	1.3%
1989	1,144	6.4%	48	5.4%	60	4.5%
1990	1,225	6.9%	108	12.1%	59	4.4%
1991	1,535	8.6%	61	6.8%	125	9.3%
1992	1,607	9.0%	62	6.9%	134	10.0%
1993	1,546	8.7%	88	9.8%	139	10.4%
1994	1,347	7.6%	63	7.0%	140	10.5%
1995	1,165	6.6%	58	6.5%	140	10.5%
1996	954	5.4%	54	6.0%	116	8.7%
1997	841	4.7%	51	5.7%	105	7.8%
1998	703	4.0%	42	4.7%	85	6.4%
1999	621	3.5%	26	2.9%	57	4.3%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>17,770</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>881</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1,338</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2: Crime of Commitment by Region**

	Robbery	Carjacking	Grand Larceny (auto)	Total
New York City	17,407	864	1,226	19,497
Erie County	363	17	112	492
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,770</b>	<b>881</b>	<b>1,338</b>	<b>19,989</b>

**Appendix**  
**Table 3: Prior Record by Type of Offender**

	Carjacker		Other Robbers		Grand Larceny (Auto)	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
No Prior Arrest	16%	137	15%	2,750	1%	17
No Prior Conviction	14%	126	15%	2,625	3%	45
Conviction No Jail	24%	214	24%	4,189	23%	312
Prior Jail Term	19%	165	22%	3,962	39%	504
Prior Prison Term	27%	236	24%	4,193	34%	459
Total	100%	878	100%	17,719	100%	1,337

No information was available on prior record of 3 carjackers, 51 robbers and 1 grand larceny (auto).

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Principal Clerk  
(graphic displays)**

**With assistance of:**

**Annmarie Curcurito  
Intern**

**Eileen Nopper  
Clerk I**

**PROGRAM PLANNING,  
RESEARCH & EVALUATION**

