

Organised property crime in Queensland



Key findings

1. Organised vehicle theft in Queensland is likely to increase over the next two to three years, based on recent increases in profit-motivated vehicle thefts, and increasing interstate trends in the theft of vehicles for parts or sale as scrap metal.
2. Compared with organised vehicle theft, organised vehicle rebirthing is less likely to increase because of Queensland's regulatory standards.
3. Organised heavy equipment theft is increasing in Queensland, particularly in rural and regional areas. These offences are likely to continue to increase over the next few years, assuming continued growth in the mining and construction industries.
4. Most boat thefts in Queensland are organised, and there remains potential for organised crime groups to further exploit this crime type. There are currently weaknesses in boat identification and registration practices providing opportunities for offenders to dispose of stolen boats.
5. Copper theft in Queensland is largely opportunistic, but the associated harms are significant. Monitoring and early action can prevent the issue from escalating as it has done internationally.
6. Key factors contributing to organised property crimes in Queensland are the profits involved, property that is not adequately secure, weaknesses in product identification and registration practices (especially for heavy equipment and boats), and difficulties experienced by law enforcement in investigating and prosecuting offenders.
7. Members of the public and business operators should take steps to reduce the likelihood of their property being targeted by organised or opportunistic criminals.

This document is published by the CMC to inform the community of current issues in law enforcement and crime prevention.

Background

Since 1999, the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) has monitored Queensland's organised crime markets – including the organised property crime market – by means of a series of strategic assessments (CMC 2004, 2009; Queensland Crime Commission & Queensland Police Service 1999). These have consistently assessed the risk posed by organised property crime in Queensland as medium. In 2012 the CMC decided not to conduct a dedicated assessment of the organised property crime market. Instead, it reviewed organised crime trends in Queensland and identified the following current and emerging issues in organised property crime:^{1,2}

- » motor vehicle theft and rebirthing
- » heavy equipment theft
- » boat theft and rebirthing
- » copper theft.

It is important to note that identifying these matters as key issues does not necessarily mean that organised criminals commit most or even many of the kinds of offences discussed here. Our analysis suggests that organised criminals are, however, more likely to be involved in these than other kinds of property crime. This, combined with indications of possible increasing trends over the next two to three years, is why these issues have been highlighted over others.

Motor vehicle theft and rebirthing

Motor vehicle thefts can be categorised as either short-term (indicated by incidents where the stolen vehicle is recovered) or profit-motivated (indicated by incidents where the stolen vehicle goes unrecovered) – see National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council (NMVTRC) 2011.^{3,4} The focus here is on profit-motivated thefts, since these are often considered an indicator of *organised* vehicle theft (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada 2010).

Vehicle 'rebirthing' helps offenders profit from stolen vehicles. It involves giving a stolen vehicle another vehicle's identification details ('clean identifiers') to make it appear legitimate; the vehicle can then be re-registered and sold without arousing suspicion.



Nature and extent of organised crime involvement

Twenty-one per cent of Queensland vehicle thefts are profit-motivated, and thus possibly organised.⁵ Consultations also suggested that there is a considerable degree of organised crime involvement in vehicle theft and rebirthing in Queensland. This comprises the involvement not only of 'traditional' organised crime groups (OCGs) such as outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMCGs), but also of organised networks of offenders with no affiliations to a particular OCG (for example, family-based networks). In either case, it is rare for vehicle theft and rebirthing to be the offenders' sole focus – they are usually also involved in other criminal activities, including illicit drugs, boat theft and rebirthing, and heavy equipment theft (see CMC 2004), as the following cases illustrate.

- 1 For this paper, organised property crime was defined as involving multiple people stealing and subsequently receiving and disposing of high-value property to obtain a profit or some other gain, where these offences involve substantial planning and organisation or are systematic and continuing.
- 2 Details of the methodology we used are provided in the appendix.
- 3 Short-term thefts typically involve cars stolen for joyriding, for temporary transport or to help the offenders commit another crime. Profit-motivated thefts are those where the offenders intend to make money from the vehicle, either as a whole or in parts (NMVTRC 2011).
- 4 It is worth emphasising that a stolen vehicle might go unrecovered for reasons other than that it has been targeted by profit-motivated thieves and rebirthed or broken down for parts – for example, it may simply have been abandoned in an isolated location and not yet found. The number of stolen vehicles not recovered is nevertheless considered a useful estimate of profit-motivated thefts, which is why it is used here. The data presented here are also adjusted for the number of missing vehicles that will be recovered up to a year after the end of the current data period; this provides a more accurate estimate of the number of stolen vehicles that can be expected to remain unrecovered (see NMVTRC 2011).
- 5 CMC analysis of CARS (Comprehensive Auto-theft Research System) Analyser data for thefts of 'passenger/light commercial' vehicles in Queensland in the first quarter of 2012 ($n = 576$ for profit-motivated thefts; $n = 2125$ for short-term thefts). Data retrieved 10 July 2012.

- A drug production and distribution network operating throughout the Queensland Police Service (QPS) North Coast Region was also involved in stealing and rebirthing vehicles, boats and construction equipment on a large scale (QPS 2010a).
- In 2011, the QPS made arrests in a long-term investigation into a major vehicle theft and rebirthing syndicate that had been operating for several years between south-east Queensland and New South Wales. The offenders especially targeted classic cars, attending 'muscle car' shows and rallies to identify vehicles to steal. Property stolen by the syndicate included classic Ford and Holden utes, classic Holden Toranas, LandCruisers, a Harley Davidson motorcycle, a caravan and a boat (Rogers & Fineran 2011; Sollars 2011).

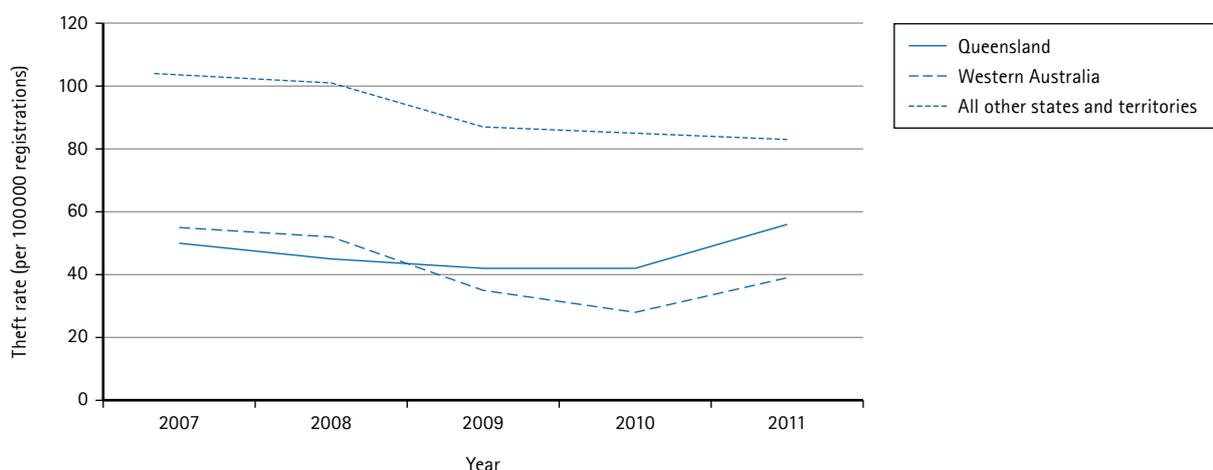
Consistent with previous CMC assessments (CMC 2004, 2008, 2009), organised vehicle theft and rebirthing in Queensland continues to be concentrated in the south-east corner. This probably reflects the concentration of Queensland's population in the south-east (providing a large supply of both targets and buyers), the simpler logistics of moving stolen vehicles from this region to southern states, and the greater presence of criminal networks generally.

Significance of the issue

Several factors point to a possible increase in organised vehicle theft and, to a lesser extent, in vehicle rebirthing over the next few years.

1. Profit-motivated vehicle thefts in Queensland increased by over 30 per cent in 2011,⁶ and have continued to rise in 2012 (NMVTRC 2012). This follows a consistent decline in thefts between 2007 and 2010. Although there was a similar increase in Western Australia in 2011, total thefts in all other Australian jurisdictions continued to decrease (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Rate of profit-motivated thefts of motor vehicles in Queensland, Western Australia and all other states and territories combined, 2007 to 2011



Source: CARS Analyser (data for 'passenger/light commercial' vehicles); retrieved 10 July 2012.

The increases seen in Queensland and Western Australia may be linked to their 'two-speed' economies. Specifically, the two-speed economy could be encouraging some unemployed individuals and marginal small businesses with links to the motor vehicle industry (for example, smash repairers and metal recyclers) to engage in or facilitate organised theft and rebirthing.⁷ If this is the case, and if the economic environment further declines, these offences could be expected to further increase in Queensland.

⁶ From 42 thefts per 100,000 registrations in 2010, to 56 in 2011.

⁷ Consultation with the NMVTRC.

2. There has been an increase in the theft of older vehicles for sale as scrap metal. Tightened regulations in Australia governing written-off vehicles have restricted opportunities for rebirthing.⁸ At the same time, the international demand for vehicle parts has grown dramatically, and the number of businesses offering to purchase end-of-life vehicles for cash has increased exponentially in Australia.^{9, 10} The NMVTRC advised that, as a result, some offenders throughout the country are stealing older, more vulnerable vehicles for their scrap metal value – up to \$400 per car. In Victoria, some organised groups have even established scrap metal yards specifically to profit from stolen vehicles. Given the connections between some Queensland OCGs and scrap metal dealers (see CMC 2008), the trends observed in other jurisdictions might also emerge here.
3. There has been growth in the market for stolen vehicle parts. This is another way in which profit-motivated offenders have adapted their operations to overcome the difficulties of rebirthing. Offenders are making money from stolen parts in two main ways:
 - Parts from stolen vehicles are being used to repair less extensively damaged vehicles, including vehicles declared as repairable write-offs (Campbell 2010; Duffy 2012). In New South Wales, for example, one syndicate was legally buying written-off Toyota HiLux SRs from interstate, and then using parts from vehicles stolen in Sydney to convert them to more expensive SR5 models (Duffy 2012).
 - Some OCGs with overseas connections – especially to countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East – are exporting stolen parts for use in these countries' illegal vehicle markets.¹¹ Similarly, it is suspected that some groups might be exporting stolen vehicles to the Middle East for dismantling, before the parts are shipped to England for sale.¹²

Although there is little intelligence showing the extent to which these activities are occurring in Queensland, the trends observed interstate may be indicators of similar problems emerging here. This is particularly so given that some Queensland OCGs are known to have links to the vehicle repair industry, and to have overseas connections (CMC 2004, 2009).

In summary, current trends here and elsewhere in Australia suggest that organised vehicle theft in Queensland will continue to increase over the next two to three years. Organised rebirthing might also increase, although the indicators for this are not as strong, since fewer avenues for rebirthing are available to offenders. This is discussed in more detail below.

Contributing factors

The greatest contributing factor to organised vehicle theft and rebirthing continues to be the profits involved. Although continued improvements in vehicle security and controls on written-off vehicles have restricted opportunities for theft and rebirthing in Queensland, the strong profit motivation of organised offenders is leading them to identify and exploit the remaining vulnerabilities. Chief among these are:

- Vehicles that remain 'soft targets'. These include vehicles that are left unlocked or unsecure (for example, parked on the street or in poorly lit areas, or with the keys easily accessible in the vehicle or the house where it is parked), and vehicles with inadequate security systems.¹³
- Emerging technologies that make it easier to steal cars with only a basic level of specialist knowledge and skills (see, for example, Robertson 2012).

8 Written-off vehicles comprise two types of damaged vehicles – repairable write-offs and statutory write-offs. Repairable write-offs are vehicles that are assessed as uneconomical to repair, but that can be re-registered after being repaired and passing inspection. In contrast, statutory write-offs cannot be re-registered as they are deemed to have been too badly damaged to be used safely. In the past, offenders often used the identification details of written-off vehicles to rebirth stolen ones. See <www.tmr.qld.gov.au/Registration/Registering-vehicles/Written-off-vehicles.aspx> for more information.

9 End-of-life vehicles are those motor vehicles that have reached the end of their useful lives.

10 Consultation with the NMVTRC.

11 Consultations with the NMVTRC and a major national insurer. See also Hinchliffe (2012).

12 Consultation with a major national insurer.

13 Consultations with the NMVTRC and QPS officers.

- Poor vehicle identification standards, particularly in terms of a lack of whole-of-vehicle marking. Most vehicle parts do not have any unique identification, making the origin of vehicle parts virtually impossible to trace.¹⁴
- Noncompliance and unethical practices in some parts of Queensland's metal recycling and vehicle repair industries.¹⁵
- Second-hand passenger vehicles from mining operations (typically four-wheel drives) that have never been registered and can be purchased at low prices from mining companies, and then used to rebirth stolen vehicles.¹⁶ Given the growth of the mining industry in Queensland, this is a particular vulnerability in this state.

Other key factors that contribute to organised vehicle theft and rebirthing in Queensland are:

- Well-established connections between OCG members (and their associates) and some businesses that can help them make money from stolen vehicles. These include some towing companies, scrap metal yards, smash repairers and second-hand vehicle dealers (CMC 2004, 2009). Many organised offenders also have familial and social ties within Queensland, interstate and overseas that can facilitate their offences (CMC 2004, 2009).
- Barriers to investigating and prosecuting the offenders involved. These include difficulties for police in proving some offences, and the fact that large-scale police operations targeting vehicle theft and rebirthing are resource intensive, time consuming and expensive.

Heavy equipment theft

Heavy equipment theft (also called plant and equipment theft) includes the theft of excavators, tractors, front-end loaders, forklifts and skid steer loaders ('bobcats'). Like motor vehicle thefts, heavy equipment thefts can be considered to be either short-term or profit-motivated, with the discussion here centring on profit-motivated (and thus possibly organised) offences.



Nature and extent of organised crime involvement

Industry representatives believe that most heavy equipment thefts are committed by organised networks. They argue that the work involved in locating, transporting and selling such large, specialist pieces of equipment requires a significant level of organisation and connections to other offenders (CMEIG 2009). Although the level of OCG involvement cannot be precisely quantified, data on profit-motivated equipment thefts suggest that organised offenders commit over 40 per cent of all offences in Queensland.¹⁷

The cases presented for motor vehicle theft (page 3) and boat theft (page 7) illustrate how heavy equipment thefts might form just one aspect of an OCG's diverse criminal activities. The involvement of OCGs in equipment thefts has also been suggested in several other recent QPS investigations.

Organised equipment thefts are more common in Queensland's rural and regional areas. Although these thefts occur throughout the state, Toowoomba, Dalby, Mackay and Rockhampton QPS districts were particular hotspots.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, organised groups are targeting areas around farming communities, mines and major infrastructure projects because of the concentration of heavy equipment in those places.

14 Consultation with the NMVTRC.

15 Consultation with the NMVTRC.

16 Consultation with the NMVTRC. See also Box (2012).

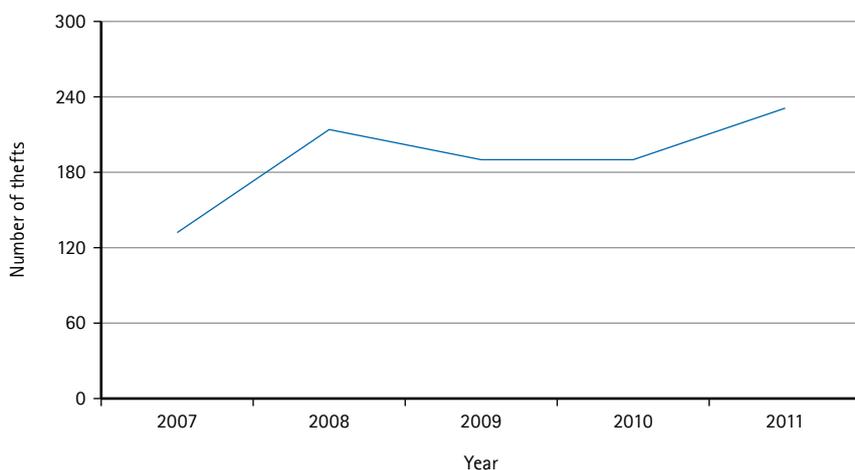
17 CMC analysis of CARS Analyser data for thefts of 'heavy commercial vehicles' in Queensland in the first quarter of 2012 ($n = 73$ for profit-motivated thefts; $n = 96$ for short-term thefts). Data retrieved 10 July 2012.

18 These views are largely supported by quantitative data from the CARS Mapper (<<http://ncars.on.net/mapper.aspx>>). These show that the highest rates of profit-motivated thefts of 'other' vehicles in 2011–12 were in the Western Downs, Isaac and Whitsunday regional councils. The CARS Mapper also indicated high theft rates in the Burdekin, Richmond and Winton shires (which cover parts of Longreach and Townsville QPS districts). Note, however, that these data may include some vehicles that are not heavy equipment (e.g. buses), and should be treated as an estimate only.

Significance of the issue

Heavy equipment theft (both opportunistic and organised) was flagged as a growing problem by QPS officers at many consultations. Quantitative data support these views, with profit-motivated heavy equipment thefts in Queensland increasing by 75 per cent since 2007 (from 132 to 231 thefts; see Figure 2).¹⁹ As outlined below, it is reasonable to expect continued increases over the next two to three years.

Figure 2: Number of profit-motivated thefts of heavy vehicles and equipment in Queensland, 2007 to 2011



Source: CARS Analyser (data for 'heavy commercial vehicles', which include trucks, tow trucks, and plant and equipment); retrieved 10 July 2012.

Stakeholders suggested that the increase in thefts could be attributed in part to the mining boom and associated infrastructure projects in Queensland.²⁰ Certainly, the expansion of the mining and construction industries creates a larger market for stolen heavy equipment, in terms of both supply and demand. Consistent with this, offenders are believed to commit many thefts to fill orders for specific equipment and parts.²¹

It is notable that a similar increase in profit-motivated equipment theft has not been recorded in Western Australia, despite that state also experiencing a mining boom.²² Organised networks may view Queensland (and the other eastern states) as a more attractive target because they perceive it is easier to transport stolen equipment from Queensland to interstate and overseas markets. Assuming that Queensland's mining and construction industries continue to grow over the next few years, it is likely that these thefts will continue to increase.

The CMC's consultations indicated that rising equipment thefts might also reflect organised offenders shifting their focus from motor vehicle theft and rebirthing. As it has become increasingly difficult to steal and rebirth cars, it is believed that some Queensland offenders have sought to profit from heavy equipment theft instead. Although many offenders have simply changed the way they make money from stolen vehicles, as discussed above, it is also possible that some have moved or expanded into heavy equipment theft. This is supported by the first case example on page 3, where syndicate members were found to be transferring their knowledge of vehicle theft and rebirthing to heavy equipment (and boat) theft. The involvement of some organised groups in both kinds of offences suggests flexibility in OCGs' activities and a continued willingness to pursue whatever money-making opportunities are available.

19 Because most heavy equipment does not need to be registered, changes in the rate of profit-motivated thefts per 100000 registrations could not be reliably estimated.

20 Consultations with the PCIU and the NMVTRC. See also Machinery Nostalgia (2011).

21 Consultation with the Organised Crime Intelligence Unit. See also Machinery Nostalgia (2011).

22 CMC analysis of CARS Analyser data.

Contributing factors

Similar to motor vehicle theft, key factors that contribute to heavy equipment theft in Queensland include:

- The profitability of the offences. Heavy equipment is of high value and is in high demand, not only in Queensland but also interstate and overseas.
- The vulnerability of heavy equipment to theft. This reflects the fact that equipment is often kept in isolated or unsecure locations (such as unobserved worksites), and because one 'master key' is often used to operate multiple pieces of equipment (CMEIG 2009; NMVTRC 2011).
- The fact that some Queensland OCG members are involved in the construction and mining industries or have links to industry insiders, who are believed to be heavily involved in these offences (CMEIG 2009; NMVTRC 2011). This can help offenders to access and steal heavy equipment, and later dispose of it. The involvement of criminal facilitators in the trucking industry can also enable these offences.
- Deficiencies in identification and registration practices, which lower the risk of being caught for offenders disposing of stolen equipment. Specifically, there is no universal identification system for heavy equipment, and most equipment does not need to be registered. This means that there is no central source of ownership or identification data in Australia, making it difficult for police to identify stolen equipment and preventing participants in the used equipment market from checking a product's legitimacy before a transaction.²³
- Some unique barriers for police in recovering stolen equipment and prosecuting offenders:
 - There is often a delay between a theft and its discovery; this can range from hours to months.
 - It is often difficult for general members of the public to identify different types of equipment. This limits the amount of useful information police receive to help them in investigating offences and recovering stolen equipment (Machinery Nostalgia 2011).
 - Investigating heavy equipment thefts requires some specialist knowledge and skills – for example, to find product identification numbers and understand make and model designations (CMEIG 2009).

Boat theft and rebirthing

The term 'boat theft and rebirthing' here relates to a wide range of recreational marine craft, including dinghies, luxury vessels and personal watercraft ('jet skis'). As with thefts of motor vehicles and heavy equipment, recreational boat thefts can be short-term or profit-motivated. Again, organised offending is most likely to involve profit-motivated thefts, as well as boat rebirthing.



Nature and extent of organised crime involvement

Police and insurers believe that organised groups are responsible for most boat thefts in Queensland. This is based on estimates that 75 per cent of stolen craft are not recovered (suggesting they are being rebirthed), and that the circumstances of many thefts indicate substantial planning and targeting. For example, some offenders were said to be researching targeted boats to determine the best times to steal them.

The CMC's analysis indicates that, despite the significant involvement of organised groups in boat thefts, this organised activity is not widespread in Queensland. Rather, to date it appears that a few networks have been responsible for a relatively large number of thefts. This is illustrated in the first case example on page 3, as well as one case involving a well-organised syndicate on the Gold Coast. This syndicate was responsible for the theft and rebirthing of four luxury vessels (valued between \$65 000 and \$140 000), two dinghies and three boat trailers, as well as a backhoe worth about \$150 000 (QPS 2010b).

23 Consultations with the NMVTRC and a major national insurer. See also CMEIG (2009), NMVTRC (2011) and QPS (2009a).

Organised boat theft and rebirthing occurs predominantly in the south-east corner of Queensland, especially on the Gold Coast. This probably reflects the relatively large number of boats in the region,²⁴ and the fact that it is perceived to be easier to transport stolen boats interstate from south-east Queensland. Stakeholders advised that many boats stolen in Queensland are eventually located interstate, especially in New South Wales. Nevertheless, there have also been occasional spikes in thefts in coastal regional centres such as the Rockhampton district and Mackay.²⁵ This suggests that, although organised thieves are likely to focus on the south-east corner of the state, anywhere that there is a relative concentration of recreational boats might be seen as an attractive target.

Significance of the issue

There are no consistent signs of an increasing problem with organised boat theft and rebirthing in Queensland. Although it has been suggested that the incidence of boat theft and rebirthing has increased alongside increasing barriers to vehicle theft and rebirthing,²⁶ and although some groups are known to have targeted boats in response to these barriers (as in the first example on page 3), quantitative data did not clearly support this.²⁷

However, this type of theft is ripe for exploitation by OCGs in Queensland. The state has Australia's highest rate of boat ownership, the offences are profitable, and there are deficiencies in the registration system nationally.

Contributing factors

Queensland OCGs may be attracted to boat theft and rebirthing by the profits involved. For example, the luxury vessels seized in the case described above were worth up to \$140 000, while even relatively cheap aluminium boats can fetch between \$15 000 and \$40 000.

Other key contributing factors to organised boat theft and rebirthing in Queensland are weaknesses in boat security, and in boat identification and registration practices:

- Some boats are made vulnerable to theft by being left on the street or easily accessible in the owner's front yard.
- Some security measures on boats can be defeated with only a basic level of specialist knowledge and skills.
- In Queensland, boats do not need to be physically inspected before registration, and can be registered without a Hull Identification Number (HIN).²⁸
- Australia does not have a national boat registration system. The lack of national consistency makes it easier for offenders to dispose of stolen boats in other jurisdictions.²⁹

Together, these factors allow organised groups to sell or trade stolen and rebirthed boats to unsuspecting members of the public. Police combating organised boat theft and rebirthing in Queensland also face challenges similar to those associated with motor vehicle and heavy equipment thefts.³⁰

24 As at 31 May 2012, over 50 per cent of all 241 118 recreational vessels registered in Queensland were located in the south-east (Marine Queensland 2012). The local authority with the largest number of registered vessels ($n = 26\,952$) is the Gold Coast City Council (Marine Queensland 2012).

25 Consultation with a major national insurer.

26 Consultations with QPS officers. See also Club Marine (2010) and Stolz (2011).

27 CMC analysis of unofficial QPRIME (Queensland Police Records and Information Management Exchange) statistics on motorised boat thefts and boat theft claims from a major national insurer.

28 HINs are unique (but not mandatory) identification numbers for boats.

29 See Club Marine (2010) and Ausfish (2010).

30 As with vehicle theft, it is often very difficult to prove that an offender was involved in stealing a seized boat, or received it from someone else knowing it was stolen; as with heavy equipment theft, police officers often lack specialist knowledge required for effective investigations (e.g. an understanding of vessel specifications and the meaning of HINs).

Copper theft

Copper is stolen from locations such as power stations, railway lines, telecommunications facilities, churches, construction sites and unoccupied buildings. Essentially, anywhere there is unsecured copper can be a target for thieves.



Nature and extent of organised crime involvement

Most copper thefts in Queensland are opportunistic and unsophisticated. There have nevertheless been some instances of larger-scale, organised copper thefts. In 2010, for example, one group of offenders stole about three tonnes of copper cabling from 11 substations in south-east Queensland. The offenders were believed to be committing the thefts to fund their drug use and, although they were not organised criminals in the traditional sense, their offences nevertheless showed considerable cooperation and planning.

QPS officers indicated that the nature of some other offences in Queensland suggests that organised groups of offenders with specialist knowledge and skills are also responsible for copper thefts. For example, recent cases have involved copper cable being removed from underground, a feat almost certainly requiring the technical skills of an electrician and multiple offenders to remove and transport the materials.

Despite indications of some organised copper thefts, the CMC received no reports of cases involving 'traditional' OCGs. The offenders in the example described above, for instance, were low-level drug users, committing the offences to fund their drug use. Organised copper theft in Queensland currently seems to be the domain of loose networks of offenders with familial or social connections.

Significance of the issue

There are no indications of a large or increasing problem with organised copper theft in Queensland. However, the issue should be monitored over the next few years, for two key reasons.

1. Copper theft in general is a large and growing problem overseas. In the United States (US), for instance, metal theft insurance claims increased from less than 14 000 to over 25 000 between 2006–08 and 2009–11 (Speer 2012). Similarly, copper thefts from United Kingdom (UK) railways rose by 70 per cent over 12 months, on top of a 65 per cent increase the year before (Herrmann 2012; McCorkell 2011). These trends are believed to have been driven by dramatic increases in copper prices fuelled by the high demand for copper to support rapid industrialisation in China (Cowie 2012; US Department of Energy 2010). Some experts predict that the global demand for copper (and thus prices) will continue to increase in 2013 (Business Live 2012; Morgan Stanley 2012 cited in Wile 2012).

The same factors apply to Queensland, and may result in similar increases in copper theft. With this comes the potential for organised offenders to increase their involvement in copper thefts to make considerable profits. Certainly, organised crime networks have been implicated in the UK (Adam 2011; Gladdis 2011), and they have been identified previously in Australia when copper prices reached record highs. In early 2008, authorities uncovered a Victorian network trying to ship \$2.7 million worth of stolen copper wiring to the Asian black market (Australian Customs and Border Protection Service & Victoria Police 2008).

2. Copper thefts can have major and wide-reaching effects. These include:
 - serious risks to health and safety, including the risk of electrocution to offenders, utility workers and members of the public, as well as explosions and flooding (Energy Networks Association 2007; SAPOL 2011; Tyschenko, Riley & Schultz 2010)
 - disruptions to daily living, including the loss of water and electricity supplies, and interruptions to transport and telecommunications services (Energy Networks Association 2007; SAPOL 2011; Tyschenko, Riley & Schultz 2010)
 - increases in the cost of living. The costs of repairing the damage caused by copper thieves often far exceed the value of stolen copper – in the Queensland case described above, for instance, the offenders caused around \$750 000 worth of damage. These costs are then passed on to consumers through increased building costs, utility costs, transport costs and insurance premiums (Higgins 2012; Riddell 2007).

The extent of these negative effects in Queensland would be amplified by any future increase in organised copper thefts. This highlights the importance of monitoring the situation and intervening early if any increasing trend starts to emerge.

Contributing factors

Given that organised copper theft is not currently a major problem in Queensland, it is difficult to determine the key contributors to it. However, the following factors are likely to be influential:

- *There are erroneous perceptions that copper theft is highly profitable.* The value of second-hand copper is considerably lower than the more publicised cash rates and offenders need to steal very large amounts of copper to make even a modest amount of money (Cowie 2012).
- *Many locations where copper is kept are perceived as 'soft targets' – that is, they are thought to be isolated, insecure or easily accessible.* For example, electrical substations are often located away from residential areas, and construction sites are easily accessible before lock-up stage. For organised offences, insider involvement (for example, through employees of construction, utility or transport companies) might also facilitate access to copper.
- *There are some people willing to buy stolen copper.* These include some disreputable, non-compliant and unregistered metal recyclers, who do not notify police upon receiving goods believed to be stolen. This is less likely in large-scale operations; these might instead attempt to capitalise on overseas black markets that allow more copper to be sold at higher prices.

Summary of findings

Given the information discussed in this paper, the CMC expects that in Queensland over the next two to three years:

- organised motor vehicle theft (and, to a lesser extent, vehicle rebirthing) is likely to increase, continuing a trend that emerged in 2011
- organised heavy equipment theft is likely to continue to increase, assuming continued growth in the state's mining and construction industries
- organised boat theft and rebirthing will remain ripe for exploitation by organised crime groups if there continue to be deficiencies in boat identification and registration practices
- organised copper theft could increase if the demand for copper (especially in Asia) continues to grow, and if organised crime groups see this as a viable opportunity for making money.

Strategies to prevent property crime

In light of our findings, we suggest some strategies that might be used to help tackle organised property crime. Strategies for law enforcement and government have been detailed in separate classified versions of this paper that have been provided to these stakeholders. Although law enforcement agencies will continue to take a lead role in this, the CMC believes that members of the public can also make important contributions to crime prevention in this area.

Owners of vehicles, heavy equipment, boats and sites vulnerable to copper theft can help reduce the likelihood of their property being stolen by making it harder to steal and easier to recover. Figure 3 outlines some specific techniques for each group. Although these measures will not always stop a determined thief, they do reduce the likelihood of property being targeted by organised (and opportunistic) offenders.

Figure 3: Crime prevention techniques for members of the public and business operators

Vehicle owners	Heavy equipment owners	Boat owners	Owners of sites vulnerable to copper theft
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always lock vehicles, even when at home. • Make sure keys aren't easily accessible should someone break into the house. • Whenever possible, keep vehicles off the street and stored securely (e.g. in a garage or behind a locked gate). • Consider upgrading vehicle security features (e.g. engine immobilisers, alarms and microdot technology),¹ or factor these features into purchasing decisions. • Use signs and labels to warn potential offenders that security measures are in place. • Record all vehicles' identifying numbers (e.g. Vehicle Identification Number [VIN], engine number). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Store equipment as securely as possible when not in use. • Pay special attention to key control (e.g. keep a log to monitor the whereabouts of keys; store all keys in a safe when not in use). • Use whole-of-product identification technology, such as microdots. • Ensure equipment has GPS tracking technology installed. <p>A great success story was reported by Cumming (2012).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use signs and labels to warn potential offenders that security measures are in place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before purchasing a second-hand boat, check its history (e.g. via the Australian Government's Personal Property Securities Register at <www.ppsr.gov.au>, and the proposed Stolen Boats website). • Store boats securely (e.g. behind locked gates with a trailer hitch lock and wheel clamps); such boats are very rarely stolen. • Consider upgrading boat security features (e.g. alarms, microdot technology, GPS tracking). • Name the boat; this can aid in its recovery if it is stolen. • Record all boats' identifying numbers (e.g. HIN, engine number, serial numbers). • Photograph boats to help identify and recover it if it is stolen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider increasing security around the site (e.g. hire security guards, install security cameras, install alarms, improve fencing, increase lighting). • Consider marking copper (e.g. with microdots or identifying grooves) to make it traceable. • Help to raise public awareness about the dangers of copper theft. • Consider offering rewards for information that helps police investigating thefts. This might include allowing scrap metal dealers who unwittingly receive stolen copper to keep it to avoid being left out-of-pocket. • Establish (and advertise) hotline numbers or online forms that the public can use to report suspicious activity around sites. • Place signs around the site to warn potential offenders of the security measures in place.

1 Microdots are tiny tags marked with a product's unique identification that can be sprayed or brushed onto the product's parts to make them identifiable.

Note: For more information, vehicle owners should see <www.carsafe.com.au>; heavy equipment owners should see [Edwards \(2007\)](#); boat owners should see [Club Marine \(2010\)](#); and owners of sites vulnerable to copper theft should see [Australian Institute of Criminology \(2011\)](#), [Kooi \(2010\)](#), [SAPOL \(2011\)](#), [Schoenfelder \(2009\)](#), [US Department of Energy \(2010\)](#) and [Yorke-Smith \(2010\)](#).

Appendix: Methodology

Information sources

We obtained information for this paper by:

- consulting with:
 - the Queensland Police Service (QPS), including the State Intelligence Group (SIG), the Property Crime Investigation Unit (PCIU) and the Vehicle Crime Unit (VCU, part of the Organised Crime Investigation Unit)
 - other law enforcement agencies, namely the Australian Crime Commission (ACC), the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (ACBPS) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP)
 - two major national insurers
 - the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council (NMVTRC)
 - the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR), including Maritime Safety Queensland (MSQ)
- analysing quantitative data from:
 - the Comprehensive Auto-theft Research System (CARS; reported motor vehicle and heavy equipment thefts)³¹
 - the Queensland Police Records and Information Management Exchange (QPRIME; reported boat thefts)
 - a major national insurer (motor vehicle theft and boat theft claims)
- reviewing open source information, including research reports, journal articles and media reports
- reviewing classified material from Queensland and other Australian jurisdictions
- reviewing relevant law enforcement investigations
- reviewing relevant legislation.

Limitations

Two key limitations of these sources are important to bear in mind when reading this paper. First, much of the information it is based on was anecdotal information from law enforcement personnel and other stakeholders; individual biases and inferences might therefore have influenced the accuracy of this information. Second, the law enforcement investigations and quantitative data the CMC reviewed only captured those offences that came to the attention of police or insurers. Because of these limitations, it is possible that not *all* emerging organised property crime trends in Queensland have been detected.

31 See <<http://ncars.on.net/index.html>> for more information about CARS and its data sources.

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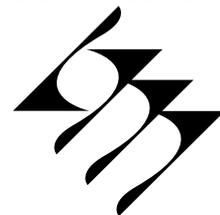
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