

JOYRIDING: THE PROBLEM IN WEST BELFAST

A Report compiled by the Social Research Division  
of the Central Economic Service, Dept of Finance

MAY 1980

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express our appreciation to the following groups for their co-operation in the completion of this report.

TRAINING SCHOOL STAFF

NIO STATISTICS BRANCH

THE ARMY

THE RUC

THE TRAINING SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE

JOYRIDING

SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

1.1 The theft or unauthorised taking of vehicles by juveniles for purposes of 'joyriding' poses obvious problems for the communities in which the offences originate and for those agencies subsequently coming into contact with the offender. Because of the present security situation in N Ireland, the offence has acquired attendant dangers for those involved, highlighted by the recent shooting incidents at vehicle check points in West Belfast. In attempting to describe the complexities of the problem it is important to distinguish between unsubstantiated information which can lead to inaccurate generalisation, and known fact. A necessary starting point therefore, is the evaluation of statistics currently available.

1.2 Recent Trends

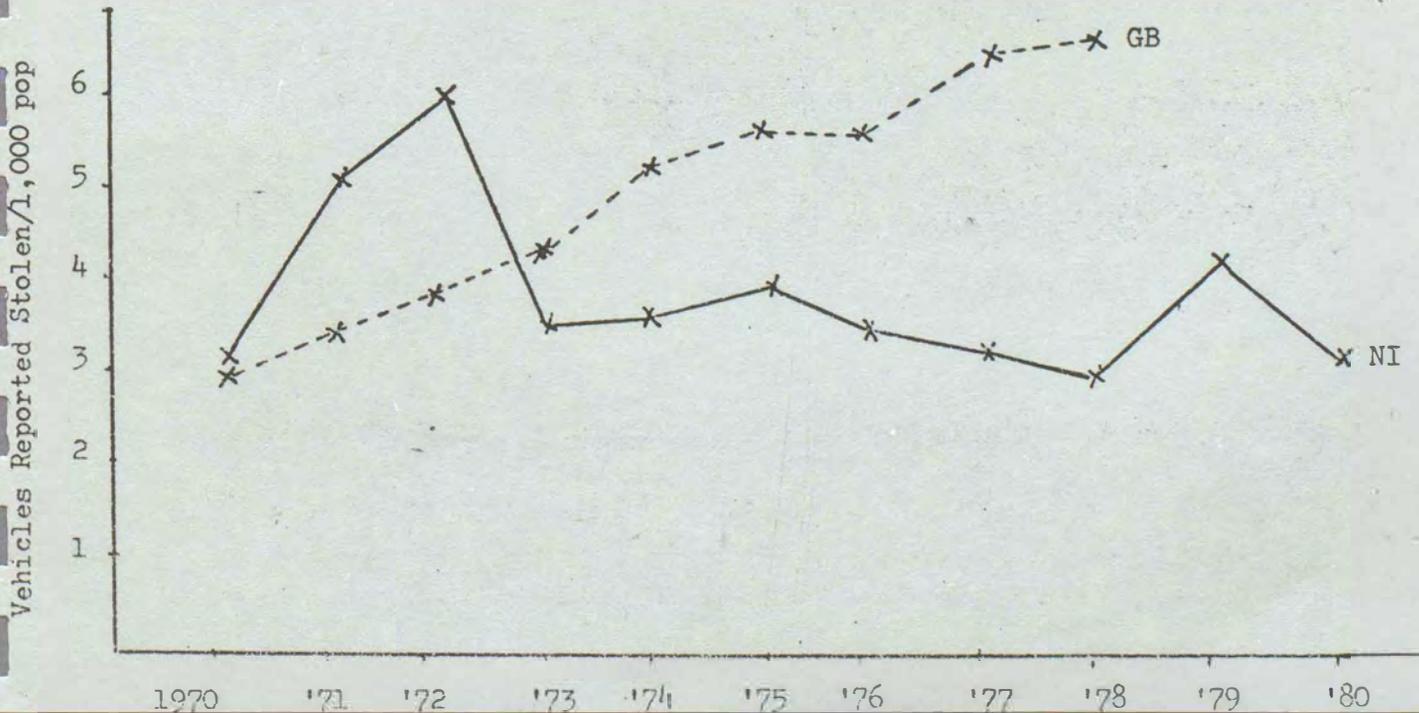
TABLE 1

VEHICLES REPORTED STOLEN

1970		'71		'72		'73		'74		'75		'76		'77		'78		'79		'80		
E&W	NI	E&W	NI	E&W	NI	E&W	NI	E&W	NI	E&W	NI	E&W	NI	E&W	NI	E&W	NI	BEL	NI	E&W	BEL	NI
3.3	3.0	5.2	3.4	6.3	3.8	3.6	4.0	3.7	5.1	4.1	5.4	3.5	5.4	3.3	6.3	3.2	6.5	14.3	4.3	-	11.3	3.3
0	148	8.0	167	9.7	184	5.5	196	5.7	251	6.3	265	5.4	265	5.0	310	4.9	317	5.1	6.6	-	4.0	5.1

Rate/1,000 population  
Thousands

Note: Figures for 1980 are projections based on information for the first four months and on knowledge of seasonal trends.



While it is impossible to determine the exact extent of involvement of juveniles in reported car theft, the experience of involved agencies indicates that a large proportion of incidents reported will involve individuals between the ages 14 and 17. Thus variation in reported incidence would be expected to be associated with corresponding variation in juvenile involvement.

- 1.3 Figures summarised in Table 1 reflect the development of the problem of vehicle theft in both GB and NI over the past 10 years. While the category of offence referred to does strictly speaking, include vehicles such as tractors and motorbikes the majority of the cases concern the theft of cars. It can be seen from the table that offence rates for N Ireland and GB were markedly similar in 1970. The problem did seem to increase abruptly in N Ireland during 1971 and 1972 - years which witnessed a sharp escalation in street violence reflected in the rise in the number of troubles-related incidents recorded by police during the period (Annex 2). It seems likely that increased incidence of hijacking and theft of vehicles for use on street barricades account for the increase in auto theft in N Ireland during 1971 and 1972.
- 1.4 A second more gradual escalation in the problems occurred between 1973 and 1975 when, government introduced legislation aimed at decreasing the vulnerability of unattended vehicles. It is likely that this legislation accounted for the subsequent improvement in the situation. More recently however the problem seems to have once again escalated with 1979 experiencing the highest incidence of vehicle theft since 1972.
- 1.5 Not surprisingly, figures for GB over the past 10 years show less variability. They do however indicate a consistent increase in the incidence of vehicle theft of the order of 114% between 1970 and 1978. In addition figures from Table 1 suggest that the overall problem in GB is on a larger scale than in NI.
- 1.6 'B' DIVISION  
It is generally felt that within NI the majority of the problem of juvenile car theft originates within Belfast and more specifically within 'B' Division the area consisting mostly of Andersonstown and the Lower Falls. Information currently available and summarised in part in Table 1 tend to substantiate this belief. Indeed in 1979 77% (5081) of all

vehicles stolen in NI were taken within the Greater Belfast area. In addition 34% (1717) of these were taken from within 'B' Division. Thus 27% of all vehicles stolen in NI in 1975 were taken from within 'B' Division. This figure does not fully describe the acuteness of the problem within this area. It is necessary to add to it, those vehicles which are stolen from outside but are recovered within the 'B' Division. Although figures are not available for 1979 the RUC have indicated that of the 554 vehicles so far recovered in 'B' Division in 1980 476 (86%) were taken from within the division. The remaining 14% were, according to the RUC, taken mostly from vulnerable peripheral areas such as Stockman's Lane and College Square.

#### 1.7 Seasonal Variations

Because of the likely association between visibility and vulnerability of vehicles, it would be expected that the problem might be more common in the darker Winter months.

Figures in Table 2 representing monthly variations in nos of vehicles stolen in NI tend to confirm this hypothesis. The incidence of vehicle theft thus seems to decrease towards the Summer months for both NI generally and 'B' Division specifically.

Table 2.

<u>Vehicles Reported Stolen</u>				
NI				
1979				1980
JAN-MAR	APR-JUN	JUL-SEPT	OCT-DEC	JAN-MAR
1863	1752	1391	1450	1493

---

<u>'B' DIVISION</u>			
1980			
<u>JAN</u>	<u>FEB</u>	<u>MAR</u>	<u>APR</u>
135	127	138	97

#### 1.8 Other Offences

Other sources of variation in juvenile involvement in car theft have been speculated by involved agencies. Specifically it has been argued that the attraction of particular offences among juveniles will vary in a cyclic manner - that one offence will gain popularity in an area, replace another and

in turn be superseded by the first. Implicit in this idea is the assumption that car theft and other forms of juvenile crime are not committed independently and may involve the same individuals. Figures in Table 3 examine this hypothesis. The figures relate to the number of car thefts and incidents of breaking and entering reported in each of 3 Belfast Police Stations - two in 'B' Division and one in 'C' Division.

Table 3 Incidents of Car Theft and Breaking and Entering

	Station 1		Station 2		Station 3	
					┌ 'B' Division ┐	
	Car Breaking Theft & Entering		Car Break Theft & Entering		Car Break Theft & Entering	
APRIL 78	39	82	21	21	-	-
APRIL 79	59	69	26	19	60	33
APRIL 80	42	164	14	17	30	61

From table 3 a pattern of association is clearly evident in each of the three stations. In April 1980, for example, station 3 reports a 100% decrease in car theft over the same period in the previous year, corresponding to a 100% increase in reports of breaking and entering. Thus the figures are consistent with a suggestion of a phased popularity of offences typically involving juveniles.

### 1.9 The Courts

Evidence from Table 4 suggests that while in GB there has been a gradual increase in the numbers of both juveniles and adults convicted for theft of vehicles, the same trend does not exist in NI. There is evidence for an increased involvement of juveniles in the offence in NI which again contrasts with the situation in GB. Finally it is evident from table 4 that there is a greater degree of juvenile involvement in vehicle theft in NI than in GB.

TABLE 4 PERSONS CONVICTED OF THEFT OR UNAUTHORISED TAKING OF VEHICLES

AGE	1976			1977			1978			1979		
	U17	17+	%JUV	U17	17+	%JUV	U17	17+	%JUV	U17	17+	%JUV
NI	208	543	28	253	613	29	264	187	35	213	520	29
GB	10,117	37,107	21	10,290	37,566	21	11,330	40,178	22	-	-	-

1.10 The Training Schools

Committal to Training School for motoring offences is largely a male phenomenon. In the years 1976-1979 only two girls received Training School Orders for motoring offences and consequently only the boys' schools are included in this analysis.

1.11 Table shows the relative frequency of committal to Training School for motoring offences in the years 1976-1979 for St Patricks and Rathgael.

	1976	1977	1978	1978
St Patricks	3/94	3/101	18/132	31/181
	3.2%	2.9%	13.6%	17.1%
Rathgael	4/148	12/157	10/138	13/168
	2.70%	7.6%	7.2%	7.7%

The table shows that whereas the proportion of boys committed for motoring offences has remained virtually constant in Rathgael. (as has the total number of committals) the reverse is the case in St Patricks. Not only has the number of committals risen consistently over the four year period but the proportion of that number committed for motoring offences has also increased from a relative insignificance in 1976-1977 to 17% in 1979.

1.12 An interesting pattern emerges when a comparison is made between the proportion of first committals for motoring offences and those who receive further TS Orders while in Training School. Consistently a significantly higher proportion of boys group are re-committed for motoring offences than is the case on first committal. A number of possible explanations might be cited to account for these observed differences. A subjective view from Senior staff in St Patricks school is that boys on home leave are now relatively more likely to engage in joy-riding offences while previously, if offences were

committed on leave they were more likely to be offences of burglary and theft.

Additionally it might be hypothesised that when a boy absconds from a Training School he becomes a readily identifiable suspect, particularly if a car theft is reported contemporaneously with the absconding. Thus it might be argued that detection rate in such cases might approach 100%. Alternatively, by definition, re-committals occur when a boy is slightly older than on his original committal and consequently, if there is a greater incidence of this behaviour with increasing age, this might well be a confounding factor.

St Patricks	First Committals	1976 1.4%	1977 2.3	1978 5.3	1979 11.4
	Re Committals	8.7%	7.1	24.6	20.8
Rathgael	First Comm	1.7	4.3	4.4	3.9
	Re-Comm	6.6	17.1	12.5	13.3

TABLE PROPORTION OF COMMITTALS AND RECOMMITTALS TO TRAINING SCHOOL ON MOTORING OFFENCES

### 1.13 Summary of Statistical Trends

- a) There is less vehicle theft in N Ireland than in GB where the problem has steadily escalated over the past 10 years. In N Ireland the problem has been particularly acute in 1979 and is largely a Belfast-based ('B' Division particularly) problem.
- b) The problem seems to be less acute in the Summer than in the Winter.
- c) Levels of car theft seem to be inversely related levels of breaking and entering - an offence which typically involves juveniles.
- d) There seems to be a greater amount of juvenile involvement in theft of vehicles in N Ireland than in GB. This trend has been increasing in recent years.
- e) A higher proportion of the offences of boys in a Catholic training school include auto theft than of the offences of boys in a Protestant training school.
- f) Offences involving theft of vehicles are more likely to be responsible for the re-committal than for the initial committal of boys to a training school.

## SECTION II SECURITY FORCES PERCEPTION OF THE PROBLEM

### Perception of the problem by the Army

- 2.1 The Army have logged twelve occasions during the past year on which firearms were employed at VCPs, nine of these in West Belfast. This does not represent the totality of incidents in which vehicles failed to stop at checkpoints and, while no firm figures are available, estimates are that as many as ten to twelve vehicles either go through or evade VCPs in West Belfast each week. In six incidents civilians were injured or killed and in five incidents Army personnel were injured.
- 2.2 Some of the problems presented to the Army are related to the actual nature of the VCP. The check-points are (i) set up quickly (ii) do not result in a complete blockade of the road (iii) only stop a sample of the total traffic and (iv) last for about ten minutes. The VCP therefore acts usually as a monitor of passing traffic at selected places for brief periods of time. An exception to this is when intelligence indicates that a terrorist incident is imminent or, alternatively, immediately after a terrorist incident when a more permanent road-block may be established.
- 2.3 The advantages of the usual VCP procedure are flexibility and unpredictability while causing minimum disruption to City traffic. They do, however, make the use of the cull-trap technique relatively difficult due to the continuous flow of traffic in both directions.
- 2.4 Soldiers are issued with explicit instructions relevant to 'check-point' incidents. In the case of a vehicle which attempts to evade a VCP by, for example, a three-point turn, the instructions are that full details of the vehicle should be taken and circulated to other patrols in the area who will attempt to locate the vehicle. When, however, Army personnel or vehicles are in danger as a result of an oncoming vehicle speeding through a VCP soldiers may open fire if the vehicle is being used as a lethal weapon. The actual reaction of the soldiers manning the VCP is likely to be influenced by their level of expectancy at the particular time and this in turn is influenced by such variables as the level of terrorist activity and intelligence reports of expected terrorist activity.

- 2.5 It is the impression of Army sources that the problem of joy-riding has increased sharply over the past five years. This, it is suggested, is a consequence of two factors. On the one hand as terrorist activity declines, car-stealing may act as a suitable substitute for an adolescent cohort of boys whose life is largely drab and uneventful. On the other hand, as the level of military activity on the ground has decreased young people have more opportunity to engage in criminal behaviour generally of which joy-riding is but an aspect.
- 2.6 There is little evidence that joy-riding has attracted the wrath of the local para-military organisations in the way that other criminal activity has. It is believed that a level of this activity might be in the interests of the terrorists who realise that it places the security forces in a position of confusion and hesitancy, ie. a very quick decision is called for as to whether it is a terrorist incident or something much less innocuous. This exemplifies the problem of dealing with normal crime in a terrorist environment.

Perception of the problem by the RUC

- 2.7 The perceptions of Senior Police Officers in 'B' and 'C' Division of the RUC and in the Juvenile Liaison Section were sought in relation to the problem. While the problem is obviously more significant in 'B' Division, car thefts are relatively common in other areas of the city. Some inter-divisional differences and similarities seemed to emerge. There was a general view that joy-riding and particular facets of joy-riding tended to go in and out of fashion in unpredictable ways. For example, active destruction of the vehicle was prevalent for a few months in the Divis Area but is less frequent now. There was also some tentative evidence of an inverse relationship between the incidence of joy-riding and the incidence of burglaries in a particular area. While 'B' Division saw the problem as largely an adolescent one the impression from 'C' Division was that juveniles were much less likely to be involved in the practice than adults. All police records checked showed that more vehicles were reported recovered within a sub-division than were reported stolen in the same sub-division. This apparent discrepancy could be explained in at least two ways. First it might reflect some ambivalence on the part of the public in terms of reporting incidents of car-theft although feeling amongst the RUC is that much more crime is reported, particularly in 'B' Division, than was the case four or five years ago. Secondly it probably reflects the fact that many vehicles are stolen outside Divisional boundaries and abandoned within the Division. This observation raises

a number of questions:-

- (a) is the rate of car-stealing related to the degree of police surveillance within a particular area?
- (b) does it suggest that motivation<sup>for</sup> stealing a car might be simply attributed to a desire to get from A to B rather than for bravado or thrill?
- (c) does it reflect a concern of the joy-riders not to alienate the local neighbourhood?

2.8 The actual mechanics of gaining access to motor vehicles is a relatively straightforward process. A variety of instruments are used varying in sophistication from a piece of wire to a kitchen fork stripped of its exterior prongs to a filed down key to, in some cases, proper keys which can be readily obtained from city shops. The incidence of very young children engaging in the practice is relatively small and consensus is that boys in the 14-17 year old group are the most frequent offenders.

2.9 Subsequent to a theft one of three outcomes usually result. First, the offenders may simply want to make a journey (eg home on a wet night when the last bus has gone) in which case the car is frequently abandoned without any damage. Second, the offenders may wish to provoke a chase with the RUC or the Army. This is effected by drawing the attention of an approaching patrol (by flicking on the lights) and accelerating away in the opposite direction. This creates a situation in which the Police and the joy-riders partake in a role-play situation in which, in attempting to apprehend the offenders, the Police may be inadvertently contributing to the excitement and entertainment of the incident for the joy-riders. The third outcome, which seems to have a cyclical pattern, is the deliberate destruction of the stolen vehicle either by crashing it into a convenient wall or by setting it alight (possibly to remove finger-prints). While this is not an infrequent practice it is certainly not the norm.

2.10 Senior police officers agree that over 90% of stolen vehicles are recovered intact within perhaps 48 hours of being stolen. Owners are invited to recover their own vehicles when located due to the risk to security forces of sniping or explosives. Army assistance can be called upon when suspicious are aroused. It is reported

that some motorists find themselves subjected to stone-throwing when retrieving their vehicles from the Divis Flats complex - a popular area for abandoning stolen vehicles.

- 2.11 From the young person's point of view the risk of detection for motoring offences tends to be relatively low at around 10%. This is much lower than the 17% detection rates for Burglary Offences. A survey of young people committed to Training School for stealing cars indicated a wide range in the number of thefts admitted or proven - from 3 offences to 120 with the modal number at approximately 40.
- 2.12 Police recording procedures can sometimes cause quite dramatic changes in criminal statistics which are not necessarily a reflection of an actual change in patterns of offending. Up until the end of 1978 it was police practice to record as a crime only those incidents of unauthorised taking in which vehicles were missing for more than 30 days. The sharp increase in statistics related to unauthorised taking in 1979 reflects a change in recording procedure by which incidents of unauthorised taking are recorded immediately as crimes.
- 2.13 A particular frustration for the RUC is the apparent lack of concern of parents whose children have been charged with motoring offences. In the words of one senior officer "parents seem to think that it is someone else's problem".

### SECTION III

#### 3. A model experiment in the treatment of Motoring Offenders.

3.1 The Ilderton Motor Project was established in Lewisham in 1974 as a response to the inefficacy of traditional case-work methods and residential treatment programmes with young autocrime offenders. The project which became a recognised IT facility in 1977 is managed by a committee drawn from Probation, Social Services, the Metropolitan Police and local Voluntary Associates Group. It has a full-time Project Leader and Assistant who are employed by the Probation Service but this apart it is not identified with any particular organisation or group.

3.2 Premises sufficiently extensive to take five cars were provided by Lewisham Borough Council and damaged cars are provided by the Transport Branch of Metropolitan Police. Relatively sophisticated equipment has been provided by Probation and the aim is to give juveniles, both offenders and non-offenders an opportunity to restore and repair damaged motorcars and to create an informal counselling situation where attitudes and relationships can be explored and discussed.

3.3 The Centre is open in the evenings five days per week and referrals are accepted from Probation, Social Workers and, increasingly, from the Juvenile Bureau. Enrolment is on a contractual basis where the offender understands that his continuing attendance depends on his good behaviour inside and outside the Centre. Length of membership is open. It is estimated that out of some 140 offenders who have attended the Centre, further conviction rates for offences involving cars has varied between 18% and 23% over the last three years.

3.4 In parallel with the educational aspects of the Project a further feature is the participation in 'demolition derby racing' in which the boys having spent weeks preparing their vehicle compete on a special track with other similar 'bangers' in a drive to the death exercise in which the old cars end up in an unrecognisable heap of wreckage. The derby lasts an average of 10 minutes.

### SECTION IV

4. (i) This paper has identified a number of trends in auto-crime in Northern Ireland in general and in West Belfast in particular. It has also

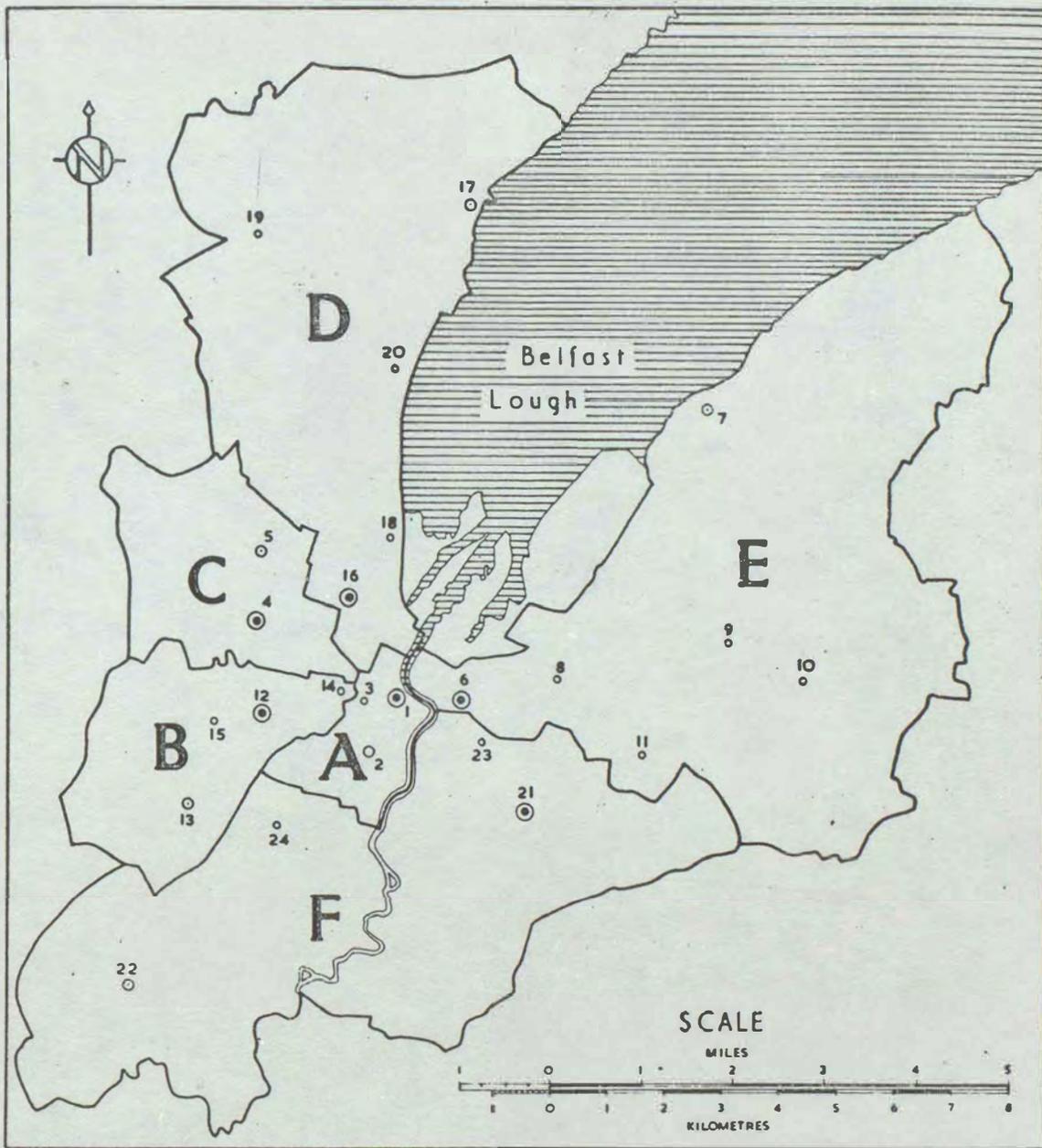
attempted to describe aspects of the problem as identified by the Security Forces and finally it has briefly described a strategy designed to combat the problem in a London borough. Based on these differing perspectives of the problem a number of questions suggest themselves.

- (ii) (a) has the situation with regard to joy-riding changed dramatically over the past five years?
- (b) what is role of recent publicity and possibly of "new initiatives" in drawing attention to and possibly accentuating the problem?
- (c) has the input of recreational facilities been appropriate to the needs of the area?
- (d) is it possible to consider the problem in isolation from socio-economic conditions prevalent in the area?
- (e) what have the agencies represented in the seminar to offer in providing at least partial solutions to the problem?
- (f) what are the barriers to inter-agency co-operation?
- (g) how can these problems be overcome?
- (h) we are aware of a Project being developed in West Belfast on the Ilderton model; what are the potential benefits and hazards of such a scheme?

E JARDINE  
DR G MULLIGAN  
Social Research Division  
Central Economic Service  
STORMONT

ANNEX 1

DISTRICT AND DIVISIONAL REPORTS  
PART II  
THE GREATER BELFAST POLICE AREA



DIVISIONAL HEADQUARTERS      ⊙  
SUB-DIVISIONAL HEADQUARTERS      ○  
ALL OTHER POLICE STATIONS      ○

ANNEX 2

Troubles - Related Incidents Recorded by RUC for Northern Ireland

1969	'70	'71	'72	'73	'74	'75	'76	'77	'78
8	383	3,271	12,481	6,538	4,589	2,496	3,339	2,774	1,503