

The rise of Wild-Wild-West style robberies of convenience stores for tobacco in New Zealand 2009-2018: Analysis of news reports.

INTRODUCTION

Taxing tobacco is said to be the most effective tool for reducing smoking but unintended negative effects exist.

Combined with minimum pack size (20 sticks/30gms loose tobacco), reduced kilograms smokers can grow for own use (5kg a year), or buy duty free (50 sticks/50gm), tobacco in New Zealand (NZ) (popn 4.8m), which has been likened to “gold”, is now the highest priced relative to income globally (\$35.90/pkt of 20; \$US22.40).

Cross border smuggling of cigarettes, common on other continents, is not as easy to execute due to NZ’s significant geographic distance from other countries and thorough border control service.

One harmful consequence was a sudden upsurge in robberies, often aggravated, of convenience stores and petrol stations for tobacco.

AIM

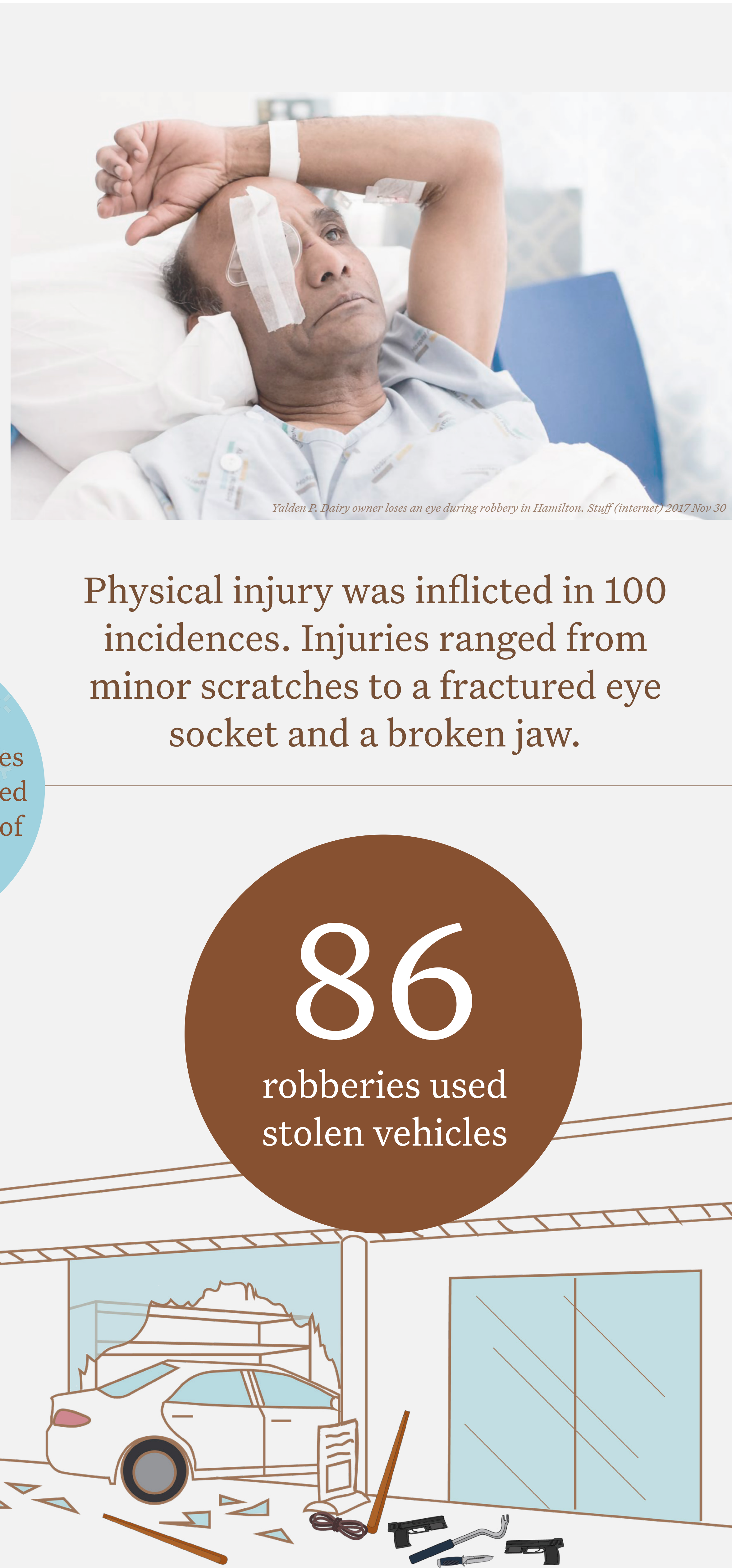
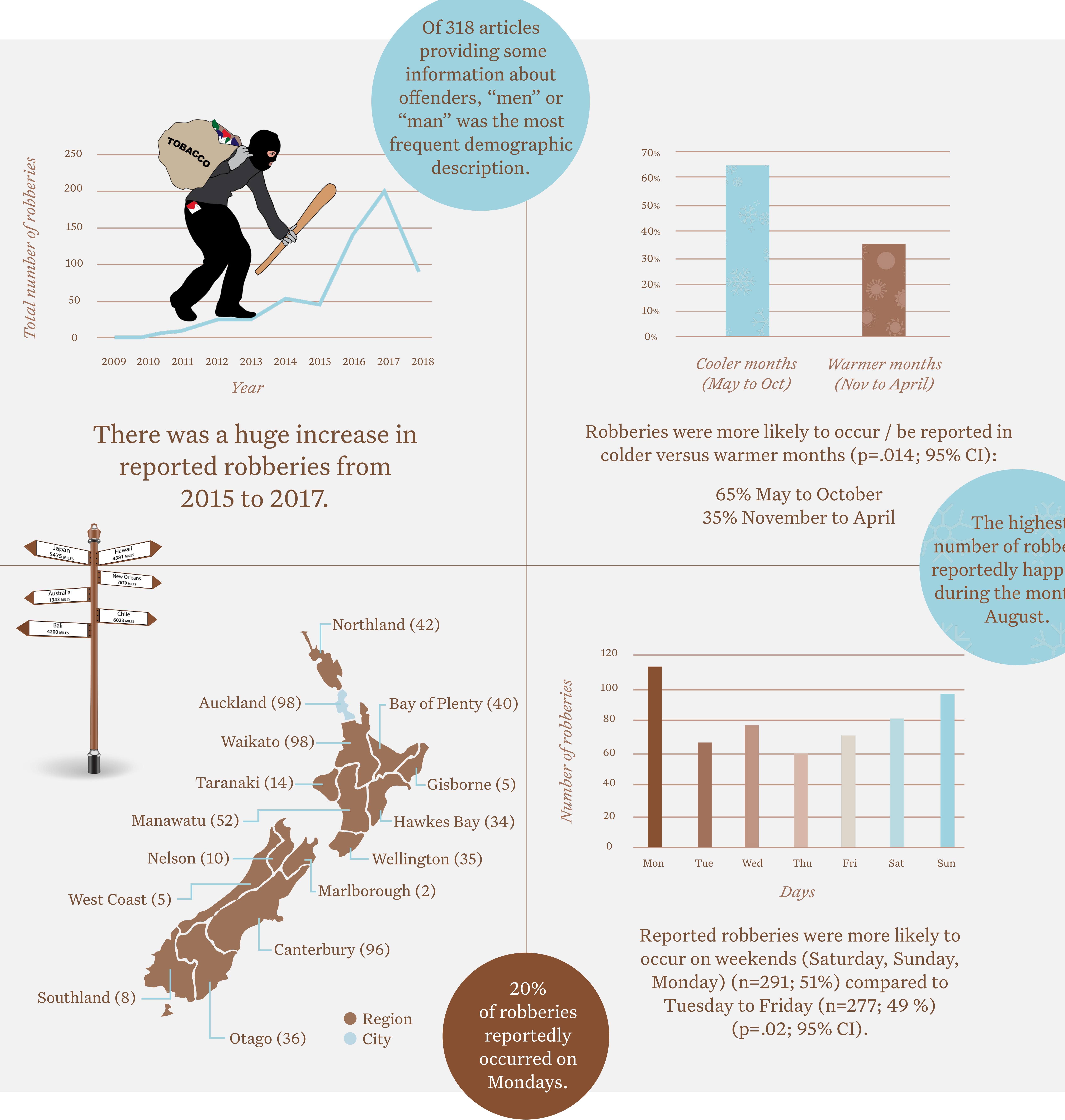
This study aimed to explore the prevalence of robberies of retail stores for tobacco over the 2009-2018 years.

METHODS

Online retrospective searches for news reports of robberies in NZ were conducted in 2017 and 2019. To identify as many reports as possible an exhaustive search was performed using search engines Google and Bing, plus searches of major news outlet websites, online police department and national library archives. The searches were repeated mid-2019 by an independent research assistant and all entries in the created database (which will be published) were checked.

Data on type of store, targeted items, place, week day and month of robbery, damage sustained, and characteristics of offenders were extracted to perform simple statistical analysis for this poster.

RESULTS



DISCUSSION

A huge increase in robberies for tobacco during 2016 and 2017 is indicated. On January 1, 2016 the excise duty per cigarette reached almost .67 cents (US .42c) and a year later it jumped to almost .74 cents (US .46c). Increased security measures, such as, the installation of sirens and fog machines, secure cigarette packet dispensing machines and the imprisonment of many offenders has likely contributed to the reduction in robberies after 2017.

A major limitation of this study is the reliance on media reports. A late-2017 news story said police had recorded almost 500 cigarette robberies in just 13 months. There could have been higher numbers of robberies in the past but link rot (url loss when websites are deleted or changed) could have caused older stories to disappear. Media fatigue could account for lowered reporting of robberies in 2018.

There is a dearth of research on tobacco robberies to enable across country comparison. Store robberies for tobacco in NZ could be occurring at a higher rate due to our geographical distance from neighbouring countries reducing access to smuggled illicit tobacco.

CONCLUSIONS

The most common type of store hit - dairies, historically were pivotal cultural spaces of community connection. The tobacco robberies threaten that culture. Aggravated robberies at a local level have numerous negative impacts for communities. The injuries sustained were also preventable.

The harm to communities, businesses and their staff, and the public, caused by robberies for tobacco needs to be considered when assessing the costs versus benefits of ever-increasing the tobacco tax.

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