

CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW

Published Quarterly by the Office of the Attorney General—
State of California

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Vol. 5 April 1978 No. 3

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The CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW is a professional forum for the Criminal Justice System in California designed to provide discussion of varied concepts and issues of crime prevention and useful resources for the practitioner in the field.

The Attorney General's office does not necessarily endorse opinions set forth in signed contributions or the listed training programs and resources.

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The Vehicle Theft Crime

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Dr. Chilimidos is an assistant professor in the Department of Criminal Justice, California State University at Sacramento. Among other courses, he teaches Vehicle Theft Investigation at the college level, and it has received strong attention from law enforcement personnel. He has also presented vehicle theft investigation training in Alaska, Colorado, and Washington.

Dr. Chilimidos received his AA degree from the Sacramento City College, BA in Criminal Justice, BVE in Education, MA in Criminal Justice from the California State University at Sacramento, and his Doctorate in Criminal Justice Education from the Western Colorado University.

There is no doubt that vehicle theft today, as it was in past years, is a big business which has all the potential of prosperous growth in years to come. The vehicle thief can make the theft of motor vehicles return him large profits. It is a costly crime, not only to the owners of motor vehicles, but for the police as well, which in turn affects all members of a community. The process of enforcing vehicle theft crimes requires a tremendous amount of time.

The vehicle thief is quite often responsible for other crimes as well. In many cases the stolen vehicle may be an untraceable means of transportation for the commission of any number of other crimes. The motor vehicle affords the criminal the means with which to evade arrest. Within a matter of a few hours he can be out of town, into another state, across the nation or into another country. Because the criminal has little regard for city limits, county lines or state borders, the vehicle theft problem must not be considered only as a local problem. Almost half of the stolen vehicles that are recovered are recovered in jurisdictions other than the one reporting the theft.

Certainly all crimes present problems to the police. Some crimes, however, present problems much more complex than others. The fact that vehicles are reported stolen at the rate of about one every half minute indicates that vehicle theft is one of the larger and more complex crime problems facing law enforcement at all levels of government today.

The problem of vehicle theft is not as old as many other police problems. As we look back in history, the major mode of transportation was the horse. There was a time when horse thieves were not looked upon with much

favor. When one was caught he was either hung from the nearest tree or shot on the spot. This was a quick solution to what was then a serious problem.

The introduction of the automobile as an improved means of transportation during the late 1800s and early 1900s also brought about an additional police problem. In addition to horse stealing, crooks now had another item to steal. They quickly found that stealing the horseless buggy was easy and profitable. If the automobile could be driven out of town, and this was somewhat risky since roads were poor and breakdowns frequent, the thief had but to change license plates and the vehicle was his.

The exact period marking the beginning of vehicle thefts is not known. However, there are three important events that took place which allow one to believe it was soon after the automobile first appeared in America.

In 1908 automobile theft insurance was introduced. By 1912 several insurance companies, realizing the vehicle theft problem was becoming quite costly and a crime few local law enforcement agencies were able to cope with, decided to combine their efforts and help combat this problem.

It was during the year 1912 that the National Automobile Theft Bureau was created. This private group, better known as the N.A.T.B., was financed by member insurance companies who write vehicle theft and fire insurance. The N.A.T.B. has offices strategically located in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Their agents are among the most highly skilled in their field and are often called upon to assist law enforcement agencies with vehicle theft investigations.

Probably the most significant event occurred in 1919. Although the horseless buggy started out as a rare form of transportation for Americans, it quickly took hold and became a necessary form of conveyance. Some people found that it was easy to use, and often without the knowledge or permission of the owner. The criminal learned quickly that he could now travel from one part of the United States to another and even into Canada and Mexico with relative ease.

Recognizing that local law enforcement agencies were unable to cope with the transportation of stolen vehicles from one state to another, legislation was introduced by Congressman Leonidas Carstarphen Dyer (Missouri 1915-1933) for enactment of a federal statute which would provide for federal authorities to investigate this crime. On October 29, 1919, House of Representatives Bill number 9203 passed in the sixty-sixth session of Congress to become the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act, better known as the Dyer Act.¹

Thus by 1920, local police and the few states that had established state police forces were provided assistance not only by the insurance industry but by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well in their efforts to curb the rising vehicle theft problem.

The combined efforts of these organizations were not to result in any great reduction in vehicle theft crimes. By 1945, Americans had reached a point where thieves were stealing 241,491 vehicles during that year alone.² In an effort to develop some understanding of the magnitude of the vehicle

¹ Title 18 United States Code section 2312.

² J. Edgar Hoover, *Uniform Crime Reports*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1946, Volume XVIII, number 2, pg 77.

theft problem, statistical data illustrates the alarming rise of this crime through the years. The illustration on page 27 shows this growth from 1945 through 1976.

Although the years during World War II were to reduce the number of vehicles produced for the general public, and with restricted availability of tires and gasoline, vehicle thefts were occurring with some degree of regularity. The rise that had occurred to 1941 declined in 1942. Thereafter thefts began to climb and this trend continued through 1945.

In 1946, with automobiles being produced in greater quantities and with gasoline and tire rationing discontinued, vehicle thefts again declined. As depicted in the illustration on page 27, the number of vehicles reported stolen during the years grew to an all time high of 1,000,500 in 1975 was recorded.

Except for a slight decline in 1954, the rise from 1949 through 1971 was constant. Then in 1972 some reduction was experienced. Vigorous growth continued from 1973 through 1975 with a decline again in 1976. Whether this decline continues, one can only speculate.

Examination of additional statistics allows one to study other crimes in order to draw some comparison between these and vehicle theft. The following chart illustrates the number of the major crimes reported by the police:

	<i>Murder</i>	<i>Rape</i>	<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Assault</i>	<i>Burglary</i>	<i>Larceny</i>
1963 ¹	8,500	16,400	100,160	147,800	975,900	611,400
1970 ²	15,810	37,270	348,380	329,940	2,169,300	1,746,100
1976 ³	18,780	56,730	420,210	490,850	3,089,800	6,270,800

There is no doubt that vehicle theft crimes require a considerable amount of police attention as can be seen by comparing the frequency of vehicle thefts with that of the other major crimes.

Frequency of crime occurrence is but one means of measuring a problem. Another impressive means is to ascertain the cost of the crime. Vehicle thefts are one of the costliest crimes, if not the costliest crime, from which the public suffers. In order to make a comparative analysis of the crime of vehicle theft with other crimes against property, including the crime of robbery owing to the fact that the target of most robberies is money, the following chart was prepared:

	<i>Auto Theft</i>	<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Burglary</i>	<i>Larceny</i>
1950 ⁴	\$886	\$248	\$127	\$58
1960 ⁵	\$830	\$256	\$183	\$74
1970 ⁶	\$948	\$235	\$310	\$106
1975 ⁷	\$1,457	\$331	\$422	\$166
1976 ¹⁰	\$1,741	\$338	\$449	\$184

¹ *Uniform Crime Reports*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1963.

² *Ibid*, 1970.

³ *Ibid*, 1976.

⁴ *Ibid*, 1950.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1960.

⁶ *Ibid*, 1970.

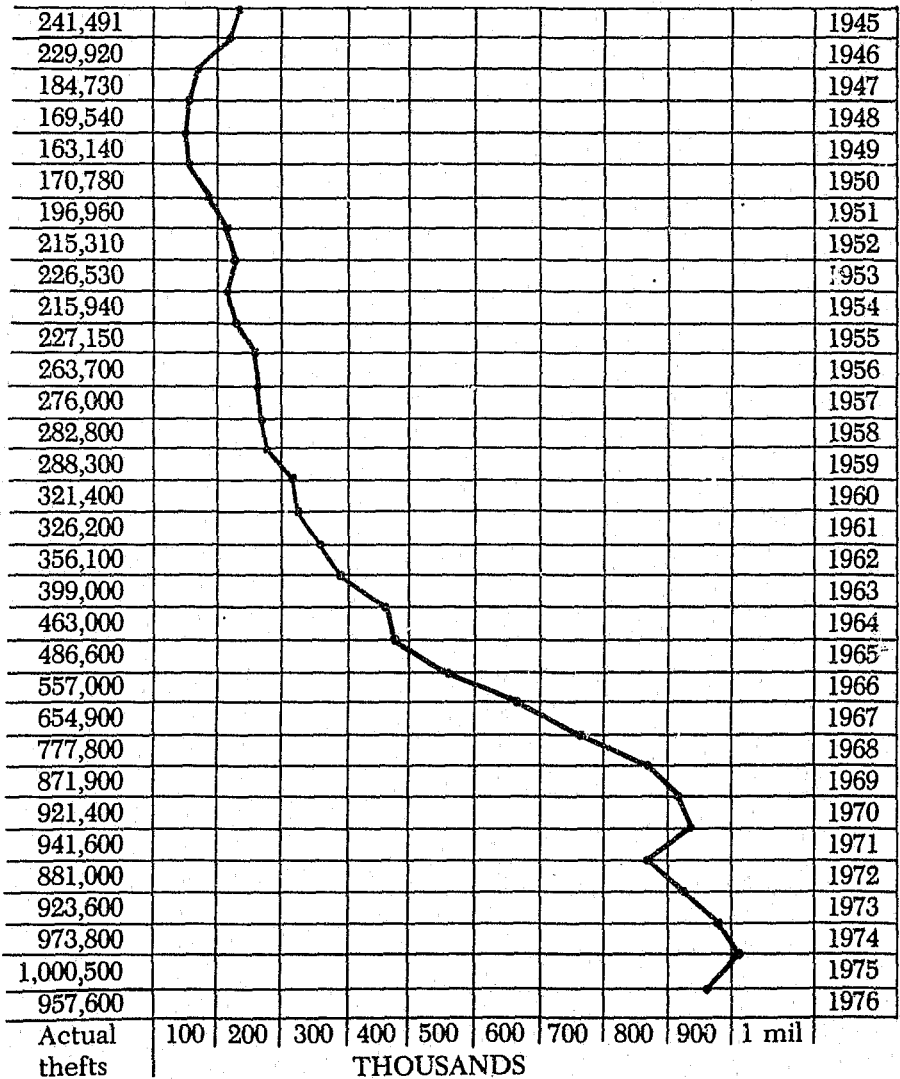
⁷ *Ibid*, 1975.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 1976.

THE VEHICLE THEFT CRIME

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Number of Auto Thefts in the U.S.
1945 to 1976



It is quite apparent that the monetary loss through all crimes reflects a staggering amount when one considers that a total of approximately 155 million dollars was lost by the crime of robbery, 500 million dollars by larceny, 1.4 billion dollars by burglary, and 1.7 billion dollars through vehicle thefts during 1976. Additionally, there is the need to establish the cost of countless manhours spent by law enforcement officers conducting investigations, preparing reports, recovering stolen vehicles and components, apprehending thieves, returning property to rightful owners, and prosecuting suspects in court. Beyond this, there are the astronomical increases in insurance premiums vehicle owners must pay.

Unfortunately, many people have the misconceived notion that once a vehicle is stolen and the police alerted, its recovery will be made in a short time. Nationally we boast a recovery rate of approximately 85 percent. California, which has one of the highest theft rates, reflects a recovery rate of approximately 90 percent. Impressive, yes. Realistic, no. Not all vehicles recovered are returned to their owners in the condition in which they were stolen. The 85 to 90 percent recovery rate is an impressive figure to many who may rely on statistical information, but who overlook the true picture—the actual loss suffered by these victims. A vehicle may have been cleared as recovered, but the recovered vehicle may vary from being a complete vehicle to one completely stripped where recovery value is almost worthless.

The 10 to 15 percent of the vehicles unaccounted for have been disposed of by perhaps one of four methods. First, the vehicle may have never existed. It was a design to defraud an insurance company. Second, some vehicle thieves look for seemingly abandoned vehicles, ones that have been parked or not used for some length of time, which they tow to a scrap metal firm where the vehicle is sold for scrap metal. Third, there are those who steal vehicles in the United States and take them to foreign countries where they are either sold or traded for narcotics. And fourth, many stolen vehicles have been altered from their original identity by undergoing a vehicle identification number change and a repaint job. Such vehicles are then ready to be sold to unsuspecting innocent purchasers with fictitious ownership titles.

One of the paramount projects of the Vehicle Theft Unit of the California Highway Patrol is to locate stolen vehicles which have had their true identity altered. These vehicles must be properly identified so they may be returned to their rightful owners.

During 1976, California had 15,325,000 ¹¹ registered vehicles of which 135,768 ¹², or 371 per day, were reported stolen.

Through the combined efforts of California law enforcement agencies, 117,221, ¹³ or some 322 vehicles per day, were recovered. Some of these were recovered in the same condition as when they were stolen while others were not. This means that approximately 18,547 vehicles were not recovered. If

¹¹ Figure from the California Department of Motor Vehicles.

¹² Figure from the Department of California Highway Patrol.

¹³ *Ibid.*

one takes the average loss figure of \$1,741 per vehicle, the unrecovered vehicles represent a minimum loss of over 32 million dollars.

Next to a home, a vehicle is probably the most expensive investment one normally makes. Many homes come with garages, yet vehicles are left on the streets. Vehicles come equipped with ignition locks, however what value do these locks have when the key is left in it. Both circumstances invite the theft of the vehicle. Parking the vehicle in the garage and locking it and pocketing the key are two of the simplest means of protecting a very expensive piece of property, yet are the most often disregarded.

Automobile manufacturers began installing steering lock devices on many 1970 and newer models as a means of providing the motoring public a simple anti-theft device. Many vehicles of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were similarly equipped and prompted, no doubt, by the high frequency of motor vehicle thefts.

Vehicle manufacturers can design products to help prevent thefts, and law enforcement can make every effort to reduce or prevent the incidence of vehicle thefts, but without the awareness and cooperation of vehicle owners and the general public, these efforts have little value. Are there then safeguards the consumer may apply? Yes, there are.

First, in an effort to avoid the purchase of a stolen vehicle, prospective buyers should know the person with whom they are dealing and where they may be located should this become necessary at a later date. Purchase of most items from private persons is done with the warning "buyer beware." Motor vehicle dealers, licensed by the State of California Department of Motor Vehicles, must be bonded to provide some protection to the purchaser in the event ownership title should become defective. There is no such protection from a private party. No matter how much good faith the buyer exercises when purchasing a vehicle, if the vehicle later turns out to be stolen, it will be returned to the rightful owner. Thus, knowing the seller is a must.

Those who advertise vehicles for sale must be cautious of prospective buyers who appear during hours when banks are closed and who want to pay for the vehicle by check. Worthless checks are just that—worthless. It is best to have the person return for the transaction at a time when a visit to the bank can be made, rather than to try to get the vehicle back later. Such efforts may require legal action.

Much emphasis is placed on protection of the consumer and probably with just cause. However, in all fairness to the merchant, he must also beware that he does not fall victim to a fraud scheme himself. One such act that the vehicle dealer should guard against is the theft of a vehicle that he has taken in as a trade or through purchase from a private party. Some unscrupulous persons have sold vehicles to dealers giving them both title and keys to such vehicles. However, with an extra set of keys, a vehicle can be taken back when the dealer is closed. Then with a duplicate ownership title, the vehicle can be resold to someone else.

Knowing the whereabouts of the vehicle is also a must for owners. This is often a problem with elderly persons, military personnel, and others who, because of circumstances, do not use their vehicle regularly. Thus if a vehicle is stolen, much time elapses until its loss is discovered and reported

to the police. One of the greatest advantages a thief has is time.

In order to curb the high incidence of vehicle theft, and other crimes as well, a concentrated effort on the part of law enforcement, the courts and the public is necessary. Public support of the criminal justice system is necessary if it is to be effective, while the criminal justice system must be supportive of the public's efforts to reduce crime.

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