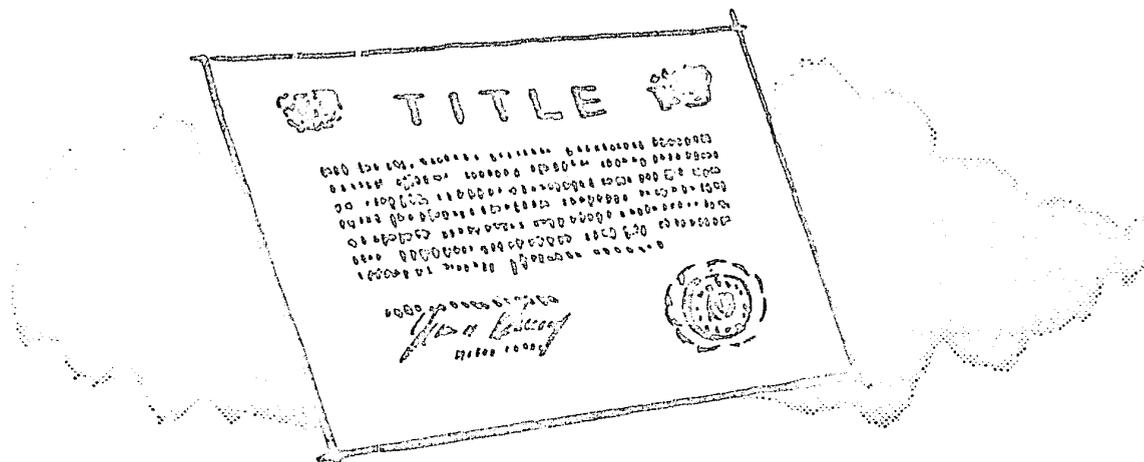


"Professional auto theft rings, composed of 'specialists' from various fields of automotive endeavor, could be called 'organized business' since their reason for existence is to make money."



"The amazing ease with which rings acquire stolen cars often reflects the carelessness of automobile owners."

Auto Theft Rings

"But officer, I just don't understand. I have the bill of sale for the car and all the other necessary papers. I paid hard-earned money for that car; you must be mistaken."

How many times have law enforcement officers heard this same pathetic story from an innocent victim who has purchased a used car only to learn later that it is a stolen car?

Auto theft statistics from the Uniform Crime Reports (1969) show that the war against auto theft during the

period 1960-69 was a losing battle. The number of auto thefts increased 168 percent in that period, with stolen cars snowballing from 325,700 in 1960 to 871,900 in 1969. The percentage increase in auto theft was four times greater than that of car registrations during this period. During 1970, the FBI investigated more than 100 major automobile theft rings, to say nothing of the thousands of autos stolen and transported interstate by thieves on their own.

In 1960 cars were stolen at the rate of one every 2 minutes, whereas the 1969 rate accelerated to one every 36 seconds. The rate of theft per 100,000

population increased 138 percent over this same period, from 182 to 432 thefts per 100,000 persons.

Although law enforcement agencies recovered 81 percent of all autos stolen in 1969—50 percent were recovered within 48 hours of the theft—the unrecovered 16 percent represented a \$140 million loss to the public. This loss can be attributed to several causes, a major one being the professional auto theft ring.

Professional auto theft rings, composed of "specialists" from various fields of automotive endeavor, could be called "organized business" since their reason for existence is to make

money. While car rings' illegal work usually follows the basic pattern shown in figure 1—the theft of a car, the deliberate and skillful alteration of the car's identifying characteristics, and the resale to the innocent victim—many different modes of operation are used to complete the basic pattern and consistently and successfully cheat the public.

The amazing ease with which rings acquire stolen cars often reflects the carelessness of automobile owners.

In the past, many professional rings have had such large-scale operations that they hired amateur thieves to steal cars, for which they paid \$25 to \$50 per car. A rank amateur has little difficulty in locating an automobile which he can start and drive away.

If a car thief is unable to find an unattended car on the street with the key still in the ignition, he can walk onto almost any parking lot, get into a car, and simply drive away. Amateur thieves supplying cars to a southern ring several years ago stole only those unlocked cars parked on hills or inclines. They would enter the car, place the transmission in neutral, and quietly coast the car off the hill. Some distance from the theft scene, the car was "hot-wired" and driven away.

Methods Used to Steal

Certain rings have employed their own professional thieves and methods to acquire cars. Members of one east coast ring posed as prospective buyers, approached car dealers, and requested to "test-drive" new cars. Their actual objective was to acquire the ignition key serial number so that they might later have a key made and steal the car at their convenience.

Some rings are very selective in stealing cars. One ring searched one area for the model of car it needed, secured that car's license plate number, and contacted the State motor

vehicle licensing bureau to determine the car's owner. Calling the owner and expressing an interest in purchasing a new car like his, the ring was able to obtain the name of the dealer from whom the car was purchased. Posing as the actual owner of the car, a ring member called the dealer, stated that he had lost his keys, and requested to be given the key identification number so he might have a new one made. Then, it was just a matter of waiting for the opportune moment to make the theft.

Bolder thieves employ the direct approach or "drive-off" method in stealing cars. Posing as a customer, the thief approaches either a car dealership or a private citizen who has placed a "for sale" ad in the newspaper. Requesting to either test-drive the car or show it to his wife, the thief drives the car away and never returns. At times, the thief might make

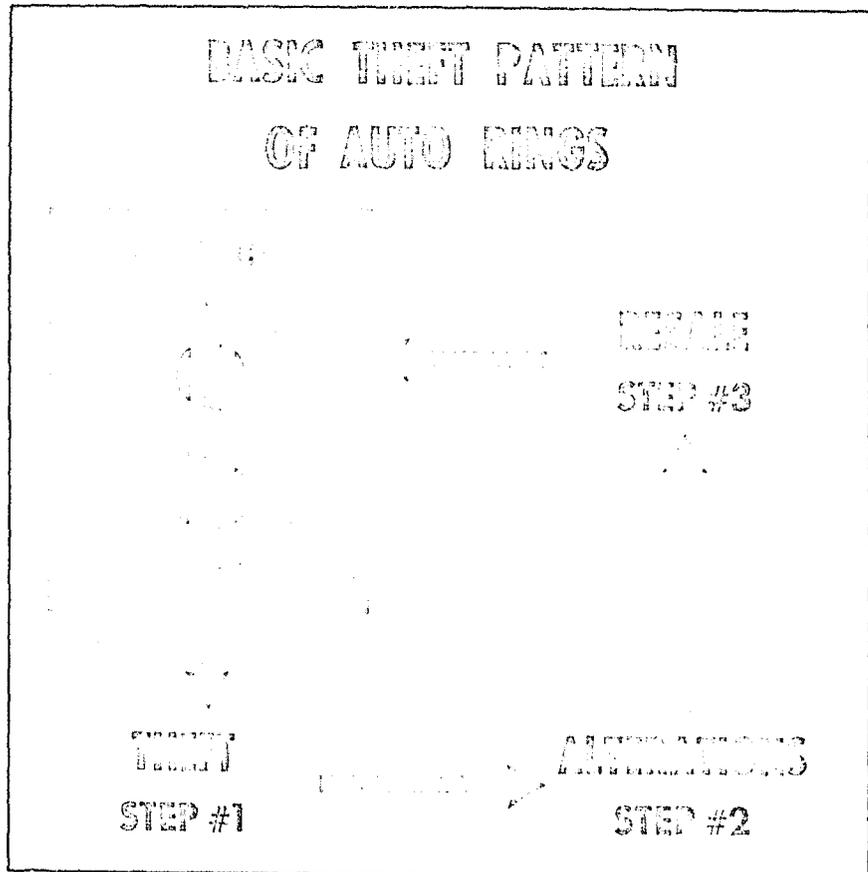
a small downpayment or issue a worthless downpayment check. A similar technique is used when thieves "rent" cars from car rental agencies.

The second step of the professional ring's basic pattern of operation—changing the car's identification numbers and forging its documentation—is the most important since it facilitates the quick and easy resale of the stolen car.

Vital to the second step is a hidden location where the necessary alterations can be made. Such locations may range from garages of suburban homes to the service and repair departments of large metropolitan car dealers. For this work, all rings have members who are specially skilled in such trades as paint and body work, motor mechanics, forgery, and vehicle number alterations.

The alterations are usually divided into four segments: document forgery,

Figure 1.



Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) changes, license plate replacement, and body work. One or all may be used to prepare the car for sale.

A small number of States, often called "non-title" States, have title laws which require little or no proof of ownership when applying for license tags or registering a car. Consequently, a thief may walk into a motor vehicle bureau in several of these States and register and obtain a license for a car that is not legally his nor even in his possession at the moment.

Another simple way for an auto theft ring to obtain a title paper is to purchase a late-model wrecked car from a salvage yard. After stealing a car identical to the wrecked one, the ring can alter the VIN and color of the stolen car to match the title on the wrecked car.

While most rings employ number altering, each ring has its own method

of alteration. For example, one prominent ring almost always stamped extra numbers between the original digits before it changed the VIN. This was done in an attempt to prevent restoration of the original number through a heat treatment process.

Changing the VIN

Other methods of vehicle number changing are used or attempted. For instance, one accomplished number changer from an eastern ring stamped new numbers directly over old ones, always stamping the new numbers deeper than the old. When the old numbers were ground off, acid was used to make the remaining new numbers take the appearance of the old ones.

Vehicle identification number changes take many forms. One of the easiest ways for a ring to obtain a new number is to either purchase a wrecked

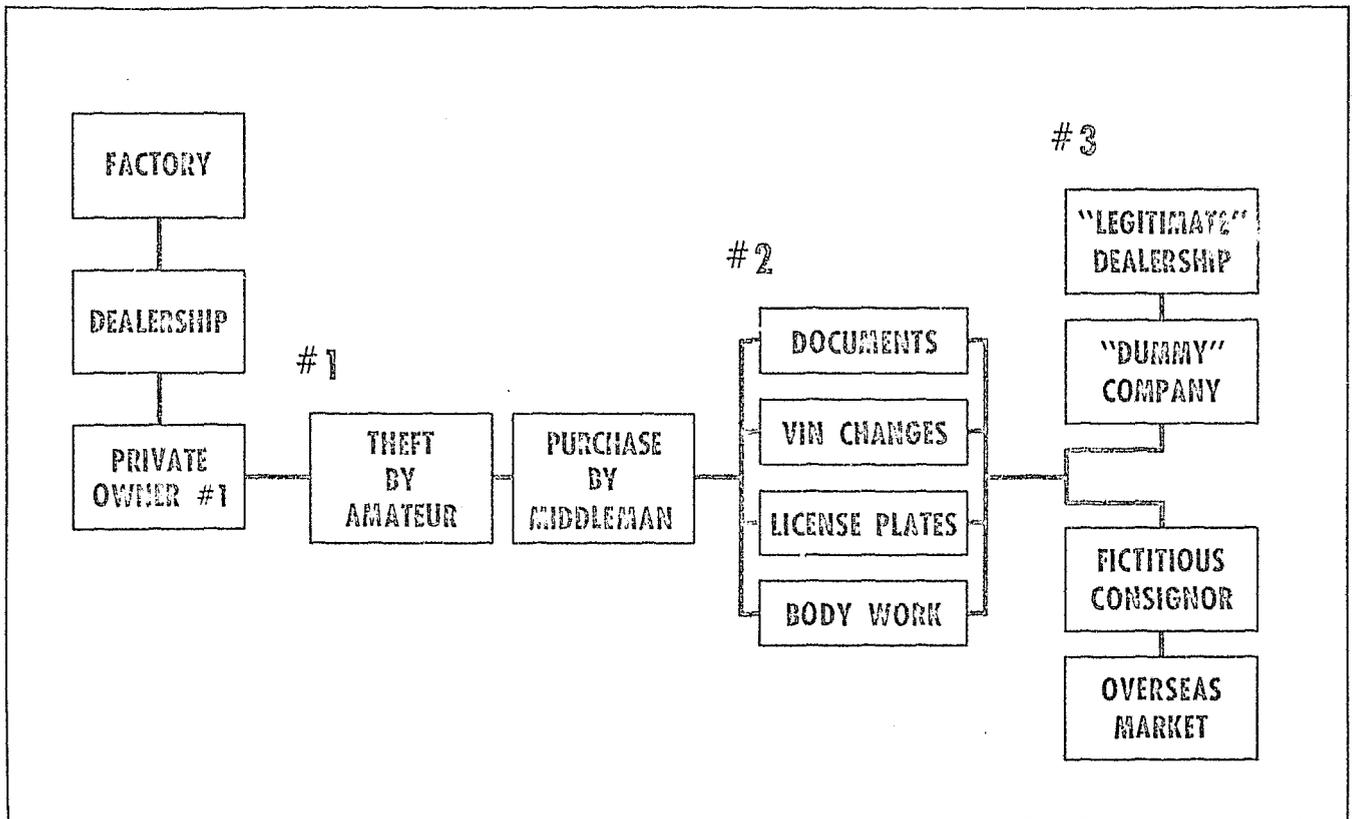
car or steal a number plate from a car on the street. Many car owners never pay any attention to the number plate and, therefore, would never know it was missing.

Some rings have obtained blank number plates which they easily number with a stamping machine. And, of course, other rings alter a car's true number with a stamping machine.

License plates are easily taken from other cars for use on stolen vehicles. Some thieves and rings take a registration obtained from a "non-title" State and with it "legitimately" obtain a license plate from another State. Then another common means is to cut two different license plates in half, switch the halves, and solder them together to obtain two plates with different numbers.

Although every car ring does not employ all of the above-mentioned methods of alteration to make the stolen car easily resalable, most rings

Figure 2.



come up with a finished product that looks legitimate to the casual observer.

Reselling stolen cars--the third step in the pattern--usually is as easy as acquiring them, since, in effect, the same unsuspecting public from whom the cars were stolen becomes the buying victim.

In general, the professional car ring will not quibble at length over the resale price of a stolen vehicle. The ring endeavors to work on a "volume" basis, and therefore it may sell a late-model car for as little as one-half its actual value. An auto theft ring with a large overseas operation in the Scandinavian countries sold stolen late-model American cars for as little as one-fifth of their actual value and almost destroyed the legitimate car market in those countries before moving on.

Getting Rid of "Hot" Cars

Many rings use the auction block as a quick means of getting rid of "hot" cars with a minimum of effort. Some advertise their cars in newspapers. Still others have approached car dealers stating that they must quickly sell their car because they are leaving on a "trip." Of course, these thieves never use their true identities.

A few rings establish "legitimate dealerships" from which they sell their stolen cars. Usually accompanying these dealerships are "dummy" companies from which the dealer purportedly buys the stolen car. When an investigation occurs, the "legitimate" dealer brings forth a bill of sale and states that he "believed" he was making a legal purchase. He will deny any knowledge of the dummy company and its illegal activities.

The complexity and diversity of the professional auto theft ring--the traits that hamper investigation of the ring--can readily be seen when all three steps of the basic pattern are

Missouri authorities recovered this altered license plate during a recent auto theft ring investigation. The plate had been constructed by cutting two ordinary plates and soldering the left half of one to the right half of the other.

linked. The accompanying diagram (figure 2) represents in theory the organizational and procedural structure of an infamous east coast auto theft ring with both domestic and foreign operations. Under the twofold operation indicated by the chart, a stolen car could be directed to either the ring's domestic or foreign market, depending on how the ring wanted to handle it.

Typically, in this ring's operation, the car was stolen by amateur thieves and subsequently sold to a middle man, a person in the lower command of the auto theft ring. The car was

delivered to a location where false documents and altered numbers were attached. It would be documented as being owned by a "dummy" company, which in turn would "sell" the car to the ring's "legitimate" car dealership. The car would then be sold to an innocent victim by the dealership.

Coordinated Investigation

On the other hand, this same car might be titled to a ring member under an alias. Then the ring member would pose as the domestic consignor

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AUTO THEFT RINGS

(Continued from page 9)

and have the car shipped to the ring's foreign market, where it would usually be sold for much less than its actual value.

Only through intense cooperative and coordinated investigation by the FBI and State and local authorities was this ring broken and its perpetrators convicted.

Congress provided for the prosecution and conviction of auto theft rings in 1919 when the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act, now called the Interstate Transportation of Stolen Motor Vehicle Statute, became law. Since that time, law enforcement agencies have kept court dockets crowded with the cases of offenders of this statute.

The value of recovered automobiles over the years has easily reached into the millions, and many thousands of years of prison sentences have been meted out to perpetrators operating theft rings.

Insurance companies, ever conscious of the rising percentage of auto thefts by professional rings, have established private auto theft bureaus to investigate and aid in the capture of those whose illegal acts are directly responsible for a sizable part of the increase in insurance rates.

Car manufacturers have, from year to year, innovated and changed car theft prevention features and identification characteristics to aid in the war against both ring and amateur auto theft. They have added such anti-theft devices as an ignition lock which si-

multaneously locks the transmission and steering column when the key is removed. Many new cars are equipped with a buzzer which sounds if the driver leaves his car without first removing the key from the ignition. Also, manufacturers have moved the VIN plate into plain view on the car's dashboard.

Over the years, numerous and varied programs have been conducted by law enforcement, civic groups, car manufacturers, insurance companies, and others to alert the public to the continuing menace of auto theft rings. However, public concern about auto thefts can hardly be legislated or enforced. Public cooperation, for the most part, must be voluntary, and it is badly needed. After all, car owners and buyers—in fact, practically every American family—are the victims. ☐

POLICE LIBRARY

(Continued from page 15)

sary to insure the prompt return of books.

The police library can be divided into five separate collections: circulation, reference, periodicals and serials, special materials, and vertical file. The librarian selects the material for each of the collections and may withdraw from the collections those materials which are no longer of value.

Circulating Collection

The largest of the five collections, circulation, will include book and non-book materials available for home use. Materials in this collection are located through the card catalog. Arrangement on the shelves is by Library of Congress call number.

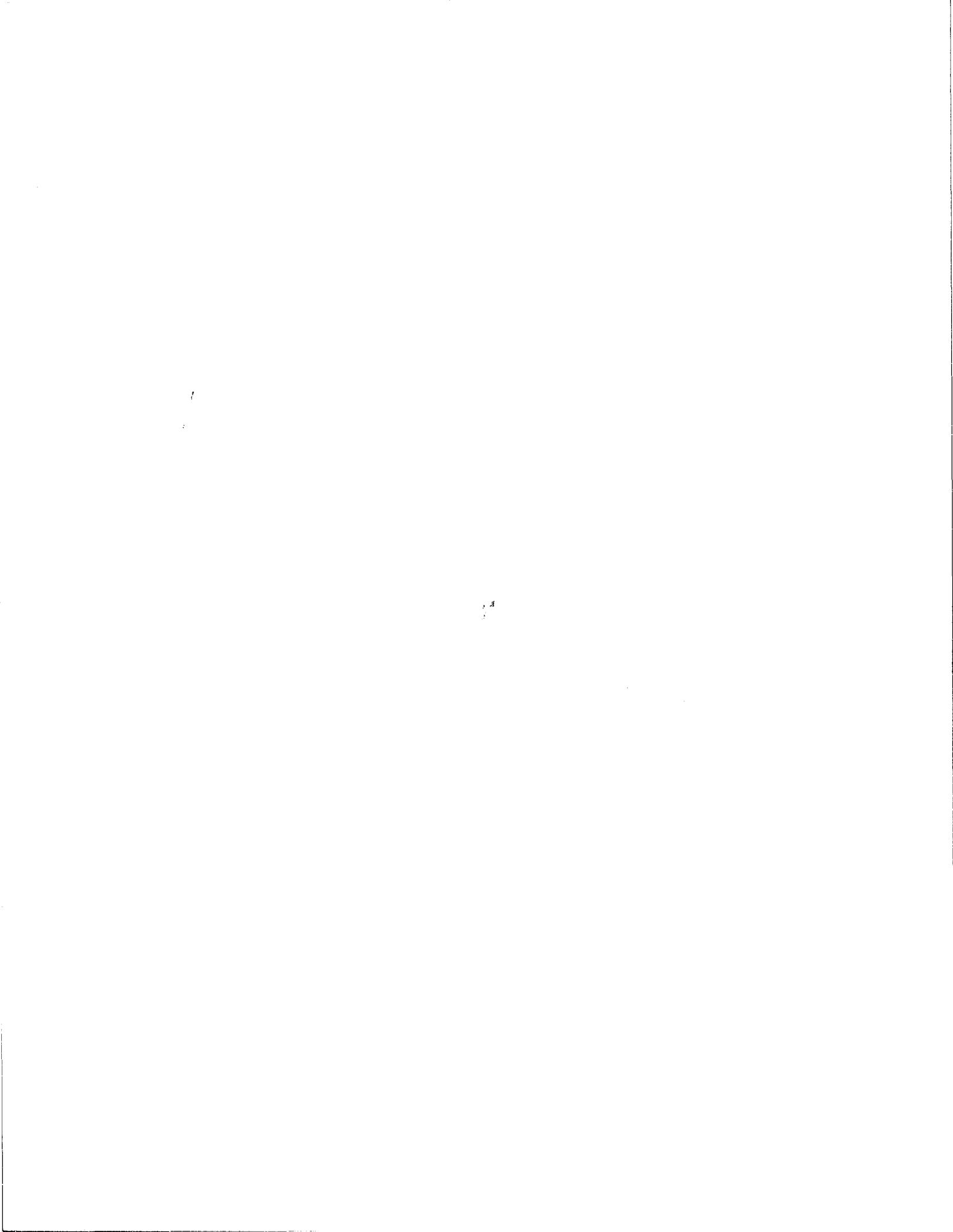
The reference collection consists of works which may be referred to for some definite piece of information. Dictionaries, handbooks, indexes, at-

lases, encyclopedias, and bibliographies all fall into this category. This type of material does not circulate. These books should always be available for consultation.

The periodical collection is a very important part of the police library, for through this literature law enforcement officers may keep up to date

on the latest techniques and innovations in their field. Police libraries should, therefore, seek to obtain complete runs of the popular law enforcement periodicals such as the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Police, Police Chief, Law and Order, and the Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science. The librarian may

An officer reviews periodicals for the latest techniques and innovations in his field.



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