Vehicle Crimes Auto Theft Educational Awareness Report

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International Association of Chiefs of Police

Bonnie Parker & Clyde Barrow

(courtesy abcnews.go.com/images)

Crime sprees and stolen cars have early roots in America. In the 1930s, Bonnie & Clyde committed dozens of felonies in stolen cars: robbing banks, stores, and rural gas stations across the country.

Purpose

The goal of the Auto Theft Educational Awareness Working Group of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Vehicle Crimes Committee is to educate law enforcement executives, their departments, and the general public as to the importance of and connection between vehicle crime and subsequent violent crime. This awareness is important to prevent violent crime sprees and their repercussions and to ignite support vital to the sustainability and longevity of auto theft investigative and prosecutorial units across the globe. Law enforcement needs to re-engage internal and external audiences to highlight crimes that have a tremendous impact on our communities, and we must work together to detect and thwart it. Our tactical goals are to do the following:

- Articulate the connection between auto theft and violent crime.
- Preserve and encourage funding for auto theft and vehicle crime.
- Define the understanding of vehicle crimes and their impact.
- Engage in predictive policing, community awareness, and hardening targets.

Background

Funding and support are in jeopardy:

Auto theft prevention funding in many areas of the United States is on the decline. Auto theft prevention authorities or similar counterparts in Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas have had their state legislatures divert funding to non-auto theft use.[1]

Auto theft has declined in the U.S. over the past few decades, leading legislators and others to argue support and resources are unnecessary. However, auto theft has not been eradicated. In fact, both individual thieves and crime rings continue to evolve using increasingly sophisticated means to steal cars and cause a ripple effect of criminal activity.

Investigative scope broadens:

Today, auto theft investigators and law enforcement officers are tasked with solving a growing

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[1] Randy Wallace, "Law Enforcement Officials Reveal where $2 Insurance Surcharge Really Goes", Fox 26 Houston, April 6, 2017, http://www.fox26houston.com/news/247118281-story; Brandi Grissom, "Lawmakers Propose Raiding Auto Theft Fund," *Texas Tribune*, 01 Feb 2011, https://www.texastribune.org/2011/02/01/texas-lawmakers-propose-raiding-auto-theft-fund.; Matt Buedel, "Stripped of funding, Illinois auto theft task forces are shutting down", *Peoria Journal Star*, 28 March 2015, http://www.pjstar.com/article/20150328/NEWS/150329126; "Senator Haine Working to Keep Auto Theft Task Force from Being Dissolved," 12 May 2015, http://www.senatorhaine.com/news/9-news/128-senator-haine-working-to-keep-auto-theft-task-force-from-being-disso lved; "Budget Cuts Threaten Auto Theft Unit," *Macomb Daily,* 3 June 2007, http://www.macombdaily.com/article/MD/20070603/NEWS01/306039999; Joy Powell, "Auto Theft Surcharge Rankles Enforcers," *Star Tribune*, 3 Nov 2012, http://www.startribune.com/auto-theft-surcharge-rankles-enforcers/177045231; "AATA Budget Cuts Impact Auto Theft Reduction Programs," *Arizona Auto Theft Authority News & Updates Newsletter* (October 2009).

list of vehicle-related crimes. Additionally, new technology and resources are needed to remain equipped to stay current on new crime trends. Therefore, it makes sense to broaden the definition to explain the modern-day reality of our crime prevention efforts.

For instance, the emerging threat to motor vehicle cybersecurity requires new skills and training for investigators. As defined by the National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration (NHTSA): "Cybersecurity, within the context of road vehicles, is the protection of automotive electronic systems, communication networks, control algorithms, software, users, and underlying data from malicious attacks, damage, unauthorized access, or manipulation" (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "Overview," Automotive Cybersecurity, https://www.nhtsa.gov/crash-avoidance/automotive-cybersecurity).

Law enforcement needs to identify, prepare, and train resources to combat this and other highly technical, emerging threats to millions of vehicles, people, and property.

IACP renamed its Vehicle Crimes Committee to better align with the role of today's auto theft investigators, who are required to conduct investigations on all auto-related crimes including the following:[2]

- Brand avoidance
- Curbstone enforcement
- Burglaries to vehicles
- Business inspections
- Cargo theft
- Construction equipment theft
- Export of stolen vehicles
- Fraudulent vehicle purchases
- Insurance fraud
- NMVTIS violations
- Odometer frauds
- Staged accidents

- Tag agency title clerk corruption
- Title washing
- Terrorism
- Tow and storage or mechanic lien fraud
- Pirate towing
- Unlawful rebuilding of salvage vehicles
- Unlawful subleasing or rentals
- Vehicle title fraud
- Vessel theft
- VIN verifications

IACP explains the following:

> Many of these auto-related crimes frequently overlap into traditional criminal activity. For example, an investigation involving stolen vehicles with altered identification numbers may lead to a corruption case involving car titles at a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). Through further investigation of what appears to be a simple theft of a car can open up a larger investigation of a DMV clerk accepting bribes in order to process counterfeit titles to use with stolen/altered vehicles. Or while conducting business inspections, an investigator may identify an active chop shop where vehicle parts are being removed from stolen vehicles for the purpose of rebuilding salvage vehicles that are subsequently titled fraudulently with clean

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[2] Attachment A of the *Auto Related Crimes Investigated by IACP Auto Theft Investigators*. See attached document that was submitted by Chris McDonold in July 2015 requesting name change of the committee.

non-banded titles.[3]

This quote is based on the experience of several of the committee members.

Public misconception:

According to a 2014 Gallup poll, 58 percent of Americans rarely or never worry that their car will be stolen or broken into.[4] However the gradual decline of auto theft does not spark widespread outrage, fear, or spur action as it did decades ago. Modern threats like domestic and international terrorism rightfully dominate the headlines and budgets. However, even there, the link remains. Auto theft is frequently a component of these high-impact crimes.

For example,
- In 1993, a stolen van was linked to the bombing of the World Trade Center.
  In April 2013, the Boston Marathon bombing suspects carjacked a driver at gunpoint; [5]
- In April of 2016, thieves used a stolen car to smash into businesses and steal shoes and apparel in Indianapolis.[6]
- In May 2016, a couple's SUV was stolen and then used to commit other crimes in Hawaii. The victim said, "Nobody wants to hear that their car was stolen first of all -- and then to find out that somebody was using it as a tool to go do more bad stuff is frustrating."[7]
- In December of 2016, an Arkansas man stole a car from a hotel valet parking lot and then used it to commit several other crimes by driving through the entrances of two stores and robbing them.[8]
- In December of 2016, teenagers were arrested for an armed carjacking and robberies in Chicago.[9]
- In January 2017, thieves stole a truck to use it to steal other trucks in Albuquerque, New Mexico.[10] Albuquerque ranks as one of the highest auto theft cities in the United States; investigators are seeing vehicles used to commit burglaries involving guns and drugs. [11]
- In January 2017, police say the suspect in a drive-by shooting used a stolen car to commit the crime in Greeley, Colorado. [12]

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Rebecca Riffkin, "Hacking Tops List of Crimes Americans Worry About Most", *www.gallup.com*, 27 Oct 2014, http://www.gallup.com/poll/178856/hacking-tops-list-crimes-americans-worry.aspx.

[5] www.boston.cbslocal.com, "Carjacking Victim Describes 'Horrifying' Night depicted in 'Patriots Day'", *CBS 4 Boston,* 20 Dec 2016, http://boston.cbslocal.com/2016/12/20/patriots-day-movie-boston-marathon-bombings-carjacking-victim-danny-meng.

[6] Jesse Wells, "Thieves Use Stolen Cars as Battering Rams to Break into East Side Business," Fox 59 WXIN, April 14, 2016, http://fox59.com/2016/04/14/thieves-use-stolen-cars-as-battering-rams-to-break-into-east-side-business.

[7] Mileka Lincoln, "Couple: Thieves stole their car, used it to commit more crimes", *Hawaii News Now KHLN/KGMB*, 31 May 2016, http://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/story/32107806/stolen-car-used-in-crime-spree.

[8] "Hot Springs Man Drives Stolen Car through Local Businesses, then Robs Them," KTHV 11, December 12, 2016, http://www.thv11.com/news/local/hot-springs-man-drives-stolen-car-through-local-businesses-then-robs-them/368665 497.

[9] Alisa Hauser, "Teens On Crime Spree Caught in Bucktown Gassing Up Stolen Car, Police Say," *DNA info*, December 21, 2016, https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20161221/west-town/teens-robbery-bucktown-caught-in-stolen-car-after-theft.

[10] Caleb James, "Stolen Tow Truck Being Used to Steal Vehicles, Victim Says", KOB 4, January 13, 2017, http://www.kob.com/albuquerque-news/stolen-tow-truck-being-used-steal-vehicles-albuquerque-owner-joe-cruz-polic e-apd-crime/4369685.

[11] Gabrielle Burkhart, "Neighborhood Breakdown: Where Stolen Cars Are Reported Most in Albuquerque," KRQE News 13, February 8, 2017, http://krqe.com/2017/02/08/neighborhood-breakdown-where-stolen-cars-are-reported-most-in-albuquerque.

[12] Tommy Simmons, "Greeley Man Police Say Took Part in Jan. 9 Shooting Used Stolen Car and Fled Police," *The Tribune*, January 24, 2017, http://www.greeleytribune.com/news/crime/greeley-man-police-say-took-part-in-jan-9-shooting-used-stolen-car-and-fl ed-police.

- In March 2017, thieves rammed a stolen car through a storefront in Fresno, California.[13]
- In March 2017, a car used in an alleged bomb threat near the White House was stolen in Roanoke, Virginia days before.[14]

Weak data:

Many crime sprees begin with a stolen car. While anecdotal evidence abounds, uniform data collection about vehicle crimes is notoriously weak. Current data collection by law enforcement varies and vehicle crime data is often not a requirement by many agencies and police departments. Without data to prove links and trends, our argument lacks power.

Emerging evidence:

Forward-thinking police executives and other stakeholders are beginning to document the link between auto theft/vehicle crime and general violent crime. Despite data collection challenges, a study facilitated by the Colorado Auto Theft Prevention Authority and the Colorado Auto Theft Intelligence Coordination Center found a strong connection between auto theft and a wide range of other crimes:

- Ninety-seven percent of motor vehicle thieves were also charged with other crimes.
- Auto theft offenders were associated with arson, drug trafficking, controlled substance violations, kidnapping, financial fraud, burglary, robbery, weapons violations, and criminal mischief.[15]

In analyzing the study, IACP Vehicle Crimes Committee member and Director of the Colorado Auto Theft Prevention Authority, Robert D. Force concludes,

Law enforcement executives should be encouraged to elevate the prioritization of vehicle theft events (report incident to the recovery incident) in order to do the following:

- Increase forensic evidence collection (e.g., DNA, fingerprints, and hair) that can be used to identify and substantiate individuals who may be involved with other crimes
- Increase the ability of law enforcement and prosecutors to establish the criminal predicates of offenders engaged in a pattern or series of criminal behavior beyond property crime

Elevate intelligence and information gathering to associate criminal enterprises engaged in pattern or organized crimes such as home

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[13]Tommy Patrick Nelson, "Stolen car used to break into storefront," *www.yourcentralvalley.com*; 21 March 2017, http://www.yourcentralvalley.com/news/stolen-car-used-to-break-into-storefront/677650729

[14]Tiffany Holland, "Car Used in Alleged White House Bomb Threat Was Stolen in Roanoke," *The Roanoke Times*, March 20, 2017.

[15]The Colorado Auto Theft Intelligence Coordination Center (ATICC) is housed in the Colorado Information Analysis Center (CIAC) and purposed to collect, centralize, analyze, and disseminate law enforcement information on the incidence of statewide auto theft. Scott Casey, *Auto Theft and Its Connection and Role in the Furtherance in Other Crimes – Colorado Case Studies 2013–2015*, report to the Colorado Automobile Theft Prevention Authority (Colorado Auto Theft Intelligence Coordination Center, 2015).

- invasions, burglaries, robberies, drug cartels, identity theft, homicide, and arson[16]

Predictive policing:

If we can control the initial auto theft, we can reduce crime in many other areas. Collecting and analyzing data, we can use predictive policing to identify trends, likely targets, and hot spots for theft and related crimes.

Vehicle crime is often a high-impact crime also involving the following crimes; in many instances, a stolen vehicle is either driven while committing some crimes or is the nexus of others:

- Robbery or burglary
- Home invasion
- Shootings
- Homicide
- Drug trafficking
- Arson
- Terrorism
- Identity theft
- Fraud and insurance schemes
- Title fraud
- Tow truck schemes

Recommendations

Define and use "vehicle crimes":

We must clearly define the crime for ourselves, police executives, and the public for accurate use and understanding. We must encourage use of the term. A suggested definition of vehicle crime follows:

> A vehicle crime is any crime involving the theft as a whole or parts; fraudulent sale, purchase, insurance or identification; or burglary of a car, truck, motorcycle tractor trailer, ATV, heavy equipment, any other motorized vehicle, or its cargo or contents.

Data collection:

The starting point is data collection. More accurate, uniform, and specific data need to be collected at the local, state, regional, national, and international level to further document and track the connection between vehicle crime and auto theft and additional violent crime. The needs are actually rather limited—the following data should be collected:

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[16] Robert D. Force, "Motor Vehicle Theft: A Relationship to Other Crimes," *The Police Chief* 83 (July 2016): 32–38.

- What is the number of vehicle crimes committed in a municipality on a monthly basis?
- Was the vehicle unlocked?
- Were the keys left inside?
- Why was the vehicle or property within the vehicle stolen? (i.e. for owner give-up, to sell for drugs, international trafficking.)
- What was the result of the theft? (i.e. subsequent criminal activity)

Education for law enforcement executives:

Law enforcement executives need to be introduced to the term "vehicle crimes" and understand why they should use it within their agencies and within their communities. We hope to increase national awareness of the importance of vehicle crime as it relates to community safety and the larger picture of predictive policing. Preventing auto theft leads to decreasing the opportunity or occurrences of other crime. *Vehicle crimes* impact us all—from the tedious work and time consumed by responding to property theft from neighborhood cars to insurance fraud to carjackings, a good portion of crime fighting touches vehicle-related crime on a daily basis.

The change in language will also then require a change in the department's training and data collection.

Police executives need to understand how auto theft and vehicle crimes "drive" other crimes in their jurisdictions. Armed with that information based on accurate data, crime control strategies can be developed which include:

- The prevention of auto theft, which often is the precursor to "other" serious and violent crimes (much like attacking the availability of crystal methamphetamine by preventing access to the precursor chemicals used to clandestinely manufacture the drug). This can be done with good prevention strategies including public awareness via community engagement, training for patrol officers on how to detect possible auto thefts, and "hardening" targets of auto theft by identifying the types of vehicles stolen and providing information and hardware to make those vehicles less susceptible to auto theft.

- Treating auto crimes "seriously" by directing patrol officers to take full and complete reports; while on patrol, paying attention to indicators of stolen vehicle activity; and providing investigative expertise and resources to quickly follow up on reports of vehicle theft and related crimes. Police agencies have to move away from the "Here's your report number, call your insurance company" model often used when a vehicle is reported stolen. We need to collectively adopt a proactive, or "quickly" reactive model realizing that a stolen vehicle might be the start of a crime spree.

- Agencies need to actively engage the public in target-hardening efforts and in efforts to change behavior and instill prevention habits, e.g., "Lock your car – take your keys – every time." Police executives, crime prevention officers, and PIOs need

to emphasize the fact that a stolen vehicle was used to commit crime X, Y, or Z and show tangible reasons why the public should pay attention to preventing auto theft. It is important that agency heads—police executives—lead the way on this, as the rank and file, and the community, need to see visible signs of support from the top.

- Police executives need to support auto theft initiatives in the budgeting process and engage community, corporate, and other governmental agencies in the effort.

Funding is at stake. If we raise public awareness and collect data to provide evidence of our need, funding is more easily saved and secured. We must advocate for ourselves. *We must find ways to communicate our relevancy and the importance of our efforts.* Public relations campaigns are advantageous in clearly communicating our priorities and persuading stakeholders to support us.

Public relations campaigns:

We recommend launching two public relations campaigns: one, for internal use by law enforcement, and a second, for the general public's consumption.

Law enforcement PR campaign:

A public relations campaign for police executives and for internal use in their departments would aim to do the following:

- Introduce the definition of vehicle crimes
- Raise awareness about why these crimes are important
- Form the basis for why new data collection needs to occur and spur discussion about changing the data collection criterion and process
- Remind, reinforce, and engage police executives and their departments as to sharing information and finding ways to support predictive policing
- Open communication with other departments and develop resources in combatting vehicle-related crime ("vehicle crimes") and explore funding options working in other states
- Provide foundational knowledge to launch their own PR campaigns within their communities to influence stakeholders, community leaders, policy makers, legislators, municipal leaders, and the general public

Suggested materials and channels for an internal PR campaign include the following:
- Campaign message (example: "It all starts with a stolen car…") that defines vehicle crimes and their ripple effect
- Training for auto theft detection and altered VINs
- Training on how to handle vehicle crimes and identification of resources for further information and support
- Posters (for display within the department) to clearly articulate key points and to remind officers of what to look for
- Talking points for officers to use in community policing
- Giveaway items to distribute in the community

General PR campaign:

A public relations campaign for the general public would aim to do the following:
- Educate the public about vehicle crimes prevention
- Inform community leaders and legislators as to the importance vehicle crime plays in community safety and its relationship to high-impact, violent crime

Suggested materials and channels for an external PR campaign include the following:
- Campaign message that defines vehicle crimes and their ripple effect
- Infographics that convey the crimes' impact re: vehicle theft, leaving keys in car, percentage of stolen cars used in violent crimes
- Posters
- Social media posts and graphics; #vehiclecrime
- Website content (graphics and copy)
- Earned media news pitches re: vehicle crime and predictive policing and what it means to your community
- Radio scripts for public service announcements
- IACP blog

The driver of these campaigns and user of these assets be either individual police departments across the globe or the IACP.