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**HOW TO SPOT A
STOLEN CAR**

by Dean Scoville
POLICE MAGAZINE

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HOW TO SPOT A STOLEN CAR

Alert patrol officers can help recover stolen vehicles and take dirtbag thieves off the streets



There are many motivations for stealing cars. Some are taken by kids for so-called "joyrides." Others are shipped to foreign countries and resold or chopped into parts. And more and more often, stolen cars are used to facilitate other crimes, including burglaries, robberies, assaults, and the transportation of narcotics and smuggled immigrants.

Another reason that car theft is such a widespread crime is that, generally, cars are relatively easy to steal. Which isn't to say owners don't work hard to protect their rides. Indeed, the antagonistic goals of car owners and car thieves result in curious technological match ups: slim jims and screwdrivers vs. alarm systems, electronic detectors and overrides vs. onboard tracking systems such as LoJack, GPS, and OnStar.

Car theft hits almost every driver in your jurisdiction right in the wallet. The more vehicles stolen in your city or county, the higher the insurance rates that people have to pay to protect their cars.

This is why many agencies, perhaps even yours, have teams of officers dedicated to finding stolen cars and arresting the thieves. These GTA cops use a variety of techniques and technologies to combat car theft, including tracking tools like LoJack, crime analysis and geoprofiling to identify car theft patterns, and bait cars to catch thieves in the act.

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Dedicated GTA teams can be very effective, but their efforts work best when they are backed up by knowledgeable, alert patrol officers who keep their eyes open for stolen vehicles.

How does the patrol cop find the stolen car and its driver?

In the near future, all they may have to do is just drive around and let their cars' mobile computers do much of the work. The Los Angeles Police Department and several other agencies have started using automatic license plate readers capable of scanning hundreds of license plates per hour to detect stolen vehicles.

Still, technology works only so well. And the best tool for spotting stolen vehicles remains the eyes of a veteran cop on patrol.

The Usual Suspects

One of the easiest ways to spot stolen cars is to know who steals them in your area. Car thieves can be notoriously recidivist, so knowing the face of the thief already on parole or probation gives you an early recognition factor when you see him behind the wheel tooling about town.

Being vigilant for the car thief on recon helps, too. There are certain suspicious activities that should scream "car thief" to you. For example, "accidental" bumping of parked cars may camouflage attempts to determine if the impacted vehicle has an alarm system, and people found crouching near vehicles may be searching for hidden keys.

Knowing the tools of the car thief can also be critical in taking him off the street. When detainees are found in possession of shaved keys, master keys, screwdrivers, slimjims, and auto jigglers, they may well have earned a ride in your patrol car.

Also, remember that car theft has become a gateway crime, the point where juvenile delinquents graduate from Hot Wheels to hot cars. Juveniles account for some 16 percent of stolen vehicles, so it makes sense to take a second glance at stature and youthful appearances of drivers, especially as some states have raised the minimum age for licensed motorists

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Any location where cars are grouped together for extended periods such as airports, shopping centers, and large apartment complexes are also particularly vulnerable

Hunting and Dumping Grounds

It's not enough to know the car thieves in your community. It's also important to know where cars are most likely to be stolen.

Popular hunting grounds for car thieves include shopping malls, streets, driveways, parking lots, garages, and car dealerships. Any location where cars are grouped together for extended periods such as airports, shopping centers, colleges, sporting events, fairgrounds, movie theaters, and large apartment complexes are also particularly vulnerable. Interestingly, high-rise and subterranean parking structures are generally less attractive for car thieves, thanks to reduced numbers of escape routes and the possibility of getting boxed in from above and below.

Since many cars are stolen for joyrides and for use in other crimes, they are often dumped when the thieves no longer have use for them. Airport parking lots, hotels, and cul de sacs are all popular dumping grounds. Transient friendly and often witness-free, these locations find stolen cars going unnoticed for long stretches of time.

Not that all abandonment sites are true abandonment sites. Some are mere layovers on the way to chop shops or other sordid destinations. For thieves not only use "cold plating" (placing unreported license plates on stolen rides) to camouflage their stolen vehicles, but "dump and watch" tactics, as well, leaving the stolen auto for 24 hours to see if cops recover the vehicle in response to a hidden recovery system hit.

Moving Targets

To hedge your bets, look for telltale signs of a GTA while the ride is mobile. These include new cars with body damage, such as broken windows (telltale sign of a break in), newer model cars with extensive body damage (evidence of cavalier driving), age of occupants, and visible lack of familiarity with the vehicle.

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Compromised door or trunk locks are dead giveaways

Det. Ed McDonald, an auto theft investigator for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, notes that the transitory lives of suspects finds them frequenting hospitable places such as motels.

"I always check for cars that are backed into parking spaces," McDonald says. "Cars that are missing front plates (in states that require them) or that have temporary paper plates also raise red flags. Compromised door or trunk locks are dead giveaways. Cars that are unsecured because of rolled down or smashed out windows are usually pretty fair indicators, too."

McDonald also recommends checking out local dope pads, as stolen cars and their contents can be bartered for drugs. Another likely car theft indicator is the guy who has more cars than he seems to know what to do with.

"He's the guy with the yard cars. He usually has several vehicles sitting on the lawn or in the backyard, and he goes above and beyond in putting tarps over the cars or fencing them in so as to keep them hidden from street view. He's apt to be running a chop shop operation," McDonald explains.

What Gets Stolen

Nationally, there were 1.2 million car thefts in 2004, with the Honda Civic topping the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB) list of stolen vehicles.

But there were some notable regional preferences among thieves, with Ford pickup trucks catching the dubious distinction of being the most stolen vehicle in Texas in 2006. In Florida, it was the 1991 Toyota Camry that caught suspects' eyes, while North Dakotan dirtbags were partial to the 1992 Chevrolet Full Size C/K 1500 Pickup. Bicoastal representation found California car thieves favoring the 1991 Honda Accord, while New Yorkers went with the 1990 Toyota Camry.

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Fridays and Saturdays are hands down the busiest car theft days, giving "weekend getaway" a whole new meaning

But the numbers don't tell the whole story, especially when one is looking at hundreds of thousands of car thefts a year. The older car owner who parks between the Escalade and the Mercedes in the hopes that any discriminating car thief will take one of the other two before touching his might be fooling himself.

Indeed, some car thieves will specifically gravitate to older models, especially for short term usage: They recognize that recovery tracking tools are cost-preemptive relative to the cars' value and they're less apt to stand out on the road.

When Cars are Stolen

No cop likes working weekends. But if you're inclined to make the best of a bad situation, it might be of interest to note that Fridays and Saturdays are hands down the busiest car theft days, giving "weekend getaway" a whole new meaning. With recovery rates showing that more than half of stolen motor vehicles are recovered in the first day, this is a window of opportunity for the aggressive street cop.

But let's be realistic. There are limits to what you can do to recover stolen cars and arrest car thieves.

While some agencies give you considerable latitude and will let you chase dirtbags to the ends of the earth, others have highly restrictive pursuit policies, which means if the suspect fails to yield once you light him up, you'd better have your ducks in a row. Having your assisting units and eye-in-the-sky in place ahead of time can help mitigate the chances of a long or canceled pursuit. And remember, your best move is to get the bad guy into custody away from the car after you've already established a strong connection between him and the stolen vehicle. That makes it a lot harder for him to run.