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Westworld

HOT TOPICS

Steal Wheels Smackdown



The heat is on to reduce auto theft, with proposed tactics for beefing up the criminal code

By Ian MacNeill

Every 30 minutes a motor vehicle is stolen in Alberta — that's more than 50 a day, or a whopping 20,000-plus vehicles per year. But contrary to the conventional "it can't happen to me" wisdom that often prevails in these matters, the unfortunate owners who lose their cars, trucks, farm vehicles, motorcycles, ATVs — you name it — are not the only ones who suffer, or pay, when a vehicle goes missing in Wild Rose Country. Alberta's solicitor general and minister of public security, Harvey Cenaiko, reports that Albertans pay out almost \$100 million every year in insurance, law- enforcement, justice and health-care costs related to vehicle thefts. And these are just the measurable costs. • The true impact of vehicle theft on our society is, in fact, incalculable. Each year, according to the Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC), somewhere between 20 and 30 innocent bystanders lose their lives as a result of vehicle theft and another 100 or so are injured, while in 2001 alone, six police officers were killed in pursuit of stolen vehicles across Canada. As well, police estimate that 90 per cent of the vehicles stolen in Alberta are used by thieves "for transportation" (the other 10 per cent are dismantled for parts or shipped out of province for resale). In other words, many of these vehicles are used by thieves to commit other crimes such as armed robbery, break and enter, and home invasion — crimes often committed by drug addicts looking for a quick buck for their next fix.

The irony is that vehicle theft is viewed as simple theft under the criminal code, meaning the deterrents are minimal, though that may soon change. Fed up with the carnage, not to mention the financial costs and the atmosphere of lawlessness associated with vehicle theft, police, insurance companies, government ministries, community groups and other stakeholders are fighting back. They're getting better organized, coordinating their strategies and proposing changes to the criminal code that would seriously deter auto theft.

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You've probably never heard of Sgt. Derek Curtis of the Calgary Police Service, for example, but if you're a car thief he's persona non grata. That's because the 18-year veteran police officer, chair of the new Alberta Vehicle Theft Advisory Committee (AVTAC), is a man on a mission. Established in July of this year and reporting directly to Cenaiko, Curtis's AVTAC is coordinating a list of 19 recommendations with interested stakeholders that — it's greatly hoped — will soon take a big bite out of Alberta's vehicle theft stats.

Some of these recommendations are administrative and include the creation of sub-committees to coordinate strategies, research possible solutions, work with legislators and legislative bodies and look for ways to come up with funding. Others will have a very public face. These include mandatory odometer readings when motorists register their cars (thieves often roll them back to increase a car's value) and running public awareness programs to encourage more drivers to "harden the target" — by installing and using anti-theft devices such as steering-wheel locks and ignition immobilizers.

Another effort will be directed at lobbying the federal government to make vehicle theft a "separate" crime. Believe it or not, car thieves often show up in court charged merely with theft under \$5,000 or theft over \$5,000, "and neither charge tells you if a car was stolen to commit another crime or if the vehicle was involved in a high-speed chase," says Curtis. "The thing is, we're not talking about a kid who stole a chocolate bar, but a guy who stole a car that could potentially harm someone."

Ultimately, AVTAC's mission is to spearhead amendments to the Criminal Code and the Youth Criminal Justice Act to classify vehicle theft as a more serious offence, so that thieves do hard time for it. Under the current system, says Sgt. Darren Cave of Calgary's High Enforcement Auto Theft Team (HEATT), even repeat offenders "might" only get a couple of months, "and that's as good as it gets."

Meanwhile, all stakeholders agree on one thing: every one of us has to do our part, and that includes making it just a little more difficult for thieves to steal our vehicles in the first place. "You wouldn't believe how many people still leave their keys in the car," says Don Szarko of AMA's advocacy and community services division, noting that AMA, an AVTAC member, spends an estimated \$200,000 year on crime prevention initiatives such as its STOP! THIEF program as well as Neighbourhood Watch, Block Watch, Crime Stoppers and public awareness and education campaigns. There are plenty of low-cost deterrents, adds Szarko, including steering-wheel locking devices and ignition immobilizers, but the best deterrents are still common sense and awareness. "Auto theft is a crime of opportunity," he says. "But unfortunately, unless it happens to us or someone we know, it just doesn't seem to register."

bait and tackle



One of the challenges in the fight against auto theft is that car thieves are notoriously difficult to catch. Across Canada, clearance rates — the arresting and turning over to the courts of an alleged thief — run a measly five per cent. What's more, police estimate 80 to 90 per cent of all stolen vehicles in the province are taken by the same 200 to 300 individuals — a core group that is stealing, on average, anywhere from 75 to 100 vehicles each per year.

Obviously, catching these repeat offenders would put a big dent in the overall numbers, and different jurisdictions in Canada have come up with some creative solutions to the challenge. Regina is experimenting with monitoring known car thieves, then pouncing on them when they try to steal a car. In 2002, the first year the Regina Auto Theft Strategy was implemented, vehicle theft was reduced by 28 per cent. By 2004, 50 per cent fewer vehicles were going missing in that city compared with 2001.

B.C. has taken a different, more dramatic, tack, but it also shows every indication of being a winner. The premise behind the Bait Car program is simple: Police park bait cars in a number of B.C. neighbourhoods and wait for the thieves to steal one. When they do, they get a big surprise: built-in cameras film the thieves at work. The cars are also fitted with GPS units that enable police to

track the thieves' subsequent movements and then run them down.

Results have been impressive. Scott Cooke, who manages B.C.'s program for the RCMP, says vehicle thefts were reduced by nine per cent during the initial nine-month test phase in Vancouver, this at a time when thefts had been increasing at the rate of five per cent a year. As the program takes hold and more thieves learn about it, the numbers are expected to drop even further.

"Every jurisdiction in Canada should have a bait-car program," argues Cooke. Sgt. Darren Cave of HEATT agrees.

"We could use a program like that," says Cave. However, he adds, bait-car programs require money, and funding is a problem. In B.C., the bait-car program is funded by a public auto insurance agency, the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia, which spent \$1.2 million during the start-up phase and a further \$800,000 since then to expand the program into other jurisdictions, including Surrey (often called the car-theft capital of Canada). Still, in ICBC's view, the program pays for itself. Each car that does not get stolen saves the corporation about \$4,500. But in Alberta, where there is no public insurance corporation like ICBC to provide funding for a bait-car program, no alternative source of money has been found. "Money goes a long way toward solving a lot of problems," says Cave. "That's the stumbling block here in Calgary, and in the rest of Alberta as well."

guardian gizmos

If he really wants your car, a thief is probably going to get it, though by and large auto theft is a crime of opportunity. If a thief has two cars to choose from and one of them has a steering-wheel lock, odds are the one that doesn't will be targeted.

Ignition immobilizers are another effective deterrent. HEATT's Sgt. Darren Cave, says he has yet to come across a single stolen vehicle that was equipped with an ignition immobilizer. All new vehicles will have to have them factory installed by September 2007, but, in the meantime, if your car doesn't have one, after-market immobilizers can be purchased and installed for about \$300.

As for those who think it's OK to rely on an insurance policy to replace a stolen vehicle rather than protecting it with such devices, those days of indifference are numbered. One recommendation AVTAC is investigating is the possibility of amending the *Alveter Insurance Regulation* so that Alberta insurance companies could charge a whopping \$1,000 deductible for stolen vehicles. This means motorists would pay \$300 now or \$1,000 later — if their vehicle is stolen.

faster than a speed addict

He doesn't wear a cape like Batman, or carry a gun like a police officer, but Ken Haywood is one of Alberta's most prominent and well-respected crime fighters.

A retired auto dealer by profession, Mr. Auto Theft, as he is sometimes known, has made fighting auto theft a hobby and a passion since he was ripped off himself in 1994 when he inadvertently purchased stolen late-model vehicles out of Québec. He's been a mover and shaker ever since in getting stakeholders to take auto theft seriously, including operating a website dedicated to the cause. Visit [Auto Theft Canada](#).

Haywood is also one of the driving forces behind the new Alberta Vehicle Theft Advisory Committee, the creation of which means "we're finally making some headway" in the fight against vehicle theft. That's because jurisdictions that coordinate their efforts have the most success at tackling auto theft, he notes, pointing to Australia, where the state of Victoria's committee approach has seen a 50-per-cent reduction in auto theft.

Haywood is also a great believer in being proactive, and, as an example, outlines the dissimilar experiences of Edmonton and Calgary. In recent years, Calgary has experienced an overall decrease in auto theft while Edmonton's rate has soared. Why?

Haywood attributes the discrepancy to resource allocation. The Calgary Police Service has a dedicated unit of nine officers working full time on auto theft, hence the declining numbers. While from 1992 to 1999, Edmonton had a similar program, called Hot Wheels, and during that period, auto theft declined steadily from 8,220 vehicles stolen in 1991 to 4,605 in 1999. At that point, the program was disbanded. The consequences were immediate. Auto theft rose steadily over the ensuing five years, and by 2004 it had reached a new high of 9,037 vehicles

stolen.

insider tip

Make AMA your partner in crime prevention by protecting yourself with its arsenal of resources to combat vehicle theft:

- **Be Theft-Proof!** A handy spiral-bound reference booklet, with advice on protecting your home and your identity, as well as your vehicles. Free at any AMA centre, or call Consumer Information Services at 430-6800 (in Edmonton) or toll-free at 1-800-222-6578.
- **STOP! THIEF** This provincial vehicle-theft prevention program relies on the impact of a highly visible STOP! THIEF sticker, which tells police the vehicle is rarely driven between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m., a prime time for theft. If a vehicle with this sticker is noticed on the road during these times, the police will pull it over to check whether it has been stolen. Registration for the Stop!Thief program is free and is now [available online](#), or at any AMA centre.
- **Harden your target!** Make your vehicle less attractive to thieves by making it harder to steal. An anti-theft steering-wheel lock is an excellent visual deterrent. Available at special member rates at all AMA centres. Car device: \$26 for members; \$36 for non-members. Truck device: \$46 for members; \$60 for non-members. *Also see, Crime Prevention for more information on [Steering Wheel Locks](#).*
- See [Crime Prevention](#), for more vehicle theft prevention tips.

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