

Auto theft skyrockets in Kelowna

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KELOWNA - To find out why Kelowna has suddenly emerged as B.C.'s auto theft basketcase you need look no further than the stunningly set City Park.

On a hot summer's evening -- a day after Mounties blew out the tires of a stolen Ford F-350, nabbed two crack-addicted thieves and recovered four stolen cars -- a disturbing dichotomy is evident at the waterfront.

Tanned and scantily clad locals walk in groups, laughing and mucking about as tourists sit at the lakeside eating dinner and ice cream. Then there are a dozen or so skinny, poorly dressed youth wandering the park.

The locals don't seem too bothered by them, perhaps not realizing these kids are addicts - - probably crystal meth, maybe crack -- and will beg, borrow or steal anything for a hit.

"We started noticing drug-addicted transients turning up about three years ago and their numbers have doubled every year since," says Kelowna RCMP Cpl. Reg Burgess.

Over the same period auto theft and other crimes have soared. In the first half of this year the number of stolen vehicles almost doubled, to 947, over the same period last year.

Burgess says the municipality is trying to deal with the crisis by introducing a four-pillars drug strategy, based on the City of Vancouver model focusing on enforcement, treatment, education and harm reduction.

"On the enforcement front we've been targeting the street-involved youth and older professional thieves," he says. "They become very proficient at stealing vehicles, sometimes doing one a night until they are caught."

In late July, police went undercover and arrested 23 dealers. Mounties also established a temporary auto theft taskforce that will work with citizen patrols to try and deter auto theft.

Burgess hopes the province will deliver on its promise to launch a bait car program in Kelowna, and wants to see more drug treatment facilities opened. "We have several crack houses in town," he says. "We close one down and another appears somewhere else."