

**Looking up: Surrey fight against car thieves turns tide:  
It takes a community effort -- bait cars, mobile patrol vans, volunteers -- to battle Surrey's  
reputation as auto theft capital of North America. David Carrigg reports that it's an uphill battle**

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*Byline: David Carrigg*

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*Series: Stolen Lives: An in-depth look at the dangerous world of auto crime*

On a Thursday morning, like every Thursday morning for the past six years, an unmarked Surrey Mobile Patrol van sets off on a random tour of the sprawling municipality searching for stolen, abandoned and unregistered vehicles.

"We've run over 300,000 licence plates this year alone," boasts Jim King, head of the Surrey Crime Prevention Society. "And so far we've recovered 171 vehicles, 26 plates and led to 37 arrests."

In 2004, a volunteer armed with a laptop, sitting in the van's front passenger seat, checked a finger-numbing 544,946 licence plates. That led to the recovery of 211 stolen vehicles and 60 arrests.

"That was the year we started seeing auto theft go down around here," says King. "It's a real grassroots thing. It's everybody working together and a really strong band of volunteers."

The mobile van is part of an auto-theft strategy that last year shifted Surrey from auto crime capital of North America to a beacon of hope in the fight against auto theft worldwide.

Headway into Surrey's auto theft crisis began three years ago when the Surrey-based Integrated Municipal Provincial Auto Crime Taskforce (IMPACT) and the mobile van launched Operation Hot Wheels, a 21-day sweep of city streets.

It was the first big strike against the auto theft community, nabbing 50 car thieves.

A year later the Surrey Auto Crime Strategies Team produced a 100-page report on auto theft in the municipality, hoping to keep up pressure on the issue.

Key findings included:

- Surrey had more auto thefts per person than any other municipality Canada-wide.
- Despite a perception that auto crime was mostly committed by young offenders, the typical Surrey thief is a 28-year-old white male drug addict.
- Nearly half of Surrey residents didn't know why auto theft was so bad in their community.
- Joy riding was no longer the main reason for auto theft; most cars were stolen to use to commit other crimes.
- Of 15 car thieves interviewed, each had stolen an average of 62 vehicles, some stealing their first car as early as age 11.
- The most common tools used to steal cars were a flat-head screwdriver, vise grips and a dent puller, a tool used in auto body shops.

In February 2004, IMPACT revealed Surrey's auto theft rate had risen so high it was the worst place in the Western world for auto theft per capita, beating out the nastiest cities in the U.S., Great Britain and Australia.

After the devastating IMPACT report, Surrey mayor Doug McCallum hit the streets, handing out free steering-wheel locks.

A well-attended public forum -- "The Hidden Truth -- Shattering the Myth of Auto Crime" -- was held and, in March 2004, the IMPACT/ICBC bait car program was introduced, leading to the first major breakthrough in auto crime in the area.

By the end of 2004 auto theft had fallen 15 per cent in the municipality, to 6,500 vehicles from a previous year's high of 8,000.

Given that Surrey accounts for 20 per cent of auto theft in the province, the municipality's success led to a reduction in B.C. overall. But it covered up some disturbing upward auto theft trends in other parts of the province, including the Okanagan and North Vancouver.

Troubling now for Jim King, police, ICBC and residents however are latest police stats showing auto theft is back on the rise in Surrey.

In the first half of this year there were 3,409 vehicles stolen, compared to 3,257 for the same period last year.

ICBC figures for the first half of 2005 are not finalized. But Karon Trenaman, ICBC's Surrey loss prevention co-ordinator, says the insurer's figures follow the same trend as police figures.

"Our figures are always lower than the police because not everybody is insured for theft, or for theft through us, but we trend the same," says Trenaman, who is also chair of the Surrey Auto Theft Strategies Team. She works closely with IMPACT and has heard anecdotally that auto theft is increasing again in Surrey.

"It's really hard to work out why. Maybe the paranoia around bait cars has reduced, or maybe it's cyclical," she says. "In October 2003 auto theft spiked around the province, then went down, and no one was sure why."

At street level the battle continues, with the mobile patrol going out every day for 12 hours.

The van is usually driven by a female society employee, known by police for her uncanny ability to spot stolen or suspicious vehicles.

On this Thursday morning the worker spots a blue Ford Mustang without any plates from 200 metres away. The RCMP are called in and within minutes arrive to block the car before it leaves a gas station.

On Sept. 21, she spotted a stolen Honda Civic and followed the vehicle as she called in IMPACT. The driver was arrested as he walked into a CIBC branch toting a replica handgun.

"That's why we do so well," says King. "We've gotten to know our job really well and it's paid off. But there's still no rhyme or reason why cars get stolen in Surrey. It happens during the day, at night, from front yards, parkades, it's probably happening right now while we're talking."

*dcarrigg@png.canwest.com*

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## **PLATES UNDER SCRUTINY IN SURREY**

Surrey has a mobile team that checks licence plates in order to find stolen vehicles. Here are the team stats for the past 3 1/2 years:

### **2003**

Vehicles checked: 425,385

Vehicles recovered: 278

Arrests: 69

### **2004**

Vehicles checked: 544,946

Vehicles recovered: 211

Arrests: 60

### **2005 (first half)**

Vehicles checked: 317,449

Vehicles recovered: 171

Arrests: 37

Source: Surrey Crime Prevention Society