

## **Nanaimo cracks down, numbers drop**

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It was late last year when Nanaimo Mounties realized their auto crime problem was out of control.

"We knew that numbers were up but when we ran a tally we saw a 200 per cent jump in a year," says Const. Jack Eubank, detachment spokesman.

ICBC figures, which are generally lower than police numbers but follow the same trend, showed 510 vehicles stolen in Nanaimo in 2004, compared to 190 in 2000 and 300 in 2003.

The shocking ICBC stats, backed by equally startling police figures, sparked community outrage and led to the establishment in November 2004 of a police auto-theft taskforce. Soon after ICBC launched its Community Solutions to Auto Crime campaign.

"We drew senior investigators from within the detachment and they targeted certain areas, conducted surveillance and executed outstanding arrest warrants for property crime," says Eubank. "That led to recovered stolen vehicles and other property and interrupted some thefts in progress."

Nanaimo was not alone in its struggle, with Victoria seeing a 22 per cent auto theft spike between 2003 and 2004 and Vancouver Island overall recording an increase of 620 stolen vehicles between 2003 and 2004.

On Jan. 31 this year the crisis was highlighted when a Nanaimo woman was run down by a police cruiser in broad daylight as the cruiser attempted to corral a stolen 1998 Nissan pickup.

The car thief was arrested shortly after and the woman was hospitalized.

Two months later, then-solicitor general Rich Coleman announced the bait car program would be expanded from the Lower Mainland to Nanaimo and Victoria.

"We had success with that right away," says Eubank, adding latest police figures show 340 vehicles stolen in the first six months of 2005, compared to 496 in the same period in 2004.

"It's really hard to say what caused the rapid increase. Sometimes one or two career criminals will move into a community and start stealing cars," he says. "We had a rash of Ford pickup trucks stolen and we nabbed one guy and it stopped."

While Nanaimo struggles with hardened criminals taking vehicles, down island in Victoria the problem is blamed on the crystal meth epidemic that has been sweeping the provincial capital since last spring.

Police statistics show 261 vehicles were stolen in Victoria in the first six months of 2005, compared to 299 in the first six months of 2004.

Victoria Police Sgt. Keith Lewis says there have been eight bait-car activations since the program was introduced in April, 2005.

"They were all addicts and all known to police," he says. "As soon as we saw them in the video we recognized them."