

Rumour mill saves new car from junkyard: In B.C.'s Interior, auto crime is becoming a bigger and bigger problem. No one knows that more than Steve Nault

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CASTLEGAR - Steve Nault started feeling really angry at about the halfway point between Trail and Castlegar.

Two weeks earlier, the 33-year-old's new Pontiac Grand Am was stolen from his yard in Robson, a small former Doukhobor community near Castlegar.

With Mounties unable to find his vehicle -- his first-ever new car -- Nault relied on the Castlegar rumour mill to track his prized possession to a vacant house in downtown Trail. He told the police where it was, they found it, the car was towed to a yard in Trail and Nault was asked to pick it up and drive it to Castlegar for damage assessment.

"I was told I was lucky because the car was drivable," says Nault. "But they keyed it, the rims were bent, they put 700 clicks on it and had been driving through bush. It was covered in twigs because they had tried to hide it, it didn't have the power it used to. The whole experience made me angry, angry, angry. While I was driving back to Castlegar I just wanted to kill him."

Castlegar, like other Kootenay towns, has been hit hard by auto theft in the past year, recording a 150 per cent hike in the first half of this year from the first half of 2004.

While numbers are relatively low compared to bigger centres -- one vehicle stolen in Castlegar every five days this year compared to one stolen every 12 days last year -- the impact on each victim is no less than in major auto theft hot spots like Surrey and Vancouver.

Making the situation worse for this 8,000-strong community is that the locals know who's mostly responsible for the recent crime wave and some are repeat youth offenders.

"It's just gone berserk and it's only going to get worse," says long-time Castlegar mayor Mike O'Connor. "There are half a dozen 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds that are running the streets. The community has known these kids since they were knee-high but the problem is we can't lock these buggers up. They've been given break after break but we have to draw a line somewhere."

Last April the community took note of the problem after an elderly man living in Pass Creek, a tiny community near Robson, was beaten. The assailant had stolen a car from the garage of a home beside Nault's, drove to the old man's home and beat and robbed him.

Although Castlegar Mounties were confident they knew who did it, the victim was unable to identify the man in a police lineup.

The same man is believed responsible for stealing Nault's car, recovered after a woman walked into the local liquor store boasting the man had stolen a nice car in Robson and that it was being kept in Trail in front of a vacant home. A Nault family member was in the store at the time and passed on the message.

A community meeting was held in Pass Creek to discuss the attack, as well as the rash of break-ins, thefts from autos and thefts of autos.

It didn't take the 100 residents in attendance long to realize a gang was at work and the ringleaders belonged to one Castlegar family.

Mayor O'Connor thinks it's a matter of time before someone takes matters into their own hands. "I'm starting to hear an attitude that if the police can't do something then we will and if someone does that then we've got real problems. There are decent people protecting their property that will end up in the clink."

O'Connor missed the Pass Creek meeting but, soon after, met with a member of the Castlegar RCMP detachment, a defence lawyer and two probation officers to deal with the issue. "The intent wasn't to bash the system," he says. "It was to say, 'What can we do to help? What has to happen so the police can do their job?' I was told that we need to contact our politicians."

Three weeks later O'Connor's home was robbed by a female juvenile member of the problem family and her juvenile female friend. It was the fifth time he had been broken into.

"I know these girls, everybody knows everybody in a small town and I knew they were trouble. I thought I should drive around the block but I didn't," he says.

Although both girls were detained after admitting to the crime they refused to reveal the location of O'Connor's wedding band and his wife's jewellery.

"There's a lot of loyalty in that group," says O'Connor, adding a lot of the crime in the city is "senseless crap," like smashing windows.

The girl from the problem family, who police describe having a record "as long as your arm," was recently sentenced to eight months' detention.

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