

How to Protect Your Auto from Thieves

By Dave Hoffman

To some, a car ranks above their house, jobs and spouse in importance. To others it's a necessary mode of transportation. Either way, nobody wants their vehicle stolen. It is reported that a car is stolen every 25 seconds in this country, adding up to 1.2 million cars per year, a total cost of \$7.8 billion.

Over 50 percent of stolen cars are recovered, but many are either sold illegally to unsuspecting customers or on the black market overseas. Sometimes they are also sent to a "chop shop" where they are stripped of their parts, which are sold to garages that use them for repairs.

Many car thieves are professionals looking for a profit, and others are joy riders looking for some kicks. Either way, there are ways to thwart their efforts. The odds of having your car stolen vary based on where you are, and what kind of car it is. Larger cities have more thefts, as do newer cars. Sports and luxury cars and utility vehicles also have a greater chance of being stolen. No matter what kind of car you have or where you keep it, it makes sense to take precautions.

Know your car. Being able to explain the make and model, as well as the license plate makes finding the car easier. You should also know your VIN, the vehicle identification number that is unique to each vehicle. It will make it easier to find your car if its appearance is altered.

First, err on the side of common sense. Always lock your car, close windows, and take the key out of the ignition. Lock all the doors, including the trunk, and park in well lit areas with more people around. It is unwise to hide a spare key in or on your car. If you can figure out a hiding place, potential thieves can figure it out also – it's their job. What you leave in your car can also encourage theft. It is advisable not to leave valuables in the car in plain sight. Valuables only encourage thieves. If you buy a new radio, make sure it is removable or has a removable face. Lower the radio before you park the car – no need to telegraph what a valuable radio or speaker you have. Likewise, transfer luggage to the trunk before you get to your parking space. If you can, park your car in a garage when possible.

The next step after removing visible temptations is to use a visible deterrent. The more visible your anti-theft devices are, the less likely potential thieves will attempt. An effective, less expensive, and highly visible device is a steering wheel lock. If a thief breaks into your car, it prevents the thief from being able to steer. More importantly, it makes stealing the car a bigger

hassle - making the next car more attractive. Send a message that trying to take your car will be more effort than it's worth. Cars without steering wheel locks are four times as likely to be stolen. Decals indicating that you have an alarm are also effective.

Some cars have hidden switches that must be activated to enable the flow of electricity or fuel. If the alarm does go off, be careful how you respond. If it is in fact a theft, you may be dealing with a seasoned criminal, so it is best to call 911 and let the police handle it.

Tracking systems such as Lojack use electronic impulses so that police can track the vehicle if it is stolen. This makes for a quicker recovery, and less chance of damage. There are also companies that will etch the VIN into the windshield, so it is more difficult for criminals to obscure the fact that the car is stolen.

In addition to knowing your car's identifying information, it is important to keep the Department of Motor Vehicles up to date on your address or any other information, so they will be more able to act in an efficient manner.

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