

A secure future?

As car thieves become more sophisticated, we ask whether manufacturers are doing enough to stay ahead of the game



TWO CARS GONE IN FOUR MONTHS

So, 'it's difficult to steal a car without the keys' and 'car crime is falling.' Such oft-heard phrases might make you think car crime affects only people with expensive premium-brand cars.

Debbie Musselwhite, of *Gardening Which?*, doesn't think so. She's had two Ford Focuses stolen in just four months. Both were taken in the early hours from outside her London home, without the keys.

On both occasions, Debbie was vaguely aware of a noise which she had assumed, in a drowsy half-sleep, was a dustbin lorry – but which turned out to be the thieves' transporter.

'Both cars were fitted with an immobiliser and



Debbie's second Focus was recovered by police

the second one had an after-market steering-wheel lock fitted, but even that didn't deter them.'

The police thought the cars were probably stolen for spares. They were proved right when they found Debbie's second car – luckily still intact – in a lock-up along with a haul of other cars and engines.

Debbie feels angry and vulnerable. She said: 'I should be able to

park my car securely outside my own home. Although I'm happy to have my car back, I'm really nervous about it being stolen again. The only way I can think of safeguarding it is to have a tracking device fitted – and that's so expensive.

'My insurance premium has rocketed and I really think car manufacturers should do an awful lot more to make cars secure.'

'I should be able to park my car securely outside my own home'

Car crime is falling, says the Home Office – yet thieves still attack 81 cars every hour, according to the latest official figures. So it seems the fight is far from over.

Thieves are getting more professional, too. The measures they'll take to steal a car, change its identity and sell it on are more sophisticated and harder to spot than ever.

Meanwhile, portable satellite-navigation systems are also increasingly targeted by opportunist thieves – they're valuable, easy to steal and easy to sell.

But manufacturer response to these new security threats is too slow. Makers of sat-nav units need to adopt anti-theft measures, while carmakers can still do much more to protect our cars and belongings.

A new era of car crime

We asked Ian Elliott, of the Metropolitan Police Stolen Vehicle Unit, about the challenges of fighting car crime in the capital and the rest of the country.

While electronic vehicle immobilisers – mandatory on all new cars since 1997 – make casual theft difficult, they haven't stamped out car theft. As Ian told us: 'Professional thieves are more organised than

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBIN BECKHAM, DAN PULLEN, ALASTAIR EYFE, KEITH EMMITT

ever, employing sophisticated methods to take, disguise and dispose of cars.' Stolen cars are often 'cloned' (given a new identity) and sold in the UK or abroad, or stripped down for spares.

For thieves, the easiest way to steal a car is with the keys – obtained by burglary, taking a test-drive and swapping a key, or having an insider at car dealerships. But they'll also resort to picking your car up and carting it off to do with as they wish – as Debbie's story, left, shows.

At the Met's stolen car compound, Ian showed us some of the very clever methods thieves use to give a car a false ID and ownership trail – effectively 'laundering' it to disguise its dodgy history.

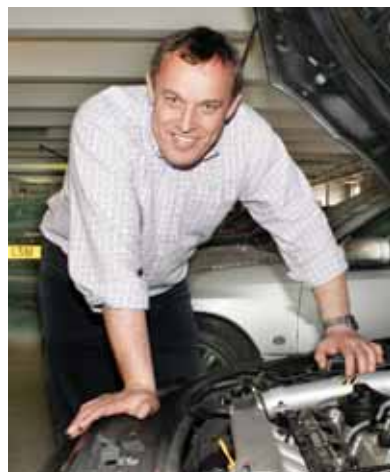
We saw several recovered cars with convincing new identities that would fool even the most cautious buyer. Their seemingly credible histories wouldn't have shown up using conventional checks (such as a £10 to £40 vehicle history check).

Buyer beware

If you unwittingly buy a stolen car that is later recovered by the police, you'll lose the car and the money you paid for it.

But while it takes more than a keen eye to spot a cloned car, Ian Elliott has some helpful advice for used-car buyers. He says: 'It starts in the classifieds. Treat advertisers using a mobile phone with suspicion.' While many people use mobiles legitimately, pay-as-you-go phones make it hard to trace thieves posing as private sellers.

Ian says: 'Take someone to the viewing who isn't emotionally or financially involved – a car expert or friend.' Fraudsters often try to draw you in emotionally, but someone less involved should spot anything odd.



The Met's Ian Elliott: helpful advice

When doing the deal, Ian advises: 'Try to establish that the seller actually owns the car. Get a good look at all the papers and registration documents. Make sure everything tallies and insist on finalising the deal inside the address on the V5C.' Ian's golden rule on buying is: 'If in any doubt, walk away. There'll be another car tomorrow.'

Deterring car thieves

Steering clear of stolen cars is one thing, but how can you prevent your car being nicked? According to Ian Elliott: 'Clear vehicle identification works. Professionally applied ID marks are the biggest single thing you can do to make it difficult for anyone to change a car's identity or dispose of its parts.'

Ian cited Toyota as the best example he knows. Toyota uses the Retainagroup's system, which marks each car repeatedly with a unique number, recorded on the Retainagroup's International Security Register (ISR). In addition to this, Toyota marks every panel on its cars with the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN). This makes changing the identity of a Toyota much more difficult than it is with some other makes. Indeed, we didn't spot one Toyota at the Met's stolen-car pound.

Tracing stolen cars

Tracking systems transmit a signal to pinpoint the location of a stolen car. But with basic systems the car must be reported as stolen before any action can be taken. So if it's stolen while the owner is away, it could be days or hours before the tracker is activated – and the car long gone.

However, more advanced Thatcham Category 5-approved systems use a unique pass-key as well as the standard car key to verify that the owner is driving the car. If the car is driven without the pass-key on board, the tracker automatically alerts a control centre, which calls the owner to check whether they're driving the car. All this happens in minutes, giving thieves far less time to get away. Category 5 systems cost around £500 to buy, with a monthly subscription of £10 or so – but having one fitted can cut your insurance premium.

Avoiding break-ins

Cars are most likely to be targeted when parked outside your home at night. There are some simple steps to avoid becoming a victim of opportunist and planned thefts.

■ Don't leave valuables in your car. If you have to, make sure they aren't in view.



MUST HAVE SAT-NAV

Portable sat-nav systems have become the latest 'must-have' gadget for drivers – and for thieves.

Chad Neilson used his £300 TomTom system to find 25 addresses each day, when installing electricity meters. He said: 'I'm an Australian working in the UK. Finding my way around without it adds over an hour to my day.'

Recently, he parked and went to a service call. 'I left the sat-nav in the van. If you remove and replace it 25 times a day, the bracket will soon wear out,' Chad told us. He covered it from view, with the sign he uses

to tell traffic wardens he's on a call. Returning ten minutes later, Chad found the van window smashed and his TomTom gone.

His insurers said a laptop or tools 'essential for work' were insured but claimed his sat-nav was 'for personal use'. Chad disagrees but is £300 out of pocket as a result.

Major sat-nav makers TomTom and Navman say you should 'remove all evidence of the system every time you leave the vehicle' – but we want them to build in security features too, such as pop-off screens and PIN codes.

MEMBER BENEFIT

Members' helpline

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For one-to-one phone support on queries about Which?, the latest Best Buy information and advice on consumer issues, contact our members' helpline.

Mon-Fri 8.30am-8pm; Sat and bank holidays 9am-1pm

Please give your Which? membership number and daytime phone number. Calls may be monitored or recorded for training. All correspondence to Which? Ltd, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH. You can also fax us on 020 7770 7485 or email which@which.co.uk

We broke in, without causing any damage, in just three seconds

■ Park your car in a securely locked garage, as out of sight is out of mind.

■ Have components (such as glass and other parts) professionally marked. It makes life harder for a thief trying to change the ID or sell the parts. Stickers showing your car has been marked can prompt thieves to look elsewhere for an easier target.

■ Fit a tracking device – again, with stickers advertising that it's there. Thatcham Category 5-approved systems are best. These react automatically and can start tracking a stolen car within minutes.

Safer car parks

Car parks are the second location most commonly targeted by thieves: 26 per cent of car thefts occur here. Crooks know you're unlikely to be able to take all your belongings with you – so where you park could be the difference between losing your valuables and keeping them safe and sound.

Around 2,000 UK car parks are now members of the ParkMark scheme, start-

ed two years ago and administered by the police and local authorities. ParkMark sites give some extra peace of mind for drivers, as the logo is awarded only to sites that have been assessed by independent inspectors. They consider the design and layout of the car park, as well as its surroundings and prevailing crime levels in the area. However, ParkMark sites still don't have to compensate you if your car is broken into.

Mike Franklin, Vehicle Crime Prevention Lead Officer for Northamptonshire Police and a director of the European Secure Vehicle Alliance, has researched sat-nav thefts in his region. He told us: 'None of the crime hotspots included ParkMark facilities.' He added: 'The ParkMark sites are well designed and managed, presenting unsafe environments for thieves and a more secure environment for consumers.'

However, ParkMark sites currently account for only one in ten UK car parks, so there's still much work to be done to raise car-park standards across the board.

**26 per cent
of all car
thefts occur
in car parks**

How we test



We use simple tools to break in – as most thieves do

Breaking new ground

We first tested car security in 1961. But while strategies for fighting car crime have become more sophisticated than our testers back then could ever have imagined, thieves keep finding new ways to steal cars and their valuable contents.

Security features available now include electronic immobilisers, deadlocks, alarms and security glass. All make cars harder to steal and some help to protect the contents – but with many cars, it's still far too easy for a crook to get in and make off with the booty.

To encourage carmakers to raise standards, we time how long it takes to break into each car using destructive methods (such as smashing a window) and non-destructive techniques (such as picking the locks).

The longer it takes us to get into a car, the more points it gets in our scoring system. We also give credit for items such as alarms and coded stereos – if we can't defeat them by disconnecting the battery, for example. No car has achieved 100 per cent yet, but the Audi A6 currently comes closest.



Secure cars: what you should look for



DEADLOCKS

These stop the door from opening, even if a thief breaks the window to use the interior handle. 'One-touch' deadlocks are set whenever you lock the car.



PARTS MARKING

Have the glazing etched with the VIN. Better still, go for a traceability scheme where the glass and other parts are marked and recorded on a secure database. Future buyers can then cross-check the car's ID with the database.

SECURE STORAGE

Genuinely secure, lockable cabin storage is still rare, meaning you have to remove all valuables when you leave the car – a real nuisance, just for a quick loo break.



SECURE STEREOS

Becoming the norm on new cars, but check that the stereo is PIN-coded, vehicle specific (won't work in another car), or multi-part (display is separate from main audio unit).



LOCKING WHEEL NUTS

These need to be better than the two-pin socket-secured parts some carmakers supply. Go for locking wheel nuts with a laser-cut groove to make it harder for thieves to pinch your alloy wheels.

LAMINATED SIDE-GLASS

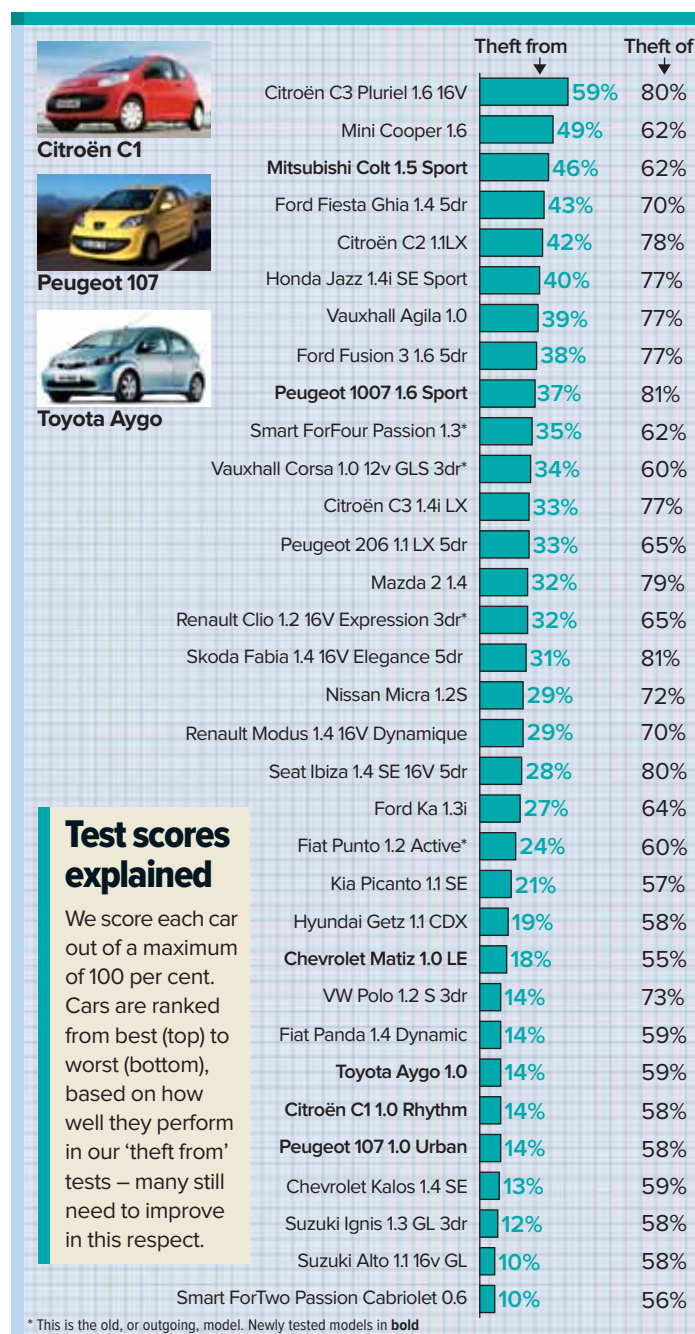
This 'security glass' isn't impregnable, but it takes much more time and energy to break than standard toughened glass. The extra disturbance also increases the chances of a thief getting caught in the act.

Superminis: test scores

What do the three superminis pictured below have in common?

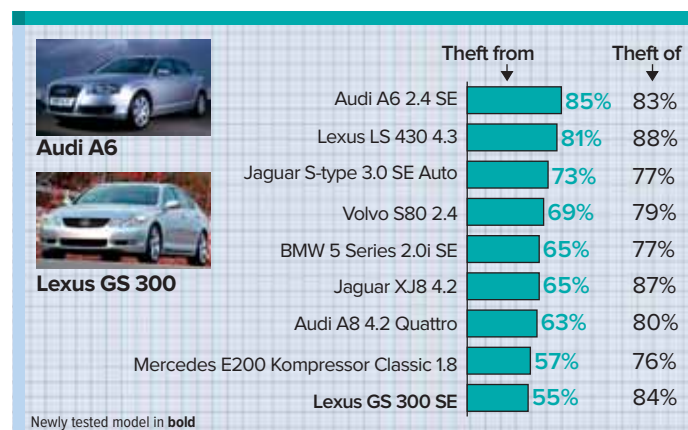
Well, the Citroën C1, Peugeot 107 and the Toyota Aygo are all based on a common design. They're all built in the same factory. They all have the same 1.0-litre petrol engine. They all start at around £7,000 on the road. And, shockingly, we broke into all of them in just three seconds – without needing to cause any damage. Such primitive security places these cars near the bottom of the pile. At least the slightly larger Peugeot 1007 offers more theft protection than its 107 sibling.

Of the other newly tested cars, the Mitsubishi Colt gave the most respectable theft resistance, but it's no class-leader. Its decent alarm is a deterrent and its multi-part, vehicle-specific radio is useless to a thief.



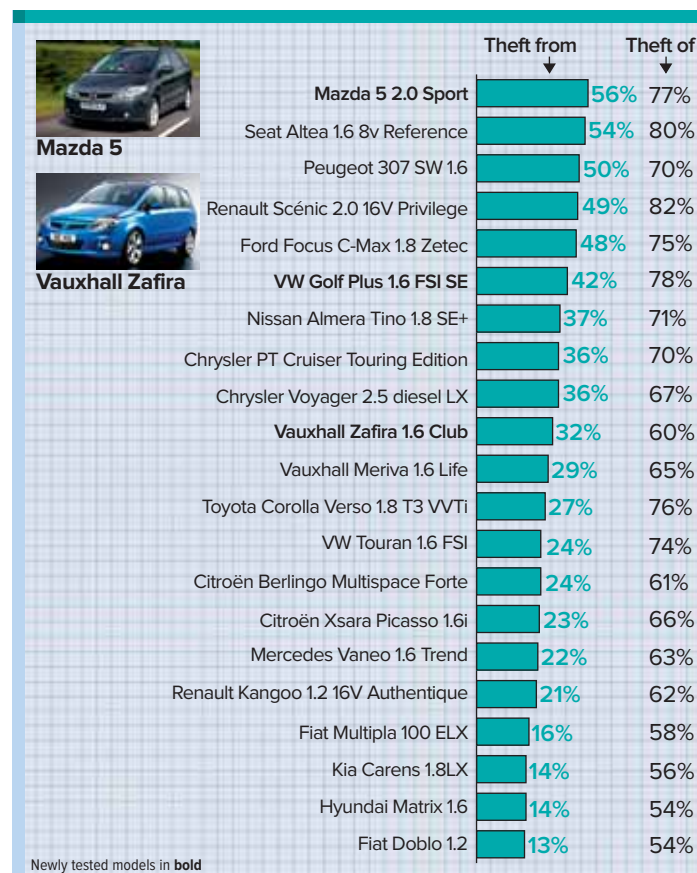
Luxury cars: test scores

The new Lexus GS 300 falls well short of the standards set by the Audi A6. Its deadlocks are 'user-set' and, if you forget to arm them, a thief can overcome the locks in less than two and a half minutes. The side-glass isn't laminated, so a thief with a brick can be in and out in no time.



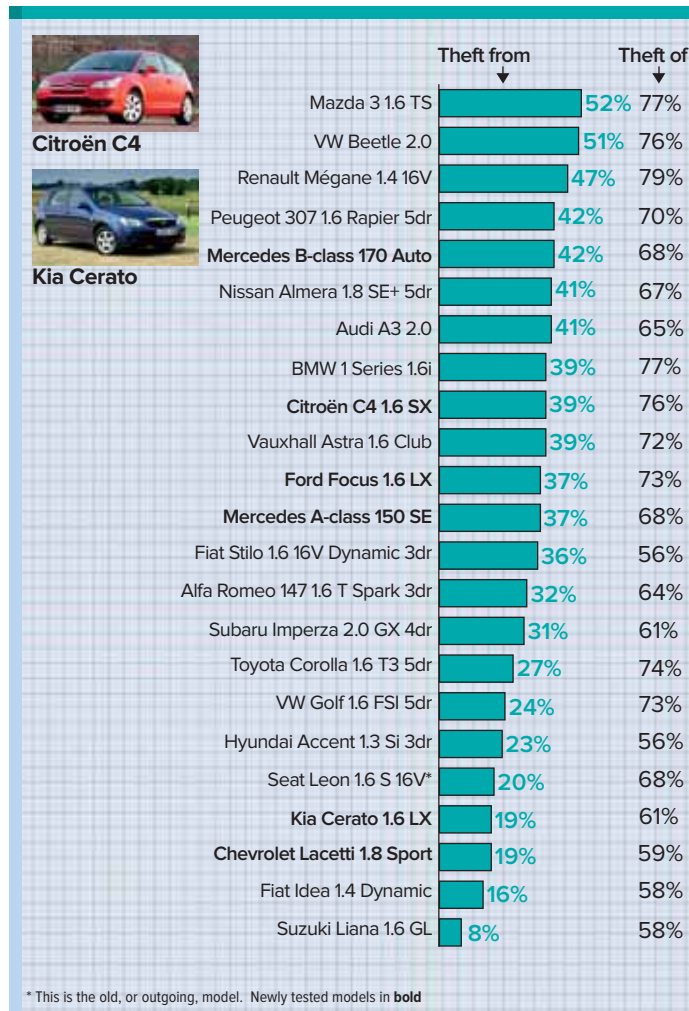
MPVs: test scores

The Mazda 5 Sport is the only new class-leader in our latest tests, just beating the Seat Altea when it comes to protecting your belongings. Disappointingly, the new Vauxhall Zafira is no better than the old model. Our 'thieves' overcame its door locks in just 18 seconds.



Medium cars: test scores

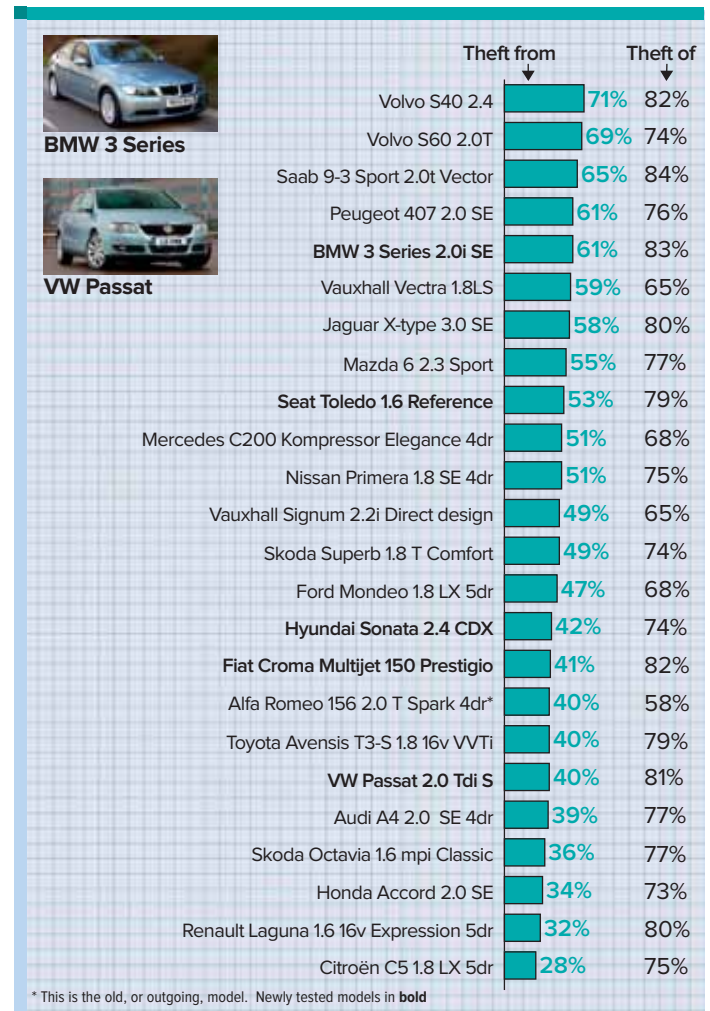
The Citroën C4 is the first medium car to be offered with laminated side-glass (VTS model only), although the lower-spec car we tested doesn't have it. Neither the C4 nor the Mercedes B-class could beat the current class-leaders, while the latest Ford Focus scores only slightly better than the old model. The new Chevrolet Lacetti and Kia Cerato were both found wanting. Although the Cerato has an alarm, that's as good as it gets – we overcame the locks in just three seconds.



Large cars: test scores

The new BMW 3 Series is the best of the new cars tested, but it still doesn't match the old 3 Series – which was the most secure large car we'd seen. However, its 'one-touch' deadlocks are effective – we couldn't overcome them without damaging the car in the process.

Another car that can't match its predecessor is the new VW Passat. It's pretty disappointing for such a key new model, especially as cars from the budget VW brands of Seat and Skoda both score more highly.



Checklist

How you can avoid becoming a victim of car crime

- **Use your garage** A securely locked garage will deter virtually all thieves.
- **Park between other cars** If you park on the road, try to leave your car between two others, making it harder to tow away.
- **Watch your car keys** Don't leave your car keys where a would-be thief can reach

them – ideally, store them in a lockable container away from doors and windows.

- **Use secure car parks** Look for safe parking spots when away from home and never leave valuables on display.

What the industry and government must do to tackle car crime

- **Car manufacturers** Offer more models with security glazing as standard. Design cars to include a truly secure,

lockable space for items like laptops, iPods, mobile phones and portable sat-nav units.

- **Insurers** Provide substantial insurance discounts for cars with professionally marked parts and tracking systems.
- **Sat-nav manufacturers** Bring in a system of PIN codes, or similar, to render units useless if stolen. Make them capable of acting like a GPS tracker device if stolen.
- **Home Office** Update parking laws to make car-park owners legally responsible for the care of cars parked on their property.