

Calling time on car crime

Home Office statistics proudly state that today's car crime rate is just 40 per cent of 1995 levels. But is the battle against vehicle crime truly being won?

Today, thanks to the near-universal use of immobilisers, stealing a car without the keys is a difficult proposition. Home Secretary John Reid said recently: 'Since being made compulsory in 1998, electronic immobilisers have had a great impact on car theft.'

Can we trust the statistics?

It's been argued that the official car crime statistics may be worse than no statistics at all. Many people do not report car crime because they feel nothing will be done – or because of the detrimental effect it may have on their insurance premiums.



Key theft: the new face of car crime

A recent independent review of crime figures said: 'The Home Secretary is concerned that public trust in crime statistics has declined to such an extent that it is no longer possible to have a debate about (crime policy) on the basis of agreed facts.' The report stressed the importance of restoring public confidence in these stats. We back the need for clearer reporting.

Regardless of the true figures, the nature of car crime has shifted. There are many more incidences of key theft – where criminals target a vehicle's keys – because it's usually easier to break into a house than it is to break into a car and bypass the immobiliser (see 'Smash and grab key theft', p23).

More frighteningly, drivers themselves, especially women, are being targeted while in their cars, or mugged for their keys. The Metropolitan Police says carjacking rose 25 per cent from 2004 to 2005 (541 to 721 cases); burglary targeting car keys jumped 40 per cent from 2000 to 2005.

Alternatively, criminals will simply lift the car on to a transporter for its spare-part value. The cars are broken up and sold off, in many cases outside the UK. Without the use of unique ID markings on each high-value part, tracing any black-market spares is nigh-on impossible. It's thought that at least 35 per cent of stolen cars are never seen again.

'The recovery rate for top-end models is as low as 10 per cent'

1995 TOP CRIME: THEFT FROM CARS



Number of cars stolen	510,000
Joyriding offences	400,000
UK cars with immobilisers	46%
Theft from cars	2,544,000
Vandalism offences	1,826,000
UK population worried about car crime	26% (1996)

2005/6 TOP CRIME: VANDALISM



Number of cars stolen	349,000
Joyriding offences	140,000
UK cars with immobilisers	79%
Theft from cars	1,121,000
Vandalism offences	1,697,000
UK population worried about car crime	14%

Detective Inspector Steve Lodge of the Met's stolen vehicle unit says: 'The recovery rate for a middle-market car is as much as 60 per cent, but for top-end models it's as low as 10 per cent.' Given the potential rewards of a high-value vehicle theft, it's no wonder organised gangs are targeting prestige makes. After all, it's just as easy to lift a Merc on to a transporter as it is a Mini.

Cloning and numberplate theft

Cloning a car involves applying a false identity to it. Thieves will target a car – say, a blue Subaru Impreza – then find the details of another, identical Impreza – maybe one on a dealer's forecourt. Having stolen the Impreza, the gang changes its identity, by forging the Vin (vehicle identification number), numberplates and paperwork.

Anyone checking the cloned car's details would find a clean record, therefore arousing no suspicion. This is bad news for a potential buyer, who could lose the car and the money paid if the police later reclaim it. It also makes life hard for the police wishing to trace a car used for criminal purposes, having been spotted on CCTV.

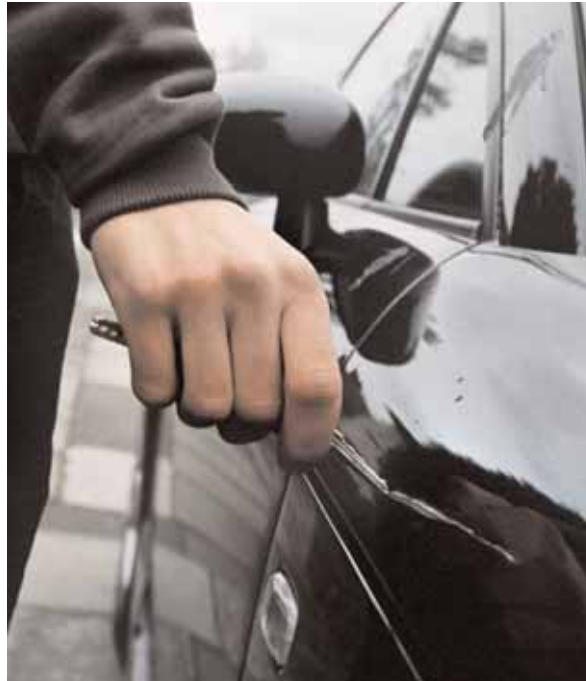
In 2004 police records showed that 77 per cent of stolen and recovered vehicles were found to be cloned. In one case, officers discovered no fewer than eight cars with the same numberplate.

A false identity for a car can be created simply by fitting stolen numberplates. At present, it's far too easy for this to happen, so solutions are being developed. Tamper-proof numberplates discolour and break as soon as any removal is attempted. Further in to the future, we may well see electronic 'senders' containing vehicle ID information, which can be scanned by police or roadside equipment.

Top tips: buying second-hand

There is very little you can do to protect yourself against cloning, as it's the most sophisticated form of car crime. But follow these tips to minimise your chances of being ripped off.

- Organise a vehicle history check (£3-£40, depending on service) and carefully follow the advice given by Auto Trader, HPI and Experian. Make sure that it includes insurance to cover you against incorrect information (an HPI check includes insurance for up to £10,000).
- Never pay cash for a vehicle – criminals selling cloned vehicles will not accept bankers' drafts.
- Ensure you get a landline number, not just a mobile phone number.
- Make sure the name and address on the vehicle registration certificate (V5c) matches that of the person you are buying from, supported by identification.
- Speak to any previous owners listed on the V5c document, if possible, to help verify the car's history.



Vandalism affects 3.5 million drivers every year

The most common form of vandalism is damaged bodywork

Vandalism still rife

No less than half a billion pounds worth of damage was caused by vandals in 2005. It's a problem that affects nearly 12 per cent of motorists – 3.5 million of us – each year. By far the most common form of vandalism is damaged bodywork – some 37 per cent of criminal damage. Wing mirrors are another easy target, accounting for just over 20 per cent of reported damage.

London is the vandalism hotspot of the UK, followed by Manchester, the Wirral, Edinburgh and Birmingham. It even affects the type of car people drive – one in five motorists wouldn't consider a prestige car as it would be a target for criminal damage.

Emma Holyer, of the insurance company

Top ten targets

Top ten targets for key theft and carjacking in Greater London in 2005 (Source: Metropolitan Police)

- 1** BMW 3 Series (1991-1999)
- 2** Volkswagen Golf (1997-2005)
- 3** Mercedes-Benz CLK (1997-2005)
- 4** Vauxhall Corsa (1993-2000)
- 5** Ford Focus (1998-2004)
- 6** BMW X5 (2000-2006)
- 7** Ford Fiesta (1995-2002)
- 8** Volkswagen Polo (1994-2002)
- 9** Peugeot 206 (1998 on)
- 10** Vauxhall Astra (1991-1998)



SMASH AND GRAB KEY THEFT

Alan Jackson 50, car dealer
Alan Jackson of Oldham, Manchester, believes the sight of the keys to his £45,000 Audi RS4 sitting on the windowsill resulted in a classic case of key theft. By his own admission, he mindlessly left the keys on display in a window at his house, only for a thief to walk by and smash the window.

Alan said: 'Within a matter of seconds he'd driven off in my car.'

Stupidly, I hadn't activated the tracking unit fitted to the car so the police couldn't trace it immediately. However, as soon as it was activated, the car was tracked and was recovered within minutes of it being switched on.'

He said he had learned many lessons from the whole episode last November, the main ones being to 'never leave my keys on show and always fit a tracking device.'

Top tips: avoiding key theft

- Treat your keys as the car's value in cash. Never leave them in the car unattended. Always take them to a safe place at night – never on display or within reach of a window or letterbox.
- Key theft doesn't just happen at home – pickpockets may strike at busy areas such as service stations.
- Keep keys safe at all times.

Inside the mind of a car thief

We took an ex-car thief with us to a typical suburban railway station car park in Kent. Having spent time behind bars for car crime, 'Jon' (not his real name) knew exactly what to look for. Perhaps surprisingly, out of around 50 cars in the car park, half aroused Jon's interest as possible targets – which he claims is typical of most residential streets and car parks.

VALUABLES ON DISPLAY

Within minutes of our arrival, we noticed a Mercedes with several valuables on display. Jon spotted them straightaway: 'I've seen the briefcase and noticed the catches are open, which means I'd have no trouble getting the contents. Also there's what looks to be a digital camera and a pair of binoculars – and if that's what's on display, who's to say what is in the boot?'



KEYS TO THE GARAGE

One of the most worrying finds in the car park was a BMW with its garage door remote opener on display. Also in the car was an open addressed envelope, probably showing the owner's address. 'I would simply take the garage opener to that address and help myself,' said Jon.



CCTV NOT A DETERRENT

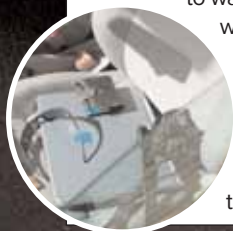
The car park had CCTV, but Jon thinks this isn't a deterrent. We looked at cars for two hours yet were never challenged.

Jon said: 'There may be CCTV, but can it get a clear picture of someone in a hoodie, in the dark or in foggy weather? Often the evidence is insufficient to prosecute. You can also work out where the blind spots are and work in them.'



OPEN INVITATIONS

'People often leave their windows open in summer, which makes life easy for thieves,' said Jon. 'Also, drivers often leave their cars to warm up unattended in the winter, and thieves can just jump in and drive off. In this station car park, it's a fair bet the owners will be away all day, so you just have to wait for a quiet time in between trains to avoid being spotted.'



BE CAREFUL WHEN SELLING

Jon also stressed the importance of being vigilant when buying and selling cars: 'There are websites which offer "replacement" documents, from birth certificates to P60s, driving licences and V5s (logbooks). Always be careful when dealing with strangers. Avoid giving your address over the phone – that's just asking for key theft, especially on luxury cars.'

Direct Line, said: 'Vandals have become savvy to where they can get away with this pointless crime. Contact the police or your local authority to report vandalism. They can take measures to deter these thugs.'

Insurance implications

It's not worth claiming on your car insurance if the damage is minor. First, you'll have to pay an excess – usually anywhere between £50 and £250. Second, it could mean you lose your no-claims bonus – up to 65 per cent off your premium. Of course, it's possible to protect your no-claims bonus, but you're still liable to pay an excess for any claim.

Extra security features, such as tracking devices, can cut premiums. High-value cars are often a target for thieves, so insurers often discount if one is fitted, but it may not be necessary on mainstream models.

You should also get a lower premium if you park your car in a safe place. Home Office research shows the risk of theft from a garage is 20 times less than from a driveway and 50 times less than street parking. DI Steve Lodge recommends: 'If you have a garage, use it. There is nothing more appealing to a thief than a shiny new sports car on the driveway.'

Vandalism often requires just minor repairs. The average cost of damage from vandalism is around £150 – in many cases this isn't sufficient to claim on your policy. This also means victims aren't reporting criminal damage to the police.

It's estimated that 56 per cent of victims simply don't want the hassle of the reporting process when there is little chance of the culprit being identified. However, reporting the crime helps the police to get resources to tackle it.

Extra security features can cut insurance premiums

We've got your number

Police use high-tech tactics to target car criminals

It's no surprise the police use cameras to spot offenders. Criminals need to use the roads. Deny them the use of the roads, and their ability to commit crime is limited.

Automatic numberplate recognition (ANPR) can spot, read and process a vehicle's identity in a matter of seconds. Not only does it spot untaxed and uninsured cars, and those without an MoT, it can also verify make, model and colour and alert operators to any inconsistencies.

It's estimated that 6 per cent of vehicles on our roads are untaxed, losing the government £220 million in revenue.

A recent pilot scheme called Operation Utah highlighted

the potential benefits of using ANPR intelligently. Equipment was installed on motorway bridges close to the Dartford crossing between Essex and Kent. It scanned 43,000 vehicles, with 1 per cent registering a hit on the database.

Many freight vehicles were found to be in unroadworthy conditions, while one driver had his car impounded for driving without insurance – an offence that adds an average £30 to every insurance premium in the UK. Utah was the first major operation carried out by the Association of Chief Police Officers' newly created Vehicle Crime Intelligence Service (AVCIS).



On duty: numberplate recognition cameras near Dartford



The police are working with other bodies to thwart crime

Which? says

It's too soon to say what the impact of ACVCIS may be, but any agency devoted to storing and sharing information about vehicle crime can only be good for law-abiding motorists. Questions still remain, though, regarding personal privacy.

Foreign plates, too, aren't currently recognised by ANPR, so more international communication is needed to stop criminals. Another obvious route for criminals is to use false numberplates to avoid detection. Before committing to more ANPR, the government needs better initiatives to prevent numberplate theft, such as the use of tamper-proof plates.

Checklist

How to avoid the most common types of car crime

■ **Valuables** Remove all valuables from display, or better still take them with you. This includes clothing, CDs, handbags, sports bags and briefcases. Also, don't leave any documentation on view, such as your insurance details or driving licence.

■ **Sat-navs** Sat-nav units and car stereos are common targets. Remove sat-navs, including the power cord and windscreen mount from the car – and wipe off the sucker mark left by it. Always take off removable faces (where fitted) on car stereos.

■ **Physical lock** If you have a driveway, consider a lockable bollard. If not, a wheel clamp can make life more difficult for thieves.

■ **Lock up** Always lock car doors and boot, and close windows (even when paying for petrol or other quick activities). And take your keys with you.

■ **Steering wheel lock** If your car doesn't have an electronic immobiliser, consider using a strong steering-wheel lock to help safeguard your car overnight.

■ **Alloys** If you have expensive alloy wheels and/or tyres, fit locking wheel nuts. These are usually, but not always, standard on new cars but often missing on older vehicles.

■ **Tracking device** Tracking devices can be invaluable if a car is stolen, but remember they usually need an annual subscription – you won't have any protection if this isn't paid.

■ **Check what you've got** Make the most of your vehicle's existing security features. Read the owners' handbook to find out how they work. For instance, sometimes arming the deadlocks requires a 'double press' of a remote key.