
Labeling Automobile Parts to Combat Theft

By PETER FINN

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Motor vehicle theft represents a major problem in the United States. In 1995, motor vehicle¹ owners reported nearly 1.5 million thefts representing 1 out of every 139 vehicles in the country.² The theft of parts from vehicles poses an even more common problem, outnumbering vehicle theft 5 to 1.³

In the 1950s and 1960s, young adults stole cars, drove them for a short period of time, and then

abandoned them, resulting in very high vehicle recovery rates. In fact, in many smaller and rural jurisdictions, joyriding remains the predominant reason for car thefts. However, beginning in the 1970s, substantial numbers of thieves in larger cities started stealing cars for profit, resulting in fewer recovered cars and more parts missing from those recovered. Car thefts increased because of a proliferation of “chop shops,” which sell stolen

parts either directly to consumers or to automobile dealerships or repair shops for resale to customers.

During this period, thieves began to employ numerous clever schemes that remain in use today. For example, thieves steal, strip, and abandon a car, and the innocent owner reports it stolen. The police eventually recover the car and cancel the theft record. The thieves then purchase the frame at an insurance or police auction, reattach the stolen parts, and sell the vehicle. Vehicle owners use this same technique, stripping their own cars, removing enough parts for their insurance companies to declare a total loss, then filing a claim for reimbursement.

In another commonly used scam, car thieves buy a salvaged car for its title and vehicle identification number (VIN). Stealing the same model car, they place the VIN from the salvaged car onto the stolen car, which they sell to an unwitting buyer. These examples represent a small number of the various techniques car thieves use. Law enforcement must make the most of new strategies developed to combat these innovative car thieves.

FEDERAL PARTS-MARKING LEGISLATION

Until recently, automobile theft investigators, in an attempt to cope with these types of theft schemes, often had no means of identifying which vehicles the parts came from, if the parts were stolen, or whether a VIN actually belonged to the car on which investigators found it. As a result, Congress enacted the Motor Vehicle Theft Law Enforcement Act of 1984, which directed the

U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) to develop a vehicle theft prevention standard mandating that automobile manufacturers inscribe or affix an identifying number or symbol onto certain parts of passenger cars that the DOT deemed a high theft risk.⁴

Manufacturers designed anti-theft labels⁵ to trace automobile parts to the original vehicle in order to help prove that they were stolen. In addition, because the federal government and many states made it a criminal offense to remove or tamper with the labels, law enforcement investigators may seize and confiscate parts with defaced or missing labels. In some states, officers also may arrest individuals in possession of cars or parts with missing labels.

In 1992, Congress enacted the Federal Anti-Car Theft Act, directing DOT to require that manufacturers mark an additional 50 percent of their remaining automobile models by December 1994 regardless of the vehicle's theft rate. This act further required that the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) assess the effectiveness of the parts marking by 1997, and, if parts marking was found to inhibit chop-shop operations and deter motor vehicle theft, extend parts marking to all remaining vehicle lines by December 1997.

THE STUDY

In response to this mandate, the National Institute of Justice commissioned a study to determine whether anti-theft labels have substantially reduced automobile thefts. One part of the evaluation examines the National Highway

Traffic Safety Administration data on automobile theft rates based on information from the FBI's National Crime Information Center and the DOT's insurer database.⁶ Another part of the evaluation examined the experiences and opinions of automobile theft investigators regarding the effectiveness of automobile parts anti-theft labels.

Do Labels Promote Arrests and Prosecution?

To assess the effectiveness of anti-theft labels, independent researchers conducted telephone interviews with automobile theft investigators from 47 jurisdictions nationwide, which varied in size and type of agency. Seventy-five percent of the investigators (30 out of 40)⁷ reported that anti-theft labels aid officers in arresting individuals who steal or sell stolen parts and vehicles.

Nearly two-thirds of the investigators (24 of 40) also reported that

labels help in prosecuting chop shop operators and other automobile thieves in two respects. First, the labels encourage the state's attorney to file charges because missing labels, or ones that do not match the VIN, constitute convincing proof of theft. Investigators can testify that manufacturers place the labels on the vehicles in the factory, which proves that the labels should have existed. Furthermore, officers believed that fewer cases even have to go to trial because the suspects usually plead guilty as a result of irrefutable evidence of theft provided by the labels.

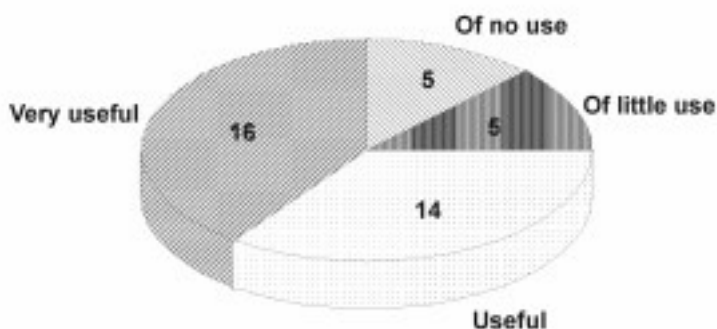
Second, the labels help prosecutors win cases because they provide valuable evidence that the vehicles or parts were stolen. Some investigators reported that, while not sufficient evidence for a conviction by themselves, anti-theft labels that suspects have removed or tampered with contribute to securing a conviction. In addition, labels help

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Investigators' Opinions About the Usefulness of Antitheft Labels in Making Auto Theft Arrests (n=40)



investigators identify stolen parts and provide probable cause for further investigations that can lead to prosecution.

Do Labels Deter Theft?

Law enforcement investigators remained divided about whether antitheft labels help deter actual automobile theft. Officers felt that labels provide the greatest deterrent with chop-shop operators because operators usually will not purchase parts with missing labels or without proper paperwork. Because many states give law enforcement agencies authority to conduct administrative searches of salvage yards and repair shops without a search warrant, owners of these operations seldom accept or keep parts without labels and frequently report suspicious parts because they know they can face prosecution for receiving them.

Even if labels do not deter thieves, they do increase their "cost of doing business." In one

videotaped undercover case involving a body shop, the owner said, "I know that I said I would give you \$500 for that car, but I can give you only \$200 because the parts are marked. Now I'm going to have to go to the trouble of removing the labels."

Whether thieves need to spend more time to select cars without labels or receive less money for the extra time chop-shop operators must take to remove existing ones, antitheft labels undoubtedly place a bigger burden on thieves. At the same time, some investigators reported that labels decreased their investigative burden because if the label VIN matches the public VIN, then they do not have to look at the confidential VIN for further identification.⁸

Obstacles to Effective Use of Labels

Several factors hinder the effective use of antitheft labels. Investigators reported that the ease of

removal represents the most serious obstacle to identifying the vehicle's owner and proving the parts were stolen.

There are two main reasons investigators cannot be certain whether the labels are missing or are simply not supposed to be there in the first place. First, because some automobile manufacturers do not redesign parts for a period of years, the parts remain interchangeable; therefore, those parts manufactured before the parts-marking legislation took effect were unmarked legitimately. Second, some models with factory-installed anti-theft devices remain exempt from the label requirement.

Still, most manufacturers use adhesive labels for the markings, which when removed, leave a trace, commonly called a "footprint," on the part. When thieves remove these labels, investigators can use an ultraviolet or "black" light to detect the footprint.

Despite the reported ease of removing the labels, investigators still can detect the footprint with a verifier or prove that a label was mandated. Although thieves can sand and paint over the labels, seasoned detectives know whether a part should have a label and can testify in court that the label was missing. However, because many departments do not have access to verifiers, and, even with verifiers, the footprint does not reveal the VIN, investigators cannot identify the previous owner or prove that the suspect stole the parts.

In addition, even when the labels exist, most patrol officers make little or no use of them because they have not been trained to locate the

labels or to become familiar with which cars even should have labels. As a result, few patrol officers refer cars with missing or suspicious labels to their departments or state automobile theft units for further investigation.

Over half of the jurisdictions in the study reported that the use of counterfeit antitheft labels remains the only other significant barrier to making effective use of the current labels. Some investigators reported that thieves now use computer graphics to manufacture very sophisticated counterfeit labels. However, over half of the investigators who have discovered counterfeit labels reported not only that they rarely encounter them, but also that they can easily recognize counterfeits.

Recommendations

Investigators had several suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of antitheft labels. A large majority of investigators preferred that manufacturers stamp VINs on the component parts instead of using labels and that they mark more parts, citing seats and airbags most frequently. As a substitute for stamping, a few investigators proposed that label manufacturers develop the technology that will leave a footprint with the actual VIN if the label is removed.

Investigators also suggested two steps that might enhance the effectiveness of parts marking in their investigations. First, departments should provide more systematic and frequent training regarding the labels, which would improve jurisdictions' ability to use them effectively. Moreover, patrol officers

may identify stolen cars more aggressively if they receive training on which vehicles must have labels, the location of the labels, and the officer's right to seize vehicles with missing or damaged labels. Although existing manuals list which cars have labels, more comprehensive training would benefit officers.

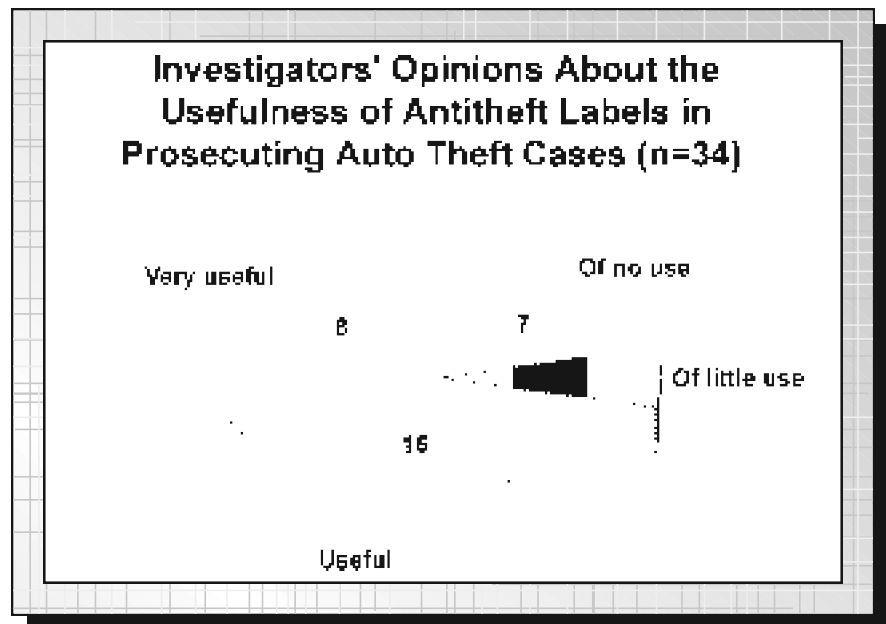
State legislation that makes tampering with or removing labels a crime could increase the effectiveness of antitheft labels. Without state statutes, investigators can only bring charges of possession of stolen property for these activities. Because only some states prohibit removing a label or possessing a component part with a removed label, thieves can avoid salvage inspection statutes in their states by having the cars retitled in another state that does not require inspections of antitheft labels. As a result, a federal statute requiring a salvage examination nationwide would

make the labels more effective in both deterring and catching thieves.

CONCLUSION

Today, more foreign and domestic automobile manufacturers exist than ever before, each producing large numbers of different vehicle makes and models. This constant influx of cars and parts poses a unique problem for law enforcement officers faced with investigating automobile thefts. Investigators must use all available resources to combat automobile theft and automobile parts theft.

To thieves, automobile parts are worth a great deal more than the complete car. To counter the number of car thefts committed for the parts, Congress enacted legislation that requires manufacturers to label certain parts of some models. While many investigators agree that the labels help them identify stolen vehicles and arrest offenders, a



number of drawbacks remain. Easily removed labels, exemptions to the law, and a lack of proper training hamper the effective use of this worthwhile crime prevention tool.

By soliciting the opinions of investigators in the field, the National Institute of Justice has taken an important first step in improving law enforcement's ability to use every means available to stop car thieves. With the cooperation of automobile manufacturers and lawmakers and the help of a small label, investigators can make a significant impact on an increasing crime problem. ♦

Endnotes

¹ The FBI's *Crime in the United States* defines motor vehicles as autos, trucks, buses, motorcycles, motorscooters, snowmobiles, etc.

² U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States, 1995*, (Washington DC, 1996), 50.

³ P. Harris and R. Clarke, "Car Chopping, Parts Marking and the Motor Vehicle Theft Law Enforcement Act of 1984," *Sociology and Social Research* 75, no. 4 (1991): 228-331.

⁴ The act required manufacturers to label the following passenger car parts: engine; transmission; both front doors; both rear doors; hood; both bumpers; both front fenders; deck lid, tailgate, hatchback, or sliding or cargo door(s); and both rear quarter panels. Later legislation also required labels on the side assembly of utility vehicles and on the pickup box, cargo box, or both of light-duty trucks.

⁵ Different law enforcement agencies—and even different police officers within the same agency—use different terms to refer to component parts' markings. Some of the terms include Mylar labels, NHTSA labels, DOT labels, antitheft labels, VIN labels, high-theft line labels, and automobile tails. Investigators may refer to the markings as stickers, tabs, strips, or labels. For purpose of consistency, this article refers to them as antitheft labels.

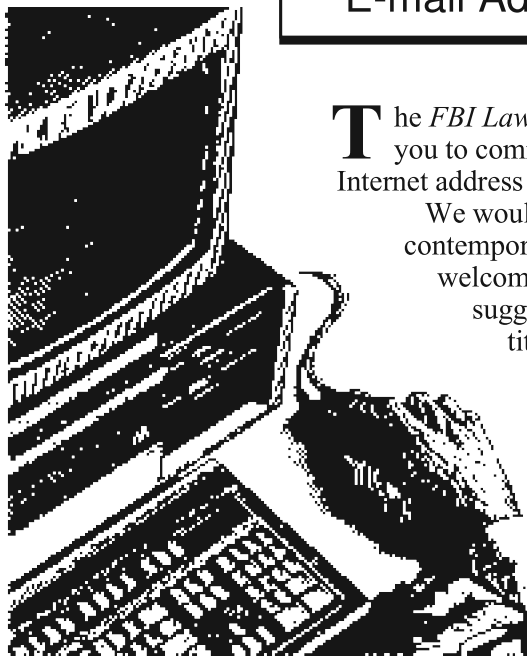
⁶ Abt Associates Inc., Cambridge, MA

⁷ In 5 of the smaller cities and rural states, investigators indicated that they did not use labels to catch thieves because thieves there steal cars primarily for joyriding, resulting in the recovery of intact vehicles and VINs. Accordingly, in order not to skew the results, researchers did not include the data from these five jurisdictions—and one other small, but high-theft area—for the analysis. As a result, the number of investigators (40) does not equal the number of jurisdictions (47).

⁸ Located on the door area, the label VIN sticker verifies that the vehicle conforms to all federal laws. The public VIN is visible in the windshield area. The location of confidential VINs varies, but typically they are "hidden" on the frame or the firewall of automobiles.

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