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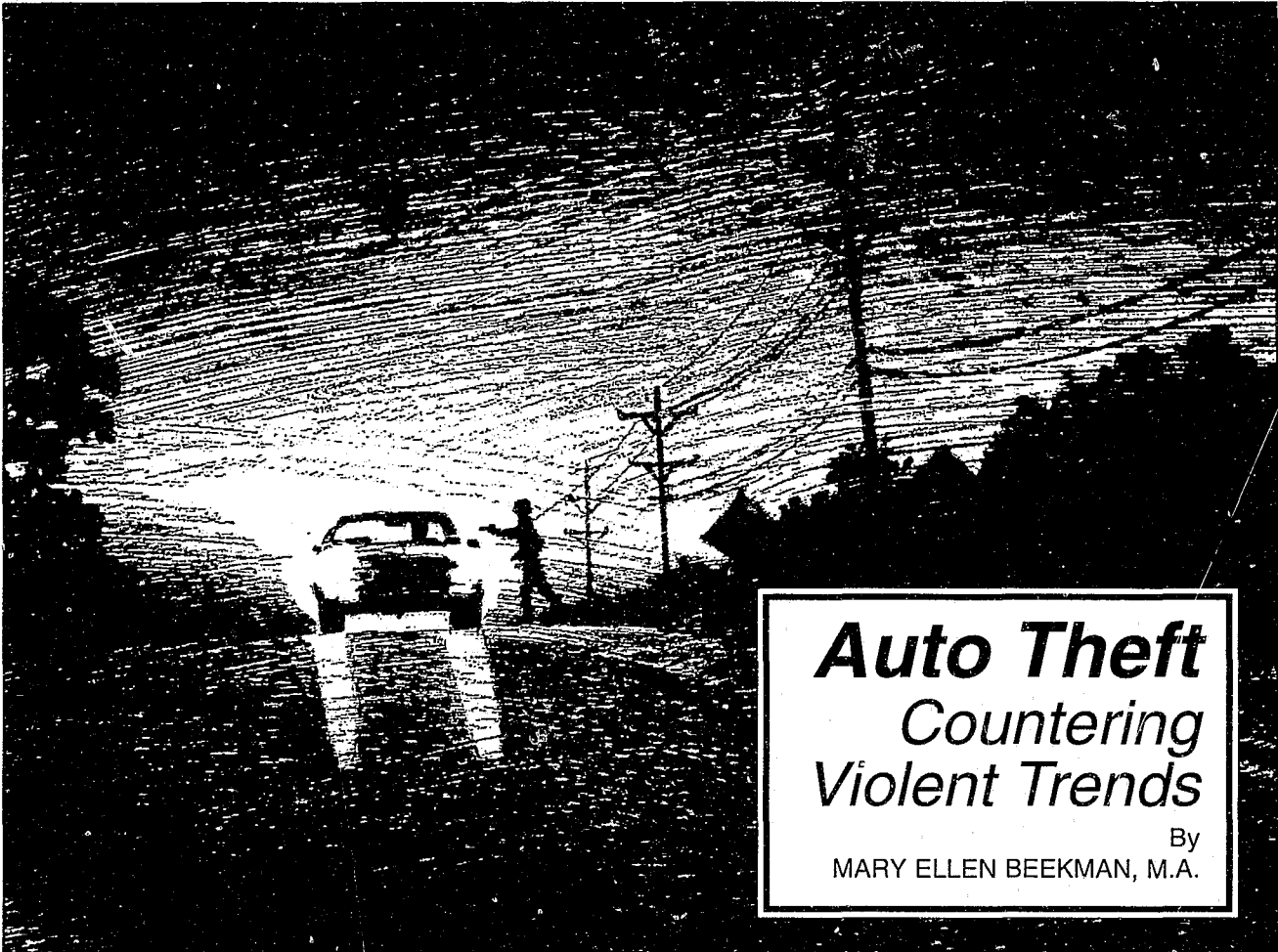
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Auto Theft Countering Violent Trends

By
MARY ELLEN BEEKMAN, M.A.

According to the most recent Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) statistics, over 1,661,700 vehicle thefts occurred in 1991.¹ This record-high number continues an alarming trend that began in the mid-1980's. Between 1984 and 1991, the number of vehicle thefts increased by 61 percent. In 1991, direct losses to the American public traceable to this crime totaled nearly \$8.3 million.²

As disturbing as the rising rate of vehicle theft is, an even more ominous trend recently began to dominate the Nation's headlines. Armed vehicle theft, led by its most infamous and widespread variety—carjacking—represents a violent

escalation in an already-booming area of criminal activity.

ARMED VEHICLE THEFT

Carjacking

An informal survey of FBI field divisions determined that just over 19,000 carjackings occurred throughout the United States in 1991; over 25,000 were estimated to have occurred in 1992.³ While these figures actually represent a small proportion of the overall number of vehicle thefts (less than 1 percent), the random nature, acute sense of violation, and threat of violence inherent in carjacking provoke intense community fear of this crime.

Although a limited number of armed vehicle thefts appear to be sponsored by theft rings or criminal gangs, carjacking, in general, continues to be a crime of opportunity, committed by individuals or small groups. Analysis of FBI cases and discussion with supervisors in more than 30 field offices—who maintain regular contact with local and State police agencies—reinforce the position that very few armed vehicle thefts are actually the work of organized theft rings or criminal gangs.

Methods used by carjackers vary. For the most part, more organized groups tend to commit the highly publicized “bump and run” and “rolling road block” thefts.

However, analysis indicates that the majority of carjackings occur in parking lots, residential streets or driveways, service stations, and intersections.

Theft from Parking Garages

While the now-familiar carjacking method is the most notorious strain of armed vehicle theft, it is not the only type. Car thieves in metropolitan areas have also been known to "case" parking garages looking for vehicles, which they then steal after incapacitating garage attendants.

In a scheme investigated by the FBI's New York City field office during "Operation Fleetwheels," several armed individuals would enter 24-hour public parking garages that were "inventoried" earlier in the day by a member of the theft ring to ensure a sufficient number of targeted vehicles. The subjects forced the garage attendant(s) at gunpoint into the trunk of a nearby

vehicle, as a member of the theft ring located the keys to selected automobiles. Within minutes, each ring member drove out of the garage with a luxury vehicle.

To evade the police, the perpetrators parked the stolen vehicles in another 24-hour garage. The thieves left with a parking stub, while the police searched nearby roadways for the recently stolen vehicles.

Later, ring members removed the license plates and placed temporary tags on the vehicles. After a day or so, the perpetrators retrieved the stolen vehicles and drove them to a new location, usually during rush hour. The perpetrators then stored the vehicles in a garage in another part of the city until they were resold.

The Key is the Key

These types of crimes stem from a basic rule of today's car thieves: Obtain the keys, as well as the vehicle. Stealing cars—espe-

cially expensive automobiles—without keys invariably results in considerable damage to the vehicles, and thus, lowers their price on the illegal market.

This situation exists largely because manufacturers of luxury automobiles are taking steps to ensure that only individuals possessing the original keys can operate vehicles. Some manufacturers now make keys that cannot be easily duplicated commercially—the manufacturer is the only source of the key. Other automakers embed computer chips into ignition keys. Removing the key from the ignition immobilizes the vehicle, and only a key with a matching computer chip can start the motor.

In addition to the growing sophistication of factory precautions and the need to safeguard the value of stolen automobiles, the prevalence of vehicle security systems also underscores the need for thieves to steal the keys along with the vehicles. All of these factors seem to lead to a shift from traditional vehicle-theft techniques to more confrontational and violent methods.

Backlash

A reformed car thief recently told investigators that "for every pro there is a con." The individual elaborated that whenever confronted by an obstacle, thieves find a way around it. Applying this to the automobile theft trade, he stated that the more sophisticated antitheft devices become, the more cunning thieves must be to overcome them.

This reasoning may help to explain the dramatic rise in armed vehicle thefts. In many cases,



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carjacking represents a reckless, but effective, backlash against the use of sophisticated antitheft devices. From a thief's perspective, putting a gun to a victim's head overcomes any antitheft device.

At the same time, the use of sophisticated antitheft devices leads some drivers to assume a false sense of security. This sometimes causes them to abandon normal precautions.

Investigators concur that thieves will find a way to steal a vehicle, regardless of any antitheft system in place. Recently, thieves stole a stretch limousine from a driveway at the owner's business. They left behind only one item—the antitheft device that the owner attached to the steering wheel.

THIEVES AND THE MARKET

The majority of vehicles stolen by carjackers are taken for joyrides or to use in committing other crimes. Analysis suggests that, nationally, as many as 90 percent of the vehicles taken in carjackings are eventually recovered.

However, some vehicles taken through carjackings and the majority of vehicles stolen by conventional means, especially luxury automobiles, find their way to enterprises known as "chop shops," which deal in stolen car parts. The market for stolen vehicles also includes local drug dealers or other wealthy criminals who "order" specific luxury automobiles as status symbols.

Like most people, criminals enjoy a bargain and will seek to purchase "previously owned" vehicles at drastically discounted prices. Criminals order luxury automobiles through intermediaries who pur-

chase these stolen vehicles from street thieves.

Disposal of Stolen Vehicles

When carjackers or other thieves steal vehicles *for profit*, they generally attempt to dispose of them quickly through intermediaries. Once the vehicles are in their possession, the intermediaries determine the next step—either dismantling or alteration.

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Although some vehicles are entirely dismantled, or "chopped," for parts, in most cases, either the front or rear end of a stolen vehicle will be attached to a legitimate vehicle of the same type that has been damaged. In this way, the entire vehicle now becomes "legitimate." Chop shop operators then dismantle the rest of the stolen vehicle or discard the remaining parts completely.

If operators decide to make the entire stolen vehicle legitimate, they take it to an individual who specializes in altering vehicle identification numbers (VIN). This task became more complex in recent years, as manufacturers began imprinting

the VIN in several different locations within vehicles. Intermediaries rely on skilled alterers, since quality workmanship ensures a higher resale price. Generally, these specialists earn between \$1,500 and \$3,000 per vehicle.

In addition to the VIN, however, alterers must also legitimize the plastic MYLAR stickers that Federal law now requires manufacturers to place on certain major automobile parts. Because altering these stickers is more difficult than changing the VIN, some alterers purchase counterfeit MYLAR plates. In many jurisdictions, it appears that this type of counterfeiting is on the rise, aided by new computer technology that makes MYLAR counterfeiting easier.

Documentation and Insurance

Although altering the VIN and MYLAR plates effectively creates a "new" vehicle to sell, intermediaries must still obtain documentation so that the vehicle may be registered or exported.⁴ Accordingly, these intermediaries generally know where and how to obtain counterfeit paperwork. Other times, they may attempt to legitimize vehicles by obtaining *valid* State titles.

Investigators also believe that some of these vehicles carry legitimate automobile insurance obtained through assigned risk pools by brokers who are aware of the vehicles' true status. Intermediaries who wish to bypass the expense of securing legitimate insurance can purchase less expensive fraudulent insurance identification cards.

To show the "reauthentication" of a luxury vehicle, intermediaries may take prospective buyers for a

Carjacking—One Department's Response

When Detroit, Michigan, experienced a substantial increase in the number of carjackings, the police department responded by forming a task force whose primary responsibility is to investigate this crime. This departmental task force operates in addition to the multiagency Fugitive Task Force that focuses on the interstate aspects of violent vehicle theft. The Detroit Police Department task force serves as a central repository for reports, as a processing center for individuals arrested for carjacking, and as a source of information regarding manpower deployment.

Officers from the patrol force, the commercial auto theft unit, and the armed robbery unit make up the task force. The use of patrol officers on the task force prevents the depletion of personnel from one command and provides a source of information regarding the activities of individuals in their respective patrol areas. Personnel from the other two units give the task force the expertise needed to investigate and prosecute carjackings from all aspects, as well as to provide investigative training to less experienced members.

In addition, crime scene technicians, latent print experts, and crime analysts support the investigative efforts of the task force. Combining the efforts of the task force and support units allows criminal investigations to be consolidated, which ultimately increases the number of cases resolved.

The task force concentrates its efforts on a comprehensive crime prevention program, an intensified patrol force, the identification of habitual offenders, and the assurance of arrest and prosecution. With these methods, the task force works to minimize the impact of carjackings on the citizens of Detroit.

By educating and reminding the public of basic crime prevention techniques, the task force hopes to reduce the probability of a citizen becoming a victim. Augmenting the police force with roving uniform patrols and surveillance units enables the department to concentrate its crime reduction efforts in areas experiencing high rates

of criminal activity and allows for high police visibility. This high visibility also enhances community relations, increases the rate of apprehension, and serves as a deterrent to would-be carjackers.

The identification and apprehension of habitual offenders significantly reduces the number of carjackings because this random crime depends on opportunity. The department determined that a minority of the criminal element committed the majority of the crimes. Therefore, linking an individual to more than one crime proves to be a valuable tool in decreasing the number of future incidents. Also, obtaining multiple warrants enables prosecutors to employ habitual offenders status, which provides the court system with the means to give offenders longer sentences.

Because lack of prosecution and uncertainty of punishment caused the criminal element in Detroit to become more brazen in their acts against society, special prosecutors from the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office work with the task force to prevent these felons from slipping through the system. The prosecutors' involvement begins with the warrant and continues through sentencing. The use of special prosecutors aids victims who usually feel abandoned or confused with the criminal justice process, ensures that the suspects are properly charged, and sends a message that such serious offenses will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

While forming a task force did not provide an instant solution to the carjacking problem, it did help to reduce and control this criminal enterprise. Carjacking may be the wave of the 1990's. However, by combining crime prevention with intensified patrol and investigation and successful prosecution, this crime may soon be considered a relic of the past.

*Written by Lt. Madelyn Williams of the
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Department.*

test drive. During the drive, the intermediaries may try to intentionally seek out a police patrol car and deliberately make a maneuver for which the vehicle will be stopped. The intermediary then allows officers to inspect the vehicle and even produces registration and insurance paperwork. This, of course, is to prove to the potential buyer that the true origin of the altered vehicle is undetectable, even by the police. Accordingly, vehicles that pass this test sell for a higher price.

Shipping Vehicles Across State Lines

Theft rings also transport a number of altered vehicles to other States, where they are purchased by drug dealers or other criminals. Because State police agencies stop many of these stolen vehicles while en route via interstate highways, one ring of clever thieves recently began using car carriers to transport the vehicles. The perpetrators determined that the police rarely stop car carriers to examine the vehicles being transported.

COUNTERING THE PROBLEM

Because aspects of motor vehicle theft come under both Federal and State laws, successful enforcement often requires the cooperation of various Federal, State, and local agencies. This is especially true in cases that involve organized crime groups, gang-sponsored theft rings, and the more violent groups of carjackers.

Cooperative Efforts

Cooperation in the form of multiagency task forces can be a successful strategy that impacts

significantly on armed motor vehicle thefts. Agencies in areas with high rates of violent vehicle theft should also consider establishing carjacking units and regional auto theft teams.

In some areas, previously existing task forces now place a new emphasis on violent vehicle thefts. In Atlanta, Georgia, the Metro Armed Robbery Task Force—which combines the resources of the

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...law enforcement agencies should publicize and encourage citizens to adopt effective precautionary strategies.

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FBI and several other agencies—arrested a subject for carjacking in connection with surveillance being conducted regarding bank robberies. In Dallas, Texas, the multiagency Interstate Theft Squad now places a priority on investigations of automobile theft with suspected gang connections.

A rash of carjackings in the summer of 1991 led the Detroit, Michigan, Police Department to create a special task force to combat the problem. In addition, the Detroit division of the FBI sponsors the Fugitive Task Force to assist local police with the interstate aspects of

carjacking investigations. Through such aggressive efforts, investigators in the area have been successful in reducing overall carjacking rates, as well as in recovering the majority of vehicles stolen by carjackers.

Federal Legislation

Congress responded to the carjacking problem by passing the Anti-Car Theft Act of 1992, which makes carjacking a Federal offense.⁵ Motor vehicle theft is covered by this Federal legislation when an individual (or group of individuals) possessing a firearm takes, or attempts to take, a vehicle from another person by force, violence, or intimidation. The act also imposes severe penalties for convicted carjackers, to include fines and sentences up to life in prison.

The criminal justice system also needs to rethink the prosecution of armed motor vehicle thefts. Many of these crimes can be prosecuted under previously existing Federal statutes. In New York State, for example, prosecutors succeeded in winning convictions against several carjackers under the Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statute. In this respect, agencies should work with U.S. attorneys offices to develop aggressive enforcement and prosecutorial strategies.

Involving the Community

As with other crimes, public awareness concerning the techniques and motivations of carjackers and vehicle theft rings in general may represent the most effective countermeasure. Working with community groups to develop prevention programs helps to combat the problem. Accordingly, law

enforcement agencies should publicize and encourage citizens to adopt effective precautionary strategies.

CONCLUSION

Motor vehicle theft has plagued society since the first Model T's drove off assembly lines. However, this crime, often viewed as "victimless," recently assumed a much more serious and violent tone. Armed vehicle theft—in all its forms—threatens the public's sense of safety and security.

Some observers note that by allowing car thieves to go largely unpunished for so many years, the criminal justice system paved the

way for more violent forms of vehicle theft. Others claim that the growing sophistication of automobile security systems drove thieves to more confrontational and brutal means.

While the root causes of armed vehicle theft may be debated for some time, the current task of law enforcement is to identify and employ effective measures to counter this crime. Experienced autotheft investigators understand that carjackings represent, in part, a natural and desperate reaction by car thieves to overcome obstacles placed before them. However, through cooperation, legislation,

crime-fighting initiatives, and aggressive prosecution, the criminal justice system can meet the challenges presented by this growing crime problem. ♦

Footnotes

¹ *Crime in the United States, 1991*, Uniform Crime Reporting Program, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC, August 1992.

² *An Analysis of Carjacking in the United States*, Violent Crimes and Major Offender Section, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC, October 1992.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Mary Ellen Beekman and Michael R. Daly, "Motor Vehicle Theft Investigations: Emerging International Trends," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, September 1990, 14.

⁵ H.R. 4542, 102d Congress, Pub. L. 102-519, 106 Stat. 3384.

Carjacking Safeguards: Advice to Give Motorists

Drivers should be encouraged to follow these safeguards against carjacking.

- Lock all doors, even when driving
- When stopped at a traffic light, leave enough space between your car and the car ahead for quick departure
- If another driver bumps your vehicle, do not stop. Either drive to a well-traveled area to inspect the damage or attempt to get the vehicle's license plate number and report it immediately to the police
- If parked in a shopping mall or supermarket parking lot, look around for anyone or anything suspicious before approaching the car. If you feel you are being watched, go back to the store and ask someone to escort you or call the police
- Because many carjackings occur at gas stations, avoid filling up at stations in high-crime areas or at night. To avoid being placed in vulnerable situations, keep the vehicle's gas tank as full as possible
- If available, take freeways rather than streets through high-crime areas
- While driving, stay in the center lane; avoid being blocked into the curb lane
- Above all, if there is no escape, do not resist.

Information obtained from Insp. Charles DeRienzo, New York City Police Department, Auto Crime Unit, and the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division.