

AUTOMOBILES | TECHNOLOGY

# Better Antitheft Technology, but Smarter Car Thieves

By JOHN R. QUAIN JULY 9, 2010

BASED on the advertisements, it would seem that technology has made it impossible — or at least stunningly foolhardy — to steal a car. Tracking systems with GPS can pinpoint any vehicle and direct the authorities straight to the crooks. But while the technology may be getting better, professional car thieves have stepped up their game, too, meaning that some tracking systems may be better than others.

The car theft rate has steadily declined for five years. The F.B.I. recorded a drop of nearly 17 percent in 2009 compared with 2008. But auto theft remains a costly crime: the F.B.I. estimates that more than \$6.4 billion was lost in motor vehicle thefts in 2008, the most recent numbers available. More important, knowing that fewer cars are stolen today than a decade ago is not much consolation if yours is one of those taken — one every 33 seconds, according to the National Insurance Crime Bureau.

While law enforcement officials and car security experts couldn't directly attribute the drop in thefts to the use of tracking technology, most agreed that it has had an effect. And all concurred that if you want to improve the chances of recovering your wheels once they've gone missing, these systems are a necessity.

General Motors' OnStar has made headlines with some well publicized recoveries, including the return in May of a 2009 Chevrolet Impala that had been stolen from State Senator Terry Burton of Mississippi. Equipped with GPS and a cellular connection, the OnStar stolen vehicle slowdown service (which costs \$199 a

year after the first year and is available in 30 G.M. models) was used to locate and then stop the Impala. But despite the system's depictions on TV, the process is not quick and seamless.

"Three parties need to be involved," explained Matt Przybylski, OnStar's director of global engineering. First, the owner needs to file a police report that the car has been stolen. This can translate into considerable lag time, depending on when the victim discovers the car is missing and how easy it is to file a police report. Once the authorities have contacted OnStar, the service will then work with them to find the car.

"When police have a moving vehicle in their sights, we can send down a signal to put on the four-way flashers and then disable the accelerator pedal," Mr. Przybylski said. Alternatively, if the vehicle is parked, OnStar can block the ignition to prevent anyone from starting the car. But for all this to work requires coordination with law enforcement — and a less sophisticated thief who doesn't know how to disable such systems, which security and law enforcement officials say professional car thieves are increasingly circumventing.

Gerry Brave, a Queens assistant district attorney who works with New York City's auto crime unit, said that "because it can take a day or two for all that coordination," professional thieves have time to dismantle any tracking equipment. And just a glance at the OnStar logo on the rearview mirror can alert thieves that they need to defeat the system.

Several experts discussed how systems like OnStar could be disabled, and there are detailed instructions (some erroneous, some ingenious) online about how to defeat such technology. Mr. Brave confirmed with detectives in his auto crime unit that "the bad guys can unplug it."

Consequently, competitors like LoJack, Escort and Blackline GPS try to take a different approach and conceal their tracking devices.

"If the thief doesn't know which car has LoJack," Paul McMahon, a company spokesman, said, "he doesn't know to disable it." LoJack has several tracking and

recovery products, including an Early Warning Package for \$995. While that price may seem steep, there is no installation charge or monthly fee.

LoJack is also distinctly different from the growing array of GPS and cellular-based tracking systems. LoJack uses radio transceivers installed in customer's cars. The Early Warning model includes an accelerometer and other motion detectors, according to Mr. McMahon, so that if a car is moved, the LoJack network can send a phone, e-mail or text message to alert the owner. While the owner must still file a stolen vehicle report to the police, the head start can shave precious hours off the time it takes to recover a car.

The LoJack device in the car is activated by a signal from a radio tower to start transmitting a signal, which can be detected only by police officials who have LoJack tracking computers. Unfortunately, that coverage is limited. LoJack is used by law enforcement in 27 states (including New York and New Jersey) and the District of Columbia, but not every county in those states is covered.

For better coverage, Escort, the radar detector maker, offers a system based on technology from Blackline GPS. The Escort EntourageCIS is \$400 (and \$60 for installation and a \$180-a-year subscription). Like LoJack, the EntourageCIS can be concealed in a car, uses similar sensors and can warn a driver via e-mail, text or phone messages if a car is moved. Unlike LoJack, Escort uses GPS and cellular signals to cover all of the United States and Canada. Better yet, if your car is stolen and you don't respond to alerts, a 24-hour monitoring station will contact local law enforcement and send them after the thieves— no police report required.

The system can also be used surreptitiously (or not) to monitor teenage drivers. You can check on the location of your car online at any time. Purchasing additional key fobs (\$60 each) that identify each driver, you can get separate "driver report cards" for each member of the family. ("Honey, you were speeding on the parkway again last week.")

"We want to be preventative," said Clark Swanson, the chief executive of Blackline.

But while stealthy systems like Entourage and LoJack may be less likely to be detected and disabled by thieves, they cannot slow down or stop a stolen vehicle as OnStar can. To do that, the systems need to be integrated with the car's computers, an advantage that only OnStar can currently claim.

Still, security and theft experts concede that even with the latest satellite tracking gear, and warnings beamed to owners' cellphones, determined criminals will find a way to thwart the technology. Mr. Brave said professionals often try to hide a car in a place, like an underground garage, that is out of range of GPS and cellular signals. "And if they're not sure, they'll lay it up on the street for a couple of days" to see if the police show up, he says.

While some companies quote impressive statistics — the 500 tracking requests a month from OnStar owners or LoJack's 90 percent recovery rate last year — in 2008, about 43 percent of stolen vehicles were never found, according to F.B.I. data. That's the worst national recovery rate for stolen cars in 20 years.

Nevertheless, authorities remain philosophical about the escalating war of technology vs. thieves. Mr. Brave, who has been involved with auto theft for a quarter-century, says, "Remember, it used to be that you never recovered your car."

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