

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1mDBU76>

The Upshot
CRIME DECLINE

Here's Why Stealing Cars Went Out of Fashion

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Auto theft isn't much of a problem anymore in New York City. In 1990, the city had 147,000 reported auto thefts, one for every 50 residents; last year, there were just 7,400, or one per 1,100. That's a 96 percent drop in the rate of car theft.

So, why did this happen? All crime has fallen, nationally and especially in New York. But there has also been a big shift in the economics of auto theft: Stealing cars is harder than it used to be, less lucrative and more likely to land you in jail. As such, people have found other things to do.

The most important factor is a technological advance: engine immobilizer systems, adopted by manufacturers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These make it essentially impossible to start a car without the ignition key, which contains a microchip uniquely programmed by the dealer to match the car.

Criminals generally have not been able to circumvent the technology or make counterfeit keys. "It's very difficult; not just your average perpetrator on the street is going to be able to steal those cars," said Capt. Don Boller, who leads the New York Police Department's auto crime division. Instead, criminals have stuck to stealing older cars.

You can see this in the pattern of thefts of America's most stolen car, the Honda Accord. About 54,000 Accords were stolen in 2013, 84 percent of them from model

years 1997 or earlier, according to data from the National Insurance Crime Bureau, a trade group for auto insurers and lenders. Not coincidentally, Accords started to be sold with immobilizers in the 1998 model year. The Honda Civic, America's second-most stolen car, shows a similar pattern before and after it got immobilizer technology for model year 2001.

Old cars are easier to steal, and there are plenty of them still on the road. But there's an obvious problem with stealing them: They're not worth very much. Cars are typically stolen for parts, and as a car gets older, its parts become less valuable.

In New York, thieves often take old stolen cars to salvage yards, selling them for scrap for just hundreds of dollars. As The Times reported in April, they're helped by a New York State law that allows a car to be scrapped without its title if it is more than eight years old and worth less than \$1,250. But in addition to not being very lucrative, that approach has gotten harder to get away with. According to Captain Boller, faster tracking through the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System has helped the city quickly identify stolen cars sold to salvage yards. Because you must present a photo I.D. to scrap a car without a title, the city has had success tracking down and arresting the sellers.

With fewer valuable stolen cars coming in, it has become less appealing to operate an illegal chop shop. And the decline in thefts has freed up the 85 detectives and supervisors of New York's auto crime division to focus on stopping organized car theft rings, the sorts of operations that actually have the ability to make coded keys for newer cars. "Our main goal is to get criminal enterprise charges on these groups," Captain Boller said of sending the groups' members to prison with longer sentences than apply to auto theft alone.

Similar efforts by law enforcement in other jurisdictions have cut into auto theft nationally, according to Roger Morris, the vice president of the National Insurance Crime Bureau. "You saw a dramatic impact on the professional car theft rings, the chop shops and all that," he said. But while auto theft has been greatly reduced in New York, the national decline (62 percent) has not been as drastic.

Car theft remains a particular problem in California, which has the country's highest auto theft rate, nearly double the national average and five times New York

State's. According to data compiled by the N.I.C.B., nine of the 10 metropolitan areas with the highest auto theft rates are in California, mostly up and down the inland Interstate 5 corridor. According to Mr. Morris, California's car thefts are often linked to Mexican organized crime, and N.I.C.B. helps auto insurers recover thousands of stolen cars from Mexico annually.

Some cars go even farther away. "A lot of them are getting shipped out of the country," said Carol Kaplan, the N.I.C.B.'s director of public affairs. Every year, Customs and Border Protection recovers dozens of cars that thieves try to smuggle out of the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach in shipping containers.

But while the port busts tend to recover high-end cars (one 2012 recovery included a 2010 Ferrari 458 Italia), California's thefts are heavily weighted toward older cars that can be slim-jimmed and hot-wired, and that are much more likely to end up in Mexico than in Asia. In time, those old cars will come off the road, leading to a further decline in auto thefts.

One of the factors that keeps car theft going in the United States is the reliability of old Hondas. Eventually, mid-1990s sedans should become too old to be worth stealing at all, but that hasn't happened yet. "They keep running," said Mr. Morris, and therefore they keep being stolen.

Correction: August 13, 2014

An article on Tuesday about the causes for a decline in auto theft misstated the given name of the official in charge of the New York Police Department's auto crime division. He is Don Boller, not John.

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A version of this article appears in print on August 12, 2014, on page A3 of the New York edition with the headline: Here's Why Stealing Cars Went Out of Fashion.