

CHAPTER 106
AUTO THEFT INVESTIGATION

DISCUSSION: Auto theft has become one of the most aggravating and without doubt, the costliest crime now confronting both police and the public. The loss from auto theft is far greater than all other crimes against property combined. The related crime of using an automobile without the authority of the owner is also the cause of great public frustration and inconvenience.

The automobile, representing one of the largest investments of the average person, is sometimes left unattended and unlocked in a place that invites theft. Despite its substantial value, car manufactures have not yet provided an effective means of preventing the theft or the unauthorized use of automobiles. Many common tools, readily obtained, can be used to open and start automobiles. The locks recently installed on the steering columns to deter car thefts can be easily dislodged by a tool used by auto body repair men to remove dents from fenders. Once the lock cylinder is removed, the car can be started with a screwdriver or a similar device.

All vehicle users should be constantly reminded of their obligation, as a matter of crime prevention, to lock their vehicles and take their keys to avoid leaving any valuables in open view in parked automobiles and to select, with care, the areas where they park their cars unattended for long periods of time. Most car thefts are committed by juveniles and many adult criminals can point to a youthful car theft as their initiation into a life of crime.

106.1.1 Categories of Auto Theft

- A. Joy Riding - The taking of an automobile without the authority of the owner for the purpose of joy riding counts for a large majority of auto thefts. Often these cars are damaged or vandalized before being abandoned. Youthful offenders who take an automobile for quick transportation, for racing or for the thrill of the possible police chase are the principal perpetrators. A contributing factor to this offense is the owner who fails to lock his vehicle or leaves the keys in the car as an open invitation to the youthful car theft.
- B. For Use in the Commission of a Crime - The taking of an automobile by criminals to provide transportation to and from the scene of a crime is common practice particularly in armed robberies. By using a stolen car and then transferring to their own vehicle, after the crime is completed, they reduce the possibility of identification and subsequent capture.
- C. Stripping - The theft of late model cars for the purpose of removing body parts and accessories is increasing as these items have a ready market. Steel radial tires, AM/FM cassette players, batteries, air bags and other specialized or expensive accessories are stripped from the stolen vehicle for personal use or for resale. Private garages are often rented for this purpose and after stripping; the car is quickly removed and abandoned.

- D. Professional Car Thieves - The activities of organized car thieves have been increasing and the recovery rates of these thefts have been decreasing in recent years. Many of these stolen vehicles are transported out of state and sold. Others are totally stripped and the body parts, chrome trim, motors, mechanical parts, etc., are sold to auto body shops to rebuild cars damaged in accidents. The professional car thief can enter a locked car, remove the ignition lock, start the motor and drive away in a matter of minutes. They are experts in altering the appearance of cars by repainting or exchanging parts, and the replacing of serial numbers and forging of certificates of title. The professional car thief is principally responsible for the estimated 15% of all stolen vehicles that are never recovered.
- E. Defrauding the Insurance or Loan Company - This offense is also on the increase in recent years as economic conditions make it difficult for owners to maintain payments on expensive automobiles. A stolen car report is falsified and the vehicle later found abandoned, destroyed by fire and recorded as a total loss.

106.1.2 Reporting

- A. Accurate and complete reports are a fundamental reason for the success of any auto theft investigation. A full report will be submitted on all stolen car incidents.
- B. In making a stolen car report, every effort should be made to determine initially if a crime has been committed. The following should be considered:
 - 1. Where was the car parked?
 - 2. Was the car locked?
 - 3. What time was it last seen?
 - 4. Who was the last person to use the car?
 - 5. Who else had possession or access to the car keys?
 - 6. Is it possible that the vehicle is being used by some authorized person?
 - 7. Is it possible that the car has been misplaced? (This can often happen if the person is unfamiliar with the shopping area particularly if in a large shopping mall or if the complainant is under the influence of alcohol).
 - 8. Is it possible that the car is being reported falsely to escape liability for a hit and run accident? This can often happen if the operator is under the influence of liquor or drugs.
 - 9. Has the car been repossessed?
- C. Every stolen car report should contain all identifying characteristics that would aid in recognizing and recovering the vehicle. Obtain the following information as accurately as possible:
 - 1. Owner's name, home and business address, home and business telephone number.

2. Registration number of the vehicle.
3. Vehicle identification number.
4. Make, model, color, and year of manufacturer.
5. Any unusual or unique markings or stickers.
6. Special accessories that have been installed.
7. Any previous damage that would distinguish the vehicle.
8. In some cases it may be advisable to obtain a current value of the stolen car as listed in a current NADA index, or if a new vehicle is determined by a franchised dealer.

D. Inaccuracies in taking a stolen car report can hamper an investigation. An owner of a stolen car must show proof of ownership, bill of sale, title, current tag receipt, etc.) before an affidavit can be signed. The vehicle identification number and the registration numbers must be very carefully noted as any transposition or substitution of numbers or letters can create confusion and considerable delay in recovery.

106.1.3 Prevention and Identification

- A. Shopping malls have become a focal point for the operation of car thieves and require greater surveillance. Traffic enforcement and the stepping up of traffic citations are a deterrent to car thefts. This can serve to discourage young people from becoming involved as it increases the chances that they will be stopped by the police.
- B. The recognition of stolen cars is a skill which should be acquired by every alert officer. Attention should be directed to the action of the driver and type of vehicle rather than just observing license numbers. Concentrate on the following:
1. Be alert for the reckless driver or the traffic violator.
 2. Note the overly cautious driver who appears to be avoiding undue attention.
 3. Observe the driver who does not seem familiar with the car (for example he may drive off without lights because he can not immediately find the light switch).
 4. Note the driver that appears out of place for the type of car he is operating or the type of car that is out of place in the neighborhood in which it is being operated.
 5. Any extremes of driver behavior or unusual reaction of passengers should arise suspicion of police.
 6. Note any damage to vehicles (for example broken vent windows or wired on license plates).

106.1.4 Stopping the Stolen Motor Vehicle

- A. If a decision is made to stop a suspected stolen motor vehicle, extreme caution must be exercised such as the use of two units to affect the traffic stop. Many officers have been injured seriously and even fatally while stopping a stolen motor vehicle. Every precaution that is taken in stopping a felony suspect must be used in checking-out a suspected stolen car.
- B. The use of firearms to stop a suspected stolen vehicle or to prevent its flight is prohibited except as provided for in Chapter One (1) of the AOM.

106.1.5 Processing Recovered Vehicles

- A. When a stolen vehicle is recovered in this or another jurisdiction, the following actions shall be authorized:
 - 1. Impound the vehicle if it was used in the commission of a crime.
 - 2. Tow the vehicle IAW Departmental regulations.
 - 3. Photograph or seize any evidence and process the vehicle for latent fingerprints or other evidence.
 - 4. Notify the owner of the disposition of the vehicle, advising the owner where their vehicle is located and advising the owner when the vehicle's release will be authorized.
 - 5. In the event the vehicle is recovered in a jurisdiction that is at such a distance that it is impractical to send an officer to process the vehicle. An on-duty patrol supervisor may request that the local law enforcement authorities having possession of the vehicle conduct the appropriate processing of the vehicle for evidence.
- B. When a vehicle that has been reported stolen from another jurisdiction is recovered in the City of Hattiesburg the following procedures shall apply:
 - 1. Notify the law enforcement agency that has classified the vehicle as having been stolen. This is an extremely important step, whereas failing to do so may result in the vehicle continuing to be listed as "stolen" even though it has been returned to the rightful owner.
 - 2. Impound the vehicle if it was used in the commission of a crime.
 - 3. Tow the vehicle IAW Departmental regulations.
 - 4. A patrol supervisor may authorize the vehicle to be processed for latent prints or other evidence as is appropriate, if requested to do so by the law enforcement jurisdiction.
 - 5. The assigned officer shall complete a report that shall include all pertinent information and shall specifically include the date, time and the person notified of the recovery of the stolen vehicle.