



Put the Brakes on Car Theft

According to the National Insurance Crime Bureau, a vehicle is stolen in the US about every thirty seconds – amounting to more than a million cars stolen every year. While more than 60% of stolen vehicles are recovered, it's often after they've been severely damaged. Unrecovered vehicles can be sold overseas or to an unsuspecting used-car buyer, or stripped and sold for parts to dishonest parts and body shops.

But there are many ways you can protect yourself – and your car – from theft, ranging from simple, “common sense” steps to sophisticated, high-tech devices. Here are a few.

Common Sense Steps to Safety

- Don't leave your keys in the car! Believe it or not, according to NHTSA (the National Highway Traffic Safety Association), 20% of stolen vehicles were stolen while the keys were in the ignition. Turn the engine off and bring your keys with you – even if you're making a “quick stop” or if your car is in your driveway or garage. Many drivers will pop in to a convenience store or ATM and leave the car running – especially on a cold morning – an easy target for a car thief.
- Lock your car – even in your driveway. 50% of stolen cars were left unlocked. Car thieves need to be fast and unobtrusive – so the more easily they can enter a vehicle the more susceptible it is to being stolen. They will casually stroll through a parking lot checking door handles until one opens – then hop in and hot-wire the car in less than a minute. Even lock the car when it's in your garage – and don't forget to lock the garage door too.
- Close windows and sunroof. The smallest opening is all a sophisticated thief needs to get into your car.
- Park in a well-lighted area, and as close as you can to building entrances or pedestrian or vehicle traffic. While some thefts do happen in broad daylight, you don't want to make it any easier for the thief – and more than half of vehicle thefts occur after dark.
- Don't leave valuables in your car – and especially don't leave them out in the open. Purses, briefcases, bags or packages, laptops, iPods, mobile phones, stereo equipment and GPS devices can be added bonuses for car thieves.
- Don't “hide” a key on the outside of your vehicle. Most thieves will know where to find it.

- Know your car. If it's on available government or insurance industry lists of the most commonly stolen vehicles, take extra precautions.

Deterrents You May Not Have Considered

- At the office, park in a different "spot" every day. Frequently thieves will study a target over the course of several days to get a sense of habits, weigh their risks, and wait for the right opportunity. According to AAA, large parking lots – such as at malls, offices, and condominium/apartment complexes, tend to attract thieves.
- If you park your car with an attendant, leave only the door/ignition key. If your glove compartment and trunk are on the same key, consider having it changed – especially if you use an attendant frequently. Also when you return to your vehicle, be sure to check your tires, battery, and spare, to make sure they're the same.
- More sophisticated car-theft operations will actually tow your car away! Believe it or not, using a tow-truck rarely looks suspicious. Parking with your wheels toward the curb and using your emergency brake can help deter this type of car theft.
- Don't leave your title and registration in the car. Keep the title in a safe place in your home, office, or safe deposit box; and carry the registration in your wallet or purse.
- If your car has window-level "T-shaped" door locks, replace them with straight lock pulls, which can be purchased online or at an auto parts store.

High-Tech Crime-Stoppers

- These days, many cars come equipped with car alarms – or you can get one installed by a dealer or an aftermarket installer. And remember, car alarms are most effective when your vehicle has a marker noting it has an alarm. Most newer alarm systems also have "panic" buttons on your key or keychain – which can come in handy if you're involved in an emergency and need to draw attention to yourself or your vehicle.
- "Kill switches" – or disabling locks for ignition, fuel, and other systems can prevent the thief from driving your car away.
- Tracking systems enable police to track and locate your car if it is stolen – but bear in mind, even though the vehicles can be recovered, it only takes experienced thieves a few minutes to strip your vehicle beyond recognition.
- Other locks – you can lock your steering wheel (you've probably heard of "The Club"), but you can also install locks on your floorboard – to disable your gas pedal; your gearshift – to disable shifting; your wheels – so they won't turn; your hood – so thieves can't get at your battery or alarm system.