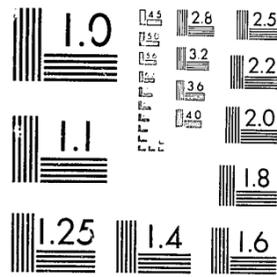


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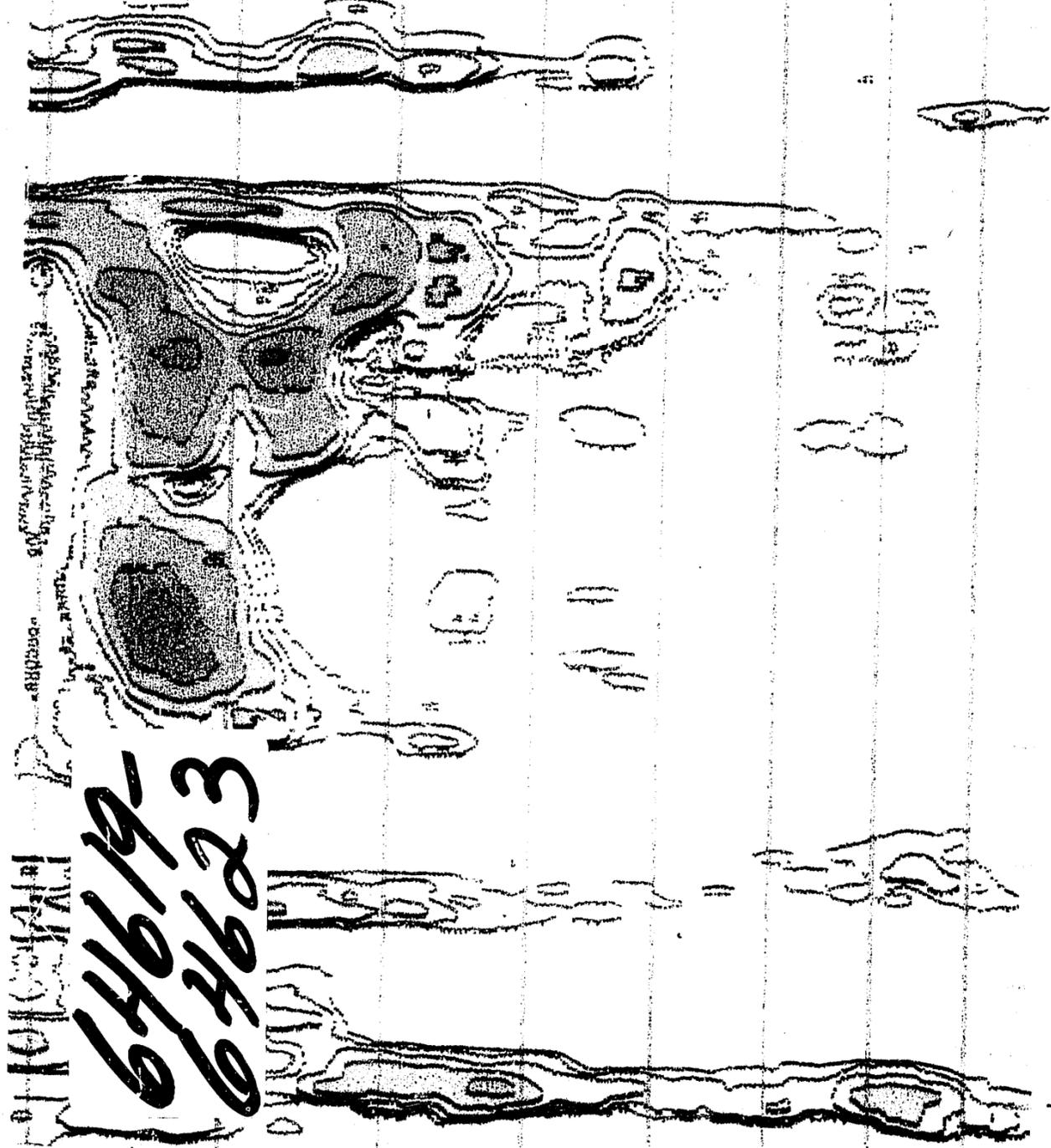
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**FBI** LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN

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JANUARY 1980



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Crime Problems

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# FBI LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN

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Federal Bureau of Investigation  
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William H. Webster, Director

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# Automobile Theft

## AN INCREASING CRIME PROBLEM



By SAMUEL J. ROZZI  
*Commissioner of Police  
Nassau County, N.Y.*  
and  
DET. SGT. RICHARD  
MUELLER  
*Police Department  
Nassau County, N.Y.*

### The Chop Shop\*

On March 20, 1979, a 1978 automobile valued at approximately \$6,000 was reported stolen from a large, suburban mall located near New York City. At the time of the report, the owner indicated that he had parked the car at 10:30 a.m., and after shopping, returned at 11:15 a.m. to find it stolen.

The automobile, in this case, was recovered 4 days earlier as the result of a raid conducted on a "chop-shop" in Brooklyn, N.Y. The owner, who was a party to the scheme, left his auto there and had been told to wait several days before reporting the vehicle stolen. At the time of its recovery, the car was found to be in a partial state of disassembly, together with 29 other stolen late-model vehicles in similar condition. The value of the car, had it not been recovered, would have increased three-fold, from \$6,000 to approximately \$18,000, since it was about to be sold piece by piece.

\*A "chop-shop" is a facility, usually a body shop, that disassembles stolen autos for purposes of selling the parts, usually through an organized network.

Had the parts been sold, several body repair shops would have been able to provide their unsuspecting legitimate customers with replacement parts secured at a fraction of their value without the inconvenience of a 1- or 2-week wait to receive factory-ordered parts.

The legitimate customer would have his car returned in perhaps a day or two. The body shop owner might purchase a \$2,800 "nose" (front-end assembly) for \$1,500, and yet would be able to bill the customer's insurance company at the going rate of \$2,800. Further, the body shop owner would not have his lot cluttered with cars waiting for ordered parts, enabling his business to operate on a quick turnover, high-profit basis. The "contact," who is the intermediary between the auto thief and body shop owner, would receive perhaps \$500 for the arrangement, while the individual who actually "stole" the automobile would receive approximately \$150. In short, with the exception of the legitimate customer, everyone would have a sizable financial gain.



Commissioner Rozzi



Detective Sergeant Mueller

### The Dupe\*\*

Vehicles other than automobiles are not immune from the activities of the professional thief.

In November 1978, the local office of a nationwide automobile and truck rental company reported the theft of a 1978 diesel truck valued at approximately \$20,000 from its storage yard. In January 1979, the police were notified by the rental company that they had received an anonymous phone call indicating that employees of a company which held a service contract with the rental company had stolen several of the firm's trucks from the storage yard, re-registered them, and were using them for their own purposes.

The subsequent police investigation uncovered that in the latter part of 1977, "paper" (meaning a vehicle identification number and necessary ownership and registration material) was purchased from a salvage company that bought used, damaged, and mechanically unsound trucks from the rental company. In this instance, the paper was for a 1973 truck that was almost identical to the stolen 1978 truck. The company holding the service contract repainted the stolen 1978 truck and affixed the vehicle identification number (VIN) plate from the 1973 truck in the appropriate place. Since both vehicles are virtually identical in external appearance, one might ask how the stolen 1978 model disguised as a 1973 model was identified. Several things attracted the investigators' attention. First, exterior model markings indicated the truck to be a diesel when, in fact, it was registered as gas-driven. This alone was sufficient probable cause to look for identification numbers. Second, further inquiry determined that the 1973 model was a 4-cylinder, gas-driven vehicle. The 1978 truck, although identical in body shape, was a 4-cylinder diesel. In this case, the thieves had registered the diesel as a gas-driven vehicle. And last, the thieves repainted the vehicle to match their company colors and

\*\*The "dupe" (duplication) refers to a stolen vehicle that has been legally registered as a result of the use of a VIN from a salvage vehicle (vehicle certified for destruction).

affixed the 1973 VIN to its proper position on the truck door. The color of paint under the VIN plate should have been the original color of the truck had it not been removed prior to repainting. Since, in fact, it was the same as the present color of the truck, it was obvious that the plate was affixed after the repainting.

Each of these incidents is a variation of auto theft. Involvement may go beyond the local level, since there are frequent instances where stolen vehicles are, in their entirety or in pieces, shipped out of State and even out of the country.

The 1977 Uniform Crime Reports indicate that one automobile is stolen every 33 seconds in this country. No matter what variation occurs, there is profit to be made by those who are willing to violate the law, and money to be lost by honest citizens who must pay the higher insurance premiums caused by this criminal endeavor. The chance, incidentally, is not a grave one. If one conducts research into the sentences of auto thieves, it becomes quite obvious that the thief may expect a minimal sentence, and generally, the charge will only be a misdemeanor.

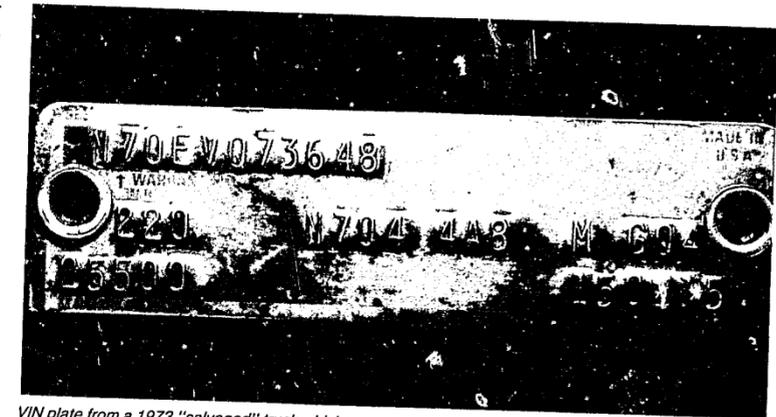
No jurisdiction is immune from the auto theft problem. In 1978, over 5,500 vehicles were stolen in Nassau County, with an equal number being stolen in neighboring Suffolk County. New York City, the western neighbor of Nassau County, recorded some 96,000 stolen vehicles in the same period. Nassau County's recovery rate was approximately 57 percent, up from 37 percent in 1977, but down from over 90 percent just 10 years ago. The 20-percent increase in recovery rate between 1977 and 1978 is a result of the police department's commitment to controlling the problem.

Joy-riding is no longer a major problem. Autos stolen for this purpose are, with few exceptions, recovered. The youth of our affluent population either own their own vehicles or have access to vehicles owned by their parents. The real problem centers around the professional thief who uses one of the methods previously described.

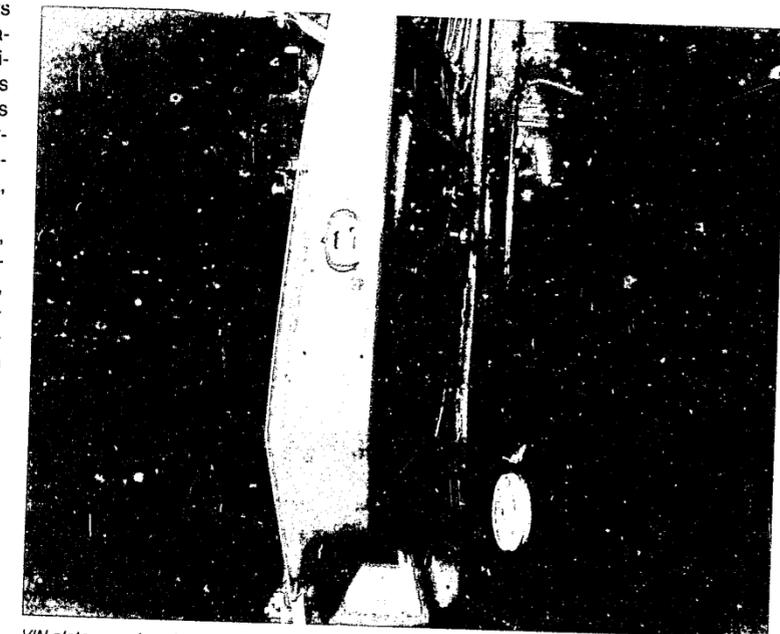
The chop-shop may work in conjunction with a car thief who steals cars only for parts, or with the automobile owner who wishes to dispose of his vehicle for some reason (debt, mechanical unsoundness, etc.). Teenage car thieves may be given \$50-\$150 to steal late-model cars which they deliver to chop-shops. These cars are dismantled, and parts are cataloged and sold either to body shops or auto parts dealers. There is a network organization to dispense these parts. It is estimated that the illegal parts business grosses \$4 billion annually—all of this tax free. It is no wonder that the insurance rates in urban areas, and particularly the New York metropolitan area, are among the highest in the Nation.

When dealing with a chop-shop, the automobile owner is usually required to leave the vehicle registration, and when the auto has been dismantled and the chassis crushed, the registration is returned to him by mail with the OK to report it stolen. Since at this point the car has been literally reduced to pieces, it can virtually never be recovered.

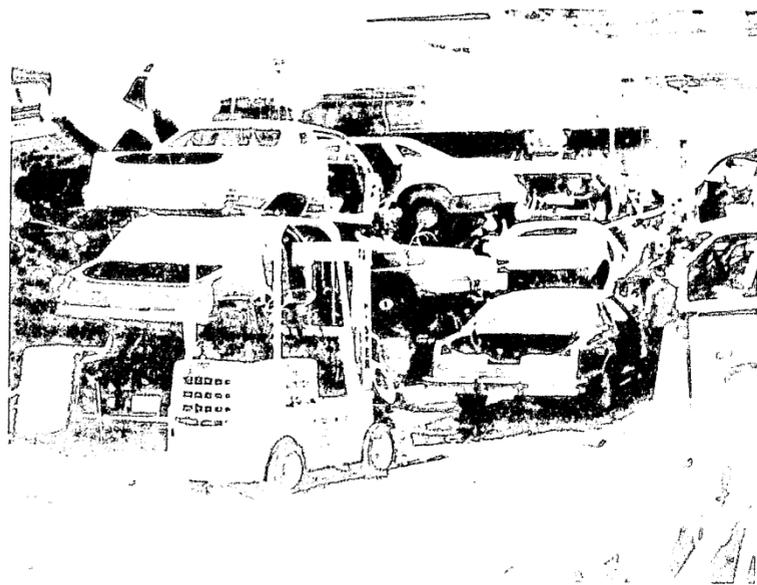
The contact purchases a salvaged (totally wrecked) vehicle for the express purpose of obtaining the VIN plate and the corresponding ownership documents. This individual pays top dollar for these "basket cases," excluding legitimate salvage buyers from making the purchase. Once the purchase is made, a thief is commissioned to steal a vehicle that matches the basket case in every way. Depending on the expertise of the contact, one or more of the vehicle identification numbers will be changed to make the stolen vehicle appear to be the salvaged vehicle. The remains of the salvaged vehicle are crushed, and the altered vehicle is resold to an unsuspecting buyer through one of several different ploys. Perhaps a



VIN plate from a 1973 "salvaged" truck which was affixed to a stolen 1978 vehicle. The outward appearance of both vehicles is virtually identical.



VIN plate on a duped truck. In this instance, the duped VIN plate had been affixed after the stolen truck was repainted.



Interior view of a chop shop. Note that all of the late model vehicles, some of which still bear registration plates, are in a partial state of disassembly. When this photo was taken, several of the vehicles had not been reported stolen.

smooth-talking salesperson who befriends the owner of a sedan and takes him to a body shop and pose as a repairman. The proprietor of these establishments will be asked if he could put a "nice car" with a "nice family" in return for a small finder's fee. Other duped vehicles may be sold through small dealers or at auto auctions. Such vehicles may also come into the hands of major automobile dealers to be sold to unsuspecting buyers.

These illegitimate activities have the residual effect of inflating prices to legitimate body and fender repairmen, and even worse, they create the impression to the public that the entire industry may be involved in illegal behavior.

#### Dealing with the Problem

What can law enforcement officers do to control the auto theft problem?

The answer is to undertake an aggressive and progressive management approach whereby all related resources are identified and used. Specifically, the following can be of assistance:

1) Prevention through education. Act *before* the fact. This is the most meaningful approach. Law enforcement agencies must strive to raise the level of consciousness of the public so that they will make the necessary effort to reduce theft opportunities. Such cautions as not leaving the key in the ignition, remembering to lock the vehicle, and not becoming involved in "chance of a lifetime" automobile purchases must be emphasized. While these cautions seem to be somewhat obvious, they apparently are not since almost 40 percent of auto thefts involve situations where keys are left in the ignition and almost 80 percent involve unlocked vehicles.

A second dimension is to raise the level of awareness of law enforcement officers in terms of the problem, the techniques involved, and what to look for in addressing this problem.

2) Aggressive and active auto theft investigation. Law enforcement agencies must encourage aggressive and active investigation on the part of their officers, whether they be patrol officers or detectives. Do your officers routinely monitor body shops with an eye toward observing repairs? Do they routinely stop unmarked flat-bed and conventional tow cars which are transporting late model vehicles that appear to be undamaged? In regard to the burgeoning truck theft problem, a productive technique might be to encourage patrol officers to pay close attention to truck identification numbers when dealing with disabled vehicles, accidents, traffic stops, and truck weighing facilities.

As a bit of agency introspection, has your auto theft reporting procedure been reduced to simply taking an affidavit and then filing it?

3) Liaison with other law enforcement agencies. Task force and regional models are the most productive in dealing with organized auto theft because of the absolute necessity for interagency cooperation and information sharing. Isolationist policies are counterproductive in auto theft investigations, and indeed, in most facets of police work.

4) Relations with the insurance industry. Are you familiar with the services of NATB? Have you considered forming an ACT committee? If you are unfamiliar with these organizations, it is an indication that you have not tapped one of the active resources available to you in connection with auto theft enforcement. ACT committees (Anti-Car Theft) have been formed in several regions of the United States under the sponsorship of NATB (National Auto Theft Bureau) to launch auto theft

campaigns in which social and community groups are encouraged to join forces with representatives of law enforcement, government, and industry. Relationships such as these can produce something as simple as the rewording of insurance claim form terminology or improvements in the form's caveat, both of which can be of invaluable assistance in improving your ability to enforce fraud and "falsely reporting" statutes. The ultimate goal of such law enforcement-industrial cooperation may be to seek reductions in insurance rates for the citizens in your jurisdiction.

5) Legislative suggestions and support. Do you support legislation related to auto theft, and more importantly, have you contributed suggestions to the legislative process? Are you famil-

iar with the provisions of the Motor Vehicle Theft Prevention Act of 1979, which is presently pending before the U.S. Congress? Among other things, this act would require manufacturers to number all component vehicle parts made in this country, as well as those parts which are imported. It would further require any person, be it the operator of a salvage yard, body and fender shop, or auto dealer, to record by number each identifiable part he receives. Other provisions would allow for the seizure of any parts which show evidence of number alteration or removal.

In conclusion, whether one chooses to recognize the growing problem of auto theft, it is a reality. Aggressive enforcement and the ability to control auto theft are limited only by the degree of administrative commit-

ment and the motivation and imagination of law enforcement personnel. It is the responsibility of the police manager to establish the proper climate in the organization. **FBI**

*The Nassau County Police Department's Televue Unit has prepared a short video cassette program to train its patrol officers to recognize the indicators of a "duped" vehicle. Copies of the program are available to interested law enforcement agencies by writing to the Nassau County Police Department, 1490 Franklin Ave., Mineola, N.Y. 11501, and enclosing a blank 3/4-inch video cassette.*

## 1978 Crime Statistics

Final 1978 figures extracted from the annual publication, "Crime in the United States," show that more than 11 million Crime Index offenses were reported to law enforcement agencies, indicating a 2-percent rise from 1977 and a 9-percent rise from 1974.

There was an average of 5,109 offenses per each 100,000 persons residing in the United States. The violent crimes of murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, representing 10 percent of the total volume of Index offenses, increased 5 percent. Property crimes of burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft were up 2 percent as a group.

In 1978, law enforcement agencies were successful in clearing 21 percent of the reported Index crimes—46 percent of the violent crimes and 18 percent of the property crimes. An estimated 10.3 million arrests were made for all crimes except traffic violations. Of those arrested, 40 percent were under 21 years of age and 57 percent were under age 25. Arrests of males outnumber those of females by 5 to 1.

Other highlights from the 1978 publication are:

- Murder offenses were up 2 percent over 1977, but decreased 6 percent from 1974.
- Forcible rape rose 7 percent from the previous year.
- Although robbery offenses increased 3 percent over 1977, there were 6 percent fewer of these crimes than in 1974.
- Incidents of aggravated assault were up 7 percent over 1977 and 22 percent over 1974. An average of 62 per 100 cases of aggravated assaults were cleared.
- The total loss resulting from burglary offenses was estimated to be \$1.6 billion, an average of \$526 per burglary. Residential burglaries accounted for 65 percent of all burglaries, and 73 percent involved forcible entries.
- An estimated average of 1 of every 145 registered motor vehicles was stolen in 1978.
- The most voluminous Index crime was larceny-theft which accounted for 5,983,401 offenses in 1978, more than half the Index total, and resulted in total losses estimated at \$1.3 billion. **FBI**

**END**