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POLICE SCIENCE

AUTOMOBILE THEFT, THE THIRTEEN MILLION DOLLAR PARASITE

RICHARD WEDEKIND

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Automobile theft ranks near the top, if not at the top, in the number of crimes committed in the United States, and professional investigators face an intricate and pyramiding problem in attempting to cope with the situation. Many police officials have not considered that automobile theft is a problem of the first magnitude, and the public seems to be laboring under the belief that auto theft does not mean individual monetary loss because most vehicles are insured. How often do we hear the statement, "I am not worried about the loss; it's insured?" From these statements and the careless conduct of motorists who leave unlocked cars upon public highways, it appears that people do not realize that insurance rates are predicated upon the loss ratios of a given area.

According to *Uniform Crime Reports*, there were 227,150 offenses of automobile theft reported for 1955,¹ and 263,720 for the year 1956, an increase of 36,570, or 16.1 percent.² Financial loss from automobile theft exceeds the combined value of all other property taken through larceny. Auto theft investigation is made infinitely more complex because it combines two problems: the juvenile problem, in which the crime is treated as an act of delinquency and the subject remanded to the custody of juvenile authorities; and the commercial problem, in which the crime is treated as a felony and the subject caused to appear before a court of competent jurisdiction.

Most authorities agree that a majority of automobile thefts are perpetrated by juveniles without the intention of selling the stolen cars or converting them to their own use permanently. According to *Uniform Crime Reports* released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, of the 28,035 persons arrested in 1956 for the crime of auto theft, 4,756 were 16 years of age, 5,427 were 15 years of age and 5,622 were under 15 years of age.³ Of the total arrested, 39.4 percent had not attained the age required by most states for issuance of a driver's license. There were in 1956 some 55,640,000 children residing in the United States, according to statistics published by Metropoli-

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS FOR THE UNITED STATES, Volume XXVI, No. 2, 1955, page 59, table 24.

² Federal Bureau of Investigation, UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS FOR THE UNITED STATES, Volume XXVII, No. 2, 1956, page 69, table 24.

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS FOR THE UNITED STATES, Volume XXVII, No. 2, 1956, page 109, table 41.

tan Life Insurance Company.⁴ Of this total, almost 7,000,000 are between the ages of 15 and 17; some 13,000,000 are between 10 and 14; approximately 17,000,000 are between 5 and 9; and slightly over 18,000,000 are under 5 years of age. Since experience has shown that individuals under the age of 17 are responsible in a great majority of cases for the "joy ride" and "transportation" theft of automobiles, it is obvious that in some areas an explosive upsurge of automobile thefts may be expected within the short time of two to four years. Far more important than the financial loss resulting from juvenile auto thefts, the cost to society from juveniles who embark upon a life of crime via the automobile theft route is incalculable.

Of all automobiles stolen, it can be conservatively estimated that 5% are never recovered. The figure of 263,720 vehicles stolen in 1956 can be used to obtain an idea of the terrific economic loss resulting from this type of crime. By placing the average value of each unrecovered car at \$1000 and multiplying by 5% of the number lost, the figure \$13,186,000 emerges.

Police investigations often begin with the realization of an aggravated auto theft situation. Cognizance of this situation is brought about in a number of ways, principally spot maps, statistics, public pressure. As soon as the officer is alerted, his immediate task is to discover the *modus operandi* in order to identify, apprehend, and prosecute the perpetrators. The original lead or break in a case is often developed by an alert patrolman who has the initiative and curiosity to stop a suspicious car or investigate other unusual activity in his jurisdiction. Other assignments, including traffic, do not relieve an officer of his responsibility with respect to other violations of the law. A problem of the magnitude and complexity of automobile theft demands unremitting and resourceful attention from all law enforcement.

The automobile theft investigator must maintain a close liaison with motor vehicle bureaus, automobile dealers, and junk or salvage dealers to obtain information concerning questionable activities of persons buying, selling, or titling motor vehicles. Informants can and should be developed in these fields, if necessary on a confidential basis. Use of confidential informants who have criminal backgrounds should be avoided if possible. The "radio detective" or "TV detective" has complete control through his writers of the actions of his informants. Conversely, the actual detective has little if any control of the actions of his informants. It is felt therefore that only the most experienced officers should use confidential informants who have criminal backgrounds, since frequently such informants are more interested in immunity from arrest than in contributing information in the public interest. The "salvage racket" is one of the most readily adaptable methods of disposing of stolen cars. Periodic salvage checks on wrecked cars can help to establish if such vehicles have been legitimately rebuilt. Special agents of the National Automobile Theft Bureau, who are especially qualified to assist in these examinations, should be consulted whenever possible.

After the discovery of an auto theft ring, the procedures to be followed usually parallel those of other investigations. However, the maintenance of records and

⁴ Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, AMERICA'S CHILDREN, Statistical Volume #37, August 1956.

proper preservation of evidence calls for special diligence. Each vehicle may have two and often more identification numbers, only one of which can be correct. If these numbers are not clearly presented to the jury, confusion and acquittal may result. Mobility of the motor vehicle itself aids the theft ring in spreading its operations over an area covering not only cities and counties but also several states. To combat successfully the operations of the professional thief, transmittal of all information to other departments and agencies is essential. In addition to the attainment of the immediate objective, such contacts encourage cooperation rather than competition and eliminate unnecessary and wasteful duplication of effort.

In commercial auto theft investigations, motive is apparent and easy to establish. Consequently, *modus operandi* takes on added importance. Before the stolen vehicle can be sold, the thief must secure proof of ownership which will arouse no suspicion on the part of the prospective purchaser. This is usually accomplished by the procurement of a title or bill of sale which on its face is legitimate. The professional car thief acquires knowledge of titling and registration procedures of individual states where evidence of ownership may be secured with a minimum amount of effort and risk. Having grasped the means to prove ownership, such an individual will repeat the same procedure again and again, creating a public record of a portion of his method of operation. By identifying this technique, experienced investigators are often able to pick out the cars handled by particular rings, or identify the conspirators. Additional elements of the method of operation may be developed from: make of vehicle stolen; method of theft; time and place of the larceny; procedure followed to change identity; time lapse between theft and sale; and location and method of sale. Any or all of these distinguishing features may vary, but by varying they tend also to establish an overall method of operation.

Although the identification and eventual arrest of all subjects involved is essential, it is important to effect timely arrests. Methods used to establish the identity of the subjects involved are numerous; however, the majority conform to standard investigative procedures. Police records verify the fact that there are a few cases involving theft rings whose leaders were prominent persons far removed from the actual operation. These cases are the exception rather than the rule, and delaying the investigation or arrest of the known subjects in order to establish the identity of a phantom who may not even exist often results in the dispersal of the conspirators and creation of additional problems.

Apprehension does not close a case. On occasion there is a tendency for the investigator to lose interest after the subjects have been arrested. The trial of the defendants is equally important and requires vigilant attention. Another objective, in addition to the apprehension and conviction of the guilty conspirators, is recovery of all vehicles involved. Here again the National Automobile Theft Bureau aids and assists law enforcement by providing agents who are experts and specialists in automobile identification procedures, and the restoration of obliterated or defaced numbers. NATB agents regularly instruct training classes in auto theft investigation at both the recruit and advanced levels, and make use of visual aids to describe investigative techniques.

Immediate cancellation of theft reports and "wanted" notices is part of the responsibility of the police organization handling an investigation of this character. It is difficult to pinpoint this duty, especially since vehicles may be recovered by agencies other than the one originating the reports. Generally accepted procedures fix the responsibility with the originating department; however, it is the duty of the agency effecting recovery to notify the department of origin and to confirm cancellation and notice of recovery to the owner. The possibility of embarrassment from a stored and unidentified automobile must be avoided.

Automobile thefts totaling 263,720 in 1956; 28,035 arrests of which 11,049 were under 16 years of age; the great increase in juveniles approaching the critical age limits; the combined value of unrecovered cars in excess of \$13,000,000; all tend to prove the magnitude of the auto theft problem, and the urgent need for immediate action.

The automobile is a necessity for the average American family. The essential character of this type of individual transportation is not often considered until the family is deprived of it. A speedy return of the stolen car induces a favorable reaction and constitutes excellent public relations. In the American way of life, no police department, regardless of size, can long exist without the good will and support of its public. No better method exists to create this support than to concentrate effort on the suppression and prevention of automobile thefts and the identification and return of stolen automobiles to their rightful owners.