

Reducing Auto Theft in Pennsylvania – 20 years of partnership.

By

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Auto theft is often characterized in the public mind as simply “joy riding” and often written off as something that is inconvenient at worst because in many cases the victim’s insurance coverage will pay for the loss. Law enforcement agencies faced with tight budgets and increasing demands for services have to make hard decisions on resource allocation. As a result auto theft cases may become a low priority relegated to report taking, an entry into NCIC, and a complaint number for the victim to provide to their insurance company.

The reality is that auto theft is often a complex crime perpetrated by professional thieves or organized criminal groups whose tactics involve violence, fraud, identity theft, and international trafficking. As the auto industry develops newer methods to prevent theft ever-evolving criminals come up with sophisticated means to defeat those efforts. The economic costs to individual victims and to society are significant. Simpler, unsophisticated methods of stealing cars such as carjacking are often violent in nature and have severe consequences. A recent carjacking in Philadelphia resulted in tragedy when while attempting to flee after the crime the suspects drove the stolen SUV into a crowded street corner. Three siblings, age 7, 10, and 15, who were selling fruit on that corner to raise money for a church organization that funded a local playground, were killed after being struck by the stolen car. Or, in many cases the vehicle is stolen to be used in another crime, such as a robbery, abduction, or drug deal or the vehicle is taken as collateral for unpaid drug debts.

In 1994 there were 52,306 vehicle thefts reported in Pennsylvania. As a result the state legislature passed Act 171 of 1994 which created the Pennsylvania Auto Theft Prevention Authority. The mission of the Authority was “to establish, coordinate, and fund activities in (Pennsylvania) to prevent, combat, and reduce automobile theft...” The Authority’s goals today are to combat auto theft through tough laws, improved enforcement and administration, effective prosecution, and public education.

The Authority uses no tax dollars. Its funds are raised through annual assessments paid by nearly 400 auto insurance companies doing business in Pennsylvania. These funds facilitate a cooperative effort by the insurance industry, law enforcement agencies, and the citizens of the Commonwealth, and this partnership has paid off. In 2013 there were 14,414 auto thefts reported in Pennsylvania, down nearly 71%, compared to a national decrease of 59% since 1994. 2013 saw a 9% decrease from the previous year and a 7% decrease in Philadelphia. Since its inception for each dollar spent by the Authority in fighting auto theft, there has been a \$7 return on that investment with \$29 million in stolen vehicles and parts recovered in 2013 alone.

The Authority is governed by a seven member board with six of the seven members being appointed by the Governor, and one member representing the Attorney General. Gubernatorial appointees include representatives of the insurance industry, the current and former State Police commissioners, and the Commissioner of the Philadelphia Police Department. This unique blend of insurance industry experience, law enforcement expertise, and prosecutorial savvy serves well to formulate strategy with regard to auto theft issues.

The board receives and reviews applications submitted for grants by law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies to fund initiatives, such as task forces or prosecutors, to investigate and prosecute auto theft cases, and from programs designed to address juvenile auto theft offenders, and programs to increase public awareness of auto theft prevention issues.

In 2014 eleven grants were approved that targeted the most significantly impacted areas of the state and, in fact, provide an auto theft law enforcement component in almost every county state-wide. These grantees include the following: Pennsylvania State Police, including funding for troopers and local law enforcement officers assigned to the PSP Eastern, Central, and Western Auto Theft Task Forces, the Philadelphia Police Department including funding for officers assigned to the Major Crimes Auto Theft Squad and other initiatives, the Pittsburgh Police Department, the Lancaster Police Department, the Lehigh County Auto Theft Task force supervised by the Lehigh County District Attorney's Office, the Northeast Auto Theft Task Force supervised by the Lackawanna County District Attorney's Office, as well as auto theft initiatives operated by the Allegheny County, Delaware County, and Philadelphia County District Attorney's offices. Many of these law enforcement agencies make use of LPR technology provided by the Authority as a way to identify and recover stolen vehicles and help gather evidence. In addition grant funds are provided to the Good Shepard Mediation Program which works with first time juvenile offenders, and the Pennsylvania Anti-Car Theft Committee which provides public outreach to increase theft prevention awareness throughout the state.

The Authority also operates a public awareness campaign designed to reach a maximum audience in areas with high auto theft rates. In partnership with the Philadelphia Phillies the Authority sponsors auto theft awareness messages on the Phillies radio network during the season, and sponsors a home game where the ATPA message is delivered to every attendee and throughout the stadium during the game. The Authority provides handout material and other items to police agencies sponsoring community crime prevention events, and provides VIN etching equipment for use in marking vehicles as a deterrent to auto theft. The fact of the matter is that the simplest way to fight auto theft and reduce the chances of a car being stolen is to educate the public with this simple message: "Lock your car, take your keys, every time!" Studies show that in nearly 50% of cases the vehicle was stolen while the keys were in it. When I served as a local police chief during a particularly cold winter recently every car stolen in my jurisdiction had been left with the keys in it and running.

The ATPA also provides training to law enforcement in the investigation and prosecution of auto theft cases. In recent years this training has included topics such as: cargo theft investigations, locking & ignition technology, tactical debriefing, physical surveillance, and courses on identifying ATVs, motorcycles, heavy equipment, and tractor trailers. Recently the ATPA partnered with the Upper Allen Township Police Department in Cumberland County to provide training on the use of VIN etching equipment to police officers in the area.

Finally, in recognition that law enforcement still remains a dangerous job, and auto theft cases are no exception, the Authority annually grants the "Scott A. Wertz Investigator of the Year" award to a police investigator who has distinguished himself in the area of auto theft cases. This award was established in 2007 in memory of Officer Scott A. Wertz, who was killed in the line of duty in August, 2006. Officer Wertz was a member of the Reading City Police Department, assigned to the PA State Police Central Auto Theft Task Force. While working an auto theft detail in Reading, Officer Wertz was shot and killed.

The Award is intended to honor Officer Wertz's bravery and to memorialize him as a member of the ATPA Family. Last year's award winner was Detective Chad Wasserman of the Lehigh County Auto Theft Task Force.

The Authority is proud of its successful 20 year record of coordinating efforts between private entities, government agencies, and the public at large to ultimately reduce auto theft and its impact in Pennsylvania. Police chiefs throughout the state should look to the Authority as a resource with regard to auto theft.

Whether it's putting your officers in touch with an auto theft task force investigator in your area to assist with a case, providing training on auto theft trends and investigative techniques, or providing materials and support for community based crime prevention efforts, we are "the Authority." Police agencies in Pennsylvania which wish to take advantage of ATPA resources can contact us at (717) 591-7097, or by email to: swheeler@watchyourcar.org.



(The author is retired Chief of Criminal Investigations for the Office of Attorney General and also served as a police chief in Dauphin County. He has more than 33 years experience in law enforcement.)