

Pedestrian hit by speeding television

If you think the above headline is absurd, then our current laws treating auto theft as simply a property crime are equally absurd, according to Richard Dubin, Vice President of Investigative Services, Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC).

“Section 334 of the Criminal Code treats auto theft as a simple crime,” says Dubin, “the same as if a stereo, bike or television is stolen. Subsequent sentencing reflects this, and the severity of the sentence is usually based on the value of what was stolen.”

However, he adds, many stolen vehicles are involved in accidents that end up killing innocent people. Dubin views these stolen vehicles as weapons, just like guns, and insists our laws should treat car theft as a serious and violent offence.

“The analogy I use is that I’ve never seen a person killed by a stolen stereo or television set speeding down a street at 160 km/hr. The Criminal Code, The Youth Criminal Justice Act and our lawmakers must recognize that auto theft is a serious and violent offence that puts the community at risk. And sentences must reflect this,” he adds.

According to Dubin, a seasoned professional can steal your vehicle in about 30 seconds, even without the key! That adds up to about 170,000 stolen vehicles each year, 20,000 of which are exported to places like Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

About half of stolen vehicles are taken to commit another crime or to drive them, often recklessly, for enjoyment. Thieves take advantage of owner negligence, grabbing vehicles that are easy to access, and they usually leave them abandoned and vandalized.

The other half are stolen by professional thieves involved in organized crime rings. Vehicles are stolen for resale, for export to other countries or for parts.

Some theft rings steal vehicles to order. A specific make and model of vehicle is scouted and stolen, and

often resold at a low price. The new owner is typically in for a rude surprise, as the professional thieves will often steal the vehicle back and resell it to someone else, or the vehicle will be seized by police.

‘Chop shops’ strip vehicles and sell off components, often to legitimate businesses that are unaware the parts are stolen. This is a big business that accounts for millions of dollars a year in profits for criminals.

“Theft rings under the control of organized crime use automobile theft to finance other criminal activities,” says Dubin, “including drug-trafficking, money-laundering, guns and terrorism. They often use youths to commit auto theft because our courts have traditionally been lenient when imposing sentences, seldom giving jail time or holding offenders in custody.”

The industry’s views on auto theft received high profile earlier this year when Dubin gave a presentation at a Nova Scotia inquiry into the death of teaching assistant Theresa McEvoy.

He told the Nunn Commission of Inquiry that auto theft is not a victimless crime and that 40 people die and 65 people are seriously injured every year as a result of auto theft.

He said IBC is seeking tougher penalties to serve as a deterrent, including changes to the Criminal Code that would make auto theft a separate, indictable offence, as well as changes to the Youth Criminal Justice Act that would ensure young offenders, particularly repeat offenders, are held in custody pending trial.

McEvoy, of Halifax, was killed October 14, 2004 when her vehicle was broadsided by a stolen vehicle driven by a 16-year-old boy. The youth was a repeat offender who had been released from custody just two days prior to the incident. The tragedy received national media attention and has become a landmark case for stakeholders calling for harsher treatment of car thieves and young offenders.



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Dubin’s presentation garnered some very positive media coverage. A Halifax Daily News item led with his comment that car theft is “a significant and troubling social problem, one that is tearing very much at the heart and fabric of communities.” The Halifax Chronicle-Herald quoted Dubin’s final comment that “the courts have been far too lenient”

The Nunn Commission of Inquiry – headed by retired Nova Scotia Supreme Court Justice D. Merlin Nunn – is looking into issues surrounding the death of McEvoy, including the custody and handling of previous charges laid against the young person involved in the incident.

The Commission is one of several encouraging signs across the country that governments increasingly believe that auto theft is a dangerous crime and that the current system does not treat it seriously enough.

IBC has reiterated this view many times and is pleased to have again had the opportunity to do so in a forum that ensured the message was heard by media, consumers and decision makers.