

Preventing Car Crimes

This guide is one in a series of crime prevention publications designed to equip current and potential Safe City partners with low-cost tools to assess their crime problems and to develop strategies to address them. Other guides in this series include vandalism, retail burglary, public disorder, panhandling, and shoplifting.



Safe City is a model community-based initiative that aims to reduce crime, build awareness, and develop communities into safer places to live, work, and shop. Community partners in cities across the U.S. modify the model to best suit their needs and resources. The goal is to leverage existing resources by building collaborative relationships between law enforcement, businesses, residents, government leaders, property managers, and community organizations. This approach maximizes the tactical, financial, technological, and human resources available to address a community's crime problems. The Safe City model promotes partnerships and technical solutions as instrumental building blocks for success. These partnerships are further strengthened by individual retailers taking ownership over the crime and disorder problems occurring in and around their businesses.

Safe City has partnered with the Urban Institute, a non-profit policy research firm, to develop a variety of crime prevention strategies for use in retail settings, many of which are inexpensive and easy to implement. For more information about the Safe City program, please visit www.mysafecity.com. For more information about the Urban Institute's justice policy research activities, please visit www.urban.org/justice.

Understanding Car Crime

The umbrella term "car crime" includes several different car-related crimes: auto theft; theft of personal items from a car, such as clothing or CDs; theft of car parts or accessories, such as hub caps or car stereos; and vandalism to a car. Unlike retail burglary or shoplifting incidents, which have direct impacts on a business, car crimes have a direct impact on customers and employees. Nonetheless, car crimes can have a secondary effect on businesses in that customers may be less inclined to patronize retailers whose parking facilities put their cars and possessions at risk of theft and damage.

Characteristics of Car Crime

PERPETRATORS. Car thefts are committed by both professionals and amateurs. Professionals typically favor cars with greater resale values, either as spare parts or as entire vehicles. Amateurs tend to be joyriders and favor cars that are easy to hot wire, have good acceleration, or fun to drive.

LOCATION. The place a car is parked has a lot to do with the risk of car crime. In fact, vandalism to cars, thefts of car parts/accessories, and thefts of personal items are not typically premeditated acts. Rather, these crimes tend to occur because a car was parked in an unsecured location with a large number of other cars, in places where perpetrators go unnoticed or can easily escape. The following are some locations most prone to car crime:

- Large parking facilities, such as those at a shopping mall;
- Parking facilities located in urban areas;

- Parking facilities with easy access to freeways;
- Surface lots with several pedestrian-access points, inadequate lighting, poor surveillance, or little perimeter or access control; and
- Facilities located near schools, which attract greater risk of theft due to the proximity of juveniles prone to vandalism and more serious offenses.

TIME. The times of day and days of week when car crime occurs depends on parking facility usage patterns. Theft and vandalism are most prevalent when there is little surveillance or guardianship over vehicles. Cars left unattended for extended periods, such as during the workday or overnight, are at greater risk than those parked for short periods. In most climates, seasonality plays some role in car crimes as well, as perpetrators are more active in warmer weather months.

Addressing Car Crime

A powerful tactic to prevent car crime includes changing vulnerable aspects of locations, making it more difficult to commit a car crime. Improving surveillance of and guardianship over parking facilities, as well as controlling access into and out of facilities, can make parking areas much less attractive to potential perpetrators of car crimes. While arresting a car theft suspect has immediate benefits, another perpetrator is likely to replace him or her. However, modifying a parking facility's characteristics – by improving lighting or adding electronic gates at entrances and exits – will deter most likely offenders.

Using this Guide

This guide is designed to help you and your partners understand and address the car crime problem affecting your business area and to help promote dialogue among retailers, police, and community stakeholders about these issues. Keep in mind that when implementing these strategies you should tailor your solution to the unique nature of your crime problem and business environment.

Other guides in this series address vandalism, retail burglary, public disorder, panhandling, and shoplifting.

Quick Tips

Here are a few guiding steps that can help prevent car crimes:

- ① Measure your car crime problem.
- ② Identify business practices that may make you vulnerable to car crime.
- ③ Choose a practical strategy to reduce car crime and try it.
- ④ Measure your car crime problem again to assess the impact of your strategy.
- ⑤ Modify your strategy if necessary.

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Defining Your Problem

Before implementing a strategy to prevent car crime, it is important to define the nature of the particular car crime problem for your area. Although there are many methods you may use to address car crimes on your own, a community-wide response that incorporates other area businesses, agencies, and public services is beneficial to address any underlying community problems which may be related to car crimes. Community partners should consider the questions that appear below. Answers to these questions will help you understand the problem affecting your business area so that you can select an appropriate response strategy.

Questions to Ask:	Example Responses:
<p>Who is experiencing car crime: employees, customers, or the business?</p>	<p>Employee cars are targeted the most, probably because they are in the parking lot for the longest periods of time and employees are required to park their cars in remote areas of the lot. Customers with older sedans and trucks are also victims.</p>
<p>What are the most common complaints about car crimes?</p>	<p>The most common complaints are from individuals whose cars have been broken into and items have been stolen.</p>
<p>Are perpetrators targeting specific types of vehicles?</p>	<p>No clear pattern exists among those cars that are broken into, but the cars that have been stolen are older sedans.</p>
<p>What time of day or day of week do documented car crimes occur?</p>	<p>Most incidents are discovered in the afternoon, but given that many employees' cars are parked for long periods, the exact time is difficult to estimate.</p>
<p>Are car crimes affecting particular businesses besides yours? If so, what do you have in common with the other businesses?</p>	<p>Yes, the businesses most affected are all located near the interstate on-ramp and have customers who typically spend an hour or more in the store (as opposed to the quick in and out of a video or convenience store).</p>
<p>Are there characteristics of your business' parking lot that may make cars parked there more susceptible to crime?</p>	<p>Yes, there is no fencing around the lot, there are many ways for pedestrians to enter the lot, and there is poor lighting.</p>

Developing Response Strategies

After you've worked with your partners to determine the car crime problem for your area, you are ready to develop a response strategy to prevent it. The following are strategies that can be used for common car crime scenarios. Do not forget that situations vary and that yours may require a tailored response. In addition, be prepared for potential implementation challenges, such as unanticipated costs and delays in both the implementation and impact of your crime prevention strategy.

It is important to measure your car crime problem before and after initiating a response. Doing so will tell you whether the response you selected is effective. Proof of effectively reducing car crime (or any other crime) can be useful in persuading other area businesses to join collaborative efforts to reduce crime throughout the community. Your measurement may also provide evidence that the strategy is not reducing

car crime as you expected, suggesting an adjustment to the response is in order. While you may note improvements immediately, it is advisable to wait at least a few months after implementing a response to see whether it has had an impact. The following table highlights ways that you can measure the state of your car crime problem, outcomes that will indicate whether the car crime problem has improved, and possible data sources.

When measuring outcomes it is important to note that a temporary increase in reporting of incidents to police may represent a positive outcome, indicating that community members are paying greater attention to car crime. However, reported incidents should decline over time as the number of car crime incidents decrease.

Measurement	Data Source	Strategic Response	Outcome
General car crimes			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Location of incidents Number of repeat offenders Perception of safety among parking lot users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local police Business records Survey of customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrict pedestrian traffic through parking facility Install video surveillance throughout parking facility Keep parking facility clean and well maintained Improve surveillance by keeping shrubs and trees well manicured If thefts occur during hours of darkness, install or improve lighting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer repeat offenders Less concentrated incidents Improved feeling of safety Increased sales volume
Theft of cars			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of reported incidents Day/time of incidents Number of cars recovered Make and model year of stolen vehicles Number of complaints Value of loss or damage (\$) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local police Business records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce number of entrance/exit points Install entrance/exit barriers Require use of ticket for exit even if no parking fee is charged If thefts occur after business hours, restrict parking after those hours If thefts occur during hours of darkness, improve lighting in and around the parking facility Promote use of steering column locks, kill switches, brake pedal locks, or other security devices to your employees Hire a parking attendant or security guard to patrol the facility Introduce bike patrols to patrol facility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer reported incidents Fewer incidents during business hours Increased recovery rate Fewer complaints Decreased value of loss/damage
Theft from cars			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of reported incidents Day/time of incidents Value of loss or damage (\$) Types of items stolen Number of complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local police Business records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post signs to encourage drivers to protect themselves, for example: "Prevent theft: lock your car and hide valuables out of sight." Post warning signs to deter potential perpetrators, for example: "This area is under surveillance for your safety." If thefts occur after business hours, restrict parking after those hours If thefts occur during hours of darkness, improve lighting in and around the parking facility Secure perimeter with fencing that allows for surveillance Hire parking attendant or security guard to patrol facility Introduce bike patrols to patrol facility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer reported incidents Fewer incidents during business hours Decreased value of loss/damage Fewer complaints

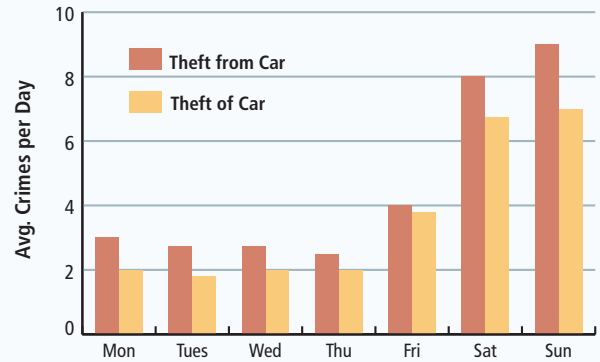
Measuring Your Problem: An Example

The Springville Mall Security Office noticed an increase in reports of theft of and from cars over several months in 2004 and 2005. Before developing a strategy to address car crimes, the security manager wanted more information about the Mall's problem. Since the Springville Police Department is called for every car crime reported to Springville Mall Security, the security manager enlisted the police department's crime analyst to look at patterns of thefts of and from cars. They reviewed each incident for a 12-month period and graphed the average number of crimes reported by day of the week (see right).

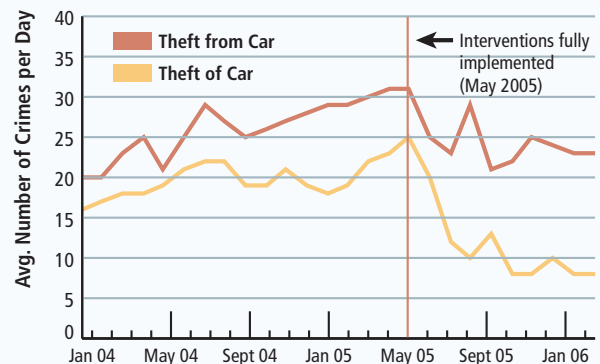
From this analysis, it was obvious that Saturdays and Sundays were most problematic for both types of car crimes. Knowing that busier retail days were associated with a greater number of cars at the mall and a higher number of car crimes, the Springville Mall Security responded by controlling access to the facilities around the clock. They installed entrance and exit gates that required tickets, although customers were not charged a parking fee. The number of security guard patrols also increased throughout the parking lot during the weekends.

After several months, the Springville Mall security manager and the police department's crime analyst assessed the number of reported incidents at the mall for a year before and seven months after the interventions were in place (see second chart). While there was a noticeable decline in car crime after the interventions were fully implemented, theft of cars experienced a greater and more sustained decline than thefts from cars. This indicates that the interventions may be less successful in preventing theft from cars, and that additional prevention strategies should be considered.

Springville Mall Car Crime Trends by Day of the Week



Springville Mall Car Crime Trends Over Time



How Other Communities Prevent Car Crimes

Here are examples of how other retail establishments addressed car crimes in their communities.

Portsmouth, England

Car crime was on the rise in Portsmouth and data analysis determined that nearly 50 percent of car crime was concentrated on 10 percent of the city's streets. Parking areas located near hospitals, doctor's offices, movie theaters, gyms, shopping centers, and restaurants also experienced particularly high levels of car theft. In response, a partnership between businesses, residential associations, media outlets, the city council, and local police was formed to institute Operation COBRA, a tiered approach targeting victims, offenders, and the most problematic locations to reduce car theft. The comprehensive strategy involved establishing a victim help line, increasing media coverage of incidents, installing warning signs, distributing auto lock immobilizers, and distributing crime prevention advice to residents and visitors. After the first nine months of Operation COBRA, the target area experienced a 31 percent reduction in car crime (*Tackling Vehicle Crime in Portsmouth, England: Operation COBRA 2004*).

San Ysidro Boulevard San Diego, California

Car thefts were one of many crimes plaguing the California-Mexico border street of San Ysidro Boulevard in San Diego. Businesses and the police department worked together to prevent these crimes through a number of strategies. First, the partnership posted signs to warn drivers to remove or secure all valuables in their cars. Second, police met with parking lot owners and provided advice on changes to parking lots that could stop or slow the crime. Third, some retailers hired security guards to patrol parking lots as well as improved lighting in the lots. Lastly, police bike patrols monitored secluded areas and plain-clothed officers conducted operations in unmarked police cars in parking lots during nights with high usage. The combination of these prevention techniques reduced car crime by 53 percent within eight months of making changes (*San Ysidro Boulevard Reducing Crime in a Bordertown Block 1998*).

Hotel Parking Lot Dover, United Kingdom

A parking lot business serving passengers for the Channel Ferry partnered with a nearby hotel and introduced a variety of measures to reduce car thefts. The parking lot managers erected wire mesh to prevent youth from climbing into the lot and installed a door that opened only from the inside to prevent pedestrians from accessing the lot from the street. An office near the lot was leased to a taxi company to provide 24-hour informal guardianship. After implementation of prevention measures, the parking lot experienced an 85 percent reduction in auto theft (*Poyner and Webb 1987*).



Additional Resources

- Your Local Police Department
- Your Local Safe City Partnership
- Center for Problem-Oriented Policing: www.popcenter.org
- UK Crime Reduction Toolkits, Vehicle Crime: www.crimereduction.gov.uk/toolkits/vc00.htm
- UK Home Office Vehicle Crime: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/vehicle-crime
- National Crime Prevention Council: <http://www.ncpc.org>
- Small Business Administration: www.sba.gov
- National Retail Federation: <http://www.nrf.com>
- National Restaurant Association: www.restaurant.org
- National Association of Convenience Stores: <http://www.nacsonline.com/NACS/default.htm>

Sources consulted for this guide include:

Clarke, Ronald V. 2002. Thefts of and From Cars in Parking Facilities. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Series, No. 13. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Available: www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-theft_cars.htm.

Maxfield, Michael G. and Ronald V. Clarke. 2004. Understanding and Preventing Car Theft. Crime Prevention Studies, Vol. 17. New York: Criminal Justice Press.

Poyner, Barry and Barry Webb. 1987. Successful Crime Prevention: Case Studies. London, UK: Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.

San Ysidro Boulevard Reducing Crime in a Bordertown Block. 1998. San Diego Police Department, California: [www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/1998/98-71\(F\).pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/1998/98-71(F).pdf)

Tackling Vehicle Crime in Portsmouth, England: Operation COBRA. 2004. Hampshire Constabulary: [www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/2004/04-38\(W\).pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/Library/Goldstein/2004/04-38(W).pdf)



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