

Police put dent in auto thievery

By David Ferris
STAFF WRITER

FREMONT — Steal a Californian's car, and you've wheeled away his identity.

"You never quite get used to the feeling when you walk outside," said Ken Quijano, a Union City man whose Honda Accord vanished from the curb the night of Feb. 24. "Something as big as a car, stolen right from in front of your house."

About 10,500 cars were stolen last year in Alameda County, according to the California Highway Patrol. That makes auto theft the most expensive crime in Alameda County.

The Northern Alameda County auto theft task force recovered 157 cars worth \$1.7 million in January alone, according to the CHP. Going by the FBI's estimate of the average value of a stolen car, Californians in 1995 saw more than \$1.1 trillion drive away.

Alameda County auto theft rates are slowly starting to fall, partly because of two auto theft task forces formed in 1995 and 1996 by local police agencies alarmed at the growing problem. But the funds of the task forces are still thin compared to the multimillion-dollar task forces in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

"We're the bastard stepchild of the task forces," said CHP Sgt. Keith Dittimus, director of the Northern Alameda County auto theft task



Robbed and found: Vehicles stolen and recovered, 1993-1996

City	1993		1994		1995		1996	
	Vehicles stolen	Vehicles recovered	Vehicles stolen	Vehicles recovered	Vehicles stolen	Vehicles recovered	Vehicles stolen	Vehicles recovered
Fremont	670	381	846	468	956	573	884	558
Newark	169	89	221	131	196	155	149	109
Union City	257	184	315	186	306	306	296	182
Hayward	1,011	601	1,206	780	1,396	992	1,257	914
San Leandro	576	260	606	340	696	378	579	351
Oakland	4,529	5,896	4,145	5,491	4,151	5,526	4,036	5,717
Berkeley	1,151	755	1,086	727	1,075	739	1,015	711
Pleasanton	144	55	154	84	168	93	129	66
Livermore	161	82	215	116	253	146	157	83
Tracy	156	84	282	154	225	144	221	140
Alameda County	10,933	9,902	11,005	10,023	11,666	10,716	10,515	9,163
Contra Costa County*	5,230	5,163	5,329	5,103	4,561	4,200	4,108	3,819
California	313,229	274,298	300,028	260,915	272,898	226,113	235,282	192,995

* includes Danville, San Ramon and Walnut Creek

Source: California Highway Patrol

ELIZABETH YEE—Staff

'Hot' cars

Most popular cars stolen in Alameda County, December 1996



Toyota Camry

Vehicle/Year	# stolen	# outstanding
1. Toyota Camry, 1985-91	36	5
2. Toyota Van, 1984-89	36	6
3. Ford Mustang, 1985-91	31	9
4. Buick Regal, 1978-87	31	8
5. Oldsmobile Cutlass, 1979-86	21	5
6. Chevrolet Camaro, 1985-88	20	6
7. Toyota Pickup, 1979-89	19	4
8. Datsun 280Z, 1979-81	16	2
9. Nissan Pickup, 1982-96	14	6
10. Acura Integra, 1991-96	14	All recovered

Source: California Highway Patrol

CHRIS KAESER—Staff

Autos: Car theft county's most expensive crime

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force.

Victims of car theft find the profound sense of violation moves quickly from the heart to the wallet.

Such was the case of Hayward resident Claire Furtado. A brazen young man broke into her husband's 1986 Chevy Celebrity and drove it away at 8 a.m. on Feb. 28, while Ronald Furtado watched through the window.

Ronald Furtado lost a few days' pay, unable to drive to his job as a house painter. And when the car was found minus its wheels in a Hayward back lot, that was just the beginning of the expense.

Towing cost \$90. Rims and tires bought at a junkyard, \$120. Replacing the locks and ignition system (the keys were in the ignition at the time), another \$150. The Furtados insurance paid for none of it.

"I feel like my rights have been violated," Claire Furtado said.

Sometimes the loss isn't perma-

TIPS TO PROTECT YOUR CAR

Drivers can take measures to protect their cars, according to Steve Kowalewski, head of the Southern Alameda County Regional Auto Theft Task Force.

Take care when parking. Always park your car in a well-lit place with a lot of traffic, Kowalewski said. Keep your car locked and your windows rolled up. Never leave your keys in the car.

Be most alert when parking at a movie theater, BART station, mall parking lot or any other place where thieves know you won't be back for a while.

A car is always safer in a driveway than in the street. And it is most at risk at night in a large apartment complex without secure parking, Kowalewski said.

It's annoying and loud, but the best anti-theft device is still a car alarm — particularly one that's wired to shut down your ignition.

A steering-wheel lock bar is only a mild deterrent. The determined thief can hacksaw through a steering wheel in nothing flat. "It's better than nothing at all," Kowalewski said with a shrug.

Don't loan your car to just anyone. While it seems obvious not to loan your car to someone you don't trust, it's common for cars to disappear in just that manner.

Avoid scams when buying or selling a car. Several signs can tip you off that the car you're buying might be hot, Kowalewski said. If the seller will meet you only at a location away from both your homes; if his only phone number is a pager; if he doesn't have identification and claims not to have the car's paperwork; and if the price seems surprisingly low, then the deal might be shady.

When selling a car and taking payment by certified check, make sure the check is good. Most banks have a number you can call to confirm the validity of a cashier's check. Since most operate only during business hours, it is wise to arrange your

whole. But theft rates have gone down as the average Alameda County resident gets older, new cars become safer and the police become more vigilant, Kowalewski said.

An older population means fewer young car thieves. Safer cars include ignitions that won't start without a key implanted with a preprogrammed microchip. And the auto theft task forces are helping to recover cars.

The Southern Alameda County Regional Auto Theft Task Force covers Fremont and Union City, among other areas. Its Northern Alameda County cousin covers Oakland, Berkeley, Albany, Alameda and Piedmont. The two are better known by their rodentlike acronyms, SACRATT and NACRATT.

The task forces are funded mostly by their member agencies (with budgets of roughly \$400,000 for NACRATT and \$600,000 for SACRATT). Each draws together six experienced auto theft investigators to track down leads and patrol for thieves.

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Speedy recoveries

Many of the cars stolen in the county are found just a few days later, according to CHP investigator Steve Kowalewski. Some are found a little beaten up, with a few hundred more miles on the odometer, an empty tank, broken locks, a sliced steering wheel and a missing stereo.

Of those cars that vanish for good, many are dismembered in "chop shops" splattered like grease all around the county, with the biggest dollop in Oakland and Berkeley, Dittimus said.

The most popular targets are cars with parts that are expensive and hard to find. The components are disassembled and sold, both legally and illegally.

Thieves often troll for cars in the wealthier areas and drive their booty back to the north county, sometimes from as far as Southern California, Dittimus said. In fact, Oakland is the only city in the county where more vehicles are found abandoned than are stolen (see chart).

That means investigators tracking heisted vehicles are, quite literally, after a moving target. Over half of the

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When selling a car and taking payment by certified check, make sure the check is good. Most banks have a number you can call to confirm the validity of a cashier's check. Since most operate only during business hours, it is wise to arrange your transaction during business hours as well.

Questions about suspicious buyers, sellers or vehicles? In Southern Alameda County, call SACRATT at (510) 790-6950. In Northern Alameda County, call the Northern Alameda County Regional Auto Theft Task Force at (510) 238-7932. From anywhere in the state, call the California Highway Patrol at (800)-TELL-CHP.

cars stolen in Alameda County are found somewhere else. Often, hot cars are found parked a few spaces away from where another one is stolen, Kowalewski said.

Young thrill-seekers

Perhaps surprisingly, many cars are stolen without profit in mind, especially in South County.

"By far the biggest problem with vehicle theft is not your professional theft, but your recreational theft," Kowalewski said. "Some kids do it for a thrill."

The tools of the trade can be as common as a heavy object to bust the window, then a filed-down key or a pair of scissors to start the ignition.

But some scams are elaborate, including expert counterfeits of cashier's checks to fool those selling their cars, reproduced pink slips and registration papers to fool the Department

of Motor Vehicles and switched VINs — Vehicle Identification Numbers — on a car to give it a new identity.

In one ingenious case, a group of Tracy chop-shop operators acquired a stack of garage-door openers and drove around a Fremont neighborhood pushing buttons until someone's garage door opened. The thieves were later arrested.

Most thieves are men in their late teens or early 20s and are poor performers in school. About 90 percent are involved in drugs and may be stealing in part to service the habit, Kowalewski said.

Luckily for the people of Alameda County, auto theft rates are now starting to fall.

Theft rates declining

Cities here saw their theft rates accelerate until 1996, while rates braked and slowed for California as a

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NACRATT and SACRATT would like more cash from a county fund derived from state vehicle registration taxes. But it's unlikely that the task forces, in competition for the pot with the county sheriff, probation department and other agencies will get any more, said county Supervisor Mary King.

NACRATT and SACRATT believe they are partly to credit for declining theft rates, as their efforts result in more arrests, more vehicles recovered, and more thieves serving time behind bars.

But that's little comfort to the unlucky ones like Quijano.

This is the second time the Union City resident has had his car stolen. Ten years ago, his Honda — that time, a Prelude — was stolen while he was living in San Diego. Police found it later, stripped of everything valuable.

This time he got a little luckier. He found his 1985 gray Accord parked on the street only blocks away from his house a few days later. Someone had rummaged through his briefcase, but hadn't taken anything of value.

"It's hard to have the feeling that you haven't been invaded," he said.