



Oakland sees rise in auto thefts

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Of the top 25 counties in the state with the highest incidents of auto theft, upscale Oakland County has ranked third for two consecutive years.

The Michigan Auto Theft Prevention Authority's 2006 Annual Report issued in February reveals that although thefts in the state have decreased by about 4 percent, Oakland County has seen a 10 percent increase with 3,769 thefts in 2005, up from 3,410 cases in 2004.

The report also shows that auto theft increases hit double digits in five south Oakland County cities between 1999 and 2005 with the Dodge Ram being the No. 1 stolen vehicle in the state and country. Statistics in the report are from 2005.

"For the first time ever, not only is the Ram the most stolen vehicle in the state, but also nationwide," said Terri Miller, director of the H.E.A.T. program (Help Eliminate Auto Theft), a partnership of Michigan's auto insurance companies, law enforcement, community groups and residents.

The Dodge Ram was the top stolen vehicle for 2004 and 2005 in Michigan, according to the report. Miller said the reasoning behind its popularity among thieves is not only the attractive exterior, but the fact that the massive truck lacks an anti-theft device that most vehicles come with as standard equipment. According to Dodge's Web site, 2007 models have a security system as standard equipment.

The Ram doesn't appear to be the only member of the Dodge family topping the list of Michigan's most stolen vehicles. The top four stolen cars in the state's latest survey were Dodge trucks and 11 of the top 12 were Chrysler models.

Sgt. Kevin Banycky with the Oakland County Sheriff's Office Auto Theft Department said a good portion of all Chrysler vehicles don't come with anti-theft ignitions.

"They look good and they're easier to steal than some of the other models," he said.

Local jurisdictions, such as the Pontiac, Hazel Park, Farmington Hills and Waterford Township police departments collaborate with the county on auto theft cases. Banycky said his personal belief on why Oakland County has seen an increase is due to the down economy.

"False reports and insurance claims have doubled over the last year," he said. "That was a big trend in 2006 and seems to be continuing into this year."

The total number of motor vehicle thefts in Michigan for 2005 was 48,064, the sixth-largest total of auto thefts among states. The total for the country was 1,235,226. Since 1995, theft reports decreased from 57,895 to 48,064, or by 17 percent. Since the inception of the Auto Theft Prevention Authority in 1986, the state's average has dropped by about 33 percent.

Oakland County communities with more than 100 motor vehicle thefts in 2005 include: Southfield with 850 reports; Pontiac, 488; Madison Heights, 303; Oak Park, 302; Hazel Park, 253; Royal Oak, 189; Waterford Township, 171; Ferndale, 154; Farmington Hills, 153; and Troy, 136. Southfield, Pontiac, Waterford Township and Troy, however, have all shown steady decreases.

Experts say proximity to Detroit, available expressways and stretched police resources add to the increasing problem in southern Oakland County cities. Hazel Park had a 78 percent spike in auto thefts from 1999 to 2005 - the largest increase of any Oakland County municipality. Hazel Park Police Chief David Niedermeier said cuts in state-shared revenue could be at the root of the problem for all these communities.

"It's hard to know exactly why this is happening, but these statistics correspond to a reduction in officers on the streets," Niedermeier said. "We're down from 42 officers in 1999 to 37 now. But it's not just us. Ultimately, communities are being forced to bear the brunt of the state's financial problems and cuts are being made at the level where service hits the streets. You may pay less in taxes, but what's happening to your insurance rates?"

By comparison, Troy, which has more than four times as many residents as Hazel Park, and is full of shopping districts and bounded by several expressways, dropped 17 percent in auto thefts from 1999 to 2005. Troy credits community investment in its police department with the low rate of vehicle thefts, saying the department has access to resources beyond what many others have.

"We're fortunate to have a lot of different options including surveillance units, technology units, officers in plain clothes, unmarked cars," said Lt. Gerry Scherlinck of the Troy Police Department. "You never want to sit there and brag, but if you commit a crime here there's a high probability you will be caught and prosecuted."

Miller said perhaps one reason behind more suburban areas experiencing theft recently is the thought that "it won't happen to me."

"Unfortunately, as we have tightened up things a little in Detroit, the thieves have moved out to the suburbs," she said. "Residents in these areas tend to be more complacent than city folks, not locking their vehicles at night or leaving personal possessions in the vehicle that would attract thieves."

Tips from Miller's organization have led to the recovery of more than \$43 million in stolen property since 1985 and the arrests of nearly 3,000 suspects involved in auto theft activity.

To keep cars safe

Close the windows completely, lock the doors and take the keys with you. Never hide a second set of keys in your vehicle. Never leave your vehicle running unattended. If you have a garage, park inside and lock both the garage and the vehicle. Never leave registration, title or insurance certificate in the vehicle. Carry it in your wallet or purse and leave a copy at home. Drop your business cards inside the vehicle's doors, under the back seat and behind the dash. Activate any anti-theft device you have installed on the vehicle. The H.E.A.T. toll-free tip line is (800) 242-HEAT. To view the Michigan Auto Theft Prevention Authority 2006 Annual Report, visit www.michigan.gov/msp.

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