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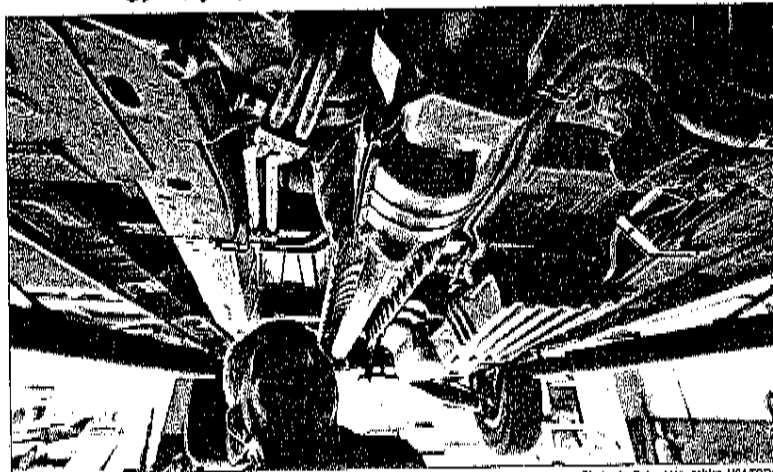


Photo by Robert Hendrill, USA TODAY

Trend in crime: John Ayvazian, owner of The Muffler Shop in Chatsworth, Calif., says thefts of catalytic converters are up because of the rise in the price of precious metals. Ayvazian looks under an SUV at its converter.

Anti-smog devices stolen for their valuable metals

Thieves snatch converters from parked vehicles

By William M. Welch
USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Police officers are seeing an explosive increase in the theft of catalytic converters, the anti-smog devices on motor vehicles that contain valuable metals.

"We've got reports from agents all over the country, really from Maine to San Diego," says Frank Scaffidi, a former FBI agent with the National Insurance Crime Bureau in Des Plaines, Ill. "It seems we are seeing it with more frequency in recent months."

Catalytic converters are required on most SUVs, trucks and automobiles. Small amounts of platinum, palladium and rhodium are used in a thin coating on composite materials inside the converter. When hot exhaust gases pass through from the engine, the metals convert harmful gases — carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and unburned hydrocarbons — into safer ones.

Thieves unbolt or cut the metal devices from the exhaust systems of parked vehicles and sell them to scrap metal recyclers.

The devices can bring as much as \$100-\$150 at scrap yards. Victims can face bills of \$1,000 or more to replace the converters.

"These guys can do 10 cars in one day, and that's a pretty good profit," says John Ayvazian, owner of The Muffler Shop in the San Fernando Valley. "It's crazy."

Ayvazian says he has heard from dozens of victims. "Many were unaware they're a victim of crime and puzzling why their vehicle suddenly sounds so loud," he says. If the device is missing, a car or truck's exhaust spills directly out of the engine manifold through the open pipe where the converter was once attached under the vehicle, ahead of the muffler.

The rash of catalytic converter thefts mirrors an epidemic of copper thefts. Thieves have targeted utilities, construction sites, farms, churches and even homeowners whose air conditioning units have copper coils. A survey last year by the U.S. Department of Energy



Coveted by thieves: John Ayvazian cuts some pipe next to a replacement catalytic converter.

ties nearly \$1 billion over a one-year period.

In Southern California, there has been a spate of reports and arrests involving converter thefts since late last year. In suburban Orange County south of Los Angeles, at least 558 catalytic converter thefts were reported in 2007, many of them in December, sheriff's spokesman Jim Amormino says. Irvine, a city consistently ranked with one of the lowest crime rates in the nation, had 59 catalytic converter thefts last year, Police Lt. Rick Handfield says. Seven were reported in the week after Christmas.

Detective Jeff Godown, who heads the Los Angeles Police Department's crime-tracking unit, says the crime has gone from "zero" a year ago to a major problem police agencies are trying to get a handle on.

"It's such a large problem, and widespread, that we're trying to come up with some ideas how we can address this," Anaheim police Sgt. Rich Martinez says.

John Abounader, executive director of the International Association of Auto Theft Investigators in New York, says there are no reliable statistics on the crime, but it is a widespread problem.

"We're having them all over the country," he says. "The problem lies in unscrupulous salvage yards."

The price of an ounce of platinum was \$1,562 on London's benchmark market Jan. 11. That is up \$100 from a month earlier and more than \$400 over the price a year ago. The price of rhodium exceeded \$7,000; in early 2004, it was selling for more than \$500.

"Typically, we see an upsurge in metal theft when the prices of underlying commodities are going up," says Bryan McGannon, spokesman for the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries.

He says only a few recyclers in the nation are equipped to open the devices and use heat to extract the metals, so converters typically change hands several times. He says the organization has issued alerts and guidelines to recycling companies to detect goods that might be stolen.

The devices don't have serial numbers and once stolen are virtually impossible to track or distinguish from legitimately obtained scrap, he says.

Thieves seem to have no trouble finding buyers. An ad has been running on the Los Angeles-area Craigslist website this month offering "up to \$100 cash" for factory catalytic converters from specific import brands.

Police say thieves often target Toyota SUVs and trucks. Handfield says Toyota 4Runners have been most frequently hit in Irvine. The big vehicles have higher ground clearance and afford easier access to the exhaust system, he says.

Richard Ramos, who repairs exhausts at Danny's Muffler Shop in South Los Angeles, says he sees victims several times a week, mostly with impacts. Owners with auto insurance covering theft often still face deductibles that require them to pay \$500 or more of the cost of fixing their exhausts.

Handfield says a tightening economy may be spurring the spike in metal thefts. He says Irvine police recently arrested a man stealing metals from construction sites. He was a mortgage banker using his luxury Lexus SUV to haul the loot, Handfield says.

"For all crime, it's opportunity vs. risk, value vs. risk," he says. "In this case, because (catalytic converters) are relatively easy to unbolt, the risk is low."