

At the top of the wrong list

by SignOnSanDiego.com

ESCONDIDO — Susan Tavernier never knew how emotionally attached she was to her Ford Explorer until it was stolen from her driveway in the middle of the night last month.

Police officers knocked on her front door the next morning, waking her husband with the news. After car thieves snatched his wife's SUV, they wrecked it in a hit-and-run crash in Valley Center, dumping it in Escondido to evade police.

"I couldn't believe it. My husband was just staring at them," Tavernier said. "It's devastating. You go through a lot of emotions. It was totally paid off. It got my kids back and forth to school. We used it for everything."

The story is similar for hundreds of other residents who have been victims of car theft.

The high auto theft numbers in Escondido also mean that residents pay more for their auto insurance.

Last year, the city had the highest number of car thefts in North County and the second highest vehicle-theft rate per 1,000 residents.

But the problem isn't as bad as it used to be.

In 2004, more than 1,500 cars were stolen, ranking Escondido just below National City for the highest theft rate in San Diego County.

That number dropped by about 500 thefts in 2005, progress that police attribute to increased enforcement by patrol officers and good use of computer-generated data to map thefts and recoveries.

Through May, 450 vehicles have been reported stolen this year — about 20 a week on average.

While car thieves appear to target some neighborhoods more than others, police say no area in the city is immune from the crime.

"They're stolen from everywhere. It's real spotty," said Escondido police Lt. David Mankin.

The car thefts do not appear to be the work of an organized car theft ring, Mankin said. Instead, local thieves steal cars primarily as a way to get around town, he said.

Some will use stolen cars to commit a crime, such as a robbery, drive-by shooting or drug run. Cars usually are dumped on the side of the street or in a parking lot within 24 to 72 hours, Mankin said.

"Some are stolen and stripped of parts and radios, but that is a very small percentage," Mankin said.

Escondido police recover 80 percent to 84 percent of vehicles stolen in the city. Older-model Hondas, Toyotas and Acuras are the most coveted among car thieves because they are some of the easiest to steal yet have a high resale value.

"All criminals know a shaved or worn-down key works," Mankin said. "It doesn't take a lot of sophistication."

In San Diego County, 1991 and 1994 Honda Accords topped the list of most stolen cars in 2005.

Ford and Toyota trucks are also favorites, especially in more rural areas.

Escondido police say there is no real pattern to where criminals shop for cars to steal, though some places appear more popular than others, such as Mission Avenue and Fig Street. The neighborhood is dense with apartment buildings.

"There are so many more vehicles," Mankin said. "Thieves target where there's a concentrated, high number."

About a dozen vehicles were reported stolen from around that intersection within the past two months. Still, many people who live in the area said they weren't concerned and haven't recognized it as a problem.

Other hot spots in Escondido are along West Valley Parkway, Washington Avenue, Grand Avenue between Ash and Rose streets and Broadway north of Lincoln Avenue.

"Sometimes we'll see a pattern and recover vehicles within a couple of blocks," Mankin said. "It's usually someone who lives there who is using the vehicles."

Most cars are stolen from residential areas at night or in the early morning hours, such as in the Taverniers' case. Cars aren't usually taken from business parking lots, although records show that the 200 block of Via Rancho Parkway near the North County Fair mall has its share.

Auto dealerships also are being targeted.

In one night, thieves stole three new vehicles from a GMC dealership on Auto Park Way after breaking into

the lock boxes attached to each vehicle.

A few weeks later, they hit again, taking a 2002 Jeep Cherokee.

After conducting an inventory check late last month, employees discovered an additional 13 vehicles missing from the dealership. Some of the vehicles since have been recovered after being abandoned in various parts of the city.

Police say fighting auto theft has been one of the department's top priorities in recent years. Investigators meet twice each month to go over computer-generated data that can pinpoint trends.

“We track where vehicles are taken from and where they are recovered so officers can pay attention to those areas,” Mankin said. “It helps us use our resources better.”

Detectives then can plan undercover assignments for those areas and patrol officers can increase enforcement. At the beginning of each shift, officers are handed a list of vehicles that were stolen recently from all over North County, so they can keep their eyes peeled.

Many officers recognize that a heightened level of danger comes with hunting for stolen cars. Car thieves are often repeat offenders who don't want to go back to jail. Sometimes they are armed.

An estimated 40 percent to 60 percent are under the influence of some type of narcotic.

“Our gang members are heavily involved in the crime,” Mankin said.

So when thieves see the red-and-blue lights flashing behind them, it's not surprising that many end up in high-speed pursuits or use violence against police.

Mankin said of this year's stolen car cases, 20 percent have ended in arrests.

The department has worked with the San Diego County Regional Auto Theft Task Force, which investigates larger operations such as chop shops and car theft rings.

The high rate of car thefts translates into higher insurance rates for many Escondido residents.

The average premium in Escondido for a married couple with no violations or accidents on their record is about \$2,250, according to calculations from six top insurance agencies.

Many other North County cities are \$100 to \$200 cheaper.

Candysee Miller, executive director of the Insurance Information Network of California, said the likelihood of auto theft, vehicle crashes and lawsuits all factor into auto insurance premiums from city to city.

Many insurance companies will offer discounts if drivers install a tracking device or engine-disabling system that could prevent a theft.

Miller said it was surprising how many people didn't follow obvious steps to prevent auto theft.

“It's really remarkable how many people leave their keys in the car while they dash in for a cup of coffee,” Miller said.

Several of Escondido's auto thefts have occurred while people left their vehicles running unattended to warm up the engine in the early morning.

Then there are those people who leave their keys in the car and the garage door open overnight.

Tavernier said she always had assumed their home of 12 years in rural Escondido was safe from criminals.

It's why she and her family never thought twice about leaving their keys in their cars, which is how her car eventually was stolen.

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