

## Car Cloning Criminal Network Taken Down in Tampa, Miami, Chicago, and Mexico

by NAMIC

A car cloning scheme joint investigation, Operation Dual Identity, identified criminal cells in Tampa, Fla., Miami, Chicago, and Mexico. This joint investigative effort is one of the largest auto theft cases in the United States. Arrest warrants for 17 individuals were executed March 24 in Tampa, Miami, Chicago, Mexico City and Guadalajara, Mexico. To date, approximately 50 individuals associated with this operation have been charged. This investigation was initiated in December 2006.

The individuals have been operating within the United States for nearly 20 years and in Mexico since at least 2004. During the period of time that these criminal cells were operating, more than 1,000 vehicles were stolen in Florida, with estimated losses of more than \$25 million dollars to consumers and victims.

The cloned vehicles were transported and sold to witting and unwitting buyers in 20 states and in several countries. Many of the witting buyers – some of which exchanged the vehicles for narcotics with other individuals throughout the United States and Mexico – purchased the vehicles for significantly less than the fair market value.

The network was also facilitated by other crimes such as drug ripoffs or robberies, drug trafficking, and other federal and state crimes.

The criminal enterprise members have been charged with conspiracy, mail fraud, interstate transportation of stolen motor vehicles, identity theft, and other federal crimes such as trafficking in certain motor vehicles or motor vehicle parts and altering or removing motor vehicle identification numbers.

Car cloning is a crime where a stolen vehicle assumes the identity of a non-stolen, legally owned vehicle that is of a similar make and model. By applying counterfeit labels, plates, stickers, and titles to stolen vehicles, these automobiles can be represented and sold as legitimate vehicles within the commerce of the United States.

In January 2009, the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators implemented the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System database, which tracks the history of vehicle identification numbers and enables each state's Department of Motor Vehicles to verify the information contained in a vehicle title and to share this information with other state DMVs. Prior to implementation of NMVTIS, there was no mechanism for state DMVs to communicate on a regular basis or share vehicle title and registration records. Once NMVTIS is fully implemented, the significant criminal issues of car cloning and counterfeit titles should no longer be possible.

“Implementation of the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System in the United States is absolutely critical to stemming the tide of auto theft,” said Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (FL-20), whose congressional district is plagued with one of the highest number of auto thefts in the nation. “By fully funding the NMVTIS program, we can protect states and consumers from title fraud, keep stolen vehicles from being re-titled, and make it more difficult for criminals to conceal stolen vehicles for criminal purposes.”

This joint endeavor was actively investigated by the following agencies: the National Insurance Crime Bureau, Lee County Sheriff's Office, Miami-Dade Auto Theft Task Force, United States Attorney's Office - Middle District of Florida, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Tampa Police Department, Department of Justice, Manatee County Sheriff's Office, Kane-Cook County Auto Theft Task Force - Illinois, DuPage County Auto Theft Task Force - Illinois, and the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Significant assistance was provided by the following organizations: General Motors Corporate Security, Ford Motor Company, State Farm Insurance, Mercury Insurance, Allstate Insurance, Progressive Insurance, Motors Insurance, GEICO Insurance, Response Insurance, Drug Enforcement Agency; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearm and Explosives; U.S. Customs Border Protection, U.S. Citizen Immigration Service, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Probation Office, United States Postal Inspection Service, Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office, Clearwater Police Department, Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, Hillsborough County State Attorney's Office, Pinellas County State Attorney's Office, Coral Springs Police Department, Palm Beach Sheriff's Office, Broward County Sheriff's Office, Orange County Sheriff's Office, Florida Highway Patrol, Pasco County Sheriff's Office, Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, Georgia Department of Revenue - Auto Crimes Unit, California Highway Patrol, Louisiana State Patrol, Ohio State

Patrol, Kenosha County Sheriff's Office - Wisconsin, Minnesota State Patrol, New York City Police Department - Auto Crimes Division, Connecticut Regional Auto Theft Task Force, and the Cook County State Attorney's Office - Illinois.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Donald L. Hansen of the Middle District of Florida. As in any criminal case, a person is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty. The indictments filed merely contain allegations of criminal conduct.

Source: National Insurance Crime Bureau

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