



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Auto theft database is left to languish Tool against terror lost to poor compliance

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By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | July 16, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Fifteen years after states were directed to share motor vehicle information in a national database, only nine states have done so, making it nearly impossible to identify hundreds of thousands of stolen vehicles -- including a small but steady number that end up as car bombs in Iraq.

FBI officials said they believe the database could help break up far-flung terrorist networks, which are using vehicles stolen and smuggled from the United States.

Bought and sold on the international black market, cars and trucks help fund criminal operations and can be turned into the terrorist weapon of choice against US troops and Iraqi civilians: vehicles packed with explosives. The FBI declined to estimate how many stolen US cars have turned up as car bombs in Iraq but said the number is believed to be at least in the dozens.

The National Motor Vehicle Title Information System was created in 1992 to thwart motor vehicle thefts, but it remains a patchwork repository at best.

Authorities say the system, which has the potential to track every car or truck in the country by its vehicle identification number, has languished because of years of local government inattention, a lack of urgency among state motor vehicle departments, and inconsistent federal funding.

"A car bomb is the absolute favorite delivery method of terrorists," said Special Agent Ryan Toole of the FBI's Major Theft Unit in Washington, who is working to get the database completed. "Tracing that VIN is very, very important" to identifying where the vehicle originated or determining how it ended up in terrorist hands.

Toole said American-made vehicles are particularly attractive to terrorists in places such as Iraq. Forensics specialists there have identified some bomb-rigged cars as vehicles that were swiped off American streets and sold overseas by criminal gangs and organized crime syndicates.

Terrorists desire a "vehicle like a [Chevrolet] Suburban because it can hold a lot [of explosives] but it also blends in," said Toole, who is leading the FBI's efforts to complete the database.

That particular SUV model is popular, he said, because "it looks like an American security vehicle [in Iraq] and they can get closer to their target than if it was a beat-up old Toyota."

The Justice Department is now mounting a campaign to get the database fully online. It is urging insurance companies, auto manufacturers, and others to report relevant information and is also offering federal grants to motor vehicle departments -- up to \$50,000 each -- to help defray their start-up costs.

Authorities estimate car theft costs American consumers \$8 billion a year. More than one million vehicles are stolen each year, yet only 35 percent of them are ever recovered.

Theft rings are also using sophisticated tactics to avoid detection. One method is known as "cloning," in which thieves replace the 17-character VIN number -- fastened beneath the windshield by the car's manufacturer -- with the VIN number illegally lifted from another, legally registered vehicle of the same make, model, and year.

Smugglers holding a stolen car with a cloned VIN number can command a premium for it on the international black market, while other stolen vehicles net just pennies on the dollar.

Vehicle identification has also proven valuable in terrorism-related investigations in recent years.

In 1993, when a truck packed with explosives detonated in a parking garage beneath the World Trade Center in New York, authorities cracked the case by tracing the VIN number of the vehicle to the Muslim extremists charged with the deadly attack.

More recently, the case against the suspected terrorist cell that allegedly plotted to blow up John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York includes evidence of falsified vehicle registration documents.

Meanwhile, law enforcement officials have uncovered a crime syndicate in Los Angeles that is believed to have shipped stolen vehicles to the breakaway Russian region of Chechnya, a hotbed of Muslim extremist activity. And FBI agent Toole said stolen American vehicles continue to show up in the hands of Iraqi insurgents.

"There is a very strong link to terrorism," said Jerry Cox, an attorney for the National Insurance Crime Bureau, which fights insurance fraud and vehicle theft on behalf of more than 1,000 insurance providers and members of the automotive industry.

"The people who profit are not just joy riders down the street," Cox said. "They are gangs. Some of those gangs are just thugs and some of them are terrorists."

Yet without a national database, most law enforcement agencies and customs officials have little chance of effectively intercepting stolen vehicles, which on first inspection can appear to be properly documented. The VIN is generally also stamped on parts of the vehicle that are hard to access, such as an axle or the frame. At crime scenes, fragments from these locations can often reveal the identity of a car or truck.

Currently, 20 states, including Massachusetts and Vermont, contribute information to the national vehicle database, but authorities in those states cannot cross-check auto information against the data of other states.

Twenty-one other states and the District of Columbia are not linked into the system at all, including Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Maine.

New Hampshire is the only New England state among the nine that fully comply with the law. The other New England states and New York "are either not connected or only just beginning to think about" linking in to the system, according to James Burch, deputy director of the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Assistance.

California, which leads the nation with more than 250,000 car thefts every year, is not linked into the national database. And many states that do participate do so only haphazardly.

Jason King, a spokesman for the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, which manages the database on behalf of the Justice Department, said the federal government must commit more resources to make the system function.

"States need the people to build the connections and the funding to pay them," he said. "That is something that has been lacking."

States that do not participate are considered havens for automobile theft, fraud, and cloning because state authorities are unable to identify most stolen vehicles once they are legally registered with fraudulent documents or VIN plates.

The database has proven highly effective in identifying stolen vehicles and falsified documentation. ■