

Auto theft a huge problem in York, GTA

By Mark PavilonsEditor

Auto theft is the number one crime in York Region. And a small but persistent group of officers is doing their best to combat the problem. York Regional Police officers informed King councillors recently about the issue, and the measures taken to mitigate the losses. Local thefts feed regional and international theft rings, according to Detective Scott Cresswell. More affluent areas like King Township mean more valuable targets for thieves. And there's an 'appetite' overseas for such high-end vehicles, Cresswell pointed out. There are several organized crime groups targetting York and the majority of vehicles are destined for overseas markets such as Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and even South America. The detective said sought-after vehicles such as Range Rovers and Mercedes typically head to Lebanon, Turkey and Dubai. Police did repatriate more than 50 vehicles recently, discovered at a port in Malta. However, bringing them back to their owners here in Canada is an expensive process. Det. Cresswell noted automobile theft is much more than an insurance problem - 'it's an expensive social menace.' This costs Canadians roughly \$1 billion annually, including \$542 million for insurers to repair or replace stolen vehicles. Other related costs include policing, health care, court costs and correctional services. But 'the sky isn't falling,' he said, noting many police agencies work together to curb thefts. Joining the efforts of law enforcement are trucking associations, vehicle manufacturers, the Insurance Bureau of Canada and even local businesses. 'We are working diligently and achieving a level of success,' Det. Cresswell said. There are many reasons why vehicles are stolen, including exportation, insurance fraud, dismantling for parts and for the commission of other crimes. Det. Cresswell said the groups are mainly made up of young males in the GTA and from Montreal, expressly for stealing cars. They are armed with the latest technology to break into vehicles and even reprogram new key fobs right on the spot. Push-button-start vehicles are the top victims. The most-stolen vehicles include Toyota and Lexus SUVs and trucks, Ford 150s, Dodge Rams, Jeep Cherokees and Range Rovers. 'It's very challenging for us,' he said, noting the trend is taking vehicles right from residents' driveways. It only takes perhaps 30 seconds for the thieves to snatch a car. Investigators have identified an increasing trend where suspects place small tracking devices on high-end vehicles, so they can later locate and steal them. Brand name 'air tags' are placed in out-of-sight areas when they are parked in public places. 'Thieves then track the vehicles to the victims' residences. Thieves will then typically use tools like screwdrivers to enter the vehicles, ensuring not to set off the alarms. Once inside, a device used by mechanics to reprogram factory settings is connected to the onboard diagnostics port below the dashboard. They program the vehicle to accept a new key the thieves brought with them. Police note the thefts tend to occur between midnight and 4 a.m. every day of the week. Det. Cresswell said they're trying to raise awareness and help citizens protect their assets. He pointed to some recent police projects that recovered vehicles and led to many arrests. The most recent, Project Touchdown, was a six-month investigation led by YRP and included Halton, Peel, Dirham and CBSA partners. It resulted in 215 vehicles being recovered and 51 people charged with literally hundreds of offences. Despite these wins, Cresswell noted the legal system's tendency for 'catch and release' of offenders isn't helping matters. There are ways residents can protect their vehicles and be more vigilant. Det. Constable Al Henson urged residents not to leave their cars unattended while warming up. We should also put our valuables out of sight. People can also purchase kill switches, air tags and steering wheel locks. If residents don't already have one, it's recommended they buy a video surveillance system. Mayor Steve Pellegrini wants to set up public forums, to inform residents of the issue and ways to prevent further thefts.