

Overview

Like other jurisdictions throughout the country, Ventura County has experienced a rash of catalytic converter thefts over the past year. Thieves steal these items for their precious metal recycle value which sometimes yields thousands of dollars. Replacing stolen catalytic converters are costly and time consuming for victims.

Challenge

Catalytic converter thieves typically operate under the cover of darkness and descend on neighborhoods in the early morning hours. They can remove a catalytic converter within minutes and disappear. The crime is not discovered until the homeowner starts their vehicle - sometimes days later - and hears a loud noise coming from their vehicle since their exhaust system has been tampered with.

Solution

To deter would-be thieves and to track stolen catalytic converters, the Ventura County Sheriff's Office launched an awareness campaign and also teamed up with dozens of local auto repair, body shops, and oil change locations. The businesses agreed to etch license plate number and paint a fluorescent Sheriff's star on catalytic converters, free of charge. Our goal was to deter a potential thief who might be planning to steal a catalytic converter. As soon as they see the painted Sheriff's star and engraved license plate number, the hope was they would leave the car alone. If the thief is still bold enough to steal the catalytic converter, law enforcement or a scrap yard would be able to recognize the catalytic converter as stolen based on the markings.

Innovation

This program is innovative in that there is no recorded program where law enforcement collaborated on such a large scale with local businesses in a continual effort to join forces in combatting catalytic converter theft. The Ventura County Sheriff's Office supplied all the tools for the businesses to successfully etch license plate numbers and paint Sheriff's stars on catalytic converters. This included spray paint, etching tools, and stencils. VCSO also provided custom stickers for the automobile businesses to display that signified their partnership with law enforcement. A robust social media campaign was launched announcing this program which also offered the following additional tips at securing catalytic converters.

1. Make an appointment to have your license plate number engraved and Sheriff's star painted on your catalytic converter at one of the listed "Etch and Catch" program locations.
2. Park in a secured garage when possible or in a well-lit area with surveillance cameras and/or where the vehicle will be seen by a passerby.
3. Install motion-sensitive lighting to illuminate driveways used for parking.
4. Consider adding security cameras to oversee driveway and on-street parking areas.
5. Research catalytic converter anti-theft devices and weigh the pros and cons of having one installed.
6. Call us if you hear strange noises during the night, such as power tools or sawing, if you see a vehicle driving suspiciously slow through your neighborhood or stopped at the side of the road, or if you see or hear ANYTHING out of the ordinary.

There are other programs that offer the service of etching the license plate in a one-day event. This is the first program that we know of that offers the service 7 days a week at numerous locations throughout a large jurisdiction.

Results

In the city where this program was first introduced there have been no reported catalytic converter thefts since its inception five months ago. The participating automobile shops have also reported an increase in their business due to interest in the program.

Replicability

This program has been replicated throughout the state. Organizations such as California Crime Prevention Officers' Association are presently considering using this model as a best practice to deter catalytic converter theft.

Program Contact

Senior Deputy Rebecca Purnell

610 Spring Road

Moorpark, CA 93021

805 532 2700