

Priority Intelligence

- There has been a reported increase in theft of catalytic converters across the UK; of note, offenders are increasingly using the threat of violence when challenged by members of the public when caught in the act.
- Catalytic converters contain precious metals, the value of which has increased considerably over recent years, making them an appealing commodity to both opportunistic criminals and organised crime.
- On 23 March 2021, the Metropolitan Police led a series of raids across the south east of England as part of an operation to disrupt an organised crime group linked to the theft of catalytic converters in London.

Background

The theft of catalytic converters is not a new form of crime but has increased over the years with a recent spike in the UK following the easing of lockdown measures last year, along with other forms of crime.

Catalytic converters are a target for opportunistic thieves, and organised crime gangs because they contain precious metals such as rhodium, palladium, and platinum, the value of which has increased considerably. As an example, in 2008 palladium sold for £180~ per ounce, which has risen to £2,000~ as of 2021. As the catalytic converters have a high scrap metal value, they are typically shipped overseas for the precious metals to be removed and refined.

Criminals can make £300 to £500 from every stolen catalytic converter, fenced through scrap metal dealers. Car manufacturers have warned that a gap in the Scrap Metal Dealers Act (2013) enables unscrupulous companies to buy catalytic converters without checks required on where they came from.

Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP)

The most common tactic used by criminals is to raise a vehicle using a trolley jack and remove the catalytic converter using a power tool, such as reciprocating saws and hand pipe cutters. Criminals can act alone, or in groups. In groups typically 1-2 individuals carry out the theft, with 1-2 spotters, enabling the parts to be removed from vehicle in less than 3 minutes.

Some suspects are brazen; vehicles parked in a public area will not deter them. Spates of thefts have occurred at car parks for retail parks, supermarkets, park and ride and hospitals. Criminals have been known to target several vehicles in one location, often in car parks and have been known to return to vehicles they have previously targeted at residential locations.

If criminals are challenged by members of the public, their most common response is to ignore or attempt to block the incident from view. The threat of violence, however, has become more common recently.

Targets

Any car fitted with a catalytic converter could be targeted, however hybrid petrol-electric cars are considered to be at higher risk. Make / models commonly targeted for catalytic converter theft include:

- Honda Jazz
- Toyota Prius - second and third-generation models (2004-2009 and 2009-2016 respectively)
- Lexus RX
- Toyota Auris - second-generation (2012-2018)

In 2018 Toyota GB was asked for 60 replacement converters; in 2019 that number jumped to 4,800.

Toyota has commenced a national catalytic converter marking programme, to increase opportunities to reunite owners with stolen parts.

Impacts

The catalytic converter is considered 'more valuable' than the vehicle itself in some older vehicles, and insurance companies may choose to write-off the impacted vehicle. A backlog in sourcing some new catalytic converters has compounded the cost for insurers, who in some cases must pay increased costs for hire cars whilst sourcing replacement parts. Customers have also complained that some insurance companies have refused to reinsure the vehicle, or hiked insurance costs to cover the risk.

The insurance industry has made numerous comments on catalytic converter theft:

- **Admiral** = "Year on year we have seen a fourfold increase in catalytic converter thefts, the majority of which have been from hybrid vehicles."
- **Aviva** = "We recently replaced a catalytic converter for a London-based customer after it was stolen, only for it to be stolen again just six hours after the customer had their car back from the garage."
- **LV** = "Between 2018 and 2019, we've seen more than a 600% increase in the number of claims relating to catalytic converters, with the average cost being about £1,000."
- **Admiral Insurance** say there was an increase in claims for theft of catalytic converters at the beginning of 2020, with 400 claims made in January. By April, this had significantly reduced with 52 claims made. However, as COVID-19 restrictions were eased, the number of thefts increased.

Metropolitan Police operation

On 23 March 2021 the Metropolitan Police carried out multiple raids across the south east of England as part of an operation to tackle a criminal network linked to the theft of catalytic converters across London.

A significant number of catalytic converters were recovered across the locations as well as tools used to facilitate the thefts including an angle grinder, car jack, a reciprocal saw, a smoldering machine and 9 vehicles on false plates. A shipping container on the Essex coast was intercepted by police which was due to be shipped to the Ivory Coast. Several people were arrested, and police are continuing to pursue enquiries linked to the criminal network. Additionally, police also seized a quantity of stolen metal originating from railways and telecoms masts, stolen vehicles, £50,000 in cash and a quantity of drugs.

Assessment

It is highly likely that there will be an increase in all forms of crime, as lockdown measures are eased in the UK, including vehicular crime (specifically in this instance catalytic converter theft, with an increased risk against hybrid vehicles).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted organised crime activity, impacting operations and cash flow, and as such criminal motivation is assessed to be heightened at this time. Additionally, the SIU assess there is an increased threat posed by opportunistic criminals, with people driven to illegal activity due to rising inequality and socio-economic hardship as a result of the pandemic.

Preventing catalytic converter theft is challenging, mitigations are available. These include: parking the vehicle in a secure area (i.e. enclosed, busy, well-lit), fitting a catalytic converter protection device or marking system, and an approved alarm device to detect and alert if the vehicle is tilted or lifted. However, **safeguards and countermeasures are unlikely to deter determined individuals, and extreme caution should be applied when engaging with potential thieves due to the potential threat of violence.**

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