

Catalytic converter thefts have spiked nationwide, including in Lafayette. Here's what to know.

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Last winter, a group of thieves set up shop in Kevin Fitch's salvage yard on Ambassador Caffery Parkway, working in the dead of night as they sawed catalytic converters from totaled vehicles on his property.

The group worked out of a van on the lot, using space heaters on cold nights, sorting the converters by the glow of battery-powered string lights and fixing themselves meals until they were eventually caught with the help of law enforcement and trail cameras, Fitch said.

The group wasn't the first and won't be the last as the auto part remains a hot commodity for thieves hoping to make quick money, he said.

Reported thefts of catalytic converters have surged nationwide since 2020.

An analysis from the National Insurance Crime Bureau, a nonprofit, found that nationwide roughly 3,300 catalytic converter theft claims were filed in 2019. In 2021, claims rose to over 52,000, the NICB reported in its quarterly magazine, The NICB Informer.

Louisiana hasn't been spared from the crime spike.

In February, police in Baton Rouge traced more than 100 stolen catalytic converters to a single home. In September 2020, two Pearl River area men were accused of stealing more than 300 catalytic converters across St. Tammany Parish and selling them in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Det. Jonathon Sanchez with the Lafayette Police Department said the city began seeing a notable increase in the thefts in October, estimating since then there's been around 300 reported catalytic converter thefts in Lafayette.

Lt. John Shea with the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office said their office handled an estimated 66 cases in 2021, where the thieves stole 123 converters, and about 20 to 25 cases so far this year, in which around 45 converters were stolen.

Shea said the crime spike is attributable to a couple things: the converters, which aren't produced with a VIN number inscribed, are difficult to track, and the theft is easily executable, yielding high potential payoff for little effort.

"It's easy to do, the value is high and [the converter] is easy to get to," Shea said.

A catalytic converter is part of a vehicle's exhaust system and converts harmful pollutants into less harmful emissions through a chemical reaction, according to cars.com. Catalytic converters became standard on vehicles in the 1970s in response to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations on emissions.

The converter contains precious metals like rhodium, palladium and platinum. KITCO, a precious metals retailer and market analyst, put the spot price of platinum at \$896 an ounce, rhodium at \$13,300 an ounce and palladium at \$2,054 an ounce, as of Friday.

Sanchez said thieves may get around \$200 per converter, though some suspects arrested indicated they were making \$600 or more when selling to buyers in Houston, who would then strip the converters down to harvest the precious metals inside.

The Lafayette Police detective said thieves steal the converter by sliding under the targeted vehicle and cutting it out with a saw or similar power tool.

"It's so quick. If you know what you're doing, if you've done a few, they can be in and out in 45 seconds to a minute and a half," he said.

Thieves who cooperated after being arrested said they sold to buyers who advertised online on Facebook and Craigslist, meeting for the exchange in places such as the Walmart parking lot in Crowley, while others funneled the converters to buyers in other states, like Texas, he said.

Sanchez and Shea said the converter thefts are happening everywhere: apartment complexes, businesses, big box store parking lots, hotels and motels, neighborhoods, auto paint and body shops, dealerships and scrap yards.

“I’ve seen them do it in the middle of the mall parking lot in the middle of the day. The middle of a bank parking lot in the middle of the day. The Circle K parking lot in the middle of the day,” Sanchez said.

The types of vehicles being targeted also vary.

While Sanchez said there were some makes and models he’s noticed were targeted more frequently by thieves, including the Toyota Tundra and the Honda Element, both investigators said that personal vehicles, diesel trucks, RVs, cargo vans, box trucks and refrigerated trucks have all been stolen from.

Fitch has been in the auto business in Acadiana since the 1980s and said the thefts are “out of control.” The thieves he’s encountered are treating the endeavor like an occupation and are aiming for volume, not stopping at one vehicle, he said.

While the salvage yard owner is frustrated that losing converters has cost him income, the real victims are individual car owners who may be out thousands of dollars trying to replace their stolen converters if they don’t have comprehensive auto insurance, he said.

The cost of repair may go up if other parts are damaged during the theft, Fitch said.

“There are people who’ve had it stolen where it’s putting them in financial duress,” he said.

“Some of these people are taking that \$1,500 or \$2,000 lick to their pocketbook. [The thieves] are only getting a couple hundred dollars for it, but they don’t care because they’re getting what they need,” Sanchez said.

The 62-year-old Fitch said he’s personally rankled by the thefts because of the connection he’s seen to drug use. Sanchez estimated 80% of the catalytic converter thefts he’s investigated since October involved people battling drug addiction looking for funds to feed their addiction.

Fitch said he’s lost a nephew and two close friends to overdoses in recent years. Seeing how addiction is fueling the wave of converter thefts is upsetting.

“The thing that bothers me most is catching these people, and if they were not on the drugs then they may be doing something that’s actually productive,” Fitch said.

Sanchez said he’s hopeful recent changes in state law will curtail the crime trend and give law enforcement more tools to combat the problem.

One law, Act 127 of the Louisiana Legislature's 2022 regular session, established catalytic converter theft as its own crime, laid out penalties for the theft based on the cost of damages, and will require anyone buying or selling unattached catalytic converters to register with the police chief or sheriff where their operation is located.

The other law, Act 584, requires buyers to be registered with the Louisiana Used Motor Vehicle Commission, maintain a log for three years of each purchase, including information on the seller, and get a signed statement from each seller confirming they can legally sell the converter.

Both laws take effect Monday.

While there's no foolproof way to prevent your catalytic converter from being stolen, there are some preventative measures vehicle owners can take.

Shea recommended drivers park their vehicles in a garage if possible and when out, park in a well lit area in good view of a surveillance camera. Video evidence is the primary way investigators are catching the thieves, he said.

Vehicle owners can also focus on the converters themselves, either by buying an aftermarket cover or clamp to make the converter's theft more difficult or by having a muffler shop etch their VIN number on the converter to help with identification if stolen.

A low cost option is to spray paint the converter and take a photo, so if it's stolen and later recovered investigators have a better chance of reuniting the converter with its original owner, Shea said.

Fitch urged people to be diligent; don't write it off if you hear or see something out of the ordinary, like the sound of sawing when you don't see work happening nearby, and alert the police if you believe a theft may be happening.

"The police need help...People need to look out for their neighbors and businesses to help prevent crime," he said.