



Department of Justice

Address by

Attorney General Designate

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at the

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National Auto Theft Prevention Campaign Opening

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(DELIVERED BY ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL FRED M. VINSON, JR.)

We are here to talk about car theft. The subject may seem narrow and unimaginative. Perhaps unworthy of our interest. But is it?

Of all the mass phenomena of the 20th Century, few have so changed our way of living and broadened our horizons as the automobile. Today 78 million cars travel our streets, roads and highways. They are, as an astute young Negro resident of Watts told me, "like part of your wardrobe. Man, you can't go anywhere without a car."

Among the things that happen to cars is that they get stolen--thousands of them, half a million last year. This is no small tragedy. Car theft ranks third in frequency among all felonies. It is second in direct financial loss--140 million dollars a year. But what hurts more is that nearly two-thirds of all car thefts are committed by kids under 18 . . . and as Burke said "crimes lead into one another."

We are a nation deeply concerned about crime in our midst. Well we should be. Crime measures the moral temperature of a people. A nation that cares about the quality of its life must therefore be concerned. Moreover we have a fever which must be checked.

But, by and large, we, as a people, treat crime as we treat the weather. Everybody complains about crime, but nobody does anything about it. Hence this citizen effort.

We know that we can reduce car theft if we care.

Those 500,000 stolen cars might well have been 400,000 fewer if you and I had followed a few simple precautions. Remove the ignition key before leaving the car. Lock the doors.

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But last year, ignition keys were left in 42 percent of the cars stolen. The doors were left unlocked in 80 percent. Carelessness invites theft.

Did we not invite it, we could halve the number of cars stolen. The overwhelming majority of stolen cars are taken for joyriding, usually by young people. Eighty-eight percent of those arrested for car theft in 1965 were under the age of 25. Sixty-four percent were under 18.

There are professional car thieves, of course. But they too can be thwarted by locked doors, and other plans are under way to help baffle the pro. Automobile and automobile parts manufacturers can add several promising anti-theft devices, such as steering wheel locks, transmission locks, pop-out keys and more secure ignition systems. The Department of Justice is considering legislation to regulate the sale of master keys.

Car thefts cost money. The direct financial loss of \$140 million did not include the enormous costs of dealing with the more than 100,000 persons arrested for car theft.

The toll in damaged lives is the greatest loss. The unlocked car often tempts a youngster to commit his first crime. That beginning can set a pattern, regardless of whether he is caught. A recent sampling by the FBI of a group of persons taken into custody for car theft showed it was the first offense for 42 percent.

There are nearly 20,000 inmates in facilities operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. More than 5,000 of them--or 26 percent--are serving terms for interstate transportation of stolen cars. More than half of the Bureau's youth and juvenile institution inmates were convicted of the same offense. The cost of keeping these inmates in prison exceeds \$3 million a year.

These are only figures from the federal experience. The overwhelming majority of stolen car cases are handled by the states. In California alone, the state's system of criminal justice, police, courts and corrections expends an estimated \$60 million a year on car thefts.

This is why 19 organizations have joined to sponsor the National Auto Theft Prevention Campaign. They and their local chapters are going to spread a message from coast to coast: Remove your keys--lock your car.

Locking your car can save you money. It can remove a temptation from a youngster who otherwise might never get into trouble.

More than 17,000 basic campaign kits have been distributed by these groups to their local chapters. They contain advertisements and spot announcements that will appear in newspapers and on television and radio. There are plans for educational campaigns. There are posters and bumper strips.

The Criminal Division of the Department of Justice is honored to coordinate the campaign. You should know that the 19 groups are bearing the financial expense. They are contributing their time and talent as well as money.

They are accepting a challenge and a dangerous one. Failure is demonstrable by statistics. To succeed they must secure the commitment of us all. If you take care of your car and I take care of mine, we will succeed. This is a practical attack on crime and its causes that can make a difference. In concert with other direct and practical actions we can reverse the trend toward lawlessness.

As with all crime, the cure is in the commitment of the people.