

## Car owners must help fight growing number plate theft, says AA Motoring Trust

Number-plate theft has grown so much that police forces have started to record it as a separate crime and flag the registration number on the Police National Computer. Stolen car registration numbers are used to beat speed and traffic enforcement cameras, the London congestion charge, petrol station security and to clone stolen vehicles.

The AA Motoring Trust is urging car owners to report the theft of their number-plates and not dismiss it as mindless vandalism. If not, they face being accused of speeding and traffic offences they never committed, and may even find the police on the doorstep investigating more serious crimes.

Last year, in the 26 UK police forces that now record the crime, there were 14,176 confirmed thefts of number-plates. Up to one in 250 vehicles may be entering the London congestion charge zone on false number-plates and more than 14 million is lost annually by petrol stations from drive-offs, mostly involving cloned cars.

Even if they don't intend to make an insurance claim, owners who log number-plate thefts with the police not only make it easier to disprove involvement in cloned-car offences but help the police to locate the cars with Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) equipment.

More number-plates are being stolen because tightened procedures for number-plate suppliers are making it more difficult for criminals to obtain duplicates and clone their cars' identity to match someone else's. The recorded number of car registration plate thefts is thought to be far short of the actual total.

Latest figures show that losses to petrol station owners from drive-offs, in which cars often had cloned number-plates, has risen 4.3 per cent to 14.3 million. This compares with a 40 per cent reduction in other thefts and robberies on UK forecourts during the same period, helped by closed-circuit TV.

Tales of cloned number-plate woe include:

- A 62-year-old woman who was accused of speeding, illegal parking, and for driving away from a petrol station without paying;
- A London businessman who picked up nearly 6,000 in traffic offence penalties, including illegal parking and driving in a bus lane;
- A man who travels into London by train who was hit with bills totalling 8,000 for congestion charge and speeding offences. The car cloned with his vehicle's number-plate entered the charge zone at least 28 times.

"Tighter restrictions on the issue of replacement number-plates has forced many criminals to turn to the street to steal car identities," says Paul Watters, head of roads and transport for The AA Motoring Trust. "You may never know that your car has been cloned until speeding, parking and congestion penalty charge tickets arrive on the doormat, and you will have great difficulty convincing the authorities it was not your car - they will demand that you prove your innocence.

"If your number-plates are stolen don't assume it is mindless vandalism, assume they have been stolen to steal your car's identity. Report the theft immediately to the police."

Police ANPR systems will help track cloned cars but, in the longer term, making number-plates difficult or even impossible to steal may be the answer. Potential solutions include plates that will shatter on being tampered with or shear bolts that break when crooks try to unfasten them.

The Department for Transport has recently announced plans for trials of secure number-plates, such as electronic number-plates fitted with a unique chip, and for developing a standard for theft-resistant plates.

NOTES TO EDITORS: What to do if your number-plate is stolen and your car is cloned:

- 1) If your number-plate is stolen, don't dismiss it as trivial but irritating vandalism. Report it immediately to the police.
- 2) If you get speeding or parking tickets and you know it could not have been you, do not ignore them or you may end up in court or have bailiffs knocking at the door. Contact the authority that issued the ticket and explain the situation. Quote any reference number the police may have given when you reported the number-plate theft.
- 3) Carry personal identity and proof of ownership of the car, such as the MoT certificate or V5C registration document, in

case the police spot the number-plate on ANPR cameras and stop your car. Make sure documents are carried securely and don't leave them in the car. Some victims of number-plate cloning have been issued with letters by the police to produce if stopped.

4) If you are continually harassed as a result of the car being cloned, ask the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) if you can re-register your car and be given a new registration number. They usually do this if you can provide evidence of several incidents and proof of entitlement to the vehicle.