

Theft from Cars, Parking Lots More Common in Orinda

By Chris Lavin

Riffling through a car for valuables has been a common occurrence ever since there were cars and petty thieves, but Orinda police are seeing what they perceive to be an increase in such crimes, as well as the theft of a common device, the catalytic converter.

"If people would simply lock their car doors, we wouldn't have so many problems. And people still leave their keys in the ignition if they are just running into a store for a minute," said Detective Nate McCormack, head of community policing at the Orinda Police Department. When McCormack was told that quite a few people still held onto those habits, he simply rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Locking doors, however, will not protect the catalytic converter, installed below the chassis in all cars and trucks to filter poisons out of the gas that runs our vehicles. According to the police and local mechanics, the converters are being stolen from driveways and the BART parking lots at night.

"Oh, yeah," said Brian Mun, of Orinda Motors. "We've seen this."

While no firm statistics are available, McCormack said that outright car thefts seem to remain somewhat steady, with one or two cars stolen each month, but that thefts to cars' contents seem to be on the increase. And the one coveted item that isn't found in the glove compartment, he said, is the catalytic converter, which has become a common stolen item on official police reports – and locking



Brian Mun of Orinda Motors holds a catalytic converter - the object of recent thievery

Photo Chris Lavin

your car won't do much to deter that crime.

"There's not a lot you can do," he said. A thief will crawl beneath the car, usually at night, with a wrench or more handily a battery-powered saws-all tool, and in a couple of minutes, viola, he's off with the catalytic converter, a part of the exhaust system that cycles poisons out of the car's emissions. "Some of them (catalytic converters) are held on with only a couple of bolts," McCormack said.

"We've seen a couple of these (thefts)," said Mun, of Orinda Motors. "One of our customers had his stolen from his truck at the BART station parking lot."

McCormack said officers are not exactly sure what the thieves do with the converters, but recycling centers are a likely destination, because the rather heavy converters contain precious metals such as platinum and rhodium. There may

well as a second-hand market for the converters "because they're so expensive," McCormack said.

Catalytic converters vary in price, from several hundred dollars to more than \$1,000 – and often need to be replaced when a car or SUV will not pass a smog test, making it a need-to-replace part.

"The only thing the driver knows is that the car is making a whole lot of noise in the morning when it starts up," McCormack said. "So they drive to a mechanic who tells them that their catalytic converter is gone – it's been stolen."

McCormack said the best preventative for petty crimes is to lock the house, lock the car, and don't leave the keys in the ignition. For the converter, one might consider a garage. "One that isn't left open," McCormack emphasized. "A lot of people leave their garage doors open."