



Federal Justice Minister and Attorney General Arif Virani is responsible for law and order in Canada. Yet he couldn't prevent his own government car from being stolen in November. It was the third time in three years that a justice minister's car was taken.

Mr. Virani's case is certainly not unique. Experts say Canada is in the midst of a car theft **epidemic**. This crime is costing **insurance** firms over \$1.2 billion annually.

Consider the following statistics. In 2022, the number of cars stolen in Quebec and Ontario rose by 50 percent. Alberta saw car thefts increase by over 18 percent, and Atlantic Canada by about one-third.

Averaged out across the country, 2022 saw a 27-percent increase in this illegal activity. Thieves made off with around 105,000 vehicles. That's the most in over a decade. Bottom line? A vehicle is stolen in Canada about every six minutes. In fact, one in four Canadians has had a car stolen in the last five years. Or they know someone else who has.

The situation is so bad that Interpol, the international policing agency, says Canada has become one of the world's main sources of stolen cars.

### **SOARING RATES**

Experts say several factors account for the skyrocketing incidents of auto theft across the country. But many blame

the COVID-19 pandemic for turbocharging the latest surge.

Here's why. Factory lockdowns and **supply chain** blockages made computer chips and auto parts hard to source. That slowed car production. The resulting vehicle shortage caused a rise in global demand for cars.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Between 2015 and 2023, vehicle thefts in the Greater Toronto Area increased by 300 percent.

Seeing an opportunity to fill this demand, **organized crime** rings got involved. Motorcycle gangs and the **mafia** began a coordinated push to steal cars. These groups sell them to finance activities such as drug **trafficking**, gun sales,

## **DEFINITIONS**

**EPIDEMIC:** a problem occurring widely in a community at a particular time

**INSURANCE:** an agreement in which you pay a company money and they pay your costs if you have an accident, injury, etc.

**MAFIA:** an organized group of criminals

**ORGANIZED CRIME:** criminal activities that are planned and controlled by powerful groups on a large scale

**SUPPLY CHAIN:** the series of processes involved in the production, supply, and delivery of goods

**TRAFFICKING:** the movement of people or goods from one place to another



and human smuggling. The most popular models to steal are Honda CR-Vs, Dodge Ram trucks, Ford F150 trucks, and the Lexus RX series of vehicles.

Other issues contribute to the car theft surge, too, says expert Michael Rothe. For one thing, car makers introduced new anti-theft devices in the early 2000s. That made Canadians **complacent**. As well, police departments had special teams for catching **perpetrators**. So car thefts plummeted.

“Everyone sat back and had their ‘mission accomplished’ moment and the teams were dissolved,” Mr. Rothe says. “So criminals saw another opportunity and theft rates started going up.”

What's more, today's technology makes it easier for thieves to do their dirty work. Modern cars run on computers. Criminals have learned how to hack into and disable anti-theft devices. They can even steal and copy signals that start cars with push-button ignitions.

### SMUGGLING CARS

Crooks are also getting better at profiting from stolen cars. Typically, they give the cars false vehicle identification numbers (VIN). They then sell some of

the cars in Canada. Buyers often aren't aware of their history.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Vehicle identification numbers (VINs) are unique to every car. One VIN is often on the dash and others can also be hidden under the frame or in the trunk.

But most of these stolen cars end up in Africa or the Middle East. That's because autos sell for far more money there than they can fetch domestically. A late-model Honda CR-V, for instance, can go for as much as \$27,000 in Nigeria. Here? about \$20,000.

### CAR THEFT NATION

Why is Canada so popular with car thieves? The criminals know that short-staffed border officials can't inspect every container.

For example, many stolen cars start their global voyage at the Port of Montreal. Last year, nearly 760,000 containers shipped out from this port. Yet border guards caught just 1800 stolen vehicles – a tiny portion of those that passed through.

“We've got a haystack, and we're searching for the needles,” said one border official.

Even after cars are located, retrieving them isn't simple.

One man had a tracking device in his stolen car. It allowed him to follow its trail to the Port of Montreal. He could even pinpoint the container it was in. But border officials told him it could take four months to open the container. To get it back faster, he had to go Montreal.

Mr. Rothe adds that police must take car theft seriously again. Otherwise, crime rings will keep targeting Canada. They believe they won't be caught here – or be severely punished if they are.

### AUTO THEFT SUMMIT

On February 8, Ottawa held a **summit** to address the problem. All levels of government, policing agencies, car makers, and car dealers took part. The group called for tougher penalties for thieves. Other ideas? Banning devices that crooks use to steal vehicles and creating new anti-theft tools.

For its part, Ottawa committed \$28 million to help stop the export of stolen vehicles. It also promised more cooperation between policing agencies.

“To the criminals out there, we're going to disrupt your activities with everything we have,” vowed Industry Minister François-Philippe Champagne. ★

### DEFINITIONS

**COMPLACENT:** feeling so satisfied with your own abilities or situation that you do not feel that you need to try any harder  
**PERPETRATOR:** someone who has done something very bad

**SUMMIT:** an important meeting between the leaders of governments and organizations