

Cars, trucks, and SUVs are an integral part of our lives here in Central Minnesota. Automobiles provide us with transportation to school and work, make a trip to the store much easier, and allow us to roam far and wide in our free time. What would you do without your vehicle? Unfortunately, 32 people in Benton County had to face the reality of that question in 2018 when they had their vehicle stolen. In today's column we'll address ways you can help ensure your vehicle doesn't hit the open road without you.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), a vehicle is stolen in the US every 40.9 seconds. Vehicles are stolen for a number of reasons. Some are taken to chop shops and broken down into components that are sold. Some are taken by criminals hoping to sell the vehicle after giving it a new identity. Some are taken by criminals for a joy ride or as a means to get from one place to another. About half of the vehicles stolen in the US are recovered by police. However, by the time they are recovered, many of those vehicles are damaged beyond repair. According to NHTSA, the most commonly stolen vehicles in the US are:

1. Honda Civic
2. Honda Accord
3. Chevrolet Silverado
4. Toyota Camry
5. Ford F150
6. Nissan Altima
7. Toyota Corolla
8. Ford F250
9. Ford Econoline
10. Honda CR-V

Whether your vehicle is on this list or not, there are things you can do to put the brakes on car thieves.

Manufacturers put door locks on vehicles for a reason. They are effective at keeping people out of your vehicle. Stealing a vehicle is much easier once a thief is inside the passenger compartment. Keep your windows rolled up, sunroof closed, and doors locked when your car is parked. Car thieves can strike anywhere, regardless of how safe you may feel in your neighborhood or at work so always keep your vehicle locked. Securing your vehicles applies to other vehicles like your ATVs, snowmobiles, tractors, or lawn equipment as well. Keeping them behind locked doors will deter thieves.

Vehicle keys are sized to fit in your pocket or purse to make it convenient for you to remove them from the vehicle and keep with you. Take advantage of this design and remove the keys when you park your car. A number of times every year, vehicles are chosen by thieves looking for an easy target simply because they found the keys inside the car.

No one wants to think about this yet, but winter is coming. It is very tempting to leave your vehicle running unattended when the thermometer dips. Leaving a vehicle unattended and running with the keys inside is an invitation to thieves and could also be a violation of a city ordinance depending upon where you stop. A remote start system is a great way to keep your vehicle warm while preventing a thief from driving off into the sunset with your vehicle. If your vehicle didn't come with a remote start from the factory, a number of aftermarket options are available.

Parking in places that are well lit with good sight lines will make your car less desirable to thieves. At home, install motion lights and keep landscaping clear to provide a view of your parking area. Away from home, choose places that are easily seen and frequently traveled to keep thieves away.

Anti-theft devices will help convince thieves to move on down the road to easier targets. Whether it is physical devices like steering wheel locks, wheel locks, or an alarm system or a technological system that includes GPS tracking, all serve as a powerful message to would-be thieves that taking your car will be no Sunday drive. Additionally, some insurance companies offer discounts for owners who invest in these anti-theft devices.

Vehicles link us to so many vital parts of modern life. Vehicles also require a substantial investment to purchase and maintain. Protect your investment and lifestyle by practicing these crime prevention tactics.

For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.