

7 things to know about protecting your car from thieves

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More than 1 million vehicles were stolen in the United States in 2022, according to the [National Insurance Crime Bureau](#), and nearly 500,000 vehicles were reported stolen in the first half of 2023. Nobody, regardless of where we live or the deterrents we put in place, is immune to this kind of crime. So what can we do to keep our wheels safe?

Cale Gould, the statewide public outreach coordinator for the [Colorado Auto Theft Prevention Authority](#), says self-assessment is a good first step. Consider what make of car you drive and what kind of security features it has. “Any vehicles older than five years may be a problem, because older technology is more vulnerable,” he says. Vehicles that use a key instead of a push-button ignition are at a higher risk, as are most lower-end models of Kia and Hyundai without an immobilizer, which is an electronic security device that prevents the engine from being started unless your key fob is nearby. If your vehicle falls into these categories, you may want to add layers of security.

Everyone has suggestions on how to secure your wheels — from gadgets and chains to GPS locaters and kill switches. But what works, and what is just window dressing? Here are expert suggestions on some of the best preventive measures — and what’s not worth the money.

Always take your keys with you

This sounds like a no-brainer, but nearly 60 percent of cars stolen in Minnesota had the keys in them, says Joseph Boche, a special agent with the [Minnesota Commerce Fraud Bureau](#) who oversees the state’s auto-theft prevention program. “Cup holders are not for your keys and fobs,” he says. Do you love how your side view mirrors automatically unfold when you get in the car? Higher-end vehicles often have fobs that trigger or turn on these features. That makes it easy for thieves to spot a parked car that likely has the keys still in it, so they jump in, start it and drive away, adds Boche.

Keep your keys secure

Even when you do take your keys with you, where you leave them also matters, Boche says. Stash them out of sight, not on a hook by the garage door when you are parked at home. Don't hide an extra key in a magnetized box under the car's door or bumper. For extra protection, store key fobs in signal-blocking pouches called Faraday bags, available online for less than \$10. This prevents thieves from using a device to clone the unique signal from your key fob, then fooling the car into thinking your key fob is close by so they can unlock it and start the ignition.

Visual deterrents help

An old-fashioned steering wheel club (about \$20) is a good investment and provides decent security. It's easy to use, and, while it's not foolproof, it's enough of a hassle for thieves that they are likely to bypass your car for one without a steering wheel club. Gould also likes parking boots — you can get something similar to what towing companies use for \$50 to \$80 online. “You put it on the driver-side front tire or wherever it can be seen. Thieves find them hard to overcome, as they can't drive the car or a motorcycle away,” he says. Skip the steel cords for steering wheels — which can be cut off easily — or gear shift immobilizers, which Gould calls “cumbersome.”

Register your wheels

Many municipalities are creating registration systems to help in the recovery of stolen vehicles. For example, DenverTrack allows vehicle owners to sign up and preauthorize the Denver Police Department to access the car's GPS system if the vehicle is stolen. When the owner reports the theft, police can track the vehicle in real time to hopefully locate and return it. Participants receive a sticker to place on their car alerting potential thieves that it is registered. Police in D.C. launched a pilot program in November to provide drivers in selected areas with free digital tracking tags for their vehicles.

Install a kill switch

Rocco Casullo, the president and owner of [Casullo's Automotive Services](#) in Buffalo, has seen an increased call for aftermarket GPS tracking and anti-theft devices, saying he's installing three or more per week. Kill switches, while not a visible deterrent, are one budget-friendly option, he says. Hidden in the glove box or in another discreet spot, a kill switch (or engine interrupter) effectively immobilizes the vehicle. “The engine won't start until you flip the switch, so if you don't know there's a switch, you can't start the car,” says Casullo, who estimates the cost of installing one to be about \$200.

Go high-tech

Even if you have an older vehicle, you can install a high-end security system that includes an alarm, blinking security lights when the system is armed (thieves tend to bypass blinking lights), a remote starter, GPS tracking, and smartphone apps that track its location and/or alert you if your car moves. Depending on the features and enhancements, these devices run from \$300 to \$700, Casullo says.

Don't take matters into your own hands

While Air Tags, GPS locaters and other tracking devices can help, if you do locate your missing car, don't try to retrieve it yourself, say law enforcement experts. Most stolen cars are being used to commit other crimes, and you don't want to get injured tracking down your wheels. Call the police and let them do their job.