

High-tech systems help thwart car thieves

Devices use electronics

By Jack Hovelson
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Your \$15,000 new car is worth \$45,000 — in pieces.

And it's the pieces that professional car thieves are after.

"The 'chop shop' operators hire kids to steal certain models of cars to get specific parts that they've promised someone," says David Manly, vice-president of Lojack, an auto-security company in Dedham, Mass.

"All vehicles are attractive targets for auto thieves because every car is worth three times its market value when it's stripped for parts," he says.

Auto theft has become an \$8 billion-a-year business in the USA, making it the country's No. 1 property crime, Manly says. A single legitimate enterprise with that much revenue would rank 65th on the most recent *Fortune* 500 list — just ahead of pharmaceutical company Abbott Laboratories.

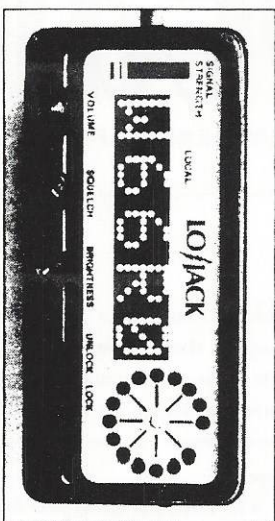
Car theft has been increasing 15% a year the past decade, he says, and 80% of cars are stolen not by joy riders or first timers, but by professional thieves. No surprise, then, that sales of automobile-security systems are up.

"Our industry is growing by leaps and bounds, but the professional thieves have been keeping up with it," Manly says.

The latest technology to foil car thieves — so new it's not available everywhere — is electronic tracking. A private security firm or police get signals from a homing device hidden in your car and follow the signals to find the car when the thief parks.

It's not cheap. Manly's Lojack sells its tracker for \$593. Rival Teletrac, of Inglewood, Calif., offers what it calls VLUU — Vehicle Location Unit — priced from \$600 to \$900, depending on features. You also have to pay Teletrac a monthly monitoring fee that ranges from \$12.95 to \$17.95.

Both companies claim a 98% recovery rate for stolen cars equipped with their devices.



TRACKING DEVICE: Lojack receiver is installed in police cars and picks up directional signals from unit in the stolen car.

Teletrac's transmitter is the size of a videocassette tape; Lojack's is about the size of a chalkboard eraser.

How they work:

► **Teletrac.** The transmitter is hidden in the car. The system is activated when the owner parks the car. It can either be manually switched on by the driver or set to activate automatically. If a thief starts the car without disarming Teletrac, that "triggers" the unit, which sends out a signal that we immediately begin tracking on an electronic map. We can watch it move." Teletrac's Mike Bailey says. Instant activation is an advantage. The thief gets no head start. Teletrac calls police before the car gets outside its tracking range — which varies by city — and which varies by city — and Teletrac's map.

A thief could bypass the system by towing or hauling the car away, instead of trying to hot-wire it. But Teletrac can activate the homing signal remotely later, once the owner reports the theft.

An option on the VLUU lets a stranded driver trigger a roadside assistance alarm to summon help.

Teletrac's system is mainly sold by accessory firms that also install the devices. Bailey says there are more than 8,000 Teletrac-equipped autos in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Dallas, Miami and Houston.

► **Lojack.** The transmitter is hidden in one of 35 niches in the car. It does not send out a signal immediately. You have to discover that your car is missing and report the theft to police. Lojack is tied into police computer networks. The police enter your personal Lo-

Jack code number into their computer, which activates the Lojack transmitter remotely. It also activates receiving units in police cars, which light up and show in which direction the stolen car is from the squad car. Lojack has a range of up to 25 miles in ideal conditions. Police agencies typically test Lojack for a year or more before deciding whether to sign up. Lojack provides the police equipment free.

Lojack is operating in California, Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Illinois, Georgia and Virginia. By year's end, it expects to also be in Connecticut and Washington, D.C.

The devices are offered as optional equipment at more than 3,000 car dealerships.

Sometimes the tracking devices deliver site benefits. In Los Angeles recently, police were led by a Lojack signal from a stolen car to a residential garage that turned out to be the hub of a theft ring. LAPD detective Bob Graybill says that cars stolen in Los Angeles were being driven to Mexico and sold after they were outfitted with fake vehicle identification numbers — VINs — and license numbers. Police arrested four people.

"We've had real good results with Lojack," Graybill says. Manly says that, of more than 200,000 cars outfitted with Lojack, about 4,500 had been stolen, and 98% of those have been recovered.

Thieves have begun to take the homing devices into account. "Typically, a professional car thief will drive the car to a cooling-off place — a parking lot, maybe — where it will be picked up by someone else at-

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ter 12 to 24 hours. Chop shops don't want the thieves driving stolen cars right up to their places, for obvious reasons."

Manly says. Most recoveries are at cooling-off spots, he says. Teletrac and Lojack both say that their high prices are justified because thieves easily foil less-expensive security devices. For instance, they say,

thieves have learned that heavily advertised steering-wheel locks are too hard to cut. But the steering wheel itself isn't. Or thieves remove the steering wheel with a wrench and use the wrench to steer the car for the getaway. "They can beat it in 5 to 10 seconds," Manly claims.

The advent of auto-security systems was prompted by an explosion of car thefts in the late 1970s and early '80s.

"At first, we had hood locks that made it difficult to hot-wire a car," Manly says. "Then we got steering column locks, simple alarm systems and on up to dummies that sit in the car and alarms that talk to the car thieves when they approach

within a few feet. They'll tell the thieves to 'Stop, stand back,' or something like that."

For more information: ► Teletrac, 1-800-800-7500, 10 a.m. - 9 p.m. ET, weekdays, 10 - 7 Saturday. ► Lojack, 1-800-445-6622 in Massachusetts only. Elsewhere, 617-326-4700, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. ET, weekdays.