



By [Vjosa Isai](#)

Vjosa Isai drove around Toronto in a Volkswagen Passat with 290,000 miles on it, a vehicle not coveted by car thieves, to report this article.

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Whenever Dennis Wilson wants to take a drive in his new SUV, he has to set aside an extra 15 minutes. That’s about how long it takes to remove the car’s steering wheel club, undo four tire locks and lower a yellow bollard before backing out of his driveway.

His Honda CR-V is also fitted with two alarm systems, a vehicle tracking device and, for good measure, four Apple AirTags. Its remote-access key fob rests in a Faraday bag, to jam illicit unlocking signals.

As a final touch, he mounted two motion-sensitive floodlights on his house and aimed them at the driveway in his modest neighborhood in Toronto.

But all of these security gadgets, Mr. Wilson is convinced, will do no more than delay what seems inevitable: Toronto’s seasoned auto thieves won’t be deterred by the defensive gear, and they’ll make off with this Honda SUV just as they did with its predecessor — and its insurance replacement, which they returned to steal.

“By no means do I think that I’ve stopped them,” Mr. Wilson said. “All I’ve done is made it take an extra 10 minutes to steal my car.”



Tire locks and a bollard are some of the other visible security measures Mr. Wilson has installed. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

While there has been a surge in car thefts across Canada — up 24 percent in 2022, the most recent year nationwide statistics were available — the scourge has hit the Toronto area particularly hard, creating a mix of paranoia, vigilance and resentment.

So pervasive are car thefts in Canada’s largest city, up 150 percent in the past six years, that the issue has become something of a common bond among vehicle owners. If not a victim themselves of a theft, or thefts, many people seem to know someone whose car was swiped, and just about everyone can instantly recall one of the [car theft headlines](#) that news outlets have had plenty of opportunity to publish.

Social media groups have formed to crowdsource help for car sightings. But the comments are filled with people telling owners to resign themselves to the fact that their car is probably already in a shipping container headed overseas.

“Organized crime is becoming more brazen, and the international black market for the stolen cars is expanding,” said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, speaking this month in Ottawa at a hastily convened auto theft summit.

The meeting was intended to reassure Canadians that the government was aware of the issue and that it was considering a number of responses, including increasing penalties for auto thieves, investing in the border agency and banning imports of key fob hacking devices.



The Canadian International AutoShow this month in Toronto. Thieves in the city target both luxury cars as well as more prosaic models. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

The government is not only aware of the problem, it also hasn't been spared: Two government-issued Toyota Highlanders were [stolen](#) three times in Ottawa from the current and previous justice ministers.

Pierre Poilievre, the leader of the Conservative Party, has repeatedly criticized Mr. Trudeau on the issue, calling the government excessively lenient in bail and sentencing for offenders.

The police have received new funding, including for better surveillance equipment, but the profit motive for thieves — as much as 20,000 Canadian dollars, or \$14,800 per car — has, so far, made the problem intractable.

Car thefts have escalated to “national crisis” levels, according to the Insurance Bureau of Canada, an industry group, which said insurers paid out a record 1.2 billion Canadian dollars, or about \$890 million, in theft claims in 2022.



Police officers on patrol in Toronto, where auto theft is up 150 percent in the past six years. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

For victims, it’s a dizzying, and sometimes traumatizing, experience.

“I was not able to digest the truth that the car had been stolen,” said Kamran Hussain, whose leased 2022 Toyota Highlander was stolen in January. Mr. Hussain’s work as a telecom field sales representative requires him to have access to a car. He’s borrowing one from a friend while he weighs what to do next.

“Either I have to buy a new car or I have to switch jobs,” he said. “I have no other choice.”

Demand for vehicle tracking from insurers in Ontario has about doubled business at Tag Tracking, a Montreal-based company, in the past two years, said Freddy Marcantonio, its vice president. Quebec insurers often require the Tag system for high-risk cars in the province, which for decades has grappled with auto thefts largely because many thieves favor Montreal's port for getting their hot wheels quickly out of the country.

Thanks in part to the well-known prevalence of tracking systems in Quebec, thieves have turned to Toronto for easier pickings.



Brad Lucas had custom bollards installed in his Toronto driveway to protect his Ferrari. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

“It’s like getting a credit card and telling a kid to go in a candy store and buy whatever you want, and that’s why they moved to Ontario,” Mr. Marcantonio said. “It’s a free market for them there.”

But as criminals have adapted their behavior — “I like to say they have Ph.D.s in cars theft,” Mr. Marcantonio said — so have Toronto’s car owners, with many motivated to take a step as simple as clearing the junk out of their garages so they can stow their cars at night.

Homeowners are increasingly looking for solutions to protect their driveways, too, with some winning the [praise](#) of the police for installing bollards, as Mr. Wilson has done.

Last year, Achoy Ladrack founded Bollard Boys GTA — for Greater Toronto Area, an acronym unfortunately shared with the popular video game [Grand Theft Auto](#).

“With this company, I’ve been able to bring that confidence back, bring that peace of mind back to people,” said Mr. Ladrack, 23, adding that one client installed four bollards after three Range Rover thefts.



Workers from Bollard Boys GTA installing a bollard in a driveway in Toronto. Credit... Ian Willms for The New York Times

The bread and butter of thieves are the most prosaic cars, like Mr. Wilson’s Honda CR-V, or Ford F-150 trucks. Luxury cars are trophies.

Some wealthy collectors store their cars in secret locations with round-the-clock security and dogs at night, but thieves can still win out.

Nick Elworthy wanted to get every last detail exactly right on his Ferrari, from the stitching down to the unique color, a candy-apple red slightly deeper than the sports car's signature shade. He got to drive it only a few times before it was stolen last summer.

But the police in Ottawa stumbled on it when an officer noticed a Range Rover being backed into a shipping container on a rural property. A second car in the container was Mr. Elworthy's Ferrari.

"I was absolutely ecstatic when I got the call from that officer," he said. "I was literally jumping up and down."

Most drivers discover they've become victims when confronted with the initially baffling sight of an empty parking space.

When Myra White couldn't find a 2021 Jeep Wrangler that she was sure she had parked at a residential corner in downtown Toronto, she first doubted her memory before she realized it had been stolen. To her surprise, the police found it in a rail yard, with a smashed rear passenger window.



"It's something endemic in the city," Myra White said of car theft in Toronto. A car she had parked was stolen but later recovered by the police. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

“I’m trying to think of what we’re going to do with the car when we get it back because I don’t want, of course, for it to happen again,” said Ms. White, an executive at a Toronto logistics company. “It’s something endemic in the city.”

For the exasperated Mr. Wilson, there has been one recent consolation to being a Toronto car owner: This year’s mild winter means he hasn’t often had to pull out his heat gun or de-icer spray to unfreeze his multiple locks.

Given that he bikes to work — and given all that is required for him to try to fend off the thieves who hanker for his Honda — he said his mind is made up on what his next move will be if he is victimized again.

“If they steal this car, I think I’m done,” he said, adding, “When they come with their antenna and they put it by the window, the only two fobs they’re going to pick up are the two cars that they’ve already stolen. I left those for them.”

***Vjosa Isai** is a reporter and researcher for The Times based in Toronto, where she covers news from across Canada. [More about Vjosa Isai](#)*

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Embarrassing.

The shopper next to you in the grocery store. The parent cheering across the ice at your child’s hockey game. How do they make a living? Is she the scammer who called last week? Fleeced your grandmother? Is he the guy who stole your car? Does he check the parking lot and follow his next victim home? At the other end, the buyer for your car never asks questions, but knows very well why he is getting a “bargain” on his Grand Cherokee or Mercedes. The guy who sells it to him might wink if he thinks it safe, but otherwise he passes on the lie and theft. Societies become built around, if not on, such deceit. TJB