



Police report cards rate cars' vulnerability to theft

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By **Ben Jones, USA TODAY**



Garmin handout

Some police departments have started to issue theft report cards to car owners. To avoid a low score, stow your GPS before you leave the car.

Mandy Mboge, a nursing student from Madison, Wis., got a bad report card earlier this month — not because of her studies but because she left a tote bag in the back seat of her car.

Police patrols like the one in Madison are on the lookout in a growing number of cities for everything from GPS devices and iPads to purses and spare change left in vehicles. They issue report cards that grade cars on how inviting they are to thieves.

"I thought of it as junk, but somebody else might think it's of value," Mboge said of the tote bag she left in plain sight in her car.

Automobiles with unlocked doors or unattended valuables fail.

"It's a new twist on an old message," said Sgt. Bernie

Gonzalez of the Madison Police Department.

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Burlington, Vt., began its report card program last spring, and [Raleigh, N.C.](#), did so in 2008. Other cities with programs include Houston, the Dallas suburb of Carrollton, Texas, and [Vacaville, Calif.](#), officials in those departments said. The University of Buffalo also has a report card program, spokesman John DellaContrada said.

The message is clear, said Kese Smith, a spokesman for the Houston Police Department: "Hide it, lock it or lose it."

Dick Ashton, grant/technical management manager at the [International Association of Chiefs of Police](#), said it's not clear how widespread the practice is, but "it's a chance to go out and do something positive."

Although car thefts are on the decline, vehicle break-ins are increasing. According to *Crime in the United States*, a report published by the [U.S. Department of Justice](#) this past September, car thefts were down 13.5% in 2008 from 2007, while thefts of items from vehicles increased 6.2% during the same period.

Frank Scafidi, a spokesman for the National Insurance Crime Bureau, said vehicle thefts are declining in part because cars are built to be

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increasingly theft-resistant. But that technology, he said, doesn't stop a motivated thief from smashing a window.

"You are always going to have people who are going to try to rip you off for whatever they can," Scafidi said. "They might break a window for what amounts to \$1.85."

Working with another officer on one recent night, Gonzalez shone his flashlight into cars in a darkened parking lot of a Madison apartment complex. Every car got a report card. The officers checked 78 cars. Of these, 52 cars passed, 26 failed.

"Sometimes motorists need a reminder on what should be common sense," said Justin McNaull, director of state relations at AAA. "If you can get rid of the opportunity, you can make a real dent in the crime."

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