

Canada faces scourge of rising car thefts

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Police in Canada believe many stolen vehicles are shipped overseas through the Port of Montreal, seen here, for sale.

Montreal-area resident Zachary Siciliani discovered recently that his car had simply disappeared—likely in one of a rash of vehicle thefts in Canada.

The crime trend, which the Insurance Bureau of Canada has dubbed a "[national crisis](#)," has seen stolen vehicles shipped through the busy Port of Montreal to overseas car lots for sale.

Siciliani told AFP there was no trace of a break-in at the scene, so he thinks thieves probably used a device that intercepts and copies the frequency of electronic key fobs used to open a car's doors and start the engine, and just drove away with it.

"The advent of technology to start cars (has) provided a level of comfort for users and drivers of vehicles, but it also provided an avenue for organized crime groups to steal vehicles," Ontario Provincial Police detective Scott Wade told AFP.

Thousands of vehicles have been stolen in major cities in Quebec and Ontario—the nation's two most populous provinces—over the past several months.

Most of them end up in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. A few have been found by police or intrepid owners using tracking sensors embedded in their cars or trucks.

According to the latest police figures, Montreal and Toronto are the most targeted.

In Toronto, thefts of cars and light trucks between 2021 and 2023 increased by 150 percent over the prior six years. In that same time span, thefts rose by 58 percent in Quebec and 48 percent in Ontario.

The cars were mostly stolen from driveways at night while their owners slept, but some were taken at gunpoint.

In one case, a tow truck operator in Ottawa was arrested for attempting

to steal a [vehicle](#) parked on a downtown street in broad daylight.

Big insurance payouts

The [crime wave](#) has its roots in the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, when public health restrictions effectively limited the number of vehicles manufactured, experts say.

The disruption of global supply chains that followed created "very high demand, while supply was at its lowest," Montreal police spokesman Yannick Desmarais told AFP.



The Port of Montreal is like a 'sieve' for stolen vehicles, says Georges Iny, director of The Automobile Protection Association, a consumer advocacy group.

Wade said organized crime networks are now behind most of the thefts in order "to supply foreign markets."

In 2023, the number of car thefts perpetrated by organized crime groups increased by 62 percent over the previous year, according to federal police data.

Insurers that year collectively paid out Can\$1.5 billion (US\$1.1 billion) in claims for stolen vehicles in Canada, an increase of 254 percent from 2018.

Most of the stolen vehicles are shipped through the Port of Montreal, according to Desmarais.

"Montreal is like a sieve," said Georges Iny, director of The Automobile Protection Association, a consumer advocacy group.

Located on the shores of the Saint Lawrence River, Canada's second-largest city is also one of the nation's major Atlantic ports, "connecting eastern Canada and North America's industrial heartland to more than 140 countries," Iny said.

"The challenge is intercepting the small percentage of these illicit goods without harming our economy by slowing down trade," according to Annie Beausejour, the Canada Border Services Agency regional director for Quebec, noting that more than one million containers pass through the Port of Montreal each year.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government, which organized a car theft summit with police a few weeks ago, pledged to make illegal the sale and use of key hacking devices.

He also announced stiffer penalties for car thieves and more resources

for Canada's border agency.

In the meantime, in Toronto as in Montreal, groups are multiplying on social networks to try to help owners spot stolen cars.

But users often comment to new theft victims that their cars are probably long gone, in a container bound for a used car lot in another country.

Siciliani now has another Mazda 3, but he protects it with a tracking tool.

"Our [insurance company](#) told us our rates would go up significantly unless we have this device in the car," he said.

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