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Car stolen. Car found. Now the bad news.

By Ruben Rosario
Updated: 07/29/2011 11:48:42 AM CDT



Charles Orme's 1968 Volvo, shown here, was stolen last month and later sold for scrap metal without proof of ownership. The ruse is part of a growing local and national crime trend by car thieves cashing in on rising metal prices and loopholes in state laws. (Courtesy of Charles Orme)

Charlie Orme is one angry hombre.

Last month, someone stole his 1968 Volvo from the alley behind his home in St. Paul.

He had spent \$4,100 to rebuild the car's engine and transmission.

But as bad as that was, it got worse. Two weeks later, police told him his car had been found at Metro Metals, a scrap metal recycling company in St. Paul.

But apparently, the car had been sold for scrap metal and then crushed.

Say what?

Say hello to a growing auto theft trend aided and abetted by a loophole in Minnesota law that allows

an auto salvager to buy an old-model car without requiring from the seller a title or other proof of ownership.

"I'm finding it more and more frustrating that I, as a crime victim, have no recourse but to accept that my car has been stolen, crushed and sold to some large steel company to profit their shareholders, and I'm out of a car," said Orme, 56, a carpenter by trade.

"This is nuts that they can get away with stealing people's cars for scrap."

You got that right, Charlie.

But Orme's stolen car ordeal is hardly a local or isolated incident. St. Paul cops recently handed over to Ramsey County prosecutors more than two dozen cases in which individuals sold stolen cars for scrap.

Criminal charges against a half-dozen suspected car thieves are expected to be filed next week.

With scrap metal prices soaring at \$195 per ton or more, market-savvy car thieves are seeking out older cars and cashing in at auto

salvagers coast to coast because of similar law loopholes.

In March, New York City police busted an "army" of crooked tow truck drivers who swiped nearly two dozen old cars and sold them to a Queens scrap-metal junkyard. The business is on a lot co-owned by Victoria Gotti, the daughter of infamous mob

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boss John Gotti.

In Tennessee, frustrated auto-crime cops are lobbying to change a state law that lets scrap metal businesses buy cars 10 years or older without requiring a title for the sale.

"It's as rare as a Bigfoot sighting," Chattanooga auto theft detective Matt Rogers said of the chances police will find a stolen car at a scrap yard before it's crushed.

"Usually, these cars are crushed before we even find out they are stolen," another Chattanooga cop, Peter Hubbard, told a newspaper there.

"If we do make an arrest and the judge orders restitution, (the victim) might get \$20 a month. They can't afford to buy another car, and they don't get any help."

In Minnesota, metal scrap processors can buy an older-model car without proof of title or ownership. They are required to write down the seller's name, driver's license information and the car's vehicle identification number, as well as submit a report of the transaction to the state within 30 days.

The processors also must maintain such records and show them to police upon request.

All the pending St. Paul cases involve Metro Metals, one of the largest scrap metal processors in the Twin Cities. In fact, Minneapolis auto-crime cops, who also have seen a surge in such cases, say several stolen cars towed from Mill City streets have been sold or crushed at Metro Metals.

"I've been here 10 years, and the name Metro Metals always comes up," said Wayne Johnson, a veteran investigator with the Minneapolis police auto theft prevention program.

Johnson said he worked a case recently in which a stolen pickup truck was crushed at Metro Metals within 2-1/2 hours of a tow truck driver swiping it from Interstate 94. Another incident this year involved a police "bait car" towed from a North Side street. Johnson stopped the car thief a few blocks away. The thief, Johnson said, told him he was headed to St. Paul to get rid of the 1988 vehicle.

CHOI: UP THE WAITING PERIOD

So what gives here?

"My client has complied 100 percent with state laws and regulations, and they have gone well beyond what they are required to do," said Craig Greenberg, a lawyer representing Metro Metals. "The last thing my client wants to do is buy a stolen car."

Greenberg blames the recent stolen-car woes on Metro Metals' large volume and reputation as the area's largest processor. He said that besides taking down driver's license and other information from the seller, the firm videotapes all transactions and last month hired an off-duty cop who checks incoming vehicles with a stolen-car database.

St. Paul police spokesman John Keating confirmed that Metro Metals' cooperation has led to recent arrests.

"The focus should be on the people stealing these cars," Greenberg said. "My client believes they are also a victim in this and they have done everything under the sun to be proactive and cooperate with police."

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said a change in state law is needed to curb not only car thieves, but also other criminals who strip copper and other metals from homes and air conditioners and easily sell them to scrap metal processors.


He favors banning cash transactions and establishing a prolonged waiting period - up to 90 days - before a seller gets their money.

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"No question, there has been a decided uptick in these cases throughout the metro area," Choi said.

said.

BILL PREPPED

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Mark Hortman, president of the Automotive Recyclers of Minnesota, would not speak directly about Metro Metals or its efforts to prevent the purchase of stolen cars.

"I've been here nine years, and I have yet to see a stolen car come through here," said Hortman, who is chief operating officer of John's Auto Parts in Blaine.

Although he doesn't have to, Hortman said, his business requires some proof of ownership, title, bill of sale or insurance on most cars they buy, regardless of age or condition.

He said he favors more industry restrictions to help prevent the purchase of stolen cars or ill-gotten precious metals. "The state law is very vague," he said.

He doesn't have far to go to lobby for a change: His wife, Melissa Hortman, DFL-Brooklyn Park, is a fourth-term member of the state House. Hortman said his wife plans to introduce such a bill soon.

Greenberg said Metro Metals would support a legislative change, perhaps a short waiting period before a newly purchased car is crushed, as long as it applies to all metal scrap processors in the state.

A LOST BEAUTY

All this does little to soothe Orme's ire. Although it was his hobby car, he knows the cars of other victims were their major means of transportation. He's filling out crime-victim reparation forms and looking into how to recoup his loss outside of writing it off on his income taxes. He had only liability insurance on the vehicle, so reimbursement is irrelevant.

He said he believes the theft of a car belonging to a known person, say a Ted Mondale, might spur action in the Legislature. For now, he just wants a small taste of justice.


"I just want the public to know about this racket and hope this law is changed so that stealing a car and crushing it is no longer legal in Minnesota," he

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