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10 people to be charged in Twin Cities auto theft ring

by Tim Nelson, Minnesota Public Radio

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AUDIO[▶ 10 people to be charged in Twin Cities auto theft ring \(feature audio\)](#)

St. Paul, Minn. — Authorities in St. Paul say they've cracked a ring of auto thieves that were snatching cars off the street and selling them to a metal salvage operation.

Some of the vehicles may have been crushed into scrap before the owners even knew they were gone.

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi announced on Wednesday felony charges against 10 people connected with taking cars right from the street to a St. Paul scrap yard — many of them hooked up to tow trucks and simply hauled away.

"In some cases the stolen vehicle were crushed within a matter of hours from being stolen," Choi said.

Authorities say more than 50 cars were missing from roads, parking lots and driveways in St. Paul, as well as in Minneapolis and Richfield. The thefts took place between February and June.

Choi said one 40-year-old St. Paul man, Lionel Warner, is charged with stealing 14 cars.

The scheme was cashing in the cars for pennies on the dollar, said John Keating, a spokesman for the St. Paul Police.

"It changes each day, based on the price of metal, but if you had to put a price on it, \$300 to \$350," he said.

St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith said it was part of a rash of auto thefts reported to his department.

"I can tell you that over the course of the last couple of years we've heard stories like this," Smith said. "But our auto theft rate hadn't exploded like it has at the beginning of this year."

And he says it was tough to trace the thefts.

"They just disappeared," he said.

Authorities say many of the cars were older models, and wound up at Metro Metals, a salvage and auction business on the city limits of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

One of the stolen vehicles belonged to a St. Paul man who reported his 1994 Chevrolet Blazer stolen from behind his house earlier this summer. MPR News agreed to withhold his name because he fears reprisal for helping bring the thefts to the attention of police.

He said police called to tell him they found the vehicle at the scrap yard, but that it was a "chunk of iron."

Another one of the people charged, Matthew Williams, of Lakeville, said he runs a family auto business and was duped into taking the cars to the scrap yard by Lionel Warner, one of the other defendants.

"I bought 'em off of him, and he just completely lied to me," Williams said.

Warner couldn't be reached for comment.

County Attorney John Choi said the thefts were a symptom of a larger problem in Minnesota: Salvage laws are lax regarding proof of vehicle ownership.

"If you tighten up some of those regulations, you could have a waiting period of 30 days before a car could be crushed," Choi said. "That would allow investigators time to catch up with these thieves." He said he'll ask lawmakers to make changes in the upcoming legislative session. And while no one at Metro Metals has been charged, Choi said prosecutors continue to work on the case.

Metro Metals declined comment on the matter.

St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith also said that the public played a key role in stopping the thefts.

"We were getting information from citizens, who played a big role in this, that there were tow trucks that were going throughout the city and they didn't have any markings on them," Smith said. "That was key."

He urged residents to watch for similar suspicious activity. Smith also said that auto thefts had fallen by more than a third since investigators broke the case.

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