

Police Announce Car Theft Metal Scrapping Bust in St. Paul

Unmarked tow trucks involved in theft, scrapping

Updated: Wednesday, 17 Aug 2011, 10:56 PM CDT
Published : Wednesday, 17 Aug 2011, 10:36 AM CDT

by Tim Blotz, Tom Lyden and Mike Durkin / FOX 9 News

ST. PAUL, Minn. - Ramsey County Attorney Jon Choi announced Wednesday that charges are being filed against ten people in connection with a three-month car theft and metal scrapping investigation.

The charges involved the **theft of more than 50 vehicles** that were **sold for scrap** at Metro Metals, a St. Paul recycling facility.

St. Paul police found three different schemes during the course of their investigation:

1. **Thieves used "spotters" to identify vehicles to steal.** These individuals then called tow truck drivers and "sold" them the identified vehicles that were towed away for scrap metal.
2. **Tow truck drivers stole vehicles directly off streets or parking lots** and sold them for scrap.
3. **Thieves stole vehicles and drove them straight to the scrap yard.**

Only one scrap yard in West St. Paul is alleged to be involved. No charges have been filed against the recycler yet; however, a search warrant filed last June claims the recycler gave investigators the run-around, saying it had either lost records or they were incomplete or illegible.

Depending on the price of metal and weight of the vehicle, thieves pocketed **\$300 to \$350 per car**. Currently, the scrap yard is paying \$190 per ton. Investigators said the group targeted cars that were 15-20 years old.

"In some cases, the stolen vehicles were crushed in a matter of hours after being stolen," said Choi.

St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith witnessed one of the crimes in his own neighborhood.

"This was not any organized tow truck company," Smith said. "These were lone tow truck operators with unmarked tow trucks that would go into neighborhoods, steal a car, put it on the hook and drive it straight to a scrap yard."

Smith said he became suspicious when he witnesses a car being put on the hook of an unmarked tow truck in his neighborhood.

One victim who did not want to be identified said his Chevrolet Blazer was taken straight from his driveway.

"There were some witnesses in the neighborhood that saw a tow truck come and hook up," he said. "(They) took off with it."

By the time police located the car, it was already too late to get it returned.

"Got a call back from the police department saying, 'Good news, bad news,'" he recalled. "The good news is, we found it. The bad news is, it's just a chunk of iron or metal."

The suspects charged in the investigation are:

- Lionel Warner
- Hugo Velasquez
- Hugo Ernest Velasquez-Guzman
- Brandon Heint
- Julie Rubbelke
- Gary Gomez
- Matthew Bruce Williams
- Michael Thomas O'Brien
- Gerald Edward O'Brien
- Jeffrey Smith

Warner, charged with 15 counts of motor vehicle theft, was the most prolific thief, prosecutors say. Velasquez and his son, Velasquez-Guzman, are tow truck drivers who allegedly purchased vehicles from Warner and sold them for scrap at Metro Metals.

Prosecutors have charged Julie Rubbelke with four counts relating to driving stolen cars straight to the scrap yard.

Choi is pushing for better regulation of the scrap metal industry, suggesting the state require a car title or proof of ownership before vehicles can be sold for scrap. Choi also recommends a 30-day waiting period before cars can be salvaged.

Smith says the arrests should send a message.

"The cat's out of the bag. We will catch you," warned Smith. "We will work with our citizens and we will prosecute you."

St. Paul police have gotten very aggressive in hunting down car thieves, and thefts of cars dropped 38 percent in June and 27 percent in July.