

WATCH YOUR CAR ANTI-THEFT PROGRAM

Introductory Overview

The Watch Your Car Program is a national voluntary effort that encourages owners of motor vehicles to display a light reflective decal or sticker on the rear window of their vehicle to alert police that their vehicle is not normally driven between the hours of 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. The decal is provided free-of-charge after the owner registers for the program.

Program History

Versions of the Watch Your Car Program, known by alternative names in some jurisdictions, have existed for over three decades. For illustration, the Combat Auto Theft or C.A.T. program began as an experiment in New York in the mid-1980's and was brought to additional cities in California in 1992 (Connelly, June 30, 1992). Other localities in California and Minnesota call it the Help Eliminate Auto Theft or H.E.A.T. program (Riverside, California Police Department, May 8, 2017; Duluth, Minnesota Police Department, 2018), while Illinois has the Beat Auto Theft or B.A.T. program (United States Department of Justice, February, 1998).

The Watch Your Car Program expanded following adoption of the federal Motor Vehicle Theft Prevention Act of 1994. That statute,

“requires the Attorney General to develop, in cooperation with the States, a national voluntary motor vehicle theft prevention program wherein a motor vehicle owner may sign a consent form authorizing law enforcement officers to stop his motor vehicle if it is being operated under specified conditions.” (United States Department of Justice, n.d.)

Supported by federal grants under this act, many other states added Watch Your Car programs, including Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Maryland (United States Department of Justice, February, 1998; McCarthy, August 11, 2004; Maryland Department of State Police, 2014).

Within the past couple years, more local jurisdictions have adopted the program, including: Riverside, California (Riverside, California Police Department, May 8, 2017), Sand Springs (suburban Tulsa), Oklahoma (Norris, February 13, 2018) and Centralia, Washington (KOMO News Staff, February 20, 2018).

In March 2018, Carl E. Neilsen, Chief of Police of Centralia, Washington wrote:

“...it is a program that has been run across the nation by several agencies. I came to Centralia following 30 plus years of law enforcement in California and had seen the program run successfully in several jurisdictions down there. I have been slowly implementing a Community Policing philosophy in this organization, so it

was kind of a no-brainer to start the program here in an attempt to curb the auto theft issues that we have by having our community members help us.”

Rationale

The program is primarily aimed at registering motor vehicle owners who are not on the road between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. “A significant number of auto thefts are committed during the early morning hours when the owners are asleep and unaware that their vehicles have been stolen” (United States Department of Justice, February, 1998).

“The theory behind this program is auto theft can occur overnight:

1. When people are sleeping; and
2. When it may take hours for a person to realize they are a victim.
3. During that time patrol officers may have come across the vehicle but had no reason to stop it or suspect it was stolen.”

(Riverside, California Police Department, May 8, 2017).

In effect, the sticker gives the police the probable cause needed to stop a car even if nothing else appears out of line (Connelly, June 30, 1992).

The presence of the stickers is also intended to act as a deterrent. According to former Los Angeles Deputy Police Chief Mark Kroeker, “it’s a deterrent for the person whose car has a sticker. There are almost zero cars stolen that have the stickers. A crook just does not want to steal a car that has one of those stickers” (Connelly, June 30, 1992).

A Successful Case Study- New York

New York City developed a successful C.A.T. program in the 1980’s. NYPD indicated at that time that one of every 15 cars in the city was stolen per year, “but for cars registered under the C.A.T. program, the theft rate [was] one in 574” (Connelly, June 30, 1992). “New York City’s CAT program covers more than 100,000 cars and boasts a theft rate of 0.7 percent, versus 7.1 percent for other vehicles in the city” (SmartMotorist.com, n.d.).

New York City’s program was so successful that the New York legislature expanded it by statute to the entire state in 1990 (New York Times Staff, August 19, 1990). Per New York Vehicle and Traffic Law Section 223:

“The commissioner, in consultation with the commissioner of the division of criminal justice services, shall establish a motor vehicle theft prevention program to be known as the “Watch Your Car Program,” which shall include the issuance of official decals to identify motor vehicles that are not normally operated between the hours of 1:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m. Participation in the program shall be voluntary in nature and shall involve the following:

- (a) In the presence of a duly authorized police officer in any law enforcement agency participating in such program, the registered owner of a motor vehicle

shall sign an informed consent statement indicating that the motor vehicle registered to such owner is not normally operated between the hours of 1:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m. The form of such informed consent statement shall be promulgated by the commissioner after consultation with the commissioner of the division of criminal justice services.

(b) (i) Upon signing such informed consent statement, the registered owner shall be issued decals approved by the commissioner and such decals shall be affixed to the owner's vehicle in a conspicuous place as prescribed by the commissioner. The decals shall be issued by the law enforcement agency participating in the program.

(ii) The law enforcement agency issuing the decals shall make a record of the decals issued to each registered owner. Such records shall be maintained by the law enforcement agencies participating in the program and shall be available to the commissioner, to the superintendent of state police, to the commissioner of the division of criminal justice services and to law enforcement agencies.”

(State of New York Legislature, 2018).

The dimensions and form of the decals is covered by Rule 15 CRR-NY 72.3 Decals:

“The Watch Your Car program front windshield decal shall be a rectangle, 4 inches wide \times 2½ inches high, made of reflective sheeting containing the language and design as mandated by the Division of Criminal Justice Services. The Watch Your Car rear window decal shall be circular, 3¾ inches in diameter, made of reflective sheeting containing the design as mandated by the Division of Criminal Justice Services. The Watch Your Car international decal, which shall be placed next to the Night Program front windshield decal, shall be a rectangle 5¾ wide \times 2 inches high displaying the language and design as mandated by the Division of Criminal Justice Services. The Watch Your Car front windshield, rear window and international decals are displayed in subdivisions (a)-(c) of this section.” (State of New York, December 31, 2017).

The approved rear window sticker, based on the national recommendation:



(Smaller than actual size and not colorized, often yellow)

Challenges Associated with the Program and Responses

1. CONCERN: Thieves will remove the stickers.

RESPONSE: Thieves are anxious to get in the vehicle and get away. “They don’t want to spend time with a razor blade taking the decal off” (New York Times Staff, August 19, 1990).

“(If the) State maintain(s) a database of vehicles enrolled in vehicle theft prevention programs, this information is instantly accessible to law enforcement officers at all times. Consider the following example: A thief removes a vehicle’s decals and, while driving, arouses the suspicion of a police officer on patrol. The officer can access a computerized database to not only check whether a stolen vehicle report has been filed, but also search for a potential stolen vehicle in the State’s Watch Your Car Program database. If the database indicates that the vehicle is enrolled in the program, the officer knows that light-reflective Watch Your Car decals should be affixed to the vehicle. The absence of such decals would heighten the officer’s suspicion that the vehicle had been stolen” (United States Department of Justice, February, 1998).

Additionally, tamper proof stickers are commercially available and would resolve the issue.

2. CONCERN: Similar programs have failed for lack of interest and participation.

RESPONSE: With proper education, citizens should be responsive to community policing programs like this that not only provide them with protection of their

property, but could very well lead to lower insurance premiums for comprehensive coverage as motor vehicle thefts decrease.

Furthermore, training and education should also be provided to participating law enforcement personnel to recommend and encourage the program and provide clarity to all parties involved.

3. CONCERN: Intrusive police activity infringes on personal rights.

RESPONSE: “Phil Gutis, a spokesman for the American Civil Liberties Union said there is no violation of drivers’ civil liberties by the police because the program is voluntary. He did suggest that owners warn drivers with permission that they may be stopped” (New York Times Staff, August 19, 1990).

Any department considering instituting some form of the Watch Your Car program should have their department’s legal representative first review the program to prevent intrusive activity or possible fourth amendment violations.

Recommendations

1. Communication with local law enforcement agencies proposing adoption of a Watch Your Car (or C.A.T. or H.E.A.T. designation if preferred) program, perhaps on a pilot basis, could determine the degree of potential interest and solicit participation.
2. Communication with other stakeholders, including insurance carriers writing motor vehicle policies, could determine the degree of potential interest and solicit participation in the new program. For example, in New York eight insurance companies in the past agreed to offer 5 percent discounts on comprehensive coverage for car owners registered in the program (New York Times Staff, August 19, 1990).
3. Grant opportunities under other programs that could help underwrite funding may be able to be identified and pursued.
4. A strategic public communication and education plan to maximize owner registration in the new program, perhaps as a stand-alone venture or as part of other community policing initiatives, is necessary.
5. Owners of vehicle brands and models most often targeted by thieves should be prioritized for encouragement to participate in the program. For example, the recently-adopted program in Centralia, Washington, emphasizes participation by owners of the top five stolen cars in Washington- Honda Accord, Honda Civic, full

sized Ford pickup trucks, Acura Integra, and Toyota Camry (KOMO News Staff, February 20, 2018).

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