

Preventing Auto Theft and Theft From Cars

Auto Thefts Are Up

In 2023, there were 11,083 auto thefts in Toronto - up by more than 35% over 2022.¹

COVID caused shortages of cars for everyone worldwide due to supply chain issues and shortages of semiconductor chips for new cars. It was hard to buy new cars and there has been a shortage of used cars. Organized criminals steal cars here and ship them to the Middle East and Africa where they are sold for many times their Canadian value.

Surprisingly, car thieves are practical. Most often, they are not stealing the most exotic, expensive cars. They steal reliable, practical vehicles. According to [Équité Association](#), in 2023, the most popular cars stolen in Ontario were²:

Rank	Model	number
1	Honda CR-V	2,684
2	Lexus RX	1,707
3	Dodge Ram 1500	1,405
4	Toyota Highlander	1,344
5	Land Rover Range Rover	1,225
6	Ford F150	901
7	Jeep Grand Cherokee	766
8	Jeep Wrangler	689
9	Honda Civic	630
10	Acura RDX	459

Car thieves are becoming more bold. In 2023, there were over 200 carjackings in Toronto and over 300 in the GTA.³ No one is safe from them. On May 16, 2022, Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs right winger, had his car stolen from him at gunpoint at the busy Cineplex parking lot at Lakeshore Boulevard and Islington Avenue in Etobicoke.⁴

¹ <https://data.torontopolice.on.ca/pages/maps>

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/most-stolen-vehicles-ontario-2022-1.7028315>

³ <https://www.tps.ca/organizational-chart/specialized-operations-command/detective-operations/provincial-carjacking-joint-task-force/#:~:text=For%20instance%2C%20there%20have%20been,of%20those%20occurring%20in%20Toronto.>

⁴ [“Mitch Marner was the victim of a carjacking in Toronto on Monday, Maple Leafs say”](#), The Globe and Mail, May 17, 2022.

To see what level of auto thefts there are in your neighbourhood for 2023, use the [Toronto Police Service Crime App \(Year to Date\)](#).

In May 2022, Toronto Police Service allocated \$2.3 million to try to stem the tide of auto thefts by organized crime and created an Organized Crime Investigative Support Team.⁵ It has paid off. By October, 2023, TPS had recovered 1,080 vehicles and had laid 553 charges against 228 people.⁶

Until things come under more control, there are many things that you can do to reduce the likelihood that your car will be stolen. Some easy, some expensive.

Tips for avoiding auto theft

1. Lock Your Car

This is perhaps the simplest form of theft prevention. Getting into your car is the first step of car theft. Don't make it easy.

Close your windows. An open window makes it easier to unlock a door.

Likewise, never leave anything in sight in your car. Sunglasses, a jacket, purchases – even an empty bag – are all tempting for a smash and grab thief. Make your vehicle uninteresting.

2. Hide and Protect your Keys

This is key (pun intended).

Never leave your keys in the car. Ever. Do not leave a spare key in your glove box “for convenience” for valet parking or under the car in a magnetic holder. Some people do that, and car thieves know it.

Never leave your car running if you need to run back into your home to get something you forgot, or run into a store “just for a second”. Your car can be driven away along with anything you've left in the car (including infants).

Protect your keys Indoors: use a Faraday shield⁷

Old fashioned keys were like door lock keys: they fit into the ignition lock of a car and were turned to start the car. Nowadays, most cars use remote, keyless, wireless fobs to send an electromagnetic signal to your car to unlock it. Your car's electronics query your key fob and measure its proximity to decide whether to reply to a query to unlock your car and start your car when you push the car's “Start” button. Car thieves can use a variety of techniques to learn your car's key fob's code and use that code to enter and start your car. They include:

[Signal amplifiers](#). This device amplifies the signal from your car to call out to your keys located within your home (say 50 feet away, near your front door, or on your

⁵ <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2022/05/25/armed-carjacking-toronto-police-marner/>

⁶ <https://www.tps.ca/media-centre/stories/over-1-000-stolen-vehicles-recovered/>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faraday_cage

kitchen counter). Your car thinks your keys are close by, so it opens the car door locks and lets the car be started. To prevent this from happening, store your keys in a metal-lined container: called a Faraday cage or shield,⁸ literally a protective shield that keeps signals from coming in or out of it. It is usually a metal-lined pouch (many are available online) or box, but putting your keys in your fridge will also work.

Car thieves can also “listen” to you lock or unlock your car in, for example, a shopping center parking lot, and use the captured code to make a duplicate key.

They can also use an Apple AirTag or other trackers to trace the location of your vehicle for theft later.

- **Cover your VIN number.** Your Vehicle Identification Number (or “VIN”) is a 17 digit number that uniquely identifies your car – like a fingerprint. It can be found on a plaque on your dashboard near the left end of your car’s windshield. Thieves can use information stolen from a car dealer to learn your car’s key fob data, and then, once in the car, can attach a device to a diagnostic port under the dashboard to reprogram a new key fob.⁹

Suggestions:

- Cover your car’s VIN number it with a card or piece of tape so it cannot be read.
- Install a “port blocker”: a lock that covers the diagnostic port. You can unlock it for your mechanic for vehicle servicing. Car manufacturers could include these on all new cars, but they have no incentive to do so. If your car is stolen, you’ll probably buy another one from them.¹⁰

3. Steering Wheel Locks and Wheel Chock Locks

A simple mechanical deterrent is a steering wheel lock,¹¹ such as The Club, that attaches to your steering wheel to prevent it from rotating. If the steering wheel cannot rotate, then it cannot be driven away, other than in the direction the locked wheel is pointing. Such locks are highly visible to thieves making them “yet one more thing” to remove in order to steal the car. Thus, it is a good “visual deterrent”. (Crime prevention sometimes amounts to making you a less interesting target for thieves, and they go elsewhere.)

Wheel Chock Locks are another option. They are a lockable clamp that fits around one of your wheel/tires and cost about \$120 at stores like [Canadian Tire](#).

⁸ Scientists call these metal-lined containers “Faraday cages or shields”. They work both ways: they keep the radiation INSIDE your microwave so it does not leak outside to warm up and harm you. Likewise, your Cable TV cable is shielded by a concentric metal foil wrapping that keeps external electromagnetic energy/signals from messing up your cable signal carried on the central copper wire.

⁹ “[Stopping Car Theft: Data Port Covers, steering wheel locks and a use for your old music CDs](#)”; The Toronto Star, Dec. 9, 2021.

¹⁰ “[Kevin Donovan’s car was stolen from his driveway in Toronto. It was tracked to a Halifax port, bound for the Middle East](#)”; Toronto Star Nov. 13, 2021

¹¹ “[Best Steering Wheel Locks](#)”, Chicago Tribune, May 2022.

4. Audible Alarm Systems/Vehicle Immobilizing Systems

Electronic systems are available to add an alarm system and a system that immobilizes your car - even with a copied key.¹² Some systems just make noise; others send a signal to your key fob or phone advising you that someone is tampering with your vehicle. They are not cheap (\$100-\$200 plus) and some require professional installation.

5. Tracking Devices

Self-contained GPS (Global Positioning System) devices are available to attach magnetically to the underside of your vehicle or to be placed somewhere inside it¹³. They are relatively inexpensive to buy (\$50-\$150) but communicate through the cell phone network and require a monthly subscription. Some are battery operated and operate for only a couple of weeks without recharging; others can be wired to the car's electrical system for a permanent power supply.

An Apple AirTag (normally used to track your suitcase when you travel) can be used to track your car location.¹⁴ Const. Marco Ricciardi, crime prevention and community relations officer of TPS 22 division, when interviewed by Global News, recommended using two of them: one that can be easily found (thieves may detect it on their phone) and one that is a lot harder to find: in the trunk, or tucked under a seat. Somewhere where thieves will not hear it beeping.

Such devices have been used to track and find vehicles after they have been stolen.¹⁵ Toronto Police Service has been criticized for not immediately following up on stolen cars that have been located.¹⁶

6. Park Strategically

If you have a garage, use it. If thieves can't get at your car, they can't steal it.

If you have a driveway, and have 2 cars, park the less attractive/desirable one closer to the road, blocking the more desirable one so thieves would have to move the other car first.

If you don't have a garage, park in a well lit area. Thieves hate being seen. Good lighting is the cheapest form of home and business security.

Toronto Police Service offer other Auto Theft Prevention Tips:

- If you have a rear-wheel drive car, back into driveway
- If you have a front-wheel drive car, park front end first
- Always set the emergency brake
- Don't leave the ownership or insurance cards in the vehicle when unattended

¹² [Best Car Alarms for 2022](#), Forbes Wheels, July 2022.

¹³ [Best Hidden GPS Trackers For Cars For 2022](#), Forbes, July 2022.

¹⁴ <https://globalnews.ca/news/9780335/toronto-apple-air-tags-car-theft/>

¹⁵ "[Stopping Car Theft: Data Port Covers, steering wheel locks and a use for your old music CDs](#)"; The Toronto Star, Dec. 9, 2021.

¹⁶ "[Frustrating response to car thefts](#)", Toronto Star Editorial, July 7, 2022.

- Drop business cards or address labels inside doors to assist with vehicle identification

Carjacking

If you are threatened with carjacking, do what Mitch Marner did: Hand over the car and call the police.

Inspector Rich Harris of Toronto Police Service, commenting on Mr. Marner's carjacking said he responded appropriately, "If someone attempts to steal your car, please give it up. Do not resist, do not argue or fight. Your safety is worth more than the car."¹⁷

Even Mitch Marner's Land Rover.

What is Neighbourhood Watch?

Neighbourhood Watch is simple: keep your eyes open around your neighbourhood and, if you see anything suspicious - people, vehicles or activities - call the Police by dialling 911.

Neighbourhood Watch is neighbours helping neighbours, by watching out for them to discourage and prevent crime from occurring. The "Golden Rule" of Neighbourhood Watch: You watch out for your neighbours and your neighbours watch out for you. Neighbourhood Watch is also neighbours helping the Toronto Police Service, by being their extra "eyes and ears on the street" to report crime and practice crime prevention.

If you see something that is either (a) a crime taking place, or (b) out-of-the-ordinary and suspicious: Call 911.

Neighbourhood Watch is only as active as you are.

When to call 911	Less Urgent Calls to Police
Call 911 only when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It's urgent and important: a crime may be in progress and police, ambulance or fire assistance is needed right away.• Someone's health or safety is at risk.	If you don't need urgent help but need to call the police to give them information or ask questions, call Toronto Police Service at: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 416-808-2222 and ask to be transferred to your local Toronto Police Service Division Office.

¹⁷ "[Mitch Marner was the victim of a carjacking in Toronto on Monday, Maple Leafs say](#)", The Globe and Mail, May 17, 2022.