Drivers beware: Catalytic converters thieves active in Twin Cities

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Mark Olek saws through the exhaust pipe under a Saturn SUV at his Economy Muffler shop on University Avenue on Thursday. He says saws like his can cut loose a catalytic converter in less than a minute, and battery-powered versions could do it dozens of times between charges.
Tim Nelson | MPR News

A crime wave is lapping at the undersides of cars, trucks and SUVs across the Twin Cities, as police field dozens of reports of catalytic converter thefts. St. Paul police say 70 vehicles have lost the auto parts since just the beginning of December. Even the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority's truck fleet was hobbled by the thefts.

"In late November and December, we had 11 catalytic converters stolen out of trucks that are extremely important to our fleet and to our functioning in the wintertime, especially," said Jeff Horwich, spokesperson for the housing authority. Four of the agency's trucks are still out of service and the repair bills are running between $3,500 and $4,000 per truck.

“We’ve had to work through the winter by moving trucks around different places in the city to try and cover those losses, to make sure we can keep up with snow plowing and keep up with all the important tasks of moving equipment and moving staff all around the city,” he said.

Home from college, Anna Ankerstjerne parked her car in front of her family's Highland Park home last week. She got in and started it up the next morning.

“It made this horrendous sound” and would only go 20 miles an hour, she said.

Her mechanic didn't even have to look to know the catalytic converter was likely stolen. Ankerstjerne’s repair bill came to $2,000, about what her 2005 Honda CR-V was worth. Replacement converters aren't particularly expensive, but thieves often damage oxygen and other sensors that can quadruple the cost.

The converters contain platinum, palladium and rhodium, metals that have seen sharp rises in scrap value over the last 18 months. Online recyclers offer hundreds of dollars each for some of the devices from the most lucrative makes and models, though some sell for much less.

And it's not just the resale value that causes the problem. Catalytic converters usually are easy to remove from underneath vehicles with a battery-powered saw that costs as little as $60 in a hardware store. Thieves use chains to yank entire exhaust systems out to get at the converters.

Mark Olek, of Economy Muffler shop on University Avenue in St. Paul, said Honda and Toyota SUVs are targets. Thieves also like to get under 12-passenger vans and Ford pickups. They look for unattended vehicles outside churches and shops. With winter cold and darkness, there are fewer people out to see or hear catalytic converter thievery.

“You go inside your house, you turn your TV on, you never look outside,” Olek said.

Mark Olek holds a replacement catalytic converter at his Economy Muffler shop. He says he's regularly replacing the stolen devices for several customers a day.
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One of Olek's customers has had catalytic converters cut out four times.

In St. Louis Park, police have received a couple of converter theft reports a week since November. Lt. Mike Garland said the cases are tough to crack.

"It's not just something people in the community look for or pay attention to," Garland said.

He suggests "vehicle owners park in well-lit areas, close to high travel areas just so it's a little less likely that something like that would take place." And Garland urges those with SUVs and trucks watch their vehicles more closely.