

HIDDEN TREASURE

Shedding Light on the Growing Issue of Catalytic Converter Theft

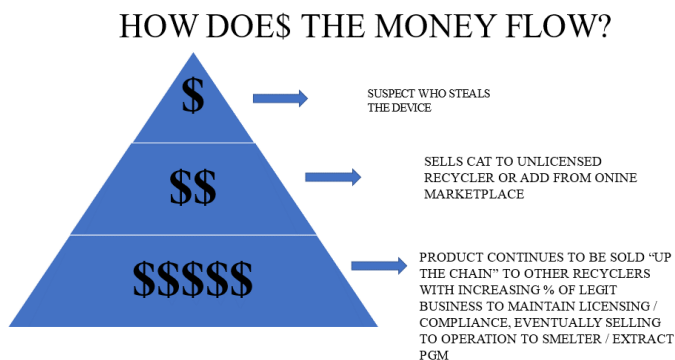
By Melissa Somers, CPP SoCal Executive Director

*“Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.”
Albert Einstein*

Catalytic converter thefts are all over the news. Anyone that’s been a victim of a converter theft will easily recall the sinking feeling of starting their vehicle and instead of the normal purr of an engine, it sounds like a helicopter. They’ll also likely to tell you about the hassle and cost of getting a replacement. If you haven’t had one (or some) stolen by now, chances are you know someone who has. Catalytic converter thefts are up some 400% over last year and are expected to continue increasing by as much as 30% over the next few years, making it very clear that it’s not only a big problem, but that it’s also one that isn’t going away – unless we take action. It’s safe to guess that most of us have a vague understanding that our vehicles need their catalytic converters and that crooks are stealing them for money. We might hear on the nightly news that one reason why converter theft is blowing up is that for the crooks stealing them, it’s a low risk / high reward way to make a quick buck. In order to have an impact or effect change, a more comprehensive understanding of the issue in its entirety, and potential solutions, is a must.

Catalytic Converters 101

Since the mid-1970’s catalytic converters are a standard part of your vehicle’s exhaust system. They contain precious metals that help filter out toxins – and these precious metals are worth some big bucks. Converters contain platinum, rhodium, and palladium – all of which are part of the PGM or Platinum Group Metals. These PGM’s are currently going for a whopping \$1,189 - \$25,850 per OUNCE. The worldwide accessibility of these metals is dwindling and challenged by a number of factors - dwindling supply, geopolitical economics and world environment - making recycling them a cost-effective option that is also less regulated than mining. Certain cars are targeted because they’re known to contain higher levels or larger quantity of these precious metals.



So is Joe Bad Guy rolling through your ‘hood and stealing your neighbors’ catalytic converters, heading home, tearing into his haul in his garage, and extracting platinum to have an engagement ring made for his beloved? Far from it. There are multiple stops your pricey converter will take before its precious contents are extracted to be recycled - each of them garnering a higher price for the seller and, subsequently, an opportunity for us “Victims in Waiting” to break the chain.

Once the suspect has removed your converter, it is sold to a buyer who, in turn, sells it to an unlicensed recycler or core buyer. This unlicensed business then turns around and sells his bounty to another recycler that maintains a level of legitimate business to satisfy compliance. The converters continue to be sold “up the chain” to core buyers with increasing legitimacy until they eventually make their way to their final destination and the contents are harvested.

Breaking the Cycle

One of the biggest challenges in the battle to end catalytic converter thefts is also why they're such an appealing target: converters are largely unmarked. If a crook is found in possession of a pile of stolen catalytic converters with no markings, there is no victim and, therefore, lessened severity of the crime / minimal penalty. The same applies to the core buyers purchasing them – all the way up the chain. However, if we take the time to mark our vehicles' converters, a crook will pass on your marked converter and move on to one that isn't marked knowing that he won't be able to sell it. This also applies to core buyers. In fact, none of the players involved in the progression of events is willing to accept the risk involved with accepting marked property and will not, therefore, purchase catalytic converters that can be traced back to a victim. AKA You. Taking steps to prevent your converter from being stolen will not only help you avoid the hassle of replacing it but will also make a huge impact in interrupting the cycle and stopping the problem.



Different municipalities are teaming up with law enforcement and local businesses to offer community catalytic converter etching programs. Mainly free, these programs will etch either your license plate or last 6-8 digits of your car's VIN onto the converter. A few places to check for an etching program in your area:

- Oil change or muffler shops
- Car dealer
- Local Sheriff's station or police department



You can also mark your catalytic converter and prevent it from being stolen by taking matters into your own hands and with the help of an etching pen, some high-temperature automotive exhaust paint, after-market catalytic converter ultra-destruct labels / clamps / plates, and / or some good old fashioned creative welding.

Marked or not, if your converter is stolen, report it to law enforcement. This can help with further establishing the scope of the issue as well as help with keeping track of repeat offenders. If you have marked your converter(s), be sure to let the reporting officer know what information is on your converter. Check with your local Sheriff's office or law enforcement agency for information about marking programs and where you can share information regarding leads.



Sample ultra-destruct label from RETAINAGROUP

Raising your awareness of the catalytic converter theft cycle, how / where the cycle can be interrupted, and prevention options are all steps in the right direction but only help to a degree in making catalytic converter thefts a thing of the past. While it's commonly said that knowledge is power, the true power occurs once the knowledge gained is put into action. The efforts you make will not only remove you from the Victim In Waiting pool, but they're likely to give you some peace of mind – and that's the real hidden treasure.



The Crime Prevention Program of Southern California (CPP) is a non-profit organization working with our members, law enforcement, the construction industry and area auto theft task forces to educate, empower and engage in a community fighting construction crime. For information on how you can join the CPP community, contact Melissa Somers, Executive Director @ 562-860-9006 or email: Melissa.somers.cpp@gmail.com. Together, We Make a Difference.