Protect Your Vehicle Against Catalytic Converter Theft

Pasadena’s Police Department has informed Caltech of an increase in the thefts of catalytic converters around Caltech. To help members of the Caltech community avoid becoming victims, Campus Security has several suggested practices to recommend.

Catalytic converters are designed to act as a line of defense against harmful exhaust emissions by turning pollutants into harmless gasses. Thieves target catalytic converters because they contain precious metals, like platinum, palladium or rhodium, which are valuable to metal dealers. They can sell them to scrap yards for up $200.

Thieves typically use a saw or wrench to remove it, depending on whether the catalytic converter is bolted or welded in and removal can take as little as one minute.

What Cars Are Thieves Looking For?

Fuel-powered vehicles manufactured after 1974 have catalytic converters, according to so there are a lot of cars on the road that might appeal to catalytic converter thieves. However, thieves often target taller vehicles (such as pickup trucks or SUVs) because they can easily fit under the vehicle to access the catalytic converter. The location of your car may also be a factor — regularly parking in one area for a long period of time, such as a shopping mall, a mass commuter parking lot, or the campus parking structures can give thieves more time to access your vehicle and steal the catalytic converter.

The most commonly targeted vehicles are SUVs and trucks, especially late-model Toyotas, because they sit higher off the ground (making for easier access) and the bolts that connect the converter are easily removed.

Hybrid cars are attractive to thieves as the catalytic converters contain a higher concentration of precious metals and are generally less corroded. The most susceptible hybrid models are the Honda Jazz, Toyota Prius, Toyota Auris, and Lexus RX of all generations and ages.

How Do I Know if My Catalytic Converter Was Stolen?

You may not be able to tell your catalytic converter was stolen by looking at your car, but you will know as soon as you start the engine. When the catalytic converter has been removed, your vehicle will make a loud roaring sound that will get louder as you push the gas pedal. Your car might also make a sputtering sound as you change speed, or you'll notice it's not driving smoothly.
What's Being Done to Help Prevent Catalytic Converter Theft?

A victim of theft may spend up to $2,000 getting their vehicle repaired. There are several states trying to help reduce metal theft by instituting laws that regulate scrap metal transactions or dealers. California requires junk dealers and recyclers to maintain a written record of each sale or purchase. The record must include the place and date of the transaction; the name, driver's license number and state of issue, and the license plate number and state of issue of any motor vehicle used in transporting the junk; the name and address of each person to whom the junk is sold and that person's motor vehicle license number. It also requires every junk dealer and recycler to preserve the written record for at least two years.

What Can I Do to Protect My Car's Catalytic Converter?

Consider these tips to help protect your car from catalytic converter theft:

- When possible, park in well-lit areas and close to building entrances.
- If you have a garage at your house, park your car inside and keep the garage door shut.
- Have the catalytic converter welded to your car's frame, which may make it harder to steal.
- Consider engraving your vehicle identification number (VIN) on the catalytic converter — this may help alert a scrap dealer that it was stolen and make it easier to identify the owner.
- Calibrate your car's alarm to go off when it detects vibration.

Understanding when your car might be a target for catalytic converter theft is the first key to preventing it. By following these protective measures, you may help deter thieves from targeting your car.