



Auto-theft cops go head-to-head with license plate readers

By Dan Vergano, USA TODAY

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License plate readers pick up more stolen cars than cops alone, but police units specializing in auto-theft deter car thieves even better, finds an experiment in Arizona.

Although declining in the last decade, car theft remains a problem, triggering about 11% of non-violent criminal offenses nationwide and causing billions of dollars of losses according to FBI data. Arrests are made in only about 10% of cases. U.S. law enforcement agencies have turned to license plate recognition -- high-speed cameras tied to character-reading computers -- to catch car thieves in the last decade, with 38% of them reporting that they used the high-speed cameras in a recent survey.

How well do they work on the street? In a recent study in the [Criminal Justice Review](#), a team led by Bruce Taylor of the NORC at the University of Chicago center in Bethesda, Md., set up an experiment to see how well license plate readers did in helping police in Mesa, Ariz., catch car thieves.

"We did find some increasing effectiveness in stolen plates being picked up," Taylor says. "The surprise in the study was the effectiveness of specialized auto theft units."

The criminologists experimentally juggled 117 police patrol routes in Mesa, which along with nearby Phoenix has the fourth-highest auto-theft rate nationwide. Some patrols were in standard police units, some



were specialized auto-theft police units equipped with license plate readers, and some were with a specialized car-theft units without the readers.

Who did best? Well, the license plate readers did pick up 2.7 times more stolen plates than the routine patrols, and scanned 8 times more plates in general than manual plate-checking. But the surprise in the study came looking at car thefts two weeks after the experiment stopped.

Only the patrol areas where the specialized auto-theft unit had been making manual checks saw a continuing decline in car thefts two weeks after the LPR experiment stopped. The study authors suggest that specialized auto-theft units busily checking plates caught the attention of thieves more than patrols swinging by and letting cameras do the work. "It really suggests a need for specialized units, but this needs to be looked at carefully," Taylor says.

The study also suggests that license plate readers may best serve at tollbooths, intersections or other stationary spots that car thieves can't avoid, rather than placed on parked patrol cars.

Finally, says the study, with the cost of the technology dropping below \$20,000 per unit, more police forces will likely begin using license plate readers. "However, with the greater adoption is also likely to include greater legal scrutiny of the privacy rights of citizens associated with this equipment or charges of the invasion of 'big brother'," says the study. The police should consider carefully the most effective and appropriate use of such devices, says Taylor.

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