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EARLY WARNING NOTIFICATION

Increase in thefts of catalytic converters

What is happening?

Metal theft has emerged as a significant criminal phenomenon across EU Member States (MS) over the past years. This has been confirmed by the SOCTA 2013.

While legislative changes, increased law enforcement activity, closer cooperation between public and private partners in response to this phenomenon as well as a decrease in metal prices have resulted in fewer copper thefts in some countries, there has been an increase in the thefts of catalytic converters (CATs) in France, the UK and other MS (Fig.1). Catalytic converters contain precious and valuable metals such as platinum, palladium or rhodium. Vehicle types with large ground clearance, such as SUVs or Vans, are specifically targeted as it is easier to remove the converters from them (Fig. 2).



Figure 1. Catalytic converters (CATs)

The value of catalytic converters differs between different types of vehicles. The minimum price for the precious metal contained in one converter is EUR 50 on the second-hand market. The value and accessibility of catalytic converters makes them attractive targets for theft. CATs are stolen from vehicles parked on the street as well as from recycling companies. Recently, a recycling company in Belgium lost 300 second-hand CATs worth EUR 15 000 to theft.



Figure 2. Catalytic converter removal tools

Specialised refining companies buy the contents of converters and extract the precious metals from the CATs' ceramic core (Fig. 3). Some criminals are able to remove the cores themselves and sell them directly to refining companies, making it impossible to trace the theft.

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Figure 3. Extraction of precious metals from ceramic core

Who are the actors? How do they operate?

Many offenders involved in the theft of catalytic converters are itinerant criminals, operating across borders and covering long distances. These criminals often target entire fleets in a single night. Many of these groups have previously been involved in other types of property crime such as burglaries, thefts of boat engines, thefts of lorries, thefts of vehicle batteries and diesel.