WHITEPAPER

Evolving Theft Trends in Transportation

Vehicle and equipment theft in Canada is escalating, driven by organized crime, economic pressures, and evolving technology. Despite a 14% drop in vehicle thefts in 2024, long weekends and high-risk provinces like Ontario, Alberta, and Quebec continue to face a significant risk. This whitepaper explores the key drivers behind theft trends, the types of theft impacting the trans-portation sector, and practical prevention strategies for individuals, businesses, and policymakers. The message is clear: prevention is not just possible—it's essential.

WHAT'S DRIVING THE RISE IN THEFT?

Economic Pressures

Despite low unemployment, Canada is showing signs of economic downturn. Rising inflation, interest rates, and low consumer confidence may push some individuals toward theft as a means of survival.

Organized Crime

Organized crime groups are increasingly involved in vehicle theft, especially in remote areas where police response is slower and surveillance infrastructure is limited. The 2024 Public Report on Organized Crime noted a geographic shift in theft activity from Eastern to Western Canada, as enforcement efforts in one region often displace criminal operations to others. These groups profit by reselling stolen vehicles domestically or internationally, dismantling them for high-value parts, or using them to commit further crimes such as robberies, smuggling, or fraud.

LONG WEEKEND LOOKOUT

Law enforcement and insurance experts warn that holiday weekends present elevated risks for auto theft.

Increased travel, unattended vehicles, and reduced neighbourhood surveillance create ideal conditions for opportunistic theft. Vehicles left in public lots, driveways, or near vacation properties are especially vulner-able. Commercial fleets and cargo are also at higher risk due to extended downtime.

Whether it's a car, truck, or a large piece of equipment, theft is distressing and often unrecoverable. With mounting pressure on police resources and increasingly sophisticated criminal tactics, proactive prevention is the most effective strategy.

Evolving Technology

Technology designed for convenience—like keyless entry—has inadvertently made theft easier. Criminals use relay devices to capture and amplify key fob signals, allowing them to steal vehicles in under a minute. These devices are easily purchased online, and current laws make prosecution difficult unless thieves are caught in the act.

CATEGORIES OF THEFT IMPACTING THE TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY

Motor Vehicle Theft

Motor vehicle theft continues to be one of the most prevalent and costly forms of property crime in Canada. While the number of stolen vehicles has declined from a peak of 174,208 in 2003, recent years have seen a resurgence.

Organized crime groups are increasingly targeting high-value vehicles, particularly SUVs and pickup trucks, for export or resale. These vehicles are often stolen from residential driveways, dealership lots, or rental fleets. Many are shipped overseas through major ports such as Montreal and Halifax, where they are either sold or dismantled for parts.

Key trends in motor vehicle theft include:

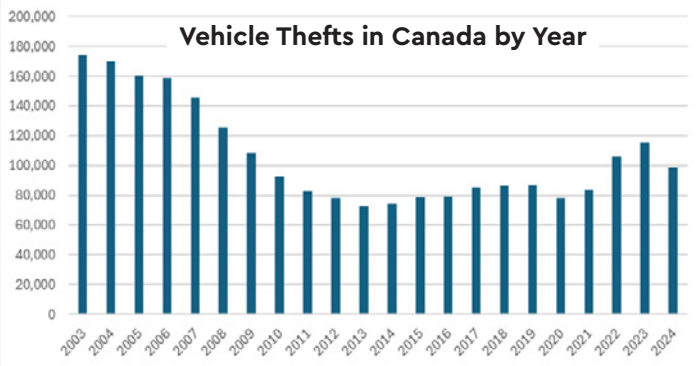
- **Relay attacks:** Criminals use signal amplifiers to intercept key fob signals and unlock vehicles without physical access to the keys.
- **Re-VINing**: Stolen vehicles are assigned new vehicle identification numbers (VINs) to mask their origin and resell them domestically or abroad.
- **Identity fraud:** Thieves use stolen or fabricated identities to finance vehicles, make a few payments, and then export the vehicle before defaulting.
- **Container smuggling:** Vehicles are hidden in shipping containers and mis-declared as other goods to avoid detection at ports.

According to the Équité Association, the national recovery rate for stolen vehicles in 2025 is approximately 59.3%, meaning over 40% of stolen vehicles are never recovered. Ontario remains the most affected province, accounting for nearly half of all thefts, followed by Alberta and Quebec.

High-risk periods include long weekends and holidays, when vehicles are more likely to be left unattended for extended periods. Commercial fleets are also vulnerable during these times due to reduced staffing and parked inventory.

MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Remove valuables from vehicles to reduce opportunistic break-ins.
- Park in well-lit, CCTV-monitored areas.
- Use steering wheel locks and brake pedal clamps as visible deterrents.
- Store key fobs in Faraday pouches or metal containers to block relay attacks.
- Install GPS trackers and telematics systems.
- Disable keyless entry systems when not in use.
- Use immobilizers or kill switches.
- Implement geofencing alerts.
- Secure fleet yards with perimeter fencing, motion sensors, and access control systems.
- Conduct regular audits of vehicle access logs and key control protocols.



Source: StatsCan

- Train drivers and staff on theft prevention protocols, including how to respond to suspicious activity.
- Engage in industry watch programs or theft prevention task forces to stay informed about regional threats and trends.

TOOL THEFT

Tradespeople and mobile service technicians are frequent targets for tool theft, particularly those operating out of vans, service trucks, or temporary job sites. Thieves often damage vehicles—breaking windows, prying doors, or cutting through panels—to access high-value tools and equipment. These items are difficult to trace or recover, especially when serial numbers are not recorded or tools unmarked. The result is not only financial loss but also project delays and possible reputational harm.

For transportation clients, tool theft can disrupt entire fleet operations. Vehicles may be out of service for repairs, and technicians unable to complete scheduled work. Insurance claims can be time-consuming, and replacement costs add up—especially for specialized or branded equipment.

TOOL THEFT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Lock tools in secure cabinets, not back seats.
- Use hardened-steel chains and high-quality padlocks.
- Add GPS trackers or asset tags to tools.
- Photograph tools and record serial numbers.
- Remove branding and/or mark tools with dyes or engravings.
- Post signage indicating no tools are left overnight.
- Bring tools inside at night and carry fewer when possible.

CARGO THEFT

Cargo theft from transport trucks is a growing concern across Canada, particularly in logistics hubs and along major transportation corridors. These thefts often occur at rest stops, unsecured parking lots, or during overnight hauls when trucks are left unattended. Criminals may use tactics such as:

- Slide and grab: breaking into trailers while drivers are asleep.
- Fictitious pickups: posing as legitimate carriers to fraudulently collect loads.
- Inside jobs: involving employees or contractors who provide route or cargo details.
- High-value are prime targets. In many cases, stolen cargo is quickly offloaded and redistributed through black markets or exported overseas.

The financial impact is significant—not only in terms of lost goods but also in insurance claims, delivery delays, and reputational damage for carriers and shippers. According to industry reports, cargo theft costs the Canadian economy hundreds of millions annually.

CARGO THEFT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Use GPS tracking on trailers and containers.
- Set geofencing alerts to notify dispatch/security if a vehicle deviates from its route or enters high-risk areas.
- Secure trailers with high-security locks and tamper-evident seals, especially during overnight stops.
- Do not leave loaded trailers unattended.
- Use team drivers or relay driving for high-value or long-haul shipments to reduce idle time.
- Verify pickup credentials to prevent fictitious pickups.
- Stagger delivery schedules and avoid predictable routes.
- Train drivers and warehouse staff to spot suspicious behavior and follow secure loading/unloading protocols.
- Run background checks on all logistics staff, including subcontracted drivers and warehouse workers.
- Partner with cargo theft task forces and local law enforcement to monitor theft trends and alerts.
- Use access-controlled yards and docks with surveillance and motion detection systems.
- Keep detailed cargo manifests and chain-of-custody records to support investigations and insurance.

PROPERTY THEFT

Warehouses, wholesale outlets, and unoccupied properties are common targets—especially those storing electronics or non-ferrous metals. Repeat attacks are common, often occurring after stock is replenished.

PROPERTY THEFT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Install high-definition CCTV systems with motion detection and remote monitoring capabilities.
- Use access control systems such as key cards, biometric scanners or PIN-based entry for staff and contractors.
- Secure doors, windows, gates with reinforced locks, anti-pry hardware and alarm sensors.
- Maintain adequate exterior lighting.
- Conduct regular security patrols.
- Implement visitor management protocols.
- Use fencing and bollards.
- Store high-value items in locked cages or secure rooms.
- Keep inventory records up to date and audit regularly.
- Train staff to recognize suspicious behaviour and report incidents promptly.
- Join a local business watch program or crime prevention network to stay informed about regional threats.

METAL THEFT

Despite regulatory efforts, metal theft remains a persistent and costly issue—particularly for the transportation industry. Catalytic converters are among the most targeted components due to their high concentrations of rhodium, palladium, and platinum. These precious metals are worth thousands of dollars per ounce, making converters a lucrative target for thieves. Commercial fleets, especially those parked overnight in unsecured lots, are at heightened risk.

Beyond catalytic converters, transportation infrastructure is also vulnerable. Copper wiring from traffic signals, rail signaling cables, and grounding systems in transit yards are frequently stolen, disrupting operations and posing safety hazards. These crimes are not only financially damaging but also operationally disruptive, leading to delays, rerouting, and increased insurance premiums.

The nature of metal theft is often violent and opportunistic. Thieves may use power tools to strip parts in broad daylight or target isolated fleet yards and depots where surveillance is limited. In some cases, repeat attacks occur after stolen components are replaced, especially if no additional security measures are implemented.

METAL THEFT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Park fleet vehicles in well-lit, fenced, and monitored areas.
- Install under-vehicle motion sensors and alarms.
- Etch identification numbers onto catalytic converters.
- Use anti-theft shields or cages for vulnerable components.
- Conduct regular security audits of fleet yards and depots.
- Collaborate with local law enforcement and industry associations to report and track incidents.

CYBER CRIME AND IDENTITY THEFT

Cybercrime continues to rise, posing serious risks to transportation businesses that rely on digital systems for fleet management, logistics coordination, and customer communications. Data breaches can expose sensitive operational details, including shipment routes, driver credentials, and client information—leading to reputational damage, regulatory penalties, and financial loss.

Identity theft is also increasingly used by organized crime to fraudulently finance vehicles for export. Criminals may impersonate legitimate transportation

companies or create shell entities to obtain vehicles under false pretenses. These vehicles are often shipped overseas before the fraud is detected, leaving businesses and insurers with limited recourse.

Transportation clients are particularly vulnerable due to the interconnected nature of their operations. Dispatch systems, telematics platforms, and electronic logging devices (ELDs) are all potential entry points for cyberattacks. A single compromised account can lead to unauthorized access to fleet data, rerouting of shipments, or even remote vehicle disablement.

Emerging threats include:

- Phishing attacks targeting dispatchers and drivers.
- Ransomware targeting logistics software and warehouse systems.
- Credential stuffing attacks on fleet portals.
- Spoofed carrier identities used to intercept cargo.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Theft is evolving—but so are our defences. By understanding the trends and implementing layered prevention strategies, individuals and businesses can reduce their risk. Collaboration between law enforcement, insurers, transportation stakeholders, and the public is key. Only through shared vigilance and innovation can we stay ahead of increasingly sophisticated theft tactics and protect our communities and supply chains.

As the old proverb reminds us: "Prevention is better than cure."

CYBER CRIME AND IDENTITY THEFT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Monitor and protect IT systems with firewalls, endpoint protection, and intrusion detection tools.
- Train employees on password hygiene and phishing risks.
- Lock screens when unattended, particularly in shared dispatch centers or mobile devices used in the field.
- Conduct regular cybersecurity audits or hire specialists to assess vulnerabilities in fleet management software, GPS platforms, and customer portals.
- Implement multi-factor authentication (MFA) for access to routing systems, vehicle telematics, and cargo manifests.
- Encrypt sensitive data, including driver records, shipment details, and payment info.
- Limit access privileges based on role.
- Use secure communication platforms for dispatch and routing instructions to avoid interception or spoofing.
- Regularly update software and firmware on fleet tracking devices, mobile apps, and onboard systems to patch known vulnerabilities.
- Establish incident response protocols so staff know how to report and contain a suspected breach quickly.

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