

Motorists are losing millions to wave of tax disc theft

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HUNDREDS OF thousands of tax discs are being stolen from cars in a growing crime wave.

The discs take seconds to steal and are sold on for about £30 after being cleaned up. Police said that blutack or razor blades are used to wipe off the disc's handwritten registration number, allowing a false one to be written in.

Despite the relatively low returns for thieves, the cost of the crime is considerable for motorists who have to repair smashed windows and replace the discs.

The DVLA and Post Office need to process claims for replacement discs, and the Exchequer loses millions in revenue.

Officers said tax discs are overtaking stereos as the main targets for theft from cars.

Music systems often come with security codes or are built into the dashboard, making them much more difficult to steal.

The first police report on

tax disc thefts will be presented to the Home Office and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency this week. It will say that more than 1,500 discs were stolen last year in the London borough of Haringey alone.

Pc Nick Taylor, a beat officer in North London and author of the report, estimated that nearly 50,000 discs are stolen every year in

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London. If that pattern was repeated nationwide, it would mean several hundred thousand discs are being taken. "This is a serious national problem and it needs a national strategy to tackle it," he said.

Pc Taylor started investigating tax disc theft and fraud after noticing that it was a growing crime in Haringey.

He enlisted the help of a police crime statistics analyst and said he was surprised by the results.

"There have never been any statistics produced on this before, because disc thefts are put together with other 'theft from vehicle' offences," he said.

Last year, more than a million of Britain's 38.5 million cars did not have road tax, up from 727,000 the previous year, and more than £183 million in road tax was evaded, according to the DVLA.

Much of the trade in stolen tax discs revolves around cars sold for as little as £200, often in pubs and coffee shops.

"The cars are like death traps," said Pc Taylor. "But it would cost more than the car is worth to get an MoT certificate and insurance so the owners take a gamble with stolen discs."

Pc Taylor tells the Government in his report that the problem could be solved by making it compulsory for motorists to use "tamper-proof" disc holders. A strong adhesive on the holder means that the tax disc cannot be



Deterred by better security systems for car radios, thieves are stealing tax discs, which can be sold for £30 after having their handwritten registration altered

removed without being torn to pieces, rendering it useless to a thief. They are already on sale for £1 and are used by some police forces - including Avon and Somerset - and local authorities. Pc Taylor said he wanted to see them adopted as a part of a national strategy.

"We are always advising motorists not to leave anything valuable on the dashboard but then we oblige them by law to leave what amounts to a £100 note

there," he said. "It doesn't make sense when there is such a simple, cheap and effective solution." In his report, Pc Taylor also recommends the introduction of insurance "badges" that would be fixed permanently to the windscreen. Without the insurance badge, a stolen tax disc would be useless.

In the longer term, he suggests that speed cameras could be modified to recognise and photograph cars with fraudulent discs, or satellite

"tracker" systems could be used. One tamper-proof disc holder, the "Secur-i-Disc" has been developed by Mike Prince, a Birmingham businessman. Mr Prince said of his invention: "It's a simple idea but it can save a lot of misery."

A spokesman for Avon and Somerset police which uses Mr Prince's device on its 750 vehicles, said: "We welcome anything that helps to reduce car crime and would encourage members of the public to

use tamper-proof disc holders. Thieves then have no motivation to break into the car to steal the disc because they know it will be ripped and absolutely useless."

The DVLA admitted that it did not know how many tax discs were being stolen or used fraudulently.

Last year it introduced expensive "number plate recognition vans" which used cameras and computers to identify unlicensed vehicles.

Road tax evaders face

£1,000 fines and their cars can be clamped and crushed if the tax is not paid.

The Government has launched a consultation on the theft of tax discs from motorcycles. A spokesman admitted that one of the proposals being looked at was tamper-proof disc holders.

A spokesman for the Department of Transport said: "If we go ahead with them and they work for motorcycles than we may introduce them for cars."