

10 accused in Ramsey County of stealing cars for scrap

Ten people face charges in Ramsey County after tow trucks often took vehicles off street to scrap yards.

Article by: CHAO XIONG and DAAREL BURNETTE II , Star Tribune staff writers

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Matthew Bruce Williams, driving his red tow truck, pulled vehicle after vehicle to Metro Metals in May and June. All were sold for a few hundred dollars for scrap.

All also had been stolen, authorities said.

They were among more than 50 cars that had been stolen in St. Paul and sold for scrap in the past several months, often crushed just hours after they were whisked off city streets, private parking lots and driveways.

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi's office charged 10 suspects Wednesday in the "brazen" thefts that occurred between January and late June.

"Clean up your act," Choi warned auto thieves. "We are watching, and we will take aggressive actions against those stealing cars in our community."

Authorities said their three-month investigation showed that the suspects used three schemes:

- Thieves scouted out vehicles, then called tow truck drivers and lied about owning the vehicles. They sold the vehicles to the truck drivers, who sold them for scrap.
- Tow truck drivers stole vehicles from streets and parking lots and sold them for scrap.
- Suspects stole vehicles and sold them directly to metal recyclers.

Scrap metal yards aren't required by law to ask for titles of vehicles.

The tow truck drivers charged in the thefts were individuals, Choi said, noting that no tow truck companies are implicated. St. Paul Police Chief Thomas Smith said the suspected tow trucks did not have any company or garage markings on them.

It's unclear whether some of the suspects worked in concert with one another or whether all of the crimes were committed independently, police said.

Thieves stole cars all over the city, targeting low-end vehicles that wouldn't draw attention, Smith said. Many of the vehicles were sold to Metro Metals, a scrap metal processor at 2576 Doswell Av. in St. Paul. The average vehicle fetched \$300 to \$350, said officer John Keating, a police spokesman.

Metro Metals has not been charged. Choi said they cooperated with authorities after they were subpoenaed.

Craig Greenberg, attorney for Metro Metals, said the company assisted the police in catching the thieves by filming transactions, saving receipts that thieves are required to sign and paying an off-duty police officer to make sure vehicles haven't been reported as stolen.

"If someone steals a vehicle and takes it to an out-of-the-way scrap yard, they're never going to get traced," Greenberg said. "If they take it to Metro Metals, the entire transaction is going to be fully documented."

Those who were charged Wednesday were: Williams, 28, Lakeville; Gerald Edward O'Brien, 30, St. Paul; Jeffrey Michael Smith, 47, St. Paul; Michael Thomas O'Brien, 32, St. Paul; Hugo Ernesto Velasquez-Guzman, 23, Maplewood; Gary John Gomez, 45, St. Paul; Lionel Warner, 40, St. Paul; Brandon Carl Heintz, 33, St. Paul; Hugo Adilio Velasquez, 45, Maplewood, and Julie Katherine Rubbelke, 48, Maplewood. They face a variety of charges related to car thefts.

In late June, for example, Williams was arrested while towing in his 14th car in a few weeks into Metro Metals, according to charges.

Choi and Smith called on state officials to better regulate the scrap metal industry to make it more difficult for thieves. Stricter measures should include requiring a waiting period before a car is crushed and requiring proof of ownership before cars are sold, Choi said.

Bob Henderson, president of the nonprofit Anti-Vehicle Crime Association of Minnesota, said it's difficult to prevent cars from being stolen and scrapped, particularly if they are parked in public places.

"It's a new trend that, nationwide, we've seen up and moving," Henderson said. "With the high price of metal, cars have become real desirable for crooks."

cxiong@startribune.com • 612-270-4708 Twitter: @ChaoStrib
daarel.burnette@startribune.com • 651-925-5032 Twitter: @DaarelStrib

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