

### Where has your “VIN” been and did you know it???

...VIN stands for Vehicle Identification Number and for security reasons it should be covered. It seems that car thieves have found yet another way to steal your car or truck without any effort at all. The car thieves peer through the windshield of your car or truck, write down the VIN # from the label on the dash, go to the local car dealership and request a duplicate key based on the VIN number.

The Car Dealer's Parts Department will make a duplicate key from the VIN # and collect payment from the thief who will return to your car. He doesn't have to break in, do any damage to the vehicle, or draw attention to himself. All he has to do is walk up to your car, insert the key and off he goes to a local Chop Shop with your vehicle. You don't believe it? It IS that easy.

To avoid this from happening to you, simply put some tape (electrical tape, duct tape or medical tape) across the VIN Metal Label located on the dash board. You can also slip a 3 x 5 card over the VIN #... By law, you cannot remove the VIN, but you can cover it so it can't be viewed through the windshield by a car thief.



I urge you to forward this to your friends before some other car thief steals another car or truck. I didn't believe this e-mail, so I called a friend at Chrysler Dodge and pretended I had lost my keys. They told me to just bring in the VIN #, and they would cut me one on the spot, and I could order the keyless device if I wanted as well, using the same VIN.

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**Actual Case:** In December 2002, officials in the Huntsville, Alabama area broke up a multi-state car theft ring that had employed, among other strategies, a scheme similar to the one described in the chain letter above to steal cars in at least four states. In that case, the thieves would identify a car to steal and copy the Vehicle Identification Number

(VIN) from a label on the dash. They then used the VIN to forge documents to "prove" ownership of the vehicle. Armed with the fake title and/or registration and ID, they go to the dealership to request a replacement key. The thieves then not only have the car and the keys, they also have a real-looking title to go with it. This strategy works well for schemes to steal valuable vehicles and resell them whole.

How common or difficult this scam may be has been the object of much debate since the chain letter above first began circulating. Individuals and investigative journalists have tried to recreate the scam, with frightening results. I've gotten several reports from folks who claim they were successful in obtaining a replacement key with nothing more than their VIN. While reports of this type of crime are not common, it is possible - and grows more likely as more people read the chain above.

The chain is absolutely right about one thing: it is illegal to remove, destroy or alter your vehicle's VIN label. The Vehicle Identification Number system was created to facilitate the return of stolen vehicles and actually serves to deter theft. You could cover it, if it makes you feel better, but be aware of these caveats:

Your dash is not the only location your VIN may be displayed. Many newer cars have a bar-code sticker inside the driver's door, the rear window or even in the engine compartment. However, they have to break into the car to get those – then they don't need the keys.

Local regulations and laws may prohibit obscuring your VIN. Check with area law enforcement as well as facilities management anywhere you regularly park your car to see if covering your VIN is allowed.

Many theft-prevention experts actually recommend that you duplicate your VIN on numerous surfaces throughout your vehicle, including the windows. In order to resell a stolen vehicle (or any of its component parts), a thief must remove

all instances of the VIN that identifies it as stolen. A car riddled with VINs would make a very unattractive mark.

In May, 2005, the U.S. media began reporting a new theft scheme involving VINs, this time revealing that several theft rings have been stealing luxury cars, then trolling parking lots and new car dealerships for nearly identical vehicles and copying down their VINs. They then forge a new VIN plate for the stolen vehicle using the other car's number, making the stolen merchandise harder to identify. They create forged ownership papers and sell the hot cars to other thieves, resellers and unsuspecting consumers. While this scheme is not quite the threat to car owners as the one described in the popular e-mail chain letter above, the similarity between the two ploys will no doubt fuel its distribution.

**Comments:** While there has been at least one well-publicized case (in 2002) of an auto theft ring using a ploy similar to the above to steal vehicles from used car lots, it is a complicated and time-consuming modus operandi and not the most likely way a thief might try to steal your car.

Still, the method can work, as proven in an experiment conducted by WTAE-TV News in Pittsburgh:

“After getting permission from the owners, we jotted down VIN numbers from four different vehicles. Then, we went to four different car dealerships with a hidden camera. We told the same kind of story that a thief might tell: we locked the key in the car and needed a new one.

First, we went to a dealership and tried to get a key made for a 2003 Blazer. It couldn't have been any easier.

Next, we walked into another dealership with a phony story. Half an hour later, we had a key that got us into -- and away with -- the car. The key cost \$2 and we paid cash. No one asked for identification.

Three out of the four car dealers struck duplicate keys with no questions asked, the reporters found, even though most dealerships have a policy of demanding identification before

doing so. A different investigation conducted by the Sacramento Bee in 2003 found that car dealers were not only aware of the scam but in some cases believed they had actually foiled attempts to illegally obtain keys by insisting on proper documentation from the perpetrators.”

**Summary:** Covering the dashboard VIN # is an option for vehicle owners concerned that they may be victimized in this manner, but, since some states do prohibit it, checking local laws is advisable first. As you can tell, there are many debates on this issue and the decision is yours however, our VINs have been covered and we feel it is one more way that thieves are deterred from stealing our vehicles

- submitted by Doug McMahan -

**NOTE:** One other item of interest, after my mishap at Hallett last April – there was an insurance agent present that was going to take pictures of my car, stating that our Insurance Agent needed to be provided w/pictures. I won't go into the story of how it ended however, I will tell you that we use a fake license plate (I created / laminated) when we autocross, in addition to having the VIN number covered up ;)



Here is a sample of one I created and use on our C4, it measures 4-1/4” wide by 3” tall (not to scale)

