

Catalytic Converter Thefts on the Rise

Thirteen catalytic converters were reported stolen in the Mast Rd. Lot at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in the past week.

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Turning the key in your ignition and hearing a loud, piercing sound is something nobody ever wants to experience when starting their car. This has become a reality for many with thefts of catalytic converters on the rise in recent years.

Thirteen catalytic converters were reported stolen in the Mast Rd. Lot at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in the past week. Cars targeted primarily include Hondas, but one Prius was also reported to be affected as well.

Why are so many cars being targeted, and why do people care about these converters?

“A catalytic converter is a part of a car’s exhaust system that helps ‘clean’ the exhaust by turning carbon monoxide and unburnt gas into CO2 and water,” said Aidan Reynolds, a third-year mechanical engineering student at UMass Lowell.

According to the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB), catalytic converter thefts jumped 325% in 2020 compared to 2019. Three thousand three hundred eighty nine claims were filed for converters reportedly stolen in 2019 compared to 14,433 in 2020. In 2018, only 1,289 thefts were reported, making thefts spike 977% in two years.

These converters have become subject to theft due to the precious metals they contain.

“Many thieves sell them or scrap them for parts. The metals in them are worth a lot for scrapping,” said UNH Police Captain Frank Weeks.

In basic terms, a catalytic converter is “a tube filled with a bunch of honeycombs made of palladium and other precious metals which is why people end up stealing them,” said Reynolds. “You can bring them to scrap yards and get like \$500 to \$1,000 for them depending on the car you get them from,” he added.

In terms of catching the thieves committing these crimes, it can be difficult because of how quickly the converters can be cut from a car.

“This isn’t the kind of crime people decide to do last minute. They know what they are doing and what to do with them once they steal them,” said Weeks. “It takes five to 10 minutes to cut one off. If you’re good at it you can do it in a relatively short time.”

For UNH students, parking your car in more secluded lots such as the Mast Rd. Lot can make a difference. This specific lot is notably a less-trafficked area, sits on the edge of campus and does not have any surveillance cameras – overlooking the lot. For thieves, this has made it a favorable spot to steal from.



With the rise of thefts at national and state levels, many states have begun to propose legislation targeting catalytic converter theft. In 2021, 26 states proposed legislation which only 10 states ended up passing.

Some of these laws crack down on the resale of converters, the NICB stated. “North Carolina, Oregon, and West Virginia presume a person in possession of a detached catalytic converter without proof of ownership is in possession of a stolen part.”

Weeks added he was not sure why primarily Hondas are being targeted in the lot, but noted that they must serve some certain purpose to thieves.

Many hybrid vehicles’ converters tend to contain more of the precious metals that thieves are looking for because of emissions classifications and frequent starts the engines must make, according to Green Car Reports.

Rhodium, palladium and platinum have all become extremely valuable with their prices skyrocketing in recent years. In 2020, rhodium was worth \$14,500 per ounce, palladium was \$2,366 per ounce and platinum was \$1,061 per ounce, according to NICB.

Weeks noted the UNH converter thefts are still actively being investigated and no suspects have been identified.

UNH Dean of Students Michael Blackman also stated that “because theft is both a crime and a violation of UNH policies, if it is found that a student committed the thefts, they’d be subject to both criminal consequences and consequences through our Code of Conduct.”

Fortunately, many auto insurance companies’ comprehensive plans will cover or reimburse car owners for these thefts. Anti-theft devices specifically made for catalytic converters have also become popular with the rise of thefts. Devices like the catstrap contain “custom-hardened cutting blade steel inside the catstrap that dulls the teeth of the saw blade, three heavy-duty aircraft-grade steel cables the saw blade can’t grip, bright orange color deters thieves and built-in adhesive bonds to vehicle exhaust.”

“Preventing crimes like theft is all about responding appropriately and educating our community,” Blackman noted. “That means finding out who is responsible for these thefts and holding them accountable.”

Weeks also added that it is important for students and those on campus in general to keep an eye out for one another and to give the UNH Police a call at 603-862-1427 if you see anything suspicious.

“If you see something, say something and look out for each other, whether it is drinking or theft,” Weeks said.