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Sheriff's deputy etches license plate number onto catalytic converter. If the item is stolen, there's a much greater chance of catching the criminal, as the officer can enter the license plate number into a law enforcement database and possibly recover it.

To catch a thief:

Etch 'n Catch Program tags catalytic converters to deter parking lot theft

By RICH MARTIN
Web Content Editor

(March 5, 2009) The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department "Etch N Catch" program aimed at preventing the theft of catalytic converters and truck tailgates should help ease the mind of those who park at Metro lots.

Transit Bureau Detective Frank Richter, assisted by a team of volunteers, supervised the program at the Green Line Lakewood Station recently. What they did was etch the license plate numbers of 16 vehicles onto their catalytic converters or tailgates, both to help deter would-be criminals and to make it easier to find and prosecute thieves.

Richter said the theft of the two items has become a national epidemic, and parking lots where trucks and SUVs are unattended for a long period of time – such as Metro lots – are the target. This is a big problem at Metro lots in South Los Angeles such as those in Lakewood, Norwalk, Willow and the Long Beach Transit Center.

He said stealing those parts is a "fast way to make a quick buck," as it takes only three to six minutes to remove catalytic converters or truck tailgates, which are then sold to auto-parts stores. Catalytic converters can be sold for \$20-\$100 and truck tailpipes for \$50-\$150, he said.

Usually the theft is done by two-man teams, Richter said, with trucks and SUVs the likeliest targets.

Catalytic converters and truck tailgates are unmarked, so a car or truck owner has little recourse if it happens to them. But if the license plate is etched on, that can help in two ways.

“Our idea is prevention,” Richter said, as thieves might look for easier targets if they see the etching. If the item is stolen, there’s a much greater chance of catching the criminal, as the officer can enter the license plate number into a law enforcement database and possibly recover it. Without that identification, it’s very difficult to catch the thief, he said.

Richter said he hoped the agencies involved could repeat the program, which was well-received by the 16 people who had etching done at the station for free.

“Whatever we can do to help customers, we should do it,” he said.

Two years ago, Richter and Transit Services Bureau officers conducted a sting operation selling purportedly stolen catalytic converters to an auto-parts store, and two were arrested.