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Criminals, your numbers are up: number plate thefts down

Majority of police forces see fall in thefts between 2010 and 2014, figures show

Warwickshire Police sees 80% drop; neighbouring West Midlands Police 38% increase

The total number of reported thefts of vehicle number plates in England and Wales fell between 2010 and 2014, although a small number of forces bucked that trend and reported significant rises, new data seen by the RAC shows.

Twenty six of the 34 police forces that responded to a Freedom of Information request by the RAC recorded a fall in number plate thefts between 2010 and 2014, although results differ wildly between areas. Warwickshire Police is leading the way with an 80% reduction in thefts, from 404 reported in 2010 to just 82 in 2014. Cheshire Police (55% reduction) and Surrey Police (50%) recorded the second and third biggest reductions respectively.

However, the data also shows there remains a handful of forces that might be losing the battle against number plate theft. West Midlands Police saw a 38% rise in thefts, recording 4,543 instances in 2014 – which is 70% more occurrences than the next busiest force. Derbyshire Police meanwhile recorded a 34% increase (470 instances, up from 351), and North Yorkshire Police an 18% increase (104 instances, up from 88).

Number plates are stolen for a variety of reasons, and their theft can be an indicator of other criminal activities. Criminals will fix stolen plates to

another car of the same make and model to make it appear genuine, and then effectively drive with impunity – ignoring speed cameras, parking and congestion charges, and leaving fuel forecourts without paying.

Overall, the highest number of reported thefts in 2014 were predictably in busy urban force areas – with West Midlands Police followed by Greater Manchester Police (2,629, a fall of 9.5% on 2010), Merseyside Police (1,322, a fall of 8.8%) and Thames Valley Police (1,291, a 46% reduction).

The RAC also asked police forces for details on car identity cloning – where fake number plates are made up and then fixed to stolen vehicles – but data was much less widely available: of the 34 forces, only six held figures meaning it is much harder to understand the true extent of this problem.

RAC head of external affairs Pete Williams said: "When it comes to number plate theft, this data paints a largely positive picture with some big reductions in crimes recorded across many police forces. The DVLA took action on the issue in 2003, requiring identity confirmation and proof of entitlement from the motorist getting plates made and it appears this has borne fruit.

"There are however some notable exceptions, with West Midlands Police in particular highlighting a worrying rise in the number of recorded thefts between 2010 and 2014, – while neighbouring force Warwickshire Police recorded the largest fall in thefts.

"Number plate theft is unlikely to happen in isolation, and goes hand-in-hand with other types of crime such as motor vehicle theft and burglary. So instances of number plates being stolen is probably symptomatic of a wider issue that police forces are no doubt well aware of.

"To reduce the chances of becoming a victim, motorists can take steps such as purchasing tamper-resistant number plates or screws, and parking their vehicle in as secure and well-lit location as possible. Sadly though, if a motorist is unlucky enough to get caught out, the onus will be on them to prove their innocence.

"The RAC is concerned that much less information appears to be being collected by forces on car identity cloning – where one vehicle's identity,

including number plate details, are transposed to another, likely stolen vehicle. There is very little an innocent motorist can do to stop this activity. We would like to see a commitment from forces to rigorously collect data on car cloning, so that we can all understand the scale of the problem."

A National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) spokesman said: "The levels of vehicle crime, including theft from motor vehicles, have fallen by nearly three quarters since 1997.

"NaVCIS, UK police forces, the Home Office and vehicle component manufacturers have been working in partnership for some considerable time to prevent and detect such offences. Those efforts have clearly paid dividends and we will endeavour to build upon these successes."

Full results from RAC's Freedom of Information request

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	% change 2010 to 2014
West Midlands Police	3,300	2,836	2,855	4,443	4,543	**+37.7%**
Derbyshire Constabulary	351	523	514	392	470	**+33.9%**
North Yorkshire Police	88	118	104	95	104	**+18.2%**
South Yorkshire Police	920	1,068	1,090	892	1,037	**+12.7%**
Norfolk Constabulary	79	106	112	100	85	**+7.6%**
Cumbria Constabulary	46	74	43	60	49	**+6.5%**
Avon and Somerset	669	779	730	709	698	**+4.3%**
Dyfed-Powys Police	34	26	29	27	33	**-2.9%**
Kent Police	792	772	681	714	751	**-5.2%**
Bedfordshire Constabulary	696	699	682	641	649	**-6.8%**
Merseyside Police	1,449	1,358	1,291	1,316	1,322	**-8.8%**
Leicestershire Police	739	866	847	769	673	**-8.9%**
Essex Police	1,118	1,087	1,196	1,355	1,015	**-9.2%**
Greater Manchester Police	2,906	2,932	2,288	3,002	2,629	**-9.5%**

Northumbria Police	362	319	301	328	324	*-10.5%*
Staffordshire Police	450	477	489	377	399	*-11.3%*
West Mercia Police	468	559	390	396	410	*-12.4%*
Northamptonshire Police	319	314	395	421	279	*-12.5%*
Durham Constabulary	89	106	116	115	73	*-18.0%*
Nottinghamshire Police	506	548	562	488	414	*-18.2%*
Devon & Cornwall Police	329	374	350	287	252	*-23.4%*
Lancashire Constabulary	496	472	605	441	362	*-27.0%*
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	458	542	432	385	319	*-30.3%*
Police Service of Northern Ireland	473	419	364	330	323	*-31.7%*
Suffolk Constabulary	207	143	169	204	137	*-33.8%*
Hertfordshire Constabulary	1,057	945	916	842	684	*-35.3%*
Wiltshire Police	256	218	259	181	162	*-36.7%*
Sussex Police	700	559	598	503	434	*-38.0%*
North Wales Police	52	49	53	109	29	*-44.2%*
Thames Valley Police	2,370	2,195	1,844	1,573	1,291	*-45.5%*
Surrey Police	779	698	625	545	387	*-50.3%*
Cheshire Constabulary	705	453	351	369	318	*-54.9%*
Warwickshire Police	404	443	386	298	82	*-79.7%*
TOTAL	**23,667**	**23,077**	**21,667**	**22,707**	**20,717**	*-12.5%*

FOI data was either not provided, or could not be used for a regional comparison, by the following forces:

- Cleveland Police

- Dorset Police

- Gloucestershire Constabulary

- Gwent Police

- Hampshire Constabulary

- Humberside Police

- Lincolnshire Police

- Metropolitan Police

- Police Scotland

- South Wales Police

Data received from City of London Police has been excluded due to very low occurrences of number plate theft (4 in 2010; 7 in 2014).

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Notes to Editors

About the RAC

With more than eight million members, the RAC is one of the UK's most

progressive motoring organisations, providing services for both private and business motorists. Whether it's roadside assistance, insurance, buying a used car, vehicle inspections and checks, legal services or up-to-the-minute traffic and travel information – the RAC offers a solution for all motoring needs. The RAC is committed to making motoring easier, safer, more affordable and more enjoyable for drivers and road users.

The RAC is the motorist's champion and campaigns to support the interests of its members and UK motorists at a national level, including advancing levels of road safety, supporting the needs of young drivers and voicing concerns about the increasing cost of motoring. The RAC's annual Report on Motoring – first published in 1989 – provides a clear insight into the concerns and issues facing today's motorists.

For the very latest news on UK fuel prices, check RAC Fuel Watch or follow #racfuelwatch on Twitter. This is a comprehensive guide to the latest UK unleaded petrol and diesel prices – both at the wholesale level and at the pump. RAC Fuel Watch analyses how prices changed through the previous month and compares the most recent prices with those from three, six and 12 months before.

Key facts:

- RAC patrols fix four out of five vehicles at the roadside and on average within 30 minutes
- RAC vans carry more than 500 parts and tools to get members' vehicles going again
- 92% of members would recommend RAC Rescue to their friends and family

Contacts

RAC Press Office

Press Contact

press.office@rac.co.uk

Emails monitored during normal office hours. For breakdown queries, call 0330 159 0740

ISDN number on request