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Arizona's Border Liaisons - DPS and NICB Work Together to Repatriate U.S. Stolen Vehicles From Mexico

It is commonly understood that a percentage of vehicles stolen in Arizona, and other states, are quickly driven into Mexico after the theft. Once in Mexico, these vehicles often prove difficult to find, recover, and repatriate. Complicating the recovery of these vehicles is the fact that the U.S. and Mexico do not readily share a computer system to identify the stolen vehicles and the process of repatriation involves adherence to an international treaty with strict protocols.

Arizona is fortunate to have the Border Liaison Officer (BLO) unit, a small group of Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) detectives whose function, among other duties, is to work with U.S. and Mexican partners to locate and repatriate U.S. stolen vehicles from Mexico back into the U.S. Embedded within the Vehicle Theft Task Force (VTTF), the BLO unit consists of five detectives assigned to areas along Arizona's southern border who are bilingual and have thorough knowledge and experience with Mexican culture, which assists them in their day-to-day duties dealing with Mexican law enforcement and government officials.



The repatriation process begins when a BLO detective receives communication from Mexican law enforcement that a suspected U.S. stolen vehicle has been located in Mexico. The BLO detective will confirm the status of the vehicle as stolen and coordinate with Mexican law enforcement for the eventual repatriation. The next step in the process requires the BLO detective to write a "*soporte documento*," or support document. This document is sent to Mexican authorities and allows them to hold the vehicle for repatriation into the U.S.

Once the stolen vehicle is in the possession of the Mexican government, the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB) becomes involved in the repatriation process and follows the protocols of the U.S./Mexico Treaty. When the vehicle is released by the Mexican government, NICB facilitates the transportation of the vehicle from Mexico to a U.S. Port of Entry (POE). Upon arrival at the POE, a contracted tow company in the U.S. will pick up the vehicle and transport it to a tow yard for a proper inspection by a member of the VTTF.



The repatriation process time frame varies depending on the circumstances of each vehicle. If the vehicle is involved in another crime, such as a homicide, it will be held by Mexican authorities until the case is adjudicated.

The vast majority of repatriated vehicles do not return in the same condition as when they originally crossed into Mexico. Many vehicles return with bullet holes and occasionally with biohazard concerns. At times, vehicles are stripped of valuable parts and accessories and are almost always missing the batteries and keys/fobs. Very rarely will a vehicle return in good, drivable condition.

In 2023, with the assistance of Mexican law enforcement (federal, state, and municipal), the BLO unit located 798 stolen vehicles in Mexico. These vehicles, reported stolen from all over the U.S., amounted to over \$23,242,136 in assets for uninsured owners, insurance companies, and rental car companies.

Of the 798 stolen vehicles located in Mexico, 476 were recovered by detectives assigned to the VTTF or NICB agents in California or Texas. The total monetary value of repatriated vehicles returning through Arizona in 2023 was \$14,342,163. It's important to note that, for various reasons, not all stolen vehicles located in Mexico make it back into the U.S. These reasons include issues such as the vehicle's condition, inaction by Mexican authorities, and even interference by cartel members which can make the return of these stolen vehicles difficult and often impossible.

The VTTF is funded by an annual grant from the Arizona Automobile Theft Authority (AATA); however, the BLO unit is funded separately by DPS. The AATA applauds DPS' commitment to staff this unit that plays a vital role in recovering U.S. stolen vehicles from Mexico.

Taking Our Show on the Road



This Spring, staff from DIFI's Automobile Theft Authority and Fraud Unit Divisions were sponsors and attendees of two statewide law enforcement events – the 2024 Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police and Arizona Crime Prevention Association conferences.

AATA staff provided educational and outreach materials as well as live demonstrations of the Auto Crime Tracking (ACT) database functions and capabilities.

Current Auto Theft Statistics “At-A-Glance”

One of the benefits of utilizing the AATA's ACT database is the ability to access near real-time information regarding auto thefts and recoveries in Arizona. In addition to ACT, Arizona relies on information published by the NICB that gives a national perspective by compiling annual auto theft statistics from each state. Using a combination of these two sources, the AATA produced its most recent [“At-A-Glance” publication](#) – here are some of the highlights:

Arizona's Auto Theft Rate Shows Decline in National Rankings for 2023

On a list compiled by the NICB showing states and their corresponding rates of auto theft in 2023, Arizona placed 19th – which marks an improvement from the 2022 ranking when it was 15th in the nation. Data show that Arizona has 267.76 vehicles stolen per 100,000 residents. As illustrated in the accompanying graphic, most of Arizona's neighboring states are experiencing high rates of vehicle theft. Seven states in the West and Southwest are ranked in the Top 10 for Rate of Theft (thefts per 100,000 residents).



How Arizona Cities Compare Nationally

The NICB also compiles data from Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSA) to show rankings of occurrences of crime in cities or other regions. This method allows viewers to see a picture of crime in geographical areas using data from an entire calendar year. The highest ranking Arizona CBSA was Tucson, which ranked 74th in the nation's highest ranking CBSA rate of vehicle theft. Notably, the Phoenix CBSA dropped from #86 in 2022 to #99 in 2023 – the result of a 10% decrease in auto theft between the two years.



40 Year Snapshot of Auto Theft in Arizona

Arizona was on a wild ride of vehicle thefts from 1992 through 2010. The occurrence of thefts has stabilized since then and has shown a level of consistency – free of large swings in vehicle thefts often seen in other states. Although Arizona's auto theft numbers are encouraging, even one auto theft victim is too many.



First Half of 2024 Looks Promising for Lower Auto Theft Rates

Arizona experienced favorable auto theft numbers in the first six months of 2024 as compared to the same time frame last year. From January through June 2024, the ACT database reported 8,310 vehicle thefts in Arizona. This number represents a 16% decrease from the 9,936 vehicle thefts reported in the first six months of 2023. These first-half numbers are promising and should spur continued efforts in personal responsibility for the important role played by owners and drivers in keeping their vehicles safe from theft.

AATA Awards Year End FY24 and New FY25 Grants to Arizona Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Agencies

In June, the AATA Board of Directors finalized the end of the FY24 grant cycle with awards to eight Arizona law enforcement agencies to support their efforts and local solutions to combating auto theft. The AATA is pleased to award these remaining year-end funds in an effort to maximize grant allocations and place the dollars where they can be used by jurisdictions working to reduce auto theft in their communities.

A total of **\$69,855** in grant funding was awarded to the following agencies:

1. Apache Junction PD - **\$10,500**
2. Avondale PD - **\$6,050**
3. Gila County Sheriff's Office - **\$9,700**
4. Glendale PD - **\$20,000**
5. Maricopa County Attorney's Office - **\$1,213**
6. Oro Valley PD - **\$6,050**
7. Peoria PD - **\$3,342**
8. Tombstone Marshal's Office - **\$13,000**

The AATA Board of Directors also finalized new FY25 grant awards – mainstay recipients include the VTTF (**\$4,452,600**) and the Vertical (Auto Theft) Prosecution program (**\$1,362,093**), which is AATA's second largest annual grant program with funding for ten prosecutors and three support staff working to achieve maximum sentencing results and keep dangerous car thieves off the streets.

FY25 Vertical Prosecution program grants were awarded to the following agencies:

1. La Paz County Attorney's Office - **\$139,393**
 2. Maricopa County Attorney's Office - **\$291,399**
 3. Mohave County Attorney's Office - **\$151,456**
 4. Pima County Attorney's Office - **\$358,832**
 5. Pinal County Attorney's Office - **\$340,218**
 6. Santa Cruz County Attorney's Office - **\$80,795**
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AZ Vehicle Theft Task Force in the News - DPS: 'Chop shop' Bust Ends in 5 Arrests



On June 25, 2024, VTTF detectives served a search warrant on a Phoenix business and arrested five suspects in connection with a stolen vehicle investigation. All face charges including trafficking in stolen property and theft of means of transportation. When detectives served the warrant in the area of 28th Avenue and Buckeye Road in Phoenix, they located five intact stolen vehicles and parts of eight dismantled stolen vehicles.

The VTTF serves a vital mission on behalf of the AATA to reduce vehicle theft in Arizona by deterring criminal activity through effective and proactive enforcement, prosecution, and public awareness programs. The VTTF is substantially funded by an annual grant from the AATA. [Read the full story.](#)

