

CBCnews

Prime minister tackles chop shops, car thieves in proposed new auto theft law

Published: Monday, April 14, 2008 | 5:31 PM ET

Canadian Press: Steve Lambert, THE CANADIAN PRESS

WINNIPEG - Prime Minister Stephen Harper wants new legislation to crack down on car theft by targeting chop shops and auto thieves, but a man who was mowed down by a teen driving a stolen vehicle doesn't believe the initiative goes far enough.

A proposed law, to be tabled soon in the House of Commons, would make it a Criminal Code offence to alter or remove a vehicle identification number. It would also make it a specific crime to sell or transport criminally acquired goods, including vehicles.

The intent is to crack down on organized crime groups that steal cars, strip the identification numbers and sell the vehicles for a quick profit.

"Organized crime treats auto theft as a business, and a very lucrative one at that," Harper told police officers, politicians and supporters Monday at a stolen car impound lot in Winnipeg. "Roughly one in five cars stolen in Canada is linked to criminal gangs."

The announcement did not make much of an impression on Kelly Van Camp, a jogger who was struck by teenagers in a stolen sport utility vehicle last spring. Police alleged the teens were deliberately trying to run down pedestrians.

"I was a little bit disappointed," said Van Camp, 50, who was invited to the announcement and spoke with Harper afterward. "People who steal cars to take to chop shops by and large don't run them into cab drivers or people like me."

"People who behave like idiots or (with) homicidal intentions, those are the ones I'd like to see addressed."

Van Camp spent five days in hospital after suffering serious head injuries and a fractured ankle. Just last month, a cab driver was killed when a stolen SUV T-boned his taxi at a Winnipeg intersection.

Harper said his Conservative government is working on other measures aimed at car thieves. One of those is a private member's bill that would make stealing a vehicle a separate offence under the Criminal Code instead of a run-of-the-mill property crime. The government is also toughening penalties for young offenders.

In Winnipeg, long considered the auto theft capital of Canada, police say most auto thieves use targeted vehicles for an impulsive joyride and dump it soon after stealing it - with no aim of resale. Statistics Canada says there were 1,932 stolen cars for every 100,000 Winnipeggers in 2006 - almost double the rate of second-place Edmonton.

But in port cities such as Vancouver, cars are often stolen with resale in mind. They are stripped of identification and shipped overseas or to another part of the country where they can be sold with a new identity.

"We're closing some of the legal loopholes that organized crime has been driving stolen vehicles through for decades," Harper said.

Insurance companies welcomed the move, saying any new law would help.

"There are many things to do to address auto theft in Canada, but I think this is a very important piece," said Richard Dubin, vice-president of the Insurance Bureau of Canada.

"Organized auto theft has grown and continues to grow."

© The Canadian Press, 2008

THE CANADIAN PRESS 