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Police warn of 'warm-up thefts' in winter months

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Police are warning motorists against leaving their vehicles running unattended.

Auto thieves see such vehicles as a perfect opportunity, said Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard.

"It's a big problem when it gets cold out like it is now," said Bouchard, "especially when people leave their cars running while they go into the gas station or party store or dry cleaners."

Bouchard said he now has a special undercover auto theft unit monitoring areas where thieves have stolen running cars in the past.

"Auto theft is very much a crime of opportunity," he said. "People grab those running cars and take off."

The National Crime Prevention Council calls the trend "warm-up thefts" and recommends never leaving your car running or the keys in the ignition when you are

away from it. The council says cars left running, unlocked and unattended are easy targets for thieves.

In Oak Park, Public Safety Lt. Samantha Kretzchmar said warm-up thefts are not rare during the cold months.

"We usually get several car thefts like that in the winter," she said.

Police have the option of writing tickets to motorists who leave their vehicles running to discourage the practice.

In Royal Oak, such a ticket carries a \$115 fine, said Royal Oak 44th District Court Administrator Kevin Sutherland.

"Officers can use their discretion on whether to write such a ticket," Royal Oak Police Traffic Sgt. Tom Goad said. "We have (unattended) running cars stolen occasionally at convenience stores or gas stations."

Similarly, Ferndale police see several warm-up thefts each winter, often with vehi-

cles left running at convenience stores, said Detective John Thull.

"Nothing could be easier for a thief than to see a car running with the keys in the ignition and no one in it," Thull said.

Ferndale Sgt. Steve Jennings said most police officers will advise a motorist rather than write a ticket for leaving a vehicle running.

"But we can write a ticket if we feel we have to," Jennings said.

In Berkley, police handle such cases the same way, said Deputy Chief Robert North.

"It's not legal, and we don't want people to do it," North said.

None of the law enforcement officials had statistics for the number of warm-up car thefts that occur each year.

"But we know it's a problem," Bouchard said. "That's why we have undercover officers out being proactive for these kinds of car thefts."

Of course, many newer vehicles have remote electric start-ups that lock the vehicles while they run.

Lt. Kretzschmar has an electric start on her Ford Explorer:

"And if you try to steal it without the keys, the engine automatically shuts off when you press the brake to put it in gear," she said.