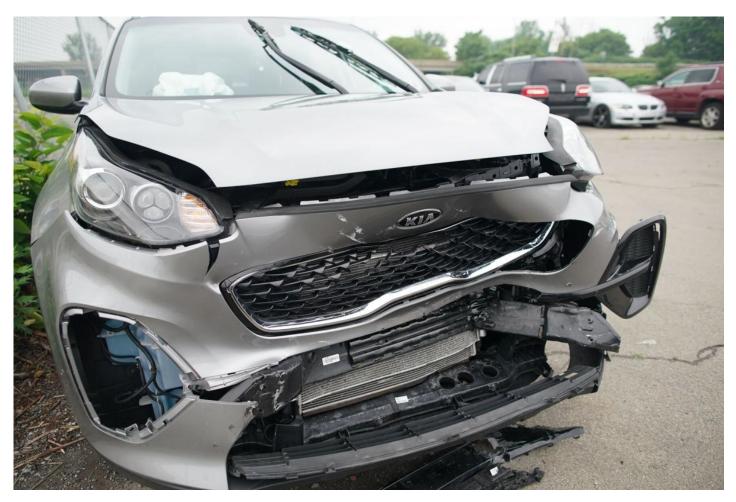https://buffalonews.com/opinion/editorial/the-editorial-board-a-smart-strategy-on-car-thefts/article_431578a2-308a-11ee-8504-4bdd3135a86c.html

The Editorial Board: A smart strategy on car thefts

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A recovered stolen KIA vehicle that was involved in a collision waits to be claimed at the City of Buffalo Auto Impound in June. Police in St. Paul, Minn., have created an effective strategy for reducing a big rise in car thefts.

Derek Gee, Buffalo News

There's a better way. As a story in The News documented last week, **law enforcement agencies in St. Paul, Minn.**, have crafted a cooperative approach to attack a burgeoning problem that many cities, including Buffalo, are confronting: soaring car thefts.

Under the leadership of Commissioner Joseph Gramaglia, Buffalo Police are working to bring this confounding and sometimes violent problem under control. Driven in part by social media instigators, auto thefts in Buffalo over the first half of this year rose 135% over the same period in 2022. The city's approach to confronting these crimes has revolved around the use of helicopters, and they have helped.

But St. Paul is doing and achieving more. City police there are working closely with the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office, which also uses helicopters – and drones – to chase down thieves. It also makes use of state grants more generous than what Albany provides. As a result, car thefts there have fallen 41% over the first half of this year, to 1,387. That's more than a few, but still 17% less than Buffalo's 1,676 – and in a city whose population is 11% larger than Buffalo's.

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A primary distinction between the two approaches is the existence of a police unit specifically dedicated to the problem. While in Buffalo and Erie County, the crime is only starting to attract the focused attention it needs, the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office in 2021 formed the Carjacking and Auto Theft unit. The CAT unit was funded with two-year state grant that was expanded by another $1.4 million this year. By contrast, Buffalo's work is assisted by a $107,000 state grant, mainly aimed at reducing insurance fraud. It's part of less than $400,000 split by Erie and Niagara counties.

The money pays for about eight deputies and civilian analysts who work with the St. Paul Police Department and prosecutors in the Ramsey County Attorney's Office. Their mission is to nab car thieves, recover stolen vehicles and, importantly, to quickly connect offenders who are usually young with intervention programs or court appearances as soon as possible. While leaders of St. Paul's effort cite that cooperative effort as the primary driver of the reduction in thefts, Buffalo could profit from other strategies, as well. They include:

Lessening the problem of repeated thefts by juveniles. With all parties working cooperatively, a judge is able to hear juvenile cases the next day and take action, reducing what one official called the "maddening" problem of juvenile offenders being immediately released pending a court appearance weeks away. The same teen would often keep stealing cars in the meantime.

In Minnesota, an auto theft prevention program is supported by a $1 surcharge on each auto insurance policy. New York's more limited program, noted above, is mainly aimed at fighting insurance fraud, not thefts. With thefts spiking and with no end in sight, Albany needs to reconsider that restricted approach.

As we've recently observed, Buffalo has done yeoman work in reducing homicides and gun violence, generally. For that, it deserves great credit but, as Gramaglia and other city leaders know, the work doesn't end. The city had three times more car theft reports in the first half of 2023 than it did during the same time period five years ago. What is more, the growth in thefts is one of the highest in the nation: As a percentage, the city's spike in car thefts was the third worst among 32 major cities reviewed by the Council on Criminal Justice. Encouragingly, it reported a 27% decrease in theft reports from June to July, but the numbers remain far too high.

Buffalo borrowed its gun violence strategy from Dallas and creatively adapted it to this city's needs. Together with Albany and the Erie County Sheriff's Office, it should look at adapting St. Paul's successful approach to the problem plaguing Buffalo.