

U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing on Federal Support for Preventing and Responding to Carjackings
Testimony of Cook County Sheriff Thomas J. Dart
March 1, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I firmly believe there are tangible ways local law enforcement, the federal government, and the auto industry can work together toward real solutions that will stop this disturbing rise in carjackings.

I am the Sheriff of Cook County, Illinois, which includes Chicago and more than 130 suburbs. In our community, carjackings have increased at an alarming rate. In Chicago, they tripled over the last decade. Just last year there was more than 2,000 carjackings, or about one every 4 hours.

This isn't just a Chicago issue. New York City carjackings have quadrupled in the last three years.

Philadelphia incidents are up nearly 300% since 2015.

Here, in the District of Columbia carjackings have almost tripled in the past two years.

Anyone in a car is a potential victim. You, your spouse, your children, your parents. Yes, even lawmakers have been victims, including Illinois state Senator Kimberly Lightford and Pennsylvania Congresswoman Mary Gay Scanlon.

The crime can happen at any time.

One victim in Chicago told us that she was performing the common winter chore of brushing snow off her Toyota Camry when two young men approached, pointed a gun and demanded her keys.

In another case, a retired Air Force physician stopped at a gas station in a Chicago suburb. A carjacker grabbed her car door, put a gun to her head and demanded she get out.

A struggle ensued, the offender violently pulled her from the driver's seat, threw her to the ground and kicked her multiple times before speeding off in broad daylight.

These two women are among the more than 4,500 victims in Cook County since 2020.

I can give you that number because our office has catalogued and analyzed nearly 4,000 carjacking events since 2020.

We've done a deep dive into the methods and tactics of the offenders.

With the invaluable assistance of the Chicago Police and the FBI, we have begun to understand the motivation behind this crime and ways to address it.

But, regardless of whether the motive is for assisting in committing another crime or for profit, one thing is certain: the key to successful apprehension and prosecution is recovering vehicles quickly.

One of the most effective tools available is manufacturer-installed geolocation equipment commonly available in most vehicles built after 2015.

But while some manufacturers are very helpful, others can be reluctant or unwilling to track carjacked vehicles.

It is often not clear who to call to get information and some auto companies have limited hours.

Sometimes staff are poorly trained and demand we obtain warrants which are not legally relevant.

In egregious cases, the companies require customers to pay an upcharge to initiate the tracking of the car which was just stolen from them.

The Air Force veteran I mentioned earlier tried to get her vehicle tracked through the manufacturer with no success.

After my office got involved, it still took nearly two days to get the vehicle's location - and while it was at large - the car was used in at least two other crimes, including another carjacking at gunpoint.

We believe auto manufacturers can be a great ally in this battle. They already innovated the technologies needed to track the stolen vehicles.

Now they must lead the way in developing a system to communicate in a consistent way with responding law enforcement.

Just a few weeks ago, we had a great example of how the system should work.

After the Chicago woman was carjacked, our office was able to coordinate a call with her and Toyota for her to grant our office permission to track the vehicle.

Once the location was established, we were able to recover her vehicle quickly and safely.

In December, I wrote to major auto manufacturers to raise this issue and suggest a single 24/7 phone number police could use to get tracking data quickly and legally on any hijacked vehicle.

We've had some promising discussions since then. General Motors/OnStar has been receptive to our requests and initiated the development of a streamlined communications system.

Also, we have had substantive conversations with the Alliance for Automotive Innovation.

Though talks are on-going, the Alliance has indicated a willingness to work toward sustainable solutions.

But time is of the essence. This is a crime that has real economic impact.

Central business districts in major cities across this nation are experiencing a slower than expected post-pandemic rebound - in part, because diners and shoppers fear being carjacked.

That is certainly the case in Chicago.

Chairman Durbin understands this. He is urging the U.S. Department of Transportation to work with the auto industry to increase police access to tracking data and he has encouraged the FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics to improve data collection.

Make no mistake: this is a violent crime done primarily to obtain an anonymous car to commit more acts of violence, frequently shootings.

Carjacking is a relatively easy crime to commit and currently a difficult crime to prosecute.

In Chicago, we estimate more than half our incidents are perpetrated by well-practiced teams of prolific offenders.

These crews often ride in groups of 4 or 5. Once they target a victim, two offenders exit the chase car pull the victim out of their vehicle - then drive away with the chase car following closely.

Once the offenders are clear from the scene, they often will meet the chase car and switch out the carjacker with a new driver the victim never saw.

Often that new driver is a juvenile –who if caught by police would likely face less severe penalties.

And as a former prosecutor I can tell you the longer the car is missing the more likely it will be used in multiple crimes and as important the less likely there will be a successful prosecution.

We must act now. Every day brings more incidents, more victims, and more fear.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions.