

Carjacking Facts- Self Defense

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Monday, 18 December 2006
Last Updated Saturday, 26 September 2009

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Carjacking is Robbery

Carjacking is the violent form of motor vehicle theft. It is a serious threat to our personal safety because the thief uses force and fear to rob our car from us. Sometimes the car owner or other occupants are kidnapped during a carjacking, and if lucky will be dropped off nearby unharmed. The worst case scenario occurs when you are transported to a secondary crime scene, which is usually more dangerous than the original confrontation. Those not so lucky victims have suffered other crimes like rape, aggravated assault, and even homicide. Since the mid-1980s, carjacking has captured the attention of the media with reports of these sudden and violent attacks. Carjackers have unknowingly driven off with infants still in the backseat of the car, leaving behind a screaming and emotionally distressed parent. Other drivers have been violently pulled out of their seats and left lying on the road, terrified by what just occurred. The crime of carjacking can be traumatic to our everyday lives because it creates fear in the common act of driving a car. Victims of carjacking have reported being unable to drive a car again while others required months of therapy. Others have become so hypersensitive, that embarrassing and dangerous situations have arisen in response to their fear when someone unwittingly approached their car on foot.

How Carjacking Got Started

Carjacking has always been around, especially in large metropolitan cities, we just rarely read about it. The crime of carjacking "took off" in the 1980s after the media published stories of bizarre situations and the violence associated with the crime. The media coined the phrase "carjacking" and the crime of auto theft took on a new identity. After a rush of publicity, other criminals "copied" the crime of carjacking. These copycat criminals must have said, "Hey, I can steal any vehicle I want without damaging it, I get the car keys, and I can rob the owner too. What a concept!" Another reason carjacking got started is because of the sophistication and prevalence of new anti-theft devices and alarm systems. New car alarms and steering wheel locking systems made it tougher on the auto thief. Chip-integrated ignition switches, engine cutoff devices, and stolen vehicle locators are now more common in cars. Unfortunately for us, poorly motivated and unskilled car thieves have adapted by becoming more violent to get the cars they need and don't think twice about using force against us. Sometimes criminals will carjack a vehicle for use in another crime like armed robbery or for a drive-by shooting. These carjackers prefer to have a set of car keys and not have a visibly smashed window or damaged ignition switch that can be easily spotted by the police. This class of car thief is the most dangerous because they are usually heavily armed and are not concerned with your welfare.

How Often Does Carjacking Occur

National carjacking statistics are not available. However, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)* made a telephone assessment of 221,000 households from 1992-1996 to gain an understanding of the extent of the carjacking problem. The biggest problem of tracking carjacking incidents is current police agency reporting practices. Most criminal codes have not adopted this new crime type nor do they track it statistically. Most police jurisdictions charge the crime of carjacking as a robbery since force or fear was used to steal the vehicle directly for the owner. Many police agencies record multiple charges like aggravated robbery, auto theft, assault, battery to one event but usually only the first charge (robbery) gets indexed and statistically tracked. Some jurisdictions charge the crime of carjacking as only an auto theft since a vehicle was stolen. Since the crime of carjacking is not indexed in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, it is unlikely that we will soon see a national statistic on frequency that is generated from police reports. What we have to work with is the NCVS telephone survey as the source of our data. From the study of 1992-1996, the NCVS learned that each year 49,000 carjackings and attempts occur in the United States. About half of the reported carjackings were failed attempts. Of the completed carjackings, 92% had weapons where only 75% were armed during the failed attempts. Unfortunately, this statistic tells us that carjackers must be armed to be taken seriously by victims. A handgun was the weapon of choice followed by a knife. Males were responsible for 97% of the carjackings and attempts and were usually carried out by either one or two perpetrators.

Where Does Carjacking Occur

Carjacking can occur anywhere, but is largely a big city problem like traditional auto theft. See my web site on auto theft facts for more information. Carjacking occurs most often in a busy commercial area where cars are parked and when the owner is entering or exiting the parked vehicle. Most carjackings or attempts (65%) occur within five miles of the victim's home. The carjacker wants the keys readily available and the car door unlocked for a quick getaway. Carjackers tend to rob lone victims more often (92%), for obvious reasons. According to the NCVS, men were victimized more often than women, blacks more than whites; Hispanics, more than non-Hispanics; and divorced, separated, or never married more than married or widowed. This trend is not surprising given the fact that younger single males tend to take more chances and go to higher risk locations than do married persons. It is unclear whether household income or the value of the vehicle is a criterion in carjacking as the statistics are spread throughout the income levels. However the \$35,000 to \$50,000 income range had a slightly higher carjack victim frequency. Surprisingly, the NCVS study indicates that 64% of the daytime carjackings were actually completed, while less than half of those at night were completed. This may be reflective of who is being victimized and who is out at night. About 62% of all carjacking victims took some form of action to defend themselves or their property. Victims were injured about 20% of the time in completed carjackings and about 16% during attempts. Although the statistics aren't clear, each year about 27 homicides are reported related to auto theft. Also interesting is that 100% of the completed carjack victims called the police, whereas only 57% called to report an attempt carjacking. This variable in reporting is probably related to the desire to get their property back and for insurance purposes. Popular carjacking locations are parking lots, shopping centers, gas stations, car washes, convenience stores, ATMs, hotels, valet parking, fast-food drive-thru, and outside of retail stores. Close proximity to a freeway onramp is a desirable escape factor from the carjackers prospective. A risky, but popular location for the carjacker is a roadway intersection with a stoplight. A carjacker will jump out of another vehicle, pull open your unlocked drivers' door, and force you to get out. The type of carjacking allows for a quick escape but increases their risk of being followed by other drivers armed with cell phones. There have been incidents where well-meaning citizens got into a high-speed chase following carjackers and ended up being victims themselves.

The "Bump" and Carjack

Another copycat scheme used by carjackers is to bump your car from behind to get you to pull over and stop. We have all been trained to always stop following an auto accident to exchange license and insurance information. What a perfect scenario for a carjacker! The carjacker, and his accomplice, will follow the intended victim to a suitable location with good escape routes and few witnesses. The carjacker will crash into the back of your vehicle at low speed and "bump" you with enough force to make you believe a traffic accident had just occurred. Beware of the Good Samaritan. Typically, the drivers of both vehicles pull over, stop, and get out discussing the damage. At this point the carjacker robs you of your vehicle, its' contents, and drives away. The carjacker's car gets driven away by the accomplice. Hopefully you won't be injured during the exchange.

What Should You Do?

Carjacking of parked vehicles depends on the car owner being inattentive to their surroundings. Carjackers, like street robbers, prefer the element of surprise. Most victims say they never saw the carjacker until they appeared at their car door. To reduce your risk of being carjacked, I have listed some common sense steps below: Always park in well-lighted areas, if you plan to arrive/leave after dark Don't park in isolated or visually obstructed areas near walls or heavy foliage Use valet parking or an attended garage, if you're a woman driving alone As you walk to your car be alert to suspicious persons sitting in cars Ask for a security escort if you are alone at a shopping center Watch out for young males loitering in the area (handing out flyers, etc) If someone tries to approach, change direction or run to a busy store Follow your instincts if they tell you to walk/run away to a busy place As you approach your vehicle, look under, around, and inside your car If safe, open the door, enter quickly, and lock the doors Don't be a target by turning your back while loading packages into the car Make it your habit to always start your car and drive away immediately Teach and practice with your children to enter and exit the car quickly In the city, always drive with your car doors locked and windows rolled up When stopped in traffic, leave room ahead to maneuver and escape, if necessary If you are bumped in traffic, by young males, be suspicious of the accident Beware of the Good Samaritan who offers to repair your car or a flat tire. It's okay to get help, just be alert Wave to follow, and drive to a gas station or busy place before getting out If you are ever confronted by an armed carjacker don't resist Give up your keys or money if demanded without resistance Don't argue, fight or chase the robber. You can be seriously injured Never agree to be kidnapped. Drop the cars keys and run and scream for help If you are forced to drive, consider crashing your car near a busy intersection to attract attention so bystanders can come to your aid and call the police Call the police immediately to report the crime and provide detailed information *National Crime Victimization Survey Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) - 1999 Carjack Robbery Prevention Advice

