Vehicle Burglary and Theft Groups Targeting Safe Neighborhoods Including Punta Gorda

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The City of Punta Gorda has recently seen an increase in the number of vehicle burglaries and vehicle thefts occurring in our community. Since the beginning of 2021, there have been thirty vehicle burglaries and seven stolen vehicles reported. Almost all of these crimes can be directly attributed to juvenile groups from outside of Charlotte County, specifically the St. Petersburg, Bradenton, and Fort Myers areas.

These groups, predominately made up of juveniles males between the ages of fourteen and eighteen , target safe communities where residents are more likely to leave their vehicles unlocked and keys or key fobs inside their cars. In fact, during a recent investigation it was discovered that a suspect involved in one of these groups had searched the internet for "safest neighborhoods nearby" on their phone before committing these crimes. Surveillance video has repeatedly shown that these groups are looking for unlocked vehicles and vehicles with keys or key fobs left inside. Every residential vehicle burglary involved an unlocked car and every vehicle stolen from a residence had the keys or key fobs left inside. These are not professional car thieves who are "hotwiring" vehicles or utilizing high-tech equipment to steal cars. These are juveniles who are simply entering unlocked vehicles and pushing the ignition button. If the vehicle starts, they drive away. If the vehicle is locked or does not start, they move on.

Two suspects find an unlocked vehicle with key fob left inside and quickly drive away.

Due to the nature of these crimes they can be extremely difficult to investigate and prosecute. Even when arrests are made juveniles are often back out on the streets quickly or are being replaced within the groups by other juveniles. The best possible defense against these kinds of property crimes is prevention. These groups continue to come to Punta Gorda because they are successful in finding unsecured vehicles and vehicles with keys or key fobs left inside. We are asking everyone in our community to assist us in changing that by doing the following:

- Always lock your vehicle when arriving at home. While

these crimes are happening overnight, it is much easier
to get into habit of simply locking your vehicle when
you get home than to remember to lock your vehicle
before bed. It may also be helpful to set a reminder or
alarm on your phone to double-check your vehicle before
you retire for the evening.

- Never leave valuables, weapons, or keys in your vehicle.
  Thieves can't steal what isn't there. Leaving a key or
  key fob in the vehicle could mean the difference between
  your vehicle being in your driveway in the morning or
  not.

Suspect finds both vehicles locked and quickly heads back to

the waiting suspect vehicle.

"We love that Punta Gorda is the kind of community where residents feel safe enough to leave their vehicles unlocked," says Chief Davis. "Unfortunately, that same feeling of security can be taken advantage of. If we all work together we can make Punta Gorda the kind of community these criminals don't even bother coming to."