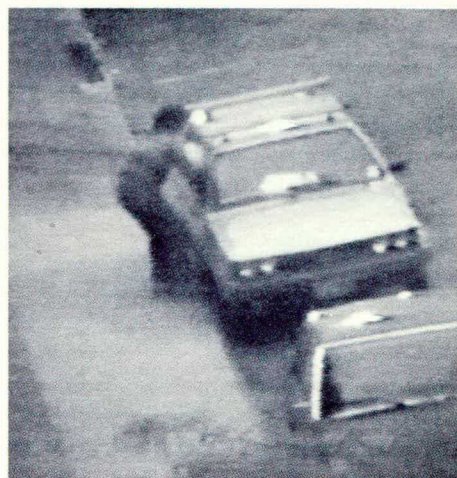
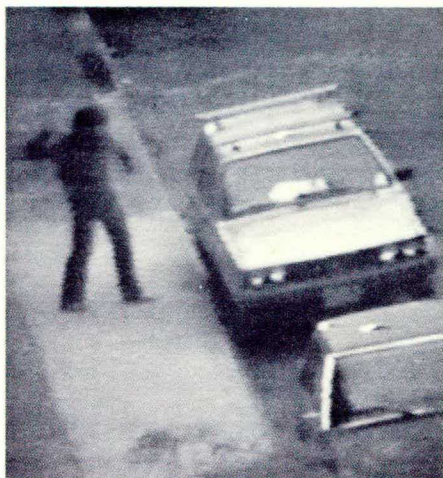




A typical car break-in on a busy Manhattan street, filmed by a Fordham University psychologist who left bait in plain sight. In New York City such incidents occur perhaps a million times a year.

NEW YORK

No Radio

Any New Yorker who owns a car can count on having the car's radio stolen regularly. A repeat victim looks into where all those hot radios go

I KNOW HOW I am going to die. I will be walking toward my parked car on a Manhattan street and I will see someone breaking in to steal my radio. In a paroxysm of rage and vengeance, I will hurl myself upon him and be impaled on his screwdriver. Or maybe I'll trip and hit my head on the curb. I'm not certain of every detail. I only know that hundreds of thousands of car radios are stolen in New York City every year, and too many of them are mine. The most pathetic irony of my death will be that I died defending a radio that cost me only \$35. It was cheap because I bought it at a police auction after my previous radio was stolen. It was in the auction because it had been stolen from somebody else.

Let me take you on a tour of my car. There is a protective steel plate bolted over the trunk lock. I had the plate installed after somebody broke into the trunk and stole five baseball bats. Another thief has since attempted to break the new lock but succeeded only in reaming out the keyhole. It looks funny but it works.

My back seat is misshapen, its up-

right cushion bent over like a carsick passenger. It was ripped forward by a thief who crawled into my trunk to look for my \$35 radio. He had noticed the empty slot in the dashboard from which I had slid the radio for safekeeping. Many people with removable radios apparently stash them in the trunk. I had carried mine into a friend's apartment. So the joke was on the guy who destroyed my back seat. Ha ha.

He also destroyed the passenger door. To get into the car in the first place he had ripped out its lock. I have a new lock there now, with a protective steel plate.

There is a wadded-up paper towel, artfully arranged to look like a used tissue, in an open change compartment between the front bucket seats. I keep it there to conceal a small cache of quarters and bridge-toll tokens. I never leave anything in the car where anybody can see it. If I have something in the car that I want to protect but don't want to carry, I stop and transfer it to the trunk *before arriving at my destination*. It is crucial never to be seen putting something in a car trunk and walking away. I have had beach chairs stolen from the trunk, and breath mints stolen from the change compartment, and hideously ugly sunglasses (my designated expendable "car glasses") stolen from the glove compartment. I have had four radios stolen. Also dirty gym clothes. A friend once gave me Bob Dylan's *Biograph*, a three-cassette set. The tapes were stolen, one at a time, in three separate break-ins.

My experiences have been comparatively paltry. I have one friend whose

car was broken into monthly for five years. According to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, in 1990 there were 55,314 reported thefts of motor-vehicle parts and accessories, including radios, in New York City and 66,691 thefts of other property from motor vehicles. National surveys show that about 25 percent of such crimes are reported to the police. I think it fair to assume that New Yorkers report such crimes at no more than half the national rate, since no sane person in New York City expects the police to recover a stolen radio. (Slightly fewer than 10 percent of all larcenies reported to New York City police in 1990 resulted in arrests.) That works out to at least 976,040 car break-ins annually, or close to one every thirty seconds, which is about how long the operation takes.

In 1981 a Fordham University social psychologist named Harold Takooshian set up a video camera on the Upper West Side and during fourteen weekend evenings observed eighty auto break-ins. Many of the thieves, he reported, would "cruise the parked cars until a valuable caught their eye, stop to tie a shoelace or lean on a fender until an opportune moment, then break in within ten to forty-five seconds, grab what they could in that time, stuff it inside a satchel and continue walking." Few bystanders intervened. Takooshian's experiment took place a few blocks from Riverside Drive, an even more popular spot among car-radio thieves, because it borders a dimly lit park. Rumor has it that they call the street "audio warehouse."



I RECENTLY BEGAN to wonder where all the stolen radios go. I discovered I was not alone. "We have always wondered that," a spokesman for the Highway Loss Data Institute, an organization supported by the insurance industry which tabulates thefts of and from autos, told me. "We talked to people at the National Automobile Theft Bureau. One theory was that they were being converted into home stereos. We've heard they were being exported to Eastern Europe." Maybe they are being used for ballast in aircraft carriers. Or as doorstops in South American post offices. There are certainly enough stolen. Nationwide, the FBI reports, larceny is the most common crime, and theft from a vehicle is the most common kind of larceny.

Upon further inquiry I learned from police officers and prosecutors in New York City that most stolen radios enter a humdrum and depressing commerce. The thieves are drug addicts. They sell the radios for \$10 or \$20 to crooked radio stores and auto junkyards, which resell them to car owners, many of whom are replacing stolen radios. I visited a store in lower Manhattan where an entire wall was stacked high with car radios lacking manufacturers' boxes. Many were pull-out models, without the matching sleeves for the auto dashboard. My conviction that they were all stolen was briefly shaken when I noticed several Denon radios with consecutive six-digit serial numbers, suggesting that they had come from the manufacturer in a single batch. Then I noticed that the serial numbers, which were printed on shiny new stickers, continued without a break onto a row of Toshibas.

A bullet-headed salesman asked if he could help me. He was interrupted by an aggrieved young man with long black hair who was holding three \$20 bills, a Sony radio, and a sales slip from the cashier. "You said no tax," he protested. "I've got cash."

"Everybody pays tax," the salesman said.

"I only brought \$60."

The salesman took it, and the customer walked out carrying the Sony. No bag. No box. No warranty card. No incomprehensible instruction booklet.

"I'm looking for a car radio," I said.

The salesman looked me over and then led me across the room to a display of obviously new equipment. He

offered me a radio-CD player for \$350, "new, in the original box."

"What about those?" I asked, pointing to the opposite wall.

"Those," he said, "are demos."

I told Detective Michael Graziose, of the auto-crime division of the Organized Crime Control Bureau, what I had seen. He said that he sees stacks of radios, cut wires dangling from them, in auto salvage yards all the time. "I would stake my paycheck that they're all stolen, but there's no way I can prove it." Some have serial numbers, but car-radio manufacturers don't keep track of registered owners.

I asked if the police couldn't run a sting—send somebody in to sell "stolen" radios to a store or salvage yard and then bust the buyer. "If I went in and said, 'I got some radios to sell you,' the guy would be skeptical," Graziose said. "He doesn't know me. When you're from the area or you're a pawnbroker type, you can judge people. You see the kid bringing you a radio. He's eighteen, he's nineteen, his eyes are all strung out. You know."

Even a successful sting operation isn't worth the effort, Graziose said. "It'll drop down to a misdemeanor—attempt to criminally possess stolen property." Any jail time would be negligible. "It's hard enough getting any kind of time on felonies. The courts perceive it as a crime against property. It's just ridiculous." Last year there were 54,895 people in state prison. Five hundred and seventy-three were doing time for auto-related thefts.

Graziose sent me a police-department handout on deterring auto crime. It advised me to lock my door, to park in well-lighted areas, to mark my radio with invisible ink, and to pull out my radio and carry it.

I already do carry my radio, but that didn't stop the most recent thief from ransacking my car to look for it. Graziose hides his under his seat, putting a dummy cover over the empty slot so that it appears that no radio was installed. Such covers are available commercially, as are dummy slots with hanging cut wires that make it look as if your radio has already been stolen.

These may protect your radioless car, but if you carry your radio, "you are to some extent jeopardizing your own safety," says Professor Andrew Karmen, of New York City's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Karmen is

a victimologist, which is a kind of criminologist, and he has had plenty of hands-on experience in his field. "I've been a burglary victim, a robbery victim, a car-theft victim, a car-break-in victim." He has been robbed at knife-point twice, once for the car radio he was carrying in a shopping bag.

Another way New Yorkers attempt to prevent damage to their cars, if not to themselves, is to leave their car doors unlocked, on the theory that anyone who wants to get in will, so you might as well make it possible for him to get in without breaking the lock (although this gives rise to the question Why does it matter if the lock gets broken if you're never going to use it?). This was the practice of Harold Takooshian, the car-break-in videotaper, until, after suffering many break-ins himself, he gave up owning a car.

David Black, a novelist and television producer who lives on the Upper West Side, had a happier experience with this technique, although it required his adapting to a peculiar kind of urban symbiosis. He left his car unlocked and somebody began living in it. The car was always empty when he or his wife arrived to use it in the morning, but they knew they had a tenant because they found cigarette butts in the ashtrays, and the radio (which worked without the ignition key) was tuned to a salsa station that neither of them favored. The Blacks felt outraged and violated until they realized that their tenant was in effect serving as a night watchman. They left a pillow and a blanket for him in the back seat. Every morning the blanket was neatly folded.

Some manufacturers are addressing the radio-theft problem by offering radios that won't work if removed from their original vehicles or if a code is not punched in. I have seen a nifty Toyota model that is divided into two modules on the dashboard, separated by the heating controls. To deter thieves who turn up their noses at factory-installed radios ("aftermarket" audio components are generally considered superior), some car owners camouflage their Blaupunkts with Toyota faceplates. Doug Newcomb, the managing editor of *Car Audio and Electronics* magazine, told me about a radio with a detachable control panel. The rest of the radio is inoperable without it (unless the thief buys—or steals—a new control panel;



most such radios have warning signs, and thieves usually know to believe them), and the panel is more convenient to carry than an entire radio. Newcomb, who lives in Los Angeles, was recently carrying his panel when he went for a ramble on the beach with his girlfriend, and it fell in the ocean, but this would probably happen less often in New York.

Andrew Karmen, the victimologist, believes that car radios should be made so that they are as difficult to rip out as they are to install. "You can pull them out with a screwdriver," he says. "But if you've ever put a radio in, you know they can't be put in easily. You have to lie on your back on the floor, and your wrists get contorted, and your feet stick out. No thief would ever do that." Karmen suggests that radios ought to be wedge-shaped, so that they can't be pulled through the dashboard, and that dashboards should be stronger. "Just as the car companies were required to make padded dashboards for safety, perhaps they could be required to make armored dashboards for security."

Karmen also thinks that the police should do more than they now do (which in New York City isn't much) to crack down on stores that buy and resell stolen radios. Most radio thieves who are caught are caught by patrol officers, who are not authorized or equipped to use them as undercover agents to trap fences. Detectives have other things to do, like catch murderers.

Individual radio thieves are, however, being prosecuted with vigor, says Paul Shechtman, an assistant district attorney for Manhattan. "We've gotten more forceful in our advocacy," he says, "maybe because every ADA [assistant district attorney] has had his radio stolen." Until a year or two ago many prosecutions faltered because victims failed to show up to sign the required affidavits stating that the thieves did not have the owners' permission to break into their cars and steal their radios. Now car owners are encouraged to file their affidavits by fax; the district attorney will even reimburse them for their fax fees. Faxes have poured in from as far away as Bangkok, and most prosecutions proceed.

"We tend to get reasonable sentences," Shechtman says. "I suppose they may not be reasonable by the standards of the rest of the Western

world. That someone convicted for the twelfth time of stealing car radios gets five months would probably give people in other jurisdictions pause. But in New York City that's a good sentence."

Part of the problem is that stealing a car radio worth less than \$1,000 is a misdemeanor (petty larceny), and breaking into a car is generally prosecuted as a misdemeanor (criminal mischief in the fourth degree), and New York State has no applicable recidivist misdemeanor law of the kind that in some states mandates longer sentences for repeat offenders. First offenders in New York City are commonly sentenced to the time served between their arrest and their appearance in court, which may ruin their weekend. Multiple offenders with multi-month sentences generally serve only two thirds of their pronounced terms. Then they go back to their regular line of work. "They get caught once a year, do two and a half months," Shechtman says. "It's still a living."

SO THE CAR-radio owners of New York City are largely left to their own devices—locking their doors, unlocking their doors, installing dummy faceplates, schlepping their radios into movies and restaurants, braving knife-wielding muggers trying to take their radios from them. I have heard of owners installing booby traps—flesh-slicing razor wire waiting in ambush behind the radio, pain-generating sirens, concussion grenades connected to dashboards—but I have not managed to find any of these people. What I have found, repeatedly, is evidence that owners have given up entirely on any kind of resistance to thieves. So they beg.

I am referring, of course, to the signs that on many Manhattan blocks are more common than dog turds. Posted in car windows, hand-lettered or commercially produced, they read NO RADIO IN CAR OR TRUNK. Or DOORS OPEN. NO RADIO. Or NO VALUABLES IN CAR. EVERYTHING STOLEN. Or NO RADIO. NOTHING. NADA. TRUNK IS EMPTY. What does it say about a civilization when citizens post plaintive notes asking criminals not to rob them?

"It's terrible," Detective Graziose says. "I would never do that. I'd feel like I'm bowing down to criminals."

Well, yes, but does it work? No, he says. "If I was a thief, I would look in

the car and trunk anyway. It only takes a second. I wouldn't listen to what a sign said." Maybe, says Professor Karmen, the victimologist. "It is a rational thing to try to reason with offenders. I've minimized damage to myself in two robberies by talking to the offenders." Yes, says Professor Robert McCrie, also of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. "There is research showing that signs reduce crime." He referred me to a study conducted for the Southland Corporation, the owner of 7-Eleven convenience stores, which are prime robbery targets. Sixty stores followed an experimental anti-robbery regimen, including the posting of signs that said REGISTER HAS LESS THAN \$35 and WE APPRECIATE EXACT CHANGE, and they were robbed less frequently than stores in a control group. But the low-robbery stores also changed their lighting and layouts.

Nobody knows if NO RADIO signs work. A lot of car owners seem to think they do, or they figure they have nothing to lose by trying them—except their dignity as citizens of a civilized nation. Which, along with seventy-five bucks, will get your smashed wing window replaced in Manhattan.

The origin of the NO RADIO sign is shrouded in the mists of the early Reagan era, but in the absence of any confirmed inventor one could point to a seventy-two-year-old native of Argentina named Naum Feldchtein, who immigrated to the United States in 1948 and eventually found himself in the car-tchotchke business. He owns a company called Kings International, which markets flag decals for cars, and "car badges" (metal ornaments that attach to car grilles), and key chains, and yellow plastic signs that stick to car windows with suction cups. I called on him in his crowded showroom in a narrow commercial building on West 19th Street. I perused the ranks of flag decals for Zambia, Vietnam, Vanuatu, the Netherlands (or, if you prefer, "Nederland"; both versions are available). I saw decals proclaiming GOD BLESS AMERICA and JESUS ES AMOR and two diamond-shaped plastic signs: NO RADIO and NO RADIO. ALREADY STOLEN.

"It was ten years ago," Feldchtein said. "I had a BMW. The radio was stolen three times, four times. After third time I got fed up. I was so angry they break the windows of my car." He



made a sign with black stick-on letters on white cardboard. It said SORRY, NO RADIO. ALREADY STOLEN.

"He was apologizing to the thief," interrupted Feldchtein's wife, Sarita, as she hung up the phone after getting the price on a batch of Puerto Rican flags on sticks.

"Yes," Feldchtein said, "because if they get nasty, they break your window."

"They break it anyway," Sarita Feldchtein said.

"I saw people looking at the sign," Feldchtein resumed. "They all laughed. Not mean. Sympathetic. They asked where they could get it. I thought, Why not get it printed? I'm not trying to pin a medal on me, but that's how started the whole thing."

The signs sold briskly in New York, and the Feldchteins exported them to Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela. "That's the good thing about that sign," Feldchtein said. "No radio is also Spanish." Now his export business is dead, because South Americans have started to make the signs themselves ("You're not talking here a carburetor; that is not so easy to manufacture"). Locally sales have dipped to 5,000 a year.

"Things go in cycles," Feldchtein said.

"Everything goes in a cycle," his wife said.

"Remember the waving hand on the suction cup?" he asked. "We sold fifty thousand a week. Now I couldn't sell one."

"It will come back," she said.

The Feldchteins offered me a NO RADIO sign, but I didn't take it. It seems to me creepily intimate to enter into a conversation, even on yellow plastic, with people who are thinking of breaking into my car. For one thing, they might answer back: there are stories, perhaps apocryphal, of car owners posting NO RADIO signs and returning to find their windows smashed and a scrawled message: "Just checking," or "Get one!"

Of course, things could be worse. Paul Shechtman, the assistant district attorney, told me that his car was recently stolen. All he salvaged was his radio, which he had removed and carried inside with him. Now he's thinking of putting it on the curb with a sign: NO CAR.

—Edward Zuckerman



A CREW WITH A VIEW

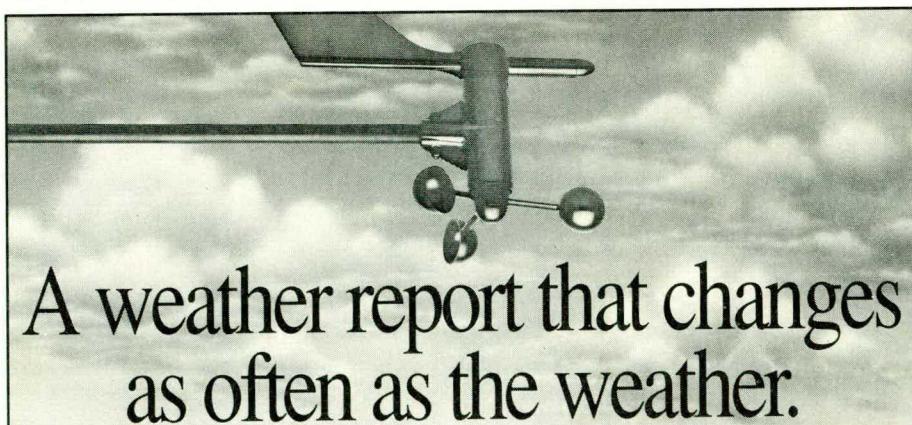
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