

Consumers warned as police report an increase in cloned vehicles being seized in Avon and Somerset

We are urging members of the public to be vigilant following an increase in cases of cloned vehicle fraud across the Avon and Somerset force area.

'Cloned' vehicles are stolen cars that criminals give a false identity – one that already belongs to another, genuine vehicle – before selling them on privately through online platforms and social media.

Nationally, vehicle theft is on the rise, with the Office for National Statistics reporting an 8 per cent increase in recorded incidents between 2022 and 2023. This has gone hand in hand with an increase in vehicle cloning, as criminals adopt increasingly sophisticated methods to change the identity of stolen vehicles in order to sell them on to unsuspecting buyers.

Last year in Avon and Somerset, officers seized at least one cloned vehicle a week on average; double the number that were seized in 2023.

To highlight the growing threat and help motorists protect themselves, we have released a short film: *Stolen Identity: The Cloned Car Scam*. The film examines the scale of the problem, the impact on victims who unknowingly purchase cloned vehicles, and the warning signs motorists should look out for when buying a used vehicle.

[Stolen Identity: The cloned car scam](#)

What's the impact of vehicle cloning?

Victims of vehicle cloning may find themselves out of pocket to the tune of thousands of pounds.

This is because buyers who unknowingly purchase a stolen vehicle with a cloned identity have no legal ownership of the vehicle they have paid for.

Once a vehicle is identified as a clone it will be seized by police and cannot be returned to the buyer, since they are not the legal owner.

If the vehicle was purchased privately, buyers often have little or no financial recourse, particularly if payment was made in cash.

This complex crime often results in at least two victims – the original vehicle owner, who is a victim of vehicle theft, and the unsuspecting purchaser of the stolen vehicle. The same cloned identity may sometimes be used on multiple stolen vehicles, creating several victims of fraud.

In some cases, the owner of the genuine vehicle may also receive penalty notices or be linked to offences they did not commit after their vehicle's identity has been cloned.

Case study

Methods being used by criminals to clone vehicles are now so sophisticated that it is nearly impossible for the average buyer to tell whether the vehicle they are buying is genuine.

In a recent case, a Bristol woman, who has asked to remain anonymous, unknowingly purchased a cloned van several years ago within the Avon and Somerset Force area.

Avon and Somerset police were alerted to the fact the van was a clone by another police force after DVLA records indicated at least two other vehicles were active under the same identity in different parts of the country.

The van was seized for an examination, which revealed that it was stolen and its identity had been extensively altered.

She said: "To say I am truly devastated is an understatement. I feel like my life has been taken away from me. We have made so many memories as a family in the three years we've had the van, and it has become such a huge part of our lives. Watching it being taken away like that was absolutely horrible."

Stolen Vehicle Examiner Matt Neale said: "The level of sophistication we're now seeing in vehicle cloning is very high. Gone are the days of simply swapping number plates. Many of these vehicles have had their entire identity changed.

"We're seeing false VIN numbers, replacement labels and even reprogrammed electronic systems so that everything appears legitimate when checked. In some cases, even the locks and keys have been replaced.

"Because of this, standard online checks can appear completely normal, as they relate to the genuine vehicle whose identity has been copied.

"That's why it's so important that buyers take the time to check both the vehicle and the seller carefully. If something doesn't feel right, or the deal seems too good to be true, don't be afraid to walk away."

How can consumers protect themselves?

Anyone can become a victim of fraud.

However, there are a number of 'red flags' to watch out for when purchasing a vehicle privately which may indicate that the sale is fraudulent:

- The selling price is significantly below market value. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- Only one key is available.
- The seller cannot produce a log book (V5C).
- The seller insists on meeting somewhere other than their home address to make the sale.
- They request cash payment only.

- They become evasive when asked for ID or proof of ownership.

Before you buy a used vehicle:

- Question unusually low prices – and be wary of 'quick sale' cover stories.
- Insist on seeing the log book and seller's ID.
- Avoid paying in cash wherever possible. Using a credit card may offer some protection
- Do not agree to apply for a replacement log book on the seller's behalf.
- Ask for proof they have owned the vehicle for a reasonable period of time- for example, a date-stamped photo or documentation.
- A genuine seller should be able and willing to prove ownership and identity without hesitation. Walk away if the seller resists reasonable checks.

Matt concluded:

"Vehicle cloning is becoming increasingly sophisticated and, unfortunately, anyone can fall victim regardless of their experience or knowledge of vehicles.

"Look out for the warning signs, ask questions, and be prepared to walk away from anything that doesn't feel right.

"Criminals steal vehicles because they can profit from selling them on. By helping buyers recognise the red flags associated with cloned vehicles and giving them the confidence to challenge suspicious sales, we can make it harder for offenders to find victims and ultimately help reduce the number of vehicles being stolen."