



# Captain's Corner

Welcome to Captain's Corner, your semi-regular column devoted to expanding awareness of safety and security.

You just love your new roadster. Technically it's not new, but it's new to you. It is your pride and joy. You paid a hefty sum for it, but that's alright. It's a life-long dream. You enjoy the many nods of approval as you cruise the neighborhoods.

Imagine your shock when authorities appear and haul your pride and joy away. You are out the money and the car.

What in the world just happened? You are a victim of a growing trend in auto theft.

This trend, generally called VIN cloning, involves a criminal stealing the identity of your vehicle and applying it to another vehicle.

A typical scheme works like this:

1. A thief steals a vehicle.
2. They find a legitimate vehicle of the same make, model, and similar year and record its VIN (often visible through the windshield).
3. They create counterfeit VIN labels or paperwork using that legitimate VIN.
4. They attach those identifiers to the stolen vehicle and try to obtain a title or registration in another state or sell the vehicle to an unsuspecting buyer. Why another state? Historically, criminals exploited differences in DMV procedures between states. Moving the vehicle across state lines can make it harder to connect the stolen vehicle with the original records.

So, what happens to me if my VIN gets cloned? You may encounter registration or title confusion. You may receive tolls, tickets, registration notices or other correspondence for a vehicle you don't own. You may receive law-enforcement inquiries if the cloned vehicle is

involved in a crime. You may encounter difficulties when selling the legitimate vehicle because duplicate records are discovered

What can I do to protect against VIN cloning?

- **Keep your VIN private when possible.** While the VIN is visible through the windshield and often appears in sales listings, avoid posting unnecessary photos that clearly show it or sharing documents with the full VIN unless needed.
- **Verify VIN consistency.** If you're buying a vehicle, make sure the VIN matches everywhere it's supposed to appear (dashboard, driver's door jamb, title, registration, and other manufacturer labels). Any mismatches are a major warning sign.
- **Get a vehicle history report.** Use a reputable service to check for inconsistent mileage, title transfers, salvage history, or registrations in multiple distant locations within a short period.
- **Inspect the VIN plates and labels.** Look for signs they've been removed, replaced, or tampered with, such as scratched rivets, mismatched fonts, fresh adhesive, or damaged labels.
- **Confirm the title is legitimate.** Make sure the seller's name matches the title and ask for identification if appropriate. Be cautious of sellers who refuse to meet in person or pressure you to complete the sale quickly.
- **Have the vehicle inspected.** A trusted mechanic or dealership may spot evidence that the vehicle's physical characteristics don't match what the VIN indicates.
- **Be wary of deals that seem unusually cheap.** A significantly below-market price is a common indicator of fraud.
- **Buy from reputable sources.** Licensed dealers generally have more oversight than private sellers, though fraud can occur anywhere.

If you suspect your VIN has been cloned:

1. Contact your local law enforcement agency and your state's motor vehicle agency.
2. Notify your insurance company.
3. Keep copies of your purchase documents, title, registration, and maintenance records.
4. If you are purchasing the vehicle, stop the transaction until the VIN can be verified.

Finally, while on the topic of auto theft, please be aware that auto-theft increases as the weather improves. Another rising trend involves a few criminals scouting neighborhoods for open cars. Once they are identified, a team emerges and steals all of the cars at once. Please keep your cars locked. Consider investing in a steering wheel club. Clubs are inexpensive deterrents that work. I have one in each vehicle. Remember that Albuquerque is a well-known auto-theft hot spot.

