

Catalytic Converter THEFT

While not a new phenomenon, 2019 saw a huge increase in the theft of these expensive devices. Chris Randall investigates why that is and what can be done about it.

▶ You will no doubt already be aware that catalytic converters, which are an essential part of a car's pollution-reducing equipment, are constructed using precious metals. In order to reduce the carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxide and hydrocarbons emitted by an engine the units use metals including platinum, palladium and rhodium to act as catalysts, and it's those materials that make them tempting to thieves.

According to a recent BBC report, the number of thefts appeared to be dropping between 2015 and 2017, but then recorded a sharp rise the following year. And figures now reveal that, in London alone, there were almost 2900 cases of theft in the first six months of 2019, compared to fewer than 1700 for the whole of 2018. That's an alarming statistic, and one fuelled by the rise in value of the metals contained within the converter. According to the British Metals Recycling Association a spike in values means rhodium is currently worth £4000 per ounce, with palladium at £1300 per ounce. More than enough reasons to explain why thefts are on the up, and it also appears that hybrid vehicles are proving especially vulnerable because their cleaner emissions limit the damage to converters, making them more tempting for unauthorised recycling.

It's not a problem that's limited to any particular manufacturer, but one car maker has become so concerned by the problem that they have decided to tackle it head on. Toyota say they have seen a 2000% increase in demand for replacements, and have identified specific models most affected. These include Hilux pickups and Lexus cars, but models that have become particular targets are the Gen 2 Prius (2004-2009), the Gen 3 Prius (2009-2016) and the 2012-2018 Auris hybrid. Their concerns have led them to reduce

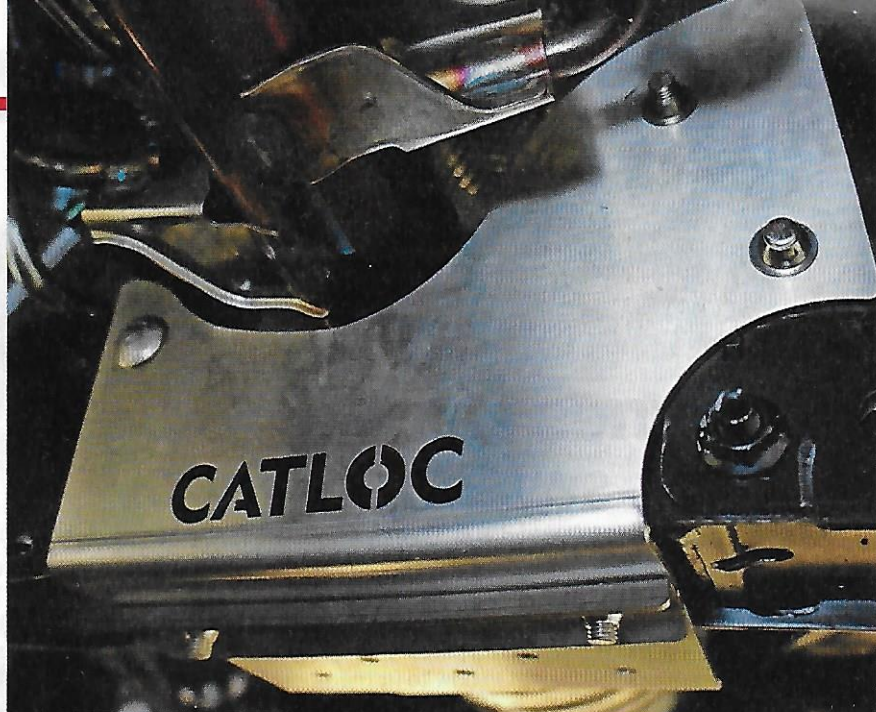
the price of replacement converters, selling them as a package with a device that aims to prevent theft from happening in the first place. That device is the Catloc, and with the package costing £950-£1050 depending on the Toyota model, the car maker says that the reduction in price means they make no profit from them. The Catloc can also be purchased separately at £250-£300 depending on model. The cost includes VAT, fitting at a Toyota dealer, and a three-year warranty.

Preventing theft

The Catloc device mentioned above has been developed by Oxfordshire-based specialist, On Board Defence. We spoke to their Managing Director, Paul Chase, who points out: "Nothing will stop a really determined thief from stealing a catalytic converter. It takes just a few minutes to remove one, so the aim of the Catloc is to make the thieves' job a lot harder and hopefully persuade them to move on to another target."

Catering for more than fifty different model variants means that developing a certified testing regime would be very challenging, but Paul is confident in the quality of the product and it certainly appears very tough. Consisting of a thick stainless steel plate that covers the catalytic converter, it is attached to the vehicle with secure fixings and a boron-alloy chain (a stainless-steel cable can also be used, although the chain is preferable for maximum security). There can be a bespoke fitting that comprises clamps and fittings for a specific vehicle model, or a universal fitting arrangement where the technician can choose the most appropriate method to attach the device to the vehicle.

Recognising that access may be required for other maintenance work, the kits are designed to be removed by a



dealer although the need to cut through anti-tamper fixings means it isn't straightforward; a re-fitting kit allows the Catloc to be put back afterwards.

So that's one answer, but On Board Defence has developed another product that can be used in conjunction with the Catloc and acts as a further deterrent. This is a marking system that sees an 'ultra-destruct' label (impossible to remove in one piece without damaging it) applied to the converter, followed by the application of an etching fluid that leaves a unique code on the unit. With the code and vehicle details registered with the company, it is easily identified by the police and proves that theft has taken place from a specific vehicle. Used by a variety of manufacturers, Mercedes-Benz is one that has taken advantage of the protection offered by the system and, as Paul explains, since 2012 all of its Sprinter vans imported to the UK have been marked in this way.

It is unlikely that the problem of catalytic converter theft is going away any time soon, so if you haven't done so already it's well worth considering investing in some form of protection system like those outlined above.