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THEFT FOR EXPORT

WHERE DO STOLEN CARS AND PARTS FROM THE UK AND EU END UP?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Car theft for export is significant but poorly understood in the UK and EU. Seizure data from the UK's National Vehicle Crime Intelligence Service (NaVCIS) from 2021 to 2024 indicated that 38.5% of vehicles stolen for export from the UK ended up in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and 20.1% in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These figures provided the starting point for this research, and the data is useful, but it derives from a small intelligence-led sample of port seizures and is likely to overstate the DRC's significance as a destination. Significant gaps remain in understanding where cars are shipped to, who is involved beyond the theft stage, how networks operate across borders, and what happens once vehicles reach destination markets. This report addresses those gaps, tracing the supply chain from theft in the UK and EU through to the DRC and UAE.

The evidence shows that theft for export is a specialist trade concentrated on high-value cars and parts. It is organized around small, interlinked networks of specialist actors – thieves, processors, logistics operators, document forgers – rather than hierarchical crime groups. Links between actors in source and destination markets are not well understood but appear to operate through kinship, diaspora and commercial ties. As with car theft more generally, theft for export is a low-risk, high-reward crime. Vehicle crime has been deprioritized across the UK and EU. Specialist capacity has diminished, intelligence is fragmented, and policing is often reactive. Despite some small and effective teams, there is an acute lack of national-level investigative and prosecutorial capacity.

Precise destinations and routes are difficult to establish from available data, but the broad direction of trade is to the Middle East, Africa and possibly the former Soviet states. These destinations largely mirror those of legitimate second-hand vehicle flows, shaped by similar factors: demand for reliable, durable vehicles, availability of parts and repair capacity, and affordability. Vehicles and parts move by sea through containerized cargo and roll-on/roll-off shipping, and by land, often with falsified documentation, along routes that are fluid and adapt quickly to enforcement pressure and market conditions.

In the UK and EU, official, commercial and criminal actors recognize that trading stolen goods is illicit and it carries serious legal consequences. In the DRC and UAE, cars and parts with stolen origins are traded openly, with buyers and sellers aware of their provenance but facing little legal risk as a result. The DRC is unlikely to be a major destination for cars stolen from the UK and EU. The market for premium vehicles is small, serves political, military and business elites, and is handled by importers, dealers and brokers operating through informal commercial networks. Low state capacity, pervasive informality and corruption mean stolen vehicles enter and integrate into the second-hand market with

little friction. Police and security figures benefit from the trade, and when seizures do occur, they are frequently reversed through high-level intervention.

The UAE functions primarily as a transit and redistribution hub rather than an end-market. Vehicles and parts enter through Dubai, pass through major logistics free zones, and are re-exported to markets across the Middle East, Africa and the former Soviet states. The system is organized around trade facilitation rather than provenance verification, and once goods clear customs with adequate documentation, they circulate on the same basis as licit imports. Cars and parts stolen from the UK and EU represent a small fraction of this trade but move through it with little scrutiny. Because political and economic elites benefit from the system, there is little political or commercial appetite to alter it. The UAE also functions as a laundering hub, with services to cut and reassemble vehicles and alter their identity, mainly to disguise their origins, which can affect onward sale prices. The parts trade may be more significant than that for whole vehicles, particularly for markets such as Iran where sanctions restrict access to legitimate supply.

This research found no evidence of major intersections between the stolen vehicle trade from the UK and EU and major illicit markets in the DRC or UAE. Beneficiaries of illicit markets in the DRC may buy stolen cars, but the actors and supply chains appear distinct. There is no evidence of links to armed groups in eastern DRC or to terrorist financing, and vehicles typically stolen for export are unlikely to serve as money-laundering vehicles because their individual unit value is too low.

The policy implications of these findings point towards source-country interventions rather than efforts focused on destination or transit markets. In the DRC and UAE, traditional forms of security assistance are unlikely to yield results because there are no political incentives to address the trade (and because of corruption in the DRC). European cooperation on intelligence-sharing and cross-border investigation could be strengthened but faces significant legal, political and technical constraints. The most effective interventions are those that reduce opportunities for theft and export in the UK and EU, where states have the capacity, legal authority and political incentive to act. Two principles should guide efforts. First, investigative and prosecutorial resources should prioritize targeting criminal actors who organize and direct theft at scale. Second, interventions do not need to dismantle large numbers of organized crime networks but to prosecute a number sufficient to alter the perception among criminals that it is a low-risk, high-reward activity. In the UK, a key step would be establishing a small national unit with consolidated intelligence and investigative and prosecutorial capacity, focused on the organizers and facilitators who have the most impact.

Methodology

This research was conducted between September 2025 and January 2026. The team undertook desk research and analysis of theft statistics provided by the UK's Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA), seizure data provided by NaVCIS and UN Comtrade data on international vehicle trade flows. The teams also interviewed police, insurance and vehicle tracking industry representatives, along with criminal actors involved in the illicit trade, including dealers and intermediaries. Fieldwork took place in the UK and the EU (September to December), the DRC and UAE (November to December) and in Kurdistan, northern Iraq (December to January).

The team used political economy analysis to examine the enabling environments in destination countries (such as the political and economic structures that shape opportunities for and constraints on illicit activity). It also analyzed criminal markets for car theft in the UK, Europe and destination

countries, as well those for major illicit activity in the DRC and UAE. Unlike some other forms of organized crime, stolen vehicles enter markets where legitimate trade in the same goods already exists. A key focus was therefore on examining how trade in stolen cars and parts intersects with trade within legitimate markets.

The analysis was built around developing a crime script for vehicle and parts theft from the UK and the EU to destination countries. A crime script is a step-by-step framework for mapping how a particular type of crime is carried out, from preparation through execution to disposal. For theft for export, the team traced four stages: (i) theft and initial processing in source countries; (ii) export logistics; (iii) market entry and integration in destination countries; and (iv) the distribution of proceeds.

This research has several limitations. Overall, there is little data specifically on theft for export. It is difficult to distinguish between vehicles stolen for export and those stolen for domestic consumption, or to identify actors specific to the export trade, within data that largely does not distinguish between the two. Intelligence and data also become more limited along the supply chain; more is known about theft and initial processing than about onward logistics or destination market dynamics. Nevertheless, by developing a crime script across these stages, the research aimed to address knowledge gaps and identify where interventions are best targeted, making explicit what is known at each stage versus what is inferred.

Key findings

- Theft for export is a specialist trade, which available data indicates is concentrated in high-value vehicles, although the true scale and composition of the export trade is poorly understood. It is currently under-policed, making it a low-risk, high-reward enterprise for organized criminals.
- The trade is networked and modular, not hierarchically organized. This applies throughout the supply chain, from UK thieves to dealers in destination markets.
- The broad direction of trade is to the Middle East and Africa. Former Soviet states may also be destinations, but they currently appear to be less prominent. Precise routes are fluid and adapt rapidly. The DRC is a niche destination; the UAE is a major transit and redistribution hub. The parts trade is significant alongside whole vehicles.
- Commercial actors dominate throughout the supply chain in the UK and the EU as well as along transit routes and in destination markets. Profits are distributed diffusely among these actors rather than concentrated in distinct criminal organizations.
- The distinction between licit and illicit weakens along the supply chain. In the UK and the EU, provenance matters and creates risk. In destination markets, provenance mainly affects price rather than risk of sanction, and it rarely deters trade.
- There is no significant intersection between the stolen vehicle trade and other illicit markets, armed groups, or terrorist financing in the destination countries examined. Trade with Iran, while subject to sanctions, appears to reflect modest opportunism rather than coordinated evasion.

CAR AND PARTS THEFT IN THE UK AND THE EU

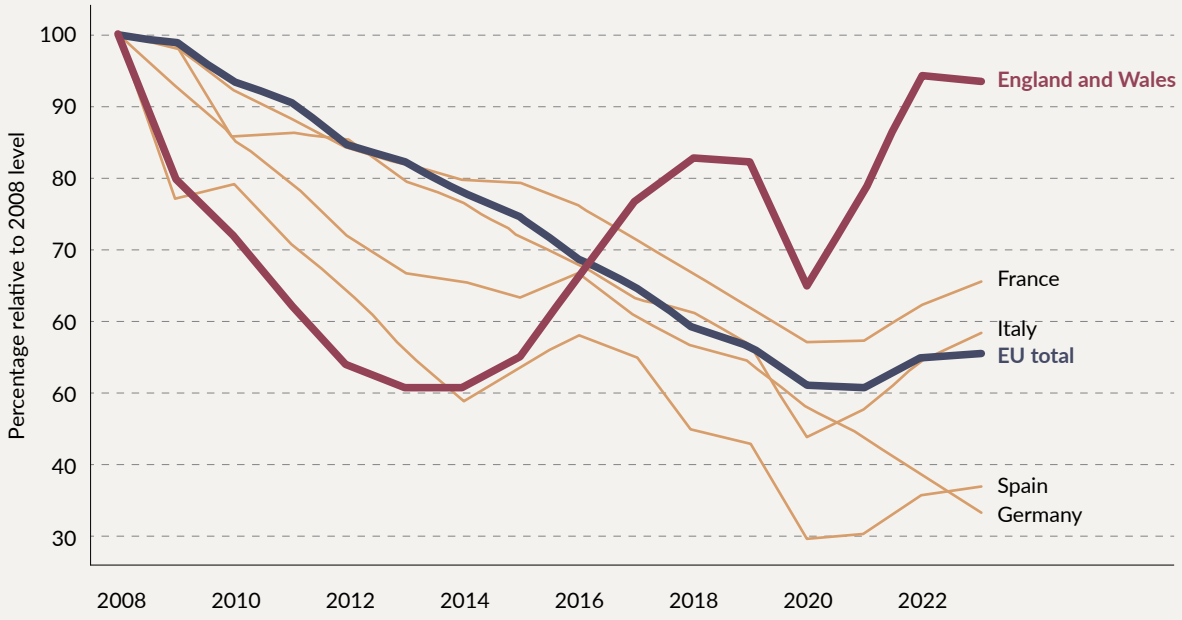
Car crime in the UK and EU is significant in scale, with almost 63 000 vehicles stolen in the UK alone in 2024.[1] But compared to other major Western European economies, where theft has fallen substantially over the past 15 years, the UK is an outlier: thefts have risen since 2013 and are now higher than a decade ago. In both settings, car theft has become predominantly organized. Stealing modern vehicles requires technical capabilities and the subsequent stages of storage, processing and distribution require coordination. The trade is not, however, controlled by hierarchical criminal groups. Rather, it is structured around networks of actors who maintain specialist roles and collaborate at different stages. Deprioritization of vehicle crime by police is a further commonality across the UK and other Western European nations.

Trends and patterns

There are no comparable datasets focusing specifically on car theft or theft of parts,[2] but data on recorded vehicle thefts provides at least an indication of the scale of the phenomenon that feeds theft for export.[3] Vehicle theft remains substantial in the UK. In England and Wales alone, police data shows that thefts fell sharply between 2002 and 2013, from more than 300 000 to a low of around 70 000, before resurging by almost 75%. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a temporary dip, but levels have rebounded sharply, reaching 122 000 in 2024.[4]

This pattern differs from EU states, where recorded vehicle theft has broadly declined steadily since 2008. Across the EU, thefts fell from around 845 000 in 2008 to 470 000 in 2023, a reduction of more than 40%.[5] Major economies such as Germany, Spain and Italy have undergone reductions of 40%–65% relative to 2008, compared to a mere 6% reduction in England and Wales over the same period.

The reasons for this divergence are beyond the scope of this study, but the data indicates that the UK is an outlier, as the only major Western European economy where vehicle theft is higher now than a decade ago. Other European countries have also seen post-pandemic increases (for example, thefts in Italy and Spain rose by 25% and 33% respectively between 2020 and 2023), but none have experienced as sharp or sustained a resurgence as England and Wales.



	2008	2023	Change
England and Wales	137 508	128 906	-6%
France	211 484	138 673	-34%
Italy	229 961	134 105	-42%
Germany	89 036	29 787	-67%
Spain	67 117	24 940	-63%
EU total	844 539	469 278	-44%

FIGURE 1 Recorded vehicle theft: UK compared with major EU economies, 2008–2023.

Organization of the trade

In contrast to data on recorded vehicle thefts, there are notable commonalities between the UK and EU countries in how car and parts theft is conducted and in who is carrying it out. Car and parts theft, particularly of high-value vehicles, is now increasingly driven by organized crime actors.[6] This is evident in the sophistication and coordination observed across each stage of the criminal process: from initial theft through to vehicle storage, onward distribution and the laundering of proceeds. While specific methods vary by country and between vehicle types and destination markets (domestic versus international), the consistent level of coordination across these stages indicates a substantive degree of organization.

In part, car theft has become more organized because more technical sophistication is required to steal a modern car than an older model. Throughout the 1990s, car theft typically involved offenders breaking into inadequately secured vehicles and hot-wiring them: starting the engine without a key by directly manipulating the ignition switch.[7] Since then, manufacturers and car thieves have been locked in an escalating cycle of innovation and adaptation, whereby the former introduces new barriers to theft (or develops new technologies that inadvertently affect these barriers) and the latter adapts their methods to circumvent them.[8]

The introduction of electronic engine immobilizers in the 1990s and early 2000s led to a gradual but substantial decline in theft rates across various countries.[9] However, the widespread adoption of keyless entry and remote start systems from the late 2000s onwards created fresh vulnerabilities. Criminals developed 'relay attacks', whereby one thief positions themselves, usually by a victim's front door, with a device that captures and amplifies the signal from a key fob inside the owner's home, extending its range to a thief with another device next to where the vehicle is parked and tricking it into believing the legitimate key is present.[10] Manufacturers have responded not only with software updates but also with measures such as improved encryption, power-saving or motion-sensing fobs, and over-the-air firmware patches.[11]

Nevertheless, car thieves have continued to adapt, including by exploiting on-board diagnostics ports to re-programme blank keys, deploying code grabbers that intercept and replicate key fob signals, and by developing controller area network (CAN) bus injection attacks. The latter method targets a vehicle's CAN – the internal communications system connecting all electronic components – by accessing it through exposed entry points such as headlights and sending false commands that deactivate the immobilizer.[12]

These techniques typically require specialist tools and know-how that are beyond the reach of most opportunistic offenders and that require criminals to be more organized. In the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, a large proportion of car thefts in the UK, Europe and other advanced economies were committed by young, local offenders motivated by convenience, thrill-seeking or a boost to peer status; they typically abandoned vehicles close to where they had stolen them.[13] As car theft increasingly came to be driven by electronic compromise methods in the early 2010s, the profile of offenders also changed, with high-value thefts now concentrated among a smaller group of offenders with the skills, equipment and network connections needed to defeat modern security systems.[14]

Many advanced tools, including relay devices, jammers and key programmers, can easily be bought or rented through online sellers,[15] while more complex hardware and bespoke software are sold by specialist technicians linked to organized groups.[16] Easy-to-access online videos may have lowered the barrier to using these devices,[17] but the development and distribution of the more advanced devices remain concentrated within (and only available to) organized criminal networks and specialist technicians.[18] At these early stages, cash payments are common and primary thieves often receive only a small share of the vehicle's eventual sale price.[19]

The increasing use of finance fraud to steal cars is also a problem common to the UK and the EU. With this method, false identification documents are used to obtain finance agreements for vehicles, mainly those of high value, which are then altered, resold or exported.[20] Police cases show that organized groups sometimes exploit weaknesses in motor finance verification systems in schemes that defraud millions of pounds.[21] However, the overall scale and patterns of fraud-based acquisition remain unclear, as there is no systematic data on the prevalence of this activity. In the UK, fraudulently acquired cars may be classified as fraud rather than vehicle offences, making it difficult to assess the true scale of the problem from data on thefts. Similar recording issues exist across European jurisdictions.[22]

The infrastructure and coordination required for storage and processing also indicate just how organized much modern car theft is. Immediately after theft, many cars enter a temporary 'cool-off' phase. They are left in public car parks, residential streets or warehouses, allowing offenders to see whether tracking devices are present and activated before they move the vehicles on.[23] Cars destined for parts markets are delivered to chop shops where desirable components are extracted for resale.[24]

These operations require permanent business sites with appropriate rented spaces and storage units; many such sites are equipped with signal jammers and are operated by distinct, specialized groups rather than the thieves themselves.[25] Cars intended for resale as whole units must also be delivered to processing sites where they undergo document fraud and identity alteration. This can include cloning vehicles – assigning a stolen vehicle the identity of a legitimate vehicle of the same make, model and colour – through methods such as requesting replacement documentation from vehicle licensing agencies, swapping registration plates, and removing or altering vehicle identification numbers.[26] Some cars destined for international export may undergo minimal processing beyond the initial storage phase, moving from theft to port within a single day. Other cars, especially those stolen for parts, may undergo extensive processing, involving elaborate document fraud operations or disassembly at chop shops. Operations within any of these scenarios demonstrate forward planning and risk management across criminal networks, and divisions of labour that indicate a degree of organization.

Overall, police and industry experts possess the most information on theft, storage and processing, but they possess less information on the distribution and trade of vehicles.[27] While multiple channels are known to exist, exactly how vehicles and parts move between criminal networks and legitimate markets – and how different actors connect across supply chains – remains poorly understood. How the profits from vehicle crime are distributed and laundered is the most poorly understood area and requires further research.[28]

Despite these knowledge gaps, the evidence that does exist further points to sophisticated levels of organization beyond initial theft and processing. Distribution and trade are known to occur through various channels. Online marketplaces such as eBay, Facebook Marketplace and classified sites serve as significant distribution channels for both parts and whole cars.[29] Both may also be sold by car

Car and parts theft for shipment overseas is increasingly driven by organized crime actors. *© John Stillwell/PA Images via Getty Images*

dealerships and salvage yards, some of which are complicit in the trade.[30] For international markets, cars and parts are loaded into shipping containers with falsified documentation, either misrepresenting container contents entirely or providing false vehicle registration and chassis numbers. In line with wider patterns in serious and organized crime, proceeds from vehicle theft are believed to be laundered through front businesses such as dealerships, repair shops and salvage yards, and in some cases through investments in real estate and other assets, often with the help of professional facilitators. However, the precise pathways and ultimate beneficiaries remain poorly understood.

Policing

A further commonality between the UK and EU countries is that vehicle theft has been deprioritized by police across these jurisdictions. In the UK, long-term declines in vehicle crime and the growing demands of tackling higher-harm offence types have led forces to redeploy resources elsewhere, resulting in specialist vehicle crime units and technical expertise diminishing.[31]

The response is also structurally fragmented. Although substantial intelligence is generated on theft patterns, offenders and export routes, it sits across 43 forces, ports, insurers, manufacturers and recovery firms, and it is rarely consolidated or coordinated.[32] The capacity to investigate and prosecute organized offenders remains limited. NaVCIS and Opal, the UK's national intelligence lead for serious organized acquisitive crime, represent important efforts to create a more coherent response, and both have contributed to major operations. But they also operate under constraints. Until a year ago, Opal had only a single analyst responsible for national-level analysis and NaVCIS's three or four patrol officers currently only cover four ports in the south of England.[33] The intelligence generated by NaVCIS and other police units is often not developed into investigations or prosecutions.[34] Similarly, while tracking companies often possess very good data (for example, on sites regularly used for 'cooling off' or processing vehicles) and there is sharing with police, it rarely leads to investigations or prosecutions.[35] The National Vehicle Crime Reduction Partnership, a UK-wide initiative that brings together police, the Home Office and vehicle-industry partners to coordinate action to reduce vehicle theft, may have the potential to support the development and implementation of more strategic responses to vehicle crime, but it is small and has limited funding.[36] More broadly, the UK lacks a national coordination mechanism capable of tackling complex criminal networks involved in vehicle crime, and much of the available intelligence cannot be translated into sustained investigations or action against high-level offenders.[37]

Similar dynamics are visible across Europe. A 2023 study of six countries highlights systematic low prioritization, limited specialist capability, weak cross-border cooperation and poor oversight of downstream markets such as garages and scrap dealers, all exacerbated by the ease with which stolen vehicles can be moved across Schengen borders.[38] While intelligence exists, it is siloed and rarely integrated into a coordinated strategy, allowing organized groups to operate at scale with limited disruption. Policing across the UK and the EU is therefore largely reactive and focused on recovering vehicles, generating limited deterrence. Interviews with offenders reinforce this picture, with thieves describing vehicle crime as a low-risk offence with little expectation of detection or meaningful sanction.[39] Several police professionals interviewed for this project also highlighted that vehicle crime offers opportunities to accrue significant wealth without the risks that apply to other criminal markets, such as drug trafficking.[40] Overall, vehicle theft is therefore widely seen by criminal actors throughout the supply chain and police alike as low risk and high reward.

THEFT FOR EXPORT

As a component of car and parts theft, theft for export remains poorly understood. It is well established that stolen cars and parts broadly follow the trade flows of second-hand vehicles, from the UK and the EU towards the Middle East, Africa and former Soviet Union. But there is limited knowledge of the specific routes taken, the actors who consolidate and export stolen goods, and how networks in the UK and EU connect to buyers overseas.[41] By examining both legitimate and illicit trade patterns and drawing on interviews with key actors, this section examines these gaps.

Scale and composition

There is little data specifically on theft for export. However, seizure data collected by NaVCIS in the UK provides some indications, as seizures of cars and parts at ports are inherently destined for export. The data indicates that the export trade is specialist and organized. From 2021 to 2024, 52% of vehicles intercepted were premium and luxury models and 79% were SUVs.[42] NaVCIS only seized a handful of models in the top three most stolen cars nationally.[43] This suggests that theft for export targets specific, high-demand vehicle categories rather than the mass market. However, as described above, NaVCIS's coverage is limited to four container ports and, since 2024, an officer placed in Dover, the UK's major roll-on/roll-off port.

It is possible that significant volumes of lower-value vehicles are being stripped for parts and exported undetected.[44] If so, the composition of the export trade may be considerably broader than seizure data indicates. The concentration on higher-value vehicles in seizure data is consistent with available European data, however. There is no comparable seizure dataset for continental Europe[45] and most available insights derive from overall theft statistics and interviews with police and industry representatives. These sources indicate that export-oriented theft is focused on premium as well as higher-end SUVs and some hybrid models.[46]

NaVCIS data is less informative on the volume of theft for export. Recovery efforts are largely focused on containers. The number of cars seized remains in the low hundreds annually, which suggests that the bulk of vehicles stolen for export are not being intercepted, given that tens of thousands of vehicles are stolen each year.

To estimate the potential scale of theft for export, this project used Python[47] to identify the top 11 models appearing in NaVCIS seizures[48] and compare this against DVLA theft records.[49] The resulting

Year	Total cars stolen (national UK/ DVLA data)	Top 11 stolen models seized by NaVCIS by volume (from DVLA data)	% of national theft represented by models most commonly seized by NaVCIS
2023	62 974	7 733	12.3%
2024	65 905	8 182	12.4%

FIGURE 2 Cars stolen in the UK in 2023 and 2024.
SOURCES: DVLA; NaVCIS

figure is an approximate indication only. It assumes that all thefts of these models are export-oriented, which is unlikely, and it cannot account for models stolen for export that do not appear prominently in seizure data. With those caveats, the top 11 models seized by NaVCIS represent approximately 12% of total national car theft.

In other words, 12% of total national car theft consists of models known to be popular for theft for export. If it is also taken as indicative of the share of theft that is export-oriented, it would imply that around 8 000 vehicles per year are stolen for export.[50] This further indicates that the vast majority of vehicles stolen for export are reaching their destinations.

Destinations

Seizure data is also potentially misleading on the ultimate destinations of cars stolen for export. NaVCIS does not report its data as representative of the total trade in theft for export, but in 2025 numerous media outlets[51] cited NaVCIS figures indicating that the top two destinations for stolen vehicles were the DRC (38.5%) and the UAE (20.1%), followed by Cyprus (6.7%), Jamaica (5.7%) and Georgia (5.1%).[52]

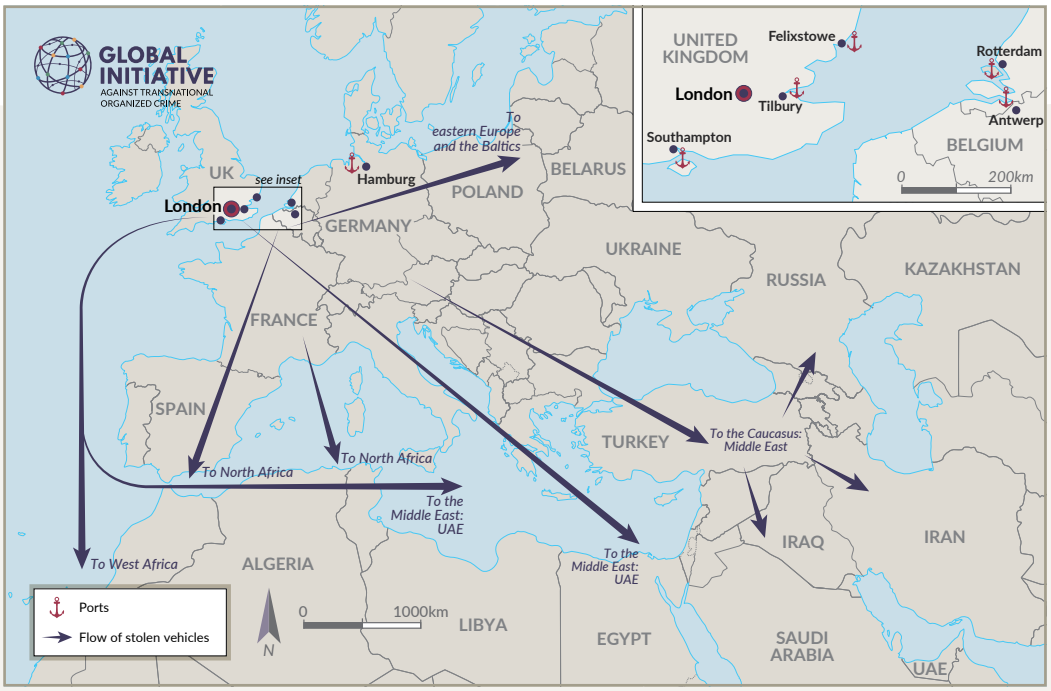


FIGURE 3 Flows of stolen vehicles from the EU and UK.

As described above, however, these statistics are drawn from a small sample and are unlikely to be representative of the destinations of the full volume of theft for export.

The figures are broadly consistent with the direction of the trade, which is reasonably well established in research on stolen vehicles and shaped largely by supply and demand.[53] Stolen vehicles from the UK and the EU flow to markets where there is demand for reliable, durable vehicles at lower price points, primarily in the Middle East, Africa and, to a lesser extent, the former Soviet Union. This mirrors legitimate second-hand vehicle flows.[54] Buyers in these regions typically prioritize cost, durability and availability of spare parts over provenance, and large informal repair sectors make European and Japanese models particularly attractive.[55]

The main channels are maritime corridors from north-western Europe, including ports such as Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg, to West Africa, North Africa and the Gulf, with some overland movement into eastern and south-eastern Europe,[56] although the latter category may now be less prominent given the conflict in Ukraine and associated sanctions on Russia. Precise routes are difficult to determine, however, as traffickers adapt rapidly to enforcement pressure, market conditions and geopolitical shifts. With recorded data focusing mostly on theft or interception rather than onward transit, it is difficult to track shifts in these flows.[57]

In the absence of reliable data on the volume of theft for export, it is not possible to assess destination shares fully. However, analysis of trade data reinforces claims about the broad direction of travel and also indicates that the DRC is unlikely to be a major destination for cars and parts stolen from the UK. Based on UN Comtrade customs data on recorded vehicle imports and exports for 2023, the UAE recorded approximately US$8.2 billion in vehicle exports and roughly 104 times more vehicle imports than the DRC. DRC exports were negligible.[58] This data captures the value of trade moving

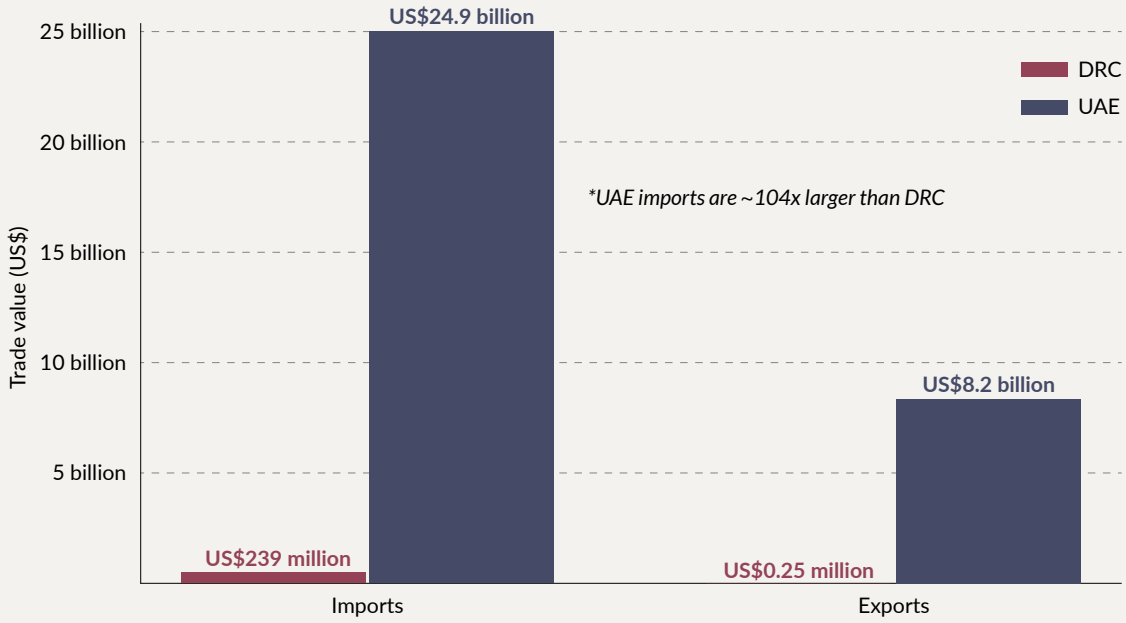


FIGURE 4 Recorded vehicle trade, DRC and UAE.

SOURCE: UN Comtrade, HS6 passenger vehicles and light goods

through formal channels and is subject to under-recording and misclassification, but it provides a useful indication of destinations and relative scale.

The data indicates that the UAE is a major hub, which is consistent with interview evidence that vehicles entering the Gulf are frequently re-exported onwards to Africa, the former Soviet Union and elsewhere in the Middle East. If the true volume of theft for export in the UK is in the low hundreds, the DRC may indeed be a prominent destination. But if, as the earlier analysis suggests, the export of stolen vehicles from the UK is instead several thousand vehicles per year, the DRC market is simply too small for the high-value cars typical of thefts for export detected in seizures. Moreover, it is also unlikely to be a redistribution hub, as it is geographically distant from major car markets in sub-Saharan Africa (and the infrastructure and logistics in place to reach them is poor).

Actors and networks

Theft for export, like car theft more broadly, is organized around networks rather than hierarchically structured criminal organizations. It involves a range of commercial actors, and those involved in the trade typically know their immediate contacts but not the wider network. Different groups collaborate at different stages of the supply chain.

A 2025 case brought by Kent and Essex Police illustrates this pattern. The operation targeted a network of international car thieves and smugglers estimated to have stolen vehicles worth more than £2.8 million. Seven men were jailed.[59] The case involved actors from different communities – including people of South Asian descent, Georgians and other nationalities – operating at different stages of the chain: transport, delivery, processing and organization.

This composition suggests that ethnic or family ties linked actors together at various nodes, but the network as a whole was not controlled by a single group. Interviews conducted for this project indicate that this reflects the broader picture of theft for export.

One tracking company representative described a recently disrupted chop shop operation involving Irish Travellers, Lithuanians and other groups working together, with different elements responsible for theft, processing and onward movement.[60] A police contact similarly reported that, in cases they had examined, thieves were generally UK-based, chop shops were often run by Lithuanian nationals and the main exporters had links to the UAE.[61] Another tracking company showed researchers for this project a graphical map with an overlay of the locations of stolen vehicles they had tracked. Numerous stolen vehicles were tracked to the same locations over time, indicative of repeat patterns and suggesting that certain commercial sites are used systematically.[62] These accounts are consistent with a networked, modular trade in which coordination occurs through trusted intermediaries rather than through vertically integrated criminal organizations.

Actors who operate in the legitimate commercial trade are prominent in theft for export, particularly at the processing and logistics stages, where they play an important role in facilitating the movement of stolen vehicles and parts through legitimate trade infrastructure. There are some indications that this involvement begins at the point of theft, with individuals within the motor industry, such as employees in car showrooms or diagnostic services, providing information to thieves on specific high-value models.[63] There is more evidence, however, on the role of commercial actors in processing. As with car theft in general, this stage relies on the relative anonymity of industrial estates and the largely unregulated nature of the car repair sector.[64] In one recent case, police investigators discovered

stolen vehicles and parts wrapped and ready for international shipment in an industrial unit operating behind the facade of a legitimate business.[65]

A relatively recent trend has been the exploitation of commercial finance and rental systems. By using fraudulent identification to lease premium vehicles, those involved in the trade can move them through ports on genuine plates before a theft is even registered, exploiting weak verification processes in the rental sector.[66] False plates are also used to avoid detection at ports by automatic number plate recognition systems, which flag vehicles recorded as stolen.[67]

Commercial actors also play a key role at the logistics stage. Exportation relies on the services of freight forwarders, shipping agents and clearing houses to book containers and manage manifests. This phase is poorly regulated.[68] Official checks and potential red flags can be avoided by booking containers using burner phones and false identities, and by submitting manifests that do not reflect actual contents.[69] Commercial intermediaries provide the administrative cover necessary for the trade, allowing stolen vehicles to be containerized at dispersed locations before being integrated into the high-volume flow of legitimate exports.

The physical movement of goods across borders is further facilitated by the use of commercial transport contractors and haulage networks. Those involved in the trade piggyback on established freight routes, using third-party haulers to move vehicles and parts across the continent. They also deploy tactics to reduce the likelihood of detection. In one example, UK-registered tractor units[70] were used to move trailers through domestic ports, avoiding the attention that foreign-registered heavy goods vehicles can attract, before swapping to Eastern European contractors for the onward journey.[71]

How profits from theft for export are distributed remains poorly understood. The available evidence suggests that proceeds are spread across the various actors involved at each stage, including thieves, processors, logistics operators and intermediaries, rather than flowing to a single controlling organization.[72] What happens once vehicles and parts reach destination markets, who the key actors are there and how stolen goods are integrated into local economies is similarly not well known. The following sections examine these dynamics in more detail, drawing on fieldwork in the DRC and UAE.

INTEGRATION OF STOLEN CARS AND PARTS INTO THE DRC AND UAE

The DRC and UAE occupy different positions in the supply chain for cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU. As indicated above, it is unlikely that the DRC is a major destination, as the car market for premium vehicles and SUVs is too small. Overall car ownership is very low and demand for luxury vehicles is concentrated among a small wealthy elite, including senior officials, military officers and business figures, who have the means to pay for cars. The UAE, by contrast, is a major re-exportation hub. Dubai's port and free trade zone infrastructure handle vast volumes of trade; stolen goods from the UK and the EU form a small part of that flow, benefiting from a system orientated towards optimizing speed, volume and turnover, with minimal checks on goods' origins.

Three findings can be drawn from the two cases. First, the line between legitimate and illegitimate trade, which is distinct in source countries, blurs as goods move along the supply chain. In the UK and the EU, a vehicle's history is of more consequence in transactions. Stolen cars need laundering before they can be sold openly, and trade in them exposes those involved to legal consequences. That logic does not hold further down the supply chain. In destination and transit markets, illicit origins may depress prices but they do not translate into meaningful enforcement risk. Commercial and informal actors move licit and illicit goods through similar relationships, logistics and sales mechanisms. Second, this pattern is shaped by what states choose (or are able) to monitor and penalize. In the DRC, weak institutional capacity, endemic corruption and pervasive informality mean stolen vehicles slot into the second-hand market without significant friction. In the UAE, the regulatory framework prioritizes the smooth movement of goods. Once a shipment clears customs with adequate paperwork, illicit goods can be traded on much the same basis as licit goods.

Third, this research found no significant overlap between trade in stolen cars and parts and other illicit economies in either country. In the DRC, individuals who profit from illicit mining, smuggling or predatory governance may purchase stolen vehicles, but they do not appear to use them in transactions, and trade in stolen vehicles is largely distinct from trade in other illicit commodities. In addition, this research did not find any indication that stolen cars and parts reach armed groups in eastern DRC or contribute to terrorist financing. In the UAE, the same permissive trading environment supports illicit flows in other commodities, including gold, tobacco and arms, but the networks and actors appear

distinct. There are suggestions that high-value supercars may serve as laundering channels, but the mainstream models stolen from the UK and the EU are worth too little per unit to be practical for that purpose. These dynamics are explored in more detail in the country sections below.

The DRC

The DRC absorbs a small volume of cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU, concentrated on premium SUVs. Buyers are drawn from the country's political, military and business elites. Vehicles enter by multiple routes serving geographically distinct markets. The western route through the Port of Matadi supplies Kinshasa, while southern and eastern markets draw from separate supply chains through East Africa. This research focused primarily on the western route.

Despite regional distinctions, the trade shares core characteristics across the country. Each market is small, caters to wealthy buyers and operates within a largely informal commercial environment. Where the state is present, it functions less as a barrier to illicit trade than as a participant in it. Customs officials, transport authorities and registration agencies routinely facilitate entry and laundering of stolen vehicles in exchange for bribes, while enforcement efforts are neutralized through high-level intervention. The actors facilitating the trade include importers, dealers, middlemen and officials embedded at each stage. Their connections to exporters in the UK and the EU remain less clear, but sources identified Congolese networks in France, Belgium, the UK and Canada as facilitating the trade.

The enabling environment

When cars and parts stolen from the UK and EU enter the DRC, they enter a context shaped by extractive politics, conflict and limited state capacity. Colonial rule under Belgium established a highly centralized and extractive state, a model reinforced under Mobutu Sese Seko (1965–1997).[73] His overthrow by a Rwandan-backed campaign in 1997 triggered a sequence of conflicts that drew in multiple African states and left the country effectively partitioned until a negotiated settlement in

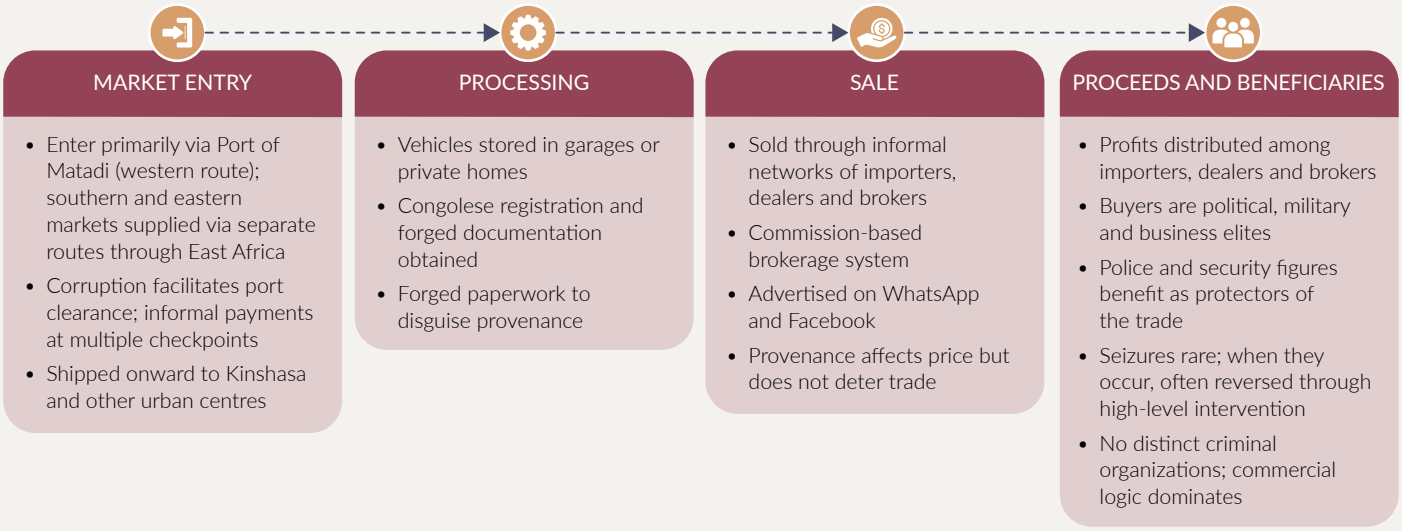


FIGURE 5 Crime script: The Democratic Republic of Congo.

2002–2003.[74] That settlement integrated former belligerents into transitional institutions and the army, but its deeper legacy was to entrench a politics of elite rule and state capture. [75]

Under Joseph Kabila (2001–2019), a narrow political class consolidated control over the state and its revenues, sustained by patronage, a dominant presidency and institutions with weak accountability.[76] Elections were held but grew increasingly flawed, while armed violence in the east persisted, albeit at lower intensity than during the wars.[77] A negotiated deal between Kabila and opposition leader Félix Tshisekedi in 2019 produced both the country's first transfer of executive power and the first leader drawn from a historically civilian opposition party.[78] Yet the structural features of Congolese politics have persisted: a dominant presidency, institutions beset by poor accountability and a political system in which access to power depends on coalition-building through the distribution of state resources and positions.[79] Conflict in the eastern provinces has also intensified sharply since late 2021, when the M23 – a Rwandan-backed rebel movement that had been militarily defeated and dormant since 2013 – resumed its campaign and rapidly expanded its territorial control, primarily in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu.[80]

These political and conflict conditions generate an environment highly conducive to illicit activity. The vast majority of research focuses on the conflict-affected eastern provinces, where illicit activity constitutes part of a conflict economy shaped by the near absence or malfunction of state authority and centred on the extraction and smuggling of natural resources.[81] The DRC is home to the world's second-largest rainforest and substantial mineral deposits, and the exploitation of these resources sustains a complex array of armed actors.[82] There is also competition between neighbouring and other countries over these resources.

Illegal logging and charcoal production generate considerable revenue, particularly in North Kivu, where armed groups harvest timber from protected areas such as Virunga National Park for export via Uganda and Rwanda.[83] Gold is primarily extracted through informal artisanal and small-scale mining.[84] Armed groups and the DRC's military tax and extort mining operations, and at times participate directly in extraction. The DRC's military often collaborates with nearby militias through revenue-sharing arrangements.[85]

Once extracted, the vast majority of this gold is smuggled by criminal intermediaries – such as traders, brokers and exporters – undeclared through transit hubs in Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi before it reaches international markets, principally the UAE.[86] Trade in strategic minerals including coltan follows similar patterns.[87] The extraction economy also drives extensive human exploitation, including forced labour in artisanal mines, sexual exploitation and the recruitment of child soldiers.[88] Over 150 armed groups operate in the region, ranging from M23 and state actors to ethnically mobilized militias and community self-defence forces.[89] These groups differ in origins and stated purposes, but over time illegal predation has become a central mode of operation, in many cases supplanting the original rationale for their formation.[90] Whether through direct extraction, systematic taxation and extortion at roadblocks, or control of trade routes, the conflict economy functions as a mechanism for extracting rents from territory and the population.[91] Kidnapping for ransom has also emerged as a significant revenue source for both armed groups and elements of the DRC's army.[92]

There is much less research on illicit activity in other parts of the DRC compared to the east. Existing research indicates that the state has greater control over its territory elsewhere, yet it remains predatory, simultaneously complicit in illicit activity and ineffective at combatting it.[93] For example, research on the southern provinces of Lualaba and Haut-Katanga suggests a 'quasi-industrial' scale of elite

predation, driven by elite 'cartels.' Reports allege that networks of political figures, military officers and foreign intermediaries orchestrate the mass extraction of cobalt and copper from suspended or active concessions, utilizing heavy machinery and hundreds of trucks rather than relying solely on artisanal labour. This predation is reportedly facilitated by the Republican Guard and allegedly involves members of President Felix Tshisekedi's family.[94]

In Kinshasa – and more recently in other urban centres such as Lubumbashi, Matadi, Mbandaka and Kikwit – illicit activity and insecurity are increasingly attributed to youth gangs known as 'Kulunas'. A product of the state's weak presence and urban poverty, these gangs have developed a symbiotic relationship with predatory state actors. Gangs often operate in partnership with police, whereby officers known as 'Kulunas in uniform' provide weapons, protection and release from custody in exchange for a share of criminal proceeds. Furthermore, these gangs serve as a contractable workforce for political elites, acting as 'political mercenaries' hired to provide security or intimidate rivals during election cycles.[95]

Alongside the resource extraction and urban crime detailed above, the DRC is beset by pervasive financial crimes, wildlife trafficking and trade in counterfeit goods, particularly pharmaceuticals and cigarettes.[96] These are facilitated by a combination of low state capacity and, where the state is present, predatory behaviour by those in positions of authority. Legal and regulatory frameworks exist but are routinely circumvented as state agents, private sector actors and criminal networks exploit weak enforcement, porous borders and institutions that can be co-opted through bribery or political connections.[97] This dynamic operates at multiple levels: from police officers partnering with street gangs, to customs officials facilitating smuggling through ports and airports, to senior political figures and military officers profiting from high-level illicit schemes.[98] The result is an environment in which the distinction between licit and illicit economic activity is blurred, and in which illicit trade encounters few effective barriers from state authorities.

The trade in stolen cars and parts

Against this backdrop, how do vehicles and parts stolen from the UK and the EU enter and circulate within the DRC? The evidence gathered for this project indicates that the trade is small in scale but embedded in the country's informal economy, serving a niche market for premium vehicles that exists mostly in Kinshasa. What follows traces supply chains from entry to sale: the routes and ports through which vehicles arrive, the mechanisms by which they are processed and laundered, the markets and actors through which they are sold, and the buyers and protectors who sustain demand. The analysis is mainly drawn from an examination of the integration of cars and parts stolen from the UK/Europe into the western Kinshasa market, although the research team also examined integration of stolen cars and parts in the south and east. This latter market is largely separate from markets in the west.

There is little reliable data on the market overall or on imports, especially in relation to the second-hand market, which is far larger than the market for new cars. UN Comtrade trade statistics do not distinguish new from used vehicles, but report around US$197 million worth of car imports in 2023,[99] with about 44% arriving from the UAE and about 28% from Japan. In a country where an estimated 97.7% of people lived below the international poverty line of US$6.85 per person per day,[100] car ownership is low relative to population size and cars are used predominantly for taxi services rather than private travel. One 2021 Kinshasa survey found that only 7.6% of respondents reported using private vehicles or metered taxis as their main mode of transport, compared with 30.2% who rely on sedan taxis (known as 'juana' locally),[101] 30.3% on minibus taxis, 16.7% on city buses and 12.3% on

motorcycle taxis.[102] In rural areas, private car use is even more limited.[103] Motorcycles and walking are the primary modes of transportation.

Car ownership is largely concentrated among high-ranking commercial personnel, government officials and wider urban elites originating from local areas. The car market is overwhelmingly dominated by second-hand cars and, as in other parts of Africa, the robustness of models and availability of parts are the prime drivers of purchasing decisions. The lower value end of the market relies on older vehicles. By contrast, most cars and parts stolen for export from the UK and the EU supply much smaller markets that centre on newer premium SUVs.[104] These models are way beyond the means of the vast majority of Congolese car owners, so the primary buyers of these vehicles are political, military and business elites.[105] From the point of sale to final registration, there is little effective regulation throughout either the lower- or upper-value markets, while many official steps, from customs duties to licence plate issuance, can be bypassed through bribery or negotiation.[106] The use of front companies and falsified documentation is also commonplace, not only to evade taxes and undercut competitors, but also to secure the necessary permissions and approvals to facilitate sales and integrate illicit vehicles into the economy.[107] The line between legitimate trade in cars and illicit activity is therefore often very blurred.

In Kinshasa, premium models arrive either directly from North America, Europe and Japan or are shipped via the UAE. Congolese police and local car industry sources identified France, Belgium, the UK and Canada as the primary origins for illicit imports.[108] Several European ports are utilized in the trade, including Antwerp, where established Congolese criminal networks operate within the port.[109] A significant volume of the broader automotive market is supplied via the UAE, both by sea and land routes, with the UAE functioning largely as a redistribution hub for vehicles from developed economies.[110] Several interviewees acknowledged that cars imported directly from North America and Europe were widely known to be stolen, whereas the provenance of those imported from the UAE was rarely discussed, other than in terms of the original country of origin.[111] The western Port of Matadi is a key entry point for high-value vehicles, which mainly arrive in containers, and are

A private car used as a taxi navigates traffic in Kinshasa, 2024. In the DRC, car ownership is low and cars are used predominantly for taxi services rather than private travel. *© Hardy Bope/AFP via Getty Images*

transported approximately 300 kilometres by road to Kinshasa. While some stolen cars enter the Kinshasa market by land routes (e.g., from South Africa, via Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia), the flow of luxury models from Europe and North America relies almost exclusively on Matadi as the country's sole major operational port.[112]

In Lubumbashi, located in the south near the border with Zambia, however, most luxury vehicles enter via East Africa. A much smaller number come from South Africa, but most arrive by sea – from the UAE and Asia – to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and are transported to the DRC via Zambia.[113] The vehicles are sold locally, mainly to public officials and Chinese actors in the mining sector.[114] The two markets are generally separate from each other. Lubumbashi is approximately 2 200–2 300 kilometres by road from Kinshasa and it is easier for actors seeking stolen cars in either location to turn to the respective eastern and western supply chains rather than incur the costs and challenges involved in trying to traverse the distance.

In the west, importers of stolen vehicles rely on a combination of technical concealment and, mainly, corruption to navigate the port. Batteries are routinely disconnected and Global Positioning System units removed prior to shipment, [115] mainly to disrupt tracking prior to arrival rather than once a car arrives in the DRC. Corruption may involve bribing officials to ensure containers clear the port without being opened, allowing for 'rapid clearance' without physical checks.[116] In other instances, corruption is more brazenly institutional: one source reported that staff at ONATRA (the national transport office) actively facilitate the trade by providing false data to police and allowing mechanics access to restricted port storage areas to scrub vehicle identities before customs processing.[117]

In Lubumbashi, most premium and luxury vehicles enter illegally through the border post at Mukambo to avoid Kasumbalesa, which is much more closely monitored. Drivers either bribe customs officers or use intermediaries with connections in the army or the senior civil service to avoid paying customs duties.[118] These duties can be extremely expensive. Importing a luxury SUV, for example, can cost

FIGURE 6 Flows of stolen vehicles to the DRC.

between US$8 000 and US$9 000, but these duties are widely avoided through corruption,[119] as they are in the east.[120] One contact reported a different scheme to avoid paying customs duties. Traffickers use specialized garages located along the Tanzania–Zambia border (in Tunduma) to dismantle the vehicles ahead of entry to the DRC and import only the parts, which are subject to lower duties. The vehicles are later reassembled in specialized garages in Lubumbashi.[121]

Once vehicles have cleared the port in the west, they often undergo further processing before entering the open market. This may involve a variety of different steps depending on the model and its provenance. Some cars are sent to private homes or clandestine garages, where specialists work to sanitize the vehicle's identity by altering chassis numbers, removing GPS trackers that remained in place after shipment and reconnecting power systems disabled during transit to prepare the car for sale.[122] Other cars, including legitimate or grey market imports from Dubai, may undergo cosmetic 'facelifting', a process whereby older vehicles are physically modified with newer parts (such as headlights and bumpers) to inflate their resale value and obscure their true age.[123] To enter the formal economy, stolen cars typically undergo 'administrative laundering', where intermediaries bribe corrupt officials at agencies such as the DGI (Tax) or DGRAD (Revenue) to obtain forged registration documents and licence plates.[124] This service, cited by one source as costing approximately US$2 000, effectively legalizes the vehicle's status, allowing it to circulate freely.[125] A freight forwarder over the border in Burundi described a similar set of processes to launder vehicles from the east ready for sale. Chassis numbers are altered and new documents prepared in Dar es Salaam, while border and customs officials in Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC along the supply route are also involved in the illicit trade, either allowing stolen vehicles to pass or directly importing vehicles themselves for resale.[126]

Processed vehicles are integrated into sales channels through diverse mechanisms. Both stolen and legitimately imported premium models are sold at major second-hand car markets in Kinshasa, such as the Boulevard du 30 Juin, as well as in hotel parking lots.[127] The GI-TOC's field investigations also identified Boulevard Triomphal, Sendwe Boulevard, Sayo Bridge and Parc des Évolués as some of the main locations where second-hand vehicles are displayed. Within these spaces, commission-based brokerage is common, with agents renting display space to sell on behalf of importers for a fixed cut without ever taking ownership of the vehicle. [128] Sellers market their inventory through informal channels like WhatsApp and word-of-mouth.[129] In contrast, other sources described a high-risk, high-reward model where re-sellers take ownership of the inventory to capture much of the profit margin, reporting gains of up to US$20 000 per stolen luxury vehicle.[130] Additionally, some elites reportedly bypass local display markets entirely, utilizing intermediaries to order directly from contacts in Europe to secure high-value vehicles, such as premium models and SUVs.[131] Overall, the supply chain primarily consists of a series of network relationships between commercial actors, such as importers, brokers and re-sellers. Communicating through WhatsApp, these actors mainly source vehicles through Congolese diasporas (e.g. in Europe and the UAE) who have their own connections to local car thieves and traders in stolen cars and parts.[132] Almost all sales are transacted in cash.[133]

One high-level reseller in Kinshasa candidly admitted that his primary clientele includes ministers, army officers and other elite figures,[134] a trend corroborated by other sources who link demand to wealthy elites.[135] Buyers are often not unsuspecting victims of fraud; one lawmaker allegedly bought a car from a reseller knowing that they were purchasing a stolen vehicle, but was confident that their powerful associates would provide a shield of impunity against legal consequences.[136] Other interviewees discussed the direct involvement of political elites in the trade in stolen vehicles, including one who was cited as a financial backer for a reseller and another who allegedly owns a car lot where

stolen vehicles were seized.[137] One confidential source reported that police investigations into stolen vehicles, in collaboration with INTERPOL, even led to the discovery of a stolen vehicle at the home of a former minister.[138] In both the south and east of the country, high-value cars are almost exclusively the preserve of officials in government, the military and the mining industry.[139]

With police and security elites benefitting from and participating in the trade, there is little effective policing to address it. When seizures do occur, they are often reversed through high-level interference. One confidential source, for example, described receiving direct calls from very senior military and police officials demanding the return of seized vehicles.[140] A re-seller also reported that owners of confiscated stolen cars can pay approximately US$2 000–US$3 000 to retrieve them immediately,[141] rendering police operations ineffective. Investigations are actively undermined when they conflict with the interests of high-ranking political or security officials. In one reported case, an investigator who works at the INTERPOL National Central Bureau in Kinshasa received death threats and was even arrested after uncovering the involvement of senior police officers and other officials in the trade of stolen vehicles.[142] Investigators who possess integrity are effectively paralyzed or even punished, as their superiors, who are sometimes linked to illicit networks, pressure them to cease inquiries.

The conflict in the east does not appear to generate a substantive market for cars and parts stolen for export from the UK and the EU, as very few armed groups have the resources to be able to afford these types of vehicles. The vast majority of groups, including the Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamic State-linked armed group, operate in small groups hidden in forests, from which they occasionally emerge for targeted operations and resupply. Their movements are by motorcycle or on foot rather than in 4x4 vehicles. Groups such as the M23, externally backed by the Rwandan government, and the Wazalendo ('patriot') and Nduma Defence of Congo militias, backed by the DRC government,[143] do have access to premium SUVs. This project was unable to identify exactly where these armed groups source these vehicles but it is highly likely that they do so from eastern rather than western supply chains. Interviewees reported that vehicles reached eastern localities via Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda. Countries of origin include Japan, the US, Europe, China and the UAE. The M23-held city of Goma is 2 700–3 000 kilometres from Matadi compared to approximately 1 600 kilometres from Dar es Salaam. Additionally, the roads from East Africa to eastern DRC are better than those that run from eastern DRC to Matadi. In the case of the M23, which controls large areas of North and South Kivu, the group taxes imported vehicles as part of its broader revenue extraction from economic activity in the territories it holds.

This research found no evidence that the stolen vehicle trade from the UK and the EU plays a significant functional role in other illicit economies in the DRC. Those economies are centred on the extraction and smuggling of natural resources and involve senior officials, military and security personnel, armed groups and commercial and criminal intermediaries. Stolen cars and parts do not appear to serve as a medium of exchange within these trades. We found no evidence that they are bartered for commodities, used as payment or collateral, or treated as tradeable assets.

However, those who profit from illicit activity and predatory governance are among the main consumers of stolen luxury vehicles. The trade in stolen cars and parts is thus sustained by wealth generated through other illicit activities, but operates primarily as a market for elite consumption rather than as a component of those illicit economies. This research also did not find evidence of stolen vehicles from the UK and the EU being used systematically for money laundering. The DRC's economy is predominantly informal with high levels of cash use and dollarization, weak operational control of foreign exchange and a lack of reliable identification systems. Real estate transactions,

trade in precious metals and stones, and casinos are more prominent money laundering channels.[144] It is therefore very unlikely that premium and luxury vehicles represent a major laundering route. The volumes are limited and vehicles and parts are bulky, logistically demanding and comparatively difficult to turn over quickly and repeatedly without creating additional transactional steps.

The UAE

The UAE is one of the world's largest markets for second-hand vehicles and parts. Goods land at Dubai's Jebel Ali Port, then move through the emirate's free trade zones before being shipped onward. Cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU represent a small fraction of this trade, but they benefit from a system that is not designed to detect or exclude them. The market for parts, including stolen parts, may be larger than that for whole vehicles, driven by substantial demand. For destinations such as Iran, demand for stolen parts is driven by sanctions that restrict access to legitimate sources of supply and drive up prices.

As with the broader second-hand vehicle market, trade in stolen vehicles and parts is handled mainly by commercial actors, including shipping lines, freight forwarders, clearing agents, dealers, brokers and parts sellers. There is little evidence of distinct criminal groups organizing the movement and sale of stolen vehicles in the UAE. Once goods clear customs with adequate paperwork, they are treated as legitimate commodities, generating little need for organized criminality.

Provenance is rarely checked and few actors have a commercial or regulatory interest in doing so. Origin can, however, affect pricing in onward trades. Various highly accessible services are available in Dubai that can sanitize a vehicle's identity, allowing stolen vehicles to move into downstream markets with clean histories. There is little local political or commercial appetite to address the trade in stolen vehicles and parts from the UK and the EU. The UAE's position as a trading hub rests on facilitating the rapid movement of goods. Scrutinizing the origins of what passes through runs counter to that model and enforcement offers few obvious benefits to local actors.

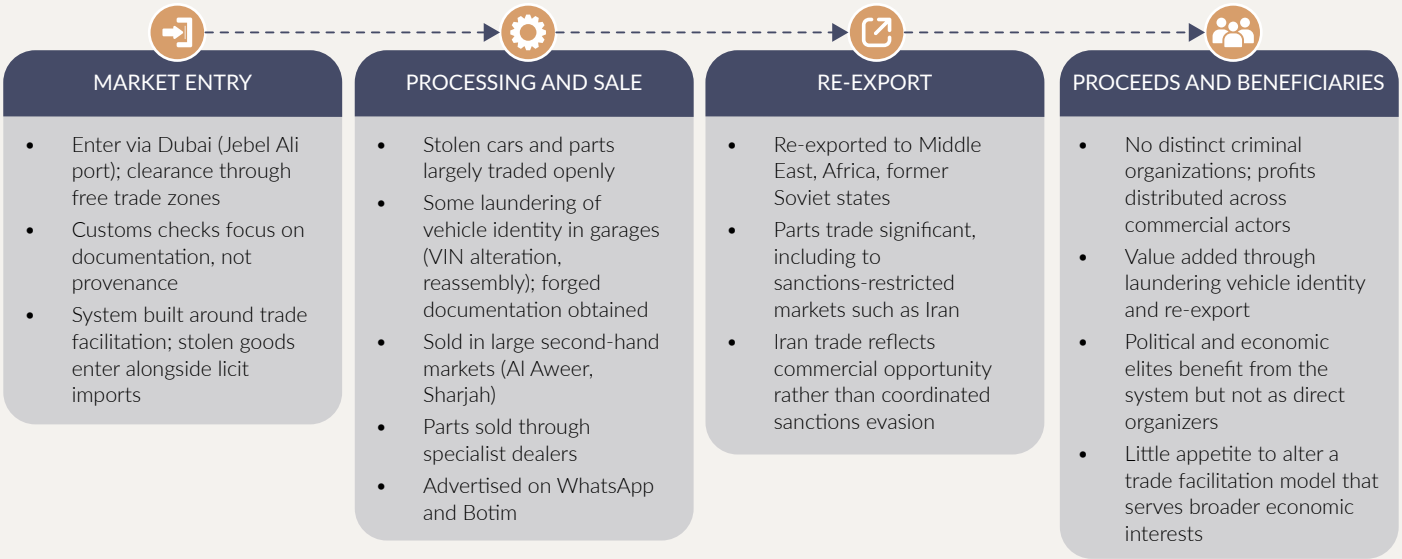


FIGURE 7 Crime script: The United Arab Emirates.

The enabling environment

Most of the cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU shipped to the UAE enter Dubai, one of the seven emirates that make up the UAE, as well as Abu Dhabi, where they enter an environment in which illicit trade and unregulated financial dealings are widely tolerated and deeply embedded.[145] Since the 1970s, the UAE has undergone one of the most rapid economic transformations of any modern state, albeit one built substantially on mass inward migration, with foreign workers now comprising roughly 80% of the resident population.[146] Abu Dhabi is the largest emirate by land area and the richest, controlling roughly 90%–95% of the UAE's substantive oil and gas reserves, and accounting for the largest share of the UAE's GDP (contributing roughly 60% in 2023, compared to around 23% for Dubai).[147] It also serves as the federation's core political centre.

The UAE's president – Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who came to power in 2022 – is traditionally also the emir of Abu Dhabi, and key federal decision-making on security, defence, energy and foreign policy is concentrated there.[148] Dubai functions as the federation's second power centre. The emir of Dubai is traditionally the vice president of the UAE; both roles have been held by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum since 2006. Dubai dominates the UAE's trade, logistics, finance and services economy. It has exercised significant autonomy in economic governance since the foundation of the UAE in 1971, although this has been reduced after the 2008 financial crisis forced it to accept a US$20 billion bailout from Abu Dhabi.[149] Situated at the nexus of trading routes linking Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Americas,[150] it emerged as a major regional trade hub in the 1970s and an important global one from the 1990s onwards. From the 1950s, Dubai's ruling family, the House of Maktoum, pursued a strategy of large-scale infrastructure development, followed by aggressive diversification away from oil that accelerated after production peaked in 1991.[151] This strategy, facilitated by the establishment of free trade zones, positioned the emirate as a critical hub for transport, logistics and finance.[152]

The UAE, and especially Dubai, is a centre for much legitimate trade and commerce, but its economic model also positions it as a centre of illicit activity. It is a hub for illicit trade in natural resources.[153] Dubai is the largest global black market for gold and one where artisanal gold from conflict-affected areas in Africa and South America is laundered.[154] It also functions as a key manufacturing and trading centre for illicit tobacco and for the trade and diversion of arms, while also serving as a destination and transit country for sex trafficking and forced labour.[155] The UAE's financial system facilitates trade in these physical commodities, illicit services and other illicit activity. Trade-based money laundering – the process of disguising criminal proceeds by manipulating trade documentation, such as through over- and under-invoicing – is particularly prolific.[156] Dubai also serves as a critical node for circumventing Western sanctions, hosting front companies to facilitate trade to and from countries such as Iran, Russia and Syria.[157]

A wide range of actors are directly involved or complicit in this activity. Transnational criminal networks – including Latin American drug cartels, crime figures from Eurasia and some of Europe's most notorious criminal groups – use Dubai not only as a residential safe haven but as a logistical node to trans-ship narcotics and other contraband. Dubai also serves as a management hub for directing global enterprises remotely and laundering proceeds.[158] Major terrorist groups similarly exploit the emirate's commercial infrastructure. While the UAE has a track record of international cooperation on counterterrorism,[159] terrorist actors and networks exploit vulnerabilities in Dubai's transit and financial sectors primarily to generate and move revenue.[160] The city is also attractive to those seeking to launder stolen public funds through luxury real estate. One 2023 study, for example, found that in

2020 at least 10% of foreign property owners in Dubai originated from conflict-affected and fragile states.[161]

There are several reasons why the UAE, and Dubai in particular, is an attractive locale for illicit activity. The logistics and transport infrastructure that facilitates legitimate activity also supports illicit trade, and the sheer volume of legitimate trade provides opportunities to hide illicit activity within it. Illicit actors can rely on an extensive network of enablers who are negligent or wilfully blind to such activity, including financial and legal professionals, as well as logistical operators. The deregulated environment of the free trade zones is also very conducive to illicit activity. In total, the UAE has about 45 free trade zones, around 30 of which are in Dubai. These zones function as special economic areas that allow 100% foreign ownership, offer duty-free import and re-export and operate under their own regulatory authorities.[162] In practice, this means goods can be shipped, stored, processed and re-exported without having to comply with the UAE's mainland commercial or customs regimes, significantly reducing cost and administrative friction.[163]

The combination of duty-free movement, simplified regulation, as well as a dedicated logistics infrastructure makes these free zones the core of the UAE's re-export and trans-shipment economy. Each free trade zone also operates with its own separate commercial regulations, labour laws and property laws, supervised by an independent regulatory authority.[164] This creates a fragmented legal and regulatory environment, allowing illicit actors to 'shop around' for the zone with the weakest enforcement.[165] Furthermore, the lack of standardized beneficial ownership requirements limits the ability of federal authorities to exercise oversight, making it easier to mask the true origin of goods and funds.[166]

While the current regulatory and legal environment hinders effective action against illicit activity in the UAE, the main barrier is that political elites have little interest in addressing either the enabling environment or illicit activity itself. Overall, the state does not lack the capacity to enforce laws and legal frameworks and it does so effectively when there is alignment with political elites' interests.[167] For example, after the 2011 Arab uprisings, Mohammed bin Zayed, the then crown prince of Abu Dhabi, oversaw a significant expansion of the state's security and surveillance capacity, consolidating political authority and further tightening controls on political opposition and civil society.[168] However, there is little incentive for political elites to develop a similar capacity to tackle much of the aforementioned forms of illicit activity. Light regulation has been a central driver of the UAE's emergence as one of the world's leading re-export hubs.[169] According to a World Bank estimate, re-exports reached 31.7% of GDP in 2024,[170] generating substantial rents for political and economic elites and limiting incentives to regulate it more strictly.

The ruling families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai also dominate both the economic institutions that promote trade and growth in the UAE and the entities that are meant to regulate trade and stop illicit activity.[171] For instance, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum's uncle chairs both Dubai's largest bank and its aviation authority while also sitting on the council responsible for economic development.[172] Similarly, Dubai's deputy ruler, Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed, chairs the governing board of the Dubai International Financial Centre and is tasked with supervising ostensibly independent regulators, including the Dubai Financial Services Authority and the DIFC Courts.[173] This combination of elite incentives to support light regulation and elites' control of political and economic institutions facilities an environment in which illicit activity is broadly tolerated and only tackled when the interests of those political elites, such as regime stability or international reputation, are threatened.[174]

An imported vehicle in a car dealership in Nairobi, where a large portion of such vehicles are believed to have been stolen from Europe and re-exported via the UAE. *© Tony Karumba/AFP via Getty Images*

The trade in stolen cars and parts

Similar to other illicit flows, the UAE's commercial and trade environment is highly conducive to trade in stolen cars and parts from the UK and the EU. Based on interviews in Dubai and Kurdistan in northern Iraq, this section traces this trade from entry into the UAE, the mechanics of processing within the emirates and the onward flow to downstream destinations.

Similar to the trade in gold, tobacco and (to a degree) arms, once cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU enter the UAE, they are largely treated as legitimate commodities for trade. The car and parts market in the UAE is bifurcated into two segments: a domestic market and a market for importation and exportation, with most illicit cars and parts traded in the latter. There is no reliable data on either segment[175] but the re-exportation market is widely considered to be larger than the domestic market[176] and there is some overlap between the two. Virtually all cars and parts that serve the domestic UAE market are imported. This market is dominated by SUVs and Japanese brands, with most vehicles sold for private needs, while significant numbers also supply company fleets and rental, leasing and taxi services.[177]

In the rapidly growing UAE economy, the market is subject to considerable flux, however. Chinese brands have in recent years grown their market share considerably.[178] The UAE also has a well-established but comparatively smaller luxury car segment, driven by high-net-worth residents and expatriates, with strong demand for premium European and high-end brands, particularly in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.[179] Industry estimates suggest that there are about 3.5 million cars on the UAE's roads for a population of roughly 10.6 million.[180] Annual sales of new cars reached around 270 000 in 2024.[181]

Fieldwork for this study suggests that parts stolen from the UK and the EU do enter the domestic UAE market, whereas whole vehicles are more commonly re-exported.[182] This is mostly likely explained by the fact that many residents are wealthy enough to be able to afford to purchase vehicles directly from authorized dealerships, which offer guarantees of provenance. At the same time, there is significant local demand for car parts[183] for which provenance is harder for buyers to verify (more below).

The bulk of cars and parts, including those with stolen origins, are imported for re-exportation. As discussed above, UN Comtrade data shows that the UAE imports more than US$20 billion worth of passenger cars annually,[184] a figure that substantially exceeds domestic new and used car demand

by value and which indicates that a large share of imported vehicles is destined for re-exportation. Industry figures further underline the scale of this activity: the used car market alone is valued at around US$20 billion per year from 2022–2024,[185] a size that cannot be explained by domestic consumption alone.

Analysis of dealer and marketplace listings indicates that the re-export market is dominated by mid- to premium SUVs and 4x4 vehicles.[186] The listings highlight the existence of a smaller export market for higher-end or luxury vehicles. However, the most frequently cited export models are large and mid-size Japanese SUVs and utility vehicles, alongside a smaller number of mid-range crossovers and sedans. This is consistent with demand patterns in key destination regions in Africa and the Middle East, where buyers tend to prioritize durability, off-road capability, availability of spare parts and the ability to operate in challenging road and maintenance environments over other features, such as fuel efficiency or advanced in-car technology.[187]

Most cars and parts, including those stolen from the UK and the EU, enter Dubai via its Jebel Ali Port, one of the world's largest container ports, as well as Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi. The bulk of imports arrive from economically developed countries, especially Japan, the US, China, Germany and the UK.[188] Interviewees in Dubai and Iraqi Kurdistan indicated that stolen cars and parts mainly originate from Europe and North America; several highlighted a recent influx of both from the US and Canada.[189]

From the ports, goods are cleared under customs control and typically move into major logistics free trade zones, above all the Jebel Ali Free Zone, where vehicles and parts are stored, consolidated, re-packed, containerized and transferred onward for re-export or movement to other trading nodes.[190] Under UAE customs rules, vehicles and parts may be transferred between free trade zones, or moved to onshore markets for inspection and sale, without incurring import duties, provided they are not formally released into the mainland's customs territory. In practice, trade passing through Jebel Ali

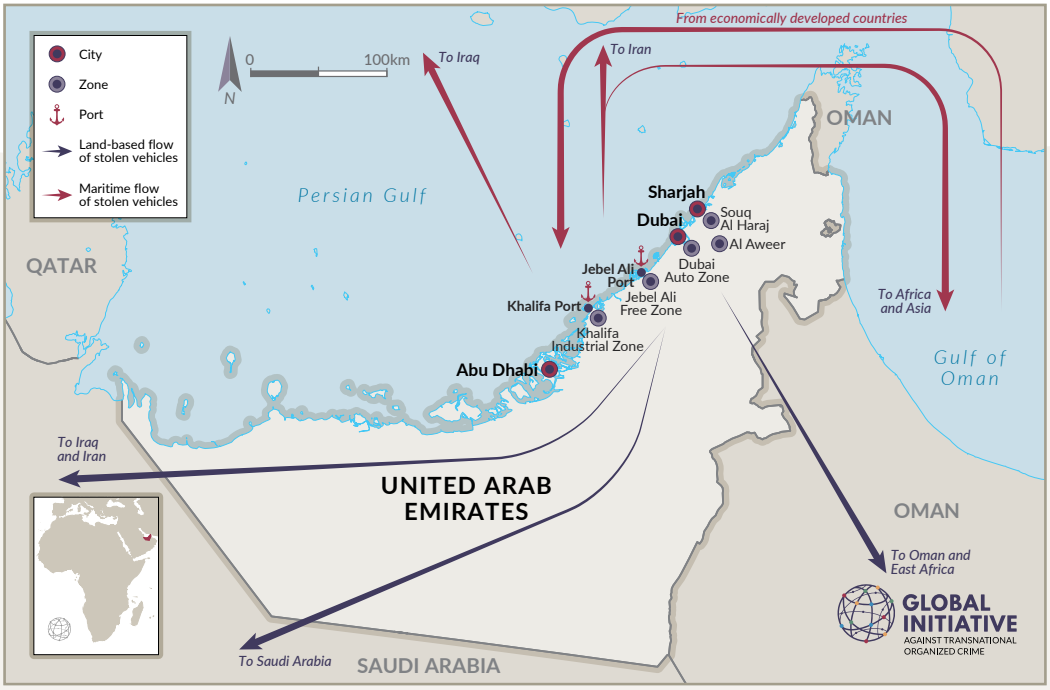


FIGURE 8 Flows of stolen vehicles in the Middle East.

Free Zone and the Khalifa Industrial Zone Abu Dhabi (which is integrated with Khalifa Port) is primarily export-oriented, reflecting these entities' role as logistics and re-export platforms rather than end markets. Several sources indicated that the market for parts, including stolen parts, may eclipse that for cars. One journalist described both the inward and outward trade of car parts as vast and attributed it partly to the large number of crashes on UAE roads and partly to trans-shipment,[191] the latter point corroborated by sellers in Iraqi Kurdistan who cite demand in Iraq and Iran (more below).[192]

Cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU are not typically handled by organized criminals once they enter the UAE because their illicit origins are either ignored or only impact the pricing of vehicles rather than generating any legal consequences. Instead, stolen cars and parts are mainly traded by commercial actors in a system organized around trade facilitation and high throughput, where basic logistics documentation is sufficient for movement and sale, and there are no systematic checks on the provenance of vehicles.[193] The initial stage of importation of cars and parts is handled by large shipping lines and port operators. The actors involved in trading, brokerage and parts dealing are more fragmented, encompassing a large number of dealers, intermediaries and small or mid-sized businesses operating in specific segments of the market. In terms of the demography of key actors, there is also significant variety, but Afghans and Pakistanis are very prominent in the used car and used parts markets.[194]

At the importation stage, there are few checks for stolen cars and parts. Given the volume of trade and the emphasis on efficient processing, there is limited practical scope for systematic verification due to the large volumes coming in.[195] Customs documentation is largely limited to recording the importer, the value of the car, the engine and chassis numbers and a car's date of production.[196] However, these procedures exist mainly to facilitate movement of goods through ports and into storage or onward transit rather than to establish prior ownership or to create a log for systematic background checks on stolen vehicle databases.

Once goods enter the UAE with documentation sufficient for customs and logistics purposes, they can circulate through subsequent stages on much the same basis as licit imports. This is not to say, however, that there is no monitoring of activity. According to one local journalist, UAE customs are dedicated in collecting taxation for cars imported into the UAE for domestic usage, while the surveillance elements of the state maintain logs of what is coming in, in terms of who placed the order and its value (albeit not the origin).[197] This assessment matches descriptions of imports of other commodities.[198]

Sale and resale take place across specialist free trade zones and onshore market hubs. Al Aweer, in Dubai, and Sharjah are the main centres for second-hand cars and parts, and also provide ready channels through which vehicles and parts of illicit origin can be traded. The Dubai Auto Zone, a specialist automotive free zone located in Al Aweer, facilitates vehicle inspection, preparation, brokerage and short-term storage, and is used predominantly for export-oriented trade. It operates alongside a wider automotive trading cluster in Al Aweer, where numerous dealers and intermediaries operate outside the free zone framework and where vehicles and parts are inspected, priced and sold to both domestic and export buyers.[199] Souq Al Haraj in the Emirate of Sharjah, on Dubai's eastern border, is one of the largest used-car markets in the Gulf, hosting several hundred dealerships.[200] It serves as a major marketplace for both local resale and onward export. In these locations, vehicles and parts are matched to buyers and exporters, after which goods may be moved back into free zones or directly to ports for shipment.[201]

These entities are also hubs for the trade in parts, including stolen parts sold in high volumes and rapidly. An 'accountant' for a chop shop in London reported sending containers of stolen parts to

Dubai, where they are then sold in 'flash auctions' where containers arrive and auctions start as soon as the doors open.[202] A spare parts dealer in Sharjah confirmed the existence of these auctions and stated that rapid onward sale then takes place through his established trade networks, including contacts in Africa.[203]

Provenance has little bearing on whether cars and parts can be traded legally in transactions between car dealers, parts sellers, buying agents and brokers. Cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU are therefore quickly integrated as licit commodities into local markets. In Al Aweer and Sharjah, vehicles and parts are traded openly by dealers and intermediaries, with transactions shaped primarily by price and condition.[204] Dealers operate within a licensed and regulated commercial environment, but regulatory oversight focuses on market conduct and transactional integrity (i.e. recording sales and upholding contracts).[205] For export-oriented transactions in particular, there is typically no routine requirement for market actors to establish origin beyond whatever documentation is commercially expected and there is little incentive for traders to undertake checks that are not required or rewarded.[206] Overall, there is little official involvement in market trading, and while state actors seek to tackle the trade in commodities such as drugs, which are viewed as threatening the UAE itself, there are few checks on cars or parts with dubious origins.[207] As one local journalist put it, 'if cars are going in and out, no one cares.'[208]

The provenance of vehicles is not, however, entirely irrelevant for either official or commercial actors. There are checks on vehicles registered for use in the UAE's domestic market (on INTERPOL databases, for example).[209] This presents some barriers to trade in stolen vehicles. Interviews with car sellers and traders in Iraqi Kurdistan who regularly trade in Dubai also indicated that provenance is checked and has a substantial impact on prices throughout the supply chain. Buyers hire local companies to check a vehicle's history[210] and cars known to be stolen sell for substantially less.[211]

Many interviewees also highlighted that Dubai is a centre for laundering stolen vehicles.[212] A range of services are available including changing vehicle identification numbers (VINs), cutting and reassembling vehicles[213] and producing fake documentation. One car parts seller in Iraqi Kurdistan even suggested that in some instances documentation would be prepared before a car was even stolen.[214] The presence of such services demonstrates that provenance impacts trade in stolen cars, though within the re-exportation trade in the UAE it mainly affects price rather than generating substantive legal consequences. Provenance has little impact on the trade in parts, however. The sheer volume and number of parts being traded makes checks impractical. One seller reported that parts are very high value and that while he suspects the parts he buys are often stolen, he never checks the origin.[215]

Dealers and intermediaries connect with each other and conduct deals through modern communication technologies and a range of relationships. Websites such as DubiCars and dubizzle advertise thousands of second-hand models and parts for both the domestic and re-export markets.[216] WhatsApp, Botim and similar social media services are also used to advertise stock. For example, a parts dealer in Sharjah reported quickly contacting his network in Africa once stock had arrived in a container[217] and a parts dealer in Kurdistan reported regularly receiving photos of available parts from dealers in Dubai.[218]

As described above, at this stage in the supply chain, there is a substantive blurring of trade in licit and illicit cars and parts (and especially of parts). However, similar methods of communication appear to be used for overt trade in illicit cars and parts. For example, a car dealer in Erbil, the regional capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, receives photos of stolen vehicles from a London-based Iranian, who has connections with car thieves in several European countries.[219]

Cars parked at a showroom in Dubai, April 2025. The UAE's commercial environment is highly conducive to trade in stolen cars and parts from the UK and EU. *© Fadel Senna/AFP via Getty Images*

Family, personal and ethnic ties link intermediaries across supply chains. This likely reflects the weakly regulated nature of the trade, where trust and reputation substitute for formal oversight and reliable dispute resolution. Several of the intermediaries interviewed in Dubai disclosed that they do business with others of the same nationality or ethnic group.[220] A parts dealer in Kurdistan relies on contacts in Dubai established over many years in the business.[221] Similarly, the 'accountant' for the chop shop in London reported sending the containers of stolen parts to a relative in Dubai.[222] Most transactions take place with cash, although one contact reported that crypto transactions are increasingly relied upon within the broader car trade due to convenience.[223]

Once vehicles or parts are sold for export, they are typically transferred from market hubs or storage locations either into a free trade zone or directly to a port for shipment. At this stage, cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU represent a small proportion of the large second-hand trade, although they follow similar routes. According to UN Comtrade data, the Middle East was by far the largest destination in 2023 (US$4.02 billion) for cars exported from the UAE, with Iraq standing out as the primary location. Meanwhile, large volumes of exports go to former Soviet countries (US$0.87 billion) and Africa (US$0.86 billion).[224]

Re-exports are often undercounted or inconsistently reported in standard trade databases, but industry and logistics sources similarly identify the Middle East, former Soviet countries and Africa (as well as South Asia and South East Asia) as key destination regions for vehicles and parts re-exported from the UAE.[225] Several intermediaries directly involved in the trade reported the same destinations.[226] Goods are consolidated into consignments and containerized or prepared for roll-on/roll-off transport, while export documentation is processed. Vehicles and parts that have remained designated for re-export throughout this process do not incur import duties or taxes, as they have not been formally released into the mainland market.

There is some evidence of onward trade from the UAE to sanctioned or partially sanctioned markets, particularly Iran. Neither Iran nor Russia are comprehensively sanctioned by the UAE, but onward trade can still trigger risks attached to UK, EU or US sanctions depending on the parties involved and links with Western financial or commercial entities. Most of the evidence from this research suggests that trade in stolen cars and parts to Iran is dominated by small-scale commercial actors rather than organized networks.

The parts trade is especially lucrative as sanctions restrict Iranian buyers' access to legitimate markets, driving up prices. Parts dealers in Erbil reported substantial mark-ups on stock sourced from Dubai. One dealer bought parts for US$6 each in Sharjah and sold them locally for US$50– US$100, with most destined for Iran.[227] Another purchased a 2024 top spec premium luxury SUV in Dubai for around US$17 000 (a price that included dismantling and shipping) on the basis of his expectation that the engine alone would fetch up to US$40 000 in Iran.[228] One Germany-based intermediary who facilitates trade in stolen cars and parts to the Middle East claimed that the Iranian market was dominated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and 'oligarchs',[229] but none of the contacts in Iraqi Kurdistan corroborated this. While Russia and other former Soviet states are known destinations for second-hand cars and parts re-exported from the UAE, these are more distant markets and none of the interviewees said they traded directly with them.

More research is required to determine how cars and parts stolen from the UK and the EU, once re-exported from the UAE, circulate in destination markets. But in the locations this project examined – the DRC and Iraqi Kurdistan – the trade appears to be dominated by commercial actors rather than by organized crime groups. Police in Iraqi Kurdistan do check vehicles and seize those identified as stolen,[230] creating the conditions for a distinct criminal marketplace: actors face enforcement risks and the trade in illicit cars may therefore require criminal actors who are skilled in concealing stolen origins. Yet even here, interviewees described the main actors as dealers, brokers and parts sellers rather than organized criminals.

Illicit services confirmed by interviewees were primarily laundering measures to disguise steep price discounts required to sell stolen vehicles. Interviewees did not use language associated with more organized criminality. Corruption may allow some actors to circumvent enforcement in these contexts,[231] but this research did not examine that in detail, beyond the DRC. On current evidence, the networks that move stolen vehicles and parts from the UK and the EU to final destination markets are primarily commercial in character.

Within the UAE, a car journalist with knowledge of the UAE market reported that since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, inflows of Russian nationals and capital have increased demand for laundering through high-value assets.[232] Supercar dealerships are widely suspected of involvement in this activity, with buyers paying in cash and reselling to 'bank' the proceeds, allegedly with official complicity. This research could not corroborate such activity, and the supercar segment is outside the core remit of this report (i.e. which focused on trade in premium and upper-mainstream vehicles). Laundering through supercars is plausible given their high unit value, but it is far less practical using lower-value vehicles. As the UAE car journalist put it, 'you'd have to launder a lot of Land Cruisers to equal one Ferrari.'[233] More broadly, although the same permissive environment that allows stolen vehicles to pass through the UAE also facilitates other illicit flows, this research found no evidence that the stolen vehicle trade intersects with those flows. The actors and supply chains appear distinct.[234]

Overall, the trade in stolen cars and parts in the UAE is defined by its commercial character. Organized crime groups play no significant role within the UAE because there is no need for them. Trade in cars and parts with illicit origins takes place largely in the open and is tolerated, sitting alongside a much larger legitimate trade. Both trades pass through the same free zones and market hubs, and are traded by similar (and in some cases the same) dealers and brokers. Profits are distributed across many actors at each stage rather than captured by specific criminal networks. Political and commercial elites have little interest in disrupting the trade system, not least because they benefit from it.

CONCLUSION

This report addressed significant gaps in the understanding of cars and parts stolen for export in the UK and the EU by tracing the journey from theft through to the DRC and UAE, and the overarching features of the trade can be represented in a crime script. Six main findings emerge from the project.

Finding 1: Theft for export targets high-value cars and parts, but the volume of lower value vehicles and parts remains poorly understood. The trade is under-policed and those involved face little realistic prospect of serious consequences. Available information indicates that the trade focuses on premium SUVs, luxury models and parts, all of which offer strong resale value in destination markets. This pattern is consistent across the UK and available European data. However, for the UK, seizure data reflects what is intercepted at a small number of ports and may not reflect the full scale or composition of theft for export. Information on trends in Europe is similarly derived from limited theft statistics and police interviews. The most commonly stolen vehicles in the UK barely feature in export seizures and it remains unknown whether significant volumes of these vehicles are being stripped for parts for export. Across the UK and the EU, vehicle crime has been deprioritized by police. Specialist units have reduced in number and intelligence sits in silos across police forces, ports, insurers and manufacturers. Responses tend to be reactive rather than proactive. A few small, effective teams exist, but there is little national-level capacity to pursue the organizers who direct theft at scale. Those involved describe it as lucrative work with little realistic risk of being caught or seriously punished.

Finding 2: The trade is organized around loose, interconnected networks rather than hierarchical criminal groups. This applies throughout the supply chain, from thieves in the UK and the EU to dealers in destination markets. Actors in the trade occupy specialist roles, including stealing vehicles, processing them, handling logistics or forging documents. They typically know their immediate contacts but rarely those beyond. The links between actors in the UK and the EU and those in destination markets remain poorly understood, although available evidence points to connections built on kinship, diaspora ties and commercial relationships. Groups may cooperate at particular nodes and ethnic or family links sometimes bridge stages, but no single organization controls supply chains.

Finding 3: Trade flows primarily toward the Middle East and Africa. The DRC absorbs a small volume as a final destination. The UAE operates as a major re-exportation hub. Most stolen cars and parts are sent to the Middle East and Africa, where there is strong demand for durable, repairable vehicles. The former Soviet states may also be destinations, but their significance may have declined since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Routes shift quickly in response to policing pressures and market

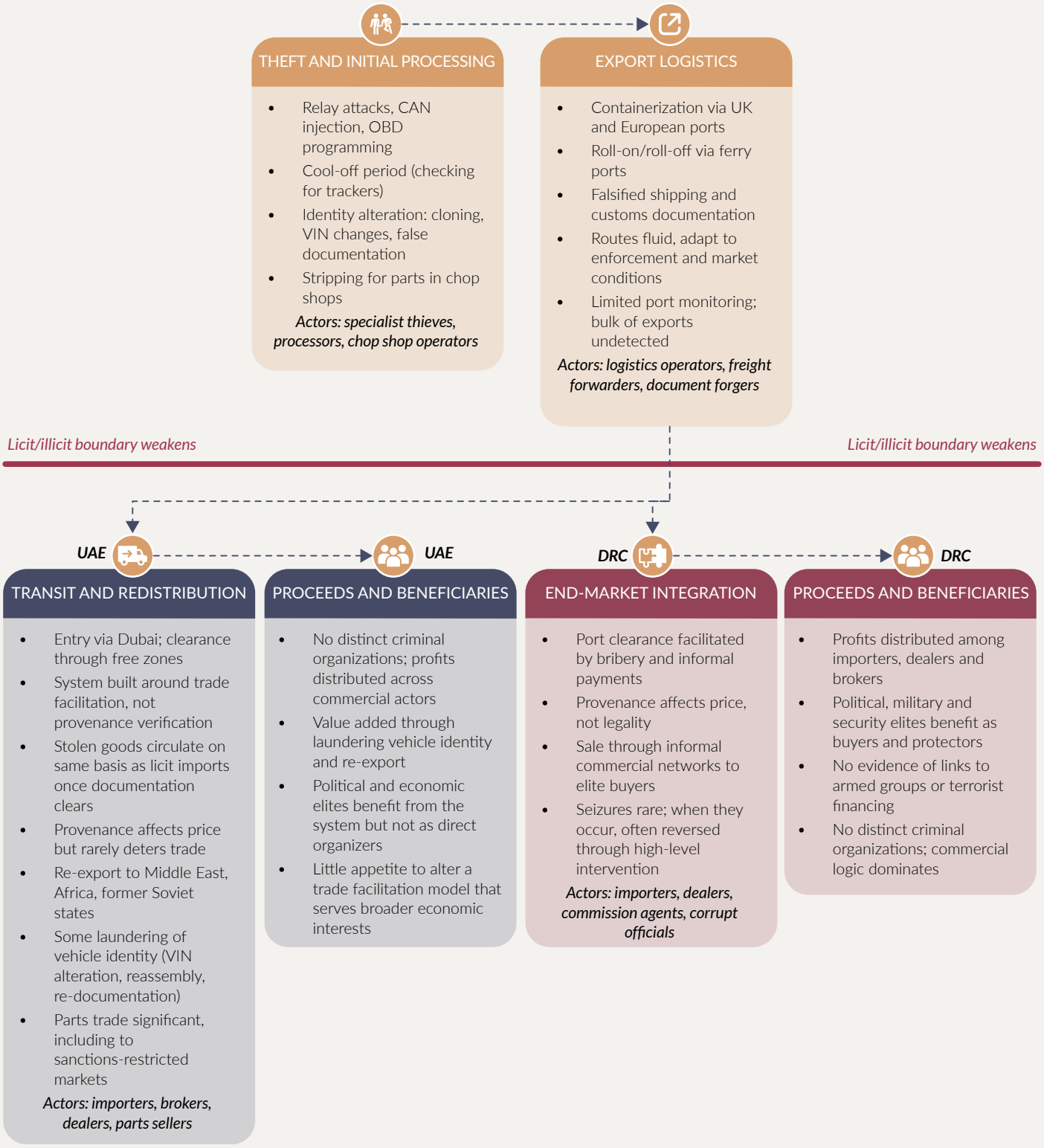


FIGURE 9 Crime script: Vehicle and parts theft for export from the UK and Europe.

conditions. The DRC represents a small final destination, with demand concentrated among political, military and business elites who can afford premium SUVs. There is little sign of onward movement to neighbouring countries. The UAE, by contrast, is a major trading hub where cars and parts are bought and sold before being shipped onward to buyers across the Middle East, Africa and beyond.

Stolen UK and EU goods form a small part of this vast flow, passing through a system oriented toward facilitating trade rather than verifying the origins of goods.

Finding 4: Commercial actors are prominent throughout the supply chain. Proceeds are dispersed across many participants rather than concentrated in specific criminal networks. From theft onwards – and especially after initial processing – much of the trade in stolen cars and parts runs through legitimate business infrastructures, including freight forwarders, shipping agents, anonymous industrial units and a repair sector that is equipped with limited oversight. Further along the chain, importers, brokers, dealers, parts traders and complicit officials move goods from stage to stage. There is little sign of distinct criminal organizations controlling the flow once cars or parts leave source countries. Stolen goods enter commercial channels and the proceeds spread among the many actors involved.

Finding 5: The line between legitimate and illegitimate trade, distinct in source countries, blurs along the supply chain. In destination markets, illicit origins affect price more than they generate legal risk. In the UK and the EU, a vehicle's history impacts buying and selling as trading stolen vehicles carries legal risk and they usually need laundering before they can be sold openly. That logic breaks down further along the chain. In destination and transit markets, commercial and informal actors handle licit and illicit goods through similar relationships, logistics and sales mechanisms. In many destination countries (including the DRC), and transit hubs (primarily the UAE), illicit origins may reduce the price or prompt a buyer to seek documentation services, but they do not expose anyone to meaningful legal consequences.

Finding 6: There is no evidence that trade in stolen cars and parts from the UK and the EU overlaps significantly with other illicit markets in the DRC or UAE. In the DRC, those who benefit from resource extraction, smuggling or corruption may purchase stolen vehicles, but they do not appear to use them in trading for illicit commodities. Stolen cars or parts that enter the west of the country do not contribute to conflict economies in the east, due to the lack of geographic proximity; nor are they linked to terrorist financing. The UAE's trading environment accommodates a range of illicit flows, from gold to tobacco and arms, but these appear to operate through different actors and channels. Some stolen vehicles and parts do move onward to Iran, where sanctions restrict legitimate supply and inflate prices, but this reflects opportunistic trading rather than coordinated evasion. There are indications that supercars may be used for laundering in the UAE, but the models typically stolen from the UK and the EU lack the unit value to serve that purpose.

Policy implications

The findings of this research have implications for how policymakers approach theft for export. Interventions are far more likely to be effective at source than in destination markets, given an absence of political will in the latter. The political economy in transit and destination countries offers little basis for optimism about enforcement-focused cooperation, while the diffuse, commercial nature of the trade means there are no obvious high-value targets to pursue overseas. This does not mean international cooperation is without value, but it does suggest that resources are better concentrated on reducing opportunities for theft and export in the UK and the EU, where states have capacity and there is at least a degree of political incentive to tackle theft.

Recommendations are provided below. It should be noted that several of these recommendations converge with those identified in recent research on organized vehicle crime in the UK and across Europe.[235]

- **Interventions in destination countries are unlikely to be effective.** This research examined destination and transit markets in the DRC and UAE, with additional fieldwork in Kurdistan and elsewhere in northern Iraq covering onward flows to Iran. In each case, there was limited appetite among political or economic actors to address the trade. In both the DRC and the UAE, traditional forms of overseas assistance that are designed to enhance security or the rule of law – such as training police or customs officials – are unlikely to impact flows of stolen vehicles. In the DRC, state authority is weak or absent across much of the supply chain. In the UAE, the sheer volume of legitimate trade passing through major hubs makes detection largely impractical. These dynamics are likely mirrored in many other destination and transit countries, particularly those with high levels of corruption or where political and economic elites benefit from low regulation.

  One partial exception may be the UAE, which has demonstrated a willingness to act on illicit activity when faced with concrete consequences (e.g. a grey-listing by the Financial Action Task Force). The UAE has also cooperated with Western powers on counterterrorism while investing heavily in positioning itself as a legitimate global business hub. It is unlikely that the UK or European countries would exert sufficient leverage on the UAE over stolen vehicles alone, not least because they have not prioritized the issue themselves. But as part of a broader effort to pressure the UAE to tackle illicit activity passing through its territory, it may be possible to secure incremental commitments. The UAE has, however, shown limited willingness to address illicit flows in gold, arms and tobacco despite sustained criticism, suggesting that reputational concerns carry weight only when accompanied by tangible consequences.

  More broadly, the track record of externally sponsored efforts in tackling organized crime in highly corrupt environments suggests that training and capacity-building for police and customs agencies achieves little where there is no political will to act (and where political and economic elites benefit directly or indirectly from the permissive conditions that sustain illicit activity). That is not to say that externally supported action should be abandoned. But addressing these political and structural conditions is a precondition for operational cooperation to be effective, and doing so is extremely difficult where the UK and other donor governments have limited political leverage or competing diplomatic priorities. Tackling higher-level political corruption, or supporting local efforts to do so, is necessary before police assistance and capacity building can take hold.[236]

- **European cooperation could be strengthened but is subject to constraints.** There is scope for better collaboration between police forces across Europe, but meaningful progress faces significant obstacles. The gold standard for intelligence sharing would be real-time data exchange – live automatic number plate recognition data, for example, could flag suspected vehicles and drivers as they cross borders. In practice, such a measure would face profound legal constraints under the General Data Protection Regulation in the EU and similar legislation in the UK,[237] alongside political hurdles, technical challenges in linking different national systems and ethical questions around mass surveillance. More realistic in the short term would be incremental improvements to integrating existing databases, including faster updating of stolen vehicle records, quicker access for frontline officers, and reduced time lags between a vehicle being reported stolen and that information being available at ports or to patrolling officers.

  Existing systems provide a foundation but are fragmented and poorly integrated. The European Car and Driving Licence Information System, more commonly known as EUCARIS, enables cross-border vehicle checks. However, it is not linked to real-time enforcement systems. The Schengen Information System includes stolen vehicle data, but access and update speeds vary

across jurisdictions. INTERPOL's stolen vehicle database provides international coverage, but relies on national inputs that are often delayed. Car-Pass, a mandatory vehicle history document in Belgium, illustrates what more comprehensive provenance documentation could look like. It compiles data from multiple sources, such as vehicle inspection services, dealerships and repair shops. It registers mileage, inspection records, damage history and recalls at each check-up, creating a verified history that must accompany any second-hand sale.[238] The UK equivalent, the V5C registration document, provides a record of only the current registered vehicle owner, while MOT history and mileage records are held separately and are not compiled into a single provenance document. Better consolidation and sharing of this data would enhance police forces' and other officials' ability to detect stolen vehicles, particularly when flagged vehicles cross borders or enter ports. Following Brexit, however, the UK's participation in or alignment with EU data-sharing schemes remains unclear and would need to be addressed for closer cooperation.

Beyond data-sharing, the main form of effective European cooperation would be coordinated investigation and prosecution of actors within the supply chain, particularly those who organize and direct theft at scale rather than individual thieves or drivers. Existing mechanisms, such as joint investigation teams and mutual legal assistance, are available but are underutilized for vehicle crime given its low prioritization across jurisdictions. A further constraint is the slow speed of cross-border cooperation mechanisms that often do not keep pace with highly adaptive criminal networks. By the time requests are processed, targets have frequently moved on. Targeting the nodes where criminal coordination is concentrated would disrupt more activity per unit of enforcement effort, but this requires political will, as well as a degree of focus on vehicle crime and dedicated resources that are currently lacking.

- **The most effective measures concentrate on source countries.** Compared to cross-border interventions (or those in destination markets), measures focused on reducing opportunities for theft and export within source countries are far more likely to have an impact. The following focuses on the UK, but similar considerations apply to other European source countries. Given how limited police attention is at present, relatively modest investment could yield significant returns.

  Efforts to address the organized crime dimension of vehicle theft should be guided by two principles. First, policing should target those who coordinate and direct theft operations rather than lower-level thieves and groups. It should aim to disrupt organizers who oversee larger volumes and more actors. Second, this approach would not need to attempt to dismantle every network. Rather, its value is to raise criminal actors' risk threshold by demonstrating that organized vehicle crime risks punishment, thus making involvement less attractive.

- **Consolidated intelligence and investigative capacity.** Some consolidation already exists through NaVCIS and industry partnerships, but there is significant unrealized potential, particularly in sharing intelligence closer to real time and ensuring that intelligence is acted upon. A relatively small national unit with consolidated intelligence and investigative and prosecutorial capacity, focusing on the organizers and facilitators who have most influence over large volumes of theft, could have a substantive impact.[239] Effectively tackling even a handful of serious networks would begin to shift the perception that theft for export is low risk, high reward. Creating such a unit would require detailed budgeting, but costs would likely only be in the region of £2–£3 million per annum, dedicated mainly to consolidating intelligence, developing investigations and translating investigations into prosecutions. There are also options to fund such a unit through

industry-funded models, building on NaVCIS's existing funding base or drawing on approaches such as the surcharges used by US Auto Theft Prevention Authorities, where a small annual levy on car insurance policies is ring-fenced for vehicle crime enforcement.[240]

- **Cross-sector data sharing.** An effective response would be considerably strengthened by data sharing not just between police forces but between police and private sector actors, including insurers, manufacturers, dealerships and vehicle inspection services. Existing VIN-check services, such as HPI in the UK,[241] are available but typically involve delays and are not integrated across sectors. A 2023 European research project has proposed a model that would address these delays: a shared database predicated on VINs rather than personal data, allowing police to flag stolen vehicles and industry actors to check provenance in real time. This would sidestep some data protection constraints while enabling faster, broader coverage.[242] In the UK, industry partnerships on data sharing exist and provide a foundation but could be deepened and formalized.
- **Tighter regulation of downstream markets.** The trade in stolen vehicles relies on the relative anonymity of garages, salvage yards and industrial estates where vehicles are processed, stripped and prepared for export. These downstream markets are currently subject to little oversight. Developing a comprehensive regulatory system is beyond the scope of this report, but options include strengthened record-keeping and licensing requirements, mandatory verification of vehicle and seller identity in the second-hand trade, and establishing minimum documentation standards for online platforms such as eBay and Facebook Marketplace, which currently permit largely anonymous transactions.[243] As noted above, Belgium's Car-Pass system offers one model for provenance documentation. Extending similar requirements to parts sales and salvage transactions, and digitizing UK vehicle history into a single, verified record, would increase traceability throughout the supply chain. Scrap yards and garages could also be positioned as partners rather than merely subjects of regulation, incentivized to report suspicious activity such as unusual demand for parts from high-value vehicle models commonly targeted for theft.[244]
- **Tighter regulation of export logistics.** There is limited scrutiny of exportation of cars and parts. Containers can be booked with minimal documentation and manifests do not reflect contents reliably. Potential options to improve regulation include more robust identification requirements to hire a container, minimum data collection requirements for shipping and exporting companies, and more systematic inspection protocols at ports. Restricting cash transactions for transport would also reduce anonymity in transactions.[245] Such measures would need to be designed to avoid placing disproportionate burdens on legitimate trade, but the current baseline is permissive enough that even basic steps to reduce anonymity would reduce opportunities for theft for export and the perception that these opportunities exist.
- **Targeted research to identify effective administrative measures.** The two preceding recommendations are examples of 'administrative measures' – regulatory and procedural interventions that raise the costs of criminal activity without relying on criminal prosecution.[246] Administrative measures operate alongside policing by targeting the enabling environment – by, for example, addressing the regulatory gaps, weak documentation requirements and limited oversight that allow stolen vehicles and parts to move through legitimate commercial infrastructure largely undetected. Administrative measures are potentially powerful tools because they can be applied broadly and systematically, affecting the operating conditions for all criminal actors rather than requiring the identification and prosecution of individual networks.

  This report's broad international scope means that the specific administrative measures identified above are necessarily illustrative rather than prescriptive. Determining which interventions would

be most disruptive requires a more granular analysis than this research could undertake. Additional research should focus specifically on theft for export within the UK, mapping each stage of the crime script against the existing regulatory framework to identify where current requirements are weakest and where tightening them would generate the greatest friction for criminal operations. This would be oriented more narrowly toward the export dimension and the specific administrative and regulatory landscape governing downstream markets, parts sales and export logistics. It would also provide a considerably stronger evidence base for targeted intervention. Such research would complement the enhanced investigative and prosecutorial capacity recommended above. While policing can target the individuals and networks who organize and direct theft at scale, administrative measures can reshape the broader operating environment, raising costs and reducing opportunities across the trade as a whole, including for actors who may never be individually identified or prosecuted.

- **Vehicle security and cooperation by manufacturers.** Vehicle security remains the first line of defence and some manufacturers have made significant progress in recent years.[247] Previously targeted models, for example, have dropped out of theft statistics as security improved. Continued investment in vehicle security, informed by intelligence on emerging theft methods, remains essential. Bodies such as the National Vehicle Crime Reduction Partnership provide forums for sharing best practice and sustaining these structures. They also ensure intelligence flows back to manufacturers, supporting an adaptive, prevention-oriented approach. This is well-established territory and not the primary focus of this research, but it remains foundational to any comprehensive response.

ANNEX: DATA ON CAR THEFT

Significant challenges arise from patchy data on overall car theft.[248] In the UK, there are two key sources. First, there is the number of cars reported as stolen by the police to the DVLA. The DVLA does not, however, proactively publish this data – instead, it is accessed through Freedom of Information requests. These figures may understate the true number of vehicles taken. Where a vehicle is stolen as part of a more serious offence, such as a burglary or robbery, it is usually counted under that category rather than as a separate vehicle theft, so some cases are missed. Even when vehicle details are recorded, data quality varies: completing key property fields is not mandatory, make and model entries are inconsistent, and some information is entered only as free text that cannot be retrieved for analysis. Fraud-related cases also complicate the picture. Many vehicles obtained fraudulently are reported through Action Fraud, the UK's national fraud and cybercrime reporting service, and handled by the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, rather than by local forces. As a result, these vehicles may appear in DVLA statistics but not in local police figures, or vice versa. Finally, DVLA figures cover all vehicle types and the total count of stolen cars depends on the 'body style' filters selected by the analyst (for example, whether 'light 4×4 utility' vehicles are included). This explains divergences between publicly cited figures. For instance, a February 2025 What Car? article reported that 61 343 vehicles were recorded by police as stolen and passed to the DVLA in 2024,[249] whereas in September 2025 the insurance site Tempcover cited a lower figure of 53 955 cars stolen over the same period.[250]

The second commonly cited source is the ONS, which provides statistics on police-recorded crime under offence code 48 ('theft or unauthorized taking of a motor vehicle'). These figures are published. This ONS category, however, covers all motor vehicles, including cars, motorcycles, vans and agricultural vehicles. There is no specific 'cars' category.[251] The ONS figures also exclude vehicles obtained through fraud, as such offences fall under a separate set of fraud codes (53A–J) with no vehicle-specific category.

Similar issues affect the recording of car and vehicle theft in Europe. Despite these limitations, large datasets remain valuable for analyzing trends over time, even if annual figures should not be treated as precise counts. Provided the recording biases described above remain broadly consistent from year to year, changes in reported volumes still offer a meaningful indicator of whether theft is rising or falling.

NOTES

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