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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Heath MacDonald (Malpeque, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 96 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. To prevent disruptive audio feedback incidents during our meeting, we kindly ask that all participants keep their earpieces away from the microphones. Audio feedback incidents can seriously injure interpreters and disrupt our proceedings. I will also remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Pursuant to the motion adopted on October 23, 2023, the committee commences its study on the growing problem of car thefts in Canada.

We have today two panels of witnesses. I would like now to welcome our witnesses for the first panel. From Équité Association, we have Terri O'Brien, president and chief executive officer. From Carfax Canada, we have Shawn Vording, vice-president, product and sales. From the Insurance Bureau of Canada, we have Celyeste Power, president and chief executive officer, and Jason Clark, national director, climate change advocacy.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

Welcome, all.

I now invite Ms. O'Brien to make an opening statement, please.

Ms. Terri O'Brien (President and Chief Executive Officer, Équité Association): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Terri O'Brien, and I serve as the president and CEO of Équité Association. Équité is a not-for-profit organization and Canada's national authority on insurance crime and fraud prevention.

I am honoured to address you here today to continue the important dialogue on Canada's national auto theft crisis.

At Équité, our team of specialized investigators provide expert support to law enforcement agencies across Canada, collaborating on auto theft investigations, including identifying and recovering

stolen vehicles and partnering with CBSA. Additionally we have developed advanced analytics capabilities, which allow us to share intelligence with our partners and track the evolving trends of insurance crime.

In Canada, a vehicle is stolen every five minutes. That means that every five minutes a Canadian is victimized, and every five minutes a neighbourhood in our country feels less safe.

With an annual cost exceeding \$1.2 billion to Canadians, auto theft is not just a property crime. Vehicles in Canada are being stolen by domestic and international criminal organizations. The proceeds are then being used to finance domestic drug and gun trafficking and international terrorism. These crimes hurt our communities and put Canada in the spotlight internationally as a source nation for illegal trade.

Addressing this issue is an important step in keeping Canadians safe and stemming the flow of funds into organized crime. To put this crisis into further context, in three short years, Ontario has seen auto theft rise by 53%, and Quebec residents have been hit even harder, with a 66% increase. These crimes hurt our communities.

We know that the criminals are becoming more brazen, often resorting to physical violence, as evidenced by the significant increase we've seen in carjackings, break and enters and owner-interrupted thefts that often result in violence. Greater Toronto area residents have witnessed a 104% increase in carjackings. Carjackings are terrifying.

However, not all vehicles stolen are destined for export either. Domestically there has also been a sharp increase in stolen vehicles being "revinned" across the country. In revinning, a vehicle identification number—or VIN—is changed, in essence, to create a false identity for that vehicle. By creating a new identity for these vehicles, criminals can sell them to unsuspecting Canadians, use them to commit other crimes or export them for significant profit.

In this way Canadians are being exploited twice, once when they are victimized by auto theft and again when the proceeds from that crime are funnelled back into our communities, funding guns, drugs and other illegal activities.

From a fiscal standpoint, there are significant costs incurred by the government in terms of law enforcement and administration of the criminal justice system, which affect all taxpayers. Both individuals and the insurance industry bear extraordinary costs in premiums, deductibles, rental cars and other transportation costs, all at a time when the cost of living and inflation are already challenging for Canadians.

According to a recent Angus Reid survey, 84% of Canadians say the rise in auto theft makes them concerned about their safety and the increase in crime in their community.

Auto theft is a multi-faceted, complex issue, but when we are looking at short-term, high-impact solutions, technology has an important part to play. Canada's current motor vehicle safety regulations were fully implemented in 2007, which resulted in a steady decline in auto theft. However, today's criminals are taking advantage of these outdated standards, and they are able to gain access to a locked vehicle in as little as 60 seconds.

Transport Canada has committed to updating the safety standards, which is welcome news for Canadians.

Anti-theft vehicle technologies can utilize simple solutions that are effective at preventing the vehicle from being stolen in the first place. These could include simple solutions deployed through software patches like introducing reprogramming delays or retrofitting key fobs to put the battery to sleep after a few minutes to protect against relay attacks.

Several auto manufacturers have been offering theft event privilege discounts upwards of \$10,000, depending on the vehicle. However, this funding could be better directed to immobilizers that cost about \$300.

Finally, expanding data sharing between CBSA and industry partners, such as Équité Association, can lead to more targeted inspections and reduce illegal exports of stolen vehicles. This strategy aligns with how the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency is currently operating with our sister association in the U.S., the National Insurance Crime Bureau.

Public-private partnerships create a more effective and efficient way of addressing the issue of auto theft by allowing us to pool resources and lend our expertise.

Canadians have been withstanding the worst outcomes of this public safety and financial crisis. We know that our collective strength comes from the actions we take to improve our communities and take care of one another.

● (1540)

I look forward to continuing the momentum that was started earlier this month at the National Summit on Combatting Auto Theft and to finding collaborative solutions to protect honest, hard-working Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. O'Brien.

Mr. Vording is next.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Shawn Vording (Vice-President, Product and Sales, CARFAX Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon. My name is Shawn Vording. I'm a 15-year executive at Carfax Canada and was recently announced as the new president.

I would like to thank the committee for inviting us to talk about auto theft, which we take very seriously.

We have been helping Canadians identify auto theft for over 25 years and have been actively working with various stakeholders and partners for the past six years. We are Canada's definitive source of automotive information, delivering vehicle history, appraisal and valuation. Our products help millions of Canadians make better decisions when it comes to buying, selling and owning vehicles.

We recently attended the automotive theft summit on February 8, where we learned even more about the various efforts of multiple partners and potential additional opportunities for Carfax Canada, in order to help address auto theft in Canada.

When it comes to automotive theft and fraud, the Carfax Canada vehicle history report helps our customers identify critical issues before they purchase a vehicle, such as vehicle information numbers, or VINs, specific to cloning; VIN tampering; stolen cars; and inaccuracies in vehicle data. In fact, for any VIN in North America, Carfax Canada has access to data that may help determine whether this is the case.

Carfax Canada provides products and services to several customer segments and is proud to work with many partners. These include Canadian consumers, Canadian automotive dealers, automotive manufacturers, banks, auctions, insurance carriers, Équité, the Insurance Bureau of Canada, border services agencies and Canadian law enforcement agencies.

Carfax Canada continues to acquire data and invest in products and services to help consumers and all stakeholders across the country tackle this major issue. We remain fully committed and are eager to expand our efforts and partnerships even further to benefit all Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vording.

Ms. Power, go ahead, please.

Ms. Celyeste Power (President and Chief Executive Officer, Insurance Bureau of Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As Terri noted, our industry sees trends before they become a crisis by way of rising claims costs. When we began to see auto theft numbers increase, we were quick to look at ways we could limit the impact on our customers. It was immediately clear that we would be unable to tackle this issue alone. Thankfully, the federal government's commitment to an action plan and the ongoing collaboration of many stakeholders mean we do not have to. It's now well understood that in order to combat auto theft in Canada, we need a whole-of-society approach.

I'd like to start by painting a picture. In terms of solving the auto theft crisis, where do we want to be by 2030?

Canada should no longer be seen as a target destination for international organized crime groups to source their stolen vehicles. By 2030, it should be so difficult to steal and export a car in Canada that organized crime groups look elsewhere. It should be so difficult that other countries are looking to emulate Canada's approach. This is critical because by 2030 we can expect to see more autonomous vehicles on our roads, and then the impact of vehicle theft will become much more severe.

How do we realize that vision?

First, we have to focus on prevention and consumer awareness to make cars harder to steal in the first place. A vehicle is reported stolen every five minutes in Canada. We need to do better for our constituents and for all Canadians.

Second, we need to expand intelligence and information sharing among enforcement agencies and industry partners. There are international examples that we can replicate here to disrupt the transnational criminal organizations from benefiting from auto theft.

Third, we need to focus on intervention and law enforcement to cut off the supply of stolen vehicles to international markets. Our borders are too porous. They're designed to prevent bad things from getting into our country, but we also need to deter things from getting out. This involves the CBSA and law enforcement, as well as the co-operation of shipping and rail companies and freight forwarders. Last week's \$15-million funding announcement is certainly a good start, but there's more work to do.

Finally, we need to improve the recovery of vehicles, in part through international policing coordination, to make it easier to bring your constituents' vehicles home.

What else could we do?

When it comes to elevating consumer awareness, insurers are doing their part. In addition to consumer education at the point of sale by brokers and agents and incentivizing the installation of aftermarket anti-theft devices, our industry ran an "End Auto Theft" campaign last fall to educate drivers on what they can do to protect themselves. We reached tens of millions of drivers.

We can build on this campaign while promoting other efforts. There are great examples of consumer education out there, and we need to see more of that.

As for prevention, we welcome Transport Canada's commitment to modernize outdated motor vehicle safety standards to improve theft deterrents. Updating standards and regulations can take time,

so our industry is prepared to partner with manufacturers on this to make it move as quickly as possible.

Through *Équité*, insurers are also committed to sharing their data with law enforcement agencies and the CBSA. In the U.S., Customs and Border Protection actively shares intelligence information with the National Insurance Crime Bureau to detect and prevent the export of stolen vehicles. They indicate that this has been incredibly useful.

Enhanced information sharing will help inform earlier, more-targeted enforcement, further cutting off the supply of stolen vehicles. The provinces also have a role to play here in addressing the vulnerabilities in revinning a vehicle.

With regard to intervention and enforcement, preventing the illegal export of vehicles absolutely should be the priority.

In Canada, export documents can be amended after a ship has set sail. In the U.S., Customs and Border Protection requires the exporter of a vehicle to present all export documents and the vehicle at the port at least 72 hours prior to export. As a result, law enforcement experts estimate that only 10% of their stolen vehicles are slated for export. In Canada, that number is over 50%.

With regard to recovery, once vehicles are out of Canada, it's complicated and costly to get them back. Sharing our law enforcement information with foreign partners, including Interpol, would help arm international customs officials with the knowledge they need to intervene.

In closing, I want to state the obvious: Auto theft is not a victimless crime. It affects every Canadian—each and every one of your constituents—either directly or indirectly.

● (1545)

Like in any other business, increased costs will eventually be borne by the customer. Last year, auto theft added an average of \$130 to insurance premiums in Ontario and \$105 in Quebec. This is to say nothing of the upstream and downstream impacts that auto theft is having on Canadians' safety in their communities—our communities—every day.

We can do better—we must do better—for our friends and neighbours across the country.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Power.

We'll open the floor for questions.

First up is Mr. Lloyd, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Dane Lloyd (Sturgeon River—Parkland, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

I'll start off with Ms. O'Brien.

Your analysts are at the port of Montreal. They analyze the containers, using statistical methods to determine if those containers might contain stolen vehicles. Is that correct?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: That's correct. We have investigators who are at the port of Montreal every day, working collaboratively with CBSA, Montreal police services and the RCMP. Our analytics team is across Canada, and they work remotely, running statistics and analysis to support confirming that the vehicles in the containers are in fact stolen vehicles.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Is it true that your analysts were pulled out of the port of Montreal in January of this year? Were there analysts removed from the port of Montreal?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: No. We have investigators who are present in the port of Montreal, and no, they work quite collaboratively with CBSA and police services. That's not true.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: You didn't have analysts there before who were pulled out in January?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: No. That's not correct.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Okay. Thank you for that. I was curious.

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Okay.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: My next question is for Carfax Canada.

We know that we're dealing with Bill C-27 in another committee and there are a lot of privacy issues with it, and we of course know that VINs—vehicle identification numbers—are part of that. Do you have any concerns about Bill C-27 and VINs? Is there an impact that this committee should be aware of?

Mr. Shawn Vording: Thank you for the question. There are definitely concerns.

The proposed bill as it stands today is very unclear as to whether or not VINs are going to be classified as personal information. I think you've heard from all three of us that the importance of VINs. The data associated with a VIN—not with an individual—is critical in combatting not only vehicle thefts but fraud in general.

We continue to take a position that a VIN is not personal information and obviously are working with other committees to get clarity on that.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you for that.

We're all talking about the vehicles that are being exported primarily through our ports, but a lot of people would know that tens of thousands of these stolen vehicles have cloned VINs and are being resold in Canada to unsuspecting consumers. It just seems glaring to me that in our country you can have people with all the VINs

and all the insurance paperwork you need for a vehicle, and people are unknowingly buying stolen vehicles in Canada.

What is Carfax doing and what can the government do to help ensure that Canadians aren't purchasing stolen vehicles unsuspectingly?

• (1550)

Mr. Shawn Vording: Thank you for the question.

Access to data is critical. We have an entire team that's out in the market always generating additional data points for our reports. The more comprehensive the data is, the easier it is to detect these cloned VINs. Most of it is done through a sequence of events. A vehicle is registered in Ontario and a day later registering it in British Columbia is attempted. A vehicle is in an accident in Saskatchewan, and a very short duration later registering it in another province is tried.

For us, access to data and the more data we have on the report, the easier it is to detect these cloned VINs, and then for us it's the general awareness through work with our partners and working through our brand team to make sure consumers know the importance of running a vehicle history check. We believe that we are instrumental in preventing the exchange of some of these vehicles into consumers' hands by catching them at the trade-in phase or at the dealership's lot before a consumer can purchase them.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you.

My next question is for Ms. Power. I'm sure the insurance industry is frustrated by the number of claims that are being paid out—\$1.2 billion last year, I think. As an insurance industry, I'm sure you're looking at all the factors.

One thing we've seen consistently in the news is that, for the people who are being apprehended for stealing these vehicles, it's not the first time. Often they're people who have been apprehended before for stealing a vehicle. They might even have been to prison or, in some cases, they might be on bail.

Does the Insurance Bureau generally support creating tougher penalties for people who are caught stealing cars multiple times?

Ms. Celyeste Power: Thank you very much for the question.

Generally, we think that all options should be on the table to be explored to help combat the auto theft crisis. In addition to looking at stiffer penalties for the criminals doing this work, we're also advocating that we invest resources in prosecuting resources. We've seen that done in Ontario, and it has been helpful in making sure that these are actually working through the court system. That will send a very significant message through to those criminal organizations.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you for bringing up the point about funding the court system. I feel the frustration of Canadians who saw—I think it was just last week, or two weeks ago—that because of court delays in this country, people who had been waiting with charges on them were allowed to walk free under Jordan's principle, because the court wasn't able to try them within a fair amount of time. I think Canadians are very frustrated. One, we're not catching these people who are committing the crimes as much as we need to be. Two, when they actually are being caught, we're not even hearing their cases in a quick enough manner and they're just walking free.

Are you frustrated by that when you see it happen?

Ms. Celyeste Power: I think a key part is to invest more into the resourcing of these prosecutions. It's important that the system works the way it's supposed to, but again, I think all options on the table to reduce auto theft, from stiffer penalties to investing more resources into prosecution, need to be explored.

Unless we're looking at all these options, this issue is not going away.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: Thank you.

The Chair: You have 10 more seconds.

Mr. Dane Lloyd: I'll leave it there and just thank everyone for coming.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lloyd.

Ms. O'Connell, go ahead, please.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all for being here.

It struck me in the testimony here today how important the auto theft summit was in terms of hearing the issues that other members are experiencing all in that room together. Even I had heard from organizations—Mr. Vording, you mentioned some additional information from partners that was incredibly helpful—and all echoed the comments about this not being a one-size-fits-all solution. We need partners at the table.

Mr. Vording, I'll start with you. This is following up on Mr. Lloyd's comments. We have similar statistics, that 50% or 60% of the cars that are stolen leave, but that means 40% to 50% actually stay in Canada. The issue around revinning is actually provincial. How do we as a federal government try to bring together provincial governments on this issue? What would you say is a gap? What's something that perhaps we could help with to close some of those gaps?

As you acknowledged in your example, often the moving between provinces and territories might be the way in which this revinning is able to happen.

• (1555)

Mr. Shawn Vording: I would suggest that one of the largest issues right now, or one of the biggest things that could be done to benefit the situation, is a better flow of data. Right now a time lag exists between vehicles that are known to be on the road in one jurisdiction that move into another jurisdiction for an out-of-province

inspection. Based on the metrics that we see, a majority of the cloned VINs are moving provinces. There is a loophole in the registration system at the provincial level that's allowing this to happen.

How is that prevented? It's prevented through providing quicker access to data. It's done through collaboration, whether that's at the provincial level or at the federal level, so that jurisdictions have better access to what is supposed to be on the road and where. That's versus this loophole right now, where a vehicle that is in a driveway in Ontario or in a dealership lot in Ontario is currently being bought as an out-of-province vehicle.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

Do licence plate renewals have anything to do with this? Ontario just announced that there will no longer be an automatic renewal. I'm genuinely curious about it. When I first read that story, I thought, does this help or hurt the issue in terms of tracking? At least when you renew your licence plate, you also have to verify your VIN and ownership. I don't know.

Have you looked at this at all? Is this a concern or a challenge, or is it not really an issue in terms of the revinning?

Mr. Shawn Vording: It's an interesting data point. There is value in that data point. In Ontario specifically, the number of people who are actually going and renewing their licence plates has been low to begin with since the changes were implemented. There are much better data points. For instance, Carfax has access to billions of vehicle service records in Canada. The service is more timely. You get your oil changed more often than you get your licence plate renewed. There are much better data points that are more timely than licence plate renewals.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Perfect. Thank you.

Ms. Power, you spoke about the export data in advance for shipping. I heard this at the summit as well in terms of the U.S. I'm curious to know how they do it differently from Canada. What's something that could be implemented? How are they able to do that and coordinate with freight, etc., which, again, might fall under some provincial jurisdiction? What is the standardized process that we should be looking at?

Ms. Celyeste Power: I will make a quick comment. Then, if you don't mind, Mr. Chair, I will ask my colleague from Équité to jump in here, as well.

Obviously, each piece of this is important to the auto theft crisis, but we feel that sharing information and implementing the 72-hour rule at the border would be extremely impactful in cutting down auto thefts.

I'll ask my colleague Terri to speak about how that works in the U.S.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

Ms. Terri O'Brien: My colleague Ms. Power mentioned that we have been recommending the 72-hour rule, wherein the vehicle has to be presented 72 hours in advance, prior to export.

Another key control U.S. Customs and Border Protection has is that the shipping manifest cannot be amended post-departure. In Canada, in some of the investigations we participate in, we'll see that a container will be listed with a load of dishwashers, for example, and then get changed to vehicles after the fact.

I will share that we work closely with the NICB in the U.S., which I spoke about. The U.S. is experiencing auto theft to a degree similar to Canada. Last year, they lost one million vehicles in the U.S., and we lost about 100,000 in Canada. They're 10 times our population. Similarly, the state of California lost 100,000 vehicles. They are 38 million people, so it's akin to the population in Canada. Most recently, in sharing information with our U.S. counterparts, we learned the eastern ports of Baltimore and New Jersey are starting to see increases in the export of stolen vehicles as well to some of the illegal trade routes across the Atlantic that we also experience.

The U.S. is in a similar place on auto theft.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you for that info. I think it also goes to the point that investments in organized crime and cuts in officers specifically around organized crime are problems, because that seems to be a real driver.

Thank you.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Michaud, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for being here.

I have been eagerly awaiting this study. On October 23, I proposed a motion that the committee study this important topic. In the meantime, other parties have talked about it, which is great. What's important is that we talk about it.

The government hosted the National Summit on Combatting Auto Theft, which I attended, and I saw a few of you there as well. It's important to bring everyone together and start the discussion. However, I am wondering about the government's co-operation with organizations such as yours, both before and after the summit was held. The government said that there would be an action plan afterwards. Announcements were made on the margins of the summit, when we hadn't actually heard from all of the day's speakers and stakeholders. I would like to hear your comments on the announcements that were made and on the investments.

This seems to have been the most effective summit we've had so far, since a few days later, there was a search of 26 containers at the Port of Montreal. They contained 54 stolen vehicles. That was done by the police. We assumed that those discussions must have led to something, although I imagine that the operation had already been planned.

I'd like to start with you, Ms. O'Brien.

I know that the Équité Association is working with the joint squad set up by the Sûreté du Québec. Several Quebec municipalities were also involved, including the police services of Terrebonne, Blainville, Montreal, Longueuil and Châteaugay, as well as the RCMP and the Canada Border Services Agency, or CBSA.

First, explain to me briefly what the Équité Association does and what positive effects the co-operation with the joint squad in Quebec has had.

Second, what do you think about the announcements that have been made by the government, particularly by the Minister of Justice regarding possible amendments to the Criminal Code and by Minister Champagne regarding a possible ban on the import, sale and use of devices that are used to detect key fob signals?

I have asked a lot of questions, so I will give you the floor. Feel free to take the time you need.

[*English*]

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Thank you very much. Thank you for your participation and for bringing this forward at committee as well. I really appreciate it.

We have been very heartened at Équité Association by all of the recent announcements and partnerships, in particular, by the actions that have come out of the summit. They have really started to make meaningful headway against auto theft.

In terms of the most recent announcement of \$15 million for law enforcement and collaboration, particularly between the SQ, Montreal police services and CBSA, our team works quite closely with them, particularly at the port of Montreal, so that is an excellent announcement. We've participated in project research in Quebec that has been ongoing for the past year, in effect acting as a Quebec auto theft team, and have made meaningful headway in terms of vehicle recoveries and stemming the flow of funds into organized crime.

The previous announcement of \$28 million for CBSA was very encouraging. We've had continued and increased collaboration with President O'Gorman and the team at CBSA. They've been fantastic partners for many years. This increased funding and collaboration has been really welcome news.

The port operations, particularly at the port of Montreal—but we also operate at the port of Halifax—have been running at a very increased rate for months. They started several months prior to the summit but are continuing post-summit as well, which has been fantastic.

The RCMP partnership was announced at the summit by Commissioner Duheme; however, the RCMP has since followed through with uploading our CPIC or stolen vehicle data from Canada to Interpol. Équité Association was designated as the non-law enforcement repatriation agency in Canada, and we're already seeing over 150 stolen vehicles identified. We are working to repatriate those vehicles to the rightful owners.

The OPP auto theft team has also been quite active. It is at the borders in both Ontario and Quebec, working collaboratively with the SQ, Montreal police, Toronto police, CBSA and us. That work has been continuing as well. There was also a large Ontario announcement recently as well.

I think I hit all of your announcements. Did you want me to speak a bit about Minister Champagne's devices, or was that sufficient?

• (1605)

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Yes, absolutely. I would like to hear your comments on Minister Champagne's announcement, because everything you are telling us seems quite positive.

However, the numbers are quite alarming. It's a nationwide scourge. Squads may be set up and the police may take action, but many Quebecers and Canadians are having their vehicles stolen on a daily basis. What more can we do? What more can the government do?

At the National Summit on Combatting Auto Theft, CBSA officials had to deal with attacks from all sides. Investments to strengthen CBSA are all well and good, yet a report was published indicating a lack of training for border services officers and inspectors who work directly at the ports, in particular.

I would also like to hear your comments on that.

[English]

Ms. Terri O'Brien: The investments in the CBSA were across additional investigators and training, as well as analytics. The continued sharing of information will be critical for us, CBSA and other law enforcement partners, so we can do more targeted inspections. Sharing that intelligence in targeted inspections has proven to be very successful as we spoke about it with the U.S. jurisdiction.

I think that's critical. It's certainly not feasible to inspect every container. However, the CBSA has been an excellent partner in that regard, and we're looking to increase information sharing with them as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

Next, we have Mr. Julian, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to our witnesses. We really appreciate your testimony.

I'd like to start with you, Ms. O'Brien.

I would like to know two things. First, the CBSA cuts that we saw under the former Harper government really haven't been re-

stored under the current government. To what extent do you believe that has had an impact on our ability to cut the export of stolen cars? The estimates range as high as 80%, as I know you're aware. To what extent have those cutbacks helped to trigger, in a sense, this increase in crime syndicates using auto theft as a way of making money?

Second, I'm interested in the work of the analysts. When the analysts determine that there are suspected exports of stolen vehicles, who do they contact first? Do they contact CBSA? Do they contact the Montreal police? How is that information shared? What has been the response time for those concerns being raised by the analysts at CBSA and the police?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Thank you for the good questions.

I can't speak to the CBSA cuts, necessarily, as I don't really have purview over its organizational structure and funding structure, but what I can say is that with the resources it has allocated to out-bound inspections, it has always been responsive. It's always been a great partner, understanding, of course, that the priority in recent years has been on inspections of guns and drugs coming into the country.

In our understanding of this complex, multi-faceted problem of auto theft, it's also been a key learning in the past two years that auto theft is funding gun and drug crimes in our communities. The additional funding now put into the CBSA has been welcome, and it is focused on auto theft and ensuring that we have those inspections in place to cut off that funding source. I think that is important.

In terms of analytics and how they help, analytics can look at things such as VIN data—as my colleague Mr. Vording mentioned—container weight, shipping lines, shipper destinations and other non-PII data to target those containers that have red flags, as in the example earlier. It may not be a container of dishwashers, and we can tell that by all of the various data elements that are analyzed.

How we share different trends and intelligence these days is through the MOUs we have in place and our partnerships with law enforcement, and then law enforcement shares that with the CBSA. What we'd like to do is open up that information sharing through an MOU or tri-party agreement, inclusive of the CBSA, such that it can share some of the information off the B13 manifests.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

My next question is for both you, Ms. O'Brien, and you, Ms. Power.

I notice from the deck that there has been a spike upward in motor vehicle thefts in Ontario and Quebec. It's 53% in Ontario and 66% in Quebec over the last two years. In Atlantic Canada, it's 26%. Western Canada is the anomaly, with only an 8% rise. In British Columbia, we actually saw a decrease in 2022.

To what extent is the B.C. model...? I know you're aware that B.C. has the largest bait car program in the world. Our thanks go to the New Westminster Police, the RCMP in Burnaby and Surrey, and all of the law enforcement, including the transit police who are involved in that bait car program.

What are the best practices we can learn from the B.C. model? While not perfect, it has certainly contributed to not seeing the rise that we're seeing in other parts of the country. Can we learn from the bait car program in B.C. and in B.C.'s Lower Mainland? Are there other things that we can learn from as well?

• (1610)

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Thank you for the question.

What I can share is that we have significant bait car vehicle programs in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, and we work collaboratively with our members in the insurance industry and with law enforcement to run those programs. What I would share about the difference in the experience with B.C. is that the illegal trade markets overseas are across the Atlantic. They are in the continent of Africa and in the Middle East, primarily, as well as in various countries in Europe.

However, on the west coast, there are not the illegal trade markets in China and Asia, and some of the other countries that you would see across the Pacific.

Secondarily, I would say that all of the shipping routes through the Pacific Ocean have to cross over into U.S. territory. If they go south, they're almost immediately out of the port of Vancouver or other B.C. ports and into U.S. territory. If they go north, they hit Alaskan waters and are, again, in U.S. territory. Therefore, they are subject to search and seizure by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Due to the lack of illegal trade markets overseas and that impediment with U.S. markets, we're seeing far more exploits and illegal vehicle shipments across the Atlantic.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Can I ask Ms. Power what we can learn from B.C.?

Ms. Celyeste Power: To Ms. O'Brien's point, we are seeing less auto theft from B.C., of course, because of a number of provincial actions, but also because we aren't seeing the export on the B.C. side that we're seeing on the Atlantic side. For example, Alberta actually has a high theft rate. It's just that it's not as costly from an insurance perspective because we can get the vehicles back, since they're not able to make their way out of the country as quickly as we've seen elsewhere.

In terms of provincial recommendations like the bait program, which is an excellent one, the tag team we're seeing in Ontario is another good one. From a provincial perspective, revinning and closing those loopholes that we heard about from the other witness today would be incredibly helpful.

However, I would like to note, as Terri mentioned, that there's a bigger picture for why we're not quite seeing those in B.C. Nonetheless, we should be learning from what works there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

We're moving into the second round now.

Mr. Kurek, go ahead, please. You have five minutes.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thanks to our witnesses for being here.

I want to bring a rural dynamic into the conversation. I would note that I believe it was about a year and a half or two years ago that the insurance industry and others declared that auto theft was a crisis. Back in the 42nd Parliament, motion 167 on rural crime talked extensively about rural auto thefts. Both of you noted, in the periphery of your remarks, the dynamics associated with export versus with more domestic challenges. I know that chop shops are a big issue in rural Canada.

Can you comment on how we can crack down on and track not just vehicles but also how they're being sold for parts and broken down in that way? That's obviously a significant part of the conversation.

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Absolutely. Thank you for the question.

Yes, a small percentage of the vehicles are actually being chopped up for parts. I think the most significant ones are catalytic converters. Catalytic converters have precious metals embedded in them, and when the value of those metals goes up, the catalytic converters become more valuable. We've seen vehicles being stolen to be chopped up for parts, or we've seen just the catalytic converters being cut out of the vehicles. We've seen mass incidents of that, in which thieves have gone into leasing companies or dealerships and have just cut out all the catalytic converters.

I believe it was the Province of Manitoba that implemented a law that has been quite effective there, which we would encourage the other provinces to look at. Really, it involves know-your-vehicle or bill-of-sale documentation. It's sort of like the way a pawn shop works. When you go to sell something at a pawn shop, you have to show ownership. You would have to show some details around the vehicle and how it got chopped up for parts.

That's being applied to the salvage industry, so if somebody drives up with a truck full of catalytic converters, they have to have a bill of sale for each one.

• (1615)

Mr. Damien Kurek: I apologize. We have only a short period of time, although I welcome all of you to please feel free to follow up with the committee if you have specific recommendations or further evidence you'd like to submit. Note in those submissions that they can be distributed and made public as well.

I've heard from a host of constituents. In fact, I have in front of me an email from a constituent who talks about a known criminal attempting to steal their truck and having stolen their neighbour's truck in a rural area. They had camera evidence but it wasn't seen to be quite enough. They talked about the whole reign of terror of these known petty thieves who are stealing vehicles.

In your opening statements you talked about the cost this has and how it's not a victimless crime. Not only does it terrify and victimize and, in many cases, traumatize the individuals who have seen significant violations, but it also has a significant impact on the cost of living. Insurance rates are not included in the inflationary index, yet we're seeing significant increases in the cost of insurance, which is of course essential for anybody in our large country. In rural areas, we don't have public transit, so you have to own a vehicle.

I am just wondering if you can share with the committee how we reconcile that there's an incentive to make sure that vehicles are not stolen, and there's an incentive to make sure that these thieves, in many cases on bail.... In some cases, they have stolen a vehicle and been arrested, and the same day they are back out on the streets, stealing more vehicles. I can point to a number of examples.

What's the picture here to make sure we can deal with it so that ultimately Canadians can save on insurance costs? The cost of vehicles over the last couple of years is up 20%. That's a massive cost and a contributor to inflation, which is not tracked in the government's numbers. I'd like to hear your feedback about how we stop this and ensure that, ultimately, Canadians aren't having to pay the price for the host of circumstances leading to massive increases in costs.

Ms. Celyeste Power: Thank you very much for the great question.

Perhaps I'll start with the cost. It was \$1.2 billion last year, and that was in addition to a number of other costs that we've seen increasing across the auto insurance industry. Our vehicles are all becoming much more expensive to repair. The industry did look at ways in which we could mitigate the impact of this on our own, prior of course to the great collaboration we're seeing now.

One way is to incentivize the installation of aftermarket tracking devices so that, when your vehicle is stolen, we can see where it is and we can get it back for you. That, of course, will lead to a reduction in costs. Those can be upwards of \$500 to install, and a number of insurers have been waiving that fee or incentivizing folks to do it by not charging the surcharge you may have to pay if you have a high-risk vehicle. Those are some ways we're trying to incentivize.

We're also making sure we get consumer information out to customers at the point of sale, including when to install a bar on your

steering wheel. You might want to put your key in a Faraday bag. We've been giving those away as well.

We are very much trying to do what we can on our end to incentivize and limit the impacts of theft.

In terms of what we can do all together, again, it's not going to be just one government and one solution. With respect to the federal government's action plan, we implore you to look at all options available to you, from having stiffer penalties to resourcing prosecution to reprioritizing CBSA towards auto theft and imposing the 72-hour rule. Those things are critical. Provincially we need to examine investing in enforcement teams and look at revinning.

I'll stop there because I see we're at time.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Power.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the extra time.

The Chair: We have Mr. McKinnon, please.

Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a very interesting study and very important.

From the discussion so far, I get the point that revinning is critical to effectively stealing cars. That to me implies that the people who are stealing cars have to be connected to a larger sophisticated organization.

Would you say that's true? The question is for anybody who wishes to respond.

• (1620)

Ms. Terri O'Brien: I can respond on revinning. As my colleague Ms. Power said, there are some loopholes in our provincial registration systems across the provinces that allow revinning to happen.

One of those loopholes is requesting RIN histories. What that is is a list of vehicles that includes make, model, colour, details about the vehicle, past owners and the VINs. It's almost like a shopping list. As Mr. Vording said, in the province of Alberta you can see all of the VINs that you could then use to re-register a vehicle in Ontario with what looks like a legitimate VIN number, but it's actually a cloned VIN from another province.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: Would a petty criminal who's going to steal a car have access to this, or would that be unusual? Would they typically be working through a large criminal organization?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Anybody in the public, for a small fee, can purchase a RIN history, but our experience in investigations has shown that these are organized crime rings that are executing these auto theft crimes across provinces.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: When revinning a car, you have to actually take the window out and take the certificate out. You have to have somebody make that new device to put in there. What does it take to do that?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: A VIN plate is a very simple piece of metal, but most of the revinning—or cloned VINs or fictitious VINs—is really happening through registration paperwork and through shipping manifests, so they're crimes of paperwork that are allowing stolen vehicles to leave the country or be sold to unsuspecting customers.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: If someone steals a car and they haven't revinned it, what are their options? Apart from the loopholes we've mentioned in the registration system, are they able to sell it domestically or must they export the vehicle?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: No, they can affix a new VIN plate and resell it domestically, or they can move province and re-register it in another province and sell it domestically.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: I'm saying that, absent revinning it, they would have to move provinces.

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Moving provinces is an effective way to evade detection.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: Even if they hadn't revinned the car, they could take it to another province and sell it.

Ms. Terri O'Brien: They could take it to another province and fraudulently re-register it, yes.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: Okay. If we were to fix the loophole in the system that is exploited by criminals currently for revinning and all the other loopholes in the system—communication between the provinces and so forth—how would that work to stop theft? Would that stop thefts in Canada?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: No. I would say, as Ms. Power said, we've been working collaboratively with all industries for a whole-of-society approach, as our friends at the IBC have been saying. Stopping the revinning fraud certainly stops the domestic resale of stolen vehicles, but preventing the vehicles from being stolen in the first place with effective software patches or prevention technology such as immobilizers is really critical to stopping the theft—and then stopping the export stems the funding into those illegal trade markets and into organized crime. It is a multi-faceted problem, and really all of these measures need to be taken.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: I understand that. I'm just trying to focus on one at a time.

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Okay.

Mr. Ron McKinnon: Ms. Power, you mentioned that stiffer penalties might be an option. I spent an afternoon one time with a good box of wine talking to a criminal defence lawyer whose major clientele were drug people. He said they just considered whatever the penalty was a cost of doing business. The sweat soldiers would do some time, and they'd move up the ladder and eventually they wouldn't be doing it anymore. They'd have other people doing it.

I'm wondering, since they did not consider penalties to be a major factor in whether or not they did the crime, whether there's any correlation between the stiffness of sentences and the reduction of crime.

Ms. Celyeste Power: I would say that it should be explored, and I know the government's committed to exploring stiffer penalties under the Criminal Code. However, it's not just that which is going to make the impact, as Ms. O'Brien noted. We need many factors in there. When we're looking at penalties and the Criminal Code, we would suggest that looking at resourcing prosecution is actually a key priority area that could make sure the system works as properly as possible.

It is not the silver bullet, unfortunately. None of these things is the silver bullet.

• (1625)

Mr. Ron McKinnon: I'm not looking for silver bullets. I understand there are many aspects. When I asked to be given an aspect, that's what I'm interested in.

We don't necessarily know that the stiffness of penalties is a sufficient deterrent. What about the likelihood of being caught? Do you see that as a higher disincentive for stealing vehicles?

Ms. Celyeste Power: I know the law enforcement panel is after us, so I would suggest exploring this further with them, given their expertise. However, I would say that I think all these aspects should be on the table to explore.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McKinnon and Ms. Power.

We're moving on now to Ms. Michaud for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like Ms. O'Brien to tell us about Minister Champagne's announcement on the use of high-tech devices.

Is that a good step forward? Will criminal networks find easy ways to get around all this? What do you think?

[English]

Ms. Terri O'Brien: Thank you very much for the question.

I think the announcement from Minister Champagne was a good step forward, in that banning these devices is helpful. However, I would share that there are dozens of these devices. The Flipper device is one that amplifies a signal from a key to a car, which is called a relay attack. Most of the auto thefts we're seeing right now are reprogramming a new key through the OBD port, or it's a CAN bus attack, wherein they just connect into the car's computer technology system.

We're seeing very effective prevention technologies in other jurisdictions such as the U.K., where manufacturers that operate in the U.K. are downloading security patches into their technology systems that prevent the CAN bus or the controller area network from being overcome. These are simple technology solutions that can prevent the cars from being stolen in the first place. I think some of the incentive for the prevention technology innovations we're seeing in the U.K. is due to some insurers in the U.K. deeming some vehicles on our top 10 list to be uninsurable, or their insurance is over 10,000 pounds a year.

I might ask my colleague Ms. Power to speak about how some of those levers are perhaps not available to Canadian insurers, though we're seeing them used quite effectively in the U.K. right now.

Ms. Celyeste Power: Thank you very much.

I would note that, as an insurance industry, we are very heavily regulated, not only on the federal front but also provincially. Provincially, the regulator tells us what we can sell, how we can sell it, who we can sell it to and for how much.

One rule in place in Ontario and Alberta is a take-all-comers rule or adverse contractual action rule. That means we have to quote every single customer for auto insurance. If you have a high-risk vehicle in the U.K., the insurer might be able to say, "I'm sorry, but no, we're not going to insure you anymore." In Ontario and Alberta, we are legally mandated to do so.

Individual insurers are working closely with the regulator to send out price signals and push for new rules. However, under law, we're not able to take advantage of that tool, unfortunately.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, you'll be the last questioner for this round.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Thanks to all the witnesses. You've added a lot of important information.

I want to come back to the issue of manufacturers and what responsibilities they have.

We will be preparing a committee report and will be making a series of recommendations. I think one issue the government hasn't touched on as much as it should is that of manufacturers incorporating security measures into their design or updating that design, allowing car theft to be cut back.

Could each of you set forth—perhaps starting with you, Ms. O'Brien—some recommendations that we can take forward in terms of what manufacturers should be compelled to do in the Canadian market to help break down the increase we've seen in auto thefts?

Ms. Terri O'Brien: I think the number one thing manufacturers can do is strengthen their security systems through simple solutions, such as software patches or immobilizers. That would prevent the cars from being stolen in the first place.

Think about the broader context of today's conversation. If the vehicles cannot be stolen in the first place, the expense of special prosecutors, port authorities and law enforcement, and the danger to our communities—the carjackings and all those things—will

start to come down, because organized crime will no longer be able to exploit Canadians and steal vehicles with the absolute speed—under 60 seconds—that they can today.

I mentioned the U.K. The U.K. is making great strides in terms of the simple technologies their manufacturers are installing to prevent vehicles from being stolen in the first place.

• (1630)

Mr. Peter Julian: Ms. Power.

Ms. Celyeste Power: I don't have much further to add.

I understand that the vehicle manufacturers were at the summit, and I understand that they're testifying before this committee, which is good news. I think that they, like us, have a critical role in preventing auto theft. I don't have much to add to Ms. O'Brien's....

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Vording.

Mr. Shawn Vording: An emerging area within manufacturers is the connected car. Vehicles are generating more of their own data, which is accessible to the manufacturers. That data currently sits with them, and for sure there is information in there that could help mitigate this.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Mr. Clark, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Jason Clark: No.

Mr. Peter Julian: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Julian. I appreciate that.

I thank all of you for your testimony here today.

We're going to suspend for five minutes to get ready for our next panel.

Thank you again.

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Maybe your suggestion in your question today in QP that we actually ban all roads would solve the vehicle theft problem, like you—

The Chair: We'll take that into consideration. Thank you, Mr. Motz.

Mr. Glen Motz: —climate change minister wants to do.

Mr. Peter Julian: Let it be read into the record that Conservatives favour axing the roads.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order, please.

I would like to welcome our second panel of witnesses.

In person, we have Mr. Weber from the Customs and Immigration Union. By video conference we have, from Peel Regional Police, Deputy Chief Nick Milinovich, and, from the Toronto Police Service, Deputy Chief Robert Johnson. Thank you for being here, all of you.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

I now invite Deputy Chief Milinovich to make an opening statement, please.

Deputy Chief Nick Milinovich (Deputy Chief of Police, Peel Regional Police): Good afternoon.

Thank you, House committee members. Thank you for including Peel Regional Police in your study of the growing crisis of auto thefts in Canada.

Our police service has been at the forefront of this issue since its onset. Despite these efforts, we continue to have one of the highest per capita rates of stolen vehicles in the country. Last year alone, over 7,000 vehicles were taken from our region. This has become a significant threat to the safety and security of our cities and communities here in Peel, the GTA and on a national and international level.

Canada has become a source country for stolen cars, which is among the top three revenue generators for organized crime and is used to support other criminal enterprises like illegal firearms, human trafficking and drug trafficking, which find their way back to our communities and victimize them again.

Record numbers of people are waking up and walking out to their driveways to find that their vehicles have been stolen. In some cases, they've had that experience multiple times. Others are walking out to parking lots and seeing that their vehicles have been stolen. The reality is that they are more fortunate than people who are experiencing this by someone busting down their door in the middle of the night or taking their vehicle with the use of violence, oftentimes armed.

Over the course of the last two years in Peel Region alone, there were 185 carjackings. Home invasions are now increasing exponentially as well.

The solution to this problem extends well beyond enforcement, but I want to make it clear that we aren't absconding from our responsibilities. In Peel, we have more than doubled our commercial auto crimes team. We have one of the largest investigative auto theft teams in the country. We continue to work with our partners on a number of joint force operations and lead efforts toward creating multisectoral approaches to address this issue. This has resulted in an increased awareness from the community and changes, as we've heard, in the area of insurance. It has resulted in opportunities to advocate for our community at municipal, provincial and federal levels. We need to continue to coordinate this action among all of the relevant stakeholders.

Many of the recommendations you've heard today, which I've had an opportunity to listen to, begin to address and speak to the variety of opportunities we need to take advantage of. That being said, I want to be very specific about what I see as being the two

most obvious and quickest solutions that I think will begin to address the problem we're experiencing.

The first is the ports. I have personally visited the ports and was surprised to learn that, despite the number of autos that are being exported out of our country, there were no officers or analysts exclusively assigned to intercepting the export of stolen cars from our country. We need to resource and equip our ports in a way that is commensurate with the pressure and issues we are experiencing.

The second thing I would like to address is a national strategy. This isn't a Peel issue. It's not a greater Toronto issue. This is a national auto theft issue that we are experiencing, and we need a national strategy to respond to it. I understand that Public Safety is developing an action plan. My hope is that it will formally elevate auto theft to a national priority and examine opportunities to legislate tougher sanctions and federal sanctions, which would enhance police abilities to pursue the organized crime groups that are responsible for this.

The reality is that auto theft is no longer just a property crime, but it's still legislated as though it were. It shouldn't be treated that way. Additionally, we need a review of relevant legislation, which would include things like the Customs Act, the Export and Import Permits Act and a variety of other federal legislation.

Again, I believe that a national auto crime strategy that enhances our ability to pursue the organized crime groups that are responsible for this at a national level is required.

• (1640)

Again, our police service appreciates the standing committee's consideration of our recommendations, and I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Milinovich.

Now we'll move on to Toronto Police Service's Deputy Chief Johnson, please.

Deputy Chief Robert Johnson (Deputy Chief of Police, Toronto Police Service): Good afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the public safety and national security committee.

As we all know, community safety is a shared responsibility. We must work together to combat the organized crime that is impacting our communities. Toronto has experienced a dramatic spike in auto thefts over the last several years, more than anywhere else in Canada. In 2023, there were more than 12,000 vehicles stolen in Toronto alone.

Vehicle theft is an epidemic in this country. Twelve thousand cars amounts to approximately \$790 million, and that is the value of the vehicles stolen in Toronto alone this past year. That is about 34 vehicles stolen every day. That is one every 40 minutes.

Just last month, a mother with two children in car seats had her vehicle stolen in a grocery store parking lot. Two young offenders drove those children around for 15 minutes. They are safe now, but this terrorizing criminal activity has to stop.

It leaves people feeling anxious, afraid and victimized while organized criminals get rich. Since 2018, Toronto police have recovered over 46% of stolen vehicles, totalling more than 20,000 vehicles, and we have arrested more than 1,300 offenders and laid over 5,000 related charges.

We know that, like other crimes led by organized crime networks, they do not care about borders or jurisdiction. A violent carjacking in Toronto can end up with an arrest in Hamilton. We know that these stolen vehicles often wind up leaving Toronto and end up sold around the world by organized crime groups. Stealing cars is lucrative. It is quick money with endless demand. With little skill and few consequences, they can steal a vehicle and get cash fast. What we all need to be talking about is the escalation of violence, threats and intimidation, where all sorts of weapons and firearms are being used to steal vehicles.

I am also concerned about the ability of the justice system to deal with repeat offenders. Whether it is a carjacking, a break and enter, or a home invasion, criminals are getting far too brazen in their methods to steal vehicles and are causing residents across Toronto an incredible amount of fear and anxiety. Realtors tell us the demand for homes with garages is rising because of this.

In Toronto, home invasions, break and enters, and auto theft occurrences rose by over 400% in 2023, with a total of 202 incidents. Carjackings have also seen a dramatic rise in Toronto, with 233 occurrences reported in 2023. That's over 50% of all incidents reported in the GTA. In addition, since the beginning of this year, we've had 17 home invasions—that's double what we had last year at this time—and over 32 carjacking occurrences, which, again, is double what we had year-to-date this time last year.

This is why we are part of the provincial carjacking joint task force, with the support of the Government of Ontario and co-led by the Toronto Police Service and the Ontario Provincial Police. The task force is an excellent example of how working together with other law enforcement agencies and government agencies helps us in these complex investigations to disrupt this criminal element.

I believe we need a national strategy to have real impact on the rising number of auto thefts and the increasing violence. However, this is not just a law enforcement problem. We need to collaborate with all levels of government, along with our partners in private industry. Vehicle manufacturers, port authorities and shipping companies need to work with us to make it harder to steal and transport vehicles. We need to work in a coordinated manner to fight organized crime, stop the violence and keep our communities safe.

We welcome all efforts by manufacturers to better protect vehicles from being stolen and timely support for our investigators so that we can catch offenders and return vehicles to their owners. Police can make the arrests and provide safety tips, but we need others to do their part also.

Now is the time to be bold in developing partnerships with manufacturers, engineering experts and others to harness the rapidly de-

veloping technology that lies at the heart of the solution. Making vehicles harder to steal and making ports more secure from exploitation will help us reduce the growing number of carjackings.

The federal government is already playing an important role in bringing law enforcement and the private sector together, as we saw at the federal summit hosted in Ottawa about three weeks ago.

I also believe we need to be bold on justice reforms and work across all sectors to tackle repeat offenders and return a sense of safety to our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. I look forward to working collaboratively with all of you to keep our communities safe.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnson.

Go ahead, Mr. Weber, please, from the Customs and Immigration Union.

Mr. Mark Weber (National President, Customs and Immigration Union): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, as the national president of the union that represents CBSA personnel, including the border officers who work at marine ports, I'm glad to once again have the opportunity to appear before you. I hope to be of some assistance as part of your study on the growing problem of car thefts in Canada. Border officers are rarely consulted by senior agency officials, and I'm thankful to be here today to represent the hard-working women and men of the front line.

I'll be pretty brief. Anyone who's paid attention to the media in the last decade will know that the issue of stolen cars being exported through marine ports is not new. Unsurprisingly, the emphasis has often been on the border aspect of the issue, yet marine ports where stolen vehicles are sent to be exported are the last step in the process. More needs to be done to prevent vehicles from being stolen or reaching the port in the first place, and we are glad to see that this seems to be the consensus that emerged from the recent summit on car thefts.

Regarding the border itself, in the last few weeks we've seen both the federal government and official opposition propose a number of solutions, some of which are to be commended, considering the fairly unreliable nature of the inspection system that's currently available to our officers. However, at the end of the day, no effort was made to find out from the officers who work on the front line what was required to facilitate their examinations. Had anyone asked the question, they would have been told that a lack of space is the primary factor impacting the volume of examinations that we can perform at the port of Montreal. While the union provided a short, last-minute brief prior to the summit on car thefts highlighting this, it's unclear if this has been taken into consideration by the minister, as we were not involved or asked to participate in the summit.

This is yet another example of what the Customs and Immigration Union has been flagging for a long time, that solutions to border problems must involve the officers who perform work at the border on a daily basis. Once again, we're seeing solutions either proposed by people who have never done the work or adopted under the advisement of individuals who have never done the work. This is truly unique within the realm of law enforcement, because senior officials in most other law enforcement agencies and organizations have at least some level of frontline experience. This is rarely—close to never—the case at the CBSA, the result being an unparalleled disconnect between the upper echelon and the front line.

In closing, I want to insist on the fact that all of this is not a new problem and that more could have been done much earlier on. While the issue of exported stolen vehicles does not rest solely on the shoulders of the CBSA, we should not be surprised that the agency is somewhat out of breath, given past policy decisions under the Conservative government's deficit reduction action plan back in 2014, where we saw our personnel slashed by about 1,100 officers, from which we're still trying to recover.

Under the current government, things haven't been much better. Little has been done to actively address this deficit in personnel, with the focus being instead on misguided ventures such as ArriveCAN, highlighting what can only be described as a desire to turn our borders into a grocery store self-serve checkout.

Ultimately, investment in personnel and people is paramount to the process. Even where personnel issues may not be the primary factor, such as at the port of Montreal, the ability of the agency to protect Canadians and adapt to new challenges rests on a properly staffed front line.

I thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weber.

We're going to move right into our first round of questioning.

Up first for six minutes is Mr. Shipley, please.

Mr. Doug Shipley (Barrie—Springwater—Oro-Medonte, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

I'd like to ask my first question of both chiefs who are here virtually.

Recently my Conservative colleague MP Hoback introduced Bill C-379, which would implement tougher penalties for repeat car thieves across Canada by bringing in a mandatory minimum of three years in jail for those who have stolen a motor vehicle three times.

Do you think this legislation, if implemented, would assist your officers in putting and keeping repeat car thieves behind bars?

D/Chief Robert Johnson: I'll answer that first, if you don't mind, Nick.

I can tell you from our experience here in Toronto as well as from the statistics coming out of the provincial carjacking task force that almost 50% of those involved who we've apprehended are repeat offenders. Of them, about a third are young offenders. Clearly, there is an issue with folks being charged and arrested again and again for the same offence, so I think, in my opinion, that would help.

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: I will maybe just echo that. I do believe that consideration of legislative changes, such as how often a person is able to commit an offence, will make a difference.

I think that we need to be considerate about how we apply that, but the reality is that a large percentage of our carjackings are committed by people who have existing violent criminal records. That's definitely something that identifies itself as an opportunity to begin addressing.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you for that.

This question will be for Mr. Weber.

Last week you stated that the \$60 million that was used for the ArriveCAN app could have been used to hire 600 border agents. Meanwhile, we know that over the last eight years the current government has added only approximately 25 frontline officers to the CBSA.

Can you speak to what kind of message this sends to your hard-working CBSA officers, when the government is willing to squander \$60 million on an app while we currently have a shortage of border agents?

● (1655)

Mr. Mark Weber: Thank you for the question.

I think it sends a very negative message.

What we're seeing overall is an overreliance on technologies, like ArriveCAN, as you mentioned. We have PIK machines at airports. There are other technologies for which the focus seems to be replacing officers and automating our border, rather than helping officers interdict.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you for that.

I'll go back to Deputy Chief Johnson.

In your opening remarks, you mentioned a “spike in auto thefts” over the last few years and an “epidemic in this country”. Those are some of your words. You mentioned that there were 1,300 offenders. I’m not sure if it was you or the other chief that mentioned about repeat offenders.

Could you just mention what’s really driving this? Why is it increasing so much?

D/Chief Robert Johnson: Since 2018, there have been 1,300 offenders and over 5,000 charges.

To your previous question and to Deputy Chief Milinovich’s comments around folks that get involved in these types of offences, like I said earlier, almost 50% are repeat offenders, specifically with car theft or carjacking but also other violent offences. We are seeing that demographic.

As I also mentioned, about a third of that 50% are repeat young offenders.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you.

You mentioned that we really need a return to a sense of safety in communities.

Do you feel that if we get some of these repeat offenders off the streets, we would get back to a sense of safety in our communities?

D/Chief Robert Johnson: That’s one component.

There are some other strategies that I think we should look at, which have been mentioned already this afternoon.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you.

Deputy Chief Milinovich, you mentioned in your opening remarks, too, that we need “tougher sanctions”.

Would you like to expand on what exactly you mean by tougher sanctions?

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Yes, I believe we need to consider what is available to us in terms of enforcement and the legislation.

Generally speaking, you’re going to find people that are charged with possession of stolen property over \$5,000 or theft over \$5,000. These are the most common charges in auto theft, but they don’t reflect the risk and the injury that it’s causing to our communities.

What I would advocate for is, and in conversations with Crowns we always hear, that there should be federal legislation very similar to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, which would take some of those same concepts and legislate them very similarly to the way we do with illegal drugs.

The importation and exportation of stolen property or stolen autos, if federally legislated, would then have that jurisdiction attached to it. It would make it easier for the police sector to pursue and investigate that and really pursue the people responsible for it. That’s the organized crime element behind it, which is benefiting from this issue.

Mr. Doug Shipley: Thank you to the two deputies. I’m going to go back to Mr. Weber.

Mr. Weber, at a recent committee appearance, you mentioned that, as of 2019, only one-millionth of all rail cargo was effectively

being examined by the CBSA and that your operational abilities in the rail field are virtually non-existent.

Can you discuss how this lack of operational ability impacts our ability to address the auto theft crisis?

Mr. Mark Weber: Thank you.

It affects it greatly. You don’t know what you’re not catching when you don’t look. We effectively don’t look at rail at all, so if you’re asking me to tell you exactly how much is coming in, we really don’t know because it’s not a mode that we’re looking into.

When we’re looking at exports at the port of Montreal, for example, it’s the same kind of situation. There’s a very small percentage we could actually look at.

Mr. Doug Shipley: To all the witnesses today, thank you for being here.

The Chair: Thank you.

We’re going to move on to Mr. Gaheer, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer (Mississauga—Malton, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing before the committee. My questions are for the Peel police.

Deputy, it’s nice to see you.

First of all, I obviously want to extend a big thank you to the Peel police for all the service they provide to the community.

I’ll turn to the topic of auto theft. This is testimony from you, Deputy. Vehicle thefts in Peel have increased 118% over the last five years. In most regions, I think it’s a double-digit increase, but in Peel it’s a triple-digit increase.

Broken down by Mississauga’s 11 wards.... Ward 5, which is actually home to Pearson airport, overlaps largely with my riding of Mississauga—Malton. This region saw the most auto thefts by far in 2023, with 1,030. Ward 5 accounted for 42.2% of all auto thefts that occurred in Mississauga. This is one ward of 11. The remaining 10 wards saw fewer than 200 auto thefts. There’s really a focus in my region of Mississauga—Malton, unfortunately.

In your testimony and in some of your answers, you talked about the organized crime angle. One of my questions is about this. There’s definitely been a recruitment of youth and young adults into organized crime to do these crimes. Youth accounted for 21 of the 49 people facing charges in 2023. This is actually a quote from you.

What is the Peel police doing to target this?

• (1700)

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: This is why an approach that’s not linear is important.

We're aware of the fact that some of our youth are being targeted by organized crime groups that would like to take advantage of the vulnerabilities in youth. We're engaging service providers, looking for opportunities to intervene before a youth decides to get involved in carjacking, and pulling the community around and making sure that the investigative projects we are doing are considerate of the fact that we need to engage the right organizations and the right people to support our youth, who are maybe lacking some of that support, which makes them vulnerable to organized crime. Those are just a few examples in terms of the social development, the preventative piece and how we're approaching our youth.

However, it's also really important that we balance that with the need to understand that there is an element in our community that is willing to be incredibly violent and has demonstrated the behaviour to do that. We had a carjacking this year in which an international student lost their life. That was associated with and attached to a young person. It's shocking.

What we're doing is balancing our strategy and trying to apply it in the most appropriate places. Save people when we can, but unfortunately, there are circumstances when it's travelled too far.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: Data from Peel Regional Police shows that, on average, more than one car is stolen from a parking garage at Toronto Pearson airport every single day. From January to November 2023, the airport reported 410 vehicles stolen from its garages. We know that, unfortunately, Pearson airport has become a hub for this kind of stuff.

What is Peel police doing to work with the CBSA, or with the Greater Toronto Airports Authority and other partners, to ensure that Pearson doesn't remain this kind of hub?

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: We're continuing to work with the GTAA. As I mentioned, we've expanded our commercial auto crime unit, and it's going to be focusing very heavily on Pearson.

I'll provide you with some other stats. Last year, over 7,000 vehicles were taken. That's almost one per hour. Not on certain days, 1.5 vehicles are stolen from our region per hour. It's definitely one of the areas that we're paying attention to and that we're making sure we invest our thoughts and efforts in it.

One of the other witnesses mentioned intermodal rail. We have a rail yard here in Peel. That, again, is another gap. Our police service doesn't have jurisdiction. The CN police doesn't have jurisdiction to do inspections for criminal activity. The only people who have jurisdiction are in the CBSA, and that's federally legislated. We're advocating on behalf of that intermodal because we believe it's the pathway or the corridor to the Montreal port for us.

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: We also recently announced \$28 million to increase the CBSA's capacity to detect and search containers for stolen vehicles and to further enhance its ability to collaborate with local police forces. We also know the RCMP has started a national coordination and support team that's been established to work with local police departments.

Has that been helpful so far? Do you find it needs tweaking, or is that coordination helping?

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Definitely. Every tool we get that supplements our current efforts is helpful. The RCMP has been ter-

rific. They're great partners, and I know they're interested in beginning to coordinate our efforts on a national level. In terms of additional funding and resourcing...and this is why I chose it as one of the few things I wanted to focus on.

We need to make sure we adequately staff our ports and ask them to do the things that would reflect the pressures we're experiencing. Very clearly right now, one of the issues we're experiencing—not just in Peel but across the country—is the export of stolen autos. We're encouraged by those investments and those dollars. We are looking forward to seeing them go directly to where they can help.

• (1705)

Mr. Iqwinder Gaheer: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gaheer.

We're now going to move on to Ms. Michaud, for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to the witnesses for joining us. I was particularly looking forward to speaking with Mr. Weber. As he mentioned, the Customs and Immigration Union could not be invited to the national summit that was held a few weeks ago, which is unfortunate. It is worthwhile to hear the views of Ms. O'Gorman and the organization, but I would also like to hear from the workers and find out what is happening on the ground. As you mentioned, these are front-line workers.

Do you feel that finding solutions and putting resources in place to counter the scourge of car theft across the country is really a priority for CBSA? It's a pretty straightforward question.

Perhaps you could also clarify something that was circulating in the media. It was reported that, as of October 2023, there were only five officers at the Port of Montreal to inspect containers. That seems like very few considering the number of containers that leave the Port of Montreal every year.

Do you think that, in the current context, this is a priority for CBSA? Perhaps things have changed since the summit and since the situation has been receiving more media attention.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Weber: The CBSA has a very difficult job on its hands in balancing priorities. When you look at what is being imported into Canada and what we, obviously, want to keep out, the CBSA has staffing constraints. Those numbers you just provided of five full-time officers is still five full-time officers. We have three officers on assignment, as well, who have been there for some time, so we're talking eight in total.

When I talk about staffing levels, we're short between 2,000 and 3,000 across the country. We have ports operating with half the number of officers they had 10 years ago. We don't see those numbers going up. We only have one college. We cannot graduate or train even up to 600 new officers per year, which isn't even covering attrition. We're having a really hard time. When I say we're desperately understaffed, we are desperately understaffed.

At the port of Montreal, specifically, other than staffing, the big issue is space. The facility in which we do the examinations has six parking spots. Once we find six stolen vehicles, we sometimes have to wait days for someone to come and take the vehicles away before we can inspect any more. With the officers working, we're looking at examining a maximum of about four containers a day, which could potentially hold eight cars.

We're really limited in terms of the space that's being allotted to exports. You have to understand that this facility is also where imports are examined. It's not only about not having enough people. Even if we wanted to expand it and add additional officers at the port of Montreal, specifically, there's really nowhere for them to do more examinations than they're currently doing.

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: That's interesting, because when we hear about the amounts that have been—or will be—invested by the government, it's as if we are expecting that, magically, there will be more border services officers and that the entire problem will be solved. However, what you are saying is that, in fact, there is a lack of equipment, space and training. This information is based on an audit report that the agency itself recently published. I'll come back to that later.

I don't necessarily want to play politics, but I found it peculiar to hear my Conservative colleagues say that they felt there was an easy solution. They're proposing to buy 24 scanning devices that would inspect 154 containers per hour, or one million containers per year. In actual fact, the number of containers that leave the Port of Montreal each year is between 500,000 and 800,000 at most.

Were these figures pulled out of a hat? Is it realistic to think that 24 scanning devices will solve the problem? The Conservative Party mentioned 75 new officers, 30 of them at the Port of Montreal, and the fact that anything coming out of the port could be scanned, which would solve the problem. How realistic is that?

You also have to consider that cars that have not necessarily been stolen and that are intended for export could end up in containers. How can we sort all this out and propose serious solutions?

[English]

Mr. Mark Weber: Given what's in place now, it would not be realistic to be able to do that volume of examinations. That being said, any investment in infrastructure—if there was space to go along with it, if there were additional officers and we were able to actually use the equipment—absolutely, is helpful. We understand how important stolen vehicles and exports are.

As I said earlier, the CBSA tends to focus mostly on imports. We can understand why, given some of what's coming into the country that we want to keep out. Again, the staff just simply isn't there. You can throw money at the problem and add equipment. Overall,

we're essentially trying to fill 100 holes with 50 pegs all the time. Until we get our staffing levels up to what they need to be, it's really going to be an uphill climb. At the port of Montreal specifically, we also need the space to do the work, so that's an additional challenge there.

• (1710)

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

The report I mentioned earlier was published by the CBC, but it was picked up by Journal de Québec. Here's one of the things the article says:

None of the CBSA investigators responsible for security at ports and borders had completed the required training for their jobs as of 2021.

An investigator testified that he had been on the job for three years but was only starting to take basic training. That seems to be the case for a number of investigators or CBSA officers. The agency said it wanted to rectify the situation. The main problem is finding people and training them within a reasonable period of time so that they can do their jobs.

Do you have anything to add to that? You mentioned that this is a problem. It is all well and good to make investments, but that will not solve everything.

[English]

Mr. Mark Weber: It's an ongoing problem with a lot of our training. One of the difficulties we find, as well, is that, because we are so short-staffed on the front line, it is a challenge to have people released from the front line to do training. That gives you an idea of how short we are. We just don't have the ability to catch up and get the training done in time to bring out enough officers every year to actually do the job. It's something we really need to work at.

Again, we talk...and I've done a few of these subcommittees where we talk about money being given to the CBSA. It can't just be all put into a bucket. It has to be very specifically, in the union's opinion, about hiring officers and getting officers to work on the front line. It's not going to be done through equipment or technology. We're desperate for more people.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weber.

Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

Mr. Garrison, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to be back at the public safety committee. I spent many years here. I was here when the cuts were made to the CBSA, and I can't resist saying, "I told you so." When the Conservative government cut 1,100 jobs, we talked about the necessary impacts that we would see from that reduction in staffing. I'm sorry, but I can't resist saying that.

The other thing I, as a recovering criminal justice instructor, can never resist is when people talk about deterrence. We know that enforcement is the front line of deterrence. The car theft problem we have is not because a bunch of kids got up in the morning and decided to joyride. There's an organized effort here to make money out of car theft, and one of the ways that works is if the cars can be exported. While I get that police are the front line on car theft, if we can do something about the easy export, we'll reduce that market. Therefore, we can reduce the number of car thefts that are going on in this country.

My questions really are for Mr. Weber, and I thank him for being here today. I think there's no substitute for the people who actually do the work talking to us about how to improve that work. When you talk about the training, it's kind of a cart-and-horse situation here, as you've said to us. You said that we can't release frontline people to do the training, but that we don't do enough training to get more staff. In the union's opinion, where do we start with that?

Mr. Mark Weber: I think we need to start by getting money invested into looking at opening a second college. Right now, we only have the one. Again, we cannot pump out even 600 new officers every year, which isn't even covering attrition, so with what you have in place, you're simply not catching up.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I'm sorry. Do you think a second facility is needed, or is an expansion needed?

Mr. Mark Weber: I would think we need a second facility. The maximum with the one facility now is under 600 per year, which simply isn't allowing us to catch up.

Mr. Randall Garrison: You'd place that somewhere else in the country.

Mr. Mark Weber: I would think so. There have been some options in different locations floated, but I do think we definitely need a second location.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Then, once you have that up and running, what about this problem of who's going to staff those colleges? I'm asking that as a former college instructor myself.

Mr. Mark Weber: There is no shortage of applicants. It's simply a matter of space and opportunity for them to become CBSA officers. The program is 18 weeks long. We have a one-year, on-the-job apprenticeship that goes along with that.

It's a long process to get fully trained to be able to fully do the job. That being said, you have to make the investment right now so that, going forward, you're able to do the job.

Mr. Randall Garrison: If we made that kind of investment to restore levels to what they were—something like 10 years ago—not only would that help with the car theft export problem, but I'm assuming that would also help with things like the import of fentanyl and other dangerous substances through the ports.

• (1715)

Mr. Mark Weber: It would help with everything.

One of the big concerns the union has is... Earlier I mentioned and others mentioned ArriveCAN. One of the focuses of ArriveCAN, initially developed to gather public health information, is that it's being used as a new kind of border technology, where we see the CBSA proposing and working on systems whereby people are able to self-declare, where you have fewer officers at the border and where you even have eGates, where people can travel into the country without seeing an officer.

When we talk about fentanyl and when we talk about guns and gangs and all the things coming into Canada that you don't want to see coming in, no one is ever going to self-declare that they have these things. Technology can be very helpful to an officer, but you need the officer there. We cannot ever get to a place where people can simply self-declare and come into the country.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I think that's an important point you make: It's the fact that people judge that they might get caught that causes them not to do these things, not that they thumbed through the Criminal Code to see what the penalty is.

When you talk about equipment, I totally accept your position that you can spend all you want on equipment, but if you don't have people to run it, it doesn't work. I was quite shocked at some of the things I saw with the lack of scanners and lack of equipment. Can you say more about what we're dealing with there?

Mr. Mark Weber: Yes, we are short. We're short of people to operate them and we're short of people to maintain them. I could give you an example.

At the port of Montreal, the large X-ray machine, the HCVM that's being used now, was borrowed from Windsor because the Montreal one is not working, so now you have a large port of entry like Windsor that doesn't have one. We have other parts of the country that have the same kind of situation sporadically, where it's very hard for us to keep the equipment running or where officers often will just be taken off X-ray duties because there aren't officers available to work the front line and process travellers.

Mr. Randall Garrison: At the time that cuts were made, almost a decade ago, there was the argument that the police would pick up the slack. I think we've heard from both the police and you that there are different responsibilities here. It isn't just somebody picking up the slack for somebody else.

Can you say a little about the different jurisdictional roles of the police and the CBSA here?

Mr. Mark Weber: Yes. To put it simply, if it's at the border and if it involves the Customs Act or the immigration act, it's the CBSA that deals with it.

When we're talking about car theft, I appreciate what was said about intermodal work, co-operation and agencies working together. We heard about the recent seizure—I believe it was 36 cars—in Montreal by the different police agencies and the CBSA. More of that work has to be done, but that's a good example. When we see the manpower that was put into those 36 car seizures, if the CBSA had that there all the time, we could be doing that. We simply don't have the manpower to do it.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I think those are my questions for this round.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Garrison.

We're going to move on to the second round and Mr. Motz for five minutes, please.

Mr. Glen Motz: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Weber and deputies, for being here today.

I'll ask the chiefs about this. You talked about numbers, both of you, in different jurisdictions, for the number of thefts you've had. Do you know or have you a sense of the difference between the number of those autos that are stolen and exported versus the number that are revinned or chop-shopped for parts?

D/Chief Robert Johnson: We do keep those statistics. I don't have them with me, but we do have that.

Mr. Glen Motz: Okay.

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Without getting into the exact... I could absolutely approximate. We expect that about 60% are being stolen for export and 40% are being revinned and moved around the country or resold under some other nefarious activity. A large percentage is for export.

Mr. Glen Motz: I suspect Toronto would be similar to those numbers.

D/Chief Robert Johnson: That's correct.

Mr. Glen Motz: Thank you very much.

Mr. Weber, you made a comment early on about the disconnect between the upper echelon of the CBSA and the boots on the ground. It's not the first time that I've heard that about the CBSA. What is the issue and how do you fix it?

Mr. Mark Weber: I think the people who work the front line need to be consulted. I think the CBSA should look at promoting from within so that you get people who have actually worked at a border previously into positions where they can make decisions on how the border runs. That's currently not the case at the CBSA, and for as long as I've been around. My career started in 2002 with the agency. It's been a long time that we've been operating like that.

As I meet representatives from other police agencies and other unions, it seems to be uniquely a CBSA problem. As a rule, people in positions of authority who are decision-makers in other agencies have worked the front line and have made it up through the ranks. We simply don't do that at the CBSA.

• (1720)

Mr. Glen Motz: Okay. I was naive. I actually thought that... Succession planning is a role police agencies employ and that it works well, generally. Does that not happen in the CBSA?

The people in leadership positions now don't have a clue about how things work on the ground.

Mr. Mark Weber: They “don't have a clue” might be a bit harsh, in some cases.

Mr. Glen Motz: I'm direct most of the time.

Mr. Mark Weber: When we're talking about making policy, no, the upper levels of CBSA management don't come from the front line. It's generally lower-level or mid-level managers who come from the front line.

Mr. Glen Motz: That's unfortunate. I would say that's a fix right there. It's changing your own policies, internally.

Thank you for that.

To the deputies, I know from experience that, early in your training... We learned about the importance of crime prevention. I haven't been on Public Safety as long as Mr. Garrison has, but over the course of a number of years, I have sat on this committee. We did a study some years back on street checks, or what you would call in Ontario “carding”. We call them “street checks” out west. It was a big deal. It was something being removed as an opportunity for police on the ground to prevent crime or determine the identities of individuals involved in crime. We used them very effectively. I think other agencies have as well.

You talked about things police agencies can or should do to make a difference in prevention. Would something along those lines...? We talked about tools that could assist you in policing, besides more money and bodies. That's always a necessary tool. What do you think are tools that could help in the prevention of...? After they are stolen, in the justice system, we talk about all those things that can be fixed and should be fixed, such as legislation changes.

How do we prevent them from occurring in the first place, if you're just looking at it from a policing perspective and not the manufacturer's or the consumer's?

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Maybe I'll jump in quickly. Then Deputy Johnson can add on.

Prevention, absolutely, is crucial and critical to what we do. I see a policing opportunity from a prevention perspective in building awareness. Last year, the GTA services and Peel held the first auto summit for the GTA to discuss the issue. Then, on the heels of that, we began to promote and share the story with the community. Fast-forward a little less than a year later. Here we are having this conversation on a national level.

The awareness piece is crucial. What that has created for us is consumers looking at the vehicle differently. They're not just asking about comfort and performance statistics. They're also asking about security possibilities. What can that vehicle do to prevent itself from being stolen? The reality is that it's the second-largest purchase a person will make in their life, aside from a house. People are very aware, particularly here in the GTA, that those vehicles and investments are at risk. They're engaging with different types of things.

The awareness is there. I think that's crucial to how we prevent cars from being stolen. It's through consumer action.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Milinovich.

Thank you, Mr. Motz.

We'll move on to Mr. Schiefke, who is online.

Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll begin with Mr. Weber.

First of all, let me thank you and your members for the steadfast work you do, day in and day out, to protect Canadians. I have the honour, as you may know, of hosting the CBSA training facility in the town of Rigaud, which is situated in my community of Vaudreuil—Soulanges. As you said, it has a 600-officer annual capacity.

Over the years, Mr. Weber, I've made a point of visiting them and learning more about why they decided to apply for the CBSA. One of the underlying factors in deciding to apply was their wanting to be part of a family that went to work every single day to better the lives of Canadians, keep Canadians safe and directly combat organized criminal activity. Their work, as I'm sure you would agree, cannot be overstated. The decisions we make as a federal government to support or not support their work are consequential.

It came as a shock to me and my community, as you can imagine, when the previous Conservative government cut 1,100 of their jobs. It didn't just have effects on those who lost their jobs. It had an effect on the mental health of all the other officers, knowing they lost such a huge portion of their extended family. In fact, in 2012, the former president of your union, Jean-Pierre Fortin, commented on the job cuts at the CBSA. He said that the elimination of those jobs represented a "direct attack to our national security and public safety."

These proposed budget cuts would have a direct and real impact on Canadians and our communities across the country: more child pornography entering the country, more weapons, illegal drugs, will pass through our borders, not to mention terrorists, and sexual predators and hardened criminals...

For the better understanding of Canadians watching, and in layman's terms, can you comment on your former colleague's quote about how CBSA cuts by the previous Conservative government affected your members and the inflow and outflow of contraband and stolen goods?

• (1725)

Mr. Mark Weber: Yes. I think the quote is accurate. I think it's still apt today. Those cuts happened back in 2013-14, but our numbers have not really gone up since. We've not seen the college or

the CBSA have the capacity to get our numbers back to what they need to be.

Really, every time we don't interact with a traveller coming into Canada, it's an opportunity lost. Something could be getting in that we don't want to allow into Canada. Again, I talked about Arrive-CAN, but when we see the focus on facilitation, the focus on pre-declaration and the focus on allowing people to come into the country without ever speaking to any CBSA officer, I think it's absolutely fair to say that it's a threat to national security. It's all the things you mentioned. There are many we don't want to see coming into the country with no check.

Mr. Peter Schiefke: Thank you, Mr. Weber.

Since 2015, since Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was elected, how many jobs have been cut at the CBSA?

Mr. Mark Weber: As far as I know, no jobs have been cut. Our numbers have not gone up, but none have been cut.

Mr. Peter Schiefke: Thank you, Mr. Weber.

As a committee, we're hoping that this study finds and presents concrete solutions. You mentioned that more outreach to you and your members would have allowed for solutions to be shared and that the best people to share what they need to do their job better are indeed the CBSA officers. I would agree 100% with you.

You mentioned in your opening remarks the need for more space, as this is an issue shared by your members. Recently, the Minister of Public Safety announced new funding to provide even greater resources, which can be used to acquire new technologies that don't require so much space to use. How important is that type of funding insofar as supporting your members and the work they do is concerned? What else could be provided to help them do their valuable work?

Mr. Mark Weber: Any funding is welcome. Technologies are useful. Technologies are only useful if you have the officers there to use the technology. At the port of Montreal specifically, the issue right now is space. I'm hoping there will be some money allotted to looking at new facilities and greater room for us to actually examine those exports. As I said earlier, the exports and imports are all done in the same facility, so it's a really tight balancing act.

Mr. Peter Schiefke: My last question is with regard to your comments on needing more capacity to train officers. Based on your knowledge, is it possible to expand on the existing facility? Would that suit the needs of the CBSA, or would we be looking at perhaps constructing or thinking about building a new facility somewhere else?

Mr. Mark Weber: From my knowledge of the college right now as it's built—I visit there quite often and meet with all the new recruits—I don't really see where you would be expanding at that location. I'm not sure where a new location would go. Certainly, we need more capacity to be able to graduate more than 600 a year.

Mr. Peter Schiefke: Thank you, and please pass along our thanks as a committee to all your members for their valuable work.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schiefke.

Ms. Michaud, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Weber, I want to come back to the responsibility of ports, particularly the Port of Montreal, as well as the responsibility of customs officers. We hear that the ports have their own security officers on their territory, but that they can't open the sealed containers. The police do not patrol the ports, but they can open the containers when they have a warrant and therefore have a serious reason to believe that they may contain a stolen item, for example.

The co-operation between all these people seems a little difficult. There may be a lack of communication. I don't know how that co-operation or information sharing could be improved. Do you have any comments on that?

I'm also wondering about the customs procedure. Should it be changed? As you mentioned a little earlier, we pay more attention to what enters the country than to what leaves it. That seems quite normal to me, but CBSA is responsible for transit across the country. Should that be changed?

You may say that you don't have the necessary resources, but let's suppose that we live in an ideal world and that we have all the officers we need to do the job. Should we change the mandate of CBSA slightly to pay particular attention to the scourge of car theft, or do we not want to go down that road? What do you think?

• (1730)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Weber: My understanding is that some of the money that's been earmarked is going toward collaborative groups, working with other police agencies. As to how that works specifically at the port of Montreal, my understanding is that for the most part there is great collaboration between the different agencies that are there. Obviously, again, our issue in terms of examinations is space.

If you're talking about looking at the Customs Act and procedurally how we operate, an ability to patrol between ports of entry would be really big for the agency to be doing. Right now, we have the authority to do our job only at ports of entry. When it comes to the border with the United States and anywhere in between, really, in large part we're not really too sure most often what's going on there. When we're looking at keeping things out of the country that we don't want to get in—guns, fentanyl, all those things—that's another big gap.

As I mentioned, there's rail, and we see marine. There's a lot. In an ideal universe, like you said, we would have enough personnel to do all this work. That's something that I think we should be looking at, absolutely.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Michaud.

Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to try to get in two quick questions.

Mr. Weber, when you were just asked about no cuts since 2015, can you talk about the increase in the number of travellers and traffic through the ports in that time? That makes it sound like it's a good thing that things didn't go down, but there was a lot more volume. That would be my understanding.

Mr. Mark Weber: I don't have exact numbers available. We could get those for you.

Things are definitely getting busier. Anecdotally, I hear that from officers. As the numbers go down, obviously, the lineups get longer. We all saw what went on during the pandemic and what happened with ArriveCAN with some of the lineups at certain times of the year. You're arriving at major airports, and you're waiting an hour or two to get through customs.

Again, what does that do to our officers? As was mentioned earlier, they are dedicated, they want to do a good job and they want to protect Canada. That's why they get into this. For them to do that, under the circumstances they're currently working under with those short staffing levels, it is often really devastating for them to not be able to really do the job they were hired to do.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thanks very much.

I'll try to squeeze in one here to the Peel Regional Police.

It seems to me that manufacturers ought to be able to do more with anti-theft devices. My partner took my car after dropping me off at the airport, and the car emailed me that it was at McDonald's in Saanich a half an hour later.

If the car can do that, which I don't really want it to do, can manufacturers do more with anti-theft devices and tracking to assist the police?

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Yes, definitely. This is why this is so important. While I've been more highly focused on a few key points here, I want to provide reassurance to everybody on the committee that we understand that everybody has their role to play, including industry stakeholders. Absolutely, they should be considering the gaps and the faults in their security systems and addressing them.

We have working groups, and we are sharing the most recent theft trends we are seeing with industry. However, it has to be one of those continuous improvement pieces, because the criminal element is learning quickly.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Garrison.

Thank you to the witnesses. Believe us, we appreciate everything you do.

The meeting is adjourned.

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