



*Catalytic Converter Marking Alternatives - What Works Best?

There are a number of possible parts marking alternatives – some work better than others at reducing catalytic converter theft. However, no marking process will work to identify the source vehicle of a converter once a converter has been de-canned and the outside converter shell has been discarded.

The ideal marking process is where the converter has been marked by the manufacturer at the time the vehicle is built. Even in this situation, one must recognize that a vehicle can have multiple converters – in some cases multiple identical converters. As a result, if the marking is limited to just a VIN, the marking is not sufficient to track the individual converters because as many as three different converters can have the same VIN. If one converter is recorded as stolen, it is possible that another one – that was not stolen – could end up being flagged incorrectly as a stolen converter during an investigation. Since at the present time catalytic converters are not covered under the federal parts marking requirements the marking of converters by OEMs is very limited and is only done on a voluntary basis. Also note, that even if catalytic converter parts marking becomes mandatory, this will not retroactively mark the many tens of million converters that are already installed on the current vehicle population.

The next best marking protocol is for a non-removable pre-registered catalytic converter label that contains a preassigned unique serial number along with a QR code to be placed on the converter and etched into the converter when the label is installed⁶³. With these programs the converter label is pre-recorded in an international law enforcement registry and when applied by the issuing agency to a vehicle the agency updates the secure record with the VIN and the original date and owner of the vehicle. If a converter is stolen off of that vehicle, the registry is updated to recognize that the converter is stolen, and if the converter is ever recovered the police can immediately determine the theft and history of the converter and vehicle. Because the labels are pre-recorded in a controlling database, counterfeit labels cannot be used to broadly hide the identity of stolen converters. If a single serial number is counterfeited, each time it is scanned by the police either the serial number will come up as a non-assigned serial number and therefore a fraud, or else the activity will be displayed and the bogus label will be uncovered through the multiple inquiry history of use or as a result of conflicting information between the physical converter and the original registration information stored in the master record.

Less desirable is recording of the full VIN or partial VIN on the converter housing. Unlike the secure label under the control of an issuing authority, anyone can mark a VIN on a converter⁶⁴. Once a converter is stolen it is not identifiable as to which vehicle it came from, and consequently any VIN can be placed on the converter and will show the appearance of complying with the law – but it provides little security for theft prevention. The main benefit of this type of a law, is that if a theft ring or a lone operator steals a

⁶³ There are a number of public service catalytic converter marking programs established by police departments, insurers and other parties that will provide anti-theft labels which are registered in law enforcement accessible databases to help control catalytic converter theft. Here is a public service message from a local police department that is working under a state program grant in Minnesota. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO8rhsWGFRl>
Here is a link to another joint effort by NYSDMV and NYPD that uses this same anti-theft marking program. <https://dmv.ny.gov/press-release/press-release-05-05-2022-2>

⁶⁴ Manually etching a 17-character VIN onto a catalytic converter housing in an industrial setting will generate significant numbers of transcription errors resulting in defective VINs etched on converter housings. These errors will result in VINs that may suffer from a range of issues including: VINs that fail the check digit test for mathematically valid VINs; VINs that were never manufactured by any manufacturer; or VINs that are for vehicles other than the one declared as the donor vehicle associated reported to be associated with the converter. These errors could either be innocent or intentional, and cannot easily be distinguished by intention upon inspection. Furthermore, an unintended transcription error made in the marking process may be treated as a violation under the law, and any attempt to correct the defectively transcribed VIN may be classified as a defaced VIN and also be treated as a violation under the law.

***For a complete discussion on the catalytic converter theft problem click on this link see the NSVRP white paper on Catalytic Converter Theft: Working Towards Effective Solutions.**



number of converters and is caught red-handed before they had the opportunity to either etch VINs on the housing or decan the converters and discard the housing, then this provision will allow for arrest and prosecution. As a result, requiring any kind of marking is still a helpful anti-theft provision by making the possession of bulk quantities of unmarked detached catalytic converters a crime.

The least desirable marking is no marking at all. With no requirement for marking, the burden of proof falls heavily upon the authorities and when operating in a jurisdiction with lax laws with many exemptions on reporting, allowing for cash transactions and allowing for transactions without proof of vehicle ownership is unfortunately the situation that presently is a significant enabling factor for catalytic converter theft.