

The Million-Dollar Car Wash: How Pennsylvania Criminals Built a Stolen Vehicle Empire

Angel Vidal's operation stole 28 cars worth \$640,000, then used fake documents and a home-based chop shop to sell them to unsuspecting buyers.



This is one of the more sophisticated Auto Fraud scams in a long time. In a crime ring dubbed “Operation Dirty Paper”, a man named Angel Vidal and his criminal organization turned stolen rental cars into "clean" vehicles through a sophisticated scheme using fake documents, altered VINs, and fraudulent insurance policies.

The scam cost victims and businesses more than \$500,000 over three years. It’s a story of how criminals exploited weaknesses in the vehicle registration system to make stolen cars disappear.

The Rental Car Hustle

Vidal's operation started with a simple idea. Rental car companies like U-Haul, Hertz, and Enterprise don't immediately report vehicles stolen when customers fail to return them.

The criminals exploited this grace period. Take the case of a person referred to as “M.D.” in court documents, who rented a 2020 Chevy Silverado from U-Haul after Vidal convinced him to put the rental in his name for \$200. Vidal provided fake financial information to get the truck approved, then simply never returned it.

M.D. reported the vehicle stolen months later. By then, investigators found the truck in California after someone tried to register it at the local DMV using altered documents.

This pattern repeated itself 28 times. The criminals used fake IDs to rent vehicles, then disappeared with cars worth \$640,000 total.

The Home-Based Chop Shop

What made this scheme different was what happened next. Most car thieves sell stolen vehicles quickly for parts but Vidal did something that was far more profitable.

He operated a chop shop from his residence at 1315 Brandywine Street in Lebanon City.

Pennsylvania State Police installed surveillance cameras that captured criminals at his location altering vehicles, changing license plates, and creating fraudulent documents.



The operation had all the tools of a professional document forgery business. Police found printers, scanners, label makers, and stacks of blank vehicle registration cards during their search.

They discovered fraudulent stamps claiming to be from Copart Auto Auction and New York Title Agency.

The Art of Title Washing – Creating Clean Cars

After stealing cars, the criminals went to work. They gave them entirely new identities through a process called "title washing."

Here's how it actually worked: After stealing a 2019 Acura ILX from Suffolk, Virginia, the criminals created fake New York state titles using the alias Kevin Thorne. They submitted these documents to Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation, which unknowingly issued legitimate Pennsylvania titles.

The scheme worked because PennDOT processes out-of-state title transfers without verifying the documents with the original state. New York confirmed they never issued titles for the vehicles in question.

The criminals used this process 25 times, creating clean titles for stolen vehicles worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Creating Synthetic Identity Cars Through Vin-Swapping

The most sophisticated part of the operation involved altering Vehicle Identification Numbers. Every car has a unique 17-character VIN that serves as its fingerprint.

Vidal's group changed VINs on stolen vehicles in two ways. Sometimes they physically altered the numbers on the dashboard or windshield. Other times they "cloned" VINs by copying legitimate numbers from similar vehicles and placing them on stolen cars.

For example, they stole a 2021 Chevy Silverado from U-Haul and gave it a VIN from another Silverado. This made the stolen vehicle appear legitimate in computer databases.

The criminals also created fake VIN labels using cardboard and black tape. Police found evidence of this during surveillance of the chop shop operation.

The Jacked Cars Were Sold Through A Broad Network

Once vehicles had clean titles and altered VINs, the Vidal and the criminals sold them through a network of dealers and individual buyers.

Javier Mejia, who owned J&R Auto Repair & Towing, bought at least five stolen vehicles from the organization. He resold them quickly to other dealers, creating multiple layers between the original theft and final buyer.

During one interview, Mejia admitted purchasing vehicles from Vidal for thousands below market value. He bought a 2019 Acura ILX worth \$20,000 for just \$4,000, then resold it to Rafael Hernandez Reyes for \$15,000.

The rapid resale process made the vehicles harder to trace. Many buyers had no idea they were purchasing stolen property.

Identity Theft Fueled The Fraudulent Scheme

The scam required dozens of fake identities to pull it off. Vidal's phone contained "identity packets" - complete sets of personal information including names, addresses, Social Security numbers, and credit card details.

The criminals used the identity packets to create fraudulent driver's licenses, insurance policies, and rental agreements. They collected personal data from unsuspecting victims, then used it to support their vehicle theft operations.

For example, investigators found a Pennsylvania driver's license belonging to victim C.C. on Vidal's phone. The license contained the victim's real information but featured Vidal's photograph. When confronted, the victim said he never gave permission for his information to be used.

The Double-Dip Strategy Helped Them Make Money Over and Over Again

Perhaps the most surprising part of the scam involved selling the same vehicle twice. Vidal and his fraud ring would first sell a stolen car to an unsuspecting buyer, and then steal it back and resell it to someone else.

There truly is no honor among thieves.

This happened with a 2019 Acura ILX that the organization first sold to A.H., then later stole from his property. They gave the car a new fraudulent VIN and sold it again to another dealer.

A Two-Year Investigation!

The investigation began when rental car companies started reporting unusual patterns of theft. The National Insurance Crime Bureau referred several cases to Pennsylvania State Police in 2021.

Detective Leo Hannon and Trooper Ramon Torres spent more than two years tracking the organization. They used surveillance cameras, phone records, and financial data to map the entire operation.

The breakthrough came when they installed a pole camera overlooking Vidal's home. The footage captured dozens of illegal transactions and provided evidence of the chop shop operation.

On November 8, 2023, Pennsylvania State Police executed search warrants at multiple locations. They recovered two stolen vehicles from Vidal's residence and found extensive evidence of the document forgery operation.

Vidal initially tried to blame other members of the organization during his interview. But investigators had already built an airtight case using surveillance footage, phone records, and witness testimony.

The grand jury ultimately charged 11 people in connection with the scheme. They face charges including theft, receiving stolen property, forgery, and identity theft.