

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Toughens Laws Against Auto Theft

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Continues the Work of the Administration to Combat Auto Theft

LONG BRANCH – Governor Phil Murphy today signed a series of bills to continue the fight to combat auto theft in New Jersey. The four bills strengthen the criminal penalties associated with auto theft, with a particular focus on persistent, repeat offenders and large-scale automobile trafficking networks.

“Every person should be able to feel safe and secure in the communities they call home. That is why over the past year we have taken serious steps to crack down on the troubling rise in auto thefts,” **said Governor Murphy**. “Today’s comprehensive bill signing is an additional step in the right direction. I am grateful to our legislative leaders for recognizing the seriousness of this issue and for taking swift action to bring these bills to my desk. Together, we will continue to work with our partners in law enforcement to keep New Jerseyans safe.”

“More than 1 million vehicles are stolen across the U.S. every year. In New Jersey, we are focused on reducing those numbers and this incredibly comprehensive package of bills will give law enforcement the means to do just that,” **said Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin**. “Thank you to Gov. Murphy and the Legislature for recognizing the need to give our law enforcement officers and agencies these additional tools. Working with our partners at the local, state and federal level, we are in a greater position to cut the number of vehicle thefts and better protect our residents.”

A4930/S3390 expands criminal penalties related to the illegal use of motor vehicle master keys. Motor vehicle master keys are key fobs or computer programs that have the ability to operate the locks or start a motor vehicle. Under the bill, individuals who knowingly possess one of these devices or programs for unlawful purposes or advertise these devices or programs knowing that such items are commonly used for unlawful purposes will be guilty of a fourth-degree crime. These provisions do not apply to law enforcement personnel, insurance organizations, or leasing business entities.

A4931/S2284 establishes the crimes of theft of a motor vehicle and receiving a stolen motor vehicle as separate statutory provisions resulting in either a second- or a third-degree crime, depending on the value of the car. Additionally, the bill provides for extended sentences for certain persistent motor vehicle offenders. If an individual has been convicted on two or more prior, separate occasions of carjacking theft, unlawful taking of a motor vehicle, or receiving stolen property that is a motor vehicle, then that individual may be subject to an extended term of imprisonment upon request of the prosecutor.

A5034/S3006 expands the crime of “leader of auto theft trafficking network” by amending the definition of said “leader” to include persons who conspire with others as participants to engage for profit or to commit other criminal activity in a scheme or course of conduct to unlawfully take, dispose of, distribute, bring into, or transport motor vehicle or motor vehicle parts as stolen property. The bill also establishes that the “participant in auto theft network” will result in a third-degree crime.

A5189/S3777 eliminates the presumption of pretrial release for defendants charged with certain motor vehicle theft offenses if the defendant was arrested or convicted of a prior motor vehicle theft offense within the 90-day-period preceding the charge. Under the bill, the presumption of pretrial release would not apply to an eligible defendant

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charged with theft of or unlawful taking of a motor vehicle or receiving stolen property where the property involved is a motor vehicle if on one or more prior and separate occasions during the 90-day-period preceding the charge, the defendant was arrested for or convicted of theft of or unlawful taking of a motor vehicle; receiving stolen property where the property involved is a motor vehicle; or a crime under any statute of the United States, this State, or any other state that is substantially equivalent to any of the crimes listed above.

In the past year, the Murphy Administration has taken several steps to address the problem of auto thefts.

Earlier this year, the Governor signed S249/A2210, making it more difficult for bad actors to sell stolen catalytic converters to scrap yards and making it easier for law enforcement to identify, locate, and prosecute violators. Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin also announced in April 2023 that 34 law enforcement agencies in 21 counties and the New Jersey State Police (NJSP) will receive grant funding to acquire or expand automated license plate recognition (ALPR) technology across the state, building on Governor Murphy's 2022 \$10 million investment in the technology to reduce violent crime and auto theft in New Jersey through the federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) State Fiscal Recovery Fund.

Auto theft measures taken in the last year have proven to be successful, resulting in a 10 percent decrease in auto thefts from January through May of this year compared to that same period last year, and a 10 percent decrease in auto thefts for the last four months of 2022 compared to those same months in 2021.

In the recently signed Fiscal Year 2024 budget, \$2 million more was allocated to increase the investment in statewide pretrial services, which will expand social service offerings and on-ramps to programming support for people awaiting trial.

The primary sponsors of these bills, which passed unanimously in both houses, were Senator Gopal, Senator Lagana, Senator Sarlo, Senator Codey, Senator Bucco, Assemblyman Tully, Assemblywoman Swain, Assemblyman Atkins, Assemblywoman Speight, Assemblywoman Flynn, and Assemblyman Thomson.

"The rate of auto-thefts over the past two years threatens the property and safety of New Jersey residents and places an added strain on law enforcement," **said Senator Vin Gopal**. "It's crucial we take decisive and creative action to deter car thieves while also providing additional support to the law enforcement departments and our prosecutors' offices who are already working hard to curb this disturbing trend."

"In New Jersey, the vast majority of residents depend on their cars to get back and forth to work, to get their kids to school, or to go wherever they need to be. These bills offer new ways of thinking, and new ways of attacking the car theft problem in our state, by focusing resources on several fronts, and, when necessary, strengthening laws to make would-be perpetrators think twice before stealing another person's automobile," **said Senator Joseph Lagana**.

"Car thefts and related crimes are an ongoing threat to the safety and security of diverse communities throughout the state," **said Senator Paul Sarlo**. "This legislation will work to crack down on offenders, prevent thefts, and take down the criminal networks of car thieves."

"In recent years, our communities have been plagued with the crimes of car thefts, with the thefts primarily being done by repeat offenders," **said Senator Richard Codey**. "These are sophisticated, well-financed, well-organized business operations, more or less corporations. If we want to get serious about busting up these operations and making headway on car thefts, we must go after the captains of these rings, and not merely be content with arresting the teen-age perpetrators who may be in their service."

"I am pleased that Governor Murphy signed this bipartisan legislation to address the epidemic of motor vehicle thefts in New Jersey. This law sends a powerful message that if you commit the crime, you will be caught and you will serve time," **said Senator Minority Leader Anthony M. Bucco**. "Unlawful activities related to car thefts and stolen car parts have rapidly increased throughout the state since 2020. With the signing of this legislation, we are enacting a plan to hold auto theft traffickers and their criminal networks accountable for their heinous crimes."

"Since the onset of the pandemic, our State has seen the most significant increase in auto thefts to date," **said Assemblyman Christopher Tully**. "New Jersey residents deserve immediate protection, which is why we have taken steps to develop smart, sensible policies that safeguard our residents and their property while punishing those responsible. The measures being signed into law today will strengthen our laws and keep our neighborhoods safe."

"The majority of families in New Jersey rely on their cars to get where they need to go, be it for work, school or leisure. That is why it is critical to respond to the recent surge in car thefts with thoughtful, effective policies that will stop repeat offenders who lead car theft trafficking networks," **said Assemblywoman Lisa Swain**. "These new laws take aim at car theft rings that for too long have preyed upon New Jersey communities, clearly sending the message that actions have consequences."

"The uptick in car thefts throughout the state has created serious cause for concern among law enforcement officers and New Jersey families," **said Assemblyman Reginald Atkins**. "People deserve to feel safe and secure in their communities, but that isn't possible when the threat of property theft looms over them. By updating our laws, we are addressing technological advances that aid in these crimes and giving our courts the tools needed to put an end to car thefts."

"Over the past few years, law enforcement officers throughout New Jersey have felt the added strain caused by car thefts and our residents have worried that their property could be the next target," **said Assemblywoman Shanique Speight**. "I am proud to sponsor legislation being signed into law today. This is a start to ending car thefts and giving New Jersey families peace of mind."

"This new law thoughtfully targets the car theft crisis occurring throughout New Jersey communities by providing the necessary support law enforcement has called for to address the 'catch and release' policies that have enabled car theft rings to flourish," **said Assemblywoman Vicky Flynn**. "Tackling the rise in car thefts was one of the first issues I took on as a member of the Legislature, so it is particularly rewarding to see this bill signed into law. Protecting the hardworking people of New Jersey and their property is a commitment I will continue to honor as I celebrate this significant step toward a safer tomorrow."

"Empowering the courts to close the door on repeat car thieves will help put an end to the crime cycle in New Jersey," **said Assemblyman Ned Thomson**. "In order to provide residents the peace of mind they deserve and protect them from falling victim to career criminals, New Jersey must take a tougher approach. The signing of this law demonstrates how both sides of the aisle can come together to prioritize public safety and ensure the justice system holds these offenders accountable."

"Car thefts are a personal and sometimes violent attack on an innocent victim," **said Peter Andreyev, Executive Vice President, New Jersey State PBA**. "The bills signed today will allow law enforcement to target the leaders of these theft rings and make sure that repeat offenders are properly adjudicated. On behalf of the New Jersey State PBA, I would like to thank Governor Murphy and the bill sponsors for their support on this serious public safety issue."

"I commend the Governor and Legislature for taking swift action to combat this very important bipartisan issue," **said Long Branch Mayor John Pallone**. "In Long Branch public safety is our primary responsibility and with these laws in place, it gives our law enforcement officers the ability to protect and serve our town and ensure auto theft offenders are brought to justice"

"I applaud the Senate and the Governor for approving the set of bills that will greatly enhance the safety and security of residents," **said Mine Hill Mayor Sam Morris**. "These bills will help crack down and bring accountability to those who prey on the public. The legislation goes far toward beating the technical and skilled car thieves advanced technology. Good job to everyone involved."

"New Jersey is plagued by an epidemic of auto theft. I commend the legislature for taking action and the governor for signing these bills into law," **said Mount Arlington Mayor Michael Stanzilis**. "I urge the public to help stem the tide of auto theft by locking their cars and not leaving the keys and key fob in their automobiles."

"I would like to thank our Legislature for passing these package of bills and to Governor Murphy for signing this important legislation to help combat the out of control auto theft crimes in our State," **said Jefferson Mayor Eric F. Wilsusen**. "As a retired Deputy Chief of Police, I know these new laws will give our law enforcement a few more tools in their toolbox better control auto theft that has affected all our communities throughout New Jersey."

"Kudos to our legislators and to our Governor for passing and signing this critical legislation into law which is long overdue," **said East Hanover Mayor Joseph Pannullo**. "It is essential for both law enforcement officers and prosecutors who can now better work together to make all of us safer."

"These bills aptly address our ongoing concerns for our municipality's public safety," **said Millburn Mayor Maggee Miggins**. "We find the unanimous approvals very meaningful and we are grateful to both the Governor and the Legislature."

"The auto thefts have reached epidemic proportions. It cannot be addressed solely in the communities where the thefts are occurring, it must be addressed from the cities where the young are recruited, to suburbs where the cars are stolen to the final destination of the vehicles," **said Madison Mayor Robert H. Conley**. "This series of bills does exactly that. As a mayor in a community that has been hit with the rash of thefts, these bills are the support we need. I thank the legislature for their overwhelming support for the bills and for Governor Murphy for signing them into law."

"I believe these bills, once they become law, will assist law enforcement and prosecutors in trying to curb the theft of autos and auto parts," **said Totowa Mayor John Coiro**.

"I thank Governor Murphy and our State Legislature for recognizing and working to address a problem in a bipartisan way that Mayors and local police departments have been combatting for a while," **said Hamilton Township Mayor Jeff Martin**. "Repeat offenders, and those profiting off their crimes, will now face far more significant penalties for their choices and be less likely to be released on bail to continue to commit these crimes."

"I want to thank Governor Murphy for taking these important steps towards strengthening auto theft prevention laws," **said Prospect Park Mayor Mohamed Khairullah**. "This is one issue where Republicans and Democrats alike are united and gives our law enforcement community the necessary resources to stop auto thefts, protect our residents and ensure public safety in our town and every town across the state."

"It's no secret that communities across New Jersey have been struggling to combat widespread auto thefts for years," **said Morris Township Mayor Mark Gyorfy**. "I applaud the passage of these bipartisan measures by our state lawmakers and thank Governor Murphy for his support to strengthen law enforcement's ability to stem this concerning trend and make communities like Morris Township safer for all residents."

"As Mayor, representing the Montville Township Committee, we support legislation that has a positive impact on crime," **said Montville Mayor Matt Kayne**. "Auto theft continues to be occurring at a high incident rate. These bills are a positive step forward in the effort to fight auto theft. I support these bills and want to thank our lawmakers for this body of work."

"The bills that Governor Murphy is signing is a big step in assisting Law Enforcement in combating the on-going crime of auto theft," **said Montville Police Chief Andrew Caggiano**. "These bills give law enforcement the ability to specifically ensure that the repeat offenders committing auto theft are not automatically released through pretrial release and are held accountable after conviction. As the Chief of Police for the Montville Township Police Department, I support these bills and applaud our legislators for their efforts"

"Auto theft has become a major concern across the State of New Jersey. It's an issue we hear about from residents every single day," **said Woodland Park Mayor Keith Kazmark**. "I thank Governor Murphy and the State Legislature for working on and signing this series of bills to address this important issue. Safety must be our number one priority, without it we have no quality of life."

"Over the past few years, we have witnessed a rise in auto thefts, an issue that is not subject to just one community in our state," **said Ewing Mayor Bert Steinmann**. "I am grateful to Governor Murphy and the state legislature for their continued efforts to support us as we work to combat this epidemic here in Ewing."

"The bipartisan measure from Trenton to raise the stakes for major crime rings who focus on auto theft is welcome news to all communities across New Jersey," **said Mendham Borough Mayor Christine Glassner**. "Law enforcement officials now have a powerful new tool to combat auto theft and bring criminal accountability to the leaders of these pyramid crime schemes and throw them in prison where they belong. In addition to supporting our cops working the streets and prosecutors who use the full scope of their authority to reduce violent and costly crimes in our state, all New Jerseyans can appreciate this important step to fight crime by our leaders in Trenton."

"I applaud Governor Murphy for signing the bills sponsored by Senators Codey, Bucco, Sarlo, Lagana and Gopal. Stiffening the consequences for actors who commit these crimes is paramount to giving municipalities and law

enforcement the upper hand in combating auto theft. It is refreshing to witness our state legislators collaborate for the betterment of our residents regardless of party affiliation," **said Roseland Mayor James Spango.** "The statewide auto theft issue affects all municipalities and NJ residents and puts the safety of the public and police at risk everyday. Harsher penalties for those committing these crimes will improve the quality of life for all of us."

"I want to thank Governor Murphy and the Legislature for working together in a bipartisan effort to address this critical issue affecting not just Long Hill but towns across New Jersey," **said Long Hill Mayor Scott Lavender.** "These laws will empower our law enforcement officers and prosecutors to effectively protect our communities and ensure criminals are held accountable to the fullest extent of the law."

"Across the State, an increase in vehicle thefts and related crimes are impacting the quality of life for our citizens. Even quiet suburban communities like Bridgewater are not immune to this rise, despite the best efforts of our dedicated Police Department. That is why I completely support this bi-partisan package of bills. The individual's committing these crimes need to know that New Jersey takes these offenses seriously and, when you are caught, you will pay the price," **said Bridgewater Mayor Matt Moench.**

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