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# NIK RETTINGER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 83<sup>rd</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## **TESTIMONY ON ASSEMBLY BILL 637** **Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety** **November 30, 2023**

Good morning, Chairman Spiros and other distinguished members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 637 today.

It is no secret that catalytic converter thefts have been an issue in Wisconsin that has only grown more rampant in recent years. These thieves have become remarkably efficient, able to saw off a catalytic converter in approximately 50 seconds. Furthermore, the thieves are so emboldened they are sawing catalytic converters off of cars in often very public places such as school and apartment building parking lots.

I want to highlight that this isn't just a problem limited to Milwaukee, Madison, or their suburban metro areas, but is in fact a concern across the entire state. Earlier this year, Chippewa Falls police caught a suspected catalytic converter thief who is accused of stealing 15 catalytic converters in the first two months of 2023 alone.

By request of the Waukesha County District Attorney's Office, this bill was authored to help streamline the process of prosecuting this crime to better hold these individuals accountable and ensure they are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Currently, when a catalytic converter is stolen from a vehicle, prosecutors must undertake the burdensome task of finding a mechanic, invoicing what a potential repair would cost in both parts and labor, and then have that mechanic testify in the affirmative of such costs in order to attempt to demonstrate an impact of \$500 or more to adequately charge the theft. Assembly Bill 637 adds catalytic converters to the list of parts of an automobile considered "major," which presently includes parts such as the engine, transmission, and doors among others.

This crime, much like our discussions on the topic of reckless driving and carjacking, has an inordinate impact on working families and single-parent households which can become paralyzed due to a theft of this nature. Beyond functionality of your vehicle with a major component missing, in counties such as Milwaukee, Waukesha, and Washington you must be able to pass an emissions test in order to successfully register your vehicle with the state of Wisconsin. Driving an unregistered vehicle would be in violation of state law. Losing access to your means of transportation can impact your ability to work and provide care for family members.

I am proud to have authored this bill with Senator Dan Knodl with bipartisan support in both chambers and appreciate the Waukesha County District Attorney's Office for working with us to bring this proposal before the Legislature. Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the public hearing today and I ask for the Committee's support of AB 637.



# Wisconsin State Lodge Fraternal Order of Police



PO Box 206 West Bend, WI 53095

**Ryan Windorff**  
President

**Mark Sette**  
Vice President

**Shane Wrucke**  
Secretary

**Tim Toth**  
Treasurer

**Randy Winkler**  
Second Vice President

**Sean Marschke**  
Sergeant at Arms

**Don Kapla**  
Immediate Past President

**Jerry Johnson**  
National Trustee

November 30, 2023

## Wisconsin Fraternal Order of Police Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 637

### Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Thank you, Representative Sprios and fellow committee members for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 637. My name is Ryan Windorff, and I am the President of the Wisconsin State Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police. The Fraternal Order of Police is the world's largest organization of sworn law enforcement officers, with more than 367,000 members in more than 2,200 lodges. The Wisconsin State Lodge proudly represents more than 3,000 members in 27 lodges throughout the state. We are the voice of those who dedicate their lives to protecting and serving our communities. We are committed to improving the working conditions of law enforcement officers and the safety of those we serve through education, legislation, information, community involvement and employee representation.

Catalytic converter theft has become a significant concern across the United States in recent years, including in Wisconsin. According to recent data from the National Insurance Crime Bureau, Wisconsin has also seen a surge in catalytic converter thefts, with insurance claims for these thefts increasing from 16,660 claims in 2020 to 64,701 in 2022<sup>1</sup>.

Theft of catalytic converters can result in expensive repairs for vehicle owners. Thieves can make between \$50 and \$875 per converter depending on the type and the amount of precious metals present. The cost of replacing a stolen catalytic converter can be much higher, with some estimates ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000, depending on the make and model of the vehicle.

In addition to the cost of replacing stolen converters, businesses that rely on vehicles for their operations can also be impacted by catalytic converter theft. If a company has several vehicles targeted by thieves, it can result in significant downtime and loss of productivity. This can ultimately impact the company's bottom line.

Furthermore, the rise in catalytic converter theft has also led to an increase in insurance premiums for vehicle owners. Insurance companies may raise premiums for individuals and businesses that are at higher risk for theft, such as those with vehicles that are frequently parked in vulnerable areas.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nicb.org/news/news-releases/catalytic-converter-thefts-surge-nationwide-according-new-report>



# Wisconsin State Lodge *Fraternal Order of Police*



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Under current law, it is a Class I felony to remove a “major part” of a vehicle without the consent of the owner. Included in the list of “major parts” are the engine, transmission, doors, hood, grille, bumper, front fenders, deck lid, tailgate or hatchback, rear quarter panels, trunk floor pan, frame or supporting structure which serves as the frame.

Assembly Bill 637 adds catalytic converters to the list “major parts” and allow law enforcement officers and prosecutors to effectively address this problem and hold offenders accountable for the harm they are doing to members of our communities. We feel this is a common sense solution to address a modern problem that the original authors of this statute couldn’t have possibly predicted, but has become an unfortunate necessity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of this bill, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

District Attorney  
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Deputy District Attorneys  
**Lesli S. Boese**  
**Abbey L. Nickolie**  
**Michael D. Thurston**

Office Services Coordinator  
**Julie A. Moelter**

Victim/Witness Program  
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November 29, 2023

Representative Nik P. Rettinger  
Assembly District 83  
Room 8 West  
State Capitol  
PO Box 8953  
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Representative Rettinger

I am writing in support of Assembly Bill 637.

This bill is necessary to improve the efficiency and likelihood of prosecution. In our experience, all the "major auto parts" listed specifically in the statute are frankly things that are never stolen. Catalytic converters are stolen with far more frequency than any other item on a vehicle. The metal inside the catalytic converter can be scrapped and sold for cash.

In the current "removal of major auto parts statute" there is a provision that allows us to charge for auto parts that are removed that are valued over \$500. Many times a catalytic converter does not meet this threshold. In our experience, the only vehicles where the catalytic converter was, by itself, valued at more than \$500, is for a Tesla. It is also unclear if that \$500 amount is meant to include labor for the replacement. This requirement puts a burden on the state to bring in someone at trial that is qualified to value the catalytic converter and the labor to get us over the \$500 threshold. This is cumbersome. Adding the Catalytic converter to the statute will make prosecution far easier and less costly and it addresses a major immediate issue facing our communities. Further, the criminal thinking to remove a catalytic converter is identical to the removal of any other major auto part and should be addressed in the same way by the statute.

The evaluation of a case then switches to criminal damage to property, which does allow for us to account for the cost of repair or replacement "whichever is less", but this puts the onus on victims to choose the more expensive replacement cost and hope to be reimbursed some day for the felony charge. Sensibly though, most victims choose the lesser cost of repair when that option is available, and the defendant can then only be charged for a misdemeanor for the same conduct and generally leaves victims with less value in their vehicle given a repair of a damaged part as opposed to a clean replacement.

We have seen this crime has become more frequent and we have seen more crews coming from Chicago and elsewhere just helping themselves to cars parked in driveways or on the street. They are very quick about their work. They often work in three man teams, almost like pit crews, where they have a jack man, a lookout and a saw man and they are gone in roughly a minute or less. All of this to say it has become a high reward low risk crime for these crews that come from outside of the county and more and more frequently from out of state.

Finally, in the situation where the offenders are caught and placed in custody, we have to file charges within 48 hours. It is difficult to identify and obtain the needed information about the value of the catalytic converter in such a short amount of time.

For all these reasons, we strongly encourage you to pass this Bill.

Very truly yours,



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Susan L. Opper  
District Attorney  
Waukesha County

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