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Heists Targeting Truckers On Rise

Robberies Are "Wreaking Havoc" on U.S. Highways, Endangering Consumers

By [JENNIFER LEVITZ](#)

Thieves are swiping tractor-trailers filled with goods, triggering a spike in cargo theft on the nation's highways.

Over five days last month, an 18-wheeler carrying 710 cartons of consumer electronics was stolen from a Pennsylvania rest stop, a 53-foot-long rig packed with 43,000 pounds of paper was ripped off in Ottawa, Ill., and a 40-foot-long truck filled with reclining armchairs went missing in Atlanta.

Truckloads containing \$487 million of goods were stolen in the U.S. in 2009, a 67% increase over the \$290 million worth of products swiped a year earlier. Thieves stole 859 truckloads in 2009, up from 767 loads in 2008 and 672 in 2007, according to FreightWatch International, an Austin, Texas-based supply-chain security firm that maintains a database of thefts that several government agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, look to for trends.

"In the past two months, we've just seen such an increase that it's to the point where criminals are just wreaking havoc," said Sandor Lengyel, a detective sergeant and squad leader in New Jersey State Police's cargo-theft unit. "They'll pretty much steal anything." Cargo thieves ripped off \$28 million in goods in New Jersey in 2009, an 87% spike from the \$15 million stolen in 2008, he said.

Law-enforcement authorities in Illinois, California and Pennsylvania are among several agencies and industry groups also reporting a spike.

[Chubb](#) Corp., a major insurer based in Warren, N.J., said that its own insurance claims and data from other sources show 725 cargo thefts in 2009, up 6.6% from 680 in 2008, and up 23% from 592 cargo thefts recorded for 2007. Chubb estimates the 2009 thefts amounted to \$435 million of products.

The latest wave of thefts is different from a run of tractor-trailer hijackings that occurred in the 1960s, when organized-crime rings forced drivers out at gunpoint and took their trucks. According to industry officials and police, the current thefts are generally nonviolent and typically happen at rest stops when the driver is away from the truck and eating or showering.

While organized-crime rings may be involved, "we are seeing a lot more amateurs get into this," said Sgt. Sid Belk, of the California Highway Patrol. Cargo bandits made off with \$29 million of goods in 2009 in Southern California, up 67% from \$17.4 million in 2008, according to the highway patrol.

Thieves "sit and wait and watch, and when the driver goes in to take a shower, that's when they steal the trucks," said Special Agent John Cannon, head of the Georgia's Bureau of Investigation's cargo-theft squad, which was launched in 2009. He believes that thefts of consumer goods in particular are "directly related to the economy; people are stealing

things that they can get rid of quickly, and consumers are looking for a deal."

Thieves often know what cargo a truck is hauling because they will follow trucks from a plant, according to police.

Thieves drive the whole tractor-trailer away or hitch up to an unattended trailer, as truckers sometimes leave a trailer in a drop lot and drive off in just the tractor for an errand. Typically when stolen, the tractor portion is found close to the site of the theft. The empty trailer is usually found miles away, abandoned, and often repainted or reworked in an effort to disguise the stolen truck.

Cargo theft represents a big concern and cost for trucking and other freight haulers, says J.J. Coughlin, chairman of the SouthWest Transportation Security Council, a nonprofit industry group that represents more than 200 freight-shipping companies. The council estimates that the average loss in each theft is \$350,000—and that is just the load inside the truck. "Sometimes you lose that too," he said of the tractor-trailer. Typically, though, the tractor-trailer is found miles away. "We find that thieves target the loads," he said.

Mr. Coughlin said that in an effort to combat the problem, freight shippers have been meeting more with police departments. The shippers have also been pushing owners of truck stops and drop lots to provide better security. "That is easier said than done," he said.

Also, in the past two years, the freight shippers have banded together to try to come up with solutions, such as sharing information about what kinds of loads are most stolen so that when those goods are shipped, everyone in the supply chain can be alerted to pay extra attention.

California, Florida, Texas, Georgia, Illinois and New Jersey are the top states for number of cargo thefts, according to FreightWatch. The crooks are targeting such things as electronics, food and beverages, clothing, pharmaceuticals and cigarettes.

The thefts can also threaten consumer safety. In February 2009, an unattended refrigerated truck loaded with \$11 million of insulin made by Dutch drug concern [Novo Nordisk](#) A/S was ripped off in Conover, N.C., while the driver was in a truck stop, according to Sgt. Shane Moore, of the Conover police department.

After the theft, the Food and Drug Administration and Novo Nordisk put out a news release, alerted the health-care industry, and advised pharmacies to inspect inventories, said Sean Clements, a company spokesman. Still, some of the stolen vials wound up in the hands of diabetics, several of whom showed up at medical centers in Kentucky and Texas over the summer sickened because the insulin was inactive, said Karen Riley, an FDA spokeswoman.

The FDA's Office of Criminal Investigations is looking into how the drugs were given to patients. Mr. Clements said the stolen insulin did not get to patients through Novo Nordisk's normal distribution. He said the "safety of our patients is of paramount concern," and that the company is working with investigators, and has taken steps to improve security.

Electronics were the target of a thief who struck near midnight on Jan. 13 at a minimart in Hazleton, Pa., two hours north of Philadelphia. A trucker hauling \$500,000 of electronics to an Amazon.com Inc. distribution center left his trailer parked there while he made another delivery elsewhere, said Trooper Charles Everdale III, of the Pennsylvania's State Police auto-theft task force. When the trucker returned the trailer was gone, the trooper said. He said the partially empty trailer turned up in recent days in Palm Beach, Fla. Amazon declined to comment.

In the pharmaceutical industry, "most everyone has had some type of cargo theft" with a spike in "high-value loads" stolen over the last two years, said Chuck Forsaith, the director of supply-chain security for a unit of Purdue Pharma LP, a privately held pharmaceutical company in Stamford, Conn., and also director of the Pharma Cargo Security Coalition, an industry group.

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