

<http://www.fresnobee.com/263/story/886222.html>

Valley ID theft scam exposed **Individuals, financial institutions lost more than \$1 million.**

By Chris Collins / The Fresno Bee

09/22/08 22:13:08

State investigators announced Monday they have busted a sophisticated identity-theft ring in the Valley that used the identities of deceased or overseas people to buy expensive cars and sell them at discount prices.

The suspects victimized at least 16 people and as many financial institutions for a loss of more than \$1 million, said Tom Wilson, supervising investigator at the Fresno office of the state Department of Motor Vehicles.

"This is uncharted territory for us," Wilson said. "We haven't seen this type of activity before."

Nine people from Fresno, Clovis and Madera Ranchos were arrested last week and have been charged with a total of 113 felonies, including identity theft, grand theft, auto theft and perjury.

The arrests follow a 13-month joint investigation by the DMV, the Fresno Police Department and the Fresno County Sheriff's Department.

Wilson said the suspects somehow obtained documents from deceased people and people who were living overseas. They altered the documents and then worked through a Los Angeles auto broker to obtain bank loans to purchase at least 16 vehicles such as Lexuses, Infinitis and heavy-duty pickups, he said.

Some of the identify-theft victims were friends of the suspects, Wilson said.

To avoid having their true identity linked to the vehicle loans, the suspects would park the vehicles at abandoned homes without removing the dealerships' "paper plates." Then a few weeks later, they would sell the vehicles at discount prices, Wilson said.

The auto broker, Arshak Tavartsyian, 43, of Glendale, disappeared one day after a search warrant was served on his business. A warrant has been issued for his arrest.

The suspects arrested in the bust are Manual Badalyan, 45; Victor Kotchkina, 45; Flora Kotchkina, 48; Rufina Kotchkina, 23; Armen Markaryan, 24; Ararat Pogosian, 52; Vladimir Bernik, 40; Aram Badalyan, 44; and Kseniya Astvatsaturian, 46.

Wilson said Manual Badalyan, who faces 39 felony counts, appears to be the group's ringleader.

DMV Investigators Make Major Bust in the Valley

DMV Investigators Make Major Bust in the Valley

A new twist on ID theft; thieves use your ID to steal expensive cars.

DMV investigators make a major bust in the Valley. They say a ring of thieves used a sophisticated system to get brand new cars without paying for them. Some of these thieves are now facing dozens of felony charges.

From luxury cars like Lexus, Jaguars and Mercedes, to expensive trucks and SUV's; investigators bust a crime ring that they say stole over a million dollars in a high-end vehicles.

DMV Supervising Investigator Tom Wilson said, "They profited very greatly by basically getting a brand new vehicle, without having to make any payments."

Wilson says so far nine suspects have been arrested over the past several weeks.

The DMV team used evidence found during searches of more than a dozen valley homes, including a home in Clovis that was raided back in April.

The suspects allegedly used fake driver's licenses and other documents to get loans for the vehicles but they never make the payments, and get away with more than two dozen cars.

Wilson said, "They would have multiple addresses set up at multiple houses in this ring. What they would do is they would shuffle the cars around. They would buy a car using one address, but then take the car to a different address."

Investigators believe the stolen cars and fraudulent loans may be just one part of a larger criminal operation including drug sales. They even caught several suspects trying to flush thousands of dollars worth of psychedelic mushrooms down a toilet during a raid in Madera County.

Police are still looking for three other suspects from the Los Angeles area.