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**NEWS** SHARING IS CARING

# A Matter of Trust

Zipcar and other sharing services are increasingly outwitted by cunning criminals.

By Antoinette Siu

**On April 18, a woman got into a stolen Kia Soul sitting outside her home, unaware that a California Highway Patrol surveillance team was waiting to bust her. Just a day earlier, a judge had released Nicole Dipo, whose legal name is Ray Charles Dipo, from a prior arrest on charges of stealing five other vehicles that belonged to the auto-sharing company Zipcar.**

Authorities found nine Zipcar access cards, eight devices for overriding ignition systems, and soldering tools in Dipo's home after her first arrest on April 12, according to the *Examiner*. Now, investigators continue to build a case against Dipo, and have noted a significant drop in stolen vehicles since her arrest.

Dipo's alleged crimes are part of a recent string of Zipcar thefts plaguing the city. Between March and mid-April, the District Attorney's Office counted 76 stolen Zipcar vehicles in San Francisco and five additional thefts in surrounding cities. The DA's office declined to comment for this story.

Other Zipcar markets are not immune to the problem. In March, the *New York Post* reported that thieves had boosted 20 of the communal cars around Tribeca, the Financial District, and Chinatown. Many of the stolen cars were high-end makes including Mercedes and Audi. Eighteen suspects linked to 11 of the thefts were arrested. In Washington, D.C., police arrested a 20-year-old man in 2008 on charges of stealing three Zipcars to go joyriding.

Zipcar public relations manager Jennifer Mathews would not comment on specific investigations, but she said the company is serious about fixing gaps in the system. "What I can tell you is that the team at Zipcar is continually improving our security technology to ensure that our vehicles are safe and ready for our members to use," Mathews said.

Like most sharing-based companies, Zipcar operates on a delicate model of trust with its users. Members get an access card to unlock cars, and they're entrusted with returning it after the drive. But thieves find ways to mess with the system: Dipo is accused of using fake Zipcards, and the suspects in New York reportedly deceived parking attendants (not employed by Zipcar) into unlocking the vehicles for them.



AP Photo/Josh Reynolds, file

**"My gut sense is that you can't expect trust to function properly in an era of rampant inequality."**

— SHEHZAD NADEEM

In 2011, home-sharing service Airbnb launched a safety department after a guest robbed and trashed a San Francisco woman's apartment. On the ride-sharing front, Los Angeles police arrested an Uber driver on charges of kidnapping and intending to sexually assault a female passenger in 2014. The latter case had more

to do with the Uber employee than Uber users, but what it said to sharing companies and their customers is that businesses cannot be run on blind faith alone. With so many rides happening every day, verification must ensure the safety of both passengers and drivers, according to Uber spokesperson Laura Zapata.

"We have a team that's constantly looking at how to make it better," Zapata said. "People are giving immediate feedback on what's happening."

**The ease and popularity of shared services has increased our trust in strangers who have something to offer — homes, skills, cars, tools — as well as strangers who have a need for those services. But the sharing economy's continued growth will rely on trustworthy businesses and users. Despite the verifications and background checks that some companies employ, recent incidences such as people stealing cars meant for borrowing or visitors destroying homes meant for renting have tested our collective faith in the new business model.**

When Boyd Cohen, professor of entrepreneurship at Universidad del Desarrollo, tried starting a car-sharing project in Chile about a year ago,

investors worried most about people mistreating and stealing vehicles because of the higher crime rates in the country.

"I must admit this is the first I have heard of this problem in San Francisco, and I am quite surprised by it," Cohen said of the recent Zipcar cases. "The sharing economy has a strong reliance on trust, and when trust breaks down, so do the business models."

San Francisco may not be a developing country like Chile, but economic health still plays a role in the trust business here, according to Lehman College sociologist Shehzad Nadeem.

"My gut sense is that you can't expect trust to function properly in an era of rampant inequality," Nadeem said. "Zipcars, for better or worse, are somewhat polarizing. They're easy targets in San Francisco's tech economy, an economy that's all but abandoned the working class."

According to the law, however, the line between right and wrong still stands. Dipo returned to jail on charges of stealing a total of seven vehicles. This time, a court date of June 4 waits for her.

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