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The Better Way

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Car Crime Safety Alert

Crime victims are locked in car trunks more often than you might imagine. What you need to know to protect yourself.

Janette and Greig Fennell had just pulled into the garage of their San Francisco home with their 9-month-old son, Alexander, sleeping peacefully in his car seat. It was almost midnight on a quiet Saturday in October 1995. Suddenly, two masked men—one with a gun—rolled under the automatic garage door before it had completely closed. They forced the couple into the pitch-black, cramped trunk of their car and slammed the lid shut.

During the torturous, hour-long ride that ensued, Janette and Greig agonized over what the men had done with their son, listening in vain for the sound of his crying. They ripped frantically



at the trunk insulation, pulling at wires in hopes of knocking out the brake lights and attracting the attention of a police officer.

Finally, the car stopped

and the thieves opened the trunk. The Fennells found themselves in a deserted park. At gunpoint, the men robbed them of jewelry, cash, and their ATM card.

When Janette stuck her head up out of the trunk, one of the men struck her in the head with his gun. The thugs threatened to come back and kill Janette and Greig if the PIN number for their bank card didn't work. Then they shoved the couple back down into the trunk, jumped into a getaway car, and sped away.

In desperation, Janette groped for the cable that she assumed ran from the trunk-release button near the driver's seat to the trunk latch. Miraculously, after less than ten minutes, she found it and guided her husband's hand to it. He gave the cable a tug, and the trunk popped open. Their son was later found safe and sound, asleep in his car seat in front of their house. The thieves were never caught.

While law enforcement agencies don't keep statistics on how often someone is locked in the trunk of a car, Lieutenant Tom Carew of the San Francisco Police Department's Robbery

What You Can Do

Ultimately, TRUNC's mission is to convince automakers to install internal trunk releases in every new car. The group is asking manufacturers to design the release so that if it's tampered with, the trunk will not lock at all, or the car won't start. While authorities say that your chances of becoming trapped are still very slim, if you're concerned, here are some things you can do:

- Many late-model cars are available with a small remote keypad that unlocks the doors and trunk. Keep an extra one in the trunk, along with a flashlight so you can see it in the dark.
- Some cars have a button near the driver's seat or in the glove compartment that pops open the trunk. An auto-alarm installer can tap into the 12-volt wire that runs from the button to the trunk latch for about \$50 to \$100. *Note:* Place the release switch somewhere in the trunk where it won't be hit accidentally by shifting cargo. For detailed instructions, write TRUNC at 537 Jones St. #2514, San Francisco, CA 94102, or send e-mail to TRUNC123@aol.com. —S.B.

Division says when it *does* happen, it's typically during a violent crime, such as a carjacking, robbery, kidnapping, rape, or murder. Janette Fennell, who went on to found the Trunk Releases Urgently Needed Coalition (TRUNC), says she's uncovered more than 575 cases over the past 20 years, "and in about twenty-five percent of them, the victims were killed or died after being put inside the trunk of a car. We believe this happens more than is reported."

Often, the stories that make the news are those that end tragically. Case in point: Last December, Edna McCain, 55, of Mount Hermon, LA, was robbed as she was leaving the convenience store where she worked, kidnapped, and stuffed into the trunk of her 1989 Pontiac Grand Am. She was found three days later in El Paso, TX, but by then it was too late. The coroner's office determined that McCain had died of hypothermia, probably just a few hours before the police

found her abandoned car.

Now McCain's children are suing General Motors (GM) for not having a trunk-release mechanism in the car that might have allowed their mother to escape. (The lawsuit is expected to come to trial next year.) "It just doesn't make sense that someone can be entombed in a car trunk—whether it's intentional or accidental—and not have any means of escape," says Sam J. Collett, Jr., the family's attorney. GM

would not comment on pending litigation.

Led by Janette Fennell, volunteers have embarked on a letter-writing and e-mail campaign to car manufacturers, requesting that they install a release mechanism inside the trunks of all new cars. Automakers in general are cool to the idea of installing such devices. In a letter to Janette Fennell dated March 18, 1997, N.B. Budzol, former assistant

way Traffic Safety Administration, which sets car safety standards.

Even so, such a device would be inexpensive to design and manufacture, says Jack Martens, a former auto engineer at Ford Motor Company, who was an early advocate of car air bags and is now a consultant to insurance companies. So why not install them? Because there is "nothing marketable" about an inside trunk

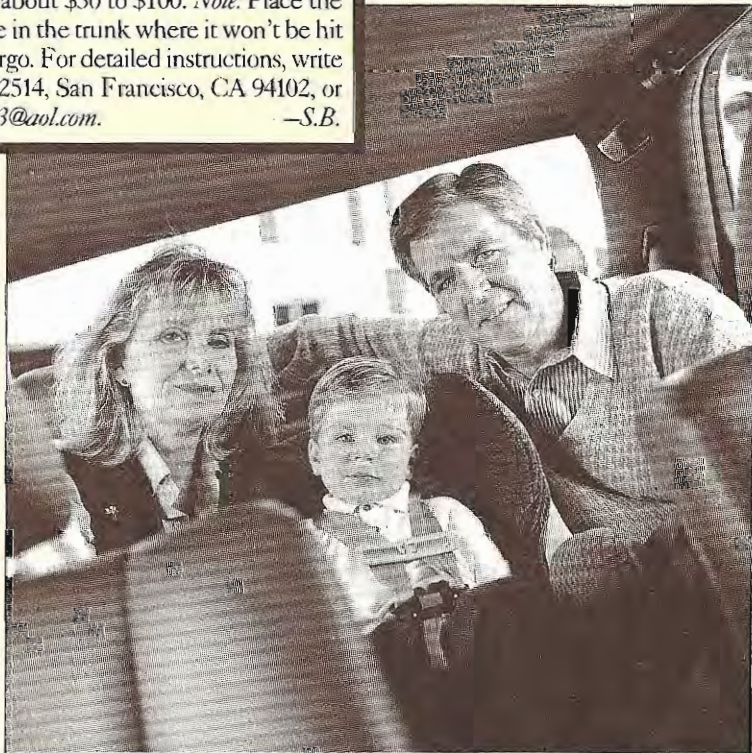
release, says Martens, who supports the idea of having them in all cars. At least for now, he explains, manufacturers see no gain from having them.

"But even if it saves just one life, it would be worth it," says Eve Chandler, whose now 20-year-old son, Philip, suffered brain damage when he was accosted by two carjackers on a sweltering afternoon in July 1993. One held a gun to his head and forced him into the trunk of his father's Ford Mustang. In the oppressive Orlando weather, the temperature in the trunk rose to at least 130°F., and Philip, who was trapped for five hours, suffered severe heat stroke, and slipped into

a coma.

Eve Chandler is convinced that if such a mechanism had been there for her son, he would have escaped safely before he suffered physical and mental damage. To skeptics, Janette Fennell adds, "In my wildest imagination, I never thought this would happen to our family. If it happened to you or someone you loved, wouldn't you want it fixed even if it wasn't a widespread crime?"

—Stephen Barr



Crime victims Janette and Greig Fennell and their son, Alexander