

CHAPTER 1

STEALING CARS FOR FUN AND PROFIT

AUTO REPOSSESSION

“It’s just the repo man,” he told his son.

“But, Daddy, why is he taking our car?” the little boy asked. His mother was digging out a mitten frozen to the floor of the trunk.

“Son, we didn’t make the payments, and when you can’t pay for it, you don’t get to keep it,” he explained, and then he handed me the keys. It was rare for an owner to handle a repossession that well, and even rarer to see it made into a teaching moment for his children. This was one of the first repossessions I did during my brief stint as a repo man more than 20 years ago.

Often, cars were not handed over voluntarily. I snuck into driveways, yards, and parking lots to take them with keys or by tow truck. I was chased and I had guns pulled on me—all part of the adventure. It had to be fun, since the boss paid me just \$15 per car. The job pays better these days, but conflict is still common.

Money

Some companies pay their agents a percentage of the repossession fee or bonuses in addition to hourly wages, so if you become good at what you do you can boost your income. To make big money, though, you have to treat the job as insider training, with the goal of owning your own company. You can do repossessions as a sideline to a normal towing business or as your specialty. Additional sources of revenue come from related services. With a fenced area to store cars for clients, you can charge a daily fee. You can also auction cars for clients, taking a percentage of the sale or a flat fee.

FUN WAYS TO MAKE MONEY

Some sources peg the average annual income of repossession agents at about \$15,000, although this may reflect the part-time nature of many positions. Tow truck drivers average \$42,000 annually, and often do repossessions. *Owners* of repossession or towing companies can make much more, of course, with a handful in the United States currently topping \$5 million in annual revenue.

How to Get Started

Many repossession businesses don't have web sites, so look in the yellow pages under "auto repossession." Call towing companies, too, because car repossessions are often a sideline to towing. Smaller companies may be open to your offer to help out for free on a job or two, to prove you can do the work. In fact, some outfits might require you to ride along on a few repossession jobs before you are put on payroll in any case, just to see if you really want the job and can handle it.

If you want to start part-time—whether as a way to decide if you like the work or to learn about the business before investing—a small company can be perfect. Some towing companies do just a few repossessions per week. And if you *are* interested in repossessions as a business, it is best to work as an employee for a few months.

Resources

- www.repoman.com: Phone numbers and links to many repossession companies—a good place to start a job search. Also has information for business owners.
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repossession>: Covers the basics of the business and the relevant laws; the latter varies from state to state.
- www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/autos/aut14.shtm: More detail on the laws involved in repossession, although from a consumer perspective.
- www.campingcompanies.com: An example of a successful repossession company, and a good place to get a job (employees get full benefits).