

999,999 ways to beat the system

Lotto scammers and other criminals are increasingly turning to used-car dealers to launder dirty money, but the police are wise to the practice and are vowing to crack down on these businesses.

A Sunday Gleaner probe has found that suspected scammers are turning up at car marts, particularly in western Jamaica, offering cash of just under \$1 million for vehicles. Even private individuals offering their motor vehicles for sale are being tempted by buyers turning up with \$950,000 in cash to purchase the vehicles. Under the law, cash transactions of \$1 million or more are banned, and head of the police's Counter-Terrorism and Organised Crime (C-TOC) Branch, Assistant Commissioner Devon Watkis, said the cops are aware that criminals are spending cash just below the threshold in an effort to avoid detection. "The truth is we are seeing this, certainly in the western region, where the phenomenon of lotto scam is quite prevalent. The frequency of these cases is indicative of the whole process of intending to conceal criminal proceeds," Watkis told The Sunday Gleaner. "It is deliberate because it is an opportunity to convert money or launder criminal proceeds through the used-car industry or through the motor-vehicle sales industry.

"We see occasions where it would be conclusive to say that they (the car dealers) either knew or wilfully blinded themselves on the process of not knowing," added Watkis. **BURGEONING PRACTICE** The C-TOC head said while the practice is not new, it has burgeoned in recent years, as the police tighten their demand for accountability among used-car dealers, real-estate salesmen, and other outlets through which criminals are known to launder money. Watkis cited the case of 44-year-old Westmoreland pastor Ray Foster, who, along with his co-accused, 60-year-old Oswald Spence, owner of a car dealership in Montego Bay, St James, was charged with breaches of the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) last September. Both men were arrested following a raid at Foster's house, where two receipts were found showing a transaction for the purchase of a Toyota Yaris motor car amounting to J\$1.1 million from Oswald Spence. Spence's office was also raided and copies of the receipt found there. This added to at least two similar cases reported in Westmoreland last year. "In all systems that have been established, there are persons who will try to manipulate the process, but that consistency will just go on for so long and no more," said Watkis as he declared that persons participating in this activity will be caught. "With a combination of purchases, and looking at the persons on a whole who possess criminal proceeds, the facts can't hide for long. "It is about recognising that persons are doing multiple transactions with a deliberate push to go under the threshold. After a while, there is an opportunity to stop and see that this person would have had six purchases for \$980,000 in the last three months." Watkis listed the drug trade, the supply of counterfeit goods, and online and banking fraud among the areas from which organised criminals are increasingly getting their hands on ill-gotten funds.