

Protect against holiday break-ins

By Anjana Dooling, Crime Prevention Ottawa

It's a snowy day in a busy parking lot. The holidays are just around the corner. You have just spent the last two hours fighting your way through crowds to pay for the armful of purchases you are now hauling back to your car. You throw them in the back seat, close the door and go back inside the mall.

You have just provided the perfect setting for a crime to be committed.

“Crime happens because there is an opportunity to do it,” says Ottawa Police Service Constable Ray Lamarre. “In my experience, close to 95% of theft from vehicles happens because people leave their cars unlocked.”

As astounding as that may seem (because you are no doubt thinking you *always* lock *your* car), Constable Lamarre finds that simple prevention – putting your purchases in the trunk and remembering to lock your doors – is often overlooked, and especially during the busy upcoming holiday season.

Leaving your car unlocked and your shopping in plain sight is not only an invitation for theft. It can, as Constable Lamarre warns, have much greater consequences. “Think about what else is in your car,” he says, “insurance papers, a garage door opener, maybe a GPS device that has your home address on it. You have now given a criminal access to your home and told him how to get there. You have also given him access to your identity with those insurance papers and the opportunity for identity theft.”

The University of Ottawa's Institute for the Prevention of Crime (IPC) states that in 2007, 1.1 million property crimes were reported to police departments across Canada. Many of those crimes were break-and-enter and many were preventable. The IPC notes that individuals can help prevent property crime from happening by changing the environment of their property to make it less attractive to a criminal. At home this means upgrading locks on windows and doors, installing an alarm system, adding security lighting around the house. With your vehicle it means locking your doors, not leaving valuables in plain sight and putting your car in the garage.

“Nothing is foolproof,” Constable Lamarre concedes, “but doing as many things as you can to protect your property will be a deterrent to criminals.”

Research from Crime Prevention Ottawa shows that the risk of break-and-enter crimes is halved in communities in which neighbours support and help each other. Getting to know your neighbours, making sure you have someone clean your driveway, turn on your lights or pick up your mail if you go away are just a few things to think about to ensure your property remains safe. Starting a neighbourhood association or Neighbourhood Watch is also a great way to increase security.

Initiatives like “positive ticketing” – leaving a note on cars in your neighbourhood to let people know a vehicle has recently been broken into – will also help people be more aware of crime and then take steps to avoid it. And don’t forget to visit your Community Police Centre and get to know your Community Police Officer so you will feel comfortable calling them when you need to.

There are many resources people can use to learn about protecting their property. The Ottawa Police Service produces vehicle safety brochures and the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police offers the “Shoulda, Woulda, Coulda” property safety booklet. Both are available at Community Police Centres across the city. Crime Prevention Ottawa also publishes resources on crime prevention, including a tip sheet for reporting crime and an information guide for landlords about safety and security in rental buildings (www.crimepreventionottawa.ca).

The Ottawa Police Service also provides a free “security audit” service, in which an inspector will come to your home to look for security risks and suggest ways to fix them. “Unfortunately, this service is most often used by residents after a crime has been committed,” says Constable Lamarre, “but we’d like to encourage people to take advantage of the security audit as a way to prevent crime from happening.”

Property crime can be frightening, expensive and traumatic for victims, but there are many things you can do to ensure your property is safe this holiday. Constable Lamarre’s advice: “Crime prevention is everyone’s business and by taking a few, simple steps we can all help prevent crime from happening. In this busy season take a few minutes to stop and think about how you can help prevent crime in your home, your vehicle and your neighbourhood. If you don’t take crime prevention into your own hands, who will?”

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