

Fort Worth BusinessPress

Technology opens new outlet for stolen goods

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At the start of the business day, after the employed perform their mass exodus to various offices and residential neighborhoods are drained of inhabitants, empty houses filled with possessions become tempting hot spots for thieves.

Though the Fort Worth Police Department reported larceny theft accounts from January through March 2008 to be 7.6 percent lower than the same time period in 2007, neighborhoods are at a greater risk of theft during the summer, said Scott Belshaw, a professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of North Texas.

Most residential theft is caused by children being out of school, Belshaw said. These young criminals and other thieves are finding new ways to sell and make a profit off others' property.

Criminals have turned to Internet marketplaces as a new venue to sell goods, Belshaw said. Due to the large size of sites such as Craigslist and eBay and the anonymity of the buyers and sellers, Belshaw said, it is difficult to track whether items online are stolen merchandise.

"The problem I see is that since these transactions are not tracked, we do not know what is stolen or legitimate," Belshaw said. "The figures reported to the police department do not include a lot of these transactions, so the number of illegal transactions online is probably higher than originally estimated."

While companies such as Craigslist or EzBayer Inc., which sells clients' goods on eBay, may require clients to agree they own the property they are selling, it's nearly impossible to guarantee the item isn't stolen.

"With anything that has value to it, we have people sign something to guarantee they are the owner of this item," said Chris Handy, a manager of the Fort Worth EzBayer. "So we do rely on the trust we have with the clients we work with."

While the Internet may facilitate some criminal activity, it also assists legal authorities to return some stolen goods to victims of theft.

Pawnshops such as Cash America Pawn, which operates 42 shops in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, utilize an online program where they can list all incoming merchandise, said Yolanda Walker, director of public relations for Cash America. This database, called **LeadsOnline**, allows police to scan pawnshop items for goods that are reported as stolen before the item is sold, Walker said.

"Less than one tenth of one percent of our goods are stolen items," Walker said. "With this program, pawnshops have become places where people can get their stuff back."

While these programs may deter some criminals, Belshaw said, new and different kinds of theft may have replaced some residential theft.

Copper theft, for example, has become a problem across the country, Belshaw said.

"This [copper] can be a product that he/she does not need to take to a pawnshop but rather a metal shop that isn't heavily tracked like pawnshops," Belshaw said. "For a number of years these metal shops did not require any ID for a person to sell off copper or metals. Now the local municipalities have stepped in and required sellers to provide a valid ID and thumbprint for background checks."

Police and citizens are also dealing with identity theft, another new trend in crime, Belshaw said.

One way for citizens to reclaim stolen items and to deter the sale of stolen items in stores is to report stolen items to the police, Belshaw said. Many thefts go unreported because of low return rates, he said, which may cause victims of theft to become disenchanted with the police.

"Many large cities have developed an integrated criminal database system to track stolen goods; however, these have their limitations," Belshaw said. "Utilizing the databases, the chance that a person will get back the stolen merchandise is often pretty high if the criminal does take it to a pawnshop."

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