

Local Search Site Search

GO

- HOME
- TODAY'S GLOBE
- NEWS
- BUSINESS
- SPORTS
- LIFESTYLE
- A&E
- THINGS TO DO
- TRAVEL
- CARS
- JOB
- HOMES
- LOCAL SEARCH

HOME / NEWS / LOCAL

NATICK

Stores cite rising toll from thefts

By Matt Rocheleau and Erica Noonan

Globe Correspondent | Globe Staff / August 13, 2009

Email | Print | Reprints |

Text size - +

The effects of the economy can be seen at the Natick Collection and other shopping meccas in town, but not in the ways retailers would like.

Shoplifting complaints at the luxury mall, neighboring Route 9 stores, and other local retailers during the first half of this year were up more than 14 percent from last year.

There were 1,012 shoplifting complaints filed with Natick police between Jan. 1 and Aug. 5, compared with 885 over the same period in 2008, said Lieutenant Brian Grassey.

Those calls follow a rash of local car break-ins this spring, as well as a rise in thefts of high-end electronic items from stores by organized groups. There have also been cases of employee "under-ringing," or undercharging, accomplices for items and being involved with fraudulent returns, Grassey said.

"It's economy-driven," said Grassey. "But I don't know if we can blame it entirely on the economy."

Police in normally quiet, safe communities around the region are reporting spikes in property crimes, including car and house break-ins, as well as shoplifting.

In some cases, there are brazen thefts of tens of thousands of dollars in merchandise, including one high-profile incident involving a \$20,000 bottle of 1945 Mouton Rothschild that was taken from an unlocked cooler in a Hopkinton wine store July 29. The bottle was recovered unopened several days later by Boston police, acting on an anonymous tip.

The federal government does not track these sorts of property crimes, but a Globe survey of more than a dozen area police departments found a recent increase in all but a few communities. And Middlesex District Attorney Gerard T. Leone also said he has been concerned over similar reports from local law-enforcement officials.

"It doesn't surprise me that during a downturn in the economy, we have an uptick in crime. When people are struggling financially there will be an increase in people doing anxious or desperate things for money," Leone said in a telephone interview last week.

Law-enforcement experts say the fastest-growing type of recession-related crime may involve planned heists by groups of thieves, but thefts driven by need and opportunity are also on the rise.

Many of the suspects arrested at the malls in Natick were unemployed and often battling drug problems, according to Grassey. Few were first-time offenders. "We don't generally run into people who are on their first day stealing," he said.

ADVERTISEMENT

MOST E-MAILED »

1. From Ireland... to the United States (again)
2. Ames site's owners plan to build there
3. State takes extra steps to battle flu in fall
4. Not taking medications as intended costs \$290B a year, report says
5. Flip a flop compared to Kodak's new Zi8
6. Remy on road to recovery
7. The August Seen - Bill Brett's photos around town

RECOMMENDED SEARCHES

- Kevin Cullen
- Obituaries
- Cheap eats
- Swine flu
- Cupcakes
- Fresh fish

ABOUT THIS LIST »

Erin Trabucco, general counsel for the Retailers Association of Massachusetts, said her members are deeply troubled by the crime trends.

“There has definitely been an increase in shoplifting due to the economic circumstances,” she said.

And while organized retail crime may not be driven by need, its effects on the economy are far-reaching. Such crime costs the industry about \$30 billion annually, Trabucco said, citing statistics compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“During these difficult economic times, the impact of organized retail crime on state governments, retailers, and consumers is staggering,” she said in testimony before a state legislative committee. The crimes not only cost retailers billions of dollars per year but significantly deprive states of sales tax revenues.

The state retailers want to see criminal penalties toughened to distinguish it from shoplifting, and have filed a bill with the Legislature to do that, she said.

Some of the smaller property crimes that local departments are coping with this summer have been resolved; others lack suspects.

Needham had 13 car break-ins between June 25 and 27 that were most likely related, said Lieutenant Chris Baker.

In Arlington, Lieutenant Robert Bongiorno said his department has seen a jump in break-ins, especially involving unlocked cars where people have left wallets, computers, iPods, and GPS devices in plain sight, or in homes where the occupants were away on vacation.

However, he said, two recent arrests have Arlington officials feeling they have “made a significant dent” in solving past break-in cases and preventing the crimes from continuing.

He attributed the crimes to “a poor economy or because of increased opportunities.” Local policing resources are also an issue, Bongiorno said, noting that the Arlington department has lost 11 officers, most due to retirements, in the last month, and none have been replaced.

In Wellesley, the town counted about 30 car break-ins between July 1 and Aug. 10, police said. Total losses from that spree were more than \$14,000, with the haul including GPS units, laptops, iPods, cellphones, cash, even a guitar and amplifier.

Deputy Chief William G. Brooks said it’s not clear the car break-ins were all related, but there were some definite similarities: All the cars were unlocked, and all were rifled late at night. No arrests had been made as of the beginning of this week.

“Chances are, it is an individual or a small group of people,” he said.

Brooks said his officers have seen a lot of GPS systems taken from local cars this summer. Even if removed and hidden in a glove compartment, their suction cups leave visible rings on the windshield that serve as a clue to a would-be thief, he said.

Ashland, too, has seen an increase in car break-ins, said Police Lieutenant Richard Briggs, with a dozen reported in the last month. In two car thefts reported Aug. 2, police expect arrests soon and are looking into whether the suspects were involved in the previous break-ins.

“I’m sure it is related to the economy,” Briggs said. “When the economy dips, we see a spike in all kinds of crimes.”

In Framingham, Deputy Chief Ken Ferguson said town numbers on car and house break-ins had actually declined slightly compared with the first half of 2008, though last month there were 20 residential and commercial break-ins, with an average of between \$1,000 and \$2,000 worth of items stolen from

with an average of between \$1,000 and \$2,000 worth of items stolen from each site.

Sixteen of the thefts were in the south or southeast portions of Framingham, prompting police to beef up their patrols in those sections of town, the chief said.

Sergeant Timothy Slatkavitz of the Southborough Police Department said July had brought about a dozen home and vehicle break-ins, nearly double the town's usual July statistics. Several were committed by culprits close to the victim, and those cases were solved quickly, he said.

"I think it's a mixture of things," said Slatkavitz. "Some people are out of work, some people are drug addicts, and, for others, it's just a crime of opportunity."

Sherborn has seen no increase in home and car break-ins, but its tiny business community has been pummeled, with four break-ins in the past four months, including a private business and a pharmacy, said Police Chief Richard Thompson.

"I would assume that property crimes in general are typically people in need of money. There are people with drug habits or people without jobs trying to provide for themselves and their family," he said of the crimes, which were still under investigation last week.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mrocheleau@globe.com. Erica Noonan can be reached at enoonan@globe.com. ■

© Copyright 2009 Globe Newspaper Company.

[Home](#) | [Today's Globe](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [A&E](#) | [Things to Do](#) | [Travel](#) | [Cars](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Homes](#) | [Local Search](#)

[CONTACT BOSTON.COM](#) | [Help](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Work here](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Mobile](#) | [RSS feeds](#) | [Sitemap](#) | [Make Boston.com your homepage](#)

[CONTACT THE BOSTON GLOBE](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Manage your subscription](#) | [Advertise](#) | [The Boston Globe Extras](#) | [The Boston Globe Store](#) | © NY Times Co.