

Don't Let Your Guard Down

Written by Shane M. Graber, BT Contributor
July 2016

Nine things you can do to avoid summertime crime

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With summer upon us, neighbors look forward to the freedom and enjoyment that these months offer, from long-awaited vacations to barbecues with friends and family to endless days of sunshine.

In the Upper Eastside, summer also brings an annual crime boost. But with a few common-sense strategies, we can help reduce crime and potentially reverse the annual trend.

According to Michelle Verdin, a Miami Police neighborhood resource officer, overall crime is down 25 percent from last year; but during the summers, we can see a 15 percent crime increase, mostly owing to the fact that school is out.

Verdin cites FBI statistics showing that “the most felonious offenders are males between 12 and 24 years old.... The [frontal] cortex of their brain has not yet fully developed, which means they are impulsive, they feel invincible, and don’t fully comprehend the consequences of their actions.”

“The frontal lobes are not fully developed, especially in boys, until their early to mid-20s,” echoes Ann Hyslop, M.D., a neurologist with Nicklaus Children’s Hospital in Miami. “This can lead to increased impulsivity and disregard for consequences.”

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While I appreciate the rationale on young male deviant behavior, I'm more concerned with how the Upper Eastside can prepare to prevent the usual summer crime bump. Allow me to count the ways.

Lock your car doors. I cannot tell you how often neighbors have items stolen from their vehicles because the doors were unlocked. "Leaving visible items in the car is the number-one attraction for criminals," says Verdin. "If they see something, they will go for it, and if not, they'll move on." Solution: Always lock car doors and hide valuables.

"When you're going to the store for a quick in-and-out, you let your guard down," adds Miami Police Commander Freddy D'Agostino. Most break-ins occur at Publix, CVS, Walgreens, and area gyms parking lots, when people leave their computers, chargers, or other items visible in their cars.

Lock your other windows and doors. Remember the Beatle's hit song "She Came in Through the Bathroom Window"?

In the Upper Eastside, we might as well change the "she" to a "he" since many of last summer's home break-ins occurred through the bathroom window, according to Verdin.

Residents crack the window to let out steam but forget to lock the window again when they leave for work -- and voila! Young kids can easily fit through that window.

Lock your fence gates and sheds as well, and don't leave bikes and lawn equipment visible or unlocked.

Pay attention to your environment. "My biggest concern is always robberies," adds D'Agostino. "People need to be aware of and pay attention to their surroundings."

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The chief targets are women and the elderly, with iPhones and jewelry the most stolen items on the Boulevard. D'Agostino reminds residents to stay alert, and to keep your purses and phones guarded, especially with criminals on bikes or groups of young people walking by.

Be proactive. In our commercial areas, we need to be more proactive to prevent crime. In Florida, if someone is hurt while patronizing a business, that business can be held liable, so it pays to be proactive. Kudos to Blue Collar, which recently added security to its parking lot.

Check the visibility. Visibility is a major key to crime prevention. If a perpetrator can be seen by you and your neighbors, they're more likely to avoid your property. As president of the Bayside Residents Association, I was introduced to the notion of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) by Miami Parks director Kevin Kirwin.

CPTED focuses on the premise that "proper design and effective use of the built environment can reduce crime," according to Wikipedia, and that we can lower crime by "improving visibility of potential offenders to the general public" -- by implementing surveillance landscaping.

Overgrown lots are like welcome mats for criminals. And according to several online CPTED websites, "How you design the windows, lighting, and landscaping plays an important role in observing criminal behavior by stationary or passing individuals. Natural surveillance maximizes the potential to deter crime by making the criminal's behavior more noticeable."

CPTED advocates recommend leaving window shades open; I suggest leaving an inside window light or the TV on at night, and all night, as well. This creates the sense that someone is home and awake, and that someone outside can be seen.

Check your lights. Make sure your pathways, driveways, walkways, and home façades are well lit; but avoid overly saturated light, which blinds neighbors from seeing what is happening. Install lighting around your garage and the house perimeters.

Consider automatic timers, photo cells, or motion-sensor lights. Decorative lighting, including landscape lighting, helps increase safety.

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Keep it neat. CPTED theorists suggest that crime is reduced when a property “communicates an alert and active presence occupying the space.... When people take pride in what they own and go to the proper measures to protect their belongings, crime is deterred from those areas because now it makes it more of a challenge.”

CPTED studies also show that “outdoor residential areas with more trees are seen as significantly more attractive, [and] more safe...than similar spaces without trees.”

Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. “If you see something, say something!” stresses Verdin. Too often neighbors see suspicious activity in the neighborhood and say nothing until after the fact, when it's too late.

Unlike your neighbors, the police don't know who belongs in the neighborhood, so if you see anything odd, like kids going through yards or suspicious characters knocking on doors, contact Miami Police at 305-579-6111, or call 911.

After notifying police, contact the neighbors. Most neighborhoods have an e-mail list, Google group, or crime-watch committee. Let everyone know of any suspicious activities immediately.

The free NextDoor app is an effective way of reaching neighbors. If you're not a member, e-mail me at shanemgraber@gmail.com and I will invite you to join.

If you're going on vacation, Verdin encourages you to inform the police and request a watch order on your house. “Our computer support department has created a new platform that allows us to immediately upload any watch orders into our system,” she says. Residents can email her at michelle.verdin@miami-police.org.

Upgrade your infrastructure. Adding new impact windows and doors, new fencing, or smart landscaping can make it more difficult for criminals to gain entry. Many companies offer integrated security solutions, with automatic coded door entrance, video surveillance, and other

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benefits.

This summer, keep your cool and help reduce crime. If we each do our part, we should see a notable decrease in the otherwise annual summer spike in crime.

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