

State of Mind

View security as a process rather than a one-and-done action.

By Mark Wright

The Bossier City Police Department in Louisiana turned to the public for help after two dozen units at four self storage facilities in the area fell victim to burglaries over a several-week period this summer. Bossier Crime Stoppers offered a \$500 reward for information leading to an arrest in any of the cases.

As of mid-September, only one of the crimes had been solved, with the arrest of an individual who had accompanied a customer to a facility. The suspect noticed that a couple of nearby unit doors were open and, with their owners apparently nowhere in sight, stole some belongings from them.

“That one was a crime of opportunity,” said Mark Natale, public information officer for the Bossier City Police Department.

The rash of burglaries was unusual, explained Natale. “We see break-ins at self storage facilities every once in a while, but not on that magnitude,” he said.

Crime statistics from the FBI don’t drill down by industry to reveal how many self storage facilities are victimized. The FBI’s 2013 numbers (the latest available as of this writing) show that 454,530 burglaries took place at “non-residence (store, office, etc.)” locations—a 5.7 percent drop from 2012.

In contrast, the number of burglaries at residential locations far exceeded those at commercial establishments, at 1,289,030 in 2013. While the FBI’s numbers show a dip in such crime nationwide, some local jurisdictions experienced increases.

Sterile statistics aside, no facility operator enjoys the pit-in-the-stomach feeling that comes with realizing one or more units have been compromised.

“It’s very disappointing to me,” said the manager of one of the burglarized Bossier City facilities, which *SSA Globe* is not identifying for security reasons. “Customers trust us. They’ve been violated, and I feel like we have been, too.”

Sadly, no single security measure can ensure foolproof 24/7/365 protection. Security is a process involving multiple layers and steps rather than a one-and-done action. But here’s a good first step for facility operators: think like a thief.

The Mind of a Burglar

Some thieves are opportunistic. They’re after the low-hanging fruit, and seek the easiest and quickest route to grabbing something of value without getting caught.

Others are skilled and professional. As Montgomery County, Maryland, police officers Dana Stroman and Oliver Janney wrote in *Commercial Burglary Prevention*, a guide for businesses in their district: “Burglars may operate alone or in pairs, or as part of an organized group or gang. Burglars tend to target property that is portable, valuable, and can easily be converted to cash and/or readily exchanged for drugs. Professional burglars steal merchandise and fence the items by having another party sell it at flea markets or online. Burglars commit return fraud by taking stolen items to a store and asking for a refund.”

Identifying potential vulnerabilities requires the operator to ask—and answer—the questions a burglar has to consider: How can I get in? How quickly can I gain access to one or more storage units? How much can I carry out? Where could I hide if necessary? How fast can I escape?

See Security, page 10

DOMICO

Software you can count on

CELEBRATING

30+

Successful Years in Self-Storage

DOMICO CLOUD

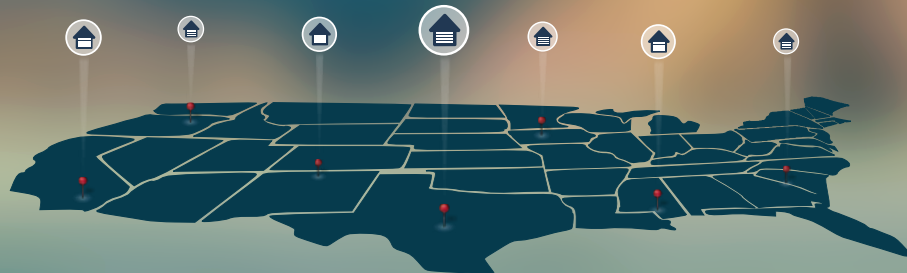
Management & Accounting Software for Self Storage

— *Since 1984* —

Complete Control



Anytime. Anywhere.



Visit our new website
www.domico.com

Give us a call
1.800.688.6181

Send us an email
sales@domico.com

In addition, what are the sight lines in and around the facility? Do they help or hinder security? Likewise, is the facility located next to a taller structure or tree that's close enough to offer easy access over a fence or into office windows or ventilation openings?

To prevent making access inadvertently easy for burglars, Stroman and Janney advise keeping shrubs and trees trimmed "so they do not provide hiding places, especially near entryways. Keep premises and surroundings clean and well maintained to communicate that the owners are in control of the property and vigilant. Do not leave access doors propped open or unlocked."

One type of threat is particularly hard to guard against: the inside job.

"Many storage break-ins are tied to those that are already tenants and now have legitimate access to the facility," said security expert Chris E. McGoe of Los Angeles-based McGoe Security Consulting. "For these criminals it is a crime of planned opportunity since access is permitted and they know the layout and security features."

In the Bossier City break-ins, for example, Natale speculated that some might have been perpetrated by one or more individuals who "had some knowledge of how to access" the facilities.

In this day of cybercrime, an operator may also fear the potential for a tech-savvy burglar to hack into a facility's systems to thwart security or otherwise compromise the business. But McGoe believes that's an unlikely scenario. "Most storage crimes are brute-force entry into units rather than from hacking a database," he said.

Go Beyond Basics

Most self storage operators already know and use security basics, like fences and locks. Another basic but easy-to-overlook measure: reminding customers to never leave their units open, unlocked or unattended.

On-site facility managers and staff themselves constitute another line of defense.

"Managers who are proactive on their property will be a deterrent to crime and will allow a problem to be identified early if there has been a break-in," said Howard Pryor, director of operations for Westport Properties & US Storage Centers. "A manager who is up and around the property, who greets customers, who shows they're active and engaged when giving a tour, who points out

their driveway lighting, who notes that codes are only given out to tenants—that kind of manager demonstrates to someone who's potentially scoping out the facility for a burglary that they might want to go on down the road."

Paying attention to customers' behavior patterns can also serve as an early-warning system for managers. For example, does a customer who typically visits his unit alone have a visitor with him this time? Is the visitor simply helping his friend lift and carry heavy belongings, or does he wander away from the customer? Does the visitor appear to be eyeballing other units or nonchalantly pulling on their latches?

If an operator notices any sort of suspicious or odd behavior, police suggest noting the person's appearance and calling 911 instead of confronting the individual. A little embarrassment over what turns out to be an innocent situation is far better than leaving a security risk unattended or, worse, exposing staff or customers to injury.

Natale recommended installing security cameras. They can not only serve as a deterrent to burglars who are smart enough to go elsewhere when they see that the facility has

a good surveillance system in place; they can also help police identify less observant or more opportunistic thieves following a crime. The Montgomery County guide recommends going a step farther when using a surveillance camera system by teaming it with facial recognition software.

Pryor said his company takes surveillance video to

an even higher level. "In areas with historic challenges, we've added remote monitoring of the video feed when the office is closed," he said. "This enables the security service to determine if an event is occurring. If there's an actual breach they have authorization to alert police. They tell police they have a live feed, and can provide officers specific direction on where the perpetrators are. It's taken much more seriously than a regular 911 call. We've found it to be a good solution."

Speaking of the police, cultivating a good relationship with them is also wise—preferably before a break-in occurs. As a general rule, officers like to be proactive and work with businesses to help prevent crime; so an invitation to stop by the facility both to become familiar with the property and to offer feedback on security measures will typically be accepted.

"The reality is we will never prevent a criminal from being a criminal," said Pryor. "So, we have to try to change that person's actions at our property." ❖



"The reality is we will never prevent a criminal from being a criminal. So, we have to try to change that person's actions at our property."

~ Howard Pryor

Westport Properties & US Storage Centers

