

Crime—burglary, robbery, vandalism, shoplifting, employee theft, and fraud—costs businesses billions of dollars each year. Crime can be particularly devastating to small businesses, which lose both customers and employees when crime and fear claim a neighborhood.

When small businesses are victims of crime, they often react by changing their hours of operation, raising their prices to cover their losses, relocating outside the community, or simply closing. Fear of crime isolates businesses, much like fear isolates individuals—and this isolation increases vulnerability to crime.

Helping small businesses reduce and prevent crime must be a community effort. The Police Department can work with owners to improve security and design their spaces to reduce risk. Small businesses can join together to alert each other to crime patterns and suspicious activities. They can help young people in the community learn job-seeking skills and give them jobs, when possible.

Finally, businesses must reach out to others—law enforcement, civic groups, schools, churches, youth groups—to fight crime and create a safer community for all.

Laying a Foundation for Prevention

Take a hard look at your business—its physical layout, employees, hiring practices, and overall security. Assess its vulnerability to all kinds of crime, from burglary to embezzlement. Some basic prevention principles include:

Provide training for all employees—including cleaning staff -- so they are familiar with security procedures and know your expectations.

Use good locks, safes, and alarm systems. If you have questions, the Police Department is here to help. Keep detailed, up-to-date records. Store back-up copies off the premises. If you are ever victimized, you can assess losses more easily and provide useful information for law enforcement investigations.

Establish and enforce clear policies about employee theft, employee substance abuse, crime reporting, opening and closing the business, and other security procedures. Keep accurate inventory records and record the serial number, make and model of valuable business equipment—registers, adding machines, calculators, computers, typewriters etc. Keep a record of all identification numbers off the premises with other important records. Consider the cost of each security improvement you make against the potential savings through loss reduction. Remember to assess the impact on employees and customers.

Crimes against businesses are usually crimes of opportunity. Failure to take good security precautions invites crime into a business.

Burglary Prevention

- Make sure all outside entrances and inside security doors have deadbolt locks. If you use padlocks, they should be made of steel and kept locked at all times. Remember to remove serial numbers from your locks, to prevent unauthorized keys from being made.
- All outside or security doors should be metal-lined. Exposed hinges can be pinned to prevent removal.
- Windows should have secure locks and wooden dowels should be placed in the tracks of sliding windows.
- Remove all expensive items from window displays at night and make sure you can see easily into your business after closing.
- Light the inside and outside of your business, especially around doors, windows, skylights, or other entry points. Consider installing covers over exterior lights and power sources to deter tampering.
- Keep your cash register in plain view from the outside of your business, so it can be monitored by police during the day or at night. Leave it open and empty after closing.
- Be sure your safe is fireproof and securely anchored. Leave it open when it's empty, use it to lock up valuables when you close. Remember to change the combination when an employee who has had access to it leaves your business.
- Before you invest in an alarm system, check with several companies and decide what level of security fits your needs. Remember to register the system with the Police Department and learn how to use it properly. Establish procedures that reduced the possibility of false alarms.

Robbery Prevention

Fortunately, robbery is a very rare occurrence in our community, but the potential does exist and the loss can be much greater from a single incident. Also, robbery involves force or threat of force and can result in emotional trauma, serious injury or death.

- Greet every person who enters the business in a friendly manner. Personal contact can discourage a would-be criminal.
- Keep windows clear of displays or signs and make sure your business is well lighted. Check the layout of your store, eliminating any blind spots that may hide a robbery in progress.
- Provide information about your security systems to employees only on a "need-to-know" basis. Instruct your employees to report any suspicious activity or person immediately and write down the information for future reference.
- Place cash registers in the front section of the store. This increases the chances of someone spotting a robbery in progress and reporting it to the police.
- Keep small amounts of cash in the register to reduce losses. Use a drop safe into which large bills and excess cash are dropped by employees and cannot be retrieved by them. Post signs alerting would-be robbers of this procedure.
- Make bank deposits often and during business hours. Don't establish a pattern; take different routes at different times during the day. If there are special circumstances and you don't feel safe, ask a police officer to escort you.
- Ask the Police Department what to do if you are robbed. Make sure your emergency contact information on file with the Police Department is up to date.
- If a robber confronts you or your employees, cooperate. Merchandise and cash can always be replaced—people can't!

Credit Card Fraud

- Train employees to follow each credit card company's authorization procedures.
- Be skeptical of a customer with only one credit card and no identification.
- If you are suspicious of the purchaser, make a note of appearance, companions, any vehicle used, and identification presented. Call the police department.
- Look for "ghost" numbers or letters. Many times criminals will change the numbers and/or name on a stolen card. To do this they either melt the original name and numbers off or file them off. Both of these processes can leave faint imprints of the original characters.
- Examine the signature strip on the credit card. A criminal may cover the real card owner's signature with "White-Out" and sign it on the new strip.
- Check to see if the signature on the card compares favorably with the signature on the sales slip.
- Source: Credit Card and Computer Fraud, published by the Department of the Treasury, United States Secret Service.)

Check Fraud

Many fraudulent checks are visibly phony. By paying close attention to a check's appearance, you can often detect a possible bad check before accepting it as payment. When you see one or more of the following telltale signs, you may be looking at a phony check. Protect yourself against possible losses by requiring good identification or asking for an alternative form of payment. Do not cash checks and do not take cash advance credit card checks as payment for merchandise.

- No perforation on check edges
- Apparently altered writing or erasures
- Water spots or alterations of check's color or graphic background
- Numbered under 500 (new account)
- Post-dated
- Glossy rather than dull finish of magnetic ink
- Signature does not match imprinted name and ID

Shoplifting Prevention

- Businesses lose billions of dollars each year to shoplifting, and then often must pass this loss on to the customers through higher prices.
- Train employees in how to reduce opportunities for shoplifting and how to apprehend shoplifters. The Police Department can work with you to teach employees what actions may signal shoplifting.
- Keep the store neat and orderly. Use mirrors to eliminate "blind spots" in corners that might hide shoplifters. Merchandise should be kept away from store exits to prevent grab-and-run situations.
- Keep displays full and orderly, so employees can see at a glance if something is missing. Keep expensive merchandise in locked cases. Limit the number of items employees remove at any one time for customers to examine.
- Design the exits of the business so all persons must pass by store employees. You may want to use an electronic article surveillance system or other inventory control devices.
- The cash register should be inaccessible to customers, locked, and monitored at all times. Place it near the front of the store, so employees can also monitor customers coming and going.
- Employees should be aware when customers are using dressing rooms and limit the number of items taken in.

Vandalism Prevention

- Annual damage estimates are in the billions, and businesses pass the costs of vandalism on to customers through higher prices. Most vandals are young people—from grade schoolers to teens to young adults.
- Following the police investigation, signs of vandalism should be cleaned up as soon as possible —replace signs, repair equipment, and remove graffiti.
- If you see someone vandalizing a property, report it to the police. Remember, vandalism is a crime.
- Protect your business by installing and using good lighting and locking gates. Eliminate places where someone might hide, such as trees, shrubbery, stairwells, and alleys.
- Make sure that business signs are securely fastened to the building or posts and do not leave any displays outside of the store after business hours.

Employee Theft Prevention

- Employee theft accounts for a large amount of business losses.
- Establish a written policy that outlines employee responsibilities, standards of honesty, and general security procedures and consequences for not following them. Make sure new employees read it, understand it, and sign it as a condition of employment.
- Follow strict hiring practices. Verify all information and contact all the references listed on an application. Consider running a background and credit check.
- Keep accurate records on cash flow, inventory, equipment, and supplies. Have it checked regularly by someone other than the person responsible for maintaining it.
- Limit access to keys, the safe, computerized records, and alarm codes, and engrave, "DO NOT DUPLICATE" on store keys. Change locks and access codes when an employee is terminated.
- If internal theft is discovered, take action quickly. Contact the Police Department and be sure to send a message to your employees that theft will not be tolerated.
- Reward employees for uncovering security problems and for doing a good job.