



Putting Happy back into Holidays - Resident Safety during the Holidays

Residential communities in the Houston area have been the subject of many preventable crimes, particularly during the holiday season. Vehicle thefts, vehicle break-ins, home burglaries and casual theft from homes have all been recorded events of residential communities, gated and non-gated alike. The holiday season appears to be a preferable time of the year for thieves for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are distracted residents and opportunities that are more profitable for thieves.

After an extensive three-year review of incident reports, several common issues have been identified that would have likely prevented holiday theft crimes of homes and vehicles from occurring. Because thieves usually make their best profits from victims during the holidays, I have compiled a list of several measures to help protect residents from holiday thieves.

1. Vehicle Safety: If you can park your car in the garage, do so. To date, I have received no incident reports about a resident vehicle being taken or broken-into while that vehicle was parked inside a locked garage. Parking inside a security gate of your home DOES NOT deter many thieves. Often, if the thieves see the potential for something of value, they will jump a security gate to find out what they can take. Parking on the curb or in the ungated driveway calls out "take me" to thieves! Remember, the more accessible your vehicle, the more likely a thief will break into or take it.
2. Vehicle & Home Security: Always lock your vehicle and keep your home secure! Several reported cases strongly suggest that thieves have been working from easy access, usually unlocked car doors and open garage doors. Thieves also try to play on resident distraction and generally being unaware of activity around the home. The point here is to be alert and vigilant, even at home.
3. Lighting Your Home: If you can provide exterior lighting to your home at night using light or motion sensors, do so. Thieves work best in the shadows. The fewer the shadows, the less of a safe haven they have in which to work.
4. Removing Temptation: If you have valuables inside your vehicle, remove them, all of them. Never assume that a theft will not find any value in a particular item. Thieves will keep coming back to the community if they find anything that has any profit margin. If there is nothing to take, your community will likely have fewer thieves.

5. Timely Reports: If you see or hear something of a suspicious nature, do not hesitate to call the police and security immediately. Timely reports of suspicious activity or crimes in progress have a better chance of preventing criminal activity from spiraling out of control. Security and the police will investigate any reports of suspect activity even if it turns out to be a false alarm. Most police officers will tell you that it is far better to call and find nothing rather than not call and have something.
6. Avoid Panic: Under all circumstances, DO NOT PANIC! When making any report of crime or suspicious activity, take a quick moment to gather your thoughts first, get control of your emotions and then make your report to the 911 Operator. You should provide the basic information of your circumstance. Police dispatchers will have a defined list of questions to ask you about the incident you are reporting. Let the dispatcher “walk” you through the list to determine what emergency services your need and where to send them. If you keep your wits, together you and the dispatcher can work the problem effectively. If you panic, the thieves gain control of the situation and you only delay emergency response from getting to you quickly.
7. House or Vacation Watch Requests: If you plan to be away from you home at any time during the holidays, stop by your community security office or contact Harris County Sheriff’s Office and file out a house watch request. Some community security companies even conduct courtesy checks on request for residents who will only be away from home for shorter periods than a day. House Watch and Courtesy Checks requests allow the security patrol or Sheriff to focus attention on areas of specific interest in the community.
 - a. House or Vacation Watch Requests: A House or Vacation Watch request usually identifies the home address and family that will be away from the community for a specified period. Simple forms usually ask the most basic of questions such as name of resident, address of home, time starting and ending the watch request and contact numbers for the resident while away. Better forms would also ask for a neighbor’s name and number who will be checking in on the home. An improvement on that arrangement would be for you to designate a key holder, a trusted and capable person who has been given detailed instructions on resetting the alarm system and given a key to the home in the event of an emergency. Included in your request should be any relevant information about the home, as in services or persons authorized to enter the home while you are away. Such services or persons would be pool service, lawn care service, maids, pet nannies, houseguests or family who might enter the home during the house watch period. Lastly, it would be useful to have a neighbor or key holder check on the home to collect mail, newspapers and any package deliveries to the home. Accumulations of newspapers on the lawn or packages at the front door are dead giveaways that the residents are not and have not been at home. Thieves look for such evidence when searching for potential target homes.

- b. Courtesy Checks requests: Courtesy Check requests are usually conducted on homes where the residents do not expect to be away overnight. As with a House Watch request, many factors may apply to a Courtesy Check even if the duration residents intend on being away might be for less than two hours. For example, if the resident intends on being away for an hour or two and the pool service is expected during that time, it would be useful to alert security about the pool service when filing the Courtesy Check request. Security patrols should be provided with a contact number for the residents while the resident is away from the community, preferably a resident's cell phone. Harris County Sheriff's Office does not have the resources to conduct courtesy checks as a rule.
8. Home Alarm Systems: Home Alarms should be inspected and serviced routinely for faulty circuits or devices in the overall system. Update your alarm company with any changes in resident contact information. It is best to have the system serviced and the alarm company updated before the holidays begin. Be sure all members of the household are familiar with the alarm system for arming and disarming the system. Remember, fewer false alarm calls to your home can mean the police will take each alarm call seriously.

Lastly, to help your communication with the community security, I urge all residents to create a speed dial number for the phone to the community security patrol allowing quick, 24-hour communication. This phone feature is a handy addition to the 911 Operator when trying to reach your community security in an emergency.

Adopting these precautions and remaining alert should make you less of a target for thieves during the holidays. Remember, it is your home and your community. Protect them, always. And have a happy holiday season.