

Crime spike expected to continue through holiday

SALISBURY – November 28th, 2009-- Residents can expect to see more shoppers at the mall and other retail establishments for the next month or so, which is not unusual this time of year.

But they can also expect to see a surge in thefts, burglaries and domestic assaults, from now through January, according to law enforcement officers and security experts.

Last December, Salisbury Police Department crime statistics were telling a different story about crime during the holiday season. There was an estimated 7 percent drop in thefts and 8 percent decrease in burglaries, according to data from the department.

Salisbury police also reported a steady decline in the number of shoplifting arrests since August 2008. This was during a time when retailers in the country, about 79 percent, reported an increase in shoplifters, according to the National Retail Federation -- a retail trade association.

This year, even though the holiday shopping season has just begun with Black Friday, thefts and burglaries are already up, according to the city police department's Web site. So far, there have been 150 more burglaries and 141 more thefts compared to last year.

"There's more people willing to try things they haven't tried before," said Muir Boda, a security expert with more than a decade of experience. "Some people get desperate when they want something special."

For several months now, law enforcement leaders have warned the community that people with no criminal backgrounds will begin to commit crimes to provide for their families.

Shawn Lornell Schoolfield, 19, and his sister, Stacey Marie Schoolfield, 24, pleaded guilty to armed robbery charges after robbing an 82-year-old Salisbury man at gunpoint in his home five days before Christmas in 2008.

During the sentencing, a judge said he couldn't figure out why Shawn Schoolfield, a young man with no criminal history who sang in the church choir, would commit such a crime. Schoolfield and his sister committed the robbery to get money for Christmas, according to court documents.

Shawn Schoolfield pleaded guilty to armed robbery and a handgun charge and was sentenced to 17 years in prison.

More recently, an 83-year-old woman shopping at an Elkton, Md., Walmart had her fanny pack stolen Tuesday. The suspect, another woman, snatched the pack containing about \$300 in cash, credit cards, keys and other personal items from the victim's waist and ran from the store.

Retailers and law enforcement are taking additional precautions in preparation for a possible increase in thefts and burglaries. The Wicomico County Sheriff's Office added extra patrols near businesses and the mall as of Monday, according to Sheriff Mike Lewis.

"We anticipate a spike in crime," Lewis said. "We always have a spike in crime during the holiday season."

The Centre at Salisbury declined to comment on whether it adds additional security personnel during the holidays, but the mall does routinely utilize foot, Segway and mobile security personnel, according to Alane Emerson, a spokeswoman for the mall.

"Safety is a No. 1 concern for us," she said.

Crimes of opportunity are more common, according to police and prosecutors. They caution shoppers to be aware of their surroundings and keep purses and wallets safe. Experts also advise shoppers not to leave gifts, in plain view or hidden, in the car.

"Some people will take whatever opportunity to commit theft and steal someone else's property if they can potentially sell it," said 1st Sgt. Tim Robinson, the assistant commander of the Wicomico County Sheriff's Office Road Patrol.

In addition to stolen purchases, sometimes shoppers have a tendency to lose children and elderly relatives in the store, according to security experts. Shoppers should keep small children in the shopping cart and monitor older relatives who could wander away and become confused.

Many retail establishments use Adam alerts when an individual is missing in the store. Store employees immediately search the store, including bathrooms and exits.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time, we locate them within five to 10 minutes," Boda said.

In addition to burglaries and thefts, domestic violence tends to go up around this time of year as well, according to law enforcement. Domestic violence experts say they expect a spike in assaults after the holiday season.

"The attitude is that a dysfunctional family is better than no family at all," said Michelle Hughes of the Life Crisis Center.

"Thanksgiving and Christmas are all about family, so these women will do whatever they have to do to keep the peace. After Christmas, I suspect that it will be worse than usual because of the economy."

- The News Journal contributed to this report.

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