

Reduce the chance of Christmas Crime

With the Christmas holiday season almost upon us, now is a good time to remind people to take steps to make sure criminals don't spoil your Christmas.

Criminals take the opportunities afforded them by the extra shopping we do, the hustle and bustle of town centres as we rush around, and the value of the goods we buy as presents and store in our homes until the big day. We might also be more trusting and generous at Christmas when requests for charity are made, giving the unscrupulous a chance to collect for their own causes.

So what can we do?

The advice below is often common sense, but you might overlook it in your haste to get everything ready. We have applied normal crime prevention advice to Christmas.

Out Shopping

When the shops are crowded, the pickpocket has more chance to steal from you. If you can't arrange to shop during less busy times, make sure you stay alert and be extra careful with your wallet or purse. If you have too many bags you will be too busy trying to hold on to these to be aware of anyone stealing from you. You could try to make smaller shopping trips rather than do it all at once and carry too much. Have your purse/wallet close to your body and don't carry too much cash. The same applies to travelling on crowded buses or trains. If you travel by car, make sure you park in a well-lit area, lock all doors and windows and do not leave presents in view. Try not to return to your car to leave purchases in the boot before continuing with your shopping trip as thieves may well watch car parks for just such a chance. Arrange to collect heavy items from stores when you have finished all your shopping. Keep your chequebook and cheque card separately.

At Home

Having bought all those wonderful presents, don't make it easy for someone to steal from your home. Keep them out of sight until last thing on Christmas Eve and if you 'hide' or store larger items such as bicycles in the shed or outbuildings, make sure they are very secure. Now is a good time to check that you know what you have both normally (TV, Video etc) and with the extra presents you have bought. You may well find you need to check your insurance to make sure you are covered for the value of goods in your home. Take the frame numbers of new cycles and the serial numbers of new electrical equipment for future reference. Remember, empty boxes left outside advertise that you have new goods inside - dispose of packing carefully.

If you go out for the evening - make it look like someone is at home by turning on lights and the radio. Don't leave curtains open so people can see your decorations as potential thieves can see in. Be extra careful about locking doors and windows. As a fire precaution, don't leave Christmas lights on in the house whilst you are out.

If you go away for the holiday period - use an automatic timer for lights and ask a trusted neighbour to watch your home. Don't forget to cancel newspapers and milk if you have them delivered and either redirect your mail through the Post Office or have your neighbour take mail into the house - unopened Christmas cards and mail are a sure sign that a house is empty.

Strangers at the door - genuine delivery personnel usually have uniforms and liveried vehicles and should not need to come into your home. Charity collectors will have identification and will not be offended if you ask to see it. If you are not sure but want to make a donation, ask whether these can be made in other ways, perhaps through a bank.

Out on the town

With office parties and general Christmas celebrations, pubs, restaurants and other venues are often crowded. Don't leave bags over the back of your chair and keep wallets and purses close to your body to make it more difficult for the pickpocket. Busy places make it easier for the sneak thief, so be alert at all times. Make prior arrangements as to how you will get home. Avoid any potential disturbances on the street. Stay with friends if you can. Avoid the temptation to take a minicab on the street even if you are having difficulty getting a cab - it is illegal for minicabs to take passengers who have not pre-booked. Make sure someone knows where you are going and what time you will be back. Don't drink too much - you could become a target for thieves. For more advice on personal safety, see the Suzy Lamplugh website.

Finally people should contact Crimestoppers or their local police if they have information about any criminal activity.

Have a happy and crime-free Christmas holiday.