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## **New Jersey crimes hit home**

By JOHN FROONJIAN Special Projects Writer, 609-272-7273 | Posted: Monday, September 14, 2009 |

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Joan Brennan saw flashing red lights as she drove up Dolphin Avenue through the rain April 20, and wondered if a neighbor's house was on fire. Fear gripped her that night when she realized police were at her Northfield home.

Brennan, 50, a food sales broker, had gone out to dinner after working all day in Atlantic City. Her boyfriend, David Goldstein, had left the restaurant ahead of her, only to discover burglars had kicked in an outside wooden door to their basement.

By the time Brennan got home, rain was puddling inside her basement entry, her house cats had fled into the back yard and police were combing her house for clues. Someone apparently seeking drug money took two jars holding \$250 in coins. Brennan had planned to buy her grandson a savings bond for his first birthday.

"I was horrified. I was scared," Brennan said. "David told me, 'We were broken into.' And I just had to sit down."

"I grew up in this area. And I have never been afraid here," she said. "But this was very difficult for me to handle."

### **Property crimes on rise**

When New Jersey crime statistics are published, as 2008 numbers were Wednesday, attention usually focuses on violent crime: the murders, rapes and beatings that devastate lives. But the statistics show that when crime hits home - literally - more people are affected by crimes involving theft of property.

Burglaries and larcenies increased in New Jersey last year, according to the Uniform Crime Report issued by the N.J. State Police. The good news is that both violent and nonviolent crime

decreased in this region of southern New Jersey. But some area municipalities still rank high statewide in the number and rate of property crimes.

The impact of those crimes is often overlooked or downplayed. There are no support groups or compensation programs for property crime victims unless an incident has elements of violent crime. Stolen property is rarely ever recovered.

But police, analysts - and victims - say property crimes take an emotional and psychological toll on the criminals' targets and on the communities in which they happen.

The latest statistics show violent crime decreased statewide by 1 percent last year. However, last year's 40,132 burglaries were up 8 percent from the year before. Larcenies in New Jersey increased 4 percent to 138,644.

Property crimes hit certain towns in this region especially hard.

Vineland, in Cumberland County, had the state's ninth-highest number of burglaries last year, and Millville and Bridgeton were in the top 25. Burglars struck nearly four out of every 100 homes in Pleasantville, Press analysis shows. Other area towns hit by more than 100 burglaries included Atlantic City; Galloway, Egg Harbor and Hamilton townships; Ventnor; Ocean City; Wildwood and Middle Township.

Residents of Bridgeton, with 340 burglaries last year, had the highest rate of burglaries in the state, with five burglaries committed for every 100 housing units in the city.

Larcenies - which include shoplifting, pickpocketing, purse snatching and stealing from cars - were prevalent in those same towns. Atlantic City had the fifth-highest number of larcenies in the state, and Vineland was 10th.

### **Lost sense of security**

Statistics show that once something is stolen, the chance of police recovering it is low. Stolen cars are recovered more than half the time. But that's not the case with cash, clothing, electronics and other items taken out of houses, cars and businesses. Only 6 percent of the \$255.5 million in personal property stolen in New Jersey last year was recovered, according to Press analysis of the crime data.

"Usually when you recover something, it's luck," Atlantic County Sheriff Frank Balles said.

"Even when you catch a burglar and he admits to a string of burglaries, he's already gotten rid of (the goods)," he said. "They don't save it for a rainy day. They're getting rid of what they steal as soon as possible."

Many homeowners don't record model and serial numbers of their belongings, Balles added. So

even when items are recovered, they may sit in a police room unclaimed until they are auctioned.

Three-quarters of burglaries are committed in homes rather than businesses, the crime report shows. And more than twice as many homes are broken into during the day than at night.

Marie Hasson, head of psychiatry for AtlantiCare and its Atlantic County hospitals, said people feel violated when someone breaks into their house, or even simply steals something. It's especially hard for people who have anxiety problems or those who have already experienced losses.

"But the average person can be tremendously impacted," Hasson said. "You no longer have a sense of security. You thought you were in a nice neighborhood and suddenly, it's not as safe."

Northfield resident Brennan said that after her break-in, she felt like she was "under attack." Her fear eventually turned to anger. She said it gnawed at her that someone she didn't know and couldn't see had intimidated and threatened her.

Hasson said: "You need to feel safe. You need to feel secure. And the biggest thing is to get that feeling back."

### **Communities suffer, too**

Not only victims bear scars from property crime. A rash of burglaries can frighten an entire community. That fear and publicity resulting from crime can have cultural and economic impacts on a town, said Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College.

If an area is known for crime, people start to move out, and new residents refuse to move in. Poorer people move into formerly middle class neighborhoods, and the schools start to suffer. That makes it harder to attract new businesses, so economic development suffers, Schulman said.

"It takes a civic toll," she said. "Not only do the victims feel violated, but the town gets the aura of that violation as well."

She said communities must promote their good qualities to counter crime publicity. And authorities must fight crime effectively.

This region's declining property crime bucked the state trend last year. Atlantic City experienced a dramatic reduction. Burglaries dropped by more than half, and larcenies declined by 20 percent. Only 1.3 burglaries were committed for every 100 homes there last year.

Sgt. Monica McMenemy said Atlantic City police improved communication between its investigative, patrol and intelligence units. When property crimes spiked in a neighborhood, the police coordinated and concentrated resources there, McMenemy said.

Bridgeton Police Chief Mark Ott said despite the high burglary numbers, his department has used street patrols to deter burglaries.

The greatest asset in fighting crimes in Bridgeton, especially in the case of home burglaries, is information provided by the public, Ott said.

When thieves burglarize businesses, there are usually alarms and sometimes surveillance cameras. When it comes to home burglaries, he said, police often have little more to go on than the accounts of neighbors and other witnesses.

Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office officials could not be reached for comment.

### **Steps to stem crime**

Other authorities said the public can help combat property crime.

Ott said the public should avoid street deals on merchandise that may have been stolen.

Balles said homeowners should make their houses more "security hardened" by lighting the property, trimming bushes that provide cover to burglars and installing good locks - and using them.

"The common thing burglars look for are unlocked doors and windows, unlocked vehicles," said Balles, who said he has investigated hundreds of burglaries over 24 years.

"When you hear of a rash of vehicle burglaries, it's a matter of the perpetrators walking down street and looking for open vehicles," he said.

Brennan and Goldstein had a new security system put in after their Northfield home was burglarized. But Brennan converted her anger to action. She attended the next city council meeting to start organizing a neighborhood patrol effort.

She attended a training session conducted by the county Sheriff's Office and soon was conducting her own. She started working with five volunteers. Brennan now has 120 people interested in organizing. A map showing Northfield divided into patrol areas sat on her kitchen table Friday. She said people should be aware of suspicious activity in their neighborhoods. She wants to help other people avoid the experience she endured.

"We're asking people to look out for their neighbors," Brennan said.

*Staff writer Edward Van Embden contributed to this story.*

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