



Small Business Crime Prevention Tips:

Below you will find tips on how to protect small businesses against crime. The information listed below is provided as a public service by the Charlestown Police Department, Charlestown, Indiana from its website located at www.CtownPD.com. The information is provided as suggestions to consider for purposes of crime prevention and safety, no guarantees are implied.

Crime—burglary, robbery, vandalism, shoplifting, employee theft, and fraud—costs businesses billions of dollars each year. Crime can be particularly devastating to small businesses, who 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. Law enforcement can work with owners to improve security and design their spaces to reduce risk. Small businesses can join together in such efforts as Business Watch 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 violence, drugs, and other 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, seek the help of law enforcement. 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. Mark equipment—registers, adding machines, calculators, computers, typewriters—with an identification number (for example, tax identification or license number). Post the Operation Identification warning sticker in your store-front window. 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 and secured with metal security crossbars. Pin all exposed hinges to prevent removal.
- Windows should have secure locks and burglar-resistant glass. Consider installing metal grates on all your windows except display 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.
- Check the parking lot for good lighting and unobstructed views.
- Keep cash registers in plain view from the outside of your business, so police can monitor it during the day or at night. Leave it open and empty after closing.
- Be sure your safe is fireproof and securely anchored. It should be kept in plain view. 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. Contact your local law enforcement agency to recommend established companies. Learn how to use your system properly. Check the system daily, and run a test when closing.

Robbery Prevention

Robbery doesn't occur as often as other crimes against businesses, but the potential for loss can be much greater from a single incident. Also, robbery involves force or threat of force and can result in serious injury or death.

- Greet every person who enters the business in a friendly manner. Personal contact can discourage a 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 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. Ask a police officer to escort you to the bank whenever possible.
- Ask local law enforcement what to do in case you are robbed. Make sure your address is visible so emergency vehicles can easily find your business.
- If you or your employees are confronted by a robber, 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 one piece of identification.
- Be aware of the customer who makes several small purchases by check or credit card that are under the amount for manager approval.
- Is the item being purchased one that could be easily fenced for cash? (Examples include televisions, stereos, cameras, and other portable items.)
- If you are suspicious of the purchaser, make a note of appearance, companions, any vehicle used, and identification presented. Call your local 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.

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 management approval of the check or asking for an alternative form of payment.

- No perforation on check edges, 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 how to reduce opportunities for shoplifting and make apprehensions.
- Keep the store neat and orderly. Use mirrors to eliminate "blind spots" in corners that might hide shoplifters.
- Keep displays full and orderly, keep expensive merchandise in locked cases, and limit the number of items employees remove at any one time for customers.
- Design the exits of the business so all persons must pass by security personnel or store employees.
- The cash register should be inaccessible to customers, locked, and monitored at all times. Place it near the front of the store.
- Dressing rooms and rest rooms should be watched at all times. Keep dressing rooms locked 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.
- Clean up vandalism as soon as it happens—replace signs, repair equipment, paint over graffiti. Once the graffiti is gone, use landscape designs (such as prickly shrubs or closely planted hedges), building materials (such as hard-to-mark surfaces), lighting, or fences to discourage vandals.
- 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.

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. Free local record checks can be obtained via cid@ctownpd.com.
- Follow strict hiring practices. Verify all information and contact all the references listed on an application. Consider running a 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, 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.

Learn more about organizing a Business Watch

Modeled after the Neighborhood Watch concept, Business Watch seeks to reduce commercial crime and the fear of crime from both the shopper's and the shop owner's point of view. The following steps are the most important concepts behind Business Watch:

Get to know the people who operate the neighboring businesses.

They are your neighbors for eight or more hours a day.

Making personal contact is the best way to get acquainted.

Make an effort to introduce yourself to others—nearby residents, schools, civic groups, libraries, clubs—in the neighborhood.

Report suspicious behavior to law enforcement immediately, even if it means taking a chance on being wrong.

An email tree is an effective means of sharing information with other merchants.

Engrave all valuable office equipment and tools. Use an identification number—a tax identification number, license, or other unique number.

Aggressively advertise your Business Watch group. Post signs and stickers saying that your block of businesses is organized to prevent crime by watching out for and reporting suspicious activities to law enforcement.

Looking for Community Partners?

Chambers of Commerce

Chambers of Commerce exist in thousands of communities. They can help start a Business Watch, offer crime prevention information to area businesses, or organize seminars on "hot" topics, like bad checks or credit card fraud.

Business Associations

Merchants may join together to address a problem that directly affects their business operations. Some examples include poor street lighting, lack of police patrols, parking, loitering, or prostitution. A business or merchant's association could price employment for youth, community improvements, or funding for a manual on small business security.

Service Clubs

Many communities have local chapters of such service groups as Exchange Clubs, Kiwanis, Lions, Junior League, General Federation of Women's Clubs, Jaycees, Rotary, and Optimists. These groups take on a variety of community and business service projects. They often have many members from the local business community.

Special Interest Associations/Groups

Businesses often join others with similar interests. Retail merchants as a whole, specialty stores, computer retailers, drug stores, grocers, cleaners, restaurants, or convenience stores may all have associations in a city or region.

Private Security

Increased partnerships between business groups, private security, and police can enhance each other's efforts to protect commercial areas.

Community Associations

Business groups can find effective partners in community and neighborhood associations. Both groups have a strong stake in thriving residential and commercial areas. They are often well versed in strategies for securing physical improvements such as street lighting or road repairs. In partnership with business, they can also reach out to help solve problems that affect the entire community's well-being—such as homelessness, lack of jobs, or the need for battered women's shelters.
