

Vehicle burglaries spike in north Fresno

By Carmen George

Editor's note: A correction has been made to an earlier version of this story. The correction deals with the price of car locks available through Fresno police.

Vehicle burglaries are up — way up — in Fresno.

Just six weeks into the new year, Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer said data shows northeast Fresno has already experienced more than a 100% increase in vehicle burglaries compared to last year's numbers. In northwest Fresno, the crime has increased 45%.

"Those are scary numbers if you are driving a car," Dyer said after a monthly police meeting last week.

Auto burglaries are shifting to north Fresno and vehicle theft is also on the rise. Sgt. Tim Tietjen, head of the department's Career Criminal Auto Theft Team, said over the past month, about eight vehicles were stolen a day, on average, in Fresno.

Dyer said hot spots for auto burglaries and theft include Fresno State, Fresno City College, Fashion Fair mall and River Park.

He attributes much of the spike in crime to Proposition 47, which made drug possession and stealing property worth less than \$950 misdemeanor crimes that can't land offenders in jail. The new rules went into effect Nov. 4.

"Prior to that," Dyer said, "auto theft and vehicle burglaries were declining in our city every single month."

He said that's because many jailed for lesser offenses, like illegal drug possession, were also involved in more serious crimes, like auto theft. Another part of the uptick in crime, he said, is due to the state's realignment decision to send lower-level offenders to county jails rather than state prison. Overcrowding has prompted the early release of many inmates.

"If we are not able to hold criminals accountable for certain types of crimes, like vehicle burglary and auto theft, it is important that people not allow themselves to become the victim," Dyer said.

Those most in danger of auto theft and burglary: People who drive Hondas older than 2001. They are the "vehicles of choice" for car thieves and burglars.

"That's because they are able to gain access and start those cars very easily," Dyer said. "Those made since 2001 have a chip in them that makes it more difficult to steal."

Other popular targets: Chevrolet pickups are increasingly on criminals minds, along with the occasional Saturn, Tietjen said.

Tietjen said most auto burglars and thieves steal to support a methamphetamine addiction and that most break into vehicles to snatch information. He recently arrested a team of auto thieves who had machines that made credit cards, fake identification cards and checks in southeast Fresno.

"It's amazing how much information they were gathering," Tietjen said. "They said the primary reason they were doing auto theft nowadays and vehicle burglaries was to get as much information as possible ... For them, this is where the money is at right now — identity theft."

To protect yourself, Dyer said, don't leave anything of value in a vehicle. Along with the obvious — things like purses, cellphones and laptops — police said college textbooks are also targets for burglars, who sell the pricey books.

Tietjen said steering wheel locks are major deterrents for auto thieves. Locks that cost \$15 are available through Fresno's Neighborhood Watch Program. Those who would like one can call the program at (559) 621-LOOK (5665).

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